

BY
Darcy Boyd Mahoney

Dark clouds swamp the proud plateau as a heavy mist shrouds the steep flanking sides of the surrounding hillscape. A wooden signpost leans, crooked, into the spikey hedgerow. The carved pointer stretches toward the forbidding skyline.

Pendle

It is 1564

Horses strike out across the bleak horizon, the snarling beasts as thirsty for the quarry as the bitter faced riders. These are witchfinders and they are hungry for fire and flame.

As they course through the scrubland the group splits into two as the roar of the hooves and the snorting of the horses fills the air with dark, angry anticipations.

In a shallow crevasse on the side of the greyed knoll the fog clings to a small patch of woodland; cold, dull, and gloomy. The crashing hooves explode from the dense mist as this fierce company of riders tear along the rough road and into the dirt streets of a tiny hamlet. They quickly dismount to surround the doorway of a rustic cottage.

The other troop follow a gravel road down into the bowl of the grand landscape, racing toward a large, lone manor house.

The doors to both abodes are shattered from their hinges as soldiers, some more nervous than others, prepare to enter.

Inside the cottage, some old women are immediately cornered and despite shouted threats and angry protestations are manacled quickly as their papers and books are

swept from tables into a pile in the middle of the rustic, wiccan room. The Overseer; the Witchfinder General, gives the order to burn it as the women are dragged from the home. Some younger women, clutching the hands of scruffy children, scurry from the site.

At the Manor House, hesitant men are passed by as clearer minded soldiers force their way deeper into the building; searching the rooms as more doors are smashed from their frames.

Bursting from the shadows; shrieking defenders, hidden by makeshift shields and panels; men and women attack the insurgents, brandishing household utensils as weapons. Their efforts are easily subdued as the soldiers chase several cowed women who head down cellar steps into darkness and a long stone tunnel.

In the tunnel one of the fleeing women turns and raises her hand as her fingers dance in a studied manipulation. The soldier chasing at her heels stops in his tracks and panics under her gaze. Followed by the less superstitious, he is pushed past and he drops his oil lamp setting himself alight. The woman turns and continues into the darkness as the burning man also turns to run screaming from the passage.

At the mouth of the cellar steps other soldiers fall back aghast at the appearance of this burning man as he screams of the witchcraft unleashed upon him. Their own Captain; caped and cowed himself, passes by these now stuttering thugs, and is calm in his descending of the steps as he follows in the wake of the women and his pursuing officers.

At the far end of the tunnel the officers are pushing their way through a heavy, wooden, metal-strapped, dungeon door, and they pry it open as their enigmatic superior approaches and he steps through into the dark room. Flickering torch light bounces from the cold, damp, walls. The old women stand defiant, their backs against the doors of some protected nook.

The captain approaches the women; behind him the room fills with his men.

Woman : (as the Captain approaches she again raises her hands...) **You will never know the power of creation or...**

He slaps the crone to the ground and his men rush to take hold of her as she and all the women are aggressively subdued.

He watches calmly as they are dragged from the room. He looks about this hallowed space then approaches the small, gnarled wooden doors in the wall. He lifts a clasp releasing them and they swing open. A shallow alcove; three shelves filled with books and loose papers falls under his brooding gaze. His men come to

his side and start to grab at the objects.

Officer : (to the other men) **Burn it, burn it all...**

The Captain : (soft, mellifluous tones) **No. We will keep these.**

His officer looks quizzical.

The Captain : **For the historical record.**

The order is accepted and the books, papers and trinkets are thrown into a hessian sack. The room empties and quickly falls silent. Alone, the Captain, once again considers the torch-lit space, he breaths in, savouring some essence in the atmosphere before following the others back into the dark tunnel.

In the blinding daylight, the soldiers now flank the manacled women as they are marched across the scrubby grasslands.

The more superstitious among the soldiery are careful not to catch the eye of any of the women.

They continue as the women weary.

Somewhere in the distance a line of gibbets stands stark in the barren landscape.

Stood on the edge of the platform the women, strung now by their necks and with chains hanging from their ankles, wait silently.

From the saddle of his horse the Witchfinder General, the hooded Captain similarly comfortable behind him, addresses the women. They are watched by some unseen viewers who hide in the long grass.

Witchfinder General : **You have proven yourselves to be unreliable in your accounts and representations of your dealings with the darkest arts. You have one last chance to redeem yourselves in the eyes of the one true power and light... Don't waste it.** (He nods toward the leader of the women) **Please...**

Woman : (she looks beaten. She lifts her weary head...) **It is the truth...there is, only one true power,** (she builds in fervour) **and to our daughters I beg you, never let weak men turn you from Her attentions. It is not the strong who you should fear but the weak and angry who are compelled to control...**

The Witchfinder General has heard enough and he calmly signals to the hangman who pulls a lever and the front of the platform falls away. The women drop as the muffled cries of children are windswept from the long grasses.

The Daughters of Pendle

It is 1998

Flaming torch-light dances on her flesh. It soaks into the rough, dark fabric which, for the moment, hides his nakedness from her.

He mutters under his breath. Strange words. Old words.

Moving his hand down to the small of her back his fingertips lightly brush her skin before he plants his hand firmly and pulls her half naked body forward, toward him.

Reciting still, he stares into her nervous eyes and dips his head in a nod—a subtle question. Scared and nervous, she nods back.

She turns her face away from his.

He slips his free hand between the folds of the dark cloak that drapes across his shoulders and throws the garment open.

Her hand comes up to her face, over her eyes, trying to hide from the event.

The hooded cloak slides off his shoulders.

As the torchlight flickers, he flexes and tenses as animal instincts and passions surge through him, vital, erect.

He chants the incantation louder now as he lifts his own hand and, grabbing her chin, turns her face back towards him, forcing her gaze to meet his. He pauses, then with a gasp he pushes toward her...

Her : (frantic) **No... No....I'm not ready, I'm sorry.**

Him : **Oh for fuck sake..!** (he stops immediately)

The crowd's gasp fills the air.

Him : (calling an instruction) **Lights.**

A small click echoes forth and tired strip lights stutter into half-life. She reaches quickly and covers her nakedness as the disapprovals of the cloaked and cowed gathering resound about this perfunctory, beige, hall.

He, pale and pudgier than expected, stands frustrated. Totally naked, with his small stick-like erection bobbing before him, he angrily addresses the seated crowd.

Him : (stern) **Not good enough...** (sterner) **Not good enough.**

He turns to see her cowering at the side of the cheap modular staging. He has no sympathy.

Him : **Sacrifice...** (he stares at her) **Belief....**

Then, a voice from the crowd.

Voice : **Make her do it.**

Him : (he spins angrily toward the voice) **Have you learnt nothing...?**

He turns back to continue berating the girl.

Him : (disappointment, less anger) **Without compliance the ceremony means nothing, can achieve nothing.**

A study in contrition, she grabs the rest of her garb and quietly slinks from the stage.

He watches her departure before spinning back to address the congregation, his failing erection swinging half limp in the gloom.

Him : (calming himself) **You know the master shall be with us in a few days' time. And, although he is aware we are a young, re-formed coven, I know he hopes we shall show the strengths of our forebears.** (He struts proudly across the stage) **The belief of our forebears. The freedom of sacrifice...** (he puts his hands together and brings his index fingers up to rest on his chin) **You know, it is the greatest sacrifices which will reap the greatest rewards.** (he nods into the crowd) **Ultimate sacrifice will reap the ultimate reward, will it not? The master has such a gift to bestow upon any of you willing to demonstrate this understanding. We'll be talking more about that later. Think about it.**

He claps his hands together. Reinvigorated, again he struts across the stage.

Him : **Now then, as I am sure you are aware, I am now, 'Rite bound'. Bearing what I have said in mind, I would appreciate a volunteer to see out this final important stage of the ceremony... Anyone?... You, of course, won't be bound to the contract...This is about releasing me from it. Now, anybody?**

He looks, hopefully, out into the crowd of hoods and masks. A slim wrist rises from the sea of dark weft.

His hopeful expression drops away and with a tired gasp he looks to the floor.

Him : (resigned) **Ah, Michael.** (another sigh) **Lights.!**

Monmouth, Wales. Saturday 24th Oct

The Queens Head

A group of friends are halfway through a boozy night out and are heading to the next pub. Like any bunch of lads, they are laughing, joking, and taking the piss out of each other.

Ariff is at the front. Very good looking, he exudes a relaxed, easy-going charm and friendly sense of humour; even strangers met in passing get a smile and empathetic nod.

This rowdy troop is walking towards another lively pub. An abundance of fancy-dressed revellers pours past in both directions and the guys weave between the drunken fairies, zombies and witches as they make their own way to the door of 'The Queens Head'.

Ariff, at the front of the wrangle, peers through the small leaded windows of the ancient pub and spies a bevy of sexy, fancy-dressed fairies at the bar. He turns back to the guys and, with a broad smile, signals his recommendation that this is indeed, the greatest pub in all the world.

At the back of this disparate procession Brekk is trying to illicit some intelligent conversation from the polite Graham.

Graham : (distracted, but making effort) **Yeah well, I guess it is all relative.**

Brekk : (seeing the choice of venue) **Oh for fuck. We won't be able to hear**

ourselves think.

Graham doesn't look as upset.

Brekki looks through the small window as he approaches the door and sees the sexy revellers.

Brekki : (unimpressed) **Why's he always got to choose the noisiest pub?**

Graham tries not to look too happy as he pulls a resigned, conciliatory expression back toward Brekki. Then as he turns toward the held open pub door his face fills with joy and he marches toward the party that Ariff has instantly ignited at the bar.

Brekki, nonplussed, follows him in but heads toward a less busy section of the long wooden counter, struggles grumpily and distastefully between some drinkers and then edges onto a sticky bar stool.

He tries to capture one of the bar girls' attention.

The evening progresses, the guys flirting and laughing as girls come and go. Brekki, still defiant, sits away. He tries to find intelligent conversation from the drinkers around him but is rebuffed at every attempt.

Girl1 : **It's not Halloween though is it? It's next week.**

Girl2 : **What, really?**

Overhearing the girls discussing the date and events of the evening he leans across to offer his thoughts.

Brekki : **The actual date is of little concern to the landlord.**

One of the girls cocks her head in interest.

Brekk : (bolstered, turning theatrical) **No, the brewer's calendar dictates the celebrations, and a false 'Sowwin' angers false gods** (he lifts his glass) **and brings forth false spirits.**

He holds his glass before him like a sacred chalice, his eyes sparkling with performance.

Girl : (dull) **Oh. Is that why Big Brother isn't on?**

Brekk : **What ? Um, I don't...**

Deflated and disappointed he turns away as the girls descend into a cackling conversation about some 'hot', 'celebrity', asshole.

Brekk looks into the mirror behind the spirit bottles opposite him and considers his face, a small look of disappointment crossing his features when a loud laugh breaks his concentration.

His friends. He glowers across and notices that the handsome Ariff has his arm around the tight waist of a strikingly beautiful, and smiling, fancy-dress fairy. Brekk shakes his head dismissively as he turns back to his half pint of bitter and lifts it to his lips. A firm hand is suddenly on his shoulder and he coughs the mouthful back into his glass.

Mac : **What the fuck are you doing over here? I thought you said you were up for it tonight.**

Brekk : (wiping the drips from his mouth and chin) **Well, no one said anything about this...** (he waves blindly about him) **fucking nonsense. 'A quiet drink' you said. I thought we'd be able to talk.**

Mac : **Well...** (he considers the options) **...we just got lucky, I guess. Anyway, I thought you liked all of this mystical stuff.**

Brekk : (impugned) **No, not this fancy-dress bollocks.** (he sees and seizes his

chance) **But, it is fascinating to see how society still plays with notions of the metaphysical, especially when it comes to self-empowerment.**

His own enthusiasm is stymied as he watches Mac's interest dissolve.

Mac : (looking across as more of the fairies' friends have joined the group) **Come on, Ariff's on good form.**

Brekk : (dejected) **Oh, really? Has he managed to string a sentence together?**

Mac : (gives Brekk a small look of disappointment) **Now, now!**

Brekk : (resigned) **Oh, I'll be over in a minute, I'll just get..**

Mac : (already heading back toward the gang) **Great, great...**

Brekk, disheartened, discards the glass along the bar. He catches the eye of one of the bar girls.

Brekk : (he ventures a small smile) **A rum, please.**

Without any visible hint of warmth or pleasure, she takes a glass tumbler from the shelf.

Brekk : (his smile falls away and he looks across at the braying mob that makes up his group of friends) **Better make it a large one.**

Elsewhere

Old, wizened hands move over a boiling broth and arcane words fill the flame-dappled air. Young, taut bodies drip with oily preparations and nervous sweat. A haze of voices and panorama of piercing eyes focus intently as a chorus builds to crescendo and the imbued words infect the libidinous instincts of those on display.

The Nags Head

Monmouth

Late in the evening.

Most revellers have headed away to seedier venues, but the gang has settled in another ancient, smoke-stained pub. No long counter in this one but a partitioned area that is divided around a horseshoe-shaped bar. The largest of these areas is home to a large, spitting fire nestled in a large, charred, stone fire place. Around the corner from this, a small nook is home to a loud and vociferous conversation.

At the bar, Graham, a packet of crisps clenched between his teeth, manhandles two handfuls of beer and short glasses off the tacky surface. He nods and grunts his gratitude to the barman as he turns toward the nook and the loud voices which spring from within. He steps toward, then rounds the corner heading for the small table where the gang sit. And another pretty girl, a 'Witch' this time, is draped happily over Ariff's shoulder; they huddle noisily.

As he approaches the table the front door to the pub is pushed open. Graham glances back to see Ariff's previous, paramour enter the pub. At the table the debate quietens as Graham shares out the drinks, eventually taking the crisps from his mouth to drop them in the middle of the table. Fast hands split the packet wide open and others begin to grab at this welcome snack.

Graham : (casually to Ariff) **Fairy's just come in.**

Ariff nods his acknowledgment to Graham and looks out toward the bar.

Brekk cannot disguise the glimmer of glee flashing across his features and turns to Tris at his side.

Brek : (quietly) **He'll be in trouble now. If he had any brains this sort of thing wouldn't happen.**

He leans back and cranes his neck to look out into the bar area to see if this dejected sprite is heading their way. Graham retakes his seat, squeezing in amongst the others.

Jon : (Angry. Anger seems to be hard wired into his features, and with a mouthful of crisps, he restarts the conversation) **If Tris is allowed to believe in fucking Valhalla, then I'm allowed to believe in Heaven.**

Graham : (cynical) **But which Heaven?**

Jon : (fixing Graham with a strong look) **Proper Heaven.**

Graham : (ignoring Jon's intimidations) **Anyway, Tris doesn't really believe in Valhalla.**

Tris : (offended but expressed with a comical glance) **I do. I can believe in it If I want.**

Graham : **No you can't.**

Tris : **Yes I can.**

The others join in with a barrage of 'Yes he cans' and 'He can if he wants'.

Graham : (determined) **No he can't. Look, you can't *choose* to believe in something, you either believe it or you don't. You know, it's like, you don't believe television exists do you?**

Tris : **I believe telly exists!**

Graham : **Semantically, possibly, but in actuality you don't 'need' to believe it exists. You 'know' it does.**

Ariff : **So you don't need to believe it.** (Brekki shoots Ariff a quizzical glance) **If you know it.**

Graham gives a little nod.

Brekki : (still mildly concerned the fairy has not found Ariff with his arm around another girl, he decides to butt in, directing his observation toward Graham) **Of course, real belief can only exist in the *absence of absolute knowledge*.**

Graham : **Exactly, faith. But surely, the point of belief is that you do believe in the thing you have belief in. And you can't choose that.**

Ariff : **So anyone who says they believe in something, is really saying they don't 'actually' believe in it.**

Everyone looks confused.

Tris : **Well, I'm going to Valhalla and that's true because I believe it.** (Graham rolls his eyes) **Or, what's that one with all the virgins?**

Mac : **You wouldn't know what to do with a virgin.**

Ariff : **Ha, no, and they wouldn't know what to do with you..**

Jon : (to Tris) **Anyway Valhalla's for warriors isn't it?**

Tris : **Oh, is it?**

Mac : **You'll be alright; they'd need jesters too, I reckon...**

Jon : **Or someone to suck off the warriors.** (some wince in deference to the girl on Ariff's arm but she pays no attention)

Tris : **Wouldn't warrior types like buxom wenches doing that? Unless that's what you're into Jon, and there's nothing wrong with that.**

Jon : (not amused) **Fuck off...**

Graham : (looks to Brekk as the others continue) **What'd you get them started for?**

Brekk : (frustrated) **Well, I was trying to illustrate that this** (he gestures to the fancy-dress and Halloween paraphernalia adorning the pub walls) **is a representation of what is probably an early form of the religions that some think are still relevant.**

Graham shakes his head, not seeing the point of engaging this particular group's interest in such matters.

Jon : (angrily butting in to their side discussion) **Alright then, which one do you think is true?**

Brekk : **It's not really a case of which 'one', but where 'all' those ideas came from.**

Jon : (warning) **You should be careful,** (he glances upwards) **you don't know who's listening.**

Graham : (raising his eyebrow in exasperation) **Exactly. And there are plenty to choose from.**

Brekki : **Yes**, (he stutters to get his point out before he loses their interest) **and, and many recycled, from earlier gods or religious figures. For instance, some of the earliest deities share the same historical details. Jesus, for instance, shares many of his experiences with the earlier Mithra and, even earlier than him, the Egyptian God Horus.** (he sees the others have started to pay attention) **Yes, all born to virgins, all dying for three days and being resurrected. All at the same time of year. It is widely, though quietly, accepted that these gods or religious figures are really just adaptations, personalized versions of a much earlier form of praise and exaltation. A more natural and ages-learned practice.**

Graham nods in agreement as the others look on in anticipation.

Brekki starts to relish the others in his thrall and pauses dramatically before...

Ariff : **Oh, um, Paganism ?**

Graham nods and the others coo at the revelation as John shrugs his indifference and Brekki shoots Ariff a fierce glance.

Mac : **Ooh, you clever fucker. You get a gold star for that.**

The 'witch' at Ariff's shoulder whispers something in his ear and everyone considers he's not just getting a gold star! Brekki's lip curls in disdain.

Tris : **Not just a pretty face, eh Ariff?**

Ariff : **Yeah I saw a program about it.**

Brekki : **I didn't think you'd read a book.**

Graham : (to Ariff) **Oh, when was that?**

Ariff : **Well, an advert for a programme, I dunno.**

Brekki : (trying to regain his control) **Whatever, Paganism is a broad term. But it isn't a single, encompassing philosophy or a 'religion', more a collection of ancient forms of trying to make sense of and worshiping nature and the natural workings of the world.**

Graham : (nodding in agreement) **Bizarrely, the genesis of both science and religion!**

The others are starting to lose interest again.

Graham : **But more pertinently, it's the reason the beer's half price and there are girls walking around with their tits hanging out.** (he nods at the buxom girl nestling against Ariff) **No offence.**

She smiles as the guys raise their glasses and release a small cheer in thanks to whatever has given cause to these welcome events.

Jon : (turns back to Brekki, angry and accusing) **So what makes your Pagan god more important than anybody else's?**

Brekki : **No, there is no Pagan god, well...that sort of came later. I mean they wouldn't even have called themselves Pagans. They weren't organised. Just inquisitive.**

Graham : **Inquisitive, but ignorant and creative.**

Brekki : (to Jon) **Pagans, well, you know, these 'Original Pagans', ended up worshiping the world and the seasons...**

Ariff : **Nature.**

Brekki : (shoots another stern look) **Yes, obviously. Nature. But their early,**

limited understandings and naiveties led them to give personalities and supernatural characteristics to the elements. And it's 'ironically' the evolution of those ideas which lead on, then, to the metaphysical and 'all-powerful' deities and, hence, religions, that are worshiped even still today.

Jon looks angrily confused.

Graham : **Pagans, it would seem, were the first to 'believe'** (he does apostrophe fingers) **in 'magic',** (repeats the gesture) **which is basically what religious people went on to call their miracles. Trying to make sense or find reason for the stuff they don't understand, basically. What we now—when we have developed a thesis—call Science, really. When we understand it.**

Jon gruffly nods at this clarification. Then...

Jon : (starting sarcastically) **Well, if it is the first or 'true' religion then, why did it die out?**

Graham : (taking issue at Jon's misunderstanding) **That's not quite what he's saying...**

Brekk : **And it hasn't...**

Graham : (a confirming nod) **No, that's true; there are still plenty of people doing it. Practicing.**

Tris : **What? You're saying there are still witches about?**

Graham : **Technically, that would be correct.**

Mac : **Hey, don't they all dance about naked and stuff?**

Tris : **And there're all orgies and stuff like that.** (he smiles at Mac) **They love sex, the witches!**

Mac : (smiling and in collusion with Tris) **Oh yes. They love the sex.**

Brekf frowns his disappointment at this frivolous digression.

Ariff : (his lady friend whispering in his ear again) **Apparently you don't have to be a real witch for that to be the case. I think we're going to leave you to it.**

Brekf is slightly disturbed as he sees the 'fairy' walk past. She half glances into the nook but is distracted and moves on without a proper look. Ariff has his back to the entrance and she heads away, seemingly heading for the door.

Brekf : **Now** (then unusually loudly) **Ariff, Ariff, Ariff, um, hang on...** (everyone looks at him and he searches for something) **Um, uh, why don't we all go and find some real ones then?** (he still struggles) **Next weekend.** (thinking on his feet) **It's the proper Samhain, um, Halloween. If ever there was a time to find some practicing witches...**

They start to ponder this unenthusiastically.

Brekf : (again louder than is natural) **Ariff? What do you think?** (again too loudly, he sings it slightly) **Ariff? Or are you scared of the unknown? Eh, Ariff?**

Ariff looks slightly surprised by Brekf's directed tone but after a flash of consideration nods and smiles back to Brekf. Brekf beams back as someone turns into the nook.

Ariff : **No, never have been.** (He and his witch friend share a naughty glance). **Great, you lot sort out the details. I'll catch up with you in the week.**

His arm around his lady friend, he turns and nearly bumps into the 'fairy' who has returned to the entrance of the nook and found the elusive Ariff.

Brekki nudges Tris gently in the ribs as his eyes widen in anticipation.

Ariff, smiles as the fairy sidles up beside him and slips her arm around his waist alongside the other pretty girl's arm. She nestles her face into Ariff's neck while whispered words pass between them and then...the three of them straighten and head for the door. They half turn to nod their goodbyes and the girls give little waves. The guys around the table, slack-jawed, give little waves back. Brekk just looks dumbfounded.

Brekki : Fucking hell, they're as daft as he is.

They watch as Ariff and his two friends reach for the front door of the pub, pausing briefly as a couple of fresh faces enter. The entering patrons' faces light up as some recognize Ariff, and they spontaneously feel the need to shake his hand and give him a gruff hug. Some light banter passes before, Ariff and his pretty company leave, smiling.

The guys left at the table turn back to each other, their faces a mixture of respect, wonder, envy and, in Brekk's case, contempt.

Mac : (to Brekk) Really, do you think there'd be witches, for real?

Brekki : (bringing his confused ire under control) Um, yes. In the right place at the right time, we could certainly be privy to some form of authentic witchcraft.

Graham : (clarifying the point) The fact that they're practicing the rituals doesn't make them 'real' witches. At least, not in the sense of real, 'magic' ones.

Brekki : Well, if we go somewhere with a proper lineage, who knows what we might find? What might be...

Graham looks disappointed at Brekk's fanciful optimism and Brekk immediately regrets his words.

Tris : (turning gleeful) **That's beside the point isn't it? It's whether they need some willing participants to join them in their naked ceremonies.**

Jon : **Or just want fucking.**

Mac : (slightly surprised by Jon's frankness) **Quite.**

Brek : **Yes, but to find someone with an understanding, a living link back to those early ideas. Who knows...** (he sees the others looking at him strangely before losing interest, he tempers his own.) **I suppose the only question, is where?**

Behind him on the wall, one of the homemade posters, advertising the evening's early Halloween event, is adorned with childish doodles. Among the scribbled zombies, witches, warlocks, bonfires and twisted churches which fill up the space on the paper, and amid the scruffy writing, a small doodle of a direction post, silhouetted against a full white moon, points away into the scrawled hills; along its length, scratched deep into the paper, the name Pendle rests in heavy graphite.

Pendle

The early sun shines brightly. Sunbeams, strong and sharp, cut through the fingers of the gnarled, wooden direction post, sculpting amorphous shadows within the soft lifting dew.

Carved into the wooden pointer, Pendle, it tells us, is 3.5 miles away. 3.5 miles along steaming, glistening roads, lined with golden, sunlight-tinged hedges and haloed trees.

The landscape breathes the rising mist in cold crisp gusts, which turn the fallen leaves and push and pull the long grasses, overgrown in the rusting fields.

In the distance, smoke rises from crooked chimneys as a rural community slowly comes to life. On the outskirts of the small village, toward some darkly wooded hills, a small but stately function hall bustles with chatter from within.

Once more a hooded figure struts, nervously now, across the stage. To his side, at the edge of the platform, two similarly cowed figures sit on old, plastic, chairs. The striding man stops, pulls back his hood and turns to address the gathering. It is the same man who addressed this same crowd not a week before.

Gilbert : (he looks pensive) **Our preparations continue well. The Master will be here in a few days and I'm sure we are all aware what an honour it will be to have him with us at this, 'The' most special, time.** (he looks across to the two seated figures) **You know, when the master came to the few of us a couple of years ago, he explained what a special and important place this was to him and how important and pleased he was that we were continuing the old craft. We had no idea then how progressive this movement could be. How powerful. I know the master has great plans for us all.** (another glance toward the 'hoods' is met with a slow encouraging nod) **It is with this in mind that I would ask you again to consider your level of commitment to the craft, and to the Master. It would be a great honour for us if we could help bring forward the Master's plans. It has been made clear to me that the rewards would be...unending.**

He strides across the stage once more, then lifts a hand and offers it toward the seated figures.

Gilbert : **These two...** (he's not sure of his next word but tries...) **Gentlemen?** (one of the figures nods noncommittally while the other merely shrugs) **have been sent by the master to help with our final preparations. We will do well to offer them our most fervent support.**

They stand but then do nothing except stare out at the crowd seated below.

Gilbert : (awkwardly) **Right.**

...

Across the brooding, verdant, undulant landscape and nestled within a small scattering of houses, is a small, crooked cottage, where an old lady shuffles through a narrow passageway, passing by a small reception counter and making her way toward the front door. She pulls the heavy door open and looks out on the glorious morning. Throwing a handful of seeds into the air she quietly mutters a few words.

She looks down the higgledy garden path where, at the forever open wooden gate, long past working and grown through with long grasses, a sign hangs on a wonky post. 'The Little Sister B and B'. The painted letters are worn and sun-bleached; underneath, hanging from a small wooden peg, another smaller, less tatty-looking sign suggests that there are, in fact, 'Vacancies'.

The old lady grunts at the sign, then turns back under the doorway.

Lilleth : (shouting as she shuffles back through the corridor) **Shem!** (no answer)
Shem!

She moves down the ages-worn flagstones to a closed door on her right. She turns and pushes it open. A shawled figure sits at an old wooden table, a thin finger follows lines of letters and strange writings that fill the pages of an ancient-looking book which lies open in the centre of the table.

Lilleth : (shouting, short tempered) **Shem!**

The figure at the table turns slowly, wide eyed...

Lilleth : (immediately calmed) **Oh, it's you.**

...a young girl, twentyish, glasses propped at the end of her nose and eminently sensible by demeanour.

Cerrick : **Hi Lilly.**

Lilleth : **I could do with some help you know ? It appears we may be expecting guests!**

Cerrick : (without looking, she closes the book and drags it from the table) **Of course.**

As she gets to her feet, she slips the book into one of the wide pockets of her old, grey cardigan. She walks to the doorway and turns to edge past Lilleth who is slow to move out of her way.

Lilleth : (warmth and a smile in her voice) **When you are here, Cerrick, you should try to enjoy yourself. There's really no need to concern yourself with this business.**

Cerrick : (stops at the doorway next to Lilleth) **Shem is concerned.**

Lilleth : **Shem worries too much. Always has done.**

Cerrick : (a small smile) **I'll start upstairs.**

Cerrick ducks, needlessly, under the low door frame and heads away down the corridor. She glances back before heading up a twisting stair at the end of the hall.

Lilleth : (watching fondly) **Okay, my darling, okay.**

Lilleth starts slowly down the corridor until she reaches the small counter. She peers over the worktop to the wall beyond and a calendar that hangs, lopsided. As she scrutinizes the date and the notes, which are scrawled into the boxes marking the coming weekend, her eyes narrow in consternation.

The Van

Friday 29th

It's pissing down and its dark. The sun has long since tucked itself behind a duvet of thick, grey cloud.

Standing in the rain is Brekk. An open umbrella wedged awkwardly under his arm, he holds a small tatty book at reading distance as he curls his other hand in strange movements and reads odd words aloud. This reading culminates in a flurry of dancing fingers as the passage comes to fruition and he glances to the ground where he has ended the incantation, pointing at a stick that lies near the curb. He stares at it with some anticipation. Nothing. He waits. He sighs and awkwardly turns a page.

Brekk : (reading from the book) **Essdamgrah! Essdamgrah!...** (he changes his tone and pronunciation and repeats, softening to a whisper)
esdumgrer...essdoomgrah... (he is losing interest)

Brekk sighs and checks his watch. The small dials tell him not only is it Friday but that it is eighteen minutes past three o'clock.

He waits a little longer before pulling out his mobile phone to call one of the guys. It's answered quickly.

Brekk : **Where are you, you bastards?**

Mac : (from the phone) **Hey, alright Brekk. Haven't you talked to Ariff? I talked to Ariff; he should be there by now.**

Brekk : **What? Is he driving? I thought you were going to drive us. I'm still surprised he can coordinate any of his limbs. Well, other than his cock.**

The weak beams of light that struggle from the front of Ariff's van peek through the rain as he pulls around the corner into Brekk's view.

Brekk : **Oh, here he comes. Alright, I'll see you in a bit.**

Mac : **Yeah, see you later.**

Out of the grey, heavy rain, an old VW panel van chugs up as Brekk stuffs his phone and the book into the pocket of his heavy coat. Behind Ariff at the wheel, the front seats are partitioned from the back by a roller blind. The van stops and Brekk, at the window, sees the empty seats next to Ariff. He reaches for the back, side door. Ariff leans across and taps on the window, catches Brekk's eye and points to the empty seat to his side. Brekk sighs and opens the passenger door.

Ariff : **I didn't think you'd come.**

Brekk : (arrogant) **Well, it was my idea.**

Ariff : **Yeah, but I didn't think you'd come on your own without Mac.**

Brekk : (climbing into the van) **I don't need Mac to hold my hand, thank you...**

Ariff puts the van into gear and pulls off. The van stutters and he has to over-rev the engine to get it to play ball.

Brekk : (realizing what Ariff has just said) **What, he's not coming? I just spoke to him; he didn't say anything.**

Ariff : **Yeah, he called last night.**

Brekk : **Last night!**

Ariff : **Yep, he said him and Jon were off to his sister's Uni, some big party or summat. Sounded good; almost tempted myself.**

Brekk : **Oh, you were invited were you?**

Ariff : (a little confused) **No.**

Brekki : **Jon's not coming either?**

Ariff looks across at Brekk, then back to the road.

Brekki leans around and, with his finger, lifts the separating screen to peer under and into the back of the van.

Ariff glances across at him and smiles to himself.

Brekki : **What about the others?**

Ariff : **Don't worry, we're g..**

Brekki : (interrupting) **I'm not worried.**

Ariff : **... going to get them now.**

Brekki : (seeing a chance to clarify his position) **No, I don't need other people's affirmations. I don't need that constant reassurance of my worth.**

Ariff : (noting Brekk's unusual proclamation, he smiles) **Oh. Very good.**

The van swings around a greasy corner and trundles to the side of the road where it pulls up in a dark street outside a row of uninspired, terraced housing. The street lights above them blink, uninterested in anything other than inducing epilepsy.

They sit and wait.

Ariff looks across to Brekk who is insistently staring out of the window.

Waiting.

Ariff picks his phone off the dash to look at the time then puts it back down.

Ariff : **So, you know what we were talking about the other night, about belief and stuff.**

Brek : (lets out a small groan) **Um, well there's a lot of issues, it's not really worth... Let's wait until the others get here.**

Ariff : (earnest) **I *am* interested, Brekk.**

Brek : (turns slowly toward Ariff, then attempts his own earnestness) **No, that's good, and I'm interested in what you've got to say. It's just, you know, we don't want to exclude the others.**

He turns back to look out of the window and into the slashing rain.

On the dashboard Ariff's phone breaks the fresh silence as it starts to vibrate before the ring tone strikes up. A comedy ring tone, that sounds like a heralding fanfare which grinds to a faltering, computer glitch of a finale. Ariff laughs to himself; it gets him every time. Brekk visibly shudders as Ariff reaches for the phone.

Ariff : (into the phone) **Yeah, yeah...wicked, alright. Okay, yeah...yeah. Ha-ha, okay, cool buddy, wicked.**

He shuts the phone, slides it onto the dashboard and turns to Brekk.

Brek : (grim faced) **They're not coming either are they?**

Ariff raises a little shrug of a smile before he revs the engine and the van pulls away from the curb. Brekk's expression sours.

Brek : **Look, I don't mind if you don't think it's worth going.**

Ariff : **Eh? No no, that's alright.** (then really earnest) **Really, I'm as keen as you. Anyway, you were on about some party weren't you? All those witches dancing naked around their camp fires, looking for poor helpless lads to practice their spells on. I'm um, (smiling broadly) quite interested myself.**

Brek : (condescending) **Oh no, it's not a party, it's not really like that at all, it's more of a cerebral thing. Look, it probably could have been fun if the others had come but I don't think you're going to enjoy the sort of thing I want to do. It's more of an intellectual exercise.**

Ariff : (enthusiastically) **Hey, really, that's fine, I like talking to people. I can do some, er, interviews, research, that sort of thing. I've always thought I could do with a more, er, intel,,igental way to spend my time.**

As Ariff talks, Brekk watches him as he listens, his expression growing more twisted as the horror of this inevitable union seems destined to be consummated.

Ariff : (seemingly oblivious to Brekk's dismay) **To be honest, I've always been interested in a lot of the things you talk about. I don't seem to get the chance to talk to you much. We can use this time to discuss stuff.**

Brek : **Discuss stuff, excellent.**

The van turns through the puddled rural lanes. They sit in silence, other than the sound of the straining engine, as Brekk quietly dreads Ariff's next comments.

Brek : (reaches for the radio) **Do you mind?**

Ariff : **No, no, go ahead.**

He turns the dial and a crackly noise fills the air. A little tuning and a local newscaster is discussing an upcoming election. Brekk settles back in his seat.

Ariff : (enthusiastically) **See, politics!** (Brek's eyes widen) **I love politics.**

Brek : (incredulous) **Really?**

Ariff : **Yeah, you know, all the, um, machinations and stuff.**

Brek : **Machinations?**

Ariff : **Yeah, you know. This person disagreeing but that person not and then someone votes differently to how they should or something. Fascinating!**

Brek : **Isn't it.**

Ariff : **But what I haven't worked out is, you know, what is the difference between, like, Conservatives and um, Labour. You know, that sort of thing.**

Brek : (pained) **Sheesh, did you go to school?**

Ariff : (a little offended) **Well yeah, but they didn't really go into that.**

Brek : **Um, look, I'm tired, I think I'm going to have a bit of a nap.**

Ariff smiles and nods his understanding as Brek huddles down against the door at his side. Brek's eyes stay wide and alert as he wonders exactly how bad an idea this is.

The van cuts its way through the foul squall, disappearing into the gloom.

To Pendle

In the blowing gale, Brekk stands against a hedge. He looks over his shoulder to see Ariff, who is pissing against the back wheel of the van. Even here, pissing amid the squall, he can't help but notice how effortlessly good-looking Ariff is, and a disdainful curl of his lip tightens his cheek. He turns back to his own, seemingly frustrated ablutions.

They have pulled over on a leafy rural lane. An archway of trees spanning the road, reaches away into the dark.

Amidst the gusting wind Brekk looks down to his own, uncooperative cock.

Brekk : **Come on, come on.**

The wind swirls, Brekk shrugs his jacket tighter when something, a noise in the air catches his attention, then, bizarrely, it seems to call his name. He turns toward Ariff.

Brekk : **What?**

But Ariff is paying him no concern. His eyes narrow in confusion; then, he hears his name called again. Whispered.

His attention directed, he lifts his ear. Alert now, he looks into the darkness beyond the trees. Again, there is a voice.

Voice : (still a whisper) **Brekk..... Brekk.....**

He peers deeper into the darkness, through the thicket...

Voice : (getting louder) **Brekk...**

He looks back over his shoulder and sees that Ariff does not seem to have heard the voice.

Voice : (losing patience) **Brekk!**

He peers, more determined, amongst the foliage and suddenly, there amid the scatter of greens and shadows, a pair of eyes seem to glow as they watch him. Brekk's breath catches in his chest.

A slender wrist and hand emerging from the hedge unfurls long, slim fingers and the delicate limb reaches out and takes Brekk's own eager hand. Brekk glances over his shoulder as he ducks into the wall of leaf and twig.

He cannot see who takes him through the flora but they glide, effortless, through the sticks and branches until...a clearing.

In wonder, Brekk looks upon the delicate, beautiful, naked woman who has led him and immediately starts to notice that behind her, in the darkness, highlighted by the moonlight, are more naked figures, lithe and oozing, pressing forward, toward him, their obvious desires reaching out to him.

Witch : **You have come to look for us?**

Brekk, dumbstruck, nods.

Another : **You wish to understand our ways?**

The 'witches' behind are moving together, wrapping themselves around one another.

Brekk : (eyes alive with wonder and desire) **Yes, yes. Please!**

Behind him in the distance another voice. It's Ariff.

Ariff : **Brekk!**

Witch : (she moves toward Brekk and places a hand on his belly, pushing her fingertips down past his belt and into his shorts) **And your friend, does he wish to know our ways?**

Brekk : (behind them Ariff calls again) **No, no he's not interested.**

Ariff : (closer now, pushing through the brush) **Brekk?**

Witch : (her hand pushes down, searching out his quickly stirring prick) **Are you sure? He has come with you to find us...**

The witches behind are now fully and lasciviously entwined, almost melting into each other.

Brekk : (frantic, excited and angry at the approaching Ariff) **No, he's really not the right sort of person.....**

Ariff : (fighting through the bushes) **Brekk, come on!**

She grabs Brekk's cock.

Brekk : (Excited, angry, wide-eyed as Ariff bursts through the foliage and enters the clearing) **Ariff, fuck off!**

He sits upright, wide-eyed, jerked awake by his own vehemence. Ariff, still behind the wheel, looks at him with a little concern.

Ariff : **I thought we'd stop for a cuppa.**

Brekk blinks himself awake and aware.

Ariff : **Are you okay?**

Brek : **Oh, fuck...** (reality crashes home) **Um, yeah, I'm fine,** (then sheepishly, while subtly adjusting his crotch) **sorry.**

Ariff has pulled into the car park of a busy service station, steering the van amidst a procession of graffiti-daubed vehicles and pedestrians whose garb would suggest their affiliation to some quasi-religious sect or group.

Brek : (quietly disparaging) **Oh jees!**

They are walking through the happy group, Brekk sneering openly as Ariff smiles and nods at the overly polite, bustling people.

Ariff : **Not impressed?**

Brek : **You can't just make stuff up.**

In the cafe they sit, drinks in hand, squeezing onto a long bench among the bustling and nattering group.

Ariff : **But I thought that was your point,** (he struggles a little putting a full thought together) **that all of the modern religions were made up, though, um, evolved from something older.**

Brek : **Yes, but not on a whim. The passage of time might give gravitas to some that they don't deserve. These people no longer have ignorance as an excuse.**

Ariff : **But what if they're right? Surely their belief in whatever is as valid as anyone else's.**

Brekki : (sarcastically) **As valid, yes. Look, you said it yourself.**

Ariff : **I did?**

Brekki : **Yeah, 'Someone who says they believe in something is really saying they don't believe in it'. This, (he gestures to the group around them) this is just wishful thinking. They may indeed want, whatever it is they have chosen to believe in, to be true, but no matter how much they tell themselves, on a deeper level there is no real belief...a shallow delusion maybe.**

Ariff is nodding some hellos to some of the smiling and circling congregation. Brekki can see that Ariff's warmth has made them ripe for approach. He raises his eyes in despair and stands.

Brekki : **Come on. How far away are we?**

Ariff : **Couple of hours still, I think.**

Brekki : **Let's get going. Before they try and make friends with us.**

Ariff : **Oh.** (he rises and follows Brekki as he nods commiseratory looks to the disappointed few who were optimistically approaching)

Outside, in the dark, rainswept carpark, the pair approach the van.

Brekki : (stopping at the van he finds a conclusion) **Real belief must be something more fundamental, a quiet understanding of the true nature of things.**

From behind Brekki, a voice.

Shadowy hooded figure : (soft, mellifluous tones) **It is discovering the true nature...**

Brekki jumps and lets out a little screamy yell.

Behind him the hooded figure stands, two attendees at his shoulders.

Hooded figure (Devvin) : (reaching out to the vexed Brekki) **Sorry my friend, I'm sorry. Are you alright?**

Brekki : (catching his breath while recoiling from the offered aid) **Fucking hell!**

Devvin : **I'm sorry, I, we, were just passing and I heard your comment. About 'Belief. The true nature of things', and...**

Brekki : (interrupting, angry) **Well, don't creep up on people.**

Devvin : **I am very sorry my friend.** (Brekki is reaching for the van door) **Please allow me to get you something, from inside; I am here to talk to some other new friends about these very ideas.** (he gestures toward the cafe)

Ariff optimistically looks to Brekki, wondering if they will be accepting the offer.

Brekki : (exasperation) **No! Shit, we've just come from in there.**

And he cracks open the door and pulls himself up into the van. Ariff looks to the hooded figure and lifts his brow in a friendly apology, before climbing into his own seat.

Devvin : **No matter, and safe journey.** (He watches as Ariff starts the van and they prepare to leave) **Perhaps we will meet again and can discuss 'Belief and the true nature of things'.**

Inside the van Brekk pulls an obviously fake smile. His teeth glint under the lights.

Brekk : (under his breath while maintaining his rictus grin) **Fucking hope not, weirdo.**

Through the window Brekk watches the hooded figure as they pull away, chugging into the dark sodden night.

The hooded figure watches as the van dissolves into the rainy distance and out of the gloom the two hooded men step up behind him.

Hoodie2 : (a hiss hangs about his words) **We should go in. We don't have much time here.**

Devvin : **Yes, yes.** (From under his dark hood his eyes narrow as he watches the van disappear from sight)

He turns and starts toward the cafe building, the two hooded figures at his shoulders.

Devvin : **And which group is this?**

...

Back in the van.

Ariff : **He seemed nice...**

Brekk's face spasms in exasperation.

Brekki : **You think everybody's 'nice'.**

Ariff shrugs to himself while a smile of agreement wrinkles his features.

Brekki : **He looks to me like some narcissistic twat who's found himself in a position to exploit some vacuous, spiritually hungry teenagers. It'll all come down to sex and death.**

Ariff : **Eh?**

Brekki : **He'll be getting them to jump into bed with some made-up nonsense about preserving the soul past this realm and into the next. Being special, the chosen people, all that bollocks. All the time tweaking some insidious power structure to keep everyone in place.**

Ariff : **Isn't there a possibility he might be right?**

Brekki : **Bollocks, they're all the same. It's part of this new wave of bollocks and spiritual groups which are fucking everywhere at the moment. Its basic manipulation. You use everybody's natural fear of death and the unknown to manipulate and abuse them. Any, (he fixes Ariff with a stare) half-charming arsehole can take advantage, once they see how easy it is.**

Ariff : (concentrating on the road) **Not everyone's afraid of death.** (Brekki lifts a disbelieving eyebrow) **I'm not.**

Brekki : **Well, I think it's easier to say that than prove it.**

Ariff : **No, I might be concerned about the way I die, but not being dead.**

Brekki : **Oh, and why not?**

Ariff : **Well, we've all been dead before haven't we?**

Brekki : **Hmmn, reincarnation?**

Ariff : **No. Not alive before, dead before. You know, whatever it is that makes us 'us', well... when we die, it... (he struggles to find the words) um... disperses and returns to whatever it was before it came together, you know, before we were conceived. So, if that's 'dead' then it's just returning to a state we've already, um, been in.**

Brekki, despite himself, is a little impressed and narrows his eyes as he considers his response.

Brekki : **It's not an original idea, I suppose. Even that is a Pagan concept, the spirit *returning* to the earth.**

They drive on in silence for a while.

Ariff : **I hadn't realized you were so interested in all this... um..., religious and... Pagan stuff. You haven't talked about it much, before.**

Brekki : **Well, the others, they... (he starts again) No-one talks about it or takes it seriously... (he looks across to check Ariff's reaction) Not that I do, but... in an intellectual, you know, social history kind of discourse, it's quite an enlightening window into the psychology of the masses at differing times through an evolving society!**

Ariff : (looking somewhat confused) **Yeah, cool. So, you don't believe in witches and magic...not really?**

Brekki : **Well, witches are a fact. All across Europe, hundreds—maybe thousands—of women and men were murdered by the state for being witches. Only a few hundred years ago. People, even intelligent people like... (he pauses) ...um, me, believed—believed to their core—that there were witches: 'magic' witches. Believed it enough to kill people, burn them alive. Think about that. Then and now there are practitioners of that same ancient craft.**

Ariff : **Ok, witches, but magic of some sort?**

Brek : **Hmmn. Well, there you are. That's not so clear.** (He thinks a moment)
You've heard of Voodoo, right?

Ariff : (he nods) **But that is nonsense isn't it?**

Brek : (vehement) **Absolutely not! The movie stuff, zombies and all that, of course. But there are documented cases of victims who, believing in the power of a curse, then succumbed to its poisonous effects.**

Ariff : (looking at him sceptically) **Really?**

Brek : **Well of course.** (exasperation) **I can't believe how oblivious you, everyone is to this stuff.** (Ariff pulls a face) **I mean, you do have access to libraries or the internet; you do have interests I presume?**

A small sly smile curls Ariff's lip.

Ariff : **Well, yeah, I got a few....**

Brek : (recognizing Ariff's flippancy he lets out a small grunt of disapproval) **Urgh, look. There was a very well publicized story about a pianist who was 'hexed' because of some insult or something. A witchdoctor cursed him publicly and it was reported on all the news and papers and everything. But although the pianist, deep down believed in the magic he couldn't openly say that, you know, in these 'enlightened' times, so he went ahead with his concert, which because of the interest was broadcast live, and halfway through the concert, just when the witchdoctor had said he would, small mistakes started to creep into the performance until after a cataclysmic mistake the pianist collapsed and has never played publicly since.** (he looks over to the wide-eyed Ariff) **Ok, so that shit's real, has real effect; however you want to explain it, that happened.**

Ariff : **Ok, but isn't that because he believed it?**

Brekk : **Well... yes, but that doesn't dismiss it's power. If the curse wasn't put in place then it wouldn't have happened. There's a million cases. When the victim believes, an idea planted by a witchdoctor or warlock or witch can lead to tangible, disabling fear. Creating hallucinations, paranoia and even death. Or similarly, the fulfilment of an incantation can affect the way things turn out...**

Ariff : **So you do believe in magic.**

Brekk : **Well, (he considers a moment) not like in the movies and stories and hocus pocus and all that, but a natural form of manipulating natural phenomena and nature and people, that is more understandable.**

Ariff : **Why would you want to manipulate people?**

Brekk : **It's not about manipulating people it's...**

Ariff : **Well, that's what you just said!**

Brekk : (angry at Ariffs interrogation) **Well what about you? You're 'Mr. popular'. It gives you a certain social standing.**

Ariff : **What?**

Brekk : **Well you know... the girls love you, guys love you...**

Ariff : **But that's not important!**

Brekk : **No, no it absolutely isn't! But it does happen to be the case.**

Ariff : **But that's not manipulation! I would say that I have a...** (again he struggles to find the words) **Tangible!** (very pleased with himself) ...um... **enjoyment in other people's happiness, their enjoyment! And as far as the girls are concerned, well that's just having fun. If there's a difference it's just that I'm not being dishonest.**

Brekk : **Dishonest!**

Ariff : **Well yeah, I'm always honest about what's going on. I don't pretend I want more than some fun. I know you and the boys always think everybody else is constantly shagging and everything but. Well yeah, sometimes there's shagging, but usually it's just having a laugh. I mean look at Jon.**

Brekk : **Well, he does alright.**

Ariff : **Does he? He lies to everybody. He lies to the one girl he says he loves most in the world and then he lies to his bit on the side. Jon, the 'real' Jon, whoever that is, doesn't actually exist in either of those girls' lives... It's like he needs to conquer women, he thinks he's some sort of 'James Bond', he's got a James Bond complex.** (Ariff widens his eyes, aware he has been clever) **Yeah.**

Brekk : **And what do you care?**

Ariff : (he finds his own exasperation) **I presume you do have a mother, maybe a sister, maybe one day a daughter...**

Brekk stops for a moment, caught up in thought. Several different concepts fight for prominence.

Brekk : (pensive) **But sometimes, when you're honest, well, some people don't find that attractive.**

Ariff : **Well, maybe you're just not trying, or not trying hard enough to...**

Brekki : (interrupting angrily) **Oh, so you admit you're 'trying'! Which suggests you don't mind projecting a false representation of yourself, which is different to Jon, how?**

Ariff : **Hang on, I think there's a difference between trying to be a decent, fun person and just trying to appear a decent one in order to fool someone into a shag. You're suggesting we shouldn't make any effort.**

Brekki softens his stare, tacitly conceding the point.

Ariff : **But anyway, if someone you approach doesn't want to know, why would you want to spend time with them anyway?**

Brekki : **A shag, I guess. But what about old-fashioned romance, determination...**

Ariff : **Stalking?**

They share a small smile while Brekki also shakes his head at the thought.

Ariff : **Anyway, you're probably as successful as me when it comes to women.**

Brekki : (disbelief) **Really?**

Ariff : **Well yeah. Out of every hundred or so girls I approach I probably only get between ten and fifteen, of what you might consider, 'positive' results. If that's how your judging things. And by the time you've approached ten girls I expect you'll be up to one or two positives yourself. So, you know, statistically...**

Brekki : (a natural smile gives way to a forced frown) **But look, this is my point. I think that your social gifts are, unwittingly perhaps, but they are an example of the manipulation of nature.**

Ariff looks at him, a little bewildered.

Brek : Look, when two people meet and don't get on, they might go on to say that they don't like each other, but that opinion is rarely based on a detailed analysis of the other person's character or morals. It's usually nothing more serious than a differing sense of humour or bad conversational timing.

But someone who can control their initial repulsion to a um... person or situation which makes them uncomfortable, to get past that initial negative feeling and then control and manipulate their own responses so that they can build a positive and valuable experience or even relationship, let alone the ability to make the other person meet them halfway. That is a true manipulation of nature and natural impulses, purely by the strength of mind.

Ariff : Yeah, yeah. Of course, it's just being nice really.

But Brekk is not listening.

Brek : So, is it not reasonable to believe that greater effects could be achieved when other factors or elements are used in conjunction with that control, or even used to enhance that control and power of the mind?

Ariff looks across at Brekk, who is now fully self-absorbed.

Brek : And this is where Original pagan practice comes in. It's well known that certain diets affect physical, but also intellectual abilities. 'Placebos', like voodoo, have tangible physical effect. Tradition, Ceremony can enhance confidence, which in turn enhances the chance of success. There must be other ways, if not a million more ways, of altering, manipulating, 'natural' situations.

Ariff : (concerned at Brekks vehemence) Yeah, that's interesting...

Brek : It's like during the natural disasters that have happened recently, the

earthquakes and stuff, it's been well documented that animals have been distressed well before any manmade instruments had noticed what was happening. Many even deserting and running for the hills. They are still in tune with the language of nature. Man, mankind, would have been in tune until relatively recently himself. The animals don't have the distractions. The modern world, technology, unnatural methods have conspired to shield us from the organic powers that surround us. If we could reform the link to the natural. Find a teacher, someone who has not forsaken that knowledge.

He stares somewhat maniacally toward Ariff.

Brek : **Imagine the power if you could rebuild that link. It would be like being one of only a handful of people who had access to the internet. Like a natural internet. The power of the world!**

Ariff : (quietly) **If that's what's important to you.**

Brek : **Potions: what are modern medicines if not 'magic potions' by another name? Alchemy, the manipulation of the elements. Modern technology does it, our scientists evolved their educated understandings, but the ancients understood these principles before technology and education had proved to them the possibilities. They worked off of belief, natural belief. What the world has lost, Ariff, is 'True', 'Organic', belief, and the link to these powers along with it.**

Brek goes quiet suddenly, a little embarrassed by his manner.

Ariff : (still surprised by Brek's vehemence) **So, you're saying this power, 'Magic', is real 'if' you believe in it.**

Brek takes a breath.

Brek : (he thinks) **No, it's not real *because* you believe in it. I mean, if it exists it exists. But maybe a natural, subconscious belief is part of the conditions necessary for it to work.**

Ariff : **But it's not like in the movies.**

Brekki : **I don't know. No, not 'Hocus Pocus', and stuff like that.**

Ariff : **So what is it like?**

Brekki : (quietly, still half embarrassed) **Well, that's what I'd like to find out.**

They share a serious look before both turn to stare out of the windscreen and they plough on into the dark, stormy weather ahead.

Amid the lashing rain the little grey van chugs away, further, until it is lost, once again, to the darkness.

Pendle

The B+B

Lilleth, cloth in hand, is busily knocking dust from the top of some of the pictures which hang throughout the hallway. A noise grabs her attention and she looks up toward the end of the hall. Shuffling backwards from behind the welcome desk, a tatty grey shawl stretches and sags as an old vacuum cleaner is dragged behind the counter and then into the hallway.

Lilleth : (mumbling to self) **Fuck it's never ending...Where does it come from?**

The figure turns and, to Lilleth's surprise, it is not Cerrick. A little wizened lady stares out from under the shawl.

Lilleth : **Oh. It's you.**

Shem : (she looks concerned) **Nothing is settled at the moment. I fear the fates are beginning to stir.**

Lilleth : **Now, don't get yourself all worked up. It isn't good for Cerrick; she is far too distracted by your worries. You know all is still vague at the moment.**

Shem : (takes her own book out of her pocket and looks at it with concern) **Yes it is, but if those vagaries that I have identified begin to condense then we will have been wise to be alert. It is hard to know how much to share.**

Lilleth : **Please be careful—she is at an age where she can be easily influenced or upset.**

Shem : (looking again at the book before stuffing it back into her pocket) **Yes lovely, yes.**

They share a glance of concern before slowly returning to their chores.

Arrival

9pm (ish)

The rain has recently stopped and everything glistens in the sharp moonlight. The departed storm rumbles angrily over the far horizon and distant bursts of lightening silhouette the destination amid the hills and woodlands of the dark and brooding landscape.

The van moves quietly along the shiny, puddled roads and Brekk and Ariff look to each other with some trepidation as they glide into an ancient village. The heavy slated roofs and crooked chimneys of the outlying, older houses slowly give way to a few more modern homes and buildings. Tarmac and cobbles lie side by side but give way quickly to more winding, country roads, leading to other antique villages and more meandering thoroughfares. Amid the old and new faces of the intermittently developed hamlets, Brekk and Ariff stare from the sparse comfort of the van, tacitly acknowledging that the need to find somewhere to stay is a priority.

They tootle about the wet streets and roads, eyes wide in hope. Down cobbled alleys, past graveyards and along country lanes. The streets are dotted with eerie-looking sculptures.

The sculptures, made of branches and twigs and adorned with scruffs of material, seem to appear at opportune moments, sometimes subtly, but others accompanied by a crash of distant thunder or flash of lightening, highlighting their surroundings and scorching the night sky. An air of desperation has gripped both Brekk and Ariff as they head the wrong way up one-way streets, realize they are going around in circles and fail to make sense of any of the seemingly randomly placed direction posts. All is in darkness; they are lost and, knowing it, are becoming distraught.

Brekk : (turning desperately in his seat to look back for clues) **Fuck! Fuck, fucking fuck!**

Ariff : (brightly) **Oh here we are. And there's rooms!**

Ariff pulls up alongside an old and crooked building. Light from several small windows light up a worn-out sign and a grassy open gateway. The Little Sister B+B. They nod to each other in shrugging collusion. Ariff puts the van back into gear and follows a gravelly pull-in, around the raised garden to a small yard, and the tires

crunch to a halt over the loose chippings.

Brekki : (climbing out of the van, relieved) **I'll try and book us in. Get the bags and stuff.** (He grimaces as he looks around at the cottage and ramshackle surroundings, then at his watch) **We should be out already.**

Ariff : **No worries. I'm on it.**

Ariff circles round to the back of the van and pushes the keys into the lock on the back door.

As Brekki makes his way down the short path to the front door of the cottage, he hears from inside, a loud discussion; not wanting to intrude, he peers around the open doorway where he glimpses, at the end of the corridor, a girl. He notices how sensible she looks, a proud nose, and he considers her pretty, but is immediately taken aback by her loud and angry manner.

Cerrick : **No, you don't understand.**

He can't quite hear the responses from whoever the girl is talking to and he ducks away, trying not to be caught eavesdropping.

Cerrick : (still loud) **No, it must...** (she tempers her volume) **I'm sorry, but I must go tonight.**

Again, some muffled response which is obviously unwelcome and suddenly she is marching out. A startled Brekki takes a couple of steps backward to look as though he is approaching the door for the first time. He attempts to apply a fake, easy smile as he sees her nearing.

Again, another unwanted reply from inside and the girl's attitude redarkens as she nears the door. She turns back.

Cerrick : **No, I must have it tonight.**

She barges past Brekk as she exits the house.

Brekki : (turning to her with false confidence and forced smile) **Perhaps I could help out there...**

Without stopping she turns back, a little bemused but no less angry; their eyes meet, and she pauses.

Cerrick : **Fuck off !**

And she is away, out into the labyrinthine lanes.

Brekki looks out toward Ariff for some sort of confirmation of her fleeting presence, but Ariff is busy gathering stuff from the back of the van. Brekki, after peering into the darkness and, disappointingly, finding no trace of the girl, turns back and heads into the B+B.

Still a little shaken from the sharp rebuttal, Brekki steps up to the counter. He can hear some mumbling, punctuated with swear words. It seems to be coming from below the counter top. Brekki's eyes widen as the old lady, Lilleth, straightens from some business behind the work top to first scrutinise, then welcome him. She continues to scrutinise him despite his discomfort.

Lilleth : **Right.**

A short discussion and he is handed a key and pointed in the direction of the stairs. Lilleth watches him without a blink as he disappears up the stairs and she purses her lips in consternation.

Arms full, Ariff trails behind as they head up the stairs and find the numbered door. The heavy, ancient door creaks open to reveal a small room.

There is a large window at one end of the room above the head boards of two single, unmade beds which are pushed, with barely walking room between, against opposite walls. A small amount of standing room at the foot of the beds is next to a small built-in cupboard. Hanging, just barely, from a rusting bracket, sits an old heavy television, bearing a 'post it' note which demands 'Do Not Use'. A door

opposite the window is wedged open and proves to be access to a tiny, tired, shower room. A plain 'white' toilet and simple basin with mirror above are crammed into the tiny space. A pull chord which hangs beneath a yellowed fan is also labelled, again demanding, 'Do Not Use'.

Where possible the rooms have been clad in pine strip-wood, now darkly yellowed, and everywhere else a heavy plaster ridges collect thick dust.

Brekki runs his finger along a crease in the textured surface, looks at the dust on it with utter disgust. Ariff, seeing the look on Brekki's face, smiles to himself.

Ariff : (taking in the majesty of the room) **This is good, isn't it?**

Brekki looks at him, disgust still writ large across his features.

Ariff : (conceding) **Well, I guess it hasn't seen a lot of love since the seventies.**

Brekki : **The fifteen-seventies.**

Brekki smiles to himself, proud of his little joke as Ariff starts to empty his bag in a heap onto one of the beds and then starts repacking several items. Brekki watches, confused.

Ariff : (seeing Brekki's impatient interest) **Just packing some supplies.**

As if to illustrate he holds up the boxer shorts which are in his hand.

Brekki : **You're not planning on soiling yourself are you?**

Ariff : (chirpy) **Better safe.**

Brekki shakes his head and moves toward the door. Ariff grumbles at his own lack of preparation as he roots among his things before standing and grabbing the bedding rolled at the bottom of the bed.

Brekki : (angry impatience) **Time is finite, you know.**

Ariff : **Thought we'd make it comfortable for when we get back.**

Brekki glowers and Ariff, smiling, reassesses the priorities.

Downstairs at the welcome desk, Brekki quietly tries to get the attention of the old lady. Despite his attempts she rises slowly; pleasantly surprised to see him, she smiles a gummy grin.

Lilleth : **Oh, it's you again! Hello my dear.**

Brekki : **Ah, er, hello. Um. We're just off into town, and I was wondering if there was anything,** (he pauses, not sure of his wording) **anything, *unusual*** (he stresses the word) **going on, in town, this evening.**

Lilleth : **Oh, well** (turning back to the messy desk behind her) **I don't know I'm sure. Let's have a look.**

As she turns, Brekki is alarmed to see her long hook nose in profile, He watches intently as she scans the information on the cheap calendar pinned to the wall.

Lilleth : (cranes her head in an unusual motion back toward Brekki) **What do you mean by unusual, my dear?**

Brekki : (swallowing hard) **Um, well, you know, given the time of year and everything. Just, anything...unusual.**

Lilleth : (narrows her eyes) **Hmmm. Well...** (she turns back to the calendar and surrounding mess) **Bollocks. That bloody girl...** (she turns back to Brekki) **I wanted to go to this one.** (Brekki's eyes widen) **There is a gathering.**

Brekki : **Yes?**

Lilleth : (Again she scrutinises Brekk with cold detachment before...) **'The Old Chatterbox.'** (she sees he looks bemused) **The old public house in the middle of the village.**

Brekki : **Right.**

Ariff, alighting the bottom stair, nods hellos to both Brekk and the old lady and heads for the door. Brekk watches him leave while the old lady continues to peruse the calendar.

Brekki : **Will we be welcome?**

Lilleth : (she fixes him with a stern look) **If you're sincere dear. Now, shall I take your key, dearie?**

He holds the key up as he considers and like lightening her long spindly fingers are around his hand; then the other of her cold skeletal hands massages the key from his grip.

Lilleth : **You don't want to lose it.**

Brekki : (feeling disturbed and a little violated) **No, no.**

And he heads for the door.

Lilleth : **The front door's always open dearie.**

Brekki nods his understanding.

Lilleth : **The keyhole's a little rusty.**

Brekk : (under his breath) **I'll bet it is.**

Ariff is waiting as Brekk exits the B+B.

Ariff : (clapping his hands together) **Right, where are the witches?**

Brekk : (looking back toward the door) **Hmm?**

They turn away from the cottage and, taking deep breaths, both stare ahead along the glistening, meandering roads about Pendle. They start walking.

Ariff : **Any ideas?**

Brekk : **I think we should let intuition guide us. See if we can't get in tune with our own innate abilities.**

Ariff : (enthusiastic if a little bemused) **Cool.**

And off they head...

The Wizards Tipp

Brek and Ariff amble through the small, twisting roads and streets. The tiny villages are nestled around the flanks of a brooding hill-scape. They march along the dark country roads between the villages and hamlets, looking for pubs or gatherings.

As they approach each hub of activity, Ariff, suggests they should explore, and each time, Brekk, remembering the name of the pub told to him by the old lady, dismisses Ariff's advice, telling him his own subconscious is not in accord and, under his insistence, on they go.

A period of frustration and Brekk is becoming agitated. They have arrived in a small village they have already passed through, at least once. They have walked a fair few miles and seem no closer to their quarry. Ariff, still buoyant, spurs them on and, on seeing some drunken revellers emerge from a tight alley they had previously missed, they head down a side street. A short walk until, before them, a modern pub. The Wizards Tipp.

Brek : (angry) **No, No, No!**

Ariff : **Hang on. We can't be sure. We are, after all, trying to use skills you admit have not been...um...used, utilized recently. Why not give it a go? And to be honest, I really do have a strong feeling about this one.**

Brek : **You've had a strong feeling about everywhere.**

Ariff : **No, this is different.**

Brek : **Really. How?**

Ariff : **Um, well, you know. It's like the first time you're really in love, even though you thought you'd been in love before, you didn't know you hadn't been until the first time you realized you really were.**

Brekki : (considers) **No, I don't think that's it. I think it reinvents itself. So, you really are in love each time.**

Ariff : **Wow, I can't tell if that's more romantic or less.**

Brekki : **Doesn't matter. This isn't it.**

Ariff : **You seem very sure. I think it is!**

Brekki : (he looks to the sign above the door 'The Wizards Tapp' with derision) **Of course it's not it.**

Ariff : (quiet but firm) **Look, it doesn't matter if it isn't *the* place, it is a place, a place that sells booze! Let's just get some drinks while we still can. A freshener! and then we'll carry on. But, I really do think this is it.**

Brekki : **Alright, alright. if you want to waste time, and to prove, one way or another, the invalidity of your intuitive powers. A quick ale perhaps is in order. Lead on, Macduff.**

Ariff looks at him confused.

Brekki : **Fucking go in, then.**

And he offers Ariff the lead with a sweep of his arm.

Ariff opens the outside door and a wave of noise hits them. Brekki's face slumps in disappointment and he begrudgingly follows in Ariff's wake toward the busy bar. Brekki stalls as Ariff continues to the counter and he looks up to see, above the shiny modern bar front, an old wooden sign, now relegated to mere decoration. 'The Chatterbox'. Alongside are some black and white photographs which chart the renovation of the building. The few pictures show how fire had gutted the original, ancient pub. Brekki sees how the incredible age of the old sign is enhanced by charring and blistered paint. He looks to the bar and eyes Ariff with unusual scrutiny.

Ariff looks back from the bar to the now-approaching Brekk. He mimes with his hand drinking a pint and raises his brow to request Brekk's choice of beer. Brekk mouths 'Ale' as he approaches. He arrives at Ariff's shoulder as he is accepting the pints.

Brekk : (spotting jars behind the bar) **Ooh, I'll have a pickled egg as well, please. I'm starving.**

Ariff : (having placed the order he looks back to Brekk) **You do know, there is no known way of eating a pickled egg sexily, don't you?**

Brekk : **Not everything's about sex.**

Ariff doesn't look so sure.

Away from the bar now, they have found a little space amid the other drinkers. They take thirsty, welcome gulps as they eye the scenery, both decorative and human. Brekk tilts his head in preparation for his snack and lifts his pickled egg. But then, through the bar he sees them!

Through a couple of timber archways, in a side room off from the main bar is what looks, to all intents and purposes, like a 'coven' of witches, sitting around an old farmhouse dining table. Old women in shawls cackle and natter at each other. Across from the table an open fire is heating a boiling cauldron and at the side of the table the girl from the B+B sits among them. She is making notes in a small book she has open on the table.

As the pickled egg hits the back of Brekk's throat the girl looks up to stare straight at him.

With his head back and gullet open Brekk, realizing how ridiculous he must look, quickly turns his head away. He snaps his head forward and pours a large swig of ale on top of the unchewed, throat-nestled egg. Now, looking as normal as any other drinker swigging his pint, he looks across from the corner of his eye as the ale fizzes around the egg.

Ariff : **Hey, I think I'm right you know.** (he gestures toward the sign and some other information along one of the side walls) **This place used to be a house used**

by a local witch back in...

Brek's cheeks balloon under incredible force as he tries to incarcerate the increasing pressure but his eyes betray his impending surrender to the eruption at play within his mouth.

SPLAT.

Brek, whose whole head seems to have swollen, makes a gulping fizzing regurgitation square in Ariff's face...

Ariff : (in a shocked falsetto) **Fifteen ninety-three!**

Ariff is stunned. Egg and ale drip down his face as from Brek's, disbelieving, slack, sputtering mouth.

Ariff : **Fucking hell!**

Brek : (shuffling Ariff off to one side, trying to compose himself) **Sorry, sorry. Shit...sorry.**

Brek looks back toward the arches.

Brek : (whispering loudly) **Over there, that's it, that's the coven meeting.**

Brek, spying now, ducks down behind a wooden post as Ariff pulls a t-shirt from the backpack, He looks to Brek and waves the T-shirt at him to illustrate his motive. Still in shock, he ambles off toward the loos, dripping ale and egg as he goes.

Brek, bent over, continues to spy. As he peeks from behind the post an old bar towel presents itself and he casually uses it to wipe his face.

Ariff enters the gents as behind him, Brek, now upright, is remonstrating with a young female drinker.

Brek : **It might well be, but it does look like an old bar towel.**

In the loos Ariff is washing his face in the sink. He switches T-shirts, rinses, and after wringing out the soiled garment he moves across to the hand drier. He laughs aloud at some particularly unsavoury graffiti before his gaze alights on something of interest and he reaches up and tears it from the wall.

Back in the bar and Brekk is still angrily apologizing to the unaccepting girl. As Ariff steps up he gives the girl a huge confident smile.

Ariff : **Sorry, is he bothering you?**

He thrusts the crumpled paper into Brekk's hand and steps between him and the girl who has instantly reciprocated his warmth.

In Brekk's hand the small poster declares that, this very night, is 'A rebirthing ceremony, at the old ceremonial hall, under Witch Hill'. Further down the black paper it explains, 'All Esoterics welcome' and he looks up toward Ariff, who is swapping numbers and getting directions from his new acquaintance.

Brek and Ariff are leaving the pub.

Brek : **But what about what's going on in there?**

Ariff points to a large chalk board where, writ large is the message, 'Cooking Ye Olde Fashioned Way. Friday Eve'.

As they step through the door Ariff turns to be met with sad-faced waves goodbye from the girl and her friends at the bar.

The Daughters of Pendle

A long dark walk through and then out of the village finds them approaching a tatty corrugated hall with a few scruffy attendees milling about outside. The music gets louder as they near and Brekk is starting to throw concerned glances toward the happy and decidedly unconcerned Ariff.

Brekk : **This can't be it.**

Ariff : (his eye caught by some attractive revellers entering the building) **Well, we should at least have a look.**

Brekk, seeing some pagan symbolism and daubing around the building, concedes a brief recce is in order.

The music, unbearably loud, envelops them at the unmanned door and Brekk flinches as they enter.

Inside now, they circle the busy room and Brekk's fears are confirmed. The event, although couched in the paraphernalia of the esoteric, seems to be nothing more than an excuse for a loud rave. He pushes, miserably, through the waves of idiots and notices a couple of hooded magicians on a small staging. They are engaged in some dark trickery and Brekk stops to see what childish misdirection they are employing to befuddle the cooing onlookers. Frustratingly, Brekk can't work out the misdirection behind the illusion, which only adds to his angry frustrations. He dismisses it and calls back over his shoulder.

Brekk : (shouting) **We should leave. We're wasting time.**

He manages to turn amongst the throng and is frustrated to see Ariff is no longer at his shoulder. Through the gaggle of drinkers and dancers he can see Ariff on the dance floor, already happily throwing shapes with fevered abandon, subsumed by a circle of encouraging girls and laughing, happy guys.

Brekki : (sheer frustration) **Motherfuckaagh!**

He forces his way through the mob and heads away, back toward the door. At the doorway he turns back to peer once more at the stage act. He concentrates on a now levitating ball of light, wincing in continued frustration as he tries to work out the form of deceit. His brow furrows in deeper frustration and he lets out a burst of angered impatience.

Brekki : **Pah!!**

Fidgety and angry, he bursts from the entrance and marches off down the road. Suddenly there is a voice behind him.

Ariff : (shouting) **Brekki, where are you going?**

Brekki : (turning, angrily) **This is not why we've come here.**

Ariff : **No, these guys are good. They're into all the, um, Pagan stuff and everything.**

Brekki : (Sarcasm doesn't quite cover it) **Oh really. Great, I tell you what, you carry on with your, 'Research and Interviews' here. See what you can find out about the 'Pagan stuff and everything'! I'm fucking going fucking back to the fucking pub!**

He turns, determined, and heads off into the darkness.

Ariff : **Oh, Okay.** (he watches as Brekki sulks away, then calls out optimistically) **I'll call you later. We can meet up before heading back to the B+B.**

Brekki : (A dismissive growl) **Whatever.**

Ariff turns. Then, after a small pensive glance toward the nearly out of site Brekki, he

shrugs and, smiling, re-enters the deafening hall. The same group of girls and guys within let out a small cheer and beckon him back into their frenetic dancing mob. The door swings closed behind him.

...

The door to The Wizards Tipp swings closed behind Brekk as he stands in the doorway, a pained frown taking hold of his features as he, once again, contemplates the busy bar. He starts to push through the crowd and glances through the arches to see the old ladies still cackling around their table. Cerrick sits, fidgeting impatiently, among them.

As he pushes toward the bar a girl turns to see him, glances behind him and asks where Ariff is.

Brekk : **Oh, he had to go home, he had a terrible bout of the shits.**

Girl : **Really?**

Brekk : **Yeah, terrible mess.** (seeing the look on her face) **I'll ring him, tell him you're asking, though.**

Girl : **Um, no, it's alright, I'm busy anyway.** (she turns back to her friends)

Brekk : **Oh, ok.**

A sly grin and he moves on through to the bar. As he tries to order a drink he keeps peering through to the 'coven'.

Between the milling drinkers he can see that the younger girl, Cerrick, now seems to be quite vocal within the group while the other, much older ladies, seem to be trying to placate her.

Drink now in hand, he slowly makes his way through the drinkers and then beneath

the arches that separate him from the old ladies and nestles himself behind a pillar, barely able, but trying to eavesdrop on their conversation.

He glances nonchalantly across the busy pub, then quickly looks back over his shoulder into the meeting room, trying to glean some information before quickly turning back to the pub and casually sipping at his beer.

In the small room one of the older women is trying to calm Cerrick's unheard concerns.

Rayshee : **...they are playing at the 'Old Craft'. There is no reason to give them any thought.**

Shar : **It's true, these children have neither the history or experience to engage with the Miasma, if they even believe in such a thing.**

Jeska : **Indeed, you should care as much about your studies, Crone.**

Some of the others cast disapproving glances.

Cerrick : (softly pleading) **Please don't call me that.**

Mysty : (addressing the whole table) **It is just her age. Weren't we all distracted by the thought of bigger, more important, exciting things conspiring against us from the shadows? More fun than this stuff.** (she prods at some of the papers strewn across the table and a few of the wrinkled gang burst into loud shrill laughter)

Behind his pillar Brekk recoils from the bone-rattling cackle.

Jeska : (sharply) **Don't patronise her. The sooner she grows out of this fanciful nonsense the better. There are real, if less exciting lessons to be learned.**

Ro'see : (loudly) **Who are you to tell her it's fanciful nonsense?**

Jeska : (contained anger) **Please. That's enough distractions. Without the foundations nothing of worth can be accomplished.**

The table mumbles its agreement.

Leanda : (quietly to Cerrick) **Sounds boring doesn't it?**

At the pillar, Brekk peeks around the corner to see Cerrick slump a little in frustration. He ducks back quickly.

At the table one of the wrinkled old women coughs a little to arrest everyone else's attention. Successful, she nods toward the arch at the far end of the room.

Brekk, again, casually peruses the bar and its customers then takes a sip of his drink and slowly turns his attention back toward the mostly aged group. He swallows hard as all at the table stare back at him.

Brekk : (shakily) **Hello!**

...

Strobe lights. Bruising rhythm.

Ariff is amid the writhing mass on the dance floor and, due to the loud thumping music, is having a shouted conversation with one of the beautiful girls who have taken him into their gang. She points at his shirt and the pattern scrawled across it. Some of the guys smile to each other as they distribute more shot glasses among their friends and all seem pleased to have Ariff in their midst. The music abates to the sound of chinking glasses and the group huddles chaotically around Ariff; he easily enjoys the affections of his new-found friends. Then, fresh beats pierce the momentary quiet and the whole group erupts in a glorious fountain of hair, arms and sweat as the next thumping sound explodes into the ether.

...

Brek, wide-eyed, sits at the table among the old ladies and all quietly consider the uncomfortable looking young man before them.

George : (leans forward to begin her suspicious interrogation) **So, is it cooking you're interested in young fella, or is there...** (she glances across to Cerrick) **something else?**

A few of the others burst into their shrill cackle.

Brek : (He looks awkward and coyly at Cerrick) **Oh god, no.**

Cerrick looks dumbfounded by this peculiarly determined response.

Brek : (pained) **No, no... I mean... Its um, just, I'm fascinated in the way you, um, use your,** (he looks at the old papers strewn across the table) **ingredients and recipes.**

The ladies look to each other in short quizzical glances. A few start to mumble.

Brek : (Quickly, he tries to stall their distraction) **I think it's interesting that the modern world is starting to look back at the ways our ancestors used to do things, you know, in trying to find solutions to modern problems.** (they start to take notice) **Natural, organic. Homegrown. All of these things are now thought of highly by growing numbers of people in our, um, society, uh... and cooks and that...**

Nods bounce around the table.

Ro'see : **Well that's right, of course.**

Rayshee : **Not enough people.**

A carafe that has sat in the middle of the table is suddenly passed his way and bony hands pour and shove the goblet in front of him.

Brekki : **Oh, er, thank you.** (He politely takes a drink, which feels like it strips the skin from the back of his throat. He coughs as the old ladies laugh) **cough** (He regains his composure and continues nervously) **I wonder, um, sometimes, um, what else society may have lost along with its disconnection from the natural world.**

He sees them eye each other suspiciously.

Brekki : (seeing they have not dismissed him, continues) **And I wondered if there wasn't more that these old recipes, ingredients and** (he takes a chance) **um, preparations may have to offer.**

George : (again through narrowed suspicious eyes) **Preparations?**

Armandle : (cutting to the quick) **Is it magic you're interested in?**

They lean in accusingly.

Shar : **Witchcraft.**

Mysty : **Spells and potions!**

Leanda : **Broomsticks!**

The cackle rises like a wave from the table and Brekki recoils in his seat. He looks deflated as they continue to tease him. He looks toward Cerrick hoping to find a supportive face but Cerrick is distracted, looking toward a large candle on the window sill. The candle's length is marked with numbers and lines, Brekki surmises it is a time piece.

Jeska : **I think you might be better off with the young-uns up on the hill.**

Cerrick : (snapping back to the conversation) **No...**

Breckk : **Oh, I've been up there. It's just a party. Loud and music...**

Jeska : (proudly) **There, what did I tell you. Children.** (she reaches for Brekk's goblet and throws the contents into a bucket that sits under the table then reaches for another carafe) **Here, try this one. It's not as rough. Leanda made that one. God knows what she does to it!** (she refills his cup)

Cerrick shoots Brekk an accusing stare which makes him shift awkwardly in his seat. Brekk takes a gulp of the new drink to distract himself from Cerrick's animosity. It is as rough.

Cerrick : (angry) **You should stay quiet about things of which you know nothing.**

Breckk, trying to ignore Cerrick's ire, coughs as this even fouler liquid hits the back of his throat.

Jeska : **A bit smoother?**

Breckk tries to disguise his grimace.

Angeline : **Now, now.** (addressing the still-rowdy table) **Settle, settle.** (she waits while the ladies quiet) **It would be remiss to ignore our young friend's, not unique, misunderstanding.**

The ladies have started to look to each other in a conspiratorial manner. Then they relax and their collective demeanour softens.

Armandle : (to Brekk) **What is, 'The question'? What is it that you really want to know?**

Brekk : (he looks around at the open, welcome faces and his mind fills with questions) **Um...** (the weight of their anticipation presses upon him) **um...** (his thoughts dissolve before their expectation) **Um...**

The ladies start to look to each other, and he feels their growing impatience.

Brekk : **Um...** (Armandle nods encouragement) **Um, is it, possible, for anybody to become a witch?**

A collective groan rattles around the table.

Ray'shee : **Well, that's not the bloody question is it?**

Angeline : **No,** (looks sternly at Brekk) **that is not the bloody question.**

Shar : **'Is there really magic?'. That's the question.**

Mysty : (to Brekk) **Isn't that what you really want to know?**

Brekk : **Yes, yes. Yes, it is, of course. Please.**

George : **I mean, what is a bloody witch? Someone who uses magic. If there is no magic, then there is no witches.**

Brekk, wide eyed, nods along to the line of logic.

Brekk : **And you are witches?**

The cackle is unleashed once more.

Ro'see : **Oh, darlin. Bless you. It is Samhain, Halloween, you know.**

Shassa : **We don't always dress like this, dearie.**

The cackle continues around the table and Brekk seems to shrink in his seat as the humiliation confines him. He takes another gulp of the fiery liquid.

Ary : **Oh dear, oh dear..**

...

The heavy rhythms continue as Ariff and another of the girls are getting close. The rest of the gang are still milling around their new-found friend but appear to be preparing to move on. On the stage behind them the two cowed magicians continue their tricks to a small appreciative part of the gathering.

Ariff : (glimpsing the magicians from the corner of his eye and quickly bewitched by the illusion) . **They're good, aren't they?**

Honey : (matter of fact) **It's all real, Ariff.** (her hand draws out shapes in the air in front of Ariff who seems relaxed in his acceptance as she hollers above the noise) **I can show you some more magic, more real magic. But we have to go on, there's another gathering. Just for the special people.**

She runs her hand over Ariff's muscled shoulder and she watches as her fingers sculpt his torso through his shirt.

Ariff : (also shouting over the music) **That's cool.**

Ariff pulls his phone from his pocket and waves it in front of her face. She nods her understanding as Ariff moves away through the gang and spies out the exit door. As he wriggles through the masses a shot glass is thrust in front of him and he stalls in his tracks and, smiling, accepts the glass. More cheers and more music and more alcohol.

...

The conversation around the table in the Wizards Tapp has settled and a more controlled discussion is taking place.

Shar : **I'm sorry, Brekk. You must understand we get a lot of people down here who have seen too many television programs about witches and magic. We like to have our fun.**

Brekk : (deflated but remaining polite) **Yes, of course. I'm sorry, I've fallen under the same misapprehensions as everyone else, it would seem. It's just such a compelling idea that a strong link to nature could yield some 'extra' reward.**

Ro'see : **Oh, it does, sweetie. It does. It's just got nothing to do with broomsticks and warty old women.**

Brekk : **But why does this idea, this misconception survive?** (his goblet is nudged toward him once more and he reluctantly takes another painful sip) **There must have been something. More than just myth.**

Jeska : **Media bollocks. Romanticism** (trying to build import) **But, it has to be said, in the distant past,** (she gives Ro'see a glare of reprimand) **it is said that there was a power.**

Cerrick : (excited) **The Miasma.**

Brekki : (coughing his drink back into his goblet) **The Miasma?** (Gentle nods from many at the table) **But, well, that means, and I don't mean to be disrespectful, but 'Miasma', means a stinking foul putrid mess... Doesn't it?**

Mysty : **Well, it didn't used to!**

Jeska : (seething, quietly to herself) **They steal what they can use and twist and hide the truth by force of their message.**

A rumble of expletives jump from all around the table as Brekk nods his understanding.

Brekki looks back to Jeska, wide-eyed.

Jeska : **Yes, yes. But the key to that power, 'if' it existed, has become lost, disseminated. First science, proofs and reason. And now certain kinds of technology, we believe, have disturbed the flow of the energies. And a shallow understanding of this new science has changed the way people believe...It has been lost to us and we must find another way forward. You, we all, must accept this.**

Cerrick frowns.

Brekki : **Technology ?**

Jeska : **Radio waves and the like** (she wiggles her fingers in the air mimicking the phenomena). **The last nail in the coffin. As far as the old ways are concerned.**

Ary : (wearily) **Out here at least.**

Jeska : (shooting Ary a stern look) **Yes, we think the technology seems to have doomed the old craft.**

Brekki : (politely ignoring the stern look, an empathetic nod) **Of course. I suppose it's a double-edged sword. It's both a disruption and a distraction. People today, they don't seem to be able to move unless they've got their little**

personal device strapped to their ear. (Most of the old ladies nod along with his concerns; he looks over to Cerrick to see if he has her attention but she is once again distracted by the timepiece on the window sill. Hiding his disappointment, he continues) **And it's all rubbish, if they're not watching pop idiots and telly idiots then they're talking about idiots or, worst of all, wanting to be idiots. So unnecessary. Too lazy to walk to a phone...or a library...It stilted thought and consideration...**

As Brekk waxes about his distaste, not only for technology but also the idiots who use it, a noise starts to quietly emanate from under the table, somewhere in the region of Brekk's pocket. It gets louder quite quickly.

Brek : (realising his phone is ringing, his impassioned speech starts to falter)...**Um...**

Mysty : **Hadn't you better get that sweetheart?**

Brek : **Um...Its um,** (He's already shaking his head as he pulls the phone from his pocket and sees Ariff's name pulsing on the screen and tuts his displeasure. Then, remembering where he is...) **It's not even mine** (he lies. He looks around for any generous faces) **I'll turn it off. Nonsense.**

He presses down hard on the off button and his phone dies a quick tonal death as he pushes it distastefully back into his pocket. Shamefaced but attempting nonchalance, he looks back about the group.

The old ladies look to each other in amusement.

Mysty : (generously) **I'm sure if we were your age we would all succumb to the same distractions you have to contend with. It is always a different world for the next generation. And we don't forge the world we are born into. Some of the older generations forget that.**

Brek manages a small thankful nod at her understanding.

Cerrick starts to gather some of the papers off the table and, straightening them,

places the pile into a small leather satchel that sits beside her on the bench.

Rayshee : **You going somewhere?**

Cerrick : **Well 'I'm' not learning much here. With all these distractions** (she shoots Brekk a look of derision as he pours himself another drink) **I'll be better off looking through these at home.**

Jeska : (suspicious) **Really?** (Cerrick's features turn guilty) **You're going home?**

Cerrick : **Yes.**

She turns quickly and takes a step from the table.

Jeska : **Don't forget your book, crone.**

Cerrick turns and without lifting her gaze grabs her small book. She marches toward the door at the back of the room.

Rayshee : (her eyes narrow) **Say hello to Shem for me!**

The room fills with the shrill cackle once more as Cerrick grabs angrily at the door handle and is gone, leaving the door rattling and swinging in the gale behind her. Brekk looks around at the shrieking old women and then his gaze alights on the slamming door. He gets to his feet and crosses to the exit. He reaches for the handle of the wildly swinging door and grips it firmly.

Before pulling it closed, he looks out into the darkness. The back of the pub. A small courtyard, ramshackle wooden panelling and gateways on each side. However, a small picket gate opposite the doorway swings loose and he tries to peer into the distance behind it. The darkness consumes the view, but Brekk sees that the pathway leads away between the gardens of old terraced houses before all is flattened into the blackness of the silhouetted hills in the distance.

George : (as the cackling abates) **Come back in, sweetheart.**

Brekki turns, disguising his interest, and edges back onto his seat at the corner of the table.

Shar : (raising her brow toward Brekki, requesting his interrogation) **Anything?**

Brekki : **Um, oh yes, of course. The Miasma?**

Rayshee : (sternly) **We must forget The Miasma. Its place is lost to history.**

Brekki : (a little deflated) **So there really is no Magic. No,** (he lifts his fingers and punctuates...) **'supernatural' abilities?**

Little comiseratory glances are rolled his way.

Ro'see : **Not like in the old days.**

Jeska : **Now we must accept that the only true magic is that of kindness.**

Ary : **Generosity, empathy. effort.**

Brekki curls his lip in distaste while glugging at the brew.

Armandle : **Psychological manipulations. To enhance confidence** (the others nod in unison) **and engage the subconscious.**

Mysty : **Yes. To enable positive results, then learning and knowledge, honesty, mindful experience. These are the skills you must master to change your path. There is no greater magic than that.**

Brek : (impatiently dismissing this hippy bollocks) **But what were the parameters the limits of the old magic? This Miasma!**

Once again, the old ladies look to each other before a consensual shrug elicits more frank responses.

Armandle : **In times past, this area became known as a centre for witchcraft, as we know you are aware, but the practice continued long past the trials of the sixteenth century. The practice was passed from generation to generation until the last practitioners...**

Ro'see : (respectful) **The Daughters...**

Armandle : **Yes, The Daughters. But they, on realizing the dwindling potency of the Miasma, destroyed their texts and disbanded their affiliation. They knew that the world needed a fresh understanding. They took the fundamentals of the practice and designed a new message that would help the world survive the onslaught of global rationalism.**

Brek : **You're saying the Renaissance, science and education are a bad thing.**

Jeska : **Well they are for witchcraft, for magic, for the right kind of belief. Isn't that what we're talking about? But the tenets of the practice...**

Some of the others start, then all join in.

All : **Respect for the world, respect for other people, respect for yourself.**

Brek can hardly disguise his distaste.

Jeska : **They still form the basis of this new movement. Of course, we still use tradition and ceremony to commune with nature and use the natural world to remind ourselves and invigour our resolve. We would hope to set a worthy example.**

Brekki : (still full of distaste) **So you've just become preachers and teachers?**

Shar : (slight disgust) **Oh no. Examples, examples of a different way.**

George : (very intense) **Beware the teacher desperately looking for a pupil.**

Brekki : (barely hiding his impatience) **But what of the old magic? what could it do?**

Rayshee : (her own angry impatience erupting) **Obsessed, obsessed. We have told you the old magic is dead. (somebody : *If it ever existed!*) We expend our time explaining to you something relevant and worthwhile and yet you have no interest.**

Brekki : (contrite) **I'm sorry. And I am interested, but I think I already understand the new forms of practice you talk about, but also, I don't have a lot of time and when I came here, I was trying to research what turns out to be what you have called the 'old form of practice', 'the Miasma'. And I mean no disrespect but If you will grant me, I had wondered on the... (he's trying not to say power) extent of the transformations and privileges it could manifest.**

Jeska : (disgusted at the idea) **No, not privilege. The Miasma was a powerful resource and capable, when understood properly, of most of your story book notions.**

Brekki : (wide eyed now) **Really.**

Jeska : (she nods sincerely) **But not privilege. Those powers of the Miasma which could be abused were rendered infeasible.**

Rayshee : **The power could not be used to aid oneself without either consultation or wage.**

Brekki : **Wage?**

Mysty : (answering Brekks question) **Sacrifice. Willing and honest.**

Brekki nods his understanding.

Rayshee : (Slamming her hand down on the table) **Enough.** (Abrupt and final)
We have wasted enough time on that dead craft.

Brekki's frustration at his curtailed investigation flashes across his features.

...

Ariff walks among the tight, exuberant huddle along pitch-black country lanes into the unknown. He is still talking to the same girl. They giggle conspiratorially.

Honey : (grabbing Ariffs forearm) **You're perfect.**

Ariff : **You're not so bad yourself.**

Honey : (she smiles) **Come with me.**

Ariff complies happily, and they edge away, ahead of the rest of the group who nod to each other in excited, knowing collusion.

...

Brekki : (Standing, he drains his goblet and thrusts it onto the table then strides toward the doorway and opens the door) **Thank you, ladies but (hiccup) I must go.**

Ary : **Just remember the important stuff we have told you. If you want to change your life. The lives of people you love.**

Mysty : **That is the real magic.**

Jeska : **The only magic.**

Brekki : (still feigning interest but looking out into the darkness) **Yep...right.**

His eye is drawn to the slamming, wind-blown gate opposite the doorway and he squints into the blackness beyond.

Behind him the old ladies still beseech his interest.

Shar : **Respect for the world.**

Ro'see : **Respect for other people.**

Mysty : **Respect for yourself.**

Brekki : (he turns back) **Okay then.. Yeah, sure will. Cheers.**

He pulls the door closed as he steps into the gale, nodding his false affirmations as he goes.

Inside, the old ladies quieten quickly and look to each other, then all look to Jeska. She lets out a little sigh and a disheartened shrug.

Over Witch hill

Brekki stands in the tatty courtyard, dart-like rain slashing against his face. He pulls his jacket tight about him and takes a couple of steps toward the small, swinging gate. He squints into the darkness, looks about for some direction. Resolve evades him and he calls out.

Brekki : **Hello?**

He stares into the darkness.

Brekki : **Are you there?** (hiccup)

No response. He looks around, again waiting for some confident impulse.

A small guttural growl of frustration and he finds his purpose. He marches through the gate and into the darkness of the poorly lit pathway. A couple of ancient streetlamps barely light up dim patches further down the overgrown back alley and he wades through until, at the far end, past the houses, a rusted gate hangs open and a roughly tarmacked access area glistens in the wetted moonlight.

Other than following the rough tarmac around the end of the terrace to the main road, a wooden stile between rough hedgerows is his only waymark. He looks around before crossing the hard surface which falls short of the wooden stile and hedge. The soft mud he steps into gives way and cold water soaks into his sock and shoe.

Brekki : **Fuck, fucking fuck...**

He jumps from the puddle toward longer grass and the stile. Looking around at the dark panorama in front of him, his face is a picture of despondency.

Brekki : **What the fuck am I doing?** (hiccup)

He looks down to his sodden feet, then back toward the dimly lit pathway that leads back to the pub, the village. He hiccups again.

As he ponders his next move the rain stops and the moon reveals its bright, crescent self. In the brighter moonlight he sees fresh muddy smears across the top of the wooden crossing and glistening trails of freshly trodden grass beyond. The vague footmarks head across the field and further into the dark unknown.

He hiccups again and giggles to himself.

Brekki : **Ah fuck it.**

He climbs over the wet, muddy stile and lands in the overgrown grass beyond.

He marches purposefully into the moon-sprung darkness with another little giggle and a hiccup. The shadows and silhouettes of the hedgerows and woodlands consume him as he stumbles onward. The heavy skies edge back toward the moon as the darkness swirls about him. A sudden surge of dark clouds and the moon hides itself completely, and blackest darkness returns to cloak the land and sky.

Brekki : (unseen in the darkness but crashing through the undergrowth) (hiccup) (burp) (giggle) **Here witchy, here little witchy....**

And on he goes, giggling and stumbling, merrily into the darkness.

Elsewhere

Amid the broad sparse landscape in the bowl of the valley, a large, roaring fire is encircled by a crowd that rumbles and bristles with anticipation. The hooded congregation mill and pulse. A naked procession swirls around the fire, an eclectic

mix of fevered expression.

Next to this, around a tall wooden staging another crowd's increasingly vehement chanting demands congress.

The gathered crowds swarm as do the clouds about the peaking moon. The low chanting, pierced by impatient feral shrieks and animalistic calls, echoes through the black and silvering night sky. Heavy rain breaks above them and a drum beat strikes, inspiring wild, fresh fervour.

...

Brek, still crashing through the undergrowth, has lost his merriment along with his inebriation. Shortly, everything but despair has deserted him.

Brek : (fear) **Oh my god, oh my god. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I can't fucking see...oh fuck.**

Blindly crashing through some rough woodland, brambles arrest and pull; branches trip and soft ground brings him to a stumbling lurch. Frantically, painfully, he goes on. A thorny silhouette against a vaguely lesser darkness suggests a route from the thicket and he starts towards this desperate salvation.

He pulls himself from the grabbing undergrowth and lurches, stumbling into the open grassy plain where, realizing the weight of the rain...

Brek : (a plea to the heavens) **Oh come on....**

Relieved to be out of the thicket he resigns himself to the weather and spins in the darkness. A howl echoes from...somewhere... and he turns, alarmed, peering into the messy black woodland behind him. He turns back and squints into the stubborn night, noticing a flickering tinge of light to the crest of the hill. A short trudge through the heavy grass should give him a view of the valley ahead.

Another noise, a scream or shriek perhaps. Brek lifts his head, searching for the noise. Something rhythmic, barely audible, is pulsing through the air and Brek

narrows his eyes in puzzled concern. He looks again to the highlighted hilltop and his resolve returns. A deep breath and he strides toward the crested hill.

He moves slowly through the heavy, wet grass toward the dark summit.

As he nears, the vague noises and rhythms become louder, clearer, and Brekk's heart begins to race as he starts to imagine the sort of event from which these feral sounds could emanate. His pace quickens.

More impatient shrieks fill the air, chanting and a low drum beat. Brekk moves faster toward the brow of the hill and his eyes are full of intrigue as the noises resound more clearly about him. He sees the busy glow from some light source, hazing the night sky past the summit of the hill.

As he breaches the summit his expression reflects wonder at the site before him. There, low in the valley, the source of the sounds and luminance. A large flaming pyre, surrounded by naked writhing dancers. Around them a braying crowd awaits some ceremony as, to the side, a large wooden framework is attended to.

Another barrage of impatient screams fill the air and on the hilltop, alarmed, Brekk, ducks down into the long grass at his feet. His view now obscured he crawls forward, pushing the long, wet grass aside and wriggling into a patch of shorter grass and ferns.

Brekk's eyes are alive with excitement as, through the foliage, he watches the event unfold.

The swathes of hooded and cowled onlookers are equally entranced by the events and an explosion of light bursting from the centre of the dancing circle causes a reciprocal eruption of noise and excitement.

From nowhere, two cowled figures have appeared next to the large scaffold. Their sudden appearance shocks and quietens the crowd.

Glinting above them, the scaffold supports a series of large blades, all delicately strung and shining in the moonlight. Beneath the blades, lying prostrate, a hooded figure, unmoving, atop a wooden plinth. The two cowled figures move toward the still body. Taking small knives from inside their gowns they start to draw out symbols in the air.

The ring of naked dancers, their bodies painted by the flickering fire and moonlight, gyrate and writhe as the rhythms and pulsing beats quicken. Two of the dancers, overcome by the moment, fuck roughly on the ground as the others continue their

fevered dance.

Approaching the recumbent, the two cowled figures stop. One toward the head the other at the feet. They spread their arms wide, the daggers reaching between them.

The crowd has quietened in expectation now, while above, Brekk bristles nervously.

Another flashy explosion and another person appears amid the staging to a cold sudden silence. He steps into the space between the two outstretched daggers. Reaching out his own arms so they form a triple crucifix, he takes the two daggers and steps forward to the side of the dais and the prone figure.

Above on the hillside, Brekk, wide-eyed and transfixed, breathless through fear of his understanding of what is about to happen suddenly remembers his phone and scrambles in the dark to fish it from his pocket.

Brekk : **Fuck, fuck, fuck. Fuck, this is it. Fucking hell... I've found it...** (he presses the power button on his phone) **Ariff, you fucker you won't believe this.**

Brekk looks up to see the masked figure bring his arms forward and plant the two daggers together. Grasping the combined hilt with both hands he lines up the tip over the still figure's heart.

Brekk : **Oh No !!!**

As Brekk's phone springs to life the screen lights up—twelve missed calls, all from Ariff. As the hooded figure lifts the blade in preparation Brekk hits the call button. He looks up.

The blades fall, pushed into the chest of the figure without a sound. A small convulsion of the limbs settles almost immediately.

All is silent in ceremonial reverence when, from the pocket of the sacrifice, a phone rings out. A chirping exaltation which slowly comes to a computer glitch of a finale. A comedy ringtone, Ariff's ring tone. Brekk furrows his already concerned brow in confusion. His breath and senses deserting him, he stares harder through the obscuring undergrowth. Below the hood he recognizes the t-shirt, Ariff's jeans, Ariff's lifeless body.

In the moonlight, Brekk is dumbstruck. All emotion drops from his face, his mind, all

feeling leaves his body. Then he unwittingly stands up, a lone figure on the hillside amid waist-high ferns, unnoticed by the crowds below.

The three masked figures take a step backward away from the body; their arms still held aloft, they relax, then thrust their hands forward into the air as a loud exultation leaves their lips.

The large blades above the figure on the table fall. The head and limbs leave the table, rolling, then dropping into deftly crafted openings around the base of the plinth.

Brek stumbles, his mind overwhelmed. From the depths of his being is welling some oral manifestation of pain and disbelief. As he opens his mouth a low rumble skreeks from his throat, building, building until... There is a flurry of movement behind him and all becomes thuddingly, painfully, black...