

“TETHERED”

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Abigail could not have been more frightened. There were two very good reasons for this.

Firstly, she was kneeling on a stranger's stone floor, with her bare chest pressed into her thighs, her wrists manacled to the ground on either side of her, a trembling zed on stabilisers.

Secondly, someone had stripped her naked before chaining her up like this. And she had no idea who he was, or why he had done this to her of all people.

It was pitch black. She waited for her eyes to become accustomed to the dark, but it made no difference; she could see nothing at all. She could smell, though. The odour spoke of damp, dirt and urine. Smell was the one sense she could really have done without right now.

She could shuffle her knees around on the stone (though it scuffed them badly), but her ankles stayed firmly pinned in place. They must be manacled, too. The sense of vulnerability, of being powerless, was almost overwhelming.

She shivered violently, partly through cold, but mostly in shock. This couldn't be happening to her. She was a nice girl, from a good middle-class family, with a safe and caring husband. Women like her weren't kidnapped and chained up in cellars. And certainly not in Ramsgate! This sort of thing happened to drug-riddled prostitutes in London or the other big cities, not friendly shop-assistants from sleepy sea-side towns in Kent.

She had been to the cinema that evening (or possibly yesterday; God only knew how long she had been here before regaining consciousness a few moments before).

Mike had dropped her off. They normally went to see films together, but he hated musicals, so she had been going with a friend instead. She'd waited for Mary outside the "Classic" for twenty minutes, but she hadn't shown up. It hadn't been the first time she had let Abigail down like this. Mary had a tendency of accusing her husband of sleeping with some woman at work, and storming off to her mother's in protest. This always seemed to happen on nights she was supposed to be going out with Abigail. Last time it happened, she had been left sitting in a pub for half an hour, getting chatted up by seedy men, whilst waiting in vain for her unreliable friend to turn up. That was before she'd married Mike, of course, though they were engaged at the time and he had come to collect her from the pub when she had phoned him. He wasn't a fan of Mary at all. But his antipathy towards her friend was outweighed by his intense dislike of musicals so he'd agreed to the two ladies going out together, just this once.

Mary's non-appearance had left her in an awkward situation. If she phoned Mike to ask for a lift home, he would not be impressed that she had let Abigail down again. He hated rudeness with a vengeance, and he would do everything possible to stop the two of them going out ever again. She wasn't very happy with Mary herself, but she wasn't ready to burn her bridges just yet. After all, they had a lot of fun on the occasions she actually showed up. She wasn't keen on going to the cinema alone – it looked too sad – but she could walk to her Mum's instead, and then come back to the cinema just before the film was due to finish, ready for Mike to come and collect her. He need never know that she had been stood up, that way.

Something brushed against her bare leg, something small and furry. It had to be a rat. She tried to slow her breathing down so she could listen for the scrabbling of sharp claws on stone, but the more she tried to control her breathing, the harsher it became. The only thing which stopped her screaming was the thought that her captor might come to her “rescue”, and she felt safer with the rats right now.

She flapped her elbows up and down as if they were wings, and slid her knees apart twelve inches or so, before clenching them shut again. She wanted to try to convince the rat (or rats?) that she was not helpless, that she was still mobile and able to defend herself, but these were about the only movements she could manage with the manacles on. She tried this two or three times before giving up. If there was one thing worse than being bitten by a rat, it was looking like a chicken on a bicycle while she tried to scare it off.

She shouldn't have used the alleyway, she could see that now. But it was the quickest way to her mother's house, and she needed to be there and back before Mike came to pick her up. She'd heard a deep chuckle behind her, and had turned round, convinced there was someone there. But the alleyway had been empty. She turned back to the front again, ready to run to the far end, even if it made her look like a scared child. She remembered taking one step, two steps, maybe a third. And then nothing, nothing at all. The whole world had just vanished. And then this.

She tried not to succumb to the swell of panic which threatened to sweep her away and drown her. Someone had kidnapped her, brought her back here, removed all her clothes, and chained her up in his cellar (she had no doubt it was a “him”, as women

didn't do that sort of thing; they had better things to do with their time). She was alone and totally defenceless. But for the manacles, she could have punched him, gouged his eyes, done whatever it took to drive him off. But as long as she was pinned wrist and ankle to the floor, as if collapsed in mid-prayer, she –

A door opened. She screamed herself hoarse, wrenching in huge lungfuls of air between each shrill shriek. Eventually, emotionally spent, she lapsed into silence.

There was that chuckle again, like the one in the alleyway.

“She’s a screamer,” said a gruff male voice.

“The females always are,” a woman replied. “I keep telling you to get males. More meat, and they go into shock quicker.”

She felt rough hands exploring her body, running over her shoulders, her stomach, her bottom. She tried to wriggle away, but there was nowhere to go. The manacles held her firmly in place.

Another chuckle.

“Too much muscle and sinew on the males,” argued the man. “I prefer my food to be a bit more – fleshy.”

She screamed again, only to be clubbed hard around the head with a heavy paw.

“Enough,” said the woman. “It’s getting on my nerves now.”

“Couldn’t we have a nibble now?” asked the man. “Just to keep us going until the others arrive? The shock might shut her up if we took an arm off.”

It was all too much. Abigail started crying. She knew she had to stay strong if she had any chance at all of surviving this, but how could she after everything she had

been through? It was bad enough being snatched off the street and bound hand and foot like an animal, but now they were talking of eating her! These creatures weren't human, not in the accepted sense of the word. How could you reason with animals like this?

The paw made vicious contact with her head again, the exact same spot as the previous blow. They could obviously see her, even if she could not see them.

“I told you to shut up! Another sound and you lose a leg.”

Abigail whimpered, but said nothing. She heard them leaving.

“I'm having a leg,” declared the woman. “I'm fed up of being given the ribs every time, just because I don't forage.”

“You can have the shin. I'm saving the thigh for myself. Plenty of meat, and none of those fiddly little bones you get elsewhere. I haven't got the patience for them.”

And with that, they were gone.

#

The cages were lined up against the far white-washed wall, spaced well apart from each another (to avoid any physical contact between the creatures inside). Their hose-clean metal bases measured about five foot by five foot, and they stood just four feet tall to discourage unscheduled activity or exercise. The bars were a good inch in diameter, more than enough to contain the rage of even the most frenzied of the chimpanzees the medical research centre had housed.

There were seven cages in all, but all save one stood empty. Photo-copies were tacked to the wall between some of them. Three of the chimps had been taught to sign, and the photo-copies contained diagrams of the signs the chimps used most, to assist those lab technicians who were authorised to communicate with them.

Gradually, the sheets of paper had been removed as their sign-language fell into disuse. The chimps no longer had any use for the words “happy”, “play” or “friend”. The remaining signs were “hurts”, “want go home”, and two different gestures for “frightened”.

A hospital trolley was parked near the occupied cage at the far end of the row. A mutilated female corpse lay upon it, half-dissected, the body left spent and broken to taunt and intimidate the occupant of Cell 7.

Like the previous inmates of the research facility, the creature in Cell 7 was large, intelligent, and very, very powerful. She squatted in the cage (there was insufficient head-room to stand), rocking back and forth, and making pitiful mewling sounds in a futile attempt to articulate the depth of her grief. Every so often she would try to jam her meaty arms between the bars in an attempt to stroke her mother’s carcass, but they were too narrowly spaced, and the trolley had been deliberately positioned a fraction too far away. Frustrated, she returned to her rocking, and mewed all the more.

But despite her size, her strength, the hair on her face, this was no ape. She was human, barely into her twenties. She had betrayed her family to save the man she had worshipped, and now she was paying the price.

#

Two young men entered the room, both wearing lab coats. One was tall, dark and arrogant; the other was short, fat and exceedingly anxious. This second man held the gun.

“Shoot her,” the first man commanded, beckoning at Cell 7.

“Look at her,” Dexter replied. “How can they leave her mother there, all torn open like that? Think what that must be like!”

“Shame it’s not your Dad! Now shoot her, quick.”

Dexter lowered the gun, and approached the cage. The woman inside sat whimpering on the floor, hugging her knees to her chest, rocking back and forth as if to comfort herself. He tapped on the bars, hoping for eye contact. It would be good to make some sort of connection with her, show her that he understood her pain. Maybe she’d be happier if he gave her a friendly smile, a little sign of kindness in a harsh and unforgiving world. But she was oblivious to him.

“Look!” he exclaimed, pointing furiously to the empty water-bottle which was clamped to the bars to his right. “They’ve not even given her anything to drink!”

“Would you please just shoot her?”

“Do you think I should sign first? Let her know what we’re doing?”

“Yeah, why not? Earn her trust, and then stick a gun down her throat. Shoot her, you twat!”

Dexter raised the gun, pointing it reluctantly at her heaving chest. He knew that it was the right thing to do, but somehow it just didn't feel that way. How was she to know that it was all for the best? He didn't want her to think that he was as bad as all the others. And to make matters worse, now was the time she chose to look at him. Not with fear or loathing, as he had anticipated. All he could see in those blue, blue eyes was overwhelming relief.

“Look in her eyes, Keith,” he prompted. “I swear she wants us to –”

“Oh, for fuck's sake!”

Keith snatched the gun from him, squeezing the trigger in virtually the same motion. His aim was poor, and for a second it appeared that he had missed her altogether. But then she shuddered in shock, and tried to climb to her feet. Her head struck the ceiling of her cage, her eyes rolled, and she staggered forwards towards them, bent at the knees to give herself more room, a grotesque and unintentional parody of the chimpanzees the cells had previously contained. One step, two steps, three steps, and she was down, crashing face-first into the bars just a few feet away from them.

“That's gotta hurt!” Keith winced.

He turned, and rolled the corpse of the mother off the trolley. It landed on the floor with a wet squelch that left Dexter on the verge of gagging.

“Okay, Dex. You've got two minutes to get Miss World out of there, and on to the trolley. And no touching her up while you're at it.”

#

Matilda was very confused.

She was pretty sure she was dead – she had after all been shot twice at close range in the last twenty four hours – but the Afterlife was not at all what she had expected. She had always envisaged romping around a big sunny meadow, with maybe a little stream for drinking, and a plentiful supply of docile rabbits (who would give themselves up to her with a friendly nod of their ears whenever she got hungry). Nanny would be there, of course, to tell her the rules (if there were any), and Mummy and Vincent, too. But best of all, she would have Philip back again. And he would hold her, and tell her not to worry about being dead, because they would be together forever now.

Instead, she had woken up in a cage the size of Philip's toilet-under-the-stairs, with her poor dead Mummy lying silent and desecrated on a trolley just out of arm's reach. She had been shot (for the second time) by two nervous men, who had spent an eternity of grunting and swearing in an effort to haul her up onto a trolley (Daddy didn't like swearing, but she didn't have to worry about that any more). If they hadn't shot her, she would have got on it herself, and saved them all the trouble!

She wondered why they had shot her, when she was already dead. Maybe when Crow had killed her, back at the House, he hadn't done it properly, and their job was to do it again just to make sure someone who wasn't really dead didn't sneak into the Afterlife and then go back home to tell everyone else about it. And maybe the cage

was some sort of waiting room, somewhere for her to sit quietly while they were getting her meadow ready. She felt guilty that she had made all that fuss, what with the crying and the rocking and suchlike. But then joy swamped her as she realised that they were probably taking her to the meadow now, on the trolley. Before long, she and Philip would be together again!

She tried to raise her arms to throw off the sheet they had placed over her face (it was probably naughty, and they would beat her for it, but she was too excited to just lie here and do nothing!). For some reason, her arms stayed put. It was the same with her legs. Even her toes refused to wriggle when she told them to. Only her brain was still working. She prayed to Nanny that her body would start to function again soon. It would spoil all the fun being in a meadow with Philip if all she could do was think! Okay, maybe he could roll her around a bit, but she got dizzy easily and she wouldn't be able to tell him when to stop. Besides, it wouldn't be the same somehow.

The sheet was covering her from head to toe. The cotton tickled her nose. She wanted to sneeze, but didn't. She wasn't sure if it was allowed, now she was dead.

She puzzled over why they had covered her up. Maybe because it was more tidy, or because they didn't want to have to see her face. Or maybe it was to stop her finding out the way to the Afterlife, just in case she didn't like it and tried to find her way back home again. They were silly if they thought she would ever return here, though. Everyone she loved was dead. Besides, she would end up back in that cage, with Mummy just out of arm's reach. No, she would stay in the Afterlife, thank you very much, where it was safe, and people didn't keep shooting her every five minutes.

It would be safe, she hoped. As long as Daddy wasn't there, it would be. Daddy was dead – run over by a car whilst trying to smash open her skull with a garden rake – but if he was in the Afterlife he would probably have a meadow of his own, with black-charred grass and a stream half-dammed with broken bones and chewed muscle, a meadow that was forever dark and lonely. She didn't want them to put her in a meadow like that. It was too much like Home had been.

She frowned, and felt her forehead wrinkle. Progress! She tried her toes again, and she was sure they moved, if only just a little. Death was wearing off. It was only a matter of time before she would be able to move her arms again. And then she would throw off her cotton shroud and gallop off into the lush green grass of her Meadow Heaven.

She felt the trolley stop moving. Was she here already, ready to be reunited with Philip? The thought was almost too much for her to bear. It had been so sad in that cage, what with the bars and dead gaping Mummy, it just hurt so very much. But the nightmare had ended. All she needed to do now was to find the strength to pull back the sheet, and they would be together again.

A voice; familiar, harsh, elderly.

“Stop,” it said, and all her dreams crumbled to ash and bone.

Oh no, please no, not him, not him. This could not be her Heaven, not with him here.

It was Crow, the agent who had shot her dead, after first slaughtering her entire family (except for Daddy, whom she had sort of been responsible for killing herself,

albeit accidentally).

She had led a bad life. She had eaten human flesh, got Daddy run over (when he was the only one who could have protected the Family from Crow) and had once rubbed herself against a door handle as it made her feel nice (until Uncle caught her and fractured her cheek-bone, without even telling her what she had done that was so wrong). He had told her at the time she was damned for it (whatever “it” was), and he had been right. Now she was here with all of the others who had led bad lives. And if Crow was here, then Daddy would be, too.

#

Abigail fought against it, but she had to wake up sooner or later. She had been dreaming of her wedding day: friends and family, seating plans and speeches, lace wedding dress and three-tiered wedding cake. Now she was back to being tethered to the stone floor; cold, hopeless and very much alone.

Or was she? Was that breathing she could hear? Irregular, frightened breathing, just like her own?

“Hello? Is there anyone there?”

“Don’t hurt me!” it shrieked. “Please God, just let me go!”

If it wasn’t for the manacles, she would have leapt three feet into the air in shock. There was someone else here! Someone to talk to, plan with, *escape* with. A man. All of a sudden, she became acutely aware that she was naked. There was a man

here, just a few feet away by the sound of it, and they had no doubt undressed him too. She instinctively tried to cover her chest with her arms, but the manacles held her wrists firmly in place. She clenched her knees firmly together, hoping that if the lights went on then he would at best get a side view of her, and would not see *too* much. It was bad enough that those monsters were going to eat her, without her having to flash her “bits” at a total stranger in the process.

She took a deep breath to calm herself down. She knew she was being irrational. It was pitch black in here; if she couldn't see him, then he couldn't see her. And what if he did? It was the least of her problems. Besides, if they were going to escape, then she'd have to bang on the neighbours' doors, stark naked, until help came. He wasn't the only one who was going to see parts of her which were normally reserved for her husband alone. As long as she hadn't been chained up with her bottom poking in his face, she could live with it.

“It's okay, it's okay. They've got me chained up, too,” she reassured him. There's no-one else in here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she replied, with more conviction than she felt.

“It was awful,” he wailed. “I was walking across the park, when they came for me. A sack over my head, knocked unconscious, woke up here.”

“That's how they got me, too, I guess. I don't remember much about it”

“They've taken my clothes!”

“Mine, too”. She blushed, despite her earlier resolution to put it out of her mind.

Nudity wasn't a topic she had been brought up to discuss with strange men, and this one did sound slightly odd. She supposed that hysteria did that to you.

“What are they going to do to us?”

She couldn't tell him they were on the menu. She felt sure that he would snap. It was better to calm him down as far as possible, and then work out how they could both get out of this mess. They needed a plan of action, but it was beginning to look like she was the one who was going to have to come up with it.

“They dropped the key,” he announced. “When they were locking me up.”

“Don't even joke about that!”

“No, really. It's on the floor.”

“Can you reach it?”

“Sort of. But the manacles dig into my wrists when I try. And I don't want them to get angry if I try to escape. They might do something awful. Maybe we should just stay here, and ask them to let us go.”

Abigail wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, and had to stifle the impulse to do both at once. He had a key! They could escape! But he hadn't used it because he didn't want to make his brutal kidnappers a bit cross! She was locked up with the village idiot!

“Okay, I didn't want to have to tell you this, but they told me that they were going to eat me!”

He screamed. Okay, maybe honesty wasn't the best policy here after all. She shushed him to silence.

“Look, there’s nothing they can do to you for trying to escape that they’re not planning on doing anyway. Our only hope of staying alive is for you to pick up that key – ”

“It hurts my wrist, though.”

“-Is to pick up that key, unlock your manacles, and go for help.”

“Will you come, too?”

“If the key fits my manacles, yes, I’ll be only too pleased to keep you company. And if it doesn’t, you can go for help. Now please get going. They could come back any time.”

There was silence for a few seconds, followed by the sound of fingers brushing stone. A clinking noise.

“Got it!” he shouted in triumph.

“Will you be quiet!” she bellowed, and then repeated the instruction rather more quietly. “It’s probably for the best if they don’t know we’re escaping!”

“Sorry.”

Five more minutes of fumbling and cursing, and he was there. He was free. She heard him get to his feet, and come over to her. She felt a rough hand run over her back, sliding over her spine towards her –

“Steady!” she squeaked. “My wrists are the other end.”

And then the key was in the manacles and her arms were free. He passed her the key, and she unlocked her ankles. It seemed safer for her to do it herself. It took her two or three attempts to stand up – pins and needles now of all times! – but she made

it. Resisting the urge to cover herself up – she really had to get over this – she walked forwards until she felt brick beneath her fingers. Sliding her hands around the wall, she eventually found a door. So close now. If there was no-one the other side, they would both be free within seconds.

“Over here,” she whispered. “I’ve found the way out.”

She sensed him moving towards her. She pulled the door open, hoping that there would be a little light on the other side so they could get their bearings. It was a hallway. A candle burnt on a small wooden table at the far end. Just enough light to see by. No-one around outside. It was going to be alright. They were going to escape.

She looked around, to see her companion, reassure him that all was well. Her heart froze. This was no man. It was a creature, the head hideously misshapen, part human, most not. Its grotesque face leered down at her, checking out every inch of her body, revelling in how much this was distressing her. She flushed red with shame, and frustration that her escape plan had come to nothing. Temper exploded inside her, and she lashed out at his face, determined to get in at least one shot at him before he dragged her back to her chains. He waved her arm away, as if deflecting an angry blue-bottle.

He chuckled. That same sickening laugh as before, when she had first woken up in this Hell-hole.

“That was fun,” he chortled. “We should do it again sometime. Nice tits, by the way.”

#

So near, so far, thought Dexter as they brought the trolley to a halt.

Crow stood in their path, right in front of the lift which would have taken them to Level One, to the Exit, to Freedom.

Crow held up his palm, like red Indians do in cowboy films (usually saying “How” at the same time, for some reason Dexter had never quite worked out). This plan was never going to work, not with Crow and ten billion CCTV cameras around the place (okay, that might be an exaggeration, but he felt he could be excused this foible when he was just about to be caught stealing a Category A test-animal from a top-secret government location on his second day at work).

“What you got there, Soldier?” Crow asked.

This question irritated him, mainly because he really didn’t want to have to say “a troll on a surgical trolley”, but also because he had never been in the Army. Crow tended to call everyone “soldier” or “son”. He supposed that he had picked it up in some war film or other, and had adopted it as he thought it made him look like some all-American action hero (whereas he had in fact been born in Tunbridge Wells). In any event, it made Dexter cringe whenever he heard it.

“A trolley,” he replied, somewhat disingenuously.

“What’s under the sheet?”

Dexter and Keith exchanged glances, looking for inspiration. They had rehearsed this a thousand times (okay, exaggeration again, but in for a penny, in for a hundred

pounds). They knew they would have to get past security downstairs, so they had practised their story again and again. But the moment Crow had appeared, standing there in his SAS trench-coat (even though the radiators were on full), all their best-laid plans had flown out the metaphorical window.

Keith nodded at him. He wanted it to be Dexter who told Crow what they had rehearsed together. Like it would really matter who said it, and what they said. They would both be in prison, made to bend over for the soap, before you could count the worthwhile acts on “Britain’s Got Talent”.

Dexter remembered his lines.

“It’s the Mother Troll,” he announced. “We’re moving her to Facility B for further surgical study.”

“On whose authority?”

“Yours,” announced Dexter.

Keith groaned aloud.

Dexter realised his mistake. If challenged, they had agreed they would say that they were moving the “body” on Crow’s authority, but with hindsight they should maybe have had a Plan B in case it was Crow who was asking them the question.

Crow approached Dexter, and stood just a few inches away from him. His breath smelt of chewed tobacco. Dexter avoided eye contact at all costs. But Crow still stood there, a breath away, staring him out, waiting for him to crack and tell him everything. This had happened many, many times before, and it was only a matter of time before it worked. Besides, Crow had only to turn round and remove the sheet to

see that it was not the mother there, but the daughter. The live Troll they had captured just yesterday.

As he looked furtively around, his eyes came to rest on the trolley. The sheet was twitching. The troll they were rescuing was waking up already! They needed to shoot her again quickly, before she came to and ripped them all to pieces. But how to do this without Crow noticing? It was impossible. Better just to leave her there and risk having his arms and legs chewed off when she came to, than to tell Crow that they were trying to set his test-subject free. With any luck, she would attack Crow first – he had just murdered her family after all – and he and Keith could then make a quick getaway and sabotage the CCTV before anyone realised what was going on.

“Mine?” asked Crow.

“Sorry?” Dexter replied, too distracted to remember what the agent was talking about.

“I didn’t authorise her removal. I want her there, by Cell 7, until the daughter cracks and tells me everything I want to know.”

“Must have been a mix-up,” interjected Keith. “We’ll just pop her back again.”

He grabbed the trolley, and started to carry-out a three-point turn in the corridor, narrowly missing Crow in the process. All the while, the sheet rippled furiously as large stubby toes tried to wriggle off the effects of the anaesthetic. The moment that Crow broke off eye-contact with his subordinate, the game would be up.

“Stop,” commanded Crow. “Shall we take a look under the sheet before you go?”

“Gotta go,” whined Keith. “I’m late for my tea-break.”

He turned tail, and made a dash for the lifts, leaving the trolley behind him.

Crow held Dexter's gaze for just a few seconds more, wanting to be certain that his chubby employee had wilted completely, and then broke off to turn his attention to the trolley.

"Did that just move?" he asked, pointing to one end of the trolley.

"Death throes?" Dexter ventured, somewhat implausibly.

"Twenty four hours after we shot her?" the agent sneered. "I think we'd better take a look at what you've got under here."

He reached out his hand and seized a corner of the sheet, turning back to Dexter for another scary dose of eye-contact before unveiling what was beneath. It was not enough for him to expose him as a thief and a traitor. He wanted to make him writhe in misery first.

A klaxon sounded.

"What's that?" asked Crow in alarm.

"A klaxon," Dexter advised, trying to be helpful.

Crow turned pale.

"She's escaped!"

He started running along the corridor, reaching into his suit for a gun as he went.

"You stay here!" he called over his shoulder. "Move a muscle while I'm gone, and I shoot you when I get back."

Dexter found Keith sitting in his car in the car-park, twitching with anxiety.

“Thanks for waiting for me,” he chided, not wanting to complain too much (as it would kick off big time, and Keith would work his way through his extensive repertoire of “fat” jokes to show that he was in the right).

“Someone had to start the car,” Keith shrugged. “Is he coming after us? I heard the klaxon.”

“Not yet. I give it five minutes.”

They wheeled the trolley to the door of the old caravan they had hitched to the car. They had had all sorts of trouble this morning getting security to allow the caravan into the parking area, but Keith had reminded them who Dexter was, and they had relented.

They pulled the sheet away. The Troll was wide awake. Her fingers and toes were wriggling like the fronds of a sea anemone on ecstasy. Her eyes were wide open, as if she had just had a shock (which, Dexter reflected, she probably had). And the moment the sheet was off, she started to try to mouth something to them.

Dexter leant over her to try to make out the sound she was making, but Keith pulled him away, flicking his face (a particularly annoying habit he had adopted whenever he felt Dexter had said or done something stupid).

“Don’t be a fuck-wit, Dex. She’ll have your face off soon as look at you.”

“It sounded like she was talking.”

“She probably was. Maybe she was asking you to get your fat, sweaty ears a bit

closer so she could bite them off.”

“Something about meadows.”

“You sure it wasn’t “miaow”. Georgia reckons they eat cats. Now get your chubby arse over here and help me get her in the caravan before she wakes up.”

Together they managed to half-drag, half-slide her off the trolley and into the caravan. Keith had a minor panic-attack when he realised that when he pulled her into the caravan after him, he would have to step over her to get back out again, and really freaked out when she howled “meadow” at him as he was trying to squeeze past her without coming within clamping distance of her meaty fingers. As he exited the caravan, he flicked Dexter’s face again.

“Next time, you go first.”

They jumped in the car, and pulled away towards the exit, just as the barriers came down. Their escape route was blocked. There was a bang from the back of the caravan. She was on the move. Keith started to panic again.

“Whose stupid idea was this anyway?”

“Georgie’s,” Dexter reminded him.

“Rhetorical question,” Keith huffed. He opened the car-door and leant out so he could reach the intercom. It crackled into life.

“Can you let us out, please?”

“Sorry,” came the reply. “Just had orders that no-one leaves until Crow says so.”

“He told us to move the caravan.”

“No exceptions, he said. Stay where you are. I’ll tell you when we get the all-clear.”

Keith looked around in desperation. He raised an eyebrow at Dexter. His companion shrugged. They were stuffed. There was another bang from the back of the caravan, louder this time. She was probably getting angry back there. The only question now was whether the troll would get them before Crow did.

A flash of inspiration.

“I’ve got Crow’s son here,” Keith announced. “He’s gonna be really pissed off if you keep him locked up in a car-park. Aren’t you, Dex?”

Dexter nodded in agreement.

“Speak!” snorted Keith. “It’s an intercom, for God’s sake!”

“Dexter here,” he called through the open car door. “Getting cross, like he says. Grrr.”

There were a few hurried whispers over the intercom, and the barrier raised what seemed like an inch at a time. Another bang from the back of the caravan, the most violent yet, and then shouts as a handful of agitated people spilled out of the building behind them. Time had run out.

Keith hit the accelerator, and they attempted to speed away beneath the ascending barrier. Unfortunately, Keith had forgotten to make allowance for the height of the caravan, which smashed the barrier clean off its hinge.

Dexter peered over his shoulder as the car drove off, watching the men who were piling out of the building behind them, some in lab coats and some in dark black suits. Crow was with them. If his body language did not make it obvious that he was unhappy at their escape, the bullets he was firing towards the caravan made it very

clear indeed.

Next time he saw his father, he would have a lot of explaining to do.

#

The mob of protestors parted ahead of the caravan as they approached, and reformed the moment they had passed through, just in time to bring the cavalcade of pursuing vehicles to a seething halt. The mob surrounded the vehicles, waving placards with inscriptions ranging from “hands off our ogres!” to “any troll’s a goal”.

A Renault Clio pulled up. Crow jumped out, and started marching towards the throng ahead. Then, with a curse, he turned back, locked the car door (no central locking, but he wasn’t about to leave it open for all these hippies to urinate on his upholstery, or whatever it was that hippies did nowadays) and pushed his way back to the battle-front.

“Who’s in charge here?” he snapped, glaring round as if to defy anyone to answer him.

A woman – early twenties, not much more than a girl – approached. She stood before him, wearing that self-assured smirk that only the young and the unhinged can carry off. She was four or five inches taller than him (most people were, damn them all). Very tight jeans, very low-cut top. He could almost see her –

“Are you looking at my tits?” she teased, to a cheer from all her hippy-friends.

“No,” he replied. He casually surveyed the rowdy group of trouble-makers grouped

around her. “But I’m certainly looking at a whole bunch of tits now.”

They feigned outrage, and then collapsed into laughter. All the while, his treacherous son was getting further and further away in the caravan. He had to clear the road and give pursuit.

“You’ve got five seconds to move out of my way.”

“I haven’t got a watch,” she quipped. “Hey, any of you guys got a watch? I need to know when five seconds are up.”

Crow took out his gun. It was more effective than a stop-watch.

“Four. Three.”

“You’re looking at my tits again!”

“Two.”

“He was, wasn’t he? You all saw that. Dirty bastard.”

She was mocking him. He hadn’t intended to use the gun - too many witnesses, too much media attention – but maybe he could get away with shooting just one of them. Her. Wipe the smile of that face. And then maybe she wouldn’t be quite so goddamn prissy about her bosoms.

“One,” he announced.

“Shouldn’t you have said “one and a half”? Build up the suspense before you gun us all down?”

“I can have you moved on by the Police.”

“Should take about twenty minutes for them to get here. I’m good to wait.”

Crow snapped. He raised the gun so it was aimed at her head.

“Get out my fucking way, or I’ll shoot you and your tits to Kingdom come!”

He had to give her credit, she barely flinched. For just a second, he could see the doubt, the fear, in her eyes, but it was gone in an instant, and the self-assurance was back. He could do with a few agents with that degree of composure.

“There you go again. It’s all tits with you, isn’t it? My guess is a mother-fixation. Were you breast-fed or formula-fed as a baby? Did they even have formula back then, back in the thirties or whenever?”

He took a step backwards. He loathed the look of triumph in her eyes.

“I’m like an elephant,” he told her.

“Scared of mice?”

“No.”

“You shit on the floor?”

“No. I’m like an elephant, because I never, ever forget. This isn’t over.”

“Oh, I think it is.”

He tucked his gun away, and looked her up and down from head to toe (ignoring the bosom area in case she drew attention to it again). He would remember her all right. And next time they met, there wouldn’t be any witnesses.

“You wanna tell me your name, Missy?” he asked.

Her eyes narrowed at the word “Missy”. She was irritated. Clearly a lesbian. Or feminist. He always got the two confused. That’s why she didn’t like him checking out her chest. Normal girls wouldn’t have minded. He stored this away for future reference. Know your enemies.

“Georgia,” she smiled. “Georgia Richardson.”

“Crow,” he replied.

“Nice name,” she quipped. “You got a first name?”

“Agent.”

He beckoned his men, and they returned to their vehicles.

“Any news on the chopper?” he asked his second in command. “Have they found the caravan yet?”

“What chopper?” the man asked. “No-one told me to -”

Crow punched him hard to his incompetent face, unlocked his Clio, and drove back to base to draw up his contingency plans.

#

Abigail tensed.

The door had just opened. There was someone in the room with her. What torment were they planning now?

“Sod off,” she said.

No reply.

“Sod off!” She was shouting now. She at least deserved a response after all they’d put her through, even if it was kick in the teeth or that horrible chuckle again. But no. Whoever was in here with her made no sound at all. She’d noticed that earlier with Mr. Chuckles. He was several inches taller than anyone she knew, and a few stone

heavier, too. Yet his walk was completely silent. She guessed it was all that practice, creeping up on defenceless women on their way back from the cinema.

And then there was light. A face in front of hers, just a couple of feet away. A pale, lumpy face, swollen and deformed, crowned with a commotion of black, unruly hair. The only thing remotely rehabilitating about it was the eyes. They were soft and blue, really blue. They belonged in an air-brushed fashion photo. It was really disconcerting to see them peering out from a face which was more Hunchback- of- Notre-Dame than Twiggy.

She blinked furiously, unused even to the modest light from the candle he cupped in his big left paw. He held her gaze, though, staring so deep into her soul that it made her squirm. He looked so sad. She did not know whether this was as a result of what he could see there, or whether it was because it wasn't dinner-time yet.

“Your breath smells of meat,” she baited him.

A slight ironic smile.

She shuddered. Of course it would smell of meat. He was a cannibal. Next time he did this, it would probably smell of her!

Still he said nothing. After an eternity, he snuffed the candle out with his fingers, and left the room.

“Hey, you come back here!” she yelled after him. “You come back and tell me why you're doing this to me! Why me? Why me, of all people?”

She lapsed into silence, fighting back the urge to cry her eyes out. She couldn't give in; she had to keep fighting. She was her only hope of escape. If she gave up and

started feeling sorry for herself, she might as well sprinkle salt and pepper on herself and let them get on with it.

The door opened again, and she sensed him approach her again. What now? Was this it? Was it time already?

She felt something land on her back, and flinched. What was it? Some sort of sheet, or light cloth maybe? What was he doing?

The door closed again, and she knew that she was gone.

She tried to work out what had just happened. It was one of two things, one of them good, and one of them very bad. He might have covered her up, knowing how much it was freaking her out being naked and vulnerable, on top of everything else she was having to cope with. Maybe, just maybe, it was an isolated act of kindness in a harsh and unforgiving nightmare of a world.

Or, on the other hand, he may have been laying the table-cloth, ready for when the others came in to eat her.

#

Georgia drove into the clearing in the wood. The caravan was there already, as they had planned. She parked on the far side of the clearing, and went over to find out how the boys had got on.

As usual, they were both glad to see her. Keith gave her what he mistakenly believed was a charming Sean-Connery smile (but came across more as a leer), and

Dexter looked like a cute St Bernard puppy, waiting for a tummy-rub.

“Where is she?” she asked.

“Still in the caravan.”

There was a loud thud from the caravan, to verify Keith’s location report.

She raised an eyebrow (if Keith thought he could do Sean Connery, then she would match him with a Roger Moore).

“Why? She should be galloping through the woods by now, and we should be cracking open the champagne.”

“She’s awake,” Dexter explained. “And she’s making loud noises. If we let her out the caravan, she’ll eat us.”

“You first,” quipped Keith, trying to point-score in front of Georgia. “There’s more meat on you.”

“Are you guys men or mice?” she replied, exasperated. “Never send a man to do a woman’s job. Get back in the car, and I’ll let her out myself.”

“Georgie, don’t!” Dexter pleaded. “She’ll-”

“You’ll be safe in the car.”

“But you won’t. I’ll do it.”

Keith looked cross. He wasn’t comfortable with Dexter getting Brownie-points for offering to save Georgie’s life. He wasn’t quite ready to save it himself – he wasn’t that stupid! – but that was not the point. Some more point-scoring was in order.

“Better if Georgie does it,” he interjected. “What with your chubby little legs, you’d never make it back to the car in time!”

Dexter sighed, and Keith flicked his face for good measure, before handing Georgia the caravan key. They returned to the car, Dexter casting anxious glances at Georgia over his shoulder. They took their seats in the front, after leaving the back door open so that Georgia could dive into it after setting the troll free from her caravan-prison. They watched her as she approached the caravan door. No sign of nerves at all.

But Georgia was nervous. She didn't show it, naturally. She had to be outwardly calm and self-confident at all times; that was who she was. But inside, inside was different. She knew what these creatures could do if they felt threatened or cornered, and you couldn't get much more cornered than in a pokey old caravan. She would have to be quick. Open the door, and then race back to the car for dear life, hoping that Keith wouldn't panic and lock all the doors if their cargo was chasing too close behind her.

She came to a halt at the caravan, and took a deep breath to steady herself. There was another thump inside; she was still very much awake in there.

She reached out a hand, and turned the key a fraction. A face appeared at the window, watching her intently. She felt a thrill of adrenalin. This was the first time she had ever seen one of them in the flesh. She had seen shadowy photos, and heard all sorts of stories from Keith and Dexter (mainly from Keith, it had to be said). But now she was actually face to face with one of them, studying one another like two sisters separated at birth who had been reunited on daytime TV. She couldn't have been more elated if the Loch Ness Monster had waddled through the trees, with a yeti on her back.

So what would happen when she turned the key? She had a sudden fantasy of a David Attenborough moment, sitting quietly in the undergrowth while the troll she had freed played contentedly nearby, surrounded by little troll babies from the mate they had procured for her as part of their conservation programme. Maybe one of the cubs would come up to her, sit on her lap, try and stick a curious finger up her nose....

She laughed.

Keith beeped. She looked back at the car. He was gesticulating at the caravan window, warning her that the troll was peering out at her. Panicking. Typical man.

Maybe he was right to be stressed, though. Their friend in there didn't know that she had just been rescued. She would have been imprisoned in a house somewhere for all of her life, held captive by the Alpha Male of her flock, or her herd, or whatever the Hell you called it. Then she would have finally been released, only to be locked in a cage, drugged, experimented upon. And finally, just when she thought it could get no worse, she had been shot with a tranquiliser gun and locked in a grubby 1980s' caravan by two so-called men who had failed to master even rudimentary sign-language. She would be tired, frightened, scared, and – worst of all – hungry.

Still; she wasn't about to give up now. She couldn't just leave her in a caravan in the woods. She wouldn't have done that to a dog, yet alone a beautiful creature like this.

She turned the key. And ran.

It was about a hundred yards to the car. Usain Bolt would have covered it in less than 10 seconds, but it seemed to her to take forever. She didn't look back – NEVER look back, that was her philosophy- but in her mind's eye she could see the trolless lumbering along behind her, giant strides, shrinking the distance between them until she was on top of her, ripping her limb from limb.

And then she was at the car, flinging herself onto the back seat, locking the door behind her. She looked around, trying to work out where the trolless had gone. She was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is she?” she asked.

Keith pointed back towards the caravan. She was standing outside, looking all around the clearing, a confused expression on her big, swollen face.

They watched as she walked hesitantly around the clearing, occasionally checking behind trees on its circumference, keeping her distance from their car at all times. For a full ten minutes, she wandered around, becoming increasingly distressed. It was almost as if she was looking for something. A mate, maybe? Her baby?

“What is it?” Georgia whispered to herself. “What are you searching for?”

Eventually, she approached the car, coming to a nervous halt about six feet away. Keith was going to drive off, but Georgia stopped him. Despite their protests, she half-opened the rear window, and tried to make contact.

Safe, she signed. Safe.

The trolless studied her, a puzzled expression on her face.

Georgia tried again.

Home. Safe. Home.

She looked more puzzled still. She took another step towards the car.

“Wind up the window,” Keith shrieked.

“She’s not going to hurt us,” Georgia retorted. “Just keep calm. You’re agitating her.”

“She’s agitating me!” he retorted.

The creature took another step towards the car. One more pace and she could reach through the window. Georgia kept her composure.

Friends, she signed. Friends.

The troll bent over, and peered at them through the open window.

Friends! Friends! Friends!

“I’m sorry to bother you,” she told them, “but this is my first day in the Afterlife. I don’t understand what you’re doing with your hands. Does anyone know where I can find my Philip?”

#

Crow let himself into Dexter’s flat. He did not have a key – he did not much like his son, and had certainly never felt the need to visit him – so he used a credit card instead.

The place was a pig-sty. Comics all over the floor (comics at his age!), plastic

burger boxes on the table, two weeks' worth of dirty glasses in the sink. Who could live like this? Crow's apartment was spotless, every inch scrubbed germ-free by his cleaners on a twice daily basis, even though he slept at head-quarters most nights. It was ironic that most of the dust the cleaners were removing was probably their own revolting flaked skin cells.

He had once had a wife to do the cleaning – two wives in fact (not at the same time) – but he had learnt the hard way that getting a cleaner in was much cheaper, and much less painful. He had lost his first wife when he was not much more than a boy, and it had nearly destroyed him. She was beautiful, and kind, and knew how to scrub a floor to perfection. The second wife was different. He had ordered her from a catalogue. Thai, or Filipino, or something like that, he had forgotten which (or maybe he had never thought to ask). Hard-workers, he had been told. Will do everything you want, with a smile on their face. *Everything*, the man had stressed with a wink. “You can wipe that smile off your leering face,” Crow had replied. “That’s my future wife you’re talking about.”

But the man had lied. She had not done everything he wanted; far from it. She wouldn't cook, she wouldn't clean, she wouldn't even do the shopping! She just sat in his living room, making long-distance telephone-calls to her family, and crying on his un-vacuumed carpets.

They had been intimate at first. But it wasn't like it had been with his first wife. Wife Number Two expected him to do things to her, to think about her needs rather than just his. “That’s not the way we do things over here,” he had explained

patiently, but she was having none of it. “My first wife didn’t expect me to do that sort of thing, Missy,” he had argued, but this had seemed to make things even worse. She had smacked him in the face with a frying pan, and stormed off to the spare room, refusing to ever share a bed with him again. The frying pan may have been an attempt at irony, as only the day before he had been complaining that she never used it.

Ten months later, she had given birth to Dexter. He had accused her of adultery, in view of the time gap, but she had claimed that it was calculated 40 weeks from the date you had your last – well, that thing that women had that made them tetchy – and that the maths therefore worked out perfectly. He wasn’t entirely sure what to make of this, but there was no-one else he could ask, and he had never been one for libraries. Besides, he figured that if she had been unfaithful it would have been with another Thai or Filipino, or wherever the Hell she had come from, whereas Dexter looked like he had never been outside wearing less than Factor 147 (or whatever the Hell they go up to). So he had done the decent thing, and given the lad the benefit of the doubt.

Dexter had brought their marriage under increasing strain. He was pretty hopeless as a child (although not as hopeless as he had turned out to be as an adult). Take the housework, for example. Crow had been doing all the dusting himself, on the basis that waiting for Wife Number Two to do it was like waiting for the Queen to do cartwheels round St James Park in a leotard (it would have been quite an event, but it was never going to happen). But his hopes of enlisting some assistance from his son

were cruelly dashed by the boy's over-protective mother; every time he had put a duster in the young child's hand, she had flipped, and accused him of child labour. "It's just a bit of dusting," he had told her. "Someone's got to do it!" But apparently, that someone was not going to be her precious son. He had to be *nurtured*, whatever the Hell that was supposed to mean! He had to be given a swift kick up the ass, Crow had retorted, which invariably resulted in more tears and expensive long-distance calls back home to her outraged relatives.

He sat down on Dexter's sofa. Something hard stuck into his bottom, and he got back up, praying that it was not going to be anything that made him view his treacherous son in an even poorer light than he did now. He breathed a sigh of relief as he spotted the remote control. He had feared much worse.

Wife Number Two had died when Dexter was eleven. He knew that, because it was his son's first day at comprehensive school. The boy had come home from school, complaining about being bullied for being fat, and had started rummaging around in the cupboard for a multi-pack of cheese and onion crisps. That boy was a lot worse at understanding irony than his mother had been.

"I've got something to tell you, Son," he had said to him. "You may want to sit down."

"Are we out of doughnuts?"

"It's worse than that. It's your Mum. She's been in an accident."

"Is she okay?"

"No."

“She’s not-.”

How to put this delicately? Don’t know. Best give it to him straight. Better for him in the long run.

“Yes. The funeral’s next Friday.”

Dexter wailed, great big howls of hopeless grief, that bunched up inside him and burst kicking and flailing into an unsuspecting living room.

Crow was silent for a moment. What to do? He had never liked his son, but he wasn’t made of stone. He had to do something, some little gesture to show him that he was there for him, would do anything he could to make things better, as long as it didn’t involve hugging.

He walked over to the cupboard, and selected a family-sized pack of Doritos and a jar of spicy salsa. He handed both to Dexter, and patted him matily on the arm.

“They’re all yours, Son,” he told him. “Eat as much as you like. You know where I am if you need me.”

Crow looked around Adult-Dexter’s flat, and caught sight of a photograph of Wife Number Two on a bookcase. He went over and inspected it, a rueful smile on his face.

A thought struck him. She wasn’t Thai or Filipino, he remembered now. And he hadn’t picked her out of a brochure. It had been literature from a dating agency in Dover. And whatever her ethnic origin may originally have been, she had been born in Doncaster, he was almost sure of it.

He put the photo down, and sat back down on the sofa, after first sweeping it for

more misplaced Television accessories.

Sooner or later, Dexter would be back here, probably with Matilda in tow. And when they arrived, he would put Matilda back in Cell 7. He hadn't decided what to do with Dexter yet, it depended on how much coercion he had been under from that smug friend of his. But it was a toss-up between Cell 6, and the operating theatre.

#

With Matilda safely stowed back in the caravan, they made their way back on to the main road. Georgia was driving.

“Are you sure we can't take my car, too?” Keith whined.

“You're on their CCTV, liberating our friend. They'll be looking for you both. Your registration number will have been circulated to every police car in Kent, by now. My car's safer.”

“But I've not had it long.”

“You won't miss it, then.”

“You didn't tell me that I'd lose my car when I signed up to this.”

Dexter sank into his seat in the back, determined to keep out of this. Georgia would win the argument, and he wasn't going to take sides against her in any case. But if he chimed in, he'd get more abuse from his friend, and maybe a few more flicks to the face. Best to just sit here, and let them get on with it.

“Where are we going?” Keith asked, finally giving up on his car. “You're not

storing her round mine. She'd eat my surround-sound, or something."

"First place they'd look," she said.

"Mine?" asked Dexter.

"Second place they'd look."

"Can't we just leave her in the woods?" Keith enquired. "That was the plan, remember? Rescue her, set her free in the woods, and then bugger off home in time for tea."

Georgia gave him a withering stare. Dexter sank even further into his seat. He'd seen that look before. Keith seemed totally oblivious, though. If his friend was ever going to have his wicked way with her (which Keith regularly assured him that he was), then he was going to have to get a lot better at knowing when she was cross.

"You selfish little bastard! You saw her back there. She was scared. When we planned for this, we didn't know she could talk. She's got a better vocabulary than you, for Goodness' sake! We can't just leave her there indefinitely. She'll be lonely. We have to find somewhere to take her, and then move her when they least expect it."

"But she's got a lovely little caravan in the woods. She'll be happy there, I'm sure she will."

"Fuck off."

"Then where are we going?"

She paused for second.

"How do you think I know so much about trolls?" she asked. "I knew where they'd

be keeping her, how to get you two jobs there, how she would have been brought up
_”

“Your tip about the sign language wasn’t quite so good, though, was it?”

“What did I just tell you to do?”

“You told him to fuck off,” chimed in Dexter from the back, deciding it was too good an opportunity to miss.

“Look, I get all this from this guy who’s an expert in these matters. He knows everything there is to know about them. *Everything*. We’re going to see him. He’ll know what to do. And then we get to move her somewhere she’ll feel safe. Somewhere she can call home.”

“I think I’m gonna vomit,” Keith groaned.

Georgia leant to her left, and elbowed him sharply in the groin.

“Next time round, I’m leaving you with her in the caravan.”

#

Abigail groaned aloud as the door opened again.

She was glad that she had the cloth over her, but what with her down here on her hands and knees, it made her feel like a table. She half expected her latest visitor to start setting out cutlery on her back.

The candle was lit again, more for her benefit than his, she suspected. It was Mr. Chuckles. Just what she needed! She sighed, and waited for him to speak.

“You’ve made quite an impression on my brother.”

“What are you up to, now?”

“Nothing,” he shrugged. “He’s not happy that I teased you earlier. Sorry about that.

It was just a joke, I’m sure you understand. Friends?”

He held out a hand for her to shake.

“It’s a bit tricky shaking your hand when you’ve got my wrists manacled to the floor.”

That chuckle again.

“I like you. You’ve got balls. Well, not literally, of course. I’d know if you had, what with you being all naked like that.”

“If you’re trying to make friends, you’re not making a very good job of it.”

More chuckling.

“My name’s Edward.”

Now it was her turn to laugh.

“You are NOT an Edward, not with a face like that. You’re a Grunt, or an Ug or a Troglodyte. But never an Edward. What shall I call you? Eddie? Teddy, maybe?”

A flicker of annoyance crossed his face, but was gone in an instant.

“You can call me Sir. Or Master. As long as you show some respect, you’ll live a few more hours.”

“Like this? That’ll be fun. Sir.”

“My brother is Stephen. He’s the one who covered you up. And the woman who was in here earlier is Anne, my big sister.”

“She sounded big.”

“Enough,” he said. “If I had my way, I’d eat you here and now. I’d take an arm first, maybe follow up with a leg. Save all the best bits for last. You’d probably be conscious for the first couple of limbs at least. It takes a while to bleed to death. Believe me, I know. I’ve seen it hundreds of times.

But the Family have been delayed. They can’t get here ‘til later tonight. And Stephen doesn’t want me distressing you in the meantime. He’s upset that I let you think you were escaping. He’s got a conscience. Don’t get me wrong, he’ll be the first one to tuck into you when the buffet’s open, but he just doesn’t want me upsetting you in the meantime.”

“You are upsetting me, though.”

He shrugged. “It’s not my fault you’re the hysterical type.”

The candle-flame went out. He cursed, and re-lit it.

“Must be a draft in here. Better watch out, we don’t want you catching a cold or anything.”

He chuckled again. This was getting monotonous. She bowed her head. She was tired of looking at his hideous, leering face.

“I’ve come to make you a proposition.”

She ignored him.

“How would you like to write to your husband?”

She looked up, startled.

“How do you know I’ve got a husband?”

“Wedding ring. We’re not stupid.”

“Why would you let me write to him? How could I write like this?”

“You write to tell him that you’ve left him. For another man. I don’t care which one; you choose. You look like the sort of girl who’d know quite a few of them.”

“Why?”

“If there are too many unexplained disappearances round here, the Police get interested. We don’t want that to happen, do we? Best if they think you’re a slut, and then no-one will bother looking for you.”

“Why would I agree to that?”

“For him. Either he’s tormented for the rest of his life, knowing you’ve been abducted, and tortured and eaten, or he thinks you’ve been unfaithful, curses you, and gets on with the rest of his life without you.”

She didn’t want Mike to fret over her for the rest of his life. She’d want him to move on, find someone else, live in happiness. But telling him that she’d run off with someone else? That couldn’t be right, could it? Besides, she was going to escape, she had to keep believing that.

“If I write that letter, they’ll stop looking for me.”

“Do you really think there’s any hope at all of you getting out of here alive?” he taunted. “This isn’t the first time we’ve done this, you know. It’s not even the first life-time we’ve done this. We’ve been taking Outsiders for many, many generations. We’ve been taking you forever. We never get caught. No-one ever batters down the door and frees the poor woman chained to the floor. You are going to get eaten, my

Darling, and the sooner you resign yourself to that, the easier it will be for you. And the only decision you have to make is whether to leave behind a poor tormented widower, or whether to set him free.”

“You’ve got paper?”

“And pencils. We don’t use them ourselves – we don’t write – but every so often we like to give our Wedding Feasts this choice, just to keep the missing-persons’ figures down. And Stephen’s taken a fancy to you. He’s told me to give you the option. There’s no problem if you don’t want to. We’ll just ask the next one instead.”

Abigail deliberated. She wasn’t terribly keen on the idea of telling Mike that she had been unfaithful. He wouldn’t believe it anyway. She wasn’t that sort of girl. But this Edward character said that none of them ever wrote anything. And if they couldn’t write, then maybe they couldn’t read either. She could write whatever she liked, tell him to alert the Police, tell him their names and what they looked like. If she got a message to her husband, then surely they’d find her in time. And if not – if it was another ploy and they knew that she’d betray them in her note – then what did she have to lose? She was chained up in a cellar somewhere, waiting to be eaten by a family of mutant monsters. What could they possibly do to her that they weren’t going to do already?

“Okay,” she shrugged. “I’ll do it.”

“No tricks,” he cautioned her. “Stephen will know if you’ve tried anything sneaky. He always knows.”

He left the candle on the floor, while he went to fetch paper and pencils. He

unlocked the manacles on her right wrist, but left all the others in place. She was tempted to swipe him round the face, but fought the impulse down. It was not worth risking her only hope of escape for one moment of revenge, however sweet it might be. And if he struck her back, she might not be in any fit state to write any letters, even if he was still prepared to allow her.

She took a deep breath to compose herself, and to work out what useful information she could give. They'd get suspicious if the letter was too long, so it had to be succinct. Bullet points.

As her fearsome captor looked on, she started scribbling down what was likely to be her last attempt at freedom.

#

They pulled into the drive of a semi-detached bungalow in eminently respectable suburbia. It wasn't quite what Dexter had been expecting. This man was supposed to be the foremost expert in trolls in the country. In Dexter's eyes, this meant that he was either an eccentric but brilliant research scientist (working from a laboratory, surrounded by whirring computers feeding him information day and night) or he was a battle-hardened field operative, six foot four, hard like uncut diamond, covered from head to foot with battle-scars (like that fisherman bloke who crushes the can in "Jaws"). Neither of these people were likely to live in a place called "Cherry Tree Avenue".

Georgia knocked at the door, and Dexter's vision of an all-action hero expired completely when it was opened by a seventy-something man in a sky-blue cardigan.

"Georgia!" the man exclaimed. "Come in, come in. And bring your friends with you."

He placed a hand on the small of her back, and guided her into the living room. Keith glowered as his hand gradually slipped down on to her bottom, fuming with jealousy that even an OAP in a cardie had got to touch what he had never been allowed to even brush his hand against. Dexter was more philosophical. Georgie was gorgeous. Everyone tried it on with her (except him). If she liked or respected them, she turned a blind eye. If she didn't – or if she was in one of her frequent feminist moods – she'd rip their face off.

They took their seats on the sofa. Georgia introduced them.

"Guys, this is Maurice. Maurice, this is Dex and Keith."

"Maurice what?" Keith asked, somewhat abruptly.

"I could tell you, but I'd have to shoot you," Maurice beamed. It was what they always used to say at work, before he retired. It always got a laugh.

Keith rolled his eyes at the cliché. Georgia shot him a poisonous look. She obviously held this curious little man in high esteem, and she was not at all impressed by her friend's behaviour towards him.

"Tea?" asked Maurice. "Elsie! Oh, Elsie!"

Keith stifled a snigger. He would SO be in for another punch in the groin from Georgie when they left.

Elsie shuffled in. If Maurice was in his seventies, she must have been in her eighties. She had obviously found herself a Maurice-sized toy-boy in the Fifties. She gave them all a friendly smile, and waited for instructions.

“Tea all round,” he beamed.

“All right. Who wants what?”

“We’re in something of a hurry,” Keith hissed.

“Milk?” she asked.

A chorus of nods.

“Sugar?” she enquired.

A variety of replies.

“Chocolate biscuit?” she enticed them. “I know how you young people like your sugar-rush.”

“Could I have two, please?” Dexter enquired.

“Better give him the whole packet,” Keith sniped, bursting with frustration, but feeling that Dexter was the only person at whom he could safely direct it.

She disappeared off on her cookie-related mission, giving them all a sweet little wave as she left.

Dexter looked around the room. Where were the computers? Where were the lever-arch files with “Top-Secret” stamped in red on their spines? All he could see here were porcelain ornaments of little puppies, a handful of photographs of grand-children, and a book-case full of videos (some of which still had 49p stickers on them). Who still bought videos nowadays? He had a sneaking suspicion that they

may even have been Betamax! His hopes of meeting an eccentric scientist were consigned to the same recycle bin into which he had earlier dropped the image of the man's-man who crushes beer-cans. The best they could hope for from Maurice, he decided, was a better class of biscuit.

“What can I do for you, Georgia?” he enquired.

She leant towards him, excited, knowing the reaction she would receive from him at her news.

“We've rescued her, Maurice,” she announced. “We've liberated her!”

He leapt from his chair, pumping the air with his fist like an over-excited football fan. He then clutched his hip, and sank gently back down again, grimacing all the while.

“Dodgy hip,” he explained. “Had it replaced in ninety eight when I fell off Elsie's stair-lift. You know how it is.”

Elsie came back in. She sidled up to Dexter, and furtively slid a packet of chocolate biscuits into his hand. He glanced over at Keith, to see if he had noticed. From the look his friend was giving him, he clearly had. The old lady gave him a friendly wink, squeezed his arm, and shuffled back off to the kitchen. Dexter couldn't quite decide whether it had been a conspiratorial (the-chocolate-biscuits-are-our-little-secret) type wink, or a there's-something-you-can-do-for-me-later-in-return type one. He was hoping it was the former. What with Maurice touching up Georgie's (admittedly irresistible) bottom, and the eighty year old woman slipping him chocolate and theatrical winks, he was beginning to wonder whether this might

actually be a home for retired swingers.

“I’m so glad you’ve come,” Maurice announced.

“Sorry?” Dexter squeaked.

“To tell me your news. Where is she now? Have you released her into the woods, like I suggested?”

“We tried,” Keith pouted. “But it didn’t turn out quite how we expected.”

“Why?”

“She came up to us and told us that she was sorry to bother us.”

Maurice looked at him incredulously. He looked over to Georgia. She nodded, a large grin on her face.

“She did. She can speak!”

“That’s impossible,” Maurice contradicted. “They can’t talk.”

“She did.”

He considered this for a while. A thought struck him.

“Are you sure she didn’t just do this?”

He made a low noise, a cross between a mumble and a groan, finishing with a vibration that sounded a little like “bother us”. “That’s the sound they make when they’re hungry. Maybe it was that.”

“Her next sentence,” Keith contradicted, “was does anyone know where I can find Philip?”

“Are you sure,” Maurice enquired, “it wasn’t something like this?”

He made a series of quite alarming grunts, ending with a noise which sounded

vaguely like “Philip.” That’s what they do when they’re mating.

“It did sound a bit like that,” put in Dexter, more for something to say than anyone else, as he was starting to feel side-lined as usual. Keith shot him a look to silence him, and then came up with his trump card.

“Her next sentence went something like this: Am I in the Afterlife? I thought Philip would be here? I can’t find him. I don’t want to be here if he’s not here. I don’t want to be here all on my own. Take me back, please. I’d rather be with Mummy, than here on my own.”

“All right, you’ve got me there,” shrugged Maurice, knowing when he was beaten. “But this is marvellous news! Marvellous! If she can talk, she can tell me everything about herself, about her family, about who she is and how she thinks. Elsie! Come quick!”

Elsie scuttled in, an anxious expression on her face.

“Is it your hip again?” she asked breathlessly. It was hard running all the way from the kitchen to the living room.

“No, no nothing like that. These young people have just given me the most wonderful news. They can talk!”

“I know,” she replied, puzzled. “They asked for biscuits.”

“Not them! *Them!*”

“Them? Oh, Them!”

He nodded happily. “This is incredible. We must note up our file straightaway!”

At last, thought Dexter. At last, he would see their elusive filing system. Maybe

there was a room upstairs, crammed full of hazy photographs, press cuttings of missing persons, plaster-casts of large footprints taken from the mud. This man was apparently the greatest living expert on trolls. What a treasure trove of information he must have up there.

Maurice scribbled down a few words on a slip of paper he produced from his cardigan pocket, and handed it to Dexter. “Can you pass that to my wife, please,” he requested. “Save her coming all the way over here.”

Dexter glanced down at the piece of paper in his hand, anxious to see the words of wisdom inscribed there, and praying that it would not be in Latin or transcribed into some inexplicable mathematical equation. He wanted to understand this scientific anthropological record, to gain an insight into the mind of a genius at work.

His face fell as he scanned the words scrawled across the piece of paper in blunt pencil:

“THEY CAN TALK!”

“Right,” Maurice instructed his wife. “Don’t lose it whatever you do. Get that in the biscuit tin with all the other records, quick as you can.”

She nodded, his enthusiasm contagious.

“Right you are, Captain,” she replied, giving him a playful salute. “There’s not a lot of room in there, though. I’m going to have to take some fig-rolls out first.”

Matilda cut a lonely figure in the clearing. She surveyed the trees around her, hoping to see her new friends racing their way back to her, but there was nothing out there but mossy tree-trunks and little swarms of tiny insects that darted from side to side as if patrolling she knew not what.

It was getting dark. She was not afraid of it - she had lived in blackness all her life until she had grabbed Philip by the hand and fled her Family home to what she had wrongly assumed to be a warm and loving future – but she preferred the light. Night reminded her of the House. Now she had discovered daylight, she didn't want to go back to what she had before.

This was supposed to be her meadow, but it turned out she was not even dead. The girl had explained that she had been shot with a special gun, that made you go to sleep. Crow had shot her with one so he could take her back to that place with the cage in it, to interrogate her, make her say where the other Families were hiding. And then the two boys had shot her with one again so they could bring her here. It seemed that Outsiders were shooting each other with special guns all the time. No wonder they were all so stressed.

They seemed nice, her new friends (“mates”, Mandy would have called them). Nicer than the men who had hosed her down in the cage, and laughed all the time they were doing it. Much nicer than Crow, the man who had murdered her family, and threatened to hurt her Philip if she didn't tell him where they were. And she had told him everything. There was nothing she would not have done to save her man. But then Philip had died, and she had betrayed them all for nothing.

She had no-one now, no-one at all. Mummy, Vincent, Philip, all gone, never to return. And now she was all alone, here in the woods, with nothing to keep her company but her guilt.

She hesitated. Maybe that was not quite true after all. Maybe there was one other person out there whom she still liked, someone she could talk to, to share her loss. For the first time since Philip's death, a smile crept warily into her eyes. Yes, Philip was dead. But his father was still very much alive.

#

Crow sat at Dexter's computer, tutting that it had been left on all this time. They were obviously paying his son too much if he could afford to waste electricity like this. The only bright side was that if the computer had been left on, then Dexter was presumably intending to return here at some stage.

He was logged on to Facebook. A thought occurred. He had never used the site himself – apparently it only worked if you had friends – but he was not unfamiliar with computers. According to the newspapers, people wrote down everything they did in this terribly indiscreet “app” (see, he even knew the lingo!) What if his idiot son had boasted to the world that he was going to steal Matilda? At the very least, there should be a list of Dexter's friends in here (if he had any) and Crow could arrest them one at a time until he found one who'd know where the ungrateful, treacherous boy was hiding.

He checked the messages first. They seemed to be in code (all LOLs and LMAOs) but he could get that checked out later. A few people had sent his son virtual pints and photographs of council estates in Thanet, which seemed odd to say the least, but he moved on, determined to find some clue to his test-subject's whereabouts.

Status updates. "Today's the day!" it announced. Too bloody right it was!

List of friends. Seven of them. Crow was impressed. He used to have friends himself, many years ago, before he lost his first wife. But not now. What was the point? Wife Number Two had taught him that there were some pretty unpleasant people out there. Best to just have work colleagues, so he could stay safely in control.

He scanned the friends one at a time. Two caught his attention. Keith, the kid from the lab. He had been with Dexter when he had caught them with the trolley by the lifts. And Georgia, the mouthy young woman who had accused him of looking at her

—

He chuckled, and checked out her home page. Not much there to help him. She was a bright cookie, too shrewd to give the game away in black and white. There were a few photos of her in a little yellow bikini, downing shots in some beach bar on some unpronounceable Greek island, and he sent those to print (just so he could identify her later on, if he needed to). Why would anyone put photos like that on here, for everyone to see? You'd never know what perverts might be looking at them?

And then on to Keith. He didn't bother with the photos this time, he knew what he looked like already. Straight to the profile page, scanning the entries for clues. And

he struck gold.

An entry, just ten minutes ago. “Stuck in a car with Mental Maurice and his biscuit-obsessed wife. Would someone please shoot me?”

Crow gave a crocodile grin. He knew Maurice, very well indeed. If they had taken Matilda, they’d want expert advice on how to handle her, and they didn’t come much more knowledgeable on the subject than his former boss. Maurice had taken him under his wing in the early eighties, when the department was still in its infancy, and had taught him everything he knew at the time. But then he had developed a conscience and bailed out, leaving it to his protégé to take over and run things the way the Government wanted them to be run.

Oh, he knew Maurice alright. And he knew Elsie very well, too (though only just the once). And more importantly, he knew exactly where they lived. It was only a matter of time now, only a matter of time.

Tucking the photos of Georgia carefully into his pocket for future scrutiny, he left the flat at a canter.

#

Two cars pulled into the forest clearing, tucking in close to the caravan. Five people spilled out (some of them slowed down by arthritis, artificial joints, and an over-abundance of biscuits).

Georgia had left the head-lights of her car on; it was night-time now, and the light

from the car was the only illumination amongst the ancient brooding trees. Maurice left his head-lights off, though. He quite liked the idea of running round the woods in virtual darkness, with his libidinousness wife and a trio of perky youngsters in tow.

The boys exchanged nervous glances.

“Trolls aren’t like werewolves, are they?” Dexter asked, trying to peer around in all directions at once, in case of ambush. They don’t get the urge to rip your throat out the moment the moon comes up?”

Maurice tutted. He was normally very good natured – everyone said so – but he hated it when people called them that.

“One, she’s not a troll. Two, the moon is not up. Three, she’s perfectly capable of ripping your throat out whether the moon is up or not. Her principal diet is human flesh. She would eat you as soon as look at you, day or night.”

“What are we doing out here in the dark, then?” Dexter wailed, huddling closer to Georgia for comfort.

Maurice softened. He gave his companion a supportive pat on the shoulder.

“We’re scientists,” he told him. “We observe. Her name’s in the biscuit tin now. I need to hear her talk.”

Dexter rallied with a weak smile.

“Okay,” he replied uncertainly. “After you, then.”

Keith got back in the car. He beckoned for Georgia to get in with him, but she ignored him. She accompanied Maurice to the door of the caravan, with Dexter and Elsie following along behind. She felt a hand on her bottom. She turned to give

Maurice a gentle reprimand –it seemed like every man over the age of sixty was either eyeing her up or touching her up today, and the next time it happened they were going to get a swift kick to the bollocks, however eminent they were in their field – but realised that Maurice was just out of groping reach. She glanced over her other shoulder, ready to give Dexter an ear-bashing he would never forget, when Elsie caught her eye. The old lady winked at her. That’s all she needed! Not only were they wandering around in a dark wood, under threat of being consumed by a grieving troll, but she was now getting touched inappropriately by the oldest lesbian cottager in town. Still, respect that she was still up for it at the age of ninety, or whatever she was!

They reached the caravan door. Maurice tried to peer in through the window, but it was pitch black inside.

“Shall we go in?” he enquired.

Georgia nodded. “Of course.”

She opened the door and stepped into the caravan. Maurice and Elsie followed her in, closing the door behind her before Dexter could follow them. There was an angry shout from inside, and Dexter bolted back to the car, throwing himself into the back passenger seat beside his cautious friend.

“I don’t know who that was,” Georgia shouted from inside the caravan, “but if either of you *ever* do that again, I’m gonna peel your wrinkly old face off and book you into a home for retired faceless perverts.”

“Sorry,” Maurice replied contritely. “I was looking for the light switch.”

“Not down there you weren’t,” she retorted. “Now behave yourself, or you’re walking home alone – Was that you, Elsie? What did I just say about perverts?”

“Sorry,” the old lady replied. “I was looking for the kettle.”

The light went on. Georgia came running out, making a bee-line for the car. Keith was in the front-seat and on the move by the time she flung the door open.

“What is it?” Keith shouted. “Is she eating the geriatrics?”

“Stop the car!” she bellowed at him. He obeyed. It was too risky not to.

“What’s going on, Georgie?” Dexter asked. “Is she going mental in there?”

“No,” Georgia replied. “It’s worse than that, much worse. She’s gone.”

#

Abigail barely looked up as the door opened yet again. It was like Piccadilly Circus in here, people coming and going all the time. Mr. Chuckles, Stephen, and even the female – Anne or whatever she wanted to call herself – on one occasion. Anne had just tried to pinch some fat round her waist, and squeezed her thigh, before complaining bitterly that her brothers never picked anyone with any meat on them. Poor thing, thought Abigail. Wouldn’t want you going hungry.

There was the sound of subdued sobbing, and the rattling of chains. And that damn chuckle again.

“Edward? You’re back.”

“I’m back all right. Larger than life and twice as ugly.”

“Did you deliver the message?”

“Sort of.”

And with that, he was gone.

There was a groan in the darkness nearby. How stupid did they think she was?

Okay, she'd fallen for the escape routine once, but no way was it going to happen twice. She'd just kneel here on all fours, until they got bored and went to torment someone else instead.

Whoever was in the room with her started to retch. Not fake vomiting; this was the real thing. And then he was sobbing again. If it was one of them, it was a pretty good act. Surely there couldn't really be another kidnap victim in with her? She desperately wanted to find out, but was determined not to give them the satisfaction of fooling her twice if this was another one of Edward's sick ruses.

“I know it's you,” she announced coldly. ”This is getting boring now. Go away, and leave me alone, why don't you?”

The sobbing stopped. There was a sharp intake of breath. She waited, intrigued what would happen next.

“Abi?” came a familiar voice. “Is that you?”

Oh God, no. It couldn't be. They wouldn't have!

“Abi?”

But there was no doubt about it. The man chained up next to her was Mike. They had taken her husband, too. And she had given them his address.

#

Matilda peered through the window. Inside, she could see Philip's father, sitting in an armchair, staring at static on the television. He grasped a remote control in his left hand, but he did not use it. He just sat there, staring at a picture that only he could see. He looked sad. She felt for him. They had both lost so much.

There was no sign of Philip's mother. She must have gone to bed already. Maybe it was for the best. Philip's mother didn't like her very much. The night before the wedding, she had tried to run her down in a car.

It had not been easy finding them. When she had left the woods, she had found a road. All roads lead somewhere, she had reasoned (Nanny said they all lead to Rome, but this did not make any sense to her as apparently Rome was the other side of the sea and you'd drown if you tried to walk there). She chose the direction at random, and followed the road, hiding as best she could whenever a car (or one of those big long cars with lots of wheels and pictures on the side) went by.

She had been spotted by a man on a bike at one stage. She knew that if he reported her, then Crow would find her and she would be back in the cage with poor dead Mummy. She didn't want that; she had a mission to complete now. So she grabbed him off his bike, and stuck him in a hedge. She felt sorry for him – he had screamed quite a lot – but it was his fault in a way for trying to cycle away quickly when he had first spotted her. If he had just stopped, and promised that he wouldn't report her to anyone, then she would have let him go free.

It had been quite tempting to eat him. They had not fed her in the cage, and she was ravenous. But it had been a long time since she had eaten human flesh, and she figured that the best course of action was to track down Philip's father, and maybe ask for a stack of sandwiches instead. It's what her fiancé would have wanted.

She tried to ride the bike. It looked much faster than walking, and the sooner she reached her destination, the less likely it would be that she would be noticed (and recaptured). But every time she got on it, she fell off it again, even before she had started to pedal. She supposed that it only worked for its owner. Maybe you needed a special code-word or something. Nanny had not told her much about bicycles, and she realised that she still had a lot to learn about Outside after all.

Things had got more tricky at the outskirts of town. There were people about (not many, but enough to make it hard for her to remain anonymous). It didn't help that she had no idea where she was going. She had to wander round until she recognised a road Philip had used when he took her to meet his parents for the first (and only) time. She was not sure that she was even in the right town. There were a lot of towns in the Outside, she believed, probably as many as twenty or thirty or six.

She must have had some of her Family's guile in her genes, as despite her size and her lack of practice at keeping to the shadows, she was only spotted twice, one of which didn't really count as it was a little child peering out of a bedroom window. His parents would no doubt tell him it was just a nightmare, and he would grow up with a fear of large women without really knowing why. The second time was a man urinating in an alleyway. She had deposited him head first into a big black bin with a

blue lid, and had shaken it until he had gone quiet. She felt a bit guilty. She supposed that she should have let him put his thing away first.

Eventually, she had found a house very similar to the one she was looking for. All gardens, and hedges, and large cars. There were only a handful of houses here, and she recognised the one at the far end. There was a Matilda-shaped hole in the hedge, where she had barged her way through it in her haste to meet Philip's mother. And a very badly dented car in the road, where her own Daddy had been run down and killed (whilst trying to knock her head off with a garden-rake). This was it. This was where they were living. She had found the only people in the Outside that she knew, who were still alive.

She tapped on the window, but Philip's father did not hear her. She rapped again, firmer this time, but he just carried on staring at the television. She started to get frightened. What if he was dead? She struck the glass hard, and it fractured. Still no response from Father. He was in trouble. She had to help him.

She scoured the garden. There was a rockery at the far end. She selected the largest rock she could find, and started battering at the window with it. It splintered still further, and she brushed away the shards of glass, cutting her hands badly in the process. Frustrated, she saw that there was another pane of glass behind it. Double-glazing. What was the point of having two windows?

She started battering at the second pane of glass. It shattered straight-away. This time, she used the rock to push away the shards, trying to clear enough away so she could wriggle through the window without cutting herself to shreds. It was then that

she noticed that Father was no longer inside.

She glanced around. The front door was open now. Back inside, Father was taking his seat again, ready to resume his vigil in front of the television. He was letting her in. He still loved her! She followed him inside.

The house was just as she remembered it. Not surprising really, as it had only been a few days since she had last been here. She remembered Mother throwing cutlery at her, and Father calming things down with a cup of tea and some smelling-salts. And Philip, her Philip had been here too. She ached for him. He would know what to do if he was here. She was lost without him. But Father was the next best thing. Father would let her live in the garden, and protect her from Crow if he came to call. He was an elder. He would also have been her father-in-law, if Mummy had not eaten Philip just before the wedding started. He would be wise, and kind, and would be there for her in her hour of need.

She sat down (properly on the sofa, like Outsiders do, rather than squatting on the floor like Family) and waited for Father to talk. But Father was watching the TV again. There was definitely no picture there, but still he stared at it intently, as if divining some hidden meaning from the random fizzing dots that plagued the screen.

“I miss him,” she said, and waited for him to say something back, something wise and kind, which would make the pain go away.

He looked at her for a few seconds, shrugged, and then returned his attention to the television. It was not the response she had been hoping for.

She tried again.

“I don’t know what to do without him here. I feel so sad, and it’s like he’s the only one who could have made me feel better. But he can’t now, can’t help me, and that makes me sadder still.”

Again. Father looked at her, longer this time, until she started to feel uncomfortable.

“I don’t know what you expect from me,” he said. “There’s nothing I can do.”

She felt uneasy. This wasn’t like Father at all. Father was friendly and helpful, and made tea in a crisis. This Father was vague, and distant, and so very, very cold.

“You can! There must be something!” she protested. “You’re all I’ve got.”

He shrugged again. This wasn’t the way this conversation was supposed to go. Why was he being like this?

She stood up and approached him, holding out her arms.

“I need a hug,” she pleaded.

He stared at her vacantly, and then shook his head.

“No.”

“Would Mother hug me, do you think? Someone must.”

Suddenly, he was animated.

“Mother’s in a home. They say I can’t look after her!” But then his passion withered, and he was tired and old again. “Maybe they’re right. Maybe I can’t even look after myself now.”

“No!” Matilda shouted. “I’ll go and get her back. She belongs with you.”

He laughed without humour.

“You do that,” he replied. “And perhaps you could bring Philip back too, while

you're at it."

She wanted to cry. That wasn't fair. She hadn't killed Philip; Mummy had. She loved Philip; he meant everything to her. She would have done anything to turn back the clock, and have him sitting here with her, sipping tea while Mother threw her best china at her head.

"Would that make you feel better?" she enquired.

He nodded, his eyes closed. Grief and guilt welled up inside her as she noticed a solitary tear slipping through his eye-lashes and becoming marooned on the bristles of his long-unshaven face.

She had come here looking for help and reassurance, but she now realised how selfish she had been. She was not the only one who loved Philip. Father and Mother loved him too. It was up to her to make things better for them, even if only just a little.

She patted his shoulder, pretending not to notice as he flinched.

"I'll be back later, Father," she told him. "And I'm going to make sure that no-one ever hurts you again."

#

It had not been hard to break into Maurice's house. Crow did that sort of thing all the time. What was difficult was searching it without parting with the contents of his stomach.

He had had his suspicions about his superior officer when they had worked together all those years ago. “I’ve told Elsie all about you. She’s dying to meet you. We’ve had a hot tub installed in the garden, so bring your trunks. You haven’t got any? Oh, not to worry, the garden’s really secluded. We could do pretty much anything out there, without a word of complaint from the neighbours.”

Back then, no-one had “hot-tubs” in their gardens. He supposed everyone was doing it now; Society was degenerating on pretty much a day to day basis. And you certainly didn’t ask your colleagues to parade around on your lawn, with ladies present, with your Crown Jewels hanging out. Maybe in the sixties, but not the late seventies, for goodness sake.

Other colleagues had been invited, too. Some had even gone round there for a splash about in the back garden. “It’ll be fun,” they said. “Won’t do my promotion prospects any harm, either. You should come too. Safety in numbers!” But he never had. And all of them had resigned pretty soon afterwards, or had been medically retired on the grounds of stress and anxiety.

Maurice’s wife would have been about fifty back then. Much more predatory than any of the trolls they were tracking down, that was for sure. He’d brought her to a Christmas party once. She’d sloped off with the work experience boy. No-one ever found out what they’d got up to in that stationery cupboard, but it was two weeks before the poor lad had even been able to speak again, and he hadn’t lost the limp until Easter.

As he searched their drawers, methodically working his way through one at a time,

he found photograph after photograph of his former boss in some very compromising positions. Some were with his wife, some with other women, some with his wife and other men. She looked about twenty in some of them (he must have developed his own photos as they would not have been comfortable developing pictures like this in Boots!) He tucked some of these away in his pocket to keep the print of Georgia company; she had been a very attractive woman back then. In other photos, she looked about forty or fifty, pretty much how he remembered her from when he had worked with her husband. But in others, she looked very much like an old-aged pensioner, and those were the photos which made even a case-hardened veteran like him shudder. This one with Maurice and Elsie on a stair-lift (it was a wonder no-one had fallen off); this one with Maurice sucking his aged wife's toes (she really ought to have taken her corn-plasters off first); this one showing Elsie endeavouring to feed the tip of a walking stick into her husband's scrawny bottom (without any lubricant, judging from the look on his stricken face).

But the photograph which disturbed him most was one of Maurice and some other man handcuffed together on the floor, while Elsie loomed above them, wrapped in a gaping fur-coat in a most unimaginative attempt to simulate a big hairy troll. She was smiling at the camera, and brandishing a turkey-leg in one hand for reasons which Crow could not even begin to understand. Trolls did not eat turkey. They ate people, and lots of them. Apart from the unbuttoned fur coat, everyone in the photo was naked.

He closed the drawer. He could take no more. He had seen at first-hand what trolls

were capable of doing, and it was not pretty. But for Maurice and Elsie to simulate it naked – at their age! – was almost more than he could stomach. And the introduction of the turkey leg seemed for some inexplicable reason to unsettle him most of all.

He continued his search upstairs, avoiding any contact with the stair-lift on his way up. He steered well clear of the bedroom as well; he was not usually one to carry out half-arsed searches, but he could not even begin to imagine what he might find in there, and would rather Matilda escape forever than have to look under the geriatric couple's bed.

Matilda. He thought back over the last week or so. He had known she was the key to solving the Ramsgate troll problem forever. Her feelings for Philip had compromised her. Threaten him, and she would give him whatever he wanted. And she had. Her whole family had been eradicated, the entire tribe taken out all at once. It was once in a blue moon that happened. Maurice had never achieved it, that was for sure.

He should have executed Matilda on the spot, he realised that now. You take out the whole tribe, you get promoted, that was always understood. But he had been greedy. He had tranquilised her instead of killing her, and brought her back to base to see if she could give him any more families before he put her out of her misery. Margate was top of the list, but there was another one somewhere in Kent which was proving even more elusive to locate. All to no avail. He no longer had anything to use against her now Philip was gone. He should have taken her mother or brother as well, given him some leverage. But the state she had been in, maybe it would have made no

difference.

And now she was loose. She'd kill again, but he didn't mind that. Shit happens. What really irked him was that until he had recaptured her, he would not have eradicated her whole tribe. So no bonus, no promotion, and no chance of trading in that bloody Renault Clio they had made him drive!

He made his way back down to the kitchen. He was hungry; it had been ten or eleven hours since he had last eaten. He reached for the biscuit tin. There were dozens of slips of paper and post-it notes inside. He fished one out at random. "THEY CAN TALK!" it announced. He smiled. He had just found their top-secret file.

#

"Talk to me," Abigail pleaded, but her husband sulked on.

"I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I didn't know they'd take you, too. They said they'd just give you a message. I wrote down everything I could think of, to help the Police find me. If I'd have known you'd be in danger, I'd never have done it."

He humphed.

"It's true! I wouldn't have said anything if I thought that you'd end up here, too."

"You gave them our address, Abi!" Mike exploded. "They kidnapped you, chained you to the floor, and then asked where I live! Didn't it occur to you that it might have been better to keep your mouth shut for a change!"

“That’s not fair. It wasn’t like that.”

“Then what was it like? I’m struggling to think of any scenario in which this would have ended up well for me!”

“I wasn’t thinking straight. I’ve been chained up here for days!”

“Well that’s strange, cos you’ve only been gone for twenty four hours.”

“Time goes slowly in here. It seems like a lot longer.”

“Well, I’ll find that out for myself now, won’t I? Thanks Abs. Thanks a bundle.”

Her emotions churned inside her. She hadn’t wanted him here. She’d have rather the whole wicked family gnawed her bones clean than this. But now he was here, she had expected some support. Shared tears, expressions of love, reassurances that they could get through this together. But instead, he was acting like her three year old nephew when her sister threw his old toys out.

“Help!” he suddenly screamed. “Help me!”

“I wouldn’t do that,” she cautioned.

“You got me into this mess,” he snapped back. “Just leave it to me to get us out of it, will you?”

Someone entered the room. Abigail strained her eyes to make them out, but it was just too dark. She did not know who it was, which of them it would target, precisely what it was that it would do. All she could do was wait. She braced herself, knowing that there would be repercussions. They weren’t keen on their prisoners shouting for help.

Mike grunted in pain.

“Every time you make a noise,” said the female – Anne, was it? – “you get a kick in the ribs.”

“You can’t do this -”

He yelped in mid-sentence, as she kicked him again.

“That sounded like a noise to me. It’s not a hard rule to understand. You Outsiders are just so dumb! You got anything to say, Blondie?”

Abigail shook her head, hoping that Anne could see this in the darkness.

“See, she knows the rules already. The female ones are always quicker learners.”

She kicked him once again.

“Next time it’s your bollocks,” she cautioned. “Only reason I’ve not done it already is that it might bruise them, and that kind of ruins the taste.”

She left the room.

“I’m so sorry,” Abigail said again. “Are you okay?”

“Sod off,” he replied. But very, very quietly this time.

#

Back at Dexter’s, they grouped around the computer as he tried to hack into Crow’s files.

“You never get any hackers when you store your data in a biscuit tin,” Maurice advised the group. “The worst you have to put up with is crumbs.”

“I’m in,” Dexter announced, looking to Georgia for approval. She smiled

encouragement at him.

“Okay,” she urged. “I need addresses.”

His chubby fingers flew across the key-board with surprising dexterity.

Occasionally, he stopped, cursed, and then started again, the pauses and the swear-words getting fewer and further between as he got more of a feel for his father’s database.

He sensed that his father had been here earlier. His waste-paper basket had been emptied, and the burger wrappers removed from the floor. Crow was obsessively tidy. It must have been him. There was no other intruder who would have taken time out to tidy the flat before he left.

He could be back at any minute. Time was of the essence. This was way too risky. But it was what Georgia wanted, so what choice did he have? As long as she visited him in prison, he could live with the consequences. Maybe they allowed conjugal visits now, and she might give him a sympathy f-

“Concentrate, Dex,” she urged him. You’ve just typed “fuck” in the password box”.

He blushed, and focused on the job in hand. This was something he was good at. He had about 8 screens open at once, flicking back and forth between them, searching for the information he required to make her proud of him.

He felt a hand on his shoulder. It ran down his broad back, round his side, and came to rest on his thigh. He didn’t dare look round. He hoped against hope it was hers, but suspected that it was much more likely to have liver-spots on it.

“He’s taking ages,” Keith complained, desperate to eliminate some of the Brownie-

points he was racking up with Georgie. “I thought you were supposed to be good at this, Chubster.”

“It’s complicated,” Dex protested. “This is a government database. Top secret. It’s not like you just enter your mother’s maiden name, and you’re away.”

He felt his face being flicked. The hand on his thigh started sliding upwards, towards uncharted territory. He felt another hand on his other leg. Either he was being groped by an orangutan or it was the Golden Oldies, one each side, up to their tricks again. It was an incentive for him to speed up.

And then he was there. Two addresses, one where she was captured, and one where the boyfriend had lived. Boyfriend! Matilda seemed quite friendly for a troll, but even Dexter wasn’t that desperate. There were photos of the boyfriend, taken from a distance. He looked quite normal. Some people had very strange sexual preferences.

As if to confirm this, he felt one of the hands reach his lap. He leapt up, as if scalded.

“What the Hell’s the matter with you now, Dex?” Keith exclaimed.

“Toilet break,” Dexter lied, putting a three metre safety zone between him and the elderly swingers who were both giving him unnervingly lecherous grins.

“No time for that now,” said Georgia. “Print off two copies of everything, and we split up. One group to each of those addresses. I’ll take the place they found her. Who’s coming with me?”

Everyone put their hands up.

Dexter it is, then,” she ruled, winking at him. “Keith, you go with Maurice and

Elsie to the boyfriend's house. Dex and I will try the house she was captured in.

Then we all meet back at Maurice's in say an hour and a half."

"I am NOT going anywhere with them," Keith pouted.

Georgia gave him her look, but he was not to be intimidated this time. She tried bribery instead.

"I'll take you clubbing if you do."

Keith hesitated, but then remembered the tiny amount of clothing Georgie wore for a night on the town. It was little more than a couple of strategically placed handkerchiefs, with a pierced belly-button inbetween. He caught the irritated look that Dexter shot him. He smirked, and then beckoned for Maurice and Elsie to follow him outside.

"Okay," he conceded. "Come with me, OAPs. But if either of you so much as look at me, I'm keeping your car as compensation."

#

She had no trouble finding the cemetery. She could sense death. She had had plenty of practice.

Matilda stood before Philip's grave. She knew it was his. She could feel him down there, calling to her. It was time to set him free, and gift him to his father. Then they could all be a family again.

She found a shovel in an out-building. It was locked, but it took little effort to force

the door open. She set to work.

The moon was up, with shreds of cloud slashed across it. She loved the moon, it reminded her so much of Nanny. Looking down on her benevolently as she dug into the freshly turned earth. Nanny would give her the strength she needed to reach her Beloved, and liberate him from his tiny little tomb.

She had assumed that she would only have to dig down a few inches to reach him, but it turned out that he was much further down than that. She thought of their time together as she shovelled the soil to one side.

There was their escape from the House. He had been chained up, all emotional and alone, crying out for help. It was the only time she had seen him naked. She blushed. She hadn't admitted it at the time, but she had liked what she saw. They had struck their bargain. She would unlock his chains, and set him free. And he would love her in return.

And then their visit to his parents. His father had taken to her straight away. Mother had not been so keen, of course. She had preferred Mandy, Philip's previous Beloved, who was petite and blonde and feminine, though she did swear an awful lot. Maybe if Matilda had been blonde, Mother would have been more friendly. Perhaps she might not have tried to mow her down with her car the night before the wedding.

And finally, the horrors of the wedding itself. Her brother had brought Mummy with him. Everyone she loved was there. She had finally found the man of her dreams, an Outsider no less. He was marrying her through choice, even though she was not petite, or blonde or especially feminine, like Mandy had been. Her day

should have been perfect. But it was not to be. Mummy had ripped off Philip's arm, and started eating it, mistaking him for the wedding feast. The wedding guests had been thrown into panic, quite understandably in the circumstances. And when she went home, she found all her family dead, gunned down by Crow and his men. It had not been the wedding day she had dreamt of, as a little girl.

Nanny had filled her with dreams of weddings, secretly and furtively when Daddy was not around to beat her for it. Nanny was an Outsider, like Philip. She had lived in the Outside, until Granddaddy had taken her for a wedding feast all those years before. But Granddaddy had fallen in love with her, and spared her, and Matilda had desperately wanted some of that for herself. But she would never have what Nanny had, not now Philip was gone. All she had now was a corpse in a box, buried so far down, as if they were afraid he would try to claw his way out.

The metal spade struck wood. She was there at last. She dropped to her knees and swept the rest of the earth off the lid of the coffin. Now she was so close, she hesitated. All she had to do was take the lid off, and she would see him again. But could she do it? Could she really cope with seeing his poor, dear face again, knowing that he could not see her, could not touch her, could never be with her again?

She took a deep breath. She had to do this. For his Father. It would mean so much to him, having his son back again. And then she would find out where Mother was, and bring her back home, too. They would all be a family. It's what Philip would have wanted.

She opened the coffin-lid with difficulty. It was hard to open it when she was

standing on one end, but with a little shuffling about, a lot of exertion, and some trapped and crushed fingers, she managed to get the thing open in the end.

She cried out in frustration. This was not Philip! It was some elderly man, already decayed a little round the edges. This was too, too cruel. All that hope, all that trepidation, all that exertion, all for nothing. She would have to dig again elsewhere.

She paused. She hadn't eaten for a very long time. Could she? Just a little nibble? While she was down here? Philip wouldn't approve, but then again she had to keep her strength up if she was to reunite him with his father.

She held the forearm up to her mouth, and took an exploratory bite. It was on the turn, sure enough, but beggars can't be choosers, as Nanny always used to say.

She tucked in, as Nanny watched on from above.

#

Crow sat in the kitchen, crumbs all over his suit, cramming the scribbled records and post-it notes back into the biscuit-tin.

He was disturbed. It took a lot to unsettle him, he had seen and done pretty much everything in his time. But this; this was beyond his comprehension.

He had expected scientific data in the biscuit tin. Descriptions of trolls, an analysis of their behaviour, maybe even a list of sightings and clues as to their whereabouts. Maurice had always been pretty analytical when they were colleagues, when he was not being a pervert, that is. But apart from the occasional observation -“THEY CAN

TALK!” for example – it was all sexual. Maurice was one sick individual, and Elsie, he knew, was sicker still. How could they possibly want to – make love, for want of a better word, with one of those creatures? It made him feel nauseous. He knew from bitter experience what they were capable of. Even leaving aside the question of why they would possibly want something like that, the question remained of how they could possibly hope to achieve it, without having their faces torn off by a very pissed off troll? Trolls would not be keen on being spit-roasted by a retired civil servant and his strap-on loving wife.

Maurice was behind all this, Mark’s Facebook entry made that perfectly clear. But now he knew why. His former boss and mentor was not helping out the youngsters in the interests of scientific research, as they believed. He and his crazed octogenarian wife just wanted to get their hands on a troll, to participate in their foul and unnatural practices.

That young lady – the feisty one, who had defied him at the road-block. What would she say, when she found out that she wasn’t liberating Matilda, but delivering her into the hands of a deranged pervert? Crow chuckled. That was the only silver lining to this whole sorry situation. It would certainly wipe the smirk off that pretty little face of hers. He desperately wanted to be the one to break the news to her.

His mobile rang.

“Crow.”

“We have 2 sightings, Sir, both in Ramsgate. A cyclist was attacked, and left for dead in a hedge. And a man was found stuck upside down in a recycle bin, covered

in urine. We're testing it now, to see if it's hers."

"Why would she urinate on a man in a recycle bin?"

"Don't know, Sir. They do strange things, these trolls."

"Okay, Soldier, I'm on my way back. Let me know when you've found her."

He hung up. The net was closing in. It would only be a matter of time before he had her back in custody. And this time, he would torture her hard, and torture her quick, find out whether there were any others of her kind around, and then dispose of her to secure his bonus, before she could cause any more trouble. It was for her own good. The alternative for her was Maurice and Elsie, and even he wouldn't have wished that on her.

He picked up the last remaining biscuit, and nibbled on it thoughtfully on his way back to the car. What to do about Dexter? His own son had betrayed him. Blood was thicker than water, they said. And when he got his hands on him, he would find out whether they were right.

#

Matilda was tired. She had struck wood again. A dozen desecrated graves were scattered around her, earth heaped to the side of each, as if some giant mole had run amok amongst the grave-stones. Surely this had to be the one? Surely this was where her Philip had been buried?

She removed the lid. It required little effort this time. Practice had made very nearly

perfect at flipping open lids upon which she was standing.

Her heart paused for several beats, leaving her in complete silence. It was him. Oh Nanny, it was really him this time! Her poor, dead Philip, lying there in the coffin between her feet, one arm missing from its socket, just as she remembered him.

She had feared that he might have started decomposing already, but no, he was perfect. She could almost imagine him opening his eyes, smiling at her, hugging her and telling her that everything would be all right, that he was here now, that no-one would ever hurt her again while he was there to protect her. She peeled back his eyelid, praying for some sign of life beneath, but it was not to be. He looked back at her, vacant and unseeing, looking very much like his father had done just now. The man she had known was gone, and only his shell remained.

She cradled his head in her arms, and howled until the grief and anger gradually ebbed away. She collapsed on top of him, spent of energy and emotion, trying to snuggle into him, but thwarted by the hard wooden edges of the coffin.

The moon called her to action. Philip's father was waiting for them. He missed Philip almost as much as she did. She had to reunite them, take the edge off his pain. Oh so carefully, she scooped Philip's lifeless body from the coffin, and set off to present it to the poor, broken little man who had so nearly been her father-in-law.

#

They were still bickering as the door opened again.

Mike had called her all the names he could think of, none of them complimentary, and almost all of them preceded with the words “stupid” or “selfish”.

She was so sorry, she told him. She would never have given them their address if she'd have thought for one minute that they were planning on bringing him here, too. She had just wanted him to know where she was, to call in the police to rescue her, but she would have just died here in silence if she'd realised that she was putting him in danger. He didn't believe her, though. Or if he did, then he blamed her anyway. Okay, he had every reason to be upset, but he'd kind of made his point now. It was time for them to kiss and make-up (proverbially, at least, as they were chained too far apart to reach each other), but he was too intent on heaping blame on her cold, trembling shoulders to move on.

“What were you thinking?” he asked. “That they were just going to knock on the door, hand me your note, and then wish me a goodnight? Anyone with half a brain would have known what was going to happen.”

“I didn't think they were going to hand the note to you. I thought they'd slip it under the door, or tie it to a rock and throw it through the window.”

“Well that's nice! It could've killed me!”

“I've been kidnapped and chained up naked in a cellar! I don't think it's unreasonable that I thought my husband might want to know where I'd gone!”

“I told you not to go to the cinema, didn't I? This is all your fault.”

“Are you saying that I deserve this?”

“Don't be stupid! I'm just saying that if you'd have listened to me, neither of us

would be in this mess!”

She wanted to shriek at him, but she could not risk bringing those creatures in again. She had never wanted him to be brought here, but she thought there might at least be a silver lining. At least her husband was here to support her, reassure her, help her plan their escape. But he was being so vile, so vicious, that she would almost have preferred it if they hauled her away now and finished her off, before her marriage deteriorated any further.

Be careful what you wish for, she told herself, as the door opened, and one of her captors walked in. Edward, she thought. He hasn't been in for awhile. This was too good an opportunity for him to gloat; he wouldn't leave them in peace for long. Sure enough, it was him. He lit a candle, and studied them both in silence, a distorted smirk on his face.

She looked over at Mike. She still had her sheet over here, but he was uncovered. She tried to catch his eye. She wanted to mouth “sorry” at him, hoping that the apology and the distress in her eyes would be enough for him to forgive her. But he wouldn't even make eye contact. Instead, he stared at the troll in front of them, his expression an equal mix of fear and revulsion.

“You'll want to thank me, no doubt,” Edward prompted. “When you're ready.”

“*Thank you!*” Mike exploded.

“Don't mention it,” Edward replied, and blew out the candle.

“No, stop, come back!” Mike yelled. “I want to talk.”

The candle re-ignited.

“This better be good,” Edward cautioned. “If you knew the trouble I have to go to, to get these things, you’d make sure you say what you want to say before I blow them out.”

“I’m sorry,” Mike said. “I just want to talk, okay?”

“A thank you, and an apology,” Edward approved. “And we’ve not even been formally introduced yet.”

“I’m Mike. Abigail’s husband.”

“Oh, I know who you are, Mikey. Your wife told me. She was very keen for you to be reunited.”

“That’s not fair!” Abigail protested. “You said you’d just give him a message. You never said you were going to bring him here!”

“And you,” Edward retorted, “said you were going to tell him that you’d left him. But what did you do? You told him that we’d taken you. That was very stupid.”

Mike nodded in agreement, much to Abigail’s disgust.

“That’s what I told her,” Mike confirmed.

“Then maybe you should have more control of your wife. Keep her on a tight leash.”

“You can read?” Abigail asked, changing the subject to try to paper over her husband’s betrayal.

“No. I can guess.”

“Then you would have taken him anyway, whatever I’d written.”

Edward grinned, and went to blow out the candle again.

“Stop!” called out Mike, in panic.

“Stop, please, I think you mean,” cautioned Edward.

“Please. I just want to talk.”

“So you said.” Edward yawned theatrically. “I’m growing bored of this conversation, Mikey-boy. Our guests are due shortly. My sister’s getting married, and I’d like to be there to greet them. If you have something to say, I’d say it now if I were you.”

Mike hesitated, working out what to say, and how to say it. Abigail looked on, hoping against hope that he had a plan, and that if it involved rescue then he would try to save her, too.

“I have money,” Mike ventured.

“No use to us,” Edward shrugged. “We don’t tend to shop very much, here.”

“What do you want?”

“Meat. Enough to feed a family of twelve. And before you ask, we’ve got that already. I’m talking to it now.”

“There must be something we can give you, for you to let us go. We could get you candles!”

Edward laughed, not his irritating giggle this time, but a genuine belly-laugh that was somehow so much worse. Fear feasted on her nerve endings, leaving them raw and shredded.

“You’re trying to buy your wife’s freedom with candle wax! Oh, Michael, I’m disappointed in you. Either you value your wife at next to nothing, or you have a

very poor opinion of my intelligence. I'm not sure which would upset me most."

"No! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to insult you. I – just thought you could use some candles, that's all."

Edward grinned, a wide and spiteful grin, and puffed out the candle.

"It's too late to apologise. You've offended me now. Now which one of you should pay the price?"

"Me!" Abigail begged. "Hurt me!"

"Would you shut up, Abigail!" Mike snapped. "You're not helping!"

She had had enough. She was sacrificing herself, taking a beating from a troll to save him, and still he was putting her down.

"Oh, fuck off, why don't you?" she retorted.

"How dare you?" shouted her outraged husband. "How dare you speak to me like that, after all you've done to me?"

Edward chuckled maliciously. "'I'm loving this.'"

Abigail clamped up. She would say no more. She was not going to give him the satisfaction. It was then that Mike started to cry. She had brought him to this; it was entirely her fault that he was here. Something crumpled inside. Enough was enough.

Her head was tugged backwards. Edward had a hold of her hair. He was pulling it back, hard, but her neck would go no further. She felt the cloth whipped off, and a heavy hand rest on her right hip. He was behind her.

"Shall we?" he whispered in her ear. "Here, in front of your husband? Do you think he'd mind?"

She bucked furiously. She wanted to lash out at him, but her wrists and ankles kept her pinned down for him. She rocked to one side, desperate to throw his disgusting hand off her body.

He roared with delight.

“I love a girl with spirit!”

“What’s going on?” Mike asked. “What’s happening?”

“Consent, and I’ll let him go,” Edward told her. “Give yourself up, to save him. Show him how much you care.”

He released her hair, so he could grasp her by both hips, keeping her steady for him.

“Just say the word, and he’s free.”

“No!” she shouted. “This is not going to happen!”

“Do you hear that, Mikey?” he taunted. “Your wife’s being all squeamish. Talk her into it, and you can be sitting at home in the warm, with not so much a bite-mark on you.”

“Let us both go,” Mike said, “and we’ll think about it.”

“Michael!” she screamed at him. How could he? Even if Edward could be believed – which he couldn’t – how could he?

“We’d both be free,” Mike gushed. “It’ll be all right. A few minutes of discomfort, and it’ll all be over.”

Before she could answer, the door opened again. A voice – Anne, the female troll – called out to their tormentor.

“Stop playing with your food,” she commanded. “The Family are here.”

“I’ll be there in a minute. There’s something I’ve got to do here, first, isn’t there Mikey?”

“Now!” she said. “Stephen says you’re to come now.”

After much grumbling, Abigail felt his hands release her, and the sheet went over her back again.

He slapped her bottom playfully.

“Keep it warm for me,” he said. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

#

Keith came back downstairs, having peered nervously around every door in Philip’s house. Along with the OAPs, they had carried out a thorough search of the property which had belonged to Matilda’s recently deceased boyfriend, but to no avail. She wasn’t here, thank God!

“There’s no sign of the troll,” he advised Maurice and Elsie.

“She’s not a troll,” Maurice said.

Keith was not keen on being contradicted by an elderly swinger.

“She’s six feet six, built like a brick shit-house, with a big, lumpy old face. She looks like she should be painted green and left in a swamp with a donkey. If that’s not a troll, I don’t know what is!”

“She’s a Neanderthal.”

“A what?”

“A Neanderthal.”

“They’re from millions of years ago. That would make her even older than you!”

“They’re actually much more recent than that. They were supposed to have died out in Gibraltar about twenty five thousand years ago. And thank you very much!”

“We may be old,” Elsie interjected, “but we’ve lively. Come over here, and I’ll prove it.”

“There’s life in the old dog yet, then?” Keith taunted.

“We can do things that would make your eyes water,” Elsie added, with a friendly wink.

“And make my stomach turn,” he retorted.

“But they didn’t die out,” Maurice interrupted. “They went into hiding. Living side by side with homo sapiens, but in the shadows, where they couldn’t be seen, where they wouldn’t be hunted to extinction. And all the while, they’ve been using us as their principal source of food.”

“You’re kidding?” asked Keith. This was too freaky. He knew a bit about Neanderthals, he’d seen pictures of them in books. Hairy things with big jaws and dumb expressions, striding across grassy plains in search of mammoths, waving stone-age spears at sabre-toothed tigers. Surely they couldn’t still be around, not after all these years? What would the Geriatrics claim next? That there was a T-rex in the garden?

“It’s true. Matilda is a living, breathing specimen of Neanderthal Man.

Governments have been tracking them down and exterminating them throughout

civilisation. But they've never been able to stamp them out altogether. And if we capture her alive before Crow gets to her, she'd be worth millions."

"Well, fuck me!"

"I thought you'd never ask," Elsie giggled, as she chloroformed him from behind.

#

Dexter and Georgia stood on the pavement, directly beneath the street-lamp, as if its weak artificial light could keep them safe from harm. They looked up at the windows of the large terraced house on the other side of the road. It was falling to pieces. The paint was peeling off the walls, and the window sills were rotting away. One of the window panes was cracked on the second storey. It looked like it had been left derelict for many years, but until recently, there had been a whole family living here. This was where Crow had captured Matilda, and murdered her family in the process.

"Maybe we should call the others?" Dexter suggested. "All go in together?"

Georgia shook her head. "Why bother? Let's go and explore."

Dexter trotted along behind her as she crossed over to the front door. He didn't like "exploring". He liked sitting at his computer, or playing Playstation games (Wii was a bit too lively for his liking). He was not the sort to go poking around deserted properties in the middle of the night, looking for a troll who in all likelihood didn't want to be found, and who was probably exceptionally hungry by now.

He stood a few paces back as she rattled the door-knob, ready to bolt if Matilda

came hurtling out towards them; a real life troll, large as life, and twice as ugly. He would grab Georgie's hand, and pull her along after him, of course. He was a gentleman. But he needed to get a headstart, as she could run faster than him and the troll was bound to target him over her (more meat, as Keith had pointed out with such relish).

"It's locked," Georgia complained

"Front doors usually are," Dexter pointed out, hating himself for sounding like Keith.

"Have you got a credit card?" she asked. "I bet I could open it with a credit card."

"No," he replied. He did have his blood-donor card on him, but she had specifically asked him for a credit card, and maybe nothing else would do. Besides, he might need the blood donor card later on, if they found their missing troll.

"No use trying to get in the front, then."

"No," he agreed. "Best meet the others back at Maurice's."

She smiled at him. That smile was dangerous. He would do anything for her when she flashed it, but she tended to use it most when she was about to do something which was incredibly dangerous.

He had known her since they were children. They had grown up together; Keith, too. She was actually a year younger than them, but even as kids she had taken the lead. Other people used to tease them for letting a little girl boss them around, but when "people" got to know her, they'd end up doing as they were told as well. She was a difficult girl to say "no" to.

She had got them in trouble time and time again when they were little. Railways tracks, big dogs in small back-yards, even the runway at Manston Airport on one occasion. Every time, he had tried to back out, knowing that what she was suggesting was preposterously dangerous. And on each and every occasion, she would shoot him that great big conspiratorial smile of hers, like it was just the two of them against the whole wide world, and he would be putty in her hands. Which is precisely why he had been electrocuted on the live rail, bitten by a Rottweiler, and very nearly decapitated by the landing gear of a Jersey-bound airplane.

He whimpered, hoping she would let him off the hook, but all to no avail. She touched his arm, still smiling all the while.

“Come on, Dex. It’ll be fun.”

It would not be fun. It would be anything but. But she was smiling at him, and touching him, so he really had no choice at all.

He nodded weakly. “Won’t it just.”

They made their way to the back of the building, which involved clambering over several garden walls (one of which had spikes on it). The tears to his jeans would have been quite fashionable on a thinner person. She tried the door again. This time it opened. Terrific, thought Dexter. Have these people never heard of home security? Then again, who would be stupid enough to burgle them?

They ventured into the back room. Georgia produced a torch (he had no idea where she’d got it from, as her jeans were too tight for spare change, yet alone anything bigger!) She played it around the room. A rusty old sink, some work surfaces, a

disused 1960's kitchen by the look of it. No sign of any kitchen implements though; no sign of any life at all.

"She's not here," he announced. "Let's go."

The torch-light went out.

"Bugger."

"Let's go," he repeated, more urgently this time.

"Maybe if I take the batteries out and put them in the other way round?" she proposed.

"Does that work?"

"I dunno. Let's see."

He listened as she unscrewed the back off the torch. There was the sound of metal on wood.

"Dropped a battery," she explained. "Can you help me find it?"

"I really think we should be going," he urged her. "It's pitch black in here. We'll never find it in the dark."

"Got it!"

"Excellent," he whimpered.

He heard her screwing the back of the torch back on, and a dim beam of light struggled vaguely across the room. It reminded him of those ghost programmes you see on the television, where you can see nothing but the presenters' pale faces and reflective eyes, and the occasional shimmer of light that flashes across the room, which everyone insists is a troubled spirit but which he was convinced was just the

camera light reflecting off someone's wrist watch.

She played the torch slowly around the room. There was the draining board, there was a big old fashioned larder, and there was –

He squealed in panic.

“What's up, Dex?”

He put his hand on the tip of the torch, and steered it about thirty degrees to the left. There was pair of eyes looking back at them, not unlike the ones in the ghost programmes, but meaner looking, and higher off the ground. There was something big in here with them. Something very big, and very angry.

She turned the torch in a spiral. Two more faces, equally as pissed off as the first. The torch went out. Someone screamed (probably him, but he wasn't quite sure).

“Run, Dex! Run!”

Oh my God, he thought to himself, over and over again, as he tried to remember which way he had to go to find the back door. When would he ever learn to say “no” to her, when she switched on that smile of hers. It always ended up like this, every single time. He had been burnt and bitten for her in the past, and had spent six months in therapy to stop him wetting himself whenever he saw a plane. And now, she was going to get him eaten.

He reached out for where he judged the door-knob to be, but it was cloth. A curtain maybe? And then he felt large hands seize him by the scruff of his neck, flinging him down on the floor.

The last thing he heard was a chuckle.

#

Matilda got back to Father's house in record time. She was getting well-practised at flowing through shadows, anonymous and invisible, even with the decaying body of her recently deceased fiancé slung over her shoulder. Daddy would have been proud of her, but for the fact that he was dead, too.

Philip's father was going to be so happy when he found out what she had done for him. Surely he would forgive her for the inadvertent part she had played in his son's tragic death? He would cry tears of joy when she reunited the two of them, and welcome her back into the family. They would live together, almost-father-in-law and almost daughter-in-law, and neither of them would ever come to any harm again.

Something leapt from the bushes, and seized Philip from her shoulder. Crow? No, bigger than him, much bigger. It was – Family!

She recognised the young troll who had pulling her Beloved into the bushes. It was Kaye. She was from the Margate clan. But what was she doing here? This was way outside her territory. And since when did females hunt, especially adolescent ones? What would Kaye have been now? Fifteen? Sixteen at most. It didn't make any sense.

Matilda crashed into the foliage, seizing Philip's wrist as it trailed along behind the fleeing troll. She yanked him back towards her. She was not going to lose him again, not like this. Especially to one of her own.

She pulled him so hard that he slipped from Kaye's grasp, falling to the ground half in and half out of the bush.

"Ha!" shouted Matilda, somewhat childishly. "I've got him!"

Kaye seized his legs and tried to pull him towards her, but Matilda still had hold of his wrist, and she wasn't going to let him go, no matter what.

And then there was another one; Maggie, Kaye's sister. Their father would have been at the House for Angela's wedding (along with all the other menfolk of hunting age) when Crow had massacred her Family. Without them there to forage, Kaye and Maggie must have been reduced to this, snatching a rotting cadaver from his grieving fiancée. Under other circumstances, her heart would have bled for them.

"You do not take dead meat!" Matilda shrieked at them, tugging frantically at Philip's arm at the wrist and elbow. "Especially *my* dead meat!"

"He's all there is," Kaye cried back defiantly, refusing to be intimidated by Matilda's superior age and size. "I need a Wedding Feast. Back off, Bitch, or we'll take you, too! We've heard what you did!"

Matilda was outraged. Family didn't swear! And she was most definitely not a bitch anyway! She showed her disapproval by tugging at Philip's arm all the harder. Inch by inch, like some titanic tug-of-war champion, she hauled the increasingly frantic teenagers out of the bushes and into the open garden.

"Got you, you little minxes!" she yelled in triumph, feeling that this insult was just about on the right side of what was acceptable in the swearing-stakes.

It was then that Philip's arm came loose, tearing free of his body with such force

that she was sent sprawling backwards on to the grass, insult added to injury as her two adversaries squealed in delight at her misfortune.

It was just a moment later that Philip's father put in an appearance, investigating the huffing, puffing, shouting and snarling emanating from the direction of his immaculately coiffeured lawn. The fog in his brain lifted just enough to take in Matilda rolling around in the grass, a severed limb clutched in her over-sized paws, shouting out something about minxes, over and over again. Beside her lay Philip, his son, his pride and joy, now with even less arms than he had when they had buried him. And skulking in the shadows were two more trolls, young ones by the look of them, seizing Philip by the ankles to drag him off to whatever Hell-hole they had crawled from.

"Matilda," he whispered. "How could you do this to me?"

She froze. She looked up, but then away again, too ashamed to meet his eye.

"Isn't it enough that you killed him?" he asked, ashen-faced. "To dig him up, drag him back here, to feed on him with your friends in my own garden."

"No!" she pleaded. "It's not like that. I was going to give him to you as a present."

"What did I ever do to you to make you hate me that much?"

She was on the verge of tears. This wasn't how it was supposed to be! He was Philip's father; she loved him and respected him, and wanted so desperately to make everything all right again. But now he was so very, very sad. She had done this to him. Stupid, stupid girl!

Her head snapped to one side like a demonic meerkat. That noise, half drag and half

rustle. Those little vixens were making off with Philip's body whilst she was distracted. Well, they could think again if they thought they could steal a march on her quite as easily as that!

She was up and after them in a flash.

"Go on, run away!" Father shouted after her. "Back to Hell, where you belong!" He started sobbing uncontrollably. "Just leave me alone, why don't you? Just leave me alone."

"I'll be back in a minute," Matilda called to him, as reassuringly as she knew how, as she plunged back into the hedge to retrieve her stolen corpse from her errant cousins. Sure enough, there was Maggie in the next garden along, Philip tucked under her arm like an oversized parcel, his last remaining two limbs tilling up the lawn behind him.

With an anguished roar, she set off in pursuit, bringing Maggie down with a rugby tackle fit for an All-Black.

A scream from the neighbouring garden. Father! Kaye must be after Father now! If only he had stayed indoors and left it to her to sort this out for him!

She seized Maggie by the scruff of the neck, hoisted Philip on to her left shoulder, and retraced her steps through the ever-enlarging hole in the hedge.

Philip's father was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he?" Matilda demanded, shaking her cousin from side to side to show that she was not to be trifled with. She quite frightened herself. Maybe there was more of Daddy in her than she had ever been willing to admit.

Maggie gave a defiant teenaged smirk.

“Looks like Kaye’s gonna have her Wedding Feast after all.”

#

A second visit from Stephen. What with all these trolls coming and going every five minutes, she didn’t know why they didn’t just wheel their sofa in here, and have done with it.

Those penetrating blue eyes again. She found them very unsettling. They were the eyes of a tortured poet, not of a murderous cannibal (though the things some of those so-called “Romantic” poets got up to, maybe there wasn’t all that much difference between the two).

“I heard what just happened in here. He wouldn’t have done anything to you; it would spoil the meat. He was just doing it to scare you. But even so. It was totally inappropriate. I’m sorry.”

She didn’t know how to respond. She believed that he was truly sorry for what had happened; why would he lie about something like that? He seemed sensitive; one might almost say “nice” under other circumstances. But this hulking great creature was capable of snapping her in two like a stale bread-stick, and was even as they spoke preparing to eat her and her husband alive.

Maybe it was that thing, she thought, where you start to develop an emotional tie to your kidnappers? What do you call it? Stockhausen Syndrome? Or was that the one

where people liked being ill because they wanted doctors to look after them? She could never remember which one was which. It didn't really matter either way, she supposed. Within the next hour, Stephen, Mr Chuckles and the whole of the damn circus act would be picking her bones clean.

"Oh, don't mention it!" chimed in Mike, his voice as bitter as she had ever heard it. "As long as you're sorry, that's all that counts. You kidnap us, you strip us naked, you chain us up, and you threaten to violate my wife, and after all that you plan to eat us. But as long as you're sorry, that's hunky-bloody-dory."

"Don't swear," Stephen cautioned.

"I'll do whatever I please," retorted Mike, quivering with impotent indignation.

"And will continue to do so until you let us go."

Stephen looked into Abigail's eyes again. So blue, so hypnotic, she thought. I have so got that Stockhausen thing.

"Did you hear me?" Mike raged.

Stephen ignored him. He stared deeper and deeper into Abigail, his face creased into a frown as if he was struggling with some inner dilemma. She had the uncomfortable feeling that he was trying to decide whether she was "worth" it. For reasons even she did not fully understand, she was desperate for him to decide that she was.

"There is a way out of this," he told her. "Just for you, though. Your husband dies, come what may."

"Oh, that's charming!" Mike grumbled.

“We have a custom. If the Wedding Feast challenges Family, then he is free to go if he wins. Or, if there is more than one Wedding Feast, he can nominate one of the others to go in his place.”

“Are you stark raving mad?” shouted Mike.

Stephen put a hand round her husband’s throat, a hand so large that his fingers nearly met at the back of Mike’s neck.

“You show me respect,” he warned.

Mike nodded, the fight knocked out of him. Stephen released his grip, and addressed Abigail again.

“If he wins, he can set you free.”

“He won’t win, though, will he? They’re all twice his size. They’ll kill him in seconds.”

“They’ll nominate me to fight, though. I’m head of the Family. I could let him win.”

“Is this another trick?” she asked, knowing that it wasn’t.

He shook his great head. He looked hurt at her suspicion. What was he doing here with the likes of Mr Chuckles? He seemed so different from the rest of them. Human, almost.

“Why would you do that?” she persisted.

He shrugged. “I want you to be free.”

“But why?”

He shrugged again. He avoided eye contact. If she didn’t know better, she’d think

he had a crush on her! She changed tack.

“What will happen to you, if you lose? The others won’t be too impressed, will they?”

His brow furrowed, and his eyes became troubled. He shook his head slowly from side to side. He looked her in the face again.

“Edward would take my place. They wouldn’t want me to lead them, not if I lose to this little creature here.”

Mike huffed, but said nothing.

“Then why?” she asked again. “Why risk everything for me?”

Before he had an opportunity to answer, the wedding party arrived.

#

Georgia was used to being cool, calm and in control. But not tonight. Tonight, she was practically hysterical.

They had taken Dexter, and it was all her fault. As soon as she saw them all in the kitchen, with their gaunt, hungry faces, she had abandoned her principles (and her friend as it turned out) and had made a break for it. She felt for them, for the way they were being systematically eradicated by Crow and his men, but she knew how dangerous they were, too. She wanted to save them, to set them free in the wild, but she wasn’t so keen on becoming their breakfast in the process.

She was over the garden fence and half way up the road before realising that Dexter

was not behind her. She had stopped, called out for him, but there was no sign of him. She tried to go back, but the front door of the House opened, and one of the creatures loped out. It was an elderly one by the look of it, grizzled grey hair, and a scarred face. It looked at her, a taunting expression in its eyes.

She screamed in frustration. What to do? She couldn't leave Dexter in there with those things, they would rip him to bleeding shreds. But she was no match for one of them, yet alone the whole family. She hated being weak. If only she could just stride in there, Kill Bill style, take them all out, and rescue her friend before he came to serious harm. She knew, however, that she would never even make it through the door.

The creature started lumbering down the street towards her, a mocking grin on its battered old face. It did not seem to be in any hurry. It knew that she would run, and that it wasn't going to catch her, she realised – she was too fast for him – but it wanted to scare her away. It was like some horrible power game, typical macho bullshit, and all the while her best friend was at the mercy of those other creatures inside.

She screamed again, not through fear but through frustrated helplessness. He was getting closer. She would have to run, jump in the car, and hope it didn't stall (like it always does in films). Cars don't stall any more, do they, she asked herself, as she turned tail and sprinted back to where the car was parked, the troll loping easily along behind her.

Out with the remote, the beep of unlocking doors, and then she was inside. The

engine fired first time (why wouldn't it?), and she pulled away from the kerb. The troll dealt a fearful blow to the rear window screen as she screeched away from the kerb, but that was all. She was off, into King Street, ignoring the red traffic lights, driving her way to safety.

Without Dexter.

#

As Georgia was fleeing at the front of the House, Matilda was letting herself in at the back.

It was her House. Home might be too strong a word for it, but it was the place she had lived all her life until Philip had ran away with her what seemed like an eternity ago. All her immediate Family had been massacred here after she had given them up to Crow in exchange for Philip's life (ironic considering Mummy had eaten him hours later). She did not want to come back here. But she had to. This was where Kaye had brought Philip's father.

She made her way through the House. She didn't need any light, she had been used to finding her way through the passageways in pitch darkness throughout the time she had been here. Besides, her night vision was exceptional. She headed for the room where she had first found Philip, naked and chained to the ground, shouting and swearing and upsetting Daddy. She wondered whether it might have been better for him if she had left him here to die. Better for both of them, maybe.

When she reached the room, she found Kaye. And Maggie. And half a dozen others, too. They had a fat young man with them, along with Philip's Father. Both the men were unconscious. The females were stripping off the men's clothes with surprising gentleness, despite the obvious excitement on their faces, like children opening fragile Christmas presents. Once the men were naked, they were carried to the middle of the room where the manacles were situated, and clamped by wrist and ankle.

She watched, transfixed. She should be stopping them. But this was such a familiar scene from her childhood. She had seen Mummy do it a hundred times. Never Nanny, though. Nanny said it was barbaric. She knew it was wrong, but it was somehow comforting at the same time. This was who she was; this was where she belonged. Whether she liked it or not.

Finally, she resolved to act.

"Let them go," she whispered.

They turned to face her, now their task was complete. She recognised some of them, but not others. They were all females and children, not an adult male amongst them. She had not got to meet the females often; it was usually only visiting males who attended Wedding Feasts when she had been living here.

"You!" spat one of them. "How could you show your face here, after what you did to your own Family?"

"Let them go," she repeated, trying to sound braver than she felt.

There was someone behind her. She turned. It was Great-Uncle, fresh from chasing

Georgia down the street. He was puffing slightly; he did not get out much these days.

“You?” he said, echoing the words of the female troll. “Come back Home. How sweet.”

He grabbed her by the throat, and pushed her against the wall. She tried to pull his hand away, but he was too strong for her. He brought his face up close to hers, his eyes battering into hers, his breath hot on her nose, her mouth, her chin.

“You betrayed them. You betrayed us all. They’ve caught us before, tortured us, but we never talk. Never. Until you came along. Your father always said you’d be trouble, too much like your grandmother.”

“Nanny was wonderful! How could you say she was trouble?”

“I ate her,” Great Uncle advised her. “Once your Granddaddy was no longer here to protect her, we tore her to pieces. Best day of my life”

He grabbed her dress, and tore it from her in just two or three tugs. She hung her head, ashamed and afraid, waiting meekly for him to pass judgment upon her.

“And that, my Dear, is precisely what we’re going to do with you, too. You are our third Wedding Feast.”

#

Abigail watched as the wedding party filed into the room. There were maybe a dozen of them, mostly male, each of them holding a candle in front of them as if this was some sort of twisted religious ceremony, (which in a way it was).

Anne came in last, wearing a wedding dress that was very much off-white. It was old and decayed, presumably passed down from one awful generation to the next, accumulating a residue of mould and splattered blood each time a wedding took place. She smiled shyly, her head bowed, a shrinking violet whom Abigail knew would be gnawing the flesh from her bones as soon as this sick ritual had been completed.

Anne was escorted in by her brother, Edward. He seemed to be there less for support than for protection, as the male wedding guests were casting lustful glances at her over their shoulders. The air crackled with lust and violence. The weddings Abigail had been to were usually a little more sedate than this.

Stephen joined the rear of the wedding party, so that he and his brother flanked the hulking bride. One of the guests stopped, and made as if to turn round to face the bride. Stephen cuffed him around the head so violently that the creature staggered, and had to cling on to the troll in front to keep his balance. Snarling broke out in the ranks. It reminded her of the sound that the lions make at the circus, all furious hunger and aggression, kept in check by the barest of margins.

One of the trolls noticed her for the first time, and came over to inspect her. Most of the others followed. Two or three went to take a look at Mike, but most seemed to prefer to view the naked woman rather than the shivering man. They crowded around her, hard fingers pressing her flesh practically to the bone, sizing her up, checking her meat content. The mood lightened; they had found the Wedding Feast, and the time had come to eat.

Edward chuckled. This was his thing. He pulled one of the larger trolls away from the drooling crowd.

“Not you, Christopher. You’ll have to have what’s left over of the other one.”

“I want this one,” Christopher protested. “I’m gonna feast on her stomach.” He licked his lips, imagining her taste. Abigail felt herself shaking. She was going into shock.

“No, what you’re going to do, is to marry my sister.”

Christopher looked sheepish, as he remembered why he was here. He took his place meekly beside the coy bride.

“But the rest of you feel free to tuck in while I’m talking,” Edward encouraged them, magnanimously. “We can’t have you going hungry now, can we?”

Stephen gave Mike an urgent kick, which brought her husband stuttering into life.

“Stop!” Mike shouted, as Abigail felt avaricious hands sinking into her body. “I want to challenge you!”

Edward laughed, not his usual vicious chuckle, but a genuine belly-laugh. He seemed to find this hilarious.

One of the trolls seized Abigail by the shoulder, ready to rip her arm from its socket. Stephen was there in an instant, shoving her assailant away. Two of the other trolls moved in to back up their staggering comrade. Violence pulsed in the air, firing up the testosterone-pumped trolls, mixing with the blood-lust and the sex-lust into an all-pervading static of blood and destruction.

Edward moved to Stephen’s side, and the two of them faced the others down. Under

other circumstances, Abigail would have admired this show of family loyalty. But she was shaking too much to feel very much at all, save for the hand of a younger troll which was furtively stroking her thigh while the rest of the Family were distracted.

“We have a challenge,” Edward smirked. “You know the Law. We let him fight. And if he wins, he goes free. If he loses, then he pays the Price.”

“What price?” Mike asked nervously.

“We strap you to the wall, and eat you a little at a time. It takes hours for you to die. It’s a privilege, really. You get to see the whole wedding that way.”

“You didn’t tell me that!” Mike exclaimed. Stephen shifted nervously, as the others turned their attention to him.

Abigail sensed the aggression ratchet up a few notches further, but now it was turned towards Stephen rather than to her. A few of the trolls started closing in on him. She had the feeling that Edward had only to step away from his brother’s side, and they would be on him in an instant. The thought made her shudder. He was the only one who had shown her any kindness since she had been brought here (her husband included). He was the only thing that stood between her and his ravenous family. She prayed that he would survive this, unscathed.

Edward put an arm around his brother’s shoulders, and the others shrank back a pace or two.

“The Wedding Feast lies,” Edward announced. “Stephen would never take the side of a snivelling creature like that, not against us, not against his Family. Would he?”

This last question was directed to Abigail. She froze. She even stopped shivering. What a cruel question. How could she answer it? If she said that Mike was lying, she would leave him isolated, deserted by the wife he was trying to save. He would see that as a betrayal, as her siding with the trolls against him. But the alternative was to denounce Stephen, which would leave him at the mercy of the other trolls, and Mike would then have to fight one of them instead. The only chance of escape was to agree with Edward, to confirm that Mike and Stephen had not discussed the duel.

She looked over at Mike, willing him to understand.

“Tell them,” Mike urged. “I don’t tell lies.”

“Well?” Edward enquired. “Has Stephen coached you or not?”

She shook her head, unable to say the words. All the while, she looked into Mike’s eyes, looking for some sign of understanding. All she saw there was outrage and betrayal.

“Say it,” Edward commanded. He was relentless. It was then that she realised that he was not content with eating her; he wanted to see her soul crushed and broken first. “Say it out loud.”

“Stephen said nothing.”

That damn chuckle again.

Mike turned pale. He gave her a devastated how-could-you look. Couldn’t he see that she was doing this for his sake, as much as hers?

“I’m not fighting him, then,” he announced. “You’re on your own.”

This was too much. She wouldn’t have minded if he refused to fight out of fear.

They probably wouldn't let Stephen fight now, not after what had just been said, and Mike would be ripped to shreds by any of the other trolls. If he was too frightened to challenge the trolls now, then she would have understood. But she knew her husband. He wasn't backing off through fear. He was standing down to teach her a lesson. You've chosen them over me, he was saying. And because of that, I'm going to let them eat you.

She took a deep breath. There was only one option left, just the one way to avoid her and Mike being devoured by a dozen hyped-up and sexually-aroused ogres.

"Okay," she announced. "If Mike's not fighting anyone, then I will instead. I challenge Anne."

#

As the sun struggled reluctantly above the suburban horizon, Georgia rapped frantically at the door, shouting for help. It took Elsie a while to open it. Her hip wasn't all it used to be.

"They've got him!" Georgia sobbed. "They've got Dex! What are we going to do?"

"Go through to the kitchen," urged Elsie. "Maurice is still up. He'll know what to do. I'll get you some biscuits."

"Where's Keith?"

"He's a bit tied up at the moment. Maurice will tell you all about it. Now go on."

Elsie gave her a playful smack on the bottom. "Off you go."

Maurice was shocked. Between the two of them, they resolved to call Crow. He sent Elsie off to make the call, insisting that Georgia drank her tea and ate her biscuits before they did anything else. “We’ve got a long day ahead of us,” he pointed out. “You’ll be no use to him if you’re fainting with hunger.”

“We’ve got to go back there,” she insisted. “Keep them distracted until Crow turns up. They’re cannibals. He won’t stand a chance.”

“Strictly speaking,” Maurice explained, “they’re not cannibals. Cannibals eat creatures of their own species, but they’re not the same species as us. Well, not since *Homo Heidelbergensis*, they’re not. They’re Neanderthals. Our family trees split 400,000 years ago. A little interbreeding perhaps, up to about 50,000 years ago, but we’re no more closely related than lions are to tigers. So the accusation of cannibalism may be a little harsh.”

“We’ve got to go back,” Georgia repeated, ignoring the history lesson. Her brain had started feeling fuzzy, she was having trouble processing what Maurice was telling her. Why was he just sitting there, sipping tea, giving her that weird look? They had to do something! Dex was depending on her. How did they know that Crow would even bother turning up?

“Did you know,” Maurice continued, warming to the subject, “that genetic studies have shown that all the interbreeding was between Neanderthal males and human females? Never, ever the other way round. The theory is that a human male can’t impregnate a Neanderthal female, but that makes no sense to me. None at all.”

“What if,” he continued, “the only reason male *Homo Sapiens* didn’t mate with

female Neanderthals was that they didn't much fancy them? What if Neanderthal males found Homo Sapien women attractive, and captured them by the bucket-load, but us human males never bothered mating with Neanderthal women just because they're as ugly as sin?"

Georgia was feeling really drowsy now. She could hardly stay awake.

"Why are you telling me this? Why aren't we rescuing Dex?"

"Think how much it would mean to the scientific community," he replied, "if we could prove that male Homo Sapiens could impregnate female Neanderthals. Well, you've got a female Neanderthal, or at least you did have before you lost her in the woods. And I've got a male Homo Sapien; your friend Mark is tied up in my cellar downstairs. All I need to do is get the two of them to mate, and I'll be the most famous scientist that ever lived. Not only will I have genetic evidence, I'll have the act of procreation on video, and – better still – I'll have the actual baby to prove it!"

"You're going to make Keith shag a troll?"

Maurice nodded happily. "Yes. It'll be so beautiful. Elsie and I will warm him up first, of course. He might need a little fluffing."

Georgia's eyes closed, just as Elsie came back in the room with some rope.

"You drugged my tea," Georgia accused them, sleepily.

"How very dare you," Elsie remonstrated with mock indignation, as she tied together Georgia's wrists. "That would be a waste of a good brew. It was your choccie bickies."

#

Matilda could not quite believe it. Here she was, chained to the floor between two naked men (one of them Philip's father), a Wedding Feast in her own House. Even Daddy would not have done that to her. He would have torn her limb from limb, certainly, but not this. The shame of it. This had never been done to Family before. Never.

Great Uncle squatted in the shadows, watching her. She wasn't keen on being naked at the best of times, but it made her even more uncomfortable that her own Great-Uncle was there to witness her degradation. But then, he had always been somewhat unbalanced. She had heard about the things he had done when he was young, sick and twisted things that made her squirm just thinking about them. How could he do this to her, his own flesh and blood?

"Pretty much the whole Family was there," he told her. "At young Angela's wedding. All the adult males except us old 'uns. All of them. So what are we left with here? A few old men, and a frightened bunch of teenagers."

"Kaye shouldn't be foraging," Matilda protested, determined to gain the moral high ground, if only for an instant. "And she certainly shouldn't be getting married. She's what? Fifteen? Since when do we get married at that age?"

"Since you sold us out to Crow," he replied. "All the adult males of both clans, completely wiped out, and only you surviving. Kaye and Richard are the oldest left, us ancients excluded. They're only sixteen, but they're all we've got left. Thanks to

you.”

“It wasn’t my fault. He made me.”

“How?”

“He said he’d hurt Philip.”

Great Uncle snorted. “So?”

“I love him. Loved him.”

“So weak. Just like your grandmother, bless her delicious face.”

She nodded. “Just like Nanny. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“So you gave up your whole Family to be with him? Your mother? Your sisters?

Vincent, even. I know how much you felt for your brother.”

She wept. He’d found her weak spot. He’d always been good at that.

“It wasn’t just your father’s clan they came for, you know. It was ours, too.”

“How did they find you?”

“You tell me.”

“It wasn’t me!” she protested.

“Of course not, You’d give up your own mother, but keep your great-uncle safe.”

“I didn’t even know where you were!”

This was awful. Truly, truly awful. It was bad enough that Mummy and Vincent had gone, but the Margate clan as well as the Ramsgate one? And everyone blaming her for both. They didn’t understand how much she had loved Philip, they wouldn’t hold it so much against her if they did.

“It’s been ten years since I moved to Margate,” Great-Uncle continued,

conversationally. “Do you know why I changed clans?”

She shook her head. She had no idea.

“I fell out with your Daddy. After we ate your Nanny. I wanted to eat you and Vincent, too. You were one quarter Outsider. You had to go, as far as I was concerned. But your Daddy objected. We fought. He won. I left.”

“He fought for me?” repeated Matilda, bewildered. “I thought he hated me.”

“Oh, I’m sure he did,” Great-Uncle smirked vindictively. “But he was half-Outsider. If we killed you for being a quarter Outsider, he knew that it was only a matter of time before someone bigger and badder than him decided that he should be next.”

“There was no-one bigger and badder than Daddy,” she replied, with just a hint of pride.

He shrugged, conceding the point.

“Why are you here?” she asked. “Here of all places.”

“I knew they’d come for us, after they’d finished here. I thought this place would be safe once they’d left. I didn’t realise there would be quite so many people poking round at night. Besides, this was my home once. I like it here. It’s cosy.”

“So what now?” She knew the answer. He’d chained her to the floor, between the fat boy and Philip’s father. There was no-one to save her, as she had rescued Philip. She knew her fate, but just wanted Great-Uncle to confirm it.

He laughed.

“We’ve never had three Wedding Feasts before. And never had Family as one of

them. This feels like the start of a new era. So when you're watching the youngsters feeding on that elderly man to your left, and us Ancients sucking the marrow from the bones of that juicy-looking boy to your right, console yourself with the thought that you're doing just a little to redeem yourself. You're helping the next generation to grow up big and strong."

He stood up, as if to walk away, but had second thoughts. He returned, took her face between his hands, and raised it up so she was looking straight into his eyes.

"Your Daddy would be so ashamed of you now," he told her. "He was strong; a real warrior. To see you like this, grovelling in chains, waiting passively for a group of children to eat you, he would have died inside.

Back then, when he saved you, I told him that I'd eat you one day. You and Vincent. Well Vincent's dead – you killed him – but I can still have you. And when you die, and you're in Paradise, he's going to come looking for you. And maybe Paradise won't be a very nice place to be when he finds you, and you tell him what you've done."

He released her head and walked out the room, wiping his hands on his grimy trousers, to soak her tears away.

#

Abigail stood in the chamber, naked but unbowed, as she squared up to her fearsome opponent.

Anne faced her, twelve to eighteen inches taller, clad in a wedding dress that had

seen better days. Candles flickered around them, illuminating a dozen leering troll faces. Stephen looked on too, his face creased with concern. Mike looked away, whether through fear, sulkiness or guilt, she could not tell.

Anne was supremely confident. She had every right to be. She was much heavier, was relaxed in her home surroundings, and had the advantage that if they got in a tight clinch she could always bite Abigail's face off. All Abigail had was speed. Anne did not look particularly agile. She would just have to keep moving, looking for an opportunity to get in a few punches, and hope for a miracle which would surely never happen. At least she would go down fighting. It was better than just sitting there, waiting for them to eat her.

Abigail made as if to move to her right, and Anne struck, swinging a fist that would have taken her skinny little opponent's head off had it connected. Abigail ducked, the fist missing her by inches. Another blow, closer still this time, and Abigail was off, haring to one side with the troll in hot pursuit.

Occasionally, a troll stuck out a hand to shove her towards the bride, and she recoiled at the feel of their coarse hands upon her bare skin. The first time, she turned to see which of them it was, but Anne closed in so quickly that Abigail nearly fell over in her desperation to keep out of her way. After that, she ignored those stray hands as best she could. Better to get touched up a little but stay alive for just a little longer.

Anne was tiring a little, but not enough to keep Abigail safe. This was not an especially large room, and it was cluttered with baying trolls. Every time she dodged,

she bought herself another few seconds of safety, but that was all. It was only a matter of time before she ran out of space, or luck, or both. She had to fight back.

But how?

She tried to land a few blows of her own, but they had no effect. The troll absorbed her best efforts as if she was just patting her on the back. Worse still, she had to get close to Anne to punch her, and that put her at risk.

As she moved in for another blow, Anne seized her. Abigail bucked hard, but she couldn't shake her off. Anne clutched her tightly, cupped the back of her head in one giant hand, and pulled her face up close to hers.

"I've never eaten face before," Anne whispered. "I wonder what it tastes like?"

Abigail screamed. Anne laughed. Abigail head-butted her. Anne stopped laughing.

"You skinny little bitch!" shrieked Anne, ignoring the tuts of disapproval from her family at this unbecoming language. She shoved Abigail backwards, so that she cannoned into Stephen, and closed in for the kill.

Abigail felt his rough clothes against her bottom and shoulders, but something else. He was pressing something hard into her hand. For a second she thought it was his – now of all times! - but no, no, it was a handle. The handle of a knife.

She swung the knife wildly in front of her, just as Anne charged. Anne skidded to a halt, and backed off, the knife blade flashing through the air just inches from her blood-stained wedding dress. Abigail flashed at her again, slicing the bodice open at the ribs. She backed off some more.

One of the trolls threw a knife to Anne. Edward, evening the odds. A much bigger

blade than hers. Abigail's advantage had been very temporary indeed. She had missed her chance. It was only a matter of time before she would be gutted like a flapping fish.

Anne closed in for the kill. But as she passed Mike, he sprung into action, seizing one leg, and sending her sprawling forwards, fighting to keep her balance. She spun around, ready to slash him to pieces. But then Abigail was on her, straddling her back like a crazed and naked cowboy at a rodeo, her knife plunging into her opponent's thick walrus-like neck again and again and again. Blood splattered all over the place, but still Abigail continued, ignoring the thick gelatinous liquid which spurted into her face, her eyes, her mouth, as she pressed on relentlessly. Eventually, Anne dropped to the floor and moved no more.

Abigail stepped off her, and stood up, facing down the surrounding trolls with pride, her heaving bosom coated in the slippery blood of her vanquished rival. Adrenalin pumped through her veins, and half-crazed jubilation through her heart.

"I win!" she screamed at them. "I win!"

They exchanged uncomfortable looks. No Outsider had ever won before. They were not really sure what to do; whether they should actually release her or not.

"You win," said Stephen, daring any of them to contradict him. "We blindfold you, and take you away. You're free to go."

"Oh, but I'm not going anywhere," Abigail shouted. "I nominate Mike to go in my place. You set him free instead."

She turned to face Stephen, touched by the troubled bewilderment in his eyes, and

her new-found fierceness melted, never to return.

“I’m staying here with you.”

#

Maurice was struggling to work out how to get Georgia out of her skinny jeans. They were tighter than a second skin, and almost as difficult to strip off. Why did young ladies feel the need to wear clothes that it was so hard for men like him to take off again? Maybe to stop men like him bothering, he thought.

He was still attempting to coax them off her hips when Elsie walked in, with Crow in tow.

“This is an unexpected pleasure,” lied Maurice. “You never seemed too keen to visit us before. What can I do for you?”

“Elsie phoned me,” Crow said.

Maurice was flabbergasted.

“Elsie? Why?”

“You told me to, you daft old bugger,” Elsie reminded him affectionately. “When your young lady arrived.”

“I didn’t mean it!” he protested. “I was just saying that so she wouldn’t get suspicious! I can’t believe you really -”

He clamped up, remembering that Crow was with them. Crow cast an enquiring eye towards Georgia.

“What are you doing with that young woman, Maurice?”

“She felt a little faint. I’m just loosening her clothing.”

“It’s customary to loosen the collar,” Crow pointed out. “Not take their trousers off.”

“She was very faint,” Maurice retorted weakly. “I thought it best to loosen everything, to be on the safe side.”

Crow sat beside Georgia, and shook her awake. She stared at him groggily, trying to remember who he was. He slapped her face. Elsie wriggled a little in her slippers, clearly aroused by this.

“Georgia. Georgia! Can you hear me?”

All of a sudden, she gasped, as if she had just been resuscitated, and sat bolt upright, clinging on to Crow’s shoulders.

“Hit her again,” urged Elsie. “Maybe on the bottom this time.”

“They’ve got Dex!” Georgia sobbed. “They’ve got Dex!”

Crow stiffened, as had Maurice (but for different reasons).

“Dexter? Where is he?”

She started fading out again, so he slapped her. Elsie giggled. She liked this game.

“Where is he?”

“Artillery Road,” Georgia murmured. “Where you found Matilda.”

Crow stood up.

“Help me get her in the car. Now!”

“Leave her with us,” Maurice proposed. “She’ll be safe here.”

“Get her in the car!” Crow shouted. Maurice obeyed.

“Cup of tea and a biscuit before you go?” Elsie enquired, hoping for a little more drugging action before bed-time.

But Crow was gone already.

#

Dexter watched as Kaye appeared. Though he did not know it, her wedding dress had seen countless weddings before it. It was something of a family heirloom.

The room was full of trolls. He squirmed in embarrassment as they cast covetous eyes towards his large meaty body. It had been a long time since he had been naked in front of anyone (probably not since he had last been in nappies). He had even had notes from his Mum to get him out of showers at school (he had had a cold which had lasted for about five years, if the notes were to be believed).

Matilda was stripped bare, too. Had she been a little less hideous, he might have taken the opportunity to check her out, but even he had to draw the line somewhere. And there was a naked old man the other side of her, who seemed totally out of it. They were all lined up in a row, as if sharing the back seat of some particularly perverse bus.

Two of the trolls were getting married. They looked young, hardly above school-leaving age (not that they were likely to have had much in the way of an education, he thought). The service was conducted by an elderly troll, who kept casting

covetous eyes towards the three of them, as if he couldn't wait to finish the ceremony and start eating them.

He was quite calm in the circumstances. It must be shock, he supposed. The old man next to Matilda was certainly in shock, there was no doubt about that. He was just staring into space, mumbling away to himself incoherently. It was probably for the best, though. No sense, no feeling, and the less he felt the better when the trolls started eating them.

There was a lesson to be learnt here, he told himself. Just because an attractive woman tells you to do something, it doesn't mean you have to do it. The more you let them boss you around, the less they respect you any way. If it had been Keith she'd left behind, she would have come back for him, no doubt about it. But because it was good old reliable Dex, always there for her and always caving into her, she had left him here to die.

He could have sworn that the guests were getting horny. They were making funny little grunting sounds, like men with moustaches make in 1970s' porn films. They were also casting looks in his direction, the sort of looks he'd give a girl in a mini-skirt once he was sure she wouldn't see him peeking. The shock was protecting him from panicking too much at the thought of being eaten, but if they were planning on shagging him first then he was going to need a bottle or two of chloroform to get through this.

There was a commotion at the back of the room. It was dim back there – the candles didn't throw out much light – but there was definitely something moving there.

Something was pushing its way through the throng towards him.

“Step aside, Soldier,” the voice said. “Or I’ll ram this gun up your arse.”

He knew that voice. It was his father. It was Crow.

All the trolls backed off, all but one. Matilda’s Great-Uncle. He stopped the service, positioning himself between Crow and the Wedding Feasts. He chuckled.

Crow recognised that laugh. He had heard it many years before. It was the troll he knew as Edward.

#

It was the Year 2000. The new millennium.

Abigail waited in the dark room. She had lived here for a quarter of a century, only ever seeing light during weddings, and even then it was only from candles. She no longer needed light to see. She no longer needed to see at all.

Her husband was dead. She had had many years with Stephen, and had grown to love him in her own way. They had had children, and they had had grand-children. She loved them all, the two youngest grand-children in particular. Matilda was three quarters troll, but she still reminded Abigail of herself. She was different to the others, somehow more human than them. And Vincent; well, Vincent was just cute.

Her son was coming for her. Now she was no longer under Stephen’s protection, she knew that she would not last long. Edward had whispered poison in his ear ever since he was old enough to walk, telling him that she would have to be sacrificed if

her son was ever to put the shame of his Outsider ancestry behind him. Now the two of them were back from foraging, and with no Stephen here to support her they would rip her limb from limb.

She thought of Mike. She had thought of him pretty much every day since she had volunteered to live here in the darkness so he could return to the light. He had upset her when they had first brought him here, but he had redeemed himself in the end. If he had not tripped up Anne, she would have lost their duel. He was a good man, deep down. It was just that his virtue seemed a little deeper down than most other people she knew.

The door opened. Two shapes in the blackness, one cursing her, the other chuckling. It was her son and Edward, her brother-in-law, come to kill her. But that was okay. She was so tired of all this. It was time to go. She just hoped Matilda wouldn't be too upset; she was such a sensitive girl.

Mike had vowed to come back for her. "I'll find you," he had said. "I'll find you, and I'll send them all to Hell, and I'll set you free. I promise you I will."

She had nodded, and she had hugged him, and she had known she would never see him again. There was to be no happy ending for her. This was to be her life from now on.

And now, she thought, as her son's shadow grasped her head and jerked it violently to one side, this is to be my death.

And Edward laughed all the while.

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Michael Crow looked around the room. Everything came flooding back to him. This is where he had been chained up with Abigail all those years ago, when he had been just a young man. This is where she had fought the troll in a wedding dress, the same dress, he remarked, as the one which the young troll was wearing even now. This is where he had hugged her for all he was worth, begged her forgiveness, and walked away, vowing to come back for her one day. And he had come back. But it was all too late. She had needed him decades ago.

The old troll stood in front of him. It laughed. He recognised that laugh from before. It was definitely the same one as before. Edward.

Dexter was chained to the ground now. His son. He had never been particularly fond of him – he was too like his mother, Wife Number Two – but they were family all the same. He had left Abigail here to die. At least he could save Dexter. It was all he could do.

“Crow,” Edward announced. “We meet at last.”

“We’ve met before,” Crow told him. “When I was tied up on the floor down there.”

Edward looked puzzled. “You’ve been here before?”

“With Abigail.”

Edward laughed out loud. “No! The Crow we’ve all lived in fear of all these years. It’s little Mikey!”

“Abigail?” Matilda asked. “Did you say Abigail?”

Edward could hardly contain his glee. “Oh this is too, too funny. I think I should introduce you two. Mikey, this is Matilda, the girl you’ve been torturing all this time. She’s Abigail and Stephen’s granddaughter. Matilda, this is Crow. He was married to your Nanny before he left her here to be eaten.”

“No,” Matilda shook her head in denial. “Not him. Nanny would never have married him of all people.”

Crow reeled. This creature on the ground before him, this Matilda whom he had spent weeks trying to exterminate, was Abigail’s granddaughter! It was almost too much for him.

But he looked into her eyes, and he knew it to be true. There was that same look in there, the look that Abigail had given him as he had walked out the door the very last time. How could something so hideous and violent have his beautiful Abigail flowering inside her?

“Abigail. Is she -?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” Edward confirmed with relish. “Very much so. Her son ate her about ten years ago, when Stephen died. I ate her, too. She was very brave. Hardly screamed at all. Tasted delicious, her bottom in particular. No wonder you were so sad to leave her.”

Crow pointed his gun at Edward.

“What are you going to do?” Edward scoffed. “You’ve not got enough bullets for all of us. As soon as you run out, we kill you and we eat you, and your son dies too. Best just walk away, old man. Like you did before.”

“I’ve only got one bullet,” Crow pondered, “and I guess you’re right. No point just firing at random. We’d all still die in the end.”

“Dad!” cried Dexter, horrified. “You can’t just leave us here!”

Crow nodded, a hard, determined nod. “I know, Son. But maybe there’s another way.”

“Which is?” asked Edward, amused as always.

“I challenge you to a duel. And if I win, I get to nominate someone to walk free.”

“I thought you’d never ask!” grinned Edward. “Just you and me, old man. And the fate of your son in the balance.”

Crow raised his gun, and shot Edward between the eyes. The troll staggered backwards a few paces, an expression of shock on his face.

“No!” he shouted. “No! That’s cheating!”

He collapsed to the floor, blood still seeping from the gaping wound at the bridge of his nose. Crow tucked the empty gun back in his pocket.

“I guess I win after all,” he announced, with a grotesque impersonation of Edward’s chuckle.

“And I nominate Matilda to go free.”

#

Dexter wept uncontrollably as Matilda was ushered out of the room.

“How could you?” he asked his father. “She was just a troll! How could you have

chosen her over me?"

Crow wanted to put out a hand to console his distraught son, but he was pinned to the ground by the manacles which encased his wrists and ankles. He was the Wedding Feast now, along with Dexter and the old man. He had got to choose who should walk free, and he had chosen Matilda.

"I owed it to her mother," he said. It was all there was to say.

"What about my mother?" Dexter shrieked. "What about me?"

"I'm sorry," Crow told him. "I really am. But I promised her I'd come back, and this is all I can do for her now."

The trolls around them started to shuffle forward. Kaye was not yet married, but they had been waiting a long time to eat. They were hungry. They were not about to let three Wedding Feasts go to waste.

"What about me?" Dexter repeated sorrowfully.

"I'm here for you," Crow told him, knowing it wasn't enough. "At least we can die together. Just the two of us. Father and son."

"And him," put in a weeping Dexter, nodding towards the old man beside him.

"Him as well."

The trolls went for Crow first. They had a score to settle. He had tried to wipe out all of their kind, and had very nearly succeeded. But now he was here, in their power, and it was time for revenge. They were determined to make sure that it would take him a very long time to die.

"Goodbye, Son," said Crow, as gently as he knew how, as Kaye took a chunk out of

his trembling left shoulder.



AFTERWORD

Keith awoke.

He was naked, and chained to the floor. The lights were dimmed, but he could make out a video-camera pointing in his direction. Maurice was sitting behind it.

“Action!” Maurice bellowed.

Elsie entered the room. Loud music erupted from somewhere nearby, a heavy bass beat that shuddered through him.

She was wearing a ragged fur coat, which flapped open to reveal her gnarled old body beneath it. She appeared to be wearing nothing else but a well-thumbed g-string.

As if from nowhere, she produced a turkey leg, which she started to smear back and forth across Keith’s shaking chest.

“I’m a troll!” she screamed at him over the music. “I am a troll, come to eat you all up! And you’re my Wedding Feast!”

She jammed the turkey-leg into his mouth, making him gag.

“Suck on that, Bad Boy!”

She beckoned to Maurice to come and join them, as she took a denture-nibble of the turkey. She would rather have had a troll to work her magic on, of course, given the choice. Who wouldn’t? But Maurice would capture one sooner or later, and there was no harm having a little fun with her young man in the meantime. He looked like

he could do with cheering up.

Maurice slipped the grubby fur coat from her wrinkled shoulders, as Keith screamed himself hoarse. It was going to be an eventful day for them all.

ALSO BY THIS AUTHOR (on Kindle and in paperback):

- 1) The Wedding Feast (prequel to “Tethered”)
- 2) Slave-Girls and Amazons (humorous quest fantasy)
- 3) Cave-Trolls and Amazons (sequel to “Slave-Girls and Amazons”)

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR:

I hope you enjoyed this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

If you could leave a review, it really would be hugely appreciated. It's what Abigail would have wanted.....

The prequel to "Tethered" is "The Wedding Feast", available from all good e-book shops and some rubbish ones...

My first book, "Slave-Girls and Amazons", is also available on Amazon for the price of a packet of Elsie's biscuits, and the sequel, "Cave-Trolls and Amazons" was published in November 2012.

The final book in the "Wedding Feast" trilogy is due for publication in about Easter 2013. Send a friend request to my "Jonathan Pidduck – Writer" page on Facebook, and I'll let you know when it's ready.

Thanks again.

And steer clear of dark alleyways.

Jonathan