

A Slave of Evil

by

James Brittain

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By James Brittain

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This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to real people, places or events is purely coincidental.

To Una, for protecting us from monsters

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## CHAPTER 1

I kneeled before my master's tomb, ten thousand possibilities in perfect opposition before me. I think I was swaying slightly. I can't remember.

“Obedience is water. Obedience is food. Obedience is water. Obedience is food.”

I did not believe it I only thought it. I was not some giddy young slut, lapping at my master's favor. The motherfucker was dead and I did not care. Was I free? What was freedom? I could stand, I could stand and walk into the world and dress myself in red robes. Whore myself among filthy men. Fuck sailors for my bread and spread the clap throughout the world. An empire of my loins. My colonies of microbes, the genital embrace their sacred passage.

But why? Why not climb the mountains? And in that cold wasteland sink deep into my soul and chant and sing with the monks and stars? The Frost Giants be my guide. Oneness with the all thing. A mind wrecked upon the reef of insipid non-humanity. Deny my loins and my servitude, scream no at the world and yes to the trite and empty moment. And why? No reason. A billion reasons without criterion, all of them arbitrary, none better or worse than any other.

“Obedience is water. Obedience is food. Obedience is water. Obedience is food.”

A holding pattern. A constant loop of meaninglessness. A chant from my childhood. When the priests would check our virginity. Obey obey obey. Check it with their cocks. Motherfuckers. Nothing to think, obey obey obey, nothing to think, nothing to be, obey obey. La da la da. Nothing No One Nothing No One.

There were people around me. I hadn't seen them come in. They were ignoring me. Was I here? They ignore me and I am not here. Bah. They regarded my master's body. Cold cold dead dead. The motherfucker is dead! The motherfucker is dead! Obedience is water. Obedience is food. Obedience is water. Obedience is food. They were talking, I hadn't realized. “..devastated by it.”

They were looking at me. Was I naked? I was.

“...the best, love a master like that...”

Nude naked nude naked. Did I care? I couldn't tell. Did they like my body? They were stealing glances at my tits. Did they like them? Did I care? Was their opinion valid? Does an idiot reading Homer make Homer idiotic? La da, la da. Does it exist outside the mind of the simpleton? Greatness humbled in the mind of an idiot. La la la. Obedience is water. Obedience is food. Obedience is water. Obedience is food. Ta da ta de.

“...waiting for the flames”

“...could take her now, they re-imprint you know?”

“flames fire black dry cracking flesh flesh flesh.”

Would they rape me? Was my body mine to rape? Was it mine to care if they took it? The motherfucker's body. The motherfucker is dead. I could walk out. I could walk out. A billion places to go, a billion possibilities. I was all and none. None none none. Let me be a cautionary tale for you. Child, believe in one thing, or many things, or nothing. But do not believe in all things. La la la.

I shall storm the heavens! Heave my mighty sword into the eye of God and the motherfucker will bleed and bleed and bleed. Ha! Some billions of neurons, some genius exploding colors bright beyond stars and galaxies yet no will to propel them, to guide their rudder. Mired in a too gullible mind, too ready to believe everything and no self to choose among them. A slave then, wanting a master's will to know to wipe my ass. Ha!

We were walking. I didn't remember starting but we were walking. Down down down. To the

funeral pyre. What nonsense. Burn a man's objects with his body. So I could suck his cock in the afterlife? Was it suicide that I followed? To limply stumble into the flames when a few hundred steps would easily save me? Well, then I shall be a suicide. Not giddy, like the young suicide I longed to be in my youth, when I would bleed my veins in that cold stone school, a mature suicide now. I shall make no resistance. I will let them lead me to the flames and I will cry out to the universe: Why not!

I stumbled along. Outside now, we were walking down a huge stone stair towards the funeral pyre. The jungle pressed in on three gray pyramids, crumbling and half green with vines. Between the three were piled huge logs, the trunks of whole trees. On top of them robes and carts, the carcasses of horses, a hundred other objects, The motherfucker's objects. They were going to burn the motherfucker's objects. Objects, Objects. Was that what I was? My obedience, my surrender of my will, the surrender of myself as well? What was myself? The will, the mind, the body, vague abstractions of a horny shitting beast. Lack a master's will to know to wipe my ass.

A man was staring at me. I squinted; he seemed to be behind a thick veil of milk. He was a new man. My vision cleared a little as I blinked rapidly. He wore a green and black robe. His face shifted beneath the cowl, shifted between many faces. A face like water, rippling and distorting light, no real face but the refraction of many. He kept looking at me. Had he spoken? He struck me with a wooden stick I had not seen before. He struck me in the knee and I fell, then turned to a crowd of people who had been concealed by the cliff before. They were far below us.

“Oh my flock!” He shouted, his voice booming through the clearing. “Deep, deep in my heart, I feel a great love for you!” His voice was nasal and piercing, his face a mask of many colors with a tall hat of feathers and bugs.

“In my heart and in my gut lives my faith. A thousand armed tree twisting deep inside me. Strutting out like His perfect will! His great spirit shall move through you as it has moved through me! He shall lift thy limbs, and move thy soul! I, Archmagio, arch priest of His great will, He summoned me unto Him. Yea! And I believed I was a sleeping man lost in mad and feverish dreams. And I believed I had gone mad and was raving, naked and savage. And He led that frightened creature, me, that frightened creature, He led me through a great and dark wood! Yes, His perfect will led me through corridors of stone and damp moss until trees, yes mighty trees, they rose up and cracked the stone and like huge pillars of His perfect love they bore me erect into the heavens! And from there, from His kingdom of light, He revealed unto me these true and pure things. The ten laws!”

Here the crowd cheered wildly. I shivered.

“Ten laws to govern our kind and bring law and justice to all men!” The odd man distracted by his oratory, I crept closer to the edge of the great stone slab we stood on. An updraft of wind chilled my naked body and I shivered. My skin tightened into gooseflesh.

The people were cheering wildly and saluting the insipid madman next to me. Thousands of them, but not tens of thousands.

“What is the first law?” He demanded, his voice the shifting of sand. I realized he had turned towards me. The first law? Fucking backwards kingdom. He struck me again, crashing his stick onto my prone back. I felt no pain but felt my body jerk with the impact.

“What is the first law?” His voice rose in a nasally crescendo, full of petty self importance. He struck me again and hissed, quietly so the crowd would not hear, “the first law is obedience.”

“Obedience is water, obedience is life” I muttered, short of breath and sounding more weak and frightened than I felt. His face shifted until he almost seemed blonde and chiseled and stern,

then fell back into its vague meanderings.

“The first law is obedience in all actions, that his perfect will shall guide us. The second law is obedience in all thoughts, for impure thoughts rebel against him as sure as actions.”

Below us men, they seemed little more than toy men so high were we, brought lit torches and set fire to the logs. It lit up in a huge tower of flame for a few moments, then died down to a slow flame that hovered about the logs.

The strange man grasped my shoulder and pushed me back. His face did not make sense, at once pudgy and gaunt.

“Will you obey me in all things? For I am the perfect vessel of His perfect will!” His voice was nasal and irritating. He was clearly a lunatic. The shifting face of madness, a thousand identities bent towards the servitude of some imaginary friend. Shit. Why hadn't the old motherfucker died in a civilized land. I'd be in a harem or whorehouse by now. Not naked and shivering before a fanatical lunatic in some rotting jungle.

“Will you obey?” His voice at once a shriek and the sound of rocks grinding each other down. His face flitted frantically between likenesses, so that it seemed he had no face at all. Would I obey? I could think of a lot of reasons not to. He was clearly a buffoon. Faces of a thousand men yet he could not pick one, contorting himself to please his master. None of them, I bet, the stupid drooling ape he was. And what master? His perfect will he said. Perfect at what? Bah.

Yet, who of us are not imbeciles? How many times has my own brain tumbled through these meaningless balances? To obey or not to obey? What cared the cold indifferent universe? Why not follow a buffoon? Lend my limbs to his petty will. Was it excessive nihilism? To obey or not? Arbitrary either way. To move with the tide or against it? He struck me again and I collapsed.

“Will you obey?”

“Obedience is water.” I heard myself speak and was startled by it. His face rifled through a few aspects, ending in the stern blonde again. He turned back towards the clearing where the logs had started burning in earnest. My suicide to obey. He stretched out his hands towards the mass of tiny toy men below us.

“My people!” He exclaimed, waving his hands in the air, “My people I shall summon him!” He gesticulated wildly, sweeping his arms in great circles and wiggling his fingers.

“A FALSIS PRINCIPIIS PROFICISCI!” He cried it loudly and his voice echoed and boomed like shrill sonic daggers.

The flame about the logs flared up into a huge tower, sparks exploding like great firecrackers. And in the flames flared an enormous beast, a hundred feet high. I staggered backwards and stumbled, so great was the image. Great burning eyes, two dozen horns danced with the flame, intermixing so I could not tell where began one or ended the other. Ears like a tiger, a great sharp beak like a vulture's, clicked and clucked. The monstrosity stood erect like a man. Great feathered wings flapped back and forth slowly, and striped skin like a zebra or tiger pulled tightly over enormous muscles. Two hooved feet, jointed backwards like a goat's, stamped about the logs and spread them asunder. Two great arms, men's arms, flexed as a tongue, long and slender like a snake's, flicked greedily.

“Oh Great Lord! The one and only Child of the Godhead, hear our humble worship!”

The demon, for I supposed that is what it was, who a moment before seemed confused, flames dancing uncertainly about its great form, relaxed and even swaggard, adjusting its flowing horns with its hand as it fixed an expression of haughty godhood to its face. As the great eyes landed on the strange man beside me, huge flames shot from them and the great beak clicked excitedly.

Below, the people were ecstatic. Women bared their breasts and men held up their wives and daughters, gleefully flinging them towards the beast. They were wild, overflowing with religious zeal. The great beast, seeing the woman stripping and dancing naked before him, grew excited, his massive sex, bigger than a tree, grew hard and rigid, great veins of sickly green and yellow blood throbbing upon it.

“Behold thy master!” Shrieked the man, voice booming, driving the crowd into a mad fury. Many of the women below were naked now, and the beast regarded them, its tongue flicking about. It crouched suddenly and picked up a woman, who shrieked in fear and in delight.

“For the lord hath give us the one true way!” Shrieked the man. The demon looked at him. Its gaze fell on me. His voice assaulted my mind.

“BLUE FIRE”

It wasn't speech, rather it's odd, reptilian voice echoed through my thoughts with the force of a feverish compulsion.

“BLUE FIRE AND GREAT SHIPS, BITS OF SAND AND MOUNTAINS AND THEY ALL GRIND AWAY GRIND AWAY GRIND AWAY”

The strange man's voice was distant, prattling on, except I did not now understand him. I hardly heard him and the great echoing thought replaced him.

“MOUNTAINS! GROUND AWAY MOUNTAINS. BLUE SILK, A PETTY MAN, A GREAT HORDE OF HORSES AND OPEN PLAINS, ALL DEAD DEAD DEAD.”

The demon's thoughts were deafening in my mind, pain throbbed through my skull. The demon crushed the woman and rubbed himself with the gore, flicking his tongue and squinting his swollen eyes in a grotesque juvenile taunt.

My mind, I suppose, had been overwhelmed with the sight before me, began to move forwards again. The whole thing was deeply absurd, some deranged pre-pubescent's fantasy. The man's face was a formless gray, features only occasionally rippling to the surface. It didn't make sense that it was real. Did my senses deceive me? Did they always deceive me? What matters to me if I follow an illusion or a reality? Does mask wear face? If illusion, did it reveal more truth than the reality underlying it?

“YOU WILL UNDERSTAND ONLY BECAUSE I WISH IT.” The thought was deafening in my mind, and totally foreign. The beast leaned towards me and the illusion broke. I was cold and naked on an exposed rock. The demon, quite real, was only four feet tall, hunchbacked, and snapped two lobster's claws at me.

“QUIET YOUR MIND!” One of its claws pummeled my shoulder and I fell. “YOU MAY ONLY THINK TO ANSWER ME.”

My thoughts could not coalesce. My mind was still but not peaceful, rather it was the silence of a deafening roar, screaming at a roaring ocean that drowns your voice completely. A thick sharp pain, a thousand needles pricking at my brain. I retched and rolled, a tranquilized swollen hand clutching at a needle to pull it from my skin.

Dimly, through the pain and oppression of my non-thought, images floated in from the world. The strange man was now an overfed aristocrat, with ill fitting hoes that bunched at his ankles. An obvious erection bulged from his well fed gut.

“Stupid motherfuckers!” He cried in a flat nasally tone. “I am your master now! The one true power! The one true power!”

The demon crawled on top of him. My vision blurred, the great loudness of my non-thought throbbed through my temples. Images, suspended from time, drifted through. The demon had knocked the man to the ground, crawled onto his chest and was pinching his cheeks with its



pincers. The people cheered and screamed in unintelligible rapture. A great fervor of religious excitement, a swirling unthinking mass, the enormous demon some holy light in their vision, flames and bright light and hope, a hansom young man, bathed in holy light, purified by flame. And then the illusion broke, and they were a filthy mob of toothless and ill fed rabble, diseased as they limped about, the gone.

The demon cooed "My pretty pretty pansy, my pretty pretty mum, my pretty pretty daisy, all dried up and done." He had shifted now, sitting on the man's face and pinching, but not cutting, his fat legs. The man was struggling desperately for air.

"YOU ARE OF THE WILLESS ONES." My head split from the noise and I had no other perception except it's deformed body pinning me, it's claws clamping my wrists.

"THE WILLESS ONES THE WILLESS ONES THE SLAVES OF LORDS AND GENTLEMEN THE HAPPY SLAVES HE HAW HE HAW." The donkey howling in my mind drove all perception from me and I saw nothing but white, heard nothing after it until the roaring of my blood in my ear returned.

"DRINK OF ME AND HAVE MY WILL" It's erection pressed against my thigh. It's beak rent flesh from its arm and thick black blood dripped from the wound.

"DRINK!" I made no decision to obey but had already swallowed. The ritual was done, I was bound.

"STAY." The deafening roar ended abruptly but I could not move. My head ached badly.

The man groveled on his hands and knees. "Please master, please! I only wish to serve you!"

"SOME GOLDEN LIGHT FETTER AND BRANDED WITH METAL LIKE ROCKS AND SHARP DEAD THINGS. A ROTTING MOUSE. A ROTTING CAT A ROTTING MAN, VILE VILE VILE."

"I serve you master, please!"

"FIVE MORE FUCKING YEARS." The demon hissed at him. The man's face, swollen and smeared with filth, showed nothing but terror. He trembled and pissed himself.

The demon was gone. I lost consciousness.

## CHAPTER 2

In my troubled dream I stumbled naked down a dark tunnel, stink and sewage to my waist, slime gushing between my toes. A man stood amongst the shit and filth. In his hand he held a pigeon, sickly and missing feathers, squirming to break free of his grasp. The man drowned it in the filth. I walked past him.

A man held a young woman who screamed and panicked, kicked and writhed. He tore at her clothes and beat her. Knocked her against the wall. She blubbered in panicked terror. He slammed her and cut her and blood and pink tissue fell from her. And the man beat her, but instead of hands there were knives and they cut and cut and still she screamed and screamed, even though there wasn't enough of her left she screamed.

Then the man's head was a bull's head and he dropped the ribbons of gore and turned to me.

“I also serve your master”

The voice was mine but I wasn't sure I had spoken. The man-bull paused, bowed, and turned to walk down the tunnel. I followed for a ways and then the bull-man left me. I was alone. I missed him. My heart sank in the way of dreams; my only friend had left me. Me, a speck drifting through the cosmos, alone now. And my master used me for sex and my trader used me for money and the world used me as a piece of art, but deep in my soul, a soul I don't believe in, it was dark, bits of dust suspended briefly in sunlight, floating, isolated, then settling back into the dark.

The old motherfucker, my master, was in the sludge before me. He laid me on a chair, knees on the seat and my stomach crushed by the back. Old, decaying and impotent, he penetrated me with rods of wood and glass. Cut thin shallow lines into my back. Square lines, boxes to hold my soul, which I didn't believe in. I was not bound. I clutched the chair and grit my teeth against the pain. A slow trickle of blood wet my hair and dripped from my down turned nose.

Obedience is life. What shit. The old motherfucker was dead and I was glad. Yet I clung there, stupidly, a mad compulsion. Acid filled my veins when I thought of murdering him, a deep upset, a frantic madness deep in my bones. Quelled only by clinging to the chair, letting the motherfucker rape and cut me. The motherfucker is dead. The motherfucker is dead. I wish only I had murdered him. He was gone and the chair fell and toppled me into the muck. I came up drenched in sewage. I vomited over and over, until my stomach was empty, and still I retched.

Next I found the demon. He was clothed in the raw hides of people and sat on a mound of guts and entrails. The sewage poured onto him from the dark above him.

“Slut” is hissed at me, “I am your master.” My deep insides twisted for I knew this as a dream then, but also knew the demon was real.

The dream was gone. I lay horizontal though I lay in nothing. A dozen people, eyes, glowing with fire, forced their hands into my mouth, a dozen hands, my jaw ached, my lips tore. “I am your master now. You will find yourself a slave and you must fain obedience. And at night you must sneak from his house, and on the streets you must murder. For I love terror, and terror is good. And you must carve into their flesh my sign, and you must spread their viscera from their bodies, and make signs of my children in blood. And you must murder men and you must murder women and you must murder children.”

As he spoke he made each of the four signs, all arbitrary nonsense. And then I woke.

I was naked still, bound kneeling so that I could breathe but could not move. Always naked. I suppose the idiots thought it demeaned me or made me vulnerable. Two vague abstractions for

vague and shallow minds. I who have no self to expose, who's body belongs not to me but to my master. Now that vile obscenity.

“What a blessing to you man, to have your daughter chosen by the god thing.” The accent was thick and rustic. I couldn't see the speaker as my head was bound.

“Yes neighbor, the baby god thing smiles on me with great streams of light.” I heard coins clink. Before me I saw a wall of wooden planks.

“Thank ye sir” said the second voice. The door creaked and a new set of footsteps stomped close to me. The wood grain in the panels before me was rough. A cheap house.

“My, mighty fine thing ye got here William,” said a new voice, and I felt a greasy hand grope by boob. Fucking provincials. “Shame about yer daughter, but baby god thing gots her in the sky now with naked signin' angels and all.” More coins clinked and jingled.

There were many more interactions like that, I paid little attention. Later we were alone. The second voice, my fake master I supposed, spoke.

“God hates us motherfuckers. Fucking baby god fucking shit.”

He stepped before me and was holding a very short knife. He touched it lightly to the ropes that bound me and they split before it. A very sharp knife.

“Stand slut.”

I didn't have a reason not to, I supposed. I wondered vaguely what I was supposed to be feeling. My mind had slowed. How should I react to this change in circumstance?

“Turn slut.”

I did so. A demon's slave. A slave of evil. Whatever. Did I believe in evil? I wasn't sure but didn't think so. A filth demon? Obscenely filthy. Did I care? My gorge rose as I thought of it and wasn't sure. Did I care? There were upholstered chairs and a large table, but no decorations. My faux master was studying me. He was short and gaunt, a ridiculous waxed mustache and pointed goatee.

“All fucking wrong, you. Scrawny hips. Tiny little tits. A man want's something to see, his vision along the smooth and holy curve, the baby god has said it, the holy ratio!”

What bullshit. It was chilly standing there. I hoped he would get me clothes. But, should I care if I was chilly? Certainly it meant my body reacted in certain way, my flesh tightened into bumps, I shivered, I grew numb. But should I mind being numb, or shivering? One of my masters had been an old old man. I had wiped his ass. How different was that than this filth demon? Shit all over me. Shit all over me. Obedience is water, obedience is food. In the school we were always naked. A hundred little naked girls, learning to please a school master.

My faux master entered the room leading a beautiful naked woman. I hadn't noticed him leaving. She was wonderfully proportioned, full but not gigantic breasts, lush hips, skinny waist and tapered thighs. A full head of cascading blonde hair. But her eyes. But her eyes. Black, black holes, like the eyeballs were gone and her brain was just a void. Black pits. La da la da.

She spoke: “There was a cold space and it was made of black and yarn and I crawled inside and I crawled inside and the only thing there was black and cold black cold.” She shivered and fell silent.

“I am not a cruel man” said my faux master. “I do not enjoy watching pain.” He lifted a syringe from the table and came over to me.

“Arm” he said.

“Yes I have one.” He hit me. Not hard but quick.

“Hold it out slut,” and I did. He tied some string about my bicep and, veins popping out of the inside of my elbow, he injected me.

I fell away from the world and was floating in a warm black thing. Only not separated, for the world came back, but stood at a far distance from me. I felt like I was grasping reality through thick gloves, feeling it through rubber, seeing a vague gray relief.

I was a black bug and I was crawling through a long dark hole or tunnel. It cut straight but I wasn't sure through what. I was lost lost. Somewhere in a strange dream the girl with pits for eyes was dying. The man cut her throat open with his knife and she was bleeding and convulsing on the floor. The horror of it reached me dully, I felt disgust writhe inside me as a vague and distant thing. The red of her blood drowned the light and I realized he had thrust me down into her blood, and I was caught in it writhing; it was sticky, red sticky and I drank and drank, and he was butchering the dying woman. He cut off her breasts, her buttocks and thighs. He cut the cheeks from her face and her nose. Inside her brain was shriveled and dried up. And my grip on the world slipped and I was falling and then floating. An awesome black around me. An awesome black through me.

And then he stepped to me and cut me. There was pain but it was far away. I was in a great sea, and off in the horizon a billion people churned like meat into a great sea of gore. Always the ocean, my default metaphor, thought some distant part of me. That core of bitter faithlessness, what bullshit my ungoverned mind believes. Obedience obedience obedience obedience. Over and over. The idle turning of the world. Obedience obedience.

He cut open my breasts and stuffed the dying woman's inside. He cut open my hips and put the dying woman's inside. Then he cracked open my ribs and laid into me her heart. And then he placed smooth stones among my organs. And then he filled me with the dying woman's veins, and filled those veins with sand, and set her dying heart beating in my chest.

And I swam in the great black, and a thousand thousand years passed me by, and mountains ground away and rivers cut deep chasms in the stone beneath me and still the dying heart beat the sand about my dying body, and still I watched the rock die.

I woke in pain. A long steel rail through my body. Pain everywhere. My mind faltered under it. A faint chant of obedience pulsed from my subconscious, my mind a dull and imprecise thing. The man, my faux master, crouched over me, spattered with blood and organs.

“You are beautiful now, my little slut. Sleep now. Tomorrow we travel.” His face flickered between the faces of several men. He injected me again with his syringe, and I fell back into sleep.

## CHAPTER 3

That strange heart beat in me. Thunk, thunk, thunk. Not the double beat of my heart. A single alien thunk. I couldn't stand. I rocked back and forth, back and forth. In the dark I rocked. I was nowhere. My body ached. Dully, though, through a thick skin of rubber, every bit of me hurt.

I felt a need in me. Not strong, a vague unrest. A thousand blasted things, things crumbled into nothing. A million miles away. A million miles and I was lost lost, thunk, thunk this strange heart, this vague need, thunk, thunk,.

I was outside, though I did not remember how. Was I naked still? No, I wore a heavy red robe. A whore's robe. White walls stretched above me to the heavens. Walls made of white sand that brushed away beneath my fingers. A giant maze of undifferentiated walls, all paths branching out at random into an infinite and impossible series of decisions. And as I turned among them I grew dizzy, and then fell against a wall under a terrible vertigo. The walls spun around me until I could not tell which was up or down. Walls of white, walls of white, thunk, thunk, this alien heart, and I clutched at the wall to keep myself from the earth, and they seemed to pull away and twist beneath my grasp.

There was a man there, colorful purple garments, tight hose, a plumed ridiculous hat, and he was staring at me in total astonishment, as if I were an octopus he found casually strolling the street. I threw up on him and fell forward, but my feet were under me somehow and I was stumbling on, rushing to keep myself above them. There were more men. Staring. Bright oranges and red, some holding hands, others alone, all staring as if struck dumb by the sight of me. I smashed headlong into a wall and braced myself against it.

Only men. Where were the women? I threw up again and was less dizzy. Thunk, thunk. A group had formed that was staring at me. One grew bold and stepped forwards, saying something that I did not comprehend.

And then I understood the need in me. The vague unease in my bones. I saw a vision of my master's, my real master's, symbols smeared in blood across the sandstone walls, and I understood my need. I had come here to kill.

I lurched towards the man before me and he backed away quickly, skittish. His heeled boots echoed on the cobblestone. The lot of them jabbered but I could not understand them. They spoke in words I knew, but could not then comprehend. I stumbled forwards and they cleared a path for me, but I turned from it suddenly and caught one by the sleeve. The world spinning uncomfortably around me, I jerked the surprised man to the ground and was on top of him, hands wrapped about his neck, staring into his clean shaven face. Then I was falling up and back with hands all about me. I screamed and flailed and they fell away, scurrying from my snatching hands until, alone within their ring, I stood panting in the street.

I had felt relief as my hands were yanked from the man's throat. I didn't want to kill, but there had been no hesitation in my hands. They were yelling to each other now and some were pointing at me, a few ran up the street shouting.

"I am not a killer" I shrieked. My voice startled me and I felt the vertigo return, and I seemed not to know which way to place my feet, but somehow I lurched forwards and those before me stepped back, so that I was still the center. I was sobbing then, how long had I been sobbing? It seemed a long time. Thunk, thunk, the strange heart inside me. I fell against a wall and was barely able to hold myself up.

"I am not a killer" I screamed again and I was falling forwards, catching one off guard as I fell over him and my hands, seemingly of their own volition, were about his neck, squeezing the life

from him. He had a finely groomed beard and oil slicked curls on his head. I screamed and shoved him away, falling over myself and rolling across the cobblestone. Then I threw up, and, heaving, fled twisting and stumbling into that white maze. It was if they had all vanished. They must have parted to let me through, but I had no memory of it. Once my back was turned I lost all track of them. Some distant part of me wondered if they followed. But it was deep, far away and drowned.

All I remember next is falling into walls and turning and turning until I was certain I was turning circles in the same small courtyard. The doors here were only curtains. I fell into a wall and in trying to prop my dizzy body up, I fell through a ragged curtain into a small dark room. I fell to my hands and knees and spent some time retching, my stomach too empty now to vomit more.

And then someone was patting my back and I fell onto my side. It was a man. Alone. My hands were choking him before I knew what I was doing and I threw him down. He stared lightly at me, his expression completely incongruous with the situation. His cheeks sunk in; he was very thin and he was very pale. Clean shaven. More corpse like than human. His expression was mild.

“I am not killer” I whimpered.

I didn't understand him when he spoke, but his voice was gentle. He laid back and stared distantly, eyes half vacant. The moment crept slowly. We stared at each other and the thunk, thunk of the alien heart beat in my ears. He smiled at me in a distracted way.

“You speak?” His accent was thick; he spoke as if his tongue were swollen.

“I must murder; I am no killer.” It startled me. The voice was mine, strained, weak and frightened. I stared at the man, who seemed to have forgotten I was there. He noticed me dreamily and smiled politely and nodded, as if he had caught my eye in a crowd and wished not to give offense. His face fell as he looked away. My mind boggled and the silence of the moment seemed to deafen me. He was staring at his finger nails with a look of mild awe.

I fell back against the wall opposite him. The room was very dark and very plain. There were a few wooden chairs and a painting I could not see. I chased my breath and stared down at the floor before me. Undecorated white tiles.

I was no killer; I must murder. A succinct contradiction to paralyze me. An ennui as complete as that which led me docile to a demon master. Why this reticence? It would be no difficulty to fasten my hands about this man's neck. A physical act. A simpler nerve impulse. I, who's future was my masters and not my own, must think of no consequence. His will, my obedience. For me it was only to lift my hands and clench them shut. It was my master's will that would place a man's neck between them.

And thunk, thunk beat this strange heart. Its alienness nauseated me. I felt its sand scrape through my veins. My veins? Her veins? All my body hurt and I felt the scrape of sand inside me. Thunk, thunk. I am no killer. I am no killer. Thunk, Thunk. Yet beneath that my own heart. Tha-thunk, tha-thunk, Obey, obey, obey. My mind spasmed at the twin pulses. Sand and blood, tight veins stretched and squeezed, an unbearable pressure. I was retching, scratching at my skin. Get it out get it out screamed my mind, and from a wound my nails gouged into my arm spilled sand. Gray and black sand. The pressure eased and I fell back, crouched against the wall.

The man was eating something black and sticky.

“We walk rivers and the sand fills us as rocks decay. The light like silver or dark like bones.” He crawled, graceful and off balance at once, to me and toyed with the sand spilling from my arm. He put into my mouth some black tar. It tasted of flowers, but sour and thick. It seemed to clog my mouth and throat and for a moment I could not breath.

And as the sand poured from me my master's will pulsed stronger in my blood. Murder, murder, I must murder. Acid in my veins. I had fallen on my back although I do not remember when. The room was gray and far away. The man's sallow face was above me again and more tar was in my mouth and the room retreated further. The room that was full of warm darkness. A great sea of black. I floated gently into it. Precision was far away.

And in that warmth my need floated with me. I must murder. I am not a cheap slave. I am bred and born to it, and feel my master's will deep in my bones, beating through my veins.

"It takes away pain." The man spoke. He looked at me across a great gulf of black, his sunken cheeks soft with distant pain. His eyes tumbled backwards into that great sea. We were the same then, two lost people floating together. I, who by my nature must always be alone, was not alone.

"I must murder," I said aloud. My voice was distant, almost distorted. A million miles away he looked mildly at me. Suspended in the same great blackness as I. Those deep deep eyes. "Come" he said and we were falling forwards through a ragged curtained door, though I do not recall rising.

The room was very dim, and I could see only where the light from the last room illuminated. There was a tank of some kind from which a woman's crotch thrust. Her legs had been neatly amputated. The man led me to her and I stared down into a vat of thick, viscus gel. Her face was completely obscured by a mask, from which a thick hose extended into the ceiling.

The man reached into the slime and pulled her body up, unlatched her mask and pulled it from her. She blinked and teared at the light, and began rambling at once.

"Flowers and rocks, flowers and rocks. Jagged bits of flame, cracked fire splitting, spilling the sky, the sky, jagged jagged sky, sharp sky, like a knife, cuts and cuts and cuts. Blasted red stone fire stone broken blasted trees, finished. Broken blasted flesh and gore and gore and fire consuming gore and blistered, blistered, blistered."

Vertigo overcame me again, her soft and terrible voice rambling in my ear, my pulse beating violently in me, a distant violence, a distant violence. A terrible slaughter just at the horizon. I stumbled backwards but the man steadied me. I stared down at her. She had no arms or legs. She was naked, a long steel rod stuck from her brain and a viscous liquid dripped from her cunt.

"It is a mercy to murder her," the man said gently. He was sitting in a corner of the room, warm and distant. When had he sat? How much time had passed? I tried to think but my mind was thick and useless. Vertigo overcame me again and I fell forwards and caught myself on the edges of the vat. I reached my hands to her throat. The goo was thick and warm. Her mad eyes stared into mine, wide with terror and empty of any intelligence. She flitted about me, as if unable to recognize me as a human, seeing a curve here, white there amongst a brown blob, but unable to comprehend what she saw.

I fixed my hands about her neck and choked. And choked. It seemed to last forever, her limbless body convulsing in the fluid, her wild eyes full of terror, but somehow not of me, terror of the world. She did not know she was dying for she did not know she was alive. And I was floating in a black sea, and a million miles from me she flopped as some primordial fish drowning in the air, and a million miles from me I murdered her. It seemed as if nothing had happened. Her eyes stilled, stopped blinking, but that was all. That lifeless face held the same uncomprehending terror in its lines, a grotesque and inhuman mask. There was no peace in death, no comprehension of the end of suffering.

Tears heaved themselves from my eyes, though I hardly knew why. I stumbled backwards and the man was holding me, though I had not seen him rise. Time was out of joint like that, all moments with no transitions. Why was I weeping? Sand poured from my veins and I cried, but it

was so far away, through a thick black fog. The man feed me more black tar and I was weeping over him but hardly knew where I was or what I was doing, and then we were kissing and sand kept pouring from me and he covered the little pile on the floor with his hand.

“A knife a knife a knife” I mumbled, my blood tearing my veins apart, the pain incredible and distant. I was gutting her and I was shaking. Where had I gotten the knife? Another displacement of time. Some thing had happened but the memory of it was gone. Her skin parted easily before the knife, it seemed too easy, and her guts were spilling out. The gel she was suspended in kept the blood contained somehow, so that her organs were a soupy mess.

Pleasure and horror mixed together inside me, the monster and the child embraced; I was shocked and thrilled as I buried my hands in her. The organs were warm in my fingers and I shuttered and trembled. I hardly remember scattering them about the room. I was a giddy, manic disaster, all tears and laughter, so that the room was a gory horror before I knew what I had done.

The man was sitting, now covered in sand and blood. He looked vacantly at a corner and hummed a sad song beneath his breath. The woman's desecrated and bloody body lay before me then, and I was drinking from her, drinking her blood and bile, warm inside me. The logic for this escapes me but I did it. My robe was wet and heavy so I pulled it off and lay naked on the tiled floor before her so that her blood poured down onto me. It was warm and thick and I felt comfort from it, and I rubbed it in my hair, and I rubbed it about my body and thighs and breasts.

And the sand that leaked from me grew wet and clogged shut my alien veins, and, softly at first, then growing, the thunk, thunk, of this strange heart in me, and then my mouth filled with the taste of bile and I vomited, raw acid cutting my throat, but it was so far away, it seemed a performance more than reality. Buckled down blood and bile poured from my mouth and splattered my skin. And the black tar, thick and greasy, came up and stained black my skin, and still I retched and thunk, thunk in my ears. All strength drained from me. Weak and wet, cold and naked, I shivered. My head ached.

The once far distant world was back, and I suffered for it. The strange man sat giggling, curling up then flexing his hands over and over, watching his hands curl and stretch. His lips were stained black and his hair was thin. There was blood everywhere, and organs lay haphazardly about. I retched again but my stomach was empty.

Slowly, numbly, without thought, I drew my master's signs upon the walls in blood. They were the signs of one of his children, remembered from my dream, but I know nothing of the theology of it. And then I sat. I wasn't waiting, rather I had stopped functioning. My duty done, there was no need in me. That strange heart beat but brought no compulsion with it. I just sat.

There were two other women in the room. My eyes now had grown used to the dark and I could see them, though they still seemed more relief than fully sculpted. Both, like my victim, were amputees suspended in a thick gel. Only their genitals and their stumps of legs protruded from the gel. They were obscene, monstrous things. The vats in which they were suspended were adjustable by a large lever besides them. Presumably so a man might fit himself into them without discomfort. Their arms too had been removed, and hoses, attached by needles, protruded from their necks and beneath their arms. Their faces were covered by black eyeless masks, with long tubes extending from them.

I could have gone, simply stood and wandered back to my faux master. The idea simply never occurred to me. The strange man still sat staring at his fingers, by turns giggling and staring vacantly at them. I sat, unthinking, until soldiers came, picked me up, and, after I ignored their jabbering, carried me away.





## CHAPTER 4

They didn't know what to do with me. I was placed in a small room without furniture. Bare wood floors and a small window. Men crowded at the window and gaped openly at me. I was filthy, itchy, caked in dried blood and vomit. The men were highly agitated, jostling each other and jabbering. The effect was grotesque through the glass, as I could not hear them. They were staring, not at my breasts or crotch as I was used, but at my hands, my legs and feet.

I did nothing. I was a force acted upon. Caught in the whimsy of great and arbitrary powers, flung story to story with no structure of my own. I who have no future; I who have no past. Both belong to them. No body for it is my master's body, no will for it is my master's will, no thought for it is my master's thought. Obedience is bread. Obedience is wine.

Obey obey obey. I was rocking then and some days past. They cleaned me. Two men sprayed and scrubbed me with rough brushes until I was raw. I hardly noticed them except that they gawked openly at my limbs. I was a gray numb thing.

I slept a few times I think but didn't pay much attention. After some time my faux master came to visit me. He was a prim aristocrat this time, all waxed mustache, greasy hair and finely tailored clothes.

"You stupid fucking whore. You goddamn fucking blood clot!" He sputtered and paced as he swore. "I have put a heart into you. Your heart belongs to him. The motherfucker. My heart too. My heart, clogged with filth and worms, knotted parasites. But I put a heart in you, A heart to defy him with. A knife of my revenge. A knife of my revenge." A petty man. A petty man trying to be vicious. A scared man trying to be cruel.

He beat me then, but what did I care if he bruised a body that was not mine? He did not hit hard. My old master beat me worse, cut slits into my neck, my back and arms as he fucked me. The old motherfucker was dead. The old motherfucker was dead.

I felt my heart beating. Beatings never really hurt. Not during them. That was later. Now I felt my heart pound in me. I would not run. My master's body that was beaten. I would not run, I would not run. And deep in me that strange heart beat, and I felt sand scrape through my fostered veins. And I felt a sob well up in me, and tears came from my eyes and the sob wracked through me. The pain was awful then. Deep welts raised my skin and my nerves tore in me. My lips moved trying to speak, I didn't know what, but pain and sobs and screams and the thunk, thunk of that awful heart filled my mouth and throat and lungs.

He was holding my hair and making me look into his eyes. The face was constant but the eyes were a gray mesh of a thousand eyes. "You are the knife of my revenge." Tears streamed from my eyes. I collapsed as he released me and I sobbed. I had no thought. Wretched and broken, pain pulsed through me and I cried and clutched at myself.

Twice a day I was given a gruel which, while not inoffensive in flavor, was so indigestible that it produced the most extraordinary flatulence of my life. Great and terrible gusts of noxious gas thundered from my body and filled my small cell with a thick cloud. It grew worse with every feeding, until I lay on the filthy floor hugging my knees, with great stabbing pains tearing my bloated guts apart. I lost any sense of space or time. I was lost in that pain, writhing. I was a wisp of agony in a great black void. It was many days I think, but I do not know.

When the world came back my mouth was full of sticky sour tar. The same strange man who had guided me to my victim was before me, feeding the drug to me. He looked bemused, and his sunken eyes focused better than I remembered.

“I will take you to your trial,” he said dully. He sounded as though his tongue were swollen. I have no idea still who he was or how he came to be there. Some aristocrat's son perhaps.

They cleaned me again, and swathed my arms and legs with thick cloth. They carried me to a larger room, full dark woods, that seemed all out of joint. Three men sat at desks at various heights, and seemed at impossible angles to each other. They bound me to chair behind a desk and the strange man sat next to me. I watched it all happen as if it were a dream, tasting the sour tar as my guts ached.

The world was back, but was far away and dark. Rather the world itself was bright, but I looked on it as if through a long blackened tunnel. My gut rumbled and I felt the pain pierce through me, but it felt more like pressure now than pain. I had to clench my sphincter to hold the noxious gas back.

“Order” said the judge, and I suddenly realized there were many people in the room. A man with a high powdered wig sat behind the highest desk. Various spectators, all men, sat behind us, a colorful array of costumes. Beside me at a small table sat the man.

The judge spoke: “In the land of Clachnik, believe above all things in three guiding principles.”

He spoke in the hoarse whisper of those trying to sound profound. My gut rumbled audibly and sharp pains spread through my abdomen.

“We believe that any moral society must hold up in its center its moral principles. We believe in every individual's right to liberty, that the individual should be protected from arbitrary abuse. We believe in the individual's right to gather and dispose of property according to their own whim and judgment. But we believe, above all, in life.”

A puff of gas escaped me with a loud boom. I clenched my sphincter down hard. The pain was not so terrible now. Flowers sprout and grew from my sour tongue. A light floating warmth now, not the great and terrible ocean. The courtroom seemed cherry, a colorful mix of indistinct objects that I could not quite focus on. I felt a little giggle escape my lips and was quickly shushed by the man besides me. How odd. My left breast itched but I could not move my hand to scratch it, as it was thoroughly bound. The judge prattled on.

“Long ago, mothers would leave their babies on the mountain side, or in baskets on the great river Lathnich as it traverses the plains beneath our city.”

The windbag continued but I drifted off. Justice. The means by which a society justifies its violence. An old master had said that. How a society plays at fairness. An ape kills another ape and it is nature. A man must play a game called justice first. Two dead apes.

My tit still itched but I could not scratch it. It barely bothered me. A gnat drowning in an ocean. Flowers bloomed from my tongue and I felt giddy inside. A great wonderful sea of indifference. Oh master, you have freed me from choice. Freedom in necessity. No self to be a slave. How do you know when you are not thinking like yourself? What is the self besides the constant shifting idea of self? We must always be ourselves. How easy is it to think of the problems in the world? How much of the world is apes doing what apes do?

My gut rumbled and pain, soft and distant, drifted through me. Hardly feeling it, I clenched my sphincter down hard, and there was a gentle, painful pulling as the gas retreated from the precipice.

“So this value” droned the judge, “This sacred respect of life is what makes our civilization great.”

Have I sketched enough of the scene? Do you, having now each clue, wish to move along this strange journey, content that nothing is missed where, events and ideas having been illuminated,

the reader can only find one possible conclusion?

The truth was I had stopped paying attention. I floated in that sophisticated nowhere, playing games in my mind. La la I will exist, la la were my will to exist, la la should my will exist, da dum da dee, had my will existed. Yes, had it existed, it had not, it should but it had not.

Where was the woman of sensation that I had so recently been? Certainly my viscera still ached, throbbing through the drugs. And my sphincter was clenched tight against of the flood of gas and filth. But that was far away. A demon master. Ha! A murder on my conscious, but what is life? Tra la! Tra la! Certainly that wretched woman didn't miss it.

I don't remember much of what was happening with the judge. The room full of male spectators kept applauding. Tra la.

What conclusion would you reach here? How should the scene end? A daring escape, my faux master and I running madly through the halls of justice, chased by an army of rabid soldiers, saved only by an explosion of slippery shit that reduced their justice to a milieu of beshitted men taking pratfalls as we escaped into the free air?

Justice was not so significant that it could be mocked so. After the old windbag finished blubbering they led me to a back chamber where they had me give him a hand job. His cock was diseased and full of puss, but I didn't pay much attention. They bundled me up after and my faux master carried me away.

## CHAPTER 5

My faux master mostly kept me in a box. It was just large enough that I could lean a little to sleep, but small enough that there was no chance of falling down. He opened it a few times a day to let me use the chamber pot and to feed me the black tar. Mostly I stood alone and the tar sprouted and grew roots into my tongue and throat, and I floated there in his box.

And I floated there, and I floated there.

Sometimes he would take me from his box and I would lay with rotten cadavers. They would push their dry, too tight skin against mine, and plant in me their infertile seed. But I only floated and I did not care, too high for the horror or disgust of the moment to reach through to me. They were distant horrors. Zombies in a tragic play, decayed, empty husks that jerked about to their beast's minds. Their human minds. And I the vase to catch the overflow. La da, La da.

I know not how many days or weeks or months past. In the drug I lost all track of time, every moment seemed an infinity, the future and past a vague abstraction too unimportant to ponder. And slowly, deep in a body that seemed almost an alien thing to me, I felt my heart beat. My own heart. And with it, that terrible unease. Murder, it said, murder murder, with each beat, murder. It built only slowly, each moment it seemed a little stronger than before, the only progression of that time, time building and moving forwards, the unavoidable catastrophe, the falling body that knows it must strike earth.

My true master came to me. Still in the box, the reek of urine and feces. And there was light and my master held a woman in his claws. Impossibly, in a too large space without limits. It was the woman I had slain. She rolled her head in circles, foam dripping from her lips, strange shrieks and sounds, inarticulate sounds that made me question the words I had heard her speak.

My master now had the body of a tiger and the head of a man. His claws, now the claws of a vulture, raked through her flesh, and through the thick gouges spilled her guts. Her eyes burst their sockets. And a baby, too little to live outside the womb, struggled amongst the viscera,

“MINDLESS LITTLE SPECK OF ICE, MINDLESS BIT OF FIRE,” thought my master, his thoughts deafening my own. “NEED NEED NEED, THE HEART OF ALL THAT ARE HUMAN. NEED. LOVE ME LOVE ME FUCK FUCK FUCK.” He snapped the infant's neck. “BROKEN LITTLE THING BROKEN LITTLE THING, YOU MUST BREAK MORE LIKE THIS.”

I let myself from the box. It was simple, a latch that jiggled loose in a few minutes. Floating, crazed, I stumbled through a thick black fog. A great structure was before me all white marble and columns, and I stumbled into and through it and a thousand faces watched and gawked at my nakedness. A thousand gray undifferentiated faces, all eyes and eyes and eyes. Nobody stopped me as I floated through the streets and buildings. Different streets. Pastel colors blurred into each other, hard angles jumbled impossibly together.

And then I was alone, and a great pit of refuse was before me and I vomited flowers into it. The world drifted by, quiet under its thick black fog. A heavy mist of my drugged mind. I sat and was quiet with it. A man came and dropped into the pit a bit of bone and skin. Another man dropped into it some broken clay, and another man, staggering drunk, urinated into the pit.

I paid no mind. I floated with flowers sprouting from my lips and tongue, and the great subsonic thud of my twin hearts, one screaming murder and the other love, and in my hand was a broken shard of pottery and the thundering heartbeats bore down on me, their terrible contradiction bore me down and I could not bear the weight, I writhed on the earth, naked and filthy. And with the clay I scratched bloody lines into my flesh, scraped as if my hatred could

carve away my human form that I might appear the monster that I was.

A man kicked me and laughed and still I could not rend my skin from me, and the man had grabbed my breast in his meaty hands and squeezed as if its milk would spay salvation over him, and still my strange second heart loved and pitied the lonely heart that could only take by force what should wash over him with love and love and love and his cock was battering at me and wide I spread my legs and scraped open a vein inside my thigh and blood poured out and my love for him flowed out and over me and I held wide my legs and pulled his bloody cock inside me and laughed and laughed with joy! What joy! That this man and I should be one! This brute, this clenched and throbbing mass of muscle, instinct and lust, should join with me, should hold me in the genital embrace that we might be some savage obscenity of sweat and blood and cum, more beast than mind, more human than these play things we call our selves. And I laughed and laughed for joy, and great giddy tears heaved themselves from my eyes, and sobbing I scratched deep channels of skin and blood into his back and clutched him deeper into me.

He was screaming and hit at me, and with great love I took the pain and held him to me, and he scratched at me and he held a knife and cut away the woman's breast that was sewn to me. And from my torn breast poured sand, and it soaked up the blood of our mating, and from my breast poured all my joy and love, all the beauty and wonder, and left nothing in me.

The man beast clutched at his torn testicle, I must have torn it somehow, and stumbled cursing into the black black black. I sat and rocked and rocked. And some time later it was dark and my head spun about me. A woman was there, a girl really. Dressed in silk rags, a whore once, now filthy and discarded. She stumbled over me and broke me from my ennui. She was tearful and tried to speak but sobbed instead. Me, I thought, had I a self to pity.

She had an infant, not more than a day our two old. She stared at me with shame on her face. I looked back with a blank mind, dizzy from my loss of blood.

"I came to kill my baby" she said, sputtering and sobbing.

I stared at, or maybe through, her. I saw her but made no sense of her. My hearts beat, but muted. I had neither hate nor love in me. I had nothing in me. Obey obey obey. Obedience is life. Obedience is my food and drink. Obedience is life.

"I, I came to kill her." she said, breaking into uncontrolled sobs. "My baby, I came to kill my baby."

I stared back blankly. I don't know why I looked at her at all. How did all this concern me? Obey, my tired mind whispered to me. Obey and kill the child. But it was distant, I could barely hear.

"What!" she screamed at my silence, an angry sputter. "What!"

"I am with death," I said, my voice distant and strained, my voice speaking from some other part of me. She seemed to see my bloody flesh for the first time and she stepped back, eyes wide. "A strange bloody mess! A tangle of sinew and bone. I am a tangle of sinew and bone and mess mess mess." I stepped towards her, my eyes fixed intensely on her.

"Whore!" my voice cried, loud and righteous, "Whore, I absolve you. I will take your baby and murder it. I will take the sin from you. I will crack its neck and with its entrails I shall write the unholy signs of my master. The vulgar and obscene sigils of my demon master!"

I was stammering and shouting in my excitement, stumbling towards her. She clutched her baby and stepped back, but stood transfixed, horror and shame crying out her eyes.

"Obedience is my food! It is my drink, it is all" I reached for the baby. And I felt my alien heart in me, thump, thump, a subsonic thunder pulsing through my body, shaking me so that the world seemed to wink in and out, and with it came a queasy shame, nausea and dizziness.

“I am death I am death I am a tool of the obscene, of the filth!” I cried, uncertain now as sand scraped through my veins. My true heart beat its hate through me still. Obey obey obey. But I stumbled, uncertain as the sand slowed my raging blood. It took all my will to focus on her, the world around her and the child was all a blackness. I stumbled another step forwards, all my will in that step, all my will to keep from falling and tearing out my veins.

The woman was shrieking and clutching her baby, backing away as if to run. An ape now, her human complications buried in terror and shame. Obey, obey, obey. Another step and the baby was there, I snatched it from her hands and she shrieked. The infant wailed and choked on its sob. The woman rushed me but I knocked her easily to the ground. I held the baby in my hands and I felt nothing. The pressure eased, I felt dizzy and giddy, uncertain of the ground beneath me but also peaceful, floating somehow still.

The infant's stupid eyes stared up at me as it wailed. A vacant being, cosmically insignificant. A black hole of need. I raised it, to snap its neck then, but that strange heart, I felt nothing for the child. But the sobbing woman was at my feet, clutching at it as I held it above her, my foot on her to hold her down, though I do not know how I managed that. Some trickle of love inside me blossomed up. She was me. Whore, used by the world, suffering for her nature. Some little bit of love left inside my battered flesh.

But obey, obey, my heart beat. Not my murder, not mine. A tool of my master. Not mine. I raised the infant up, its fragile neck would almost snap itself if I but shook the thing. It wailed at me but the sound barely penetrated. I raised it up. I would do the thing. I would obey. I raised it up, and hesitated.

And a hand touched my naked shoulder and a soft nasally voice said “please stop,” It was a command, gentle and firm at once. I did not mean to listen. Love, love, that strange heart in me, my blood screaming murder in my veins, the sand clogging, an ineffective sludge of hate in my veins, poisoning me. Vertigo overcame me again and the world seemed too far away. That strange heart in me, thundering through my consciousness, bearing me down beneath its weight. I did not mean to listen. The babe's life was nothing. Another death in an infinite series of deaths. Neither good nor evil, only dead. A cold uncaring stone.

But my blood pushed through me too thick, I hesitated, I did not snap that crying infant's neck, I did not. A terrible moment, my master's will thundering in my ears and yet I did not do it. A tool that did not obey. A broken tool. I was weak, blood leaked from my missing breast, I stumbled as if to faint, but did not fall. The world's edges filled in with black, I was not sure where was down. I lowered the baby, I did not snap its neck. I lowered the child and her mother took her from me.

“Care for her,” said the man, handing her something, maybe coins? I stumbled away but fell. Too much blood gone. The world spun and blackness closed around me. I blinked it away and I was on my side. I stared down at my naked chest and a strange breast, that other woman's breast alone on my chest, the gory raw flesh where its twin should be. Should I be feeling pain? I heaved myself up to run again but only stumbled and sank, too dizzy and weak. The taste of flowers strong still in my mouth. No pain, it was as if I floated on the ground, sinking into a great blackness, sinking into death. I did not mind that.

“You are badly hurt” the nasally voice said.

“I must kill it, I must kill it” I muttered. The world returned around me, but hazy, a black and dreamy edge to everything. I started up after the woman but only fell pathetically, flopping on the earth.

“Go now,” he said. Go where? But then the woman left sobbing, but with her child clutched to

her. I chased her but only flopped again, I do not think I even rose an inch from the earth. The man caught my arm. I turned to claw at him but only touched his bearded face with my hand, a gentle pathetic pat.

“You're badly hurt” he said, his voice cautious and uncertain. I looked down at my severed breast, at the bloody sand that still seeped down my body. I tried to stand again but fell again. Tentatively, he placed a hand on my shoulder and turned me so my chest was up.

“Damn” he said. I was nothing again. My two thumping hearts were far away. The pit of refuse, the man, they both were far from me and retreating, as though they were behind a thick clouded glass. An infinity of atoms spread across all of space. A vague and uncertain thing. I sank into blackness and hoped that it was death I fell into. The world pulsed back once, when he hefted me into his arms, but it was a faint stutter, it fell away again and it was black black black.



## CHAPTER 6

Ten thousand cut and impossible faces stared at me. I lay naked and could not move. My own naked, not that woman's body that was sewn to me. Ten thousand bits of eyes and refracted faces stared into and through me, and some hundred hands reached into me and pulled threads of me away. My flesh unraveled and then my heart and guts, thin threads of gore and blood and slime, until I was an empty cage of bones.

And my demon master was above me, an awful amalgamation of beasts, a beaked head of a lion, dog and lizard hideously sewn together, bits of blood and gore leaking from the stitches. The ten thousand faces split into twenty thousand frightened, refracted masks, and my master loomed huge above me, more blackness than form, a horrible incomprehensible monstrosity that boggled my mind.

“BROKEN LITTLE FUCK. BROKEN, YOU DID NOT OBEY! BROKEN FUCKING USELESS BROKEN JAGGED BONES AND RENT FLESH!”

It's terrible thought inside my head, crushing out my mind. I had no mouth which with to scream, naked bones chipped against each other as I trembled. A thousand tiny clawed things desperately scraped bone, pulling my bones apart, pulling me to death.

“I FORBID YOUR DEATH, BROKEN SHIT,” his beak clacked noisily and a forked snake's tongue flicked about nearly faster than I could see.

The demon held the baby that I had not killed in taloned human hands. Crushed its skull in his chattering beak and drained its brains into me, and cut it's stomach with his crab-like claws and spilled its and guts into me.

“WITH THIS INNOCENCE I WILL PUNISH YOU!”

My mind shuddered under the terrible weight. From the great cock of a horse he pissed into me his hate and then was gone. And hands without arms or bodies threaded the spindles of hair and blood and guts, and made me whole again. When my mouth and lungs were made again, I screamed

“Master, I will obey!” I cried, “Master obedience is all! It is my food, it is my life!” But he was gone, I screamed at a black and empty space.

I woke in great pain. I could not move. I could not see. There was a muffled sound of insects. I realized slowly that I was not bound. My muscles simply would not move. There was pain but also a great exhaustion, a lethargy that pulled all function from my muscles.

I hovered near to myself, but I was not quite myself. There was a faint light. A simple room. A pallet of straw under me. I sensed it barely, as through a thick and colored glass. All around that glass was heavy black. And my master held me still, lay on me his rough diseased flesh clawed at me, and rotted out my womb so that I carried in me the rats and roaches, the pestilence that, birthed, would be the ruin of the world.

The world, that tiny room, was there but terribly distant, an impossible distance. I meant to flex my limbs, to scrape myself through that black tunnel, but my nerves returned only pain and I did not move. No will in my battered flesh to move.

“My name is Argyl.” The sound echoed and distorted around me. From where? From where? Was there a man behind that glass? I could not see. I ached and hurt. “Your eyes are open, can you hear me?” Simple language, there was a man there. Far far away from me. I meant to stir but there was only pain and the rape of demons.

Then mostly it was darkness. Shaking started in my muscles, a steady and uncontrolled

twitching, almost a seizure except my dull mind remained to suffer it. Twisting and shaking in blackness, pain that shrunk my mind into a scrap of myself that clenched tight against it. My mind a narrow compressed slip of self that could not think, could only feel pain. A hurricane of glass cutting through my muscles and my mind.

I vomited sharp acid that cut my throat and mouth. I gagged and gagged and panic rushed up in me, the beast's panic for I had no wish to live myself, the panic of the body, of the beast, it seized my muscles in a great painful clench and I knew I must suffocate as vomit wheezed into my lungs. Too clenched to breathe, the distant world went away altogether and I was alone in pain and panic. Panic that drove my consciousness from my brain and down my neck. Hateful spiteful pain, ferocious pain, raging all the harder as its prey escaped into unconsciousness and shrank and shank away.

I was back in my body when I was aware of anything again. My muscles still shuddered uselessly, my eyes blinked a quarter open at best. But I breathed. There was no thought yet. A still ache engulfed me, squeezed any thought away from me.

An unknowable time later I peed myself. It surprised me, I had not known I had to pee. Cleaning myself seemed a good idea so I meant to rise, but nothing happened. So I thought to lay still and pant. My first act of self will, to clean my piss from me, and I could not. Why had I wanted to act?

The man was there then and he pulled back a sheet that was over me and looked away. He took the sheet up and then cleaned me. He'd gotten a wet rag from somewhere. His hands were firm, not groping, and gentle. My mind stammered forwards. Gentle hands, not lecherous. He stopped when my behind was clean. Left again and was back again. How much time had passed? I did not know.

He rolled me over and I saw only a wall then, a dark stained wood. The wet blanket under me was pulled away and he cleaned me more. How did he clean my front when I stared at a wall? I tried to form a thought but could not. Warm wet rags cleaned my crotch and belly, cleaned my thighs. My chest was wrapped in bandages.

The same man, the man who has stopped me slaying the child. I was empty, free of thoughts and feeling. Even the pain was distant, my shaking calmed. He was firm and efficient. He lifted me and I was clean on fresh straw. He draped a blanket over my legs and I was not naked anymore. A warm broth touched my lips and I drank it. He tipped the cup gently into my mouth.

"You're through the worst of it now," he said gently. I wondered at his antecedents. The worst of what? Was this blunt pain better or worse than any other pain? This body, a body to which I felt no particular ownership, its pain was my master's broken tool. The worst of it. The worst of all lives, to be a slave such as I. To own nothing of myself, to drift and surge at the trivial will of a master, himself a victim of his nature?

My mind worked again, a little.

"You should sleep more," he said, raising a cup of warm tea to my lips. I drank a little and it warmed me. A slight bit of pleasure. A warm sip of tea, a glass of wine, a good deep laugh, an orgasm, were these what I should live for? Should I simply balance the likelihood of future pleasure and future pain and, should the balance fall towards pain, affect my suicide?

I, the willless one. Did my master command evil through force of will, or was it simply his nature, to relish in the filth and the murderous? All insignificant. A great collision of insignificance and absurdity. A colony of microbes that thinks 'This, this is self. I am self but the microbes in my gut, they are other.' Broken broken broken.

“How do you feel?” The light was different, how long had it been? How did I feel?

“Broken broken” I whispered, though my voice was very distant strained. It was if someone else had spoken.

“Yes, your breast is gone,” he said, misunderstanding. “But you will live.” He spoke softly as if to soften a heavy blow.

“Not mine,” I heard my strange voice say, “But she is dead and he put her tits on me and put her heart in me and the sand scrapes my veins and I bleed it out and out and it turns my hate to sludge and builds in me a wretched loathing of all my evil, all his evil, I don't know the difference, his hate my hate, I am a tool, a broken broken tool. Broken broken.”

He hushed me or I would have kept repeating. My mind sputtered down and I realized I had struggled up as if to stand, but only sagged into his arms.

“Shh” he hushed again, and lowered me to the bed of straw. This time I was facing the room. He placed a kettle on a hook over the fire, and mixed the contents of a couple jars into a cup.

The room was small. The dark wood of the walls sucked up light. A single pallet of straw on which I slept, a simple wood table with a few jars and books, a stool, a small chest of drawers in some disrepair. There was no window. A door stood ajar and I could see another room, but the details were obscured in darkness.

The kettle boiled quickly and he poured water into the mug.

“This will help you sleep,” he said. I said nothing.

“Were you eating black tar?” he asked. Was I eating it? Yes. Or I was fed it. I could taste it almost and I felt desire grow in me, but I said nothing.

“Well, if it was you should feel fairly normal soon. The withdrawal usually lasts a couple of weeks. I couldn't get you awake the first week, and you're about halfway through the second.”

He brought the cup to me and held it to my lips. It was almost too hot, tasted of licorice, and was very bitter.

“This will help you sleep and calm your tremors.” He spoke nervously, but like he was trying to be calm and reassuring. He was not very tall, and wore a simple black robe. His arms were very thin. His long hair was tied back and he wore an unruly beard that made him look a bit wild.

I still said nothing. I thought nothing. I was nothing. He sat watching me for a time. I realized I was clothed. Bandages covered my chest and a blanket was pulled up to my hips. Odd for a man to clothe me. I realized I was thinking again and then that I was very tired. I drifted down to sleep.

I dreamt of flowers. I lay in a field and they sprouted from my skin and unfurled before a warm black sun that leached the color from the world. I was floating, floating as if I were buoyant and the earth were water. Roots curled through my flesh and fed my nerves horror and joy.

Then the babe was in my arms and snuggled warm against me, and I held him as roots plunged from my arms to the earth, and I held him to my breast. He suckled black sap. From his back sprout roots and his face distorted at hideous, impossible angles. My eyes recoiled and my mind stuttered and I could not look at it, and it bit into my breast and I could not run I could not run, my roots held me fast. I screamed and woke.

I lurched up on the straw and supported my weight with my arms. The quiet and dim light seemed full of tension as my dream fled my senses. It was a moment before I realized my arms supported me when they couldn't have before. Coals glowed low in the fireplace and a little light

spilled in from the next room. Every bit of my body, inside and out, ached horribly, but my muscles obeyed me now. Leaning against the wall I struggled to my feet, then slowly, slowly, limped into the other room.

The man was slouched over a desk. A candelabra before him burned low, its wax dribbled and cooled in abstract patterns on scattered opened books. The room was full of jars, hundreds of them, most full of different green leaves, but some had red or white powders, scattered haphazardly about a few ramshackle tables and shelves. Books too were every which way, every color of spine, piled high on the tables and two deep on the shelves, with more stacked on top. There was no fireplace and it was chilly. There was a window but it was dark.

I forced my trembling legs to carry me to the door. I had to lean on the tables and displaced several jars. The door was latched but not locked and I let myself out. It was cold and I wore only the bandages about my chest. A little light spilled from the open door and I could see a few trees. Evergreens of some kind. The ground was covered in browned needle like leaves. Insects buzzed and chirped loudly, but there were no human sounds. I stood there for a time, looking into darkness. No moon or stars lit the night. I stood. Cold seeped into my feet. I shivered in the wind and did not think. Where was there to go? What was there to think?

Now was my punishment. What form would it take? My old master, the dead one, would tie me to a machine so that only my own strength held me away from poisoned barbs. He would hold me there for hours, cutting thin cuts into my back until, exhausted, I collapsed onto the barbs and felt the poison, jerked back involuntarily into his knife, then collapsed again into the barbs.

It had been a poor punishment. We had learned that pain was the damaging of our masters' tool. Not ours to own. Long before that I had locked myself away from myself. From my body and from my mind. It had been a poor punishment. I had locked myself away. Locked away, it had been a poor punishment.

"Do whatever you wish of course, but your body is still very weak." The man's voice was behind me, he must have come to the door.

"Where should I go?" I asked back. My voice was small and weak. I don't know why I asked him.

"For now, back inside. Though I suggest it, I do not command it."

All could command us, the lowest of the slaves. The highest and the lowest. The best in our abject subservience. Slaves could command us. Pretentious bastard. I felt my own heart pound louder in me. Murder, murder it said, but its call was faint. Now was my punishment. Murder in my blood but later, my master held it back. Somewhere the woman's heart beat but was faint. He was kind and I hated him for it.

"Yes master" I said at length. I walked abruptly inside. He held very still as I passed him, hiding his reaction in stillness. Then he followed. Inside I kneeled to him and waited to hear the bastard's will. He paused and considered me for a moment, then walked past me into the other room. He returned with a heavy black robe.

"I'm afraid black is the only color I have. Goes with the office, as it were." He held it out to me. He said it as if it should be a joke, but he did not smile.

"If you're going to be walking around it's probably best that you're not naked all the time." I took it and placed it before me. He studied me for another moment, thinking.

"Please don't kneel like that. I'm not your master."

"Yes Master." I said, rising. He pressed his lips but said nothing as I attempted to stand. He dropped his expression and rushed to me as I toppled over instead.

“Here,” he said as he caught and steadied me before I collapsed completely. Pain sprouted through me as he helped me to his chair. The world was too sharp now, all sharp needles pressing into my vision and nerves. I realized I was moaning and gasping with pain.

“It's okay,” he said softly. “Here, I'm going to put this on you.” He pulled the robe over my head, then fumbled for my arms through the sleeves. Then I was standing and stumbling into the second room, most of my weight leaned onto him. He lowered me onto the straw.

“There's a chamber pot here,” he said, lifting it so I could see. Pain throbbed in my head and pulled at my consciousness. “I'll show you the outhouse tomorrow. Sleep now.”

“Yes master” I whispered. I didn't see his expression. I closed my eyes and was gone.

If I dreamt that night I do not remember it. I came awake slowly. It was chilly in the room, but I was warm in my robe and blanket. The general pain in my body had receded so that I could now localize the agony to the cut in my chest where my breast was gone. A great hot brand weighed on me as a dull but heavy weight. My limbs still hurt, but more with stiffness than with pain.

I meant to pull myself up. My muscles protested but had strength. Instead, pain exploded on my chest and I fell, black shutting out my vision. Obedience, obedience. Why would that occur to me now? Why had it not for so long? Fuck I hurt. Obedience is food. Obedience is drink. Bah, what foolishness.

The pain subsided slowly and shallow breathes kept it stalking but not attacking. I stretched out my feet and gasped and fell again. How did moving my leg hurt my chest? Where was I going? If I were to await my punishment then I should simply wait. Lay in bed until my master deemed it time. But I had risen. A tiny act of defiance. Hesitating to kill the baby, I had meant to do it, I had felt no hesitation in my mind. Obey obey obey. But my hands had hesitated. My body had pushed itself out of bed. Why? What was I if not a tool? My mind played for me images of the murdered woman, that strange woman, that strange limbless woman I had slain. Had I strangled her or cut her? I could not recall. I felt nothing. The baby had been as empty as her, a vacant unreasoned being. I doubted it was any instinct. I was no motherly slave. I didn't care about the babe. It was nothing. It it it.

My bladder gave me an immediate destination. I stretched my leg out again, only an inch, another inch, and it was okay, pain but not so much pain. My hand, my left hand, could scooch my ass towards my foot. A single inch. My lungs bellowed air in and out, another crushing pain exploded across my chest and I was panting and crumpled on the floor again. A red blur of pain. I did not have to think when the pain pulled all my consciousness away. Easier to suffer than to think. Fuck. After a moment I remembered my left breast was intact. Why couldn't I use that arm to propel me? Why had it not hurt like this before?

My bladder finally let go with me crumpled on the floor. I felt warmth on my thighs but only barely. A small distant signal against the blaring light of pain. Something must be wrong. It made no sense for me to be crippled by my wound when yesterday I had walked and spoken as a whole woman. Had the man poisoned me? Better that he would, I would not mind death. Death, freedom, death, the same.

I heard muffled voices. The man was speaking to someone who I could not see. The door was open a slit. An inch. Another inch. Another inch. Each gained through stabbing pain, a hot brand burning deep into me with each inch. Another inch. Another inch. Either to my salvation or my death. My healer or my poisoner. Either way, another inch, another inch. To end suffering. To end the pain all that I relished.

They both fell silent as I realized I was gasping and moaning loudly. I collapsed through the door with a scream and the room went black and the man, what did he say his name was? The man rushed to me, eyes darting as I realized I could see again.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Pain,” I whispered, holding my arm to my chest. His brow furled and he quickly picked me up and carried me back into the room to the pallet. Quickly but with great care. I hurt but it did not black out my mind. Then he pulled off my robe and then left me, stalking into the other room.

“My cousin, she was badly hurt, the war,” he came back in, walking quickly, and cut the bandage from my chest. He turned the knife he had fetched away from my skin, but it was very sharp against me. I thought I would see blood but did not.

“You have a fever” he said touching my forehead. I did not feel hot but said nothing. Maybe he would cure me, maybe he would kill me. Better than the pain either way. Why did I care about pain?

My chest was unwrapped and he said “infected, crap.” He seemed to realize I was naked at the same moment and pulled the blanket above me, he had to lift my legs to free it, to cover my body and remaining breast.

“I will go get some supplies and be right back, don't move.”

He hurried from the room. Was it strange I was so indifferent to my pain? Certainly my body writhed and would cry out had it its own voice. But I almost found comfort in it. In pain there was no question of disobedience, of self. Did these questions really trouble me so? They were roiling inside me, just beneath the surface of my mind.

“Yes she is my cousin, a refuge. Her family was killed and her almost.” The man's voice came quietly from the other room. A woman's voice responded but I did not hear the words.

He returned to the room carrying a bowl and a jar. He placed them on the floor besides the pallet, placed the kettle over the fire, and then returned to me to spread a sticky goo over my wounded chest. It felt cool and the pain eased almost at once.

“This will numb you and help pull out the infection. I'll give you some tea for the fever. Try to sleep if you can, but at least lie still.”

The man lifted some tea to my lips and I realized time had passed and drank it. I felt heavy at once, my thoughts roiled still just out of reach above me but I sank down down and I could not touch them, I reached, I could not touch them. I was a sail in a storm, flitting this way and that, torn to rags and sticks and tossed on the winds. And then I slept.

Do you tire of my injuries? What was I if not a tool? What was this pain if not my master's broken tool? But tools obey. In me there had been not only hesitation, but defiance. Had I wished to obey the baby would be dead. I wished I could sprout flowers in my mouth and tongue again, to drift off into that warm and easy blackness. I could taste it now that my mind turned to it. What was I and why did I care? Why did my hesitation penetrate the cynicism that I wore about myself as armor? What was I now, a willless tool, undirected mechanism broken beyond repair, waiting to be hammered into something new?

Do you tire of my recounting of my injuries? I must seem a thousand different people, first concerned with this, then that. First cynical, then lustful, then dour and brooding. Brooding over inane abstractions of myself. It is a problem of identity I think. Most have some idea of who they are. A fiction, an absurd fiction, that they are a noble or good, or that they manipulate and dominate for the good of those they control. They think they pretend to be someone they are not,

they like or loathe themselves. They are more who they pretend to be than who they think they are. I have no such abstractions. I am nothing. I am a vessel for my master's will, bred for generations for obedience, trained from a young age to be a thoughtless, moralless tool. What must seem bad characterization is after all the constant product of a single mind. In this moment I was this way, in that moment that. Sense is something we apply to these things later. I did things this way because I am this kind of person, and I like or loathe that I am like that, but there it is, it is what I am. I am nothing. I am a terrible and empty space. Beyond good or evil, as happy to kill as to make love, as happy to be victim as to be villain.

Do you tire of my injuries? Who is this man, why does the story not move forwards? I simply did not care who he was. Some thing that was not my master. Why did he care for me? It didn't matter to me. He did and that was that. When I had pathetically inched myself across the floor and called to him, I had gone either towards my death or my salvation. I hadn't cared. There was only a tiny spark of self then. I had dragged myself there, not simply lain in pain and indifference. It gives lie to all I have said here. It gives lie to my non-identity. There was a self there that desired not to be in pain, to be healed or killed, but not to be in pain.

He didn't speak to me much. He replaced the salve on my chest often and fed me broth and different pungent teas. I did not speak or listen to him. I was in a kind of daze. He must have been drugging me with something for I did not think or speak or feel a desire too. I just slept and almost slept.

## CHAPTER 7

“What's your name?” he asked. I had been awake and unusually alert. The pain was mostly gone, it floated just below my attention, so that any too quick movement brought it up, but sitting still or moving carefully I did not notice it much.

What was my name? I stared into the fire. I sat on the straw, back leaned against the wall. He on a stool a few feet away. My name.

As the silence stretched he asked, “Do you have a name?” It was a simple answerable question. Why was I reticent to speak? I never thought of myself as anyone but myself. Who was I? A question of metaphysics. My old master, the old dead bastard, had called me 'whore,' an appellation that made no sense, except as insult, as he had never paid me. I then was a cynical and obedient slave. I now was, what? A slave still? A disobedient slave? Not even that, not even bold as that. A hesitant slave? Or not a slave at all? No tool, whether a tool for murder or masturbation, had will itself. I had no will perhaps. But hesitation, in hesitation there was at least the implication of will. Is there such a thing as will, or is it a fairy tale we amuse ourselves with?

“What are you thinking?” he asked. He had been studying me as I didn't speak.

“Is will? Rather, if, or should, will exist, does will exist? Or is everything, or anything, any moment, a mechanism, an inevitable if infinite, nearly infinite, a mechanism of great complication but utter predictability. If I am a slave is my master not also a slave? His will a fairy tale, himself an equation, of great, great complexity, but an equation none the less? Do I exist in any sense except as right now? As I do right now? My past a narrative I am now telling myself? If I disobey is it inevitable? Or do I disobey, or.” I stopped suddenly. He was looking at me carefully, as if afraid any reaction would be the wrong one.

“I always repeat repeat.” I went on needlessly. “Circles upon circles of thought, ideas re-parsed, re-contextualized and repeated, conclusion washed away with each new turning. All a hopeless muddle.” I trailed at and we sat in silence for a long moment.

“I recognize myself in that.” he said gently. I looked at him but he looked into the fire.

I hadn't spent much thought on him, but he was another thing that didn't make sense. His pretension that he was above us slaves and masters roiled me. But also there was something there. Something. I didn't know.

“I believe you are the strangest person I have ever met,” he said. “And I've met some strange ones.” He looked at me more closely. “A tar addict without a name who kidnaps babies, casually ignores more pain than would cripple the most disciplined soldier, and struggles with obtuse metaphysical questions as another would brood over a lost lover.”

Was there venom in his voice? A touch of sarcasm or something. My ire raised against him to speak of me so. It wasn't rational, but resentment smoldered in me. He looked back to the fire and seemed to study it.

“Okay” he said after a while, giving me a small smile. “That answers the question. Is it likely your former or possibly current master will come looking for you?”

“Look, no,” I said.

“Okay.” He rose and stepped towards the door. “I will leave you be now. If anyone, if you meet anyone you are my cousin from the countryside by Asgyth. Your family was slain and you were raped by soldiers wearing blue and white. Your name is,” he paused, considering. “Your name is Kara.” He smiled very slightly and sadly. “I was going to name a daughter that once.” His face returned to its carefully controlled neutrality. He turned to leave.

“He does not need to look,” I said, “he knows I'm here.”



He spun quickly and looked hard at me.

“How?” he demanded, his voice harsh. Then, “I’m sorry. How?” more gently.

“He comes to me in my dreams” I said. “I am here so that he might punish me.”

He looked at me for a long time with great intensity. After a while he said, “okay,” and left.

That night I dreamt that I was walking in a river of blood. And down it flowed feet and hands and arms and then a man's headless limbless torso. And then a woman's head and she was screeching “you are the evil, you are the evil!” which seemed absurd. I did not believe in evil. My master was there then, in his massive form, but his body was all of black, sucking in the light around him and the color beyond that. He blocked out the sun and leaning drank from the river, chewing the bits of gore and stroking his obscene erection.

Then I was falling falling and I was alone and naked and curtains opened as if I were on a stage, and a thousand people were laughing at me and jeering, and on my chest where my breast had been was a black and cancerous mass that pulsed with every beat of my heart, and a woman's voice whispered inside me but I could not make out the words. As I was trying to figure out where to hold my hands she whispered again, “a thousand statues, all gray stone and marble. Athena hunting. All chiseled stone. Athena hunts!” And I was looking at the man at the cabin and he wrapped me in a white sheet and I said, “No, I cannot I am not pure,” and he said “You are pure.”

“No, I have fucked and I have murdered and found joy in the spilling of blood.”

“I am not asking it of you but telling you it is so. You are pure. You have locked yourself deep deep deep you have locked yourself deep deep, a thousand shards of glass, a thousand selves inside you, cutting cutting cutting but buried deep deep deep deep. I do not ask I tell it. I see it and I tell it.”

And then I was falling away from him and he was calling out my name, a name I didn't know, but he could not find me, and my master was there and his slimy arms held me where the man had held me, and my master pressed into my hand a knife, a long knife with green emeralds and a black black blade.

And then before me was the baby. I held the knife to its screaming throat. I cut the child's hand and blood poured from my own hand. I cut my arm and the baby shrieked in pain. Then darkness had eyes and reached down to take my child and hissed sharp fangs at me, and I reached for the child to save it but I could not reach I could not reach I could not reach.

I woke sweating and panting. I lay still on the pallet calming myself. I heard voices, the man's and a woman's I didn't know. They were in the other room and too muffled for me to hear. The woman sounded angry, the man defensive. I closed my eyes but couldn't fall back asleep. I could actually understand them if I concentrated.

“So you brought her home?” the woman's voice asked.

“Yes,” the man answered simply.

“Typical!” she said, exasperated. “Argyl, you're in hiding. That means nobody is supposed to know where you are. Bad enough you went into town, but bringing back some stray puppy isn't good. What do you know about her?”

She didn't actually sound angry. Or rather, it was the anger of concern, not malice. I wondered how I could tell that. Something about the voice I think, the tone. I missed whatever he said but it had been brief.

“Well, I should talk to her,” the woman's voice.

They must have rose for I heard footsteps coming to the door. I found my pulse quickened somewhat. Odd, that I should care. I felt that I wanted to stay her anger towards him, defend his decision. Odd that I should care. I decided not to care. Better that way.

The door opened and the woman entered first. She was thin and dressed in plain brown. She wore a sword.

“What's your name?” Her voice was soft now, trying to be kind.

“Kara,” I said. The woman looked significantly at the man.

“Do you have a real name?” she asked.

“It's okay, this is my wife,” the man said.

She studied me. I looked at her legs. After a long moment she laughed.

“Come sit down,” she said, still mirthful. She turned and walked into the other room. I followed, keeping my eyes down. I kneeled on the floor before her but she said “no, on the chair hun.” I looked at the stool.

“I should not sit higher than you mistress.” She laughed at this.

“Okay, here,” she shoved a few jars our of the way on a table and hopped up to sit on it.

“Careful,” he said snarkaly as he collected the jars and redistributed them to a shelf and another table.

“Has Argyl told you anything of the situation here, oh nameless one?”

I didn't respond.

“Talkative isn't she?” the woman asked.

“Jade, please,” he said.

“Okay,” she said, “here's the important part. Argyl here is in hiding. We're all in hiding but he's in hiding here. Do you care why?”

I shook my head.

“Good. It's good for us for you to be incurious. Now I need to know a few things about you to make sure we're safe. Then I need to tell you a few things. Okay?”

Stupid question. Her face was very angular and her nose was too large. She had a scar on her left check. Not too bad; it made her look tough. Her eyes were very sharp.

“Are you listening to me? I'm glad you can look me in the eye.”

“Sorry mistress,” I said, not meaning it at all. She laughed.

“Keep calling me 'my mistress,' I like that.”

“Jade, please.” Argyl, I finally remembered his name now, said. His tone was sharper now.

“Oh shut up.”

“Hmph.”

“Okay, listen this time. Does anybody know you're here?”

I thought about this. I didn't know how to answer. What did she mean by anybody?

“Don't think, just answer.”

“What do you mean by anybody?”

“Is that a metaphysical question?”

I didn't know how to answer that either.

“She told me her master did, but she also said her master visited in her dreams,” Argyl said.

The woman regarded me for a moment.

“So you're a slave then. Who is your master?”

A demon, I didn't say. Would that betray him? Better not to say.

“Don't think speak,” she said again. I didn't respond.

After an awkward moment Argyl spoke softly. “I think we don't have to worry about a dream

master Jade.” She's crazy is what he didn't say, but it hung in the air. Jade looked at me for a while. Brown hair. I didn't look at her eyes. The difference between seeing and noticing something. Certainly I had seen that her hair was brown before. But it hadn't registered or seemed important. It still didn't seem important. How much was like that? What color hair did the woman who I murdered have? Mine had been black, but how long ago was that? When I was a child? Had Archmagio changed my hair as well as my body?

“It isn't my breast,” I said. My voice startled myself. They were both looking at me now. The woman, what had her name been? She had been mid sentence.

“What?” asked Argyl.

“The breast, it wasn't mine. It was another woman's. He sewed it to me. He sewed her hips and breasts to me, and cut out her heart and veins and filled them with sand and broke open my chest and put them in, and now the sand muddles my blood and blunts my purpose. Not my purpose, my function. Blunts my function. I cannot, I am not what I had been. I am never what I had been anyway but particularly so now. I have no self. I am no self. There was never myself, only their body, their mind, their tool.”

They were both looking at me very carefully now. The man, Argyl? Was that a real name? Argyl. I liked how it sounded. Argyl. Argyl. Agravaine or Artigal. Argyl.

“Um dear?” the woman said.

“Yeah?” he said, eyes fixed on me.

“I think you're in over your head here.”

“Yeah.”

It was quiet a moment.

“My master, he knows where I am. But I don't think he cares about you. I, well, I think I am here so he can punish me. He comes in my dreams and tells me things and makes me see things. I have murdered for him. I choked her? Stabbed her? I can't remember. It was all like a dream. Vague and black and black. It's hard, I come and go. I, earlier I was here all, I wasn't thinking at all, but you both seem so far away now. Like I am in a cloud. Like you are behind a thick and dirty glass. I am lost always. I have so little. I am nothing, I am nothing, I am a tool of my master. But I didn't, I hesitated. No piece of iron or wood or glass would hesitate. But I hesitated. I am less than iron.”

“Shh,” said the man. He came to me and held his hand on my shoulder as if to steady me. I looked up at him. Then I lowered my eyes very quickly.

“I'm sorry master.”

The woman snorted at this and laughed without much real mirth.

“I'm not your master,” he said quietly. “I am nobody's master. What they've made you, it is a terrible crime. Not against me but against you. Against humanity. To be a slave, it is terrible. But to be so beaten down, to have your spirit so wrecked, it is, it is evil.”

I didn't look at him. Evil? I didn't believe in evil. “I don't believe in evil,” I said.

“You're the strangest person I've ever met,” he said after a moment. I looked down still. A slave never meets her master's eye. He was not my master, but close enough now. Why had I spoken aloud? A slave keeps her thoughts to herself. I had not spoken like that since they beat me for it as a child. Spoken openly, without a filter, without a simple yes master no master. I felt very tired and weak. As if I had released a poison into my blood. Speaking was no unburdening. It only deepened my disobedience. Only made things less certain.

“Why don't you lay down hun?” The woman asked. What was her name? Jade?

“Yes mistress” I mumbled, standing and walking slowly to the bedroom. Argyl supported my

arm. I didn't really need him but let him. The fire burned low when we made it through the door and it was cool. That didn't make sense for some reason but I left it. He helped me down the pallet and I pulled the blanket over me.

I closed my eyes. When I opened them he was gone but the fire was burning brighter. It seemed as if no time had passed, but obviously it had. I lay thoughtless for a time, dread overwhelming me, a heavy weight on my soul that I don't believe in. I felt wrecked. I hated the fire for its warmth and turned away from it. Black black black black. A horrible and empty black. Bah. Does depression make a bad poet of you as well? I slept, or almost slept, and then slept.

I woke suddenly to the sound of great commotion in the other room.

## CHAPTER 8

Men were yelling and there were loud thuds, as an ax into wood. I was at the door very quickly and opened it. Argyl looked at me.

“Run, hide if you can!” he cried. The door caved in as an ax broke through it and a man rushed into the room holding the ax. Two more quickly came through to either side, each with a sword.

“Hello Kracht,” Argyl said.

“You'll come with me motherfucker. I will kill you if you give me any reason at all.”

There was a moment when nobody moved, then the man furthest from me took a step towards Argyl.

“What about the girl?” asked the man closer to me. Kracht didn't take his eyes off Argyl.

“Bring her too. If she resists kill her.”

“Sir,” said the man, stepping towards me. Argyl held up his hands and Kracht and the other man cautiously walked towards him. Then the man was in front of me and I took a step backwards into the bedroom.

“Please don't rape me,” I said in my best soft scared voice. I didn't know why I said it, I had perhaps some half realized impulse to elude capture, to do my master's bidding and murder them. He reached out to grab my hair and I let me knees go weak. He yanked me hard and dragged me back into the main room.

“What do you say we have some fun with the whore first capt'n?” said my man. Kracht had eyes only for Argyl.

“Do what you want with her, just don't waste too much time. I can keep this one,” Kracht said. Argyl now had shackles on his wrists. I hadn't seem them come in with shackles. I sobbed my best sob, and it must have worked for the two men laughed and my man dragged me by my hair back into the bedroom. I screamed and left my body limp.

He threw me against the wall and there was a knife against my neck. I froze up. I didn't feel any fear. Adrenalin pumped through me and it was some effort to play at helpless. My heartbeat surged in me and I knew I must kill. My master still thirsted for blood. Any blood. All blood. Mine or his, my master made no distinction. I twisted slightly away from the knife so that my body fell. He used the knife to cut open the front of my robe. I made an act of pathetic struggling while I considered what to do. The other man had not come into the room. Maybe they were the type to take turns rather than both go at me at once. Better for me. He had my robe split down the middle now and was fumbling with his breeches. He was careful, he kept his eyes and his knife at my throat. I squeaked pathetically.

His cock was hard already when he had it out. He leered at me and reached down to grab my breast. By luck he grabbed it. I wondered if he had noticed the other was missing, but put the thought aside. He let it go and put his hand on my throat. He dropped the knife next to us and used his free hand to maneuver his cock into me. I was quite dry and he couldn't get it in. He cursed and then spit on me.

I had too much to do at the moment to worry about it. His eyes stayed on mine, and I kept mine wide and as fearful as possible. I groped for the knife with my hand, careful to keep my eyes away.

“Please, please no,” I whimpered. His eyes glinted, he liked to see me beg. Motherfucker. He thrust at me again, but too late. My fingers touched the knife and I racked it quickly across his throat. My aim was off and I sliced a deep cut into his cheek instead.

“Bitch!” he cried, but my second try was better and he had trouble screaming with his throat cut. Blood spurting out over me and I shoved him off. He was grabbing at his neck and staring at the blood pouring from him in weakening spurts. He looked rather pathetic, like a scared child more than a grown man. I didn't have time for him. I slid to the side of the room so that I could pounce on the other man if he came through the door. He did not. The door was nearly shut, so that the other man couldn't see into the room. The robe was soaked in blood and badly torn so that it dragged about my feet and threatened to trip me. I looked back at my rapist. He had no mind for me, what life he had left was being spent on panic. I quickly pulled the robe off me and crouched naked.

For a long moment nothing happened. Then the man in the other room called out “Hey, save some for me huh?” I wasn't actually good at fighting. I probably would never have killed the first man except he had left himself very vulnerable. Also, though, I wouldn't mind being dead, and didn't mind pain either. I crouched and waited, more because I couldn't think of anything else to do. The thought of rushing him seemed like suicide.

The door kicked open and the other soldier stepped through, sword out. I was on him before he had finished registering the carnage. I stuck the knife into his neck and rushed passed him into the other room. I heard a loud thunk and spun around. I had ended between the stove and the wall, crammed into a corner. The stove, which I had not noticed before, explained the heat difference that I had been confused about before. The man in the door was on the ground with blood spurting everywhere. His sword was embedded in the wall where I had rushed passed him. Good soldier, I had almost been dead. Argyl and the other man, what had his name been? They were not in the room. I moved quickly to the man in the door, who was clutching at his neck. His eyes widened when he saw me approach, and he shook his head and pulled away from me. I shoved the knife through his eye and he stopped moving. His hand was holding his knife, he had been about to stab at me. I had been very lucky again.

I tried to pull the man's sword from the wall, but could not. My hands were bloody and slippery. Instead I took the sword from the first man I had killed. He was actually sort of sputtering still. I pushed his sword through his neck to sever his spine. A man with a cut throat didn't seem like much of a threat, but I wasn't certain.

I went to the window in the main room. I didn't see anybody through it so I climbed out as quietly as I could. It was fairly easy to walk quietly. The ground was mostly pine needles and was quite soft under my bare feet. I made my way around the back of the cabin and peeked carefully around the side.

Argyl was sitting on a horse, his hands shackled to the saddle. He held his head up as if to be defiant. The other man was on his own horse. I could, I thought, go out some distance into the woods before he would investigate what had happened to his men. It was unlikely he would search for me alone, when Argyl was clearly who he wanted. I was just a random woman who had been there. I would be safe. I crept back behind the cabin and then walked, crouched, some ways into the woods. There were many low firs mixed in with the pines, and any one of them would offer a good place to hide. In a moment I was safely in one.

My master would be happy with the blood. After Argyl and his captor were gone I could return to the cabin and desecrate their bodies. Would he forgive my transgression? The thought sat uneasily inside me. A blunted tool, I thought, a worthless tool. More blood. He would want more blood. Should I return to kill the two men? It would be suicide. But it would please my master. And death would not be unwelcome to me. I felt strangely detached. Once I would have been mad with my master's will. Now it all seemed far away from me, a quaint question of

ethics. To kill, I suppose, was my purpose. I felt no enthusiasm for it, but also no reason not to.

I was quickly back watching the two men from behind the cabin. They hadn't moved much since I had left them. He was giving his men a lot of time to rape me. I should wait until he went inside to investigate, then kill Argyl and ambush his captor when he came back outside. I waited quietly. Instead, the captor abruptly began to ride away, holding a rope that brought Argyl's horse along.

"Wait!" I called as I stepped out from besides the cabin. The men paused and turned to look at me. The soldier let me get fairly close before he reacted. I must have been a strange sight, naked and bloody, walking towards him with murder in my eyes.

"Stay there," he said. I ignored him and kept walking. He apparently decided it was better just to leave with his prisoner than stay and deal with me, as he spurred his horse. I leapt to try and cut him from his saddle. I missed horribly, and instead cut into the horse's flank and fell myself. The horse jumped away then toppled over, pinning the man under him. Argyl's horse kept going.

The man swore as the rope leading the other horse slipped from his hand. He was pinned beneath his horse for a moment, but then the horse was rising and running away. My cut had surprised it more than hurt it. The man drew his sword but had trouble standing. Argyl's horse was galloping away. I lumbered to my feet.

"Who the fuck are you?" the man said.

"I don't know," I said, pulling back from him. His leg bent at an unnatural angle and he clearly couldn't stand on it.

Who was I? My master's slave? Vehicle of his will? The man was shaking his head.

"I don't know what to do," I told him. He looked disgusted.

I didn't want to be there. I didn't want to do my master's will or disobey my master's will. I wanted to be nothing, to do nothing. I dropped the sword and fled into the forest.

## CHAPTER 9

Some ways into the woods I realized it was cold, and that I was naked and wet with blood. Quite cold. As the adrenalin drained from me I felt very tired and sore. My knees, palms and left thigh were badly scraped, and there was a cut in my left shoulder which I did not remember getting. My muscles convulsed into shivers as the wind blew hard against me. The wound at my breast festered and pulsed still.

My head ached and my mind was tired, I wanted to fall and die there. To stay in the woods would mean death from exposure. Returning to the cabin would be my best chance. The man might have stayed, might have gone. Even if he had stayed I might kill him. Some odds of survival. I should go back. Bah, my mind was sterile. To weigh this option against that. I missed the taste of flowers in my mouth and the rush of life, of murderous rage or even the ennui of life in that austere box. Would my master care if I died or not? I doubted it, maybe he would rather I lived to suffer more. Did I care? My master's will. I the willless one, but still my master's will seemed bleak, distant and unimportant, as I shivered to death in the woods. He was a thing of men, a thing of filth and evil. He was not a creature of forests or wilds. Fuck him anyway. My blood curdled at the thought but I stumbled forwards. Better to die. Better to die. Fuck him. Fuck his will. Better to be dead, better to be dead.

I was stumbling stumbling, my mind numb from cold and despair. My body shivered and my fingers went from pain to numbness and my body was cold cold. I was stumbling forwards in twilight now, so cold, my arms and legs stung with frostbite, my feet great numb clubs beneath me. I fell into a great fir tree, it's sharp needles cut into my numb flesh but it felt like an embrace. The world was a fuzzy far thing, great iron fingers pinching at a fir's single needle, too small, too small, the numb fingers cannot pinch it, cannot pinch it, and I am falling and then it was dark and I was cold, so cold. I shivered and shivered and could not rise or even feel my limbs, and I was sure I was dead.

I was naked and shivering on a great plane of flat iron that stretched far from me. I was alone, and then my master was above me, a huge black hole blotting out the cold sun. I shivered and was almost dead. My master had only eyes. My master didn't look at me. He moved on and left me to freeze and die.

I was warm and softness pressed all against my skin. I drifted slowly from a dreamless sleep, my mind relaxed, no thoughts, drugged almost. I was warm and that was all. There was a body against mine and its naked skin was soft and radiated heat into and through me. Slowly I became aware of arms and legs firm against mine, a stomach and breasts pressed into my side, a warm breath on my neck. All about me a thousand thin needles, soft as cushions. The leaves of this great fir. They held my thighs and back and face, everywhere that the woman's skin did not warm me, gripped me as firmly as did her arms. They were soft and wonderful and I did not fear them. I snuggled closer to the woman's skin, like nothing I had felt before. How an infant must feel against its mother's breast. I heard myself moan with pleasure as she clasped me and kissed my neck. Our bodies pressed tight together and I drifted back to sleep.

When I woke again she was still there. She held me in her arms and I realized I was not dead. Not dead. Flesh had never felt well against me. Always some savage man, his only aim its own pleasure and my abuse. When I could I would drift in thick gray fog as they would fuck me, and I would float away, as far away as I might. This was different. There was no sex. There was no



lust or desire between us then. Not yet. Only warmth. A drugged warmth. A mother's warmth. A cocoon, and I the chrysalis.

"What are you?" The voice a flute, light music that held my ears as she held my body. But what was I? A slave? A disobedient slave? A killer and a monster?

"I don't know," I said. My voice choked with tears, but they didn't seem to be my tears, they seemed to be someone else's, someone else who cried for me, who cared for me as I did not. The woman moaned and held me, and held my tears to her hair.

"You were freezing and dying and you fell into me, and I held you and held you and now you are warm and warm and I held you, but now I do not know what you are or how to free you? Will you not just freeze again if I let you go?" Her accent was strange and clipped. It was as if she were unused to speech, uncertain how to put the words together or how to pronounce them.

"I don't mind death," I said through my sobs. I still did not feel grieved. It was my body that cried. "I wished to die," I murmured softly into her hair and she held me and we wept together for a time. But I was not sad about it. My body cried, not I. It was my will, nascent as it was. I wished to die. In my half-awake stupor this thought fixed itself in my mind. Do not obey, I thought, die. Perhaps I could not have thought it fully awake. Only in that warmth and safeness could my own will form itself. In each other's warmth we slipped into a dreamless and holy sleep.

When I woke again she still held me, but the press of needles had receded and I could see a dim and gentle light filter through the fir above me. A soft blanket of woven leaves covered us. I was more myself now, the thick fog had lifted.

How many who wish to die are thwarted so? Saved by this improbability, then that? And how many must curse in futile rage against their coming death? Should I go back, back to the cabin and drive a slain man's sword through me? I felt despair certainly. An unending chain of catastrophe and suffering lay before and behind me. My flesh was used and ravaged by a thousand uncaring strangers. But despair did not drive me to suicide. It was a familiar despair, a long companion. It was logic that stood suicide on all roads before me. To live was to suffer. To die was to end suffering. I would forsake myself, my purpose and history, betray my master in the damage I could cause his property. And at once I would put myself beyond his reach.

A joy welled up in me, giddy and unbalanced. I hardly knew the feeling. Oh what joy! Suicide! So simple, I laughed, so simple. My joyous cackling must have sound insane but I did not care. As the tears had not been mine, now the laugh was not mine. I threw off that blanket of leaves and sprang to a crouch. The strange woman woke and looked at me in some alarm.

"Suicide!" I cried at her with glee, "Suicide!" I was not mad, quite rational. "Suicide! It is the best way, the best! I shall simply run a length of steel through my body and I shall die!"

"Lady, you are mad!" She cried, throwing her arms around me, "Please lady, I have only found you now! Do not!" She held me and wept but I threw her aside. Yes, suicide was the answer! I rolled the word about my tongue and laughed. I shoved the branches of the fur aside and blundered into the cold world. It was bright and crisp day, a wonderful day! Four soldier's bodies lay dead about the three, and all of them had sword. I laughed at my luck and pulled a sword free of its scabbard at a belt.

"Lady please!" shrieked the woman! She was nude still, stark white hairless skin with a flowing wreath of fir needles cascading from her head. She rushed towards me.

"You shall not deny me lady!" I cried at her, smiling and laughing, "This is my suicide, my joy!" I swung the sword at her and struck her arm. The sword reverberated as if I had struck a sturdy trunk, and the sound of an ax on wood rang through the forest. Her arm was barely

scratched, and a bit of sticky dark sap oozed from the wound.

“Lady I would love you!” she cried in desperation, throwing herself at me again. I jumped back and swung again, a huge and reckless swing that didn't come close to her at all. She bound for me again but I jumped back again and she fell before me feet crying and pleading.

“Please, I have seen your heart, I have slain for you, I would love you! Your heart is pure, it beats pure blood and pure and pure and pure, you are pure please, please I am so lonely, I am so lonely, please I would love you I would love you, and make you happy and keep the nasty men away from you!” I laughed again as she groveled before me. I stood out beyond the roots of the fir now and she writhed prostrate at their limit and wept big and bitter tears. I turned my back to her, quickly and unthinking.

The sword was actually quite long, not the shorter sword the men in the cabin had carried. I could not reach my arms long enough to plunge the tip into my chest. I could perhaps pull it across my throat, but it seemed an uncertain way to be about it. More likely I would rend myself mute but not die. I considered slashing my wrists on the edge but it was a clumsy business, and I wondered if it would really bleed enough for me to die. I finally decided to wedge the handle between some roots, the roots of a different tree so that the odd white woman could not interfere. Heroes killed themselves this way, did they not? I was no hero. But I would die, die, tee hee, I would die!

The sword secured between some roots and stones, I threw myself at it. The white woman screamed as I did, but did not need to. My aim was poor and I succeeded only in toppling the sword down and scraping a nasty gash just above my hip. It bled and stung in the cold but was easily enough ignored. I shoved the sword deeper into the ground and threw myself upon it again. This time I succeeded. It passed clean through my stomach and my insides wrenched in shock. Shock, not pain. I knew there was pain there, but could not really feel it. Rather the body felt it, but I was not that body anymore, I was letting down the threads that held me to it. I was dying! Dying! I laughed and sputtered blood. I wasn't cold then, I was warm as my insides spilled out of me and warmed me, and I was free! I felt the world slipping away.

And the white woman was shrieking and screaming in unintelligible despair, sobbing and shrieking as if she were the one who was slain. And the sword stuck through me and I could not turn or roll, and there was an intense pressure where the hilt pressed into my stomach. Was it odd that I could feel that, but not the blade through me? Or was it all hallucination? The world spun about me and I felt it was hallucination. It was the logical conclusion. I was almost free, almost free. It had been one last act of defiance, to slay myself, not to wait for my master to but to act.

And there were hoof beats echoing around me, I could barely discern them. It was as if I was deep in a cave and they echoed down to me from the surface. Were they real or imagined? I laughed but spit blood instead, but still my mirth welled up inside me as I grew feint.

And the woman was screaming “bring her to me bring her I can save her!” and I thought no no, please, but had no voice anymore to speak, and then there were strong hands on me pulling me, but the sword was very long, and then the sword was free from the ground and I was carried, sword and all, and I thought I saw Argyll, hands still bound in chains that dragged him down, but he struggled and fought to hold me and stumbled forwards with shackled feet, then back back back into darkness, into darkness I fell from consciousness and hoped that I was dead.

## CHAPTER 10

On waking I did not recall my dream. I lay under the tree again, although now a lattice of roots and low branches formed a sort of cage around me. The white woman lay snuggled against me; her nude skin again radiating warmth into mine. I was very warm and comfortable, save my face which was only slightly chill.

I felt nothing. Empty. Neither the giddy joy nor bleak despair survived my failed suicide. But I felt as if a light mist had settled in my mind. The woman against me was warm and wonderful, the press of needles about me soft, the scent of the tree sharp and pleasant. But still, something hung in my mind, something not quite me. Something I could not fully place.

The woman's flesh felt good against mine so I burrowed deeper into the blanket and into her. She mumbled something unintelligible and shifted her arm between my shoulder blades and pulled me into her. Her breasts rested against my throat, nestled between my chin and chest. My own single breast, slightly larger than her's, pressed gently into her stomach. The earth beneath me shifted, or seemed to, just enough that my arm wedged beneath me rested comfortably among the soft crush of evergreen leaves.

My suicide had been an act of independent will. Did it matter? What was I if not a mechanism of my master's? What was I? What was I? The question seemed unimportant. Rather, as an important thing that is far away and not of consequence just for now. I felt, nothing. My mind was empty. Empty save for the warmth and softness that held me to itself. It filled my senses and the mist swirled around my thoughts, pushed them away. Only the body next to me felt real, important. I reached an arm about her and pulled myself closer. She moaned a little and stirred, her arm left goose flesh in it's wake as she slid it against my back.

"You are angry for living?" She spoke in an odd, clipped accent I had not heard before. I did not have an answer so I said nothing, only let my mind drift along the touch of her skin on my body. She pulled away from me and I had a moment of strange panic. What should I care if she was close to me or not? But panic welled up unbidden, unexplained, for a brief moment, but she only shifted down so as to look into my eyes. I closed my eyes to enjoy the brush of her body against me as the peaceful mist settled back over my mind.

"Your," she struggled for words. "Your temper, it is not like the thorn?" she managed. I opened my eyes. Hers were a beautiful green, the whitish green of her tree. They were shaped differently too. The iris' were not quite cat like, but more like that than human. Her mouth was just before me, and so I kissed her. Her lips were thin but strong, and for many wonderful moments we explored each other that way, with little licks and kisses on our upper and lower lips. My whole world were those kisses then, and the press of her body and the soft brush of her fingers on my back. I had no words for her, but our bodies had a language of their own, and they knew what must be. She was everything, filling my mind like a great flood, washing all my questions and doubts, all my petty abstractions away. Self, masters, slaves, all ideas that were washed away by the warm body and the beast in me that responded to it. One hand on my back, her other hand traced my chest over my breast and missing breast, and I felt sharp, wonderful twinges in my nerves and kissed her and kissed her.

My hands were on her hips then, and she was rocking them rocking them filling my hands. She traced light circles on my back and I was moaning softly, my whole consciousness those light circles, the touch of her lips, the feel of her rocking hips, and I moaned and opened my legs for her. Her other hand held my breast, gently, and gently I traced out her curves, breasts, stomach, hips and butt, her skin smooth and soft, filling my touch and stirring warmth between

my legs and up my stomach and down my thighs. She smelled of trees and earth, a gentle, healthy scent. Her lips sweet, like syrup or sap, and I kept tasting it over and tasting it over to fill my tongue and nose with her. Her thigh was between my legs then and I gasped and my hips rocked of their own accord and my pussy rubbed little circles on her thighs, and she was rolling then on top of me, and my hips moved in little circles against her as my passion spread out from my crotch and sent more sharp, wonderful little twinges running up and down my legs and up my stomach and torso. Almost impossible to describe, jolts of pleasure that overwhelmed my nerves, halfway between pain and joy.

My hand, drifting from her breast to thigh, the wonderful skin of her stomach, found two warm and wet mounds in her crotch and slipped into and unfolded inside her. She was like a flower there, petals folding on top of petals, slippery and soft around my fingers. I wanted to feel every nook of it, I wanted to commit every bit to memory and my fingers explored and rubbed and found soft texture, soft yielding flesh, petals and a tiny stem between them. She gasped and pulled me against her, her thigh pressing harder into my crotch I moaned and we were kissing again, and then we were shifting and her fingers were inside me too, but gently, exploring and caressing me for my sake, and we were both moaning and clutching each other with our free hands, and our hips moved in circles, circles that moved together and apart with building intensity and pleasure, and her sex and mine were all a blur; where my body ended and hers began was uncertain, I could not tell. I only moaned and we were gasping moaning and panting together, one frenzied being gasping for air, and her lips were on my nipple and I was shuddering and her mouth was back on mine and I was shuddering as an orgasm gripped me, my body shaking and my throat moaning loudly, then breath came in short, interrupted bursts and I shuddered and gripped her body to me, and she was shuddering and her hips rocking against my fingers and we convulsed together for a moment, then breath came easier as we grasped each other.

Slowly we relaxed, our arms gripping us to each other as we breathed hard, chasing breath, and then we were snuggled close again, holding our bodies together and sharing warmth beneath the great tree. I'd had orgasms before. I'd been abused and whored since my memory began, and if most had been rough, unpleasant experiences, some some were more gentle and some few even pleasurable. But only in the way masturbation is pleasurable, a practice which I had occasionally indulged before my school masters had beat it out of me.

This was somehow fundamentally different. Words are poor vehicles for the language of the body. Words like pleasure, lust and love convey the feeling only awkwardly. Sex was a place for us, not an action. Beyond reason, beyond words or their expression, a place of that moment only, where two perfect beings shared their true lustful selves, where all ideas of slaves and masters, men and women, love and hate, of identities and belonging, were rendered moot, irrelevant. Where I was not a lost and half rebellious slave, but a perfect body making love to another perfect body. My scars and severed breast exactly what she wanted, her too white skin, strange green eyes and scent exactly what I wanted.

I curved and wriggled myself so as to touch her body with as much of mine as could touch. My fingers explored every curve and bone. I had no sense of what I touched, a soft curve, then a bone with only a little flesh above it, another soft, slow curve. She did the same on me, and might have tickled had the afterglow not turned it to a light and tingling pleasure. We were as two beings afloat in a great void, sharing warmth and pleasure, and shutting out the world.

I felt myself begin to moan again, and found my hips were moving again, little circles that pressed and rubbed my against her thigh. Her tongue found mine then and I got lost in it as it

pinched and tickled my lips. And then she rolled me to my back and was pulling away, I reached for her and opened my eyes and she was looking into them. Her eyes were soft and deep and smiling lustfully. Then her hand was on my sex again and gently rubbing, and I was pushing myself up into her touch, moaning. I pulled her head to mine to kiss her, but she pulled away after a single kiss.

Then her lips were on my nipple, licking it erect and then gently tugging at it with her teeth and lips, sucking it into her mouth, flicking and caressing it with her tongue. It became lost in sensation, my body was lost and all I knew were bits of this or that pleasure overwhelming me. I was moaning louder then, my hips gyrating against her hand, gentle, slow, then hard, then slow, then hard then hard, then she blew cold air against my wet nipple, and tingles exploded like lightning across the black of sensation. I could not stop the movement of my hips, I could not, hard then soft, slow slow hard but perfect, and then her tongue was in on my sex and two fingers slipped inside. Not hard like a cock, but contoured to me, exploring and pressing and reaching into every moan and gasp.

She was moaning too then, and when I opened my eyes she was masturbating herself, pressing her breasts against my thighs as her lips sucked and her tongue and fingers danced and explored. I orgasmed again, this time long and hard, until I was screeching and shuddering, my whole body spasming and spasming. Then she was cumming too and she pitched up on top of me and I grasped her to me and pressed my still shuddering body against her to steady myself, and she shook and moaned as I kissed her again and again, and then we were gasping for air and laughing and holding each other's bodies close.

We slept on and off for a time. The feeling of her was wonderful and lingered with me in and out of sleep. It was some time before we were both awake at once.

"I don't know what words to use," I said, whispering as not to break the stillness of the afterglow.

"I know your heart my love, I know the hearts of all things, you do not need to speak."

I moaned lightly and drifted along her perfect body, drawing attention across every bit of skin that warmed my own.

"Your skin is so beautiful," she said, "A perfect shade of brown, like rich soil for my roots." I smiled and kissed her.

"I know your heart." Her accent was thick and clipped and wonderful in my ears. "Men are rough beasts, I do not like them. But you, I have not loved in so long. My love, my love." She toyed with the words, saying them with slight variation as if to taste and savor them.

"In so very long. I am so ancient and it is so lonely. And you, who have suffered so, and are so pure and lovely. A lovely black for my lovely white. So beautiful."

I nuzzled her and enjoyed the press of her breast against mine.

"Come," she said suddenly, loudly and breaking the stillness. I wish to show you." Her nude form scampered easily up the branches of the tree. I watched her firm muscles grip and lift her body up. Lithe and graceful, she flowed up more than climbed.

I rose tentatively, noticing first the lattice of root and branch that had been a cage before was gone, and second that all my wounds were healed, not just the puncture of the sword, but also the scrapes on my hands and knees, and the long festering gash where my breast had been. I looked up the tree and saw my lover's nude form beckoning me up. I warmed at the sight of her and climbed.

Though the bark looked rough it was smooth beneath my fingers, and whenever a hip or shoulder scraped against the trunk it was as a gentle touch. Every hand that reached found a

branch, and every step fell on solid wood without effort. When I reached her we were nearly at the top of the tree. She took my hand as I reached her and pulled me to her, kissing me, and then we were sitting hip to hip on a gentle sweep of branches that perfectly fit our forms. It was chilly there, the wind strong, but my lover pulled a branch thick with soft needle leaves over us, and her body warmed me.

Her tree, or was her body the tree's body? Her tree was several times my height taller than any around us. We could see the forest stretch out with tiny beautiful variation until it thinned out and ended at the peaks of mountain. Black except their snow covered tips, stark even in the distance.

"Look this way," she said, and I loved her accent all over again. I kissed her and then shifted, which brought me half onto her lap. She wrapped her arms around me.

Where she pointed the forest thinned out as it approached a valley, cut through my a wide but slow river, sided by green pasture populated by sheep, tiny white dots so far below us. The perspective seemed impossible, but I was too happy besides my lover to worry about the physics.

"I am very ancient. Long ago many trees took the shape of men and women.

Almost none do now, men are hated now, but it wasn't so then. The people who lived here called themselves the Kathati. They were, different than how humans now are. There were only a few together, they, they would travel and hunt together, and wear the skins of the beasts to warm themselves. Many spoke with us then, and many of us chose the form of men and women so to sing with them, and they would come to our trees and dance with many drums and colored costumes. Some of us took mates from them, and they would honor the one who came to live with us and seek wisdom from them."

I took her hand and held it against me, leaning into her so that my stomach traced her side and my legs, pulled up, cupped her butt. She was looking up at the stars. I looked at them briefly, but stars were not very interesting. Too far away to be significant, I cared only for close things then. Instead I looked at her lovely face, her shoulders and breasts, committing every detail to memory. White white skin, impossibly flawless, and no sign of blood beneath. A small, slightly upturned nose, a cute focus on her face. Her face was round and her cheeks dimpled when she smiled. Her breasts were not tiny but also not large, perky and well rounded, perfect orbs with small areola and hard small nipples. Impossibly perfect, an artificed body. Beauty that rose both desire and awe in me. The beauty of a sculpture, and the lust of a supple and ready body that I loved.

"A boy came to love me then. He was young when we met first, his family came to dance and sing with me, and he could not take his eyes off of me. He was not very strong and not very valued by them as a hunter, but he had deep, intelligent eyes, and they hoped he would live with me and learn and share the wisdom of the trees with them. I looked into his heart and saw that it was pure. He cared for his people and he thought me something holy. I'm not really holy, but closer to it than humans perhaps."

She squeezed my hand. There were tears in her eyes and so I kissed her and put my arm about her to pull her close to me.

"His name, he was Nichtin. He lived with me many years, until he grew old. At first none of his people came to visit us, but then later they would come, and we would tell them what we could. We trees, we talked with each other then, and we knew much of where the great herds were. And we know the hearts of all beasts, so I could help when the family did not, get along. I loved him, we played in my young branches and made love. We had many seasons together. It was then I learned to keep a human warm in winter. Much colder than now, my love.

"Girls would come sometimes to visit. Girls by themselves. They were very, the girls, the girls

in those people did not have very much respect. They were not treated well or allowed to, to, do sex with who they wanted. So they would come to us for freedom and for sex. I did not mind they wanted to sex with Nichtin. Jealousy is a human thing, not a thing for trees. I learned to like the girls then.” She smiled at me and kissed me. Her lips were wonderful and we dwelt for a moment.

“My Nichtin, he was very kind. It wasn't, it was a kind of freedom for the girls. He was never forceful. It is, humans have strange ideas about sex and love. After a while, the girls sometimes they would come for me. Not many, but a few. We would play in the branches, chase each other up and down, and tease Nichtin with our strong bodies. He was old by then. One girl came often for me. Nichtin died. He was old, I can heal people, but the body, even trees grow old and die, humans just much faster. The girl, her name was Kayla, she came then. We honored Nichtin and loved and grieved together. We made sex and she stayed with me.”

She smiled wistfully for a moment. Her body was warm. I felt she was telling the story for her, not me. The words didn't matter too much for me. Her voice was all. I keep mentioning the warmth and softness of her body, but it was the first time I had known warmth or comfort like that. I felt content as I never had before. Not the ennui of indecision or lack of will. I had a will then, and all it desired was to be by that warm body, to feel her naked skin with my naked skin.

“Her people,” she said, “did not understand. They thought women were tools for men. They were afraid of us I think. Their hearts were full of confusion and hate. It was as if they feared their woman would not listen anymore if they let us live. They came to kill her. They came with fire and spears, to burn me and slay her as she ran. For my lover my leaves were soft, but for those who would hurt her they are sharp as steel. My lover wished to fight them, but I did not let her. They would have killed her. I put her high in my branches. I took a bough laden with needles and met them at the edge of my roots. They stuck me with their spears but my skin was hard as wood. They flung their fire at me but I was strong and had drawn much water from the earth; I only singed I did not burn. I struck at them with the bough and slayed many. A few ran. Their blood leeches into the soil, and I did not mind that I would drink it. They had come to kill my love.

“They never came back after that. Not for wisdom nor for mating. The girls stopped coming. My lover lived many years with me. She was never happy, not after that. Humans need humans I think, for all my love I was still not of her kind. I tried, I thought that if I loved her hard enough I would be enough for her, and I loved her. But it was not enough. She loved me, but it was not enough. She withered in loneliness and at last I let her die.”

She was quiet for a long moment. I hugged her and we kissed for a few moments. Then I decided that was a good idea, so I rolled on top of her and kissed her more. She gave me a sad smile and kissed me back.

“Now, it has been so long.” She put her arms on my butt and pulled me up onto her. “You are very lovely, very pure. They have done terrible things to you, your heart is scarred and full of needles. Your master calls you still.”

“I do not hear him, I do not dream of him,” I said, but dread welled up in me, a thick black ink spilled and soaking through a pure white page. I felt as if waking from a dream, the tree, the night, all seemed sharper. How had I fallen so quickly in love? I seemed so different from myself, I couldn't place anything but unease sat in me a moment. Then she smiled and kissed me.

“Do not worry my love. I make you love me because you were so lonely and so bitter. You would be a suicide again if you did not love me and so I opened your heart and put it in. I keep your master's calls away, out of my tree. But if he came here. I fear no human, even now with

their steel and torches, I do not fear men. I am old and know how to fight them. But your master, I, if he came I might be able to make you safe. But probably I would not. Probably he would kill me and take you.”

“No,” I said and kissed her furiously. She kissed me back and held me. I began to weep. Slowly at first, but once tears flowed there was an ocean inside me to feed them. I wept and she held me, stroking my hair. I had not known how many tears I carried. I had not known. Even as I wept them I did not feel entirely that the tears were my tears. My master's cold grip was back on me, and I pulled my mind back and back to the tiny cynical core that was left to me, that had been left to me.

“My love, my love,” she said, and we were like that for a while, my tears dripping down her branches to her roots. “Even in sorrow you nourish me,” she said. “You are so perfect.” She caressed my hair, and then I was kissing her and we were making love again. It was different this time. She opened her legs to me and I ground myself against her, desperately I made love, held her body hard to mine, burying my face in her breasts. It was as if the violence of our mating could drive away my master and myself, make me that pure being again that had made love with her before. I threw into the sex all my hate and cynicism, all my pain, my hatred for my master, my hatred for myself, my hatred for all men who had raped me, my hatred for all the motherfuckers of the world. Motherfuckers all of them. I fucked her hard and she took it. Holding me and moaning she took all my hate from me and gave it back as love, until I was clenched hard around her, face pressed to her breasts, arms clinging her to me hard, violently, legs by now outside hers, clenching them together and to me and I orgasmed, shuddering violently, mindless and desperate. And she took it all. She held me and took my violence and gave me love. She gave me love. I wept again, but not for sorrow now. I wept to know her, to have her arms around me. I wept for joy in her arms.



## CHAPTER 11

“The man who lives among the dead returns.”

“What?” I asked, blinking at her in the warm morning light. We had fallen asleep in our perch near the top of the tree, and slept through the night swaying gently in the wind.

“The man who came and saved you. Who, brought you to me when you were dying beyond my roots.”

It seemed forever ago but had only been a day. A day since I woke anyway.

“I told him to come back after three days,” she said. “He is unusual for a human. Very kind, but conflicted, his heart, I don't know.”

We could see him coming from the top of the tree, though it would still be some time before he arrived. He traveled with a companion, Jade I guessed, and they had several animals with them bearing sacks. Goats it looked like.

“You must go with him my love,” she said softly, moisture welling in her eyes.

It was as if a great stone had collided with me. I started and slipped from the perch. Another branch caught me before I could fall and she was holding me then.

“You must not, I mean, my mistress, I must obey but, I will,” I was sobbing and rambling and she held me gently, not speaking but holding her crumbling lover together. I sobbed and fell into her a blubbering wreck. She held me and she loved me.

“My love, my love I wish that you were not so enthralled. A man, even a king, I would slay his armies to keep you, my love, my love, I love you. It is not so. It is not so. I love you.”

The words crushed me with their terrible truth. I was dizzy and weak and tried to pull away to sob alone, but she clutched me to her perfect white breasts and rocked me as a child.

A whimper, a whimper like an infant's, “you are all I live for.” I was pathetic, stupid, muttering cliché like a hack writer. Stupid, stupid, my sniveling weakness would repulse a lesser lover, should repulse her, should make her throw me from her tree. But still I could not halt the sobs, I could not stop them, they shook me, but still she held me and rocked me and I gripped her back. For a long time she held me. Until all my tears had fallen and I was numb and empty vessel in her arms.

“I will always love you, my love my love, but I cannot come. My roots, I cannot. But there, it is no abandonment. You must go and free yourself. He is a demon and not a god, it may be done! He is despised by some gods, some of them, they will help you, they will tell you how.”

I was drained, empty. No less upset but out of tears. I stared bleakly at the ground as she pet my hair.

“The man, he is fleeing there for his life. You, I will give you the aid I can, and it will be safer for a group.”

I clutched her and we did not speak.

It was not only Argyl but Jade as well who came to us. Argyl wore his heavy black robe and sturdy boots. Jade wore many furs and a sword. Her brown hair pulled tight in a pony tail. My lover opened her boughs to them. They indeed had several goats with them, who foraged for food nearby as they entered the tree. They seemed very far below us.

She climbed down to them, her small strong muscles giving powerful strength to her form. Longing surged within me, and with it a terrible ache. I would leave her. And all I did was moan to myself in trite unspecific terms. Longing, ache, terrible and vague. A great splotch of black ink seeping into the world around me. Love made a terrible poet of me. I would leave her. I was

leaving now. It was happening. And I helpless, a scared little mouse burrowed down in this damn body, useless helpless little shit. I should rage against the world! Call my master to me and murder him. Storm the heavens and slay what gods aligned against my love and me.

I was leaving her. Trudging after my little masters like an obedient hound, my nascent will bending like a hinge. And to the will of those who did not even desire my subjugation, much less command me. My master's will that I should suffer excruciations and be ground away under his yoke. My lover's will that I should share my body and my joy with her, that I might live happily. And what of my will? That I might stay with her? That I might die perhaps? That I might put a bold final period on all my ramblings.

And then my lover was kissing me and holding me and I held her back for a long time. I was leaving her. Tears flowed out of me again, and she too was crying. We held each other for a long long time, our tears mingling amongst her roots. I felt distant and numb.

She broke the silence still choking on sobs, "I have, I made you things my love, I," she let me go and pulled from a low hanging branch what seemed a bunch of needle leaves. Jade and Artgyl were pretending to check the goats. My lover lifted the bundle over my head and pulled down over me a dress of leaves.

"My, it will, it is not smart, it will act to protect you, not smart like me," she was crying and stammering. "But it will act, be like steel if it, when a sword or arrow strikes." It was the bright frosty green of her leaves, hair and eyes.

"And here," she said, bringing forth another bunch of leaves. "They are boots, gloves and a mask too, to protect you and keep you warm in the mountains. And, and I made you this," she grabbed something small from a branch.

"It is," but she was crying to hard to continue and wept for a while. I came forwards to hold her, but she stopped me and clutched at my left hand. She took it and slipped onto my fourth finger a simple amber ring. It seemed to shrink a little to fit my finger.

"It is just to," but she just held me and I held her. It was different with the dress. Her body was very soft, the skin of her back smooth to touch. My eyes had dried and itched, I wanted very badly to itch them but I had to hold her for she was trembling and I did not think she could stand without me. I felt the strength and will drain from me as if my life blood had all seeped from an opened vein.

"You must go," she whimpered, but did not release me. I held her, for her now more than me. I filled my senses with her smell, of the tree and the salty taste of her tears. We stood there a long time, but I did not mind.

"I will go," I said at last, "because you will it, my love." She looked up but was crying too hard to speak. My tears were still all gone. I kissed her, and we lingered on the warmth of contact for just a moment. Then I turned and walked away. I heard her sob but I walked away. It was her will and so I did it. I had clutched in my hand the boots, gloves and mask. I did not remember picking them up but they were there.

When I reached Jade and Artgyl they had the goats ready. I suspected they had just been acting busy for a time anyway. Jade's eyes were moist with unshed tears.

"I am very sorry," Artgyl said. I looked at him. His features were carefully neutral.

After a few moments, "You should put your shoes on hun," Jade said. I did so. They fit perfectly, and rose halfway up my calves.

Jade turned abruptly and led the goats away. I followed mutely, felling numb and stupid. I did not know if Artgyl followed. I stared at the ground and trudged after Jade as a zombie.

I trudged behind her for a long time, staring at the ground before my feet. My mind was empty. I did not so much think of my lover as remember sensations, the press of her lips against mine, the feel of her warm flesh as we drifted in and out of sleep. The touch of our hips. The knowledge that these things were memories now, not part of the continuation of my life, weighed on me as a great stone. I felt too, something. Something at the corner of my mind, always just out of reach. Something I should be thinking of but could not. My mind wasn't much good anyway. On I trudged.

We stopped at some point and I was handed something bland to eat. They were talking to each other but I did not pay attention. When twilight came we stopped again. They went about unpacking one of the goats. Jade looked at me for a moment. I was standing still, where I had stopped walking. Then she approached me.

“Look hun, why don't you go get some wood together or something?”

“Wood?” I asked as if I did not recognize the word. What was I forgetting?

“Yeah, you know, for a fire? But don't cut anything living, just find dead wood. We promised your tree lady friend we wouldn't kill any trees and she doesn't seem the type to cross.”

“She is my lover.”

“Right. Well. About the wood?”

“Wood?”

“Shit.”

“Yes, I remember wood mistress.” I was back a little. They would need a fire. They required me to fetch them wood.

“Yes, mistress. Obedience is my food and drink.”

She regarded me with an expression of uncertainty. Wondering, I supposed, if I was sane. Was I?

“If I give you a hatchet are you going to off yourself?”

“No mistress, I will obey.”

She looked at me hard for a moment, then returned to the goats. I had forgotten to kneel. Would my masters flog me if I did not show respect? Obedience is food. Obedience is water. Obedience is food. Obedience is water. I kneeled on both knees before her when she returned. I kept my gaze down as I ought. The man, what had his name been? The man was watching us now. Concerned, worried I thought. Did they think that I would not obey? Jade held a hatchet out to me and I accepted it, eyes still down.

“Do you still not know your name?”

The question confused me.

“I'm the forty second of the fifty third of the seven hundred, mistress.”

She seemed not to know what to say. “No, well, um, you're Kara now, okay?”

“Yes mistress.”

“Okay, go get wood, but stay close enough we can call you back.”

“Yes mistress.” I rose, eyes down, and went into the woods.

The forest was old and untouched, so there was plenty of wood to gather. The trees were conifers of some kind, and were fairly dense. It was dark, with few low branches. I saw no animals except what looked to be cockroaches, save they were many times larger and had massive mandibles. They were brown and black, winged, and stank of carrion. There were dozens of them. They seemed wary more than frightened, and also seemed more intent on me than foraging.

My lover had made the dress for me, that is, the bosom was made for my single breast. I

stacked many sticks and small logs on my hip, securing them with my arm. The trees rustled far above me and seemed to sing to me, a sweet sad melody to sooth a child to sleep. It intoxicated me and I felt as though I were floating. There were many, many more insects now, all seemed to be staring and then I heard my name, the insects were watching me and I heard my name yelled, the name they had given me. Was it mine? I walked to my masters.

They had erected a small tent and gathered some wood. Jade was striking a flint to a bunch of dried leaves and twigs. I added the wood I had collected to their larger pile and kneeled to await my next command. The trees still sang to me and I drifted in their music and felt I was forgetting something. But it was so hard to think, and I drifted, drifted.

"Please sit, if you wish to," said the man. He had brought a pan with water and put it near the fire.

"Yes master," I said absently and sat cross legged on the ground.

"You don't have to call my master."

"Yes master."

He sighed and sat a few feet away. Jade had the fire burning then and sat to complete a triangle. We watched the fire a moment. It was large for the amount of fuel, consuming the leaves and twigs before it settled onto the larger logs to simmer in its rage. I drifted with the smoke and leaves, a few leaves blown away into a great and open sky. The pot of water was boiling amongst the embers and then I had a bowl of boiled grains. I ate mindlessly.

"How do you feel Kara?" asked the man.

"Master, I drift away."

They were quiet a moment and my bowl was empty.

"Kara" Jade spoke sharply and I looked at her. "Do you know where you are?"

"In the woods mistress."

"Um, do you know where you are going?"

I had to think about that for a moment. What was I forgetting?

"Am I not following my mistress?"

"Um, oh."

"Kara," interjected the man, "your, um, tree friend, she told us you might be, disorientated. Do you remember your tree friend?"

"She is my lover, master."

"Am I, are we your masters now?"

I had to think about that. It was hard to think.

"Yes, you are, master, mistress, you are my little masters. I have, I, there, I have two greater masters?" It ended as a question somehow.

"I don't know, can you tell us?" Jade asked.

"One is, a demon? He, he commands my blood. The other, I, I don't remember. I should not have two masters. But, I don't remember."

She handed me a couple pieces of jerked meet and I chewed them. They were very brittle.

"What's your demon master's name?" the man asked.

I tried to think but the trees sang to me and it was so hard to think.

"I don't know it master. Mistress."

They were quiet a moment, looking at each other.

"How about your tree lady friend?" Jade asked.

That answer came much more easily. The trees seemed to whisper it to me.

"Mistress, I don't believe she has one."

“Does anything have a damn name?” she stated more than asked, exasperation in her voice.

“Mistress, I,”

“I think I can answer that, in part at least,” interrupted the man. He began speaking and I drifted back into the music of the trees and watched small flames flick about the embers.

“Wait,” Jade interrupted him, “Kara, pay attention.”

“Yes mistress.”

“Okay love, start again.”

“Um, okay. I was saying to a tree, trees don't think of themselves the way we do. They don't differentiate themselves from everything else. There is a tree, but then there is the soil, and often a fungus in the soil that cooperates with the tree, and the air and wind, and the sun of course. And the forest. They see themselves as the whole. Or, well, and or as a particular perspective of the whole.”

“Okay, I'm almost with you. Is there an easy explanation of the 'and or' bit?”

“Uh, no.”

“Didn't think so.”

“So,” he continued, “To give a name to a piece of the whole is, well, they wouldn't think of it. What does your liver think its name is?”

“My liver doesn't think. Well, I hope not anyway, it would hate me.”

“Right, but if it did. Or, rather, if you considered the liver's point of view. That is, you, Jade, are the whole, but you could consider how things seem to different parts. From the perspectives of different parts.”

“That doesn't make any sense to me.”

“It's a bad metaphor I think. Maybe mood would be a better one. You see things quite differently from different moods. Bleak when you're depressed, joyous when you're happy, sexually when you're horny. And so on. But you don't have a different name for yourself when in each of your moods. They are all part of Jade.

“That almost makes sense. What about crazy people who thing they are more than one person?”

“Right, exactly. It's a continuum, not a switch.”

“Odd definition of 'right exactly' you have.”

“Well.”

“How about the demon?”

“Demons have names, and I haven't heard of one keeping theirs secret.”

“Is something wrong with her then? She can't remember names for some reason?”

“Hmm. Kara?”

“Yes master?”

“Do you know my name?”

I tried to think but my mind was dark and misted over.

“Master, I cannot recall it.”

“Do you remember anything about it at all?”

“Master, it was like Agravayne and Artigal. But those are from poems? Or stories?”

“You don't need to call me master.”

“Yes master.”

He scowled but Jade laughed.

“So,” she said, “do you remember your old master's name? The one before the demon?”

I was drifting badly, pulled aside by the singing of the trees, lulled to sleep, my eyes weighing

down, wanting to shut.

“No mistress.”

“How do you, I mean, if I asked you a question and you had to talk about him, what would you call him? What do you call him when you think to yourself about him?”

“Mistress, I would call him my old master, or my second master. To myself he is the old motherfucker.” It was hard so hard to focus and the realization of what I had said aloud penetrated my awareness only slowly.

“Master, I have wronged in profaning a master. I accept my punishment.”

After I spoke I realized Jade had been laughing and the man smirking. He grew serious.

“Kara, I will never punish you. I haven't the right. I do not think you are truly a slave.”

“Yes master.”

“So what does all this mean practically?” Jade interjected.

“Well, the more we understand the better. If we can understand her, the demon, and her tree lover, we can at least help her, and at might be able to leverage some pretty powerful allies.”

“No, I mean, what the hell are you getting at?”

“To her, I think, names are not necessary or important. She doesn't think in those terms. She exists as a binary relation to a master. She is slave. Master is master. What else does she need to know?”

“Um, okay. I'm either developing a horrid headache or I almost understanding part of what you might be getting at.”

“I think it sheds light on her behavior. Why did we have to tell her specifically to pay attention to us? She is totally uninterested in anything that isn't an order. She functions for people, she isn't a person. I mean, of course she's a person, but that's not how she thinks of herself. She is slave.”

“Huh.”

“I think it sheds light on her behavior. Kara, I've known you almost a month, but you've only been awake for a few days of that. You've gone from a crazed kidnapping drug addict to surly and very confused about basic questions of your identity, to a homicidal maniac, you came to kill us both, right, not to free me?”

The memory seemed very far, far away.

“Yes, master, I thought it would please my master.”

“Fuck,” Jade said, turning to the man, but he held out his hand to hold her at bay.

“Then immediately you were running away from that, suicidally. You knew you would have frozen to death, naked in the autumn mountain woods.”

“Yes master.”

Jade sighed and rubbed her temples.

“Then you were throwing yourself on a sword, then madly, passionate in love, then completely heartbroken, heartbroken as if your whole world was destroyed, and now you are a content, passive and obedient slave.”

“Yes master.”

“You knew her what, a day and half?”

“Yes master.”

“Yet you're madly in love with her.”

“Yes master, she is my love.”

“Do you miss her?” asked Jade.

The memory of the soft flesh, the press of her body against mine, the look in her eyes as she lowered herself to please me with her tongue and lips, orgasming hard and knowing she was as

well. I was crying, but not hard.

"I'm sorry," Jade said softly. "It was rude, I didn't think."

"Mistress, I don't understand." I looked at her, then remembered to cast my gaze down.

She didn't say anything.

"We should sleep," said the man quietly.

Nobody moved for a moment. I shut my eyes.

"Kara," Jade said. I opened my eyes. The man was gone and the fire was only embers now.

She took my hand.

"Please come to bed."

"Yes mistress."

She led me back to the small tent. It was very low, so that we would have to crawl in. Jade stopped at the precipice and took off her boots, placing them just inside. I felt that she wished me to do the same and so I did.

There were several large blankets on the floor with very little room around them.

"I'll sleep in the middle hun, just take the side there."

Moving at all took effort. I crawled into the spot she indicated. She pulled off her furs; it was actually a pair of outer pants and jacket with a hood. She put them over the other blankets. She wore red hose and a simple white blouse underneath. I began to remove my dress but she stopped me.

"Leave it on hun, you don't need to be naked."

"Mistress, I do not mind."

"Leave it on. I don't want Argyl getting any ideas."

I tried to focus on what I was saying, but it slipped away from me.

"Should I please my master before we sleep?"

"Please him?"

"Yes mistress. Please him with my body."

Her eyes widened and she pressed her lips.

The man spoke. "Kara, I am not your master and you must do nothing, least of all that."

"Yes master."

Jade laughed, almost hysterically, then bit it off. I wondered if my body displeased them but lay in the spot Jade had designated. She climbed over Argyl to take the middle. Her body just barely touched mine.

As if I was watching someone else, I went to her, I put my arm around her.

"Stop!" she snapped. "I'm not into girls. Shit," then "Oh," when she realized I was weeping hard. She held me awkwardly at first, then she put her arm on my back and rubbed as if to soothe me as I sobbed into her blouse. She held me until I cried to sleep.

I dreamt I was in a large steel box. It was chill but I had my lover's dress and only my bare feet lost warmth to the metal. I paced the room but there was no light so I collided into the walls when I came to them.

I collided with a body and I knew that it was my lover. We had bowled each other over but I jumped up and rushed to her to hug and kiss and kiss, and we were holding hands and my other hand was remembering her nude form.

"I came from the frost where ten thousand little things, little things like mice and sparrows, little things like leaves and bugs, where ten thousand little things were dying and all I could do was turn my wood to steel and trap myself inside. And they banged on the steel but I am an

ancient tree. No ax nor fire nor demon's minion will breach my walls. But I miss you, my love, I miss you. My love, my love. Do not be angry when you learn. Just as you are what you are, I am what I am. A tree does what it must do. A tree does what it must do.”

I was alone again in the way of dreams, now naked and wandering a dark wood. I was me except my severed breast had been restored. My feet kept me moving but I had no urgency or sense of destination.

“YOU WILL NOT ESCAPE ME.” The weight of my master's thought tumbled me to the ground. He was there, all clacking beak and claws. His body now was a crab's body, with the tail of a lion and the head of a vulture.

“YOU WILL SUFFER YOU WILL SUFFER”

The beast was excreting a terrible stench, and it urinated on the ground as it gaped at me. Then it spit on me. A sticky and heavy gel that weighed me down.

A naked man with the head of a bull watched us from the darkness. The saliva stuck me to the floor and I tried to pull away, panic vibrating through me, and clack clack clack that terrible vultures beak came snapping close to me, clack clack clack. I could not pull away I could not pull away, I could not, I was stuck, I could not pull away. And my ears deadened from the great sharp clack clack clack and his breath reeked like carrion and I was gagging but his crab's claws held me down, rent the flesh from my arms' bones and I could not breath I was choking on my vomit and that terrible reek of death and rot.

And then there was a great pressure in my head and ringing in my ears, my master's filthy presence in my mind. Memories came, unbidden images of my past. Cold damp stone against my child's body as firm invasive fingers inspected every bony angle. Soft bright silks and the feel of eyes inspecting, enjoying. The boredom of harem life, a sex slave barely used. The sharp pain of clamps and knives as the old motherfucker violated me with a metal phallus, too impotent to rape me, yet still the torture, the sting of knives that cut deep burrows into my back. The thirst and delirium of long days tied and sometimes tortured. The great heavy darkness of the drug, the wonderful drug, that kept all the terrible world safe and far away. Brief images then, fuzzy and cold, the dissection of that woman's body. The retching of the soldiers who came to take me.

Then the cabin, where the man had tended me. The memories slowed. The smell of wood burning, the bitter taste of the medicines he made me drink, the stench of the ointment he smeared on my chest. The smell of blood and the murdered men. My mind lingered on the face of the man with the broken leg.

And then my lover. I choked and could not breath. The pain pushed harder within my skull and her warm body was with me again, and the taste of her tears, but I could not see her face. And I could not breath, I was spasming and choking on bile, and my mind was ten thousand shards of glass, all grinding and refracting, and my memories were all there at once, drowning me, I could not breathe, I choked and choked and could not see, my mind my mind it was too much, a billion colors refracting and I could not see or think or breathe, and then my master was pulling out like a long filthy rope pulling from my stomach and stretching my nostrils and slimed up up up.

Then he was over me, I was back and gasping and sputtering but air was in my lungs! I was coughing and couldn't stop, then air was back.

“YOU WILL NOT DEFY ME.”

My head rattled but he was gone. The bull headed man walked slowly to me, as if I were a mouse that might scamper away.

“I too serve the vile lord,” he said. He was very muscular, with red skin. Both feet and hands



were blades. Sharp, long and curved. His cock too, but it hung limp between his legs.

“All evil is the evil of him. All evil is the man's cock.” His great bull head turned sideways and tilted to cast an eye down.

“All evil is sharp, sharp birds, broken rent carcasses, jagged jagged like torn cloth, like a jagged sky, all bloody and bloody, it was fucked apart, the sky was fucked apart and it is red and bloody bloody bloody. A wind of sea salt and blood blood, the hair lifted just so and just so, the stench of the sea, of rotted fish, the stench of the sea now a mountain.”

I was backing from him. Watching those blades. They were caked with blood and filth but very sharp very sharp. I felt them shave my skin, the scrape of the edge, the burn of it.

“Please,” I said. “I do not wish to defy him. How do I serve him?” My voice was small and thin.

“We all serve, all serve. All the time. We are all vile vile things. Like worms and mucus and filth filth filth.”

I backed into the edge of that great black room and he pushed a blade hand into my chest, pinning me to the wall. I felt the cock blade slowly rise, jabbing and bouncing against my thigh. Did I fear? I do not know. I felt nothing and everything. Meaningless abstractions, but that was all I was then. Incredible pain, his free hand blade buried deep into my eye. It began to slice, little wet sucking sounds as it rent my brain. He cut away my childhood, my pain, my torture, my self and I was nothing, only one free eye staring at the great bull head. Blinking, but not comprehending.

He stood suddenly back and I felt my brains drip out along my cheek. He scraped his erect cock with his hand blades, screeching metal splitting the quiet room.

“You have hid it well, slut thing. Some bit of you is cut away already. The bit our master desires. You would do well to bring it to him.”

“I don't know! I wish to serve, please tell me how to serve!”

“Slut thing, I do not care. I obey. I obey but I do not care. I obey or I would rape and murder you, make your soul another blade.”

“I don't believe in souls,” I whispered.

“That does not matter, slut thing.”

## CHAPTER 12

“There are a couple things I still don't understand,” said Jade as we picked our way along an increasingly rocky and inconsistent trail. My muscles were very stiff and each step sent small shocks through my legs and back. Argyl's grimace suggested he was in similar difficulty. Jade and the goats seemed to be doing much better than we.

“Only two? You're doing much better than me.” said Argyl.

“Funny,” she said. “Kara's lady friend seemed to be pretty independent. She fell in love with Kara, for example. Also she talked about the other trees, I don't know, like they were distinct from herself.”

Our path seemed to be cut out of the mountain. Steep black rocks shot up around us so that we could walk no more than two abreast. Jade and the goats scampered up a steep rocky incline. Argyl and I lumbered up afterwards.

“I think,” said Argyl, slightly winded, “that her lover is somewhat unique. The books all indicate that trees,” here he paused to catch his breath. Jade stopped and looked back at him.

“The books all spoke of trees as, well, superficial things. I don't think they chose human form much, but when they did they seemed to, I don't know, reflect, imitate? They were very similar to the scholars who had sought them out. But also very superficial, like they didn't really understand humans very much, they were just copying the form and some of the characteristics of the scholars, but it was a, like a child playing pretend or something. There was the form of humanity, but no substance.”

“That doesn't sound like her lover at all.”

“No, exactly. I think her lover is unique. It's hard to tell, when you encounter something for the first time, if it's normal or an exception. Think of Clachnik. If you landed on our shores for the first time in their territory, if you were from some distant and very different land, you might think that all people of this content are like them, when in reality they are an extreme exception.”

“Not for long maybe.”

“Maybe, but defeating us is not the same as defeating the other major powers. We were never more than a small principality among superpowers.”

“Hmm. Well, that doesn't really answer my question.”

“Well, I think she is very very old. Kara's tree that is, not Kara. I think she is very old, and her imitation of humanity is very sophisticated. Kara, did she speak at all of her past?”

“Yes master. She spoke of a people called the Kathati. That they would give some of their children to the trees to live and mate, and that these people were considered wise.”

The goats were jumping up a series of boulders whose passage seemed improbable to me. They looked to be enjoying themselves. It made sense why goats, unruly as they were, were chosen over mules or another pack animal.

Argyl made it to the top of the boulder by holding Jade's arm and scurrying up. He sat breathing hard as Jade reached her arm down for me.

“I've never heard of the Kathati, but that proves the point, if she's reliable. I know the history of these lands as far back as there is a history. The Kathati must have been a prehistoric tribe.”

“Well, that explains her personality. But why fall in love with Kara so quickly?” Jade barely seemed winded. Every muscle in me ached as I struggled for purchase on the rock.

“Well, Kara here is very, well,” he considered the word. “She's very compulsive. She is not the type to half do anything. She's completely homicidal, crazy, reticent, submissive, or whatever other mood is on her. The tree's quick infatuation might be her reflection of her. Like, she is

aping her characteristics.”

“So because Kara is crazy her tree lover is crazy too.”

“Well,” he said, looking at me as I finally made it to the top of the rock and sprawled, gasping for breath. He did not finish his sentence. Uncertain if he would offend me?

“Master, you will not offend me.”

He looked at me for a long minute. “You don't have to call my master. And you are very astute.”

“Yes master.” Was there a hint of sarcasm in my voice today?

A large body, all browns and hair and scruff, slammed into Jade and she went down, the body jabbing a sword at her throat. I meant to jump up but instead smashed hard into the rock with a heavy body on top of me that smelled of stale sweat. He was very efficient, I could not move my body.

I heard shouts and what seemed to be several large boulders slamming into the ground, but I felt my perception was off. Odd how calm I was. Was this my normal reaction to sudden violence? It had been so fast I hadn't time to react. Did that mean that they were good at what they did, or that we were particularly easy victims?

“Get up,” a gruff voice in my ear. A ridiculous request, his heavy body was still on top of me. But his weight was shifting, pulling my arm behind me and leveraging me up.

“Yes sir,” I said, although not resisting was all I could do at the moment.

“That good. Keep up like that you live long time,” he grunted out.

“Yes sir,” I said again. Did I have any loyalty to Jade and Argyl? Were they relevant now, the situation changed? Jade was struggling still and two men were holding her to the ground. A fourth man wore a flamboyant outfit, all bright greens and yellows, tight hose, puffy blouse, flowing cape.

“The essence,” this man said in a high flutey voice, “of good drama, is conflict. We have here our stalwart band of adventurers, bogged down in hopeless exposition and conjecture.”

“Fuck you,” shouted Jade just before one of the sweaty men clubbed her. She reeled from the blow but did not give up the fight. I watched impassively.

“You,” said the colorful man, stepping towards me, “won't do at all. No passion, no struggle. A totally inappropriate subject of any sort of narrative.” His face too was a rainbow of colors. Purples, red, yellows. Bright differentiated streaks across his face. He was slurring his speech.

“Yes sir,” I said.

“Ha!” he cried, and spun, furling his cape behind him in grand melodramatic fashion. The brutish man that held my arm propelled me forwards, and I walked obediently. Jade glared at me. One of the men was hefting her up onto the others shoulder as she kicked. She probably would have killed the both of them if they had been sensible to pain. They ignored her strikes and I did not look back.

“You see,” the man was saying walking before me. “There is nothing I hate more than boredom, and this mountain pass is nothing if not boring. Imagine my delight when I heard that we had visitors? Ha! That I would have known. I sent my little sparrows to you, my little finches and my little bees. But what do I hear? Prattle about the nature of trees? It could at least have been an argument! The married couple, fleeing not only their enemies but the troubles that threaten to destroy their marriage, the sexy slave girl, tempting the man to infidelity. A situation ripe for conflict, for drama! But instead this inane prattle! Bah! I could not abide it. I had to intervene.”

He led us up and out of the pass. We had nearly been to the end of it, where it widened into

another forest of conifers, this one more sparse and rocky than the one we left behind. We left the path almost immediately, cutting straight and deep into the woods. My body was very sore. Jade made sounds of struggle behind me for a time. I did not turn around and she stopped after a short while, replacing it with a low steady moaning.

We came into what seemed a small village. There was a stone building in the center, with several huts surrounding it that seemed to be made of grass, however improbable that was in such a northern climate. The flamboyant man led us to the center, stopping before the stone building. The brute that was carrying Jade threw her, now unconscious, onto the ground next to me, and then the men formed a circle around us. They were huge. Muscles bunched on top of muscles. The firs they wore were poorly made, haphazardly stitched together with thick strips of hide. They were filthy and stupid looking.

“Wake up my dear,” said the colorful man. He was just a bit rotund, had a hairy and unkempt beard that made him seem mad. His hair and eyebrows stuck out at odd angles. He slurred his words together, as a drunk or as an old man who had suffered a stroke or two.

“There,” he said as she lolled awake. There was a bit of blood in her matted hair. “What’s your name my dear?”

She seemed too dazed to answer, holding her hand to her head and looking about with unfocused eyes. Somewhere inside me pity stirred for her. A compulsion to rush to her and offer what aid I could. I resisted it. That wouldn’t help anybody now. Besides, where was my loyalty?

“Well, we’ll give her a moment to recover. How about you my dear? What’s your name?” He leered awkwardly before me. I smelled the stench of liquor on his breath. Sweet like brandy or bourbon.

I didn’t say anything, more because I didn’t know how to answer the question He slapped me but not hard.

“Well?” he said?

“Sir, the question does not signify.”

“Huh,” he said, swaggering a bit. Jade was feeling the clot of blood in her hair and looking between the brutes around us. Calculating, I thought. A very practical woman.

“What’s her name?” he said to her, spitting on the ground before me.

“Fuck,” she said.

“No, I don’t think that’s it,” he said.

“I don’t fucking know. What do you want with us?”

“You don’t know your companions name?”

“What the fuck do you want?”

“Tsk tsk now.” He turned back to me. “What do they call you?”

“Sir, they call me Kara.”

“Sir, I like that. Kara, so that’s your name?”

“No sir.”

“No?” He looked at me, trying to focus his eyes. He had a flask, I saw, and he took that moment to drink a good draft of it. “Who, then, are you?”

“Sir, I do not know.”

“Huh,” he said. He came up to me. I stood before him, then came to myself a bit.

“Sir, I am sorry.” I said, kneeling in subjugation before him. He hmped but said nothing, instead placing his hands on my scalp. I was suddenly very, very alone, adrift in a great black void, painless and terrible, as if a billion lost men were slaughtered just beyond my senses, and I floated happy and stupid and helpless against it.

Then suddenly I was back. The forest around me seemed sharper, the brutes were but shadows of themselves, weak, shriveled men on the verge of collapse, bruises and festering wounds scarring their flesh. The man's face flickered, for a moment, into a gray meandering of visages. The scene solidified quickly.

“A piece of you has been cut away, little one.”

“Archmagio,” I said. He stared at me, a corner of his mouth twitching into a smile.

“What?” Jade demanded.

“Master, what is your command?”

“Kara!” Jade screamed at me, but I ignored her. I bowed to my faux master, designated to me by my true master. He leered at Jade. Why did she expect me to be loyal? Had I given her a sign that I would be? I had called her mistress, but she knew she was my little mistress, that my true master would someday come. I had wept in her arms. That thought stirred something in me. What? Why were emotions so damn vague? Fuck.

“Well, my command. Hmm. Blow me.”

“Yes master,” I said, moving towards him. He grinned stupidly at me. Was he really drunk? I fumbled at the strings that held his breeches up. They were tied haphazardly, knotted over and over again to make up in force what they lacked in skill. I picked at them.

Jade was glaring at me, hatred in her eyes. Why such hatred? The betrayal of womanhood? To meekly take a cock into my mouth at a man's command, to think nothing of it? Would taking his finger be the same insult? Was his pleasure relevant to my self-respect? Did I have self-respect?

I managed to undo the awful knot and pulled his manhood out. It was limp and useless. I kissed it a little, rubbed it with my tongue and fingers, but to no avail.

“I'm too damn drunk, fuck.” he said, looking down at me. I looked up at him as meekly as possible. Jade's scorn burned into me. Odd that it should affect me so. Did I reflect on my reflections as a defense against feeling them? I felt that I was insulting her by being meek. He kicked me away and I sprawled obediently. He hadn't kicked that effectively but it is the duty of the slave to hold up their master's self delusions.

“Don't glare at me you little whore,” he was looking at Jade now, leering and stumbling towards her, fumbling with his breeches but waving his impotent cock in her face. “Whore, slut. I should fuck you instead.”

She spit at him. Her spittle fell short and landed on his blouse. He didn't seem to notice it.

“Do you think she's a whore, little slut?”

“Master, I do not think you propose to pay her.”

“Huh?”

“Master, semantically, a whore would be paid, but you seem more likely to rape rather than buy.”

He struck me across the face and I really fell this time, the impact smarting on my cheek. How like the sensation of my mind dripping out from the bull man's blade.

“You,” he said to me, “do not forget. You are the knife of my revenge. The knife of my revenge.” How melodramatic. He kicked me down again. “Put them up, tie them together in one of the huts.”

The brutes grunted and one lifted Jade easily above his head. One came to lift me but I struggled to my feet and stumbled obediently after Jade. They carried her into the closest of the huts. Inside there was nothing. Just a small empty room. They dropped her, not cruelly but not kindly either. They shoved me down besides her, and then wrapped long strands of raw hide about us. The strand did not seem strong, but they used a lot of it. Jade struggled for a short time,

but they clobbered her over the head until she stopped. I think she lost consciousness. We were tied back to back, arms twisted behind us, so that we could not stand without breaking both our arms and the arms of the other.

One of the brutes reached a hand down and pushed into my mouth a wad of something dark and sticky. It took only a fraction of a moment for my tongue to realize what it was and lick at his filthy fingers for more of it. Flowers! Flowers sprouting and blossoming in my mouth and down my throat! And the wonderful dark sea that accompanied them, floating again and wonderful, the stupid painful world safely away from me now. There, but far, tolerable through the warm black tide.

How much time did I float there? I haven't any idea. It may have been the night, it may have been days. The brutes came and went several times. Jade woke up at some point and swore at me, but it seemed so unimportant. Peace, again, floating and floating and peace, such wonderful peace. Obey, obey, it did not matter, happiness was a bitter drug in my mouth, a warm and wonderful ocean in which I floated, buffered a thousand times over from the shocks and horrors of the world.

Then we were lifted and there was more tar in my mouth and I licked and licked to get it all, and it tasted foul like sweat and dirt, but it did not matter, there were flowers there and I licked it all and licked and licked. A thousand Jades might have died and it did not matter to me, as long as that taste was on my lips and tongue. And then it was bright and dark and I was tied and gagged and laying in a circle of the great brutes. Jade too was tied. She was just before me. Her eyes looked deep into mine. Bloodshot eyes. She floated too! But she did not know it for the wonder it was. She fought it, fought to remain aware of what the stupid world was doing to her. What did it matter? The ocean mattered. The flowers mattered. I tried to tell her but words, words were too far away. I floundered useless on the earth.

Then they were cutting her loose. My master, my faux master, pulled me up and sat me on his lap. I was still dressed. My lover's dress and boots still hugged my flesh. I smiled when I thought of my lover. Her soft warm body. So like this ocean. To float with her, I longed to float with her. But she was so far, and the ocean so close, and that is all that mattered, to float. And then there was more again in my mouth, my faux master was feeding it to me and I was swallowing and licking and he was laughing.

"Watch," he said, and my eyes blearily looked out. The brutes had formed a ring around Jade, and one of them was standing inside it with her. Her bonds had been severed and she was standing, staggering, facing the man who stood rock still.

"She fights for her freedom, my little slut." he said to me. Focusing was hard, I drifted off and floated for a long time, black closing in against my vision and numb wonderful tingles taking over every nerve in my arms and legs.

Jade faced the man. They had stripped her naked. Her flesh was strong. The least of her muscles were well toned and many were well defined against her frame. But the man she faced, naked too, had muscles bunched on top of bunches. He strode towards her clumsily. She tried to grapple and throw him, but it was like throwing a boulder. He reached up an arm and whacked her hard. She crumpled under his blow. It wasn't really a contest, more a torture to make her feel weak. I watched it dully. I felt something, some pity for her, but it seemed unimportant, not worth the effort to focus or think on it.

He clubbed her with his great meaty fists and her body fell and broke before them. One of her legs stuck out at an odd angle and blood dripped from her nose. She raised her hands feebly, she was on the ground now, she raised them feebly but to no end, he clubbed past them, breaking one

and smashing her face.

Then it was over. She was a bloody mess groaning and rocking on the ground. I wondered if she would live. But flowers, flowers blossomed through me and I felt my faux master grow hard beneath me. How it was beneath me I know not, somehow our bodies must have shifted.

“Suck me, bitch.” he said, standing suddenly and displacing me to the ground.

“Yes master,” I said, spinning up to my knees and fumbling with his pants again. This time his cock came out hard. I put my lips to it.

Argyl exploded into the camp, all sword and screaming. The brutes turned to him slowly, stupidly, and he had cut one down before they could react much. Two of them advanced on him, three others forming a line between my faux master and Argyl. One of the two grabbed the sword that was swinging on him and it sliced deep into his hand. But still the fingers gripped it, pulling it from Argyl's hand. The other stepped forwards and swung his great fist at him, missing him badly as Argyl jumped backwards. Argyl tumbled down, tripping over his robe.

My faux master wore a knife on his belt. It seemed so far, yet simple, so easy. I clamped my teeth down on him, tasting blood as he screamed, and the knife was in my hand and I had driven it up into him. I did not cut his manhood, but instead drove it between his thigh and his crotch, burying it deep into his organs and I twisted and wiggled it to make sure he would die. He dropped, quickly, simply, and with a great cry. So easy. A small movement of my teeth, of my hands and arm, and he was dying. I smiled a little at the thought and drifted backwards, stumbling and nearly falling.

The brutes were suddenly not what they had been. Weak, frail and injured men, they collapsed screaming and clutching at wounds that festered about their bodies. The man that had been advancing on Argyl fell, and Jade's husband wasted no time. He was up again and snatching the sword from the man's hand who held it. His speed didn't matter, the brutes were down, moaning in agony and useless.

My faux master fell and struck at me, hitting me hard in my head. I held onto the knife and a great spurt of blood sprayed across my face, although I do not remember cutting him. His face then flickered away from the mad old man and became a gray nothing.

“Master!” he cried, “Save me!” I do not know if my master answered his call. I was up and stumbling towards Jade. I pulled her broken body into my arms and drifted into the woods with what speed I could muster. Argyl followed quickly behind me and we ran and ran until I fell, still floating, to the earth. Argyl pulled me up and I tasted blood in my mouth. He picked Jade up then. She was moaning and was not very conscious.

## CHAPTER 13

“This way,” he said, leading off.

I stumbled after him, more from habit of obedience than anything. What had I done? My faux master, who I had been ordered to obey, lay dying by my hand. I fled my master. Clearly, I fled his will and gave succor to his enemy. But it was so far and so hard to think about. The flowers were so close and so wonderful, and I drifted back into them.

Argyl stopped suddenly and I tumbled into him. I fell but he managed to lower Jade's body carefully to the ground. There were two saddle bags on the ground, although the goats were nowhere to be seen.

“What's that in your hand?” he asked. I looked down at my hand and realized I held a pouch. I held it up to him. Opening it, he pulled out sticky black tar.

“Huh,” he said, and immediately broke a small piece off, much smaller than I would have eaten, and pushed it into Jade's mouth. He was rustling through the bags and pulled out some blankets, some rope, and some pouches. Jade's moaning had grown more shallow. She was shivering badly now, her broken and twisted limbs flopping horribly.

“Kara,” Argyl said, “I need wood. Sticks. Sturdy, as long as her limbs. No, half as long. Four, half as long. Sturdy enough that they won't snap, but just so. Four of them”

“Yes master,” I heard myself say and looked about my feet. There were not as much wood as there had been the last time I looked, but there was still enough. I managed to gather four and stumbled back to him. I was dizzy and couldn't quite focus. Orders were good. No need to think with orders.

Jade was screaming as he pulled her limbs straight.

“I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry, I was too late,” he kept saying. He took the wood from me without saying much and I sank down to my knees. It all seemed distant still, I hoped I was keeping up, desperation chasing through my mind, but so so far away. Like I was distant from myself, her screams filtering through a thick dark space, their faintest echos only penetrating to my nerves. Like my self was some other thing there, in a world with pain and consequence, where terrible suffering was the price of healing, separated from the peace and warmth I floated in.

He had tied the sticks tightly to her limbs and was fumbling with the blankets. He rolled them out and lifted Jade and put her in them. Her lips had turned blue and somewhere I thought that wasn't good.

“Kara,” he said, “I'm sorry, but please take off your dress.”

“Yes master,” I said, struggling out of it. I got caught in it and felt dizzy. The wind was very cold against my exposed thighs and buttocks. Then the dress lifted over me and Argyl was holding it. He was very careful to look only into my eyes, and never let his gaze fall down against my chilled body.

“Quick,” he said, “in the blankets with her. She'll die of cold.”

I was down and pressing my body against her almost at once. He pulled the blanket tight around me and wedged it underneath me.

“Hold her very tight,” he said, “Your body must warm her or she will die. I need to build a shelter and a fire, then I will join and help you.” The explanation was not necessary. I wasn't present enough to disobey. Had I disobeyed my master? I pulled my body close to Jade, intertwining my limbs with hers, feeling her chill flesh against mine and willing my warmth into her. The sticks tied to her legs reminded me to be gentle there. Why did I care? Did I care? Argyl carried the pouch of tar now. To please him would mean more tar. Was that why I did it? Surely I



could kill Argyl and take it. But I did not. I held Jade to me and rubbed myself against her. There was nothing sexual about it, although it might seem so to read it. Our bodies were not mechanisms of sex then though. They were broken fragile things that needed each others warm to live, and so I rubbed and clung to her.

After a time it grew dark. Had I dozed? I did not know but it had grown dark and I could not account for the time. Then another body had crawled into the blankets and was holding Jade's body opposite of me. It was as if time was stuttering forwards, little snapshots with the intervening time hewn away. Argyl I knew. I felt his limbs snake between Jade's and press against mine. His arms wrapped around Jade. One grazed my breast but he quickly lowered it, so that it pressed against my lower ribs. That seemed funny to me. All three of us naked, pressed together to save a life, and he still scrupled to get no pleasure from my body. I would tell him I did not mind, but that didn't seem the point to him.

Had my opinion of him changed? He had seemed a helpless intellectual, reasoning his way through circumstances that required action more than words. But then, when it mattered, he had charged men outnumbering him, desperate and against all odds, to save his wife. To save me, I realized slowly, dumbly in my drugged mind. He had come to save us both. We were kin of some kind. As clumsy and useless as his attack had been, he had acted when it mattered.

I pulled myself into Jade, shifted myself down so that my breast pressed, just slightly, against his hand. He did not pull away. Was it a stupid thing to do? Would he think me a slut, beneath his contempt? Would he think me a fool for thinking such things when his wife lay nearly dead between us? Yet was I not giving my warmth to save her too? I was drifting, it was so hard to stay aware of the world. It was stupid. The worst possible time and place for it. Yet, he did not pull his hand away. It pressed, ever so slightly, against my breast.

Jade had stopped shivering. Her breathing came more regularly then and she seemed to be sleeping, healing. Our warmth had saved her from freezing, the tar had let her sleep. So odd that I felt it poisoning me as it saved her.

“Master, I think she will live now.”

There was a long silence. Then, “Yes, Kara, I think you are right.”

“Master,”

“Don't call me that.”

That sank through me. A command? I ought to obey. He had always asked before, but now he said.

“Argyl, I am glad that she will live.”

“Me too Kara.”

“Argyl?”

“Yes Kara?”

“Do you love her as I love my lover?”

There was a long silence. Jade breathed slowly but firmly.

“I don't know Kara. It's complicated. But I am very glad she is alive.”

I didn't respond. The flowers now were more distant. How long had it been? I felt myself drifting still, but the world was closer. Jade's body was warm now and it felt good to hold it against me. It must be very cold for her to have almost died of it so quickly. We were all three keeping each other alive then. I realized there was no wind on me. Argyl must have built the tent around us to block it out. I closed my eyes and drifted there, three naked bodies holding to life as if it were a thin golden string that might slip away.

It was so dark in my dream that I could not see, though I could feel cold wind cutting through my back. I walked forwards but had no sense of movement. Then there was a light far in front of me. Crumbled walls of white stone, bloody flesh and bones, and among it stood the bull headed man, streaked with gore, the great bull mouth drooling obscenely. In the logic of dreams I stood before him. There were two blades protruding from the stump of his right arm, where there had been one before. The white rubble seemed familiar, as if I had wandered through it in a dream before, but I could not place it.

I must have drifted out of sleep then, as I felt cold ebbing into my back and the warmth of Jade's body before me. I pulled myself closer to her. My legs bumped against one of the sticks that had been used to splint her leg. Jade moaned a little and I pulled my leg back.

The bull man was flanked now by two creatures. One seemed sometimes a great cat and other times a woman, yet I could not tell when her form changed, it was simply different from moment to moment. The other was a bear with three heads, one of a serpent, one of a vulture, and one of a man. All three were filthy with matted blood.

“You are to be broken, little slut.”

I stood before him shivering. He stepped towards me and there were two cock blades now, and his left foot was three blades. I did not resist him. My rebellion was overt now. I had acted on my own to murder myself. I had attacked a servant of my master. No mere hesitation now, I had acted. I fell to my needs. Was that terror inside me? Or fear? Both, I thought, but distant somehow, as though I were above myself and watching. And then I was shaking with it, paralyzed as that great obscene man stood before me, erect blades bobbing inches from my chest. He loomed huge above me, twice my height or more, and I shrunk down before him. I fell to my knees and supplicated myself before him.

“I have wronged,” I whimpered. “I accept my punishment. I accept I accept I have wronged.”

The cat took me then, gripping me with harsh clawed hands that bled my flesh. She bore me down, and the bear stood over me, the human face protruding on a long scaled neck, filthy, bits of dirt and shit caked on a ragged beard, its breath rancid with vomit and rot. I gagged then screamed as pain shot through my hand. My head twisted to look but could not, the serpent's head hissed and flicked its tongue on me. Pain then in my other arm, then feet. I screamed and tried to pull away and gagged and that awful mouth was in front of me. I could not get away, I screamed and whimpered and whimpered but I could not get away.

Then I was outside myself again, looking from far away, through colored glass. They hung me, through holes the bull man had cut through my hands and feet. They hung me and I was suspended in a pit, darkness all around except a small glint of light far above me. It was very cold, and my hands and feet burned with pain.

Then above came a procession of figures. Were it not a dream I would not have been able to see them, for distance and for pain. First came the bull man. He spit down at me and a wad of cud landed on my stomach. Then a three headed dog came and pissed down on me, the stream soaking my legs and pubic hair. The cat woman came then and looked. She was a woman then, but when I blinked a great lion. She did nothing, simply walked away.

Then came a man with the legs of a goat and rounded ram's horns on his head. He spit on me. Then three grimy children came and threw bunches of filthy wet rags onto me. One landed on my hand and the terrible pain grew worse. I screamed up at them and tried to jerk, to fall and die in shame and cowardice. But each twitch rocked my body with fresh agony and my protests ended in whimpers. Still somehow I was distant, only half feeling, half watching. Creatures who looked like men but had no color threw rocks, bruising my flesh.

“Master, forgive me, master, forgive me,” I heard myself whimpering, hardly knowing what I was saying. A stone struck my head and I could no longer focus my eyes. Far above black shapes threw stone and pissed and spit on me, and I whimpered and wished to die, for my hands and feet to tear open that I would plummet to the great black below me.

My hands wrenched in pain and flesh split as my master impacted into me. He now was a great beast, all dog, bear and lion, roaring hideous shrieks through a vulture's beak. His eyes were little black beads that sucked the color and the life from me.

“Master, master,” I whimpered. “Punish me, punish me.” I wished only for that great beak to close over my head and snap my neck. But it did not. He pissed his hate on me, hot acid that burned and peeled my skin.

“Kill me kill me kill me” I mumbled in pathetic little gasps. Pain and panic mixed in me and I was only the awareness and suffering of the pain.

“STUPID LITTLE PANSY STUPID LITTLE MUM, STUPID LITTLE HUMAN FUCK.”

“I will obey” I whimpered, anything for that pain to end. I heard my words echo back to me. “I will obey, I will obey.”

He took my head in his beak and I screamed, starting myself awake.

Jade and Argyl were still sleeping. My head ached badly and I felt dizzy and nauseous. It was very cold. The side of me that pressed against Jade was only slightly chill, but my back and legs ached and cramped with cold.

Argyl had built the tent around us, fitting into its corners what supplies we still had left. I lay next to Jade and realized she was still breathing. A little bit of relief made it through the pain and horror that I felt. It was hard to shake the dream. My head pounded and I knew a terror for my master that I had not before. I had disobeyed. Not just a hesitation, not a toddler's first tentative step. I had plunged a knife into his servant, a man he had ordered me to follow. From disobedience to open rebellion. My head hurt and I didn't want to think about it.

I reached over my head and into one of the saddle bags Argyl had saved somehow. There was another story there. How had he escaped when the brutes captured us? Where did he find the sword? How odd that events beyond our knowledge affect us so much. How many lives ended through some other narrative they had no part in? A man living his life, suddenly trampled to death by a run away carriage he had no knowledge or understanding of. My head hurt. My thoughts could not distract me from the horror of my dream. It lingered in my muscles and in my blood. A deep and terrible horror.

My hands were still above my head. I had lost track of them. I shivered with cold and longed to pull my arms back into the relative warmth of the blankets and Jade's feeble heat. But I needed something first. It was not in the first bag. I reached for the second, barely reached it, and pulled it closer. Argyl stirred and I froze, but he only pulled himself closer to Jade. It was in the second bag. I pulled the pouch to me, opened it and had the tar in my mouth. The bitter taste of flowers filled my mouth and nose, and I felt muscles relax that I had not known were tense. The horror of my dream, the cold, all questions of self washed away under the fragrant taste. I closed my eyes and savored it. Then, quickly, I closed the pouch and shoved it back in the bag.

Jade seemed warm and I wrapped myself around her. Argyl's hand still wrapped around her, and I shifted to press my chest against it. It fell just below my breast. I felt warmth blossom inside me and spill it's life out into Jade and warm our little cocoon. I did not wish to sleep again, did not dare to sleep, even with the drug. But I floated there. Horror was all around me, but I was warm, or felt warm at least, and that was all that mattered then.

“I wish we still had her firs,” Argyl said. He had pulled on his robe and I was struggling into my dress and boots. My whole body was very stiff, and though I felt little pain through the drug, I had trouble getting my limbs to bend, especially as I had to crouch within the small tent. He was outside before I was. Jade still slept. I tucked the blankets around her carefully, making sure the cold air would not get at her body. Her face looked strangely peaceful for the agony her body must be feeling. I kissed her forehead and crawled out of the tent.

Argyl was blowing on the coals from a fire I did not remember from the night before. Several fresh bits of wood were on it and starting to smoke. I approached him.

“How may I help, Argyl?” He had managed a small flame and was positioning wood to keep the wind from blowing it out.

“We need long pieces of wood,” he said between huffs on the fire. “Longer than Jade's body but only by a foot or two. They should be the same length.”

“Yes, Argyl.”

He didn't turn to look at me. It was very cold and the wind was very harsh. I climbed back inside the tent and found my gloves and mask. The gloves I put on, the mask I tucked into the bosom of my dress.

The woods were sparse here, and provided very little shelter from the wind. It seemed strange that it would be so cold without any snow or ice, but I did not know what I compared it to. Fairy tales perhaps. There were very little wood of any kind on the ground. The trees were smaller here, though I could not tell if they were younger or just stunted by the rocky earth. I stumbled about the trees searching for wood until my hands and feet were numb with cold and the shivers impeded my ability to walk. But I found nothing.

Argyl watched me return empty handed and scowled. The fire was burning well now, but he was constantly throwing more sticks on it, as thicker wood seemed unavailable.

“I'd almost break my promise to your lover and cut some wood, but the hatchet was with the goat that got away.”

“Yes, Argyl.”

He looked at me a moment. He looked very tired and weak in the bleak sunlight. I looked at him and wavered a little, shivers rocking through my body.

“Come,” he said, stepping to me and leading me to the fire. It stood before it and let the warmth filter through me.

“We need a way to move Jade. Her leg, she can't walk on her leg like it is. I thought we would make a stretcher, but.” He trailed off.

“I care for her, Argyl,” I said.

He looked at me for a moment. I couldn't read his expression.

“Yes, I do too Kara.”

We sat in silence for a while. He had some jerked meat that we shared. Then he went inside the tent. I stared into the wood for a time, feeling the warm darkness of the tar inside me, feeling coming back into my limbs as I held them to the fire. I thought about the touch of Argyl's hand against my chest and breast, the soft curve of Jade's body against mine.

A bit of movement caught my attention. I looked and in the distance, it was a naked man, looking at me from across the woods. I went to him immediately. He watched me approach with his head slightly cocked. I felt myself float a bit above the earth. I knew my feet plodded clumsily beneath me, but it seemed unnecessary, as though lifting them would not send me tumbling to the earth.

The man was not a man. That is, he had the general form alone, the details were vague. His eyes were only sunken impressions on his face, his hands separated into fingers, but only slightly, giving them an odd webbed appearance. His mouth was more square than oval, he had no nose, and his skin was a dark speckled brown. He had no genitalia, only a smooth stretch of skin where it should be. As I came up his head turned to stay faced to me. I cannot say he looked at me for his eye sockets were empty.

“Sir, my mistress is badly wounded, we require aid.”

He didn't say anything for a long time. I wondered if he could speak. The cold was sinking back into my bones, and I thought it would cause injury to my flesh soon. Still, the pain was distant, and seemed less important than I knew it probably was.

“You you you you you you.” he stammered, his voice sharp and harsh as wood striking wood.

“I am,” I considered what to call myself. I am my master's slave? I am, I am? What am I? “I am Kara,” I said.

He looked at me, said nothing.

“Please, sir, I, my mistress is injured, I fear for her life. A tree spirit, my lover, she healed me once. I was, I had slain myself and she, she rebuilt myself, I mean me, I mean Kara. Can you, can you save her, my mistress?”

“You you you,” he paused, seeming to consider, “are were was will would not of the forest?”

“I, I am blood and bones and flesh.”

“And and and?”

I had no response. I stared at him stupidly.

“You you have bloomed?”

“I, my lover is of the forest. We, we mated.”

He came forwards. He seemed very powerful, tall and strongly muscled. He reached out and touched my dress.

“You, this is the forest.” he said. “You you you are water not sun?”

Again, I had no response.

“You will, you will have? You have? You would will have frozen with the ice?”

“Yes, but my mistress.”

“Yes yes yes yes.” He stepped forwards suddenly past me and was marching towards the tent.

He had left his tree.

My love had never left her tree. She had sent me away. She had sent me away and she had not left her tree. But he had left his tree. I spun to look at him. Argyl had stepped out of the tent and was watching the brown man approach. He was holding the sword, but did not hold it up.

Then I was running. Is it my curse to never feel myself? I ought, in the height of passion, to have felt all myself, to be so firmly embedded in that weak and lustful flesh that carried this consciousness through those circumstances. Yet I felt more like a spectator, watching my hate and love roil within me, watching myself run, stumble, fall, run and stumble, run and run until I collided with the strange brown apparition of a man.

Apparition of man. A strange, laden branch, strength bending, bending, bending under the weight. Snow was falling, when had it started? It was up to my ankles, when had it started? I would murder him. I would murder him and all of them and then myself. A great gorey slaughter, all broken chips and angles, my master's broken tool, jagged, cracked, broken broken broken I would cut myself and bleed and die.

## CHAPTER 14

Argyl was sprawled over me, holding my convulsing body down. Some time had passed, that wooden man was no longer there. I still shook but the tremors slowed.

“Master, master, master,” I whispered, and I wrapped my arms about him and held him held him.

“I am not you master, Kara. You have no master but yourself.”

“He tortures me. He takes me in my dreams and tortures me, grinds my flesh to sand, rends my love and hope from me, and spits and pisses on me. His hatred is all hatred. His filth is all filth. It is all it is all. I wish to die. Master, I wish to die. Please master, please.”

“No, Kara, stop, please, look at me.”

Shuddering, frozen and barely able to shiver, yet rocking violently under the tremors of my mind, my eyes, twitching twitching, but he was there, he was there holding me.

“Master, please, save me. Save me I wish to die, please save me.”

“Kara please. Please,” he whispered with some desperation, holding my convulsing body down.

“Master,” I whispered. And then held him back, clutched him to me. My lover, she had sent me away. Yet the tree, the man, whatever he was, had left his roots.

“Jade,” I whispered, “Jade, I love her Jade Jade.”

“She is okay. Kara she is okay, the tree, the tree spirit took her. He is healing her. We spoke and he is healing her.

“Master, I don't know what I am.”

He sighed. I was no longer struggling.

“Kara, I am sorry. I have no answers for you. I wish, but it is not how, it is human not to know. It is what we all are.”

“Master. Love me. Love me please.”

“Kara,” he said. I looked into his eyes. Deep and green. Very sharp.

“Master, please.” He held me for a long time. I felt the cold sinking into my flesh again, realized that my fingers and toes were numb.

“Master, we will freeze.”

“Yes, we must act. I would not leave you. We must act though, or we will freeze. We must take the blankets to his tree. The tent is, you wrecked it when you fell into it. We must take the blankets and bring them to the tree. It is our best chance. It, I don't know how it is so cold here. It doesn't make sense to be so cold when it was not.”

“Master, I will obey.” I struggled to my feet. I felt dull, full of ache and empty of will.

“Don't call me, well, you don't have to call me master,” he said.

“Master, we must save your life.”

“Our lives.”

The tent was ruined. It was torn badly and blew tattered in the wind. The physics of it's collapse eluded me but there was no time. I grabbed into my arms a bundle of furs and blankets and stumbled into the woods. Argyl caught me. It was snowing and I could not see more than a few feet. He said something but I could not hear it. I don't know why that would have been as the wind was not loud. He pulled me and I tumbled after him. He pulled me up and we were walking into the white. The snow now blinded us.

The tree man stopped us as we almost stumbled past his tree.

“You green yellow you you red yellow,” he said, which did not make sense, but he was

pointing to a ditch in the earth. Argyle threw down a bunch of blankets and then pulled me down into it. He took from me the bundle I carried and laid it over us, tucking it carefully around himself, then pulling me close to him and tucking it around me. I lay dumb and still as he did this.

And then it was very quiet. Our bodies were close, and we both breathed hard for a long time. I could feel my pulse thundering in me, only slowly did it subside. And it was still cold. The cold seemed to leech into every bit of me, I began to shiver and felt darkness press onto the edges of my vision.

“Master, we will freeze.”

“Kara, we will be okay.”

We shivered together. I pulled him to me but he seemed far away, and I felt that the cold would close around me and consume my flesh in frostbite.

“Master, we should be naked. Our warmth, we might live that way.” He didn't say anything. After a moment, I began to struggle out of my dress.

“Kara, I, I do not think you are my slave, I do not want, I do not expect you to sleep with me.”

“Master, we will freeze.” He didn't say anything. I had my dress over my head. I left the boots on. They came only halfway up my thighs. He still hadn't moved. When might the slave overrule their master? Never, save when the master's life might be saved. Then any punishment was acceptable. I reached to him and pulled up his robe.

“Kara,” he said, but then, “you are right.” He pulled off his robe and put it over us. I pulled my naked body against him. He wore some kind of undergarment over his crotch and upper thighs, but it was thin and seemed not to matter. His flesh was warm to my cold body. His robe, I thought, must hold the warmth better than my dress.

We shivered together and held each other. Did I think then? I seemed so far from myself. So long ago my old master had died. What had happened since? I was so far from myself. This strange man held me. So strange. A man who treated me as an equal. Not only treated, but insisted over and over and over despite my protests and provocations. He held me and I held him. Equals, somehow? But he was my master somehow too. My master, my true master, knew I was here and allowed it.

It grew warm slowly. We stopped shivering and lay on the edge of a delirious and sickly sleep. Slowly that subsided, and we lay in a warm daze together. I could not see any sky or feel any snow or cold. That did not make sense either. We had no tent, we should be freezing and exposed beneath our tawdry blankets. Scarcely enough to hold out that cold. But he was warm and I held him to me, to share my warmth more than to take his. I thought, I do not know why, but I thought that he did the same for me. More concerned with my warmth than with his own.

It was a long time that we lay there. I did not think much. You must be tired of my rambling circular thoughts by now anyway. But I did not think much.

At some point, as we drifted off into sleep, I felt him grow erect beneath the thin hose he wore about his crotch. I wanted to please him, to touch it and take it into me, as is the duty of the slave to her master. But he only turned his body a little, so that it did not press against me. And still he held me, he held me and shared his warmth with me, and took to himself nothing of what I would have offered to him gladly.

I did not dream. I did not dream I did not dream, I slept and his body warmed me, and I wished for his body. It was warm and close and I desired him. Not to please him, but to please me. But he turned away from me. His cock wanted me, but he turned it away from me. And so I slept in his warmth and warmth and slept in his warmth.

I woke from darkness and from darkness I crawled a broken and maimed thing. A babe cried and I held it to my breast, but my breast was gone and it starved and died. I held the dead thing in my arms and wept for it. And he held me. He held me through a thousand broken hearts and a thousand shards of glass that cut and cut and bled me, all my blood gone gone gone. But he held it together as it all spilled out, dripping through his fingers but he held it.

In the morning, was it morning? There was no sun, I could not see. We were buried in needles and held our bodies in a warm and saving embrace. Saving? It means nothing. Abstractions that mean nothing. I am an abstraction that means nothing. A slave? A thing? A body, a will, a fractured and manipulated will. Argyl refused to take me as a slave. Nor did he send me away. You, he said to me, or implied to me, or meant to imply to me, are my equal. You do not act it or feel it, but I insist.

I felt him. I reached my hand down and felt him. He was not hard, he was sleeping and his mind was not on sex. I fumbled with his pants and pulled down his breeches. His cock fell into my hand and I felt it. It was small and flaccid. Circumcised. Was there a reason for that?

Slowly, it grew erect. I touched it gently. I did not feel that it was sex. Men. Men had always been abominations to me. Beasts with cocks that assaulted me, or at the very least were vehicles of their own pleasure, my wetness or dryness a convenience or inconvenience only. But him, he turned it away from me. Not in spite, not in rejection, but in respect. I felt his cock and slowly it grew hard in my hands. It was very smooth. Smooth and almost fragile. Not a battering ram, not a sword to penetrate me, but a piece of him, exposed and vulnerable, sticking out from the safety of his body and trusting itself to the touch of my hand. I ran my fingers up and down, it stuck out trembling, hanging slightly down from his body, unlike most of the men that had plowed me before. Smooth and vulnerable. A piece of trust he placed in my hands.

"Kara," he whispered, but I did not say anything back. My fingers said all that I had to say. I felt him, cock pressed into my thigh then, I had turned him back, cock smooth and gentle and vulnerable. My other hand found his testicles and they were small and retracted against his body. I moved them in a slow, careful circle. It was as if he had laid a precious and fragile thing in my hand. His own insecurities, great enough to match my own in scope if not severity, were all there in my hand. His body was a mans, vicious and brutal, ready to rape and leave its seed in me, and yet his soul was gentle, ashamed of his body's violence, his cock's, wishing instead he were a pure body of warmth to save me, pure arms to hold me up.

"Argyl," I whispered, "I wish you inside me."

"Kara, Kara I cannot." He turned to take himself away from me, but I held on, turned him back.

"Master, you are the first, you are the only man to lie with me and not to rape me. You, I wish you inside me, Argyl, master, servant, whatever you are. I wish you inside me, I want it. I, not as a slave but as my own master, I want it inside me, I want it."

"Kara," he whispered, "I care for you. I do, I care deeply, you are totally unique and wonderful and loyal, but I cannot. I am no master, I am not, I am sworn to another, I cannot, even though she, I mean, I cannot Kara. I love you, I do. You are, you have saved me from myself or from her, you are wonderful and it feels wonderful for you to hold me Jade, I mean, it is not simple, but I cannot Kara, it is not fair for you or for her or me." He took himself from my hand.

"Please" I whispered, grasping at his manhood. "I wish it inside me. It is, it is an organ of mine that is missing. Not a weapon or a tool of your pleasure. I am not whole, master I am not whole, I need it to be me."

"Kara, Kara," he whispered into my ear, pulling his shorts up to his waist, crushing his hard



cock inside, "I wish it too, but, it cannot be. Not as master and slave. Not as husband and mistress. It cannot be like this. It is not fair to you. It is not fair to Jade."

"I love her too master, I would mate her too."

He took a breath before speaking. "Kara, I do not know, but this is not right, not now. Not while we are freezing and she is almost dead. I don't know Kara. I am so lonely. She, she, was an arranged marriage, did we tell you? I was the prince and she the duchess. They put us together and it was never right, and she, she took another man and, but, but that doesn't make it right for me. Not now, not like this. I will not make you my mistress. I will not let you accept being her second best, a secret with no real existence. You, you are a person whole as any other. You are, she, I don't know Kara, But not now, not like this."

I held him to me and said nothing. I held him to me and felt his hardness against my thigh and knew that he desired me as much as I him. Was that enough? Was that enough?

"Master, I mean, Argyl, I love you."

"Kara, I am so sorry. I am so sorry you have suffered as you have suffered. It is evil what they have done to you. It is evil. You are such a wonderful and pure being, such a pure soul, they have wronged you so. I hate them, you know that? I fought against them all my life, all the bastards that have done this to you, or would, or would take advantage, but, but it was never enough. Never enough. For every small victory a thousand armies came and multiplied. And we were so weak. So pure but so weak. We could not stand against the efficiency of tyranny. All for nothing."

"Master, not yet, you live, she lives, it is not done yet," I said, although I did not know of what he spoke.

"Kara, Kara please, just, let us just hold each other. No fucking, no lust to sully the moment. Let us just hold each other and be pure and love each other as human and human, not man and woman, not married man and slave girl. That is evil. But two humans, two humans holding each other in the cold to stay alive, that is something beautiful, and let us be beauty in the face of evil and tyranny."

"Mast, I mean, Argyl, there is nothing evil about your cock, or my cunt. Let us put them together, let us join as one perfect being in the face of everything, let us love each other."

He held me, for a long time, and I realized he was weeping, tears sliding from his eyes and down his cheeks onto mine. I held him for a long time. I wrapped my arms around him and we held each other, and we both wept then, and we held each other and in our shared warmth we wept.

We drifted in and out of sleep for a time. It had grown comfortably warm, warm enough that we might have dressed, but I enjoyed the sensation of his body. And enjoyed too the knowledge that his body enjoyed the sensation of mine, even if his mind was discomfited by this.

He was very thin. My lover had been soft and luscious against me, Jade had been firm but gentle, strong in a smooth form. Argyl was hard and angular. His hips and shoulders jutted from his body, his stomach alone was soft, and it only slightly bulged from his hard ribs.

He had forbidden me to touch him sexually, but desire still smoldered in me. I wanted this gentle man. I wished for him to dominate me, lead me from indecision and incompetence, stand me up to my master and slay him for me, slay him with kindness, anathema to the demon.

He was sleeping then, and heavily. His rising chest pressed gently against my breast. He had slipped his cock back into his hoes, and turned himself so his hip pressed into me. I put my hand on him, feeling through his hoes the shape. It stirred at my touch but he did not wake. I was used to strain and torture, he was not. His exhaustion must seem to his flesh extreme.

Gently, I pulled him out. He was quickly fully erect beneath the touch of my naked hand. It was a long smooth arc, and I traced my fingers against it, not to masturbate him, but just to feel him, to touch with my fingers what seemed so strange to me. Was I simply so used to abuse that finding a man who didn't was a curiosity. Like a strange bug I wanted to poke and prod to life? Did I love him? A moment ago I had been sure, now not. I did not love him as I loved my lover, or had loved my lover or, but leave it.

Why should it matter that she had sent me away? I the willless one. Why was I not simply happy to obey? I had whored myself for my first master, I had been tortured and raped by my second, I had slain for my third, my current, one of my current masters, what? Why was I not happy to obey her? Was she my second master? But she had not bonded me, it made no sense. And yet, and yet.

His testicles were soft now, warmer. I cupped them in my hand and he moaned a little. I froze but he did not wake. I took again his cock and simply held it. It was neither huge nor small. I held it and it throbbed gently. I held it and felt that I was holding something precious. Something vulnerable and fragile, that I might brake him with a squeeze of my hand, a bite of my teeth.

## CHAPTER 15

I drifted into sleep sometime then, I do not know how long, but when I woke his now flaccid penis still rested in my hand. There was a soft and very dim light, and I could see Argyl's chest slowly rise and fall in sleep, the outline of my hand holding him. And on the other side of him, Jade. Was she sleeping? She barely moved. I could see her nude chest rise and fall, the silhouette of her breasts.

I released Argyl slowly and gently replaced his hose. They fit only loosely, which helped. My muscles were sore but warm and not cramped. I was able to move almost gingerly. I put a knee and an arm between them, there was just enough room, then slid the blankets over me and, switching hands, over her. I maneuvered my weight so that I landed besides her, and tucked the blankets about me. I put my body next to her to warm her. She was not cold, but was cooler than me. The ground beneath me was soft and slightly damp, but warm.

I felt her pulse on her neck and it was weak but steady. Her splints were gone and I could not make out any bruises in the dim light. I kissed her forehead and took her hand in mine. She did not stir. My heart thrilled to hold her hand and body, I wrapped my other hand about her chest just below her breasts. A strong woman made weak by circumstance. I watched her sleep for a long time, the rise and fall of her chest, the tiny twitches of her eyes beneath their lids.

At some point I slipped into sleep. Again I did not dream.

I woke to Jade stirring. She had rolled in her sleep so that we lay in an embrace, arms wrapped about each other, breasts pressed to breast.

"What, what are you, what are you?" she mumbled.

"Mistress, I do not understand." Her eyes came open and I realized she had been sleeping still.

"What?" She said, releasing me but not pushing me away.

"Mistress, are you cold, do you hurt?"

"What? Oh. No, I am not cold. I feel, I feel very tired but not pain."

"I am glad, mistress, I feared for you."

"I'll bet."

"Jade," Argyl said.

She turned to him. "Oh, Argyl how, I mean, are you okay? I thought they had killed you. I--."

"No, I am okay. What do you remember last?"

"Um, why are we naked?"

"They, your clothes were lost. And it's better when you are freezing not to wear much, creates more warmth in the insulated space, and Kara, she had only her dress."

"Um. Okay. As long as you didn't fuck her."

"I didn't."

"I wanted him to mistress, but he would not."

"Fuck," she said harshly, and they were both quiet. I felt tension. How do we sense these things?

"Mistress, I,"

"Shut up." I did.

"You should have Argyl. Serve me fucking right."

"Jade."

"Why the fuck do we have her with us anyway?"

"Jade, please."

“Fuck.”

“Mistress, I, I am not a, I am a slave mistress, I do not count. To sleep with me, I am not a woman who is a threat to you, I am a slave.”

They were both quiet.

“Fuck,” Jade said again.

“Kara,” Argyl started.

“No” interrupted Jade. She turned to face me, put her hand on my side just above my hip.

“Kara, look, you are not a slave.”

“Mistress,”

“No no, you just said you wanted to fuck my husband, that means I get to be mad and hateful. But no, you think you are a slave, less than human. But listen. Argyl does not believe in slavery. Not just that he doesn't think it is just, but that he doesn't believe it is real. Practically speaking, it's too fine a distinction for me. But for us, you are not a slave. I let you call me mistress because I thought it was funny. But I was wrong. It isn't. You're fucked up Kara, they fucked you up. But you're not a slave. You're a woman just like me. So. Don't. Fuck. My. Husband. Okay?”

“Mistress,”

“No. No mistress. Fuck.”

“Jade.”

“No! Okay, it needs to be fair.” She turned to him. “Argyl, it needs to be fair.”

“Jade, don't,”

“No,” she turned back to me. “One time. I cheated, he can cheat. One time. Only one time. He can fuck you one time and that's it. And I don't ever want to know about it.”

“Jade,”

“Mistress,”

“Don't fucking call me that. My name is Jade.”

I stared at her.

“Jade, I,” I had nothing to say, I stared at her.

“Jade, I am not going to fuck her. I, it's okay. It was a long time ago now.”

“You hate me for it.”

“I don't hate you for it.”

“Well fuck you, you should.”

“No, Jade.”

“Mistress, I mean, Jade, please don't fight with him because of me. I have a lover already. I don't know, but I love you and I don't want this for you. My body, it, I don't know.” I was weeping and she took me into her arms. Why was I weeping? A cold stone floor, the blows to my back, weeping and they beat me, and my lover, but leave it. I couldn't stop. There was an ocean of unshed tears, and I shuddered in Jade's arms as I shook, the terror of those first beatings, those first invasions, the first drops held back. My purpose to be fucked, my purpose to be fucked, to be used. They beat my body on that cold stone floor.

“Kara Kara Kara,” she said. Argyl was silent. I wept and she held me. “We do this too much Kara. I am so sorry for what they've done to you.”

My voice spoke as another would. “Mistress, Jade, Mistress, I am lost mistress. If I am not a slave what am I? If, I have done, I have killed. If I killed for myself, not for my master, what am I? I am a beast, a monster.” My hands on the woman's throat, her skin clammy in the sticky gel. The spray of blood onto my body, the man's life pouring onto me and me the killer.

“Shhh,” she said. Then “Fuck. Argyl, you, fuck.” She was weeping too then. “Just don't fuck

him, okay?"

"Mist, Jade, I will obey."

"No, don't obey! Just do it, don't obey just fucking do it."

"I do not understand." My strange voice was tiny, thin. My mind retreating into darkness, floating back into nothing. My hate will make me strong, my hate is pure, hate for the whole fucking world. But this soft body, this weeping woman who wept for my suffering, I could not hate. A breach through which an ocean raged.

"Fuck," she said for the last time. Argyl was silent too. "She betrayed us Argyl." She pulled me closer, my sobs slowing, my mind exhausted and slowing. "When the brutes, when that man, she knew him, she swore allegiance to him. She called him master." I was weeping too hard to respond. I buried myself in her and shook with my tears.

"Jade, it must have been a trick. When I came she stabbed that man, she broke his spell and must have killed him. We all would have died, I came to save you but it was, I had no real chance, I am no swordsman."

"I thought you were dead," Jade said quietly. There were tears in her voice, but she did not shed them.

"No, I killed the man who chased me. He was big but stupid, I choked him. I took his sword. When I saw that brute knock you down, I came to save you." He put his arm around her and she took his hand and pulled it over her, between us. It was quiet for a time, but not uncomfortably so. I pulled myself closer to Jade and felt the dampness of our tears in her hair.

"Mistress, Jade, I still do not understand. Sex with me should no more be a threat to you than you fucking me should be to him."

"Um. I'm not sure that makes sense."

"Mistress,"

"No, okay. Kara, you can't just go around fucking everyone. I mean, people don't.

Argyl is married. I'm married. You don't do that without consequences. It's not, sex is like that. I'm not into girls anyway."

I understood the form, but--

"Out loud, Kara."

"Yes Mistress. I understand the form of it, of monogamy. But, but I am the slave. It is my function, I do not count, I ought not to count. Slave or not, it is my function. You might as well be angry at a dildo. I could not be a lover, I wish to be fucked, to serve my function for my, for people who I like, that I respect, that I would serve."

"You are not a slave, Kara. Not to us."

"But, it is my function none the less."

It was quiet for a while.

"Kara, it might be different. I am not, I am not a very good wife. I'm no prude, you know. I mean, I am not a jealous woman. But don't fuck him. I am a bad wife. I cheated on him, I was very stupid. It's hard, it's harder than just sex. Maybe, in a different time or place, or if we were happier, if it wasn't always so damn hard."

"I am happy Jade." Argyl said.

"No."

It was awkward and quiet for a time. I felt Jade breath, enjoyed the press of her breasts and stomach against me. She seemed very tired. She seemed very beautiful. Strong, vulnerable only now, brought low by circumstance. The opposite of me. Invulnerable in my fortress of cynicism and hate, weak in body and in will.

“Kara,”

“Yes Mis-- Jade.

“I'm sorry I was angry.”

“Mistress, I deserved it”

“No, I was the one who was weak.”

“No, Mistress. You are strong. You are your own woman, you have respect. From men, but more you have your own. I am small and lost without a master's will. Need a master's will to know to wipe my ass. I am a nothing, a vehicle of another's will. A mechanism. You are the master, I am a slave, just a slave no matter. My will, at best my will to prefer a master to another. To prefer to serve my lover to my demon, to prefer you and Argyl to whoring. My pathetic will, to be fucked by a man that he might own me and protect me, that I might discern myself in his will for me, master or no. You are very beautiful.” Pulling back, I traced her body, her stomach, hips and breasts with my fingers. Then held her hand to the scar where my breast had been.

“I am not whole. This broken body was not mine, it was made for me. Made by a slave of my master, himself my master. A slave's slave. Made to be fucked and abused, to serve no function but to masturbate a master's vain will.” They were quiet a moment when I finished speaking. I wonder if it was I who had spoken. I felt that it was my body, not myself, that I was buried further inside myself than the mind that formed those words.

“I am so sorry Kara” she said after a time. She had rolled to face me. She put her arm on my waist. Carefully not sexual, but close still. I took her hand in mine and, hesitating, she took it.

Her back to Argyl I realized, who had been quiet. He turned himself to face away from her.

## CHAPTER 16

When I woke again Argyl was gone and Jade was sleeping soundly. She had thrown off the blanket; it was quiet warm, and we lay half exposed. I checked her pulse, which seemed stronger if not strong. The light was slightly brighter, and I realized we were in a low cavern. There was only one way out, so I stooped and made my way into the larger chamber that lay beyond, full of weathered boulders, stalagmites and stalactites. The cave seemed to stretch on forever in each direction, but the light was coming from a hole partway up the cavern.

As I approached the light I could hear Argyl arguing with the tree man. The larger cavern had been cooler than our hovel, and the chill air blowing in from the entrance made me regret not putting on my dress.

“We must leave, you have, we cannot stay here.”

“You are of the mountain now. You were of the mountain and will be of the mountain.”

“We are people,” he said each word carefully. “We are only of ourselves. We must leave.”

The brown hulk of a man shook his head. “You will of the forest been. You of the mountain have been will.”

“We must go!” Argyl raised his voice and stepped forwards. The brown man shoved him back, seeming to use no effort to send him sprawling back onto the cave floor. I lunged at him before I had thought and wrenched my arm about his throat. I squeezed as hard as I could, enough to strangle I'm sure, but it was like trying to squeeze the life from a block of wood. I remember being very calm, as if I were separate from my body, commanding it as an automation. He spun, trying to reach inflexible hands behind himself. Another ill formed brute, this one black, his features barely hinted at in his form, was on me then. I tried pathetically to spin the man I held to the ground, Instead, the second man lifted me into the air and casually hurled me back into the cave.

I was in the air for what seemed an impossible time, dread of the collision growing in me, a strange vertigo overwhelming my senses. It was as a dream, time suspended, my body, not my own, hurtling towards harm. Luckily I landed on my back, although my head knocked the stone and my dizziness increased. I scraped my back on a loose stone and lost feeling in my right shoulder and arm.

Argyl was to me before I had stopped sliding. His eyes darted over me quickly, looking for damage I supposed.

“What hurts?”

“My arm and shoulder are numb, my back is scraped, my head.”

“Can you sit?”

With help I could. He checked my head first, then shoulder and back.

“Only your back is bleeding, and its more skinned than cut. Can you move your fingers?”

I managed to wiggle them a little.

“It feels more like needles now than numbness. My head hurts, I feel dizzy.”

He angled my head towards the mouth of the cave and looked carefully at my eyes. There were four tree men now, three facing us and the last away. The outside was bright and I could not make out much, but thought I saw little black figures, the size of small dogs, out beyond the men.

“I don't think you have a concussion, or at least not a bad one And I don't think your arm is broken, but we need to be careful just in case. Can you walk do you think?”

I tried to rise but faltered over my numb hand. He helped me up carefully, and I was able to stay standing with only a little dizziness. The black forms were the roach-like insects I had seen

before. They were amassing in a semi-circle around the tree men. Hundreds of them at least.

"Let's get back to Jade," he whispered, "and figure out what to do."

"Yes Master," I said absently. I could walk on my own, but he offered his arm to steady me and I did not refuse it. Jade was awake when we crawled into the small cavern where we had slept. She leaned against the side, a blanket pulled up about her.

"What happened?" she asked, worried.

"They won't let us leave," Argyl said, then to me, "Lay down here on your stomach." I did so.

"Is she okay?" Jade was leaning over me.

"I'm not badly hurt, mistress."

"I'm mostly worried about infection," Argyl said. "Kara, this will sting a little."

He plastered something cold along the scrape, and it did indeed sting, but not badly, and it quickly grew warm.

"We're not proving very good at this adventuring stuff," suggested Jade.

"Heh," Argyl responded.

"Mistress, with our enemies, it is good that we are alive at all."

She shrugged and said nothing.

"I wish I had a bandage for this."

"There's a knife in the bag, we could cut a blanket."

"Maybe, not yet."

"Did they attack?"

"No, she did."

"Kara, you should at least have gotten dressed."

"Yes mistress."

Argyl was still working my back and I enjoyed the sensation of his fingers.

"Leaving isn't really practical anyway, we'd freeze. How much food do we have?"

"A few days," Argyl said.

"Water?"

"Less, very little."

"Okay. How long until her cut is healed?"

"Um, the only real danger is infection. It's pretty long and wide, but not deep. She could move now, although she'll be stiff. I'm more worried about the arm, I'd like to see how it is in a couple hours."

"Okay. I say she rests here then. You explore the cave. Finding water is the most important thing, but there may be other exists too. I'm going to try to rig one of these blankets into clothes of some kind. I don't fancy running around naked as much as Kara here seems to."

"Okay. Let the poultice stay on her skin and exposed to the air. I'll clean it up when I get back."

"Okay."

He went out. After a moment Jade shifted to her knees and, after giving me a glance, pulled the blanket off herself. Her skin was very pale in the dim light and she was very beautiful. I watched her.

"Like what you see?" she asked sarcastically.

"Yes mistress, you are very beautiful."

She snorted, then paused and looked at me.

"Well thank you." She experimented with wrapping the blanket about her in a few ways, although she did not seem satisfied with any of them.



“Mistress?”

“What Kara?”

“Mistress, when I was a young whore, we wore cloth wraps.”

She regarded me a moment, then, “okay, teach me how to dress like a whore.”

That she could not stand made it more difficult, but I managed after a few tries. Her skin was smooth and warm against my fingers.

“Did you enjoy that?” Her tone was sharp.

“Mistress, yes. The wrap is such that it will come undone if you pull your shoulders too forwards. Also, it was customary to show more of the breasts.”

She looked down at herself. “It is very flattering. I don't think I could run or fight, but that's okay, I'll just stun our enemies with my beauty and you and Argie can run 'em all through.”

“Yes mistress.” I dropped my eyes and kneeled.

“Are you doing that just to piss me off?”

“No mistress, I accept your anger as just and subjugate myself to it.”

“No, don't. Bitch at me. Tell me how you want to fuck my husband and take him from me and how you're not sorry you fondled his cock when you thought he was sleeping. Yes I know, he feigned sleep but he told me.”

I felt my face burn with shame, and I bowed lower, pressing my face to the floor before her feet.

“Get up.”

“Yes mistress,” I scampered up to my knees.

“Look at me.”

It was hard, I hesitated, then looked into her eyes. They were very crisp and sharp with anger.

“Look. Kara. I like you. I really do. You've had the shittiest life I've ever even heard of. I don't blame you for being fucked up. For not knowing how to be around people. You've saved my life once already and tried to a few more times. Thank you. Really. I'd like to be your friend. But you are not a slave or a whore anymore. You are a woman. An equal among equals. That means you don't fuck my husband. You don't fondle him. You don't run around naked all the time so he can ogle you. Okay?”

Tears were in my eyes but none fell.

“Yes mistress,” my voice cracked but I got it out.

“Okay. Thank you. Also, you don't fuck me either, okay? You don't seduce me. You don't have to fuck anyone.”

“Yes mistress.”

She looked at me. Tears streamed from my eyes but I did not sob. I felt very small beneath her gaze, like I was shrinking into nothing. A bad dog desperate to please her master.

“Okay, thank you.” She was less sarcastic now. “Rest now, try to sleep. I am going to walk around the cave a little, stretch my legs and explore.”

“Yes mistress.”

I did lay down but sleep was long in coming. I heard Jade stoop out of the small space.

What I did was not exactly thinking. I replayed it in my mind, the feel of his cock, of her hips and breasts, the rage in her voice, what I was sure was disappointment in his. I was sure I loved them both, wished to be with them both. And her rage cut me, rent the muscles from my bones. I was ashamed. My heart had betrayed me. My heart was a black and tarred thing, unacceptable to the world. I was an injured bird, a pretty songbird with a crushed wing to be pitied and nursed. Not a woman to be loved. I wept, not hard but steadily, for a long time, and then sleep claimed

me.

Again, I did not dream. Or rather, I dreamt of nothing, some colors perhaps, abstract and undecipherable.

## CHAPTER 17

I woke thinking of my suicide. I thought it was a warm sharp thing, a dark beyond the scope of reason, a thousand small and tangled threads dropped into insignificance. I felt that I had been dreaming a long time, caught up in the lust and passion of my lover, of my friends. Giddy, then numb. Stumbling through the tasks of everyday like some ridiculous automation. But beneath, my suicide. To wrest control of my life from the vain and petty outrages of fickle masters. To throw up against the absurd hurt and horror of the world the simple inarguable end of self.

I was alone in the small hovel. My arm was very stiff and my head ached badly. There had been a knife in one of the bags. I could use it to die. I reached for the bag above my head and my shoulder popped loudly, but felt better after. The bag of tar was gone. I checked both bags but it was not where it had been. I searched through the loose blankets but it was not there either. I was willing to feel the pain, to suffer it. But could my body plunge the blade knowing what pain would follow? It was, I realized, a moot point. The knife was gone as well.

I wrapped one of the blankets around me, I wasn't sure if my back needed to be cleaned before I could wear my dress, and crawled out of the small chamber. Jade was sitting on a low rock just outside, and turned to me as I came out.

"Mistress," I said, and tears were in my eyes again. She looked at me and then sighed.

"Okay, lets get you dressed hun. Let me see your back."

I dropped the blanket and turned away from her. She used her fingers to pull the dried poultice from my back.

"It looks pretty good. Does it hurt?"

"Only a little mistress, when I move my back."

"Good," she said. She walked before me and crawled into the space. I felt self-conscious, standing there naked. Not from my nudity, but from remembering Jade's words. I saw Argyl some ways up the cave, not quite at the entrance but closer. He seemed to be carefully not looking at me.

"Here you go hun," Jade said. I tried to pull the dress on, but my shoulder popped and would not bend far enough, so Jade helped. The boots were easier, and I stuffed the mask and gloves into the bosom when she handed them to me. She smiled a little at this. The clean whirling and snapping of a machine, arm up, dress on, life lived.

"We're going to move deeper into the cave," she said. "We think it'll be safer, and there's water."

"Yes mistress," I said softly. I stupidly could not meet her eyes. Better not to think of that. She seemed to consider me a moment, sighed, and walked towards Argyl. I meekly followed. He nodded at me as we approached, but I did not meet his eyes. Instead, I looked out the entrance.

There were more of the tree men now, maybe thirty in all. They were all colors, greens, browns, even some deep purples and blues. They were all the same, as if they were stamped by some machine, huge hulking impressions of men, as if a sculptor had ended after hewing out the rough form.

Only a few were faced in towards us. They seemed to watch us, although they had not eyes. The rest faced outwards, forming a semi-circle around the cave and patch of trees. And beyond them, thousands and thousands of the black bugs. Carrion bugs, giant roaches with strange dead eyes. Some flitted back and forth over a few inches of space, but most stood stock still, cleaning their mandibles or antennae. Shriveled eyes.

And among them stood a gray robbed man. His face concealed by a hood, his form leaning

heavily on a cane, but I knew him. Archmagio. I started back.

“Do you know them?” Argyl asked.

“Archmagio,” I said, “they are servants of my master”.

“That's the name you used with that fop in the woods,” Jade said.

“Yes.”

“That's not the same man.”

“Mistress, it is, he is a servant of my master, as I am sure the bugs are. They come for me.”

She considered for a moment. “Well fuck.”

“Do you think the tree men will stop them?” he asked.

Nobody said anything.

“Do you think you will stop them?” he asked again, this time to the brown splotched man who I had first met.

“They are not of the forest, or of the mountain. They are not.”

“Huh.” he said. We watched the bugs amassing for a moment. Then he added, “We should go.”

He walked back to the chamber we had been sleeping in. After a short moment Jade followed and I followed her, dropping my gaze to her feet. They were bare still.

Argyl rigged up the two remaining saddle bags so that he and I could each shoulder one. To Jade he rigged up the blankets, which were not as heavy. He had discarded anything he didn't think we needed, so they were not too heavy.

The cave had a dim luminescence, even but very dark, so that everything seemed hazy. I could just see the outline of the cave, which seemed a huge cavern tapering slowly inwards as we descended. I could make out Jade before me, but barely. The effect was not dissimilar to the tar, I felt dizzy and removed from the world. My thoughts were fuzzy, my head ached lightly but persistently.

It seemed to go on forever. Staring at Jade's bare feet, the cave floor seemed very smooth, and stumbling forwards forwards forwards. The cave walls closed in until we could only walk single file. The grade too became steeper until I had to turn my feet sideways to keep from falling. We stopped a few times. They offered me water and jerked meat. They must have found water somewhere. It tasted faintly of clay, but was drinkable.

They did not speak. It seemed tense between them, and I wondered if Jade had spoken to Argyl as she had spoken to me. He was polite to me, but seemed more distant than he had been.

I thought of my suicide. The knife had been missing, but one of them must have it. Perhaps I would have to wait for some other opportunity. A chasm in the cave to hurl myself into, a river in which to drown myself. Or my master's minions would catch and murder me. But they were dull thoughts, reliefs carved into the haze of my mind.

At some point later we stopped. The intervening time seemed only an impossible vertigo, a whole of time, a series of moments impossibly the same as every other one, no progression and no time, simple a single moment infinitely deep.

We spread out the blankets but it had become quite warm inside the mountain, so we lay on top of them rather than inside of them. We all slept several feet from each other. None of us undressed. We spent the next day stumbling down into the mountain and not speaking. I kept watching Jade's body sway in the dim and impossible light. Her figure danced back and forth to some unheard song, our forwards momentum lost in the hypnotism of step after step after step.

It seemed an army of hands assaulted us and I cowered back suddenly, only to realized that

they were simply hand prints on the wall. Some of the fingers had been broken, it seemed, as they jutted at odd angles. They fluttered in and out of sight, my eyes barely able to discern them in the dim light. Next a group of antelope and gazelle, pursued by lions, loped along besides us.

"It's remarkable," said Argyl.

"Master, it makes little sense."

In the dim light the figures seemed to move and flicker before us.

"How so?" Jade asked.

"These animals, they do not live so far north." There was no response.

The way grew even steeper. At one point there was a drop of five or so feet. Argyl was able to lower himself, but Jade's tight fitting wrap prevented her, although she had hiked up the legs so that she could walk more normally. I was able to lower her down into Argyl's arms.

"I'd almost rather be naked than helpless," she said.

"Yes mistress," I had responded. She looked at me for a time, but I could not make out her expression in the dim light.

At one point I stumbled down a passage, slipping on the steep and slippery rock and sliding into Jade's legs. She managed not to fall, and helped me to my feet. She said nothing, but held my hand as we descended, until the slope eased. My heart thrilled at the touch. She was kind, allowing her fingers to linger some moments after I had regained my balance.

We came then upon a river. It cut directly across the path, and beyond it the chamber opened into a larger chasm. Argyl leaned down before it and put in a finger. Drawing it forth he smelled it.

"Huh," he said.

"What is it?" Jade asked.

"Smells like wine."

"Huh," she said.

He cupped a little in his hand, brought it to his lips and tasted it, just a little.

"Yep. Wine."

"Fuck."

"Yeah."

Jade crouched with some difficulty, and scooped a mouthful.

"A little too sweet, but not bad. Seems white."

"Yeah. I don't really know all that much about wine."

"I think the fact that it exists is more important than the variety of wine."

"Let's keep going."

The wine river was not deep, and we waded across easily. We came across another painting. Three nude women held hands in dance. Their stomachs swelled as if pregnant. The figures were primitive but seemed almost alive in the dim light. The sloping cave floor gradually transformed into shallow steps, and the artwork appeared more regularly. It also grew more obscene, until it seemed a series of instructions of exotic and improbable sexual positions. They grew more realistic as well, as if as we descended we walked forwards through eons, from the primitive palm plants of a crazed medicine man, to the sophisticated sexual abandon of an advanced civilization.

I cannot relate them in more detail as I hardly paid attention to them. My eyes stayed downcast except for quick glances. I was a daze of sorts, lost behind vague and imprecise perceptions, an unthinking mind dully plodding behind a beautiful and curved form that descended through a vague darkness. Jade, walking before me, kept glancing back at me, but

whether to check and see if I kept up or for some other reason I did not know.

The stairs gradually became more sharply cut and steep. I stumbled on one, and Jade caught me as I stumbled down a few steps. I doubt I really would have fallen.

“You okay hun? You seem, distracted.”

“Mistress, I, I feel as though I am dreaming.”

“Yeah, the light here is funny. You going to be okay?”

“I think so mistress.”

“Good.”

She took my hand then and helped me down a few steps. Her hand was warmer than mine. I followed her easily, letting her hand guide me and drifting after her. I felt that I was floating. The cave, my master, my suicide, they seemed distant, like a fine cloud had settled over them, softening them. I could leap from the stairs. They were steep enough that I would fall some ways and likely crack my spine on the hard stone. But to hold that warm hand, to drift down after Jade, was easier. Surrender to the dream and vagueness of that stumbling journey.

“Mistress,” I heard myself mumble, “I only wish to please you. I, I am very sorry I have wronged so. I feel very lost.” But my words were too soft, she did not hear.

“Oh,” Jade said as the cave flattened and opened up before us.

“It's beautiful,” said Argyl. I stumbled down and Jade steadied me, then changed her mind and helped me sit. Below us was what seemed a city. The strange luminescent stone had been carved into buildings that snaked about several chasms in the stone. The paths meandered naturally, as if they had been cut by water. The buildings were several stories high, and stone footholds had been built into the sides so people could climb to the higher doors. The structures showed signs of wear, corners were crumbling, in some instances footholds were chipped or missing

The longer I looked at the city in the dim light, the more it seemed to swim and flutter in my vision. Tiny specs of light danced to and fro, and the constancy of lines seemed dubious, as if the standard way in which rocks and angles worked was suspended there.

I realized I was rocking, my eyes hanging half open, leaning, leaning to left, into Jade's legs.

“We better stop for a bit,” she said. Argyl turned to us, his eyes darted down to me, and worry crossed his face.

“Eat some more,” he said, offering me some more of the meat. I took it and absently put it into my mouth.

They were talking then, but it was too hard to concentrate on the words, so I just sat, rocking. I should be saying my mantra, but it seemed too far from where and who I was, so I just left my mind empty.

The images about me seemed to loom and move. A woman shrieked in the excitement of orgasm, a man guided his cock carefully to maximize her pleasure, two women felt each other's with their fingers, a man blew another man as he crouched and held his own sex. The shapes took an inhuman form, a wing here, a beak, a claw and hooved foot. They seemed to dance about me, mocking me, fucking openly to shame me.

“Kara,” Jade said. She was holding my shoulders and I thought she had been speaking my name. Was is my name? She had been speaking that name to me for a time.

“Mistress,”

“Can you walk?”

“Yes mistress,” I said, but stumbled as I stood. She held my hand and I managed to steady myself.

Can you take the blankets Argie?” she said.

“Sure,” he said, though he seemed to struggle with them a little. Jade took my arm and draped it around herself, so that I could lean on her. I felt very small, and very lost, and leaned my weight on her and she became the only piece of me that was in reality at all. I felt her bare feet against the cool stone, felt my dead weight dragging along, but that was all.

“Things just seem to keep getting more perverted as we go,” she said at some point. All about me there was fucking. Bulls mounted on men and women, harpies fucking lizards, women masturbating themselves as gods and demons watched.

“Perversion,” said a strange cultivated voice, and one of the beast men seemed to walk before me, the legs and hooves and horns of a goat, the face, body and cock of a man. A cock that hung huge but flaccid between the scratchy fur of his goat's legs.

“Perversion,” he started again, “is the murder, the torture you surfacers commit, the suffering of your world. Not good old fashioned fucking.”

“Um,” Jade said, and I stumbled as she stopped walking.

“We meant no offense, sir, we did not realize we could be heard.”

“We,” the voice said, and the picture seemed to move off the wall and stand before us, “do not take offense. Welcome to our city! You have no need for violence, friends, we are prepared to submit to you, sexually, in whatever way or combination you might desire.”

“Um,” Jade said again.

“That, um, we, that will not be necessary, my friend. We are, we are travelers only, we are seeking, we are passing through,” Argyle managed to stammer out.

He grinned big. “Well, that's just great. Really wonderful. Not that we would have minded the sex, but it's always nice to meet friendly people. Sure you wouldn't like, you know, anything?”

“Er, no, thank you, but no. Do you, um, do you have any water?”

“Oh sure. We can get you a room. Come on.”

Jade and Argyle looked at each other for a moment, then we were moving forwards again, down into the city, following the satyr. I leaned on Jade heavily, enjoying the press of her body more than I felt I should. But I was too tired to stop. Her arm around me too seemed more familiar to me as well, as though her hostility had melted into pity. Or, or something else. My head hurt and I stumbled on.

“I'd take you for a tour, but ya'll seem pretty worn. Did you come all the way down from the surface?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Wow, that's far!” He was earnest and unguarded and made me feel awkward for him. He did not seem to notice or mind however.

Lights streamed and danced around us as we walked. They seemed almost human, bright little lights in human form, naked little men and women peering at us, skittish, zipping away before we could fully see them.

“Here,” he said at last. “Can you climb?”

He was looking at me.

“Sir, yes I think so. I am very far away.”

“Yes, I can tell.” He walked before me. Jade tensed and hauled me up. He put a hand, human but covered in thick black hair, up to my chest and placed it where my severed breast had been. I felt a tingling run through my from my touch,

“You,” he said, “have suffered much.”

I looked up at him. His eyes were dark and deep, and seemed to hold all the suffering of the world in them.

“You, you are very beautiful. A dark skinned beauty. Is that racist?”

“No sir,” I said, or rather, my voice said. I was floating far away.

“You have a lover who is far away, but she loves you truly, and, how did you lose your breast?”

“Sir, it was cut from me.”

“Ah. Well, our mistress may be able to heal that. She is very powerful.”

“Sir, I do not understand.”

“Later,” he said. “A piece of you, it has been cut away.”

“I have been told, sir, but I do not remember.”

“I can restore it for you. But, ah, but it has been done for you, not for them, so perhaps I should not. You lover, she is a tree?”

“She, I love, yes, sir, but she sent me away.”

“But she loves you, it, she could not come. You confuse yourself. The abominations above, at the cave, they are not as trees are. Your lover spoke true.”

I was weeping. Heavy tears that heaved themselves from my eyes and fell heavy against the stone floor.

“You were made for sex, my dear. Madam. Mistress, for I would serve you as you would serve your companions. Madam, you were made for sex. Do not blame your body for the evil of others. The surfacers, they are perverse in their repression of themselves. They make monstrosities of their sex. They rape and kill, enslave and torment their kind as we once did, before our great lord came. But it is no fault of yours. It is no fault of your sex. The fault is theirs.”

“Sir, I do not understand.”

“No, you are far far gone. Time, though, your friends here, they are pure of heart. They will aid you.”

“Sir, yes sir, I love them.”

“Yes, it is right that you do. I will help how I can.”

“Sir, thank you.”

“Madam, thank you.”

“What?” said Jade, and I realized we had not been speaking aloud as her voice cut through my thought.

“Mistress, I am sorry. I am well, I only need to rest a moment.”

“Indeed, here, I will show you in,” said our Satyr guide. He climbed with impossible nimbleness, given his hooved feet, and Argyl, after a glance at Jade, followed.

“Go on hun, I'll catch you if you fall,” Jade said to me. I don't particularly remember climbing, but I stumbled into the room with the two men and Jade stepped in after me.

The room was chiseled of white stone. A single large bed, stone but topped with a thick mattress, lay in the center, and a low stone bench was besides it. A small table, of wood rather than stone, sat surrounded by four stools. Opposite the bed there was a deep bath filled with steaming water. Two fountains were cut into the wall, each bubbled with liquid, one as clear as water, the other a dark red.

“This one is water, the other is wine. It's not, alas, the best wine. But it's not terrible either, it'll get the job done. The bath is safe, it is fed by a spring and has been carved so the water refreshes constantly. It's big enough for four, so you should be able to all get cozy in it. I'll go get some food for you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Argyl said, nodding at the satyr.



“Yes, our delight!” he responded, then descended the ladder, pulling shut a curtain that covered the door.

“What the fuck just happened?” asked Jade. Argyle looked back at her, almost smiling.

“Not sure.”

“Are you okay hun?” Jade asked, lowering my pack to the floor.

“Mistress,” I felt my brows furrow, “I, he spoke of my lover, I had thought, I had thought she had sent me away, but he spoke of her. I am, yes, I am well, mistress. I, how may I serve you mistress?”

She sighed. “By not calling me mistress first of all. Call me Jade hun.” She put her hand on my shoulders.

“Yes Jade. I know, I didn't.”

“It's okay,” she said kindly.

I sat on the bed and stared quietly at the floor.

“So,” Jade said. Argyl turned away from the wine fountain.

“They don't seem to be hostile anyway,” he said, “and Kara here needs some rest even if we didn't. Which I do anyway. I'm not used to all this walking, and those stairs were rough.”

“What about those bugs?”

“I don't know. Kara, do you think they will get past those tree monstrosities?”

“Argyl, I am not sure. I think it, I do not know.”

“Well,” Jade said, “they'll slow them down at least, and we won't make it much further without finding food and water. Maybe the Satyr will help us. What did he say to you Kara?”

“Mistress? I mean, Jade?”

“When he spoke to you.”

“He, we spoke of my lover. Jade.”

“You don't have to say my name every time you address me.”

“Yes Jade.”

She smirked but said nothing. The curtain pulled aside then and the satyr entered. With him were two female satyrs, also naked, with large hairy breasts. They both stumbled a little, as if drunk. They had with them three large silver treys. They placed them on the table. One had a large roasted fowl on it, the other two a variety of dishes that seemed highly improbable so deep underground. Steamed greens, pastries, other things I did not know what.

“Thank you for your kindness,” Argyl said. “My name is Argyl, this is my wife Jade and our companion Kara. We are very grateful for your hospitality.”

All three of them beamed giddy smiles.

“Sir, madam, madam,” the male said, address each in turn. “We are delighted with your company, and hope, sincerely, that your stay with us is a pleasure you will remember you whole life. I am Achten, these are my friends Laylie and Bella. You are in the city of Agalaka, which is a stupid name but a wonderful place. There are not so many of us here, but we are all happy to help you.”

“It is our pleasure, Achten. Will you please dine with us?”

“Absolutely! But first, wine. Wine wine!” He took an empty cup from one of the treys and filled it from the fountain. He held it out to me, and I stared at it for a moment, then took it. He started singing in words I did not understand, but his deep baritone filled the room with pretty song that made me think of fields and sun and joyful, free love. One of the women joined him in the chorus, and I drifted in their song and felt lighter, happier somehow. My suicide waited for me, secure, knowing I would return. But it was far away, and the song and food and wine close,

and the memory of Jade's body against mine, holding my weight as we stumbled down the endless stairs, and I smiled and drank the wine and swam in it.

We gorged ourselves on the food. The satyrs ate with us, drinking and singing and telling jokes, all of them dirty and none of them funny save the joyous way in which they were told. As we finished our meal they rubbed wet fingers over their wine glasses, making a beautiful ringing sound that filled and reverberated through the room. I felt lost in it, as if the echoes left ripples through my dazed thoughts, vibrating colors and patterns across my consciousness. The female, I did not remember which was her name, sang a sweet sad song. I did not understand the words, but it made my heart ache for my lover, and I wondered at the satyr's words.

He said she loved me, that she had done what she had for me. I remembered her, her body, her soft embrace, her tears at our parting, and the music carried me and I drifted in it. The touch of her body, the wonderful orgasms that had ripped me from the stupor of obedience to a terrible master. Is that what it had been? Had she freed me? Or did I walk enthralled still?

I grew very tired, and lay back on the bed. I felt gentle hands grasp me, and I opened my eyes and saw Jade above me. She pulled me up onto the bed the bed proper and rested my head on a pillow. I drifted and very quickly was asleep.

In my dream my lover pressed her firm strong body to mine. Cradled in her tree, we floated gently in empty black space. Stars and nebula filled our vision and faded softly into one another, a great purple and red blur, punctuated with bright little pricks of light.

“Love my love my love I am so sorry so sorry.”

I was weeping and she was covering me with kisses. I shut my eyes and drifted into her, her warmth, the sensation of dry pressed lips. I was weeping but felt joy, not sadness, an explosion of light within my closed eyes.

“You sent me away, you did not come.” The words seemed thin, the inane prattle of a badly written drama.

“My love my love, I am my true form. Those, things, they are abominations. They are forest, but not. I am not as they.”

I felt no relief and realized I had already forgiven her, but drifted further into her warmth. To be safe and warm and unalive, to float in that womb forever, the terrible light of the world kept forever at bay. Was this what death was like? The be nothing, float away into nothing and be nothing, the warm embrace of a lover, the end of all thought. Her hand found my crotch and mine her's, and our hips danced some few inches away. We had no thought, only a desperate urgency, to keep moving, keep touching, keep building, to blow our minds out into space and cease all time in the sensation of that single moment. We came together, one mindless being bound in orgasm for a too short moment, for a perfect moment.

And then she was fading from me, her and her tree, slipping from my hands as I grasped her tighter to me, and cold light pressed on my skin and I shuddered at the terrible ache of loss. A heavy chain was about my neck, so that heavy I could hardly lift my head. The ground was rocky and cut into my hands and knees, my cheek as the chain bore me down and burned cold into my neck.

Archmagio was there, a gray shifting form, meandering aimlessly between ten thousand forms of men. He held the chain, but did not seem to see me.

“She is silk, scraps, an abominations of thought, an I where there ought not.”

It was not Archmagio who spoke, but the bull man. He stood just outside my vision, a glimpse of terror forcing itself into my periphery.

“Our master thinks it otherwise. Ours is to serve his perfect will,” the wizard responded.

“He is a foolish god, he toys with sharp sharp things, cracks and unknowable and broken sharp things, like silk, and clay and bones and feces and bones bones.”

“Uh, what?”

“You are a petty petty shit.”

Before us a thousand of the giant bugs, their stench of death and rot assaulting my senses and gagging me. They descended on the wood. The tree brutes clobbered and smashed them as ruthless automatons, great machines that killed without thought or fear. But they were too few. A thousand bugs for every man, a thick swirl of black about them, blotting out the forest and leaching the light from the sun. The bugs attacked not the men, but the trees, crushing their leaves and branches in their mandibles, digging and sniping at their roots.

It was a great slaughter of insects, but still they came. Their carcasses piled deep on the forest floor.

I woke shivering and realized I had been very cold. Also that it was pleasantly warm. I was sprawled along the foot of the bed, someone had pulled a thin sheet over me and tucked a pillow beneath my head. Argyl and Jade slept on opposite sides. Argyl faced outwards, but Jade faced him. Was that significant, or had they just rolled in their sleep?

Not someone, it had been Jade who rose me to the bed. The memories of the night were hazy, imprecise, the dream lingering in my senses. I rose quietly so as not to disturb them. There were cup on the table, so I brought one to the water, changed my mind and filled it with wine. The wine was not as sweet as it had been. I liked it better and refilled my cup. Better to be hazy and imprecise, better not to feel the world.

There was a small separate room with a flush toilet, a luxury I hadn't seen since my old master had taken me from his manor. I used it to defecate, cleaning myself after with water from a small basin. White, smooth stone all of it.

When I returned to the main room Achtan was standing in the door, bold and naked against the soft glow of the outside. That made me wonder how the room was illuminated.

“Sir, how may I serve you?”

“Madam!” he said grinning widely, “how may I serve you?”

We stared at each other for a moment.

“More wine?”

“Sir, if it is okay?”

“Madam, my only pleasure is to please you.”

I filled my wine glass up again and wondered if I should be keeping track of how much I was drinking.

“Come,” he said, “it is still night, drink, drink!” He laughed and filled another cup up, quaffed it, and refilled it. “You, you are not as the other two are. They are good enough, but you, you are such a free being, we felt you coming, knew you were coming. Will you come with me? I will show you our underground city before your friends wake.”

It felt a command. “Yes sir,” I said meekly. He laughed.

He led me out and down the ladder. The city was all of polished white stone, mostly crumbling, ancient and decayed.

“Did you make this city?”

“No,” he laughed. “We don't really make things.”

We stopped at a large fountain in the center of a lane. Wine flowed from it, but only in a

trickle. It was a fraction of its former self, shriveled within its shell. The stone was ornately carved, Satyrs and fairies, beasts and half men of all varieties, all lost in their sexual abandon. He refilled his cup, as did I. I was starting to feel drunk and stumbled after him as he boldly strode off. The wine now was sweeter, and the taste stuck in my mouth between sips. The satyr was speaking but I didn't pay attention. So much of history lost to you by my failing attention.

“You're not paying any attention are you?”

“Sir, I am sorry.”

“Madam, it is fine. Please.” He gestured to a doorway with a curtain pulled over it. I stepped to it, and slowly drew the curtain inside.

Inside was a combination of bodies in sexual embrace beyond what I thought possible. Satyrs, men inside of men inside of women inside of men, long chains of genitalia pressed together and pressed to mouths. Goat legs and human arms entwined, the beginning of one body and the ending of another impossible to discern. And about them flew fairies, tiny sparks of lights with human forms more implied than defined. And they rubbed themselves as they watched, fucked and fondled each other and, though they could not have intercourse, stimulated both themselves and the satyrs. None of them noticed us, all too busy with their own pleasure.

I watched the writhing mass for a short time.

“Imagine yourself among them, little slave girl, wonderful slave girl. There are no slaves here, no masters. Only bodies doing what bodies are made to do, fucking and loving and the pureness of pleasure. We have wine, yes, more wine than you will ever need. And your tar too. We have it all. He took from a table just inside the room a mass of the tar, and pressed it into my mouth. I ate it eagerly, and felt myself drifting off immediately, the warm dark void pulling up around me. It was more than I had been eating, I had been taking only a little to avoid detection, and my body savored the sensation, flowers sprouted all down my tongue and among my lips and teeth, and I was warm and free.

The scene before me seemed a pastoral and beautiful thing, and I stepped forwards to join it. I fell onto a goat girl. There was a boy behind her, penetrating her from behind, but she spread her legs for me and we were kissing, her thick goat hair scratchy against my cheeks and hands. I pulled at my dress to pull it off, but Achin pulled me back, smiling warmly into my face. He was erect now, his cock was massive and curled up along his abdomen. I reached a hand to touch it and he laughed, let me touch it for a moment, then pulled my hand away.

“Madam, you are enthralled to another, we cannot accept you yet. You must first pledge yourself to us. We can protect you. Your master preys upon your mind, tracks your thoughts and owns them. We can take them from you. Drug you and fuck you until you are a pure being of pleasure, a pure receptacle of love and orgasm, an orgasm to last your lifetime, to blot out all questions of self and loves and hates, all the problems of your life, replace them with pure and mindless pleasure.”

I felt a small white light, a brightness that walked alone in the world, a pure thoughtless bright bright thing. I was slipping down the ladder then and he caught me, although I did not remember him going down first. I stumbled after him through the city, and it seemed to me that I was once again stalking through that white city for a victim, twin heartbeats thundering in me, desperate to murder and save my master's lust, desperate to save that victim to relieve the scraping of sand within my veins.

I was in our room again, Argyl and Jade sleeping softly. Both seemed beautiful to me, I wished I could crawl inside them both, cocoon myself in their flesh. Instead I lay dizzy on the foot of the bed.

“Sleep now, my dear, and think on it. Dreams will not trouble you now, you have no mind for them to find. Sleep now, my dear, and think on it. You can be one of us.”

I was asleep I think before he finished speaking, and this time I did not dream.

## CHAPTER 18

I woke again feeling very groggy, but still high from the tar, the world pleasantly dimmed, buffered by a warm dark womb.

“How do you feel?” Jade asked me. She looked restored for the first time since her fight, color in her cheeks and a bit of her bravado back in her voice.

“Mistress,” I mumbled, “very groggy, and my head aches” I felt that I was slurring my words some. She smiled at me.

“We did drink an awful lot last night.”

I realized she was drying her hair with a towel, and wore a dark blue robe of fine silk.

“Have some water, it'll help your headache. You should clean up, there's fresh water in the tub. It seems to be automatically refreshed somehow.”

I stumbled as I stood, misjudging my height and the distance of the floor, and Jade caught and steadied me.

“Careful hun.”

“I am okay, mistress,” I said, enunciating every syllable very carefully, executing with my full attention the steps to the tub. It was large enough for four or five people.

“There's no curtain but I promise to only peek a little.”

“I don't mind mistress.”

“It's a joke. Never mind. It feels great to be clean.”

I pulled off my dress carefully. It took a great deal of concentration not to get lost in it, but I managed. The boots were much easier.

The water was very warm and I felt that was sinking into it for a moment, the room and Jade seemed very far away. Then there was water in my mouth and nose and I was choking. I pushed myself up with a shot of panic and hacked water from my windpipe.

“You okay?” worry on her face and in her voice now, rather than amusement.

“Yes mistress, sorry mistress.”

The adrenalin pulled me from my stupor somewhat, and I felt dizzy but closer to the world of sensations and reactions. There was soap and so I scrubbed myself. I turned carefully so I could not see Jade. I wanted her to watch me without feeling self-conscious. I hadn't realized how dirty I had gotten. It was a dry but thick layer of dust over me, as if I had been a neglected vase, dusted now and returning to life.

The water was surprisingly clean; there was a steady stream of warm water from a stone spigot. I saw there was a razor and scissors, so I shaved, scrapping the sharp blade against my legs and armpits. I used the scissors to trim my pubic hair. When done I stood and turned slowly so as to not lose my balance I felt close to sober now. Some property of the water perhaps?

Jade was looking at me, but blushed and turned away.

“Mistress I do not mind.”

“Um,” she said, and turned slightly darker red. “Is that, do, did you shave yourself like that as, when you were a prostitute?”

“It is, mistress.” I looked at her a moment. She looked back at me.

“There's, um, a robe here for you.” She brought it over to me. I took it but didn't put it on yet. She walked back to the bed and messed unnecessarily with the blanket, smoothing it.

“I'm, uh, sorry that I was rude to you earlier, Kara. I was, very stressed and, well, I cheated on Argyl, so.” She stumbled through her language awkwardly, then stopped abruptly.

“Mistress, you do not need to explain.”

“But I owe it to you,” she said, looking up at me.

“No, mistress.”

“I cheated on him. We had just lost the baby, and, it was a very, I don't know.”

I walked to her and took her into my arms. She was surprised a moment, then held me back. After a moment she disengaged.

“I didn't expect you to take it like you did. You've saved my life, you've saved his life, I need, I should be more patient with you, I can't expect you to understand everything.”

I did not know what to say. I felt more sober but it was still an effort to hide my condition. I felt that I loved her, and wanted to hold her and take her to the bed, but she would be upset so I did not.

“I've never been into girls,” she said. “Maybe, I mean,” she trailed off.

“It's okay mistress,” I said, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. Anxiety washed through me and I breathed carefully so I would not fall.

“Maybe in a better world, we could all just love and never be jealous or, I don't know.”

“It's okay mistress,” I said again, this time very faint. We were both facing each other but looking down. I looked down at the robe, noticing it for the first time. It was a deep dark red. Red, the color of whores. But probably not here, among the satyrs there seemed to be no money anyway.

“Red is the color of whores mistress.”

“Oh. I'm so sorry. We can, I didn't know, we can trade.” She was flustered.

I looked at her for the first time. “I do not mind, mistress, Jade.” I remembered finally she had asked me to call her by her name.

“I do not mind, I, being a whore is not a shameful thing for me.”

“You're not a whore, Kara, we'll, Argyl and I will make sure of that, if we live through all this.”

I wanted to shrug but didn't. “My master, he brings great danger on you mistress, you should leave me here and escape.”

“No.” She looked firmly at me. “Argyl would be captured and dead if not for you, and I too probably. And your lover, your tree friend, she helped, she saved us as well. I don't, it wasn't an accident that we were safe until we crossed the mountains. It should not have been that easy.”

“I, mist.. Jade, my master comes to revenge himself on me. You must go.”

“No, we will fight, we will find a way to free you.”

She took me in her arms again and we held each other for a moment.

“I feel so strange, like, like ever since we entered this city I haven't been able to think right, or, I don't know, like that satyr is casting some spell on me, or us.” The words coming from me surprised me, seemed as though they were someone else's, someone else speaking with my voice.

“I murdered a woman, she was, she was only half a woman, they had taken her arms and her legs, she was just there to be fucked, they had taken her mind and she was just floating in a thick warm gel. I think I am like that, impotent, thoughtless, floating in a thick warmth. Am I alive? I get fucked, cut, whored, and tortured, and I float and say nothing, feel nothing. Am I alive? I loved her. I love her. I love my, my lover, I love you, and Argyl. Does that make me alive? Life is a strange small string of dust of life and love and small bits of silk and cloth and burlap. I am dead I am dead I am a little scrap of death that wrecks and savages all. My lover wept, you were hurt and cut at me, am I alive? Am I a dark hole?”

“You're so fucking weird.” I looked at her but she was smiling at me. Then she stepped back and shook her head, as if to clear it.

“I don't know what to say to any of that. I think, I do not think you are dead, but I think you are not used to living? I don't know. You keep calling us master and mistress even though we don't want you to. Do you know any other way to relate to people?”

I didn't say anything, not knowing the answer.

“I think you are very smart. Educated too, at least in some ways. You seem at times very simple, driven by simple ideas of love and relations. At other times you speak of obtuse philosophical questions with more sophistication than I could. Did you really kill a Clachnik woman?”

“Clachnik?”

“The woman without arms or legs.”

“Oh, yes, for my master.”

“Well, that's almost a mercy.”

“I am, I don't know what I am.”

“You haven't called me mistress in a while.”

“Sorry mistress.”

“No!” she glowered at me, then softened and laughed. “Why is it so hard?”

“Mistress, I” I didn't know what to say.

She leaned over me a moment, our mouths coming close, and I felt a pull towards her, as if she willed me to lean forwards and kiss her then. I started to, but then she turned away, blushing.

“I don't know, I feel strange, this is such a strange place,” she said.

The curtain pulled aside and we both looked up to see Argyl and Achant enter bearing trays of food. Argyl blushed and looked away, and I realized I was still naked. Achant grinned and winked at me, and I quickly pulled on the robe to alleviate Argyl's discomfort.

We ate a combination of fresh fruit, impossible deep in the mountain, and sweet pastries. There was coffee and wine available. Jade and Argyl both had coffee, I did not drink. Eating for some reason made me feel dull and dimwitted again, but everyone's attention was elsewhere and I do not think they noticed.

“I will take you to meet our priestess now, if you like. She's requested an audience, we don't get many visitors you know.”

“We will be very pleased to meet her.” Argyl said politely.

The city seemed to swirl about me as we walked, the dim white buildings blending together until I could not tell one from the other. They seemed to be before and behind me at once. I felt dizzy and had to concentrate on following Jade, who walked just behind Argyl and the Satyr.

We came at last, by what twists of the city path I knew not, to a temple. Outside was little more than a relief of various sexual couplings, all different beasts mating cross species. They seemed to loom over me, mocking me with laughter, even moving or dancing, though I have no memory of which beasts fucked which beasts. Dizzy and unthinking I followed Jade inside.

Inside darkness assaulted me. It seemed I stumbled into a great void. Jade and Argyl dimmed to shadows, their steps and voices echoing away into unintelligible clamor. Achant alone seemed to leave some piece of himself with me. His strong nude form gingerly striding before me, with his strange reversed joint where his hoof descended from his ankle. I have no memory of thought then, only of plodding after him for an indeterminable amount of time, as if we descended into the void and diminished in significance and size, although our distance from one another never changed.

A blue light originated from the form of a woman, details lost in brightness. All light seemed to



be her skin, her edges indiscernible, so that her body only implied her form, so that she was before but also around us. Maybe even that we were within her, no walls about us but her light reaching out infinitely around us.

“Why is everyone always naked?” Jade asked in an ironic tone.

“You,” the woman said, “are alone among your kind.”

“Yeah, still it's strange for a city girl like me.” Jade said.

“That makes sense,” Argyl said, “is it the same with the trees and Satyrs?”

“Yes mistress,” Achantan said, and retreated back into the darkness.

“Mistrss, I” I addressed the woman. She had eyes only for me. Jade and Argyl continued speaking with her in words that seemed incongruous with what words the woman spoke to me.

“I am not your mistress, little one. Do not address me as such.”

“Yes,” I almost said mistress but managed to choke the word back. Her blue light seemed to fill my vision, blinding me to anything but it. I could hear them speaking around me, but it all seemed unintelligible. It was not unlike how my master thundered in my mind, pressing all other thoughts and sensations from me. Yet, this was not a violence, more that my mind could not comprehend more than only her. Instead, a great feeling of peace filled me, blotted out everything else until I felt soft and pliable in a great sea. A scrap, a piece of something not whole, fluttering in the wind, a few words nearly sensical.

She placed a hand on my chest where my breast had been. And as she pulled back her hand a breast grew beneath it, the perfect twin of its twin. She giggled then, and small flutters of joy passed through me and I giggled too. She kissed me and I felt a warmth between my legs, the growing urge of sex, undirected and pleasurable in its own right.

“You desire your companions?” She seemed to speak aloud but I could not answer. Rather, longing in me reached out at her, at an image of them she held in my mind, and I saw us all three held in a nude embrace, all smiling and flowing into and out of each other.

“It is fear that holds them. Rational Argyl, pragmatic Jade. He fears he does not love her enough, and that he is falling for you and this will hurt her. She fears she has hurt him, that the heir that died in her womb was her only use to him, that her feeling for you make her abomination. It is not so simple, but words are poor devices for your hearts.

“There is no room for fear here in my city. You will love both of them. It is there now a little, but it will grow inside you. You who have no true past, no true future, no true self, you, super human slave, may bring them together in your love.”

She stepped forwards and kissed me, and intense waves of pleasure shook me. It was not as an orgasm, no slow build then release, only the pleasure, only the peak suddenly there then gone.

Then she was gone, dissipating into light that hung about the temple. It was very dim and the walls were still not visible. Achantan stood behind us. Jade and Argyl seemed as startled by the woman's disappearance as I had been. Argyl said something but it was lost in echos. How did it echo if there were no walls? Achantan led us back through the door, which seemed only a rectangle of light in the center of the vast emptiness.

I hardly remember the walk back to our room. The dim light of the city almost bright, and it felt as though I had taken only a few steps before I was climbing the rails to our room.

I sat on the bed dazed. I worried that the drug would be discovered until I realized Jade and Argyl too were sitting stupefied. After a bit Achantan came in with a platter of food. I paid no attention to what he was doing, and after a while realized he was gone.

“Kara, come eat,” Jade said, and I realized Argyl was sitting at the table. He looked as dazed as I felt.

Food was some kind of fowl, roasted with a number of different vegetables. It was hearty and filling, and I remember nothing else about it, or what it was served with. When it was gone, however, I felt myself returning to the world some, most of the effects of the drug were gone as well.

“Well,” said Jade, “I’m starting to feel normal again. What was that?”

“Who the girl?” Argyl responded.

“Yeah, was she a girl?”

“Well, no, not when you put it that way. I’m not sure exactly, although she is very powerful I think.”

“She was talking to all three of us at once, wasn’t she?”

“I think so, what did she talk to you about?”

“How to deal with Kara’s master and escape the mountain. There’s a cache of ancient weapons not far from the city, she thinks they will help. Also there are several passages we might take to escape them when they get this far down.”

“Did she say how long we had?”

“She didn’t know exactly, but she did know they weren’t in the mountain yet. It took us two days to get this far down, but she thinks it will take them three.”

“Why longer for them?”

“She is going to, to slow them somehow. I didn’t really understand the specifics. She thought we should leave tomorrow if we were going to escape them.”

“Well, it would probably be wise to do as she wishes. Did she say why she is helping?”

“Not exactly, but I got the impression she doesn’t like her master very much.”

“Huh.”

Jade rose and filled a glass with wine. “Would you like some?” she asked me, and I nodded.

“How about you?” she addressed Argyl.

“We talked about the nature of magic mostly. It was very interesting.”

She handed me a glass of wine and another to Argyl. It was red and slightly sweet.

“How so?”

“Well, she said there’s always an element of irrationality to it, or rather, of impossibility. If there weren’t, it would be science, not magic. Like my herbs. Many people think it’s alchemy, or a kind of magic, but really I’m just combining different substances in different ways. The results are rational and reproducible. But with magic, for example, it isn’t possible, really, for someone to be healed from a sword through the gut in two days, as Kara’s, as your, sorry, as your lover did. Not really possible, therefore magic.”

“I always thought it was a science. Such and such wizard gyrates his hands in such and such a way, and bam, the ex-wife is a newt or something.”

“Maybe superficially, but underneath it’s still irrational. She talked about it like, it’s an extension of what she is, she just wills things and they happen. Her relationship to the world is such that she manipulates natural laws the way we might manipulate an abacus or something. That’s not a great example but it’s hard to explain. Human magic, if there is such a thing, is just manipulating the senses of other humans. It’s a very weak and minor form of it compared to what this glowing woman can do. Like that man who captured you, those were half starved neglected bodies that he made seem like incredible brutes.”

“Wait, that doesn’t make sense. How did they beat me then? I wasn’t faking.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure. Maybe there was some other element to it as well. He serves your master as well?”

I realized after a moment they were looking at me.

“Uh, what? Oh, yes, master, I mean, Argyl, he is also a slave of his.”

“So it could have been the demon's magic at work in the fight. That's the other source of most human magic, channeling the power of something greater. That comes at a price though, the master giving the power gives it on certain terms only. I hate to think what that man, what was his name?”

“He called himself Archmagio.”

“Wow,” Jade said, “pretentious git.”

Argyl laughed a little. He was very animated as he spoke. All his awkwardness interacting with Jade and I was gone. His mind had grabbed hold of something and he had forgotten his self-consciousness in his excitement. Jade was smiling at him, enjoying his enjoyment more than the subject. Still, she did a good job keeping him engaged.

“Well, we assume. I hate to think what he traded to her master.”

“Do you know?” Jade asked me.

I tried to think on it. “He, I remember on the mountain, he summoned him, or pretended to summon him. My master abused him, pinched his legs and bled him. I, he said something about time, only having a little time.”

Jade looked disgusted and drank more wine as if to wash the image away. We were all drinking more wine, I was starting to feel it more. Argyl stayed interested.

“The man, Archmagio, he put a heart and veins into me, he said that I would be his revenge, he said the knife of his revenge. He, the heart, when it beat I did not want to kill. I killed from the blood in me, my obedience beat in my blood, was my blood, but that other heart, that woman's heart, it slowed it, made me love and stayed my murdering hand. Or tried to.”

Jade wore pity openly on her face. Too tipsy now to hide it maybe.

“I wonder how much of that was illusion. You can't have two hearts, but maybe he planted the thought with some magic of his own. Is he trying to free himself from his master?”

“I don't know.” My wine glass was empty but Jade refilled it.

“Hmm. That might be useful.” she said.

“Maybe.”

A silence fell over us a moment.

“What about her tree lover? Is her magic the same as the blue lady? What don't any of these things have names?”

“Not sure about the lady down here. She might, and just didn't give it. The tree magic though, I think it has something to do with time, with manipulating time. Making it so things happened other than how they had.”

“Oh gods don't get started on the time paradox crap.”

He laughed. “Okay. But, exactly, it's impossible. Any time manipulation would already have happened, so it isn't possible that we would remember it differently than how the effect came out, thus magic.”

“Okay, that makes sense. Well, makes sense that it doesn't make sense.”

“Right. And that's the problem with all the scholarship. They try to present the study and use of magic as systematic and scientific, but it's fundamentally not. Most of the publishers won't even print anything unless the 'magic system' has a solid philosophical foundation and a consistent method of operation. In other words, they won't publish anything that's actually about magic.”

“Sounds about right.”

We all had drunk a fair amount of wine by this point. I was drifting pleasantly, enjoying Argyl's excitement for his subject even if I didn't share it. I stood and refilled my wine glass. Jade had shifted to sitting on the bed, Argyl lounged in his chair still. I sat back into my chair.

"Kara?"

"Yes Jade?" I had almost said mistress.

"You said the wrap was almost how you used to do it?"

"Yes."

There was a mischievous intensity to her. "Show me."

"Yes," I said. It took a sheet from the bed and folded it to the right width. I began to unfasten my robe, but she stopped me.

"No, on me." she said. She undid her robe. Argyl was suddenly uncomfortably stiff and looked into his wine as he swirled it in his glass.

"You've got your boob back," Jade said, startled and staring at my chest. Argyl too looked up with surprise.

"Yes, she gave it back to me."

Argyl blushed as he realized he was staring at my chest and looked away.

"Well," Jade said after a moment, "show me the wrap." She took her robe off completely.

"Uh, you start at the chest here. You do it this way so your boobs will press up and together. You about half cover the nipple. Then you come up around the shoulders here, and here like this, letting it open down the arm. Then tuck it here, careful not to block your cleavage, and drape the rest like this, so your one leg is covered and the other is seen through the slit here."

"That's amazing," she said, smiling down at herself. "What do you think hun, would you shell out your money to fuck me?"

He laughed, but awkwardly said nothing. I smiled at this, and sipped more wine.

"I'm not sure I've ever seen you smile before," Jade said, which made me smile more until I looked down and regained my composure.

"How long did you do it for?"

"I, I'm not sure about time."

"So you would solicit men? On the streets?"

"Oh no, we were in a brothel. Men, usually men, sometimes couples, would come in and we would entertain them until they chose one of us."

"Entertain how?"

"Well, some would speak to them, or dance, there was a little stage for it. Or we would kiss each other or even make love to get them aroused."

She laughed a little. "I bet it was more fun with the girls than when they brought you upstairs."

"Neither were fun really. You make love differently when you are doing it for show. It isn't the same."

"How so?" She was smiling at me, her eyes fixed on mine.

"Well, when you work to please a man, you focus on the sensations you are creating. Being visually appealing is part of that, but is less important. If you are trying to please a man visually, you have to make sure they can see what you are doing. So you have to keep your body further away. Like, if you kiss with the tongue, it is more visually appealing if you are further from who are kissing, but if it is to please the one being kissed, it is better to be closer."

"Ah, I see." she said. She was smiling at me. "Will you show me?" She said it hesitatingly, drunk and unsure, but wanting to. I felt a twinge at the question, something inside me tightening

with excitement and anxiety at once.

“Yes, if you like.”

“Yeah, lets see if we can get Argyl worked up enough to pay me.” Then almost immediately, “I’m sorry, is that, was that insulting?”

“No, it is fine.” I said. I felt queasy a little and was glad for the wine. I drank the rest of my glass and stood and took a half step towards her. She looked awkward for a moment, then took my hand and guided me to sit on the bed besides me. I didn’t look back at Argyl.

“So,” she said, and by the way she lurched I realized that she was more drunk than I had thought. “So, show me first how you would kiss me to excite our client here.”

“Jade,” Argyl said.

“No,” I said, surprised by my voice, “I, like this.” I leaned forwards and kissed her lightly. Her lips were very soft, which seemed strange. I closed my eyes then kissed her again, pulling back as she kissed back and teasing her lips with my tongue. Her lips parted slightly and I licked and kissed gently at her tongue.

“See, like this. So that he can see. If I were kissing to please you, I would be much closer with my mouth, and being more careful to keep my saliva from you.”

She laughed at that. “No messy kisses?”

“No,” I said, “nobody likes lots of saliva. Or, not many people. You have to be careful how open your lips are, and to suck it back when you inhale.”

“Show me?”

I smiled and kissed her again. This time, I stayed close, and our lips and tongues nibbled, licked and explored each other. I was leaning towards her and she placed her hand on my shoulder. The touch was hesitant, uncertain.

She pulled back then, as if to say something to Argyl, but I leaned after her and we were kissing again, then laying facing each other on the bed. I put my arm behind her and pulled myself to her. Bosom to bosom, we kissed, her hand on my back pulling me towards her.

Then she was pulling away and sitting up, steadying herself with an arm on the bed.

She looked at me, flushed but smiling. “I’m pretty drunk,” she said.

“Yes, me too.”

We looked at each other a bit longer, wavering slightly. I wanted desperately to kiss her more. I realized I was staring lustily, mouth hanging slightly open, and I shut it and looked away. She was blushing very deeply. The moment hung awkwardly for a long time. I waited for her to do something but she did nothing, only blushing deeper and wavering in her drunkenness.

Argyl was there then, offering me a glass a wine. I took it from him and sipped it. He stepped in front of Jade then.

“Do what you want to do, hun. I won’t mind.”

She reached up to him and he took her hand, holding it gently and smiling down at her.

“Do you, do you like to watch us?” she asked.

He laughed a little and blushed as well.

“I certainly don’t mind dear. Not, we’re all drunk, just have fun.”

Jade was looking at me again and I smiled. “I am here,” I said. I leaned forwards, but she pulled back. I wanted very badly to chase forwards for her lips but I held back.

She was looking at me levelly. We were all drunk still, but the giddy silliness was gone. The silence stretched for a long time and I felt a weight descend over us.

“Master.” I said, although my words surprised me as I heard them, “I mean, Argyl, do you not mind because you want to watch us, or because you want Jade to be happy?”

He looked at me, then at the floor as if considering.

"I think," he said, "I feel a bit like a creep watching. But I want her, I mean, I want you to be happy Jade. I don't know, I, this is a strange place, and maybe I'm just drunk, but I really don't see a problem with it. Be drunk, have fun! If you wake up regretting it we can just chalk it down to a drunk mistake. But, I don't know, it feels right somehow."

"Yeah," Jade said, looking at me now. "I, are you okay with that? I mean, I think it's fun, I don't want to lead you on though or anything."

"Mistress, Jade, you do not need to worry so much about Argyl. He loves you, he is just lost in his mind all the time. You hurt him but not so bad as you think, he is quiet about it because he is cautious. Love is many things to many people, it is not something that is always the same or must be the same. He loves you as he loves, and you as you love. There is no need to fear or be hurt anymore."

She was staring at me. Argyl smiled. They kissed then, the quick sincere kiss of those long accustomed to each other. Argyl then stepped away, refilled his wine, and sat back at the table.

Jade looked at me, blushed and fumbled with her hands. It was strange to see her so. I was used to her boldness and practicality. Her uncertainty now made my heart leap, made her more beautiful to me.

"Jade," I said, the wine making me bold perhaps, "my companion, let us entertain the master." I stood and undid the clasp of my robe, letting it fall open and off my shoulders so to expose my breasts.

"It looks like it was never missing," Jade said.

I felt my new breast. More firm than soft, the same as it had always been. I sat on the bed and kissed her. She hesitated, then returned it. I reached for her, felt her back and shoulders, and gently loosened her robe. She fumbled with the clasp and I slid it down.

"When performing, comrade, it is important not to block the master's view. Were we lovers we would embrace, but instead we hold our bodies so, breasts just touching, torsos turned so that he might see."

"Mmm," she moaned softly. "Should I touch them?"

"Yes, comrade, like this. Gently, tease the nipple hard." I demonstrated on her and was rewarded with goosebumps and an erect nipple. She hesitated, uncertain, but touched me and felt me as if she had never made sex before.

"Lick it like this," I said, moving to my hands and knees that I might reach. "You want to use your tongue and soft little kisses, keeping the nipple as visible as possible."

"Mmm that feels good," she said as I demonstrated.

"Were I pleasing you as a lover I would do it like this," I said, closing more of my mouth around her, sucking and licking. She just moaned in response.

She was very submissive, letting me take the lead, yet still eager for my touch. I pulled myself up and lay her on the bed. She opened her legs easily and I pulled up on top of her to kiss her again.

"My robe's in the way now," I said, and pulled it off completely. She let her fingers trace my form as I lay myself on top of her.

"Rubbing crotches like this is not so stimulating for two women, but as it mimics the heterosexual act we hope the master is considering, it is appropriate for this purpose."

She giggled a little and wrapped her legs around me. Her calves were pleasantly chill.

"Were my purpose to please you, I would use my fingers like this."

She squirmed under my touch, gasping a little then laughing a little.

“It is always good to exaggerate the pleasure. For show like this, but also for sex with a master. Most men like to think they are good lovers.”

“Mmm, just keeping doing that with your hand.” His voice was sultry now. She did not reach a hand to touch me back. She was very passive. I enjoyed very much pleasing her. Few men let the sex over so much for me to steer and control. I worked my fingers now, kissing her and licking at her neck and ears. She was very wet between her legs now, more so than I ever was.

“Mmm,” I said to her, breathing heavily, simulating more excitement than she was actually producing in me. She smiled at me and we kissed again. She pressed her lips tight, forgetting the show, and her hips moved in little circles against my hand.

I pulled back slowly, moving first my hand away, then kissing her gently and pulling away more. She looked at me, eyes half closed in arousal and lust. Then she seemed surprised.

“What's wrong?”

I smiled at her. The robe was still caught around her shoulders, although it was open down her front. She was beautiful. All curves and softness, vulnerable and uncertain before me. I wanted her. Very badly, my desire was thick and warm inside me. I leaned forwards to kiss her again. We closed our eyes, and for a moment all sense of performance was gone. We were two lovers kissing. Then I pulled away again.

Why did I do it? Was I bent on serving my masters? On pursuing their own interest even when they did not command me? Because I loved them and wanted what was best for them, at my own expense or not? How often do we build motivations around our actions, ideas of who we are, built after the fact? I don't know why. I desired her, but I stepped back. I walked to Argyl and knelt before him.

“Master,” I said, “have we pleased you?”

Jade laughed a little. She stood, swayed, regained her balance, and let her robe fall back on the bed. She stepped carefully forwards and knelt next to me.

“Yes master,” she said, “have we pleased you?” Her tone was heavy with irony, but not anger.

“I'm not sure I'm comfortable being the master.”

Again, the wine must have made me bold, for I spoke as a stranger to who I had been.

“Argyl, there is no shame in pretending. The fault is not with the sex, it is with the coercion. There is no shame in watching us, enjoying our bodies in your eyes. The shame is in the forcing, but we are giving it to you.”

He smiled, looking down at me.

“Yes, I'm not sure it's all that simple, but,” he paused, as if trying to think through his drunkenness. “I feel creepy for it, but yes, I am, I did enjoy it. Does that make me a voyeur?”

“No more than all men and women. Please, master, come with us.” I took his hand and he stood uncomfortably. Caught between desire and shame? Do those abstractions mean anything? How can we ever know what another is thinking or feeling?

“Comrade,” I said as I sat Argyl on the bed, “the master has chosen you. Now you must perform for him.”

She giggled and kissed me. We stood there a moment, naked before Argyl, kissing as if he wasn't there. Then I turned her towards him. She smiled, but her hands fidgeted. He hesitated at the same moment.

“I'm not sure,” he began, but I interrupted him.

“Argyl, we perform for you because we wish to, to arouse you and to know you are aroused by us. It is not the sex that is wrong with slaving or whoring, rather it is the coercion. Enjoy this because we wish you to, not because you take it.”

“I, alright.”

I took Jade by the hands then, and pulled her to her feet. I kissed her and held her for a moment.

“It is alright comrade, shall I show you how to please a master?”

“I, I'm sorry,” she said, “I, I do, I do Argyl, I'm so sorry.”

“Ssh,” I said, “now is not the time for words, now is time to speak with your body.”

She drew back a little and looked at me.

“Yes, yes I see. I can't believe we're doing this.”

“It's okay comrade, come.” I brought her to a crouch with me. “The particular techniques employed are less important than the arc of sensation and emotion. The whore's true work is in creating and sustaining fantasy. Pay particular attention to reactions, there is no magic technique, it's more about finding what stimulates your client. As whores, we wish him to be satisfied, but also to orgasm as quickly as possible, so that we can get to other clients more quickly. The slave's task is different, and depends on the master.”

I pulled his robe up and off him. He wore his hose beneath still.

“It's heartbreaking to hear you talk about it like that.” Argyl said. “It's so, your life has been very hard.”

I pulled Jade up to him, pulling her body against mine. She was lovely, strong and beautiful, strangely vulnerable in her drunkenness. In her discomfort. She seemed to draw comfort from me, and caught my hand as I moved behind her. I pressed myself against her back, opened my thighs and embraced hers with mine.

I took her hands to his cock beneath his hose, and she caught it as I pulled his hose down then off. He was hard but not completely. There was some strange thing happening between him and Jade, something that I was outside of, a catalyst rather than a piece of the reaction. Or maybe the container. It made me feel small and alone, even as Jade leaned on me for strength.

“Treat it as a holy thing. Worship it. Touch him as if he is a relic.” My voice seemed distant from myself. She was tracing her hands along his length now, and he had closed his eyes. I caressed Jade, held her breasts and pulled her body against mine. I rested my head against her.

She leaned and kissed his cock without prompting from me. I let go her breast and slipped a hand between her legs, cupping her sex and massaging it gently. Desire built in me, a sort of indistinct longing for what these two had.

My lover and I had come together in an explosion of lust, bound tight in love and warmth. She had saved me in some sense, pulled me up from my suicide and propelled me further into life. And even if my suicide waited, a companion who walked with me, always just underneath, she had saved me then.

But now I longed for what Jade and Argyl had. Two real people, all the problems and struggles of dealing with a person, of fighting through the gap. My lover and I had fucked under Dionysus' eyes. They under Athena's. And as they made love now, as she used her lips and tongue to please him, she pleased a man she had loved and hated, admired and despised. I had never known that. I had pleased many men and women, fucked in every variation imaginable. What was I thinking of? My mind seemed to fail me, to grasp at something I could barely understand.

I was running my fingers through her now, feeling the folds of her labia and tracing around her clitoris. Slowly, almost sadly. Argyl was moaning softly, had placed a hand gently on Jade's head. She was moving her hips, small circles that pressed back against me.

He pulled her up then, gently pulling her hand up until she was standing before him. I rose with her, letting my hand slip out of her, but holding myself against her. She stepped forwards



and crawled on top of him as he pulled himself back onto the bed more fully. I let her go. I should slip away, let them take each other, build back the bridge that had been broken somehow before I had known them. I let her go.

“No,” she said, turning to me. Her eyes were half closed in lust and drunkenness, but were very serious. “I need you.”

I went to her before I knew what I was doing. A compulsion led me. I loved her, admired her. I could not refuse her. I took her hands and we kissed. Argyl held a hand gently on her thigh.

“You don't have to Jade, if,”

“No,” she said, then smiled. “I want it hun. I just, I want her with me too. I don't know, it doesn't make sense to me.”

“Okay,” he said, smiling at her. She mounted him then. I reached a hand and guided his cock into her. He moaned along with her. I came up behind her again, but she pulled my hand forwards.

“No, in front, I want to face you.”

I hesitated, but Argyl touched a hand to my hip and encouraged me over his chest. I followed, facing Jade, holding her and we were kissing and tongues and lips were entwined. Her hand reached between my legs, and I felt something slip loose inside me. Some tension I had been holding since I left my lover, and I fell forwards into Jade. She took Argyl's hand and let it to my crotch. It was an awkward angle for him but he shifted. Her hand had been small and strong. His were bigger, less powerful but seemed to know me better, to find more quickly the best spots to press and those to rub. I clung to Jade and her to me, and felt we both would collapse if either gave way. But leaned against each other we stood, and kissed and held and loved.

Then she was pushing me down, and I fell back onto the bed. She was on top of me and we were kissing and feeling each other. He was behind her, and I found his cock with my hand and guided it back into her. We writhed like that. Three almost as one. Jade orgasmed quickly, clutching her nails into me and moaning in my ear. I held her and pressed myself up against her, but felt strangely distant. He took longer, but came as well, leaving himself inside her as he did, collapsing onto her back and pressing us three closer.

We fell apart onto the bed, laying shoulder to shoulder to shoulder, Jade between us. She took my hand and his, holding them to her breasts. They spent a moment catching their breath. The smell of sex, not overpowering, pleasant almost.

They were soon dozing, hand in hand, some piece of what had kept them separate now broken through. Come together through me, their holy vessel. Bah. I felt no joy from it. Rather, a black and sickly jealousy unfurled within me. It was some magic of this city that opened them to me. Opened to me something of theirs, not truly mine.

Such petty thoughts. What a petty woman I. A poor woman, lapping at the leftovers of a failing love. Jealous of their misery. Jealous of the faltering wreckage of love. And I brought with me their doom. My master came for me. I felt him in my mind, feeding my disgust and hatred, polluting my thought. They knew of him, did they know his power? Certainly he was their doom. We could only run as he allowed. Was this my punishment? To make me love, and make that love destroy?

Did I love? I think yes. Their scrupulous insistence on my equality, their kindness, even the honesty and respect of their anger. They made me into something more than I had even been before. Yet, was I the person they loved? I hardly recognized myself in how they treated me. I felt a sick and wasted puppeteer, gaunt beneath the strong wooden form. Who they loved, but no, who they were growing to love was not me. I was a victim of my nature. A victim of my black

and soiled heart.

The putrid stench of my master filled my nostrils and I gagged. His presence filled my mind, blotting out my mind and pinning me beneath his filthy weight. I felt that my mouth and throat filled with his stench, and I could not breathe but retched and retched.

I was chained then, spread open on the earth. And from a ledge above me an army of men and women came and pissed on me. They wore many different costumes, purples, greens and reds seemed to predominate. They had many tall flags and banners. An army come to foul me.

Their filth turned the earth about me to mud and I was sinking, drowning in piss and shit and my own vomit. Drowning drowning in convulsions of disgust and wretchedness. My mind shot to nothing. And then my master was above me, his sharp cock tearing open my bowels and mind.

“YOU WILL OBEY.”

And I knew with heavy certainty that he was right. My fledgling will ten thousand times over could not withstand that great will that shredded my flesh and mind.

I woke with dreadful certainty. Jade and Argyl slept besides me, hands clasped. She had turned in her sleep and held him now, back to me.

We had played at slaves and masters, but they would never truly believe it. They were coming to love what they thought I could be, not the wretched thing I was. Argyl had played the master, but I knew he would worship at Jades's body as she had at his. They would never truly accept my nature, my devotion.

They were the good. My master the evil. And I a broken thing, a shard of fractured mirror my master would slay them with. Better first to suicide.

## CHAPTER 19

I fled naked into the underground city, leaving Jade and Argyl sleeping in each others arms. My intention was to find a building from which to hurl myself, or else find a blade or other object sharp enough to open a vein or artery. Better to lose myself first, that Jade and Argyl never see my corpse.

Every lane of that dim city looked the same, and losing myself proved easier than I had supposed. Every structure seemed to be the same crumbling white stone, the ruins of a people once great.

At every decision point I chose whichever road seemed to slant upwards most, thinking that the stair which we had descended would be high enough for my death. The passage of time was impossible to measure. I felt that I spent hours turning circles in those streets. The air grew chill as I climbed, and I regretted not stopping to dress. I felt comical. The hapless would be suicide. So miserable and helpless she cannot find a means to do what must be so simple for those who do not wish it.

My mind grew so numb from the constant dim light and white stone, so addled from cold and lack of sleep, that I was some yards up a narrow path that burrowed straight into the mountain rock before I realized I had left the city. The climb took only a few minutes but exhausted what strength I had left.

I stumbled at last onto a narrow ledge that jutted out over a great empty space. Far below, and far ahead of me, the city seemed a tiny labyrinth for mice. It looked impossibly far, but I supposed it could have been another city, the one I had lately left obscured by the rocks about me.

Just below me was another ledge, to which I lowered myself. The edges were sharp, as if chiseled rather than worn by time. At the very center ran a trickle of water, which had worn a thin deep channel through the stone. I followed the gentle downward slope. It was cold but I did not mind it now. The severity of it fit my mood somehow. The stone ended abruptly, the finished stone giving way to crumbling ruins. The water poured off the edge and fell into darkness below. I heard no sound, which I supposed meant it had a long fall. Ideal, I thought. There was a strong warm wind coming up from the blackness, which seemed impossible to me inside the mountain, but I did not dwell on it.

What of my lover? We shared an intense bonding, a connection as deep as it was short. I did not doubt her love. If she had lied to me, her body had not. She had given herself completely. She had held me in her warmth and branches, for a moment I had been safe, content. But it could not be. My nature destroyed it. I am a slave of evil, and I would draw it to me. Her love would destroy her and so she sent me from her. Sent me from her. My love would be her doom.

Jade and Argyl too. Jade had held me, truly held me. The play of dominance was just that. Beneath it a step of faith, of trust in me, and in each other. They had touched each other with thin threads I had strung between them. A stray he had picked up and taken in. Had refused to give up on. And what of Jade? She had not liked me, seen me as a liability and then as a threat. Why had she come to like me? To take me into her bed? Pity? Regret? Discomfort with her anger? That was a mystery still.

And their love for me would be their doom. My love their doom. My love. Did I love? They loved what they thought I could be. I was not that person. I was their doom come to claim them.

Nothing simple. Nobody who simply cared for me as me. Accepted what I truly was, everything I was. I was, by my very nature, alone. And save for the illusions of a few chemicals,

endorphin and dopamine, whatever else, save for the few moments these chemicals create a delusion in my mind, I would always be alone. It was in my nature. Willless, a vehicle of evil. I was the doom of all who loved me. I was not who all who loved me loved. Alone against the infinite complexity and misery of the moments of life. And against that I would fling the shallow but infinitely long blackness of my suicide.

My suicide. I stared down into the black void, into the impossibly warm air, and knew that it was in me to jump.

“COME TO ME,” the voice reverberated in my mind. Not my master, but filthy and foreign, sharp against my own thoughts.

“COME TO ME,”

I looked behind me and saw, not along the path I had taken, but above on a massive staircase leading up into the stone, the Bull Man. He looked down at me. Too far to see details, I felt the scrape of blade on blade, felt the massive bull eyes peering through the dim light at me.

“TURN BACK AND COME TO ME.”

“I will obey my master,” I said, and stepped away from the precipice without thinking.

“COME TO ME AND SERVE YOUR MASTER”

“I will obey, I come to serve. Obedience is my food, obedience is my drink.”

I took another step without wanting to. I thought of Jade and Argyl, probably still sleeping, and how this bull man would butcher them. I thought of my lover, far away, and wondered if she lived still, or if his bladed cock had found and wrecked her.

“I will obey.” I said, and turned and threw myself into the great abyss.

## CHAPTER 20

I felt a great joy in falling. The adrenaline that would fuel fear or panic in another grew in me a joy beyond any I had know. My suicide! I plummeted to it with increasing speed. I seemed to fall a long, long time, and I was whooping with joy, screaming and yelling and laughing into the rush of wind, the coming of death thrilling me with joy. I had jumped! My will had propelled me from that precipice. Not my master's, not my thought of what another would wish. Mine. My suicide. My first and last great act. My suicide! I whooped into the infinity that rushed up at me, went to my death with a heart spilling over with joy.

I struck water at an incredible velocity. I don't see how my body survived the violence of the fall, into water or not. If you have ever missed a dive or belly flopped from even a short dive you know the violence impacting water can cause. I fell for a long time, many minutes, and I can't conceive of any angle I could have struck the water that would not have broken my body.

But somehow I was alive and underwater and very, very cold. Already chilled by the wind of the fall, my limbs and face were almost instantly numb, and my thoughts grew groggy and I surely should have drowned, wished to freeze and drown and die. Yet again, my suicide was foiled by incredible circumstance, so that I must wonder if some divine power intervened then to spare my life.

I remember little of that freezing water save it seemed to have no bottom or top, seemed to extend forever about me. I knew not which way was up, and sought to sink myself further, but somehow I was floating and moving up, up forever, and I opened my lungs to breath and pulled in thick water that blacked my vision and I was sure I had died at last, felt the euphoria build inside me with giddy love.

And then I was sputtering and puking salty water and rough hands were holding me and hairy lips were breathing air into my lungs. I coughed and sputtered and I was being carried and puked more water down the back of who was carrying me, but they seemed not to mind.

I was dropped at some point and many bodies came around mine, rubbing warmth into my numb limbs and pulling black webs from my mind. Satyrs, I realized, nude drunken beasts, rubbed life back into me, the bastards.

"I wanted to die," I whispered, hoarsely, barely able to speak.

Achtan stood over me, I realized, separate from the goat men who rubbed their hands and genitals against me. He said nothing, but put into my mouth a large glob of black tar. It dissipated into my blood quickly, seeming to pull straight from my lips and throat into me, replacing the cold harsh water of my drowning with the warm black sea of tar, and I drifted into it, floated in it's wonderful and terrible space. A small black thing in a huge black sea. A spark of sensation in an electric storm. Dead dead dead, except not dead, floating, black bleak black, floating warm and thick.

And there were breasts and cocks before me, and mine mixed into theirs, and one was inside me, and a nipple below me and I was suckling at it as a frightened babe, and then another body was on top of me and a hairy cock was in my mouth and I suckled at it, desperate for the life within it, and another was inside my cunt and a woman, or was it a beast? A thing a thing was licking at me and we all mixed together into an impossible organism, a huge pulsating mass of fucking in a great dark sea. A woman's face loomed before me. She was more goat than woman, horns and a long snout, with a woman's eyes and lips. I kissed her and our tongues entwined, and in her eyes I saw the same black sea that was in me, and a goat had mounted me, it's cock pressing into my anus as a satyr fucked my cunt. Then a delicate feminine hand was pressing

more tar into my mouth and I was licking at her fingers to get it all, and we were all sticky with the semen of a hundred men, all fucking and writhing in it's slime and fucking fucking with the tar filling our mouths and sprouting flowers along our throats and tongues.

There was none of me then. Not enough of me left to observe the sensations that washed over and through me. A cock here, a pussy there, licking then sucking then fucking, all the same, all rolled into a great impossible organism that writhed about me and filled every sense and orifice with its own organs of pleasure. And there was a great hairy cock in my mouth, my saliva matted down the hair and I opened my mouth and throat to it as if it were some piece of me come back to fix me.

I haven't any sense of how long I stayed there. There was not enough of me left to measure the passage of time. I remember some sensations, I think for some time I was rubbing my head against a rock, for a while longer I was licking a goat girl's pussy, and I remember a tiny fairy masturbating me with her whole body, wings sticky with my wetness. But what happened and what was imagined I cannot say. I think a woman came and suckled me at some point, feeding a thick warm milk into an empty stomach, and some time later another woman did the same.

But time then was a great black void. A nothing. I, or rather, we, were a bundle of sensations, of cocks and cunts, of nipples and lips, fucking and fucking as if the basest parts of our minds, the parts survived from some primitive creature that knew only fucking and eating, was all we had become. The rest lost in the black tar and the unthought of orgasm after orgasm.

Then at some time, impossibly distant from my leap into the void, a million years or lifetimes later, I was being pulled away, and a man and women were screaming and pulling me free, and reluctant arms and legs and cocks let me go, none aware enough to stop me, to oppose whatever force pulled me free.

I don't think I struggled until I was free of them. Then, desperately, I only wanted back, to feel myself filled with bodies and drugs, to fling myself into that dark warm abyss of pleasure and numbness, fuck and drug away the life that my suicide had failed to take.

But the man and woman, Jade and Argyl as you must have surmised, were insistent, and they wrestled me free. I screamed and struck at them with my fists and later rocks when I found them beneath my hands. They were shouting and finally I heard Jade's voice break through, "Kara Kara, please please please," she was desperate and I stopped, dropped my weight and rocks with such suddenness that they fell forwards, dragging my naked body along the ground.

"Kill me, kill me," I whispered at them, desperately, I writhed in their arms and Jade held me down.

"Quiet quiet," she said, and slowly I relaxed.

"You came for me," I whispered, "you came for me." I was kissing her and holding her and she held me back.

"I've got you, I've got you," she kept saying back. I clung to her and she to me, and I felt the world rocking around me, circles inside of circles, fucking and filth and death and the taste of flowers in my tongue and throat, and I was choking on it, flowers so thick they choked me and I could not draw air into my lungs, and black black death dug talons into my eyes and I could not see, and I was choking and she was there, Jade was holding me and whispering I know not what, but whispering, holding me and she was everything, I clung to her and she was the only solid thing, the only extant thing in a swirl of terrible phantoms.

"Breathe, breathe please breathe. Fuck Kara, please breathe, please," and I opened my throat and air flooded into my lungs, my eyes snapped open and her tear streaked face was inches from mine.

“That's it, keep breathing. Keep breathing. Good, in, now out, good. Keep breathing. Keep breathing, just one breath after the other. In and out. In and out, just keep breathing.”

She was whispering, forcing calm into her voice that I could not see in her face. Terror, her eyes were full of terror.

“Keep breathing, keep breathing. That's all that matters right now, just in and out, in and out.”

“I'm here,” Argyl's voice.

“What did, no keep breathing Kara. There you go, in and out. What did he say? In and out.”

“Nothing useful,” Argyl's voice had an edge I had not heard in it before.

It was quiet for a moment, and I was breathing, staring into Jade's eyes.

“I love you,” I told her.

“Oh fuck,” she said. She looked down at me and time seemed to stretch forever. An infinity in a moment. Eyes to eyes. I looked into her eyes and I loved her. She had come for me.

“YOU MUST MURDER HER”

“Kill me,” I whispered to her. “Please murder me. Murder me, I love you murder me, you must murder me.”

“YOU MUST MURDER HER” It was not the bull man now, though I saw him then, or knew he was close. How could I see him? I stared into Jade's eyes.

“Kara, listen, nobody is going to kill you. I love you, I am not going to kill you, why would I kill you? Why do you want to die?”

“Kill me, I love you kill me, he is coming, he will be your death, he will, I am your doom, I love you I am your doom, please you must kill me.”

“Kara please, please, I love you, come on, we are going to run, Argyl, he made a raft, he is going to, we are going to escape, there's a river.”

“It doesn't matter, he will kill you, he will come.”

“Come on,” Argyl's voice cut in. Get her arms.” They hefted me up. I was before the bull man then, his blades pierced my shoulders and thighs and I was pinned to the earth, and his cock blade sliced into my guts. There was no pain. I felt pressure, an awful impossible pressure inside me.

“YOU WILL MURDER HER,” but it was not the bull man's mind, it was my master's mind. My mind squeezed out, nothing of me left, nothing but obedience, the tool, the submissive, the lowest wolf, the tool waiting to be used.

“YOU WILL MURDER HER”

“I will obey,”

“Wake up!” Jade was screaming and my eyes lolled open. She was dragging me onto a boat that was sloshing in the water. I clutched the edge and heaved myself towards the water to hurl myself overboard. She held tight, her feet falling from beneath her but holding me, we crashed together into the bottom of the boat.

“He comes he comes” I screamed at her, clawing at her face, futile, my arms obeyed themselves and not me, I threw limp and useless hands against the horror. She held me down and Argyl was above us, straddling us and the boat was rocking.

And the Bull Man was above me. My blood leeches out into the earth and there was nothing of me left.

“I will obey, I will obey.”

He pulled off me. I was dead, I was dying, I was dead. And Jade was kissing me and holding me down and kissing me, and I was kissing her and holding her, and I was pulling at her robe and pulling it loose from her and we were kissing kissing her tongue in my lips and my tongue

with hers, we were kissing and I was holding her breasts and ass and pulling her against my naked body, and we were fucking on the bottom of the boat, a wash of madness and sensation.

“Jade,” it was Argyl, and she pulled away from me and I pulled her back, and then I was holding him and pulling him down with us and the three of us were as one, one mindless being fighting what must be, fighting the impossibility of any person holding on to any other, of not destroying those we would love and hold to us.

And there was nothing of me, or Jade or Argyl. We were one thing. I pulled at his clothes and Jade too was pulling at them and his cock was out, and I pulled Jade above me and pulled her towards him, I wanted her to have him, I pulled her cunt towards him but she was kissing me and sucking at my breast and then he was inside me, and it was like a part of me that was missing, a part of me that the motherfuckers had taken from me, taken from me when they, taken from me, it was back, and Jade was there holding me and kissing me, and she wanted that missing piece of me to be in me, she wanted to give me what had been hers alone, and we all three were one thing, one thing, and I was orgasming, not as I had with the man beasts, but with pure belonging, with two people who made me what I could be, in a better world, in a better life. What I should have been.

And all three of us lay panting on the bottom of the boat.

“You okay hun?” Jade asked. I looked at her but she was looking at Argyl.

“Yeah.” he said. “That was, I'm not sure what happened there.”

“It had to. I don't know. Shit's crazy.”

He nodded and pulled his robe back around him. It had never come off, just come loose. I pulled myself to sitting, still clutching Jade and she supported me. We looked down at the world. Before us we could see light, see the sun shining on the river as it broke from the mountain, saw green fields and blue sky. We were rushing towards it. It was freedom. Oh, my master would come, but we would be free from the darkness, we could run and run, find some other god who offered a salvation that wasn't the base mindlessness that this mountain goddess had made.

Why had we made love? I knew my own desire, and understood perhaps Jade's desperation to save me, the overflow of emotion turned action. But why Argyl?

“Come put your dress on,” Jade said, and she was holding the leaf dress my lover had made, clean now, and I pulled myself into it. It was tight where my new breast was, but it was tolerable if I pushed myself a bit to the side. I pulled the boots on and stuffed the mask and gloves into the bosom. Jade had fixed her robe and fell back on a small bench towards the back of the boat. I fell down besides her. She took my hand and then Argyl was sitting besides us.

“I don't see how we fucked, I mean, how we made love, in this space. It, it seems to small.” My voice seemed strained and distant.

“It was pretty uncomfortable actually. You okay hun? You seem, too sober now.”

“I, yes, it doesn't make sense.”

I took Argyl's hand and held both mine and hers, hand in hand in hand. The bridge between them.

I felt, for that moment, perfect belonging. I was no longer a lost slave. Argyl had returned to me a piece that had been missing. A piece the motherfuckers had taken from me as a child, that my whoring and all my masters had taken from me. He had penetrated me, no, he had, he had allowed himself to be taken into me, he had accepted my embrace. I had been a full person, taken, accepted, the whole thing loved for all my faults, pulled from the depths of the drug and the basest acceptance of the use of my flesh for the pleasure of others. They had seen my basest self, and they had taken me and loved me.



There were no words. We held each others hands and we were each other, we were one bit of love, tiny and helpless, our destruction behind us, our destruction before us. But one moment, we were whole, we belonged, we were exactly what we needed each other to be.

And after one perfect moment, it was gone. The boat shifted on the water and a chasm carved into the mountain came into view, and on it stood the bull man, and on it stood Archmagio, and our tiny boat wrecked itself, smashing into that jagged and broken rock.

## CHAPTER 21

“Little one little one,” the bull's voice reverberated in my head. A low rumble like gravel scraping against gravel. I stumbled dizzy and retched.

“You must come to me,” the bull man roared in my mind and the world was spinning beneath me.

“Run,” I hissed, desperate, off balance and retching, my thoughts squeezed and the worlds colliding in my eyes. “Run,” I screamed now, “leave me, run!”

“We're not leaving you Kara.” Argyl. Stern, stoic, determined.

“Murder me and run,” I hissed.

“Come to me”

I fell forwards, fighting against his pull but it was too much, my blood pulled me towards him. Then Jade was on top of me, pulling me to the ground and screaming something I did not understand. Too far away, I was in a thick fog.

“Come to me”

“I will obey,” I whimpered, pathetic and small.

“Kara, come on. Just leave! We'll jump in the river, swim. Just come, fuck just come.

“I will obey,” I whimpered, pathetic and small.

“Get her legs!” she screamed, and Argyl was there grabbing me and pulling me towards the wreckage of the boat.

“Come to me.” Archmagio was there as well, watching, his face flickering between a thousand faces, a gray wreckage of humanity. I was kicking at Argyl and I knocked him down. Jade tried to hold on but I was twisting and falling as spasms racked me, and she could not. I broke away and fell into the rock. My head stung and must have bled.

She was on me again and pulling me back and I was shouting at her between sobs.

“I am abomination! They broke me they all broke me, motherfuckers they broke me.”

She yanked me back and I realized I had been on my feet again, but now sprawled down on top of her. She wrapped her arms and legs about me to hold me fast.

“I am a million slivers of mirror, an infinite reflection of mirrors, a broken soulless tool, a knife for evil to cut you, a hideous monstrosity.”

“Shut up Kara shut up. Come on, come on, just come, just run with us.” She was screaming, frantic and nearly crying. I was a sputtering sobbing mess.

“A being made of filth. The best of me my suicide.”

“Fuck shut up!”

“Come to me.”

“No Kara,” she was weeping now and I realized her grip had broken and I was falling away away away. It was all so far away. My weeping body, her weeping body. I found her hand and held it, looked into her eyes and smiled at her.

“I love you Jade.”

“I, I, I please stop, please come back, fuck!” I was walking away again and she was clutching at me. Her pretty face was scraped now, somehow it was bleeding, but only skinned.

“I am,” I said, but did not know how to finish. My pulse pounded inside me. OBEY OBEY OBEY a terrible and loud necessity burning through my blood, go to him. “I must go. It is, it is what I am.”

“Kara, please.” she grabbed my shoulders and forced my eyes to look into hers. “I, I was a princess, you know? But that's all rubbish now. Collapsed. Fleeing with my prince, my betrayed

prince, to what? We run with no purpose anymore. We have no conspiracy to return to power. We have nothing. We have nothing to hold but each other. I need you. We need you. Your love is all we have. Please please just come with me. I have no other center.”

“Run,” I said back, “I must obey”

“No! Why? Come!”

“It is what I am!” I was screaming now, “It is what I am. Not a trait but my nature. I must go.”

Then there was something over my head and my arms were pulled tight to my body.

“Her legs,” Argyl shouted “Grab her legs!” and I was borne aloft.

“Come to me” in my mind.

Obey obey. I writhed in their arms, but my feet now were bound and they were struggling with my squirming weight. And I was screaming.

“Motherfuckers let me go! Motherfuckers made me weak, blunted this tool, motherfuckers.” It was as if a different woman was screaming. “I’m a fucking monster let me go you motherfuckers!”

Somehow though I was floating away, or beneath, the turbulent surface just beyond my reach, flowers blooming down my throat and weighing me. “I love you,” my voice was gentle and far away, they were bearing me away, struggling towards the remains of the boat. Kicking and squirming I was yelling through heavy tears, “Jade, I love you!” She was screaming but I could not make out the words. She was weeping and I could not hear, and then the blanket was falling off of me and I was kissing her and her me.

“Come to me” and I realized she was unconscious and Argyl was vomiting and rolling on the rock clutching his gut. The bull man stood over us, blade hands cut into the rock around us.

“GO TO HIM” my master's command now, and I was up and stepping towards Archmagio as if in a dream. I thought of Jade as I walked, slow step after slow step. The rock and horror seemed far away, I felt it was her and I alone again, as we made love in the bottom of the boat, her hand guiding Argyl into me, her clutching at me as we made love, her joy at seeing my joy, her desperation to pull me away and save me, as if her love would be enough to break me free of masters and slaves, make me whole. I had cracked her, a tool I had cracked her open, touched her heart. We had but the seed of love. The grasp of body to body, the intention to love all the dark unknowns, untainted by the consequences of those mysteries. The idea of it, the pure idea, not the troubled muddled thing itself. An infant love, made desperate and intense by the severity of the circumstances. I all she had now but her troubled husband. Saving me her only purpose left to cling to. Her my, what? My only window out of servitude? Out of serving evil?

In my mouth the blooming of flowers and Archmagio was pressing into my lips the black tar. The taste mixed with blood and I held to life by a thin thread, a tethered bit of silk in a great dark sea.

“Little one,” he said gently, his face an impossible transition between a hundred faces, a monstrosity of all the hate and sorrow of the world.

“Little one, he made you love to hurt you. He made you love her, and now he will make you kill her. To cut you. To enjoy your blood and tears.” He pressed into my hands a silver knife, half a foot of blade and it fit my hand, it was made for my hand. I looked down at it and a wonderful calm wrapped around me. I floated there and knew that all would be okay, I would float and float away and would be okay.

“MURDER HER” my master's voice reverberated through my head, and I turned towards Jade. She was sleeping still. Argyl, stomach empty, still heaving, fought his way through waves of nausea and pain to Jade. I walked forwards a step and looked at them.

Peace, I thought, was suicide. The knife was very simple, a sharp simple tool. Made of silver, made of silver. I sliced myself, a cut in my wrist, on the back of my hand, not a suicide cut, and I bled. Blood blood dripping from my hand, a sharp simple knife. I bled and I knew my suicide was the answer.

“MURDER HER” another step, a terrible step. Jade slept, Argyl clutched and her and pulled her desperately, ineffectually. The bull man, his great cock blade rising at their suffering, stood close and watched.

“MURDER HER” and another step. Argyl retched but did not surrender, pulled on her and made an inch, pulled again and failed. I loved him too. A kind man. A man who would feel a woman's hands on his cock, know desire in his heart, and turn away, turn away in love, not in disgust. A man who would share himself but not take, a man fiercely gentle. The greater mystery than Jade. She was open to me, he not. Not truly. But we had made love. He had planted his seed in me.

Another step. My heart pounded in me, obey obey obey, kill kill kill, and another step, I was halfway to them and I cut myself again, cut deep into my wrist and the blood flowed. No pain, a little pressure, no pain. The blood poured from me and I stumbled, grew weak, the darkness fighting up my spine into my eyes and mind.

Another step. “MURDER HER” I was closer. Argyl stared at me. No expression but disgust, and he retched again. Controlled. Tight muscles held. Eyes flickering at me, at the bull man, at Jade, at the boat. He tried again, another inch. Another step. He would not out pace me. Only my suicide would save him. Wonderful, soft suicide. I cut into my other wrist, deep. A tendon snapped and my wrist went limp, blood spraying for a moment then flowing. Flowing down my lover's dress. The dress she made for me.

“MURDER HER” another step. Closer now, closer now, another step. I bled but not fast enough. I thrust the blade at my chest but the dress deflected it, and another step. Too close too close. I cut at my neck and blood gushed from me and I fell, dizzy and weak, I fell, and I dragged myself towards her, I could not stop, the taste of blood and iron in my mouth. Another foot, another, and I was on her. Argyl grabbed me and shoved me away. He was yelling but I could not hear.

“Kill me,” I said, and he hit at me with his boot. But it was weak, the bull man pierced his shoulder with a bladed hand and lifted him into the air. Effortlessly. Argyl writhed and blood leaked from the blade, his arm hung limp, he was screaming and flailing but useless, he was flung bleeding away. The bull man turned to me, scraping blades against his erection

“Murder her,” he said, eager, an excitement I had not seen in him. Or had I? Raping and dismembering a woman, a river of sewage.

“MURDER HER” my master's command and I held the knife to Jade. Her eyes opened and I lost sight for a moment, then it returned. Jade was looking into my eyes. My blood spilled over her and soaked her. I was dying, but not fast enough. Panic.

“I love you” I said. “I love you.”

“I love you” she said, dreamy and distant. “Lady, Kara, I love you. I love you, it's okay, I love you, it's okay.”

And I cut at myself, I cut my throat again and more blood poured from me, but not deep enough. Why not deep enough?

“MURDER HER” and I knew, he held my hand back. He held me on that edge. I bled but not fast enough. Death was not fast enough.

“I love you” I said, and she smiled at me, and I plunged the knife into her breast.

“I love you” she said, smiling, dreaming, lovely. My heart broke inside me. I knew it. It was far away and I was floating but I knew.

Argyl fell into me and I fell off Jade. The knife, I realized, had not penetrated. Deflected off a rib and she was still alive, still alive, I could still die before her, I could still die to save her. The knife in my hand I slashed at my face, and blood flowed from my cheek, and still I could not die. A blade slashed through Argyl again, pinning him to the ground. Again through a shoulder, it would not kill him, only hold him.

“MURDER HER,” I was on her again, holding the blade to her breast. She looked at me, eyes wide with fear now, but she did not move, could not move. I loved her. I loved her.

And I plunged the dagger into her breast and murdered her.

I fell to the earth to die, hating myself, hating my weakness. A million chances to die and I had not. Blood pouring from me, and then Argyl was above me, one lame arm dangling helplessly, the other holding my silver blade to my throat. His expression fiercely nothing, his eyes blazing hate.

“Kill me” I said, meeting those terrible eyes, eyes that burned my guilt into me, my own hate. My own hate.

He threw me back instead. Threw me to the earth. I bled and should have died. I wished to die. He turned and the bull man was there, glowering over him, watching his pain and stroking himself. Argyl, small weak man, turned to him, turned to him and thrust my puny blade at him. A brave pathetic attack. Argyl was swept aside without care, the great bull eyes fixed on me, Argyl was cut in half, the great bull eyes fixed on me.

He hissed. I felt my master lick at me, lick through my mind. He was there on the rock, dancing ludicrously and shitting and pissing, laughing and clapping his hands, an obscene display. The bull man turned towards him and bowed.

“BOW TO ME” and I was lurching to my knees. I had no strength, I was bleeding and dying and should have been too weak to move. But I fell up to my knees and kneeled before my obscene master. Erect cock, masturbating to the carnage about him, fowling the air with the stench of carrion.

“FOLLOW THE LITTLE WIZARD AGAIN” my mind thundered, and my blood was oozing not flowing, and I stumbled to my feet and Archmagio was next to me, a hand on my shoulder, his face a gray mass.

“Come with me,” and I knew I could not. The dagger was before me and I lurched towards it, caught it up in my hand, and the bull man slashed his blades towards me and would have killed me. Would have, save my lover's dress. His blades struck with the force but not the edge. I had the blade and I was close, inside his blades, and I slammed it into his guts. He roared an impossible roar, neither human nor bull, and I twisted the blade and cut it across, spilling his insides out and he fell and his blades were slashing at me again, the force of it throwing me to the ground and twisting my leg beneath me, a sharp pressure that I knew should be pain.

Should be, but the flowers were still inside me. Archmagio stood above me then.

“You must obey.” I fell, fell down before him as if I were groveling. He stepped away, careful, watching me close. I lunged at him with the blade but he jumped back and I fell. I fell and lunged and fell, and he was backing away, then I saw he was a frail old man, gaunt and wretched, splotched diseased flesh, his face more skull than alive. I saw him and I lurched again and he fell, his own bones betraying him. And I put my hands about his throat to choke him, and squeezed his windpipe shut and choked and choked and he should have died. The motherfucker should have died.

But his knife slashed my face and still I choked, and his knife slashed again and dug into my wrist, and my hand went limp and useless, and he was away. He scooped up his robes and ran, a frightened old man, he ran and leaped into the wreckage of our boat and pushed desperately at the shore. Then he was gone, half in the river, drifting down the current and away.

Would I die? My wounds should have killed me, but the blood only oozed. I held my sliced wrists before my eyes and saw them clogged with sand, sand that poured from me and slowed my blood. How many times must my suicide be foiled?

I had no strength. Could I lay and die? How long? It was not cold. The numbness of the drug was wearing off, pain began to fill my nerves. Better a quicker death. Would the goat men come to save me? Motherfuckers. I pulled myself towards the river. One small pull. Then another. I woke and realized I had blacked out from pain, which seemed odd as I hardly felt it.

Jade, but no, my death was all. I pulled myself another foot, and my hand was wet with water. I pulled again, hard, and pain was all I knew, and then I knew that I was wet and drowning and drowning and that was all, and my heart was full of joy.

## CHAPTER 22

My suicide was a black flower that shared that current with me. As I reached for it the current pulled it this way, and me that. Teased me, held it just beyond my reach that I might see its beauty and suffer its absence more. I can conceive of no explanation for the failure of my drowning save the intervention of some hostile divinity, gleeful to see me suffer more. I felt that Jade was with me there, her firm body pressed to mine, the warmth of skin and arousal cocooning me from the cold water, her arms a legs clutched about me, her weight holding me down, willing me to my longed for death.

I was hauled up and out, and I was coughing and vomiting water and my lungs burned inside me. It was bright but I could not see, then there were people standing over me, silhouettes against the brightness.

That may have been a dream. I certainly should not have been conscious for it, having lost so much blood and being nearly drowned. It was several more days before I woke again.

I woke naked in a cot. There were no covers but the room was warm. It was also bright, and there were several other white cots, all of which were empty.

Sensations of Jade, of Argyl, dwelt with me. Of Argyl inside me, Jade before me, held inside and out. I recalled no dream but must have dreamt of that one perfect moment before. Before. And with the memory a deep and violent hate welled up in me, and I thought of my suicide, drifting beyond my reach in the river as monsters pulled me out, breathed life where none was wanted.

Probably thought they were heroes, motherfuckers.

I meant to rise in order to find some new way of terminating myself, but found instead that I was bound ankle and wrist to the cot. Archmagi, when had I ceased to think of him as my faux master? He had kept me in a box, unable to move or lay to sleep. But I had the drug then, and simply floated. My old master had kept me bound for hours as a means of torture. A few tethers should not have bothered me. But I raged against them, quietly. They held me from my suicide and I hated them for it as I had never hated tethers before.

It was some frustrated hours later when a man in blue and white robes entered the room through its one door.

“You're awake.”

I made no response.

“Will you try to harm me or yourself again if I untie you?” His dialect was thick and unfamiliar.

“No sir.”

He considered me a moment, then untied my bonds. He watched me carefully as I sat, then kneeled before him.

“You are a slave?”

“Yes sir.”

“Hmm. Runaway?”

I wasn't sure how to answer that.

“Well, if your master comes for you he'll have to pay just the same,” he said, misunderstanding.

“Do not kneel, sit.” I did so. “We have no slaves here, we are a free principality. Only, we have certain fugitive slave treaties. None of your injuries were life threatening, save the

hypothermia. I was able to reconnect the tendons in your wrists and minimize your scarring in general. What happened to you?"

In my mind I saw Argyl's look of hate and rage, but I said nothing.

"Well, no matter." He was a meek and shrewish looking man. "Your charges for your, medical care, are 5,000 shekels of gold. I can provide an itemized bill if you like."

I hated listening to him. Or maybe it was breathing I hated. Suicide. Suicide. I thought of Jade, of her perfect strong body, and the black hate inside me writhed and flexed itself.

"Are you listening?"

"No sir." I hated him. Not just him. I hated My heart was dark and full of hate.

He was looking at me now, not speaking. I did not meet his eyes.

"Don't kill yourself," he said.

"Yes sir." He turned and left.

Why didn't I? I almost did, but there was some hesitation in me? Will to live? Ha! I longed to hang myself from the tethers on the cot, smash the glass window and cut my arteries with the shattered glass. I did not. I hesitated, I obeyed. I sat wretchedly and wished only to die, but I obeyed like a meek and stupid child. Perhaps my hate of myself denied me my suicide, willed me to suffer more, to carry that black and sharp regret in my chest and gut, that my heart would be cut and cut and cut.

The shrewish man reentered the room with two other well dressed men.

"This," said a tall clean shaved man, "is a free principality. You are under no obligation to choose any particular way. You may pay the gentleman doctor the 5,000 shekels of gold. Not having the money does not excuse you from the debt. You may, of course, seek employment in the town. There are many exciting opportunities in the garment and customer service sectors. If you can find a creditor willing to front you the money that is. If you have land you can use as collateral, any number of banks will grant you a loan at 2-5% interest, which will take about four years to pay off working. If you don't have land, the banks will not speak with you, but Jacobs and Makel & co. can provide a loan at 30-35% interest. Working any of the unskilled jobs, you can pay this off in thirty to thirty five years, assuming you live in the shanty town and eat from the rubbish heap. The second alternative is to donate your flesh for medical experimentation. The going rate is 500 shekels of silver per pound of flesh. In your case, that will likely be your life. The final alternative is to sign a contract with Mr. Cuntshable, who will discharge your debt at no interest to you, provided you work off that debt in his employment at his Smiling Gentlemen Brothel.

I had hardly paid attention. The third man, a rotund and finely dressed gentleman, stepped up and spoke.

"May I count on your agreement to our terms and conditions?"

"Yes sir," I said distractedly. I certainly did not intend to be alive, and submission to their will was always the easiest course.

"Stand up," he said, and I did so. He inspected me, touching, poking and pinching everywhere.

"Excellent work on the scarring Doctor," he said.

"Thank you, my good sir."

"Well, the constable's fee here is two shekels of bronze. Do you have that?"

"No sir" I said.

"We of the public office do require immediate payment, Mr. Cuntshable."

"Of course sir. Please, madam, and I call you madam as you are a free lady in our great land,



please lean up against the cot there. Uh, no the other way, yes, like that, now lean at the waist, yes like that.”

Once you gain control of your sphincter muscles, receiving a cock anally is, while uncomfortable if not aroused, not actually painful, provided enough lubrication is used. The constable used some sort of industrial grease.

Cuntshable walked about in front of me. “Do you know what this is?” he asked, holding a wad of black tar.

“Yes sir,” I said, my voice expressing a bit of the discomfort of the situation. I had hesitated stupidly and alone when I might have murdered myself, I stood there dumbly, my will subordinated to a stranger. Why?

He pressed that tar into my mouth, and a thick black veil fell about the world, and my suicide hung thick about me, present and untouchable. It deadened the misery of my body until I hardly noticed when they led me to a small room full of bunks where dozens of us nude whores slept, two to a bunk. A room that would be small for half our number.

It locked me into my suffering. I drifted helpless in my hate and guilt, knew only Jade's soft surprise, her blood pumping from the knife I had plunged into her, Argyl's look of hate. I was the monster I was trapped inside, and that monster jabbed at me with memories of those last moments, replaying again and again without pause for mercy. And the feel of skin on skin, the feel of them both, holding me, helping me without real reason. Helping their murderer.

I tumbled over and over myself, and all there was was hate, hate of myself for my weakness, and hate for a world that had made me weak.

“What's your name?” a soft scarred voice said. Far far away my body clutched hers, weeping, both of us weeping, cold and naked together in that crowded room, waiting to be whored or worse.

“Kara,” I said, forcing the word through that thick veil, and wary from the effort.

“I am Dakra,” she said softly, and we held each other and shivered and I hated, all I was was hate. I drifted there in blackness and in hate. I'm not sure if I slept or not, but eventually a bell was rung and all the girls all pulled themselves from their beds.

They all had dark sunken eyes and were very skinny. Dakra took my hand and whispered something into my ear, but I did not understand her. Standing was hard, I felt my muscles shaking, and the light, which streamed into the room through large windows in the ceiling, hurt my eyes and made everything look pale and sick.

There was another bell and we shuffled forwards. I had to lean on Dakra, who managed to keep me moving with the rest of the group. Many others seemed to be in a similar state to me, leaning on their partners as they shuffled through.

We walked into a large cafeteria, where we collected a tasteless gruel and sat in long rows and ate as much as we could stomach, which wasn't much. A few men in white official looking costumes circled among us, asked us for our names, and marked the cost of the meal against our debt. Nobody spoke.

After we all hobbled and limped to a great shower that adjoined the cafeteria. Spigots in the ceiling sprayed us with soap, then some minutes later, with clean water.

“Hurry, it costs us if we are not clean enough to work,” Dakra whispered to me, and we cleaned ourselves and each other. The water was luke warm, and left me feeling cold and weak when it was done. Numbly I stumbled, leaning on Dakra's arm.

Next we came to tables where two nude old women handed out gobs of tar. My pulse quickened a bit when I saw it, and Dakra sensed it.

“Just take as little as you can, they add the cost to your debt. You'll never get out if you eat too much.” The women handing it out had sunken cheeks and their teeth had all fallen out. They had festering soars about their bodies, and their eyes were drugged and dead. I took a large handful and crammed it into my mouth. Dakra took a much smaller amount, reconsidered, and took just a bit more. We ate it greedily and drifted into each other, leaning on the other as we trudged on.

Makeup was smeared over us next. Three old and decrepit women worked us in an assembly line, applying different pastes and powders to our faces and bodies, and a fourth woman quickly brushed and fixed our hair in a variety of styles. Some rose above our heads, others snakes long braids around their heads and down their backs. I paid no attention to what they did to me. My eyes hurt and it was hard to focus.

Thoughts of Jade rode heavy in my heart, and I fell down into them with the drug in my veins. I stumbled forwards mindless into a large and finely furnished room. Dakra led me to a sofa where we sat and leaned against each other.

“When the men come we must make love to each other, to entice them.” she whispered in my ear. I said nothing, holding her hand and drifting. My mind was heavy, numb. The events of the day seemed distant, cold and real, bright against the dim light of the cave where I had murdered them. I thought of my suicide but it seemed too much effort. Easier to lie numbly against this young whore and drift away, drift in shame and guilt, drift in a soft and gentle hate.

She started kissing me and I her, and we were making love gently on the sofa as men walked amongst the couches and picked their whores. Dakra's kisses were soft, where Jade's had been strong and confident, but she was gentle and it was easy to reciprocate the function of it. Without thinking, I gently guided her towards a better show, shifting our bodies so that our breasts and asses showed better, so that our tongues and passion, fake as it was, seemed enticing to the passing men.

We were picked by a young man who placed a flower on us. Dakra smiled up at him and I faked encouragement as well.

“Sir, you will not be disappointed,” she said.

“I hope not” he said, slurring drunkenly.

“Sir, will you pee on us?”

“Huh, uh, no.”

“Would you like to bind us?”

“Heh, well lets see.”

“Yes sir. Would you like--”

“No more fucking questions.”

“They are required sir. Please, come with us.” She took my hand and his, and led him up a shallow flight of stairs to a small dimly lit room.

I was having trouble walking. Dakra half carried me up to the bed and I fell back on it.

“You,” the man said, looking at me, “suck my cock.”

“Sir,” I said, and tried to rouse myself. I fell rather than stepped and he kicked me in the ribs. I hardly felt it. Dakra rushed to me and helped me to my knees.

“Sir, it costs extra to hurt us.”

“Yeah fuck you,” he said, and kicked me again. Dakra tried to interpose her body between me and him, but by then I had managed to get his cock from his pants and was applying my trade to it.

“You're good at that you fucking slut,” he said. Darka reached a hand up to touch him too, and put her other arm around me as if to steady or comfort me. He kicked her too then, and she fell

back. It all seemed so small and insignificant, as if I watched a play or read it in a book. What was I? A little ball of hate. Too small, too small to effect my revenge. Too meek to end myself. A black little pit of nothing.

He had a knife out now and was cutting my face as I blew him. He was moaning as my blood dripped down my cheek and mixed with my saliva on his cock.

“That will cost you sir.” Dakra said meekly, fear in her voice.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said, and kicked at her again. She fell back again. When had she returned to my side? He pulled himself away from me and grabbed her hair, throwing her onto the bed. I watched his cock press into her, her gasp of pain, small, meek and resigned. He held his bloody knife to her chest now, tracing her nipples and breasts with it.

I saw then Jade, my blade penetrating her chest, her blood pumping onto me, her soft surprise. I saw Jade, and remembered her body against mine. I saw Jade, and I lost my mind.

The man hit the floor hard with a profane scream I didn't listen to. He held the knife up to me and I was standing over him.

“Kill me! You motherfucker!” I screamed at him, and was kicking his face and head, and Dakra was screaming too but I could not hear her. There was blood dripping from her chest, her breast had been sliced. The man slashed his blade at my leg but it was a pathetic slash, I drove my heel down onto his face and he cut my leg, a thin light slice. He was screaming bloody murder then, and I heard commotion outside the room. I snatched a chair into my hands and smashed it into his face, then again and again. His skull caved at some point, splattering brains and blood onto the floor. A few hits later I realized he was dead.

Dakra was staring at me wide eyed. I looked at her for a moment.

“Will you kill me?” I asked. My voice sounded weak, pathetic. She stared at me, uncomprehending, for a long moment, before she slowly shook her head no.

The door burst open and a large man stared in at us. He opened his mouth to speak but I threw the chair at him and he ducked. He rushed the room and tackled me to the floor, spinning me onto my front and twisting my arm behind me. I could barely move, but found with my free hand the knife that had cut Dakra and I, and I used it to cut behind me. He twisted me farther into the ground and my knife never connected to anything.

“Kill me you motherfucker” I hissed at him, and there was a long silence between us. Then I twisted suddenly, into his pin, and I slipped away, a slight weakness in his grip. I plunged the knife into his throat. His blood spurt down onto me and his great weight crushed me. I struggled out from under him.

I felt that I was waking from a dream. I heard shouting from outside the room and people were running. Dakra stared down at the body, then to me.

“What are you?” she said, whimpering. I didn't know.

“I killed her,” I said, and her wide eyes took in the two dead men on the floor. “I killed her for my master commanded me. I killed her. She was my love and I killed her. There is nothing else for me but death. I will kill a thousand of the motherfuckers before I die. I will kill a thousand and drown the streets in blood and I will kill and kill until they cut me down.” I was wavering, the drug still strong in my blood, it seemed like another woman stood in my skin soaked in blood. I took into my hand the bloody sword of the dead soldier. His own blood. I said nothing as I left the room. I don't know why I did not kill her too.

Two men, fops not soldiers, were running past as I entered the hall and I cut one of the them down. “Fuck you!” I cried at him and he screamed and I cut his neck and was down bleeding on the floor. The other ran on ahead. It seemed a thousand ants running before me, pathetic little

things. I felt my master in me then, his putrid body giddy with blood. I felt him surging through my veins and I cut a woman in half who rushed up to me. People were scattering before me as I descended the stairs. Two men with swords came to me and I swung wildly at them, crashing my sword into his and bearing him down with my weight. The other slashed his sword against my arm and I saw my skin flop open but could not feel it. I cut his face and was past both of them.

Cuntshable was running about and screaming and I headed towards him. Two more toughs with long pipes closed around him and I cut at one, felt a blow from the other, and twisted as I fell, driving the blade through the man's calf. He fell and I cut his throat. The other struck me again and I fell, dazed, but still there was no pain. I turned to him and cut him and cut him and he was bleeding and holding a flap of flesh in his hand, and I cut him again and he was dead and falling.

Cuntshable was in a corner then. I raised his hands feebly and shrieked, and I cut him in half, tearing a great gouge into his side and his organs spilled from him. I sliced his face and then passed the blade through his eye. My mind felt cold, precise. I was bleeding from my arm and I hoped it killed me. This was not the giddy slaughter I had committed before. This was murder, my murder, and my suicide.

There was a ring of men in armor and bearing swords that blocked me into the corner.

“Kill me you motherfuckers!” I screamed at them, and took a wild swing at them. They backed away carefully, but did not break rank.

“Kill me! You motherfuckers are worsers slaves than I! Dead pathetic things, you are dead pathetic things flopping dead and dead fucks.” I was swinging wildly at them and they continued to just contain me. I rushed one and he brushed my sword aside. I slammed myself into him and he stumbled a little, I pressed on and was past him, my sword scraping uselessly against his armor.

There was a finely dressed lady there and I slashed at her and cut her. Then I was stumbling towards two great doors and dizziness overcame me. I saw Argyl's eyes full of hate looming over me and then a man at arms was slashing his blade at me and I was running at him, hoping he would kill me, and my blade was through him somehow and he was falling. Two other soldiers were behind him and I swung my sword wildly at them. They knocked my sword aside casually and then one passed his sword through my arm and the sword fell uselessly to the ground.

“Kill me motherfucker!” I screamed at him, rushing him with my naked body and I was on top him, we were falling and I was choking and choking and he knocked me aside and I tasted blood in my mouth. And I was on the ground and there were two men on top of me, and my arms were held behind me, and I was stuck I could not move, and I screamed and swore and writhed beneath them, screaming “Kill me kill me kill me!” They clubbed at me, then somehow I was loose and lunging forwards then falling again, then I was stumbling through the doors and onto the open street. Two of the soldiers were behind me. They were more weary now, holding back. I thought I saw Archmagio there, in the crowd of men in the street, and I lurched at him swinging as if I had a sword, but he stepped back and I lost sight of him.

“Kill me!” I screamed, but nobody moved against me. I stalked towards a group but they pulled away from me, so that I was surrounded but not confronted. “Fucking cowards! Fucking kill me!” I screamed and screamed and was crying and stumbling forwards.

Darkness closed in about my vision and I stumbled to the ground. Of course, they only had to wait for me to die, to bleed my wounds out. Well, death was death.

“Don't let them take me to that doctor,” I said, now quietly. One of the guards was watching me closely, sword at the ready. “Don't let them. Make them kill me. Make me die.” His

expression did not change.

There was a trail of blood behind me turning the dirt road to mud. I stumbled on. I pulled at a door but it was closed and I heard swearing behind it.

“Please someone kill me. Please.” Nothing. I fell to the ground but stumbled up again and on. I fell onto another door, this one open. I fell onto cool stone and nearly lost consciousness.

“Not in the house of the lord!” cried a voice, and I looked up, seeing an old man standing above me.

“Father, she has killed, she,”

“No! Wait there, you may have her when she leaves. But this is the house of God, and all may be safe here.”

“Father!” shouted one of the men.

Another started barking commands, “Get the back, you and you, make sure she doesn't escape there. You, check for windows.”

The thick dialects prattled on. The old man took my hand I helped me up. I fell onto a pew, one of many that lined the room.

“Child, may I bind your wounds?”

“No,” I said, not looking at him, “I would die.” My voice hardly a whisper.

“Oh my child,” he said. He cradled my face in his arms and I wept against his robe.

“What god is this?”

“He is the true God, there is no other name.”

I rose, stumbling, and walked forwards. There was an alter there, and symbols on the wall. I put my hand on the alter. The man walked closer to me, but stayed back.

“The one God, he can absolve you, you need but to ask. The men outside, they will still punish you, but your soul will be bound to the one God.”

My blood smeared the alter. Hate welled up inside me. The one God. Absolution. I pulled the alter down and smashed it to the floor.

“My child!” the man said, rushing forwards. I kicked him back and he looked up at me.

“You have suffered so much, my child.” he said, though his voice lacked conviction.

I smeared the signs of my master into the fallen alter, and onto the walls. I stumbled as I did. I would have spread my organs about the room as he had demanded, one last sacrifice to set myself free.

“Kvathka,” he said, and I knew my master's name.

And then there was light. It filled the room, horrible bright light that filled my vision and blotted out the temple, and a loud and impossible rumble that blotted out the sounds of shouts and men grumbling in the street, and a bright light that thrust through my eyes and I fell to the ground and fell, and there was nothing there, I was suspended weightless in that terrible white, droplets of blood drifting off of me as I tumbled head over heels.

Then I stood in a long white marble hall, with great pillars and vaulted ceilings, with reliefs of men and women locked in combat, ferocious scenes of violence that shifted under my vision. Great slaughters of men and women beneath swords and arrows, with great winged angels flying overhead with blades of light, directing the human slaughter this way and that.

I stumbled under the sudden gravity, and felt heavier than I was. An angel, a massive forbidding man three yards tall and hefting a massive sword that seemed to be only light, entered the hall opposite me.

“You have seen an angel of the lord and so you will die.”

“Fuck you, murder me you motherfucker!” I screamed at him, and meant to rush him and

pummel him with my fists, but fell instead, my weight too much for my limbs to support.

“You have defiled the temple of the lord with the symbols of the foul one, and so you will die.”

“Murder me. Murder me!”

He advanced towards me, powerful stride that crossed the huge corridor with too few steps. I pulled myself forwards towards him, a pathetic effort. He stood before me then and placed his sword against me.

“Fuck you. Lord of everything, fuck you! I will murder you! You who let this evil live, who made me what I was, made me weak, made me weak to thrust the knife through my lover's heart, made us hurt, fuck you I will murder you!”

He looked down at me, unmoving now.

“You, scraps of blood and filth, made this, made us filth and filth and death and you let me thrust the knife, fuck you, you let me thrust the knife, I killed her. Motherfucker I killed her.”

I made it to his feet now and pummeled them with my fists. It was like striking stone, but I did not stop. I raged against him, grabbing his ankle and wrenching it with what might I had, but it had no effect. He stood over me coldly, impassively.

And then in my hand was the silver knife, the knife with which I had slain my love. I drove it into him, into his legs and he screeched and tumbled and I was on top of him and drove the knife into his chest and he dissipated into dust that choked my lungs. I coughed and stumbled on, clutching the knife. My master's knife, he must be there with me, I felt his presence with me, smelled his stench drifting from behind me. I did not care.

A great white light burned out my vision and I strode to it, each step a tremendous effort, each step all determination. I could not look into the light, behind me five giant angels closed ranks around me, one the angel I had slain. They wore dark and rageful expressions, and it seemed an act of will that they did not rush and slaughter me there.

I thrust my puny knife into the light and heard my master laughing in my mind. Not loud like it was before, now it was a weak thought, almost subconscious, tickling the edges of my mind.

Then I was falling, my mind obliterated in a sudden onslaught, all my thoughts torn from me, I had no mouth with which to scream, I was nothing, heaved out of existence, my mind casting desperate tendrils towards my body, which fell and twitched helplessly on the marble floor. Then as suddenly I was back in myself, helpless, seizures, twitching and then my whole life was playing before my mind's eye. Not chronologically, but all impossibly at once, a great rush of everything I had been and had thought. Foremost among them that silver knife plunging into Jade's chest, my master's cackle, Argyl's hate, over and over it burned through me and I could not breathe, the memory of Jade, of my tree lover, of Argyl, of all the nameless men I had fucked for my master's profit, all the tortures, all the thoughts, all the moments lost in drugs, the murder of that woman, the infant I could not slay, it was all there at all once.

And then suddenly gone, and I was alone in a great white space. White as far as space could be seen. I stood naked, my silver knife gone, melted to a pool of metal on the floor. And then a man was before me. A massive man, ten times my size and stooping to look at me.

“You are of the first side,” he said.

“You will murder me!” I screamed at him, and would have rushed him save he was insubstantial, more phantom than physical.

“You will not be of the third state.” he said.

“What?”

“You will not be of the third state. Not now. You wish to be free of the foul one?”

“My master?”

“You are of the subordinate state with it, yes.”

“Yes, I wish my freedom.”

“He has great force. You will not be free easily. I have this for you.” He stooped and placed into my hand a sword sheathed in a scabbard.

“But you must choose. There, the ones you love, the two you love. They are of the second state, but not of the third state. You may still find them. I have not the possession of their state. It must be found and they may be restored. But then the foul one will be ready when you come to free yourself. Or you may go to your master now and free yourself, but then your lovers will pass into the third state and be gone to you.”

I stared at his massive form. He stared down at me with mild curiosity, as if I were a cute mouse he would prod towards a bit of cheese for lack of a better idea. The sword I held was longer than any I had welded before, but not, I think, all that long. Resting at my waist it almost reached the ground. It was curved very slightly. I did not draw it.

He was bleeding, a small cut on his calf, hardly a trickle of blood from it. A paper cut. My silver knife. All my rage and hate, a tiny nick on the calf of a god, useless.

Then I was back in the temple, holding the sword still, bloody and naked before the fallen alter. The priest was staring at me.

“What, where, did you get that?” He was pointing at the sword.

“He gave it to me.”

“The true God?”

“Yes, I think, he was very tall.”

His eyes opened very very wide, awe on his face, his mind boggling inside him.

## CHAPTER 23

I stepped outside the temple and the ring of guards still stood around me. My wounds, I realized, were closed without scars. They held their swords carefully, professional men doing what they were taught. I pulled the sword from its sheath, holding the sheath in my left hand. The sword was a great length of light, insubstantial but burning white light. The men pulled back, staring carefully, some seemed ready to run, others uncertain.

I walked back along the carnage I had left. There were more bodies than I remembered. A young man, fopishly dressed, lay with a deep slice into his chest, blood still leaked from him but he did not move. I leaned to him. My master was gone, no longer within me or watching me. Had the god broken his hold? Or did my master fear me now, blade in hand? Or was I beneath his notice now, the slaughter done?

The men surrounding me were watching, completely uncertain what to do. Was someone in command? Or had I slain their authority? Mechanisms such as I, helpless without a master's will. Or as I had been. What was I? The monster that had slain this man? A helpless man, patron of the whores perhaps, but not their pimp. My breast itched and I looked down at it.

My body was soaked in blood, but the breast, the one the goddess of the mountain had restored, was not, was the untainted brown of my skin. It ached, now that my attention was on it, and seemed heavily laden, to pull on my body as they never had before. I felt it, it seemed thick and full. Full of what? I pulled on the nipple and little beads of white formed on it. Milk, somehow. I pulled again and it sprayed out, dribbling over the bloody corpse below me. And his lips, his lips moved, just a small twitch, then a tongue was lapping the milk from them. I knew not why, but I leaned down and placed my nipple in his mouth, and he suckled from me. It felt, odd. Not sexual, but not entirely without pleasure. A new sensation for a body used to use. He suckled from me and as he did his wound bound up. It's hard to describe, it was not as if it healed quickly, but rather as if the cut were undone, played in reverse and then gone. He looked up at me, eyes wide, pulling his lips from my nipple.

"What?" he asked, befuddled. He knew not where he was. I had nothing to say to him, so stared stupidly. There were gasps from the soldiers around me. I looked and most held wide eyed expressions of awe. A few were cold, disciplined, watching. The resurrected man propped himself on his elbows and stared up at me, wide eyed.

I passed on. A woman dressed in silks and heavily perfumed lay on the earth with her throat slashed open. I crouched next to her. The sun was very bright, the street muddy with dirt and blood, which caked to my legs and itched. She was a pretty woman, a face powdered white and curled hair, a wig I realized. I placed my nipple in her mouth, but nothing happened. Who was she? Not a whore, not a pimp probably. A wife perhaps? I knew nothing of these people, save that they called slaves free. I squeezed my nipple gently and dribbled some milk onto her lips. Nothing at first, then a slow lick, eyes not opening but meaning to. I gave her my breast again and she drank, her neck closing up, her lungs gasping in air. She lay moaning still when I left her, eyes still shut.

I passed on. Two more bodies before the door to the brothel. I gave each my milk, first a soldier who had been stabbed through his chest, his armor somehow split. The second was a dirty boy dressed in greasy rags. I did not remember killing him but must have, his guts had been spilled out, a look of agony on his face.

The soldiers were still with me. Some watched me, swords ready. Others were helping the people I had resurrected, helping them up, reassuring them, pointing at the church and speaking



words I heard but did not listen to. I walked inside the brothel.

People had scattered. A number of the nude girls pulled back away from me, pressing themselves into the far side of the room. There were two dead whores just inside the door. I did not remember murdering them, but restored them all the same. They drank deep and looked more alive than the girls who had not been slain when I was done. One scampered away from me, weak but helped along by some of the other girls. The other looked at me with dreamy eyes and I saw the tar in her look. High as I was. Or had been, I did not feel high anymore, but neither did I feel the need in me. She smiled at me, dreamy and far, far away.

Further in one guard was being patched together and two others were dead. The men trying to staunch the bleeding in the living guard backed away from me. I placed my nipple before the dying man and he stared at me.

“What, hey,” he said, but I sprayed the milk on him and pressed my breast into his mouth. He did not suckle and tried to pull away, but I sprayed my milk into him and his wounds closed.

“The fuck?” he said, and I restored the other two as well. The men pulled away from me but I ignored them and I moved on.

Cuntshabble lay dead, his guts spilled out along the rug. I took him onto my lap and he suckled at me as a babe. He came aware only slowly, looked up at me blankly, then slowly fear and awe replaced his confusion. I passed on.

Upstairs there were two bodies, both whores. I restored them both and passed on before they could register me. I entered the room and Dakra was gone. The man I had slain lay in a pool of blood. I paused above him, remembering the glee with which he cut me. Remembering my old master slicing my skin and back as he fucked me.

What was I? Was I still that slave? Or had that self died in the church, bled to death and been reborn as a free woman. What was the difference? I hated the man, but I took him to my breast and restored him to life. Why did I do it? I did not know. Some judgment of my subconscious, no logic, benevolence spilling from me as it overflowed my spirit. A soul I did not believe in. Bah. The man came aware slowly, eyes registering shock, then horror. He tried to move away from me but I held his hair.

“Drink the milk, you motherfucker, drink it and be restored to life.” Nothing registered on his face. I wondered why I had spoken as I had already revived him.

“If you ever cut a girl again, I will return for you,” I said. His pale skin turned paler. Hate, but let it go, he is too small. A petty man who would rape and cut me, I was all of womanhood, not scared or cynical anymore. “

“Come and fuck me, I care not, I am woman and I will bring you life motherfucker.” I threw him to the ground and grabbed his cock, tried to mount him but he was not erect. He was trying to get away from me then and I let him go. Why had I done that? I let him go.

Outside the room only a few soldiers were still trying to keep track of me. A few people were openly on their knees and praying, many others watched in fear and fascination. I walked downstairs.

There was a bar with several chairs around it. Men, no whores, cleared quickly as I approached. I sat and felt empty, felt that there was nothing in me. Three choices. Free myself from my master. Bring back Jade. Bring back Argyl. Were they mutually exclusive? How was I to choose? Do I run away? What was I, what should I be? The possibilities all lined up about me, in opposition, suggesting that I do each other and themselves, an impossible array of options. Three choices, but they might have been a million. A million ways to be, to think and feel. The only one I could not be was what I had been. Ten billion possibilities and all as insignificant as

any other, to be devoured by time and the explosion of our star. Yet, I thought of Jade. That was important. Not to the world, but to me. Is it always so? Always qualified, always to me or at what? I felt dizzy and wondered if my blood had been restored or not. I placed my head down on the bar and closed my eyes.

Jade was there, staring at me, I love you she said as I plunged the knife into her perfect breast. Perfect to me. Would I carry this image behind my eyes?

“Uh, what's your, I mean.”

“Mr. Cuntshabble.” He was standing a few steps away, fidgeting with his hands and sunken into himself.

“Yes Ma'am.”

“When I was pulled from the river I wore a dress and boots. I want them. And also the gloves and mask that were with them.”

“Um, I didn't.”

“I don't care about the details, Mr. Cunstshabble.”

“Um, yes ma'am.”

“Also Dakra will need a dress. And we will need provisions for a journey. Food and drink.”

“Uh, it will cost,”

“I don't care about the details, Mr. Cuntshabble.”

“Um,” he looked down at his hands. Was he afraid? Was he in awe? I wondered if he was a religious man. He said, “Yes ma'am.”

“Dakra?” I said. She stepped forwards from the mass of whores, looking skittish, not looking at me.

“Will you come with me? You were kind and I have much to do. And it will be better than this life.”

“Ma'am, Kara, my debts...”

“Dakra, they are not real. They believe in the power of property, but behind that is the sword. It only exists with the sword. And this is more powerful,” I said, holding my hand to the blade I had sheathed. When had I sheathed it? It did not matter.

She was quiet for a long time. I wonder if she was thinking or just staring. “Where are we going?”

“I don't know.” I said, and looked at her. She stared at me. She looked sickly and tired, the make-up having run in her blood and tears.

“Yes,” she said, “I will come.”

Three choices, but really four. My suicide below all three, pervading everything I did or could do. To die, to simply end. Obedience still roiled deep inside me, the compulsion to obey, to murder for my master. But also I was in open rebellion now, restoring life where he would have committed desecrations. No longer the thick sand that clogged my blood, now my heart pulled me in new directions. Jade, Argyl, my lover. All three drew me to them. Obedience still tethered me to my master, but in my hand I held a blade that might sever that bond if it only were pulled taught.

Do I disappoint you? Ending here, with so much still to do and so much unsaid? But it is the end of the first movement of my life, away from slavery, the first steps into my own will. And what terrible steps. It is the end of what I had been, its final death splattered in blood across the brothel and streets, within the halls of whatever god that was. But no, not the blood. The blood was my master's will, the slaughter. My milk was my knife, the resurrection my salvation. To undo my master's horror, to have mercy where none was deserved.

## About The Author

James Brittain was born just outside Chicago. He received his Bachelors in English Literature from San Francisco State University in 2004, and an Associates in Applied Science in Film Production from the Oklahoma City Community College. His Poetry has appeared in The Homestead Review and the Prism Quarterly, among other publications. He is also an accomplished, if very independent and strange, filmmaker, his films having been selected for the South Texas Underground Film Festival and the Bare Bones Script to Screen festival. You can learn more about his writing at <http://books.brittainfilms.com>, and more about his films at <http://brittainfilms.com>.