
The Giving

Order of Nine Angles

(Deofel Quartet)

Re-issued and corrected [v 1.03]: Anton Long 119 Year of Feyen

(First published 101 yf)

“In truth, Baphomet – honoured for millennia under different names – is an image of our dark goddess and is depicted as a beautiful woman, seated, who is naked for the waist upward. She holds in her left hand the severed head of a man, and in her right a burning torch. She wears a crown of flowers, as befits a Mistress of Earth...

For centuries, we have kept this image secret, as the Templars and their descendants did...”

Book of Asoth

There was much that was unusual about Sidnal Wyke, including his name. His name no longer brought forth any comments from his neighbours in the small hamlet of Stredbow where he had spent all his life, and his strange habits were accepted because he was regarded by them as a cunning man, well versed in the ways of the old religion.

He was six years old when the old car his father was driving went out of control on a steep local hill, killing both his parents while the child was safe at his grandmother's house. For twelve years he lived at her cottage. Stredbow was his home and he knew no other.

It was an isolated village, surrounded by hills and accessible only by narrow, steep and twisting lanes. To the west of the village lay The Wilderness, Robin's Tump and the steep hills of Caer Caradoc hill. The lane northward led along Yell Bank, skirted Hoar Edge and the side of Lawley hill to the old Roman road to Wroxeter. To the south, the village was bounded by Stredbow Moor, Nant Valley and Hope Bowdler hill. The area around the small village was, like the village itself, unique. Small farms nestled on the lee of the hills or rested in sinewy valleys hidden from the lanes. Coppice and woods merged into rough grazing land and the few fields or arable crops were small, the size hardly changed in over a century. But it was the sheltered isolation of the area that marked it out, like a time-slip into the past – as if the surrounding hills not only isolated it physically but emotionally as well. Perhaps it was that the hills dispersed the winds and weather in a special way, creating over the area of the village and its surrounding land an idiosyncratic climate; or perhaps it was the almost total lack of motorized transport along the rutted lanes. But whatever the cause, Stredbow was different, and Sidnal Wyke knew it.

He had known the secret for years, but it was only as his twenty-first birthday approached that he began to understand why. Stredbow was an ancient village, an oval of houses at whose center was a mound. Once, the mound contained a grove of oaks. But a new religion came, the trees were felled and a church built from stone quarried nearby. The church was never full, the visiting ministers came and went, and the oaks began to grow again, although reduced in number. The village was never large, although once – when the new railway fed trains to the small town of Stretton in the valley miles beyond the hills – there had been a school. But it had long ago closed, its building left to slowly crumble as the towns, cities and wars sucked some of the young men away from their home and their land. Yet a balance had been achieved through the demands of the land. For over sixty years, since the ending of the Great War, no new houses had been built and no outlanders came to settle. The village attracted no visitors, for there was nothing to attract them – no historical incidents, no fine houses or views – and the few who came by chance did not stay, for there was no welcome for them, only the stares of hostility and scorn, the barking and the snarling of farm and cottage dogs.

Sidnal knew every square foot of the village and the lands around. He had visited every field, every coppice, every valley and stream, all the houses and farms. He knew the history of the village and its people and this learning, like his name, was his grandmother's idea. He had been to a school, once and briefly – against his grandmother's wishes. But her daughter and son in law had died to leave Sidnal in her care. She taught him about herbs, how to listen and talk to trees; about the know of animals. She owned some acres of land and he farmed them well, in his strange way.

His clothes, and he himself, never looked clean, but he bore himself well, as befitted his well-muscled body. His solitary toil on the land and his learning left him little time to himself, but he was growing restless and his grandmother knew it and the reason why. She had no chance to guide him further, no opportunity to find him a suitable wife to end the isolation she had forced upon him. A few days before his twenty-first birthday, she died – slowly and quietly sitting in her chair by the fire.

It was a warm evening in middle May with a breeze to swing some of the smaller branches of the large Ash tree behind the cottage which a mild winter had brought full into leaf, and Sidnal did not hurry back from the fields. He greeted the tree, as he always had, and smiled, as he almost always did. He did not cry out, or even seem surprised when he found her. He just sighed, for he knew death to be the fated ending of all life.

It was as he closed the cottage door on his way to gather his neighbours that the reaction came. For the first time in his life, he felt afraid.

II

Maurice Rhiston did not even know her name. A room of his house overlooked her bedroom and she was there, again, as she had been every weekday morning for the past three weeks. Her routine was always the same – the curtains would be drawn back and she would stand by the mirror for a minute or so before removing her nightdress, unaware of him watching from behind a chink in his curtain.

Naked, she wandered around her room in her parent's house. He lost sight of her several times – before she stood by the mirror to slowly dress. He guessed her age at about fifteen. His watching had become a secret passion that was beginning to engulf him, but he was too obsessed to care. He was forty-five years of age, his childless marriage a placid one. For fifteen years he had sat behind his office desk in a large building in Shrewsbury town, satisfied with steadily improving both his standard of living and his house on the small and select estate which fringed the river. He was diligent, and efficient as he worked as a Civil

Servant, calculating and assessing the benefits of claimants. His suits were always subdued in colour, his shirts white, his ties plain and even his recent worrying about his age, baldness and spreading fat, did not change his taste. The cricket season had begun, his place in the team was secure and he had begun to feel again that sense of security and belonging which pleased him.

He had, during the past week, turned his observing room into a kind of study to allay the suspicions of his wife. He bought a desk, some books and a small computer as furnishings. He had changed his unchanging routine of the morning to give time to sit at the desk with the thin curtains almost meeting but allowing him his view. Then, he would wait for her to draw back the curtains, and undress.

Today, as for the last week, he would be late for his work. Yesterday he had spent most of his evening in the room, hoping to see her and she, as if obliging, had appeared toward dusk – switching on her room light. For almost an hour she wandered in and out – and then his moment came. She undressed to change her clothes completely.

The morning was warm, again, and he left his overcoat on the stand by the front door. The goodbye kiss to his wife had long ago ceased, and she was already stripping away the bedclothes at the beginning of her workday. She was singing to herself, and Maurice smiled. His watching had brought to him an intense physical desire and his wife was pleased, mistaking his renewed interest for love. But he kept the girl's naked image in his head, while his ardour lasted.

His journey to work by car was not long, and only once did he have cause to cease his planning of how best to photograph the girl. He was about to turn from the busy road to the street which held the office where he worked when a young man, dirtily dressed and carrying an armful of books, stepped off the pavement in front of the car. Maurice sounded his horn, hurled abuse through the open window, but the man just smiled to walk slowly away toward the town centre to try and sell some of the books his grandmother had owned.

The routine of Maurice's morning at work was unchanged, and he sat at his desk in the over-bright, stuffy office, found or retrieved files from other desks and cabinets, entered or read information on pieces of paper and computer screen, his concentration broken only by his short breaks for morning tea and lunch. It was at lunch that his interest had become aroused.

As was his habit, he ate his sandwiches at his desk. One of the ladies from the section that investigated fraud brought him a case file and he recognized the name written on the cover.

The young lady was fashionably dressed and had swept her long black hair back over her shoulders where it was held by a band. She smiled at him, and for a few seconds Maurice felt an intense sexual desire. But it did not last. She explained about the man and the information anonymously received – as she might not have done had Maurice not been responsible for her training in her early months in the office before she became bored and sought the work of investigating fraud.

He gave her his computer read-out of the benefits the man had claimed and listened intently as she, a little shocked and angry, explained about the man's activity – Satanism, child prostitution, living off immoral earnings. She borrowed Maurice's file on the man and left him to continue his lunch in peace.

There was turmoil in Maurice's head, images which made him nervous and excited, and it did not take him long to decide. In the relative quiet of the office, he dialled Edgar Mallam's number, wishing him to be in.

Edgar Mallam was a man of contrived striking appearance. His hair was cropped, and his beard pointed and trimmed. He dressed in black clothes, often wore sunglasses even indoors, and black leather gloves. Maurice watched him for some time as Mallam sat at a table in an Inn in the centre of the town amid the warmth of the breezy late Spring evening.

People mingled singly, in pairs or small clusters around the town as evening settled, traffic thinned and shops closed, and Maurice, fearful of being seen, had tried to avoid them all. He had bought a hat, thinking it might disguise him, but wore it only briefly as he waited for the appointed time. The image of the naked girl obsessed him – and had obsessed him all afternoon: her soft white unblemished skin, her small still forming breasts, the graceful curve of her back...

Cautiously, he sat down beside Mallam.

“So, you want an introduction?” Mallam smiled.

“Well – “

“Don't be nervous! One favour deserves another. I presumed that is why you – ah – warned me. How old?”

“Pardon?”

“How old do you want the item in question to be?”

Maurice coughed, and shuffled his feet. “I –“

“Thirteen? Fourteen?”

Maurice felt an impulse to leave, and rose slightly, but Mallam’s strong hand gripped his arm.

“Let’s say fourteen. It’s a middling figure. Come on, then!” Mallam rose to leave.

“Now?”

“Of course!”

For an instant fear gripped Maurice, but the haunting image returned and he followed Mallam through the customers and to the door. The alley outside the side door seemed dark and he did not see the two waiting figures cloaked by the sun’s shadows. But he felt their hands gripping his arms.

“Just a precaution,” Mallam explained. “I’m sure you understand.”

He was searched, led to a car, blindfolded. The journey seemed long and he was guided into a house where the blindfold was removed. The luxury of the house surprised him. Mallam indicated a door.

“One hour,” he said. “Any longer,” and he smiled, “and there will be a charge!”

Maurice needed no encouragement to open the door.

The river, swollen by heavy rain and brown from sediment, swept swiftly and noisily over the weir, and in the dim light of dawn Thorold could see water eddying over the edge of the concrete riverside path that led into town. The warm weather had been broken by storms.

No corpse was water borne to add interest to Thorold's day and he walked slowly, trying to savour the light, the sounds and his happy mood. A few people, work-bound on bicycles, passed him along the path but they did not greet him as he did not greet them. Sometimes he would smile, and an occasional individual might forget for an instant the impersonal attitude of all modern towns. There would be then a brief exchange of humanity through the medium of faces and eyes: and the two individuals would pass each to their own forms and patterns of life, never to meet again.

But today, no one returned his smile. He stood for several minutes under the wide spans of the railway bridge watching the water carry its burden of branch, silt, twigs and grass. He was thirty-five years of age and alone in his life, except for his books. His marriage of years ago had been brief, broken by his quietness and unwillingness to socialize, but the years were beginning to undermine the happiness he had found in solitude. His face was kind, his hair unruly, his body sinewy from years of long-distance walking over hills, his past forgotten.

He liked the hours after dawn in late Spring and Summer, and would rise early to walk the almost empty streets of his town and along the paths by the river, sensing the peace and the history that seemed to seep out toward him from the old timbered houses, the narrow passages, the castle, bridges and town walls. Gradually, during the hours of his walking, the traffic would increase, people come – and he would retreat to the sloping cobbled lane, which gave access to his small shop, ready for his day of work. 'Antiquarian & Secondhand Books' his shop sign said.

The path from the railway bridge took him along below the refurbished Castle, set high above the meander of the river, under the Grinshill stone of the English bridge to the tree-lined paths of Quarry Park. He stopped for a long time to sit on a bench by the water, measuring the flow of time by the chimes of the clock in Shrewsbury School across the river. No one disturbed him, and by the time he rose to leave the cloud had broken to bring warm morning sun.

His shop lay between the Town Walls at the top of the Quarry and the new Market Hall with its high clock tower of red brick. The window was full of neat rows of well-polished antiquarian book, and inside it was cold and musty. Summer was his favorite season, for he

would leave the door open and watch, from his desk by the window, the people who passed in the street.

A pile of books, recently bought from a young man whose grandmother had died, lay on his desk, and he began to study them, intrigued by the titles and the young man who had offered them for sale. The four books were all badly bound and in various states of neglect and decay. One was simply leaves of vellum stitched together then bound into wooden boards, the legible text consisting mainly of symbols and hieroglyphics with a few paragraphs in Latin in a scholarly hand. There was no title – only the words ‘Aktlal Maka’ inscribed at the top of the first folio. The words meant nothing to Thorold. The three remaining books were all printed, although only one of them in a professional manner. It bore the title ‘Secretorum Naturalium Chymicorum et Medicorum Thesauriolis, and a date, 1642. The titles of the other two works – ‘Books of Asoth’ and ‘Karu Samsu’ - signified nothing to him, and though the books bore no date he guessed they were less than a hundred years old. They also contained pages of symbols, but the style of the written text was verbose, the reasoning convoluted, and after several hours of reading he still only had a vague idea of the subjects discussed. There was talk of some substance which if gathered in the right place at the right time would alter the world – ‘the fluxion of this causing thus sklenting from the heavenly bodies and a terrible possidenting of this mortal world...’

He was still reading when a customer entered his shop. The woman was elegantly dressed and smiled at him.

“I wonder if you can help me,” she said confidently.

Thorold smiled back, and as he looked at her he felt an involuntary spasm in the muscles of his abdomen. But it was transient and he forced himself to say “I hope so” as he looked at her beauty.

“Do you have a copy of Prometheus Bound by Aeschylus? Only my son – “

“Aeschylus?” he repeated, and blushed.

“Yes, the playwright – “

“Of ancient Greece,” he completed. “Was it a Greek text that you wanted or a translation?”

“The Greek, actually. Julian has just begun his “O” levels at his school.”

The woman was near him and he could smell her perfume. For some reason it reminded him of the sun drying the earth after brief rain following many dry days. “Yes, we do have a copy.”

He rose from his chair slowly and as he did so the woman smiled at him again. In his desire to impress with his agility he tripped and stumbled into a bookcase.

“Are you alright?” she asked with concern as he lay on the floor.

“Yes, thanks.” He rose awkwardly to search the shelves for the book. “Ah! Here it is. It is a fairly good edition of the text,” he said as he handed the book to her.

She glanced through it. “I’ll take it.” She placed it on his desk before taking her purse from the pocket of her dress. Their fingers touched briefly as she handed over the money but she did not look at him and he was left to wrap the book neatly in brown paper. The ‘Book of Asoth’ still lay open upon his desk and he could see her interest.

“May I?” she asked, indicating the book.

“Yes,” he faltered, unsure. “If you wish.”

She handled it carefully, supporting the covers with one hand while she turned the pages with the other. She stood near him, silent and absorbed, for several minutes. But her nearness began to make him tremble.

“I have not, as yet, had occasion to study the work in detail,” he said to relieve some of his feelings.

She held it for him to take, glanced briefly at the two other books before perusing the vellum manuscript.

“They are for sale?” she asked.

“Well – “ he hesitated, wondering about the price. “You have an interest in such matters?”

“Yes!” and then softly, “do you?”

She turned to face him, so close he could smell her fragrant breath as she had exhaled with her forceful affirmation.

“Actually, no.” She did not avert her eyes from his and part of him wanted to reach out with his fingers to softly touch the freckled smoothness of her face. He smiled instead, as she did. “I am not familiar with the field – but would think it was a very specialized market: if a market as such exists.”

“Are these recent acquisitions?”

“Yes.”

“May I enquire from where – or whom?”

He did not mind her questions, for he wished their contact, and closeness, to continue. “A young chap brought them in – in the last few days. They belonged to his grandmother, apparently.”

“I would like to buy them – name your price. Except that one,” she indicated the ‘Secretorum’. “That does not interest me.”

“As I say, I have not really had time to study them in detail and so – to be honest – have no idea what they are worth.” Her nearness was beginning to affect his concentration and he edged away on the pretext of studying the manuscript.

“But surely you have some idea of their value?”

“Actually, no. I did consult some of my reference works and auction records but could find nothing.”

“How refreshing!”

“What?”

She laughed, gently. “To find someone – particularly in business – who is so open and honest.”

“Well, bookselling is a small world.” He looked away embarrassed, but pleased.

“How much – if I may ask such a question – did you pay?”

“Actually only a part payment – I was going to research them, particularly the manuscript, and then, if they or the manuscript were particularly valuable, add to that payment.”

“Do you wish to sell them?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Then I will buy them. You will want my address, naturally.”

“Sorry?”

“My address. So you can bring the books with you tonight when you come to dinner. Nothing formal, so no need to dress. Do you have a pen and paper?”

“Er, yes.” Dazed, he gave her his favourite fountain pen and notebook.

She wrote quickly. “Shall we say half past seven for eight? Good. Oh – and you can bring that Greek book with you as well.”

She smiled at him, waved, and then was gone, out into the sunlit street and away from his world of dead books. Her perfume lingered, and it was some time before Thorold’s amazement disappeared. He tried to still his excitement and imagination by searching again

through his reference works.

He did not succeed, and the one reference he did find to anything mentioned in the books did not interest him. 'Asoth', it read, 'was a demoness worshipped by some ancient and secret sects about which nothing is known beyond the fact that women played a prominent role.'

No customers spoiled the solitude of what remained of his morning, and he carefully wrapped the books and manuscripts for the woman, sorted some stock from the piles of books against the cabinet by his desk before closing his shop early. He wandered happy and full of anticipation along the paths by the river, pleased with the sun and warmth of the day, occasionally stopping to sit. He spent a long time sitting on a bench by the weir, watching people as they passed, vaguely aware of his dreams but unwilling from fear of disappointment to make them conscious, to dwell upon them.

He had not noticed a man dressed in black following him, and did not notice him as he began a slow walk under the hot sun along the overgrown riverside path that led him back to his small riverside Apartment.

IV

The gardens of the large detached house were quiet and secluded, and Lianna spent the hours of the afternoon removing weeds from the many beds of flowers. The house stood on Kingsland above the river and beside Shrewsbury School but afforded views of neither. Once, the area had been select, but the decades had drawn some of the wealthy away, their homes absorbed by the School or divided into still expensive Flats and Apartments. But an aura remained, and it pleased Lianna.

Her interest in her garden waned slowly, and she discarded her implements and her working clothes to bathe in the bright surroundings of her bathroom. She lay relaxed and soaking in the warm water for a long time, occasionally thinking of the bookseller. She had enjoyed her game with his emotions and although the books he would bring interested her, he himself interested her more.

She was dressing in readiness for her evening when someone loudly rapped the brass knocker of the oak front door. She did not hurry, Edgar Mallam smiled at her as she opened the door, but she did not return his greeting.

“Yes?” she said coldly.

“Hello Lianna. May I come in?” He removed his sun glasses.

“Why?”

“To talk – about my group.”

“Fifteen minutes – that is all the time I can spare.”

He followed her into the Sitting Room to sit beside her in a leather armchair.

“Well?” she asked.

“I thought you and me – “

“As I have said to you many times, our relationship is purely a teaching one.”

“You know how I feel,” he said almost gently.

“What you feel, you feel. It is a stage, and all stages pass.”

His mood changed abruptly. “Is that so?” There was anger in his voice.

Her smile was one of pity, not kindness. “I sense your feelings are being inverted. What you thought was love is turning to anger because your will is thwarted. You will doubtless now find reasons for disliking me.”

Edgar stood up. “I’m sick of your teaching!”

“As I have said to you many times since you first embarked upon your quest, the way is not

easy.”

He took a step toward her, but she rose to face him and smile. He stared at her, but only briefly – averting his eyes from her suddenly demonic gaze.

“I’ll go my own way! I don’t need you!” he shouted.

“You are, of course,” and she smiled generously at him, “free to do so. But I have heard reports that some of your activities are, shall I say, not exactly compatible with the ethos of our Order.”

“So what?”

“Such activities are not conducive to the self-development which our way wishes to achieve. They are not, in fact, connected with any genuine sinister tradition but are personal proclivities, best avoided if advancement is sought.”

“Stuff your tradition and your pompous words!” He walked toward the door. “And I’m not afraid of you – or your curses!”

“True Adepts do not waste time on such trivia. Everyone has to make their own mistakes.”

He laughed. “Just as I thought! You’re all talk! Well, I do have magickal power! So stuff your Order!”

She waited, and was not disappointed for he slammed her front door shut on his leaving. One of her telephones was within easy reach, and she dialled a number.

“Hello? Imlach?” she queried. “Lianna. Mr. Mallam has I regret to say just resigned. You will know what to do. Good.” She replaced the receiver and smiled.

The hours of her waiting did not seem long, and when the caterers arrived she left them with their duties while she occupied herself in her library. The table was laid, the food heating, the wine chilled by the time of Thorold’s arrival and all she had to do was light the candles on the table. The caterers had departed as they had arrived – discreetly, leaving her alone.

Thorold was early, and nervously held the books as he knocked on her door surrounded by the humid haze of evening. She greeted him, took the books and led him to her library where he stood by the mahogany desk staring with amazement. Books, in sumptuous bookcases, lined the room from floor to high ceiling. She placed her new acquisitions on the desk.

“Later, if you wish,” she said, “you can spend some time in here.”

Only two places were laid on the table in the dining room.

“Will your husband not be joining us?” an expectant but nervous Thorold asked.

“Joining us? Why no!” she laughed. “He went abroad, some years ago. Living with some Oriental lady, I believe.”

For two hours they conversed while they ate, pausing only while she served her guest the courses of the meal. The topics of their conversation varied, and as the hours drew darkness outside, Thorold began to realize there was much that was unusual about Lianna. She asked about his knowledge of and interest in a wide variety of arcane subjects – alchemy, the Knights Templars, witchcraft, sorcery.... He had admitted his ignorance concerning most of them, and she, slightly smiling, had explained in precise language, and briefly, their nature, extent and history.

“Come,” she said as she poured him a cup of fresh coffee, “let us sit together in the Sitting Room.”

She took his cup and held it while she sat on the sofa. “Here, beside me,” she indicated.

Thorold sat beside her and blushed. All evening he had tried to avert his eyes from her breasts, uplifted and amply exposed by the dress she had chosen. But his eyes kept drifting from her face to her eyes to her breasts. He knew she knew, and he knew she did not mind.

She gave him his cup and he managed to control the shaking he felt beginning in his hand.

“Do you believe in Satan?” she abruptly said.

“Satan?” he repeated.

“Yes. The Devil.”

“Well, actually, I was brought up Roman Catholic to believe that he existed. But now – “ he shrugged his shoulders.

“Now you no longer trouble yourself with such matters.”

“I did – once. There was a time,” he said wistfully, “when I believed I had a vocation to be a Priest. I suppose most Catholic children – the boys, that is – who are brought up according to the faith have such yearnings at least once.”

“But you sought another road.”

“I lost my faith in God.”

“So you do not believe there is a supra-human being called the Devil who rules over this Earth?”

‘No. Why do you ask?’

She did not avert her eyes from his. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because I sense the question is important to you.”

She laughed, and touched his face lightly with he fingers. “You are astute! I like that.”

“In what way can I help you?”

“You underestimate yourself.”

For a moment Thorold was perplexed. He had accepted her unusual invitation to her house partly from curiosity but mostly because he had been sexually attracted to her. The intimate dinner, her topics of conversation, her looks and gestures had gradually made him aware – or at least he had thought so – of her purpose in inviting him. This, he had believed, would explain why a beautiful obviously wealthy and exceptionally intelligent woman would be interested in an unadventurous bookseller.

She saved him from his perplexity by saying, “You know what I am, then?”

“I can guess.”

“Yes – you have guessed. And the prospect of your guess being correct does not frighten you?” When he did not answer, she continued. “It excites you, in fact – as I now excite you.”

Thorold began to sense he was losing the initiative. Then it occurred to him that he had never had the initiative. Since his first meeting with her he had been playing the role of victim. He tried to distance himself from his desire for her, but she moved toward him until their bodies touched. Her lips were near his, her breath warm and fragrant and he did not resist when she kissed him. She did not restrain his hand as it caressed her breasts just as he did not prevent her from undoing the buckle of the belt that supported his trousers. He felt a vague feeling of unease, but it did not last. It had been a long time since he had kissed and touched a woman, and he abandoned himself to his desire, a desire enhanced by her perfume, her beauty and her eagerness.

Their passion was frenzied, then gentle at his silent urging until her need overcame his control. They lay, then sweaty and satiated with bodies entwined for some time without speaking until she broke their silence.

“You are full of surprises,” she said with a smile, and kissed him.

He wanted to stay with her, naked, and sleep but she kissed him again before rising to dress.

“Come,” she said, throwing him his clothes. “I have something to show you.”

Outside in the warm air, a nearly full moon in a clear night sky cast still shadows around and upon the house.

V

Mallam could sense the girl's fear. He did his best to increase it by staring at her while Monica, his young Priestess and mistress, held the girl's arm ready. The room was brightly lit in readiness for the filming of the ritual that was to follow, and Mallam walked slowly toward the girl, a small syringe fitted with a hypodermic needle in his hand.

The girl could not struggle, for a man dressed in a black robe whose face was shadowed by the hood, held her other arm and body, and Mallam carefully pierced the vein of her arm with the needle and filled the syringe with her blood.

“See,” he said to her as he withdrew the needle, “you are mine now!”

The girl began to cry, but he had no pity for her. “Betray me, and I shall kill you – wherever you are.” He showed her the blood-filled syringe for effect. “Take her,” he said to Monica, “and prepare her.”

The Temple was in a large cellar of a house, and Mallam walked around it, ensuring that everything was prepared. The black candles on the stone altar had been lit, the incense was burning, the lights and camera ready. A black inverted pentagram was painted on the red wall behind the altar.

He did not have long to wait. The now naked girl was carried by some of the black robed worshippers and laid upon the altar. Stupefied by drugs, she was smiling and seemed oblivious to the people around her as, behind the bright enclosing circle of camera lights, drumbeats began.

Mallam raised his hands dramatically to signal the beginning of the ritual, his facemask in place.

“Asmodeus! Set! Jaal! Satan! Hear us!” he shouted.

“Hear us!” his followers responded.

“We gather here to offer you the first blood of this girl!”

“Hear us!”

“Hear us, you Lords of the Earth and of the Darkness. This day a new sister shall join us in our worship!” He gestured toward the girl and one after the other, the worshippers kissed her.

“Now we shall dance to your glory!”

The worshippers removed their robes to dance around the altar laughing; screeching and shouting the names of their gods while the drums beat louder and louder. Only Mallam and another man did not join the dance, and Maurice Rhiston let himself be led toward the girl. He did not notice the camera lurking in the darkness and operated by a black robed figure, as he hardly noticed Mallam remove his robe. The girl seemed to be smiling at him as he walked naked toward her. Mallam had offered him the privilege and he could not refuse.

For Rhiston, the orgy that followed did not last long. Mallam, still robed and masked ushered him upstairs into a house where they both dressed before sitting in the comfortable Sitting Room.

“You have done well,” Mallam said. “There are two matters, though, that need your attention.”

“I am only too pleased to help,” an obsequious Maurice said.

“All of this,” Mallam smiled, “is not cheap.”

“I understand.”

“The other little matter is a short trip – to London. I have some contacts there, there will be a film to deliver.”

“As you wish. May I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“With all these people involved – there is a risk, surely?”

Mallam’s laugh made Maurice even more nervous. “I have the power of my magick to bind them!”

“Yes – but...”

“So you do not believe? I shall show you, as I have shown them!” and his eyes glowed with his intensity of feeling. “Fear! Fear – that is what keeps them silent. Fear of me.” Quick, like lightning, his mood changed. “You like girls – I give you girls. So why should you worry?”

“I’m not worried, really,” Maurice lied. Then, to ingratiate himself, he said, “there is someone I know who might interest you.”

“Who?”

“Shall I say a certain young girl who lives near me.”

“For something like tonight?” And Mallam smiled again.

“Possibly, yes.”

“For yourself, I presume.”

“If you wish it so.”

“I might – because I am beginning to like you. Of course, it would be expensive. All the arrangements, and so on.

“I understand.”

“If you can bring her – I shall take care of the rest. I’ll need details.”

Before Maurice could answer, Monica entered the room. Beneath the black velvet cloak Maurice could see she was naked.

“What do you want?”

“Sorry to interrupt, but there is someone to see you.”

“They can wait.”

“He insists.”

“So what? I’ve better things to do.”

“He mentioned Lianna’s name,” whispered Monica.

Mallam’s face twitched. He indicated Maurice. “Look after him, then.”

A tall man with the face of an undertaker stood in the hallway, holding his hat in his hand. He was dressed well, except the cut of his suit was forty years out of fashion.

“You do not know me,” he said directly. “But we have a common enemy.”

“Is that so?”

“I have information you might find useful.”

“Oh yes?” Mallam pretended indifference.

“I don’t ask much.”

“What makes you think I’m interested?”

“If you are not, there are others.” He turned to leave.

“So what is this information?”

“A place I found out about. She knows about it – but no one else. Special it is, see. For the likes of you – and her.”

“So?”

“There are rich pickings, in that place.”

Mallam was suspicious. “Then why come to me?”

“I need your help. The place, see, where to find it exactly is written about in a sort of code – a secret writing. I know nothing of such matters.” He took a step toward Mallam. “Ever wonder where she gets her money? I’ll tell you. A hoard, from this place.”

Mallam had often wondered. Once, when he had been her pupil for only a few months, he had asked and she laughing had said, “It is a long story. Involving the Templars. I may tell it some day.” He had been infatuated with her even then and could remember most of their conversations. But the months of his learning with her were short, for he lusted after success, wealth, power and results while she urged him toward the difficult – and for him inaccessible – path of self-discovery. So he had drifted away from her teachings, seeking his own path.

“What about this place?” he asked, his curiosity aroused.

“An old preceptory it is – of the Knights Templars. South of here, exactly where is a secret only known to her. But I stole her precious manuscript!”

Mallam controlled his excitement. “How are you involved with her?”

“I’ve seen you – many a time. Coming to the house. The gardens – for years I tended them, made them bloom. These hands, see, they worked for her and her father before her. I paid no heed to their doings. Paid to be quiet, see. But then, after all these years a weeks’ notice is all I got. No thanks. Nothing. No reason given. Turned out of my home, as well. Nothing to show for forty years!”

“A manuscript, you say?”

“Yes, sir. For a price!”

“I would need more proof than your story.”

“Would I cheat you? You pay – a small sum, see – I give you the thing to you. You find something – you give me some more money. You find nothing – you come and find me, have your money back. Is this fair – or is this not fair?” The man held his hands out, palms upward, in a gesture of hopelessness.

It did not take Mallam long to decide. “You have the document with you?”

“You have money to give me now?”

Mallam smiled. “How much?”

“A few hundred pounds, that is all I ask.”

”Wait here.”

Mallam was not away long. He counted the money into the man’s hand. The manuscript the man took from the inside pocket of his jacket consisted of several small pieces of parchment rolled together and tied with a cord.

“I call upon you again,” the man said, “in two weeks.”

Mallam did not answer. He had already untied the cord and unrolled the parchments by the time that man closed the door. Each sheet consisted of several lines of writing in a secret magickal script and, with increasing excitement, he walked slowly toward the stairs and his

own room. The small desk was cluttered with letters, books, bizarre artifacts and empty wine glasses, and he pushed them all aside.

For hours he studied the script, making notes on pieces of paper or consulting some book. Once, Monica entered. At first he did not notice her as she tidied the heap of clothes from the dishevelled bed. But she came to caress his neck with her hand and he pushed her away, shouting, "Leave me alone!"

It was nearing dawn when his efforts of the night were rewarded and with a shaking hand he wrote his transliteration out. The parchments told of how Stephan of Stanhurst, preceptor, had in 1311 and prior to his arrest in Salisbury, taken the great treasure stored in the preceptory at Lydley - property of Roger de Alledone, Knight Templar – to a place of safe keeping. It told how the preceptory was founded in 1160 and how, centuries later, the lands granted with it became the subject of dispute and passed gradually into other grasping hands; for Stephen after his arrest was confined within a Priory and refused to reveal where he had hidden the treasure. But, most importantly to Mallam, it told where the treasure had been stored when the foresightful Roger de Alledone realized the Order was about to be suppressed by Pope Clement V and all its properties and treasures seized.

The name of the building housing the treasure meant nothing to Mallam, but he did recognize the name of the village containing it. As soon as he could, he would buy a large scale map of the village of Stredbow, and begin his search.

VI

The bright light of the rising sun awoke Thorold, and for several minutes he lay still, remembering where he was and the events of the previous evening and night.

He had not slept well. He had watched the film Lianna had shown him in silence and was almost glad when at its end she had shown him one of the many guest bedrooms, kissed him briefly saying, "I'm sorry, but I always sleep by myself. I shall call you for breakfast."

The film disturbed him not only because of its content but because Lianna, before, during and after it, had made no comment to him about it. For years, Thorold had lived like a recluse – dimly aware of some of the terrible realities of life but content to follow his own inner path. He prided himself on his calm outlook and his intuitive understanding of people, accepting events with an almost child-like innocence. The film had shown what he assumed to be some kind of Black Magick ritual during which a young girl, obviously drugged and

probably only around fourteen years of age, was placed on an altar and forced into several acts of sexual intercourse with men, all of whom had worn face masks to protect their identity. But, coming so soon after his passion with Lianna, the film destroyed his calm. By the time the film ended, his own passion – and the beauty he had felt in his relationship with Lianna – was only a vague remembered dream.

He had felt anger – a desire for the girl somehow to be rescued. But this did not happen. Lianna's face had shown no emotion and he became perplexed because he could not equate the woman with whom he had made love with the woman who, by having such a film, must be somehow connected with the events depicted. And Lianna had left him alone with his feelings.

The sun rose into a clear blue sky and he watched it until it became too bright for his eyes. He dressed quickly, and left to find Lianna. It did not take him long, for he could hear her singing.

She was in the bathroom and he, politely, knocked on the door.

“Do come in!” she said.

She was bathing in the large bath and indicated the chair beside it.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked and smiled.

Her breasts were visible above the foamy water and Thorold blushed and averted his eyes.
“No, not really.”

“Do you want to join me?” she said mischievously.

“I'd rather talk, actually.”

“About the film, I presume.”

“Yes.”

“Your verdict? I presume you have come to some conclusions.”

She smiled at him and Thorold closed his eyes to her beauty. When he opened them again, she was still smiling.

“Are you – “ he began, hesitant.

“Am I involved, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“What do you feel – sense about me?”

“You really want to know?”

“Of course.”

Thorold sighed. “This is all very strange to me. It’s like a dream. I cannot believe I’m sitting here, in the bathroom of a beautiful woman who last night shared with me something beautiful and who then shows me a”

“A perverted film?”

“Basically, yes.”

“But you have not answered my question,” she said, softly.

He shook his head. “I sense you could not be involved in something like that.”

“And?”

“Which leaves the question – why show me the film?”

“To which your answer is?”

“I don’t have an answer. Except –“

“Except what?”

“It has something to do with the subjects we discussed – correction, which you talked about - last night.”

“Nothing else?”

“Actually, it occurred to me that you might be testing me.”

“And if I was, why would that be?”

“I can only guess.

“Guess, then.”

Thorold turned away. “Our relationship.”

“Would you like to join me now?”

Without hesitation, Thorold stripped away his clothes.

“After breakfast” she had said, “you might like to browse in the library.”

He was surprised to find that the manuscripts he had brought were no longer on the desk but this discovery did not detain him from beginning to inspect the contents of the library. For an hour or more he wandered around the shelves and bookcases reading the titles and

occasionally removing a book. He found a section devoted to classical Greek literature and, among the volumes, several editions of 'Prometheus Bound'. This startled him, as Lianna did when he came up quietly behind him.

"So," she said, observing the copy of Aeschylus he held in his hand, "another secret discovered."

He replaced the book, tried to appear unconcerned, and failed. "You are an intriguing woman."

She laughed. "In both senses of the word!"

"I didn't mean it that way."

"Nevertheless, it is true."

"So I was right after all. Our meeting was obviously not by chance."

"Is anything?"

Thorold ignored the remark. His feelings became confused again. And his pride was hurt. "So, how can I help?" he asked, almost angry.

"Help is not exactly the right word."

"Is that so?"

She answered softly and slowly. "I would say 'partnership' is the word that captures the essence."

He could see her, outwardly unperturbed, watch him as she waited for his reply and as he did so he became aware of his own feeling for her. He wanted her to elaborate, but dared not ask directly in case he had misunderstood her usage of the word. He was still trying to think of something reasonable to say when she spoke.

“You are,” she said, “unusual for a man in being so sensitive.”

Thorold was unsure whether he was pleased or insulted, and said nothing.

“That is,” she continued, “one of the qualities that attracted me to you. I have watched you for some time.”

“Say again?”

“I met you once before – although you will probably not remember. You were walking, one morning very early, along by the river. I was there, too. You passed me, and smiled. You revealed yourself through your eyes.”

Thorold tried, but could not remember the incident. He began to tremble, thinking in his innocence that she spoke of love. But her speaking dismayed him.

“I shall be honest with you, now – and cease to play games.” She sat on the edge of the desk, but Thorold remained silent and still. “You see around you what I possess, and you have, I believe, some intimation of some of my interests and activities. I am approaching that time in my life when certain changes are inevitable. Before that time, there is one role I would like to fulfill. But more than that I wanted companionship. Of course, I could have, with you, carried on as I began. But I wanted you to know, to understand. Because of who I am and because of – shall I say? – my interest, there was really no other way.

“Also, you have other qualities, besides sensitivity – or perhaps I should say, besides your empathy. At this moment in time, you yourself are probably unaware of them. But they are important to me – to my interests.”

“In all this,” Thorold said, “haven’t you forgotten something?”

For a few seconds Lianna looked wistful. “I don’t think so.”

“Spontaneity? Love?”

“That’s two things,” she smiled.

For an instant, Thorold thought of abruptly leaving, slamming the door as a gesture of his intent. He did make a move in that direction, but he was already smiling in response to her remark.

“What am I letting myself in for?” he said humorously as he turned toward her again.

“Paternity?”

“And I thought romance was dead!”

“You will stay tonight, then?”

“I might consider it – if I have any energy left.”

“I shall make sure you have! But now, there is someone I would like you to meet.”

“No more games – or tests?”

“Naturally not. It is only a short drive. You may drive me, if you wish.”

Thorold bowed in deference. “Of course, ma’am. There be, like” he said in a demotic voice, “one little problem, your Ladyship. I canna’ drive.”

She started to play her allotted role, then thought better of it and said, seriously, “Really? I didn’t know.”

Thorold made an imaginary mark on an imaginary board with his finger. “One up for me, then!”

She did not quite know how to react to his playfulness. “Do you wish to learn?” she asked.

“What?”

“To drive, of course.”

“Not really. I’m quite content walking. Why should I want to leave Shropshire? All I need is here – within walking distance usually.”

“But your business, surely,” she said.

“A few trips a year – by train. The fewer, the better.”

Nearby, a pendulum clock struck the hour. “Come,” she urged, “or we shall be late.”

“May I ask to where?”

“Oh a small village, not far”

“Why the rush?”

“Because it is seven o’clock already, and we have to arrive before someone else.”

“I suppose all will be revealed?”

She smiled. “Possibly.”

Thorold followed her out of the library. He was curious, perplexed and pleased. Her dress was thin, and suited to the warm weather and he had noticed, while she talked, how her nipples stood out. He could not help his feelings, and as he watched her collect her keys from a table in the hall, turn and briefly smile at him, he realized he was in love.

Compared to that feeling, the reason for the journey was not important to him. Outside, he could hear cats fighting.

VII

Lianna was right. Their journey was not long even though she took the longer route. She drove along the narrow, twisty lanes southeast of Shrewsbury town to pass the *Tree with the House in It*, the wood containing *Black Dick's Lake*, to take the steep lane up toward Causeway Wood.

"This lane," she said, breaking their silence, "used to be called the Devil's Highway. Just there –" and she indicated an overgrown hedge, "was a well called Frog Well where three frogs lived. The largest was, of course, called Satan and the other two were imps of his."

The lane rose, to twist, then fall to turn and rise again, always bound by high hedge and always narrow. A few farms lay scattered among the valleys and the hills on either side, a few cottages beside it and Thorold caught glimpses of nearby Lawley Hill and wooded banks and ridges that he did not know.

The village she drove through was quiet, its houses, cottages and church mostly built from the same gray stone, and Thorold was surprised when she stopped beside an old timbered cottage whose curtainless small windows were covered in grime.

"Wait here, will you?" she asked.

Thorold watched her enter the door of the cottage without knocking. For over ten minutes he waited. But the heat of the sun made the car stuffy and uncomfortable, and he got out to walk toward the cottage gate. As he did so a man appeared, quite suddenly from the small rutted driveway across the road. He was old, dressed in worn working clothes and wore a battered hat.

"You not been here before, then?" he asked Thorold.

A surprised Thorold stopped, and turned. "Er, no I haven't."

"You come for The Giving, then?"

Before he could reply, Lianna appeared beside him. She smiled at the old man, nodded and held Thorold's hand. Thorold saw the man's look of surprise, and the old man raised his hat, slightly, bowed just a little toward Lianna and shuffled away, back along the tree-shadowed driveway.

"Come on," she said to Thorold, "I shall show you round."

She still held his hand as they walked along the lane toward the mound and the church. Her gesture pleased him, but she did not speak and he let himself be led sun-wise around the mound, up through the wooden gate and through under the shade of the trees. She lingered, briefly, by the largest oak to take him down and back toward her car. A young woman in a rather old-fashioned dress stood near it.

"I shall not be long," Lianna said, and left him, to walk the fifty yards.

He could not hear what was said between the two women, but several times the young stranger turned to look at him. Then, she seemed to curtsy slightly to Lianna before walking away, but the movement was so quick Thorold believed he had been mistaken.

Lianna beckoned to him and he, obedient, went toward her.

"There is something else I would like to show you." She opened the passenger door of her car for him.

"What did you think?" she asked as they drove away from the village.

"Of what?"

"The village, of course."

"Alright. Seemed a very quiet place. They seemed to know you."

She avoided the subject by saying, "Do you ever see your wife?"

"Occasionally. Why do you ask?"

“You never divorced.”

Her words confirmed Thorold’s earlier suspicions. “So, you’ve been checking up on me?”

“Of course! You are still friends, then?”

“Yes. Where exactly are we going?”

“Just a place I know. Very efficacious – for certain things. A stone circle, in fact.”

The lane gave way to a wide road that took them down and turning into the Stretton valley, through the township and up the steep Burway track to the heather-covered, sheep-strewn Mynd. The turning she took, brought them down over Wild Moor to a stream filled valley of scattered farmsteads, up over moor, past the jagged rocks of the Stiperstones, past woods and abandoned mine-workings and high hills, to a narrow rutted track.

“Just a short walk,” she said, and briefly touched his face with her fingers.

The moorland was exposed and covered in places by fern, almost encircled by distant undulating hills. Thorold had walked the path before, in a storm, to the clearing which contained a flattened circle of stones, some tall, some broken and some fallen. He had not stayed long then, for his walk of that day was long and the weather bad. Now, a breeze cooled him as he walked beside Lianna, and she held his hand as they entered the circle to stand at its centre.

“Looks like someone has lit a fire recently,” Thorold said, indicating the burned ground under their feet.

In answer, Lianna kissed him and guided his body to the Earth. She did not need to encourage him further. His passion was strong but her need and frenzy were stronger and his body soon arched upon hers in orgasmic ecstasy to leave him relaxed and sleep-inclined.

“I must go now,” she suddenly said before rising and smoothing down her dress. “Meet me

on June the twenty-first outside the church in the village. At dawn. And do not worry about what you saw in the film. I will solve that particular problem – in my own way.” She bent down to touch his forehead with her hand. “Sleep now, and remember me.”

No sooner had she touched him than he was asleep, and she pulled up his trousers and re-fastened his belt before walking back along the track to her car.

Almost an hour later, Thorold awoke. She was not waiting for him by her car as he hoped and he walked slowly under the hot sun along the road and away from the stone circle. He walked for miles without stopping and when he did stop his memory of her was like a dream. A few cars and other vehicles passed him as he continued walking along the road past the wooded sides of Shelve Hill and down toward Hope Valley, but he did not try to stop them to ask for their assistance. There was a shop in the village at the valley’s bottom but he passed it by, unwilling to break the rhythm of his walking. He wondered about the lateness of the hour, about customers waiting for his shop to open, about Lianna and her strange interests.

There was little breeze to dry the sweat, which covered him as he walked, and he would stop, occasionally, to wipe the forehead with his hand. He did not mind the sweat, the heat or even his walking, and the nearer he came to Shrewsbury town, following the road down from the hills to the well-farmed plain around the town, the more he became convinced of the folly of his love. He began to convince himself that he did not care about Lianna – that she was only a brief liaison to be well and happily remembered in the twilight years of his life. But he nevertheless took the town roads that led toward her house.

He stood outside her gate for a long time, aware of his thirst for water and his sweat-filled clothes. For almost five hours he had walked toward his goal, and he stood before it exhausted and dizzy but still determined.

No one came to answer his loud rapping on the door of the house, and he wandered round, peering in the windows. Around the back, a young woman was kneeling as she tended a bed of bright flowers, and she smiled at Thorold before rising and saying, “Hello! Can I help you?”

Her face and bare arms were sunburned, and as she came closer, Thorold could see her hands were roughened and hard.

“I came to see Lianna.”

“Ah! You must be Thorold. She told me to expect you.”

“Is she in?”

“Afraid not.”

“Do you know when she will be back?”

“Three to four weeks.”

“Are you sure?”

“Quite.”

“Do you know where she has gone?”

“Amsterdam, she said.”

In the middle of the large expanse of well-tended lawn, a sprinkler showered water, and Thorold went toward it to stand in the spray. The coolness refreshed him, and he washed his face and neck several times with his hands before cupping his palms together to try to catch sufficient water to drink. He was not very successful.

The young woman with the sad face watched him, bemused.

“Would you like a drink?” she finally asked.

“If you don’t mind.” He left the spray to stand in the sun.

He followed her to a small outbuilding shaded by the branches of a walnut tree. Inside, and neatly arranged, was a large selection of gardening tools, two small tables and some chairs. A small sink and tap adorned one wall.

“Tea?” she asked, and seeing his surprise, added, “I was about to make one for myself.”

“You work here, then?”

“Sometimes.”

She smiled, and her smile reminded Thorold of Lianna and the reason why he had come. He thought, briefly, of rushing away to an airport to find her, but this romantic impulse did not last. He felt physically exhausted from his walk and emotionally confused, a piece in a game Lianna was playing. And his own pride was sometimes quite strong.

“Actually,” the woman said, intruding upon his thoughts, as she filled the kettle with water, “my father is the gardener here. He’s away at the moment.” She handed him a towel.

Thorold did not mind its colour or the stains. “Does she often go away?”

“Quite often, yes.”

“I know this may sound strange,” Thorold said, “but I don’t know her surname.”

“Alledone.” She smiled as she said the name.

Its significance escaped Thorold. “Mine’s Imlach, but you can call me Sarah.” The young woman smiled again, and began to remove her clothes.

VIII

It was if Thorold could still hear her laughter. He had left, as she had stood naked before him. It was not that he was not aroused by the sight of her lithe body; it was that he felt himself again part of a game Lianna was playing.

He had left without speaking, and her laughter seemed to mock him. He did not care for

long. His tiredness, hunger and thirst returned, and he walked almost as if in a trance of his Apartment. He drank, ate and rested, and when darkness came he lay himself wearily down to sleep. His sleep was fitful, disturbed by images of Lianna. Once, she appeared before him smiling and dressed in black. They were in a dark and cold place; full of mists and smells and when she kissed him it was as if she was sucking life from him. He felt dizzy and exhausted, and when she stopped to stand back and laugh, he fell to the ground where rats waited.

Several times during the night he awoke shouting and covered in sweat. Morning found him tired but restless and mentally disturbed. Outside his dwelling, the weather was cloudless and hot, but he himself felt cold, and dressed accordingly.

Dawn had long since passed when he left to walk to his shop and, despite the lateness of the hour; he was surprised to find the town quiet. Only on entering his shop did he remember it was Sunday. Momentarily pleased, he left to walk up the narrow street toward the trees and spaces of Quarry Park. For some time he stood by the wrought iron gates, looking down toward the river, and while he stood, absorbed in his thoughts and feelings about Lianna, church bells tolled, calling the faithful to prayer.

The sound pleased him, as the weather itself did, but he began to shiver from cold. But the strange sensation did not last and he began to slowly walk beside the old town walls toward the reddish-gray stones of the Catholic Cathedral.

Mass had not long ended, and he could still smell burning wax from the altar candles. A faint fragrance of incense remained and, conditioned by his childhood, he performed a genuflexion before seating himself near the altar. Even in the years of his apostasy he had often visited churches of the religion of his youth, finding within them a peace and tranquillity which pleased him and which drew him back. He did not know the reason for this, and although he had thought about it occasionally, he had left the matter alone, content just to accept the feeling, whatever its cause. Once, his wife – tired of such visits and such silent sittings – had challenged him repeatedly on the matter, and he, unwilling to speak, had muttered briefly about the stones and the space within the building as creating a special atmosphere. He had partly believed himself, but a vague suspicion about God remained. All his subsequent visits during the years of his marriage he had made alone.

He sat on the wooden pew gently breathing and still for a long time, free from thoughts and feelings about Lianna and was about to leave, calm and happy, when a Priest walking toward the altar turned toward him and smiled.

The man was young – too young, Thorold thought, to be a Priest. His face was gentle, his

smile kind and in the moment that measured the meeting of their eyes Thorold felt a holy aura about the man. It was a strange sensation – a mixture of joy and sadness – and possessed for Thorold a uniqueness, bringing back memories from the years of his youth: the sound of the communion bell, the reverence as the head was bowed, the host shown; the smell of incense... Then the Priest genuflected, and walked through the sacristy door.

Thorold followed, consumed by a desire to speak to the Priest. But the sacristy was empty and, beyond in the narrow corridor, a balding bespectacled man in a cassock mumbled words from a Breviary he held in his hand.

“Yes. Can I help you?” he asked as he saw Thorold.

“Yes – I’m looking for the young Priest who just came this way.”

The old man squinted, closed his Breviary, and said, “Young man, you say? No one else is here but me.”

“But – “ Thorold looked up and down the corridor, back toward the sacristy, and as he did so he realized he had seen a ghost.

“Father –“ Thorold began.

“Yes?”

“Can I talk to you for a moment?”

The old Priest started to look at his wristwatch, thought better of it, and said, “Yes, of course. Shall we go into the garden?”

He led Thorold down the corridor, through several doors, rooms and a passage, into a small but neat garden. He indicated a wooden bench.

“Do you believe,” Thorold asked directly, “that Satanism exists today?”

The Priest smiled. “I myself do, of course. But some of our younger brethren have different

ideas.”

“About Satan?”

“Indeed.”

“And such people – would they have any powers?”

“To an extent, yes. I remember reading somewhere – a long time ago...” He thought for a moment, removed his spectacles, cleaned the lenses with a handkerchief from his pocket, blew his nose and continued. “Joseph de Tonquedec I believe it was, who said something like *‘the Devil’s interventions in the material realm are always particular and are of two kinds, corresponding to miracle and Providence on the divine side. For just as there are divine miracles, so there are diabolical signs and wonders.’*” He replaced his spectacles, squinted at Thorold, and said, “Why do you ask?”

“Curiosity.”

“Curiosity, of course,” smiled the Priest.

“And these people, when they want to – how shall I say? – draw someone into their circle, how would that person feel?”

“I am no authority on such matters.”

“But surely you have heard things?”

“Heard things? Yes, of course. I have been in Holy Orders a long time.”

“And?”

“I remember one incident – years ago. Many years ago. A young girl was involved. There was a man – whether he actually worshipped the Devil, I do not know, but he was said to. He brought this girl under his influence. Gradually, of course, for that is how I believe they work. She who was happy became joyless – a shell. For he sucked the life from her.

Thinking back now, she was like an addict – needing him.” The Priest kept his silence for a long time.

When he did not speak, Thorold asked, “And what became of her – and him?”

“Oh, she died – wasted away. He left the country. Never heard of him again. My first Parish. Her family of course kept the matter quiet. That’s how they work: slowly, offering to their victims what that victim most desires. For some, it is money, others power – for others perhaps love and affection. When they have that person under their control - they have one more soul for the Devil. He rewards them, of course, for bringing such a prize.” He looked at his wristwatch. “Just curiosity, you say?” When Thorold did not reply, he added, “I have a friend, a monk, who knows more about such matters.”

“No. No, thank you, Father. I must be going now.”

He stood up.

“As you wish,” the Priest said and smiled.

“Thank you, Father.” Thorold turned, and hurried away, back through the church and into the bright sunlight.

He felt cold again, and walked briskly back along the path by the narrow road toward Quarry Park, aware as he did so of a man behind him. The man stopped when he stopped, waited when he waited, and walked when he did, many yards behind. Thorold felt a brief fear. Then, suddenly and unexpectedly for him, he felt anger and turned to walk back to face the man.

The man was tall, his face tanned and lined by decades of weather. He held in his hat in his hand and his heavy unfashionable suit seemed to be unsuited to the hot weather.

“Why are you following me?” Thorold demanded.

“I am Imlach.”

Thorold's surprise lasted only a few seconds. "Well, you can tell Lianna that I'm not playing any more of her games! I never want to see her again!" His anger, frustration and incipient fear moulded his words and he felt himself shaking.

"You will be there," Imlach said, with menace in his voice, "on the twenty-first as she instructed." He touched Thorold's shoulder, placed his hat upon his head and abruptly turned to walk away, down the hill.

Thorold did not watch for long. But he had taken only a few steps back toward his shop when he realized the coldness he had felt was gone.

Around him, he felt he could hear Imlach's daughter laughing.

IX

Carefully, in the dawn light which entered his room, Mallam refolded the parchment before hiding it, safely he thought, behind the mirror on the wall. He felt unusually excited, almost possessed, by a desire to find and steal Lianna's secret horde.

He found Monica asleep downstairs on the sofa, the house quiet and otherwise quite empty. He did not like the silence, and turned the radio on loudly.

"Come on, wake up!" He shook Monica several times.

"What?" she mumbled.

"Get up! I want some breakfast," he demanded.

"What time is it?"

"About four. Come on – I've got to go out soon."

Monica turned over intent on resuming her sleep.

“Get up you lazy bitch!” he shouted.

“Leave me alone,” she mumbled.

“Get up!” he snarled, and shook her again.

“I’m tired.”

“I want some breakfast!”

“Get you own.”

This sign of defiance, meek though it was, enraged Mallam, and he took her by the shoulders to throw her onto the floor.

“Get off me!” she screamed. In the struggle, she kicked him.

“You whore! You bitch!” Mallam shouted and began to beat her body with his fists.

She tried to protect herself with her arms, but to no avail, and Mallam in his fury, ripped off her dress.

“You like this, don’t you?” he smirked as he fumbled with the belt on his trousers.

But Monica was crying, and tried desperately to wriggle free. He slapped her face several times before attempting to kiss her. Suddenly, her flailing hand touched a lamp knocked over in the struggle and before she was aware of what she was doing, she hit his head with it several times. He groaned, then collapsed but she pushed his body from her.

He was only stunned by the blows, and she took advantage of this to grasp her dress and flee from the room and house. Her dress was torn, but she did not care, and she put it on before running away.

It did not take him long to recover. He changed his clothes, collected a large portion of the money he had hidden in the house, and left to find her. He toured the streets around the house in his car, then, finding nothing, drove to her Flat. The streets around the Abbey were deserted and he parked in the shadow of the large old Benedictine building to wait and watch the row of terraced houses across the road. A few cars passed while he waited, and he was soon bored.

He thought the church was mocking him, and he spat in its direction before crossing the road to unlock the front door with his key. Her Flat was on the ground floor, and faced the Abbey, a fact that he had detested on his infrequent visits. Quietly, he opened her door and it did not take him long to wreck her few possessions, and he sat at the table by the window to wait for her. Her clothes he had torn and scattered on the floor, and with a knife from her small kitchen he had slashed her bedding, her pictures and anything else he could find. Her Teddy bear he had disembowelled and set upon the table before him.

The longer he waited, the more frustrated he became until, after hours of waiting, he smashed the table, the chairs and overturned her bed. Then, hearing movement in the Flat above, he crept out into the bright sun of morning.

He drove fast and almost recklessly away from the town toward the village of Stredbow, remembering his greed and his hatred of Lianna. He left his car near the mound of the church and wandered around the quiet village trying to locate the house and, when he did, he was not impressed, as a tourist might have been by the black and white half-timbered, if somewhat restored, house. The front garden of the residence was separated from the narrow lane by a low wall of large stones, and, set back in a corner of the grounds and almost obscured by a tree, Mallam saw a small stone building. The stones were worn by the weather of centuries, and he was considering how best to sneak toward when he knew to be his goal – whether then or later that night – when a young woman in an old fashioned dress came out of the house toward him.

Her face was round and her cheeks red and she had gathered her hair in a band behind her neck.

“It’s a fair old morning, isn’t it?” she asked and smiled.

Immediately, Mallam thought her stupid and dull. “Yes!” he agreed, trying to ingratiate himself.

“You passing through, then?” She stood by the low wooden gate, resting her hands on its top.

“Yes. Yes I am.”

“Come far, have you?”

“No, not really.”

“Be a hot day, again.”

“Yes. I don’t suppose,” he asked and smiled at her, “there is anywhere I could get a cup of tea. Only I’ve been driving all night.”

“Can’t say as I can think of anywhere. Lest ways, not round here.”

“Oh.” He tried to sound disappointed.

“You must be hot – in all them black clothes.”

“Yes – I am a bit.”

“Well – “ she began before looking him over, letting her eyes linger for a while on his crotch, “I suppose I could see my way to letting you have some water. You want to come into my kitchen? It’s cool in there – and what with you being so hot.”

“Yes, that would be fine.” He concealed his glee.

“Follow me, then.”

He did, his mind already full of scheming.

“Sit yourself down.”

The kitchen was large, cool and full of old furnishings. Bunches of drying herbs hung from the walls, and rows of cork-stoppered glass jars adorned nearly all the other spaces. Most seemed to contain herbs or spices but a few appeared to Mallam to contain parts of animals or insects. He could not be sure for the strong odours made him feel dizzy.

“Sit you down.”

She brought him an earthenware mug full of water, which she placed on the old table beside him.

“Good water, that is. From the well. None of your piped stuff.”

Mallam drank, and began to feel better. “You have a well, then?” he asked.

“Been here for centuries, that well.”

“That old building in your garden – that’s not it, is it?”

“That? No – that belongs to her!” She almost spat the last word out.

“Who?”

“She herself who owns this house – and most of the village. You mark my words, one day that family will pay for what its done!”

“So that old building is not yours, then?”

“Keeps it locked, she does. Once or twice a year she comes to it. Nobody I know has seen inside.”

“You don’t like her then?”

“No one here does, I tell you. For as long as anyone can remember her family have owned all the land here - and the houses what’s in them.”

The woman looked around while she spoke, and Mallam guessed she was afraid.

“She herself does not live here, in the village?”

“Why no! Got a big house in Shrewsbury town, she has. And others elsewhere – abroad, as well. You feeling better now, then?”

“Yes, thanks.”

“You’d best be going.”

Mallam sensed the sudden change in her mood, as if her resentment had overcome all her other feelings. Mallam had no doubt that the woman had referred to Lianna, and he began to form a plan of action in his mind.

“The water is good, as you said. Can I take some with me?”

“If you like. I got an empty bottle somewhere.”

“Your husband out, then?”

She filled the bottle from an urn by the sink before answering. “In the fields, yes. Since dawn.”

“You must get lonely.”

“There, take that with you.” She handed him the bottle. Its shape and rubber stopper gave away its age.

Mallam stood up to face her. “I’ll bring the bottle back, if you wish.”

“If you like.”

“I often pass this way. Well, nearby.”

They stood watching each other. Mallam felt she was waiting for him to make the first gesture of their intent, and he was about to raise his hand to touch her face when she turned away.

“Folk around here talk,” she said. “You’d best be away.”

She walked him to the door, where he said, “What would be the best time for me to call for more water?”

“Sunday, after dark. Wait by there.” She indicated the stone building.

“Until then.” He did not look back as he walked along the path, through the gate and back up along the lane toward his car, elated by his success and his plan. She would, he thought, be easy to control. He had seen the desire plain on her face, sensed her frustration. He had it all worked out in his mind – a homely woman, young and burdened with a desire her hard-working husband could not or would not fulfill. He would play his role, and gain access to the building, which he was certain would contain the treasure of the Templars.

Happy and contented, he drove away from the village. He would forget about Monica – she was just another whore, and there were plenty more, as there were plenty more girls ready to be enticed into his group. Maurice Rhiston, he felt sure, would not fail him.

X

Thorold spent the hours of the morning walking slowly or sitting by the river as it wound its way through the town, and when he did return to his Apartment he was tired and thirsty and still thinking about Lianna. For once, the hot sun in a clear deep blue sky did not bring forth a mood of peace and contentment, and he trudged wearily up the short overgrown path that led from the river to the road of his dwelling.

A woman was sitting on his doorstep, and he sighed, thinking of Lianna and the games she played with people. The woman was a pitiful sight to him – her face was swollen, she was barefoot and her dark dress was torn. She saw him approaching, and rose.

“Hello!” he said like a simpleton.

Monica smiled at him.

“Can I help you?” he asked. She nodded, but said nothing and Thorold could see the fear in her eyes. “You’d better come in,” he said.

Across the street he could see a net-curtain twitching in the bottom Apartment. His dwelling was stuffy and hot, and he opened all the windows. By the time he had finished the woman had curled up and fallen asleep on the sofa. He covered her with a blanket. She was young; her oval face enchanting despite the swelling, and Thorold searched his own wardrobes for suitable clothes for her, which might fit.

For hours she slept, and when she did awake, he sat by her on the floor.

“Would you like some tea?” he asked.

“You haven’t got anything stronger, have you?”

“Sorry, no. But I do have a good selection of teas. Any preference?”

“Not really.” Her smile was forced.

“Are you hungry?”

“A little, yes.”

“Some toast, then?”

“That would be nice. You’re very kind.”

Embarrassed, Thorold stood up. "Mind if I ask," he said as he busied himself in his kitchen, "what you were doing on my doorstep."

"Waiting for you of course!"

"I suppose that is logical. There are some clothes there, if you want to try them."

"Thanks, I will. You have a bathroom, I presume."

"Down the hall, second door."

She returned wearing a shirt several sizes too large and a pair of jeans that almost fitted. He presented her with a tray containing teapot, jug of milk, cup and saucer and a plate of buttered toast.

"I was right about you," she said softly, taking the tray.

"Since we have not met, Thorold said, "may I introduce myself?"

"Thorold West," she replied.

"Ah! My fame precedes me! And you are?"

"Monica."

"Well, Monica, I suppose that a certain lady sent you?"

"Sorry?"

"Lianna. Or perhaps I should say Alledone."

“No.”

“But you do know her?”

“Not exactly. Perhaps I should explain.”

“It might help – after you’ve finished your tea, of course.”

He sat beside her, and waited, occasionally smiling when she stole a look at his face.

“The person who did this –“ she gestured toward her face, “was watching you because you were involved with that woman. He was an ex-pupil of hers but they disagreed about his activities.”

Thorold guessed her meaning. “Young girls?”

“You know, then?”

“Just a guess. What’s his name?”

“Mallam. Edgar Mallam.”

“And he did that to you?”

“Yes.”

Thorold’s objectivity began to disappear. The film he had seen, the physically abused woman who sat beside him, his own fading but still present and mixed feelings about Lianna, all combined to undermine his calm resigned acceptance of the world and its darker deeds.

“He sent me to follow you – once,” she said.

“I must be more observant in the future!” When she did not return his smile, he said, “tell me about yourself – only if you want though.”

“And if I do – will you still help me?”

“It is my help you want, then?”

“Yes. I want out. I’m finished with them.”

Slowly at first, then with increasing confidence as she saw he was not repulsed or disapproving, she explained about her life. The parties at University, the half-serious searching for new experiences which led her and some friends into a kind of ‘Black Magick’ sect and a meeting with Mallam. It had been, for her, a game at first – a revolt against her upbringing, her parents and what she saw as society. She had enjoyed herself – and was gradually drawn deeper and deeper into the activities of this sect.

“I knew what was going on,” she concluded. “At first, I did not care. Then he – Mallam – chose me as his Priestess. I was flattered. I had power over others and for a long time I thought I was in love with him. But I began to feel disturbed at some things he and the others were doing. Then this – it sobered me up!” She laughed, a little, at herself. “I should have come to you sooner. I spent yesterday and last night hiding in the town.”

“How do you know you can trust me?”

She sighed. “I have to start somewhere – trusting someone. Anyway – you’ve got a kind face!”

“Have you thought of going to the Police?”

“Yes – but what could they do? They need evidence.”

“You could give them plenty.”

“Not really. Now I’m gone he’ll change all of his arrangements – even the places they use.”

“Any you still fear him?”

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“Do you live in Shrewsbury?”

“Yes. Why?”

“I thought – “

“I couldn’t go back there!” He’s probably got someone watching the place.”

“What do you intend to do?”

“I know it’s asking a lot, but could I stay here - at least for a few days?”

Thorold liked living by himself, but his compassion for the woman overcame his objections.

“Well, actually, I suppose so – for a few days.’

“You are kind!” And she kissed him.

Embarrassed again, Thorold stood up. “We could go to your place and collect some clothes for you. Those are not exactly a good fit.”

“He might be waiting,” she said softly.

“Is that so? I’ll telephone for a taxi, then.”

The wait and the journey were not long, and he stood beside her while she rang the doorbell of the Flat above.

“Hi!” she said in greeting to the dishevelled man who opened the door. “Forgot my front

door key again! Sorry!”

The man yawned, scratched his face and sauntered back up the stairs.

“Can you?” Monica asked Thorold, pointing at the door to her Flat.

“Are you sure?”

“I won’t be coming back here again.”

Thorold tested the door, stepped back, and kicked it hard, bursting the lock open. Monica said nothing about the devastation Mallam had caused, but stood by the window, cuddling her torn Teddy bear and crying while Thorold began to sort through the devastation to find undamaged clothes and belongings. He found a suitcase for his collection, took Monica’s hand and led her, still crying and clutching her bear, out to where the taxi waited. He saw no one watching them, or following the taxi, and relaxed, wanting to hold her hand as a gesture but unwilling to commit himself in case his gesture was misunderstood.

Books adorned the floor and bed of his spare room, and on his return he removed them.

“Come on,” he said as she sat still on his sofa holding the bear. “I shall show you your room, and then we can begin.”

She looked at him nervously, so he added, “finding evidence to use against him.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I presume you want to.”

“What?” she asked defensively.

“Find evidence?”

“I suppose so. I hadn’t really thought about it. I just wanted to get away. I have no friends

here – he saw to that.”

“Can you drive?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

“But I don’t have a license. Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Are you involved – in her activities?”

“The mysterious Lianna Alledone herself you mean?”

“No. She bought some books and manuscripts form me. That’s all.”

“Really?” Her expression was of surprise and belief in what he had said.

He did not want to lie to her. “Well, there was something else, but that is over now.”

She smiled, and held up her bear. “Let me introduce you. Reginald, say hello to Thorold.” She waved his paw.

“Hello, Reginald!” a bemused Thorold said.

“Regi to his friends.”

“Hello Regi!”

“Do you have a needle and some thread?”

“Somewhere. Going to do a bit of minor surgery, then?”

She patted Regi’s head. “It’s alright, Regi, it won’t hurt. Honest.”

Thorold sighed. “I hope I’m not going to regret this.”

“What – lending me a needle and thread?”

It was not what he meant, and she knew it, as he instantly understood her playfulness. He felt comfortable with her and re-assured – for in the first moments of their meeting he had liked her. Unwilling to think about his feelings further, he said, “You know where he lives?”

“Yes.”

“Then I suggest we eat, provide ourselves with some transport and begin our quest.”

She saluted in good-humoured mockery. “Just one thing, General.”

“Yes?”

“Can I have a bath first, please?”

“You don’t have to ask.”

A speeding car braked suddenly in the road outside and he saw Monica wince and hold her bear tightly. It was only a car avoiding a strolling cat, and as he returned from looking out the window, her fear made him resolve to seek out and destroy Mallam: her tormentor and the molester of children. His resolution made him forget both his dreams about, and his memories of, Lianna.

XI

Several times, while Monica lay in his bath singing to herself, Thorold resisted the temptation to wander into the bathroom on some pretext or other. Instead, he busied himself by telephoning one of his few friends.

He spoke quietly, not wishing to be overheard, and ended the conversation abruptly when Monica entered the room, dressed in some of her rescued clothes.

“I shall see you shortly, then,” he said and replaced the telephone receiver.

“A friend?” Monica asked.

“Just arranging some transport. Are you ready?”

“What for?”

“I thought we would eat out.”

“That would be nice.” She went toward him to kiss him to thank him for his kindness, and then decided against it, thinking he might misinterpret her gesture.

The evening was humid; the sun hazy and there was no breeze to cool them as they walked the streets that took them to the centre of the town. The restaurant Thorold chose was small, its food plain but wholesome and its windows overlooked the river – a fact which appealed to him. The waiter recognized him, and pretended not to see Monica’s swollen face.

“Good evening, Mr. West. A table by the window?”

Thorold nodded, embarrassed, believing Monica would think he had chosen the restaurant to impress her.

They ate in silence for a long time until Thorold said, “what do you know about Mallam’s

connection with Lianna?

“Not much. He approached her about a year ago - wanted to learn about her tradition.”

“Which is what?”

“What she called the seven-fold sinister way – or something similar.”

“Satanism?”

“Not in the conventional sense. Our friend Mallam,” and she smiled, “takes that route. He showed me a book she had given him.”

“Oh, yes?”

“*The Black Book of Satan* I believe it was called. She believes that each individual can achieve greatness: but that must come through self-insight. There are certain rituals – ceremonies – to bring this.”

“And Mallam?”

“He wants power and pleasure – for himself.”

“And is prepared to do anything to achieve it.”

“Yes.”

“But she – Lianna – still uses people.”

“Yes. I think she was using Edgar. But why and for what purpose, I don't know. In her book I remember reading about members of the sect being given various tests and led into diverse experiences. These were supposed to develop their personality.”

“Doesn’t sound like Satanism to me.”

“Well, some of the experiences involved confronting the dark or shadow aspect: that hidden self which lies in us all. Liberating it through experiences. Then rising above it.”

“And Mallam and his cronies? They wallow in their dark side – without transcending it?”

“Something like that. Enough of him – tell me about yourself. If you want to, that is.”

“Not much to tell, actually.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard.”

Thorold soon hid his surprise. “Oh, yes?”

“He found out about your past,” she said softly.

“Is that why you came to me?”

“Yes.”

Thorold smiled. “And I thought it was just because of my kind face!”

“So it’s true?”

“That depends. How did he come by such information?”

“Someone involved in the sect was once a Policeman – through his contacts.”

Thorold sighed. He had guessed that Lianna had discovered at least something about his past, but this new revelation dismayed him, although not for long.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“Not really.”

“That’s fine by me. I’m not as bad as you think. Your past is yours, just as mine is mine. What is important is what we are now.”

“Your past does not matter to me.”

“Likewise.” And she smiled.

“However did you become involved with such people? Thorold sighed.

“Not the type you mean?”

“Not really. How did you become involved?”

“I suppose – “ She stopped, waiting until the waiter had removed their dishes and served them coffee. “I just wanted more and more ‘highs’. I remember I used to find that with men – the first intimate touch, the first French kiss, and then the exploration of the new. Of course, what followed was good. Well, some of the time,” she laughed. “But – I don’t know – it was, how can I say, the excitement, the build-up that really got me. I just couldn’t get enough of that feeling. What Mallam and his sect offered seemed – at the time – just an extension of that.”

“I do know what you mean. It’s why I used to do what I did. There was an ecstasy there – a feeling, which made me, exult. Most men fight not because of idealism or patriotism or whatever, but because they enjoy it. They like living on the edge of death. It gives them a feeling that ordinary life cannot match.”

For a long time they looked at each other until he said: “I used to live with that feeling – or searched for it, like you perhaps, but in a different way.”

“Then something happens to bring you down to reality.”

“Usually other people.”

“A big slap in the face - literally, with me!” she laughed at her own misfortune. “So what happened to you?”

“I won’t bore you with the details – you know the rest, I’m sure.”

“But the Court of Inquiry exonerated you?”

“That does not stop people talking.”

“So you resigned.”

“Only way. I put it all behind me – to live quietly.”

“Until now.”

“I suppose I knew it couldn’t last forever. You don’t change that much in a decade. Not deep inside. You only pretend to yourself. I’ve just stopped pretending.”

“So now what?”

“I pay the bill and we go. That’s enough talking!”

Outside, the streets were busy with people, the road burdened by traffic flowing past the monument to Hotspur, past the tall spire of St. Mary’s church to descend down the steepness of Wyle Cop.

“He does not live far,” said Thorold unhelpfully.

“Who?”

“Oh, didn’t I say? The chap who is going to lend me his motorcycle.”

“You must know him well,” Monica said as she struggled into the leather motorcycle suit.

Thorold ignored the remark. “You’re about the same size as his wife, fortunately. Hope the helmet fits.”

“I hope you can drive that thing,” she said, pointing at the gleaming, powerful motorcycle that Thorold had brought back from the terraced house in the narrow alley near the railway bridge and a strip of waste ground covered in second-hand cars for sale at bargain prices.

“I had a few lessons – a few years ago,” he joked.

The visors on both helmets were tinted, the suits black, and Thorold felt good as he skillfully rode along the streets out toward the suburb where Monica had told him Mallam lived. Darkness came as they rode, then lightning and thunder to herald the storm. The house was on a new estate that had expanded the western boundary of the town, and they waited nearby while lights showed in the house. The storm passed, and their patience was rewarded, as twilight settled.

It was not difficult for Thorold to follow Mallam’s car along the roads of west and south Shropshire, but he was surprised when Mallam took the turning that led to the village of Stredbow. He left the bike a discreet distance behind where Mallam had parked his car and walked, with Monica, in the fading light in the direction Mallam had taken.

A diffuse light from an upstairs window made Mallam visible as he crept into the garden of the house, and Thorold recognized the woman who was waiting as the one Lianna had spoken to when she had brought him to the village. He could not hear what was said between them as he crouched by the garden wall, but he saw the woman point to the window then to the darkness that shrouded the back of the garden. He did not follow them further.

Mallam was not away for long. The light showed him nervously glancing around as he stood by the stone building in the garden. He tried the door, fumbled with the heavy padlock, glanced around several times more before almost creeping toward the gate.

Hurriedly, Thorold pushed Monica down to the ground. He could hear her breathing as he lay close to her, but Mallam neither heard nor saw them as they huddled close to the wall in the shielding dark, and they were left to slowly rise and follow him back to his car.

Somewhere among the houses near the mound, a dog howled.

XII

Mallam led them not to his house, but over the hills toward the Welsh border. Thorold thought the roads familiar, but it was only as Mallam came to his destination that Thorold realized where they were – near the track that led to the circle of stones Lianna had shown him.

“I wish I had brought a camera,” he whispered to Monica as they lay, under the cover of the ferns, watching the group that had assembled within the stones. Lanterns, holding candles, were spread around the ground and in their light the ritual unfolded. Mallam had bedecked himself in a black cloak.

“Our Father which wert in heaven,” they heard the assembly chant, “hallowed be thy Name, in heaven as it is on Earth. Give us this day our ecstasy and deliver us to evil as well as temptation, few we are your kingdom for aeons and aeons.”

A woman was stripped, and bound to one of the larger standing stones. There were more chants, people in black robes dancing anti-sunwise inside the circle, dramatic invocations by Mallam, and a ritual scourging of the woman who was bound.

“Provide us pleasure, Prince of Darkness,” Thorold heard a man say, “and help us to fulfill our desires!”

The balding, slightly overweight man unbound the woman, pushed her to the ground, and began to copulate with her, while others gathered around, clapping their hands and chanting to their Prince.

Thorold was not impressed. "It takes all sorts, I suppose," he said quietly to Monica. "That the sort of thing you used to be involved in?"

"Yes."

"No one under age I can see."

"Those sorts of things are never done in the open."

The balding man interested Thorold. "We might as well wait until they've finished."

It was a long wait, and several times Thorold almost fell asleep. When the revellers did leave, he followed not Mallam, but the man he had watched. His trailing of Rhiston led him back to a prosperous riverside house in Shrewsbury town – a house almost visible from Thorold's own Apartment across the water.

For almost an hour they waited outside.

"Well, that's one down, ten to go," he said as he indicated to Monica that they should go.

He was glad to return to the peace of his own dwelling. He had removed his leather suit when Monica said, "Can you help?" She was struggling to free herself from hers.

"It's a bit tight," she said.

Thorold smiled. "You're somewhat larger in some places than she is."

She lay on the floor while he pulled on the legs of the suit. He fell backwards and banged his head against a bookcase. He did not mind her laughter, and held his hand out to help her up from the floor. She stood in front of him, still holding onto his hand, and she had closed her eyes in anticipation of his kiss when someone knocked, very loudly, on the door of his Apartment.

Thorold sighed, before leaving to walk down the stairs.

“Yes?” he said gruffly as he opened the door.

“She has sent me,” the man outside said.

It was as he spoke that Thorold recognized Imlach.

“So?” Thorold replied, annoyed.

“She does not like your interference.”

“My what?”

“You are to leave a certain gentleman alone. He is her concern, not yours.”

“Is that so?”

“She kindly requests you not bother him – or any members of his group.”

“Oh, really?”

Imlach moved closer to him. “You’d best heed her advice. For your own sake.”

“Tell her from me I’m not playing her games anymore and I’ll do what I like!” He slammed the door shut.

Imlach knocked loudly on the door, but when Thorold thrust it open in anger, he could see no one. He looked around, but the streets were quiet and still. Upstairs he found Monica asleep on the bed in his spare room. He covered her with a blanket before closing her door and settling down to listen to music, keeping the volume low.

But the music did not still his feelings as he had hoped, and he spend a listless hours, listening, attempting to read, and thinking about Monica, Lianna and Mallam. When he did

retire to his bed, strange dreams came again. He was on a cliff above the sea when a man leapt upon him from behind and tried to stab him. A woman was nearby, and it was Lianna, laughing. He wrestled the knife away from the man, and stabbed him by accident. Only then did he see the man's face. It was his own, and the man lay dead, while Lianna stripped away her clothes to offer him her body. He moved toward her, aroused and disgusted at the same time but she changed herself into Monica and he awoke, clawing at the humid air in his room.

He lay awake, then, restless and troubled, and when sleep came again he dreamt of his shop. There was a doorway among the shelves where he knew no door existed but he opened it to walk down stone steps into a cavern. Mallam was there, bent over a stone altar on which Monica lay tied and bound. He began to move toward them but he found himself paralyzed and when he could move it was slowly and painfully. Monica kept looking at him, her eyes pleading and helpless, but then he was alone, riding the motorcycle around the circle of ancient stones, faster and faster. There was a sudden mist, and he could not stop, crashing into the largest stone. He felt sad, lying on the ground knowing he was dying – for there was so much he wanted to do. The mist seemed to form into Lianna's face, then of her holding in her arms a baby. 'You will never know your daughter,' she said. He awoke again, to lie tired but unable to sleep, and was glad when dawn came, bringing light to his room.

He left Monica asleep to spend a few hours alone, thinking about his life and his dreams, before breakfasting and leaving her a note about his intended surveillance.

Rhaston, in his car, was easy to follow among the morning traffic that took most of the vehicle occupants to their work, and Thorold was pleased with his success. He watched Rhaston park his car in front of the large office building before returning to his Apartment.

Monica, obviously watching from his window, came out into the street to greet him, smiling happily. Thorold was glad, and it seemed natural that he should embrace her. He liked the feel of her body, but she drew away to take the helmet from his hand and lead him, her other hand in his, toward the door. Before he could speak, a car drew up alongside and Thorold recognized Lianna.

“So,” she said as she stood in the road near them, “this is how you repay me!” She stared at Monica.

Thorold could not understand her sudden anger toward him. “Were you following me?” he asked.

Lianna ignored the question. "I told you to stop but you took no notice of my words."

"Why should I?" He could feel Monica tighten her grip on his hand.

"You do not understand," said Lianna haughtily. "Great things are at stake."

"Is that so?"

"You deserve better than the likes of her!" She looked at Monica with contempt.

"Really?"

"Leave her – now, and come with me."

"No!"

For several seconds Lianna did not speak. "You are a fool!" she finally said.

"Goodbye, then."

Lianna stared at Monica. "You will pay for this!"

"I – " Monica began to say.

"I think you'd better leave her alone," Thorold said to Lianna, a trace of anger in his voice.

Lianna laughed. "I'm not finished with you either!"

"Go play your games somewhere else." He turned away, led Monica into his Apartment and shut the door without even looking at Lianna.

“She seemed a little angry,” Monica said as they, from the window, watched her drive away.

Thorold shrugged her shoulders. “Jealous of you, I guess.”

“And does she have reason to be jealous?”

“Yes.”

She turned toward him and kissed him. It was a long kiss. “Does she frighten you?” Monica asked at its end.

“No, actually.”

“I think Edgar is afraid of her.”

“Are you?” He stood beside her but she still held his hand.

“No. Well – perhaps a little.” She shivered.

“Shall we go and see what your old friend Edgar is up to, then?”

“What, now?”

“Yes.” He understood her look and touched her playfully on the end of her nose with his finger. “We have plenty of time.”

“Good,” she smiled, and kissed him again.

“On the hand, Mallam can wait,” he said as he began to unbutton her dress.

For Mallam, the day passed quietly. A van, driven by a trusted member, arrived early in the morning and he helped in the loading of cult and Temple equipment, including the video cameras and lights. A few telephone calls, and a safe haven was found - a place unknown, he knew to Monica. The removal had not taken him long, and he smiled as the van left, thinking of the rituals to come.

The sun of the afternoon saw him in the neighbouring town of Telford, visiting a house in a quiet street in Dawley where some of his ladies brought their clients. One girl, just seventeen, still looked much younger and she was seldom alone on the streets for long. He arrived at the house as she was leaving for the third time that day.

“Hi. Jenny!” he said in greeting. “You alright?”

“Sure!”

“No problems?” She was his most lucrative girl to date, and he intended to keep it that way.

“No. See ya!”

“Jess in?” he asked.

“Sure!” She waved and walked away to find another client.

Jess was a smiling man of Caribbean appearance with the physique of a wrestler, and he looked after the practical aspects of Mallam’s business. Their business that day did not take long. Jess gave him a pile of money which Mallam counted before giving half of it back.

“Any problems?” Mallam asked.

“Not one. I tell you it's too quiet.”

“Got a new house lined up – if we need to move.”

“Any new girls?”

“Maybe soon. I’ll see you next week.”

“Sure thing!”

Outside, in the warm sun, he could see no one watching the house but still drove carefully away, checking several times to ensure he was not being followed, and he drove slowly back to Shrewsbury arriving at Rhiston’s house at the time he had arranged.

“You have no trouble arranging time off?” he asked as Rhiston came out to greet him.

“Not at all!”

“Good.”

“Your wife in?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent.”

Inside the house, Mallam greeted Rhiston’s wife by kissing her hand. She was pleased by this gesture as well as by the look, and smile, which he gave her, unaware that this charm was a net closing around her.

“Could you,” Mallam asked Rhiston, “get my briefcase from my car?” He held out his car keys.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” the obsequious Maurice said.

Mallam waited until he was gone. “Jane, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes.” She smiled.

“You’re more attractive than I was led to believe.”

“Maurice said you used to work in his department. Is that right?”

“Only for a brief time,” he lied, convincingly. “I’m having a small party – tomorrow night – and wondered if you’d like to come. He paused for effect. “With your husband, of course.”

“That would be nice.”

“I shall look forward to seeing you there.”

Rhaston returned, bearing the unwanted case. But Mallam took it, saying, “Shall we retire to your room? That computer program you wanted to show me?”

“Ah, yes!” He turned to his wife. “We’ll be about an hour, dear.”

In the bedroom, Rhiston quickly set up his binoculars on a stand behind the curtains, before handing Mallam photographs of the girl.

“Not bad!” Mallam said. “Not bad at all!”

“She should not be long, now. A creature of habit,” and he smiled his lecherous smile.

“You seem more settled now.”

”Oh, I am, I am!”

“Good. There is a quote from de Sade, which always appealed to me. It goes something like – in translation of course! – *“The pleasures of crime must not be restrained. I know them. If the imagination has not thought of everything, if one’s hand one hand has not executed everything, it is impossible for the delirium to be complete because there is always the feeling of remorse: I could have done more and I have not done it. The person who, like*

us, is eagerly pursuing the career of vice, can never forgive a lost opportunity because nothing can make it good...” Mallam smiled. “You agree?”

“Naturally, naturally! You and your group have opened my eyes. I cannot stop now.”

“Excellent. I am having a party tomorrow night. Nothing special – just some friends. Bring your wife.”

“Jane?”

“Yes.” Then: “you seem unsure.”

“No, not really. Just surprised.” He wanted to ask, but dared not.

“Does this work?” Mallam asked, pointing to the computer.

”No. But I could set it up for you, if you wish.”

“Our prey has arrived,” Mallam announced. He watched the girl through the binoculars for some time before saying, “she is most suitable.”

“I’m glad you are pleased.”

“I shall make the necessary arrangements. Should they be successful – “

“I’m sure they will!”

“ – I can arrange for you to be the first. There will be expenses, and so on.”

“I do understand.”

“How soon can you have the money ready?”

“Next week. I have savings.”

“Tomorrow.”

Yes. Yes, of course. Can I ask how you will - I mean, how she will be...”

“I have experience in these matters.” She had gone from her room, and he studied the photographs again. “A pretty young thing. At such an age, they all have a weakness. With her – a wish to be a model, perhaps. Some infatuation with a celebrity. Whatever – there are ways.”

“Do go on, it’s fascinating.”

“Have her followed – find out where her haunts are. A chance meeting – then an offer suited to her weakness. Perhaps a few legitimate modelling sessions. Then disguise the ritual as one, get her drunk. You know the rest.”

“I admire your cleverness! And after?”

“Depends on her – how she reacts. If she takes to it, fine. If not, let her go. If her family doesn’t care or she wants away from them for whatever reason, draw her in.” He turned to stare at Rhiston. “I’ve told you all this because for some reason I like you. I’m going abroad for a while, and want someone to handle things here.”

“I’m very flattered that you should consider me.”

“You’ve proved yourself. But first, there is something I want you to do for me.”

”Anything. Just ask.”

“Tomorrow, after our little party, I have some business to attend to, not far from here. You will assist me.”

“As you wish.”

The warm weather had brought people into their gardens, and as Mallam stood fingering the photographs again, he could hear children playing happily and noisily under the heat of the summer sun. The sounds pleased him, because he understood them as part of a society he despised. To him, the people in the houses, no less than their children, were important only insofar as they might offer him the opportunities to indulge both his own pleasure and power. He felt himself different from them in a fundamental way – a prince among slaves – and the fact that society had passed laws in favour of them and what he saw as their utterly futile and wasteful ways of living, made him aware of his own genius even more. He knew with an arrogant certainty that he could outwit them and their laws – and he enjoyed doing so, planning and scheming and reaping his rewards, financial and physical and mental.

He believed, sincerely in his own way, in the powers of the Prince of Darkness. To the Devil he had dedicated his life – his Prince had given him power over ordinary mortals, and he used that power for his own glory and that of his god. With Lianna's treasure and his own powers and genius, he would be invincible.

Pleased with himself, he began to laugh.

XIV

Thorold awoke slowly. Monica's arm rested on his chest and her face was near his, peaceful, as she slept. He watched her before caressing her shoulders.

"I have to go out," he said as she opened her eyes.

"Want me to come?" she said sleepily.

"Only if you want to. Just going to put a note in my shop window. I shouldn't be long."

"What time is it?"

"Eleven o'clock."

“Still early, then.”

“We’ll go out for lunch when I get back.”

“Fine.”

She was asleep as he left the bedroom. Vaguely, she heard him leave the Apartment as, some time after; she vaguely heard a knock on the bedroom door.

“He should really lock his door when he leaves,” a woman’s voice said.

Startled, Monica sat up. Lianna leaned against the door frame, smiling mischievously.

“What do you want?” Monica asked, angry and afraid at the same time.

“Just a little chat. I have a proposition to put to you.”

“I think it would be better if you left.”

“This will not take long. I have here,” and she held up an attaché case, “ten thousand pounds in cash. Plus a train ticket – first class naturally – to London. There in a train in half an hour. I shall of course drive you to the railway station.”

“He will be back in a minute.”

“Not so. Such a charming man, but so open to magickal persuasion.” She took a square of parchment inscribed with magickal sigils from the pocket of her dress, glanced at it and smiled before returning it. “So you see, you have no option.”

“Please go.”

“I should explain. If you do not accept my little gift then you will be arrested and charged with possession of certain drugs. Before I came here, I visited your Flat. Such a mess. You will be pleased to hear that I have had the place tidied. One telephone call – and a valuable

find by the Police. If you care to look out from the window you will see my car and a gentleman within it waiting. So useful, those new car telephones!”

“I would deny everything.”

“Of course. But you had a conviction at University, did you not? Only cannabis then – but we all know, do we not, what the next stage usually is. Then there is the little matter of a certain video, which had by some chance come into my possession. You may not recall it – so many such things made, I understand – but there are certain scenes in it which certain newspapers would enjoy describing. They would no doubt publish some of the photographs.”

Lianna’s smile was almost mocking. “I have of course used only that material which does not feature a certain person who, until yesterday, you were somewhat well acquainted with.”

“You seemed to have planned things well.”

“I always do.”

“Why is Thorold so important to you that you want me out of the way? I don’t believe for one moment that you are jealous of me.”

“It is not important for you to know the reason.”

“I want to know – and then,” she said resignedly, “I might accept your offer.”

“A wise decision. It makes things much more civilized. I had other things planned, of course, if you had resisted.”

”Tell me then.”

“About Thorold?”

“Yes.”

“Since you are going, I suppose it will do no harm. All I will say is that something is about to

occur – something very special which takes place only every fifty or so years.”

“And for this Thorold is important?”

“It could well be,” Lianna smiled. “Now gather your belongings since you have a train to catch.”

“Mind if I check the case?” Monica asked.

“I shall leave it with you – while you dress.”

Monica did not bother to count the money. She was ready and prepared to leave when she surreptitiously placed two of the ten pound notes she had extracted from the case under the motorcycle helmet as it lay on the bookcase in Thorold’s living room. She did not look back as she left the Apartment.

It was partly the sunny weather, partly Monica waiting asleep in his bed, that prompted Thorold’s decision – or so he thought at the time. The message in the window of his shop – announcing an ‘illness’ forcing closure for a week – he left to ride the borrowed motorcycle back to the house of its owner.

Jake was the opposite of Thorold in almost every way. Broad when Thorold was sinewy; tall where Thorold was only of medium height; bearded and with many tattoos on his arms. Thorold was quiet by nature, serious and determined, while Jake was naturally boisterous with an amiable attitude toward life – unless provoked. He had been easily provoked, until marriage calmed him a little. Their unusual friendship had been forged in the unusual years which made Thorold’s past interesting and intriguing, to some who knew of it or who had discovered it.

Thorold had hardly entered the narrow alley beside the terraced house when Jake descended upon him. He inspected the bike carefully while Thorold stood and watched in amusement.

“I don’t suppose,” Thorold said, “you want to sell?”

Jake glared at him, then smiled. “No way!”

“I didn’t think you would. You free for a bit, then?”

“Why?” he asked cautiously.

“Need your advice.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“I thought I might buy something similar.”

“You serious?”

“Yes. Can’t really afford it – but still.”

“She’s really got to you, ain’t she?” He thumped Thorold on the back in a friendly gesture. But Thorold was almost knocked over.

“Not at all – I just thought I might as well make use of this suit and helmet I bought. I had it in mind when I bought them, in fact,” he said trying to convince himself. “Sitting behind you a few times a year – well, it’s a bit of waste.”

“I’ll get me helmet, then.”

The staff at Thorold’s Bank were helpful and showed no surprise at him wishing to draw from his account what, for him, was a large amount cash, and he let Jake drive him to a succession of motorcycle dealers where machines were discussed, touched, sat upon and inspected. After less than an hour, Thorold made his decision. He bade his friend farewell and walked back toward his Apartment, eagerly anticipating the collection of his present to himself later that afternoon.

At first, on ascending the stairs that led up from his front door, he assumed Monica’s absence to be temporary – a walk perhaps, by the river, or a visit to a shop nearby. But then

he found her clothes and suitcase missing, and he became sad without quiet knowing why he was sad. His sadness did not last, for he thought of Mallam forcing her away against her will.

The idea angered him, and he smashed his fist against his bookcase. The bookcase shook, moving the helmet and revealing the money. He held the money in his hand, feeling the newness of the banknotes, and wondering, and the more he thought the more it became clear to him that it was not Mallam, but Lianna who was responsible. He knew Monica had had no money of her own. Mallam certainly would not have given her any or left such a small amount, hidden under his helmet she had used, for him to eventually find. His reasoning brought him to the conclusion that Lianna had left him the money – as an insult or gesture. And this displeased him more. Perhaps Monica had been involved with Lianna?

He refused to believe this, and wander around his dwelling without purpose, occasionally thumping a wall or a door, frustrated and angry – with himself, Lianna and the world. Then, quite suddenly, it occurred to him that Monica might have left the money as an explanation. Immediately, he understood – or hoped he did, for he grabbed his own helmet, then hers, to run down his stairs and out into the street, returning after a few yards as he remembered to lock his door.

Fine wisps of high white cirrus clouds had begun to cover the blue of the sky, dimming the sun. But the sun was still hot, sweating Thorold as he ran enclosed in his leather suit toward the centre of the town.

XV

It did not take Thorold as long as he had expected, even though he had run only for about the first mile. A taxicab waited outside the entrance to the railway station, and he was glad to let it convey him the rest of the distance. Several times he checked to ascertain whether any vehicle was following him.

But Monica was not there, as he had expected and hoped, and he sat on the low wall that marked Jake's rear garden, not wanting to think about the consequences of his now obvious misunderstanding. Neither Jake nor his wife came in answer to Thorold's repeated thumps on the door of the house, and he removed his suit to let the sun and breeze dry his sweat. When an hour of waiting became two and brought scuttering low clouds to smother at intervals the searing heat of the sun, he folded his suit under his arm, collected the helmets, and began to walk slowly along the traffic lined streets, over the English Bridge and into the

centre of town.

His new motorcycle, powerful and gleaming as Jake's had been, brought him only a brief sparkle of pleasure, and he rode without any enthusiasm out and away from the town. But he could not dismiss Monica from his mind and rode dangerously fast, back to his Apartment.

She was not there – no one was – and without any hope left, he returned to Jake's house, intent only on intoxicating himself at best by sharing Jake's prodigious supply of beer or at worst by patronizing the nearby Inn.

But she was there, waiting as he had waited, sitting on the wall, and he stopped, stood his bike on its stand and removed his helmet while she stood and smiled. He wanted to rush toward her and embrace and kiss her, but he forced himself not to, hoping she would come to him as a gesture of her feelings.

She did not, so he said, "I was right, then, about your message."

"I thought you'd understand!"

"Lianna?"

"Yes." She reached behind the wall where she had hidden the attaché case, and opened it for him to see.

"Quite a lot there."

"Nine thousand, nine hundred and eighty pounds, exactly." She closed the case, and with a slow precision rested it against the wall.

He needed no more gestures and embraced her. She was relieved, and began to cry, but soon stopped herself.

"Another bike?" She asked, embarrassed by her own show of feelings.

“Yes!” he said and went to stand beside it. “Do you like it?” He ran his hand over the seat. “I’ve just bought it.”

“It is rather nice,” she said approvingly as she came to stand beside him and hold his hand. “Where shall we go?” She laughed. “We are not exactly short of money!”

“Monica?”

“Yes?” she said, trembling a little.

“I’ll have to give it back.”

“But you’ve only just bought it!” she joked.

“You know what I mean.”

“I know. I thought you’d say that.” Then, smiling again, she added, “A pity though! I’ve often wondered what I’d do if I had some money.” She went to collect the case. “Here you are!”

He took it from her, and she sighed. “And I suppose,” she said, “you’re still going to follow what’s-his-name?”

“Yes.”

“Also as I expected.”

She smiled at him, and he embraced her again, saying, “I’m glad you’re back.”

She began to cry again, then pulled away from him to laugh and point to her face. “Looks much better now, doesn’t it?”

“You look beautiful.”

“I see you brought my helmet. Shall we go and return the gift?”

“Actually, I would rather you stayed with a friend of mine – here, in this house. At least for a few days.”

“Not likely! Where you go – I go. Anyway, I want to see the look on her face when you hand back the money.

“But – “

She repossessed the case. “I’ll hold onto that while you drive. Unless you want me to!”

“Come here,” he said gently.

“Yes, Master!” she playfully mocked, “I hear and obey!”

He held her hand. “I’d rather you were safe, here.”

“What? And miss all the fun? Not likely! Come on!” she sat on the pillion

seat of the motorcycle, put on her helmet, held onto the case with one hand and waited.

Thorold shook his head, sighed, and then put on his own helmet. Clouds began to cover the whole of the sky, blotting out the sun, and as they arrived at the driveway of Lianna’s house, rain had begun to fall. They stood together outside the door, helmets in hand, and waited for an answer to Thorold’s insistent knocking.

“I hope she is not going to spoil things by being out.”

Thorold was about to answer when Lianna opened the door. She betrayed surprise at seeing Monica, but only for an instant.

“I expected you,” she said to Thorold, “but alone.”

“You can have this back!” Monica held the case out.

“So? You ignore my offer?” Lianna said to Monica.

Monica smiled at her. “I changed trains at Wellington.”

“I see I shall have to make that telephone call.”

“Go ahead! Monica shouted as Thorold stood watching. “Do your worst! Do you think I care? But I’ll tell you one thing – if you do. I’ll kill you. A few years to wait – maybe. But one day I’ll be there!” She was staring at Lianna her eyes full of passion. “You will never be safe and none of your magick will protect you!”

“I – “ Thorold started to say, but both of them ignored him.

“You’ll have to kill me,” Monica continued, “to stop me! Or have me killed – that’s more your style! So here, take your money before I start stuffing it somewhere very uncomfortable for you!” She threw the case down at Lianna’s feet.

Lianna turned to smile at Thorold. “Such a common woman, don’t you think?”

“I’ll show you how common I am! Monica said before punching Lianna on the chin. The blow knocked Lianna over and Monica did not wait for her to recover.

“Just a taste!” she said before kicking the case into the hallway where Lianna lay prostrate.

“You coming?” she demanded of Thorold, and a somewhat startled Thorold followed her down the steps to his transport.

Suddenly, a shaft of sunlight bathed the scene in brightness and warmth.

XVI

Thirteen people were present – a number that pleased Mallam – and he mingled with his guest in subdued light of the room while loud music played and could be heard throughout the house. Rhiston, alone among all the people, sat by himself.

The owner of the house was a widowed woman in whom Mallam had once shown an interest. But she soon bored him, as he found most women did – although not before he induced her into his sect where she prospered, finding younger men to her liking and often only too eager to physically please her while their interest, hers, and her monetary gifts, lasted.

There would be no ritual following the gathering, for several of the guests were new and unblooded. The party was a ruse – to arouse their interest, offering as it did drugs to those who wished them as well as the sexual services of members of Mallam's sect. Mallam's own interest centred on Rhiston's wife and Rhiston knew it and like a child sulked in his corner. Mallam found this amusing, considering Rhiston's proclivities, and soon directed a lady member of about Rhiston's age to seduce him. Rhiston did not resist the woman's charm.

“Come on Maurice,” she said, “let's go and make love.”

Mallam was slightly more subtle in his approach to Jane. She had been watching him since she had arrived to be greeted by his seemingly friendly kiss, and when she saw her husband leave with the woman, he went to her.

“I hope you don't think I've been ignoring you,” he said.

“No, honestly.”

He smiled at her. “Another drink? Or would you like to go somewhere quieter – where we can talk?”

She was hesitant, so he said, “You know why I invited you, don't you?”

“Another drink would be fine!”

“I find you very attractive, Jane – as you must have guessed.”

“Maurice – “

“You’ve never been to a party like this before, have you?”

“No,” she answered softly.

“You’re not offended though?”

“No.” she whispered.

He kissed her and at first she did not respond, and when she did, half-regretful and half-thrilled, he led her out of the room and upstairs.

Twilight had begun outside when he left her in one of the many bedrooms of the house. Rhiston was asleep alone in another room, still tied to the bed as the woman had left him. Mallam freed him and gave him his clothes.

“I’ll wait for you outside in the car,” he said.

Downstairs, the music still played loudly, now mingled with sporadic laughter.

They arrived in Stredbow as the last vestiges of twilight gave way to a sky clear of cloud and full of stars, and Mallam parked his vehicle by the mound, some distance from the house and the small stone building where his real interest lay.

“Now,” he said, “to action. We’ll walk to a house and I want you to use this – “ He gave him a Police Warrant Card. “You are investigating the escape of a dangerous criminal who has been spotted in the area – making a routine check. There will be a man and a woman in the house. Just keep them talking – local gossip, sightings of strangers and so on. Use your own work experience,” he smiled. “Alright?”

“Yes. Is that all?” a relieved Rhiston said.

“What did you expect? I’ll be fifteen minutes – no longer than half an hour though.” He reached over to the back seat of the car where a torch and a pair of bolt-croppers lay. “I’ll meet you back here.”

They walked in silence to the gate of the house where Mallam waited while Rhiston went to ring the doorbell. Swiftly then, Mallam crept toward the stone building. The padlock was easy to cut through and he was soon inside. His torch showed a bare room. It smelled of burned wood and he was creeping along the walls, inspecting them for hidden recesses or loose stones when the thick oak door was closed behind him. He tried to force it open, but without success.

Outside, Sidnal Wyke secured the door with a new padlock before calmly walking back to his cottage.

Rhiston did as he had been told, and it was half an hour later when he left the house to return to the car. For hours he waited by, then near, the car – sitting on the mound under a tree, leaning against the stonewall that supported most of the mound among its circumference, or crouching. Twice villagers came near, and he hid himself by the trees.

It was after midnight when he made his decision and left to look again at the house. But it was quiet, and he walked along the lanes he knew would take him to the main road miles away and thence along and down to the township of Stretton.

With the departure of Rhiston, preparations for the celebration in the village began.

XVII

It was a long time before Mallam ceased his shouting and banging his fists against the door. His voice had echoed in the empty stillness and, tired and confused, he slumped against the wall.

The building was windowless and without sound, and he was soon restless. For hours he checked the walls, the stones of the floor, the door itself by the light of his torch. But nothing moved. He could see a narrow slit in the wall far above his head, but could not reach it. He tried to sleep, but the floor was cold and as soon as he closed his eyes he thought he could hear someone behind the door. Each time he leapt up and listened, but could hear nothing.

The torchlight began to fade. Its dim glow lasted a while, and then was gone to leave Mallam in darkness. He had never before experienced such blackness and several times tried to see his hands in front of his eyes. But he could not see them. He crawled along beside the walls until he reached the door by touch, but no one came in answer to his shouting or in response to the banging of his fists against the studded oak, and he lay in the darkness listening to the roaring silence.

Sleep came, and when he awoke he could not see the time by his expensive watch. His waiting passed slowly and he began to feel hungry and thirsty. He shouted, and nothing happened. He began to curse all the people he knew and had known and then the whole world, and his voice grew hoarse and he himself, more thirsty. He prayed fervently to his Prince many times, saying: 'My Prince and Master, help me! Free me and I shall do terrible deeds in your name!'

He stared into the darkness trying to imagine where he had seen the slit in the wall, but no light, not even a glimmer of light, came to relieve his darkness. He began to imagine he heard sounds – people laughing and talking, then strange music. But the more he listened, the more he began to believe he was mistaken.

He slept again, only to awake in terror because he had forgotten where he was and could not see. He crawled over the floor, along the walls – sat and listened and strained to see. He stood up but became disoriented and dizzy and fell against the door, injuring his arm. He shouted, beat his fists again against the door, but nothing changed except inside his head. His hunger and thirst became intense for what seemed to him a long time until his increasing fear made him forget them.

To calm his fears he lay with his back against a wall, trying to understand why and for what purpose he was being kept a prisoner. At first he had believed that some mischance had imprisoned him – a gust of wind, perhaps, which jammed the door – but he had become gradually aware that it was not chance that brought him to the village and the building which had become his prison. Somehow, he felt, Lianna must have planned it all, and as the hours of his captivity became countless because he could not measure their passing, he came to increasingly believe that she might be testing him. Vaguely, he remembered – his memory brought back by his desperation for hope – her once saying when first he had

asked to become her pupil, that those who sought Adeptship underwent severe ordeals; ordeals not of their own choosing and about which they were never forewarned.

This is a test of hers, he believed, briefly smiling – she is testing my will. And this belief sustained him, for he believed in the power and strength of his will. But his hunger, thirst, the darkness around him and the darkness within him eventually broke this explanation. For she had never followed his own path as at first he had ardently believed. The weeks and the months of her teaching had extinguished his hope – she was no dark, evil, mistress with whom he might forge a physical and magickal alliance. So he had gradually turned away from her, seeking again his old ways, friends, helpers and slaves, understanding that she had been using him, playing with him almost. And this deeply offended his pride. For he, Edgar Mallam – High Priest of the Temple of the Prince – was above them all.

He had thought then that she had used him as he had used others – for her pleasure and satisfaction. She was playing the role of mistress, with him as her pupil – and this made him despise her more, for his own pleasures were carnal and real. He lusted after women, and money – enjoyed the power he had over others, making them his slaves; he enjoyed the misfortunes of others, the taking of young girls. But she simply played her mind-games from the safety and comfort of her house. Her power, he had thought, was nothing compared to his own.

His remembrance of this thinking from his past comforted him, and he began to laugh. But then his laughing stopped. He thought he could hear someone else laughing and when he stopped and unconsciously stooped to listen, he imagined he could hear a woman's laughing voice.

Then there seemed to be a voice inside his head. "Remember The Giving from the Black Book of Satan!" it said and laughed again.

Mallam remembered.

The Book, which Lianna had given him, spoke of an ancient blood ceremony performed only once every 51 years. The sacrifice was always male, an Initiated Priest, and before his blood was offered he was kept for days in a darkened room wherein to draw magickal forces to himself...

He tried to convince himself otherwise. But he heard "Remember The Giving..." in his head again, like an echo.

“I won’t be fooled by you!” he shouted aloud. “Do you hear me Lianna!” He shook his fist at the darkness. “You can’t fool me! I know that you are testing me! You’ll see – I’m strong! Stronger than you!”

He laughed, to convince himself. But the suspicion remained.

“Must not fall asleep!” he muttered aloud. “She’ll try and get me when I’m asleep. I’ll beat her! Me – her sacrifice? Hah! She’ll be mine!” He began to visualize in lurid detail how he might sacrifice her – tying her naked to the altar in his house, ravishing her, the letting others have their fun. He would kill her slowly, very slowly. These thoughts pleased and fascinated him, and he was still thinking them – visualizing them in detail – when he fell full asleep.

His dream was vivid – the most vivid dream of his life. He was surrounded by spiders; they were crawling all over him, biting him and filling him with their poison. He could not move, trapped in webs, and a large spider was crawling over his chest toward his face. But it was Monica, a spider again, Monica smiling with blood on her teeth and mouth and he awoke to thrust the imaginary spiders away with his hands as he writhed in panic on the floor.

XVIII

The evening and the night that had marked Mallam’s party passed swiftly for Thorold and Monica.

“I don’t think she will bother us again,” a confident Monica said as they sat in his Apartment on their return from visiting Lianna.

“You amaze me.” Thorold said. “Would you like some tea?” he asked.

“I know what I would like!”

Thorold’s surprise turned quickly into delight. “I’ll just have a quick bath,” he said.

“No, don’t. Perhaps I shouldn’t give all my secrets away, but the natural smell of a man – well, some men! – turns me on.”

Thorold blushed. In that moment, Monica reversed their roles – standing to take his hand and lead him to his bedroom. She was gentle at first, then passionate and after hours of mutual bliss they lay with their bodies touching, sleep-inclined but pleased. Several times she started to speak – to try and form into words the feeling within her. But each time she stopped, afraid of herself and her future.

The recent years of her past had been years full of new experiences and through them all she had kept her cynicism. Only Mallam had disturbed her, for he seemed to fulfill, at least in some measure, her expectations: a man of mystery, arrogant and self-assured. But she had discovered the real Mallam was selfish, cruel and somewhat vain.

Her defences had been and were still being broken by recent events, and of all of them she felt her friendship with Thorold was the most significant. For as Lianna offered her the money, she knew she was in love with Thorold. She wanted to tell him, but felt constrained by her own doubts and fears, and as she lay beside him she realized for the first time in her life that she needed to be loved.

They awoke together at dawn. She had expected his suggestion and so was not surprised when he mentioned following Mallam. She did not want his quest to continue, but said nothing. She sensed Thorold wanted somehow to avenge her beating as he sensed his disgust and outrage at Mallam’s paedophile activities.

Thus it was that less than an hour later they rode together on the motorbike to wait near Mallam’s house.

“We’ll try the other chap,” Thorold said after an almost interminable time.

They waited again, outside Rhiston’s home, and then followed him to his place of work. Several times during the day they returned to find his car was still in place outside the building, and several times they returned to Mallam’s house, without success.

Dark cloud covered the sky promising rain, but they sat for nearly an hour by the river, refreshing themselves with food and drink, before lying beside each other in the grass in the peace of Quarry Park. She spoke to him, as their hands and lips touched and desire became aroused, of her bleak childhood without love, but still she could not say the words

she wished. She spoke instead with her body and they made passionate love in the long grass near the river's edge while people ambled or fastly walked along the path above.

By three o'clock in the afternoon they had returned to wait for Rhiston. He spent a few hours at his home then journeyed to Mallam's house and then to a house nearby to briefly speak to the woman who answered his knocking upon her door. And thence he led Thorold and his lover to Stredbow village.

Mallam's car was still where he had left it the night before, and in the twilight Rhiston checked it before walking toward the black and white house. Thorold saw him stop by the gate, turn and listen, and then enter the garden to creep toward the stone building. Rhiston listened again, tried the door, then noticed the broken padlock and the bolt-croppers discarded on the ground. He tried to cut the padlock several times before finally succeeding and Thorold watched in surprise as Mallam crawled from the building.

He blubbered something that Thorold could not hear before Rhiston assisted him to his feet. Then Mallam was running fast away from the house, his face contorted, his eyes staring, his clothes dirty and torn. He reached the car, fumbled in his pockets for his keys and shouted several times at Rhiston. Rhiston ran to the car, panting and exhausted, and Mallam pushed him inside before driving them both away.

They were not far from the village when Mallam slewed the car in the lane, using the driveway of a farm, to drive straight toward Thorold whose motorbike light he had seen in the rearview mirror. Thorold reacted as best he could, braking and steering away, but the front of the car clipped the side of the bike causing him to lose control. His front wheel hit the curb and he was e HeHe in the air, briefly, to land dazed in the hedge by the verge.

He sat up to see the car reverse over Monica as she lay still in the road. He ran toward her, but she was dead.

Carefully, and almost crying, Thorold carried the body to the verge. His motorcycle was undamaged apart from scratches and a few dents, and he collected several stones from beside the road before riding with fury after the car. He soon caught it and sped past to turn, skidding, and race back, throwing a stone at the windscreen of the car.

He did not hear the screech of brakes – or see the car swerve and weave across the road as the driver's vision became obstructed by the suddenly frosted glass. But he did see, as he turned, the car crash and come to rest on its side. Mallam was dazed, his face bleeding,

while Rhiston was unconscious. Thorold dragged Mallam from the car, banged his head against the underside and threw him onto the verge, and he was walking toward where Monica's murderer lay when the car suddenly exploded, searing the air with heat and light and throwing him to the ground.

Instantly, he regretted saving Mallam's life, and as he stood up to edge away from the burning, he felt an urge to throw Mallam onto Rhiston's funeral pyre. Mallam began to moan, and Thorold was considering what to do when, in the light of the flames, he saw people approaching.

Thorold recognized the young man leading them. He was Sidnal Wyke, seller of Lianna's books, and Thorold made no move to stop them as they carried Mallam away from the burning and back to the darkness that covered the lane to their village.

Many miles away, in a room of her house, Lianna smiled as she burned her square of inscribed magickal parchment in the flame of a black candle.

XIX

They had not spoken to Thorold and he had not spoken to them, and he watched them - numb with shock from Monica's death - depart, carrying Mallam. His rage had gone and he stood near the now slow burning car for several minutes before riding to the nearby farm.

To his surprise, the Police did not take long to arrive, and the Policeman found him waiting beside his bike near Monica's body.

"My girlfriend." Thorold explained. "The car - just came straight toward me."

He explained about the crash, the car reversing, and his moving the body. "There was nothing I could do. Then I heard a crash and an explosion and went to see."

The young but kindly Policeman smiled. "We'll need a statement. No need now - tomorrow."

Thorold gave his name and address, heard a Fire Engine approach, watched an Ambulance

arrive and take Monica's body away. He did not quite know why he did not speak about Mallam, but he did not, but as he drove slowly away from the scene to take the roads that led to Shrewsbury, he began to regret his lie. He stopped once, to turn back and tell the full story, but it was not his courage that failed. Rather, he began to sense he was involved in something of great and sinister import, and although he did not have all the answers – or indeed perhaps not even the right questions – he would find them. He did not, at this moment, know how, but Monica's death gave him the desire to succeed.

Jake was at home with his wife as Thorold had hoped, and he sat with them, drinking beer while the television relayed some film.

“Want to talk about it?” Jake asked.

“No.”

But Jake was not offended, and offered him more beer. Gradually, Thorold drank himself into a forgetful stupor to slither from his chair to the floor where he fell asleep.

He awoke to find himself alone in the house and obviously carried by Jake to a bed. He soon dressed and left to drive in the light rain to Lianna's home.

“I have been waiting for you,” she said as she led him inside. “I am sorry for what happened.”

“You know?” he asked without surprise.

“One gets to hear these things.”

“You know why I have come then?”

“Yes.” She took him to her living room. A copy of *The Black Book of Satan*, bound in black leather, lay on a table, but its title did not interest Thorold.

“I have to make a statement to the Police,” he said.

“You met Constable Tong, I believe.”

Thorold was not familiar with the name, but he made the obvious deduction.

“Such a bright young man,” she continued. “A cousin of Mr. Wyke – whom of course you have met.”

“I see,” said Thorold, uneasy.

“I thought you would.”

“What will you do with him?”

“With whom?” she teased.

“Edgar Mallam.”

“Does it matter?”

“It might.”

“To you?”

“I might want to see justice done. He killed Monica!”

“What is justice?” she mocked.

“He killed her!”

“An accident. A body burned beyond recognition,” she shrugged.

“I should have left him to die in the explosion!”

“You had no choice.”

“What?’ he asked perplexed.

She ignored the subject. “Come, do not let us argue. Remember how it was between us.”

Her smile, her eyes seemed to be affecting him and he became aware again of how beautiful she was. He remembered the ecstasy and passion he had shared with her – the soft sensuous beauty of her naked body; her intoxicating and seductive bodily fragrance. She was moving toward him with her mouth open, her lips waiting to be kissed.

But something inside him made him suddenly aware of her witchery, and he forced himself to think of Monica – her body, bloody and broken, on the road. His remembrance of her death and her face in death broke Lianna’s spell.

“I must go,” he said, turning away from her eyes.

“As you wish!”

Her words seemed to end the tension he felt in his neck and shoulders, but he still avoided looking at her.

“Remember,” she said as if chanting, “I want to share my life with yours.”

Even as he left he felt an urge to return and surrender to her seductive beauty, but he rode away down to the river where he sat for hours in the first nascent and then fulsome sun thinking about Monica, Mallam, Lianna and the events that bound them, and he himself, together.

He was disturbed by this thinking and tried to relax by returning to the secure reality of his bookshop. He wandered around the shelves, seated himself at his desk, and opened the mail that had begun to accumulate. But the longer he stayed in the musty shop, the more he felt that the world of books in which had been his world for years, was a dead one. Its charm

had gone. Monica had been real – exciting and full of promise for his future: his surveillance had been exciting, reminding him of the years before his marriage. Lianna herself had been real – warmly alive, as the books around him were not. He could give his statement to the Police, forget about Mallam and Lianna – forget about them all – and live again within his cloistral world of books. Except he did not want to.

The door to his shop opened.

“You are open?” asked the elderly man who entered.

“No, not at the moment.” Thorold was annoyed at being disturbed.

“Oh, dear! And I did so want to look around. I called yesterday.”

“Didn’t you see the note?” asked Thorold, pointing to it on the door.

The man bent down to peer, took some spectacles from the pocket of his tweed jacket and squinted. “My! How silly of me!” He turned to smile at Thorold. “But you are here now.”

The man was short and rotund with red cheeks and thinning white hair. His manner of dress was conservative and he carried a rolled up umbrella.

Thorold relented. “You can have a look if you wish. But I will be closing again soon.”

“You were recommended to me.”

“Oh, yes?” Thorold said without interest. He was still thinking of Lianna.

“Perhaps recommended is not the right word. May I sit down? My legs are not what they were.”

Surprised at the request, Thorold offered him his own chair.

“Most kind! Let me introduce myself.” He held out his hand. “Aiden is the name.”

Thorold shook his hand.

“I shall be brief,” Aidan said. “You spoke to a friend of mine some days ago about a certain matter.” He smiled at a perplexed Thorold. “The Devil,” he said calmly.

“Just curiosity.”

“I know a little about such things.”

“Academic interest, that’s all. Someone wanted to sell me some books on the subject.”

“You have these books?”

“No, actually.” Then, thinking quickly, he added, “I threw them out.” He pointed to a bundle of books tied by string, which lay on the floor. “I haven’t got the room. Have to be very selective.”

“For over forty years I have studied the subject. Meeting people. Often those who have been involved. One develops an instinct.” He smiled again. “Rather like a Detective. Although in my own case, an ecclesiastical one.”

“You must excuse me – I really ought to close the shop.”

“You have the scent of Satan about you,” the old man said in a quiet voice.

“Say again?” Thorold was startled.

“A figure of speech. Those who practice the Occult Arts believe there is an aura surrounding the body. It is said Initiation, particularly into the darker mysteries alters that aura, most noticeably between the eyes. You must forgive me if I speak frankly.”

“You are welcome to have a quick look around the shelves for any books that might interest

you.”

“You interest me.”

“You must excuse me – I have a busy day.”

“Are you afraid of someone?”

Thorold was insulted. “Of course not!”

“I came only to help.”

“Why?” Thorold was becoming a little angry.

Gently, the man said, “Because I am concerned about the growth of evil.”

“What is evil?” He realized he was echoing Lianna’s parody and added, “I sell books, that is all.”

Aiden sighed. “I can only help if you want me to. You know where I will be staying if you wish to contact me.”

“The Cathedral?”

“Yes. Sometimes it is better to ask for help than to try to solve things alone.”

“Are you staying long?”

“A few days.”

“I hope you enjoy your stay. Goodbye.”

Aiden pointed to the motorcycle, which Thorold had parked outside. “Yours?”

“No, I always dress like this,” Thorold quipped.

Aiden did not mind the jest. “So different now, such machines. Once – a very long time ago before I accepted my vocation within the Church – I rode. An Enfield – at least, that is what I think it was called. So long ago. Fast?”

“Very. Zero to sixty miles per hour in less than six seconds.”

“A different world, now. Such memories. I shall pray for you.”

“Goodbye.”

“Adieu!”

Thorold had declined the man’s gambit to prolong their conversation, and he watched Aidan walk slowly up the narrow lane that led to St. Chad’s church and the gates of Quarry Park. He did not regret his decision not to share his secrets, and as soon as Aidan was out of sight, he closed the shop and rode down into the traffic that was congesting the roads through the town.

The street, which contained Mallam’s house, seemed quiet, and he parked his bike nearby to walk the last hundred yards. To his surprise he found the door slightly ajar, and cautiously entered. A faint perfume lingered, reminding him of Lianna, but he quickly forgot about it as he slowly moved from room to room. The rooms were untidy and he was making his way upstairs when he heard someone moving about.

“Hello!” he called.

No one answered, and he crept into a bedroom. Someone touched his shoulder and he raised his hands, saying, “it’s a fair cop!” before suddenly turning around and smiling.

His quick movement startled the woman, and Thorold recognized her as Rhiston’s wife.

“Can I help?” he asked cunningly.

“You haven’t seen Maurice, have you?” she asked hopefully.

“No,” he lied. “Not recently. He gave you this address?”

She stared down at the floor. “Edgar did.”

Thorold drew the correct conclusion. “Been waiting here long?”

“I’ve just arrived.”

“You’ve got a key, then?”

“The door was open.”

“You checked the other rooms?”

“Not yet.”

“Come on, then.”

All of them, at least to Thorold’s once practised eye, bore evidence of a quick but thorough search.

“You don’t know where Maurice is?” she asked.

“Afraid not. You know Edgar,” he smiled. “Likes to be a man of mystery. They’ve probably gone somewhere together.” He had no qualms about lying to her since he assumed, from her involvement with Mallam, that she knew at least something about his activities. “Do you want to wait here?” he asked her.

“I’d better be going. If you see him – “

“I’ll tell him you called.”

“Thank you.”

He walked with her down the stairs. She turned to smile weakly at him before she left, and he felt sad. But he did not follow her to tell her about the fate of her husband. Instead, he sighed, remembered Monica’s death, and began to search the house, after locking the door. He found nothing of interest and nothing to incriminate Mallam – only a large collection of pornographic magazines, some leather whips and some manacles and chains. No photographs of his activities, no letters, documents, and nothing to indicate his interest in the Occult or the names and addresses of his varying contacts. He was disappointed, but not surprised, and left the house wondering what he could do next. Mallam was gone, Rhiston was dead, he had no names and addresses, no factual evidence concerning Mallam’s activities. Then he remembered the woman that Rhiston had briefly visited.

She answered his knock on her door wearing a nightdress and squinting into the brightness outside.

“Yes?”

“I am a friend of Edgar.”

“Do come in! Please excuse the mess. A social occasion – last night – you know how they drag on and on.”

“You came highly recommended,” he said, guessing.

“Really?” Pleased, she thought he looked promising, although somewhat older than she had come to expect. “Would you like something to drink? Beer, perhaps?”

“Tea?”

“Darjeeling, if you have some.”

“You don’t look like a tea drinker to me.”

“It’s the leathers! Often gives the wrong idea.”

“You must be warm in that black leather.” She breathed out the last words as though black leather interested her.

“It has its uses.”

“I’m sure! Do you ride often?” she asked mischievously.

“As the mood takes me.”

“Does it take you now?”

“Possibly.” After such a promising beginning he was at a loss as to how to continue, except the obvious course. But he was not disposed to take this, despite the attractiveness of the lady whom he guessed was at least fifteen years older than him. He began to feel embarrassed by the role he was creating for himself as well as surprised by his burgeoning desires. She was standing near him, her nightdress almost transparent and he could see her nipples and dark mass of pubic hair. He forced himself to remember the reason for his visit.

“Have you known Edgar long?” he asked.

“Long enough! Have you brought anything from him?”

As she said the words he saw the needle marks on her arms. The sight decided him.

“I’ve just remembered it!” he said, and dashed out of the house.

He did not seem to consciously decide, but just arrived at the road to Lianna’s house, and he did not have long to wait in her driveway. Attracted by the noise of the motorcycle, she came out to greet him.

“I must know,” he said as he removed his helmet and she stood, smiling and beautiful, in the sunlight. “About Mallam.”

“It is good that you come of your own free will.”

By the side of the house, Thorold could see Imlach turn around and walk back into the garden.

XX

The house was cool, and Thorold and Lianna sat in the Drawing Room overlooking the rear garden. She brought him iced tea before sitting beside him.

“What will happen to him?”

“Do you care?”

“Not in that way.”

“But you want revenge?”

“Possibly. I don’t know.”

“And if you were given the opportunity to dispense justice by taking his life, would you?”

“It’s not up to me. There is the law.”

“The Law! Hah! The Law is an accumulation of tireless attempts to prevent the gifted from making their lives a succession of ecstasies!” Her passion was soon gone, and she smiled kindly at Thorold. “I’m glad you came to see me again.”

Thorold returned her smile. "You didn't answer the question."

"About Edgar?"

"Yes. I do have my suspicions."

"Do you?"

"It seems to me you planned things."

"I will not deny – to you - that I planned some things. But I will tell you something. I planned things, yes – but I did not plan to fall in love with you."

For several minutes Thorold could not speak. He watched her, and she began to cry, gently, until tears ran down her cheeks.

"I have never said that to anyone before," she said, softly.

Thorold did not know what to do. He thought, vaguely and not for very long, that she might in some way be trying to manipulate his feelings, but the more he looked at her and the more he remembered the ecstasy they had shared in the past, the more his doubts began to disappear. She had turned her face away, to wipe the tears with her hand when he reached over to stroke her hair.

"Don't cry," he said.

"I'm sorry." She held his hand. "See what you do to me! I can't remember the last time I cried!"

"You are a strange woman."

"If I ask you something will you give me an honest answer?"

“Possibly.”

“Were you in love with Monica?”

The question surprised him. “I don’t know,” he said hesitantly. “I don’t think so.” He felt he had betrayed her.

“Good. I was a little jealous.”

“The thought occurred to me.”

“But I’m sorry about what happened – with her, I mean.”

“So am I,” His sense of having betrayed Monica began to fade. “I’d rather not talk about it.”

“I’ve missed you.” She moved toward him and kissed his lips.

The kiss, her perfume, the feel of her body pressing against his, overpowered his senses and he began to return her passion.

“Not here!” she said.

She held his hand as they walked from the room, and along the hall to a door. The door led down some steps into a dimly lit chamber. A dark, soft carpet covered the floor and she took him to an alcove where cushions were strewn, drawing him down with her. Her passion seemed to draw from Thorold all the darker memories of the past days and he abandoned himself to his lusts, remembering the tears and her words of love. Her hands gripped his shoulders and as her own passion became intense her nails sank into his flesh, drawing blood. But he did not care, as her body spasmed in ecstasy, followed by his own.

They relaxed then, in the gently bliss that followed.

“I want you,” she whispered, “with me always. Will you do something for me?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation.

“Whatever it is?”

“Yes.” His hands stroked her breasts. “You are beautiful.”

“I am all yours – now.”

“What did you want me to do?”

“Live with me.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously!” She kissed him. “I love you.” She sat up to lean against a cushion. “Tomorrow night there is a celebration in the village that I would like you to attend – with me.”

“Your village?”

She laughed. “I suppose it is!”

Thorold sat up to rest beside her against the stone wall and as he did so he noticed in a far corner, a statue. Beside it hung a lighted candle shielded by red glass. The light reminded him of the sanctuary lamp in a Catholic Church, but the statue showed a woman, naked from the waist up, who held in her outstretched hand the severed head of a bearded man. The woman was smiling.

“What’s that?” Thorold asked, pointing with his finger.

“The violent goddess – Mistress of Earth. There was a time when men were sacrificed in her name, and the Priestess of her cult would wash her hands in the victim’s blood before taking it to sprinkle on the fields. It ensured the fertility of the land – and the people.”

Thorold understood – or felt he did. He looked around the chamber. It was bare, except for one wall where a battered medieval shield, sword and armour hung.

“And those?” he asked.

“Family heirlooms. They were supposed to belong to an ancestor of mine – Roger de Alledone. There is a book in the library about the family – if you’re interested.”

“Yes. Does your son visit you often?”

“My son?” she asked, surprised. Then, remembering, “I have no children – yet.”

“But I remember you saying when you came to my shop – “

“A fabrication – to meet you. Am I forgiven?”

He vaguely remembered something else she had said, but could not form the vague remembrance into a distinct recollection of words, so he dismissed it. “Of course!” he said.

“Will you stay tonight?” she asked.

“Do you want me to?”

“You know I do.”

“I would have to collect a few things.”

“Naturally. Do you have a suit?” She looked at his motorcycle clothing discarded in haste.

“Yes, why?”

“I thought we could go to a rather nice restaurant I know. For dinner, tonight. And then come back here.”

Totally captivated by her, totally under her spell, Thorold simply said, “That would be nice.”

They embraced before he rose to dress. She watched him, before dressing herself. In the hallway, she kissed him saying, “Don’t be long, my darling!” He was almost to the door when she added, “I love you!”

It was a dazed almost hypnotized Thorold who sat outside astride his bike. Then he rode slowly out of the driveway only to be confronted by Imlach’s daughter who waved him to a halt.

“Listen!” she said, fearfully glancing around. “I must talk with you.”

He removed his helmet before saying, “What about?”

“I can’t talk here – it’s too dangerous. Please, you’ve got to hear me.”

“But – “

“Please!” she pleaded. “I must talk to you about Lianna!”

“Come on, then!” He indicated the pillion seat, replaced his helmet and drove down the road to take the lane that led to the toll bridge. He stopped before reaching it.

“Well?” he asked as they both stood beside the bike.

“She killed Monica,” she said.

Thorold’s smile disappeared. Stark realities, and memories of love and death, returned.

In the hazy sunlight, Thorold stared at the river flowing nearby. Two rowing boats, carrying their rowdy youthful crews, passed under the bridge.

“That’s ridiculous,” he finally said in answer to Sarah’s accusation. “It was an accident.”

“Was it? She arranged it using her magick.”

“Impossible.” He looked at her, but she did not turn her eyes away from his.

“Believe me, she has powers – sinister powers. She put a death curse on Monica.”

“Nonsense!”

“Is it?”

Thorold became perturbed. He had sensed many things about Lianna – including her natural charisma. “She wouldn’t – she had no reason.” Even as he spoke the words he knew a reason existed.

Sarah smiled, out of sympathy. “I saw her inscribing the parchments she uses to work her spells.”

Thorold still did not completely believe her. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because I – we - need your help.”

Thorold sighed, and went to stand on the bridge, leaning against the supports and watching the water flow below. She followed him.

“For centuries,” Sarah began, “her family has ruled the village. Her father before her. But she is different – they are all afraid of her. She owns the land, nearly all the houses – the fields. Without her, they could not survive. But she had followed a different way. I was born in the village, so I know.

“She is using you, as she uses everyone, including me and my father. There is a ceremony due – part of an old tradition. She has captivated you – like the dark witch she is.”

The rowing boats had gone, and the river seemed quite peaceful. Sarah continued speaking while Thorold watched the breeze ripple the surface of the water.

“Her family kept alive for generations the old traditions, the old ways – as did the folk of the village. But she has meddled in other things. We need your help.”

“Why?”

“Because you are important to her – at least, in what she is planning.”

“And what is that?”

“To use the power of The Giving for herself. I don’t agree with the old ways – and want them stopped. You must know – or have guessed – what will be involved. The man whom you saw escape – “

“I did wonder. There is a statue in her house.”

“Yes. So you do understand?”

“I am beginning to.”

“Will you help, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“She will take you to the ceremony – we, you and I, must prevent what she plans.”

“And then?”

“Let him go.”

“I see.”

“I could give you enough evidence.”

“About his activities?”

“Yes. She removed all his files, last night from his house.”

“I did wonder,” Thorold said.

“She has other evidence against him as well. I could get that.”

“What is she to you?”

Sarah sighed. “My mother.”

When Thorold had recovered from his surprise he said, “she told me she had no children.”

“Oh, she doesn’t acknowledge me – not as her heir and all that.”

She smiled at him and Thorold saw the faint resemblance to Lianna that he had seen before but dismissed.

Sarah laughed. “I am a mistake that she made in her youth!”

“She never said anything to me.”

“She is not exactly proud of me. That’s why she keeps me around in her sight.”

“And you father?” Thorold still found it difficult to believe that she was Lianna’s daughter.

“He is her loyal servant – and servant is the right word!”

“So they are no longer close?”

“Close? They have never been close! She used him - once and for her own ends. He was and always has been her guardian. She despises him. He is totally in her power.”

Thorold felt relieved, but he soon suppressed the feeling. “You will be present tomorrow night at the ceremony?”

“Yes. You will help, then?”

“I’ll think about it.”

“I shall have to get back – before I’m missed.” She walked a few paces, and then turned toward him. “She killed Monica. And when she has finished with you – “ she shrugged, “ – who knows?”

Thorold did not watch her go. The past few hours, through their intensity and contradiction, seemed to have drained away his vitality and he rode to his Apartment to sit in the stuffy interior silence for a long time, without feeling and without thinking about recent events. When he did think about them, he came first to one conclusion and then another, to finally change his mind again, and it was without any enthusiasm that he collected clothes suitable for Lianna’s evening.

She greeted his return with a kiss, and did not seem to him to notice his change of mood.

“I feel very tired this evening,” he said to build his alibi.

She led him upstairs to the bedroom he had slept in before.

“I’ll see you downstairs, in the Sitting Room,” she said smiling, and left him.

He was soon changed, and sat to wait for her in the Sitting Room. It was a long wait, and he rose to briefly play the Grand Piano.

“You must play for me,” she said as she entered, startling him.

He was momentarily stunned by her beauty and appearance. She wore a brooch of colourful design, held by a black silk band around her neck, and her close-fitting dress emphasized the feminine proportions of her body. It was cut low at the back, exposing her tanned skin to the waist, its fit so close that Thorold could see she wore nothing underneath.

“What do you think?” she asked unnecessarily, turning in a circle in front of him.

“I think other women will hate you.”

“Good!” she laughed.

Her driving matched her mood, for she drove fast but with skill out of Shrewsbury to take a circuitous route to the restaurant. Inside, the furnishings were antique, and they were ushered to a table overlooking the extensive private grounds.

“Such a civilized place, don’t you agree?” Lianna said as Thorold sat amazed by the selection of food, and the prices, which were shown on the menu.

The tables were set at a discreet distance from each other, some at different levels. No one else was present – except two waiters and a waitress, discreetly watching them.

“I suppose the prices put people off,” Thorold said as he glanced at the empty chairs.

“We have the place to ourselves tonight.”

Thorold blushed, and stared at the menu.

“Decided what you want yet?” she asked, pleased by his show of innocence.

“Cod, chips, mushy peas and scraps.” He waited for her reaction and when none came, he said, “You decide.”

She did, and a waiter sidled up to her on her signal to take the order. She chose wine, and Thorold had drunk two full glasses of her expensive choice when he said, “all we need is an orchestra.”

“There are speakers secreted among the oak beams to channel background music.”

As if listening to their conversation, the nearby waiter walked gracefully toward their table. “Would Madam like some music?”

“Do you have any Strauss Waltzes?”

“I shall see!”

A few minutes later the music began as the first course of their meal was served. Thorold watched Lianna while they ate and talked of inconsequential things – the long spell of hot weather, the restaurant, his likes and dislikes in music. She did not seem to him to be evil – just exceptionally beautiful, wealthy woman, born to power and used to it. But he could not still his doubts. He heard Sarah’s voice in his head accusing her; remembered Lianna’s lie about having no children; her anger toward Monica. But most of all he remembered Monica’s death and Mallam being borne away by the people of Lianna’s village.

“Why did you never have any children?” he asked to test her.

She smiled. “My husband. Marriage of convenience, really. Did not want him as the father of my children.”

“Did you never want any?”

“Apart from now, you mean?” And her eyes sparkled.

“Years ago. As an heir.”

“Together we shall solve this problem!”

“But seriously – “

“Seriously – not until now. I never found the right man, until now. One has to be so careful.”

Thorold had his answer, and he did not like it. “It is a pity,” he said, guarding his feeling, “that there is not room enough to dance.”

“We could ask them to make room.”

“No – I’d be too embarrassed.”

The evening passed slowly for Thorold. Their conversation returned to the mundane, and he drank an excessive amount of wine to stifle both his feelings and his thoughts. He pretended to fall asleep in her car on their return to her house, awaking at their journeys end to say, “I’m sorry. Drunk too much.”

She smiled indulgently, and did not seem to mind when her kiss, as they stood in his bedroom, was not returned.

“We have the rest of our lives together!” she laughed in reply to his apology for his tiredness.

“I shall be leaving early in the morning. To prepare for our little ceremony. Meet me outside the village mound at ten in the evening. Can you remember that?” she asked playfully.

He slumped onto the bed, playing his role. “Of course.”

“No curiosity?” she asked.

“‘Bout what?” he slurred his words.

“The ceremony?”

“Too tired to be curious. Anyway – trust you.”

She looked directly into his eyes and for an instant he felt she knew about his pretence and the reasons for it. But she kissed him, and the moment was gone, making him sure he had been mistaken, for she touched his face gently with her hand, saying, “sleep well my darling!” to leave him alone in his room.

No sounds reached him and he undressed to sleep naked in the humid night on top of the bed. He was soon asleep. He did not sleep for long. The weather oppressed, making him restless and sweaty, and his mind was troubled by thoughts of Monica, Mallam and Lianna’s lies. Only when dawn came, bringing a slight breeze through his open windows, did renewed rest come, and he did not hear as Lianna quietly opened the door to watch, for almost a minute while he slept. She smiled as she closed the door to leave him to his dreams.

It was late morning when Thorold awoke, tired and thirsty. The house was quiet, and empty, and he wandered to one of the many bathrooms before dressing. He found Lianna’s note on the table in the kitchen. “Yours – to keep,” it simply read. Next to it was a key to the front door of the house.

Half expecting to find Sarah or Imlach, he ventured into the gardens. He found no one, not even in the buildings where Sarah – a long time ago it seemed to him now – had taken him to strip away all her clothes. Now, he felt, he understood: angry with her mother, she had tried to seduce him as an act of revenge.

He spent an hour wandering around the house, occasionally opening a drawer or a cupboard as if by such openings he might find something to incriminate or explain Lianna. Even the library held no clues – only books, many of which he would once have been glad to own or buy for his shop. The door that led to the stone chamber was unlocked, and he walked down the steps aware that he might be transgressing Lianna’s hospitality. But he hardened himself against the feeling, remembering Sarah’s story, Monica’s death and Lianna’s lies. Black candles lit the chamber.

The red light by the statue was still burning, and as he approached, he saw a book lying on the floor. *The Black Book of Satan*’ the spine read.

The book was open at a chapter entitled ‘*A Gift for the Prince*’ and he began to read.

‘In ceremonial rituals involving sacrifice, the Mistress of Earth usually takes on the role of violent goddess, the Master of the Temple that of either Lucifer or Satan, the sacrifice being regarded as a gift to the Prince of Darkness. This gift, however, is sometimes offered to the dark goddess – the bride of our Prince.

‘Human sacrifice is powerful magick. The ritual death of an individual does two things: it releases energy (which can be directed – or stored, for example, in a crystal sphere) and it draws down dark forces or ‘entities’. Such forces may then be used, by directing them toward a specific goal according to the principles of magick, or they may be allowed to disperse over the Earth in a natural way, such dispersal altering what is sometimes known as the ‘astral shell’ around the Earth. This alteration, by the nature of the sacrifice, is disruptive – that is, it tends toward Chaos. This is simply another way of saying that sacrifice further the works of Satan...’

He read no more, but carefully replaced the book, leaving the chamber to ascend the stairs to his room. He felt comfortable again in his motorcycle leathers, gloves and boots, and left the house without locking the door.

The roads and lanes he took led him to a narrow, old stone bridge over a narrow stream, and he stopped to sit beside the water under the blue sky while larks sang high above the fields of ripening wheat. The book had given him final confirmation of his suspicions.

XXII

It was nearing the hour of ten when Thorold arrived in the village, his sealed letter safely in Jake’s house. His friend would open it and know what to do should he fail to return.

Twilight was ending, and as he parked his bike by the mound, removed his helmet and as he listened, hearing only the leaves of the trees moving in the breeze, he found it difficult to believe in magick. The perfume of flowers was strong, reminding him of quiet English villages full of charm. He had not heard or seen the old tractor that was driven across the lane, blocking it, after he had passed to take the last turn into the village, as he did not know the other entrance to the village was similarly obstructed. Neither did he see or hear Lianna approach until she stood beside him and touched him on the shoulder, startling him, again.

“Come”, she said, “they are waiting.”

She carried a wicker basket but he could not see what was in it. He was surprised when she lead him toward and into the church.

Inside, a multitude of candles and lanterns had been lit, and he saw the whole village assembled with Sidnal standing and waiting by the altar. But the altar was covered with fruit, food and what appeared to be casks of beer, and as he looked around he could see that all Christian symbols and artefacts had been removed.

The assembly parted as he and Lianna entered.

“Wait here,” she whispered to him before walking by herself toward the altar. Sidnal bowed slightly as she gave him her basket. It contained envelopes bearing a substantial gift of money, the same amount in each, and Sidnal took the envelopes one at a time, read the name written thereon, and waited for the recipient to come forward.

Each villager received an envelope, and Sidnal gave the empty basket to Lianna. She held it upside down and on this signal a young man and woman came forward. She touched their foreheads with her hands, saying, “I greet the Lord and Lady!”

They turned, as the assembled villagers did, toward where Thorold stood. The door opened, and Imlach entered holding a rope whose ends were tied round Mallam’s hands, binding them.

Lianna addressed the congregation, saying, “You have heard the charges against him. How say you – is he guilty or not guilty?”

“Guilty! Guilty!” The congregation responded.

“Is that the verdict of you all?”

“Yes!” the voices chorused.

“And his sentence?”

“Burn him! Burn him!”

Mallam looked terrified. Lianna led the exit from the church.

“Come,” she said to Thorold, taking his hand. Imlach led Mallam into the darkness followed by Lianna, Thorold, Sidnal and the folk of that village.

Sarah waited by the gate to the mound, holding a burning torch. She led the procession through the village and into the fields where they stopped beside an unlit bonfire. In its centre was a stake.

“No! No!” Mallam pleaded. “Forgive me! I’ll do anything! Anything!”

Imlach had a long-bladed knife, which he gave to Lianna as Sarah came to stand beside Thorold while the villagers gathered in a circle round the stake. Thorold felt Sarah’s hand touching his, then cold metal. He was surprised, but put the revolver in his pocket, and watched as Lianna approached Mallam.

“Are you ready?” Sarah whispered to him.

Thorold did not answer. Nearby, Lianna cut the rope which bound Mallam.

“Run!” she said to him. “Run!”

For some seconds Mallam did not move, and when he did the waiting villagers moved aside to let him through. He ran, bent-over, into the high, shielding wheat. No one followed.

“There is she,” Lianna pointed at Sarah, “who has betrayed us.”

Lianna came forward, took the torch from Sarah’s hand and beckoned to two men. They held Sarah by her arms while Thorold stood with his hand clutching the gun in his pocket. But he did not move, surprised by Mallam’s freedom, as the two men took Sarah away. Lianna lit the bonfire with the torch, and on this signal the villagers began to dance around it, laughing and singing. Two young women came to Thorold, held his arms and ushered

him toward the circle of the dance, and soon he lost sight of Lianna. He danced with them around the fire, several times trying to break away. But another circle of dancers had formed around the one containing him, dancing in the opposite direction, and constraining his movement.

He seemed to dance a long time until he saw Lianna again. She was outside the circle of dancers and came toward him, took his hand and joined in the dance. The heat of the fire had become intense, and the dancers moved away, still holding the circles. Wood crackled, and, among the singing and shouting,

Thorold thought he could hear music accompanying the dance.

“You did not believe her, then?” Lianna asked.

“You knew?”

“Of course!”

“And if I had believed her?” he asked, panting from the exertion of the dance and the heat.

“It would have been a pity to spoil the celebration.”

“And Mallam?”

She smiled. “He has his just reward!”

“Then Sarah is not your daughter?”

“Naturally not! And you have shown the insight I would expect from my future husband.”

Thorold was so surprised he stopped his dancing, and as he did so he could see, by the light of the fire, blood upon Lianna’s hands and dress.

XXIII

Thorold had no time to think. The dancing stopped, and he was borne along in the crush back through the gate of the field toward the village.

Several times he tried to find Lianna but without success. He was approaching the church when he saw her standing by the door with a young woman. Her hands were clean, her dress a different one.

“Shall we go and see Sarah?” She said, smiling, when he reached her.

Inside the church, the feasting had begun, and Thorold followed Lianna and the young woman, unwilling to form his fears and feelings into words. The light from the windows of the black and white house illuminated the garden, and as they passed through it Thorold could see, through the open door, fresh straw covering the floor of the stone building that had been Mallam’s prison.

Sarah sat, her head resting in her hands, by the table in the kitchen, the two men who had taken her away beside her, with Sidnal standing close by.

“Leave us,” Lianna said, and the two men left. “You have done well,” she said to Sidnal. “I have a gift for you - as your grandmother I know, would have wished.”

Sidnal shuffled his feet and looked down at the floor as Lianna joined his hand with that of the young woman who laughed playfully and dragged an unresisting Sidnal away. As they left the house, Thorold saw Imlach standing by the door.

Sarah looked hopefully at Thorold. “Why didn’t you stop her?”

When Thorold did not answer, she said, “You didn’t believe me, did you?”

“No.”

“But it was true,” she said in desperation. “My father will tell you.”

Imlach turned away.

“Tell him! Damn you, tell him!” she shouted.

Imlach said nothing, and Sarah began to cry. Then, suddenly, she was angry and glowered at Thorold. “You’re pathetic,” she snarled. “I pity you, I really do! You’re totally in her power! She’s corrupted you, beshrewed you, and you don’t see it!”

“I know what has gone on,” Lianna said.

“What do you mean?” Sarah demanded, angry – and afraid.

“Between you and your father.”

“No! It’s lies!”

“I have known for a long time,” Lianna said quietly.

“I hate you!”

“So, that’s why you pretended to be her daughter?” Thorold asked.

“Yes!” Sarah was defiant. She stood up, as if to strike Lianna, and as she did so, Imlach moved toward her. “I knew you loved her!” she said to her father. “That’s why I did what I did – with you!” She laughed, almost hysterically.

Imlach raised his hand to hit her, but Lianna stopped him.

“Now,” Sarah shouted, “you’ll never know your child!”

Swift, she ran out of the house, too quick for her father to catch her. She was in the stone

building, pushing the door shut, by the time they reacted, and when they reached it she had set fire to the straw.

She laughed at them as they stood by the door and flames engulfed her. Thorold tried to reach her, but the flames and heat and smoke were intense and Imlach pulled him back. Sarah screamed, briefly, and then was silent.

“I shall be at the feast,” Imlach said before walking along the garden path to take the lane to the church.

“Come on,” Lianna said to Thorold, “there is nothing you can do here.”

She took his hand to lead him back into the house. She brought wine, and they sat at the table in the kitchen drinking.

“I suppose,” Thorold said, “this is your house as well.”

“Indeed! Shall we live here – rather than in Shrewsbury?”

He ignored the question. “She said that you killed Monica – by cursing her.”

“Do you believe I did?”

For a long time Thorold did not speak. “No,” he finally said. “There was a book I found, in your house, the evening – “

“The Black Book of Satan?”

“Yes. It mentioned sacrifice.”

Lianna smiled, disconcerting Thorold still further. He realized then that he still loved her. It had been love that had overcome the doubts Sarah had given him, not reason.

“Tell me about Mallam,” he asked.

“What do you want to know?”

He wanted to ask about what he had seen – the blood on her hands and dress – but it had been the briefest of glimpses in difficult light, and he could have been mistaken.

“He is free, then?” he asked.

“Yes – at last.”

“And you planned everything?”

“You tell me,” she said enigmatically.

“I think you set him up right from the beginning. Let him make his mistakes. Condemn himself, in fact.”

“Possibly,” she smiled.

“But why?”

“I’m sure you can work it out.”

It was the answer he had expected. “How does the book I found fit into all this?” It was not exactly the question he wanted to ask, but it would, he hoped, lead him toward it.

She smiled, as a schoolmistress might toward an otherwise intelligent pupil. “Satanism, you mean?”

“Yes,” he answered, amazed at her perspicacity.

“It is not the way I follow. My tradition is different – much older.”

“And Mallam?”

“He followed his own dark path.”

“And Monica – surely she did not have to die?”

“No – it was an accident. But he killed her, accidentally or otherwise.”

“The village – how does it fit in?”

“Do you want to marry me – and share all this?” she asked.

Thorold smiled. “I thought I was supposed to ask you?”

”There is an older way.” She paused. “Yes – or no?”

Thorold felt the importance of the moment, heard the beating of his pulse in his ear, saw the enigmatic beauty of the woman seated beside him, and remembered her physical passion, her tears and words of love. “Yes,” he said trembling.

She kissed him. “I never really had much choice, did I?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, you had plenty of times to chose.”

For a moment Thorold had the impression that she had planned everything – including Sarah’s intervention and death – but the impression was transient. He looked at her, and could not believe it. She was smiling, and he suddenly realized that he would not care if she had.

“Imlach – what will happen to him?” He asked to test her.

“He will stay with us – should you so wish it.”

He was pleased with her answer. “And if I don’t wish it?”

I believe that Sidnal will need some help with his land. Now,” she said, and stood up, “let’s go to bed!”

Thorold needed no further encouragement to follow her.

Tired from the physical passion of the night, Thorold was sleeping soundly when Lianna left the house in the burgeoning light to dawn.

The village was quiet, and she walked past the church and into the fields. The bonfire of the night before was but a smouldering pile of ash, and she walked past it and through the wheat along the path Mallam had taken in his flight. Nothing remained by the edge of the field to mark his passing, except a large patch of discoloured earth, which, she knew, would soon be gone, and she smiled before returning to her house.

It would be another fifty years before the field would be needed again, and her heir would be there to carry on the sacred tradition. She was pleased with her choice for the man who would father her daughter, and, around an oak tree on the mound, she danced a brief dance in the light of the rising sun.

[Fini]

Appendix

A Brief Note Concerning The Deofel Quartet:

The books in the Deofel Quartet were designed as esoteric Instructional Texts for novices beginning the quest along the Left Hand Path according to the traditions of the ONA.

As such, their style is not that of a conventional novel. Thus, detailed descriptions – of people, events, circumstances – are for the most part omitted, with the reader/listener expected to use their own imagination to create such details.

Their intent was to inform novices of certain esoteric matters in an entertaining and interesting way, and as such they are particularly suitable for being read aloud. Indeed, one of their original functions was to be read out to Temple members by the Temple Priest or Priestess.

In addition, each individual book represents particular forms, aspects, and the archetypal energies associated with particular spheres of the Septenary Tree of Wyrð. Thus, and for example, *The Giving* – dealing with “primal Satanism” - relates to the third and fourth spheres, the two alchemical processes of Coagulation and Putrefaction, and the magickal forms represented by the magickal words Ecstasy and Vision. [For more details, refer to the ONA MS *Introduction to the Deofel Quartet*.]
