

Raven-Made

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

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

The walking vivified me, and I felt the clouds from the city melting out of my mind. I had found the going easy to start with and the uphill straits only served to be pleasantly challenging, for I'd made sure my rucksack was lightly packed. I stopped by a river to eat the sandwiches I had bought and to drink some juice. I was fascinated by the sight of a fish in the river and watched it until some movement of my shadow caused it to dart away. Then I had become engrossed in the wavering river bed, where the stones were so arranged there appeared to be a gradation of steps descending to the bottom, decorated with the green tendrils of weeds. If it had been summer I might have taken my clothes off and tried those rough steps out; perhaps they might have taken me to another watery world, or introduced me to a hidden cave beneath the river - so did my imagination work. I was rejuvenated by this activity. All of a sudden I felt all the months - years even - of pressures and harassed city living slough away from me and I was returned momentarily to childhood instincts, where the immediate and present circumstances encompass the whole world, the whole of being. Some sense of uplifting freedom infected me. Time seemed irrelevant and I looked about me in pure appreciation once more, not now concerned about destinations. I was lured to explore a little coppice not far away where I found three strange standing stones. One of them was so hunched and creviced at the side that it looked like an old woman transmogrified into stone. The impression was compelling and gave life to the whole arrangement, so it seemed that the stones had become three giant granite females caught in conference, permanently in the act of quiescent commune like guardians of the Earth. So it struck me. As I dwelt upon this I extracted a notebook from my rucksack. Being inately fascinated by such structures, though I'd never had the time to explore the instinct further, I spent some time scribing my thoughts into a poem - poetry being something I dabbled at now and again. The time passed and I was loath to leave, but deemed it prudent then to do so. Not before time, I discovered.

I was stiff when I got up, though I soon got into the rhythm of walking again. But, I had miscalculated the distance it would take to get me to Knighton, and after some time I realised I was way behind schedule; my legs had begun to ache, and a blister was beginning to rub on my right foot. After an age of walking, the sun was starting to set behind the swelling hills and forested peaks, softening them with the fading

light, and adding to their aura of sombre power. I was not immune to such beauty, but now I began to feel an edge of panic as I was still a long way from where I needed to be. I did not relish the thought of walking in the dark along a route I did not know save that it was traced upon the map: I began to curse myself as a fool and tried to increase my pace, which only served to exacerbate the soreness of my blister and churn my insides up more.

The light had turned to gloom quite quickly and fog had risen, making it tortuous and tense, stumbling along in the dimness of twilight. I felt a sick ball of fear in my stomach as I imagined staggering around in the dark endlessly, finding no houses or welcoming lights - exposed to all that the thick night might draw the words of Lady Macbeth sprang to my mind and seemed peculiarly appropriate: "Come thick night and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell...". That's how the night had become, as if the smoke of Hell had usurped the healthful light in one fell swoop and left me full of trepidation and anxiety. My imagination began to play tricks on me - I thought I saw a black shape crouched on the path ahead of me, but then it disappeared as I approached. A tree startled me as it rose up in the darkness, its branches like long crooked claws, raking the smoky air above me. Nebulous shapes haunted the hedgerows. I speeded my pace once more, in irritation with myself, longing to see a light, the presence of a cottage or a farm. On and on I walked, chilled to the marrow and depressed by my predicament.

The path took me down a steep hill, which was hard going, especially with the fog so thick and night encroaching. I bumped into a tree and swore, scrabbling through a bush of gorse, close to tears. But as I got further down I perceived a twinkle of light, and a ruddier glow beside it. Heartened, I picked up my pace heading for the source. My track came steadily downwards until it levelled out to a plateau. In front of me was a gate leading a way out of the field, and beside it, facing the track, was a stone cottage with a cosy flood of light coming from the windows. I was shaking with relief and also feeling rather stupid. The cottage nestled in a dell; behind it, hills loomed. Before it, undulating land hid it from view. By the cottage was an orchard and at the edge of this, a fire leapt in challenge to the night. I could make out a figure standing beside the fire, holding a stick, apparently absorbed in contemplation of the flames. I felt awkward, intrusive; perhaps because of the stranger's demeanour which expressed an intimate communion with solitude - and somehow, forces unknown. I felt my presence would create an unwelcome disturbance for the silhouette reflecting upon the flames. Something about its stillness struck me□

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As I followed her into the wooden porch entrancing the front door, I noticed a carving above me, revealed by the porch light. It was the face of a man, a wild swirl of hair and beard billowing his head and chin, a grimace cut into the features. A Wild Man - Green Man of the Forest - *Pan*; the associations rang through me. I was struck by it, intangibly awed by it. I followed her through the door which was of heavy dark oak wood. It was divided into squares and within each square was some kind of motif. It seemed such an ancient door: it looked as if it would have been better suited to a castle.

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

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

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

She stirred the pan and lifted the spoon to her lips. She sipped, pausing whilst she ruminated upon the flavour, then reached for some salt. Stirring it once more, satisfied, she replaced the lid. She'd observed the grimace I had made on taking off my boots - particularly the right one - and there was a tone of solicitous concern in her voice when she asked: "How are the feet? You can bathe them if you like. I'll bring you a bowl of hot water with a particularly good herbal preparation I've concocted myself. Guaranteed to help the condition. I am rather accustomed to walking myself you see, hence it has been tried and tested, and proven extremely effective, I promise you."

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

She shrugged her shoulders, a little motion that conveyed vague irritation and equally, utter no-chance. "Right," she said, becoming pragmatic, and regarding me closely with eyes of storm-cloud grey pierced with emerald. Strangely affecting eyes somehow ... "I'll show you where the phone is. You can try and phone for a taxi but as I said, I'm not optimistic about your success on a night like this. My offer stands. You are quite welcome to stay and be on your way in the morning; as you wish, it is up to you. "Thank you very much," I stammered, "it's really very kind of you. It's so stupid of me really... I should've ..." But I was interrupted by my new acquaintance holding up her hand to silence me, in a manner I could not ignore.

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

The room I was led into was sparsely but tastefully furnished. There was a fireplace at the further end of the room, which gave an ambience of comfort; a richness set off by the uncluttered space around it. The carpet reminded me of a forest floor - it was a pattern made of cream, fawn and green, threaded with browns and gold. A wooden rocking chair, an armchair and a sofa surrounded the fire. Green velvet curtains shut out the night. I noticed a large wooden cabinet to one side. There was a strange wall hanging next to it. It was of a simple oatmeal weaving, but in the middle of it, in black, was a sign, a symbol I did not understand. It was like a diamond shape with a horizontal line intersecting it, whilst inside it was an oval - something else inside of that. The hanging gave an aura of enigmatic power to the scene, that I found strangely affecting, but couldn't quite put my finger on why or how. In another corner of the room, a weird contortion of tree roots, smoothed and polished, stood as a natural form of sculpture. I made out a black rounded shape hanging from one of the static roots. I could not see what it was. Next to this was a large picture which conveyed a sense of brooding wilderness: trees crouched over a river threading into a black interior. The depicted shadows and moonlight and snow suggested mystery - the primal pulse captured in essence upon canvas. These perceptions took a moment to register in my mind, before I followed her to the back of the room, where a telephone rested on a small table. Beside it, surprisingly to my mind, given the basic charm of my surrounds, was a music system and a shelf stacked with CDs and tapes. The whole of the back wall was covered with shelves, filled with books. I was intrigued as to their nature but did not feel able to browse upon them in my host's presence.

"Well, here's the phone. There are some directories under there if you need them," she indicated. "Thanks, that's great. Is it O.K. if I phone a friend as well? It's just I promised I would," I rambled tentatively, still too embarrassed by my predicament and too much in her debt to behave otherwise. I fumbled with my purse trying to find the number scrawled on a bit of paper, buried amongst other cards and folded notes. Something fell from my purse and onto the carpet.

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

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

"I don't hold with such things. In fact, I find their presence a defilement and an irritation - Nazarene sickness that it is." Her voice was low, yet delivering the lines with a smooth intensity that rendered me uncertain and speechless. "You believe in such nonsense do you?" she asked with quiet precision. "Not especially ... A friend gave it to me. I've never worn it. I believe in something; not all the dogma, but what's behind it, I suppose." I felt embarrassed by my immediate disassociation with the church; God, Jesus. I probably seemed weak, shallow. Yet the male dominated ethos of Christianity had distanced me from it a long while since. It seemed to divest me of power so I could not love it or believe it as fully as others seemed to.

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

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

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

But I feared the silence would betray me, so I moved quickly to the door and walked in to see the woman sitting on the chair by the Aga, supping a mug of tea. A tortoiseshell cat, resplendent in orange and white and fawn, dappled with black, purred upon her knee as she stroked it sensuously. She'd taken off her boots, and her coat now hung beside the door along with a variety of other coats and footwear. She wore a plain red woollen jumper with a long Arran cardigan, cream with brown buttons, and soft-coloured cinnamon-brown trousers, that revealed a certain sleek robustness about her figure, despite the banner of her hair proclaiming her lack of youth. Her face was a touch imperious. This effect was accentuated by the steely-grey hair twinned and captured neatly in a bun at the back of her head. A few wisps escaped

and framed her smooth inscrutable face, notably the high cheekbones and small vertical scar running down her right cheek. That scar could have been a tribal initiation mark or a score bequeathing some high rank of honour from the way it was starkly, symmetrically cut into her skin. It certainly suggested there was much more to her than met the eye. I noticed the steady grey-green eyes, dark straight brows, strong nose and firm chin. Her skin was browned and rosied as if by a life lived as much outdoors as inside. It was only her hair, the lines around the mouth and forehead, about the eyes that told her age.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You mentioned some standing stones. Where did you see them? Could you locate them for me?" I told her the area as near as I could, mentioning a village near by.

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

The story tells of a young girl, her mother and grandmother, travelling the roads in search of their True Lord, their earthly Master who one day had simply vanished from their lives having, unbeknownst to them, been sacrificed to fructify the land. Now, when a stranger - a young shepherd - encountered on their

journey, brought this to their awareness in all innocence, all three women - the daughter, the wife, the mother - were consumed with grief, which turned to hatred. They had come to an obscure place on their travels, in a coppice beside a river, and there they began to plot their vengeance: to use their will and Woman's power to destroy, to wreak havoc, as their own lives had been shattered. All three women were together in this, the girl no less than the old woman or the raging widow.

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

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

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

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

"Oh, it is something I choose to dabble in when I have the time," Brenna answered evasively. I sipped my tea and stretched my legs, basking in the warmth, only grateful I had a roof over my head and a place to stay for the night. What the evening would bring I could not tell.

Brenna began to question me about my background and where I had originated from. "Staffordshire," I told her, without my usual inclination to dress that up by claiming to come from the heart of England, as was my usual theatrical wont. I felt she would neither have appreciated nor tolerated such a flowery riposte.

"Not too great a distance from here," she observed casually. "And your job, what do you do for a living?" "I'm a psychologist," I answered. "I work with psychiatric patients".

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

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

"It's the case with most jobs I should think. There are always the positives and the negatives - it is whether they balance favourably that counts." Then she turned towards the stove. "I must confess I am feeling hungry. Will you join me ? I won't take kindly to you watching me eat alone," she said. "Of course, that would be lovely. You're really very kind," I responded, repeating myself, at which Brenna laughed, a slight derision in the sound. "I hardly think so my dear. It is little enough, and your presence here offers me favourable relief from my own company - though do not misunderstand me, I am inclined to solitude. In general. I prefer it. But I am not so rigid yet as to make that state an unbroken rule. There is always something to be learned from strangers, do you not think ?"

"Certainly," I replied, feeling again almost intimidated by Brenna's manner. She was so different, so self-possessed and fluid, like no one I'd ever met before. I felt my answer had pleased her in some way. She smiled slightly and regarded me for a moment in a calm detached manner. Again, I had the sense of indiscernable power, as of something hidden yet soon to be revealed - as if she were assessing the likely manner of my reaction to something specific. As if she were manipulating me in some way for her own ends. "Well then, let's eat," she demanded. She took another bowl from those stacked on the table beside the bread and set a place for me. Then she brought the saucepan over to the table and ladled a generous amount of the stew into each of the bowls. In truth, I was very hungry as I'd anticipated a pub meal in Knighton by now. But of course, events had now been dramatically altered. There was nothing I could do but take advantage of them.

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

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

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

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

"Ah yes, her name ..." said Brenna, her voice a little distant. "People's tendency to name their animals often amounts to a pathetic attempt to humanise them. Degrading and deceiving for both the animal and the person. The name I have for her does not bestow upon her pet status, rather it makes me appreciate her nature - her catness if you like - more. Asoth is her name, *Asoth*," she mused gazing at the cat, as if identifying some quality or other she held in her mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you like piano music?" She moved to the back of the room as she spoke, selecting a CD as I responded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You made it?" I gasped.

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

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

"How long have you been playing it for?"

"I've been playing this particular instrument for nine years," replied Brenna. "Previous to that it was the Japanese version. I find the process meditational and the sound is, I hope, pleasing as well as unique." "It is - I wish I could have it on tape to listen to some more," I said, conscious of my flattery but sincere with it.

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

I was conscious of my ignorance in this area; there were some pieces I knew and loved, but also a vast amount I knew nothing about. "I saw, or heard rather, *The Eroica*, Beethoven's third in the Royal Festival Hall and Handel's *Messiah* at the Royal Albert Hall. That was a while ago now". "Lovely music," commented Brenna, "though it's a pity about the subject matter of the latter - that spoils it a bit really". I looked at her, puzzled.

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

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

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

I waited for more, but nothing seemed forthcoming. "But what are your main reasons?" I pushed at her. She scrutinised me, again appearing to ponder upon my inner self in that subtle, intuitive way of hers. "Well Joanna, you strike me as an intelligent woman. Perhaps you could tell me one reason why I might dislike the Church so much - come, use your perceptions," said Brenna, regarding me with interest and swirling the liquor round in her glass.

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

"*Rather?*" took up Brenna, "that's something of an understatement don't you think? Christianity is no lover of 'Women's Rights' - quite the converse, I should say. There are many references in the so-called Bible to the unclean and corrupt nature of women; to the inferior status of women in relation to the man." She threw her head back and appraised me, her eyes glittering with a vein of humour. Her words were spiked, deliberately and provocatively I felt, to expose my own allegiances; to stir me or to educate me. "The Bible is littered with such references from St Paul to St Thomas Aquinas, starting of course with 'Eve', the 'Original Sinner'. Then we have 'Mother Mary', the highest expression of femininity: a virgin - the only fitting vessel for God's Son! Thus was the paragon and pinnacle of female virtue held up to all women; always unattainable, stressing purity, virginity - a quintessence of what is most valued in a woman. At least by the obtuse devils who contrived such rubbish. I could talk about this ad infinitum. It scarcely needs underlining. Look at the concept of God. *Our Father which art ...etc... etc.* Utter rot! Strange that God should be male, when it is the female of the species who brings new life into the world ... contradictory don't you think? In addition to that, it is now accepted that the Christian myth, even down to its ceremonies, is based on older, pagan practices and legends - even so far as the eating of the host, and the cross itself. The reality is, an older, more attuned Way was supplanted by an alien creed. Hence I have little time for any of it - the church, christianity, the Bible. It's all blah blah blah as far as I am

concerned," said Brenna, moving her hand in a circle and drawing out the last three words to emphasise her point. "Do you understand?"

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

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

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

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

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

"You think so? It is not the case as far as I am concerned. This book - that most people swear by the precious Bible - was written over a period of hundreds of years by many different people. Scholars with an interest in furthering the aims of the Church, and the forces beyond that. Some time ago, ancient writings were unearthed, known as the 'Dead Sea Scrolls', which gave a completely different picture of the Nazarene, or Yesua, as he was called. According to suppressed sources such as these, he was a militant leader who provoked an uprising against the Romans and was accordingly stoned to death. His body was removed from its tomb by friends in order to implement a new religion. These documents have far more authenticity than any 'Bible', but most people aren't prepared to accept their validity. The Church has done its job well. The majority are brainwashed according to the legend and act out the sheep metaphor used so frequently in Nazarene texts. The Lord's my shepherd! Tsssk! The Lord's my ball and chain more like. The Lord's my bloody blindfold! Ha ha!" She completed her speech with a short derisive laugh that resonated out, and then lifted her glass to her lips, gazing at me over the brim as she did so; her grey-green eyes smouldering, alight, seemingly aroused by the discussion.

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

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

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

"Do you not see how useful such a story was for the Church? It gave it impetus - a cudgel to beat a people. It was easy to inspire fervour and unquestioning devotion in a population already under the so-called tyranny of the Romans. It gave their lives new meaning: a spiritual strength, for they believed that after death, if they were true to the teachings of Christ, they would earn a place in 'heaven' - poor ignorant chattle. In truth it was a dream with no place in reality, manipulated by a learned hierarchy who either used, or created, the reputation of a man called Yeshua, this 'revolutionary' whose corpse was mysteriously abducted ... Thus, there was a 'mythos' to spread further the unique ethos of a people. The story of Jesus Christ has no basis in fact, I assure you my dear. But, what of it ! People believe what they want to believe, don't they? Persist with your misguided notions if you choose - it is not my concern". I was stung by her arrogance, her final provocative comments, But I was also filled with doubt. She sounded so sure of herself it made me feel foolish. I had always doubted but now those doubts threatened to overwhelm and submerge me. I was at sea clinging to the sinking wreckage of my slender beliefs. Yes - and still I clung to them.

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

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

It is interesting that Pagan Traditions contain both Gods and Goddesses - powerful female archetypes, as well as male ones. Not the case, as you've pointed out, with christianity. In that sense the Pagan Tradition was a far more balanced and wholesome system of worship than the autocratic masculine church, don't you think ?" Brenna had relaxed back into her seat and seemed to be enjoying herself.

I was not. I was disturbed, knocked off balance by what I was hearing. Understand, it was not because I had any deeply held convictions. Years ago I brushed most religious dogma to one side but decided I believed in something. I believed in a great creative spirit or force which I tried to imagine was beyond any distinction of gender. Yet invariably when I prayed, which was albeit infrequently during moments of extreme depression or delight, I would imbue the imagined omnipotent listening presence with maleness. I was conscious of it yet I couldn't quite rid myself of the habit. I had believed Jesus was a highly evolved man, way ahead of his time, who had given people belief in something greater than themselves, who had

offered a humanitarian ideal. Now I no longer knew where I stood with regard to any of it. I lapsed into an uneasy silence. I'd forgotten about the time and the unfamiliarity of my surroundings. I cogitated on the metaphysical matter at hand and stared into the fire.

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

But things will change. For like any power throughout history, the Nazarene influence is waning. Something else shall replace it, perhaps several hundred years from now, but it will come and it will be, I think, a force more vital, more creative and numinous than anything christianity produced. Ha! Perhaps it's impossible to say what the future will hold, and perhaps not ..." Her eyes glimmered with a humorous yet haunting light. "But one thing is easy to tell, and even though I live in this nest of the countryside, I am still in touch with what goes on in the world. I know the church is crumbling: Thank Satan himself!" Her laugh as laconic yet spiked with a wicked glint of humour, as she saw the slight tension of shock trace across my features.

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

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

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

"You've heard of 'tarot cards' have you Jo? I'll read your cards if you like - would you like me to do so?" She leaned towards me inquiringly, a smile and a challenge in her gaze. I felt a thrill of nervous energy. "Why not?" I said readily enough, "I've never had my cards read before".

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

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

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

I did not know how to answer, for I did not know what I wanted anymore. I just knew a growing dissatisfaction inside myself, an itch to spread my wings and fly - to where I knew not. I knew I had to change things, my circumstances; my relationship with Mark, the man I lived with. I knew I had to change my situation, but I lacked direction. So for the moment I dithered with the idea without any real attempt to change things on a practical level. Yet what did I want? I couldn't tell. A space of freedom. A space free of the staleness in the atmosphere between two people who have ceased to be excited by each other, whose responses are routine, based on friendship rather than passion, and whose arguments and interests remained fixed. I had begun to withdraw from Mark - it was all too cosy, too safe, too predictable and I was coming to the conclusion that this was not what I wanted. It had begun to make me antagonistic, caustic. This consumed me with guilt. Mark was a good man - warm, intelligent, loving. Yet in the past year I had become conscious of that growing dissatisfaction inside myself. It was becoming clear to me I needed room, a space for myself alone, to express things I'd never had chance to express. This holiday had been intended as a watershed, a time to think things through, consider possibilities, and reach a clear decision. Now fate had thrown me on the doorstep of Brenna's cottage and into her electric presence - that spark coupled with a depth of stillness, which gave her the qualities of a muse. What did I want from the future? I answered honestly. "I don't really know - freedom from present constraints. Something more challenging, more fulfilling than my present circumstances. I've given myself away a bit haven't I?" I said, a little abashed by my own honesty.

"You did that some time ago Joanna," quipped Brenna with the glimmer of a smile. "I believe you have the courage to be honest. Well and good: let us see what the cards will portend. Would you spend some time shuffling them for me please?" She finished, tending her hand towards me holding the strange cards. I received them and contemplated their red and black surfaces punctuated with coloured spheres. It was not that I was not interested in such things. I'd never had time to develop such an interest. Perhaps under normal circumstances, I would have been sceptical of their accuracy or their validity. But Brenna's presence inspired me and in a way, I was quite awed by the situation. I was used to being in control, to conducting myself in boardrooms, at meetings, with individual clients. There I was contained, unemotional - rational. Yet this situation was entirely strange to me, and Brenna an unknown quantity that I sensed to be special, in a way that suggested the spiritual. It was the invisible world she consulted, an invisible world altogether foreign to me. That strength, that stillness in her, the sparse elegance of her

home, and of herself compelled me. I felt drawn to her, as if I would have liked to spend a long time talking to her and to know that the conversation would be a journey of discovery, a time of true education. The music swelled into the silence as the fire crackled, and I awkwardly shuffled the cards. They were quite large and not easy to handle. The sound of waves upon the sea shore, the wind, the resonant rising tone of the Celtic pipes all brought an ache to my heart. Such beautiful poignant music. It filled me with longing: for something better, more passionate, more fulfilling. My ideas had grown stale. I was disillusioned with my profession, which scraped the surfaces of issues and had little real influence or credibility in the recognised establishment. It had become mundane and tedious to me. I knew this too well.

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

"No," she said quietly. "now divide the pack into three ".
So I placed three piles of cards on the table before her.

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

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

"One here," motioned Brenna, pointing to a spot directly above the first card and ahead of the second two. "Here," she said, pointing again at a place on the left hand side of the centre card; then one on the right hand side, and completing the configuration with a final card at the top,

"Right," said Brenna, leaning forward slightly. "Let me explain a little about what this represents. This card," she said pointing to the first, the one nearest me, "represents your essence, your true inner nature; that which drives you and motivates you. These two," she pointed at the two half way above it on either side, "represent the recent past; an expression of what has happened to that essence, that motivating force inside you - the situations that have resulted from your attempts to seek fulfilment, expressing your inner nature in the material world. Is that clear, do you follow ?" asked Brenna, rather pointlessly I thought. I followed it well enough, given its psychological flavour.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And the next," said Brenna softly.

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

growing awareness that my lifestyle had become a cage to me. *Satiety*, I pondered, moving to the next card on the right.

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

There was something else to life I was sure. It glared me in the face. Those hands outstretched, always missing the accomplishment of true contact - always embracing emptiness. Now I recognised with a jolt how far apart we had grown, he and I; how the charge between us had faded so that the friendly ease between us had become too comfortable, too much of a soporific. I felt confined, suffocated by it. The difficulties had started when I joined the group. I'd always had a good voice and a musical inclination, and I could play the guitar with a certain amount of skill. So, the group served as a lively, inspiring diversion from the growing discontent symptomatic of the rest of my life. I had even begun to write my own songs - two of which the band had used and sung to audiences with much success. My music, my singing began to matter more to me than anything else. At least, I derived the most pleasure from it: all else paled beside it. On stage, I felt truly alive.

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

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

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

I turned over the card on the left side of the *Death* card and above it, to a degree. It was a dark card. Stormy clouds and sky with a break at one point to reveal a gap of blackness in the sky. In the foreground a german soldier stood resting on a cane, a face dark and intense. Behind him rose a hill. Before this was a stone circle lending an ancient presence to the card. It had a strange brooding feel to it ... I looked at the bottom and ***Wyrd*** was the word I saw. The picture disturbed me - an unknown quantity that yet attracted me. I was drawn to continue studying it to try to place a meaning upon it, but meanings eluded me. I glanced up at Brenna: again, the still, composure, the inner intensity, veiled and honed.

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

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

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

With the tantalizing, almost spooky sense of *rightness* contained in the last card, I had almost forgotten the rest of the layout. I resonated so completely with that image. I could not say why, exactly. I sat back and waited for Brenna to speak, gazing now at the first card, **The High Priestess** – that swirl of wildness. Brenna leant forwards and touched that card.

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

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

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

I looked at the *Satiety* card, and at the one adjacent to it, *Futility*. I pursed my lips and said nothing. Brenna touched the *Futility* card. "This really confirms what is expressed in the preceding card. It suggests a lack of connection with things that move you, that matter to you most. It suggests emptiness and lack of fulfilment on a deep level. But it is on the right hand side, which indicates a resolution, and ultimately favourable outcome to the situation." She scarcely looked at me for confirmation of her words. It was as if she knew their import and could hear the gongs striking inside of me. Strange how those two cards completely summed up my recent past, merged to become conscious awareness of that present reflection. Eerie, eerie.

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

"This card, *Death*," said Brenna, "reflects on your present situation. It indicates a reckoning; a stripping away of masks and images to get to the self, and a higher fulfilment of the essence beyond the constraints of the ego. In essence, a time of destruction in order to create the new - that is the implication". Brenna looked at me. I was leaning forwards. With her words had come a sense of both relief and a strange release; confirmation of a decision that was becoming clear to me, as I breathed in my mystical surroundings. I'd feared - I had dared not think... yet now the card also whispered of new tomorrows, of stronger possibilities. It was the whisper of that, which compelled me rather than the implied the symbol, like placing a bet on the luck it could bring me. Rather than the implied destruction. That whisper of higher achievements ... I glanced up at the wall-hanging and connected with the symbol, like placing a bet on the luck it could bring me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Before you tell me the meaning of the last card, would you mind if I asked you what that symbol stands for? I find it strangely compelling - what does it mean?" I asked, wholly intent upon what Brenna might reply. I thought the symbol was in some way a key. I thought by understanding it, my destiny would be made clear.

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

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

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

"*Mistress of Earth*," said Brenna, again inflecting lightness and ease in her tone which only seemed to further enhance the mystery and power of the card. "*Mistress of Earth*," she repeated, "suggests someone who is control of her life and destiny on all levels. Someone who has attained ascendancy over the

internal and external circumstances surrounding her. Someone who is able to flow with the forces of Nature and attain empathy with those things on many levels. Someone who has achieved a full expression of her inner essence with results on both a practical and acausal level. Someone in touch with the power inside themselves and able to manipulate their environment to achieve their own designs. This card, you see is an expression of the original card at the start, *High Priestess*.

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

How strange to me was the future before me, yet how intriguing - how it flared within me! For I was conscious that I was close to what I had been struck by as soon as I witnessed Brenna standing by the fire: a breath of the unknown. But a breath that was vital, real, tangible. I saw it about me in Brenna's home, but most of all in Brenna herself; by her bearing, by that stillness, that wisdom, that inner flame. I relaxed back into the couch. Brenna settled herself back and looked at me over the edge of her glass. "Well, Joanna Fox, what do you think of your future now?"

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

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

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

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

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

be a bridge to a further understanding of the force within. Brenna observed my inner reflections, waiting. What now ? I thought.

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

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

"An old Tradition - our ancestral root," said Brenna, with quite deliberate brevity I thought. "Where does the Tradition come from? What is it, this Tradition?" I asked, barely able to contain my frustration with Brenna's elusive insistence.

"Something spawned during the civilisation of Albion, some five thousand years before the birth of the bible's putrid christ; spawned through the architects of Stonehenge and Calanais, those worshippers of the sun and watchers of the stars ... It is, obviously, an ancient Tradition."

"But what does it stand for? What kind of Tradition is it?" I continued, still dissatisfied with Brenna's responses.

"An essentially Pagan one, from a time when there existed communion with the stars and Nature in a way that is still fathomless to this present, purblind society. Do not say you do not know of the race - your ancestors - who created the stone-circles, and what this knowledge now intimates, within the context of this whole fortuitous evening." Brenna's face had suddenly become intense in a way that thrilled my sensitivities. The scar on her cheek was lit to a lurid degree by the dancing flames, inducing an almost hypnotic effect. But then Brenna's whole presence was hypnotic.

Of course I knew of the stone-circle period, but it had not struck such a knell of significance as on the note of the moment. Somehow there was poetry in her words and it inspired me; again some deep primal connection was thrummed. Again I was struck to reflection, and there followed a short spell of silence, with Brenna, all the while in easy composure, waiting.

When I could find my voice, I replied: "Yes, I've been aware of all that, but what little history that now exists, seemed something obscure and unimportant - as far as the Present is concerned. But I don't know; I don't know anything any more... It seems what is important is that which lies behind that connection, or beside it if you will. Surely, the stone-circle time is but a beginning ... It would be interesting to know if there are any other links in the chain. Would you tell me more about the Baphomet Tradition, and how you came to learn of it?"

"Now, now Joanna Fox," Brenna's eyes twinkled with their almost unearthly vivid green light. "What would you like, some enlightening reading matter, or my life story?"

I flushed and laughed as I stammered, "Well both actually - but I would particularly like to hear..." "About myself?" quizzed Brenna. "My own path in life?" She raised her eye brows, smiling archly. "Now then Joanna, my friend; it's getting late and I don't know about you, but I am starting to feel a little tired. I usually retire earlier than this, but exceptional circumstances have altered my routine tonight. I've enjoyed your company Joanna, but you must excuse me now for chivvying you off to bed, for tomorrow you also have a long walk ahead of you, do you not?"

I nodded, disappointment lodged in my throat. I burned with a desire to know more. I did not want to go to bed, but courtesy bade me contain myself. However, as Brenna moved to place a fireguard before the fire, she continued: "I'll tell you what I'll do," she said, as if reading my disappointment. "I'll give you some reading matter and you can take my phone number. Perhaps while you're down here you will get chance to call again. I'd be pleased to renew our acquaintance; as I've said, I've enjoyed our evening. Besides it's interesting being in the company of one who is a changer of the face of fortune!" Her tone was disarmingly light and warm.

"Oh well, I just want to say thank you. It's been incredibly good of you and entirely fascinating. I will come and see you again - once I've consulted with my friend Margaret, who I'll be staying with." My words tumbled out, eager to grasp the connection.

"Do, and at your leisure, my dear. You will be welcome whenever - I give my assurance." The sincere elegance of her tone humbled me.

I stood around, shuffled my feet, and half shrugged my shoulders. "I don't know what to say..." I began, but Brenna held up her hand and smiled me into silence. She moved across the room and blew the candle out. She went to the back of the room, and I followed her.

"I'll just dig something out for you now," she said bending to a shelf on the bookcase, a strand of grey hair escaping across her cheek which she brushed back, as she reached for two large bound volumes. The covers were dark, non-descript and the titles I could not read - for there were none.

"Have a look at these when you've the time - see what you think. Come back to me with any questions or responses you care to offer, when conducive. It's entirely up to you. Don't consider anything too much though now, specially not on three glasses of mead!" She quipped.

I flashed her a smile, as she turned the music system off and motioned me the way forward, turning the lights off. Within the darkness, she carried a small oil lamp before her to light the way.

"Fetch your rucksack and I'll show you your room," said Brenna indicating the kitchen door by which I had left my belongings, as we stood in the passage way that heralded the stairs. I fetched my rucksack and Brenna led the way up. I did not even question the lack of use of mains lighting. The oil lamp seemed somehow so fitting, so entirely appropriate after such an extraordinary evening. There was a door next to the bathroom which she opened and led me into a simple tasteful haven. She turned on the bedside light. A bed with a wooden bedstead was revealed. A patchwork quilt of creams, reds, pinks and deep blue. A big dark wooden chest was against one wall, looking as if it had arrived fresh from a pirate's cavern. A bedside tressal with a lamp upon it: I noticed the lampshade was made of some creamy parchment with dried, pressed flowers worked upon it somehow. It was exquisite. "It's lovely," I said, "how charming." Brenna smiled appreciatively in response.

"You can see the bathroom next door," she said, "use it as you need or want. You're quite welcome to have a bath in the morning if you wish. I'm usually out and about early, so you may not come across me - don't wait around for me, will you? As for breakfast: I'll leave everything out for you to help yourself. I'm a great believer in breakfast - it must be done. But as I've said, don't expect to see me in the morning, for I like to embrace the dew of dawn, and probably won't return til much later." She held the light higher, and stood upright a little more as if in salutation.

"So Joanna Fox, well met and good night. I hope our paths will cross again, and in the not too distant future."

"Oh most certainly," I agreed, conscious of the inadequacy of words.

"Good night then:" Brenna whispered, withdrawing, the pool of light spotlighting her movement across the dark landing til she opened a door across from my room, on the opposite side of the stairs, and disappeared behind it. I stared after her for a while, reliving all of it in one resounding surge. Still stunned, I performed my ablutions and fetched a glass of water. I undressed and got into bed but I still did not feel tired; rather, too charged up to sleep, despite my long and arduous day. I reached for the first volume she had given me to read. Regardless of the time, I turned the cover. The words that greeted me, dripped darkly down into my mind like spreading pools of blood, and just as potent:

THE BLACK BOOK OF SATAN

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I sit on this hillside, with only the rocks and the trees below as my companions. The night is clear; the moon a full geometric potency above me. The wind denudes my face, sharpens my sense of timelessness. For two and a half months I have been alone, in this terrain, in this wilderness, without human contact, without material distractions and entertainments. Tonight the moon's luminous presence drew me to recall that first meeting with Brenna - raven-made, I learned the name meant: an appropriate name for one such as she.

I am not what I was. Oh no: I am much more, much less than ever I imagined I could be. I sit with the galaxy aglow above me, embracing this silvered darkness, the star-filled ecstasy of outer space. I feel clothed in cosmic tides, part of the force which flows from before, from beyond. There is only this numinous night and the spark within me which reflects that numinosity.

I think of those tarot cards; how shocking, lurid, and fascinating they seemed - how little I knew of my future then. Now my destiny has become clear to me. These months I have spent alone have bridged a gap in my consciousness. I know my role, my path, will take me further still, to attain an ultimate understanding of the *sinister* ... That is my way, and I know I am to be heir of that Tradition, as Brenna was before me. My crystal has revealed images, pictures to me. Magickal energies fructify my awareness and the invisible, acausal world is become an imprint on my soul; a stretch to master my universe. I sit here on this hilltop beneath the perfect moon and the incandescent stars with the wind buffeting my cheeks and chilling my hands, and think of that first meeting - of my naivety, trapped as I was within the conditioning and morality I'd been subjected to. I think of that and I smile. I smile in this dark, lonely night and I no longer feel alone. I flow with Nature's expressions, I listen to her silence and thus have I come to know her, a little.

Like an autumn tree, stripped bare by the winter wind, so did I become, before the green buds of spring made their appearance. So has it continued, this seasonal transition, this growth of blossoming and destruction and so shall it still do. That is the essence of my life.

I have touched profundities: a goddess within me has arisen. I smile – I smile in this stillness as I remember what I was, and what I shall be. I smile and raise my hands to the moon in acknowledgement of an awful bond. I smile.

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Whilst single raven
all ebony-gloss
and clever eye

and crafted beak so jet
lifts its shape
to coast another settling place
on the rock face
before the crashing waves
A gift of obsidian velvet
for all our stormy skies.

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Annia Ashlet,
***Seven Stones Coven* (ONA)**
1996eh