

The Sinister Pathway Triangle Order

(SPTO)

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Volume One



ORDER OF THE NINE ANGLES

The Complete Deofel Quartet

Included here is the complete Deofel Quartet
Introduction – Deofel I Falcifer: Lord of Darkness (P.09)–
Deofel II The Temple of Satan (P.99)



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The Magickal Art of the Deofel Quintet

The Deofel Quintet - the original Deofel Quartet plus *Breaking the Silence Down* - were designed as Instructional Texts for novices beginning the quest along the Left Hand Path according to the traditions of the ONA.

As such, they are not - and were not intended to be - great, or even good, works of literature. 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 effect, they are attempts at a new form of "magikal art" - like Tarot images, or esoteric music. As with all Art, magickal or otherwise, they can and should be surpassed by those possessing the abilities. If they have the effect of inspiring some Initiates of the Darker Path to creativity, to surpass them and create something better, then one of their many functions will have been achieved.

Anton Long
115yf

Introduction To The “Deofel Quartet”

The works collected under the title “The Deofel Quartet” were written as instructional texts for members of a Black Magick group. As such, they deal with certain esoteric matters relevant to Novices and those who have begun to follow the path of Black Magick and Satanism.

While the form chosen is fictional, it is not that of a “conventional” novel. Instead, a new vehicle was created with the aim of combining a fast (and thus entertaining) pace with a narrative style that not only required the imaginative participation of the reader, but also sought to involve the unconscious. Thus, detailed descriptions – of, for instance, characters and locations – are for the most part omitted. It is left to the reader to supply such “missing details”: partly from their imagination and partly unconsciously, from their own expectations and projections.

This form also had the added advantage of making the works interesting to listen to when read aloud in a group setting. This new form may be considered as an extended “prose poem”.

While each work is self-contained in terms of “plot” and “characters”, they all deal with the varying insights attained by those following the darker path to esoteric enlightenment, as well as with those practical (i.e. real-life) experiences which form the basis of genuine magickal training and which explicate real sinister magick in action.

Each work deals with (although not always exclusively), a certain type of magickal/archetypal energy – and thus is connected with one of the spheres of the septenary Tree of Wyrd. Thus, in the instructional sense, each work explicates particular archetypal forms as those forms affect people in real life. Naturally, quite a few of the forms so explicated are dark or sinister.

In order to guide the interested reader and student of the Occult Arts, some “Themes and Questions” concerning the Quartet are included as an Appendix to Volume I.

(Typed note at bottom of this page: The works are reproduced exactly as they were originally circulated in manuscript form, with typed/hand-written corrections.)

ONA

Responses and Critical Analysis:

Each novice reading the Quartet should try and analyze their response to it – the feelings, expectations, points of agreement and disagreement and so on which arise from reading it.

A first reading will be sufficient to show the works of the Quartet are Satanically subtle – i.e. they are not blatant “horror/Black Magick” stories and neither are they pornographic. They are also not akin to the amoral diatribes of other writers – e.g. de Sade.

Instead, they are intended for those of discernment, those who can see beyond mere appearance and affectation – i.e. Satanic novices: those who wish to know and who seek to question, those who wish to discover secrets (often about themselves).

As explained elsewhere, they deal with problems a novice following the Left Hand Path might be expected to come across or be familiar with – both in terms of their own development/feelings/expectations, and in terms of real sinister magick. Such magick is, for the most part, subtle and esoteric – it is hidden and bears little, often no, resemblance to what most people (and some Initiates) consider magick to be.

Hence, those who turn to the Quartet hoping to find the kind of cheap and sensational thrills often associated (in the herd-mind) with “Black Magick” stories and “horror” will be disappointed. The Quartet is not intended for such sensation seeking, uncritical and weak individual – it is intended to instruct Satanic novices in some esoteric aspects of their craft; to aid their own understanding and sinister development.

“Falcifer” concerns Initiation and the gathering of Satanic experience. It also deals with the Dark Gods – revealing esoteric knowledge. The energies which give form to the story are concerned with the first sphere on the Tree of Wyrd – magickal form “Night/Nox” ; Tarot images – 18, 15, 13; Alchemical Process –Calcination.

The Temple Of Satan also concerns the Dark Gods – but it deals mainly with emotion on the personal level, particularly “love”: how a Satanic Initiate of some experience encounters and deals with this emotion. “Love” of this type is a stage, to be experienced and transcended. For a Satanist not yet achieved Adeptship, this feeling is often a snare, a trap – which they can fall into, thus ending their sinister quest. It is about still unconscious feeling and desires – about making these more conscious, controlling them and transcending them. Third sphere on Tree of Wyrd. Magickal form – Ecstasy. Images – 6, 14, 17. Alchemical process – Coagulation.

“The Giving” concerns “primal Satanism” – and a more subtle magick and manipulation than the previous works. It is a story based on fact – on real life happenings and real people. It reveals a real Satanic Mistress in action – someone quite different from the “accepted” notion of a Satanic Mistress. Spheres – Third and Forth. Forms – Ecstasy/Vision. Images 7,12,5,6,14,17. Processes – Coagulation/Putrefaction.

“The Greyling Owl” (the title is significant) concerns the second sphere, and the magick is even more subtle and esoteric than the previous work. It requires an understanding of individuals as those individuals are – a subtle changing of them. Magickal Form – Indulgence; process – Separation; Images – 0, 8, 16.

In all the works of the Quartet, “the other side” (i.e. those with “moral”) is shown in context – moral individuals are described and things seen from their point of view. **It is vitally important for a novice to be able to be detached** – to see things and people as those things and people are. Only thus can they learn judgment and discover how to work esoteric sinister magick. Such detachment is necessary – and its cultivation is part of Initiate training. It is the aim of the Quartet to cultivate this ability – and the self-criticism which is part of it. This “criticism” is a self-awareness, a self-knowledge. Thus, some characters in the Quartet and the views and attitudes they express may provoke the Satanic Initiate into disagreement and possibly discomfort. This is intentional. The novice should analyze why they react as they do – and why they expect certain things/certain views/certain outcomes.

In short, they are entertaining Instruction Satanic Texts – those who are prepared to spend some effort in understanding them will discover many layers, and so learn.

Falcifer :

This MS deals with overt magick in a magickal setting – Temples, rituals etc. It describes Satanic initiation from a Satanic viewpoint, and the tests etc. a novice may undergo as well as the awakening awareness appropriate to a novice.

It also deals with the Dark Gods – describing them and the magick which returns them to Earth.

Of all the MSS of the Quartet, it is the most easily understood, although it does contain some hidden/esoteric meanings. These, however, are explicable since the perspective of the MS is overtly Satanic.

Temple of Satan:

This also has an overtly magickal setting, but deals with the stage beyond that of a novice; i.e. someone who has been involved for some time and who has developed certain magickal skills – e.g. manipulation.

Melanie is the archetypal Satanic Priestess: sexually alluring, using her sexuality to manipulate and captivate, enjoying some delicate pleasures (e.g. sadism). But, as a true Satanist, after some time she becomes bored by the routine. So unconsciously at first, she seeks after something else: and is drawn toward Thurstan, against her better Satanic judgment. She is “drawn” because she still has to gain a deep self-understanding – because there are still aspects which remain unconscious and powerful in her psyche (relating to the “luminous” power of love etc. Gradually, she falls in love – but is she herself being manipulated toward this by Saer? And if so, why? (Consider the crystal he left with Thurstan for her to find and read). Saer is “beyond the Abyss” – an image/symbol of aeonic magick as against Melanie’s external and internal magick.

But she gradually understands its purpose – to propel her toward the next stage of the sinister journey, and to provide a child who because of her own sinister abilities and the apparently non-sinister abilities of Thurstan will have special qualities. That is, the child will be beyond opposites (as e.g., symbolized by Melanie and Thurstan). Toward the end, Melanie is presented with a choice – love, or her duty/destiny. She chooses the later, and her magick is restored.

Claudia is a complication for Melanie – a further test/distraction. Does her love cause her lover’s death? Pead and Jukes, representing old aeon magick, try to keep Melanie and Thurstan apart – because with him she cannot fulfill aeonic magick, to the detriment of the old order and “the light”.

The Giving:

This MS has several esoteric strands and several overt meanings. Lianna is a Mistress of Earth (note: stages beyond Melanie in “Temple”) and it is her duty to undertake The Giving – rite of sacrifice.

As a Satanic Mistress, Lianna uses magick in a subtle way, as benefits her status. This magick is esoteric (e.g. empathic) but she also directly manipulates others, although in a subtle way. Consider how she draws/attracts Thorold to her: sending Sidnal to him with books, visiting his shop as a customer...

Lianna requires two important things: an offer, and someone to father her heir. The MS describes her attaining these goals.

Mallam is a recent initiate – enjoying as all good Initiate should, over magick and evil. He involves Rhiston in his games. Lianna however presents Mallam with a choice – finely and subtlety presented. She advises him that his activities are not conducive to further advancement, for she understands he has become ensnared by some of his desires, rather than enjoying them and then discarding them to rise beyond them and so attain self-insight and mastery. However, he sees her hints “morally” – he misinterprets them because he cannot see what she is trying to do; i.e. he shows no Satanic insight. The reader is shown this from Mallam’s perspective – like Mallam; certain discernment is required to see beyond the outer appearance to the essence. (This sudden change of perspective occurs in the MS several times, as it does many times in other parts of the Quartet. The reader should often ask: what is really going on here? A critical judgment is required because often characters and what they may do/say are not what they seem; i.e. the real intent/magick is hidden.)

As it is, Mallam’s lack of insight means he believes Lianna is making a “moral” point, and he openly breaks with her.

Following this decision by Mallam, Lianna provides him with a test, a new opportunity to prove his worth or otherwise. She sends her Guardian, Imlach, to him – unknown to Mallam, of course – with a secret MS. Again, Mallam fails to realize what is happening – he cannot see through Imlach. Instead, he is overwhelmed by unconscious desires: material greed, lust for power. Rather than controlling, and using his desire for some purpose, he lets his desire control him. He goes to Lianna’s village – and again fails, because he cannot recognize the young woman as a Priestess of Lianna’s tradition: he sees her as dull, easily manipulated. Thus, he shows he has no genuine magickal insight or abilities.

Hence he becomes a candidate for sacrifice. Basically, he chooses himself – he is not chosen because of his “evil” activities. They merely provide a fail-safe to deflect attention from his disappearance (when the rite is completed): no one in “conventional” society would miss him/mourn him or worry about his disappearance.

Lianna also tests/manipulates Thorold. Does she also manipulate Monica? Or is she genuinely annoyed when Thorold becomes involved with Monica? Is this a further test of Thorold? Certainly for Lianna, Monica’s death or removal is necessary – or it seems to be. Lianna has drawn Thorold into her world – and changes him, for he is captivated by her: in a sense, in her power. He has qualities which she judged would make him a suitable person to father her child.

The MS ends with an unasked question: what is to be Thorold’s fate when his purpose has been achieved? That is, when he has fathered her child. Will he be an offer, or will he become part of her tradition? Clues to the answer are given at various points in the MS. Also, is Lianna a Satanist?

Certainly, she does not seem to be – there are no “Satanic” rites, no invocations to Satan. At one point she says she belongs to an older tradition. Does she say this for a reason? - To deceive? She certainly represents a primal darkness: and is a genuine Mistress of Earth....This raises the question as to what genuine Satanism really is: a question answered, in fact, by Lianna’s actions as described in the MS from its beginning to its end.

The Greyling Owl:

This is the most esoteric and therefore the most difficult MS to understand – at first reading – and when viewed by conventional/accepted ideas of Satanism/Black Magick.

This shows real magick in action on several levels: manipulation, empathic, forms (e.g. music), images, and via opening psychic nexions within individuals.

Essentially, the MS deals with the changes wrought in the lives of Mickleman and Allison, and how these are made to aid the sinister dialectic – i.e. sinister aeonic strategy, to aid the presencing of sinister energies in the causal and so bring/provoke change to the benefit of the sinister, aiding evolution.

The magick here is that appropriate to an Internal Adept and beyond, while the energies described (the outer form) are symbolic of a particular sphere on the Tree of Wyrd (Mercury), although other energies are sometimes involved/intrude.

This magick is far removed from external magick and thus rituals/robes. This magick means a working with individuals as those individuals are - a subtle re-orientation of their consciousness/lives.

Mickleman is gradually changed, and brought into an influential position – the Professorship – without him realizing this is occurring, in the magickal sense at least. He believes he is still in control of his own Destiny – and it is important not to undermine this belief, except insofar as a certain self-insight is obtained. He must have assurances of his abilities, this confidence to fulfill what is his “hidden” wyrd. He becomes aware, on terms he can cope with/is familiar with (this is important), of certain archetypal aspects which will be important for his future professional development/standing. These aspects, by which he will influence others in a non-magickal way by “seeding their minds”, will aid the sinister dialectic. Part of this would be through academic work (aided by insights attained during his “manipulation”) and part by his own life style: his “decadent” past and his future deriving from the past – both would influence others, providing inspiration and thus changing others in certain ways.

Alison also is changed - realizing that power of music to transform. Again, her aims, dreams, hopes, etc. are described from her own perspective, from her own “moral” view of the world. However, her fundamental insights are “provoked” via the subtle magick/influence of Edmund etc. Further, the future forms she creates/uses, while having the appearance of conventional forms (and perhaps a moral content), will achieve and aid the sinister (or at least most/some of them will). She herself will see here aims in terms of her own perspective: often “morally”, without fully realizing what she and her work are achieving – opening nexions, and presencing dark energies to influence/infect others.

This arises because she has been influenced/directed by magick in a specific: to access a nexion within her own psyche. (All this is a very important notation to understand – and

marks the insight appropriate to those who aspire to go beyond the stage of novice. It reflects genuine magick in action). Her thoughts/actions etc. (as others) are often “morally” described.

The dark interior life of both Edmund and Fiona (and thus their real aims) are hidden – i.e. not overt, as generally befits a Master and Mistress. Such Adepts generally work esoterically – they do not fit conventional Satanic role-models. In their different ways, Edmund and Fiona live in the ordinary world in an “ordinary” way – they are real shape-changers who blend into their surroundings. This enables them to work sinister magick effectively. Further, Edmund possesses no trappings normally assumed to be part of his station – he has no wealth, no power, no obvious influence. His Satanic power is internal, hidden – it is insight, wisdom, and magickal skill of a rare kind. This skill allows him to work magick on others (and thus the world) as those others are – in the confines of their own roles/image for the most part. Fiona’s magickal work is often more overt – e.g. using her sexuality to advantage, but her real magick is still hidden. Thus the MS describes real Adepts at work.

A note concerning “Breaking The Silence Down”

This MS is often regarded as making the Quartet into a Quintet. It is similar in its magick to The Greyling Owl – although the background is Sapphism.

Basically, Diane – who already possesses an intuitive awareness of primal darkness and thus Satanism – is lead toward self-discovery and magickal partnership.

She has an insight into the female persona/strength (after the attempted rape) and discovers a power of music to capture the essence hidden by appearance.

She is seduced by Rachael, who uses music (her piano playing) as a magickal act. Aphone is the archetypal immature product of this age and its societies: swayed by desires and using petty manipulation to achieve lowly goals. When he becomes a threat to Diane, he is dealt with by those who desire her, magickally and sexually (Rachael and Watts). Is his accident purely chance? Or is someone, or two, watching over Diane? In the end, Rachael wins Diane. She is a hereditary sorceress – carrying on her grandmothers’ tradition (thus missing a generation: Rachael’s mother). This tradition thrives in a certain part of the countryside near where Diane lives.

As in “Greyling”, the perspective is often that of the character involved: i.e. events/thoughts etc. are seen through their eyes, with their (often moral and conventional) understanding/attitudes. They give an appreciation and understanding of these people as they are – and how magick affects them, usually without them being aware of it. It requires the reader to suspend and transcend conventional Satanic/sinister notions (which are often only the outer form of what is Satanic/sinister rather than its essence). This should enable genuine magick to be understood – as it should aid the understanding of how forms/energies etc. affect/change individuals, often unconsciously. All this should aid self-insight.

Deofel Quartet Volume I

By Anton Long - ONA

Falcifer - Lord of Darkness

Prologue

The chant rose towards its demonic climax:

Agios o Atazoth! Suscipe, Satanas, munus quod tibi offerimus...

There was no wind on the high hill to snatch the chanted words away, and the naked dancers twirled faster and faster around the altar under the moonlit sky of night, frenzied from their dance and by the insistent beat of the tabors.

The two red-robed cantors sang their Satanic chant to its end while, nearby, Tanith the Mistress, as the elder prophetess, uttered words for her Grand Master to hear: "From the Circle of Arcadia he shall come bearing the gift of his youth as sacrifice and key to open the Gate to our gods..."

Swiftly then to the ground the circling dancers fell almost exhausted: ruddied by Bacchus the Great and the force of the dance as, around the altar on which Tanith writhed, the orgy of lust began...

I

The room was dark, although the candles on the altar had been lit, and Conrad could dimly see the witches preparing for the ritual. Their High Priestess wore a scarlet robe and came toward him, her bare feet avoiding the circle painted on the floor and the bowls of incense which not only filled the room with a sweet smelling perfume but also added to its darkness.

"Please", she said to him, pressing his hand with hers before re-arranging her long hair so it fell around her shoulders, "do try and relax."

Then she was moving around the room, dispensing final directions to the members of her coven. It all seemed rather boring and devoid of real magick to Conrad and he began to regret his acceptance. He felt uncomfortable dressed in a suit while the other wore robes.

"Nigel!" he heard the Priestess shout, please do not place our book on the floor!" She retrieved her copy of the Book of Shadows and placed it on the altar before ringing the small altar bell. "Let us begin." she said.

She stood in the centre of the circle, the four men and two women around her, raising her hands dramatically before intoning her chant.

"Darksome night and shining moon, harken to our Wiccan rune. East then South then West then North, harken to our calling forth..."

She was twirling round, and beneath her thin robe, Conrad could see her breasts. He found her sexually alluring, and followed her movements intently. Perhaps, he thought, it would not be so boring after all... suddenly, the candles flickered and spluttered. There was no breeze as cause and the sudden darkness was unexpected. Conrad could sense the High Priestess near him but his groping hand could not find her body.

"What is it?" he heard a nervous male voice ask.

The incense became thicker, and several of the coven coughed.

"There is nothing wrong - really!" came the confident voice of the Priestess. "Nigel - do light the candles again."

Nobody moved. A light appeared above the altar, red and circular. It began to pulse before moving up to swoop down and burn one of the coven. The victim fell screaming to the ground while the light moved to rest above Conrad's head, suffusing him with its glow.

He could see the High Priestess frantically making passes in the air with her hands and mumbling "Avante Satan!" as she did so. But her words and gestures had no effect on him, for she was only an ineffectual Priestess of the Right Hand Path while he knew in that moment he was chosen.

Then the pulsing light was gone, and the candles once more lit the room.

"The lights! Will someone turn on the lights!" Her voice was strained, and Conrad smiled.

The coven gathered behind her in their protective circle as if for comfort. "Go, please go," she asked him. "You are no longer welcome here. I sense evil."

"Yes," Conrad replied, "I will go. But I will return." He stepped toward her and kissed her lips but she drew away. "You are very beautiful," he said, "and are wasted here."

The coldness outside the house refreshed him so that he remembered he had forgotten his coat and that a number 65C bus would take him back to his University. The sodium lit streets seemed to possess an eerie beauty in the darkness of winter and he walked slowly along them, his sense of the power he had felt was a vague yet disturbing unease.

A bus disgorged him near the campus and he wandered along the concrete paths that entwined the University without noticing the man following him. He recalled Neil's challenge to his skepticism about witchcraft and magick, the invitation his friend had quickly arranged to the coven meeting and his own laughter. It would be interesting, he had thought, and he would watch with scientific detachment while the simple souls indulged their sexual fantasies under cover of the Occult.

Several times he stopped as he remembered the sensual beauty of the High Priestess, the rich fragrance of the incense, his kiss, and several times he turned around, intent on returning to her house. But the power, the arrogant assurance, he had felt in her house as the strange light

suffused him with its glow was gone, and he was only a first year Undergraduate studying science, awkward and shy with women.

Instead, he walked to the house near the campus which Neil shared with some other students. Neil was pleased to see him. They sat in his room while in the house loud music played.

"You're back early," Neil said, and smiled.

Conrad wasted no time on trivialities. "I want you to tell me about magick."

"You're seriously interested, then?"

Conrad thought of the High Priestess, her voluptuous body, and said, "Yes!"

"Well, as you know, I have some little interest in, and knowledge of, the subject."

"So - the aim of the sorcerer is to control those forces or powers which are Occult or hidden from our everyday perception?"

Neil seemed surprised. "Yes, exactly. Have you been reading up on the subject?"

"No."

"Then how - "

Conrad shrugged his shoulders. "It was an obvious and logical deduction."

Neil smiled. His own background was artistic, his home the city and port from which the University derived its name, and he had met the gaunt-faced Conrad a month before while distributing leaflets on campus. Conrad had read the proffered document and, in the discussion that followed, demolished its content logically and effectively. The earnest young man, dressed in a suit in contrast to the casual clothes of all the other students, had impressed him.

"Basically," Neil said, "magick symbolizes the various forces, sometimes in terms of gods, goddesses or demons, and sometimes in purely symbolic forms. Knowledge of such symbolism forms the basis of controlling them - according to the desire or will of the sorcerer."

"I see."

"Of course, some people believe such entities - gods, demons and so on - exist in reality, external to us. Others believe such forms are really only part of our sub-conscious and our unconscious. In practical terms, it does not matter which: the means of gaining control are essentially the same."

"So, where is all this symbolism?" He pointed at the rows of books in the room.

Neil handed him one. "That gives the essentials of ceremonial magick. It is based on what most Occultists believe is the Western tradition of magick."

Conrad glanced through the book. "Which is?"

"The Qabalistic. The Occult world and the forces within it are represented by what is called the Tree of Life which consists of ten stages or sephira. Each sephira corresponds to certain things in the world - human, divine, and of course demonic."

Conrad looked directly at him. "Most Occultists, you say? Then what do you believe?"

Neil was not surprised by Conrad's insight. "There is another tradition - a secret one."

"Which is?"

"It has many names."

"I'm sure. Are you going to tell me or not?"

"I have only heard of it second-hand so to speak. It is a sinister tradition - some would say Satanic. It is based on a division of seven as against the qabalistic ten. Hence one of it's names - the septenary system."

"And you have details of this system?"

"I know some people who know a group who use it."

"And through such a magickal system one could obtain one's desire?"

"It is possible, yes."

"Then when can I meet them - these Black Magickians?"

II

"So you are the Black Magickian I have heard so much about?" Conrad gave the man a disdainful look before sitting in the proffered chair.

The room, like them, was not impressive. Dreary paintings hung from drab walls and a human skull lay atop a pile of paperback books containing horror stories.

"Some call me a Black Magickian." The man was dressed in black and wore a medallion around his neck bearing the symbol of the inverted pentagram. "Your friend Mr. Stanford informed me of your interest in the Black Arts. There are rumours about you."

"Is that so?"

"Why have you come here?" the man asked.

"You hold certain meetings."

"Possibly."

"Meetings which attract a good many people."

"Sometimes."

"One of which will be held here, tonight."

"For a neophyte you are exceptionally well informed."

Conrad smiled it had taken Neil only a week to arrange the meeting, and he used the time well. "I wish to attend the ritual."

"You must understand," the man said, "we have certain procedures. For those who want to become Initiates. A testing period."

"Quite so. But you would not have agreed to see me this evening at this hour if it was not your intention to allow me to attend."

As if to reflect on his answer, the man lit a small cigar, allowing its smoke to billow round him. "You may attend the first part of the ritual. The second is, I'm afraid, for Initiates only. And then, afterwards, should you wish, we shall talk further about the matter." He stood up. "Come, you must meet some of our members."

He was led into a back-room of the spacious house. The windows were covered with long black drapes and the walls were painted red. A large wooden table, covered with a black cloth, served as the altar upon which were lighted black candles, a sword, several daggers, silver cups and chalices. In one corner of the room stood an almost life-size statue of a naked woman in an indecent posture, reminding him of a Sheila-na-gig. Around the altar the members had gathered in black robes, but they did not speak to him and he was left to stand in his suit by the door while the magickian walked toward the altar. He took up the sword, struck it against the dagger, saying 'Hail Satan, Prince of Darkness!'

The congregation echoed his words, raising their arms dramatically while he removed the robe from a young woman before helping her to lie naked on the altar. She was smiling as she lay, her taut conical breasts rising and falling in rhythm with her breathing and Conrad watched her intently.

One by one the congregation came forwards to kiss her lips.

The magickian kissed her last, turning to face his congregation saying. "I will go down to the altars in Hell."

They responded. "To Satan, the giver of ecstasy."

"Let us praise our Prince."

"Our Father which wert in heaven, hallowed be thy name, in heaven as it is here on Earth. Give us this day our ecstasy and desires and deliver us to evil as well as temptation for we are your kingdom for aeons and aeons!"

The magickian inscribed in the air with his left forefinger the sign of the inverted pentagram, before saying, "May Satan be with you."

"As he is with you."

"Let us affirm our faith."

In union, they pronounced their Satanic creed. "I believe in one Prince, Satan, who reigns over this Earth and in one Law, Chaos, which triumphs over all. And I believe in one Temple, our Temple to Satan, and in one Word which triumphs over all: the Word of Ecstasy! And I believe in the Law of this Aeon which is Sacrifice, and in the letting of blood for which I shed no tears. Since I give praise to my Prince the fire-giver and provider as I look forward to his reign and the pleasures to come in this life!"

The congregation continued their litanies in a similar vein while the magickian made passes in the air with his hands over the body of the woman upon the altar. He was chanting something, but Conrad could not hear what it was, and he watched as the magickian raised a chalice over the woman, deliberately spilling some of the wine it contained over her body. He showed the chalice to the congregation before placing it between the woman's thighs. Then one of the congregation came forward to stand by the altar and chant.

"I who am mother of harlots and queen of the Earth: whose name is written by the agony of the falsifier Yeshua upon the cross, I am come to pay homage to thee!" She kissed the woman upon the altar.

Then there was something in her hand which Conrad could not see, but she too made passes with her hands over the naked woman, chanting while she did so. She held up to the congregation what Conrad assumed to be a host.

"Behold," she said, "the dirt of the Earth which the humble shall eat!"

She laughed, the congregation laughed, and then she threw the host, and others which she held, at the congregation who trampled them under their feet. "Give me," she said to the woman upon the altar, "your body and your blood which I shall give to him as a gift to our Prince!"

The magickian was beside her as the woman on the altar raised her legs into the air. But two of the congregation ushered Conrad from the room. Outside a woman waited.

"I am called Tanith - at least here!"

Conrad stared at her. Her grey hair was cut short, accentuating her features and her clothes were a stunning blend of indigo and violet. There was beauty in her mature features and a sexuality evident in her eyes. "I'm sorry?" Conrad said.

"Come, let us talk."

She led him to a comfortable room where a warming fire had been lit, deliberately sitting close to him.

"Your impressions of the ritual," she asked directly.

He had recovered sufficient to say, "Too much pomp and not enough circumstance."

"Humour, as well. A most pleasing combination! What is it that you seek?"

"Knowledge."

"Like Faust? Do you also wish to sell your soul to the Devil?"

"I do not believe there is a soul or a Devil to sell it to."

"And what you have seen, here tonight? Is it what you are seeking?"

He had felt there was no real magickal power in the ritual, no mystery to enthrall, nothing numinous to attract him. There had been only the trappings of sex and what had seemed almost a boredom in the satanic invocations, and he had begun to realize as he watched and waited that he wanted something more than sex. He desired a return of the power he had felt a week ago at the beginning of the wiccan rite. The satanic ritual had disappointed him - but Tanith intrigued him.

"I must admit," he said, "I was disappointed."

"But I interest you."

"I - "

"Why be embarrassed? It is a perfectly natural feeling." She smiled, and moistened her lips with her tongue. "But first to other matters. I could introduce you to a Master who could instruct you. For you, like everyone need to learn. Are you prepared to learn?"

"From someone I can respect."

"Unlike our friend Sanders tonight."

"Yes - unlike him." It was Conrad's turn to smile. Tanith's perfume seemed exotic to him, and he found it difficult to avoid looking at her breasts, partly exposed by the folds of her unusual clothes. "So this evening's entertainment was just a charade?"

"How acute of you! And such hidden talents. But not a charade, exactly."

"An inducement?"

"For some: those lacking your talents." She leant toward him. "Tomorrow, you shall meet the person you are seeking. There will be a price to pay, though."

Conrad was dismayed. "I have no money."

"I was not thinking of money."

"What then?"

"Such innocence!" She leant closer, so close he could feel her breath upon his face and see the fine lines around her eyes. Then she was kissing him. He was so surprised he moved away.

Suddenly, she understood. "You've never done this before, have you?" She touched his face gently with her hand. "Well, I'd better make it memorable then."

Outside, in the darkness, it had begun to snow.

III

Conrad lay in his bed a long time. Dawn was breaking, but he possessed no desire to rise quickly and run, as had been his habit for years, five or more miles before his breakfast whatever the weather. Neither did the prospect of lectures excite him any more. Instead, he felt languid and satiated. Tanith had taken him to a bedroom in the house wherein their passion had flowed to ebb slowly in the hours after midnight. Her departure was sudden, the house empty, and he was left to walk back to his own college room through the snow-covered streets of the city, happy and pleased with himself.

He was still thinking about Tanith when someone knocked on the door of his room. He dressed hastily.

"Conrad Robury?" asked the tall well-dressed man.

Conrad was suspicious, for the man kept nervously glancing around. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm Fitten. Paul Fitten. You are in danger. Grave danger!" He gestured toward the briefcase in his hand. "It's all in here. If only you will listen. Please, I must talk with you."

"About what?"

"Those Satanists! They want to make you their offer! You are in danger! I do not have much time. Look," and he opened the briefcase, "study these books, please. Take them."

Reluctantly, Conrad took them.

"They are after me," Fitten said, glancing around. "They want to stop me, you see. Read the books, it is all in there. I shall call again. But they are coming - I sense them coming near. I must go now! Here, my address." He gave Conrad a printed card. "We must talk soon."

Fitten rushed along the corridor and down the stairs.

Alone again, Conrad sat at his desk to study the books, curious about them. The first book was entitled 'Falcifer - The Curse of Our Age' and was printed on shoddy paper in a small and unusual typeface. The title page bore no details of the publisher only the words 'Benares, Year of Our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Twenty Three' and the author's name, R. Mehta.

'Falcifer,' the book began, 'is the name they have chosen. Working in secret, even now they are planning his coming. He is the spawn of Chaos, the leader of those dark gods which even Satan himself fears. For centuries his secret disciples have deceived us and are deceiving us still, for he is not the Beast...'

"Darling," Conrad heard a voice behind him say, "are you ready?"

Tanith came forward and kissed him. "Come, leave your books - I have need of you."

The invitation pleased Conrad, and he forgot about the books, Fitten and everything else. Only Tanith was real, and he surrendered himself to his passion. Afterwards, she dressed herself quickly saying, "We must go. The Master is waiting."

"Of course."

She touched the three books Fitten had bought and, one after the other, they disintegrated into dust.

"The books! - " Conrad began.

"They are not important. We must go now." She threw him his clothes.

He walked beside her, surprised but pleased when a chauffeur ushered them into the luxury of the waiting car. Several students turned to look, and Conrad was secretly proud.

The car took them from the city and along country roads to the tree-lined and long driveway of an impressive house. A fierce looking and very tall man with the build of a wrestler opened the car door, and Conrad followed Tanith up the steps of the house and into the hall. He was led through doors and elegantly furnished passageways to a verandah where a man sat reading.

"Welcome," the man said, and indicated the chair beside him. "Welcome Conrad Robury. You are most welcome in my house."

Tanith shut the door to leave them in the cold outside air.

"Come, sit beside me," the man said

His beard was neatly trimmed, his dark clothes thin and seemingly unsuitable to the weather. His voice had a musical quality with a veiled accent that Conrad could not identify, but it was his eyes which impressed Conrad most.

"You wish to learn?"

"Yes," Conrad replied, shivering from the cold, although he tried not to show it.

The man smiled. "I am called Aris - at least here! Tell me, Conrad, is it a return of the feeling which you felt after a certain - how shall we say? - well-endowed lady began her wiccan ritual?"

Conrad was amazed at the man's knowledge of his inner feelings.

"Perhaps," Aris continued, "you are beginning to understand that it was not chance that brought you here. Perhaps, also, you are beginning to realize that you may have found what - or should I say whom - you are seeking. Do you, then, wish to learn from me the Art whose secrets you believe I know?"

"Yes."

"And you wish Initiation?"

"Yes I do."

"You have a special Destiny to fulfill - and I shall guide you toward the fulfillment of that Destiny. Are you then prepared to accept whatever conditions I may make?"

"Yes."

"You appear unsure - which is good. It is only fitting that you are apprehensive. Our path is difficult and is only for those who dare. The ritual of your Initiation will take place soon, and afterwards you will begin to study our way. but you should understand that, as from yesterday, your experiences are formative and part of your quest - it is for you to understand them."

It had begun to snow again, and Conrad was shivering from the cold despite the elation he felt at being accepted. There was a knock on the door that led to the verandah, and Aris the Master smiled.

"Enter!" he said.

Tanith entered and Aris rose to greet her with a kiss. "You have met my wife, of course." he said to Conrad.

"Your wife?" Conrad said as he also stood, suddenly warmed by the shock.

"Yes, darling!" Tanith said, and kissed Conrad's face.

Conrad was perplexed but the Master said, "See, how profitably you have spent the last twelve hours. Already you are beginning to learn. You see, I know what has occurred between you and Tanith." He laughed. "There are no Nazarene ethics here!"

"In fact," Tanith added, "no ethics at all!"

"Come, Conrad, I have a present for you: a gift of your Initiation."

It was a somewhat dazed Conrad who followed Aris to another room. On a couch, a dwarf with a pugnacious face was apparently asleep.

"Conrad Robury, meet Mador your guide."

At the sound of his name, Mador sprang up, did a somersault and landed near Conrad where he gave a mock bow.

"Charmed, I'm sure!" he said.

"A word of warning - he is a fool," Aris said.

"Bah!" Mador replied. "Ignore him - he's a liar!"

"Show Conrad the house," Aris said.

"Yes, Master," replied Mador, bowing and winking at Conrad.

Aris left them alone. "You are Conrad," Mador said. "Well, I shall call you - Professor! Come!"

The passage that led away from the room was long, adorned with oil paintings and antique furniture. He was shown a small laboratory, the library, the many bedrooms on the floor above, each decorated and furnished differently. Some seemed luxurious, others austere and a few quite bizarre with walls like trapezoids and no windows. The gardens around the house were large with well-tended lawns and Mador pointed to the dense wood that formed their boundary at the rear.

"Not at night," he said breaking the silence between them and shaking his head, "not alone."

"Why not?"

Mador ignored the question. "The cellars! I forgot the cellars!" And he hit himself on the head.

The door to the cellars was locked, and Mador kicked it in anger.

"What does Aris do?" Conrad asked.

"The Master? Do?" replied Mador perplexed. "Why, he is a Magickian!" he cupped his hand to his ear, listening. "Come Professor. It is time. Yes, it is time!"

"For what?"

"For the Professor. She is calling me."

Mador led him to a dining room. "She waits," he said indicating the door, and left him. Tanith was in the room, seated at the table where only two places were laid.

"Sit, here beside me," she said to him.

"Won't your husband be joining us?"

"The Master? Why, no!" She rang the silver hand bell.

A maid came to serve the hors d'oeuvre. Conrad thought her very pretty, but she refused to look at him.

"Did you enjoy your tour?" Tanith asked him as she elegantly devoured her melon.

"Yes - and no."

"Why no?"

"I was still thinking - about you and me and your husband."

"We are different, as you are learning."

"So he does not mind?"

She smiled. "What do you think?"

"I think I'm beginning to understand."

"Excellent! You will be staying here, with us, of course for the next week, few weeks or whatever."

"I had not thought about it. My studies - "

"They are more important to you than the goal you seek? Than the pleasure you find with me?"

"Of course not."

"Whatever belongings you wish to have around you will of course be brought here from your present lodgings."

"And if I didn't want to stay?"

"You are free to go any time." She rang the bell, waiting until the maid completed her duties before speaking again. "However, should you leave - there can be no returning."

"I see."

For some time they ate in silence. "How long might my stay be?" he finally asked.

"However long it takes."

"A test of my desire for Initiation?"

Tanith smiled. "Possibly. Do try the wine, an excellent year. Or so I am told."

"I don't drink alcoholic substances."

"Really? How extraordinary!" She drank from her own glass. "Judging by last night and this morning you do not seem like a Buddhist to me."

"It be-clouds the senses?"

"Buddhism?"

"No - wine and other such beverages."

"Or relaxes them!" She raised her own glass. "To Bacchus the Great!" The glass was soon empty. "I suppose," she said lasciviously, "the cultivation by you of one vice at a time is sufficient - for the moment!"

Conrad sighed. He felt he was being manipulated to some extent; but he also felt he did not care. His memory of his passion with Tanith was strong.

"Can I see you tonight?" he asked. "I mean - "

"I know what you mean," she said softly. "I'm sure it can be arranged. Such youthful vigour!" She closed her eyes. "To paraphrase a certain French author - 'The pleasures of vice must not be restrained.'" She rang the bell again. "You will have a rather full afternoon and evening, I understand."

"Doing what?"

"Oh, various things. You have not eaten very much."

"Bit excited, I suppose."

"Coffee?"

"Yes, please."

The maid returned to whisper into Tanith's ear. "Come," Tanith said to him.

By the outside door in the hall, the wrestler stood holding a man by the arms. Conrad recognized him. It was Fitten.

"Alright, Gedor," Tanith said.

The wrestler nodded his head and released Fitten.

"You must get away!" Fitten shouted at Conrad. "They are cursed! They want you as their - "

Tanith gestured with her hand and Gedor's fist knocked Fitten over, bloodying his face. Conrad saw Tanith smile.

"Escort him away," she said to Gedor, "and lock the gates."

She closed the door. "Fitten will not bother us again."

"You know him then?" Conrad asked, surprised.

"Yes, we know him. He calls himself a White Magickian. Runs a group of sorts in the city. You are in demand, it seems."

"Must be my natural charm!"

She did not respond. Instead her eyes betrayed no emotion.

"The Master awaits you. In the library. Go now." She turned and walked away.

In the library Conrad could see no one. The room was dim, and he was about to open one of the shutters that had been closed over the windows when he heard a voice behind him.

"Be seated," it said.

He saw no one, but sat at the table. Behind him he heard footsteps.

"Do not look round," the voice like that of the Master said.

"Your Initiation will be tonight. Are you prepared?"

He was not, but did not want to say so. "Yes," he lied, trying to convince himself.

"After the ritual of your Initiation there will be a task for you to complete. But now you must meditate".

The sudden blow enfolded Conrad in darkness.

IV

Conrad awoke in darkness. His neck ached, and he was lying on a hard surface. On both sides he felt a cold, rough wall. The mortar between the bricks crumbles as his fingers touched it. No sounds reached him, and the steel door that sealed him in the cell would not open.

He lay for a long time, thinking about his life, Tanith, the Master and the Satanic group to which he assumed they belonged. Once and once only he felt afraid, but the fear soon passed as he remembered how Neil has spoken of the tests of Initiation. The darkness and the silence soon worked their magick upon him, and he fell asleep.

The loud click awoke him, and he rose to see the door swing slowly open, spreading a diffuse light into the cell. He waited, but no one came. Outside, stone steps led up along a narrow passageway and he climbed them slowly. The passage led to a circular room whose light was emanating from a sphere upon a plinth in the centre and, as he stood watching the light pulse in intensity and change slightly in colour, he felt the room begin to turn. Was he being deceived - or was the room really turning? He could hear a distant, sombre chant and smell a rich incense, and was surprised when the movement stopped and what he thought had been a wall part to reveal a large chamber below.

Steps led down to where black robed figures stood around a stone altar. The Master was there, and Tanith, clothed in white, and she gestured to him. Somewhere, drums beat and cantors sang a mesmeric chant in a language unknown to Conrad. Tanith was smiling, and he walked down and toward her.

"You," Aris the Master said to him in a voice that was almost chanting, "have come here, nameless, to receive that Initiation given to all who desire the greatness of gods!"

Two figures whose faces were hidden by the hoods of their robes came forward to hold Conrad and roughly strip him until he was naked.

"You have come," Aris was saying, "to seal with an oath your allegiance to me, your Mistress here, and all the members of this our Satanic Temple."

Tanith came toward him, and kissed him on the lips. "I greet you," she said, "in the name of our Prince! Let the Dark Gods and His legions witness this rite!" She turned to the congregation. "Dance, I command you!! And with the beating of your feet raise the legions of our lord!"

The Master was chanting something, but Conrad could not understand it.

"Drink!" Tanith said to Conrad, offering him a silver chalice.

He did, draining the wine until the chalice was empty.

"Gather round, my children," Tanith said, and the congregation obeyed to enclose Conrad in their circle, "and feel the flesh of our gift!"

They came towards him, smiling, and ran their hands over his flesh. Conrad was embarrassed, but tried not to show it. One of the congregation was a young woman and she stood for what seemed a long time in front of him so he could see her face enclosed within the hood of her robe. He thought her beautiful, and she ran her hands over his shoulders, chest and thighs before caressing his penis, smiling as he became erect. Then she was gone, enclosed again within the circle of dancers and he found himself held by strong hands and blindfolded.

He could hear Tanith's voice, the chant, and the dancers as they moved around him.

"We rejoice," Tanith was saying, "that another one comes to seed us with his blood and his gifts. We, kin of Chaos, welcome you the nameless. You are the riddle and I an answer and a beginning of your quest. For in the beginning was sacrifice. We have words to bind you through all time to us for in your beginnings, we were. Before you - we have been. After you - we will be. Before us - They who are never named. After us - They will still be. And you, through this rite, shall be of us, bound, as we are bound by Them. We the fair who garb ourselves in black through Them possess this rock we call this Earth."

Then the Master was before him. "Do you accept the law as decreed by us?"

"Yes, I do," Conrad answered.

"Do you bind yourself, with word and deed and thoughts to us the seed of Satan without fear or dread?"

"Yes"

"Then understand that the breaking of your word is the beginning of our wrath! See him! Hear him! Know him!"

The dancers stopped, and gathered again round Conrad to briefly touch him.

"So you," the Master said "renounce the Nazarene, Yeshua, the great deceiver, and all his works?"

"Yes, I do."

"Say it!"

"I renounce the Nazarene, Yeshua, the great deceiver and all his works!"

"Do you affirm Satan?"

"I do affirm Satan."

"Satan - whose word is Chaos?"

"Satan - whose word is Chaos!"

"Then break this symbol which we detest!"

A wooden cross was thrust into his hands, and he broke it before throwing the pieces to the ground.

"Now receive," the Master continued, "as a symbol of your faith and a sign of your oath this sigil of Satan."

Tanith gave the Master a small phial of aromatic oil, and with the oil Aris traced the sign of the inverted pentagram on Conrad's forehead, chanting 'Agnos o Satanas!' as he did so. Aris held Conrad's arm while with a sharp knife Tanith cut Conrad's thumb, drawing blood which she spread over her forefinger to draw the sigil of the Temple over his hear.

"By the powers we as Master and Mistress wield, these signs shall always be a part of you: an auric symbol to mark you as a disciple of our Prince!"

"Now you must be taught," he heard Tanith's voice say, "the wisdom of our way!"

Two of the congregation came forward and forced him to kneel in front of her.

"See," she said, laughing, "all you gather now in my Temple: here is he who thought he knew our secret - he who secretly admired himself for his cunning! See how our strength overcomes him!"

The congregation laughed, and he felt his hands being bound behind his back. For a second he felt fear, but it was soon gone, replaced by anger and he tried to wriggle free from his bonds.

"A spirited one, this!" he heard Tanith's voice mock. "Listen!" she said to him. "Listen and learn! Keep your silence and be still!"

Conrad strained to hear. There was a rustling, a sound which might have been made by bare feet walking over stone, the chant ending, and then finally silence. He lay still even when he heard someone approaching him as he lay on the floor of the Temple. He felt a warm hand softly touching his skin, felt a woman's naked softness next to him and smelt a beautiful perfume. He did not resist when soft arms moved him to lie beside her, and he began to respond to her kisses and touch.

"Receive from me," the woman whispered, "the gift of your initiation."

Bound and still blindfolded, he surrendered himself to the physical passion she aroused and controlled, and his climax of ecstasy did not take long to reach. When it was over, she removed the cord which bound his hands and then his blindfolded. Conrad recognized the young woman who had caressed him earlier. On the altar lay a black robe and she gave it to him before ringing the Temple bell.

The sound was signal for the congregation to return, and each member greeted Conrad, their new Initiate, with a kiss. Chalice of wine were handed round and he was given one. He sipped it while around him an orgy began.

"Come," Tanith said to him, "we have other duties."

She led him out of the chamber, through a passage and up well-worn stone stairs to a wooden door. The door was a concealed one and led into a hut. Outside, it was night, but the snow-scattered light illuminated the woods, and he followed Tanith through the snow, shivering from the cold. She did not speak, and he did not, and it seemed to him a long walk back to the house. Inside, it was warm and smelt vaguely of incense.

"Rest now," Tanith said, and kissed him.

He held her and caressed her breasts.

"I have to go," she said without smiling. "Gedor will show you to your room."

Conrad was surprised when out of the shadows Gedor stepped forward, grim-faced.

The room he was led to was unfurnished except for a bed, but it was warm and Conrad soon settled himself under the duvet to read the book that lay upon the pillow. 'The Black Book of Satan' the title read.

The first chapter was called 'What is Satanism' and he was reading it when he heard strange, almost unearthly, sounds outside. He drew back the curtains and to his surprise found they concealed not a window but an oil painting. It was a portrait of a young man dressed in medieval clothes and he stared at it for some time before realizing it was a portrait of himself. It bore a signature he could not read, and a date which he could: MDCXLII. "1642" he said to

himself. The colours of the painting seemed dulled a little with age, the canvas itself cracked as if to confirm the antiquity of the portrait.

The strange sounds had stopped, and were replaced by loud laughter outside the door. He went to it, but it was locked.

V

Baynes was a quiet, almost shy man in his late forties. His handsome features, his neatly trimmed bear - black with streaks of grey - his wealth and the soft, mellow tones of his voice made him attractive to many women. He was well aware of this, and made efforts to avoid being left alone with them. A bachelor, his only interest outside his work was the Occult and he had acquired the reputation of regarding women as distant objects of chivalry. His abstemiousness in this matter gave rise to rumours that he was a homosexual but he did nothing to dispel them except explain when pressed on the matter by some of his friends in the Occult and magickal groups he frequented that he regarded women as a hindrance in the attainment of the highest grades of Initiation.

Dressed in an expensive suit, he sat in the lounge of one of his comfortable city houses listening to Fitten talk about the group of Satanists. It was after midnight, and uncharacteristically he was becoming bored. Several members from his own Temple of Isis sat around him in the subdued light, and some of them were trying to resist the temptation of sleep. Fitten had been talking, in his own disjointed way, for nearly an hour, explaining his theory about the origins of the Satanist group.

"It is an old tradition," Fitten was saying, "a very old tradition. A racial memory, perhaps, of beings who once long ago came to this Earth. For we have been deceived. They are not of the Beast, not of those Others about whom one writer has written, decades ago. We need to understand this, you see: need to finally understand the truth. We have been deceived about them."

Fitten paused to wipe sweat from his forehead with his coloured handkerchief and Baynes took the opportunity to interject.

"I have taken the liberty," he said, "of contacting a colleague of mine in London who is well-known as a leading authority on Satanism and he has agreed to come and talk to us. The Satanist group to which the gentleman to whom Mr. Fitten referred to belongs - "

"Conrad Robury," interrupted Fitten.

"The group to which Mr. Robury now, apparently belongs," continued Baynes, "has interested us for some time. Since the murder of Maria Torrens, in fact. You will all, no doubt, recall the brutal facts of that case."

He could see his audience now paying attention.

"As you will remember, her naked and mutilated body was found on the Moors, her head resting on what the Police assumed to be a Black Magick altar. An inverted pentagram had

been cut on her skin by a sharp knife - a surgical scalpel, I was told. Discreetly of course, I was asked for my opinion.

"At first I and the Police investigating the matter were of the opinion that the killing was a motiveless one with no genuine Occult connections, the murderer or murderers providing the 'Occult' evidence to confuse. For, as you will recall, some rather scurrilous newspapers ascertained and published details regarding the lady's rather unfortunate background. She was a 'Lady of the Night' - "

"A prostitute," someone said, and giggled.

Baynes ignored the remark. " - who frequented the area around this city's dockland. She was last seen apparently accepting a lift in a vehicle driven by an attractive middle- aged lady. Shortly after the newspapers published their story, the Police received an anonymous call, naming a suspect. The man was quickly traced, and interviewed and then arrested when he confessed to the crime. He himself had a rather dubious reputation, and said that he had driven Miss Torrens to the scene of the crime and persuaded her to adorn herself in an Occult manner. Apparently, he had been to the motion-pictures and seen some scenes in a film.

"He later retracted this confession and claimed to have been forced to give it by a man whom he continually referred to as 'The Master' whom he claimed had himself committed the brutal murder. He further alleged that this 'Master' was the leader of a group of Satanist's here, in this city and had killed Miss Torrens during a ritual for his own diabolic ends. He made a statement to the Police to this effect, but shortly afterwards began acting rather strangely, and withdrew that statement. During subsequent weeks before his trial he made several other statements, each more ludicrous than the other - for instance, one referred to beings from another planet landing in a 'space-ship', abducting him and Maria.

"It was at the trial, you may well remember, that the Prosecution proved by the testimony of a very respectable witness that Maria and the defendant had been seen together on the Moor only a few hours before her death. The defendant was sentenced to life imprisonment, and was found, some weeks later, hanged in his prison cell. After the trial, I began my own quiet investigation into Satanist groups in this area - and subsequently uncovered one organized by a certain gentleman whom his followers call 'The Master'. This group uses and has used several different names, and has Temples in various other cities. Among its names are 'The Temple of Satan', 'The Noctulians' and 'Friends of Lucifer'."

Fitten was slumped in a chair, apparently asleep, and Baynes smiled at him, in his gentle was, before continuing. "The group is very selective regarding members, and tests all the candidates for Initiation. These tests are sometimes quite severe and sometimes involve the candidate undertaking criminal acts - this of course serving to bind the candidate to the group as well as giving the group evidence to blackmail the candidate with should he or she later prove uncooperative. Unlike most so-called Satanist and Black Magick groups which are usually only a cover for one or more persons criminal or sexual activities, this particular group does work genuine magick, and seems to possess quite an advanced understanding of the subject. Apparently, they follow their own sinister magickal tradition based on the septenary system - or Hebdomadry as it is called.

"Since the Maria Torrens case we, acting with a number of other 'Right Hand Path' groups in this and other areas, have tried to infiltrate this Satanist group, always without success. Until recently, that is."

Smiling, he waited for the exclamations of surprise to subside before he continued. "This member - whom I shall for obvious reasons call only Frater Achad - has given us valuable information, and he is shortly to be initiated into the sect. What we are hoping is that he can provide us with details regarding members, their magickal workings as well as information regarding their activities which we can pass onto the Police. As I have said, some of their activities verge on the criminal kind of which we are at present unaware, and of course there is always the possibility that Frater Achad can provide us with evidence regarding the Maria Torrens case.

"Naturally, I have told you this in the strictest confidence. Frater Achad is in a delicate - not to say dangerous - position."

Suddenly, Fitten was on his feet, pointing at Baynes. "We must act now! Don't you understand?" He turned and faced the other people present. "Don't any of you understand? We cannot afford to wait! We must act now to destroy them! Soon, their power will grow - so great we, and others, can do nothing. Listen! They will do a ritual to open the gate to the Abyss. An offer - they need an offer to do this, and offering of human blood. Do you want another death on your hands? Once the Gate is opened they will possess the power of the Abyss itself!"

"Mr. Fitten," Baynes said gently, "I - we all - share your concern about them. But we must plan and act carefully in this matter."

"I shall show you!" Fitten shouted. "I shall stop them! Me! Because I know their secrets! I don't need any of you!"

No one followed him as he left the room and the house.

"Our brother," Baynes said, "needs our help. Let us meditate for a while and send him healing and helpful vibrations."

As they closed their eyes to begin, laughter invaded the room. All present heard it, but no one could see its source. But it was soon gone, and Baynes and his followers of the white path of magick soon resumed their own form of meditation, praying to and invoking their one or many gods according to the many and varied beliefs. The laughter was only one incident and did not undermine their security of faith.

Outside, in the cold and above the snow which covered the ground deeply, an owl screeched in the darkness and silence of the large ornamental garden. The cry startled them more than the demonic laughter.

The voice awoke Conrad, and he roused himself from his troubled sleep to see Mador standing beside his bed.

"Breakfast, Professor?" the dwarf asked again.

"What?"

"Breakfast?"

"What time is it?"

"Time to rise and eat!" He handed Conrad a neat pile of clothes. "Hurry! Rise and eat"

"Leave me alone," Conrad said. His dreams had been disturbing, his sleep broken, and he felt in need of rest.

"The Master sent me," Mador replied, and smiled.

Wearily, Conrad sat up in his warm bed. The room itself felt cold. "Alright. I won't be long."

"I wait for you - outside."

Conrad dressed slowly in the black clothes someone had selected for him before following Mador to the dining room. The maid was waiting, ready to serve him from the many dishes and he was not surprised when Mador left him. He was surprised when the young lady who had sexually initiated him entered the room to sit beside him.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked him, and smiled.

"Er, yes thank you," Conrad replied in his surprise.

"Do try the kippers," she said to him. "From Loch Fyne. Delicious!" she gestured toward the maid who began to serve them both.

"Do you live here?" Conrad cautiously asked her.

"You are sweet!" she chided him. "I suppose you could say that. I'm Susan, by the way."

"Conrad," he said unnecessarily and held out his hand.

She did not take it and he was left to awkwardly shuffle in his chair.

"Did you like your room?" She asked.

"Well, it was unusual."

"They all say that!"

"They?" he asked.

She ignored his question. "Has the Master explained what you will be doing today?"

"No."

"I'm sure he will want to see you - after you have eaten." She gestured toward the kipper with which the maid had served him.

"I'm not very hungry, actually."

She laughed. "You're not a vegetarian by any chance, are you?"

"No, of course not."

"After all the energy you expended last night," she smiled at him, "I would have thought you'd be ravenous!"

Conrad blushed at this reminder of the passion they as strangers had shared.

"Such innocence!" she said,

"There is a painting in my room," he said to cover his embarrassment. "Is it very old?"

"Have you read any of the book that was left in your room?"

"A little. It's very interesting."

"It's a beginning," she shrugged. "Just a beginning."

"Have you been involved with this group long?"

"That's a quaint way of putting it! 'This group!' You mean, have I been a Satanist a long time?"

The woman's self-assurance, his own discomfort at being a guest in an unusual and luxurious house, and his shyness with women all combined to make Conrad wish he was elsewhere - at his lectures, preferably, learning about the mysteries and beauties of physics. But as he sat looking at the young and quite beautiful woman beside him and as he remembered the bliss they had shared, he began to feel a confidence in himself. It was as though some of the power he had felt during the wiccan ritual over a week ago had returned.

"Yes," he said smiling at her, "how long have you been a Satanist?" He said the last word with relish, as though consciously and proudly committing a sin.

"I was brought up with it - baptised into it."

"Really?"

"Naturally, there was a time when I began to question it, and was given the freedom to do so. In fact even encouraged."

"By your parents?"

"But once you have tasted paradise on Earth, it is irresistible!"

"Why do you evade some of my questions?" Conrad asked, his confidence growing.

Her eyes seemed to him to sparkle as she answered. "Because I am a woman and like to be mysterious!"

Without quite realizing what he was doing he leant toward her and kissed her lips. She did not draw away, and out of the corner of his eye he could see the maid pretending to look out of the window at the garden. Across the room, he heard a discreet and almost gentlemanly cough.

Aris stood by the door. "If you have finished," he said almost smiling, "perhaps we can talk."

"Of course!" Conrad said, surprised.

"In the library." He turned around and left.

"Can I see you - later?" Conrad asked Susan.

"Do you really want to?" She teased.

"Yes!"

"Perhaps. You'd better not keep him waiting."

"No." He stood up, bent down to kiss her, then decided against it.

The door to the library was open, and Aris was already sitting in a chair by the desk.

"Come!" The Master said in greeting.

Conrad sat opposite trying not to appear nervous.

"The power you felt before," Aris said, "is returning to you. As you hoped it would. This is one result of your Initiation. For you must understand, Initiation into our way is similar to opening a channel, a link, to those hidden or Occult powers which form the real essence of magick."

Conrad was impressed, but Aris continues in his unemotional way. "Those powers you may use for whatever you desire. For sexual gratification, should you so wish. Such power as you feel and have felt will grow, steadily, with your own Occult and magickal development. What occurred last night is but the first of many stages in that development. Are you then prepared to go further?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

"There is a task I wish you to undertake, a task connected to your Initiation. But you must understand that you have been chosen for more than just this and such other tasks as may be necessary for your own magickal development. For remembered I have said that you have a special Destiny to fulfil. What this Destiny is, will become clear when the time is right. You are important to us, as we to you. Because of this you are more to me and my comrades in magick than a mere Initiate, a beginner in the ways of our dark gods. Remember this, Conrad Robury. I extend my hospitality to you and not just of my house, as you know, because you are more than another novice.

"Now to your task. It will, for a short while, take you away from the house."

Conrad sensed that, whatever the test was, it would partly be a test of fidelity to Aris and his Satanic group.

"You are familiar with someone called Paul Fitten," Aris said.

It was not a question, but Conrad still answered, "Yes."

"You are to go to him and persuade him that you wish to help him. Then you must endeavour to undertake a magickal ritual with him. It will be a qabalistic ritual, but never mind. During this ritual you are to redirect the power brought forth - which you must help to generate - so that it takes control of Fitten, harms him in some way. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

Aris stared at him, then smiled. "You understand part of it - yes. For you believe I aim to test your morals by asking you to harm by magickal means another individual. But there is more, as you will discover. Now, I have a gift for you - a gift of your Initiation." He placed a silver ring with an ornamental stone on the desk. "Wear it always from this day as a sign of your desire to follow our ways."

Without thinking Conrad began to place the ring on the third finger on his right hand.

"The other hand," Aris said.

Conrad obeyed. The ring was a perfect fit.

"Now, Conrad Robury, you must go to accomplish your task. Susan, as my Priestess, will go with you."

Conrad was at the door when Aris said, "Do not let them - or anyone - try to remove your ring."

VII

Susan, obviously prepared, had driven him straight to Fitten's house. It was a small house, bordering a quiet road near the edge of the city and a dog ran out toward them, barking, as they walked along the path to the door. Susan stared at the dog, and it whimpered away.

Conrad knocked loudly on the door, as a Policeman might. Fitten bore no visible scars of his ordeal at the hands of Gedor and greeted them warmly.

"Come in!" he said. "Please come in! I knew you would come! It was in the chart, you see!"

He led them into a room crowded with books and dimly lit but where a coal fire burned warmly.

"Please, be seated!" he enthused. "I have so much to tell you!"

"This is Susan," Conrad said.

"Yes, yes! How did you escape?"

"Escape?" asked Conrad.

"From the house of the Satanists? You were there, yesterday."

"Oh, them. They seemed only too anxious," lied Conrad, "to let me go after you appeared. One of them mentioned something about 'magickal attack. Perhaps they thought I would be a burden to them in that case."

"As you would, as you would my son!"

Conrad winced.

"Did you read the books I gave you?" Fitten asked.

"They destroyed them."

"Ah! They are evil, evil incarnate!"

"But who are they?"

"You do not know?" Fitten looked amazed.

"No. Should I?"

"Perhaps not. It is not important. You are here, now, that's what important."

"I wish," Conrad said and sighed, "someone would tell me what this is all about. I get invited to this party at a house, meet a right bunch of weird characters. Then you appear and are thrown out. Then one of them shows me this Temple they use. I'm a bit out of my depth, here."

"They need an offer, you see. For their Mass. Not a Black Mass - no, something far worse, something more vile and sinister. You had all the right qualities. Just what they needed. They knew that after you attended that meeting of the Circle of Arcadia. They know. They have spies - agents - infiltrators in most groups."

A slim, young woman appeared in the doorway of the room. "Would you like some tea, dear?" she asked her older husband.

"What?" said Fitten.

"Tea. Would you like some?" She innocently returned Conrad's smile.

"Why not! Why not indeed!"

She had gone when Conrad spoke. "You said they needed an offer - a sacrifice."

"I did? Quite! They needed - still need - someone young. They have a tradition, you see, of sacrificing a young man aged twenty one. But only for this important ritual. The time of this ritual is near. They will have power from it. Not just Occult power. No, real power! They channel the magickal forces, you see, into a practical form - sometimes a person, sometimes an institution, a company, or something like that. Such use of magick is real black magick, real evil! They fermented, these worshippers of the darkest of dark forces, the French Revolution - the blood spilled was a sacrifice, an offering to their strange alien gods. They brought about with their magick the Third Reich. Now they prepare again!" He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his hand.

"But why me?" Conrad asked, trying to appear serious.

"You were a key to open the gate to the powers, the dark powers of the Abyss. Their Black Magick rites would use this power! I have sent for help."

"Sent for help?"

"A Magus. The most powerful White Lodge has been alerted. They will send a Magus."

"You do not want to deal with it yourself?" Conrad asked.

"I? I have no authority! A council must be convened: all the Magister Temple must be invited."

"But if the situation is as serious as you believe," Conrad resisted the temptation to smile, "can you afford to wait. Surely you must do something yourself."

"Well," Fitten sighed, "I did a little ritual. Last night."

"And it worked. I am here."

"I am thankful to the Lord for that. They might try and get you back - or find another offer." He slumped in his chair, looking pale and tired.

Suddenly, Conrad conceived an idea. "Will you excuse me a moment," he said, "I must go to the toilet."

Fitten said nothing, and stared into the fire. Conrad left. He found Fitten's wife in the kitchen of the house.

"Making tea?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Any special kind?"

"No, just ordinary tea."

"I prefer Formosa Oolong myself." He closed the door.

"I wouldn't know!"

"There's a lovely tea shop in the city centre which serves a good selection. Perhaps you've been there?"

"No," she said and turned away from him.

"It's really lovely sitting there on a winter's evening watching people pass in the street. You must try it sometime."

"Maybe."

"You look very tired," he said, softly.

"It's been a hectic week."

"Perhaps you need a break - away from the house."

"Maybe," she said dully.

"Please don't be offended, but perhaps I could take you out to dinner one evening?"

"I'm sorry?" she said with genuine surprise.

"You looked so sad, standing there," he said with kindness in his voice.

"I'm just tired."

"Would you like to come to dinner with me one evening? I know a rather nice restaurant."

"It's very kind of you to ask," she said formally.

"I'm not being kind. It would give me great pleasure to have the company of a beautiful woman for an evening. And you are beautiful."

"I'm a married woman."

"And a beautiful one. When did you last dine out?" He could see that the question pained her although she did not answer.

"Would he really miss you for one evening?"

She looked at him briefly then lowered her eyes. He moved toward her and held her hand, gently caressing it with his fingers. She closed her eyes, and he was surprised by her reaction as he was by his own confidence. It was as though he had become another person. He bent forward to kiss her but she moved away.

"Please," she pleaded, but made no move to free her hand from his.

"Tonight," he said, "About eight o'clock?"

"I don't know."

"I'll collect you about a quarter to eight, then."

"The lady who came with you - " she asked.

"My sister?" he lied. "She wants to talk to your husband about witchcraft, I think. Can't say I find the subject of interest, myself. I'm studying Physics at the moment."

She finally withdrew her hand from his. "At the University?"

"Yes. Do you know it?"

"I went there," she said shyly.

"Really? What did you study?"

"Geology."

"I've always been fascinated by that subject. You must tell me about it - tonight."

"I didn't complete my course."

"To get married?"

"No. Well, not exactly." She turned away to complete her preparation of the tea. She gave him the tray. "Would you mind?" she asked.

"Not at all! Tonight, then?"

She smiled and held the door open for him. "We'll see!" she said.

Down the dark hallway of the house he could hear Fitten's agitated voice.

"Tea?" he said, entering the warm room.

"Mr. Fitten," Susan said, "is thinking of performing a ritual here tonight."

"Oh? Why?"

"Well," Susan continued, "I suggested it would be a good idea at this moment in time. To strike now, when they are unprepared."

"I don't know, I don't know!" said Fitten, shaking his head.

"I have explained" Susan said to Conrad, "that I myself am a Second Degree Witch, so I can assist."

Suddenly, Fitten stood up. "Yes! We must act! I feel it is right! The time is right! You are right."

"If it would help," Susan said to him, "I have something taken from the house of the Satanists." She fumbled in her handbag.

Fitten took the silver medallion inscribed with an inverted pentagram and the word 'Atazoth'.

"Atazoth. Atazoth," he mumbled. "Yes, this would be very suitable; very suitable indeed. Where did you get it?"

"Conrad found it in the house."

"Yes. I gave it to her. All this Occult stuff does not really interest me. Not any more."

"But you are," Susan asked him "prepared to partake in a ritual with us."

"Of course. As I explained to my sister," he said to Fitten, "although I don't understand all of this, I'm prepared to help. I trust her judgment."

"Good! Good!" Fitten said. "Tonight, you say?" he asked Susan.

"It would be best. You could get assistance? For I have heard you have many contacts. I would of course leave the type of ritual up to you - since you have far more knowledge and experience of ceremonial than I."

Fitten was pleased by Susan's praise. "I would have to make some telephone calls."

"Naturally. What time would you suggest?" Susan asked.

"Eight o'clock. The hour of Saturn!"

"Surely," Conrad said, "the sooner we begin the better. How about now?"

"Now? Now?" Fitten looked amazed.

"There is you, me, my sister - your wife."

"My wife?"

"Such a ritual as we need to do may be dangerous."

"But surely she has assisted you before?"

"Of course! Many times, in fact. We need more time to prepare."

"But we have the medallion," Susan suggested.

"Even so - "

"Do you intend," Susan asked, "to conjure force and send it against the Satanists?"

"Yes. Yes, I had thought in such terms. Psychic attack! I can remember the face of that evil woman!"

"What woman?" Conrad asked.

"That evil woman who was with you in their house!"

"Tanith is her name."

"I thought so! The spirits speak to me, you see. The Lord is with us!" He stared at them both as if possessed. "Yes! We will act now!" Then he was quiet again and softly spoken. "I will make a few telephone calls - perhaps some friends of mine can come at short notice."

As soon as he left the room, Susan asked, "You have a plan?"

"Indeed! It should be interesting!"

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Susan asked, smiling.

"Yes! I feel really alive! Bursting with energy!"

Fitten was not away long. "Three others!" he announced on his return. "Three have agreed to come!"

"It bodes well, then," Conrad said.

"My temple - we will wait for them in my Temple."

"Your wife will be participating?"

"Yes, she will. Come, I will show you my Temple."

The Temple was a converted bedroom. There was no altar, only a large circle inscribed on the floor around which were magical names and signs. IHVH, AHIH, ALIVN and ALH. The name Adonai was the most prominent and various Hebrew letters completed the circle's adornment, The walls of the room were grey and white, and inside the circle on the floor

stood a small table covered with a sword, several knives, candles and bowls of incense. The sword and knives were inscribed with writing the Conrad, from even his cursory study during the last week of the qabalistic ceremonial tradition, recognized as the magickal script called 'Passing the River'.

"We must meditate while we wait for the others," Fitten said as he lit several candles scattered around the floor.

"Bring good vibrations to assist us."

Following Susan, Conrad sat on the floor. He closed his eyes and imagined the room filling with demons and imps. He was almost asleep when Fitten's wife brought the remainder of the participants, two rather plump men and a woman with an unsmiling sallow face.

"Let us begin!" Fitten announced dramatically. He gave his congregation white robes and offered some to Susan and Conrad who declined. "Let us stand within the circle!" he announced.

Conrad deliberately stood next to Fitten's wife with Susan beside him. Then Fitten was pointing the tip of the sword at the painted circle on the circle on the floor.

"I exhort you," he shouted, "by the powerful and Holy names which are written around this circle, protect us!"

He put down his sword, held a piece of parchment up and then sprinkled incense over the floor. "Let the divine white brilliance descend. Before me Raphael, behind me Gabriel, at my right hand Michael, and at my left hand Auriel. For before me flames the pentagram and behind me stands our Lords six pointed star. Elohim! Elohim Gibor! Eloath Va-Daath! Adonai Tzabaoth! City of Light, open your radiance to us. We command you and your guardians, by the Holy Names - Elohim Tzabaoth! Elohim Tzabaoth! Elohim Tzabaoth! Twelve is our number."

"Twelve," repeated the others present, with the exception of Susan and Conrad.

"There are twelve," Fitten continued, "twelve signs of the Zodiac."

"Twelve signs of the Zodiac."

"Twelve labours of Hercules."

"Twelve labours of Hercules."

"Twelve disciples of our Lord!"

"Twelve disciples of our Lord."

"Twelve months in the year!"

"Twelve months in the year."

"Let us adore," Fitten chanted, "the Lord and the King of Hosts. Holy art thou Lord, thee who hast formed Nature. Holy art thou, the vast and the mighty one, Lord of Light and of the Darkness. Holy art thou, Lord! By the word of Paroketh, and by the sign of the rending of the Veil, I declare that the Portal of the Adepts is open! Hear the words! These are the words - Elohim Tzabaoth! Elohim! Tzabaoth!"

He bent down to scribble a sign on the parchment, then held it up, circling round sun-wise as he did so. "Come!" he shouted. "Come to me! To me!"

Conrad assumed the sign was of a demon, taken from the Lessor Key of Solomon.

"Behold the sign!" Fitten was saying. "Behold the Holy Name and my power! EIO! EIO! EIO! Tzabaoth! I command you! Appear! EIO! Tzabaoth!"

The candles began to dim, and Conrad could sense the anticipation of the participants. He saw Susan close her eyes. She, too, was speaking, but softly so the others might not hear. He caught the words 'Agios o Satanas' as she exhaled but heard nothing more.

Then a vague, ill-defined and almost luminescent shape appeared in the corner of the room.

"Yod He Vau Heh!" Fitten shouted.

Almost immediately, Conrad took the hand of Fitten's wife in his own. She seemed to grasp it eagerly, and he stepped back, placing his foot over the painted circle. He could feel a force pulling him, and he closed his eyes to concentrate, willing the force into Fitten's wife.

She screamed, and fell to the floor. Then was she standing, her hair disheveled, his face contorted and almost leering. She raised her hands like claws and began to walk slowly to where Fitten stood. Hurriedly, Fitten tried to burn the parchment he was holding in the flame of one of the candles, but he burnt his fingers instead. His wife was laughing and had ripped open her blouse to reveal her breasts.

Suddenly, as if realizing what had happened, Fitten stared at Conrad. He held the medallion Susan had given him over the flame of the candle and as he did so his wife stopped, her hands held motionless before her, her lips bared in a silent snarl. Susan gripped Conrad's arm, and he turned to see her face contorted in pain.

There was a demonic strength in Conrad as he saw this, and his body tensed as he willed Fitten's wife nearer and nearer to her husband. He could sense the elemental force within the room and tried to shape it by his own will to make Fitten's wife take the medallion from his hand. She touched the chain, and then the medallion, but did not scream as the heat from the candle burnt her flesh, its smell invading the darkening room. She threw it to the ground to turn to face her husband, her hands reaching up towards his bare neck.

Then, quite suddenly, she stopped. Conrad felt another force within the confines of the room. It was a powerful force, opposed to him and he watched as Fitten's aura became visible, flaming upwards in patterns of red and yellow and curling up over his head before it turned to inch closer and closer toward him. Fitten's wife turned to walk in pace with the advancing colour-changing aura toward where Conrad stood. There was something Conrad did not understand about all this as he strove to try and will the advancing force away. Two names

suddenly entered his mind. Baynes; Togbare an inner almost laughing voice said, and he was wondering what to do next when he remembered the last words of Aris his Master.

He held out his left hand to show Fitten his ring.

"The ring! We must get his ring!" one of Fitten's followers shouted.

They moved toward Conrad, slowly it seemed as if in slow motion, and as they did so Fitten's aural light was sucked into the ring. Then all magickal power in the room was gone, and he could see Fitten, his mouth open, his eyes staring, his face white. Fitten's wife had stopped again and was slowly falling to the floor.

They reached her, but she was dead.

VIII

An exhausted Conrad had slept in Susan's car on their return journey to Aris' house. The death of Fitten's wife had ended the ritual and a crazed Fitten had lunged at Conrad who had time only to raise his arms in self-defence before Susan knocked Fitten unconscious using Martial Arts techniques.

"Go, please go" one of Fitten's group had said, and they had left unmolested.

The Master was waiting for them in the hall, and he ushered Conrad into the library where a log fire had been lit.

"I gather there were certain complications," Aris said.

"Unfortunately."

"Tell me, then, what transpired - exactly as you remember it."

Conrad told his story - Fitten's wife, how he planned to use her during the ritual. The qabalistic conjuration of Fitten. His own breaking of the circle. The aura and the presence. Finally, he spoke of the ring which had drained the hostile magick away.

"Oh," concluded Conrad, "I remember two names. They just came into my mind before I was remembered about the ring."

"Are you certain it was before?"

"Yes."

"Certainly, that is interesting. And the names?"

"Baynes and Togbare."

Conrad thought he detected a look of surprise on Aris' face.

"You know them?" he asked.

"I have heard of them."

"Are they important?"

"You spoke of Fitten mentioning the White Lodge. Do you know what that means?"

"Only that it is supposed to be a group of Occultists who follow the Right Hand Path."

"It is a loose term used to describe a group of followers of that path who are dedicated to counteracting the activities of groups such as ours. Most are also followers of the Nazarene. This White Lodge fears that we will unite to use our powers against them. There are some who believe a 'Black Lodge' exists for just this purpose. Paranoia, naturally." He smiled, and the sinister nature of his appearance in that moment became evident to Conrad. "Or at least it was."

"This White Lodge," Aris continued, "tries to infiltrate Satanist groups, disrupt them, and so on. They conduct rituals for just such a purpose. The Council of this Lodge - an extremely secret organization - oversees all these activities, and its present head is a certain Frater Togbare."

"I see," quipped Conrad, nervously.

"Then perhaps you will explain what you see."

"It was not Fitten I was struggling with toward the end of the ritual but this White Lodge."

"Probably."

"But how - how did they know?"

"Through Fitten himself. You said he had claimed to be in contact with them before the ritual."

"Yes." Earnestly, he looked at Aris. "If this White Lodge is so powerful why did they allow Fitten's wife to die?"

Aris smiled. It was not a pleasing smile. "Once brought, such power has to be used, directed. It was dissipated, one could say, through the woman's death."

"They could not have saved her?"

"Yes, they could have, but they were unprepared for the ring."

"The ring?" Conrad stared at it. It looked ordinary, now in the light of the room and the fire.

"It was a link - between you and Susan."

"Susan? I'm sorry, I don't understand."

"You will."

His tone precluded, it seemed to Conrad, any further discussion of the matter. "But the woman's death," Conrad asked, "surely there will be complications? The Police - "

"Will not be involved," completed Aris. "The White Lodge - or rather the individuals composing it - are quite influential. Death by natural causes, I am sure will be the verdict."

"But surely I - I mean, what occurred during the ritual - will have started something? Fitten and the others will surely not let the matter stop there."

"What occurred was a warning to them - a prelude. There will shortly be a ritual undertaken by us in which you will figure. Recall the mention I made of your Destiny. The time for fulfillment is near . Now they know our strength and our power, as I wished!"

"So it was more than just a test for me - of my Initiation?"

"Yes! As your Initiation was more than just another Initiation. But you are tired, and in need of sustenance. Go then, and feast yourself. We will meet again, and soon."

He walked to a shelf and took down a book before opening it and beginning to read. Conrad left the library to find Susan waiting.

"Shall we eat first?" she asked him quizzically.

"I'm sorry?" he said obtusely, still suffering from his contact with Aris.

"Which appetite do you want to satisfy first?"

He smiled, and she took his hand leading him toward the stairs and her room. It was luxurious, warm and vaguely perfumed, and he was surprised by her eagerness for she had soon stripped him and herself of clothes. She was remembering the ritual, the momentary exhilaration of rendering Fitten unconscious but most of all the death they had induced as she sought through Conrad to satisfy her lust.

"I want you!" she almost pleaded and screamed, and Conrad in his inexperience believed her. But his own physical experience was growing along with his magickal-inspired confidence, and he sought, and succeeded, to prolong his own pleasure and hers. In the bliss of his satiation he fell asleep, his limbs entwined around her body, and it was in the deep of night he awoke, to find himself alone.

Thirst and hunger roused him from her bed, and he dressed to wander from the room. The house was lit but with subdued and warming light, and he walked cautiously down the stairs, hoping to find someone awake. The silence unnerved him, a little, and he stood by the open door to the dining room for some minutes before going in.

The table was laid for one. The servers' door still swayed, a little, and he was about to push it open to peer into the serving room and kitchen's beyond, when the maid opened it.

She indicated the chair, and he obediently sat at the table. Several times he tried to engage her in conversation, and each time she turned away. Her expression never changed, and twice he asked her after Susan but she continued with her duties, mute and efficient. He was served soup, a course containing fillet steak, and he was sitting shrouded in silence and replete from the food drinking his coffee alone when he saw a light in the garden through the window.

It was a torch, wavering in the distance. Vaguely, he could discern a person running. Intrigued, he extinguished the lights in the room to watch the figure weave closer toward the house. The snow was bright, and as the figure passed by, Conrad recognized Fitten. He soon had the window open.

He clambered through, surprised by the intense cold outside. Fitten must have heard him, for he turned around and shone the light from the torch into Conrad's face.

Then Fitten was screaming and running toward him. "You killed her! Devil!" he shouted.

Fitten swung the torch at Conrad's face, but Conrad parried the blow as Fitten tried to grapple. Then, they were both on the ground, rolling over and over in the snow with Fitten trying to pummel Conrad's face with his fists. Desperate, but determined, Conrad butted Fitten's head with his own. Dazed, Fitten rolled away and Conrad was about to stand and drag him to his feet when Aris and Gedor walked out of the house toward them.

"How pleasing!" Aris said. "He has arrived just in time to join our little celebration. Bring him!" he commanded Gedor, and Gedor obeyed, lifting Fitten easily.

They were returning toward the house when Aris said, "We have other unwelcome guests, I sense." He appeared to be listening to something no one else could hear, then turned to Gedor. "Release him!"

Gedor dropped Fitten into the snow. Aris bent over him, gripping his neck in his hand and saying, "He is dead already! Give him to them if they wish it!"

He released Fitten, who fell dazed. Then Aris was gone, in to the shadows of the trees beside one side of the house, and as he did so two men appeared, walking over the snow from the front of the house.

"I'm sorry to intrude," the tallest of them said to Conrad, "but we have come for him."

"What do you want?" Conrad asked aggressively.

"My name is Baynes - " the tall man said.

"Baynes?" Conrad repeated, and then remembered.

"Yes. Now, about Mr. Fitten - "

"You are not welcome here," Conrad said.

"That is no surprise to me. We have come to escort Mr. Fitten home. I am very much afraid the recent death of his wife has unsettled him."

Fitten had stood up, his head bowed and he appeared to be crying.

"Take him," Conrad said.

"Thank you Mr. Robury."

Conrad was surprised at the use of his name. "Go, now," he said. "This is private property."

"This place and that attitude," Baynes said gently, "do not suit you. If at any time you wish to come and talk with me - "

Conrad was beginning to get angry. "Push off!"

"You do not realize what is happening to you, do you?"

"Gedor - " Conrad said, gesturing toward Baynes. He was half-surprised when Gedor, obeying him, moved forward menacingly.

"We shall take our leave," Baynes said, holding Fitten's arm.

Conrad watched them go. Someone was walking toward him from the house, and he turned to see Susan.

"Our ritual will begin soon," she said. "Come, I must prepare you - for the fulfillment of your Destiny is near."

His anger had left him by the time they reached the libation chamber, beside the hidden Temple, with its sunken pool. He stood watching Susan as she stripped naked to bathe. The sight aroused him, while nearby in the Temple, he could hear that Satanic chanting had begun.

IX

Only once did Conrad think about the death of Fitten's wife - but he did not care. He had and did feel the pure exhilaration of life, the joy - the blissful ecstasy of living totally without planning and almost without thought. There was an exuberance within him which he felt he was beginning to need.

Events were happening to him, rather than being controlled by him, but he possessed a strong sense of his own importance, a strong belief that life had chosen him for something, and he drifted into the events with wonder but little fear. His life, since the light suffused him during the wiccan rite, had been enhanced. Was what he felt, he briefly thought, the ecstasy that warriors found in war and which they sought again and again? That bliss of being so near oblivion that there was a pure joy in the ordinary moments of living? Was this, he wondered, the true meaning of Satanism?

He did not know, nor particularly care, so far had magick re-made him, he followed Susan down the steps into the Temple with greedy anticipation, proud of his robe which had been

waiting for him beside the waters of libation, and proud that he had physically possessed Susan, the beautiful Satanic priestess.

Near the altar on which Tanith lay naked, a crystal tetrahedron glowed, adding to the light from the candles. The congregation were gathered round the altar and their Master stood nearby, holding up the wax effigy which had lain on Tanith's womb.

"I who delivered you in birth now name you," he said, but Conrad could not hear the name Aris pronounced and blessed with the sign of the inverted pentagram.

Susan took the effigy, and dressed it while the Master raised his arms.

"I will go down to the altars in Hell," he said.

"To Satan, the giver of life," responded the congregation.

Conrad stood within their circle, raising his voice in the Satanic prayers that followed. He knew the Satanist 'Our Father' and Creed by heart.

Aris began the chanting which followed. 'Agios o Satanas!' he sang. It was then that Conrad noticed the small coffin beside the altar, and a black shroud, ready. The chanting continued as Susan assisted Tanith from the altar before clothing her in a crimson robe.

"We" Tanith said to them all, "curse Paul Fitten."

"We curse Paul Fitten."

"He," she said, with glee, "will writhe and die."

"He will writhe and die."

"By our curse, destroyed!"

"By our curse, destroyed!"

"We shall kill him!" she laughed.

"We shall kill him!" the congregation, Susan, Aris and Conrad laughed.

In the shadows, someone beat a hand-drum, capturing the rhythm of the chant.

"We shall glory in his death!" Tanith, as Mistress of Earth, said.

"We shall glory in his death!"

Tanith made passes with her hands over the effigy, chanting as she did so, before picking it up and showing it to the worshippers gathered around her.

"The Earth rejects him," she said.

"You reject him," the responded.

"I who gave you birth, now lay you down to die!" She placed the effigy in the coffin, secured the lid, and wrapped the shroud around it.

"He is dead!" She said.

"He is dead! By our curse, destroyed!"

Slowly, Susan led the dance and the chant. "Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla teste Satan cum sibylla. Quantos tremor est futurus quando Vindex est venturus, cuncta stricte discussurus. Dies irae, dies illa!"

The chant was strange to Conrad, almost unearthly, but he quickly learnt it as he danced and chanted with the others, counter sun-wise around the altar. The dance and the chant were becoming quicker with every revolution, and he was almost glad when Susan pulled him away. She did not speak, but took him down with her to the floor while Tanith stood over the, saying "Frates, ut meum vestrum sacrificium acceptabile fiat apud Satanas!"

Susan kissed him as they lay on the ground and Tanith kneeled beside them to caress Conrad's buttocks and back. In the excitement of the ritual and Tanith's touch, Conrad's task was soon over, and he slumped over Susan, temporarily exhausted from his ecstasy. He did not resist when Tanith rolled him over, and watched, as the dancers danced around them still chanting and the light pulsed with the beat of the drum, while Tanith buried her head between Susan's thighs. Then she was kissing him with her wet mouth before she stood to kiss each member of the congregation in salutation.

"You who gave him his birth," Susan was chanting as she walked toward the shrouded coffin, "and with my power I have killed him who dared to stand against us! See!" she said, laughing as she faced the congregation who had gathered around her to listen, "how my magick destroys him! He died in agony and we rejoiced!"

"He died in agony and we rejoiced!" they responded.

She took the coffin, placed it on the floor of the Temple and held a lighted candle to the shroud. It burst into flames. "Our curse, by my will," she said, "has destroyed him! Dignum et justum est!"

She laughed, Conrad laughed, the congregation laughed as the shroud and the coffin burnt fiercely.

"Feast now, and rejoice," Tanith commanded them, "for we have killed and shown the power of our Prince!"

Near Conrad, the orgy of lust began as two naked men walked down the steps to the Temple carrying large trays full of food and wine. A woman came toward Conrad, smiled, and removed her robe, but Susan took his hand and led him back up the steps.

She did not speak, and he did not, but bathed with him in the libation chamber, to dress herself and wait while he dressed, and take him back to the house. The room to which she took him was dark and empty.

"You felt no power in the ritual?" she suddenly asked as they stood beside each other in the coldness.

"Yes" he lied.

"You must be honest with me," he heard Aris' voice say. Light came slowly - a soft light to reveal only the bare walls of the room and Susan standing and smiling beside him. There were no windows, and the door was closed.

"Do not be afraid," Susan said in her own voice.

"I am not afraid," he answered honestly.

"Tell me, then, about the ritual," Susan asked softly.

"There was something," he said, "but not what I expected."

"Am I what you expect?" she said with Aris' voice. She was watching him, waiting.

Momentarily, Conrad had the impression that Susan was not human at all - she was something unearthly which was using her form and Aris' voice, something from another time and space. But he had touched her, kissed her, felt the soft warmth of her body. Confused, he stood watching her. She was not the young woman he had known: her eyes became full of stars, her face the void of space. She became Aris, a nebulous chaos that was incomprehensible to him.

He could feel within him her longing for the vastness of space. There was a sadness within this longing, for it had existed before him and would exist after his own death, thousands of years upon thousands of years. He would have to understand, he suddenly knew - he would have to understand and help before this sad longing, this waiting would be over.

Then she was Susan again, standing next to him and holding his hand, caressing his face with her fingers. Gentle and warm.

"You are beginning to understand," she was saying.

Her touch re-assured him. "Yes" he said, "I am yours."

The door opened, and Aris came toward him.

"Your life," Aris the Master said, "will break the seal which binds Them."

"I have no choice," Conrad said as if hypnotized.

"You have no choice," Aris and Susan said together.

Aris smiled, and kissed Susan. "You have done well, my daughter. Now you must prepare him."

It was time, Conrad understood. Yes, it was time. Susan touched his forehead, and he fell unconscious to the floor.

X

Fitten was mumbling to himself as he sat against the wall of Baynes' house. He seemed harmless, and Baynes left him alone.

"He has been like this since you returned from that house? The speaker was an old man whose white beard terminated in a point. He sat on a comfortable chair, his ornately carved walking stick beside him.

"Yes," replied Baynes. Frater Togbare was his honoured guest.

"I spoke with the Council, last night," Togbare said. "We are agreed the situation is serious. You have had no recent news from Frater Achad?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"His Initiation in the Satanic group is due, you said?"

"Yes. Sometime during the next few days. He should be able to provide us with more information then."

"Excellent. We shall need it. I only hope we have enough time."

Fitten began to gibber, jumping up and down as he watched the guests Baynes and Togbare had invited arrive in their cars. Togbare went to him, and touched his shoulder. The gentle touch of the Old Magus seemed to comfort Fitten, for he sat quietly in the corner, tracing shapes on his palm with his finger.

It was not long before all the guests had arrived and were settled in the room. They had been quietly told about Fitten, and could ignore him.

Baynes rose to address them. "Ladies and gentlemen. You are all, I know, familiar with the reasons why Frater Togbare and myself have called this meeting. You come here - some I know from far away - as representatives of many and different organizations. All of us, however, have a common aim - to prevent the Satanists succeeding in their plan." He sat down, and Togbare whispered in his ear.

"Er, yes of course," he agreed in answer to Togbare's whispered question. He stood up again. "Frater Togbare has suggested I briefly outline the facts of the matter to you, so that everything is in perspective - before we begin our magickal tasks." He surveyed the eager, expectant and occasional anxious faces before him. Six men, and four women of varying ages and manner of dress. "We believe that the Satanist group responsible for the death by magick

of Mr Fitten's wife, the present state of Mr Fitten himself, and the murder of, among others, Maria Torrens, are acting in concert with a number of other Satanic groups in this and other countries to perform a powerful and very sinister ritual. This ritual has as one of its aims, the Opening of the Gates to the Abyss - releasing thus the psychic energy that has been stored over the ages on various astral levels as well as drawing into the ordinary world of our waking consciousness evil entities. This opening will release powerful forces, and change the world. It will be the beginning of an age of darkness.

"As you all know, Satanists - and here of course I refer to genuine practitioners of the Black Arts and not the showman type - have used their magical powers for centuries to bring about chaos, to increase the evil in this world. Perhaps there exist some centuries old Satanic plan - I do not know. But what is clear, what has become evident to us over the past decade or so, is that some groups are about to perform this particular ritual which to our knowledge no one has attempted before."

He smiled, a little. "Or perhaps I should say - no one has attempted and succeeded. The power of the most important group involved in this is immense - as I am sure you all have realized. It is not easy, in magic, as you all know, to kill another by ritual - but they possess this power, claimed by many others, but rarely proven.

"When this power is released by their ritual there will be immediate effects as well as more long term ones. An increase in evil deeds - resulting from weak individuals becoming possessed by the demonic forces unleashed. That is only one example. You all share, I know, my concern and that of the Council which Frater Togbare represents.

"Thus we have called you here to use our combined abilities to nullify this plan and the ritual. You all are accomplished and experienced Occultists: some working within your own groups, others, alone. I have myself prepared a site for you." He indicated a woman seated near him, resplendent in colourful clothes and jewelry. "Denise here will go with you, and explain the details of the ritual we propose to undertake."

A man rose, respectfully, from his chair. "You will not be accompanying us?" he asked.

"No. Neither will Frater Togbare. Perhaps I should explain. We recently infiltrated the main Satanist group with one of our members. We are waiting for him to contact us with important details - the time, place of the ritual and so on. As you will appreciate this is a delicate matter, and we need to be available as the information could be received at any time. We will both, of course, at the appointed time of your ritual, perform one of our own, joining you on the astral. I hope this answers your question, Martin."

"Yes. Yes, of course," the now embarrassed man agreed.

"It only remains, therefore, for me to hand you over into the very capable hands of Denise."

Denise smiled affectionately at him, and he looked away.

As they stood to leave, Togbare addressed them. "I am most pleased," he said, "that you have responded to our call so readily at no small sacrifice to yourselves. If I may be allowed to add a codicil to our learned friends remarks, I would remind you that the ritual which the Satanists

plan here in this city or nearby, requires at least one - possibly more - human sacrifice. Thank you all, most sincerely."

He beamed with delight, and shook the hands of several of the guests who came to greet him.

"Shall I light the fire?" Baynes asked him when all the guests were gone.

"That would be most kind," Togbare replied. "Most kind of you. Then we must begin."

"I suppose," Baynes said as he knelt down before the hearth to light the fire, already prepared. "We could liken this opening of the gates to the return of Satan himself - Armageddon, and the beginning of the reign of the Anti-Christ."

"Yes, possibly."

Suddenly, Fitten jumped up. "No! No!" he screamed. "He lies!" he shouted at Togbare. "He lies! I know! Me! For I have been given the understanding!"

He moved toward Togbare, and Baynes went to restrain him.

"Leave me alone!" screamed Fitten. "You are cursed! He must know!" He pushed Baynes away. Togbare smiled at him.

"Listen!" Fitten said to Togbare. "We will all be offers. Not Satan! Not Satan! Do you understand? It is THEM! The spawn of Chaos. They have lied to us, you see. Lied to us! Oh, how they have lied and deceived us. The Master will bring Them - They need us, you see. From the stars They will come. The seal that holds Them in Their own dimensions will be broken! Don't you understand? They are not the Old Ones! They have lied about that, also! The Nine Angles are the key - "

Fitten stopped, his hands raised, his face red. Then he was coughing and choking, spitting blood before he fell to writhe and scream on the floor. Frothy blood oozed from his mouth, and his bones could be heard breaking. His face went blue, his eyes bulged and then he was still. Baynes went to him, but he was dead, Having swallowed his own tongue.

"We must be calm," Togbare said as sudden laughter filled the darkening room. "Concentrate, with me." Baynes came to stand beside him. "There is evil in this room. Concentrate, with me," Togbare repeated. "The flaming pentagram and the four-fold breathing."

Gradually, the laughter and the darkness subsided.

"He is dead," said Baynes unnecessarily. He covered Fitten's contorted face with his coat.

Eerily, the telephone began to ring. "Baynes here," he said. He listened, then gave the receiver to Togbare. "It's Frater Achad. He wants to speak with you."

"Hello!" Togbare said. "Yes, we are alone. Mr Fitten? He was here, yes. But listen, my son. Just now he died. Here, in this room. Are you still there? Evil magick - dark powers came to us, here. Yes, I understand. I shall pray for you, my son. Goodbye." He returned the telephone receiver to Baynes. "He could not speak for long."

"Of course. Did he mention anything? About the ritual?"

"Only a manuscript which might be relevant. Sloane MS 3189."

"I am not familiar with it, myself. British Museum?"

"Yes. Now, about poor Mr Fitten - "

"I shall take care of everything. The Police will have to be informed, of course."

"Naturally."

"I have some influence," Baynes said, shrugging his shoulders. "I do not like to use it, but in the circumstances - "

"I quite understand," said Togbare sympathetically.

"There will be no need for the Occult connection to become known. If you will excuse me, for a moment. I have some telephone calls to make."

"Yes, of course."

The fire was burning brightly when Baynes returned to find Togbare still sitting in the chair and Fitten's body still nearby on the floor. Baynes admired Togbare's calm detachment.

"His notes and papers," Togbare asked. "It might help if we perused them."

"Possibly. I have a key to his house."

"Indeed?" Togbare was surprised.

"A few weeks ago," Baynes explained, "he came to see me. He gave me the key with the instructions to burn all his notes, papers and books should anything happen to him."

"He was expecting something to happen?"

"Apparently. But he was always liable to get excited. It was just his way."

"You did not believe him?" asked Togbare without censure.

"To be honest, no. I wish I had done. Perhaps I could have done something."

"There is nothing anyone of us could have done. You have informed the Police?"

"Yes. Someone will be arriving shortly."

Togbare smiled. "Just as Denise and the others begin their ritual."

"Of course!" said Baynes, suddenly understanding. "The Master has timed this well."

Togbare sighed. "He is powerful. Yet there is something else. Our every effort to neutralize the magickal power of this group over the years has come tonight. I have long suspected they have infiltrated us. The Council itself. These most recent events only confirm my suspicions."

"You believe there is a traitor?" asked Baynes with incredulity.

"I do not believe," Togbare answered quietly, "I know." He sighed again. "For this knowledge I will die. Perhaps my death will stop them - I do not know. But I know that beyond death this Satanic Master will try and claim my soul."

Gently, Baynes held the old man's hand. It was cold, like the room.

"It will be dawn in a few hours," Baynes said.

Then the laughter returned to haunt them - damning, demonic laughter. But it was soon gone as, outside, they heard an owl, screeking.

XI

Around him, Conrad sensed many people. He could not see them directly, for he was held as if paralysed on the floor of a small chamber near the Temple. There was a pillow supporting his head, and he looked down to see himself dressed in a black robe, the septagon sigil of the Order embroidered in red over the place of his heart.

He could hear chanting, smell incense and burning wax. Then a voice, speaking words he remembered from his own Initiation: "Gather round, my children, and feel the flesh of our gift!" It was Tanith's voice, but it seemed to become very distant. Then he was asleep again, dreaming of being in space above the Earth as it turned in its orbit around the sun. Then he was among alien but humanoid beings as they descended to Earth from the cold prison of space. Time rushed on, in a fluxion of images. Primitive tribes gathered in awe and greeting for the beings who taught, guided, controlled and destroyed among the forests and the ice. Others opposed to them came forth from space, seeking them out to kill or capture, taking their prisoners away, back into the cold, vast prison in space from which they had escaped, sealing them in forever in a vortex. He was there, in the dimensions and time beyond the causal, and felt their longing to escape, to explore the vastness and the beauty of the stars.

He awoke feeling a sense of loss. For minutes he lay still, scarcely breathing, and then he saw - or thought he saw - Tanith enter the chamber leading a man, blindfolded and bound. She lay with him on the floor to complete his Initiation before removing the blindfold.

"Neil, Neil!" he tried to say as he recognized the man. But the words would not be formed by his mouth and he lay helpless and still until the image vanished. He saw Susan walking toward him, and he closed his eyes, refusing to believe them. But she touched him, washing his face and hands with the warm water she carried in a bowl. She was smiling at him as she gently caressed him.

"I..." he began to say.

"Don't try to move too quickly," she said. "You will take some time to recover."

Slowly, he became aware he could move his fingers, his hands, his feet and as he did so he realized he loved her.

She kissed him, as if understanding his thought. "You understand now?"

Her eyes were beautiful, and it did not matter to Conrad that they had seemed full of stars.

"I think so," he replied.

"Together, we are a key which opens the gate, breaking the seal which binds Them."

He did not think it a strange thing for her to say.

"Now," she said, "you are prepared. Come - for the Master awaits us."

It was as he stood up that he remembered that she was the Masters' daughter. She led him from the chamber into the dimness of the Temple. There were no candles on the altar, no naked priestess, no congregation gathered to greet them, indeed nothing magickal except the crystal tetrahedron, glowing as it stood on a plinth. Only the Master and Tanith awaited them.

"The season and time being right," intoned the Master, "the stars being aligned as it is written they be aligned, this Temple conforming to the precepts of our Dark Gods, let us heed the angles of the nine!"

He gestured toward the crystal, chanting "Nythra Kthunae Atazoth!" as he did so. The light that seemed to emanate from within it darkened and then began to slowly change colour until only a dim blue glow remained.

"So it has been," the Master intoned, "so it is and so shall it be again. Agarthi has known Them, the Nameless who came forth before we dreamed. And Bron Wrgon, our twin Gate, Here," and he gestured toward Susan and Conrad, "a Key to the dimensions beyond time: a key to the nine angles and the trapezohedron! From their crasis will come the power to break the seal which binds!"

"They exist," Tanith chanted as Aris began to vibrate with his voice the words of power - "Nii! Ny'thra Kthunae Atazoth. Ny'thra! Nii! Zod das Ny'thra!" - "in the angles of those dimensions that cannot be perceived, waiting for us to call and begin again a new cycle. They have trod the blackness between the stars and they found us, huddled in sleep and cold. But the Sirians came, to seal us and them again in our prisons and our sleep. Soon shall we both become free!"

The Master stood with his hands on the tetrahedron, as Tanith did, and they both began to vibrate a fourth and an octave apart, the words that were the key to the Abyss.

Susan stood beside Conrad, but she did not pull him down with her to the floor as he expected. Instead, she held his hands with hers and stood before him. Her hands were cold, icy cold, and he could feel the coldness invading him. Her eyes became again full of stars which spread to enclose her face. The Temple itself became black, and all he could hear was

the insistent and deep chanting of the words which would open the Abyss. It was a strange sound, as the two voices chanted an octave fourth apart. Conrad began to feel dizzy, and felt he was falling. A profusion of stars rushed toward him as if he was traveling incredibly fast in space itself. He passed a coloured, broken grid made of pulsing lights and world upon alien world. Peoples with strange faces and bodies upon strange worlds, beautiful and disgusting scenes: a sunset on a world with three moons, red, orange and blue; a heap of mangled corpses, spaked and being eaten by small animals with rows of sharp teeth while, nearby, a starship lay crashed and mangled in yellow sand... The impressions were fleeting but powerful and came and went in profusion. And then they suddenly ended. He was alone, totally alone in stark and cold blackness. Faintly, he could hear a rustling. It was the wind, and as he listened and waited, faint images, growing slowly and changing in colour - violet to blue to orange then red. Brightness came with the swift dawn, and he found himself standing amid barren rocks beneath an orange sky. A figure was walking toward him, and Conrad recognized it. It was himself.

The figure spoke, in Conrad's voice. "The seal that bound us is no more. Soon, we shall be with you."

The man smiled, but it was a sinister smile which both pleased and disquieted Conrad.

"Now I must depart," the image of Conrad said. "But before I go I give you a reward. See me as I have been known to those on your world with little understanding."

The figure contorted, was Satan, and was gone.

XII

"You consider it important?" Baynes asked Togbare as they stood beside Fitten's desk in the study of his house.

Togbare read the tattered manuscript again. "It could be. It well could be."

"Anything interesting?" Neil asked. He had met them at Baynes' house as they were preparing to leave in the dawn light. He was fresh from his Initiation ceremony, but they wasted no time discussing it.

"Does it mean anything to you?" Togbare asked Neil.

Neil took the manuscript - several pages of handwritten sheets. He read it carefully. "Not really," he finally said, passing it to Baynes. "They told me very little - other than to be prepared for an important ritual very soon."

Baynes read the writing. "The ancient and secret rite of the nine angles is a call to the Dark Gods who exist beyond Time in the acausal dimensions, where that power which is behind the form of Satan resides, and waits. The rite is the blackest act of black magick, for it brings to

Earth Those who are never named." He put the manuscript back on the desk. "Sounds like Lovecraft to me," said Baynes dismissively.

"Of that," replied Togbare, "I am aware. Yet I gain the impression, from what I have read of Mr Fitten's notes and the little I already know, that he himself - and I am inclined to support him - that he regarded the mythos that Lovecraft invented, or which more correctly was given to him by his dreaming-true, as a corruption of a secret tradition. He made his Old Ones loathsome and repulsive. I myself am inclined to believe that if such entities as these so-called 'Dark Gods' exist they might be shape-changers, like the Prince of Darkness himself."

"What do these qabalistic attributions mean?" asked Neil, pointing to a page of the manuscript Fitten had written. "About 418 not being 13?"

"Alas," admitted Togbare, "I do not know."

"Do you think he copied this from somewhere?" Neil asked.

"Possibly. You said they mentioned books and manuscripts in their possession?"

"Yes. 'The Master' said I might see some of them, soon. All their Initiates, apparently, have to study them."

"We shall have to wait, then," said Baynes.

"Possibly, possibly," mumbled Togbare. He began to search among the files that cluttered the desk and the room itself. "There is a tradition," he muttered as he searched, "that Shambhala and Agharti have their origin in a real conflict between cosmic forces at the dawn of Man. It is a persistent tradition, in all Occult schools, and this may point to the tradition having at least some basis in fact." He sat in the chair at the desk. "I am old," he said, shaking his head, "and the Inner Light that guides our Council has been my strength for many, many years. Even as a young man I sought the mysteries. Yet, here I am, many years later, and still I lack understanding. There is evil around, even here - in this room. I sense it. What is happening and has been happening for years is distorting the Astral Light. We seem to be about to face a new, darker, era. We seem no nearer a solution. Perhaps we have looked in the wrong areas. We believed the Satanists who have caused the distortion to be literal worshippers of the Devil. Then they became for us followers of To Mega Therion, their word Thelema. Now, when it is almost too late, we discover they have no Word, except perhaps Chaos - that what they plan is perhaps even more sinister and terrible than we imagined."

"But there is time," Neil tried to say, helpfully, "I am aware there is. Conrad Robury - "

"Ah!" Togbare's eyes brightened.

"If he is important to them in what they plan, then why has he appeared only now? Surely more preparation is required."

"You know the gentleman, I believe?" Togbare asked.

"Yes," said Neil. "I introduced him to the wiccan group."

"And arranged an introduction with Mr Sanders," added Baynes.

"Yes I did."

"Even though," said Baynes quietly, "you knew Sanders to recruit for the Master and his group."

"Well, when you suggested I infiltrate them myself, I thought it would be a good ploy. Show my intent, so to speak, to introduce someone who might be useful to them."

"And so it has proved," said Togbare.

"What are you suggesting?" Neil asked Baynes, as though he had not heard what Togbare said.

"I am not suggesting anything," replied Baynes, softly.

"Come! Come!" chided Togbare, "let us not quarrel. There are elementals about, trying to divide us and disrupt our plans."

"I am sorry," Baynes said sincerely. "I'm just tired. You must forgive me."

Togbare looked at him with kindness. "When did you last sleep?"

"I don't know. A few days ago, perhaps. There has not been time."

"May I suggest," said Togbare, "that you return to your home for a few hours rest?"

"But surely, I can help here?"

"Yes, of course In a few hours time. It will not take all three of us to search these files." He indicated a small pile on the desk, awaiting their attention. "Please, do go and get some rest."

"If you are sure," said Baynes.

"Yes, of course. We shall return to your home within the next few hours."

"Will you be alright?" Baynes turned to leave.

"Do not worry!"

Togbare waved to him through the window. The snow still lay heavy upon the ground, but the sky was clear. "He works very hard," he mumbled to himself before returning to sit by the desk. "This Conrad Robury," he asked Neil.

"Yes?"

"He had no previous interest?"

"No. None. He was a friend, studying science. It all started out as a bit of a joke, actually. He thought all of the Occult was nonsense. So I suggested that as a scientist he should study the subject at first hand. But there was always something about him. I don't quite know what - perhaps his eyes. Sometimes when he looked at me I felt uneasy. He was a very intense young man. I know it may sound funny, but he was very earnest in an almost puritanical way."

"He could be the sacrifice they need."

Neil sighed. "I know" His eyes showed the sadness and the guilt he felt at the possibility.

"Do not worry," said Togbare sincerely. "If that is what is planned, we shall save your Conrad Robury."

"Did I hear," a voice from the doorway said, "someone call my name?" Conrad stepped into the room.

"Conrad!" Neil said with pleasant surprise. He started to walk toward his friend, but Togbare restrained him by grasping his arm.

"Wait," Togbare advised. He looked at Conrad. "By what right do you dare to enter here?"

Conrad smiled. "By the right of my Word - Chaos!"

"Conrad," Neil said, "what's happened?"

"You thought," Conrad said hatefully to him, "to betray us! You will not stop us! Neither of you will. You!" he pointed at Neil, "are coming with me!"

"He is staying," said Togbare, using his stick to help himself stand.

"You do not frighten me, old man!" Conrad said. He moved toward Neil, but Togbare raised his stick. Conrad felt a sudden and severe pain in his stomach. He tried to move forward, but the pain increased, and he placed his hands on his abdomen, grimacing with pain.

Silently, Susan came into the room to stand beside him. She touched his hand, and the pain vanished. He stared at Togbare, concentrating on shaping his own aura into a weapon. He formed it using his will into an inverted septagon which he aimed at Togbare.

The effect was minimal, for Togbare still smiled and raised his stick. From it's tip white filaments flowed to form a flaming pentagram above the Mage's head. The pentagram came closer and closer, sending purple filaments toward Conrad who held up his ring to absorb them. But however hard Conrad tried he could not will any force to oppose the filaments. The ring simply kept absorbing them. For every one filament absorbed, three new ones arose until both he and Susan were enclosed in a purple web. Desperate and determined, Conrad concentrated on his ring, remembering the chant he had heard in the Temple. The concentration and visualization seemed to work, for a bright red bolt broke forth from his ring, hurtling toward Togbare. But the Magus simply held out his palm which harmlessly absorbed the light. Conrad could feel his power being slowly drained away. Then he remembered.

Susan's hand was near and he grasped it tightly. She leant against him and he felt a force rush through him. She was laughing, the power she gave him was strong and he had time only to fashion its primal chaos into the sign of the inverted pentagram before it sped across the room in accordance with his desire. It touched Togbare's stick, knocking it from his hand as the purple web which enclosed the Satanists shattered, then disappeared.

Togbare was unharmed, but his power was gone. "You have powerful friends, I see," he said.

"You cannot stop us!" Conrad laughed.

Togbare smiled, and bent down to retrieve his stick. Cautiously, Conrad stepped back. "Do not worry," Togbare said. "My power - like yours - is for the moment gone. But it will return, and soon."

Conrad went toward him and tried to grasp the stick. He wanted to break it over his knee. But some force around Togbare kept him away. It was as if when he got within a few feet of the Magus he became paralysed.

"It is your evil intent," Togbare said, and smiled, "which holds you back."

Conrad ignored him. Instead, he caught hold of Neil, twisting his arm behind his back. "You're coming with us!"

"He will be of no use to you," said Togbare. "As your Master will soon realize."

"We shall see!"

"Please," Neil pleaded, "don't let them take me!"

"They cannot harm you, my son," Togbare said. "Trust me. Now I have seen their power, I know what to do."

Neil was unsure, and struggled to be free. Conrad held him round the throat. "So much for his power, eh?" he said as he pushed Neil toward the door.

"Conrad, Conrad!" Neil pleaded. "What's happened to you?"

"You're to be our sacrifice!" Conrad said, and laughed.

"Help me! For God's sake help me!" Neil cried out.

"It's too late!" gloated Conrad. "We need your blood!"

Susan had her car waiting outside the front door of the house, and Conrad pushed Neil into it, holding him down as she drove away toward their Satanist Temple.

For several hours Togbare stayed in Fitten's house. At first, following the departure of Conrad and Susan with Neil, he sat at the desk and meditated, gradually restoring to himself, by breath control and mantra, the power he had lost during the astral combat.

Afterwards, he studied Fitten's manuscripts, notes and books, and it was almost noon when he stood up from the desk. In his absorption, he had not noticed the cold of the room, and he shivered, a little, as he walked to the door. Outside, the sun was warming, and he walked slowly and steadily like the old man he was, the miles to Baynes' house, glad of the exercise and the snowy coldness of the Winter air.

Baynes was in his large study when Togbare arrived. The room was warm, and Togbare sat by the coal fire as he related the events leading to the taking of Neil. Baynes was clearly perturbed.

"I am sure," Baynes said, "they will sacrifice him. He has betrayed them - broken the oath of his Initiation. This is disturbing news, it really is. I do not believe we can wait any longer. I think the time has come for us to act - swiftly and decisively."

"You have a suggestion?"

"Yes. Since this Conrad Robury is important to them - or so it seems - I suggest we entice him away from their house, and hold him, here if necessary, for a few days as our guest. We can then arrange for him to be exchanged with Mr Stanford."

Togbare's surprise showed on his face. "It would not be right."

"To save Mr Stanford's life? It is the only way, for I do not believe that we can succeed by magick alone. Not now."

For a long time Togbare did not speak. He sat staring into the flames of the fire.

"You are right," he finally said, and sighed. "I do not like it, but it appears to be our only hope. The situation is desperate."

"May I," Baynes said, "therefore suggest that we - you and I - undertake a simple rite with the intention of enticing Robury from the house. I could arrange for some people to be waiting. He would not be harmed, of course."

"You could arrange all this?"

"Yes. It should not take long - a few hours, no more." He turned toward Togbare and smiled. "Wealth has its uses - occasionally!"

"Those good people who were with us, yesterday?"

"Yes?"

"If you could arrange for some of them to come here, you need not be detained. We, then, could do the ritual you suggested."

"Splendid! I shall contact them at once. I told them, this morning, to be prepared as we might need them at short notice."

"You spoke to them all this morning?" Togbare was amazed.

"Well, when I returned here, I could not sleep. I thought I would do something useful. They all felt the ritual they undertook went well."

"It has bought us some time, I think. Some little time. This Mr Robury - I have realized that his apparent Occult ability depends on a certain young lady. She was with him, this morning. It is the same woman, I am sure, who was with him at the ritual at Mr Fitten's house when that unfortunate lady, his wife, passed over to the other side. So, alone and with us, he should have no power. Yes," he mused, "the more I think on this - on this plan of yours - the more I am inclined to believe it will succeed."

"Then," said Baynes, "I shall go and make the necessary arrangements."

Baynes stood staring out of his office window watching the traffic in the city street below. He liked his office on the top floor of one of the tallest buildings in the city centre as much for the splendid view as for its relative quiet amid his busy business empire which he controlled from his building.

His desk intercom buzzed. "Yes?" he asked.

"A Mr Sanders to see you, sir."

"Excellent! Send him in!" He seated himself in his leather chair behind his uncluttered desk.

"Mr Sanders," his Secretary announced.

"Please," he said, indicating a chair, "be seated."

"I'd rather stand," Sanders said. He was dressed in black as was his habit. "You wanted to see me?" he asked, warily.

"I have a proposition for you - a business proposition."

"So your flunky said on the 'phone."

"You operate what some might describe as a 'Black Magick' temple, do you not?"

Sanders sat in the chair. "Let's cut the crap! I know you, Baynes, and you know me."

"I would like you to do me a favour - for a substantial sum of money."

Suspicious, Sanders looked around the room. "Are you taping this?"

"Of course not!"

"So what's your offer - and how much?"

"Fifty thousand pounds."

Sanders hid his surprise. "To do what?"

"Not long ago, a certain young gentleman - a student - came to visit you. You introduced him, I believe, to a certain group. Well, I would like this gentleman brought from where he is to my house. With the minimal use of force, of course."

Sanders stood up. "I can't say it was a pleasure meeting you. Goodbye."

"You have a very lucrative side-line, I believe."

Sander was nearly at the door when Baynes added, "I'm sure the Police would be very interested in your - what shall I call it? - your import business. A Mr Osterman is your contact in Hamburg, I understand."

Sanders stopped. "You're bluffing."

"I assure you I'm not. Your last assignment arrived last Tuesday. Estimated value - I believe the term used is 'on the street' - two million pounds, at least. Of course, if my figures are correct, your profit is somewhat smaller. Much smaller in fact. So many overheads."

Sanders walked back to the desk. He sat down again, and smiled. "You're very well informed."

"Of course," Baynes said, "we both know who takes most of the profit. You are familiar, I understand, with the house where this Mr Robury is currently residing."

Sanders shrugged. "Possibly."

"Toward dusk, he will be walking in the garden. You are to bring him to me. At this address." He gave Sanders a printed card.

"And the money?"

Baynes opened a draw in his desk. He laid out several piles of ten-pound notes. "A small advance. The rest will await your arrival at the house."

"And if he is not where you said?"

"He will be. But should some unforeseen circumstance arise and he is not there, telephone me and I shall arrange another time."

Sanders scooped up the money and stuffed it into his pockets.

"And," Baynes added as Sanders stood up to leave, "if you are worried about your 'Master' finding out about our little arrangement, I'm sure you have experience enough to work some plan out so as not to implicate yourself."

Sanders was already thinking along similar lines. "You've missed your calling!" he smiled before walking to the door.

Baynes waited until Sanders had left before he used the telephone.

"Hello?" he asked as his caller answered. "Frater Togbare?"

"Yes?" came the quiet and somewhat nervous reply.

"Baynes here!" he said cheerfully, pleased with his success with Sanders. "It went well. All is arranged as planned."

When Togbare did not speak, Baynes said, "Did everything go alright with you?"

"Er, no, not really. You'd better come here - I'll explain."

"I'll be there as quick as I can!"

XIV

It did not take Togbare long to fall asleep. He was sitting by the fire as Baynes left for his office, wondering about the events of the past few days and the events to come. He too was tired, and slept soundly by the warmth of the fire.

The doorbell awoke him, and he walked slowly to answer its call, leaning on his stick, and expecting some of the guests of the night before. The cabinet clock in the hallway of Baynes' house showed him he had been asleep for nearly an hour. He did not recognize the woman who waited outside, but her expensive car, waiting with its chauffeur, did not surprise him, for he knew of Baynes' own wealth.

"Is Oswald in?" a smiling and alluringly dressed Tanith asked.

"Oswald?" repeated Togbare, averting his eyes from her breasts, amply exposed by her dress.

"Mr. Baynes. Is he at home?"

"Er, no. Not at the moment. Can I help?"

"I've come for your little ritual - or whatever it is you've planned."

"I'm sorry?" For some reason Togbare felt confused, a fact which he attributed to having just woken from a deep and needful sleep.

"May I come in?" Tanith asked and proceeded to walk past him, making sure their bodies touched. She walked into the study, and stood by the fire. "Dear Oswald," she said, "such a

charming gentleman, but so frightfully forgetful sometimes. He forget to tell you I would be coming, didn't he?"

"Well - "

"Do be seated," she said affably.

Togbare obeyed.

"Any idea what this ritual thing is about?" she asked standing near him. "If it is anything like the one's he's invited me to before, we are in for some jolly good fun!" She laughed.

"Fun?" said Togbare, perturbed.

"Why yes! Don't say he hasn't told you? My word! Would you like a drink - to get into the mood?"

"A drink?" Togbare felt distinctly uncomfortable.

She went straight to a bookcase, pushed a hidden button, and waited until a shelf revolved to reveal decanters and glasses. "Whisky?" she said. "You look like a Whisky man to me. He has some very fines malts."

I myself," Togbare said, rather stuffily, "do not imbibe."

"Shame. I'm partial to Gin, myself." She poured herself a full glassful and drank it immediately. "Splendid! Best on an empty stomach. Straight into the blood!" She poured herself another glass before saying, "Shall I draw the blinds so we are prepared?"

"Pardon?"

She pressed another button and the window-blinds descended to silently close.

Togbare stood up. "You seem to know this house rather well."

"I should say so! All the hours of fun I've had here! Oswald has the most marvellous parties!" She came toward Togbare who was standing by the light of the fire. "Hot in her, isn't it?" she said, beginning to remove her dress.

As she reached Togbare it fell around her ankles. She was naked and an unbelieving Togbare stared at her.

"Your spirit," she said, "is younger than your body."

She took his hand and placed it on her breast.

Togbare snatched it away and almost ran to the door. It was locked, but there was no key.

Tanith stepped out of her dress and moved toward him, laughing. "You will enjoy the pleasure I offer," she said.

Suddenly, Togbare understood. "Harlot!" he shouted. "The Master sent you!"

"Yes!"

She was closing upon him, and to Togbare she became a Satanic curse. He held up his stick, but she laughed at him.

"You are weak!" she sneered. "Look at me! Look at my body!"

Togbare turned away, mumbling words as he did so.

"Your god cannot help you now!" she mocked.

He turned to face her and as he did so she began to change form before his very eyes.

"My God!" he cried with genuine surprise, "you are his wife!"

It was a pitying laugh she gave him before gesturing behind her with her hand. Her dress disappeared, briefly before re-appearing on her body. She gestured again, and the blinds rose to flood the room with daylight.

"You cannot harm me," Togbare said, holding his stick in front of him for protection.

"I have achieved what I came for!"

He stood aside to let her leave. The doors opened for her and she walked out into the sunlight. Through the window, she saw the Magus kneeling on the floor and saying his prayers.

"Home, Gedor!" she commanded as she got into her car.

Togbare prayed for almost an hour. He was calm then, but dismayed, and stoked and re-built the fire in his study. He sat by it, sighing and shaking his head in consternation, for a long time, rising only to answer the doorbell twice. Each time he half-expected the satanic mistress to return but each time it was only a group of Baynes's guests from the night before, summoned for a new ritual. Each time he apologized and told them to await another call. He did not explain why and they did not ask, but it took him a long time to remove the traces of the woman's presence from the house and the room/

Her mocking, lustful satanic presence seemed to have invaded every corner, and he cast pentagram after pentagram after hexagram to remove it. He only just completed his task when the telephone rang.

"I'll be there as quick as I can!" Baynes had said, and Togbare sat by the fire to wait.

He was almost asleep again when Baynes returned.

"Well," Baynes said after Togbare had explained about Tanith's visit, "it matters little. We can do the ritual ourselves, as I originally thought. That is," he paused, "if you yourself feel able to continue as planned."

"I fear we have no choice," he said sadly. "It will tire us, even more. I just hope we can recover sufficiently."

"In time for when the Satanists attempt to Open the Gates you mean?"

"Yes. Shall we begin?"

Together, they sat by the fire in the last hours of daylight, trying through their powers of visualization and will to entice Conrad away from the safety of the Master's house and into the open where Sanders would, hopefully, be waiting. After several minutes effort, Togbare withdrew from one of his pockets one of the small squares of parchment he always carried. Taking his pen, he began to write, first Conrad's name, and then several sigils, upon it. For several minutes he stared at the completed charm before casting it into the flames of the fire to be consumed.

"So mote it be!" he said as the parchment burned.

Near the window, a raven cried, loudly in the snowful silence that surrounded the house.

XV

Conrad, as Aris had instructed, was reading in the library as the twilight came. The manuscript Aris had left out for him was interesting, telling as it did of the Dark Gods. But the more he read, the more dissatisfied he became.

The work was full of signs, symbols and words - and yet he felt it was insubstantial, as if the author or authors had glimpsed at best only part of the reality. His memory of the recent ritual was vivid, and as he stared at the manuscript he realized what was lacking. The work lacked the stars - the haunting beauty he himself had experienced; the numinous beauty which he felt was waiting for him. He wanted to reach out again and again and capture that beauty, that eerie essence, that nebulosity. He had felt free, drifting through space and other dimensions; free and powerful like a god - free of his own dense body which bound him to Earth.

"Having fun?" a voice unexpectedly asked.

It was Susan, and she walked toward him.

"Not really."

She wore Tanith's exotic perfume and her clothes were thin, moulded to the contours of her body. In that instant of his watching - full as it was of sensual memories and sensual anticipation - he remembered the bliss that a body could bring.

She stood by the French windows looking up at the darkening sky. "Shall we go outside," she suggested, "and watch the stars?"

"You been reading my thoughts again?" he asked, half seriously, and half in jest.

He rose from the desk to stand beside her and was pleased when she placed her hand around his waist before opening the windows.

"I'll just get a coat," she said and kissed him. "I'll join you outside."

The air was cold, but Conrad did not care as he walked out into the snow. The stars were becoming clearer, and he wandered away from the lights of the house to watch them as they shone, unshimmering in the cold air of Winter.

They came upon him swiftly, the three men waiting in the shadows. One carried a gun and pointed it at Conrad while the others grabbed his arms.

"Quiet!" the man with the gun said, "or you're dead."

Conrad struggled, and succeeded in knocking one of the men over. He tried to punch the other man in the face, but a blow to the neck felled him, and he was unconscious as he hit the snow.

"Bring him!" the man with the gun said.

Conrad awoke as he was being bundled into a car, but his hands were bound and he was roughly thrown onto the back seat.

"Bastards!" he screamed, and kicked at the door.

A knife was held to his throat. "Calm down, stupid," its holder said, and smiled. "Or I'll make a mess of your face!"

Yards away, Sanders sat waiting in his own car. No one had followed the men as they had dragged the unconscious Conrad toward the gate and the waiting cars, and he sighed with relief. He followed the car containing Conrad and they were soon far away from the house.

As he had instructed, Conrad was blindfolded, and he stood behind two men as they stood outside Baynes' house holding Conrad between them. Baynes had been watching from his window, and strode out to meet them.

"As promised," Sanders said.

"Excellent!" replied Baynes. He gave Sanders a briefcase. Sanders opened it and then pushed Conrad toward Baynes.

"He's all yours."

Baynes led Conrad into the house. Once in the study, he locked the door before removing Conrad's blindfold and bonds. It took Conrad only a few moments to adjust to his new surroundings.

"Please," Togbare said, indicating a chair by the fire, "sit down."

Conrad ignored him. Instead, he turned to Baynes who stood by the door.

"Resorting to armed violence now, I see," Conrad quipped.

"An unfortunate necessity."

"How very satanic of you," Conrad smiled. "Well, great Mage," he said mockingly to Togbare, "what is your plan?"

"You will remain here - for a short while."

"I suppose you in your stupidity think they will exchange Neil for me."

Togbare looked at Baynes. Conrad sneered at both of them. "You won't be able," he said, "to hold me. Not once they find out where I am. They will come - are you ready for the violence they will use?"

"What makes you think," said Baynes, "that you are that important to them? You are just another Initiate. They have plenty more. You'll be easy to replace."

"Is that so?" Conrad laughed, but Baynes' words made him feel uneasy.

"We have taken certain precautions," Togbare said.

"Oh, yes?" Conrad sneered. "You have drawn a magick circle thrice around the house - and I stand trembling and abashed at its centre! Sint mihi dei Acherontis propitii!"

"Well, well!" said Baynes, "a scholar as well as a comedian."

Suddenly, Conrad rushed at Baynes, intending to punch at his face, but Baynes was too quick and easily avoided the intended blow. His own counter was quick, as he caught Conrad off balance, tripping him to the floor.

Baynes bowed slightly as Conrad slowly got to his feet.

"He studied in Taiwan," Togbare said by way of explanation.

"Oh well," Conrad said, shrugging his shoulders, "so much for that idea then." He looked around the room. "I suppose I'd better make myself comfortable."

"A wise decision," Togbare said.

"Do you not wish," Baynes said to Conrad, "to complete your studies at university?"

"What's it to you?" Conrad looked at him briefly, then at the window. He sat in an upright chair as near to it as possible.

"I believe you have an interest in Spaceflight?"

"No need to guess who told you that."

"Mr Stanford, of course. I have some contacts in the aerospace industry in the States."

"Bully for you."

"I could arrange for you to continue your studies at an American university at the end of which you would be guaranteed work with one of the leading companies in the aerospace industry. You would, of course, be provided with a large capital sum - say fifty thousand pounds - for incidental expenses over the years."

"Are you trying to bribe me?" Conrad asked, amazed - and interested - by the offer.

"Yes." said Baynes without hesitation.

"What would you want in exchange?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" asked Conrad incredulously.

"Except your immediate departure for America. I would, of course, make the necessary arrangements."

"I don't believe it," Conrad said, amazed.

"Money has no interest for me - beyond what good I can do with it."

"And the Master?" Conrad asked. "What of him if I betrayed him by leaving?"

"As I said before, you are a mere Initiate to him. He can easily find someone to take your place. But if you wish, I could provide you with a new identity. I have certain contacts who could arrange matters. You would soon be forgotten."

"It's very tempting. But the Master - "

"All you have to do," said Baynes, "is stay here with us for a few days. You will see when nobody is sent to fetch you, when they show no interest in you whatsoever, that what I say is true."

"How do I know this isn't just some ploy to get me to stay here?"

"You have my word. Should you wish, you can be with me when I make the necessary arrangements. I can have the money here within a few hours, the airline ticket likewise. Your passport and new identity will take a little longer - a day, perhaps. You yourself can speak to the American university I have in mind."

"When do I have to decide?"

"The sooner you decide, the sooner I can make the arrangements."

For several minutes Conrad stared at the fire. Then he rose slowly from his chair to yawn and stretch his limbs. "Any chance of some tea?" he asked casually.

"Have you reached a decision?" Baynes asked.

"Yes." Taking several deep breaths, Conrad grasped the back of the chair, swiftly lifting it and smashing it into the window. The glass shattered, and he threw the chair at Baynes before diving through the broken glass. He landed awkwardly in the snow, his hands cut and bloodied by the glass. Something warm was running down his neck, and he extracted a splinter of glass that had embedded itself in his arm before leaping up to run down the driveway and away from the house. He could hear Baynes shouting behind him, but did not look back, concentrating on running as fast as he could down the street. He ran and ran, past houses, over roads, on pavements, verges and roads, stopping for breath once by a busy main road. Then he was away, out into the dark lanes beyond the lights of the city.

He stopped to hide behind a tree, nauseous and shaking, and it was some time before his breathing returned to normal. His hands, neck and face were covered in blood, but it was dried or drying, and he took off his jacket to tear off his shirt for a bandage for his arm. Soon, the cloth was soaked, and he lay still, pressing his hand over his bandaged wound to try and stop the bleeding. As he did so, he began to feel pain in his hands and face. He felt very tired.

No one had followed him down the dark narrow lane. He dreamed he was in the Satanic Temple. Neil was on the altar, tied down by thongs, and Tanith bent over him, a knife in her hand.

'It is your deed,' Tanith said to Conrad.

'Your deed,' Aris and Susan repeated as they stood beside him.

'We require his blood,' all three of them said.

Tanith gave him the knife and he walked toward Neil.

'Please,' his former friend pleaded, 'spare me! I don't want to die! I don't want to die!'

'We require his blood,' Conrad heard as a chant behind him. 'His blood to complete your Initiation. We must have his blood!'

Conrad hesitated.

'Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!' the insistent voices said.

He raised the knife to strike, but could not find the strength, and as he lowered it in failure the bound figure on the altar was no longer Neil, but himself. Then Aris, Tanith, Susan and his double on the altar were laughing.

'See how close to failure you came!' Aris said and kissed him on the lips. He made to move away, but it was Susan kissing him until she, too, changed - into Tanith.

Suddenly he was awake again, lying on the cold snow stained by his own blood. Such a waste, he thought, to die here, cold and alone. He tried to sit, up against the tree, but lacked the strength. Then he smiled. 'I would do it all again,' he muttered to the tree, the snow, the stars. 'Susan', he said to himself as his eyes closed of their own accord, 'I love you.'

The last thing he heard was the cry of a hungry owl.

XVI

Denise sat on and surrounded by cushions as brightly coloured as her clothes, two green candles in tall ornate holders alight beside her. Her house was otherwise unlit, and quiet except for the nearby rumble of traffic which passed along the main road less than fifty yards away. She was looking with half-closed eyes into her large crystal scrying sphere and her friend Miranda - High Priestess of the Circle of Arcadia - sat beside her, awaiting her description of her visions.

"I have found him," Denise said as if in trance. "He suffers, and will die."

Slowly, she placed a black cloth over her crystal. "Come," she said to her friend, "I shall need your help."

Her zest was evident in her driving, and it did not take them long to drive away from the city to dark, narrow lane she had seen in her vision.

"There, by the tree," she said.

Conrad was unconscious. "We must hurry," Denise said as she bent over him. "Others - the evil ones - will soon be here. I feel they are near."

Together they lifted and carried Conrad into the car.

"You drive," Denise almost commanded her friend. "I must begin, now."

Her hands were warm and she gently placed them on Conrad's cold and almost lifeless face before raising them a few inches to make passes with them over his arms, hands and body. She imagined energy flowing to her from the Earth through her fingers and down through his aura into the vital meridians of his wounded body, stopping only when they reached their destination.

Her house was warm, and they laid Conrad on the cushions between the candles.

"Will he be alright?" an anxious Miranda asked.

"I don't know - yet."

"Shall I let Mr. Baynes know?"

Denise turned toward her, her eyes intense. "No!"

"But I thought - "

"Nobody must know!" And she added, in a softer voice: "Not yet, anyway." She kissed Miranda, saying "Trust me, my love."

Then she knelt over Conrad to renew her healing with her hands.

"Can I do anything?" Miranda asked.

"Be a darling and make some tea." Denise did not turn around or look up.

The pot of tea was cold by the time Denise stood up, tired from her efforts, and she went to her kitchen to hold her hands against the cold tap, earthing the energies, before drinking several cups of the cold brew.

"Do you want me to stay?" Miranda asked hopefully.

"No - I'll be alright. I'll call you if there is any change,"

"Well, if you're sure."

"Yes. And," Denise said, embracing her, "please not a word - to anyone."

They kissed, briefly, and then Miranda left the room and the house. Denise sat beside Conrad, and gently stroked his face. Slowly, he opened his eyes.

"Back with us, then?" she said and smiled.

"What?" Conrad said, confused.

"You had a bit of an accident. And before you say anything, you're in my house."

Conrad sat up. "And you are?"

"Let's just say someone who likes helping waifs and strays!"

Conrad looked around the room. He saw the crystal with its black cover for 'closing down', the incense burner upon the fireplace. There were no furnishings other than the many cushions of varying size strewn over the carpet and the long, heavy drapes covering the window; no light other than that from the candles.

"Whose side are you on?" he asked cautiously.

"Does one have to be 'on a side'?" she countered with a smile.

"You know who I am?"

"Yes. How are you feeling?"

"Alright. I must have passed out." He found the woman strangely attractive. although her features were not beautiful in the conventional sense. But he suppressed his feelings, remembering Susan. "I really ought to go," he said and tried to stand up.

He failed, and slumped back into the cushions.

"Rest, now," Denise said,

"I must telephone someone," he said as he lay down to close his eyes to try and stop the dizziness he felt.

"In a while. But first you must rest."

She left him for a short time, returning with a silver bowl, cloths, phials of lotions and a mug containing a hot infusion of herbs, all carried on a silver tray.

"Here," she said, "drink this."

He sat up and smelt the contents of the mug. It smelt horrible. "What is it?"

"Just an infusion - of herbs and things. My mother showed me how to make it. It will bring back some of your strength."

Cautiously, Conrad sipped the drink. She removed the bandage he had made to cover the wound on his arm and began to clean the area using the liquid in the bowl. When she has finished, she made a clean covering using a cloth richly suffused with lotion. Soon, she had washed, cleaned and covered all his injuries with her lotions.

"It tasted better," Conrad said after finishing her potion, "than it smelt."

Her nearness, her gentle touch and her bodily fragrance all combined to sexually arouse him, and he held her hand before leaning to kiss her.

She moved away, saying, "I'm sorry to disappoint you - but I'm not that way inclined."

"I hope I didn't offend you," he said sincerely.

She laughed as she collected her lotions. "For an alleged Satanist you are rather innocent. Your aura marks you as different from them."

"Oh, yes?" Conrad was intrigued.

"What is your aim in all this?" she asked. "What do you hope to find?"

He felt his strength returning with every breath he took. Even the throbbing in his arm had begun subside. "Knowledge," he said.

Denise sat down beside him as she did so he felt there was a calmness within her. He felt good, just being near her, as if in some way she was giving him energy. At first, he had felt this as her sexual interest in him, but the more he looked at her and the more he thought about it, the more he realized it was nothing of the sort. It was just beneficent energy flowing from her. He did not know, nor particularly care, why - he just felt relaxed and comfortable in her nearness.

"What is it?" she asked again, smiling, her eyes radiant, "that you hope to find. Why did you join them?"

"I wanted knowledge." It was only partly true, he remembered. Most of all he had wanted to experience sexual passion.

"Is that all?"

He sensed she knew the answer already. "Well, sex as well."

"And then what?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, perplexed.

"Think of it - in a few years time, if you continue along your present path, you will have had many women, learnt many Occult truths. Perhaps you will have acquired some skill in magick. But life is - for most people - quite long: many decades, in fact. What do you do with all this time? The same pleasures and delights over and over again? Someone of your intelligence would surely find that boring?"

"There will be other goals, I'm sure. Other things to achieve."

"Perhaps. Your youth will go, and with its going will come tiredness of both body and spirit."

"So what? It is the present that's important. Why worry about what might never be?"

"And if I said you were giving up your chance of immortality what would you say?"

"I don't believe there is a chance. It's superstition. When we die, that's it."

"Is that what you believe Satanism as all about - the pleasure of the moment?"

"Yes." Then, with less certainty, he added, "Well, at least, I think so."

"There is no belief in something beyond?"

"Not as far as I know." He smiled. "But as you must know, I'm only a new Initiate."

"Would you kill your friend Neil?" she suddenly asked.

"Pardon?"

"Neil Stanford. Would you kill him if your Master demanded it?"

"What do you know about Neil?"

"He came to see me once. For a reading. But you haven't answered my question. Would you - could you - kill him, or anyone?"

Conrad remembered his dream. But there was within him a desire to deny that part of himself which would not kill. For a few moments he felt compelled to boast, to answer her question in the affirmative - depicting himself to her as someone ruthless and unafraid. But she was sitting near him, calm and smiling, and it seemed to him that her eyes saw into his thoughts. She would know it was just a boast, the nervous arrogance of naivety.

"I don't know," he said honestly.

"See," she said with a slight tone of censure, "to you all this Satanism is at present a game. An enjoyable one, to be sure, but still a game. Your aura tells a different story. They are serious - they kill, without mercy. They corrupt. Are you ready for all that?"

"You make them sound vile," he said, thinking of Susan, and the bliss he had shared with Tanith. "They are not like that."

"Don't you understand what is happening to you? Of course, now all is pleasure - all is passion and enjoyment. You are being courted, drawn into their web. But soon the perversity will begin. It will start in a small way - something perhaps only a little morally degrading. But soon you will be so involved there will be no escape."

"No, I don't believe it. You're just trying to turn me against them, aren't you?"

"Am I?" she smiled. "I have something to show you."

She fetched her crystal sphere and set it down between them. Carefully she removed the black cloth before making passes over the sphere with her hands.

"Look," she said to him, "and see!"

Conrad peered into the sphere. At first he saw nothing except the reflection of the lights from the candles, but then a blackness appeared within which cleared. He saw the Temple in Aris' house. Susan was there, naked upon the altar, and around her the congregation danced. Then a man went to her, fondling her body before he removed his robe to lay and move upon her. Then the scene changed. Aris was with several other people whose faces Conrad could not see. They were on what looked like a moor, and on the ground a young woman lay, naked and bound. She was struggling, but Aris laughed - Conrad could not hear the laughter, only see the Master as his mouth opened and he rocked from side to side. Then there was a knife in his hand and he bent down to calmly and efficiently slit the woman's throat. Conrad turned away.

"There is more," Denise said,

"So what?" Conrad said, affecting unconcern. "Every war has its casualties. Anyway, what I saw was not real."

"It was. The woman whom you saw murdered was called Maria Torrens. I can show you the newspaper reports of her death if you wish."

"In every period there are victims and masters. The weak perish and the strong survive."

"Do you really believe that?" she asked.

"What if I do?" Conrad said defensively. "Will you try and convert me?"

"You must make your own decisions - and take the consequences that result from your actions, both in this life and the next."

"Belief in an afterlife," Conrad said scornfully, "is merely blackmail to prevent us from fulfilling ourselves - from achieving god-head - in this life."

"You seem set to continue along the dark path you have chosen - despite what I sense about your inner feelings."

"I've made my choice."

"I know," she said softly.

"Tell me, then, why you have helped me?"

Denise smiled, and her smile disconcerted Conrad. "I have no right to judge. I simply help those in need."

"But even so -"

"You should rest now." She covered the crystal with the black cloth.

Suddenly, Conrad felt tired. He lay down among the softness of the cushions and, in the warm room with its gentle candlelight, he was soon asleep. His sleep was dreamless, and when he awoke he was astonished to find Susan sitting beside hi.

XVII

The repair of the window Conrad had shattered was almost complete, and Baynes watched the workmen while Togbare sat, wrapped in a cloak, by the bright fire. Slowly as first, and then heavily, it began to snow again.

When the work was over, Baynes thanked the men, gave them a large gratuity in cash, and stood outside to watch them leave. He was about to return to the warmth of his house when a motor-cycle entered his driveway. It was a powerful machine, ridden by someone clad in red leathers, and he stood in the bright security lights which adorned his dwelling while the rider dismounted and began to remove the tinted visored helmet.

Miranda shook her long hair free. "I have some news for you," she said.

"Shall we go in?" Baynes asked. He gestured gallantly toward the door, and held it open for her.

"You have not met Frater Togbare, have you?" he asked her as he showed her into the study.

Togbare stood to offer Miranda his hand. "Hi!" she said, smiling, but not shaking his hand.

"Please, do sit," Baynes said.

"Denise found him," Miranda said, "and I think she'll need your help!" She looked anxiously at Baynes.

"Found who?" he asked.

"Robury! He's at her house. She didn't want me to tell you - but I had to." Miranda sighed. For over an hour she had sat at her house, wondering what to do. At first, she had thought of going back to Denise. But her memory of Denise's firm insistence persuaded her otherwise. She had tried to forget her own worries about Denise's safety, and had almost succeeded - for an hour, trusting as she had in Denise's psychic ability.

"They are sure to find him," she continued. "She'll be in danger! We must do something!"

"You mean," Baynes said calmly, "Mr. Robury is at present in her house?"

"Yes!" It was an affirmation of her impatience.

"Did he go there himself?" Baynes raised his eyebrows as he glanced at Togbare.

"No - she found him. And we brought him back. He was injured - quite badly, it seemed."

I see." Baynes stroked his beard with his hand. "You took him to her house? Why?"

"She wanted to help him." Then, realizing what she had said, and seeing the exchange of looks between Togbare and Baynes, she added, "It's not like that!"

"You said," Togbare asked her, "she found him. Was she therefore looking for him?"

"Well - in a manner of speaking, yes." The room was hot, and she unzipped the front of her leather suit.

Baynes looked at her as she did so, as if suddenly realizing she was a woman. She noticed his attention and smiled at him, shaking her head so that her long hair framed her face. Suddenly, she saw him as a challenge, for she knew of his avoidance of women. Her own liaison with Denise was only for her a brief interlude in her bisexual life, and she smiled enchantingly at Baynes.

Hastily, Baynes turned away.

"Did she say," Togbare asked her, "why she was looking for him?"

"No. And I didn't ask. You know about her, don't you Oswald?" she said to Baynes, smiling at him again and deliberately using his first name. "About her abilities."

"She is rather gifted in certain psychic matters, yes." He looked briefly at her, then turned away.

"Do you know of recent events," Togbare asked Miranda, "involving Mr Robury and the Satanist group?"

"Only that there was to be some sort of ritual. Denise said something about Robury being important."

"You know of the death of Mr. Fitten and his wife?"

"Yes. She mentioned them."

"You were among the first to know of this Conrad Robury, were you not?"

"Actually, yes. He came to attend one of our meetings."

"Introduced by a certain Neil Stanford?"

"Yes." She turned to look at Baynes, but he staring into the flames of the fire.

"I think it is right and fitting," Togbare pompously said to her, "that we take you into our confidence. Mr Stanford, I am grieved to say, has fallen into the hands of the Satanists - he had, on our instructions, infiltrated the group. However, he was betrayed. We did not know by whom. As you probably are aware, such groups do not take kindly to anyone who betrays them, and therefore since Mr Stanford was kidnapped by Mr Robury and taken to the house of the so-called 'Master', we have been concerned for his safety.

"Yet for some time I myself, and the Council, have suspected that we ourselves have been infiltrated by the Satanists."

Miranda looked first at Baynes and then at Togbare. "And you now suspect Denise?" she asked with astonishment.

It was Baynes who answered. "It is logical - considering what you have just told us."

"I don't believe it! Not Denise!"

"Of course," Togbare said, "we cannot be sure. But Mr Baynes is right - it is logical to presume she may be implicated."

"So you see, Miranda," Baynes said, and smiled at her, "if it is true then she is unlikely to be in danger from them, as you believed."

Miranda sat in a chair, confused by the accusation against her lover yet pleased that Baynes had apparently shown an interest in her. He had used her first name - something he had never done before - and his smile seemed to convey a warmth toward her. Suddenly, it occurred to her that if the accusation was true, Denise had been cruelly using her. The thought saddened her.

"But if you're wrong about her," she said, still unconvinced, "then she will be in danger?"

"For helping Robury?" Baynes said. "I doubt it. You did say she intended to help him?"

"Yes. She was going to use her healing powers."

"Which, to my knowledge, are quite remarkable. Quite remarkable."

"But surely - " Miranda began to say.

"Why did she wish to find him in the first place? And, more importantly, why did she then wish to heal him? For she knew, being with me a member of the Council itself, that he was important to them - to their ritual."

"She was on the Council?" Miranda asked with surprise.

"Why, yes. Did she never tell you? I knew you two were very close friends." Baynes smiled at her.

Miranda blushed, and shuffled in her chair. "No," she said softly, "she never told me." She sighed in sadness, for she remembered what Denise had once said: 'There shall be no secrets between us...'

"He was badly injured, you said?" Togbare asked her.

"Covered in blood."

"Well," Baynes said, "he did jump through that window."

"He was here?" Miranda asked with surprise.

"We had hoped to - how shall I say? - exchange him for Stanford. Now we are back to where we were before."

"But surely the Police - they can help. If Neil has been abducted - "

Baynes shrugged his shoulders and made a gesture of obeisance with his hands. "What evidence have we? What could we say about this conflict which such people would understand?"

"But surely they would listen to someone as well respected as you?"

"Possibly. Even if I sent them to the house of the Master, would they find Stanford there? Of course not. How would I explain why he should have been abducted? What reason - what motive - could I give without appearing as some sort of crank? They would listen, make some routine enquiries, find nothing and decide I was rather strange. No, it is not as easy as that."

"I fear, my child," Togbare said to Miranda, who cringed at his endearment, "that Mr Baynes is right. There have been two deaths, two unfortunate deaths, already. It is due to Mr Baynes' resourcefulness and indeed influence that those deaths have been registered by the authorities as natural ones, unconnected with any suspicious circumstances. And this I myself accepted - for how does one explain to an unbelieving world the true cause of such deaths? If we had tried, then we would now, I am sure, have all manner of journalists intruding upon our affairs,

impeding our investigations and preventing us from achieving our goal - that of ending for once and for all this Satanist threat to our world."

Togbare seemed pleased with his speech, and rubbed his hands together.

Miranda turned to Baynes. "I would like to help," she said.

"Then I suggest we go and see Denise. I shall ask her, directly, where she stands on the matter."

"And if Mr Robury is with her?" Togbare asked.

"I shall persuade him to return with us." He walked to the desk and from a drawer took a revolver which he placed in his jacket pocket.

"Please," Togbare said, "surely we can avoid such complications?"

"There is no choice now," Baynes replied. "Do you wish," he asked Miranda, "to travel with me or use your own transport?"

"With you," she smiled and began to remove her leather suit.

Even Togbare glanced at her fulsome figure. "If," Togbare said, clearing his throat, "Mr Robury is not there - what then, my friend?"

"Sanders - he will know how to enter their Temple. He can be persuaded to tell us. We shall then go to them. You ready?" he asked Miranda.

"Yes."

"Excellent!" He turned toward Togbare. "If we're not back within the hour inform the Police."

"But - " mumbled Togbare. "what shall I say?"

"I'm sure you can think of something!"

"But - "

Baynes did not wait to hear the Mage's words.

XVIII

"She has done well!" Susan said as Conrad sat up. "You are better than we thought."

"How did you get here?" Conrad asked her. He looked around the room, but they were alone.
"The woman - "

"Denise?" Susan said. "You will see her in a while. The Master is pleased to see you."

She helped him to stand.

"Ah! Conrad!" Arise said as he entered the room. "Such determination! You rejected a most tempting offer, I hear."

"Sorry?" Conrad looked at Susan, and then at the Master whose black cloak and clothes seemed to Conrad appropriately suited the Master's gleeful yet sinister countenance.

"An offer - from Baynes," Aris the Master said.

"You talked in your sleep," Susan said before Conrad could ask the obvious question.

"Come," Aris said, gesturing toward the door.

Conrad followed him up the stairs of the house and into a bedroom where Denise lay on a bed, apparently asleep.

"She is yours," Aris whispered to him.

"I'm sorry?"

"It is for you to decide her fate. Take her - possess her if you wish. She has never been with a man. You can be the first."

Aris walked to Denise, touched her forehead with his hand and she awoke. Then there was a knife in his hand and he held it as if ready to strike.

"Your wish?" Aris asked him, and smiled.

Conrad went to her, took her hand in his and kissed it. "Thank you," he said to her sincerely.

The fear that had been in her eyes disappeared.

"And her fate?" Aris said, still holding the knife.

"I don't want her harmed.,"

"As you wish." Aris touched her forehead with his hand, and she closed her eyes in sleep.
"You must go now," he said to Conrad.

"Are you alright?" Susan asked him as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

The face of the Master had shown no emotion as Conrad had expressed his wish, and he was wondering whether the Master disapproved.

"Are you alright?" Susan asked him again.

"Just a little tired," he replied.

"We must go now." She held the front door of the house open as a gesture of her intent, and, in the snowful street outside, he saw her expensive car.

He walked with her out into the coldness to seat himself beside her, and was soon warm in the cocoon of the car watching the snow covered streets and houses as Susan drove almost recklessly in the dangerous conditions.

The music she chose as an accompaniment to their journey seemed to Conrad to reflect his mood and the almost demonic aspirations which underlay it, and he listened intently to Liszt's B Minor Sonata. As he listened, he began to realize that his decision regarding Denise was correct, and they were approaching the Master's dwelling when he concluded it made no difference to him what Aris his Master - or indeed what anyone - thought about it. He would do the same again.

Gedor awaited them at the steps of the house, and held Conrad's door open for him in a gesture which pleased Conrad. The very house itself seemed to welcome him, and he was not surprised when Tanith greeted him in the hall with a kiss.

"They will soon heal," she said as she caressed the dried cuts on his face.

Even Mador came to greet him.

"Welcome Professor!" the dwarf said. "Welcome!"

"The Master will see you soon. But first, you should bathe and change. Mador will show you your room."

As Conrad turned to follow Mador, she added, "And Conrad, from this day forth this house is yours as your home."

Her words pleased him, and he followed Mador, proud of himself. Susan was beautiful, wealthy and powerful, and together they would return the Dark Gods to Earth.

The room Mador led him to was on the top floor of the house. It was large and luxurious and he was surprised to find the cupboards full of new clothes, all in his size. He selected some, and was relaxing in a bath of warm water when the maid entered the room, pushing a trolley replete with food.

She did not speak, but smiled at him through the open bathroom door as he lay, blushing at the unexpected intrusion.

"Thank you!" he said unnecessarily as she left.

It was almost an hour later when he too left, cleaned and fed, to find his way to the library where he assumed the Master would be waiting. It took him a long time, for the house was large and mostly unknown to him.

"Do you find," the Master said to him as he entered the library, "your house pleasing?" He smiled as he sat at the desk, indicating a chair.

Conrad sat down.

"From tonight, all this," Aris continued, "shall be yours."

Conrad could only stare in amazement. Was it a jest?

"There shall be a ritual," Aris said, "whose success will begin that new aeon which we seek. Recall that I said you had a Destiny. Your Destiny is to continue the work which I and others like me have begun. Every Grand Master such as I chooses, when the time is right, someone to succeed him. And I have chosen you. My daughter shall be your guide as your own power develops. She shall be your Mistress, just as Tanith has been mine."

Aris smiled benignly at him. "It is right you are amazed. You have proved yourself fitting for this honour. As to myself, I have other tasks to perform, other places to visit where you at present cannot go. We have tested you, and you have not found wanting. I shall reveal to you secret of our beliefs. We represent balance - we restore what is lacking in any particular time or society. We challenge the accepted. We encourage through our novices, our acts of magick and the through the spread of our ideas that desire to know which religions, sects and political dogmatists all wish to suppress because it undermines their authority. Think on this, in relation to our history, and remember that we are seldom what we seem to others.

"Our way is all about, in its beginnings, and for those daring individual who join us, liberating the dark or shadow aspect of the personality. To achieve this, we sometimes encourage individuals to undergo formative experiences of a kind which more conventional societies and individuals frown upon or are afraid of. Some of these experiences may well involve acts which are considered 'illegal'. But the strong survive, the weak perish. All this - and the other directly magickal experiences like those you yourself have experienced - develop both the character of the individual and their magickal abilities. In short, from the Satanic novice, the Satanic Adept is produced."

He smiled again at Conrad before continuing his Satanic discourse. "We tread a narrow path, as perhaps you yourself are becoming aware. There is danger, there is ecstasy - but above all there is an exhilaration, a more intense and interesting way of loving. We aim to change this world - yes, But we aim to change individuals within it - to produce a new type of person, a race of beings truly representative of our foremost symbol, Satan. Only a few can belong to this new race, this coming race - to the Satanic elect. To this elite, I welcome you."

He passed over to Conrad a small book bound in black leather.

"All this I have said, and more, much more, is written of in here," Aris said. "Read and learn and understand. We shall not speak together again."

He bowed his head, as if respectfully, toward Conrad before rising and taking his leave. Alone in the silence which followed, Conrad though he could hear a woman's voice.

"I am coming for you, I am coming!" it seemed to sing and for an instant he glimpsed a ghostly face, It was Fitten's wife.

Then Conrad was laughing, loudly, at the thought, as he basked in the glory of being chosen by the Master.

"I am the power, I am the glory!" he shouted aloud in his demonic possession as, behind him, the ghostly face cried,

XIX

Several times during their short journey Miranda tried to engage Baynes in conversation and each time she failed. He did not speak even as they left the car near their destination to walk the last few hundred yards.

Only as they approached Denise's house did he relent.

"I fear," he said, pointing to where a car had left its imprint in the snow, "we are too late."

The door was unlocked, and he entered the house cautiously. No sounds came from within the house, and with Miranda in tow he slowly checked every room. The house was empty.

"Has she gone with them?" Miranda asked as they returned to the front door.

"Or been abducted."

"Why would they do that?"

"She would be a prize, I presume. A lady of her - how shall I say? - persuasion would be regarded in some respects as an ideal sacrifice."

"It's my fault," Miranda said sadly.

"Not at all. We still do not know if she is involved with them." He ushered her outside.

"I feel so responsible," she said.

"There is no need," he said kindly.

She took advantage of his tone and his nearness by resting her head on his shoulder. He held her, feebly and briefly, and then drew away.

"Here," he said, giving her the keys to his car, "can you tell Frater Togbare what had occurred?"

"Yes, I will."

"Good. I will make some necessary arrangements."

"To get into their Temple?"

"Exactly. I shall be - say - an hour at most. Tell Frater Togbare to be ready to leave at once."

"Will three of us be enough?"

He looked at her for some seconds before replying. "I cannot allow you to go," he said somewhat pompously.

"Tough! I'm going!" she said with determination.

"No you're not."

She held her head slightly to one side, resting her hands on her hips. "Because I'm a woman?" she demanded, a touch of anger in her voice.

"Actually, yes."

"Oh I see!" she mocked. "It's strictly a job for the boys, is it?"

"It could be dangerous."

"Oh I see! And we weak women, cannot cope with danger, is that what you mean?" By now, she was angry.

"I didn't say that," he protested.

"But you meant it!"

"Look - there are more important things at the moment than this stupid argument!" He himself was beginning uncharacteristically, to become annoyed.

She smiled at him, as if satisfied to have aroused some emotion within him. "We'll be ready when you get back," she said. She did not wait for his reply and walked back toward his car.

Baynes watched her drive away in the falling snow before he returned to the house. The telephone was working, and he dialled Sanders' number.

"Baynes here. Can you meet me? Or should I say - meet me in fifteen minutes."

'Leave me alone! he heard Sander say, 'One favour is - '

"Listen! There will be more money, this time."

'I'm not interested.'

"Just meet me. It will be to your long term advantage. You know what I mean?"

Sanders sighed, and Baynes smiled. 'Where?' he asked.

Baynes gave him the address, and sat in the stairs to wait, Sanders was late.

"That your car?" Baynes asked.

"Yeah."

"Let's go, then."

As they drove away, Sanders asked "Where to?"

"My house. Now - you've been in the Masters' Temple I imagine."

"Possibly."

"Excellent."

Baynes did not speak again until they were inside his house.

"Some friends of mine," Baynes said as he led Sanders into the study where Miranda and Togbare were waiting.

"Hello Miranda," Sanders said.

"You know each other?" Baynes asked, surprised.

Sanders raised his eyebrows and gave a lascivious smile. "I've heard of her. It's a small world, the Occult." He stared at her breasts.

Miranda stared back, and nervously, Sanders looked away.

"You said," Baynes asked him, "you'd been in the Satanist Temple."

"It's a free country," he shrugged.

"Can you lead us there?"

"You're serious?" When Baynes did not answer, he added, "You are serious!"

"Naturally, I would make it worth your while. Financially, of course."

"How much?" he whispered to Baynes.

"Sixty thousand."

"That's a lot of money!" He thought for a minute. "And all I have to do is lead you there, right?"

"Correct."

"When?"

"Now."

"Now?" Sanders said with surprise.

"Yes. And not tricks. I know the Temple is below the house, but I also know there is a secret entrance somewhere, nearby."

"You're well informed," Sanders said with surprise.

"I have my sources of information."

"don't I know it!" Sanders said like an aside. "And the money?"

"Tomorrow. When the Banks open."

"Let's get this straight," Sanders said, twirling the inverted pentagram he wore around his neck. "I lead you there, then I'm free to go right?"

"Correct. Provided, of course, you do not inform anyone of our presence."

"What do you take me for? I know you've got your pet Policemen."

"Shall we go then?"

"Your car or mine?" Sanders quipped.

"Please," Togbare said quietly to Baynes, "may I talk with you? Alone?"

"As you wish," Baynes replied. "Please, excuse us for a moment," he said to Miranda.

Outside, in the hallway, he firmly shut the door to the study.

"This plan of yours," Togbare said, "are we not being too hasty?"

"I don't believe so."

"But to go to their Temple - "

"What choice do we have? They will sacrifice Stanford and for all we know Denise as well. Did Miranda not say that Denise was 'virge intacta'?"

"No."

"Don't you see? I am sure their ritual will be tonight."

"The blood of a virgin - yes, yes," Togbare mumbled.

"Your actual presence at the ritual will I am sure suffice to disrupt it."

"It is possible, yes. But the physical danger - "

"I shall of course leave a message with a friend of mine, a Police Officer. Should we not return, he will investigate. Believe me, there will be no second chance for us. Can we afford to wait? What if we do nothing and tonight they complete their sacrifices and open the gates to the Abyss? What then? The evil they will release will spread like a poison. Large scale demonic possession will occur - madness, crime committed by those weak of will ..."

"Yes, yes of course," Togbare said abstractly, "you are right."

"Their success," Baynes continued, "would give them magickal power - Satanic magickal power - beyond imagining. We would be powerless. And their Dark Gods would return, to haunt the Earth."

"You have only voiced me own fears. I shall prepare myself as we journey to our destination. May God protect us."

Baynes left Togbare mumbling prayers. In the study he found Sanders kneeling on the floor, clutching his genitals, his face contorted with pain. "See," Miranda said to Baynes in triumph, "we women can take care of ourselves! Shall I drive then?"

Both Baynes and Sanders watched her as she left the room.

XX

"Your marriage to our daughter," Conrad remember Tanith had said, "shall be first."

A prelude, he thought to the fugue that would be the opening of the gates to the Abyss.

He stood in the candlelit Temple, resplendent in the crimson robe Tanith had given him for the ceremony. The congregation formed an aisle to the alter upon which the tetrahedron glowed, and he stood in front of it with the Master and Tanith to await his Satanic bride.

There was a beating of drums, and Gedor, with Susan beside him, walked down the stone steps and into the chamber of the Temple. She wore a black veil and a black flowing gown and walked alone past the congregation as Gedor stood guard by the door which marked the hidden entrance.

Tanith's viridian robe seemed iridescent in the fluxing light, and she greeted her daughter with a kiss before joining Susan's hand with Conrad's.

"We, Master and Mistress of this Temple," Aris and Tanith said together, "greet you who have gathered to witness this rite. Let the ceremony begin!"

There was a chant from the many voices of the congregation.

"Agios o Satanas! Agios o Satanas!"

We are gathered here, " the Master said, "to join in oath and through our dark magick this man and this woman, so that hence forward they shall as inner sanctuaries to our gods!"

"Hail to they," Tanith chanted, "who come in the names of our gods! We speak the forbidden names!"

The Master raised his hands and began to vibrate the name Atazoth followed by Vindex while Tanith led the congregation in chanting 'Agios o Satanas! Agios o Satanas! Agios o Baphomet! Agios o Baphomet! while the drums beat ever louder and more insistent. In Tanith's sign, they stopped.

The sudden silence startled Conrad, a little.

"Do you," the Master said to Conrad, "known in this world as Conrad Robury accept as your Satanic Mistress this lady, Amilichus, known as Susan Aris, according to the precepts of our faith and to the glory of our dark gods?"

"I do," Conrad replied.

"Then give me as a sign of your oath this ring."

Conrad accepted the silver ring, and placed it on Susan's finger.

Aris turned to his daughter. "Do you Ambilichus, accept as your Satan Master this man, known in this world as Conrad Robury and whom we now honour as Falcifer in name, according to the precepts of our faith and to the glory of our dark gods?"

"I do," Susan replied.

"Then give as a sign of your oath this ring."

She took the silver ring, and placed it on Conrad's finger.

"See them!" Aris said, "Hear them! Know them! Let it be known among you and others of our kind, that should anyone here assembled or dwelling elsewhere seek to render asunder this Master and Mistress against the desire of this Master and Mistress, then shall that person or persons be cursed, cast our and made by our magick to die a miserable death! Hear my words and heed them! Hear me, all you gathered in my Temple! Hear me, all you bound by the magick of our faith! Hear me you dark gods of Chaos gathering to witness this rite!"

Tanith unbound their hands to swiftly cut with a sharp knife their thumbs. She pressed Conrad's bleeding thumb onto Susan's forehead, leaving a mark in blood, before marking Conrad in the same manner and pressing the two thumbs together to mingle the blood. Then she pressed a few drops of blood from each onto a triangle of parchment. There was a silver bowl on the altar containing liquid which Aris lit before Tanith cast the parchment into the flames.

"By this burning," she said, "I declare this couple wed! Let their children be numerous and become as eagles who swoop upon their prey!"

"But ever remember," Aris said, "you who in joining find a magick which creates, never love so much that you cannot see your partner die when their dying-time has come."

"Let us greet," Tanith said, "the new lord and lady of the dark!"

Tanith's kiss was signal for the congregation to greet the spaeman and his wife.

No traffic came along the narrow lane that led past the neglected woods near the Master's house, and Miranda parked the car partly on the snow-covered verge. The snow had stopped, and there was an almost unearthly beauty about the scene: the snow-capped trees, the virgin white of the fields, the cold quiet stillness of the night air.

But the horizon around the fields began to change, as if the sky itself was full of fury. Red, indigo and thunder purple vied for mastery. Each passing moment brought a change, a subtle shift in colour or intensity. Yet there was no sound, as there might have been if an Earth-bred storm had existed as cause.

Then, as suddenly as it had appeared, the spectacle ceased, to leave Miranda and the others staring at a night sky full-brimming with stars.

"This way," Sanders said as he walked in among the trees.

There was a fence yards within the wood, and he climbed it easily while Baynes gave assistance to Togbare and Miranda. Soon, the undergrowth became thick, but Sanders followed a narrow path deep into the stillness, stopping frequently to wait for his companions. Baynes kept close behind him, one hand in his jacket pocket and holding the revolver.

The snow was deep in places over the path that snaked around trees, bushes, dead bracken and entwining undergrowth, and Togbare stumbled and fell.

"Are you alright?" Miranda asked him.

"Yes, thank you." Slowly, he raised himself to his feet using his stick.

He tried to sense the power of the rituals being undertaken that night on his instructions to try and counter the magick of the Satanists, but he could sense nothing, however hard he strained and however he listened to the emanations from the astral aether. There was nothing, and it took him some minutes as he walked along the path to realise why. The wood was like a vortex in the fabric of space-time, absorbing all the psychic energies that radiated upon it. He sighed, then, at this realization, for he knew it meant they would be alone in the magickal battle to come.

He could see a clearing ahead where the others had stopped to wait for him. As he reached its edge, he was startled by the strange cry of an Eagle Owl. He had heard the cry before, in the

forests of Scandinavia, and looked up to see the large ominous predator swooping down toward Sanders face, its hooked claws ready to strike.

Sanders shielded his face with his arm. Quickly, Togbare raised his stick and the huge owl veered spectacularly away, up and over the trees. It was not long before they hear its harsh call break the silence that shrouded the wood.

"Come," Togbare said, "we must hurry. They will know now that we are here."

XXI

Denise awoke to find herself in a cell. It was small, brightly lit and warm. There was a thong around her neck, and she was still struggling to remove it when her cell door opened.

Neil, dressed in the black robe of the Satanic order, stood outside and motioned her to come forward.

"Listen to me," he whispered, glancing behind him at the stone stairs, "I don't have much time. You must go and warn the others. It's a trap. Here," he handed her a bunch of keys, "take one of their cars. Come on."

When Denise made no move to leave, he said, "Please, you've got to trust me. Frater Togbare will explain."

She looked into his eyes, then smiled. "How do I get out?" she asked, taking the keys.

"I'll show you."

He led her up the stairs and through an archway. "Through that door," he said, "are some stairs. You'll come to another door which leads to a passage. Follow the passage and you'll be in the hall, near the front door of the house. And don't worry, no one is around - they are all in the Temple. Good luck!"

He watched her go before returning to the top of the stairs. He stood in the circular chamber and waited. It was not a long wait, for soon the floor began to turn. The wall parted, revealing the Temple, and he walked down the steps to join the worshippers.

Conrad greeted him. "The Master has just told me," he said, "that you were one of us all along! Sorry if I used too much force."

"You weren't to know," said a relieved Neil.

Aris, Tanith and Susan were standing in front of the altar, the congregation before them, and they waited until Neil and Conrad joined them.

A proud Conrad held up his wedding ring for Neil to see, and Conrad joined them.

"Let the rite of sacrifice begin!" The Master intoned.

Slowly, the congregation began to chant.

"Suscipe, Satanas, munos quod tibi offerimus memoriam recolentes Atazoth," they chanted.

Then they began their dance around the altar, singing a dirge as they danced counter to the direction of the sun.

"Dies irae, dies illa, solvet saeculum in favilla teste Satan cum sybilla. Quantos tremor est futurus, quando Vindex est venturus, cuncta stricte discussurus. Dies irae, dies illa!"

Then the Master was vibrating the words of a chant, Agios o Baphomet, as one of the congregation came away from the dance to kneel before Tanith who bared her breasts in greeting.

"It is the protection," the kneeling man said as he removed the hood which covered his head, "and milk of your breasts that I seek."

Tanith bent down, and he suckled. Then she pushed him away, laughing, and saying, "I reject you!"

The man knelt before her, while around them the dancers whirled ever faster, still singing their chant.

"I pour my kisses at your feet," the kneeling man said, "and kneel before you who crushes your enemies and who washes in a basin full of their blood. I lift up my eyes to gaze upon your beauty of body: you who are the daughter of and a gate to our Dark Gods. I lift up my voice to you, dark demoness Baphomet, so that my mage's seed may feed your whoring flesh!"

Tanith touched his head with her hand. "Kiss me, and I shall make you as an eagle to its prey. Touch me and I shall make you as a strong sword that severs and stains my Earth with blood. Taste my fragrance and I shall make you as a seed of corn which grows toward the sun and never dies. Plough me and plant me with your seed and I shall make you as a gate which opens to our gods!"

She clapped her hands twice, and the dancers ceased their dance to gather round as she lay down beside the man, stripping him naked. Then she was upon him, fulfilling her lust as the congregation clapped their hands in rhythm to his rising and falling body.

"Agios o Baphomet! Agios o Baphomet!" Aris the Master was chanting.

Tanith screamed in ecstasy, and for a moment lay still. Then she was standing, intoning the words of her role.

"So you have sown and from your seeding gifts may come if you obedient hear these words I speak." She looked smiling upon the congregation. "I know you, my children, you are dark yet none of you is as dark or as deadly as I. With a curse I can strike you dead! Hear me, then, and obey! Gather for me the gift we shall offer in sacrifice to our gods!"

She gestured with her hand and two of the congregation ascended the stairs as drum beats began in the Temple. It was not long before one of the men returned, aghast.

"She's gone!" he shouted.

Aris turned toward Neil, and smiled.

"You will do instead," he said.

By the far edge of the clearing lay a wooden hut, and Sanders led them toward it.

"Inside," he said to Baynes, "there's a trap-door in the floor."

He made to move away, but Baynes said, "Show me."

Reluctantly Sanders went inside and lifted the floor covering in a corner. The hut itself was bare.

"There," he said in a whisper.

"Open it then," answered Baynes.

Sanders did so and light from the stairs suffused the hut. "They're all yours!" Sanders said with relief and walked toward the still open door where Miranda stood beside Togbare,

He was about to step outside when he saw them. Three large dogs snarling and running toward him. Hastily he slammed the flimsy door shut. They jumped against it, fiercely barking. Only his weight against it held it firm. They jumped again and again as if possessed and the wood began to splinter.

"Quick!" Baynes said, indicating the stairs.

He helped Miranda and Togbare down and descended the several steps himself.

"Follow me quickly!" he shouted to Sanders who stood, his eyes wide with terror, with his back and arms against the breaking door.

Baynes had gone, and he ran across the floor of the hut, almost stumbling. The door shattered and he was fumbling with the trap-door ring when the first dog attacked. But he succeeded just in time in closing the door, and leant back against the steps, breathing hard as above him the dogs tried to dig around and through the door.

"Come on," Baynes said to him as he stood, stooping, in the narrow tunnel that led away from the stairs.

Sanders said nothing. His eyes and face betrayed his fear.

"You don't have any choice," Baynes said unsympathetically.

Above them, the dogs could be heard howling. Miranda edged past Baynes to take Sanders hand in her own.

The gesture worked, and he followed them as they walked along the tunnel. Soon, it began to slope gently downward, but it seemed a long time before they could not hear the barking and the baying of the dogs.

Gradually, the light began to change in intensity, and it was only a faint glow sufficient for them to dimly see by when Baynes reached the door that sealed off the exit to the tunnel

"Yes, my friend." He felt in his pocket for his crucifix. Dramatically, Baynes withdrew the gun from his pocket before opening the door that led to the Temple. It swung silently on it's hinges.

"She's gone!" they hear a man's voice shout.

XXII

Denise was sitting in Susan's car outside the house when she experienced her vision. She saw the wood, the country lane where Miranda had parked Baynes' car, and she drove toward it, followed her instinct and intuition.

When she arrived, she sensed the woods were a place of danger, both physical and magickal, and she walked cautiously in the snow-steps Baynes and his two companions had left behind, stopping every few minutes to stand and listen. The deep into the wood she went., the more did she become aware of elemental forces. The wood was alive to her - and she had to shut her psychic senses against the myriad images and sensations: a primitive far urging her to flee back to the road and safety; leering and laughing demonic faces and shapes peering out from behind the trees and bushes...

She knew as she walked that the Master and his followers had built with their sinister magick psychic barrier to shield the woods, the house and the Temple. But she was also aware that there were other forces outside this barrier trying to break it down. She saw in her mind groups sitting in a circle within a room within a house... They were focusing their powers upon Togbare: he was their symbol, his stick a magical sword trying like a magnet to attract the energies of their rituals. Her awareness of these rituals, of Togbare's foresightful planning of them, pleased her as she walked in the silence of the wood.

The clearing she entered caused her to stop and stand still for many minutes, and she with her heightened psychic ability sensed the owl before she saw it. And when she did see it, swooping silently toward her, she spoke to it in words like gentle music. It seemed to hover above her head as if listening to her voice before flying silently away.

She was approaching the hut when she heard the dogs. She did not shorten her pace but walked toward the door to see them crouched in a corner as if ready to pounce.

"Hello, little ones!" she said gently and unafraid.

They snarled at her, but did not attack. But they would not let her near. When she moved toward them, they would bare their teeth and growl as if ready to leap at her. But when she moved back toward the door, they sat down on the trap-door watching her.

Several times she tried to edge near, but the response was always the same. She could not seem to break with her gentle magick the barrier which surrounded them.

With a sigh, she settled down to wait, consciously trying to break a hole in the magickal barrier shielding the woods and the Temple, hoping that the white magick outside might break through to aid Togbare in his battle.

As she spun her mantric spells she experienced a vision of Baynes and his companions entering the Satanic Temple.

Baynes was the first to step into the Temple, but Miranda and Togbare soon followed.

The Master turned toward them, as if he had expected them.

"Welcome!" he said.

Conrad saw Gedor go through the door and return carrying Sanders whom he carried toward the altar.

"You have betrayed us!" The Master said to him.

"No! No!" Sanders feebly protested.

"Prepare him!"

"Stop!" Togbare shouted, and raised his stick.

The congregation parted, making an aisle to the Master.

"We must begin," Susan whispered into Conrad's ear.

She was standing in front of him, holding his hands as she had often done before, and Conrad understood. Then Neil was attempting to come between them but Conrad knocked him away. Dazed, Neil retreated to stand beside Togbare.

Gedor was stripping Sanders of his clothes while Tanith stood nearby, holding two knives.

"Stop!" Togbare said again.

The Master held out his hand, his ring glowing. A bolt of energy sprang from it toward Togbare, but it was harmlessly absorbed by the Mage's stick. The tetrahedron on the altar had begun to pulse with varying intensities of light and the Master went to it and laid his hands upon it. As he did so he became engulfed in golden flames. Togbare raised his magickal staff and he too became surrounded by light.

Susan tightened her grip on Conrad's hands and he suddenly felt the primal power of the Abyss within him. He was not Conrad, but a vortex of energy. Then he was in the darkness of space again, sensing other presences around him. There was an echo of the sadness he had felt before, and then the vistas of stars and alien worlds, world upon world upon world. He became, briefly, the crystal upon the altar, the Master standing beside it. But there were other forces present and around him, trying to send him back into his earthly body and seal the rent that had appeared and which joined the causal universe to the acausal where his Dark Gods waited. He became two beings because of this opposition - a pure detached consciousness caught in the vortex of the Abyss, surrounded by stars, and Conrad, standing holding the hands of his Satanic Mistress in the Temple. His earthly self saw the astral clash between Togbare and the Master as their radiance was transformed by their wills and sent forth, transforming the colourful aura of their opponent. He saw Tanith give Sanders a knife. Saw Gedor approaching him, brandishing his own. Saw the congregation gather around the fight as they lusted for the kill - Sanders tried several times to get away, but the encircling congregation always pushed him back toward Gedor. Baynes, Neil and Miranda were beside Togbare and partly enclosed in the luminescence of his aura.

Then Conrad seemed free again to wander through the barriers that kept the two universes apart. He and Susan, together, had been a key to the gate of the Abyss, his own consciousness freed by the power of the crystal and the Master's magick. He was free, and would break the one and only seal that remained.

In the Temple, the fight did not take long to reach its conclusion. Sanders seemed to have become possessed by the demonic atmosphere in the Temple and attacked several times, slashing at Gedor with his knife. But each time Gedor had moved away. Sanders tried again, and harder, after Gedor cut his arm. He caught Gedor's hand and turned to be stabbed by Gedor in the throat.

"The third key!" Tanith shouted in triumph.

The spurting blood seemed to vaporise and then form an ill-defined image above the altar. It became the face of the Master, of Conrad, of a demon, of Satan himself.

Suddenly, Neil snatched the gun from Baynes. The shot missed the Master, and Baynes knocked Neil over.

Togbare, distracted, looked at Baynes and then at the Master. He felt in that instant the Satanic barrier protecting the Temple break, and renewed magickal power flowing down toward him, energizing his staff and his own aura. He pointed the staff at the Master, sending bolts of magickal energy. They reached him, and the auric energy around the Master, and the shape above the altar, vanished. But Baynes leapt forward to snatch the staff and break it over his knee.

As he did so, the aura around Togbare flickered, and then disappeared. But the old man was too quick for Baynes, and bent down to retrieve part of his stick which he threw at the crystal, hitting it. As it struck, the crystal exploded, plunging the Temple into darkness.

There was then no magickal energy left, and Togbare calmly led Miranda and Neil back along the tunnel to the hut. The dogs departed quietly the instant the crystal shattered, leaving Denise free to open the trap-door. When Togbare and the others reached her, she realized Neil had gone insane.

Togbare smiled at her as she closed the trap-door, and then he quietly fell to the floor. She did not need to check his pulse, but did so nevertheless as Neil stood over her, dribbling.

Togbare was dead, and over the trees the Eagle Owl sent its call.

The darkness in the Temple lasted less than a minute, and when it was over both the Master and Tanith had vanished. Conrad looked around and saw Baynes walking toward him. The congregation still stood around the body of Sanders, looking at Conrad and waiting, as Susan looked and waited.

Without speaking, Baynes took hold of Conrad's left hand and bent down to kiss the ring in a gesture of obeisance. Suddenly, Conrad understood. He was not just Conrad but a channel, a like, between the worlds. He would be, because of this, the Anti-Christ and had only to develop and extend his already burgeoning magickal powers for the Earth to become his domain. For by dark ritual a new beast had been born, ready and willing to haunt the Earth. A few more rituals, and his invading legions would be ready.

His laugh reverberated around the Temple.

Epilogue

Barred windows? Neil shook his head as if he could not remember before returning to his seat. The television was on, as it always was during the day, and he watched it in the smoky, grimy room. He did not know what he watched, but it passed a few hours.

Occasionally he would rise from his chair to stare around the room or out of the window. Once, someone brought him some tablets and he took them without speaking, and, once he wandered across the room to watch two of his fellow patients play a game of snooker on the worn table with cues that were not quite straight. But neither the game nor they themselves interested him, and he resumed his chair, sunk into his stupor.

Baynes watched him briefly as he sat with the psychiatrist in the small almost airless room at the end of the ward.

"Yes, indeed," the man was saying, "a perplexing case."

"And, he mentioned my name?"

"Once, a few days ago, when he was admitted. He said something about an Eagle Owl, but it didn't really make much sense. You met once I believe?"

"Yes. He was a student, at the University. Into drugs, I understand. And the Occult - that sort of thing. He wanted to borrow some money. Rambled on about some conspiracy or other."

"Well," he fumbled with the folder that contained Neil's psychiatric case notes, "I won't keep you any longer."

"He is receiving treatment, then?"

"Of course. Medication at the moment - although tomorrow we shall start ECT."

"Electroconvulsive therapy?" Baynes asked.

"Yes."

Baynes looked at Neil, and smiled. "If there is anything I can do to help - " he said formally to the Doctor as he stood to leave.

"We have a note of your address."

"Good bye, then."

Neil did not even look at Baynes as he walked through the ward to the door that led down the stairs and out into the bright sunlight.

The sun warmed the air, a little, but insufficient to melt any of the snow, and Denise stood by a large Beech tree in the grounds of the hospital, watching Baynes leave. She knew better than to try and follow him, and went back to her car where Miranda waited, asleep.

Miranda could remember nothing of the events in the Temple, but by using her own psychic skills, Denise was beginning to understand them. She did not know what, if anything, she could do. All she knew was that she had to try.

The Temple Of Satan

A Symphonic Allegory

“Baphomet is a goddess of violent aspect who washes in the blood of her foes. She is the bride of Lucifer – a Gate to the Dark Gods beyond this Earth.

Traditionally, Baphomet is associated with the magickal grade of Mistress of Earth – the fifth of the seven stages that mark the Satanic path. Her daughters are Power, Vengeance and Lust, but the only Earth – based living child to be born from these children is the Demon named Love....

Herein are truths to set against the lies and distortions of Elisphas Levi and others.

Book Of Recalling

Prologue

Melanie was a beautiful woman, and she had grown used to using her beauty for her advantage. Her crimson robes, her amber necklace and her dark hair all enhanced it, and she smiled without kindness at the overweight man prostrate before her.

The black candles gave the only light but she could still see the parchment paleness of his naked skin as the dancers chanted while they danced sun-wise in the temple to the beat of the tabors.

Beside her, a man cloaked in black declaimed in a loud voice words of Initiation.
"Do you bind yourself, with word, deed, and oath to us, the seed of Satan?"

"I do," the nervous, prostrate man replied.

"Then understand that breaking your word is the beginning of our wrath!" He clapped his hands, and the dancers gathered round. "Hear him! See him! Know him!"

Seven beats from a tabor and the dancers broke their enclosing circle, sighing as Melanie raised her whip. The sweating men knew it was a formality, a ritual gesture without pain. But Melanie smiled, and beat him till he bled.

Then she was laughing. "Dance!" she commanded, and they obeyed, completing the ritual to its end. And when it was over and the bloated man with the freshly bloodied skin drew some pleasure as he slumped by the altar in the climax of a whore's sexual embrace, Melanie left to swim naked in the sensuous warmth of her pool.

Soon, only the chief celebrant remained, waiting for her in the small study by her hall. He was a tall man of gaunt face whose eyes brought to some a remembrance of the image of someone who was mad. For years, in a monastery and fed his body and tried to break his spirit but he had given way to temptation and sought the road of sin.

Melanie dress hid little of her flesh, and she sat on the edge of the desk beside him, smiling as he turned his eyes away. He wanted her body, and she knew it and the reason why he would do nothing.

"You are going bored with us, " he said.

"And you are afraid."

"Of where you might be leading us?"

"The Ceremony of Recalling."

"But no one, for a long time, has dared-"

She leaned over him, caressing his lips with her finger. "If I find you sacrifice, have you faith enough to do the ritual and slit his throat?"

I

Thurstan's past seemed to him to consist of a series of disconnected memories and, as he sat above the stream while hot sun drew sweat from his body and a light breeze carried it away from the summit of the hill, tears filled his eyes.

His memories were of women. There was a beauty, and ecstasy about their recalling as there was about his gestures of love and as he remembered he experienced again the intensity of life that those gestures had brought him.

He remembered walking one late perfume-filled Spring evening to see, for just a few minutes, the woman he loved before she left for the company of another man. It was, he remembered, a long walk begun with the sun of afternoon was warm and the bridge that joined the banks of the river Cam where they in Cambridge would meet only an image-distance and hopeful-in his mind. He remembered, years later, a cycling 15 miles through a winter blizzard to take his letter to the house of the woman he then loved while she slept, unaware of his dreams. He remembered the exhilaration of running through the streets of the city to catch the last train and the long walk in the early morning cold to a house to apologize to the woman he loved.

Yet the tears, which came to him, were not the tears of sorrow. Everything around him seemed suddenly more real and more alive - the larks which sang high above the heather-covered hills, the sun, the sky, the very Earth itself. They, and he himself, seemed to almost to possess the divine.

He sensed the promise of his own life - as if in some way he and the woman he loved were, or could be, the instrument of a divine love, a means to reveal divinity to the world. Yet the divinity he sensed was not the stark god of religion, or even to one omniscient God, and the more he experienced and the more he thought he realize it was not god all. It was a goddess.

This thought pleased him. He felt he had re-discovered an important meaning, maybe even the ultimate meaning, about his life, and he walked slowly down the from the hill to wash his face in the cold water of the stream.

The loss of his wife held no sorrow for him now and the sad resignation of yet another loss began to fade. Like a little boy, he took off his shoes and socks and paddled along in the stream.

There was no Natalie to share this with him as he might have wished, and his meeting with her seemed a dream. Was it a week since you come upon her, sitting by the bank of the river Severn in tree-full Quarry Park while, around, the town of Shrewsbury became drier for the hot sun of summer?

He could remember almost every word of their conversation – she had smiled as he had passed and he, shy and blushing, spoke of the weather, of how the long heat had lowered the level of the water. On her delicate fingers – a ring with a symbol of the Tao. So he had asked, and had sat beside her. For two hours they talk, revealing their pasts like two friends.

"Without my dreams," she had said, "I would be nothing" and he hid his tears.

There is a beauty in her words, in her eyes, sadness in the softness of her voice and by the time she rose to leave he was in love, although he did not realize it then. "Can I see again?" yet asked. She was unsure, but agreed and he gave for his address, named a day and time and watched her walk away wanting but not daring to run and embraced her.

And then she was gone, lost to his world. A day only was over before he found her address and sent her flowers. Next day – her long, sad letter. "I have nothing to give," she had written. "You were my random audience."

He sent more flowers, but sat alone by the river at the appointed time before the dying sun dried away and the foolish vapor of his dreams.

The cold water of the stream refreshed him and he bathed his face again the slowly his sadness returned, only muted by his ecstasy. No one passed him as he walked along the paths that wound down of among the hills. There was no one to welcome him home, and the sat by the window in his small cottage wondering what he should do. The hills of south Shropshire, the isolation, the garden - all had lost their charm. Somewhere, beyond the valley, the hills, the villages and the town, his wife would be happy within the arms of another man.

It was not a long walk from his cottage to the town and it's station, but the heat of the day oppressed him as it made up their other passengers in the stuffy, noisy train sit silent and still throughout the short journey.

Variegated people mingled over the sun-shadowed platforms of the Shrewsbury station and Thurstan followed two young girls as they walked along the concrete above the sun-glinting lines of steel, which carried a diesel engine through the humid air that vibrated with it's power the ground and buildings around. A wooden barrier siphoned the arrivals down dirty stone steps and ultramodern doors to the traffic-filled streets of Shrewsbury.

It was the streets the Thurstan realized he was afraid. He believed he could sense the feelings behind the faces of the people passed in the streets – and not only sense them, but feel them as if they were his own. He felt the nervous of vulnerability of a young girl as she waited, half-afraid by the frontage of a shop where people jostled, and an intimation of her gentle innocence being destroyed troubled him. He felt the anger of a young mother as she scolded her screaming child while cars passed, noisy, in the street: the pain of an old man as he hobbled supported by a stick toward the pedestrian precinct where youths gathered, waiting.

Thurstan fled from the people, their feelings, the noise, and the latent tension he could feel in the air to sit by the river in Quarry Park. The sun, the flowing water, the warm grass all calmed him. He sat for over an hour, occasionally turning to watch a few people who passed along the paths. The sense of an affinity, perhaps a love, for the individuals around him – an empathy that he could not, even if he had wished, formulate into words. But this insight was destroyed by a woman.

She was beautiful, the woman who passed him as she walked along the path near where he sat vaguely wondering about love. She seemed to smile at him, but he could not be sure for she passed under the shadow of a tree while sunlight narrowed his eyes. His feelings in that

moment or not mystical but rather a strange mixture of gentle sexual desire, expectation and a burgeoning vitality mixed with the anguish of shyness, and he was resigned to simply remembering the moment as he had remembered such moments before when the woman turned around and smiled.

Thurstan felt as though he had been punched in the stomach. The woman turned, past a tree to walk under the bridge that fed a road over the river, and up toward the town along a narrow, stone-lined passage, leaving Thurstan to his turmoil. Then he was on his feet, and following.

He wanted to run, but dared not. So he followed, quickening his step. He would catch her when the lane met the road ahead between High School and Hospital. Perhaps she sensed him lurking behind and was afraid, for she seemed to Thurstan to quicken her step and he was left to follow her not knowing what he would do. She crossed the road. Thurstan saw nothing except her and decided not to follow her anymore, when she turned, almost stopped, and smiled at him again. He felt she was waiting for him and this feeling made him follow her along the empty pavement and down a narrow cobbled street towards the empty market of an empty town.

He was within yards of her when she vanished into one of the many small shops that lined the street. 'J. Apted – Antiquarian Books' the sign above the door read.

No bells sounded when the Thurstan entered and in the musty dimness he peered around the shelves. A portly gentleman with a genial face stared back at him.

"Can I help you at all, sir?" he asked.

In this small room beyond the shelves Thurstan could see no one. "A woman – did woman just come in here?" Thurstan asked shyly, and blushed.

"A woman?"

"Yes - long red hair, green eyes, wearing a long dress."

The man smiled, kindly. "No one but yourself as entered here this last hour."

Fear of having mistaken the shop, which he saw her enter, made Thurstan rush towards the door when he saw her portrait, in oils, upon the wall.

It was only several minutes later, after questioning the bookseller, that Thurstan realized he is seen a ghost. The woman had been dead for 50 years.

II

Fifty years, the bookseller and said.

"Is sad business, yes indeed. Murdered she was. In here - in this very house. I was a school then, you see.

"You saw her, you said?" And the old man's eyes seemed to brighten.

The Thurstan had thanked him and fled through the humid people the streets to find a train to take him toward his home. He could not sleep that night and the next day, at the same time, he was in the park again, but she did not appear and he walked away to stand for nearly an hour near the bookshop trying to find the courage to go in.

The bookseller was not surprised to see him. "She is beautiful, yes?" he said as Thurstan stood staring at the painting.

"Where did you see her first?", the old man asked directly.

Thurstan turned towards him, and shyly shuffled his feet. "I -" he began.

The man smiled kindly. "I have always felt this place is still her home but, alas, I have myself never have never met her, as you have done."

"I didn't realize -"

"That what you saw was an apparition? They appear so real, you see. I myself a small interest in such matters. Would you like some tea?"

The invitation was still unexpected and so kindly meant to the without thinking Thurstan said, "Yes - that would be rather nice."

"Shall we retire-to somewhere more comfortable?" the man smiled and wrung his hands.
"I shall close early, today!"

The room beyond the shop was, like the shop itself, lined from floor to ceilings by books and like the books the table, chairs and desks were antiquarian. There is a large and oddly shaped specimen a rock crystal on the table and Thurstan bent down to examine it. A face - the face of a beautiful woman -was within it but Thurstan had barely recognized it when it vanished.

"Help me!" he thought he heard a sad, distant voice, say.

The bookseller brought a tray, offered a mug of tea, some biscuits and cake while Thurstan waited, half -watching the crystal and half -expecting to hear the distant voice. He ate and drank, and listened to the words of the old man without really understanding them. Somewhere, in a nearby recess or room, a large clock struck the quarter hour.

His nervous expectancy, the heat, the man's slow but consistent voice, all combined to make Thurstan disposed towards sleep and he felt himself drifting into to embrace the temptation when a lot and persistent wrapping awoke him.

"I'm sorry," the booksellers said. "Would you excuse me?"

The Thurstan heard a brief curse, the door being unlocked and a few words of a hurried conversation that followed. He was staring into the crystal when the bookseller returned alone. Nearby, the hidden clock marked the passing of half an hour.

The old man did not smile but stared, nervously, at the floor while he said: "I must go. An appointment, you understand. You will not be offended I hope?"

"No, of course not".

"Perhaps -", but he looked up and cast his eyes down again before leading Thurstan towards the door. He saw Thurstan look again at the woman's portrait but pretended not to notice.

"Well, good-bye," Thurstan said, perplexed by the sudden change a man's aura.

"It was nice meeting you, Mr. Jebb."

Thurstan held out his hand, but the bookseller shuffled away, leaving Thurstan to stumble down the step and awkwardly close the door. He had almost reached Quarry Park where a warm sun cast cool tree shadows over the grass when he realized he'd never told the man his name. But this strangeness did not concern him for long as he walked down to the river to sit on a bench, trying to remember what the bookseller had said.

It had been about apparitions, but not in general and not about the ghost of Thurstan and seen, as he sat watching the strong river flow silently by, he felt his sadness returning. He would never meet her. Never be able to share his dreams, visions and love. He tried hard to wish himself back in time - 50 years before. He would walk to her house and wait. He would not care how long he waited. But he would be ready and somehow save her.

It was childish fantasy and he knew it was, but still he had to control himself to prevent the tears. "There's so much I don't understand", he said to himself aloud and a young girl, prettily dressed, moved away from him, fearful, as she passed by his bench.

His tiredness returned, slowly, brought by sun and his sadness and he closes his eyes to briefly sleep. No sound woke him from the dream about his wife - only a beautiful scent, nearby. A woman had sat beside him on the bench and for almost a minute he feared to look at her. But then she seemed about to leave and he turned, in desperation.

Her dark hair was cut gracefully to fall just above her shoulders and she wore a necklace of polished amber.

"Do you often gawp like that at a strange woman?", she said as he sat open mouth and unbelieving. Only the color of her hair and manner of dress was different.

"I...", Then: "I'm sorry, but you are so beautiful," he said without thinking as he let out his breath.

She smiled but stood up to leave.

"Please- ", Thurstan stood beside her, unable to control himself, and held her arm as she turned.

She was alive, and in his joy at this he forgot his fear of her reaction. But only for an instant. He jerked his hand away.

"Yes?"

He struggled to find words would make sense but his thoughts were fastly moving water breaking over the weir of dread.

She's saved him from this turmoil. "You may invite me to share a pot of tea with you at the cafe around corner."

"What? Yes, of course."

He walked beside her, awkward and blushing, for many yards before she spoke again.

"You are an interesting man."

"Do you live in Shrewsbury?" he managed to say.

"Nearby."

"Do you often walk along here?" The banality of his questions pained him - but she would think him a fool or mad, if he formed his chaos of feelings into words. And did not want to lose her.

"Sometimes."

It was a strange sensation for Thurstan walking beside the beautiful woman. Was she a vision sent to haunt him-or was his dream the ghost of yesterday? But he knew she was real as the seemed to know the she was interested in him. In him, Thurstan Jebb. Perhaps she was intrigued. Was it something in his eyes, he wondered, that gave him away? For a long time he had believed he was different - a mystic perhaps, who felt and saw more than others. This secret knowledge give him security in the outer barrenness of his life as he eked out a type of living as a gardener, content to have forgotten his past.

"You are an interesting man", he heard in his head like an echo, and he smiled.

"May I ask your name? " he said, feeling his mouth go dry.

She turned and smiled. "Melanie."

"Melanie, " he repeated, like a fool.

"Yes. I believe it comes from the Greek for black."

"Hence your black dress."

"Not really. I think the color suits me, don't you?"

Unexpectedly, she twirled around, laughing.

"I think most colors would suit you." she smiled at him again and Thurstan wanted to from embrace her-more from sexual desire than from any nobler feeling. This sudden desire surprised him with its intensity and he began to tremble. It seemed to him natural that he should be walking with her, for she was not like a stranger to him. He wanted to hold her hand as they walked away from the river up a narrow street to were an almost empty cafe lay, renovated and waiting beside the boarded up windows and doors of a once notorious Inn. "Barrick Passage", the street sign read.

They sat in silence for a long time as their Darjeeling tea cooled. "I don't", Thurstan said and blushed, "make a habit of this."

"What? Drinking tea on a half a hot afternoon, " she teased.

"No-I mean inviting strange ladies.... "

"Am I strange then?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"Don't worry," Melanie laughed. "Anyway, I invited you!"

Her smile made Thurstan's desire return. She seemed to be waiting-expectant. There was warmth and her eyes, in her smile, even in a way that she leaned her body slightly towards him. Her dress to emphasized her breasts as her necklace emphasize her green eyes and Thurstan greedily sucked in her beauty through his eyes as he sucked in her perfume through his nose. Her skin was tanned and he found it impossible to judge her age. He wanted to tell her of the ghost he seen-of his dreams and hopes and visions about life. But all he did, trembling of limbs and with straining heart, was reach across the table and hold her hand.

She did not flinch nor move away as half of him expected, but slowly stroked the back of his hand with her thumb. He was elated with his success, and closed his eyes in delight.

"You are trembling, " she said, gently.

Slowly, he shook his head. "I can't believe this. There are so many things I want to say."

"Don't say them. Let's just enjoy this moment."

"You are so beautiful." he reached up and stroked her face with his fingers.

"Will you walk with me to my car? "

Dazed, he followed her out of the building to walk beside her. She did not seem to mind when he held her hand.

Several men turned to stare at her as they descended the shop-strewn steepness of Wyle Cop, to cross the busy road. Thurstan was oblivious to it all.

The luxury of her car surprised him and he stood beside it under a hot sun, tongue-tied and embarrassed and feeling lost. Only the wealthy could afford such a car.

"You seem surprised, " she said, breaking free her hand to find the keys in the pocket of her dress.

Their slow but short walk from the cafe had unsettled Thurstan, for the magick of the moment they had shared it appeared to him to have drifted away to another world, and he had convinced himself that he had been mistaken. There would be nothing more-except perhaps the future possibility of him trying somehow trying to painfully recapture her those moments: to draw her on toward the fulfillment of desire. But she held passenger door of the car open for him, saying, "Come on." Obedient, he sat beside her, while chaos returned to his head.

Skillfully she drove through the streets to take a road westerly from the town while Thurstan watched and waited, so full of anticipation that he could not speak. She turned to smile several times as a miles lay numberless because uncounted behind them and a strong summer sun colored the sky deep blue, he found his desire increasing. He knew she sensed this, and drove faster as if intoxicated both by the power of the car and his feelings toward her. The road rose steadily through small village, past cottage and house, to turn and returned between the Stiperstone rocks and the growing hills that became Wales, leading up from a tree-lined valley to the desolate wastes of marshlands were abandoned mine-workings lay.

Melanie left the main road before drop slowly between Corndon and Black Rhadley hills to follow a low hedged-hemmed lane over the border to Wales. The lane rose and fell to rise again between fields worn for centuries only by sheep and sparse of tree. Then, quite suddenly, Melanie stopped.

Thurstan felt her anger before he saw it in her eyes. She was staring at him, but he only smiled. For a moment, she did not seem quite human and when he reached out for her hand and she snatched it away.

He was perplexed by this change in her rather than afraid and sat, quietly waiting and smiling. When she looked away, he said, "I can walk back if you wish."

She did not turn around. "It might be best."

"I'm sorry if I have upset to you in any way. I thought-"

"I know what you thought!" she said savagely.

"No-not just that." he closed his eyes to see within the fleeting impression of his dreams. The days, hours, minutes shared: the moments of intuitive closeness - sharing a sunset, a snowy day in Spring, laughter, tears, and physical joy. The look, touch, feeling of lovers.

Thurstan did not want to lose his dreams. "You are a rare, precious and beautiful woman. There is something about you - I don't know what it is." he felt so much love within him that wanted to share that his words could not be stopped. "I sensed something about you when we sat by the river. Call me mad - or a fool, or both. I don't care. You sensed it too, I know."

Angry still, she said, "What did you sense then?"

"Then maybe you are my Destiny." gently, he stroked her face.

"Your dreams are not real."

"They are if I make them real." He sighed and stared out the window. A raven flew nearby, but it did not interest him. "Maybe it was the goddess I saw in you, I don't know. I've certainly made a fool of myself this time, haven't I?"

"You interest me, " she said, her anger gone.

"And you perplexed me." Since he felt he ought to be honest he added, and it arouses my desire. But you know that. As you know that basically I'm just a romantic fool with a headpiece filled with dreams."

"You do not know anything about me."

"I have always found the beginnings of relationships difficult. The tentative steps, the gradual of unraveling of lives. It always seemed such a waste-there are so many more important things. And I'm not talking about the physical aspect either. I always plunge straight in - rather bad choice of phrase - the grand passion every time. Never seem to learn either.

"So, it's not important for you to know me. I sense things about you. I see your beauty, smell your perfume, and am intoxicated. You offer the choice of existence, meaning, bliss, sorrows, tears. Whenever. It does not matter - I am alive again! Really living. Full of energy, anticipation. You are music, poetry, dance - even religion."

He laughed. "Now you know that I am mad!"

Slowly, she drove on to where a cottage with a sagging roofs and decaying walls grew beside the road, sheltered from sheep by a small garden where a rusty dismembered tractor lay dead. Incongruous beside it was a new car, spreading bright sun. Melanie stopped, and entered the cottage without knocking on its paint-peeling door. Less than a minute later she returned.

"I must see you again," she said she started her car. "Now I have other matters that must be attended to. "Joel," she indicated the men who emerge from the cottage "shall take you back."

Thurstan look perplexed so she said, "Don't worry," and touched his face. "You were not mistaken. Meet me tomorrow night at nine where we met today. Can you do that?"

"Of course!"

"Good. Now I must go."

To Thurstan surprise, she leaned over and kissed him on the lips. Then he was outside the metal womb of the car. She did not wave, but drove quickly away to leave him standing beside the ugly man with a madman's grin.

Over the cottage, a raven flew to shadow him briefly from the sun.

III

They were waiting for her, in the small wood near the circle of ancient stones. Algar, Master of her Temple, smiled as he watched her walk alone towards them.

"So," he said, "he was not to be our chosen." In the light of the wood, his dark gaunt features were sinister.

"There shall be other times." Melanie did not take she offered robe. "Tomorrow when dark comes, we shall gather here again."

"For the sacrifice?" Algar asked.

"Perhaps." She addressed her followers directly. "Go now. And tomorrow we shall feast and rejoice!"

She did not wait but turned back along the track toward he car. Almost obsequious, Algar walked beside her.

"But he was receptive?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You do a particularly fetching in that dress if I may say so." Then, seeing her indifference, he said, "Shall you lure him tomorrow?"

"He may not be suitable."

"Oh? Why would that be then?"

Melanie stopped and stared at him and he visibly cowered. "What do you mean?"

"I meant nothing," he said truthfully. But her anger aroused suspicion.

"The new candidate?"

Algar smiled. "He is healed well. He would like to see you, privately of course."

"Of course. Tonight?"

"I could arrange it, if you wish."

"Arrange it!"

The humid heat of the evening annoyed her while she waited, and when he did come, brought forth from the darkness outside her house by Algar, she was impatient to begin. Algar took

the man's money before leading him into the candle-lit incensed Temple where he stripped and bound him to the frame.

But the frenzied whipping of the fat man with bulging eyes and pale skin did not bring forth the joy of pleasure she anticipated - only a hatred that quickly passed as the men groaned and sighed, taking his own dark pleasure from his pain. There was little blood upon the back and buttocks of the man and Algar, leering in the shadows, was surprised when she stopped. The bound man turned to look up at her, his eyes pleading for the pleasure her pain and dominance brought him. He to see her breasts clearly through her thin sweat-stained robe, but his hands were bound by leather thongs to the cold aluminum frame and he could not reach out and touch them as he wished.

There was a strange desire within Melanie and appalled her. She tried to destroy it by fulfilling her role as Satanic whip queen and surrendering again to the joy she found in dominating and debasing the men she despised. But did not work and the lashes she gave became softer until they stopped completely. In disgust at herself she threw the leather scourge upon the altar to let Algar disrobe and take his own selfish pleasure upon the man whom he unbound and pushed roughly to the floor.

Her swim in the warm water of her pool settled some of her feelings, a little, so she was able to plan how best Algar could kill her chosen sacrifice. She and she alone would dare to call the Dark Gods back to Earth. The chosen would be easy to entice to their sacred circle of stones as he had been easy to capture, and the more she thought of the deed to come, the more at the anticipated pleasure covered and obscured her remembrances of his gentle dreams.

She was Melanie, Mistress of the Earth in the Temple of Darkness: ruler of a coven of fifty. No man would mold her feelings. For years she had schemed, cheated, manipulated and lied, building from the foundations of her beauty and sexuality the wealth and power he craved as a girl. She was fifteen when her parents died when the plane they were in crashed. A teacher befriended her and was not long before she realized the power her innocents and beauty gave her. He was her first victim, but she soon tired of him and his small gifts and sought more wealthy prey. But she despised them all, is man who lusted after her - they would sell their souls, most of them had, for short pleasure she sometimes allowed them to find her body. Thurstan would be no exception.

It would be good, she felt, to sacrifice him at the moment he achieved his desire. This thought pleased her and she swam slowly, allowing the physical exertion and the warmth of all of water to gently excite her.

Algar watched the rear lights the man's car fade on the long driveway from the house before he shut the door. Melanie was upstairs, asleep, and he did not creep but walked boldly through the hall to her secret Temple. It was a small room, windowless and black, containing only a chair and a wooden plinth on which stood a large quartz tetrahedron.

A diffuse light, reddish in hue, was thrown upward from the opaque floor and for many minutes Algar sat in the chair amid the warm and perfumed air. He felt powerful, sitting there instead of a kneeling on the floor while she sat smiling and forming her thoughts into the crystal to become the chains, which bound him.

"With a look or smile," he remembered she had said, "I can strike you dead!". He did not doubt it. Three years ago she had stolen his power.

For ten years he had followed the way of his Prince gathering allies and power. Even as a boy he'd followed some of these ways, but his teachers and superiors had mistaken his hatred for intellectual sophistry, his dark interior life for spirituality and his ruthless ambition for spiritual gifts. The world of monastic schooling was all he had ever known or wanted and it was natural that it should lead him to a novitiate and the Order of his teachers.

For one year, and one year only, he tried to follow their way until Bruno the elder novice had one night seduced them as he lay in his cold monastic cell.

For weeks afterwards he had prayed to the Prince, "Our Father, which wert in heaven hallowed be thy name in heaven as it is on Earth. Give us this day our desire and delivers us to evil as well as temptation for we are your kingdom for aeons and aeons. Prince of Darkness, hear me."

Bruno died soon after, in his sleep, an expression of stark terror on his face. "Heart attack" a doctor had said, but Algar knew his humiliation had been avenged.

He was a Priest, his dark life hidden and the source of satisfaction, when he first met her. It was a cold morning in Spring and she stood outside his little church, radiantly beautiful in the light of the sun. "I have come, " she said, "to ask you to say a Mass for us". She held out her left hand and he saw the strange symbol on her ring. Obedient, he knelt down to kiss it. "How did you know?" he asked. She smiled, not kindly despite her beauty. "I have seen you at night to pray to our Prince."

The crystal guided her. That very night he presided as priest and a Black Mass and afterwards, with only her servant Lois remaining in her large house, she had bound his will with her own. He had been standing by the crystal when Lois had stripped him bare and offered her body. Then Melanie the dark witch was laughing but his sudden anger was no match for her power and she stared at him before binding him by curse.

Her eyes seemed to suck as will away and she unthreaded an amber bead from many she wore around her neck. "In this bead I bind you by the power of our Prince! Binan ath ga wath am!" she chanted. "Nythra!..." He watched silent and paralyzed while she counted the fifty beads she wore around her neck. The crystal gave power to and magnified her thoughts and when she released him he stared at it for several minutes. But it was useless - he could do nothing with it and calmly allowed himself to be led by Lois to his room. And when he awoke, worn and feeling old, there was a beautiful boy, waiting naked, by his bed. "I am her gift" the burgeoning man had said...."

Algar sighed as he remembered. Even after three years he did not know the secret of her crystal but he did know the Satanic organization she had created to keep her power and wealth, and as he walked from her temple to find a telephone, he was smiling.

"Rathbone?" he said into the telephone receiver. "This is Algar. I believe you owe us a favor ...I have a job for you."

Upstairs, unknown to or her High Priest, Melanie was awake and watching him on the monitor screen of her discretely installed surveillance system.

IV

Thurstan was early. It was a humid evening and he sat by the river enjoying the twilight. The new clothes he had bought for the occasion made him feel self-conscious and every few minutes he would look around. But the few people who wandered by did not - or pretended they did not - notice him and he would be left to rehearse again in his head what he would say to Melanie when they met.

It was not a sudden decision, but the planning of the night before, that made Melanie watch him silently from a distance. She did not watch for long.

Darkness was upon the hill as in silence the worshipers prepared, guided only by the diffuse light from the candles in their red lanterns. Carefully Algar laid out the sacrificial knife upon the woven cloth inside the circle of stones. The thongs were strong and would bind the victim while the cloth would soak up the blood. Satisfied he whispered commands.

"She is here!" Lois said seeing the signal from one of the men guarding the track that led to the stones.

There was a sigh from thirteen throats and then the slow dance and has chant began. "Suscipe Satanas munus quod tibi offerimus..." Soon the hissing became like the sound of a thousand demons chattering as they rose gleefully from the pits of Hell. In the center, Algar waited with his muscular helper to bind the victim's arms and legs.

Then Melanie was before him. One bead of her amber necklace appeared to Algar to be glowing, pulsing in rhythm with the beat of his heart. He was becoming mesmerized with this when occurred to him that Melanie was alone.

Before he could move he was held from behind. He felt thongs being tied around is wrists, heard Melanie whisper mockingly in his ear, "We have our sacrifice!

"No! No!" he screamed. But she was laughing as someone gave her the knife.

Around them, the sibilant chant rose towards its climax, the dancers feel it fleetingly caught in the red glow from the candles.

With a sudden burst of energy Algar screamed. "Jebb dies if I do!" but a gag silenced him.

Melanie held the sharp knife to his throat before loosening the gag. "Tell me what you mean!" she demanded.

"He dies if I do not return," Algar said, flinchingly.

"Is that so? "

"Rathbone shall-"

Melanie clapped hands twice and from the darkness around the track a man stepped into the dim circle of light. Someone held a lantern near his face.

"I had no choice," Rathbone's said, his face, like a weasel, twitching.

Then Algar was on his knees, crying. "Spare me, spare me!" he pleaded

"And if I do?" demanded Melanie.

"I shall always be your slave."

Three times Melanie clapped her hands as a signal for the dancers to gather around. "See" she said, "all you who dwell in my temple. Here is Algar, the High Priest who thought he knew my secret, admired and envied for his fortune by you all see now how he begs before me! Shall I spare him?"

"Kill him! Kill him!" they demanded.

Melanie laughed. Algar was brought to his feet. "For a year I shall spare your life."

The dancers, as if signaled silently, dispersed to return to their dance. "Now," she whispered to Algar, "you shall see my power - brought without the gift of blood!"

She did not speak, or move, but slowly raised her hands as, many miles away, the crystal within her secret temple began to glow. "Atazoth! Atazoth!", the dancing dancers hissed. The sky above and around them was clear, speckled by stars but a ragged darkness came to cover a part of the sky as a putrid stench filled the air and a circle of cold fell around the worshipers. No one moved, chanted or spoke but all stared up at the sky. The darkness grew slowly before withdrawing into a sphere that darted across sky. And it was gone.

"Tomorrow, " Melanie said, "you shall see the chaos I have caused. Now feast and rejoice and take your pleasure as you will!"

Around her, the orgy began as she unbound Algar's hands and led him from the revelry toward her car.

"There is much you do not know, " she said she drove toward her house.

Algar did not speak during their journey and slunk away like a broken man into his room on their arrival, while Melanie watched him on a monitor screen. But it was not long before she began thinking about Thurstan. She had reached out to him while she had watched him sitting by the river and even had not Algar's intended treachery changed her plans she knew that she could not have hurt him.

She had even lost her lust for Algar's blood and let him live. Somewhere, around the world, the dark power she unleashed would be causing disaster and death. It was small beginning, the

prelude to the opening of the Star Gate, which would return her Dark Gods to earth. It was not fulfilling, and she thought it might be.

Unsettled, she went down to her temple. The warmth of the gentle light, the perfume but most of all the crystal brought here reassurance about her power and role, and she forgot about Thurstan and a burgeoning dichotomy he was causing in her head. Perhaps her dark gods and guided her to the crystal - she did not know. But only four years ago she had found it, in a Satanic Temple she had visited. The group not impressed her, but the High Priest was easy to do manipulate and her given her the crystal is a gift. Only when she first touched it did she discover its power.

The High Priest was the first person whose soul she bound within the beads around her neck. He still brought her money from his schemes, and sometimes a new member. She was content to leave him to bask in his little power, knowing she only had to summon him for him to fall prostrate at her feet. And when his schemes failed or he ceased to be of use, she would remove his bead and grind it into dust, for then he would surely die.

For weeks after the gift of the crystal should shut herself away in the small house she then shared with Lois. The crystal brought knowledge and she had learned how to use it to travel among the hidden dimensions where the Dark Gods slept, waiting for someone to break the seal that bound them in sleep. She learned of Earth's past, of how the Dark Gods had come bringing terror and much that was strange. Of how her Prince was their Guardian, given the earth as his domain. Her shape-changing Prince was her guide to the Abyss beyond, and she explored the Abyss without fear, trembling or dread. She would be ready, she knew, when the stars were aligned aright, to call and summon the Dark Gods from sleep.

Her temple, the men she held in thrall in her beads, were but a means to this call, for the crystal was the key to the Star Gate. She, and she alone of all those who over the centuries had tried to bring the dark terrors forth, would succeed - of that she was sure.

So had she played her games of power and joy, feeling herself the equal of gods. There were few crimes that she had not sanctioned or sent men, in their lust, to commit, few pleasures she had not enjoyed. Yet she was not maddened and by either pleasure or power, and kept her empire small, sufficient for her needs, and herself anonymous. Many small firms headed by small men, a brothel or two, a number of temples in the cities beyond - such were the gifts of her Prince and she tended them all, as a wise woman should.

Slowly, and contented once again, she left for temple to climb the stairs to her bed.

Algar waited, quite patiently, until he was sure she was asleep and knocked, not too loudly, on Lois' door. She had returned alone, as he knew she must, and was not surprised to see him.

"Yes!" she asked and smiled, leaning against the frame of her door. Sometimes, Algar liked to talk with her, as one servant to another.

Algar did not smile, nor speak but moved towards her to stab her in the throat. She gasped, staring in disbelief, and staggered back towards the bed. Not content, he followed and stabbed her through the heart. The beauty that had pleased Melanie would please her no more and, smiling at this thought,

Algar wiped the handle of the knife clean on the satin sheet. Soon, he was running away from the house under the shimmering bright stars of humid night.

Melanie awoke slowly. She sensed a change in the aura of house and had walked towards her door before realizing what it was. She was alone. But there was no fear in her and she wandered barefoot and naked along long corridor, as there was no shock when she entered Lois' room.

It was then she knelt down to gently close the eyes of her dead lover the reaction came. Her cold hatred toward Algar for his deed was soon gone, and in the silence of her house for the first time in her life, she began to cry.

Outside, a stray, fierce dog howled.

V

Algar heard the howling as he ran down the narrow lane away from the house and in terror he scrambled through the hedge to run faster across the fields. The dog, sent by the dark force of Melanie's will, had picked up his scent and Algar ran, desperate and stumbling, toward the valley stream.

The house lay alone on a track below the hiss that held Billings Ring, the fields around sheep-strewn and rough, overlooked by the southerly slopes of the Mynd that turned the waters of the Onny River south then almost north until a softer rock fed them eastward again. The sound of water was clear amid the silence of the night and Algar stood beside the stream in an effort to slow his straining breath. The lights of a car on the road above and a field away from him shone ragged through the high hedge, and Algar crept down, fearing to be seen.

But his fear of the pursuing beast was stronger and he waded into the stream to walk along it for several yards and hide under the bridge. He could hear the dog but could not see it and waited, cold and shaking, for nearly half an hour. The bridge swept a narrow lane away and up for the valley road to a hamlet of a few houses. There would be no safety for him there in the farm workers' houses less than a mile from Melanie's home.

For some time he listened intently, and, hearing nothing, crawled slowly and scared from the stream. He was on the lane, almost at the junction of the road when the stalking dog attacked. It leapt snarling to try and sink its teeth into his throat. But Algar shielded his face with his hands and the dog bit deeply into his arm, knocking him over. It bit him again as Algar struggled with it on the ground. There was a large stone by his hand and Algar used it to smash at the dog's skull. In a frenzy, he struck the dog until it was dead. But even then he kicked it several times and threw the stone at its face before staggering to the road.

The first car that passed him did not stop and nearly knocked him over as he stood in the road waving his bloodied arms, but the second one, a long time after, did stop and Algar pretended to faint. The driver was near when Algar leapt up to push the man away before stealing his car.

The pain was excruciating but he tried to ignore it and the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm him. He had one hope and one hope only and drove fastly toward Shrewsbury to seek sanctuary from Melanie's curse. The roads were empty, the streets of the town deserted in the silent hours before dawn and he abandoned the car to walk the last quarter mile to the church.

No light shown in the Presbytery windows until his insistent knocking on its doors awoke its occupant from his sleep.

Cautious, but not afraid, the old Priest opened the door.

"Help me, Father! Please, help me!" Algar pleaded.

He did not see the bats that flew silently away from the church.

There was no choice, as Melanie knew. The two members of her Temple, summoned from their sleep, carried the body to their van. Melanie had cleaned and bathed it, using her own black satin sheets for a shroud, and she stayed beside it during the hours it took them to dig the grave.

Dawn came, with no wind to break the silence of the forest, but its beautiful colors did not interest her as she stood, dressed in white, in the still air to watch the two men lower the body into the Earth. There were no prayers to her to say, no lament for her to sing – only an unvoiced oath to avenge the death of her friend. The Earth was returned, the covering of grass and small bush neatly replaced, the debris of leaves and broken twig scattered again. There was no sign of the grave and, satisfied, Melanie allowed the men to return to her home.

"There shall be gifts for you both," she said as they bowed slightly before taking their leave.

Slowly, in her secret Temple, she unthreaded from her necklace Algar's bead. There was no frenzy of anger within her but a desire for Algar to suffer a slow, painful death as she squeezed the amber bead several times between her fingers. To her surprise the crystal did show her Algar contorted in pain. Yet she knew that even though for some reason she could not see him and thus discover his location, she was still causing him pain, and as she danced around her crystal she increased the pressure on the bead before stopping to visualize the time and place of his death, two weeks hence in the center of her circle of stones.

Slowly, and deliberately she cut the threads, which bound his life to this Earth, and, although still living, he was imprisoned in her web of death. It was not difficult for her to move the plinth upon which the crystal stood, for she had done it many times before and the mechanism which she had installed many years before did not fail her. The plinth, and the stone and which it rested, moved quietly aside to reveal a dark pit that sank deep into Earth. She did not smile, or feel anything, as she let the bead drop to join the scattered human remains.

The remains were the work of the sinister woman who had in the weeks of her dying given Melanie the house. "I have waited for you," as she remembered the old woman had said, "waited as our Prince said I should. My coven and books and house are yours." She never spoke again, but signed her name on her will, and Melanie was left to find the old woman's secrets from the Black Book of workings she had kept. 'I, Eulalia, Priestess of the forgotten

gods, descended from those who kept the faith, here set forth for she who is to come after me, the dark secrets of my craft...’ The book was Melanie’s most treasured possession, after her crystal and her beads. It was the crystal that first showed her the house.

She let the crystal guide her again and sat in her chair while the plinth slid silently back into place. At first, the tetrahedron showed nothing, but its inner clearness gradually vanished to reveal a man’s face. Thurstan was in his cottage, reading as he sat hunched on the wide inside sill of a window, framed by the rising sun. He looked up, briefly, and smiled as if aware of being observed. He seemed to Melanie to be staring at her. Then he was gone as the crystal cleared.

His smile, that gentle look in his eyes, her sensation of herself being observed all confused her, and she left her Temple to walk under the warm sun in the walled garden at the rear of her house. It was not long before she returned to her crystal.

It did not respond to her commands of thought. There was no Thurstan for her to see, not even an outside view of his cottage. Faint images seemed to be forming, but they were intrusive – bats flying away from a church at night, a raven plucking the eye from a dead dog – and her failure angered her. Her anger was the catalyst, and transformed the flickering images into a clear vision of Algar writhing in agony upon a bed. Above him on the wall, was the symbol of the Nazarene. By the bed an old Priest spoke silent words as he read from a leather breviary.

Melanie’s laugh erased all thoughts of Thurstan from her mind.

VI

“Exorcizamus te, omnis immunde spiritus, omnia Satânica potestas omnis incursio infernalis adversarii”

The old Priest continued his prayer of exorcism while Algar writhed in pain on the bed. But then the pain eased. Algar however, did not attribute this to the Priest but to Melanie’s curse. She would want him to die slowly, and as he lay smiling inwardly at the antics of the old man who had earlier cleaned and dressed the wounds the vicious dog had caused, Algar sensed a chance for life.

It would not arise from the exorcism for he had no belief in the religion of the Priest which once and briefly he himself had embraced inwardly. The old man had been kind, listening intently as Algar had told him a tale composed mainly of lies. He had been given sanctuary, clothes and medical aid – which was all he wanted – and let the Priest play out his farce of a role. His chance for life would come from his own hands by his breaking of Melanie’s curse. For that, she herself would have to die, and he began to think of stratagems by which he could lure her to her death.

Thurstan Jebb held some fascination for her, or some future potential which she planned somehow to draw out for her own advantage and although he did not know nor particularly care which, if any of these was correct, he knew enough to realize Jebb might provide his bait.

The plan he thought pleased him, bringing a resurgence of some of the power he had felt as High Priest and he allowed the old man to finish his prayers before explaining he would have to leave.

He thanked the Priest for the exorcism, lyingly said it was effective and thanked the man for saving his life. He even suggested they go into the church to say a prayer of thanksgiving. Algar, offering his wounds as an excuse not to kneel, sat to say aloud in Latin a suitable prayer. The Priest was impressed, as Algar knew he would be, and did not say no when Algar asked for some money.

“Just a small loan, Father,” the lying High Priest said.

A few hours later, he was safely in Leeds. The pain, which came to him during his journey by train, was not intense or prolonged.

Ray Vitek was not pleased to see him and it showed on his face. But in deference to Algar’s position he asked him politely inside the seedy terraced house along the sloping streets between the traffic noise of Hyde Park Corner and the tree lined peace of Meanwood Ridge.

“So,” Vitek said suspiciously as they sat among the books within a mould-filled room, “she has sent you for another favor.” Nervously, with thin fingers, he stroked his pointed beard.

“A favor, yes. But not for her.”

“I see. So it has come to that.”

“Will you join me – against her?”

“Years ago – I forget exactly when it was – I had a Priestess. Perhaps you remember her? No, well I was young then, as you were. I loved her. Linda was her name. Then she came to entice her away. She died – in a brothel.”

“Then you will help?”

“Me – once in love! I have never loved anyone or anything since.”

“I did not know,” Algar said, acting concerned.

“Who cares – I don’t care – not any more.” Then, his mood changed, he added, “what has she done to you then?”

Algar took off the coat that the Priest had given him and showed his bloodstained bandages.

“So?” Vitek said. “Why come to me?”

“Because you have friends. Desperate friends who need a little something every now and then. What would you do for a year’s supply?”

“She would have you killed before you did anything.”

Algar laughed. It was not pleasant to hear. “She does not know about my – how shall I say – my little side-line!”

Vitek was surprised – but his lethargy soon returned. “So what can I do?”

“Your friends” Algar’s imitation of a gargoyle suited him, “shall keep a little something of mine. To lure her. She come – and they – how shall I say – entertain her?”

Vitek’s brief laugh was broken by a spasm of coughing. He spat into the fireplace. Then, remembering: “but her power – “

“When they take her they bring you the necklace she wears. You shall bring it to me.”

“But I remember – “

“The crystal? Yes, I shall smash it while she is away and her power will be gone!”

“A year’s supply, you say? For them all?”

“For them all!”

“It shall be done as you wish. When?”

“Tomorrow!”

“So soon?”

“It must be! When she arrives – surprise her. Take her by force, tear the necklace away! Without it she has no power. And when your friends have finished with their games with her –“ he shrugged – “an overdose perhaps.”

“When do you deliver?”

“After the deed is done.”

“I may need something – “

“To offer them? Of course! You shall have it, my friend! This very day. Give me two hours.” His torment was beginning again, and as he strove to control the pain, sweat began to dribble down his face. “I shall return here.”

He did not wait but rushed to flee outside where he stood under a cloudy sky while his body contorted in pain. “I shall kill you!” He repeated. “You shall die a horrible death.”

He imagined that the death Melanie would find tomorrow and although this brought a little satisfaction it did nothing to lessen his pain. He felt like he was being crushed. Then, as suddenly as it had before, it stopped. He walked on toward the summit of the road, dreading its return.

He worked slyly and quickly in the anonymity of the city while thunderclouds covered the sky and the humidity grew. A few telephone calls, a meeting with a man whose expensive car drove him along the crowded streets to a small warehouse by the river. Promises made, a briefcase given to him, another journey by car and he was handing Vitek the promised goods – small packets containing white death.

His pain did not return, but his dread of its returning never left him, becoming during the growing cloud darkness of the daylight hours a demon to haunt him. He was always two footsteps behind, this demon.

The Satanic underworld did not fail him. For two years he had used his influence as Melanie's High Priest to spin his webs in the temple of the empire she had built. Money diverted, a few small schemes of his own. He had been waiting for her weakness, and had found it. Soon, her empire would be his.

This pleased him. He was given help in her name, but in a few days it would be his name it would be his name, which commanded respect. He had used her name before and she never knew. He used it again, and a young man collected him in a new car and ferried him toward her home.

The demon of dread followed. Several times while lightning struck and nearby thunder crashed, he feared Vitek's betrayal. "You know how she feels about these," he had said to Vitek while he gave the white death away. And Vitek's sunken eyes had bulged. "She does not like them. Warn her, Vitek and there shall be no more." Vitek's thin, grasping hands said he understood. "Your friends, Vitek – I should have to tell them, you understand, if you betrayed me."

His fears grew like the darkness that brought the day to its end until he became a madman pretending he was sane. He had procured a revolver, and caressed it repeatedly.

Apted was in his shop, as Algar hoped he would be. As soon as Apted unlocked the door he pushed past him.

"Is all well with you?" Apted asked cheerfully.

Algar pressed the barrel of the revolver into a flabby cheek. "Give me Jebb's address!"

"But she – "

"Give me the address!" He eased back the hammer of the gun with his thumb.

"But I gave it to Rathbone."

"He is no use to me now! The address!"

Apted gave it.

"Tell her, fat man, and I shall carve the fat from you, slice by slice! Understand? Good! She is finished!" As a gesture of his defiance he spat at her portrait, which hung on Apted's wall.

The storms, which had followed him from Leeds, fell upon the town to wash the heat and dust away, stealing, for a few brief minutes, the lights that kept the night at bay. Somewhere below the thunder, a young child screamed.

VII

The storm pleased Melanie and she danced naked in her garden while the rain washed her body as she sucked the storm's health in.

She was inside, allowing the warm air in her secret Temple to dry her when she heard the telephone ring. The call was brief and she dressed slowly before saying goodbye to her house.

Apted was in a corner of his shop, jibbering, the telephone in his hand, his door open as Algar had left it. She smiled at him and touched his forehead with her hand. Soon, he was almost smiling.

"I had to tell him. I am sorry," he said and meant it.

"You are safe now. He cannot harm you. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, my princess." Happiness returned to his face.

"Is Jane still in your care?"

"Why, yes! But they have threatened to take her away from me."

"May I borrow her for a few days?"

"She is yours now – a gift from an old and grateful man."

Melanie's brief kiss surprised him, but when he opened his eyes again, she was gone.

The sky had cleared by the time she drove along the narrow track that led to Thurstan's cottage among the hills of south Shropshire, and as she left her car to walk the few yards to his door bat swooped around her. She greeted them, as a queen should, laughing as she pushed the door open.

Thurstan was gone, as she half expected him to be, and she felt and smelt the traces that Algar had left. There was a note, stuck to the table by a knife and she read it without emotion. "Come alone," it read, giving a date, time and place, "or he shall die like Lois." It demanded a large sum of money.

She burned the note in the fireplace before examining the cottage. There were few books and all of those were in Greek. Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles... Few clothes, furniture or possessions. In the bedroom she found a neat pile of translations but they did not interest her, as the cottage seemed to hold few clues to Thurstan himself. It was damp if clean, austere but full of memories. The memories, spectral forms and sound, seeped out of the walls, the floor,

the beams which held the roof, to greet Melanie. Sighs, laughter, the pain of childbirth, an old man dying his bed while his spirit wandered the hills above.
Two centuries of life, struggle, love and death.

But however intently she listened, however still she held her gaze, neither sights nor sounds from Thurstan's past seeped to her through the gates of time. Behind the only in the cottage she found her answer. It was a good painting of a pretty woman, curiously hung above the long narrow windows where Melanie had seen Thurstan sitting. Behind it, totally obscured, was a niche carved from the rough stone that made up the walls. It contained a large quartz crystal. Stored in the crystal was Thurstan's life, in images only a Mistress of Earth or a Magus could see.

The child that Algar had abducted near Apted's shop during the storm had lain silent and terrified in the car while the young man drove through the night, obedient to Algar's commands because he believed he was acting in Melanie's name.

The young man had said nothing when Algar told him to stop and took the child into the darkness of trees by the road. He kept his silence when Algar returned alone fastening the belt of his trousers. He said nothing as he stood waiting for Thurstan to answer the knocks that Algar made upon his door. Kept his silence as he bound and gagged the man at whose head Algar aimed the revolver. Said nothing as he drove his silent passenger to the city of Leeds and the rotting, broken houses that were Algar's destination. The human shadows that surrounded his car and who dragged the bound man away repulsed him, and he was glad when Algar gave him money and dismissed him.

There was much mute laughter and hissing glee as Thurstan was hauled from room to smelly room whose denizens lay supinely on floors or leaned, festering, against walls while loud music played. Vitek was lashing Thurstan to a chair in an upper room when Algar's demon of dread leapt and sunk its rows of teeth into the flesh of its prey. Algar did not scream but cowered in a corner, his whole body convulsed. Thurstan was smiling – or seemed to Algar to be smiling at him – and he leapt up to punch Thurstan several times in the face. Instantly, his torment ceased. Then Thurstan winked.

Raging, Algar held the revolver to his head, but Vitek calmed him and led him away, saying, "He is our bait, our money. Leave him."

Daylight brought no sun or light through the boarded windows and Algar slept, twitching from nightmares, on the floor of a suppurating room where three men took turns copulating with a young girl too tired and drugged to care. But their energy did not last and soon only Thurstan was awake, dreaming of the woman he had loved.

A few high cirrus clouds flecked the beautiful blue of the sky as Melanie drove slowly under the warm sun through the busy streets of Leeds. She was not late, and parked her car in the narrow rubble filled street of boarded up houses. Two men with long greasy hair wearing chains for belts watched her, showing rotten teeth as they smiled.

Swaggering, they walked toward her as she got out of her car. Behind her, another man emerged from the shadowed alley beside a house. He was within feet of her when she opened the back door of her car. Gracefully, the leopard leapt into the sun.

She stood leaning against her car while the leopard sat beside her. Respectfully and silently, the men moved away. He did not speak and she did not but as he passed her he bowed his head while she stared into his eyes. There was a scream as he, obedient to her will, entered the house, then the sound of breaking glass and wood. A shout. “Don’t come any closer!” And then a single shot, dull but echoing.

Another man walked toward her and he too bowed his head, a little, as she stared into his eyes. “Kill him!” a voice like Algar’s screamed, as he too entered the house.

The third and last man came forward to wait with her beside her car. For a long time silence – broken by a shout from within the house.

“We must kill her”

Three men carrying clubs and knives came forth from the house but the single man was no match for them and was soon beaten unconscious. Triumphant, the three moved sneering and leering toward Melanie.

“Kill her! Kill her!” the demented Algar screamed from the safety of the house.

“Come on!” laughed one of the men, “hypnotize me!”

“She is making me tremble!” jeered another.

“Let’s strip her, hey?” Laughed the third.

Melanie did not see but rather sensed Algar aim his gun and she stared toward the shadows in the doorway. There was no shot, only Algar cursing as the revolver jammed, while the leopard stood and kept the shouting men away.

Their obscenities were irrelevant to Melanie as he was content to wait in the heat of the sun for her full magickal powers to return. Her control of the three men had weakened her, a little, but she knew her weakness would not last. Perhaps the jeering men sensed her weakness or perhaps Algar had told them to try to drain her power away, but it was not important and she hid her strength for Algar’s expected attack.

It was Vitek who came running from the house, carrying an axe. He slowed, as her power touched him, then stopped to stand harmless and silent. But his appearance broke the spell that kept the others at a distance – they rushed toward her howling with drug courage. The leopard snatched one, her power slowed another but the third was not stopped. The knife he carried reflected the sun and Melanie side stepped gracefully to strike the rushing man as he passed, his momentum conveying him into her car. He bounced, slightly, before her blow to his neck sent him falling unconscious onto the road.

Her absorption freed Vitek who fled into the house.

“Leave!” she commanded and the leopard obeyed, leaving the uninjured man to help his sobbing and bloodied companion away.

Behind the house she heard shouting, and a car being driven away. Thurstan, Algar and Vitek were gone, and as she stepped over bodies near the door, the house burst into flames. She could almost hear Algar laughing.

VIII

The coven was gathered, dressed in crimson robes, in the large Satanic Temple to give honor to Melanie as Mistress of Earth. A man lay on the altar, naked, while a young woman in white robes kissed his body in the light of the candles to the insistent beat of the tabors.

A masked figure dressed in black came to lift the man from the altar and place him at the feet of the green robed Mistress of Earth.

“What do you wish?” the Mistress asked.

“It is the protection and milk of your breasts that I seek”. The naked Priest reached up as the Mistress bared her breasts, but she kicked him away with her foot.

“I pour my kisses at your feet and kneel before you who crushes your enemies and washes in a basin full of their blood.” He stared at her body. “I lift up my eyes to gaze upon your beauty of body: you who are the daughter and Gate to our Gods. I lift my voice to stand before you, my sister, and offer myself so that my mage’s seed may feed your virgin flesh.”

“Kiss me,” she taunted, “and I will make you as an eagle to its prey. Touch me and I shall make you as a strong sword that severs and stains my Earth with blood. Taste me and I shall make you as a seed of corn, which grows toward the sun and never dies. Plough me and plant me with your seed and I shall make you as a Gate that opens to our Gods!”

Slowly, she led him to the Priestess whom she kissed on the lips and caressed before removing her white robe.

“Take her,” she said to the Priest, “for she is me and I am yours!”

Around them the coven gathered, clapping their hands to the rhythm of the tabors as the ritual copulation began. And when it was over and the Priest lay sweating and still upon the Priestess, the masked Guardian of the Temple came to lift him up and forced him to kneel at the feet of his Mistress.

“So you have sown,” she said, “and from your seeding gifts may come if you are obedient hear these words I speak. I know you, my children, you are dark and yet none of you is as dark or as deadly as I. I know you and the thoughts within all your hearts: yet none of you is as hateful or as loving as I. With a glance I can strike you dead!”

The Guardian brought her a large silver chalice, which she offered to her coven in turn. The Priestess was the last to receive the gift of wine and the Mistress kissed her to receive the wine from her mouth.

She threw the remains of the wine over the Priest, saying, “No guilt shall bind you, no thought restrict you here! Feast and enjoy the ecstasy of this life. But ever remember, I am the darkness that lives in your soul!”

She did not wait for the orgy of lust to begin, but left alone. No sounds of Satanic revelry reached her as she sat in her own small Temple, waiting. But the crystal showed nothing.

For hours, Melanie sat still and alone. She did not think of the flames that only yesterday had engulfed her and from which she had escaped unharmed, nor of Algar, fleeing now from those who sought to collect bounty she offered for his death. The ritual had bored her, and she did not miss the pleasure that she had obtained in the past through having a man groveling while she whipped his naked flesh. Instead, she thought of Thurstan and his strange life that she had seen in the crystal. There was a quality about this Thurstan that both pleased and disturbed her, as if he was someone from a dream she had just awoken from and could not quite remember. She wanted to forget the dream and concentrate on the pleasures of her own world, but she was lonely. Thurstan’s intrusion into her planned and orderly life, Lois’ sudden death, both combined to become a catalyst and change her emotions. Her feelings of loneliness surprised her. For years, she ruled her coven and small empire through her magickal charisma, power and the fear she inspired. She could be charming, subtle, scheming and brutal as the moment and the person required, never losing her belief in herself and her Destiny. For a long time during the years of her growing she had felt herself chosen and different from others. Gradually, awareness of her Destiny came – as Mistress of Earth, ruler of covens, who would dare to return the Dark Gods to Earth.

She still felt her Destiny – but it was the distant beat of her pulse in her ear, not the yearning she now felt to share with someone a moment of life, like the strange moment she had shared with Thurstan while they sat in the café and he, trembling, had first held her hand. She had been playing a role, but somewhere and somehow the role had become real to her and for an instant she had become the woman she was pretending to be – gentle, sensitive and vulnerable. This woman had returned, unexpected, when she had held the dead Lois in her arms. Her tears had been real tears of love and loss – but they did not last.

Now this woman sat in Melanie’s secret Temple, thinking of Thurstan and the moment they had shared. This woman knew she was alone.

Melanie, in anger, walked slowly from her Temple, her eyes glowing, to seek the comfort of her car. Her speed was an attempt to express her anger and she drove westward along narrow lanes and wider roads for nearly an hour before returning east to stop near the stone circle. The twilight of closing cloud and strong wind colored the sky near the descending sun, and Melanie stood in the circle’s center calling on the storms to break. Thunder cloud rushed toward her, killing the color, as the wind graved strong and heavy around. There was no thunder, only a sudden and prolonged burst of rain, which Melanie laughing let soak through her thin dress to the warm flesh beneath. She became intoxicated by the power of wind and rain, and danced around the circle calling on the names of her gods. She was Baphomet – dark goddess who held the severed head of a man; she was Asoth – worker of passion and death. Circe – charmer of man; Darket – bride of Dagon. She felt her crystal, many miles distant, begin to respond and draw power from the Abyss beyond. The power came to her, slowly, through the gate in the fabric of space-time, a chaos of energies from the dimensions of darkness. Her consciousness was beginning to transcend to the acausal spaces where the

Dark Gods waited and she sensed their longing to return, to fill again the spaces of her causal time. They were there, chattering in lipped words she could not understand, roused from sleep by the power of her previous rites, ready to seep past the gate to feast upon the blood of humans.

But they could not break through from beyond the stars. The two universes, rent together by her will and crystal, were drifting apart again and she was left to walk along the track from the stones while the wind lost its power and the clouds left with their rain.

She sat in her car for a long time, No power, not even a trace of power, had come down to here over the abyss that divided the causal and the acausal realms of existence. No chaos for her will to form and direct as it had many times before. Her magick was weakened. The cause of her failure became clear to her slowly, like the low autumn mist of a valley becomes cleared by the sun as it heats the cold air of morning. She was in love with Thurstan, and her feelings of love had begun to brighten the darkness that was the source of her power.

IX

“The Police have released the names and photographs of the two men they wish to question in connection with the murders in Leeds...”

Vitek turned the radio off. Algar was beside him in the van they had stolen in Leeds, waiting for the last glimmer of light to conduct the ritual, which he hoped, would free him from Melanie’s curse.

“She arranged things well,” Vitek said while in the rear of the van Thurstan worked silently to try and free his bound hands.

“Of course!” Algar shouted, “what did you expect? Her influential friends! When she is dead they will be mine!”

“Must we...?” asked Vitek, indicating Thurstan.

“It is the only way. The force cannot be invoked without a sacrifice. Her power is weakening! I sense it!”

The forest Algar had chosen lay in a small valley between the haunted rocks of the Stiperstones and Squilver mound, and had in times past been used by the darker covens which once had abounded in the area. He would invoke the Great Demon, Gaubni, through sacrifice and imbue himself with power before setting forth to kill Melanie herself. His ritual would strip her of magick, her death would end her curse.

“Come, let us prepare,” he said.

Trees were creaking in the breeze and the smell of stinking fungi mingled with the damp the heavy rain had brought as Algar walked carefully the path to the small clearing. Vitek

followed, stooping and afraid, listening to Algar mumble incantations. “Veni, omnipotens aeterne diabolus! Agios O Gaubni...”

The incantation became louder until Algar was shouting the name. “Gaubni! Gaubni!” Then a silence that startled Vitek. He could not see Algar’s face as he stopped and turned in the clearing but he heard the hissing and saw the hands raised like claws. The long, bony fingers grasped Vitek’s neck and the strength of the arms pushed Vitek to the ground. Algar sat on Vitek’s chest, slobbering and laughing while his nails tore the flesh on Vitek’s face. The spasm of struggle did not last long as the fingers snapped the neck.

Possessed, Algar loped awkwardly out of the wood. Thurstan sat hunched in the back of the van and Algar stared at him, dribbling like an idiot while in the distance a dog howled.

Algar was struggling to control the chaos, which had possessed him and direct it to bring another death when he heard the voice behind him.

“Come to me, come to me!” the melodious voice said.

Algar turned to see the leering face of a multitude of witches. Then they vanished. But another voice came from the trees behind him.

“You are my gift!”

He did not look, but the power of the demon he had invoked sucked from within him to form a hideous face whose rows of teeth gnashed before the mouth opens to spray Algar with fetid breath. Then it was gone, sucked into the trees and down into Earth by the power of the long-dead leering witches.

“You are my gift!” the voice repeated.

There was no longer any magick in Algar and he became a man who was half-mad. His madness made him move toward Thurstan, but the High Priest was afraid, and all he could do was turn and watch as Vitek with a ruptured face and dead eyes walked toward him.

“You are his gift,” a chorus of voices behind him said.

Desperate, Algar performed a banished ritual, inscribing a pentagram in the air before him with his hand, saying, “The sign of the Earth, protect! Agios O Shugara!”

The dead body of Vitek still came toward him. He invoked more gods, drew a pentagram, called on the Prince he had followed in secret from youth, but Vitek moved ever nearer while behind him the ghostly chorus laughed.

He tried a hexagram, but his gesture and words had no power and, in abject terror, he began to pray fervently in Latin to the god he had scorned.

“In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. In nomine Jesu Christi...” he mumbled.

But Vitek did not stop – instead, the dead eyes swiveled down to stare at him and the mouth opened in a leer. Algar fled, crazed and stumbling, along the track, over a fence and field, to

run up the side of the steep hill. He did not stop when he reached the summit, but ran on down the steep bank and over another hill to drop exhausted into a ditch. Terror brought recovery and he ran on for many miles over fields, fences and hills, his clothes and flesh torn by stone, wire and thorn. When he could run no longer, he crawled among the heather that grew on the side of the Mynd, clawing his way to the slope's summit. He rested then, staring down into the silent blackness below, fearful and afraid of something following and praying for the light of dawn. He made a kind of cross from stems of heather which he pulled with bleeding fingers from the ground. Around him, nothing stirred.

Thurstan had freed his hands from the cord, which bound them when he saw Algar run away. Cautiously, after unbinding his feet and removing the gage, he left the van.

Twilight had almost ended, but sufficient light remained for him to follow the path into the woods. He walked for sometime but could find nothing or no one. The place seemed peaceful and calm to him.

A large dog was sitting by the van when he returned. It did not bark, but sprang up to run for a few yards along the track before stopping.

“Your guide!” a soft voice beside Thurstan said. When, he turned, he could see nothing.

There was no moon, only the lingering glow of the sun that was now below the horizon. The clear sky soon showed the brighter stars and in the pleasant warmth of the early night Thurstan followed his guide along the track to paths and narrow lanes that kept a southerly course until he was led eastwards by the stream and up to where a large house lay darkened and silent.

He knew why he followed the dog, as he knew whose house it was, but he still stood nervously in the driveway. The evening was dark by the time he walked toward the house, and as he did so a soft light shone through the half-opened door.

“Hello!” he called like a jester to a court of fools as he stepped onto the mosaic tiles of the hall. He did not see the door behind him close.

Somewhere he could hear a harpsichord being played. He followed the sound, along the hall and up the stairs whose walls were lined with paintings depicting lust, greed and joy, to where a door was open. A voluptuous perfume reached out to him and he closed his eyes, listening to the gentle music. It seemed a long time to him that he waited, listening and trembling. But it was only a few heartbeats of his life that passed.

He took several steps into the candle-lit room. Melanie sat at her harpsichord in a long flowing dress and looked up briefly before playing the fugue to its end.

The room was beautiful, graceful in its few furnishings, the music was beautiful, the light itself was beautiful, casting subtle hues that only a painter, a musician or a poet might recall. But most of all, to Thurstan, Melanie was beautiful. His senses, subdued by his captivity, were overwhelmed and he began to cry, not loudly or for very long, as a mystic or an artist might cry when overwhelmed by such splendor.

She smiled at him again when her fingers ceased to work their magick upon the keyboard, and held out her hand. He could see her breasts, uplifted and partly exposed by her dress, rise and fall with the rhythm with her breathing: the way her amber necklace seemed to glow a little in the light from the candles around her, and he walked forward, hardly able to breathe.

It was unreal to him, an idle dream, perhaps, of a hot insect-filled summer's day as he sat by the stream near his cottage. But their fingers touched, bringing reality. He felt shy and foolish as she stood to face him, gently smiling. No words would reveal themselves into the world through his mouth, and he embraced her, stroking her hair with his hand while she molded her body to his so he could feel the heat of her flesh through the thin dress.

Stretched were the moments of their embraced until she kissed him, pressing her tongue to his lips in supplication. He let her in, smelled the fragrance of her breath and felt with his hand the warmth of her breast and the erection of her nipple as her tongue sought his. He did not see the door of the room close silently, nor the strange shadow that seemed to stand beside it, but let himself be let to the circular bed in the adjoining, darkened room.

She was gentle with him as she removed his clothes and then her own, kissing his body as he kissed hers in return. He tried to speak of his love and her beauty but she pressed a slender finger to his lips as they lay naked together on the sensuous softness of the bed while perfumed incense caressed them. He felt the softness of her breasts and kissed them in worship as he kissed her lips, shoulders, face and thighs in worship before tasting her moistness. She pulled him gently upon her, opening herself in invitation, and he did not need his hand to guide him to her hidden cleft.

He moved slowly, and for a long time the gentle intimacy continued while the warm humid night brought sweat to him and a gradual urgency to her until a frenzy of passion possessed them both, rising to issue forth into loud ecstasy mutually achieved before the natural fall left limbs loose and a pleasing exhaustion.

He slept then, although he did not wish to, holding her as if he feared she might go, softly breathing the words of his love. He dreamed he was walking on a strange planet whose two bright suns lit the purple sky. There was a city nearby, but it lay in ruins, and as he approached over the warm sand, he could see the desolation of centuries. He wandered the empty streets made of strange steel where above twisting walkways hung or soared to meet the towering pyramids of buildings whose entrails of floor and room had been cut away cleanly and left dangling from tendons of wire. He felt a sadness at the desolation, for the world was abandoned and quite dead.

When he awoke from his dream, Melanie was gone.

X

Part of her wanted to kill him. His death would make her free again; restore to her the power she had lost.

She sat in her Temple wondering what to do. The years of her life had been bereft of love and only Lois had shown her kindness – unexpectedly, for kindness was something she had never wanted or sought. But she had been too proud, too confirmed in here role and quest for power

to let the kindness of Lois matter, and their relationship had become, for her at least, a simple affair to satisfy her lust and turn her momentarily from the hatred she felt for the many men who sold their souls and gave their wealth and power away to satisfy themselves with her body.

For a year she had withheld her favors from all men, using her magick as a snare and a weapon to keep her dominance and power. She let them lust, and satisfy themselves with the whores she gave them. But she had enticed Thurstan, sending a wraith to guide him to her house after she had found him through her crystal waiting bound in the van. Other forces had gathered round, surprising here, but she had fought them and gained control, molding them to her will to bring the dead body of Vitek back and send Algar in terror to the hills.

She had sensed the other powers were trying to help Thurstan and keep him from her for some reason she did not understand, but she wanted him and would have her way.

Her crystal reached out to him upstairs where an elemental spirit, born from one of her rituals, waited to work her will, hovering by the bed she had left. The spirit was guarding him, shielding him from other powers, but she had only to transform her thought through the crystal for the elemental to cause Thurstan's death and break the heavy chains that now seemed to bind her to his Earth.

But she did nothing. She was intrigued by the other powers she felt and by his crystal that she had found. There was also, for her, a promise in the feelings she felt for him – there seemed to be new pleasures awaiting, new experiences to enhance her life. She began to think of what these might be – of what it would be like to talk with someone, just to be with someone, who seemed to love her, not her power, wealth or influence. Someone whose lust, though real and strong, was bound with sensitivity and who sought through it an ecstasy of sharing beyond the physical; someone who gave, and did not just take. She had captivated him at first, but not as she had expected: not as she had captivated all the merely lustful men before him. He had seen beyond them to another world.

These thoughts pleased and disturbed her, but she sensed he had awoken from his dream and waited, strangely tense, for him to find her. When he did, and stood in the doorway of her Temple, she hid her feelings before trying to destroy them.

She did not succeed. The crystal began to glow, betraying her as it pulsed to the beat of her heart. He walked past it, drew the glow onto his hand and offered it to her. She stared at him as he stood before her smiling. Then, before she could open her hand to receive his gift, the light in the Temple faded, and there was gone, leaving only the glow he held before her.

A multitude of babbling, hissing voices broke the silence.

“He is ours!” one clear voice said.

“Ours!” a second and third repeated.

The powers she had felt before were stronger now and she strove to cast them away by casting her thoughts into her crystal, but the glow on Thurstan's hand dimmed, then died.

There was laughter in the Temple, the smell of rotting flesh as, slowly, a luminous shape began to form in a corner. It began to resemble a bearded man with green skin who held in his hands a crook and a whip, and from whose eyes fine filaments emerged to move toward where Melanie sat. She knew they would form a web to imprison her. She formed her own will into purple strands to form a wall before her but the filaments snaked easily around it before writhing toward her. She cast an inverted seven-pointed star at them, but the star shattered and was obliterated. Sweating from the effort, she held her hands outstretched before her in readiness to absorb the power that came toward her, tensing her body to try to cast it into her crystal and send it out into the acausal space where it would die.

She felt Thurstan beside her and the heat of his hand as he touched her shoulder. In the instant of his touch the mocking laughter stopped. She did not know what was happening but Thurstan's face had become a dark void filled with stars, but she felt herself becoming stronger. A chaos of energies rushed from the void to be transferred to her by Thurstan's touch, but the energies were not hostile and she shaped them by her will into an auric demon before casting them at her foe. The demon greedily ate the filaments before devouring the green bearded man. Then it too vanished, leaving Melanie and Thurstan standing naked beside each other in the soft light of the perfumed Temple.

When she looked at Thurstan, she realized he was in a trance. She sat him down gently and stroked his face until he awoke.

He was surprised to find himself in the Temple and embarrassed by his nakedness.

“Are you alright?” Melanie asked.

“Yes, thanks,” said Thurstan blushing and covering his genitals with his hands. “I must have been dreaming!”

“What did you dream?”

“I was on this dead planet – in a city. Alone. Then I saw you. There was a shadow near you, which I seemed to think was threatening you, so I came to you and held your hand. Strange thought – I thought I woke up.”

There was no guile in Thurstan's face as Melanie looked: and in that instant he seemed an innocent child. He sought to hold her hand as if for reassurance and she did not refuse. She looked at him, as he sat smiling and embarrassed, then at her crystal and then at Thurstan again, realizing as she did so that in some way she did not yet understand Thurstan was a gate to her gods, a medium, perhaps, that anyone might use. It was not thought of using him and his psychic gifts that made her kneel down beside him and kiss his lips, but a strange desire to somehow share again the moment when he had first touched her hand and trembled – to discover again the joy that his body had brought her, the feeling she had felt when she had examined his face and found a curious trust.

He responded readily to her kiss and they made slow, tender love on the floor of her Temple. Melanie was receptive to him through her burgeoning feelings of love, and felt herself drawing power from him. She let this power build within her before trying to transfer it by an act of will to her crystal but even she was surprised at the ease of this and the extent of the power she had stored. The crystal began to glow, and in her orgasm she felt possessed of the

power of a goddess. But she did nothing with her new found power, and let it rest safely in the crystal in her Temple before realizing, as Thurstan breathed in her ear the works of his love, that it was her own feelings of love that were the key.

She lay for a long time while Thurstan caressed her and their sweat dried slow, wondering about the meaning of this in the context of her Satanic life. But only vague feelings, need and desires suffused her and she led him from her Temple in the quiet house to her own bed. He was soon asleep, entwined around her warm body, while she inwardly watched the shadows that gathered outside her house, held away by the power she had stored in her crystal. They beat down, screaming, leering and threatening, upon the auric protective sphere that enclosed her and her new lover, desiring her death or at least a chance to lead Thurstan away. These shades of the dead and dying were like rain to her, and she listened, safe and warm, while they beat noisily down.

In the morning, they were gone. But they had sucked her crystal dry. Melanie slept on, her body pressed close to Thurstan's, while in her garden Algar waited, ready to kill her with the billhook he held in his hand.

XI

Ezra Pead lived surrounded by mold and mites. The mold rose up the feet of the furniture in his small, dark cottage at the end of a muddy track between two high hills that shielded him from most of the sun, while the mites could be seen scurrying away from anything he touched.

The wood burning stove in his kitchen lay broken and unrepaired, letting damp seep up the walls and wood lice to cover the floor, and he cooked his soups on a small gas-burning ring. He was not an old man, but bore himself like one and dressed like a tramp, his beard matted and long. The large sums of money his father had left him he left unused in a bank, and he walked the three miles to the small town of Stretton once a week to withdraw the few pounds he needed to keep himself alive.

Like his cottage, Ezra Pead was slowly falling into decay. His cottage smelled and was like an overgrown, wild forest whose floor is alive and where green fungi crept slowly up trees and where strangling ivy thickens and hardens as it grows round trunks, branches and stems seeking the canopy of leaves. What falls to the ground is captured by the myriad creatures who live mostly unseeing in the dampness, or covered by mold and by mites, or stolen to be eaten or stored away by insects. The roof did not leak, but Ezra Pead would not have cared if it did. He had plenty of buckets. He never opened the windows which were covered by thickly spreading grime.

He spent his days reading the many books and manuscripts that surrounded him everywhere in the chaos, or writing in one of the large vellum bound volumes that covered one of his three scriptorium desks. Unlike his features or dwelling, his handwriting was beautiful, and he used a quill pen and ink that he made himself.

All his books and all his writings were about alchemy or magick. When darkness came, he would light a candle and retire to the room where he slept. There, where no windows relieved the dampness of the walls and where only a rusting metal bed stood upon the floor, he would cast his spells into the night. All his reading, spells and writing were directed toward one end: to discover the secret of life and so make himself immortal. Every night he invoked demons from the pages of the medieval Grimoires he possessed, for he had read once and long ago when young that some of these demons knew the secret. So he invoked, and questioned them, night after night and year after year. Baratchial, Zamradial, Niantiel, Belphegor, Lucifuge ... he knew the legions of hell well, and although the answers they gave him he did not often understand, he wrote them all down in his book after the conjuration was over and his ritual banishing complete. A demon named Shulgin he invoked most of all using his ceremonial circle, names of power and sword – but the demon spoke backwards in a numbered code and transcribing the messages took many hours of his day, as breaking the original code had taken over a year of his life.

But the years of his work wore down his body, and he began to wish for a better means to find the answers that he sought. He possessed an insane faith in demons he invoked, and it did not seem to matter to him that most of the information he obtained was meaningless or wrong. He checked and re-checked the answers, searching patiently among his books and manuscripts. There were enough answers over the years, which could be corroborated with the little he already knew or could find in his books to keep his faith in the quest, and it never once occurred to him that this quest was destroying the life which he hoped to prolong.

Sometimes, he would venture from his cottage in search of herbs to grind and make into incense or oils to aid his invocations, talking to himself while he walked. All his original ideas and expectations had been eroded over the years – there was no stone for him to make by alchemical means, no potion for him to drink. He had tried both ways, led by manuscripts and demons, but his alchemical apparatus lay dismantled in his shed together with the rare juices of plants and bizarre ingredients he had used. His apparatus and ingredients had come from a dealer only too eager to indulge his expensive needs, but the cost made little difference in the money that he kept in the bank.

For almost a year, following the ten years of his alchemical work, an idea had come to possess him. Something was happening that was threatening his quest. His demons were becoming increasingly disturbed or disoriented. Sometimes his invocations did not succeed – or he obtained a jumble of form as if someone or something was disrupting the energies. He felt something himself – a force darker than the demons he knew. An ancient manuscript gave him the clue – the cosmic tides were changing, or rather being changed by someone. The very balance of the hidden universe was threatened.

Minor ripples in these tides were no stranger to him, but these did nothing to change in any significant way the current of Osirian energies that he worked with and which for centuries had passed over the Earth, partly due to the rites of the Church of the Nazarene and those who followed its faith, for they belonged to the same world as him. He was only part of its darker side. He knew a change was coming, symbolized by the son of Osiris as a child, but this was a natural progression that would not affect his own work or alter in any meaningful manner the balances of power on the Earth, despite the rhetoric of some of its adherents.

But this new distortion was different. If it succeeded, it would bring a new Aeon, which had no magickal Word to describe it – an Aeon of Chaos. He spent months searching his manuscripts and books for answers. Parcels of books arrived regularly from his dealer – they were read, then discarded, to suck more mold from the floor.

He began to realize that he was near the center of the disruption, but the demons he invoked to question were incoherent or would not appear. He needed the blood of sacrifices. The dealer brought him a dog, which he kept chained outside. He began using necromancy to bring him the spirits of the dead, sacrificing often by sending the dog out to bring a victim back. Sheep were not a problem, for they roamed the hills around cottage, and he would sever their necks letting the blood pour to his floor while he chanted his invocations. And when it was over, he would burn the body in a pit outside while the spirits he had raised gathered round.

He found his answers. He did not know the identity of the person who was trying to break through the causal dimensions and draw to Earth the energies of Chaos, but he knew the area form where the forces were being drawn down and sent his reluctant spirits to guard it. His ancient manuscript told of dark entities that were waiting to be returned to Earth to drink their fill of human blood. Atazoth, Dagon, Athushir, Darkat ... such were some of their names. Once summoned, they could not be returned. To be summoned they needed human sacrifice of special kind.

His own work had wrought changes in the astral planes, drawing to his cottage another Adept. Ezra Pead did not like the man who arrived at his cottage. Jukes did not like Ezra Pead either, nor the squalor he found. But a vision by his Priestess had brought him, and her trance warnings made him stay, offering his help and that of his Temple of Ma'at, to prevent the Dark Gods from returning.

“We have a common aim,” he said, and Pead, reluctant, had agreed. “They cannot be allowed to break the Current of Aiwaz.”

Jukes, stocky and squat, sincerely believed what he said. For over a year he had run his small Temple in London, helping by his acts of magick to further the Aeon of Ma'at. By day, he worked in an office, but at night, in his basement flat, he became High Priest for his gods. He had read widely on the subject of the Occult, made many contacts during the years of his searching, but he was surprised by the books and manuscripts the Pead possessed.

Avarice was a stranger to Jukes, but the rare books and manuscripts introduced them.

“They need a human sacrifice,” Pead said in his lipsing voice.

“Can we prevent it?”

“If we knew who it was.”

“Your manuscripts – “

“They are silent.”

“May I?”

Pead smiled. “Study them here? Of course.”

For two days he studied, while at night, he stayed in a hotel in the nearby town, slightly fearful of the obsessive Pead and the savage dog, which strained on its chain snarling every time he entered and left. The filth and squalor oppressed him while he worked, as avarice whispered cunning words in his ear, but he ignored them. On the third day he rose from the stool by a scriptorium desk, triumphant.

“So they need a psychic, eh? Pead said.

“There is a ritual – the Ceremony of Recalling – to which he is brought. The sacrifice, and it must be a man, is killed and the High Priestess washes in a basin full of his blood before calling the Dark Gods back to Earth.”

“So, you found all of this there?”

Jukes held the vellum manuscript carefully. “Yes. The first few pages are a blind – and the last few. Quotations from the Fathers of the Church. The real text begins here – “ He pointed with his finger.

Pead shrugged. “I cannot read Coptic.”

Jukes spent a day copying the manuscript while Pead watched over him. He was glad to leave and, returned to his flat, he burned all his clothes before scrubbing himself clean in the bath. That night he summoned his Temple. The ritual began at the time he had agreed with Pead. He did not know what ritual Pead himself would do, but he had his suspicions and he did not want to ask.

Jukes’ Temple was the room where he lived, lit by candles and perfumed by thick incense and his members sat on the floor touching hands. It was not long before his Priestess was in a trance, guided by the sigil that Pead had inscribed on parchment. She spoke of being in a forest where two men walked, leaving one who was bound. Of how spirits had gathered to help her. “Above his eyes – the one who sits waiting and bound – there glows a tattvic sign. He is the one we seek... but there are horrors of which I cannot speak! Another will opposed with mine. Stronger – it casts me away and back...”

All night they tried, until, pale and exhausted, the Priestess slept, severing the astral link that had bound her to Pead and his spirits of death. And in the morning while a few rays of sun brightened for a few minutes the top of the basement window, she told of battles on the night that had drained their power away to leave the one who was chosen in the sanctuary of the Dark Gods’ Temple.

Jukes knew that where magick had failed, physical force might succeed.

“We must stop them!” he had said, his eyes bright with the fervor of his strange faith.

Outside a solitary bid sung, unheard amid the early traffic that chuntered along the narrow London street.

XII

Melanie did not sleep for long. But there was no desire within her to rise and breakfast before using her telephones and telex to establish the well being of her world. She had done so for years, and it was a new experience for her to lie watching a man sleep in her bed. The few who in previous times had been granted her favors for reasons of Satanic or financial power, she had told to leave after the conquest of them was complete.

She watched until he awoke, roused by her gentle caress of his face. She left him them, to dress and walk in her bare feet across the lawn of her walled garden. The sun was warm as she walked, intrigued by her own feelings. There was a beauty about the world that she had never seen before. She felt this beauty in the blue of the sky, in the delicate colors of the flowers that bordered her lawn, in the sound of the wind as it rushed through the trees nearby. It was the warmth of the sun, the dampness of the grass, the silence that surrounded her. She understood that there were many worlds within the one on which she lived, brought to reality perhaps by a mood or a circumstance.

This world of beauty was real to her in a way that brought unusual feelings to her, but the world that she had left yesterday was still there – still full of the feelings she felt: contempt for the members of her coven while she played her role as Mistress of Earth, hatred and love of strife. Each year, each day of her life was a world into which she projected meanings, interpretations and from which she sought to wrest for herself money and power.

There were worlds beyond – alien worlds, which she hoped to join with hers, bringing chaos and much that was strange. But she found happiness in walking around her garden in the warming sun and thinking about Thurstan. She wanted to make him her High Priest, share her power and wealth with him and enjoy the pleasure that she felt such a sharing would bring, ending the years of her loneliness

She did not see, nor even sense such was her preoccupation, Algar creeping toward her and when she did her attempt to stop him by her magick power failed. She had no power. This startled her, and she could only watch in silence as Algar, grinning like the madman he had become, raised the billhook to slash at her throat.

She raised her arm to deflect the blow when Thurstan, sprinting across the lawn, jumped on Algar, knocking both of them over. Algar was screaming, trying to slash at Thurstan but Thurstan grappled and held his arm round Algar's neck. They rolled over the dewy grass until Algar's body went limp.

"I've killed him! I've killed him!" Thurstan said.

Melanie's inspection of the body was brief. "Come on," she said. "Let's go inside."

"But I've killed him."

The beauty she had felt was destroyed. "He deserved it."

"I didn't mean to," Thurstan tried to explain. "The Police – "

Melanie smiled. “There is no need to involve them.”

“But I killed him.”

Melanie turned to face him. He was now quite calm, but perplexed. “There are some things you should know about me.”

“All I know is that I love you.”

With his words and the look on his face part of the beauty returned. She had been defenseless against Algar, and now she felt defenseless against Thurstan. She did not like either of the forms of this defenselessness took, and walked with Thurstan into her house to arrange the removal and disposal of Algar’s body.

Thurstan followed her from room to room, listening amazed while she made her telephone calls. And when they were done and they sat eating breakfast he cooked, Melanie explained about her life. Thurstan listened, intently and gently smiling.

“So now you know the person you think you are in love with.”

“Why did you tell me?”

“Because – “ She turned away, appalled at herself. “In your cottage I found a crystal sphere.”

“I love you.”

Her feelings for Thurstan seemed to her to have stolen the personal power she had over people, and she was uncertain as to whether she cared about this. “You are not appalled by what I have told you?” she asked.

“No. Nor about the chap lying in your garden. He was going to harm you. I love you, so I stopped him. Simple really. The Police would ask too many questions.” He shrugged. “Considering what you have said, that is very understandable!”

“It will bind you to me.”

“Why do you think I have agreed?” he said directly.

“You are not afraid?”

“Of what?”

“That I might use this to control you?”

“No.”

“Even after what you know about me?”

No – because I sense you love me even though you are afraid to say the words.”

She did not answer, but stared out of the window. “They should be here soon – to dispose of the body.”

“And then?”

“We shall go to your cottage.”

The two men who had taken Lois’ body arrived and Melanie talked to them briefly before they went to carry the dead High Priest to the van. Thurstan was in her secret Temple when she returned, having seen them depart.

“What do you feel?” she asked.

“About this crystal? That it shall take us to the stars!”

Intrigued, she asked, “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Just a feeling. I remember you were a dream of my youth. Maybe I am your Destiny as you are mine.

Melanie perceived forces gathering around them, as if a rent had appeared again but without her will in the metric of causal space and acausal energies were surrounding them. The Temple darkened while she stood breathless beside Thurstan watching her crystal become filled with stars. She touched him then, drawing his hand into hers, to feel the power tense her body as it would be tensed before and orgasm relaxed it. But she did not feel the intoxication of power, nor the sensuous bliss that her many and varied pleasures had brought her over the years of her reign. Instead, there was the quiet ecstasy of gentle and suffusing love couple with an expectation, a promise of vistas yet to be explored but waiting. But it was soon over, this tantalizing glimpse, as light returned to her Temple, leaving only a dim glow to suffuse her crystal.

Her house, drained by the demon battles of the night, was alive again, and she let her own spirit wander from room to room. The early oppression she had felt was gone, as if somewhere and somehow a storm had broken.

A vague memory came to her, like details of a landscape seen through thin mist, and she let Thurstan out of her house and into her car. She did not speak, and he did not as she drove the narrow, hilly lanes, in the warmth of the early morning, that lead to his cottage. The crystal was in its niche, where she had left it, and she took it down. She tried to read it, as she had done before when it gave up its images to her mind, but it was empty.

“You seem surprised,” Thurstan said.

“Where did you obtain this?” she asked.

“An old man gave it to me.”

She sensed he was not lying, for she could almost see the image that formed in his mind as he spoke the words. “Why?”

“A gift, he said. He was insistent. How could I refuse?”

“When was this?”

“Oh, not long ago. A few months. I forget exactly when. He came here to beg a little food. I suppose he wanted to give something in return.

“You do not know what this is?” she asked.

“A crystal ball? He might have been, once, a teller of fortunes.”

For a long time, Melanie had controlled her life, guiding herself toward the goals she sought. She was always the Mistress, the Satanic queen who ruled, never possessed of fear. No one she had ever met had disturbed her belief in herself or shown in any way an inner power greater than her own. Satanist, criminal, businessman or people of wealth – she had mastered them all through her wiles, will and beauty. She found their weakness, and used it to her own advantage. Thurstan had disturbed her because he was so transparent – there was nothing in him that was hidden, neither to her or himself. His feelings, thoughts and pleasures seemed spontaneous and enthusiastic like those of a child. Yet he possessed a fatalism that no child possessed or could possess: an inner belief in the necessity of change, which far from negating his own life, seemed to enhance it by making each moment of life unique.

But it was not Thurstan who disturbed her now. The control she had in life was ebbing away. The loss of her personal power, evident in her failure to control Algar as he attacked, was only a part of this. Events were happening to her, rather than being controlled by her, and she did not like this. What she had seen in Thurstan’s crystal had sent her in pursuit to Leeds, drawing outward her burgeoning feelings of love. Something had and was happening to her because of Thurstan, and she began to believe because of his crystal that forces she did not understand or even know about were trying in some way to manipulate her.

It was simpler for her to believe that her love for Thurstan was changing her life, and she tried to believe this. But a suspicion remained.

“You are a strange man,” she said to Thurstan as she gave him the crystal.

“Not really. I live – or did live – a quite simple and somewhat boring life.”

“You know nothing about this crystal – or my own?”

“No. Only what I feel.”

“And what do you feel now?”

“That there are forces trying to keep us together – and other forces that are trying to break us apart.”

“And you are not afraid of where we might be going?”

“All I know is that I love you and want to be with you!”

He embraced her then, kissing her, and she did not push him away. She felt again, as they stood in the room of his cottage, swaying slightly in their embrace, that with him and through him she possessed a greater, if different, power that made her own past and even her dreams, seem tawdry.

“There is a gathering tonight,” she said, “which I would like you to come to.”

“Oh? What?”

“Just a simple ritual called the Ceremony of Recalling.”

“To what purpose?”

She walked away from him to watch a few ragged cumulus clouds straggle from the horizon toward the sun that rainbowed in places the old, worn glass of the window. “To draw down to Earth a certain power.”

“Why?” he asked in innocence.

“To bring change.”

“Why?”

“To hasten our evolution.”

“Toward what?”

“A higher consciousness,” she said, a little exasperated.

“Such is the aim of the covens that you rule?”

“Not really. They are a means to provide me with things.”

“Enjoyment? Pleasure? Power?”

“Yes!”

Urwroth showed in her eyes but she quickly controlled her feelings.

“Come,” he said smiling and taking her hand, “I would like to show you something.”

His cottage lay in a fold of small hills between the steep slopes of bare Caer Caradoc and the road, which rose from the Stretton valley to track eastwards through field and village toward the wooded ridge of Wenlock Edge. All around, springs began small brooks among the slopes where sheep mostly grazed and few trees grew, and Thurstan took a path to one of these. Yards from where the water issued forth as a trickle, a small pool had formed on a slight piece of level ground, and Thurstan knelt beside it while Melanie stood, bemused, watching and listening to a kestrel as it flew between the bare hills that made a little valley for

the brook. The kestrel flew toward her, circling three times overhead before calling its woeful call and flying away.

“Look!” Thurstan said, rising and showing her the palm of his hand.

On it, no larger than the nail of his thumb, sat a frog. “Isn’t it wonderful?” he said enthusiastically.

Melanie looked at it but without much interest.

“I come here often,” Thurstan said as he placed the frog in the water. “Every time it is different. In one day the light may change so much. In March the frogs come. Last year there was thick snow, but they still came. There is always change – even in this little spot – as the seasons change. Snow, ice, frost, mud, scorching sun that bleeds the green from the grass and brittles the fern. At night – perhaps a moon or only the stars, which change too. No day in its weather and light is ever the same as any other day.”

He stood up to stand beside her. “And I do nothing. Yet everything changes. Even I change, a little with the passing of each year. There,” he pointed, “miles away is a road where fast cars carry people. They seldom see the change around them, only that which lives in their head. A few miles - and another world where those small specimens of life,” he gestured toward the frog, “are never seen and become squashed without thought.”

“You are beautiful – slightly wild, perhaps, like that kestrel which flew overhead – and your world is strange to me. These hills, that cottage, the farm over there where I work, are my world. There is so much in so little – so much beauty to share. I make love with you – kill someone to protect you – and our two worlds join, for a little while. But they are still two worlds. You want me to step into yours as I wish you to enter mine. The change you seek to bring may destroy my world – and I not ready for that.”

Melanie had felt the warmth in Thurstan as he talked.

It was a strange warmth to her, a kind of supra-personal love which she did not understand and which she could not relate to the pleasures of her own life or the goals that she had sought. Yet she liked being beside him as he talked, watching his face and eyes. He could have crushed the frog in his hand as she might have done in her youth or as she had crushed people that opposed her – he did not seek to mold it or destroy it according to his will. He accepted it as it was at that moment in Earth’s history.

“I have seen in you,” Thurstan was saying, “the same beauty I see in this small piece of land, as if you were natural to it in a way I cannot describe. More natural, more real and living than most other people. Yet the world in which you live and have lived and in which you possess power, is not where you should be. I fear it will destroy you, and I don’t want that.”

“I know no other world.”

“But you have begun to discover mine. I touch you, hold you, make love to you.”

His world possessed a fascination for Melanie, as if he had divined what she had felt and as she stood beside him she was no longer a Satanic queen, ruler of a coven of fifty, but a woman in love.

“I would like you to share my world as well,” she said.

Thurstan smiled. “Then I shall come to your ritual.”

The kestrel returned to swoop down toward them before veering away, calling, as it flew toward the sun.

XIII

The wood where Algar had been buried was not silent for long. The sun had set, leaving a nebulous light, when the sibilation began, muffled by earth. Algar had awoken in his grave.

The Priestess screamed, and fell unconscious into the circle of worshippers in Jukes’ Temple. Jukes held her, and she awoke to wail before crying in terror at the vision she had seen. She could not speak aloud but described the horror in a slow sobbing whisper.

It did not take them long to prepare and they left London in three cars as the sky darkness became complete, to travel toward the hills of Shropshire and the house the Priestess had described before the horror had ended her trance. The eight were silent and subdued in spirit during the hours of their journey, nervous when they left the warmth of the cars parked on the verge of a narrow lane almost a mile from Melanie’s house. Around them and dark, the countryside was silent and still.

Jukes let them, walking slowly and beginning to doubt. With every step he seemed to become more tired. He stopped before the driveway of the house, listening, while the Priestess, shaking and sweating, held his hand.

“It will be soon,” she whispered, touching the silver scarab she wore as an amulet around her neck.

The driveway was full of cars, and a warm glow of light spread around the house. Jukes thought he could hear the beat of drums. His Priestess sensed it first, and turned toward the blackness beyond the hedge where they stood, huddled together in the increasing cold. There was a rustling in the field beyond, the sound of wood being broken sharply by force.

Algar smashed the gate apart with his torn and bloodied hands and came toward them. Only Jukes and his Priestess did not flee at the harrowing sight, but hid, pressing themselves into the thorns and leaves of the hedge. They were not seen and watched, trembling and afraid, as Algar walked lumbering like the living dead he was toward the house.

XIV

Thurstan waited in her secret Temple, feeling embarrassed by the luxurious crimson robe he wore. He could not hear them, but knew that many of Melanie's members had arrived and were preparing for the ritual.

She prepared him well, returning him to her house in her car whose telephone she used to summon her willing servants. He had bathed, been massaged, his body relaxed by gently hands of a pretty woman who caressed perfumed oils into his skin, been served food, manicured, his hair attended to. Dressed in silken clothes. No one had spoken to him, but he was treated with deference, and by the end of the afternoon had begun to appreciate in a way that was not real to him before, Melanie's power. When she finally came to him, hauntingly beautiful like an ancient queen, part of him had already begun to accept her world and enjoy it. She was corrupting him with luxury and he knew it.

Melanie, in a green robe almost transparent and which emphasized the contours of her body, came to guide him to where her Satanic worshippers were gathered. The large Temple was lit only by candles and a naked woman lay on the altar beside which a young girl dressed in white with a garland of flowers in her hair swung a thurible. Somewhere, among the shadows, hooded red-robed figures beat their shaman drums.

"Hail to he who comes in the name of our gods!" the worshippers chanted as a greeting for Thurstan.

Two men with the physique of wrestlers whose faces were covered by black masks and who wore very little, closed the doors of the Temple as Thurstan followed Melanie to the altar. Melanie kissed the temples, lips, breasts, womb and pubic hair on the altar Priestess before kissing Thurstan who turned to receive a kiss from all of the congregation.

"Now shall we," Melanie chanted, "with feet
Faster than storm's horses
Seek to bring she who with fire
And cutting sword leaps plunging
Upon her foe while the fates of dread
Unerring gather round!"

"Agios O Baphomet!" came the shouted response.

"See!" Melanie pointed at Thurstan, before twirling round, building her feelings into a temple to frenzy while the congregation sighed and the beat of the drums sounded loud,

"Here is he
Who shall this night
Be her consort and pour forth
As libation his seed of life!
Dance – I command you
And with the beating of your feet
Raise the dead!
I shall take him down into Earth

And let her with her teeth
Suck him dry!
Dance! – I command you!
And I, Mistress of this Earth
Shall raise him up and feed him
With the fragrance between my thighs!
So shall he unlamenting
Become the Gate that opens
To our gods!

The congregation began to dance, slowly at first, chanting loudly as they did so. Melanie stood in the center of the circle they were tracing with their bare feet, raising her arms as the power was invoked. The chant of Ba-pho-met pulsed to the beat of the drums as the dancers danced faster and faster, throwing off their robes as quietly the altar-Priestess arose to climb down from her altar.

Her eyes were closed, but she walked within the circle of the enclosing dancers toward Thurstan. She embraced him, lightly, before pulling his robe open and revealing his nakedness. Then she kissed his lips and opened her eyes.

Her eyes did not seem human to Thurstan, but he was not afraid. The young woman with the slender body had become Melanie – the power with Melanie and the greater power beyond her. She was lover, mistress, wife, mother, daughter and sister – goddess and demoness, and Thurstan let himself be pulled to the floor of the Temple. He had no will to resist as he looked into her eyes. She was not gentle with him, but tore off his robe before wrapping her legs around him and digging her nails into his back. There was pain, but it seemed to enhance the delight that came to him. The drumbeats, the chanting, the naked whirling dancers, the incense, the writhing woman beneath him – all ravished his senses. The pain brought frenzied desire, and sweat soon bathed their naked bodies. Then she was screaming in ecstasy as he was while around them the dancers stopped to turn inward, clapping their hands as they watched and shouted the name of their goddess. And when it was over and Thurstan lay breathless upon the relaxing body, the two men by the door came to lift him and place him still naked upon the altar.

The worshippers formed an aisle to the altar down which Melanie came to kiss Thurstan and rekindle his fire with her lips. It did not take her long to succeed and she leaned over Thurstan's face to brush his lips with hers before whispering as her eyes became the eyes of the altar-Priestess: "Now you are mine forever!"

She signaled with her hand, and her dancers moved slowly in a circle around her and her altar, calling down with a dirgeful but powerful chant the Dark Gods beyond the Gate that was Earth.

"Nythra Kthunae Atazoth!" they chanted.

Melanie did not remove her robe, only lifted it as she lowered herself upon him. The beat of the drums had slowed to match the slowness of the chant, and she moved upon him slowly. Somewhere, in the Temple, two cantors began to chant, a fifth apart, above the chanting drone of the slow circling dancers.

“Agius Rotanev”, sang the cantors, their powerful, clear voices making the complicated plainchant flow like a high crested wave toward shore, rising, falling slowly with grace but always moving on.

The slow moving organum of the cantors, the chant of the slow moving dancers who had linked hands, the energy brought by sexual frenzy, the shamans drums and wild dance, all conspired to push open the Gates to the Abyss. The slowness was a counter-part to the earlier frenzy, and Melanie used it to gather the energies to herself. She showed no outward sign of the ecstasy within and was smiling as she transferred the energy to her crystal while Thurstan’s body spasmed and then relaxed. She kissed him before climbing down from the altar.

She signaled the dancers to stop and gather round her in preparation for the climax of the rite when she would release the stored energy to bring her Dark Gods to Earth. They would still their minds, as she had shown them, to become parts of a mirror that would focus the energy.

But the doors of the Temple burst open. No one screamed as Algar stood, hideous, in the light of the candles, but they seemed to gather closer to Melanie. The two men by the door moved upon him but he easily knocked them to the side and they fell away unconscious. He was snarling, staring at Melanie as he walked toward her in silence. She did not move except to hold up her hand to restrain Thurstan who had risen to stand beside her. Then she smiled.

Algar stopped, his body twisting forward as if he wanted to move but could not. Melanie raised her hand toward him and he fell upon his knees, oozing blood as his already torn flesh, festering, split further. She raised her hand again, and he screamed as if tortured, before crawling face down on the floor. She dropped her hand, and his screaming stopped. He looked up at her then, not as a madman and not as one of the possessed that had returned, briefly, to life. Instead, his look was that of a mute child who could not the pain that it felt. But Melanie raised her hand again and the specter that had once been Algar lowered its head and died.

XV

“Join us!” Melanie said as she stepped past the body.

Jukes and his Priestess stood in her hall, awed by what they had seen. They had followed Algar, and were still trembling.

“Come to me!” said Melanie softly.

Jukes stared at the floor while the Priestess looked upon Melanie’s face. She was smiling, her dread gone, as she walked forward to kneel at Melanie’s feet.

“No!” shouted Jukes. He tried to move toward her, but could not.

Gently Melanie raised the Priestess to her feet and kissed her on the lips. The Priestess understood her thought and went on the touch the masked Guardians who lay unconscious in the Temple. They awoke and followed her to stand on either side of Melanie.

“Will you be mine,” Melanie said to Jukes, “as she is?”

“Never!”

“Then I shall make you mine!”

She was about to raise her hand to force his head up so she could see into his eyes when she saw an old man dressed up like a peddler walk through the open door of her house.

“He is mine, I believe,” he said as he tapped Jukes on the shoulder to free him from the bonds Melanie had placed around him. “He is no use to you. But if you object –“

There was great magickal power in the old man, hidden even in his eyes, but Melanie perceived it.

“Who are you?” she asked.

He bowed deeply, like a jester. “I am Saer.”

“Saer?”

He looked around the hall and peered briefly into the Temple. “You have made great changes, I see.” Then smiling, he bowed again before escorting Jukes away.

She let him go. “Feast! Rejoice!” she said, turning to greet her coven and they felt happiness spread among them as the drums began to beat again.

She detailed her Guardians to carry the body and let them into her secret Temple where they threw it into the pit beneath the plinth that held her crystal. There was laughter and lust among the worshippers when she returned, servants carrying trays of food and chalices of wine. She thanked her Guardians, bid them join the feast, and watched Thurstan as he stood, covered by the robe he had discarded, beside the Priestess from Jukes’ Temple. She did not mind the hidden desire between them and went to walk alone in the hazy darkness of the garden.

Forces opposed to her own were present, returned from the night before and sent forth against her by the shedding of blood, but they did not affect her or the guests in her house, kept away by the power in her crystal, and she walked slowly in her bare feet over the cooling grass, idly looking up toward the stars.

It was not long before Thurstan joined her. He was followed by Jukes’ Priestess.

You knew, didn’t you?” Thurstan said, a little shyly. He too had been awed.

“That it was Saer who gave you the crystal? Yes, I knew it as soon as I saw him.”

“Then you know who he is?”

“Perhaps!” she laughed. “What is your name? She asked the Priestess.

“Claudia.”

“Yes – it suits you. I shall not change it. Do you wish to stay with me, Claudia?”

“Oh, yes!”

“You are free to go.”

“I don’t want to go.” She looked down at the ground. “Not now I have found you.”

“I shall never harm you – unless you turn against me.” She took Claudia’s hand and held it to her own breast. “You are mine now and I shall always protect you. As a sign of my trust I shall give you a gift.” She placed Claudia’s hand in Thurstan’s, kissed them both and left them standing together in the mild night air.

They were still standing in her garden holding hands when she looked upon them from a high window in the house. She knew Thurstan did not know what to do and Claudia was too shy to initiate anything. Melanie wanted, through the ritual and her gift of him to Claudia, to draw out Thurstan’s darker self, and as she watched while a bright large moon began to rise quickly above the distant hills an owl screeched nearby, she felt she had found the means to achieve her goals.

The ritual had returned both her power and her role. She was stronger than she ever had been and, with Thurstan as her willing High Priest, she would make herself stronger still by uniting his world with hers. Together, they might wander among the stars. The prospect excited her, as her desire to watch Thurstan and Claudia have sexual intercourse excited her, and she remembered words from the Black book of the witch queen before her: ‘The secret of the Moira who lies beyond our Grade of Mistress of Earth, is a simple unity of two common things. This unity is greater than but built upon the double pelican being inward yet like the stage of Sol, outward though in a lesser degree. Here is the living water, azoth, which falls upon Earth nurturing it, and from which the seed flowers brighter than the sun. The flower, properly prepared, splits the Heavens – it is the great elixir which comes from this which when taken into the body dissolves both Sol and Luna. Whoever takes of this elixir will live immortal among the stars.’

Melanie believed that she had found the secret, brought forth from within her by her feelings for Thurstan and the power of ritual. She was preparing Thurstan – for first she had to return the Dark Gods to Earth.

Excited, she saw Thurstan briefly kiss Claudia before leading her toward the house, and she retreated to her room to follow them on her monitor. They seemed uncertain what to do as they stood in the hall, but the naked worshippers who rushed past them to run up the stairs gave them their clue. Suitable rooms lay open and waiting on the first floor of the house, as they always did. No one ever dared violate the floor above, reserved for Melanie and her special guests, and Thurstan did not as he slowly led Claudia to an empty room.

Nothing in the house was hidden from the surveillance system but Melanie did not often use it as she used it now to watch and listen to Thurstan and Claudia, for there were a multitude of pleasures that gave her satisfaction. In her desire to make Thurstan part of her world she pressed a switch to record images and sounds in the room on the floor below.

Melanie became aroused by watching them. Thurstan undressed Claudia slowly and as her naked body appeared, Melanie realized she desired it also. Claudia responded to Thurstan's kisses by pulling him down with her onto the softness of the low bed in the luxurious room and it was not long before Thurstan's tentative slowness of delight gave way to sexual frenzy. But this was not prolonged and there was no scream, nor even sigh of ecstasy from Claudia – only Thurstan's groan as he slumped fulfilled upon her voluptuous body.

This pleased Melanie and she lay listening to them talk.

“Who is she?” Claudia asked.

“You don't know?” an exhausted Thurstan said.

“I saw her in a vision – in this house. We came to stop her.”

“But you didn't.”

“I couldn't. When I came near to her I felt – “

Thurstan smiled. “An overpowering love?”

“Maybe,” she said and blushed. “And you?”

“She is the most remarkable woman I have ever met.”

“You serve her then? I mean as High Priest?”

Thurstan laughed. “I know little of her world. I only met her a few days ago.”

Claudia was surprised. “But are you an Initiate?”

“Of what?”

“Her Temple.”

“Not as far as I know. She told me she was involved in something – “

“Satanism?”

“Yes. But I assumed it was some kind of game. You know what I mean? Then,” he sighed, “this ritual. There is real power in her, real magick. She casts a spell with just a look.”

“You love her then?”

“Yes. Because, I suppose, like you I am sensitive to things and people. When I saw you I felt a warmth in me, a happiness. I don’t normally do this sort of thing.”

“What?”

“Leap into bed with women I have only just met.”

“Neither do I! I think she overwhelmed us both.”

“Do you mind?” asked Thurstan softly.

“No,” she whispered. “I feel I have found what I have always been seeking – here in this house. It is exciting and yet I feel protected. Before I came I assumed it was evil in some way – that she was evil and must be stopped. But now –“

“Stopped from what?”

“Changing the cosmic tides that wash upon the Earth and give to people a certain energy.”

“I understand nothing of such things.”

“I saw that man – in his grave.”

“The one who died?”

“Yes. He was her High Priest wasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“I assumed you had taken his place,” she gestured to his robe, discarded on the floor.

“I know little of her beliefs.”

“It is a new beginning, then, for us both.”

“Perhaps we can learn things – together?”

“I sense that is what she wishes.”

“And the man you came with?”

“High Priest of my Temple in London.” She laughed. “I suppose he will be thinking I have been abducted against my will and forced to indulge in hideous Satanic rites! Or be offered as a sacrifice to Satan.”

“You are not afraid that you will be?”

“No – as I’m sure you feel. I know nothing about her except what I feel, and I feel she will not harm me. Quite the reverse, in fact.”

Thurstan leaned on his elbow to look at her. “It may seem like a trite thing to say, but you are not like a stranger to me.”

She touched his face with her hand. “I know what you mean. She is not a stranger to me either.”

“What shall we do?”

“Apart from the obvious, you mean?” They both laughed. “Wait, I suppose for her to tell us.”

“It could be an enjoyable wait.”

“I hope so.”

Melanie had seen and heard enough. It did not take her long to reach their room and she stood in the doorway while they sat up from the bed, nervously smiling.

She gave Thurstan his robe. “Leave us,” she said to him.

He left, obedient to her word, and she closed and locked the door before sitting beside Claudia on the bed.

“You are beautiful,” she said, caressing Claudia’s neck.

Her soft kiss was returned, shyly, and she took off her robe before drawing Claudia toward her in an embrace.

“I have never done this before,” Claudia whispered.

Melanie kissed her neck and breasts. “Do you want to?” she asked gently.

“Oh, yes.”

The tender caresses, the perfumed softness of Melanie’s body, the slow intimate kisses and movements, her own feelings of warmth, the sensuous pleasure that Melanie brought to her gently through touch and tongue, all combined to stimulate Claudia to an ecstasy both physical and emotional and of a kind she had never experienced before.

She lay beside Melanie, embracing her and softly crying, drawing comfort from the strange woman who kissed away the tears, feeling in that moment that all the confusion, doubts and sorrow that her sensitivity had brought her over the years, was no more. Her past, with its broken relationships its traumas and dreams, was forgotten. Her future was unreal – only the present was meaningful to her. She sensed forces outside the house that wish to harm the woman who kissed her and whose body heat reassured, but she was protected for the moment from those forces as Claudia felt protected. The harmful forces, which were waiting for weakness, drew more emotion from Claudia until she felt a genuine love.

Jukes had stolen her love when they first met and through him she had learned to use her powerful psychic gifts. But his passion for her had just been a passion, fleeting like the brightness of a meteor in the sky of night, and she had learned to live again and alone with her

dreams while he filled and emptied his bed with the women in the Temple in the name of the magick he invoked. Her gifts brought empathy and vision, but never the love she needed.

Melanie to her, in that moment, became all her dreams and it did not matter to her then that she gave her love to another woman. It felt natural to her – as it had seemed natural when she and Thurstan had made love, and she understood, as she lay warm and relaxed, that she had given her body to him because it was what Melanie had wanted.

To Melanie, she had given her body also, but now she gave up her soul as well.

“I think I love you,” she said, and Melanie, in the humid room, felt a confusion of love that she did not need nor desire grow within her heart.

XVI

Thrust forth from the room, Thurstan wandered around the house. The Temple was full of naked bodies and the incense of sex, and when he tried the door that he knew led to the crystal, it would not open.

Other doors were locked to him as to other worshippers, and the one that did open led him to a library. He heard the door closing behind him, but it did not open when he tried the handle and he contented himself with trying to see out of the window. He could see nothing, for the outside shutters had been closed. The room was large, with high ceiling and books rose in shelves on all the walls, darkly lit. A chair stood waiting beside a table whereon a single book lay open. ‘The Book of Wyrð’, the gilt spine read.

She planned this, he thought to himself and sat down to read.

“Satanism is the philosophy of the noble and strong. It is the antithesis of the religion of Yeshua, that worship of decaying fish. To the cowards and the followers of the Nazarene belong the meekness of the weak, the rapid utterances about pity and the vileness of the bully. Above all, Satanism is the enjoyment of this life.

The most fundamental principle of Satanism is that we as individuals are gods. The goal of Satanism is simple – to make an individual an Immortal, to produce a new species. To Satanists, magick is a means, a path, to this goal. We walk toward the Abyss and dare to pass through to the cold spaces beyond where CHAOS reigns. There is ecstasy in us – and much that is strange. Vitality, health, laughter and defiance – we challenge everything, and the greatest challenge is ourselves.”

There was music filling the room as he read. He knew it was real even if he could not see its source, but it was faint – an unearthly sound that he found beautiful and brought a vision of stars and a remembrance of his strange dream after he had first made love to Melanie. His body tensed as he listened, carried to another plane of existence, and he experienced in that moment, a possession of feeling surpassing the ecstasy of physical passion. There was no room, only a rushing of stars, the exhilaration of phenomenal speed and then a silent slowing that brought him to the planet of his dreams. The music was a slow chant of words he did not

understand combined with sounds from instruments he had never heard before, and it expressed the desolation of the dead planet as well as his longing for Melanie – and Claudia.

Then the vision and the music ended and he was simply sitting alone in a library staring down at a book. He tried, but could not recapture what he had seen and heard and he felt a longing that strained his breathing and brought tears to his eyes. Melanie was the woman he had always sought to bring meaning into his life, the reality behind his insight of days before when he had stood by the stream near his cottage and made his divinity a goddess. Her power, charisma and promise made his own life and expectations seem dull, as his vision made the world around him seem ponderous.

He experienced a sudden need to express his feeling through the frenzy of his body and was not surprised to find door unlocked. He began to understand the house itself was alive, an extension of Melanie's will, and he let it guide him. Lights brightened to show him the way, or dimmed when he went wrong. He was led to a room where all that he needed, and more, lay waiting. He dressed quickly, his heart beating fast and ran along the corridor and down the stairs to leave the house.

He was not alone. Something was with him as he ran along the driveway in the cooling air under the stars with the light of the moon to guide him. He sensed the presence as he sensed that it was protective of him, and he ran fastly down the narrow lane allowing the freedom of physical exertion to suffuse his body. His running brought some of the vision back to him and he left the road to follow a track that led alongside the sloped of the Long Mynd. He was soon tired and breathing heavily but he ran on to become a little detached from his body, defying it. He ran for miles before turning and running only a little slower back to the house, suffused with a desire to learn, to be master and equal of Melanie. Her world had become real for him, and he did not want to leave it.

The house seemed to welcome him on his return. There were no cars in the driveway, for all the worshippers had gone, and he followed the lights to a bathroom where he soaked himself for a longtime in a deep bath, please and expectant. His love for Melanie, his hope of their affinity, the passion they had already shared, the ritual, her sharing of him with Claudia, even the killing he thought he had done for her - all had liberated him, releasing the inner energies that his normal life had kept under control. He felt there was no challenge that he could not overcome, nothing that he would not do. Life was before him – a large canvas on which he would paint a masterpiece. He wanted to make his own life a work of Art.

Satan was the name he gave to the energy that made both his body and his mind vivid with life, he dried himself vigorously, covered himself with the silk robe that hung from a hook on the door and let the lights guide him to Melanie's room.

The door opened for him and he walked over the soft carpet in the azure light to find Melanie was not alone and the door closing behind him. Claudia was beside her in the bed, asleep. He was not shocked by this, only momentarily confused. They were both naked.

“Come”, his Mistress said, “sit beside me.” And he obeyed.

She kissed him, before stroking Claudia's hair. “She is lovely, isn't she?”

“Yes.”

“Can you share me?”

The directness of the question startled him. “I think so.”

“Come then and take off your robe.”

He obeyed, and lay beside her. She was pleased with his arousal, and the reasons behind it, but she teased him saying, “Trying for four in a row, then?”

“I’m sorry – I didn’t – “

“Don’t be sorry, my darling.”

The endearment made him happy, lessening the awe he felt and which came upon him as soon as he had entered her room.

“You are pleased with things?”

Their bodies were touching as they lay together and he felt his awe ebbing away. “I want to learn. Share your world with you.”

“It is good that your inner strength returns. I want us to share.”

“But I feel a little lost sometimes.”

“Because of what I own?”

“Partly. But also –“

“Do not say anymore.” She pressed her finger to his lips “I shall tell you something. You have made me realize how lonely I was. How much I need love.” She laughed, self-mockingly. “I, with all that I have, all the power you have seen, need you. I am human after all, even though I don’t want to be.”

Thurstan kissed her, and Melanie felt like crying. But she mastered her feelings. Thurstan had changed, as she had hoped and planned he would, but she herself was changing. Never before had she displayed her feeling and she felt vulnerable. She knew Thurstan sensed this, as Claudia had when they walked hand in hand to her room. She was not afraid of them, only herself, and when Thurstan spoke she was composed.

“And Claudia?” he asked gently.

“I need you both, it seems.”

“You have enough love to give.”

“You must be tired – after all of your exertions!”

“I am.”

She kissed his eyelids and he smiled, languid, before relaxing into sleep. She watched him for some time. Her feelings of love, born by Thurstan and suckled by Claudia, now enhanced her power and did not destroy it, and she drew down energies while her lovers slept beside her, storing them in her crystal below. Words from the Black Book kept returning to her. She had never understood them before, knowing only that they described the process of change necessary before a Magus or a Mousa was born in the coldness that lay beyond the Abyss where Satan reigned. She did not know what awaited for her and in her if this change was successful, for all her books were silent about it and there was no one whom she could ask. She had believed with a certainty that her own power had confirmed, that no one living in her time had passed that way toward the final stage of the seven that marked the Satanic path.

This belief, however, troubled her now more than the changes within her wrought by love – more than the duality that love has assumed in the past hours of her life. More even than the persistent hostile force which still surrounded her house and came with the night like hail. She was troubled by Saer, and tried to cast an image of him into her crystal, but some barrier beyond her own power to breach prevented her, and she lay awake between her two lovers pondering instead the patterns which the Dark Gods might assume when, tomorrow as she had planned, they would be returned finally to spread their chaos upon Earth.

Only Saer, she felt, might prevent her - and if he tried, she would have the power of two lovers to help her.

XVII

The old man who had rescued him from the Satanists left Jukes as he had arrived – without greeting or explanation – and Jukes walked toward the cars and the shivering members of his Temple who had fled from Algar.

He did not speak to them and they asked no questions of him, and they sat huddled together while the moon rose and their sense of reality returned. Then, in whispered words Jukes told his tale and how he wished them to join him in the battle that was to come when, with Pead, they would conjure from the Abyss, a destructive force to send against the witch queen and her house.

They gave their assent, and in all the cars drove along the moonlit roads over and down hills and through turning valleys to Pead's unlit cottage. The dog snarled, straining on its chain, while a voice from the darkness said, "Why do you come?"

Jukes shown a torch on Pead's face, then turned it away. "We failed," he said and explained.

"This man," asked Pead, "did he say his name?"

"Saer."

"Saer? I thought he was dead!"

“You know him?”

“No, but there are stories. Come in, my friends!”

Inside, Pead lit a single candle.

“We must act!” Jukes said while his followers adjusted themselves to the stench and the flickering shadows.

“This night I have sent a fetch against them.”

“Perhaps Saer – “

“If indeed he lives, I do not know where to find him.”

“She had no power over him. If – “

“He would acts if he wished. If he does not, them maybe it is for us to do nothing also.”

“But we must do something!” shouted Jukes. Several members of his Temple, standing behind him, were already scratching themselves.

“I see you do not understand.”

“I understand,” persisted Jukes, “enough to know this planet is threatened. By her and the forces she wants to bring.”

“If Saer – “

“Saer this! Saer that! Who is this bloody Saer anyway?” said Jukes in anger, his body trembling in reaction to the events of the night.

“He is an old man, older than me – much older than me – who in his youth sought the secret of the alchemical Stone. Some say he found it. Myself – I do not know. It is said of him that he understands and can control should he wish, the cosmic tides themselves. He had a pupil once, a young woman. But she abused his trust and they parted – he to live alone and she to follow the sinister path. But that was a long time ago. No one has heard of him or seen him for – what? - maybe thirty years.”

“Then he is a Magus?” asked Jukes.

“Indeed. The only one this century – although there have been many who claimed the title but lacked the understanding and the power.”

Even in the dim light, Jukes could see Pead’s sly smile. He ignored the slight at the man whose teachings he followed. “But surely them he must do something.”

Pead shrugged his hunched shoulders. “Maybe he is.”

“I feel nothing.”

“As I.”

“But surely,” persisted Jukes, “his very appearance – his saving of me – means something.”

“Perhaps.”

For years, Jukes had absorbed diverse Occult theories, and he quickly made an assumption. “Perhaps it was a sign for us to act? Perhaps he has chosen us to act?”

“I do not know.”

“I saw and felt the power he had. He must have wanted me to do something. We could summon Shugara.”

“Do you know what you ask?”

“Yes! There is enough of us to invoke such power.”

“It is dangerous.” Pead rested against one of his desks as if seeking comfort from the books upon it.

“We cannot allow her to succeed. Shugara would destroy her – and all of her followers.”

“And maybe us, also.” He moved to where a pile of small, bound manuscripts lay on the floor. Extracting one, he began to read aloud. “Shugara is one of the most dangerous to invoke. Manifestations may be accompanied by the smell of rotting corpses. Symbolized by the Tarot card The Moon – Shugara is the great Beast that comes from the dark pool under the Moon. His call is to be chanted in the key of G major...”

“It is the only way!” said Jukes with messianic zeal.

“In all my workings I have never dared – “

“We must dare it now! Listen to me! Do you believe in evil?”

“Evil?”

“Yes, evil. Do you believe that there is a dark power at work on this Earth?”

“I know that there are dark forces that we as magickians can use.”

“Yes, yes. But what about innocence?” He reached behind him and drew forward a young female member of his Temple. “See her?” And the young woman blushed. “I would call her innocent – someone who trusts and believes in the good. Now,” he continued, intoxicated by his eloquence, “If I for whatever reason threw her to the ground and raped her, I would destroy that trust, that innocence, wouldn’t I?”

“Maybe.”

“I would be imposing my will on hers, to fulfill my own desire. Well, I should really respect her – her own desires, for ‘every man and woman is a star’ and ‘love is the law, love under will’. My act would be an evil one.” Something obscure occurred in his mind, but he could not define it and passed on. “Our magick – the Osirian current and that of the child who comes after – is to bring love into this world, to bring a New Aeon. Yet she – “ he spat out the word – “wants to break our magickal current and impose her own. We would become possessed by the power she brought – invaded in our minds. There would be evil – the ending of love!”

With his strong words, Jukes seemed to have invoked a presence in the damp, shadowed room. They all sensed it – and Pead most of all.

“Yes, you’re right,” Pead said, glancing behind him. “We shall do as you say.”

“Then let us prepare,” said Jukes confidently.

Pead took the candle and led them to the room where he slept. They could not see the bloodstains that covered the floor and he set the candle by the window to fetch his ceremonial equipment. The magickal circle, inscribed with sigils and words of power, almost filled the room when joined together, and Jukes and his followers stood within it while Pead brought candles, incense, a sword, parchment and pen. The burner was lit, incense burned, the circle purified by the sprinkling of salt and sealed by the passing along it of the tip of the sword.

Jukes and Pead stood in the center while the others linked hands and began to walk, slowly at first, sun-wise around the circle. Pead drew a sigil on parchment, showed it to the four corners of the room and began his chant.

“You I invoke, Shugara, who lurks waiting in the pits of the Abyss! You are Fury and the bringer of Death! Hear me! And hearing hearken to my call! For I am the Lord of Powers in this circle – hear me! And hearing hearken to my call!”

“Shu-ga-ra!” chanted the circling dancer as the incense filled the room and the candles flickered. “Shu-ga-ra!”

“Shugara!” commanded Pead. “With this my seal and sword I conjure you! Attend to the words of my voice! Exarp! Bitom! Nanta! Hcoma! I rule over you all: Gil ol nonci zamran! Micma! Come Shugara! To me! To me!”

Jukes felt the frenzy and began to chant the demon’s name in the key of G major while Pead continued with his invocation and the dancers, circling fast, chanted their own chant.

First the smell choked them, and then the laughter stopped their chants. The dried blood on the floor seemed to boil, and then seeped away into the room to form an ill-defined shape that hung near the ceiling. Pead began to speak, but the shape swooped down to engulf his face and vanished.

“You fools!” he hissed before turning and walking from the room.

Outside, the dog growled, yelped and then was silent. When Jukes found it, it was dead. Jukes waited a long time, but could hear nothing. He left the implements of magick, the candles and the incense burning, but performed a banishing for himself and his followers before leading them to their cars. They felt sick and oppressed and, in silence, drove slowly through the night knowing Pead was possessed and would probably die. There was nothing they could do except hope that in some way he would fulfill the purpose of the ritual.

There was little traffic as they drove down the roads toward London, sensing that they might have failed. In his depressive state, Jukes did not care about leaving Claudia and as the time of the journey turned into hours and clouds came to cover the moon, he had come to believe his own beliefs were an illusion. Nothing was threatened, there were no powers trying to break through the dimensions, no magick – only hallucinations and dread. He found comfort in these thoughts, a sense of reality returning, and all he wanted to do was return to his flat, throw away his books and begin a normal life. He could forget the terrors of the night. He was like a person suddenly and unexpectedly locked in a prison cell – first, there was the loss of his will, a disbelief, the slow depression of shock, and then the gradual adjustment to the reality of the surroundings. But there would be no anger, no sudden resentment at this fate as there might have been for one unjustly imprisoned. The terror had burned that from his soul as a flash of lightning burns out the bark of trees.

For the first time in his life, Jukes felt the need of a personal love. His need was not for the love that was an idea that he carried in his head, nor for that which was only a word in someone else's faith used to bring a little self-importance to his life, as when he used a woman in a magick ritual or real life. Instead, his need was for the comfort and gentle joy that personal love could sometimes bring, and as he drove carefully and slowly toward the lights of London, he held out his hand for the young woman beside him. She did not refuse, for she loved his charisma as High Priest and in her gentle, trusting way held his fingers tight.

The simple gesture destroyed all the demons of Jukes' past.

XVIII

It was dawn when Thurstan awoke to find Claudia still asleep beside him. It was her hand, which rested on his shoulder, her warm breath against his face, and for some time he thought the memory of Melanie being between them was the memory of a dream.

A thin duvet covered them, but their closeness, Claudia's bare shoulder and his memory of her body, aroused Thurstan's passion and he was about to let his hand stroke her breast when she awoke. For a moment there was fear in her eyes, which he saw, destroying his passion. She smiled at him and in her smile was an awkward vulnerable trust, which brought to Thurstan a remembrance of all the women he had loved and the reason why he loved them.

He kissed her, as a brother might, before leaving the room to find his clothes. Dressed, he wandered around the house but could not find Melanie. The air of late summer was mild and hazy and he sat on the grass in the walled garden, listening. A contemplative calm came to him and he might have been a Taoist monk meditating in the still air of dawn. He was at peace, within himself, and felt in a way stronger than he had ever done before that the world,

and he himself, unfolded in its own natural way. It was also beautiful, in a strange, calm way and he sat, very still but without effort, while the gentle euphoria suffused him.

The mood drifted from him, slowly. His fervor of the night was unreal – a memory of another person. The calm he felt now was real and he realized with a sudden insight that it was this feeling that he wished above all else to share with Melanie. It was the beauty, the calm he found when he looked into a woman's eyes – the gentleness he experienced sometimes when he lay naked beside the woman he loved and she showed by a caress or a kiss or a smile that she cared for him. It was the longing he felt to be with a sensitive woman – the soft desire to make slow, gentle love to her. All the sharing moments, all the experiences of two people in love would be a remembrance of such moments, a giving and returning, a mutual embrace and breaking of barriers, that he knew no words might describe.

The energy of the night, even the magick, was alien to him. He wanted his vulnerable love to lead himself and the woman he loved to another existence, and he began to feel that such a love might in a way he did not understand, affect the world, as once he had believed that prayer to a god might. He knew this was an ideal – but it was an attainable one, if the love was mutual and without reservation. He began to think of how a monk or a nun, pledged to contemplation, might seek to love God – he wanted and needed to love a woman in such a way: a woman of flesh and blood who responded to his kisses, who laughed, cried, danced, became angry or sad, but who, whatever the emotions and whatever the experience loved him faithfully as he would love her. There would be a sacred quality about such a love.

He did not need the energy of power or magick or money, for he sensed the beauty of life lay hidden in its simplicity, in a kind of detachment, and as he sat in the still warming air of early morning only the sound of bird-song around him, his body and mind languid, he felt it easy to believe in a god who might have made it all - or some force, perhaps named Fate, which governed the workings of the cosmos. He was aware, as he sat, of the suffering and misery in the world, as he was aware that he himself was not God – not even a god. He did not understand the suffering, or the misery, but felt that all he could do was try and change himself, re-orientate in some way his own consciousness so as not to add to those burdens.

All the threads of his life were gathered together in the moments of his sitting: the memories, sometimes painful and intense, of the women he had loved; the lessons of his own past, his feelings and thoughts of and about others. He drew them to himself by a quiet process of thought to make his feelings and memories conscious and part of a whole, and by the time he had completed the task, his view of the world had profoundly changed. He felt he had at last discovered the reality of his own self, buried for so long in a confusion of feelings, moods and desires.

Perhaps his intuitive awareness of Claudia's vulnerability or the strange things of magick he had seen caused this. He did not know or particularly care. There was a happiness within him, which was gentle and made him smile. He felt in love with the world and possessed and awareness of meaning. He sensed there was something beyond his own life, which a particular way of living would create – which a sharing of love with another person would make possible. Perhaps this was another life in another plane of existence. It was a nebulous sensation, this belief, which he could not formulate directly into ideas expressed by the words of his thoughts, but nonetheless real to him and he added it to his view of the world before rising from the grass and walking, in the sunlight, toward the house.

A man was by the door, leaning on a stick. It was Saer and he was smiling. Thurstan blinked in surprise – and Saer was gone. Thurstan felt he had seen a ghost, and did not bother to look for the old man.

Melanie sat by the crystal in her Temple and he stood beside her.

“Will you marry me?” he asked.

“What?”

“Will you marry me? Leave all of this and come and live with me in my cottage?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“There are many things that I must do.”

“Forget them. Forget all this.”

She smiled at him. “And Claudia?”

He sighed. “And Claudia. I cannot share you.”

“All that I have is from this day yours – and hers.”

“I want nothing except you.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing. No money, power – whatever. I earn enough to support us both, if we live simply.”

“You need never work again.”

“But I need to.”

She laughed, and touched his face. “It is a lovely, romantic ideal! But not possible.”

“Why not?”

She gestured toward her crystal. “This is my life.”

“I can be your life.”

“But for how long?”

Thurstan flinched, and in that moment part of his hope was extinguished. “We can try.”

“Why this sudden change?”

“All this really isn’t me. You have power, money, charisma – and magick to bind people to you, to control. I love what is beyond all that in you. My real world is outside, sitting in the sun listening to the songs of the birds or watching clouds or waiting for the frogs to return in Spring. I do not belong here – in a Temple, doing strange rituals.”

“You are tempting me,” she said smiling.

“As you tempted me?”

“Perhaps.”

They stood in silence for a long time until Thurstan said, “You could use your power to bind me, but – “

“I no longer have any power over you,” Melanie said softly. “I knew that when you entered here.”

“You still love me then?”

“It is not my love that makes me powerless to bind you. There is something else.”

“What?”

“Would you like to take Claudia some breakfast? There are many things to do this morning.”

“Marry me.” When she did not answer, Thurstan said, “well at least come away with me.”

“And if I want you to stay here with me? Share my world?”

“I don’t think it would work,” Thurstan said, sadly.

“You could try.”

“It would be a game. What would be the point?”

“To enjoy the game, perhaps.”

“I want to go straight to what is beyond all that.”

“Our bridge is in danger.”

Thurstan looked at her and began to cry. He made no sound and Melanie wiped the tears away with her hand.

“Go now,” she said. “Before I do something I will regret.”

The sunlight seemed painful to him as he walked along her driveway toward the lane. He had not looked back and she did not run after him, and he walked slowly shuffling like an old man along the lane and down toward the road. He stopped for several minutes to stand and

lean on the bridge toward the bottom of the lane, watching and listening to the fastly flowing stream of water. A cyclist, brightly clad and whose bicycle was laden with panniers, passed and wished him good-day.

“Lovely day!” Thurstan said.

“Yes, splendid!” replied the traveler before changing down into a lower gear and riding up the hill.

The scenery, the weather, the brief human contact charmed Thurstan, bringing the world around him alive. Melanie the Satanic witch queen was not of this world where he himself belonged, and as Thurstan walked away to take the Neolithic track that rose up the slopes of the Mynd a mile distant, his sadness was relieved by a presentiment of joy.

XIX

The house seemed, to Melanie, to sigh as Thurstan left. Her own grief was longer, and it was nearly an hour later that she went to her bedroom to find Claudia asleep.

For several minutes she stood, watching the sleeping woman. There was a gentleness and trust in Claudia that brought to Melanie an intimation of a type of love she did not know nor even perhaps understand, and she allowed her grief at losing Thurstan to sharpen this intimation. But she could not hold in her consciousness this insight and left, imbued again with her role and Destiny, to make arrangements for the evening ritual.

There would be no sacrifice, only a calling down of dark power through her crystal – a breaking of the gates by the directed frenzy of the members of her Temple and the guests she had invited from around the world. The hours of the day passed quickly for her, Claudia was happy, receiving guests, preparing the Temple and food for the feast, which would follow the recalling, directing the servants that morning had drawn to the house on Melanie’s command.

Fifty-four people were gathered in the Temple as darkness came slow to cover the lard around. Melanie left them as her cantors began their discordant chant and her dancers began to dance, slowly, drawing forth from themselves a rising pyramid of power. Claudia waited for her in the secret Temple, her hands on the crystal and soon the diffusing light from the floor began to change in color until a purple aura surrounded them.

There was a yearning in Melanie as she stood beside her Priestess and lover. But it was not a yearning for love - only a cold desire to alter the living patterns in the world and so fulfill her Destiny by returning the Dark Gods to Earth. She was suspended between her past with all its charisma and power and the future that might have been possible if she had surrendered to Thurstan’s love. She was aware of herself only through the images of the past and her barely formed feelings for Claudia: detached from the realness of her body and personal emotions. The power being invoked seemed to be drawing her toward the Abyss and the spaces beyond the Abyss where she had never been.

The Abyss was within her, within Claudia, within all those in the Temple and all those outside it. It was primal awe, terror and intoxication and she entered it she felt its energies forming into shapes ready to ascend to Earth through her crystal and Temple. She was not conscious of the world around her and so did not see the door of the secret Temple open or the leering man who entered.

The darkness of the Abyss had attracted the darkness, which had possessed Pead, as it made him sense the vulnerability of Claudia. He was growling like the animal he had become as he fastened his hands around her neck. Melanie heard the scream but she was paralyzed by the Abyss and could only return slowly to the world of the living as inadvertently Claudia operated the mechanism, which opened the pit beneath the crystal. She and Pead stood on its ledge as the plinth with its crystal slid aside.

“Take me!” Melanie screamed. But she was too late and as she moved toward them they stumbled and fell into the pit.

Silently the plinth returned to seal them in deep darkness. Melanie could not make it move and bloodied her hands trying. And when it did, no answer came to her repeated calls, only silence rising from the rotting blackness below.

The power in the crystal had gone and she hid her tears as she walked toward the Temple and its worshippers. They were still chanting and dancing, unaware that the real power was gone from the crystal, the house and its Mistress they all held in awe. Melanie watched and listened, aware as she did so that what they felt as they chanted and danced was only a flickering shadow. She left them to seal herself in her room.

She sat for a long time, vaguely aware of the passing hours and the people who drifted away from the house, perplexed. They had danced, chanted and waited for her to appear, but when she had not come forth to carry them to the Abyss they had waited again until the realization of failure made them shuffle and slink away.

Dawn drew her to her garden and in the long moments of her walking barefoot in the dewy grass she found an answer to her grief. It was an answer without words – a feeling that drew her beyond the cold Abyss to where a new universe waited. She was drifting in this universe, floating among the stars and galaxies of love, sadness, sorrow and joy, and as she consciously drifted, her body tensed and tears came to her eyes.

Images and feelings rushed through her as a whirling system of planets and stars forms from chaos and rushes through a galaxy past other stars when time itself is compressed. The images were of her past but the feelings attached to them were not the original feelings. There was sadness instead of exultation, love instead of anger, grief instead of joy. They had changed because her perspective had changed for she was seeing herself and her past not as before through her own eyes but from beyond herself where other people were part of her in a way that brought an awareness of their sorrow, passion, hurt, narrowness, love and stupidity. She was Thurstan as he sat in the café holding her hand and trembling with the expectation of love; she was Claudia as she lay being kissed for the first time by a woman – the possessed man who in blindness and unthinking hate had killed Claudia.

The images and feelings rushed through her and when they were gone she was left feeling both sorrow and love. Her sorrow was in her lack of vision – she had drawn forces from

within herself and beyond herself and used them to fulfill her will and desires: nothing had been real for her except those powers and herself. Here love was in a yearning to try and understand by giving herself, by sharing what she felt with someone who understood.

The sorrow that burst upon her broke her free of her past: it was a storm which smashed her mooring and snapped the anchorage of her self so she became a ship sailing free blown by winds she did not understand. Her feelings for Thurstan, her brief sorrow at Lois' death, her brief love of Claudia were distant heralds of the storm, which had come.

Gradually, her yearning became a yearning for love. She felt the blue of the sky above pour down upon her as the warmth of the sun, felt the wholeness of the patterns of Nature before her as if they were all notes in a beautiful piece of music – Vivaldi, perhaps, exulting in song the god of his faith, or Bach transforming a fugue to its end. She received the emanations that broke upon her with a joy seldom before known except in brief moments of physical passion, and she became happy, sad, compassion, ecstatic and afraid until a vision calmed her. Her vision was of the vital, ineffable mechanism of the cosmos itself – the eternal beyond the transient forms that life assumed through the process of slow evolution to something beyond itself.

This something she felt to be a vast, calm ocean where evolution ended, and began, in an indescribable transcendent bliss. But the vision was soon over, and she found herself lying on the grass of her garden in the chilly air of morning.

For over an hour she lay, calm and gently breathing while physical senses returned to her body and an awareness of self brought need. She did not want to move as she did not want the calm, her perception of the whole of which she was a part, to end, and when she did move it was to slowly walk toward her car to drive away from her house, hoping, as she did so, that Thurstan would still love her.

XX

The past came back to Jukes. The day had barely gone after the night of his return before his insight faded. He was in bed with his new and gentle lover when they called.

“I hope you do not mind us calling,” the nervous young man said.

“Not at all.” He gestured to the sofa and watched keenly as they sat. The young woman with short hair was pretty, dressed in a purple dress while the young man with a straggly beard seemed weak-willed and shy.

“We heard about your group,” the man said, “and are very interested.”

“How did you hear?” Jukes asked.

“Oh – the chap in the ‘Occult Bookshop’.”

“Actually – “ Jukes began.

“He said you were an Adept – and we would very much like to learn from you.”

“How do you mean?”

“Be one of your pupils.”

Jukes was flattered and when he looked at the woman she turned her eyes away and blushed. His new Priestess entered bearing a pot of tea on a tray – she smiled at him with love, but his own smile was brief and she sat down in a corner, quiet and trusting, while Jukes began to manipulate.

He talked of the Occult path, the difficulties and the sacrifice that was needed, and the importance of being willing to learn. He drew them to him, talking of the Aeon to come when truly free individuals would change the world forever. He talked of the magick within, which could be drawn out and help each individual find their True Will, and as he talked he drew nearer to the subject of Initiation and acts of sexual magick. His desire for the woman who sat opposite him grew as he talked, molding his will through words which seeped into his new followers as a parasite seeps into the intestine of the host.

“You are very sensitive – to certain forces,” he said to the woman.

“I don’t think I am,” she said softly.

“It seem to me you have a natural gift.” He sensed the compliment was well received. “It can be developed by certain means, should you wish to do so.”

For hours, he talked while they listened. He felt a power talking to them about magick, a mastery that made him confident. He was an Adept, and would guide them toward magickal understanding. Part of him was sincere as well, and over the years he had covered his desires with lovely names as his assumption of having attained Adeptship made all that he did or chose to do seem right for both the cosmos and him. His names were Destiny, free love and the Chosen.

As the hours passed he became his role – there was no dichotomy within him. His pupils would be a means, sent by his gods, whereby he himself – and they – could attain further magickal understanding.

Darkness came early, shielding, and his Priestess lit some candles to shed some light and add to the atmosphere of magick that he was building with his words. The terrors of his recent past became rationalized as he talked – Pead had brought misfortune on himself by his past deeds of sacrifice, and the terrors at the Satanist house were the result of a battle between Saer and the woman who had enticed Claudia away. It was not his battle, and his only mistake had been to become involved. That involvement was Claudia’s doing, she was obviously being manipulated by other powers emanating from the Satanist house.

Jukes was pleased with his understanding. He described to his new pupils the ritual Pead had done and explained how the magickian became possessed.

“So you see, there is always danger present. We must learn to master our wills!”

His two pupils looked at each other, and the woman nodded.

“When,” asked the man, “can we be Initiated?”

Jukes pretended to consider the matter carefully. “We have a meeting next week at which Initiation could take place.”

“Really? As soon as that?” The man was surprised.

“Of course, if you wish to delay – “

“No, no. What you suggest is fine. We are only too keen to begin our quest.”

“Good. I shall arrange everything.”

“May I ask you something?” For the first time the woman spoke.

“Why yes!”

“What happened to the man in that ritual?”

Jukes laughed. “He is probably wandering around still, quite mad!”

Jukes was pleased to see them go, knowing the woman would soon be his and knowing that his Priestess would be only too willing to please him when they returned to his bed. He slept well that night, tired from his bodily exertions and safe again within the world he had created. He did not hear his Priestess crying, a little, toward dawn as she sensed what next week would bring. But she would accept it, for she was only a Priestess and he was her teacher.

Outside, two Blackbirds sung her to sleep.

XXI

‘Therefore, let every mortal see that last day
When they die – not considering themselves fortunate
Until without suffering they cross the boundary of this life.’

Thurstan wrote the words slowly, savoring them, before collecting together the scattered pages of his translation. He glanced through it, satisfied at the labor of months, but sad because he would have to think of something else to do in the long hours to be spent alone as summer changed to autumn and brought the dark of night to cover the evening hours.

A premonition of dawn came to him as he looked out from his window to the eastern hills, and he snuffed out the candles by which he liked to work. The air outside was fresh like that of early autumn and he stood by the door of the cottage slowly breathing it in. There was no wind to break the silence and he walked into his small garden, riddled by weed and long of grass, to watch the haze of Aurora grow. Definition of fence, tree, fields and hills came

slowly in rhythm with the song of birds as if those very songs were calling Eos from her sleep. The growing light though without warmth still drew the cold sadness from Thurstan as he stood waiting for the sun god to rise. And when he did, climbing steadily between the cleft in hills on the horizon, Thurstan smiled in reverence.

Phrases from his translation repeated themselves in his mind and it did not seem to him a long span of time since Sophocles had seen or imagined the sun rising over the mountains of Phocis: ‘Bright as a flame from the snows of Parnassus comes a voice...’ Who, Thurstan wondered, had in the intervening centuries understood the message? Would his own attempt to present it in his own language fail should it ever be printed and read? Would hubris – defiance that broke the balance in the cosmos – increase? Could the balance ever be restored?

He did not know the answers to these questions as he did not know any answers that were solutions to the problems of his own life, and he contented himself with enjoying the beautiful world around him; the sights, sounds, smells of sky god and Earth mother. The Earth around him was real in a way that his memories and dreams were not and as he stood, experiencing the dawn of day, he forgot his love of Melanie and his dreams of sharing his life, making himself content by his work in the gardens of mother Earth and by his night time toil of translations.

He became at peace again with himself and sat upon the step to his next translation. The turning of Earth brought the sun higher into his sky while he sat, enjoying the warmth of his last day free from his work. Tomorrow, his brief holiday over, he would return to the farm to strain and stretch his muscles and delight in his simple tasks.

The sun was warm when he heard a vehicle approaching, but he did not rise even when he recognized the car, which was screechingly braked to a halt. Melanie came toward him and his peace vanished like darkness by lightning. For minutes they stood, pressed close together by their arms.

“I love you.” Melanie’s words were a spell, which bound her to him. She knew they would be and had never used them before.

“You seem changed,” Thurstan said as she began to cry, gently.

“Claudia is dead.”

He kissed her, sat her in a garden chair in the sun, made and brought her a pot of tea and sat beside her to listen while she talked. She spoke of the man who came rushing into her house, drawn somehow by the power she was invoking, of how he seemed to sense, as she had, Claudia’s innocence. She described the pit into which they fell where Algar’s disfigured body lay rotting: of how she had let her grief walk her to her garden and how the burgeoning light of a new day had brought to her an understanding of the tragedy of her past.

“Your simple love,” she said, “broke through the shield around me. I don’t know how or why – but it did.”

“What will you do?”

She laughed. “Did you mean what you said?”

“Yes.”

“Then I want to stay here – with you.”

Clouds began to gather around the eastern horizon of hills as they spoke, growing as a wind arose to shape and move them across the sky to cover, briefly, the sun. Other, darker clouds followed.

“But your house – your plans?”

“I shall forget them.”

“Can you?”

“Yes. My perspective may have changed – but not my will!”

Thurstan was delighted, both by the answer and the spirit, which sent it forth from her lips. “Will you marry me, then?” he asked.

“Yes!”

They kissed like new lovers while clouds covered the whole of the sky.

“Shall we go in?” Thurstan asked.

“I would like that.”

Inside Melanie said; “You know what I wish?”

He was attuned to her and answered, “I think so.”

“It may be possible, for I no protection and my cycle is right.”

This new desire enhanced the closeness they found as naked body lay upon naked body. Rain fell around the cottage in where they lay, sweating. It beat down as a storm upon the roof and windows, a counter-point to their passionate ecstasy and love, and when it was over and they lay entwined together while the sun sent shafts of light through a window, Melanie began to cry. She softly cried for a long time as if the tears purged her of her past. Thurstan felt this, and brushed them away as she lay resting her head on his chest.

The knocking on his door startled them both. Hastily Thurstan covered part of his nakedness.

“Yes?” he asked as he opened the door.

The old man was in ragged clothes and it was some seconds before Thurstan recognized Saer.

“I am sorry to intrude – at such a time,” smiled Saer. “May I enter?”

Thurstan was reluctant, for he sensed the Saer was more than an intrusion. “I’d rather you didn’t.”

“Her power is gone.”

“Please go.” Thurstan did not understand what was happening – but Saer seemed a threat to him in some way.

I cannot leave without her.”

The words struck Thurstan like blows. “We are to marry.”

“It cannot be,” said Saer quietly.

“Leave us alone!” shouted Thurstan and in anger shut the door. He bolted it before returning to Melanie.

Saer stood by the bed. “It cannot be,” he repeated.

Thurstan’s wrath made him move toward Saer who raised his hand. Thurstan’s body became paralyzed and he could only watch as Saer gave Melanie her clothes.

“I shall kill you!” Thurstan screamed.

Saer smiled.

“Why are you doing this?” Thurstan asked, realizing his rage was useless. Melanie did not look at him and seemed to be in a trance.

Saer smiled and Thurstan’s rage return. He channeled it to his body. Trembling with effort he could only manage to move his feet a little forward.

“Sleep now.”

Thurstan’s eyes were closing and he could not stop them. The last thing he saw was Melanie’s pleading but helpless eyes. Then he was dreaming. He was in his garden under a searing sun – but his garden was different: full of beautiful flowers and luxurious grass. Claudia, radiantly beautiful, was beside him and held his arm. He felt peaceful with her and listened almost rapturously as she spoke.

“You were part of his plan. He could do nothing until your love broke her power.”

“Help me,” Thurstan asked.

“We can do nothing here.”

Thurstan awoke to find himself lying on his bed. Moonlight reached his room and he lay trying to unravel dream from reality and reality from dream. It was a slow process, but helped

by Melanie's perfume, which still lay on his pillow and when it was over he remembered her car.

It was still outside his cottage. He felt uncomfortable with its power and drove carefully along the moonlit lanes and roads to her house, which he found empty and cold. Nervous, he switched on all the lights as he journeyed from room to room and floor to floor avoiding the temple of her crystal. But he felt and saw nothing except the shadows and fears of his own mind. And the memories of their brief time together.

Only the library possessed some warmth as if in indication of the answers he hoped to find, and he shut its door before browsing among the books. All of them, and the manuscripts bound like books, were about alchemy, magick or the Occult. He could read the Latin of the medieval manuscripts and books, but what it related did not interest him as the later books brought forth no desire to read further. Even the Black Book of Satan, resting on the table, seemed irrelevant to him. They were all compilations of shadow words, appearing to Thurstan to fall short of the aim that the searchers who had written them should have aimed for. His instinctive feeling was to observe in a contemplative way some facet of the cosmos – to stand outside in the dark of the night and listen for the faint music that traveled down to Earth from the stars – rather than to enclose himself in the warm womb of a house to read the writings of others. Demons, spells, hidden powers, the changing of base metal to gold, even the promises of power and change for himself, were not important to Thurstan, and he left the library with its stored knowledge and forbidden secrets and lurking gods, to walk in the moonlit garden.

The stars were not singing for him – or he could not hear them above the turmoil of his thought – but his slow moon-wise walking brought a calm. His dreams of sharing life with Melanie were still vivid, but he realized that if such sharing was not to be, it would not be. He might try, through force or even magick to win her back. But if he succeeded, his dreams would only become real if she wished to make them real for him, and all he could do was give her the freedom of choice. Saer was using her – for what purpose he did not know – and he would try and find her, somehow, to give her the promise of choice. He was not afraid of Saer, not worried about the magickal powers he possessed, for as he walked with a calm that deepened and brought awareness of the rhythms of the cosmos, he felt that it was his fate to try and find her. What happened when and if he did, would happen, as Spring happens after the cold darkness of Winter.

XXII

It was not a long wait. Thurstan did not enter the secret Temple and use the crystal nor any magickal means. His way was not the way of magick but of sensitive thought and he sat on the damp, cold grass to close his eyes and think of Melanie.

What he saw guided him and he walked in the moonlight along the narrow turning hilly lanes singing softly to himself. His songs were from his translations and he invented the music to match the rhythm of his walking feet. There was joy in him then, a simpleness that gave him the strength of water and its ability to follow any channel or shape itself while still being itself to any vessel or container. His goal was a small cottage of stone with a sagging roof and tiny windows beside an unmarked track that weaved among the mamelons between the western

slopes of the Mynd and the tress of Linley Hill. No one passed him as he walked and the fields were quite silent and quite still. His chosen track let him for a hundred yards through a wood, past a stream flowing down between two hills to curve eastwards and rise north among the rocky barren land. As its sudden end lay the cottage but briefly home to the short sun of Winter. Dawn was almost rising behind him as he knocked upon studded oak door.

No one came to answer his call and he opened the door. Inside in the flickering light of a fire, he saw Saer hunched on a stool before the hearth while against the wall in the recessed bed, Melanie lay sleeping. The large room comprised all of the cottage and it smelled of burnt hazel mingled with pine. Saer, though surprised, did not move.

“You are persistent.” Saer did not look toward Thurstan but still stared into the large flames that ate, with sporadic breaking of tree-limbs and fingers, the wood.

Thurstan did not close the door but began to walk toward Melanie. Suddenly, Saer rose.

“Leave her,” he said quietly and raised his left hand.

For an instant Saer’s features seemed, to Thurstan, to be lacertilian but the impression soon vanished to leave only an old man with the impression soon vanished to leave only an old man with white hair standing before a fire. As soon as Thurstan touched Melanie she awoke. “She is mine,” he said, almost sadly.

“It is not for you or for me but for Melanie to decide,” Saer said, and smiled. It was a kindly smile and he raised his hand again.

Thurstan signed and held Melanie’s hand.

“I can see,” Saer said to Thurstan, “what powers you now represent.”

“I have no power – only my love for her.”

“Even now you do not understand.” Saer turned toward Melanie. “It is written: ‘Baphomet is a goddess of violent aspect who washes in the blood of her foes. She is the bride of Lucifer – a Gate to the Dark Gods beyond this Earth. Her daughters are Power, Vengeance and Lust, but the only Earth-based live child born from these children is the Demon named Love,’”

“So I,” said Melanie, “as Mistress of Earth passed beyond the Abyss.”

“To bring into this world what must be.”

“And now I must choose?”

“Yes.”

For a long time Melanie looked at Thurstan. “I must go with Saer,” she finally said. In that instant, she felt her magickal powers return.

“But I –“

“Say nothing.” She pressed her forefinger to his lips.

“I don’t understand,” said Thurstan, almost crying with emotion.

Melanie smiled, sadly. “There will be enough time for understanding in old age. What lives now and grows within me will always be a part of you.”

She kissed his cheek and he became too full of emotion to do anything but watch her and Saer walk into the burgeoning dawn. Then, suddenly, they vanished. He ran outside, but he could not find them.

He walked slowly away from the cottage. The light of dawn seemed to be sucking mist from the ground, but he did not care. He moved, like an old man pained by his limbs, through the cold and sometimes swirling mist along a path that took him toward the Mynd and up, steeply, to its level summit where he stood, high above the mist, to watch the mist-clotted valleys below. The heather was beginning to show the glory of its color, and he walked through it northbound along the cracked and stony road stopping often to turn around and wait. But no one and nothing came to him – no voices, song or sigh. There was hope within him as he walked as he had often walked along the almost level top of the long and beautiful low mountain. But it did not last. He sensed he would never see her again – never know their child. The very Earth itself seemed to be whispering to him the words of this truth. He began to sense, slowly, that there was for him real magick here where moorland fell to form deep hollows home to those daughter of Earth known as springs and streams, and where the Neolithic pathway had heard perhaps ten million stories. No wisps of clouds came to spoil the glory of the sun as it rose over the mottled wavy hills beyond the Stretton valley miles distant and below. No noise to break the almost sacred silence heard. For an instant it seemed as if some divinity, strange but pure, came into the world, and smiled.

The smile might have been one of understanding, but Thurstan sat down in the heather and cried.

XXIII

It was raining still and dull of day when Jukes arrived at Pead’s cottage, summoned by avarice. His fear began to ebb away as he saw it was empty, unchanged since the night of the ritual – except for the stench of the dismembered, half-eaten and rotting dog.

He selected his goods carefully, selecting only the rarest of books and manuscripts to his car wherein his Priestess waited, soothed by his words of charm: ‘He said if anything happened to him, I was to keep his books...’

So he worked while she, in trust, waited. And when, to his satisfaction, the collection was complete, he drove in curiosity to see from a safe distance the house wherein Claudia had left him and where he thought she lived in bondage to her Satanic mistress.

An old tramp was walking away from the direction of the house and Jukes stopped him, saying: “Do you know who lives there?”

“In that house? Said the old man before spitting on the ground. “Empty it is – has been for weeks if you ask me. No mug of tea for me there, that’s for sure.

Jukes did not thank him or even watch him walk away. He was excited, and led his Priestess along the driveway to the house. Behind them, Saer turned in the rain, and smiled.

Jukes tried the door, and to his surprise found it open. The house was warm, comforting after the cold rain, and they ambled along the hallway with Jukes calling “Hello?”

No one came. Jukes left his Priestess for he felt strangely aroused. The house, he felt, was a woman of beauty and he was violating her. He was full of physical lust and felt powerful and began to explore all the aspects of her warm and scented body – hoping vaguely he might find a real woman whom he could rape. He eagerly sought the bedrooms – caressing the silken sheets – as he eagerly sought items of clothing, which he hoped by their texture, and smell might bring nearer to him the woman he was searching for. Night came from outside while he wandered, bringing light and increased warmth within the house. But Jukes did not notice this. His arousal became stronger until he became a man intent only on rape. He did not see the shadows from his own Abyss as they gathered around him lipsing words of encouragement, as he did not find in his search the woman he wanted. But he remembered a woman, waiting for him below.

He found her asleep in a chair fluxed in the glow of a large crystal before her. He did not care about the strange room nor wonder about the crystal. He cared only for satisfying his lust – he wanted, as he had never wanted before, to abuse her cruelly, to beat her and rape her savagely. He was strong in body and would use his strength to satisfy himself by forcing her beneath him.

He moved toward her, leering. Then she opened her eyes and smiled.

Jukes found he could not move, and did not see the door behind him close. “You are mine now,” the woman who had once been his willing lover said. “With a look I can strike you dead!”

Jukes did not doubt it. Reality for him returned quickly. She was no longer his Priestess, but a woman, mistress of him, who by magick bound his will. Beside the crystal where he stood watching helplessly, an amber necklace lay and she rose from the chair to take it for herself. She was still smiling as she unthreaded one bead, which began to glow in her fingers. She showed it to him, mockingly, and laughed before re-threading it and placing the beads around her neck.

“You are mine,” she repeated and smiled. “Through Them whom we never name, we who garb ourselves in black possess this rock we call this Earth.”

She did not yet know what she would do with her new power, but there was plenty of time for her to think of something, plenty of secret books to be read. The old man who had led her from the hallway to this chamber would return, one day, to instruct her, she remembered he had said.

Thurstan saw the lights in Melanie's house, and waited. He waited for a long time in the cold and the darkness, trying to forget his hunger, his tiredness and the rain. At last the lights became fewer, until all were gone, and he walked, trusting in his love and hopeful still, toward the door. It was not locked.

There was a woman sleeping in Melanie's bed. He did not wake her, nor the man he found sleeping in another room, but left them and the house to walk along the dark road that would take him to the Mynd, down into the valley and back to his cottage.

"I am an old man in a young man's body," he said to himself as he walked amid the rain. Maybe some day he would love again, but the shattering of his dreams had changed him, making him to wish to live alone, content with his translations. He did not fully understand his recent past but he felt that Melanie's child, when born, would be important in some way to the world – a kind of channel for the forces which both she and Saer represented.

He had seen enough of the hidden dimensions of the world to realize his lack of knowledge, but this lack did not bother him. He would go his own way, slowly as perhaps befitted a hermit-scholar, seeking through the slowness of the years a kind of inner peace in the little piece of Earth that was his home. Change would come – as it always had and always would – and he would sigh, while he treasured what he knew.

In the rain he thought he heard a strange creator star-god sigh, but walked on – shaking his head at the perplexity that was human life and the sadness that was the breaking of his dreams.

Incipit Vitriol.....



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