

Twisted Imaginings: Vol 4

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VOICES AND SHADOWS

Greg was terrified people would think he was a freak, just the thought of one person discovering his secret brought on the dark caress of icy fingers along his spine. Yet, at the same time, he so wished he could tell someone, anyone...just to relieve the pressure of guilt he felt.

But why, he asked himself, should I feel guilt for my true feelings? Why should I hide away in my safe haven every time I wish to be myself? What is the point of me trying to be comfortable with myself if the end result makes me feel this way?

"Because you know we'll hate you," came the whispered reply from the other side of the louvre door.

Greg moved further back into the safe realm of the walk in closet, shuffling between the soft fabrics of the hanging dresses...his dresses. A small yelp escaped from his lips as his back hit the rear wall and he quickly began moving the shoe boxes, arranging them in a protective wall between himself and the outside. He worked quickly

despite the shakes of fear he had to endure every night. Fear of discovery, fear of ridicule and fear of the voices that haunted his mind.

“We know you’re in there, we can smell you,” The voices taunted.

“Leave me alone!” Greg cried, pulling the collar of the designer blouse tight against his neck. “Why can’t you leave me alone?”

“Why would we leave you alone?” replied the cacophony of voices. *“This is so much fun.”*

Greg made himself as small as possible, hugging his legs close to his chest in a feeble attempt to become invisible. He cried softly, tears staining the mascara he'd applied only minutes earlier.

Tonight was meant to be different, the night he finally came out to the world. No more secrets. At least that's what he'd told himself as he'd shed the tailor made suit he'd worn all day and prepared to shower, washing away the masculine scents of aftershave and deodorant.

He hated the façade of normal life, the manly mask he wore each and every day. As soon as he came through the door he'd kicked off the leather brogues with their annoyingly flat soles and made his way upstairs at an almost run. This was the moment of each day he loved...the casting off of the lie...the point of metamorphosis from ugly caterpillar into beautiful butterfly.

Not that the moment ever lasted long. With the change made he would then hear them entering the house, shadowy outlines that slid in under the door, through the window frames and up through the drains. They knew his secret and they came to grind him down and stop him revealing his true self to the outside world.

At first Greg had ignored the voices, sure they were nothing more than the embodiment of his own fear and weakness. Before the voices had come Greg had always savoured the feeling of the soft nylons as he'd rolled them up the length of his freshly shaven legs, but it hadn't taken long for their laughter to make him feel wrong...to feel unclean.

After weeks of torment Greg had confronted the voices, a concerted effort to face what he thought was his own delusional guilt. He quickly discovered that the voices were stronger than he could ever be. In retaliation to his outburst they'd turned violent, the

shadows accumulating around him in a fit of rage. Greg had run through the house, begging for them to stop, but his pleas only riled them up. They tore through the downstairs in a vicious tantrum, smashing everything in their path.

Greg had fled, taking the stairs two at a time before running along the landing. The shadows followed, surrounding him in their darkness and pulling violently at the floral patterned dress that clung to his stocky frame. Greg had fallen into the bedroom, kicking off the low heels and crawling across the carpet as they slapped and kicked out him.

“Why are you doing this?” he'd begged, tears rolling down his cheeks. “What have I ever done to hurt anyone?”

“You hurt no one, but we are their hatred of the unknown,” the voices had howled. *“We are the sum of everyone’s fear and loathing and we choose you for punishment.”* Their laughter was deafening.

Greg had pulled open the closet door and dragged himself inside, closing the door behind him and curling into a ball as he sobbed. The voices had quietened, nothing more than a whisper. Eventually Greg had slept, a fitful slumber filled with dreams of hateful faces and accusing fingers. The next morning the voices had gone, leaving a trail of destruction in their path. It was a mere hint of what would become Greg’s regular routine.

Life outside the house became unbearable. Now that Greg knew the hatred that everyone hid behind veiled eyes and shielded smiles he grew to fear them. What if they knew his secret? What if they hated him with the venom the voices claimed? In reply he began to leave the house less and less, quitting his job and locking himself away from those who claimed to be his friends. But this didn’t stop the voices. Each night they would return and punish him for what they saw as his sins.

“I won’t let you beat me down,” Greg screamed at the voices. “I’ll let the world know who and what I am.”

“You haven’t got the balls,” the voices laughed softly, filling the bedroom with their swarming outlines. *“You ain’t man enough.”*

“I’ll show you,” Greg hollered, standing up and kicking the shoe boxes out of his way.

“Greg’s coming out of the closet,” taunted the voices, their laughter reaching a new high of vindictiveness.

“Fuck you!” Greg yelled, throwing open the door and running into the room looking like the devil in drag. “Fuck you all.”

The voices danced around him, screeching with joy as Greg launched himself at them, passing through their cloudy miasma with little effect. Greg spun around as anger took over the fear that had eaten away inside him; he trashed the room in his attempt to rid himself of the voices and their constant attacks. The voices defended themselves and attacked as one, coiling themselves around Greg and intensifying the verbal onslaught.

“Freak.”

“Weirdo.”

“Unclean.”

“Outcast.”

Greg clasped his hands over his ears, squeezed his eyes closed and ran, once again, for the safety of the closet. But the voices had turned him around and caused disorientation.

The window shattered as Greg hit it at full speed, his weight taking him over the edge and out into the cool night air. The ground rushed up to meet him and he was engulfed, for a split second, in searing pain and then numbness. As the world darkened he looked up at the star filled sky and saw the voices swirling away and he smiled.

“I came out,” he whispered on his dying breath.

VOMIT BABY

Ash wasn't the type to fall ill often and, even on the rare occasion that she did, she didn't let it interfere with her day to day routine. She was the kind of person to turn up for work with thick, green snot flowing from her nose and bloodshot eyes the colour of freshly boiled beetroot.

This trait alone made her a scarce commodity amongst the workforce and they all noticed when she didn't arrive for work at nine o'clock on the Monday morning. What was even more surprising was the lack of a phone call to explain the absence. This

disruption in Ash's timetable of life threw the office into disarray and turmoil. Her usual reliability threatened to be the company's downfall.

Not that Ash would have given two thoughts about Sheila in accounting or Norman in IT as her guts, not for the first time that morning, left her body in a vivid explosion of liquid acid.

"No more," she cried out, tears rolling down her cheeks as she sat on the toilet, her legs shaking as another fluid expulsion cascaded out of her like yellowed giblet gravy.

She reached around and weakly pulled on the cistern handle, gagging as fresh water stirred up the foul aroma in a whirlpool of rancid stomach contents.

"What the hell did I eat?" she sobbed, trying to remember the Chinese meal from the night before.

It had been a wonderful night, all arranged by her husband, Michael. It was his unspoken apology for the downward spiral their marriage had taken of late, a way to show he was sorry for his outburst at her announcement of pregnancy. She knew he loved her, but the show of affection was appreciated. She could have cried when he'd walked in from work and presented her with the flowers and chocolates. He'd handed them over with a smile and kissed her on the cheek.

"Go get ready," he'd said. "You deserve a night out."

Michael wasn't one known for showing his feelings; some would have called him *deep*. Because of this Ash had embraced the effort it must have taken for him to open up, accepting the romantic gesture with pleasure and excitement.

Mr Fong's Golden Lotus was the best Chinese restaurant in the area...hell, it was probably the best restaurant full stop. Trying to book a table was a mammoth task and, as they pulled up outside, Ash had realised just how hard Michael was trying.

Everything about the night had been perfect and all of Ash's troubles were forgotten. She was sure things would be alright. It would just take a little time and effort from both of them. Things only started to go wrong after the drive home.

They'd fallen into each others arms as soon as the front door had clicked into the frame behind them upon their return. Ash had returned Michael's passionate kisses and

had begun to unbutton his shirt when the phone had rung loudly from its place on the hallway table. Michael had pulled away from her, already doing the shirt back up. Ash tried to stop him, grabbing his arm but he shrugged her away.

“Don’t answer it,” she begged.

“I’ve got to,” Michael replied and she slumped against the wall, the happiness of the last few hours evaporating into a dull sadness she had become so familiar with.

Michael picked up the receiver and lifted it to his ear. “Hello, Michael Flemmyng speaking.”

Ash left him to the call and walked to the kitchen, shutting the door softly behind her. Before it was fully shut she heard Michael’s inevitable reply. “I’ll be there in twenty minutes.” He left the house without saying goodbye.

Ash settled into bed, alone under the King sized duvet. She wanted to cry, but fought against it. To cry was to admit defeat. To cry wasn’t an option she was willing to consider. Instead she closed her eyes and placed a hand on the tiny lump of her stomach. Eventually she fell asleep, filled with hopes of dreaming of a better time.

When Ash awoke, after what felt like only minutes, she was suffering the most blinding of pain. Her stomach felt as if it had been pierced by a thousand red hot needles, each one forced deep into her abdomen and then used to stir up her tender insides. She immediately thought of the life growing inside her, gasping as a fresh bout of agonising heat ripped its way through her midsection.

It took all of Ash’s strength to pull herself upright and climb out of the bed, holding onto the wall for support as she left the bedroom and hobbled along the landing towards the bathroom. She struggle to pull the light cord, her fingers stiff and numb, panic nearly took over when she was unable to get them under the waistband of her panties. The burning sensation increased and Ash was petrified of the indignity she would feel if she soiled her clothing. Finally her fingers obeyed and she sat as she slid the pink briefs to her knees. And only just in time, another spasm of pain tearing down her intestine, into her pelvis and out of her backside. The agony exited her body in a wet splash that offered no relief from her inner turmoil.

Ash spent the next hour in the bathroom before her stomach finally calmed. Only when she felt safe that all movement had ceased did she creep back to the bedroom and collapsed onto the bed, breathing heavily and feeling exhausted. She reached out and picked up the cordless phone from the bedside table on Michael's side. She dialed his number from memory and waited.

"You have reached Michael Flemmyng. Please leave your name, number and a message." Ash waited patiently for the *beep*.

"Michael. It's me," she said weakly. "I'm not well. Please come home," she paused. "Or at least ring me. I love you." With that she hung up, rolling onto her back and stared at the ceiling.

She didn't have to wait long for the boiling sensation in her gut to return.

Michael didn't ring back and he didn't come home as Ash had requested. She spent the next four hours in the bathroom, either trying to sleep on the floor or sitting on the toilet as her insides gradually slipped out into the world.

She knew she should ring work, but the very idea of returning to the bedroom was the last thing she could contemplate. The bathroom was safe, the bathroom was easy.

And Michael was bound to come home soon...

Eventually she slept, an uneasy slumber littered with broken dreams of still births and miscarriages. When Ash's eyes finally opened they did so onto daylight filtering through the frosted glass of the window.

The respite didn't last long... Ash's nightmare was far from over.

The new pain, when it hit her, was far more intense than any of the other. But it was intense in a different way. As it lanced through Ash's gut her mouth filled with cold saliva, a signal of what was to come. She forced herself up and hung her head over the edge of the toilet bowl, her throat contracting and then releasing a torrent of warm, rancid puke.

The very act of vomiting created a vicious cycle and more followed, spewing from Ash's mouth and nose like water from a high pressure faucet. Her back arched and her shoulders tightened with each new convulsion, leaving her limp, spent and clutching onto the rim of the toilet.

Ash could smell the sour stench of her own badness and wanted to flush it away, but the energy to reach up was inaccessible. She could feel lumps of undigested food and mucus lodged at the back of her throat, but feared trying to shift them, knowing that to snort them back would only start a new cycle of heaving and retching. She opted for the better of two evils and placed a finger over her left nostril, closed her eyes and blew. She felt the blockage fly from her nose and heard its moist landing. Her stomach turned over for a moment and then settled. She waited a while and then repeated the procedure with the other nostril.

Tired and aching she rested her head on the toilet edge and let her eyes close once more.

Ash wasn't sure, but she thought she must have slept again. The morning sun had moved away from the bathroom window and left her sitting in the shade.

"Michael?" she shouted, her voice dry and harsh. "Michael?" There was no reply.

Ash lifted her head and was relieved to discover that her stomach felt as normal as could be expected. She felt as if she had been kicked repeatedly, but there were no further signs that she would erupt in any way.

"You need a bath," she told herself, preparing to stand.

As she straightened Ash looked down into the bowl and frowned. She knew she hadn't flushed, she had been incapable. So why was the toilet not only empty, but clean? As clean as if somebody had scrubbed it.

"Michael?" she called again and received only silence as a response. "Fever and delusions," she stated to the room. "You just can't remember doing it." Just saying it out loud eased her mind.

Ash turned to face the bath, having no wish to look in the mirror until she felt clean and more like herself. She took a step forward and nearly fell, her foot sliding out from under her. She steadied herself and studied the splashes of vomit on the floor, a trail of off yellow that appeared to lead from the toilet to the bath. She followed the uneven line of thick droplets and reached out for the shower curtain hanging around the bath. Ash yanked the curtain back, sure that she'd find nothing.

She froze, a scream strangled by fear before it could leave her lungs.

The creature, a vomitous resemblance of humanity looked at her through bile filled eyes and gurgled a moist *'welcome'*.

Ash tried to move, attempted to back away, but nothing would respond to her command to run. All she could do was watch as the vomit moulded creature lifted a dripping arm and touched her face.

She felt the warm fingers trace a line along her cheek and down to her mouth. The creature almost smiled; licked its lips with a dirty brown tongue covered in pustules of sweetcorn and carrot.

Ash found the drive to scream, her mouth opening to release the sound only for the space to be filled with the creature's fingers; probing fingers that tasted of dead food and digestive fluid. The hand filled her mouth, melting over her teeth and gums, running under her tongue and enveloping her tonsils.

The scream was drowned as the creature slid down her throat, joining the fresh vomit that attempt to flow upwards. Ash tried to breath, but the futile effort only brought death sooner, flooding her lungs with red hot acid. She slumped forward, sprawled in the bottom of the bath as the remainder of the creature fell lifeless around her.

Later that morning Michael returned home.

"Ash?" he shouted, heading up the stairs. "Ash?" The smell hit him before he reached the top step.

Michael peered into the bathroom. He couldn't see her face but he knew it was Ash laid in the vomit drenched bath. He made no attempt to touch the body, instead making his way directly to the bedroom and snatching up the phone. He stabbed at the buttons and placed the receiver next to his ear.

"It's Flemyng. Tell Mr Fong the money will be in his account by this evening." He paused and listened. "I'm very happy with the results and the price was fair." He hung up.

'Cheaper than a divorce and alimony,' he thought with a grin.

Michael quickly dialled the next number and waited for the answer. "I need an ambulance. It's my wife, I think she's dead."

THE PLEASURE OF PAIN

The air is moist and holds the flavour of rotten meat, the aroma infiltrating every taste bud with its vile decay. There is no light. Even with eyes open there is only blackness, heavy and pressing down like a suffocating blanket.

The slow drip, drip, drip of water is all that hides the shallow whimpering that echoes from within the dark. A laugh like cry that, in equal measures, is terrifying, heartbreaking and almost childlike in its quietness.

The bed is made of steel, cold against the flesh, yet not as uncomfortable as the rigid leather straps that hold the body in place. Rough and aged from years of hard use and stained dark with the life-force of those that have come before. The straps are many, one at each wrist, one at each ankle and one tightly bound around the head, the edges digging into the skin between eyebrows and fringe. A sixth, thicker than the rest, holds the hips in place and a final belt is clamped just above the chest.

We have, over the years, discovered that this is more than enough restraint. Any less and the subject tends to wriggle too much which in turn makes the art appear sloppy and that of an amateur. Any more and the canvas is obscured, shielded from the hand of the artist. The art is restricted and unable to flow in a natural design. Don't get me wrong, the finished job is always good, but never satisfying and my love demands satisfaction.

Oh my love, my darling Angelica, the only person who has ever shown me what love truly is. The woman who opened my mind to the creativity of the finest art, who taught me that boundaries were there to be pushed and that beauty can be brought to the fore in even the ugliest of subjects. That is what she does best, that is her art.

And how, may you ask, did we come to be together? How does a man of average build and less than average looks end up with such a Goddess on his arm? The answer can only be found in the art, silently whispered on the honed edge of the blade and only seen reflected in a rivulet of deepest red as it slides along the clinical steel. I suspect that my ramblings are above you and your blinkered vision, so let me try to enlighten you. Let

me try to help you paint a picture in your mind of our relationship. Let me explain the rush of fire that burnt in my soul on that first night with my beloved Angelica.

I forget how many years have passed since our paths first crossed; it must be some time because I'm sure that back then the cinemas were still showing the likes of Valentino and Chaplin. The silent classics that would soon be surpassed by talking pictures and then the revolution of colour. Do not think me a liar or mad, we have honestly been together for that long, again a benefit of the art.

It was November and rain was falling from the dull evening sky. Lacking an umbrella I had my collar pulled up and my hat low over my eyes. Maybe if I had been taking more notice I would have seen her coming and stepped to one side, passing by like ships in the night and never to meet. As it happens I was taking more attention of my feet than those around me and pass we did not.

The collision was only glancing, but it sent her bag onto the rain drenched street and the contents rolled out around our feet. I smelt her sweet fragrance before I saw her face, but the perfumed scent of her hair was enough to hold me entranced as she looked accusingly into my eyes.

"You clumsy fool," her eyes burnt with a fire that warmed my cheeks, or maybe that was just the side effect of the deep blush that filled my face.

"I'm sorry," the spell was lost and I quickly bent down and started to grab at her lost belongings and return them to the bag.

"No, it is I that should apologise," she crouched down and joined me in the retrieval operation. "I was not looking at where I was going," the fire of anger had left her eyes, but still they warmed me with their intense stare.

"Please, let me buy you a coffee," I was astounded by my upfront nature in the presence of such a good looking woman.

"I would like that very much," she reached out for the bag and her fingers touched mine, igniting a fire of my own, but not in my eyes. "But before we go, I must know your name," she made no move to retract her hand from mine.

"Martin. Martin Chadwick," she nodded with a smile, before standing up and holding out a hand.

“I am pleased to meet you Martin Chadwick,” I took the hand and she shook it gently as I straightened up. “You can call me Angelica.”

We drank coffee and spoke for hours. Well, I drank and she spoke. I have no memory of the words, only that they washed over me like a cleansing wave. The more she spoke the more I wanted to hear and the more I wanted to feel her in my arms. It is only as we stood to leave that my mind clears of the fog and events begin to solidify.

“So Martin Chadwick, would you care to join me for dinner,” her tongue flicked across her lips with a promise of more than dinner.

“I don’t know, it’s late and I have an appointment in the morning,” I wanted to say yes, but I had always thought of myself as a gentleman.

“All I am asking is for a few more hours of your time,” her eyes flashed with the fire and I felt my stomach melt. “After the meal you are free to go, if you so desire,” she reached out and stroked my hand and I nodded.

“Good, pay the cheque and I will get us a cab,” she made her way to the door of the café, seeming to float along the floor, unnoticed by the remaining patrons.

I had never been a man to make rash decisions, but on that night I decided I was in love. What I did not know was that before the night was out our love would be set in the art and that our destiny was to be sealed with blood.

As promised she'd secured us a cab, but upon climbing in I discovered we'd been joined by a stranger. I could not tell whether it was a man or woman, dressed in rags and covered in grime. I hung back for a moment, unsure of the new turn in events and feeling the tug of hesitation in my gut.

“Martin, get in and shut the door,” Angelica ordered in a tone as smooth as velvet and all trepidation fell away. “Can you not see that the poor girl is freezing.” As if on order the filthy urchin began to shiver inside the sodden excuse for clothing.

“Please Sir, the lady has been kind enough to offer me a bed for the night.” Through trembling teeth the young woman (she could have been no older than twenty, but years on the streets had aged her) begged for my agreement and who was I to argue with Angelica’s apparent charitable nature.

“What is your name child?” I climbed into the cab and closed the door behind me and before I'd even sat down we'd pulled out into the road and towards our destination.

“Megan, Sir, but my friends call me Meg.” She held out a grime encrusted hand and, hiding my disgust, I took it and gave it a gentle shake. “You two are the kindest people I have ever met.” She smiled and I got a view of her mouth, missing teeth and swollen gums caused my stomach to churn.

“Do you not think that she is a vision of beauty?” Angelica brushed a hand through Megan's matted hair, pulling the girl's head back as it snagged and revealing row upon row of ground in grime on her neck.

“I can't say that I do.” I meant no offence, but I saw nothing but common ugliness.

“You must picture past the street dirt that shadows what is underneath,” Angelica said, removing her hand from Megan's hair and stroking the young woman's cheek.

“You don't have to defend me Miss, many a man has paid good coin to partake of me.” Megan glared at me with bloodshot eyes.

“I am not trying to defend you my dear, but Martin has been rude and I think that I must show him how wrong he is.” Angelica pulled Megan to her breast and hugged her protectively. “When we get home, we will have to prove what a bath and a new dress can do for you.” From the cradle of Angelica's arms Megan smiled and I inwardly cringed at the repulsiveness of her haggard mouth.

Megan slept in Angelica's embrace until, half an hour later, the cab pulled up outside a large house – although it would be better described as a mansion - and the gates swung open on a grinding mechanism that screeched into the darkness like the howl of a banshee.

Angelica thanked the driver without paying and he doffed his cap at her “Good evening M'lady.” With that he pulled the cab around the driveway and exited the gates as they shrieked closed behind him.

Megan had yet to awake and as we approached the front doors they swung open and she passed the sleeping body of Megan across to the old man who stood waiting for us.

“I’m sorry Madam, I did not realise you planned on entertaining tonight,” he said, lowering his eyes away from those of his lady and stepping back into the hallway with Megan weighing him down.

“Run the girl a bath and sort her out something more suitable to wear,” said Angelica as the old butler stepped aside and bade us enter.

“Anything else Madam?” He still refused to look her in the eye.

“No, I will see to Martin here, just have the girl join us in the living room when she is ready.” She breezed past him and headed along the hallway with me in tow.

The living room turned out to be more like a library, one wall filled with books. The lower shelves were stacked with authors not quite to my taste, Stoker, Shelly, Poe, Lovecraft and even The Marquis de Sade.

I noted that some of the titles were sneered upon by society and not readily available on the open market. I was uncomfortable at being in their presence and the feeling was intensified by the titles of further bound volumes. Words such as magic, black, orgies, damned and necro shone in gold leaf from the spines, flickering in the light from the fireplace that roared with heat at the far side of the room.

“I see you admire literature,” Angelica said.

Whilst I had glanced over the fearful tomes she had poured two glasses of an almost black beverage.

“I wouldn’t go as far as to say admire,” I said, taking a step away from the bookcase, my attention fixed upon the glowing word ‘Cthullu’.

“I see you are familiar with the work of Mr Lovecraft,” she said before drinking from her glass, the liquid clinging to her lips which she licked away seductively. “He wrote those specifically for me before he died, such a feeble man, but he understood how to work the art.” I had no idea what she was talking about, but her voice had once again entranced me with its velvet tone.

She handed one of the glasses over to me and I took it with a mumbled thank you, unsure of what was happening to me as she stared deep into me. I looked at the contents of the glass and sniffed, the aroma was bitter yet laced with exotic spice. She touched the

bottom of the glass and moved it towards my lips and, without further urging, I sipped of the unknown.

The taste was indescribable, but I will do my best. It entered the mouth cold and harsh on the tongue, almost burning as it sat in my mouth. Then the warmth began to grow and, although impossible, cooled away the fire that had threatened to have me gagging. The spice was noticeable, but below that, hidden under the cinnamon was a taste that I can only call metallic. Coppery yet sweet and with the consistency of treacle.

I swallowed and it coursed down my throat with a warming glow that has never been matched since. No sooner had it hit my stomach than it rushed to my head, chasing away all fears and doubts about my hostess and blurring the edges of my vision with a rose tinted haze.

By the time Megan rejoined us my glass was empty and I was in the most relaxed state of mind I'd ever experienced. The rose tinted hue had now invaded my entire vision and my surroundings had taken on an atmosphere of security I felt I'd never want to lose.

The butler entered the room first and bowed his head slightly. "Madam and Sir, may I introduce Miss Megan Reilly," he announced and, with a flourish of his arm, she walked into the room.

Angelica had been right, with a little water and the right attire it was as if I was looking at a totally different person.

"You see Martin, did I not say she was a true beauty?" Angelica seemed to move across the room in the blink of an eye (at the time I blamed the drink, but now I know so much better) and was stood behind Megan with a fresh glass. "Drink my dear; you have some catching up to do."

"Graham, would you be as kind as to prepare the gallery," she said, turning to the old man and he nodded as he closed the door.

We sat on the rug in front of the fire as Megan greedily drank the glass empty, her eyes glazing over before she got as far as running her tongue around the inside of the glass.

“I really like the new dress Miss Angelica,” Megan said as she placed the glass on the hearth and leant back into the deep fur of the rug. “I feel like a real lady.” The last word was no more than a whisper as her eyes closed and she once again fell asleep.

“Pick her up and follow me,” Angelica ordered as she retrieved the girl's empty glass and threw it into the fireplace, the flames jumping to life and I swear I saw beastly figures dancing within the orange, yellow and reds.

“Where are we going?” I ask despite having no real care for the answer as I scooped Megan up into my arms.

“The gallery of course.” Angelica stroked Megan’s now glossy hair and the young woman moaned erotically from her slumber enveloped mind. “It is about time I show you my art.”

She led the way along the entrance hall, lit by candles in majestic holders that only just forced back the darkness of night. Cobwebs littered the furniture and the dust sat inches thick, unmoved by our passing.

Under normal circumstances I would have been disturbed by the lack of cleanliness, but a mixture of Angelica’s presence and the drink that still held warm to the lining of my stomach and mind had left me numb to the emotion of fear. The rosy haze that filled my vision had doubled and the already shadow drowned walls had taken on a deep red shade, as if I'd been draped with veil of darkest crimson.

The hallway came to end and we were faced with three doors and Angelica opened the smallest, ducking slightly as she entered the room beyond.

“This way Martin, my sweet,” Angelica said, facing me. Her face appeared to sneer at me somewhere below the façade that was here smile, an almost glimpse of something that dwelt within her skin, but was usually hidden from mortal eyes.

“What is this gallery?” I asked, suffering a moment of clarity washed over me with a bowel loosening dread.

“Do not worry yourself, you will be safe,” she said and the dread was blanketed by a new wave of peaceful calm as she touched my face with her fingertips, running the nails along my cheek and down around my lips. “But we must hurry, my love, the time for the art is crucial.”

I smiled and kissed her fingers before she could remove them and she moved deeper into the room and out of sight.

“This way.” Her voice teased from the blackness and I stepped forward to find that she'd descended a steep staircase and was stood at the base and looking up at us.

The basement, or gallery as she has always insisted on calling it was brightly lit by a candelabra that hung from a beam in the centre of the ceiling, hundreds of tiny black candles burning away and dripping slow moving wax onto the tiled floor.

I stood at the bottom of the stairs with Megan in my arms and surveyed the walls and the artwork that adorned them. Stretched heavy canvases; leathery in texture, hung on every available space. The thick material carved with symbols and dreamscapes beyond the imagination. I let my eyes dwell on each one only for a moment before moving onto the next scene of unthinkable savagery.

“Bring her over here.” I was drawn away from the art and my attention was pointed towards the table that sat just beyond the centre of the room. “Lay here down and we can begin.”

A tiny part of my mind tried to rebel against the suggestion, rationally attempting to tell me that things down here were far from alright, but my fog drugged brain ignored the warning and I approached Angelica.

“Place her head at that end,” she said.

As instructed I lay her down on the gleaming table of steel, her head to the far end and tilted slightly back.

“Good.” With skilful purpose Angelica strapped Megan's feet into place before moving upwards a strap at a time.

I did not move whilst Angelica carried out her work, frozen by God knows what as she cut away the satin gown and disposed of it in a corner. Megan continued to moan under her breath, her eyelids flickering and a frown creasing her forehead as her naked skin came into contact with the table under her back.

She never regained full consciousness as Angelica worked the art into her bare flesh, only whimpering slightly (in what seemed joy) as the blade dug in between her breasts.

With the skill of Picasso Angelica transformed Megan from the normality of the mundane into something so much more. As I watched in what should have been horror, but what was awe, the warmth in my gut doubled and the fuzziness in my mind finally cleared and I saw what was to become my life. With each cut of the knife the truth of Angelica's words came to me. Megan truly could be made beautiful when placed in the right hands.

Blood flowed from every cut, seeping over Megan's pale skin and down onto the table only to collect in troughs around the edge and run towards her feet. At the end of the table the life blood gurgled down a drain hole and gathered in a bottle sat on the floor. A bottle that matched that of which I'd drunk the contents earlier in the night.

When she'd completed the art she stepped back and nodded in satisfaction at what she'd created. Laid out, her lips blue and her skin white Megan still groaned in ecstasy, squirming within the constraints of the straps as if at the peak of pleasure.

"You see Martin, I have given her in death what she never had in life," she said, leaning down and kissing the girl softly on the lips. "I have given her happiness and the chance to live forever in my gallery." She turned the knife in her hands and offered me the handle.

"What?" I uttered only that single word.

"The art is complete," Angelica said, taking my hand and placing the knife in my palm. "You must finish her and then we can have dinner."

I did as Angelica asked and we've been together ever since. Years have passed since that first night and the art, although I still do not know how it works, has helped me retain my youth on the outside, but on the inside I have grown old and I tire of what now seems an endless life.

Tonight is special and I know that my love is as excited as I am at the work ahead. Our guests are in the room above awaiting the main course, and their introduction to the art, but first we must ready ourselves and then we can invite them down.

I have drunk heavily this evening and like so many years ago it has vanquished the demons of doubt and fear, but somewhere in that rational part of my mind I regret what we have done together. That part of my mind wants to beg for forgiveness, but I am too far gone to receive redemption.

Tonight will be her grandest work, she has promised me that.

As she begins I feel a twinge of sorrow at this being our last supper. But as the cold steel of her artist's tool sinks into my chest the regrets are taken away by the pleasure of the art, by the pleasure of the pain.