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Ménage & More

Light O' Love

Jacqueline George



Light o'Love

When Shirley arrives at the Institute, she thinks she will be studying Politics. But the Institute has a sterner purpose, the study of Witchcraft. Gradually, Shirley is introduced to the practice and history of the Craft. She has a talent for mind control and for romance, and is given her witch's name, Light o'Love.

She is shown the sights of Liverpool by the brilliant, austere Rostov and taken back to his den. He is one of her lecturers. The others are more friendly and cherish her and her growing powers. She surprises them all by breaking two of the Dark Light's "toys" automata sent to monitor the Institute. Shirley is the center of attention from witches and from the Dark Light.

Through her efforts, Rostov is revealed as a spy and he is driven into exile. He can only win back his masters' approval by presenting them with the cause of their trouble: sacrificing Light o'Love herself.

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DEDICATION

To all former students at The Jane Flockman Institute, especially my
wide-eyed friends of 1968

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Prologue

Eastern Slovakia, 1916

The nuns have wheeled her out onto the veranda again, to enjoy the afternoon sunshine. She likes it out here. She likes to look down the valley to the distant village and its patchwork of fields. They look homely, even to a city girl. She does not like the dark, forested hills behind the sanatorium. They are foothills of the Carpathians, and remind her of the fighting.

Sister Maria comes quietly to her side, bringing a glass of tea. Sister Maria understands her, even though they do not share a language and have to make do with a mixture of Jane's sketchy German and Maria's native Polish. She needs to be alone, and Sister Maria leaves without attempting to chat, or plump her pillows.

There is a movement on the road above the village and she catches a glimpse of a field-grey military ambulance, with its large red cross painted in a white circle. More casualties. She hopes they will not be boisterous young officers who smoke cigars and shout to each other. Not many noisy people come to the sanatorium nowadays. Most of the sick come here to die, just as she has done.

She supposes she is fortunate. She is tranquil. She has seen many dead and dying men in the last two years. The ones killed in battle lying discarded beside the muddy roads. Many others, far too many, died screaming and swearing in the field hospitals as she and her friends struggled to save them.

At least, to save the ones that might be saved. For the others, she could only offer comfort.

The soldiers liked her in the hospitals. They called her Jane Flockman, The English Sister and they brought her presents. If the patients could return after treatment, they brought her flowers gathered from the roadside. Or their friends would bring chocolates or a bottle of wine, sent from grateful families in Budapest or Vienna. It used to make her sad when she could not remember which wrecked and bloody body had sent the gifts.

That is all behind her now. So much has happened to her in the last two years that her previous life seems to belong to someone else. Liverpool is so far away, and her family too. She raises a hand to her cheek and then looks at her fingers in wonder. There are tears. She thought she had forgotten how to cry.

How different life had been two years ago! Then she was an English lady, on a great adventure, visiting Vienna by herself on her first journey away from home. Vienna; everything she had imagined and more. She had stayed in the Embassy and the First Secretary's wife had taken care of her. They had bought European dresses, and gone to balls together. Glittering Embassy dinners enchanted her, and she had even been presented to Emperor Franz Josef. She had not liked him. He was an old man, far too shrunken and old for his jeweled uniform and the majesty around him.

She coughs into her handkerchief, and rubs her chest uselessly. Coughing hurts her more now and she imagines she can feel the shell fragment that sent her here.

Back then, back when she was healthy, she wasted her time. In her heart, she knew she had come to Vienna for something important. For something that was vital to people, that only she could do. She did not know what had sent her east, only that she had to come. She lay awake each night trying to decipher the confusion in her mind.

Instead of following her instincts, she had wasted her time dancing. By the time she reached Belgrade at the end of June, it was already too late. The Archduke Ferdinand and his wife were already lying bloody and dead in Sarajevo's town hall. If only she had hurried from Vienna, she could have warned them.

She should have gone home then. She was not needed any more, but she could not face her failure. She had hired a servant, Vlado, and moved slowly

across Hungary in the direction of Vienna. One day they had reached Kaschau, and Vlado had carried her bag to the station and bought tickets for the night train back to Vienna. Her train had been delayed. Before it could arrive, another train had pulled up at the platform, a train of dirty freight wagons. They had opened the doors and soldiers carried stretcher after stretcher past the waiting room and on into town.

She could not go to Vienna that night. Instead, she had returned to her hotel and reported to the military hospital next morning.

Dear Vlado, where is he now, she wonders? She can see him clearly, straight, brown, with wavy black hair touched with grey. He had a gold earring, just as a gypsy should. His hands felt rough to the touch, a workman's hands.

He would not leave her, even in the worst of times. He had put on a soldier's uniform to care for her. They did great things together, but she had lost him. Soon after Przemsyl fell, when the Imperial Army was retreating back over the mountains. They had come to tell her in the field hospital. They knew she cared for him, so they came all the way to say that he had been killed, along with the stretcher patient. The other stretcher bearer had survived almost untouched. Shells could do that sometimes. She hopes the Russians have buried him properly. The Army has left so many dead behind.

Dr Pačnar comes out onto the veranda. He is leading an orthodox priest. The priest looks untidy with his long, grey beard and his hair tied in a tight ball on the nape of his neck. She has been a nurse far too long not to recognize why he has come.

Chapter 1

Shirley Grainger stood on the other side of the narrow street and looked at The Jane Flockman Institute of Political Science and Ethics. It looked warm and homely in the drab confusion of Liverpool University. Its red brick and warm, cream limestone made a statement of old-fashioned and subdued good taste.

Today was October 31st. This year, Hallowe'en had come quickly for her. She had already been at University for over a month and her old life, living with Auntie Joan in Staffordshire, had grown hard to remember. Auntie Joan was a world away, and she now here lived at the Institute, and in her room at Smethwick Hall in Penny Lane.

Holly Greenleaf's bright yellow Mini Cooper roared down the lane, braked hard, and parked in front of the Institute. Holly was Tutor in Residence at the Hall, a cheerful woman, her long dark hair flecked with grey. She got out of her car and came over to stand beside her.

"It's a fine old place, isn't it? Sometimes we forget how lucky we are."

"Exactly how old is it?" asked Shirley.

"Let me see; they started to build just at the end of the First War. Jane Flockman died in 1916, and I think Albert decided to build something as soon as he heard. It must have taken a couple of years to build. I suppose we'll be having its fiftieth birthday party soon. I wonder what we'll do."

Shirley thought for a moment. "Was Albert a witch too?"

Holly chuckled. "Certainly not. He was a very conservative sort, a solid, boring businessman. Apparently, Jane used to drive him nuts with her crazy ideas and premonitions. It was Sarah Biddell the herbalist who persuaded him to build the Institute. Left to himself, he probably would have dedicated a park or something like that.

"Do you know about Sarah? She was a little bit of a witch, but she came to it late in life and did not get trained. She was good herbalist though. I still

use her *Medicinal Herbs* sometimes. She finally convinced him about what had been disturbing Jane, how she'd been driven half-mad by her premonitions and was trying to reach the Archduke before Sarajevo. Albert hadn't believed her at the time."

"And so he built the Institute?" continued Shirley.

"Yes, and Sarah told him not to ask too many questions but just let our founding members get on with trying to stand up against the Dark Light. They wanted to steer history away from catastrophes like the War. It must have been difficult, trying to get Albert to understand and not interfere.

"So Shirley, you've settled in, do you think?"

Shirley did not need to think about her question. "Yes, definitely. I had no idea when I came, but now... I'm really enjoying it."

"You had no idea! Don't make me laugh! I remember you on your first day, arriving at the Hall with that poor taxi driver. You positively skewered him in his seat. I don't think I could have done it so easily, and I've been studying for years."

Shirley still felt embarrassed. "Well, it was his own fault, giving me the grand tour like that. And besides, I didn't understand what I was doing then. I'd always done it, don't forget. Auntie Joan must have been the only one who kept me in check."

"You must have been a right little monster when you were younger. Anyway, what have you got this morning?"

"I'm free first, and then Rostov again. More pain and trouble, I suppose."

"No more invitations from the great man?" Holly was smiling at her.

"No. I'm afraid not, but no-one gets more than one, do they?"

Rostov, thought Shirley, Dr. Nikolai Rostov, late of Romania and now lecturing in geopolitics. The Institute's great gift to women, so he thought. The trouble was, he could still make her feel uncomfortable, along with most of the other females. He was tall, with wavy back hair swept back from a long, Slavic face. You only had to listen to that voice for a couple of minutes before you knew he was educated and cultured, that he lived on a different plane. He had long pianist's fingers and deep, dark eyes. If he was interested in you, those eyes could make you feel like the only woman in the world.

Shirley and her friends had met him soon after the start of term. They had been waiting in the lecture room, all quiet and expectant, for their first lecture in '*Central Europe, 16th & 17th Centuries*'. True to the minute, Rostov swept down the steps, his black gown flowing behind him.

He had a presence, and commanded everyone's attention as he stood at the lectern.

"Curtains, please," he demanded, and the slide projector behind his audience clicked into life. A map flooded the screen behind him. It took Shirley a while to sort out the location. The Baltic formed the northern edge, and she quickly picked up the cities of Berlin and Prague. The map extended further east too, but she did not recognise any names there. She had not studied that part of the world at school.

Rostov gave them a moment to consider what they saw, and then he started. "Central Europe at around the year 1700. We shall use this area for the study of how the forces of history ebb and flow, and the way they affect people and countries. Let me start by sketching quickly, the centres of effective power at this time..."

Shirley grabbed her yellow pad and frantically tried to keep up with the flow of names, places and dates that poured out of Rostov. All around her, pens shuttled back and forth as the students tried to catch ideas that flew past them and disappeared. Life with Rostov would not be easy.

Three quarters of an hour later, Rostov stopped abruptly. He had spoken continuously all that time and left his audience stunned. In the same tone of voice he had been using to lecture, he announced "This evening we will be meeting at The John Barleycorn. You should be there." He swept out of the room without looking at them.

Shirley's day had continued with an afternoon practical on crystallography with Dr. Paul Grimes, a long session of peering at rocks and minerals, and trying to describe them accurately.

By five o'clock that evening, all the students were tired. Shirley nearly gave up and went home. Instead, she went looking for Debbie. Debbie was a mousy girl with a disproportionately large bust. They had been thrown together at Smethwick Hall and still spent much of their free time together.

They set off into the city streets to look for the John Barleycorn. They could have easily missed it. On a narrow side street off Pembroke Place, they found its small hanging sign. John Barleycorn stood as a red-faced

gentleman in a low-crowned hat and a blue tail-coat, smiling and holding a foaming pint. The girls took two steps down to reach the door and pushed it open. They stepped into another world.

It felt warm and comfortable and looked exactly as a pub should, with horse brasses pinned over the bar and heavy harness displayed on the walls. Low wooden beams painted black held up the ceiling and more horse brasses. A rustic wooden bar looked out onto a room of round tables and Windsor chairs. Benches like church pews lined the walls. Rostov and Paul had pushed two tables together and were holding court the students.

“Come on, come on,” called Rostov, “tonight Paul and I will buy the first one. After that, you are on your own. And, for the rest of the year. What will you have?”

Everyone sat behind a beer except for Rostov who had a glass of colourless liquid that might have been water. Paul went to the bar and brought back two halves of bitter.

“So?” he asked as he set their beers down. “What do you think of your first day?”

“It was...,” Shirley hesitated. “There was a lot to learn.”

Laughter ran around the table. “You too? I thought we were being kind to you.”

“Well, don’t ever be hard on us then,” snapped Debbie. More laughter and they settled down to relaxing.

Rostov sat across the table from Shirley. “Do you like the pub?” he asked.

“It’s good. I’m surprised. I thought Liverpool pubs would be different, but this one’s just like at home. In the country.”

He smiled. “That’s right. Kent or Sussex. Liverpool pubs are different. Some are pretty rough. Others still think that only working men like a drink. They even have smoking rooms where women can’t go. Terrible places. The Institute encourages this place to be a bit more civilised. No slot machines, no juke-box, good lunches. The beer’s a penny a pint more and that’s enough to keep most of the engineering and medical students away. And any other devoted piss-heads. Have you been to Liverpool before?”

“No, it’s all new to me. I’ve hardly had time, but it looks very run-down from the bus.”

“You’re right. It’s a dirty old town. Lost all its money and doesn’t know what to do next. It’s criminal what’s happening to some of the areas around the centre. I’ll show you round if you like.”

Shirley thought no more of his offer until seven-thirty and the party started breaking up. She was getting into her coat when Rostov said “Come on, I’ll take you for a drive around the centre.”

Surprised, she looked for Debbie. “Go on,” she whispered, “I’ll be alright.”

Shirley followed him out and he led her briskly back towards the Institute and his car. She still felt in awe of him. Why had he selected her for his guided tour? She should have asked if Debbie could come too, but she sensed he would not have wanted that. She pulled her coat tighter against the evening cold and hurried beside him.

He took her down Brownlow Hill and into the centre. The evening rush hour had gone but the streets were still full of cars and taxis. They drove past closed shops and people hurrying by on the pavements. Rostov said nothing as he steered through the traffic.

They turned into an anonymous city centre street and he spoke at last. “Paradise Street. Perhaps you’ve heard of it. You could find all the sailors’ brothels along here in the old days. All gone. Now there’s only a couple of restaurants worth visiting.”

He drove on, following side-roads, past tall, dark buildings and dirty streets. Fish and chip papers blew along the empty alleys. He pulled up in a narrow street and pointed across the road. Shirley could see nothing, just a double doorway leading, she supposed, to a storehouse.

“The Cavern Club,” he said. “It used to be here, and just a few years ago you could have seen The Beatles for no more than the cost of an entry ticket. Nothing there now. It’s closed. No-one’s got any imagination around here.”

He drove on and slowed down again in another side street. They paused opposite a pub called *The Slaughterhouse*. “Remember this place. Fenwick Street. They have the best steak and kidney pie in England. I wouldn’t come down here during the week, it’s much too busy with people from the offices, but they’re open for Saturday lunch and it’s still the same pie.”

They drove out of the labyrinth into an area of massive stone buildings. The hub of Victorian Liverpool. “Pier Head. This is where it all used to

happen. That's the Liver Building, and Cunard next to it. It's all here. Let's go and look at the ferry."

They walked down to Princes Landing Stage. In the gathering night, the whole structure made a cast iron statement of Victorian achievement. A wide sloping walkway led down to the actual landing stage, a massive floating pontoon big enough to accommodate several ferries at a time. Nothing stood between them and the dark waters of the Mersey rushing and gurgling past. The lights of Birkenhead on the other bank glimmered far away in the darkness.

For once, Rostov showed some signs of enthusiasm. "This place is fantastic! I love it. It's so big, such engineering for the time. Look, we're floating and only held onto land by the walkways. It moves up and down with the tide and the river level. And it flexes, look at the waiting room."

Shirley looked along the front of the waiting room and the landing stage stretching away up the river. Sure enough, as the sea waves moved up the estuary, the landing stage flexed like a snake and the waiting room lifted up and down as if it too, could bend. It fascinated her, and she tried to understand how it worked.

Suddenly, in a cloud of spray and acrid smoke, a ferry came to them out of the night. Powering up against the current, it pushed firmly against the stage and a sailor dropped a noose of woven cable over a bollard. The gangways banged down and passengers disembarked on two levels. Minutes later the sailor recovered his cable and the current swept the ferry back and away into the centre of the river.

Rostov showed her the details of the landing stage. "All riveted together, they had plenty of people then and no welding. You see, each one taking two men to set. And, the decoration, it's beautiful. Look at these lamp standards, that's real artistry in iron. Just imagine what they must have looked like when they were gas-lights. Hard to think that they all came out of a foundry."

He led her back to the car. "Now we will go and eat," he announced, "Salad, black bread and pickled fish."

"From Romania?"

"No, not Romania. But the fish and the bread you will find in Danzig. Or Gdansk, if you prefer."

He took them away from the city centre along streets Shirley did not recognise. Finally, he turned into a gateway with imposing sandstone pillars. Beyond them lay not a Victorian mansion like Smethwick Hall but an ugly glass and concrete box. "Collins Hall. My flat is at the back here."

His front door opened directly from the yard. He took her coat and ushered her into his front room. The decoration declared severe good taste. She sat and looked around as Rostov busied himself. He had painted the walls bravely in apricot, with cream ceiling and trimmings. A large minimalist pastel of a nude girl reading at a desk filled the space over the gas fire. The artist had enjoyed the flow of lines and curves in the girl's back. Rostov turned on the stereo, a futuristic turntable, a thin aluminium platter with heavy golden posts to support the disc. When he turned it on, the golden posts started to flash hypnotically past as the turntable gathered speed. He lifted the Perspex cover and lowered the counter-weighted arm delicately onto an LP. Mellow sax filled the room. "Getz," he said, "and Gilberto. The best!" He disappeared into the kitchen.

Suddenly, she felt adult. Rostov had invited her to his flat and taken her seriously.

He returned in a moment with a bottle and two small glasses to set on the coffee table. "Vodka. Specially from Poland." He did not offer to pour but returned to the kitchen. She looked at the bottle. Wyborowa Wodka. She did not recognise the name.

He brought a tray of food and settled beside her. She was surprised at how elegant the tray looked. He had arranged small pieces of pickled herring and continental sliced cucumber on one plate, and thinly sliced black bread on another. Between them sat a small bowl of chopped tomato and herbs.

Rostov filled the two small glasses with neat vodka and offered her one. "Now, drink up. The first one you must finish instantly. The next one can be sipped. So cheers!" He raised his glass, tipped his head back and the vodka disappeared.

It would be childish to object. She put her doubts aside and copied him. The vodka came as a shock. It bit her throat and made her eyes water, but she survived. A warm glow grew in her stomach. He re-filled the glasses. She did not think she could drink one too.

“Now, we will have a Prussian snack to go with your Prussian history. Or a Polish snack because Prussia has disappeared.” He manoeuvred a piece of herring and a slice of cucumber onto some bread with a fork. She copied him. Sharp, clean flavours hit her, the sourness of the cucumber, vinegar from the fish and the bitter grainy flavour of the rye bread.

She was enjoying herself. Sitting on the sofa next to Rostov felt good, and she liked eating the foreign food and drinking vodka as she had never done before. It was exciting. She helped herself to more food and cautiously sipped at her glass.

Rostov sat back and put his arm around her. That felt good too. She liked the size of him, his maturity and even his arrogant self-confidence. She leant against him and did not resist when he lifted her face to kiss her.

His touch and the smell of him overwhelmed her. Her heart raced and she felt suddenly clumsy in his strong, confident arms. Nothing she had done prepared her for this. Rostov was a man and completely eclipsed the boys she had kissed before.

She surrendered everything to him, happy to follow where-ever he led. He pulled her closer. His kisses made her body sing and she reached up to hold his head. She wanted more of him.

His fingers worked at the buttons of her cardigan and blouse. He did not hurry or fumble. As they kissed, she felt her heart rise in her throat and a warm open flowering within her. She was light-headed, half drunk from his kisses.

She felt the steady flick-flick-flick as he released her buttons. He reached inside her blouse to cup her breast and stroke her nipple through her bra. She shivered and moaned as he crushed and twisted her nipple between finger and thumb. She could feel the twisting deep in her stomach.

Still kissing her, he pushed the coffee table back and turned to kneel between her feet. He reached around her, and pulled her blouse out of her jeans. He sat back to look at her and his dark eyes shone for her. “Beautiful!” he said, and unbuttoned her cuffs. She sat silently under his gaze; there was nothing she could say.

She felt no shame with him. It felt natural to sit forward as he pushed her sleeves off her shoulders, and reached around to unhook her bra. He examined her, delighting in her nudity. He took her hands in his and lifted her arms wide.

“Beautiful! Truly Beautiful!” He bent to kiss her breasts and tease her nipples with his teeth. Shirley jumped at the first sensation of his moist lips on her, and then moved to press her breast against his mouth. She let her head fall back as waves of excitement rushed through her. He held her breasts and sucked her nipples, one after the other, and rolled pleasure into them with his tongue. As he sucked and tormented her, she barely felt him pulling off her shoes, jeans and panties. She was naked before him, presenting her pussy to his gaze. She was conscious of a tightening between her legs, and in her mind her pussy loomed large and swollen.

He sat beside her again, holding her and reaching under her. She caught her breath as she felt his fingers slide over her thighs and into her wetness. She sat back to lift herself to him and he rubbed slowly, exactly as she wanted to be rubbed. His fingers pushed inside her, and at the same time he rubbed her with long, slow strokes. Her hips were moving against him, opening herself and seeking more of him inside her. She heard herself panting, and she buried her face in his neck as she lost control again and again.

The storm he stirred inside her with his fingers left her hardly able to think. His fingers continued to play as he took her hand and put it into his open trousers. He helped her to unravel his cock and pull it out into the open. It stood out of his trousers, long and white, and its swollen purple head shone.

His hand left her and now he pushed her down, pushing her head towards his cock. She had an instant to look at it before it butted against her lips and she took his cock into her mouth. She sucked at it, gripping the shaft with both hands and rolling her tongue around its head. Vaguely she could hear Rostov gasping.

He pulled her away. “Let’s go into the bedroom.” He led her by the hand into his room and steered her onto the bed. Rolling her onto her side facing him, he stood beside the bed and presented his cock to her. She took it in her hands and suckled on it, comfortable and happy to receive. She raised a knee to open herself and invite him. He reached for her again, strumming her clit rhythmically, firmly, continuously. Her pleasure mounted rapidly.

He began to pant again as she worked on his cock. She heard him whisper, “So good. Oh, so good...” and he pulled away from her.

Without speaking, he helped her from the bed to her feet and led her to the dressing table. Standing behind her, he bent her forward until her elbows rested on the table. The top of the table was polished, and nothing stood on its surface. She felt him reach under her to take something from the drawer. A quick fumble and he was entering her. His cock pushed into her and she welcomed its presence, drawing it into her and wanting it to fill her completely. His hands gripped her hips and he moved in and out of her, firmly, deliberately, slowly.

She could see them both in the mirror. Her own face looked flushed and swollen. Rostov stood behind her, still fully dressed, working on her and searching for his pleasure. His eyes were half closed and his hair had begun to fall wildly.

Moving faster now, he slammed against her with each stroke. He moved faster and faster. She knew that soon he would come. His cock flew in and out of her now, and the table rattled against the wall. She watched his face, contorted in pain, striving for release. And then it was happening. His expression hardened in animal ferocity as his cock jumped and spat inside her, and he pulled her hard against him. He stood still, rigid, holding her in a grip of steel against him. She felt only the pulsing of his cock deep inside her. Then he relaxed and slipped out of her.

Smoothly, he stripped off his condom and tied a knot in the neck, and hid his cock in his trousers again. Shirley had not moved. She remained resting on her elbows, trembling.

"Come," he said, taking her arm. "Let's sit down again."

He took her to the sofa and refilled their glasses. "Your very best health," he offered and Shirley sipped her drink again.

Suddenly she wanted to dress, but he put his hand on her arm. "Don't. You look very pretty like that. Here - have some more fish."

"But, I don't..." She felt uncomfortable sitting naked beside him, but she took the bread he offered and scooped up a piece of herring and some cucumber. She drew a deep breath. "I think I should go..."

"Of course. But finish your drink first, and then I'll drive you home. The bathroom's there, if you need it."

She sipped her drink long enough for politeness, gathered her clothes and made for the bathroom. She did not want to dress in front of him. That would have been even more uncomfortable than drinking vodka in the nude.

He had her coat ready for her when she came out of the bathroom. He drove her back home with a proprietorial hand on her thigh. She felt grateful for his silence. He pulled up outside the hall and she got out. As she closed the door, he smiled at her.

"Thank you, Shirley. I enjoyed that. You're surprisingly good at it. I'll invite you for dinner soon, and we can do it again."

"Yes, that would be nice," she found herself mumbling and he pulled away.

She showered automatically and went to bed early. She felt numb and shaken. Was that how it is meant to be, she asked herself? Is that all?

Next morning, Holly Greenleaf was waiting at the foot of the stairs to give her a special lift to the Institute. She looked forward to a ride in Holly's yellow mini, a rally version that went really fast. She quickly found out what Holly wanted from her.

"So, how was Nick last night?"

Shirley felt shocked. How on earth did Holly know about him? And so soon? "Er, alright, I suppose. Interesting."

"I'm sure it was. Pickled fish and cucumbers? Polish vodka?"

Shirley could not say anything. Holly knew more than decency allowed.

"Don't worry, Shirley. It's your business. I just want to know how you are."

"Me? I'm fine. Honestly. I mean, it's okay, really."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it. I just wish he wouldn't do it. Not with new students. It's not fair," Holly grumbled.

"But it was okay. I mean, he didn't force me or anything."

"How would you know? He could persuade you to do anything and you'd never notice. Or perhaps you would. You especially. Are you sure you didn't feel him pushing you?"

Shirley thought back to the night before. She could remember nothing strange. "I don't think so. I'm pretty sure I was doing what I wanted to. Does he really, I mean, push girls?"

"Perhaps I'm just being negative about him. Sometimes it's hard to judge where seduction ends and persuasion begins. But if you're happy, that's the important thing. Do you think you'll see him again?"

"Er, I don't think he'll want that."

They pulled up at some traffic lights and Holly took the chance to take a good look at her face. Then she smiled. "Good. You understand. Lots of them don't, and that makes for problems. Tears, moping, upsets. Upset me too, I don't mind admitting."

"You?"

"Yes. I was honoured once. We had quite an evening. Until he gave me the brush-off and I went to bed by myself. I didn't know if I wanted to sleep with him or shoot him. Or both."

Shirley giggled. She liked knowing that Holly had shared the experience. It made her feel more adult. "It was good while it lasted, I suppose."

"Yes. Me too. He took me to the theatre and then home afterwards. He put some sexy jazz on the stereo and fed me pickled fish and vodka."

"He did the same with me! Except there I didn't get the theatre, just a drive around Liverpool and a visit to Pier Head. I've been cheated! But I got the jazz, and the fish and vodka. And he made love to me."

"He kissed me on the sofa, and played with me..."

"That's right."

"And he made me suck him. And then he bent me over the back of an armchair and had me from behind."

"Exactly! Except he took me into the bedroom and bent me over the dressing table. I could watch him do it in the mirror."

"Lucky you, I could only see cushions and the carpet. But I have to say it wasn't bad. Sort of animal really. But, I would've appreciated a cuddle afterwards."

"I didn't get one either. He made me have more fish and vodka before he let me put my clothes back on. That felt a bit uncomfortable." They drove on in silence until something occurred to Shirley.

"Is he allowed to do that? I mean, with a student?"

"He wouldn't be allowed to in the rest of the University. He'd be out of a job in no time. But we're different, and the lecturers don't have any real power over the students because we don't have proper exams. Professor Rundle doesn't like it but she reckons you're all eighteen or more, and it's all part of growing up. Happened to her as well, although I find it hard to imagine Eliza nude and bent over an armchair. She says she enjoyed it and would do it again given half the chance. Only she says that next time she'll

be forewarned. She'll lay him on the floor and sit on his cock until *she* decides it's enough. That'll put him in his place. Or her place, I suppose." They were still giggling as Holly pulled up in front of the Institute.

The more Shirley thought about her encounter with Rostov, the less she liked the way she had behaved. *I let him push me around*, she thought. *I was just like a silly little girl. Well, that's not going to happen again. If he ever asks me for that dinner, he'll have to be really, really persuasive. I think I'll just brush him off anyway.*

In the meantime, Shirley had the Institute and her friends. She loved the old place, from the dark coffee room in the basement right up to library on the top floor. Ari ran the library, Ari of the long dark hair and long, long legs. She was the sexiest librarian Shirley had ever seen, with her short skirts and a naughty twinkle waiting in her eyes.

Each student had a carrel in the library, a private place to study. Ari had taken Shirley to hers, and showed her the books she could take home, and the private ones that must stay in the library. In the drawer of her carrel she had found a note. *To the next occupant of my carrel. I hope you have as much fun here as I did. I'm sure you're looking at all your books and wondering how you'll manage. Don't worry – I felt the same but it all worked out in the end, and now I'm sorry I'm leaving. Good Luck, Julian Frobisher.* It had been good to be welcomed like that. It made her feel she belonged, that she was part of a tradition.

The following Sunday, Holly had taken her off to Snowdonia, for a walk in the mountains, in a bus with the Open Air Club. She could not walk with the others. She only had jeans and tennis shoes, no good for the mountains. Instead, Holly had taken her for a walk in the valley, and taught her something of what it meant to be a witch and how they had always fitted into the countryside. On the way home, the bus had been full of singing. A dishy student called Tim had come to sit next to her. He had long blonde hair and a straggly beard, and he taught her the words to *The Leaving of Liverpool*.

* * * *

Shirley followed Holly into the Institute. Someone, presumably pretty Goldpenny the Professor's secretary, had taped a large notice to the wall.

For all Students

Hallowe'en Party Buses leave at 16:30 hrs

DON'T BE LATE!!!

Hallowe'en had come. Shirley had never done anything to celebrate Hallowe'en. She knew about it, of course, but mostly from America. Pumpkin lamps, kids in costumes, trick or treat, those all meant nothing in England. All the same, a folk memory lived on of witches flying on Hallowe'en, so she supposed Holly planned something special for them.

All day, the air at the Institute had a buzz in it and that buzz reached a peak when buses pulled up outside at four o'clock in the afternoon. Shirley stopped staring at minerals with Paul Grimes. The practical finished early and they filed down to get on their buses. The organisation surprised her. Paul even checked off the names of students on the buses. Holly waited at the gate of Smethwick Hall and ushered them all inside. She sent them to their rooms to drop their things and change into party clothes.

The common room waited for them. Brightly lit, chairs around the walls, side tables stacked with plates and bottles. Ari, the librarian, had come, dressed in a very short smock and long boots. She had put her long dark hair down in a loose tail tied with black ribbon. She looked very sexy as she struggled with the ping-pong table, trying to fold it up without losing her hemline. Shirley went to help and they carried it out and left it under the stairs.

"You're looking very kinky, Ari. Where did you get those boots?"

"Oh, just down town. You don't think my dress is too short?" Not a serious question. She knew exactly what she was doing and had judged her dress to the limit.

Shirley pretended to study her. "No. Not too short. Very brave though. I expect all the boys will have heart attacks each time you move. And the girls will die of jealousy." She looked down at her own skirt. She had thought of it as daringly short, but it did not risk everything the way Ari's smock did.

"I don't suppose there'll be many males. That's the only trouble with the Institute. We're nearly all girls. No wonder Nick manages to catch us all, there's hardly any competition. Did you know he's even had Professor Rundle once?"

"I'd heard that. I suppose you...?"

"Yes. Once. And you?"

"Yup, me too. At least I don't feel left out. But that was ages ago now, and I wish there was a bit more fun on offer. Do you have a boyfriend? Or husband?"

"No, it's difficult. Librarians, you know. We've got such a boring reputation."

Whatever else Ari might be, she was certainly not boring.

Holly came in with her arms full of a Dansette and LP's. They hurried to help her set it up and put on her new Simon & Garfunkel album. It sounded good, but it was not dancing music. People had begun to gather now, and Holly went back to her flat to bring a large pan of mulled wine. By the time she returned, the room had filled up.

She put the ladle in Debbie's hand, and everyone filed past with their paper cups. The wine smelt rich and spicy, and slices of orange and lemon circled slowly as Debbie dipped and poured. Holly called them around.

"Well, everyone, welcome to Hallowe'en at Smethwick Hall. I've got some good news for you. Firstly, you're all here. A couple of people have dropped out of the other halls, but you've all survived and done well. Secondly, the syllabus will change next week. Now we're sure you've all come to the right place and belong with us, we can start on the serious stuff. It might sound like fun but, believe me, if you think you're working hard now...

"But tonight we're celebrating. You've finally made it. All you have to do now is turn up to all the lectures and practicals, and make sure that all your assignments are long enough and relevant. That's it. No final exams. You won't have to waste springtime revising and cramming useless facts into your heads, you can enjoy it instead. And we can keep you busy right up to the last minute. So, a toast to the students of Smethwick Hall!"

The wine tasted strong and warmed Shirley's insides. She wanted to start chattering but Holly called them to order again.

"Just a moment more. As you know, you've been kidnapped here for drinks and dancing. In fact, we've quite literally kidnapped you. The Institute is locked down for the night, and Paul Grimes and Pretty Goldpenny are outside right now securing our boundaries. They'll be with us in a moment. Yes, it's Hallowe'en, folks, and that means there'll be lots

of things out there that you don't want to meet. Harmless mostly, but there are so many of us around that we attract them. Tonight is just the time for someone to try and slip in unnoticed. So, we're going to stay here and enjoy ourselves until midnight. It'll be safe enough to go to bed then, and tomorrow will be just another day.

"So, I don't want anyone leaving the building. No one at all. We'll all go out into the yard for a few minutes later on, to see what we can see, but that'll be all. Inside you're safe. Put some dancing music on and let's have fun. I hope you three men are feeling fit because we're going to wear your shoes out. Oh, and leave the lights on. We need bright lights and loud music for safety." The music changed to The Hollies and they started to dance.

It might have been the wine, or it might have been the unpleasantness of 'outside', but Shirley found the party atmosphere went rapidly to her head. She danced with everyone and with herself. She deliberately lost count of the paper cups. Paul came in trailing Pretty Goldpenny. A tall woman made taller by impossible stilettos, Pretty liked to party. She sank a cup of wine without blinking and dragged Paul onto the floor. She was still dancing an hour later, her long auburn hair growing wild about her face.

At some point the mulled wine had given out and been replaced by large bottles of cheap Australian white, straight from the fridge. A huge pot of stew appeared, a rich and heavy soup to give a lining to their tummies. They ate and went back to dancing.

At sometime during the evening, Shirley found herself dancing with Ari. She liked Ari. The librarian had a cheerful sexiness. Her long, long booted legs looked modern and sophisticated, and it was impossible not to stare at them. Ari danced closer to her and asked, "Can I stay in your room? I don't want to go back home tonight."

Shirley started to say that she only had a single bed, but stopped herself. Ari must know that, and it did not matter anyway.

"Of course, you're welcome."

Ari gave her a smile like a tigress and went back to dancing.

Later, about eleven o'clock she guessed, Holly turned off the Dansette. "Come on, people, let's go outside and take a look. Stay together, and don't go outside the yard."

They filed out onto the cobbles and looked around. Night and cold surrounded them. Nothing broke the darkness.

"There!" called Paul, pointing low in the sky. Close to them, just over the fence, a white wisp of cloud shot past. "That's one. There'll be more now. Just wait a moment. They'll start to sense us."

Quickly the sky filled with rushing white shades, passing over and around the house. They did not come near. They hurried past as if on the other side of a glass wall. As if we are in a goldfish bowl, she thought. The white shadows had shapes, distorted figures in the smoke. As she watched, she began to pick out veiled faces with empty eye holes. Some of them had a suggestion of hair and clothing, and she could guess at their sex.

Pretty stood beside her. "What are they?" she whispered.

"Dead souls," Pretty answered in a normal voice. "They can't hear you."

"Can they see us? Do they know we're here?"

"Hard to say, you can't talk to them. Not in the normal way, at least. They seem to be attracted to us, but they don't react. Or wait and watch us. Just hurrying past. There must be so many stories out there."

"It's so sad."

"Yes, I suppose it is. They used to be here and now they're not. But that's life. They might be happy where they are now, we could never tell."

Shirley wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "I don't like to think about it."

"Of course not," said Pretty, putting an arm around her shoulders. "We'll all have plenty of time to worry about that when our time comes."

The party was difficult to re-start when they went back inside. The students looked thoughtful and a little frightened. Holly put soft music on and the party slowed along with it. Shirley found herself holding Ari and dancing to Hey Jude played again and again.

"Let's go," said Ari. "It's not quite midnight, but I'll take you up and we can get to the bathroom before the rush."

Shirley was alone in her room. With the lights off, she put her head under the curtain and peered out. Nothing. No more dead souls. Behind her, the door opened.

"Still looking?" asked Ari.

"Yes, it was horrible."

"I suppose so. But I don't like to think about it. Golden lads and girls, I suppose."

"Golden lads and lasses," Shirley corrected her.

“Ah-ha! Arguing with the librarian. You can’t win - *Golden lads and girls all must, As chimney-sweepers, come to dust. Cymbeline*, speech by Guiderius. Now you owe me. Can I come to bed? I’m cold.” She still wore her smock but carried her tights and underwear in her hand.

Shirley watched as Ari took off her glasses and pulled her smock over her head. She had a chance to stare as Ari worked the smock over her hair. Nude and beautiful. Her body looked milky white and elegant, with firm round breasts and very dark nipples. At the base of her belly, a dusting of trimmed black hair emphasised rather than hid the long lips of her sex. She caught Shirley staring and smiled. “Are you going to let me in before I freeze?”

Shirley threw the covers back and Ari slipped in beside her. She huddled up shivering. “Hold me, I’m cold.” She wriggled around to present her back. Shirley reached around her to pull her tight and spoon against her. “Oh, that’s better. You’re nice and warm.” She took Shirley’s hand between her own and held it against her chest.

The shivering girl overwhelmed Shirley. Ari felt big, adult, and their weight made a deep valley in the mattress that rolled them closer together. Ari’s perfume filled her nostrils, and her thick, silky hair flowed under Shirley’s cheek. She enjoyed the softness of Ari’s body against her own and her senses started to sing.

Ari’s shivering died slowly away and she reached behind her to grab Shirley’s hip and pull her closer. She still held Shirley’s hand to her chest, and slowly Shirley became aware of the soft weight resting on her wrist, Ari’s breast, heavy and rounded. She moved her hand experimentally to feel it roll against her, and Ari sighed.

“Mmmh, that’s nice,” she said softly, and with no protest, she moved Shirley’s hand to cup it over her breast and held it there. Shirley’s mind raced. This was wrong, she knew that, but it felt so good. She liked the heavy softness of Ari’s breast. Its generous roundness filling her hand. The roughness of its hard button poked insistently into the palm of her hand. It felt wonderful, and Shirley’s heart jumped with the blessing of Ari’s sigh as she rolled the hard point in gentle circles.

She pulled at Ari’s nipple and twisted it between finger and thumb.

“Oh—oh—oh—oh God!” Ari mumbled. “Yes—like that—yes. Oh yes...” To give pleasure like this was something new and exciting for

Shirley, and she twisted and pulled at Ari's nipple until Ari wriggled onto her back and held the teasing hand still.

Ari smiled at her with bright eyes. "You nearly made me come," she said. "Just like that. You're very naughty."

Shirley moved to the other breast and teased that nipple into erection. Ari's eyes were frowning, half closed, and she was whimpering. I am giving her that, thought Shirley, and it's good. She wanted to give more and lowered her head to take the near nipple into her mouth. Suckling and teasing, she played with her breasts. Ari's scent surrounded her, Ari's soft body enveloped her, and Ari's sighing and panting rewarded her. This was magic, and Shirley felt proud.

Ari pushed her head away. "Wait, it's too much." She worked her way up onto one elbow and pushed Shirley to lie on her back. "I could see you were sexy, but I had no idea how clever you were. You must have done this before. No? Then it's just natural talent. I loved it." She unhooked the buttons of Shirley's plain flannel pyjamas.

"It's your turn now." She spread the shirt open. Shirley felt shy and wished her breasts were as big and round as Ari's, but she did not stop her. Finger tips brushed her breasts, circling and tantalised until they reached the hungry points. Her nipples stood proud, hard, and ready, and grew bigger under Ari's nips and scratches. This felt good. And she could see that Ari knew what was happening. She understood the flowering she was causing in Shirley's belly and did not stop.

She threw a leg over Shirley and knelt astride her hips. Now she could play with both nipples at once. Perched above her, Ari looked beautiful. She watched Shirley's face as she twisted and teased. Her hair fell loose. Shirley reached up and drew it forward over one of her shoulders, straight, black, and heavy. She tugged at the ribbon and let it fall down one side of her face and onto her breast. She ran her fingers through its richness. "So beautiful," she whispered and, reaching round Ari's shoulders, pulled her down to kiss.

Kissing a girl felt different, softer and smoother. Ari was hungry and demanding, and very clever. Her hair hung down around Shirley's face as she took her with her kisses, and Shirley was hers.

Coming up for air and sitting back, she lifted Shirley and drew her shirt from her arms. She threw back the covers and roughly pulled her pyjama trousers off. The cold air filled the bed for an instant, and then Ari was back,

kneeling over her and drawing the covers over them both again. Ari kissed her and she did not resist when Ari pushed her legs apart and lay in the cradle of her open thighs. She sucked her breasts turn by turn and her tummy pressed against Shirley's pussy. Her wetness grew slippery between them, and Shirley raised her knees and opened wider to hold her lover between her thighs.

Ari slipped down under the bedclothes. Her warm breath and her kisses trailed down over Shirley's tummy and lower still. Her hands held the insides of Shirley's thighs and her kisses touched her hair, nibbling and pulling, and venturing further down the outsides of her lips and along her thighs. Shirley wanted Ari at her centre and forced herself to spread wider, lifting her cup to Ari's lips.

Ari's first tentative brush with the tip of her tongue took Shirley's breath away. She felt herself sucked very slowly into Ari's mouth, everything, all her hot and sensitive places, drawn in and crushed between covered teeth. She was held there, sucked into delicious tension until Ari relaxed and let her slip out equally slowly. And then, drew her in again. Sucking her up and releasing her, slowly, rhythmically and irresistibly.

Shirley lost control and waves of ecstasy rolled over her again and again. She was vaguely conscious of the fingers inside her, of the dancing tongue driving her, and that she held Ari's head between her thighs. She knew that, over it all, the slow, imperative sucking and releasing had taken her life.

When she returned, the sucking had stopped. Ari's fingers were unmoving inside her, and her covered teeth held Shirley's clit clamped tight. She had crushed her lover's head between her thighs and tangled her fingers in Ari's hair, trying to tear her tormenting mouth away. She did not move.

Cautiously, Shirley relaxed her legs, but still Ari did not let her free.

"Please no more," she begged.

Ari chuckled with a full mouth and Shirley jumped as deep vibrations sheared through her. With painful gentleness, the wonderful woman let Shirley slip from her mouth, and her sensitive clit gave up an agonising spasm.

"Aaah, oh Jesus! What did you do to me?"

Ari climbed up out of the darkness of the blankets again. She looked happy. Her eyes sparkled, and her smile and her cheeks were wet. Shyly, she

offered herself for a kiss and Shirley pulled her down to drink from her lips. She had never felt so complete. It was good to have Ari lying on her and, as they kissed, she ran her hands up and down Ari's back.

She wanted to return some of the pleasure she had received and wriggled around until Ari lay on her back and she rested on one elbow beside her. Ari's beauty took her breath. Her face soft and yielding, and her deep eyes watching and waiting for the next movement of the symphony.

Shirley soaked up the picture, absorbed in her contrasts and curves. She lifted the covers a little. Ari's smooth white body disappeared into the darkness. She bent to leave kisses on her breasts. She wanted more but when her kisses moved downwards, Ari stopped her and drew her back. "Not this time," she said. "With your fingers. I want to watch your face."

Shirley slid her hand down over Ari's tummy to the rise of her mound, to Ari's sparsely trimmed hair. She brushed it with her fingertips but she could not wait. She slipped down between Ari's lips and dipped into her wetness. This should have been familiar from her own pussy, but Ari felt so alive, so wet, so smooth and slippery. She searched until she found Ari's clit and teased it with a finger tip. Her lover's sigh rewarded her.

She watched Ari's face as she played. She had a distant expression and her eyes were blank. Shirley moved her hand lower, seeking the hidden opening below. She circled the entrance with a fingertip, and it squeezed and nibbled in return. Slowly Ari's eye's opened. She watched Shirley's face and waited for more.

Slowly and deliberately, Shirley slid her two middle fingers into her until her lover's pussy nestled in the palm of her hand. She saw Ari bite her lip and her eyes flickered. Shirley began to make love to her with two fingers. Probing deep and bumping her clit with the heel of her hand on each stroke.

Ari did not last long. Her eyes half-closed, she rocked her head from side to side. As her climax neared, the pink tip of her tongue slipped out to moisten her lips and then she was coming. Bucking up against Shirley's hand and panting harshly. Shirley pressed her fingers deep and rotated her hand slowly over Ari's desperate pussy. She did not stop, even when Ari gripped her wrist with both hands and tried to pull her away. She had the power to make this woman suffer every last drop of pleasure.

Shirley woke early. Ari slept spooned behind her and her arm lay over her hip. Shirley came awake with a smile on her face and listened to Ari's breathing. For the first time in her life, she was waking with a lover in her bed. And it was female lover, a woman, Ari the librarian, the sexiest woman in the Institute. Ari with her beautiful hair, and impossibly long and sexy legs. The idea made her feel proud.

She heard the breathing change as Ari woke. She could almost hear Ari asking herself where she was and why.

"Good morning. Sleep well?" Shirley asked.

"Yes." Ari thought for a moment. "Yes, definitely. Like a baby. You made me come so many times..."

"And you too. I'm still sensitive. I'm afraid I'll come again if I move."

Ari laughed and slapped her bottom. "Come on. Get out. I want to see what I was making love to last night."

"No, don't look at me first thing in the morning. And it's cold." But Ari had got her feet into the small of her back and relentlessly pushed her out of bed. Shirley dropped heavily out and started to look for her pyjamas.

"Mmmh, not bad at all," commented Ari. "You look quite tasty. But I should know that, shouldn't I?"

"Stop it. I don't want to talk about it." Ari's directness embarrassed her. She could dream about doing naughty things, but she did not want to discuss them. Not out loud, standing in a cold bedroom.

"Why not? Didn't you enjoy it?"

"Mmmh, maybe. But I'm sure it's against the rules to do it for so long. I went out of my mind. It'll be your turn next time, and I'll do it to you for so long you won't be able to walk afterwards."

Ari lay back and stretched so her perfect breasts just peeped out over the top of the blankets. "Mmmh, that'll be worth waiting for."

Ari had to borrow everything. They walked to the bus with Ari wearing Shirley's tights and knickers, and a mini that looked short on Shirley but dramatic on her long legs. She had no bra under Shirley's best blouse and only her cardigan would keep her decent at work.

As the bus ground into town, Shirley asked, "Do you only have girlfriends?"

“What? No, definitely not! I mean, it was very good last night. Excellent in fact and you’re special. But, I’d like you even more if you had a good hard cock as well. Had you ever done it with a girl before?”

“Not like that. I mean at school, we used to talk a lot about it. We used to stroke each other’s legs sometimes. Or, make each other’s nipples stand up, that was nice. I helped make a girl come once...”

“Oooh, that sounds really naughty.”

“I suppose it was, really. We had a girl called Victoria in our class. You know the sort of girl, there’s always one or two who want to try things and do things before anyone else. Just as well there were no boys at our school. Anyway, one summer day after lunch, we were all sitting on the grass by the athletics track. There was a place that was partly out of sight of the teachers if you lay down. We used to sit there in a group and if anyone wanted to smoke, she’d lie down and could not be seen. Anyway, one day Victoria said she wanted to come as she hadn’t done that before. I don’t think any of us had yet. So, she lay on her back in the middle of the group and we played with her, stroking her hair and her legs and so on. I was playing with one of her breasts, that felt nice. Two of the girls had their hands up her skirt, playing with her pussy. It didn’t take very long. Her face went red, and she stopped us. That was all, she’d come. She said it felt very nice, and I think the rest of us would have tried it as well, but the bell went. But she didn’t have half as much fun as you do.”

“Years of practice,” giggled Ari. “You didn’t do so badly yourself. That’s quite a sexy story, young ladies at school gathering round to make one of them fly. I wish I’d been there, but I probably would have failed all my exams if there was entertainment like that on offer.”

Chapter 2

When Shirley reached the Institute on Friday morning, the wooden signpost to the lecture room carried a message from Pretty Goldpenny.

Acceptances at 10:00 am today. All students must attend. DON'T BE LATE!

The staff enjoyed keeping the students in the dark until the last moment and then surprising them. In revenge, Shirley refused to gossip or ask questions about the notice. She just went up to the library to work, but she left early enough to get a coffee before ten o' clock. Ari was already going around the carrels and shepherding people out. She wanted to close the library and be there herself.

Expectant students filled the lecture room. A simple chair stood in the place of the lectern. They sat whispering to each other and staring at the empty chair. Soon after ten, Professor Rundle led in a procession of the staff. She wore her square velvet cap again. The staff all wore academic caps or hoods and looked very grand. Most of them split off to find seats amongst the students, but the Professor took a small party down into the centre. She stood with her hand on the back of the chair, and behind her stood Rostov and Holly Greenleaf. There were two lecturers Shirley did not know well, Betty Whinshuttle and old Dr. Bonely, and Nurse Pettigrew with her white uniform under her black gown. Pretty Goldpenny towered over the other women in her heels. She was almost as tall as Rostov. Ari stood at the end of the line, her open gown making her normal short skirt look even more enticing.

“Welcome, everyone, to a big day for us all. It's time for you to formally join our company. We need to give you your witch's name, and we'll take the opportunity to decide what you are best suited to, which branch of the Craft represents your calling.

“So, in a moment you’ll come out one at a time, ladies first, and sit in our chair here and we will see what we can do. And then, Dr. Asa Bonely here will look for your name, he’s very good at that. And, Ari will write it all down for us. Now, we’ll put on our blindfolds so we don’t know who you are, and we’ll get started.”

The lecturers produced black silk scarves and fussed around tying them over each other’s eyes. They settled in a group behind the chair, touching its back or each other to keep their bearings. *What are they doing?* wondered Shirley. *They look so stupid. They can’t be serious.*

“Are we all ready? First candidate please, Pretty.”

Pretty beckoned the nearest student, a short plump girl with dark hair and glasses. She led her into the centre and sat her down. All the lecturers except for Bonely pounced on her. They dipped into her hair and pressed all ten fingertips onto her scalp. As there were five of them, there was not much room and Shirley had only a glimpse of the girl’s frightened white face between their robes. The lecturers stood still and tense, trying to draw something from her through their fingers. Then they whispered together until the Professor called out “Put her down as Precognition, Ari. Your turn, Asa.”

Ari made notes in a small book as Dr. Bonely shuffled forward alone. He bent to touch the girl’s head and immediately began mumbling. Shirley could not pick up what he was saying until his voice became clearer. He chanted like an auctioneer.

“Pumpkin, plumpkin, downly, pumpkin, upply downly pumpkin, upply downey plumpkin, upply dumpling, downey upply, upply downey, downey dumpling. That’s it, downey dumpling! Is that good enough, d’ye think? Downey Dumpling, no, that won’t do. Poor girl might be fat, you know, and calling her ‘Dumpling’ won’t do at all. Downey Dumpling, Downey Dumpling, my lovely fat Downey Dumpling, Dumpling downly, Plumpkin Down, Plumpkin down, Thistledown, of course. Thistledown! Thistledown it is, young lady, can’t be helped.”

He let go of her and, below his blindfold, a cracked smile spread over his face. The girl looked relieved and hurried back to her seat. At least she had avoided being called ‘Dumpling’ for the rest of her life.

Pretty had the next candidate ready and sat her down. The lecturers crowded round and in a moment the Professor called out to Ari

“Telekinesis!” Bonely named this girl Starfire and she seemed happy with that.

The students had grasped the procedure and everyone watched to see how their friends fared. And, of course, they worried about what would happen to them. There seemed no pattern to the specialisations that the Professor was picking out. Precognition came most often, followed by herbalist and healer in about equal numbers. The names were building up now. Dr. Bonely’s choices, or perhaps insights described them better, were completely eccentric. Some sweet, a spindly blonde had scored Columbine, some dramatic, Star Lady and Sunburst. Others simple and dignified, like Silver, Arkady and Topaz. Shirley hoped she would get a name like that. She would have to wait. Seated where she was, she would be one of the last girls named. She felt nervous.

Debbie was the first of her close friends called out. “Definitely precognition!” declared the Professor. Bonely had more trouble.

“Farmly, warmly, milkly maid, dairy maid, maidly milkly, milky churnly, churnly girl, milkly cowly, cowly girl, Cowgirl! No, no that’s not it, cowly milky girlie, Jersey girl.” Distress spread over Debbie’s face as she listened to his litany. “Sweetly Jersey, sweetly Molly, Molly sweetly, creamy Molly, sweetly creamy, creamy milkly Daisy, creamly churnly milkly Daisy, milky Daisy, yes, that’s it, Daisy. Sweet creamy milky Daisy. Daisy’s the name!”

Debbie jumped up in a fury and confronted the Professor. “No, no, no! It’s bad enough having tits like these without being named after a bloody cow!”

The Professor lifted the edge of her blindfold and peeped. “Oh dear, oh dear. I’m so sorry, Debbie my love. It’s just the way he is, you know, and he really can’t see you. Sit down again and we’ll have another go. Now, Asa, try and concentrate on something else for a moment or two, and have another go.”

Completely flustered, Bonely mumbled incoherently for minutes before Skyler dropped from his mouth. Debbie went to her seat content. Shirley’s other two friends gave Bonely less trouble. Margaret was assigned to Horse Whispering and got Godiva as a name. That sounded promising, and anyway, she spent a lot of her time with horses at home. Siok from Singapore became Tiger Lily. The Professor gave her to Alchemy.

Shirley found herself trembling as she sat down. She did not want this. She wanted to keep her own name. The weight of ten hands pressed her down and the assessors whispered, perhaps to themselves or perhaps to each other. The whispering was harsh and growing louder when the Professor's voice cut through the noise. "Stop it, colleagues! Stop. Let's have a talk about this. Stay here dear, we're just going to consult." Behind her, Shirley could hear them whispering again, arguing this time, but she sat too far away to overhear. Then they came back again. "We're going to try again, dear. Right, slowly and gently please." The hands crowded back, but this time there was no whispering. Just humming, very faint and at the edge of her hearing. The Professor brought it to an end. "Right, that's enough. Let's talk again." More argument, but subdued this time.

"Cognodynamics *and* Love! Yes, put down both of them Ari. Your turn, Asa."

Dr. Bonely stood behind her, massaging her scalp and muttering. "Strongly, manly, songly, sweetly, roundly, firmly, hard and pokely, finely, tickly, prickly, purply mushroom, prickly, dickly, comely quickly, very comely, sweetly wetly comely, strongly, wildly, seekly, suckly, juicy Lucy, wetly Wendy, sweetly wetly Wendy, Wendy moonly. Oh it's so difficult, well, it's not really. Prickly dickly, ripply NIPPLY! No not nipply, not allowed, roundly, firmly, sweetly, creamy comely, stop it you've got to stop thinking about them, think lightly, brightly, hipply, roundly, handly, firmly bouncing, bottomly, heavenly, ooooh stop it! Think lightly, brightly, spritely, nimbly, trimly, longly leggly, pretty furry lipply, no, don't wander in there. Lightly lovely, sweetly suckly, lovely suckly, lovely suckly sweetly. Ooooh, no, lightly suckly, lovely sweetly, suckly lightly, suckly lightly, lightly lovely, yes, it's coming, love lightly, no, try lightly lovely, no, yes, that's it! Light o'Love! Exactly right! Never felt better, believe me. Light o'Love. There you are, my dear, do you like it?"

After all the embarrassing directions Dr. Bonely might have wandered in, Light o'Love came as a starburst. She jumped up and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Doctor. Thank you very much!" and she floated back to her seat with the wind under her tail feathers. Light o'Love. That sounded very well. And *really* romantic.

Shirley had nothing scheduled until after lunch and she had time to start digging into the history of Danzig for Rostov's tutorial. The city surprised

her, and she nearly missed the start of her next lecture. She rushed in to find the lecture room full, and a tall man in extravagantly flared trousers and a black polo-necked sweater arranging notes at the lectern. Still a couple of minutes early and she had a chance to get a good look at him. Brown hair, worn straight and long over his collar. A very short beard and square glasses with black plastic frames. A political scientist, Shirley decided, from America.

When he finally spoke, he had an accent that might have been Irish or English “Welcome to Religious Studies. The Religion Hour as we call it. I’m Patrick Ryan, and I used to be a priest. You can call me Patrick, but I daresay you’ll be calling me The X-Father, like the rest of them. I’m not on the staff, so no academic robe for me. I’m just a visiting lecturer. I help with the religion side of things because of my inside knowledge, so to speak. I only come in once a week, so we have a double lecture to make up for it. Well now, let’s get started.”

A slide flashed up on the screen. A block of text, it looked like an encyclopaedia entry.

Witchcraft

It is not easy to draw a clear distinction between magic and witchcraft. Both are concerned with the producing of effects beyond the natural powers of man by agencies other than the Divine. But in witchcraft, as commonly understood, there is involved the idea of a diabolical pact or at least an appeal to the intervention of the spirits of evil. In such cases this supernatural aid is usually invoked either to compass the death of some obnoxious person, or to awaken the passion of love in those who are the objects of desire, or to call up the dead, or to bring calamity or impotence upon enemies, rivals, and fancied oppressors.

He let them read in silence. Surprise whispered around the room.

“You’ve been found out, you bunch of Devil-worshipping murderers! What do you think of that?”

He waited a moment and continued. “This quotation is, of course, pure horse-shit so why are we bothering with it? Because it comes from an influential book called *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*. The word ‘catholic’ means something free from simple prejudices and attachments, but this book is something very different and far from broadminded. It should really be called *The Roman Catholic Encyclopaedia*, and it is full of everything

anyone really needs to know about Roman Catholicism. It's not an old book, first produced in 1917, but the ideas are venerable and mostly admirable. Now tell me, why is it so mistaken about witches?"

He looked around his audience, inviting an answer. "Speak up, I surely get tired of the sound of my own voice. You, why is it so mistaken?"

He pointed at a student who instantly gave up and mumbled, "I don't know."

"Doesn't know. Anyone else? Why the mistake?"

One of the men raised his hand and said, "Is it a mistake? I mean, do they really think that?"

"Develop that. Explain yourself."

"I mean, maybe they know it's not true. They're just trying to frighten people."

"And why would they want to do that?"

The student scratched around for an answer. "So people won't look at witchcraft?"

"And? Don't stop thinking now, you've surprised us all with your efforts so far."

"Competition?" he asked.

"Exactly! Listen, people. The Roman Catholic Church takes witchcraft very seriously. They don't want anyone else playing around in what they see as their sand-pit. What is their reaction to it? Attack. And hatred. All those jolly old fathers out there actually hate you. At least, they are taught to. Perhaps the gentle ones just see you as souls to be saved from the clutches of the Devil.

"Enough about the Roman Catholics. What about the other religions?"

They took a coffee break at half time, but Ryan did not stop talking. "Why did you leave the church?" someone asked him. "Did you want to become a witch?"

"Then, no. Not at all. I didn't even know about witchcraft. I just got tired of all the sex."

"All the sex?" People crowded together to hear him now.

"Yes. Sex. Most of them spend half their days thinking about sex. Did you ever hear of anything as stupid as the idea of celibacy making people good? That's as sensible as starving people to make them good. Sure, it's a good idea to stop eating or screwing now and again to clear your mind for a

little thinking. But, starving folk spend a deal of their time thinking about food, just as some priests spend a deal of their time thinking about sex. Not about doing it, of course. The pretty choirboy's arse is safe enough for all that. Most of the time, anyway. No, they have to think about not doing it, and making sure no one else does it either. Miserable, I call it, and stupid too."

"So you left for sex?"

"I suppose you could say that. More or less."

"Did it work?"

"Did it work? Oh yes. Definitely. I am definitely not obsessed with sex any more. I just do it as often as possible, and now I've got time to enjoy life."

"You could have joined another church."

"And so I could, indeed. I thought about it. The Church of England would have welcomed me. They never turn down a good Roman Catholic priest. Of course, they only get the good ones, the ones who want the priesthood and marriage at the same time. The bad ones stay behind and grab what they can wherever they can find it. They pretend to be pure and Godly at the same time. It's terrible the damage they do."

"But you didn't get married?"

"Well now... I didn't get married, no. You see, there was a brown-haired girl with the prettiest eyes you ever saw. Used to sit in the front row of the Mass, and she was the undoing of me altogether. She didn't want to get married at all. Now there was a witch, if ever there was one." His audience laughed with him.

"Is she still around? Do we know her?" they asked.

"Ah. Now, you see, that's not so easy to answer. Yes, she's still around. I see her now and again for old time's sake. She's even kind to me on occasion. You might meet her, indeed. She lives not so far away, but she doesn't hold with marriage. She didn't hold so much with me either, in the end. She just saw me up there in the church, in all my pride and glory, and decided to prick my bubble. Bless her heart. I needed it."

"Could we get an introduction?" asked one of the boys.

"Oh, you young rascal!" Ryan said without rancour. "All these beautiful young girls here and you want to go chasing after my Lady of the Night? I'm not half stupid enough to introduce you. If she wants you, she'll find

you, believe me. Now, finish up with your coffees. We've got work to do. There's an awful lot of religion out there, and we have to cover it all."

* * * *

There was no walk with the Open Air Club that Sunday, but Holly had something she wanted to share. Skyler and Light o'Love met her for breakfast and then the three of them piled into her mini and set off north. They drove into a true November day, windy, grey, with dark clouds threatening rain. Shirley hated November. It always depressed her, wet and cold, storm following storm with never a sunny day from one end of the month to the other.

Their road led out of the city and towards Preston. The countryside looked bare and charmless. Heavy clay fields lay soaked and empty, their cows long since taken under cover for the winter. The hedgerow trees shivered nakedly, stripped by the autumn gales. The girls wanted to know where they were going, but Holly would only say that it was a story best heard on the ground, and that it would not be too long before they arrived. She drove on through the industrial awfulness of Blackburn, Accrington and Burnley.

These relics of the Industrial Revolution saddened the girls. "Don't worry," said Holly. "We'll soon be out of it. Actually, the moors are never far away. And we're just driving around the edge of the Forest of Bowland." Peering through the steamy windows, Light o'Love could make out bare rounded moor land in the distance, but no trees. At last Holly turned off the main road and climbed away from the houses and factories. The clouds sank lower now, weighing on their heads. The mini flicked along narrow lanes between drystone walls and pulled up at the village of Barley.

"Here we are. Barley, who could have thought of a better name for a village than that?" But nothing could make the square stone buildings look cheerful under a November sky.

"Come on, walk first and we'll have sandwiches and a story when we get to the top. Let's get there before it starts raining."

At least I'm properly dressed this time, thought Light o'Love. She had raided her bank account and gone with Debbie, sorry, Skyler, down Hope Street to find some proper clothes. Now she too had moleskin breeches and

thick woollen socks. A light nylon cagoule against wind and rain, and heavy walking boots with deeply cleated treads.

She had tried them all on together in her room and felt quite the part of an intrepid explorer. Then she had told Auntie Joan in a phone chat, and a few days later a letter had arrived with a cheque straight from Auntie's golden heart and two small charms pinned in straggly black letters on cartridge paper. *Fare you well wherever you fare* was all they said. Auntie Joan said she should leave one in each boot whenever she put them away.

Now her boots bore her along the shore of a reservoir, grey cold water rippling in the wind. No trees grew here and the ground sloped up into the clouds on her right. She felt as warm as toast and thought about removing her cagoule. They turned into a narrow valley following the course of a gravelly stream. She stopped to pull her cagoule off over her head and wind it around her waist. The valley gave a little shelter and her cheeks were grateful to be out of the wind. The clouds glowered above them as they left the stream behind and started to climb. The clouds came down to meet them and suddenly she could see no further than her friends. The mist deadened the rush of the wind and they heard only their breathing and the squelch of their boots in the muddy ground. Light o'Love moved closer to the others.

They climbed in a small bubble of visibility. The cloud flowed past on all sides and they were getting damp. Light o'Love could see no more than the grass under her feet, but Holly seemed to know where she was going. A drystone wall emerged from the mist and they followed it to a stile. They climbed over the wall and crouched in its shelter while Holly studied her map. She had a compass, a complicated thing mounted on a Perspex plate, and took measurements on the map. Light o'Love took the opportunity to put her cagoule back on.

Holly put her map away and smiled at them. "This is where the real walking starts. It's not hard going but there's nothing to guide us. Stay close and I'll tell you a story as we go." They plodded off with the moor squelching beneath their boots. Behind them, the drystone wall disappeared as quietly as it had come and they walked alone in their small cloudy bubble. Holly held her compass in front of her and watched it continuously.

"We've got just the right weather for my story," she said, "because you've got to imagine just how this place looked more than three centuries ago, at the beginning of the 1600's, before the factories came. There were a

lot of people living in these valleys then, and generally they were dirt poor. No money, no work that paid anything, nothing but their own efforts to keep them alive one year to the next. They seemed to have lived more or less exclusively on barley bread and turnips.”

“No potatoes yet,” chipped in Light o’Love, from Rostov’s lectures.

Holly laughed. “No. No potatoes and no tobacco either. At least, not for poor people like the ones around here. They came later.

“At the time we’re talking of, Queen Elizabeth, Gloriana if you like, had just died, and an era had come to an end. The 1500s had been a time of great upheaval in England, and all over Europe as well. The stranglehold of the Catholic Church had been broken in many places and ordinary folk were left without their old certainties. You could say that England had a relatively mild time of it. King Henry had replaced the old Catholic state religion with a state religion that was almost identical as far as the peasants were concerned. But still, the monastic centres had been crippled and many people found their comfortable lives taken over by grasping aristocratic landlords. And, the poor got poorer, as they usually do. Careful, now.”

They had come to a ditch cutting across their path. They jumped across. Holly checked the compass carefully and they set off again.

She continued her story. “Around here, the people were stubborn. Still are, in fact, and they didn’t turn their backs on the Old Church easily. Not that they’d taken the Old Church completely to their hearts in the first place. There were still a lot of ancient memories in England, and it seems there were more around here than in most places. So we had all the good folk here going to church every Sunday, they had no choice in the matter, but a fair number of them were secret Catholics in their homes. Especially the rich folks because they had space enough and money to hide their priests. But there were a good many of the ordinary peasants who had a yearning for the Old Church too.

“King James was next on the throne, the first monarch who had actually been born a doctrinaire Protestant. Jimmy One and Six, they still call him. James the First of Great Britain, and James the Sixth of Scotland. He was a strange character. Loved being a King, and loved his favourites even more. He hated tobacco, and he hated women, but above all, he hated Catholics and witches.

“It’s uncertain whether he hated the Catholics or the witches more. Of course, it was much easier to find Catholics, but some of the grandest families in the land were still secret followers of the Old Church, and they had political influence. On the other hand, it was easy enough to put the name of witch on any old woman who lived alone...

“Now, the villagers here were no more good or evil than villagers anywhere, but at the beginning of the 17th century, the neighbourhood was dominated by two tough old women, Mother Demdike of Malkin Tower and Mother Chattox of Higham. Neither of these families was rich in the aristocratic sense, but they were mighty powerful around here. The two old women lived like two pike in a small pond, and they hated each other. They dedicated everything to promoting their family interests above everything else and you can imagine how many locals they must have upset over the years. It was easy for the name of witch to be whispered against both of them.”

Light o’Love and Skyler walked close enough to Holly to touch her, and waited for every word. Light o’Love felt the wind wrapping her clothes around her. The wet cotton grass under their feet stretched endlessly before them. The bleakness of Holly’s tale made the cold seem more penetrating and moor became even more unfriendly.

Holly went on. “Although the two old women were generally disliked and thought to be witches, no one had been brave enough to earn their disfavour, and life had rolled slowly on over many years. Then things changed. King James had been threatened by assassins, that was the Gunpowder Plot, and he was stirred up to seek out his enemies - witches and Catholics. He had actually written a poisonous text called *Daemonology*, which was no more than a handbook for witch hunters, and enforced laws to encourage these fanatics in their work. Now the local authorities, mostly newly Protestant aristocrats, could use witch hunting to scare the population. And incidentally, attack the richer local families that did not come from the same class or religion. Around here, the Demdikes and Chattoxes were natural targets.

“You haven’t heard this story before have you? It’s quite famous.”

Light o’Love shook her head. Studying the Craft felt strange enough; having some connection to historical witches did not seem possible.

“Look around and you’ll find some books about it. Novels based on it, anyway. But what I’m telling you is the truth, as near as we know it. If you’re going to understand the Craft and how it survives, you need to know and understand the witches of Pendle. Anyway, going back to what happened.

“Mother Demdike had a daughter, Elizabeth Device, and she in turn had a daughter, Alizon Device. I suppose the story really starts with her. In fact, we don’t know what sort of girl she was. Some would have it that she was flourishing and beautiful, Queen of May, and a friend to all. Almost the all-wise Princess. On the other hand, some speak badly of her... Actually, the first time we hear of her, she was begging beside the road, which doesn’t sound much like a Princess.

“So, there she is, begging, and along comes John Law, a pedlar. Apparently Alizon tried to get him to give her some pins to sell, on consignment if you like, and she will pay for them once she has sold them. But this is Lancashire after all, and the pedlar would not part with anything except for cold, hard cash. They argued, and I’m sure Alizon was still shouting at him as he left. Unfortunately for her, he’d only gone a few steps when he fell down with a stroke. Alive but paralysed.

“That must have been the talk of every house and cottage in the district, and Alizon was the granddaughter of Mother Demdike the witch. A couple of weeks later, they took Alizon for questioning as a witch to the local Justice and Squire, Roger Newell. Concepts of justice, and of guilt and innocence, were not so clear then as they are now. The reason for questioning a witch was not to examine her, but simply to get a confession and evidence against other witches. The whole thing was stupid really, because they tortured people horribly, mostly women and girls, while asking them leading questions. Of course, the poor women would admit to anything in order to stop the torture and Alizon signed a statement admitting to worshipping the Devil. She also implicated her grandmother, and Mother Chattox and her daughter Anne Redfern. The fact that Mother Chattox and her daughter were arrested on the evidence of one of her sworn enemies makes it sound as if Roger Newell was taking the chance of clearing out two families of notorious old trouble-makers.

“Things were bad enough where they stood, but now all of the Demdike family’s supporters gathered at Malkin Tower to hatch a scheme to attack

the prison and free Mother Demdike. That was a direct affront to the authorities and they struck back hard. Everyone that could be caught was thrown into prison and labelled a witch. Of course, the confessions and incriminations flowed like water. It must have been appalling in that old prison, people being tortured day after day. Old women, girls, even children, the youngest was only nine. Just think of it."

A cloaked figure loomed out of the mist in front of them and Light o'Love grabbed Holly's arm in shock. She tried to say something, anything, to stop Holly as the figure came closer.

"Ah, here we are," said Holly. "You've got to congratulate me. Exactly right, and no witchcraft. What do you think of that?"

The threatening figure in the cloud reduced itself to a concrete survey pillar surrounded by a cobble apron. Light o'Love's heart slowed again. The cloaked figure had looked so real.

"Sandwich time," announced Holly, "But I wish the sun would shine." They squeezed together at the foot of the pillar and dug their lunch from their pockets.

"How do you know this story?" asked Skyler. "Has it been passed down?"

"I suppose it has. The whole affair was famous and we're lucky that the records are good. I wouldn't trust folk memories on a thing like that."

"So what happened next?"

"Well, let me see. The original event, the pedlar John Law getting paralysed, happened at the end of March. By the beginning of April, the old women Demdike and Chattox were in prison along with Alizon and Anne Redfern. The plot at Malkin Tower came at the end of April, and the prison was full of witches from then on. They even brought some completely different prisoners over from Yorkshire to add to the fun.

"They went on trial in August, twenty supposed witches all at once. Old Demdike didn't get as far as the trial. She had already died. I guess being tortured is not good for eighty-year old women. There are very good accounts of the trial written by the Clerk of the Court, Thomas Potts from London. They make me cry when I read them, it really was awful what they did to people then.

"They used Alizon's young sister Jennet to convict her, her brother James, and their mother Elizabeth. The things they must have done to that

poor child... How could she live with it afterwards? After convicting most of her family? Poor Alizon testified against her own mother.

“If you’re cynical about what was going on, you’ll be even more cynical about the verdicts. All the Yorkshire witches were found not guilty. Just the ones from around here were sentenced to death. Ten of them were hanged on the 20th of August. Including Alizon. She was only eleven.

“Come on, we’re getting cold. Let’s go and see where Malkin Tower used to be.”

Light o’Love followed her in silence. How could it have happened? In the middle of Old England, where people lived together and knew each other, how could ten people be hanged by superstition? Most of them knew less about magic than Light o’Love herself, and that was little enough. Her heart cried for the poor children. She imagined Alizon, the little Princess only eleven years old, hanging dead in some crowded town square. The mist became even more unfriendly as they dropped towards the valley.

Chapter 3

On the way home Holly drove off the main road to find a friendly pub. They sat in the warmth, enjoying crisps and a beer. Their faces burned from the wind, and the day on the moors made them feel pleasantly relaxed.

“About those witches,” asked Skyler, “I mean, were they actually witches? Or was it all invented?”

“Who knows? There were witches out there, I’m sure of that. There always have been. Whether the old women were part of the Craft, I don’t know. I suspect they were pretty unpleasant people, whatever they were.”

“But are witches really like that? I mean, doing evil things. Talking to the Devil and so on.”

Holly stopped for a moment. “Well, there are witches, and there are people who *play* at being witches. They pick up ideas from here and there, try and do some charms. They might even have a little success. But they don’t understand what they’re doing because they’ve never been taught. How many people have you heard of that read fortunes? Most of them have a spark, but it’s never been developed into anything useful.

“Who knows what the Pendle Witches actually were? The old women seem to have been quite unpleasant people, so they might have wanted to do evil things. You can’t believe any of the evidence from the trial. Most of it was confessions they gave under torture. And then, there were Elizabeth’s children, testifying to save their own lives. It must have been terrible.”

Light o’Love shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t understand why people wanted to believe those stupid things about communing with the Devil. Who would do anything like that?”

“Oh, there was much more than that. Especially after the crowd at Malkin Tower had been arrested. The court saw human bones, mysterious clay dolls, familiar spirits. Almost certainly just hysterical rubbish, but it’s just possible that someone had been playing with things like that.”

"But that's evil!"

"Yes. Yes it is, and no one should ever play with the Dark Light. But don't think that people never do, and that includes genuine witches. People seem to have as much of a tendency to evil as they do to good, and it's probably only laziness that saves most of them."

Holly took another crisp from the packet and chewed thoughtfully. "We are most at risk, because we know more. We're always trying to do things, to influence events, and an evil witch is much, much more powerful than an ordinary person who's going wrong. So never, ever think about it. There is only madness and death on that road, no matter how attractive it looks.

"Enough. I took you to Pendle to help you understand a little about how witches were seen in the past. Also about how easily women in particular could be destroyed by false accusations. Thank God, life's easier now but I expect you could still find some hysteria in Old England if you looked hard enough. Now, tell me what you think about your new names."

"I like mine," said Skyler. "It has an interesting sound. And it's much better than what that old fool Bonely came up with first!" The others laughed at her.

"It's all very well for you to laugh," said Skyler peevishly. "You don't have to put up with tits like mine."

"Well I wouldn't mind a bit more, if you could spare some," said Holly with a smile.

"Me too," jumped in Light o'Love. "You can hardly see mine."

"You should be careful what you wish for," said Skyler with bitterness in her voice. "Sometimes they seem to rule my life. And it's not just buying clothes. People are always staring, even women. And men are impossible. They keep talking to my tits instead of looking me in the face. They don't know what it's like to have to carry these things around. I hate them!"

Light o'Love put her arm around Skyler's shoulders. "Don't say that. I think they're wonderful. Really. And if I was a man, I'd want to play with them all the time."

"I'd be happy to play with them now, and I'm a woman!" said Holly.

"Me too, we'll take one each. Would you mind, Skyler?"

Skyler was relenting. "Maybe. One day. When I'm not feeling so negative about them."

Holly tried to calm her down. "You know, you should appreciate them, really. Not everyone's as lucky as you. And, who cares if people stare? They're only jealous. And of course you drive men out of their minds. Look at old Bonely. He's goodness knows how old, and he was blindfolded, and you still knocked him for six. He'd probably have a heart attack and die happy if you let him get his hands on them."

"You know, if you were a bit more generous with them, you could probably rule the world. Well, let's not exaggerate," said Light o'Love, "but you could certainly win friends and influence people. Male people, anyway."

"What do you mean, be more generous with them?"

"I mean, share them around a little. Show them off a bit more. You know, undo a couple of buttons, show lots of cleavage. Rub them up against people when you get the chance. We all like you, and we like your breasts too."

"She's right, everybody would like to see more," said Holly definitely.

"But that would just make it worse," complained Skyler. "If they talk to my tits now, what do you think they'll be doing if I let them look down my cleavage?"

"That's not the point," said Light o'Love firmly. "The fact is that your tits are special, and everyone is impressed with them. Even the women. I know I am. And if you can make people's life a little happier by sharing your good fortune with them, well, you're a very lucky girl. So much good done so easily."

"Listen to her," said Holly. "She's going to be the expert."

"I don't know about that," said Light o'Love, "but I tell you what. Next time a man talks to you like that, just take his hands, put them on your tits and say 'Right, now you can talk to me properly.' That should sort him out. And he'll remember. When you find one that doesn't get embarrassed but just says thank you, hang on to him."

They all giggled at the picture and then Holly said, "You know, Light, I think you're going to grow into a real expert on love. You talk a lot of sense. What do you think of your name?"

"I like it! I was so afraid Dr. Bonely would come up with something stupid, did you hear what he was mumbling? He's a really dirty old man."

But Light o'Love's nice. Very romantic. But I'm not sure it's justified. I don't have any experience at all. I don't know anything about love."

"That's not what Ari thinks..."

Light o'Love felt her ears burning. "How do you know that?"

"Ah-ha! I'm your tutor in residence. I'm meant to know everything, especially if my students are having fun when I'm not."

Skyler looked from one to the other. "What are you talking about? Has something been going on, Light?"

Holly chuckled. "Our only expert on love has been doing naughty things with Ari. After the Hallowe'en Vigil. She was quite impressed, I think. She certainly came to work next morning looking very tired and wearing borrowed clothes."

"Light! I don't believe it! She's a girl." Skyler sounded shocked. Light o'Love's evening with Rostov had been bad enough, but sleeping with a woman was clearly something beyond her understanding.

"Yes, I was surprised too. But I have to say it was fun. She's the one who should be a specialist in love, not me. She's really clever."

"Don't think that, Light," said Holly. "There's a very good reason why you were the only one chosen for love, you know. We all felt you had real strength in that area. Just wait until you've had some real experience, and I don't just mean at sex, although that's very important too. You have to learn relationships as well, and they are much more complicated."

"Why did they give her cognodynamics as well? No-one else got two specialisations." asked Skyler.

"That's right. It doesn't happen often. But both areas felt very strong, and we were arguing about whether she should have one or the other. But it was stupid. Both of them were far stronger than anyone else. If you work hard, you've got the potential to be a very significant power, Light. The love is good, we can all relate to that, but the cognodynamics... Promise me that you'll always be very honest with yourself. We don't want to think that you've been using it to control other people, ever. That would be terrible."

* * * *

As promised, the syllabus changed next day. Professor Rundle herself gave a lecture on Basic Charms and told them that they would see her three

times a week until the end of term. She started out with the elements of Air, Fire, Earth and Water and it was clear straight away that there would be a great deal to learn from her. Light o'Love's fingers were cramped from writing by the end of the lecture.

On the notice board near the coffee machine, Pretty had posted a list of Special Groups. Most of the students' specialisations could be covered in groups of varying sizes, but three lonely students at the bottom of the page had 'To be Arranged' against their names. The Lamplighter from Sierra Leone - his specialisation was fire. Godiva was alone in her horse whispering. And then came Light o'Love.

Rostov caught her as she finished her coffee. "Come to my office, Light. We must study your cognodynamics together."

Light o'Love's heart fell. Rostov had behaved normally with her since that special night, but that made things worse. As if she had been just another girl, a one-night wonder. *Which is exactly what I was*, she told herself, so *why feel upset?* She followed him up to his office and sat opposite him.

"Now, cognodynamics. It is perhaps the most difficult specialisation of them all. Telekinesis is easy by comparison. Moving inanimate objects that don't fight back. Even levitation only involves yourself, and so is just a matter of extreme energy. But cognodynamics, now that is completely different. Controlling another mind, or even minds, that is very serious.

"Now, first what we are going to do is let you recognise the process within yourself. Once you've done that, we shall practice and strengthen your mind, until you can apply the process where-ever and against who-ever you like. So, we start to identify the process. You must be ready for this to take a long time. Maybe even weeks. We won't make any progress today, I'm sure."

He reached into his jacket for a pencil and set it on the table between them. "Now, concentrate on the pencil. I want you to make me pick it up."

Light o'Love reached out and picked up the pencil. It was yellow, with an eraser in a golden ferrule, and neatly sharpened using a knife.

"Why did you do that?" asked Rostov. "Put it down again. Now make me pick it up."

Again, Light o'Love picked up the pencil.

“Put it down again. Concentrate on the pencil, Light. Make me pick it up.”

She could not help herself and there she sat, holding the pencil again. She was shocked. The pencil was in her hand, and she had no idea how it got there. She done nothing, felt nothing, and there was the pencil again. Rostov took it from her and laid it on the desk again.

“Concentrate on the pencil, Light, and make me pick it up.” Seconds later, it was in her hand again.

She continued picking up the pencil and setting it down again for the next twenty minutes, until Rostov took it from her hand and put it back in his jacket.

“So, as I thought. No progress today. But you will continue to try. Come to me tomorrow at ten o'clock and we will try again.”

Light o'Love left his office feeling shocked and useless. She had been like a doll in his hands. She had felt nothing as he manipulated her time after time. She wanted to go home and be miserable alone, but it was only lunchtime.

As she reached the bottom of the grand staircase, Professor Rundle was waiting for her in the foyer.

“Come to my office, Light,” and she led off, through the outer office where Pretty typed at a terrible old upright, and into the inner chamber. Surprisingly, the Professor was a very untidy person. Bookshelves, crammed to overflowing with books and files, lined the walls of her room. Useful things crowded the narrow ledges in front of the books, teacups, crystals, a bicycle pump, packs of cards. Stacks of papers covered the floor and in the far corner of the room a stuffed owl sat, staring miserably at a pair of wellingtons.

“Sit down, sit down. Well, my dear, how was your first lesson in cognodynamics?”

“Terrible. I couldn't feel anything. I didn't know what was going on. I'm useless at it.”

“Now, now. I rather thought that was happening. Nick's not very forthcoming sometimes. He was spending a lot of energy and I could feel it crackling all over the place. But nothing from you at all. What did he have you doing?”

“He put a pencil on the table and I had to make him pick it up. I concentrated on it as hard as I could, but I kept picking it up myself.”

“He’s tricking you. Look, watch me.” The Professor picked through a mug of dead pens until she found a pencil. This one was short, chewed and had a broken lead. She put it on the table between them. “Now, my dear, forget about the pencil, and concentrate on me. Look into my eyes, and don’t fight me.”

Light o’Love stared at the Professor’s round and rosy face, into her faded eyes. She felt the Professor inside her head, ordering her to pick up the pencil. Well, not ordering. It felt more like *helping* her to do it.

The pencil was in Light o’Love’s hand again and the Professor chuckled. “Put it back, Light, and we’ll try again. This time you can try to stop me.”

Light o’Love looked into her eyes again, and leapt to her feet as the Professor’s chair tipped back against the bookshelf and fell sideways. For a moment, the Professor was a rolling ball wrapped in her black gown. Light o’Love rushed around the desk to help her to her feet.

“I’m alright, I’m alright,” she was saying as she patted her hair back into place. “Can you see my glasses? Where did they go?”

Light o’Love recovered the glasses from the corner of the room and dusted them on her skirt before handing them over. The Professor was back to her usual self again.

“What happened?” asked Light o’Love.

“You are asking me, Light? My dear, you positively thrashed me. Don’t tell me you don’t know. What did you feel?”

“Well, I felt a bit cross...”

“Yes, you were definitely that. You must have had a frustrating afternoon. What else did you feel?”

“I think I felt you coming in, and I pushed you out. But just a little push.”

“Well, I’m very glad you didn’t try a big push. You caught me completely by surprise. We’ll try again, but don’t push me this time. Just hold me, and then try to come back and make me pick up the pencil. Are you ready?”

Light o’Love tensed herself and looked again into the Professor’s eyes.

“Oow!” cried the Professor. “That hurt!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Are you all right? What happened?”

“You happened, my dear. You’ll have to learn to be more controlled. More gentle. Now I think we’ll stop before you give me a headache. We’ll let Nick do the hard work. I hope he can get you under control quickly, or I won’t be the only one with a headache.”

Light o'Love went alone to the Student’s Guild for lunch. She sat in a corner munching her pie and thinking. She had hurt the Professor, really hurt her. How had it happened? She had not been fighting, she had not tried to push the Professor out of her mind, but the Professor had complained. Then she thought about Rostov. He had manipulated her, tried to keep her from understanding. Why would he do a thing like that? She was still pondering when she got to Holly’s practical that afternoon.

The syllabus here had changed as well. Instead of the boring studying and drawing of medicinal plants, today there was laboratory equipment ready on the benches. They would prepare an infusion of dried *Camellia sinensis* and then reduce it to an essence by distillation.

* * * *

Skyler met her by the coffee machine. She looked elated and ready to giggle. “I did it! Really, just like you said. And it felt wonderful!”

“Did what?” asked Light o'Love in trepidation.

“That boy Peregrine, you know the one? I don’t like him much. Anyway, he was trying to talk to my tits again, so I did just what you said. He got so embarrassed, he whipped his hands away as if they were boiling hot. Then he turned bright red and forgot what he was trying to say. But it made *me* feel good.”

“What’s the time? Look, it’s only just after four. Why don’t we run down to town and buy you a sexy blouse to celebrate? Can you afford it?”

* * * *

They were back at home playing ping-pong when the front door slammed and Godiva rushed into the hallway. She was red and trembling when she came into the common room.

“I’ve just been chased by Mormons!” she said, still breathing heavily. “Two of them. They followed me all the way from the bus stop. I tried to

hurry, but they hurried too. They got close enough to call me 'Pretty lady' and ask where I was going."

"Pretty lady? That doesn't sound like Mormons. They're terribly serious, aren't they?"

"Well, I don't exactly know that they were Mormons. But they looked like them. You know, cheap dark suits and black ties. One of them had a briefcase. Bastards! They really scared me."

"Are they still there?" Light o'Love went to the bay window and got behind the curtains. The pavement outside was empty. She wondered if Godiva had been mistaken about the Mormons. Perhaps they had just been two stupid men. God knew there were enough of them around.

Chapter 4

Light o'Love continued to think that Godiva was making a fuss over nothing until she waited for the bus next morning. On the other side of the street, waiting for the bus in the other direction, stood the two men. They looked unmistakeable. Cheap, dark suits on a morning when everyone else had wrapped up against the wind. Black ties, and one of them held a briefcase. They both had glasses with square plastic frames. They both had dark hair, slicked back with cream. And they were staring at her.

For a moment, a bus pulling up on their side of the road hid them. Light o'Love looked for them boarding the bus, but saw nothing. When the bus pulled away, the bus stop was empty. She went straight to Paul Grimes when she got to the Institute.

She found it difficult to work before her ten o'clock meeting with Rostov. He waited for her with the pencil on the desk in front of him.

"The Professor tells me you were wild and uncontrolled with her yesterday."

"Yes, but I didn't mean to be. I didn't know it was happening."

"So, perhaps it is better to do these things in my way? Yes? Now, Light, concentrate on the pencil, and make me pick it up."

With part of her mind Light o'Love concentrated on the pencil, but with the rest she watched for an intrusion similar to the Professor's. And there it was, much more subtle, almost imperceptible. Rostov helped her as she reached out and picked up the pencil. Then he slipped out again.

"Again," Rostov ordered.

Without looking at him, Light o'Love waited for the intrusion and clamped her mind around it. Rostov grunted as she twisted and pushed against him. He tried fending her off but she was pushing and pushing...

"The pencil..." he said, in a strained voice.

Still forcing him back, Light o'Love tried to take the pencil. Angry now, she wanted to take the pencil and stab it back into his pocket.

With a violent shake of his mind, Rostov broke free. There was a blue flash and a gunshot, and Light o'Love threw herself back in her chair. The pencil had gone and the smell of fireworks hung in the air. She felt weak and shaky.

Rostov hands stilled gripped the edge of the desk. He relaxed and rubbed his forehead. "Well, that was different," he said.

Light o'Love looked around her. The pencil had destroyed itself against the door. A small heap of debris lay on the floor and a rosette of splinters embedded in the door showed the impact point. There were hurrying steps outside and the door was flung open. Jane Thorpe the junior lecturer stood with an anxious look on her face.

"What happened? Are you alright?"

"Er, I think I broke my pencil," said Rostov, and then the Professor and Pretty were there, looking over her shoulder.

The Professor was smiling. "I did warn you, Nick. How are you, my dear? Any progress?"

"I don't know," said Light o'Love. "I'm not sure what happened."

"Well, something did. It felt like a slap around the head and all the alarms have gone off. Even the library's been locked down! So, what will we do, Nick? Do you need help?"

"I think we'll manage, Professor. Now we have some idea of the problem."

When they were alone again, Rostov opened a drawer and brought out a box of new pencils. He sharpened one into the waste paper basket using a small pocket-knife, and set it on the desk. "Now, we will try again, very gently. You make me pick it up. I won't resist as long as you are careful."

Light o'Love ignored the pencil this time. She looked into Rostov's eyes and suggested that he pick up the pencil. It needed only the finest of touches, and he picked up the pencil. Success! She had done it, and it felt completely natural. A wave of elation swept over her. She wanted to do it again immediately.

"That's better, Light. Very delicate. Do it again, as gently as you can."

She repeated the process again and again until Rostov took the pencil under his own volition and put it in his pocket. "Good. Now we are making

progress. Good progress. But, here in the Institute, all our minds are different. Well-worn. Let's go and find some untouched material to work on." He took his jacket from the back of his chair and they went out to the street.

He led her to the Guild and into one of the lounges. They sat together and watched the world passing by. The lounge was a down at heel, functional room, full of students relaxing between lectures. Ash-trays sat on every table, and the furniture smelt smoky. Three banks of seats faced each other over coffee tables. Passers-by used the lounge as a corridor linking the two sides of the Guild building. Two aisles ran the length of the room and a steady stream of students wandered along these, going from one place to the next.

Light o'Love wondered what Rostov intended to do here. Surely he was not going to ask her to play with the minds around her. The thought frightened her. She knew that would be illegal.

Light o'Love watched an approaching girl, a thoughtful blonde with long hair. She wore a grubby sheepskin jacket with Tibetan embroidery, and carried an armful of files against her chest. Light o'Love felt something beside her, and the girl turned to pick her way between the seats. She reached the other aisle and continued on her way. Rostov had controlled her.

He shrugged in answer to Light o'Love's questioning eyes. "You're right. We shouldn't do it. But it's a very small thing and no one is aware of it. We need to introduce you to normal minds. You do the next one. Wait for someone by themselves, and be very, very gentle. I'm sure the Professor's listening in."

The next single person was not a student at all. A young office worker in suit and tie hurried down the aisle towards them. He looked busy. Light o'Love tried to find him with her mind, and he turned suddenly, skipped over the legs of a seated couple and hustled on to the other aisle.

Rostov laughed at the man's energy. "Gently, Light. More delicate. Do it so gently that you might fail. Try this one."

It did not take long for Light o'Love to get the balance right. The minds she influenced felt wonderfully open and trusting. A slight suggestion, a gentle nudge, and their owners would decide to leave one aisle and use the other. It came easily, and she felt happy when Rostov left her alone to find lunch.

When their day had ended, Paul drove her home. They cruised the streets around Penny Lane and the edge of Sefton Park looking for the two men. Light o'Love had not realised just how many side streets there were in the city, and in how many places the men might be hiding. They would only be found by the purest chance.

But found they were. Walking along the far end of Penny Lane, away from Smethwick Hall. Shoulder to shoulder along the pavement, almost in step. Paul pulled up ahead of them and released the car bonnet. "Stay here, and don't look at them," he said, and went out to lift the bonnet and look at the engine. Light o'Love heard the men approach from behind and watched them walk past without breaking step.

Moments later, Paul got back into the car. "Strange, I couldn't work out who they were. I didn't get any of that religious feeling... But they're not a problem, anyway. Definitely nothing dangerous about them. Might be sales people, come on, I'll drive you home."

Next morning they had The X-Father on religions again. Light o'Love liked him. Ryan had a smooth tongue and could keep them interested for the whole two-hour lecture. During the coffee break, the students crowded around to hear more, as if the lecture was not enough. When they were heading back to the lecture room after coffee, he touched Light o'Love's arm and said, "Don't you be running away afterwards. I'm taking you for lunch."

He took her to his car when the lecture had finished and drove her away. He would not tell where they were going. Another surprise.

"Light o'Love, now isn't that just a perfect name? Old Bonely surely has a way with names. Do you like it?"

"It's a bit embarrassing actually. I feel as if I'm meant to be some kind of love Goddess. Venus, Aphrodite, and I don't have the right bits and pieces. And I don't know anything about it."

"Well now, the bits and pieces are fine. Just fine. After all, the Venus de Milo gets by without her arms, and that must make some things very difficult. And fat? There's bits of her all over the place, and she's still lovely, God bless her. And as for not knowing anything about it, well, you wouldn't be in Uni if you knew all there was to know, would you now? Just you wait and learn, that's all."

They continued to drive out into the northern suburbs and Light o'Love mused about her future as a love goddess. Perhaps if she could learn more?

Then she rejected the whole idea. She might be able to study things in the library, but actually *being* a new Aphrodite, that was out of the question. She did not want people looking at her and thinking 'There's Light o'Love, she's the expert on sex'.

They pulled up outside a small brick bungalow. "Now, let's go and meet Milady. I shall have to be on my best behaviour, and perhaps she'll be kind to me. I wonder what we'll be having for lunch. To be honest, she's a lovely cook. Ah, there she is now!"

A slight woman with long brown hair opened the door. She had a wide and welcoming smile, and her laughter lines put her at forty or more. She wore jeans and, beneath her open cardigan, a tight cotton bodice that made Light o'Love instantly jealous.

She held out both hands to take Light o'Love's. "Light o'Love, Light o'Love, you look just as pretty as your name. Welcome, come inside."

"Why thank you, Milady."

Her hostess turned and looked at her curiously. "You've been fooled by Padeen here. What've you been telling her, you old fool? I'm no more 'Milady' than you are, my dear. Just call me Foxglove; that's my name." She made as if to cuff Ryan around the ear. "Has he tried to get you into bed yet, Light? The old goat's so randy he'd jump up on a cracked plate. He says I was given my name to provide a glove for his fox, but if I did that as often as he wants, I wouldn't have time to take a breath." Hearing a stranger talk openly about sex made Light o'Love feel uncomfortable, but Foxglove thought nothing of it.

She led them into her parlour, a long room made by knocking the traditional front room and kitchen into one. The kitchen table had been set for three, and something exotic and spicy simmered on the stove.

The food tasted as good as it smelt but Foxglove did not let her linger once she had eaten. They left the X-Father washing the dishes and went to Foxglove's bedroom. "Time to work," she said. "We've got some serious tutoring to get through by Beltane, so we may as well get started. We'll start off with a Circle. You must do your studying properly from the beginning, and you can't learn proper magic without one. I always practice in a Circle, and I always cast it the way it should be done. So let's get undressed." She kicked off her shoes and started to strip. Reluctantly Light o'Love followed her.

She felt uncomfortable looking at Foxglove naked, but Foxglove was keen to look at her. She took Light o'Love's hands and held her arms wide to examine her.

"You're a pretty young thing, so you are. And you'll be even prettier when you've filled out a little. Very nice indeed. But you'll have to do something about all that hair down there. It's not right to be spending so much time on prettying your face, and leave your little lover's purse to take care of itself. Not right at all. We're not here to study forestry."

Foxglove practiced what she preached. Her own hair had been trimmed short and in the shadows her sex was full and interesting. She looked attractive without her clothes. Dark chestnut hair fell onto her shoulders and dramatised her white skin. Her figure was feminine; round, heavy breasts and wide hips. She looked comfortable with herself and moved as naturally without her clothes as she did when she was dressed. She took Light o'Love's hand and led her to another back room.

"My special room," she said, throwing open the door. It looked very special. Dark blue velvet curtains hung from ceiling to floor on both sides. A single mirror covered the wall at the far end. A low altar of rough-cut timber stood in its centre. Flanked by two stubby candles, a pearl-white statue of Aphrodite stood in her seashell.

Foxglove pushed her in and closed the door. Light o'Love stared around at this wonderful room. The ceiling had been carefully painted as a starscape. Stars twinkled in the infinite dark and the constellation figures floated in lightly airbrushed mist. Cool and fresh air filled the room and carried a hint of incense from the candles. The carpet was a dark, inky blue. A silver circle had been woven into its pile, and four candles stood in saucers at diameters that were not aligned with the walls of the room.

"There, my special room!"

"It's beautiful," said Light o'Love. "I've never seen anything like this."

"Yes, Padeen helped me a lot. It might look simple but, never mind that now. Another day, and I'm sure he'll be proud enough to tell you himself. There's my altar to the Goddess, bless her. And the circle with the four cardinal points, east, west and so on.

"Now, we're not here for fun. You've got studying to do. Today we're going to cast the circle anew, and we'll try a charm. Would you like that?"

“Oh yes! We haven’t done anything real at the Institute yet.” Light o’Love definitely liked the idea. At last she would learn some real magic, the sort of thing she associated with witches.

Foxglove took a silver circlet from a hook behind the door and slipped it onto her head. Its narrow band ran across her forehead and shone in her hair. A single blood red stone sat in its centre and reflected the candlelight. She looked at Light o’Love.

“You don’t have a lucky stone yet, Light? Dear oh dear, you’ll have to find yourself a rich lover to buy you one. This one’s a ruby from my mother’s engagement ring. I’d no use for it like that, so Padeen made me up my circlet in white gold and used the ruby in it. Rubies are good for strong and pure love. Not that it ever did Padeen much good, he wears a garnet because he’s as much tuned into sex as to love. Isn’t that just men for you? But it’d be better for you to have something around your neck, it’ll make the charm go that much smoother. I’ll get Padeen to lend you his, it’s a very fine thing to have one from a man’s hand anyway, if it’s men you’re more interested in.” She slipped out and came back with a chain and pendant, still warm from the X-Father.

“There you are. The old goat very nearly nailed me to the table when he saw me dressed like this. He’s a terrible man when his blood’s up, and him a priest and all. You never saw anything so ridiculous!”

Light o’Love put the chain around her neck. The dark, crusty garnet hung low between her breasts. Foxglove approved.

“That’s the way. Why are we as naked as we were made? I’ll tell you. Firstly, it’s not naked. We call it sky-clad. Dressed in what God made, no more. You should be sky-clad as much as you can, although that’s difficult enough in this climate. When I’m rich enough to buy a Caribbean island, we can throw our clothes away. Do you sleep naked? You must sleep naked. If you’re cold, put another blanket on. How can you rest your mind when you’re all dressed up in clothes?”

Light o’Love shuddered inwardly. She could not imagine giving up her warm pyjamas. “I think I’d freeze no matter how many blankets I had.”

Fox glove had no time for her objection. “If your blanket’s not warm enough, buy a duvet. Or one of those sleeping bags that opens out flat. Then you’d be warm in a snowstorm.

“Now, Light, let’s get to work. The Professor’s done the basics with you? Air, fire, water and earth? Now, that candle there is east, that’s for Air and rational thoughts. The men like that one. South, Fire and intuition and great ideas, that’s where we belong. Then West for water and emotions. And finally cold North for the earth beneath your feet and all the sensations you feel.

“See, I counted them out all deosil, sunwise, clockwise if you like. We always work that way when we’re making something.

“So let’s start by having a quiet word with the Goddess.”

She led Light o’Love along the edge of the carpet, not setting foot inside the circle until they could kneel at the altar. Aphrodite stood as Botticelli had painted her, tall, elegant, coyly covering herself with the ends of her long hair. But this Aphrodite did not look demurely down to one side. She gazed back at them, questioning their value.

“Now tell the Goddess you’re here, and ask Her for help in our magic...” Foxglove had her eyes closed and her hands together. She was mouthing words, but made no sound. She looked like a child. Light o’Love closed her eyes and asked Her for help, love and comfort.

They entered the circle from the south. “First let me close the circle around us.” She pointed at the eastern candle and drew a circle as she walked around, muttering all the time. She stood behind Light o’Love and guiding her by the hips, brought her to stand in front of the eastern candle.

“Now we breathe the good air, and let the wind surround us. We leave our troubles and worries on the wind and breathe deeply.” Foxglove stood close behind her and Light o’Love could feel her drawing deep breaths. Light o’Love did the same until Foxglove pushed her to the south candle.

“Now the fire, burning away our pride and stubbornness. Feel the heat on your face and let your spirit dance in the flame.”

At the western candle, Foxglove recognised the spirits of water. “Think of water, Light. We are made of water, of smooth cool pure water. We are washed with water and water makes us free.” Light o’Love rested against Foxglove’s warm body and imagined they floated in water.

“Finally, we turn north to the cold moist earth. The earth will take you and wrap you in its womb. And then, it will give you life and you will grow and flower in glory.” She reached around Light o’Love’s waist and held her tight for a moment.

"Now, sit in the centre and face south." She pushed Light o'Love to sit cross-legged in the centre of the circle. She did as she was told and sat with the roughness of the carpet under her bottom.

"Close your eyes and put your hands open on your thighs, that's it. Now I want you to think of the candles and their elements one by one, and ask them to come and help your charm."

The heavy silence of the room enveloped Light o'Love as she mentally recognised the elements as the Professor had explained them, and asked them to come to her aid. She sat and opened herself to them. In the silence around her, she began to hear Foxglove's gentle breathing, and the sputtering of the candles. Around all felt strong, safe and peaceful.

"Good, now what love charm do you want, Light o'Love?"

She did not know what to ask for. She wanted to learn. She wanted success in her calling. Not ordering people around with her mind, but making them happy. "I want to love, I want to be open to love. I suppose I want to share love with everyone."

"Brave girl! But that's what a lover should say, and we'll see what we can do. Now stay just as you are and we'll prepare to cast the charm."

Light felt Foxglove kneel behind her. She slipped strong hands under her hair and softly massaged Light o'Love's neck.

"So, first we will make you ready to receive your blessing, and when you're completely ready, we'll cast the spell on a wave of good feeling. It's very important, that wave of good feeling. If you try to cast a charm without that, it will be a weak and unhealthy thing. So when the time comes, you concentrate on the charm, and I shall bring you to the point where we make our charm along with a great crashing wave. Just let me guide you.

"Now think of what I'm doing as I touch you. Don't move now, I'll do everything for you. I'm stroking your neck. Feel my hands bending your proud neck."

Foxglove's strong fingers kneaded the muscles at the back of her neck, pressing and rotating them. It felt relaxing and exciting all at once.

"And now feel your shoulders, your wide and strong shoulders, strong enough to bear your friends' troubles as well as your own." Her muscles were being gripped and wrung out like wet rags.

"And your back, strong and straight and upright, as all true lovers must be..." Foxglove had switched to using her thumbs. She inched her way over

Light o'Love's back pressing, rubbing, manipulating, missing nothing. It took a long time and brought a glow to Light o'Love's body. She focussed her mind on each spot that was being massaged in an effort to become totally aware of herself.

Foxglove reached the base of her back, and surprised her by slipping a hand under each arm to reach her breasts. Light o'Love's heart leapt inside her. The touch of Foxglove's fingers made her tingle all over.

"I'm holding your breasts, your round, soft breasts, given to you so that you may give to others..." She cupped Light o'Love's breasts and rubbed her thumbs back and forth across their sensitive tips. It felt wonderful.

"Now say the words after me"

In the day and in the night

"Go on, repeat them out loud, line after line"

In the day and in the night

Let love come to fill my cup

Come in gentle breezes and strong winds

Come in the ruddy amber of the flame

Come on the tides and the river's run,

Come to me in my waiting

Fill my sweet and thirsty cup

Fill me, fill me, fill me

"That's it, Light, and we'll say it again. Let the energy build up as you say it."

The insistent rubbing of Foxglove's thumbs across her nipples confused her. Waves of pleasure flowed down into her stomach. It was difficult to concentrate on the words coming softly from behind her.

"Concentrate, Light, say the words after me"

In the day and in the night

Let love come to fill my cup

Come in gentle breezes and strong winds

Come in the ruddy amber of the flame

Come on the tides and the river's run,

Come to me in my waiting

Fill my sweet and thirsty cup

Fill me, fill me, fill me

"Yes, Light, let it happen to you. Do it, Light, and say the words,"

Fill me, fill me, fill me”

Foxglove was reaching into her lap, reaching underneath her, slipping into the groove of her sex, pressing her clit and moving it in delightful circles.

*“Fill me, fill me, fill me,
Fill me, fill me, fill me”*

Light o'Love muttering the words to herself and tried to delay the explosion.

*“Fill me, fill me, fill me,
Fill me, fill me, fill me”*

They chanted softly together and Foxglove was drawing her circles with the rhythm.

*“Fill me, fill me, fill me,
Fill me, Oh God! Aaaaah!”*

Light o'Love was coming. She was chanting and losing awareness as the waves swept her off her feet again, and again. She was chanting and rocking in Foxglove's arms, and coming, coming, coming. She lay amongst the stars.

She returned gently and comfortably. She was sitting, safe in Foxglove's arms. Her head thrown back onto Foxglove's shoulder, she gazed into the starscape on the ceiling above. Leo stared at her and grinned proudly.

“Now that was a charm, if ever there was one!” said Foxglove. “That was a charm indeed. How are you feeling?”

Light o'Love was not sure. She felt drained. And comfortable in Foxglove's embrace. And satisfied. “Did it work?” she asked.

“I'm certain it did. Not a smidgen of doubt in my mind. Now sit up. I'm going to put the circle to rest.”

Light o'Love watched as Foxglove pointed at the eastern candle and, working widdershins, unwound the circle again. She got shakily back to her feet. “I feel exhausted.”

“And so you should. That was the strongest charm I've seen in a long time. Now I'm going to put you to my bed for half an hour, and when you're good and awake again, come and get some tea. You've done well today. Next time I think I'll let you cast the circle yourself. Now get on with you.”

Chapter 5

Light o'Love felt confident and bouncy when Ryan dropped her at Formby railway station. She would take a train home while Ryan went back to Foxglove. Presumably he hoped she would be kind to him.

She liked Foxglove; no, more than that, she admired her. She was probably about the same age as Auntie Joan, but what a different woman. In spite of her assurance that Ryan would jump up on a cracked plate given half a chance, she could not imagine he would treat Auntie Joan with anything more than politeness. But Foxglove had him eating out of her hand, and she was not even 'kind' to him very often, as far as Light o'Love could judge.

Daylight was fading as Light o'Love walked back home from the bus stop. In Liverpool for nearly two months now and she felt at home in the city. Not bad for a country girl, she thought to herself, and looked over her shoulder at the two men following her. Who were these people? She no longer feared them and decided to let them catch up.

Close up, they still looked strange. Unsmiling, pale faces. Thin lips. The square black frames of their glasses dominated their faces.

"Good afternoon, Miss, we're from the Fundamental Church of God, out of Alice, Texas." He had a strong American accent and for some reason that surprised her. They were scrutinising her and when she did not reply, the man continued. "We understand that you are a University student? Would you like to spend a little time with us so that we can bring you the Good News?"

Light o'Love thought of the fright they had given Godiva and decided she would play along. She might find a way to turn the tables. "Why not? I'm not in a hurry. How about a walk in the park?"

She crossed the road and headed down the hill towards Sefton Park. The two men followed, still shoulder to shoulder, down the narrow pavement.

Light o'Love felt a little like an escorted prisoner, but she was wondering to herself what she could do to hinder the two of them. She did not like the idea of her friends being frightened. They came to the park and headed out across the grass, the men on either side of her.

"My name's Shirley. Who are you?"

"My name's Mortlock, and he's Grizzle." For religious salesmen, they were not very talkative. Light o'Love led them to a park bench. The day had nearly gone from the empty park, but she did not feel worried.

They sat on the bench, the men on either side of her, close enough that their shoulders touched her. "So, tell me about your church."

"Our church comes from Alice, Texas. That is where our Moderator has his office. What do you study at University?" Mortlock did all the talking.

"Me? Oh, just Politics. Politics and Ethics."

"Ah. You are studying at the Jane Flockman Institute. What do you study there?"

"Politics, ethics, history, that sort of thing. All pretty dull really. What's it like in Texas? What is Alice like?"

"Alice is a good town. Our church is there and our Moderator has his office there."

"Yes, you told me. But what's it like? Is it big?"

"We have twenty-nine churches, a public library, a private hospital, and five hundred and fifty-seven businesses. There is also a museum of South Texas history and culture."

"Goodness, you sound just like a travel guide. I must visit some time. But what do you do for fun?"

The men looked at each other as if the idea of fun had never occurred to them. "We go to church."

Why am I doing all the work here? she asked herself. *They're meant to be winning me over.* "Tell me about your church. Is it a friendly church? Are you kind to women?"

"We are very kind to women. We respect women. Our women are a gift to us. From our Moderator."

"That's nice. Are you married? Or do you have girlfriends?"

"We do not have girlfriends in our church. We respect women."

Light o'Love felt depressed. Surely girlfriends would do some good for these two lost souls. On impulse, she put a hand on their thighs either side of

her. "I'm glad you respect women. But if you had girlfriends, you could respect them even more. And they could teach you about other things too."

"Other things?" asked Mortlock.

Light o'Love stroked their thighs. "Yes, other things. Pleasant things. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"What are you doing, Miss Shirley? Why are you touching me?"

"This is what girlfriends do. Do you like it?"

"It is - pleasant."

She slowly stroked the length of their thighs and with each stroke, she brushed against the soft bundles at the top. They made no resistance but gave no sign of enjoyment either. "Tell me, tell me about your museum."

"Our museum is at 66 South Wright Street. It is opened every day between nine o'clock and four-thirty. Except Sunday, when it opens at one o'clock. People go to church on Sunday morning."

She had stopped stroking their thighs and now she rubbed and fondled their hidden bundles. They grew in her hands. "And what do you have in your museum?"

Mortlock continued talking as if the cock she was holding belonged to someone else. "There are items on display relating to the history of the town of Alice. Alice was founded in 1888 and is old for that part of Texas."

"So what will I see when I go to the museum?" She had pulled down their zips and struggled to bring their cocks out into the open.

"The oldest items are from the local Indian people who inhabited the area before the white man came. There are also many items from the early days of the town of Alice. At that time Alice was a centre for the cattle industry."

Light o'Love had managed to free both men and she felt very happy. In the gathering dark, she was sitting on a park bench in the middle of Liverpool with one extremely religious cock in her right hand and another extremely religious cock in her left. If this did not upset their Moderator, he was not the man she expected. She slid her hands up and down their shafts. They felt dry and silky. She had the levers of power in her hands. "There, do you like that? That's what girlfriends will do for you."

For a moment Mortlock hesitated. "It is very pleasant. Do you want to hear more about the museum?"

"Of course. You keep talking, and I will keep doing this." The two cocks had grown bigger and harder.

"In the 1930's, oil was discovered in the country around Alice. The oil industry grew very quickly - what are you doing?"

Light o'Love had turned to kneel in front of them. "Nothing. Just open your legs a little, both of you, so I can reach what I want... That's better. Now keep telling me about the oil industry." She knelt on the ground with a cock in each hand, playing and watching their faces for signs of excitement. She liked their cocks. Straight white poles against the black fabric of their trousers. Two mushroom heads; pink, shiny and swollen. It felt very pleasant to be playing with them both. She moved her hands up and down in unison, not wanting to favour one or the other.

"The productive capacity of the oil fields around Alice was not great, but due to its strategic position, a large oil field service sector grew up in the town." Light o'Love pondered Mortlock's ability to keep talking about something so inappropriate while she was pumping his rigid and excited cock. His mind seemed to be independent of his balls. In fact, it seemed as if there was no connection between the two. And Grizzle did not show any greater signs of life. Light o'Love did not know if they would reach a climax at all.

She looked into Mortlock's eyes. "Here, help me, take hold of his cock and do what I'm doing," and she gave him a little push. She felt a delicate snap as if a very small elastic band had broken, and Mortlock reached for his friend's cock and started pumping it up and down.

Light o'Love looked at Grizzle. "And you. Take his cock and play with it." Again the little snap and Grizzle wrapped his hand around Mortlock's cock.

"That's very good," said Light o'Love. "Now keep doing that, and I shall play with your balls." She burrowed in below the upright poles to cup their furry balls in the palms of her hands.

They stroked each other's cock in unison, their hands moving deliberately up and down. Were they enjoying it, she wondered? "Do it a little faster. I want you both to come."

They caught her by surprise. The words had hardly left her mouth before Mortlock groaned and started spouting. Grizzle came immediately

after and white cream splattered onto the park bench, their hands and even their trousers. Light o'Love jumped back to avoid the impressive mess.

"There, was that nice? Didn't I promise you it would be very pleasant?"

No spark of emotion had come from either of them, but their cocks had remained hard. Light o'Love had an idea of how she could leave. "Now that was very good, Mr. Mortlock and Mr. Grizzle. And I want you to keep doing it until you both come again. Then you can both stop. Look at each other. You are friends and, when they don't have girlfriends, friends must play with each other's cocks at least once every day. Understand? Don't forget now; next time I see you I'll be checking." She picked up her bag and left them on their bench, earnestly pleasuring each other.

She was walking out of the park when Holly's mini came flying along the tarmac footpath towards her. Holly jammed the brakes on and slid to a halt. She leaned over to throw the door open and shouted, "Quick, get in!" She spun the car on the grass, and raced off.

"Are you OK? What happened out there? Did you see anything?" Holly sounded flustered. There had been an emergency; something had happened and Holly was trying to help.

"What's going on?" asked Light o'Love.

"You didn't feel anything? It was like an incredible thunderclap. The others are coming." Light o'Love continued to look at her in surprise. "Was there anyone else there? Did you see any other students, Light? It's important. Someone's in trouble. I think."

She bumped off the footpath and back onto the road. She headed back to Smethwick Hall in a hurry, pushing the mini to its limit. Light o'Love clung onto the door and wished she had put her seat belt on. Holly braked sharply and swung into the driveway.

"Good, now let's find out what the hell's been going on. The others should be here in a moment. Are you sure you didn't see anyone out there? No other students?"

"No, no students." Holly looked at her carefully as they stood in the light of the front step.

"What have you been doing, Light? Why were you out there at night? It's dangerous."

Light o'Love's embarrassment grew. She did not want to explain what she had been doing. Instinctively she knew that, if there had been trouble,

she was probably involved in it. And she would not be able to hide. She swallowed. "I was with a couple of men."

"Men? What men?"

"The Mormons, or what ever. The church people who frightened Godiva the other night. That's all. Just being friendly."

"Light, if you know something..." A car pulled up and parked outside, followed by another. "That'll be the others. Let's get inside and you can tell us everything you know."

The Professor hurried in, with Paul Grimes. Rostov had already arrived, without his suit and tie for once, wearing a chunky wool pullover. He must have been at home when the call came.

They hurried into the common room. "So, what do we know?" the Professor asked Holly, peeling her coat off.

"I just found Light in the park. She's okay, and didn't see anyone else or feel anything. She was just going to tell me what she was doing. Go on, Light. What were you doing?"

"I was with those two men, the ones we saw last night, Paul. They were following me, so I took them into the park to have a talk."

"By yourself?" said the Professor. "That was a bit stupid. I wouldn't go into a park at night with one strange man, let alone two. Why did you do it?"

"They were following me. And they'd frightened Godiva..."

"What have you been doing, Light? Didn't you feel anything?"

"No - what was it?"

"We felt it. All over town. And there was no one else there? Are you sure?"

"Just the two men. They're called Mortlock and Grizzle."

The Professor grunted in exasperation. "Let's sit down. Bring some chairs over. We'll have to get to the bottom of this." They pulled chairs over to the ping-pong table and sat around one end. "Now, Light. From the beginning. Where did you meet these men?"

Feeling sick, Light o'Love started. "I was walking back along Greenbank Road and they were following me. I didn't like them, so I stopped and let them catch up. They were American. They said they came from a church in Alice, Texas, and wanted to give me the Good News."

"And you let them take you into the park? By yourself?" asked Holly.

“Well, I suggested it, actually. I thought I might be able to make some trouble for them after the way they frightened Godiva.”

“Oh no...” whispered Holly, and the Professor looked at Light o’Love severely.

She knew she would have to continue. “They didn’t say anything as we walked, so I stopped at a park bench and we sat down. With me in the middle. They asked me what I studied.”

“And you said...?” asked Rostov.

“I told them politics and ethics, at the University. They knew that meant the Institute.”

“Again, Light,” demanded Rostov. “You said exactly what?”

“I think I said ‘politics and ethics’. And they said ‘at the Jane Flockman Institute’. That’s all. We didn’t talk about that anymore because I asked them about Texas and their church. About Alice. They said their church was in Alice, and their Moderator has his office there.”

“Go on.”

“What else? I asked them what they did for fun, and they didn’t seem to know. They said they go to church. I asked if their church was kind to women, and they said they respected them very much. Said they were a gift from their Moderator, which sounded a bit strange. But they said they didn’t have girlfriends. They had lots of facts about Alice.”

“Light, my dear, there’s something you’re not telling us, isn’t there?” said the Professor.

She took a deep breath. Oh, well, here goes. “It’s embarrassing. While they were talking, I started to play with them.”

Her listeners looked stunned. “You did what?” said Rostov in disbelief.

She tried to defend herself. “I thought it would be good for them. I mean, they didn’t seem to have any fun at all. And no girlfriends. And I didn’t like the way they’ve been spying on us.”

“Wait a minute, my dear. Paul, what can you say about them?”

“Er, I honestly don’t know, Professor. I got very close to them, but I didn’t feel anything unusual. And I *was* searching. But they didn’t seem like religious people either. I thought they were just salesmen or something. I’m beginning to wonder now. I’m pretty sure they didn’t know who I was. And I was being careful because I was still suspicious at that stage.”

"Mmmh, I'm beginning to dislike the sound of all this," said the Professor. "Go on, Light. What happened next?"

"Well, they were sitting there and I was playing with them. Grizzle wasn't talking but Mortlock just carried on as if nothing was happening, telling me about Alice, its population, its museum, the oil industry around there. So I turned around and knelt on the ground. So I could look at them while I was playing."

There was something in Holly's eye that might have been the beginning of a giggle if things were not so serious. "Tell us exactly what you were doing. We want to picture it."

"Nothing really. I mean, I was just kneeling there and playing with them."

"Playing with what?" Holly was determined to make her suffer.

"With, with their things. I had one in each hand."

The Professor pulled a sour face. "You're certainly earning your name. Go on."

"Mortlock was still talking about Alice and I didn't know if they would come. They were hard, but they didn't seem excited. I told them to play with each other's thing."

"And they did?" asked Rostov with surprise in his voice.

"I had to give them a little push. But a very little one, really."

"I think we know about your little pushes, Light. So what happened next?"

"They were doing it to each other. They seemed to like it and I was holding their balls in my hands. But they didn't come until I said I'd like them to. And then, they suddenly came. It went everywhere, all over the place. I was lucky not to get any on me. I think I didn't, anyway. And that was it."

"You mean, there was nothing else?"

"No. I left. They were still hard, so I told them to keep playing until they came again, and I left. That was all. I met Holly on the way home."

The Professor looked at the others. "What do you think?"

"It sounds strange," said Paul. "I didn't feel a thing from them, really. But that was a major shock this evening."

"Rostov?"

"I don't like it. That was a tremendous release just then. The energy levels must have been extreme. I was on the other side of town and it was still very strong."

"Light, go back to the bit where you pushed them. What did you feel?"

"It was, I don't know, almost nothing. Just a gentle snap, I suppose. First one and then the other. But it was really nothing. Like breaking a biscuit. Or less, really. But what's going on? What does it mean?"

The Professor did not answer the question. "Look at me, dear. At my eyes. Now, is there anything else you haven't told us?"

"Well, when I was leaving. I told them that if they didn't have girlfriends, friends should help each other and do it again, at least once a day."

A yelp of laughter from Holly. "Light! That was bad."

"But I didn't push them. Not at all. I was just telling. Normally. Nothing else."

"And I believe you, my dear. Holly, can you give her dinner? Spend the evening with her?" She waited until Holly nodded. "Good. Light, come and see me at twelve tomorrow. We should have had time to discuss things by then."

Light o'Love found it difficult to concentrate on studying next morning. Time dragged until she could knock on Professor Rundle's door at twelve o'clock.

"Sit down, my dear. Get comfortable because we've got some talking to do." The Professor looked tired and worried. "Firstly, it looks as if you have uncovered a big problem. I don't know what we've got on our hands, but it doesn't look good. Fortunately for you, because you seem to have broken all the rules. Even if you didn't mean to.

"We've been talking about you on and off all morning. I'm going to give you a very serious warning and I want you to listen very carefully. You will never, ever, manipulate people's minds the way you did yesterday. That's completely illegal and this morning there were voices for throwing you out of the Institute. We had to plead your ignorance in order to keep you. Even then, if you hadn't uncovered something so important... So don't do it again. Unless life is threatened. Or you get an order from me. Got that?"

Light o'Love had not dreamt that she had been in such danger. "Yes, Professor. I didn't realise. I - I didn't know."

"Even little pushes are out of the question, my dear. I know why you did it, and it all turned out well in the end, but it's illegal. If we ever find witches doing it, or anyone else for that matter, we all stamp on it immediately. We even take powers away if necessary."

Light o'Love thought about that for a moment. "Who were those people last night? They don't seem to be normal."

"They're not normal, that much is definite. We've got people looking around in Alice this morning, well, it'll be a couple of hours before they start really, but we're pretty sure we won't find anything. No, I'm pretty sure they were toys, poor people who have been taken over and modified. Sent here to spy on you. And us, of course."

"The question is, who sent them? And why? Setting up that sort of thing's not easy. They must have invested a lot into making those toys. Look at the amount of energy that was released when you broke them. We all felt it; two distinctive blows, one after the other. And you felt nothing, you say?"

"Just two little snaps. Nothing really."

"That's very interesting. We're speculating on why that was. I can't help thinking that if I or one of our staff had tried to do the same thing, it would have been very messy. If they'd managed to do it at all, of course. It's as if you'd got in using a key, where we'd have to blast our way in and cause all sorts of damage. That's very interesting..."

"What will happen to them? Where will they go?"

"We don't know. We don't have any experience with this at all. We've heard of a case in New England where a coven confronted one of these toys, but that turned out badly. The toy was blown apart and two of the witches were killed. The others had fearful damage to their minds. Never fully recovered, although they can lead normal lives now. But these two were still functional afterwards. Well, more or less normal. The Mortlock one was still talking about Alice afterwards?"

"Yes, yes, I think so. They didn't seem to change at all. And they were still normal when I left."

"So I don't know what to think. We assume their owners are aware of what has happened. They'll guess that we know enough about them to make

them useless. What happens to them now, I don't know. Poor men. I wonder who they were."

Chapter 6

The Professor was waiting for her when she reached the Institute next morning. She had a copy of The Liverpool Echo, folded to one of the inner pages. She had circled a small article in red.

Two Men Arrested

Two American men appeared in the Liverpool Magistrate's Court yesterday on charges of performing homosexual acts. They gave their names as John Mortlock and John Grizzle, and their address as a boarding house in Edgehill. They were remanded on bail to re-appear on the 15th of January.

Light o'Love searched the Professor's face. No sign of upset and Light o'Love was not in trouble again.

"It looks as if they listened to your advice about 'friendship'. Paul's going down to the court this morning to see if we can find out any more about them. It would be good to know who posted their bail, although I don't suppose they've been careless enough to leave us any real information. What do you have for the rest of the day?"

"I've got Geopolitics at ten, then a tutorial with Dr. Rostov. Then Paul's crystals all afternoon. It's busy today."

"Good. Leave the practical at four-thirty and come and see me. I'll warn Paul. And bring a friend with you. What are you doing for lunch?"

"Going to the Guild, I suppose..."

"That's fine, but take a friend with you. And come back to the Institute as soon as you can. I don't want you outside for long by yourself until we've had a chance to understand what's going on."

She went for lunch with Godiva. The Institute buzzed with gossip about strange events and her strange boyfriends, and Godiva wanted to know more. She took Light o'Love up to the restaurant and paid for her lunch.

Light o'Love followed her example and ordered a healthy salad, although she had been within a whisker of asking for chips as well. Sometimes she felt cross with Godiva. The girl had it all. Rich parents with a manor in the Home Counties. She had the effortless manners that only come from an education in one of the better boarding schools. Tall, blonde, beautiful, with a classic English strawberries and cream complexion. She knew how to dress for any occasion, and she looked *elegant*. Everything she did, she did with grace. She was sickening.

Light o'Love liked her, in spite of all that. She was unconscious of herself, and made friends with everyone. Her wealth and upbringing brought no problems for her, and she did not know why they should interfere with her choice of friends. Now she listened to Light o'Love's story with her smoky blue eyes wide.

"I think you're so brave," she said. "They frightened me to death when they followed me. I was running as hard as I could by the time I got home. I wouldn't have dreamt of stopping to talk to them. And I certainly wouldn't have taken them off to the park!" She shook her head in disbelief and her shoulder-length blonde hair swayed like silk.

"Oh, it wasn't so bad. If they'd been ordinary people I probably could have handled them easily. I think."

Godiva giggled. "It sounds as if you did handle them! Is it true? You had them both at once?"

Light o'Love did not enjoy her new reputation. "It wasn't anything much. Really, I just wanted to make trouble for them. I thought that if I could get them to do something really naughty, they wouldn't go around being so holy and preaching at everyone."

Godiva was more interested in basics. "I've done that with one boy a couple of times. It was quite interesting, especially when he did the same to me. But two at once, that must have been really exciting."

"I think it was for them. In the end at least, although they didn't seemed to get carried away with it at first. It wasn't that good for me. I wasn't doing it for fun. I didn't like them, and their clothes smelt of mothballs. But it was interesting, playing with two at once. Perhaps I'll try it again, if I find two men I like at once."

Godiva toyed with her salad. "You're good at that sort of thing. I can see how you got your name. But it's different for me. There were only girls

at my school. We used to talk about it a lot, but we never had the opportunity to meet any males at all. Hardly any of the men here talk to me anyway, and the ones that do..." She shuddered.

"You have problems with men? You're joking. You're the most attractive girl in the Institute. They must be falling over themselves to ask you out."

"No," Godiva said sadly. "I think I frighten them away. The male students hardly talk to me at all. And to be honest, they are very young. I probably need to be swept off my feet by someone mature and strong."

Light o'Love laughed at her. "We all need that! But what are you going to do in the meantime? There are not many white knights around. Are you going to live like a nun?"

"But I don't want to go out with just anyone. I don't want to get a reputation."

"Why ever not? Men just *love* girls with reputations. In fact the worse, the better as far as they're concerned. Haven't you noticed?"

"But I don't want to be cheap..."

"Oh, come on, Godiva. You'll never be cheap! You make any clothes look fashionable, even second hand from the market. All the men worth having will only chase after someone they're likely to catch. Wouldn't you, in their place? Who wants an ice-maiden, no matter how beautiful she is?"

There were tears forming in Godiva's eyes, and Light o'Love regretted her words immediately. She reached for Godiva's hand. "I didn't mean you are an ice-maiden."

Godiva shook her head and looked in her handbag for a tissue. "It's alright. I'm just being silly. It's just that, oh I don't know. I overheard some girls saying that about me once, and it hurt. I'm not like that. Really I'm not." She was pleading for re-assurance.

"Of course you're not. We wouldn't be talking like this if you weren't interested in men. But I can't believe you haven't got a queue of men waiting to take you out every Saturday."

Godiva blew her nose. "Well, I haven't. Why do you think I'm always in The Tram with the other girls?"

If the Institute was right, and love was part of Light o'Love's purpose in life, she would have to do something for her friend. "Right, if they're not

asking you out, you'll just have to ask them. This is 1968, we can do things like that now. Who are you going to start with?"

Godiva stared like a rabbit caught in headlights. "I – I - I hadn't thought. I don't like any of the students. Except maybe The Lamplighter."

"That might be nice. You two would look very nice together. And you know what they say about black men..."

"Light! I'm not thinking like that!"

"Yes you are. You just did. Admit it, the thought of a nice big, long, black -"

"No!" shrieked Godiva, holding a hand up to stop Light o'Love's mouth, "I didn't think of that."

"I did. And I think it might be very interesting. You know, I heard that when they're so long, they can -"

"No, Light, no. I don't want to hear about it. Not The Lamplighter. Well, not yet, anyway."

"Well, who else? Have you tried Nick yet? He's quite interesting in his own way."

"No, he hasn't tried to get me. I think I'd say no anyway. I don't want people to think I'm that sort of girl."

"What sort of girl? You mean, like me? Or Holly? Or Ari? Or the Professor, come to that?" She carried on over Godiva's embarrassment. "It doesn't mean anything, you know. I went with him, and we had fun. I'd probably do it again if he asked. In fact, I'll probably ask him myself some time. I certainly don't feel bad about it. And people don't look down on Holly, or the Professor. If you don't like him, what about Paul? Is he single?"

"Paul's nice. I like his smile."

"Perhaps try The X-Father. He's the one for you. He's kind, and he's more or less single. He'd take you out without wanting to get serious. I bet he knows all the fun places in town. Just jump in and ask him to show you around. I could ask him for you, if you want."

They finished their lunch and walked back to the Institute arm-in-arm, which felt good to both of them.

Light o'Love slipped out of Crystallography early and dragged Skyler along with her. The Professor was waiting for them, and took them downstairs for coffee. She fed the machine with shillings for all of them.

“Well, young Skyler, do you understand what you’re volunteering for?”

They both looked at the Professor in surprise. They had not realised they were volunteering for anything.

“We want some-one to baby-sit Light. That’s all. Are you volunteering? If you are, I’ll tell you why...” She smiled at Skyler and nodded. Skyler smiled back weakly. “Good, you’ve heard all about the other night, I’m sure. Light’s suddenly become famous. Probably infamous, actually. We should lock her up and throw away the key for being such a bad girl, but she may have done us all a favour.” She sipped her coffee.

“I’ll tell you what we know, or what we think we know. Firstly, toys definitely come from the Dark Light. We think they’re sent out to spy rather than to do any real damage. They behave like robots, I suppose, but they’re human. Except for their minds. The Dark Light seems to catch normal people and convert them. Brainwash them so they behave like machines. We’re even more frightened of them because we don’t know what they can actually do.

“Light, your toys were still more or less functional when you left them, but you’d thrown them off the rails. The police picked them up later that night after complaints. They’d been sitting in a bus stop together and playing with each other. Can you imagine? Anyway, off to the police station for the night, separate cells, and then up in front of the magistrate next morning. Holly went to the police station and they seem to think the two men are just crazy. And queer. Nothing else.

“Then Holly went to the court to see what she could pick up. It was all very ordinary, apparently. The two men had been remanded and immediately released on bail. The person who actually made the arrangements came from a small solicitor’s office. On behalf of Mr. John Smith who gives his occupation as the proprietor of the boarding house where the two men had been staying. Except that the address doesn’t exist. Somehow, the magistrate has forgotten to impound their passports, I think we can imagine why that happened, and the two men walked out with the solicitor’s clerk. They then disappeared. Holly and Betty Whinshuttle will be going around to the solicitor tomorrow, just in case there’s any kind of lead there. But. I doubt it. We’re getting nothing back from Texas either, I’m pretty sure there’s nothing to be found or they wouldn’t have let us have the information in the first place.

“So where does that leave us? Whoever sent the toys has reclaimed them. They could probably just have been left in custody, and be no danger to anyone except their fellow prisoners. Although from what I understand of prisons, it might be mutual. Anyway, they’ve gone. The owner of the toys was probably worried about us getting to them and extracting something useful. They might have wanted to extract information themselves. Either way, they’ve been reclaimed. Their owner knows that they’ve been tampered with, and tampered with in a way that has left them intact. That must be making them very worried.” The Professor sipped at her coffee. Light o’Love thought she looked very worried herself.

“We don’t know how they communicated with their owner. Was he able to see through their eyes? At the other extreme, did they just send letters? Who knows? We have to be worried that Light here has been identified as part of their problem. I wonder if they realise we know so little about what happened the other night? Probably not, but we can’t count on it. They’ll probably see you as part of some fantastic system that can trap and de-fang their spies.

“We’ve got to lock you up a little, Light. Sorry about it, but it might be a matter of keeping you alive. Skyler, I want you to stay with her for one hundred per cent of the time when she’s not either in Smethwick Hall or in the Institute. Can you do that? You can both travel in and out of town with Holly, so you’ll have to keep the same sort of hours as she does. When you go for lunch, take a staff member with you as well. Or Ari, she’ll go for lunch with you.”

Skyler stopped her. “But what am I supposed to do? I mean, if, what if something goes wrong?”

“Run away! Definitely. Don’t think about staying to help. Just get away as fast as you can and contact us. There’s nothing you can do to help Light that she can’t do herself, but you might be able to tell us something useful. So run away. What do you say, Light?”

Light o’Love had nothing to say. She was struggling with how horrible life had suddenly become.

Chapter 7

Light o'Love resented her confinement. After the first couple of days, her fear had worn off and she wanted her freedom again. She missed her solo walks through the city, window-shopping and exploring. Now she travelled under escort from Smethwick Hall to the Institute and back again, and the city lay out of bounds. Even Skyler felt resentful. "All I'm meant to do is run away," she said. "And I'm definitely not built for speed. I won't be any good at all." But Holly disagreed; she clearly felt that if the worst came to the worst, Skyler might be the only survivor. That prospect did not cheer up either of them.

They enjoyed their lunches with Ari. She was always cheerful and outrageous. The three of them would sit in a corner at the Guild and Ari would use her wicked sense of the absurd to deconstruct passers-by, reserving her sharpest darts for girls who did not measure up to her own high standards. She could be a cruel mimic and often had them in fits. For Light o'Love, it felt good to be with sisters when a cloud hung over her head.

Holly did what she could to ease the burden, but she took the danger very seriously. The most Light o'Love could get out of her was a promise to take them to The Tram at the weekend.

Dr. Daniel Couturier of the University of Rheims will be addressing us on France Post 1945 at 14:00 in the lecture room. All classes cancelled so everyone can attend.

The notice greeted them in the foyer. That looked interesting, especially the part about all classes being cancelled. It sounded important, and the students looked forward to watching the higher levels of academia at work.

Dr. Couturier was an older man, Light o'Love guessed around sixty, with thinning grey hair. He was tall and had a pronounced hunch in his shoulders. He wore an unfashionable tweed suit and looked untidy, not at all

like a French man should look. When he started to speak, his origin became obvious. He spoke to them in clear English with a light and romantic French accent. Some students took notes. Light o'Love sat back and enjoyed the fluid sound.

He spoke of a concept he called *le flux* which he explained as the ebb and flow of evil. Dr. Couturier and his colleagues had mapped it and then searched for something they could measure that would allow them to predict the changes. They had looked at everything, starting at sun-spots and going on to all the government and statistical indices. So far they had not been lucky. The only statistic they had identified was the price of West Texas Crude Oil translated into francs. Dr. Couturier had rejected this as coincidental, and now his team had returned to checking their initial histograms.

The mention of West Texas had made Light o'Love sit up. Where is Alice, she wondered, is that western Texas? She had no idea but resolved to check in the library. Strange that Texas should appear in her life twice in such a short time. She could not remember when she had heard the word previously, except on television, of course.

She liked listening to Dr. Couturier. He had an air of authority, and knew what he was talking about. But she had to let the mathematics go over her head. When he stopped talking, the Professor led them all downstairs where special coffee and biscuits waited. Dr. Couturier answered their questions with a plastic cup of doubtful coffee in his hand. None of the students felt brave enough to question him. Light o'Love stood in the background and listened to Rostov and the Professor picking at his ideas and concepts. It felt good to think that other people in the world carried on the same sort of tradition as the Institute.

As Rostov's questioning became more and more esoteric, the Professor clapped her hands and called an end. "That's it, people. Let's give our guest a chance to rest. I dare say you can catch him at the John Barleycorn later on. We've got to show him how to enjoy English beer. Where's Light o'Love? There you are, let's go up and have a talk. The conference room will be best."

Light o'Love found herself ushered into the conference room along with Dr. Couturier and several staff members. They fussed and squeezed, and settled around the large table. The Professor and Dr. Couturier sat together

opposite Light o'Love. She was the only student at the table, and she started to feel very alone.

“Now Light, Dr. Couturier here –“

“Daniel, please, Eliza.”

“Thank you - Daniel here has come from Rheims mostly to talk to you, Light. He knows a lot about the enemy's toys, they've been a speciality of his for years. So why don't you tell us all everything again. Start from when you first heard of the toys.”

Light o'Love described Godiva running into Smethwick Hall in a panic, and her own first sighting of the toys the following morning. Paul chipped in with what he had seen and felt when they had gone looking for the men. And then Light o'Love had to recount the whole embarrassing story of her meeting and the time they had spent together on the park bench. What she had been doing did not worry Dr. Couturier at all, but he did question her very closely about exactly what had been said, and exactly how the toys had broken. The Professor rounded off the story with what information they had gathered locally about the toys' little police problem, and the lack of anything useful coming from America.

Dr. Couturier thought for a while, and then steepled his fingers together in front of him and said, “Professor, you have a case here of the utmost significance. I cannot emphasise this too strongly. You know I've studied these unfortunate toys very closely, and I've never found anything like it.

“We have reports of strange people who might have been toys. We have reports of people who definitely were toys. There are two instances of individual witches actually confronting them and driving them off, one in Germany and one in Argentina, I think you all know these things.” He looked around the table and the staff members nodded thoughtfully.

“And then of course there is the New England Incident. I have worked especially on that incident, along with Glen Rossiter of course, because it may be possible to learn things from the enemy's failures that we could never find out from his successes. It is the function of the toys, we believe, to gather information secretly. We must assume that there are many toys that we have not noticed. We should also accept that they have collected information about us that we would rather have kept to ourselves.

“I stress again, this case is most significant. The toys appear to have been normal, just the same as previous descriptions. Their reactions when

challenged and the success of our young lady in breaking them, those things are new. What is happening? Why is she unhurt? How did the toys release such prodigious quantities of energy and still walk away? For all of these questions, I will say, I do not know. I do not know how, or why or where, everything I thought I knew last week is now standing on its head.” He looked sadly at Light o’Love. “You have made me think I have been wasting my time, Ma’msele.”

A chuckle ran around the table and he turned to the Professor. “Would you mind if I examine her a little more closely?”

“You must ask her, it’s her mind. He wants to look at your memories, Light. It’s nothing to worry about, I’m sure he won’t poke into anything you might want to keep secret. Do you mind?”

Dr. Couturier reached across the table and took her hands. He had a firm, masculine grip, but he looked at her with an old man’s eyes. Light o’Love studied his faded blue gaze and felt him slipping into her. She made no attempt to resist but held his stare until he released her.

He smiled. “I think we have a lady here who could rule an emperor, Professor. Another Josephine. Very interesting. It’s just as she said. Those were not normal minds, of course, but very close. I’m not surprised Dr. Grimes did not notice anything. I think I would also have accepted them for what they appeared to be, crazy American evangelists. And as we’re speaking of Americans, any news of Glen Rossiter yet?”

The Professor checked her watch. “He should have landed already, if his plane was on time. He’ll still have to get into London and catch a train up here. I hope he calls from London. All being well, he should get here tonight. Nick’ll meet him and bring him to the Adelphi. I should imagine he’ll be exhausted. We’ll have to go easy on him tomorrow. Now, does anyone want any more from Light? Holly, do you think we can take her to the Barleycorn this evening? The poor girl looks as if she needs to let her hair down a little.”

“And Skyler?” asked Holly.

“Give her the evening off. One of us will drive behind you on the way home, just to be on the safe side.”

The John Barleycorn was packed when they got there. The tables and the bar were full of students and staff chattering. The level of noise was as

high as the empty glasses suggested. Dr. Couturier stood in a corner with Rostov, talking seriously. Light o'Love went looking for Godiva.

She was sitting with some girls and sipping what appeared to be orange juice. Light o'Love led her across the room to Rostov and Dr. Couturier. She did not hesitate to break into Rostov's conversation. He had been inside her mind (and other places) and that gave her the right to take some liberties. She introduced Godiva as the prettiest horse-whisperer in England.

Godiva took it all in her stride, good manners demanded no less and she knew all about good manners. Light o'Love felt pleased with her little strategy, but she paid for it when the conversation switched to French and she found herself struggling to understand and tongue-tied when she tried to speak.

Foxglove came to her rescue. She pushed her way into the pub wrapped up in a stylish llama poncho with matching woolly beret. Light o'Love helped her extract herself from the poncho, and she went straight up to Dr. Couturier to hug him and offer her cheek for a kiss.

"Old friends," she said to Light o'Love while they stood at the bar trying to get a round in. "He used to be my teacher in Prague, and he's a sweet man."

"Prague?" said Light o'Love in surprise. Somehow, she had not associated Foxglove with exotic places. She seemed too, well, English.

"Yes, I was there for a post-graduate year. Very nice. You should try it some time. Not just now, of course. Brezhnev is still going bananas over there, very sad. Now, what have I got to do to get noticed at this bar? Take my blouse off?"

"Oh no, that's what you do to get free drinks. I'll just catch his eye." The barman turned and smiled at her. She did not notice the quiet as she ordered the drinks, but she certainly noticed everyone staring at her when she turned back. Suddenly she was in her nightmares, going to church in her underwear; dying for the toilet when no one would let her go. Her ears burned as they took their drinks back to the others. Slowly the noise picked up again.

"Very interesting, young Light o'Love," said Dr. Couturier. "Very interesting. Have you been teaching her, Foxglove?"

"Nothing to do with me. That was bad, Light."

Light o'Love felt crushed. "I'm sorry, but I never realised. I mean, - I've always done that. I didn't notice..." Godiva was looking at her with questions all over her face. Clearly she had not felt anything.

"Let me understand you," said Dr. Couturier. "You were doing that before you came here? To the Institute?" Light o'Love nodded. "And no one taught you? No? Now that is very unusual. Very unusual. Who's training her now?"

"I'm working with her on love, but Nick's doing the cognodynamics. Having a tough time of it, I hear. Did the Professor tell you Light knocked her out of her chair by accident?"

"Really? Please tell me, Light."

"It was an accident, I didn't know..." How could she explain it? The memory of the Professor rolling on the floor, all wrapped up in her robe, was too embarrassing.

"She's too undisciplined," said Rostov. "She must study more. She must learn control."

Dr. Couturier looked surprised. "Is that true? What we just saw was not uncontrolled. If I had tried it, I think it would have been the same as shouting at the poor man. That was smooth, so smooth. Like the best crème caramel. Do you permit her to do this in public?"

Now Rostov looked uncomfortable. "I have never seen her do anything quite like that. We've had lessons, and under supervision we've tried some things, but not like that. That was very good, Light. But not correct."

"Definitely not correct," said the Professor, joining their group. "Did you realise you were doing it, Light?"

"No, Professor. I've always done that, even when I was little. I hadn't thought about it. I didn't connect it. I wasn't thinking about it."

"Well, you'd better start thinking about it. Not only because you're getting stronger here and can do more damage. It's also dangerous for you personally. If anyone's looking for practitioners, you'll stand out in a crowd. It's like standing on a chair in the city library and whistling with both fingers in your mouth. You'll make yourself a target. And besides, it's illegal. You start off doing harmless little things like that, and who knows where you'll end up? You've got to be more careful!"

“You see what we’re up against, Daniel? With most students, we have to struggle just to make them aware of what’s happening around them. Some of them never get it. But this one, she’s a disaster waiting to happen.”

“I think you’re being very hard with her, Professor.” Dr. Couturier was smiling at her annoyance. “A little more work, maybe, but then, ah, then you will have a student with great potential. If she is too much trouble for the Institute, send her to me. I think we can manage her, and find some useful work for her to do.”

The Professor did not seem to like idea of losing Light o'Love. “We’ll see. In the future. Right now, we’ll just have to work on her discipline. I think I’d better get involved with her, Nick, let’s talk tomorrow. Now, I need to get home. There’s dinner to cook, and I’m late already. Shall we follow Holly and Light, and then you can drop me off? Godiva won’t mind walking Daniel down to the Adelphi, will you, my dear? Don’t let her stay out late, Daniel, and put her in a taxi home.”

They drove back to Smethwick Hall, Light o'Love in the back of Holly’s mini. She listened to Foxglove chattering in the front seat. She planned to stay the night with Holly and catch up on all the gossip. They would dine on fish and chips, and talk about old times.

Chapter 8

Glen Rossiter was a very much younger man than she had expected. He was tall and square. He had a comforting solidity about him and he smiled easily. His hair fell in collar-length blonde waves and his eyes twinkled behind very small glasses framed in gold wire. Without the glasses he might have looked young and careless. With them, he became academically respectable.

Light o'Love met him over breakfast at the Adelphi. They were having a late breakfast (a second breakfast in Light o'Love's case) in deference to Rossiter's jetlag. The meal impressed her. She had never been present at important happenings before and it was fun. It came as a surprise that important people are provided with the good things in life as a matter of course. The breakfast buffet had long been cleared away, but the starched waiter still offered her any breakfast she wanted. She followed the Professor's lead and sat over an elegant bowl of kedgerree.

Rossiter, the Professor and Dr. Couturier met as old friends and Light o'Love merely eavesdropped. The conversation did not concern her antics at all, and she found herself listening to talk of the summer's riots in Paris, the anti-Vietnam marches in Washington and the rapid growth of the hippy movement around San Francisco. She had no idea that the Professor concerned herself with such things, and that other international academics so obviously respected her views.

They reached the end of breakfast without questioning her at all. They were still busy chewing over the Biafran crisis and the implications of Russia's intervention in Czechoslovakia. It was only when Rossiter got up from the table that he took any interest in Light o'Love.

"Do you mind if Light o'Love and I walk up to the Institute together?" he asked the Professor. "It'll give us a chance to chat."

The Professor thought about it. "I suppose so. You can probably handle anything that might come up. You're in safe hands, Light, he knows as much about these things as anybody. It's not far, and I'll be listening, so don't try and lead him astray."

It felt nice to be out on the street again, especially as she was skipping one of Rostov's tutorials. Rossiter was fun to be with, once she understood that he needed shepherding when he crossed the road. He still looked in the wrong direction as he stepped off the curb. The wind had relented for him, and the sun even made a watery attempt to break through. They took the Brownlow Hill route because Rossiter admired the cathedral and as they walked he listened very carefully as Light o'Love retold her story. Rossiter showed more interest in her than in the toys.

"Love and cognodynamics, that's quite a combination. Which one do you like best?"

"I don't know really. I hadn't thought about it that way. I suppose the cognodynamics is easier to learn, apparently I have a good background. Love is much more difficult. There's so much to know before you can even start to practice."

"Ah, practising. That would be most male students' great unfulfilled dream. To practise love-making and get course credits for it."

"If only it was that easy."

"But tell me about the toys. Did they respond normally when you...?"

If she was honest, she would have to admit that she really could not tell. Even including Mortlock and Grizzle, she still only needed the fingers of one hand to count the cocks she had seriously played with. "I suppose yes, at least physically. I mean, they stood up normally. And, they came. But, the way they behaved, I don't know, they didn't seem to get excited. I mean, I'm sure I couldn't keep talking about our local museum while some-one was playing with me."

"I'd be willing to try..."

Light o'Love looked at him sharply, but he was just teasing. "Join the queue! No, seriously. They didn't seem to be engaged in what I was doing, even though their cocks seemed very excited. They didn't come until I told them they should, and then it all happened in a rush. Like two hosepipes. I was lucky to get out of the way."

“You see, that’s why it’s so interesting. They were experiencing extreme physical stimulation. In normal people you’d expect certain physiological effects, panting, reddening of the face, sweating, building up to spastic muscular contractions, all the normal things that you can see if you’re disengaged enough when you watch someone coming. But, as you describe it, there were none of these.

“In fact, you’d probably done more than enough to make them come, but nothing happened. There was something missing, I guess the vital connection between the body and the brain. That gap wasn’t closed until you told them that you’d like them to come and then, Bingo!

“I think these people are actually very, very difficult to create. I think that when the Dark Light starts to make one, they take a normal person and wipe out all the connections between body and brain that make people what they are. Take away all their human responses down to the most basic animal level. Even further perhaps, because the simplest male animals can manage an orgasm without thinking. They only need the physical stimulation. There are some insects that can keep making love even when their heads are chopped off.

“So the constructor of these toys must start off with a nearly clean sheet, no human responses. Then they have to re-program every function to make them apparently human. That explains why they’re so often a bit odd. Imagine the work that must go into them. Much, much more than programming a computer.”

They slowly came to the top of the hill and the massive modern bulk of the Roman Catholic cathedral lifted its crown of steel thorns above them. “I love that building,” said Rossiter. “Let’s goof off and have a peep. I never miss it when I visit Liverpool.”

The cathedral was quiet on a mid-week morning, and they had only two cleaners to keep them company. They strolled the circuit of the nave, absorbing the art that faith had brought to life. Above them the stained glass of the Great Lantern poured in light. Rossiter stood staring at it. “I’m fascinated by the way the light changes through the day. I’ve sat in here for hours sometimes, just thinking and watching the sun move around and change the light. The Church has given Liverpool a real blessing here. Much better than the other cathedral. That’s looking back, this one’s the future. I

love the fact that a basically poor community still found the money to create something glorious. Let's sit down for a moment."

His enthusiasm surprised Light o'Love. "Are you Catholic?"

"By birth, yes. And still a Christian, I suppose. But no great fan of the priesthood or the Vatican. Sometimes the bureaucracy gets in the way of the message, but all churches are like that. God's way up there, and his human administrators have their own games to play."

"But the Craft, the church hates it. That's what the X-Father says, anyway."

"He's right. Ask the bishops straight out, and the old hatred is alive in them still. Out on the ground it's different. Most parish priests don't feel threatened by something that's only ignorant superstition as far as they're concerned. Like the good Irish Catholics who would never cut down one of their fairy thorn bushes. They'll go to confession, Mass, whatever, but they'd no more cut down that bush than shoot their mother-in-law."

"I don't see why the Church should worry. It's none of their business to decide how God set things up down here. Why shouldn't He provide the world with spirits as well as humans? Or suspend the laws of physics long enough for a charm to work? And that's the way most Christians believe, especially in places like Africa."

"So the person behind those toys. Who was he? Or it? A spirit?" asked Light o'Love.

"No. Not a spirit. Definitely not. Whoever is responsible for things like that is just human. Human and evil, using powers they've learnt or been born with, to do more damage than a normal criminal could. Did Daniel give you his talk about *le flux*?"

"Yes, it sounded interesting. I'd never thought of life that way before."

"Yes, he makes you think. But I don't know that it's anything new, perhaps just a new way of thinking about it. And trying to measure it, that's new. Very modern and very French. Us poor old Americans are far too dull to even imagine the possibility of measuring a flood tide of evil. We like to measure practical things, and leave the philosophy to the old countries."

"Like measuring the price of West Texas Crude oil?"

"Yeah, like that. I looked at that relationship, you know. Daniel's got me half-believing him, but I couldn't make it work. Not really. I mean, you

could always massage the input data and get a perfect fit, but once you start doing that, there's no end."

Light o'Love felt disappointed. "Oh. That's a shame. Because the toys said they came from Texas. Was that just a coincidence?"

"I think so. I didn't like to accept it either. After all, Alice is an oil town. I can't believe whoever is responsible for them would lead us right back to where he lives. Someone must have just visited Alice and collected the information."

"So where does this person live? Is there a whole group of them? Do they have an organisation?"

"We don't know any of that, although we've looked hard enough. We've never been able to identify groups at anything other than a local level. No sign of a Pope of Evil. Not yet, anyway."

Light o'Love looked up at the suspended steel network that held the lights over the central altar. It was a complex three-dimensional web. Like the network they were talking of. "I wonder where the toys have gone. It's a shame that the magistrate didn't keep their passports."

"I doubt it would have made much difference. I'm sure that their keeper could get them new passports in someone else's names. You'd only have to fill in forms and convince some embassy clerk to stamp them."

"So the keeper would be like, like someone from the Institute, only bad."

"That's right. At least, we think that's right. We haven't seen any evidence to suggest otherwise."

"I was just thinking. The toys got arrested at night, but their keeper went to court to see them first thing in the morning. He must have been in Liverpool all along."

Rossiter thought for a while. "Couldn't he have been somewhere else, say Manchester?"

"I suppose somewhere like Manchester's not too far away. But, I was with them in the evening, and they were still alone later on when they got arrested. So, their keeper must have lost touch with them and searched all night to find them before they went to the magistrate. That can't have been easy."

"I wish we knew how they communicate with their masters," he mused, "Although from the sound of it, you made such a noise when you broke

them that he would have known about it right away even if he'd been living in London. I wonder if he was staying locally but lost touch with them after their little bit of fun with you. That would explain why he didn't get to them *before* they were arrested. Perhaps he lived far enough away that he just couldn't reach them quickly enough. Who knows? He may just have been suffering from a headache after you'd blown up his lines of communication."

Rossiter pondered silently for a while. "I wonder if the Professor has thought of all that. You know, I think we'd better get back now and tell her that she might have someone with a bit of power living secretly right on her doorstep. I think they've just been assuming that the operation was run from somewhere distant."

Tonight was the big night when Holly had promised to take them to The Tram and Light o'Love got ready as carefully as if she had a date with Prince Charming. It was a sad reminder of her present captivity that a trip to The Tram had become such an event. They wrapped up and walked there like lambs venturing into the forest.

The long bare room had already started to buzz when Tim and his banjo-playing friends arrived. Light o'Love made room for Tim who sat with his arm around her shoulders, and she sang as hard as any of them. Then Rossiter appeared and sat with Holly on his lap. It was a good evening, and she felt reluctant to leave Tim and return to her nun's life, especially as Rossiter was escorting Holly and showed no sign of walking off home when they reached Smethwick Hall.

* * * *

Light o'Love arrived at the Institute on Monday morning after a tedious weekend. She had been feeling the weight of her confinement. True, Ari and Betty Whinshuttle had appeared at Smethwick Hall on Saturday morning to take her to Birkenhead market. That had been a welcome break. They had taken the bus down to Pier Head and Prince's Landing Stage, and ridden the ferry across to the market. The trip was something new and exciting and she promised herself that, when the danger passed, she would bring her camera down to the riverfront and take some pictures for Auntie Joan. They had come back early enough for Betty to treat them to steak and kidney pie at

The Slaughterhouse. It tasted every bit as good as Rostov had promised on that long ago evening. Light o'Love had spent the rest of that day and all of Sunday locked up, with nothing to do but study and drink coffee with her neighbours.

She felt glad to arrive at the Institute on Monday morning, especially as the notice board announced another surprise lecture, this time by Rossiter who would be talking about 'The New England Incident'. It promised to be interesting, and much more exciting than Dr. Couturier's thoughts on *le flux*.

Foxglove was waiting beside the notice board with a blonde woman in black leather boots, a knee length woollen skirt and a roll-necked pullover. She had rich blonde hair, plaited and arranged around the back of her head. She was stocky and looked a little forbidding, like a Rhine maiden. She smiled as Foxglove introduced her.

"This is Dr. Panek from Poland, Light. She's normally working in Krakow, but she's keeping quiet in the countryside at the moment. She's an important person over there. Over here too, come to that."

Dr. Panek reached out a stubby hand. "Light o'Love, I am hearing very much about you." She spoke with a strong accent.

Light o'Love shook her hand uncomfortably. She did not enjoy her celebrity.

"Can you drop your stuff, Light, and come with us? We're going shopping. Don't worry, it's the Professor's idea. We'll take care of you. If you're polite and respectful and promise to carry Tamara's bags."

They walked down to the shops. Dr. Panek was no stranger to Liverpool and had a long mental shopping list of what she wanted to take back to Poland with her. They dived straight into the grand entrance of Lewis's, under Epstein's famous nude male statue. "Socialist realism!" snorted Dr. Panek. Light o'Love felt offended. She was becoming a Liverpudlian and revered the statue, known locally as Dickie Lewis for obvious reasons.

They went straight to the make-up counter. Foxglove kept the purse. "How much do you want to spend here, Tamara?"

"Here is for me only. Also, a small present for my mother. So, we will spend £10. That will be enough to make me famous. Like a Communist wife, I think. It must be Chanel No.5. I want them to smell me and know that it is not necessary to marry one of the fat pigs who run our country. We

can only buy these things in Poland at the Konsumy, and you must be important in the Party to go there. Is not for ordinary people.”

And so, it started. Dr. Panek wanted cosmetics. She wanted elegant underwear. She wanted American jeans for the young men in her family. She wanted shoes. She wanted records - Miles Davis LP's for her and singles from the Beatles and the Stones for the family. She wanted to walk around the supermarkets, feasting her eyes on the packed shelves and incidentally searching for anything Polish or Eastern European. She lingered at the shelves of Krakus and Globus products. “We never see Krakus like this in Krakow. Never. A small bit perhaps, but our clever managers are sending everything to the West. Why does Bulgaria send these things to here? I think they come by the train through Poland, but they do not stop with us. It is not correct.”

Light o'Love lost count of how much they had spent but she knew the carrier bags were getting heavier and heavier. She felt glad when Foxglove called a halt and diverted them into a city pub. They sat in a corner with their bags piled beside them and Dr. Panek lit a cigarette. She would not touch the beer - “Is disgusting!” - and drank sweet cider instead.

She too wanted to hear about Light o'Love's performance in Sefton Park. She drank her cider and listened carefully, saying nothing. When Light o'Love had finished her story, she shook her head.

“Very interesting. Very interesting. We never have this in Poland, I think. One time I see a policeman I do not believe. It is possible that he was one of these toys, but that is all. He was watching me and the others, but the police are always watching around the University. You must take me to this place. I want to feel what happens there.”

They staggered back up to the Institute, Dr. Panek would not waste money on a taxi, and arrived just in time for Rossiter's lecture. Light o'Love sat with Skyler and the rest of the students. In the front row below her Dr. Panek's blonde head was with the Institute staff.

Rossiter was a clear and organised lecturer, and he told a story that he had told many times before. “Good afternoon, friends,” he started with a smile for everyone, “Both old friends and new students. It's always an honour for a humble colonial to be invited to speak at The Jane Flockman Institute. I shall try not to embarrass you. Or me. I know that some of you have heard me talk about The New England Incident before, and that some

of you have studied it closely. Let's run over the bare bones of what happened for the benefit of our new friends.

"First, I should say that it's not normal to be talking in detail about this sort of thing to students. The events are too dark, too dramatic and too dangerous. We naturally try to insulate new students from them, we don't want to give the wrong impression of life. The things I'm going to talk about are very unusual. We can't find anything similar in the records. They came as a great shock to us. In fact, I think we can say that there are still some practitioners who don't believe our explanation. I suspect, but I don't have any evidence at all, that they also came as a great shock to the Dark Side.

"So, let me tell you what happened. On the coast of New England, north of Boston, is a small town called Gloucester Harbor. That's a very old part of the States, right in the area first settled by folk out of England. They started off making their living from the sea, and kept right on doing it. Inshore fishing, fishing on the Grand Banks, and eventually whaling all over the world. They're still fishing now, but not in a big way. Now it's becoming popular with artists and city folk are moving in. Still a quiet town, at the end of the line. Go to Gloucester Harbor and you either have to go back again or fall into the sea."

Gloucester Harbor sounded fun to Light o'Love. In fact, Rossiter's chatty way of telling a tale drew her in. Beside her, she could see the other students had also made themselves comfortable and were enjoying his story. Rossiter was a natural raconteur.

"Now I don't know that there was ever what you would call a tradition of witchcraft in Gloucester Harbor. No more than anywhere else. But, old New England did know about witches, they brought the idea of them over from Europe. They were terribly serious and religious people, always ready to believe the worst of anyone. Every child knows about the witch trials at Salem, wicked village and chapel politics dragged up to accuse enemies. But, all that's behind us now. Witches are becoming fashionable. You could probably hang your shingle and set up as a witch if you wanted to, and no one would bother you.

"We have groups of ladies setting themselves up as witches all over the States. They've read a bit, learnt a bit, and they get together to study. Mostly plants and crystals, that's what they like best. They're great ones for blessing stones and selling them as pendants. I'm not saying they're bogus.

They're not, but they're not trained. There was no one to be an apprentice to, or nearly no one anyway. And, there are some people with natural talent in these covens. I've met quite good precognition in some of them.

"The trouble with these groups that sort of are and sort of aren't witches, is that they provide an easy way in for the Dark Side. We think someone out there saw that slipping a spy into one of these covens might eventually pay off by bringing a closer contact with real practitioners. That's what we believe happened at Gloucester Harbor.

"Now, by chance in a place nearby called Rockport there lived a lady called Zoë. She was what we would call a proper witch. She didn't advertise as a witch, but she did earn her living as an astrologer. She had a little cabin on the wharf in Rockport where she'd sell knick-knacks to tourists. She did very well from that, and for the winter she'd fall back on her astrology. She wrote for one of the Boston papers and had a wide list of regulars who came to consult before doing anything important. People liked her; she had become part of the scenery."

Rossiter had moved out from behind the lectern and was half-sitting on the front of the lecturer's table. He looked handsome with his long, fair hair and granddad glasses. Light o'Love found something endearing about his seriousness and boyish energy.

"Once a week, on a Wednesday evening, she'd take off to Gloucester Harbor where she'd run a séance evening. At least, that's what they called it. In fact it was more of a coven meeting. They'd meet in each other's houses and Zoë would have a topic for the evening, say a wellness charm, or how to bless a car. They'd study that, and talk a bit and finish with coffee and chocolate cake. Next week they'd do it all again in another house. They were just a few friends getting together and trying a little magic in a small way, all very harmless and comfortable. It was nice to see, in fact.

"And then something changed, and here we run into problems finding out exactly what happened. I'll give you the authorised version, what we guess occurred."

Almost imperceptibly, Rossiter's manner changed. As he story became more sombre, he stood more erect and began to emphasise important points with his hands.

“First, a new couple moved into Cape Gloucester, Michael and Jeannie. He worked in a bank and Jeannie apparently did nothing beyond being a housewife. They had no children.

“Now anyone meeting Jeannie for the first time immediately realised something was wrong. People described her as strange. She was friendly enough, but withdrawn. She never initiated a conversation, but she apparently liked to hear people talking around her. She seemed intelligent, or at least had an extraordinary memory. She could remember and repeat long conversations from days or even weeks before. Word for word, people said. But, she had no emotion, no warmth, and that made her uncomfortable to have around.

“In fact, they probably would have neglected her, even in a place as friendly as Gloucester Harbor, if her husband Michael had not spread the rumour that she was suffering the effects of a car accident many years ago. So, her strangeness was due to brain damage, and the good people of Gloucester Harbor make allowances for things like that. They looked on it as a duty to make sure she did not get left out.

“They persuaded her to help out at the library, and she proved very useful there. She positively enjoyed cataloguing and getting every book in its right place, although she never seemed to read any of them. A small town library is a bit of a social centre, and Jeannie inevitably met coven members. Even though they kept their meetings secret, Jeannie seems to have gotten herself invited and soon settled in as a regular member. She studied under Zoë and was apparently a good student. She remembered everything, and Zoë eventually asked her to keep the official diary. She did this in her own way, by remembering everything that was said and writing it out at the end of the meeting while everyone else enjoyed the coffee and chocolate cake. Zoë would then take it home until the next week. That diary’s important, because it survived and we have an excellent record of what the coven had been doing over about eight months in 1963.”

Rossiter moved behind the lectern again and gripped both edges with his hands. No matter that he had presumably recounted these events many times, he still seemed to feel them deeply.

“Let’s skip some details and move on. Zoë had developed an urge to speak with the seals that live around there. It would have been easier if she had chosen a land animal, but she wanted to speak with seals, and she seems

to have made some progress herself. The coven was not so successful. They'd all bought themselves black plastic rain capes, with hoods, for protection against the weather, and they must have looked a strange sight wandering beside the sea of a summer evening, trying to reach out and communicate. They didn't do that every week. About once a month, and Zoë claimed they had come close to making contact.

"And then, at last, Jeannie got lucky. A practitioner called James Frobisher visited Rockport one summer, and met Zoë. James came from New York, and he had the reputation of being a very serious practitioner. Well read, well trained, he wouldn't have been out of place standing here. He met Zoë and realised that she had some natural talent. The long and the short of it is, he came to the next meeting. They weren't talking to seals that night. Instead he showed them a simple little love charm and they all practised it. What the diary doesn't tell us is what James was thinking. We do know that when he returned to his own people in New York, he started to worry about Jeannie. He must have picked up a little about toys, and asked one of my colleagues about them. No blame here, but my colleague did not realise the seriousness of it all. He told James all he knew, but didn't pass the information on to me or anyone else."

In a flash, Light o'Love realised where she had heard the name Frobisher. The previous owner of her library carrel had been a Frobisher. Could there be any relationship there? Suddenly, Rossiter's story had become more personal, and Light o'Love waited with a sense of foreboding.

Rossiter went on. "James decided he'd take another look, and took a couple of day's holiday to return to Gloucester Harbor to attend another meeting. From that point, we have nearly no information beyond official sources. Apparently, that night the coven decided to talk to seals again. Not far from Gloucester Harbor, at a place called Annisquam, is an old lighthouse. It's a pretty little thing, not out on some rocky headland but down amongst the houses. The locals are very proud of it.

"That was the place our coven had decided to look for seals to talk to. They'd all put on their black capes and were apparently sitting in a circle on the sea rocks there. It was early October and the dark came early. There was a strong breeze from the ocean, but the sky was cloudless. They must have looked a fine sight, all crowding around in their capes and muttering. Like storybook witches."

Rossiter bowed his head and frowned. “The police report says that at around ten to eight there was a brilliant blue flash and an explosion a little like thunder, but very nearby. All the lights went out in the area. Some windows were broken, and some radios and televisions burnt out as if they’d been overloaded.

“On the rocks, the scene was a disaster. Bodies lay scattered around where they had been sitting. The explosion seems to have centred on Jeannie, one of her shoes was recovered but the rest of her was just carbon and scorch marks on the rocks. James and Zoë had been sitting on either side of her, and their bodies were burnt and unrecognisable. The others survived, more or less. Burnt, of course. The flash burned any exposed skin and their capes had melted and caused terrible damage. They were all temporarily blind and deaf. They couldn’t say anything comprehensible.

“They were all rushed to hospital and treated like victims of lightning strike or high voltage electricity. They started to recover. Eyesight and hearing came back, more or less anyway. But, they all suffered brain damage. A year later none of them was the same person that they had been before that night. They were terrified, weepy shadows of their former selves, hiding away and speaking to no one. They were a frightening thing to see.

“Their friends rallied around. We all did what we could. A support group grew up but it was a long slow road, and it’s only recently that they’ve started to smile again. Officially, they had been hit by a lightning strike, and we’ve left it like that.

“We knew different, of course. It had been felt far away. We felt it in New York and it was a strong blow. The meteorologists agree that there had been absolutely nothing in the weather pattern that night that would have permitted lightning to strike.

“We got someone into the support group to help with the healing, and to try to pick up any information. We recovered the coven diary from the police station, it had been in Zoë’s car but no one had looked at it closely. The police put it all down to an unfortunate seal-watching party struck by lightning.

“We kept quiet and searched for Jeannie’s husband. We are almost certain he was Jeannie’s keeper. He stayed in Gloucester Harbor just long enough to allay suspicion and then disappeared. We’ve never found him. Now the trail is cold, and there’s no where to look for any further clues.”

Chapter 9

A subdued crowd gathered for coffee after Rossiter's lecture. He had gone on to a review of toys and what they were. He had detailed other sightings, including the two known confrontations when toys had been driven off. And, he had finished with a detailed, and very embarrassing, account of Light o'Love's encounter.

Rossiter's lecture had shocked Light o'Love. She had spent the last weeks learning about crystals and herbs, all the good things that a witch needed to master if she wanted to help people. Hearing Rossiter talking about Jeannie and bodies scattered on the sea-shore brought a cold chill to her day. Suddenly witchcraft seemed very much less quaint, and very much more dangerous.

The Professor approved of the scare he had given them. "I hope you've all listened carefully to Professor Rossiter. I take his warnings very seriously. Something is happening out there, and because we don't know quite what's going on, it's very difficult to fight back. For the moment, I don't want anyone moving around unaccompanied outside the Institute or your halls. If you want to go somewhere, anywhere, take a friend from the Institute. We'll all be working hard on securing our neighbourhood, but Liverpool's a big city, and we can't be everywhere at once. So take a friend with you, and that's an order.

"Now, let's put that in the back of our minds and ask Professor Rossiter some questions on his lecture. He's not here every day and we've got to take advantage of his knowledge while he's here. Yes, Light. You first."

"I was thinking, Professor, about why these toys are around. Is there a big pool of evil that they're coming from? Like a sort of evil factory? I think what I'm asking is, is there a centre manufacturing a limitless supply of evil? Or, is there only so much in the world at any time, and it gets shared around?"

"I'm not sure that's really Professor Rossiter's question. But let's start with him and then ask Dr. Couturier's opinion as well. Glen?"

Rossiter thought for a moment. "Important question. You could ask, just how many of these toys could there be? Might we face an army of them one day? We don't know, but we think that they're not easy to make. The Dark Side has to capture suitable candidates and presumably invest a lot of time and effort into preparing them. If we assume that Dark Light practitioners are as limited in number as witches are, it stands to reason that we shouldn't expect too many toys. If there was a big manufacturing plant for them, I expect we'd feel it. What about you, Daniel?"

"Well, you know about the idea of *le flux*. I haven't really thought it through, but it does seem as if the supply of evil is not unlimited. So, if there is a big concentration of evil in one location this week, it stands to reason that there must be a corresponding shortage in other places. What is really worrying is that there may be a movement by the Dark Side to concentrate evil at specific points to achieve something. And that concentration could swamp any good that might be around at the time."

Dr. Panek chipped in. "You are right! Exactly this is happening in Poland and Czechoslovakia this summer. Suddenly there is too much evil. It is coming from where, I ask? It is everywhere, pushing ordinary people to do bad things. Some it is coming from Russia, that for sure. But, more is coming from our own places, and taking over normal life. You think is normal for Polish people to help Russians to invade Czechoslovakia? No, is not normal.

"Let me ask you all. Many people are saying to Secretary Dubcek in Prague, you must fight. There is the Czecho army, and it is enough strong, you must fight. But, Dubcek is saying no. He is saying no fighting, nothing. I think he is right. If they fight, they will lose and the future will be like concrete mixed with blood. A bad future and very strong against change. If there is no fighting, they will win. Not this year or next year, but they will win.

"Now, Daniel, tell me. Why Dubcek is saying no fighting? Is he clever man doing a good thing? And the evil is not wanting him do this?"

Dr. Couturier looked mildly embarrassed. "Look, people, I'm not ready yet. In fact, I hadn't even thought about taking *le flux* out of France until I came here this week. But, it does sound very obvious from our discussions

that limiting *le flux* to France is a bit silly. We'll have a busy time in Rheims when I get back. I'd like to re-cast our curves to include all of Europe, that much to start with.

"So what about Dubcek? I don't know. I'd really like to look at more information, if it's available. I have to say it's clear that he's a very clever man, a much bigger thinker than most Party secretaries. How can I answer? Only, I think, to say that the Dark Side will not be happy that the invasion was not sealed in blood. I'm sure Tamara is right, the gains of the Prague Spring have not been totally lost. They might be sleeping for a while, but they are not lost altogether. That's a hopeful thing, isn't it? The Dark Side may well have caused a lot of trouble, but they didn't get a complete victory. I wonder if it was just luck, or whether any of our Prague people were involved?"

It was all too much for Light o'Love to think about as she sat in the library trying to study. She had attended her lectures and she was up to date with her assignments, but the morning's lecture given her a glimpse into dark things that frightened her. Nothing she had learnt equipped her to live in a world like that.

She closed her books and set them back on the shelf. She needed to do something, a useful thing that lay within her each. It took a little thought, but the answer came to her. She packed away her books and went looking for Rossiter.

As she reached the library door, Ari was not in her normal place. Behind her desk sat Rossiter himself, scanning through a thick, old-fashioned book. He looked up and smiled. Before she could ask him anything, he said, "Can't help you. I'm just keeping Ari's seat warm. She had to run down to the shops."

"But it's you I'm looking for. Can I come around there and whisper in your ear?"

"You can whisper in my ear whenever you like, Light. Everyone has time to listen to a love goddess."

She let the compliment pass her by and went to crouch down in front of him. "Do you mind if I show you something secret? But you must never tell..." Now she had Rossiter's serious interest. "I'm not sure I can do this properly, you might have to help me." She spun his chair until he faced her. She took his hands and looked up at his face.

He was handsome, she decided, and felt a shiver run through her as she looked deep into his eyes. He was open for her and waiting. She replayed her conversation in the restaurant with Godiva, when she had confessed to not having boyfriends.

Rossiter looked shocked. "Wow, Light! You really do take your job seriously. Do you think I ought...?"

"Definitely. She needs to meet people unofficially. She's always acting like Her Majesty's Ambassador to somewhere, and she needs to let her hair down a bit. And she's a really nice person, you know."

"I'll think about it. That was very good, by the way. Very clear. You're not just a pretty love goddess after all. Tell me, do you ever get involved in the practical side of your work?"

"You're asking me out, Professor Rossiter? Not me, Godiva first. And if I hear good things from her, I'll think about it."

"But I might fall head over heels in love with her," he objected.

"Then we won't have a problem, will we?"

Light o'Love sat in the back of the mini and thought as Holly and Skyler chatted in the front. She would have liked to accept Rossiter's offer. He was handsome, and intelligent. He had an effect on her, and she wanted to get closer to him. She sighed to herself. Godiva first, I suppose, she needs someone and it's part of my job to help. But if they don't get on...

She dived to the floor. "Holly, they're there!" She had a glimpse, the smallest glimpse, of two dark suited men, one carrying a briefcase, marching along the pavement in step. "Oh God, they'll see me. Don't stop!"

"Don't stare Skyler," Holly hissed. "Ignore them!" and she drove on past.

"Was it them? Did they see us?" asked Light o'Love, still curled up on the floor between the seats.

"I don't know, Light. I didn't see them the first time. But they look just like you described them. They didn't seem to notice us, I looked in the mirror. We've got to get back and contact the others."

"Why don't they leave us alone?" wailed Skyler. "We're not hurting anyone."

"I think we might hurt *them*, if we can catch them. But, let's get home first and we'll see what the Professor says."

When they got back to Smethwick Hall, Holly took charge. "Light, boil us a kettle and bring it to the common room would you? Skyler and I will set up the urn and get the cups, but it'll take a while, and I want a coffee now. The others shouldn't be long. I wonder if I left any biscuits last night?"

They were sitting in the bay window and looking out into the dusk when the others started to arrive. Light o'Love got busy distributing plastic cups of coffee. The Professor looked worried and was deep in consultation with Rostov and Dr. Panek. Paul came in last, trailing Pretty and Dr. Couturier. "It was them," he announced. "Or exact copies. I didn't feel anything again, but we didn't hang around."

Dr. Couturier looked excited. "Very, very interesting. It felt as if we were passing nothing much at all. We could feel that someone was there, but no thoughts. Even a dog makes more disturbance than that. Very interesting. I never thought I'd be lucky enough to see a toy..."

"Did you feel anything, Light?" asked the Professor.

"No, nothing. But I was hiding behind the seats as we went past. And I wasn't feeling for them, I was closed right up."

"Damn them! Why ever did they come back?" said the Professor.

"Perhaps they're looking for another date with Light?" said Rossiter. "Sorry, that was facetious. But, they might have been told to look for her. Their owner must have been worried by what happened, and perhaps he thinks Light could answer a lot of questions for him."

"Damn, damn, damn!" said the Professor. "Right, let's get comfortable. Pull the table out here, and can you find us more chairs, Holly?" Light o'Love helped get the ping-pong table out into the middle of the room and soon they were all sitting around it.

The Professor started. "Right, the toys that Light had disabled are now back on the street. We have to assume they're functioning again, and we have to assume that they're interested in the Institute, and probably in Light especially. Anyone disagree, no? Now we have to decide what we're going to do. Suggestions, anyone?"

"Try and catch them, this is the obvious thing to do," said Rostov.

Rossiter was quick to jump in. "Professor, I've got a feeling that's just what we're meant to do. It's got to be obvious that we know who the toys are, and where they came from. If their owner was just collecting

information, he would at least have bought them new clothes and tried to hide them away. He must want us to have a shot at them.”

They all thought about that. “What do you say to that, Rostov?” asked the Professor.

“It could be correct, Professor. But this is making a big step in guessing what their plan of operation is,” said Rostov.

The Professor tried again. “Anyone else? Is it reasonable to think that we are being tempted to move against the toys?” They mumbled agreement around the table and she went on. “So, Glen, what could happen if we tried to catch them?”

“We don’t know. We’ve never been in this situation before. But, they might be booby-trapped. You know, perhaps they’re literally programmed to explode if we touch them.”

Rostov snorted and muttered “Ridiculous!” under his breath.

“No, no,” said the Professor. “Let’s not ignore any ideas out of hand. Have you got any evidence to suggest such a thing?”

“No. No evidence. But I’m just thinking about something. How about this: what about if whatever Light did to disable them resulted in a more or less normal failure? That might mean the very different failure in the New England Incident wasn’t a failure at all. It might have been deliberate destruction. A booby trap, in fact, set to catch a senior practitioner. Let me think about that for a moment. It’s turning everything on its head, but it might be true.”

“This is very interesting.” The idea excited Dr. Couturier. “You could be right, Glen. This is a perfectly logical explanation.”

“But, why didn’t they kill Light when they had the chance?” asked the Professor.

“She’s only a student. Blowing her up wouldn’t achieve anything much. Perhaps they just wanted information from her. Or they wanted her to lead them into the Institute or Smethwick Hall.” Rossiter jumped with excitement as he developed his ideas. “They could do a lot more damage if they exploded themselves in those places. But Light disabled them before they got very far.”

“Light couldn’t get them into the Institute,” said Holly.

“Of course not, but they don’t know that. Or, I should say, they probably don’t know that. Just the way that they probably don’t realise how

little we know about their make-up. We don't understand what Light did to the toys, but the Dark Light doesn't know that."

The Professor gave them little time to think. "What about those ideas, people? Paul? Tamara? What are you thinking?"

"Is possibly right," said Dr. Panek slowly. "Very possibly right. We must not think that the Dark Side is stupid, but also we must not think that they are knowing everything."

The Professor summarised. "So what we're saying is that the toys might be here to collect information, but it's quite possible they're designed to get caught so they can get close enough to kill us. Or, some of us anyway."

"That's a good working hypothesis, Professor," said Dr. Couturier, "And that's the safest way to think about them until we have more information."

The Professor thought for a moment and pushed her plastic cup over to Skyler. "Could you get me another coffee, love? Anyone else?" Skyler jumped up and began to provide refills.

The Professor continued. "I've got to say I'm shocked that the toys are back on the streets. I hadn't expected that. I wonder if they're a danger to anyone else? What do you think, Glen?"

"No, no danger to anyone else. Who else would be of any interest? And besides, if they decided that someone had to be eliminated, they would use other methods. Persuade them to jump out of a window. Or, work out some more subtle self-destructive method. Like alcoholism or drugs, or perhaps committing a public crime. The approach they're using can only be effective against the Institute and us."

The Professor looked around the table. "Do we agree with that assessment everyone? No danger to normal folk? Good, I'm going to get the police onto them. Tell them the toys terrorised Godiva and Love. That should stir things up a bit, especially as they're out on bail for a sex crime already and our students are mostly young women. It won't hurt to have other eyes watching them."

There was a murmur of assent around the table. Then Holly had a question. "Professor, what about Light? Exactly how much danger is she in?"

"I've got my own ideas about that, Holly, but let's ask the others. What about Light?"

“She is in danger, and we must send her away.” Rostov was definite.

Dr. Couturier was thinking a bit further. “Yes, we have to assume she’s a target. If the enemy could get their hands on her, they’ll probably want to find out exactly how she disabled the toys. And, as a bonus, she could bring them all sorts of information about the Institute that they might not have already. She’s not in danger of being blown up, if that’s what the toys do, but she’s certainly in danger of being captured. She should be taken somewhere safe, or at least safer than here.”

Rossiter was the only one to disagree. “Don’t forget she’s the only one of us who’s ever managed to win against these things. If we’re going to confront them, we need her here. She might be new, but she’s not stupid.”

Light o’Love became more and more surprised at the Professor. This was not loveable old Eliza Rundle at the head of the table but someone very different.

“Right, I’ve looked at all of that. As the Professor, I have to decide what we do about Light, and I’m not having her exposed to the sorts of things that might be happening here. She’s a student, for goodness sake, and it’s our duty to keep her away from harm. Later on, when she’s older and stronger, then she’ll be very useful to us. For the moment, I’m moving her away from here. That’s final,” she added to forestall Light o’Love’s protest. “Now Light, Skyler, we’ve got some serious talking to do and here’s not the place for either of you, so I’ll say thank you, and ask you to leave. You can tell any of the others we’re talking serious business here, and no doubt there’ll be some changes announced tomorrow. We could be in for interesting times. Light, I’ll be up to see you for a moment when we finish, so stay awake.”

Staying awake was no problem at all. She sat in her room with Skyler, chatting and listening to Radio Luxembourg in the background. Work was just not possible. She would leave soon, the Professor had said so, and she still had so much to do and to learn. She felt tearful inside at the thought of being torn away. She loved the Institute but she was being kicked out. And leaving her friends, that was the worst of it.

She tried to divert herself. “So how are the men treating you, Sky? Still talking to your tits?”

“Yes,” she said sadly, “I suppose that’ll never change. But, I don’t mind it so much anymore. All the students are scared stiff of them now. They’re afraid to be caught looking.”

“Did you ever buy anything more revealing?”

“Well, a couple of things. But, I haven’t worn them yet, it’s too cold. Perhaps it’ll be better in summer.”

“That sounds like an excuse to me. Show me.”

Skyler hesitated, but went to her room. She came back with her new clothes in her hand, and Godiva following.

Godiva looked upset. “You’re leaving! Skyler just told me. That’s terrible. I wanted to talk to you about something. Where are you going?”

“I don’t know yet. I think I’m just going on holiday early, that’s all. Everything should have sorted itself out by next term. I hope. Anyway, sit down. Skyler’s going to model for us.” She patted the bed beside her for Godiva.

Skyler was shy but made herself peel off her sweater and blouse. Underneath she wore a severe and prosaic white bra. Light o’Love winced.

“Sky, you haven’t been listening to me. That bra’s awful, don’t you have anything sexier than that? Imagine your lover unwrapping you and finding that thing underneath. He’d think he’d found his grandmother and he’d run a mile.”

“I do have a better one, but it’s black.”

“Good. Black lingerie is naughty. You should wear it all the time to remind yourself. Go and get it.”

Skyler wrapped her blouse around herself and disappeared. She came back wearing a very interesting bra. Black, lacy and much more revealing. The black shoulder straps framed the double white roundness of her breasts.

Godiva clapped her hands. “Oooh, I like that! That’s really tempting.”

“Tempting fate, I think. I haven’t tried sneezing in it yet. I like this top, but it’s a bit formal.” She wriggled her shoulders into a burgundy top with no front. It had loose three-quarter length sleeves and a narrow frill for a collar. There were no buttons to close it. Instead the two sides crossed in front of her and tied at the back with tapes. She tied herself in and turned to face them. “What do you think? Is it too sluttish?”

The effect looked dramatic. The tight waist emphasised her bust, and the décolletage displayed nearly everything the bra had left uncovered. For once, she had got it right, but still waited for reassurance. “Fantastic! Wear that to a party and all the other girls will hate you. There won’t be a man in the room who wouldn’t want to get his hands in there,” said Light o’Love.

"It's not too cheap? I mean, I don't want to look like a prostitute or anything. What about you, Godiva? You're not as crazy as she is."

Godiva looked a little sad. "I wish I could look like that."

"It's wonderful," said Light o'Love. "Promise me you'll wear it at the next party. Now show us the other one."

"It's a bit see-through. I can't wear it with this bra normally."

"Never mind that, let's have a look."

Skyler's other top was a smock in soft, creamy muslin, a loose peasant-style blouse with a drawstring neck. At first sight, it did not show much at all, but as she stood in front of her audience, they could see the shadows of black lace underneath.

"Interesting," said Light o'Love. "That's just made for a black bra. It's very tantalising. But, what would it look like without a bra?"

Skyler looked scandalised, but Godiva was enjoying this game. "Yes, yes! Take it off and let us see." Without taking her blouse off, Skyler reached around to unclip the bra and then eased it down one sleeve and then the other. Her friends watched carefully as she straightened up. Her bust line had hardly moved.

"That's wonderful," said Light o'Love. "I can just imagine you dancing like that."

"Not a chance! I'd bounce all over the place! And besides, you can see my - my buttons."

"Exactly! Wouldn't you be popular then?" said Light o'Love. "But, we can't see your buttons, I'm afraid. Come closer. Closer, we still can't see them."

When Skyler had come close enough, Light o'Love made a rapid grab with both hands and gripped her nipples between fingers and thumbs. Skyler gave a quiet scream and grabbed for her wrists.

"Stop it, Sky, or I'll unscrew them," threatened Light o'Love. "I will, really."

"Oooh, you're hurting," complained Skyler, but she dropped her hands and let Light o'Love free to roll her nipples. "You shouldn't..." but she made no attempt to stop what was happening.

"Here, Godiva, you take one. Let's show her what they're really for."

The breast she held felt wonderful. Heavy, soft, rich, so female. She tried to wrap one hand around it while pulling and teasing the nipple with

the other. Beside her, Godiva was happily doing the same. Skyler had closed her eyes and bit her lip. Her hands rested on their shoulders. Then she sighed and shuffled away. "Stop, stop, stop, that's enough!" She was cupping her breasts and looked red and flustered.

"So, let us see now." Light o'Love pulled her hands away and now Skyler's buttons showed proudly through the muslin.

"Beautiful," said Light o'Love. "Now come back here. Don't worry, we'll keep our hands to ourselves, won't we, Godiva?"

Cautiously, Skyler returned to stand in front of them, her hands ready to protect herself.

"What's the matter?" asked Light o'Love, smoothing the front of her blouse to stretch the fabric around her breasts. "Didn't you like it?"

"It was - good. You made me all excited."

"I thought so. Your buttons look much nicer now, don't they, Godiva?"

Godiva nodded her agreement as Light o'Love slowly lifted the hem of the blouse up and up to show off Skyler's breasts. "Look at that!" she whispered. "Did you ever see anything more beautiful?"

"They're fantastic," said Godiva and patted the nearest one. "I wonder what the other top would look like without a bra? Can she try that one again?"

"Why not? Show us, Sky."

The burgundy top crossed snugly between her breasts and the deep décolletage made it quite obvious that blouse had nothing but Skyler inside. She was still admiring herself when the Professor tapped on the door and came in.

"Oh Sky! I like that! Promise me you'll wear it to the Yule party. I can't wait to see old Bonely's face when he sees those. You'll have to fight the men off.

"Now, Light, I've made a start. I've spoken to your Auntie, and she's taking you to Cornwall until after Christmas. I know some people there who'll keep you safe, and you'll have fun. I want to sneak you out of here so there's no possibility of you being followed. Pack your bag tonight, and we'll put it in Holly's car while it's still dark. That way no one will see you leaving the house with your bag. Just leave here as for an ordinary day at the Institute. We'll be working out what to do with you tonight, so no one knows when you leave Liverpool or where you're going.

“And, take all your warmest clothes. It can get very bitter down there in winter.”

Chapter 10

Light o'Love walked up the Institute steps next morning with a sense of expectation and adventure. She did not know what would happen today, but it would surely be interesting. She would see Auntie Joan again, and that would be good. The door to Pretty's office stood open and she waved when she saw Light o'Love.

"The Professor says you're to carry on as normal until eleven o'clock, and then she'll meet you in her office. Be ready to go straight away."

She went up to the library to tidy up her carrel. She did not want to leave her little home in the Institute, much as she wanted to see Auntie Joan again.

She went looking for Ari and volunteered to bring her a coffee. They sat behind her desk to chat in whispers. Ari always knew all the gossip, and Light o'Love decided to leave her two projects with her.

"I want you to keep a strict eye on Godiva and Skyler for me. She doesn't know it yet, but I've set Godiva up with Rossiter for a date. Even if she likes him, tell her I said she's to try at least two more men before Christmas. I don't care who, but it's not healthy for her to sit at home waiting for Prince Charming to ride up.

"Skyler's got to stop being shy about her tits. She's bought two lovely tops, and I want to hear that she's wearing them. Tell her I said if she hasn't had at least four pairs of hands on her tits before Christmas, then she's being mean and miserly and I'll be ashamed of her. She's got to share them around."

Ari smiled at the thought. "You're right. It's not fair to have tits like that and keep them to yourself. Are they as nice as they look, do you think?"

"Nicer. Fantastic. She let Godiva and me play with them for a while last night and it was an experience to remember. For all of us."

“Really? Both of you? I’m jealous. I wonder if she’d let me play with them.”

“Why not? They say flattery will get you everywhere. Give her a try. I’m sure she’ll appreciate you. I did, and I want to do it again when I get back.”

Ari undid something from around her neck, a pea-sized garnet on a silver chain. “Here, take this for Christmas. It’ll do you good.”

“But I can’t take that, what will you do instead?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got a supply of them at home. You don’t think I’d be without my garnet, do you?”

The Professor waited for her with Celandine, a slight student with her brown hair done up in a ponytail. She looked nervous and held a pair of granddad glasses with round metal frames.

“Light, we’re going to do a little play acting. Here’s your double. I want you to leave the Institute with Holly as normal. Celandine and I will already be waiting in the Lime Street multi-storey for you. We’ll want to swap your bag over to my car, Holly and I will see to that. And, you two will have to swap identities.” She pulled a large Ellis Brigham’s bag out from under her desk. “I hope you like these, because you’re going to be stuck with them.”

The Professor pulled a stylish down ski jacket from the bag. It was Post Office red, impossible to miss. She passed it to Celandine.

“My God, Professor,” said Light o’Love in surprise. “I couldn’t wear that!”

“Why ever not? Anyway, you’ve got no choice. We want something that really stands out. And there’s this to go with it.” She produced a soft woollen beret in matching red. “Put it on, Celandine. So we can see how Light will have to wear it.”

Together the hat and jacket looked far too adult, and too brazenly stylish for a student. If Light o’Love had to wear them, she would feel very mature.

“So here’s how we’ll do it, Light. Firstly, Celandine and I will make a fuss of going out in my car. We’ll go to the multi-storey car-park at the railway station. I’ll park, and we’ll go off to the station buffet for a coffee. The trick’s going to be that if anyone’s watching, they’ll be able to see I’m not with you. In fact, you’re going to leave a bit later with Holly, and we’ll do a switch back in the car park. You’ll have to change your clothes with Celandine, of course, and end up with the red jacket and glasses. Don’t

worry, people will be watching over you, just in case. Then Holly will drive off to Smethwick Hall with Celandine looking like you. By the time anyone notices, the real Light o'Love will already be miles away with me.”

Celandine looked even more nervous but said nothing.

“Do we have to do all this, Professor?” asked Light o'Love.

“Probably not. But I’m not taking any chances. No one’s going to be happier than I if those two toys are still wandering the streets of Liverpool five days from now. That’ll mean they’ve lost you, or perhaps that they weren’t too focussed on you anyway. But, if they are looking for you, I think we can fool them for long enough to get you away.”

The switch went very smoothly. Light o'Love left the Institute with her bag of books over her shoulder, trying to behave and talk normally as she slid into Holly’s mini. With Holly watching the time closely, they wandered off to Lime Street, reaching the car park entrance at exactly ten past twelve. They wound their way up looking for the Professor. At the entrance to the third level, a parked car had its boot open. It had been jacked up and Rossiter was changing a back wheel while Betty Whinshuttle looked on. Their eyes brushed past but they gave no sign of recognition.

The Professor waited half way along the floor. Light o'Love jumped out and rushed between the cars, pulling off her jacket as she went. Celandine had the elastic band ready over her fingers and grabbed Light o'Love’s hair into an instant ponytail. Then they had only to get the red jacket on her and set the beret at a fashionable angle. The glasses came last. Celandine handed them over. “You’ll hate them,” she said. “Good luck!” Then the Professor started the engine.

As they turned for the exit, Light o'Love caught a glimpse of Paul and Pretty leaning against a pillar and kissing enthusiastically. Pretty looked at her over Paul’s shoulder and winked. And then, they were out onto the road and into the traffic.

The Professor did not let her take off the glasses and the red beret until they had got well clear of Liverpool. By that time, Light o'Love’s head ached and she was keeping her eyes closed. She did not recover until they were already speeding south on the motorway. She watched the open winter countryside slipping by and wondered how different Cornwall would look.

The Professor drove without talking. She was thinking, and Light o'Love did not disturb her. The miles mounted as they drove south until the

Professor pulled over and drove down the slip road into the Keele Services area.

“Time for a break,” said the Professor. “Let’s stretch our legs and find some lunch. Leave your things.”

There, in the entrance of the building, Auntie Joan waited for them. Light o’Love ran to hug her. She wanted to sit her down and tell her about everything that had happened to her since she had left home as a schoolgirl a few short weeks ago, but now was not the time. Auntie Joan and the Professor shook hands. Not friends exactly, decided Light o’Love, more acquaintances.

They carried their trays to a quiet corner of the restaurant and got comfortable. Light o’Love felt ravenous, and was glad when the two older women started eating. The Professor did not start talking until Light o’Love had time to look up from her plate.

“Joan, Light, I’m going to disappoint you. Look, I didn’t want to make too much fuss back there, but I’m *really* worried about what’s happening in Liverpool. I can’t believe the Dark Side’s being so obvious and forceful. Joan, they’ve got toys strolling around Liverpool in broad daylight. Can you believe that? Light’s met them already, I’ll let her tell you all about that later. The thing is, we think they’re trying to grab her.”

“No!” Auntie Joan’s hand flew to her mouth. “Not that...”

The Professor reached across to take her hand. “Joan, we’re not sure. But, it’s possible, so we have to get her somewhere safe. Joan, listen to me. Joan...”

It shocked Light o’Love to see tears running down Auntie Joan’s cheeks. She was suddenly an old and frightened lady. Light o’Love shuffled along the seat to put her arm around her. The Professor passed over a tissue.

“I wish I’d never...” she sobbed quietly.

“No, Joan, it’s not your fault. You did exactly the right thing to send Light to us. She’s in exactly the right place, and she’ll be a help to everyone in the future, not just us. Don’t worry, we’re taking care of her. Come on, dry your eyes and listen. You’ve got to help too.”

“But my house isn’t safe, not from them. I couldn’t, I’m sorry, Shirley, I’m not strong.”

“Oh don’t be silly! Do you think we’d leave you all alone? Of course not. Now, do you know anyone in Cornwall?”

Auntie Joan wiped her nose. "Cornwall, no, we never had any family down there. My little sister's in Exeter."

"Excellent. Even better. Now listen. I've been letting out that Light's going to a safe place in Cornwall. I know some good strong people in Bodmin, and that wouldn't be a bad place to send her. But not the best, so we're only going to pretend we've sent her there. This is your bit to help. Can you go and stay with your sister for a few days? I want you down that way driving around. While you're there, send postcards to your friends. Do you have a dog or cat at home?"

"Only Prince. He's a cat."

"Good. Do you have a friend who could feed him, that sort of thing? Can we call her and tell her you've got urgent business in Cornwall? And then, while you're down there, can you drive over to Bodmin and send postcards home? When you're ready to go home, I'm going to send a lovely girl called Ari by train to meet you in Exeter and drive home with you. I want her to stay with you for at least a week, and then the two of you are coming up to the Institute to spend Christmas. How does that sound?"

Light o'Love was amazed. The Professor had everything mapped out for Auntie Joan, and she expected that if she barged into Auntie Joan's life and sent her off on a series of errands that included spending Christmas away from home, she would just agree. And so she did. She only had one question.

"What are you going to do with Shirley?"

"You're going to drop her off in Bath. Just drop her at the railway station, and everything's arranged from there. Can you do that? It's more or less on your way to Exeter."

Auntie Joan was nodding uncomfortably. "But where's she going?"

"I'm not going to tell you. There are only two people who know. Me, and the person she's meeting in Bath, and I'm not telling who that is either. Just drop her at the railway station and drive on. That's the safest way."

"But I don't have enough petrol..."

"Don't worry about it. I'm going to give you some petrol money, from the Institute. Now, you've got phone calls to make. I've got some change, how about you, Light?"

Auntie Joan went looking for the telephones while Light o'Love and the Professor went to the Ladies. It was empty, but the Professor crowded her

into one of the cubicles. She sat down and held her finger up to her mouth. Light o'Love waited in silence as she rummaged in her bag and pulled out a passport. It was new and the gold coat of arms stamped on the front gleamed richly. In the oval window at the top a neat hand had written 'Miss Shirley Grainger'. Light o'Love had never owned a passport; she had only seen them in films. She opened it reverently. Inside the cover, on a page printed with anti-forgery designs like a bank note, she saw the beautiful copperplate exhortation to foreigners

*Her Britannic Majesty's
Principal Secretary of State for
Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs
requests and requires
in the Name of Her Majesty
all whom it may concern
to allow the bearer to pass freely
without let or hindrance
and to afford the bearer
such assistance and protection
as may be necessary*

On the next page her photograph grinned back at her, and her signature sat beside it. Now she felt important.

"How?" she whispered.

"Never mind. Here's some money, just in case." The Professor closed some five-pound notes into the passport. "Hide them and I'll see you back at the car."

Auntie Joan was waiting at the door. She looked lost and nervous, and Light o'Love shepherded her to the car. When the Professor came, she took Light aside. "Pay attention, Light. After your aunt has dropped you at the station, wave her goodbye and go looking for a taxi. You need to go to the Lansdowne Grove Hotel, here's the name and telephone number in case of problems. Don't check in, but ask for Mrs. Petersen. She's staying there. I've written her name down as well. I don't want your aunt to know any more than that she's dropping you at the station, do you understand? What she doesn't know, can't hurt her.

“Now, have you got another jacket with you? You can wear the red one when you get where you’re going, but it’s a bit obvious for us today.”

“I’ve got my anorak. You said to bring warm things.”

“Exactly right. You’ll look just like any other student. So pack the red one away now and keep the other one out for when you arrive in Bath. Let’s get you moving. You’ve got a way to go yet, and I still have to get back to the Institute.” Light o’Love took her bag from the Professor’s car and left her with a hug and a ‘Good Luck’.

It took a little time for Auntie Joan to relax, but by the time her grey Mini Traveller was bowling down the M5, she seemed nearly back to normal. It felt good to be with her aunt again and Light o’Love could not stop telling her about Liverpool and the Institute and all her friends and lecturers. She must have talked most of the way to Bath, but she did not go into the details of her meeting with the toys, or explain anything of her private doings with Rostov, Ari or Foxglove.

Night had already fallen when Auntie Joan dropped her outside the railway station in Bath and drove tearfully away. Light o’Love gathered her thoughts together and went to find a taxi. She was glad she did not have to find her own way. She had the Professor’s money in her pocket and had only to ask the driver for the hotel, and sit back in her seat. A few minutes later an impressive commissionaire opened the hotel door for her and she stepped into the carpeted warmth of the Lansdowne Grove.

She went to the reception desk and asked for Mrs. Petersen. A young porter carried her bag up to Room 103. The door opened on the chain, closed, and swung wide open. Tamara Panek welcomed her with open arms and a big smile.

Chapter 11

Light o'Love felt both dog-tired and elated as she lay on the unfamiliar hotel bed waiting for Tamara to take her to dinner. This morning she had woken in Bath, in the heart of old England. Now she was far away on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In a communist country. In a communist hotel. Even the bed she lay on was communist. Her tired mind toyed with the idea of looking underneath it to check for any Reds in hiding.

Last night she had enjoyed an elegant meal with Tamara in the Lansdowne Grove Hotel restaurant. Tired from travel and excitement, she had slept like a log in a wide and enveloping bed, until Tamara had woken her before six and they had hurried to the railway station. She had watched the watery December dawn through the windows of the morning express to Reading. And then, the bus had brought them slowly into Heathrow.

All day she had drifted in a daze. It was the first flight she had ever taken, and she was glad that Tamara knew how things worked. They had flown Lufthansa to Frankfurt, and then had taken a Polish Airlines flight to Krakow. Everything felt different. Even at Frankfurt they stepped into a different world. It was not just the German language for the announcements and signs, but the noise, the smells, the shops, everything. Even the numbers on the boarding gates were printed in lettering that was subtly foreign. Light o'Love felt nervous and excited all at once.

If Frankfurt airport had been strange, Krakow airport was stranger still. Bare and quiet, with frightening Customs officers and policemen, all in strange uniforms and over-sized caps. Tamara took it in her stride. She had presented their passports together and told the passport officer to take them to his supervisor. In an untidy office, a fat balding officer had put down his cigarette and thumbed through their passports. He spoke in a low voice with Tamara and pulled a large bunch of keys from his trouser pocket. Unlocking his desk drawer, he brought out a large stamp to pound into Light o'Love's

passport. A quick signature and he handed back the passports with a bored smile.

"Is excellent," explained Tamara. "You have visa for six months. This is not possible for normal people."

They went to wait for their luggage. Light o'Love helped carry Tamara's bags into Customs, but the officers there did not seem interested. One of them chalked a cross on each bag and gestured them on.

This time, Light o'Love had been watching. "You cheated!" she whispered as they dragged the bags outside.

Tamara brushed off her accusation. "In Poland, many things are necessary to do. If we are always waiting for the correct things, we are waiting for ever."

A grumbling Fiat taxi took them into town. It had been cold, well below freezing. Streetlights shone in dim halos and the pavé road surface looked grey and icy. Twin tramlines ran down the centre of the street and their electric power cables hung low above them. There was little traffic apart from the trams; dumpy, high-sided vans in either black or grey and black Fiat taxis like their own. At the tram stops, real live communists waited for their rides home, crowded together and wrapped up against the cold.

The Polonia Hotel felt forbidding. An old building that had seen more glorious times, the pillared foyer was now dimly lit and unornamented. The reception counter stood too high for Light o'Love and the island of light behind it was empty. From an open door at the back came cigarette smoke and the sounds of relaxed conversation. Light o'Love watched as Tamara reached out and searched for a mind in the back room. A plump woman with lacquered blonde hair and a cigarette hurried out and let Tamara bark at her. She took their passports and gave them an old-fashioned key.

Their room was basic, institutional and badly cleaned, but Light o'Love felt tired enough not to care. Square and functional furniture in stained timber added to the darkness. She dropped her bag on the floor and stretched out on one of the beds. The hairy blanket smelt of smoke as it engulfed her.

"No, no!" said Tamara. "First we are washing and then we are going outside for dinner. I will show you Krakow. Bring your soap and your towel and you will wash. No towel? Never mind, you will share mine." Carrying Tamara's soap and towel they went looking for the bathroom.

Outside the cold bit hard and Light o'Love was glad of her down jacket and woollen hat. She pulled it down over her ears and kept her hands in her pockets as they walked into town. A few other pedestrians hurried along the cobbled streets but she saw no sign of where they were going. Everything was dark and closed up for the night. She wondered where Tamara was taking her. It did not look a promising place for restaurants.

They emerged from their street into a wide square, lined with grand houses decorated with baroque gingerbread stucco. Here, at last, street lamps glinted on the cobbles and some of the upper windows had lights behind their curtains. Moonlight softened the grimy facades of the buildings and lent magic to the place. Their beauty made her heart jump. Now she could believe she was in the Europe of fairy tales, with palaces and Princes, burghers and toy makers. Certainly, not too far away, she would find dark forests with wolves and woodcutters. May be even a soldier of fortune passing through from one campaign to another. She stood and stared.

Tamara had gone on without her but now she returned to where Light o'Love stood in amazement.

"It's wonderful," said Light o'Love softly. "There's nothing like this in Liverpool."

"Krakow is our first town, our first capital," Tamara said with pride. "Before Warsaw. This is centre of city, the Old Town. There is much history here. Very much history. And behind over there is the castle Wawel, not too far walking, and that is the heart of Old Poland. It is very beautiful. One day I will show you, but now we must eat. I am hungry."

Tamara led her to a corner of the square where a plain door opened onto a flight of stone steps. She closed the door behind them and opened her coat. "This is the club for journalists. It is for the brave men who write in our newspapers and are without fear to tell the things that happen in our society. But, because is not possible to find these men, instead the ordinary workers on the newspapers come here to eat and drink. Still the food is good, you will see."

Light o'Love followed her up the stairs. She could smell food, and from above them she could hear voices and the clatter of plates and cutlery, but this did not seem like any restaurant she had ever visited.

They stopped at the cloakroom to hand over their coats in return for a wooden token, and went into the dining room. Tables full of diners hid

amongst stone pillars, and laughter and a rich smell of food filled the air. A waiter with a long linen apron showed them to a table.

“Now you will have Polish cooking. Is good, better than Liverpool I think. What do you like? They have very good knee of the pig here.”

Light o'Love winced at the thought and it must have shown on her face. “So, not golonka. They are also making very good schabowy, I think you know it, schnitzel in Vienna. You like this? Good, I will also have. And special soup from chicken. And beer, my favourite is Kmicic from Czestochowa. It is near to here.”

The beer tasted good, light, golden and full of flavour. Tamara was proud of it. “You like it, no? This is proper beer. Cold, not like in England!”

The food was good too. Peppery chicken soup with macaroni followed by schnitzel with boiled potatoes and Polish sauerkraut. And, more beer. Light o'Love felt stuffed full and a little drunk by the time they retrieved their coats and made their way arm-in-arm back towards the hotel.

“What will we do tomorrow, Tamara?”

“Tomorrow we are going to my house in Sanok. It is a long time by the slow train, but you will see some of Poland from the window. It is better if you see it in the summer. Now it is cold and all is dead. But it can be beautiful after snowing. Can you skiing?”

“I never tried. Not enough snow in England.”

“Never mind. My Piotr will teach you. You will go to the mountains with him for skiing.”

* * * *

Light o'Love slept content, without dreams.

Tamara woke her early and dragged her down to the hotel restaurant. A cold room, and business men wearing their overcoats sat eating lonely breakfasts. The waitress brought bowls of bean stew with lumps of pork, and slices of strong grey bread. Light o'Love ate greedily and washed it down with dark muddy coffee. This was a breakfast to line the stomach and keep out the cold.

The Hotel Polonia originally served travellers on the railway during the high days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and they had only to walk across the street to reach the railway station. The ticket hall was large and busy,

and the timetable board displayed names that Light o'Love had never seen before. She kept close to Tamara.

Their train was old, a steam engine with worn and dirty carriages. They settled into comfortable but threadbare seats in first class. The rest of the compartment stayed empty, perhaps because of the non-smoking sign on the window. The train shuddered, shook itself, and slowly clanked out of the station. Light o'Love was keen to leave the smoky city air and catch her first sight of Poland.

She saw a hard winter countryside. Bare fields without fences, dark pine woods, all frozen under a grey sky. In sheltered spots facing north, grey snow banks survived from the last storm. Unwelcoming, thought Light o'Love, no place for people. As she became more used to it, villages showed themselves. Small clusters of houses around a church, usually with the industrial buildings of a state farm on their outskirts. The train picked its slow way on towards the east.

"How long will I stay with you?" asked Light o'Love. "Will I be here for Christmas?"

"Christmas definitely. You will have a Polish Christmas with us. All the special food for the Christmas, and we will go to the church at night in the snow, it will be good. You will see, very good. Many people, too much talking, drinking. It will be good. And then after the Christmas, the Professor will tell me when you go back to your home."

"I don't have any money..." She had come away without thinking of the future. Apart from the notes the Professor had tucked into her passport, she had nothing.

"The Professor is giving me money. I have enough to buy good clothing for you to be warm, enough for food. And also for going for skiing. Is not a problem."

Everything had been planned for her. "Will I be OK here? I mean, safe? No more trouble?"

Tamara thought before answering. "I think yes. The Dark Light does not know we are here, I think, and so we are safe. But you are an English girl in Poland, you cannot be in secret always. If they are looking for you, perhaps we have one month when they are not finding you. Perhaps two months. After that, we must be careful. But, I think in this time the Professor will be telling you to go back to Liverpool. I hope."

It was not a comforting answer. Safe for the moment, but soon she would have to start looking over her shoulder. And, Poland was a strange country; she could not just run away. She was tied to Tamara. On her own, she would not even be able to buy a train ticket. She would be hopelessly lost.

“But what will I do? I can’t just sit at home all the time, and I don’t speak Polish...”

“Don’t worry. First, we will have the Christmas. There will be much cooking and work to do, I will teach you for Polish cooking. And then, I must go to work again, and you will come and study my work. It will be good for you.”

“Work? What do you do?”

“I am koroner. Koroner in the family court. You will come and study my cases. It will be good experience for you, Light o'Love. You must learn more about people.”

The train rattled steadily on. Light o'Love watched the unfamiliar landscape slide past, and pondered her future.

Late in the afternoon they rolled slowly into Sanok. The train terminated there and everyone got off. Loaded with bags and made impossibly fatter by their thick winter coats, locals pushed down the corridor and clambered down to the ground-level platform. Tamara waited until the rush faded before manoeuvring their bags down from the luggage racks and out into the corridor. There were no porters, and they loaded themselves up. Tamara followed the crowd, ignoring the bridge linking the platforms, and walking straight across the lines. Crossing the track made Light o'Love feel like a naughty girl. In England, breaking the bye-laws of the railway rated high on her scale of criminality, but here it seemed that regulations were not necessarily followed. The other passengers trailed into town on foot but Tamara went for a taxi. “I think the Professor is happy,” she giggled. “Is not too much money and the bags are heavy.”

Tamara lived in a house of her own. As soon as the taxi pulled up, her family rushed out. Tamara had children, a boy and a girl of Light o'Love’s age. They came as a surprise. Light o'Love had not imagined that some-one as important as Tamara must also have a home life. She pushed the children away to introduce Light o'Love to her husband.

“Light, this is Tadeusz, my husband.” Tadeusz was a solid man with thinning blonde hair and a long straight nose. He looked intently at Light o’Love and took her hand in one of his wide paws. Without shaking it, he raised it quickly to his lips, and brushed a kiss onto her knuckles. Light o’Love was stunned, too stupefied to whip her hand away even when his son Piotr took it to kiss as well. “I am happy,” he announced in accented English.

“And this is Magda, she will be taking care of you.” Magda gave her a hug and they hurried inside. They fussed over Light o’Love. They took her coat as she removed her boots in the narrow hallway, and they produced a pair of felt slippers. She was pushed into the living room, a small space with a sofa, padded stools, and a table. An old-fashioned television played silently in the corner. The table was set with glasses and small plates. They sat her down at the table and crowded around chattering. Weak tea appeared in glasses with silver handles and legs. There were two plates of small open sandwiches, each with a slice of sausage and another of pickled cucumber. Tadeusz poured vodka into shot glasses. They lifted their glasses to her. “Na zdrowie! Witajcie na Sanoku!” The vodka disappeared in an instant and they poured again.

Light o’Love was overwhelmed. In this tight family, she would be welcome and safe, no matter what.

Chapter 12

The sun shone and took the edge off the January cold. The old town looked cheerful in the sunlight and Light o'Love hummed to herself as she stumped along the strip of footpath cleared between banks of dirty snow. She liked Sanok, and enjoyed the faded elegance of its old buildings, relics of the days when the Emperor in Vienna ruled central Europe. In those days, the province of Galicia had been one of the Empire's most productive, spreading across southern Poland and well into neighbouring Ukraine. Now Sanok hid away in a corner of modern Poland and depended on the state planners for its allocation of industry and resources. It was no longer at the centre of a large region, but life went on more or less comfortably despite the change in fortunes.

People had jobs to go to, and they had somewhere to live. Usually an apartment, but there were many single family houses as well. On their walks around the town, Magda had shown her the private summer gardens where local people spent their weekends growing vegetables, and relaxing over beer and barbecues. Some of their little wooden chalets were quite ornate and obviously well-loved. She could imagine that, taking one thing with another, life was not so bad. The state ran everything, shops, transport, medical services, factories, but did it without the energy and drive of the capitalist west. There an inefficient factory would suffer bankruptcy. Here no one seemed to care.

Tadeusz was some sort of manager at the local plant, manufacturing buses. He worked from seven thirty to three thirty every day and had a driver to bring him home. Perhaps he did not get paid as much as his western counterpart, but he was a respected person and did not seem to suffer from over-work.

As far as Light o'Love could see, Tamara worked even less, and except when she was actually hearing one of her cases, always had time to stop and chat over a cup of tea.

When Light o'Love tried to put her finger on exactly what made life different in Poland, she decided it must be the quiet acceptance of things as they were. In England, people always tried to achieve a bigger house, a new job, a better car. There you had to keep running just to stay where you were.

Here, life was more assured. No amount of worry or work would change things appreciably, so the trick was to accept the situation. A minor effort kept life ticking over. A little more would allow measured progress in your work and society. Any more than that would be wasted, so why bother? She could see that the system had its advantages.

This morning, she was on her way to the Post Office. The women behind the counter knew her now, and she had picked up enough Polish for politeness as she asked for a telephone line to call Auntie Joan. It might take a while to get through, and sometimes they failed altogether, but who was in a hurry?

She had enjoyed her time in Poland. Life behind the Iron Curtain was nothing like she had expected. No one around her seemed oppressed or abused. They did not starve or go without shoes. The organs of State security had not troubled her although that may have been Tamara's shielding influence. True the shops were boring and limited, and the television tedious. On the positive side, the people here had some advantages that were unheard of in England. People felt secure and did not worry about getting thrown out of work. They could go to all sorts of holiday camps, owned by factories, work places, unions. There were convalescent homes that tired workers often used as holiday accommodation as well. No one seemed to pay much for the use of these things. When Magda and Piotr had taken her skiing in the High Tatry mountains, they had stayed free in a hostel provided by Tamara's work.

That had been a wonderful trip. She enjoyed spending time with Piotr and Magda. Their English had become more fluid which helped, but they were good fun to be with in any language. Every morning they had marched up to the ski lifts with their skis over their shoulders and spent the day tearing down the slopes or sitting in ski cafes with hot beetroot soup and boiled sausage. In England only the rich could afford to travel overseas to

go skiing, but in Poland everyone could do it, and the slopes were crowded. Plenty of young people had the time and energy for skiing. Magda had taken up with a group of students from Bratislava and enjoyed the admiration of the men.

One morning, after Light o'Love had learnt enough about skis to stay upright nearly all the time, Piotr had taken her cross-country skiing. They had changed their boots for square-toed running shoes and their downhill skis for long slender ones with comical turned-up tips. She quickly found out that cross-country skiing was very much tougher than simply sliding downhill. Piotr led her off along the edge of the forest and she soon suffered when she had to force her way uphill, and waved her arms disgracefully about her as she tried to control the short slides downhill.

It was tough, but it was beautiful. The snow lay soft and deep in the forest, and sat on the branches of the pines with a cuteness that would have disgraced a Christmas card. She just could not see enough of the landscape and was delighted when Piotr took her off the packed snow of the trail up into a small valley with a cleared meadow in its bottom. It was a pool of soft white in the silence of the dark forest slopes all around them.

Skiing through fresh snow had been difficult with such narrow skis, and Light o'Love had reached the meadow at the point of collapse. Piotr brushed the snow off a stack of tree trunks for them to rest, and sat with his arm around her. He was working up enough courage to attack her.

She had felt it coming, of course, and did not object too much. She liked Piotr. He was handsome in his way, tall and strong. He made a good teacher, patient with her fumbling efforts to ski properly. He was painfully shy and spoke little even in Polish. However, quietness did not mean that he lacked emotions. Sensing a disturbance, Light o'Love reached into his mind and, for the first time, felt the cauldron that bubbles inside a man as sex overcomes sanity. It shocked her. He wanted her very badly. He wanted *her*, her femaleness. She was a woman and he wanted sex. Now. The change in him frightened her, but to resist would be to stand in front of a runaway train.

Piotr turned her to him, to kiss her clumsily and sweetly. She did not hold back, and as she pushed herself against him, she felt music growing in his internal storm. He responded to her invitation, his uncertainty slowly dissolving. He pulled her to sit on his lap and held her tight.

Slowly, Light o'Love's exultation grew to meet his, and she became comfortable with her ride on a tiger's back. The need flowed through her too, and she welcomed his hand at the zip of her jacket. He reached in to cup her breast. She gave him a little sigh of encouragement when he rubbed a finger back and forth across her nipple. The familiar tingling ran down to her stomach. She came up for air and held his head against her cheek. A feeling of great beauty rose within her, sitting in a forest clearing, their skis and sticks stuck in the snow beside them, having her breast stroked and teased. She sighed again and tried to take it all in.

She dropped her hand between them into his lap. His cock was excited and she squeezed its hardness. What would he do, she wondered? She would not take off any clothes in the freezing cold. How would he get through the layers of her clothing? She was sure he had no plan waiting. She hoped he would not give up too easily and started to open his belt buckle.

It was difficult to reach him but she knew what she wanted and spread the front of his trousers wide. She burrowed over the waistband of his thermal underwear until she touched bare skin, and could move down to his sex. He was hot and hairy at his centre, and she knew her hand must feel icy. The hardness of his cock hid awkwardly down between his legs. She reached over it and pulled it up to stand straight against his stomach. It grew long and slim. She felt his mind sing at her touch.

She studied his mind as she played with him. It thrilled her to read his excitement, and she enjoyed the crazy rills of pleasure that shot through him each time she pushed her fingertips over the head of his cock so that it nuzzled the palm of her hand. The craziness built up step by step each time she brushed his hot slippery plum. She wanted to speed up, to ratchet up the excitement and feel him explode, but they had time enough for that. First, she wanted more attention herself. She returned to kissing him.

Piotr was caressing her breast. She guessed he did not know how to proceed. She encouraged him to pull the zip of her jacket completely open and search for the hook that closed her trousers. He fumbled for a moment before it slid open. He drew down her zip, and she lay open for him. His hand felt big and strong inside her thermals. When he touched her skin, his uncertain fingertips were rough and masculine.

He did not know what to do!

She felt his uncertainty, his confusion, as he finally touched her hair. She helped him. She made him reach between her legs to trail a fingertip up and down her lips. She led him to dip into her wetness and stroke her just as she wished to be stroked. She drew him up to her hidden clit to show him how she loved to be pressed and rubbed, slowly, gently and just so.

"Oh yes," she whispered. "That's so right..." She felt his spirit leap as he understood what he was giving her.

She held him and squeezed him, but he had been distracted by her own excitement. She decided to let herself go, to give him all her pleasure. She leant back further against his encircling arm and tried to lift her pussy to him. He was rubbing her clit firmly and regularly, just as she had shown him. She set his mind free and opened herself to him. Her head lay against his shoulder. She knew she was moaning out loud. It just felt so good. She climbed the slope, she was nearly there.

"Aaaaah, Oh God!" and she was coming. Piotr did not stop; he rubbed her centre continuously, smoothly, without a change in his rhythm. "Ooooh!" she wailed, "Oh stop! Stop!" She closed her legs on his hand and tried to hide her pussy from him as she rode the waves of her orgasm. "Oh, Piotr, that was so good. Fantastic!" Passionately, she kissed him again.

The head of his cock was wet in her hand, he hovered dangerously near the edge. Light o'Love did not want him to come. Not yet. This first time she wanted him inside her when it happened. She jumped off his lap and slipped her glove back on. She stood by the stacked tree trunks with her back to him so he could see her. She pushed her trousers and underwear down over her hips. The cold bit her bottom, but she did not care. Piotr sat quiet behind her. She turned to the tree trunks, and bent forward to rest her weight on her hands. She showed her bottom and her wet and hungry sex to the meadow and the forest.

Still Piotr had not moved and she had to push him. "Come on, Piotr. I want you inside me."

Finally, he understood and came to her, holding her and steering his rigid cock to her lips. At last, he slipped into her and sank deep until she could feel his hips against her. She felt full and ready. He began to move.

"Oh yes," she hissed, "Yes, just like that."

In a rising tide of pleasure, he probed her deeply. It felt so right, and she reached for his mind again. He was biting his lip in an attempt to control

himself, but he would not last much longer. Without thinking, Light o'Love stopped him moving and he stood still, pressed against her. She luxuriated in the delight of his cock inside her, so deep, so insistent. She felt his control slipping, even as he stood there. "Hold me!" she commanded and he gripped her hips tightly and pulled himself an impossible centimetre further into her. They stood together on the very edge and he was desperate.

She took mercy on him. She ground her hips back into his lap. Instantly, his cock jumped and spat inside her. She welcomed the great pulses from deep in his roots and squeezed him tight, as his mind whirled. He had clamped her hips to him and rocked from side to side as he gave her everything he could.

They did not move but stayed welded together, slipping back down the mountain. Light o'Love felt disappointed that she had not been able to join his ecstasy, but it felt good to be full of his hard, wet cock as they slowed down together.

She could feel his wonder at what had happened and felt him move. He liked being inside her, and he liked moving in her slick glove. She felt him experiment with sliding in and out, and she liked that too. He was still hard. The excitement of Piotr's first love making still worked on him.

Without touching his mind, she reached behind her for his hand and brought it round between her legs. He knew what to do. He felt for her clit and started to rub, and Light o'Love began to fly again.

She did not if it had been the setting, or perhaps the long sexual drought she had faced, that created the extra magic. Whatever the reason, that morning in the snow-covered clearing had come straight from a story book. Piotr rode her through one long and glorious orgasm, and then took her on to another higher summit. He left her clit at the last minute to concentrate on slamming his cock violently in and out of her, but it had no longer mattered. She joined him in the end, his spasms triggering shivers of delight that ran right through her.

She had been thankful that the way back to the main track sloped gently downhill, and that they had their inward trail to follow. She was not certain her trembling legs would have carried her anywhere difficult. As she skied behind Piotr, she wondered what sort of trouble she had got herself into. She liked him. She liked the whole family, and Piotr and Magda were almost the

brother and sister she never had. But, she really did not want any other relationship with him.

Reluctantly she looked into his emotions. Turmoil reigned. Gently, she smoothed the confusion, polished his pride and contentment, and quietly suppressed the unbrotherly feelings he had for her. He would not be a problem. Like any young man, he had sex on the brain, and he would see her through that filter.

Perhaps she would let him do it all again, in fact she was sure she would. Perhaps when Magda went off with her Czechoslovakian friends she would have the chance to lock the bedroom door and really study Piotr. She had a keen curiosity to actually see and handle what had given her all that pleasure.

Next day had brought a blizzard and skiing was out of the question. She had spent the afternoon alone with Piotr, getting to know his cock from every angle. She had played with it for hours, doing delightful things to it and watching for his reaction. All to further her studies.

Tamara and Tadeusz joined them for Christmas. The big event would be the special meal on Christmas Eve, and the hostel did its institutional best. The bare dining room still looked bare, but the single long dining table had more plates and cutlery than normal and there candles wreathed in pine fronds brought some cheerfulness. Dinner came early, at four thirty in the afternoon, so that the kitchen staff could get home for their own meals with their families. The hostel manager flushed everyone out of their rooms and all the residents sat at the table as the waitresses brought a succession of traditional dishes. They started from fish soup and went on through a variety of small fish dishes and pickles. In Poland, no meat was eaten on Christmas Eve. Everyone ate a quiet meal, probably because the hostel allowed no alcohol. Its climax came with the exchanging of wafers, something Light o'Love had never seen before. Beside her plate lay something like a communion wafer and she had to give everyone else a small piece of it, and collect a small piece of their wafer and a kiss. The tradition touched her.

By nine o'clock, dinner had finished and they were at a loss. Midnight Mass was still a long time away. They decided to go cross-country skiing as a family. Outside the moon was shining and the large thermometer on the tree in the car park showed minus 14 centigrade. They carried their skis up steep paths, through the pine woods across the road, and emerged onto

rolling fields under a gleaming blanket of snow. In the still, clear air they could see points of light from houses scattered near and far. They pushed off in line and slid rapidly across the sleeping countryside. No wind blew and with the work of skiing Light o'Love felt nothing of the deep cold. They went on across the open fields, occasionally crossing a bank or farm road, keeping to the high ground. The night's silence was broken only by the swishing of their skis, and their breathing. Light o'Love wished she could capture the moment, and take it home for Auntie Joan to share.

They eventually swung back into the houses and took their skis off to walk on the roads. The church bell was calling, and they joined the crowds.

The church was a tall, white building, glowing with light. The doors stood open and Light o'Love could see it was already full. They joined the crowd in the forecourt to listen to the service through loudspeakers around the door. The mass sounded strange to Light o'Love and she could not follow what was happening. Around her people of all ages, men and women, concentrated on their devotions. They knew the carols and prayers by heart, and put down hats or scarves to let them kneel on the cold ground. After the service, they hurried back to the hostel to exchange Christmas gifts.

After Christmas they all returned to Sanok and real work. Light o'Love sat in the back of Tamara's courtroom and took notes of the cases coming before her. She could not understand a word she heard. It would have been harrowing enough just to listen to the stories, but she had to do more. She had to examine the feelings and relationships of applicants to the court, and discuss her notes with Tamara at the end of the day. The pain and suffering uncovered made her suffer, and without Tamara's urging she would have quit at the first lunch break. Instead, she put her head down and worked hard. She had a good file of notes now. The Professor would be proud of her.

* * * *

She also had a photograph of Jane Flockman's grave. One Sunday Tamara had taken her by train over the Carpathians on an ancient track into the far east of Czechoslovakia. They had left the train at Humenne and hired a taxi to take them to the village of Dara, not far from Snina. On the hillside above the village stood a small white chapel. The taxi driver waited as they

trudged through the snow of the churchyard to find the gravestone. It was in English, engraved in severe Welch slate, and sent by her family to mark the end of an unusual and valuable life. Tamara had brought flowers and they laid them in the snow. Light o'Love treasured the photographs they had taken.

Her relationship with Piotr remained unchanged. In the family home, they had much less opportunity for sex, and a winter's evening in Sanok offered little opportunity for fun. They had managed a quick and explosive bout in a friend's bedroom during the New Year celebrations. It seemed the best way to usher in the coming year. She felt very comfortable with Piotr, and enjoyed squeezing together to watch television or play cards with Magda and Tadeusz. She would miss them all when she left, but she would especially miss Piotr.

The Post Office was quiet. She did not have to wait for a line to England. She spoke to Auntie Joan first, and felt very homesick. And then, at last, she got through to the Professor.

She stood on the street outside the Post Office and thought about what she had heard. She felt shocked. The Professor had been difficult to understand. She had sounded confused, distracted... Light o'Love's plight had not interested her. She sounded unclear about what was happening in Liverpool and gave no lead as to whether the trouble had passed.

Light o'Love had prompted her. "So I suppose I'll head home then. And I'll see you next term."

"Next term. Yes, see you next term. Um, so cold here now. I must..." She had hung up or been cut off.

Whatever is happening in Liverpool, it did not worry the Professor if Light o'Love returned to England. In a rush, she decided that was exactly what she would do, as soon as Tamara could arrange a flight.

Chapter 13

“Good morning, Miss,” said the Customs officer, as he returned her passport. “Welcome home.”

It felt like home. Even Heathrow felt pleasant and familiar. As she waited for the bus in the centre of the busy airport, the cold fingers of the English winter probed her red down jacket. Sanok had snow on the ground and a comfortable minus ten when she left, and she had come to England to feel cold?

Leaving her Polish friends had been a wrench, and she wondered when she would ever see them again. It would be a long time before Poles like Magda and Piotr could travel to the West. She had given Piotr a last check and, to her chagrin, found only disappointment that there would be no more sex. She felt the parting more deeply than he did. Long afternoons in his small bedroom had been fun, and instructive for both of them. *Never mind*, she told herself, *he has learnt a lot about life this Christmas. There will not be a woman at Lublin University safe from him*. She still felt sad she would not be one of them.

It was already evening when she finally opened the garden gate and swung her bag from her shoulder. Prince was glad to see her and rubbed himself against her legs. Auntie Joan was waiting with supper, toad-in-the-hole, cabbage and mashed potatoes. Good English cooking again, along with tea with milk in it.

Light o'Love produced Auntie Joan's present after supper as they sat in front of the television with their feet up, an extravagant necklace and earrings in silver and Polish amber. She was delighted. She had got her Polish Christmas card and said she wanted to hear all about Light o'Love's adventures. But, what she really wanted to do was share her own story.

“It was such a long way to drive after I left you at Bath. All the way to Exeter. I was as tired as anything by the time I got to Lily's house. They

gave me Sarah's room; she had to share with John and she didn't like it at all. Never mind, I took her to the shop to buy a record to make up for it. And, I went driving off to Cornwall, sending postcards from everywhere. Do you think they did any good? Mrs. Wainwright was so surprised to get hers. She came in to feed Prince, you know, but he didn't want to eat. And, she lit the fire on the day I came back.

"I do like that girl Ari. She's got such nice manners, and so intelligent. She'll make some-one a lovely wife, you know, but she says she doesn't have a young man."

Light o'Love savoured the image of Ari as a dutiful young wife. She almost said, she doesn't have a young man because she has *lots* of young men. Not to mention the occasional young woman. And, as for being a dutiful wife... it was hard to imagine.

"How long did she stay with you, Auntie Joan?"

"Let me see, nearly a week, I think. And then, I took her all the way back to Liverpool and I stayed with the Professor for Christmas. That was nice. I haven't been in a big family Christmas for ever so long..."

"They were very kind to me. I felt as if I was everyone's Auntie, I'm sure. The Professor's a very important person, isn't she? I think I remember her from years ago, but I never thought she'd go so far. But, she's not stuck up, you know. She was the perfect hostess, just right, laughing, playing with the kids, cooking, taking care of the house, everything. I tried to help of course, but she wouldn't let me do very much. She just kept giving me another glass of sherry, and telling me to sit down and relax. No, I had a good time. Then, after Christmas, she came back from the University one day and said that everything was fine now and I could go home. So here I am, back again. Did you have any trouble, my dear?"

* * * *

It was Saturday next day, and after unpacking, doing her washing, and helping Auntie Joan with the shopping, Light o'Love had nothing to do. She decided to call Foxglove for a chat and to wish her a happy New Year.

It was not a happy call. As soon as Foxglove heard her voice, she started to cry.

"Foxglove, Foxglove, listen to me. What's wrong? What's happened?"

Her sobbing slowed enough to get some words out. "It's Padeen. He's got something wrong. He won't talk to me."

"He won't talk to you?" Light o'Love did not understand. "Why not? Have you been fighting?"

"No, it's nothing like that. He won't talk on the phone – he just hung up. I even went there, and he just left me on the door step, he wouldn't open the door. I was knocking for ages." She started to sob uncontrollably.

Light o'Love looked at the kitchen clock. Twelve thirty. "Foxglove, listen to me. Stop crying a moment and listen. I'm going to come up to Liverpool now. You'll have to meet me at Lime Street. Is that OK?"

Auntie Joan was upset lose her again so soon, and she looked sad standing on the doorstep with Prince in her arms. With her bag over her shoulder, Light o'Love set off to help her friend. She bought her ticket and telephoned Foxglove to let her know. She sounded a little happier and did not cry.

At Lime Street, Foxglove came running to hug her. It shocked Light o'Love to see how *small* she looked. She cuddled her and let her sniffle a little. Then, they went off down the platform with Light o'Love's bag between them.

The X-Father lived in a small Victorian terrace in Dingle, in a quiet and narrow street built long before the motorcar had been imagined. The identical houses of the terrace stretched down the street on either side. They stood back just two steps from the pavement, and their narrow frontages permitted only a front door and a bay window. Evening had come, and cars packed the curbs. It was impossible to park.

They crawled past Ryan's house. His car stood outside, and the light of a television flickered on the curtains of his bay window. Light o'Love left Foxglove in the car and went to the front door. She felt gently for Ryan and found him blankly watching a football game. He felt slow and depressed. Gently, she pushed him to pick up his coat and come to the door. He gave no sign of recognising her presence, and did not resist. He had no life in him at all.

The lock clicked and the front door slowly opened. Ryan looked a mess. His hair was uncombed and he had not shaved for a week or more. Light o'Love reached out to take his hand. "Come on, Ryan. We're going to visit Foxglove." She led him to the car, helped him into the back, and sat next to

him. He sat with his hands on his knees looking straight ahead and said nothing. He smelt of smoke and dirt. Light o'Love saw tears on Foxglove's cheek as she drove.

As they crossed Liverpool, Light o'Love stroked his mind and looked for the problem. Ryan was sick, obviously sick. Where life and humour should have been bubbling up, nothing moved. As if his spirit slept while his body was awake. She probed deeper until she found it at the heart of him. A nasty brown scab, a hungry nexus drawing the energy from him. She brushed over it, and it flared angrily back at her. Ryan groaned. "Don't," he muttered in a low cracked voice.

They took him straight into Foxglove's back room and laid him in the circle. Foxglove was all energy now that she had something to do. She stripped off her clothes and threw them out of the door. Ryan showed no sign of life, not even when she stood over him nude and commanding. She reached down to close his eyes with her fingertips and muttered a charm. His eyes stayed closed and he relaxed in sleep.

"Now, let's get organised," said Foxglove. "Get undressed, and we'll start with a circle."

"Not yet. Come outside, there's something I want to check." Light o'Love led her out to the kitchen and sat her on a barstool. She looked small and cute, dark hair falling over her naked shoulders and her nipples wrinkled tight in the cold. Light o'Love moved behind her and held her close while she searched and searched for the ugliness that had captured the X-Father. She found nothing. Foxglove's spirit remained bright and clear. Now they could get to work.

Ryan still lay asleep on his back. "Let's get those dirty rags off him first," said Foxglove. "They'll only hinder the magic."

Together they unbuttoned, tugged, and pulled until he lay naked on the floor. He still looked untidy, and he smelt. Light o'Love stripped off her clothes. Wearing only the garnet that Ari had given her, she held Foxglove's hand and added her strength to casting the circle. They knelt together and invoked the help of the Goddess in front of Foxglove's altar.

Light o'Love led her friend into Ryan's mind and showed her the scab. They stood back and stared at it. It seemed alive, moving, and pulsing, with lines of red breaking the brown surface and quickly disappearing. They slipped out and left Ryan while they had a consultation.

“What is it? And what are we going to do?” asked Light o’Love.

Foxglove shook her head. “I don’t know. I’ve never heard of anything like that. Did you touch it?”

“Just a little, and it got all aggressive and wanted to fight back.”

“Let me think a moment. Whatever it is, it’s bad, that’s clear enough. And, we have to get it out. Can we just get hold of it and pull it out, do you think? I mean, would it hurt Padeen?”

It seemed simple enough to Light o’Love. “We can’t leave it there, it’s bad for him. It’s like, I don’t know, like a leech or something. It’s sucking his life’s blood. So, we should just pull it out. It might hurt for a moment, but he’ll be much better off without it.”

“I don’t know, what if it’s too strong?”

“If it won’t let go? If that happens, then he won’t be any worse off than he is now, and we’ll just have to get more help. But, let’s have a go first. You never know, it might be easy.”

“Okay,” said Foxglove uncertainly. “But, stay with me. A little extra help might make all the difference. Do you think we ought to tie him up or something? He might hurt himself otherwise. Or hurt us.”

“There’s two of us, let’s just sit on him. That should be enough.”

Foxglove carefully knelt over him and, trapping his arms at his sides, settled her weight on his chest. Behind her, Light o’Love sat astride his hips and thighs. Her unprotected pussy hovered in the danger zone.

I can just imagine what would happen to me if Ryan was not sick, she thought.

“So,” said Foxglove, gathering herself, “Let’s try. Stay with me, Light. Goddess help us both!”

They entered together and Light o’Love watched as Foxglove reached tentatively for the scab. She touched it briefly and Ryan groaned beneath them. Then she summoned her courage and seized the foul thing. It radiated heat, scalding heat, and Light o’Love thought for a moment that she would let go, but Foxglove was tougher than that. She hung on grimly and pulled. The scab started giving way. It stretched, and part of it was reaching for Foxglove. All of a sudden, it was no longer resistant, but flexible and deadly. It reached out for her. She leant backwards, trying to resist, but she was being drawn down to within the reach of the scab. Light o’Love knew she would accept it, and join Ryan in his misery.

Light o'Love pushed past her and threw herself at the scab. She wrapped herself around its fiery evil and wrenched it away from Ryan. She could hear him screaming but she fought to hold the red-hot coal that had been the scab. Ryan was threshing on the floor and he had thrown Foxglove aside. Light o'Love fought her way to her feet and staggered to the altar, bringing her burden to the Goddess. The pain of it seared through her and it was too much to bear. She had started to collapse and give up to the foul thing when waves of light and cool crystal water flowed through her. The waves came to help her, to wash the fire away and carry the burning thing from the world. They trickled into every corner of her being, and brought hope and laughter. She would be safe, and her friends along with her.

She found herself alone on all fours in front of the altar, cold and trembling. She looked around. Foxglove lay curled up to one side, whimpering. Ryan still slept in the centre of the circle, but with the suggestion of a smile on his face. Quickly she looked into him. He was back, normal and alive. She could find no trace of the scab, no mark left behind. Relief flooded through her and she checked Foxglove. Her mind was also clear, but she suffered from a blow that Ryan had landed on her arm.

Light o'Love picked her up and kissed the sore spot while she tried to repeat the Professor's charm for hurt children. Foxglove smiled through her tears. "Did we do it? That was the Goddess. I've never felt her like that. We're so lucky... But you did it! By yourself. I'd gone for sure. It had got me and I would never have escaped. You're so strong, Light. Superwoman!"

"I don't think so. It had got me too. It was making me give up when the Goddess came and took it away. The cavalry arrived in the nick of time. God, I'm still shaking."

"Come on, let's get Padeen out of here. Oh look, he's better already. Randy bugger!" A large erection had sprouted from his hairy centre, and he sighed in his sleep. "We'll put him in the spare bedroom, he's too dirty for my bed. And you can sleep with me tonight."

They laid the circle to rest, and guided Ryan on wobbly legs to his bed. Foxglove filled the old cast-iron bathtub, and they sat in it together drinking parsnip wine. They were both too tired and shaken to cook, and they went straight to bed.

Light o'Love woke to sounds from the kitchen and the smell of bacon. Foxglove still lay asleep beside her, and Light o'Love lay looking at the ceiling until the door opened. The X-Father came in wearing one of Foxglove's frilly dressing gowns and bearing a tray loaded with a proper breakfast.

"Sit up, sit up!" he demanded. "Will you give me some room to set the tray down? I'll go and bring the coffee this minute."

They could not resist. Foxglove sat up and stretched. Her full little breasts lifted and dropped again, and she smiled. "Sit up, Light. I know he just wants to look at you but I'll make sure he doesn't touch. He owes me first."

Light o'Love pulled herself up and looked at the fried eggs, and the mountain of bacon, fried tomatoes, and black pudding. "He knows the way to a girl's heart, doesn't he? He can have his way with me as long as I'm allowed to eat first."

Ryan came back in with mugs of coffee. "There we are now. Just what the doctor ordered after a hard night of curing the sick and wounded. Are you feeling well, both of you?"

"Hungry," said Light o'Love, reaching for her mug. "Ask me again later."

Later, after they had sent Ryan to do the washing up while they got out of bed and dressed, they sat around the kitchen table with a second coffee.

Ryan tried to explain what had happened to him. "I knew all along that something was wrong, I suppose. It all comes of not listening to myself, just like always. I knew it over the phone. I was speaking with Pretty and she just wasn't right. So, in I go, all smiles and innocence to ask her what the problem was, and it got me. Just like that. I'm holding Pretty to give her a Christmas kiss, and she isn't fighting and pretending she doesn't like it, she's just standing there like an accountant. And damn me if that thing doesn't reach out and grab me, pretty as you please. So I ran away. You know the rest," he ended lamely.

"Can you remember what we did last night?"

"Well now, it's usually me asking the girls that in the morning. Sure, I remember some of it. It hurt like having a red-hot poker stuck up my... It hurt like hell, so it did. But, it's gone altogether now. I can't feel a thing."

"I can!" said Foxglove. "Will you look at my arm? And, that's after Light tried to magic the bruise away. You don't know your own strength."

"I did that? Well now, come along now and I'll kiss it all better for you. Light won't mind."

"Later, later. And it's Light you ought to be thanking. The bloody thing had just about got me when she took over and carried it away for the Goddess to deal with. Light's the one to thank."

"Well then, I'll kiss her better too, but afterwards. Beauty and age first, my dear. And then, youth and beauty afterwards."

"You're a terrible chancer, Padeen. And, if you think you're getting your leg over Light without my permission, and hers, of course. Now concentrate. What's happening at the Institute? Do you think they've all got the same thing?"

"The Professor didn't sound right when I called her from Poland," said Light o'Love.

Ryan spoke seriously for once. "I think you'd have to say that they've either all got it, or somehow they've managed to cure themselves. And, I'd bet a king's ransom they were surprised before they realised what was happening. It'll be easy to check. Just telephone them on Monday morning. If one of them's got it, they all have."

Chapter 14

“You know, Padeen really scared me,” said Foxglove. “I think I might have been taking him for granted. I really missed him when he wasn’t there.” They were walking on Formby beach, working up an appetite for Sunday lunch. The wind from the Irish Sea did not relent in its efforts to bowl them over, and talking was difficult.

Light o’Love put her arm through Foxglove’s. “Well, he’s back again now. Perhaps you’ll have to be kind to him more often.”

“Oh, that... More sex won’t help at all. No matter how much sex the randy bugger gets, he’s always ready for a bit more. And, a girl can only handle so many orgasms in a week, believe me. But maybe we should have another go at living together.”

“You tried it before?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t a success. We always ended up striking sparks off each other, and he’d disappear for a few days at a time. In the end he bought his little house and now he just visits.”

“You couldn’t get him a house a bit nearer? Or, build something in your back garden? A granny flat?”

“A granny flat. Now that’s an idea. Why not? I wonder if the council would let me. Mmmh, it might work. And, Padeen could build it himself, he’ll enjoy that. I’m not sure I will. He always drags me in when there’s heavy work to be done, like mixing concrete or something. I hate concreting. I’m stiff for days afterwards, and the dust gets in your hair, and you have to get it all smoothed just right before the stuff starts to set, I hate it. Padeen doesn’t much like it either, but he enjoys the rest of it. Says a bit of proper work is good for him, along with all his lecturing and writing.”

“It’s a bit hard to imagine him as a builder...”

“Oh, there’s a lot to Padeen that he doesn’t let show. And, him just marching into the Institute to rescue Pretty, that’s typical. He’s never one to

think twice if a friend or a pretty girl needs help. And, Pretty is both. He's got a thing about her long legs, and he's climbed them a few times..."

Her nonchalance shocked Light o'Love. "You don't mind?"

"Mind? Look, I've already told you I can't keep up with him. I don't think any mortal woman could. In spite of what he says about me being kind to him, I never am. Never! We only make love when I want some too. I never do it as a present or a reward. And then, we do it properly and I come so much, I can't even think about it again for the rest of the week. I could try and make him tie a knot in it while I get my energy back, but where's the fun in that?"

"He had enough stupid celibacy when he was a priest. As long as he keeps coming home, I don't care if he gets Pretty or anyone else to give him a hand. Or anything else, come to that. He never lies to them. They know he's only out for sex and if that suits them, fair enough. He's very good at it, you know. You should try him sometime. I've heard a couple of people say that the occasional afternoon with Padeen is the only chance they have of a good orgasm, and they live a boring life in between. Mind you, I think most of that's just their own laziness. Padeen doesn't care for women who have trouble with sex, but that doesn't stop him being generous and trying to solve their problems."

"Can he help with the trouble in the Institute?"

"No, not at all. If he could get out his bell, book and candle and scatter holy water everywhere, that might make a difference. I really don't think that symbols will be much help at the moment. Whatever it is needs real power if you're going to beat it, and Padeen just doesn't have the strength. I'm afraid you're going to have to roll up your sleeves and do it yourself. I'll help you as far as I can, and Padeen can make the tea for us afterwards."

"I'm not sure. I'm mean, last night Padeen wasn't fighting us. He's not strong enough. Imagine if he'd been stronger and working together with the scab? I had enough trouble as it was, but with someone who has power of their own... Like the Professor or Nick. It would be hard enough fighting against either of those in the normal way of things, but with the scab as well? I'm not going to even try."

"What are we going to do, then? We can't just leave them."

“We need help. I think tomorrow morning we’ll just call the Institute to see what they sound like, and if things are how we think they are, we should call Dr. Panek and Rossiter. They’ll know what to do.”

They walked along the strand line in silence, enjoying the violence of the wind and spray. In spite of her breakfast, Light o’Love had begun to feel hungry again. “When did Ryan say we should get back?”

* * * *

They burst into the house with their faces glowing, demanding food. Ryan was sitting in the kitchen reading the Sunday paper. The rich smell of cooking filled the air. “Oh, you’ve decided to come back, have you? And, me thinking that I’d have to eat the whole damn thing myself. Get your coats off and come and tell me what a treasure in the kitchen I am. And I’ll make someone a wonderful wife one of these days, so I will.”

He had laid the table with Foxglove’s best cutlery and glasses. He brought steaming bowls of potatoes and cauliflower to the table, and then his masterpiece, a casserole of lamb. Foxglove played mother and served while Ryan produced the wine. “And now, Milady, I’m offering Nature’s magnificence, all the way from France.” He poured a careful sample into Foxglove’s glass and she sipped suspiciously.

Her eyes widened. “Padeen, what is that? It’s fantastic!” She grabbed for the bottle. *Côtes du Rhone Villages 1959*. “1959? Padeen, this must’ve cost a fortune!”

“No, no. Not at all. Of course, I had to mortgage the house, but if it gives Milady pleasure, it’s all worth it.”

“Oh yes, it certainly gives me pleasure. Perhaps I might have to drink it all myself.”

“Well now, the lady I know couldn’t bear to drink alone and her friends with their tongues hanging out.” He took the bottle and filled their glasses. Light o’Love felt a bit of a fraud as she sipped. She had no experience at all of expensive wines, but she did like this one. It tasted just so smooth, so rich. And, with the flavours of the lamb as well...

Ryan sat with the last of the bottle while they washed up. It was the least they could do after such a meal. When they had finished and hung up the drying cloths, Foxglove asked, “Padeen, shall we go and relax in the back? I

don't feel like doing much, and we've got a busy day ahead of us tomorrow, I expect."

They threw their clothes onto Foxglove's bed and went into her special room. Ryan's erection pointed the way. "And you can put that away," said Foxglove. "We're just going to relax, have a siesta maybe. He just can't help himself, Light. He's no more than a randy old goat, and proud of it. Rob the pillows from my bed, would you? We may as well be comfortable."

When Light o'Love got back, Ryan already lay on his back in the centre of the circle, his cock unashamedly stretched on his belly. Although she tried not to look, Light o'Love's eyes were drawn to it. She wanted to examine it a little, and compare it with Piotr's.

Today she cast the circle herself, with Foxglove standing close behind her. Her first time and she felt proud to kneel at the altar and welcome the Goddess into her heart. The girls went to cuddle up to Ryan. They lay together with his arms around them and their heads on his shoulders. Light o'Love felt warm and comfortable. Looking down through the hair on Ryan's chest, she could see his cock staring at her with its single eye. It looked vaguely threatening.

Foxglove played with the hair on his chest, teasing it out and winding strands of it around her fingers. "I love this room, you know. It's just so, safe, I suppose. If I'm feeling down, perhaps worried or just over-worked, I often cast a circle and just sit and relax. And, the magic we've made here... Clients never see inside. When I'm scrying fortunes, charming warts or anything like that, I always use the front room. This room's for my special place. I only ever use it for the Craft, and I think the magic is soaking into the fabric of it. It's like a good guitar or violin. It gets better the more you use it."

"Or like me," suggested Ryan.

"Okay, okay. You also get better with age and usage, I suppose. You're certainly a lot better than when I first had you. That was just before he left the Church. Just an enthusiastic young priest, and all energy and no sense at all. Still, from what I understand about priests, I was lucky he laid me on my back that first time. I think he wanted to make up for all those lost years in our first night. He just wouldn't leave it alone. I even woke up with him inside me once. That was the limit, I sent him off to the sofa so I could get

some sleep, but he ambushed me before breakfast, and did me twice more before I could slow him down. The goat!"

"Well, I'd built up a powerful head of steam, you know. Even the altar boys had begun to look attractive, spotty youths that they were. Not to mention the demure young thing in the front pew, always flashing those sly eyes at me."

"Sly, is it? That's not what you said when you were trying to bed me. Nothing was too sweet for me then. My eyes were full of mystery and grace then. There's some words a woman remembers, you know."

"Well, and they're still full of mystery and grace, when you want them to be. Did I say that? Mystery and grace, that's pretty. Now I wonder did I ever try that on anyone else?"

Foxglove tugged at his hair and Ryan yelped. "You'd better not try them on anyone else, they're mine, understand? Sometimes I think you're all cock and no principles. No wonder you fitted so well into the Church."

Ryan reached up to stroke her hair. "Oh, but you're a sweet woman when you want to be. There's no one like, and that's a fact."

"You see, Light? He's just thinking that if he's nice to me for a few minutes, I'll sit on his cock for him. I told you, we're just relaxing this afternoon. And maybe I'll take a little nap. No sex, so you can just put it away again."

"Well now, you can hardly blame it for standing up when it's so close to such a vision of womanly loveliness as yourself. You should take it as a compliment to your beauty, my nymph."

"Womanly loveliness! Listen to him. And you know perfectly well it'd stand up next to any female who might be soft enough to give in to you, no matter how old or fat she might be." Although she had said that she only wanted a siesta, she continued to play with Ryan's hair and his cock grew fatter and harder.

"Ah, it's just one of the burdens of being a gentleman. We have to stand up and be polite to every lady we meet, and treat them like angels even if their knees are welded together."

"What about Light then? Is it standing up for her womanly loveliness too?"

"Of course it is. Of course. And if I had two of them, they'd be standing up one for each of you, I'm sure."

“Two of them? God forbid, you make more than enough trouble with one. But I’m glad to see it’s standing up for itself again, Padeen. Yesterday it was as soft as a small pink jellyfish. No good to anyone, was it Light?”

“None at all,” said Light o’Love, entering into the fun.

“What do you think of it now, Light? Any good?”

Light o’Love giggled. “I’m sure it must be good for something.” Watching Foxglove tease was making her excited. She had decided that Ryan’s cock was at least as long as Piotr’s, and definitely fatter.

Foxglove took it in her fist and pointed it at the ceiling. Slowly she pulled its skin back to let the pointed, purple head swell and blossom in the open air. “Not bad, is it? And it’s been a few miles in its time.” She wriggled down the carpet until she rested on one elbow above her plaything. She moved her hand up and down, slowly exposing and hiding the head. “Mmmh, I love just playing with it like this. Here, you help...” She reached for Light o’Love’s hand and placed it on his balls. They felt big and hairy. Light o’Love let them rest in the palm of her hand and stroked them with the side of her thumb. Ryan sighed in contentment.

Light o’Love watched Foxglove nuzzling his cock, planting little kisses all around its head. Ryan’s eyes closed and he looked the picture of a man in Paradise. Foxglove caught her eye and gave her a naughty smile. She lifted the thick root to her lips and, without taking her eyes from Light o’Love’s, gently slurped the shiny head into her mouth. “Aaaah!” said Ryan softly. A spasm ran through Light o’Love’s hand. He was very excited.

Foxglove’s eyes had closed too, and she was nodding her head in complicated circles. Watching her savour his cock gave Light o’Love butterflies in her stomach. “I can’t wait,” said Foxglove and, kneeling over him, she pointed his pole at her pussy and firmly sat on it. He disappeared into her and she sighed, “Sweet Jesus, that’s good.” She had her hands on Ryan’s chest and looked down to where they were joined. She ground herself slowly around and around on his divine spike.

Light o’Love lay quietly and watched. Foxglove was completely absorbed in making love. She had wrinkles on her brow as she laboured to crush Ryan beneath her. She looked beautiful and innocent. Her long dark hair and her breasts swayed as she stirred herself deeply with his cock. A shudder hit her and she groaned. “Aaaah! It’s...” Another shudder shook her

and she stopped still with her head down and her face hidden in curtains of hair. She was softly panting. Light o'Love felt jealous.

Foxglove looked up and smiled guiltily at her. "I wasn't going to do this, was I? Never mind, it's either now or later. Would you like some? Come and try." Ryan's cock slapped wetly down onto his stomach as she dismounted. "Come on, try it. I've got it all ready for you." She held his slippery post up for her.

Light o'Love knelt over him and let Foxglove steer her onto Ryan's cock. The mushroom head probed her and quickly found its way. Sliding down onto him brought relief. Now she was stretched wide and full, more full than she had ever been before, and Ryan reached far up inside her. She sat and savoured the feeling.

"Move," ordered Foxglove. "Use him!" Light o'Love tentatively moved upwards and allowed herself to drop back down onto Ryan's cock. It reached further inside her and Light o'Love caught her breath.

"Are you alright?" asked Foxglove.

"Very alright," said Light o'Love in a strained voice. "I've never felt such a big one. It's good..."

"Want some too," muttered Foxglove and, throwing a leg over Ryan's face, offered her sex to his waiting mouth. She steadied herself with her hands on Light o'Love's shoulders and carefully lowered herself. In moments she was biting her lip and panting as Ryan devoured her. Light o'Love caught her in her arms as she shivered and gave herself up to Ryan's licking. She rode his tongue for as long as she could before lifting herself up and looking down at Ryan lying wet-faced and smiling on the floor. "Slowly! And gently. And just the bits I want licked..." Ryan's smile disappeared from sight again as she tentatively brought herself within reach of his tongue.

Light o'Love had stopped moving. It was enough to feel Ryan inside her and to watch Foxglove as she dipped onto the rude tongue and then pulled away when the feelings became too intense. Light o'Love leaned forward and pressed down on her thighs, forcing her down and holding her where Ryan could attack. She did not resist, but hung over Light o'Love's shoulder and moaned incoherently. She drifted out of her mind, and Light o'Love only released her when the moaning faded into harsh panting.

Foxglove pushed herself back until she could sit on the carpet and cuddle her knees. She was breathing heavily and rocking from side to side as her excitement ebbed. "Oh God! You two will kill me..."

"That looked like fun," said Light o'Love. "Are you okay?"

"I don't know yet. You try it, I want his cock inside me."

Light o'Love moved over, reluctant to release the delightful pole inside her. With her eyes still closed, Foxglove guided it to her pussy and slumped down onto it. "Yes! That's it," she hissed through closed teeth. She sat still on Ryan's magic fulcrum.

Light o'Love offered herself to be licked. She caught her breath when Ryan's agile butterfly tongue flicked and glided around into her secret places. Foxglove watched her with bright eyes, knowing what was happening to her. It felt too much, but Light o'Love could not leave. A great wave built inside her and whirled her away. She was coming. She hung onto Foxglove and crushed her flower against Ryan's mouth. She could not move and he plundered her continuously.

She came to on all fours over Ryan's smiling face. For a moment he had driven her insane. Foxglove, rocking gently on Ryan's root, looked down at her. "Did you like that?" she asked, as if there could be any doubt.

"Oh yes. Wonderful. It was too much."

"Cuddle up and watch. I'm going to finish him off."

Light o'Love came to lie with her head on Ryan's shoulder and his arm around her. Foxglove knelt above them, in command and riding up and down in tiny movements. "I want to ride my broomstick," she announced and lifted herself off the erect shaft. It fell onto Ryan's stomach and she sank back again, pressing her wet lips around its base. She slid backwards and forwards along the length of it, kissing it with her wetness. "I love this," she said, "Broomstick riding is the best thing in the Craft. Just don't go too far and rub the head of it with your hair, or it'll give up on you." She began to pant again and quickly came to a halt as another orgasm rippled through her.

"Now, Padeen. Paint my clit. We want to see you coming..."

She lifted herself up on one knee and knelt high above him. Her pussy shone wetly and her inner lips hung swollen and open. With his hand Ryan lifted his cock to her and brushed it along her clit. "Aaah yes!" she hissed.

“That’s it. Do it! Hard and quickly!” With rapid strokes Ryan rubbed himself on her.

“Oh Padeen...” she squealed in agony. “Now, now, come on my clit!” Ryan grunted and rubbed her faster. “Oh – oh - oh,” she cried and suddenly he was coming. He held himself against her and bathed her in cream. For an instant Foxglove watched it happening, and then moved to spike herself on his pulsing cock and collapse shivering onto his chest.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” she said, when she had her breath back. “You drive me mad.”

Ryan pushed at her thighs, persuading her to lie between his legs with his root still inside her. Light o’Love stroked her hair and pulled wisps from around her face. Together they lay still and Foxglove’s eyes began to close.

“Better get off me, lass. You’re nowhere near the nymph you used to be.” Ryan helped her to slide over and lie under his arm.

Foxglove smiled contentedly across him and giggled at Light o’Love. “That was great, but what about you?”

“Oh I had enough too, and it was fantastic to watch you. You looked so sexy, I had no idea.”

Foxglove gave her a cat-who-got-the-cream grin. “I told you he’s very good. Next time, you should ride his broomstick. It’s fun.”

“When you’ve quite finished offering my services to all and sundry, I think I should decide who rides my broomstick. It’s a very unique privilege, and not everyone gets the chance.”

“I’m not offering it to just anyone, only Light. And she deserves it, if anyone does.”

“Well, if you put it like that...”

“I’m sure she’d like you to put it in all sorts of different ways, but not just now. Squeeze me. Mmmh, that’s better. I need to be cherished now and again.”

Foxglove lifted her head again. “You missed the Christmas party, Light. You should have seen him there, he was like a child in a toy shop.”

“Ah, but what toys!” said Ryan.

“Of course, you won’t have heard!” said Foxglove, raising herself on one elbow. “Your friend Skyler danced on the table.”

“Skyler? Really? I’d have loved to see that.”

“And there’s more, she took her top off! It was all I could do to stop the mad priest from jumping her there and then.”

“No, I can’t believe it. Skyler took her shirt off, but she’s so shy of her breasts.”

“Not that night. We’d all had a bit to drink, of course, and we were dancing. Then there was a bit of a fuss in the corner, and the men were helping her up onto the table, and she danced. It was great, everyone clapping and shouting, and she loved it.”

“But what did the Professor say?”

“Nothing, she cheered and clapped with the rest of us. And then, Padeen shouted for her to strip and everyone joined in.”

“And she did? Padeen must have enjoyed that.”

“I certainly did, and so did everyone else. She didn’t strip exactly. She was wearing a sort of top that crossed at the front and dipped very low. It showed just about everything anyway, and her buttons were standing up, they would’ve poked your eye out.”

Foxglove joined in. “It was a sort of maroon-coloured top. Crossed in the front and tied at the back. I think she might have had a bra to start with, but by the time she got on the table it had gone. She danced for a while and after all the shouting, she just pulled the top open, and let her tits fall out. They looked fantastic.”

“That was a night, that was,” said Ryan. “They’ll be talking about it for years. And the way the three of them danced, ah, it was sweet to see them. A privilege to remember.”

“Three of them?” asked Light o’Love.

“Well now, yes, all three of them. Everything was moving in different directions at once as she danced, I hardly knew what to be looking at.”

“And that’s not all,” said Foxglove. “Someone sat on the photocopier. Two people and you’ll never, ever guess who.”

“Come on, tell me.”

“Well, Godiva was one...”

“No, it can’t have been!”

“Yes, it was. I’ve got one of the copies somewhere, I’ll show you later.”

“Godiva, I can’t believe. Whatever is the Empire coming to? But, I’m glad. She really needs to let her hair down sometimes. Who was the other? Anyone I know?”

“If you think Godiva was hard to believe, try this. Siok!”

The idea stunned Light o'Love. She could not imagine Siok doing anything remotely sexy. “Are you sure? Not Siok.”

“Yes, one hundred percent definitely her. No possibility of a mistake. Not that I'd recognise her from that angle, but I was there.” said Foxglove.

“You were there? So why didn't you sit on it yourself? I'm sure Padeen would have appreciated a picture.”

“Of course he would, but he's got far better ones than that. I went off to a proper photographer once and did everything you can imagine in front of the camera. A big fat album of the naughtiest photos you ever saw. So a photocopy would have been a bit dull.”

Ryan did not let her get away with half-truths. “Now if she was telling you the whole truth, it was because she wasn't wearing any knickers. Isn't that so Nymph? And she didn't want to leave a big wet kiss on the glass for Siok and Godiva to admire.”

“Foxglove, you *have* got a dirty mind,” said Light o'Love. “It must be Padeen's influence.” But, Foxglove would not be drawn, her eyes were heavy and she wanted to snuggle up and relax.

Chapter 15

In the morning, Light o'Love called the Institute. It was hard to talk to Pretty and remember what she had been like. Her voice sounded lifeless and she did not respond to Light o'Love's chatter or good wishes for the New Year. Neither did Ari when her call was put through to the library. Light o'Love put the phone down with tears in her eyes.

Foxglove had listened at her shoulder. She shrugged. "Well, now we know. It's time to get serious. We can call Tamara right now, and Glen this afternoon."

They booked a call to Poland and made tea while they waited. When they finally got through, Tamara was all business. She took them through the evidence from the Institute and the freeing of Ryan. Her lawyer's background showed. Then abruptly she said, "I will come to Krakow today. I will fly and will come in Liverpool tomorrow. Now give me address and telephone number." Her last words when she rang off were, "Do not go near to Institute! I will come soon to you."

Foxglove had two customers that morning, a lady who came in for regular readings, and a troubled businessman who knocked at the door without an appointment. Light o'Love sat with her as she looked into her customers' futures and wondered at the clarity in which she viewed the woman's coming week. Not that anything eventful showed on the horizon. It looked like a normal, boring week to Light o'Love.

The businessman was a different case. Foxglove struggled to achieve anything fixed. Pictures whirled into view, and quickly mutated into totally different scenes. A woman returned again and again, a tall dyed blonde of perhaps 45. She projected strongly, dressed only in high heels, stockings and a red suspender belt. She was not sympathetic to the businessman. Over it all hung a cloud of pain, tension, and worry such as only the lack of money could bring.

When the customers had left, Light o'Love made toasted cheese and tea for lunch. Foxglove sat quietly. "I hate customers like that," she said at last. "All sorts of trouble hanging over his head, and no clear road out of it. That wife of his..."

"Are you sure it was his wife? He might just have been embarrassed."

"No, it was his wife. Things feel completely different when they try to lie. The picture doesn't come through at all. But, he says she hasn't worn that suspender belt for ages. Now I don't know if I was seeing his dreams or reality. Perhaps she has actually been wearing it, but for someone else. Either way, I didn't like her very much. He really needs to get away from the bitch. Not that dumping her will help with the money problems. I don't know. I'm not going to get any clear view of the future unless he takes some decisions. If he does that, I might be able to tell him if he's making a mistake or not, or what other things might happen as a result. I wonder if he'll come back? It's a hard way to earn thirty pounds, whichever way you look at it. Sessions like this morning leave me drained."

That impressed Light o'Love. Thirty pounds sounded like a lot of money to her, even if earning it was emotionally tough.

Foxglove had one more customer that afternoon and then they went off to see *Bonnie and Clyde* at the local fleapit. It was a violent and frightening film, but it stopped them worrying. Foxglove treated her to a Chinese meal afterwards, and that helped keep their worries at bay.

Rossiter sounded cheerful on the phone. He listened, asked if Tamara was definitely coming, and said, "Right, I'll try to get on a plane tonight. I'll give you a call from Heathrow." And that was that. Help was on its way.

The following day they had a call from Tamara, and then Rossiter called only half an hour later. He said he would take a cab into the city to try and travel up to Liverpool on the same train as Tamara. They called again from Kings Cross. In spite of their tiredness, they sounded cheerful and looked forward to Liverpool. Foxglove started to get their beds ready, Tamara in the spare bedroom and Rossiter on the couch in the living room. Light o'Love would have to share with Foxglove.

Breakfast next morning was a crowded and disorganised affair. With no jetlag to trouble her, Tamara rose bright and hungry. After his long trip east across the Atlantic, Rossiter looked as if he had been dragged out of bed at

three in the morning. He sat quietly over his coffee. They waited for Ryan to arrive before clearing the table and getting down to business.

Tamara knew about business meetings. "So, Ryan, first you will tell us everything that is happening to you."

Ryan told of his meeting with Pretty, how he had become infected and the desperate state he had fallen into afterwards. Foxglove and Light o'Love continued his tale through the removal of the scab and his immediate recovery.

"Doesn't sound like anything I've ever heard of," said Rossiter. "And you, Tamara?"

"Also, I do not know. Perhaps this is a new thing, and that is good, I think."

"A good thing?" asked Light o'Love.

"But, of course. If this is a new thing made by the Dark Light, then we know we can fight, yes? Is made by people, can be break by people."

"Don't you love her?" said Rossiter. "That's the way to think. And, I'm sure she's right. We just have to figure out how. But, let's have a look at your mind, Ryan. Light, show us where it was."

Ryan sat with eyes closed and his hands gripping the table edge while they probed and examined. Nothing showed, no trace or scar. Only memories of black, bitter, oppressing futility. They searched for his meeting with Pretty, saw his clumsy attempt to examine her and the ugly grasping beast snapping out of her to seize him and drag him down. After that, nothing. Just a slowly accelerating slump into nothingness.

"Is terrible thing, Ryan," muttered Tamara. "Too terrible. I have no impression was bad like this."

Rossiter tapped the table as he thought. "I think that we're lucky the girls got to Ryan when they did. He was declining all the way through, did you get that idea? I think he would have ended up shooting himself, and he wasn't far from it when you stopped him. What do you think, Ryan? Were you going that way?"

"It's true..."

"Let me think about that for a while. Now, your turn, Foxglove." Light o'Love travelled with them. They watched as Foxglove reached tentatively for the scab, saw it bristle and jump to trap her. She was violently thrown

aside and saw no more. Her next recollection was of having her face stroked by Light and a feeling of terror departed.

Light o'Love opened herself to them. They entered and she relaxed until she felt them leave.

Rossiter looked impressed. "Wow, Light! The John Wayne of Liverpool! You're a real firebrand. Just as well, you're quick off the mark or who knows what might have happened. I guess the circle might have helped you, we'll never know what the Goddess might have done to save you. But you did just the right thing, obviously."

"Light, this was very stupid," said Tamara in her koroner's voice. "This was too dangerous. And you too, Foxglove. You must have called for help before, not after."

"Don't be too hard on them, Tamara. They didn't know, and Ryan might not have lasted until we got here. Anyway, it all worked out and at least we've learnt something from it. The question is, what do we do now?"

"Should we ask Dr. Couturier to come over?" asked Light o'Love.

Rossiter thought not. "I don't think we should risk getting him infected. I'll give him a call to brief him. We can write down everything we're doing and put it in the mail. Then, if we make a big mess of it, at least there'll be someone out there to start a rescue effort. If he comes over and we get it wrong, he'd go down the drain with the rest of us. So, where do we start?"

Tamara felt confident. "Now we will go to the Institute. All together. We will be enough strong and ready."

Rossiter would have none of it. "No, no, no! They're waiting for us. The Dark Light has been in the Institute for a couple of weeks now. I bet there'll be alarms bells sounding everywhere if we go anywhere near Institute property. We can't attack them like that until we know exactly what we're facing. They could have anything in there, and the big minds like the Professor helping them."

"Mmmh - is true," said Tamara. "First we must know what is to happen inside. Then we can go and fight. But, we must be quickly or the people will killing themselves like Ryan."

"Maybe," mused Rossiter, "Once we know what we're up against, we can do something on a big scale. But, I'm thinking out loud here, the Institute was probably infected before Ryan by a week or more. Has there been anything about suicide in the papers? You said you'd telephoned Pretty

and Ari at least, and they are still alive. I wonder if the Dark Light wants to keep the Institute running, at least for the moment. That would make sense, they could be setting it up as a great big trap to catch people like us. Perhaps they let Ryan decline because he is unimportant or perhaps they just didn't know he'd been infected. So, losing him wouldn't have mattered, but if any number of Institute staff start shooting themselves... It'd be in the papers, police everywhere, the Dark Light wouldn't want that."

"So let's just catch someone and bring them here," said Light o'Love. "Once we've fixed them, they should be able to tell us what's going on inside."

"Is good, Light. First reconnaissance, and then attack. This is the correct way. We will take the Professor."

"The Professor?" Light o'Love was worried. "She's very strong inside, couldn't we start with someone like Pretty? Or Ari?"

"No. When we take someone, then quickly the Institute may know. So, we take someone who knows everything, and in the morning we make a big attack before they can be ready. If it is possible. We must start with the Professor."

Trapping the Professor was easier than Light o'Love had imagined. She spent the late afternoon slumped in the back seat of Ryan's car, parked by the bus stop nearest to the Professor's house. Ryan watched the mirror as they waited. At quarter to six, and in the gathering dark, a bus deposited the Professor behind them. Light o'Love opened the door and simply ordered the Professor in. She came like a lamb, just as Ryan had done. As they rode to Formby and Foxglove's house, Light o'Love held the Professor's hand and calmed her, stroking her into tranquillity.

The others waited ready for them and they quickly led the Professor into the back room, shedding clothes as they went. They laid the Professor on the floor and stood around her, while Rossiter cast the circle. Foxglove's private room was becoming too small for them all.

Rossiter looked good, thought Light o'Love. She liked the play of light on his nude body as he stood with his back to them muttering his circle charms. His shoulders were broad and his legs well muscled and athletic. A prominent furrow ran down his spine, deep between strong muscles. It faded down into the cleft of strong, hard buttocks. It sprang into her mind that this was the most attractive bottom she had ever seen. She wondered if he had

managed to take Godiva on a date, and whether she would have a chance herself.

The Professor lay asleep on the floor between them, a small old lady with white curled hair. They had taken her glasses away and she looked confused in her nakedness. It felt indecent to be staring at her like this.

Tamara ordered them to their places. Light o'Love had the experience and she would take the lead. She knelt over the Professor's chest. Ryan sat behind her, providing the weight to hold the Professor's legs still, and Foxglove crouched beside her head, smoothing her hair and chanting softly to keep her asleep. At either side, with their hands on Light o'Love's shoulders, Tamara and Rossiter stood ready to support her.

Light o'Love took a deep breath. "Well, no point waiting, I suppose. May the Goddess help us all!" With Tamara and Rossiter beside her, she entered the Professor's mind. Her scab was large, covering a much bigger area than Ryan's. It exuded a dark and dangerous power.

Here we go, thought Light o'Love, hard and fast. She poked at it to make it rear up ready to strike, and then threw herself at it. She wrapped herself around it and pulled. In her grip the burning monster struggled, fought like a wild cat, and for an instant she feared it would break free. Then, the strength of Rossiter and Tamara helped her. They wrapped themselves around her belly and added themselves to the confinement of the beast. Still clutching her burden, she pulled up and out, putting all her force into uprooting it. A roaring filled her ears. She strained to her limit and held. The noise was increasing and over it all, someone screamed in long, lonely agony. She struggled, but she could not do this much longer. She gave a last effort and suddenly it broke free. She fell forward, off the Professor and towards the altar. Again, the cool presence of the Goddess washed through her and the ugly fire at her centre evaporated. She was left on all fours, sweating and shaking before the altar.

It had worked and she felt Rossiter sweeping the Professor up in his arms and holding her as he laid the circle to rest. He carried her out, leaving the rest of them silent on the carpet.

"*Bože!* I am shaking," said Tamara holding her hand out. "Look. And you, Light? You are well?"

Light o'Love had turned to sit with her knees up and her head resting on them. "I think so. That was tough. Do you think the Professor was fighting against us?"

"I think so no. She was asleep to us. This was just the infection."

"I don't know if I can do the whole Institute. It's too much. I'm not strong enough."

"Do not worry, Light. You did it very good. And, next time we will understand more, and we can give you more help. And, we will also have the Professor, I believe."

* * * *

She woke in the small hours to an empty bed. Low voices came from the kitchen. Bleary eyed, she staggered out of bed and went to the kitchen. The Professor sat at the table, fully dressed, drinking coffee with Foxglove and Tamara. The Professor jumped up with a big smile and came to hug her. "Happy New Year, Light! And, thank you, of course. Thank you very much. I hope we didn't wake you. Come and sit beside me."

Foxglove pushed a coffee in front of her and brought her red down jacket to keep her warm and cover her nakedness. "We're just planning, Light," said the Professor. "Glen and the X-Father will be here for a very early breakfast, and then we're going to take back the Institute. It should be quite a morning."

"But how -"

"Don't worry about it now. We'll go in two cars before the Institute opens, and take over the basement. Nowadays people have been coming in and going straight to their offices. They don't seem to do anything, just sit there. At least, I don't think I was doing anything... We'll have our altar set up ready, and we'll kidnap people one at a time. Thank God the students are not around. At least there won't be too many people to deal with."

Light o'Love cuddled her coffee. "Professor, do you know where the infection came from? How did it get into the Institute?"

"The short answer is Nick. He made a stupid mistake I think, imagining he was smarter than he is. He brought it in, hidden inside him. He came to my office and said he wanted to show me an experience he had had the night before. I looked into him, and it just reached out and grabbed me, as simple

as that. Then I think he went on and spread it to the rest of us. He seems to be running the Institute now, I certainly wasn't doing it."

* * * *

They drove through the early morning darkness. There was little traffic on the road so early and under the orange street lights the city looked foreign and threatening. Light o'Love struggled between fear and excitement. There were no other cars parked outside the Institute. Ryan took Rossiter and the Professor right to the door. The Professor had the authority to deal with the alarm system. Foxglove, driving the other car, hung back waiting for the all clear. They watched the Professor unlock the door and the two scouts slipped inside. Light o'Love wanted them to come running back, to give up now so they could all escape immediately. The door closed and they waited.

Ryan had turned his car around, getting into position for a quick getaway, when Rossiter returned to the door to wave them in. Relieved to do something at last, Light o'Love jumped out and grabbed a large armful of blankets from the boot. The lobby of the Institute was unfamiliar, grey, and unwelcoming. She hurried down the stairs to deposit her load in the basement. It was untidy and dirty, with discarded plastic coffee cups lying scattered. The light on the coffee machine was not shining. She dropped her blankets on a table and went back for more.

They had managed to get all the material down to the basement and the cars removed before the Professor came downstairs. She was not happy. "We can't work in this squalor. Let's get the tables and chairs stacked over there. Foxglove, Light, do you think you could break out mops from the cleaners' room? We'll get this place clean before we start. We've got time, there's no-one upstairs and they won't be coming in for another three hours."

The last thing Light o'Love had expected to do on their commando raid was mop the floor, but that was what they did. They had warm soapy water and a mop, their weapons against the Dark Light. They hurried over the floor and used clean mops to flog it as dry as they could. Rossiter produced a length of rope and used it to chalk a circle that just fitted into the basement

area. Foxglove set about unpacking the altar she had brought from home and setting up the statue of the Goddess to preside over their work.

Rossiter and the Professor wrestled with the coffee machine. The light was shining again, but it needed to be re-filled and that process proved hard to understand. Tamara and Light o'Love pulled out chairs and sat watching. Tamara lit a cigarette. She blew a smoke ring and sighed, "Now we will find if we are enough strong or not."

"Do you think we might not be?"

Tamara thought for a while. "Is always possible to have surprise, but I think all is good. Perhaps it will be difficult, perhaps easy. But, we will succeed at the finish to take the Institute, I think. I do not know about the people, will they come to us or not. But we will try."

The Professor and Rossiter had persuaded Ryan to come and rescue them. He had got the machine open, but was standing and scratching his head. Light o'Love could not understand why they wasted time on it.

Neither did Foxglove. She had the altar up and the candles standing ready for lighting. "Professor, we're ready. Would you like to come in now?"

"One minute, my dear. We just have to get this machine working, and we can all have coffee."

"But Professor, we can wait without coffee," said Foxglove.

"Without coffee? Where's the fun in that? Don't worry, look, Ryan's getting it to work. It is alright, isn't it Ryan?"

"Sure, it shouldn't be long now. Just wait until the red light goes out."

Foxglove gave a snort of disgust and started spreading blankets on the floor inside the circle. Light o'Love went to help.

"Now!" said the Professor as the red light went out. "Who wants coffee?"

They sat on the floor in the circle, sipping coffee, and waiting. The Professor had cast the circle herself, taking a long time and using charms in a language Light o'Love could not recognise. As she explained over her coffee, they would not only be safe in their circle but anyone coming down the stairs would see only an empty room.

"We will sit here until we're sure everything is quiet up there, and then we'll go and grab Pretty. When we've done her, we'll work our way up the building. One person at a time. I hope they're not too long, this floor's hard.

And, we can't go out and get more coffee. Do you think we should have included the machine, Glen?"

"We'd have to unplug it or the power cable would be cutting the circle."

"Of course, I'm not thinking this morning. Why didn't we bring a thermos?"

Light o'Love tried to divert her. "Professor, how did Nick get caught?"

"You don't know? Of course not, how could you? It all started with those toys of yours. You remember they were walking around as if they owned the city? That was when you and Tamara left. Nick wanted to catch them and kept trying to persuade me. I didn't want to touch them because if the Dark Light made them so obvious, they must have expected us to do something. In the end, we agreed that he could watch them, see what they were up to, but on no account was he to go near them.

"And, that's where it stayed. Nick wasn't doing much conventional work; he spent most of his days trying to find out more about the toys. He'd arrive at the Institute at all sorts of odd times and tell me what he'd been doing, following the toys across half the city. Losing them too, most of the time. He thought he knew, more or less, where they lived, he suspected Edgehill, but he never found the actual building.

"I know just when it happened. One day after Christmas, the 28th of December, Nick turned up to work on the biggest motorcycle you've ever seen. It was huge, and made a noise like a diesel railway engine. Everyone looked out of their windows, of course, to see what was making the racket and there was Nick, getting off this monster. And, he had a girl on the back. We couldn't see much of her because she was all wrapped up in leather. She had a scarf across her face, and her helmet on. Anyway, Nick got off and the girl just scooted forward and took off with the motorbike.

"Nick came straight to my office. He was wearing a leather jacket over his normal clothes, can you imagine that? Nick is so careful of his appearance. He was smiling and said he had interesting news. We came down here for a coffee and he told me what had happened on Christmas Eve.

"He had been driving home at about seven in the evening, after the staff had met in the John Barleycorn for drinks, and he spotted the two toys. For some reason they were attacking a girl, the girl on the motorbike. Apparently, she had stopped to do up one of the straps on the pannier bags,

and the two of them tried to grab her. I can't imagine what they were going to do with her. Or to her. Anyway, Nick didn't stop to think. He quickly pulled up behind them and jumped out of his car. He tried to drive them away as hard as he could, but they did not seem to notice. He says he got close enough to push one of them, and they both ran off. The girl was all right. She'd broken a fingernail, I didn't think that sort of girl had fingernails to break, but otherwise there was no harm done. But, she was shaken, so Nick drove behind her back to her flat.

"She lived nearby and apparently has a nice flat, but covered with posters of motorbikes and rough pop groups. The Animals? Is that right? That was one, and there were some American ones as well, but I forget the names. She made Nick comfortable, and I suppose you can guess what happened next. He said that right from the beginning he had been suspicious of her and had checked her very carefully. I don't know how carefully he probed her mind, but I suspect he was too eager to get on with probing the other end.

"Now here's the really strange part, and thinking about it, it's what makes me sure she was not what she seemed. Nick liked her! He liked her so much that he spent Christmas with her, and even took her along for dinner with some friends. He's also very taken with her motorbike. Apparently, it's old and special, I forget that name too, but it's one of the ones that Lawrence of Arabia had when he was killed. Very big and powerful. He says he wants to buy one himself, and then the two of them can go cruising in Europe. Does that sound like Nick?

"Anyway, he brought the girl to the John Barleycorn a couple of nights later. She calls herself Princess, and she's a nice enough person on the surface. Not at all educated, I think she works in a shop, but not stupid. Pretty, I suppose, but in a very severe way. She's pale with very black hair that reaches half way down her back, and she likes to wear dark make-up. I don't like the way she does it, but I'm not fashionable. Makes her eyes look like empty windows. Nick is obviously happy with it, and they behave just like a normal couple. I had a good look at her myself that first time we met, and I didn't see anything at all. She was just very taken with Nick, and he returned the feeling. I just shrugged my shoulders and thought that Nick had finally been trapped by the oldest magic in the book. It would probably do him good, even if it didn't last. He even asked if he could show Princess his

office that night. I didn't object. I was going back to my office for an hour or so anyway, and we walked together. They didn't stay long because I heard the motorbike leaving.

"It was next morning that he came to my office and infected me. I don't even want to think about what happened. I started to feel bad right away, and by the next morning I was shocking. Terrible. I don't know how my poor husband put up with me over the next couple of weeks. He's been terribly worried. He told me he'd even been to the doctor to ask advice. He's happy now, I think he almost cried over the phone when I called him last night. As soon as this is over, I'm going to take him fishing. He deserves it."

The Professor shook herself to get rid of the memory. "Well, Light. Are you feeling energetic? We've got a lot of work to do this morning."

"I'm not sure, Professor. I don't think I can do it for everyone. It's very hard... Do you remember what happened to you last night?"

"No, didn't feel anything. I just woke up in bed. I'd been dreaming about the Greek Islands in summer. Very pleasant when it's January in Liverpool."

"Well, you'll see. It's a lot of work. Ryan was bad enough, but you were really difficult. I was forcing myself as hard as I could, and it still wasn't easy."

The Professor patted her hand. "Never mind, my dear. We'll all help you this time. Just show me how it goes on Pretty, and then perhaps you can even rest and let one of us do it." She looked at her watch. "Still at least an hour before the first ones arrive. We may as well get comfortable."

Chapter 16

Light o'Love woke with her face buried in the folded blanket she had been using as a pillow. Someone was shaking her. "Wake up," said Rossiter in a whisper. "No more beauty sleep. We'll be starting soon."

She sat up and looked around her. The Professor laid the circle to rest, and as she and Rossiter started for the stairs, the rest undressed. Light o'Love quickly slipped off her clothes and dropped them on a table outside the circle. The room was cold and she was quickly covered with goose pimples. Foxglove lit the candles, ready to start.

Sitting in silence, they heard a door open on the floor above and click shut again. The sound of footsteps on the stairs, and the Professor and Rossiter stepped into view, supporting Pretty between them. She looked embarrassed and had difficulty walking, as if she had been drinking. She smiled sheepishly as Foxglove and Tamara got her out of her clothes. Rossiter quickly cast the circle again, and for a moment, they all stood and faced the altar, Pretty in the middle with friendly arms around her. They laid her down and Foxglove caressed her to sleep.

Without speaking, they took their positions. When Light o'Love was ready, she looked at the Professor.

"Go on, Light. We'll be with you."

Confidently she pushed into Pretty's mind and seized her scab. She knew what to expect now and quickly overwhelmed its resistance. A thrust from her friends and they were out again, in front of the altar and letting the Goddess wash them clean. Light o'Love stood standing alone as the circle was broken. They wrapped Pretty in a blanket and laid her on one side. It had all happened so quickly. Light o'Love was surprised at the ease of it. She lifted her hand up and found it trembled uncontrollably. Perhaps things had not been so simple.

“Get your clothes on, Light! It’s your turn. Let’s get up to the first floor before anyone realises something is going on.”

In bare feet, she followed the Professor up to the first floor and the lecturer’s rooms. The Professor pushed open the door of the first room. Paul Grimes sat at his desk. No work lay in front of him. He looked at them steadily but gave no response.

“Go on, Light. But *quietly*...”

Light o’Love ordered him to follow them. He did not want to go. He resisted and gripped the desk. Light o’Love gave him a little push and he stood up and walked between them. He said nothing, had no expression on his face. He might have been sleep-walking.

They laid him down on the floor and were about to start work when something made Light o’Love look up. She caught a flash of movement at the top of the first flight of stairs. The Professor held up a hand to stop everyone. They were all looking at the stairs when he came.

Rostov was hurtling down towards them, leaping down the stairs with animal hatred in his contorted face.

“Now, Light...” cried the Professor, and they fought against him. Light o’Love tried to reach out through the protective wall of the circle, to grab him and throw him down. The circle resisted her. She could not push through. She felt as if she were striking a blow under water. The protection they had given themselves held her back. Outside the circle, she could move only slowly and her attempts to reach Rostov lacked force.

Rostov skidded to a stop and stepped back out of her reach. For a moment, he looked contemptuously at his old colleagues. “You have lost!” he spat, “We will come for you.” He turned and ran back up the stairs. The heavy front doors of the Institute were pushed open and they heard the heavy cough of his motorbike being kicked into life.

“That should make things easier,” said the Professor calmly. “Come on, Light. Let’s fix Paul.”

This fight was nothing like the easy victory they had won over Pretty’s scab. Paul’s looked bigger and seemed to possess power in some relation to that of its host. Grappling with it took longer, and drained more from Light o’Love. She was panting and trembling afterwards as they sat on the floor and looked at Paul. He lay grinning in his sleep, and he had colour in his cheeks.

"Oh look!" squeaked Foxglove. Paul's cock slowly unfolded itself, just as Ryan's had done. Light o'Love watched in fascination as it filled and stiffened, finally swinging up in a long slow arc to lie rigid and twitching on his belly.

"Well, I think we can all guess what he's dreaming of," said the Professor. "Let's wrap him up in Pretty's blanket, and they can keep each other warm. Men, I was dreaming of beautiful Greek islands afterwards, and look at him! Sex on the brain, same as the rest of them.

"Come on people, stop staring, and get moving. Are you coming with me again, Light? I think you better had, if you can manage it."

Holly was as difficult to deal with as Paul had been. By the time she was lying at peace, Light o'Love sat exhausted with her head on her arms. She felt cold and shaken. She needed a rest.

The Professor patted her on the shoulder and told her to relax. "It's old Bonely next. He shouldn't be too much trouble. I think I'll have a go myself. You can help and make sure I don't make a mess of it."

Dr. Bonely did not look very impressive stretched out naked on the floor. He had thin, old man's legs, and a round tummy. He was hairy, on his chest, and he had a wiry nest of grey and white at his centre.

The Professor readied herself. "So watch me carefully, Light, and don't let me make a fool of myself. Afterwards I think you might see something surprising." She settled her broad bottom on his narrow chest. If only Dr. Bonely could have seen what was happening to him, it would have been the high spot of his year.

They crowded around the Professor as she made a tentative grab for the scab. It almost escaped her. She hung on grimly as it tried to escape, and she fought to reel it in and wrap herself around it. The others tried to help, but they too had been caught by surprise. Light o'Love frantically tried to encircle both the Professor and the beast in one, and force the struggling mass back to where it could be held still. Slowly the Professor got on top of it and, together, they all lifted it out of Dr. Bonely and up to the altar.

"Oh, oh, oh!" complained the Professor. "The bloody thing! It nearly got away. It was so hot, I could hardly touch it. My God, Light, that was hard work."

They all felt a bit shaken and sat quietly getting their breath back. The Professor watched Dr. Bonely closely. "Come on, man. Show us you're

grateful. Ah, here it comes.” Moments later Dr. Bonely had a wide smile on his face. An impressively large truncheon lay on his stomach and stretched up to his navel. Springing from his hair at a normal girth, it tapered up to a dangerous thickness behind its mauve, bullet head. It looked powerful and vigorous, quite unlike his gentle academic character. “There you are, Light. I said you were in for a surprise. Let’s pop him in with Holly, and see what she says when she wakes up with that thing poking her in the back.”

The rest of the staff were easier to subdue and the Professor shared them with Light o’Love. Soon the circle was full of sleeping bodies and they led Ari down from the top floor for her cure. Rossiter decided he should try at least once for the sake of the experience. He looked very serious as he knelt astride the girl, his hands pressing her shoulders to the floor, staring at her blank face. They looked beautiful together, and Light o’Love felt instantly jealous.

Rossiter managed well. He made a small fumble as he gathered up the scab, but with their help he pulled it free. Afterwards, he looked shaken but proud to have done it.

Light o’Love sat at the long table they had put up in the basement. Ryan had just come back with a mountain of fish and chips wrapped in newspaper, and four glass flagons of cider. Around her, smiles and wide eyes ringed the table. They had achieved a great victory that morning. They had wrested control of the Institute from the hands of the Dark Light and returned it to where it belonged. But, she did not feel elated, only tired. Her batteries had run flat. Perhaps great victories always felt like this, and elation would come after she had caught up on her sleep.

Pretty produced more salt, pepper, and vinegar. She sprinkled them over the line of food in the centre of the table. The newly freed people tucked into it, talking with their mouths full. Ryan made sure everyone kept a full plastic cup of cider in front of them. Light o’Love reached for a chip. She had better try to eat now, while she had the chance.

“People, people, listen a minute,” called the Professor. “I just want to say ‘Welcome back!’ Thank God, and good luck, we’ve survived to fight another day. Now listen, we’re still in deep trouble. I don’t think we can claim to have moved forward, when all we’ve done is survive and win back the keys to our own home. We know that out there somewhere are some very dangerous people. Including Nick, I’m afraid. They nearly beat us this

time, and they may try again. So, here's what we're going to do. Firstly, take a holiday up to Monday next. Paul and I will be working on our security systems, and I hope Glen and Tamara will be able to stay long enough to help. We've got to be certain we can stop one of those horrible things ever getting through the door again, even if I have to sit at the door every morning and check everyone personally.

"Next, I want you to check everyone you've been associating with over the last couple of weeks. I don't think you'll find anything, but check anyway. And you'd better keep checking each other, but do it very carefully. You've all seen at first hand how quickly the blasted things can grab you, don't let it happen again. If you find anything, call for help.

"Lastly, term starts in two weeks and the place will be full of students. We've got to be ready to receive them safely and give them an education. I want you to devote all your energies to that.

"What else? Anyone? No, that's enough serious stuff for today. Ah, but there is something else. We've got to say thank you. Foxglove and Light are the ones who started off the rescue mission, and Tamara and Glen came over to help. Without them, I don't know what would have happened. We'd all still be sitting at our desks staring at the wall. And, that would be the best of it.

"So, raise your glasses people, let's have a toast! To our rescuers, God bless them!"

Light o'Love came in for many thank you's and pats on the back, and that felt good. She could eat her fish and chips gratefully now, so perhaps her depression was just a result of hunger and tiredness. All the same, she needed a rest.

"I think I'll go home and spend some time with Auntie Joan, if you don't mind," she told the Professor.

"That's right, my dear. But, I don't think you should tell her exactly what's been happening. It'd only upset her to no purpose. I'll have to send messages out everywhere today, to warn people. And, some of us will have to travel I think. Perhaps Foxglove would like a holiday on the continent. I'm sure Glen will do the States. But that's my problem. You go and have a good rest, and we'll see you in a couple of weeks."

Light o'Love told Ari she was going, and arranged for her to come down and spend a quiet weekend before term started. They could travel back together.

Chapter 17

The Transit minibus drummed north through the early night, past Lancaster and on towards the Lake District. The Open Air Club was having a National Trust working weekend. Hopefully, the first minibus had already got there, the tents had been put up, and supper should be cooking on the Primuses. Light o'Love looked forward to an invigorating couple of days in the mountains as a relief from the hard work they had been putting in at the Institute.

It had been strange to return to the Institute for the new term. The old place looked its normal, comfortable, down-at-heel self. Her friends were excitable, noisy students, all traces of shyness long gone. They gossiped, and talked of music and clothes. They studied with the confidence of old hands and now looked as if they belonged in the lecture room. Light o'Love found them all a little immature.

They did not really notice that Rostov had disappeared and that Ryan was now giving his courses. They regretted his expertise, but preferred Ryan's efforts. He had been studying frantically to stay ahead of his students. Rostov had not used anything as ordinary as notes he could crib. Ryan swore he was an idiot for letting himself get talked into lecturing about anything as dull and boring as geopolitics. In fact, his lectures were far from boring. He always arrived with some new piece of human folly to talk about, and it did not matter that he had only encountered it himself the week before.

No one spoke about the desperate times at the Institute. Light o'Love fended off questions about her early departure with descriptions of her Polish Christmas and skiing at Zakopane. The lecturers kept up a conspiracy of silence. Even the Dark Light was co-operating, the toys had disappeared completely. No-one at the Institute had seen or felt anything suspicious. The

toys had not reported for their court appearance. They had probably fled the country.

Skyler was full of herself. Dancing topless on the table at the Christmas party might have embarrassed some people, but it had given her a confidence in her sexiness. She took more care of her hair, wore make-up more often, and sometimes even tempting high heels. She had been a sensation back at home during the holidays. She had even made love to a complete stranger at a New Year's party. A virgin no longer, she had decided she should enjoy her time at University while she could.

Godiva was quieter and she did not open up until Light o'Love brought a bottle of Cyprus sherry home and invited her to share. While Light o'Love travelled to Poland, she had been invited to the theatre by Rossiter.

"It was really good, Shaw's Joan of Arc. I always like reading Shaw, but it's so much better seeing it in the flesh. I really enjoyed it, and I think he did too. He's very quiet, isn't he?"

Rossiter had not struck Light o'Love as quiet. Strong, confident, thoughtful, intelligent, but not quiet. "So, what else did you do? Did he take you for a drink?"

"He took me to the Adelphi for dinner afterwards. I didn't realise that they do things properly there. It was as good as most places in London. In fact, I think the wine list was better than most places in London, they have quite a range of older bottles. He let me choose the wine, and he said he'd never tasted anything as good before."

"Jesus, Godiva, I hope you didn't spend the poor man's annual salary."

"Oh no, I asked the sommelier and he found a good Beaune that they had forgotten about. Just a single bottle and at an old price. It wasn't bad."

Light o'Love brushed past Godiva's description of the meal. "But what did you do then? Did he take you to his room?"

Godiva looked shocked. "Of course he did! You don't think I'd just go home after he'd been to all that trouble? That would have been extremely bad manners."

"Ah, so it ended well. What was it like?"

"Well, a bit Victorian, to be honest. Very big - I was surprised. It had windows looking out on two walls. I think he must have got one of the better rooms. But the furniture and the decoration, they were new, but so old fashioned."

“Not the furniture, silly. What was it like making love to him?”

“Oh, that. It was fine, really. He’s very gentle and caring. I didn’t feel at all worried, and I think he enjoyed himself too.”

Inwardly, Light o’Love had shaken her head. If Godiva could not let herself go even after being wined and dined by a man like Rossiter, there was not much hope that she ever would. And, if she could not even manage to have proper sex, how could she ever relax enough to fall properly in love?

“So that was one man. I hope you got my message from Ari that you had to try at least two?” she asked without too much hope.

“Oh yes, I got the message. And, I did try, really. I went to a rugby club formal just before Christmas. My friend took me, he’s a Harlequin already and I’ve heard he’s likely to play for England under-21’s soon. And then, chances are that he’ll end up playing at Twickenham one of these days, and he’s promised to invite me.”

“Well, he’d be a contrast with Rossiter, that’s certain. How was it with him?”

“Actually, we didn’t do it. I tried, really. But after all the drinking and singing and more drinking, he didn’t seem to want to. I think he went outside to be sick. He didn’t come back and I got a lift home with some friends.”

“Well, that sounds like a very English courtship. Did you see him again?”

“No, he’s a member of the Cresta Club, so he was off to St Moritz immediately after Christmas.”

“Anyone else?” but she knew the answer would be no.

“There really wasn’t time, honestly. We had to go and see my Grandmother in Norfolk. I went out with the hunt nearly every week, you know how it is after Christmas. And, my mother wanted to buy a new hack, she’s very particular so we trotted from stable to stable for ages before she found one that would do.”

And, what had Siok been up to after sitting on the photocopier? It was hard to get her to talk, but almost certainly nothing much. She had gone home to Singapore and went shopping with her sisters.

“But, Siok, no one can go shopping for a whole month...”

“When we finish here, right? When we finish in June, you come with me and we go to Singapore. It is very, very good for shopping. Every day

the shops are open until late, even for Christmas day, of course, but not so much for our New Year in March. And also, we can go to Malaya, to Kuantan and Mersing, and then to the islands. It is very beautiful. You wear bikini and go very brown. My brothers will like you, you are very sexy!”

One out of three, she thought. At least good old Skyler is coming alive and having a good time. She decided to make it a major study. How to get the three of them into adulthood confident, sexy, and ready to form adult relationships. It would be a test of her vocation, a severe test.

Now that Rostov had gone, her tutorials on cognodynamics had ended. The Professor said she had done quite enough damage over the holidays, and while they might do a little revision together before the end of the year, it was best to leave things as they were. Instead, she supplemented Foxglove’s lessons on charms with lessons of her own. The Professor had a memory like a herd of elephants, so there was a lot she could teach. Her tutorials were dry work, and Light o’Love filled stacks of yellow pads. All in all, February had been a tough time, and she was glad of the chance to take a break.

Around her, in the dark of the minibus, the others either slept or talked quietly. She did not know any of them well. Only Holly, and she was sitting at the front with her bearded boyfriend. Light o’Love slumped further down the seat and, with her knees jammed against the seatback in front, tried to doze off.

She was shaken awake as the minibus started uphill. In the headlights, drystone walls rushed towards them on either side. Too close. The roads here had not been designed in this century and were more suitable for packhorses. The bus swung and struggled as it negotiated its way across the hills into a flat-bottomed valley. It slowed as they finally reached somewhere and a brightly lit pub appeared ahead. *The Laughing Trout*. Just as they reached it, they swung onto a narrow side road and started to climb. They sat back in their seats as the minibus pointed its nose to the sky and chugged in low gear up towards the fells. It was a long climb.

The road flattened out high above the valley. The sky had cleared now and grey frost glazed the fields. It looked bitterly cold. Abruptly they slowed down and turned sharply into a farm entrance. They bounced down the unmade access road towards a cluster of low stone buildings and pulled up beside the other minibus. Cold air flooded in.

The tents stood a short distance away amongst the rocks of the home pasture. There was a little one for Holly and her friend, and two heavy bell tents as used by Boy Scouts the world over. The flap of one of them hung open and two large pots bubbled on Primus cookers in the entrance. They dropped their bags outside and squeezed in past dinner.

It still felt cold inside. Everyone was wearing all their clothes and sitting on folded sleeping bags to hold back the cold rising from the ground. But, they felt happy and passed a large bottle of Australian white wine from hand to hand. Tim waited for her, cheerful and smiling as always. Light o'Love parked her bottom on part of his sleeping bag and squeezed up close.

The temperature rose once dinner had cooked and the door could be closed. Packed in like sardines in their tin, they struggled to eat dinner without taking off their mittens. They did not wash up, that could wait for tomorrow, and they threw the plates out dirty onto the frozen grass.

An early riser stumbling over her woke her up. She peeped out of her hood. It was very, very cold. She puffed into the air and could see her breath. Getting up would be unpleasant. She slowly dismantled her pillow and pulled the clothes one by one into the warmth. They felt cold and damp, but they had to be worn. Tim groaned as her struggling disturbed him and he rolled away. Eventually she had dressed and it was time to unzip her sleeping bag and face the world.

Through the door flap she looked across a wide field to the fells beyond. The grass, silvered by frost, had been nibbled as short as a carpet by sheep. She could see rocks everywhere, sticking up through the turf individually or in ragged heaps where generations of farmers had thrown them in an unending battle to rid the soil of at least the largest stones. Beyond the stone wall of the field hid the grey slate roofs of the farm buildings, tucked into a slight hollow as shelter from the wind. It was a clear day with the promise of sunshine to come, but for the moment, the cold air hurt her nose and throat. She scrambled out of the tent and made for the nearest clump of rocks. This would be really cold...

No one else had got out of bed yet, so she collected the plates and pans and went down to the stream. It was also sleeping. Clear ice had frozen the cascading water into ornate terraces. She kicked a hole in the edge and, laying her mittens aside, grabbed a handful of sand to scour the plates. The

cold felt painful and her hands went white and dead very quickly. She went to pump some life into the Primuses and get some breakfast cooking.

The farmer came to show them what needed to be done. He was a young gangling man dressed in an old man's tweed jacket and flat hat. He was at home, but looked embarrassed to be talking to a crowd of knobs from the city. He led them down to the stream. He wanted them to build a bridge over the stream, and open up an all-weather route for his tractor to the fields beyond. The National Trust had provided decking, and old telegraph poles as load bearing beams. All the Open Air Club had only to build two large, stone abutments on either side of the stream. A big project. A lot of stone would be needed, and it would have to be collected and brought to the stream. The National Trust had provided wheelbarrows. The Open Air Club would donate the muscle to fill and push them.

Tim went with some of the men to prepare the foundations of the abutments. They took picks, crowbars, and shovels. The wheelbarrows belonged to the people who would be winning the stone. Light o'Love untangled one from the stack and headed for the nearest clatter of stone.

She had just dropped her first boulder into the barrow when Holly appeared.

"Hi, Light. How did you sleep last night?"

"Okay, I suppose. A few lumps and bumps. And you?"

"No dreams?" insisted Holly.

Light o'Love stopped work to look at her. "What happened?"

"I kept waking up. All night I think. I heard motorbikes, big ones, in the distance."

"You mean -" she thought for a moment. A big motorbike in February had to be Rostov. And perhaps his black-haired girlfriend, if Holly had heard more than one. "But why here? He can't be following us."

"Why not? Mind you, I can't imagine why he'd bother. If he wanted to find us, Liverpool would be the place. Although the Professor's been working on some local surveillance and discouragement... quite surprising, some of the things she's come up with. It's possible he wants to make contact and doesn't want to be anywhere near the Institute."

"Maybe he's living up here now."

"That's possible. It'd be a good place to live, although personally I'd give it a miss in winter. But, it didn't feel as if he was just hiding. I got threats and danger coming through my dreams."

"Oh hell! Why can't he just go away and leave us alone?" It was so unfair. Why did he keep on bothering Light o'Love? She remembered the fury and hatred on his face when they had last met, and their confrontation in his office when she had beaten him over controlling a simple pencil. Could the threat be personal?

"I think we'd better stay together, Light. And stay awake. I don't think he'd try anything when we're in a crowd, in daylight. Sleep with me tonight. I'll tell Rory something, tell him you're having a crisis or a story like that. He won't mind. We'll put a circle around the tent to hide us."

Together they half-filled the wheelbarrow and struggled to push it down to the stream. Their work was not appreciated by the men with picks, who sent them back to get boulders, not tennis balls. They spent the rest of the morning laying the wheelbarrow on its side and rolling single massive stones into it. Holly tied a rope onto the front guard of the barrow and, between them, they hauled and pushed the rocks down to the stream, one at a time. Around them, the others did the same, and every few minutes another boulder was delivered to the men who sweated and struggled to get it into position.

The wheelbarrow crews found themselves having to go further and further to find suitable rocks. Construction had started to slow down, when the farmer appeared with his tractor. They worked with him for a while, rolling large rocks into the link-box mounted behind the tractor. The strength of the man amazed Light o'Love. She and Holly struggled to turn a rock over, and he would jump down from the tractor and tumble it into the link-box without effort. "Years o' practice, m'dear!" was his recipe for success.

They had slowly gained ground on the builders when the farmer's wife called lunch and they trooped up to the farm. They ate in the half-empty hay barn. Weak midday sunlight streamed through the open door as they sat with the farmer and let his wife dole out steaming potato stew with bread and margarine on the side.

By the time the light faded, they had completed first abutment. A massive block of drystone masonry, the height of a man, stood beside the

stream. The farmer was pleased, and the students felt proud of their work, and a little surprised. The temperature had started to fall, and they took their stiff limbs off to cook supper.

Two hours later they wandered off down the hill. *The Laughing Trout* was beckoning.

To step through the door of the pub was to step into another world. Up on the hill stood their tents, where they lived in arctic cold with only the thickness of a canvas wall between them and death from exposure. Down here, the pub had bright lights, music, smoke, and laughter. They crowded to the bar for drinks all round. After the first one, they took over the dartboard to play the Open Air Club's own version of team killer. Their tired bodies soaked up the warmth, and Light o'Love knew that it would not be long before the alcohol and the warmth relaxed her completely. She switched to drinking orange juice and stayed at Holly's side.

Leaving the bar at half past ten demanded real moral fibre. Wrapped up in hats, scarves, mittens, all the sweaters they could find and with anoraks over the top of everything, they stepped out into the night. The road climbed steeply away from them, back up to the farm. For once, the wind and storms that attack the Lake District for most days in the year had faded to only a light breeze under a starry sky. The cold probed their clothes as, regretfully, they started the climb up through the trees. The road ran through the shelter of the woods and was free of frost, but it also felt dark and unwelcoming. The chattering stopped as they laboured up the hill.

Light o'Love stayed within touching distance of Holly and tried to peer into the forest. She could see nothing, and felt nothing wrong. They tried to keep in the middle of the group, but it became strung out, strong walkers at the front, the weak and tipsy bringing up the rear. The road snaked back and forth across the hill, breaking out into starlight at each hairpin. In between these islands, under the dark of the forest, they could see nothing.

Holly stopped and touched her arm. "Can you hear it?"

Light o'Love searched but found nothing. She shook her head.

Holly swung her around to face her and looked straight at her. Now she could feel it, deep, throbbing, ugly, terrifying. "Not just one," she whispered.

"No, at least two," said Holly. "We must hide, quickly." She called to the others, "I'm just stopping for a minute, don't wait. Light'll stay with me."

As they kept on climbing, they laughed and told her not to freeze her bottom off.

Light o'Love looked around. Just behind them, at a hairpin bend, stood a concrete salt bunker. They rushed behind it and crouched in its shelter. "Can you do the Hidden Circle charm?" whispered Holly urgently.

"I think so. The Professor taught me. I think I can remember."

Holly scanned the sky to pick up the North Star. Quickly she collected four pebbles to mark the cardinal points of the circle. They only needed a small one, just big enough for both of them. On the other side of the concrete bunker, some stragglers passed. A girl panted by saying "... even the barman. Or the barmaid. I'd have offered my body to anyone who would have let me sleep at the bottom of this damn hill." Behind her, growing louder, but still unheard, came the throbbing of the big motorbikes.

"Good, we're ready. Do the Hidden Circle with me now. And make it as strong as you can. Give me your hand."

She slipped her mitten off and took Holly's hand. Still crouching out of sight, they faced east and started chanting. She followed Holly's lead, uncertainly at first and then with more confidence as the words came to her. Fear drove her, and she gave everything she had to the charm. Her whispering blended with Holly's, their two voices echoing off each other and resonating louder. The strength of their voices grew beyond reason, but they did not falter in their charm. Was it only the echo of their words that filled the woods around them? A wonderful feeling of concord filled the air, of strength and safety. Light o'Love felt as if the two of them were only the smallest part of a celestial choir chanting the magic words.

They crouched in the centre of the circle and listened. Light o'Love could still feel the motorbikes, but she felt safe in her cocoon. Inside their circle, the noise sounded more like the buzzing of insects, and it was much less frightening without the primeval throbbing. Holly turned her around. "Now sit against me and empty your mind. Make it like a deep pool. Very still. You can receive everything but give up no secrets."

The ground no longer felt cold underneath them. Inside their protective circle, even the air was warm. Light o'Love sat and rested her back against

Holly's. She drained herself and became a cool dark forest pool, impossible to see into but ready to swallow anything that falls into it. She sat empty and waiting, hearing the throbbing engines but letting them pass her by. They had come much nearer now, driving fast up the valley, weaving from side to side with the turns of the road. They were coming. Soon they would reach the pub. Perhaps they would drive on. Perhaps they would stop. She knew neither of those things would happen.

She could hear the crunching of gravel beneath their wheels. She could hear the wind in the riders' clothing. Soon they would pass her.

The engine noises dipped twice, three times, as the bikes approached the pub and dropped into first gear. They turned and the revs picked up as they threw themselves at the hill.

The pool in the forest lay tranquil, silent as the night, ignorant of what passed on the road. Ignorant of the mighty engines being gunned around the hairpins. Ignorant of the two heavy bikes speeding up the slope and powering around the tight curve on the other side of the concrete bunker. Unaware of the engines' roar fading as they sped on to overtake the Open Air Club climbing slowly back to its tents.

They did not move. Light o'Love kept her mind blank and waited, the motorbikes driving into the quiet distance.

Holly moved first. "Get up, Light. We've got to hurry back to the tents. In case they come back again." They held hands and quickly laid the circle to rest. The cold night flooded back and surrounded them. They set off up the hill as fast as they could.

Light o'Love lay in Holly's sleeping bag. She felt good. Rory had gone off to sleep with the others in Light o'Love's single sleeping bag, and she was tucked in with Holly. They had cast a circle around the tent. Again, their voices had resonated together and they felt secure and protected.

"Is it always like that with two people?" asked Light o'Love. "I mean, when we cast the circle down there. It felt as if we had thousands of people chanting with us. Did you feel that?"

"Yes, and I've never felt it before. It felt a little bit the same just now, but nothing like that first time. I wonder what it means? We'll ask the Professor when we get back. It might mean that there was real danger and we were being helped somehow."

"Thank God for that," said Light o'Love. "It felt dangerous down there, but I can't feel anything now. Those motorbikes, they sounded awful. Like something from Hell. I could feel the vibrations inside me."

"Nothing sinister about that. They're very big bikes, Brough Superiors. Classics from before the war. Very rare now. Great big, slow engines, almost as big as the engine in my mini. I don't know anything about Nick's girlfriend, but she's obviously got taste when it comes to motorbikes. And strength too, I guess. Those bikes are really long and heavy. Well, I hope they've just gone on and given up. I suppose we can be sure it actually was Nick..." Holly left her question in the air.

"It would have to be, wouldn't it? It's night time in February. He and his girlfriend both have big bikes. I can't imagine anyone else looking for us. But, whoever it was, they've gone now." Light o'Love spooned behind Holly with her arm around her. "I like double sleeping bags, I've never tried one before. It's nice and warm, isn't it? I bet no one else is sleeping in just tee shirt and panties."

"No, but stay close. Don't go rolling off to one side or you'll leave a gap between us like a chimney to suck in cold air." She was holding Light o'Love's hand between her breasts.

Holding Holly felt good to Light o'Love. There was something about the smallness and softness of her body, comfortable and erotic at the same time. Not at all the same feeling as cuddling a man like Piotr. Light o'Love remembered her first night with Ari and how sexy it had felt to drive her wild. Doing the same to Holly would be fun. The thought excited her and, in spite of her tiredness, Light o'Love wanted to play. "Not tonight, Josephine," said Holly. "I don't want either of us giving off any shrieks of delight. We don't know who may hear them."

"Not fair. Can we make up for it when we get home?"

"Light, sometimes you're too much. We've just avoided a very dangerous situation, and you want to make love? Think about something else."

"Oh, I will. But, are you going to invite me when we get home? I mean, if you're going to reject me, I might have to roll over to the other side and sleep alone."

Holly pretended to be frightened. “You wouldn’t! Not that. Okay, okay. When we get home. If you treat me with respect. I respond well to a good Riesling and Boursin with pickled walnuts.”

Chapter 18

Light o'Love woke to the smell of bacon frying in the open air. The sheer delicious luxury of it had her out of bed and looking for breakfast in moments. Another clear day, they would be lucky again. There was a thick frost on the ground and no sign of rain. Soon the sun would peep over the top of the nearest fell and although it would not bring much heat, it would make everyone cheerful.

In the cold air the bacon and eggs grew cool and greasy as soon as they left the pan. Fully dressed with boots and anoraks, they ate standing up and enjoying the view. Breakfast tasted delightful.

Today they took their wheelbarrows across the stream to build the other abutment. They were old hands now and the work went well. By lunchtime they had the second abutment nearly complete and standing proudly opposite its mate. The farmer had begun to eye the old telegraph poles that would bridge the gap between them.

There was stew for lunch again and then came the great moment when the first pole was dragged across the gap and manhandled into place. The others followed quickly and by mid afternoon the farmer's wife was taking photos of the exultant bridge builders crowded together high above the stream they had tamed. And then, it was time to strike camp around the small crew who cooked a last meal. They ate, climbed into the minibuses, and with waves and horn blasts, took the road back to Liverpool.

When Holly and Light o'Love arrived at the Institute on Monday morning, they went straight to the Professor's office.

She listened in silence and thought for a while. "Let's go for a coffee." They trooped downstairs and fed the machine.

At last the Professor spoke. "There's something going on, people, and I don't know exactly what. Makes me feel stupid. Why did you hear the motorbikes, Holly? Have you thought about that?"

"I thought I was just feeling the evil..."

"I know that, but why? And how? If I was Nick and his Dark Light doxy, I might come chasing you, but I certainly wouldn't let you know in advance. That would be stupid. So, how come you could hear them far away? Are you sure they didn't feel you?"

"Completely. And, we were concentrating, believe me. I felt nothing. And you too, Light, did you feel anything?"

"I felt very scared," volunteered Light o'Love, "But I wiped myself empty as much as I could and waited, and they went straight past without showing anything. We didn't feel any people at all, just the motorbikes. They made everything shake, much more than natural."

The Professor sipped her coffee. "That's the good side to it all, of course. You weren't alone out there. I'm betting that something showed those bikes to you, giving you time to hide. And then, when you cast the Hidden Circle, that was something special. I've *heard* of that happening before. Read of it actually. But I've never met anyone who has experienced it themselves. You're lucky girls. Most of us would give our right arms to feel that happen, although I'd prefer it without the danger first. I don't know, I've never been in what you would call real trouble, something I couldn't handle. If that's what it takes to get help, I don't think I'll risk it.

"So, what have we got? The Dark Light, probably Nick and his girl, were looking for you. We can be sure of that much. And, we know it was a serious threat because you got help when you most needed it. A comfort, of course, but it still leaves the question, why were they looking for you at all? Was it particularly you they wanted? And why there, and not back home in Liverpool? I know we've stepped up our security around the Institute and the halls of residence, but I would have thought Nick could get through if he really wanted to. Or, maybe not. I'm talking about something we can't really know. Not until we catch him, anyway.

"Damn it, I thought it was all over for a while. It looks as if they're hunting you, Light. Praise be that I never let Nick know where you'd been hiding over Christmas. My friends in Cornwall said they felt someone had been watching them after Christmas, and that begins to make some sense now. Nick must have let out where you were. As far as he knew, of course. Now we'll have to go back to protecting you again. Sorry about that."

Light o'Love felt disappointed. But, at least she would not be sent away again. Not for the moment, anyway. "Professor, you don't think it could be personal with Nick, do you? I don't think he likes me very much."

The Professor laughed. "Of course he doesn't. Not since you almost shoved that pencil up his... Well, never mind. He wasn't a great one for liking anyone, even before this. Except himself, of course. But, damn it, I miss him. He's very, very sharp and I'd much rather have him on our side of the fence. I don't need to tell you, Holly, but don't underestimate him. D'you hear me, Light? He's extremely dangerous. If it's Nick that's looking for you, you need to be very, very careful. We'll go back to escorting you, a staff member with you every moment you're outside the Institute or Smethwick Hall. And a friend, just like before. Follow the rules and stick with us. We can protect you as long as we know where you are and what you're doing."

"But I'll be locked up..."

"Yes, and I'm sorry for it. But, there we are, there's nothing we can do about it. There's nowhere else you can go and be safe. Poland was only an option for as long as the Dark Light didn't know where you were. In fact, I wouldn't have sent you there if I'd known what I know today. So, let us take care of you for the time being. We'll organise something different for you over the Easter break, so it shouldn't be too bad. Actually, you don't have any choice. At least until we can find Nick and stop him."

Light o'Love sat in the library feeling frustrated and miserable. A prisoner. Grounded. Confined to barracks. She might as well be a bloody nun. God knew that Liverpool was not exactly a pretty place, but it was all she had. And, now that had all been taken away again. She tried to study until Ari came for her.

"So, locked up again," said Skyler. The three of them were walking to the Student's Guild for lunch. "What did you do this time? Break the Professor's pencil? Kiss Dr. Bonely and turn him into a Prince?"

"No, none of that," said Light o'Love sadly. "And I should tell you; there's more to Dr. Bonely than meets the eye."

"What do you mean? He's just a dirty old man. He's absolutely the worst when it comes to talking to my tits. He can hardly speak for leering at them. And, I still haven't forgiven him for naming me after a cow. Daisy!

I'll give him Daisy if I ever get the chance. What do you mean, there's more to him than meets the eye?"

She looked suspiciously at Ari and Light o'Love as they exchanged glances. "Come on, you two. What are you talking about?"

"You can't blame him for admiring you, Sky," said Ari. "He's just a great lover of the female form, and he has a thing about breasts, that's all. Yours in particular. You should be pleased, he never stares at ours like that. And, he's a very gifted individual, you know. Ask Light here. She knows."

"Light, what's she talking about? Bonely is a dirty little old man with sex on the brain, nothing more."

"True, very true. But then, most men are like that. No, Bonely is just, er, gifted, I suppose you'd say." Light o'Love enjoyed teasing her friend.

"Gifted? Gifted? What are you two going on about? Talented? What's he good at? Or for?" Their knowing smiles frustrated her.

Light o'Love took mercy on her. "It's just that he's rather large..."

Skyler's eyes opened wide. "Large? But he's... You mean, you mean, his thing?" Her friends were nodding. "How large? I mean, how do you know, anyway? Oh no, you haven't been sleeping with him, Light?"

"No. No, I didn't sleep with him." Which was strictly true; Bonely had been sleeping alone until they wrapped him up with Holly.

"Then how do you know? Who told you?"

Ari joined in the teasing. "But she's right. It's huge. A real maiden's dream, if you're brave enough. Otherwise I can imagine it might be a bit of a nightmare."

Skyler turned to Ari. "So you've seen it, right? Really? You slept with him? I can't believe it. He's so *old*."

"That's true. But, he's a very nice old man, once you get to know him. And besides, his cock is magnificent. And so well behaved. It stays hard until you're begging for mercy."

"You did sleep with him," Skyler repeated, still in disbelief.

They walked on in silence until Skyler spoke again. "Just how big is it?"

Ari did not tell her story until they were sitting over lunch. "I'd never really thought about doing it with him. He's married, and he's really not my type. I like to go dancing and so on, and his dancing days must have been before the War. If they ever happened at all. But, I'd heard about him, of

course. You can't keep something like that a secret in an Institute full of women.

"I'd seen him naked a few times during ceremonies and celebrations. Wait until Beltane - everyone's skyclad then and we have some real fun. But, he's just an old man, nothing special or sexy. I'd heard the stories and I looked at it, of course, but it's nothing particularly special when it's soft. It's just so difficult to tell with soft ones. You know what it's like, they could grow into anything and surprise you. Anyway, one day he got a telephone call in the library. From the vet, his cat had just been put down. He looked so shocked and sad, I went down to his office with him and cuddled him a bit to cheer him up. I was sitting on his lap and I'd taken his glasses off and put them on the table. We weren't saying anything, and he was resting his head on my chest, just here."

Light o'Love tried to imagine a tall girl like Ari sitting on Dr. Bonely's lap. "You must have swamped him, Ari. You're much taller than he is."

"Didn't seem to bother him. He's resting his head there, and the next thing I know, he's holding my breast. I couldn't believe it. His cat's just died and he's holding my breast."

"You have that effect on people, Ari. I don't think you could trust any man you did that to, or most of the women either."

"Anyway, he's playing with me, and I was feeling sorry for him, so I thought 'What the hell, let's do it.' So, I let him take my blouse and bra off, and play with me properly. I'd always been curious about whether it was as big as they say, and now I was going to find out."

Skyler burst in. "And how big was it?"

Ari ignored her and continued. "He was quite good at it. He played with my tits quite nicely, and made me all randy. At the same time he was getting my clothes off and, in no time at all, I was sitting on his lap stark naked and juicy. He was sucking my nipples and he had a hand underneath me doing really clever things. Really clever. I think he had a couple of fingers inside and he was diddling me with his thumb, but whatever, he drove me wild. I'd come a couple of times and I felt so wet and sexy that I would have done him even if his cock was the size of a pencil. So, I got off him and opened his fly. Really, you should have seen it! It popped its head out and started growing and growing and growing. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was sticking right up as he sat there. It must have been this long, and so fat,

I couldn't come close to closing my hand around it, not by a long way. Normal to look at, but so big! Its head was sort of pointed, purple and pointed, with sweet little pink lips in it. It sort of flared out below until it was, I don't know, this big around. Really, I'm not exaggerating, am I Light? And the rest of it is in proportion, as solid as a bedpost. I couldn't believe what I was looking at."

Skyler had stopped with her mouth open and her fork full of steak and kidney pie.

"Anyway, as soon as I saw it standing, well there's only one place for something like that. I put a leg over him and pointed it in the right direction. You can believe I sat on it very slowly. I had to have a couple of goes to get it properly in, but he'd made me so excited, there was no chance that I wasn't going to get as much of it inside as I could manage. It took a little effort, but once I'd got it started, once I'd got the head and shoulders in I suppose, it slipped in quite easily. I slid down his pole and sat on his lap. It felt heavenly, so big and I felt so *full*. I didn't dare move for a while. I just sat on it and enjoyed the feeling. My pussy was all stretched and squeezing it, and each time I squeezed, I could feel it jump. You can't imagine what it felt like.

"Bonely was loving it, of course. He held me tight and buried his face in my tits. You should have seen him, he went wild over them. He really is tit-crazy, that man."

"Really, it was that good?" asked Skyler.

"Oh, the best. The very best. I'd had to stretch to get around it and I was very full. It felt just so, I don't know how to describe it, sexy? Naughty? Wonderful? I was completely full of cock, you've no idea. It felt fantastic. I started moving up and down on it, just little movements, and in no time at all I was coming all over the place. But, he was only just getting started, so I had to do it again. And then, again. It's tiring doing it that way after a while. I was doing all the work and he was just sitting there. So, I got off and lay on his desk. He got between my legs, held them up in the air, and shoved it into me again. It went in even deeper that way, and I didn't know what was happening. Talk about the earth moving under you, I was spinning through space and he was still hammering away. I was gone..."

She took a mouthful of lunch and rolled her eyes as she chewed. "It felt wonderful, really special. But, I was too disconnected at the time to realise

what was going on. Anyway, in the end he pulled it out of me and made me roll over so he was doing it to me from behind. He's not just crazy about tits, that one. He loves a good female bum as well. Anyway, he hung onto my hips and shoved it up me again. This way it went in really deep, almost too much. Not that I could have stopped him anyway. Straightaway, he had me flying again until he was ready to come. It was really great, feeling it jumping and pumping when he finally got there.

"Honestly, I don't know how long I stayed there afterwards. He'd pulled his trousers back up and was sitting in his chair again, and I was still draped over his desk with my bum in the air. I felt totally, completely, absolutely stuffed. I couldn't do a thing, I just lay there looking at him.

"I tell you what, my knees were trembling when I went back up the stairs to the library. I was hanging onto the handrail and walking like a tired old woman. And my poor pussy, it felt as if someone had just played a football match in there. I sat right on the edge of my seat with my legs open for the rest of the afternoon. I was still tingling all next day. Every time I moved, my pussy reminded me! Definitely, there's more to Dr. Bonely than meets the eye."

Skyler ate the rest of her meal in silence. She did not even ask how Light o'Love had come by her inside knowledge.

Light o'Love went back to the same old dreary round of being escorted to the Institute in the morning, escorted to lunch, and escorted back to Smethwick Hall in the evening. Her guards did their best, and she tried to remain positive herself, but she always had an urge to break free, to just wander off down Brownlow Hill and into the city crowds. She wanted life, variety, shops, people.

There were no more trips to visit Foxglove. She came to the Institute instead. No more spontaneous trips to the Tram, they had to be carefully planned. She ran into Tim one lunchtime, and invited him to join them, but he shyed away from sitting with Pretty and Nurse Pettigrew.

She spent a suffocating weekend at home with the Professor and her husband, sleeping in their son's old bedroom and playing Scrabble in the evenings.

And she studied. The Professor had changed the range of charms she taught. Now she dealt less with love and relationships and concentrated on self-protection, on shielding, on the locking and unlocking of doors. She

was merciless in the amount of work she dumped on Light o'Love and she spent long hours in the library, memorising the Professor's charms, and sometimes goofing off to read where ever chance and the book stacks took her.

No word came of Rostov, and no heavy motorbikes disturbed her dreams. She prepared to defend herself against danger but had no real idea of where that danger lay, or of how and when it might strike. She only knew that she was too frightened to be complacent.

Serjeant Musgrave's Dance was playing at the Everyman, and Tim volunteered to buy her a five shilling student ticket. A visit to the theatre was something to look forward to but in the end, it turned into a bit of a circus. Half of the Institute staff competed to go with her. Finally they booked a block of seats and Light o'Love sat in the middle with Tim on one side and Betty Whinshuttle on the other. Dr. Bonely had turned up with his wife, a small mousey woman with grey curled hair. She did not look robust enough to accommodate Bonely's famous weapon, but she did smile a lot.

Although Tim had given the invitation, he found himself in the centre of a community he did not belong to. They were talkative, friendly people, but they shared things with Light o'Love that he did not. For all that, they had a good evening. The play was stimulating, the actors devoted, and afterwards they all ate good food in the basement, along with members of the troupe and aspiring stagehands. Betty picked up the bill for Light o'Love and Tim, but she insisted on driving them home, first dropping off Tim, and then, taking Light o'Love safely back to her own bed. She felt disappointed. She had not had a chance at a man for ages. Even though she only had an affectionate interest in Tim, she was sure she would have enjoyed waking up with him.

She was happy to return home one evening to find a carrier bag on her bed. Inside she found a distinguished looking bottle of Josephshöfer Riesling Spätlese, some thinly sliced rye bread, a soft French cheese, and a jar of pickled walnuts. She went thoughtfully to the bathroom and got herself ready for a very special night.

Chapter 19

It was dark when she woke. Very dark and she had a raging hangover. She lay for a moment thinking of nothing but the rolling ache in her head. The mattress under her felt unfamiliar. Where was she? Her eyes were covered. She put her hand to her face and scratched at the blindfold across her eyes.

It was not night at all, only a curtained darkness in the room. She lay staring at a high ceiling, white with ornate plaster moulding at its borders and at the central rose. Shadowed cobwebs hung in the corners. A heavy hook protruded from the centre of the rose, but no chandelier hung from it. Only a simple flex with a single unshaded light bulb.

Tentatively she rolled her head to examine her surroundings, and immediately it began spinning. Bile rose in her throat. She forced herself up, desperate to vomit. She saw a desk with a waste paper bin beneath it. She pushed herself up onto her feet meaning to reach for it when she noticed a half-open door in the middle of one wall. A tiled floor, a toilet perhaps, she staggered to it, lunging for the doorframe. There was a washbasin in the dark and, thank God, a toilet. She collapsed over it heaving and swallowing as waves of nausea shook her, but did not give her the relief of throwing up. Slowly the spasms died away and she was left kneeling at the toilet, cold and shaking.

Something gripped her ankle, a leather cuff attached to a chain with a padlock. Her spirits collapsed further as she slowly realised that she had been taken. Rostov and his foul girlfriend must have succeeded. She turned and sat on the toilet, her head in her hands.

"Are you intending to stay in there all morning?" asked Rostov's voice.

Oh no, she thought, *not him*. She frantically searched for the light switch, flicked it on and shut the door. She must do something. She drew herself together and concentrated.

“Don’t bother, Light. We’ve blanketed the place. You can’t touch us here, and you can’t scream for help either. It just won’t work. We were up half the night making sure it won’t work. Try, if you don’t believe me. Reach for me, I’m just outside.”

She tried, but she could not find him. She could not reach out, she felt paralysed. At that moment, she gave up.

“Finish up in there and come out when you’re ready. I’ll go and get you some breakfast. Can you manage toast and fried eggs? The refrigerator’s a bit empty, I’m afraid. And coffee? How do you have it?”

“Get lost!” she said, but she did not even convince herself.

“Right you are. Toast and eggs, coffee, milk and two sugars. Coming up in a minute.” She heard a door close as he left.

She looked around her little cubicle. She had a wash basin and mirror, and on the other side of the closed door, a shower cubicle. She flushed the toilet and looked at herself in the mirror. The lighting was terrible, but she would have looked bad anyway, with puffy face and dishevelled hair. A towel hung behind the door, so she tried the taps in the shower. There was hot water, and that was welcome.

She returned to the main room with wet hair and the towel wrapped around her. She stood in a large room with a wide sash window at one end, its curtains now open. Through the window she could see the tops of trees and roofs. The door to the rest of the building was in a corner of the opposite wall. The writing desk and an office chair stood beside it. She could hear something out there, presumably Rostov in the kitchen. The floorboards were bare pine, coloured black around the edges, but with a large unpainted rectangle in the centre; normally covered by a carpet, she guessed.

A large five-pointed star had been chalked crudely onto the floor and her mattress lay in the centre of it. It had a sheet and a pillow. Her blindfold lay beside it.

On the side of the room opposite the bathroom was an elegant fireplace. A gas fire stood in it, and it glowed orange. Light o’Love had only her wet towel, but still the room felt pleasantly warm. She guessed the old-fashioned heavy radiator under the window was helping the gas fire.

She turned her attention to the chain at her ankle. It was silvery and long, probably long enough for her to reach the whole room. The other end looped around a water pipe running from floor to ceiling beside the toilet

door. There too, a padlock secured it. The padlocks were a possibility. She had been studying locking and unlocking with the Professor. She hid that thought away. She did not want Rostov to anticipate her. She sat on the mattress and forced herself to think positively.

Rostov did not want to harm her. She was undamaged, no bruises or scratches. They had even given her a mattress, with a sheet and a pillow. That would be luxury for a normal prisoner. They were heating the room, and bringing her a good breakfast. That showed they wanted to keep her in good condition. Concentrate on that for the moment, she told herself. It doesn't matter why you're here, or what comes next, worry about that later. For the moment, they're not trying to hurt you, so you're lucky.

But, how had she come here? She tried to remember. They had been running. Running for exercise in Sefton Park. Holly and Siok, and herself. Not too hard, jogging along, panting not talking. And then, one of the toys had stepped out onto the path ahead of them. That was it. Definitely one of the toys, Mortlock or Grizzle. She had done the first thing that had come into her head and dashed towards it, meaning to grab his silly black tie and strangle the sneaky little bastard. Was it Mortlock or Grizzle? It did not matter which, because the other was hiding in the bushes beside the path.

She had heard a pfft of air and simultaneously something had stung her in the side. She had clapped her hand to the spot and turned to face Mortlock, yes, it was definitely Mortlock, who stood against a tree, lowering his pistol. Holly and Siok were coming up behind her, but they would be too late. She was already falling.

She did not know what had happened next. She had a vague picture of Mortlock standing over her and shouting, but that was all. She hoped Holly had not been hurt. She would have tried something, Light o'Love was sure. And Siok, did she do what she was meant to do and run away? Perhaps Rostov would tell her.

The door opened and Rostov entered with her breakfast on a tray. He wore jeans and a black polo neck shirt. Behind him stood a tall girl with long black hair. She dressed in the same way as Rostov, jeans and a black polo neck shirt, but her clothes showed off a generous figure. She looked pale, just as the Professor had described her, and she wore dark make-up. Heavily emphasised eyebrows and eye lines, eye shadow like bruising and dark cherry lipstick. The effect looked shocking.

She looked critically at Light o'Love. "We'll 'ave to get that towel off 'er, Nick," she remarked in a conversational tone. Her coarse voice came as a shock. She had expected Rostov's girl to be, well, better educated.

"Better hand it over, Light," said Rostov.

"But, but why?" She did not want to lose the only covering she had.

"Because that's the way it is. We wear clothing, you don't. So hand it over."

Light o'Love did nothing so he set the tray down on the writing desk and strode towards her. She reached out her hands to protect herself but he grabbed first one wrist and then the other, and pulled her to her feet. "Off you go, Princess," he said quietly.

Princess came up behind her, unwound the towel and threw it onto the desk. Princess was doing something behind her and Rostov pulled her wrists up until she had to stand on tiptoe.

She tried to look at Princess over her shoulder and saw her stepping back. She heard a loud swish and a heavy belt slashed across her bottom.

She screamed at the explosion of pain it brought. Rostov lowered her back onto her feet. "Understand, Light?" was all he said. He released her wrists and they both left, Princess swinging her studded belt as she walked.

Light o'Love pressed her sore bottom into the mattress and ate breakfast with tears in her eyes. She knew she needed to eat to settle her stomach, but she took no pleasure in it.

While she was alone she spent the time trying to reach out and find them. She did not succeed. She knew what to do and how to do it, but she just could not reach out. She failed so completely that she was sure Rostov did not even know she had been trying.

They came back after about half an hour and stood looking at her as she sat on the mattress. "Stand up, Light," ordered Rostov. "Turn round and let's see your bottom."

She did not want to expose herself, but she definitely did not want to earn another stroke of Princess's belt. She stood and turned her back on them.

"Very pretty, don't you think, Love?" said Rostov.

"Fine, if little girls turn you on. I like 'em better when they've matured and have a bit of meat on 'em." She had a husky voice and a flat Birmingham accent.

“Like you, you mean?”

“Yeah, like me.” She turned Light o'Love around by the shoulder. “Look ‘ere, girlie. I know you fancy yourself as high and mighty and all, and I know that Nick’s pronged you already. That’s right, ‘e told me all about it. Well, things have changed now. I tell ‘im where to put ‘is prick now, and it ain’t going to be giving *you* a good time. I can tell you that, girlie. Unless you’re a bad little girlie, of course. Then we might just make sure that pretty little bottom of yours is as sore on the inside as it will be on the outside. You listening? Good. Now, we’re all going to stay ‘ere for a day or two, while we wait for some visitors. They want to have a word or two with you. That’ll be nice, won’t it?”

The brutality of the woman terrified Light o'Love. She had no doubt that upsetting her would be a very painful business. She decided to do whatever Princess wanted.

“We’re going out for a while, Light,” said Rostov. “I’m sure you’ve tried your chain already and you know it’s not going to break. We put a lot of work into it and the padlocks before we blanketed the place. And, you can’t pass any of the doors or windows either. We’ve made sure of that. You may as well save yourself the effort of trying, but go ahead if you want to. You can’t do any harm.

“Now, there’s something I want you to do. It’ll help you pass the time.”

He opened the desk drawer and produced a note pad and a biro. “I want a diary of everything you did, everywhere you went and everyone you met from when you left the Institute in December until I saw you there with the Professor. Got it? Everything. And don’t try to embroider the truth. I’ll know if you do, and Princess will enjoy basting your bottom until you get it right. I want our visitors to have a complete record when they arrive, so you’d better start now. Don’t mess around, Light. Our visitors are very serious people and they’ll get the truth out of you in an instant anyway. So, better get it right first time. If not, well, as they say in the cinema, we have ways of making you talk. Yes?”

She nodded, and they left her standing in the middle of the room, locking the door as they went.

She went straight to the window. Her room was on the side of the house, on the first floor. A narrow strip of garden separated the house from a suburban side street. To her right, cars rushed past on the main road. A

rumble of thunder came from below as a heavy motorbike kicked into life. Moments later she saw it on the main road, Rostov driving and Princess leaning against his back.

She knew instinctively that she did not want to meet any visitors. Rostov and Princess were bad enough, and she was sure the visitors would be far, far worse. She would have to escape, and escape quickly. She looked through the window at the busy road. It was not far away. Surely, she should be able to reach it. Or shout for help. She reached up to release the window catch. She pulled at the sash and it moved. Thank God. So many sash windows had been painted shut. She pulled harder and it lifted. This was fantastic, even the counterweights were working. Experimentally she reached out and whipped her hand back.

Ow! She had been shocked, just like touching a live car battery. She shook her fingers in surprise. There was some kind of barrier or interface out there. Where she had touched it, purple ripples had spread in rings and disappeared out of sight. She would not touch it again. Her fingers still tingled. She thought she had felt a hard surface out there. She looked around for something non-conductive to use as a probe. The only thing she could come up with was a spare toilet roll. Tentatively, she used it to prod the barrier.

The result was the same, an electric shock and purple ripples flowing outwards. She picked up the toilet roll sadly. There had been a hard physical surface out there. Even if she could get free of her chain, throwing herself from the window would not be possible.

No barrier to shouting for help though, but as soon as she had the thought she realised that Rostov must have thought of it too. Outside, an old man in a raincoat was being dragged along the pavement by a terrier. She shouted to him but he gave no reaction. Her voice had sounded dead, without resonance. The only result of her shout was an instantaneous misting of the barrier. She shouted again with all the power she could muster. The man looked around, and for an instant her heart leapt, but he was merely checking the traffic before crossing the road. It was hopeless, but she tried again with two younger women, in case the old man had been deaf.

She was just putting the toilet roll back in the bathroom when she had a thought. The barrier was not absolute. She could hear the traffic quite

plainly. Perhaps the barrier reacted just against her. Perhaps it was *her* barrier, constructed only for her. She screwed up a sheet of toilet paper and went back to the window. She threw it out. There was no reaction and the paper ball fell into the garden.

With excitement high at the back of her throat, she rushed to the desk and tore off a sheet of paper. Quickly she folded it into a paper dart and wrote on the wings *Help! Please call Liverpool 92703 and tell them Light is in trouble. Reward £100.* She tried the dart across the room. It flew straight but dived to the floor. She tweaked the tail upwards and tried again. Good.

The road looked further away now. She did not want the dart to fall into the garden where Rostov could see it. She had to get it over the wall, out of sight from the house, but where a passerby could pick it up. She could feel no wind, and the bare trees were not moving. She stood back and threw the dart as hard as she could. It shot upwards in a wild loop and settled to glide away. She clapped in delight as it carried over the wall and onwards. It landed in the centre of the road. It might be seen out there, but who in their right mind would bother walking into the road to pick it up? She went back to the desk. She needed more darts.

She threw many darts. Several lay in the garden, but most of them had made it over the wall. Cars drove past scattering them and two people had walked by without seeing them. Finally the two women were there, coming back laden with shopping. They picked one up and read it. They looked around to see where the message could have come from. Oblivious of her nudity, Light was shouting and waving at the window. The women looked at her, but did not see her. But, they did take the unfolded dart with them.

A young boy followed them and the darts took his eye immediately. He collected all the viable darts and took them with him. She watched him continue down the road, throwing a dart and chasing it.

Then the noise of the motorbike came again, the hateful sound, and she slammed the window shut and raced back to the desk. She was sitting in front of a half page of notes when Rostov unlocked the door.

"That's not good enough, Light. What have you been doing?"

"I felt sick," she stammered. "I was sleeping."

He grabbed her wrists and in one movement he had swung her to the side of the desk and then pulled her over it. There was nothing she could do

and she resigned herself as she heard Princess's belt sliding from her jeans. Whack! The blow stung and she was crying.

"You're right, Rostov," said Princess from behind her. "She's a pretty little piece. I like 'em when they're bent over like that. See it all. Do what you like to 'em. Here, you want me to hold 'er while you do 'er? And then, you can do me, I feel like a bit after looking at 'er like that."

Light o'Love did not care what he did to her now, but he said, "No, not today. She's no fun at the best of times. Let's go to bed and I'll do you until you're begging me to stop."

"Now you're talking!" said Princess, and left, giving Light o'Love a casual flick with her belt as she went.

"Get writing, Light," threatened Rostov. "You'd better have something for me to read when I get back, or it won't just be one stroke next time."

Chapter 20

Light o'Love sat at the desk, writing as detailed an account of her trip to Poland as she could remember. Underneath her, her naked bottom was sore. Bruised and smarting all at once. Although it felt a cowardly thing to do, she had given in to Rostov's demand for a diary. She did not want Princess to be let loose with her leather strap, and if the visitors were going to get the truth anyway...

In the room above, Rostov and Princess enjoyed themselves. At least, she supposed it was enjoyment. The mixture of screams, slaps and swearing did not sound like fun to her, but they were broken up by periods of the bedsprings squeaking, or the bed-head banging rhythmically against the wall, so she supposed Princess was getting the 'doing' she had asked for. The noise made it difficult to concentrate.

Some time later, Rostov came into the room with two mugs of tea. He was fresh from the bathroom, with wet hair and dressed only in a towel. He wanted to chat.

"So how's the Professor keeping? Everything back on the rails?"

"I suppose so. Everyone's normal. The X-Father is doing your geopolitics course."

"Ryan? What does he know? Everything outside Ireland and Liverpool's a closed book to him. Ridiculous!"

"Oh, he's managing. He reads up everything and then does the lecture while it's still fresh in his mind."

"That's a scandal. Anyone could do that. Look, Ryan doesn't speak any of the languages. Sure, he can ask for another beer in fifteen different tongues including Latin. And, probably talk a girl into bed in most of them as well, but it's not enough. You need to have lived in the countries you're talking about, to have seen their history and spoken with their people. You can't get that from books!"

“Oh well, I guess you’ll just have to come back then...”

“No. Not now. I was wasting my time there. The Professor and the rest of them, they’re much too conservative. They’ve got a lot of power between them, but do you think they are going to use it to achieve something?”

This was clearly a subject he felt deeply about and his conversation became animated. He put his tea down beside her and gestured with both hands. “Every time I suggested something, there’d be some stupid convention holding us back. Oh, the Institute is good enough for training fortune tellers and television mind readers, but not much else. I would have left soon enough anyway. I needed room to grow. And then, this opportunity came along to make a real difference, so I grabbed it with both hands. Life’s going to be much more interesting now. And more profitable, of course.”

Light o’Love held her mug in two hands and sipped slowly. Now she had the chance, she wanted to question him about all sorts of things, about Holly, about the toys, about the scabs and how they functioned. But, there were pressing questions at the front of her mind. “Why me, Nick? Why are you going to all this trouble just to catch me?”

Rostov came back to pick up his tea. “Oh, that’s just stupid. The Powers imagine that you’re some kind of super-girl and they want to have a good look at you. I told them that you are perfectly normal, just well-practised, but they still want to see you. I expect they’ll make you an offer if they like what they see. You could be very lucky, and you’ll learn a lot. There are some very intelligent people on this side, you know. Very intelligent.”

“What are they going to do with me?”

“Don’t worry about it, they’ll just ask questions. If they like you, they’ll invite you on board. If not, they’ll just let you go.”

She guessed he believed what he was saying, but she did not. She wanted to keep him talking, now he was in the mood. “So where will you be working now? In England? Not Liverpool, I suppose.”

“Why ever not? I’ve got as much right to be in Liverpool as anyone else. But, no, I don’t think it’ll be Liverpool. Somewhere nearer to head quarters, I suppose, somewhere in Europe. That’ll be good, proper weather again. And, proper food. We’ll see when the time comes.”

“What about Princess? She’ll go too?”

“Of course. I’d never go anywhere without her. She’s made such a difference to me. I’d never realised just how good life could be.”

Light o'Love could hardly believe the change that had come over him. Suddenly Rostov had gone doe-eyed over his ladylove. That would have been surprising enough in any circumstances, but being soft and affectionate over Princess? It would be easier to love a rhinoceros.

He stood in the middle of the room, dressed only in his towel, and stretched his arms wide. "She's made me feel wonderful. With her, life's really worth living. I have time now, time to look around and enjoy the world. Look, look at those trees there. Now, have you ever stopped to think just how beautiful they are?"

He moved towards the window and Light o'Love was desperate to call him back. She jumped up and sat on the edge of the desk. "So you've only got eyes for Princess now? What about me? Aren't I at least a little bit attractive anymore?"

Rostov turned back to look at her. "Of course, Light. You're very pretty in your way." He paused and Light o'Love was conscious of him scanning her nakedness. He turned away again. "But Princess, now there's a real woman. Beautiful, of course she's beautiful. But such a fine intelligence too." He had reached the window and turned to sit on the sill. "You know, I've never made so much love as I do now. It's wonderful. She loves everything I do to her. Everything that gives me pleasure, gives her twice as much. But then, you have to be intelligent to be a good lover. You know that. All these ordinary people out there, they don't know what they're doing." He had turned to gesture out of the window and something in the garden caught his eye.

He threw up the sash and leaned out. No electric shocks for him. There was fury on his face as he rushed back. "You stupid bitch!" he screamed as he ran out of the door. Light o'Love hurried to the window. Below her, Rostov ran into the garden still wearing only his towel. He picked up one of the darts and quickly unfolded it.

He threw it aside and stood as still as a statue for a moment. She guessed he was searching for danger. He tore himself free and shook his head, before dashing back to the house. Light o'Love heard him running up the stairs and on up to the next floor, shouting "Princess, Princess!" as he reached the bedroom.

Light o'Love felt afraid and elated together. Help must be on its way, but what would happen to her before it arrived? She did not want to meet

Princess or Rostov again. And, she had nowhere to run. She looked around frantically for help.

The noises upstairs showed they were getting dressed. She had only moments before they came to fetch her. She tried the door and it opened. In his haste, Rostov had left the key in the lock. Quickly she took it from the outside of the door and used it to lock up from the inside. Good, that should delay them. What else could she do? She dragged the writing desk across the doorway but she did not place much hope in that. She retreated to the toilet, taking the chair with her. The door was Victorian and solid, but the tuppenny bolt which secured it would not hold back much. She jammed the chair beneath the door handle but quickly realised it would slide away if anyone hammered at the door. She tried sitting on the chair and found that she could brace her feet against the opposite wall and press the chair back into place. She got into position and waited.

She heard a clatter of feet hurrying down the stairs. Go on, she begged, don't stop, but the feet came to the locked door. She heard the handle rattle and then thunderous blows as they tried to break it down.

There was nothing she could do except sit and stare at her feet against the wall. She was looking at the chain looped around her leather cuff. If only she could take it off. And then a thought shook her. What if they both got hold of her chain on the other side of the door and pulled? They could break her leg! Hurrying, she jumped up and lifted the chair to wind the chain several times around a leg. That should protect her. Outside the door had finally given way and they were pushing back the writing desk as she slammed the chair back into place and threw herself into it.

"Quick, the fucking bitch is in the toilet." Princess sounded frantic. "Don't fuck around, Nick. Break it open."

There was a shattering blow against the door. He must have kicked it just below the handle. The shock ran through her but the door did not move.

"Damn!" she heard Rostov say. "She's holding it shut. Come on, let's leave her - we've got to get out of here."

"I'm not leaving that little slut here. Hit it again."

Another crash, but she held it easily. "It's no good," said Rostov. "I'll never break it. We haven't got time. Let's go."

"Use your powers. I'll help you."

"Not with the blanket on. And, we haven't got time to lift it. Even if we did, you don't want to tangle with that one, believe me. I'm going!"

"Sod it, sod it, sod it!" shouted Princess. "Light a fire! Come on, if we can't take the bitch with us, we can fry her instead."

"Stop messing around, Princess. We don't want to draw attention. Come on, let's get the bikes and leave nice and slowly. And quietly. God knows who'll be here in a minute. It could be Hell on wheels, or the police. Either way, I want to be as far down the M6 as I can be when they hit this place."

"Fuck you, fuck you, and fuck you, you little bitch. Next time I see you I'll slit your fucking belly open!" But, she was leaving. Light o'Love started breathing again as she heard them running down the stairs. Still she did not move. She remained braced against the wall until she heard the bikes cough and finally pull away, one after the other.

She relaxed, but she did not move. If help was coming, she could wait until it arrived.

She had no idea how long she waited, hearing nothing but the distant traffic passing outside. She picked out the noise of a siren approaching. It pulled up outside. The police? A fire engine? And then, the Professor's voice calling her. Her steps came up the stairs and into the room. Light o'Love reached for her, and felt her. She jumped off her chair and opened the door. She was wearing a stupid soft old lady beret and carrying a handbag. She looked like anyone's grandmother, but to Light o'Love she was guardian angel and the 7th Cavalry all in one. Ignoring the two policemen standing in the doorway and the chair trailing behind her, she threw herself into the Professor's arms and hugged her.

Light o'Love sobbed into the Professor's coat and she was patting her back and making soothing noises. "There, there," she was saying, "It's all better now. No harm done. Would you mind looking for her clothes, officer? We'd better get her dressed and off to hospital." The policemen left and the Professor started muttering. Light o'Love recognised a basic unlocking charm, and the padlock at her ankle clicked open. A small kick and the chain and leather cuff fell free.

"How are you, Light? Did they take care of you?"

"My bottom..."

The Professor turned her around. "Oooh, that must have hurt! But, are you OK now? Was there anything else?"

“I was frightened.”

“Of course you were. I would have been too. You did well to get a message out.”

The policemen had returned and one of them cleared his throat to attract attention. They had found her clothes and passed them to the Professor.

“If you wouldn’t mind waiting downstairs, gentlemen, I’ll get her dressed and bring her down to the ambulance right away. She’ll be all right now I’m here.” The policemen left like lambs and Light o’Love heard their heavy steps going down the stairs. She started to dress and the Professor went over to the window.

“We’ll have to make the police a little story, Light. We knew you’d been taken in this direction, so I wasn’t far away. A woman called, she’d picked up a message on the pavement promising her £100. Are you sure you’re worth that much, by the way? Anyway, she wanted to call the police as well and I thought she better had because, if things were desperate, they might slow Nick down. It was Nick, wasn’t it? Holly wasn’t sure.”

“How is Holly? And Siok? Are they OK?”

“What? Oh, yes, they’re fine. Never mind about that, we’ll have time to chat on the way home. Look, for the moment you’re mentally disturbed. I’m taking care of you, and you escaped. No chains, no force, no Nick. Anyone who saw them has forgotten about them, and Paul will stay here to clean up. We’ll take you off in the ambulance, and that’ll be fine. The police can write it off as just another crazy girl and everyone will forget about it. Get your shoes on, and we’ll go. Just keep quiet and act stupid.”

“Nick’s got away...”

“Yes. Yes, but there’s nothing we can do about that now. And, I don’t want the police chasing after him because if they get him cornered, there’ll be the Devil to pay. Nick’s not one to go quietly and he’ll never stand trial for kidnapping. Come along now, it’s off to the lunatic asylum for you.”

The Professor led her out to the ambulance with an arm around her shoulders. Two ambulance officers took her over and with professional care and insistence, got her sitting comfortably in the back. The police car pulled away with a wave, their job done. Behind them, the Professor talked with Paul through the window of his car, and Pretty was getting out of the passenger side. The Professor came hurrying into the ambulance and the doors closed on them.

The ambulance lurched and rolled smoothly away. It did not take long to reach the hospital. A single toot of the siren and they swung across the road and into the casualty reception bay. The ambulance officers helped the Professor down and she thanked them. They were driving off as she led Light o'Love into the hospital. They waited until the ambulance had gone, and left. Pretty was waiting just outside.

"Where are we?" asked Light o'Love.

"Of course, you don't know. St Helens, so it's not far to get home. So, tell us what you've been up to. No, on second thoughts, let's pick up Paul first. I'm sure he'll want to listen. Wait a minute."

"Can you tell me what happened to Holly?"

"Yes, why not? Only what she and Siok told me, of course. And, they say they didn't have the whole story. Apparently, the three of you were running through Sefton Park, and suddenly you stopped and grabbed your side. Is that all right, by the way? You didn't say anything about it."

Light o'Love lifted her sweater and felt the spot. "I suppose it must be, I'd forgotten about it. I just felt a sting. Mortlock had shot me with something."

"Some kind of tranquilliser dart, we think. Anyway, it acted very quickly and you collapsed immediately. Holly says she didn't hear anything, so it couldn't have been a normal gun."

"It was an air pistol. I heard it."

"Makes sense. Anyway, you collapsed and one of the toys was standing over you, pointing his gun at your head, and shouting at Holly to keep back. They didn't know what to do. They just stood there. It can't have been for any time at all when they were swept off their feet and thrown into a rose bed. So, they got all scratched and tangled up, I'm afraid. Anyway, while they were trying to sort themselves out, a van pulled up and you were thrown into the back by the toys. They hopped on board and you disappeared. Holly thought she saw Nick driving but she wasn't sure.

"That was it. One minute you were there, and the next you'd gone. Holly put out a warning straight away, and we tried to follow you. But, it's difficult to be precise with these things, and then Nick had put a blanket around the house. And what a blanket! It took me a good five minutes to break through, thank God that was before the police arrived or I'd have had no end of questions. He did that to keep you inside, of course, but also to

control you. No powers can be used inside a blanket like that. I expect that confused you.”

They had pulled up at the house again and they all went inside. Paul came down from the top floor.

“What’s up there?” asked the Professor.

“Nothing. Just a bedroom. They left in a hurry so it’s all of a jumble, but they didn’t leave anything. They must have been travelling very light. This is where they kept you, Light?”

Her room looked a mess. It seemed smaller now. The writing desk still stood in the middle of the floor and her chair lay on its side. The window was open and the breeze had scattered paper everywhere. Her chain had disappeared. The Professor turned off the gas fire. “Let’s give the place a quick tidy, and we’ll be on our way.”

They left the room with the writing desk and chair back in their places, and the mattress neatly arranged in one corner. There was nothing they could do about the door which no longer closed, but Pretty had found a broom and dustpan, and gave the room a quick sweep. In the garden they picked up Light o’Love’s failed paper darts, and left.

Light o’Love slid into the back of the car with the Professor. “So, Light, tell us all about it. Step by step. We want to know everything.”

They listened and questioned as she went through the experience step by step.

“So, this Princess has some powers, you think. I missed that when I met her. I wonder what they actually involve,” said the Professor.

“She’s certainly got a hold over Nick. It would be quite sweet, if you didn’t know Nick and Princess. I almost laughed out loud when he was talking about her.” Light o’Love could not help grinning at the memory.

“That’s certainly not natural. Nick’s very proud and for him to fall for a woman like that... It’s not possible. Perhaps that’s all she can do.”

“But she did say she’d help him try to open the door,” said Light o’Love.

“That’s true. But anyway, she’s not the important thing. What I understand is that Nick’s under the control of someone, or something, that was involved with the attack on the Institute. But, probably not the Dark Light’s top people. Some of them were coming to see you. Thank God you were spared that meeting.”

Light o'Love shuddered at the thought. "I was surprised to see Mortlock and Grizzle again. I thought they'd gone."

"So were we. Bringing them out in public again must have been a risk. Suppose the police had seen them... We think they used the toys because they're so good at hiding their energy. Perhaps they don't even have any of their own. If it had been Nick hiding behind that tree, you might have felt him no matter how careful he was. I wonder where the toys went. I also wonder who exactly was coming to inspect you. Well, well, I shall have to get a report out first thing tomorrow, and we'll see if anyone we know about has been on the move. They said a couple of days, didn't they? That probably rules out mainland Britain. Most of Europe too, if they were going to fly. We'll see what we can guess anyway, once everyone else has had a chance to think about things. I might ask for advice on keeping you safe too. You can never have too many brains working on a question like that, and we certainly don't want you to keep your appointment with them."

"What would they have done to me?" she asked.

"Whatever they wanted to, Light. They certainly would have sucked you dry of any information about us and the Institute. After that, I don't know. They seem to be impressed with you, so they might have tried to convert you as they've done to Nick. Sometimes they just wipe a person's powers away,. but they do it in such a crude way. They don't care, of course, and the result is sometimes permanent damage to the individual. Don't forget we still don't know how they fashion their toys, or if a person like Princess is using a natural talent or one that's been programmed into her."

"Do you think Nick will try again? I don't want him to succeed a second time."

"Neither do we, Light, neither do we. Anyway, he's not going to have a second chance. I've been thinking about that. Whatever it takes to keep you safe, we're going to do it. And we're going to do it without bricking you up in the Institute basement."

Chapter 21

They gave Light o'Love a new room at Smethwick Hall. The day after she got back from St Helens, Holly spent the day supervising three workmen on the top floor. They had gone by the time the Professor brought Light o'Love home from the Institute, and all her things had been moved to her new home.

It was a long room up under the roof. Along one side, the ceiling sloped with the roofline and there were three wide dormer windows. Light flooded in and it smelt of new paint and new furniture. It looked much bigger than her old room. All her things had been arranged neatly. Even her posters had been carefully peeled off the walls and remounted on pieces of board. They only needed to be pinned up again.

"There you are, Light," said the Professor. "You've got an artist's studio up here on top of the world. Do you like it? The light's so good you'll have to take up painting."

"Did I have to move, Professor? I was safe enough, wasn't I?"

"Probably. But we're going to do what we can to make things better and this didn't cost too much. The next step is to put up a shield. So, tell me how we do that."

Light o'Love found she already knew most of what was required, and that she remembered the charms. Now she and the Professor used them in earnest. No one would set foot on the stairs without her being instantly aware, and they could not continue to climb them without her permission. Neither could they leave on their own.

Light o'Love became the only student in the Institute with an office of her own. They gave her Rostov's old room and shielded it in the same way. They painted her name in gold letters on the door. Shirley Grainger. She felt a touch of immodesty when she looked at it for the first time, even though

she knew she had not earned the honour. Auntie Joan would be so proud of her, if only Light o'Love could tell her.

She kept her carrel in the library, but when she was not reading up there, she could sit in her very own office. At first, she closed the door, but she quickly found she did not like being shut off from her friends. The door stayed open and she could be seen studying at her desk by anyone passing. The other students quickly learnt to knock on the doorframe to enter. They already knew that Light o'Love had been attacked and despite the Professor's efforts, gossip about her had flourished.

She had to pay for her new office. Her cognodynamics was advanced enough to let her help those students who could not manage even the smallest projections of mental power. The Professor timetabled her to give two half hour tutorials every day. She found herself enjoying teaching. It felt satisfying to bring a hopeless student to the point of sending numbers to her or rolling a pencil across the table. Soon she had more students than she had time for.

The Professor had taken advice and ruled that the most immediate danger would come from regular habits. Another kidnap attempt would require planning, and planning could only be effective if Rostov could predict her location at any particular time. Now her movements to and fro between the Institute and Smethwick Hall took place at different times every day, and used different cars and different routes. She had never imagined that she would miss visiting the Students' Guild for lunch, but any regular trips out of the Institute were a security risk. Her friends and the staff made up a rota to bring in food and eat it with her. The only variety she had now was the room in which she ate.

If danger came from regularity, it followed that unpredictable activities were probably safe. Light o'Love became used to surprise visits to Liverpool's museums and art galleries, afternoons at the cinema and overnight stays with staff members. She knew these were no substitute for ordinary life. She sent Tim her timetable and office phone number so she could at least chat with an outsider. She had the difficulty of explaining why she was nearby but out of touch. She persuaded him that she had met a Palestinian terrorist over the Christmas holidays and was now under twenty-four hour police guard for her own safety.

Her office conferred prestige and soon she had her first visitor asking for advice on her love life. Once that had started, there seemed to be no end to it. She was forced to make appointments that cut into her study time.

Life as the student's Agony Aunt was interesting, but frightening. Her experiences in the Sanok family court underlined how the simple problems of a tearful and confused girl could quickly escalate into something much more serious. She wanted to spend counselling time with her three targets Godiva, Skyler, and Siok, but for the moment they were swimming confidently.

Easter was approaching fast when Godiva came to see her. She wanted to talk, but she could not bring herself to start.

"Come on, Godiva. Spit it out. Are you pregnant?" Light o'Love had said that to shock her.

"No! Certainly not! I'm careful, but why did you think...?"

"Relax, I was just stirring you up. But, you have been up to naughty things, haven't you? Don't blush, it's what we're meant to do. We're students, remember? You know, free love, sex, marijuana. So, who have you been doing it with?"

"No one. Honestly. I haven't done it since before Christmas with Rossiter. I've tried, but I haven't found anyone."

"So why are you here? I don't have a supply of eligible men, you know."

"It's just that, I don't know, it sounds too stupid. It's The Lamplighter, I've been trying to get him to invite me out. He's nice, we eat lunch together sometimes, and he seems to like me. But he won't ask me, that's all. Maybe I'm not sexy enough, can you help me?"

Light o'Love sighed inwardly. How could Godiva, the living ideal of English womanhood, imagine that The Lamplighter and everyone else in the Institute did not find her attractive? It was enough to make you laugh. Light o'Love swallowed and tried to take her seriously.

She got up and closed the office door. "So, you want to be more sexy and drive The Lamplighter crazy. Good. If you get it right, I should imagine you'll have the most exciting time of your life. Jump up, let's have a look at you."

Godiva was well dressed, far too well dressed for a student. She wore a soft roll neck pullover in beige Shetland wool and a pleated skirt to her

knees. Her collar-length blonde hair styled simply, but looked as immaculate as always, curling around her face and occasionally displaying the pearl studs in her ears. A silk Jacqmar scarf, rich in autumn leaves and horse shoes, hung loosely around her shoulders. Her make-up and nails were perfect. She looked elegant, sexless and untouchable. The Ambassador's favourite daughter. No wonder The Lamplighter had not asked her out on a date. He probably feared being thrown into prison for high treason.

Light o'Love's scrutiny damaged Godiva's self-confidence. "What do you think, Light? Am I okay?"

"Do you really want to catch him, Godiva? I mean, really want to?"

"I suppose so, but how?"

"Right, sit down. So, let's start from the beginning. Why are you wearing pearl earrings? Paul would be ashamed of you. Balance and tranquillity, just what you don't need. What should you be wearing?"

"Carnelian? Garnet? I just never thought..." Godiva looked confused.

"You know your lessons, but they don't apply to you? Naughty! You need something good and earthy and fruity. Carnelian or garnet, either would be good. Or both. Preferably with white gold settings. And a matching pendant, do you think you could afford that?"

"I suppose so. Do you think they will they make a difference?"

"How could you ask that? Of course they will. Bring them here before you try them and we'll bless them together. What's next? You couldn't come to the Institute in jeans, could you? Just once? I think you might be frightening The Lamplighter to death."

"Jeans? I suppose I could, they're old and a bit tight though." Godiva was doubtful.

"Good, he'll like that. Just jeans and a simple sweater. I know you'll make them look good."

"If you think it will help. I can do that. I was afraid you'd want me to dress like Ari. I mean, she's fine, I like her but..."

"But you couldn't wear anything so short? It takes a bit of practice, I suppose, but I'm sure you'll manage eventually and I can guarantee The Lamplighter will love you that way." She waited for Godiva to change the subject and leave, but she had more on her mind.

"You haven't got a potion for me, have you? I mean something to make him want me?"

This is stupid, thought Light o'Love. What on earth is she talking about? Then she had an idea. "I think I could manage something to give you a special presence. I'm not going to break the rules and give you something for him, but you didn't want that, did you? Come back before you leave this afternoon and I should have something for you."

Once Godiva had gone, she ran upstairs to ask Ari to buy a small bottle of vodka for her. That would be the basis. A little damiana, plus a pinch of turmeric for colour, mixed up and sealed with a charm in a small laboratory flask, and Godiva would have the potion she needed to help her unwind.

Chapter 22

The meeting was a grand affair. Light o'Love slipped into the lecture room early and would have hidden in one of the back tiers if they had not been roped off. The first row she could enter was the third one back. She ignored the central block of seats as too public and tucked herself into the back corner.

Almost immediately the others began to file in. At first, she saw no familiar faces. Strangers wandered in, singly and in groups, and sat down as if they felt at home. Some of them nodded to her. Others just kept on chattering in a variety of languages. Light o'Love studied them. Mostly women, the youngest was probably about thirty. The oldest made the Professor look like a spring chicken. Many were obviously foreign in their gestures and dress. Why was it that an Italian fifty-year old looked glamorous while most English women of that age just looked old? They all dressed seriously. Some had academic robes, others wore business suits. Light o'Love felt glad she had put on a skirt, but now she wished it was a little longer. She was the only student there and she did not want to look irresponsible.

The seats were filling up when the Institute lecturers began to appear in the mix. They were on their best behaviour too. The X-Father had managed a tie and sat beside Foxglove as if attending a church service.

A tall woman with long chestnut hair came to sit next Light o'Love. She twisted right around to offer her left hand to Light o'Love. "I am Stjerne," she said with a winning smile. Light o'Love was shaken. The woman's right arm was missing below the elbow, and under the stump she had tucked a box of cigars.

"Er, Light o'Love," she mumbled and blushed.

Stjerne laughed at her embarrassment. "Ho, my young friend would like a cigar, no? You have good taste, these are genuine Havana." She held out

the box. Its decoration was traditional and the heavy bearded gentleman on the central medallion looked like King Edward VII.

"No, no, I don't smoke."

"Ah, you are missing one of the great pleasures of life. Cigars are not just smoking, they are pure pleasure. But, I suppose it will be rude of me to light one here. So, you are the young lady all the fuss is about?"

Light o'Love was surprised to be called young. Stjerne did not look much over twenty-five herself, and with both arms and no cigar box, she would have looked glamorous. *No*, Light o'Love corrected herself, *she is glamorous, cigars or no. And she looks it.*

"Yes, I suppose so. But, honestly, I don't know why. It's just an accident, I think."

"Of course. I cannot imagine that any one of us would want these things to happen to us. Only by accident, I think. And you are from Liverpool?"

"No, Staffordshire. And you?"

"Denmark, I think you guess? I study in Roskilde. It is not very far from Copenhagen. I am here because my Professor says I need a holiday, but I think he is joking. This will not be holiday."

"I don't know," admitted Light o'Love. "I don't know what the Professor has planned. I don't even know why I'm here."

"Ah-ha! You are here so we will put your feet in the fire and make you talk about everything! Why else will Vikings come to England? Look, now they are coming."

The most important visitors were escorted in by the Professor and Dr. Couturier. It was a procession of about fifteen people, mostly academics, and included Dr. Panek and Rossiter. Light o'Love did not recognise any of the others. They filed down to the front and settled themselves. To Light o'Love's surprise, Dr. Couturier took the floor to welcome everybody.

"Ladies, gentlemen, my friends, welcome to The Jane Flockman Institute on the occasion of this special convocation. I want to say thank you to those who have travelled far to be here. Most of you know each other, of course, and you'll meet the rest over the next day or two. Besides leading representatives from around the world, we have invited regional representatives from around Britain. It is probable that the trouble we are investigating will continue and the worst of it will be felt here in Britain.

"I'm going to hand you over to Professor Rundle in just a minute, and I'll take the chair for the discussions. But, before I start, as this is a special meeting, I don't think it is appropriate to hear the minutes of last year's annual general convocation. Can I have your agreement to that?"

Murmurs of assent came from around the room and Couturier continued. "Very well, so we'll get straight down to business. First of all, we'll hear from Professor Rundle who will give us a complete picture of what has been happening here at the Institute. That should take us all the way to coffee. After coffee we'll hear first from Light o'Love, the student who has been directly involved."

Light o'Love sat up with a jolt. No one had said anything to her about speaking. And, speaking in front of all these strangers...

Stjerne gave her a wicked smile as Couturier continued. "I think that may take a little while because you will have questions to ask, and it's better for you to hear the answers straight from her. Before lunch, or maybe afterwards, we will hear from Dr. Tamara Panek about her researches on the attack that nearly disabled the Institute over the New Year holidays. We have no time limit on the speakers or the discussion because the situation we are facing is obviously very grave. It is vital that we understand clearly what we are facing and why. So, I will ask you today to confine yourself to collecting information. I know some of you like to talk more than you like to listen, no, Heinrich, I was not speaking only of you. I am also guilty, but at least today I'm chairman, and I will have to behave myself. No, my friends, we have no time to indulge ourselves today. We are here to work, so let's get started. Professor?"

Couturier handed the lectern over to the Professor and went to sit alone behind the central table. The Professor came up, hitching her robe more comfortably over her shoulders, and set a fat file on the lectern. She looked up and smiled. "Don't worry my friends, I won't be reading it all. So let me start from the beginning. I'll go through it all, and you can ask questions afterwards. One evening last autumn I was at home, preparing tea. I was just filling the teapot when there was a blow in the air, like a sharp and violent clap of thunder from a lightning strike very close by. I dropped the kettle and boiling water went everywhere. I jumped out of the way, fortunately, and my husband came running to help. He had heard nothing. Then the messages started coming in..."

The Professor laid out the story of the last few months step by step. She made no attempt to explain or analyse. She simply told the tale. Her audience, who must have already heard something of the troubles, were spellbound. The Professor led them through the first encounters with the toys and her decision to send Light o'Love away over Christmas. She gave a very detailed picture of the scab infection, describing just how she had felt at the time and afterwards. She gave a full account of Princess and of Rostov's defection. Then, the encounter that Holly and Light o'Love had had in the Lake District, and finally, the kidnapping and subsequent rescue. When she had finished, Couturier took questions, sharp and sober questions from serious people. The story seemed to have worried them.

Light o'Love went for coffee with Stjerne. "So, young Light o'Love, you're going to talk to us afterwards. I hope you have your notes ready?"

"No one told me," she complained. "I don't know what to do." They were following the others down to the basement. Light o'Love could see the convocation was certainly a special occasion. Real china cups had been set out for the coffee and there were plates of biscuits.

"Don't worry, my friend. The Professor probably did not want you to be too ready. This way will be natural, no? Now I want a coffee and a cigar. You are sure you will not try one?"

Light o'Love laughed at the thought. "Definitely. But I like the smell of cigars, please light one and show me."

They stood together in a corner. With only one arm, Stjerne might have had difficulty managing both coffee and her cigar, but she set her coffee cup on a ledge and Light o'Love held the cigar when necessary. It felt very light and smelt good. "Try it," urged Stjerne with a smile.

Light o'Love drew on it tentatively, and coughed immediately. Stjerne laughed happily. "Practise, my friend, just practise. And, I will tell you a secret. If you want to frighten away the men, a cigar is the best!"

"I don't want to frighten them! I'm locked up! At least Rapuntzel knew that the Prince would come for her in the end. I never have time alone with a man."

"Never? And you are Light o'Love? This is not good. Perhaps I shall speak about it in convocation."

"No, no please!" She could not imagine having her sex life discussed in front of all those august people, but Stjerne was smiling at her.

"Do not worry. We must stop all this. It cannot continue as it is now. We cannot lock you up for your whole life. We must think and we must act. That is why we are here."

Light o'Love stood behind the lectern and looked at the audience. So many people staring at her. Her fear made her heart race. She could see friends in the crowd, but they were no help to her now.

She swallowed and started. "Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Light o'Love..."

"Louder, louder!" came a voice from her right.

"Switch on the microphone, Light," said Couturier. She looked for the switch and flicked it over. *Thunk!* She started again and this time her voice carried out to the room. She started her story with Godiva's first sighting of the toys. The audience was friendly, but that did not stop them questioning her on every step in her story. They wanted to know everything and she had trouble keeping to the thread of the story. They enjoyed her encounter with the toys and embarrassed her mercilessly. They probed deeply into the extent of her cognodynamics. But, they sympathised with her fear at being hunted.

She did not know how long she had been talking, and it was a surprise that, when she had fielded the last question, Couturier announced lunch and a one-hour break. Down in the basement a cold buffet had been laid out. Light o'Love enjoyed herself on prawns and smoked salmon, and listened to Stjerne describing life in Denmark. It sounded fun and she promised to go cycling with her in summer. She did not ask how Stjerne managed to cycle one-handed. She seemed capable of anything.

After lunch, Tamara gave a very detailed account of the scab infection. She quickly started using words Light o'Love did not understand, and referring to events and people she had not heard of. Her audience did understand and her lecture provoked a lot of discussion that carried on through coffee. Rossiter finished the day with a roundup of international affairs. He ran quickly over world events and then with a bow towards Dr. Couturier, he started to apply the principles of *le flux* to the balance of good and evil. It made depressing listening. Biafra, Prague, Alabama, Paris, Vietnam, there seemed to be more festering nests of evil than any good spirit could cope with. Anything he could offer to redress the balance was vague. True, young people rejected many of the old certainties, but who

could see the hippies of San Francisco as anything other than self-indulgent when compared to the suffering their Government had brought to Vietnam. But, as Rossiter explained, no spectacular events could be expected from their side. Their duty was one of healing and progress, not fighting. In his own country, the great work of reversing black slavery moved forward, and he hinted that the current troubles in Prague were not going all the Dark Light's way. He ended on a note of hope and encouragement.

After Dr. Couturier had wound up the day, Rossiter stopped by to speak with Stjerne and Light o'Love. He invited them both to the Adelphi and soon they were propping up the bar, Stjerne happily sucking on a cigar and Light o'Love listening to Rossiter talking about life in New York.

The dining room at the Adelphi was packed with convocation members when they got there. Old friends enjoying good food and wine while they caught up on past times. The waiters brought another table to extend one of the groups and Light o'Love found herself between Rossiter and Dr. Bonely.

At first, it felt difficult to talk to Dr. Bonely. Ari's story of her experience with him made it difficult to think of anything else, and for the first time she appreciated the effect Skyler's breasts had on susceptible males. He turned out to be good company, with a puckish sense of humour. She enjoyed herself and resented Holly coming to take her home. She would have preferred to stay and enjoy a nightcap and good conversation with Rossiter.

She had hardly hung her coat up when Skyler and Godiva came to the foot of her stairs asking for admittance.

Skyler was full of questions. "So, tell us what's happening. So many people! Will you still remember us when you're famous, Light?"

Light o'Love did not know how much she could say. "It's not like that really. It's a lot of professors and so on arguing about what's been happening around the Institute. It's quite interesting, but not exactly exciting."

"I saw you this afternoon. You were going out with a tall woman with one arm."

"That's right. Stjerne. She's nice. I think she's some sort of post graduate student from Denmark."

"And you were with that American man. He's quite dishy. Are you going to wind him around your little finger?"

"Glen? Oh, I don't think he's interested in me. He's a bit too distinguished, I suppose." She stole a glance at Godiva who looked uncomfortable. "Anyway, what have you two been doing? Anything interesting?"

Skyler was dying to gossip. "Tell her, Godiva..."

Godiva had the grace to blush. "I asked The Lamplighter out. We're going skating on Friday night."

"Skating? I'd never have thought of that. Can he do it?"

"Never been before. They're a bit short of ice where he comes from. But he's keen to try anything."

"With you on his arm, he'd try walking on water, I'm sure. Be gentle with him. Make him think everything's his idea. But, don't let him off the hook."

"I don't think of it like that," said Godiva huffily.

"Well, you should. Good men are too rare to be wasted. What about you, Skyler? Any fine young man lighting your nights?"

Godiva laughed and answered for her. "Men, you mean. She's trying a different one every week! Two, some weeks."

Skyler looked embarrassed. "Well, they're fun. And if you don't try them, you'll never know what they're like, will you?"

"And you haven't found one you like yet?"

"Oh yes, some of them are really nice. But there are always more around the corner, I'm spoilt for choice."

Light o'Love thought for a moment. Skyler could be riding for a fall. "You'd better be careful, Sky. One of these days you'll get swept off your feet by someone, and I bet he's a real ratbag. Have you had your fortune read recently?"

"No, not really. Only in class by other students, so you can't be sure."

"Listen, I'm going to set you up for a session with Foxglove. She's the best you'll ever get, so listen to her. By the way, I've been with Dr. Bonely all evening."

If Skyler's ears could have stood up like a dog's, they would have been doing it now. "Really? Is it, I mean, what were you doing?"

"Having dinner at the Adelphi. It was fun. And, he's more interesting than you'd imagine. He was talking about what he did during the war."

"That's boring..."

“Not the way he tells it. He was in Durban most of the time. They’d sent him and his unit by ship to Egypt, and they got dropped off in South Africa. They were waiting for another ship to take them on the last bit of their journey. But, somehow the War Office forgot them and they spent over a year there doing nothing much. He was talking about the Zulus and their magic. It was really interesting. You should try to get him talking sometime. He can be really funny. He had Glen and me in fits.”

Skyler looked disappointed. Perhaps she had expected another tale about his amazing gifts.

Next morning, Dr. Couturier threw the floor open for short contributions. Light o’Love retreated into her corner and listened. There was so much she did not know. Sometimes she only understood half the words and concepts. Sometimes she understood far less. She had to concentrate hard to follow the speeches. If she let her attention slip and she lost the thread, it escaped forever.

Discussion raged across the benches as people presented historical examples of attacks that might have been similar. Light o’Love enjoyed watching the protagonists defending their positions and attacking their opponents’, but it was far from today’s urgent reality. She felt relieved when Dr. Couturier called an end to the session and they went for a break. They were noisier than usual as they took their coffee and biscuits. The arguments were continuing.

Stjerne did not seem to be interested. “So, Light. What will you do when you leave the Institute?”

She had not thought about it. At the moment, finishing the course free and alive was enough of a goal. “I don’t know. I like it here... It won’t be much fun starting another course somewhere. I can’t think of anything else I particularly want to study.”

“Many people feel that because they are frightened a little, I think. Something new, and they are worried. For most of them it is not a problem. They make new friends and learn to live in the world outside.”

“What did you do?”

“Me? I was like you. I did not want to leave the Craft. So, my Professor sent me away for one year. I went to Bolivia as an international volunteer. It was very good. I liked helping people and that is satisfying. I love Bolivia. It is where I lost my arm in a stupid motorbike accident. I had to come back

then, and my Professor said I had learnt enough and I started to study the Craft full time. Now I am studying to be Doctor. It is a good way to live. I am not rich, who is? But I like my work very much.”

Light o'Love's heart jumped. Perhaps she could stay with the Institute at the end of the year. “I wonder if Professor Rundle would do something like that for me.”

“No, do not stay here. That is okay, but not the best for you. You must go to Europe and learn different things. You are speaking French? So, ask Dr. Couturier. Perhaps you can study one year with him. And, at the same time, you must also learn another language. German? There is much writing in German that is not translated. Perhaps you can come to us for some time. I am working mostly in German, but also in English. There is not too much in writing from Denmark or Scandinavia. You must learn enough to order a beer and to live, of course, but that is not too difficult.”

“But who would pay? I only have my Auntie and she's not rich.”

“Do not worry for this! If Dr. Couturier is wanting you, he will make an arrangement with your professor to exchange another student. The Institute will pay for you, it is normal. And, when you have your degree, perhaps you will come here for postgraduate work and teaching.”

As they filed back into the lecture room, Light o'Love had already decided that she would approach Dr. Couturier as soon as she could.

Dr. Couturier called the room to order. “Now, my friends, playtime is finished. No more discussion, we must decide what to do. Clearly, something is going on around the Institute and we must either stop it, or at least, control it. We have been caught by surprise, but now we know a little more about defending ourselves. Speaking practically, it is not a good thing to be under constant attack. In these circumstances, our defences must be always perfect and that is difficult to achieve. On the other hand, our enemies need only be lucky once if they want to break in. And, once they are in, who knows what they will manage to do?

“I will call Professor Rundle to speak to us again. She is the one at the centre of the attack.”

This time the Professor did not use the lectern. Instead, she took the microphone from its holder and went to lean against the front of Dr. Couturier's table. “Thanks again, everyone, for coming. It does all the Institute good to know that we have friends ready to help us. So what are we

going to do? As I see it, there are two parts to our problem. We need to prevent the Dark Light breaking in here, because if the Institute falls, all of Britain will fall like a house of cards. The net will be destroyed if its centre is eaten away. Practitioners out in the countryside might escape individually, but what can they do alone?

“And, if Britain falls, how long will it be until the rest of us are under attack? We don’t know what has caused this upsurge of evil. Perhaps the leaders of the Dark Side have become especially malicious and dangerous. We have had tacit understandings between us in the past. They understood we could not destroy them completely, just as they could not destroy us. It was easier to live in peace and not interfere with each other past a certain point.

“Now that attitude seems to have been abandoned. We see their hand at work all around the world, and their attacks on the Institute have been very dangerous indeed. Some person, or persons at the top of the Dark Side, has mistaken our quiescence for weakness, and they are trying to destroy us. I am confident they will not succeed. But, what are we going to do to stop them?

“I know what we have been doing to defend the Institute. Now let us consider how we defend you, and our network.”

A man stood up in the audience. He was short and balding, with a strong black beard. “Professor, can you show us what you are doing to protect the Institute?” From his accent, Light o’Love guessed he was German.

“Certainly, Heinrich. After lunch, anyone who’s interested. We’ll have a guided tour.”

“That is good,” said Heinrich. “Now I think we should make a committee for protecting between one centre and the others.”

The Professor passed the microphone to Dr. Couturier. “I think that’s a very necessary idea. What about a committee of five to look at protecting our network and making sure that if one of us is under attack, the rest know about it and can help? What do we feel about that?”

There was nodding and assent from around the room. Light o’Love had the sense that many of the delegates were old friends, and trusted each other.

“Right, I’ll try to work out a list of five people. I’ll give you back to the Professor.” He handed back the microphone.

"That's good," said the Professor. "We'll certainly support a joint approach. I'd suggest putting Paul Grimes on the committee from our side, he's the security expert. Now, the second part of our problem; what to do about Nick Rostov?"

"He has hurt us badly. He knew everything to do with the Institute and now we must guess that the Dark Light does also. We have changed what we can, but each time I do something, I feel he is looking over my shoulder. He knows us all. And then, there's the problem of his attacks on Light o'Love. The Dark Light is keen to have a look at her, but I suspect that most of the animosity comes from Nick himself. It's a personal matter for him."

"He must be caught and stopped!" said someone, and other voices agreed.

"Well, yes, that's easy to say. But, how to do it? That's the question."

Heinrich rose to his feet again. "Perhaps he has now given up his attempts? The last one was a complete failure."

"Possibly. But, I doubt it. From what I understand, bringing Light in would be a feather in his cap with his new bosses. Conversely, failing to catch her after all his efforts will diminish him in their eyes. And I know Nick. I am absolutely certain he has not given up. He will keep trying until he's stopped."

"Perhaps we could take away her powers? He wouldn't be interested in her then."

"That's an unworthy suggestion, Heinrich. I'm sure the Council would never agree. We have no right to interfere with what she's been given. Unless she misuses her powers, of course, but that's another matter. And besides, in time Light will become very valuable to the Craft. We must protect her. Any other ideas?"

"Do we have any idea where is Nick at the moment?" asked Tamara.

"No. None at all. We had him on watch lists at all ports, and the police are looking for his motorbike, it's very big and special but no luck so far. We guess that he's still in England."

Heinrich snorted. "This is not correct planning. If you cannot find him, how can you catch him? Move the girl away."

"No, Heinrich, I think you're wrong about that. We've considered moving her, of course, but what does that achieve? Sooner or later, Nick will find out where she is and we will still have our problem, but in another

country. We would be just moving the problem, not solving it. We have to trap Nick, and England is the best place to do it. Unless we hear he's moved elsewhere. The question is, how do we trap him?"

Light o'Love stood up. The Professor did not see her and she had to wave.

"Yes, Light. What have you got to add?"

"Professor, if we are going to trap him, we need to bait the trap. If you can think of a trap, I'll be the bait."

Chapter 23

The room fell silent. The Professor did not look at her, but scanned the benches for a reaction. Light o'Love's words hung in the air.

There was a stir in the audience. "Yes, Heinrich?" asked the Professor, "Do you have a better way?" Heinrich said nothing.

The Professor looked around again. "Anyone else? No. Well, I don't like it either. If I could think of some other way of making Nick break cover, I'd take it. This way puts one of our own, and a student at that, in the gravest danger. But, Light knows that. She probably knows more about what's involved than many of you." The Professor looked across at Light o'Love. "Are you sure you want to do this, Light?"

"I suppose I have to..."

"Well, there's no more to be said." She turned back to the room. "As her Professor, this is a decision I'm going to make by myself. We're going to do our best to entice Nick out into the open, and we'll grab him. It will be done by our people here in England, but I know without asking that I can count on all of you to help if needed. And, I won't be too shy to ask, you may count on that.

"So, what I am going to propose is that we use the rest of the convocation to clear up any international business we have, I know a lot of you have administrative issues that we might just as well get out of the way while we can, and then you can set off home. In the meantime, I'll ask Dhu Varren to sit with me and we'll work out a team to hunt Nick. We don't need to spread the details of that around, so please don't even mention it when you get home."

As she left the lecture room, the Professor called Light o'Love to her office. Seated in front of the desk was a slim man with a mop of curly grey hair. She had seen him sitting on the far side of the lecture room, listening intently, but saying nothing to his neighbours. As she went in, the man

slowly stood up to greet her. He offered a rough hand, and as she shook it, he studied her. "My name's Dhu Varren, Miss. I'm pleased to meet you at last." She could not work out his age. His face was weathered, deeply lined around a great hook of a nose. His cheeks showed the red broken veins that long exposure to the weather brings to countrymen, but his eyes were fresh and alert. If his hair had been black, she would have taken him for a young man but as it was, she did not know. His accent sounded gentle and Celtic. Scottish? Irish? She was not sure.

"Sit down, Light," said the Professor. "Dhu Varren's here because he's the man we turn to when all else fails. I want you to do everything he says, Light. And, exactly when and how he says too. You can trust him. No matter what it costs, he'll do the right thing. Don't let his pretty face fool you. Beneath that rugged exterior beats the heart of a sergeant-major."

Dhu Varren gave only the smallest trace of a smile. He said, "First thing, Miss, the Professor tells me you're both strong and wild. Is that right?"

Light o'Love felt like a reprov'd child. Dhu Varren looked over at the Professor. "I'd just like to try, Ma'am, if that's all right with you? Just so I may understand what I'm dealing with?"

"Certainly. Go ahead, but be careful..."

From Dhu Varren's chair leapt a black wolf. Thrusting itself at Light o'Love, its lips back and teeth ready to seize her throat. Strong white teeth reaching for her. The primeval brutality of the beast struck her as she threw up her hands to shield her face. It was impossible to resist and she was knocked sideways by the onslaught. She crashed to the floor along with her chair. For an instant she felt the creature's breath on her face, but it was wrenched away. She was on her feet again, reaching out for the animal that had somehow missed her and been thrown into the open doorway. Its claws were scrabbling on the tiles as it fought to regain its feet. As she threw herself onto its back, she heard the Professor shouting for her to stop, but it was too late. Her weight had knocked the animal down again and her hands struggled to crush its throat through the thick black fur. It was powerful and violent beast, with muscles like a horse. A thin horse; the wolf's neck was shrinking in her hands and at last the Professor's words were getting through to her. "Stop it, Light, it's Dhu Varren. Stop it! Stop it!"

She was lying on Dhu Varren's back. Instead of fur she could bury her hands in, she was gripping the bare skin of his neck. He was choking. She let him go abruptly and jumped up. Behind her desk, the Professor was trying not to laugh as she watched Dhu Varren get slowly to his feet and shake his head.

"I warned you, Dhu Varren. I was just going to tell Light to be careful with you but you wouldn't wait."

Dhu Varren sat down, twisting his neck one way and then the other. "I thought you were going to tell me to be careful with her." He looked curiously at Light again. "Well, Miss. You're not just the pretty little girl you look to be. That was very good. Very good indeed. There's not many who could have resisted, let alone fought back. If Little Red Riding Hood had been like you..."

"Very good. At least I'll know that if everything goes completely wrong, you can put up some sort of a fight. You never know but that might buy us some time one day. Professor, I think I shall take a little time with Miss Light here. Get to know her. And then, I shall think a little about what we might do and where we might do it."

"Good idea, Dhu Varren. Take her for lunch. I don't need to tell both of you to be careful."

Dhu Varren said little as he found a taxi and whisked her off to The Slaughterhouse. It was full of the noise and bustle of a city pub in the lunch hour. Dhu Varren found her a seat and he dropped his jacket on his stool while he went to order. She decided to keep her previous visit a secret, and let him introduce her to the best steak and kidney pie in Liverpool all over again.

Dhu Varren sat opposite her and ate delicately, using only his fork. He did not look at home in the pub. She could see the closeness of the crowd bothering him. He picked up his half pint of Guinness and drank slowly.

"Well, Miss Light..."

"Please," she interrupted him, "Why do you call me 'Miss'? Just Light is enough."

"Sorry, er, Light. It's just a habit. And, where I live we don't see so many women."

"Where's that?"

“Ah, Ralfland Forest. Near Sleddale and Shap Fells. On the moors. More deer than people, and more sheep than deer.”

He was not comfortable with small talk, but Light o'Love persevered. “That must be a lonely life.”

“Not so bad. No, not so bad.” He raised his glass for a thoughtful sip. “There’s a lot goes on around the moors and fells, and someone needs to keep an eye on it. The Institute takes care of me.”

“The Institute? How, why, I’m surprised. I didn’t think they did that sort of thing.”

“Oh yes. Young Holly Greenleaf, she’s the one in charge. She’s up there all the time with her young man. She doesn’t want the Institute to be losing touch and growing into a city place. So, we keep a home up there, and folk from the Institute can come up for a week or two and help about the place. Fix the walls, dig my garden, get their feet back on the ground. The Professor’s always coming up, her and her husband. They just walk. Walk and think, she says. Just walk and think.”

“But how do you keep busy?”

Dhu Varren looked at her with something like surprise. “Keep busy? Perhaps you’d better come up yourself, and I’ll keep you busy enough. That was a proper job you made of that bridge over above Ulpha. Proper job. I’ve got some stone that needs shifting around my place, if you and your friends ever take to doing that again.”

“You’ve seen it?”

“The Professor sent me over to look around. Not that I found anything. Not a sniff. But, that’s a bridge that’ll do a lot of good, I’m sure. It was well done.”

For a while, they ate without talking. The pie tasted glorious and her brown ale suited it very well. Dhu Varren mopped his plate with a piece of bread and waited for her to finish. He took their plates back to the bar. Half of his Guinness still waited for him and Light o'Love was embarrassed at her nearly empty glass.

“So, young Light o'Love, tell me a bit about yourself. You live with your Auntie Joan, I’m told. That’d be Joan Weatherwax, wouldn’t it?”

“That’s right, do you know her?”

“Oh, I remember our Joannie. I remember her very well. In fact, I think I might have met your mother once, before she married. The Weatherwax

sisters. The quiet one, and then there was Joannie. Now, there was a flighty young lady. All the men in the world chasing after her, and she'd just smile at them. Dance and smile. I remember that smile as if it was yesterday. It could put the wind under your feathers if it was meant for you. Sometimes she'd take a shine to one of the men for a day or two, and then she'd be off again, dancing and smiling.

"And she never married! Well, well, I suppose she was having too much of a good time. She honoured me once, you know, but I knew all the time it meant nothing to her. Just good fun. And so it was. A couple of days and she was away with someone else. Does she still dance?"

Light o'Love had trouble picturing Auntie Joan as a flighty young thing. "No, no. No dancing or men. I don't know why, she's seems happy just as she is. Her and Prince. Alone most of the time, but friends all around the village."

"Prince?"

"He's the cat. Big, black and soft. She calls him 'Prince of Darkness' when he won't do what she wants. Not that he minds. You know how cats are."

"And the Craft? What does she do nowadays?"

"You know, until I went to the Institute, I didn't know she was even involved. Looking back, she is always visiting people and helping them with this and that. She grows a lot of herbs in our garden, and she used to make horrible medicines for me when I got sick. I never thought to ask where her money came from, not from working, that's certain. She gets a cheque every month from her savings. It's not much, but she manages. And she just goes around helping everyone."

Dhu Varren sat quietly sipping. Light o'Love guessed he knew very well where Auntie Joan's money had come from, but he was not saying.

"So, what are we going to do about your little problem? You've no idea where Nick could be?"

"No, none. I knew him, but only as a lecturer. We never really talked. He talked, and we listened, that's all."

"You know, if I was him, I wouldn't try to grab you while you're at the Institute. Not with all the protection you've got and everyone wide awake. He's tried once and that didn't work. He won't try again. He'll be thinking

about where you'll be over Easter and wondering if it'll be easier to snatch you then.

Dhu Varren sipped again. "I wonder if he's watching Joannie. That's what I'd do. Whatever you do over Easter, you'd probably tell Joannie. You might even go back to visit her and that'd suit him very well. She's got a telephone? Good. I'll lay a bottle of Bushmills that he's listening to that telephone, one way or another. I think I might have to fly past Joannie and have a quiet look around. If he's been there, I'll know.

"Then I think we'll send you off on holiday with one or two of your friends. Perhaps Holly and a couple of students. Just enough protection to make him think we're worried about you but not too worried. You can tell Joannie by telephone where you're going. Make it easy for him. I'll arrange somewhere to stay, somewhere that's easy to get to, but hard to leave in a hurry. And we'll be waiting for him."

"Will it be, you know, dangerous?"

"Shouldn't be. If everything goes well, you'll wake up one morning and it'll all be over. And, I'll work it so that if everything goes awry, you'll still be safe. Be sure of that. I don't want to face the Professor saying that you've disappeared again. I doubt she'd forgive me."

"I don't think I would either! Do you want me to organise some friends?"

"Yes. Yes, you do that. Just a couple of friends, students, nothing more. They're just there for camouflage. I don't want them getting ideas of helping. This is far too tricky for them. But if Nick sees you've got a couple of friends along, he'll think everyone's on holiday and that we're all nice and relaxed."

Skyler had sighed and agreed straight away. "I hope that doesn't mean me being locked away with you for the entire holiday. I love you, but a girl can have too much of a good thing, you know. Where are we going anyway?"

"I don't know. Not too far away I guess. In England, anyway. What about you, Godiva?"

Godiva was having trouble agreeing. "Well, I don't know, Light. It's not that I don't want to help, but... I might have other plans."

Debbie knew what was troubling her. "She doesn't want to leave The Lamplighter behind. She was going to take him home to her parents and spend the holiday in bed with him."

"No, of course not. My parents would never let me..." She was blushing. "He's got nowhere else to stay and he can't afford to go home."

"That's okay," said Light o'Love. "Bring him along. That way you'll have a little light entertainment when you're not being a prison guard. You can take him home to visit your parents afterwards. I'm sure Dhu Varren won't mind."

Skyler was ready to gossip. "What's Dhu Varren like? Holly says he's the best polymorph in the country. She wishes he'd come to the Institute and lecture sometimes, but he lives up in the hills somewhere and only comes down if he absolutely has to. Holly says he sometimes takes a student to stay with him for a couple of months, to learn about the hills and nature and so on. And shape-shifting. Did he say anything to you?"

"No, nothing about being a polymorph. He did say he works for the Institute, and that surprised me. He runs a sort of retreat in the hills. The Professor and the others go up there to meditate, I think. And dig the garden. I wonder if that's where we'll be going."

"I think he's an expert in something, but I'm not sure just what. Apart from polymorphism of course. He says he looks after a forest up there."

Debbie snorted. "If he thinks I'm going to spend my holidays digging his garden, he's in for a surprise. I shall demand to be treated like a lady. Though I might change my mind if he brings me breakfast in bed. He looked quite sexy, in a wildman sort of way."

Whatever else the holiday might bring for Skyler, Light o'Love was sure it would not be sharing breakfast in bed with Dhu Varren. He did not look like that sort of man. More like rising with the sun and a cold bath in a mountain stream.

Rossiter had applied for a place in the party. Holly had taken her and Godiva to the station to see off many of the visitors. Light o'Love had sat with Rossiter over British Rail coffee in the crowded station café and made plans to tour Old England if the danger from Rostov ever ended. She needed more time alone with him. He had written after his January visit, and his letters had made her hungry to learn more about him.

He walked away down the platform with Stjerne. Light o'Love saw him offer to carry her bag, but she would have none of it. She marched down the platform, tall and erect, bag in her one hand and her cigar box under her stump. Light o'Love felt a pang of jealousy. She wished it were her turn to travel with Rossiter.

Chapter 24

“Because I went there myself. Just after the convocation. I thought I’d take a good look around and spent the night there.”

Light o’Love was sitting with Dhu Varren in The Slaughterhouse. It was a Saturday and the bar room was less crowded than normal. They had steak and kidney pie on the table again. Dhu Varren was conservative in his tastes.

Light o’Love wanted to know more. “Did anyone see you? Did you go as yourself? I mean ...”

Dhu Varren was not embarrassed. “No, that would not have been suitable. I put my black wolf coat on, and no one saw me. Except Prince.” Dhu Varren smiled at the memory, savouring it and his pie together. “One glimpse of me and he had gone. Straight into the house to call your auntie. I heard her coming to the door, but I was away by then.”

“Poor Prince, he must have been terrified.”

“Ah, caring cats is only a small part of the fun. There’s so much more when you morph into an animal. So much more.”

“But Nick had been there?”

“Oh yes. More than once. I could feel everywhere he’s been, and he’s looked at that house very carefully, front and back. He’s making it easy for me, being so open about it. I wondered if he might be doing it deliberately, to set a trap of his own. But I don’t think so. He’s a city person, and he’s one of those who’ve forgotten all they ever knew about where they came from. Animals are just something they read about.”

“I can’t imagine a big back wolf in our street.”

“There’s a lot of things outside your night-time door that might surprise you. Anyway, I’ve recruited some friends to keep an eye on the place, just in case. But, I think it’s time you gave Joannie a call and invited her for a couple of weeks in the Lake District. Do you think she’ll be difficult?”

“She’s really coming too? That’s fantastic!” And then a thought struck her. “But it’s going to be dangerous...”

“Not for her. Or your friends. But will she come, that’s the question?”

“I think so. If I can use the Professor’s name, she’ll definitely come. Where are we going?”

“Just tell her an old hotel in Langdale. That’ll be enough for her. And for Nick. Tell her we’re going to leave here on the 9th of April. It’s the Wednesday after Easter. I managed to book rooms for all of us for two weeks. I’m betting he’ll spy out the land for a day or two and then hit us that weekend. When will you call Joannie?”

“Tonight?”

“That’s good. You’d better get her up here on the day before, then you’ll all leave together on Wednesday morning. Now look, don’t tell her anything else. Not about me. Nor about the plan, of course. You can tell her some friends are coming along, that might set her mind at rest along with Nick’s. Yes - you can tell her that much. Is there anything else you need?”

Yes, she decided, *I need a change*. “Dhu Varren, can you take me for a walk down to Pier Head? I’ve been locked up for so long, I’ve forgotten what the river looks like. And you’re the only one the Professor trusts to take me out alone.”

Dhu Varren was uncomfortable with her arm through his, but he solemnly marched her up and down the landing stage for half an hour before returning her to Smethwick Hall. She invited him in for coffee, but he brushed her off and ran like a rabbit.

The Tram was packed for the end of term party. High spirits filled the air and added to her sense of loneliness. All her friends had come, Skyler, Holly, Siok. Godiva had brought The Lamplighter, who sat quietly in the corner with his arm around her shoulders. Tim was there. He had bought her a drink, but was now sitting next to the banjo player and singing.

He caught her as she came out of the toilet. He had something serious on his mind and got straight to it.

“Don’t you go out any more? I’ve been looking for you.”

She grinned guiltily. “Well, you know, the Palestinians. I’m only here tonight because Holly’s on guard.”

Tim looked around. Holly was sitting two tables away and had her eye on them.

"This is stupid," he said. "I want to go out. You know, do things together, but you always have people around."

"I do too. It's been like this all term. I never meet anyone. I'm not allowed out." That was not strictly true, but she did not meet any people outside the Craft. On impulse, she pushed him back down the little corridor that led to the two toilets. There was a door at the end marked Private. He did not resist, but allowed her to back him into a corner. She liked Tim. He enjoyed life, he enjoyed singing and he enjoyed being out in the mountains. Now she would enjoy him.

She did not care if Holly watched. She kicked his feet apart and pushed in close to him, offering herself. For a moment, their foreheads rested together and then he kissed her. His arms wrapped around her and one hand was in her hair, pulling her closer and keeping her where he wanted her.

She broke off. "That's better," she whispered. "That's what I've been waiting for." She kissed him again. It made her blood race. She pushed closer, pressing the front of her body flat against his. She had not felt this excited since her first party years ago.

His hand was wandering. On the side away from Holly, he explored the side of her breast. She shivered and twisted away slightly to allow him more room, inviting him to take her whole breast in his hand. Her heart danced in her mouth. It had been so long...

She decided she wanted it all. Without breaking her kiss, she reached out to try the handle of the Private door beside them. It was locked. No matter, she thought, I'm not letting Rostov or anyone else push me around tonight.

"Wait here," she said to Tim, and stepped quickly into the toilet. Both cubicles were empty. She locked herself in and struggled out of her boots. Her tights followed and her panties. She was already wet, wet and desperate. She stuffed her panties behind the toilet cistern and pulled her tights back on. Tearing a hole beside the gusset was harder than she expected, but they gave way in the end. Back into her boots and she hurried to Tim. He was waiting uncertainly in his corner. She went to him again. Nothing would stop her now. He hugged her to him again.

"Touch me," she whispered, moving back to give him space. "No, not there, silly. Lower."

His uncertain hand slid lower until he could cup her through her skirt. "Oh yes! That's it... Do it properly."

He did not know what she wanted. "Under my skirt, go on." At last, he was touched her. He found the gaping hole in her tights and his fingers burrowed through her wetness to bury themselves inside her. She kissed him fiercely as he stirred her depths.

Someone passed behind her and the toilet door opened and closed. She did not care. He was rubbing her, his fingers sliding over her clit and in and out of her. She would come soon and she gave herself up to him.

It did not take long. She buried her face in his neck as he gave her wild pleasure. "Stop, stop, wait," she begged, pulling herself away from him and squeezing his hand between her thighs. "Wait. It's too much." She kept him at her centre and when he understood that he must not move, she relaxed and let him hold her.

"That was wonderful," she whispered in his ear, and kissed him again. As they kissed she felt for his zip and, fumbling in the space between them, her hand dived deep in his trousers. She could feel his cock hard in her hand, but it was difficult to reach. His shirt tails got in the way, and once she had negotiated those, he was trapped in his underpants. Growing frustrated, she tugged roughly until his cock sprang free and she could pull it out into the open. It straightened in her hand, alive and hard. It was hungry for her and as she ran her hand up and down its length, it cried slippery tears.

"Lift my skirt," she said as she guided his shaft towards her. She did not care that Holly was watching her, or that anyone looking into the corridor to the toilets would see her and know perfectly well what she was doing. She pushed her hips towards Tim and led his rubbery plum to her clit. She shuddered as he slipped between her lips and into her wet centre. She lifted him hard against her pussy and it felt wonderful. She was rubbing herself backwards and forwards over the head of his cock, pressing him against her clit and sliding him the length of her furrow.

She had Tim pinned in the corner, his shoulders against the walls and his hips thrust forward so that she could take his cock for her own. She wanted him inside her. Arching her back and lifting her pussy to him, she managed to trap his tip in her entrance. At last. She sighed and levered herself further onto him until his cock lodged safely inside her and could no

longer escape. She held onto his shoulders and spiked herself as deeply as she could.

Now she had him trapped, she no longer had any hurry. She kissed him and listened to the noises behind her. The banjo still played and the room was singing. No-one paid any attention to her and her love-making. She kept kissing Tim and moving gently on his cock. It felt so good to have him inside her, reaching into her and crushing her clit at the same time. Tim let her do what she wanted, allowing her to move as she wished and as slowly as she could. She was ready. She knew a few quick thrusts of her hips would finish her again, but she did not want it to end so soon.

Tim was whispering to her. "...so good... so good. That's it, so slowly, oh God, do it slowly." She forced herself to move even more gently. Pushing slowly onto him and drawing slowly back, feeling every millimetre of movement outside and inside. She would make it last forever.

Her own body let her down. She could no longer control herself and her hips started moving erratically. With three quick pushes, she was coming, hanging on to him and burying her face in his neck to silence herself.

"Don't stop, don't stop!" he begged her, and she forced herself to keep moving. Her orgasm was taking her mind and she only vaguely heard him saying "Oh—oh—oh..." as his cock jumped and pulsed inside her. Clinging to him, shaken and with her knees trembling, she waited for the world to settle around her.

"Wow!" said Tim, and she giggled.

"Are they watching us?" she asked.

"I—I don't think so."

"I don't care if they do," she said defiantly. "I enjoyed that."

"You're not the only one, it was fantastic. I've never done this way before, but how are we going to...?"

"No problem." She moved back and he fell heavily out of her. She heard an undignified *splut* as she dripped onto the concrete floor. It made her giggle again. She still shielded him from view. "Go on, put it away and you can go back to them. I'll just be a minute."

She was entering the toilet as Tim got back to his friends. There was a roar of cheering, clapping and shouted comments. She could imagine the colour of his face. And, the colour of her face when she got back to her seat.

She wiped herself and stood before the mirror. Her hair looked untidy, but her comb was outside in her coat pocket. She did her best with her fingers. *I can do this*, she told herself, *my name is Light o'Love and this is how I am meant to behave*. She gathered herself and walked out of the toilet.

The noise came even louder than it had been for Tim, but she waved and smiled to her friends as she returned to her seat. "Is it my turn now?" shouted a male voice. She blew a kiss in his direction and sat down.

"Well, well, well," said Holly quietly. "Light o'Love puts us all to shame."

She shrugged and smiled. "Sometimes you just have to take what's offered."

"Indeed you do," said Holly, patting her hand. "Well done, it looked very sweet and you've made me feel very randy. I hope you enjoyed yourself as much as you seemed to."

* * * *

Easter was the most boring time she had ever spent. In spite of Dhu Varren's conviction that Rostov would not try to snatch her again in Liverpool, she moved into the Institute itself and was guarded by shifts of two people twenty-four hours a day. The Professor had done her best to make her comfortable. She had a television set up in a corner of the library and she lounged in the armchairs there along with her guards. For the rest of the time she could run up and down the stairs for exercise and she slept on a camp bed in her office. Life was boring beyond belief and she felt very relieved to finally go to the railway station to meet Auntie Joan. She arrived in hiking clothes, breeches and dubbed walking boots, and she carried a very old Bergen style rucksack. She looked ready to enjoy herself in the mountains

They spent the night along with the others at Smethwick Hall. Rossiter had arrived that afternoon, but he was still dog-tired and went to bed early. Light o'Love spent the evening lying on her bed face to face with Skyler, swapping school stories.

Holly appeared after breakfast with the minibus. They crowded on to it joyfully and set out for the Lake District and Langdale. Light o'Love squeezed onto the front seat with Rossiter. Behind her Skyler chattered with

Auntie Joan. At the very back sat Godiva and The Lamplighter, tangled up together. From the studied vacancy of their expressions, Light o'Love guessed they were doing naughty things to each other.

She could not get any conversation out of Rossiter. He was still more than half asleep, but he had his arm along the back of the seat. Light o'Love wrapped it around her and snuggled up. She felt happy to doze with him.

Holly took mercy on them eventually and pulled into the Forton service area. She let the others get out but the front seat passengers stayed in the van. They did not have long to wait before Dhu Varren walked towards them across the car park. He nearly had a smile on his face.

"It's working," he announced. "He's been snooping around for the last three days, and he's got the toys and that woman with him. They're staying in Windemere. Or they were, anyway. They disappeared yesterday, but they'll be back. I wondered if he might try something on the journey up. We watched you, but no sign. All the same, we'll be watching you all the way to Langdale. So, fill up your tank here and then keep moving straight to the hotel. Don't stop for anything, understand? Unless you see me standing in the road waving my hat, and I'll only do that if there's a big problem. Get the others on board and move out."

"Not until I've had a pee," said Holly. "We're not all made of stone, you know."

"And a cup of tea?" asked Light o'Love.

"Very well, but be careful," said Dhu Varren. "I'll be watching."

He waited at the minibus as they climbed down and rushed to the toilets. He was nowhere to be seen when they returned, but Light o'Love knew he would be watching somewhere.

Chapter 25

Rossiter came awake as they left Kendal and passed into the Lake District proper. He had never been there before and Light o'Love enjoyed his first impressions of the miniature mountains with wild farms at their feet. Through Victorian Windermere, then the dour farming town of Ambleside, and then they were twisting and winding into the narrow valley of Langdale. Dhu Varren had done the impossible and found them all places in the Old Dungeon Ghyll Hotel. Light o'Love had visited the bar there, full of mountain climbers celebrating at full throttle, and had never imagined that she would ever be on the other side of the heavy doors marked 'Guests Only'. The hotel was forever associated with the heroic age of British mountaineering. Golden youths, reckless and handsome, cutting their teeth on the Lakeland crags before going out into the world and conquering first the Alps and later the greatest peaks of the Empire in the Himalayas.

Dhu Varren waited at the hotel door as they pulled into the car park. He gave a nod, and turned away, leaving them to carry their bags inside.

The April weather had decided to be glorious in a way that only Lakeland can. It felt warm, the winds were light, the clouds scudded high and broken in a blue sky, and from the fells all around them came the continuous bleating of new-born lambs and the calls of distant cuckoos. In thickets along the valley streams and in corners of the tiny stone-walled fields, the thorn buds had begun to break. The spring green of the in-fields' grass lent hope to the dead and drab fell slopes above them. After her long confinement in Liverpool, Light o'Love's heart sang to be outside in such wonderful surroundings.

After lunch they trooped in a slow crocodile towards the pass at Three Tarns. Not a long walk or a difficult one, but ideal for getting to know their surroundings. They sat on rocks by the path halfway up The Band and

looked down along Langdale. Dhu Varren had chosen well; it would be difficult for Rostov to get in and out of the valley unobserved.

Light o'Love shared a rock with Rossiter and listened as Holly pointed everything out. "That's the Old dungeon Ghyll hotel, over there against the foot of the valley wall. The New Dungeon Ghyll is the other one, further down towards Ambleside."

She pointed down towards the valley mouth. "That's the road coming up from Ambleside. It's the only way in to Langdale for a car, without you use the Little Langdale road. That's it, do you see? It just goes up to the farm at Little Langdale, and then loops back to the main road anyway. We won't have to worry too much about that way. It's an easy road to block."

They sat examining the steep sided valley and tried to guess what Rostov was planning.

"He has to do it by road," said Rossiter. "He's got to immobilise Light somehow, and then taking her out by road is the only option. Unless he's hired a helicopter."

"He could use ponies," said Holly. "That's how everything used to move around here at one time. The only way to get between valleys without roads."

"Can you see Nick riding a pony?"

"Maybe not, but that's what I'd do, I think. If he uses a car, we'll know exactly where to find him."

Light o'Love did not fancy the idea of being knocked out by another dart. Recovering was too miserable. "Does he have to immobilise me? I mean, there's Princess and the toys, as well as Nick himself. And who knows what other help he might have."

"That's possible," mused Rossiter. "I'm hoping that he won't ask for any further help because he wants to make a favourable impression on his new bosses. But it's possible. And the ponies are also possible, so we don't want to think ourselves into a rut. But look at the ground over there. If he manages to grab you and tries to retreat up hill, it's terribly steep. And he'll have trouble escaping from Dhu Varren. I'll put my money on some sort of diversion to distract us, then a grab for you and a quick escape by road before we can react."

"Where is Dhu Varren anyway?" asked Light o'Love.

"We don't know," said Holly. "And we're not meant to know. If Nick sees him guarding you, he'll be a lot more careful. He might not even try at all and then we'd be biting our nails to no good purpose. Come on, let's move. We're only halfway up." They clambered to their feet and continued climbing. Skyler suffered most and the others called frequent rests for her. Auntie Joan climbed seriously and silently behind Holly at the front.

Coming out on the open pass at Three Tarns was their reward. The head of Eskdale spread out below them, and on the far side sat the highest mountains in England. They took their time and enjoyed the view until the wind drove them back down into Langdale.

That night the bar was crowded with climbers from the campsite across the valley. They looked a rough lot, and their singing was loud. They had to pay a deposit of two shillings for their beer glasses because they could not be trusted to leave them behind at the end of the evening. For all that, they were friendly and high spirits rather than liquor fuelled the fun. In the intervals when they were not tossing songs from one side of the room to the other, they held competitions to see who could hang longest by his fingertips from the ceiling beams, and who would have to buy the drinks.

Light o'Love had tucked herself into a corner with Rossiter when Dhu Varren slipped into the room. "No sign of him yet," he said in a low voice. "It may be that we'll have a quiet night. Who's staying with you tonight, Light?"

"Holly and I are taking shifts," said Rossiter.

Dhu Varren was not pleased. "Ah well, mind ye're not distracted by other things then. And don't sleep the night through, Light. Talk to them sometimes so they don't drop off." He sat with them long enough for a half pint of Guinness and left again.

Holly refused the other side of the double bed and sat in the armchair reading. Light o'Love tried to stay awake with her, but Holly laughed at her nodding and told her to get her head down while she could.

By the time Rossiter had taken over for the next shift, the beer had caught up with her and she had to be escorted to the toilet. There were no other guests awake to see Rossiter standing outside the toilet door and trailing her back to the room. She crawled back into bed and arranged the pillows so she could sit up and chat.

"Is America very different from England?"

"Ah, yes. Completely. I mean, when we come over we're always surprised at the similarities, but that's just because everything else is so different. And especially the people. I guess that's inevitable. We're half a world apart."

"I'm not sure I'd like it."

"Oh, you'd get along. And I'm sure America would like *you*. A pretty girl with that marvellous accent, and a witch as well. You couldn't go wrong."

"But isn't it dangerous?"

"Some places in New York, I suppose. But only some places, and I guess you could say the same about London or Liverpool, couldn't you?"

Light o'Love did not know enough about cities to know if that was true. She knew something about the countryside. She definitely knew how miserable an April night could be if you were not tucked up in bed. "I wonder where Dhu Varren is. Do you think he's somewhere warm?"

"I doubt it. He'd be in deep trouble if Nick turned up and he was sleeping in a woodshed or something. I can guarantee he's outside and wide awake."

Light o'Love thought back to his short visit to the bar that evening. "Glen, you wouldn't like to be distracted by other things, would you?"

Rossiter's reply was instant. "No, definitely not. Well, that's not true. I'd just love to be distracted as much as you could manage. I can't think of a better way to pass the time. But not tonight. Dhu Varren would kill me if he peeped through the window and saw me being distracted. Or asleep."

"But he can't see, we're upstairs. And the curtains are drawn."

"Don't think Dhu Varren wouldn't know exactly what was going on, if he wanted to check. No, I'm going to stay here in my chair, and you stop fluttering your eyelids at me. Wait until we've got Nick in the bag."

"But it won't be half as much fun then," objected Light o'Love. "And besides, I might change my mind."

"The girl I know will do exactly what she pleases no matter what I say, so I suppose I'll just have to live with your decision. Now lie down and go to sleep. There's no point both of us arriving at tomorrow dead tired."

She was conscious of the shift changing to Holly some time later, but Rossiter was there again when she finally woke up. His face looked haggard. Dawn had broken and it seemed there would be another fine day.

“Come to my room,” he said. “You and The Lamplighter can stay awake until breakfast, and watch me sleep.”

Rossiter appeared later in the morning and breakfasted on coffee and a sandwich. As soon as he felt fully functional again, Holly took off for a tourist visit to Ambleside with Auntie Joan and Skyler. Not that Light o’Love benefited. She would have to stay behind reading in the hotel. “We’ve got to look as if we’re relaxed and enjoying ourselves,” Holly said. “So we’re going to show the flag. And you’ve got Rossiter, Godiva and The Lamplighter to keep you company. If the weather stays fine, you can go for a short walk this afternoon.”

They had a planning session over lunch, and Holly and Auntie Joan were set to staying alert but hidden in the hotel. Rossiter would escort Light o’Love for a short walk further up the valley where they would find somewhere comfortable and wait for a couple of hours. If Nick was watching, she would be tempting but inaccessible. Especially if Rostov’s plan relied on getting Light o’Love away by road, because he could not drive any closer than the hotel. Past that point, he and his team would have to move on foot and they would find it impossible to hide.

Light o’Love felt safe as she strolled with Rossiter up the path. He would protect her and somewhere in the valley, presumably hidden in the faded russet of last year’s bracken, Dhu Varren the hunter waited for his chance.

Above them the bulk of Gimmer Crag hung, rough and friendly in the sunshine. Beyond it, the sharp peak of Pike o’Stickle. “There’s a Stone Age axe factory up there,” said Light o’Love. “There’s a special volcanic rock and axes from there have been found all over England. You can go up and sit where the men worked thousands and thousands of years ago.”

“Thousands and thousands?” Rossiter came from the New World and could not be blasé about so much history in one lump. “That must be a magical place.”

“I suppose so, I’d never thought about it like that. Shall we go up?”

“No, stick to the plan. Once we’ve caught Nick, we’ll be free to do what we like.”

“Once we’ve caught him! So many good things are planned for then, I don’t believe it will happen.”

They left the path and searched for a track that Holly had described. It was difficult clambering up through the dead grass, but they found it eventually, an old grass-covered pack trail, weaving steadily from side to side, a steady grade for packhorses to climb. They plodded upwards, stopping frequently to enjoy the view and take a breather. They looked for somewhere to stop.

At the foot of the crags, boulders and old scree held the bracken at bay. Some of the larger boulders must have rolled right down to the valley, others had lodged on the slope and settled permanently. They headed away from the path towards a boulder the size of a small house.

The old rock stood in a small oasis of short cropped grass. It was a meeting place for sheep and near the ground its rough places had been made smooth and greasy where generations of sheep had rubbed themselves. Higher up, the lichen-covered rock surface was rough and dry.

“Do you think you could climb up?” asked Rossiter. He laced his hands together and put his back against the wall. She struggled up and with a scabble of her boots against the wall, pulled herself onto its flat top. Rossiter climbed up to join her, simple and delicate in his movements. It was a wonderful, private place. Light o'Love rolled onto her back and stretched out in the sun. Rossiter lay beside her, saying nothing but filling her consciousness.

By tipping her head back, she could see Gimmer Crag beetling above them. Wispy clouds raced towards it and disappeared out of sight. Their movement hypnotised her. She heard Rossiter's breathing beside her become regular. He had fallen asleep. She decided to let him rest. She would watch for him this time.

A dark shape swept into view high above her. A hawk, no, an eagle! A Golden Eagle! Its great square-tipped wings spread wide, the eagle enjoyed itself, sweeping backwards and forwards in the wind flowing over the crags. They were rare in the Lake District because sheep farmers were suspicious of them. She had seen one in Scotland long ago and at a great distance. She had never seen one in England, or so close to humans. Her heart went out to the great bird as it glided majestically.

She felt something like an eagle herself, perched above the valley and surveying the world. Opposite was The Band, the rocky rib they had followed yesterday up to Three Tarns pass. Their stopping place had been

the saddle between Bow Fell Mountain in front of her and Crinkle Craggs further to her left. Down on the valley floor, she could scan the footpath coming up the valley from the hotel. There were two walkers on it now, a short distance from the hotel and coming slowly up the valley. She rolled over and watched them closely. They resolved into Godiva and The Lamplighter, out for a walk.

She watched idly as they passed below her. The tiny figures stopped and she could see them pointing with out-stretched arms towards the crags behind her. They left the path and started climbing, near the track that she had taken with Rossiter. This was not in the plan and she prodded Rossiter awake.

He took in the situation. "Are you sure it's them?"

"Of course. Look at them; who else could it be?"

"Exactly. Let me think. If they're Nick's people in disguise, he already knows we're here, and Holly and Dhu Varren already know *he* is here. I'm going to cover us up. If Nick's around, it will be as good as putting up a billboard advertising us, but he will know that anyway. If the people really are Godiva and The Lamplighter, they just won't see us. But Nick will if he's somewhere across the valley spying out the ground. We'll be out of reach, but tempting. Sit still."

Rossiter started his charms and crawled right around her making passes from above his head down to the rock they sat on. He turned and smiled to her. "There, we can watch them climb past and they won't even know we're here."

Godiva and The Lamplighter had found the pack trail and were zigzagging up the side of the fell. They did not hurry, and Light o'Love could hear their chattering slowly coming nearer. They were young, cheerful and in love. Once they had climbed high enough, they left the path and headed towards the boulder where Rossiter and Light o'Love were hiding.

"They're OK, I think," Light o'Love whispered. "I can feel them and they're genuine. What do you think?"

"I think so too, but why are they coming here?"

They were getting much closer and it was hard to look Godiva in the face without flinching and trying to hide.

"This looks good," said Godiva as she got close enough to see the short grass. "No-one will be able to see us behind here."

The Lamplighter looked suspiciously around one side of the boulder and then the other and finally he gave a wide smile and swung his small rucksack from his shoulders.

"This is just the right place. At last." He pulled a folded groundsheet from his rucksack. Between them, they spread it on the grass behind the boulder. They unwrapped their anoraks from their waists and folded them as pillows. Godiva unlaced her boots, kicked them off, and rolled on top of The Lamplighter.

"Now I've got you," she said. "All to myself. No escape." She swung her hair to one side and started to kiss him.

Light o'Love looked at Rossiter. He had a naughty smile on his face as he lay on his stomach and settled down to watch. Light o'Love lay beside him. There was nothing else to do.

They watched as the lovers giggled and kissed below them. They shared long sucking kisses as they drank and explored each other. The Lamplighter had already pulled Godiva's shirt out and his hands were wandering beneath, looking for the fastening of her bra.

He broke their kiss and pushed her back until she was kneeling astride him. One by one, he undid her buttons until he could push her shirt back over her shoulders. It caught on her wrists and Godiva had to help him, fumbling at her cuffs until she could pull her shirt clear. She shrugged off her bra and he took it from her, folding it and placing it at the edge of the groundsheet. He lay back with his hands behind his head and stared at her.

From where she lay, behind and above, Light o'Love could not see Godiva's breasts clearly, but The Lamplighter could and he liked them. "You are a beautiful, beautiful woman," he said in his deep voice, and he reached out to take a breast in each hand. Godiva sighed and Light o'Love knew that her eyes would be closed as The Lamplighter played with her. Her head rolled from side to side.

With a powerful twist of his body, he turned her onto her back. He leaned over her and, with one big hand, he held her wrists together above her head. She did not take her eyes from his face as she waited quietly for what he would do to her. He bent to her and kissed her, her face, her eyes, her neck, her mouth. She struggled uselessly in his grip as he kissed and she returned his kisses. She still struggled as he kissed down to the pink tips of her breasts. Her eyes closed and she whimpered as he sucked and teased.

She twisted, offering him first one and then the other, to be sucked and bitten. Light o'Love could see him taking the swollen nubs cruelly between his teeth and pulling her breasts into taut cones before letting them fall back.

Light o'Love no longer felt any embarrassment. Watching her friends was not an intrusion and it was making her excited. She moved closer to Rossiter and he put his arm around her. He felt good beside her.

Below them, The Lamplighter had left Godiva's breasts and pulled the rest of her clothes off. She kicked her legs free and lay back, one leg straight and the other bent at the knee, fallen sideways to open herself to him. Her pussy was a pink shadow beneath its wispy blonde fur. She was Eve incarnate, the woman who does nothing and still rules her man with her beauty.

The Lamplighter lay beside her and lowered his hand to the fork of her legs. Godiva propped herself up on her elbows and, like a mouse fascinated by a serpent, watched his masculine brown hand probing her, parting her lips and dipping into the nectar within. She dropped back with a moan and lifted her hips, thrusting them upwards in a slow rhythm to draw him into her. The Lamplighter played on as Godiva's moans became louder and her movements faster.

Watching felt immensely exciting for Light o'Love, and she made no objection when Rossiter took his hand from around her shoulders and reached underneath her. She lifted her hips from the rock and allowed him to unclip her breeches and reach inside. His fingertips were roaming across her mound and she knew she was as wet as Godiva.

Godiva's moaning had taken on a desperate tone as her climax drew near. She hung on to The Lamplighter with one hand while the other arm stretched out wide and gripped a fold in the ground sheet. Her eyes were closed tight and her face was red and strained.

With both hands, Light o'Love struggled to push her breeches and panties over her hips and halfway down her thighs. Now Rossiter had the freedom of her pussy and she lowered herself into the palm of his hand. He clasped his fingers into her wetness and she moved slowly against him.

Godiva came with a rush. She had gripped The Lamplighter's wrist with both hands and tried to pull him away from her pussy, but she could do nothing against that knotted forearm. She was whimpering "Oh – oh - oh - oh stop, stop..." but The Lamplighter would not let her go. She fell back,

her face a picture of suffering. Then she relaxed and opened her eyes with an angelic smile.

"Come here, you big black monster," she cooed, and pulled him down on top of her to kiss him all over again.

Rossiter's fingers played quiet games with Light o'Love. He knew what she wanted, but he refused her. His hand lay on the rock and she moved above it, dipping herself until her mound nudged his palm and pulling back again. His fingers teased her, slipping along her furrow, dipping inside her and flicking out again. He was rubbing the length of her, spreading her open, but giving her clit only the lightest of accidental brushes. She did not mind. She wanted to see more of the theatre being played out below them.

The Lamplighter wriggled out of his clothes. He emerged black and sleek, and the light played over the muscles of his arms and legs. He stood over Godiva, legs apart and knuckles on his hips. He was a powerfully muscled man, and Godiva shrank in awe of the rigid stem standing out from his centre. It was a dark ebony shaft, hard and hungry, its plum peeping grey from under its hood of skin.

He laughed happily and settled himself on his back. "Make love to me, woman," he ordered.

His cock was already in Godiva's hand and she smiled as she knelt by his thighs and looked down at him. "I love your cock," she announced in her faultless public school accent, "Shall I rub my Lamp and see if it will give me a wish?"

"You can do what you want with it," he chuckled, "as long as it ends up inside you somewhere."

"Inside me? Do you really think that's a good idea? Well, let's give it a try." She lowered her mouth to him.

Watching Godiva's naked body from above, Light o'Love thought she was making an obeisance to his cock, a grand luxurious kowtow. Behind the curtain of her blonde hair, she sucked at his root and The Lamplighter's face showed the pleasure he was receiving. He reached down to stroke the side of her face as she suckled him.

Rossiter was giving Light o'Love's clit a little more attention now, just enough to start her on a slow climb to orgasm. She wanted more, but when she wriggled her hips in frustration, he just smiled at her.

On the ground, Godiva had stopped sucking The Lamplighter's cock. She sat back, holding him still, pointing him at the sky, and waiting for his pleasure to recede. "Sit on it, lover," he said.

Godiva quickly shuffled forward, threw a knee over him and settled herself on his pole. "Oh yes," she purred. "That's the way I want it." She leaned forward with her hands on his shoulders and began to move.

They made a beautiful picture. Godiva lithe, blonde, and hungry, and the black masculine body between her thighs. The sun shone on her back, throwing a soft light on her curves and shadowing the cleft of her bottom. Under her, The Lamplighter was being ridden. His hands were on her hips, his strong black fingers gripping the white of her. Underneath Godiva's bottom, as she moved on him, Light o'Love caught glimpses of his shiny black root burrowing deep inside her. They watched each other's faces, waiting for the climax that was coming.

Rossiter let Light o'Love join them. He rubbed rapidly at her clit now and it would not take long. She could see him watching her, but somehow she was not aware of it. He was rubbing her and rubbing her but her mind filled with the beauty of the scene below and the menace of the swelling black cock that was flashing into view in the shadows below Godiva's bottom.

The Lamplighter arched his back and half lifted Godiva into the air. He was coming, and so was Light o'Love. She opened her mouth just as Rossiter clapped his spare hand over it. She trapped his hand inside her as she crushed her thighs together and rocked from side to side in ecstasy.

It took her a long time to come back to her body. When he was sure of her silence, Rossiter took his hand from her mouth, but left his other hand where it was, cupped around her mound with his fingers inside her.

Below them Godiva had stretched out on The Lamplighter and he was slowly stroking her back. Godiva, too, luxuriated in satisfaction.

Light o'Love was contemplating what she could do to Rossiter when The Lamplighter started getting up. He was growing cold. The two lovers slowly got dressed and moved back down the mountain.

Once they were out of earshot, Light o'Love rolled onto her back. Her breeches were bunched around her thighs and Rossiter was staring at her. She welcomed his gaze. Above, the sky was still blue and the clouds still swept out of sight behind the crag. The Golden Eagle looped back and forth

on his lazy patrol. "That was quite exciting, wasn't it?" she said to the sky. "I wonder if Dhu Varren was watching as well."

"Of course he was," said Rossiter. "Didn't you notice the eagle?"

"What?" she said, sitting up with a start.

"Dhu Varren. The eagle..."

"Oh no," she wailed, and frantically pulled up her breeches. "It's him? But he can't see us, can he?" She read Rossiter's smile. "No, he's been looking at me, hasn't he? At my bottom?"

"Well, it's a very nice bottom."

"I don't care! Get me down, I'm going home, now!"

She did not relent until they had reached the valley floor and were making their way back along the path. "Well, I hope he enjoyed it as much as I did. But, he didn't." She put her arm through Rossiter's to show he was forgiven. "After all, he didn't have anyone to play with him, and he hasn't got a free hand when he's flying."

Chapter 26

They did not go to the bar that evening. Instead, they sat in the Guests' Lounge and played Rummy. She felt safe and comfortable, but her friends were all over-caring. The feeling that Rostov was near oppressed Light o'Love and she would need all her strength to confront him. She gathered her thoughts together and went to bed early.

She had a disturbed night, filled with dreams of Rostov and Princess and brutally real motorbikes. Each time she woke Rossiter or Holly patted her and sent her back to sleep.

At breakfast, Holly announced the plan for the day. "I've been talking with Dhu Varren and he says he picked up a trace of Nick's work yesterday. Just a trace, not enough to pin down. Perhaps he's got someone watching you. Or, some animal, more likely. He's decided that we should make a real effort this morning and see what happens. You've got to trail your coat a bit, Light, and today you're going to do it near the road. Listen to what Dhu Varren wants.

"Firstly, you three," she spoke to Godiva, The Lamplighter, and Skyler. "You three are going to walk down to the New Dungeon Ghyll and up to the water fall. You'll enjoy it, it should be a pretty sight. Now, you're to walk straight there, not hurrying, but at a steady pace. No stopping, right?

"Light and Rossiter are going to start out well behind you, about ten minutes should do. I'll come along with Auntie Joan, but she's going to twist her ankle after a minute or two and I'm going to help her back to the hotel. That should leave Light out on the road with only Rossiter for protection. Except I shall be only moments away and Dhu Varren will be hiding as close as he can without being felt.

"How does that sound?"

It sounded dreadful to Light. She would be alone on the road with only Rossiter nearby and everyone else minutes away. Didn't they remember

how long it had taken Nick to snatch her last time? "What about the road out?" she asked. "Who's watching that? How will you stop him if he grabs me?"

"It's being taken care of, Light. Don't worry, if he makes a run for it he won't get far."

"I'm frightened they may shoot me again. It happened so quickly last time."

"It won't happen, Light. He'd have to use the toys because you can't feel them, and there's nowhere to hide them. Only behind the field walls and Dhu Varren is taking care of them. They might be hidden from the road, but they'll be wide open to anyone watching from the field side of the walls. Anyway, he'll have to show himself in the end, and then Dhu Varren will have him. Or at least drive him off."

Light o'Love felt shaky as she stood inside the entrance of the hotel. Her friends had already started out and the ten minutes that Dhu Varren had ordered had already stretched out beyond reason. Rossiter waited quiet beside her. She wondered how he felt, knowing that in a few minutes he might be facing Rostov in all his fury. She did not think that he could stand up against Rostov by himself, but with her support, they could definitely drive him off.

Holly opened the door. "Right people, let's go. Now remember, we're on holiday. I want to see smiles and chattering. He mustn't suspect what we're doing."

Light o'Love stepped out into the car park. It was a grey day and a chill breeze made Light o'Love shiver. There might be rain later in the day. They set off down the road, trying to act their parts.

They had only gone a short way when Holly said, "Now might be a good time, Joan."

Joan stumbled and made a grab for Rossiter's arm. She leaned on him, lifting her foot in pain. They sat her down beside the road and Holly made a show of rubbing her ankle. They decided what to do and Joan limped back toward the hotel, leaning on Holly as she went.

Light o'Love continued down the road with Rossiter. She slipped her arm through his, and said, "Cheer up, it probably won't happen."

"You're right. And we have to keep smiling and chattering. Did you enjoy yourself yesterday?"

“Me? How do you mean?”

Rossiter smiled at her. “On top of that boulder, silly. Was it fun?”

“I thought it was quite nice, didn’t you? They make such a handsome couple. And she’s so passionate, but you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?”

“Well she wasn’t passionate with me! I didn’t know if she felt anything at all. Anyway, that’s not what I meant. Did *you* enjoy yourself, that’s what I want to know?” He might have been asking about love making with her, but he was looking around him, over the empty fields that were growing the first silage cut of the season.

“If you mean did I enjoy showing my bottom off to Dhu Varren and the rest of the world, no I did not. And if he dares to mention it...”

“But it is a very nice bottom.” There was a noise up ahead. A vehicle came towards them. They could see a boxy red roof above the stone walls. They braced themselves as a red Morris van came into view. It should be the post man. Light o’Love searched for him and he was there. She examined him, but he felt normal. The van sped past them, driven by a small man in a uniform cap. He gave a casual wave with his fingers above the steering wheel and disappeared.

They breathed again. “I was saying it’s a very nice bottom, Light, but what I really wanted to know was, did you enjoy -”

His words were cut off by a scream of great pain from Holly. It echoed around and around inside Light o’Love’s head. “He’s here, he’s here,” the words were being twisted out of Holly in agony.

Light o’Love looked at Rossiter. “Stay here,” he said. “Hide. Get off the road. He mustn’t know you’re here,” and he turned to run back to the hotel.

A gate stood beside her. With trembling legs, she clambered over it and crouched against the wall. A vortex of pain and violence radiated from the hotel and rang in her mind. Clumsily, she felt around, searching the fields for Dhu Varren. He could save Holly, but where was he?

And then, with the dull recognition that they had all been tricked, she felt him emerging through the fog. Not Dhu Varren. Rostov himself. He was coming for her. She felt him on the other side of the wall and she knew he could see her. She jumped up and ran back into the field. She could see Rostov surging up the road, a blur of action, and one of the toys ran behind

him. She turned and stood alone in the middle of the field. She could not escape; she would have to face the danger.

Rostov came to the gate and stopped for an instant, while Mortlock levelled his pistol and fired. Without thinking, she reached out to stop the dart and ram it into Mortlock's neck. She had no time to look at his collapsing figure as Rostov vaulted over the gate and came for her.

"Stop, Light, there's nothing you can do now." His voice sounded familiar, but much grander than a normal voice. It filled the field. He walked towards her, hands poised in a wrestler's stance. She wanted to run, but she knew instinctively that this would be a mistake. She just looked at him, uncertain what to do.

"Just do what I tell you, Light, and no one will get hurt."

He was coming too near to her. Another step and he could reach out and grab her. He had a flush of triumph on his white face.

She crouched and dived at him. Suddenly she was inside his guard, driving him back with great blasts of energy to his stomach. It was no longer Rostov she fought. He had changed and grown. She was struggling in the grip of a black beast. The leathery skin of its underbelly and its animal reek filled her senses. He clawed at her back, talons driving deep into her flesh and ripping her open, but she did not stop. The wildness in her had taken over and was throwing all of herself at him. She hammered him with fists that were more than fists. She did not feel her blows with her knuckles, but in the air around her. Violent blows that sank deep into the beast's stomach.

Suddenly, she sensed he was giving way. Elation ran through her as she drove Rostov back towards the field wall. She knew he could no longer resist her. Strength was running out of him as he slumped against the wall, a beaten man. She kept hitting him with slow regular blows. In the corner of her eye, she saw the black wolf vault over a wall into the field and streak towards her, but she no longer needed his help. Her power drummed into Rostov and he was helpless.

"Stop, Light, stop it," said Dhu Varren. "He's finished, I've got him now."

She stood and looked around her. For some reason, there were tears in her eyes, and she felt completely spent. A white minibus slid to a stop at the gate. In her daze, she read the name on its door. Edgehill Senior Haven. There were old people getting out, opening the gate, and coming towards

her. The Professor was there, hurrying to her. And old Bonely. And Foxglove, looking ridiculous with white hair done up in a bun.

She must be losing blood from the wounds in her back, but she did not feel any pain. She could feel her control slipping as the Professor reached her, showing concern all over her face. She looked up and saw Rossiter and Holly running through the gate.

The sun was out when she woke, shining at a low angle through the small window. She looked at the ceiling and thought for a moment. The sunlight came from the east. It must be breakfast time. Perhaps it was even too late for breakfast. She sat up in a hurry and almost fell out of bed as her head spun around the room.

“At last!” said Auntie Joan. “You looked as if you might lie there all day. Can you manage something to eat?”

“Definitely, I’m hungry. But my head...”

“Nothing to worry about. The best cure for that is a good meal. But, how are you feeling apart from your head?”

She thought for a moment. “But what happened? My back...”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll go and tell the others you’re up and breakfast will be waiting.” She bustled out of the room.

Slowly Light o’Love climbed out of her pyjamas and looked for her clothes. They were not on the chair where they should be. She went to the mirror and turned her back. Nothing. No cuts or scratches. She found her clothes hanging in the wardrobe.

Her head was already clearing as she reached the dining room. The others were there, sitting around the remnants of a solid breakfast. Even Dhu Varren was there, smiling and chatting with Auntie Joan. Everyone stared at her and she felt uncomfortable.

Rossiter waved her to a chair opposite him. “Come on, Light. Sit down and tell us how you feel.”

“Er, hungry...”

“That’s good, Dearie,” said the waitress at her elbow. “One Cumberland special breakfast. Your friends said you’d be hungry. The coffee’s just coming.”

The plate in front of her was large and covered in eggs, bacon, black pudding, fried bread, fried tomatoes, a chop, and a length of Cumberland

sausage. She swallowed. This morning she could teach Pavlov's dogs a thing or two. The smell made her stomach crave and she settled down to eat.

The events of yesterday slowly came back to her, but did not make much sense. "Did I see the Professor?" she asked.

Holly answered her. "You certainly did. The Professor and the others. They were all waiting down the road disguised as an old folk's tour group. They would have stopped Nick if he'd been able to escape back down the road."

She thought some more. "And Foxglove in white hair? She looked so silly."

"They had to act the part. Wait until you see them this evening. They're staying at the New Dungeon Ghyll and they've invited us all for dinner. They arrived in disguise and they can't change now or people will be upset. You're not allowed to laugh at them."

"Where's Nick? What happened? I heard you..."

"No you didn't. That what you meant to hear. Do you remember seeing a post office van?"

"Yes, but it was all right, I checked."

"So you think, but the back of it was blanketed and Princess was in the back with one of the toys. They'd been playing with the postman but he didn't know a thing. That's why you didn't suspect anything. As soon as it pulled into the hotel car park, Princess broke the shield and she did the screaming. I don't think it was her, actually. It must have been something that Nick had created and she just channelled it. I don't believe she could do it herself, and anyway, she doesn't know me well enough. However she did it, she drowned us out and managed to call Glen from your side. Stupid man! He had his orders."

"But he wanted to help," said Light o'Love. "I wanted him to."

"Never mind. Orders are orders, and he should have stayed with you. Shouldn't you, Glen?"

Rossiter sighed. "She's right. It could have been a disaster. Not that I'd have been able to help you much against Nick, I'm afraid. I don't think a poor male could offer much to help Superwoman. Poor old Nick must be feeling terrible this morning. If he's able to feel anything at all."

"Where is he?"

"The Professor has him," Holly said sadly. "We took his powers away yesterday afternoon. That was awful. But, what else could we do? The Professor says he can earn them back a bit at a time if the Convocation agrees."

"But what will he do?"

Holly chuckled. "I'm not sure. Lecture on Geopolitics, I suppose. But, I think the Professor's got more on her mind. He can drive her around, for a start, and I suspect she wants to take revenge for being bent over an armchair and not satisfied."

It was Light o'Love's turn to smile. "He'll be very tired if we all take revenge like that." Rossiter gave her a questioning look, but she did not explain.

"And you, Light? What do you want to do when you've finished breakfast? The Professor says we can stay for the rest of the week because the rooms are paid for anyway."

Light o'Love considered. Perhaps Rossiter could take her to Ambleside. She fancied a little shopping and civilisation. She looked at Auntie Joan. "Don't worry about me, Shirley. Dhu Varren's going to take care of me. We've got some catching up to do."

Perhaps Ambleside could wait for tomorrow. She did not want a crowd today, and she did not trust Rossiter to drive on these roads. He would get confused about which side he was meant to be on.

She looked at Rossiter. Behind his glasses she thought she could see concern for her and an eagerness to please.

"Perhaps Glen could take me for a walk again. Would you mind? I feel like being distracted a little."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacqueline lives in the far north of Queensland, Australia, on the shores of the Coral Sea. She has a house built for the tropical climate on tall stilts and with walls that open to let the breeze blow through.

She settled in Australia after living with her husband in many countries and cultures, and her travels have given her a fund of stories and locations she uses.

Jacqueline writes romantic stories because she is an unrepentant romantic at heart. In a world that is drowning in poverty and violence, she tries to hold up a cheerful light and make everyone's life a little happier. That is a big job, but it is fun to make the attempt and, who knows, it might just work.

When she is not writing, she is kept busy by her garden, which is still maturing. Right now her coconut trees look young and scrappy, but come back in five years and they will be towering over the house. What could be more romantic than a coconut palm?

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