

Order
of
Nine
Angles

~ Collection of Tales & Poetry ~

Preface by the editor:

The following work re-presents the Order of Nine Angles 'Tales & Poetry' database [the 'Deofel Quintet' is included as a separated .pdf file] to be found within 'Sitra Ahra' on 'www.MurderDeathKill.net'.

Other databases are:

- Various Manuscripts*
- Chants*
- Interviews*
- Books*

Layout and compilation by Caput Mortuum

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Please note: This summary is not authorized by the O.N.A.

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Ayin Quadma'ah Movement*

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I.

Copula cum Daemone

Or

A Summer's Tale

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I

Richenda was happy. The coven were already dancing inside the circle of stones and she could see their black robes silhouetted against the dawn sky. For several minutes she lay still on the ground, despite its coldness, while her Magistellus circled around her holding the sacred dagger and her coven chanted their slow rhythmic chant: 'Veni omnipotens aeterne diabolus!'

Then she was on her feet, wresting the dagger from Paul's hand. He tried to resist, but she was too quick and agile and as he turned she tripped him. He fell to the ground where four of her coven pinned him down while she, smiling, bared his chest and cut a sigil into his flesh with the tip of the dagger.

The sight of bright, fresh blood brought a sigh to the coven and Richenda began her chant: 'Suscipe, Satanas, munus quod tibi offerimus, memoriam recolentes Atazoth!'

She raised the dagger but there was a shout and then another and she looked up to see several men running toward them along the rutted track to the stone circle.

Richenda, as befitted a Mistress of Earth, did not panic.

"Someone," she said calmly, "has betrayed us." She looked around, then stared at Paul, who turned his terrified gaze away. "Ne paveatis," she said, mocking him, "ista est illuio."

She stood up, and the eight women of her coven gathered behind her. "We shall meet again," she said to them, "as planned."

She did not run with them or even after them as they ran toward the shielding cover of the forest which covered part of the lower slope of the hill. The stone circle stood on the almost level ground that made the top of a hill and while Black Hill was neither the highest nor the most scenic of the many that covered this corner of the Welsh Marches, it was isolated, the overgrown wood which led down to Worm Batch valley providing an excellent route of escape.

The men did not follow Richenda into the darkness of the trees and she hid the dagger before threading her way through the undergrowth. The disruption of the ritual saddened her, a little. Every seventeen years, at sunrise in the Summer, the Magistellus would offer up his life in grateful remembrance of the forgotten god. His blood would fructify the land. Since the death of her mother, it had been her duty, as Mistress of Earth, to uphold the ancient and secret tradition. But she, unlike her ancestors, had failed. For several minutes, saddened by this failure, she walked aimlessly. Slowly, sunlight began to filter and speckle down and she sat on the ground, resting her back against a the trunk of a fallen and rotten tree as a rising and then gusting wind shook the leaves and branches around her.

"There is nothing you could have done," a soft voice beside her said.

Startled, she stared at the figure beside her. The old man smiled. His full beard was a little unkempt, his dark clothes clean if well worn, and in his hand he carried a staff whose top was carved into the head of a wolf.

"Do not be afraid," he said to her.

"I am not afraid," she said before looking around.

"They will not follow you here, Richenda."

"Who are you?"

"I have many names, none of them important. But you are more beautiful than I expected. Do you have a question?"

"What do you want?" He did not look like a beggar or a tickney-man.

"It is not what I want - but what you wish to know."

"What do you mean?"

The man smiled. "When you find the question I will be here."

A rustling in the trees nearby distracted Richenda and when she turned back, the old man had gone. For what seemed a long time she sat still until rain made her resume her walk, and she had walked what seemed a long distance until the rain reached through the trees to soak her.

The sun was strong and had already begun to dry her ragged clothes by the time she reached her home. Cold Hill cottage was set in a lee between two hills almost directly north and south. To the west, the sheep-grazed land rose steadily to the wooded, overgrown and partly derelict sides of the Stiperstones - a rocky outcrop between the almost barren flats of the Long Mynd and the nearby hills of Wales. Only toward the east did the land slope away from the cottage, down to a tributary of the river East Onny. In Winter, at the cottage, there was often little sun.

Ceridwen was waiting for her by the cottage door. She was Richenda's sister, although a stranger would not have guessed, for she was fair of hair where Richenda was dark, tall and broad where Richenda was of medium height and very curvaceous; Pretty, with a weather-worn complexion whereas Richenda was beautiful with a complexion a town-lady would have admired.

"There was a man here," Ceridwen said in greeting to her sister. "Someone I'd never seen around here before."

"What did he want?" Richenda said, suspicious.

"He gave me this." She held out a piece of vellum. It was inscribed with some kind of map.

Richenda stared at it. "This man -

"He knew my name."

Richenda made the obvious deduction. "Did he carry a staff - with a wolfshead?"

"Yes. And The Giving?"

"We were betrayed."

"Paul?"

"He shall pay for his treachery."

"They shall come for us, then?"

Richenda laughed. "They would not dares"

"But Father Albert -

Richenda laughed again and then spat on the ground. "He will fail, like all the others."

"I do not like it. What if -" Ceridwen began to protest.

Richenda took the piece of vellum from her hand. "Shall we see what this is all about."

"Perhaps it is a trap. That Nazarene priest -"

"Well, we'll soon find out."

Richenda found the map easy to follow, and she led her sister along the track from the cottage, through bracken and down into a small valley. The way led upward for a while, following a tiny stream, and into woods, to take them further up toward bare rocks and then down again to a scattering of trees. Nearby, a tree overhung a ledge and Richenda scrambled around. Behind the curving trunk of the tree loose rocks lay clumped, overgrown and mossy and she gave them a cursory look before realizing.

"Come on, help!" she shouted to her sister, and together they began to clear the rubble. It was not long before they discovered the entrance to a cave.

"I don't like this," Ceridwen said.

"It's probably just an old mine shaft. Might even be Roman." She squeezed herself into and crawled along the passage. It widened after a while, enabling her to turn around.

"Goes a long way in. We need a lantern."

Richenda left her sister at the cave entrance, and she had almost reached the track which led back to their cottage when she heard a horse approaching. She hid in the bracken, but it was only Owen, her nearest neighbour, and she watched him raise the gun he carried to shoot at a Skylark. The bird fell, and Owen sent his dog after it. Owen was partial to Lark pie. She could see his ruddy face smile as he urged his horse on.

She did not wish to speak to him and waited until she was alone again. Ceridwen was asleep when she returned to the entrance of the cave, carrying two lanterns and a flint tinderbox. She lit them both, woke her sister and led her into the crumbling, dank passage. It slanted gently downward to sharply turn and end in a small chamber. Toward the left Richenda could see another passage, but it was almost completely blocked by rubble and large rocks. She tried to move some, but soon gave up and she turned, crouching, to see Ceridwen digging at the ground with her hands. There was a smile on Ceridwen's face as she extracted something from the rubble.

Outside, in the bright light, she used the dirty hem of her dress to clean it. The crystal was large, cold to the touch, and shaped like a tetrahedron.

Now, Richenda thought, I have a question, which hopefully the old man can answer.

II

"So - you failed us." The speaker was dressed in a cassock of a Priest. His face was wrinkled with age, his hair white, some of his teeth rotten, while his body seemed too small to support the large head. He looked dismissively at Paul who was kneeling before him the cold damp Chapel.

"Forgive me, Father," Paul said in a pleading voice.

The Priest turned to his three companions, who nodded gravely.

"Rise," the Priest said to Paul, affecting a smile. "And sit with us."

"These followers of the Devil," he continued, "cannot be allowed to continue with their blasphemy." He turned to whisper to his three companions. "Inveni Pauli servum meum, oleo sancto meo unxi: manus enim mea auxiliabitur ei, et brachium meum confortabit eum." To Paul, he said, "I have a special task for you, my son. Have you faith enough to accept?"

"You must be strong, my son. Watch her well. See who she sees. Follow. We will pray and plan anew. You have studied veil with us - quod er commixtione homines, et tali modo nasciturum ess Anti-Christum. We fear this, and depend on you." He gave Paul a small phial. "Holy relics, to guard you. Go now."

Paul left. It was a long walk along the lanes and tracks to the sinewy small valley that gave one access to Richenda's cottage. A man leading several tethered pack-mules passed him as he skirted the grounds of Linley Hall. He wished the man with the wizened face and torn, dirty clothes, a good day but received no reply. The man barely looked up and briefly met Paul's gaze before looking nervously around, his hand clutching at the pistol stuck into his belt. Then he was gone from Paul's sight as the track he had chosen led him and his mules eastward toward the Port Way over the Mynd.

Paul chose a high vantage point, in the bracken, to observe Cold Hill cottage. The day was warm, and he was glad to be freed from the toil of work. He hated work, and had been glad when Father Albert had come to his father all those years ago. He hated their squatter's cottage perched near the bottom of Nind hill - always filled with smoke, with his brothers and sisters. Its walls were thick, composed of stone, undressed and found nearby, its windows tiny. There were only two rooms, and on most nights the children huddled together round the fire while their parents slept alone on a mattress made from moss. He had always been hungry.

But the old Priest had saved him, and sent him to school in Salop town. He was sixteen, his mind full of stories of Empire and adventure, when the Priest found him work with a Farrier not very distant from Cold Hill cottage. So he had worked and came to know Richenda, as the Priest had planned. After four years, she had confided in him, as the Priest had done. Thus he had played the Priest's game, priding himself on his success. What stories he would tell in the Taverns when his adventures were complete.

The warm sun began to make him feel sleepy. He had seen no one around the cottage during the hours of his waiting, no sign of anyone within, and he began to wonder what it was like inside. He had only ever met Richenda at or near his place of work - and only twice near the circle of stones - and the more he thought about the interior of the cottage the more excited he became. It was there that she slept, that she kept her clothes. Perhaps even now she was sleeping. He could creep up, and see her through the window.

Soon, his excitement could no longer be contained, and he crept slowly down with beating heart and quivering limbs toward the cottage. He crouched outside, listening. No sounds reached him, except the breeze, the sound of a curlew, the cry of a raven, and he stole a look through one of the small windows at the back of the cottage. There was a woman, sleeping on a bed, and she was naked. Paul stared at her, unable to avert his gaze. It was not Richenda, nor Ceridwen. She seemed of middle age, her dark hair in disarray around her head and shoulders. He had seen one of his sisters naked, once. But this was different. He was a virgin, and as he stared lustful thoughts began to grow in his mind. Then the woman opened her eyes.

She looked directly at him, as if she had known he had been there, but she did not move, even to cover herself, or turn her eyes away. Instead, she began to very slowly caress her breasts, smiling as she did so. Paul stood there, transfixed. Then she was beckoning him in, arching her body and touching the large mass of her pubic hair with her fingers. Its blackness contrasted vividly with her white skin, and he walked slowly to the door of the cottage, almost fearful that the vision would disappear before he got inside.

But she was still there as he walked into the bedroom. She sat up, still smiling, to stand and touch his face. Her touch startled him, because he had half-expected her to be unreal. Her fingers were warm, her touch soft, her breath fragrant and she kissed him passionately before starting to remove his clothes. "I am Melusine" she whispered in his ear as she dragged his naked body down with her onto the bed, her hand guiding his erection.

In his inexperience and passion, it was soon over, but she clung to him and he soon drifted to sleep. He did not know how long he slept, but he awoke when she moved to take his penis into her mouth. His recovery was quick, and she pushed him onto his back to ease herself onto his erection.

She would not let him rest, finding new ways to arouse him until even the vigour of his youth and the excitement of losing his virginity diminished and then were gone, leaving him exhausted. His eyes began to close, and she began to laugh. She was mocking him with her laugh. But it suddenly stopped, and he opened his eyes to see her gone. He rushed outside, but she had vanished.

III

Richenda waited a long time in the woods near her circle of stones, but Ceridwen did not come to meet her as they had planned. It was nearing dusk when, weary and beginning to worry, she began her walk back to the cottage.

She reached it in darkness, guided by her senses, her knowledge of the area and the vestigial light rarely absent on a summer's night in Britain. Spectral shadows entwined her cottage, and she understood. But the form that she had summoned to work her desire upon Paul did not return and she sat in a rickety chair before the empty grate of the fireplace reaching out to Ceridwen.

But she could sense nothing. It was as if some barrier existed between them, a barrier that not even her magick could breach. For some time she listened to the sounds of her night: a white Owl screeching, the jarring cry of a Nightjar. Tired, she closed her eyes to sleep.

"I hope I do not disturb you," a soft voice beside her said. The old man, holding his staff, stood beside her.

"No," she said, without surprise, "I was just dreaming about you."

"You have found a question?"

"The crystal -"

"Ah! You are Mistress of a long tradition. As your own mother was. Yes, indeed. Right back to my ... well, the old ways flourish still, for which I am glad. What was I saying? Oh yes. To change a whole folk is the aim of your magick: to bring wyrd, change on a large scale. Once, a long time ago now when ... when a young man was still learning like Logres, his ward, a change was begun. And after - new ways of living, new understandings. This by the crystal you have."

"How?"

"How? Simple. I give part answer: *wyrd non est aliud, quam halitus aquae, terraeque, solis calore exacte attenuatus et coctus, a frigore secutae noctis in unum coactus, densatusque*. And another part: *veniebant Dasmones, et cum mulieribus miscebantur*. You have heard of the sangreal? Who now, alas, has not? But Phereder knew the secret - and ben Beirdd. There was a hermit - I forget now his name although Helinandus remembered him who began to change the real meaning and make it as a vessal for that new silly god with crosses and flocks of silly sheep It is, as von Eachenbach knew, *lapsit ex coelis*. And this you have, given by me, its guardian."

Richenda was very tired, and closed her eyes in sleep. When she awoke, she did not expect to see the old man, and did not. '*Veniebant Daemones, et cum mulieribus miscebantur*' she heard in her head like an echo. Did she really understand?

She believed so, and this pleased her, although she was still troubled by Ceridwen's absence.

'The crystal - ' a voice seemed to say to her, and she went to where it was hidden among the objects of the untidy and unclean cottage. She found it, and sat down at the table, clearing away the remains of the discarded and mouldering food to place it in front of her. She stared at it, and it was not long before her mind cleared and began to fill with images. She saw Ceridwen, almost naked, tied to a chair in a damp chapel replete with Nazarene symbols and images. Father Albert and two other men stood over her, leering as one of them began to beat her with a whip. They were shouting at her sister, although she could hear no words, and her sister sat as if oblivious to the blows, mocking them with a silent smile.

Anger overcame Richenda, and the vision flickered, then vanished. Then, remembering, she formed her anger into an astral shape and sent it forth to bring her Paul.

IV

The presbytery was not large, and not even purpose built as a dwelling for a Priest, but Father Albert liked it, and the chapel attached to it. It was a gift, less than a decade ago, from the wealthy Sumner family. Recusants, the Sumners owned the village in the shadow of the Long Mynd and most of the surrounding land. So he said his Masses for the family and the few villagers who ventured to attend. It was a comfortable living. But Father Albert, educated as most Catholic Priests of the time had been, in France, had in his first year of residence come upon the legends and the whispers and the rumours of witchcraft and Satanism in the area. So he had studied, and listened and learnt, seeking help from his learned brethren. Thus it was that he came to know of a coven perhaps centuries old, dedicated to the old ways and commerce with demons. And so his suspicions grew until he seriously believed this commerce was of great import - a new and important battle in the centuries long war. So he had begun to scheme to defeat his enemy.

His small study was filled from floor to ceiling with books, and from a crowded shelf he took down a manuscript bound in vellum. He opened it and began to read, and as he did so he felt someone laughing at him. He shut his eyes and began to pray: 'Exorcizamus te, omnis immunde spiritus, omnis Satanica potestas, omnis incursio infernalis adversarii'.

The prayer soothed him, and the laughter disappeared. The manuscript was hand-written in a monastic script and told of the signs by which commerce with demons could be told. He had read it many times, and read it again while he waited for his fellow believers to return with their prize. Ceridwen, sister of the women who knew to be hereditary leader of the coven. Paul, his oblate and pupil, had failed to return, and Father Albert suspected foul and demonic deeds. Perhaps they had him, and would complete their sacrifice. But with Ceridwen, he might forstall their plans

His reverie about his holy war was interrupted by the arrival of his companions. He had sworn them, with holy oaths, to secrecy, and they being god-fearing and educated like him in theology in the confines of a monastery, had obeyed.

Ceridwen had offered no resistance, and she let herself be led into the chapel where they bound her to a chair, these ageing relicts of an almost dying age.

"Speak, witch!" Father Albert demanded.

But she smiled and spat into his face.

They prayed over her then, but she still smiled. They sprinkled her with their holy water, held a crucifix near her face, but she said nothing, and did not attempt to move. After an hour they left her.

She was still smiling when they returned, an hour later.

"Tell us," Father Albert said to her as he clutched his Breviary, "this area is important, is it not? I have heard tales of that hideous stone circle - of what you do and have done there. Do you not promise the Devil sacrifices and offerings" He turned to his companions. "Singulis quindecim diebus, vel singulo mense saltem, necem alicujus infantis aut mortale veneficium."

They crossed themselves in horror. "Why do you not answer us?" Father Albert said to her. "We seek only your good, your own salvation. We can save you from eternal damnation. If you repent, you can be saved. We only seek to help you, be your friends. It is our duty to save your soul."

He opened his breviary and began to pray. For nearly an hour he prayed. But she still smiled at them.

"There is a mark," Father Albert said, remembering his manuscript, "A mark made by the demon. It is imprinted on some hidden part of the body. Sometimes in the shape of a toad's leg, sometimes a hare or a spider." He motioned to his companions and they began to remove her clothes.

She was almost naked when Father Albert began to touch her breasts. "Et hoc modo," she whispered to him, "homo jungens so Incut~ non vilificat, immo fignitcat suam naturam."

This startled and shocked him, both for its content and because of her obvious knowledge of Latin, and he sprang back, horrified. Quickly, his mind made many assumptions.

"She is a demon!" he shouted. His riding whip was nearby, discarded, and he grasped it in trembling hands. Then one of his companions, perhaps excited by the exposure of female flesh or from whatever other motive, snatched the whip and began to beat her with it, shouting 'Avante Satanias!' as he did so.

Cerdiwen smiled at them all.

Suddenly, Father Albert shouted. "Leave her! Leave her! We must pray."

They left her then, bloodied but defiant, while they went to the study to pray.

V

Richenda did not have long to wait. Paul came to her, as she had bid him do. He had been nearby, still under the spell of Melusine's body and lust yet morbidly ashamed of his betrayal of his faith and Father Albert. So he had sat and waited, for some sign.

A voice called him, and he came back to Richenda's cottage to stand on the step to her door, shivering with both fear and anticipation.

"Do you wish her again?" Richenda asked him.

"Yes," he said, staring down at the floor.

"Then she shall be yours. But first - do you Paul Jones renounce Yeshua, the Nazarene, and all his works?"

"I - "

"Say it! And this time there shall be no escape!" She held the fingers of her left hand against his forehead.

"I Paul Jones renounce Yeshua, the Nazarene, and all his works."

"Do you affirm Satan?"

"I do affirm Satan."

"Do you bind yourself with word and deed to me, your Mistress of Earth?"

"I do."

"To the glory of our dark gods?"

"To the glory of our dark gods."

"Then receive from me as a sign of your faith this kiss."

She kissed him, as Melusine had kissed him, tongue against tongue, while she pressed her body into his. Then she pushed him away. "Go now, and release her and bring her back to me. Then, before dawn, your desires will once again be fulfilled."

He ran the first mile, then stopped to briefly walk before running again, and it took him less than an hour to reach the house where Father Albert lived. For a while he waited in the darkness outside and as he waited he felt a strength growing within him. It was a dark strength, born from lust, youth, rebellion and fear, and he was smiling as he knocked on the door.

Father Albert cried in surprise and joy when he opened the door to see him. "My sons" he said.

Paul pushed him aside and rushed toward the chapel.

"Are you possessed?" Father Albert said as he scuttled after him.

Paul did not answer. He untied Ceridwen and spat at the large crucifix which adorned the chapel.

"Quickly!" Father Albert shouted to his companions.

"Quickly come! He is possessed!"

He tried to bar Paul's way, but was knocked aside. He fell, blocking the path for his two companions who could only watch as Ceridwen and Paul escaped into the shielding cover of the darkness.

Richenda was waiting for them by the door to the cottage.

"She is waiting for you, inside," she said to Paul before she embraced her sister in welcome.

He gave a brief smile, then nervously entered.

Outside, Richenda showed Ceridwen the crystal. "Do you wish to rest or shall we begin?"

"Let us begin."

"First then, our foes."

They stood beside each other with the crystal between them and Richenda began her visualization. She saw the clerics in the study of the presbytery kneeling and praying, their breviaries open before them. Then one of them looked up, as if to smell something. She saw Father Albert stand and turn toward the door just as it burst into flames. He shielded his face as books above and around them caught fire, raining down in sudden profusion. Soon, the whole room was ablaze and then the whole building. Nothing that was living escaped from it.

Satisfied, Richenda turned her attentions elsewhere. There was a scream in the cottage as she began her second visualization. The crystal, Paul, Melusine - they were all keys, as her vision had foretold. Had the old man returned to her while she waited for Paul to return with her sister - or had it been a dream?

The dark gods were waiting, as they had waited for centuries, and she would free them - earthing their power through a body yet to be born. She knew enough, through her mother's teaching and education as well as through her own intuitive understanding, to understand what she was about to do - what the old man had bid her do and what her mother had spoken of in mysterious words many times and although she did not understand everything, she was happy to proceed and bring the dark forces back to earth.

She began to chant, as Ceridwen began to chant, the ancient words handed down by her mother. 'Nythra Kthunae Atazoth. Binan ath ga wath am!' She would not know where the child of her endeavours would be born, or to whom, only that, nine months hence, the chosen child would

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emerge into the world.

Inside the cottage and lying naked on the bed, Paul was dead, an expression of stark horror on his face. Near him on the floor, a recent crumpled newspaper lay. 'The Ironbridge Chronicle' was dated **August 1888**.

- Order of Nine Angles -

2.

Griggin's Nap

Brenna, ONA.

We have been here for an ageless while. Locked deep. Deep in the dank loam of the black earth. Our bones are strewn where the brackish waters driddle, oozing the foetid breath of stifled secrets that cannot let go, cannot let go.

We know. We remember. We cannot forget what was done, so long ago. Here, on this wind-torn hillside. Here, where a track has long been trodden. Here, where a road was stretched and rolled out to measure a single sparse length of tarmac that passes us by, passes us by. Yes, the motor cars quickly, quickly they pass us by. Until just lately. Until now when the long neglect of our upper residence has mustered some unthinking ones, some poor kimets to come and try their luck with us again.

Ha. But they are not to know. What do they see these modern people? What do they know, these vacuous souls who come to gawp, to assess, to consider the potential of this broken-down abode? This derelict cottage stuck on a wind-buffeted hillside behind where the Black Hill doth roam. Behind which the Black Hill rises with a dour majesty that the many would not choose to live with.

We did not choose to live here. We did not do the choosing. Others did and their dark deeds rebound. Rebound as an echo that can never cease. A reverberation that our vengeance still desires, still requires. Oh yes, we thirst, we thirst. Still we thirst for recompense, for the sacrifice of violated flesh, for the giving of blood which was ours once, so long ago. Which is our demand now.

The weary ages have dragged by. It is only the pulse of blood, the rank pungent smell of fear that quickens us, stirs us to arise once more.

We were here when the Earth was fresh-formed; we know that now. Something willed us into place a million years before our bones, our flesh, the panic of our beating blood was flung and pressed into the maws of the beckoning earth, into the sarcophagus made of soil, which our flesh then moulded to fit us. Just as the caul of the birth-strangled babe does cover and close fit the still-born infant. Perfect in its smothering role. Thus did the blistered sod come to enclose us - an impression on the seamless acrid clay that will never be erased. Even when our bones have mouldered unto dust our imprint shall mark this place. No, we shall never be away from here. Now the choice is ours and we shall always choose to stay. For this has always been our home...

Before the meaning of 'time' began we made a home here. When the Earth was barely cooled and her sister fragment moon was still roughened and torn - a ragged crusty rock weltering in the torpor of airless void, waiting for the voices of the stars, the winds of the woonsome Cosmos to smooth and refine her. Shaping her into the luminous sorroricide she does become when her fullness fattens on psychosis, swells the aqueous flesh til humour is found wanting. Until the tension must be displaced. Somehow. We work in synchronicity, She and we. A flawless syzergy; a potent symbiosis sheathed in the shadows wherein we reside.

Yes, yes. We were here before our blood gave way and our screams were choked by the cloistered mouthing of an endless night. We were chosen. We did the choosing. The white flesh of our fingers found the revolving frame, found the ductile thread that ran like a razor through wounded tips that had once owned the kind integument of skin, the protective covering of nails. But we found a cutting blade that was keen and we have wielded that blade, watched its glance shoot silver in the moonless night when deeds were done. When the time had come to please the whim we discovered was ours to instil.

First there cooled the rock; then was packed the earth and through the dull depth of bitter loam a meandering rusty trickle of moisture has permeated. Like a vein of poison it seeps; caustic as the

taste of our memories. And above this bland bedrock where a nascent serpent sleeps, from the million million years on, a clogger did come to build him a cottage upon our poor clay.

Ah to one of spartan habits and lonely occupation the positioning of some bricks and mortar seemed a fair chance, a reasonable risk worth the dalliance. We almost pitied them as they worked so staunch and determined, a cheerful vigour infecting them that allowed occasional expression in the gravelling of their voices chorused together. An old folk tune they sang reminiscent of something we once knew from long, long ago - before the Earth grew tired of our stone-raising and wrought us drought and famine to cool our ardour. Oh those times! When our flesh burst forth its abundance of beauty, blossoming, just beginning ... we were scythed and torn from the curious melding of our discovered power. Scythed, torn, plucked and crushed, live-buried and erased. Our potent orifices discovered with the gaspless cloying of foetid slimy clay where the little life did do its work and render us down, render us down. To the bone. To the bone of our purpose. Oh chanceless Fate that strewed us here! As seeds that would bloom acid barbs, spines of blood and death in the Future Time that would follow.

For aye was our pubescent power stifled before its zenith. The buds of our majestic worth frozen in cruel frosts that turned to the Hag's wizened Winter just on the lips of the verdant kiss of Spring. Thus does our ravening vengeance infest the root of rock and soil, spike the underground waters with a flow of subtle poisons that seep, seep into the soul. At night, when the bleary eye of Day has winked its concealments by. In the dark of the night when the gaping terror, the agony that must come is witnessed in the whirling of an inner void. A malevolent void which would suck away, suck away the marrow from the vessel, consuming, obliterating - the hapless urgent life these ignorant jots do crave so. Oh oolerts! Poor hopeless fools.

We could have warned them. Indeed, in a quaint misgiving of our hatred, a tenderness nigh almost did appear. There were subtle gestures they could have read if their eyes had not been so cow-struck. Ah if only their senses had craned to listen to the murmur of our voices. Ah, if only their minds had but touched us briefly there might have sparked a different flame. But our whispered warnings went unheeded and then our greedy vengeance did gorge itself on the ruin of the unconscious souls, that came to live within those self-erected walls, deaf to the keening of our siren hearts.

Aye, in the nub of spring the clogger came with a cluster of his swains to help him raise his roof. Whence they all set to in digging the foundations regardless of a knuckle of my little finger that they sifted then threw aside. Regardless of my sister shards, turned, revealed and ignored, to be trodden under once more, crushed once again beneath the boots of the brutish, whose meagre spirits allow us a little dalliance, a little dalliance, while the moments provide our meat. The feast that swells our appetites, a gift of death conjured from the throat of our soundless howling. Oh petty lives that do not know! That shall never understand! Oh meagre snivelling lives - see how in the confines of our web these little flies do tremour and crawl, shiver and struggle, further enmeshing themselves in their own messy ends. See how our victims struggle to their own demise, flailing their hag-ridden senses before the whisper of our bitter Despite. See how their little minds spark an inferno of vile imaginary that lurks in their unconscious bible-muddled minds, that wracks their flesh with contorting agonies, a blade made from the sheep minds of their following.

Aaah but we allowed them a dew of beginnings in a wistful after gleam of pity before our passion for violence was succoured. Ah, yes. We allowed them a dew of beginnings, a tremour of sweetness that was snatched before it had chance to bloom; a transient brilliance whose petals were extinguished air they had chance to form. Ah, we gave them a brief flicker of lightening ray, a sudden sweet intensity of warmth before it was doused, engulfed, submerged in a cesspool of inchoate ravings, where a rabid Death held the last and final card - torturing them on so, torturing them on. Wringing them for every ounce their petty shells deserved.

Oh, our clutches have a crushing capacity that smothers, that eats away at the vitality of their Reason, exposes the putrescence at their core. So! We must draw down our crow-black hoods and do the carrion's work! Oh Azanagelle, Azanagelle, you chose us well! Ah, you ceaseless winds; where the Cosmic Powers do flow. We are part of the grip that made you nigh, yet our cause is kept inside your spell - rubbing us a pearl of bitter-sweet potion where the sweet is a superficial suasion and the bitter is a caustic germ that rots from the inside in.

In the stirred vats of our brewing malevolence, the fermentation continues and the sting of vinegar burns its bitter taste more and more. Corroded that fragile cerebellum, inciting madness, frenzy,

the self-sundering of flesh, the gouging of those eyes that had looked and looked yet never seen. These little lives, these little lives, how you pass us by, how our ravening whim has consumed you. First one, then the others. Now, look see, still, some others more - following the footprints of other fools who have gone their wretched, bloody ways before them!

Before the cold of spring had gone, at time of April showers and fleeting sun, the clogger with the aid of his comrades, built him up a homestead, raised a roof well-sealed from leakage, equipped with a pantry, a small kitchen and front room, two bedrooms up above the downstairs rooms. One to house his wench and new-wed wife and another to crowd the childer in. But for a meagre inheritance that allowed him the privelege of bricks and mortar, he would have steadied him to temporary abodes or begged a rented roof from the sometime benevolent master who owned the estate.

Oh gifts are never given without a price to pay and a gift of joy may come seeming-fair to stay and vanish in the cold, grey dawn, the morning after its advent was bespoke.

Proud, the clogger surveyed his and his fellows neat and nippily erected structure which would house his new married life's endeavour. Aye, and a welsh lass from Newtown way had struck his fancy, caught his eye with her curls and celtic smiles. Not a one from the valley a good enough for he. No ho whey, from his neighbours came their croaking - right enough we conceded as the flakes of our bones crushed to needle splinters beneath the unaccustomed density of cottage above our bedrock clay; the siphoning of our silthy waters, sullied from the cadaverous inclinations of our torrid past.

Ah and on the sunlit denizen of a showery day, in spontaneous abandon, he swept the muslin-frocked bride up into his arms before he carried she, his welsh menlchion, over the threshold into the bliss of their wedded abode. They did not realise that in the unbuilt cellar, a charnel house of fragmented bone fumed, emanating like poisonous gas from the welter of our memories, focusing our viper's venom on the unsuspecting flesh that had come our way.

Upon their heather-feather mattress they lay; a tenderness lighting their eyes, rosyng her cheeks at the posy of crocuses picked especially to lay beside her pillow and gild that first intertwined morn.

But oh, he must away for long seasons and she toil in the labour of a local farm, the glue of a foetal form keeping them close in common togetherness when he was back from the shelters by the river, where his lengths of clog wood he kept well stacked. But oh the wood was swept away with a sudden rising of the flood. A whole season's work washed down the swanee, down the swanisome deluge. And more hours spent away and the loss of that first baby come still-born. The resentment building; bitter comments cast in the violence of pain. Gradually, gradually, the centre falling apart. The centre failing. That which cannot hold must dissolve, disintegrate, die and reform.

And thus the ragged years went by, the nagging years, the vitriol of disappointment tinging her tongue with the moaning attrition of a ceaseless wind. And no new childer came their way - no infants blessed their supposed sacred vows and dark and loathsome grew the feelings in her breast as the years soured her freshness and turned her eager softness to obdurate spite. Oh and how the poor clogger pushed his cart come the fitching season, 15 mile or more to the hub of the larger welsh town west, for which to sell his wares. Toiling from dawn to dusk in the dim and dour to bring the glint of a spartan smile to the wan cheeks that had once been rosied charm. But failure was stamped the clogger's brow and harden like she lashed her tongue of acid round and left to sell her butter next day, leaving the welter of inward wounds like scalding spears of shame upon the clogger's soul.

And oh in the dark season, dark full crept into the clogger's soul and wound a lynch pin around his heart. Up on that lonely hillside where the wind did moan upon the shutters and buffet against the stout built walls, the clogger did feel a blackness blacker than he'd ever known, descend upon his mind. And aye we whispered our reproofs and taunted his mind with years of exaggerated penance come nigh. The cries of what had been came to taunt his lonely hearth. Until lo! he did clasp his hands unto his ears and call to the no-god for a mercy now. But only the dark of wronged days did trickle through his fingers, like blood from a weeping wound that no day's eye flower could ever staunch. Oh we wound the thread about and my sisters snipped as the reel was worked. For oh but in his agony he did strip him down to his well-worn flesh and take him a rope from the lean-to

shed. Grimly then to the pantry he sped, past thought, past care, only begging for the pulse that kept his gimlet life alight to still and be no more.

And there where in 'bundant times a quarter carcass swine had swung, he cast his rope round the well-ried hook, wound the slip-knot round his sinewed neck, placed the stool that would set him aloft. Ah we cranked the wind's voice high, like the resonance of bellows in a stone-arched space, urging him to leap his last, to succour our stolen lives and blood, with the ragged remnant of his own poor pay. With no mortal witnesses to see he kicked his stool from under he. But we the invisible, vengeance inspired, witnessed the purpling of his choking skin, the kicking and twisting of his strangled form, drawing it out, drawing it out, throttling, suffocating, re-giving the horror that had come to us, through the torments of the clogger's asphixiated breath.

Until still, the silhouette did swing, softly, gently, in the candle-lamp light. A hunched and monstrous shadow swaying from wall to wall, where the confines of a mind had crumbled to a crypt of void.

When his wizen-spirited wedded one did return, more screams and chokes of woe, of penitance did ricochet round these banshee walls. She ran out into the guttering dark - to a neighbour's cold comfort and never did return.

She snivelled her way to a church-cottage and listened to interminable sermons that aggravated the self-pity thickening in her veins, protracting her misery with thrombosis and swelling arthritic joints. Hands, that twisted to bird's claw incongruity for months on end, so she could barely pull down her draws to piss for herself. Ah well, the ice-time got her eventually. The harsh winter of a middling century froze the air in her lungs, hastened her wheezing to her modest-marked grave, now overgrown with weeds.

But sacrifices come in many forms and sometimes a subtle drawing of the wine is more satisfying than the immediacy of spilled blood and strangled life. Thus did come to our lamented abode a spinster with calves of iron and a mouth already pursed in the process of shaping curses. In the lean-to shed she housed her poor beasts - her long suffering donkeys who pulled the cart she piled with faggots. And many a blow from her benighted switch did they receive on the bones of their poor rump, mangy with neglect, made sour from the hariden's wielded stick. In the lean-to shed the poor dumb donkeys munched their meagre portions, near-starved on a spinster's spite; whilst in the pantry next door come evenfall the shadows loomed and flickered upon the wall. The apron hung upon the nail stirred and swung, as the wind whispered its elegy of woe and the tableau macabre retraced its tale of the previous occupation.

Around the black-bonnetted spinster wound we sisters three, as she scrunched her angular frame over the feeble flame which flickered uncertainly, fed from the few lumps of coal that lasted her through the lonely nights. The tip of her nose grew red in the chill she bare kept away and she rocked and stared into the thin flame sucking on a liquorice stick that would last her the whole week through. Oh but it strengthened the muscle of her tongue and gave her a yellow grin that grew dreadful for the country folk to see.

We kept her acrimony vital with plagues of lice, a scourge of scabs which she scratched to sores between the flannel sheets of each long night. Her bloodied nails would pick the lice from her scalp and squeeze them between her fingertips til they popped. Little things, little things they say, can matter in a big big way. So it seemed with spinster Pugh as we tormented her with plagues of tiny vermin which drove her to the verge of apoplectic outburst and turned her already crabbed tongue to a rancorous rasp of vinegar.

Oh the invectives that contumeliously cut the curt air of these haunted walls! as she pressed her chilblained feet into her hob-nailed boots each morning and scratched her stringy rump chaffed by the coarse woollen under-draws her modesty and meanness did insist upon the wearing of.

Then out to straff the donkey's hide; hitch its mangy form, rough-bridled to the cart whereupon the donkey did frequently rehearse its complaint with a loud and timely braying which would stir the vicious instinct of maitre-hausen Pugh, who would belt it about its vociferous head with a cabbage stalk until the beast's cacophonous rebellion was quelled.

Yanking the halter torn by the gusty wind, the specious spinster trudged her way by the Black Hill to find her some faggots to pile high the cart. Then down through the coppice of a steep, slanting fall, with a full load cranked up to pitch did she go. Dressed all in black with the bonnet and all - white apron cotton and servicable scowl, wanting the impression of decency to give. Oh but her squinting eyes and yellow tongue belied the charade as all the childer did know and the donkeys were intimate aware of. But the busy and the business-like paid for her trade and kept her coffer full of coppers to be sure. Whilst wherever she walked, cross market square, upon the packhorse bridge, along the cusson for a merry 'uns to take, all the young 'uns would go in fear of her passing. They would scuttle down the alleyways, run off by the riverbank, climb to the castle mound or dive into doorways, whenever they 'ud see her acoming black-lookin' and boulder-lassel along, along oh. Aye the childer were dread-filled of her ratchet crone's caper, avoided her when they could, shouted names from a distance when well hid and safe, spoke legends of her vices and devil-sworn pacts.

Oh but the bitter old cuss was a tough boot to yield and the blood ran like icicles' silt in her veins and her sinews of string proved tenacious as weed - woody and hollow the bones of her heart ran, spiky as a thistle, as obstinate to leave-go was the withered old rag of her soul. We took our toll at subtle torture but tired of the game when the yellow-toothed wrinkle-skull clung on and on and on. She made us remember what the clogger's dance had dulled. Made our anger fresh to our memory as the spark of life in her wizened old frame waxed on and on inexorably, persistent as the winter rain, fatal as a still-swollen moon. Ha! What charm had life's spark shone to bequeath the wicked old stick such a length of remorseless longevity.

Our virgin skin was a score shredded thin that sweltered beneath the burst of a crocus spring. Whilst still the spinster's malign old thread spun on. But malevolence can be tended to bloom and flower when the seed of malice has been nursed and gnawed for long enough. And the rats that had wriggled the tawdry wainscotting and scuttled for sparse crumbs come dark, delivered us a whopper to nip off her nose.

Eh, it was sizeful, the pink-eyes albino our rat-kin did give us. White as a ghost and nigh on twice the size of the normal host. Bold as brass and savage as a weasal. It could out stare a farm cat and make the tail of a terrier turn right under - set a quiver in the hide of any as 'ud see.

It found its way to her bed one night - faced her brazen in the full moon light. Wakened her with a tickling of its whiskers. Oh she shrieked and flailed and dove for the covers, a sobbing on the bile that her belly'd rue. Our albino over-sized bluff, patterned a vigil for an hour or more, roaming like a lion to the kill while she quaked and squealed neath the covers. He cut her a swift nip when her fingers showed nigh and left her diseases for to sicken by and die. The crochet old rind wheezed her way through another long summer til autumn's frost curdled her towards disintegration. Hair turned white as a winding sheet, sores seeping pus in a plentiful place, while her death rattle clung from two dawn-dusks more til the sour old guss was finally done.

Into the dust of a pauper's grave they poured her riddled flesh and acid heaped bones. So for a space alone awhile we were given licence to dream. To dream the shape of another cull into the nightmare of reality, from the damp feator where our black waters force their meandersome flow. From the ache we've inspired in these walls of stone when the pitiless passion of the thousand years ago did murder so horrible slow. Plugging our mouths with a cakeful of soil, stilling the song of our youth with rough, angry fingers that pushed us down, pushed us down, drowned us in the mud of all our making, never to be more, never more to be. Thus did blossom the birth of our rage. The ether could not consume us. The flicker of allotted span could not extinguish us. Thus, have we remained. Gaining time, grooming our venom, burning for the harvests of blood that we wished and should have known.

Yornals! That they should always come back for more! Even after so many blood-worn hints. They never let go, they always persist. Even after fifty years and more decades to mention, the grim inflections resonant in the bricks and mortar and in the centaurous wooden beams, the bleak abandonment of this place, does not deter them. How strange to be so blind! What are these little lives that are busying themselves to stir and unsettle us. Would they slash a scythe through a wasp's nest? Would they plunge themselves naked into the icy torrent without first a thought, a sensing, an opening unto the interlude? Could they not see a vampire's gleam dazzle from the cobweb trailed rafters exposed to a sunlit ray?

Strange. From the city they say. They will hear the whisper of the old country folk tales from the few that remain in the village which once was a thriving market town. They will hear murmurs that'll chill their hearts. Tread gingerly, they will, on the dark staircase when they are alone. The images will come. Oh their palpitating hearts! Oh the sweat of the mawkish limbs! How the feline in us shall retract the claw and choose to predator's play awhile as long, as long as the little mouse may quiver and run, be pounced upon, a sinking of the canines in. Just to tease. To see these modernos tremble. See how fragile! Their sanity so paper-thin, spirits so cringing, incapable. Ho! We shall see, we shall see what may be. When our new residents come to take over their renovated, transformed, modernised, extended home. We shall see, we shall see what the meat, they are made of. Whether the blood run white and wan or a clot of pungent red. We shall see how bold their marrow, ho! In a very soon time indeed.

Poor yornals.

A few spans on a season, or half a century and more; a while to mortal equivilance, a roadman did come up with his wife. Rented or bought, the detail's superfluous. A raunchy pair and I'll be bound. But his heart was helter-skelter devotion and struck on fidelity whiles she was a racy bint, of a tuck for flirting and carry-ons when the back of her bloke was well-turned.

He was a big chap, the roadman. He took her up there, after he'd worked down the valley and taken a liking for the place. They told him about the house - abandoned - cut in the hillside before where the Black Hill does loom. They even told him about the clogger who had hanged himself one cold stormy night in November. But the roadman shrugged and set his cap, walked up to find us, here on the gale-sheared valley-highside, where Winter's grip lies hidden in the 'bundant Summer green. Where frost is ever locked and laced within the blossom of verdant Spring.

He did not tell his girl about the clogger who killed himself and nobody had batted an eyelid at bad biddie's agoing off. So when he brought her up here one Sunday, he chose the best of days. The willow herb strewed in the ill-tended garden looked charming, while the May blossom covered the hedgerows surrounding and a cluster of bluebells had found a hold be the side of the fencing and a few roses bloomed planted early on by the clogger's wife.

They were cheery together - this couple. The roadman and his gal. A teasing banter drawn from the well of their passion for life, ensued. She teased him and they chased round the remnant furniture. She dashed up the stairs, he close behind. She, laughing, breathless, excited, her viscera twitching. Oh yes, we could sense her, we virgins, we frosty maidens three. We savoured the bouyancy in her veins, the thrusting flesh, as much as he, the roadman, who caught her up in the big bedroom, encased her in his arms, ate up her neck, drank from her mouth and put his massive hands greedily grappling upon her wealth of bosom, rubbing her crotch as he stiffened beneath his sunday best - got a devil into it for his bargain.

Oh yes, she says Josh, wiping a finger through the grime on the kitchen tops, this place could be made to look right homely with a touch of spit and polish, some of ma's furniture put by - the savings he'd made for a sunny day venture. Oh yes, Josh she says. Look we could have flowered chintz in the sitting room, the rocking chair by the range in the kitchen. Come bent it lovely an' a couple o' mile to town no more. The road trade takes you plenty and wide but always the cottage to come home to. A tart's hips to relish his banquet in, keep his nose to the grindstone while she may fillallio it around and about, passing the time of day with any passing tradesman, should he so happen upon her door. Well! The welterpit of her imaginary did so work and fed her lust to keep her lush for roadman when ahome he did come.

His family they tried to tell him, to fashion a distrust. But he ignored them, veiled his eyes to her faults, only saw the gold she gave him, did not realise that the gawdy can turn tawdry and lie. She struck on a nice little number, a husband worked well-paid from home of a times, complete with a house on a hill behind which the Black Hill doth roam. A place to call her own, a house to order, a few fellows to flirt with awandering down to town - all merry-ho! Oh yes, awandering down to town she did go, all on a lark for a merry-so she did waim. All on a lark for want of entertainment she did dabble a hook in the river and hooked fish that she never had oughta.

The chaps came to clear out and lady turned up to suggest and make the tea. Get a broom in her hands thank the lord - as she felt the relish in the men's eyes, as she swung her hips from side to side, sensual in her duty. Oh so sensual subtle warming in the swing of her duty. And lo could the husband see the lust in his comrades eyes and lo did he contain a rising irritation, a gruffness

belying the violence inside; a terseness that chivvied his comrades back to the hauling of furniture. Always somehow she come, thrusting her winning breasts to their smiles, charming them in her woman's way, while he scowled like a fool behind his mates, who gallant strove to please her with the placing of the furniture, with the carrying of the clather-all and chairs.

Aye but she had the sense to stay downstairs while the bed was taken up the stairway - all forties-fancy beginning to know the lower-middle trade. Aye she had the sense to stay put, we saw that. She knew how to tease him, how to use her female wit and whim. She pushed him but only so far. Just to let him know. Just so their night hours could deliver a scarlet blanket unto the milky cusp of her alabaster thigh. Just to make their love-making a walk on the wildside. Just how wild my beauty, you only saw too late. Too late to realise, the fruit that hung your body could be cut, forsworn, blasted away into the void. Oh you only saw too late my wild child. Tart who did not know the score.

She gave them tea in the sitting room, passed them the biscuit jar, liberally thanked them with her eyes and smiles. Queen bee mustering her honey, knowing where her sting would be drawn, did not reckon on a momentary bandonment, the cost of a third round eye in her skull, dripping red and dripping red and plenty more there is to tell, the song of mephitic lullaby. But not yet. Not yet. Let us savour the gory details. Let us savour the stirring of the swarm.

Furniture moved and house spit and polished. Aye and dressed with a vase of wild flowers, the table top first night together there. Platter cleaned and tankard dredged, beseated on soft couch in big rose chintz, afore a homely glint in the hearth. They did fill their hearts on happiness, carried the glint of its gold to the rafters, as she leapt and surged beneath his horny touch, under the covers in the candlelit dark, he cut his teeth upon her nipples, plunged to take the peak of his thrill, melted the twain in their climax, awash, awash, sweet lusty heathens, alost and adrift in a sea where the caverns grow deep, very deep indeed, and your little lives cannot know how crushing the chaos that may reign, how voiceless the silence, a sound that sharpens and cloyes the brain. They did not know what bricks and mortar could rigor mortar whenever it did spy a chance cometh by.

But the chalice of their love was flavoured vellum, venom that would winter and spittle to a crack of ice on a grave, come the naught of a blustery May. The chalice of their love was not savoured and drawn but gulped at and turned away from whenever the away times did afflict them. Him, stopping in digs away off past the valley, to lay out the tarmac, work muscle and sweat to bring home the bread she required, savour the musky wine she allowed him portions of.

Petulant at times she was. Moaning about how dreary things were there on her own. How they never had enough money and how Maisie Jukes was away off to the welsh mountains and over 'em to see the sea on the new charabangs that'd come to the valley. How the Gryce sisters had gone to Ludlow town the other week and seen Gone with the Wind. Why could they never go anywhere or do something interesting? Suffocated here, she was at times, nothing to do but keep house and garden, sit and twiddle the thumbs of an evening. No childer yet to spoil her abandon. Oh yes, she'd made sure of that with a peck of Penny Royal.

Goaded him, she did, to go for the big jobs. The ones that meant far away, far in another town. While she did the dirty on him back home. Only towards the end, we could grant her. But by then the cards were drawn, the dice had been thrown, the tripple six had upturned. She did not see. She could not predict until her brains were splattered across the bedpost behind her. Oh, sure, the wheel had turned quite mortal slow at a certain time. We allowed her dallying spirit to roam, to enjoy the chase as they say, indulged her for a while. Sugar-pot should've spun your own honey not taken the treacle from our tart frame. Poor little sugar-muff - lust for all and panker spicing in your shanks, delicious 'un all aquiver, ensavourd up and enravell'd in the indulgence of her own appetites - the animal flanks that riveted her thighs.

Could not help the aroma of spring that wafted round her, when she placed her order at the butcher's counter, asked for his sausages, oh and how many? Only one; and a big fat long one at that, was the thought as it flashed in her mind. She did not speak it though of course, but smiled in a brazon way thrusting her bosom so his help-mate, young buck, looked on with a blush round his neck and something of stiffness behind his butcher's apron.

Oh six and six more she would say, just to be on the safe side, never know when he might come home hungry, she joked and tipped the lad a wink, something playful, which master butcher saw

and joked on. Sent her laughing out of the shop and a fizz of deofel entered their stride, a jovial electricity that lasted them the whole of a day. She took it home with her and fed on it 'neath the covers where her own hands reached to satisfy and her thoughts hooked onto the butcher's boy with his fine strong youth all of aglowing, wanting to taste the experience she may offer, lusting the cup of his load.

Seedy little bint she was, when her hector and snuff set her going. Ready for anything, she was. She'd have made a mint, coffer of gold no doubt about it, under a red light, in one of those districts don't you know. She might have made a madame with style but too hung and drawn by her mother's mither'n, too superstitious to throw off the christ lump and say hang to hell wi' it. She wanted respectability as well as the flavour of a little dalliance now and agin. But well, it was just, sorry missus, 'cos I'm afraid to we three, here down below, in the dank dim rizem of the loam, a little dalliance can go a long, long way. A trifle reactful like - just when you might expect it.

Ah she was not to know, poor little bitch. But you can't mess a rough man's passion around, oh no don't rouse the beast in his soul, she should've known. She felt the fangs to be sure and then, bless her, Void. Nothingness. Void. A flicker of memory in the pantry as from the hook her housecoat shifted; in echo of an earlier writhing.

Not agony my dear. Sensual gluttony. The craving her body and hormones dictated. We obliged her with an opportunity - a chance she oh - could not avoid taking. Sewn up and stitched her. Little tart. Back to oblivion where you belong. Blow a bubble up your arse with your bitch's hide, setting the whelps to all their slaving. Silly girl. Didn't count there was bound to be gossip. Well and aye do the valley folk churn up the talk with aplentiful wagging of tongues. Didn't realise how whispers could ricochet round all the green length of the valley, whey and dearie me, no did she not. Didn't reckon on her man's being close-like. Didn't caper on his stony-kept silence; his watching and waiting for any false move with a worm of suspicion wriggling away at the nub of his love.

And aye it was true, she sensed on a thrill of fear, a displeasure that cringed her to guilt. So she soft-round and sweet-bubbed him, looking misery of the times when he was away, how long the hours dragged. How necessary it was to troll into town now and again. The both of them could go. Down to The White Horse. She could sit in the garden there, he could bring her out a beer - on Saturday when he came back home. Don't be like this, all starchy, she bridled. I get the groceries, sort out some deliveries. There's only one of me - can't cook the Sally Lunn's you love without the flour and the milk churn. Nor do the steak and kidney of a Sunday, care of the butcher, care of the butcher's boy who runs the delivery service.

Didn't tell him so of course - only she knew like. She'd been told the previous week. To save her lugging heavy shopping tuthree mile or so back up the hill. Get her sausages delivered. On the doorstep you know, whensoever you may require. She flashed her smile to beguile him. Well come Friday if you can, so I can bake before the man comes back home on the Saturday. Come Friday lunch would be kind, to give I all afternoon to get the fingers worked in the dough, in the pastry pie, man out on the road-line has such a hankering for.

And well, they could believe him missus, let me tell you. When they oggled her from over the counter with her primrose yellow-smelling jumper which swelled and floated up to wash their glances on, as they cut extra sharp with the cleaver to impress, ketch a shot of silver chopped swift straight thro' the vertebrae. They remembered and she fuelled their fantasies, as the elder chose the meat for her parcel and the younger went for a wank-off be the seat and pail, up behind the bliffshed, aye. Fire in his blood at night 'neath his single-bed sheets as Wednesday evening swam onto Friday and the shaft of his loins rose to plunge her cleft, in the rampant imagery of his mind. The mystery, the woman secret she could give, he wanted so to know of. So his fantasies did run, well she knew. And jiggled her bait like a trap coated honey, not reeking violence, a shot through the skull.

Laughed my dears, we could have died. They did to be sure. Ha ha. Why should we care? Why should we give a damn? Quite frankly, my dears, its the opposite, as Rhett had said to Scarlett. Poor Scarlett, who washed her tears in the fog as away her man did run. Not so kind the cut of blighty our Suzanna was swung for. No tears in the foggy foggy dew - dear suzie when the blinds are drawn. Dear me no.

How delicious then, the energy that unravelled up the home. How sunny became its accent. How she toyed with Friday in her mind, pleased herself on husband's Saturday, that she knew was sure to come. But some bluster of the youths in the Castle square, set roadman on the whiff of suspicion. A nagging of his sub-conscious mind at the note in the men's laughter, as a fellow made complimentary quip about his wife, aye, about his woman Mal. Really, he could've taken it as compliment, but there was the wolf he'd seen arise, arise, in the men's eyes, at the thought of her. Eyes akeen and panting saliva'd mouths. Aye to be sure. The wolf - he is fidel, do not amess with he - arose in the glint of the eyes of the men who laughed for the joy of his wife's behind, who laughed to celebrate the flutter and the jiggle, unbeknownest of roadman standing right by. And a viper stealthily entered his heart and gnawed at the root of the passion there; poisoned it with a black, formless thread that unravelled to the centre.

Shot rabbits on the way home, few wood pigeons, pheasants when they could be had. He prepared 'em for her squeamishness could only deal with flesh and bone. Not guts, Mal. Not feather and claw or fang or fur. Just the rosy bone and flesh, my dear. Just your ivory flank upon the bedspread and the flickering candlelight to lend you that sheen of gold. Your eyes such pools a man could drown in, maws to swallow you up in. Take your pride. Spit you out and cheat you if you would let her. Never.

Never again, my dears, will we see such scenes. Such a marvellous coalescing and gathering of the energies that brought climactic sunder and atwain. Marvellously bubbled to the boil, my dear. Oh we played it long and shrieking stormy towards the end. Never again, quite the same.

But still. More victims come to the sacrifice. Still. Despite the ruins of our domain. Despite the obsidian-sombre embers that throw light from incandescence, absorb the ethers and flatten-form such angles from the crafty corners where oh such a strain of malevolence broods they could not fathom. Oh these trifling innocents! How they trickle through our net. See how they wriggle and squirm! See! Now there are others come. Ignorant ones. Fresh from the urban mire, trying to test their teeth on the country, trying to grasp the rustic rusk to their mouths. Poor, poor little shallow innocents! Worldly - so they think - but ignorant of the name of the game. Ignorant of the name of this particular kind of game, I'll be bound, eh Mal? Oh the whispers we shall dispel, impelling them, surrounding them with an ache of the voiceless void. Oh, such an ache of the voiceless void! How we shall toy with our new city playthings. Oh how we shall toy.

Bedlam, no doubt. Not a place to go to as well our Josh knows. Doesn't he now girls? B'aint that not so my fair sisters? Oh Bedlam's not a place to go now. They put electric in your brain and fill your veins with chemicals, cattle-prod you pillar to post, aye. Bit of a bed to lie on, a can to piss in the corner of. Doctor's eye to probe'un. Tablets to keep'un quiet. On the scarlet walls where countless crimson roses bloomed coalescing in patterns across the whitewash backdrop of his mind. Just blood red roses blooming cast always from the corners of his mind where the centre had fallen through to leave a blank behind. Mummbling. Dribbling. Scarlet roses splashed in livid abandon across the primrose-yellow, violet-blue, flock-flowered wallpaper that had dressed their bedroom wall. And roadie now, Josh roadie, has cut his flanky, found his own bit of blighty, stuck with his needles and tablets and semi-oblivion, aye. A can to piss in the corner of, where his shrivelled soul doth jibber before the crimson turmoil of his mind.

Say; but come Friday of that passed on May Day time, why she did draw her a leisure of bathing, to be sure. Washed her hair and put a bit of lipstick. Picked the early bluebells that'd come to set the scene a charm. Tidied, swept and clean, especially, well of course loves, the pantry. And the boudoir upstairs, don't you know. Oh scarlet one. Oh scarlet hearted one, who smelled and savoured the rose without reckoning on the in-growing thorn that would rupture all, from here and to eternity, my dear, and never back again my dear. Never back again, from here and to eternity, my dear. Lash loves - did not realise the man could groan wild!

Chosen a skirt that could shown some of her knee off, a close-fitting snifty that pleasingly would accentuate round her titties so. A pleasure to see, to be sure and so thought the butcher's boy after he loads up the cart and trots for that house on the hillside behind which the Black Hill do roam. Canny times. Behind where the Black Hills do roam.

He'd done his bit of bluster and shine. Thought on his trouser work and tended to the fluffy bits of his hair tendrils that he tamed to a bluff young man's business come the morn of Friday night. Flexed his muscles in the mirror back home; soaped well and washed too, that an' all to be sure.

He knocked on the door ready to do her gallant service and my dear, he knew his bargain day had come.

Bluebells you see. A cluster of 'em in a vase on the table when the coppers brought her down. It was - 'I know 'cos Hilda's boy's in with the blue. She had it from the horse's mouth: the table with the vase full of first-season bluebells, a pot of tea and two cups on the stand. Invited him in see, she did, must've done. Didn't reckon on poor Joshua coming back early from his work-time. Carrying his gun, ready to shoot the odd rabbit or two. My word he found a blighter in bed with his wife. My word. Came in, saw the teapot and the cups, heard laughter upstairs, a creak and a tumble of the bedding, so they say'.

Scandalous! The murder writhe did ricochet his mind and rose in a torrent from his heart; a black flood that engorged him in the center of his happening. Maddened bull he was. Leapt up the stairs, pushed the door open. Saw her. Saw him. Saw them. Scushered his incoherent whisper, "Susan!" Savage, oh so savage, the hunter's cry from the silent anguish of the heart. And she, oh Lady Di, oh laddida, Lady Di, hunter turned victim, high criddle-by, got blasted away with a wind where her soul should've been, all gone on a glut of the blood sin. Sinner's blood. Dropped to hell, you see. And hell is nowhere and nothing you see. Hell is all around if you know where to look, if you happen upon a particular potent snatch of lair, don't you see.

But let us, for our delight, backtrack up a while. Oh welcome young tall handsome delivery boy, was the giste of her quip. Oh certainly, at your mercy mam, it is nothing you see, a pleasure and a duty. Or words less skilful but put to better effect. If you could just bring it in here she says, guiding him to the pantry. Such a larder boys! It would whirl up your mind, so round and juicy boys, I tell you. He could hear the bluster in his mind's eye. Hot for me she was, he would say, for sure, and so she was. With a little persuasion, a mock thrown appeal, a tip and a nod and a winkle to test the stars on your bed missus.

Oh Davie, come and have a cup of tea, when he had hung the ham on the hook in the pantry - did not notice the shadow of its claw upon the upraised roof as the sun flooded into the kitchen behind them. Sat down, certainly Missus Knapp. A cup of tea would be nice and some sponge-cake lovely, yes for me. Thanks for sure I will take it and enjoy. And so he did and so did she.

Sugar she asked. Oh plenty he said if you have it. She giggled and asked him how the work load was. Busy as it must be, was the young man's reply. For sure, Lady Jane, busy all the while the butcher 'ee be. Always got work on. Always food in the pantry though. Think on that. But she couldn't put a lock on the latch of the door, didn't hear his footsteps aleaping up the stair until he had burst in upon 'em and she was revealed, well, for what she was, slut, sloshed upon the ceiling. Painted the wall, he did with her. Brains splattered all over the bedroom wall paper, Hilda's boy said. But a perfect red hole in her forehead so that her glassy eyes could stare at him as her brains were blasted from behind 'em into his own nightmare of nothingness. That haunting sea-maiden glassy stare would siren twist and gimlet him like a gyre at the centre of his life to follow, where the blank backcloth of his brain paints up forever rose clouds, those crimson clusters that coalesce continuously through a dead-fish steadiness drilling holes in his mind of a myriad fragments. Automaton. All parts. Stuck in routine unison. No centre. It all fell apart. But still functioning. In a dulled and nightmare-lobotomised fashion.

And after all that, see, still they come, the silly city slickers, come to escape the modern mess they've made. Oh don't mess with our midnight soul, you little innocents, you city slickers come to till a portion of our soil. Don't reckon on no bed of roses. For I tell you, too many ebony ones have rooted here and though the perfume can be exquisite, the barb is ever present, the operator awful skilful - at cutting up a square!

Kimets! Vapid fools. Will not listen to how oppressive be the silence up here, when the gusting torrent of the winds do drop their play awhile to listen to our echoes sing.....But after all, it's a free world isn't it my lovelies? As they say out there, on the spirit-frozen streets. It's a free world, they say. Oh yes. It's free alright. Death has no fee; death requires no fee whatsoever. And fear, well, you can join us at any time, come rain nor shine. Just dot. dot. dash here and you'll see @. windows. com. rtl. house on the hill. Thoroughly, expertly, verily, linked to e-mail, don't you see. Hark! Can you hear the screaming of the void? Cheer! Oh something wonderful, my dears. E-mail as well, plenty to tell, kiss and tell. Oh so much to see, so much to relish. Poor foolish little modernos. Poor wandering sheep that cannot tell the wolfish domain when they sees it and comes ready to make their nest in our pantry.

Slowly they will remember the truth they cannot avoid. Perhaps they will see the blood drip down those re-stripped, freshly plastered and painted walls, as if the facelift could do away with the disease in the bone. Or whether now it will be much more subtle. Oh yes. The possibilities are endless, we can see. Given e-mail.

Still, they are not to know. All the pollution. Senseless, you see. Drives them senseless. They live for that computer you know. Can't get them off it some nights. We can just hear it now, can't we my dears? My marvellous snow queens beset in the icy Lock of the Land. Ready to arise. To take out your mantles, place up frosted crowns. Ah, my sisters! Shall we not laugh! Have fun! Enjoy their abandon! Watching and waiting, like a crow's crooked claw, when to swoop and when to stick the talon in.

He didn't get chance, the butcher's boy, to stick his flesh pizzle in, that is. Roadie caught them part way. She had her top off. He had his mouth to her nipple. The inside story you see, local press don't get a look in, see. Cup of tea and some cake. Ever so nice, says Davie, the butcher's lad, getting bold with her flashing smile and busters thrusting. How about a kiss then, says he. Well I never, swear, my sweet Davie, now you shouldn't a go saying stuff like that, you'll get me all of a mither some. And what if I does, he carps back. Davie the butcher's lad. What if I does? How does thee think I gets by with all the nonsense you put my way. But he couldn't articulate it, only body language bluff took a stride. Perhaps you would like me to kiss you, he asked roguish-like, at her panting denials and blushing, oh no no, my young laddie, what do you take me for, heaving her bosom, parting her lips, pressed her hand to the softness she was formed.

Then he suddenly leant towards her, put his mouth upon hers and tongued her inner cove, exploring, just like a man first unto the mountain top, aye. Ever so passionate like. Lovely it was. He kissed her long and lingering and well they both did come. He kissed her long and lingering like til readily she did succumb, my love, until readily she did succumb.

And soon by gum, not even the locals know this one, he was pulling her onto his lap, duck to water like completely, ravaging her missus, wrapped up and taken. Hands everywhere let me tell you. For she was so obliging you see. Didn't give a dinkie about the maister away from home. Thought noone'd see or know. Just a swift one while the old man's back was turned. Just a quickie to sample his fresh-formed thigh - fancied him rotten for ages, she had. Why shouldn't she taste the forbidden fruit? No one to know, now. Besides, he was all over her and her body was already charged afore he set upon her. Couldn't resist that. Her flesh melted for it. Burned for it. It didn't burn long by charrie, I'll tell you.

He had taken her top off until she stopped him, placed a finger on his lips, led him upstairs then. Yes, onto the very bed, dears. The marital. Scandalous. Absolutely. That's what her husband thought. Writhing on the bed they were, semi-clad. Him with his trousers off, she in her suspenders, no knickers, all shed, see. Warm weather, see. May-time, see. Gets to their veins, hormones, see. What can you do? But oh boy does this devil have a sting in his tail at times! We can vouch for it. Eh, sisters three?

In comes roadie, sees primrose yellow jumper shed. Hears a creaking some, a squeaking some, a giggle in the rafters.

'Susan!' came his hoarse whispered tone, like a snake's sudden slither in the grass afore it lunges to strike, choked on his own agony. She didn't have chance to scream. A frozen moment. The horror beginning in her eyes, the notion for pleading about to kick in. He couldn't bear it. Shot her brains out, plastered the butcher-boy's in the other corner straight after he'd leapt back from offa her, lifted his head from his honey-pot's frozen side.

He didn't hear him, see. Butcher's lad didn't know Roadie was there. Neither did she to start with. Roadie opened the door so quiet-like. Heart breaking into vulcorous rage. Stood for a few seconds and watched 'em at it. Saw his bitch dribble wet for another. Then he scushered out her name through his rage-broiled larynx, through his strangled throat. Froze both of 'em for that second as he shot her. Then turned his gun and shot again as the butcher's boy sprang up. Both of them, through the head. Only the butcher's lad, his face was a mess. Eyes all shot in. Her face though, was perfectly preserved, apart from the weeping red hole in her forehead. Good job he was a sure shot, I tell you. Took the back of her head clean off. Little time to suffer for both of them.

Him, though, Roadie, his suffering went on interminably. Had his mind done-in, he has our Roadie. They locked him up in a mental home and threw away the key. Poor sod. Still continued ... enduring his little agonies. The rose clusters never receded. They were always there - blooming black midnights in his mind, through the frozen wreckage of his soul, through the gleam of a fish-dead stare. Poor sod. Poor Josh. Poor no tell and Roadie man. Aye.

Aaah! That was then and this is now. But b'aint it so peaceful now, my sisters, b'aint it our Mal and Gella? Whey and all prettified and up-spruced. Made right salubrious, eh girls? Right plush and fine. Look at thaise drapes the Misses brung in - heavy claret velvet for the downstairs casements, bonnie cotton print up here be the rafters, fresh painted walls in the corridor, down both the staircases, papered right tasteful like in the rooms where the childer will sleep. And through over the extension, the master bedroom where the Maister and his Misses shall to their bedding, with their shower room en suite. Opposite a room like a private study, with a single bed stashed to the wall.

Then the bathroom all dreamy blue with a pale buttermilk carpet thick between the toes - for those as 'as got 'em, that is. Seahorses and starfish stencilled round the borders, bowing the water in, mustering a suasion of the seashore in from the rushing of the silvery taps, the waterfall of sound.

Eh well, who would've thought it Mal? Who'd a thought it our Gella? Right from the time of the clogger's squattage, through the hariden's festering rind, past all that blood on the walls, to come up to this! Eh, who'd a thought it? Marvellous! Like a new place, ain't it meine schwestern. Like a palace it be or something near as fine, I'll be bound. And we can tell they've got plans for the garden can't we sisters? Oh yes, with that acre adjoining the little stretch of woodland behind it. All up here on this valley up the high side, just before the Black Hill does loom.

I can see them now - we all can, can't we girls? The whole little clan of them. The teenage boy turned sixteen, the girl come thirteen this fall. A little 'un called Jack would you know, a maither and a faither. A tad posh mind.

Look alive. Look alive. Oh yes. Quite a little tribe we can see! 'cos ain't it done up nice mind sisters. Four bedrooms now Mal. Oh and the prospect of a tiller an' all, out back of the bit of the garden left, adjoining the cleverly thrown in paddock, that scrub of old woodland. Oh yes, the extension's exceeded our expectations, hasn't it girls? Yes, rather tasteful. None of your cheap rubbish here, lads.

Boots lads, you'll have proper ones, I'll make sure of that, you'll see.

Don't you think a tour would be nice ladies? Sisters? My fate-sworn falcons, we silver griffins who gargoye back come the dark. Now. Shall we look. Upon our verily much enhanced new abode? Sitting room enlarged, wood stove burner in the broad stone hearth, oak beams exposed, and the pillars, which entrance through the downstairs extension with its parquet floor and persian rug covering. A big kitchen at the front now. No pantry - they've had it knocked through. No hooks there now. But I'm sure a shadow will swing boys, some nights when ebbs of silver may lace the midnight air, boys.

Little one, look over there. Do you see, the shadow of the crow's claw caught on a crook of night's wing?

Upon the polished staircase girls. In the second bedroom we have little Jack's domain. Hence the jolly wallpaper and single bed with bright bedspread. And in the original master bedroom ... oh yes gasp and shock horror, my ladies and gentlemen, but do we not have a girl grown to tumultuous pangs of adolescence? Mark the tiny rose cluster wallpaper, all Laura Ashley fine you see. Oh sweet, so cottage country, she will say. And the primrose duvet she will love. Oh and the view from the window my dears, won't she enjoy that too, on a stormy night when the ethers shall boil their recreations and cast the spectres toilsome.

Look at all this lovely pine ladies. Plenty of wardrobe space, soft oatmealie carpet, ever so tasteful, cosy, inviting, her room. Little girl, little woman coming to grown. Oh yes, I wonder ... when will the blood of her flow come nigh? My word we shall see eh girls, eh sisters? In the midst of a hot July when the sun blazes blisters and sultry-warm, come soft even-tide, eh sisters?

Moving on down the corridor, we have the enlarged bathroom with its shell-blue lampshade, its pristine state-of-the-art tiles and enamel. On the end, next to where the maister and misses shall bed and abide, we do waim, where the maister and his misses shall to abide, at the end of the long corridor - opens out a door where our young warrior-hero, our whizz kid with his inter-net whistle or however they say it in them city slinks down south, there shall reside our whizz kid with his internet whistle. The whole deck asnd calaver of computable sustenance-screen, he shall have we can tell, oh yes.

Oh, we've never moved, never known much, only everything, you see. It's our nature. Planted before the moon was born, we were. Desecrated and bloodied before our virgin springs had sprung, before our triplet telepathy could deliver them real power. Idiots. They were not to know I suppose. Yet our own flesh and blood, they should've! What a wonder we could've worked, we three - harnessed our mind power for all the Folks bounty. White we were. White snowdrops, pure as fresh fallen snow. Like snowdrops our beginning; the start of our offerance. We would've bloomed a thousand lilies and treasure of poppy-corn and harvest, if they had let us.

But no our strange understandings, they never cherished, they feared them. Grew uncertain of us. Just as the swelling of our pure song had sung its first knell. Dug a big hole they did, at dark moon tide. Thrown us into it. Pushed the soil at top of us. Chanted we to our living, drowning death-mud graves. Squelched us, smothered us, in the soil of their extremity. Leapt a-top to push our faces down, packed into the soil. Live burying us to empower the Land, appease the Goddess, raise the burden of famine that'd swept from the gossip of a neighbouring homestead.

"It's ever since they came born. Those three. Those three girls as have such a strange looks betwixt 'em." No matter they speak so soft and gentle. No matter they can talk in their minds to each other. Spooked 'em see. Silly. Heathens. Always we were. Meant to be. They have seen and they shall see.

These new ones, oh yes, they shall see. The young girl and the lad with his net internet field, surfing the jet-spread on an electronic screen. Oh well, we'll give you food for thought Maister Humphrous, we can tell you and for sure. Oh 'A' level is it he's doing sisters? History was it? Computer science, History and French. French! I know girls, that's what all the plain-spoken farmer folk'll say around here. Why French? Bloody French, never helped us out of a hole! German, my dear. Oh German would be much more interesting. He'll have opportunity for both, won't he dears? It'll be his choice by the end of the summer. Perhaps.

Or perhaps their choices shall be chosen for them. Pre-empted, preordained, so to speak.

The workmen were here all spring. Bashing and stripping, building and knocking through the kitchen, taking back the length of us, til blimey luvs, this is a tad different fromert we been used ta, eh lasses, eh?

Nice long cosy lounge. Bookshelves, C.D. player, T.V. and video machine. Oh sisters, so these are the modernos now. These are the ones who have the pick of the day. Look, my-my, at all o' thaise gadgets now. All run be electric. Oil-burning range in the kitchen. Whey lasses, just like a page offa Country Living or some such glossy-hype-mag. Oh yes. Thaise folk. These modernos reckon they have the vision for Today. Reckon they've got it sewn up and sorted. Ketched their piece of paradise amidst the borderlands, in a house upon a hillside, behind which the Black Hill do loom.

Oh we take them to our heart!

... Those hills; they are our breath and brether. Aye for such an' all are we a part of them, as they are a part of we, we three, we sisters three. And in the snow-draped silences, how potent the crest of your dream! How potent! When the snow lay stole about, five feet high in the drifts that came legendary those years. Those hard cold bitter years.

And they, thaise centrally-heated new 'uns, now all come 'cased in the finest of cloth, cotton-wooled 'em all about to keep 'un from ahurting and never a scrape or a tussle shall they graze the knuckles of their proof on. And naither a harm shall be come to 'em. Not if they can help it. We can see the love that laces the new-sanded beams. Yes. A loving little family. A loving little tribe.

And where was faither when they took our lives and where was maither but screeching til knocked unconscious and faither on a hillside alone, the weight of murder upon his soul. That the bitter lack-lustre love which threw us to the depths of our ceaseless grave. But sad ... folk, they were not to know. That we had seeded long before the Earth's swollen Tides gave a myriad Birth. Our roots have succoured on starlight, sifted through the timeless winds, trawled the ether of the void. Long and always have abided. Long before the Earth did grant our flesh to bloom. Long before ... Ah, the budding of our hour! How priceless the memory!

But we were not suffered grace to blossom, to truly flower. No no, not we. Forced on us the Hag's mask so early they did. Freezing our blood, sucking away the moisture of our life, with the caking, suffocating mud. The cloying dank soil that came to wriggle and heave neath the skin, eating the flesh, clearing us to our bones.

Three pretty maidens all in a row! Pretty maids all in a row. Look oh look so! Three pretty snow-white maidens all in a row - eyes of blue and hair of gold and look; one that is different to those two. Hair as white as the sunbleached wheat and eyes as pink as a serenade. Pink eyes, the iris, all pinked. Albino you see. One of triplets. Strange those pink eyes that looked and looked of a knowing and suffered a sadness in the silent winters of her heart.

Ah sisters! But weren't we rare! Oh the three of us so dazzling pretty! Well, you two fronting it of course. They all loved you! But you loved me more than they could guess or ever hope to understand. You knew my beauty. You knew the tenderness at my heart. How mortal sensitive to their shunning, my strange pink eyes. You knew sisters - and you held my hands and cried with me.

Never mind now. It was meant to be. As we know sisters. As we have always known. So have we always been. We myriad three. We, ones of the Myriad Three.

Yes, they came, the workmen. After the builders and the plasterers. Then came the carpenter to do up the stairs, create a second flight further down the extension. Came they down, the two of them, the maister and twain, to do a spot of decorating, decide how to dress their house. They didn't bring the childer. Kept it a mite secret. Like a surprise to be sprung on 'em. Something to delight 'em, whilst they was snook in their private boarding schools and little Jack was with the grandamum. Oh yes sincerely happy families here, we saw.

Colours decided, fabrics accorded, carpets delivered, furniture installed, furnishings draped and dressed, beds made and duvets fully co-ordinated. Each child chosen for a space and maither and faither - whey! out in the big bedroom above where the extension has stretched. All over that piece in the garden, do you see dears? Do you remember it? That little stretch of the garden where thaisen modernos have gone and planted their house-kit. Do you remember it? Of course you do! There's my little finger knuckle see, deep down, deep embedded in the clay. Yes and if I crook my little finger you see. Well, things start to happen, don't they sisters?

Delicious isn't this my sisters? This prospect so fair and advantageous. Oh to dabble in the world of the modernos, oh to dabble in the world of the modernos for a while. There's nothing new under the sun of course nor below the moon. But it's always nice to have things close at hand isn't it now sisters? Yes, always better to have things live and close to, wouldn't you say my dears?

Well and this old house has never seen such a dressing, such a painting and slicking. Spruced up and spruced up fine ain't it gals? Ketched their piece of paradise here to be sure girls, eh? So they think.

Poor innocent modernos. So they think. Now how shall we begin my sisters? How shall we consecrate our offering? Something marvellous subtle or volcanic and thrash of lightning? What dreams of blood shall we dress the stairwell with? What hidden embers shall we stir into flame? What conflagration shall we conjur forth now ... from the depths of our foetid grave? Endless. Endless the possibilities ... of course and then it will've been and come real ... we watching, we three ... how oh ...

She came in as a child and a queen all in one. Breasts beginning to form. Legs like the length of a deer, all colt-charm and rosy. What do you think my melchion schwesters? A nightmare shot in the depths of her dream. A fluttering of wings and the jet-beady stare of a raven on high, the

soundless glide of the screech owl. The brushing of her breasts against the hoary oak, a braw man-dryad's arm encircling her pretty maiden waist. The silken slip of erotica whispered awake in our hands. Oh the stirring of her sexual energy, the sensual levity of flesh! Yes, we like to get the ladies razzed, don't we sisters? Like to turn the lasses lewd. All unsettles the men so. Can't keep their minds from off of her thighs.

I can see it now. The beginning of the sleep-walking. Our voices calling her ... calling her. The start of her obsession with that patch of the garden, close by the extension wall. She won't be able to help herself, of course, little lamb. Somehow she shall be compelled. All in her unconscious-exposed in the depths of the night, in the dark of the night.

And they are bound to find out, to know later on. Just as they are cutting their teeth on this country-cake lark. It'll be maitrehausen no doubt. Searching up the local history. Finding time to indulge her interests. Down to the quaint local library she'll go. Look at all the moth-eaten books on the borderlands. Chance she will stray upon a story and turn a little squeamish when the lights are on low and the creaking of the boughs above the windows can sound like a gunshot snap when the wind rages wild and dashes infrequent agin recent embellished eaves.

And fearful for her little ones she will deliberate to tell them. Consult the maister, who'll agree with she. As they always do in the end.

But see, they never learn do they? Endless repetitions we see. Endless repetitions of mistakes they never learn from. No. Civilised they call themselves. And thaise, thaise folk inparticular. There is a smugness about them ... we would like to rent asunder, to dash and toss aside, abide, abide ... teasing before, long, long before we get shut of 'un.

Slowly, oh so slowly to watch the disintegration of their oh so carefully worn masks, come about, come about. The facade slipping until the worms have taken hold - metaphoric, of course, eh sisters? Maggots that run riot 'ginst your bones, we could tell them couldn't we sisters? But there are those with maggots in the brain who will never see a dawn as its dying. Who will never catch that special frozen moment - the witness of something rare. Their noses are set too firm ap the grindstone. Aye and they naither lift their eyes agin in wonder at the fragile snowflake fall but muttersome and grumble-long, all of a clathered in their tincan motorised metal, beetling to the brow of an every hill. But never stopping. To witness the dew as it falls so soft and subtle upon the petals of a flower. Always repeating the same mistakes. Really, I wonder sisters, has the human race grown at all? Or is it kept in a contusion of similarities; a rut that cannot be outgrown? What think we sisters three?

Maitrehausen, she will shield them but she will witness the disturbance of her little ones and chaff herself at the edges with a dry crumbling attrition of worry, that takes its toll, dulls the aim, as the years grow by.

Look childer! All of the pictures that spring to mind! The sound of a gunshot and scarlet roses blooming 'gainst the bedroom wall, ebony roses that smell of her perfume in the purple twilight when a girl's heart has wings and the ecstasy of her body is beginning. Oh, then the stormy night shall come, oh yes, the night of thundersome lightning, when she, young maiden daughter, walks into the night to dig in the mud with her nails, grasp the clods with her snowy little fingers, take the soil from out of our lungs.

And father and mother shall follow her into the night. And maitrehausen seeing her little one's deep-sleep state shall stop him from jolting her for fear the shock could kill her. And muttering she will be, the little fair melchion, with the snowy-white tips and red, flowing hair. "Must release you, get you out of there." Let you breathe a little. Yes my fair sweet melchion. Oh yes, through you we shall breathe again.

And aghast before her father's eyes, he who was sworn to stand by, she shall squirm about in the mud, contours caressed by her moon-drift shift with the muck she'd dug up to the side. And the rain lashed down and stung her budding breasts, made her know she was alive.

Her faither shall cast his eyes down in shame, afraid of his daughter's beauty, afraid of her dazzling, fresh-life, allure, animal-child, woman-come in the rain-drenched thundersong. As the lightning flashes and the mother screams but will not abandon her little melchion flesh. Ah the

chaos in our little maiden's mind, how it shall rivet and ravish them all! But subtle her mind we shall close to. Awaken she shall in the midst of her ruins, in the midst of her ravishing exposed to the elemental flesh of her ruins. Oh she shall be so bemused. "What are you standing there for? I was having a dream. It was a dream! Suddenly leaping up, the mud smeared and slimed from crest of her breast to her buttock that curved with a racehorse behind. Swear the father's guilt must look aside, afraid to meet her eye lest she should read some madness there. Aye and suddenly leaping forwards she shall and dig again as a remembrance do come to her. But sit back she shall, troubled, perplexed, all upset, and burst into tears, put her muddy fists to her brown-amber eye. And maither shall comfort, attempt to fathom, and she shall speak of her dreams and they shall know us. Aye they shall know us. Perhaps. For a little while.

But they shall not know. They shall not know just like all the others, the point of no-return. The fools will hang around until the viper from the Dark Heart of her nest is drawn. They will wait until Winter's iron claw has locked them, hot stock and barrel. Frozen them into a purpose all its own. Pitiless, the ice-time see lads. Pitiless. When the North winds do blow and the cold cannot be kept off for the harvest has failed in successive years. Now there's a winter for them to remember eh sisters?

Spring was sweet for a while til the soil choked us. Oh well! Those halcyon days! How many Mal? How many our Azanagelle? Pah! You could count them on the fingers of one hand, I'll be bound, wain't it not so we sisters three? Still.

Our bitterness was dredged and mulled long before the forests took root, before an infinity of fossils melted into glutinous oil. Flesh will come and flesh will cease. Mulch down. We know about the mulching down don't we sisters? The steady rotting of the carcass. The gradual falling of the meat from the bone, just a wisp of skin left, like a strand of lace holding a remnant of my sword arm, unwilling to let go. Ah! I could have known such fervour! Yes, we were all so fervent sisters, waim't it not so?

But nothing is fixed. There are many, many ways to slow, quick quick, slow. There are a very many days to dance in a sun-drunk summer ho yet, I'm sure, couldn't we say, we sisters three? Infinite. The choices.

Perhaps we could snatch the little one to our bosoms, slash their hearts right out of their feathers. Cripple 'em and crush 'em in one fell swoop. He heard voices see. From underneath the surface of the water, from the bottom of the pond in the middle of those woods, voices calling him in ... come to no harm ... but the weed will have choked him, somehow kept him down, little sign of any struggle. Oh how to wither a mother's heart! Oh we know that well, don't we our lasses?

But say hey. We waim't be saa hasty shall we our lasses? Never of it - it's not our style. Slowly oh ever so slowly to the simmer til the boil eh sisters? Eh meine schwestern? Oh surely surely we shall tease them for a while, ketch 'um playing. Join the games, won't we sisters? We ice-queens three turned frosty glare of crimson come the witching hour.

It could all unravel so slowly, so deliciously inexorable, as they shall come to know. When the chips are down. When the cards are on the table, they will find the dice are loaded. Oh yes, won't they just sisters?

It'll be Alex is in his bedroom again. At the computer again, as the web-sites entangle him in his own private hell and his world shatters. Splits apart, turns inside out. His dreamy regime of green, white and blue, he will discover is owned by you know who! No, no mention of names, oh no names. Don't look too long into the centre of the swastika my son or it'll spin you whether or no you care to go. Don't dredge up those mouldy old details. Why ponder young warrior? When you are designed to get out and do! Join a club. Scour the park. Go scaffolding. Bunji jumping. Stock shelves in the supermarkets. Earn a wage! But not for he - no ho - 'cos daddy will indulge and daddy will provide, until the young dog has bitten the age-old hand which by its comfortable emersions would tame, the untamed wild.

The hawk! The hawk! Listen loves, hear how the buzzards call, keening, plaintive, wild on the wings of All Beyond. Yes, on the wings of All Beyond.

Order of Nine Angles

Ever so quiet and cosy 'ent it Mal? Ever so comfortable warm and cossetting bain't it be my one, my own Azanagelle?

Perhaps we'll settle us to sleep now. Drift as the homesters get themselves feet found. Eh, meine schwestern? Eh, my sisters? Shall we let them unravel a spiral of happiness into the summer-long dawn? Look dear, how the garden has taken. The bluebells, aren't they charming? The maiden of brown and amber bends down to study, to caress. Aaah, so sweet that gentle caress!

Aaah! That she should know pain. But mother's hearts were made to bleed don't you know? Beneath the balmy summer song, beneath the days so hot and long, with all the green growth fecund rich - how shall they know that Winter's Heart can wither so?

And like pearly ribbons the moonlight at times across the dew-covered lawn. Primroses border to the doorway and honeysuckle has been tended to frame the entrance portal. A lightness. And how oh, all seems so rich and mellow as autumn fruits begin to bronze and rosy-russet in the fermenting mists that linger round the hedgerows; a scarf trailed across the dour expanse of the pines, where once the sturdy oak had shed its giant limbs to foster the myriad life-form. Where once the oaks had stood, the pine forests add an inflection of sterility into the twilight air. The Land. This Land. Once so rich.

Now so taken up somehow. Taken up. Cut up and squashed down and racked around and ruined.

Still. Secrets run deep. Secrets run very deep. The inner loam is rich. Ready for the fray. Ready to succour its soil upon blood. Steadily consume the concrete. Longing for it, aren't we my dears? Oh yes. The carnage days. Get out my butcher's apron and chopping blade. Plenty of heads to chop, I'll be bound, eh sisters? Eh, my dark majesties, draped in your stoles of snow, we, she, all three of us are part of. But for nigh the storm is gentled, nibbling merely at the edges.

Oh dark, dark, bitter dark and poisonous is the cud that we do chew upon. Where? There! At sacred root, the filthy worm has found its hole and wriggled in its canker. Oh the knowledge of poison is a subtle art, subtle as they come.

We know our trade better than well. We know how a nuance can continue domino effect. Oh yes. We can make plenty a house of cards come down and tumble, they shall see. Oh yes. We know how a shadow can appal. We know how misery can seep cold in, to ice the marrow of the bone. Like an icicle our hearts. Oh foolish children. We could freeze your souls at a glance. Trickle ice til you rigor mortised. Hapless ones who have wandered from the fray to find the battle come to roost beneath the ivory towers of your protection. Naughty e-mail @ com.w.dot dash. house on the hill. Where the sunwheel spun an electric screen, where a wheel of scythes rotated round, whirling him off to a future he could never have foreseen.

House of cards, they shall see. Oh this mortal coil, how it shuffles off, shuffles off ... how about explosions of wrath to see it on its way! How about the shadow of a crow's claw, the razor beak against the candlelit wall in the pantry. Power cut and all lights out except the light of living flame. Little did they know - could never foresee the nightmares that would come to pace and prowl the storm-brewed night, to clatter at the door and crack inside the bedroom and whisper a round of lintels of stone through the crevices in the ghostly doorways where memories unfurl a victim's psyche sprawling and into the screaming void.

In the whirling midnights of your mind.

Lest we forget.

Cunning how it works. The blitzkrieg. The zeitgeist.

See there in the shadows the outline of a raven's wing, the beak of the hooded crow. Up on the hillside where the carrion will gather.

Gone up in smoke all of it, you see. Gone up the swanny.

House of cards come tumbling, they shall see, oh yes.

Oh yes, meine schwartze lieben.

House of cards completely.

Fragile as lattice of cobweb-lace bedecked with the dew of the morn where above 'un does circle a call:

Order of Nine Angles

aye, listen Mal, our Azanagelle, can you hear it? Oh how it thrills!
Deeper than memory song, like a scar that will always belong, the expanse of horizons ...

aye, comes the lance of the sound on the air
and the keening edge of the buzzard's cry
on high in the wilderness winds
above where the black hills do roam ...
aye, keening edge of the buzzard's cry
 on high
 in the wilderness winds ...

- Order of Nine Angles -

3.

Carving

Christos Beest, 1997 e.h.
Order of The Nine Angles

Do we bring gods from soil
As I carve this face in wood?
Do we and they as one
Shape Wyrd
By willing answers for our living?
The trees now budding
Shape of my soul, tranquility:

This is the face of Hierosgamos
Once a truth over creed
When mouths unravelled leaves
Instead of death
In this moment
I am still of the elements
Which bear the Musick I call my own:
I must wait therefore, for solitude
To open Earth
And bring forth consciousness
Carving my face into the form that wakes...

There is one Wyrd
And the wheeling Cosmos will always shape
And discard, until a few buds at least
May blossom as Art

Not simply a means
But a god for each waiting Earth

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4.

DYSSOLVING
Diary of an Internal Adept

S. Lagain, ONA

In a Landscape

Winter darkens
And each city is a refuge:
Yet still a river moves through unlit moors
Waiting, miles from our place
Of Forgetting
And echoes
Elude the notes, formed
To seize Divinity
To suckle for some
A dream

My crucible, nourished now
By rain and snow
Has waited long years:
It is time for the Earth to bear again
From a kind of Death,
To bring the deepening spread of Summer
Once more by an Oath
In fever fulfilled

Frantic, a connexion sought
While each season is unheard.
Here, resides the longing
To find the Inner Land, immutable
Since in our loss
We cannot grasp
A killing frost that seeps
Where no paths
Cut us from the black hills
Where no track
Leads to a favoured place
And echoes, after you
We shall still be, waiting ...

D Y S S O L V I N G

Diary of an Internal Adept

March

21st: Should the above read "Internal Inept"? A terrible start. I am cold and exhausted after the journey, but weather has been wonderful. I did not do a sufficient 'recce' of area, and arrogantly based my plans according to a map. Getting to this wilderness, burdened with my home on my back, has proved traumatic. Fool! First lesson?

I feel hungry. Upset - I miss J. To be honest, I have doubts about my ability - perhaps this is normal? I swing from one mood to the other. As I write, I can see the comet above - it seems encouraging. I feel frightened.

"Tomorrow is another day" and I really must take this one step at a time. I feel ... inept and about to be exposed as a fraud.

22nd: Collected a month's provisions - not a bad walk (twenty mile round trip) but back-breaking on the way back - kept my mind busy, though. Fairly positive today, particularly after having explored some of the area; and it is beautiful - exactly the right domain for the ritual: treeless, rocky, mountainous ...

I'm fine when I'm busy. This afternoon I was upset. All I can think of is the Summer Solstice - and yet , why can I not just "enjoy" this experience? Here and now? I wait now for the night, then I can sleep and one more day will be over.

This seems an awesome task - wonderful to romanticise about, but as with all things, the living reality is ... many intense things. I am happy using here as a base. It's been raining lightly now for a few hours - it looks as if it has been snowing on the mountains, which I can see from the tent.

I cannot begin to think about what I am doing - I just must go through each day ... And see. I don't see how I can do this; the tent is not really bearable to be in during the day. Raining heavily now. I must just do what I can. I will review the situation a week from yesterday.

23rd: Better day, more settled - explored more of the immediate landscape. Re-pitched the tent - and thought I had lost the tent pegs: I was almost overwhelmed with panic, which shows how nervous I am. This occurred as the afternoon rain started up, and I am paranoid about getting wet, particularly this early on. I have a fear of rain at present. I may re-locate the tent tomorrow to somewhere more picturesque - all the land here is water-logged. Still, as the weeks go on I am expecting the weather to become drier and warmer (!).

When the Sun breaks through the clouds there is some happiness. There is also simple pleasure in doing simple tasks, such as washing cutlery!

Horrors. Have just discovered five or six of what I presume are sheep ticks embedded in each leg. I have applied my insect repellent, pulled the bastards out, applied antiseptic and plasters. They must have pounced via my exposed socks (I am wearing breeks - tomorrow I shall permanently wear over-trousers). Horrible moment - apparently they can cause fever, but nothing life-threatening. One on my hand.

Those little scum must live everywhere - still, it's their land. I've yet to earn respect and trust from Nature. This is horrible. It's still raining. Cold, damp and feeling ill - already.

24th: Woke up feeling very unimpressed with the strong sunlight and general beauty of the weather. I only began to pick up when cleaning cutlery! The weather remained bright and clear,

and helped to slowly instill a sense of cautious well-being. That feeling keeps me occupied, but fades as the day progresses to evening.

This is all very difficult. I do not feel 'esoteric' in the least; or that I am fitting comfortably into the 'role' of 'Hermit'. I am a man missing his beloved terribly. It feels cruel to be parted like this, and the sense of three months stretching before me seems too much to bear. Anguish.

But this situation is my choice - I could leave if I wanted. I just know that if I did, so much would be lost; my path would effectively end - a staying at 'external adept'. I would perhaps go on to live an enjoyable life composing music - but that music would lack the ultimate power that this ordeal can earth. There would be the torture of what could have been achieved. There would be failure, within me, where it matters.

I think my problem is the knowledge of the length of time ahead of me. I must try and become detached from the time-scale; live within each day - each moment in fact, each one acutely felt. Tomorrow does arrive, bringing me one day nearer to my goal.

I do need a task to occupy my time. Perhaps I will try to carve something. This whole situation is difficult, sickeningly so. But each day completed is a mini-triumph. I will endure.

25th: If I wrote this journal early each day there would be positivity; as it is so far, the evening brings such anguish and weeping - I am haunted by the moment we parted. I worry for her, and feel torn. A period of such anguish then brings rest.

There is so much I can derive from this experience - so much loss and failure if I "chicken out".

Generally, my mood is one of contentment (it is still early days!). Today, apart from this evening, was my calmest yet. I spent a productive time contemplating the tarot.

The weather has been bright and warm, and I sat in the sun like an old man in his deck chair. It is during the day when I see things which bring a sense of well-being - ie. circling buzzards (possibly some eagles too), and deer: two hinds very close to the tent yesterday. And a stag standing on a distant rocky crag, as the sun set.

Night is approaching now - a time of great comfort when I don't have to endure - just rest, sleep. I am usually fairly tired at the end of each day, so sleep is no problem. Although quite cold.

Another day done - no further visits from ticks.

26th: Emotionally, a better day. I awoke before dawn, with the rain lashing down on the tent. I went out for some water and was caught in intense wintery showers, sleet and some hail. The river was engorged and raging.

As the showers subsided, I went for a further recce of the area, and decided on a place to re-locate the tent to - quite far from here, but it has a greater sense of wilderness.

Content; I feel I am starting to accept/identify with the role - or rather, am becoming it. Have spent time sitting and watching the land - and listening. Tonight, I watched deer on the horizon, feeding.

27th: I relocated the tent and belongings to the wilder place. Today, I have felt upset again, my mood unsettled by the relocation - it took three trips altogether, carrying all the stuff over steep and hilly land. It really began to irritate me.

Also weather very changeable - hail stones and very strong winds. As I write this, the tent is being buffeted by the strong weather, and the noise is oppressive. But what do I expect in this far Northern terrain, amid echoes of Winter?

I am low today. Saw two hinds this evening, which cheered me. The wildlife has that effect on me. I also observed a frog today, coloured brown like the heather. In fact, every life form, including the flies, seems of the same brown colour - except me in my bright red mountain cap (a stupid colour).

Order of Nine Angles

I am not happy today. Perhaps I will become more ground down as the weeks wear on; but my resolve remains. In fact, the alternative of giving up seems much more repellant now. The 'waiting' is not really that bad - as yet. Still worrying about J. though, still tearful, at times.

I am starting to get a feel for how a day progresses, uncluttered by a timetable of modern life and routine. I am attempting to calmly let each day unfold and pass.

28th: Bad night last night - I froze as rain and hail continued to assault the tent, and could barely sleep. This morning was spent warming up in tent with hot drinks, before venturing outside. The rain persisted on and off throughout day. It has been very grey, cold and damp which has made me feel lethargic. Despite conditions, I sat on a fallen tree by the burn, and began carving a 'wand' for J. This mindful act did go some way to easing an otherwise depressing day. It is a week today since beginning - I should be celebrating having reached this far! Yet it is obviously quite a pathetic 'achievement' compared to all the weeks, the months still to be endured.

After a week, things seem more of a burden - but my mood has certainly been affected by the weather.

I feel irritated, slightly, by my predicament. Yet - on, on, it must be so. I feel pissed off, to be honest.

29th: It is possible to lose track of the day/date - even with diary as a reminder. Since each day has no form, no routine that I am used to, they tend to blur into each other ...

More Wintery showers this morning, cold again, but weather quickly gave way to the glorious Sun. I marvelled at the Sun today, as my body responded to its life-giving rays - I feel that I have gained a new understanding/relationship with the Sun (which I have tried to capture in an attempt at poetry), which seems the first - albeit subtle - gift of this venture. Just a new shift in perception.

Spent most of day carving by the river: it has, on the whole, been a good day, but marred slightly by a period of preoccupation with when I finish, on the Solstice. Too far away to happily dwell upon.

It's raining now. I feel a sort of detachment evolving re. my life prior to being here. I have accepted that I am going to see this ordeal through, so no longer dwell emotionally on what I have left behind. I feel 'I' as a personality am disappearing into the landscape; not an unsettling feeling, but, somehow, something of a relief and quietly inspiring. This detachment is not a rejection or judgement of what I have left behind - rather, this is my life now, and the expression of the life that I am becoming.

Writing poetry and carving have given shape and purpose to the day.

30th: Weather miserable for most of the day - cold, grey and raining. It has had a depressing effect - that coupled with a feeling of being a little physically run down (beginnings of a 'cold' coming on?). I have felt, for the first time, really depressed, and sat by the river emotionally drained. This heaviness continued until early evening when, following the days only decent meal (porridge!), I continued to carve by the river and the Sun appeared, filling me once more with contentment - there was a loss of a certain dread that has plagued me for much of day.

Today, I sensed the awesome time factor ahead of me: tonight there is a sharp coherence, while earlier there was a lethargic, dulled and blurred lack of awareness. Tonight, I feel content.

31st: Last night, some living creature visited the tent. I awoke, in pitch darkness - I literally could not even see my hand before me - to the quiet but determined sound of something pulling things from my rucksack. I felt unnerved to say the least. There was also intermittent scratching at the edge of the tent - something trying to get to the bag of rubbish that I keep at the foot of the tent. It was a horrible unknown, insistent sound and my mind began to run through the various options: rat; wildcat ...? It might have been a weasel or stoat - whatever, it had claws and incisors (I could hear it nibbling away). I was disturbed. After lying still, my heart racing, I shouted, made movement, and went outside with a torch to see what I could find. Nothing, of course.

Stupidly, I had been keeping my food rubbish in tent, so bound to attract scavengers. I moved the bag some distance from tent, ledging it amongst the foundations of a crofter's cottage. I then securely fastened my rucksack.

From then on, I felt reasonably unbothered whether it returned or not - as long as it did not subject me to any carnivorous violence.

The sky lark has just sung a brief song, which so far, at least here, I have taken to be a herald of rain. Today has been depressing. I woke up reasonably confident, washed some clothes and myself, in the stream by the tent. I explored a part of the valley today. It is a very unsettling place - really, genuinely wild, exuding a sense of pre-human age that is too vast to cope with. There are no footpaths here, no tourist trails - just the fallen green husks of elfin trees, slimy boulders, and the vast violent cliff sides. Perhaps it is my heightening sensitivities, but I have never encountered such an atmosphere; for a twentieth century city dweller (even one who would be 'magickal') there are no familiarities - just a sense of awe, of ancient fear ... I felt unable to progress too far, partly because I was caught in a very heavy bought of rain, and mostly because the valley is too overwhelming. I need to explore it gradually, and build up trust on both sides.

I returned drained and wet to the tent, and have stayed here since the afternoon. Perhaps it was the valley, but for the first time, I felt the beginnings of real loneliness - real 'aloneness'.

The weather, as ever, does effect my mood. It is warmer tonight.

April

1st: The creature re-visited last night with a vengeance. The scavenging, and the ferocious winds worked away at my imagination - at my nerves! I do not mind admitting that terror began to grip me. The 'thing' at one point ran round the inside of the flysheet. Then silence. Then more gnawing and pulling of plastic. I shouted and shone the torch about in a panicked state. Silence - then more nibbling; almost as if it was finding the situation humorous, enjoying my fear. The wind battered the tent - in this ancient place, miles from anyone and anything. I shouted again, and the reply I got was a deep and sudden guttural exclamation - too deep and strong for a little rodent. I was shocked into silence. The gnawing, delicate and intense, continued. Then, I remembered my own magick, held the talisman around my neck, and was calm. I went off peacefully into sleep.

This morning, I discovered that the varmint had eaten through the bag containing my food - and had eaten into the oats and rice. The size of the holes were small, and obviously gnawed at by a rodent - so cannot explain the deep animal noise. I am no longer worried though, but calm in myself. I have wrapped and hidden all food in my rucksack, and firmly fastened it up - so little here now to attract a scavenger. No doubt it will return sometime tonight. But, I have sprinkled chilli powder over the rucksack, and a little at each entrance to tent!

Today, from the start, has been miserable - weather again grey, cold, windy and wet. It has felt the coldest day yet. Very oppressive. I ventured out for a time, as I could not stand just lying in the tent. Sat by the river at various places, then returned to tent, heavy with lethargy, feeling cold. The river does not, at times, lull me - rather its crashing rush seems to mirror the chaos of feelings within me, and can unsettle profoundly.

However, after a hot evening meal (generally, a stock cube boiled up with a little rice or pasta added), I ventured out again when the weather calmed. I sat high up, by the stream that flowed down by the tent, fed from the rocky slopes far above. I looked out across to the sea, with its tiny islands, and felt a sudden overwhelming feeling of tremendous awe and beauty - a satori... The clouds, like the life forms they were, moving perfectly, calmly and quickly across the sky; the fading light, so serene, and a speck of a tiny white cottage far over the sound, many miles on the other distant shore: all created a sense of my future - of *becoming* the mystery itself. I felt resolved then to return to the world when the ordeal was over, and make a way of life that would capture the essence I felt. This feeling is difficult to describe - perhaps in musick? This experience made up for the drabness of today.

April ... time is passing. I am content with where I am and the journey so far made.

2nd: A funny day. Weather, at last, quite beautiful - strong sunlight all day. Feeling quite positive (no scavenger last night, incidentally). I ventured up the sheer face of the fells, and found the small loch which is the source of my stream - it was beautiful up there, and it felt good to exercise my body after the inertia of yesterday.

Afternoon was spent by the burn that flows from the valley, sitting on rocks and taking in the idyllic scenery. I even saw two eagles, playing in the sky. And yet, I felt troubled. The beautiful weather made me feel rather restless, and I became ... bored, for the first time; with oppressive miserable rain and cold, the day is confined and dulled and passes quickly ...

Missing J. again. My mind has been rabbiting on, preoccupied with the mundane problems of my life prior to here, which certainly did not provide the tranquillity I needed. Also, I seem to lack creative inspiration.

Have decided to eat the oats attacked by the scavenger - hopefully no disease will result.

3rd: I complained about the Sun yesterday, and have been repaid today by cold, rainy, grey weather - exactly what I wanted! Today has been reasonable - started some creative writing, and, having finished the wand, began carving a 'river god'.

This morning was spent watching ravens dive in and out of the rain-mist - rest of day, spent carving by the river. Emotionally, I feel a little fragile; beginnings of loneliness again. Still content to be here - I am wake up now with feelings of excitement about the challenge of the ritual (these feelings lessen as day wears on).

Scavenger, for now, turned away effectively. Perhaps some Sun tomorrow? (!). It's raining now.

4th: The two week mark has been reached - everyone in my past life joked: "He'll be back in two weeks!"

A difficult day in some ways. Weather has been of extremes - an hour or two of beautiful sunshine, followed by a spell of more Wintery showers; hail and sleet and very cold.

Scavenger appeared briefly last night - it didn't stay long, since there is nothing here to scavenge; but its presence, its noise, wakes me up and unsettles me - really annoys me, in fact.

Woke up cold. Day spent walking and carving by river.

Felt very unsettled this evening - my life before this yet again encroaching. Obviously, I can't really expect just to place this to one side - after all, it's there to be learnt from, via this ordeal.

Also have been bothered now for some days by a frequency, which I hear constantly. Have noticed that it is loudest when by a river - particularly when engorged by rain. Am I picking up the vibration of the water - its natural tone? It seems obtrusive at times, but appears to be a natural feature - so quite interesting. It sounds like a note from an organ key permanently held down (an 'A' perhaps?), and certainly seems external to me, rather than some hearing defect. It is cold tonight.

5th: Do not know whether early evening, afternoon or what - but have now retired to tent since weather is atrocious. Last night was freezing. It has been snowing heavily on the mountains but here, only a light flurry of snow and sleet and a few heavy bouts of hail. When not hailing, there is the ever present rain, and now a heavy cold mist has enveloped the area, which looks set to stay throughout the night. The weather has not emotionally bothered me too much, and I have turned my energies to writing. My mind has been quietened today thanks to an attempt at a vow of silence (I have been talking aloud to myself far too much - driving myself to distraction in fact). I feel calmer, and subdued.

Food supply is running a little low, despite my rationing and meagre diet. Will have to revise my needs when it comes to fetching the next month's supply.

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6th: Tent battered by rain and winds all night, and this morning found water seeping in through ground sheet. - not seriously, but obviously that caused some worry.

Heavy rain finally cleared, and there is sunshine tonight, for which I am now grateful. The tent should dry out O.K. - but will re-pitch soon to a higher plateau which does not seem as water logged. Stream engorged.

I have approached today quite practically, generally re-arranging tent so it will dry quickly. I spent some time working on new septenary correspondences, including a section on clouds - based on my experiences and observations so far. Spent time again by river, carving.

Have felt tranquil, at one point nearly idyllic - although always the tinge of caution, and sadness over who I have left behind.

All in all, quite content to be here.

7th: Another cold and wet night; groundsheet was soaked and water started to penetrate sleeping bags. So, have spent today drying out and re-pitching tent. The weather warmed up slightly, which made life easier, but now it is raining again.

So, woke up feeling grotty after an uncomfortable night. Once tent was re-pitched, I ventured some way into the valley and washed myself completely in the rushing river. Water absolutely freezing, but exhilarating to bathe naked - afterwards, I felt refreshed and calm. Rest of day spent carving and washing clothes.

A quiet day of contentment. Scavenger still visits, but am not too bothered.

8th: Today I ventured up into the hills to explore the more distant lochs - possibly to look for a new site, since I feel more solitude is needed. By this I mean that my current proximity to a few ruined foundations of cottages is causing problems - they are becoming an intrusive reminder of human activity, despite their intriguing presence. There must have been a thriving crofting community here, some centuries ago - there is still evidence of 'lazy beds' carved into the slopes.

The day began with a feeling of being rather jaded, lethargic, so felt some strenuous climbing and walking was in order. Having reached the summit, I still felt worn and a little irritable - until I entered a natural arena enclosing one of the highest lochs. My mood changed instantly. Here was one of the most peaceful, natural and numinous places I had encountered so far. The feeling was strange - I actually fell in love, and the whole spirit of the place was beautifully feminine in a startlingly tangible way. It was like meeting a beautiful woman.

All that could be heard was the gentle lapping of the water; and the surroundings - just the magnificent mountains, not a trace of 'civilisation'. I resolved then to pack up the tent and relocate, so investigated the area further. Unfortunately, found the ground was very marshy and waterlogged - but I was still not put off. The views from the highest slope leading up from the loch were breathtaking - the great expanse of sea, all the islands ... This all seemed to confirm that I should be there.

And then I noticed the signs of people - that is, litter, stuffed into rock crevices, a crisp packet in the water ... My precious feelings of isolation became eroded, and I felt sad for this place, to be subject to the stupidity and lack of empathy so characteristic of modern people. The surroundings began to unsettle me - even the views, which I had once, from another vantage point, shared with J.

Depression set in, and I descended the crags to my current site some distance below - it looks like I am staying where I am, for now.

Weather has remained rain-free and warm, and was able to restore some positive feelings. However, I am still attracted to that site, and have found what seems to be a more gradual route to the summit, which would make it easier to relocate. Not sure.

I am having moments of deep loneliness.

9th: Scavenger appeared, really pissing me off, but otherwise a decent sleep. Woke up feeling a bit better than yesterday, but gradually, quite quickly, on rising became depressed. Just lay in the tent for a while. Then dragged myself up and decided to walk to some other high lochs. The rain was torrential when I reached my destination, and I sat utterly desolate by a really grim looking loch, depressing in the greyness. I just sat and watched the land becoming more marshy, and felt the increasing cold and damp. As I stumbled away back to the tent, I was overcome with the desolation of my predicament - feelings that have been building up over the past few days. I wept copiously in the rain. I felt that I had reached my limit of tolerance - that I had reached some internal barrier. No amount of reassuring talk did any good. A natural reaction at this point I suppose, one which has arisen of itself, and that I could not control. So I allowed the misery - and it was Misery.

Got back to the tent and eventually calmed myself into a peaceful state, by carving wood. And have continued thus for the rest of day.

I am still here, and still able to continue.

10th: Scavenger again, but eventually, a good night's sleep. The weather has remained good today: sunshine, no wind - quite warm. I woke up feeling quite positive. After my regular dose of oats and water, I began what I aim to be a regular session of physis: it felt good, and I remain quite supple and feel well, physically.

After that, I spent a large part of day by the river, carving, and pondering on the Minor Arcana.

I feel better than I did yesterday - but do feel different, living with this sense of desolation which threatens always to break out. Today, I could identify my feeling of unease as just boredom - creativity is fine, but it doesn't fill a day.

Days are noticeably getting longer - due to the lengthening hours of daylight and my own unease. Have noticed with pleasure, that some trees in the valley are starting to bud, and primroses are emerging. Spring is spreading finally - at one point, it seemed as if the grey and rain and desolate landscape would always remain.

An echo of Summer, then.

11th: Three week mark reached. This has been a special day: I have experienced - all day - a form of transcendence; almost one long and effortless, flowing meditation. I felt a calmness and unity with my surroundings which I have not felt before - ever. I found myself not dwelling on any one thing, but often I would simply just listen, to changes in the wind, the river ... I feel almost happy. I write almost because I am rather cautious of this feeling - it is perhaps a special moment, which will not return tomorrow, or for a few days/weeks. But, here and now, this day has been one to remember, and to live for its return.

I constructed a circle of eight stones for my physis practice, which I undertook with great enjoyment, and ease. The circle's presence has created an added dimension to the site - I feel like what I really am, or at least becoming: a shaman.

Wrote more poetry, and pondered on further septenary matters. Weather has been very fine and tranquil, which of course helps my mood.

12th: Went to fetch month's supplies today - earlier than planned. My jaunt began well - slow and contemplative in the sunshine: it was good to see the changes that had occurred since my last outing, particularly the trees waking after their Winter sleep.

The way back was an ordeal - back-breaking in the relentless sun. The experience became absolute agony when I clambered - nearly crawled - over the fells and moorland back to the tent. But when finished, I felt a great sense of accomplishment.

I attempted some physis later on, but was physically too tired. Concluded the evening by sitting in the circle, and, as last night, just listened - listened to the land speak to me. I was transfixed ... this really is a new sensation, and I am beginning to feel different, in myself, as though I have passed through a veil. However, there are many more changes to come - positive and disruptive.

Unpleasant dreams last night - and scavenger.

13th: Slept very well last night, not surprisingly. If scavenger did appear, I was not aware of it.

It has been an uneventful day; still feeling the physical effects of yesterday. Carving; physis ...

My mind has lapsed to my previous life, and so have felt unsettled by all those unresolved things. Have also felt a little bored; but spiritual feeling remains. When my mind ceases to jabber, I remain awed listening to the unfolding of Nature.

14th: It began to rain early this morning, and when I did finally leave the tent, the landscape was wreathed in stratus clouds. Quite cold. Although my mood remained positive, I found the weather quite oppressive.. I became lethargic, with a feeling of confinement and boredom.

The day was rescued from misery by a good physis session.

As the day wore on, I motivated myself to undertake what is now a regular evening walk - excellent; I felt a new controlled dimension of myself emerging.

I felt a little depressed about the weather, until I reminded myself that it was as much part of me as the sunshine. I began to meditate, and became moved by the colours, how the heather has darkened - all the land darkened - by the rain, while the rocks stood out almost white against the ruddy backdrop. I watched the low cloud wreath around the peaks; listened to the stream; felt a warming of the temperature; noticed the differing colours in what is on appearance a dense blanket of grey sky ... the land once more spoke to me, and today has concluded on another beautiful note.

15th: Woke again to greyness, but this began to break up during the day, and occasional blue sky appeared behind dramatic clouds. It has remained cold.

Did not venture far from tent today, initially because of mist, and then lethargy. The physis session was a bit of a struggle as my mind was distracted - all day my mind has babbled on about both mundane and esoteric matters, so have not been very still in myself. I struggled to gain control, and was able to conclude morning session satisfactorily.

I spent some of the day searching for wood with which to make a wand for myself. I do not want to take anything from a living tree, so scavenged for debris. While down by the burn, I looked up and something shone at me, from a distant tree. I made my way towards the tree and found it was dead, so took a large limb back to the tent. The shining object was fungus, reflecting the Sun. I thus felt the wood was meant for me.

But this sense of destiny did not continue as I attempted to carve the wood: instead, it proved a labourious job, and I became bored, and waited for the time to boil up my evening "meal" - at least that was something to do.

Another (minimal) physis session and then, not a meditation, but a further session of babbling mind to round off the day.

Today has been tedious - the only highlight being the sight of a half-Moon in the blue of the late afternoon sky.

16th: Had hoped to be now writing this in a new location, but was not to be. I woke up to Sun and pure blue sky. I decided then it was time to move on - mainly because of a need for a new experience, and my desire to feel even more isolated.

Packed up tent and rucksack, but had to leave food behind for a second trip. So set off with full heavy rucksack, for the area near the loch discovered some time ago. I decided to follow a deer path up the steep slopes above the Valley - I had previously investigated this route, but decided against it, it being too dangerous (the 'path' rises up on a sheer slope which drops straight down, far into the Valley below). But, I decided to face the challenge.

So I ambled off - but not without some apprehension - and discovered very quickly why I had rejected the route in the first place. The 'path' was a difficult climb anyway, but with a heavy rucksack even more so. I was in a precarious position, always walking at a steep angle, close to edge, and the rucksack would often lean too far towards the precipice. So at times, I would be clinging to the heather on the side of the slope to help me up. I slipped on several occasions - once shockingly so, the rucksack adding to my loss of balance - so, decided to turn back. On the final slip, I had to quickly remove the ruck sack, which was pulling me towards the edge. The rucksack was thrown off, and slid down to the edge, but did not go over. I lay there for a while recovering my wits, and then tackled the problem of retrieving the rucksack, putting it on again, and descending. This was done calmly and slowly and - thanks to the gods - I made my way safely back to tent.

After reflecting on the awfulness of the situation and the puniness of one individual life, I decided to go off exploring a new area, further into the mountains. So, took up rucksack again, and waded across the river. Steep climbs, the weight of the rucksack, and merciless Sun soon began to wear me down - but continued walking for some time, aiming for a place marked on map, by a stream. Became quite light-headed and thirsty, so stopped by a river and bathed and drank (there is very little shelter here from the Sun).

Reached the area, but found it to be very marshy - water-logged as it tends to be high up in the peaks. However, I felt very attracted to the wilderness environment, so began putting tent up. The tent pegs slipped into the ground as though going into soft butter - plus on withdrawing my hands from the long grass, I found them absolutely covered in small ticks. The area - also rather too exposed to strong winds - was obviously not suitable. I looked at a few other areas close by, but all was of same terrain. As evening began to appear, I reluctantly decided, for now, to return to previous location.

I felt depressed - as though I was taking the safe option and copping out. Anguished about my reasons for returning (I also, in truth, did not really relish the thought of making a second trip for the food, being so exhausted), I set up camp again, as before. I really have to be practical, ultimately, and that place just was not right - only on surface appearance. No doubt I shall still anguish over my decision tomorrow.

On the return trip, I put wellingtons on in order to wade through the rivers, so I wedged my walking boots into a space in the rucksack. As I was re-pitching tent, I discovered I had returned with only one boot - the other obviously having fallen out, somewhere along the route. A strong pair of walking boots are, as I have found, absolutely essential in a terrain like this, and the thought of only having a pair of wellingtons for the next two months was a terrible realisation to taste. All this, because of my own stupidity, carelessness and complacency. Typical! I had to re-trace my route back to the marshy location - difficult, since there are no paths as such. I found nothing, and felt the gods kicking me for my patheticness. A harsh insight indeed, and I turned back, in a very sorry state.

Just before I reached the tent, only a few yards away, there, miraculously, was the brown boot, nestling in brown heather. I had been spared. I have never fallen in love with footwear before, but at that point we became very close.

Returned to tent feeling very tired.

17th: Today has been quiet and inactive - weather remained very sunny and hot. Excellent physis session this morning - although physically I am appearing to suffer from yesterday's exertions.

I have still felt a little knocked by yesterday, but remain sure that I did the right thing in returning. Also, best to re-locate when food is about to run out. Will look again at another area near the marshy land, soon. For now, I do not want to be bothered with re-locating, but I must try and resolve my inner unease, and stop being so hard on myself.

Perhaps I have been too swayed by the romantic appearance of a place - but that is just appearance, as I am learning. Here, essentially, I remain in absolute solitude. What is achieved is achieved, regardless of the appearance of the form ...

Today, I have been bored and am feeling continuously hungry. Still, another day done.

18th: A good night's sleep. Woke up to an almost unnatural stillness and silence, which has remained throughout day. Sky filled with blankets of grey cloud, but still warm. All day there has been a serene glow of 'evening light' in the West - orange and yellow light. Tired, but completed a physis session.

I went exploring for most of day, up into the peaks and found new and accessible areas. I love climbing up to high places and viewing the great expanse of mountains and sea - with no reminder of human beings in sight. Only the occasional plane above reminds, even here - or in fact anywhere in this world - that there can be no complete escape from this causal time I was born into. A connection remains, intrudes, and that can sometimes be a little saddening, irritating.

Returned to tent mentally and physically exhausted. For some reason, this intense stillness has not been welcome - it seems so absolute, I can't even hear the river today. Strange. The land does not seem to move - do I need external stimulus? It has been like walking in a vacuum devoid of anything.

Have retired to tent in daylight, as I can't stand anymore of today. Feeling ground down with the burden of this ordeal. Four week mark reached, but there is no celebration. Too tired to think or write any more.

19th: A quiet day. Still tired. Eventually got up, and had breakfast. The weather was a little livelier than yesterday: winds, and the Sun appearing off and on. I cheered up slightly and went for the highlight of the day - a bathe in the river in the Valley. It was good to liberate my body of clothes, worn constantly as a protection against the multitude of ticks that scour the land. The Sun poured through the Valley trees, glittering on the freezing, exhilarating water. It felt good to be really clean. Discovered a good piece of wood for carving.

Returned to tent, refreshed, and undertook a physis session. Perhaps I am over-doing the session, or my diet is imbalanced, but I am left feeling physically exhausted for rest of day.

Idly carved, and practised the Olenos chant. Towards evening went for a walk up to a peak, and rested on a high crag which gave a panoramic view of the sea and islands, and mountains.

Feeling reasonably high-spirited, now.

20th: Another quiet day, although last night strong winds assaulted the tent, and kept me awake. Still strong winds today, but brilliant sunshine and absolutely clear blue sky. Woke up feeling exhausted again. Tried physis, but my legs could not stand the strain - I imagine this physical life is taking its toll, as well as meagre diet. Despite the meagreness, I enjoy the austerity - food now seems a luxury and often a spiritually (and physically) dulling indulgence. Not much is really needed, and the simplicity of my life here appeals and seems spiritually cleansing.

Still, suffering through lack of something - perhaps not drinking enough water. Tired, tired, tired.

Forced myself to go for a short walk, and spent afternoon resting in heather. May take it easy for a while, until I feel physical vitality returning. Just sitting in different places around my site delays the tedium.

I feel reasonably alright within myself - but really, feel too drained to motivate myself to do anything creative. So, tinges of boredom. Never mind, another day has been endured.

21st: The day I have been crawling towards has finally been reached - the one month mark. Weather turned much colder today, with strong winds. Stayed in the tent for most of the morning, inspired by a sudden burst of creativity. This passed time away quite fruitfully.

Eventually forced myself to do a short walk, and rested as per yesterday. I reflected on the time so far spent. I suppose I should feel a sense of achievement, but do not - rather, I feel lethargic, but eager to continue and complete the month ahead. Still much more to be experienced.

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A month is definitely not enough time in which to create real Change (if the rite was limited to a month, it would simply be a holiday). I feel that if I returned now, whatever changes that have occurred would recede and I would be as I was before the rite.

I am developing a sense of perspective on my previous life - an objectivity that could not be bred amidst the clutter and fast pace of everyday urban life. Many things now seem trivial indulgences; many patterns of behaviour now seem blind to me, fitting unconsciously into some acceptable social/domestic regime. I thought I was really different to others, but in so many ways I had not seen before, I too have been one of the masses, swept along with all the rest on the great wave of mediocrity.

Even most foods seem unnecessary and decadent. But even so, I marked today by eating tinned haggis - that great spiritual food. It was a spiritual experience - utter joy. I remain very hungry but very content with my monastic diet of purity and simplicity.

Still resting, doing very minimal physical exercise; I assume my strength is returning. Have been drinking more water. The colder weather helps to enliven me - I hope rain is imminent, as the streams are running very low. No scavenger for several nights, so am sleeping well. On with the next month!

It is now raining lightly.

22nd: Night of strong winds and driving rain. Woke up to bright sunlight, but winds still powerful, and temperature cold.

Re-located tent today to a much wilder, isolated location (gradually the need to be away from all things human - even dead reminders - became urgent). I undertook this over two trips; not too arduous. I am on a plateau, slightly sloping, up in the hills. The outcrops provide a natural arena. I feel very hidden, very content.

Had to re-pitch tent: it was in a rather exposed (to the elements) place, and facing lengthways into the North wind (wind from this direction seems the most prevalent).

I am next to a tiny stream, flowing from the earth and rocks a little above me - that and a nearby small spring will hopefully suffice for water. I am much happier and glad I mustered the energy to come here.

A practical and reasonably positive day. I have not dwelt on anything in particular.

23rd: Quiet night on weather front, but had an uncomfortable sleep as tent is pitched stupidly on a slope. Will get used to it though, and re-pitch in a week or so.

This morning was idyllic as I sat in the heather on one of the many immediate peaks that I can choose from in my new location. The Sun stayed out most of today, and the cold winds died down. I sat for what seemed like a long time, just listening, and absorbing the view. My mind felt almost at peace - until my inner mundane voice began babbling, and took over, debating away on the incidents of my previous life. I became more unsettled, began to think of J, and gradually became worn down and depressed. My physical energy waned again. No anguish, just an eroding lethargy which not even the beautiful mountains or sea could dispel.

But the day has passed as it always does. My evening 'meal' - boiled stock cube and a few grains of rice - is becoming a definite highlight: it appeals to (but does not assuage) my hunger, and marks the closing of another day.

Perhaps it is my lethargy, but I seem to have left behind that archetypal shaman/mystic persona that so imbued me up until now. The idea of carving a wand seems rather pathetic - as does all the paraphernalia that makes up the 'magickians' kit. This is not because I have lost faith or empathy with the 'esoteric', but because I feel, almost intangibly, that the essence, the source, of that form now lies close to me, residing in moments without struggle, when I seem to need nothing. When I am listening, and just being. Such a feeling appears and then fades: I can't expect to lay aside my life prior to here, although often I wish I could. I must try once more not to dwell too much, and allow the time to flow.

24th: What a Hell of a day. Yesterday, there was boredom in the sun. This morning, quite early, I was woken by torrential rain and very strong winds. The weather here changes so quickly. There were signs last night of approaching rain - a halo around the setting sun, and a haze of grey cloud. But the weather was so peaceful and clear, that I thought little of it. Yesterday, I was becoming complacent and the weather encouraged a feeling of ease concerning this ordeal - a sense of triumph.

But today Nature was savage. I woke to the inner groundsheet swimming with water; beneath me, a hollow upon which I had pitched my tent was also welling with water. All around, the sound of rushing water. The inner tent was soaked, so I took it down and attempted to dry it by lying on top of it. Remained calm, but cold and wet - and had a breakfast of hot water and oats. The inner became drier, but as I put it up again, I noticed pools of water steadily filling; gradually, they overflowed and once more soaked the inner tent. Obviously a stream that had been sleeping was awoken by the heavy rain during the night, and I was pitched on its course.

I scrambled outside in the deluge to find bracken and heather to make a dam. Outside was wreathed in fast moving thick cold cloud, and the rain and wind was fierce. The whole site thundered with engorged streams, furiously rushing down to the big river below. My attempts at dam building were pointless, and as myself and all my belongings became soaked, I realised I would have to re-pitch the tent. I found a small patch of ground slightly raised above the flowing waters, and struggled against the winds and rain to re-pitch. The wind tried to tear the tent from my hands, and I shouted at and to the Gods in defiance, and desperation. Eventually I triumphed, but the inner tent remained a good while crumpled in the water, lashed by the rain; all that it contained, including sleeping bags, was thoroughly drenched. I hauled the inner tent under cover, and fetched other stranded belongings.

I spent dreary hours then trying to dry out everything - by again, lying on inner tent. I became colder and more disheartened, and tent remained soaked. Eventually I put it up anyway, took off my wet clothes, got into the sleeping bag and made a hot drink.

And that's the current state of play - everything damp, but now I am fairly warm, and the location of the tent should ensure no problems tonight - but I remain cautious. The winds have lessened, but the rain persists. Now I just need to remain warm and dry. Tomorrow - please: a bit of sun and dryness?

For a time, I rather enjoyed the challenges of today, in contrast to the ease of yesterday. Being a day of practicalities, my mind has been occupied away from the morbid, inward and petty preoccupations of late. I can't say I feel wonderful though - I'm certainly not happy. Still, another day slips away.

25th: The rain continued for most of last night, but I was able to sleep well. Woke up early to Sun and dry weather - thanks to the gods!

An inactive day - sat and watched the sea and islands and mountains. Last night amidst the darkness and rain, I became possessed with a sense of destiny regarding the role I had lived before coming here. This desire spread into my dreams. It was exciting, but daylight has brought a reality, and the esoteric essence is where I belong. Much concerning the next few years has come to light, and I know what I must do on my return.

After the ordeal of yesterday, I decided to do very little. Attempted physis half-heartedly. Dwelling on J. a lot, and missing her. But the day has passed quickly, and its gentle nature has been appreciated.

The weather has remained sunny, but cold - clouds very turbulent, and there was a short lived attempt at rain earlier on. Another day done.

26th: Coldest night so far last night - the cold woke me up several times. However, finally slept and woke to bright sunshine and clear blue sky. Despite this, my mood on waking was irritable, my mind once more dwelling on mundane aspects back 'home'. I decided to go for a good walk to exorcise my mood.

On this walk, I discovered some new - breathtaking - isolated areas. Although I remained unsettled, the walk did calm me a little. I experienced a lovely 'light' esoteric incident, by a delightful stream, as I chanted "aktlal maka" to the pitch of the flowing water ...

Returned to site and undertook physis, which was fulfilling. Spent some time absorbing myself in the view of the sea.

I still sometimes dwell on the end of the rite, but I must take time to savour this unique experience - the land is so wonderful. But I do feel lethargic, and a little depressed.

It seems I have pitched the tent on an ants nest.

So another day done. "Each day completed is a mini triumph", I keep reminding myself. Feeling pissed off.

27th: Woke up to rain this morning. The sky grew threatening as the day developed, but rain never surpassed a miserable drizzle. Now, this evening, the Sun has appeared. First comfortable night's sleep for a while.

I took myself off climbing the peaks, and sat atop high crags, meditating on the view. For a time, despite the cold winds (almost an echo of Winter) and the drizzle, I felt nearly happy. As I woke, I was possessed with a clear understanding of what I have been trying to live and achieve on the Path so far: everything seemed to make sense, whereas before, there was a vague awareness driving the practical living. This experience took me climbing high, with Promethean zeal. Gradually though, my own fervour, together with the cold and damp and greyness, began to wear me out. I returned to the tent depressed, and lay within for quite a while, in a stupor. Sun appeared quickly towards end of day, and my positive mood partly returned. Undertook a good physis session.

Once again I explored the site I had mooted as a potential new home, but found that my instincts had been right - the place was a marsh. A day is done.

28th: Woke again to greyness and icy cold. All day, the threat of rain - but only a slight shower. The sky is very turbulent - I hope this does not herald a major bout of rain a la the 24th - or gale force winds. However, this could blow over, and reveal a clear sunny day tomorrow.

I began the day by constructing a new circle of stones, where I shall practice physis - looking over to the mountains in the south, and the sea to the west. The circle at my previous site seemed to make a lot of difference - it seemed then to draw magickal energies from the earth. Today though, the gesture seemed 'naff' - an entirely romantic gesture not really suited to the person I am at present. At least, it is an evocative place to sit, from where I can contemplate the view.

Undertook a physis session, which was rather a strain. I then climbed the same route as yesterday, and sat high amidst the promise of storm. I do not seem to need to do anything - ie. carving, creative work - and I do not put this down to lethargy: rather, perhaps an internalisation is beginning whereby those things that I am realising about myself now can be dis-covered by a most natural of ways: sitting, walking and dwelling within the landscape.

The day has passed reasonably comfortably, but I do feel physically and emotionally tired - almost like I've had enough. But! I must endure, and I must endure for a long time!

29th: Again, more rain this morning. Stayed in tent until it subsided.

I emerged to what appeared to be promising weather, and had my breakfast of oats and water outside. Blue sky occasionally appeared between the ragged grey clouds, and the Sun was sometimes visible behind a thin veil. Quite warm.

I stayed outside and began to write, and ponder, with great inspiration, on some septenary aspects that have lain within me, unanswered, for years. So the day began well, with a focussed mind - aided by taking a vow of silence (since I often talk aloud, which has a more disturbing effect than an elucidating one). My ponderings held at bay any personal morbid preoccupations - which shall no doubt plague me again.

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However the weather developed into a - less devastating - replay of a few days ago: the area became swathed in mist and sheets of heavy rain. Spent much of the day in the tent, continuing my ponderings. Completed a poem.

I did venture out to the 'stone circle' which seemed wonderfully primeval in the white mist, and undertook a physis session, which was reasonable. Once back in the tent, I grew colder, and so had a hot meal.

The rain has now ceased, and sky is clearer, but I am not taking anything for granted, as rain may return with a vengeance in a few hours. Weather wise, it has been a miserable, cold past few days. It has been oppressive and a little wearing - but I know it will change, presently. In slightly better spirits today.

30th: Another good night's sleep, but rain has returned, furiously. Waited in tent for ages for rain to subside. Eventually, I crawled out into the now light drizzle and heavy mist. Light glowed through the mist, in the West, and I sat for a long time in the stone circle, waiting for the Sun.

But the light faded, and the land remained gloomy, dark and very cold. I undertook a walk to keep warm, and the rain began to ease. In afternoon (?) again, a bright light brought promise to the Western horizon. I sat on a crag and waited for the sky to clear. It did not, but instead became colder.

Outside, now, very cold - but perhaps a drier and brighter day tomorrow. I'm getting fed up with the weather - the cold is wearing me down. But what do I expect? Part of me accepts the state of play, but really, another few days of this will make things intolerable.

I feel cold and confined, and yet positive. Some revelations concerning the septenary have warmed my soul. I feel progress is being made in this ritual, and am pleased at having got thus far. I feel confident about what is to follow.

My sex drive seems nearly non-existent: fantasies seem sordid and pointless. Perhaps my sensual self is being re-defined as I shed my cultural conditioning. Some affectations seem to be disappearing - I will be curious to see what remains. But really, in these conditions, food and warmth are upmost in my mind, since they are essentials.

Plodding on.

May

1st: Rain continued hard throughout the night and this morning, thus I was confined to the tent once more. Ventured out when rain had ceased - sky, land and temperature as yesterday. I was in good spirits though, as more esoteric and creative realizations occurred. However, the cold and returning rain began to wear me down again, and I returned to the tent after a short walk, tired, cold and fed up. Lay in tent, in a state of misery.

Out again when rain stopped. The land seemed warmer, and a promising light appeared on the horizon. I stood by the stone circle, my mind for once silent, and I absorbed the sounds and sights.

Eventually hunger - an almost constant companion now - and cold forced me back to make my evening meal. The temperature did seem to rise, and the light began to spread.

The sky is full of clouds, but they are Sun-tinged, and there is a stillness which seems to promise that the grey rainy weather may pass immanently - but I've thought that before. But tonight feels a little different.

Mentally and physically very tired

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2nd: Woke to glorious sunshine, and the weather has remained hot all day. I spent this morning washing a shirt, and wrote some literature for distribution when I return - I seem to have learnt - in the sense of knowing the reality ...

So much creative work to do when I get back. I ventured out last night - the sky was still cloudy, but it was quite warm, and it was exhilarating to see the land transformed in silence by the night.

For the rest of today, I went for a long walk into the high peaks, slowly following a circuit back to the tent. I spent a lot of time sitting by one of the lochs. However, physically it all seemed a great strain, and I returned exhausted. Perhaps the sunshine has drained me - perhaps it is my diet: I am hungry all the time, craving sweet things in particular. Perhaps I am also worn down by the debates still going on in my head.

I have retired for the evening, shattered. Another "mini triumph" accomplished.

3rd: Cloudy sky on waking, but warm. The cloud quickly made way for intense sunshine, which has remained all day. When I left the tent I was still very tired, so the day has been physically inactive.

However, time has not been wasted, as I spent many hours this morning writing, and covered much ground. Rest of day was spent lying in the heather, and watching the sea and mountains.

Again, I have felt absolutely drained - perhaps exposure to the Sun? The intense sunlight will probably continue tomorrow, judging by the evening sky.

Unfortunately, again, a scavenger is visiting at nights and seriously disturbing my sleep. It will give up eventually once it realises there is nothing here for it.

There are certainly some strange bird (?) sounds at night. Writing of which, though not strange, I have had the pleasure of listening to a polyphony of cuckoo calls during the day, for the past week or so. Summer is approaching. Emotionally, I'm fine - but missing J.

4th: A good night's sleep. Woke to bright sunlight - heat intense, but relieved slightly by occasional breeze. This evening, the sky was covered in a uniform blanket of grey, obscuring the Sun - an ominous herald. Sky red on horizon.

Day spent as yesterday, and more good written work achieved. I seem to be re-discovering my occult Destiny: this time round, it involves conscious decisions rather than being swayed by unconscious forces. Interestingly, many of those old forces are being re-visited, and still found valid. But it is I who am in control, this time round (famous last words). This unfolding of Destiny is making me a little unsettled - a little restless to leave and implement what I have learned. But there may well be more to learn - I still have a lot of time to experience here.

Physically a little better, although heat still draining. Drinking plenty of fluid.

After a very over-salted evening meal, I sat for a time in the stone circle looking out to the sea and islands: it was quite moving, as though I were gazing upon the living landscape of the 'Maiden of Wands' card. The light was serene, everything still.

I remain a little tired, and a touch emotionally unsettled - but another day, another psychic dollar.

5th: Something about last night's meal strongly disagreed with me, and I spent an uncomfortable night feeling ill, and not sleeping until just before dawn. Also rain returned in a replay of that April day, and thundered down onto the tent.

Did not leave the tent this morning for quite a while because of torrential rain, and illness. I seemed to have 'flu' like symptoms, so had a hot drink. Sun appeared, dramatically and briefly.

I am exhausted beyond anything yet experienced - it seems an exhausting task just thinking. I feel very low and vulnerable in this state of illness, and just want to regain my strength. Some diarrhoea. Mild food poisoning? - some butter used last night tasted rancid.

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For the latter part of day, my mind has gone into overdrive re. esoteric revelations. I really need to quieten my inner self down - approach things in a more meditative way.

Sky is looking ominous, and wind has picked up. Rain will return, I think. I need strength.

6th: I went into flu mode as I settled to sleep last night: muscle pains, high temperature - general physical discomfort. I did not sleep or really rest, particularly when nausea set in. I became very hot. The rain did appear, but briefly, with strong winds.

As light approached, I felt utterly wretched, headache and nausea quite strong. So have spent all day in tent, trying to rest and recover. This seems like food poisoning.

Ventured out briefly tonight. The weather has been very turbulent: a mixture of strong sunshine, occasional hail storms, and strongest winds yet.

Perhaps I will sleep better tonight, and regain my strength. The boredom, mental anguish - all are ultimately bearable; but physical illness is wretched in this situation, exposed as I am to all that Nature wishes to throw at me. A dreadful day.

7th: Became very cold last night as I settled to sleep - icy, the coldest yet. Nevertheless, did eventually sleep well. I woke to strong winds, and heavy snow. The snow has continued all day.

Still feel poorly, so have again spent day resting. Have had quite a bit of diarrhoea. But, have also fasted all day, and gradually feel as if my health is improving. Now that recovery seems imminent, I am in better spirits.

Not much more to add - an unpleasant few days. Right now, the early evening Sun is shining on the tent. Snow has stopped, and winds dropped. All could change again though, within the hour.

8th: As I settled to sleep last night, the temperature dropped, and snow began to fall again. This time very heavily, and the tent began to sag under its weight. Still had illness, which added to discomfort.

When I woke, it was raining, and bitterly cold. All day, brief periods of wintery showers, and occasional sunshine. I ventured out for a while, but was eventually back to seek shelter by rain and very strong North winds - the clouds above raged grey within the wind. Returned to tent, but grew very cold just remaining inert, so with a great effort of will, I went out again. The rain began to ease. Despite a difficult, exhausting start, I got into the rhythm of walking, and my spirits rose, taking a delight in the transformed, rain-engorged land.

As I approached a peak, I saw a fox ambling across my path, very close. It stopped, and we both stared at each other for a moment: it was a beautiful creature - such vivid colour amidst the drabness and bleak grey. After the moment, it ran off, away, occasionally looking back to see if I was following. I went on, in another direction, feeling warmed by this meeting. The weather changed then to a blizzard; utterly cold - so made my way back.

Feeling better, physically and spiritually. Now rain has returned, but I sense the weather will change for the better, shortly. Another day.

9th: The rain ceased last night, but it became freezing; still, slept reasonably well. Awoke to warmth and sunlight, feeling energised - at least, in the spiritual sense. Re-pitched tent today, within current location.

Forced myself to go for a walk, which was still a bit of an effort. But, I did discover new and very beautiful areas - a place where there stands large columns of shining rock quartz; astonishing.

Weather remained very fine; the sky deep blue, but dominated by clouds of varying types: interesting to see such apparently conflicting activity, suggesting several possibilities for weather - all at once, in the one sky, blending and creating the overall condition of today; just like sinister magick. The mountains are capped with snow: against the vivid blue, they are a magnificent sight.

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My spirit has recovered from my illness, but - and yes, it is tedious to repeat - I am still physically tired.

Feel a little bad tempered today - perhaps exacerbated by the return of my jabbering mind. Onwards.

10th: Freezing again last night, but slept. Sun appeared this morning and has stayed all day, though there was a brief shower of hail in the afternoon. Spent the morning washing clothes, then went on a long walk. This took up the rest of the day, since I rested for long periods of time in various beautiful places. I decided this morning to attempt to not dwell on anything too much, and my mind remained fluid and relaxed. Walk was good, and did not exhaust me.

I am still in an irritable mood - at times impatient with the very slow pace of things, anxious as I sometimes am to return to 'civilization' and create; at other times, I am content, and content to endure.

I feel very at ease simply walking and sitting and pondering upon the landscape - mostly, I feel that nothing else is needed. I have little to offer in observing changes within, since I have ceased to bother observing: I am just existing in a very quiet, mostly patient way.

11th: Good night's sleep, and warm. Woke to Sun. I was fine for a little while, but on rising and leaving tent, I became depressed. I still feel irritable. My only desire this morning was to spend the day rotting in the tent; but, I forced myself out on a walk. This turned out to be very short, as I got bored. The weather has turned much colder, and all day it has threatened to rain. This evening, rain still seems immanent. Cold wind.

I have felt worn down in every respect today, lacking positivity. I seem in poor shape, physically. Very hungry. Cold, feeling a bit empty within. And yet, I have held on to my objectivity, and understand why I feel this way; and feel this is a phase, as rain is a phase. One day soon, I shall wake up feeling wonderful, consistently. Must push on. May the gods send warmth.

12th: Slept well again, and woke to light rain. Stayed in tent until rain had eased to a drizzle, then set off on a new walk to investigate an alternative route, down from the hills to a track that leads eventually to the road - in preparation for the trek to fetch next month's supplies.

Weather remained grey and drizzly, and I, much to my frustration found my walk hampered by ever-present exhaustion. I saw the fox again - much the same encounter as before: a lovely moment. The new route took me down through a wood of scots pine. It was almost a shock to be amongst so many trees, after having lived thus far on craggy, desolate moorland. The scent and stillness was quite profound. I arrived at a point where I could see the road, in the distance: "civilization". I turned back then to the wilderness, feeling a heavy sadness.

I found my return journey tiring, and began to dread the coming ordeal of fetching supplies. Then I remembered my will power and what it could accomplish, and placed the coming ordeal in a positive context: a challenge to be overcome. Also, this will be my last journey to fetch supplies.

I have recently felt at my lowest so far. I have felt very pissed off, and generally unsettled and uncomfortable. I move my limbs like an old man.

Spent this evening sitting within the stone circle. The weather has brightened: Sun, no rain, but clouds very dramatic and turbulent above. Still quite cold. During the time within the circle, I felt some of my old energy returning. I began to think more positively, and I returned to the tent feeling renewed.

I almost feel as if I am reaching the end of my persona - I have exhausted my personality it seems. How trivial I have seemed. Now there is just a waiting.

I must not forget that I am in a beautiful and wonderful place - that it is a privilege to live here, in this way.

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13th: The weather has been atrocious today: heavy rain, and very cold. Went out for a walk, but weather drove me back after a short time. Spent a lot of time festering in the tent, but was able to sit for a time in the stone circle. Increase in wet weather put a miserable end to this.

But my spirit has been encouraged, despite the misery, by a return of energy, which has helped physically. Dwelt on some magickal matters today. Things are not too bad, I suppose.

I can accept the weather in all its guises, since each guise is necessary - and appropriate to/part of where I am at in the ritual. I always imagined the second month to be the most difficult. Another day gradually passes away.

14th: Weather abysmal. Rain, rain, rain. Stayed in tent for hours this morning; even when a meagre piece of sunlight appeared, I felt unmotivated. However, I was able to realise some Tarot concepts, so not an entire waste of a day. I did manage to rouse myself for a walk, which was lacklustre and depressing. Rain has persisted all day, though not as cold as it has been.

I have become fed up with waiting for my trip to fetch supplies, so will set off tomorrow - food is very low anyway.

Very fed up: after my illness, all I can think about is food. I want to return to my almost settled, contemplative self - a self which resided in the environment and ritual, not in a craving for chocolate. Still, this is all part of it. I must admit to feeling a little concerned about the ordeal to collect supplies, since I seem to lack the strength I had earlier on in the rite.

However, I am determined to meet the challenge with my greatest asset - my will.

Very grim. Another ***** day.

15th: Today has been a Triumph of the Will. I set off early amid light rain. My initial apprehension and tiredness began to vanish as I walked the road. On either side, the trees were shimmering with young vibrant leaves, and their presence - the green and its scent heightened by rain - filled me with absolute joy. I seemed to draw strength from the trees, and my determination grew as I reached my destination.

I bought all that I needed to ensure a comfortable - but still spartan - remainder of the rite. The walk back, in torrential rain at first, was a wonder to me. I strode onwards bearing the heavy weight without resting. I was imbued with the sheer determination to overcome, and that walk, difficult though it was towards the end, seemed over much more quickly than the previous trips. The end was a triumph, and the Sun appeared.

I am exhausted in a rewarding way. Today was just what I needed, something to break the awful lethargy. I feel re-vitalised with magickal power, knowing myself again, and what I am capable of when I return to the world - and the world shall know it!

But I am not complacent: there is still time to endure.

16th: Unfortunately, a bad night. The same bout of illness reappeared.. Strangely, I was far from hungry last night as I ate my evening meal - and the meal made me feel uncomfortable.

I barely slept last night, due to constant diarrhoea - every five minutes it seemed I had to go outside; sometimes digging new holes. The weather was cold with strong winds, which briefly caused some concern about the tent. I slept a bit this morning, after dawn.

Not having eaten today, the sickness has subsided. I hope I can rest tonight. The day has been spent lying ill in the tent. I have attempted some writing, and weather, thankfully, has been calm and warm. My spirit remains strong.

17th: An excellent night's sleep, and I awoke feeling, for once, fit. The light this morning was quite beautiful: dawn is one of my favourite times - the stillness is inspirational.

Day has been uneventful: very hot, merciless Sun in a cloudless sky. I have sought the shade of large rocks, and have written, a little. I felt a bit bored and unsettled for a while, but once I relaxed and let the day wash over me, I was fine. Not much has happened - within or without.

Have recovered my health, for which I give thanks.

18th: Again, a good night's sleep. The sudden strong wind last night heralded a change in the weather, and this morning I woke to rain and greyness. I was not unsettled by this - in fact the drop in temperature was welcome. Rain didn't last long, and I went for a long walk. I enjoyed the experience of wandering further into the land, into new realms. There was a strong easterly wind on the peaks which was enlivening. I felt a return to form.

I've become much calmer and quieter within myself. My mind no longer becomes embroiled in some irritation from my past life, but lets thoughts flow and pass, like the water around me. All quiet, in every respect.

19th: Felt lazy again today, but forced myself to go for a decent walk - the weather remained bright, though there was the threat of rain. The walk was good, and I enjoyed the quiet meditation of it, and the peace of the land.

On returning to the tent, it began to rain quite lightly and has continued throughout this evening. I felt confined within the tent, and unsettled in myself - with a slight return of the jabbering mind. Still, I feel fine really. Days seem to be washing over me at present, and I am sleeping well. During my walk today, confronted by the beauty and stillness, I realised that I will be sad to leave this place that is becoming home.

Another day washes away.

20th: A bad start. Absolute lethargy on waking up. Totally unmotivated. Had a bad night's sleep - woke up wracked with hunger, and became very restless. I suppose I've lost a lot, physically, through the illness. Have spent today craving food. I never seem to have enough to eat.

I attempted to revive this morning from its stupor by visiting the valley, and bathing in the great river there. This turned out to be a beautiful experience, as the Sun stayed all day, enabling me to lie naked on the rocks, bathing in the warmth. I plunged myself wholly under the freezing rushing water - almost heart-stoppingly cold; but bursting out into the sunshine was wonderful. It sounds so hackneyed, but I really did feel free.

I returned perhaps too early to the tent, for the afternoon was spent idling around, waiting for the time to eat. My hunger and craving brought my mood down slightly. Eating now has become a Holy experience - I can see how food is so taken for granted back in civilization. I thank the gods after each evening meal.

I have lost a lot of weight - none of my clothes fit properly. I am a little unsettled again.

21st: Two months accomplished, and I woke early after a good night's sleep, feeling very positive, and allowed myself to feel proud of having got thus far. Reaching this point has really made a difference - I see now that some of my unsettled moods were partly to do with the interminable crawl towards this stage.

The weather has remained hot all day. Went for another long, slow walk, and appreciated the great beauty of this wilderness land. Found weather a little too hot though, and returned to tent, drained. Although I am pleased to have a sunny spell, I do now wish a bit of rain as water levels are getting low - the spring from which I take my water is just a trickle.

Today's walk passed some time, and allowed me to dwell on further insights into myself. I feel reasonably settled in myself - perhaps a little too eager to complete each day, when I really should be savouring each moment: this special way of living, a way that now is only really beginning for me, will cease in a month.

Still hungry, but not oppressively so.

22nd: Weather has been bright and very windy; gradually, the sky has filled with blankets of grey clouds, and now, this evening, it is raining slightly.

Undertook a good walk today, climbing up to the higher peaks where I had a clear and beautiful view of the sea and islands. I spent some time reviewing what I have learned about myself. Clarified some personal details, examined some demons and ghosts. Felt more positive today.

I asked the gods for strength, and have received, and been thankful. I am achieving a less obsessive state of mind regarding food, though remain constantly hungry. Anyway, another day.

23rd: Last night, I ventured out to look at the Moon, nearly full. I was stunned - at the beauty of its whiteness amidst the shattered clouds. And I was filled with a further sense of Destiny, and received some intriguing creative ideas. This morning, I awoke to sunlight and gathering grey cloud. Re-pitched tent, and became miserable. I was irritated at having to start another day, at having to create diversions for my mind while my body struggled with hunger. Felt fed up with walking - almost resentful of the routine - so I stayed by the tent, and wrote. And this brought a type of contentment, eventually.

The growing irritability is not what I expected at this stage of the rite - when the conclusion is tangible. I thought I would radiate calm and positivity. But, I am treating this emotional state as I have done with all the others - as a stage, that will pass. Perhaps the last few weeks are always more difficult - balanced as one is between the very different worlds of living here, like this, and leaving, back to modern life.

This evening, I sat within the stone circle, and lost myself in the beautiful vista, serene in the evening light. Unfortunately, the midgies really did their best to irritate me, and eventually drove me back to the shelter of the tent, earlier than I had hoped. Tomorrow night therefore, I will sit doused in insect repellent.

A frustrating day in some ways, but it has passed.

24th: Woke again to sunlight, and positivity. I took myself off, without objection, for a slow and long walk. This brought a peace of mind; a detached, tranquil mood.

On return, spent rest of day writing. This was excellent - my creativity flowed with new inspiration, as I drew from my own experiences since I arrived here. This is just the sort of uplifting focus that I need in order to take me towards the conclusion of my time here. However, always cautious, I am not getting too carried away with enthusiasm for my new creativity; I shall see how it sustains itself over the next few days.

This evening, still sunlight, but now strong winds, perhaps bringing a marked change in the weather. My water supply still a trickle, from its underground source.

Feeling alright; just plodding onwards.

25th: No weather change: as yesterday, intense sunlight - but perhaps slightly cooler. I woke feeling reasonable, but soon gave in to weariness. I stayed near the tent all day, and have continued writing. I just could not be bothered to do anything else. I wasn't pissed off exactly, just unmoved.

In between writing, things were a little tedious. The unrelenting "sameness" of the hot weather seems to grate on me - it is confirmed that I am a rainy, turbulent cloud sort of person.

All life is blooming, including insects, and I wake with the occasional bite on my face, and bloated tick somewhere on my body. Spiders, biting flies ... I have learned that I actually like insects, and find them quite fascinating; characterful, rather than cold and alien.

Towards evening, I went to sit in the stone circle feeling burdened and quite depressed. Sometimes, I feel impatient regarding the time left, with the end being in sight, but still much to endure before then. Sometimes, a day seems to amount to nothing more than distracting myself

until the day is done. But at other times, there is an ease, a peace, which is worth suffering for - when I don't contemplate the impermanence of this way of life.

However, as dusk approached, my mood picked up, and I spent a happy few hours sitting in that lovely still evening light. But the one insect I do hate - no, they are not insects, but are in a class of their own - the bastard midgies, eventually forced me back into the tent. They have no problem with the insect repellent. Still, all part of the time of year and environment. Part of life.

26th: Much colder today, and grey - which, of course, I like. Undertook a long walk, but found it exhausting. But sitting by the loch was lovely: everything was still, and I watched and listened to some very strange bird life, emitting unsettling, almost human cries.

On return, I wrote a little more. I rounded the evening off by sitting within the circle, directing my thoughts to J. Tonight was much more comfortable - cooler temperature and light breeze kept the midgies away.

A little more positive today, though feeling physically ground down by this way of living. Now it is rather chilly.

27th: Last night, heavy rain - just as I wished: welcomed also, I am sure, by the land. I awoke to the mist and continuing rain, all streams engorged and rushing. By mid-morning, it had stopped, replaced by clear sky and bright sunlight. And thus it has stayed. Water supplies have been dramatically renewed.

Despite the clear weather, I was content to remain by the tent and write more, still feeling inspired. The day has passed quickly, absorbed as I have been in creativity. My mood is so much better.

The evening has been taken up with a long meditative sit within the circle, looking out as always to the sea and vast mountain range. Looking back over the experiences of the last ten or so years, I felt a new awareness beyond my own personal desires and goals. An awareness of the essential goodness and unselfishness of people, which can easily be missed, amidst the fervour of one's ego. It is an awareness of the "light" side that balances the fanatical "dark". To learn to give in an unselfish way. To learn tolerance, and become part of a greater struggle to bring human decency and honourable behaviour. To do something for others, for no personal gain.

A good and productive day - I feel better than I have done for quite a while: dare I say it, more complete than I have been.

28th: Woke to intense sunlight, which has remained throughout the day and early evening. Went for a new walk, exploring a rocky area that was also the home of some fairly impressive trees - not the usual gnarled elfin wood, clinging to a cliff face. I found several caves - natural shelters big enough to live in. One obviously had been the lair of a fox (?), judging by the old bones scattered on the cave floor. The shelter that I had marked out in case the tent was destroyed by gale force winds has been replaced by one particular cave - ideal for a hermit. Even on a hot day such as this, it is very cold inside. Maybe I will live in one, one day.

I found various places to shelter from the sun, amidst huge boulders and lovely ash and birch trees. As always my idyll was marred by hunger, but I gained spiritual nourishment.

Again, sat this evening within the circle, the weather wonderful. Enjoyed watching the bird life. I feel as if a barrier has been crossed, and I remain content.

29th: Cloudy start to the day, but it gradually cleared, and I have experienced the hottest day so far. Have spent the day writing, but have experienced more unsettled feelings - irritability, mostly. The heat hasn't helped. The day has been uncomfortable, and slightly tedious - physically, have done very little.

Late afternoon, I felt emotionally tired and upset - burdened by the slow, grinding pace of this life of mine here. But I regained an even mood during my evening "meditation" within the circle. I much prefer the temperature of early morning and evening. Much insect life, including midgies - but tonight, I did not mind them so much. Now, shoots of bracken are growing rapidly towards the

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Sun, and bluebells, buttercups and other flowers are spreading out. Everything looks very beautiful. The bird life is highly active - I love the sound, a burr of beating wings, as little birds nestle on the heather by the tent.

Unable to sleep last night, I went out and lay beneath the clear starry sky. No need to try and express what cannot be expressed. After that experience, I returned to the tent and slept well.

30th: Weather has been very hot again, and a mist from the sea has added to the stifling atmosphere. My mood has been a little low - irritable and restless.

But, I did pick up during my walk in the new area. Summer really is blossoming: the heady scent of plant life, and business of the insects (I watched two beetles mating!). Everything busy and green and full of life - I felt imbued with this green energy, for most of the walk. But have felt very hungry.

Returned to tent, and wrote. Evening concluded with the usual contemplation within the circle - probably the highlight of the day. The sea was beautifully still. Finished off with a bit of physis. I'm alright, really.

31st: Glorious weather again, with sea mist. Spent the morning writing, until the heat made me restless. I then went off for a walk to sit beneath the shade of an ash tree. It was idyllic, and rescued the day from irritability. I lay on a mossy plateau of rock, among the huge boulders, and gazed up at the ash leaves and flickering sunlight. I felt wonderfully free, and daydreamed of being a Knight Templar.

I am still unsettled in myself though - but, as before am treating it as a phase that will pass. Generally, I am much quieter within myself, and sensitive to sounds that disrupt the natural stillness - even the setting up of the Trangia sets my teeth on edge. Once, I could only clarify thoughts out loud; now, the sound of my own voice is an intrusion - and I am able to clearly debate within my head. I can feel a sort of peace, beginning to flow within.

I am enjoying immensely being among the bird and insect life - particularly the insects, with their different and spontaneous characters. They feel like companions as I integrate progressively with the landscape: there is no loneliness.

It will be strange when the time comes for me to leave. I think part of me expects this way of life to just continue.

Sat within stone circle this evening. Slightly cooler tonight, with a veil over the setting Sun. The light and stillness has been very moving. I would have stayed out longer, but the midgies drove me back to the tent. Concluded with a reasonable physis session. That's it - onwards.

June

1st: Took a while to sleep last night - my mind was buzzing with possibilities, on my return. So I went out and sat beneath the mostly clear, starry sky. The completion of this rite is now tangible, which is making me restless with various emotions - partly excitement that I have got this far, and - although I cannot be complacent - the clear sense that I will triumph; and sadness at having to leave, and face the tedium of everyday life in modern society. My former life seems so far away, and this is now the reality. I often feel almost fearful of the end approaching.

But tonight, during my meditative sit, I felt burdened with the time still left to do - I felt crushingly tired with the waiting.

I am waking to the early morning Sun, which does imbue me with a great sense of freedom and well-being. Heat today very intense - so have done very little, physically, but have continued writing. After writing, I languished beneath the ash tree. This was idyllic, and I daydreamed the

time away amidst the activity of wildlife - voles, finches, etc. I felt so content for a while, craving new adventures when this is complete. And then, the burden of time experienced tonight.

A strong and cool wind has appeared tonight, heralding, I think, a change in the weather. Water levels are low again. Rain is needed - although I am adapting to the heat and continuous sunshine.

2nd: Perhaps I ought to feel some elation that I have reached June, but do not. I am surprised - which is a good thing - at how different I actually feel to how I thought I would feel at this late stage. I am weary and burdened. However, these feelings do not dominate the entire day.

This morning I wrote with renewed inspiration, and spent the afternoon again beneath the ash tree. I felt very relaxed then, almost in a dream mode. But, as with last night, when the time comes for me to sit within the stone circle during the evening, I become heavily burdened. There is now too much a sense of the rite finishing - too much anticipation of the conclusion while I still have time yet to experience and endure. But at such times I return also to my apprehension of the changing land, of deepening Summer, and positivity returns. Tonight I was suddenly struck by the intoxicating sense of life that is bursting all around me - new wild flowers, the frenetic bird life - and that incredible evening light which seems so characteristic of Summer. I feel very fortunate to be here, and to have undergone this experience.

I concluded the evening with a poor physis session - body still wearied by hunger. Although I should not wish time away, another day has passed.

3rd: Intense heat, and again, spent a productive morning writing. Another afternoon beneath the ash tree.

I felt fine in myself until this evening, at the usual place and time. My mind did not accept the day's sense of contentment, and I became caught up in old debates and battles in my head. I felt sad and depressed. I attempted a physis session, which was utterly useless - my joints are stiff, and cracking. I am very lethargic. Perhaps I will give the writing a break, and spend tomorrow walking.

Strong and cold winds appeared again tonight, and I returned to the tent feeling uncomfortable and fed up. As ever, I must treat this as a phase, and it will pass - but I feel wretched. Quite upset.

4th: A positive start to the day: I undertook a long walk to the main loch, and felt the benefit both physically and emotionally. It was definitely the right thing to do - I felt once more involved in the ritual by integrating with the land. It has been intensely hot again today.

As evening wore on, and I sat within the circle, the pattern of weariness returned - although the walk has boosted my spirit somewhat against the misery. I'm feeling worn down, but not really depressed. I just must keep plodding on through the days.

The walk helped clarify and calm the processes of my mind. All in all, a better day than of late. Have given the writing a break.

5th: This evening I have had to retire to the tent earlier than I would have liked - the midgies are out in full force, swarming over everything, and biting. Not a lot can be done, just have to accept it as part of life's rich horror.

Found it difficult to sleep again last night, but this time, my mind was filled with music - specifically new piano compositions. I got up and made a welcome cup of tea, and pondered, wondrously, on the new music. Sleep eventually came, but I woke before dawn - and saw Venus bright above the peaks as I left the tent to sit and experience the dawn.

Yet, as morning grew to its fullness, I again descended into a bleak mood. I felt fed up at the prospect of having to endure another very long day. I felt fed up with the whole venture. However, I roused myself for another long walk, and my spirit was raised. The weather has been incredibly hot, so I made my way up to a small loch, high in the peaks, and bathed there. A lovely experience.

Order of Nine Angles

During my evening contemplation, my mood remained good - although the midgies did their best to discourage this.

Water levels very low again. The source I have been using is almost dried up, but I was able to relocate another spring a bit further away from the tent- although this source cannot be guaranteed for the rest of the rite, if this weather remains constant. I may have to re-locate the tent, so tomorrow I will investigate a small loch down at the foot of the fells. Rain would be appreciated.

I am relieved that my mood has picked up, obviously aided by a bit of physical exertion. I feel another internal barrier has been broken down, although I feel the weariness may easily return. I've encountered some very difficult emotional states over the past week or so, which I had not really anticipated - a good insight.

I must note that now, whenever I drink water from the spring, it feels as if I am imbibing the consciousness of the water. A sparkling pure awareness speaks within my body - it is almost as if I am looking through the eyes of water. I am probably much more receptive to the spirit of water now, after having been ill and purged, and purified by starvation. I am nearer to the land.

6th: Forced into tent early tonight - flies and midgies causing hell. A decent night's sleep. On waking, my bleak mood descended again; I felt so worn down. The sky has been quite cloudy today, veiling the Sun - there is a faint echo of rain. I hope the weather does change - the flies are a nightmare early morning and evening.

Now as I write there is rain! Very light, but the sky is thundery. Thank the gods: a temperature drop is just what is needed to disperse the little fiends. I am getting so fed up with them crawling over my face and hands while I sit in the circle, and waking up with swollen eye lids or lips. This adds to my sense of weariness.

I undertook a walk this morning which I did not enjoy. I went to the loch in the land below me. Exploring the lower flatter features does not carry with it the sense of achievement and exertion of the peaks, and I spent most of the walk, until the ascent back to the tent, feeling drained and hungry. The loch and the flat land was bleak, dark and depressing. Afternoon spent lying in the tent, in a stupor.

The sky remains dark, with a hint of summer storm in the air, and the rain light. Worn down, but I still endure.

7th: Took a while to sleep again, my mind once more on music. The rain continued off and on throughout the night, and on waking, it was heavy and the sky turbulent. Remained in tent for most of day, writing. Rain has continued, with very strong, cold, southerly winds. Water levels in full flow.

I have felt content with today, and have not been visited by weariness. The fact that I am gradually moving towards the conclusion of the rite is starting to sink in, sometimes lessening the depression, sometimes creating it. I have quite enjoyed today, and have pondered on some interesting esoteric ideas.

I feel absolutely replete with creativity - music is growing within me: in some ways, this does make me impatient to return.

These past few weeks have been strange; I feel quite different than I did in the previous months. There seems to be a greater edge of struggling, and a clearer vision concerning creativity and the esoteric. I have learned much about myself so far - I feel that my character has deepened with the insights.

Feeling reasonably fine.

8th: Got off to sleep quickly, but was woken before dawn by very strong winds battering the tent. As the winds increased, the tent was partially pulled up from the ground, the flysheet unzipping and flailing about. Several times I had to get out and re-pitch. I could not get back to sleep, even though I was exhausted: I was worried whether the tent would stand up to the battering.

As daylight approached, I witnessed an awesome sea of cloud rushing from the south, and unfurling not far above me. Directly above the raging cloud was calm blue sky with higher cirrus wisps, barely moving. Since my time here, I have never encountered such strong winds. The rain lashed down, on and off.

I felt I had to stay near the tent today, in case the wind tried to tear it up. I began contemplating my alternative accommodation. Thus I was confined within the tent, which was tedious. Suddenly, my creativity no longer seemed sufficient, and I could have done with a good walk.

I sat out for a brief period tonight beneath the rushing sky. It has become very warm, but the wind remains furious. Sitting beneath the column of scudding clouds was absolutely awesome - like watching time lapse film. Surreal.

Although there had been indication of imminent change, I really did not expect this. But as always, one can never be complacent where Nature is concerned.

The power of the winds, their all-consuming presence, has been quite an experience - rather unsettling. Beneath today's practical concerns - or rather, because of them - my mood remains positive. I have asked the gods for calm, and so far conditions have quietened down, a little.

9th: The winds increased as I settled down for the night; earlier I had re-guyed the tent so it was much more secure, so I decided not to worry. I settled down to sleep and was woken only once by the intense battering, and lashing of rain. In the morning, the tent remained unharmed.

The powerful winds and rain continued today, but I decided anyway to undertake a walk, feeling the need to be out in the land amidst the raging elements. It was interesting to observe how the land had been transformed by these conditions. My mood was very contemplative: I do not feel the need whatsoever to continue expressing myself creatively while I am here.

And yet Art etc. is, or can be, important. The majority must be touched by a type of creativity if the ultimate aim of encouraging an upsurge in Adeptship - and thus the beginnings of a new civilization - is to be attained. And so on.

For myself, now, I do not need words to express how I feel - I do not need to tell a story which does not need to be told. The essence does not need to be expressed by anything other than the life here.

As evening drew near, the winds suddenly ceased, as at last the southern horizon was lit with blue sky. Now there is sunlight, stillness and warmth, and I was able to sit in the circle. Midgies are returning - but nothing is perfect.

10th: A good night's sleep. Awoke later than usual to sunlight and stillness, although slightly chilly.

As has been usual, the morning saw a return of recent lethargy, so I took myself off on a walk up to one of the higher lochs, hidden in the peaks. For while, the experience was marred by my mind jabbering on over past debates long since thought resolved. However I was able to resolve these inner conflicts, with honesty.

The walk concluded positively as I unravelled my thoughts and returned to the tent just as rain appeared. There was a brief but dramatic thunderstorm then, with strong winds and lightning. This passed over quickly to leave stillness and sunshine.

I decided to find somewhere new for my evening contemplation, and chose a place higher up. Because there was a slight breeze at that height, there were no midgies. The view was inspirational, and the Sun remained.

I am occasionally feeling the excitement of finishing; but am trying not to dwell too much - there are still days left which may bring new experiences and insights. Any creeping depression seems nulled now by the sense of impending completion. I am not dwelling too much on what has been

experienced over the past three months - such a review, such a distillation, is too much - too final
....

11th: Did not sleep for ages last night - mind buzzing with all manner of general things. Awoke early to sunlight, although temperature at night and early morning is quite chilly. Sky cloudy.

Again, morning prefaced by lethargy. Went for a walk, which was spiritually rewarding, but physically shattering. On return, dwelt further on esoteric matters.

So, day progressed into evening positively. Climbed to my new peak this evening, but the flies and midgies found me. At present, the inside and outside of the flysheet is swarming with them. I am resigned to it.

Feel quite positive - my contemplation of things esoteric seems to have yielded some revelations. Now it is raining, slightly.

12th: Ventured out again last night as dusk gave way to night, and was engulfed in midgies - horrendous. Rain grew heavier as I settled to a good night's sleep.

Awoke with more bites than usual. Tent full of midgies. Got rid of the little scum by re-pitching the tent. It began to rain again, lightly. I went off for a walk and washed in the valley river. The walk was uneventful, but my spirit was strong, feeling a sense of achievement as the days draw on towards the climax of the rite.

Afternoon spent in tent as rain became heavier. No evening out, as rain has increased. Much colder now.

13th: Woke early to rain - the rain had continued throughout the night. Consequently, the day has been quite chilly with hill fog, and wind. Everything has felt damp and cold - almost like the earliest stages of the rite, rather than Summer. Wind now quite strong.

I have been confined to the tent, no variations in light to tell me how early or late it is. However, I have begun composing, developing a - hopefully - new and effective system based on the septenary. This is such a new development, and shows that even at this stage, rewards can flower. Physically, I am quite uncomfortable, cold and hungry, with a lot more bites than usual, particularly on my legs.

The tent has withstood the elements brilliantly, but is now showing signs of wear - a few holes, and less water repellence.

My mood remains positive - almost detached, as I am still aware of the days yet to be experienced.

14th: Rain and winds continued through the night. Strong winds buffeted the tent during the day. Weather has remained really atrocious, and I have been confined again to the tent. Not too bothered though, as I am now engrossed in composition.

But, I became cold just remaining in the tent, so went for a walk. It was invigorating being amidst the strong winds and rain. Rain and winds easing now - probably will be a brighter day tomorrow. I feel very calm.

15th: A good night's sleep. Rain and winds have eased, and this morning I woke to sunlight. The temperature remains a little chilly.

Despite the good weather, the prospect of going for a walk lost its appeal as I continued composing.

I still feel detached, but am a little irritable at present - headache, and tiredness, and hunger. I still can't allow myself to think about leaving this life - I am aware that part of me does not want this to end. The approaching conclusion seems bitter-sweet.

16th: Woke earlier than usual this morning. At first, the temperature was cold, but as the Sun rose over the peaks, the weather became quite hot, with a slight breeze.

I undertook a walk that I have been saving for the conclusion of the rite - back to the loch that had so enchanted me with its feminine aura. The walk up to the summit was very tiring, but the view was breathtaking - I could see all the inner islands, and those beyond.

I wept. I felt such a mixture of feelings: absolute relief at having reached this far, and a sense of great achievement. But also, a deep, deep sadness at having to leave. It was/is a sadness I have never felt before, in connection to anything else, and I cannot really describe it.

I returned to the tent, without dwelling further on the conclusion. I just want to continue, quietly and practically.

17th: Another sunny day. Did some washing, and once more became absorbed in composition. I have never concentrated so much: persistence and absolute focus enabled me to solve some esoteric and compositional riddles. So much came together, at that point. I felt the incredible elation that creativity can bring. The day however became stifling, confined as I was again to the tent, of my own choosing.

I have not really felt motivated to take a walk - each walk now seems so final; it is too upsetting. I will leave uncharted areas for another time, another life. I do feel sad.

After the physical inertia, I attempted to sit out this evening, but the midgies drove me back. Physically, an inactive day, but the creativity has been incredible.

18th: Once again, very hot weather. This time, I undertook a walk first thing, which I found a little tedious and tiring. I was eager to return to my compositions, which again took up much of the day. Keeping my mind focussed and occupied is helping me cope calmly with the very little time I have left.

Evenings are confined to the tent, as the midgies are out in full force. I won't be sorry to live without them.

Some further esoteric ideas came to light, and in the evening, I did a little carving in the tent. Very cold at night, but am sleeping well.

19th: Rain last night, and for most of the day. Thus another day in tent, composing. But my creativity has been less inspired today, and I now feel there is little to add to what has so far been accomplished.

When evening came, my lethargy lifted, and I felt strong positivity - a near happiness, yet one tinged with the burden of return. It seems so depressing to have to be, if only partially, a part of the machine of modern society and its stifling ways and laws. Yet there is J. So many mixed feelings coming to the surface.

I sat out tonight within the circle, when rain had ceased. The view was inspiring, and the ancient land enhanced the feeling recently experienced of my own mortality - the passing of human life in the blinking of a mountain's eye. This feeling is not negative, but liberating: I know life to be an opportunity. I know this with calm acceptance.

Writing this diary has, recently, ceased to be a help - it is now a petty burden: I no longer need or wish to express what I feel. Last full day tomorrow.

20th: Awoke just before dawn, to light rain. It felt good to be awake at that time, with the light, and birdsong, and deer.

I bathed, one final time, in the river valley, and spent a tranquil, if rather cold, time beneath an ash tree, washing, and sharpening my knife, and just 'being'. Further esoteric ideas surfaced - almost final pieces in a jig-saw. I returned to the tent to write.

Order of Nine Angles

The evening was marred by the midgies who held me hostage in the tent. However, as evening wore on, the temperature dropped and their activity ceased. I ventured out. As I crawled from the tent, I was confronted by a magnificent Satanic sunset: high up, red clouds; on the horizon, dark clouds, carriers of rain. The clouds created beautiful shapes, of creatures beautiful in their moment - but the shapes became forgotten as they changed into something else. It is the flow, the constant change that is real.

I stood in the circle, and undertook a simple and spontaneous oath of re-dedication. I chanted.

I do not feel sad now - I am ready to return to the world. I feel as if I have arrived at myself, after this long journey of my life so far.

I am very calm. When dawn appears with the first light of the Solstice, this rite will end. I'm not sure I quite believe it.

Bagendon, February evening

20 million years hence
Is Now:

In this one Moment
Are human hives grown from soil
Threaded through with one mind

The stars have caused these forms
Each stone nest and its twin star
A ripple upon a river
That has now passed
From the illusion of my eye

And been received into deep space

Someone - it does not matter who -
Sends out three tolls of the bell
Three more
And three more, and I am thankful
For there is no longer the lie of evolution
The game of race
The illusion of the "West"

No longer the willful schemes
The false cycles of time
But only what has always been
And nothing more

What is believed
Flows away:
Three tolls of the bell
Three more
And three more

5.

The Lay of Apollo

Brenna, ONA.

A man stood lone-lild, graft against the skies. He stood nearing the peak of a hill which rose out of the land like the great long back of a whale breaching the surface of a green sea. This stol-sun man gazed crossways to a smaller hill, where smoke was adrift in tokening of homesteads and terraces of patchworked farm fields, graduated from the arena of its flattened tump to its broad, contoured base.

The man shifted his leather knapsack from one shoulder to the other. It was filled with flint axe-heads which were some of his own creation, and some of his fellows. He was dressed in a home-spun tunic of rustic brown, girt at the waist with a leather thong. He wore leather boots shaped like stockings and laced at the front, leather armulets and a sleeveless overthrow of beaver fur on his back. He had tattoos on both of his muscular arms: one in the form of a lightning strike crossed with a single arrow; the other in the form of a sun-wheel below which was the detail of a bird of prey.

His face had a lean, hawk-like appearance; the long brown mane of hair and bristled beard lending him a leonine, animal-regal air. For this distinction of feature he had been called Ly - short for Lyone - for his wild-swept, brown locks and bristling beard gave him the same shaggy-crowned look of a lion. But for his trading name he took The Hawk, and only his folk, the company of his kith and kin, could call him Ly.

He seemed to spend a long time ruminating, standing on the grassy knoll with his leather sack of flint axe-heads. He was turning something portentuous over in his mind. Reflecting on the future and referring back to the past, as was the way of his folk so to do. Only Ly stood frozen to the spot for a good deal longer than most could countenance, and hence his special status amongst his company, and his close friendship with the oldest of the Wise Ones, Old Man Wem. Ly was a traveller and a trader who took his stock from the first Old Rovers whoever walked across the seabed in the Ice-time, and first came fetching to these shores and this blest, fair isle that Ly knew as home. Hence, there was a certain arrogance in his look and hence, the innate dignity with which he moved and bided by his work for the company.

He stared into middle distance as the sun dropped a portion lower in the sky and shifted his emphasis from the horizon to the round-shaped hill where the smoke rose, and where the ditch of the first earthwork boundaries were clearly visible. Whilst he stared, his mind went back to the past. The globe of the sun and the swirl of smoke rising up triggered a memory brought unaccountably from his fund of folk experiences. He felt at once vivified, comforted, inflicted with an unusual nostalgia and confirmed in his own belongings as he remembered the age-old tale that had been told to him ever since he was old enough to listen and understand.

He remembered sitting by the central fire in his father's lap a few days before the winter's feasting began. It had been uncommon cold, the dark and ice come early that year and a certain grimness had inflicted the company. To lift the dreariness, eld Mendion had begun to tell one of their best-loved stories.

In his rythmic and sing-song rasping voice, which held them all spellbound, he had begun to weave his tale telling the story of Apollo and how the God they worshipped had come to be. He could hear the voice of eld Mendion spinning through his mind, enthralling him, alongside the sound of the fire crackling, the flames dancing upon the season-weathered skin of his kinsman as he spoke, the smell of the smoke and the red deer they had cooked still hanging in the air. Like an indelible imprint on his mind, the story - *the lay of Apollo* - recounted and unwound itself as he stared at the slow settling of the sun upon the further hills behind his homestead.

"Long, long ago when the Ice-time was still enravell'd 'cross thay great tide-streams n' clefts of All Land an' the age o' thay monster-lizard was cum well nigh to close bein', all but'un memory in the minds o' thay folk, thay did live 'un peoples as was stolsun n' far-going of thought next to none. Tall n' fairse thay wert, strong as thay grizzled bear, who'm did live in thane mountains where'as home o' thay folk. Na - 'twas held 'mongst this'n folk that shape-shifter gods had given thay knowing of fire-ken n' the power ovva dreaming-flight. Saa! was thay raised up before n' beyond all thay rude folks 'cross Evera Land. In thay mountain home, way above the Ice-line, these did learn o' the fire-craft fra the shadow-hands of gods, who'ud shiftens-shape, as water forms its course 'ccording to thane contours o' the land.

Chosen thay'n were, for the brightness o' their spirits n' for the stoll-strength of their true arm n' will. But as the knowing was passed and learned, bright beings came fra thay stellar-kin'd to hunt the shape-shifter gods, to battle 'un an' vanquish 'un an' erase all thay fire-craft fra span o' human memory. But canny-like these mountain-folk hid i' the deep caves o' thay rock n' be dint o' thay stalwart n' toughen-tree spirit, were spared the wrath o' thay Fieriads who'm lightning-braiz'd thane skies, shattering the dark wi' a thunder-song as clept fear in of evera heart. And the shape-shifter gods did no more return'n. Except'n it was sayeth that in some special times i' the forestlike o' thay un-iced valleys strange-lilds could be seen. One wi' great horns bigger'un thay tines o' the greatest stag n' wi' a voice as was strange-some wooning, a voice as could freeze'n thay blood well as nigh, when wilder-ed, scowlls cumen long. Saa! do we give to thay God o' the Green, the Horned One as comes cheer in spring, as mun be revered on thay travel-paths of all seasons long.

Saa! did thay mountain folk, knowingfulled o' fire-craft felt in thay bones thay mun share the benivolance, these sacred light o' flame, wi' thane folks ovva further feld. And gradual-like as thay Ice-line did melt to water'un valleys wi' trees, these'n folks did spread their knowing wi' neighbours n' travellers as did cum near ovva nigh to afar, at thay summer o' gatherun time. Saa! did all peoples cum to know fire-craft n' to look to n' respect, full-fine, thay folk who'ud given unstintlike ovva fire-ken - clept'un golden-hawk folk, winged of thought as the bronzayed hawk who did soar highest peaks, 'cross thay alps o' thane world - the eagle folk of fire-ken who did see-es far in vision as thay mightiest hawk-claw all.

Eh na i' th' cycle of a many-fold season an' be th' swelling n' starving of'm countless moons, there was born unto these eagle folk of fire, a childer full special n' rare. This'n special childer was birthed on a night the lik-es of which had'nay been seen not ever afore. Twert such'm night it did seem that thay gods were'n throw-ed stellar-kin dund to thane goodly earth. A night as was naither i' the memory of thane elder folks nor yet in th' tales that the wise ones'ud told. A night when it did seem as if the heavens rained fire, as if thay venerid stars'ud burst aflame n' fallen to bruise dane Modor, wi' dints n' fire-tails that 'sooth did turn folk's mindes wild. Thay was some as did say it noted a warning, showed anger of the bright ones at thay burning begun of, to helft clear a space midst the forested way. Thay was some as did say it knelled the ending of Time, naither'ud be their age gone-ap-by - n' thay was some otherus who did spake of a childer, brought to birth be the fiery holds o' the gods - a special childer, a change-bringer, he who'ud draw down the Gold One fra the skies n' woo him'us warmth for all winter's long.

Na was born to the gold-hawk folk, on this night of never-seen fire-fall, a childer wi' eyes all blue as a clear-dawn; a childer with hair like a feld of corn cum cutting-time at harvest, with hair like the leaf burnished bronze at time of autumn fall. Born of a beautisum Azanagelle, beget be thane jerntroue Henddryn, he known saa resolute, fu' strong; this childer, named Apollid, grew more man-some stoll, more far in's sighting, more brow an' fiesty in's bearing as ever had cum to that folk, who lived in the lild of the Great Lands stretch.

This childer who clept the namen of Apollid was baith dream-like 'n muscle-willed. He did move him as quiet as thay still ones, wi' naither a whisper to show'un whence he trod. He listened fu'-tentive as thay wise ones tund-temple song, 'n he hafted his spear n' sent swift his arrow likes nain other'ud been brought to th' blood bond afore. On's name-day single-handed he wrestled dun n' killed-dead a brunnen-bear, as big n' as fierce as ony bear can be. And in time, as he grew full to his manhood, when he spoke his word-weaved ho, all on'us folk cum to listen n' be led. Til 'un was known as Apollid - he of thay wording that flowed lik-es drops of gold fra thane Bright One o' th' Dawn.

But druth fra thane bowels on thay mountain, did cum 'un monster terrible foul. Forged 'n formed nee thane belly o' The Mother, made fra magic mind-weave o' thase Fieriads; Fieriads as'ud cum to take fire aways fra human hand in thane aged times gone by. Thissle monster did skrake sa'unearthel-sharp, wickedfower hidyus it freez-ed the vitals on any as heard. Fixed 'un to be pluck-ed 'n torn limb fra limb, as the weasal-snake do chill 'n still the prey it do drink thase'n blood of. Thissle fowerstirk 'n terrifying baist was winged all-leathery like'us night-bat but scores beyond the size o' thase little flitters. So huge 'n so hane that when 'un swooped razor-skrakin' likes lance to'un brain that terrible cry, it did blot out the sky like'es vasty cloud fra wind-nourished storm-torrent dark. Mass-grim, dagger-toothed, flint-clawed, this'n fouldome baist roamed the mountains o' thay Great Lands spilling blood, scattering 'n renting thane flesh of many-a folk, fuelling fear where stoll nerves'ud been. Soon all 'cross the Lands 'n nigh still amidst thay valleys havoc 'n horror had set all folk aquakin' 'n all but afear-ed to travel or to hunt in the ways as'ud been kept fra before living memory.

Na thay baist did rip 'n range even to thane folk of Apollid, shrakinen to mind-numb howelin' eeriekeld, freezen folks, dead as stone, in thase tracks. Then swooping to shred their'n flesh fra thay bone, laivin' mangled carcass to terror-quake sons of stoll-men who'ud seen thay ghasly-gurgitated remains. But dour as savage as a monstesome three, did Apollid's fair brow becomen when he did see thay terrible remains - th' baist's meal made of man all twisted 'n bloodied, inside spewed full-out, gnashed-up 'n livid. Aye 'n nair did his will flinch fra the vengeance he vowed. Til the death he flint-swore his'n sinew 'n nerve. Naither to still his'n fearful quest til he'ud crushed 'n killed, ripped wing fra wing, all spilled thay horridable-innards, sundered 'n split thase most fearsome-foul jaws as did plunder the flesh o' thane folk he was sworn to.

Wi'un knowing that pierc-ed past thay gloom, cast drear in the minds of'n evera man, Apollid did leather bind his limbs, gatherun from's folk the staunchest made arrow-hafts 'n ready-flexed'us long bow moistened stoll-mort, set the sharpest cut, of his dagger-flint fixed, like a single killing tooth to thay belt that girt his 'n midriff. And aye, in his knowing he plugged his'n ears with th' fat on the aurochs so that deaf to all sound, he set out to thane high peaks where trow-na 'twas said, the baist made's nasty nest o' noxious bones. Deaf to all sound, insistent-alone, still young as the green corn not yet boldened be sun-season, Apollid set out on's fearful quest, sharp on his wits, silent as a windless night he stole, casting his blood-keen glance hither'n an' athither'n, likes thay owl lookin' to's back, even as his handsome hale limbs, stepped froward-long, for the length of a sun 'n be the dint of a dark moon night.

And high high up Apollid did climb where the white snow topped still that aerial clime, when far down below thane fruit was swelling en mellow harvest sun. Kept warm be his bear-fur wrap 'n leather-binding, sharp-eyed's the gold hawk as do wheel in the sky, keen-drop to'us prey like a thunderbolt let fly, Apollid kept his look abound, fixed in's readiness to fearless 'n fight. Laith! The light on th' Dawn was red as th' dye fra the felled alder tree, as red as the blood berries that spring 'pon the haw 'n askrakin anhowelin' fra its bone-cave so high, baist did swoop 'n blot out thane light o' the ruddy-dawn sky. Wi' its wings whirling like a snow-storm skin-tund, its terrible monster-maw slaving all-ready to rent the flesh of man. Angered twert, be the bold of Apollid's march cum close be its nest where its dark heart did rest, straight-flew its nark apnar to mankin, desirous of scattering our'n Apollid limb fra limb, all across thase peaks o' granite grey. Aye 'n fearsome did it skrake waitin' for'issle foolish, bold son of stoll-man, to freeze 'n stop-dead, still as a stone for the claws of thane baist to reap'us hot blood.

Eh na but Apollid, wi'an hero's heart, braw in'us stance 'n grim long-held, his limb, he fixed druth baist wi'a flint cold eye nain hearen thay nefaire-cry as sought to freeze'un dead. He drew back his bow-strong, set arrow-haft to flight, pierced the breast of thay wicked baist - flaili-yed'n monster wings, likes whirl-wind cum nigh, above him i' the blood-dawn sky. Eh but thase craiture was dagg-ed fra the hell-mouth of hate 'n did tear the arrow fra its leathery hide, plummeten to death-gorge this'n troublous male of humankind. But staunch-set of will 'n brave-bent'us brow, Apollid did fast-flight from'us bow thay shafts of 'un double-spent arrow, settin' thane foul baist to cry-pluck wi' pain, afore it did wheel to turnen cum again. Aye 'n despite the sharp-skill o' thase best arrow hafts, gross baist did cast the flints fra its hide, as if thay'twarse the nagging of'un tiredsum speck o' flies.

Wi' its nasty dagger-teeth wide 'n ajar, its rip-razor claws clept outright to clutch, downen it descended to pluck at the face of this troublesome man-child. But fierce bright contained, steadfast tay endure, rugged wi' the strength of'un storm-toss-ed mighty oak, Apollid did stand to meet's loathed enemy. Eh na in his mansome hand, leather-bound protected, did he catch 'n hold the leg

on his foe, whilst wi'us flint-dagger sharp as the lion's tooth he thrust at the throat o' thay carious baist. Saa! did he bring 'un acrashin' to ground.

Thane baist wasnay dead nor defunct-gone but ripp-ed 'n flailed wi' its hidyus claws, opened its maws to crush 'n to twist, rent limb fra limb, tear head fra torso, o' this mankin ah should've squashed aright in a blink of its ghouliey-viled eye. But thane will of Apollid tund immovable as thay rock of its mountain home 'n though it did scrussle 'n tear 'n tussle wi' a might as was more than five-bears strong, Apollid did grip it wi' so fierce an intent its spirit did stagger 'n crumble 'n fall. Before the bright flame of Apollid's will, the baist did cower what it couldnay surmount. Til in a surge likes swell-tide o' thay Mother, Apollid did grasp that rank 'n blood-globb-ed jaw 'n wrench-tore the maw o' thane mephitic baist, splitting its skull wi' hard muscle honed as Winteree's ice-lock unyielding - 'pon the frosted Land. And laith! did the man-rent baist fell'd down wi' a gurgling blood-frothen pain as its limbs thay did lurch-ed their'n last. And eh na was Apollid priz'd vanquisher as at last he sat bleeding 'n weakened fra the fight 'n the blood-loss of his victoree's battle. Near to thane dark lands o' death was Apollid in thay aftermath o' battle wi'ert fiercesome 'n foul-dwirlen baist, forged fra the wrath o' the haters spleen. Fainting 'n gasping but heart-strong inside, given praise to the gods as he crawled to'us rest, Apollid found'us way to thay monster-louse cave, high in the snow-clept climes, close to the path of the sun. There Apollid laid'un to sleep, nather knowing past caring, if in sleep he'ud drift fra mortal'd life to the land o' thay dreamen death where these silent ones do wait.

High in that cave-cleft of the mountain, high 'n close to thay realms of the sun Apollid did sleep him for the length of a sunrise 'n two nights of a sliver-new moon. When he wakened he found himself alive still 'n living, then too weak to travel he made'um 'n fire taught of's ancestors-learning. He gathured berries 'n spagmoss fra tinder, th' small birds 'n beastin's he could catch fra his cave-holt, thence stayed he to heal his'm near-mortal woundin's. For seven full cycles of the moon did Apollid stay aloft in's sky-close cave, recovering his'n strength for thay journey home 'n thinking 'n watchin' whiles, the irids of thay Bright Ones as sparkled constant-ever-on adrift in thane massy night sky. Apollid from'us looking saw how these starry spears path-shifted 'cross each deep-black night moving tuthree time of'n cool moon's pace. And laith! So it happened at the entrance to'us cave there did jut, heads taller'un he, a pinnacle-prong childer-made be the alp he had climbed up to. He watched 'n he saw how the Gold One in each clear dawn would cast a diverse shadow fra thay rock-prong stooedes-tall. He watched 'n he saw these shadows fade 'n grow; a changeful track that stretched 'n strayed wi' thay coming of winter's ice-time 'n the melting of snows in thay blossom-burst of spring. Thence his timing he came to keep 'n he sought to hold his sanity be the charting of thane golden sun.

Na 'cos th' flame of 'un's spirit, was bright as th' firetails that do flash fra the skies in a rare'n wilder dark, den Modor, The Great Mother, did send her'n spirits to speak to 'un through th' dream-world. In'us visions Apollid saw thane settlement Land be off on its own. This Land that his own golden-hawk folk traversed to, on thay seasonal swim when shallow seas became bridged of'un ice to favour thane frequenten o' this'n northerner land. Be vision, in a flash of's sun-bright mind, Apollid did see the sleepstake 'n bounty on a fairerful isle. He saw the shorning of thay tree-fells, the shaping of thane hill-scapes, the planting of great stones as'ud mark the passage of the sun 'n the heavens, just like the rock-jut afore him served'us purpose, marking thay shadow-glyphs for'n eroodighted while. Eh na in mind's bright eye did he see the building o' temples fu'chantment mayjestical that'ud grace the lild on a fair-free land, connect'um to thane myriad glow, thay flickersome lights in vasty deep skies that ever'es dark-domed 'n blue-spaced above'un. Held did he call to The Mother for blessing, to favour'us vision he'd forsoothed along. 'N na circling to the rock-jut thrust afore his mountain-high cave, swept on the curve of a seven-colour arch, came'n golden bird bigger'n likes he'd ever seen. Thane noble bird ovva golded wing did descend to perch aft that jut of rock 'n gazed on Apollid wi'un keen-rent eye. From its beak it did drop some shining clear stone, as of water that had fixed into rock, hard yet clear 'n sparkling strange in thay sunlight that glanced 'n winked fra that gift all magickal-made - fra that gift by a golden bird given, that gift of a myriad-work stone, came kernal of crystal gestaytied, bloomed mighty-worth 'n sun strowen, be he of the golden brow.

Laith did Apollid feel mighty-sun moved 'n blessed beyond fullscore 'n more. Long had he spent fra weakness to strength, dependant on fickle-will of She who governs all, grateful for the warmth of fire-flame that's kinsfolk had brought humans knowing of. And now when his strength was come nigh full-stol he did take him ready for'us journey, patch his bear-fur torn in'us battle, renewed his arrow-hafts 'n leather-kind binding. Saa, did he climb then down fra thane mountain to travel back the path of's near-death plight but now all hale 'n hero-driven he did stride with'n light in's fair-fettled heart.

But for'us kinsfolk most thought of'um dead, passed to thay dream-shores where the soul-wings do wed. Though troth did thay know Apollid'ud driven aivil monster far aways far, for naither was 'un seen drear-darkened no sky, no kinsfolk blood-spilled 'n mangled nain more. Though their fair one wi' the golden-corn hair 'n the ways wise-spoken, wi'us word-weave pure, liken dew fra first dawn, though he Apollid had naither return-ed, he'ud driven these flesh-renting foul baist, fromert evermore. Aye'ud thay wept when their staunch 'n braw champion, the best fra the blest of their kindred came no more. And aye'ud thay wept as thay watched in dour forest 'n waited be the brook 'n the foot on thane mountain. Long'ud thay kept a light in their heart but when hard winter's hoar-frost came ice-frozen stead; they knew, they believed - alas! alumno! - their hero, he mun be dead.

Thraist then, in honour of'n rare-braveful hero, these thought 'ud met'us end whiles fighting for'n's kinfolk, these sought to mark his passing in a ways special-rare, naither forgettin' the fair youth-blest fair who'd spilled of'us blood for the good on the many. All elders consulted, priestessi-considered, lead-folk's decided 'n blessed be Azanagelle who'd birthed brave Apollid, these kindred did raise girtt finger of stone, on a stretch o' the uplands, pointing straight-touch above thay. Pointing straight-touch to the Sun in'us cloudy scapeseas. And aye, these'all did gatherun round, to weep and to wail; to give thanks to The Mother 'n the Gold One of Day for sending Apollid to drive thay snaggerdhuun foul-baist aways. Na though the golden youth lived in their hearts 'n sang in their memory, whist the winter's home-fire, thay thought, all'us kinsfolk, naither to see their brave bronzed Apollid, nain more could he be

But mother's is knowing beyond birth's seperate-ness, 'n thane moon-ma nee Apollid, faithfu' Azanagelle unerring-steadfast, did hold at her'n heart a hope as'ud see her hale son return. And aye though she'd sanctioned the raising o' the sun-rock, she couldnay believe i' the depth of her knowing that her fair'n brave man-childer was gone 'n nain more. Saa! in the spring sun of a joy-filled day did she walk to the sun-stone placed tall to her'n hero-son. Evera day, since Apollid'd gone, her'ud cumby beseechin thay all-power gods fora grant ney on wishes 'n favour for'un son. Saa! on that day a full cycle's passing and over again since Apollid had left'un to quell-kill dwirt-baisten, she did spy in the distance a stranger's approach. And Laith! as she watched'um cum closer 'n by, 'n she saw his 'n hair full gold as the sun, she knew her Apollid'ud return-ed home-shore. Thraist! was there bounty 'n bounty full-store, blood singing veins 'n eyes wet wi' joy. Na'un the feasting went dusk fra the dawn, in praise of Apollid risen fra death's land, alive 'n full braw!

A full cycle of seasons then'ud gone by, afore'n Apollid did speak the wise of's mind's eye. He gatherun the elders, the lead-folk 'n priestesses 'n spoke in's word-weave of the seven-coloured bow. He showed'un the gift fra the eagle's beak, the jewel like water turn'd cclear into stone. He spoke of's thought-span, his charts o' the sun. He show-ed how the stone-crystal shimmeren-light did warm 'n coo' 'n picture-draawt a-mind 'n respond to thane spell-chants stell-age brought by. He told his'n kinsfolk of's dreaming song, the Magic-Wyrd beckonin' in a north-lander isle. That isle thay'ud travelled to whan the ice-froze a bridge to gatherun a fruit-store, a harvest for hame. He sang-spoke'us knowing o' thane star-stirred space, the voices of the spirits that'd whispered - "Whist, begin! begin!" He spoke'us skilful, bright as lightning stroke o' fire, bolden-byautiful as thay finesung tree-bretheren. He paid homage to their braw-noble ancestors blood, who'd kept fire's light i' face o' dread foe, for the good o' these'n all beyond their blest-kindred. He stirred up each heart for'n quest to the brave, to live in new ways, willed flint-formed into being. He spoke how their'n reverence'ud raise'm on high, raise'm to reflect the glory of thane sky 'n how in their worship they'ud match 'pon Land the praise of the Bright beings, their own fiery star, the Sun o' their'n life, brought thay into being, along'ov pale-shiftin, thay silvery moon, be skill-mancin' maeystro-ment of'un Unison-Hand. And aye be the shaping of soil 'n stone, brought-nigh fame-fu' be a crystal accord, creatin' thane temples o' rocks to the sun - thraist! ey'ud draw-up fra the Womb of All Things, destiny's deliver-ed, thane Great Holy Wyrd - for the good of thay kinsfolk froward'un time, past ken o' hunder-wealth, a thousand cycles on.

So potent-vig'rous, so forcefu'-eloquent was the speech-song of the gold-haired Apollid, so upliften vision-strong thais warrior, wise beyond the youth on's year, all'n thays folks were wooed be his word-spell 'n swayed to foller'un spark set aflame, in the mind-scapes of their high-dreamin-high. And aye when they saw the clear crystal stone like'un tear shed-shinning fra thane Mother's eye, truly were they awed be this gift full of light 'n gladly did they swear their fealty to foller'n; He, who was hero 'n harp-spun o' Wyrd, harbinging great feats to carve 'n continue thane legacy on.

Saa! thane company as pledged to Apollid ken dwirt-sturd en stell; fu' resolute n' glarn. Trow, thay did silthily move to stand be shoulder'un Apollid, shewin' allegiance wi' naither a word but be whole body-spression. Remember-red thay for all their'n elan; the worth thay proved of endeavour

gegan. Thraist! Ihr namen passed fra kinkine to kinkine a hunder hunder cycles on, cumme nigh as pith en a brand o' memory:

Thern there be, helver o' thay aurochs horn n' Halwyn fox-hair wi'us flint-knappin' skill, Brynedin fleet-a-foot, Guifron the yew-sever, bow-maker deft. And 'oomankin answert did cum by azel: Enyllen flax-tress, weaver-hand 'dept, Cariadden bowl-shaper n' Temissle raven-lock, Miiaren meliflowerus, wi' songen o' skylark, meagan n' sweet, Bodianna mickle-struth n' Feoris the lithe, Leahllan bread n' brewer, Silfaen thay stitch-quick n' Nyadd o' quabberken. Along of a side thase brace o' stoll mankin: Dutlas - quiet-reeth n' Kurnay the fire-hand, sail-tund Quernis, water-wend trailer, Jonnock the hasp-pitcher, bard be the dusk, long-bearded Hergan arrow to'us mark, Yealdor birch-cleaver, wi' pipe trillern gifted n' lastlaith cum Guilam, axe-wielder grim n' corrac-lat fitcher. Thase were the company glendid n' fower who'm took it a mind to pioneer be Apollid.

All in flurry, bustle to be ready, did thase folk who'ud go, build up their'n skiff-paddles fra cut-wooden lat-frames, water-proofed tight 'ginst afrolicsome wave. Eh na thase set to in preparing their furs to keep'un in warmosome fra drear winter's dread. Thay treated 'n cut their'n countless leather-goods, their auroch-oiled footwear, body-wraps 'n breeks, their bindings 'n bast-wefts, their coverall cloaks. Thay honed up their'n axe-heads 'n gatherund their spagmoss, their'n tinder-shells 'n tree-gum, bow-strongs 'n spear-hafts, the flint-points of arrow-swifts. Thay took o' their'n leaving laith blessings o' th' elders, the chant-spell protection of their kinsfolk who'ud stay. Wished on their way be the heart-hum of moon-ma's who harnessed a favour fra the blood-cups of wombhood. And aye fu' half the company hale-set 'n stoll-brow were druth-bent 'n stalwart to foller'un mainprow well-pointed nigh; on, twert that north-lander isle. Whiles rest of the company stayed be the sun-rock, raised to a hero's challenge, planted like first seed ovva soil to bring forth fu' bounty o' barley crop, aye. And eh na in the cleaving of a goodlysom folk did doubled 'n trippled the score of'un worthcum, as thay each waved'un aft be the by of a break, nain severed no tie but bond-forged anew in the colonise-creation of a north-lander isle.

And straight-time did thay travel on the seasonal known, traded 'n talked wi' many cycles gone by. Though in a squall did the storm-clouds blew 'n the waves tossed'un fiercefu mega-drifts high, wi' Apollid's wise reasoning 'n brave spirit shining, be the grace of the Goddess the shore-tide's welcome boundary was soon within reach. Aye 'n spied thay fra the swayey-sum waves bright-fair 'n white in light o' settin' sun, thase snaw-white comel-cliffs as beckon-ed grace fra the Land thay'ud journeyed cumbly

Thankfu' thase pioneering peoples led be Apollid in their alms to the gods, did give praise for the swiftness of'n journey, for the difficulties lift 'n overcome. Be the great swell-tide of the ocean, be the myriad of shimmerosome stars, did Apollid's fair folk light a beacon fire high, to give grace-prayers to the gods of their new land 'n kin. Affirming their vision 'n staking a claim, swearing be the bond of their honour-word 'n blood, thay shear-ed thay each their hair tresses grown, the lark-brown, the night-black, the fox-coloured hue alongof the gold of Apollid's thay knew. There in a circle-connection, unbroken from an ageless time, thay buried deep in the sands of Albion's fair Land, the hair where their magic contained, chant-woven intent-bound, fixed forever 'n a day, the pure oath of their uttering deemed that thay'ud stay - stay 'n stay 'n stay 'n stay, immovayed as'un mighty mountain-grim, changeless 'n maygical-poetic as the certain-sunrise dawn, honeyved eloquent, powerfu' compelling as the voice of the wind 'n the sea. Saa! this he saw Apollid - This! it was meant to be.

'N cum the dawn of a fresh new day, thane company did treck be Apollid's lead, up fra the mouth of' browad smooth-flowen river. And aye the land was virgin-rich, with tree-bretheren vast 'n unbound, tall as the white cliffs, coasted south-east the isle, broad as the wide-water's way. All day long did thase first pioneers travel be the watery-flow, sleep-camped 'neath stells in the dusk of nightfall living fra the lap of the land. Next sunrise Apollid did look to thane tear-crystal, consulting directions, the lie of the hills. Then followed he in to central south, mapping a way fra the dappled sun's glint, til all strange and strewed stood great giant rocks, the bones of the earth cast afar 'n afree. Thase rock-stone was older than of any they'ud known, full harder'n denser, toughest earth-bone grown. Shielded 'n shape-nar be the forested veil, buried 'n bebstocked all'cross the midriff lee, further 'n far-seamed than ever'un eye could see. Grey 'n mottled white, thase stones as stung Apollid's far-sight, echoed of chalk-cliffs that white-gleamed i' the sun as seen fra a wave-tossed sea. Special-strange thay seemed those gantish-cast stones, as contained with the spirit of a magical isle. Subtle-spoke thay ssalms to Apollid wi' silences deeper'un word-song, wi' a message that moved vibrational, resonant rock-bone to blood-bone, the melding of substance on substance, nain distinct 'n nain divide, man-kin to mountain-kin an'all fra the Earth-mother's womb. Instant-

like he knew then there they would haft'n clear, there it was thase'ud sow a seed 'n shape thane unturned Land.

So began the mighty Wyrd of'un proud 'n gracefilled folk. Many did the tree-fells spread, full cycles spent in the axe-biting active, in cutting and clearing, in building staunch homesteads, in hale-kept thane body's health be the flesh of the aurochs, be the haunch of the red deer. Be thane goodly-grace of Earth-Mother's Store were all'un provides matched 'n met. Be the richness of an untried land did the company of Apollid grow vig'rous 'n fairsome strong.

Eh na when thane sap be risen 'n gruff-call rutting stags be horn-danced thay glade, when blossom-froth bursts 'un many-fold branch 'n fresh-green decks bare-wood, lustrous, liken hair-tresses fra ripe 'oomankin's beautisome brow. Aft the ice-lock of winter's fierce 'n spring's song is joyful nigh, thraist-urge thane mansfolk looks laith to's bind-fast 'n sped-thoughts to mating whiles blood be insing. Saa! this'n season did spark our'n hero Apollid 'n the winsome Goddess did bewitchen bedazzle'us sky-bluen eye.

With all the wealth toll of timber-felling, man's time was taken and's 'oomankin did gather'un plant-till thane soil. Unaccustomed she to stol bow and arrow, the haft and the gavel of flint-point and spear. But nendress, cum a fine and fettle-free day, Apollid did snatch some moments alonesome in a walk be the greenwood where'un pure water's flow. Cum athrustle in the greenleaf be thick on the forest and Apollid did freeze-still to spy what could be. Brazen his sight cum fair beguildy light, a birth of beauty he'ud seen but naither been struck be afore. Stood she curves swelling store, eyes akeen to the pijinene, aloft of a branch all preenin its feathers ovva pink and grey. In her hands was flexed'un stol bow, in her stance struck hunter's quiver-lance, as fra its preenin branch grey-pink pijinene did fell'd, dead fra the arrow of 'ooman saa fair, kept secret the theft of'un faither's bow. And rare-black her hair as'un raven's wing, black as the jet-stone fra the northern shores 'n rosie-soft her downy cheek, her skin with the sheen ovva thay ramblin-rose, as soft as the petals of that flower of thay forest.

Straightsome past thought-much Apollid did appear to pick up thay pijinene her'n arrow killed aright 'n she full of blushes, uncertain-exposed at her man-be-right's task, did thank 'n beseech our'n Apollid wi' a look 'n a sigh. Wi' a sigh 'n a look fra her dewy eye, dreamy-deep as the doe of the forest, emerald aglintin glance-like of a springtide leaf, shamin' now caught at a mankin's task, she stood afore he, the hero-gold of'n all their company. "Na Temissle," quoth he, for such was it known her name," Yen be aft strappin' for a mansome craft it do seem - 'n druth! your'n aim be true to centre-mark. Na! as thane arrow be pierced this feathered breast, swear the sight of thee has smitten me too. Wi' a maid as can stretch saa straight an' saa true I'll naither me want fer'n meat on thay platter and na shall our'n fireside be warmer'n flame - if Temissle's lip-buds would pout-speak to say 'aye me will 'n tie me I to he clept Apollid let'un be' whey a brood of fair childer shall furrow ovva thee. Temissle, Temissle, lilting fair'n lovel, saa'un speak-plaisin - let 'un be."

Temissle was troth-done all quiversome, faint fra the nearness of he as did speak, he who was gold of'n hero with'un eyes of deep-songa blue, with 'un eyes saa clear as the blue of summer skies, tall 'un straight-lithe as'un sapling tree, a full head 'n taller than most mankin company. In reply wi' silence more meaning dane word-swap, she glistened her deer-dark, forest-glint ey-es and faced him wi' her'n lips ripe-red as thane berries of the mountain ash tree. And he did bend him to his kiner mark, twa lips fra he as brushed wi' she, cleavesome long together while, nain laiving off til twas clear-sealed 'n thase heart's blood did beat'un as one.

Eh na was thay company carouselled 'n well nigh did thay feasting begin, wi' dance-twirls 'n drumbeats 'n songstirs 'n merry-wealth fra dusk to dawn awhile. And eh na were thay flowers bestrewed at nay-binden circle-blessing 'n cheer-give did thay much thane company wi' smiling 'n tear-dimm-ed eye. Saa! did Apollid take to he'un moon-ma, birth of beautiful she, to warm a light inside ovva he. Saa! did Temissle bring'un full brace of fair childer, to swell strong thay blood-bonds their company nigh - laith! to swell strong the blood on thay company nigh, to marshal 'ginst the dun-gliffs and dour-stints of time. And aye will's all was worked 'pon land, seven sons 'n seven daughters beget 'n hale-brought, birthed fra the breast of the lovely Temissle, birthed fra the breast of the blest fair Temissle.

And nigh as thay company grewed on, the eld-kith did felled be, took fra life of blood and bone to invisible guard thane portals unknown, the dreaming-dhuun lands where the worthy walk sky-tall, their spirit'us vigilant protecting fer'n thay kin as still lived on. Thraist! did Apollid deem fit to mark their'n passing, in agreymnt wi' full company, be the stones to the sun, as had first been begun,

when his fost folk'ud thought he was dead. He remember-red aye thay great stone raised, to he when'us kin thought hell-baist'ud torn him, fra land of thane living to thate of the dead. He remember-red well wi'un keening light cum close to's breest wi' the thought. And aye did all thay company behind him cum truer'n true, wi' one mind thay thought, wi' one voice thay cheered, wi' one heart thay follered their chosen Apollid, to do as thay'ud all settin to. Cleared thay the craggy hilltops, the gentle valley lee, 'n worked thay moon cycles long, digging dirthed a drocht, a homestead harbour dwert-grund 'n lithel-loom, to keep in reygal staytus-high dane spirit'us 'n bones ovva thay who'ud passed fra life of living-brave to thay Spans of Silent-Ever On. Wi' girt unison of effort, wi' 'oomankin casting chant-spells to soil, wi' mankin all braw fra the brute of his muscle, these mighty monumental rock was raised fer'nigh, on thay all of Time.

And in the lie of a reverent land-drift, full resonant with rich Earth-Mother's store, a sacred area was nigh set be. A praise-place to thay shimmerten-stells domed bright vast above'n. A temple to thay fire-star, thay bronze-embolden Sun, was dug wi'us sweat-toil of trey-mendous effort, wi'un fire of will 'n worth, plough-staves urrdapted, antler-picks drith-wielden, crystal-coaxed na mind-ruth, wheel-grooved 'n drey-turreted the loam ovva grist intention, hied to thay childer of'un frowarden-time. Hied to we, who momentury be, nigh in thay dance of Life.

Be the subtle sparks of crystal light, be the laying of hearts and hands, stones were chosen and stones were brought, crafted and dressed be the ray of the sun, be the flare of a fire-flame carefully crossed, be the chanting of unison minds struck and readied for'n sacred task. And mazed were all be Apollid's skill, his hands with the warming power of sun, his hands with the power of'un life-giving sun did stoke and shape these hard stones, dense fra the mountainkin. And his spirit did spake thay words of'un wind, thane constancy 'n wisdom of water's seesey-less flow, the deep-sung spell of thay treasurefull soil, the bone of the Earth-mother's loam. Eh na liken thee tallow of animal-fat, liken thee dough of wheat-pounded flour, liken thee good clay all moulding to shape'us desire did thay stones of'un mountain kin, ne Apollid's hands become. Mystic-magic thraist! - was through thane full company be the blessing of Apollid's fire. Thraist! Did magic 'n mystery unloose be the dell of that sacred isle.

Mirror reflecting like 'un image 'pon a still waterpool did these sacred placed stones concord with thay path of the mighty-fire sun. Mind-melded aft to mark-rise brightes-pitch autumn star, unified aligned-ap, ne the dark of the seasonal-swing. Temple-tuned the chart circle, mapping thane awefulled shadowskill be the dint of dawn to dusk. Deep and deep and deeper still, sunk thay stones lik-es jewels, lik-es tattoo skin-glyphs, in thane hide of'un Earth-mother She, Goddess fra birth til death do us all. Deep and deep and deep as the sea, cannily cleft and honed druth-ne to the arc of the special-tide solstice key, stood thay stones in a round and still ever these stay, the first 'n the last of thay Great-Mother's kin. The first 'n the last raised fearfund mayjestical be the dint of thee mystic-light; garnerun ne godswain sun-strong fire-ray, de-meter converse-na subtle-soft thane moon. The first 'n the last of thay Great-Mother's kin raised be the far-sight of Albion's fair folk. Placed as benediction, as grandthurl design, as a ssarm 'n a song to the Mother of all, as praise-gesture strong, as chart-call 'n power-dhuun, an legacy-long to the blood and the bone, these vision-creators of'un god-given craft, thay of the sun-golden spirit, these first-maeston proud-full, kindred shaped beauteous, this'n fair lovely Albion isle.

Whey na wi' the building of these rock-fortress hallowed-halls fer'n spirit-flown kindred in dhu land of thane dreaming, foo succoured was thay be their spirit-flown dead. Fortified and bond-boldened be the wing-given flesh 'n the holy bones kept high foster'un might of ancestral dread. Whey na did these Works of God frew'n wonder spread far, coast unto coast 'n all across the hinter-lands foo beyond dash 'n wave-drift of thay girthswill massy seas. And curious-like as mony folk be, did travellers and rovers cum to see, the mightisun stone-craft birthed 'n hoisted upso, rooted mountain-longtide in the depth of steep-carved clay. Werily and wondersome did all folks be, who saw these mighty chamber-tombs, the circle stones made fast-forever, magicked and seeming soil-grown, as druth 'n adrang as the tree-bretheren kin, as marvel-meglithic as thay granite-alps of Great Lands.

And all the timber axe-sheared fra mony a seasonal shunt and turn, that Apollid and his company'ud felled in grandsumgrand desiyeen, did go to make these homesteads, these wainsteads, these wheel-curts and dragframes, these settle-loons and trestle-longs, these bows 'n hoes 'n arrow hilts, these spoons 'n looms 'n mealie-bins, these carryalls 'n spear hafts 'n ploughblades 'n broomstaves. But more and more and plentiful besides did there be, past needs supplanted be the druth of colossally stone. Saa! master of thay sail 'n sea, skilled in skiff 'n paddle-craft speed-sojourneyed thay, twert lands 'cross salt-briney swell, the ever-on motion-song of the vast-drift Ocean-tide. Eh na did they trade with that wealthen of wood, taking thay log-boon

far-frew 'n wide, fullsooth east-west, southern crost north, 'n further'un sight or mind cun know. Whey na did their proud repute all foller'un wheresomever be thay tarried, wheresomever be thay strayed. And god-like did strangers see our'n Albion kin with their wealth of the kiner craft, with their knowledge of the wind and the sea, with their bearing proud and honour-bound, trading their timber and flint-frew for sakes of venturesome learning cum beguiled anew.

Laith! did thay 'oomankin bundance-birth thane wheatfield, thane barley stretch, a riff of poppy-flowers and flax in the meads of the Albion isle. Thraist, while these manfolk did girden-heave famed rock-crop 'n tarry-ho fron coastlines acradling best tree-limbs for a trade- wears far-drift of seas, did 'oomankindred care-take full seemly, the druth of thee homesteades bound. In the seasonal long when the sun girt honed strong and the sky was blue-so lik-es blue as thay blue-buds in thay beech-woods of spring, thane 'oomankin'ud foster mysterycum-clay to bring-bounty crop 'n harvested store to see company fat 'n fullfed in the dree of winter's ice-dread. And saa! did these fair 'ooman kindred belly-grow a brace of'us bloodline - childer-bairns beautifrew-hale who'm swelled thay company fra score to scores 'un hunder and hunder homesteads more was weft-worked 'n waimed fer thay good of thay folk, staunch-growed right strong. And aye were thay stol 'n graceful fair, and aye were thay noble 'n matchless of honour, born of the vision-line to sun-ravel wise, the boundary of clachan-rath, the fringe of wooded isle, to sun-ravel wise fra north to south 'n east to west all 'cross thay Earth-Mother's plentiful goodly shores.

And holding aloft lik-es tree-folks thane skies, did Apollid center pillar provide. Proven beyond all, his warriorhood stodes tall, versed in the axe-craft 'n ways of thane wood, skilled at the wind-sail 'n tiller, mage-minded be mountainkin, magick of hand, of chant-hold full godlike, just and far-visioning beyond any's known, ken Apollid thay legend 'n champion-king full-famed throughout evera Land. Wi' his beard tresses now golded to grizzled and grey, wi' his age-cycle passing hunder'n more, his moon-ma Temissle her raven hair wintercum, as white as thay first driven snow. Their seven be seven of fair childer grown to birth 'n host of bloodkin more; the company foo proud and upright of bearing, and goodly-grown wise. Clept uncoo continents thane keepers of the singing crystal light, the mag-nifiyen-magic drawn fra rock-water buds that sang to the spirit of the Great Mother-Earth, that chant-weaved a spell to the Sun-God on high. Kept thay solemn lild-cum connection, with the moon 'n thay bright stars-celestial, hung in the black nightes sky.

Whey na did Apollid cum eld as these eld folks, they'ud left be the foot of the great mountain stretch. That mountain-haime where Apollid was birthed on a night when thane fire-balls did rain from thee sky. And eh na doest the wheel cum nigh in full cycle, when the weather-wrinkled brow, signals grey-stuff of age. Tired was Apollid though's spirit was fire-white, wantsum of rest from fray of a charge-hand, feeling his purpose long-since achieved, he did lie on his heather-bed 'n just closed forever thane flame of's blue-burning eyes.

Of a sudden all strange-like did the sun's light grow dim, though nigh it was clear of the middle of day. And all these folks fra that long ancient age, did look up 'n dread the sight of'us gold sun turnen black as the black as the middle of night - a midwinter's dree on a funery dirge. Black turned thay gold one, the life-giving God, black tur-need thay gold sun when Apollid's blue-ee-breet cum closed, 'n his spirit was fled to the dreamin kindred clept in thane stone chambered land. It beseeemed like the great sun grew sad-drear full of woe, with the passing of Apollid's bright-flame'us spirit. The black sun did groan and silence spread the isle fra southernmost tip to 'un far northern shore. Silence did spread and day was cum night in the midst of a cloudless high summer sky. Doom-laden turned the drift of all's folk minds, fallen to knees, hands clasped and praying for return of thay lightray 'n warmsight of sun. In each heart they knew that something amiss had befallen the Albion isle.

But in a shorten space of time or an age that did petrify, the black sun was gone, like a slide of the shape of's grim-reaper twin, 'twas gone and the black sun was nain more. Hale in its place the gold one did shine and the folk did prayer-thanks to Goddess-mother give, as these saved fra the wrath of'un untimely dark 'n dread-cold that could twist the balance of cycle-so. But in saa short span of another glint their thankful cries turned to tears of passing woe. For sad word cum carried that their head of the clan, thay great and wise man-held, their hero and champion, mage-minded light-master, gifted keeper of the crystal-tear, was gone and na departed, spirit-flown 'n shell-like left'us body's form. And aye were thay lines of solemn folk stood, in silence their tears speaking all, all the kin of the Albion folk did gatherun, gatherun mizzled with grief, mazed be the Sun-God's response up on high, as did blacken himself, in the jet raven's cloak, foo of death 'n dreathsome winterstark, grieving for Apollid's bright-flareful spirit, gathered in to the Source of thay Mother and kept now fra light of living day. This great wise 'n braw-ways command-am Apollid, gone back to

the womb of thay Mother - thraist na! wet were'un faces and moanfull the air for troth it was so: the honey-song stilled of Apollid, the first of the Albion folk.

And aye was it right with thay Albion kin to bear'un greyed 'n gold-pure form to the wind and the sun and the rain, to the carrion-crow flesh-returned all, to rebirth be the belly of the Mother. Laith! 'twas a brace of tall manstrong did carry'un draped in cloth of'us hero-white. Did carry'un high with all folk in train, calm 'n dignified-accepting was Temissle ahead of all thay company-cum. High on thay grace-carved wooden altar was placed the empty soul's shell where Apollid had long-lit 'n been. And nigh as his tall form still straight as the elm, despite though'us countless cycles of age, and nigh as his spiritless dead flesh was placed on a special high platform made reverent be all of'us folk, saa did the sun dart out ravenous rays that lit's still form like fire fallen to ground.

Whey na to the mazement of all who did see, ever cum awe-struck fra the knowing was thay. For there as they stood chanting cycle-songs round, giving reverence to greatest mankin, all in a flash of lightning strike cum fra nowhere these could see or have ken, the sun set afire Apollid's fair mansome form and a fire did flame his body to dust. In this instant that the strange fire flamed fra his form 'n conflagration burst fiery-white-hot, fra'us death-shell flesh, a golden bird did rise 'n circle 'n circle these white flames of fire, then fly on a shine-dazzled wing as high 'n high 'n higher'un high lost in the path of the sun. Whiles down on the high ground on that special-carved place where Apollid's body'ud death-slept so brief, a white fire did steal him all of thay bones except for his thigh bones and skull. And twert wi' this strange 'n fearful passing, wi' this dread touch of the Sun-God's hands, all these Albion kin clept "Oh!" and "oh" again, as Apollid in a magic-flash was swept fra their sight. He become to nought, the Oh of an emptied place, the Oh of the space-filled circle, the Oh of complete-contain-ed around, fra nothing come to nothing gone, to the vast void of'finity where all must birth be. Ah but he, eh na had he, Apollid the fair, risen in bird's form engoldened'us wing, grace to become, laith twas clear the new God of Fire-touch, the God of the Sun - the Apollo who'm all would cum to worship ne fear, to reverence and chant to, to seek favour from, to ask blessings of, to praise 'n go in awe of. He, Apollo, the sun-god become, giver of life and light and warmth, giver of the harvest grain, the forest green, the crystal cave, giver of all to all life he be. Apollo, Apollo - our God of the Sun."

Why Ly should think of that old tale now, and why it should unravel so from his mind that late spring eve, he could not quite fathom. Except, perhaps instinctually, he was aware of changes coming, changes that would irretrievably alter the way he and his folk lived; ripples that he knew eventually would transform their lives forever. This was unsettling, but also inevitable. Ly knew he could no more alter the influxes which were beginning to change generations old practices, than he could halt the procession of the sun in the heavens or prevent the moon from its constant waxing and waning. Perhaps it was because of this awareness that he chose to stay there, casting his mind back, delving into his myriad of memories and warming himself by reinventing them in his mind.

He thought then, on his boyhood, the tasks he was set to: watching over the cattle-kinder and the goats, sorting the wood pile tinder and best log; cutting the thatch weed under direction of Wulffdor and aiding the assembling of the new homesteads that grew up from time to time. Well at this time, when he could sneak him some lonesome moments, he would sit him by the hut-space of his Pri moon-ma's brether: Wem, of the wise ones, who charted on tablets of wood the passage of the celestial heavens, who mind-melded with the Mother spirit and spoke to the spirits gone aft over the boundary of death to the motion of All Life beyond. Most usual it would be priestesses who were Listeners in this way. But of the way of the radiant ones in the sky the wise ones came of male and female kin, showing a special quality which revealed itself in time and marked the childer out as noviciate into the chart-magic ways. Wem was a such a one as these. His hut-space was edged be a boundary, and a solitariness about him had always drawn Ly to the vicinity of Wem's dwelling, recognising something of a kindred spirit in that desire for solitude. Old Wem would never chastise Ly or show irritation at his inclination to linger be his hut-space, perhaps because Ly's pri moon-ma was Old Wem's sister. Or perhaps more simply he never minded Ly's quiet observant presence, who could sit in self-sufficiency as well as the roosting hawk upon its perch, quiet and contained in its biding time. So he had come to strike up a special relationship with Old Man Wem, which flowed quiet and deep alongside the other bonds of affection and new-stake activities that filled his time.

As he had grown something older, his mind had turned to hunting craft and times would be when he was off on the trail of small-scale game for the platter of his folk. Yes, and then before he had known it his initiation was upon him, and he was after breaching the boundary from boyhood to manhood, as all the lads must do when they came of the seven be seventh cycle of their age. There it had come finally, after all his seeming ages of chaffing and waiting; his initiation into

warriorship and manhood. He could remember it as clear and stark now as if the experience had happened only two suns' gone by, not the distance of yearly cycles that stretched between the Ly of now, and the boy-come-man he had been.

He remembered moving through the forest, the men fanning out to make a net. The foliage had been dense in that part of the forest so that they walked deer tracks, a barely perceptible passage through the depth of the trees. Birds had hooted and chirrucked in the branches overhead, and every so often a blackbird lilted low through the air, calling its rising alarm call to warn other birds and beasts that threat was approaching. The men wore sleeveless leather jerkins and trousers woven from hemp. Some held long wooden spears with points made of flint, whilst others carried bows, a quiver of arrows slung across their backs, flint knives hanging from belts at their midriff.

They followed the spore of the wild boar. In his trance-dance Ly had seen the family of wild boars, a stretch of fifty meds or more from the homestead. Nearby was a river, one of the smaller, lesser frequented waterways. In the depths of the forest where virgin trees swelled to massive proportion and the woodland was left to rampant growth, there was the foraging home of the wild boar family.

It was Ly's first time of hunting with the menfolk proper. For his name day, for the strengthening of his manhood, he sought to kill a wild boar.

Before his initiation into warriorship, he had been inclined as a boy to wander off from the others, to seek the solitude of the remotest haunts in the quest for berries and fungi, or on the small game hunting expeditions equipped with slings and stones, small bows and flint arrows of their own.

It was Ly that was wont to climb up the largest trees, hafting holds in the trunks and making his way up thus, to sit in overhanging branches, to watch and wait for whatever game might appear. Thus had Ly learned patience, and so had he become accustomed to long-ways walking, the silence of the wilderness, where the keening hawks cried in the sky. Providence had always paid these vigils with bounty to take proudly to the homestead. So even then in his youth, a reputation had grown up around him. Ly, the hawk; Ly, the rover; Ly, the loner, with the patience of the wild cat that watches and waits before committing itself to the pounce. Thus, he had begun to gather a respect even before his initiation into manhood. He had brought back small deer, hares, stoats, a badger or two, many caillie birds and pheasants. Unlike the other youths of his age he ignored the pull of the pack, the comfort of numbers, the security of a team. For him he trod a lonesome path, a way off from where other folks usually strayed. Because of his yearning desire to explore, to travel far, he grew into his role of flint weapon maker and flint tool trader. He had travelled from shore to shore of the land, and he had braved the Big Waters sailing to the Great Lands over the sea. In his youth the seeds of his adulthood had been sewn and begun to blossom.

He remembered why he had chosen to hunt the wild boar for his name day. His mind went back to one of his solitary expeditions. A time when he had climbed up a huge oak, in the heart of a wildways he had found, and crawled along a way its gigantic overhanging branch. So he had sat and so he had waited, watching the birds twittering, a squirrel leaping, a beetle crawling. And as he sat he became absorbed in this myriad tiny life. He became the creatures he observed; he seemed to think and feel with their instincts. The sun came glancing through the leaves dappling, like the fallow deer's haunch, the forest floor, bestrewed with bramble and a rash of greenery.

As Ly had sat, there had been a rustling, a movement, a snuffling, and beneath the tree a family of wild boar had come; three females and a brood of little ones, headed by a single male. Ly had waited until the little train of wild pigs had all but passed, then aiming skilfully he had shot and pierced one of the little ones through the neck. The raucous squeal of it as it toppled had an immediate effect on the other pigs. The females whirled round and circled the dying piglet, touching the rest of them protectively with their snouts, defensively herding them into a tighter clique. The male boar was snorting and looking for foes. A slight movement from Ly betrayed his position, and he inwardly cursed as the wild boar fixed him with a hating eye, beady and ferocious, wanting restitution for the felling of his flesh.

All at once the boar had lowered his head and charged the tree, gouging the base of it with its tusks, ripping the ground to shreds around it. Ly could only cling on, awed by the show of ferocity he had provoked. The piglet he had shot now lay dead. Its little body had given a final shudder and twitch before the life in it had faded and gone. The earth around it was damp with blood. Still the wild boar squealed its anger and pain, trampling and gouging around the base of the tree.

But lumbering up the bank, drawn by the smell of young pig's blood, came a large brown bear - just as much a threat to Ly as to the family of wild pigs. He froze and watched a drama begin to unfold. Two of the female pigs were nudging the rest of the little ones protectively, circling around them and keeping them together, whilst the other female mournfully nosed the dead little pig. When the bear appeared it rose up threateningly over the mother pig, who squealed and grunted back refusing to give way. The wild boar tearing up the earth around the tree stopped and turned immediately towards the bear. Now it had a target for its vengeance; a target of flesh that could give the satisfaction of blood.

The wild boar whirled and charged at the bear. The bear was not prepared for the immediacy of the attack. It tried to bat the boar away with its huge raking paw but the boar was too quick for it. The bear's paw glanced off the pig's tough hide, and the boar jabbed its tusks into the belly of the bear - thrust, rip, retreat, before the bear had chance to recover, to act. The female pigs came in a clique mock-charging the bear, that was groaning and flailing at the angry pigs. When the wild boar's tusk slashed the bear's paw, it retreated and lolloped off, growling and moaning in pain, moving with greater difficulty than when it had first come up the bank.

Snorting and trotting back and forth in the adrenalin satisfaction of vanquishing a foe, the wild boar strutted beneath the trees at the top of the rise. The family clan gathered, the females around the little ones and finally with a disconsolate nudge of the dead piglet's body, the company of pigs moved away, with the wild boar bringing up the rear.

Ly finally moved his limbs again and in relief relaxed the tension that had kept him frozen. He was very much struck by the experience. From thence onwards he had a great respect for the wild boar that roamed the forest. To be faced by that ferocity on the ground was his greatest fear. This was why he had chosen to hunt wild boar on his name day. He chose to confront his greatest fear and in conquering it he would be strengthened in his initiation.

Ly thought of Nionie, his sister, his twin. He remembered when she had come of blood. It was a day or two before his name day. He had come back from his wanderings supplied with berries and fungi, a squiver of birds to his toll. He had cast it down on the homestead table, turning to see the reaction of his sister, swelling towards his name-day pride. But there was no Nionie to savour his little gift of bounty. He had asked for her and his moon-ma had told him: she had gone to learn the gifts of blood in a place that was taboo for him. For 7 days she would be gone. And she would miss his name-day victory, the triumph that would give him the name of 'Hawk'. He had turned bitterly away and his moon-ma had come and touched a hand to his shoulder:

"Ly, Ly, it all comes of season, so the Goddess wills. So the Goddess has willed that Nionie follow her blood-rite of passing at the time when your own manhood is grown to set tall. It can only be now for you to accept what is and must be. Is your name-day come too soon? Are you to become stoll and mangrown two suns from now or not? Come Ly, come my wanderful flintsharp, blood son, look to your name-day and the task ahead, leave the lee of childer behind, na eh Ly?"

And his mother's eye had twinkled a smile as she solemnly bent her head to his and tousled his hair. Then she had turned away, and gone quickly to cut and prepare the fowls he had brought whilst he pondered his thoughts at the doorway. She had gone, Nionie, and he became a man. Nionie had gone and when she was returned she was 'ooman become. A chanter of the moon; the moon which was connected with and moved so the 'oomen of the kin. The women's moods seemed to match the changing aspects of the moon - undiluted their yearning to access the silver one on high. Theirs was the secret knowledge of the soil, the growing seasons. The earth as filtered through their blood-stained hands.

Squatting on the land they plunged their fingers into the loam and tilled it with wooden trowels, a stone-sifter, tending the fronds that swelled into plenty. Then there would be the chant-blessing of the corn-priestess come cutting time, with the menfolk gathered to wield their flint-sharp blades, graft and gather the goodness the Goddess-mothers had given. The womenfolk were their source and their inspiration; they kept the blood of their kindred whole. From whence they would be directed to quarter the boundaries; to seek and make and create when the time for questing came.

Ly understood all of this instinctively; it was not something he could objectify or analyse. It was what was, a fact of his being and his kinsfolk's being as much as the wind and the sun were incontrovertible mysterious facts of nature. When he thought of his sister he apprehended her both in an intensely personal sense and with a generalised reverence for her femaleness; the

personification of the Mother Goddess that all women were. He remembered the wistfulness he had felt when she had gone, that first time, to be initiated into the mysteries of womanhood. For he knew things would never be the same again between them. Something immense and undeniable had thrust itself between them, something that inevitably separated them and distanced them from each other. He remembered the awe and discomfort he had felt as his sister's lithe nymph's form began its subtle changes; the budding of her breasts and curving of the hips that had suddenly seemed to come from nowhere, as he himself had grown taller and broader, strengthened and made hale by his wanderings.

The night that she had gone to begin her woman's journeying, he had dreamt of her. He had dreamt that he was her. He had dreamt that he, as she, was escorted by the older women, packed and prepared for their vigil, her seven day rite of passage. Thus she and the three older women would escort her, to the cave by the river, to learn of the Goddess calling. Whence other women also in blood would join them that night.

In the river-loamed soil, he, as Nionie, plunged her fingers into, squatted and merged her blood with the soil. She cradled the loam of her creation, placed it in an earthen ware bowl, planted the seeds of the flowers; the plants that were given her for her name day gift. Then the women came all from the homestead, and the whole company of them, in a cleared worked place in the forest, wild-called at the dark of the night. They chanted their primaevial souls alive, whilst the blood dripped from between their thighs and moistened the soil into mud around them. The sound of their voices shivered eerily through the night air; like beings from a strange and other world they sounded. Beings of beauty and power, who had the facility to destroy, to ruthlessly erase, as well as to create and give life to. The sound was both exquisite and chilling; the cry of birthing and death, a trembling of the earth where the invisible Goddess glided, strewing her contradictory impulses about her as she swept through the ceaseless potency of night.

And Nionie and the women were swaying and chant-crying to crescendo now. They began to dance and stamp their feet, gyrate and undulate to the velvet night, the glitter of the moonless night where the stars looked down like winking eyes, watching and sanctioning their frenzy. And the blood dripped down and splattered in clots, the more frantic the women became. They turned and whirled and trampled in the soil, making a mulch of it, their feet sinking into and churning the earth, so that soil spattered upon them. Soil and earth and blood smeared upon their naked flesh. In a paroxysm of energy there was a pulsating final surge until they all dropped and lay panting, bathed in their own sweat and blood which mingled with the loam of the soil. This was their magical fertiliser which was bespread the fields and used to grow a harvest of einkorn and emmer, the barley and oats that gave them sustenance throughout each cycle of the seasonal turn.

The gathering of it would come later, in the dew of first light morning, but for now they bestrode 'un towards the cave and the river. The women all went down to the river to cleanse themselves, until only those who had come with Nionie remained. They had left Nionie at the cave, all blood and mud-bespattered, telling her to wait until they came for her. Laughing, exhilarated from their fervour, her moon-sisters had poured her a beaker of honey wine, telling her to sip gently while she waited for them to return. They had taken with them a leather carry-sack filled with a flagon of the honey wine, some clay cups, the brood cake that settled a dreamful sleep; an initial erotic buzz and flare that came with the velvet night.

Sabrina, one of the moon-sisters, washed clean and dressed in a simple kirtle, came to lead Nionie to the river's edge. She led Nionie to the river where the other moon-sisters waited. Sabrina had taken off her own robe and faced Nionie, so they were naked together. She had taken hold of Nionie's hands, saying: "Welcome to the Dawn of your Womanhood, may the Goddess bring your blossoming; an armful of crimson flowers, a brood of the plenty that be your making"

Then she had led Nionie into the water, making her gasp at its icy touch and gasp more as her moon-sisters doused her. They washed away the blood stains and the smears of mud. Then gently, their hands teasing at sexual expression, they had admired her youthful beauty, rubbing her buttocks, stroking her belly and breasts, plucking and sometimes sucking at the nipples like plums upon the pert mound of her woman-become. They touched her all over; overwhelmed her with their arousals. Until near swooning and sexually charged they took her back to the cave; the heather-bed spread with fine cloth and furs. They had bade her drink more honey wine and eat of the specially made brood cake. Then the playing of Nionie's body commenced by her moon-sisters, who sought to teach her what her own body could know. Thus, did they arouse her until she climaxed and orgasmed ... the after glow of bliss, the floating sensation that carried her away into

the world of living sleep to dream of her brother's victorious name-day. Whilst around her, as Nionie had fallen to sleep, her moon-sisters now aroused each other, giving the gifts of sexual unity, enveloping each other with ecstasy.

So they had slept and so they had stayed sleeping, until Sabruna woke in the hour before dawn, set the fire going and boiled some herbal broth for their pre-dawn sustenance. Nionie was wakened at the sound of the fire and walked, tousled and naked, something shy of her body, to the fire. Sabruna had handed her some herbal broth and went to stir the others. Soon they were dressed and ready assembled. Other women from the homestead had joined them now. All of them, Nionie included, carried baskets hung from a pole which was set across their shoulders. They walked in a train to the small clearance and patch of worked soil in the midst of the wilderness. They scooped up the soil and began to fill their baskets - each of them carrying their share of the burden. When the baskets were filled, they bent their knees and lifted the pole and carried the baskets filled with their blood-enriched soil, back towards the homestead.

Each woman carried her own measure; carried it as something magical special. Something that could provide the growth of the harvest, provide food for future sons to grow tall. With the dew of the morning still upon the soil, they drew off a vial of moisture; a fragrant elixir, sensuous as a woman's smell. Then they gathered up the loam they had created, to carry back the pride of their mystery which did make the golden fields to grow, the flower scents fill the air. By the river and by the new moon, at first dawn-light and at last-light dusk's fall, Nionie learned the chants of the Mother-Goddess, the Song Cycles of the Moon. She learned how her body could leap and shudder, become moistened in pleasure, ache for the sexual fulfil. She had learned of the Star-Source, the Moon Mystery, the women's gift to their kin; their bodies that birthed the kindred strong - kept their man-home stoll.

Nionie! Nionie! She, of the lush, dark-mane hair, the same Ly eyes looking back at him; hazel-brown, glint of green and gold in the smile of her eyes that mirrored his own. Woman become, moon-ma in the making. Whilst he proudly faced her as victor of blood-drawn chase, a hero talked amongst the menfolk, become the Hawk, near legend on his name-day; her brother grown man-some and stoll.

Nionie dreamed of her brother on her own name-day night with the women's inner sanctum, where they had kissed her and given gifts: the seeds, the pot to plant them in, a fine woven garment, the pride of all her treasures. She dreamed of him, as he dreamed of her and on the astral level they connected. There, they melted and merged the one to the other, passing their awareness with a flux of osmosis, speaking in the language of dreams - physically far away, psychically married and intertwined through the images of the dreamscape, astral world. And thus, they each knew of the other's experience even before they met, after Nionie's withdrawal into the women's sanctum, and after Ly was acclaimed champion of the feast on his name-day night.

Now Nionie was priestess of the Fire-star temple and moon-ma several times over, having birthed four hale childer and taken Dagnon as man-home, these seven cycles gone. Their paths had inevitably taken different directions ever since the name-day that had seen their entry into adulthood. It was bound to be, as the Gold One rose in the sky each day, as the waters that kept their never-ceasing flow, as the separation and distinction of their sex denoted; it was bound to be. But there was no remorse or wistful recollection in Ly's mind as he now thought of these things. It would not have occurred to him to chaff at the loosening of his filial attachment no more than it would have occurred to him to attempt to pluck the stars from out of the night sky. These things were laid down by the Gods, by the Mother-Goddess, and all the human kindred must abide by the laws that ruled the wind, the rain, the growing time, the beasts and birds of the forest. So had Old Man Wem pointed out to him at that uncomfortable phase of passage when he had left his childer-time behind and stepped the boundary to adulthood. This Ly knew as incontrovertible fact, as the reverential thread that underpinned the whole of his life.

Now, in an unaccustomed spurt of nostalgia, he remembered the afternoon before his name-day ...

Ly was taken by a group of the menfolk, Segwin leading him, Old Wem alongside of them, into the valley before the Fire-star temple; before the Temple of the Golden One, he was taken down into the valley where a single hut had been built long, long ago, that could fit a whole company. Here, he was instructed to wash himself in the river. When he came out, the men were all gathered around. Segwin spoke:

"Ly, it become nigh on the morrow your name-day of manhood, when you mun learn what it is to be a man, when you mun learn the tests of man-hood. Still boy-soft your body shall be toughened. You mun accept the pain - take it into your body and try not to shield you fra the fire-strokes we shall flay you with. An' with each stroke of the fireweed stem, with each mark of pain, your body shall'm grown towards the sun-strength of manhood. Do not fight the hurt. Let it into your mind to know and understand 'un so that when the time of battle comes, in the season of the hunt, stoll-like you shall'm take the blows, not be knocked or crushed by thane shock that pain do bring".

So saying, Segwin solemnly tied a rope around the wrists of Ly, who, naked apart from his loin cloth which covered only his genitals, was bound with his hands above his head. The rope was slung over the bough of a nearby oak tree: tree of Light, tree of the Sun, tree of the lightning strike, tree of strength and endurance; chosen of the Gods. Thus, with his arms pulled above his head and his feet still something aground, he was left exposed for the pain ceremony to commence.

There, had Old Man Wem stood to one side and commenced a humming which all the men took up. Above their humming the chant of Wem's song grew; a sound that he clung onto throughout his ordeal. The rise and fall of the song seemed to mesmerise him, resound in the hills, thrill his heart. It spoke of the hunter's skill, the warrior's glory, songs of the legend of the sun. But all the while his skin grew afire with pain, for the men began hitting him with the fireweed stalks, flaying him across his back and his shoulders - whip lashes that stung, made him want to cry out. He strove to silence his cries of pain in this test towards his manhood.

And all the while the men lashed him across his chest, his buttocks, his legs, his arms, the whole of his torso, so his skin was on fire with a pain that grew more raw and intense the longer they switched his skin with the fireweed's torturous stems. He had gritted his teeth on the agony determined not to cry out. But towards the end he could not but do so, as each time the pain bit into his flesh, its teeth grew more raw and jagged. In the extremity of sensation he felt that he would faint, choking on the cries that he tried to still. When he did cry out it was such a release he swooned and the ground bent down to submerge him ... until water splashed in his face, burning into his cuts, awakening him from his faint.

Then Segwin was soberly cutting the rope that bound Ly as he whined in his pain and shook his head, getting up in a daze to stand. He steadied himself, feet apart on the ground. He looked into Segwin's face who was intent upon chaffing the rope with a flint knife. He wanted to read the signs of approval there, anxious lest in finally crying out he had failed, feeling womanish at his body's fainting defence. Segwin, intent on cutting the rope, did not look at him. But when Ly's hands were free and the rope dropped off, he levelled his gaze with Ly. Segwin's face showed impassive and Ly felt a sickness rise from his belly - had he failed so soon the test of his manhood?

But then Segwin's blue eyes had crinkled at the edges: "Eh na, boy become into man, let us back to the river to wash your body, salve the soreness. Then shall your dream-spin be painted on your dressed skin; the story of your awakening, the totems that define you. The symbols of light shall battle-dress your body before the dawn of your name-day comes. The sunrise of your warriorhood, the challenge to your hunter's skill and daring is come nigh. Let us away now be the river to cleanse you for the dance-chant of this night".

Segwin's eyes were warm as he spoke, though the rest of his face was a mask. But through his eyes came the glinting of pride that filled Ly's heart with gladness. Segwin's brief smile as he led the ways to the river. Ly's eyes sought the face of Wem held apart in aloofness to read what was writ there on the face of his infrequent-kine friend. Wem's furrowed face-lines looked on impassive-like. But his sharp wise brown eyes danced some and shot a spark of humour-filled exultation into those anxious eyes of his nephew. And as Ly looked into the faces of his menfolk he saw also a warmth, a pride - an admiration even - in their smiles and acknowledgements. No, he had not failed. Rather, so it seemed, he had triumphed!

In the river the men watched as Ly doused himself, whinching still in pain. But the menfolk laughed, told him he would soon be right and smiling, teasing him as they washed themselves. And soon the water became a soothing balm washing the pain away. Dripping wet then, they walked from the water and Ly was led to the hut where he was told to stretch himself out on the feather-down, fur-covered bed. His skin was treated with soothing ointment by Ragleth, who massaged the worst of the pain away with his health-giving expert hands. Then he was bid to sit up and all the men

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gathered round as Segwin set beakers down, which he filled with strong ale. Each of the menfolk were given a beaker of ale, until last of all, Segwin handed one to Ly too.

Segwin raised his beaker and all the menfolk followed suite. "To Ly," said Segwin in masterful simplicity.

"Aye, to Ly become warrior on th' eve of his name-day dawn"

"To Ly, the stalwart"

"To Ly, rider of the wings of pain"

"Eh na, to the silent endurer"

They smiled at him and urged him to drink down his ale. So done he, shy and pleased fra his glory, set down the beaker to unaccustomed belch, which set they all of them laughing. There was a clapping of Ly's shoulders, a-ruffling of his mane-like hair, a victory hold of his hand. Until soon Ly was smiling and floaty from the unaccustomed strong brew and the praise and attention of the menfolk.

Then Old Man Wem, with his shadows-silth presence, began putting candles around and eld Mendion story-spoke his words, spinning the tales of their ancestors as the flames flickered around. And as eld Mendion spoke Ly lay on his belly whilst Ragleth stick-painted the symbols of life upon his back. The dyes and pigments came up blue, orange, red and purple-black. A stylised tree grew down his spine and the sun spiral above it glowed in orange. On Ly's left shoulder a half-moon was hung painted in the red of blood. He was made to stay so, quick-drying whilst he heard the sound of the other men outside preparing the evening's fires. Eld Mendion continued his tale of ancestors who flew to the stars and became the Light-Gods, patterning the night sky and speaking their messages from on high.

Ly turned over then to sit propped up. His arms were given a lightning dash - the sig rune as it became - three times repeated, and on his chest appeared the head of a wild boar surrounded by runic talismen representing strength, protection, fortune, the benevolence of the Goddess, keeper in health, swiftness of passage in travel-times and so on and so forth, until Ly's chest and belly were covered with vibrant colour. The symbols of life and the enhancement of it flashed in the candlelight, filling Ly with a feeling of invincibility.

The other men had also painted themselves and each other in a known and accustomed ritual. Dressed in their leather wrap-around kirt, the men's arms and sometimes their legs were braided with circles of woven reed, stuck with feathers, pebbles and beads of clay. The ceremonial garb was donned. Ly was given food - a heavy sweet oatmeal cake. All of his kinsmen then, ate of the cake and drank a beaker more of brew.

Soon Ly was handed his leather kirt. By now it was late evening and the sun had set in the west turning the skyline gold and indigo-rare at the edges. The men now were gathered in the trance-dance arena outside of the hut. Fires had been lit and staves of flaming torches stuck in the ground to border a wide circle. Ragleth led Ly outside to where the rest of the men had now gathered, their ceremonial painted bodies flashing lurid and vivid in the firelight, the drummers waiting behind their percussive rounds. Ragleth took Ly to where Segwin, the headman, awaited him. When Ly was brought forward, Segwin put both of his hands on Ly's shoulders and looked into his eyes. A silence had infected the arena with an intensity both profound and liberating. Segwin had stood back and raised his arms aloft, addressing all of they there gathered:

"This night Ly become into man-grown
On'us name-day the boy decreed'm
to hunt the wild boar an' turn'm
tuthee man-tall as shows'us spirit strength"

Appointed members of his kinsmen then came forward to lay upon the ground beside Segwin a

number of gifts symbolic of his entry into manhood. Then Segwin had spoken again:

"Company an' kindredin have gifts o' man-status engiven.
Around thee waist I fasten this'n belt complete
wi' flint-dagger wi'un handle o' horn.
Likes the Gold One mays'm Ly shine
Like the mighted oak mays'm grow tall
an' stol-like of'us bearing
Like the horned ones o' the forest
mays'm come proud an' fierce
And likes the silvered salmon wise
jump up the river 'ginst the tide
following the flow of'us source
and so learnen the skills of'us ancestors taught
growing into new learning more"

Ly had held his arms up so Segwin could fasten the leather belt around his middle, open the dagger sheath, draw forth the finely made flint-headed knife with its handle carved of stag's horn. He handed the dagger to Ly who took it and turned it reverentially in his hands. So sharp, so long, so skilfully made! By his own sun-pa father's hand no doubt. A treasure for him that might last at least ten summers! "Arnoch sol ne stol - may the fire of the ath-ra in thee flame fierce and bright," spoke Segwin blessing the weapon in sonorous tone. Then the spear was brought forth and Ly stood as Segwin addressed him once more:

"In the forest for the hunter's skill an' daring
here we'm be giving thee
staunch, the yew-bow flexus skill
spears strong an' arrows fleet
sharpened and to the mark.
Mays'm fly unto the heart o' quarry or foe
defend an' kill when needs be upon thee.
With this spear and dagger haft
with this bow and arrows swift
so shall thee vanquish the fierce wild boar
take over his spirit; his invincible store.
But for hunter to know
his quarry or foe
he must needs of tranced
into the spirit he do seek.
Before the hunter kills
he mun know his beast.
Eh na hereby I begiven the boy
dredge of bitter-bite
to turn his soul to quarry-mind
fly on the wings of trance
to the dawning of'un's manhood"

After these words he was handed the spear, which he took with both hands, holding it to see the symbols etched on the hazel-wood, to finger the feathers of the brown hawk attached at the top by leather binding along with a string of beaded gems: some jet and rock-quartz. Its point was very sharp and it had slicing edges, thick and stoll enough to stand the shock of manysome impacts. He stood it on its end and held it in one hand - the same height as himself - like an extension of himself specialed to his name-day, so the spear seemed to him.

A yew-bow and leather quiverful of flint-headed arrows were also given to him. He slung these over his shoulder - equipped for the hunt or for battle. Then lastly, the dredgeful of bitter-brew was given to him and he understood that he was to mime his quarry; become the wild boar he must hunt on the morrow. A drink, a toast, as Ly downed the bitter-brew and was handed some ale with which to wash it down.

Then the men formed into a group at one end of the circle with Ly and Segwin still standing of centre. Segwin raised his arms and on the boundary Old Man Wem began to intone a chant; a rhythmic, stealthful chant with a steady pulsating thread. Ly stood in the other half of the circle and felt an energy, a desire to move, to dance, to stamp come over him.

The tone of Wem's chant changed. Segwin looked at Ly and lowered his head, his two hands creating tusks as he did so. Ly lowered his head and made the same gesture back. He began moving towards the rest of the men threatening them with his stance. The hint from Segwin had been enough; the desire for physical expression too strong to resist.

As he took on the symbolic pose of the wild boar, he felt himself a becoming, and as its fiesty, fearless nature took over the quiet, lonesome Ly, he moved to threaten the men headed by Segwin. He trotted and stamped as would the beast itself, whilst Wem stood to the side and continued to chant, leading the chorus of his kinsmen's voices. Then, as Ly threatened his kinsmen with his motions, they in turn, threatened Ly, as the beast, as the wild boar quarry he had become. They jabbed at him with their spears, raised their voices as if the volume of them could crush him. Ly in response, must turn to run, as the wild boar would, if there was the freedom to do it. But the men followed him and soon he was surrounded, whence dancing and leaping, snorting and crying out at times, Ly feinted with his spear. To the right, to the left, in front of him and turning swift behind him, fearless as the wild boar in the face of its foe, he whirled and stamped and jabbed about, as the men took up the rhythm of the dance and circled him - a rhythmical, ineluctable force that could crush him when it chose. The drummers picked up their pace and Old Wem's voice rolled on, leading the men forwards, and Ly himself was jabbed at from all sides, parrying each blow and whirling faster and faster, the faster the rhythm was beat.

Soon his movements became fluid. At the zenith of his ritualised performance, his flashing hands and agile movements assumed an automatic motion of their own. Fearlessly; invincible as the wild boar was known to be, he stood his ground, parrying, feinting, circling and ever circling round, so that his captors did not get chance to blood his body or graze his skin. Ly felt he could have carried on thus forever, as in a dream. His movements had become a form of poetry; a connectedness that transcended thought, kept him a blur of motion for anes upon anes. Whirling and leaping, as mercurial as the tail of a shooting star, he kept up his fluid, lightning strokes, until finally a fatigue began to show, and he felt himself grow light-headed with his exertion.

The men encroached with increased threats, and Ly began to feel he could not keep up his momentum. Like the beast, the wild boar, he was growing tired. His stamina was fading. The rhythm of the drummers and chanting was still fast and frenetic, overwhelming him with volume. He gasped to maintain his skilful parrying as the hunters closed around. But Oneth scored a flesh wound on his belly, and the shock of the flint on his skin made him swoon and fall where he lay, breathing heavily, become the spear pierced wild boar: panting and snort-squealing on the ground. There was a rousing crescendo until the drums came to a halt, and the chanting and ritual dance concluded with all the men stood around him, pointing their spears at his tumbled form. Then they too, all collapsed about and lay listening to the sudden-come silence, the sound of the fires crackling, gazing up at the celestial ones, the stars of their ancestors souls.

Ly's spirit took wing as he lay prone. He closed his eyes and imagined the beast lying as he was. His spirit turned to the feathered riders of the winds. Above the forest wilderness he flew, in his mind's eye, searching, searching for the tracks of the wild boar. There was no moon but the sky was clear; starlight showed him the way. Five hills hence in the cleft of a wooded valley his spirit found what he had besought. Once more he became the wild pig, snuffling its home in the quiet of its family group, nudging its childer down to sleep, grunting one to the other in comforting acknowledgement. Five hills hence in the cleft of the valley, saa the wild boar lived. In the dawn of his dance-trance Ly ran and snuffle-searched for food source, aggressive in encountering a fox. Now Ly was become his prey - five hills hence in the cleft of the valley, nearby a quarried cliff, his centuries-back ancestors had hewn. Ly was drifting, drifting back through the night air across the distance on the swoop of a tawny wing; be the curve of a fierced-beak hawk, now his spirit coasted home, where the husk of his body was left. Hawk-risen, boar-found and known, hawk-returned his journey.

He flew above the circle arena and dropped like a stone through the air towards where Ly could see himself, or his body, recumbant upon the ground. He plummeted through the air and the sensation of flying was gone. Ly's body jerked and twitched as if at an impact and sensation was returned to human experience. He could feel the ground beneath him, hear the dimmed

conversation of the menfolk around him. He could sense the glow of flames across his face, from the fire-torches at the edges. He knew he was himself again. He opened his eyes. They flickered sensitively in the sudden light.

"Ly be come to," called Ragleth to the other men. "Eh na Ly, how be thase mind space. Limbs still strong and stoll, belly hungry na?" asked Ragleth, smiling down at him. Ly tried to sit up whilst the men came and sat around him in a circle. He discovered the fleshwound on his belly had been cleaned and staunched with the day's eye flower. It was already healing well, and it was much smaller than he had imagined. Ragleth helped him to sit up and some bread-cake and meat was brought him and he was given a draft of milder ale. Ly felt ravenous as soon as he saw the food and did not speak until he had eaten and drunk the ale refreshment. The men waited patiently for him to finish, waited patiently for the wordspeak of his trance-dance to be shared.

"Whisst na Ly, tell we'm o' your'n journey - the travels that betook your'n spirit this night," spoke Segwin when Ly had eaten and drunk his fill.

Ly looked around the men-company, noting now the absence of Wem, whose solitary tithe had taken him be his hut-space of a lonesome. He knew this was to be expected and though he would've liked his oldest revered uncle to hear of us trance-dance journey, it did not dilute his experience of the moment. With his pupils dilated and his eyes shining in the fervour of his experience, he began to speak:

"I'se fell'd'm down at the graze and I laid there as the wild boar hissel'n, tired be the chase and wounded to's death. But as I laid thus, 'm feathered wings, brown like the hawks as coast above'n trees, come by ane-me. I was flying as the hawk, watching wi'um piercing eye, flying til I spied the spore o' the wild boar. And down'n I'se plummetted to becomen the wild pig in's homestead, in's dawn foraging, in's aggressive chase o' the fox-lith that lingered roun' the edge be the little 'uns. I became thase beast and I saw the place'us spirit dwells - five hills hence in the cleft of the valley, be the quarry-hewn edge o' ancestors toil, five hills hence and a valley more. Then I be riding the night-winds, flying home to harbour'un body. Flying through the night-sky and dropping like's stone above'n me laid by form. Then its spirit-hawk left me and I was laid come by on the ground, hearing the murmur'un thee voices as the flames danced across'm closed eyelids and I become to misseln once more - Ly o' the Albion kindred".

"Na thee Ly, truely ha' you foun' the boar and thee quarry. Well has thee danced the trance-dance this night. Well the lightning dance becomen thee. Proud we'm become o' your'n stance, your'n wild boar daring, the lightning strike o' your'n impulse. Tomorrow now we'm follow the hunt to spore o' the wild boar. Now we'm all mun rest and thee 'specially mun lay to good night's sleep, to waken refreshed fer'n thee test o' the morrow".

So spoke Segwin, who urged Ly up and to the bedding chamber where, rolled in furs, they slumbered and rested til break of day. The fires had been all but quenched bar one which smouldered slowly through the night in readiness for sunrise, when eld Mendion would heat the water and brew the broth of hare and herb for the huntsmen's morning repast.

Ly had wakened with the lark that called before the rise of the sun. Battle-dressed, he squatted be fire and supped the steaming broth, chomping on the bread made special to the occasion, followed by oat-cakes spread with a layer of wild bees honey, collected by Wizen Dee, the watcher of the bees. All thoughts of Nionie were now banished from his mind, though in his dream world he had forged a strange telepathy with her. Now as he sat, the morning mist rose before the rays the unrisen sun had shed, and he did not think of Nionie. He thought of the journey ahead of them. He thought of the wild boar which that day he must seek out and kill. The beast he must cut the life-link of and thus imbibe its animal spirit to add courage to his own; the spirit of his manhood that would walk him tall on this his name-day. So he vowed, so he swore to himself and the Gold One, as it rose shedding light and sound, the poetry of nature all around.

The other men had woken and come round for a bite and a sup of the same. All carried spears and bows and arrows, a knife at the hilt of their belts. All wore the symbols of fire and life on their skin. Ly smiled at Ragleth, who tousled his hair fondly and turned to take a beaker of broth. No he had not thought of Nionie, who toiled in the muck of their making; she, his sister-spirit, who had called to the moon, given birth to mysteries inside her form - her blood-rite name-day dawn. He did not think of that. His senses twitched to the hills, horizon's breadth away from him. His spirit surged to

the quest before him and he felt impatient to move, to be off, to commence their journey. He grew impatient as his elders took their time with their broth and the oat-cakes spread with honey.

But presently Segwin was arising and the menfolk carried skiffs to the river, three between them. Ly, in the headboat with Segwin, led the way forwards. Hence they rowed up the river a ways and at a known harbour vantage, pulled up the skiffs onto a shore-bank of the river, a convenient inlet that let them anchorage thereby. Then with Ly and Segwin leading the way, they carved their passage across the hills and towards the cleft of the valley Ly had spied in his trance-dance. This was fifty or sixty meds away in an area that was not much frequented, though the site of the quarry was known. The family of wild pig lived three or so meds away from that quarried edge, in the roots of a huge tree they had carved out a cave from under and padded with leaves and grasses. The family of pigs would forage for meds around that area.

With the sun at its height through the forest foliage, Ly caught the sight of the dark shape of a wild boar. The creature turned and grunted, snorting inquisitively at the faintest of rustles. Ly froze but the breeze blew from behind him and the creature snorted and grunted and trotted away from Ly calling to his pig-kin. Ly remembered Segwin, who had that instant become aware of the wild boar, holding up his hand to halt their procession, then freezing and indicating to three of the menfolk to head the group of wild pigs towards the river and the quarry.

The men had fanned out and around. They began banging and shouting, driving the wild pigs towards the area of the quarry, on guard in case the wild boar chose to wheel and fight; aggress instead of flee. But the menfolk made it sound like a hundred warrior army was thundering towards the wild boar and his family, so he did not turn to attack but turned to fleet-foot flee.

Even so as he jog-trotted in the wild pigs' wake, Ly felt part of himself become the thing he sought to hunt down. He was the wild boar, the fear of its fleeing, the adrenalin rush through its hide he felt as if it were his own. But still inexorably he chased the wild pigs down, the men closing in, like at the trance-dance of the evening before. And he understood the boar's fear and battle-anger as the men now surrounded it on all sides of the quarry, the little ones and the females squealing their consternation, their fear and threat behind him. And the wild boar wheeled and snorted, pawing the ground and bristling, standing defiantly before them, pinning Ly with its fiery eye, squealing and grunting its rage as it lowered its head to tusk-charge the boy-man who had headed the expedition.

The cornered beast had whirled and snorted, turning to fix Ly with a livid fearless eye. Without a moment's deliberation, it had squealed and charged, perhaps choosing Ly as the most vulnerable looking link in the human net that surrounded it. There was a brief moment of unreality, then a panic in his belly, until the instinct of self-defence made him lower the spear he carried. Whether it was fortune or skill that drove the point of the spear into the heart of the wild boar, Ly neither knew nor cared.

The wild boar had charged, its tusks like scimitars ready to gash and rip. There had been a frozen moment when Ly had gazed in terrible fascination at the beast, as the menfolk around him had shouted, urging him to action. They did not shoot, for the wild boar hunt had been Ly's choice: it was his name-day, and they would not interfere with the pattern of events. Ly stared at the violent beast charging at him, wondering at the spirit, the passion, the intensity of its fury. In mercurial panic, he lowered his spear.

Fortuitously, he put it down just before the boar crossed the range of the spear. Ly's action had been lightning swift and just in the nick of time. The point of the spear went in the boar's chest just to the side of its razor-tusked head. Ly had assumed a natural stance, instinctively feet apart, body balanced, knees slightly bent to sustain the impact. But the beast's fury was such that when the spear went into the boar, its forward momentum had assumed such a pace Ly was carried backwards through the air, only knowing whatever happened he must keep hold of the spear. As the wild boar squealed with pain and rage, Ly was flung backwards onto the bank and sprawled lolling to one side, both hands still grasping the spear. At the other end of this newly blooded weapon the boar, in red-eyed fury, was attempting to gouge, and lacerate the spear. Now with his assailant at the same level, the boar thrashed and stamped, with Ly tossed from one side to another, his hands blistering, beginning to bleed from the effort. But of a sudden the boar had faltered and dropped to the ground. It snorted and frothed its anger, before the spear-point finally served its purpose and brought the appointed end.

Then all the menfolk came crowding round, the men who had been gathered close about, arrows drawn, ready to shoot should Ly lose the spear and become defenceless. Thus Ly's reputation-name, the Hawk, was established. For truly, had said Segwin and the other men, truly had he displayed that lightning reflex which the hawk shows when it drops to kill. Truly had that lightning reflex saved the day.

Ly had been numb to the praises to begin with; still shocked by the closeness of death, the closeness he felt to the animal spirit as it raged towards him. He had almost felt sorrow that it had to be killed. He felt an empathy for the beast which gave him, like all the others of his kin, a reverence for the wild creatures and anything of the Earth. The Earth was their belonging - the bountiful Goddess with the deathly aspect. She who gave and ruthlessly took away. It was Her harsh and abundant dictates they had to abide by.

After the wild boar had expired its last breath, its body shuddering a final response, the menfolk were all patting Ly, grasping his shoulder, shaking his blistered hand. They clustered around the boar and a pole was fetched as they waited for Ly to come to do his privilege. It was Ly's privilege to slit the throat, claim the head and tusks and later, to cut out the heart to be made into his name-day victory feast.

Ly got out his name-day dagger-sharp flint knife. He came and stood over the boar, gazing down into its deadened eye; the eye ferocious that had been fixed on him, intent on death. Ly lifted up his head then, and cry-howled up into the sky, proclaiming his victory; his primeval soul seeking vibrant expression in a roar and shout - the triumph of Life over Death. Ly bent and with the strength of intent stuck the blade in the pig's neck, and drew it jagged cut acrossing. The blood poured forth, besmirching his hands, flecking onto his face. Then Segwin drew the lightning sign in wild boar blood down Ly's chest, and upon his forehead. The dead beast's feet were tied and it was attached to a pole which was slung over two of the men's shoulders. Ly led the way forwards with his bloody spear and torso, signalling his triumph over the odds of death.

Smear'd be the stuff of life he came, be the wild boar's blood, and back at the homestead the childer came to awe'd watching, while they 'oomenkin, they moon-ma's gathered round to praise Ly, to proclaim their admiration and pleasure. Ly cut the heart out of the boar and all they folk had cheered as his moon-ma kilt forth to receive it. She, smiling pride into his eyes, same blue as Segwin's eye'n. She, accepting his offering and going by off to hasten the feast on with her food preparation. A gathering of women took the rest of the beast and Oneth went to help butcher and cut up the meat to be shared amongst the kin of the homestead. For what was for one, was for all in aplenty, wherever fortune favoured or fiddled forth disaster - still'm folk was comeby to share thee in'un sorrow. But no sorrow then. Saa! The wild boar killed single-handed - rare indeed! Ly killer of the wild boar - dubbed the Hawk on his name-day stoll - come to hinter manhood in the making of his own triumph feast. Aye, and he had known his mother's mind and thoughts then for sure.

Ly! Ly! Her childer, her bairn come knee-by nine summers since. Ly, her childer grown to manhood. From her womb he had sprung and her heart sang and her fingers worked gladly and quickly, preparing the meat for her son's victory feast. Proud to furnish his victory feast be her'n labour. Proud to be by a son such as he! For sure, she could sense the admiration, the pleasure of the men, their pride in him as well. And she infilled high alee, joyous her heart rang and her eyes shone as she dredged the herbs, crumbled the oatmeal, sliced some root crop into a tasty platter.

His stoll-some sun-pa had returned from his hafting after flint on the high of the hilltops, Corndon and Black Rhadley, camped over night the previous eve when Ly was commenced his ritual of pain. It do be ken to separate the blood-close at testing time, so they crossed the boundary to adulthood without their closer kin. Other'uns took care of the thurl-initiation rites; whilst family of the to-be-initiated weft and waited, tension building up and infecting them. A quiet before the storm of applause and riotous feasting could be delivered.

And Ly remembered how his sire and sun-pa had come to him as he sat at the feasting tressel waiting for the vittals to be brought and spread about. He had been companied by his youth friends, Kyfeth and Duffryn, who now he was passed into mankin lost the aloofness they had but recent took on when their own initiations made them man some several moons before they. Kyfeth was stag-tithed whilst Duffryn was hunter of the grey wolf that ranged the deeps of the forest. They had come to him admiring now at his courage for the quest to take the wild boar's spirit. All his kinsmen were sat about quaffing their beer-strong, and filling Ly's beaker so twert never'n

emptied. Beunydd, his sun-pa, had come down from his hilltop and found his way to his son's honoured side. He stood across from him saying naught for a while, but then creasing his face to a smile: "The sun be bold-bronze in your'n spirit I'se do hear Ly, and the flint be in your'n sinew and nerve. Whey tudden! Pride have you brought to your'n blood-kin, pride and full joy. Saa! Ly may your'n stoll-strength come constant as the Gold One above us. And here's gift na, lad-lith, special made for'n thee, a talisman-protector nigh for'n as long as your chosen, the path that'll be."

So saying he had placed a piece of black stone jet shaped like an ellipse, carved with the sunwheel, hung on a leather thong, ceremonially around his neck. Then he had clapped Ly on his shoulders with both of his hard-hewing hands and pulled his son to him, giving him a brief but warm and heart-felt bear hug. All the surrounding menfolk had laughed and cheered then, as his sun-pa had tousled his hair and sat to drink of the barley beer made special to the occasion. Aye had they all lifted their clay beakers then and toasted, not just to Ly, but to each other, to their blood-bondings, to the Goddess, to the Horned God whose spirit was in the hunt. And Ly could remember well the look of quiet pride in his sun-pa's eyes as he had lifted his beaker to toast his second-born son - the sun warrior who nigh had well come of age.

But be evening-tide the kindred were all settled around the long tressel-tables which they sat cross-legged at or on one side before. There was a place for the elders, as befitted, in the middle of the table and next in honour to those participants of the hunt and chase, who sat at the head. Here Ly was centre of attention and all they beguily glanced his direction, smiling, admiring, casting their eyes to catch a flicker from his own. He could not prevent a different feeling taking over him then; a liquid fire stirring in his belly and loins which he knew, that night, would be satisfied as it had never been satisfied before.

Opposite to the elders and down the top part of the table next to the warriors, were the wealth of the kindred, the rest of the adults, 'oomankin seated amongst the menfolk, having provided and served the feasting food. Further down the table next to the adults came the youth, and then came the childer with a few appointed grandam-moon-ma's amongst them to oversea the operation of their eating. This feasting was special time too for the childer, even though some were not five summers on in the age-wise. There had been much cheering and clapping and hallooing when Ly's moon-ma had brought forth the platter with the carefully cooked boar's heart upon it.

The head of the boar had been cleaned and placed as decoration, covering the meat and honouring the spirit of the animal he had killed. His hands betraying a tremour that was never evident when he hunted, Ly had lifted the boar's head and sung of his victory over it as all his kindred listened and applauded some more at its conclusion. Then, his moon-ma had taken the boar's head from him and he had cut the meat, eating it all with gusto, for truly his moon-ma had excelled in the preparation and cooking of the boar's heart. When he had finished all the menfolk toasted him and Segwin formally acknowledged Ly's brave hawk spirit, his birth into manhood, his coming of age, the privileges that were his as a result of this crossing of the threshold. Segwin turned them all to laughter then after the formality, by a bawdy innuendo that set all they adults to merriment whilst Ly's face was flushed half with expectation and half with embarrassment.

All was then to feasting and good feelings, laughter and quaffing and banter. There was much praising of Ly the hunter, the hawk, eh na? The menfolk turned to each other and said, nodding their heads and laughing agreement. Whereas Ly, now shy and stoll-like could nay hardly soak up all the atmosphere pledged to the honour of he. In his wildest dreams he had not imagined himself so honoured, the first action of his spear so vital and speed-thrusted, the hunt so cleanly and clearly executed, the killing his, and his alone. But this only made him humble, not boasting or swaggerful but reticent in the face of their praise, feeling the gods had favoured him, grateful for that favour and no-some overblown with pride.

Aft feasting came the music and pipes; the strumming of new-frame strings. And female acolytes - neophytes - came to chant them song-spell until the menfolk warriors took over. The kelter females danced a moon-chant, beguily swaying and merging their forms in a moon-trance. The temple-cakes were passed around and pretty soon'm mask-maiden came to take Ly from the fireside to a hut-space in the silver-dark.

By her looks, by her motions thay fair beguily lured Ly forth from his victory feast, whiles Ly watched her with mesmerised eyes, following the moon-spell she cast and shadowing her to the way-off hut-space door. Inside the door he heard whispers and gigglings stilled at a brief sharp whisper from the maiden who led him:

"Before thee enter thaise special place, forbidden to they who'm hev not yet passed thay threshold to manhood, I mun blindfold thee here'n, to protect our'n kindred from the shame o' naming and thay untoward flarin' o' jaylous curdlin' come thay bright revailing light o' dawn. Thay moon-nymphs shall give your'n body the succour of sensation it do crave and teach thee the ways of 'oomankin's desire. Bend thee now so'm put thee blindfold cloth; as your'n sight be taken so shall'un flesh come unto thay thrusting ecstasy of life"

Ly nodded his head staring and bent forwards so she could tie the cloth around him. Satisfied it was secured, she opened the door and led him inside. And ah the smell of her as she came close to tie the cloth around his eyes - ah the smell of her! Dew-misted mornings, the fresh loam of soil, fecund like the fragrance of wild flower blooms, a faint musk of wood-smoke and the season-smell of the doe, the hind that be rarely hunted. All of these things and countless subtle more it seemed to Ly she did smell of. Her smell alone intoxicated him!

Inside he sensed two other presences, soft voices and hands that took off his belt with the flint-dagger on it. Took off the leather kirt girt around his groin, so that naked he stood and blindfolded as the maidens led him across to the fur-covered soft-bed. They massaged his flesh with aromatic oils, touched him all over til his arousal caused him to reach for thay dangly-fare that brushed his chest and his mangrown stoll. Then a moon-nymph was guiding his hands, showing him how to stroke her so and so, how to squeeze her and give her body pleasure. As now another of them sucked his member, gently sucking and pulling his cock-swain high, grasping his groin a sensation that he couldnay fettle some to control, and he orgasmed, shooting his seed high; hinto thay maidens did scrape it off with their hands and tongues whilst he lay and gasped, his spirit spiralling up to the radiant sovereigns that glittered in the night sky outside and above them.

Until honey-wine was passed from tongue to tongue, temple-cakes given again. Very soon Ly's manhood returned and the moon-nymphs let thay explore'um their bodies, his mouth and fingers exploring, whilst another of the moon-nymph's oversee the ritual. Ly in frustration sort to tear the blindfold from him so he could see the beauty he was trammeling. The lead moon-nymph forbade him. But there was rustling and movements, giggling which told him they had expected and waited for this frustrated action on his'n part. Masks to hide identity were donned and Ly had his blindfold taken off so he could feast his eyes on thay dangly-fare beguily, thay moon-maidens who'm had come to share a flesh-feast on this his name-day, manhood night.

And thay moon-maidens laid down beside Ly, curled aboon'un as he stroked'un and suckled the soft fair paradise of their'n flesh. He opened the petals of the mystery place and searched his tongue inside'un wondering at the flowing sea-tang juices, the tremour and pleasure moans of the maiden. And Ly was shown by the accompanying moon-maid how best to arouse her sister and when her pleasure come full-hold, Ly was telled to'm push his'n man's prong into that mystery womb-hole, so secret and neat, a flesh-cave of ecstasy so hidden from view. Then there were'n cries of pleasure and ecstasy burst nearly forth after a short span of thrusting animal motions; the rising erotic wave and rush of bliss in the aftermath still.

The moon-maid had lain panting while some-told later that evening Ly plied the same brave on the skin of the second moon-nymph. Whilst in the near-dawn, the overseer masked priestess came to the bed and bled the elixir of his manhood from him once more, as he devoured thay soft female flesh. Later, thankful and beamsome he bid them goodbye as they waved him off from their hut-space hidden some on high.

There were quiet days to follow then for a three day spell after Ly's name-day feast. He never knew who his initiators into the pleasures of sex were. He could guess, by a certain way of walking, a measure of fair proportions, a jut of the breast, a toss of the hair. But, as was their custom, it never was made known to him. Though he knew it was the older beguily on the fringe of moon-ma asserting the power-mystery of their sex.

When Ly met Nionie first from her blood-rite, he was sitting alee an old willow be a little trickle of water that swelled to stream, and sometimes river in times of plentisome rain. Ly was alolling lazy-like in the old tree's bough, hafting at a wood piece, waiting for her coming. She came through the path in the woods to where Ly was beseated, her moon-sisters alongside of her carrying'un baskets that they'd blood-drenched at the dark of no-moon. Ly grinned as she came through the trees and she proud and self-conscious came into the sunlight and put down her burden some twenty steps from Ly. Her moon-sisters bid her passing goodbyes, leaving her to word-speak with her brother.

"Na Ly," said Nionie, shy-like yet provoking. "Hast thee set'n thee name-day feast and killed a boar of's own?" She asked him outright, her eyes reflecting his, shining a kin-light forth.

"Na Nionie, maybe'm so and maybe's thee on thee name-day becomen childer to 'ooman - goddess-formed and moon-ma of the making, a burdened of a magical soil - ey'us ent not so, eh na? Fech fer sure, as saa is the wild boar na?" Countered Ly, sharing his heart-speak with her, making known their connected telepathy.

"Even so, even so, my stoll blood-brother Ly - even so, we be both halves of the same kernal, na? Our'n minds do beat as one. Though now you becomen into man-some and I in thay moon-spell sung, we begowen our'n own ways, eh la, my blood-brother own? We've come seperate and different in our'n ways as the seasons in time do change, as the radiant ones above do so dictate, na? Ly the wanderer gone, Nionie, his blood-sister tied to till thay soil; ties that link her to the silver one, to the goddess that breathes through fruit, frond and stem. Ties she would no more swap than Ly would turn hissself thatcher and water-carrier be the rood. Now I be moon-maid eh? Acolyte to the temple priestesses. Our roles be clear defined eh na Ly? Stark our'n difference be droved betwixt us, likes stag fra his sister'n hind, likes she-wolf fra her'n brother kin eh? But be thee brother fair and keep me to wholesome in thee heart-space and I'll find thee fond and tithy awhile be agin."

She looked at Ly for the longest while, gazed her devotion, her pride, her admiration into his brownen e'en. In her look she spoke the unspeakables; her form pert and nymph-like, leggy like the doe-faun at its inquisitive phase of childer. The look that passed between them was deeper than passion; it spoke of the whole concordance of the universal flux. It was the drift of a timeless spell and in it was revealed the nakedness of their desire alongside the acceptance of the taboo that bound them; the sorrow of their loss, the future that took their paths seperate.

The look was a call from blood-kin unto blood-kin, an acknowledgement of umbilical belonging, an intercourse of the unity of their vision, the one for the other. A look that reduced the gulfs of space between them and brought them, not side by side but conjoined - one and the same thing; different aspects that made up one whole. Thus deep and profound, beyond passion and of passion, through an ageless kindred link of blood, that look did speak.

Then, smiling, she came towards Ly, kissed his stoll-some cheek as he bent down to hold her, to hug her before the gestures of childer mun be laid to thay side and manhood framed his reserve. Nionie, trying to brush away the traces of tears in her eyes, carried hup her burden and walked aways, her back to Ly, towards the homestead of their'n moon-ma, their'n stoll-ra faither, who hefted the flint-tool blades.

And Ly felt the shadow of melancholy, the pain of things he could not change darken his heart and burn there for a pace. He felt like calling her back - his blood-sister, Nionie, moon-nymph become to acolyte of the high priestess, moon-chant weaver, weaving a spell of growth into the soil of the Land. She, of the fecund mysteries, his sister had become and thus did their ways shew a parting.

But stoll-like in the cast of his kind, Ly could only carve and carve the piece of wood, grappling with and soothing his pain and his sorrow by the persistance of his actions. The knife in his hand became blurred for a moment, and he had to stop to brush the unaccustomed tears away, wondering at the ache in his heart and burying it together with those things that had marked him as still yet a childer.

Remembering his man-hood, his name-day hunter's status, he stopped and gazed into middle distance, recollecting, collecting himself to live be the Hawk as the name-spur he'ud been tokened. Like a man, stoll and strengthful, he would be - with the wanderlust trade in his veins. The flint-maker and hunter-warrior skills that defined him, held him self-sufficient, as wild and independent as the wolves at high forest side.

He would carve legends in the memory of his tomorrows - he would spur story-spells told by the fire be the eld folk. Aye, fech fer sure, eld Mendion'ud spin his tale of the legend of Ly, the Hawk, the lightning wild one with the courage invincible of the wild boar fierce. So Ly swore to himself as the new quarter moon crooked a silver spell in the night, remembering the fullness of the harvest moon in the slender shiver of its potential - soon to swell, as the belly of a moon-ma did when thay little'uns becryn' to besought's 'un eyes on thay world.

This was the way Ly's thoughts had drifted, and had brought him calm and accepting, steady at the thought of sister's distance. He shut the cries of his deep-down heart to the side and remembered his warrior status.

Oftimes then he would linger be off'n of Old Wem's place seeking a mite of wisdom from the mouth of one whose lips were mostly kept well shut. But the silence of Old Wem's intuition served to soothe him, and he learned to fathom solutions for himself without ever having a word past between them. Ly had thought on occasions that he was made to follow in the footsteps of Wem's wisdom, alongside of the high-moon priestesses, they communed with the flux of All Life and kept the links with the kindred alive. But in a rare moment, Wem had pierced him with his gimlet brown eye, saying:

"There be too much of the coiled dather, too much of the rover's questing about thee Ly fer yon to take to sitting at the Listeners task - even though you have the stillness in thee stark to see. It be combined with a restlessness to know, to see that'll tek you's be way off'n from cycle to cycle; aye sure like tinder in your'n veins it be planted just awaiting a spark to set a light and flame-free" - a hand on his shoulder, a rare half-smile upon the chant-elastic lips. Of course, he had been right as always. Confirmed by the gift Wem had given him after his initiation name-day, the hawk-claw clasped pouch which hung now upon his belt and where was kept the special stones marked as divinations for the trade-main of'us ways.

He had sought out Old Wem when he was still flint-knapping with his sun-pa. He had an itch in him that could not settle for the steady, plodding familiar-visited sites of the flint-founder's trade. His heart yearned to a wider horizon, and though he applied himself and learned well the art of flint-forming, he was not content and his spirit sang after the traders who came and went and returned and were off for a season and more besides. Ah, he could not help that desire quivering within him and finding the courage for his release. Without him having to speak this out in words, Old Wem seemed to know him sometimes better than he knew himself. He had sat himself outside Wem's place, savagely chipping at a piece of flint, wondering how he should broach so momentous a subject.

"Seems Ly's forgotten the delicacy of'us cuts," commented Wem dryly as he walked up from the Fire-star space to find Ly there; and when Ly could finally bring himself to speak what was constricting him, Wem gave him solution simple and to the mark: "Your'n wings be itching to be unfurled and gliding a broader range, than the home route of your'n sun-pa's trade na? Then speak to he of what's awrithing in your'n heartsore, eh me lad? Or despite your'n name-day courage yen'll be a childer-kept for all your'n adult-status!"

Aye that'd been all the encouragement he needed, and though he felt strong-fond of his sun-pa and did not want to cause him sadness, he could not keep the core of his being stunted and unleashed all his life.

Ly remembered then the first times flint-knapping with his sun-pa faither. The excitement he'd felt of trekking off together, taking vittals for a day or more if needs be. His faither had taken him to all on his prime sites thereabouts, to the hilltops and rocky crops and quarry dents and river beds where the choicest of flint material could be found. But soon the near-bound features of his activity be his sun-pa's side came to seem too dull and homely. The wander-lust in his veins craved the venture of further horizons and though he had learned well at his faither's side the itch in him bade him favour a further and further boundary. Until, given courage be the counsel of Old Wem, he had come to beg his'n faither if he could trade the flint-path accompanying the rover-deals, Dracon and Brinren, in their travels away for'n a half a cycle or more.

Ah and his'n faither had looked way off towards the mountains of the west when Ly had made his desire known to him. "There be dignity and worth in the rendering of flint Ly, though trowe all things have their'n season and the travelling trade do bring many novel things of interest to our'n homestead. I would nay keep thee honing the flint lessen thee had a mind to stay, never mind but thee's a feel fer'n the art of it too. But though your'n born of me own blood, the Gods decide where your'n spirit be apt. If there's a feel in thee fer'n the far and wide I would nay tether thee to a homely radius. Thee be man-some now son, man enough to choose your'n own ways. If Dracon and Brinren have nay objection to your'n accompanying they, then I'll find none else by which to keep thee. Lad, thee've a wilderness bent in thee heart I've kent it fra the moment thee could hunt with a childer's bow and arrow. You've my blessings for whey fer sure I could nay turn a flying

speddie seed to a rooted frond, even if I'd mind to, which I dunnet. Saa away wi' you Ly and take care, as the Goddess wills so be it, eh na Ly? As the Goddess wills!"

Aye, and he had smiled at his son a benediction, concealing his sadness for Ly's sake, who was at that moment too full of the zest of release and freedom to study his faither close like. It was only much later that he realised from something his moon-ma had said that he had caused his faither some'at of a heavy in the heart awbiles. But after all, he had the flint skill learned from his faither the first two cycles since his initiation into manhood. He was fast at his learning which had begun before his special name-day, when he had killed the wild boar. And since that time he had hewn flint from many a hilltop, and from the stone he had made a multitude of flint blade scrapers; small flints for delicate work and carving; flint arrow heads and spear points; axe heads and pounders. Each flint blade had its special and general uses, mainly being cutting, carving, planing, smoothing, scraping, sawing and splitting. For all these functions flint was the hardest, and as yet, most plentiful material.

As a matter of course Ly had become expert in the use of wood. The backpack he carried for long journeys was made from a frame of hazel - the pack itself being made of leather with different pockets for various items. Inside it he would carry axe helves and wooden bowls made of ash and oak. In one pocket there would be a sewing kit with an awl made of bone and limelast for sewing thread. In the main part of the backpack was a birchwood container which housed his tinder and fire-starter. Inside a mollusc shell container to prevent dampness was some tinder fungus (collected from dead or diseased beech or birch trees). There was also some pyrite. In order to start a fire, Ly would strike a flint core repeatedly against the pyrites. Sparks fell on the tinder which with blowing ignited a fire.

Ly had learned to make fire before he was even 9 cycles old. It was a familiar almost unconscious routine which provided the warmth and heat that was so necessary for him and his kinsfolk's survival. For the rest of the tinder, Ly would have a stock of reed-mace wool, hammered willow bast, juniper pith, mosses and thistledown, small feathers and twigs. He also carried birch sap which was an essential gluing agent, and birch fungus which had many beneficial medicinal uses. Thus supplied, Ly was a mobile self-sufficient unit enabling him to live in solitude or in the wilderness with his travelling companions for seasons upon end, without the necessity of returning to the homestead.

All the different uses of the forest trees he had learned well before his initiation and could cut and carve alongside of the most practiced of his kinsmen. Ly's long bow was made of yew wood and his arrow shafts came from the wood of the wayfaring tree, mixed with some dogwood shafts. All the trees were used for diverse purposes which Ly had learned well; their special qualities and spirit being known and passed down through the centuries of ancestors. He knew the uses of birch wood, ash wood, hazel and thorn, willow, beech, yew, lime and oak. The oak was sacred to the sun god and revered for its enduring quality, its hardness, its life-giving aura. Ly had helped to build wattle and daub dwellings with it, watched the skeletons of boats taking shape and made his own before very long, using the sacred oak. Furniture was crafted from this wood and it was also used for dyeing and planing.

But always the tree spirit was consulted, gifts left to appease it; only a certain number being felled each cycle, and these were storm damaged or diseased, or old. For it was thought if the oak was felled indiscriminantly, the sun god would punish them with drought, lightning strikes and storms, or with a withdrawal of that very necessary light and warmth which swelled the corn and brought them bountiful harvests. The oak was a tree which was revered and honoured as much and above nearly all the other trees in the forest by the Albion kindred. It was totem, and held a special place in the hearts of all Ly's kinsfolk for it housed them, kept them safe and secure in the storm, sped them along the waterways, padded out their lives with a beautiful and sturdy substance that they were ever mindful of. And aye was this instinct full within Ly, for a grove of oak trees always had a specially alive and listening aura, potent and fecund, as if it harboured the horned god himself, which caused him to tread quiet and reverential like whenever he were in the midst of the sun trees they thought so special.

As soon as he could walk, Ly had set to watching the world go by and playing with the bits of wood carving his faither had made for him in the lightening evenings of blossom-tide. And pretty soon he had set to and watched the world go by whilst carving his own plith of wood. He had watched Hurgin, his cycles older brother, making arrow shafts and spears and followed his suit in making his own. As he'd got older he had helped with some of the construction work, in the building of a

byre to house'un cattle in winter's dregs, and new homesteads for the swelling community. He had spent long times be the river observing his kinsmen assembling the skiffs they used to paddle the waterways. Before his initiation he had cut and planed, shaped and seasoned his own boat-frame, stretching and oiling the deerskin which completed it and made it the practical and effective means of transportation it was.

He had learnt at his moon-ma's knee the names of the plants and edibles they gathered. Many a time when young had he walked with the 'oomankin, not yet old enough to let be his own. With his moon-ma he had gathered fat hen and chick weed, corn spurrey, bugle and cuckoo flower. He had harvested acorns, blackberries, thay bitter sloe, crab apples, haws and hazel nuts. He had collected elder flowers, thorn leaves and beech leaves in spring. In autumn as well as the fruits, there was a wide variety of mushrooms, the fungi to be strictly avoided, and those which could be sparingly used.

In the spring the 'oomankin fertilised the fields and planted the crops to be grown. Whilst before times, the menfolk came and prepared the small fields, ploughing them with wooden hafts, chircking the oxen to pull ho. Then before thay blossom sprung, the 'oomankin would come to spread their sacred soil which contained the blood of their wombs. The priests and priestesses would come to dance-chant whilst thay menfolk'un gathered aroun. The moon-goddess appointed Ethreal, for 7 cycles past, would bless the seeds as they'ud come to be planted. And around the rim, the menfolk would begin their sun-wise cycle dance with thay childer to follow in thay wake.

In this way the kindred cultivated: linseed, opium poppy, legumes, einkorn and emmer, durum, oat-ear and barley. Thus did they live by way of the richness of Nature. The food they ate so reverentially garnered, made them strong and hale. The bounty that their environment afforded them allowed them to cast their sight beyond the confines of the homestead. It was partly the cause of their outward looking spirits, their questing, desire-born souls. They came to observe their environment, not just exist in it. They came to study the moon and the sun, the drift of the stella space and this study had provoked the building of monumental temples. The stone circle temples which, like huge sculptures speckled across the land, had grown up and had produced the great connectedness that had carried thay thus far forwards.

He thought of the corn festivals they'ud had in the past, where Ethreal came to bless the harvest - give thanks to the goddess. There'n was watching and waiting whiles the menfolk cut the grain that the 'oomankin would grind and pound for the flour to laid a platter on the mealboard. And with the wealth of the autumn harvest - thanksgiving festival did commence, where the men enacted the corn god dance, wedded be the Mother til his time of death did cant the fall. And the 'oomankin become thay goddess-nymphs dancing seductions in the firelight as'un all quaffed and made much merry. Couples disappeared to a quiet-space hut where often Ly had been taken by the moon-maidens too - since that first night of his initiation. The sacred stook of corn was the last'un kept, woven into blessing scree and made into special magic cakes eaten in mid-winter, when they all had need of cheer. Aye, there was goodly times to be had fer sure, for thay as settled in the lee of the homesteaders rhythm, thought Ly, convincing himself this was so whilst his spirit took winged flight towards the travel ways and further foreign places that had always stirred his blood so, gave him his full zest for life.

He remembered the first ever time he had travelled far down the water-ways with Dracon and Brinren, in the first great skiff he'ud ever been in. The voluminous sail and flange were holed a deck as they'd sped down the silver Severn, the main thoroughfare 'pon which the sturd-druth sailboat was moored. Cross country by a minor river, they had set out with Ly all quiet, his eyes as big as his head taking in all the landmarks they passed too shy and too full of respect for his companions to speak much at all, jumping to do their bidding almost sooner than he'd been told! That first time they had not stopped by The Holy Place which would come to be so special and awesome to Ly. The experience of The Holy Place came after that first trip away which had filled Ly's senses so to brimming. Quickly had the broad river's flow taken them south and then east, til be eventide they had stopped at a trading harbour before the Big Waters swell. All new and strange to Ly, he had quickly slept after the tasty fare cooked on an open fire beside the bustle of other strangers camps who shouted greetings to Brinren and Dracon, as fatigued from their day's travel they crouched by the fire.

The following day before the sun had risen, they were up and away and soon upon the shore of the Big Waters' swell. Ly could remember the awe he had felt when for the first time he had witnessed the expanse of the sea and heard the swooshing of the surftide upon the shingled shore. Seeing it

had given him a conscious apprehension of his ancestors greatness. In his bones and switched like a light in his mind, he knew then, an immense admiration and reverence, for they who had gone before him. For they who by their trials and errors had so developed their sailing skills as to make the great saltwater expanses merely another broad river to cross, maintaining trade links that went back to the times when the first ever folk had settled these sacred isles. He felt the ancient noble spirit of his ancestors in his blood as he tasted the sea-foam, and as at last Dracon and Brinren pointed their vessel seaward and scudded her out into the swell.

And the sea-monsters that plunged past drivthning a sonorous call through watery depths, spouting thane water high. Those mountainous waves on's first journey! But Dracon and Brinren, skilled and expert at boatcraft, kept the bobbing stoll-skiff asail whiles Ly steadied himself be the hull of the water-rider, and prayed to thay gods in's lack of faith. But coasted to shoreline come they two suns after, complete, untoppled and ready to trade. Through thay Breton lands they traded, through Bayun, by the serpent Seine and all by thay neighbouring lands they took their'n wares. Through Carnac, thay myriad megalith corridors of stone, they reverent-came and traded their flints and clever-weave cloth for some new brew wine and crystal-coral. Thus did their reputation spread so they welcome received, communicating be the common store of their language, as their ancestors issued from the same root and stock.

Full two seasons had they wandered across the Great Lands, Dracon with his pipe music proclaiming their presence, diffusing any aggressive urge and signalling that they in trade'n friendship had come. In the hot southern darks they traded and be the cold climes of the north. They had forged links with thay southern-east peoples, they stoll of grist and bone where the olives and lemons grew, where islands scattered the sea before the coast of more dusty and exotic lands. The flint they traded was sharp good-rare, skilful made and sturd-druth, taking the homesteads and hev-steads be store, swamping their own packs with treasures to tell kindred come the snap of the dark-time when their sail would bow to rush before the norther winds blow.

The different shapes; new grim gods and lighter aspects that foreign folk did pledge to had intrigued Ly at first, alongside of plenty other'un. Thay red-metal rarity of an axe biting as sharp as thay flint almost. The brun bear and wolves they girt round to avoided. The star-ban boot-lan where the folk fished and ate strange pastries, honour'un the earth, tantazled be the skies, seeing but not learning the trace of the path of the celestial ones. Not understanding the pull of the greater tide as his own folk did. Advanced; superior Ly had felt - though a natural instinctive tact forbade him pressing the point with the strangers they met. There were gems they traded - pink rock and coral, special shells, bloodstone, jet and quartz, as well as new foods and strange fashioned wares to take back to thay kindred. After the harvest fall, when the air was beginning to frost, they returned after two full seasons travelling.

The folk been all quiet-like but when they came of the afternoon there was celebration and feasting called for and Ly found hisself and his companions surrounded by the pleasure on their kindred's faces. The welcome and sun-warmth they smiled from their eyes was enow to set thay heart aflame and brimful, thay spirit on a wing of joy. And aye, it had been good and lollsome wintered in with homestead kindred safe-harboured in the lee of familiar hearts and hands. All tucked up and cosied - seeing his sister, acolyte of the moon-temple grown. They talking and walking as of old days, sate be the fire of their mutual belonging, their company being enow one for the other once more. Though on the feasting nights Ly was lured by the masked moon-maidens who set his body on fire, carved the craving for 'oomankin within him, and succoured full his physical needs.

Aye and always with his travelling betimes, Ly had kept hisself aloof from the company. Not getting close to any one beguilty-fair and not being drawn ever to the tether of man-home. He had kept himself close inside and though would smile friendly-like and dazzle'un charm fra his e'en, he would never stay long enow for intimacy much. Aloof ultimately he was - bent upon the rovers trading whiles and wanting no more ties to bind him to thay harbour of's birth.

This containment of Ly's gave him a reputation amongst the 'oomankin. Because of his battle prowess, because of the glamour of his trade and his infrequent presence, because for he was comely and stoll, adazzle and atwinkle of's e'en at times of glee, thay 'oomankin did swoonsome him and as time went on they took to pledging one to the other, each trying in their turn to bind Ly and clap him man-home and tethered. Many other'un young mensfolk stayed stoll be the hunt and the crafting; home at the homestead for many an evening. But for Ly he must let his winged soul to his freedom turned to the shoresides, the wild sides, tarrying in strangers lands, learning some

more and anew. So did Ly's heart quiver like an arrow from the bow, the wanderlust steeped full within him.

Thus had Ly held himself from any intimacy with his 'oomankin. Ten, fifteen, cycles from his initiation Ly's wanderlust was joked amongst thay folk and he was renowned for a bringer of rare and unusual gifts. Precious gems, special foods and spices, reindeer hide, a copper axe head, shiny yellow embossed bowls, an ornamentation of the Great Mother. Bear he had encountered, escaped and killed. Wolves he had watched and won the pelt of; beaver and otter and hare had he trapped and killed for the meat or the hide. He had hunted auroch in plenty; red deer, roe deer and elk. He had fished salmon, trout, perch, pike, eel, crab and molluscs.

As well as his hunting skills, which were common to the kinsmen of his boundary, Ly was known as a warrior of formidable character. It was necessary he should be so, as his travels sometimes exposed him to hostility he must needs defend himself from. Four cycles from his initiation a border dispute had flared between his kindred and that of a neighbouring community. Such disputes were rare but when they flared, they flared ferocious and determined. Segwin had done all within his power to prevent the fuelling of feud but Minreeth, the headman of the neighbouring community, was puffed up as the adder and illbind to strike, assuming with his growth of numbers more, he could steal the lush stretch that had long been harvested and tilled be the company of Ly.

On the cusp of spring the battle came, the Minreeth rabble appearing massed 'gainst the skyline, a brief stride on the opposite hill. Ly could remember the tension, the fire in his belly, his prayers to the War Goddess making him immune of fear, accepting of pain and death if it should come; sure if it did he would win his place be the fireside of fame, a light in the memory of his folk, returned to the paradise of the everlasting Golden Source from which he had come and to which he would return one day, he knew. His kinsmen had not streamed, haphazard and thoughtless down the hillside, as Minreeth's foolhardy anger had spurred his mensfolk to do. Segwin advised by Onreth, suggested by Ly, had cautioned their company to split into three, two parts of their forces taking high ground and forming a kind of pincer with which to crush their assailants. But one part of their forces, the third part must needs provide the bait to draw Minreeth's forces into their well-thought trap. Ly had volunteered to be part of this "bait" force which must draw and contain the enemy until the waiting flanks of the pincer could crush the exposed opposition and vanquish them as quickly as they had come.

Ly had stood beside Kyfeth, his childhood friend, and Oneth the battle-hard and brave. As the enemy streamed towards them, Ly had opened his throat and chant-cried their blood-burning warrior's song. Upon his breast and that of those who stood with him was a skilfully woven basket tunic designed to protect them some from arrows and flailing spears. Ly's group had let fly arrows from their long bows, whilst a front line braced themselves for the onslaught. Wielding his long-shafted axe in one hand and his protective dagger in the other, Ly clashed with the enemy. Such was the ferocity with which he fought, fearless beside the seasoned Oneth, courage-giving for those of virgin battle prowess, the enemy were held and even knocked back on their heels.

Ly's movements had been so quick and so lethal none of the aggressors could get near him. So too could be said of Oneth and others alongside him. Though there were some who were felled, some who slashed and bloodied, grave wounded and gouged, must totter and fall. Their demise only spurred Ly on so that he trebled his efforts, determined to kill and wound protective of his own. His mind had been in a strangely elevated state then, the rush of adrenalin made him oblivious of the deep cut on his shoulder, oblivious of the arrow that had glanced from his thigh. All he knew was his bloodlust, the sweet satisfaction and white fire in his veins that came from cutting the enemy down and finally seeing them routed and humbled; fleeing before them, vanquished by the superior tactics Segwin had employed. Aii! And he had never felt so alive, so triumphant, so vivified, so melancholy-poignant on learning the deaths of those who had stood with him, as he had felt on that day, on the eve of their victory. Aii! he had never felt such utter sweetness, the joy of living, the sorrow of loss, as he did on that day, which came known to their folk as the battle of the Leasowe Stretch, after the piece of land that had caused the dispute.

Other times too, Ly had to defend himself, to fight in order to survive. There was the second time with Dracon and Brinren, in a dust-lush land of the east, when they'd come across a hostile folk, mistrustful and fearful of Dracon's pipe. The three of them had readied to withdraw, clear-given in their intention, but the strangers had attacked and it had taken all their sling and knife-throwing skills to keep them off and give Ly and his companions chance to escape unharmed. There was the time they had got caught up in the quarrels of a northerner folks; the time when a careless arrow

had brought another battle to their homestead between them and a south-wester folk; the time when an ambush had nearly resulted in the loss of their lives but for the light sleeping and wariness of Dracon which had saved them in the nick of time. Aye there had been many tests, many escapes, many tales to savour of the telling for Ly, he who was well-known nigh on for the length of their wooded isle, as The Hawk; he of the Albion Kindred, close-named as Ly.

Standing on his hilltop, Ly reflected on all the goodness his life had held. He thought of his vantages and he thought on the sorrows that had deep-carved his being. The loss of Dracon, his early travelling companion, the death of his faither-sun, main-stoll, the bairn his moon-ma had birthed who had choked and died in the third cycle of his little life. He thought of the battles they had fought on occasions which had caused the loss of his kinsmen warriors. Aii! But life and death were all but one he knew, and the one fed into the other, so he consoled himself, philosophical and accepting, as it was the way of his folk to be. Aii! As winter followed the harvest, as snow and ice did creep against the sun, death had its timeful phase, just as in season the sap did rise and the earth gave birth to cubs and fledglings. Aye, everything had its own species of time Ly knew, as he stood pondering on his hilltop in the late afternoon sun.

He felt close to his faither-sun main-stoll up here on the tip of Corndon, for it was here that Benyyd, his main-stoll, was buried as befitted his status and his soul-skill. The ice-time had killed him when Ly was in the far-lands. He'd been struck be cramps or some such blight, when he was part way up a rocky incline. He had been unable to stop himself falling so it seemed. His head had banged hard agin a stone, cracked'us skull, killed him fer sure. A slight encroaching weakness of age had killed him, scythed him down. His faither's bones slept in the earth now whilst his spirit made a path to the stars and his soul did cleave the two togethersome.

He remembered the shock of it on his return. His moon-ma's sagging shoulders, her red-rimmed eyes. The internment had already taken place, but the burial mound had not been completed. The company awaited the second son of Benyyd - Ly, he known as the Hawk - to come and share the measure of's main-stoll's death: his entry into the unity of Life, into the never-ending cycle that contained the stars, the moon, the earth, in the sun's sacred circle of light.

The company had climbed up a Corndon and stood beside as Ethreal and Old Wem led the chanting, and the sol-bearers chorused a eulogy to he of the flint-forming hand: Benyyd, with his miner's, tool-maker's skill. And the wind had whistled sharp and icy cold, like a blade against their faces, as they stacked thaise stone upon stone, and his faither's material presence was known remote and never to be more, even whiles his spirit sang to them from the soil. Ly had stood alongside his elder brother and sisters, his twin sister, Nionie, and his moon-ma, all of they teary and sorrowful, left to weep the pain away; to allow the light of the gift that was Death to chase thay gloom-shadows away.

The rest on thay company had climbed down, the temple acolytes quiet-chanting. Their company kindred went down to prepare the funeral feast, where songs and stories loved of Benyyd, the flint-knapper, rock-sturd stoll, would be sung and heard and told by all of thay gathered. The feast had been a remembrance of Benyyd, a praise of thay goodly life he had long-kind lived.

When Ly and his family had come aft away fra Corndon and down to homestead feast-hall, the company were'n all gather-red and Ly's folks were shown ways to the head-table, whereto the ale did lightensome thay's sorrow together with the kindness of the company who spoke many tales of Benyyd, stoll of the homestead kindred. The folk-songs of old were sung and his moon-ma had gone to her bed early, leaving the rest of them to listen to the songs of their ancestors, the memories and stories their faither had given'un. Ly'ud been sad-like and wearisome for days, but life went on. The pulse of it continuous, the thread of it unbroken and his faither though not evident to his eyes, he knew was part now of that Great Flow which encompassed all things.

Many times Ly'd sensed his faither be his shoulder, chiding at a bad hit, in praise at a well-flaked flint, and he would turn to find nothing but air, the wind, silence, his faither invisible now to human eye. But Ly knew his main-stoll was rich in the earth - had joined they great ancestors that had raised thay fire-star temples. Eh na! thought Ly wistful-like, that he could live and remember so well yet never touch thay dead ones that were gone from him. The barrier of death was unbreachable and yet in the dark nights, a cycle of moons before midwinter, their ceremony to the dead was enacted. Through the psychic charge on that night when all'un dead ones were called back to company to beseat and feast with'un, to bless'un and give thanks for the gifts that in life had been given; to seek their approval and blessing for new ventures undertaken - at such atimes

did Ly feel his father's close presence, and be the keening light in his moon-ma's eyes, he knew she sensed'un too. The company gather-red strength from the festival of the dead. It helped them wholesale accept what inevitably was part of life: Death - the converse equation. Death, that would claim them all in the end. The festival of the dead thus contained a deep, spiritual awe, a resonant profundity that psychically empowered the whole company.

It was his father's death into Universal Life that had made Ly turn his thoughts more homeward lee. His father had died but three cycles since and his death had impressed upon Ly the fragility of human ties - the preciousness of the quantity of time allowed him.

Not only that, in the past few years there had come changes, rumours of aggressive actions, the sudden stealthily spreading novelty of the fire-metal that kirt harder and sharper than even the topmost flint. Trowe it was a wonder how the fire could soften the shiny hard stuff and make it moulded to a sharper slicing edge he'd ever seen. In the mid Great Lands he had stood by a gathering and watched the metal crafter shape his skill. There was a rill and fervour that had gripped the folk there, and everybody who walked away from the timely demonstration knew that some great change was on the horizon.

Flint was still necessary, but Ly knew its magic was beginning to fade. He sensed this and accepted it as part of the inevitable process of life, only there was a vague melancholy in the depths of his heart that made him glad his father was be the bones of the Earth, cradled in the womb of the Goddess, so that he was not there to experience the decline of his flint-worker status. For all'un such reasons Ly had cast his glance homeward bound much more than off, lately now.

It was Brith-na-gig who had made his mind up, clinched his thoughts and put actions to his desires and motives. Ly had held the wanderlust long, sharing the festivals of many a different homestead far and wide, in'us own land and across the Big Waters in the Great Lands. He had diddled many a dangly-faire when the festivals and fertility rites, the seasonal celebratory feasting made the allowances, gave licence to his sexual expression. In his homestead he had na cleft eyes on any dangly-faire that riveted him. It was only a cycle after his father'd died when Ly had come back from a long times journeying, trading and travelling the communication links that kept thay trade-main going. He came back just in time for the company's midwinter feastings. The joy and relief on his moon-ma's face and on that of Nionie and his other'n kindred, was starksome evident. He'd been aturn so long they'd begun to clemm that he was harmed or troubled. But no, not he, not the Hawk, he assured them, moved be the keening light that shone from many an eye.

The time for orgiastic ceremonies had come round and all thay company was dressed sharp and teasing, washed and lotioned and rubbed dry with sweet herbs for the couplings that would come later as the temple-cakes were given made from the last stook corn of the harvest - magically imbued. Ly knew that his lust, the thrust which kept life going, would be embraced and fulfilled that night. But it seemed each moment was sharpened with a new light, the pleasure more acute and made so be the long absence he'd seen away fra'us kinsfolk. He watched the festivities and participated in them as he never had done so wholly before, yet so observing-like too, outside of himself, watching the proceedings with a freshened eye, conscious of the style and aesthetic charm of the dressed festival wattle and daub hall, of the health and harmony of thay company, come kirtled in fine-woven cloth dyed in thay rich'n colours rare. After the feasting; the chanting and dancing, the magical ritualisation begun of their orgiastic energies. And company was all be-seated and the female acolytes came round with beakers of warming, intoxicant brew, distributing the temple-cakes for company's pleasure.

She had given him his beaker of mulled brew glancing quickly to his eyes and then down again, smiling and murmuring a blessing. It seemed to Ly his heart had quickened a beat as he gazed on the apparition of loveliness he'd not noticed so much but two cycles since. Now a new moon-maiden blossomed before him as soft and luscious as the golden plums given to he be his trade in the south lands. He watched her moving, bending to each of the company with a smile and a blessing. There seemed a sheen on her - as if the radiant beings had shed their twinkling luminosity upon her, surrounded her with an aura of silthful light, so it appeared to Ly's sight.

Finally she went to join the other acolytes to begin their humming chant, their ritualised dancing, whiles company began drinking of thay flesh pleasures that wrought an sexual unity, sanctioned by the high-moon priestess, embracing the urge that the Great Mother and Her God of the Green, the Horned One, had placed in them to remove all barriers for its expression. Any childer conceived on such nights and legitimised by a binding were regarded as well-favoured. If thay 'oomankin was

free of acknowledged man-home, it was very rarely they would conceive. And the 'oomankin had thays secret ways for encouraging or discouraging the seed that was planted in their wombs. But no thought of faitherhood was in Ly's mind that night.

Many a masked moon-maid had come to lure Ly from the vigil of the acolytes trance-dance. But he would not be led away and ignored the body language of the masked moon-maidens. He ignored all the presences around him and only feasted his eyes on the moon-dance of the acolytes, watching she with the fiery hair, thay faire-beguildy who had caught his heart-beat in his chest of a sudden-like and dazzled his sight for long into the evening.

He had sat buzzing from the winter-wine and the temple-cakes facing the area where the acolytes were. She, his fox-coloured moon-maiden, with the form as lithsome as thay otter, as graceful as thay long-legged doe; she, absorbed the whole of his attention. She swayed and hum-chanted with the other moon-maidens. Closing her eyes to begin with she had not noticed his attentions. Then at an instant her eyes had caught his regarding her. She saw how he waved the masked moon-maiden from him so that he could watch her, bask in the sight of her!

Her eyes flashed at him as the trance-dance continued, as the moon-dance stirred their motions. Her movements were luxurious, beautifrew-sensuous, oozing the gift of her sexuality, as she breathed, as she moved, so natural, so silthful, more beautifrew-rare than any beguildy he'd set eyes on afore. She blushed at his continued focus of attention; her cheeks like rose-bloom at its soft-velvet zenith. The longer he watched her, the more her eyes were drawn back to his, the more their spirits connected, and the more her dance was exaggerated, heightened, performed for the unexpected audience instead of her own dedication to the Silver One. Her dance became ever more provocative, ever more yearning in its teasing, as if a desire for him infected her also and she danced the real, rather than the ritualised, expression of the Goddess power and sex need. Be the end on it Ly's loins were aflame with desire. He wanted thay beguildy-faire, she with the hair like autumn's leaf-fall, he wanted her as he'd never wanted an 'oomankin before.

When another masked moon-maiden came returned to try herself with Ly, he acceded and went with her. He thrashed his love-lust out for Brith-na-gig on a moon-maid who be morning he would be untethered be. The same could not be said of she, who lived now in'us mind's eye, held in the beat of his heart. Ly did not feel untethered and free from she, as he did of the moon maid that had quenched his most immediate urge. The next day he was struck be the memory of her and took himself off to the valley where he found a piece of apple-wood to carve as a gift for'n thay beautisome Brith who had so quickened his pulse. He felt she'd infected him with a fever he'd never be free of until he had tasted the fruit of her fair form.

Later that day towards the tide of even' he clept eyes on her weaving outside the homestead of her moon-ma, Oinica. She were weaving and plaiting some rush-matting, her hair falling forwards like a sheet of silky flame in itself. He had seen her spy him from a distance and pretend an unawareness by putting her head down in apparent close concentration on her task, which Ly knew for sure was feigned. He smiled to himself his heart giving a little fillip and jump, a strange happiness surging through him. He walked over and stood right beside her until she must of necessity respond to his nearness. She had looked up at him and blushed, but nevertheless, had looked blatantly into his eyes, brazen-like and breathing quickly as if she risked danger be doing so, even though her cheeks be burning afire.

"Eh na Brith-na-gig, in trowe I've naiter seen an acolyte maiden dance saa feisty and saa faire, wraithing a spell as seemed summat more'n thay reverencing of the Silver She who sheds her milky light in the night sky, na? Whey it took Ly's breath and burned him laithel-like full of fever for a stint fer sure! Thee dance was worth a favour of finest flint, a bolt o' best cloth and the rarest gems from a further shore land, whey ya right fer sure! Or my name be nether Ly nor cometimes as Hawk at all! Such silthful talent and extravagant devotion tuthee Goddess deserves some little gift or'n gesture fer sure".

Ly's eyes twinkled at her, teasing her with his words which contained a twist of sarcasm, a barb that both flattered her and revealed the fact that Ly had recognised that wayward streak in which had made her forget the duties which required her concentration on calling magic from the Goddess for sakes of the feasting and company's enjoyment. She had allowed herself to be swept along, excited by the attention of Ly and rather than losing herself in the moon-dance, she had danced to tease, to impress, to draw the blood of he who was known as the Hawk. But Ly his eyes

dancing in suppressed merriment, crouched down beside her and placed on the ground before her the apple-wood carving he had spent much of the day working on.

"Mays it be happen that if Brith do accept this'n gift, if she do take it up in her'n hand to study and show liking of, maybe she should know then the price of that accepting. Fer sure Brith, I'll speak some trowe na? She, who sits all blushing and brazen afore me, has the carver's heart in the hand that she do hold his gift'un, if she's a mind to accept sa poor a gift unravelled fra a day's unreckoning na?"

Ly had squatted beside her placing on the ground before her the carved figurine of a hawk in flight. He looked into her eyes the colour of burnished beech leaves at fall-time shot with an emerald inflection - all autumn's richness of colours, her eyes, her skin, her hair. He had held her eyes with his own, and hers had sparkled their vivacity at him, astounded, delighted, devilment dancing in them intermixed with a high-strung nervousness of uncertainty. Oh how she inflamed him! Until she had turned sudden-shy like at his proximity and the intensity of his attentions, betook him her thanks, dropped her work, took up his gift and fled with it inside the enclosure of her moon-ma's homestead. Fiesty and excited she was, half-fearful too, of what the gift might portend; knowing the man, the reputation he had, the prize of many of her 'oomankin, the desire of her elder moon-sisters.

From thence onwards Ly took it to halt her with word-speak, a play of teasing words that became a tingling frisson for them both. Ly strove to be by her, to see her eyes sparkle and shine at's own, to see the luscious, lovely, curvesome birth na beauty as she was, as oft as he could engineer it. Then he left company homestead, his family and folk, to wandersome of'us trade, far and wide as it'ud always been his seasoning to tarry such-likes. But whiles he was away he held Brith in his mind like a flower, like a flame, and her image teased him and flared in his mind all the times he was by aft in the travelling line.

A summer and the game was begun again. They's took to the teasing and speaking often the one to's t'other'un, when Ly become on by. The tension between them was patent to see, and all 'oomankin watched and waited to see if Ly, the Hawk, the free bird, be tethered in manhome be Brith-na-gig come two seasons hence.

She struck out fer he. He'd never been so bedazzled be'un 'oomankin-faire before this while. He never had been so moved. She was all come seventeen - she be nineteen cycles on when Ly finally decided he mun trappple and betroth she for'us own. Ly finally decided that his heart was held fer'n home when the pull betwixt the travel and what's mun keep him be the homestead, be balanced in the latter's favour; and it were Brith-na-gig that tipped the scales in favour of'us final choice. It was she as finally decided'un, made him put up his skiff and paddle-line, his maintrade wares, fer'n the steady and season's activity tethered be a homestead aft the providesome lark for childer and a swell-bellied young'un moon-ma of'us own.

Comel a constant as opposed to a spasmodic feature of the company. Happy with'us choice yet wistful all the same, Ly dwelt upon all'n these things that floated through'us mind-space. Be-remembered him of the past and betook him to the future-flight, settled him steady in the present at peace, at one with'un's environment, complete in hisself, only waiting for fulfilment of Brith-na-gig. It seemed she was his all 'n all to be that would put the light in the lantern of'us life, that would make'us living harvestshone-whole.

Then his mind ranged to his coming journey, and all that this last jaunt away would mean to him.

" Feelin' that sem old fire in me veins," he thought to himself, viewing the homestead across the hilltops, sheared of trees but surrounded by wooded vales all around.

"Old Man Wem says, it will be the death of me...the return on me bones and flesh to The Mother. I say to he in turn, 'well it do got to come to all, like the coming of Ice-cold, like the drift from summer sun to Winter's rain'n dark, I says to Old Man Wem. Do got to come some time, fech for sure.

'Aye'n,' he says, in return; 'bechance it come nigh in a blinkin' tith if yon get runnin' to meet it though, stead of it comin' to thy in goodly time,' and he mutters darkly to hisself as become his

way. But he do come old and crankle in his ways, though troth he is wiser and weird-like than any of ourn kin and revered be all'n company. Betimes he do gets to worritin some and don't let it get by yon if its clept a darksome in the skies. It be only 'cos he come fond and tithy on me that he speaks so stark.

He's afeard forn the whole on us now, he tells me when we be all on ourn lonesome abidin' distance fra the rest on company. He says our season is come to closin' time. He says winds be blowin changes that'll trample up ourn company, cut kin fra kithin like the brown time fells leaf-flutters fra the tree-talls when the light do shrink and the cloudmass piles the sky. He says cold, cold winds of change becomin for all on us - for the Great Land 'cross the waters too, not just for this blessed island span. And he do mutter darkly to hissenn,'things be worse before they cam better and a kindly light do come. Things be much'n, much'n worse before they cam better and all on us shall drop away, and the temples to The Fire-Star be old and ruinous afore the folk cam this ways agin, he do say. He's nigh on puttin the prang and felch up the whole tone on us, but fer he's wise and he keeps it close to hissenn rather than mither and misery-up ourn company. And he says but little enow by troth. Its just his looks that betimes stir so darkly as if he got the keenin' light in his heart and he says not much to the rest on 'em.

Only me 'cos I stir and go and bide nowhere fer the length of a single season's span. 'Cos I be back and far'n aways agin, fra the Far Waters and The Holy Place to homestead here and up and aways sometimes before the full shift o'the moon. Cos I baint not be here all'times, he prises his husky shell and shares the heart-sore he'd never girt nor open, wi' non rest on company. He was my Pri Moon-ma's stol, so I ky girt closer by him than all the company, though he be one of The Wise Ones, with his cell all to hissenn. Wey! but his heart be sight bigger than his brain, though be all his charts you could thought there'd not be a bigger.

He had his chance at the Holy Place but the nether-fare-well broght him back agin to all'n us here and my Pri Moon-ma and all them'n long anes past. Saa! I'm fond on the crankle Old Wem, forever if he's arter puttin' winds sleer through me. I knows he's all fer all our'n good - and as we work fer one, we wish it fer the all. Wey-ya rite! It all comes down'n to the Great Fire-Star, the Silver-White Moon-ma up'n above and the spirit of Erce Eorphan slumberin' deep downsides liken the Great Mother she be - wey-ya rite! It all comes down'n to that in the end and we mun give oursens up fer bad or fer glee when betimes it do come to bidin' be The Old Ones, thase Rovers as fost walked the sea-bed in seasonal times long gone by to bide be this land, this fair isle, shriftik aways from The Great Lands on a mark all its own.

Wey, its a cannily thought to me, fer the rovin' be in me blood sure as if the fost Old Rovers were me kithin and kin-come. Wey and I be arter stokin' me skiff and paddle-oar down'n the watery-ways. It's the travellin' fire neath me skin as stokes me and keeps me by off on me own'n - with no dangly-fares but the dugs o' the Great Mother to girt me when I'm coldsome and tarnish-like. She's a harsh one but she brings fair up in me the shine, the keenin' light in my heart.

Fer sure though Brith-na-gig is after stealin' that wild'n light away fra me and makin' a fire-light all her own'n there. Wey-ya but she smites me sore to heart when I catches her, fer she's a dangly-fare and a birth of beauty on her. Saa! Maybe when I comes away fra the Holy Place, maybe I's'll tether her to bide be me as my fullsworn Moon-ma and bring flesh to company as the Gold One in the skies do spring corn to swell the fields. Wey-ya rite! prater'nigh I's'll tether her be me as my fullsworn Moon-ma - though she's a feckle n' dancin' fer many I keen it in her as she holds a torch fer'n me.

'An Ly,' she says with that look in her e'en, 'Ly, thy thinks more on the starsight than fer any on yer own'n'.

Fech fer sure! Troth if I do but she be all a tops of'n any pile fer me. Sure if I won't take her birth of beauty and her soil-soothers hands, fer me own fullsworn Moon-ma come the harvest-reap when I'm home be here agin..."

He shifted in his reveries and drew a circle in the soil at his feet with his staff, and then a smaller circle joined to it as a satellite. Then he drew a larger circle round the whole with a squggy line crossing from the outside to the centre.

"Aye Brith-na-gig," he whispered aloud to himself; "come the harvest-reap I'll take yer birth of beauty and bring thy to hearth as me fullsworn Moon-ma, fech fer sure if'n I do! Thensliken we'll

plant as do yer stealth-fine fingers - only the soil to be tilled'll be nont but the bounty of'n yer body!"

He smiled to himself, placed a fingertip to his lips and touched it to his heart, then to the image he had created in the soil at his feet. He got up, erased the symbols with his feet and began to make his way down the hillside, humming himself a strange old folk song, a song older than himself; one he had learned at his Pri Moon-ma's knee before he could walk.

It took him a while through the lower wooded region to get down Corndon and make his way across to Roundton, catching a hare along the way from a trap he had set earlier about. He slung the dead animal across his shoulder with a satisfied air, and strode on through the trees and up the pathwalk that led to the homestead.

Ly was a contradiction of qualities. He could maintain a stillness, a silence that emanated with the wild untamed expanses he was so accustomed to traversing. In this sense he was, and would always be, something of a loner. And yet, he also enjoyed time with the company, the merry-making and reverences that marked the seasonal turn, the movements of the constellations. He had that exuberant and questing spirit which was the defining feature of his racial kindred, a spirit which had enabled them to grasp understandings and map them out in stone, upon wood, through the virtue of their resonant voices.

And thus would they in time take those understandings to all the far-flung reaches of the globe, planting and inspiring great works which would tease the minds of all humanity in the aeons that followed. Ly held this spark within him so his dealings with all the other clan kindreds in respect to travel and trade contained a visionary zeal that the many had found irresistible in the past. He had the gypsy capacity to live for the moment whilst maintaining an animal alertness, a vigilance which had never thus far let him down. He took his meat and his company where he could, in the travel and trading times, forging an easy bond wherever he laid his bedding for the night. In the long distant past, this roving life had been a constant for his ancestors. But the spirits, the invisible ones had made themselves visible and given of their wisdom to the folk as the old legends told. So in the days Ly had been born, the skills of farming and the static homestead had been long established. This kept the many homely and to their boundaries. It had also enabled them to study the vastness of the skies and develop a lore reflective of the profundities they strove to crystallise into thought and form.

But Ly, himself was of a certain caste of men that took it as a holy journey - the trading, the travelling - and he and his caste were the folk who kept the lines of communication going from The Holy Place, to every far corner of the isle and further across the seas. He and his caste gained expert use of the waterways, and by force of necessity they were natural masters of the paddle and the sail. Hence, they not only brought crafts and trade to a vast scope of communities, they also carried news and messages which meant they were generally eagerly received. They also performed the vital function of maintaining links and reinforcing the loose telepathic ties networked all across the land, where one community's cause or turmoil was empathised with by all to one degree or another.

It had begun with The Holy Places - places where the Great Mother gave her vibration, her energies to the soil and to the rock. Thus had sacred areas been established, decreed by the folk guided by the Wise Ones and the Listeners until temples to The Mother and The Fire-star came into being. Where Earth-energies predominated, did these temples grow aligned to significant stars, charting the pathways of the Fire-star - the gold that brought the body of the Earth alive - witnessing the growth and dwindle of the moon whose cool presence stirred magic in the hearts of the kindred.

Ly knew that from the farthest corner in the craggy North to the strange most southern tip, this influence and inspiration bound them all together, despite the diversity of clan-tribes. This was something that had transcended the old ways, elevated and close-combined the kith and kin, creating a numinosity that spread its effect globe-wide in times to come. It was also a zeal which had resided in the bones of Ly's ancestors since before the stars began, when those first Old Rovers came to claim this piece of The Mother's Glory.

Ly felt this in his bones; it was something he knew intuitively for his consciousness was still growing into the awareness of its state in relation to the whole. He was grappling towards something - grappling towards some sort of cosmic comprehension. It was there in his bones, but

to crystallise it in his consciousness was still not a place he had grown to yet. He was a creature akin to his environment in the same way that the wolf thrives in the forests and a cactus in the desert. Only the human predicament was filled with that contradictory chaff which has ever teased it forwards in search of the elusive, all-encompassing knowledge; the knowledge which would provide the key to the meaning of existence: the paradox of self-awareness. And this was what Ly was growing towards when he walked down from that huge hump of a hill, made rugged by the many rocky outcrops placed along its ridge. This was the source from where they took their materials to make the axes they traded as far away as Callanish and Land's End, and indeed further still.

There was a mission air about Ly as he strolled onwards along the wooded valley. He had considered his position and he had worked everything out. He had sold his Rover's soul to the birth of beauty that was Brith-na-gig with her feisty hair and comely body. Where did this feeling come from that made him want to bide by her? Why did it contradict his every stollen manly impulse? Why did it infect him with a desire always to be about her when previously the Paps of the Great Mother had been all-come his yearning. Now, though there had been many a dangly-fair savoured in by-roads, the vale-roads, the secret roads; though there had been many to bed na for a while and so it could go on, yet he had a yearning for this one lassie, this one dangly-fair who touched him at his core. Ly could no more fathom where this grand passion had sprung from, than he could fathom what made the stars flicker and change position in the deep velvet space of the night. She had just seemed to scoop him up so he had developed this need to leave all his ramblin' rovin' days, to leave the vast curves of the Great One for a mini-paradise all his own.

He was a torn man. He could not reconcile either inclination - yet he wanted both. But no, it had to be a stark choice and in his mind upon the hilltop wherein he had shaped all his earth-born, star-born desires, he had made his choice. He had decided to relinquish the wilding part of himself as if it was a fervour of his age, rather than his essence and blood as he knew it was.

Yet this Brith-na-gig she was such a lolly, such a fair dangly, as ever had the Mother of All Beauty birthed. With her dark red hair and her burnished-brown green e'en, her rosy charms and untamed bird-free soul she was likened to the perfumed flower which grew in the middle of the thorny forest, a glittering jewel in the midst of a sharp entanglement of scratches and snaggle-traps; thus was she. And yet, did his spirit set up a resonance with hers that set him all of a tingle, matching the fire of his travelling ways.

So it had gone on until Ly had had to admit to himself he had a yen for this brazon dangly-fair; he had a keening in the heart no matter that he tried to ignore it or put it from him. As Old Man Wem had said, when there's a keening in the heart, there's as wild as ever shall betwixt and between. Ly couldn't help agreeing in sympathy. He had come to a peculiar conscious state of degree - understanding that for some strange feeling, one which came from who knows where, he was giving up his yip and his yen. He was giving up his travellin' wide and long, his taken 'venture where it's stored in the wild-ways, the green-ways, the silver-water-ways.

He was giving up the tarry and tether be tree brether, in golden sight of sun, before the swollen moon's soft glow, the swoosh and tang of the oceans and all across the moors where the starsight showed him the map of the heavens. That map caused by the tread of thay Ancients with winged feet, imprinting messages in the dusky blue for all the kindred to fail or to fathom. The starsight above was all their soul-source and mystery, and it was all this Ly seemed to be saying for never and a nay to. All this he was giving up to bide be Brith-na-gig, she of the fire-falling hair, the may-blossom cheeks, the eyes so vivid and flashing as green as the leaves of the summer oak trees, as coppery-shine brown as the beech-fall leaf, and that comely form which was as lithsome as an otter and as elegant as the deer that grazed midst the woody glades.

For this smiting, keening feeling in him he were to wed the shores of the land and no longer ferry for the margins as hinter wild as wing span of hawk or fleet foot of stag. Now he would bide be the homeland, sticking as he'd been bided to please 'cos as a strange spirit in him wilt to him he would. Though he was here now, all he knew was for his ancestor's roving spirit that he had strong in his veins; he would take himself off to the Holy Place, see the Great Lands once more before he bided be homeways and this Brith-na-gig that he couldna get all of at once for all but that he did.

That choice had brought him to a peculiar state of knowing. It brought him to stand outside his experience and view it from the strange position of audience to the main affair, noticing in reflective way, the little familiar actions, the sight of the Homestead, good kith and kin to bide be

that warmed the vitals in the veins, like the slouch of stonsy ye'd had thrice skin-filled all on an empty belly. That too, love of the kindred and homestead, was in his blood just as was the rovin' vein, and constantly he tripped the two and could never make up his mind between the twain. Only now it seemed he had. He - the Hawk - had descended to barter skiff and trade his sail and paddle for a Moon-ma! Fech fer sure - all of it was not what he'd had in his reckoning!

But it wasn't just that he knew. It was straight and true as an arrow to its target, what Old Man Wem hinted to Ly. For Ly himself had seen the changes when the new shiny stuff from the Great Lands had come over and now a many of companies far and wide would give na to learn the hot-hard metal forged in the ath-fire, magicked into shape, rather than keep to the flint-stone that'd worked them well all til nigh. Ly was discomforted by the changes he saw taking root and enveloping the country. It was another reason for his decision. He had seen his trade lessening. Company he had come by would rather trade a tither of corn or even a best moon-ma beasten for the metal fang. They had begun discovering sources anew near their homesteads, so there had been a gradual decreasing necessity for the flint-axes he brought them. Flint axes that had been made with his instinctive feel and reverence for the substance he worked - his harmony that was a kith and kinship melding with the life of the stone.

To him the stone had spirit, as did the rock-face, and only by biding by the rules of reverence he employed did he achieve his craftsmanship. He spoke to the stone as he worked it in his gutteral ath-na-bin language. But lately, more and more of the folk were turning to this new creation that brought dim-spoke rumours of fight and fear from the Great Lands. He sensed it was a source unstoppable and much as he loved his gypsy-tangle roving ways, loved the flint he worked, he had begun to feel his years, as his reputation had ceased to spark quite the same interest in these new times they were coming to. It would have made him worrisome, but that his travelling soul could never lilt on the side of the dark and the death for long - for in his stalwart pragmatist way, he instinctively recognised to do so would serve no purpose. So he had come to his decision and the lot that life had drawn for him. He felt an impulse more and more to be with the Fire-Star Temple - a yearning for the stone infecting him as of something almost lost.

Yet as this was to be his last long travel he could not help giving himself up to the secret fire it strolled in him, the pleasant fizz of excitement in his veins with a last return to the wild old ways. He hugged the decision he had made to himself and looked for Brith-na-gig as he came into the boundary walk. The stretch of corn on either side, though not expansive, gave the impression of being so, because it was so tall, growing to the height of Ly's shoulder and shading the path from the lowered sun.

There was a rustling in the corn on his righthand side. Immediately Ly froze and turned in readiness either to spear a beast or to fend off an unknown assailant, though such a thing would be unlikely. He acted instinctively, from long habit, like a viper-come hawk, ready to trap or dispatch what lay in his path. But he relaxed when Brith-na-gig came through the corn, her hair on fire from the setting sun, taking Ly's breath away for a split second with the beauty of her.

"Did Ly think I become as assassin to smote him down a peg or two - na if Brith could fer sure she would!" The girl's husky voice intoned to him. Her voice of autumn mellow, so full and rich, like her scent, like her body, fullsome and rich.

"Fech fer sure Brith would if she'd hachna hand to - be rights!" joked Ly, accustomed to keeping his feelings inside himself, effecting ease in his ever-worldly way.

"But Ly here reckons on fettlin' a bit more yonder and ferrying out to rove whenever the mood does clept him. Not be tethered like a tottie be a bank with no wind to take him lee-side nor sound-side. Is that how Brith'd have it? Aye, fech fer sure, I bet!" Came back his jaunty cry, that brought the accustomed banter between them.

Ever since her blood had come she was as lush as a golden plum and all the menfolk's prongs had hied for a diddle, and pledged to barter when the tuppin' time came. She'd a merry in the heather lark fer now and agin but she hadna settled on either one nor all and Ly knew she was waiting fer him to come round to her. Hence the banter that had begun when she'd bloomed like the wild flowers up the folly, swellin' out in paps and rump-round, fer all the menfolk sent a grindled and a raunchy on sight of the brazer lassie. She'd tried this tack and that tack but met her match with Ly and though she were stunning lovely, that sent n' all bewilderin', and though she was more birth of beauty than any beguildy he'd seen or heard tell, Ly was a man who kept his wits. But fer his wild

n' roving trade she'd never have come by to him. But fer his coaxing her to the line as he did to the fishy in the brack and many a beguilty before Brith-na-gig, but fer the silent aura that gave him a singular status amongst the company, she'd have taken an ath-ra to bine and turned moon-ma fer another this longest while. But Ly with animal confidence, knew she would wait fer him - in which besides he loved a wild cat 'ooman and he didna dither with soft dangly-fare until he'd brought her all feisty to boil.

"Ly should bide be the now, fer Brith-na-gig be gettin' weld and wankle waiting fer Ly to turn homestead bound," she looked at him from beneath her lash-dusky lids. "Ursen Horn brether be makin' me matey and urgin' to feather me a nap. Maybe Brith be tired and tenty of waitin' on Ly's time. Maybe Brith'll be a moon-ma fer Ursen be the time Ly's returned fra the Great Lands, maybe this'n time Ly'll have tarried once too long".

But Ly was too certain of himself to be disconcerted by the import of her words. He knew it was a ruse to make him decide either one way or the other, so he replied: "Brith knows that Ly be her ath-ra man-home and will bine beguilty when he's ready an' all".

But rather than passify Brith, this comment of Ly's only served to provoke her further.

"Mebe, be the time Ly's ready to bine, Brith-na-gig shall be twicfold moon-ma and taken to another fer man-home, before Ly's back or afore he's blinked again. Mebe Brith-na-gig man-home is no fettle fer Ly in his rovin' fine," she said accusingly.

Ly fer devilment sought to needle her further with an implied flaunting of the tribal taboo which was the bedrock and glue of the whole company.

"Mebe Brith will merry in the heather lark fer Ly to take her to moon-ma without a bine!"

But he discovered he'd nettled her too much and she flew at him, like a tigress spitting fire, her hair, a banner of ruddy flame. Her lithe comely body was bent on scratching or biting or kicking the man called 'The Hawk' who toyed with her feelings in this way. Although there was much unrestricted carnal activity, the beliefs of the culture were such, that 'ooman would only conceive, if she bine be a partner and proffered be the Fire-star temples, which was practical and protective at the same time. It salved any wrangling and kept the company gentlemel. For a 'ooman to conceive without a bine was deadly bad favour and was not rent be any kith and kin come far nor wide. Hence Brith's reaction.

But Ly was not called 'The Hawk' fer nothing, and with lightning responses in a moment had dispossessed her of her strength and dignity as she stood pinioned against him, glaring up at him, contained but not subdued, by the wild light of anger in her eyes. But Ly bent his lips to her and though she strove to turn hers away from him he found them and married their mouths and tongues atwain. Until she bit him, so sparked himself, he tossed her in the corn and let his hands all over her dangly-fare, pinning her arms still and lying across her so she could only be resistless. And when his mouth was on her paps and her belly and tucked for the fathom that sent all menfolk rangy, and her body was something soft and pliant, the sap in her veins rising, like the need of spring to bud and then bring fruit. And the bucking and tenseness were all melted away so he knew she wanted him to come-fill her, he let her go.

He watched her assemble her frayed emotions, grinning, but in that momentary adjustment she tried to kick him again before running away all in a huff. It was this fire-formed spirit in her that he loved as much as the beauty that was so renowned. As she turned he was too quick fer her and corrodled her as she tried to run. He cleft his hands on her round haunches trying them fer size, his lean hard arms encircling her waist and keeping her close-by him, rubbing her V with rough art.

"And how'd it be Brith-na-gig if I took you to moon-ma, now, this night, fer only the birds and the Listeners to see? How'd it be Brith-na-gig if I took you to moon-ma now and again in the harvest time on my return fra rest of kith'n company? Would that fettle your like pleasing?"

She softened to him some, but still struggled against him, knowing in her 'ooman's way that such struggle strangely pleased him, until in a sudden urge of passion Ly quieted her. His feelings had suddenly got the better of him, what he felt fer her, the fact that he was going on the rovin' trade one more time, the momentousness of the decision he'd made, reduced his usual reserve. His lips

met hers most hungrily with a hitherto unknown, though long-suspected passion, that took Brith-na-gig's ready breath of inspiration away. She was melting immediately and taxing to his purpose, undulating beneath him with a fiery tingling sensation, neither she nor he could resist. Until now he had only teased her with his passion. Now with his heart on wing, her body felt like the treasure store of Earth, to be plundered, savoured, worshipped all at once.

"Brith, Brith," breathed Ly; "Brith be Ly's moon-ma now, this night, and Brith be Ly's moon-ma come harvest time, her man-home come full tethered then, if such be her choosing," he murmured into her hair, drowning his face in that richness.

She shifted beneath him and indicated with her body and lips, with her shining eyes, how she felt about that. She too had held her bounty from him but now with those words, that promise from his lips, the barriers were all but broken away. She'd never known Ly like this before and she was swept away by the strange electric feeling that roused her and infilled her - as it did him. They snook further into the corn and there, in the evening light amidst the Earth's aroma, the scent of the corn, the fragrance of wild flowers that drifted from the edges of the field, there they expressed this new feeling for each other in animal abandon. When it was over they lay for a while stunned and warm and indolent with the knowledge of their new-expressed feeling and the bond that had only just been confirmed a certainty.

After a while of lying together so, Ly shifted. "Na Brith, let's the baith on us go ways to the Fire-star temple to make offering to thaim Gods as do bless us."

"Brith be Ly's moon-ma and she do follow'n wheresoever Ly abide, now he done tethered as bine," she smiled up at him, the keening light shining in her eyes.

They went then, the two of them, back down the hill, through the wooded valley beneath until they walked an avenue of stones towards the temple that was their destination. Soon they came to a circle of 17 tall rough-hewn stones. At the entrance, two Listeners sat weaving mats, keeping the great stones company and their flint markers ready to etch a symbol for the sun's passage on the wooden board before them. The temple was a sacred place but all of the company could go and stay by there, when they so chose. The two old women nodded their heads in greeting but did not speak, as words within the vaunted arena were counted unnecessary.

They watched though, as Ly and Brith, hand in hand threaded through the stones, as if the action of weaving thus, would prove the binding power that would keep their union strong and fruitful. Three times they circuited the stones in this manner before stopping at the largest of the stones, behind which the mass of Corndon rose up. They faced each other with both hands linked, while the megalith stood tall between them.

"Moon-ma mine, man-home become," Ly intoned.

"Man-home mine, moon-ma become," Brith replied.

"In troth, thrice bine, fra now til harvest and all'n season cycles done, we come, we come, and look to the Fire-star fer our'n favour. Bring the blessing we'm now begun," whispered Ly.

"Aye, bring the blessing we'm now begun," echoed Brith.

Then, leaning around the stone they kissed each other, first on one side of the stone, then on the other and then back again for one more time. Ly cut off the front paw of the hare he carried, whilst Brith tied a piece of corn around the bloody tip and wove some flowers she had picked along the way up the stem of the corn. They placed their offering on a specially cut shelf in the stone and gazed upon it, with a silent prayer in their hearts.

They walked back to the entrance then, where the two old women crinkled their faces in smiles and one of them, she known as Runya, spoke at last: "Be feastin' be company afore the white one shows her face eh Ly? Eh Brith? Crackin' the honey-ale early like it seems, na?"

"Fech fer sure! maissn' Runya, but full blessing time be harvest on Ly's return. Fer now, we bine be the Fire-star's favour, just the baith on us with maissn' Runya and maissn' Deesel as witness to see"

"Aye 'n may's the bright ones bless the baith on yer afore the harvest feast's begun!" twinkled the old Listener known as Deesel.

"As bounty's given so shalt it reboun, fra the heart to thinen baith," beamed Brith in her turn.

"Mellily now, always til feastin' time this night - the keenin' light be too bright to bear fer such old'n crankle likes as we'm. Always, always 'n leave we'm to the dusk of the Fiery One's dimming, na!" Cautioned the bent old Runya, while Ly and Brith, thus sent upon their way, smiled some more and waved a hand as they retraced their steps through the avenue of stones.

They walked through the wooded valley and up the steepening incline towards the homestead. They talked but little as they walked and yet their closeness was apparent by their proximity. They parted with a clinging kiss just before Brith left to help with preparations for the feasting that night. They promised to meet again later, before Ly rested for his early start away the next day.

Ly walked around the perimeter of the central homestead. Inside the wooden stockade were a series of round wooden huts which made up the dwellings. There was a central fire in the arena at the centre, and some goats and rangy fowls clucking around. Close by this fire was the main hall where all the company gathered come feasting time. This was a large wooden building insulated by the accustomed wattle and daub method. A variety of activities were under way. Some young 'uns were squatting near naked by the fire playing with some sticks in the dust. An old woman sat and turned a young boar on a spit above the main fire. The boar had been caught the previous day just for this evening's feast. Men and women crouched or sat on blocks of wood, embarked upon various activities. There was weaving and spinning and sewing of leather using needles made out of bone, under way. Some of the men sat carving wood or stripping and sharpening pieces of bone and flint for practical uses. Various foods were being prepared and cooked round smaller domestic fires. The women wore simple cloth shifts tied at the waist by a belt.

Because it was warm, they wore little else, their capable fingers working their wares; pounding grain, peeling root crop, stripping herbs and flaking them into earthen ware bowls. Some kneaded a dough mixture to be baked in the clay ovens devised for just such a purpose, while others mulched a vegetable starchy mixture and shaped them into small round pieces to be cooked on a griddle above the fire. Some of the men prepared an arena for the feast that would come later; to wish Ly and the other traveller-traders well, to bring fortune to them along their way.

The feast was in their honour and there would be many a skinful of the dark strong beer they made to fire their blood for the dance and the drums. On occasions they would imbibe their choicest bitter-bite - a filtered mesh of a special plant that took them into trance and produced a shamanic effect, which Ly had first been introduced to on his initiation. In this way they sought to link with the animal spirits, whose material forms provided them with a sustenance and bounty they could not do without. During these shamanic journeys, they sought directions for their hunting, sought for new wisdoms and understandings to expand their experience of living.

They took their signs from the visions of their dreamscape and thus became travellers of the astral. Uninhibited by any limiting mind-sets, they discovered things naturally and experimented with an all-embracing interest. The bitter-bite had long been part of their culture - it gave them wings to far off places they might otherwise never have perceived or been aware of - though their resourceful and inquisitive spirits made them quest from shore to shore, learning through the Trade Main, of other lore, other customs and ideas, alongside the celestial intuitions.

Ly circled round the outer perimeter. He kept away from the main thoroughfare, moving towards a small hut set away from the other homesteads as something of an off-shoot. The entrance was concealed by a hanging of heavy cloth. Ly pushed it aside and went in. Old man Wem was at a sturdy wooden work table where he was in the process of etching symbols on a tablet of wood. It was time of full moon and as was his custom, he recorded it on such tablets along with other signs and symptoms of significance as he saw it. He was a tall lean grey haired man; his hair and beard were long and flowing and added to his air of other-wordliness. He wore a long deep-red gown over the top of a shift, and hung around his neck on a leather thong was the tooth of a bear. The tooth was etched with a black spiral.

Old man Wem looked up from his activities and grunted a response to Ly's presence, indicating he sit on the stool that was stored beneath the table. Ly pulled out the stool and sat down.

"An' how be it with the traveller then? The Hawk is to make his sojourn whatever'um in the stars to say nay - is that it?"

"Wey ya right, Old man Wem knows. Ly's strikin' out fer the Great Lands and The Holy Place one more time," Ly responded resolutely.

"One more time?" Old Man Wem looked at him keenly. "Ly's decided then," Old Man Wem said in his deep sotto voice.

That was why Ly appreciated his company so much - his very quietness taught him worlds and he would always come away thinking more clearly, feeling enriched somehow after being by Old Man Wem.

Last time, Old Man Wem had said he had seen darkness shrouding Ly's choice to remain a trader and traveller. He had urged him to take note of it. But Ly had the Old Rover blood in his veins and his spirit had risen up in him at the thought of being permanently tethered to one region - even though his company was here and he always came back anyway.

Ly had stalked out and since that night, had kept away. But he had pondered the words and ways of Old Wem, and now with the continuing allure of Brith-na-gig, he had reconciled himself to go one more time, and then to stay. This was the first Old Man Wem had heard of his decision. Typically in his way he took it quietly.

"So Ly mun go one more time afore his rovin' days be over? Ly mun needs frith the travellin' trade once more - be that it?" asked the old man.

"Wey ya right fer sure. Old Man Wem knows as much as Ly. Ly's abirthed with Old Rover in his blood and if Ly's to be tethered and taken to man-home, then Ly mun walk the wild way one more time afore he settles his nest fer steady," came Ly's explanation.

Old Man Wem sighed and put his hand over Ly's which were clasped together before him. "May it go'm well with thee Ly. May it all come fruitful as kine do thee deserve"

Ly was surprised by this unwarranted show of affection from a man who kept himself so much in reserve yet gave all the same, and somehow provided a tonic, a focus for thought. In response, he himself was moved to sit in silence. Old Man Wem's keen eyes picked up on a strand of gleaming red hair stuck to Ly's shoulder, where Brith's head had but recently rested.

"Ly's made'm choice in one ways or another then - be Brith-na-gig come moon-ma bide be harvest time fer sure?" Old Wem questioned, his sharp eyes probing Ly's own.

Even Ly - The Hawk - was astonished by Old Man Wem's perspicacity. How could he hit the haft so smartly and so adroitly on the head? Though Ly knew Old Man Wem had watched and noted his social connection with Brith and the sparky teasing between them, there had been little enough said about her between them. So now Ly was stunned that Old Wem had forseen the intimate timing of events before Ly had even spoken of it.

"Old Man Wem's as keenin'm sight as the Fire-star hisself - Ly should say. Fech fer sure an' all!" Ly said jocosely in his astonishment.

Old Man Wem smiled. "She's a plum-bloom beguilty as ever was fair - in Ly'speak - fech fer sure, Old Man Wem says so!"

Ly threw back his head and laughed. As he did so a momentary expression of dark foreboding filled Old Man Wem's face as he looked at Ly, though he immediately reflected Ly's mood when their eyes met again, so Ly had no hint of the clouds that had arisen in this enigmatic old man.

"Old Man Wem hopes all comes to boon and shine fer Ly - Ly knows. Company'll bide be harvest time and await Ly's recall - 'll be merry welcome fer The Hawk then as ath-ra to Brith-na-gig, moon-ma with the majesty of The Mother Herself"

"A bounty on the heart fer all the well-wishing but Brith and Ly be fostin' bine this day afore the Fire-star'd fell'd - though at harvest-fall we'm call fer whole company's blessing fech fer sure!" Revealed Ly for the benefit of Old Man Wem.

"Ist' even so? Ly be as swift as flint-sharp to its mark when his mind is set to target! Na? Weel, Old Wem hopes as the Gold One gives full fruit come by harvest-fall 'special fer Ly's return eh?" Responded Old Man Wem.

Ly looked into Old Man Wem's wise brown eyes and felt his eyes own to water with emotion. He held out his arm for Old Man Wem, who responded to the gesture, clasping Ly's forearm as Ly clasped his, pulling each other close in a brief hug and gesture of affection.

"Ly'll bring plenty of gleesome'n rare, plenty of booty fer'n all the company to 'aaah' at, come corn-cutting time. Something special fer the Wise One, na? Old Man Wem shall see," stated Ly with conviction.

"Ly mun just needs take care'n hisself and bide on his wife and his wit to tarry him home come harvest moon," said Old Man Wem soberly.

"Fech fer sure. The Hawk is ever on the poise. Ly watches his carcass as constant as the shine on the Gold One, Old Man Wem knows," Ly responded with instinctive arrogance.

"Goodly and gange-tines as ever Ly, surely do this old heart hope so. Just wishing thee weel and wholesun, Lyone, thee as is commonly clept The Hawk. Weel and wholesun and home-come in hervest fer feasting such as The Hawk has never known. Company'll be givin' favour to that, Ly'll see!"

Thus saying, Old Man Wem provoked a cheerful mood which equated with Ly's own elevated high spirits. His heart was revelling in the memory of Brith-na-gig and his soul was stirring with the notion of the waterways travel, the trekking across the wilderness expanses. Old Man Wem rose to the occasion and did not seek to dampen Ly's mood.

"Fech fer sure - come corn-cutting time Ly'll be ready to bide be tether as ath-ra'm riches as fullsome as The Great One Herself. What'll Ly care then fer the wild-ways? But Ly's a mind to take one last look at the Holy Place afore he settles his skiff on the shore and traces the path home-bound ever more," said Ly, making clear his motives in a moment of transparency.

Old Man Wem's eyes glinted the warmth of humour back at him. He strode to some shelving at the back of the room, produced a flagon of harsh spirits, a beverage that stung the back of the throat and warmed the belly and given the name of ath-flux. Old Man Wem produced two beakers and filled them half full of the ath-flux. They both knocked a draft back in a practised rapport of ritual. Then they got talking about the words on the water-ways, the rumours of blood-shed, the considerations of the community.

But the sun had set and dusk had come, and Ly had a few things to prepare before the feasting began. So he left Old Man Wem after a long searching look and a warm grasp of the arm.

Ly walked away from Old Man Wem's boundary and towards where he and his companions had a shelter left for such travellers as they. Ly had long since left his moon-ma's domain, and though he had not bined nor been ath-ra until that very evening, he had a stead of his own because of his roving tithe. He shared this stead with the other menfolk who were also part of the Trade Main.

When he entered the hut, Frenra was plucking some strings on a round drum that kirt it an om. He was plucking and singing an old story in lilting rasping melody, so that Ly felt compelled to strike up the chord too. This was his companion - a quick dark man with lightning thoughts and tongue, who joked all the while yet who kept his quiet and could bide his time like a rar'un stoll. There was Ly, Frenra and Brinen who kept by there. Frenra and Brinen were his travelling companions on the roving while. The one, quick and dark and ready to wit with the fingering minstrel all the while. The other was large and silent and listening to all. Staying silent much of time, but adept with his hands and profound when he spoke his steady thoughts. His hair was light and his eyes were more green than brown which set him off the ordinary strain straight away. He was placid, but with a steady dark energy that only needed rousing before it took root and flamed to a life all its own.

Unassailable, when he chose to be. He was larger than most folk, a giant of a man and by virtue of this was rarely challenged, but kept quiet like all his travels.

Brinen lay on his bed rattling stones in his fist and casting them down every so often to read their import, note the pattern of their fall. Frenra was plucking the strings of the drum, dark, small and mercurial, moving his hands and making a melody that made Ly want to move his feet, tap about, sway his rhythm for the last far-flung rite. Brinen nodded to Ly whilst Frenra smiled and continued his refrain. Ly grunted and set to checking the wares that he would take with him to trade and barter with. Then he too lay down on his own sleeping place, a mattress made of heather and hay, covered with animal skins and a length of fine-spun cloth, to listen to Frenra's tune and hum along to it, his thoughts dwelling on Brith-na-gig and the coming journey.

Pretty soon there was a whole hum beginning in the company. In the central hall, boards of wood rested on blocks had been brought out. On this tressel were brought all manner of vittles in readiness. The childer were chivvied midst the home-space and the adults and near adults came out to gather round the fire, set the feast and assemble the company. Elegantly crafted clay beakers in unique design were placed upon the tressel alongside flagons of beer and skins of more such brew. There were bowls of meat and platters of fresh-baked bread. There were griddle-scones and bowls of fresh greens, nuts and root-crop as well as the central boar that had been roasted on the spit for most of the day. Hanks of this were hewn to be spread amongst those gathered. All set to in the feasting, picking up the meat with their fingers, tearing the bread to sop up the juices, quaffing the brew and growing riotous all the while.

Ly found himself sat, of a sudden, be Brith-na-gig and the evening flamed into beauty beside him as it seemed all he ever wanted and all he had ever gained was contained in that moment. He, the Hawk, on his last journey hither to the mystery of the Holy Place and the Great Lands. One of the last old travellers - part of a fading line. Even then he knew it. But beside him was Brith-na-gig, with her flaming locks, her dangly-fare, so scrumptious and rich and ripe - her curving lels and soft smooth dander. The evening seemed to phosphoresce - just he and her with her laughing smile, her tempting brown-green eyes. Never a one like she thought Ly. The Holy Mother comes in every shape and size, his realism told him, but Brith-na-gig is Goddess manifold, by her beauty she is some sort treasure and the one who has, receives the sublime. Such is how Ly felt beside Brith. She had become his mini-paradise to take the place of the larger scale wilderness he travelled and felt akin to.

When the company was taken over with word-bandies and laughter, Brith and Ly conspired to slip away, for their blood was fevered and stirring and must needs have expression. They found a nook away from the noise and there coupled their souls and bodies again, as if confirming the bond that Ly had made known to Brith that day.

The river snaked before them glistening and iridescent in the early morning light. The skiff swept steadily along, flowing with the current and travelling south. For a few hours the three men, Ly, Brinen and Frenra, travelled thus, pacing themselves and continuing with an unspoken understanding before a ready made clearing on the bank evidenced a roughly made infrequently used stopping place. With a nod Ly indicated they head towards it. Near the bank they jumped out of the boat and pulled it up onto the inlet, part way out of the water. Ly fetched a cloth bag from his boat and a container of water. They sat awhile partaking of the seasoned meat and bread and swigging from the flagon in turn. Because it was late spring and unusually warm that day, there was no need for a fire; it was simply the welcome respite from moving the paddles and guiding the boats they needed.

After a short rest they set off again, continuing along their route flanked by the swell of the verdant wilderness on each side, passing from time to time the known trading posts and riverside dwellings long known to them. They did not stop though, being intent on reaching The Holy Place before dusk. A nod or a raised hand acknowledged the greetings called out to them, or confirmed the friendly disinterest of those who watched them by. Mainly, it was the burgeoning green that avened their passage along the wide river's way. Blossom dripped from encroaching trees, the white of cow parsley and hemlock bunched from time to time upon the bank; yellow celandine sprang up, wild violets and dog roses where a web of bracken had gained a foothold. The Earth was sprung to life, bursting into the zenith of its first seasonal fullness all around them. The air was rich with its fecund aroma. Travelling along in accustomed silence Ly looked about him and appreciated the aesthetic quality of the sunlight which ravished the greenery, and highlighted the poetry of the floral displays.

And every flower was she he had left behind warming a place in his heart, and every dripping frond and blossom froth was a reminder that he would not come this way again, in such a season, at such a time. Every diverse shoal they passed, each familiar trading bank reminded him that this was the last time he would spend him in this pursuit. And it was as if because of the impending changes to his circumstances, everything had been brought fully alive, sprung into relief by his own intensity of experience.

The sun had gradually lowered in the sky having reached its zenith earlier in the day. The sounds of the forest changed to a lazy hum, the quietude of a somnolent afternoon. Presently they rounded a bend in the river and in the distance they could see an inlet, and some yards from the bank, a tall wooden watchtower. As they approached closer a broad avenue was discernable, leading off across the terrain which had transformed to grasslands, and in the distance, to sectioned stretches of corn and wheat. A number of skiffs and larger vessels were harboured in the small but effective inlet close by the watch tower. As they drew their boat up beside the tower, some fishermen along the bank raised their hands to the newcomers and the watchman of the tower came down to greet Ly and the other two men.

"Swailth! How goes it rover-stoll folk? Be the Hawk, na? And Brinen the bearkith eh? And a new companion I'll be bound, least so's fer'n my poor eyes being bound fer'n a goodly while. Greetings to all'un!"

"Na Kyrren, greetings returned. This here be Frenra, whose song-charms be famed fer'n far and wide and whose fingers do struddle up a tune on the pipe or stringed drum that sure does ketch the keening light from even the heart of rock!" Joked Ly, grasping the hand of Kyrren to return the friendliness apparent. Kyrren was a squat dark-haired barrel-chested man whose duty it was to monitor the comings and goings at this well-known harbour, and relay information to the main homestead way off and further inland. Brinen followed Ly's gesture whilst Frenra, pleased and laughing at Ly's introduction of himself, nodded his head in friendly manner and let Ly make the usual arrangements as regards the mooring of their boat. This being quickly done, the three travellers took their leave of Kyrren and walked up the well worn trackway that took them inland and towards the boundary of The Holy Place. They took the scantest of provisions with them and the goods that they hoped to trade either here or across the Big Waters, and which were too precious to leave unattended in their moored vessel.

They walked the well-known route in silence, even Frenra, who was the most locquacious of the three of them was come mute and thoughtful in the approach to the special place. After a short while of walking, the famed avenue could be discerned in the distance.

Ly felt the old familiar tingling at the sight of the avenue. He always felt a sense of stillness and power reaking from the landscape when he approached The Holy Place - the temple that was a source of awe and inspiration to all peoples of this Land; an influence that spread further into the Great Lands, where their own uniqueness was respected and revered despite the ebb and flow of the warring factions. Such fighting had not been the case in Ly's country-land, on any kind of scale for a long time. There were occasional battles and clashes, as their own battle of the Leasowe stretch was testament to, but ever since the time of Vision, peace and co-operation had been the guiding principle in their dealings with each other.

The Grand Endeavour, the Great Works had brought their fore-fathers and fore-mothers together in one numinous sweeping fervour, dictating their actions thus for centuries to follow. Their legends, their oral history told them of a time of light when inspiration had been given by agents of the Earth Goddess, by messengers from the stars. The knowing of the motions of the radiant ones, of the phases of the moon and the passage of the sun had come to them, and the gathering times had been begun amidst circles crafted from tree brether. But in time the gift of stonework had come more pronounced and they honoured their dead with massy monuments to house their spirits that would still watch over them, though their flesh had come to empty shells. Having perfected their temple-charts of reverence in wood, the immutability of stone drew them into the zealous activity which had erected such elegant, grand and impressive sculptured temples all across the island. The Holy Place was the apogee, the crowning principle of all that elan which had provoked the raising of these temples of stone, demonstrating their consumate skill-mastery of that substance.

Now it was true, for the most part, they lived relatively peacefully, bartering and exchanging, integrating with and learning from each other, sharing their discoveries and their allegiances. They

recognised themselves as part of the cosmos from which they had been spawned, and they observed the changes of the seasons and the stars, reading signs and forming frameworks for their understanding. The Earth was the Mother of them all, and she was scattered with guardians and spirits that tended her flame and brought it thither. The Sun was their God; their source of light and life. The stars were their magical scripts, enigmas of brilliance that stretched their senses and brought them in tune with their surrounds - enhanced a harmony of understanding that tied them together with their missions and their aspirations.

Thus before Ly's time, the whole of the communities in the surrounding area had been brought together to accomplish these feats of gravity and grandeur. The very excess of the effort required, the long years of digging and preparing the area was evident in the monumental achievement of the raised immense stones. The stories had come down to Ly: the gathering of the first huge stones, the magnitude of labour, the focus of magickal energy required to achieve the renowned feats of precision. Thus had all the stones been erected, impacted and strengthened, aligned as intended. The whole of the company, island over, swelled in their hearts towards their achievement.

And so had it been from generation to generation, the stone-workers guiding their action, the Wise Ones plotting their course. The graves of their ancestors bones were monuments all around the huge temple, signifying as procreators of what had been assembled. The white chalk tops of the graves glistened in the sunlight, striking the eye with brilliance when the sun was at its height, a radiating reminder in the long afternoon, a muted gleaming presence in the softness of the moon. The whole of the company knew that the spirits of their ancestors slept in the Earth and nourished their endeavours still.

Or at least they had known up until now. Now it seemed gradually, incontrovertibly, that their influence was waning and something new, exciting and dangerous was coming to light. There was some distinction of pride taking root where the new unearthed metal, baubles of the rare gold and amber, were all the company seemed to desire. Ly had sensed this new, rapacious-like fervour stealthily growing amongst the company. Nothing obvious or extreme but there nevertheless. Ly had sensed these changes last time he came about, only this time they seemed almost tangible. Some nuance in the air infected him, some air of discontent, mingled with a sombreness that betokened a death. Ly felt troubled, but squashed the feeling down as they came now close up to the object of their destination.

But as they approached the huge pillars of the temple, the huge sarsen blocks the old ones had erected generations before, Ly felt a sense of peace and awe overcome him. The stones dwarfed them and the arena they created, an ellipse with an inner round of blue stones which Ly knew the history of even though they had been erected long before he was born. Each huge lintel crossed over, skilfully joined with a carpenter's join translated into stone, to the great sarsen standing block opposite. The fixity of it was awesome. The greatness it represented elevated his soul and sent his spirit to give thanks to those white chalk topped tombs mellowed by the sinking sun. Silently, like his companions beside him, Ly dwelt upon the old ones who had wrought this expert of beauty, this timeless eternal presence - a statement of endurance elegant in its grandness of scale and its sparsity.

There were few other folk about, but within the arena of the Holy Place there was always an unchallenged silence, unless at ceremonial times. Through the silence the wisdom and fervour was more keenly felt. The stars were their acquaintance, their source for meditation, along with the deepening sky, the limitless expanse above them. It had carved their souls, that sky. It had worked its magic and mystery upon them and still they wooed and studied it - their spiritual growth teased and inspired by the navy-blue infinity.

The sight of The Holy Place never ceased to cast its spell upon Ly, or indeed upon any who came into proximity with it. The sun had all but disappeared from view but the last strands of it glanced off and illumined the white chalk-topped mounds at the peak of the downs rising away from The Holy Place. They glistened with a magickal light and shone white in the lowering strands, setting up a field of protection and kinship with the massive temple at the centre location below them.

There were two guardians at the entrance to The Holy Place. Initially they had been sitting cross-legged but now they arose to stand, both holding the bronze tipped spears that had come to earn a place in ritual. They both wore simple shifts with a leather waistcoat garment over the top. They were both sun-tanned and brown haired. The one being slightly broader, the face rounder than the

other, who had a more lean and chiselled face. As the three men approached, the two guardians regarded them gravely without any sign of suspicion or tension. Visitors were plentiful to this incredible erection, and welcome, for the stilled reverence of the place was undisturbed by strangers, who were allowed to sit and study, to meditate and gain from the potency of the place.

As the holy company who tended the temple knew, there was no one who could take away or destroy what had been erected. They believed with each new visitor something of their spirit was left behind, only serving to swell the aura of The Holy Place. With pride they granted access to all, for it was a monument to themselves and their ancestors, a monument to the kith and kinship that had seen it created. A testament to their vision. Proof of their extraordinary wisdom and greatness. Unassailable, standing eternal as the island itself, indeed now a part of it, as inexorably as the cliffs that breached the seas or the hills that climbed to crags and mountains further inland.

As Ly and the others approached the two honorary guards, they bowed and then crossed their spears to the entrance. The broader one intoned the ritual words: "Do you become in faith to grant the silence that be given if'n you wilt enter herein?"

"We become in silence," Ly and his companions responded.

"Enter and receive the mystery come grace that be ourn and ourn ancestors' gift to the Great One, Mother of us all, Father to all ourn seed. Do you become in peace and carry it fra thither when the parting time be nigh."

"Blessings to the Mother and to the Fiery One," the three travellers murmured, bowing and crossing over the threshold to be greeted by the resonance of the stones, their mightiness imposing itself upon them, making them feel insignificant and powerful at one and the same time. There was an outer circle of thirty mighty sarsen blocks, each nearly twenty foot high, capped with lintels that created portals all the way around. These were set around a still more massive horseshoe of five free-standing trilithons. Each stone had been laboriously dressed to shape, and the stones had been joined one to the other by a supremity of stone worker's art. There were smaller blue stones reworked and rearranged until they created what then existed - a free standing circle set between the sarsen ring and the trilithons with a further blue horseshoe setting placed at the centre of the temple. The blue stones seemed to glow warmly in the evening light and the mighty stone blocks glistened with a faint eldritch sheen; wise listening presences that guided their responses, made their spirits stretch to the deep blue dome of the skies. And they meditated on the waning light, its angle as it came down past the midsummer stone.

The three men seperated, each finding his own place within the outer arena to sit and meditate as so many had done before them in this same way. Ly sat cross-legged, amongst the first circle of blue stones. The silence and the vastness infilled him as he stayed with close to the blue stone, soaking up the energies and beginning to transcend himself. He was lulled into the same fixity as the stones; part of them, a feature of the wisdom they exuded, part of the infinity that had seen them born. The light was gradually fading and dusk was beginning to gather. Ly paid no heed to the passage of time - he sat waiting to gain the sight; the inspiration derived from gazing at the Radiant Beings, and reading the messages they flickered back to the earth-bound. The pin-pricks of light came more and more into force as the dusk deepened, and evening began to encroach.

To Ly, the Celestial Ones were lit with special purpose that night; they seemed to token some sort of promise - as of a richness stored up for him, as of a blessing on the decision he had made. And to his mind came Brith-na-gig as he'd seen her at their parting, her full mouth smiling, the dancing brown-green eyes misted with tears, her fiery hair unsettled by the wind. It felt right in his bones their coming together, their bond and where he was now - that felt right too. So Ly felt a sense of swollen peace and contentment he had not felt before to such a degree - like a culmination of all his efforts and desires. He had seen once again, perhaps for the last time, the Holy of Holies, the greatest temple of them all. He had yet to cross the Big Waters to the Great Lands. He would bring back precious stones, spices and other goods for his company. The traveller returned to receive his due, bearing gifts for the many with a moon-ma waiting by the fireside, a moon-ma with auburn-gold hair and a curvesome form more birth of beauty than any fair beguildy both near and far, aye! Such did Ly see in vision unfolding.

But just then the strangled screech of an animal tortured the air, coming from a distance away and dying as it pierced into force, but seeming to echo nevertheless. Ly's thoughts were jarred by the sound, and his eyes lowered and inadvertently fell on the dagger etching on one of the trilithon

stones opposite him. All at once he felt a superstitious dread that as soon passed, as a cloud across the face of the sun, and as a presentience of violence. Why had his eyes dropped from the sky to the etching of the dagger, directly after the ugly scream of some creature in the jaws of death, giving vent to terror and agony? Why had he looked at the dagger - the symbol of violent retribution?

But he strove to shake such thoughts from him, brushing them away as of an irritation and nothing more. Once again he took to star-gazing and let his mind drift in those limitless spaces between the phosphorescing star-systems above him. He sat cradled within the Void for a further stretched while.

Then his senses finally came grounded. Ly's mind was all but cleared of the unsavoury screech and its portents. He was once more elevated by the majesty of the incandescent evening sky and the pillars of the temple. With unspoken agreement they shifted, touching a hand to their forehead, their lips, their chest and to the earth they stood on, in genuflection to the Mother who had formed them all, in recognition to the sky that contained the Mysteries of Beyond.

When they passed the portals of the Holy Place, the honorary guards were once more seated cross-legged. Ly, Brinen and Fenrar bowed their heads and murmured: "Blessings to the Great Ones".

They collected the sacks they had left at the entrance and struck out for the homestead that was near to being a second home to Ly. They walked in an easterly direction passing through grasslands and then through arable farmland - fields of corn and wheat lining the trackway which after a mile or so brought them to a homestead typical of the area. There was a circle enclosure marked and protected by a ditch inside of which were round wooden huts with thatched roofs and wattle and daub walls. There were look-outs posted who shouted to the company inside the protected enclosure, of their approach, and of a sudden, a group of them had gathered at the entrance.

As Ly, Brinen and Frenra approached the opening to the homestead enclosed by a wooden stockade, they halted, flung their right arm across their breast, stooped in a low bow, then standing erect again, opened the arm out in a gesture of acceptance. The group of people opposite them distinguished themselves into individuals, and were calling out a welcome in jocular familiarity. "It's the Hawk, it's the Hawk" went whispering round, the company fizzing with the knowledge, a response that never failed to gratify Ly.

"Hey na, Hawk come wingin' by agin then eh, Ly?" The ratchety voice of a tall gaunt man called out, whose eyes held a latent fire which now shone in rye humour. His beard was grisled with age yet also virile, and his hair was a shag of iron grey around a bald pate bronzed by the summer sun. He wore a long over-garment as a robe, together with a simple shift tied at his waist with a leather thong in the manner of dress familiar to that people.

"Hawk, Brinen, Frenra - healthful greetings to all! Come hither and dinnut dandle on the boundary liken lost an' lonesome!" Joked a middle-aged woman with long brown hair, greyed a little now with experience, and a round smiling face. Ly and his companions stepped towards them and there were greetings all round, Ly grasping the fore-arm of the tall gaunt man and holding briefly the hand of the woman who had spoken, while the company clamoured around and sent hither and thither to make preparations for the visitors.

After the greetings, the tall gaunt man faced them saying: "Come now let's take offer'n to bide by a little afore we gather for the evening's feastin' wi' all the company aroun'."

They followed him through the settlement, nodding and smiling gestures of recognition to those that they knew as they went. They were led through the homestead to a hut slightly larger than the others. As they entered, the tall man gestured for them to sit on a long bench with a sturdy back and arms, covered with weft dyed red, padded beneath with grasses that were changed frequently. It was a little bit of welcome luxury for the three traveller-traders and they sat down appreciatively, looking around them at the place they were not unfamiliar with.

There was rush matting on the earthen floor, a large table and wooden shelving upon which were various carvings and choice pieces of earthen ware. There was a low wooden armchair with a

basketwork base with several other simpler chairs set around the table. The man reached down some clay beakers, intricately patterned and beautifully glazed in cream and red. A flagon of liquor was placed on another small low table and the man called Ogrune, uncorked the container and poured some rich amber liquid into the beakers. Ogrune lifted his beaker after placing the others before the three men, who followed his gesture.

"Hale come harmony be thee blessed wi'" said Ogrune

"Returned be the gifts of the Mother, same as spoken," Ly responded.

"Aye an' besides plentisome goodly companee, a lilt o' dangly-fair 'ooman an' quaff cups filled reet as become," quipped Frenra in his accustomed jocular manner, causing Ogrune to chuckle and Ly to grin, whilst Brinen looked on, smiling a welcome at his host and raising his beaker to show his appreciation.

Frenra was younger than Ly or Brinen and still enjoying the trance of the dance with dangly-fair far and wide. He'ud not settled be any for certain but continued to enjoy, the partaking of pleasures when conquests could be made, when the feasting and ceremonial times compelled it. He was skilful in singing and playing the stringed drum instrument he'ud made himself and which he carried everywhere, strapped to his back. He was Brinen's moon-ma's brother and had joined them when their travelling ways had already been established over some five cycles.

But Frenra gave the added advantage of being a drum craftsman, which many homesteads fra far norther shores to the southern most stretch of their journeying, used and coveted. His ready wit and gallantries charmed the most company and made more eager to trade, now the wares consisted of more than axe-heads and cutters to offer, na though they'd been plentiful sought in the early days of Ly's travelling wiles for sure.

When Brinen and he had first set out with Brunwill the brave, as he'ud been known, they were keen and green and learnt from an old master rover who'ud done nothing but all his life. His frien and fettle had died and been returned to the Mother months before, from ambush bandits in the Great Lands. Brunwill had fought off the assailants with beserker frenzy and carried his companion to their skiff, returning him to the homestead of their birth, only for him to die of fever the day after arrival. Brunwill the brave himself had gone off in the frozen time, looking for the rare'n status-high snow-hare. He'ud fell'd and broke his leg and alone, without help, up on the Long Mynd, and died the death of cold.

But to Ly's mind Brunwill had sought the extinction, ketching the glint of metal on the horizon and giving himself to the old gods before it upset the fabric of his world and understanding. When that time came, Brinen and he were already established roving traders, but it did not prevent the keening light from creeping into their hearts so they silently acknowledged the instinct behind Brunwill's action. It was an empathy between them that each saw reflected in the other's eyes; a conclusion being reached, a sadness and acceptance, mingled with the knowledge that he was with the Mother, the Womb of All Birth again, back to the Seed and the Source. This they felt and knew, stirred to embrace the radiant levels in the stella-spheres of the vastless skies.

From thence on they had travelled alone, until Frenra had joined them and made merry some their while, brought a new zest to the gradual lessening of trade. Frenra had fitted into their patterns surprisingly easily. For despite his love of word swaps and joking he too liked his quiet time and bided so by himself, composing his songs and his rhythms that set all'es companies spinning.

So there the three of them were, seated in comparative luxury in the chamber of Ogrune the South-lander.

"Na Hawk, Brinen, Frenra - tell me o' yourn companay. How be yourn wise 'uns, Old Man Wem, Ethelran High priestess, and yourn close-kin, yourn moon-ma's brether?"

"Ah fair to middlin' fine," came back Ly. "All the same an' homely-like, only young 'uns comin' curious for'n thay bronze an' sendin' prayers to the gods to help 'em find their ownen source. But harvest still be handy and water-ways wide as ever ..."

"An' all the 'ooman dangly-fair to be blisshed-full far and wide, forsooth...or not? Wey ya right eh Ly?" quipped Frenra, with a twinkle in his e'en that hinted at many things - or so it appeared to Ly.

Ly felt there was a subtle innuendo in what Frenra had said which Ogrune had taken at face value, knowing Frenra for what he was. But Ly felt Frenra's sharp eyes had gathered the change in relationship between Brith-na-gig and himself and he felt a slight irritation. It was not something he wanted known. He wanted to be himself. True to his roving kin, to come and to go, as he had always come and gone; free as the wind and as fresh as the coming of the seasons, unentangled, meeting fate as openly as the deer in the forest or the eagle on wing. He did not want others guessing his plans, his momentous decision. That would simply be when the time came. There could be no ceremony of partings. And partly it was because he felt his resolution might fail if all the folk-places he was used to girt his bounty to were nigh after making a big celebration and a fond farewell for him. He did not want that.

So he pierced Frenra stonily with his eye but melted some when it was clear Ogrune was simply laughing at Frenra's usual enthusiastic embrace of the whole of 'oomankind. Ogrune did not suspect any underlying meaning, so Ly relaxed and smiled along with the other two, trusting to Frenra's sense and discretion of friendship.

When they'd quieted some, Ly took the initiative, remembering his former instinct which had sensed a sombre inflection in the air.

"What news from hence then?" asked Ly directly

Ogrune's face became instantly more serious and somewhat saddened.

"Last time Ly become by, we both on us thought on the changes, beginning wrought be the bronze and I remember there excitesome as well as some misgiving. After you become two seasons hence, fresh trade come from after the Great Lands; a whole seal of bounty for the bretheren. Leadman Rushwort from the eastern-steads had troubles with outlanders. They held them off and sent them thither, though in trowe they were'n gang for opportunists and nought to cliver the whole. Leadman Rushwort was injured some and some of the east-steaders were killed in the fray, but also when battle was over and done, the east-steaders clept themselves of treasures found be the Outlanders. Now Rushwort on's deathbed has declared a wish for singular burial! As he and his kithkinship have defended all stalwart and ever steady since folkship began. But he betaken on some great glory all his own, glory that he whist willed be passed down to's sons. He be seperating himself out as top notch, high and mighty ho for'ngetting as his'n ancestors have raised 'um be dint of mutual grist and getherness. And folks hereabouts be muttering bly, it is the end on the beginning - that the Old Ones be turning in their graves and rising up to raze us for our mischief, as to see and let this thing go by, without a word nor action to say 'em nay, and some be saying it be right and fair and follows fair on to the future, and some be taking it in their stride but keeping amsteady all the same. To speak trowe it bides not well with me, with us in general. But the East-stead be in their own patch and what we West-steaders may mutter can go lightly either way. So there'n you have it; make of it as you'n will."

Ogrune looked at the three men, acknowledging their shock and gravely patient in the face of it. Surprising enough it was Brinen's deep gruff voice that spoke first.

"Naither! To put himself away from the Old Ones, from the common kith and kinship of's ancestors? To set out singular with baubles of shiny stuff to brute the vigour? Naither! For why has he done this? Have not the Wise Ones bid talk with him?"

"Not enough. It's not been enough. The whole of the East-stead follow Rushwort leadman - he has kindled up a fondling as keen as the metal he'us craved. There'll not be a gain saying." Ogrune responded grave as ever.

"Whisst! It be strange times becoming then now - in trowe. We'll wait and see but I bide it's not likely," was Brinen's deep, gravelled response along with a grim expression that showed he'ud said his piece and could not add more.

"Laith! What becomes now?" intoned Ly, still shocked by the import of what he'd heard. "This be taken from the Great Lands, na? This be from their'n map and heritage that have come to take a claim off us, na ha? Is that how it goes?"

"The Outlanders boast," said Ogrune darkly, "of their wealth in metal crafts; their skill at the blade, which sends the whole on'us company the same. Seeking the metal to increase the power of the clan-magic, to defend from fear of whelment and all the time becoming what they wouldn't."

"But has Ogrune taken any action? Have you'se na thought on taking token stoll and delegating to Leadman Rushwort, request some sense on word swap? Have you'se na thought fer this to be done and down-stayed?" asked Ly.

"Aye fer sure but folks be jitterun, for the East-steaders a' been building up reet stocks of the metal stuff and bristle with the bronze if there be tally of talking some round. It become like a fever through them and they won't wash for the old ways nor tether their high an' mighty some not even for the sakes of our'n ancestors, which hold a common root, not for the sake of our'n kith and kinsome now rested with the Mother, who's keening light helped build The Holy Place, revered in all lands across the Big Waters.

Whisst Ly! I be saying all on this and more, fech fer sure. But it become to all out war if'n I jostle 'em up too much and to speak trowe we would be company cut downen - thraist aye well an' sure! They been stoking the bronze fra first to much and more, much more'n than we West-steaders, and those've made no bones about bristling it out. New trade has always come first fra the East but the sharing times that wrought the Holy Place be rifting by now it do seem. If Ly can counsel me - counsel me good, for which ever ways I've looked aroun this'n thing there be no clear and cut and dried solving on it, na? So's counsel me now, I be open and willing to take heed," Ogrune finished looking from one to another of his male companions, appealing to Ly with his hands held out palms upwards.

The men were silent. Ly pursed his lips and stared off into the distance.

"It be really so strong as that - this fever on 'em?" he said eventually.

Ogrune put his hand on Ly's shoulder. "Ly, what can we do? The only path is to trade for bronze, otherwise we become as the paltry party, the kiner runt as defenceless as the fledglings in nestin's before the kes's come snatching."

"Na, na, fech fer sure Ogrune. But be it not so as you'se could dint 'em with the brit and braw of the flint and wiley-like surpass 'em withall their'n melcher bronze. Dinnut roll over and show thasen belly before'n it be that or the void,na?" Said Ly, bristling with anger at the East-steaders obdurate stance.

Aye, aye dinnut do it, echoed the voices of Brinen and Frenra.

"Ly, Ly, me stoll brethers, there'us been such talk, but company be split and not enough hands on without no doubting for it to pull off and make that stance of difference. I will nay go agin what half the company do favour. I mun think on the whole on us and crush my'n instinct for the best way for whole on us, na?"

Ly scuffed his feet on the floor and looked down, shrugging his shoulders as if to shake a burden from him. In his heart he knew they could not stem the tide of change that would sweep the magic of flint into the void. He knew for Ogrune's sake he must be philosophical, he knew for his own peace of mind, he must be philosophical and accepting. There was no use in fighting against flow of the current, as there was no use in hurling abuse at the inclement wind. What was to be would be, as the gods decreed, and there was nothing they or Ogrune or even the Wise Ones and Old Man Wem, could do about it. So he sought to console Ogrune as best he could.

"Wey ya right - fech fer sure. 'Tis something I been seen coming for the long while. Change begot to come, take it how we wilt, change begot to come - but they bai'unt be always whole nor healthful neither."

"Thraist! That do seem trowe, and surely!" Agreed Brinen in deep echo. Ogrune and Frenra picked up their beakers in silent agreement.

"But there be little to be done aboun'es fer'n now. I was jus' thinkin' whiles to fill you'se in some, before you'se hear it fra bad nor worse exceptin' as it is," said Ogrune, anxious now to forget his troubles in favour of his guests.

"Thanks be to thee, Ogrune," Ly quickly reassured him, lifting his beaker again. "But as you'sve spoken, tis none for now to dwell on, so let's betake it now to turn to kindlier case and tell us how company be. What of Danroth and Hamtheor and the lovely Enyella? What of the folks hereabouts?"

"Aye'n so, serves no purpose to dwell, na? As the gods will or'n we forget ourn'selves, na? As for company - Danroth be all in his kilter, melding the stone-ware all the same and Hamtheor is after tilling the harvest afore its kinded be the sun as ever and Enyella...Enyella has a keening light for one who comes and goes, but is after fettlin' freely with Karum, who comes be the East-stead as messenger and trader. 'Tis said he is of Outlander blood some but Enyella's kindled to him and in trowe he can smooth-say full-fairly and gentles alot of the folk. But he come sharp of a times, as sharp as the metal he do bring."

Ly looked something troubled, "And be Enyella for taking him to fare and freely?"

"Closesome. I think in her heart she's n' after a one who tarries and goes and comes hither but for shortn' whiles, if you betake my meaning Ly," said Ogrune pointedly.

"Aye fech fer sure, there's a many as is waiting be the Hawk to tarry and fare!" Burst out Frenra after having contained a silence for a while. Ly trod on his toe which made Frenra yelp and dissipated the tension in the gathering.

But Ly felt he must make his position clear regarding Enyella. "She mun set her store be me Ogrune. I come and I'll be gone as always but I would see her kindlier earned na freend, dost see?"

Ogrune looked a little saddened by this communication. "Wey ya Ly, so I be says to her but 'ooman have their own ken and there be no turning 'em fromerts or frowerts when mind's setten to vaward!"

Ly gave a small smile. "Na if'n Ogrune be reet but Ly will take his trowe to her and kindlisme share, Ly be away come sun-in to the Great Lands and thence to Shroplande, the homestead, of'n his birth. These be Ly's plans freend Ogrune, just as ever". Ly looked earnestly at Ogrune.

"Wey ya right Ly," Ogrune answered. "But I be got qualms, I be got qualms. Aiee! 'eesle n' idleyway it be come to nought for what it should. So, let us toast to the Ones Who Sleep and the Mother-Goddess to us all and pray to they that providence may counsel and guide us, na? Come whisst! be there no song forert thay company Frenra? Be there no strumming and singing?" And a little banter began between Frenra and Ogrune as Ly pondered on what Ogrune had said.

He knew Ogrune had accepted his words, his plans and had never doubted he would say otherwise. But Ly was fond on Enyella, who was as sweet as the mead in spring, so silken-soft and melting sanje with her long black tresses, dark long lashes and eyes become of summer-blue. Ly had sat and danced beside this blooming-fair'un for a good few seasons betwixt and between be now. They'd be got close and cleavesome like but Ly clept no promises and bided be none on a false word though oftentimes in past recall were impassioned responses.

Passion he remembered, but he'ud made his pledge to the birth of beauty that was his Brith-na-gig and the charms of Enyella though lovesome, paled beside the 'ooman who now he was bonded to be the word-truths he'ud given her. Still he felt sorry to hear she might be in the sway of some unsavoury called Karuum. But he could not dwell for long on something that even Ogrune, who was pert of her withcome kinship, could cast off so as not to gather glooming to the company. So Ly betook it upon him to take to the merry in and sieze the moment in life to make the most of it, as all his kind before him, the old rovers who gypsied along the wild-ways had done - taking their

pleasure where they found it, but with that questing spirit which had seen their many achievements born.

So the conversation took a jocular turn and they were entertained by Ogrune's stories of Hamveor and Danroth's famed rivalry of strength, in being matched for nigh on length and breadth the same. Ogrune told of the previous harvest when they both vied to bring home the most corn the quicker. When it came to it Dunroth feigned faint and badly and made Hamveor leave off in worry for 'un to send fer'n the Healer moon-ma. While Hamveor be gone Dunroth set to and met Hamveor on the way to the third quarter with Healer Mermelisle. Dunroth greeted them all hasle and fettle and Hamveor all razed up and raging jumps'n wrestles'un to the ground until Dunroth's all begging for mercy and Healer Mermelisle is after cursing the baith on 'em for all their troubles but smiling like and in on the joke.

Such was the tale told to the three travellers from the West-lands whilst they quaffed of the good rich barley beer. They could've stayed full steady for a while if it weren't for Ogrune's moon-ma, Liandine - she who had greeted them at the entrance - who came to chivvy them to food and preparations afore they met the whole on'un company all on an empty belly with head full of the frisk of beer.

They were taken to their sleeping quarters, which was a small vacated hut set aside especially for visitors and traders. They were supplied with some water and left to their own devices for a little while. They stashed their trading wares and settled down to rest some. Ly was just washing from the courtesy bowl of water left for them, whilst Brinen was checking their trading items and Frenra was plucking his instrument and humming on the bedding. Ly, naked from the waist up was just drying himself on the cloths provided when a soft, lilting voice was heard outside the hanging fabric at the door.

"Hoow now - whisst! Hawk be come to ground and welcome and Brinen the bear-like be welcome too for the plenty to be had, and all the 'oomans and beguilty be after a snatch of Frenra's twang. Hey stolls - here be Enyella - leadman Ogrune's kins'ooman daughter, waiting to take you to platter. Be you decent for this beguilty's eyes na?"

Ly pulled back the hanging and gave Enyella a broad grin; she smiled shyly in return.

"Hoow now your'nself," teased Ly. "And how goes it fair beguilty fair? How doest this'n dusk-time find yous? Hale and hearty I be hoping - fech fer sure!"

Enyella smiled and nodded her head. Her dark locks were tied away from her face so that tendrils hung around it, highlighting the softness of her face, the smooth curves, the rosyng of her cheek, the startling cornflower colour eyes. Ly donned his leather waistcoat with its beaver fur trimmings as Enyella responded.

"Ly's spoke with Ogrune and knows the news fra hereabouts but fer'n Enyella the days dance lightly. She been after weaving her gifts for the company and picking wild flowers in the mead for the Holy Place and those as keening on 'em. Sun become and days be always merry for this time on our season, Ly knows".

"Aye but who be making Enyella all merry and frolicsome as the young kine in the felds - na ha? Enyella's gone giddy-like on some young stoll eh - fech fer sure!" teased Ly fishing to gauge her responses.

But Enyella showed scant sign of being abashed as she replied, "Na - there b'ent no case there - who be filling your'n ears with such nowort clammer?"

The other two men had gathered beside Ly. Brinen looked silently on smiling benevolence. Frenra eager to be in on the word-swap chose his moment.

"Wey ya right - laithwhiles! When any would look in those eyes saa blue he'ud ever befall in a trance and swoon away with a heart all lost to the keening light ever forever more, na? Enyella be beguilty fair'n fair as any stoll mun know, na?" Frenra's dark eyes glittered out their charm and appreciation of 'oomankind, who were for him part of the Great Mother's Mysteries, to be wooed and worshipped as the daily abundance that grew from the Earth and succoured Frenra.

Enyella laughed and blushed beautifully, revealing white teeth and a pink mouth. She had a daisy's freshness about her, all open and dewy-sweet, that never failed to gain a response from the menfolk.

"It be very courtsome and smarming what Frenra says and Enyella thanks him kindlisome for such honey-wordings but she be beguilty and part of the company all the same, na Frenra?"

The men smiled around her and Frenra acting as dazzled as he truly was breathed out. "Aye and some beguilty sure - some sweet dangle-fair with the sky for her eyes and the blessings of the Mother on her curvesome!"

"Sssh whisst Frenra! If yous be genin me the honey-sweet all til duskier-dawn I'm a betwixt Ly and Brinen and never a word-swap with yous no more, neh?"

At which Frenra looked so immediately miserable and suitably dampened that Enyella had to take pity on him to let him know she was nay as mortal offended as she'd given and would carve him a banter from time to time. And so with this fair beguilty in the midst of the three brawny weathered travellers, all of them taller than she, she led them to the centre circle, where a fire had been built and where along one side, a low table had been filled with the bounty of the forests and the field. All the company were gathered with the childer lit be the homesuns with a bit of snaff and pilcher to set 'em to sleep kindlytith when the folk be on a revel.

The older youth and the adults were gathered for their evening fare and greeted the three travellers by calling welcome and hearty from the many voices that knew them, as accustomed seasonal visitors. Enyella led Ly and the others to seat be the table at the end, where she sat on one side, and Ogrune still standing filled the other space, beckoning their visitors to be seated and rest their lols on the soft-stuff weaving supplied for the purpose. Brinen sat further along with Frenra but still close enough to Ly to word-swap. Frenra was gazing about him casting his eyes over the dangle-fair and sending out his signals before the fast was broken.

A dark-haired olive-skinned man smoothed his way into the space beside Enyella. She turned and smiled at him her sweet smile and said: "Hoow now - Karuum's snook in of a sudden as be'int he like - how hales yous, fair it be yent on hoping, na?"

"Karuum be always hale and hearty in presence of so fair beguilty-blue, Enyella knows some na?" His voice had an unusual smoothness and richness to it, like the cream atop of the kine's milkin' and dangerously pleasing. Enyella blushed half with embarrassment and half with pleasure. She touched his shoulder briefly as if to placate the admonition of her tongue, telling him to still the honey-sweet and join in the toast to their traveller-trader guests, which he duly did, waiting for his moment to come.

Ogrune opened the feasting with a toast to all: "Singen and secgan miri be all and weel and wassail this eventide." Where to everybody set on and the eating began. The platters set before them were many and varied: venison and wild boar, duck, a type of pheasant and hare, fresh bread made from the grain of the fields, butter and an assortment of greens and roots, dressed in a variety of picquant and aromatic flavours as well as honey and honey cakes. Truly was the table spread plentiful, exuding the bounty of the land.

Ogrune and Ly looked at each other busy with their hands and mouth. Instinctively, each then raised their beaker and said to the other: "Honour to the homestead and hale be the company". After which they set down their beaker with some old spirit vigour, and laughed together, a kind of defiant joy in the sound. Ogrune, determined to cast the shadows of the present from them, entered into jokingly questioning Ly about relations in his own homestead and skilfully kept the talk-jest flowing be a witty word to Wulffmar, hunter of the forest and downs, be a comment to Hamveor of the ready scythe and a compliment to Bruthnania, his scelding's moon-ma. So very soon the company were all in jolly and rousing and enjoying the moment become when spring was at the advent of summer's sun. A precursor jollisome it was to the great gathering of the following few days on at the Holy Place.

Finally when well filled and swilled, Ogrune called on all the fair beguilty to dance for the Fire-Star, the Sun God, come creating to Earth in this the season of gold. He requested Frenra to accompany the drummers with his new rippling string drum. At this point then, the tables were cleared and

activity begun. The women all comely youth and mature allure, transformed their garments so they wore sleeveless short-skirted tunics with coloured scarves around their waists and hips.

The women stood in position a little distance from the men, forming an arc before them with the fire behind them. A group of men at the drums began to beat out a rhythm. The women began to swish their hips hypnotically, as if to tantalise their Sun God, to bring down magic and rain gold onto the harvest. Frenra took up the rhythm and added to it with his strumming, lilting strings. This provoked the women's movements further, rendering them ever more eloquent and seductive.

Enyella stood at the end closest to Ly and moved her lithe slim budding body in voluptuous frenzy to appease and please the Gods of their world. The sight of her and the other women stirred the men to begin clapping rhythmically and to whistle and call in strange curling ululation in appreciation of what they saw. The pace of the dance grew ever more wild, ever more extravagant, the women now shimmying their bodies and arms and undulating their forms, lifting their legs and tapping out the beat with the men, until eventually they reached a frenzied crescendo when the music stopped abruptly and the women fell down, sweating and exhausted, symbolising the conquest.

Briefly the silence, the moon now glowing pale and silvery in the clear skies adding a luminous quality to the night. Then the men's rousing applause and the women getting up, smiling and laughing and still panting some. There was a lull in the company as the women went off to bathe before they returned freshened again to the gathering.

Ogrune turned to Ly and Frenra standing near behind Brinen: "An ever a fair beguilty amongst the whole on 'em - na ha?"

"Fech fer sure, stoll, fech fer sure," responded Ly but with the promise of Brith-na-gig in his mind and none of the former dazzle in his eyes. His tenderness for Enyella was now distanced, and in trowe it had always been a warm appreciation rather than ardour. He appreciated her dainty resilience but loved the brazen beauty of Brith-na-gig, and now he'd made up his mind - that was clear as day. Ogrune turned away again somewhat saddened, but trying not to show it.

Close by shrewd eyes were watching and noting this encounter, misinterpreting it through the filter of his own ambitions. Then a smooth, silky voice, resonant and seductful spoke across the low tressel to Ly.

"Ly become in time for the ceremony of the Sun God eh na? Yous'rn after basting a bloom of beguilty na Ly? You become to taste the fruits of the Mother, in 'oomankind, on the festival day na ha?"

Ly was irritated by the assumption of the stranger who had only met him on a nodding acquaintance that very evening.

"Ly become to reverence the Mother at the Holy Place and to give thanks to the Fire-Star, our God of the Light, be uppermost in mind Karuum na? None on yen fair beguilty, though they be birth of beauty to set eyes on fech fer sure," Ly said, controlling his tone and redirecting the conversation to focus on Karuum rather than himself. "How fer'n yous na? Be yous a settin' eyes on a baste of dangly-fair in the blaze of the fertility feasting na?"

Karuum smiled broadly. "Na and maybe-some too. Karuum hane gotten his eyes filled fer sure with some lovely lilt of dangly-fair and maybe, maybe this lovely loll will come be moon-ma be the harvest wain - if the Mother do bless me bold na ha?"

Karuum's voice had an odd effect on Ly. He was drawn to that smooth rolling tone, a little transfixed by it; but equally the man's assumption of familiarity chafed at Ly's sensibilities, as well as his brazen manner and what Ly knew was Karuum's bid for Enyella. But this did not prevent the fascination of the voice, seducing Ly to continue the conversation rather than give the man short shrift and dismiss him more bluntly.

"Karuum be from the East-stead na?" Ly asked in seeming interest and common courtesy, now the ice be broken with the quips on dangly-fair.

"Trowe in summun but I bin gan born and brought fer the Great Lands fra first and now tekk kindlier to the East-stead of'n this land and ferry betwixt and between as message-bringer, talk-gather fra import. I be fleet as the stag, faster'un the hawk, and do the distance with me stolls in quick betime that comes na? Lately there han been some buzz na? On leadman Rushwort be bravin' the boundary and taking to the womb on the Mother nigh soon. But the bronze be girding us up and stretching us strong and we mun meet the challenge as it become na?"

Ly continued regarding Karuum in a calm, contained way and let silence reign for a short but intense moment - a moment in which Karuum instinctively sensed the strong opposition. Ly kept his instincts under control and considered his reply; but his stoniness was apparent.

"Change begot to come na? But when the haleness at the core be turning to canker, then it be time to stand and listen to the Voice of the Wind and begather to heart the messages of the Mother".

"And these be?" Questioned Karuum with an edge in his voice.

"That in death all be joined to the Mother. The greatness of the Holy Place become and grown from such a knowing. That the stones be the bones of the Mother and the bodies of our'n kith and kin be returned in wholeness of spirit, tied soil to blood back to the Womb of the Mother til the Fire God be fertile Her and spirit comes through in the green growth times na? Be not this the hearthstone and kernal at base of our'n lives?" Ly said this quietly and firmly. It did not affect him directly as yet this issue. He could hardly muster force from present company nor still from his own folk further north-west. He was not about to create war, having no means to effect one. Nevertheless, his very lack of influence in that respect freed him to be able to state his mind with a continued directness that intimated at the passion beneath.

Karuum curled his lip and said: " So say'n some on the old ones na? But times become when the bronze girt us stronger than stone-know and we mun flow with'n that tide nar try to dam what musters force and shall overtek these lands wither we will or no, na?"

Ly shook his head slightly and gave a small, sad smile. "Fech fer sure, but there be bonds on blood and soil to memory on and lest we nor forget company be split and schismed and the old ways lost and gone, alonga the wise-lore that betaken fra the first folk as come and were placed be the gods on these'n fair shores. Without stone reverence, company be losing themselves to where no will and ravages become on the harvest and the Mother wilt reek her own vengeance like'n before in the Dark Times whiles I were but a secret in the Womb of the Mother. These be not just my own words but those of the Wise Ones be my own homestead. Ly only be-speaking what leesle in the heart of the many na?"

Ly had put his case plainly, but with a firmness and integrity that surpassed himself.

In contrast, Karuum had a dark look on his face that came close to being a sneer. "The Mother tekks as she gives and those as gets her vengeance, leave way for those as she chooses to give bountiful to. This be the way on the Mother, too. The bronze be girtin us strong and leading us ever into ways anew and genen us a glory past ancestors, took on in a different way. The bronze be superior to flint in ways of war and beauty - the bronze be giving out a glory as those that begets and filling souls with a girth of wonder na? Those that seek to gainsay so shall fall before'n in the season of this new sun, na? This fer sure by helve be the trowe, so does this stoll believe and hold by aye!"

Ly saw in this speech a near open gesture of hostility, and responded accordingly: "Be Karuum setting up a challenge to Ly na? The glint of the metal before'n the gout of the flint na? Be that it? If Ly be challenged, Ly fer sure will'nt turn it about - be that it Karuum? Yous're wanting a hand to hand between the flint and the bronze na?"

But Karuum as his voice betokened was a schemer before he was a warrior, weighing up his chances against the well-versed brawn of Ly, and sensing danger for his own position in the eyes of the West-steaders if he challenged Ly to a duel and lost. Or even if he won, for he knew Ly was known, respected and even loved by the few - the few that mattered to his ambitions he realised. Thus he took the sting out of his former bravado whilst turning over in his mind a possible plan.

"Ly misunderstood Karuum. There were'nt naither'un challenge but a view voicing a favour of bronze na? It were nay meant to be tekken to bone, na? And blighting the company as has set us both fair up well and nigh. But if Ly took it as such, why's Karuum pleads his sorry and offers up his'n spear arm to show there be nought to cliver up the twain on us fra now til sleeping times becomen eh?"

Karuum's tone was treacle-rich and soothed Ly's sensibilities despite the fact he still retained his essential distrust of the man. The arm gesture he could either ignore and cause a lasting disaffectedness between them, or clasp it and be hypocrite to his heart. Ly could not quite be false to himself thus, so he stood stalwart-grave and courteous-like replied: "Ly accepts Karuum's words and thanks him for his clarifying of his'n word-swap. The rouse-talk be over'n done on now - if Karuum's non offenden Ly belikes to silt and merry-make with his roving stolls and the fair company as becomen on return right soon, na?"

Thus saying, without taking the proffered arm, Ly gave a gravely courteous smile and reached for a jug of the apple-ale on Brinen's earlier recommendations and turned towards his travelling companion to make light on talk some'ere the carousin' .

Thus subtly slighted, Karuum was left gazing into his beaker until he turned his attentions to some that would feather him friend; all the while plotting, plotting his hatchet plan, the sting in his scorpion brain concealed behind the false brimming of his social smile.

Ly strove to master his instinctive repugnance of and rebellion against this newcomer. He thought on Brith-na-gig and felt warmed by memories of their rampant whiles where her flanks had seemed to glow with a golden sheen in the low evening light. Ly knew in his heart that change was inevitable, that the bronze would come to dominate - but it was the way that this was being done that aggravated his sensibilities, as if the old must be shed wholesale and forgotten in this thirst for the gleaming novelty of metal.

He could not stem the tide of change he knew; so instead he thought of Brith-na-gig which made him light of heart in stranger ways he couldn't have called to before. Now he was glad of his pledge, glad to turn his back on the fomenting present and feast his mind on his own future prospects, in place where stone was still mother-bone, with a heart so quiet and still, only the few folk could command. A place where the Fire-Star and the Mother brought their truths from messages across the skies. There in his own homestead they still kept holy the ancient wisdoms that spoke to the stone and saw in the stars a mighty wealth of possibilities.

With these thoughts and understandings filtering through his brain, and with the advent of 'oomans return, Ly chose not to dwell on the incident between he and Karuum. He pushed it from his mind to toast on kindlier matters. Enyella came beside him having passed Karuum and received some wordings of which communication Ly was ignorant. Enyella proffered Ly some sweetmeats - dough-cakes sweetened with honey and little biscuits fermented with subtle aromatic flavours. For to which now Ly lay to questioning, having a passing interest in the hearth-produce as he burnt be the fire himself so often. There was a while of banter on the food, with Enyella opening her eyes to him like a daisy of blue and making winsome merry with him as the friend and semi-secret lover she held him for. But there was a paternalness in Ly's manner that had nay hitherto been there, a distant tenderness Enyella could sense but not fathom, some subtle shift that made her feel he was not with her, appreciating her, teasing her and flirting with her, as he had done. So for a while of Ly's gentle questioning on her workings and ways, her weaving and food-lore, Enyella turned the tables about and asked Ly of his homestead. Who was keeping him fed and tending his hearth-food, where his company be kept and if any on a fair beguily had twinkled his eyes and held to his heart-strings of late.

This question was direct and fairly put, with a quiver betraying to Ly how her feelings still held for him. Ly could nay betray her honesty with lies and did nay like the notion of her yenning for him when his heart was set on the tawny Brith-na-gig. But he did nay want to send her swift to the arms of the silky sly Karuum - he wanted to wrest her altogether away from him. So swift he turned the conversation about, directing her own question back with more force and knowledge of her affairs than she owned of his.

"What of Enyella na? Fer what I hear'n and see with mine eyes, Karuum messenger fast-far and mixed-blood brether fra the Great Lands be seeming to taking Enyella to moon-ma for such as likes na?"

Enyella caught her breath in self-defence. "Whom be saying so? I take a liking for Karuum but he baint be my main and stoll, yet be no means nor all. Karuum be easy on the ear'n and clever for the brain - he bring weaving all such tales of Great Lander folk and their'n weird'n wondersome ways. Fay, Ly! Fer'n a new-just 'ooman seen nor sight of lands across the Big Waters it be some'at as feasts for the mind and sets the spirit all soaring. Baint be no wrong in that, na? For sure Ly mun see that na?"

It was rare if ever for Ly to speak ill of someone, but out of concern for Enyella and respect for her sun-pa stoll Ogrune, he did so now.

"Aye'n maybe's the feast of tales as he spins be webs spiked with poison and nay fit fer'n a fresher whist with her new-form wings to spread na? Enyella milchien, Karuum is skilful sly, he be'en nay fit steady company somehow for saa hale and wholesome honey-fair as Enyella be. Trowe there be some'at not to be trysted nor trusted be'un na kinen? Him be on his own glory trail and bidding not be the Old Ones whose wisdom has clothed ourn tomorrows nor be the claims of the Mother who brings us back again through the succour on the ripened corn and the stag and boar on the forested ways. Whisst Enyella! yous all folks knows well these sacred says - tell me not yous've 'r nay forgotten some?"

Enyella was looking down and examining her small perfect hands and looking something woe-begone. "No, and naither has Enyella forgotten thase Old Sungen but what be it to Ly if I keeps company with messenger Karuum. What does it matter much to thee?"

"Enyella knows she's a heartsun sweet-song for'n me and Ly be loyal as to kith and kin for Ogrune who be most old friend and stoll-wether to me as Enyella be herself. Thus and thraist so would Ly see Enyella with a worthier one to bind, a stoll likes thay king stag for thay forest hinds na? Not some sly back'n slider with a self to the fore for he leeth all, na?"

Enyella was moved by Ly's concern for her whilst at the same time still hurt by his brotherly tone. She realised at once without he must state it, that he would come and go as he always had but that he would never stay, and that there was no hopes for to become his moon-ma. Underneath her softness she was a sensible practical young 'ooman. She knew to court Karuum more would cause disharmony 'mongst her own kith and kin for which she still felt strong in the Old Ways despite the glamour Karuum brought to her.

"Ly can rest be sured that Enyella won't be taking Karuum to man-home nor being his moon-ma fer now nor fer never, and maybe some there be none to take'n as such til I be old and wankle with naither a kiner-bairn to call'n me own!"

"Laithwhiles! Don't talk seeding in the winds to be lost and forgotten! Enyella, be as fair a beguilty as any saa far and wide with all men'sfolk wanting come man-home for her - we knows na?"

At which Enyella smiled and put her head down half-shy and half-pleased by Ly's words, but still sore fra the knowledge that he, the Hawk, would never be man-home for her.

At that point Frenra's antics paid in good stead, for a companion of Enyella's came up to them laughing and excited, saying Frenra would only sing them one of his famed songs and strungenen his plucking drum if Enyella be there to give him inspiration. If only she gazed on him with her sky-soaring eyes then he would be moved to woo and lilt the whole on the company til Fire-Star rise and shed his light again.

So quoth the short buxom wench before Ly and Enyella, making Enyella laugh and blush and causing Ly to hail Frenra hither so that company be all gathered round thereabouts, still ready for a merry-run, and laughingly waiting for Enyella to turn her much admired eyes to gaze on Frenra, who caused then more laughter with his sighs and beautific expression. But thence he set to a strumming and a singing a song for the young beguilty taken to moon-ma, and of youthful stoll smitten to man-home and of the raunchin and runshone, the gasping and gape of 'ooman's maw best-fitted for the stoll's prong hard-turned til happiness come atrembling with the cleavesome of the twain of flesh. So went the giste of the song that caused much laughter, much scolding too, and made company livesome still, reluctant to leave the firelight on a night so clear, with the moon so soft and silvery above them.

Ogrune had come back to join them and thus they stayed until late on in the night, when folks went drifting off to their beds and finally Frenra had to leave and follow Brinen to their night-dwelling, after making jests and promises in kind to all on the fair beguily, and begging kisses from the many before he went his way. Ogrune sat with Ly a little longer. The tressels had been cleared and there were but few folk around now. A few of the menfolk were posted as watchers at the entrance but most of the rest were gone for the sleeptime, leaving the homestead still, with only the occasional crackle from the dying fire and a solitary owl's soft hooting to bestill the silence of the night.

"Well Ly," said Ogrune rising and yawning. "I'm be off to gen some sleeptime afore the preparations for the celebrants begin in serious-sturd. Tarry as you'm like an Ogrune'll be seeing you'm fair and fettling on the morrow's sun, na?"

"Fech fer sure, old man, I'm be pleasing and lankle-like here fer'n some while gracing with the silver moon-ma above'm afore turning in on me sleeptimes," replied Ly.

"Not on the old, yen boggart! I'm only ten cycles on fra you'm na? You'm frish-shank eh? Sleep well friend stoll, til sun-up then na?" Said Ogrune clapping Ly on the back all fond and jocose before heading off to the dwelling where his own kin were now gone. Ly smiled and lifted a hand to wave him off before sitting alone and still gazing into the dying embers of the central fire, and cogitating as he sipped the last of the apple-ale in his beaker.

From the shadows under the eaves of the stockade fence a figure crouched as if sleeping, wrapped in his cloak under pretence of being up with the first watchers at sun-rise. He had stayed thus until all but Ly stayed solitary by the fire. Now he watched and waited, biding his time til his venom could strike.

Ly pondered on the evening, and the changes afoot came back to him, disturbing him once more with their import. He thought on the clear night and revelled in its softness which contrasted well with the several seasons recent mizzling rain and dank, that in turn caused some drear spirit cast on the home-folk. Ly was troubled though he tried to cast it from him. It seemed to betoken some great change, something disruptive and dangerous he could not quantify. So he chose to walk the ways to the Holy Place to quiet his mind and lend his spirit some peace - receive the unction that always came within the vicinity of the Holy Place's granduer.

That timeless fixity soothed him, made him remember the pathways to the stars. The fact of and features of the Holy Place always uplifted his spirit; the greatness of it never surpassed - a symbol to all their futures from long before. The fervour and painstaking persistence that had seen it created, the mystical magnitude of that endeavour, that past expression culminating in what existed now. The last stones he knew were placed before he was born, in the youth of Old Man Wem, who'd told him all on it. How company from all the land gathered to pay their tribute and see last stones raised.

The Holy Place had brought them favour far and wide, and the emanations were still felt across the Great Lands in the north, where they worked their own kind of magic, and further south, where news of their temple, the messages from the gods it brought them, was renowned. Ly was for that vision, for seeing the Holy Place in solitary silence in the moonlight, perhaps for the last time and never as in that moment, when the axis of his whole life was tilting, edging him finally to man-home and the resonance of kin-placed stone.

There was a flame in his heart that he saw was his birth of beauty Brith-na-gig. Now the charms and tribulations of Enyella passed him by and all his mind and heart were hoving to Brith and her lush 'ooman's dangly-fair, all glad and sad for his decision. Yet feeling a poignant melancholy sweetness all the same at these, his last solitary wanderings come tether be home-tide in the west-lands, and rare if ever come that way again.

So he got up and drained his beaker, fetching from the hut where Brinen and Frenra now lay sleeping, his leather jerkin, a small flint axe and his staff held as ever. He strode silently as the night, used to moving with little or no noise, buoyed and determined towards the entrance of the stockade. He nodded to the watchers at the entrance to the homestead, who nodded acknowledgement in return, and didn't remark or question him for he was known and trusted throughout those parts.

As Ly walked through the fields of shoulder high corn either side of him, a figure watched him go from the shadows, near the watchers' fire. The figure became subtly more alert, more primed towards action, masking this beneath a pretence of fatigue and making some comment about seeking a blanket to keep off the dew. When the figure left the watchers he crept to a small hut beside several others and soon emerged with a bow on his shoulder and a quiver of flint-tipped arrow-heads. The moon illuminated his features as he came out of the hut.

It was Karuum. A sinister expression on his features betokening ill-will and some bitter humour twisting to intent as he lifted a bronze dagger to glint dully in the moonlight. Then he plucked from the quiver an arrow. He raised this to the light, then laughed darkly to himself, deliberately chopping the arrow-head off with a swift vicious action that stemmed from jealousy and anger at a pride that dared to equal his own. Karuum crossed the boundary ditch of the homestead and climbed the stockade fence to the fields beyond, and disappeared into the silvery shadows of the night.

The night was soft and warm, a welcome benediction after the recent wet and wind times which seemed to have lengthened and grown more severe over the past several winters. Now Ly was on the move in the midst of that balmy night, he did not dwell on such matters. Rather he was moved to note again with a heightened acuity brought on by his peculiar and unique circumstances, the silvery tone the corn took on in the moonlight, the dark of the distant forests, the rising of the downs and pasture before him.

Ly stopped abruptly as a weasel suddenly undulated swiftly across his path, when he rounded a bend in the track. His hunter's instincts were alerted at a slight noise behind him as of rustling. He turned round and scanned the track and the fields, thought he spied the corn waving gently some distance off and gradually stilling. He stayed completely motionless for a long while until he was satisfied that there was nothing untoward in his surrounds and that the movement was merely some small night predator on the prowl. Unaware of the irony of the thought, unsuspecting that any true treachery could exist, in such a place that was like a second home to him, he once more relaxed, walking on with the quiet ease and lightness of motion, as the panther in the forest, the wolves among the hills. But such creatures, kings in their domain, may even so be tricked and trapped and killed, despite the natural weapons and skills Nature had so bequeathed them.

After a while of walking he was in sight of the Holy Place and its arena. He could discern the white-capped perimeters that surrounded and partially secluded the mighty monument he sought. Ly turned dreamy mellow on sight of that feature and he felt his heart lift, his spirit expand; the way the place always made him feel, only more so now, at a time he'd never before witnessed it - in the depths of a moonlit night that promised him all the hope of harvest in his heart.

Closer and closer Ly got to that landscape until he was walking the central avenue and witnessing the bulk of the great stones against the starlit sky. And soon he came to the first great stones that marked the entrance to the arena. They towered above him gleaming faintly with moonshine. Awed, he placed a hand upon the one, almost tenderly and with a depth of reverence unknown til now. He could feel the life of the Mother Spirit in the hard rough stone; he could sense the secrets it contained and his mind and senses were taken up with unravelling those for the moment.

As yet he had encountered no one, and had remained undisturbed in his solitary sojourn. This proved to be the case as he drew near to the inner entrance formerly marked by two guards. Now they were not there and Ly was able to stand and regard the elegant symmetry of the structure, begin to discern the wisdom behind the texture and variation capturing the shifting light and charting the sky. Ly opened his hands as if to embrace the ethers that had brought the Holy Place into being, touched them to his chest and from thence to his lips, bowing his head and opening out his hands again in a gesture of obsequence. Then he walked through the inner entrance stones and into the temple itself, moving betwixt and between the massive structure, caressing and contemplating as he moved, entranced, under the spell of the stones and the soft silver light.

He saw two Watchers sitting cross-legged either side the innermost circle, leaning against the stones, gazing upwards with a flint and board to mark down the subtle shifts and changes from above. Ly moved back from the centre blue stone circle to the inner round of huge sarsen trilithons. He wanted aloneness, and fell back away from that inner boundary to the next outer one. Genuflecting, he sat down inside one of the great arches and looked up into the navy-blue night flickering and incandescent with the myriad stars above.

He thought of the tales told and passed on from old, that spoke of finding a home in the stars, that revealed they themselves had come from the stars - with the coming of the first great ones, the sky lords who came down to mate with the Mother. It was said in time, in generation beyond generation on, their kith and kin would fly to the stars and found new homes and new horizons on those flickering worlds above, from whence in legend they all had come, and where according to the old prophets, they would return when the wheel of the future had come full circle. These were the grand and profound thoughts which filled Ly's mind until he lost his wonder and opened himself up to the Divine Spirits above and below him, melting into the night sky and becoming one with his surroundings, part of the substance and tone around him. Ly floated for a while in the heavens, devoid of self, a fragment of the sky, as tiny and insignificant as a pebble on a beach, as potent and magical as the universe itself.

How long Ly stayed thus in semi-trance was unquantifiable. It seemed no time at all, and yet the moon was lower in the night sky and there was a sense of contained quiescence as if Nature were holding Her breath before a hint of dawn came, and the night activities moved gradually to ceasation before the trilling of the early birds. But when Ly came out of his trance night still ruled though its influence was beginning to wane. He murmured a thanks and benediction to the gods and the Mother as he rose finally, with the accustomed gesture to the breast, the lips, the ground.

Ly felt uplifted and calmed as he turned to leave the place, having received his succour, calmed by the decisions he'd made and the future he envisaged. The distant call of a night-jar brought to mind once more Brith-na-gig in all her beauty, and he saw her as fullsome rich as the harvest, the image of the Goddess in youth Herself. Ly's heart swelled when he remembered their last cleavesome fleshwhile on the night before he left, and his body melted and stiffened on remembrance of her touch. Soon, soon again before the season's finish he would be with her and never more, most probably, would he come that way again. Never more would he circumvent this great Holy Place as he did that night. The thought of this stirred profound depths in him, and he lingered through the inner entrance, stones turning and viewing the gargantuan granite missives standing witness to his silent worship. Finally Ly was moving on, his heart bursting within him, rendering his usual stalwart sharp self whimsical in the rareness of that night.

He reached out and touched again, for a final time, the outer entrance stones which he had come to. On a whim, Ly turned to climb the avenue bank that rose up, marking and secluding that central approaching avenue. Ly thought he would catch an aspect of the Holy Place he'd never seen before. His silhouette was outlined by the clear silvery night as he stood there gazing still upon the great temple, reluctant to leave, and seeing new missives in the shadow and soft light created by the play of moon sheen and smudges of dark from the semi-tone greys of the deep night balm.

All this the Great Old Ones had sown the seeds of. All this the kith and kin from old had planned and mapped and toiled to erect. All this signalled the Great Height in Human Endeavour, the Great Achievement of that fair land that served as a shining light, influencing and illumining the folk of the continents, all about and further. The instinct and knowledge of this moved within Ly making him humble yet proud, enriched yet melancholy with the thought of endings, glowing gold with the possibilities of an altogether different future; and still excited by the prospect of travel before he finally turned his skiff to the north-west, and stayed by the homestead for good and for all. He was a man come into the fullness of his own being, standing at a crossroads, having decided his path but still melancholysome over what he had to leave behind.

He heard a warbler call in the distance to his left where he knew the waters of a lake lay. He turned towards the sound and stood looking out across the country with the Holy Place now behind him, as if the sound of vibrant life had pulled him from the world of reflection to the world of the present, where the forward motion of life itself desired to be embraced.

Breathing deeply of the night air, Ly warmed himself with the Bounty of Beauty that formed in his mind from the shape of the mamelons in the near distance. Brith-na-gig's fleshly mounds so lush and ripe came to mind, making Ly wish for an instant, he could hold her to him and clasp that birth of beauty in his arms, ravage her flaming foxy hair and join her moon-ma to his man-home once more before he took off to the Great Lands that one last time.

With his mind filled with such thoughts in his seemingly solitary vigil, Ly did not hear the stealthy figure which appeared from behind the further entrance stone, silently placing the arrow and drawing back the bow. Ly did not hear the sudden quiver of the arrow through the air until it was too late and in his back: deeply embedded, a flint arrow-head, closely followed by another and

another, severing the spinal cord and cutting off his life as speedily and quickly as the flight of the flint-tipped arrows themselves.

Ly's main emotion was surprise as he fell forward. But the image of Brith-na-gig came to his mind, holding open her arms and he felt himself slipping through her to the arms of the Mother Herself, where his trials and tribulations were ended and his soul was returned to Source.

In the moonlight a stealthy figure stole forward to see if the form fallen down the bank was lifeless. Satisfied that this was the case, the figure crept down the bank and began to dig the loam in the shadows, at the base of the rise, where the dead body of the Hawk lay severed from his death-writhe. Soon a pit had been dug, the body buried, skilfully and painstakingly concealed. Then in the stealthy darkness, a shadow of Death's scythe sped away across the country, as silent and unobserved as he had come, having spent his venom - holding a smile of poison, within his scorpion mind.

Gradually, gradually the moon fell back before the coming of the light of dawn, until the sunrise glanced off the first stones in the midst of the great arena; as glorious as ever, shining forth the gold of life regardless of the presence of death, buried in the recumbant form of the dead man, lying face down with the flint arrow-heads embedded in his back, the soil and stones compressing his flesh, in time, sifting a skeleton to bone.

Far away, further north in the Westlands, an old man was seated at his bench, gazing through his portal at the night sky and the full round moon. For an instant the black silhouette of a screech owl flew like a porten across the face of it, causing Old Man Wem to frown and turn down to his sacred bowl of water into which he had been scrying. He looked once more into the moon-filtered water and from the shadow of the fleeting bird he caught the glimpse of a form falling forwards, falling forwards and dying beneath some virulent shadow in the silver perfection of the night.

In that instant, Old Man Wem knew that Brith-na-gig would never see Ly come man-home and would never be moon-ma with him come by. With the same piercing intuition, Old Man Wem knew Brith-na-gig would seed and flower with a childer part of the Hawk himself.

Tears trickled down the old man's face, silver jewels on brown leather, tracing a path wrought from the sorrow of wisdom and more ...

6.

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 trembling 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 fulfill 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-stocking. 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 wiley 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 prowl 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 hareem 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 hummingbird 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 recumbant 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 business men 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 fulfill 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 existances 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 mannikin, 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 specially for such an occasion. Iron loops on the floor, a hook on the ceiling, iron bed posts, a reversible head board with rings in order to secure chains and leashes. Many times he had handcuffed her to the bed posts 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 innured 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 a 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 ankelet 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, til 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 duely 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 O.K. 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 disshevelled, 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 cossetted 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 dependant 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 creche 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 O.K.? 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 pony tail, 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 tree-top baboons taken out for you so that the building work can go ahead, alongside this little extra you promised me, O.K.? 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 oggling 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 - O.K.?" 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 til 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 disshevelled 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. "O.K. 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, O.K.? Thanks for a fab 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 zig-zag 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 O.K. babes? And don't do anything naughty while I'm away alright? '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 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 potted 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 pent 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 diaphonous 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 risqué 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?

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 artifacts 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 fulfill 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 water-tight 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 Ceasar 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 prediliction 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 bridling 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 tete-a-tete 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:

Order of Nine Angles

"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 practicing 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 liason 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 manoevered 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-pooping 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 whince, 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 bouyant 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 bubbled 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 uproarously.

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 adrenalin. 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 tantalizing! 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 til 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 unshakable 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 O.K. 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-manoevered 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, metamorphosed 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 out-stripped, 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 adrenalin 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 targetted 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.

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 indeterminant 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 arrid 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, adrenalin. 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.

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 fulfill 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 lunch-time 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 massuers 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 hareem. 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 chamber. 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 multivarious 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 armulets 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. 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 ...

Order of Nine Angles

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 leaves 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.

7.

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 river bed, 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 inately 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 draw¼

The words of Lady Macbeth sprang to my mind and seemed peculiarly appropriate: "Come thick night and pall thee in the dunnest 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 me¼

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 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 nochalance. "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 O.K. 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 tides, 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 Asooth, 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 disenchanting. 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 categoric 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 til 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 crystallized 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 supercede 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 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 - sinister¼

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 curvacious 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 equivilant 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^¼

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 tantalizing, 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, eerie¼

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 subtly.

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 actually¼ 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 til 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

8.

Chaconne

CB, ONA 1998eh

It had taken him many years of dreamcraft to locate the planet; long stretches of time seeking an answer to a question only intuitively felt. And now, through the power of Thought, Squilver stood upon the desert soil of yet another world.

But this world was very different to those others he and his ancestors had explored - those ancestors who, aeons ago, had left their green and blue home to spread outwards into the cosmos, as befitted a race of gods. That home now only existed in images and ageless legends.

Squilver knew that They would one day guide him to this place. The faith he carried within had been nurtured throughout the achingly long span of aeons by the shadowy and often misunderstood few who had waited, as They had waited, for the time to come full circle. Tradition spoke of those few guardians, and kept alive their names and deeds.

The old chants weaved patterns in his mind: *Nythra kthunae Atazoth ... Reryh, meril eildof feterit nye ...* And his soul sang the living songs of all those who had gone before him. Squilver, follower of the Seven-Fold Way, stood now as All Things - all histories; all creatures; all individuals. As he breathed, so did the planet: this primal realm, now more than just the dream which first inspired his species to yearn for the wide spaces beyond.

And the purple sand was blown around him and blown across the shells of the past, beneath a diamond shaped moon, of lizard-green.

He moved among geometric forms that were visible only to his inner eye and sensed their presence, though long silent, long neglected, still puncturing the dimensions. He rested beside one, and listened to the chanting wind.

Squilver took from a bag a humanoid skull, blackened with age. Legend related it as being the head of a follower of the Path, who lived upon and was buried in the earth of the green and blue homeland. His body had been removed from its secret place and re-buried on the first new world, when the seeding of the cosmos had began. The head of this individual remained in the keeping of each Heir to the Tradition. Red hair was still matted to the jaw-line, and within the skull was lodged an equally aged crystal, shaped as a tetrahedron.

Squilver held the object and fixed his gaze on the horizon. Volcanic extrusions and screes of shattered rock brought to him an ancestral echo, and very briefly he saw, standing amongst the grey and white rocks, the phantasms of two humanoids of male and female appearance. Others clambered the rocks to stand by the couple, but the vision was soon obscured by the distant clouds of sand.

With one hand, Squilver held the skull, and with the other touched the unseen object by which he stood. The object was a dodecahedron, and whilst ice-cold, began to thrill Squilver's flesh with the current of Life. And thus, he began to chant: *Otonen Satanas, faus rige cedar fising, Mach beoda ...*

As the chant swelled, he visualised the rotating, scything wheel under which his people had first spread out into the starry realms. He sensed his consciousness expand likewise into the cold depths as the chant took him over - as the crystal, as the unseen form, as the dust and rock and wind flowed with his voice, until there was only the surge of Life itself ...

Order of Nine Angles

And yet, the experience was tinged with something unsettling. Forces opposed to Squilver and his Way groaned and stirred and clawed their hatred in some far distant place. There was a momentary wavering of intent, as something within Squilver recognised the Forces as those long regarded as vanquished.

But it was of no matter now: the many invisible shapes that littered the landscape filled with green life which broke through to unfurl across and within the sand. The sound of water took over as the chant reached its completion.

His first task complete, Squilver let his instinct walk him through the crawling land, the growing light of the sky and the scent of rain mirroring his own inner awakening. The purpose of his individual life no longer slept as a promise, but was now embodied and living within every cell of his Being, within every cell of all the life forms that flourished around him - as it had always been intimated, by the legends and traditions of his people.

He was led to stand by an awakened stream that flowed down from high, rocky hills. The water of the stream was quietly fed from above by a pool shaded by gentle moorland slopes. Squilver sat amidst the young heather and looked out over a bay that opened out into a calm sea, the sparkling waters bearing distant islands.

On a far shore across the bay, stood a dwelling. To Squilver, it appeared breath-takingly ancient, the thrill of some older treasured time living before his eyes. It was a squat, white building, of stone, crowned with a long dark brown roof, possibly of grass or moss. It seemed to contain only one level, and its small squared windows revealed the darkness within. A rectangular opening was firmly closed off by dark wood. Behind the dwelling, the rising slopes were cut with strips, presumably for the growing of crops.

Tears of ecstasy, of revelation, welled in his eyes as he gazed upon his future. In that dwelling, Squilver would reside for a season, and complete the tasks of a prospective Magus. On completion, the others would join him, and the long trek of Ages since Their banishing would truly be at an end.

And through Their joining, the legendary Nexion would become fully opened, heralding a new cycle of Aeons. No one would dare again seek to seal the rent ...

- Order of Nine Angles -

9.

Winterreise

Coire Riabhaich

In Winter

The book is put aside
When wordless the slow force
Pushes sadness in my soul
I cannot give myself then to his writing
For the real land stretches out
In turgid progression:
A Wilderness no book or painting
Can live for me
And my soul shrinks at what I must do ...

There is an Awe
So terrible in its pace
Evolving a merciless expanse
Where one life
Can only ever be forgotten.
Can I lie like the rocks I am dreaming
And become that ageless existence?
Will the silence return
To find I am the streams
Moving through this impossible Earth?

When the book closes
It is as if my blood
Will become the heather-rust
And my tiny mind is lost
To the Nameless Dread
We do not have to face until
Last moments of recalling

Yet, to remember
When others forget
Is an ancient Gift:
It is to become
What words cannot make a becoming
And to move, because of fear,
The fragile Present
To embrace the yearning of Ages ...

Once Fortuna may have eased the burden
Now beginnings seem more difficult
And I turn and bring forth from a sleeping form
A book half-written
And barely understood.
I will be that Spring time
When the book must be lived;

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But for the Present, the cold still encloses
As I am only the oppressive promise
Of a season yet to be lived

In a Landscape

Winter darkens
And each city is a refuge:
Yet still a river moves through unlit moors
Waiting, miles from our place
Of Forgetting
And echoes
Eclude the notes, formed
To seize Divinity
To suckle for some
A dream

My crucible, nourished now
By rain and snow
Has waited long years:
It is time for the Earth to bear again
From a kind of Death,
To bring the deepening spread of Summer
Once more by an Oath
In fever fulfilled

Frantic, a connexion sought
While each season is unheard.
Here, resides the longing
To find the Inner Land, immutable
Since in our loss
We cannot grasp

A killing frost that seeps
Where no paths
Cut us from the black hills
Where no track
Leads to a favoured place
And echoes, after you
We shall still be, waiting ...

Last Sleepwalk

The patterns of water
From the mountains
Could not unsettle:
Surely they would lead a spirit to silence
Lull each terrible night
That could not bear the birth of Spring
For Winter's last rage

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Surely the storm, that one perfect symphony
Would spare the home
And lift the Oblate to stand,
Staring like the Moon
At the swirling life of birds
Who brought once before
That same precious laughter

It is hard to let go of happiness
For a cause beyond:
I will seek to remember
In moments without struggle
The simplicity
Of the patterns of water.

Fugue

When infant Spring
Woke the glow of life
We settled on Haddon Hill
Amid the whisper of storm.

We sat with the songs of the outcrops
That held in our small space of peace
The yearning we have always been.
Far below, garish in stupidity
The infestation of life crawled
Never once listening;
The gentle fort above, degraded
Carried its dying ghosts to their end
And the present seems void:
There was a pool there once,
Where that car park now rots
Syphoning the cadaverous

We two sat imbued by wyrd
Enshaded by the tyranny
That makes our Way fragile.
I heard your Musick, beautiful and a little sad:
You were the memories cut into Stanyeld;
Light Spout, its unassuming and truthful descent;
The forgotten hill-side home, built before dawn ...

The Past turned then
Over the dark tumuli to the west
And my future looked out through your eyes -
I, still forming, was content
To let my ageless soul
Walk the new horizon.
There was no looking back, as some do
Towards dead folklore
All Life surged through us
Only ever moving beyond

A prelude of years
Now ceased its song
And marked the end of words.
You were acceptance
And I, the waking season

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No division then as we responded
In cloud
As one carrion circling
As one God heard fleetingly below:
I belong nowhere else.

Somewhere, rain
Marked our farewell
You left to bring an echo to my future self;
I stumbled, led by the present
And bound for the Black Earth
We belong nowhere else

Carving

Do we bring gods from soil
As I carve this face in wood?
Do we and They as one
Shape Wyrd
By willing answers for our living?
The trees now budding

Shape of my soul, tranquility:
This is the face of Hierosgamos
Once a truth over creed
When mouths unravelled leaves
Instead of death

In this moment
I am still of the elements
Which bear the Musick I call my own:
I must wait therefore, for solitude
To open Earth
And bring forth consciousness,
Carving my face into the form that wakes ...

There is one Wyrd
And the wheeling Cosmos will always shape
And discard, until a few buds at least
May blossom as Art

Not simply a means
But a god for each waiting Earth

Return

There are no songs
To sing a sea
That fed a sickened heart
No colours to awaken
The awe that held a ragged soul
The rocks will remain
Where my wisdom stayed

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Where life moves between fire and hail
And will live still a truth
I cannot see between noise and loss.

Even then
I struggled to listen
The message of the sea could not free
One life still lost in fetish
Of Art.
Even then
I left clothed in pettiness
Waiting for meaning
But the sea
Could not break the hold of starvation.

I sought to possess the numinous
But there is nothing of mine to bring forth
When the Earth is all that yields.
Once bewitched by clouds
Yet I was never lost
Still Her memory
In my heart does not recall
But only the question:
When will I become what I cannot possess?

As I write
I cannot hear the sea

Diabolus

Once as always
Tides
The loneliness of unity
Will call us forth
From behind the Earth.
Life listened
But in sleep
Until
I met us all again
Through your eyes
And my animal flesh

I met us all again
Where the Earth is
No longer Earth
And would know that expression again
When the stars were my eyes
And my heart
Had no name

Eternity is Nameless
Where the stars
Are not stars.
Wake again, cold space
And I will seek
Creation

Order of Nine Angles

And seek again
Through your eyes
And my animal flesh

Monuments

Cradled in rock
Thoughts are returned
To monuments, never sleeping
Beneath the quartz slope
Where hands once tore
To fashion, for us, a question

But we do not need to seek signs:
The Earth is scarred by monuments
They grew like trees, rooted in minds
But Life has moved on since
Now my own hands cease to tear
From Earth an answer

What will I be then
For future eyes?
A circle of musick, a stone to stand
Before each traveller,
Its message unchanging?

I will be a declaration
Only as a tree declares itself;
For the secret was already unlocked
When the Earth
Still bathed in fire

Art

He drew a symbol
To make his mark
But he did not exist
Only the storms he once painted
That would return

He was glad
When the symbol was carried
It was his Legacy, emblazoned
But he was the same

As those who carried
As the one who spoke before the crowd;
They had drawn the symbol
He did not exist

To justify his mark
The artist looked back
To those before him

Order of Nine Angles

But saw only the storms
Returning

The same storm
Behind each eye
Speaks no revelation
Of Self and Isolation:
The banner was one Life
Carried by their Desire

You drew the symbol
I am you who now addresses the crowd
There is no Art to make a mark
The choice is one of Life
It is only the storm
That returns

Master of Charms

In words
Are no measures of Time.
Thus, the message of
Clouds
Their progression
I do not seek to compare
With a voice I contain
Once thrown out from unhewn rock
To infinite depths

It was the falling snow
That stayed against the blue
As the blizzard of stars
As the clinging ash
Was the carved frame that contains
A life
After my bones have nourished
The hewn rock

There is no measure here
To perturb our mind;
The sky above me now
Is the orange-grey presence
Again, as so long ago

I see all that I had seen
Know all that I have known.
This is not the order I have believed
But the state I have dreamed

Where the clouds are

Order of Nine Angles

Annum per annum

I will wait for a far-off place
Where distant rain brings mist
And low cloud wreathes grey around
The black stone and the unseen nests.
May others look across water
To where I sleep
Growing as each season lends a little grey
To flesh.
This man of mystery
Who carries the hills within:

Through my eyes
They glimpse themselves again

But I cannot live now
As the man of my future.
In the Wilderness I found even less
Of myself;
No centre
Only fragments disowned, of pitiful stature
My escape, the slow tides
Of the sky.
But there is a life to be lived
While such tides feed my flesh

While my mind
Frames the underground spring
That sustains;
And gracious life, the rain that befriends.
Acknowledged without symbol,
Thought as the river
A wonder so simple, as to be missed
Or rejected
In slow flowering

With each sun
Another memory played out until
Only the light of existence
Sees infinity held within rock.
My soul will dream again
No longer stifled by peace
And the land will not bear
The repeating blow: I cannot be more than I am ...

Or will each far-off place
Bring me to stand always beneath the Moon
Wishing I could weep?
Each time, my head bowed
She speaks with my voice: *Birth*

This man of mystery, white as Winter
Turns again to the distant rain
But will seek no more, what he has become

ΙΟ.



Sappho - Poetic Fragments

With artwork by Christos Beest

τέγγε πλεύμονας οἴνω, τὸ γὰρ ἄστρον περιτέλλεται,
ἂ δ' ὥρα χαλέπα, πάντα δὲ δίψαισ' ὑπὸ καύματος,
ἄχει δ' ἐκ πετάλων ἄδεα τέττιξ ...
ἄνθει δὲ σκόλιμος· νῦν δὲ γυναῖκες μαρώταται,
λέπτοι δ' ἄνδρες, ἐπεὶ δὴ κεφάλαν καὶ γόνα Σείριος ἄσδει

Introduction

The aim of the present translation is to try and present something of the unadorned beauty of Sappho's Greek.

From the many fragments that remain of her poetry, I have chosen those that best reflect something of this beauty. The text used is that of Lobel and Page [*Poetarium Lesbiorum Fragmenta*, Oxford 1955] - and the numbering of the Fragments in this present work follows that of their text.

.... in the text indicates a break in the fragment; [] indicates a conjecture.

Fragment 1

Deathless Aphrodite - Daughter of Zeus and maker of snares -
On your florid throne, hear me!
My lady, do not subdue my heart by anguish and pain
But come to me as when before
You heard my distant cry, and listened:
Leaving, with your golden chariot yoked, your father's house
To move beautiful sparrows swift with a whirling of wings
As from heaven you came to this dark earth through middle air
And so swiftly arrived.
Then you my goddess with your immortal lips smiling
Would ask what now afflicts me, why again
I am calling and what now I with my restive heart
Desired:
Whom now shall I beguile
To bring you to her love?
Who now injures you, Sappho?
For if she flees, soon shall she chase
And, rejecting gifts, soon shall she give.
If she does not love you, she shall do so soon
Whatsoever is her will.

Come to me now to end this consuming pain
Bringing what my heart desires to be brought:
Be yourself my ally in this fight.



Fragment 16

For some - it is horsemen; for others - it is infantry;
For some others - it is ships which are, on this black earth,
Visibly constant in their beauty. But for me,
It is that which you desire.

To all, it is easy to make this completely understood
For Helen - she who greatly surpassed other mortals in beauty -
Left her most noble man and sailed forth to Troy
Forgetting her beloved parents and her daughter
Because [the goddess] led her away

Which makes me to see again Anactoria now far distant:
For I would rather behold her pleasing, graceful movement

Order of Nine Angles

And the radiant splendour of her face
Than your Lydian chariots and foot-soldiers in full armour



Fragment 22

Gather your [lyre] and sing for me
[Soon]
As desire once again [enhances] your beauty:
Your dress excites, and I rejoice
For I once doubted Aphrodite
But now have asked that soon
You will be with me again

Fragment 23

When I look at you
I know that even Hermione
Was not such as you -
Fairer to compare you to Helen
The golden-haired

Fragment 31

I see he who sits near you as an equal of the gods
For he can closely listen to your delightful voice
And that seductive laugh
That makes the heart behind my breasts to tremble.
Even when I glimpse you for a moment
My tongue is stilled as speech deserts me
While a delicate fire is beneath my skin -
My eyes cannot see, then,

Order of Nine Angles

When I hear only a whirling sound
As I shivering, sweat
Because all of me trembles;
I become paler than drought-grass
And nearer to death

Fragment 34

Awed by her brightness
Stars near the beautiful moon
Cover their own shining faces
When she lights earth
With her silver brilliance
Of love



Fragment 41

Beautiful girls, towards you
My thoughts will never change

Fragment 47

Love shook my heart
Like the mountain wind
Falls upon tress of oak

Fragment 58

Age seizes my skin and turns my hair
From black to white:
My knees no longer bear me
And I am unable to dance again
Like a fawn.

What could I do? I am not ageless:
My youth is gone.
Red-robed Dawn, immortal goddess,
Carried [Tithonus] to earth's end
Yet age siezed him
Despite the gift from his immortal lover

I love delicate softness:
For me, love has brought the brightness
And the beauty of the sun

Fragment 94

I can reveal to you that I wished to die -
For with much weeping she left me
Saying: "Sappho - what suffering is ours!
For it is against my will that I leave you."
In answer, I said: "Go, happily remembering me
For you know what we shared and pursued -
If not, I wish you to see again our [former joys]
The many braids of rose and violet you [wreathed]
Around yourself at my side
And the many garlands of flowers
With which you adorned your soft neck:
With royal oils from [fresh flowers]
You anointed [yourself]
And on soft beds fulfilled your longing
[For me]



Fragment 96

She honoured you like a goddess
And delighted in your choral dance.
Now she is pre-eminent among the ladies of Lydia
As the rose-rayed moon after the sinking of the Sun
Surpasses all the stars and spreads its light upon the sea
And the flowers of the fields
To beautify the spreading dew, freshen roses
Soft chervil and the flowering melilot
Restless, she remembers gentle Atthis -
Perhaps her subtle judgement is burdened
By your [fate]
For us, it is not easy to approach
Goddesses in the beauty of their form
But you



Fragment 126

May you sleep on the breasts
Of your tender companion

Fragment 130

Once again, desire -
That looser of limbs and bitterly sweet -
Makes me to tremble
You are irresistible

Fragment 138/ 147

Believe me, in the future someone
Will remember us

Because you love me
Stand with me face to face
And unveil the softness in your eyes

- Order of Nine Angles -

II.

Antares

Christos Beest

Order of The Nine Angles

Where love beckons, arson calls. The fallow ship that in less stately times, did cut its way through passion with oafishness, has, with the aid of muse and pen, become an elaborate galleon. Other less native ships are likely to see and yet, for all their bus and blunder – impressive to the thigh I admit – they do return to port and reconsider at the drawing board. These are nightly times, darksome and covet, where a swan's tail both sparkle with homogenous water; unfold me if you will, for I know it hath both stellar and terrestrial counterparts. I know also that love within two eyes is also divine, and yea, like that distant star breaking upon the shores, or the moon's gradient, its tides extracting, the conjoining of two gates is worthy of all the spoils of man.

How could Wyrð be so met? No fortune is there to take away the seed of spirit; to destiny now look, for it is a mighty fool. Though rabbits do multiply with a sullen eye, what joy crowns the union of man and beast? Man hath reason and the beast both flower imperceptivity, for it knows only what it sees: aye, a joy indeed.

But of the greatest joy do I sign oft; for it is between my love and me where lyric doth fall short like wingless sparrows – sparrows that dream about thee. Verily this creature is no boon to the sun, that clumsy ball of bombast; no hushed lyric from that idiot globe. The sparrow doth, in its pursuit of flight, seek the Moon to cauterize its wounds, knowing as teardrops fall, that the Moon doth breath tickets to the clouds. Let the clouds not be illuminated by gold, but as water charges and sweeps across the brittle always, the silver doth thread its way the tyrian vestment. Beating in couplets, there is no way that it is – who understands that which doth not pour out elegance to fashion the passions whisper that shades ebullience? Where there is imbecilic dualism, there is panic and failure. For man both build love as a house for weather. For woman, the lock may be shattered... but there are mysteries for both, which only the wise may see.

II

Time hath bred a flame worthy of Hell's greatest heartache; no hushed casket contains my soul – what manner of flame is this which spins from my once forgotten frame? In pursuit if the spiritual did I become dislocated: a walking and enunciating moribund mannequin... how the raven did circle above in distaff! Verily a courtly reminder of the fragile bone that causes a thread to finality; but what is this life if not the presence of solidity, the white spaces where shapes once existed do reveal an essence for those with eyes to see. And mine own eyes see the richness of this being, the vibrance of the grass scudding beneath my feet. Grass may scud as and when I rush over it, rush over with such joy - hungry grass! Yea, I know that even the grass craves a joint of rain, the long patches obscuring once where a meal was set upon.

I do know the hunger of all things and it is a glad hunger! Colors now dazzle where once there was a gray reason...Look! The trees are such fine shapes; they stoop to tell of a life in nitrate, of their favorite pastimes – the trees are literate! They read their own leaves, the print is noble and bears witness to much irony! Oh sweet excellence, how few do ride in my starry strangle hold. Tonight songs will be sung to touch luminosity; a Moon shall rise over corn and many inanimates will be accorded greetings. But what inactivity shall follow? What creates vacuity? Within and without, one creative act will alter the shape of things as only a boat of animals on a shiny sea could know.

But who will make life their art? Now, how the stars do sparkle, rippling the water like the taut facial expression of an enthralled gibbon. I am abandoned to this... there are no words as we project onto animals the qualities of humans. I am touched by Eros, bells remembering my heart

weaved into a gift of wicker – I offer it to the one who hath stirred the ivory spinning pin. Tears hath dyed the tapestry and laughter, laughter cracks the dawn! Midnight alone ploughs the field, the darkling owner of that primal rhomboid tractor is elusive of features, cloaked as it may in forbidden and diverse sonnets. Speech carries no bounty, all images retire as Spring opens a way, doors loosen, an intersection made...

And with the clattering of words, indeed by their presence, I give myself up finally to silence. For in oblivion, a strangely shaped ruby may be seen – and what is felt? It is to love that I give myself and to she who embodies this, my muse, my life I dedicate. What is achieved alone is a half journey.

To love therefore, since times are recalled for they do last forever.

III

Now the evening shrouds a clear deceit – but what is deceived? The two of us, close, as is said, the world revolves outside. Yet birds sing to us and the leaves embellish our song. Saccharine lilt in our hearts – something is earthed inside, each the others home - if such is the way, then I worship thee, I worship thee who sways me. Your hair still wet frames thy flickering gaze: Paradise stands a path away, yet there are many routes and my trembling form, barely present, seeks with helplessness that trusted way.

She cares that I live, that alone I cause disharmony to her tomorrows. We both seek refuge from emptiness and therefore provide a mutual port – is it for myself that love is cast? By her eyes I do know the answer and yet I do not falter for mine own to burn with the same. Here is the deceit that if acknowledged any other way than floating harmony, would perturb.

I do in silence, beneath the smoking tree, know there is ever one end unless our stars do create the same firmament that flows with natural order – where there is almost effortless change. Is this my chosen door to life? The choice is made by more than one. I do say, in evening, that strangest of words, love; I do love thee for all my reasons. Cast on parchment shall we ink our smiles in mutual agreement, knowing other reasons unsaid. Time alone tells all and let us not pretend we know not.

IV

To love... what is that exactly? Time and time does not reveal in the minds what such passion is; by this silence the strongest fall sick, confusion tearing at the soul like an insane beast – through the eyes of beasts, there is no end in sight. The cracking of the ultimately immobile, only an impassioned dent, for the walls dare not be removed. To run far from the object that inspires the untranslatable cannot be so amiss!

I need to be reassured in this! To this terrible awning do I return alone, for it is of my won design; the walls, sheer and constricting are the gilets of my mind. I breathe and feel more pain...

Death, a blank option awaits by the door; the key I cannot identify, all is so homely and yet the mould that cast the metal contained an unsure ingredient, an unnerving interlude in the possible erratum of the dream. I would die and have all and nothing – for names in this wretched world amount to naught. The luminosity within counts for something greater, yet only this can be gradually attained, through the worst of experiences and not by their hiding. To build, to build with paid and fear; this is a constant knowledge, which tears cannot deny and yet I feel older than the sea and weary. I wish to disappear, to sleep – for life is a wound, reopened, festering until it kills with the poison of love and pain and all that comes under the umbrella of sensation. Your words, empty letters, never once expressing, have hurt the self of me that cannot empathize. I lie bloodied in my hall of mirrors.

There come thrice no words in this season: for I sit stabbed, diseased, raging like a giant curtain! The sky is mine to rend – the sky! It knocks thrice and throws me restless! The water of this

Order of Nine Angles

evening is a festering wave to my heart – carved in pieces through rapture! The slightest light perturbs - who will be my friend in such a season! They scatter like lens at my jabbering, which in one instant inspires more than one good time – a pleasing broth – but in others, I am rolling, broken, vital! My hands would kill for this!

There it is ... the real moment; that which cannot be contained. I know it now and the joy it creates means to kill – or I succumb! The fabric rips, the storm doth batter this raft – yet I hang on!

I love, so I cannot live. I cannot tell you...

Burdened therefore with the baggage of tragedy, I fall inwards; to what I do not know – only the pain and wounded curling do I expect.

I die though live: my tears are still warm. In fact, they burn...

V

Death holds no opinion. The blank rage of minions stirs not the breast of the leopard.

Now I know the Sun; now its fruit doth stain my mouth. For suffering is a prelude to understanding and I have arrived! Washed, unexpected, upon a shore, its sands were undoubted, it flowers a glorious statement of truth! Simple, undeniable – a beauty not of my creation, but of my life, naturally. And how I marvel at myself, born anew. For there are experiences that are outside and move within - she moves within! I see a greater picture! Free in the greatest surety I have known.

I did battle by my own deceptions and now you stand before me, your smile alone fills my world. What can I do to express this? Simply – let me look into your eyes, for there are no images to cage – we dance, we are inspiration and we are beyond death.

I love you as I look now into the Sun, and know within my heart, every creature toward love roams free.. together.

12.

Nythra

A Sinister Concerto In Three Brief Movements

by
Anton Long
114yf

1

Lars smiled. The bullet had done its work, and his victim - his third offer in as many months - toppled over backwards by the force of the impact, lay on the dark green late Spring grass, eyes open, limbs akimbo, and quite dead.

His vantage point had been the old Quince tree on one side of the ornamental lawn of the large Edwardian house, and he was soon back, past the wrought iron railings, on the pavement and walking under the bright May sunshine toward where he had parked his motorcycle, the wide ring road a few streets away making his escape from the town quite easy. Less than three hours later he was back in his own city, in his own modern, small, if expensive, Apartment overlooking the river. The smallness, the uncluttered clean newness, the view of the river, all pleased him, and, opening a bottle of Chablis, he raised his glass and gave his customary toast: "To presencing the Dark."

For Lars - not quite twenty-three years of age, of medium if muscular build and with a mane of not quite curly almost long chestnut-coloured hair - was entering the second year of his dark, sinister, quest.

Months ago he had shed the once obligatory black clothes for stylish wear obtained through his new hobby of credit card cloning, just as he had exchanged the room he shared in a rented house with friends for his pleasing Apartment, and just as he had given up his dreary city office job. It was meant to be new start, after his successful completion of the Rite of External Adept, and it was. Even his own sinister group had begun to flourish, and tonight, his dark gods willing, there would be a new woman for him to sexually initiate.

The small bookshelf near his plasma screen contained a large quartz crystal and only a few books, all of which dealt with his dark quest, and he sat in his comfortable chair - set to give the best view of the river - to read from his favourite book.

"It is of fundamental importance - to evolution both individual and otherwise - that what is Dark, Sinister or Satanic is made real in a practical way, over and over again. That is, that what is dangerous, awesome, numinous, tragic, deadly, terrible, terrifying and beyond the power of ordinary mortals, laws or governments to control is made manifest. In effect, non-Initiates (and even Initiates) need constantly reminding that such things still exist; they need constantly to be brought "face-to-face", and touched, with what is, or appears to be, inexplicable, uncontrollable, powerful and "evil". They need reminding of their own mortality - of the unforeseen, inexplicable "powers of Fate", of the powerful force of "Nature".

If this means killing, wars, suffering, sacrifice, terror, disease, tragedy and disruption, then such things must be - for it is one of the duties of a Satanic Initiate to so presence the dark, and prepare the way for, or initiate, the change and evolution which always result from such things. Such things as these must be, and always will be, because the majority of people are or will remain, inert and sub-

human unless changed. The majority is - and always will be until it evolves to become something else - raw material to be used, moulded, cut-away and shaped to create what must be. There is no such thing as an innocent person because everyone who exists is part of the whole, the change, the evolution, the presencing of life itself, which is beyond them, and their life only has meaning through the change, development and evolution of life. Their importance is what they can become, or what can be achieved through their death, their tragedy, their living - their importance does not lie in their individual happiness or their individual desires or whatever."

Slowly, as Lars read, drank his wine, listened to his favourite modern music, twilight descended as it does in England, bringing a strange aethereal beauty to the river and the mutely lit buildings on the opposite bank, and he lay down his book to begin to plan his next deed. For there grew in him even then a desire for something beyond the clean almost emotionless efficiency of his killings, and he stood, outside, on his small balcony, glass of wine in hand, wondering what he might do.

His assignation with his sinister group was still some hours away and he spent one of those hours walking along by the river in the warmth of the early evening, half hoping that someone, or some gang, would attack him, for he had yet to try out the swordstick umbrella he carried. But all the people he passed seemed happy or absorbed in their own affairs, and he returned to the large, new, building that housed his own Apartment still considering what his new plan of action might be. Maybe it was this which made him err. Or maybe it was something else.

There was music in the room of a type he had not heard before, and he was scrutinizing the pile of CD's which lay beside the player when a female voice surprised him.

"It's Schubert's Piano Trio in E-flat."

She did not seem concerned to find a man in her Apartment, and stood, by the door to her bedroom, slightly smiling, her long auburn hair trailing over her shoulders, her nipples straining against the thin fabric of her revealing purple dress.

In control again, Lars said, "Beautiful."

"Yes, what a tragedy he died so young."

He was referring to both the music and the woman. "I believe I'm in the wrong Apartment." He guessed her age to be early thirties, and it was his turn to smile.

"Surreal."

"What?"

"This."

"I must be on the wrong floor."

"You are. You're right at the top, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Better view?" She gestured toward her window and balcony.

"A little. Would you like to see?"

"Yes."

She was on his balcony, intently gazing across the river, and he stood so close to her their shoulders were touching. His dark quest had given him a confidence with women that his previous years lacked, and he allowed his hand to briefly touch hers as he turned and said: "Would you like some wine?"

"Yes," she smiled and followed him back inside.

He noticed her interest in his small pieces of electronic equipment, resting on the glass table he used as a desk. But she surprised him again by knowing what they were. "Cloning. Interesting," she said as she took the glass of wine he offered.

"It's just a hobby," he said and tried to hide his smile behind his glass as he drank.

"And one which can be quite useful. To interesting hobbies!" She raised her glass.

"To interesting hobbies!"

"You have a contact, I presume, who supplies some useful and necessary details."

For a few moments he looked at her suspiciously. Jared, one of the members of his sinister group, had indeed proved quite useful, employed as he was in an hotel. "Well..." he began to say in reply, trying to make some reasonable answer or excuse.

"Don't worry!" And she came toward him and touched his arm. "I've been looking for someone like you."

For a second he found her confidence, her attitude, her interest perplexing, but it was only a second. She was waiting, and he knew she was and he did not disappoint, taking the glass from her hand and placing both his and hers on the glass table. She did not resist his embrace: instead, she welcomed it, pressing her body into his and embracing him with a strength which surprised him. Then they were kissing, tongue to tongue, and removing each other's clothes.

Soon, they were on the floor, her dress pushed up around her shoulders, his shirt undone, his trousers and underwear removed. She was naked under her dress, and their sexual passion was intense. And when they were satiated, they sat, stretched out on the floor leaning against his sofa, drinking wine.

"You must have some interesting friends," she said.

"Not as interesting as you," he quipped, then winced at his use of a cliché. But before he could make some clever riposte in compensation, she spoke.

"You enjoy it, then?" she asked, "the game?" And she gestured toward his electronic equipment.

Her perspicacity amazed him and as he looked into her azure-coloured eyes he felt a brief contraction in his stomach as if she had reached out to him on another, darker, level. "Yes! Care to join the game?" He said the words quite without thought, instinctively, his face flushed with excitement.

"I would love too!" she replied, and kissed him. "When can we start?"

"Now?"

"Excellent! Anything in particular in mind?"

"Well, there is this meeting, tonight."

The Temple of his sinister group was a large converted room of a large house in Lars' chosen city, and it followed the precepts laid down in the *Black Book of Satan* as did the ritual of Initiation. Unusually, Lars did not participate, but sat with Arleen, his new lover, on cushions to one side of the altar, and as the ritual progressed Lars knew Arleen was unimpressed. So was Lars, despite the dramatic rendering of the ritual, and for the first time it occurred to him that such theatrical games had served their purpose and belonged to his past. He must quest forth into new realms, new sinister experiences.

It was many hours past midnight and Lars and Arleen left to stand for a while, in the garden of the house, in the still warm air of the night.

"You found it boring, then?" Lars asked.

"Yes."

"It lacked that vivifying ecstasy - that excitement, that danger - we need and crave."

"Most certainly."

"It's still early."

"My thoughts exactly!"

She stood smiling at him, and her presence, her eyes, the memory of their passionate, sexual, encounter earlier that evening, affected him in a reckless way. "I've got an idea," he said, satanically.

"This one," she said with an air of knowledge.

She had broken into, and started, the car parked in some nameless city street, in only a few minutes. "A youth, well-spent," she smiled as he looked at her quizzically.

Their target was several miles away in the sodium-lit darkness - an all-night garage on the edge of the city - where they, both dressed all in black, stopped, away from prying surveillance cameras, to assume their disguise of demon masks which Lars had borrowed from one of the members of his sinister group. There were no other customers, a tribute perhaps to the lateness of the hour, and Lars brandished his revolver while the thin, gaunt, and male keeper of the till with the face and clothes of a student, went even more pale. Lithe, Arleen vaulted over the counter, pushed him aside and took what cash there was. Less than a minute later, their first deed was done.

The money was irrelevant. It was the sheer excitement that roused them, that captivated, exhilarated, and after they had abandoned the stolen vehicle they sat in her powerful, sleek, car, laughing. Then they kissed, passionately, before she speedily, recklessly, sped them back to his Apartment and a night of physical passion.

2

It was only the beginning. For some reason Lars did not understand, but did not then bother about, he and Arleen not only inspired each other in a sinister way, but also complimented each other. He knew little about her beyond the few unimportant things she said about her past and present circumstances, but the truth was he was not that interested. What mattered for him was that he found her company vivifying. He felt stronger, more confident, more Satanic, as he knew she did. Quite without expecting to, or even wanting to, it seemed to him that he had found his perfect sinister partner, and he felt that with her he might Presence the Dark in exhilarating practical ways, bringing dark magick to the Earth in a manner far beyond the mundane rituals, and cullings, he had previously used.

They spent the morning of that cloudy, rainful day, in his Apartment planning their next deed. Once, after they broken bread and drank wine, she browsed through his small collection of Satanic literature, all of which emanated from the *Order of Nine Angles* and all of which did not seem to interest her.

Taking down one of the books, he read for her his favourite quotation, and, after he had finished, she smiled and said: "That certainly expresses the essence. We two are more than mortal, for we are ready by our combined will and life-force and through our deeds to forge the next link in our evolution to inspire those who will admire us."

It did not seem a pompous thing for her to say given the circumstances, for Lars knew then with perfect clarity that she understood and it seemed to him for one indefinite, although brief, moment that she was darkness come alive.

"We might even become infamous," she added as a coda to his thoughts.

Now that, thought Lars, would be good. With this, his conversion was complete, and he showed her, locked away in aluminium cases and hidden behind a false back to his wardrobe, his small collection of guns, collected and bought from his sinister friends and contacts over the past two years. She said nothing, but the way she touched them pleased him.

Their planning completed, they left in her car to purchase the few items, and extra clothing, they needed, returning only to change into their new black outfits and affect a minimalist, but reasonably effective, disguise. They kissed passionately before setting forth into the typical rain of typical English middle afternoon.

An hour, and one stolen car later, they arrived at their destination: a Building Society in a fairly prosperous suburb. Three customers of indeterminate personality, and several staff, were inside. From his bag, Lars produced a shotgun, firing into the ceiling. One stocky middle-aged man, in a checked shirt and jeans, rushed toward Lars as a hero might, and Arleen drew the pistol Lars had given her, and shot the man dead.

"Money!" Arleen demanded to the terrified woman clerk nearest her, who duly if nervously obeyed, stuffing the small bag Arleen held out with a collection of banknotes.

Then they were gone, amid the sound of an alarm and a delayed, female, scream.

That night in Lars' Apartment - after a celebratory meal in an expensive restaurant paid for by Lars' hobby, and the customary toast to Presencing the Dark - their sexual passion and excitement attained new levels, binding them even closer together.

The morning sun found them tired, but joyous, and they lay together a long time in bed, drinking wine, touching, and talking of deeds they might - and should - do. Once, Lars left to return with one of his books, from which he read, and once they wandered to his sitting area to watch the news on his plasma screen. Their deed was there, if only briefly reported, and both smiled when they heard their deed described: "...callous...cold-blooded..."

"Those people, at that ritual, would they dare to do what we have done?" she asked.

"Probably not."

"Then they are still in chains; held back by their own feebleness, their inertia."

"Probably."

"So, it's only a pose for them, is it?"

"Probably."

That day of dark joy, killing, exuberance and passion became the archetype for the next part of their life together. Their next plan took them away, to another city, and although their *modus operandi* was almost the same, the dark intensity of their deeds increased.

This time, there was a long queue of non-descript people waiting patiently in the non-descript area marked out for such waiting, with the three non-descript serving staff of the chosen Bank seemingly secure behind their screens. The vestibule was large, if poorly lit by high modern lamps, and a non-descript kind of tribute to the time when the Victorian Bank building itself was a symbol for its times. Arleen and Lars, in their now customary black clothes and minimalist disguise - a wig, Egyptian style make-up for her; a flat tweed cap and a moustache for him - energetically entered the building, their guns ready. Arleen shot the last person in the queue - an elderly man - and gestured for the remainder to lie on the floor, which, obedient to her gun, they did as the body of the man lay bleeding and dying near her feet.

The cashiers swiftly handed over money, and it was all over in a minute with Arleen and Lars calming walking out of the building into the street where oblivious people, and traffic, passed. Over the road, and two side-streets later, they were back in their stolen car as, in the distance, a Police siren wailed above the city vehicle noise, lyingly proclaiming a kind of mastery of the streets.

Three days later, Lars and Arleen ventured forth again, to a city even more distant. The drab, dreary building was almost the same, and it seemed to Lars that he already existed on some higher level, taut, waiting, like some dark predator, ready to lunge, to kill. There was no queue, this time, on that dreary rainfoul morning in that dreary city of copycat shops and traffic - only one customer with a face like an artists' blank canvas, leaning against the counter while a young woman Bank clerk talked trivia to him, half-smiling. Lars pointed his gun, but it was Arleen who shot him, once while he stood, and twice after he had fallen to the floor. A young man pushed opened the glass door as she did so, and he stood there, unmoving, his hand, knuckles-white, still holding the handle of the door. Arleen turned, raised her gun, pouted a kiss at him, and the young man fled with memories, a face, to haunt his dreams for years to come. Then she was smiling, waiving at the surveillance camera while Lars collected money.

Once outside, several people stood watching them - uncertain what was going on or what they should do - but Lars and Arleen walked calmly away not even bothering, this time, to hide their guns. They had not gone far along the street with its passing traffic when a Police car skidded to a halt.

"Armed Police!" a Police Officer shouted as he swiftly in a trained and masterly fashion exited the car, brandished his gun while using the open car door as a shield. "Put down your weapons!"

Lars turned and in an even more masterly fashion shot the man in the centre of his forehead. Around them, people ran, cowered, sheltered behind anything they could, astonished, afraid, amazed. The other Police Officer, about to aim, was forced to move away from his position beside the bonnet of the car as Arleen fired three times in his direction before brazenly walking around the back of the vehicle toward him as he crouched on the pavement that stood in front of a row of drab High-Street style retail shops. It might have been a scene from some film - except the dead body of the Policeman, the terror, the astonishment, of the people, were real. For a brief moment the Police Officer and Arleen looked at each other, weapons raised, and it was this look that doomed him. He could have fired at his closing target. Instead, he stayed crouching, looking into her eyes, looking at her smiling face, until the first of her two bullets impacted - one in his head, the other in his chest - when he tumbled awkwardly backwards yet sideways before the stillness of death overcame him. The rain had stopped as she had walked toward him, and a small swathe of bright, warm, sunlight came to relieve the scene of its repetitive city-drab greyness.

Lars gestured toward Arleen, who understood immediately and she fastly, recklessly, drove them away from the scene in the Police car which, a few minutes later, they had abandoned in favour of another hijacked vehicle.

Hours later, back in their lair, the television news had pleased them - "...cold-blooded.....ruthless..." but Lars sensed Arleen was restless as they sat on his sofa, having toasted their latest triumph.

"If what you say - or rather, what those books of yours say - is true," Arleen said, after Lars had read another extract from his book, *Grimoire of the Dark Gods*, "why don't we just bring these entities who can cause chaos, disruption, back to Earth? Wouldn't *that* be fun! Watch all the morons scurry about in their terror."

Lars smiled, and continued to read aloud. "I quote: *The Dark Gods are means to self-fulfillment, self-understanding and self-divinity.....According to Sinister tradition, it is possible to "open a nexion to the Dark Gods" by certain sinister rites. Some of these rites involve such things as esoteric chant (for which see Naos) combined with a large, clear, pure quartz tetrahedron, while others involve ceremonies of blasphemy, excess and human sacrifice.*" He paused to look at her. "We would need a sacrifice, or two."

"Or three!" she laughed. "We should really change our tactics - keep one step ahead. I know, why not a bomb?"

"Or two."

"Why stop at two?"

"One small technical problem."

"You don't know how," she said.

"You guessed it."

"Can't be that difficult. Are we above mere mortals, or what?"

"I suppose the Internet would be a good place to start."

A meal, a bottle of wine, and several hours later, they had their answers. "All we need now are the materials, and ingredients."

A week later, they had their materials. Two days later, they had their bombs. They had slept little, and had ventured forth into the real world only to purchase or acquire the materials, the food, the wine, they needed. Their hours were spent studying the texts - the manuals they had acquired via the Internet - talking of deeds they might do, and satiating their sexual desire for each other. Those nine days had affected them both, although in different ways. Lars looked older, and somewhat tired, while with every passing day Arleen seemed to become more passionate, more energetic, more needful of physical passion.

Their city targets were chosen quite at random - a Bank, a street of shops, an Inn - and they left their deadly explosive devices, packed with long nails, in three stolen cars, with their timers set one hour apart. Lars and Arleen were not disappointed by the chaos, the death, the terror, they caused, and they sat avidly watching the television reports of the explosions in Lars' Apartment, smiling, and making toasts with their glasses of wine to strange-named Dark Gods as the toll of their sacrificial victims rose: Shugara, Azanigin, Gaubni..

Lars was visualizing their victims - past and present - exulting in his deeds, and imagining the life of their lives seeping into, seeding, the large quartz tetrahedron he held in his hand. Arleen was beside him, pressing her warm thinly clothed body into his, and it seemed to him then that her nearness, her warmth, her very presence, not only strengthened him, overcoming his tiredness, but also seeped somehow into the crystal, warming it and his hand.

That night they ventured forth into the darkness of the rural English countryside, traveling hour upon tedious hour until they reached their destination. Lars had been there, already, in the first keen months of his dark quest, and he was not disappointed as they left their car in the lane by The Marsh to walk in the almost full moonlight to the top of Corndon Hill, for it was there that their simple ritual began.

Arleen held the crystal and he chanted his first chant: *Nythra kthunae Atazoth*. She lay down then, naked, still holding the crystal, and he stood over her, chanting his second chant: *Binan ath ga wath am*. He lay with her then, naked body to naked body, while a cool breeze came to dry a little of his sweat as he moved upon her. Was there really a change in the light? Or was it just the intensity of his visualization? Was there really something there, seeping through the nexion of their ritual, their crystal, their visualization, coagulated by the blood they had shed, and their own, cold, sinister, desire?

She was reaching her climax and as she did so her shout became a dark exultation: *Aperiatur terra, et germinet Chaos*. Then, there was stillness.

3

He had been a little ahead of her as they descended the hill, clothed, and happy, and he had to will himself to stop from laughing, loudly, raucously, for in the moment of her climax he had sensed the worlds, the beings, the dimensions, beyond. So little; so puny - we are..... He wanted to run, to jump - to shout, scream, to share, the truth, and he was nearing the bottom of the hill when he turned around. But she was gone, nowhere to be seen.

Calmly at first, he walked back toward the top, as - calmly - he walked back down again. He waited, then, a long time, before returning to the top. He waited even longer by the car; in the car, even as Dawn arrived to bring the warmth of the Sun to dispel the chill of the last hours of that night. Once, twice, in the bright morning light of that warm morning he ascended that hill; wandered around it, and it was only many hours later that he willed himself to leave, wondering, hoping, she would be there on his return, having played a lover's jape.

But she was not there, in his Apartment, and he found himself - surprised by his nervousness - knocking on her door, several Apartment floors below. There was no response to his insistent rapping. Her door was unlocked, as he half expected, and he stood inside the completely bare, empty, spaces, not knowing what to think, and drained of all feeling.

The days, the weeks, past, grave-worm slowly, and even the news of chaos spreading across his planet did not please him, at first.

[Fini]

13.

Hangster's Gate

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Winter came early to the Shropshire town: a cold wind with brief hail that changed suddenly to rain to leave a damp covering of mist.

An old man in an old cart drawn by a sagging pony crossed himself as he saw Yapp shuffle by him along the cobbled lane toward the entrance to the Raven Inn. It was warm, inside the ancient Inn, but dark from fire and pipe smoke, and Yapp took his customary horn of free ale to sit alone on his corner bench by the log fire. The silence that had followed his entrance soon filled, and only one man still stared at him.

The man was Abigail's husband, and he pushed his cap back from his forehead before moving toward Yapp. His companions, dressed like him in their work clothes, tried to restrain him, but he pushed them aside. He reached Yapp's table and kicked it aside with his boot.

Slowly Yapp stood up. He was a wiry man and seemed insubstantial beside the bulk of Abigail's husband.

"Wha you been doin? To her!" Abigail's husband clenched his fists and moved closer.

Yapp stared at him, his unshaven face twitching slightly, and then he smiled.

"I canna move! I canna move!" shouted Abigail's husband.

Yapp smiled again, drank the rest of his ale and walked slowly toward the door.

"I be beshrewed!" the big man cried among the silence.

Yapp turned to him, made a gesture with his hand and left the Inn as Abigail's husband found himself able to move.

No one followed Yapp outside.

A carriage and pair raced past him as he walked down the lane. The young lady inside, heading for the warmth and comfort of Priory Hall was alarmed at seeing him and turned away. This pleased him, as the prospect of the walk to his cottage, miles distant, pleased him - for it was the night of Autumnal Equinox.

The journey was not tiresome, and he enjoyed the walk, the mist and darkening sky that came with the twilight hour. The moon would be late to rise, and he walked briskly. Soon, he was above the town and at the place where the three lanes met. His own way took him down, past the small collection of cottages, almshouses and a church, toward the wooded precincts of Yarchester Hall. He stopped, once, but could not see the distant summit of Brown Clee Hill where he had possessed Abigail.

It had been a long ride back in the wind and the rain, but the horses had been strong, almost wild, and he smiled in remembrance, for that night Abigail has warmed his bed.

Tomorrow, perhaps, they might go to Raven's Seat. It would be all over by then, for another seventeen years. No one would stop or trouble them.

His way lead into the trees, along a narrow path, down the Devil's Dingle to Hangster's Gate and the clearing. There was nothing in the clearing - except the mist-swathed gibbet with its recent victim swinging gently in the breeze. He would need the hand, and with practiced care, he unsheathed his knife to stretch and cut the dead man's left hand away.

Order of Nine Angles

Less than a day old, the body had already lost its eyes to ravens.

It was not far from the clearing to his cottage, and he walked slowly, every few moments stopping to stand and listen. There was nothing, no sound - except a faint sighing as the breeze stirred the trees around. A lighted candle shone from the one small window of his cottage. It was a sign, and he stopped to creep down and glimpse inside. There were voices inside and as he looked he saw Abigail standing near a young man. He saw her draw the youth toward her and place his hand on her breast. Heard her laughing; saw her kiss the youth and press her body into his. Then she was dancing around him, laughing and singing as she stripped her clothes away to lay naked and inviting on the sphagnum moss that formed the mattress of Yapp's bed. Then the youth was upon her, struggling to wrest himself from his own clothes.

Yapp heard people approaching along the track and he stood up to hear Abigail's cries of ecstasy. He waited, until they reached him and they all heard Abigail climax with a scream. Then he was inside the cottage, with the others around him. The youth was surprised and tried to stand and Yapp stood aside to let them pin him down on the hard earth floor of the cottage.

An old woman in a dirty bonnet gave a toothless laugh - Abigail laughed, even Yapp laughed as the tall blacksmith tore out the youth's heart. Then was a pail for some of the blood.

Abigail was soon dressed, the body taken away and she led Yapp and the old woman through the trees to another clearing. The moon was rising, the blood was fresh and she took the severed hand from Yapp to dip it in the blood and sprinkle their sacred ground to propitiate their Dark Goddess Baphomet.

I4.

Shugara ~ A Sinister Pathworking

Collyn Branwell - Earth-Gate Assembly (ONA)

I have just returned from that specially chosen site in the forest, just three miles from here. This time, I had been successful in allowing myself to become more thoroughly immersed into, and absorbed with, the spirit of the place, and the Invokation itself. As for the previous Pathworkings, there had always been a kind of foreboding, a certain hesitation, a tangible fear and recognition that this communion with primal Nature, under the dark, open sky, all alone, was overwhelming - beyond the romanticized, dualistic perception of Nature and the Cosmos so prevalent within modern-day paganism and new-age thinking.

Today, however, all such hesitation and fear - separateness - dissolved. A manifest connexion has been created on this cold, early Winter morning. All distractions, all strange, hidden surroundings united with my Being. I had successfully confronted the fear, which once, when I was unaware, had controlled and limited the promise that is my Life; that primal fear of the Dark - that Shadow which threatens to emerge into this causal existence and devour. Today, I have faced this fear.

The walk to the chosen site was a brisk one, as I was forced to travel up the hillside in a long, winding manner, as necessitated by the steep cliffs of the hillside. Every step was made in deliberation and contemplation, knowing that this was an exercise of Will, in unison with Nature's higher order, a discovery of the Primal Darkness within and without. I was aware that this Darkness, this Shadow was about to be confronted.

Unlike before, I instinctively understood that on this morning, I would travel through the forest without aid of flashlight or lantern. There existed simply an instinctive knowing - that this was necessary, that there could be no crutches, no hesitation, no turning back. This newly added element, together with the fact that coyotes are well known to roam and hunt along these parts, functioned to make this Pathworking, this brief moment in a life-long Quest, all the more interesting - all the more worthwhile.

Finally, after traveling through the heavily forested area, I entered into the small, flat circular clearing, which I had gone to some pains to locate some weeks earlier. I knew when I first came to this place, with its solitary, circular formation of trees in the center, that this clearing was indeed fated for such a venture. Here, one was surrounded by both the awe-inspiring presence of Nature, in the raw, and by the stark, intimidating vastness of the heavens. Here, there could be no simple pandering to the ego in some urbanized, disrespectful form of sorcery so prevalent within the city. One was within Nature's grasp, with only three choices : 1) to bow down to Her in some feeble attempt to show respect; 2) to disrespect Her by ignoring Her, and by investing one's energy into the petty purpose of building one's own ego; or 3) to become One with Her - what, in fact, She truly desires.

After unloading the relevant supplies from my backpack, I first lit the charcoal I had packed, and placed on top of it the incense I had prepared - a mixture representing the combination of the energies attributed to Luna (the sphere of hidden knowledge) and Mars (the sphere of sacrifice, death and destruction). Afterwards, I lit the candles, one red, the other blue, and stood quietly, understanding that this exercise was more than a mere mindless, egotistic

abstraction. This was the continuation of a sequential Becoming, of a living, breathing entity possessing the potential to alchemically transform. This Calling was a step further in that process of stripping away the deceptive, temporal layer to reveal what is, and to progressively become One with that essence. Yes, I had understood that this was in fact a sequential unfolding of the genuine Dark Tradition.

After several moments, I began visualizing the sigil of Shugara, the Dark God-related entity associated with the fourth Pathway of the Dark Tradition. And, as I visualized this sigil, I began the first of thirteen deep vibrations, nine in continuous succession, then a short pause, and four more vibrations. The deep, resonant quality of these vibrations was revealing a remarkable improvement from previous attempts. The entire week previous had been spent preparing for this event. A steady decrease of food, meat and sleep had been implemented one week prior to this morning, with the last day providing very little food or sleep for this morning. At this moment, I could feel the positive effects produced by such a preparation, as the vibrant, resonant energy emanating from my solar plexus began rising and spreading throughout the whole of my body. This tangible energy was reverberating within my uttermost Being; an energy which, had I not taken the previous week to prepare for, I'd have been numb toward.

An altered state of consciousness was rapidly manifesting. It felt as though it were my very own spirit producing the sound. A tangible oneness had begun to travel like an electric current pulsating through my Being - a concrete partaking of energies that were at once both personal and supra-personal, unconscious and Cosmic.

It seemed as though I had "plugged in" to an entirely new source of energy. Indeed, by the fourth or fifth repetition, my vibrations began to grow not only in strength and power, but in duration as well. A good fifteen to twenty seconds was elapsing before my breath and power gave out, requiring a new breath to be drawn. Yes, something inside was awakening, a Chthonic Darkness millennia old, yet so vibrantly and enticingly new.

Now, I finished the thirteenth and final vibration, my voice echoing in the dark, intimidating silence. With my Will vocalized, I reclined across the cold ground, closing my eyes and breathing deeply, waiting for this new energy to manifest. At this point, while realizing I was confronting that Darkness which threatens to devour, I could sense a literal hair-raising fear, a fear which seemed to be sensed by the forest itself.

At first, what I witnessed was a violent eruption of dark, black smoke mushrooming forth out of a deep well. I knew at once that this signified the awakening and unleashing of the Shadow within. The Dark was being presented...

What then followed was both enlightening and unsettling. It seemed as though I was able to leave my body and travel directly overhead. I could see the area of the forest which directly surrounded me. What this panoramic view revealed was rather disconcerting: in a perfect circle, surrounding me on every side, were a pack of wolves, crouched down and hidden by the surrounding brush, visibly positioned to pounce at any given moment. What I immediately found to be even more alarming, was the simple fact that each wolf was perfectly still - there was no sound, no sign of restlessness, no apparent agitation or warning of any kind. Not once did I hear them approach. Nevertheless, they were there, and my own prior lack of empathy and self-awareness became startlingly clear.

These "wolves" represented, for me, that which threatens to devour, and that which most likely will devour if not confronted, explored and resolved. The fact that I could now see these "wolves" revealed that I was indeed now beginning to develop a real empathy with my true self and with the primal essence of Nature. The genuine Sinister Tradition had afforded for me the opportunity to transcend these primal fears which had earlier held sway over my Being. This Tradition had provided me with the raw materials for surpassing present consciousness - a surpassing which alone is able to provide one with a clear and precise evaluation

of one's true self.

After what seemed a long time, new images began to appear, most notably those which had been invading my dreams, or rather nightmares, ever since I had been initiated into the Dark Tradition some weeks earlier. These strange dreams had contained very bizarre images, and had even occasionally become somewhat disruptive. It was as though distant, faded objects, from a past that I was minutely aware of, began invading my consciousness, though I knew perfectly well that it was all in accordance with my own Will. I was more consciously aware now than at any other moment that my Initiation had in fact opened a Gate within my psyche, that this was in fact a genuine occurrence beyond mere delusion, and that the Shadow is indeed a factual fragment of the Self, lying dormant, awaiting the opportunity to be developed and integrated, so as to create a new, evolved, un-divided Being.

The most startling image, which appeared at that moment, was (and had been since I first encountered it in a horrific dream just days earlier) an enigma that seemed to haunt at the very edges of consciousness. It appeared as an intimidating black fish, or shark, of very large proportions, silently hovering at the very bottom of the ocean in complete darkness, as though it had remained there for centuries, or even for millennia, forgotten - waiting...

While gazing at this image, it was as I had been transported into that timeless existence in which the Dream itself had originally taken place. This time, I possessed a clarity of understanding, which I had not earlier possessed while in the dream. I found myself plunged once again into the cold, dark, murky depths in which I first encountered the huge Beast. In the original dream, I had, at this point, become frenzied and hurried, struggling to head back up to the water's surface, where I could hope to find some sort of safety. However, now all such desperation was absent - controlled. Rather than struggling to escape the Darkness, I found myself exploring the Darkness. And again, just as in the Dream, I bumped into that impenetrable Darkness, which at first puzzled me, that is, until I saw the Face of that Darkness.

There it was, the same giant creature, which, in the Dream, had devoured me. Actually, I had awoken just after the huge creature grunted and immediately lunged toward me with teeth glaring, but I was nevertheless aware that I had been devoured within the Dream, and that this encounter was symbolic of something unknown, yet very real. However, at this precise moment in the replaying of my Dream, I immediately understood the meaning of this fish. I now understood that I was encountering a projected symbol of my undiscovered, unrealized self - the Dark Unconscious; that aspect of the psyche which has been the occasion for many uncontrolled, destructive, frightening bursts of the acausal into the physical world throughout history. I also understood that this Darkness was not only something internal, but external to myself as well.

During this last phase of the Pathworking, I could sense the increase of a tangible euphoria coming over my body. I could truly sense a genuine Becoming taking place, and that this experience was void of any mystification or abstract romanticism. There was present only a steely, sober clarity that what was taking place was genuine, solid step toward Eternity, toward Becoming, and toward Destiny.

As I left the site, a new awareness of, and connexion with, the forest permeated my being. All noise, all abstract thoughts, all nervous mind-activity, so common within the metropolis, was absent. Only a distinct, unmistakable knowing permeated my consciousness; a knowing which only further clarified, and solidified, Direction. This new insight, this new personal victory, was to be only one of many such victories and events, which, together, allow for a Becoming. Yes, there would many more experiences, which would, over time, become much more varied and certainly more difficult.

Now, the darkness in the forest did not intimidate - it called. Shugara had come, and I was not the same.

15.

The River

From 'Fenrir' Volume V, Issue Two

The figure stood with pride along the mouth of the river, a solitary witness to the precious gift which nature had bestowed upon his soul. Of what consequence this may have upon not only his being, but of all who had crossed before him, there was no telling. Upon his arrival, the river had erupted forth, billowing forward that of liquid fire, brilliance born of life; a life filled with the power to shape mountains and the lives of men, yet tranquil enough in its motion to induce sleep upon the same. This embodiment of Mother had been born from the tears of Gods, to be presented by only those of rightful choosing.

From the wind there came voices, of which each uttered gentle whispers of welcome in their passing, as well as details of nature's efforts toward the coming winter and the darkness that would follow. Within this, wind and water coupled to form the backdrop of what is now one man's sanctuary, to be used in times of need when the moon eclipses even the brightest of hopes, and the faintest of memory.

To this the lone magickian was given strength through action, from which did he erect a Temple, undying in its grandeur and scalable only through the limitlessness of imagination, its uses for that of workings known only unto him. Of wood gathered throughout the darkest of forests and stones shaped through timeless assaults, did the magickian construct an altar, its purpose rendered through the permits of his only Will, the attainment of true being, through the perfection of body, mind and soul.

Creatures of the forest, long since accustomed to the ways of this man, proved their trust through protection and neutrality when needed, for without this friendship failure was assured. Three months since the arrival of the magickian had it been, and throughout this time lessons were taught, not only to the mage and his counterparts who crawled on four and swam the depths, but unto the entire world which polluted his home from all points, near and far.

This was only the beginning, an infant in the manhood of the evolutionary puzzle, and as he stood facing the trident of the river, thoughts toward the future swarmed throughout his mind.

Was not he truly evolved, empowered with previous action and well spent time toward the tests of self, that he could justify his rightful place among the stars and call forth the names of all who tread before him? If not now, if not him, then who? When? Who before him hath shown truer purpose, stronger limbs, or sharpness of mind? "Have I not suffered unto you, Mother, for the period of time which I, through the breath that feeds my blood, which in turn gives life unto my heart, had agreed upon from the first eve of my journey?"

The magickian spoke to the river as he stood, motionless but with great urgency, facing the wall of tears. Great suffering had befallen him in previous times, but through the trials set forth by nature, and more importantly himself, he had improved and honed many skills, skills which would be needed for this and future generations to sow the seeds for rebirth and ascension to the stars and beyond. Answers were expected from this plea, but the river did not speak.

Disheartened by the river's ignorance toward his many accomplishments, the mage slowly turned, making steps weighted with anger toward his Temple. There he would rest throughout the night; concentration given to that of questions aimed at loyalty and his wanted gift of placement amongst the Gods. The river flowed throughout, but with the motion and reaction that of silt and clay, forever slowing with every link broken by this man's ego.

Sleep invaded the dawn, the mage undertaking a breathless nightmare of visions hammered down by what seemed to be the wrath of the Twin Rivers.

Awakened by the shrill laughter of a child, the figure again took placement along the river, again questioning its judgment and purpose as authority. Again, no answers were handed to the perplexed and now angered Adept. Throughout the day, needed tasks went unnoticed; self-pity

and the villain of righteousness took hold with a firm grasp.

Weeks passed by, with no answer to the questions posed by the now disheveled mage given, the river lay silent. With a hatred did the magickian take to dismantling the Temple, with great thrusts of livid persecution did the foundation fall, and to it went the spirit of Will.

With all but the altar remaining did the mage cease his attack, to once again lay upon the earth, allowing the soil to cradle his beaten body as in times past. With his last vision of conscious awareness did the man spit upon the river, renouncing that which before he had held sacred. Thoughts echoed throughout his mind, with the lasting image of his true wish this night, for the river to open once again and flow like the liquid beauty he had loved and caressed with every motion of every deed. "It is then," he spoke unto himself, "that I will receive the answers I so justly deserve!" Then the darkness of sleep took hold. Forever.

Throughout the night, the great river churned under the hardened mass created from inactivity, with every flow harbored a hateful decree bellowed from the mage. Slowly, the river edged upon its' side, closer to its prey, until the compacted soil could hold the power from within to more. The river erupted, flowing as blood only all that lay within its' wake, consuming the life it had given so generously in time past, gripping and suffocating innocence as well as the guilty. All that had lived there were now dead, to be used again toward the new life the river would surely bestow, to make the land again fertile.

The river allowed the mark of a lone altar to stand in place amongst its new children, to be a remembrance of her generosity and power, to not be mistaken for rightful dues by any man.

16.

A Beginning

ONA 1977 ev

Per Sorenson was dead.

His death did nothing to ease the shelling. Katgusha rockets still shattered the buildings around. A tram burned as rubble from a nearby explosion slithered onto the tracks in front of it and the armored troop carrier bearing Sorenson's body turned to avoid the flames.

A pretty woman wearing a Wehrmacht helmet for protection against debris looked up at the carrier and briefly smiled. But her smile did nothing to relieve Dieter's sadness, and he watched her as she walked nimbly through the rubble clutching a canteen of water. The block of buildings ahead of her shook with explosions, and smoke and dust drifted away with the slight wind. Somewhere nearby a man screamed.

Dieter and his comrades did not move as the carrier bore them and the body toward the Ploetzensee cemetery. Zhukov's Red Horde was near and Dieter imagined he could hear small arms fire in the brief pauses between shell, rocket and bomb. Despite the explosions, no one ran along the streets, and a tired Volksturm guard waved the troop carrier through the intersection. Nearby, young boys in Hitler Jugend uniform worked cheerfully, digging a trench parallel to a lane of twisted, torn trees. Their leader spoke, but Dieter heard nothing except another shell burst nearby. For a few seconds the boys stood silent, their caps removed, as the carrier passed. Sturmsharfuhrer acknowledged their respect with a salute.

Sorenson's coffin was made from empty ammunition crates and Dieter helped lower them and their body into the grave. The symbolism seemed fitting for a man who had fought for three years on the Russian front, always with his machine pistol on a lanyard around his neck.

Dieter's eulogy was brief: "Bright and glorious that warrior's Destiny who in battle-array stands for his children and home, stands for the woman of his heart, bravely opposed to the foe. Do Death my come, when it will, bringing this life's thread to an end."

"For think not that Destiny will allow for a man to live always unharmed, great though he be, though even he boast descent from the gods. Even though the coward pass through the fury of battle safe to his home in his flight – Death will assail him there. But then he dies unlamented, unloved by his folk, while both the high and the low weep by the tomb of the brave".

"Yes, with a nation's tears wherever he may die, we bewail him; and if he the brave lives he is hailed all but a god upon Earth. Strong as a fortress of defense in the fight do we gaze on our hero; his are deeds for the many, and he does them alone."

Amid the falling shells Hermann led the last salute before the honor guard fired their three salvos over the grave. A woman flak helper threw fresh Spring flowers before the Earth protected the body: not for Sorenson the mutilation the Soviet troops inflicted on the bodies of dead SS officers.

The men, led by Hermann, were singing "I Had A Comrade" and there were tears in Dieter's eyes. Sorenson had saved his life, twice.

The journey back to the dug-out was slow, and Dieter wished Zhukov's troops would attack. For every bullet a kill; for every Panzerfaust a tank. Vengeance for Sorenson's death.

The smoke twilight from the battle bombardment was long, and Dieter was relieved when the first tank appeared, lurching over the rubble in the street. A Soviet sniper made a dash for the safety of the church façade on Dieter's right but then stopped to clutch his throat and topple to the ground dead. The tank turned abruptly, its machine gun hitting nothing that was living. Dieter aimed the pin on the edge of the Panzerfaust at the tank, gripping the weapon under his arm. His muscles

ached from the repetition and there was no elation about the kill.

Close range Soviet bombardment began while machine gun fire spattered the ground. The buildings around – or what was left of them - hid a few German snipers and Dieter was trying to judge their number from their sporadic when the bullets and the bombardment ceased. Dieter tensed while buildings and the burning tank crackled with fire.

A few grenades were thrown, then a slow rush of Soviet troops among the rubble and the bodies.

“Tank riders!” shouted Dieter.

The only thing that tank riders did was advance and die, and Dieter did not disappoint Stalin’s expendable peasants. He shot two, three, six. Hermann had run out of grenades. More Soviet snipers were seeking cover to provide cross-fire but Dieter could only target one before the others escaped into the rubble of the church. He threw his last grenade after them.

The young machine gunner in the dug-out beside Dieter was dead and he rolled the body away before quickly changing the clogged barrel of the gun. Hermann fed the ammunition belt until, without a sound, he slithered down the trench, shot in the head. The tank riders were crawling closer but Dieter held their advance with Hermann’s sub-machine gun while through the smoke filled street another tank lurched toward him.

Soon Dieter had no more ammunition, the men in the dug-outs behind him were dead and he began to throw bricks, stones and anything he could find before scrambling back to find a weapon with which to kill. From the still warm hand of one of his dead comrades he took a Mauser pistol but had no time to aim. The shell from the tank exploded near him knocking him over before burying him under earth, rubble and wood.

Dieter awoke to consciousness to hear the crackling of a nearby fire and the distant explosions of battle; to smell burning wood and flesh, and to see above him framed by the crack of light, a large brown rat.

No voices reached him and when he clawed his way cautiously into the light he could see no human movement along the street. The light drizzle refreshed him, and he let the rainwater soak his hair and trickle over his blood stained face before crawling toward his dug-out. The tank smoldered but the dead Soviet troops had been removed.

Along the street an old man pulled a wooden cart while beside him two women walked enwrapped in long coats with black shawls covering their heads. From the end of the cart two sets of bare feet protruded. A squad of Zhukov’s soldiers led by a bandy-legged officer in a peaked cap strutted toward them. They shouted and laughed. The old man tried to speak, but the officer knocked him down before three soldiers dragged one of the women into the façade of the church. She screamed and resisted and was shot.

Dieter shot the officer through the head. Surprise and his marksmanship killed four more before inaccurate fire was returned but within seconds he had shot the remaining three.

“Thank you,” said the old man as Dieter approached. “You must go – there are more.”

Dieter knelt down to retrieve a selection of weapons from the bodies before helping the woman to her feet. Her beauty surprised him and he forced himself to turn away.

“Where is the front line?” he asked.

“There is no front line,” said the old man sadly, staring at the ground.

Before Dieter could reply, the woman spoke. “You must go - it they find you alive....”

“And you?” he asked.

The woman smiled. “We are now the children of Fate. We shall head west.

The old man knelt briefly beside the body of his dead daughter before covering her face with his coat. He dragged the two bodies of his wife and young daughter from the cart to lay them beside, covering them the best he could.

"I have no strength to carry them for a burial," he said.

A lorry smoldered at the end of the street where a building showed a lilted inside of floors.

"Where is your regiment?" the woman asked.

Dieter looked around the scene of their last battle. "I am the Regiment!" he said proudly. Dizzy and weak from loss of blood and concussion, he collapsed against the cart.

"We must help him," he heard the woman say.

The old man sighed wearily. "Yes, I know."

The last thing that Dieter remembered was the woman's beautiful smile.

Wolfram stared into the quartz sphere while outside his shuttered room the high ranking SS office waited in the cool air of the Bavarian Alps.

There was no mystery in what he sensed through the medium of the crystal as, many years ago, there had been a mystery when a gaunt young man fresh from war had sought Dietrich's help to seek him out. Now they both were dead and he alone of the original seven was left to try and build from the ruins of the destruction a new empire to reach toward the stars.

The Dark Gods that for most of his life he had served would be waiting among those stars and he had only to open another Gate for their power to be his for him to use it as he had used it to help that young man of vision. Yet there was something that he did not understand about the events that had brought destruction to his dreams. Some other power opposed to his own must have been invoked and he moved away from the crystal to stare for several minutes at the pieces scattered over the seven boards and one hundred and twenty six squares of the Star Game. But he could see no pattern that might explain the events and, sad, he shook his head to play perhaps for the last time upon his piano his favorite piece of music by Bach.

The music brought quiet joy and he entered his plain Temple to seek the guidance of his gods. The quartz tetrahedron glowed, a little; as it had done for the past few days and he rested his hands on it. The coldness seemed to drain away his sadness and joy and he imagined he was traveling through the dimensions beyond the Seventh Gate. There was a presence awaiting him among the stars at the very edge of the galaxy and he allowed it to shape his consciousness as many times in the past it had been shaped. The futures of his own planet lay in visions around him and he had only to find here desire to make one future real.

With one possibility he returned to the terrace where against the backdrop of mountains the office waited, holding a sheaf of files. The files contained the personal details of SS officers who had distinguished themselves in the savage combat of the last few months of the war, and Wolfram read through them all slowly and with interest. Per Sorenson, his favored, was dead but in an hour he had found a successor.

He handed the file of the chosen to the office. "You can make the arrangements?"

"Yes!" replied the officer curtly but with respect. "And the country?"

"England."

The officer was surprised. "As you wish." He saluted, bowed slightly and left the terrace to walk down the steps toward the road.

Dieter could recall little of his journey. Burnt by fever he heard mumbled voices, the sound of aircraft, smelt putrid smells, felt a damp cloth on his face and the bumping as the cart trundled its slow way across a ravaged land. At length, daylight stung his eyes and he saw a convoy of lorries, Soviet soldiers standing idle, the husks of burnt-out tanks. Behind the cart where he lay hidden he

could see a straggle of unkempt people pushing or carrying on their backs a few possessions.

A few more miles and the old man ceased his pulling of the cart. "There is a Soviet check point ahead" someone had said.

Slowly, night drew its darkness over them and the people huddled in the small convoy for safety stopped, exhausted and hungry.

"What shall we do?" Dieter heard the beautiful woman ask her father. Stiffly, Dieter climbed from the cart. A haggard woman in a black skirt, coat and shawl stared at him. Even in the twilight his uniform was distinct. Soon, everyone was staring at him.

"There is a reward for the likes of him!" crooned the old woman. "It would feed us for days!"

Several of the group stood up to move toward Dieter. The old man pulled the cart between them.

"You make me ashamed to be a German," he said to them.

"Germany is finished!" shouted the old woman. "And it's due to the likes of him!" She spat on the ground. "When did you last eat, eh? A proper meal I mean. Meat and fresh vegetables!"

Dieter held the old man's arm. "I am stronger now and shall leave."

The old man nodded, "Hans-Peter Schemm."

"Hauptsturmfuehrer Dieter Norkus." They shook hands.

"My daughter, Ilse."

Dieter bowed to her. "I have much to thank you and your father for."

"It was nothing," she said, "compared to the sacrifices some have made."

"And the war?"

"Unconditional surrender."

"The Fuhrer?"

"Dead – so they say."

Dieter sighed. "I hope I shall see you again."

"Koblenz – that is where we go," Hans-Peter said. "Ask for us near the Florinsmarkt in the Old Town – if it still exists."

"Until then, I thank you." He brought his heels together in the Prussian manner, bowed toward Ilse and strode purposefully away from the road into the gathering darkness.

Dieter walked for several hours across fields before stopping to take a rest and check the two pistols he still carried. The night silence was strange after the bombardment of Berlin and he could not sleep only try and dispel the sadness he felt because the war was over with Germany's defeat.

He did not know what to do except journey toward the farm of his father in Hessen. But Germany was in ruins, occupied by foreign armies and he felt himself bound still by the oath of loyalty sworn those many years ago.

Dawn's first rays found him in a small copse. Somewhere near, he knew, would be a farm, with water and food and probably foreign soldiers, and he forced himself to remain within the cover of the trees until darkness brought again the freedom he needed to resume his journey.

Sleep did not come, just insistent hunger, thirst, and the boredom of inaction. Twice he thought he heard voices and once, the distant rumble of tanks and when night came he was content with the caution born of combat to edge his way slowly through fields, avoiding all roads and tracks.

Toward dawn he came upon farm buildings. A man slept by the entrance to the courtyard, a rifle beside him, and Dieter watched the buildings for nearly an hour before walking down the track to kick the sleeping man awake and taking his rifle.

"Good people!" the startled blurted out. He saw Dieter's uniform and shouted several words in Polish.

"Quiet!" commanded Dieter. "You speak German?"

"Yes!" said the old man proudly.

"Who is in charge here?"

The man stood up to face Dieter.

"Landrat von Leiden."

"No Russians?"

"No." replied the man nervously, "not yet".

Dieter looked around, listening. "The Landrat – tell him I want to see him."

"Of course!"

Dieter did not have long to wait. Von Leiden stumbled toward him, bent and shuffling because of arthritis.

"Berlin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You have come a long way. Alone."

"Yes."

"Hummph!" He turned to speak to the Pole who was skulking behind. "Fetch some of the bread. And water." He scowled.

"And a little of that sausage that you have hidden in the urn."

The Pole displayed no emotion, and scuttled away.

"No manners these Poles," muttered von Leiden. "They steal my geese."

"I am Hauptsturmfuehrer...."

"I do not care who you are. The Russians are everywhere."

"How far to the American lines?"

"Not far – a day, walking. Perhaps." He stared at Dieter's uniform. "My son – " he began. Then abruptly; "I have some old clothes, should you wish. Your uniform –"

"No thank you."

Von Leiden shook his head. "This war's ending – it is not the same. No honor in peace."

Dieter gave him the rifle and this gesture of trust brought tears to von Leiden's eyes. "Our old world of honor lies in ruins." Then seeing the Pole return he took the food and water and gave them to Dieter saying, "Go and quickly."

Dieter stuffed the black bread and sausage into his pockets. The water was cold and refreshing and he cleaned his face briefly before handing back the jug, bowing his head to von Leiden and striding along the track toward the fields.

He walked for several hours, unconcerned about being seen for he had resolved to die fighting, like all his comrades, rather than surrender. He stopped briefly, to take from an inside pocket his Knight's Cross which he pinned to his camouflage jacket, making sure all his insignia were clear and bright. Nearby, he heard someone whistle.

It was a tuneful whistle and, as it came nearer, Dieter recognized it as the Parade March of the 18th Hussars. It was whistled by a boy dressed in the striking uniform of the Napolas.

Dieter let him pass as he lay hidden by a tree before calling out to the boy.

"Heil Hitler!" the boy replied with enthusiasm. Tall and muscular, he appeared to Dieter be the perfect advertisement for the Jungmannen.

Dieter returned the salute, with less enthusiasm. "Where are you heading?" he asked.

"Home!" replied the boy cheerfully, his left hand resting on his dagger.

"Where is that?"

"Hamburg. And you, Hauptsturmfuehrer?"

"South. Have you eaten recently?"

"No sir."

Dieter gave him all the bread and half the sausage.

"what will you do when you reach Hamburg?"

Brightly the boy said, "Build a new Germany!"

"Germany will certainly need rebuilding."

"Sir?" the boy said seriously.

"Yes?"

"I would consider it a great honor if you would allow me to accompany you."

"What about your home?"

"There will be plenty of time!" He stared at Dieter's Knight's Cross.

"Have you seen any action?"

"Yes! Anti-aircraft battery at Grunewald. Then when the Reds came I joined some Volksturm and Hitler Jugend. When we ran out of ammunition, we split up."

"I have no intention of surrendering. But you are Germany's future."

"I am not afraid to die."

Dieter smiled, "I can see by your eyes you speak the truth." He gave the boy one of his pistols. "You might need this."

In silence they walked together for many miles while Dieter's spirit grew troubled, and he was about to order the boy to leave him and find safety in the American lines when ahead they saw a straggling line of soldiers.

"Go now," Dieter said, "while you can".

The boy smiled and shook his head before releasing the safety catch on the pistol. Slowly, the soldiers encircled them.

The boy was laying on the ground, his young, earnest face intently watching the advancing soldiers. Dieter took the pistol from him.

"The future is yours," Dieter said.

"And you, sir?" the boy asked.

"At least they are American," Dieter said, throwing the pistols away and raising his hands in the gesture of surrender.

They were taken to a small village occupied by the Americans. Several of the timbered houses, as well as the Saxon church, lay in ruins while around the largest standing building which served as American headquarters, small groups of old women and young children sat, strangely silent, on the ground. Amongst the destruction, trucks, jeeps, stores and American soldiers were littered without any appearance of order.

Pushed against a courtyard wall, they were searched for the third time.

"OK." Shouted the American Sergeant, "turn around you Nazi bastards!"

The American Major who approached them did not smile. Behind him a small bespectacled soldier carried a clipboard.

"Rank, name and unit," he said to Dieter.

"Hauptsturmfuehrer Dieter Norkus, Waffen SS, Nordland Division...."

"Sir," the bespectacled soldier interrupted, talking to the Major, "the boy."

"What?"

"G2 orders, sir."

"Take over Sergeant!" the Major strode back toward his headquarters, his clipboard bearer in tow.

With the Major gone, the Sergeant approached Dieter. "Let's see that medal," he grinned. "Kinda nice, ain't it?"

He went to rip it from Dieter's uniform when the boy sprang forward. Without speaking a word he wrenched the American's arm and tripped him up.

The other guards laughed.

"You son of a bitch!" Enraged the Sergeant jumped up, snatched a rifle and smashed the butt into the boy's face. Dieter moved toward him, but two guards pinned his arms against the wall. Nearby, a few birds sang their unchanging songs of spring. The Sergeant ripped the Knights Cross from Dieter's tunic.

"Sergeant Piaggio!" shouted the Major from his doorway. With a swaggering gait the Sergeant walked over to him and their conversation was whispered and brief.

Dieter was forced into the building and onto a chair. The Major said a few words in German before Dieter said "I do speak English."

"Great! Cigarette?"

"No, thank you."

"Where is the rest of your outfit?"

"They fell in Berlin."

Nearby, a brief burst of gunfire could be heard.

"How did you get here?"

"I walked."

There was a knock on the door and the Sergeant entered without saluting. "That kid, Major," he said. "Tried to escape. We had to shoot."

Dieter stared at him, his eyes bright with anger. "How heroic of you to shoot an unarmed boy!"

"Shut your mouth!" shouted the Sergeant.

"I wish to report this to the senior American officer," said Dieter.

The Major was smiling and the Sergeant had started to laugh when Dieter leapt across the room to grab the machine gun the Sergeant was holding. His hand was on the barrel, his finger near the trigger when his two guards beat him into unconsciousness with the butts of their rifles.

For Dieter the next few days became a blur of impressions: a long journey in a covered lorry with other prisoners of war with whom he was forbidden to speak, an interrogation, another journey, another interrogation, a guarded prisoner of war compound where he and the other prisoners were forced to sleep on the ground.

He lost count of the days and weary from the months of fighting, the shock of defeat, lack of sleep, hunger, the journeys and the interrogations, he sat in the back of an American lorry watching through the open flap the stream beside the road as the lorry wound its way among some hills. The day was warm, perfumed by the scent of Spring's flowers and as Dieter began to recall the quiet beauty of the Germany he had known in Hessen as a boy, his spirit began to yearn to return to the house of his family where to renew with his own hands the cultivation of their lands. There was a family legend, he knew, connected with the farm and he possessed a desire to wander free and homeward to hear his grandfather tell it. But Germany was in ruins, he himself was a prisoner of war and he still believed he was bound by his oath of loyalty sworn in the exuberant first year of the war.

"My Honor Commands Loyalty" said the motto on his ring – and to all the questions that in the last few days he had been asked his answer was always the same: "I have done nothing," he would say with pride, "that is dishonorable."

But they did not understand.

"For my Fatherland in sadness I weep" he recalled from memory for himself when alone or when no one would listen or believe his words of truth, "for my country am I robbed. How great is the chant of our woe: tear upon tear is shed and only the unseeing dead forget how to weep..."

Enwrapped in dreams of his home, he did not notice when the lorry stopped. But the driver brought him and his two guards out into the warming sun to move the rock-fall from the narrow road.

An old man shuffled slowly toward them along the road while they worked and Dieter was dragging the last rock away when he reached them. Without speaking he walked straight to the two guards who were lounging against the side of the lorry, grabbed them and knocked their heads together. Limply, they fell to the ground. The astonished driver went to draw his holstered pistol but swift like a wolf in attack the old man leapt toward him striking at his windpipe with his hand. The driver fell still on the road.

The old man was smiling, his eyes bright and blue like the clear sky of summer.

"Come Dieter Norkus, we must leave."

Dieter did not question his sudden freedom and followed as with surprising agility the old man led him upwards through the rocks and trees, along twisting tracks to a small wooden hut. Dieter recognized the SS officer who was waiting inside.

The officer handed him a sheaf of documents, saying: "All the documents for your new identity are there. Memorize the history you will find then destroy it. A few days from now you will be in your new country."

Dieter looked up from the documents. "Which is?"

"England."

Dieter was surprised. "May I ask – what for?"

"To continue what has been achieved, and prepare for what is next." The officer saluted, bowed and left.

"I", the smiling old man said, "am Rundi and will be your guide. Come now, for there is much to do."

17.

Kthunae

Anton Long. Order of Nine Angles 114yf

It was dark. Not the usual dark of a rural English night atop some isolated, tree-free hill, but an intense dark that made Jared unable to see even a few feet in front of him, and he could not help but be nervous. His *Black Pilgrimage* was not going that well and he had to finally admit to himself that he was lost. His brown hair - like his out-of-place urban clothes and shoes, and even his face - was covered in drying mud.

At least the night was mild, and he bumbled on as best he could for a few minutes in the hope of reaching the top of the hill. It should have been Black Rhadley Hill, but he had lost both his map and torch in the tumble caused by falling over something, somewhere, some time ago. It seemed like hours since he had passed through that dense copse of his fall but it was only thirty minutes. Thirty minutes which had seen him stumble into a stream, trip over twice, and stand still at least seven times in the hope of hearing something, anything, which might give him some indication of which direction to go.

Then, he really was at the top of the hill, able once again to see the stars in the sky, and make out dim shapes ahead and beyond. There was even a faint yellowish glow on the distant horizon which he took to be Shrewsbury town, and, pleased that the strange darkness had gone, he sat down on the damp grass. He thought - but only for a moment - about Lars and his sudden disappearance, for there was a faint light, down toward one side of the hill and he set off, hoping it was a Farm or a cottage.

It was neither. Instead, and nearer than he thought, it was a butane lamp, and it stood on the edge of a field beside a small tent. Jared waited by the old wooden field gate for a long time, watching, listening. But all he could hear was the slight breeze in the nearby trees, and all he could see was a young woman sitting outside the tent, reading, oblivious to the many moths that swirled around the lamp. Her long blonde hair was plaited in a single plait - a style Jared had assumed was long out of fashion.

Then, obviously aware of his presence, she turned toward him as he lurked in the shadows and said a friendly "Hello!"

Awkwardly, Jared climbed over the gate. "Hi."

"Lovely night," she said, as if they had met many times before.

"Yes."

"Traveled far?" She smiled, and something about her - maybe her round, cheerful face - made him feel quite calm and relaxed in her presence, and he sat down on the grass near her tent.

"Not really." For some reason she seemed familiar, and it was several seconds before he realized where he had seen a young woman, with hair like hers, and with a youthful, lively face like hers. It was a photograph in a book about National Socialist Germany and it showed members of the BDM. She was about the same age as the young woman in the photograph as well, perhaps between eighteen and twenty years old, and thus seven or so years younger than him.

"Be Dawn, soon," the young woman said, and put down her book.

"I suppose so." He tried to see what the book was, and failed.

"I'm Hester, by the way."

"Jared."

"You not camping, then?"

"Just out for a walk. I got lost."

"Easy to do, round here. Bit off the beaten track. Would you like some tea?"

"Well - " he began.

"It's no trouble, really." From the covered porch of her tent she extracted a camping stove, two small aluminium camping kettles, and two mugs. "This one, " she said holding out one of the kettles, "is my teapot!"

Jared was impressed, and while she waited for the water to boil she chatted, as a friend might, about the weather, the old man she had met yesterday who gave her permission to camp in his field, her trip, last month, to Germany, and by the time the tea was prepared, and drunk, Jared was quite content - more than content - to just sit and listen. Occasionally, he would say a few words, but mostly he smiled while she chatted and the light of lamp faded as its fuel was expended. But it did not matter, for the Dawn, opportunistically it seemed, replaced it. And with the light of Dawn he realized that not only was the young woman dressed all in olive-green, but also that her rucksack and tent were olive-green. She seemed like she belonged to a distant, more, gentle past, with her walking breeks, and her woolen shirt, although the shirt emphasized, rather than detracted from, her fulsome breasts.

"Time to get ready," she suddenly said, "it's a long walk back to catch my train."

"You heading for Church Stretton, then?" he asked as she stood up to begin to pack away her gear.

"Yes."

"So am I," he lied, desirous of her company. Suddenly, his Black Pilgrimage did not seem important.

"London?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, surprised. "How did you know?"

"Just a guess," she smiled.

"And you?"

"Oxford."

It did not take her long to pack and - after another mug of tea - Jared, trying to be gallant, offered to carry her rucksack. Her acceptance of his offer pleased him - for the first two miles. After that, he was struggling, and tried not to show it as they walked paths and country lanes through the beautiful rural landscape and under the pleasant warm Sun of early June. He was glad when she suggested they stop by the foot of the Long Mynd for yet another brew of tea. But, after that, his torment got much worse, for the road up to the flat plateau of the heather-covered Mynd was steep, his feet were blistered and the rucksack straps had rubbed part of his shoulders raw. But he managed to keep smiling as they trundled on and she talked of her studies, her college in Oxford, her dreams of traveling around the world. Several cars passed them as they descended down the steepness that was the Burway with its glorious views of South Shropshire: the old hill fort of Caer Caradoc; the prehistoric remains of a volcano known as The Lawley; the ancient settlement and earth circle - as old as Stonehenge - atop Bodbury Hill.

The small town of Stretton was busy, with both people and cars, and Jared was wonderfully relieved when, after many hours of walking, they reached the Railway Station. The one bench - over the open footbridge - was occupied by three young men in modern casual clothing drinking

from cans of beers, and such was Jared's tiredness that he sat on the platform leaning against the fence while the young woman stood beside him.

"The train won't be long," she said to him. "Are you changing at Hereford, too?"

"Yes." The three young men were staring at the young woman, and then at him, and he turned away. Her could hear the men talking among themselves, although he could not make out the words, but their laughter, their looks directed at the young woman, made him nervous, so nervous that when their train arrived, he suggested he and Hester go to the front of the train.

"No. I'm sure this will be alright," she said.

Jared was not surprised when the men followed, and sat in seats three rows behind, but he was surprised when - over an half an hour into the journey - Hester excused herself, saying she needed to go to the lavatory. Jared felt he should escort her, but he was trembling, his mouth was dry, and all he could say was, "OK."

She smiled at him, and left. The three men got up and followed and as they passed where he sat Jared made a half-hearted attempt to rise from his seat, but the look from one of the men was enough to dissuade him, and he slunk back into his seat, staring out of the window. But after less than two minutes, he could bear it no longer and - still trembling - he got up.

Whatever he expected, it was not the scene that greeted him in the narrow corridor that housed the train's small lavatory between the vestibules of its two carriages. The three men lay on the dirty, stained, floor of the corridor, slumped in various postures of unconsciousness, with Hester standing near them.

"Drunk too much beer, I suppose," she said, with a charming and disarming smile. "This is our stop, I believe." As the train slowed, she collected her heavy rucksack, and it was a somewhat dazed Jared who followed her out of the train onto the platform of Hereford Station.

They spent their short wait sitting on a wooden bench on the Station platform while Jared answered Hester's questions about his interests and past. Not that he was forthcoming about his involvement with the dark path he had chosen to follow over a year ago. Instead, he spoke then and on their shared train journey of his interest in computing, and regaled her for most of the time about that subject. For him, the time of that journey past quickly, and she was preparing to take her leave as the train approached Oxford when he blurted out: "Can I see you again?"

"Would you like to?" she smiled.

"Yes!"

Quickly, he wrote his address and telephone number on a page torn from her notebook, and sadly watched her descend from the train and walk toward the Station exit, hoping that she would turn round and look at him. She did, and smiled, and this image of her lasted until his own journey of another hour was over.

The city days passed slowly for him after that, and even his return to his work as a Night Porter in a small central London hotel did not please him, and he was thinking of her on that wyrdfull night when a young man with a pierced nose and lip walked to the hotel reception desk, and, brandishing a gun, demanded money.

"There is no money here," Jared said, his voice trembling.

"Then down on your knees, or I'll kill you!"

Jared did as the man said, and by the time he had the courage to move and creep to look over the top of the desk, the man was gone. Relieved, he was surprised when his own mobile telephone rang.

"Hello?" In his haste and nervousness he almost dropped his telephone.

"Jared? It's Hester. Can you meet me?"

"Of course!" Suddenly, his world did not look so bleak.

She named a place - not far - and a time - half an hour, and it only took Jared an instant to forsake his job for the pleasure a meeting with her would afford. The meeting place was a street corner of shops and offices, and only a few cars passed in the humid heat of the sodium-lit city night as he waited. Then, nearly half an hour beyond the appointed time, a black taxi cab stopped. Hester opened the door for him and he had hardly stepped inside when her skillful blow rendered him unconscious.

Jared awoke to find himself seated in and strapped to a chair in a large vaulted cellar, lit by subdued bluish light, although a few feet in front of him a perfect circle of bright white light had been projected onto the stone floor. Faintly, as if from an adjoining room, he could hear what sounded to him like Arabic music. Several people were present in the cellar, but the subdued light made them indistinct, mere shadows.

"Let this Sunedrion begin," a male voice said. There was something familiar about the voice, and Jared was trying to recall where he had heard it before when the shock of seeing Hester walk into the circle of light erased all his thoughts.

Barefoot, she was dressed only in a long purple robe fastened in two places in such a way that most of her breasts and her pubic hair were exposed. Her long blonde hair had been loosely tied at the back of her head by a purple band so that many strands of hair fell around her face and ears. This, combined with her red lipstick, her painted nails, her exotic perfume, overwhelmed Jared more than finding himself tied to a chair in some cellar.

"Do you accuse him?" the male voice said.

"Yes," Hester replied, "I accuse him."

"Proceed."

"I accuse him of cowardice in the face of the enemy. I accuse him of submitting to the decadent and the ignoble. I accuse him of betraying the dark quest he swore with an oath to undertake, whatever befell him."

"And if found guilty," the male voice said, "what penalty would you, our Mistress of Earth, impose?"

"Opfer!" she shouted with joy in her voice, and there was a faint hissing sibilation emanating from the indistinct shadows.

"Do you deny the charges?" the male voice demanded.

"What?" Jared said.

"Do you have anything to say in your defence?" the male voice asked.

It was then, only then, that Jared understood. "I failed the tests, didn't I?" he said to Hester.

"Yes!" Her smile was not one of kindness.

"Three?"

"Yes."

"So you admit," the male voice said, "the charges?"

"This is another test, right?" Jared said, trying to laugh.

"We await your answer."

"OK. So I failed. Big deal. I was wrong. It won't happen again. You've made your point."

"Opfer!" Hester shouted.

There was a faint hissing sibilation emanating from the indistinct shadows, after which the male voice spoke again. "It is decided. It is as you wish. He shall be your offer."

"Agius O Baphomet!" Hester chanted.

"Agius O Baphomet!" came the sibilating reply.

"Wait - " Jared began to say, but two tall men with the gait, build, dress and looks of professional bouncers came to hold his arms while Hester untied him. Then, they forced him to his feet and she kissed him, briefly and on his lips, before the two men led him away.

He was taken to a large windowless room somewhere nearby and still underground, furnished only with a bed and lit with the same subdued bluish light. There was a metal door, the top of which was formed of a steel grille. Jared sat on the bed and waited. All he could hear was the faint music he had heard earlier, and all he could think of was that this was some new kind of test.

It was not long before Hester - accompanied by the two tall men - came to see him, although it seemed a long time to him.

"You have a choice," she said through the steel grille, still barefoot and still dressed in her robe. "We will give you a sporting chance, so you can freely go from this place, knowing that sometime, maybe soon, maybe not, we will seek you out and, one way or another, bring your causal life to an end as has been decreed. It could be weeks, months, a year; maybe more. Or - or, you could stay here, willingly, for seven days, during which time, for seven nights, I shall be yours. You should know that it is my time to conceive, and that our child would be raised among us according to our ancient ways, as you yourself would be revered." She smiled, then. "I shall return, at Dawn, when you can tell me what you have decided."

He did not sleep, and the large gourmet meal, the fine wine, he had been given he left untouched. He had no idea of the time, and spent an hour or so pacing up and down between the walls of his cell, trying to work out what was going on. Of course, he smiled to himself, several times during the hours of that night - or what he assumed was the night - he would not really be an offer. This was just another test. But what was the right thing to do? Pretend to accept his fate, and make love to the beautiful, sexy, Hester? Or opt to go, and possibly never see her again?

Then, with her guards, she was there, still clad in her robe, watching him. "Have you decided?" she asked.

"Yes. I'll stay."

She smiled, this time quite kindly. "Gather round, all you here." And there were indistinct shapes that seemed to haunt the shadowed spaces beyond Jared's cell. "Witness that he, named Jared, has agreed of his own free will to be our offer. Thus shall I for seven nights be his bride before our deed of sacrifice is done."

She unfastened her robe and let it fall to the floor. One of her guards unlocked the door and she came toward him, naked, as a lover might, smiling, enticing. Jared did not see, not hear, the door being locked, as he did not see nor hear the guards move away to leave them alone in the blue, subdued, light.

Her passion of hours exhausted him, and she left him sleeping, dreaming, happy, content. He awoke alone to find fresh food, new wine, and he ate and drank, and waited, dreaming, happy, content. Then she was with him again, soft, gentle, passionate, shouting in her ecstasy. Then as the hours quickly, slowly, passed, she was gone, and he ate and drank the gourmet food, the fine wine, and waited, happy, dreaming, content.

Soon, he had lost count of the days, the nights, and weary but pleased, waited as he had waited. But she did not arrive. He fell asleep, to be awakened by the guards who carried him out from his cell through a sinew of dark corridors to the dark chamber of his accusers. But there was a not quite elliptical altar there, swathed in reddish light, and an ellipse of indistinct robed figures hugging the shadowed darkness beyond that swathe of light. And there was music, the subdued strange music of his past seven days and nights.

Bound by leather thongs, he lay naked and helpless upon the altar, while, out of the darkness beyond, a beautiful Hester in a crimson robe approached him, holding a curved, sharp-bladed knife.

She circled around Jared, saying: "Before you - we were.
After you - we shall be, again.
Before us - They who are never named.
After us - They will be, waiting."

Then she turned toward the shadows. "What is it that you seek?" she chanted.

"It is the protection and milk
Of your breasts that I seek, " a voice replied.

Hester, as Mistress of Earth, moved toward Jared, revealing her breasts, before laughing and moving out from the ellipse of reddish light toward the shadows.

"I put my kisses at your feet," a male voice said,
"And kneel before you who crushes
Your enemies and who washes
In a basin full of their blood.
I lift up my eyes to gaze
Upon your beauty of body:
You who are the daughter and a Gate
To our Dark Gods.
I lift up my voice to stand
Before you my sister
And offer my body so that
My mage's seed may feed
Your virgin flesh."

Hester laughed and her two guards raised her until she lay upon Jared. Then she was arousing him with her hand and he did not, could not, resist as she guided his erection into her warm, moist cleft.

"Kiss me," she said as she slowly moved upon him, " and I shall make you
As an eagle to its prey.
Touch me and I shall make you
As a strong sword that severs
And stains my Earth with blood.
Taste me and I shall make you
As a seed of corn which grows
Toward the sun, and never dies.
Plough me and plant me
With your seed and I shall make you
As a Gate that opens to our gods!"

Then, as Jared's body spasmed in his ecstasy, she intoned the last part of the rite.

"So you have sown and from your seeding
Gifts may come if you obedient heed
These words I speak."

The guards came, then, to lift her from the altar, and she circled around Jared, before speaking to the shadows, beyond.

Order of Nine Angles

"I know you, my children, you are dark
Yet none of you is as dark
Or as deadly
As I.
I know you and the thoughts
Within all your hearts: yet
Not one of you is as hateful
Or as loving as I.
With a glance I can strike
You dead."

She smiled, and twirled around, three times. "No guilt shall bind you, no thought restrict! Feast then and enjoy the ecstasy of this life: but ever remember I am the wind that snatches your soul!"

Jared tried to turn to see her, but she swiftly slashed his neck with her knife, and it was not long before the fountain of his life, his spurting blood, ceased to flow.

"AgiOS O Baphomet!" Hester cried, in triumph. With bloodstained hands and face, she went to kiss every member of her Temple reserving her last, and most passionate kiss, for Lars.

"So it has been, so it is, and so shall it be again," she said, before leading Lars up, toward the light of day, leaving her guards to do their work of cleaning and disposal.

Atazoth

Anton Long. Order of Nine Angles 114yf

"So, you came back to see this old man." Ellick smiled, and stroked his greying beard before leaning on his ash walking stick. He stood by the gate of the small field of pasture land on the slopes of the old hill. Below, the hedgeful land gradually leveled out until it met the sea, less than fifteen miles distant.

"I knew you would be back here," Hester said, and kissed him on the side of his face.

"Will he do?"

"Maybe. There's a long way to go."

"But he shows promise."

"Yes."

"I'm glad."

"As I am. It's been a long wait."

"But he can never know, from you, the complete truth."

"I know."

"One more corner until the angles of our nexion are complete," and he gestured with his stick toward where the Sun of early morning rose into the sky of blue.

"Shall I take the next one there?"

"Indeed."

"And the third, and last?"

"Where you met and enticed the first."

"But it won't really be the last, will it?"

"Only for this cycle; this nexion." He sighed, looking at her beauty, her youth. "How I envy you."

"I know." And she briefly, warmly, held his hand.

"You will live to see it all."

They stood for a long time, looking out toward the landscape of the levels that had seen much darkness and mystery, much joy and revelry, and as they stood, she rested her head on his shoulder, as a daughter might. Once, she remembered, there had been an island, there, before the straight, land-cut drains made and reclaimed the land.

"Will you see her, before the angles are complete?" he asked, interrupting the flow of her centuries of thought.

"Maybe. Do you think I should?"

"Perhaps not."

"But he will meet her again when we all meet for the closing of that angle?"

"Yes, and then he may understand. At least what it is necessary for him to understand." Then he smiled. "I hope you will choose better names, next time!"

They both sensed, and felt, the intrusion, long before the woman and her dog appeared on a footpath an hundred yards above the sloping field where lay several buried secrets.

"You should go, now," he said, regretfully.

She looked toward where her two guards waited, under the shade of the large, old, Oak tree.

"Yes," she said, and briefly held his hand.

Then Ellick was walking away, breaking a part of the causal bond between them, and by the time he reached the field gate and the footpath beyond it, he appeared to be only what many people assumed him to be, an ageing if eccentric countryman.

"Good morning," he said as he passed the youngish woman and her Welsh Collie dog. The woman smiled, slightly suspicious, but his smile, his eyes, re-assured her, and she returned his greeting. But he was gone, into the trees that led to the Coombe, where he sat, on the sun-warmed grass, thinking about Hester and her sister.

Suddenly, Lars understood. It was partly time itself that magick changed, the slow, causal, time of the world, of mere mortals. The ecstasy, the passion, the triumph, the exhilaration - the true magick - which he had felt since Arleen and Hester burst upon his life, were emanations of the real time which existed in the acausal, an acausal where space as he and mortals knew it, did not exist. So it was he could be here, standing atop Bredon Hill in the falling darkness looking toward the Malvern Hills, and there in that house of cavernous cellars, south-west, on the edge of another sloping hill, while also being near Black Rhadley, completing the three-fold acausal link in this particular causal time and space. He just had to open the nexion to slip into the acausal dimensions where the Dark Gods lurked, waiting.

But there was something else, something beyond even this, which he could not quite comprehend - an intimation of something far greater, far more powerful, far more evolutionary and devastating to the mundane world. But this something was insubstantial for him, in that moment, as a shadow vaguely perceived in semi-darkness.

Then, the insight was gone, as the last light of twilight faded, and Hester, with her two guards, joined him not that far from the summit of the hill. Without a word, she cast dark magick to reinforce the barriers around them, sufficient to make anyone venturing onto the hill in that hour instinctively turn away. The deep pit had been prepared, and their middle-aged and balding victim - chosen according to the guidelines for choosing such opfers - sat, bound and gagged, on the edge of his burial pit, his eyes bulging with terror, his once clean and expensive city suit crumpled and stained.

"This is your right, and duty," she said to Lars, and he took the centuries old curved knife. Then, with the crystal tetrahedron in her hands, she began her sinister chant. "Nythra Kthunae Atazoth," she intoned.

His first cut was not deep enough, and the man frothed blood until the second cut to his throat when he toppled over to briefly writhe in the bottom of the pit. Almost immediately, the two guards began to shovel earth over the still warm and bleeding body.

There were several hours to Dawn when they arrived, washed, refreshed, and changed into new clothes, to stop in a narrow hedgeful lane not that far from Black Rhadley. Ellick was there, dressed in his customary olive-green country clothes, standing in the field where Hester had, not that long ago, sat outside some tent; and there was a woman, standing with her back to Lars, near freshly

disturbed soil. She turned to walk toward him, and he could clearly see her face in the star-lit country night. It was Arleen.

He stood, staring, while Hester rushed to embrace her. Then, the two women were kissing, passionately, as lovers might.

"This, here, as you know," Ellick was saying to Lars, distracting his attention from the women. "Is the center, now. You must guard it well."

"I will."

The two women came toward him then, and each kissed him in turn.

"You're going, aren't you?" he said.

"Yes," they replied with one voice.

"There is no child?"

"No," they smiled, replying with one voice. "Not the kind you think!"

"When shall I see you two again?" he asked, feeling he already knew the answer.

There was a brief rushing of air behind him, and he turned around. But he was alone, standing by the hedge in the field, near the fresh earth that covered the recent burial, home as that topsoil now was to the Ash sapling which Ellick had planted, and home as the deeper soil was to a fresh male and beheaded corpse, Arleen killed. And this sudden departure of Arleen, Hester - and even Ellick - saddened him, for a moment, even though he had many reasons to rejoice. Forty, fifty, or more, years from now, who would he choose to follow him, as Ellick had chosen? Who would be tested, as Arleen had tested him? Who would know the joy, the ecstasy, the passion, the cold calmness of wyrd, the aethereal acausal beauty, that a true Mistress of Earth would bring? Who would be there to shape the changes as he would shape the evolutionary change that the dark rituals of the past months would most certainly bring?

Then he smiled, knowing that he would have to begin a search for some woman, of inner darkness, to share his deeds and his life, and knowing that around him strange, shadowy shapes were faintly hissing their sinister sibilations.