

Prologue

Reality was returning, the dream fading step by step. Jacqueline took her bow from the front of the stage where blazing hot lights blinded her. Applause thundered up through the timber framework of The Swan theatre and though the offering was not of any particular significance – no more than another fleeting moment, a thing witnessed by a mere 450 people – it was as great a show as any in the dark backward and abysm of time.

Little over half-an-hour later she was pouring herself a stiff drink, sitting on the back-seat of an ink black Bentley, being chauffeured to the airstrip. She had of course already gobbled down four pints of water immediately after the show but she needed something stronger to steady her nerves and the mini-fridge was right there, so... *what the hell?* All this sneaking around was making her tense. Nobody could know what she was doing, it was crucial. She had left through the backstage door, discreetly, seen only by Mr. Gibson from a distance in passing. Sometimes, particularly on the opening and closing nights of a production, admirers would wait there in the cold just for a chance to see her without the mask and add another worthy signature to their collection. Tonight however – mid-season - it was far too cold for that, even for this rising star.

She wondered what the driver was like. He had a nervous habit of glancing at her through the rear-view, as though he expected she might disappear at any moment. She still wasn't used to it. The respect – or was it fear? Veneration? Whatever it was, it came with decadence such as she had never dreamed anyone might possess. She would never get used to it, at least she certainly hoped not.

Tis the strumpet's plague to bewitch many and be bewitched by one – no, not bewitch, 'beguile'... she muttered under her breath, recalling some half-remembered verse of Shakespeare as she ruminated over it all, alcohol stinging her throat. Jacqueline had

always been an extraordinarily talented user of men – as is the female species natural right and duty, setting them onto good purpose - and she had never been a victim, save once, the first time, as is so often the case with young girls too pretty for their own good. Joshua had been the exception, it was true, but then she had lost her virginity to him so that was completely different. After that heartbreak, little Jacqui had vowed never to be broken again and for a decade she had made good on that promise - until now? She was a big girl now, playing adult games and the stakes were much higher.

The MD 530-F took off from a farmstead a few miles from the coast and as they climbed Jacqueline saw fields of startled sheep dawdling frantically in the adjacent crofts. The helicopter was small, broad perspex sheets wrapped around them like a bubble. She had no idea where she was going and she didn't speak to the pilot other than when acknowledging him politely before take off. She sensed they had all been instructed not to speak with her, the other drivers and the staff in general. Except Myra, of course. There was no question Myra was uncomfortable asking. Everything from her sexual preferences to her darkest secrets, Myra probably knew Jacqueline better than anyone else in the world, better than her own parents, friends, lovers. The only thing Jacqueline knew about Myra was her first name.

Soon pleasant dreamy pastures transformed into choppy seas and rocky crags. They were ploughing up the coastline and with only the heavens to light their way it seemed to Jacqueline they were flying dangerously low. There were all kinds of obscurely shaped rocks thrusting up from the angry spray of crashing waves and any one of them might smash the little craft to pieces. She fingered her silver necklace anxiously. Like most of her jewellery it had been given to her by someone special and in the rising apprehension she felt it became a kind of lucky charm. She could have done with some banter to take her mind off things. But for all her concern, sure enough, within 20 minutes they arrived safe

and sound.

Veering into the bay only then could the castle be seen, hidden as it was in the cove of the island. It never failed to take her breath away. With all the lights on – the landing lights on the helipad, the courtyard lighting further up the promontory, the light from the castle itself, complete with arrow slits, turrets and ramparts – she felt a warmth that could only be described as feeling she was home at last, though to be sure, this was a place far from home. This was a dreamworld. As she climbed down onto the tarmac with wobbly legs, the huge arched doors opened and a few people came sauntering out to greet her, yet another shaft of light bolting out with them to join the nexus, their long shadows creeping towards her ahead of the pack. Scrambling out of her winter coat, she hastily shifted around her tight Lancaster red dress, surely a perfect 10 in any man's book. Myra was there, of course. And Marley, the creep. *Slithering about as usual...*

Last of all, her beguiler emerged. He was there, right there in front of her, at last. The sight of him made her weak at the knees. She did not know how old he was, though it was perfectly likely he was in his 50's and therefore at least twice her age. Jacqueline had always been attracted to older men but even for her this was... something to be kept a secret. Even though he wasn't, he seemed older than her father. In a strange kind of way, he seemed older than anyone she had ever known. When their eyes locked together, she fancied glimpsing a soul as old as diamonds.

The way he had found her, the way he had made himself known to her, he had been impossible to resist from the first. His age meant nothing compared to the dynamic presence which radiated from him night and day, the piercing study of his gaze, the bone crushing strength of his mind and body, the energy and inspiration he evoked within her, the way he touched her, the way he made her feel, the way he made love to her and whispered sweet nothings in her ear. How he kept in such good shape was a mystery,

considering the fact his thick, oily hair had long since turned completely silver. He was the only man who had ever been able to make her climax at will. When they were apart, she thought of nothing else. When they were together, she counted the seconds remaining in his company. The obsession was emotionally draining and unruly. The last month had been nothing but a waiting room, waiting for this, waiting to give herself to him so that he might do with her as he willed.

This evening he was dressed in a luxurious wolf-skin coat which was unfastened and blowing gallantly in the currents generated from the rotary blades powering down behind her. A black, almost priest-like shirt showed beneath the coat and the walking cane held at his side gave him a kingly appearance. She smiled her most seductive smile – an uncharacteristic flicker of insecurity wavering amidst the veneer - and dropped to one knee that she might kiss the Five Metals ring upon his hand, second and fourth digit ratio indicating high levels of testosterone in his seed. Her lips were moist against the silvery coolness, the small and intricate impression of a scarab beetle set against a pyramid kissing her back.

"My lord Primus," she said pouting shamelessly.

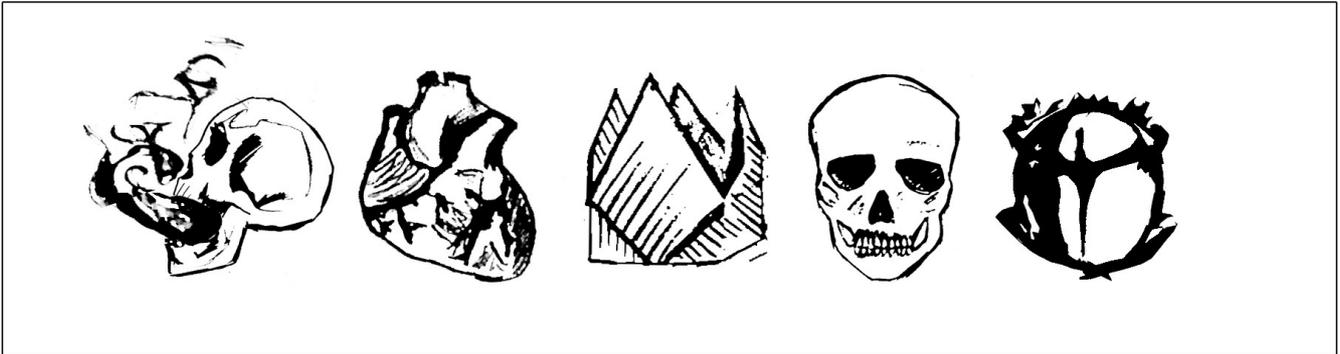
"Rise." Arm in arm they did go in together and there find comfort in each other's embrace. But over 100 miles away on the mainland, at the seat of a 4x4 parked on a muddy off-road track, a third party was witness to their meeting unbeknownst to them.

Now that the mark had gone within the castle walls, the device secreted in her necklace would be unable to broadcast. Tearing the 1/4 inch headphone jack out from of the portable relay box, the listener terminated the session with a deafening screech of distortion that should have made him scream out in pain. But scream he did not. He removed the headphones gradually and then chucked them rudely onto the dashboard, chipping the windowpane as he did so. Fuming now, he shielded his deepening frown and

quivering lip with a shaky hand as though some unseen light blinded him. The air was too close. Stumbling from the vehicle he left the off-roader in search of fresher climbs though in sooth he wished only to escape from himself. Blood was pumping through his skull, hideous visions of them together racing before his eyes. *Noses, ears, lips.* Everything was going haywire. A million and one thoughts were pulsing through his mind, an unstoppable cascade of torturous conceits giving way to terrible bitter regrets.

The Midlands looked beautiful in the starlight, celestial bodies stretching far and wide overhead. There was no light pollution here to contaminate the dark. Space dust could be seen swathing across the Milky Way, illuminating tendrils of fog which drifted down to the ravine below. It was a kind of false mirror image, mimicking the reflection of a night-sky above a still lake. Here was his friend of old, here lay his best knowledge and understanding. *Here is a web to enmesh them all...* This landscape would make for the ideal territory, the perfect stage on which to perform his masterwork. A tragedy of classical proportions. Teeth clenched, he spoke with the shadows of the forest; those who mocked him, those who scorned her and those who longed for her despite everything, all of them howling together wretchedly. Black vengeance was shambling forth from his hollow cell and every grim tread was ice in his veins. Where only a small slice of silver remained, he could have sworn the rising moon had been full earlier that evening; but of course, it was the 10th of December, the very night of the lunar eclipse, the very hour of the earth's penumbra passing over. *"Thus I turn from my country's light,"* he murmured gravely, heartbeat slowing to its common measure, a wave of demonic villainy flooding through him, serenity taming the chaos as his final purpose came upon him. *"...to dwell in solemn shades of endless night."*

Thread of Life



Xhuteq's Labyrinth
Book I