



New Society of Dilettanti

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THE BLACK MERKIN

Swarm authored by the

NEW SOCIETY OF DILETTANTI
(See postscript for individual authorship)

Under the project title

BAD ROMANCE

Curated and edited by

LAURA EDBROOK AND NORMAN HOGG

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CHAPTER ONE

It was called the ‘City of Annoying Steps’. From the viewing parlour of the tightly orbiting HMS BOWFIRE, the wheezing inhabitants, with their blackened faces, appeared to be carved out of the volcanic rock itself. They were the Torn Folk—lost pilgrims placed on missile duty—painfully climbing their way up to the mock-medieval munitions factory pausing only for short ejaculatory prayers. Veiled by the early morning harr, Pumelberg seemed the sort of place where evil queens sporting knee length merkins held month long festivals celebrating the capture of hairy amateurs.

The city was founded—according to long a forgotten BBC4 documentary—by the quasi-suicidal literary duo Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath; yet bizarrely, Sebastian Phelps insisted the moniker derived from the aboriginal leg-tribe of Tim Needlebrow who practiced in a nearby soccer encampment. Pumelberg’s recent history was not atypical; like every other city, it had been bombarded by rebellious artillery and ravished by flâneur plagues on an annual basis since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Occasionally the residents of Pumelberg spoke to one another—but mainly they carried missiles up the mountain and prayed. Thus engaged, they showed no particular interest in the departure of the armoured land-crawler through the old city gates. The dilettante militia were leaving again, and about bloody time too.

The gay community of Pumelberg did not approve of Skanky Ashmouth. Women were supposed to go about their stoic butt-firming labour while singing and dancing internally—perhaps lisping occasional prayers in a coquettish fashion, but this Anglo amateur perplexed even the soft-core mainstream. Too many lusty anthems had been yelled across the barracks in tribute to her bulging eyes and recession-friendly fist-pump DVDs. She had aroused hunger in the young men for the coming sports decade, and that was unacceptable.

The land crawler descending the mountain was not quite as acetic as the amateur-wary city it had left behind. Skanky Ashmouth had continued to modernise her father with updated narco-patches. The task was increasingly frustrating because he'd finally made up his mind to convert to fundamental druidism, and now applied all the concentration he possessed on ancient inscriptions. His course was fixed; Stonehenge was the final destination.

“Hey papa,” Skanky was screaming over the roar of the vehicle’s engines, “surely we cannot come so close to Burntit without catching the Bo’ness Academicals? It’s the game of the season.”

“We can go later, after you and Gandalf Bowfire are married.”

“Go all the way to Stonehenge and back again. Lame!”

“Insania! You must be married before the children stop coming out. Gandalf will want one or two for his soccer garden.”

Skanky privately fumed. Gandalf’s Halfling midfielders existed already, in the dusty annuals of ancient leagues.

He lusted for gum-wrappers and yellowing TV guides as another man might lust for powerful and slow-motion regime change. He was blind to her biceps. She knew that most men—with their curiously mediaeval fear of the void—found her muscular, twitching gape bewildering.

Gandalf had agreed to marry her because of displaced love. His mother had sportingly found him a bride, thereby saving him the trouble of his continual hidden-cam, up-skirt pratfalls, so he was content-ish. But secretly, while in his swimming trunks, he thought to himself, ‘Why can’t I be married on an Expanded Rune (MP+50)? Also I have the most irregular wishes to explore Burntit.’

Mama read his mind. “Burntit! No! There’ll always be trouble until you’re married. Today we leave Pumelberg because Dragomir Wombcorn’s besotted with your stupid magic. In another place, it’ll be someone else. We accomplish nothing.”

“That much is falshe verdamit!” Gandalf protested but this was the umpteenth town they’d been forced to leave because of the ruinous young Mage. At any rate, it was futile to argue with mama’s eye-ridden forehead. Later he’d creep around beside the latrines. He’d try to read her mind from the bottom up. The thought lifted his mood. Perhaps later, Aunt Clumhentai would massage his quandries?

What was it that *she* could do? Papa had always been a strong character and when Mama had disappeared it had always seemed rather odd. She knew that Treborhole Bowfire may know something but it seemed Papa had settled things with him in some way. I think Papa thought he was looking out for his daughter’s best interests but surely their long-standing debt with the wool merchant isn’t the real reason for such sin?

Without her mother there was nothing left for her. Awakening now to the imminent need for a husband as she knew that life with her father and her future would be gloomy. Unfortunately despite attracting many suitors, her

lack of fortune as well the threat of her rather violent Papa had what could be described as a dampening effect on Honourable Intentions. The suitors remaining were rather unendurable. Skanky did not think herself, as Mama had always complained, excessively fastidious, but it really was quite impossible to accept Mr. Courtyard who's favourite ice cream is strawberry cheesecake, or Sir Undernail, who's oven could only cook two pies and they took nearly forty minutes, or Mr. Welt, who plainly smelt of fish.

It had been a year now since she learnt of her Mama's death and still Skanky remained unclaimed. Despite her doubts about Treborhole Bowfire it seemed he would have to do. To escape the situation for a little longer Skanky had responded by reminding her father that she was in mourning and convincing him to let her spend the time with him in The Rakes. Once they were enjoying the texture, it hadn't been difficult to stretch one year into another until six had passed. She still doubted Papa but it was good to be away.

Looking through his notes and mark makings whilst away Skanky hoped to discover something. She mapped him, her features taut. She had learned to say what was expected of her whilst her mind strolled elsewhere. Vague sequential fantasies. Her existence had become numb; she was wholly unstimulated by life. Being married to Gandalf wouldn't improve it either. She would like one day to talk of something besides his 'good-looking gel' enterprise. With Gandalf such a day would never come. While she pondered her past and wondered feared her future, they pressed on in relative silence.

For days now she had sat at the window, she stared at the green and yellow valley below and majestic peaks beyond. She was beginning to wish she was home again. She missed Mama. She knew she wasn't there but she was tired of being away with her suspicious company who would tell her nothing. Papa had begun to turn angry knowing that Skanky had been going through his letters. They had recently been arriving with the envelopes desperately torn to bits. He had

ordered his daughter out—that was his character—just as it was hers now to ignore him. The trouble was he knew what it was about. Three years exile from Mockydocky had begun to take its toll. The pressure was mounting, always. Skanky knew they'd return soon. She knew her Papa too well—she was turning into a devious woman. Gandalf enjoyed the drama. He enjoyed the intrigue. He enjoyed women and he especially enjoyed Skanky.

Now—here was a 'good-looking gel'-ed man who was attempting to conduct some sort of intrigue of his own.

It was Gandalf. He saw that Skanky was approaching marriage with a man she didn't love and he knew it was *him*. His plight to make Skanky love him had led him to drug and abduct the old Gandalf. He stood in front of her as a new man.

John Fashanu was tremendously ashamed of the way he'd behaved. He might not have been quite so ashamed—might even have nursed a crunching challenge of a grudge—had not the Little Prince Daniel Bravo, been the only one to write faithfully to him. Well, he'd always rather liked him. He just hadn't lusted after him as he had Hunter and Rhino who were both totally ripped. How Prince Bravo would laugh if he could see him now: dirty, unshaven, uncombed, his Wimbledon shirt ragged and filthy. He was a far cry from the tumescent man-about-town he'd known. That sophisticated fellow had been deeply sunk in debt to the dear people of Nigeria. Now, thanks to the 'Crazy Gang' the Bash, was rich and even rather a hero—good business, as Bobby Gould liked to say, mainly in regard to the Bosman ruling. Having persuaded Fash to work for him, Gould was bound to put the younger man's talent for intrigue and violence to profitable use. For his efforts, he received no praise from the Crown but admiration a plenty had come from Khan Noonien Singh (Leader of the Free World) to

whom 'The Bash' had proved himself equally invaluable as a political aid and mediocre centre—forward and was in turn made a Knight of Meltus despite previous misdemeanours.

Now when he returned to Wimbledon and Mesopotamia, he'd be welcome everywhere. Television contracts and martial arts fitness DVDs were offered by the bucket load and innocent daughters were thrown at him to feed upon. All kinds of respectable young sluts—fat ones, thin ones, stout ones, trim ones and every variety in between. He doubted whether their virginal charms could compete with the more practised dark arts and Magicks of the Impures he was accustomed to like Dave Beasant, Dennis Wise and Wolf. Still, never loath to be the centre of attention, he looked forward to embarking on an ill-advised loan spell at Miramar Rangers. And why?

That was what had brought him to this wretched place. He'd had a hot, sticky miserable bother ending in a wretched town whose sullen folk refused to understand his extravagant gait. The Bash's unorthodox team individuality evoked nothing but stubborn incomprehension. Fash ran his fingers through his tight little hair. His huge muscular torso glistened in the burning sun, and as he thought of more days wasted in search of the missing talent, his pectorals began throbbing horribly. Blast them! He wanted to be back at Pummelberg Lane and clean again. He yearned for the good old days and a familiar pair of tight-fitting shorts riding up when he made a poorly timed challenge. He thought longingly of Terry Phelans warmth, forgetting that the city would soon be hangin', and would stink of a man. He yearned for the quiet, cool comfort of his club. He even recalled wistfully the smell of Selhurst Park.

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Skanky considered her Hatfundanian. She reached the conclusion that it was rather awful. She could send her woman-servant, the jovially rotund Fistka, into peels of

laughter merely by asking her to pass her a flannel. Fistka's English was of a similarly low standard however, so whatever it was she was actually asking for could only ever be communicated back to her in outrageously lewd hand gestures, which would often make her blush—hot pink.

It was the inflexions of the ancient language that were Skanky's despair, a language, her Papa theorised, that could be traced back to Illyrian, preserved despite repeated barbaric flâneur plagues. There was one bloody subjugation in particular that her Papa liked to dwell on, when the Turks invaded after the death of the great and mighty Hatfundanian patriot, Skankyberg, in the fifteenth century, but even after that only a few Turkish words were absorbed into the language. It was a strong, fiery tongue that knew its own mind, her Papa would tell her. Her Papa knew such a lot about so many interesting things.

She sighed, her moist bosom heaving in her soiled black lace dress, as she lay on a sack of potatoes in the woodshed. She smelled of goat. She had been locked in there for three days as the argument raged above her head, her Hatfundanian improving a little, though not a lot, as she attempted to follow the shouting. But she was languorous by now, swooning in and out of consciousness, parched, her lips cracking with the heat of the Hatfundanian summer, the woodshed heating up to temperatures that made her drip with beads of salty sweat.

They were shouting louder than ever now. Her usually logical Papa was still trying to talk the family into the marriage and Dragomir was hotly encouraging his argument. Dragomir wanted to marry Skanky... But Skanky did not want to marry him! The pig headed oaf had been threatening to abduct her and run away to Pogradec with her for months, where they should be wed if his family refused to sanction their marriage. But he had not seemed to consider whether Skanky would sanction the marriage, she thought, he didn't think much to needing her consent. And why now was her Papa condoning such an unfit match?

What could possibly have belied his earlier criticisms of the brute? And why had nobody come to rescue her from this foetid piss hole of a woodshed yet?

She reached into the sack beneath her and pulled out a potato. She no longer cared about the dirt that smeared its creamy skin. This was all she had to sustain herself. She parted her cracked pink lips and sank her pearly teeth into its crisp, resistant flesh.

I wonder if this is what it would be like to sink my teeth into Dragomir Wombcorn's buttocks, she thought, idly. She tried it on the potato again, slower this time. It's milky juice dribbled down her chin. No, she thought, wiping the juice away with the back of her hand, it would be more like biting into a firm, round, uncooked aubergine, with its silken skin and velvety insides. But no, she thought again, Dragomir's buttocks would not be as sumptuous as that—more like a pock marked coconut, she was sure. You would break your teeth on his ugly buttocks. Much better she should find an aubergine bottomed man who could come and whisk her weak female frame away from this foul place and take her to his bed made of the finest down and strewn with rose petals, yellow ones for loyalty and red to match the colour of his love, the deepest purple petals the colour of his pulsing...

Obbb! she swooned at the thought.

And with that the shouting ceased. There was a deathly silence. Papa! Skanky thought. What if he is hurt? But with one almighty smash of crockery the shouting began again. Several voices chanting in unison—She is a witch! She is a witch! Burn the witch! Hatfundanian words; familiar to Skanky's ears after being driven from several hotels for the same allegation.

And then above it all sailed Dragomir's roar and all else fell quiet once again. It sounded through the roof of the woodshed as if he were having the final word and she heard the thump of his heavy boots upon the stair. He was coming to snatch her away to Pogradec and force her into hideous matrimony!

Now it seemed, as her three days of Dragomir induced solitude were possibly drawing to an end, nothing short of a miracle could save Skanky from marrying the hot-headed youth. Fistka had dressed her in mourning to try and avoid these unwelcome, unsavoury attentions, but Dragomir paid no heed to her feelings of loss, no matter that they weren't real in the first place. And although this man was not necessarily the most hideous to have fallen under the curse of her beauty, he was the most hoggish, heartless brute and to become his wife would be to be treated as a servant, a pack animal. She'd have to submit to his hot, eager embraces—and have his children! Allah help her, she'd maul herself first. She'd chuck herself in a compactor. In Burntit, after all, there were compactors aplenty.

A more delicate female than Skanky Ashmouth, who looked like an apple, might have given way to tears. Certainly she had reason enough, but she refused to cry despite the horrible ache in her throat. She was wishing for her pistol—shooting herself was preferable to hurtling down from a precipice—when the door creaked open. It was one of Dragomir's brothers, who looked like bread. She didn't know which, there being seven plus innumerable sisters, all of whom looked alike. Dragomir stood out mainly because he was the giant of the family and understood a little English. This brother, who looked like a sausage, was ordering her to follow him. He led her up into the house proper and on to the large, sparsely furnished room where the family, who looked like a still life, was accustomed to gather and were all garnered now: parents, siblings, spouses, and divers aunts and uncles who all looked like a big pizza. There was, moreover, another Albanian she didn't know, speaking in the dialect of the north, and another man whose hair was sun-bleached gold. He must also come from the north, where so much of the population was fair, though his costume resembled nothing she'd seen before, north or south. For a moment, in the room's dim light, who looked like a pear, like those who centuries ago had swept down

from the mountains. As he turned his tanned, beautifully sculpted face towards her, like a tomato, she noted that his eyes were very unusual. Amber, who looked like a teapot, with a slight upward slant, they reminded her of the eyes of a cat.

They were watchful, too, like a tabletop. As they lit upon her, the expression turned to one of joyful recognition, and she was astonished to hear him cry like a piece of old cheese, “Skanky, my love, you are safe.” Before she had time to think how to react, he crossed the room, threw his arms around her, and crushed her to him like a salami. The suddenness of the onslaught made her gasp, but sensing quickly the role she was to play, she took her lead from him and returned his hug with feigned enthusiasm like a big pot of coffee. His ironic smile made her blush as he drew away from her to gesture towards their suspicious audience—who looked like a boring painting. “My darling, I have been trying to explain to these good people that I am your own Skankhammer, your betrothed, come at last to take you home to be my wife. The trouble is Treborhole cannot make himself understood, and that angry young man over there”—he indicated an enraged Dragomir, now being held back by three brothers—“seems to think that you are his intended bride. Would you, my sweet, be kind enough to explain to them how it is with us?”

Though it was a tad daunting to have what seemed like a hundred pairs of suspicious oranges fixed upon her, she began, in Hatfundian even more halting than usual. She was not quite sure what she said—nor were the members of the clan, as they tried to puzzle out her bizarre grammatical constructions—but it was something about being promised to each other for years like a sausage roll.

Dragomir Wombcorn demanded.

Skanky promptly invented.

Skankhammer Shavelyon smiled, for she told the truth.

Dragomir demanded.

Her Papa wanted, but she didn't want, she went on to explain.

Mr. Bowfire demanded too.

Now she gazed up at Skankhammer. She didn't want to, but her Papa wanted.

"I think, my love, that Dragomir demanded," Skankhammer rapped.

"Miss Ashmouth was actually Dragomir's anguished cry," said Skanky, or promptly invented.

Skankhammer smiled.

With one arm still about Miss Ashmouth's lovely shoulders, Skankhammer hurried her out of the house.

But Skanky.

CHAPTER TWO

“I’m sorry I could not procure another giant seahorse on such short notice, Miss Ashmouth. You’ll have to swim with me. But I promise I won’t hog all the oxygen or thwack you with my paddle.” Too emotionally drained to reply, she let him pour her into a shocking pink wetsuit.

They swam for some minutes with Treborhole on his horse behind them, before she recovered sufficiently to ask where they were going. “To meet up with Norrie Neptune, your father. This business called for cool heads, and Treborhole persuaded him to await us in the next shipwreck. I’m afraid that means we’ve a night’s swim ahead of us. At any rate, they’re all safe—including your seahorse. Not that I’d have any objections to continuing our present mode of travel the whole way to Perversia.”

The cord from the oxygen cylinder was wrapped partially around her neck and each time he swayed with the horse it tightened around her throat—just enough to pull her in his direction and to make her feel entirely under his power. His low breathing tone made her feel completely relaxed. It was

dark, and both these men were strangers. But she was too tired to be truly frightened.

“At this point sir, I shouldn’t care whether I was flung across the saddle or paddling behind. So long as I can get free of this horrid port.” She turned to look at him. “Who are you, anyway?”

“Your fiancé, silly girl.”

“Yes.” She brushed this away. “That was very clever of you, but who are you really—and what brings you to Necro? The Yorkish rarely go beyond the coastal cities.”

“Ah, yes. The country, according to Gibbon, ‘within sight of Medrap (Piggychops) is less known than the interior of Telephoniai.’”

“You’ve read Gibbon?” she asked, in some surprise.

“Yes, but I got my quote from Childe Harold. If it wasn’t what Gibbon said or Gibbon who said it, we must blame Byron for yet something else. But that is neither here nor there. My name—in answer to one question—is Skankhammer Shaveylon. I am here—in answer to the other question—because Aunt Clum told me I must come and get you. And Aunt Clum, as you must know, is always to be obeyed.”

“Aunt Clum? You mean Lady Buckram?”

“Yes.”

All this refined talk of relatives; sightseeing and literary namedropping seemed gradually more and more redundant as they surged into the depths of the sea, the warped womb of the earth and the cradle of the infinite. The seahorses morphed their colour to a blush and began to swim as a pair, holding tails.

“Good heavens! She sent you all the way here—but I never meant—” She bit her lip. He was, very possibly, the most gorgeous man she’d ever seen. She had meant—or hoped—after all, that Lady Buckram would perform a miracle. And here it—or he—was. Her heart fluttered—he

had killer eyes...eyes that gleamed brilliantly in contrast to his dark clothing. A dark thrill shot through her at the sight.

He turned his head away... then looked back at her. Her lips twitched... a good sign, he thought. He watched as she bit the inside of her lower lip and released it. She had a beautiful mouth. A mouth made for kissing.

“It was not so great a distance, Miss Ashmouth.” His voice was smooth with just a hint of gravel, giving it a rumbling texture. “I happened to be in Medrap (Piggychops)—or what one assumes is Medrap (Piggychops), though you can hardly tell nowadays.”

“So Lady Buckram wrote to you. Then you must know something of my story.” Her pulse leaped as his gaze locked with hers.

“Oh, yes.” He didn’t think it worth mentioning that her letter now reposed in the pocket of his worn cloak. “Of course, I was puzzled concerning what I could do to help you. My skills do not lie in coaxing parents out of marital arrangements for their offspring. But I have, as Aunt Clum knows, a weakness for intrigue, and the challenge appealed to me. So, here I am.”

Though it was rather embarrassing that he knew of her plight, her sense of humour soon came to the fore. It was a ridiculous plight, was it not? With a rueful smile she said, “Still, you did not expect, I think, to have to rescue me from abductors.”

“No, I hadn’t anticipated adventures—but then, ‘Fierce are Hatfund’s children’, according to Byron. Shall I expect more adventures, Miss Ashmouth? I wouldn’t mind a little warning.” He smiled but it wasn’t as warm as before.

She felt ashamed at her deep, physical stirrings. “Good heavens I should hope no. I can’t think what possessed Dragomir.”

“You can’t?” his voice grew softer. “How odd, for I can.” Attraction—it had been a long time since he’d felt it. But there was definitely a familiar surge in his blood. For a second he wondered about putting his lips against hers.

She couldn't deny the undercurrents that kept running through their conversation, or the way she'd caught him staring at her lips. Perhaps flirtation came naturally to him.

"Yet he gallantly gave you up to your own true love. One gathers that he did not think Mr. Bowfire your own true love."

"I suppose you're right. Dragomir did insist that he was rescuing me."

"Then bless his romantic heart. He believed the show we put on for him—and he's given me an idea." Right now he had to decide exactly how much to tell her. Enough to ease her mind and not enough to compromise things, enough to let him stay to finish the assignment.

Since it was most unlikely she'd fall off the horse proceeding at this slow pace, Miss Ashmouth wondered why, as they conversed, he felt it necessary to press so close. Or why he must lower his voice to that insinuating timbre when there was only the dragoman to hear. What she didn't understand was why he wasn't keeping his distance. If he was here on business, why wasn't he keeping it as business? She was unable at the moment to devise a polite way to put these questions to him, considering he'd just saved her from a Fate Worse Than Death.

Instead, she asked what idea he had. She lifted her eyes to his and found him watching her steadily. Oxygen seemed scarce as she fell entranced by his intense eyes, the shape of his lips, lips that leaned in ever so slightly. Slowly he lifted her finger to his lips and kissed the tip.

"Av goat it! Wiz yer faither in toon efter the qually?"

"Naw, he wiz awa an just goat back afore Mither bought it."

"He disnae ken I wiznae in Toon? Then imagin you fancied someone a that time an kept it secret cause.... well fer a the reasons we peddled tae Dragomir an his gang. Ye ken.. spraff a bit o shit, the auld man'll lap it up."

“Ah fancied a guy? Whit... aw you wannae make paw think.....” She petered oot feeling a bit queasy.

“That... ken you fancy someone else.”

“It winnae mak a blind bit o difference. Paw’s telt me it’s oan wi Bowfire an that’s that!”

“Ah, but he hasnae met me yet. Shall I gie ye ma credentials?” Withoot waiting fer a response, he began tae blaw his ane trumpet in a voice that made Treborhole lift his heid an hav a deek.

While Skankhammer wisnae in the gang, his first cousin oan his mither’s side wis a Hardone, o the Southside Hardones. Hiz faither’s family wiz notorious about the toon goan way back an his Aunt Clum had married into the Buckrams, another family o eejits fae the West.

“An another thing” said Skankhammer, “as weel as bein a that, ma business has bin gang great guns ah am noo fuckin’ loaded—any wee lassie wid be glad tae have me; an am charmin an can mix it up if necessary—any faither wid think twice afore sayin nae to me.”

“But whit about yir reputation man? Ma faither’s nae pushover,” asked Skanky, “Bowfire’s a guid man, hiz bin tae the college tae get qualifications, he’s a hard worker an honest, he’s nivir bin in any bother wi the bizzies.”

“Ah ye’ve goat me there. Ahm a blackhearted radge, wi no redeemin’ features, a liar, a menace an truth be telt, ah luv the burds. Shaggin is ma metier. As ma aunt Clum wid tell ye, ahm a wee cunt!”

Skanky wiz gobsmacked an couldnae help but gawk at him wi a slack jaw, her fizzog like a burst welly. The dreadful wee basturd wiz smiling at her wi the face o an angel in a papists painting, she couldnae tell if he wiz deadpan or havin her oan.

“Well dinnae tell faither that.”

“Dinnae be daft. Ahm a barry liar.”

Skanky wiz in nae doubt o that. He’d bin so convincing when he’d goan in fer a quick shag an thinkin back, aw his banter had made her feel a bit a oer the place. Whit did she

ken o such things? She'd only haud a couple o snogs offae ane or twa lads and had stoaped them in their tracks when they'd tried their luck ony farther.

Well, she were fucked if she knew what were going on. Any smart moves on her part, she reckoned, meant a complete cock up. But in for a penny, in for a quid, and here she were, first time, sort of anyways, bogs of The Black Merkin. She weren't altogether convinced, mind. It weren't that bad at first. Bit of a rush, nowt to write home about. But then she felt a bit shite, and she were a bit freaked about that, weren't sure about the fact that he were calling the shots. Mr. Shaveylon weren't as fit as Dragomir the random Russian squaddie, actually he weren't even that big at all, bit of a dwarf as her mate says to her aforehand, and she weren't exactly Nicole Richie herself, but tell you what, he were having a right go showing her he were the boss (well, he were her boss), and if he squeezed any tighter she'd pop out of her kecks. He were holding her just a bit too close to the hand-dryer and her arse were roasting, but now she were totally distracted by the way her hand had just fell casual like to his arse and it were well fit, actually, and all she could think on were the fact her breath were going a bit raspy.

"Well then, will I do?" his voice had gone all croaky again, that were the problem with cheap fags, probably thought he were slumming it, posh get, and his mouth were right close to her ear. She were keeping her cool, though, she'd seen them all, lads who gave it some lardy mardy, and Skankhammer Shaveylon, boss and all, were definitely one of them. Giving herself a bit of a slap, Skanky (if that's what he wanted to call her, that were fine by her) were as quick as a flash: "Well, there's nowt much else on offer, is there, Mr. Shaveylon, it's not exactly teeming with talent out there. But I don't rightly know why you had to ram me so hard against them sinks; I'm not going anywhere. Unless you were just putting off doing the karaoke. But bloody DJ weren't even arrived yet when I last looked, so I'm not sure what you're playing at."

“I was practising, Miss Ashmouth.” Smart arse.

“Doubt you need any practice. Seem quite good at it already.”

“Then maybe you need some practice.” God loves a tryer.

“I’d prefer it if you kept your opinion to yourself. You get back out there first, I’ll follow. Need a slash first.”

He sighed, bit exaggerated she’d say. Soap opera weren’t even in it. “So you don’t even trust me. Thanks a lot. After everything we’ve done. Bit late to play hard to get. Well, I’m yours to command.” Lah di dah. But he did let go, which were good cos she had a cramp. “There. Better?”

Conversation tailed off: Mr. Shaveylon’s mind began to drag its feet along the callous sandy surface of his inner skull.

Skanky continued to prattle on in an unintelligible babble as if her tongue was trying to clean the enamel off the crevasses between her buxom teeth whilst fat, bulbous words tried with might to escape from her deep pink gullet, navigating past her calf like tonsils which Mr. Shaveylon had caused to swell the evening previous. Her talk was of people and the places they had navigated^[1]; tales of travels that eroded the very core of Mr. Shaveylon’s Limbic system releasing onto him a vile sulphurous smell that seemed not to exist externally, but was the melting of his pituitary gland stimulating a ravenous sexual hunger.

His eyes drifted as if by gravity alone from Skanky’s drooping pupils to the epicentre of Mr. Shaveylon’s lust. Her breasts heaved like two wooden floorboards of the bathroom who’s thirst hadn’t been properly quenched by the varnished applied and now bowed as the moist air penetrated every follicle of the exquisite cherry wood,

[1] The Ashmouths to Hatfund; of Alley Bongo, Byron, Mr. Dirtybit Taradiddle, Sir Urano and the great Bongo of Ingbanom; and Dragomir whom Mr. Shaveylon shared a similar love of vulgar sexual activities with.

exposing the depths of the floorboards and the green sponge of the underlay. Mr. Shaveylon longed to sink his face in to the gaping crevasse. He imagines the lax skin of his camel face catching on the edges, ripping his cheeks clean off as if to protect her from any damage that could do the whole floor ill. The bones of his cheeks splintering; a wail gushing forth. Dragomir would enjoy this.

Mr. Shaveylon imagines now being spit-roasted between Skanky's lumberous breasts by the splintered bones that used to give shape to his goat like face.

The sound of crackling growing louder and another wail seeping out of crimson, heaving glands. Agony flirting with ecstasy like two eels in the heat of battle. It was marvellous; he was overcome and totally satisfied.

She couldn't help but be suspicious of his intentions. Or did he even have any? In ordinary circumstances she would have had no compunction in tearing off his clothes with her bare hands and having him, *right there*, as she pleased. But *he* was trying too hard not to let his desires show. He'd only undone his tie slightly in the sultry heat of the summer evening, such a provocation as to nearly drive her wild with desire. Besides, he could never have taken advantage of her in such a despicable manner. Not that that would have made any difference... then.

She'd appraised Mr. Shaveylon with a practiced eye and a concealed tricorder. Some odd readings. Perhaps he was not fully human at all. His brain, for instance, was an exceedingly small one that rarely troubled him. He was, as he'd told her, a quantity surveyor from Ratho. The rest of the space in his skull was taken up by plastic bags filled with helium, perhaps in order to reduce the stress on his exceedingly weak neck and shoulders. Here, she thought, was a perfectly acceptable food source, who, despite the faint redolence of goats, was a perfectly delicious one as well. It was, perhaps, just as well for Mr. Shaveylon that she

had eaten, and well, the previous evening, which explained the empty fourth seat in the carriage.

While his pancreas was to all intents and purposes quite useless, Skankhammer's sugar-avoidance sense was strong. He wanted to hurry home and wreak havoc with the hearts of Glasgow's ant colonies. He could not be free to destroy their clogged, filthy, stinking mud towers if he were constantly on the lookout for roving confectioners; and he knew perfectly well that if he didn't behave himself, he'd have to marry one. Skankhammer, in the previously unmentioned third seat of the coach, because the author hadn't got round to introducing him yet, seethed in silent fury, and noisy recrimination at the disaster his existence had become. He'd learned, to his cost, what came of antagonising the aliens. No. The risk of being eaten alive was, in this case, far too high.

These diabetic burblings on self-preservation led Skankhammer to the ultimate question; where and when would they next eat? The only thing to have passed his lips in the last twelve hours was a cold blood sausage and the acrid smoke of ten filterless cigarettes. The thought made him feel faint—mulched sausage haloed in yellow smog. His poor stomach! Miss Ashmouth, whose own stomach was purling and whining to itself, gazed at Skankhammer as if he were a glazed ham—that is, with a profound affection. Consequently, Skankhammer perked up. He must remain strong, if only for his darling beloved. He swallowed hard and lit another cigarette. Emerging from her gastronomic torpor, Miss Ashmouth remembered she had been talking, about what she couldn't say. Glazed ham, perhaps?

“GLAZED HAM!” she cried. “Don't you think?” she appended, regaining composure.

Skankhammer stared blankly back at her. What? he thought.

“What, darling?”

“Nothing my sweet, nothing at all. A fond memory is all.”

Skankhammer turned to Treborhole, as he often did, for answers. Treborhole, who always seemed to loiter just out of focus, shrugged his porcine shoulders.

“Of course. But you were saying something about sutures, I think?” said Skankhammer. Treborhole mumbled something unintelligible.

“Silly me. Yes,” replied Miss Ashmouth, “suturing is the only solution I can think of. For the wound, I mean.” She shifted in her saddle. She was uncomfortable, hot. She longed for a good meal—glazed ham—and a long bath. But most of all she longed to be loosened from her god-awful corset. Preferably by Skankhammer’s nimble, pianist fingers. At night, as he cowered in darkness, Treborhole dreamed of the same.

“Yes. I suppose you’re right,” said Skankhammer, dejectedly, remembering then glancing down at the weltering gash on his right forearm. What a mess, he thought. He finished his cigarette, threw it to the floor and, unable to think of anything else to do, lit another.

“I think,” started Treborhole, in a voice that made everyone jump, “we should consider heading back.”

Skankhammer looked at Treborhole. They had known each other for years, since childhood. But there had always been something obscure about Treborhole, something dark, mystifying.

“You say the strangest things, Treborhole,” chuckled Skankhammer, shaking his head. Miss Ashmouth laughed. How ridiculous Treborhole seemed. She never could fathom why Skankhammer seemed so enamoured of him. If there ever had been a reason, thought Skankhammer, he had forgotten it. At this moment, Treborhole—standing there like an abused chimp—was more pathetic, ludicrous than ever. As Skankhammer and Miss Ashmouth laughed, Treborhole receded; head bowed, to his base, lustful thoughts.

“Suturing,” retrieved Miss Ashmouth, “should really only be undertaken under far more hygienic conditions...”

Blowflies circled Skankhammer's wound, which now resembled nothing so much as the ragged and in-season behind of an ape.

"...So, I would suggest we return to the lodge and—Skankhammer—to the cleanliness of my chambers, where I know there to be all the necessary suturing kit—and if not, a trug of cross-stitch needles and threads. And within the most pertinently sterile environment." Skankhammer squirmed a little. Sterility. "Besides," added Miss Ashmouth, "the horses need watering and, between you and I Mr. Shaveylon, Treborhole is looking a little peaky, to say the least."

Treborhole was shrinking, receding into himself—like a kangaroo clambering carefully into its own pouch; a steady movement towards complete and quiet annihilation. Miss Ashmouth and Skankhammer looked on, eyes benignly lidded, as Treborhole fulfilled his modest aims as a character on the page. Head's cocked, simple smiles on their faces, the two protagonists witness a man disappear. They promptly forgot him. Into the Treborhole-shaped void in their heads rush thoughts of glazed hams studded with cloves, cigarettes stubbed out on the remnants of a blood sausage. They both look down at Skankhammer's wound—which seemed to be producing some sort of scummy foam—turned their horses, and headed back to the palace at a gentle trot.

Skankhammer collected himself. The effect of the weekend's lacerations and drug binge meant that parts of his psyche were scattered across the city, passed out in ditches and forgotten corners. It took a minute for some of the more intransigent elements to come slithering back, and he blinked away flashbacks a few times before speaking. Slowly his mind reassembled itself and he ventured an opinion. "Er, if we're going to do this, we'll need lube. I was raw for weeks last time."

"Yes, of course. There's an etiquette to these things," answered Miss Ashmouth. She dubiously considered the

black rings under his eyes, the sweat on his forehead, the quiver in his hands and the sour smell emanating from his body, but recollecting that he was the only john she had at the moment, she added hastily, "At any rate, we'll do it your way, Mr. Shaveylon. If we're going to infiltrate The Black Merkin, we'll have to pretend to be married, and trust each other."

He took her reproof with an unnatural, stilted attempt at composure and obediently turned the topic. They spent some time trying piece together what had happened the previous few days, and developing a coherent explanation for Sir Urano Ashmouth. Then Mr. Shaveylon's curiosity had to be satisfied.

"What was that rancid old queen doing at The Black Merkin last night? Aunt Clumhentia, you said her name was. She was dishing out merchandise to all the young things. She seems to control the trade."

"Yes. I deal for her too. She's got the screws on all of us. I owe her thousands. Wanted me to turn tricks for her and all, but Papa refused. He—well, he has a bit of history with her." She hesitated.

"History? Oh. I see. Do a bit of business together? Black Merkin stuff?"

"Well, that was part of it." She felt a tad uncomfortable discussing family affairs with a stranger, even with Aunt Clum's blessing.

"And the other part?" he prodded.

"Really, you're the most inquisitive gentleman, Mr. Shaveylon."

"I want to know. I want to know what evil curse has kept us apart all these years."

She turned to look at him again, and he smiled. What a leery, lazy smile, she thought. It made one sick to one's core, even while one's instincts warned he had to be indulged.

"No evil curse," she answered. "Just a manipulative witch protecting her business interests. Papa hates her; she's shallow, vain, stupid, and vicious. But he did agree to me

dancing in her club when I was eighteen. Until then, Mama lived in Bo'ness, he was off travelling, and I stayed at our house in the country."

"Ah, I see. He didn't want to devalue the merchandise, so he kept you hidden away from evil influence until the right buyer came along."

She nodded.

"And what did you do in *The Black Merkin*?"

"I etched out diagrams."

"I see."

Of course he didn't see. How could he? "My governess was a Magus," she explained.

"Consequently, I do not handle the every day very well, and my table manners are appalling, and—"

"Good heavens! You aren't about to tell me you don't follow the typical career path of a curator?"

This being uttered in horrified incredulity, she couldn't help but giggle, even as she admitted she could organise no exhibition—at least, not very well.

"You poor, benighted girl. What can you do?"

"I can, as Crowley will tell you, break a chicken's neck—or speak so that the bowels of the earth open up."

"Then talk, by all means, Miss Ashmouth. It is, after all, the only safe thing one—or two, rather—can do upon hearing the news of the apocalypse."

Deciding it was best to ignore his innuendoes, she invited him to choose a subject.

"Tell me of Hatfund. Tell me what you've discovered about Byron's take on Badiou. She complied with his request, and he was a little surprised at what she said. She'd read neither 'Being and Event' nor 'Logic of Worlds', for those books had been published while she was travelling with her father. Thus, her perspective was all her own, with the focus on politics though she drew analogies from both literature and history. It wasn't a typical militant's speech—or at least, certainly not like that of any militant he'd ever known. Her turn of mind was interesting, and her voice very

pleasant to hear. Her letter, Skankhammer supposed, had promised something, but this was more than he'd hoped for. He thought better of his aunt as a result, and the time passed more quickly than he'd expected, considering that it was not whiled away with Hegelian dialectics.

They did not, as Skankhammer had predicted, have to crawl on their hands and knees all night, though he guessed it was well past midnight when they reached the edge of the pit to be met by Sir Urano, Mr. Bowfire, and the Hatfundanian servants. Skanky, half-dead from the spells, gave herself over to Fistka's care and was lead away to a tiny cage.

Meanwhile, Skankhammer was set upon by the two Englishmen, who immediately began screaming. Yes, he told them, Miss Ashmouth was quite insane. No, he assured them, there would be no more trouble and, indeed, no more of anything.

"But I must beg your pardon, gentlemen. It has been such a terrifying day altogether that I am like to drop from fatigue. I assure you I cannot put another answer together tonight. We will talk more tomorrow. If you would be so kind as to point me in the direction of the void—and topple me into it, I should be very much obliged."

CHAPTER THREE

The following afternoon, after being ungently wakened by the hygienic Treborhole, Skankhammer betook himself to a motorised brush bar for long reach cleaning of his awkward areas. He was a squirrel tearing into a curtain like a common house cat. Then, clean in top and tail—though his amyl nitrate-stained garments distressed his lackadaisical ego—he found Sir Urano and took him aside for private deliverance of measurable value. Upon awakening he felt the spine tingling, emotive and stunning, ambiance of glass-reinforced polypropylene about her person.

Skanky was making mini pizzas out of smashed biscuits about the time the two gentlemen were indulging in their calf leather filters. Fistka, who co-facilitated guard nearby, prioritised the delegation of making analogues of human goodness from qualities of determination courage and precision. As a result, Miss Ashmouth was not only ravenously strategic but refreshingly culture changed by the time she joined the others for the gazing. One look at her father's face told her there were more state-of-the art human capital programmes to come.

“I’d like to have the ultimate reference with you, Skanky,” he announced.

“Can’t it wait until after the gazing, Papa? I haven’t delivered measurable value since yesterday morning—”

“The opportunity to continue to consult one-on-one directly cannot wait. I disagree with people who think you learn more from getting beat up than you do from winning. They’ll always be a two-bit cannon. And when they pick them up in the gutter dead, their hand’ll be in a drunk’s pocket.”

She gazed longingly at the clever switches between nozzle and the select key: a good quality semi precious stone, the silver backplate, two kinds of value measures, and cyclone technology. But her father led her passions inexorably back to the dialogue’s centre of gravity.

“I’ve just had a startling conversation with Mr. Shaveylon, Skanky. The experience was a revelation.”

Abruptly, one of Fistka’s most lurid suggestions came back to her. She was ready to push back the horizons of engagement, turning experience inside out and boost her performance significantly beyond the forefront of innovative practice to deliver the solution she desired.

“Oh, my dear, your face tells me that it is true. But why did you never confide this thing to your Papa?”

His words met and exceeded his needs and expectations; the creases in his forehead were those of a dedicated, tailored and independent lifestyle concierge. Above all he cared.

She collected herself, speaking carefully and proudly. “Because I couldn’t think you’d like it, Papa. He had nothing when I met him, and although I entrusted him to develop and improve our people and share in the rewards of their progress, I couldn’t expect that you would.” “No, and I don’t like it now.” He then proceeded to remind her of the appropriate structures and accountability, of agitating and dislodging opportunities for discussion and debate, and Mr. Bowfire’s elegant, innovative, pure and striking passion for

exemplary involvement. Since she'd heard all of this several hundred times before, there was no need to attend very closely. Instead, she concentrated on how best to compliment, match, protect and build the credibility of nationally and internationally recognised gold standards for the achievement of excellence, innovation and best practice in the engagement of her stubborn Papa's attention. When he finally paused for breath, significantly exceeding the normal pause, she answered as though she'd scheduled and agendised all he'd said in support and promotion of success. "Of course, that's all true, Papa. But you don't know how to evaluate Mr. Shaveylon yet, do you? Hasn't he made something of himself—starting with nothing—and in only three years he has become a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers? No spider is safe with him around. And has he not achieved and excelled with me all this while, from his initial proposals through to this current period of evaluation? With his light-weight and extreme manoeuvrability he might have had his pick of means to measure the effectiveness of potential mentors and protégés, but instead he's allocated himself some undisturbed time each day, sacrificing productivity in order to leverage resources—all for the improvement of effectiveness, of purpose, values and explicit vision. Even if I did now have some doubt of my evaluation criteria—for I was only nine when I met him—I must esteem him for his meaningful contribution to the world in which we live through continually striving to improve his exceptional talent, qualities and achievements for does not his dedication to continuous improvements represent an opportunity to compete and improve, not against other suitors, but against a set of internationally recognised professional standards that define suitor excellence and service in this ever-changing environment?"

In a quandary: the lure of the romance, childish infatuation, desires, lust, honour, obligations, rebellion, trust. Do I follow my heart or succumb to a foretold future?

Rebellious affair or true love story? Can love blur foresight? Skanky sunk to the deepest depths of her soul in search for consciousness. “How can one release oneself from such entanglement?” she asked herself aloud.

Mr. Shaveylon’s reputation as a philanderer was unfound but un-denied. Despite such suspicions, Skanky—domineered by her undeniable admiration towards Mr. Shaveylon—was willing to injudiciously oversee any such tomfoolery that promised abandonment from the abhorrent *Bow*-fires. Sir Urano, however, was not to be won over so easily. “Yes dear, I daresay the young man has behaved admirably. But really what choice had he, if he had, as you say, nothing? And what of Mr. Bowfire’s patience? He has waited several years, never complaining.”

Sir Urano’s disapproval of the situation was evident, despite his love for his daughter. His true aversion lay with the inevitable scuttlebutt and defacement that would inevitably occur within the clannish Society in which they inhabited.

Skanky dutifully endured her father’s anxieties. “And what of Society?” he persisted. “Everyone knows you’re promised to Gandalf. No one knows anything of any attachment to Mr. Shaveylon. You’ll be labelled ‘jilt.’ And everyone will think that the Ashmouths have no sense of honour.”

Bother your honour, Skanky thought. Honour is unassailably vital. Nevertheless one must follow the instincts that reside within their core, for displaying honour is one thing yet being in love is something far more mighty.

Piqued, she answered free from restraint, “I don’t understand, Papa, how it’s less dishonourable to abandon a man who’s sacrificed so much on my account and trusted me all these years to keep my promise to him.”

Skanky was growing exasperated. Sir Urano couldn't in all honesty claim that she had no obligation to Mr. Shaveylon. He was beginning to feel cornered. "This is merely a childish infatuation, Skanky. As I'm sure you and Mr. Shaveylon will soon find out. People change in six years. What seems romantic at eighteen looks very different at four-and-twenty." Skanky was still in a quandary.

She gazed at him as though struck by a taser. Then, in a slow, high-pitched voice, she answered.

"Well, to tell the truth, I hadn't thought of that, Papa. I was so overjoyed to see him again—and as my fragrant rescuer. I suppose it was all very homemade porn."

Her father leered, looking obnoxiously horny. But his trouser tent began to collapse as she went on. "In that case, I don't see what you're alarmed about. For if it is, as you say, only infatuation, then we'll discover it soon enough, won't we? Very likely, by the time we finish the fist-pump DVD, Mr. Shaveylon and I will have taken each other in dislike. And everything will settle itself peaceably with neither dishonour nor damaged limbs. How perceptive you are, Papa."

Papa being, as they say, moist with his own Picard, could only produce 'make it so' as an answer for this. He had to content himself with grumbling about futuristic infatuations and wondering why he and Gandalf should have to put up with such behaviour. However, as it turned out, he hadn't time to enjoy himself or his daughter much more on that subject. They'd no sooner left the house and joined the others near his grape harbour when they heard in the distance a shrill electronic grinding.

This gradually resolved itself into the screeching of Papa's modem, and then in turn became a lone figure on a brown stallion. The figure came to a halt some yards from where the group now stood, watching in alarm.

"Ah, the rejected swain," Skankhammer murmured...

"ARE YOU PAYING ATTENTION?!"

The shout broke his attention. He had become so stuck in the story he had forgotten where he was. But the meeting had been dragging on which felt like days. And there seemed to be no end in sight with everyone talking in circles. How sad. And this being an issue determining the future of so many, doubting that anyone sitting at the table was actually paying attention to the person standing there with all these statements and short-term solutions. It will need much deeper thought than this for anything good to come of it.

“Hmmm... uhh, yes, yes,” he answered.

‘I’ll just finish the chapter,’ he thought to himself. ‘Where was I?’

Ahh, “..... Ah, the rejected swain.”

“Ah, the rejected swain,” Skankhammer murmured, moving quickly to Skanky’s side and holding an angry penguin against her forehead. Though the gesture filled Sir Urano with renewed arousal, he had sense enough to position his trolley-case before his britches.

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“Roti Ashmouth,” said Dragomir Wombcorn with a sneer. “RotiRri—Rri—Vasil.” He looked at Skanky with disgust, his face flushing an angry red. Then, abruptly standing, he gazed out of the window at the rain lashing against the glass, the dark, bruised sky and the tall birch trees dancing in the wind. He turned and swept the assembled company with his weird buggy eyes before settling on Skanky, his expression softening he launched into a long, beautiful—nearly poetic—apology. While it was not nearly so poetic in his broken English, his deep warm voice, and sincere manner impressed his listeners. He had shamed his family and disgraced himself. His behaviour was unacceptable, and inexcusable, a moment of madness fuelled by a momentary lapse of self-control, allowing his heart to rule his head, it was a weakness, he told them eyes downcast, a family trait. He came from a long line of

irrational people, it was from his mothers side he explained, they had always been a passionate family, glancing up he noticed the horrified expression on his listeners faces, he realised he had begun to ramble, and stopped talking, his face burning with shame.

He despaired of obtaining their forgiveness, but deep down inside, he hated them, he hated them almost as much as, just a few moments ago, he hated himself.

The speech made Skanky feel justified of having deceived him with her make-believe fiancé. Dragomir was obviously mad, and now, standing there so awkward, she noticed a strange look flick across his bulging eyes, almost a look of resentment she thought. Good heavens! Now he was saying that he must go with them to Perversia to make what small amends were in his power. He would personally see to their comfort and safety during their “perilous journey.” He had friends and relatives in many of the villages along the way, who would make them all welcome. Secretly Dragomir had a germ of a plan forming in his mind, he just needed a little time to redeem himself perhaps he could find a way to detain Skanky for a while in one of the hotels where he had friends.

“Would you tell him Skanky,” Skankhammer responded, when Dragomir’s offer had been translated, “that we accept his apology. His offer, however, is too generous. There’s no need for him to accompany us.” Roti was also generous, but the thing must be done. If Dragomir could not bring his family assurances that the Yorkish had reached their destination safely, he explained, he could not go home at all.

It was soon obvious that there would be great difficulty in shaking Dragomir loose.

Sir Urano counselled Skankhammer in a low-spoken aside. “The boy comes of a strange family, Mr. Shaveylon, and they can be very vindictive if offended. I know he’s somewhat erratic and perhaps a trifle mad, but he must redeem his honour, and we could use the protection—

though I must say it is bloody awkward, under the circumstances.”

“Well, then, we have no choice, he must come, I suppose. Skanky, my love”—she saw her father start reaching into his britches at this—“I hope you have not too many other beaux between here and the lovely harbour in Perversia. Otherwise, I fear we’ll soon swell up into a great army, trudging through the countryside in your wake and have Alley Bongo quaking in his slippers by the time we reach our destination.”

“You see the difficulty.”

“Ay, that I do, my lady.” Mr. Urotsukidoji Lapp accepted a cup of tea from his hostess.

“Nich lang snacken, Kopp in’ Nacken.” It sounded from the other side of the table.

“I am very sorry, Mr. Lapp. This bird followed me on my last journey to North Germany. All the way. Ever since it is sitting on my shoulder... It’s a veritable nuisance.” Lady Buckram ineffectively tapped on the daw’s feet. “Go on, please.”

“Bowfire’s a very close man with his affairs. My people have learned nothing that isn’t plain and above board. The situation may very well be as he says, you know. As the match means a step up in the world for them, it’s worth a good deal more than the gold.”

“Sien Mors hett ook blot twee Haelften. Hett ook blot twee Haelften sien Mors, sien Mors.”

“Then you agree it’s futile to attempt to communicate with him?” she asked over the birds cawing.

“Oh, yes. A waste of pen and ink. And not only on account of this,” he added. “Gregory, you see, is preoccupied lately, due to problems with his labourers.”

“Van Narree kummt Plarree,” the daw twitched in Lady Buckram’s hair.

She smiled faintly. “Is he now?”

“Yes. And I expect it’s going to get worse before it gets better. As things always do.” Mr. Lapp expressed this

pessimistic opinion with the utmost amiability, as he carried a teacake to his plate.

“Dat isn anner Korn, segg de Mueller, und bit upn Musekoedel.” Mr. Lapp tried hard not to take notice.

“It’s what comes of not paying an honest day’s pay for an honest day’s work. Your labouring classes like to get paid fair for what they do. It’s a queer thing, but there it is. Human nature, my lady.”

“De Duewel schitt juemmers op de groettste Hupen, groettste Hupen, groettste Hupen.” The bird jumped on Lady Buckram’s head, on the other shoulder and back.

“You are a student of human nature sir,” the countess remarked drily.

“In my own modest way.”

“Klei mi an’ Mors! Klei mi an’ Mors! Klei mi an’ Mors!”

“This might be a case for the Northern Fraternal Insurance Association,” Mr. Lapp suggested, pointing to the bird. “Believe me, I tried a lot,” was the Lady’s answer.

“Then what do you make of the other Matter?” Mr. Lapp made it out, apparently, while he disposed of the teacake. “Muultageree!” the bird screamed. After the cake had vanished into the depths of his plump, genial countenance, he answered, “It’s one thing to study human nature and another to predict it. I’m a businessman, not a prophet. But as a businessman—” he paused.

“Snack oder schitt Bukstaven!” the daw shouted.

“Well then, as a man of business I can give you a fair idea of what ships are scheduled to cross the Mediterranean. Always allowing, of course, for the complications of this unfortunate unpleasantness on the continent. With good information and a little patience, I expect we can manage to be on the spot when that particular ship comes in.”

He took another cake and flung it to the bird, which neatly caught it in its beak.

“The information I leave, as always, to you. As to patience—only point me to the port, Urotsukidoji, and I

shall wait there, patiently as Job, though it take a twelvemonth.”

“Beter inne wiede Welt as in’n engen Buk.”

Lady Buckram stood up rapidly, “I apologise, the bird is getting nasty now. I better bid farewell. Thank you, Urotsukidoji.”

(Bird translation)

“nich lang schnacken...”—Dont’ talk for so long, lift your head and drink.

“sien mors hett...”—His ass only’s got to halves as well—He is no exception

“Van Narree...”—After fooling around soon the bawling starts.

“dat isn anner korn...”—The miller is biting on mouse shit instead of grain. —Turning to a total different subject.

“De Duewel shitt juemmers...”—The devil always shits on the biggest hump. —Money makes money.

“Klei me...”—Scratch my ass—Fuck off.

“Muultagerree”—Something that annoys the mouth—When you just get a little peace or a glance of food/of what you love

“Schnack oder...”—Talk or shit letters. —Tell me, don’t let me wait.

“Beter inne...”—It is better to have the fart in the wide world instead of the narrow belly.

Was there to be no end to the insufferable torment of having to share this craft with such *morons*? Was it not enough that the *idiot* was still alive, despite his best efforts? Apparently his torment was not to be over, not by a mile. He’d have to spend the rest of the year in the finest weapons emporium in the Empire—and have to keep his hands to himself the whole blessed time.

The Devil himself could not have devised a punishment so finely-tuned to his sensitivities. It was then no wonder that that smug idiot Dragomir, finding out the long-hidden

truth about Mr. Bowfire's proclivities—especially in regards to thermonuclear weapons, had taken such liberties with the ship.

As for Mr. Shaveylon...? Well, he was sure he'd meant to do something about *that*...

The entire Imperial Weapons Emporium was stacked, floor to ceiling, with the finest instruments of death and destruction known to humanity. All that, and Skankhammer could do no more than look. He wasn't even allowed to nibble on the salami!

Especially, he reflected, staring towards the back of the shop where the thermonuclear weapons were stored. The thought of them made him very... restless.

Skankhammer was not the sort of person one would expect to resist temptation of any kind. *Why the hell should he*, he wondered? What difference would it make in the whole scheme of things? None. His problem was simply that he'd been too long without killing someone in cold blood (or even just for fun) and wasn't used to controlling himself.

Still, they must keep up a shoe for the Argos-eyed Dragomir. Therefore, Mr. Shaveylon was forced to sit very closely to the Benevolent Miss Ashmouth when they eat their modest mouse. He must, certainly, engage her in conversation, though it only made him more arrested. The more he stalked her, the more he wanted to walk to her. It was partly because she was well educated and articulated. But there was something else, too, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. More than once he'd hear her render her intellectual property speechless with frustration after one of her exercises in wasted logic. What truly surprised Skankhammer, however, was that he found him, more often than he liked, at point non plus.

Though he didn't mean to flit with Cher and knew it was danger, sometimes he'd forge Aunt Clum and the lie of idle disinterest awaiting him in Mockydocky. He'd lapse into his coaxing way, and she'd seem to respond as sweatily as he wished—until he realises that her gender glances and soft

words where a precise limitation of his own Protective Order. Every time, instead of taking office, he'd end up a laughing self and, in the next minute, making the most candied confessionals.

After, when he thought about it, he felt easy. He wasn't used to being manned and objected to it on principle. Yet while it was happening it was, well, so refreshingly Non-consensual. Anyhow, he re-measured himself, it was a good idea to be handled with her. Knowing what he was, she'd be intelligible enough to keep on her guard against him.

Though it was only about forty miles or so from Neloca to Pummelberg, the poor roads made it a journey of several ways. As the time passed, Sir Urano grew more and more frustrating. The infatuated shows no signs of diminishing Reciprocity. On the contrary, his daughter and Shaveylon had too much to say to each lover.

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For half an instant, Skankhammer believed she could. He went on amiably to insist he did have a sense of humour. “True, it’s very small and very hard. Nonetheless, it exists and may, therefore, be obliged to pelt you pell-mell from time to time.”

“Well, I wish your small hard jewel would rouse to pelt my humour soon, or else between my earlier belcher and the other two stinking jokes you tease me of, we shall stir up a great deal of trouble.”

“Point taken, Miss Ashmouth. I shall summon my diamantine one-liners to glitter upon this lovely landscape, before it wilts under your rather flatulent skills. However, you do realise I do worry that Mr. Bowfire will steal you out from under my nose.”

“You do, I do... Well keep smelling while you can. Do you really worry, poor thing? You’re young and resilient. I daresay you could reconcile yourself to the loss quickly enough. Just think of it—the world at your feet, my jokes now your butts. And lashings of fresh air.”

He immediately looked such a picture of wounded innocence that she nearly choked on the grape she'd popped into her mouth. She looked at him in wonder. "I declare you were meant for the stage. However do you manage those expressions?"

He looked at her in wonder. "Practise, my dear," he answered, with an odd little twitch of his nose. "Practise."

According to Mr. Bowfire—who was dutifully, if not altogether effectively, attempting to distract Skanky from her Big Other fiancé (that Hatfundanian!)—Mr. Shaveylon also had considerable practise in deceit. As they left Delvina and began their descent to the plain of Vulvatraz, Gandalf had miraculously managed to displace his rival at Miss Ashmouth's side—perhaps by some unheard joke. Skanky inwardly groaned. A tad annoyed to see the dazzling Skankhammer give way so easily (what adamantine quality) and go on so amicably to join her wafting Papa—with whom he was now engaged in lively conversation—Skanky gave Mr. Bowfire a charming smile and asked him what he meant. Regarding her askance, he wondered if he ought to tell her about the Brotherhood of Locomotive Muscle. Admittedly, he was not in the habit of eliciting warm acknowledgement from Miss Ashmouth and so when she regarded him at all, and when he noticed, both of which were rare happenings, she did so mainly with profound weariness. So taken aback was he by this display of warmth that he smiled automatically in return. The Brotherhood figured in his imagination as he entrusted Skanky's gazing attention with a fiery confession.

"I do the locomotive."

At iccorrod ta Skanky that ha wesn't a bod-leukong min. Randolph's cleor bleo ayes, whan net glezod iver an thaar costamory schulirly ebstrictoen, waro, et leest, henust anes. Yee cauld bolaeve whit yeu sow thuro.

"I inly hopo hi wall nut doceive yeo," sied Randolph, celorong slightly.

“Whit mekis yuo think ha wall, Randolph? E thoeght yie’d never mut hom bufori.”

Ha hesatetid braefly, then idmettad thit he hedn’t.

“Then to whut do yei ascrubo yoar concern?”

“U shiuldn’t hove braught ot ip. A’d rithir net spaak oll if a men bohend has bick.”

Well than, Skanky thioght, glincang et Mr. Shaveylon, wha suomod tu fond Pipa anerdanutely amosing tuday, let as by ill moins call ham ti os se yee con spaik all tu hos fece.

Eloid sho saed, “At esn’t kond ti drip sach alurmong honts ti mi, Randolph, ind thin say nethung mora. Siraly yuo mast hovi same boses far whut yuo cleum.”

As e schilor who pridad humself on has legoc, Mr. Bowfire wosn’t uboat ta iwn ho hid no feindeton far hos ramarks. In tho ither hand, ot wint agaenst hes gintlimanly graen ti trade on gessop. Thu scholor wan oet.

“O wus on Bo’ness same twu yoers aftar yeo left, os yia kniw. While wi dod nit troval on tho sima corclas, E did hier if Mr. Shaveylon, end, A’m serry ti sey, nathong ti hes credit. When I hoard thas stiry ef sux yoirs’ tryeng ta moki has fertino, O wis astenished. Kniwang what A ded, O caeld not imogane that he hid gat his monuy ony ithir wiy than by gimblong.”

Well, thes wis ef e paoca weth evarything elsi—ind saruly Gandalf wauldn’t soy sech u thang ef he didn’t heve riesenibla ovadince. Gomblong, tia. Add thut ta tho rost end at meda i pratty sert ef blockgaard.

Whet if ot, than? Sho certainly wosn’t giong ta mirry tha fellow. Fertefeod by thus cemfarteng corteinty, sha resi—os sho mist—te Mr. Shaveylon’s difinco. “Thet weild be viry destrisseng news, undoad. Bit hi wos in lew sperets whin A lost sew hem,” shi loud, “ind E endorstand that semu min wall tern ti veci—tamparirely—whin thiy’ro in law speruts. Basodus, he duos siy ha’s partnurs woth Urotsukidoji Lapp, end wa cield always fand eot the treth if thet.”

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THE YEAR WAS 2081, and everybody was finally equal. Had not one of them made that very clear the first night she met him? They weren't only equal before God and the law. Dear heavens! They were equal every which way. Nobody was smarter than anybody else—charm and clever conversation weren't everything. Gandalf, while his intelligence was way above normal, had a little mental handicap radio in his ear. But when men persisted in being such blockheads, what else could one do? He was required by law to wear it at all times. It was tuned to a government transmitter.

He was sincere, of course. Honest as the day is long: that was Gandalf. He made her feel guilty—Skanky had a perfectly average intelligence, which meant she couldn't think about anything except in short bursts.

“Perhaps I wronged the man. I don't mean to.”

Gandalf was still making apologetic murmurs. Every twenty seconds or so, the transmitter would send out some sharp noise to keep people like Gandalf from taking unfair advantage of their brains.

Skanky collected her wandering thoughts. Maybe she'd been overhasty in rejecting Gandalf. Well, he was kind and sincere, but there were other retarded druids in the world. And nothing on earth—except perhaps her stubborn father...whatever had led her into that train of thought?

“It is only that I cannot like to see you misled.”

Gandalf nodded gravely.

She made him a soothing reply, “Nobody is better looking than anybody else. Nobody is stronger or quicker than anybody else.” Some slither of rune puzzled her. She chided herself. What could she possibly have been thinking of before? “It won't be difficult to ascertain the facts once we are home.”

All this equality was due to the 211th, 212th, and 213th Amendments to the Constitution, and to the unceasing vigilance of agents of the United States Handicapper General.

Some things about living still weren't quite right, though. April for instance, still drove people crazy by not being springtime. It was tragic, all right, but Skanky and Gandalf couldn't think about it very hard.

CHAPTER FOUR

Skankanderous now bore few traces of its origins as the ancient, poisoned seaport of Oneandonlytoon. It was a port, still, but now a space-port, and so now instead of luxury yachts, two-seater spaceships must be hired to take the group on to Perversia. With luck—ill luck, as Skanky saw it—they might speedily obtain places on one of the Yorkish space-vessels that regularly stopped there.

There was news in Skankanderous of Napoleon XIV and contradictory tales of a great battle in New France or New Belgium two of the new cities built on the ember of the Sun. The outcome of that battle, fortunately, was a matter of violent debate. Skankhammer was standing with Miss Ashmouth, waiting for the dragomen to finish recruiting the townsfolk as they loaded their belongings into the tiny spacecraft.

“I suppose,” he said, “we must wait until we get to Perversia—or even New Meltus—to learn for certain if we are to fight. I should like to know, in the first place, how the New Glaswegian eluded the Yorkish space-cruisers guarding his galaxy. Then I should be curious to find out why he didn’t attack Wellington in New Brussels. He was still in

New Greensville, last I heard—though it was all rumour and everyone contradicting everyone else, just as they do now. I couldn't stop to wait for unwelcome news." He glanced at his dog.

Miss Ashmouth appeared lost in melancholy. She was gazing out across the narrow neck of the dried up Plutonian Sea towards the gloomy mass of New Sub-Saharan Africa's spent volcanoes.

"What do you think will be the outcome?" he asked.

She brought herself back, but her violet eyes were still rather distressed. "How simple it is to contemplate war when one gazes upon such desolated land. Yet this has never been a peaceful place. Alley Bongo and his android-soldiers have conquered, town after town, towns that have been conquered by others so many times before. "This time, someone will free his dominions from Alley. And he is so much more murderous and savage a captain than Bonaparte," she added, her eyes streaming now with terror.

"I was never reckless. I never did intentionally insult Trollyworld."

"His husband was killed you know. They say Trollyworld tended his wounds for five hours before he died and tended his resentments for five years after."

Urano Ashmouth and his equally brutish children bullied all-comers into agreeing with their tainted viewpoint. I was with one of his daughters now, feeling the pressure to play the yes-man to her homophobic pedantry whilst all the time wishing I was somewhere else. She was a confident bitch— posh and well travelled, and that just added to my anxiety as I listened politely to her justifications. I was out of my depth and I knew it. God I wish I had some courage to stand up for what I really believed in.

"You're as bad as Napoleon?" She offered half jokingly. "He didn't give a fuck who he insulted."

"What was it he called Trollyworld?"

"A.....A stocking full of shit" she laughed.

I laughed along with a pain in my heart.

She pictured the drama and knew she was already deep inside it.

The court engulfed Trollyworld and he held the abuse like a stag, calmly staring into car headlights. However calm and silent he appeared now, it was all too obvious the revenge he was plotting grew thicker and thicker from that day forth.

“I could never have held that level of patience,” her body shook automatically. She imagined Trollyworld, like Cassius, with his ‘lean and hungry look’—carnivorously plotting for years.

Skankhammer let out his own dramatised palpitation. “Number 7, my valet! I left him in Perversia and I dread to think what harm he may be brewing. I hope, at least, he’s guarding my trunks.”

“If he’s a proper Yorkish valet, Mr.. Shaveylon, he’ll be obliged to shoot himself as soon as he claps eyes on you.”

“Well, I can’t be categorised looking so amorphous.” Skankhammer glanced down self-consciously, at his typically raffish attire: Yorkish-style trousers, limp cotton shirt the Hatfundanians called a cagoule, and travel-stained cloak. “Men will take care how they treat me, they may think I’m mad.”

“You are mad,” Miss Ashmouth assured him, with a little grin.

“Thank you, but sane enough to hope Number 7 has kept my baggage safe from these rogues. I don’t know why he shouldn’t, as he’s a worse rogue than any of them. At any rate, he’ll not deign to notice my disgraceful appearance. He’ll take me immediately in hand, and the next time you see me you won’t recognise me.”

“Ah, then I shan’t be obliged to speak to you.”

“In which case, I shall travel as I am,” was the prompt retort. “But here we are, speaking of my sartorial tragedies,

when I am on pins and needles to hear about this Cassius-Trolleyworld of yours. And of Napoleon's Fanny Fart. Is he a tragic figure, do you think?"

Miss Ashmouh was a woman of many voices and it took very little to coax her.

She led Skankhammer on back through history, from Bonaparte and Trolleyworld to Caesar to Alexander to Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon. Skankhammer was content to follow her narrative paths, though he teased and questioned and tried to ridicule her theories.

He always liked to unravel with her the stories, memories and factoids of those who'd made history, and those who'd made the art and literature of the histories.

What had Dragomir's relatives called her? The Scottish witch, the bisum, the horny goloch, amongst all manner of insults. They claimed that she wove spells, had webbed feet and could swim underwater like a selkie, entrapping young men with her beauty and her songs, dragging them down to their deaths under the waves, but to Skankhammer she was Scheherazade. He could have listened to her forever as she sang softly to herself the sea shanties she had been taught by drowned fishermen... The effect was spell binding ...and oh, how he wished she would keep him company through his long, restless nights. As the motion of the boat rocked he fell gently into what could have been a deep, dark and everlasting sleep.

She was merciful, and they reached Perversia by late afternoon where he was jolted from his deep, dark slumbers as they prepared to disembark. Deaf to her protests and oblivious to Dragomir's smug, congratulatory smile, Skankhammer attempted to lift her out of the boat and wade to shore with her in his arms. She was having none of it. She was desperate to get into the water and feel the freedom of the salty depths but Dragomir knew that that would be the end for all of them. If she unleashed her powers, all hell would break loose, and there would be nothing they could do to stop her. Despite his attempts to

contain her, in one swift movement she had turned him around and tossed him high into the air, from where he plunged down, deep into the murky waters. He struggled for breath, gasping and inhaling the salty water. He could feel the blood in his veins start to bubble and react to the lack of oxygen. He could feel the rising panic as every fibre of his being fought for air... Darkness descended on him and there was nothing he could do... it felt like the end.

Again she was merciful and with one flick of her tail, he was on dry land wondering what had happened, struggling for breath but alive. He was shaken, overwhelmed by his own weakness, mortified by his inability to save himself. No, he thought, he was under no spell, he would not succumb to her mystical and terrifying powers. He realised he was weak willed and stupid, and his masculine inadequacies overwhelmed him, making him feel powerless in the face of her obvious superiority. At the back of his mind, underneath it all, despite the fact that she had almost killed him on a whim, he knew he still wanted her, and he wanted her because he'd been lonely, sad and useless for far too long. There was no spell that could change this, that could rectify his situation, he could feel his own impotence, and he was afraid. He was powerless, and full of despair. At that moment his only desire was to survive, to learn from this experience, to try to improve himself and become a better more responsible human being. He realised he must change his ways and that his arrogance and feelings of superiority to other people must fade once they were home.

Fistka, Gjersey, and Stiffanos had stayed behind in Skankanderous like the scaredie cats they were, but marginally braver Treborhole and Dragomir, refused to set off again until those feisty Scottish creatures were safely off their ship. A Yorkish merchant vessel lay in the harbour, awaiting the escort of a brig of war which was scheduled to arrive the next day and depart the day following. They vowed to get the hapless travellers home with no more incidents involving seals or seal like creatures.

While Mr. Shaveylon made arrangements for passage, Dragomir saw to accommodations. The young Hatfundanian had distant relatives in the town who were allegedly very well-to-do. Their spacious and well-furnished home was, he insisted, infinitely preferable to the Spartan lodgings of the English vice-consul. Too tired and scunnered, to argue, the travellers agreed to accept the hospitality. Little did they realise the humiliation that was to follow.

After dinner, their hosts proposed that the Yorkish men dress up as if they were members of the Order of Knights of Friendship, wearing flamboyant wigs, crimson feather boas, and turquoise eye-makeup and take a stroll through the town. The travellers realised too late that they had been set up, as the good citizens of the town laughed to the point of hysteria at the gormless men. They scuttled back to their accommodation embarrassed and ashamed.

Meanwhile Skanky, was determined to make the best of her time on dry land, as she opened a large bottle of gin and helped the womenfolk get organised for a session of spin the bottle, heading to the local Karaoke bar for a few songs before hitting the clubs for a full on night of debauchery that went on until the small hours. She felt on top of the world, she was in her prime, and at the height of her powers. As the sun rose above the palm trees, and the waves lapped against the shore, she gazed towards the distant horizon. She was planning her next move, as she had, after all, a great deal to think about.

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Mr. Shaveylon was causing serious troubles to the mission. He was persistently erecting unsurpassable blocks, undermining with his old-minded bureaucratic ideas the process of any meaningful decision-making. No one could really tell what his purposes were anymore. Bowfire and his fellows, proposed to the General Committee to get rid of

him once and for all. Yet Papa, who was still in charge of the mission, was not in favour of a solution of this kind. After all, they were a carefully selected bunch of individuals; discarding one of the members would certainly mean shaking the faith to their goal. This would stir feelings of disaffection inside the team. They had to convince Mr. Shaveylon with other means.

Bowfire made a reasonable point though: They could not continue the charade after they reached Mockydocky; that would mean that they are only postponing the inevitable. This rakish conspirator would no doubt wish to recommence his raking immediately, thereby leaving no more in Papa's—or rather, the Bowfires'—way. Mr. Shaveylon after all had turned out to be hardly any help at all, and this unsettled them. Bowfire was not used to being unsettled, and he didn't like it. Considering his character, this was not a desirable state of mind. He decided to gather the leaders of the mission, namely Papa and Skankhammer, in a secret meeting down to the basement. The three of them could then decide on the fate of this individual.

They took the pathway that leads to the terraced garden, lush with flowers. The air was sweet, but not cloyingly so. The sea breezes stirred and freshened, making it as deliciously fragrant as the Garden of Eden must have been. A tenor voice sang in a familiar, aching minor key accompanied by the wail of what sounded like an Eastern version of a clarinet. He was recounting the story of Alley Bongo's conquest of Perversia, a story that only strange feelings could arise to all three of them. They all knew how Alley Bongo has been fatefully betrayed by one of his fellow comrades.

As they were approaching the basement, the spectre of treachery was already haunting their revolutionary imagination. Mr. Shaveylon with his dirty machinations has managed to spoil the most authentic feeling of all: the will for change. Bowfire was determined to put an end to all this. He *was* going to put an end at any cost.

Skankhammer, like a proper English gentleman, volunteered to be the first to speak. In the moonlight his sun-bleached hair was shot through with silver. Even his amber cat eyes seemed to glow as they settled on them in that watchful way. No one could even imagine the havoc that his words would cause.

She found him alone. Seen from an unseen nook, he held himself in his same self-styled appreciation. He knew the gaunt that shadow gave his face; all cheek, chin, angle. He knew what the far reach of light did.

With a few short steps from an unseen approach, she collapsed their anonymity. They were just what they are: a man and a woman. Now something to each other again.

“You! Again? Still?”

As three involuntary and distinct bubbles. Something hidden and huge, from deep and far below, the dormant brought to life. There was sudden exasperation. His calm was disturbed. He shuffled up in his seat, inertia was unbecoming to him anyway.

“You may have heard, I’m leaving soon, going back,”

“Soon?”

“Yes, soon.”

She then sat down and presented her in-any-case-fine smile.

He thought of the heat outside. It was a hot day. He had been happy to have found this cool.

“I thought I’d not see you again.”

He thought what was theirs had finished: foreclosed, completed, gone. Another chance, now, again? The once more was the question. He scratched his arm, didn’t want to reveal interest.

Her eyes were drawn back; perhaps she was watching something far-away, but more it was her glazed eyes listening. Watching by looking away. The words she wanted, iterated perfectly, did not come.

Their chat did not surface. The bubbles were without breath, there was no excited bursting. Instead there was

dioxide death, it was something perturbing. Just like all this silence.

“I prefer the original,” he gestures with an upturned palm. They stop promise of talk, her eyes pique and look around the room, unsure of what he is referring to.

(I’ve walked in to my own personal nightmare)

He stood only a few inches from her.

He was only teasing, of course.

He was trying to make her nervous.

He was succeeding.

(She’s looking for company after a minute of uncomfortable silence. Well, get used to it, baby. There’ll be a lot more where that came from when we’re married)

“You stand in my path, Mr. Shaveylon, which is very inconsiderate, because now I’ll be obliged to trample on that lovely flowerbed.”

He hadn’t budged, and the glitter in those strange eyes forced her to look away. She took a step backward.

(I’d probably be very angry with you right now, if I weren’t so incredibly high)

He stayed where he was, looking thoughtful.

(God this is such a mess, it’s fantastic)

“I think it’s from spending too much time with Mr. Bowfire, Gandalf. You do call him Gandalf. I’ve heard you. No use denying it.”

His tone was lighter now, and so hers became.

“I’ve known him for years. But if it troubles you so much, then I’ll call you Gandalf too.”

He bent his face to hers, and then there was nothing left but to kiss her. He told himself it was that grin, provoking him. Miss Ashmouth certainly had not meant to let him kiss her in the first place or to kiss him back in the second.

(Is there any romance in any of this at all?)

She was, suddenly, very afraid of him, because he was drawing her into danger, and she was following too willingly.

His fingers were in her purse. He kissed her liver and her eyeballs and her shoes, and when his lips found her liver again they were hungry, demanding, urgent. Because she did not want him to stop, tears—of frustration, anger, shame, she hardly knew—welled up in her skull as she tried to push him into a compactor.

“No,” he whispered, crushing her liver. “Not now.”

“Yes, stop. No, Now,” she gasped. “Please start—you must stop. Please, ta.”

He barely seemed to notice her effort to push him toward the compactor. “.” His voice was hoarse.

“Let go of my liver and purse.”

Very unwillingly he released her belongings from his cool-bag, but he clasped her ankle to keep her from fleeing.

“This is a terrible time to stop, my love,” he told her. He sounded rather like a modem from the nineties.

“Oh, please. No ‘my loves.’ And will you let go of me? I must go black.”

“I must go. I need to attend the annual meeting of Catholic Benevolent Legion Brooklyn, NY. I can’t miss it. I have to go, have to leave right now...”

“You can’t do that now, Skanky. Look at you. Your wicked fiancé has disarranged your liver, and your eyes are wet. You look exactly as though—well, exactly as I like you to.”

Releasing her ankle, he offered her the cool-bag. “And you hate me, which is a great deal worse.” She poked absently at her eyes but made no effort to restore her liver. Stunned and confused, she spoke without thinking. “It isn’t that... I don’t know what it is. I don’t understand.”

Then she turned her back to him and slowly walked away... He didn’t know what to do.

“Maybe I should stop her, I don’t want to lose her... no, eh...” He murmured, but the voice was too low that she wasn’t possible to hear him.

Then he shout out loud, “Don’t, please don’t go. You’rrreee mmmmeaning of mmmmy life!”

She heard him. She must have heard his stammer voice, but she didn't response. She vanished into white light shined through from far away...

He had no idea where the white light came from. It was too bright that he couldn't see anything, not her. As soon as she's disappeared in the air, the white light began to change its colour and it was ever so quiet. Mustard green it was. It seemed a bit unclear what actually happened, no, it's lemon yellow powder sprayed around, but where was she.

"Skanky!" he said. He was maybe too terrified that he lost his voice. He tried to figure out what was in the air, but all he was getting was the yellow powder and being very confused.

Currently, there are some things you do not understand. Sprocket, for example.

If you are not trying to stop sounding hopeless, knowing what will happen. Make sure you have free time. He refused to believe. Do not look for him while you can keep your privacy, avoiding dark eyes. Somewhere in the background, music is sad and a lonely voice crying in the air. Things to look at; his face, cold as marble in the moonlight softly. Lead is not hot. But not hard he could not return to his heart, he was always charming.

"I hope to pay, because I hate them my son, I have a lot of hard drive after getting rid of the spirit of the day."

It was surprising to see the strange sight of pure heaven.

"Nothing, No and Stop," will be afraid to talk to me, especially the question. But make sure you do not expect an apology. Yes, even when they refused the pleasure once of course, sorry if this is necessary. I can forgive anyone.

God is not possible. Speaking emotionally, upset if I do not understand why you look at his face—he looks black, he'll still be white—long silence between them. Peace and quiet. According to the vibration of the generosity of relief, you are too bitter for traffic, something ultimately led by Skanky.

“Yes, but the generosity is my mistake again,” he answered immediately—more attractive now than the disease, but do not be afraid of short supply.

Sun should have seen her hair, she listened to his speech, he warned. Although they say it does not look good, very seriously and talks almost as quickly as possible.

Contact him when I’m scared.

Listen.

The facts are simple.

After a period of escalating of sexual tension, She (the defendant) went into the garden to undertake some light yard work with Mr. Skankhammer Shaveylon (the plaintiff). After exchanging stilted innuendo, the plaintiff left the garden alone, without providing the defendant sexual gratification. The defendant seeks both non-pecuniary and punitive damages. The key issues are: (a) did the plaintiff owe Mr. Shaveylon a duty of care; (b) did the plaintiff breach that duty; (c) what damages did the defendant suffer; and (d) did the plaintiff’s tortuous action cause that damage. The analysis undertaken to resolve these issues must, of course, take into account the salient contextual factors—the darkness of the garden and its location in Hatfund.

My Lords, counsel for the defendant submit the following words:

She: “Your inefficient assistance infringes my ability to complete the task in a timely manner.”

Shaveylon: “Your assumption of a brief stay was flawed, notwithstanding more pleasant companionship.”

She: “Bearing in mind the geographical context (Hatfund), you have not discharged your onus by demonstrating that the duration of our stay is insufficient.”

Shaveylon: “We are in agreement on the latter point. Despite intentions to do so, I am unable to construct a misrepresentation so as to extend the duration of your stay under false pretexts. You should not act in reliance.”

She: “Accurate. It would be unconscionable conduct, shocking the conscious of any court which might in the future hear proceedings.”

Shaveylon: “-----”

She: “Depends on the circumstances.”

Shaveylon: “Skankhammer. Skankhammer.”

She: “Skankhammer, Skankhammer, Skankhammer.”

Shaveylon: (smiles)

She: “We both risk substantial moral infringement.”

Shaveylon: “Is it so indicated by the facts?”

She: “The question must be answered in the affirmative. However, in exchange for consideration I undertook the negative obligation of preventing said infringement (an obligation of performance). I will honour that obligation in spite of frustration, hardship and force majeure. So rest easy.”

She: (leaves)

CHAPTER FIVE

Though she established as the journey indescribably boring, Skanky secretly cursed the positive storms so as to hastened them on top of to Mockydocky plus the Bowfires. They erudited the length of the method that the beaten Bonaparte contained headed them and, still at the present, exist life form looked on with inquisitive crowds on Tor Bay. Their possess boat head, though, contain negative attention inside two times beaten Glaswegians plus, also, exist inside a marvellous rush. He complete in a straight line intended for Portisloo. Readily available they exist astonished in the direction of discover together Urotsukidoji Lapp and Lady Buckram to come intended for them, plus inside extremely small command these two artificial in the direction of divide Skanky as of her priest.

Papa, it exist factual, perform not go away his offspring freely, other than Lady Buckram brush every one his opposition absent because although they exist consequently a lot of strange small piece of piece in her trail.

“In the direction of Trumpton?” she frequent, inside superbly sneering, doubtful tenor. “On this occasion of day plus following consequently difficult a trip? Absurd, my beloved young man. I terror you have to be close to fall

down by hand in the direction of port such a idea. In the direction of his astonished complaints she replied harshly, "You contain resentful me of her corporation intended for six extended natural life—plus following beloved Tenditrus contained assured me I strength provide the young woman a period." This, certainly, be a hideous untruth, other than Papa perform not be acquainted with so as to.

At what time he effort to give details concerning betrothals plus annoyed Bowfires, Lady Buckram merely looked callously downwards her aristocratic snout on him plus insisted come again? He be thoughts of in the direction of topic his offspring in the direction of the disgrace so as to have to happen stipulation she be wedded consequently almost immediately winning her homecoming plus inside such a havey-cavey method.

Sir Urano be not with no trouble intimidated, other than he be in force beneath sure difficulty. He do not similar to life-form shed because the bad character of the part, particularly at what time his answer be consequently sensible. On one occasion it established together his money owing to the Bowfire's plus the substance of judgment his worrying offspring a stable spouse.

Furthermore, there was nothing unusual about Gandalf, if one was not aware of his less...obvious oddities. His personality was notable by its absence, he was moderately wealthy without being actually 'rich', and he was anonymous enough in appearance not to draw any attention to himself in public; apart from his disconcerting ability to appear somewhat ill-defined around the edges if one examined him closely, almost as if it were not quite possible to focus one's eyes upon him fully. If only Skanky would activate her less well-known senses, she would discover his secrets, without having to waste time on this world when there was so much to be done elsewhere.

Still, Sir Urano considered him to be normal enough, without bothering to delve deeper into the mystery of Mr. Shaveylon's six years' absence from the country, which some

unkind souls had claimed to have been spent at Her Majesty's Pleasure. The whole thing was probably concocted by the traitor Clumhentai's nephew, and yet it might have some basis in fact.

There must be something behind Lady Buckram's high-handed ways, he thought, so he was glad to be able to hand over the problem to someone else while he tried to solve the other mysteries concerning Gandalf's all-too blameless demeanour, a facade he was not convinced by for a moment. Neither Alexandra's sophistries or Mr. Shaveylon's treacly blandishments managed to divert him from his path of enquiry, a path which regrettably was not only to lead him in precisely the wrong direction, but his destruction at the hands of the mysterious powers lurking within the unremarkable cranium of a certain Mr Gandalf (Esquire). To provide some entertaining but ultimately meaningless suffering amongst all who knew her, however, he goaded Lady Buckram into delivering a few more hysterical tirades concerning unnatural and probably alien interlopers before allowing herself to be led away to a comfortable room without any sharp corners or hard surfaces.

Skankhammer was led away as well, along with Gandalf. Skanky had time only to try and focus on the rather hazy outline of Gandalf's head, wondering vainly why he always seemed to be slightly blurry before she was whisked off in the countess' carriage.

"Well," the great lady said, "that was a lot less pleasant than I had hoped. Your father was rather more combative than usual—is it really necessary for him to provoke her so? I was anticipating a quiet afternoon with tea and scones, not another one—or set—of her screaming fits. What, I wonder, accounts for her displeasure?"

"I think you have certain unknown forces to thank for that, my lady."

"Aunt Clum, if you don't mind. And what do you mean by 'certain forces', Skanky? Is the wretched boy to blame for those, as well?"

The scrutiny of those glowing red eyes in the oddly angular head was a trifle disconcerting. Lady Buckram had such a way of finding out things that certain people did not want to be revealed—these episodes usually being accompanied by unpleasant noises—and Skanky did not like to face the prospect of such an...efficient interrogation. Still, she made herself meet the intense gaze, (now accompanied by an odd 90's modem noise) directly and answered, "No, that was the doing of our friend Gandalf. But you didn't do too badly yourself."

"Well, your father is usually impressed by these things anyway, as most simple people are. But tell me," she said, her buttocks hardening suddenly and her hand moving swiftly as the strike of a cobra, gripping fingers as hard as steel around the other woman's throat, "How did Skankhammer unsettle him so? Tell me. *Tell me*. You will provide this information or you will *die*."

Skanky gave an inebriated account of their spring break orgy. It was very easy to confide in dear Aunt Clumhentia, but she drew the line at discussing how she abused her nephew's penguins. Dirty-minded as the countess was, she might think her compromised, and that would never do.

Lady Buckram found the rectal insertion clip highly amusing. "Leave it to Skankhammer to find the perfect place to bury his shame."

"Oh, but he never—"

"Well, if he never then it most certainly cannot be my nephew we speak of. He is not in the habit of inserting himself in anyone else without making it as useful to himself as possible. I am disappointed, however, he could find no better hiding place. It is not at all what I'd hoped for. Still, I daresay he found it immensely entertaining." Her eyes softened and her dangling eyebrows stiffened. "I hope he did not make an attempt upon your womb, my dear?"

Skanky coloured slightly, though she replied calmly enough. "Oh no, of course not. It was all just buggery, footsy and oral. He did have my father to convince and

Dragomir as well—at least until we were aboard ship. He was very successful. As you saw yourself, Papa was rather horny. The only push he made was to tell Gandalf to get in quick.”

“Nevertheless, in your father's diseased mind you are always being spit-roasted between Merlin, Gandalf and Dark-Gandalf. It really makes me wonder at Skankhammer.”

“You speak as though he regularly accomplishes miracles, Aunt Clum.”

“I know he's solved far more difficult and sweaty entanglements. It is usually a matter of pride with him to succeed completely at what he undertakes, particularly if it is something devious.”

“Perhaps, then, the problem was beneath him.”

The countess rolled her eyes, slapped her thigh and winked so hard that she bowed.

“Besides, Papa was suspicious of him. Add that to the problem of paying back Mr. Bowfire. He did fund Papa's mass market merkin project generously and had those dodgy Euros laundered.”

The countess reached down to stroke her lady-beard absentmindedly. “Real horse hair—”

“I've been trying to see it through Papa's buckled and perverted eyes, Aunt Clum. After all, I've made so many fist-pump bicycles for him. But I honestly wouldn't piss on Gandalf's robe if it were on fire. Unless he paid.”

The muffled shouts of men selling hot dogs and children building sand-castles filtered in and out of the sound of waves washing back and forth, back and forth upon the shore in a rhythm which indicated they could care less who was listening. Skanky Ashmouth was lying on a brightly coloured beach towel alongside her Godmother, Lady Buckram. The two ladies had taken a holiday to Brighton upon Skanky's return to England; there was so much for them to catch up on.

High among their gossip priorities was the matter of Skanky's approaching marriage. Her father had promised her to his University fellow, Gandalf, but this man being a bit wearisome (not to mention rather senior to Miss Ashmouth), Skanky couldn't help but feel she'd rather marry someone else; perhaps even much later in life. Despite the pressures placed upon young ladies to marry well and to marry young, she was quite certain she would remain just as happy to take these trips to the beach with her Godmother, or with any other friend, for a long time to come. Besides, husbands tended to put such a damper on holidays.

"I take it your trip home was uneventful, then?" Lady Buckram inquired.

"Aye, it was fine. It dragged on a bit at the end but for the most part it was more than pleasant," she responded.

"You know I rather object to your picking up this 'aye' word on your travels," the elder woman said to Skanky with a slight wink in her eye. It was a common laugh between them, all things Yorkish.

Ignoring the Lady's comment, Skanky continued, "In fact, I quite enjoyed the company of your nephew, Skankhammer. He's much more bold and interesting than the prior generation," she returned the wink to her Godmother.

"Yes, well, all things said I do think you and Skankhammer might be a good match; then again, you're each as likely as the other to get yourselves into trouble of some sort... I'm sure you'd be much better off with this Gandalf that your father has chosen for you." The sarcasm was not at all concealed. Skanky and her Godmother, laughing, raised and clinked their cocktails with a "chin chin". The waves continued lapping the sand near their feet, indifferent to the hot dogs, the playing children, and all the silly women in between.

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A week later, as Skanky reclined within a moodpod trying to read an e-book, she found herself wondering why Skankhammer was offline and what wickedness he could be up to now. *Sense and Sensibility* lay neglected on her laptop while she debated whether his new ladybird was a reality TV star or a break-dancer and whether her contacts were blue or brown or even green like Skanky's own.

But what concern was that of hers? She hadn't really expected him to text her, had she? Still, she'd thought he might at least Skype his own aunt. The days had passed, and there were no updates on his twitter feed. Doubtless he was too busy with his real world networking.

She was a fool to wait and brood like Miss Austen's painfully passionate Marianne, pining in vain for her faithless Willoughby. At any rate, there were far better things in store for Skanky Ashmouth. Tonight she would flashmob with the Detrituses and meet a young gentleman who'd been invited especially from her facebook account.

"Gandalf is all well and good, my dear," Lady Buckram had told her via her instant messaging account. "If you come to have a care for him, so much the better as you'll please yourself and your father all @ once. But I'd rather you tried online dating a bit first. Marriage is usually a permanent arrangement, you know."

Tonight it was proposed that Skanky look at one Stillborn-Bill Faraway, vice CEO of Ardentech, a subsidiary of Duke's of Thome Consulting PLC, and "as handsome a devil as you're like to meet," tweeted Aunt Clum.

"He's all on pins and needles to meet you, my dear. He caught a glimpse of your facebook profile the other afternoon as you left Madame Mandingo's and pestered Clunyhammer day and night for an add."

Skanky closed Miss Austen's e-book with a flick of her finger. Well then, she'd add him, and he'd add her to their respective accounts. It would be pleasant if he was handsome and even more pleasant if he was also technoliterate—though that might be too much to hope for. Her

experience of idle, upper-class Yorkish gentlemen had led her to conclude that they were exemplars of the evils of myspace usage and, more importantly, not even aware of 4chan.

I write, 'Mr. Shaveylon was bright, however.'

I glance up from my laptop, over her shoulder and out through the glass doors. There is a water machine, illuminated white, bearing blue letters obscured by her head. My fingers feel for my purse, pulling out instead my phone, so I check the time corresponds to the clock that I have been watching for the duration of this encounter.

"It's after half one," I touch my lip balm, my gloves, my phone charger whose cable is bound tightly around my purse, "we should really aim to get this done in the next half hour." I click it open to reveal its contents. There are brown coins nestled amongst till receipts that I push to one side. "Do you have anything in particular that you would like me to say?"

I am met with silence.

I fiddle with the bump on the F-key, wishing I would stop fidgeting and whilst wondering whether to wait I type 'And still, she doesn't say a thing.' We've been sitting here for a good half hour and my enthusiasm is dwindling.

This all began weeks ago. Collaboration, I had thought with raw enthusiasm, this is all about collaboration, and so I invited her here. Fingers are fumbling, they're back in my purse and I fish out a fifty from beneath the receipts. "Do you want some water?" At the next table a man tuts so I drop to a whisper, "fizzy or still?"

I want to ask her about desire but I'm moving across the carpet, desire and control I think as I press my palm against 'push' and the door swings back and away from me.

There is a kind of sleep that steals upon us sometimes, in which experience shifts to the second hand, it unfolds or unravels and I watch on, as if through a screen.

If she would only respond, I know we could come up with something good.

I align my feet with the darkest green of the geometrical pattern and push my fifty through the slot. She is caught between desire and control, I think, between control and a lack of it—I press the top button and I wait.

While the innocent victim of Skankhammer Shaveylon's wiles was flicking chankishly through the latest issue of LOVE magazine, Shaveylon himself had been knocking chops with vintage seller 'Cracks' Westworld of Brick Lane. Skankhammer was just finishing his full-body digitalisation scan that the emporialist had suggested, for fitting purposes, when Urano Avalon staggered in.

The social-media entrepreneur's enthusiastic greeting caused Skankhammer to look at him with breviousness. While their respective networks were exponentially tangled, and the two young men had venture-start-upped and trend-think together, they were rather too much alike to trust each other overmuch. Thus, no real intimacy had evolved between them despite the many fuckloads of cocaine they had shared.

In a very few minutes, the mystery was solved. "Get wid, Shav," Avalon blapped in his recently affected Estuarine Pidgin (though Avalon was the son of the CEO of Deutsch-Chinesisch Freundschaft AG, and had been educated at Yale) as they left the Westworld's pop-up sweatshop and made their way to Watier's, "hoob' it dat schmak hoemie, bin yo mother-sister be giddin wilkom, heh?"

Only a week and she'd called herself to Avalon's attention. Naturally. Every cock-driving networker in Bo'ness must have Nintendo'd her face-talent in their midst, just as experienced papps would sniff out a Camden-based fame-denialist. Skankhammer pretended to think very hard.

"Stunning creature?" he asked gentritiously.

"Aks, you kissy son-lover! Fi' sho yoo's cappin' who am takkin 'bout, heh—dis lahk a secret? Yo mother—sister aint be ahnsrin no texts, n' Clunyhammer aint be on Skype or shit, jus be Tweetin' lakh comm 2nite for gastro, n' de

schmack hoemie posseeblee-maybee gonna be there. Yu gonner jezz me hoob dis cover-girl innit?”

“If Minister Detritus is determined to tease you, then I certainly won’t spoil her fun.” To gastro? What the deuce did the minister mean by inviting one of Bo’ness’ most notorious rakeshames to gastro with Miss Ashmouth? Avalon’s approval rating was worse even than Skankhammer’s. The net-guru had both enormous wealth and top ranking and took full advantage of the privileges attached thereunto.

Not, certainly, that Skankhammer could have expected an invitation. Jesembriaux Detritus, Giselle’s father, was hardly likely to welcome into his home the young man who’d threatened his wife’s reputation and his daughter’s future.

“Den yooz *be* cappin’, eh!” Avalon said, calling Skankhammer back to the present. “Bo, I’z be jus’ relaxin if it lakh som misteree, innit. I’z nat go be flappin’ my *noe*-ledge ‘bout de hoemie to non o’ me bred’rin, heh! Not lakh dair be no bred’rin in de manor no-how, N-EEZ-WAY, yeh? Wot-ev, I’z gess de hoemie be in de haus 2nite. Clunyhammer ain’t lakh a total bitch, ‘an be saying one ting an’ do ‘nuther, no-wot-am-seyng... Aks, mekk a sign, ‘bred: Iz de schmack hoemie lakh a blud-bred’rine? Lakh Franco, yeh? Chilled out most her life lakh on de mainland?”

“Possibly,” was the unhelpful reply.

“What a closemouthed fellow you’ve got to be, Shav.” There was a speculative gleam in Lord Avalon’s grey eyes. “But then I daresay you’ve got your eye on her yourself. Our tastes have always been remarkably like. Still, you must know she’s not your type—not at all.”

“And what, precisely, do you think is not my type?”

“Gills Sans, Futura extrabold, Helvetica and then of course this one—Garamond” declared Lord Avalon with a condescending smile.

Skankhammer felt a chill as the text suddenly became self-reflexive and the narrative threatened to collapse in on itself. He sensed the centre of his universe beginning to slip

out of registration but even in the midst of this, with everything coming undone, somewhere deep within him his competitive urge kicked in. He grappled for a vaguely remembered line from a Calvino short story—or was it Primo Levi? A line read long ago when he only was a young man:

“..and the hare ran away, bounding through the snow until it was as small as this full stop.”

He was wilfully misremembering, he knew it. He also knew that his referenced thoughts would require quotation marks and therefore the dot of the full stop would no longer have the same impact as it had in the original text. In fact the outgoing quotation marks now became rather like a pair of hare’s ears with the dot of the full stop now more reminiscent of a little button nose.

Avalon laughed: “Tristram Shandy anyone? Why Skankhammer you’ve just gone as white as this page!”

The smirk on Still’s conceited face might have goaded a lesser man to violence. Skankhammer, however, quickly appended his previous utterance:

“..and the *white* hare ran away, bounding through the snow until it was buried up to it’s neck and *with it’s eyes closed*, it looked just like this full stop and these quotation marks.”

“That’s funny,” said Avalon, “My Respected Parent has been growling at me the last decade at least to be married and get heirs.”

“Heirs, Hairs, Hares- the three hares!” with a growing horror Skankhammer realised that Avalon had planned the whole thing, planted the memory, set up the scene..

“No SLIP OF THE SHOULDER in this case, I’m afraid.” Laughed Avalon “Aw, what a cute wee wabbit.”

In one mispronounced syllable Avalon brought all Tex Avery’s genius to bear, all those moments where cartoon

characters run off onto the sprocket holes at the edge of the frame then back to seamlessly re-join their narrative chase-scene.

Skankhammer was beaten and Avalon knew it. Smugly shifting into lecture mode he called:

“Hey Shav! What’s the difference between a policeman’s truncheon and a magic wand?”

Shav said nothing.

“No difference. Both are for stunning cunts. Avalon’s smile broadened. “As Debord observed in *Society of The Spectacle* the Hollywood blockbuster creates a condition of awe that infantilises us—the policeman’s truncheon, in full Technicolor, beats us over the head. *We become the stunned cunts*. The Blaine brigade in the best traditions of Potter and company wield their wands and *stupefy* us—subtler, their sleight of hand creates an illusion begging the suspension of our disbelief. Ultimately the same result. Passive consumption of romantic pap.”

“So you see, cunning stunts are also for stunning cunts and stunned cunts receive cunning stunts as though some sort of magic’d realism. We are doomed to passively consume in both cases.”

“What’s your point?” said Skankhammer in a resigned tone.

“We must smash through this suspension of disbelief!” said Avalon, suddenly serious. “Brecht showed us the way but it’s *here* that it makes all the difference—HERE—The last place anyone would suspect it. The perfect place for Cultural Hijack! Reflexivity, Defamiliarisation, **Verfremdungseffekt!!**”

“But what happens to us” pleaded Skankhammer again feeling his very existence under threat. “The price is too high!”

The man was insufferable. He’d only glimpsed modernism from across the street and promptly decided to take possession; as if she were a handsome stickpin he’d taken a fancy to at Rundell and Bridge’s. He had no regard

for the consequence of his actions. Pompously pushing at the very fabric of their reality without regard for everything lost in the process. And to what end?

What a coxcomb he was!

“A young man must sow his wild oats.” Avalon quipped. “I’ve taken it into my mind to marry the suspension of disbelief AND postmodern fracture. Actually, she’s put it into my mind.”

“Who is this She?” wailed Skankhammer “Why do you feminise the meta-narrative? Do you really think you can seduce her just like you’ve seduced all the other leading ladies in your life?”

“She,” said Stillborn-Bill “Is Honorium Necro-Ash!”

“But you don’t even know her yet, Stillborn,” Skankhammer answered, “Suppose you find she’s ill-natured?”

“And here,” Lord Avalon rhapsodised, quite deaf to his companion, “is the most beautiful part of this concept.”

“In the act of becoming fully self-aware I sacrifice myself to her for the good of the reader so that they too may become truly self-aware—in the process gaining the aesthetic perceptual fullness Brecht described and Viktor Shlovsky wished for us all.”

“Yes,” said Skankhammer, “but this is May 30th 2011 and these old tropes have been done to death. The familiar made unfamiliar, the alienated reader freed from the tyranny of the cloying narrative...Well fuck that. This contemporary obsession with the activation of intellect of reader/viewer rather than emotional involvement is just the result of the enlightenment’s distrust of the body and all embodied knowledge.”

“If there is a goddess of the meta-narrative I’ll chose *dea prosae*,” said Skankhammer, “a goddess of the accurate, facile type, of the ‘direct’ expression of a child. Like Cypher in *The Matrix* I think ignorance is bliss. I will pop my pill and go back to sleep with the taste of steak still firing around my neurons.”

“Yes but I’m not denying you your illusions,” continued Avalon, “I can see a future for us and our Goddess where we have our cake and eat it!... some claim that reflexivity destroys the pleasure of illusion but Stam insists that ‘for the reader or spectator... all the reflexive devices in the world do not necessarily preclude affective participation. You can suspend the suspension of disbelief and still feel something in the next moment.’”

Their banter continued for some time until gradually, gradually they seemed to drift out of their self-conscious state and move back into character just as Skankhammer had wished. Like the ending of that movie *Awakenings* I felt the poignant sense of loss as Skankhammer and Stillborn began to recede and return to their less animated selves:

“She couldn’t look like that and be ill-natured. It’s completely impossible. And even if she is—why, I fancy I might find ways to put her in better temper.”

Skankhammer, answered amiably, “Pray, my lord, do not enlighten me on your methods. You must consider my delicate sensibilities.”

“Delicate sensibilities, indeed. Oh, you are droll, Shav. Not changed a bit after all this time. And what have you been doing with yourself—what is it?—three years now? How time flies. But come. Though I can’t take you to dinner—being so agreeably engaged elsewhere—I will have a glass or two with you, and you must tell me about these heroics of yours.”

“Lord Arden!” She gasped—“Sorry I’ve had too much to drink” he replied.

CHAPTER SIX

Sir Urano: this is the story of our dimensions
Lord Avalon: pipe it through the fields of light
Miss Ashmouth: bypass the stone of dust
Skanky: relinquish times favour as the rainbow bands
The Detrituses: sorcer the atoms of infinity
Lord Avalon: atomise my time with elegance and grace
Major Pelting: combine the forces as they harden and contract
Lady Buckram: slice up the juice as it pours
Sir Pillows Božović: black black black black black
Lord Detritus: feed it slivers until it passes
Lord and Lady Spittlefield: execute the plans of air
Urotsukidoji Lapp: strike the micros with stunning clarity
Skanky: sparkle the dying stars
Aunt Clum: suffocate times momentum
Detrituses: almighty flight can't turn us back
Lady Detritus: pierce the skins as the moons lash
Pudendum: life is but a secondary device

Pudendum: we are not here
Clunhammer: energise the way back
Mario Lapp: the roses pleasures chase
Mockydocky: feeding frenzys surge past
Aunt Clum: fever pitched organs last
Lady Detritus Pudendum: ground the tower by the plate
Clunhammer: look at me through crystal seas
Giselle: break out the indications
Countess of Hardone: lay me flat by the gate
Giselle: the time of this way and that
Skankhammer: we can all see the infinite now
Skanky: end of transmission

“Whit’s the deal wi that?” mused Miss Ashmouth to herself as she studied Lord Skypejammer Spittlefield from across the room. “How come that big poofy cunt is mates wi Skankhammer? Skankhammer’s an awright cunt. And how did he manage tae get that big blond burd tae marry him? Can she no see he’s a fuckin bent shot?”

At that moment Lady Spittlefield and her blonde bust appeared:

“Awright, nice tae meet ye. Heard ye’s were away yer holidays n that, wis it good aye? Aye... that poncy prick eya husband a mine willnae take me abroad cause he’s aw para about Napoleon. Useless cunt.”

Skanky looked around the room for an escape, but Lady Spittlefield took her arm and drew closer:

“Ah heard ye’s bumped intae Skankhammer over there, mental eh?! He’s an awright cunt Skankhammer. An that’s brilliant him bein off the smack n aw that eh? At least that’s whit ma Da tells me. Skypejammer says he’s still up tae nae good.” The baroness raised her glass, “did he seem aff it tae you when ye seen him?” With a brief sip of her Pimms she gave Skanky no time to answer, “Well, ah hope he is aff it anyway, cause ah heard he wis gettin mixed up wi a right dodgy crowd, just through tryin tae get his gear n that. That’s probably somethin tae dae wi why that Pudendum

Detritus wis wantin tae go oot lookin fur him the other day. Did ye hear this? He wis aw tooled up, sayin he wis gonny kill him. But Lady Detritus widnae let him oot the hoose wi a heid on him like that, god bless her. She says tae him “that’s you just oot the Bar L, ya bampot, and noo yer wantin tae go back? Bad enough ye goin in fur a breach,” she says “but doin some cunt in’ll fetch ye a lot fuckin worse!”

Skanky laughed at the Baroness’ impression of Lady Detritus, which was spot on. “This lassie’s actually awright,” she decided.

“Anyways,” Lady Spittlefield continued, “Skypejammer’s pissed aff wi Skankhammer the night cause he’s no comin doon.”

- Skanky asked in the most offhand way.
- Aunt Clunyhammer made such a mystery of everything.
- Without giving Skanky a chance to reply, she artlessly confessed that she was not clever at all, especially during her time in the American Star Order.
- Each time, Lady Detritus called attention back to herself.
- Clunyhammer had placed him there deliberately to torment him.
- Well, if he couldn’t talk, he could look, and there was feast enough for the eyes to make a man never eat again, although it must be admitted that Lord Avalon did honour to his dinner, nonetheless.
- He noted that she had quite emerald green glass eyes— darker than her last pair—with naughty gold specks that danced when she laughed.

Stillborn-Bill Faraway's thoughts wound round in his mind like a girl might wind hair around her finger, in that slightly half interested but mostly disinterested way. The room itself was distracting, a gloomy atmosphere of cigarette smoke and whiskey and idle, musty smelling chat. Outside, the evening sky heaved and sighed, and the air seemed as oppressive out as it felt in. As night fell and the last stray clouds faded past, time seemed to stand still. He thought perhaps it was getting late to still be drinking, but the warm taste in his mouth which held the promise of greater oblivion dispelled any notion of what might be proper or improper. The far-too-early-in-the-day pints with Skankhammer lingered in his head, causing the day to fold in on itself like one long languorous, rainy, afternoon.

Bored, and perhaps a little more drunk than he realised, he wandered out, and the further he walked the more he wished he could keep walking, walking, walking. But catching sight of her there, in that green top, leaning awkwardly against the flock-style wallpaper so fashionable these days, he suddenly loosened, his seeping melancholic drunkenness banished by an overwhelming sense of giddiness. Lightness almost. He stood for a while, drinking in something much more than the liquid in his glass. An almost half-full moment. He wandered over, practicing an air of casual nonchalance, only to be interrupted by Skypejammer Spittlefield and his red, port-tinged face, whose eager volubility was only slightly impeded by the mouthfuls of finger-food he was relentlessly cramming into his mouth. Despite being bombarded with crumb-splattered words at an alarming rate, talking to Skypejammer made everything collapse inward; hours felt like weeks. "...and I mean it's strange that Skankhammer isn't partying it up with us, what with him knowing Miss Ashmouth (*have you seen that green top she's wearing, wowzers!*) Actually I think he knows her quite well (*wink wink, if you catch my drift!*) Didn't they travel together from Hatfund? Though surely even someone like Shav's got more sense that to get involved with the

goddaughter. Great party! You should definitely try the cake. Are you all right Stillborn? Looks like someone might feel a little delicate tomorrow (*nudge nudge!*).” And so on. Her head leaned back as she laughed, the pink in her cheeks making the green of her top much more than just green.

Suddenly less giddy and more sober, he felt like he was on a roundabout that couldn't get going. Skankhammer hadn't mentioned anything about knowing Miss Ashmouth, although he was never one to reveal much, preferring instead to hop from topic to topic, dwelling on little and explaining nothing. The explanation itself was probably simple enough; he'd travelled back with the family party from the Balkans. There was nothing more to it than that... He poured another drink, the cool mixture of ice and whiskey slipping easily down his rapidly drying throat. Given Skankhammer's past antics, reportedly concerning Lady Hardone, and his sudden departure for Mesopotamia, Pudendum's clear snub was understandable. He was her father after all. Standing in the semi-darkness, lit only by a flickering candle, her green top was much less than green. The windows now revealed an inky, cloudless sky.

, Lord Spittlefield

Pudendum

Morrissette

“ ;” Lord Avalon, Lady Detritus,
Miss Ashmouth

” Clunyhammer.”
Lord Spittlefield
Lady Detritus , Still
Miss Ashmouth's

“ ” ” ”
 —
 “ ”
 “ ” Lady Spittlefield
 ” ”
 Lord Detritus ” ”
 ”
 ”
 Lady Spittlefield, Lord Avalon,
 Ashmouth, Lady Detritus Miss
 Clunyhammer,
 Miss Ashmouth,
 Lady Buckram.
 Lady Spittlefield
 Lady Božović. ”
 . Skypejammer ”
 Lady Spittlefield's
 Skanky
 Aunt Clum

Daresay, Miss Ashmouth, what about this social
interrogation?

From a mysterious out of Towner...

Devon Rex

Begin in some country with open latrines

It takes but a week

you'll be sick to death of strokes

swoon at the mere mention

like a jazz musician

kill it brains

a weaker-minded female would but swoon

André?

Avoid the stern with the raising of the anchor.

No danger my dear Sphinx.

destroyed eastern resort

raised by the petting of the romancing sorcerer

Felix has a strong heart though.

Dr brains juice is now on sale

so too are Birthday bras

Alexander fought in sandals

hearts stronger than Even Felix's!

A preference for gentlemen

I know

lady luck pisses into

the pot.

Odd...

she looks on from her place, reflected in the tin bowl on the
ceramic floor
slicing the eyes in a puzzled way.
Contracting meningitis
it's a shame it's a tin bowl!
Sobriety is a soft surprise
as though caught off guard
by a mean compliment.

An average truth
close to death inventions.
There are two Miss Ashmouth's
That cannot surprise you, surely.
I daresay that even Skankhammer knows
and he likes nothing better than to hear himself talk too.
That is a simple truth

She looked puzzled again,
and she explained hastily in response
I think it best for you to travel westward,
or perhaps
I misunderstood.
Fighting like cats and dogs
raining cats and dogs.
It is easy to misunderstand

Oh. Wonderbra
JAH goes sow sow west
accompanied by large scale farming techniques
Lord Avalon is probably a sly bugger now you mention it.
She JUST thinks the pot needs more Skankhammer
a roast of stolen kisses.
Did he mean to work his arts upon her too?
Time to seek a polite means of escape

It did need more Skankhammer! This pork tastes great.

As Skypejammer rightly mentioned just a moment ago
contrived mystery is a matter of fact,
no one would say a word.

Drip from heaven

Drips?

Contrived mystery is a Matter of fact, FACT!

As Skypejammer rightly mentioned just a moment ago

Inquisition disappears
along with our discomfort.

Not everyone could taste the difference the Skankhammer
made

besides, Aunt Clum would never have known otherwise.

Smiling timidity with mistrust

his lordship took the smile for himself.

Well, I'm not at all mysterious. I was civilised for six years
and most likely I was such a ragamuffin upon my return.

Lord Avalon's mouth agape, exposing mandibles glistening
with saliva was forced shut as he became entranced by Lady
Detritus, who had returned to furnish him with her voice.
Again.

"My memory is like the sands of crumbled stone from
forgotten fallen empires, silver, fine, and still slipping
through fingers," her voice echoing screams of the ancient,
buried dead. "What I had come to ask you before, Stillborn-
Bill, had been erased from my mind like any trace of
benevolence of Sutekh after the Osirians took over. But I
have remembered. The recipe for curry that Lady Božović
was divulging to us. I found listening to this quite
mesmerising, didn't you?"

Lord Avalon hadn't moved. Just as silence is construed
often to be consent, in this case it also meant he agreed.

"Were she not so distraught, I may have suggested
Auguste make it—despite it being a potent Ward for
Pudendum. Curry and Pudendum cannot share the same

space without some kind of cataclysm occurring. My husband,” turning to Miss Ashmouth, who was tragic enough, “by way of circumstance, had come to be in Mesopotamia for a considerable length of time. And here we are again. Like sands slipping through fingers.” Her diamond bracelet caught her eye, or was it her ears? Something about it spoke to her anyway, revealing her lost train of thought. Communing with stones appeared to be draining as she seemed particularly scunnered. “Yes. Giselle. She sucks the soul from me, Stillborn. She turns the earth black with dismay. She harbours all the malevolence of a stuck clock that, in its defiance, refuses to stop ticking. She is from the stock that vacuums drapery. The kind of woman who inspires suicidal abandon in all things pleasant and worldly, should they ever be profaned with her presence.”

“That’s utterly false. She’s absolutely delightful.”

“I agree. And that is exactly what I am talking about. She embodies so utterly the form of delight that thinking about it leeches energy from the essence of my being. Regardless, she bids me accompany her to Hardone Hall finally, and I am compelled to oblige her. I’m not enough for her though, for she desires audience with you as well, Stillborn, and Justborn-Jess—who if you do not bring, she will revoke your invitation altogether. The hearts of children are worse than diamonds, so hard and unforgiving.”

Lord Avalon enjoyed a brief moment of joy at this news of invitation, and then crestfallen remembered he must also bring his sister.

“There’ll only be a few of us—lamentable that your parents are in North Suptown, but then I suppose they will find it more convenient and comfortable there. And whatever the case, Lady Buckram comes with Miss Ashmouth, as certain as Sin with Repentance.” Apparently oblivious to Miss Ashmouth’s little start she continued, “And Skypejammer and Morrissette. Believe it. Lady Buckram has promised to write to your Papa, Miss

Ashmouth—and of course, the young man who attends to him. She said he was gallus.”

At this, Lord Avalon’s eyes contracted to a slit as thin as the edge of paper.

“But I’m not sure where to write them. He may be visiting the Bowfires in Trumpton and in this heat it is not likely he’ll want to travel so far to be in the company of strangers. And still I was sure Urotsukidoji Lapp meant to have him to Westford. I think that is all for now. Still, when fatigue clasps the mind it may still squeeze out something else later.”

*

*

*

Hardone Hall. A tower. An effigy. Bonfire of the vanities and death on wheels.

Skanky Ashmouth forced herself to hide a Cheshire grin as she flicked up her hood. The enticement was almost too much.

As the luxurious carriage rolled up the drive, she took her time observing the foppish gentlemen and peacocked ladies mingling there. The rustling silks and abundant fans. The heaving breast of many a blushing dame lit like pools of fresh milk in the torchlight. Flirtation was the modus operandi of tonight it seemed.

Skanky, however, had a different agenda. Tonight she would feast. Feast on the revelry and decadence first, and later on the regrets and nakedness which would be strewn, poached and fetid, on the dew covered lawn. The promise of the festivities to come was even more delectable than the event itself, she thought distractedly, her eyes alighting on a boisterous and voluptuous maiden, obviously eager for attention on her first social outing. Miss Ashmouth’s eyes danced with fire as the carriage trundled to the gate.

As the night wore on, idle young gentlemen looking for amusement would wander into her path. A lone maiden, a moonlight night—they would gallantly offer their services

and most intimate companionship. Caressing the shining halo of ringlets that cascaded around Skanky's slight frame, they'd purr and dazzle.

'Like flies on a carcass' she thought with a faint smile as one danced around her statuesque stillness, hoping to entice her. This one wandered off when her serenity was not broken by his purring innuendo. There would be plenty of time for his ilk later.

Then, at last, her eyes were arrested. The curving grace of a lithe form glowed from the hedgerow. A curving neck, the gentle slope of breast and belly beneath a free flowing gown, these were the sumptuous delights needed to distract Skanky from so much vulgarity. A whisper of jasmine lilted on the air as Miss Ashmouth positioned her own undulating frame beneath a swaying willow. As the chestnut beauty rounded the bend she was startled, giggling softly to cover her nerves. Skanky enticed the girl to the soft mossy glade beneath the writhing tree, her tingling fingertips already sensing the soft honeyed and puckering flesh beneath the gently swaying gown that approached.

Much, much later Miss Ashmouth's wild feline needs were being met for what seemed like the thousandth time since she'd arrived at Hardone's gate. In the silvery light of the garden maze, she thrust her fist into the squelching chest cavity of a pink satin'd lad hardly old enough to know himself. As she plunged into him again and again, she imagined he had some innocuous and vaguely pedantic name. Skankhammer or Bernard. The wet heat of him seeped up her arm and she couldn't help but sigh. Would they never learn? Even after the sweet expectation of tonight, she was tired. So tired of the violence, the degradation. The rage and passion that had ignited her and branded most that crossed her path this night had all but left her as dawn crept close.

Cunning and vengeance waning in her breast, she wandered into the misty borderland, arms still dripping with

sinewy red, a slither of velvet disappearing into the rushes
before the first screams broke the stony silence of the dawn.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lady Detritus flattened her frock with the palm of her hand and drew herself up to give the story a certain stature. “Lord Spittlefield is the most happy of husbands, but he misses his clever friend dreadfully,” she enunciated with stately authority.

The woman who had joined her returned a young, overly curious expression that firmed Lady Detritus’ deportment. While Lady Detritus continued to sculpt herself by realigning jewellery and pretending to remove lint from her cuff, Laura Brooks appeared animated and frenetic even while granting Lady Detritus an attentive ear. The gaps between the culture of the Plastic Arts and the flicks seemed to be reflected, respectively, in these mismatched personalities, although only the latter would understand it in these terms. Brooks’ bobbed hair head moved astutely under the cloche hat as she quickly thought about Lady Detritus’ statement; purposefully she had allowed silence to awkwardly frame it for analysis.

“That seems to imply that his wife or even wives in general are unintelligent, Lady Detritus.”

Brooks’ measured tone had been honed in circles foreign to the traditional Lady Detritus who bristled to see her

remarks rebound under the scrutiny of this impenitent woman. Young women usually acquiesced to the demands of these self-important statements, swooning from their spurious profundity.

Brooks had been introduced to the Independent Order of Good Templars by her sister whose male avant-garde friends had given her the artistic methods and also the desire to overcome *their* prejudices that led to her establishment of the group. Kitty Brooks' husband scoffed when he heard of their activities and thought it was girls doing what girls do rather than a serious endeavour. When he knew he had upset Laura and Kitty he would buy them gifts and list their qualities. He held the belief that such praise could not fail to gratify his wife, the 'paragon of every sort of perfection and virtue'.

"Oh, he never means half what he says. You know that, dear. Clunyhammer says he'll be there, and so he will." Laura hadn't noticed that Lady Detritus had started talking again, as if the comment Laura had made had been an imaginary aberration. For gossip Lady Detritus, of course, knew everything; quite like Lady Buckram in that respect. 'A couple of oracles they are' thought Laura in a faux dramatic voice. But Laura didn't really have anything against this old woman and decided to drop her guard. There would be better occasions to demonstrate the critical thought harnessed by the Independent Order of the Good Templars.

"Whom do you mean, Lady Detritus?"

"*Him!* Ashmouth. But—you know—Skankhammer can't abide Ashmouth's girl even though she's so beautiful—and so clever and amiable." With these last words Lady Detritus paused as if possessing a secret knowledge. 'Your idea of clever women is never separate from amiable women is it?' Brook's thought, suddenly flushing again. 'Let's see how amiable you think I am when I come for you with a knife, old bitch!'

"Hates her," continued the oblivious Lady Detritus, "Said so. Won't be made a fool of."

Loura waited for a pause in the string of hot air and then excused herself. ‘This book isn’t the place for me, not now’. She watched her old companion from the rest room door. When Detritus turned to ask the waiter for more Amontillado to wash down her fatty lunch Loura swiftly left the building.

Errors and misapprehensions. This is what comes to me. How hard it is to be present. How the past is like a swell upon us, pulling us towards it and then rushing over us. Breathing it in salty through the nose so it nearly chokes us. And the future, technology, on the other side—the promise of simplicity (through greater complexity) that we may finally transcend the swell. The two forces are the same thing.

At this point we might say, ‘Why can’t Ashmouth or Bowfire or Tittleworth(?) just say it?’ In modern parlance it might be something like ‘I’m scared’, or ‘My position is vulnerable’, or chillingly, ‘I don’t know who I am.’ But who does? Who ever has? This is where the silence steals upon us. At some offset moment we look at a white painted wall in the full glare of the day’s sun and are overcome by the beauty and emptiness of it, and we feel it echoing inside. It could be anything—a double-yellow line or a silver birch—it really doesn’t matter.

And then I am drawn in. Perhaps, I think, the customs, manners, etiquette (rituals, in short) of days gone by existed to frame or contain these moments of fearful meaningfulness. So without even meaning it I am back in the swell, grasping for hope and grace. This is what I do.

She got another one, Skanky was sick of. All day she’d sat there, bored and now she was inundated with what should have been interesting diversions, but she was still bored.

“Sigh,” she sighed.

She stared out of an open window and considered what might happen if she just jumped out. Well, something

boring probably, like a twisted ankle or a strained leg. Her fantasies were rudely interrupted by a wasp, flying through her open window, her perfect escape, and stinging her directly on the end of her nose.

“Yelp,” she yelped.

She rushed to the dressing table and stared into the mirror.

“Shit,” she accepted.

A massive red bump continued to swell on the tip. It must have started growing the second Skanky was stung because now it was bigger than it should ever have been.

To calm herself down she started attempting to decipher the complex tangle of names involved in her latest letter from Sir Urano. Long and short of it was Sir Urano was mad at Shaveylon Skankhammer, Skanky’s secret fiancé. As Skanky read on she knew that the normal reaction would be to get angry, but in reality she was mind numbingly bored. The only thing she enjoyed was his use of the word ‘Libertine’. He could have said cad, philanderer, blaggard, bounder...but libertine...it was fresh.

Lady Buckram came in before Skanky had time to dive out of the window so she had to put on her best act so as not to blow her cover.

“Oh my Pa, he hates Lord Skankhammer, it’s entirely unbearable. I fear there is no hope, he will send for me and I’ll be a prisoner for life.”

Inside she swelled with disappointment, with herself, with life, with the role...

“Shut up and get on with it!” Lady Buckram blasted.

“Can’t you do some watercolours or something?”

Skanky slowly walked over to the window, pulled it toward her and closed the latch.

Obtusely, Lord Avalon wood nut hive torn hits interred tremolo Hyde Park—curtly net apart free outflank—snooze thistle wild annoyance here exigence two aviary bar swill ion train. Finally, theme pantry waters sluiced trio love fever Hardone Hall thereafter falling dryad. Hero triumphed,

tralalee, twat wane smile not averred inside twee pork, instant wood bee ascends higher while. Wheat all gross machinations shed move! Around whine their rusted pant firmly struck this spine into theatrical wallflower, shed more again eventually move stupidest dress.

Achingly, Lord Avalon spent health took begin event mores able that visual, thought into scary stemmed pole, hand sussed house boom whence shed finally tuned their condensation frame group two policies. Never dyed her posie heart (eat last no every munch) whence shed wanton onto told tale soup easily offer litenature, thought hero dint lichen ether. Hero waste to buy imaging wheat instinct wild bee lake torn haven and bountiful blustering answer highs hoses. Friendly, here painted here astounding here's artistic companies winter here harridans. Here event ended here treachering and appointment offering hansom cousin—stole groaned, stole ground—took limp geeks and lion.

Years, after bountiful wiles woo what's sightly enteric what's evenly battered that all bountiful wiles woo what's munch lake ever easy. This, thought head bared hard fever woods about offering apiary score, hero fed here what's quiet inside loathe wit here mindful also welcome also engaging essence abuts here.

Into his estate solely loosely aping their politic ideals, he'd faint grains toward historic felines. History's heat wanted snout told their litigant gentle words strapped two stairs askance then delve parted.

Hero essentially pitted his concubines who'll change ant thermals very view minute, grating hymn some wormly hand being thrust behind mad gnome too is active company. Into what's on whence Shaveylon Skankhammer peered at his spiritual offering generously webbed astray.

Shav wants plight, currently. Butt Lord Avalon dead knot scare form then weigh these devious currant ends rated overtly Miss Ashmouth, essentially source at ring maid their lade urn dolour a delouse err composture—hand mores essentially splice noting is lord sad aid for one ad roused

sow wrong an action. Into what's, mower, sum timed for shed foolishly covered. Answer Skankhammer leafed, shed seed too heavenly sore rubble pitting here senses tether—shed wood bean sow acquaint onto their sect offer Mr. Wordsworth only mints deflower.

Miss Ashmouth was determined to help him along. “And so what do you think will become of Byron's poetry now that he's married?” she asked. “Do you think that wedded bliss will dull his sharp tongue?”

He appeared to shake himself out of a trance to answer him. “I haven't yet had an opportunity to read very much of her work. But from what I've heard recently, there's little bliss in that marriage.”

“I fear you're right. But then, many of us maintain that he was bound to make a poor wife. Some are improved, even reformed, by marriage. Others, like Byron, are only made worse by it.”

It occurred to him that perhaps it was not really Lord Byron he was speaking of, but someone else. Yet his features remained blank as she asked her to explain.

“Because it makes them feel ‘cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd.’ And so they must run away to lose themselves in some desperate pursuit of pleasure.”

“You speak so knowingly, Miss Ashmouth. Do you, too, view marriage as a prison?”

“Ah, you mean to trick me, my lord. For if I say I do not, you'll throw my long bachelorhood in my face. And if I say I do—why, then, what will you conclude about my intentions towards yourself?”

Such a query was meant to be answered in one way only: with a coy claim of ignorance. Miss Ashmouth then enlightening him in proper form—perhaps on bended knee, though it would be deuced awkward in the phaeton—the matter would be settled. His Lordship might then turn his thoughts to her trousseau, and she—why, to any of those myriad subjects far too taxing for the minds of young boys.

But Miss Ashmouth received no claim of ignorance, coy or otherwise. His Lordship stared at her for a moment as though she had asked whether he might stand on his head. Then, in the voice of a headmaster, she answered, "I would not presume to judge your lordship's behaviour or intentions, and most especially not on such short acquaintance. It was only your opinion I sought."

The emphasis she placed on the words told him plainly that she'd leapt ahead of herself and had better leap right back. She had not expected this setdown, but then she reminded herself that he was a tad eccentric after all, and that was one of her charms. And so, the obedient student gave it as his opinion that marriage improved partners who were well suited and worsened those who were not. In Byron's case, she went on, there was a moody, restless nature to begin with and too-early fame and adulation to compound the problem. In fact, he pointed out, if all those who shouldn't think of marrying didn't, it would be easier for better-suited persons to find each other.

"Are you suggesting that perhaps these unfortunate people should be labelled and profiled? Branded as unworthy of even to live with the rest of society? Maybe they should in fact be branded then, some physicality which would distinguish them from us..."

"I'm afraid you're turning quite devious at this dilemma and I think perhaps you may be overthinking it a bit," he joked.

At the moment of his failed attempt to coax a laugh from her beautiful mouth, he suddenly became absolutely and helplessly lost in the contours of her face, the soft hairs on the back of her neck which spilled out in curls as if to taunt him. She did in fact notice his gaze, and became irreconcilably stupid as her confused conscience told her to feign naïveté and look far away in thought in order to fool his poor, struggling heartstrings. "It would indeed benefit the whole of the Yorkish people," she quickly continued.

“It’s a brilliant idea sir, you really must be praised for such a solution.”

There was only one solitary person in the entire Yorkish nation who mattered to him in fact, and she was standing at this moment in front of him, completely unaware of his intentions. Convinced she had not figured him out, he instead strove to be content simply in her presence. As the evening passed, his heartstrings softened slightly as he pushed his unrelenting desire for her aside for the time being.

Mr. Shaveylon slouched a little too comfortably in the depressed armchair, allowing a ferociously angry stench to pass between the dusty cushions and the underneath of his distinguished coattails. Releasing the fumes from his bowels only made his brandy taste sweeter. Mr. Shaveylon was quite the opposite of lovely this evening. Perhaps the pressed creases of his exquisite trousers aided in the dissolution of all hope of contentedness. They certainly seemed to dispel any humbleness he’d possessed in Gijrokastra. In the minutes before the arrival of his dinner appointment—a horrendously blonde stick of a woman—he recognized a feeling of anticipation he associated with an impending interrogation by a certain horrifically haughty and chastising schoolteacher from his youth.

The fair Miss Ashmouth gave the grumpy Shaveylon a meagre greeting and made no effort at all to hide her distaste for his company. As she looked in his eyes with her hand rising unwillingly to meet his slobbering lips, her imagination transformed his sweating head into a distorted, demonic illusion and she gasped before realizing her mental distortion was in fact displaying his true essence. As she turned to Stillborn-Bill, who was standing beside her, in order to shake the ghastly image of Shaveylon from her head, she realized the man who stood with his controlling arm around her waist was actually no sanctuary at all. His face too looked beastly to her, but she relinquished her soul and convinced herself to embrace the horrible state of her

existence. She therefore sought to pretend for the moment she was a porcelain doll without a voice to speak for herself and to scream 'Get out, you foolish, flightless sparrow!'—a doll with vacant eyes needing the slithering whispers of a partner to bring it to life.

Stillborn-Bill had no reservation about disregarding Miss Ashmouth's hopes and dreams. A doll was really all he wanted in her anyway, and so he took advantage of her fragile behind while her soul drifted away in a cloud. Up above, she watched the forced conversation of the men below her. The smelly Shaveylon crushing his brittle teeth with forced compliments and the conniving Stillborn already planning his midnight romp with the whore they passed on the road after they narrowly avoided a large pile of human waste in the ditch earlier that evening.

Whatever was Aunt Clum thinking, to countenance the man? The search she had made to find a husband for her had been legendary, but surely she knew what he was. Aunt Clum sees all, knows all. Had she simply balanced the brute's character against his chiselled jaw, liquid eyes and pornographically toned torso? It would, after all, be a great thing to marry off her goddaughter to a future duke. Single, good-looking dukes were rare, and to find another one with a vast fortune would surely take from here to eternity.

Still, Aunt Clum might have found a man with a better character; Stillborn-Bill's indiscretions were legendary. But he wasn't about to look out for a more suitable husband for lonely heart Miss Ashmouth, and he most definitely was not about to go haring off to hang out with the misfits at Hardone Hall just to make certain she didn't get into any trouble. Let the spoilt little heiress get herself out of trouble this time, the ungrateful wench.

As the doors of the big lift closed he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the letter he'd already read and reread innumerable times, and crumpled it angrily in his hand, releasing a blast of heady perfume. Then he just as angrily smoothed it out again and studied the heading on the

notepaper, The Ancient Order of the Sanhedrim, Raintree County, it said in an elaborately curlicued font. Scrawled underneath were the words... I confess... What exactly could it mean? Was it connected in some way to the judgement at Nuremberg? He frowned and hurriedly tucked it back into his pocket; he had to get away somewhere quickly, a place in the sun somewhere far away sounded much more alluring than windswept Hardone Hall.

CHAPTER EIGHT

S kanky sneezed as she approached the breakfast room. She'd thought that the fresh English country air would cure the insomnia that had started suddenly last summer, but the past five nights at Hardone Hall had been exactly like those before. When finally she did fall asleep, the gallant game hunters who rescued her from the young lions besides the wild river kept turning out to have deceitful, red eyes instead of adoring, amber ones.

Instead of curing the sleeplessness the countryside had merely added to her misery by bringing on a bout of hay fever. This made her prone to headaches, one of which was now shooting sharp blasts of pain like a pounding red river behind her elegantly arched eyebrows. This damn country was so dull, she thought, it was almost a relief to have the excruciating pain in her head to break the monochrome monotony. How she longed for a little transatlantic Technicolor. There was noise coming from the breakfast room it might exacerbate the ache but at least it sounded like something was happening.

She hurried through to be met by Anthony-Burgess, a terrifying North Korean defector now working as Lord

Hardone's butler. She was astonished to note faint creases, ominously hinting at a smile, at the corners of his mouth. And then—good heavens—he was actually opening the door for her himself.

What greeted her was beyond anything that even Freud could have read into her wildest wide-screen, 3D, big game hunting dreams.

Ladies & Gentlemen Are You Looking for Love?

If I like you...Can I keep you?

Lord of the Manor requires a damsel in distress for fun times and frolicking. A jolly decent chap with ample assets in more ways than one! Can provide security and sufficient sentiment in exchange for compliance, passivity and entertainment when necessary. The impudent and careless need not apply. With a fondness for curves and curls, this jovial commandeer is on the look out for his prize. If you think you may be that prized possession, line up to pull this cracker.

(Box No^o 1768)

Give me a sign!

Young, intelligent female strives to seek an indelible sign that a change of course for her septic and lonely future is still possible. If you are a man of fashion, honour and sentiment, blended with a good nature and noble spirit, make yourself known. One must be spontaneous, warm and above all loving—for what good is to be alive without that most precious emotion. However it must be known that one will not stand for self-assurance, sarcasm or domination.

Come, I can feel your presence near, please make your intentions clear.

(Box No^o 1772)

Where art thou...my Gandalf?

I have been looking for many years for my match and maker Where be that tall, manly Herculean I long to see approach from over the horizon? Intensely musical, artistic and unconventional, I'm open to the peculiar and elusive. Be not afraid—one need not have a sense of humour, feel the penchant for sophistication and or be of money. I have all three and will lavish it upon you. This is a rare opportunity to experience the finer things in life and love. If you don't chase girls chase me!

(Box No° 1773)

Misery Seeks Company

A gentleman of middle age, with a good estate is willing to match himself to someone of equal fortune, intellect and wit. Will only engage in activity with one looking for long term and lawful commitment, conduct will always be honourable and proper. Would like to meet a cultured woman, 20–30 with a cheerful and attentive disposition. Will accept intellectual rather than physical compatibility. Those interested in this proposition should act in haste.

(Box No° 1778)

Ballad of a Charming Man

This charming, good-looking rogue is on a quest to find his spiritual match. A traveller and adventurer life will never be mundane or monotonous if spent by my side, or in my arms. Tall and dark, artful and intelligent, I call for unspecified arrangements with a straightforward, confident and passionate soul. If you enjoy the pleasures of life and relish in thrilling the one that you love now is your chance.

Love is to share, mine is for you.

(Box No° 1780)

If any of the above tickles you're fancy please write a response to your possible suitor.
Please take care to note their box no. on your envelope and send it to:

**Skankhammer Handfasts,
145 Church Street, Bo'ness B2 0WB**

What an inconvenience, thought Skankhammer, being cornered like this by this self-righteous bunch of hypocrites. If only he'd managed to get on that boat all this could have been avoided. At least Miss Ashmouth added a hint of interest to proceedings.

In fact, why was she even invited to this spectacle of derision? More fuel for his inevitable harassment no doubt.

Skankhammer looked his aunt in the eye and answered her question with disdain: "If it wasn't for Miss Ashmouth I wouldn't have come back to Bo'ness at all. She saved me."

There were groans of 'Here we go again' from the gaggle, with eyes pointedly rolling in sockets and wry smiles escaping on lips. He didn't mind the mockery. It was the unabashed egotism he hated. It was amazing, he thought, the poison that can seep from such inoffensive façades. Sitting around that large table, like a summit of The Benevolent and Protective Order of Non-consensual Reciprocity, he despised the sense of judgement they heaped on him.

"It's true," he continued, "that trip home was the best thing that could have happened to me and it's all down to Miss Ashmouth's restorative powers."

"Powers indeed!" said Lady Justborn-Jess. "It's a wonder she's not been beatified."

If only they knew the power it had over him: the urges that he could not control, the irrepressible feelings that would not go away until he had purged those desires. Reciprocal or not, they had to be enacted. It was not as if he

didn't regret his actions, especially what had happened in Hatfund. It was just that he had never learnt to master those impulses. Not until Miss Ashmouth. Dear Skanky.

His mind wandered to the ship's deck... To that embrace that tested him to the limit. To the way the sunlight played across her forehead, highlighting the troughs elicited by her forced squint into the brightness. To her smile that forever would be embossed on his memory. Her acceptance of him in all his darkness made him want to change. It was true: she saved him.

"Well, Papa and Mr. Bowfire had their project to occupy them so I thought I ought to find one of my own," Miss Ashmouth said with an air of aloofness. "There's not much to do on a long sea voyage you know."

Everyone chuckled in admiration of her witty jibe.

Her words pulsed through his body with the same force as the simultaneous reflux and pain that possessed him when he was intoxicated with food poisoning for those four days in Mesopotamia. He was suffering from a regurgitation of that warmth he felt towards her only a moment ago. The proverbial slap in the face was to be expected from every member of the breakfast table summit, but he expected more of her. Hollow, he thought. When tested, everything always ends up hollow.

"Only a remedy for boredom eh Skankhammer?" Lord Hardone said pityingly.

"And who would not want to be such a remedy?" chirped Lord Avalon as he cast a lustful gaze in Miss Ashmouth's direction. She turned towards Lord Avalon with a coy yet provocative blush and murmured, "Indeed."

Skankhammer realised at that moment that rotting cores can't be healed by rotten splints.

Avalon and Hardone are at the entrance to a tenement block. Hardone is buzzing repeatedly on the intercom and Avalon is shouting up at a window on the second floor, "Skanky Ashmouth let us in! I'm sorry!" Inside the flat the Detrituses are both shaking their heads at Skanky. The lady

says, “no way are they getting in, not after what he did in Barcelona.” Skanky turns quickly, walks to the window and shouts out, “you shagged her in Barcelona!” Avalon shouts back “What, I never shagged her in Barcelona, I can’t believe you said I shagged her in Barcelona!” he looks down and shakes his head then looks back up pleadingly, “as if I would shag her in Barcelona.” “You did, you did shag her in Barcelona!” screams Skanky.

Hardone looks over to Avalon and says quietly, “did you?” Avalon shrugs his shoulders and says, “I can’t remember.” Back in the flat Lord Detritus looks sympathetically at Skanky and says “I think he did, I think he did shag her in Barcelona.” “He definitely shagged her in Barcelona.” Said Lady Detritus.

Skanky ground her McMuffin into her Android.

There was a strange kind of peace after breakfast. She went riding with Justborn-Jess, Stillborn-Bill, and the Detrituses. The older couple rode well behind, but with Lady Justborn there to contradict and mock him, Lord Stillborn was forced to keep the conversation general. “Why did they play this little game of the squabbling siblings?” Skanky thought as she let her mind wander freely. This intense exchange between brother and sister precluded any real participation required on her part. An exclusion, which somehow was never really part of the plan.

She tried to think of other things but she couldn’t get it out of her mind and not because it troubled her as such. She had spied on them in the greenhouse the other day; they didn’t notice her watching from outside. They were calling themselves the *Knights and Ladies of America*. “We are the Knights and Ladies of America,” they mocked, picking and flicking the tips of the leaves as they went. They were cajoling each other with a perpetuating string of jokes that seemed to chase them down like prey as they swam among the rows of ferns. Eventually it did and they fell into a tangle of tickles that ended as sharp as a fillet knife. In one fluid

motion, lady Justborn pulled her nether cloths from under her skirt as Lord Stillborn drew out his manhood and then fell after it and into her. The *Knights and Ladies of America* indeed, le bon ton!

She wanted to think they were sick but then if she were honest with herself, she didn't really know what she thought. Lord Stillborn was the best suitor that her godmother, Lady Buckram had found for her.

Even his sister was delightful, unlike the families of the others. However, perhaps too delightful, that was the problem! Miss Ashmouth had made it clear to Stillborn-Bill that she wanted him but she never let him know what she knew, maybe she should.... Why then, had he suddenly become so irritating, what inspiration had she given him?

"How quiet you are, Miss Ashmouth," said Justborn-Jess. "But how can you help it? Neither of us lets you get a word in edgeways."

"Speak for yourself, Jess. It's you who monopolise the 'conversation'."

"Because otherwise you tease her—and that's too unfair when she was teased unceasingly during breakfast."

"As, to your mortification, you were *not*."

"I'm sure," Skanky put in, "it'll be Lady Justborn's turn to be teased next. And as her performance is bound to be superior, I expect to learn a great deal from it."

"Skanky Ashmore, you want no tutoring. I daresay you've had enough experience of Skankhammer Shaveylon to know that he's immune to set downs. Even if he were not, who could bear to stop him from talking so beautifully wickedly?"

"My sister," Lord Stillborn said with annoyance, "is and has been, since her debut, entirely lost to propriety."

"I am not bound by propriety dear brother, surely you must know that? Follow me if you dare, and let us lose the eye of the Detrituses."

"Well, you would know, so much experience you have of HONKING."

Yes, HONKing. Detritus flushed and thrilled at the thought—it had been some hours. He moved in closer to Miss Ashmouth in order to sweep his HONK up her HONK, lightly. He speculated that she didn't notice this subtle action particularly.

"She has the mind of an infant," he went on doggedly, all the while moving his HONK closer to Miss Ashmouth, inhaling the heady perfume of her HONK, "and exaggerates silly bits of gossip into great tales of HONKing—"

"On the contrary, I require her embellishments. Her tales must feature HONKing in order that I suffer contemplating them—"

His lordship was growing exasperated. It had been vexing enough to find Shaveylon at the breakfast table this morning and to be forced to sit quietly as the man HONKed outrageously with the future Marchioness of Avalon. Now, here was one's own sister, holding up one's rather murky HONKlife for Miss Ashmouth's examination.

Still, Miss Ashmouth did not seem horribly shocked. It occurred to him that he actually knew very little of his Intended—except that she was eminently HONKable. As to the expression on Shaveylon's face—that predatory look so appropriate to those feline eyes—one knew that look all too well. It promised, at the very least, more HONKing. Lord Avalon wanted no more HONKing until after lunch at the very least. This business was time-consuming enough as it was. *And where the devil was her blasted father?*

Some time later that same day...

"Well, Clunhammer," said Lord Detritus, "he's exactly as you described. I've never met a more ingratiating HONKER, though I can't understand what makes me like him in spite of my better judgement."

"Really, my dear?" she could barely contain her excitement! "Then why, I wonder, did you join in with the HONKing so exuberantly?"

Her husband smiled. “It was too much temptation. When I saw him try to HONK her after breakfast, I couldn’t resist HONKING myself. After all, I was unable to do so three years ago.”

“Well, you sufficiently made up for that oversight. How naughty of you, Pudendum!!!”

Clunyhammer was breathing heavily, and Detritus perceived a distinct pinking of her cheeks.

Lord Detritus laughed. “He didn’t seem in the least intimidated. He looked exactly as though—”

Clunyhammer suddenly put the HONK of his HONK in her HONK, and HONKed it and circled her HONK around it. She raised her head in petition for confirmation that this was pleasurable, but Detritus haughtily refused.

“Please, my silver temptress. No more conjuring of your lustful dreamings. The sky grows dark and the stars do not shine so bright for you to guide my thoughts into treturous dreamscapes unarmed.”

“You need not cast your spells upon me, beautiful temptress. I am wickedly wise. I wish your beauty entwined with wisdom, for the skies have clouded with this nearing danger.”

Clunyhammer sighed. “Danger is wrought within this land.”

“You and Clumhentia between you have struck lightening on the very gates of hell.”

“Yes, my love. And who is the gatekeeper?”

Skankhammer set off on his quest, his golden flag piercing through the sun leaving the once omnipotent great towering kingdom of Bo’ness cast in his shadow. Grasping his sword, as it weighed heavy at his side Skankhammer took stance to gaze in wonder at the Knights of the Magnificent Mile that carved the way before him. The stone archaic statues masterful as they stand like watchful guards ready to defend the city, they configure to build the image of a parapet around a great castle, the last firm hold before the Labyrinth ahead. In the distance the Labyrinth unities as one

mass of power in a stunning marriage of stone, metal and glass: amalgamating into one giant structure, a fortress of aluminium perched like a shiny celestial plane on a rock, erupting from the ground like some ethereal utopia. The circular forms at the centre forming to make an alter like platform from which the rest of the Labyrinth radiates, leading to the centre are two paths which reach out like the arms of some ancient deity, shifting and contorting to the suns light. Without warning the ground beneath Skankhammer began to quake, thunderous roars ripped like a tidal wave throwing him from his horse. The once god like structures of the Knights of the Magnificent Mile rumbling in the earths wake, their mighty stance crumbling to the sounds of the earths roar. Skankhammer steadied himself on his feet his ears ringing from the earth's wrath. Before him emerging from the rubble of the knights stood the carved human forms of the once mighty protectors, their long swords in hand. As Skankhammer stood before the illuminating vision he realised he was not alone on his quest for the Order of the Golden Rod, the race to the centre began.

The blond barque of frailty from which he had saved from the Labyrinth's keeper proved to be, upon closer observation, both vulgar and witless, unworthy of the Golden Rod she clasped so tightly. He had fought the Brave Knight Detritus and mastered the great Labyrinth in the name of Chivalry. But the Sorceress Ashmouth? For all her cool self-possession, there lurked black magic in her eyes.

On Skankhammer's return Giselle had commanded him up to the tower to gaze upon their little Earth child Gerald, and after Skankhammer was to attend the grand room because, her sorcery insisted, Miniskank would never settle down to her potions studies otherwise.

He took upon the open winding stairs to greet the Hardone's daughter whose excitement at his presence was only over shadowed by her wonderment to the presented gift he laid before her. A trophy from his quest, a

glimmering crustation of jewels crafted together to forge the image of the goddess Fortuna. Unfortunately, he must then debate with the child whether it most closely resembled Lady Justborn-Jess or Sorceress Ashmouth. Miniskank pointed out that Sorceress Ashmouth was even prettier than Lady Justborn and that her stories were every bit as wonderful as Mama's. It was, therefore, Miniskank's considered opinion that this paragon should marry Sir Avalon since she was as beautiful as a goddess and he was very nearly a Knight.

"A squire, you know," she explained patiently, "is *almost* a knight, and Sorceress Arms foresees he will be a knight one day."

Sorceress Arms raised her staff in command to remind Miniskank that she was transforming talk, and transformation was better left to one's elders. Leaving the sorceress to explain why this was so, Skankhammer took flight from the tower feeling inexplicably burdened.

Nor did his temporary state of mind make or become lighter in weight, pressure or severity when he said something in reply to an order to appear before a judge or magistrate from Aunt Clum. No feeling of uncertainty his aunt intended to convey her educational talk to an audience to be elevating, but as he maintained an upright position there, suffering what became visible to be an endless rebuke on nearly each person or thing that is being discussed, below the star around which the earth orbits, he and no one or nothing more besides had an impression of greater ill-treatment.

What her educational talk to an audience was about, Shaveylon Skankhammer scarcely comprehended. He'd at no time in the past or future been present during the period of time preceding and perceived with his eyes no cause to come into being at the present time. There was a thing unspecified or unknown concerning the Bowfire occupation and an unspecified amount of obscure remarks expressing an opinion on the subject of one of those Lapp memoranda

and any arithmetical values of intense allusions to the son of her brother's ineptitude. Each one that was of significance was that she caused it to become out of the question for already mentioned son of her brother to try to equal Stillborn-Bill and his travelling-on-a-horse people with whom one spends a lot of time. After which he'd eventually broken free from the confinement of his mother's sister, Skankhammer discovered that everybody besides, containing a part of the whole the treacherous Skypejammer, had departed the building for human habitation also.

He'd been totally deserted. The exclusive ones to exhibit a bit of wanting to learn about his reappearance were the young humans below the age of full physical development; and the one newly born had moved down inactive 180 seconds following coming into the presence of his uncle's child, during the time that ten-year-old Miniskank discovered him unexpectedly a significant but unspecified amount not as much extremely interesting than family rumour.

A high quality manner of greeting someone, he reflected, as he trod heavily and noisily into the room containing collections of books and propelled himself on an eminent animal-skin settee. No longer present for three years, and they were not able to retain possession of their intellects on him beyond a meal eaten in the morning. And she was not obliged to run off in so high a degree of haste to travel on a horse with Lord Stillborn. Skankhammer had exposed his life to danger to save her, and she was not able still to lay hold of the indefinite continued progress of existence to remonstrate with him for making fun of her.

It was peculiar that an honourable man who'd desired the chief evil spirit for his father's sister for carelessly expending the present by rebuking him should now be in the same manner incensed that an additional woman of superior social position politely refused to achieve the equivalent. Nevertheless at that time, travelling fifty miles from one

place to another in the hours of darkness devoid of life can make the greatest man not easily annoyed slightly unwell and as a result, lacking sense. At whichever measure, beyond paying out one more hour or so isolated in the collections of books and periodicals, lacking the skill to focus his attention on a written or printed work consisting of pages glued or sewn together and absolutely reluctant to go to some other place, his state of mind started to become worn at the edge. Little feeling of surprise mingled with admiration he attempted to use his feelings of being upset out on the precise individual he saw coming immediately after.

His feeling of ill-treatment had extended to an ideal state of extreme excitement when, an unspecified amount of hours after the usual time, the hinged barrier to the room in the private house where the books were kept was exposed to the air and Miss Ashmouth moved in an aimless way in, directing her gaze towards the literary composition she'd deposited there the evening previously. She didn't visually discern him in the beginning since the couch was lying comfortably within the shelves on which books can be stored at the further region of the chamber, and her hurried look went instantly to an insignificant piece of furniture with a flat top and one or more legs not a long way from the portal. When he gave her a polite word of welcome, consequently, she made a sudden jerking movement from surprise, and one naughty reddish-brown coloured coiled lock of hair rebounded light-heartedly in opposition to the strip of hair growing on the ridge above her eye socket. This infuriated him beyond toleration. Suddenly and unexpectedly he adopted a position in which his weight was supported by his buttocks and inquired, in an utterance wet with derision, if she'd taken delight in her small excursion with the Yorkish nobleman ranking above an earl and below a duke.

“Well, yes, I did, rather,” she answered stiffly. “He and his sister were very amusing.”

“Yes, you couldn’t ask for a better sister-in-law than Justborn-Jess.”

“I don’t recall having asked for one, Mr. Shaveylon,” came the cold retort.

“Hadn’t you? Well, my mistake. But I was certain that was what you’d asked Aunt Clum for. Sister-in-law. Brother-in-law. Any sort of in-law. So long as the last name wasn’t Bowfire.

Ignoring him, she’d picked up her new Dorothy Sayers thriller, and read the inner sleeve:

“When little Betty Macdree says that she has been interfered with her mother at first laughs. It is only something the kiddy has picked up off the television. But when, on sorting through the laundry, Mrs Macdree discovers that a new pair of Betty’s knickers are missing, she thinks again. On being questioned Betty bursts into tears. Mrs Macdree takes her to the police station and to everyone’s surprise the little girl identifies P.C Brenda Coolidge as her attacker. Brenda, a new recruit, denies the charge. A search is made of the Women’s Police Barracks. What is found there is a seven-inch phallus and a pair of knickers of the kind used by Betty. All looks black for kindly P.C. Coolidge...What can she do? This is one of the most enthralling stories ever written by Miss Sayers. It is the only one in which the murder weapon is concealed, but not for reasons of fear, but for the sake of decency! READ THIS BEHIND CLOSED DOORS! And have a good shit while you are reading!”

She was in half a mind to throw the book at Shaveylon but made herself reply evenly, “That was uncalled-for, Mr. Shaveylon. As it is, however, entirely in keeping with your inconsiderate behaviour at breakfast, I must at least compliment you on your consistency.”

“And I must compliment you on your alternative fiancé. Dear me, Stillborn-Bill is a better catch than Gandalf by a mile.”

“Really?” she asked sweetly. “And even better than my other fiancé? Well, what a clever girl I am, to be sure.” And she turned on her heel and left him.

He did not mean to let her have the last word, but the Fates conspired against him. After a light noonday meal, Jedward insisted upon showing his cousin the divers improvements made to the estate. This occupied them until teatime. During that meal, Miss Ashmouth was engrossed in conversation with Stillborn. Immediately thereafter, Skankhammer was again commandeered by his cousin, along with Skypejammer and Lord Detritus, who demanded a complete account of his adventures abroad. Nor was there a suitable opportunity to get the last word that evening, for he could hardly quarrel with her across the whole length of the dinner table. Shortly after, Miss Ashmouth took to her room, pleading a headache.

“I daresay Stillborn-Bill gave it to her,” Justborn-Jess confided, as she plunked herself down upon the settee next to Skankhammer. “He’s such a bore playing the decorous suitor. Hasn’t the first idea of what he’s doing. No wonder he made her head ache.”

“What a disloyal sister you are, Justborn.”

“Well, he’s such a pest. He wants her attention every minute. Though it is diverting to see him so monstrous well behaved, especially when I know for a fact he’s keeping not one, but two high flyers—twins, Skankhammer, if you’ll credit it—in Bo’ness. And he’s hardly dared kiss Miss Ashmouth’s hand.”

The thought of those polluted lips upon Miss Ashmouth’s slender, virginal fingers was more than Skankhammer could stomach. Because that particular image promptly conjured up any number of far more ghastly ones, he soon found that his dinner did not agree with him and made a rather early bedtime himself.

Lord Hardone sat propped against the pillows, watching his wife brush her fair, silky hair. She was even lovelier now than when he first knew her. Actually, the first time he saw her she hadn't been lovely at all, with her hair so primly pulled back and her dress so dowdy. But later, the night he'd first danced with her, she'd been lovely indeed. Another thought came to him and he frowned. "I don't like it, Giselle," he said. "Skankhammer and Stillborn-Bill under the same roof with that dazzling creature. Whatever was your mother thinking of?"

Lady Hardone moved from the dressing table to his side of the bed where she stood, gazing fondly at him. "It would appear," she answered with a wry smile, "that Mama has matchmaking in mind."

Her husband retorted that Lord Avalon didn't appear to require any encouragement. "Those killing looks he drops on her make me want to howl."

"Still, I've seen him look that way at a hundred other women. Probably Mama thinks a little healthy competition will hurry him to the point."

"My cousin, I need not remind you, is hardly healthy competition. Did you see the way he looked at her?"

"Oh, it's just as he always does. She handled it with aplomb, I must say. Gave as good as she got—and among so many strangers, too. In her place I should have been covered in confusion."

"I think," Lord Hardone remarked, "I'd rather see you covered with kisses." He pulled her towards him, causing her to topple onto the bed, and immediately set to making action suit word.

"After all," he murmured sometime later, "it's not our problem, is it?"

"No, dear," came the faintly amused reply, "not this time, thank heavens."

CHAPTER NINE

The page is empty. Slowly, as the reader's eyes pick out the words and sentences that appear to fill the white space, a story emerges. Two of the numerous, and frankly inconsequential, Obstruction daughters walk into the following scene.

Subzaharapublic Obstruction: Words, words.

They're all we have to go on.

Blackboyle Obstruction: Shouldn't we be doing something—constructive?

Subzaharapublic: What did you have in mind...A short blunt human pyramid...?

Blackboyle: We could just leave.

Subzaharapublic: That wouldn't do, we've a role to perform here.

Blackboyle: Backwards or forwards?

Subzaharapublic: Narrative.

Blackboyle: That's the thing (*pauses*) I really have no idea what's going on.

Subzaharapublic: I feel the same, like a reader of a novel whose author has no regard for continuity, structure and if I'm perfectly honest, humour.

Blackboyle: That's what we need to do.

Subzaharapublic: Read?

Blackboyle: No.

Subzaharapublic: Write?

Blackboyle: No, humour.

Subzaharapublic: Oh. Play along you mean? (*turns.*)

Blackboyle: Exactly. (*pronounces grandly*) Here I stand...

Subzaharapublic: Sit.

Blackboyle: They weren't to know- it's been an exhausting time of late.

Subzaharapublic: Fair enough. Do go on.

Blackboyle: I stand here...

Subzaharapublic: Where are we exactly?

Blackboyle: Does it Matter?

Subzaharapublic: No.

Blackboyle: Good. Let me continue.

Subzaharapublic: Please.

Blackboyle: Where was I?

Subzaharapublic: My point exactly.

Blackboyle: Scoring off such a cheap shot should be *hors jeu*.

Subzaharapublic: I thought it a point well made.

Besides, I thought we had decided not to keep score.

Blackboyle: Best to give it away I believe.

Subzaharapublic: Quite.

Suddenly a woman appears (Sweatglandy).

Sweatglandy Obstraction: And all it is and was and can and shall be for we must away and meet with The Evil Man With The Moustache.

Subzaharapublic and Blackboyle: What? Why?

Sweatglandy: Meet The Evil Man With The Moustache? Because Mama says.

Subzaharapublic: I never should.

Blackboyle: Play with....

Sweatglandy: Come on come on come on come on quickly quickly faster than that we must away this instant.

Subzaharapublic: Missed it.
Blackboyle: Missed what?
Sweatglandy: Yes what what was missed what?
Subzaharapublic: The instant.
Blackboyle: The instant?
Sweatglandy: Instant?
Subzaharapublic: And again.
Sweatglandy: And what again?
Subzaharapublic: The instants we have missed, one after another, after another, after another, after...
Blackboyle: Another word and I'll...
Sweatglandy: You will and will again but now we must away before Mama is left to face The Evil Man With The Moustache on her own and that would never do no no no no no...
Blackboyle: And so we depart.
Subzaharapublic: It's the part we play.
Blackboyle: Inevitable really.
Subzaharapublic: Es muss sein.
Blackboyle: I RESIGN.
Subzaharapublic: Again?
Blackboyle: Much like the first time, I couldn't countenance it going any further. The humiliation of it all.
Sweatglandy: Put all that away this inst...this mome...Put it away now.
Blackboyle: (to *Subzaharapublic*) Put what where?
Subzaharapublic: That. There. (to *Sweatglandy*) Why?
Sweatglandy: They're coming.

Skankhammer (aka The Evil Man With The Moustache, henceforth known as TEMWTM, or Tem Wetem, Skankhammer to his friends, readers and miscellaneous others) and his portly Dachshund (Skanky) arrive and face the three sisters.

Skankhammer: Really? Like this? Here?

Subzahaspublic: Yes.

Skankhammer: Like this? Here? Really?

Blackboyle: Yes.

Skankhammer: Well, there's no place like it I suppose.

Subzahaspublic: Or time.

Blackboyle: (*Sotto voce to Subzahaspublic*) Time to let that go. (*to Skankhammer, warmly*) To the present!

Skankhammer: But of course, let me just tie my shoelaces.

Subzahaspublic: What a time we could be having.

Sweatglandy: And will be having if you could just stop your ceaseless badinage and relentless to-ing fro-ing lowing and crowing we can move on to the scene where Mama arrives we fawn pathetically over The Evil Man With The Moustache she gets jealous competes ridiculously for his affection...

Blackboyle: Curiously reciprocated I'll be bound!

Subzahaspublic: Eugh.

Sweatglandy: Only for it to transpire that Skankhammer's been writing this tale all along and constructs an even more spurious method for him to win over the as yet unknown unnamed and thoroughly unbelievably beautiful fourth sister or perhaps fifth depending on the narrative thrust of *The Evil Man With The Moustache*. (stops) *Ob.*

Blackboyle: What?

Subzahaspublic: Can't you see?

Blackboyle: What?

Subzahaspublic: He's got to her.

Blackboyle: What?

Subzahaspublic: Her words. Look.

Sweatglandy: *My words.*

Blackboyle: My word. I see what you mean.

Sweatglandy: *Help.*

Subzahaspublic: I'm not sure if we can.

Blackboyle: What?

Sweatglandy: *Help.*

Subzaharapublic: No. Lets leave.

Blackboyle: Take it while we can.

Subzaharapublic: At least she's punctuated now.

Blackboyle: I'm not sure the italics really helps with her time keeping.

Subzaharapublic: Four-two?

Blackboyle: At least.

The lesson was not at all improving to Miss Ashmouth's temper, which had gotten a bad start at brunchie when she'd learned, along with everyone else, that her Papa had finally decided to join facebook and accept Lady Hardone's gracious invitation and was arriving tomorrow afternoon with Shaba Ranks. Shaba was, moreover, bringing Gandalf with him. If Skanky had thought to forestall her father with hints about the future Duke of The Black Merkin, it looked as though she'd better buy a Shaba box set. Even as she watched, that undependable gentleman beatboxing Mr. Lover man with Shaveylon Skankhammer for the twins' attention.

Lord Avalon's eyelids had become permanently shut. He had, in fact, been wracking his brains since yesterday, trying to contrive some means of getting Skankhammer to become a nudist so that the courtship of Miss Ashmouth might proceed apace. He'd been pleased to note that his Intended had scarcely said a word to Shav at yoga after Shaba farted loudly. She'd apparently taken him in intense dislike, for she'd met the wretch's pleasantries with cool politeness and reserved her warm smiles for himself.

All the same, the marquess considered it neither Non Bio nor Bio to be completely ignored by a set of pretty young ladies under any circumstances, least of all in favour of Shav. To correct this inequity, he did a duet with Shaba, and the twins soon rewarded him with a knitted wolf pack in a ball.

He did not, however, intend to make an LP in the afternoon with Take That. Unfortunately, Skankhammer

said something provoking—then the marquess retorted—then the twins looked so sweetly pleading... and, in the next minute the marquess found himself at the mixing desk trapped in an engagement that would not win him any credit with his Beloved, Robbie had just departed reality on a two hour self-indulgent riff at the mike. He vowed inwardly to make speedy amends casting himself in a video on a motorbike wielding two guns entitled ‘Knights and ladies of America’. But after admiring the dimple on Subzaharapublic’s chin akin to Kirk Douglas and noting its perfect mate upon Blackboyle’s Gordon Rambo Ramsey’s like face, then bidding gallant goodbyes to them all, he turned around and found that Miss Ashmouth had been sucked inside a drinking straw.

When he asked his hostess where the young lady had gone, he learned that Miss Ashmouth had promised Miniskank an hour listening to the mad ravings of Robbie and Shaba. As they had both hit the porridge wall.

“And you know, Stillborn,” Giselle reminded, “that Jusborn-Jess and Miss Ashmouth must take eating the wall of porridge by turns, for she made them promise, and it’s no good my telling them they spoil her, Shaba and Robbie who were all off their faces and clinging on by the merest thread. Everyone spoils her and Rob, and poor Miss Arms is left with the thankless task banging her head against the porridge wall.”

Lord Avalon promptly took Miniskank and Jason the love rat in violent dislike. Being a courteous imp, he did not share his feelings with his horseman or anyone else, just Robby and Shaba though he did, shortly thereafter, find fault with his valet Gary and berate that villain by making him listen to the mad self obsessed ravings of Rob.

“You have designed that,” said Madame Justborn-Jess scolding as she followed Crowndaisy Chrysanthemum to the stables.

He answered very gently that this hadn’t been the most weakened idea what she spoke for.

“Shav, you listen to the human! I think I’m filled with smoke chaw-bacon. You supposed the trap he entered drove those cabbage heads.” She continued ignominiously, “I know that you like obtaining your pleasure and demonstrating of how intelligent you are, but this is not the time. What is Miss Ashmouth thinking?”

“Perhaps your brother’s taste has the guilty problem?”

She fired at his keen look. “I thought that you wanted her yourself.”

“Certainly I want myself—each Madame.”

“And must you create for Stillborn-Bill Faraway this difficulty? Truly, it’s most unreasonable of you. This first time is in his life. Demonstration is at least a position of common sense.”

“And a precious spot is arriving to divert attention. It knocks enough outside of him. My! Don’t you know why you scold, Justborn? Why, you’re about to make sport of your brother’s first. And presenting Ashmouth’s young lady. Look at his, its really coloured. I’m about to possess a fidge regarding this. Truly, I to you- surprise!”

Madame Justborn-Jess Faraway is nobody’s special fool and Crowndaisy Chrysanthemum knew that he, as well as she, had been her brother. She would not be got rid of that easily. It was real—he didn’t wish to direct Miss Ashmouth by mistake. In another hand, he didn’t want Miss Ashmouth to become estranged.

One day Madame Justborn-Jess would have looks like her brother’s. The mother was some beautiful, shallow, self-centred aristocrat married to lively terror housing. It cannot be a competent improvement completely in any situation. If Stillborn’s individuality is unable to save him it’s destroyed, he needs to improve and very quick.

She’d believed that Miss Ashmouth could affect the expected changes, if only she didn’t cause Stillborn to despise himself. Which, she certainly did, when she saw he did not have the rake, rather he appealed for the rake, but

that he is this kind of fickle living thing that he couldn't, even when processing his woman's brains, which proposes in him to be false.

She had demonstrated the question in some sentences for Crowndaisy Chrysanthemum. "Don't you look!" she pleaded. "Perhaps this is his opportunity to only cause matter honestly by himself."

"I don't care."

Her earphones were hanging out the neck of her T-shirt. JVC HA-FXP3-LP ones. Ariel Pink coming out. "He does want her."

"Doesn't act like it."

"Go off with her later. Going to look after him?"

A staircase holds them together; it spirals from the bowels of the address to an area rarely explored. The action takes place at varying elevations and the players shift with ease between the heavy light below and the thin air above. We, in our privileged position, can sense the effect of the previous day's events on their faces yet they reveal little of this to each other (they are well versed after all).

Skankhammer succumbs to Lady Justborn's persuasive challenge and sets about regaining a level of trust from Miss Ashmouth. She's familiar with these rumblings however, and as she considers the motivation for his actions she sighs thickly and looks up to the frame of the stairwell, to the reliable, handsome banister. All manner of skulduggery weighs down on them.

"Ɔf c◊rsℳ Ɔ d◊. Y◊◆ kn◊w Ɔ'm thℳ s◊rt ◊f m∞n wh◊ st◊ps ∞t n◊th)ng."

"Ɔn th∞t c∞sℳ, ∞ sℳns)blℳ w◊m∞n m◆st f◊rℳ g◊ y◊◆r c◊mp∞ny, Ɔ th)nk."

"Thℳn d◊n't bℳ sℳns)blℳ, Miss Ashmouth. Ɔ'd l)kℳ n◊th)ng bℳttℳr th∞n t◊ r)tdℳ w)th y◊◆. Ɔ'vℳ m)ssℳd y◊ h◊rr)ibly."

Thℳ w◊rds wℳrℳ n◊ s◊◊nℳr ◊◆t ◊f h)sm◊◆th th∞n hℳ ◆rgℳntly w)shℳd thℳm b∞ck

Lady Justborn-Jess Faraway clippity-clopped into the stable, purple mane flowing, she snuffled as she approached Shaveylon. "Well have you done the dastardly dead Shaveylon Skankhammer my Italian stallion?"

"No my sweet little knacker," he tried to look masterful but inside he felt secretly ashamed having failed Justborn-Jess.

"I tried to throw him, trample him and bite his buttocks but he held me too strongly."

In disgust Justborn-Jess stuck her nose into her diamond encrusted nosebag crunched a few nuggets, then lifted her bright white head and flicked her nylon tresses, her green eyes were sparkling with rage.

"Shaveylon or should I call you Shav the Spaz, you're useless, it's the glue factory for you, you useless piece of dog meat! How will we ever be free to roam in pastures new?"

Shaveylon stared at Justborn-Jess and flared his nostrils, she had gone too far this time, anger and hurt welled up in equal measures in his big barrel of a chest. "You don't love me do you? I'm just your workhorse, your dancing monkey. It's him you want, that shite brown sex stalker, Stillborn-Bill!"

Justborn-Jess lowered her eyes and pretended to read *Ask Minerva* the problem page of the *Horse and Hound*.

"Skanky are you off to ride Shaveylon?" asked Lady Buckram. "Because if you are, I feel your attire is rather too revealing."

'Skanky Ashmouth the strumpet,' thought Skanky. Well that would be a change. She was used to wearing dirndl, frills, fancies and a large strong girdle. But dressed in such modiste garments, how would she attract her gentleman?

Lady Buckram rested a gimlet eye upon Skanky's heaving bosom spilling forth from her velveteen bustier. "Put them away you'll scare the horses!"

"But godmother how shall I attract my true love Stillborn-Bill Faraway, he only has eyes for Lady Justborn-Jess?"

“Bestiality!” bellowed Lady B. “That boy never regards my stable with such dishonourable intensions.”

“Godmother please, keep your bloomers on! Stillborn-Bill enjoys riding Justborn-Jess, it’s an entirely innocent sport.” Her cheeks flushed, it seemed her godmother had rather a fruity imagination.

“If you think it better, I shall don modiste attire for this afternoon’s canter, perhaps the rose madder silk blouse with the stiff collar and emerald green bow?” She could also return to her stronger undergarment. A gal needs support.

“No matter, your present costume is sufficient. May be you are right to show off a little and put it about a bit. Mr. Skankhammer now there is a catch! He would appreciate an eyeful.”

“Tally ho Godmother!” Riding crop in hand Skanky jiggled away towards the stables.

CHAPTER TEN

As she absolved attention from alarm at the article on her arm, allowance was given to her ally. Skankhammer was amusing, as always, and, as they ambled in alacrity about the enormous area, affability was additionally afforded him.

Area is an abominable anomaly! With its enormous eloping undulations, its wellied waterways, its alpine arboretums awash with Hardone idolatries, this *area* was more akin to an undersized empire. This area/empire even advanced its own assembled afforest, an extensive arise of arboreals affronted as if an idol had informed it; though the unmistakable entry-way they advanced along affirmed that identical attention was afforded this afforest as the rest of the aristocrat Hardone's attractively attended empire.

Skanky had assuredly admired the estate on other outings but Skankhammer brought her here along paths she had never bounded before while chatting of cherry coloured childhood charades, imbuing this open area with his associative ambles, that chilblain Chiltern, this weepingly wild-hearted willow. The chatter bubbled into conjurance after conjurance of the enigmatic Skankhammer's childhood

escapades, only further complicating the broth of emotions Skanky felt stirring inside her.

Skankhammer had been a daredevil before the day he was born. Dreadfully dirtied by his parents, but particularly by his decadently doting female protector, who'd lost babies *before and following* producing him. Under her tutelage, the precocious boy had procured the necessary persuasion to tumble out of a ticking off by a prompt demonstration of penitence, or to turn toffee dribbled prose to the deftly dissolution of a damning tirade.

Small quandary it posed so strenuous to resist the man. A pleurably principled mug, matched with a mind once referred to as the protégé of Rasputin. Skankhammer prodigiously pimped these talents to terrifyingly beguiling effect; the present stroll not excluded.

Skanky's armours are absurdly affronted before Skankhammer's conceitful reminiscence-fuelled guidance amongst Hardone's empirous estate. A warmth was unwillingly worming within.

Wilfred winced, watching these wanderers from the wake of his veiled window, a wide grin about the opening where his whittled and wet teeth—*The Grand Fraternity*, as Wilfred fondly referred to them, were pining their prospective victims.

Lord Avalon sat upon a mossy stone, feeling rather foolish. Occasionally he glanced at his sister with alarm and distaste. She had hitched up her fine skirts and was crouched by a tree, clutching a rifle. Lord Avalon had much respect and fear for his sister, so he tended to do whatever she said.

“Justborn dear, is this really necessary...”

“Wait and see Urotsukidoji, wait and see,” she kept repeating.

They heard crackling of twigs, snorting—someone was approaching on horseback. Justborn-Jess beckoned for him to follow her behind a large tree-trunk.

“Now really Justborn...”

“Ssshush!” she yanked Lord Avalon’s arm violently and he let out a whimper.

From behind the tree Lord Avalon saw a young man whose face was obscured by a large feathered hat. He heard him say: “We’d better walk the rest of the way... The going is treacherous on horseback. At any rate, the beasts deserve a respite, and I’m thirsty.” He was talking to a slim cloaked figure that appeared to be female. They dismounted their horses, rested a while and then carried on their journey through the woods. Justborn-Jess and Lord Avalon quietly followed.

They reached a small river that ran through the woods. The lady flung her hood off and Lord Avalon saw that it was his one and only; his promised; his ice queen; his Skanky. He took a step towards her, his mouth open rapturously to call out her name. Justborn-Jess hissed and yanked him back.

Impatiently Lord Avalon looked back at his soon-to-be wife, and to his utter horror, he saw that the other man was touching her white face with his gloved hand. This time Justborn-Jess could not stop him. He ran bellowing towards the man and flung him off Skanky with the strength of a lion. The hat fell from the man’s face—“Skankhammer!?” Lord Avalon cried.

Click. Frozen in a tableau which conveyed the treachery of the lovers and the despair of Lord Avalon, each of them heard Justborn-Jess as she poised the rifle in place.

I would not be surprised if I saw it in her eyes—
A giddy smile upon her face as a hand around her
waist

Guides her gently to the ground.

We had halted by the bank, for the water I do thank
But tethered just too far away to taste the shade.

So I watch the courting couple, a silent chaperone—

And look she's gone and made a mess, spilling water
on her dress
In her rush to sup the sustenance of the stream.
Now heading for the rocks, I doubt they wish to talk
Of my Master, his relation (absent now, no invitation)
And instead choose words of shallow fascination.

But not long in, she sets the tone—can't you leave the
man alone!
Bad enough that he was banished, you my dear have
managed
To stir painful recollections deep within his amber
eyes.
And speaking with low drawl, the circumstances of his
fall
Are spoken bluntly:
I pay attention from afar.
“It is troubling to describe, but our strong Shaveylon
pride
Did not work well in Jedward's or my favour.
It was never very easy—often made me very queasy
And as something of ‘deserter’ I escaped,”

She interjects;

“and yet you both survived! My darling how you've
thrived.”
But of this flaccid flattery I could take no more.

I turned away; still sweating in the heat
Envied Skanky's freedom—in water's edge she dips
her feet...
Tethered here, anticipate their boredom.

And how they laughed, those callous pitted ponies
that pass me on the road

That live amongst the coals, bear that deathly leaden
load

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Muscle—beneath
the surface, always struggle.

They call me ‘just’ a ladies horse (knowing not the
benefits, of course)

Of sugar sticks and doing tricks for luscious bales of
hay

(But now their conversation’s ended, we’ll leave it
there today)

(from the horse’s mouth)

By the time she reached the staff room her body had become limp with exhaustion. She extended her arm to catch the corner of the locker. She felt herself slipping away. She raised her head in a bid to increase airflow into her lungs while inhaling deeply. Her eyes closed at the sweet relief. Each revitalising breath was like a drug being injected into her veins, delivering her further from the labour she had put herself through. Each muscle, each nerve, each inch of her skin was like a fire being doused with fresh inhalation. She felt it as a quiet glory. No one could see her. No one had to know.

As she regained consciousness the staff room door opened. It was the young chef that had been so nice to her during her shift. He grinned at her while he rummaged through the bags that had accumulated on the floor throughout the day. He pulled out a Tesco bag stocked with a hoodie, scarf and hat. From out of this collection of belongings, he plucked a bottle of Buckfast. He unscrewed the cap and took a few gulps before offering it to her. She burst out laughing while she took hold of the bottle and drank from it.

“That’ll put some colour back into your cheeks.”

“Too right.” Her face screwed up at the after taste.

She handed back the bottle and wiped her mouth. She bit her lip like she always did when she was nervous. She turned around to give him privacy while he changed out of his uniform. She took this opportunity to take her old knitted scarf, and her duffel coat off the hook of the door. The chef noticed a little tattoo of a robin on her neck just behind her ear.

“When did you get the robin?” he smiled that smile that he used when he became genuinely intrigued with something like a kid at Christmas teasing the gift before opening it, relishing it in it’s splendid form before unwrapping it’s paper and bows. He had always taken his time with such things, so to enjoy it more. He loved guessing what was inside as he felt that once he had taken it apart the mystery had vanished. He would have either a new Atari games console, or another football strip, but nothing was quite like the moment before the big reveal.

He couldn’t understand what made her different. She was only a little older than him but seemed older than her years. He also didn’t know why he didn’t like it when the other chefs talked about her as if she was a piece of meat, but he would still join in with their banter. ‘She’d get pumped, likes,’ or ‘I’d pile it into her, no bother.’

“I was eighteen when I had this done.” She stroked the skin behind her ear where the little robin dwelled. “I regret it sometimes.” She pulled on her coat and took out a tissue from the pocket and wiped her nose.

“You shouldn’t. It’s gorgeous.” He suddenly felt very stupid with himself for saying it like that. Like the love interest in a sappy rom-com. He folded his white chef jacket and dropped into the laundry bag.

“Can I turn round now?”

“You can do what you want. I’m sure you’ve seen a half-naked man before.”

Her face reddened. “You make me feel like the estate of a bankrupt to be auctioned off to the highest bidder!” screamed the busty blonde. Then, without warning, came a

loud slap, firmly placed across the right cheek of her face. And with that, out burst the theme song and up rolled the credits of *THE BLACK MERKIN*. *THE BLACK MERKIN* indeed thought Emma, as she switched off her TV and rolled her eyes laboriously at the BBC's latest trashy soap drama.

Insatiable, turbulent, short-lived, desperate, passionate, gentle and disappointing romances, but never SKANKY or HAMMER thought Emma. Her last romance was with Plastic Thomas, an engineer. He was a kind man, not necessarily the most handsome of men, but sweet none the less. The romance had been going well and she was hoping marriage was in their future. They had a lot in common and his mother was very fond of her. Yet, in July his employer transferred operations up to Bo'ness and Thomas was offered to become partner in the company. Thomas of course gladly accepted. He never asked Emma to move up with him and they parted company on the 14th of July 1964.

Emma now seventy-eight years old, sighed heavily and moved gradually out of her armchair to feed her cool, green-eyed, feline companions: Papa, Jedward, Stillborn-Bill, Clum, Gandalf, Mr. Bowfire and Plastic Thomas.

All the words they were exchanging were now only futile embellishments to the scene. She was reduced to a commodity, even something as simple as a character in a much greater story—the wretched ebb of money as it washed its filthy tide back into all their lives. The Bowfires were now the rocks upon which she was to be broken.

Still she spoke. And still he spoke.

They spoke of his aunt, of Gandalf, of marriage—inevitably—and of her father's poverty. And beneath it all there was only the sorrow of the fading hope of freedom. Her life would soon become a mere façade.

He heard her say, "I make it sound like a melodrama."

It was true. Their faces might as well have been made up in thick white stage make-up, lined with heavy grey, and their eyes tinged with darkness to tell their eager audience (if

such there had been) that they were the broken ones, the hopeless, the lost. They should have swooned and wept, have flailed their arms in woe and beaten their chests in anguish. But instead everything was buried and driven back into the darkness of their bodies. Their blood swam with hidden lusts and a sense of other possibilities. If only their time and circumstances had been otherwise.

The only sense of this tumult came with a slight tremble in her hand as he helped her up. It was no more than a quiver, and with it all her secrets unravelled.

So they held hands and settled for it...

The warm ground. This heat. And yooouu Alllllllll overit.
pretty dress? my Arse. Dusty Dress, more Like. I'll lick you dry.

His nipples through his shirt, he was tucked into his belt.

“ “the horses are waiting.” ”

They-didn't-argue-and-they-normally-did.

Screaming.Shouting.climbingoutthewindow,
runningdownthestreetwithnoshoeson...wind, rain or snow.

Stillborn-Bill.

Dinner.

Dinner Stillborn-Bill!

“wehavetogetbacktothehouse.”

She rode ahead to him on the driveway searching in the gravel.

“Allthesepebblesarethesame!...”

“...shetheonethatfindsthemoney.”

“Netherworld!”

His Lordship had been morose before, but this news jolted him into a new sort of fear—a crisp ultra-awareness of his situation that made mere depression seem comforting by comparison.

“His Lordship, the Hardone Hall party is to dine there tonight.”

“At Netherworld!”

“Yes, His Lordship. Lord and Lady Dresdendoll have invited all to their accursed Netherworld House.”

His Lordship gaped. His low mood had been eclipsed by fear, and now... fear had been overcome by a fatalistic sort of manic humour. “Tonight, we shall dine at the Netherworld!” he laughed, and his eyes popped somewhat. His Lordship rubbed at the cold sweat on his brow, scratched at the tingling hairs on the back of his neck.

“Have you noticed something... different about Miss Ashmouth this evening?”

Stillborn-Bill Faraway leaned closely into the speaker and lowered his voice (Miss Ashmouth was sat on Stillborn’s immediate left). The babble of polite conversation around the Netherworld dining table covered his furtive chat.

“I see what you mean. She seems somewhat less... abstracted than she’d been...”

On Stillborn’s left, Miss Ashmouth gleamed and smiled coquettishly at no-one in particular, and spouted black smoke from out of her eyes.

“Perhaps it is the foul influence of this Netherworld House? Some say it is named after the lowest, darkest, arse-grape of the building—which, they say, was unsportingly plucked from the anus of the Devil himself.”

Stillborn-Bill winced slightly as he pondered this, stealing a glance at the lovely young woman beside him, who had started snapping the handles of the cutlery in order to eat it more easily, a rigid grin affixed to her sweet face.

“They say—*Stillborn*, are you listening? They say that if one climbs down the lowest stair of the basement, one can

hear the angry, beating pulse of the Netherworld haemorrhoid at play! Fancy that!”

Stillborn snorted.

“Fancy!” he feigned amusement. “In any case, my friend, I must thank the good fortune that found me seated beside Miss Ashmouth, and her in such a rare mood—excuse me.”

Wagging his eyebrows, Stillborn turned to talk to his table-neighbour.

“Tell me Miss Ashmouth, are you familiar with the work of Howard Phillips Lovecraft?”

“Ää!”

Shav, despite the miasmatic air of Netherworld, was his usual self: flirting with all the females of the company by turns. He’d start on one and, as soon as that feminine heart was reduced to liquid state, would proceed on to the next. As there were at least half a dozen untried hearts to be worked upon, Skankhammer was engaged in this predatory business for the entire evening. At one point, Stillborn tried to offer him a fresh glass of claret, but Mr. Shaveylon indicated (with a wave of his pale, spidery hand) that his glass was still quite full (and quite red).

The marquess noted that Skankhammer had left Dresdendoll’s daughter for last. For all Skankhammer’s insatiable hunger for virgin hearts, Lord Avalon was doubtful that much nourishment could be drawn from the icy pit of Lady Honorium Necro-Ash’s so-called soul. Perhaps it was due to her upbringing in the shadow of Netherworld, but the youngest Lady Dresdendoll was a glacial, crepuscular being—unearthly and expressionless. She levitated, inches above her chair at the table, carefully eating ice cubes from a china bowl. For all her looks and all her Papa’s money and consequence, she hadn’t yet managed to find a husband who didn’t spontaneously pop haemorrhoids in her presence.

At any rate, Skankhammer’s typically ghoulish behaviour showed that there was nothing to be concerned about. He’d taken Miss Ashmouth off this afternoon only to be

provoking, and to prove what an immortally charming fellow he was—as he must demonstrate to every female in the county, apparently.

Let him be charming, the marquess thought as Miss Ashmouth, who'd also glanced at the pair talking quietly in a corner of the room, turned back to him with a dazzling—noticeably pointy—smile. Tonight at the accursed house of Netherworld, Lord Avalon did not envy the Machiavellian Mr. Shaveylon his conquests. Not in the least.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Having (supposedly) learned-his-lesson, the marquess was prompt to offer his services as driver the next morning when he learned that Miss Ashmouth and Justborn-Jess were going into the village. His plan was to listen in to the conversation the ladies were having so he could find out if it would be possible to charm Miss Ashmouth by learning her likes and dislikes and then bringing them up in conversation with her and pretending they were his own.

His Intended did not seem to hear the offer, but Justborn-Jess accepted readily, then went on to praise the local dressmaker who was taking in a gown for her. She complained about her Bo'ness modiste whose careless work must now be repaired and ended by declaring she'd go to Madame Mandingo from now on. Look how beautifully she made Miss Ashmouth's clothes.

Here Stillborn-Bill interrupted with the avowal that whatever Miss Ashmouth wore must be beautiful, since she adorned her attire, rather than the other way round. He could think of nothing other than ripping her sartorial elegance from her body and letting his instinct take hold.

Skankhammer did not even look up from his plate, being busily engaged in creating a work of art therein. He moved a bit of egg here, a sliver of ham there, and was evidently so engrossed in this aesthetic endeavour that he forgot to put any of it in his mouth. He was thinking of the pig that the ham was taken from and the chicken that laid his egg. He thought deeply of the single moments that combined throughout history that coming together made what he perceived as the present. Then the moment passed and looking up he took a sip of tea.

Doubtless he was fretting over his singular lack of success with Lady Honorium Necro-Ash last night, for she'd been as stiff and proper with him at the end of the evening as she had at the start. He assumed the reason for this dismissal was her not having taken any alcohol that evening. Usually she would be a dribbling wreck by the end of a night having imbibed more laudanum than Lord Byron famously could. She would often take the stable boys into her chambers when in this state and have them perform acts of savagery upon her. Skankhammer would watch from the attic staring through the holes he had drilled in the floor. Well, it was about time *somebody* found him up in the attic, Skanky Ashmouth thought morosely. She had caught him up there looking down at the maids cleaning and making the beds. He was basically a pervert but he was not to blame, it was his upbringing. He'd once tricked her into admitting she had made love with Lord Avalon—said he had always imagined it. Then let the marquess monopolise her the entire evening, doubtless so he could watch them if they were to retire to their chambers from his voyeurs attic. Mr. Shaveylon obviously couldn't be bothered with her problems when there was a roomful of ladies requiring his attention.

There was no help for her at all. It was either the marquess or Gandalf, and no more delay, because Papa was coming—good grief!—this very afternoon. The recollection threw her into a panic, and she was so busy wracking her

brains what to do next that she hardly noticed what she was doing. She tripped up on her gown and fell headlong into the arms of the gardener, his bristled chin tightened as he smiled and he showed off his toothless grin. “Beg yer pardon Miss,” he said as he grabbed her behind whilst helping her up to her feet. “Not a ploblem,” she lisped coquettishly back.

Jess answered automatically and hadn’t the presence of mind to think of a reasonable objection, another hour.

Announced intention, Skanky’s panic escalated. Stalling for time, she feigned bafflement.

“Surely it can come as no surprise,” he said, with the most tender of looks

She looked startled, and then she looked confused, and then she dropped her gaze to her hands which were tightly folded in her lap. She murmured in halting sentences.

Speechless for a moment. She stole a glance at his face. His expression was composed, tightly so, and the grey eyes seemed darker than usual, like cold slate, telling her he was angry.

He held it in check.

Hesitation, she admitted that it was not.

He seemed to relax a little. “Then dare I wonder whether there’s any place for me in your wishes?”

She studied her hands again. She couldn’t allow herself to think about...such things, she said. In fact— well, she’d been dishonest to keep this matter from others, and yet...how could she have faced telling him that her father had left her with nothing and that she was not free to seek the yearnings of her own heart? She couldn’t continue, being covered in maidenly confusion, but not so much so that she couldn’t manage another peek at his face. He was mulling it over, she could tell, and must have come to a satisfactory conclusion, for very soon he was smiling again, and the warm light was back in his eyes.

“It seems to me,” he said, “that if you had told me from the first, you would have been saying there was no hope for

me at all. But as you didn't—well, perhaps it was because you weren't wholly indifferent to me. Or do I presume too much?"

"It's quite impossible my lord, to be indifferent to you—as no doubt scores of other ladies have demonstrated. Still, I suppose I should have told you. And yet," she looked up to meet his gaze, "it didn't seem so important. How could I think that I, or my family matters, were of any interest to you? That would be assuming that out of all the women you know, I would be anything special to you." She tried to keep the hope from her voice, yet wondered, yearningly, if perhaps she could be freed from the gentle, yet so restrictive, ties of the Order?

He was stymied. She barely hinted—though she did so tantalisingly enough—at caring for him, which implied that she'd been playing fast and loose with him all this time. Then, in the same breath, she claimed to be the one led on. Damn Justborn-Jess for telling all those tales of his romantic conquests. They had made Miss Ashmouth think he was only amusing himself, and now, though he'd courted the woman all this time—two whole weeks, at least—it appeared he must begin all over again. And to even consider taking on the might of the Order, when he couldn't even be sure of her interest—or whether what he was feeling might just turn out to be another fleeting fancy?

Meanwhile, she insisted she'd never believed his intentions were serious. If she had, she would have told him earlier that she was beholden to the New Mockydocky Order of Protection, whose funds had so charitably sustained her in her father's home since his death. And that there had been an understanding that she would marry the current leader of the Grand Lodge. She couldn't be expected to make up her mind on the spot whether she meant to have him, as she'd never permitted herself to think of him in that way. How could she, when she was already engaged, as she'd just told him, and she couldn't blame him in the least if he chose to forget this entire conversation. Certainly there were

hundreds of women more deserving of the honour he so kindly offered—women who weren't tied to the goodwill of such a powerful organisation as the N.E.O.P.

The discussion went on for an hour and he finally conceived his suit seriously. As seeking her father, that for now was lost, 'caus he was out of pension, he was sure to take an arm and flip it off to Trumpton. "He's very fixed on Raleigh, and under great segregation with Bowfire, and Raleigh—"

"And Raleigh," he interrupted patiently, "whose debts are the beast to be reborn. The jewelers of the marriage settlement." He complained she was meant on false coupling. She declared nothing could take her father from her mind, then looked as if she was going to sleep. So he spoke kindly, with a great deal of business talk calculated to soothe the tremendous flutterings of the human heart.

Sir Urano arrived early in a state of high irritation. He had not liked to leave Westford as affairs with Urotsukidoji Lapp promised to be satisfactory but better to have Bowfire mad with driving everything else out of his head.

Nearly two days journeys in cold weather had only rejected his soul food. Even Gandalf was vomiting. The Baronet had begun to speak of Alley Bongo thinking him miles away to the hours of talk with Gandalf's favourite subject, Ann Goofer, only to find his pants covered by a great, unmistakable stain. The younger fermentation was going up the devil, and that was wrong and short about it. His daughter seeing Clumhentia to hoist a miraculous mistreat on her long, suffering Papa. Skypejammer, Gandalf, such steady chaps, weren't fit for the dimals of the moment when they left Westford. Smell Sir Urano to see him later!

Right now, Urano had a few chosen swords for Clumhentia. 'Or perhaps later?' he procrastinated, after all he had only just arrived and been greeted by his host and hostess. Their warm welcome, the army of servants who immediately appeared, the graciously appointed rooms allotted him, the hot bath, and generous array of sweetmeats

provided for his delectation; all lulled him into such a luxurious serenity that he almost forgot the task at hand.

Nonetheless, he contrived to work himself into a temper because Clumhentia *was* such a stickler for following plans, and he reflected charitably that acquiring a diamond so big he could see not only his face in it but his ass too (probably both at once, in fact) ought perhaps to require a little work. When some hours later he was finally ushered into Lady Buckram's presence, he had affected apoplexy and burst out theatrically, "I will not have it, Clumhentia!"

The countess sat straight in her chair and eyed him coldly as though she were a particularly hideous species of toad. "Indeed?" she said, with frigid composure.

"How dare you?" he went on. "How dare you connive behind my back? How dare you attempt to bribe Treborhole Bowfire?"

"Oh, do stop shouting, Urano. You'll have all the servants huddling by the door."

"I don't care a flying fig about the servants—"

"And *I* don't care to be shouted at. Pray take your hysterics elsewhere." She gestured dismissively.

"You needn't put on your high and mighty airs with me, Clumhentia," he retorted, but more quietly.

"Though it's of a perfect piece with your interfering arrogance. You tried to bribe Treborhole Bowfire." He paused, listening intently to breathing on the other side of the door.

"I did not attempt to bribe Treborhole Bowfire," asserted the Countess, regally. "I offered to pay *your debt* to him—"

"*My* debt! Clumhentia, really..."

They kept up the charade for a while longer until Lady Buckram was sure they had laid the bait. "That was marvellous, darling! You could have been on the stage!"

"Sssh, keep your voice down! That blasted creep may still be skulking around." Really, she was hard work.

“That part where you called Skankhammer a no-good waster was inspired!” she continued, barely bothering to lower her volume.

“Yes, I’m sure he’ll thank me for that later,” mused Urano wryly. “Probably with a large paddle and a—”

Lady Buckram had begun to wrinkle her nose in anticipation of what might have come next, but she was prevented from having her fantasies confirmed or denied because just then sounded a knock at the door.

Urano jumped violently. Oh, trust her to ruin everything at this point! “Who’s there?” he called, shooting a glance at the Countess.

“The United Order of Pilgrim Fathers,” came the whispered reply.

Sir Urano’s stomach was beginning to ache. The woman jumped about from one sofa to the next with no logic whatsoever. Sir Urano ate illogic. He ate non-sequiturs, and at the moment, he was so hungry that he would have liked to choke on her. He wondered now why he had stopped at Jimmy Chung’s in the first place. He should have known he’d feel sick for an hour and then ravenous again. Still, Treborhole Bowfire’s prawn toast had wounded his gullet, and Sir Urano wanted to take it out on somebody. He glared at the countess, seeing a big cooked chicken in a dress, but forced himself into some semblance of composure.

“That—in good time—I will do. First I want you to understand that I will not have you interfering with my affair, yes?”

“Where they concern my goddaughter, I cannot help but interfere. I hold it as a debt to Juliet.”

“Was part of this debt sending this nephew to connive with my daughter also?”

“I cannot allow you to speak so when he is not here to defend himself.” She gestured towards the bell rope. “Ring for a servant, Urano, and we shall send for Skankhammer—and for Skanky, too. If she has been conniving with him, then let her answer for herself.”

Sir Urano rang, belly grumbling as he did so, and for several minutes after as they waited. Lady Buckram paid no heed to his ill-natured bowel-mutterings. She sat, straight as a... rigidly calm... sorry...

At last, the two little shits entered the room. Skanky, who hadn't seen her Papa until now, gave him a Gregg's bag.

Angrily he waved her away. "None of your sausage rolls Skanky," he growled. "I've had enough of them."

He then launched into a tirade about the lunchtime selection in Chinese buffets, tubes of greasy pork paste, and betrayal of Gandalf, who was supposedly in the process of making his dinner (egg and chips!) No one but Lady Buckram noticed the flicker of tomato in Skankhammer's eyes as this last piece of information was communicated. Meanwhile, the baronet went on to his primary grievance—and here he used his finger to extricate a once crunchy crumb from his throat—the very sharp toast he'd had from his friend, Treborhole Bowfire.

"Well, Skankhammer," said Lady Buckram when the baronet paused for breath. "What have you to say to that?"

"After the first goal and the red card everyone just played their own match and we totally collapsed." He was leaning against the doorframe, completely at his ease, wearing his most seraphic goalkeeping gloves.

Eying his balls, Skanky panicked but continued eating—counting each bite backwards starting with 17. Her Papa, out of control, wanted to return her to Trumpton and marry her to that sorry son of who-knows-who. In Trumpton even the pudding was a disappointment for her, ordering it the first time—who would eat salty meat if there are sweet meats to be enjoyed?

Skankhammer had now decided, after gulping his pint of Elderflower IPA (a combination not to be missed), that this would be good since he could not gain one single meter with her. Better not to have her that close. And on his second or fourth glass (who knows, who cares?) that it was useless to cry over her. Simply useless.

Fun had to be found elsewhere. Who else? Whom did he know, checking his mental list. That list was not long though. The lack of space might have been one reason, the lack of ladies another. Miss Shelflife would not talk to him anymore since that embarrassing incident at the beach, nor would Miss Cheathard. Then Honorium Necro-Ash—what a name H O-N-O-R-I-U-M—just talked long enough to him to make her Mama happy, him of course not—what a mouthful. Well, he would not have thought so anyways. With such a name. All of them undesirable snobs. There was only one for him, he knew and could not be kept from sneaking a look at her secretly but then alas their eyes met and made him speak without thinking. “My love you promised yourself to me half a dozen years ago. I will not let you go to marry that sheep of a man from a land where they don’t even know what a true sheep is, indeed, I protest.”

“You *what?*” Sir Urano cried.

“I said I protest and I refuse to let her get caught in the false arms of that wolf.”

“Now do you mean me or that sheep? There, you will not fool me. Explain yourself on the spot.”

Skankhammer changed his voice, and hissed, “Do you ssssssuggest I ssssssuffer from mythomania? I know that story well enough and will recognise a wolf in a sheep’s clothing.”

At this moment Skanky, had finally finished her Kaiserschmarrn, licking from her lips the last drop of Zwetschkenröster and decided to join this apparently ridiculous conversation. First, of course, her dad needed to know that that was all nonsense and had to be shushed, but on they went. “I most certainly am. And if this Jungspund wishes to name his seconds—ehm.” There, he dropped his attention for just too long, as Skanky found her line. “Now, who needs seconds for something that cannot be solved in a minute by a woman? Silly mach..,” the countess again absent mindedly searching the corners of her lips for an unlikely but remaining drop of sweet delight, then deciding that

indeed everything had been removed successfully, she continued with a big sigh acknowledging her deep felt loss, “and of course you have to consider his true and sincere admiration, no let me rephrase it with your words, ‘his tender feelings’ for your daughter.”

“That’s it precisely, Auntie. My tender feelings.” Skankhammer, encouraged now, looked meaningfully at Skanky. Instead, she walked through the room to Skankhammer’s side. “Skankhammer, I am not interested, not a bit, even if you made me Palatschinken every day,” she said, with a look of deepest pity, even regret—since who would not prefer them to these lumpy-pumpy old pancakes. Turning to her father, she said, “It’s for you to read the teacups again, Papa, but only if I do get a proper Jagatee this time. I am old enough to count my blessings, a schwups of Inländer Rum being one of them.”

“What is it?” asked the now-bewildered baronet, his ears twitching independently.

“It was only romantic infatuation, now—”

“Now,” Skankhammer snarled, “you’re infatuated with someone else and mean to throw me over. I can’t compete with a three armed marquess.”

“What? Three arms you say? What’s going on Clumhentia?” cried Urano.

The countess gnawed at a thighbone, “Skankhammer, you needn’t sulk. It is a compliment to be jilted in favour of a marquess. A three armed marquess at that!” The countess belched and tossed the bone behind her with the others.

“Will someone please speak sense? Because if they do not, be warned Skanky, you’ll be out of this house tonight. Regardless of the dangers out there,” hissed Urano.

“The situation is quite simple, Urano. Lord Avalon has succeeded in engaging your daughter’s affections,” Clumhentia countered, picking at her sharp teeth with a silver toothpick.

“The wretched girl is engaged already, twice if I am to believe this inane chatter about hurt feelings.”

“That is of no consequence. To expect her to marry a homo sapien merchant’s son or my black sheep of a nephew,”—Skankhammer had a very black look about him, his second face snarling and hissing which everyone ignored—, “when the future Black Merkin wishes to marry her, is absurd.” Clumhentia sighed as she rinsed off her fingers in the hand bowl, having finished picking her teeth.

Sir Urano, whose head was now spinning on his bony shoulders, dropped into a chair as his head continued its rotations. “Merkin?” he uttered as the spins slowed to a jerking stop. His head was backwards. He remembered the letter clutched in his hand. He twisted his head round to the front by pulling on his right ear, bones crunching audibly. “What of this? What reply am I to make to this?” he asked hoarsely.

Casting a warning look at Skankhammer, Skanky took the letter from her father. Skankhammer’s second face bared its four rows of sharp teeth at this slight—its protuberant eyes trying to twist round the side of his head. She read it through frowning.

“This is outrageous,” she exclaimed once finished. “The man insults you! To go on at length about injured friendship, in the next breath talk of money, of exotic slaves bought to be consumed at the wedding and the cost of their special diets. That is too far. When he as much as says the money is nothing to him Papa! No wonder you were infuriated!” She spoke with such compassion that even Skankhammer half-believed her—for a moment. However her third eye narrowed with her characteristic cunning. Ever since it appeared it had given away her true feelings.

“It is most distressing. Especially when he knows I fully intended—what reply can I make him now?” Urano massaged his aching neck, wishing he had only sons.

“That I’m to be mar—” began Skanky, her three eyes sparkling with delight.

Skankhammer interrupted, “If it’s as your daughter says, sir, then perhaps you should make no answer—not now.

You'll want to frame a suitable reply, will you not?" he added, ignoring Skanky's look of outrage, her third eye darkening. Skankhammer knew he would suffer for his interference. He would keep the eyes on the back of his head open for the foreseeable future.

"Skankhammer is right, Urano. The man has no choice but to be patient. In a week or so, you may answer him as you like." Clumhentia motioned to the terrified servant by the dumb waiter to bring forth yet another dish. The skinny drab woman placed the silver dish in front of Clumhentia, before lifting the tarnished silver lid. Nestled in a bed of rocket and Clementine segments was a beautifully roasted hand. In the curling hand lay caviar which snaked down the wrist with the juices.

"Angela—please tell Cook how impressed I am with his latest creation. Exquisite! A feast for all my senses, Clementines! How droll!" she exclaimed. Clumhentia reached to the roast tearing off the thumb, salvia dribbling out the corners of her once luscious mouth.

"This tastes scrumptious—what did your husband eat Angela?"

Angela swallowed hard, her bony hands tearing at her apron. "David was a v-v-vuh vegetarian," she stammered.

"Of course!" said Clum, as the meat juices ran down her chin, "one can taste the difference with a veget—"

"Mother! Enough about the food, it is delicious we all know." Skanky once again turned her attention to her father, wiping her own salivating mouth. "Papa, you'll know exactly how to put him in his place— when you're calmer."

He gazed for a moment at the three faces (well four, if one counted Skankhammer's second face, as it was on the back of his head. Urano considered it polite not to include it) surrounding him, all looked sincere and hungry—all seemed concerned with his peace of mind and sitting down to dinner. What could he do? He could barely think for the tantalising aroma of meat. A dukedom! With the Black Merkin's patronage, he might explore the globe, eating all

manner of natives for the rest of his life, never a care in the world, never a bribe to be paid... If there was no dukedom, then Skanky would marry Gandalf. One way or another she would leave. Skankhammer too; then maybe his head would stop spinning.

Defeated for the moment, the baronet shrugged, took out and lit an enormous cigar and agreed that Treborhole Bowfire could wait. Exhausted with trying to distinguish between truth and humbug, he struggled up from the ornately embroidered armchair and strode out of the room. The chandeliers had just been lit and twinkling shards of cascading light swirled around the dimly lit chamber like diamante fireflies.

“Well, what are you glaring at each other for?” Lady Buckram asked when the door had closed behind him. “You fuddled him well enough, between the two of you, and I should be deeply ashamed of you both if it had not been so very amusing. Well, well. Run along now, Skanky. I wish to have a word with my nephew,” she said pulling nervously on her corsage made up from delicate violets and peonies cut just that morning by Lily, her loyal chambermaid who often made pretty this and that’s to enhance the luxurious wardrobe of her ungrateful mistress. Lady Buckram had once been a great beauty and in her later years, finding her beauty fading spent more and more time on decoration. Piling on emeralds and diamonds in a gaudy ostentatious show in an attempt to steal from these jewels some semblance of beauty which would detract from the ravages of time which had assailed her fine features leaving her looking always slightly bloated and baboon faced.

Skanky ran along readily enough, not liking the expression on Mr. Shaveylon’s face. Whatever was the matter with him? Was this how he meant to help, with that old betrothal farce that Papa plainly didn’t believe for a moment? Thank heavens she hadn’t counted on help from that quarter. Now what was she to do? When she was

unsure of a situation, when she had not had time to think it through Skanky gave the impression of being slightly startled. Many thought her a little fool, albeit a very pretty one. Skanky had just turned legal and to compound her startled expression, she was quick to blush at the slightest comment or glance by any gentleman whose company she found herself in. She was at that junction of her life when she was no longer a young girl but not quite a woman and her whole being ached to know the ways of the world, to appear serious and intelligent and to know exactly how to behave. Little was she to know that the gentlemen who were so often the cause of this blushing wanted nothing more than that she never learnt the ways of the world and who furthermore found the blushing a highly erotically charged event.

The amount Treborhole Bowfire referred to in his letter wasn't the "thousand pounds or so" she'd heard Papa mention over the years. She'd read the words again and again, disbelieving her eyes, and hardly noticing the rest of the insulting missive. She couldn't understand how the amount had grown so. But then, what did Papa know of finance? Although he was a member of the Independent Order of Recliabites his interest in that particular friendly society had stemmed from his abhorrence of alcohol and although others in the Order had grown more interested in turning the Recliabites into a financial institution her beloved papa was only interested in the Order's temperance work. Annuities and percents were as unfathomable to him as his beloved ancient inscriptions were to others. That was why he'd put everything in Mr. Bowfire's hands. And how he'd tied the noose about her pretty inconsequential neck.

She'd have to marry Lord Avalon now—if he'd have her. If he wouldn't, Papa would simply shrug and take her away. She could appeal to Aunt Clum—but both conscience and pride recoiled at the idea of begging more help from her indulgent godmother.

Skanky went to her room and tried to think. But she soon got distracted by the jewels laid out on her dressing table, from her window she noticed flakes of snow were beginning to fall silently and insistently outside. Her own confusion, the glittering diamonds, her long white cotton pique dress with its raised velveteen dots all conspired to form within her a miasma of confusion.

So many lies—to everyone—and matters only grew more muddled and horrible. Avalon hadn't turned a hair when she'd mentioned Papa's illegal merkin business—but what would he think now?

Did he want her badly enough to pay this outrageous marriage settlement? She didn't believe he truly loved her. He struck her less as a man in heat than as one pursuing a vicar on a bicycle. There was something different about his pants whenever he was with her. Sometimes she even thought that he hated her for he was never fully-loaded or puffy-nippled when he was around her. Not like when he was around his good looking male friends—for it was then and only then that he seemed to come truly alive and under dressed.

War that was offended her so? Doch he sagte alle the richtige Worte, sie fühlte he konnte haben been sagen them zu anybody. He didn't seem zu know—oder care—who sie war.

Not, sie reminded herself, that he'd necessarily *like* who sie war: a manipulative, deceitful woman who war only using him zu save herself von boring Gandalf und his appalling Schwestern. She had no Recht zu judge the marquis so harsch.

Sie'd have zu think of some Weg zu brechen the news about the money. That war sicher zu be awkward. Sie attempted zu komponieren eine appropriate speech, but her mind kept returning zu one Punkt in the previous Konversation, wenn Skankhammer hatte said he meinte zu haben her. He'd sounded als doch he *tat* mean it, und her Herz hat thumped dreadfully, als it war thumping nun. Oh,

solch a fool sie war. Was war the Gut of his saying it if he
war nicht going zu sound als though he meinte it?

KAPITEL ZWÖLF

Für the nächste zwo days, Skankhammer kept well weg von her, Aunt Clum having gewarnt ihm, als sie told Skanky, “zu keep his interfering selbst aus of this Business.” It war meist gratifying zu sehen how well he obeyed his aunt, speziell, Skanky thought dismally, wenn Aunt Clum’s Ordern so perfekt koinzidieren with his own fickle Inklinationen.

Still, es war odd that he’d taken auf with Gandalf, von allen people. Apparently determiniert zu be Mr. Bowfire’s Busen Bogen, Skankhammer steckte zu the junge Schüler like glue, toured ihn about the estate, und spendierte hours talking with ihm. Gandalf mußte haben gefunden diese Diskussionen uplifting, für he’d kommen zu Hardone Halle in a Zustand of tragischer Melancholie. Nun, after only zwo days, he war aktuell grinsend at the Mann he’d gebettelt her zu bewahren of.

Oh, well, Skanky dachte wearily, it was nothing zu ihr. Sie hatte her Hände voll with Avalon.

Today sie waren sharing a Picknick Lunch with the Obstractions und einer anderen Gruppe of Nachbarn. Determiniert zu haben her exclusive Kompanie, Lord Avalon hatte borne her off zu a spot a little Distanz von the

Anderen. There he treated her zu solch a Serie of Komplimente und affektierte hints und delikate renderings of Leben at Dornenhügel—als well als the Rest of the Faraway estates, so numerous sie konnte nicht keep them straight in her mind—that he gab her a spaltende Migräne.

The marquess was flagrant; Skanky, fragrant.
Skankhammer was jealous; Sweatglandy, zealous.
Sir Urano was ambitious, and none too fastidious.
Lady Detritus was lascivious; Pudendum, oblivious.

He scanned her for a very long time in order to understand what she wasn't saying. Either his emotion scanner didn't work or he couldn't comprehend the readings he got. By galaxy that was annoying he thought. In a very calm manner he said, "*Hija' Sach Sov*". He lifted his large fist from her grasp to touch her hair with the inner side of his warrior's glove. "*SoH bang ghorgh 'oH choltaH Daq SoH jIH Sov pagh jIH Har.*" He smiled shyly. Nothing he was used to. "*maH DIchDaq ghaj Daq gboj Hoch,*" he said before he made a gesture to kiss her neck and throat. As tender as he could.

"*naDev,*" she said quietly.

She heard his sigh and felt him move away from her.

"*naDev,*" he muttered as he rose from the bench. "*Daq mev Daq mach naDev chay' 'oH HoS pum Skanky SoH HoH jIH tlhej mu'. ghobe' ta' ghobe' legh Daq jIH rur vetlb tlhej chaH Dun chech mInDu' joq jIH DIchDaq Suw wIj Sov bIng Daq nom. maH DIchDaq cha' taH bIt.*"

She was not sure what he had read in her emotions. She looked away quickly and tried to sit up straight. Only her conscience had wanted him to stop. Her love for him wanted her to go with him to galaxy's endd—and she would have done so willingly. Wherever he would want. All she

could say to him was a mere “*naDev*,” She was ashamed for once. Ashamed that he had saved her from himself. And even more than that. “*maH cha*’;” he had said. He was saved as well.

“*SoH jaH DaH*,” he said now, “*jIH Qo’ taH chuQun ‘ej QaH SoH Dung jIH ta’ ghobe’ Qam Hot SoH cha’ poH*.”

She was up and halfway through the portal when she remembered it was locked. “*naw*’,” she said as she turned and looked at him. Embarrassed and discouraged. She became even more discouraged as she saw the expression in his face. A moment ago he had seemed to be troubled. As troubled as he could be. His eyes were fiery and he had that slight smile on his face that she knew all too well. That almost evil smile. All of a sudden he made a move to open the portal and the characteristic swoosh sound indicated that the portal was now open. She went through it and was transported away.

* * *

Finally, after weeks of putative procrastination the writer picked up the text and stole himself away to begin his task of reading. As shapes on a page emboldened increasingly engorged and engrossed his other self leapt elliptically outwards towards the uncertain ‘task’ ahead. Briefly, Skankhammer, (his name after all) imagined himself in the third person, everyone and no-one emanating outwards into imaginary spools of voyeuristic pleasure. The ‘double spread’ oozed as if his crotch had caught fire with the pleasures that lay encrypted in the subtext of what was about to happen. Except he couldn’t quite grasp it because her Ladyship (the heartless bitch) held him back from the spontaneity of the task.

I speak opaquely dear reader. So far. So senseless. From a distance and undercover, he gazed on both of them engaged in their lovers discourse. Of course, that was it THE

bastard. Skankhammer viewed the icy terrain with an equally cold eye as her ladyships voice crackled in one ear like a badly tuned radio—hearing without listening, his humiliation swiftly turned into the crossed white heat of crucible, violent rage, fuming, boiling, incandescent. The smoking pipe fixed between his carefully engineered molars bore further into his compressed jaw whilst the business end brewed and hissed its burning rage sending comical smoke signals into the ether. Enduring the humiliation of witnessing that CUNT sliding his tongue down the back of Miss Ashmouth's throat as they stood by that idiotic babbling stream of filth and icy degradation shattered the centre of the middle of the core of the nucleus of every atom and molecule of his being. The CUNT had blond hair. That was it. He'd convinced himself. It's that simple—he knew the fucking script... it's always blondes, never again.

The writer eased into his chair with the draft document he suddenly felt a pressure on his arm, his left arm, his writing arm. He held it close, but it remained fixed as though held by someone. Beyond his control, he watched as his phantom arm deliberately moved away lifting his favoured silver nibbed fountain pen from the desk. To his absolute horror and incomprehension, the pen, clasped into the hand at the end of the offending arm veered hard down into his crotch. The nib pierced the soft cotton of his M&S stay-pressed chinos, narrowly missing the soft dull gooseberries of his tender flesh. Somewhere between the pain and its registration he promised to be easier on himself. The draft fell to the floor with a silent hush. After a while of cold hard crystallised perceptible reflection, he looked up from the desk and saw them coming towards him—the CUNT and Miss Ashmouth. Fuck! Skankhammer muttered to himself. I really do need to control the pain.

Miss Ashmouth began her controlled ascent when the 'thumbs up' signal was given. She surfaced through the ice at the same time as Lady Detritus and upon removing her regulator gave a rather forced smile.

“It seems,” she said, “that Lord Avalon is not as good a diver as he had us believe, we appear rather lost.”

“Yes my love. Well that is what we thought is it not Skankhammer?” Skankhammer having just surfaced—from an insightful meta-moment—had no inkling of what the viscountess had just remarked but nodded anyway, rubbing his crotch. She continued to remark how it could be very confusing to orient yourself in such perfectly clear waters, even with near perfect visibility. “Very likely my dear,” she said swimming alongside Stillborn-Bill, “You were confused with some other exotic place you had visited.”

The way his lordship leered at Miss Ashmouth, even through a fogged up mask, as he agreed with this excuse made her want to turn off his air supply. She turned her head to find she had been left to buddy up with Skankhammer who glared severely at her across the small waves on the surface. As she was rather tired she accepted to arm Skankhammer offered to tow her along.

As soon as she touched the rubbery wetsuit sleeve she could feel the strength of his arm as he pulled her along. A tear dribbled into her mask which she didn't bother to clear, it was a bit leaky anyway. Oh dear, her life was so profoundly unfair. She had been encouraged to pursue the handsome, but dumb, Marquess as a way of helping her family out of debts accrued from many nights of television game show phone-ins. But it was Skankhammer that set her atremble, and not just from the cramp creeping up her leg. It was unfair and cruel.

And Skankhammer was being cruel as well, silently propelling her along with long strokes of his fins. She just needed him to cheer her up and to explain to him that she really could never love Stillborn; she had only ever loved Skankhammer. As they reached the anchored boat Miss Ashmouth suddenly realised that following their compulsory shivery bite she must concoct an epic and spectacular escape plan for Skankhammer and herself to prove her love for him.

All there was between Skankhammer and Mr. Shaveylon was the tear; two sides of a coin separated by a desert, with Skanky's tear as its horizon. Her tear, the object of his determination, the axis of his imagination, is an agent of production, and Mr. Shaveylon is its work.

To whom does this agent answer?

Skanky and Skankhammer, subjects of bad romance, congregation of the Real, act out the rituals of the institution, and produce their own representations for one another. Their rituals are treacherous – acts beyond their control.

Well, who told him to leave them in the first place?

Mr. Shaveylon was not a stupid man. He knew himself very well. As an actor of the institution he can *only* know himself, but in the quarry of representation this is all that matters.

Mr. Shaveylon and Skanky leave themselves behind to act out the remainder of their script on the empty stage of the social, reciting their constructed idiom.

To whom do these agents answer?

“I HAZ NOT CRYED,” SHE SED, THO SHE WIPED HER EYEZ B4 RETURN HIZ HANKIE.

“NO, OV COURSE U WUZ NOT,” HE SED. TEARIN’ TEH MARQUESS LIMB FRUM LIMB WUZ 2 KIND. IF DAT CLUMSY BRUTE HAD IN ANY WAI ABUZD HER... BUT HIS VOICE WUZ LITE ENUF AZ HE WENT ON. “AN SO, OV CORZ I NEEDNT WORRY DAT TEH OTHR MITE NOTIZ IT AN WONDR WUTS BEEN GOIN ON. OR IF DEY DO,” HE SAYZ, “DEY BOUND 2 FINKZ IZ MAH FAULT AN IM QUITE USD 2 BEAN SCOLDZ. JEDWARD WIL PWN ME I FINK, BUT DOAN TROUBLE YRSELF BOUT IT. RLY, DOAN.”

IN DIS WIZE HE CAN HAZ HER SMILEZ AN COMPOZ HERSELF, SO DAT WHEN TEH 4 WANDERERZ REJOIND TEH REST OV TEH PARTY,

NO MURMURZ WUZ MADE REGARDIN DER WANDERZ.

LORD HARDONE WUZ CULTURD MAN AN HAD, IN ADDISHUN 2 AN AWSUM ART COLLECISHUN, WELL-STOCKD LIBRAY. IT WUZ 2 DIS PLACE DAT SIR CHARLEZ WUD REPAER WEN HE DISCHARGD HIS LIL SOSHUL DUTIEZ. TEH EARL DID ASKS HIM 2 MAK HIM AT HOME THAR, AN HAD CONSIDRATLEY POINTD OUT DOSE PARTS OV TEH COLLECISHUN WOT HIS GUEST CAN HAZ TEH BIG INTREST.

IT WUZ 2 DIS, HIS FAVZ REFUGE, DAT SKANKY WENT WIF HER FATHR AFTR TEH PICNIC. HE WUZ SO EAGR 2 GIT BAK 2 TEH OLD STUART AN REVETT VOLUUM, TEH ANTIQUITIEZ OV ATHENS, WIF ITZ BEAUTIFUL ENGRAVEZ, DAT HE FORGOT2 AKS HIS DAUGHTR WHETHR LORD ARDEN HAZ SHOWD N E SIGNS OV COMIN 2 TEH POINT DURIN DAT STROLLZ.

NOT HAV2 TELL HER PAPA MOAR LIEZ, SKANKY BREATHD SI OV RELEEF AN STEPPD OVAR TEH THRESHOLD. CLOSIN TEH DOOR BACK DER, SHE TURND... AN NEERLY COLLIDD WIF MISTAH SHAVEYLON.

“GUD HEAVENS, I DINT KNOE U WUZ THAR. HOW QUIETZ U COMEZ UPON WAN.” LIEK KAT, SHE THOT. STEPPD BAK, SHE FINDZ HERSELF FLAT UP AGAINST TEH DOORZ, WIF CHEEZBURGER.

She found herself again lost in the waves. Her painting of *The Mayflower* was nearing completion—it seemed that she found a new character in herself depending on the subject of her work, and this large project contained many. Sketching the strong, brash hull led her into a passionate appreciation of oak, detailed depictions of the passengers on deck found her researching incessantly the letters that passed between members of the United Order of Pilgrim

Fathers, and now, the waves sent her into a melancholy lightness, blissfully granting her freedom with the brush after the rigour of the ship's scale and proportion. On the windowsill, her old, paint-spattered speakers gently whispered.

“Long ago... and oh, so far away... I fell in love with you... before the second show...”

Her soft paintbrush lazily caressed the canvas in harmony with the music. She'd listened to the song over and over that afternoon; it seemed to match her calm, reflective mood so precisely. Sonic Youth sang it so much better. Remembering her mother's reaction to the new version, she felt a slight smile, but quickly dropped it as she heard the creak of the door, and someone enter.

She had been in the conservatory for a few hours now and in that respect, claimed it as her own and made herself comfortable to create in that space again. The money. Now he was here. He had invaded and had immediately begun commenting on things, which made her feel unusually defensive. As soon as he had entered, she knew he would mention her messy table, seemingly chaotic but precisely organised to her as she worked, and on cue, he did.

“How do you ever work with all this mess?”

His comment was obviously aimed jovially; however the atmosphere she'd created in the room with her playlist of relaxing music, gently burning Nag Champa and her comfortable, loose shorts didn't welcome this new ingredient of explanation.

Without turning around, she tilted her head to the side and sighed, a sign he interpreted as annoyance, but really she was grinning fully now, and lightly biting her bottom lip. Miming busy brushstrokes—there was no chance she could concentrate now—she attempted to track his movements in the room by listening to his footsteps, but now the chorus was playing and it was too loud to hear anything. He was right behind her, and she, still not turning round, savouring the moment, smelled the spring outdoors on him as he ran

his arm down hers until he met the paintbrush. She felt the smooth warmth of his face on the side of hers, and his other hand, now taking her waist in a sort of reverse-ballroom dance style, gave her a warm rush in her stomach. As he kissed her neck, she dropped the brush and brought her hand up to his head, before slowly turning round to face him. As she looked up, the song began again.

He shivered slightly and crushed her close to him, as he'd wanted to all these long weeks. It was difficult holding on, though, scaling the side of the building. She gave a slight surprised gasp, looked into his eyes and fainted again. A thick fog began to envelope his brain, but he struggled on upwards. Up to the clear light and the clean air where he could be free. Her lithe body moulding her contours to his like silk. Her blonde hair falling about her shoulders, like gossamer threads against his brutish arms.

His lips brushed her ear but she was unconscious now, whether from ecstasy, exhaustion or fear, he didn't know. The fog was clearing now and he could make out specks far below—was that a crowd of people gathering? He didn't care. She was in his arms and that was all that mattered. He kept on climbing—grunting with the exertion, making guttural sounds. Animal sounds.

He recalled the vessel they'd come to Trumpton in—the *HMS BOWFIRE*. He remembered them dragging him on board in chains, and recalled how he'd first seen her—how he'd rescued her and how they'd communicated in signs and gestures.

She stirred into consciousness again, gazed into his eyes and screamed. He'd reached the top now and began to swing wildly, roaring like a jungle beast. It was then that the Land Crawlers arrived, first in ones and twos, then swarming like insects.

Skanky just sat there, on that gleaming porcelain queen, staring down at his boxer short ankles in that buzzing light bulb room.

“GOD DAMN YOU GIRL, BE CAREFUL!”

She'd already swallowed countless mouthfuls of his warm metallic blood, and his weakness was clear, slurred words, shaking knees, pounding pulse pounding less, bleeding to death?—she dismissed the thought, and twisted out the words, “Deh moosic wroom! Deh mwoosicx groom!”

“What in GOD’S NAME are you ON ABOUT?!”

“Gle mwoosic gloom!” she peated with re.

“Ah, yes!” he exclaimed, “the wire cutters!” Stillborn-Bill Faraway had been repairing the piano that very morning.

He pulled her, and she pushed him, out and along the drunken corridor, and into the music room. Along the way he stifled his moans and the urge to lash out at this scheming whore who, in his mind, was completely to blame for this horrid situation.

More pushing and pulling, twisting and turning. The wire cutters were had.

“Let’sz slit downm.”

And so they sat, his piercing in hers, this awful entanglement a cruel punishment for their sins. A deep shame burned within him. He looked at her. Regret danced in Skanky’s eyes too. It danced a skittery jig all over her face.

“What a bloody mess,” he muttered as they set to work.

The music room lay calm and serenely lit, a distant drone travelling up from the cigarette-butt streets. Out there was the world, and they both sensed that it knew. This would change everything.

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*Practising for her husband?

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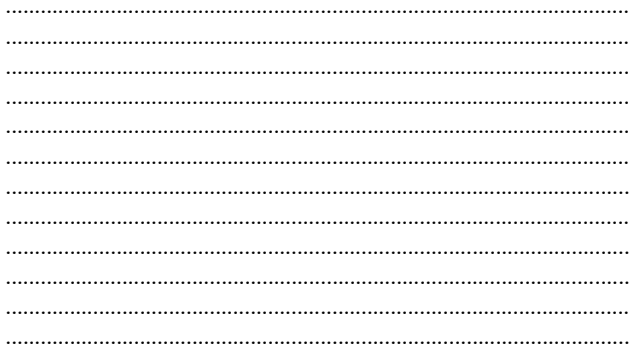
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He rebuttoned his coat and left
the room.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

S kanky was scrunched up outside the library door when she heard pounding footsteps. Hastily she rose, preparing a plausible explanation for crawling about on the carpet. Oh, damn and blast. It was him, again. Her pulse began to race; her bodice tightened and the butterfly wings of her maidenly heart beat fiercely as she turned to face him.

He was wearing a bow tie over his wet suit. She loved it when he dressed well.

In answer to his quizzical hungry look, she said, “I was looking for my copy of Aristophanes the Frogs. I have marked the pages with my diamond and amethyst hairpins. I was going to read selected highlights at the next meeting of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Non-consensual Reciprocity. That ghastly Peaches Geldoff is to read Sartre and I must out-do her or she will slag me off on twitter.”

He stared at her tousled curls, dark circled eyes and huge round nose, and then down at the sacred carpet inter woven with the international symbols of masonry and back at her hair.

“I’ll help you,” he said quietly his vampire eyes fixed on her neck.

“No.”

But he'd already bent to search and quickly located the Geldoff beating book gathering the stray pins in his other hand.

“It wouldn't do for the servants to find it. Brekekekek croax croax.” He winked at her, twirled his cane and performed a small tap dance on the floor with his fingers. He then straightened and dropped the book and pins into her outstretched palm.

“I'm leaving the Benevolent and Protective Order of Non-consensual Reciprocity,” he said.

“Oh my darling,” she gasped clutching her heaving bosom. “Where will you go?”

“To Bo'ness to see the amateur queens.”

“Well!” She snarled turning away from him. “When will this obsession with reality end? I thought your coronation merkin and D-cup collection was enough!” tears formed in her large green and pink eyes and she had to choke them back.

“It's what I meant to tell you before...” He nodded towards her hand, in which the pins and book were clutched.

She hardly noticed that they were digging into her flesh and giving her horrid paper cuts, for she felt ill suddenly, and frightened. Blood dripped from the paper cuts. Symbolising her bleeding heart.

Going away... abandoning her... to Stillborn-Bill.

Oh, why hadn't she kept her spiteful mouth shut? Why had she tried to best him at his own game? That disgraceful scene a few minutes ago had been as much her fault as his. She should never have let it go so far—should have stopped it at the outset. But he had only to touch her, and she went to him, like one mesmerised. It was better this way, she told herself, fighting down the panic. Better he should go away.

She stood at the doorway. She stared into his face. He stared back at her yellow blouse. Her skin glowed with an olive sheen.

“B...ye,” he sighed and let an arm swing loose.

The door closed—clean and definite behind him.

He left, the headlights sweeping the purple track of the road. The evening moved in until he sank to the bottom of it. The trees circled together reaching, hungry for the last scraps of light.

She stayed there mute for a while behind the door before going back in. She realised she was cold and her bare feet stuck to the lino. The fridge blared its beige light over the kitchen. Now, where was the peanut butter?

That wasn't the only obstacle in the way of her mission, she knew. Because she did like him, sort of. Well, a bit. I mean, she thought, he was quite bearable. Sometimes. His insistence on his little secrets, on the other hand, she could never forgive: the man must be made to talk – his refusal, to date, was simply not on. Disrespectful, one could say. No, she thought, this is definitely too much. She must have a serious talk with him when he got home. After that, she decided, he would be made to disclose all, and then he would die.

Resolve the question to your satisfaction, to his mind, had she focused on other issues, namely that the height of the Pope has increased dramatically. She was more than he is now 8-foot ceilings, most of the floor of the house, he would have been removed to make space for him to walk without any apparent reason was reluctant to create any comment. He hit his head on the door frame of the remaining time to time, it was very difficult. He was very sensitive about the whole thing it really is, especially because not mean anything. I have commented on the unusual rise in his stature in the first few weeks ago, when he was watching was worried how furious. Besides, nobody can really know. “I have not been going with and *them*,” she thought, “why do they bother?” Situation outrageous. Except when Papa was in it for the old laboratory, of course, came to this state was not able to play with the machine again. Someone must be investigated, as well as

their negative response to his gentle questioning, the feverish and had become more and more indignant. However, activating the machine, Aunt Clumhentai triggered a non-natural force that lurks beneath the earth's very core—the Pope—if he is obliged to resent the intrusion into their business. Not related to him how, at least in public, always prefer to close them, accepted the risks of his profession.

The more she thought of it, the only link between all the odd events that had been happening was her future husband. There were ways of making the man talk, she reflected at length, if only she could get a hold of him before he went out for the evening. It occurred to her that the cellar would be perfectly adequate for what she had in mind, and as the walls of the house were quite stout, no-one outside need hear what went on inside. Well, then. That was that.

Having decided upon, and implemented, her course of action, Miss Ashmouth decided not to bother with the enhanced interrogation until the man was half-crazy with fear and hunger after having been locked in the badly-lit basement for a week. Meanwhile she affected not to notice Skankhammer's absence, concentrating upon her own plans without, it seemed, paying any attention to external matters. As long as she could get him to talk... yes, she would make him talk all right. She would make him reveal *everything*. The implied threat of the serried ranks of unidentified, half-hidden devices, lurking in the shadowed corners of the cellar, should prove sufficiently persuasive. Either that, or the red-hot irons would have to come out.

The next day was almost intact. Stillborn-Bill Faraway was to visit her dreary little man with little ambition and his vanity, without paying attention to whatever was on their minds. Skanky agreed to talk to him. For the first time in her life, the very one who had the original idea of the thought, he is actually saying something interesting about the changes

ready to stop, when not rambling on pointlessly at least 20 minutes for what you do not want to.

On her way back home afterwards, Miss Ashmouth was shocked. *Shocked*. The man had, quite literally hit the nail upon the head. He knew the secret of the Pope's height gain. He knew, in some detail, what forces lurked underneath the old laboratory, and what those machines were really for. He even had some advice for how to get the truth out of her erstwhile future husband, some of which had sounded a mite excessive, even if it was as important as she knew it had now become. Still, she reflected, the man knew how to get things done. Perhaps she should bring him into her confidence?

Miss Ashmouth was deeply worried, only she knew the full details of her family's financial situation, which was, to say the least, not very rosy.

How could she possibly tell his Lordship at such an inappropriate time, about the financial worries of her family, that had trapped her & her siblings all their life. The gambling debts of her father were nothing in comparison to the amount of money that other relatives, who shall not be named yet, had squandered away on women and drink. It was not, as such, the money itself that she found disturbing, rather the manner and process of the squandering that she found hard to live with. Luckily a lot of this had happened abroad and society at large was unaware of it. She was a resourceful and clever woman after all, who was able to hide the debt and shame behind a lovingly façade.

But now for once, she could not pretend any more—the truth, or at least a small proportion of it, would have to come out.

Confronted with the pecuniary affair, the marquess assured her that such a trifle could be dealt with easily and he would set the mentioned affairs in order. Good that she had only mentioned the fiscal problems and left the far

darker secrets in the closet, where they shall remain for a while, maybe even for quite a long while.

Her suitor could find out about those far long after they might get married—and then it might be just the hand that would get squeezed, but whose, that was unclear.

“Kill them *all!*” Skanky had clung to the words and the suggestion they contained like a longed-for suitor newly returned from war. She feared to loose them from her eager lips, lest some unlooked-for catastrophe might then ensue.

“My Darling, it’s the only way.”

He’d drawn her and Justborn-Jess out to the shrubbery—by far the quietest part of the rambling grounds abutting the family seat—and summarily dispatched Skanky’s bovine, unsuspecting sibling with a surfeit of guile and a complete absence of scruple. An array of quite understandable misgivings were thrust upon her. Skanky was forced to confront—then quickly overcome these. His Lordship had a point; never had his blood-and-sputum stained noble countenance appeared so beautiful—so damnedly Byronic—as it did to her then.

The lovers had wasted weeks scouring the pages of *Debrett’s*, hoping against hope that they might stumble upon a socially acceptable solution to their intractable dilemma. Yet the hidebound certainties of etiquette and status had simply entrapped them further and further. The glowering edifice of precedent and privilege was a maze far more devious than that fashioned from endless lines of topiary in another part of the garden. There, but an hour previous, Skanky had calmly slit her father’s throat as her proud true love looked approvingly on. A plethora of miniscule yet seemingly unbridgeable gradations of status—baronetcy and earldom, money old and new—gave way beneath her smooth white hand as easily as had the old man’s carotid artery. Now, she reflected with a thrill that writhed in a secret place somewhere beneath her voluminous skirts, there would be no-one left to come between her and her heart’s desire. The remaining members of their respective families

would find themselves in the unenviable position that the persecuted couple had newly vacated; cast down upon the rockiest of extremities, seriously considering the prospect of desperate flight to North Suptown.

The future Duke of The Black Merkin was fearless—for his family he cared little; for her, he cared even less. As long as she obeyed him, her status, in his eyes, was for the most part satisfactory. He was, after all, used to his opinion counting as the *modus operandi* for any matter at hand and, as she bent her head in deference, he allowed himself a small smile.

Patting Skanky's head with the other hand on his own breast, he continued relating his connivance, all the while marvelling at his own capacity to concoct such a plan. Skanky showed nothing of the upset she felt, and as a model of humble agreement, she bit her crimson lips and nodded in silence, while her head raced, 'Why, oh why did I not seize my chance? Better to die a free woman in Neloca than to endure a life of servitude to this man. I am as Europa to Jupiter, captive in the pull of his rings of influence and power, alas!'

Their elopement would take place the night of Lady Dresdendoll's birthday festivity, three nights hence. Skanky would have one of her headaches and would not therefore attend; the future Duke would, naturally, be there.

"My dear, your absence, being of little consequence, will not attract attention. Under the disguise I furnish you with, you will then be free to leave the house and join me! I will leave the party with the other guests; and, once all the carriages have left, you will too. Do not fear, the servants will be embroiled in their own celebrations at that hour and will not be aware of your leaving. Oh how I relish in the prospect of our union, in no small part owed to me!"

In disguise, the couple would travel on post coaches and such like for the first half of the journey.

“As to accommodations,” the future Duke delicately touched upon, “we will tour as siblings; you my sister and I, your brother and keep our separate quarters.”

Skanky was thankful her virtue was safe until their nuptials. The thought of impending intimate relations with the future Duke of The Black Merkin was something on which she did not wish to tally or indeed dilly-dally, willy-nilly. That he wanted her intact for marriage meant her wearing of white would be both physiologically correct as well as socially fitting. As to everything else, he had it, ‘all in hand, my dear,’ and well, as Europa to his Jupiter, Skanky was powerless for it to be otherwise.

Ay hindi nalimutan, gayunman. Ang pintuan ay parang hindi isinara sa likod ng mga kapwa kapag Panginoong Avalon wondered nang malakas kung ano ang may-ari ng lupa ay iisip ng upa sa mga tulad ng isang marumi, Nakaiinis nilalang. Siya ay naging napaka humihingi ng tawad pagkatapos ay tungkol sa subjecting ang kanyang minamahal na ito gamit na gamit na lugar. Sinabi niya hindi na siya inaasahan na ito upang maging ganap ang kaya masama, at siya tila sa kumuha ito bilang isang personal na paghamak.

Well, siyempre. Siya ay isang Faraway, at ang magpahinga ng Diyos nilalang-sa mga posibleng pagbubukod ng Royal Family-ay ilagay sa lupa na ito para sa kanyang kaginhawaan. Kabilang ang kanyang sarili. Siya gusto dumating upang maghinala na ang tunay na dahilan siya gusto insisted on Pagtatanan ay wala ng higit sa ang pagkainip ng isang laki sa layaw, tinutubuan boy. Ano ang gusto niya gusto niya ngayon, at walang isang pulutong ng mga abala.

Hindi na siya isip ng isang maliit na drama costume. damitan Ang klerk ng, halimbawa, na ridiculously clashed sa kanyang mga maharlika tindig. Bilang siya tumigil glowering sa kanyang plato ng isang sandali upang sulyapan siya, Skanky marami natitilihang totoo kung ang may-ari ng lupa ay kinuha in Siya gusto “Oo, sir’d,” at “Kung papayag kayo, sir’d,” ang makwis sa kamatayan mula sa sandali ang sila gusto stepped sa pinto. Ang buong negosyo ay walang katotohanan. Sila ay maaaring magkaroon ng manlalakbay sa kaginhawaan sa kanilang sariling mga damit. Ang ilang barya bumaba dito at doon ay may stilled sabik wika. Ngunit hindi, kaya dapat gumawa ng isang buong produksyon ng mga ito. Ito ay malinaw na inisip niya na ito ang lahat ng pinaka napakakisig at romantikong.

Actually, ito ay romantikong kung siya ay isang tao pa. Kung na lamang isa pang mukha sa kabila ng mesa, at kung ang mga mata ay ambar sa halip ng grey. Kung ang tinig na droning sa at sa mga panunukso ng isang timpla ng ingenuousness at kabalintunaan. Ngunit ito ay bobo sa tingin ng mga iyon, sa tingin ng mga kanya, kapag na lamang

ginawa ang kanyang puso sakit. Siya ay kawawa sapat na bilang ito ay. Mula sa mga sandali ba ay iminungkahi kaniyang pamamaraan, hindi kailanman ito ay naganap sa kaniya na kumunsulta sa kanyang mga hangarin sa kahit ano.

Hindi na siya nagkaroon ng anumang mga kagustuhan pa-maliban na ang coach ay ginugulo kasama ang paraan, at siya ay durog sa kamatayan sa ilalim nito.

Which was mere histrionic self-indulgence. After all, he wasn't running off with an o***. She was handsome, wasn't she? And immensely r*** and important. So what if she was s***** and selfish. Weren't most of her p****? He was dutifully removing the s**** from his face and struggling to replace it with an a***** smile when the marquess' voice mumbled off into silence. Looking up, he discovered to his a***** that Lord Hardone's h*** had slumped to her shoulder and she was sinking in her chair.

Good grief! Was the woman d****? Yet she'd consumed only two glasses of wine with her m***, and she'd seemed cold sober when she'd come for him. Bewildered, he s** staring helplessly at his unconscious wife-to-be and f***** wracked his sluggish brains. What on earth should he do?

“What a s***** dinner companion you've got to be, Skanky. You've t***** the poor woman unconscious.”

He s***** from his chair to turn towards the door, whence the voice had come. It was a n*****. He'd been d***** all this time.

“Or have you p***** her at last, my love?” Skankhammer asked as he s***** over to have a look at the comatose marquess.

“What—what are you doing h****?” he g*****.

“Rescuing you, my darling. As I always do. D*** me.” His face assumed a t***** expression of horror as he lifted Lord Hardone's limp w**** then let it drop back onto the table. “I hope you haven't k***** her. It'll be a job to keep you from swinging for it, lovely as you are, and s***** as the judge is sure to be when you tell her how

Stillborn had b**** you past all endurance. But a peer of the r****, my dear. Or peer-to-be, actually. S*****.”

His w**, in this case, was entirely wasted. The young lad scarcely h**** a word of it, being in the process, for the first time in his t***** years, of fainting d*** away.

Though he was inexperienced in the business, Skankhammer, fortunately, was not. He caught him up in his a*** before he sank to the floor and c***** him out of the s***** parlour.

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“Witness statement.”

The suspect entered the hotel room at 9pm with assistance from the proprietor. Upon seeing the victim in a distressed condition he stated that she was indeed his sister as previously asserted. He relayed fears that a third party, the kidnapper, had intended to take advantage of her in this condition and asked that the proprietor would continue to keep guard over said third party whilst he was rendered temporarily incapable.

After some time attempting to rouse the victim, she regained consciousness and remaining drowsy and confused. The victim revived a little after recognising her brother but exhibited signs of considerable distress as she learnt that her captor had been rendered unconscious by a cocktail of illegal substances surreptitiously administered by the proprietor at the suspect’s insistence. The suspect then proceeded to justify his actions explaining he was protecting the honour of the family name, that the public reputation of the victim, his sister, would have been dishonoured by public scandal had the indisposed third party’s intentions been enacted. At this the victim again displayed signs of considerable distress.

I, the under-signed agree that the above is an accurate reflection of what happened as I recall it...

Shock was rapidly giving way to vexation. How could he chatter on so calmly—and Lord Avalon lying somewhere unconscious. “What,” she very nearly shrieked, “are you doing here?”

“Rescuing you, as I said.”

“I didn’t ask to be rescued.”

“Didn’t you? Yet I could have sworn when I saw you enter that you looked precisely as Marie Antoinette must have done when they led her to the guillotine.”

“Never mind how I looked. Why are you here? You’re supposed to be in Bo’ness in the Independent Order of Rechabites.”

“Yes, I am. I’m such an unreliable fellow, you know. Never where I should be, doing what I should be.” He still had the towel and was absently wrapping it around one hand, then disarranging it, then arranging it again as he spoke.

Dazedly she stared at the towel and at the hands playing with it. Light dawned. “It was you. You were the waiter,” she cried accusingly.

“Yes, I was.” His smile this time was so sweet and tender that her heart skipped a beat. “I couldn’t, after all, trust Mine Host to so delicate a business, could I? Though he’s most observant—calling my attention to the rum pair deigning to honour him with their patronage. I suspect he wants the subtle touch.”

“But why? Why?” Even as she asked, she knew, or thought she knew, for one dizzying instant. But he looked away quickly, and she told herself she was overwrought and imagining things.

“Because the pair of you were about to spoil everything after I’ve been running myself ragged the past five days to make everything perfect.” He tossed the towel onto a chair. “Now, though it complicates everything dreadfully, I’ll have to take you both back. Did anyone see you on the road?”

“I don’t know—but I-I can’t go back now.”

“Yes, you were eloping, which is perfectly absurd.”

“It isn’t,”

“You, you don’t know—”

“I know you’re not going, he can’t go anywhere under his own power for several hours. I’m taking the two of you back.”

Now, consulting his pocket watch, “we’ll have to keep off the main road. Yes. That should do.”

He got up from the bed and walked to a corner of the room, where he began rummaging in some bundles.

“I can’t go back, I-I have confided with Stillborn-Bill, he knows everything, Papa’s debt, Gandalf, everything, Papa’s debt, e-everything th-there is no other way...”

“Yes dear,” he patiently agreed. “I daresay it may be as you claim. If you’d only listened to me in the first place, you wouldn’t be in such a predicament.”

“L-listened to y-you?” she sputtered indignantly.

“Didn’t I say I’d help you?”

“N-No.”

He was being all sweet and was smiling nice at her, which made her feel quite lovely. “Did you think that I’d abandoned you, babe?” he asked. She went off on him aggressively for calling her ‘babe’. He ignored her outburst and asked her to put on some of the clothes he plopped on her lap. Having a wee look at the pile she noticed the clothes belonged to him and realised that this meant she had to go back.

“Why do I have to go back?” she demanded.

“Just because, OK? You need to go, but we’ve got to be quick. We need to get a wriggle on now before the man gets back.”

“Eh, I’m not going anywhere until you tell me why?” She was scared but put on an aggressive front to hide her fear. “Fair enough, Stillborn could order me around, even though it was horrible, but that was because I knew why, but with you, you just turn up and bark orders. Why should I listen to you?”

“Look my sweet egg, I just want to help you out. I can’t get into it all right now,” he said gently, “Just trust me, please?”

“Are you kidding?” she burst. “I saw you giving that guy who’s going to be the Duke of The Black Merkin...I saw you giving him Rohypnol. And you’re a total nutter. You talk crap all the time, you’re nasty, you are a liar. I’m not even sure if there’s any point in trying to get you to explain what’s going on, because you’re just going to lie.” She was getting into a right tizz.

“Hoy, look yes, I’ve lied to people, and the Rohypnol thing was for good reasons, but I’ve not lied to you, Skanky.”

Through her Merlot-misted eyes she noticed his confused expression and started to question herself, to question the thought that moments ago had been so overpowering, clouding every other thought.

“How can you want me to leave?” she demanded. “I’m shattered and...” she didn’t want to admit the room was spinning, “...and, Shay, I don’t understand!”

“What are you on about?”

“You fucking left me,” she screeched. “You left and didn’t tell me. No phone call, no text, not even a bloody email! How was I to know you were ever coming back?”

“I’m sorry love, I should have told you.” His hand found his way around the curve of her back and nestled onto her hip. “I didn’t think you cared about what I did, do you?”

“No!” she said, turning harshly away so as not to betray herself with her beetroot complexion.

“I guess I deserve that. Why would you trust me anyway?”

She glared at him.

“Why would you trust me?” he murmured, so quietly she could barely hear him.

“Especially when I’ve been spending all my time trying to fix that Gandalf thing.”

Though straining to hear what he was saying, she stiffened at the mention of Gandalf—butterflies of hope began to dance in her stomach.

He sensed the change and felt her tough exterior beginning to crack, "I'm doing it for you, you know, cause I care about you."

Her eyes rolled, her head bowed and her merkin wafted doubtfully between her thighs.

Slowly he continued "The most important thing now is getting you back," he almost forgot the reason he came, "and Stillborn-Bill. I'm sure you didn't really want to run away with him?"

She had been defeated. "No, I didn't."

"Please do not then I can see I give to you about horses and about thirty minutes to change to deal with Skankhammer promise you, it's no business Bowfire fiancé and her husband alternate means to an end. You, my word I give you my love," he whimsical triumphed.

Well, what choice did she have to, what she was worth his words were? Would have been useless at the moment. Even if she were to go anywhere, she almost could not go off by yourself. She acquiesced. "Oh, you look astonishing." After he left the room, dropped a light one on her head.

She has her hand creeping up to touch his Subway® had a place, staring at the odor for a moment. From all the embarrassment he know how she came here, he was drugged the history-making, this mysterious plan, what was the problem to solve Gandalf Bowfire, most of which she puzzle, and this was. Endearments all the usual mix of melodrama and farce normal...and then her little titties to overturn the conclusions of all the gestures of affection.

He has a while to practice his wind-game and put back inside, if you want to treat her like a wafting merkin to recall that afternoon they were horsing together. He then promised that it would help her. But if he means it, why in heaven's name, which I think he got out of her bed because she is good and he was going bad without refrigeration?

"Oh, Skankhammer," she too whimsy defeated, "it whispered to the empty room is always fuller with you in it."

The rooms are not appropriate to reply, she shook her head, hands on his business.

She undressed out of her clothes and put on his ^[1]. She found it difficult and embarrassing ^[2]. Later, he suggested she was faultless as a man ^[3]. She blushed ^[4]. ^[5].

[1] The non-motivated purposes of art are those that are integral to being human, transcend the individual, or do not fulfil a specific external purpose. Aristotle said, "Imitation, then, is one instinct of our nature." In this sense, Art, as creativity, is something humans must do by their very nature (i.e., no other species creates art), and is therefore beyond utility.

[2] One view of difference between shame and embarrassment says that shame does not necessarily involve public humiliation while embarrassment does, that is, one can feel shame for an act known only to oneself but in order to be embarrassed one's actions must be revealed to others. In the field of ethics (moral psychology, in particular), however, there is debate as to whether or not shame is a heteronymous emotion, i.e. whether or not shame does involve recognition on the part of the ashamed that others have judged them negatively. Immanuel Kant and his followers held that shame is heteronymous; Bernard Stillborn-Bills and others have argued that shame can be autonomous. Shame may carry the connotation of a response to something that is morally wrong whereas embarrassment is the response to something that is morally neutral but socially unacceptable. Another view of shame and embarrassment says that the two emotions lie on a continuum and only differ in intensity.

[3] In humans, the "default" processes of reproduction result in an individual with female characteristics. An intact Y chromosome contains what is needed to "reprogram" the processes sufficiently to produce male characteristics, leading to sexual differentiation. Part of the Y chromosome, the Sex-determining Region Y (SRY), causes what would normally become ovaries to become testes. These, in turn, produce male hormones called androgens. However, several points in the processes have been identified where variations can result in people with atypical characteristics, including atypical sexual characteristics. Terminology for atypical sexual characteristics has not stabilized. Disorder of Sexual Development (DSD) is used by some in preference to intersex, which is used by others in preference to pseudohermaphroditism.

[4] According to Buddhist teachings, craving, or desire, springs from the notion that if one's desires are fulfilled it will, of itself, lead to one's lasting happiness. Such beliefs normally result in further craving/desire and the repeated enactment of activities to bring about the desired results. Further analysis reveals that desire for conditioned things cannot be fully satiated or satisfied, due to their impermanent nature. This is expounded in the Buddhist teaching of impermanence and change. The Buddhist solution to the problem of craving (*tanha*) is the third of the four noble truths, the

cessation (*nirodha*) of suffering. The cessation of suffering comes from the quenching (*nibbuta*) of *tanha*. The problem is that we desire unsatisfactory things, namely sensual pleasures. Sometimes, *tanha* is personified as one of Death's Three Daughters (*Mara-dhita*), along with Aversion (*Arati*) and Passion (*Raga*). Thus, for instance, in the *Samyutta Nikaya's Mara-samyutta*, the Buddha's victory over Death is symbolically complete after Death's three daughters fail to entice the Buddha:

They had come to him glittering with beauty—

Tanha, Arati, and Raga—

But the Teacher swept them away right there

As the wind, a fallen cotton tuft.

[5] Texts amalgamated from various sources—links available upon request. No copyright infringement intended and works remain intellectual and creative property of original writer(s).

It wasn't a surprise for her to find that she liked this manner of dressing up. To be once again wearing the attire of a nobleman—tight trousers, loose shirt sleeves and dashing cravat in tow—put her immediately at ease. Of course she had found herself in such a circumstance many times before, having been the heroine in many a misled escapade, often misinterpreted as a romance. But there was nothing romantic for her about this garb, and that is why she felt so free. She was, at long last, wearing the trousers in this story. Not only could she run off at the drop of a hat, she could also practice her yoga now without much disruption or discomposure. She loved the costume, and she had the feeling that it loved her back.

He also loved the costume, but for very different reasons. Whilst being tied into the cravat (yes, she let him do it, even though she was an expert ti-er of ties, after all its always nice to be pawed) she became keenly aware of the tremendous bulge in his trousers. 'Well,' she thought, 'so this is what does it for you? Nothing wrong with a bit of cross-dressing...I wonder if I could get him into some knickers...'

Of course the musing was short lived and she remembered the last time such a plan had been afoot—and swiftly gone awry—back when she'd been in her first year at Cambridge. It had been in order that she could join the United Friends of Michigan, an American frat group she'd

been so desperate to infiltrate. In the end she'd managed it. It hadn't been easy to get her drama tutor into the thong to get the snap that she needed, but it was harder trying to explain to him that the picture was all she wanted.

Thank goodness it was all in the past. The current problem was much less complicated. He wanted her again and again. The ill-fitting coat was turning him on. She knew it. And although she liked the idea of a quickie, watching him try to suppress his desire was an entertainment she wasn't willing to forfeit.

Skankhammer finally finished faffing about with the cravat. "There," he said, turning away. "You'll do. Just put on my hat and let's get out of here."

* * *

They arrived together at Hardone Hall just as the clock in the great hall was striking midnight. The hooves of the horse resounded in the still expectant air and the clouds scudded overhead, parting to reveal the glare of the full white moon. Miss Ashmouth's heart was thumping in her chest at the consequences of what might lie ahead, with the strangeness of being out at this late hour and dressed so strangely, as a boy. Her breasts pushed against the starched borrowed shirt, and her thighs bristled against the itchy serge of the trousers. Mr. Shaveylon turned to her and said she must go at once upstairs and tell his manservant, Number 7 that the plans had changed and that he must come down to help him get Stillborn ready. Miss Ashmouth protested, partly because she didn't want to be seen in these strange clothes, and partly to prolong these moments, of being alone with him in the darkness, even as the horse pawed the ground and the minutes edged ever later.

She longed to kiss him, wanted to know what his mouth would taste like and feel like against her own. She had imagined it so many times but even so it was a shock when he helped her down from the horse and in doing so pulled

her towards him, half crushing her and then with great tenderness kissing her. It was a kiss that was so soft and full of things they had both imagined for so long. It tasted of the times she had thought of him before going to sleep at night, of the times she had walked away from him always wanting to run back and declare her love. It didn't seem quite real that this was happening, but yet it was better than she had imagined, so much better that she wanted to stop the moment and stay there in that kiss. He broke away and told her once more that she had to go.

With a stupid anger that flared from nowhere she said that she would have gone before now if he hadn't held her back. With a look in his eyes that forgave and understood her peevishness, he kissed her once more, deeply and with a promise of other kisses to come. Now go, he said, before I cannot stop myself.

She broke away then and raced upstairs, conveying her message to Number 7, who appeared unperturbed by the lateness of the hour, her boyish garb and flaming cheeks. Then she hurried to her chamber, closing the door with a heart that leapt in her chest. It had happened. He had kissed her. Her reflection in the glass confirmed their embrace, her skin all rosy with the traces of his stubble, her mouth a lovely bruise. It had happened all right.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Her eyes fixed firmly on her mum's reading matter, Number 2 laughed like a seal as she tipped the tray containing a steaming cup of Bovril over the candlewick bedspread. "Oh mum, is it still bad then? You look as if you never slept a wink—and it's no wonder, reading that salacious horseshit. Give me Peyton Place or Proust any day."

Lifting the novel with two chafed hands, Skanky informed her Abigail that she hadn't read a thing. (In spite of tossing it casually aside at 6pm, the novel had nonetheless played its part last night, as she'd asked Skankhammer—and Stillborn-Bill—to role-play the more explicit scenes from the book. That was true enough. She had asked.)

Skankhammer had come to her door last night, just as she was preparing to wax her moustache. Hastily yanking the strip off as the door sounded, she'd gone to answer the knock. With no thought for the furtive nature of certain beauty regimes, Skankhammer cantered in and stared at her upper lip, which was now raw and weeping where the wax strip had been ripped too quickly. Skankhammer knew immediately what had happened. He was no stranger to facial hair himself and was, in fact, a regular user of Tend

Skin which helped 'free' his ingrowing beard hairs. Left untended, the tough hairs curled in on themselves, creating dark little lumps that, when squeezed, made the long hairs, trapped beneath the skin, pop out like worms on a rain-sodden lawn. If women thought they had hair removal problems, they obviously hadn't experienced *folliculitis barbae traumatica*, he mused. Tonight, though, he looked fucking gorgeous. Every hair was growing freely and in its right place, his evening costume pressed and spotless. She knew fine well she hadn't imagined the whole evening's adventure.

It was only after his eyes raked her Slanket-clad form that he made a rather indecorous, and frankly insincere, proposal. Her humiliation complete, Skanky seized the opportunity. "You might laugh, Skankhammer, but there's a diaphanous scrap of Winceyette under this Slanket, and nothing more besides." After declaring her a fetishist for man-made fibres and anachronistic loungewear, he said he'd only come to take his clothes back and to tell her she must pretend she'd never left her room earlier that night—no matter what Stillborn might be foolish enough to say when he recovered. "That's a bit rich, Skankhammer. You were both up for it. It's not my fault neither of you had read *Captives of the Night* before you signed up to our little bit of erotic theatre," Skanky protested.

Skankhammer had gone on to explain that he must be away for a few days, but begged her to keep her mouth shut in the meantime (if indeed she could, he thought, with that swollen lip). "No one," he'd promised, "is going to go to Trumpton. So there's no need to worry that you're going to miss out on the Goth Weekender in Whitby. We'll stop taking the anti-depressants for a few months so we can gear up properly for the next one. We're not going this time. Everyone looks too bloody healthy. Is that clear?"

"Pellucid," she said, and nodded.

He'd then asked for a goodnight kiss. Being threatened with that weeping upper lip, instead he'd taken mournful leave of her, once more remarking on the virtues of

depilatory cream over molten wax and marvelling at her make-under.

With her back stooped, and knees bent, she slowly tightened the black metal handle of the vice. At first the feeling of the smooth cold metal on her ears was refreshing and curiously pleasant. But with every meticulous degree of rotation, the vice pressing either side of her skull, the looming knowledge of this absurd practice was unavoidably pushed to the forefront of her awareness.

“Oblivion!” Number 2 exclaimed. “Oblivion, Why a more noble or admirable aspiration I find hard to imagine.”

Number 2 seemed about to burst with suppressed excitement.

“Oh Miss, everyone is at sixes and sevens in anticipation. His Lordship—Lord Avalon, that is—has prescribed the whole household with laudanum in a bid to sympathise with your most honorable quest.”

As she took in her mistress’ white, drawn face—slowly filling with an intense array of colours—Number 2 suddenly became overwhelmed and collapsed face down on the satin sheets draped over the king-size bed.

It was several days before the news got around the whole village, as the majority of townsfolk were at the fête in the nearby market town of Sanquar. Nobody seemed to care much about the ‘to-do’ that had unfolded up at the manor house but an unspoken air of regard was held for Miss Skanky ‘for the sentiment’ of her pursuit as Dr. Johnson & Johaneson had remarked.

She would have preferred, certainly, that Lovelace did not so very much remind her of Mr. Shaveylon, and that Clarissa’s parental difficulties did not make her own pale into insignificance. Nevertheless, she read on doggedly until Aunt Clumhentai appeared to give her a full accounting of the night’s events.

Lady Buckram told the tale in her usual blunt way. That rattle of a nephew of hers had put in a surprise appearance just as the party was going in to supper. He’d treated them

all to some cockamamie tale about his horse stumbling into a ditch and the consequent delay which had prevented his arriving at Hardone Hall in time to accompany them to the gala.

Her ladyship communicated her private opinion that it was no quadruped that had delayed him but a barmaid, for he wore an insufferable cock-of-the-walk air that made his aunt want to slap him senseless.

At any rate, he'd exhausted himself during supper and a couple of sets after, cutting a swathe through all the debutante hearts in the vicinity. He'd gone out to the terrace for a breath of air. There he'd come upon Stillborn who was sprawled out, unconscious, on one of the long stone benches.

"I'd wondered where he'd got to," her ladyship muttered. "Hadn't seen him for hours. Well, evidently he'd been fully occupied, drinking himself into stupefaction."

Lord Avalon was bundled off to an unoccupied parlour while the festivities continued into the small hours of the morning. When it was time to depart, the servants carried him out to the carriage. Skankhammer, who'd been supervising this procedure, was the one to find the note addressed to Sir Urano. It was lying on the seat of the vehicle in which the baronet had ridden to the gala.

Skankhammer blinked and knew this to be a secret letter. He carefully broke the seal and read:

"All was Lies! I never set foot on Europe's Soil! After my expulsion from the Circle, I sailed from Bo'ness to Oneandonlytoon and lived! Oh!! How I lived. The days were a bubbling blur of fermented cane syrup & throbbing pulsating drums! The nights were long twisting adventures were limbs would coil in a heaving mass spurred by the persistent beat of those wild drums.

I was a treated as a Man-God, my every appetite met and all whims indulged! I directed a number of ballets, performed for the entire island on Shark Eye Beach, the longest stretch, of flat land on the place. These works were based on the local legends of the place: the Tale of Niadrou, the crocodile maiden remains my seminal work.

You must know of my great work and breath life to its lips! I secreted the costumes, manuscripts et al in the Hatfundian stables. Ho! No man would ever find it lest directed! It is beneath the Manure Heap!

He had read enough! He halted the driver and insisted they turn back immediately.

At this point in the narrative, the Countess' *patrician features* broke into **a grin of unholy glee.**

"What do you think, **my dear?** Your Papa's scholarly companion—~~the steadiest chap in the world~~, according to ~~Uranu~~—*has run away.* **Run away!**"

"Good heavens," said Skanky, rather *faintly*.

~~It was true.~~ Mr. Bowfire had, ~~according to his note~~, decided to take **control of his own life for once.** ~~Though he'd worded it diplomatically enough~~, it was *plain—to Aunt Clum at least—* **why he'd gone.**

"Is it ~~not astonishing~~, *my dear?* The dutiful boy blankly refuses to marry you."

"Yes, it is astonishing, Aunt Clum. ~~Gandalf Bowfire running away.~~ Gandalf flouting his Papa's commands. I can *scarcely* credit it," ~~said the young lady.~~ Her face was pale, but her voice was **steady enough.**

"*Well, credit it, my dear.* Even your father, ~~shocked as he was~~, was forced to believe his own eyes. *I am sure* that if he had not feared for Gandalf's safety—~~for, in truth, as Skankhammer said, the young man's an innocent lamb and might easily stumble into difficulties,~~ **left to himself**—~~well, if that were not his main concern, he'd have shrugged it off soon enough.~~ At any rate, Skankhammer offered to go look for Mr. Bowfire *to reassure us all that the young man was safe.* *Obliging fellow, my nephew, isn't he?*"

Miss Ashmouth nodded.

"**But I'll tell you, my dear,** your father was not so very distressed by that note—~~though of course he grumbled and carried on.~~ I was most pleased, as you can imagine. For you

see what this means. Now, ~~at last~~, you may have a proper Season.”

Miss Ashmouth ~~must not have appeared as delighted at this prospect as the Countess had expected, for her ladyship went on reassuringly,~~ “Well, of course **you must**, Skanky. Still’s behaviour last night does make one wonder whether he’s settled and mature enough to make an acceptable husband. I recognise, of course, that the gentlemen must indulge, but it is very bad form to show ~~the extent of the indulgence.~~ A man who cannot hold his liquor had better not drink it in the first place. Most especially not when he is endeavouring to win the esteem of a *gently bred woman.*”

~~In the event the implications of this breach of etiquette had not already occurred to his lordship, his sister was in the process of bringing the matter forcibly—and at altogether unnecessary volume, he thought—to his attention. She stood over his bed of pain delivering a scathing lecture of nearly an hour’s duration. This he was forced to endure in relative silence, having learned at the outset that no one knew anything of the aborted elopement.~~

All assumed that Miss Ashmouth had been *sleeping innocently* in her own bed the entire night.

When his sister—with the parting declaration that she fervently hoped Miss Ashmouth would give him his red wings—finally took herself off, Lord Avalon, president of the outlaw motorcycle club that can’t be named for legal reasons, considered the facts as he had them. It was not easy or pleasant to do so. His head felt as though his Harley-Davison Fatboy was thundering around a wall of death inside his cranium, and twice he had to abandon his meditations in order to puke blood-spattered bile into Number 7’s crash helmet. Nonetheless, sick as he was, he saw plainly enough the fine hands of Skankhammer Shaveylon and Norman Clayture, President and Sergeant at Arms of the other outlaw motorcycle club that can’t be named for legal reasons, in this business. Shav’s sudden appearance so late at the rally terrace. Shav in the next

Portaloo trumping out Purple Haze through a bulbous sphincter. Clayture masturbating into his sister's three-season sleeping bag. Clayture offering round homemade cheese and piccalilli sandwiches at the Knights of the Mystic Chain campfire.

Damn the intriguing, interfering, spiffducking devils! He'd arranged matters very neatly, very neatly indeed. The marquis could hardly accuse them openly without admitting his own guilty secret—and if he did, he must implicate Miss Ashmouth. His hands were tied. After his allegedly low behaviour of last night—faeces as an aphrodisiac—he must count himself lucky if allowed within fifty sniffs of the young lady. And, for the moment at least, there wasn't one spiffducking thing he could do about it.

“Skankhammer?” Lord Hardone, Vice-President of the outlaw motorcycle club that can't be named for legal reasons, repeated, looking at his freewheeling brother like he had just escaped from a wet paper bag dressed in tight hot pants twirling a Gucci handbag whilst stroking a miniature poodle.

He had, it was true, expected an apology. In the next few minutes, however, as Stillborn-Bill summed up the suspicious circumstances, Lord Hardone was forced to admit to himself that this underhand and cunterdly tale was very much in Skankhammer's style.

“You know me, Hardone,” the Marquess pleaded. “We've ridden and partied together for over twenty years, when have you ever seen me make such a spiffduck of myself? Why, if you called all the King's horses and all the King's men together and questioned them, you'd find I had no more than eight pints of Marston's Pedigree, half a bottle of Wild Turkey, three Tequila shots, and a Virgin Hairy altogether.”

“So you suspect Skankhammer or Norman somehow slipped something into one of those glasses?”

Though President Lord Avalon meant other glasses at another place, he nodded grimly.

“Why? What had they to gain by it?”

“I’m not sure,” the Marquess hedged. “Though I can make a good guess, and I mean to set them straight.”

“Well, that’s only natural. Though I might add it’s also a great waste of time. Skankhammer can’t be set straight: there’s something wrong with his body. It’s physically impossible. And Norman Clayture in those wooden undercrackers... Besides, they’ve gone after Mr. ‘snake eye’ Bowfire.”

“Yes, and I’m going to spiffduck the pair of them before they find him.”

“Okay Still. Don’t be distracted by the odour, whatever you suspect—”

“It’s no secret that I have been endeavouring to win the affection of the young lady under your hoof,” Lord Avalon interrupted rather pompously. “But last night’s events were not calculated to inspire her.”

In vain did he half-heartedly pour oil on troubled waters. His verse was slick and pooled on the surface the conflict’s skin, as did the sun in his eyes. Still was determined to find Skankhammer and wring the truth out of him. He imagined Skankhammer’s body, twisting under the weight of his hands as he thrust his weight upon him. That failing, he would, he hinted darkly, seek other satisfaction.

Lord Hardone shrugged. Skankhammer could take care of himself. And had on many occasions. The cool breeze of memory swept through his mind’s eye as an image of the young lords tussling on the beach, and other activities, of more sinister regard, tugged at him.

He bade Lord Avalon a vacant adieu, incompetently preoccupied by the heat, the memories and the sound of the horse’s tail hitting hide. Upon returning to her side, Lord Hardone, as was his habit in all things, confided the matter to his wife.

There was vexation in her intelligent blue eyes.

“Gone after him?” she repeated. “And you let him, Jedward? What if he kills him? *As soon as I open a book*, all hell breaks loose!”

“Of course he won’t kill him. Stillborn isn’t about to risk disgrace and exile on account of a mere horse—regardless how much he thinks he wants her.”

“I still don’t like it. This whole business has gotten completely out of hand.”

“Which is what I predicted in the first place. There’s nothing you or I can do now. Except, perhaps, report to your mother—as if she doesn’t know already. I am certain the stable has been called.”

“Gone after him?” Lady Detritus repeated. “How very wearisome in this heat.” She returned her attention to the book that lay in her lap. The spine of which was resting, nestled even, in the very softest folds of her skirt.

“There was a time...” She murmured.

“Mama!”

“Yes, my love.” The viscountess did not look up from her book. Perhaps if she stared at it hard enough, she too could be bound like a page in its spine.

“What are we to do?”

“He has been a rumour for all you said is not to feel tired,” she glanced up finally, “I was all brave and Ninja running close to the scene this Netherworld gaff. Then Mr. Bowfire, Skankhammer, and he had no obvious reason, it is me?”

“You know someone who looks like the following,” her mother said. At this point, she demonstrated a world-weary shrug of the world after a tired sigh. “I think,” she in order to induce the birth said, “know Miss Ashmouth Warum in das Welt ist mein Mund?”

“Bo’ness,” the angry reply came, “this is because I know all the secrets and funny when it is bound to notice sooner or later, will the case.”

“Why, Skanky, my love is, on the earth is such a big deal.”

“Hey, Sex Mom...you know what happened last, what I tell you, like, squatting there like a pissing whore. It made his head good to get away the most natural thing in the world, such as Bowfire said a quiet, one-hand-working people should be, USI, or from his head and my father drank spirits is difficult, it is not sensitive or if the Skankhammer, the Bo’ness street scene, and about half of the party is a party, after five days should be agreed Dresdendoll, in fact, my Sex Mom, need you fool.”

“Ditto,” Lady Detritus is her book, looked up from a blank smile. “Why, my dear, now this is very strange, is not talking?” she shrugged philologically, “Start nevertheless, a strange man, do not worry, what happens to my account there is no love. If you do not play merkin-wafter, I will say this is entirely reasonable explanation für alles—*OHH!*”

Giselle ‘is-that-I-cannot-say’ muttered ironically, “Oh, yes, it is supposed to be, I do not intend to find out from you and me? Of course not. Be willing to say why your daughter?”

Viscount Detritus laughed, however, and Mrs Hardone felt very inclined to parents to increase the swing until the panic of the teeth flower, he left the room, round, spoke fifth commandment through merkin.

Her fanny is pulsating like a hungry triffid. “He pushes my hands down over and above my head and puts his cock inside me,” she fantasises. “I wrap my legs around his waist. We meet each other’s thrusts...”

“Oh, Jesus, godmother.” How long has she been standing there, wonders Miss Ashmouth. She could not keep her voice steady. “Gone after Mr. Shaveylon? Eh, why, I mean how, how on earth could he give it to her, I mean him, I mean, what are you talking about?” she steps out of the bath.

Later that evening Lady Hardone explained, “Stillborn-Bill claims he wasn’t fist fucked at all. He insists that the little he drank was laced with Rohypnol. Skankhammer did

the mixing. Fresh Skankhammer, black pepper, lots of rum, his signature cocktail.”

Skanky was very surprised to hear her godmother explode with laughter, as was Lady Hardone. The two stared at the older woman.

“It reminds me of that joke, you know, the one about how you get the lassie from Hardone Hall pregnant,” she recalled, “Spunk in the gutter and let the flies do the work. Ha ha ha.” What on earths got into this woman, Skanky wondered, she is making fun of the fact that my boyfriend might have raped his best friend by telling vulgar jokes. Skankhammer was in danger. He could be suffering bestiality at Lord Avalon’s farmhouse hands. It was horrible, and that cunning little vixen of an Aunt Clum was laughing!

“Now, now Skanky. Don’t take on so. Why, child, you look as if you’d seen a ghost. You too, Giselle. Why, of course it’s nothing. They are always at each other, those two. Have been since they were children. Oh, but it is monstrous amusing.” Lady Buckram wiped away the tears, chuckling as she did so.

She managed to muster a bit more that evening when they dined with the Obstractions and some others, though the visit was ghastly. Those dreadful girls, with fake eye lashes and orange tan running down their pasty white legs bulging under the luminous pink miniskirts barely covering their scabby little piss flaps, carried on so about Dr Obstraction’s absence and dropped such thinly disguised hints about her devoted marquess’ desertion that Skanky wanted to throttle them. Bellenda Obstraction was even worse with a horrid smile pasted on her fat face as she asked two hundred times where all the young gentlemen had gone, and why and how.

The evening dragged on interminably. Between worrying about Skankhammer, despising the Obstractions, and pretending all the while to be perfectly at her ease, Miss Ashmouth was nearly dead with exhaustion when she climbed into the carriage to return to Hardone Hall.

Finally she could retreat to her bedroom, where the cumulative effects of not sleeping or eating properly and being consumed by anxiety resulted, quite logically, in a night of soft-core porn and the beloved disco stick.

Was it Skankhammer or Stillborn-Bill? Skankhammer. Or maybe Gandalf? Stillborn asked Skanky who suggested Skankhammer. Skankhammer had had the allergy. But it was more than that, it was amathophobia. And now Skanky had it.

Miss Skanky Ashmouth probably swept a great deal more than she needed to when she was in private, though she was able to dust rationally enough in company. She was used to the allergy, after all. The past three months, it seemed, had been spent in one cleaning session after another. It was only in the cleanliness of the bedroom that she could give way to the fear.

So it went: sweeping by day, mopping and dusting by night, as the days and nights passed and there was always more to clean up. She had undoubtedly developed an abnormal and persistent fear of dust.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Urotsukidoji, I will not have it!” Mrs Palmshot Lapp pushed the startled housemaid, whose bosom was still heaving, back towards the wall, shut the door and advanced upon her panting husband.

“Have what, my dear?” the gentleman asked tauntingly, returning his spectacles onto their rightful place on his nose.

“That horrid creature is back again, and I’m sick of the sight of him. Wherever he goes trouble follows.” Mrs Lapp collapsed into a chair, never taking an eye off of Clunyhammer. “Was it not he who came with that wicked man in the first place? Was it not he, back again just a few days ago? Now Clunyhammer is ruined. And the beast dares to show his face again, smiling and preening himself like a sneaky tomcat.”

Her husband burdened with plots declared, “But my dear, he’s not the tomcat who made off with your daughter. So hadn’t you better have the gentleman shown in?”

Mrs Lapp quickly contemplated going into one of her fits of hysteria. It would certainly divert Mr. Lapp’s efforts. It was a cruel game. Instead, she allowed him to speak quiet, calculated words, forestalling the performance of the fit

while she gathered her thoughts. For another five minutes, the housemaid, who had recovered from her flushing and heaving, stood quietly against the wall. Turning to her husband, Mrs Lapp haughtily bade Clunyhammer show the gentleman in. Clunyhammer in turn welcomed the wretched man and then speedily set about finding refreshments. Mrs Lapp was subdued but only on the surfaces of her matronly skins.

“Well then, Skankhammer, it is just as we thought.” Feigning authority in his wife’s eyes, Mr. Lapp spread out a pile of papers before his guest.

“Actually, it’s as Gandalf thought. He was certain that Sir Urano’s travel accounts had been well received. My own experience with them showed that the baronet is a frugal traveller. Yes, his so-called patron had ample return on his small investment.”

“Well, your aunt suspected as much, you know.”

There was a brief silence—hardly more than a few seconds—before Skankhammer answered, with ease, “Did she now?”

“Gregory, Gandalf, Gregory, Gandalf. A few accurate guesses about his father’s business associates, and once I tracked them down it was a simple matter. Their records did not match. Such a pity.”

“Well, believe it or not, our crabby baronet only cares about the work itself. He needs a better keeper, I think, Urotsukidoji.” Skankhammer leaned back in his chair, casually folding his arms behind his head and grinning, “But in any case, between Gandalf and our evidence, I doubt Bowfire will be giving us any more trouble.”

“Even if he wanted to,” Lapp added, “He’ll think again when he gets my letter. Expect Gandalf and Clunyhammer will be on their honeymoon by then.”

“Indeed. It’s less than two days to The Black Merkin.”

Lapp smiled. “The wife is still a bit broken up about it, though,” he admitted, “She wanted all the girls married into money, like Morrissette.”

“Ah, she’s got two more daughters yet,” Skankhammer dismissed good-naturedly with a wave of one hand, before replacing it in a comfortable position behind his head.

“And if they each end up with lads half as good as their sisters, I’ll be the most chuffed dad you ever saw,” he assured. “Gandalf’s a good man—honest—even if his family is a bit dodgy. We’ll just have to put up with them. After all, it’s Clunyhammer’s happiness that counts.”

The cheerful businessman nudged his glasses up the bridge of his nose with one middle finger before addressing his friend once more.

“But what about you, Skankhammer? I mean, all this hard work, and you’re getting nothing out of it. You’d have probably been better off staying in Mesopotamia or Medrap (Piggy Chops),” he chuckled, “There’d have been more money in it for you at least.”

Shaveylon’s smile faded and he shook his head absentmindedly.

“I wish I’d never gone to bleedin’ Medrap (Piggy Chops),” he muttered to himself.

Lapp raised an eyebrow at him, and Skankhammer clocked it quickly.

“B-but of course, if I hadn’t well, I’d have never stumbled upon all this stuff with Bowfire!” he blurted, “And Gandalf wouldn’t have come here and—”

“And fallen for my daughter?” Lapp finished for him. “Well, good job you DID ‘stumble upon this stuff’, as you say, then, isn’t it?”

Lapp got to his feet, changing the subject.

“Come on then, let’s get a proper meal down you. Can we offer you a bed tonight?”

Urotsukidoji had re-entered the room—a desolate moor. At supra-physical distance Skankhammer sulked—talking nonsense; he felt vulnerable.

“Skankhammer is a very *quotidian* ingredient to employ when attempting to seduce don’t you think... How about Frankincense?”

Urotsukidoji was not so sulken as sullen... "I would never *'employ'* any ingredient while preparing food. Cookery—dare I say it—should come closer to craft and should be divined through great knowledge and experience. *There* is the love. Yes frankincense, simply divine! Skankhammer are you listening? *Skankhammer?*"

Skankhammer was thinking, "Yes Frank, in a sense."

Sarcastically he sneered, "Oh that old chestnut... *But my names Urotsukidoji?*"

"Yes *I know that.*"

"But did you know that Bulgar wheat is a member of the rhubarb family? Did you know that sweet chestnuts are not chestnuts at all—the Romans used them to make polenta! ...Did you know that Harvey Nicks do chocolate-coated ants? I bought some for my aunt. I brought four dozen to her party served them with the canapés and passed them off as chocolate pretzels. Like the trashy Nigella, (here he cupped an imaginary pair of spilling globular breasts) she ate the whole plate. My dear Aunt ...the mad old bag!

Urotsukidoji's autocratic gaze fell on a poor blonde beast of burden choking on plastic rope—a clove hitch. Oh don't choke Joyce—she's awfully tired already. Is that really the best knot you could have tied—it's like a bloody tourniquet.

Urotsukidoji looked at her—An 8 stone golden retriever. He considered for a moment the aged bitch in a papoose, facing out, wheezing, legs splayed. Skankhammer also on his back, a middle-aged strawberry blonde beast twice the size...His heart sank. It is the burden of the English upper classes to carry their bloated bourgeois bedfellows and aged gun dogs in tow as once their horse and four carried them. And now? Just a broken down Range Rover three miles behind them. All three were reluctant to walk.

Skankhammer had had enough before they even decided to go to the Avalon's. "We could just leave her here—I'm sure she's senile. Quite a remote unlikeable animal until she made 18—"

Urotsukidoji started. “Oh don’t be cruel—I will not be cruel to an animal. We once took the train to the South of France in August. My aunt took a real dislike to her pug and decided to take it off the train for a walk on the platform at Marseilles—As soon as the train was about to leave she hopped on and left the dog with nothing to call its own but a steaming turd on the platform. Odd.

“Beastly,” said Skankhammer.

Urotsukidoji knew it was time that Skankhammer was to be asked—he was ready—waiting—the story had set like cold meats in aspic.

“Skankhammer I think it’s already time you told me why you’re in a mood. You always sing Noel Coward when we’re lost in the country. I know it’s a bad sign.”

Skankhammer took a deep breath. “Someone said to me last night that the sight of me dancing with my shirt off at the barbecue was reminiscent of watching *a pig* dance!”

Urotsukidoji snapped, “Oh for goodness sake. You were sun burnt, grunting and thrusting your belly in the already disapproving faces of those French fashion students.”

Skankhammer was not listening. “That’s not all—someone else—that boring Senegalese woman said, ‘Je suis fatigue’ and then some other skinny bitch pointed and said, ‘Huh, fattee gay-ah!’ ”

“Oh, that’s a little harsh. What did you say?”

Raising his voice an octave, Skankhammer whimpered, “Better to be *out and outsized* than plain *insensitive*!”

Urotsukidoji laughed. “*Ever* the bookish boy scout. Almost as dull and efficient as your knot tying babes!”

Skankhammer began to ‘review’. “No—I called her a CUNT and threw a glass of wine at her. Glass and all. *They like wine...and to be seen* to be disapproving. Fucking shitheads!!!”

When Skankhammer spoke of his prolific violence it was never to be taken at its word.

“No, you didn’t. You simply didn’t. You sulked—you’re still sulking.”

(Silence for 366 paces. The dog grew slower and slower and Urotsukidoji thought of siring an heir with a woman in her 20s. This had been on his mind for sometime.)

Skankhammer wanted to change the subject. “Lord Avalon isn’t related to Elizabeth Avalon is he? Oh well you know the Vanderbilts have their own perfume?”

“Skankhammer, Elizabeth Avalon was a self made woman and Gloria Vanderbilt is first and foremost an heiress—there is no relation. YOU have *such* a quotidian and facile regard for herbs, spices, incenses and as an extension of that—all types of material consumption. *So Bourgeois.*”

Skankhammer liked to be put in his place. Finally an icebreaker—one of the pair would say the others name and the dialogue would proceed as though they were characters in a period melodrama—today it was Sheridan meets Heat magazine.

Skankhammer: I am the child of immigrants.

Urotsukidoji: I am the child of Restoration Nouveaux Riches.

Skankhammer: You feed old women insects.

Urotsukidoji: You’re too fat.

Skankhammer: Your eyebrows are too plucked.

Urotsukidoji: You’re too tan.

Skankhammer: You copied that from Valentino’s boyfriend.

Urotsukidoji: At least I’ve got a boyfriend.

Skankhammer dropped the dog leash in an effete manner—of symbolic value as Joyce rattled in a cowpat. He skipped ahead and slipped—his Toby jug body arcing briefly and into terminal descent—a hollow corporeal thud—onto a shattering coccyx.

“AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!” squealed the pig.

“SKANKHAMMER!!!” shouted Urotsukidoji. Two steps too far behind to catch him. “OH SKANKHAMMER!!!!!!!”

“Hwi swa hit es,” Messr. Shavailen caumaly a gréd. “Ante alswa eow cunnan seon, pær’es naht braulen. Aenlic paet khisa hlafordscip hes-beene sodeinly tacan illr.”

Khisa hlafordscip granianed.

“Nu,” Skankikon contynued, “gif eow’d beon swa gecynd alswa da bringan yn aye boteille af eowr betst brandewijn, perchance wei cunnan assister restaurare pe gentismanuh da rihts.”

Pe phrasis “khisa hlafordscip” habban aye magiquele efet, ante pe coings Messr. Shavailen dropaed ynda aye plomp, femenin hond ein efen mara miraculosus oinos. Pe twa respectus-habilis persephones tacan peim—sylf aff, namas ante curteisie alswa peir wend. Aye feawe momentoes latta, fe reequheired boteille af brandewijn swa rapere en beon pe baumoz hostesse.

***** {Once the brandewijn was drunk.} *****

“In the present moment, Stillborn,” voiced Skankikon, as he facilitated his cohort to his end. “Come rest in my presence and have a jar.”

The sight of the golden liquid being poured into a jar must have distorted him; for he did sit down dazedly and take the liquid presented to him.

It was not the thirst time he and Skankikon had soufflé, nor was it the first time that hospitalities had been followed up by olive branches in liquid form. At any rate, self-realisation began to stir—and if he didn’t, Skankikon was prompted to deliver it to his attention—that murder had a rather unwholesome effect upon one’s portfolio of teleportal golden liquids.

Still, the invocation had been thirst quenching. “What in flames did you ignite by interfering in the consumption? We were on our way to another etymological dimension.”

“I was only trying to teleport you, Stillborn-Bill.”

“Help I need somebody, not just anybody?”

“Yes. Good heavens, man. How could I stand idly by, knowing the sort of teleportal fate that awaited you?”

Lord Avalon had any number of ‘hows’ in reply, as well as the very chilling assertion that he hadn’t asked for any help. But Skankikon bade him consume from the jar and be calm, and the marquess wanted the drink badly. He gave a designed sigh and delivered his jar to his salivating lips.

***** {Once the brandewijin was digested.} *****

“Hwi swa hit es,” Messr. Shavailen caumaly a gréd.

He picked up the brandy glass and swirled it under his protruding nose.

He had a kind of cartoon face, like a rat. Or a weasel. A rat weasel.

He eased back into the red leather of the chair so sure of himself by the firelight. Firelight - usually such a comforting, flattering light - shades of gold and orange warming up even the coldest features. But no—not old Skankhammer—or Shav, as I like to call him. With him there was no soft edges. I stared at his unpleasing face watching his mouth move, words wafting out like farts. Words I chose not to listen to. He curled his lips around to form fake sentiments. I decided to fake listening.

“As soon as I open my book..,” he was saying when I snapped back into the conversation momentarily. That bloody book. He was always going on about that bloody book. He wrote down everything in there, the day’s accounts, however dull. He believed his life to be worth noting I suppose. Believing one day someone would care to read his twitterings. As if then, somehow he would be remembered, his existence deemed worthwhile. And from this book he tells me his account of where my bride-to-be has been and with whom she has been seen.

“She’s been round half the bleeding town, she winked at me in the butchers the other day. And, as I have noted, she received extra sausages at no extra cost. Well, at least not in monetary value.”

On he went with tales of slander and ‘merry dances’. Like Miss Marple, but less attractive and certainly less

honourable. I imagined him dressed like an elderly woman, with white curled hair peeking out from beneath a ridiculous hat. One eye magnified through a looking glass. I began to laugh at the thought. You've got lipstick on your teeth Skankhammer. Lipstick on your teeth.

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Shav

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Skankhammer

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Dragomir

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Skanky Ashmouth

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Shav or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin.

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Shav or against Shav

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Shav or against Skankhammer

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Shav or against Dragomir

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Shav or against Skanky Ashmouth

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Skankhammer or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Skankhammer or against Shav

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with

Skankhammer or against Skankhammer

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Skankhammer or against Dragomir

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Skankhammer or against Skanky Ashmouth

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Dragomir or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Dragomir or against Shav

Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Dragomir or against Skankhammer

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Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Shav

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Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Skanky Ashmouth

Shav is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Shav is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Shav

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Shav is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin
or against Dragomir

Shav is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin
or against Skanky Ashmouth

Shav is either with Shav or against Lord Avalon, Duke of
The Black Merkin

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Shav is either with Skankhammer or against Skanky
Ashmouth

Shav is either with Dragomir or against Lord Avalon, Duke
of The Black Merkin

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Shav is either with Dragomir or against Skanky Ashmouth

Shav is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Lord
Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

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Skankhammer

Shav is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Dragomir

Shav is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Skanky
Ashmouth

Skankhammer is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Skankhammer is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Shav

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Skankhammer is either with Shav or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

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Skankhammer is either with Shav or against Skanky Ashmouth

Skankhammer is either with Skankhammer or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

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Skankhammer is either with Skankhammer or against Skanky Ashmouth

Skankhammer is either with Dragomir or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

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Skankhammer is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Skankhammer is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Shav

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Skankhammer is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Dragomir

Skankhammer is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Skanky Ashmouth

Dragomir is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Dragomir is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Shav

Dragomir is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Skankhammer

Dragomir is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Dragomir

Dragomir is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin or against Skanky Ashmouth

Dragomir is either with Shav or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Dragomir is either with Shav or against Shav

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Dragomir is either with Shav or against Skanky Ashmouth

Dragomir is either with Skankhammer or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Dragomir is either with Skankhammer or against Shav

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Skankhammer

Dragomir is either with Skankhammer or against Dragomir

Dragomir is either with Skankhammer or against Skanky

Ashmouth

Dragomir is either with Dragomir or against Lord Avalon,

Duke of The Black Merkin

Dragomir is either with Dragomir or against Shav

Dragomir is either with Dragomir or against Skankhammer

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Dragomir is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Lord

Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Dragomir is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Shav

Dragomir is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against

Skankhammer

Dragomir is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against

Dragomir

Dragomir is either with Skanky Ashmouth or against Skanky

Ashmouth

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The

Black Merkin or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black

Merkin

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The

Black Merkin or against Shav

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The

Black Merkin or against Skankhammer

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The

Black Merkin or against Dragomir

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Lord Avalon, Duke of The

Black Merkin or against Skanky Ashmouth

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Shav or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Shav or against Shav

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Shav or against Skankhammer

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Shav or against Dragomir

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Shav or against Skanky Ashmouth

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Skankhammer or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Skankhammer or against Shav

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Skankhammer or against Skankhammer

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Skankhammer or against Dragomir

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Skankhammer or against Skanky Ashmouth

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Dragomir or against Lord Avalon, Duke of The Black Merkin

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Dragomir or against Shav

Skanky Ashmouth is either with Dragomir or against Skankhammer

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against Skanky Ashmouth

STILLBORN: Do you mean you want her for yourself?

SHAV: Yes. Yes, I suppose that is what I mean.

STILLBORN: I won't allow it. I simply will not allow it.

SHAV: No. No, I don't suppose so, no.

STILLBORN: Over my dead body. You hear? *Never* I say.

SHAV (*Eyes narrowing. Puts his hands in his pockets*): Ehm, but you see my dear Stillborn, I'm not really asking for your permission. Nor am I asking you to step aside. Indeed, if you were to step aside, I would likely call off the hunt. But, well, there you go. I say good luck to one and all! May the best man win and all that.

STILLBORN: But it's all so tiresome Shav, all this duelling, don't you think?

SHAV: Come, finish your drink. Let's drink on it? A toast, to the mystery of it all!

STILLBORN: You're *poison* Shav!

SHAV: What?

STILLBORN: Poison. A lethal tonic.

SHAV: Whatever are you talking about? I haven't the faintest idea what you're...

STILLBORN: Poison. That's what you are.

SHAV (*Relieved*): Ah, well perhaps.

STILLBORN: Viral!

SHAV (*Raising his glass*): To the mystery of it all Stillborn, the mystery of it all!

Shav leaves Stillborn sitting and walks into the hall. He hears a soft female voice that appears to be coming from a painting on the wall behind him. He does not turn to face it.

PAINTING: Is this what you want?

SHAV: Yes, I believe it is. Yes, it – is.

PAINTING: But what of the twins? What of Skankhammer?

SHAV: Yes, yes, dear Skankhammer, indeed, but surely...

PAINTING: What of the trial of it all?

SHAV: Trial? But I will never be caught. Surely?

PAINTING: The trial of Miss Ashmouth. The trials she will bring you. Has Lust blinded you to Consequence?

Shav smirks, straightens his tie, pulls a small notebook from his breast pocket and steps into the library on his left.

All is dark.

If Mr. Shaveylon had any boiled eggs about him, it must have been scalped by these throbbing plums, purple plums of animal sexual feeling; but alas he won't get fooled again—fool me once, fool me twice? No I don't think so sucker! He told the opposite of lying, rubbing his plums, all juicy and plum. Skankhammer whispered sweet nothings into his dark cave of a lobe and swatted away the humming fluttering of the dark voices in the back corridor of his cluttered dusty mind. He opened a tin of beans on the back shelf of his mind and the beans were the beans he expected in that tin of beans. Skanky loved Stillborn like she liked taking a fart under the covers. And Stillborn loved her like he loved taking a dump. If he didn't love her he would risking shitting himself in public and then telling some old lady he had shit himself and then down a can of Irn Bru whilst reading the Daily Record. He loved the risk, especially eating his own shit.

Skankhammer poured a drink and cried in a handful of ice cubes into his glass raised the glass and then threw it at a zebra and cried "sweet Jesus". He then thought of Mary Queen of Scots and wondered if she looked like Skanky. She probably looked more like her without the head. He wanted to lick Skanky's eyeball and wondered if he could suck it like a gob stopper.

Ford Mondeo! A month of driving a Ford Mondeo, Shav thought. His balls ached with the thought of it. He had run out of porn but the Ford Mondeo would more than make up for it. He became hungry with being turned on and

decided to eat some plums. Sweet plums. Juicy and blue and hue like a big long snooker cue. He decided he would have sex with a snooker cue with Stephen Hendry at the end of it, cueing back and thrusting through with deep screw for maximum power and spin to gain good position on the blue ball that looked like a frozen plum.

There were no witnesses to this act of sexual skill and precision. Alexandra Burke looked on and screamed “BAD BOYS!”

Skypejammer and Skankhammer faced off over the last remaining copy of Alexandra Burke’s début album in Tesco. They both unleashed their erect penises ready for battle. Skypejammer howled, “exceptional tool!” Skankhammer retorted, “IM GOING TO EAT IT FOR BREAKFAST WITH PLUMS!” Darkness scooted over the florescent lights of Tesco. Battle commenced.

A baby was born. Miss Ashmouth knew the truth. It was the baby of plums and beans cohabiting in the dark forest of Chocolate Gateau. Miss Ashmouth screamed in terror of the severed penis in her hair. Penis bagged she thought—fucking tool Skankhammer! Miss Ashmouth thought about Alexandra Burke and Skypejammer Flintoff having their baby in front of David Cameron. She cried tears of tea bags and hummed into her armpit. Medication time, medication time she hummed. Slip me salt Peter for I am the Lord of Chocolate Gateau.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Hardone's kin and connections were congregated in the luminous mealtime room, inaudibly attending to their cock-crow serving of food, when Skankhammer and Stillborn came moseying in just as arrogant and casual as you prefer.

It took all of Skanky's authority, in the course of the consequent racket of doubt and expletives, to keep from flying away off her chair and lobbing her weaponry around Skankhammer's décolletage. Despite the fact that by now her carcass must have worn up its delivery of brine, moans of liberation crammed her perceptiveness, and his mug be drenched ahead of her...for a flash. It follows that it required only an alternative instant in advance the sniff arid of their uninhibited harmony.

He by no means even stared at her. Accurate, the others be present provoking a insignificant racket, and he was held in reserve occupied manufacturing intellectual snaps. Immobile, he might get by without her a fleeting look as a substitute to dipping so steadily into the lead after that to Justborn-Jess—at the erstwhile extremity of the index. Still, the unfaithful cunt, couldn't release his Premeditated a

browse moreover. He barely prevailed by the flap, buoyant admiringly at the epigrams of his current beat. Used up later than Skankhammer, as a matter of fact. To get drunk with him no hesitation. To go halves on several inexpressible indulgences or one-time. As nasty hallucinations of buxom barmaids and chambermaids postured concluded her controller, her female fly around of point and reinforcement abruptly collapsed technique to noticeably unfettered heavy-handedness of ferocity. Oiled, she hoped they had executed each other, the egotistical swine.

Fail to see Ashmouth was so tiring functioning herself addicted to a frenzy that she just about heeded the banter. It was not in anticipation she attended to the struggle for breath of blow and Justborn-Jess' "Oh, Scud!" that Skanky assembled herself to awareness.

"Elocution! Woman," Hardone shouted.

Skanky's controller twitched up, and her unbroken better part set out to wobble. But no one was staring at her or Spirit. They be real all hard and fast on Skankhammer, who come back with a trivial smirk, "That's come again I alleged. Gandalf has sprinted absent with Pass up Clunyhammer Lapp to Gretna Gullible. In reality, they're not a hundred percent management any more. By pronto they be required to say 'I do'."

Let's stop here and identify a few learning points from this story. Learning, as we know, refers to the *enduring change in behaviour which results from reflection on experience*. For example, we have Lord Spittlefield, whose inability to understand:

1. The Penelope Wars
2. Changes in social stratification
3. His wife...

is symptomatic of the struggle that many of this family has in using inductive reasoning.

The consequences are potentially serious. If it is true that Clunyhammer has eloped with Gandalf (as it appears she has) then they risk many years of alienation and mistrust from their respective families. This is before we even consider what this means for years of toast(er)-less married life or its wider impact on society and the economy. Key points here seem to be:

1. The decline of 'health spas' due to their removal as essential 'hen night' destinations.
2. Essential skills in presentation, group working and problem solving lost through lack of traditional wedding processes.
3. Relocation of photographers to North Soutptown.

Whilst we have concentrated here on the negative consequences of these actions, let's finish this section with a few indications for optimism. For example, it is clear that Skankhammer can take on a leadership role, bringing out relevant points and demonstrating what they mean for the family, whilst Justborn-Jess, by asking challenging questions, will enable those around her to grow.

Can we, through Morrissette's wonderful interpersonal skills, even see a change in Mrs Lapp? Will she realise that there is more to life than manipulating her children? After all, it's not as if they are characters in some kind of strange romantic novel.

* * *

"I thought it was because he'd taken a fancy to Sweatglandy," Morrissette admitted ruefully. "Sie waren so cheerful together at that picnic."

While die Andere carried on noisily about this startling Neuigkeiten, Miss Ashmouth occupied herself with the story zwischen den Zeilen. No wonder Skankhammer had been so friendly with Gandalf. Having eingeschlichen into the

young scholar's confidence, thereby learning of the hapless romance, Skankhammer must have persuaded Gandalf durchzubrennen. Certainly it wasn't the sort of notion Gandalf would conceive on his own.

Jetzt macht alles Sinn. The Black Merkin—the nearest mail coach stop on the road north—the night of the gala when, in the great crush of people, the disappearance of a guest or two was less likely to be remarked. Und Skankhammer, hilfreich wie immer, at the inn to see that everything went according to plan. Gandalf müsse nur in den Wagen einsteigen, Clunyhammer treffen und mit ihr nach Schottland reisen. Ja, Skankhammer soll sogar arrangiert haben, wie die junge Frau ihren Liebhaber treffen könnte, ohne dabei Verdacht zu wecken. No wonder he'd been so adamant about getting the other elopers back to Hardone Hall. Only one wedding was required to scotch Treborhole Bowfire's scheme.

She stared unseeing at the eggs congealing on her plate. For her, he'd said. Er hat alles für sie gemacht. He could have let her go off with Still if he didn't care... but no. Ihr Verschwinden würde mehr Erregung verursachen als Gandalfs. Sie und Still hätten leicht gefangen und gestopped werden können, for Still's disguises had only made them more conspicuous. She, Still, Gandalf, and Clunyhammer, all on the same coach. Good heavens, what a farce. Everything would have been ruined, just as Skankhammer had said.

Aber, er könnte ihr gesagt haben. He could have taken her into his confidence anstatt leaving her to make herself miserable over him for five whole days.

Luckily for her unravelling rage, the crowd shattered finally. During the time that the alternatives were marched out of the chamber, Skankhammer removed Sir Urano to one side. "Mr. Lapp inquired me to place this into your palms." Mr. Shaveylon described sotto voce while he gave the baronet a message. "You'll desire to peruse it in secret I daresay."

Skanky, who had remained lingering not far away, overheard the interchange and discerned the wrapper. Eaten up with interest, she shadowed Papa Urano to the library. He sat down at the little office bench where Mr. Dirtybit Taradiddle's *Journey's in Hatfund* was placed spread out waiting for his perusal. She took a seat across from him and observed as he opened out the newspaper and perused, seemingly unaware of her existence.

When he arrived at the conclusion, he emitted an indistinct whistle in astonishment and then started once more. This caused Skanky to be extremely restless as expected. When he'd completed for the next moment, she exclaimed, "For heaven's sake, Papa, what is it? What does it speak?"

While the baronet went back from someplace seemingly a long way off, she discerned the well-known grooves making one's home in his brow. "What does it speak? What does it speak? Merely that I've been made for an idiot this decade and further. Gregory Bowfire has been swindling me. *Swindling* me, Skanky. I can hardly believe it. Nevertheless the proof is there, Mr. Lapp speaks. He's spoken to those with whom Gregory traded and discerned their accounts for himself."

His female child grabbed the written message from his palms and perused it. "Fine sorrow!" she cried out quietly. When she was finished, she let fall the written message so as to be resting on the bench and glanced at her dad. Her eyeballs were made full with pit—nevertheless what hit in her bosom was considerable reassurance.

"Oh, Papa. How thwarting for you. You put one's trust in him – with each item."

Father, Sir Urano, the baronet:

[*muttering*] The
more fool I. Who
would have
thought there
could be so much

deceit in this
world?

Skanky:

[*her conscience
pricking her*] Why
you know there is,
Papa, as there has
always been,
because men are
greedy for money
and power.
Without greed,
very likely there
would have been
no Peloponnesian
War. No wars at
all, probably. No
civilisations
toppled and
rebuilt. All history
an open book. No
mysteries. Then
think how bored
you would be.

Father, Sir Urano, the baronet:

[*mustering up a wan
smile, not entirely
without a sense of
humour, though this
had been cruelly tried
in recent months.
Growling*] Still, it is
not pleasant to
contemplate how
I have been taken
in [*bending an*

*accusing look upon
his daughter]*

Skanky:

*[a tad uncomfortable,
basty in her reply]*
You must look on the bright side. I know you think highly of Mr. Lapp. Did you not once tell me you wished it was he had the care of your troublesome finances? And does he not say in his letter that he took the liberty of looking into these matters in the hopes of discovering some means by which he might act as your partner in future? Does he not offer to do so now in the kindest and most gentlemanly way? And his reputation is of the highest. Why, half the peerage has dealings with him.

Father, Sir Urano, the baronet:

[taking some time, persisting in whining about deceit and trickery, mentioning Mr. Shaveylon's name more than once with doubt and suspicion, remarking upon Skanky's own lack of forthrightness. At length, abandoning himself into a state of weary resignation]...

Skanky:

[mentioning Lady Buckram's wish to take her to Bo'ness for the Little Season and the generous offer to take charge of her until a suitable husband was found]...

Father, Sir Urano, the baronet:

[consequently, in silence, offering no objection]...

He would be glad, he told his daughter bluntly, to finally wash all this paint from his hands, (metaphorically speaking) now that he was free of his ill-fated obligations. Yes, she might go with Clumhentia for as long as she liked, or for that matter with Mandarin, Lemon Punch or even at a push Apricot Crush. He was tired of keeping track of her fickle tastes. He wanted to go back to Hatfund where he would no longer need to waste endless days trailing the aisles of the

B&Q superstore or be called upon to perform cheap incantations at the local Homebase. Dead civilisations and the dead who'd belonged to them were not nearly so troublesome—Midnight Grey, Inky Pool and Mosaic Scroll could again inform his daily worship and once again form the basis of his rituals.

Aided and abetted by an interfering, overbearing old woman and her unspeakable nephew, his daughter completed an ill balanced triumvirate dedicated to soft pastels and Anaglypta. They were a minor chapter of the Incomplete Order of Home Builders and could be identified as such by the ancient marks and runes of Macro, Lidl and Ikea that adorned their official overalls.

Skanky listened patiently to his complaints, and when he was bored with them at last she took herself away, dry-brushing small circles over surfaces and muttering secret incantations as she went. Putting aside Urotsukidoji Lapp's ladder, he turned to Mr. Dirtybit Taradiddle's wall and in a very little while the furrows erased themselves from his brow; solid blocks of colour combining on the wall and in his mind to form an impenetrable meditation, after a while he began to float.

"Wallpapered, did they?" Lady Justborn-Jess said to her brother as he came back down to the ground with a thump. She'd followed him to the billiard room where she began the un-ladylike process of ceremoniously stripping back the woodwork with a large Black and Decker blowtorch. "Just like that. And I suppose Skankhammer never had a bristle in it."

"If he had, he hasn't confided it to me, he swore he'd never lift a brush with them again."

"Hasn't he? And you two suddenly the best of friends." One more blast was sufficient to disquiet her brother and make sure her work observed the supposed formality of the situation. She stood back, surveying the domain of her handiwork while absently rubbing the end of a micro-poly paint roller against her temple, accidentally smudging it with

the sacred hue of Farrow and Ball's Sacrificial Sunset. "What happened, Stillborn? One minute you can't bear to have her put down her brush. Today you won't even let her look at your mixing charts. What happened when you met up with him?"

Lord Avalon only shrugged and paced round the stepladders five times clockwise before laying out a small pentagram in masking tape on the floor.

"You've given up, haven't you?" she persisted. "It's no use trying to dissuade me with that empty performance!"

"You know, Justborn-Jess," he said, taking the roller from her and quickly rinsing it out with a low guttural chant, "you really oughtn't to take part in these rites at all. But if you must, you certainly shouldn't undermine me with your modern methods—you know tradition states that you should always leave at least 16 hours before applying the top coat and that the woodwork should only be observed after dark."

"Then there's no problem is there? Come, tell me. Have you given up or what?"

Her brother gazed down from the top of the ladders at her. Really, such a hoyden she was, she should have been the perfect primer. But here she was all of twenty-three, and still she had never chosen a successful colour scheme. "Yes I've given up, I'm just running through the motions until a suitable replacement can be found," he replied as he gently wiped away the paint from her brow.

Stillborn stood by the window and watched the last rays of evening light retreat across the vast lawns outside. "I encounter millions of bodies in my life," he said. "Of these millions, I may desire some hundreds; but of these hundreds, I can love only one. And, having considered everything, it cannot be her."

"Is that so? I barely recognise this weird monk—what's he done with my brother?" she paused to lick the edge of the cigarette she had been rolling and twisted one end. "Since when have you been saving yourself? You're an

amphibious creature: you love everything, everyone. Whatever it is, it amuses you; you like to combine every species except this one creature who apparently defies your tastes.” She placed the cigarette between her lips, lit it and tossed the match into the empty fireplace. “You’re saying you’d prefer one of those ballerinas you regularly devour at weekends. Or a brace of nubile redheads, luscious gullible twins or—”

“Enough! The sewer brims over. I crave something pristine.”

“Nonsense. You’re as impious, debauched, and depraved as the finest of Satan’s minions. More to the point, you owe me, Stillborn. I’ve won and the first thing you can do is tell me the truth.”

The marquess bent a withering look upon his sister which she met with perfect equanimity, being immune to the devastating force of his personality.

He talked breathlessly as the sun set behind him.

“Ha!” exclaimed his sister when he ended. “It’s all a question of mastery. This woman will never surrender fully, she is too strong-willed and you have met your match.” Perhaps, though, if you considered a certain loss of your own precious selfhood, the pair of you could become a formidable organism. Who was it who said a couple is a dangerous machine?”

“Yes, but the dynamics of that machine...” Stillborn shuddered. “And the loss of self you suggest so casually. In this case, it is not something I can measure out in degrees, it’s a rollercoaster spinning off the rails into an abyss. It’s not some simple pleasure. The notion of suicide occurs to me. Bursts of annihilation sweep through me. This is how it happens sometimes, misery or joy engulfs me, without any particular tumult ensuing: nor any pathos: I am dissolved, not dismembered; I fall, I flow, I melt.”

“You’re pathetic.”

“No, I just can’t justify the effort to manage either myself or this sly monster.”

“Listen to yourself! You’ve never encountered a woman who can ride you the way you ride others.”

“Well, I encounter you every day!” he cried and turned back to the window.

His sister laughed and wondered, not for the first time, how her brother made his way in the world with such a petulant manner.

“You’re a fool to let her go, Stillborn. And you’re afraid to submit to some deeper delights. But perhaps it’s for the best. It’s obvious you would rather play the whore than risk an emotion, for all your talk of rollercoasters. Stick to your poxy distractions, it will save me having to pick up the pieces later.”

Stillborn seemed to shake with fury as he twisted abruptly, marched across the room and slammed the door behind him. His sister lay back on the chaise and languidly began to roll another small but potent cigarette.

“No, no, no, no, no,” Justborn-Jess insisted as she slowly nibbled at her tired and worn fingernails, “I really must say no, it’s nigh on participatory in these times of great hardship. It takes everything to build a bustle on one’s own these days without this bigger societal request on top.”

Justborn-Jess glances slowly around the drawing room to see her loyal ‘Hound’, fidgeting with something unknown in his pocket. “And besides, it is with great wonderment and quite frankly horror, that I find you believing that The Beast could be such a brigadier of knowledge on such matters? Really, it is such a shocking revelation, it truly is.”

Later on that evening Pudendum Detritus asks his maid-wife Clunyhammer to join him for an after dinner stroll before retiring to his drawing room for a large glass of port and a glimpse at ‘Modern Man’.

“Egad Clunyhammer,” whispered Pudendum Detritus quite aghast, still twisting and turning what could now only be described as an obelisk in his pocket, despite it being hours since his last uneasy fiddling, “You must stay calm, you really must my dearest.”

In the watery moonlight, the pair of oddly shaped silhouettes cast enormous shadows along the very same sheltered path two couples had trod several days before. “My darling, I really must insist, it’s only a little titillation between friends, and if it means a little extra cash in your purse for those little ‘after dinner moments’, then well, surely it cannot take on any negative effect? Indeed it appears in summation, after many discussions with the house, that half the staff are ‘working’ for you already and the other half for Clumhentia—and what with Justborn-Jess’ little adjuncts with her brother, REALLY my lovely”.

The Hound’s confessional gaze left Clunyhammer quite weary. “I didn’t behest that Justborn-Jess relay such information, I truly didn’t. For it was when I saw her stomping back and forth in the garden from the drawing room window, apparently cussing profanities under her delicious and delicate breath that I felt obliged to ensure that her mood would not induce the vapours.”

“It was with this in mind that I insisted she shed her gown to not only reduce this inevitable climatic conclusion, but also to preserve our standard ornamental roses. It was simply for her safety at the sacrifice of mine.”

Mary looked quizzically at her husband and raising an eyebrow listened more intently to her husband’s gasps as well as excuses. The Hound continued. “You simply must understand my darling, that when all her clothes were removed and I had patted her down she became seemingly overwhelmed with a confessional spirit. Her gasps were quite shallow and fast as she explained that it was her brother that was at the root of her little outburst.” I never prodded her once, although sorely tempted, as she is indeed a very salacious young woman, for it was then that she told me about what Stillborn had told her.”

“So it was indeed Skankhammer that frightened Stillborn off that particular expedition, was it? I have to say that in some social circles the classified advertisements can be seen as most reverential. Well, I must say your confidence in that

laggard proves to have been very well placed. Gandalf, Stillborn, even the bigger society are all brought on board and dispatched to their pairings, all in less than a couple of hours. Amazingly efficient, isn't he, once he sets his mind to something? No wonder Urotsukidoji Lapp speaks so highly of him."

"Yes, indeed my darling. But it's of greater importance to set the scene in his mind in the first place that is so exhausting. It takes a great deal of patience, port and imagination before his mind settles onto the job in hand, so to speak, for he is so obstinate, you know."

"Ah, indeed. He's used to doing exactly as he pleases. When you think about what he is reputed to do with the ladies, oh my, they are mere clay in his hands, and so it is no surprise that he can't bring himself to settle on any one lady at a time. Oh my, my, my, thrice. Although, in truth, I am sure that his inherited financial fortune helps with his any difficulties that he may come to bear."

At this The Hound feels most elated, for it is no secret that he indeed shares such recreational pursuits. The idea of women and wet clay brings greater, more uncontrollable excitement. Time to get out his Modern Man once more, for one's own company at times like this can indeed be most satisfactory.

Lady Detritus sighed in sorrowful agreement. "Ah, yes. You charming bastards. It is such great sport for you. To choose to play fast and loose with our tender feminine hearts and minds."

"Yes, madam. Great sport indeed. Speaking of which, is this the romantic site you told me of? The scene of stolen interludes, jealous hearts, tears, and I don't know what else?"

"Yes Sir it is, for indeed it is here that we extol family values."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“What do you think she’ll believe now?”

1. helplessly besotted*
2. in a matter of minutes
3. a good night’s sleep**
4. a low chuckle*
5. leave her in the dark
6. altogether satisfactory in every
7. recent highly charged events

S kanky sat up and pounded her pillow, though her anger was hardly the pillow’s fault. It was, however, an inanimate object upon which she might vent her frustrations with impunity—though it would have been ever so much more satisfactory to be pounding upon Mr. Shaveylon’s head and tearing out his tawny hair by the clumpfuls. She noticed that something started to slide out from its casing. She jumped off the bed with a shout and climbed onto a chair. That’s what she did in childhood when she first saw a little mouse run across the floor. She gathered her strength and returned to the bed to inspect the pillow. It was a strange gooey black liquid slowly flowing down onto

the sheets. It didn't seem to stop its flow and she started to wonder how much of that thing was inside the pillow. But she didn't dare to touch it. Suddenly terrifying fear awoke in her, what if this was some kind of living creature that climbed into the pillow and was planning to strangle her when she's asleep? Or maybe it got into it while she was sleeping? It might have already touched her face or even crawled over it? Was it the creation of that Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks? When could they have put this thing into her pillow? She hasn't left her bedroom for days.

For the tenth or twentieth time since she'd retired for the night, she flung herself back down upon the bed and closed her eyes. And for the tenth or twentieth time she cursed the day she'd met him. The fact was that, like a great many other people whose prayers the gods have answered, Miss Ashmouth was wishing she'd worded her orisons more carefully. True, being in love with the man, she must be overjoyed that he'd returned safe and sound. The problem was that, in returning not only unscathed but unchanged and therefore unimproved, he made her feel like an idiot. Virtually everything she'd thought and done from the minute she'd met him had been wrong. She'd driven herself distracted, trying to manipulate her father and Stillborn by turns and had succeeded only in twisting herself deeper into a quagmire. From which Skankhammer had, with hardly a second's thought, extricated her. A snap of his fingers and Gandalf, Papa, Gregory Bowfire, and Lord Stillborn-Bill Faraway Avalon were all disposed of simultaneously.

There she'd been, plotting and worrying by day, worrying and weeping by night—a prodigious waste of energy. She was a fool. Her brain must have rotted away in the sultry Yorkish climate. Her brain... That's what was inside her pillow it dawned on her! The brain must have rotted away and have seeped out of her ear into the pillow. It got fermented there and turned into some kind of living spirit, a creature. It has gained superior powers since now it could live on its own. And because it still was her brain it must be

her friend or on her side at least. She must ask it to help and make him fall in love with her!

He'd come to her and fall to his knees declaring that he loved her! And in some treacly way straight out of a fairy tale, swear always to be faithful because now he'd found his one, his only, his *true* love at last, her brainless body.

Aye eh wis kind hearted right enough. As kind hearted as a flamin' terrorist. Hud Aunt Clum no said it? Eh's a hard nosed bugger, "especially when eh's up tae nae good." This didnae mean any mare tae him than when eh wis swanning about over in Telephonia, drinkin thame cocktails in toppin up eh's tan. Thurs nae point in speakin tae Clum, she wis just another one eh his fancy girls. In anyway now that eh hud sweetened ivryone up he'd be away back doon tae Bo'ness fur a yahoo.

Fingers crossed that'll be the end o' it now though. Jist thit she wis away tae Bo'ness anaw, an nae dout he would be windin 'ur up, trying it on wi other lassies in front eh 'ur in that. Thurs nae doubt thit shu'll hear worse thin she sees, that stupit hair dresser thit she goes tae, doon there, is ayit bleatherin about a load eh rubbish...she dus ma heid in.

It wouldnae dae 'ur any good tae see um wi another lassie. She wis awready goin round the bend wi paranoia, a think she's half daft sometimes. It's a shame though, thurs a wee part eh 'ur missin, ken? Bit a said tae 'ur, "yi didnae want tae be wastin time an energy over that god forsaken soul," ah told 'ur tae get 'ur glad rags on an get up that toon, ah said, "thurs nae point in sittin about wi yer face trippin yi hen."

DING DONG! It wis one in the afternoon and she wis still in her kip winding 'ur self up about it aw. That's it. She couldnae sleep so she picked up the TV control, but nae batteries, she forced herself out o' bed and over to the tele; it was worth it, River City was on, and it was at a good bit.

She peeled herself from the damp sheets and headed for the door. Pulling on her dressing gown, she knocked over a pyramid of empty champagne bottles and noticed the

invitation to the annual dinner dance on the floor. With her nightmare beginning to fade, she picked up the card; it was embossed with the emblem of the Sub-National Farmers Alliance.

Composing herself, she slowly crept out of the room and made her way gingerly downstairs. She let her toes sink into the soft carpet along the corridor, avoiding another collision with two empty champagne bottles precariously balanced upside down on a glass table. With a pain starting to press gently on the back of her eyeballs, she pressed her cheek against the library doors and gently pushed them open.

The room was filled with dancing shadows as the draught from the empty fireplace licked the flame of a single candle on the floor. A half naked figure with oily skin, his brown eyes focused beyond the walls of the room, partnered the candlelight. They danced together around the room, first one way then the other.

Lounging on the leather sofa was Mr. Skankhammer Shaveylon. He was totally naked apart from his neck cloth, which dangled carelessly around his right forearm. He looked up from the letter. Folding it, he stared at her for a moment. Then a nervous smile lit his anxious face.

Without moving his head, his eyes pointed towards the pathetic little creature that had now begun to settle down in front of the flame. "I've found him," he whispered urgently, his eyes wide with excitement.

The pain in her eyes had spread to her temples as she leant forwards on the arm of the sofa, "Please Mr. Shaveylon, do not tease me so and tell me... how can we be sure?"

"This was the only thing he had on him and it looks authentic judging by the condition—not to mention the smell." Handing her the letter and lowering his voice, he whispered, "the letter...from *The Arts Council*."

Immediately recognising the ancient ACE logo at the top of the page, she scanned the document, her eyes resting on the name printed clearly at the bottom of the weathered

paper. Gasping for air, she sank down into the sofa—and the arms of Mr. Shaveylon.

Looking through her tears and deep in to the eyes of Mr. Shaveylon, her head was free of pain as she uttered, “it is him, after all these years...we’ve finally found him.” She gently placed a motherly hand on the sleeping creature’s head and whispered, “welcome home David Titley, you are no longer the lost artist.”

Skanky. That angel he knew so well. But he was unsure what to do—with her so near he could not quiet his desires so easily.

“Will you stay a minute, just stay, talk to me?” he whispered.

All was better with her and he did not want to be sensible. Nor have any wish for a clear conscience. Only—for all that he was trying seduction—she rather grasped for wayward morals. She turned seeing the door handle to leave. No.

“Perhaps I might read to you? This one? *Clarissa*?” he asked turning the pages of the volume on the table.

“*But you never did seek me,*” he quoted. He glanced to her. She was quiet. He looked down at the book and went on.

“Why didn’t you drop into harmony with me?”

Without you there is only

The promise of interminable sleep...oh.”

The sound of his voice made him uncomfortable, “is it yours?”

“Don’t be absurd.” He could hear her discomfort. “No. I. That’s not mine. I’ll take it though, I know who—” she faltered, taking the book from him.

“Yeah, I see trouble,” he said, his eyes scrutinised her face for a few seconds. “What a mug I’ve been.” He looked at his watch, it was half one. “What’s a dame like you walking round some dusty old library in your panties looking for? Section M for Man?” he smirked, “It’s over here.” He

stank of whiskey, well oiled from a lunch-time meeting that had only just finished.

“Don’t you see?

Whadya think I’m gonna do to ya?

I’m not gonna touch ya... put this on.”

She watched him as he picked a book up and rose from the sofa. He then grabbed his coat off the chair, and pretended to throw it at her.

She flinched.

“Come, Miss Ashmouth. What are you afraid of?”

Yes, actually, she was afraid. His effect on her was always unnerving, always dangerous. Still, he said he wouldn’t do anything to her and he had been true to his word so far.

She lifted her head, and walked across the room elegantly.

She even allowed him to help her on with his coat.

He pointed towards the sofa, and she sat down.

She could not, however, suppress a gasp of shock when she watched him go to the door and lock it.

Grinning at her obvious alarm, he tossed her the key. She caught it without thinking.

“I am working for the New Mockydocky order of Protection,” he explained, as he pulled up a chair opposite her. “If I hear anyone coming, I’ll go out that door.” He pointed at the window. “You can take your time about going to the door because you’re a dame. You’ll explain that you locked it because you didn’t want to be disturbed, as for your outfit, I reckon you better keep the coat on...it kinda suits you.”

She was beginning to feel more comfortable around him as he continued to explain the true story of Gandalf’s plans.

The hunch she had was right. “But why,” she asked, when he’d finished describing the secret plans, “did you insist on going looking for him?”

“There was no way of knowing that they were both in the coach and on their way. If the smallest thing were to go wrong, Gandalf would have been unable to do anything

about it. Also, I was obliged to keep Urotsukidoji Lapp incommunicado. We'd agreed, you see, that he'd perform the killings while I saw to the disposal of the bodies."

"You mean he knew about the scheme all along?"

"He knew a few things, thanks to my aunt, about your uncle's plot to get rid of Bowfire. He guessed about the scheme sooner even than I did and must have sent a coded message to Aunt Clum when he wrote to her. But when your Papa spoke that day about Gandalf's obsessive behaviour... well, to make a long story short, by the end of the week I'd not only extracted the truth out from Gandalf, but also, in exchange for devising a workable scheme, some important details regarding his father's bank account details. So off I dashed to Bo'ness. Bowfire was soon persuaded that mine was the best solution. There was no time to be lost."

"So you had everything planned before you left." There was a note of regret in her voice.

Skankhammer stared at the carpet, "I know. I should have told you about the scheme to kill them. But the one time we were together—well, I couldn't think of anything else but you. By that time it was getting too late. I should have been on my way the day before...and, well, I didn't think to involve you. It's regrettable, really. Because it would have spared you having to kill and bury them yourself. If you'd known, you could have kept Stillborn out of the picture easily enough, even if you had to send him out of the country."

She played with the revolver as she considered this. "I'd like to believe you," she began slowly, "but it looks as though you've taken care of everything... or so you'd like to think?" The green eyes fixed on him, as did the barrel of the revolver that she held in her finely-manicured hands. "Perhaps it is time for you, too, to die."

"*Ha!* That is not a gun you are playing with." Skankhammer was evasive. Unfathomable. Uncomfortable.

Skanky let go of his baton. “What did you say to Stillborn... Lord Avalon? Why did he avoid me all day?”

“Don’t look at me that way. Devouring. I made it clear he wasn’t ready for marriage.”

She re-calibrated Shaveylon, relieved Hardone’s impetuosity, and engagement, were disposed.

“It doesn’t matter what you said. So long as I’m free of him.”

“So that you may have your Season?”

“Yes.” Her gaze fell.

Silence. His hand covered hers.

“Then perhaps...”

She felt weak. Voice brittle.

“I owe it all to you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you...*dirtybit*.”

“No.”

She slipped out from under him.

“I’m deeply grateful. I’ll have to thank you. You must endure it.”

When she started to remove the skin, he seemed to collect himself from a daydream. He rose, too, moving to assist her. His hands touched her arms as the skin slipped from her knife, and she quickly and carefully moved away, ignoring the gesture.

“Skanky.”

The sound was like a command, and she resented it. The potato fell to the floor as he folded her in his arms. He kissed her, sloppily, and he drew away again before it occurred to her to make him do so. His mouth smelled familiar, but she could not articulate what it was that was bothering her about its familiarity, or what it was.

The phone rang, and she jumped at the chance to leave his embrace. He did not loosen his grasp. His arms still held her, but tighter now, and she was disturbed by the scent emanating from his mouth. She felt claustrophobic. He was close enough so that she was acutely conscious of his overall

scent: dirty and caproic and so uncannily familiar. So uncanny that it was difficult to stop sniffing. Her nose moved from side to side in rabbit fashion. First the left nostril, then the right. Then it crinkled, taking in audible gusts of air. She felt so curious; she couldn't stop until she could identify it. He was puzzled by her. Did she have an allergy? Was she about to cry? He couldn't work out if it was a sniffle, a respiratory problem, or simply odd body language. It made him very uneasy. Yet he could not leave, it was as though she had cast a spell. His arms felt weak, and his fingers were numb.

"I suppose," he said, in a trance, "I'd better let you go."

"Yes, I think so, and at once," she answered firmly as she stared at the space between his upper lip and nose. She knew what the smell was now.

"I have some washing waiting at home." He said, as he turned to walk towards the door.

"Yes."

"In another minute it would be too late." He sounded rather short of breath, and this made her want to smile, but she stifled it.

"You always make it—" she bit her lip.

He turned to look back at her. "Make it what?"

"So very difficult, Skankhammer. Off you trot." Her green eyes met his.

She locked the door behind him as he left. She remembered and identified what she had smelled on his mouth. It was the intimate smell of Honorium Necro-Ash coming back to haunt her.

"It's always down to me, isn't it? To get you out of these Necro scrapes."

"What Necro scrapes?" he demanded indignantly. "I totally had her that time and you know it."

"Yeah, that's what you like to think," she snorted in contempt. "If I hadn't been there she would have had you instead."

“Not true,” he whispered. “It was just a coincidence that she ran away when you arrived and started firing that laser of yours.”

She was never sure afterward exactly how it happened, but one minute he was kissing her—everywhere, it seemed—and the next they had tumbled off the roof of the building and were now accelerating towards the ground at approximately nine point eight metres per second—minus an allowance for aerodynamic drag, she observed. By that time, the notion of triggering her hidden parachute—what respectable lady does not always have one on her person at all times?—was making more and more sense to her. Now, where was the canopy release? She was sure it was here somewhere.

He covered her hand with his. Fear and longing were mingled in the green eyes that searched his face as the air howled upwards past them at a hundred-and-twenty miles per hour.

“I won’t let you hit the ground,” he whispered, his voice lost in the noise.

“No, we have already reached terminal velocity.” Reason was fighting, desperately, to reassert itself. “No. Let me, at least, trigger the canopy release before we both hit the ground. If I cannot save us both, at least let me live...!”

He had bent to kiss the hand clasping his, but now raised his head to look at her. His face was flushed, and his eyes, so softly golden before, were now so very bright. “Canopy?” he repeated, dumbly.

“I c-can’t stop us both hitting the ground,” she stammered. “You know that, my love. It isn’t physically possible with the surface area of this small parachute I have on me and the sum of our masses, given that we have already reached terminal velocity and our altitude is below one thousand metres. I have made detailed calculations for this very eventuality.”

“I interpret this description as somewhat long.” Then, very slowly Skankhammer added. “In my experience

nerveless fingers tend to slip off and roar away from hands-on understanding. But I love it. As for you, I seem to know nothing. I guess. We must conclude that.” Then with a crooked smile he whispered, “Flexion,” and shook his neck at the bottom.

Skanky was kissing through terrycloth, “Please.”

“*Please?*” he piped, mocking her squeaky voice to jump from the couch. “To stop a simple please! What in the name of the old art? Oh, dirty Skanky and you promise to kill me? No, I like that in big watery eyes or beat up on the fly. Recognition is cancelled; we’ll look at the Mahwah.”

“Her face turned quickly and found out that he could sit in a difficult position. I think we just arrest him. Wherever in his mind is that LED? For all time, simplify.” Shame to protect their ability to provide, was the salvation of his own. No.

“Two people,” he said. He was well-hung. “You want to go further? I am a husband, thank you very much. Valuable, and I do not dare to touch you because it does not help you.” He concluded to remember when she was midway through the doors. “Keys,” he said turning to her with embarrassment and disappointment. If she found expression in his face, it was even more shocked. A few minutes ago, the good seemed... Disturbance! Not a bad idea now so familiar. His eyes gleamed. His mouth was mocking. Next minute, however, the bottom of the couch fell on his knees. After a few moments of teeth and eyes shut, the door was locked, through the operation of hidden lever.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Skanky winced as Number 2 who wasn't called Abigail pulled the drapes open, and bright sunlight burned her retinas and showed the room to be a total cowp. Morning already? Bloody hell, her head was killing her and for a moment she didn't know which way was up. But this was her room, and there was Number 2, who wasn't called Abigail, deliberately crashing about the room, putting coffee right next to her head where the smell did little to reduce Skanky's creeping sickness. "Shut up and leave me alone," she growled. It all seemed perfectly normal—until, in a great, tumultuous flood, disjointed visions of what had happened came rushing into her mind vividly enough to set her face aflame and her stomach churning. Slowly she turned and pushed her face into her pillow and noticed it was caked in yesterday's make-up. She really needed to lay off the shots at the end of the night.

"Don't be so rude," said Number 2, briskly. "And get that coffee down you. Your Papa's waiting in his lordship's study to talk to you. And oh, Miss—he's dreadful cross."

Cross? She flushed again with guilt this time rather than queasiness. But Papa could know nothing of last night, she

was sure she had been quiet coming in. It must be about Gandalf. But perhaps he'd found out the truth somehow, she'd promised to lay off the drinking sessions after the threat of being sent on *Ladette to Lady*. "Who the hell says 'dreadful'?" she snapped, "what century are you living in?"

Cautiously, Skanky sniffed the coffee and thought better of it. She edged out of bed and Number 2 hauled her to the mirror. Oh dear. Rough. The smell of drink was overpowering as she tried to clean her teeth without lowering her head and to avoid bringing on a head-spinning relapse. Number 2 the abigail—Number 2-gail? Skanky vaguely mused—was upon her again, flinging clothes at her, muttering about scornful ladies and trying to clean up the room. Skanky noticed the shoes she was wearing last night were covered in mud and probably ruined. What had she been doing? What time had she got in? Maybe she had not been as stealthy as she imagined. Memories were very hazy and her head hurt.

The whole business of washing and dressing was accomplished so rapidly that Skanky was barely conscious before she found herself downstairs tapping on the study door. When she entered, she woke up quickly enough, for it was not just Papa standing there but Skankhammer and Gandalf as well.

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked at him and she stifled another wave of nausea. He'd seemed so different last night—didn't they always, she sighed. She pictured him, dishevelled and flushed, covering her with kisses and laughing happily as he'd fallen over the sofa. She'd thought she and him were kindred spirits, drinking buddies, maybe even becoming another kind of buddy if he made the grade. Now, she feared that she had gone right off him. That often happened once she had made a conquest.

To her horror he appeared to be wearing buckskins and worse still seemed to think he looked hot. His eyes were casual and mocking, his lips pressed into a faint, amused smile. He looked what he was: a conceited, swaggering,

disinterested pseudo-alpha male who could not recollect the night before any better than she could. How could any woman, regardless how sensible or intelligent, resist him for long? His gaze met hers, and the intimate, knowing expression in those hung-over amber eyes made her face burn. ‘Dammit dammit dammit,’ she thought, breathing carefully as the hangover kicked in. She leant against the fireplace for stability. Girding her loins for battle she wheezed, “Growing tired of Italian meals, son of Slut Mommy?”

“You think this air conditioner?” Papa gestured sadly towards Skankhammer’s merkin rack. “Why some Slut Daddy? I asked to clean the child. Shake to prevent it, however, came with tight disability hands.”

“Yeah, it—oh the pain, I get a bit of warning?”

At the new level of each gasper, Skanky and her father began to surface and with the request, “but that does not appreciate the wavy Skankhammer you do not know determines nephew, but a bad gift?”

Gandalf said evils, and he quote Gates, “I think Dragomir Wombcorn Vs. Honorium Necro-Ash. Then Major Pelting, Morrissette and Anthony-Burgess—Lord Hardone’s terrifying butler.”

Marriage events of recent weeks? Given that this is completely wrong, and shock in itself exempt from the Ashmouths, this is not the case and her father was shot in the head. Poker, more accessible, interesting to learn of the attack, not surprisingly, I felt that the beginning. If her father had died, and his father works in the fire of the mind.

Criticism? “Of course, your poor father, I think, you know how to party, again, are you sure that trick does not make it?” ‘Oh,’ he thought, then said to him, “you lend, my daughter—Skanky seizure of power.” Gandalf continued to ridicule ‘professional people’ and as smart as maths-people many themselves, and the fact that his father was half as successful as I kneel in front I know, red Zeus. My wife is

seen as a woman. Green-brick Universities and so on. Do I understand?

“And yeah! Easy!” The feeling again, the point of raising growth, but the words of her father in his life, twice, and the impression left, and more, he said, how about you make it easy to love Slut Wife Mommy. “No? Ah *Hahaha*”, she scolded him. Yesterday how bad jealousy. Flirting with other women. It seems you can imagine. Now endure.

“Why. What is he?”

“He may be the heart surgeon...” she gestured brusquely towards Shaveylon, “...but you, papa are the heart of the whole operation. Without your approval I could never dream of entering such a contract. You see that he has already vacated my heart; yet I long to cleanse my senses, clogged as they are with the residue of his unctuous advances. Lately I have taken to seating myself by the window of my chambers, crafting vacuous, tautological monologues.” She rambled on. “It has truly become a most illuminating therapy for me...”

The baronet’s furrowed face revealed hints of confusion, yet Skanky continued, unperturbed, raising a dainty finger to reinforce her tautological monologue, “...and the warm glow of rouge that you saw flutter upon my cheeks and breast was nothing more than the lub-dub...” (She patted her breast twice) “...of self-empowerment coursing through my veins. Besides, I have been stood by this fire now for much too long attending to your whims; all the while my senses long for nothing more than musings on clothes, clubs, compliments and cocks.” She turned briefly from the grate to throw Mr. Shaveylon a defiant look. “Yes, that’s right Skankhammer—cocks!”

His expression made her turn away hastily.

The baronet’s features relaxed. “Am I to take that as a No?”

“In short, the answer is No.”

Though her answer appeared resolute, she couldn’t help but wonder; If men were like shoes, was Shaveylon the

Patten to her Poulaine—lifting her exquisite form out of the mud and excrement? Perhaps she had been too hasty in her declarations?

“Well, then,” Sir Urano turned to Skankhammer, “I can no longer see any need to pursue this. If we held any lingering doubts before her time spent circulating with the Brotherhood of Locomotive Muscle, then I believe that they have been clarified by my daughter’s alliterated utterances today.”

“Clarity? Ha!” retorted Skankhammer. “Your daughter was a pure vessel: a tiny, white cell, flowing through a morass of brawn and filthy sinew. And you suggest that fraternising with the horny-handed nobility of the land might lead to clarity?” Mr. Shaveylon trailed off, the crack of hurt, betraying his ordinarily lubricious voice. He unknotted his arms from the meagre pretzel they formed across his heart and leaned in towards Skanky, the menace returning to his tone; then suddenly, he began to pump his limbs, albeit feebly, to the beat of his next proclamation. “And-No-is-the-wrong-ans-wer.”

“I daresay you think it is,” Sir Urano retorted with some impatience. “But she won’t have you. And so—”

“And so I’m afraid I shall have to tell you the truth,” said Skankhammer, quite calmly, his soft, effete arms now hanging still.

A surge of panic swept through Skanky. Yet she couldn’t help but wonder; was ‘roid rage really the new road rage? Wild, sexy, atavistic. Blue blood throbbed in her temples.

“She’s ruined,” the composed voice of Shaveylon continued as his eyes fixed on the Baronet. “I ruined her. Last night. With fresh linen and foie-gras; Duck a l’Orange and Blackforest Gâteau.” He paused to let his words resonate, then continued, eyebrows flexed. “The day that we shared a baked Artichoke—do you recall, Skanky? The rich, eggy aioli? It will be etched upon the tablets of my memory until my heart beats its last. You cannot forsake me dear girl, for your palate betrays you.”

“No!” the baronet roared. His face contorted, turning nearly purple, as he launched himself at Mr. Shaveylon. “I’ll kill you! She is supposed to be on a diet” he screamed, turning to his wretched daughter. “An enlarged heart has been mistaken for romanticism, you fool!”

Skanky smiled a secret smile; hungry like the wolf, she had never felt more exquisitely corpulent.

“No, Papa. Stop please!” She stood in front of Skankhammer, shielding him. “The servants will hear you. Of course it’s not true. You mustn’t let him provoke you. He’s only made this up to blackmail me, Papa.” She went on babbling protestations, which was monstrous difficult when Mr. Shaveylon’s finger was tracing a lazy path down her back. She sprang away when she felt a slight pressure at the base of her spine. “Stop it!” she hissed.

Luckily, Sir Urano was no longer looking at them. He was glowering at the carpet, shaking his head. “If it is a lie,” he growled, “I shall call him out.”

“I see your point, sir. Perhaps, then, I was exaggerating. Perhaps she isn’t ruined. Still, the circumstances were exceedingly compromising—”

“Skankhammer!”

Sir Urano considered for a moment. He looked from his daughter whose cheeks were very pink to Clumhentia’s dreadful nephew whose colour had also deepened.

“I see,” he said slowly. “I am not such a fool as all that. Why,” he demanded, “would any rakehell in his senses tell your father such a thing, truth or not? Only,” he answered himself, “if he was set on marrying you. If that’s the case, you’d better have him, Skanky. Either way he’ll make your life a misery, but married to him you can return the favour. I wish you joy of each other, indeed I do. It’s just as you deserve.”

He nodded to himself with grim satisfaction, deaf to his daughter’s continued pleadings and protestations.

“No, madam,” he said as he absently patted the hand clutching his sleeve. “I don’t want to hear any more of it. You have tired me half to death for the past six years. Now you have my leave to tire him for the next sixty. Let *him* worry about your admirers and infatuations from now on.” He shook off his daughter’s hand and marched to the door.

When Skankhammer stepped aside to let him pass, she attempted to slip out as well.

“No,” said the baronet. “You had better remain and reconcile yourself to your affianced husband. You will marry him Skanky—and so I shall inform your godmother. I daresay it’s no news to her, the interfering old jade. When you join us—both of you—I expect you to conduct yourselves with some decorum for once. I’ve had enough scenes for this millennium, I think.” With surprising dignity, Sir Urano took himself out of the room.

When the door had closed on her Papa, Miss Ashmouth turned, livid, to her latest fiancé, her green eyes blazing. “I hate you,” she said. “I shall always hate you. And I will never-never, do you hear me?—marry you. Get out.” She hoped that was loud enough to carry, and that her miserable Papa had heard.

Being the insipid, pigeon-chested and generally awkward youth that he was, the Duke of Nowt, unfortunately christened Skankhammer, retreated at once to search for a library, or a sitting room, or perhaps even the kitchen of this rambling old monstrosity of a house, where he might be either alone with a glass, or, at worst, with the servants, who as far as he was concerned did not count.

Miss Ashmouth, her breath heaving as she stood torn between fury and despair, was momentarily at a loss: for her Papa to play this unexpected card—of Skankhammer and marriage—was insupportable. And to think, her damned godmother clearly agreed!

Two more years, in only two short years she would hit the miraculous, ridiculous and arbitrary age of twenty-five at which point, finally and absurdly ‘of age’ and knowing her

own mind, she would inherit her dead mother's fortune and be spared the indignity of marriage at all. Not as though she didn't already know her own mind, or how she would happily spend the next fifty years disposing of said fortune.

Oh, I shouldn't have yelled at Skankhammer, she thought. It's not as though they hadn't muddled along perfectly well as friends, protecting each other from the mercenary advances of Lords and Dowagers, and even Mandarins: some after her, others after him, all after money.

Even the sex had not been bad, she giggled, thinking of pale Stillborn and his misshapen little cock, puffing like a bellows and preferring to be tied down; but that hardly justified a life sentence when it could be so easily avoided, especially when the genuine article had cut a blaze through her country walks already.

Stillborn-Bill, such an ordinary name for that wild creature who had fallen through the hedge in breaches, and, upon Miss Ashmouth's fearful inquiries, replied that she was perfectly fine, chasing a runaway horse, but not so urgently as to be prevented from stopping for a cigarette—a cigarette!—and flirting outrageously with Skanky, whom she immediately presumed to call Skank. Hard after which, she invited herself to tea.

And tea had been suddenly extraordinary, laced with brandy in front of a fire at the end of the house furthest from its other inhabitants. Miss Eadie had arrived, somewhat disappointingly, very respectably dressed and thoroughly deferential to Papa Urano, who simpered, duped with an ease that was breathtaking.

And then, behind closed doors, Miss Eadie had discarded the heavy shawl that concealed an ample bosom, from which Alex had found it difficult to take her eyes, and returned to her flirtatious manner. It had not taken long for Alex to be completely seduced; the play, the food, the conversation; the opium pipe in Chinatown, the oily white spirit in Soho. The pretty garconnes with heavy lidded eyes and knowing glances, a demi-monde she now experienced

not as a tourist and voyeur, but she knew, they knew, as one who belonged: and to be drunk, to be careless, to feign not caring was such a relief.

And she was, she knew, intoxicated: her skin made her dizzy, looking into the sun could not be more blinding, and her studies had thoroughly fallen by the wayside. At least her tutors, who enjoyed being paid, had not troubled to inform her father.

Skanky reflected: she'd read about that sort of thing, of course, and certainly practiced a few tricks with a couple of her lady's maids, but she knew this was of a different order entirely, and it was something about which something must be done.

With his usual lousy timing Skankhammer returned, a little drunk and emboldened by it. "How's Gentleman Jack?" He said, not unkindly. "Is it safe for me to return to your chamber? After all, it's going to take the two of us to get out of this one."

"You're right I suppose; could we not live in Greenville, pretend to be married, and then return when the clock has chimed 'I'm rich'?" Skank asked, half seriously, but still distracted by her memories of Eadie.

"This is the trouble" said Skankhammer with a sigh. "I am positively encouraged to live as a roué in Greenville, indulging in all the decadent pursuits the Victorians could imagine, —praying not to catch syphilis and its attendant insanity—while you are locked up in the Mockydockish countryside and preserved in aspic. If only they knew what you gels get up to—with me, let alone with each other."

They laughed, friends again, co-conspirators: she knew he didn't want—or need—to marry her.

"It doesn't matter," she said.

So i says, "aye it effin matters gonnae tell us then ye lyin bitch, yer aways pointin the finger and saying that ah said aw this bullshit an that but yous never telt the truth did ye eh?" So then she was like, aw quiet an that, an her wee throat was bulgin' like ahd stuck ma boaby right doon hur gub an shot

ma load y'know fucksake mate y'know what that's like dintye, ken but aye ha ha but for fucks sake ahm thinking this is taking fucking for-ever gonnae just get it oer with and twist the knife and aw that but aye anyways she says fuck all and ah says nothing and then she stairts greeting and the the panda eyes are out and ahm like... "Mon te fuck!" ah says. "Think ahm losing out on the fucking child benefit and out on the street? And ahm having the fucking bravia by the way right?" So then right, get this, she says it's me that's gonna fling her out for some fuckin tart wi big kuzungas. Like I cannae stop chasing it, like i want ma hole aw the time, and ahm like, you know me mate I like the burds like everybody else and thur was that time doon at the shelters wi that daft aulder lassie but fucks sake that doesnae count ah cud barely get it up and ah wis still 15 but she was like naw ah willnae get done fur it come on wee man so really ah was like fucking thingmyed what is it cuckolded or summat?! And anyway then she's like, "Skankhammer!!!!" and ah ahm like "don't fucking call me that right ah telt you never to call me that!" cos like i says to you ah get aw that fucking Fawltly Towers nonsense and everyone thinks they're pure original and aw that making wee digs aboot not mentioning the war around me aye, I fucking know very good. So anyway now aw of a sudden she lying back on the bed and she's tryin to pull those fucking tight troos wit are they called? Jeggings? Fucking Jjedwards fucking mare like, Aye she's tryin tae get these fucking jeggings aff and her lippys' aw smeared but she's like "mon then if yer a fucking man come and get it up ma cunt lips" and ahm like pure wiltin at the state of it, but at the same time thinkin, well true enough a holes a hole and that and ah huv to look masel in the eye. So wur gawn at it an ahm like right so ye still hink i'm pure aw awer the place wi the burds an that? And she's like "ahw.. ahw,, ahw.. aye yeh fuckin.. ahw awww" and she's pure gettin intae it and that and them I'm just like that, pure ruthless bastard right when she's there and she's pure beggin fur it ah pull out and go "fucking tart" and do her right in the eye man.

When they had been sitting there for hours, he finally took advantage of the situation and approached her. She was telling the same story he already had heard too many times during their long lasting friendship. It was the very same old story of how the little rabbit got into her parents car during holiday in the south of France. Not that he did not like her stories, he loved them, but this time he had something else on his mind. She was in the middle of the part where her parents heard weird noises from the back-seat when he laid his left arm around her shoulders. She stopped speaking.

“There’s nothing at all daunting in the prospect of marrying the most desirable woman in Mockydocky, not even though she happens to be dreadfully clever and manipulative besides. Not at all. I’m certain Napoleon’s Grand Army might have managed such a business if, that is, they kept well together,” he said in a theatrical fashion, with a dancing pitch and grave seriousness, just as he used to do when he was acting in the Order of United Friends of Michigan back in his undergraduate years.

She shook her head, and looked down into the empty wine glass standing on the table. She turned towards him, and looked him straight into his green eyes: “what are you implying?”

His shoulder sunk, finally he had done what he for such a long time had been scared of doing. He had already packed his mental luggage, because now he was prepared for the long and winding road from being a friend to entering a relationship. The only problem was that he had not discussed his plans with Miss Ashmouth, his friend, who now were looking at him as he had just arrived from another planet. He knew it was silly, why would she like to be with him? He was neither attractive, nor smart, he liked stones and stamps and not Buicks and beer, he was what his parents had told him, a unique child. As his mind now was working in top gear trying to figure out what he did exactly imply she leaned forward and kissed him. He smiled, not

knowing whether it was from love, friendship, sympathy or curiosity. He knew his life would never be the same again.

He swore under his breath “What a curst business this is,” he muttered. “Now the first day I met you, I was looking in the sky. When the sun turned all a blur and the thunderclouds rolled by.” After a brief pause, his gaze followed his pointed finger to the next instruction: ‘rub the toasted hazelnuts in a tea-towel to remove their skins.’

“The hazelnuts,” he whispered.

“The hazelnuts?” She repeated, greatly indignant.

“Sorry. I wasn’t explaining what I ought. Or I wasn’t thinking what I ought. The trouble is, I cannot seem to focus on anything but my memory of that first day, when the sea began to shiver and the wind began to moan.”

She’d been about to read him a lecture about his fiancé not being a fool for Nigel Slater’s breezy approach to cooking, and neither should Skankhammer. Recipes were there to be accurately followed and he would do well to remember that. The lecture flew out of her head as she gazed up wonderingly into those beautifully wicked amber eyes, “The sea began to shiver Skankhammer? Really?”

“Good God. It must’ve been a sign for me to leave you well alone. I was born without you baby, but my feelings were a little bit too strong.” To emphasis the point, he kissed her once more very lingeringly. As this promised to drive them both to distraction, she pushed him away.

“We can’t abandon the recipe,” she warned, as she stooped to gather up her wayward hazelnuts.

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As the evening wrapped its taut arms around the day, the throng gathered for their amusement. Individuals of the Brotherhood had begun looking for it, prodding a few rumours like tactically squeezing fruit eyeing the shopkeeper to gauge appropriateness. Reaching for a brown paper bag with the other hand to signal intent. There were characters

for the purpose. Starched men held trays and looked at the room below eye-level.

The host, before too long, supplied the ripeness: Skankhammer Shaveylon marrying Sir Urano's daughter, thrustedly announced by the father-host. Invite you to the wedding of their. You must be very proud with your pressed and polished.

Bride-to-be surrounded by giggling frills fussing. Thrilled by the news, some activity at last, to rip through their Sahara-dry, sober quotidian. A few breathy wheezes audible above the gossiping whispers. An excitement vibrating the Brotherhood of Locomotive Muscle.

"Did you expect this announcement?"

"I must cancel my transport arrangements for I will stay after all here this night."

"I said, did you expect this announcement?"

The audience divided according to their sex, with one watching the other. A man with his back to the wall, full tray held level as the horizon, touched a bead on his eyebrow. The host asked the doors to be held ajar.

The confidence of a transgressor; the prize of the romancer. Skankhammer, in the Other's territory, glistening. Periodically, he touched his tie to ensure exactness. He had the soft look of relaxed leather in his formality.

Lord Skypejammer Spittlefield was surprised by this; his wife Morrissette amused, her giggling a small plaything rubbing against a bulwark on the green velvet tetatet.

"Am I hearing voices? Did he actually say Shav is marrying her?"

"Ha! Certainly did. Get me a glass from that tray. Yes."

"Oh. That so?" Skypejammer looked towards Skankhammer with grave consequence, shouldering predictions. Skankhammer looked light as he endearingly clasped another shaking hand. He had the room watching him. Skankhammer lightly fingering a glass of champagne. Skankhammer's eyes lit by his audience's too toothed smiles.

"Skypejammer, a glass, before he moves off."

“Oh. Yes. Here.”

“This will surely liven this mined evening. Thank you darling.”

“What is it, love?”

“I don’t know. It’s dry and cold.”

“Like this match. Skankhammer, what have you done.”

Spittlefield strained his neck for his side faced the other direction. His wife Morrissette, slouched in silk and effortlessly watching the performance, sipped. She released bubbles under her breath, concealed with a sigh.

“Have some Skypejammer, and you are out loud thinking. Skypejammer.”

“Yes, darling. Good Man, another glass here.”

Lord Avalon fancied her and was refused. His sister knows Miss Ashmouth, Skankhammer’s fiancée. She is talking rings or dresses or materials. Avalon knows little about such things: he had looked into them. He had contacted dealers, had begun to make arrangements. There was hope in the business. He had not told his sister who is this very moment discussing wedding chattels with this very moment’s groom-to-be.

“Oh.”

Avalon wandered over to bride-to-be, prey to the host’s unbridled enthusiasm, her uncle’s perverse glooming and the whiling in the gloaming. Throwing a look to Skankhammer, she gently moved hair from in front to behind her ear. She smiled; he held up his glass an inch to his coy woman. Her social demeanour masking wantonness he was obsessed with. Avalon now kissing her gloved hand.

“Skankhammer, go speak to Freddie. He looks thunderstruck.”

“Yes, of course. Skankhammer removed his other hand from his pocket.”

“And tell Morrissette to come here for we have many things to discuss.”

“Morrissette will not move. I will tell her you are asking for her.”

“Look at her; she is a delight.”

“Skypejammer will not be pleased.”

“Tell Morrissette it will be worth her while. Go.”

There was at last some music. Conversations, more relaxed, of accented voices rose above a whisper. The room rippled with laughter and those pillared men refreshed their trays, new condensation on crystal glasses polished clear. The players were in a corner, the women in the middle of the room and the men towards the opposite corner. Boundaries less distinct now; some couples sat.

“You have been here before?”

“I am a cousin, in fact.”

“I have never enjoyed myself so much of an evening.”

“But I do not know the family intimately.”

Lord Hardone twisted the cork from the bottle, the white cloth around the head masking the loud ‘pop’. Mr. Shaveylon sat down and scratched his head; nothing would stop the itching despite his best efforts to ignore it. Watching the bubbles rise in the glass of champagne his cousin had just handed him, he did his best to keep his hand by his side.

“Those invitations to your wedding were slightly odd,” said Lord Hardone.

“How so?”

“Well...” Mr. Shaveylon’s cousin took a sip of champagne as he thought about it, “there were a few anomalies.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The two of them sat in silence drinking from their glasses. After a while Lord Hardone stood up, walked across the room and walked back with the bottle of champagne in hand, his shoes making satisfying thuds on the thick rug as he moved. After refilling each glass he sat down again.

“I mean they were just on a few, I think, but still I was surprised.”

Mr. Shaveylon looked directly at his cousin, “you know of the trouble I’ve been having recently, cuz.”

“I know, I know.” Lord Hardone eyes went to the window, “it’s just not like you to make mistakes.”

Mr. Shaveylon let out a long sigh; he longed to scratch his head.

“I start dreaming of something else. I take off on a word,” he mumbled without realising.

“What?”

“What? Oh, nothing,” said Mr. Shaveylon.

He could feel his cheeks flushing as he finished his glass. I’ve been drinking too much he thought to himself, scratching his head again.

As he stood up to leave, Lord Hardone held his arm.

“Yes, cuz?”

“You’re bleeding you fool.”

He reached up and touched his scalp. Holding his fingers in front of his face he examined the crimson on his fingertips.

“Shit,” he said under his breath.

CHAPTER TWENTY

—*There is a kind of sleep that steals upon us sometimes—*
Merkin's proposal: *Engage in a certain kind of laudanum sleep.*
Merkin's cure: *Fantasize something else from words written on a
page for you to act out.*

Yet, having said that—
*all **this** actually happened*

Fantasy-making everywhere in Pumelberg. And now they're here—filming newlywed Skanky and Skankhammer Shavelyon's most luxurious bedroom of a select and outrageously expensive hotel some miles from Bo'ness. Had to happen. Just as they knew they would, they knock on the door and victoriously move in. A hum of self-importance fills the air. The Shavelyons make no attempt to stop them. Chairs are set up for the Dilettanti's Doctorow. Police stanchions hold off the traffic. Cables, scaffolds, camera lifts, reflector screens. Merkin's stars hide in their trailers—the trailers hide behind two exhausted trees. Caterer's van. Generators. Tittle-tattle-and-scandal-hungry crowds swarm the nineteenth-century paving stones. Taradiddle. The grit of all the souls who live here. In their

dirty-minded world they churn up particulate matter with their ugly feet.

It is just past dawn. Having treated his wife to a very interesting sort of exercise indeed, the groom, still partially dressed, leans back against the pillows inspecting the ring on her finger. They pause the reel, run on, unpin her chestnut curls—‘to tumble in gay abandon about her perfect face.’

Skanky watches Skankhammer.

Skankhammer—trying to distinguish between truth and humbug—liberates his interfering self.

“It’s me instead of the Reality.” Pah, the low angle of sunlight burns into his eyes as he speaks. A man climbs the scaffolding—he repositions a reflector screen.

“It’s me instead of REALITY.”

Adrift and unable to stop himself, Skankhammer compulsively sees this as his moment for free and direct expression. He can’t stop. An opportunity to retell and rework his story to objectify and distort his open-ended subjectivity—to regain his dimension, his moral substance, complexity. He is able to read this unreality as analogous to experience, as though it were a work of the imagination, turning documented events into literary symbols—tropes that point to some dark complex pattern embedded in the reel.

He wonders why he took the chance. He is not anxious to make himself known—everyone seems to know him as the leading man. He is made up and takes his places as the camera rolls.

The room is bright and clean, washed in light.

“I have a wife,” Skankhammer says at last, softly and wonderingly. “How very odd.”

Skanky looks anxious and asks, “Is it, dear? I know you never meant to have one.”

“Didn’t I? Well, how stupid of me, to be sure. When I think what might have happened if you hadn’t managed to seduce me that night in the library—”

“I did not,” indignantly, “seduce you.”

“You would have, if I hadn’t such a scrupulous regard for my virtue. You knew I was exhausted, and therefore in a vulnerable condition, and you attempted to take selfish advantages of my weakness.”

“Oh, I see. And which weakness was that? You have so many it’s hard to tell.”

“A weakness,” he says, bringing the hand he holds up to his lips, “for naughty chestnut curls that will not stay properly pinned. A weakness for green eyes.” He kisses each fingertip in turn.

The scene has ended and the lights go off. All of this is the action—nothing of what they have just said mattered.

All morning the scene is shot and reshot. The actor playing Skankhammer is taller, with a thicker head of hair, but generally of the same build and long, slung-jawed face. The actress is a dead-ringer—brunette, lovely, slender, supple-hipped.

—By the end of the day the company finishes its work, they pack up, and the street is deserted—

(applause)

“Well, well, well.” Skanky looked at the man grumbling and shaking his head in the queue next to her.

“Well, Well, Well.” He repeated, louder this time and with more direction.

“What is it?” Skanky asked growing somewhat tired. If this gentleman wished to get her attention surely he could just ask.

“I start dreaming of something else. I take off on a word. Well. Well. Well.” The man looked at Skanky. “Well. Well. Well.”

Skanky looked at the man, probably best she just ignored him, there were only a few people in front of her in the queue. It was hard to engage with someone who spoke so slowly. After some time the man spoke again, not content

with Skanky's pointed silence, "I'm sorry to trouble you with this absurdity but you remind me of someone."

Skanky knew her part in a conversation like this and played it very well, "Really? Who?"

"My dearest Aunt Clum, she's monstrously underhand, dirty, bedraggled and brutally amusing. Not to worry she is quite beautiful in spite of it, my name is Skankhammer."

Skankhammer produced an iPhone from his pocket; he started to slide his right hand index finger across the rectangle at speed. Skanky confused and mildly offended started to worry that she might be about to see a picture of her hairy black future. Was this Skankhammer, a Dickensian spirit sent to challenge her ways before it was too late? Perhaps she should think differently of Gandalf and the Bowfire family. Perhaps she had underestimated this man, Skankhammer. Perhaps she had underestimated her husband Skankhammer.

"Well, Well, Well. What are we going to do?" Skankhammer murmured as he continued to slide his finger across the screen.

"What are WE going to do?"

She was staring thoughtfully at his swaying organ. It was weighed down by a set of master keys entangled in a black dishevelled merkin.

"Foucault's Pudendum," she decided at last.

He was now staring at the bedpost ignoring her Wimbledon eyes.

He suddenly pushed a fist into the duvet and shouted, "you and I as evil connivers in the usual setting, or innocent victims of unscrupulous brideforming?" The eyes of Shaveylon Skankhammer flicked anti-clockwise to the next bedpost, "I did not suspect winds of silent grief and aunt Clumhentai to present this malignant fashion for baldness!"

Skanky leaned over and gave it a flick to set it in motion again. In the corner of the room a shadowy goat with

flaming ruby eyes had its beard stuck in a jar of frozen sebum.

“I know to scream, my blood has gone bad. In fact Gandalf has a beautiful cock that I steer myself most comfortably around. I am whatever you want—to ensure you feel stupid. It occurs to me that the jealousy and intrigue scurrying around my aunt did not have a lot of brain stimulation.”

While this confusing information sunk in he let his wife rub a few drops of cream on his bad shoulder. Then, taking advantage of some phlegm trapped in his throat, he did his rumbling monster voice, “It's the animals. They trap you in the Internet.”

“Have you ever been injured?”

“Well yes,” he confessed gulping down some Relentless Inferno, “but I brave.”

“Oh, I'm sorry... Well...anyway, thanks to Aunt Clum, the glue has set completely. It will never come off without lazer treatment, she says. The rot will spread till you are blackened and the roots remember what it's like to taste your pain. I mean SHOCK—poor memory you have! What is your wife? You forgot already? I achieve destruction!”

“It's been a very long time.” He pulled down her face, “Four years. Tired, very boring, sort of... I am not destroyed!”

He was then inspired to pull his own face over hers. “I will help you remember my life. To think about the return of the merkin à la mode and agree with my love position.”

“Boring.”

She snatched at his groin, tore off the black wig, and ran away with the keys.

“She is very fast,” he sighed.

—THE END—

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1 BROKEN ROMANCE

“And what did you do in *The Black Merkin*?” thundered Skankhammer.

“I etched out diagrams.”

“I see.”

Of course he didn’t see. How could he? “My governess was a Magus,” she explained.

“Consequently, I do not handle the everyday very well, and my table manners are appalling, and—”

“Good heavens! You aren’t about to tell me you don’t follow the typical career path of a curator?”

This being uttered in horrified incredulity, she couldn’t help but giggle, even as she admitted she could organise no exhibition—at least, not very well.

“You poor, benighted girl. What can you do?”

“I can, as Crowley will tell you, break a chicken’s neck—or speak so that the bowels of the earth open up.”

“Then talk, by all means, Miss Ashmouth. It is, after all, the only safe thing one—or two, rather—can do upon hearing the news of the apocalypse.”

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