

Further Complications

Introduction

Written by Robert K. Bishop

Illustrated by Robert Bishop

Transcribed by guardian46w

Back again, eh? Ah ye of simple tastes and rinocerous-like hides. I had not thought to encounter such teeth-gritting diligence or such sphinx like indifference to pain. Surely some of you must read without moving your lips or have proclivities to some tome, work, or book effusing some thought or deed more suitable for transcription into that nobley sophisticated and shriekingly perverse language of the Englanders than the Varied Boondoggles of the Bunz. Not so! you reply, and that had better not be the goddamed case after I've coughed up six fuckin' beans for this goddamed rag! A carbuncle here, an sic there, but other than that, no real gripes.

The purpose of this (hopefully) brief prologue is not so much to flay the sensibilities and impugne the general intelligence of those wicked enough to see the wench of my own private dreamings thrashed to within an inch of her life and/or lashed into a packet the size of what now passes for a grapefruit as to pass on to those wretched enough (or lucky enough, depending on your point of view) not to have espied this thing's progenitors. Of which there are two. So far. The next time we see each other it'll be three. Like my math?

The first two books were, true to Bishop Form, bound and printed thrashings around in the dark looking for the Premise. For those of you wholly untutored in the writing shtick, Da Premise is da thing ya hang the whole damned story on. Those of you more familiar with past efforts of mine are thus intimately aware of what stories with NO premise look like, so the first two books shouldn't spring any unpleasant surprises on you - just wretched excess and aimless floundering.

Howsoever, with this third blunder out from beneath the presses the way has been seen. Towards what I still don't quite know, but something may be shaping up. But of course that's what I've been telling myself for the last seven years.

At any rate... The first two books introduced the normal complement of Bishop loons besides, of course, Our Heroine (I have a horrible itchy urge to spell that huron every time I get backed into using it). For the sake of brevity I won't probe too deeply into Fanni (we'll see if you catch it*) but will, huzzahs, deal with rather more detail with the others. In order of importance, we'll start with the Bad Guys. First, there's Eaza Ferret, an Englishman. Sort of. Cadaverous, homely and lecherous as a mink. A brain the size of a walnut - just smart enough to be dangerous. Segundo, we have A. Gorila, an expatriate east 'European of neanderthaler muscles and sesame-seed intellect. The two of them are a team: A. Gorilla cleans pipes with Easa Ferret and the latter wakes the former every

morn with a .44 Magnum - it takes a substantial clank on the gourd to penetrate through 4 inches of bone and get the attention of that little speck of brain.

The Madame has been around since Stonehenge. Her clientele, referred to cleverly as "the old man" remains the substantial enigma in the first book, appearing chiefly as a shadowy and distinctly unscrupulous business-type who, as Book One opens, has his own daughter snatched by Madame's little helpers (see above) and bundled off in gags and binds in profusion to learn that it's really not nice to tell daddy to fuck off and perhaps more germane to daddy's purposes to keep her out of his harried hair.

Madame, as part of the price of the conversion of the daughter to slave, has pounced on the idea of using the kidnap as a ploy to ensnare her good and most loathed enemy Fanni. To this end the old man calls our huron (sorry about that) starts the proverbial ball to flattening.

As the story unfolds, Fanni has a small but nasty talk with one of Madame's erstwhile belongings and after some suitable persuasion finds out where the old man's brat is being attended to. The brat at issue is meantime being subjected to rather a lot of indignity, to put it somewhat mildly. Two thousand rope-and- whip marks later, the child (Alissa, by name) has miraculously transformed into - you guessed it - a slave warm and sweet enough to warm the cockles of her father's heart. And other parts of Madame. As the story ends, we find our Buns in the act of succoring her and dangling Madame from the ceiling when, surprise, surprise, the kid picks up a wood stool and gives Fanni a good clout over the ear. Madame is pleased.

The second book parallels the first to an extent but this time Fanni is the one in the bind (literally). The new slave Alissa proves, however, to be nearly as rebellious under Madame as she was under daddy and both she and Fanni pay the cost dearly from time to time. Eaza Ferret has been booted off to the English countryside and A. Gorila enters the story as rather more than the eye and nose would have suspected... at first.

Along the way Fanni meets a visiting British MI-6 secret agent hero looking for a bunch of Enfield 4.85mm assault-shooters which, as fortune would have it, Alissa has seen through a spy-hole as Madame was conducting a wee deal with samplings of those types not particularly off-put by violence substantial and red-colored. Goddamn, I should be a writer. This is good! A chivalrous man, he thanks her for the information, stuffs the gag back into her mouth and gets back to the serious business of rape. Promises to keep in touch.

The tale ends with Madame haring off to a secret midnight meeting in something vaguely resembling a Hughes 500 with Fanni packaged up at her side. One should always travel with a few toys. Unfortunately for the both of them, the old man's intelligence net had been making little inquiries into the nationality and politics of her early-morning clients (she got the guns from him) and discovered that their political sciences classes hadn't contained much about the wonders of capitalism. In short, they was dirty commie rats and the old man was pissed.

Fanni is pleasantly sucking on another gag while Madame gets down to business when the old man's storm troopers ring on the doorbell, wipe their feet on the mat and proceed to shoot the shit out of all of them. Madame excluded. Revenge-time.

As Madame and Fanni and the heavies are wafted gently into the night, we fade out as Mr. MI-6 squints through a night-sight and calls somebody. Anybody?

So there you have it, kiddies, the first two installments of a Bishop dirge that might well last into infinity if the pencil doesn't break and the old melon doesn't go 'straight'. Good Christ, could you imagine that, ME drawing nice clean dirty pictures?!

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Part One

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The dimensions of the nightmare were becoming more ominous if not more specific as to the players themselves, Fanni mused. Certainly she'd been the bearer of restraints and gags and blindfolds on numerous other occasions but always within the rather clubish realm of her perennial and seemingly infinite adversary relationship with the Madame. The new players were not a part of the club. Or nice. At all. Her fear this time 'round was quite genuine; her mind's-eye image of the effects of several 32-round .45 caliber magazines hosed into the bodies of the Madame's erstwhile business associates established a singularly potent and very possibly lethal future contingency for herself and the Madame bound and gagged beside her.

The helicopter bumped and jangled and clawed its way through a storm that had assumed Herculean proportions since their liftoff. Time, as before, became irrelevant in her stifled blindness. She and Madame, scrunched side by side in the back of the ship, thumped and banged together as the flyer flung itself through the maelstrom. The killers and the crew were nearly as blind as their hooded captives but for the baleful eyes of the instruments glowering out a dim red gloom. The pilot fought and cursed. The killers said nothing.

The landing seemed more like a controlled (barely) crash than anything the FAA would have approved, Fanni thought. At least they were down, she hoped; surface winds tore at the ship like giant hands; almost she could envision the helicopter rolling endlessly end-over-end like a paper cup she'd once seen careening down a street during a New York squall. An especially violent push literally tipped the thing up on one end. There was a shout from the front of the helicopter, at once an oath and a cry of fear and the side door near Fanni was thrown open by one of the men leaping out, nearly knocking Fanni out with him. A wall of wind and rain as hard as shotgun pellets drove her back against Madame's shoulder. Almost, Fanni was glad of the blindfold to protect her eyes. Her cheeks and chin and belly were scalded by the assault before the door was slammed closed. The drops in their millions slammed into the hull and through the din she could only just barely hear voices, and clanking through the metal as the ship was tied down. They'd made it this far it appeared. What next?

The door on the lee-side of the helicopter scraped open and there was more clumping and scraping as gear was removed and the killers left with it.

"What the hell's this! Who the hell are they!?" was the voice, torn into almost instant incoherence by the wind blaring past the hull. She couldn't hear the reply. "Christ, we don't have anyplace to put 'em..." the voice started. The pilot was shouting something about taking them to wherever the original destination was to be when the storm quit or at least let up. He sounded somewhat desperate; orders were orders but one tended to



develop a certain attachment to the vagaries of life after awhile and flying conditions were not exactly encouraging.

The voice seemed to mull that over a bit. "Fuck. All right. Bring 'em in. Shit." Whoever he was, he wasn't pleased. Fanni could hear him shouting other instructions from a growing distance. Busy, busy, busy, she thought.



"All out, ladies," said the pilot. "Gonna have to leave the blindfolds on; security and all that; wouldn't want you to see anything you'd have to get shot over, ha ha." His little joke for the night. Madame went first, sliding over the seat to the edge, where the pilot or somebody turned her feet to the entrance and guided them to the pavement. It was Fanni's turn next; hands on her arms turned her back towards the open door and she was

drawn, leather pants sliding slick as glass over the nylon seat covering, to stand, finally, next to Madame covering from the godawful weather. Stumbling and teetering, they were pushed, splashing and soaked to the skin, across whatever expanse it was that provided the landing field and beneath what sounded like a sheet of tin roofing, there to stand dripping and miserable as somebody fumbled with a ring of keys. The door finally succumbed to their guide's ministrations and a light switch was flipped.

"Need any more help?" A new voice. Another man. "Nah, I'll take it from here." The pilot, again. "Make sure the ship's down tight. I'll get on the horn to the Old Man and explain the situation as soon as I've got these two settled in for the night. I don't think we're gonna get out of here before morning." The other man left, running through the puddles and dodging the drops. Another joke.

One by one, Madame and Fanni were drawn into the room behind the door, into warmth and shelter and seated in chairs separated across the room. Fanni slumped, chin on knees, draining a huge puddle onto the floor.

"Can't have the new toys catching their deaths of cold," the pilot quipped. "Can't have that at all. Come on, lassy," he concluded. Madame gave a small groan behind her gag as she was hefted and half-dragged across the floor and into another room. A door slammed and Fanni was alone. Reflexively she squirmed against the links at her elbows and wrists but they appeared to be thoroughly waterproof and weren't loosened an iota. She could still walk with the hobble, but blinded by the band over her eyes, what would be the

use? She sat and dripped and began shivering. A long time later, the man returned. "Now for you, dove." They passed through several doors before stopping. The last one was slammed and locked with a key from the inside. She heard it clink as he put it back into his pocket. Sounded like one; not on a ring. He stopped her and then, stooping quickly, bound her ankles together with a strap. Fanni experienced a moment of panic as she came near to losing her balance and taking a bad header. Then, using the small keys no doubt plucked from Madame, he unlocked first the glittery collar and then the similarly endowed crotch strap that held her wrists in such tight union with her bottom. For the first time in many hours she could actually bend forward from the waist.

The gag was pried out of her mouth next, then her wrists were released followed by the blindfold's being ripped away from her eyes. A bare 500-watt bulb aimed directly at her face after the hours of enforced darkness almost caused her to scream in pain and she frantically screwed shut her eyes and reached hopelessly around the sides of her body with her still-bound arms. The man's timing was impeccable: just as her defensive reflex towards her eyes was at its peak, he loosed the ring joining her elbows and her hands shot up and to the mark. Their trusty pilot obviously had more than a little experience in dealing with slaves; at no point had she had the slightest opportunity to lash out or, in fact, to resist in more than a token way.

The light was snapped off to reveal a normal degree of illumination in the room. Small, with only a single door to break up the expanse of walls but for several towels and what looked like Madame's clothing lying strewn on the floor, it reminded Fanni of a secretary's office or anteroom of some sort. She wasn't allowed much more time to speculate.

"Strip," was the command. The pilot was large; not so big as Gorilla, but more than casually imposing under the circumstances. He looked prepared for a struggle and appeared vaguely disappointed when she shrugged her shoulders and complied. The leather came off like a sodden second skin. She dropped the top on the floor and stood, hands on hips, looking at him.

"I can't get the pants off over the boots," she finally commented.

"That's all right, just roll 'em down to your knees," was the rebuttal. "I expected some resistance, lass; your friend in there put up quite a brawl."

Fanni smiled ruefully. "Yes. Knowing Madame, I expect she did. However..." she sighed, pushing down the by now rather resistant leather, "... being essentially a pragmatist and in view of how big and strong you so obviously are-and having my feet tied together-I decided why get any more bruises?" She gave him a dazzling smile and, with a flourish, tugged the pants down snug to the tops of her boots and again put her hands on her hips.

The man's stare was suspicious; he had a sneaking hunch she was blatantly putting him on. "What's next?" she chirped. The pilot was very cautious now. He threw her a damp towel from the pile left over from Madame's escapade and indicated that she should dry herself. Bliss indeed, after the eternity of being lashed and then soaked. The rough towel left her scrubbed pink when she was done.

The man walked around behind her. "Put your hands behind your back. Palm to palm." With a small grimace, Fanni obeyed. Several loops of thin, tough twine tied her hands together and were then cinched. Another loop of twine went around her upper arms, just below the elbows. When he was finished, her elbows were once again touching. From the cinch between, the cord was then run around her arms and chest below her breasts and then back again. That done, a final loop was drawn up and around her throat and tied off. Fanni teetered and vainly tried to blow errant strands of hair out of her face.

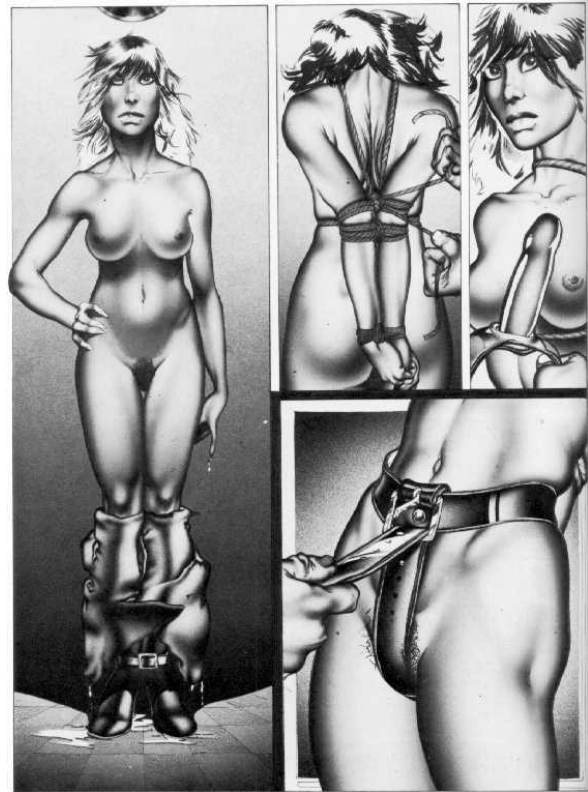
The final tie, if it could be characterized as that, began as a two-inch-wide leather strap that buckled around her waist and locked at the back. Depending from the front center of the belt was a long strap that dangled nearly to the floor. Lifting the end, he threaded a loop at the end of a dildo of moderate dimensions and brought it up towards the lips of her sex. He paused and gave her a sharp glance, almost as if he expected her to pass out at the sight of the thing. She looked back with a level stare, then turned her head indolently to the side and gazed at the ceiling. The lady couldn't care less was the effect on the pilot. More and more, he didn't know what to think about this one. Ah well, just keep her tied good and tight and let the Old Man have her. His bother. He was just a working stiff.

She obligingly opened her knees for the insertion. Once the dildo was home, the end of the strap was threaded through the tiny gap left between the striated wrists and run forward back through the loop and up Fanni's belly to be fitted to a lock-buckle. About a foot of strap remained to stick out before her like a tongue. Fanni looked down at her degradation and then at the man. "A chastity belt. With a difference," he mumbled.

He opened the door with the key then and brought in a small stool and placed it behind her thighs. Fanni sat very gingerly. Another strap pinned her legs together just above her knees and the man then finally removed the pants and her boots and dried her lower legs. Each tiny movement of the process intensified the experience wakening between her legs. Wily bastard, she thought. Why would she need a chastity belt?

He made her stand then and walk as well as she was able with her knees pinned together through the doorway and down a short corridor to a steel door with a small shock-glassed window inset into its center. The door was slightly ajar. The pilot cursed and ran and threw it open and disappeared inside, leaving Fanni to shamble along in his wake.

"Tyler, you sonofabitch, what are you doing in here?" was the exclamation that boomed out the door. Fanni inched her way closer. What was going on? "I just wanted to get an eyeful of the new catch," came a lecherously cheerful reply just as Fanni came round the



door. "You've got two of them!" was the incredulous response. The newcomer was grinning from ear to ear. "Hot DAMN." His gaze was totally unaffected in its genuine enjoyment of the spectacle Fanni must have provided as she lurched in, all curves and rope, the strap disappearing between her legs. "Goddamn, George, we are going to have one hell of a good time tonight," he said, almost licking his lips in anticipation. Fanni was near blushing from the stare.

George walked very close to Tyler and stood glaring down at him. "You aren't having any fun with these two, Tyler. Not tonight; not ever! You know the Old Man's policies on his private property: you can look all you want, but touch only if you don't really care about living much past then!"

Tyler seemed mollified, but only barely. "Come on, George. Who the hell is gonna know? Jesus, man, they're gonna be nothing more than sex slaves for the rest of their lives; getting fucked by anybody who can afford to buy 'em or rent the service from whoever the Old Man sells them to...."

"They'd know!" George roared, pointing at the girls. "You don't think they'd go whining to the Old Man if he warmed up to one of 'em?! He keeps some of the little bitches for his personal use, you know!" Tyler's expression seemed to indicate that he didn't. Until then. George paused, seemingly for breath. He spoke again, slowly and quietly. "You are a stupid, stupid shit, Tyler. Remember your old buddy, R.J.? Hhmm? Remember that little broad he used a couple years ago? Turned out she'd been a virgin and the Old Man was giving her to one of those crazy Arab fuckers who had a real thing about his women being 'pure'. I had a long little talk with the Old Man and a couple of his enforcers after that; I didn't know if I was coming out of there alive. He thought it was me because I'd flown her out. Well, I'll tell ya, Tyler, you little fuck, it didn't take much time for me to tell him who it really was!" Tyler was going a little green around the gills.

"Wonder where old R.J. is these days?" George guffawed. "Maybe he's down in Acapulco sipping drinks by the pool and grabbing ass!" George howled with glee.

"You mean the Boss..." Tyler began.

"I don't mean anything," injected George. "Think it out for yourself, dork. Now get the hell out of here; I've got to get this new one trussed up and get some sleep tonight."

Tyler regarded Fanni with a peculiar expression as George sat her down on the edge of a bed, then walked out the door, pausing to turn and give her a wink as he disappeared from view. She didn't think George's little lecture had been entirely successful; she had suspicions that she'd be seeing Mr. Tyler again. Goody. That's all she needed.

As George attended to the binding of her feet, Fanni looked over his back at Madame, bound into a neatly curled package on the opposite bed. It was going to be a long night, she thought, if her position ended up like that of Madame.

It was. With Fanni's knees and ankles bound to his satisfaction, George put a huge hand at the base of her neck and one beneath her knees and brought her thighs up to her chest. He then bound her in that position with a short cord joining her throat rope to those around her knees. He then rolled her over on the bed so that she was kneeling with her heels dug into her butt and linked her wrists to her ankles with another length of cord. When the last knot was done, Fanni was laced into a compact ball, totally unable

even to twitch. Another cord went from her throat to a ring set into the wall next to the bed. Ridiculous, she thought. The swine was a professional. Taking no chances. She decided that wasn't fair.

He sat next to her then and propped her up against his side. The gag was a huge ball, black and glistening. He wedged it into her mouth and strapped it tight. As an added embellishment, he wrapped the lower half of her face with a soft, black length of rubber strapping that completely hid the ball and forced it deeper into her mouth. Madame stared morosely over her wadding at Fanni's silencing. "Don't want you guys planning any sly tricks in the night, now, do we?" George observed.

Standing, he rolled her onto her side so that she faced Madame and they regarded each other across the gulf of the room, the only method of communication left between them being their eyes and whatever tiny gestures they could convey. Madame's was that of fury bound and gagged into submission. Fanni's was that of the long-suffering, infinitely patient victim who knows that things will probably improve and that in the meantime, one might as well not be any more uncomfortable than necessary. She had hopes for Tyler's return. She saw possibilities with him; none with George. The latter walked to Madame and inspected the bindings, then turned for a last look at Fanni, yawned a conspicuous yawn and walked out of the room, snapping off the light as he left. The door locked with a dull and solid thump.

Instantly, Madame was a flurry of almost infinitely small motions that were all her spider's web of cords would allow. Fanni would have smiled but for the huge ball packed into her mouth. Madame was always a sore loser. Fanni closed her eyes and slipped in and out of a doze, not comfortable enough to truly sleep, but by sheer willpower able to extract some respite from the recent labors. She had to be ready for whatever came.

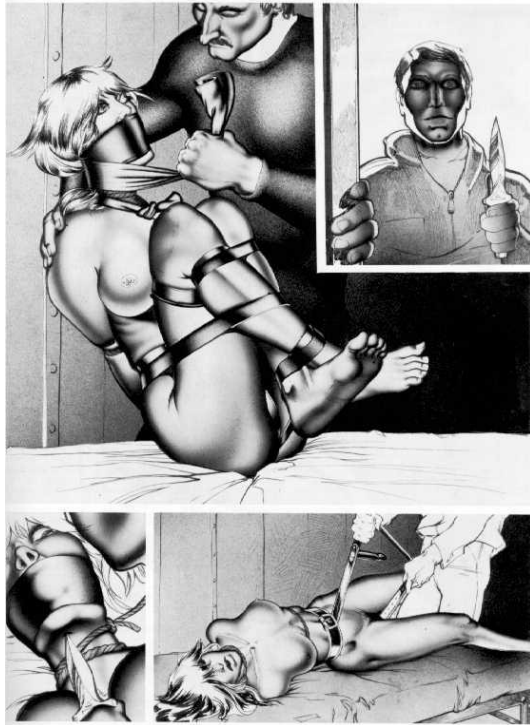
"Hi-there, sweetypie," was the whisper in her ear. She'd been semi-conscious and hadn't heard the door open. Tyler. At her service. Madame seemed to be asleep; probably exhausted fighting the ropes. "I decided to come round and try to make your little stay a lot more pleasant," he continued. His voice was slurred; he'd been drinking. So much the better, Fanni hoped. She'd read him right, after all.

He sat down beside her and ran a fingertip down her arm from the shoulder, crossing to her hip, and traced a continuous line down to her toes, pausing momentarily at each band of cord sinking into her skin. All the while he hummed a tuneless little tune, like Gorilla.

He pulled a large knife from a pocket and opened it and ran the tip down the softness of her cheek and out onto the expanse of rubber sealing the gag. "Pretty" he almost crooned. "Very, very nice." He reached around behind her head and slit the cord tethering her to the wall, then drove the knife into the wall above her with a thunk.

He began turning her over and around like a child's doll, nipping at her shoulders and buttocks, licking her toes; biting the tip of her nose. He was becoming excited to a greater and greater degree.

He yanked the knife out of the wall and placed the point hard under the tip of her nose and lifted. Fanni jerked back her head, but the point followed. Tyler grabbed her mane and held her head still, pushing a little more insistently with the blade. "I'm takin' off the gag and you don't scream, right?" Fanni frantically nodded fractionally; the knife was still



pressing hard. Yes, yes, she yelped into the gag. "No noise, not a fuggin' sound," he continued, lowering the knife, then jerked it back within inches of her face. "Or ya get this, ya little cunt," he rasped. "Unnerstan'?" More nodding and gagged assurances of cooperation. "Awright."

He peeled off the rubber strap, unbuckled the ball and pulled it from her mouth with an audible pop. Fanni worked her jaw back and forth to relieve strain, but almost immediately her lips were again sealed by Tyler's mouth, tongue hot and insistent on hers as she opened her mouth to accept him. She moaned in her throat, attacking him with matched intensity.

"Oh, God, take me, take me for God's sake," she groaned when they broke. "I've had this dildo in me for hours. God, I can't take

anymore. Please! Help me!"

"How the hell can I do anythin' with you all trussed up that way?" he challenged, but the tone of his voice belied his ignorance of a solution.

"Untie me," Fanni whispered, sensuous and breathing into his ear. "I love being tied when I'm balling," she said. "You don't even have to untie me all the way, just my legs and maybe the rope on my elbows. You could spread my ankles to the end of the bed and fuck me all you wanted. Please!" She was almost in tears.

"Hell, I don't have to do all that shit," he said. "All I have to do is untie your ankles and spread 'em; I've had other broads with their knees tied to their chins...."

"But what about the belt?" she interrupted. "The lock's at the front and you won't be able to get at it with my legs up. Please, Tyler, I'll give you anything you want...." Tears were now running down her cheeks. "Then when you're done, you can put the dildo back in and tie me back up all nice and tight and put the gag back in my mouth and nobody'll know the difference. Nobody!" She was sobbing now. Tyler was thinking hard. He and R.J. had been pretty close friends. Fanni softly, insistently kissed his face, leech-like, not to be denied, her tears running down his face, now. "And I'm not a virgin," she whispered.

Tyler leaned back to full arm's-length and gave her a slow and nasty smirk. Deep throaty laughter bubbled up and burst from his lips as a quickly snaffled hoot followed by a much less successfully muffled belch. "GodDAMN, honey, you're hot to trot," followed by an instantly suspicious but quickly fading leer. The smirk was back.

He stumbled back from the bed and took a protracted suck from his beer. He thumped it down on the floor and again dragged out the knife. "Oh, I am gonna fuck you, lady," he mumbled to himself, snickering punctuated with more and smaller belches.

The first cord to go was the one holding her wrists to her ankles. She couldn't move her legs. The knees/throat line came next and she was free to straighten her legs, but again

her body failed her. Tyler solved the problem by dragging her legs out extended towards the floor off the side of the bed. Fanni clenched her teeth, then bit her lip to stifle the cry of pain that welled up in her throat. Tyler fell upon her, grasping and stroking her breasts, kissing and licking and groping for her leather-clad crotch. "The key, the fuggin' key," he said, rummaging in his pockets. "Where the fuck... ah, gotcha." The key was found. Fanni ran her legs back and forth in the grip of the cords. The numbness had been replaced by tingles.

Tyler had the key in his meaty little fist and was looking down at her with a dumb expression on his face. He looked perplexed. He was looking at her legs. He bumped it back into his pocket and went for the bands on her legs. They still tingled agonizingly when they fell apart. Tyler was getting more and more fucked up. She didn't have any time left. Tyler picked up his beer and a handful of short rope and waved the cords toward the foot of the bed.

"The strap, honey," Fanni breathed. "The strap. Once you've got my legs tied, it's going to be hard to get off." She leaned forward and rubbed her face along his arm.

"That's a good little lass; always thinkin'," he agreed, putting down the rope and barging his fingers around in the pocket. Fanni leaned back with her head to the wall as he danced the point of the key around the tiny opening of the lock. He finally had to set down the beer as well and lean over her to match key to hole. The lock's release was a miniscule click. For Fanni it was the penultimate step in the plan.

Tyler held up the dildo, wet and shiny from its recent home and looked from it to her. "Make way for daddy," he grinned, then stood and leaned his head back to empty the beer. He should have taken lessons from George.

The heel of Fanni's right foot shot straight to his crotch with a solid thump and the man snapped forward at the waist, beer asprayed over Fanny and the wall. The next blow, not as well aimed as the first, caught him at the bridge of the nose and slammed him across the room and over Madame's curled form to bash the back of his head into the concrete. He sat slumped over Madame for a second as his eyes rolled back into his head, then slowly, limply, slid to the floor in a heap.

Fanni was instantly in motion, hiking herself up onto her knees and aiming herself with looks over her shoulder. The knife was imbedded in the wall roughly at the same level as her elbows. Fortunately, very fortunately, the blade edge was aligned vertically; had it been horizontal, things would have looked pretty bleak.

Her wrists wouldn't reach from her kneeling position courtesy of the cords pinning her arms to her back, so she had to stand and carefully, carefully spread her hands and lower them astraddle the blade. When the bundle of cording that comprised the cinch butted up against the target, she shifted her weight cautiously against the knife's hilt and pressed it hard into the wall to steady it as she sawed away. The knife was not exactly the sharpest she'd ever encountered; time was fast bounding away. Tyler still lay like a lump on the floor. Fanni sawed furiously.

Her elbows were the next absolutely crucial step after the line on her wrists eventually parted; she was as effectively bound with her elbows banded together as with her wrists. The knife slipped precipitously as she lowered herself and for a livid second she'd

thought she'd lost it. It stopped, bent at an acute angle towards the floor, but still in the wall. Quickly but carefully, she lifted the end back to the horizontal and pushed it in as hard as she could, then resumed the attack at the ropes. Her legs were trembling from the awkward bent angle they'd been forced to maintain to hold her at the right height when her arms finally, agonizingly fell down to her sides. She slumped on the bed and wiped the sweat from her face with the back of one hand and stood, stretching and twisting to relieve the strain. Her limbs and body were banded in red where the cords had gnawed at her. She shook her hands and fingers to encourage life and was rewarded with searing tingles. Nothing new there.

Tyler was very still; she hoped she hadn't killed the bastard. A well-aimed stomp to the kidneys produced no movement. He was breathing, though. She bound him and gagged him with the equipage she'd so recently worn, then turned to Madame. Even in the dark of the room, it was glaringly obvious that Madame was wide awake and ready for flight, to judge from the agitated jerks of her head toward her lashings and her muted pleas filtering through the gag.

Fanni walked to her side and regarded her with a baleful eye. "What do you want, lady?" She was still a little out of breath. Madame seemed to go completely out of breath at Fanni's query, eyes huge and glaring over the gag. Furiously, she jerked her head again at her bindings, and then again. Fanni gave her a wan smile and shook her head negatively. "You're just fine the way you are now, sweetheart; you can't cause me any trouble at all and that's the way it's going to stay." She put her finger to her lips at the stifled rancor that now oozed out from behind the wadding and shook her head again, her expression suddenly turning stern. "How'd you like me to run you up to that ring in the ceiling by your hair, dumbass?" she hissed, bending to Madame and pulling a long lock of hair out and up as if in demonstration. Instantly the protests and bitching ceased. The glaring remained undiminished.

Tyler's clothing produced a very convincing Model 29 Smith & Wesson. Six-inch barrel. Huge. Fanni damned near had to heft it with both hands. These little men and their goddamned howitzers, she thought to herself, then slid to the door and pried it open a crack.

The room revealed was huge and lit not very successfully by high overhead fixtures. The expanse was partitioned by line after line of tall metal shelves gleaming a dull gray on the lighted side and sunk into a total black of their own shadows on the other. The spaces between aisles wasn't very great in most cases. Good cover for a bit of reconnoitering. Or for watching for guards.



She turned back to Tyler. Still no movement but for his long breaths. Madame stirred, shifted minutely in her cords. Fanni dragged up Tyler's coat, removed before she'd bound him, and tried it on. The sleeves were caricatures in their excessive length and the entire garment was grossly loose and floppy. Bad for shooting or fighting. She discarded it and took a last look at her captives and returned to the door.

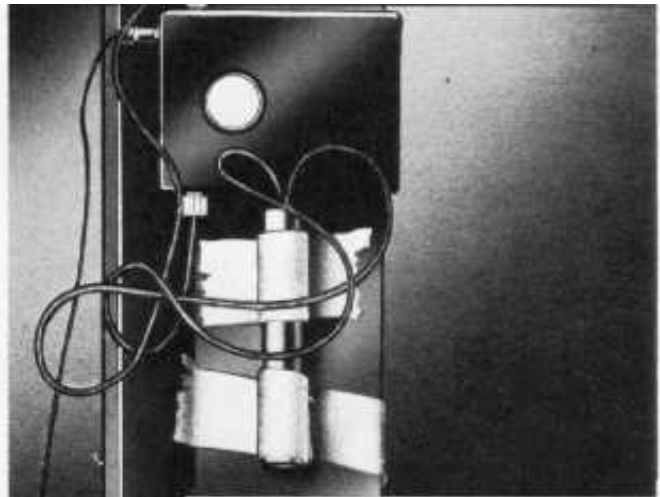
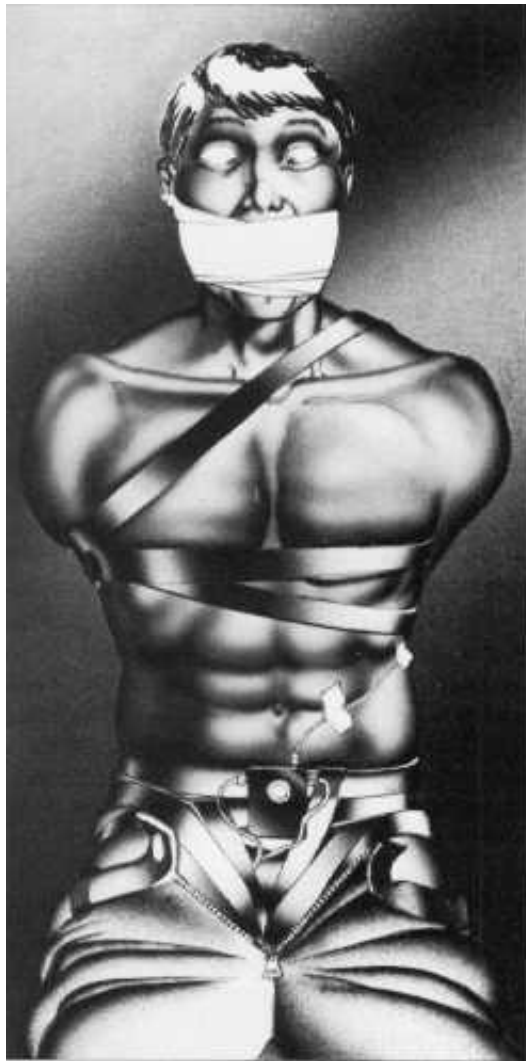
Nothing had moved. She strained her ears out through the crack, concentrating, visualizing the slow unhurried tread of a bored guard; the slight jingling of a dog's leash; a chair being shifted; workers shoving and banging whatever was stored on those shelves. There was nothing but the sound of the rain scrabbling at the roof and a slow dripping somewhere. Where was George?

There was finally nothing for it but to explore. She shoved the door, expecting a squeal that would have been explosive in the stillness, but it glided in and away with an oily smoothness. She stuck her head out just far enough to have a peer at the sides of the walls radiating away from the door. Nothing. More silence and more shelving. The drip was coming from the right. She stepped out into the first corridor of stackings and darted away from the cell and paused, eyes darting, ears searching. Stillness but for her breathing. The air was noticeably cooler out here and she shivered as, naked and marked by the ropes, the huge pistol held before her with both hands, she began a cautious, very cautious circuit of the building.

A short time later she was back sitting at her bed fiddling with a peculiar jumble of straps and buckles she'd assembled from the wares outside. The place was an arsenal! The mystery of the 4.85mm Enfields was solved: they were out there in their shipping boxes along with what appeared to be literally thousands of FALs, MACs, M-60s, G-3s and representatives of virtually every other military small arm in the Western world. A number of 80mm mortar tubes had been stacked like hollow metal logs along one wall. The bipods and bombs were in separate boxes stretching towards the ceiling. MG-3s cluttered the floor. Hundreds of thousands of rounds of ammunition for the various weapons bulked as a lumpish, boxy mountain along another wall. The shelving contained more ammunition, hand grenades by the hundreds in their little styrofoam containers, some of the most sophisticated radio-communication gear she'd ever seen in portable and hand-held configurations, even some of the new man-carried tactical radars, most of them just barely out of development stages at least to the public's knowledge. Fanni was stunned at the display. How was it possible? World War II, Korean and Vietnam-era surplus she could understand, but this lot was all state-of-the-art in most cases, deployed with line troops in Western armies. How the hell... she'd thought as she wandered down the aisles, shaking her head. She glanced down at another of the new surprises awaiting Warsaw Pact tankers: the MBB "Armbrust," and shook her head yet again and held up her contraption. It was a good thing Tyler was still asleep. Fanni hopped off the bed and got to work.

When Tyler came back to the world of the living it was like sticking one's head through a mile-thick layer of oil smoke that thinned and thinned as the surface or top layer came nearer. He saw the light on the ceiling first with the surroundings vignetting into black and then the vignette seemed to drop away and to the floor and the rest of the room began floundering into focus. He was a little sick and there was something in his mouth. Someone was humming his tune and he strained his neck and head to the tone,

blinking his eyes and staring myopically. He shook his head and the thing in his mouth was getting worse and looked again at the sound which had solidified by this time into a human form blurred at the edges swinging something even more blurred back and forth like a metronome. He blinked his eyes again and the form resolved itself into the younger of the two women sitting on the edge of the bed with her head cupped in one hand with the arm propped on her crossed knees and his .44 Magnum dangling, twitching back and forth from the other, the muzzle describing short arcs inches from the floor. Still semi-stupefied he stared at the gun, transfixed by the almost hypnotic reciprocations.



"Good evening, Mr. Tyler," the woman said. And Tyler came out of his daze. And lunged and pulled and thrashed against the ropes. The woman kept humming. The gun had stopped. Suddenly, almost in mid-lunge it seemed, Tyler stopped and panted and chewed on the gag and looked up at her and then down at himself. He could tell he wasn't going anywhere. But there was rather more, as he was discovering.

His pants had been pulled down to his knees and his underwear had been torn off and his groin was festooned with a network of leather straps that wound round his hips and buttocks and between his legs. His penis and testicles were somewhere in the maze. At the front of this arrangement was a small black cyclac-plastic box with two wires, one red and the other blue, disappearing beneath the strapping from its right side and a much thinner bare wire coming out the opposite side and taped to his side and back. At the front of the box was a tiny light. It was off. He looked at it again. Tyler was beginning to have a very, very bad feeling about this.

"Well, I'm certainly glad you've come back to see us," the woman said. "For a while there, I was beginning to despair of you." She stood from the bed, dropping the pistol onto the mattress and walked nearer. "Seen enough?" she asked, indicating the maze with a jut of her chin. He looked down at it, then back up at her. "I just wanted you to know it's there and that it ain't comin' off." He looked up at her, puzzled and afraid. "Now, if you'd be so good as to pay close attention, I'll explain." She gave him a cheery smile and walked out the open cell door to one of the small empty shelves she'd pulled over to a short distance directly in front of the portal.

Something had been taped to one of the legs and this she examined and fiddled with momentarily. She then turned and came back to the cell, stopping first at a fullish shelf out of his sight and picking something out of a cardboard box and holding it carefully in her hand as she re-entered the room. Boy, he thought, this is getting stranger and stranger. The other woman was still just as tightly tied and gagged as when he'd first seen her. He'd thought they were friends, these two, but apparently not. The woman interrupted.

"This, Tyler my good man, is your basic, ordinary, run-of-the-mill blasting cap," she said, sticking the coppery cylinder in his face. He winced away reflexively then gasped as something in the maze poked him. "And this," she continued, "is a little bitty radio transmitter. Two channels." She showed him: a dial that could be turned to either A or B, an On-Off switch and a distinctly ominous red button at the top center of the small metallic rectangle that comprised the transmitter's body. A stubby antenna topped the thing.

"One of these caps has been taped to that shelf-leg out there, as you can see, and just above that is taped another of those cute little transceivers you're wearing." She poked the black box on the maze with one finger. Tyler was beginning to understand. "Now, simply by switching to its transceiver's channel..." she flipped the button to B, "...and by pushing this little button here..."

The patch of tape disappeared into a flash of blinding light and a metallic bang that made his ears ring for minutes after. Where the cap had been was now a baseball-sized dent in the shelf leg which was itself somewhat bent and twisted from the tiny blast. Tyler looked at it and then back at the woman staring down at him.

"You're wearing three of them," she said. As Tyler stiffened and goggled down at his threatened manhood, she continued. "Two up the spout, so to speak, and the third tied along your little pecker. I really do want ours to be a friendly relationship..." (Tyler was very carefully making sure his anus was as unclenched as humanly-and maybe even a little more so-possible) "...and I thought that this might convince you towards a certain degree

of cooperation. If not out-and-out 'terror.'" As he watched, Fanni flicked the channel switch to A and the light on Tyler's transceiver obediently glowed like the eye of an animal, eliciting a muted cry of horror from the man.

"Look at me," she intoned as she walked close and knelt at his side. Tyler remained agog at the light. "Look at me," she said again, evenly. He did then, head jerking, sweat beading on his face. She held up the transmitter and indolently laid her thumb over the button. Tyler's no's were frantic but his eyes never left the button. "Shall we be friends?" she asked. His nods were so violent she thought he'd break his neck.

An hour later and Fanni was once again seated curled on the bed, playing about with the Armbrust. Tyler knew next to nothing. She'd watched him like a hawk, sensitive to the slightest waver in the fabric of his answers. And they rang true. Goddammit. Her thumb never left the button and his eyes never left her thumb. He didn't have the guile to pull it off that well or that long. And he especially didn't have the conviction or courage to put up his balls, literally, for his employer, now that he was reasonably certain that said persona had snuffed a friend.

The man groveling in front of her was nothing more than a relatively minor functionary around the warehouse and, as such, was capable of showing her little more than the location of the hardware itself and those of the inventory sheets he'd handled himself. As far as the acquisition network itself was concerned, he was as much in the dark as she.

The warehouse itself seemed not, in fact, to be a distribution point at all as she had first surmised but, according to Tyler, strictly a stockpiling area, which was even more alarming; you could fight a damned fine war with the equipment she'd seen out there, and, again according to Tyler, there were rumors floating around (gotten via an ear hard pressed to a wall) that a second, larger, installation was slated for the near future.

The sheer size of the cache was frightening enough in itself but compounding that was the modernity of the fighting gear. The organization required to do it would have to be massive, Fanni thought. And there would have to be an incredible amount of top-end cover-up. Corruption. How extensive? And who was going to fight the war? And where? Where? How the hell could one man be responsible for all this, she asked herself for the fifth or sixth time. It made no sense. None. Zero.

More germane to her immediate situation was what the hell was going to happen to her, now that she'd seen what she'd seen. She had absolutely no illusions about George's remarks about the blindfolds and their necessity for the protection of life and limb; as slaves ignorant of the situation, they were of variable profitability; as witnesses to this staggering pile of weaponry, they were an intolerable liability. Fanni had not merely opened Pandora's Box; she'd torn the lid off and thrown it away and blown up the box. Shit.

She couldn't go to the locals; Tyler said they were well paid, but didn't know the exact reason other than that they were to protect the installation from unspecified terrorists. Apparently they thought it was some hush-hush government installation. They were paid to think that. Where was that MI-6 bastard, now that she needed him!

The way she saw it, she had one of only two choices: to disappear into the woodwork-unlikely in view of her projected organization size for the crowd she was dealing with-or to

go right for the top and the Old Man himself. Both seemed equally suicidal. If she ran, they'd find her or she'd spend the rest of her life looking over her shoulder-she doubted that they'd be forgiving about losing their guns. The other option seemed equally bleak. Hell, she didn't even know who the Old Man was, let alone how she could ever get to him. She turned back to Tyler.

"You say you don't know anything about your fearless leader." He nodded his head, tiredly. "Any of his friends, then?" More shaking of the head. "Anybody who might have some contact? Anything?" Fractionally, Tyler seemed to tense and Fanni pounced.

"Well, if that's the case, you're no more use to me..." she concluded and picked up the transmitter. She flicked the switch to ON and Tyler, head slumped, saw the eye go back on.

"NO!" he screamed. "Wait, wait, let me think...!" Fanni raised the box and put her finger on the fire button; there was no more time for bullshit.

"WAIT!" Fanni wasn't waiting. "There's this girl... it might be nothing... don't!!" Fanni didn't but her finger remained on the button. Tyler paused for breath and continued. "I think she was some kind of friend to the boss... the Old Man. She was a lesbian and... every now and then I'd be told to take her a girl for a couple of days and then bring her back afterwards, you know?" Fanni's look was icy and becoming colder.

"That's all." More of a statement than a question. She began pushing the button.

"She did something special for the Old Man," Tyler wailed. "Some big business favor... went a lot toward making him what he is today. She knows his kind of people!" Fanni paused to think. Possible. Just possible. If the organization was run as tightly as Fanni thought, it was unlikely that George knew any more than Tyler; he was, after all, nothing more than a helicopter jockey. And he was a lot tougher than Tyler. She had no desire to remain sitting there for his return and then have to go one on one with him to get questions answered. Besides which, she wasn't sure she could pull it off with George. And what if he came back with more people? Time was against her.

"All right, we'll try it. Where is she?"

"Only about an hour's drive from here," Tyler gushed, relief rampant on his sweating face. "I know right where it is..." then paused, again unsure of himself.

"What is it?" Fanni rasped.

"I'd have to call her to okay it," he whined. "You see, it's been about six months-the Old Man's getting out of the body-business like I told you before-and she might not..."

"Where's the phone?"

Further Complications

Part Two

Written by Robert K. Bishop

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Transcribed by guardian46w

Madame stood at stiff attention as Fanni pulled the strap tight around her throat, anchoring her crossed wrists inches below her shoulderblades. Her legs were bound at ankles and knees. Tyler watched from the shelving that he'd been tethered to. The girl, Paula, was surprised and interested by Tyler's call. She'd let on that she now had a live-in slave/companion but that the thought of a new morsel to savor, especially when she found out she'd be getting two in the bargain, overcame any reservations she might have had over the disruption of her schedule which, Fanni gathered, was rather tight. They were leaving, effective immediately. The more immediately the better.

With Madame's hands done to her satisfaction, Fanni bent and hobbled her ankles but didn't immediately release the tighter bond. Madame still wore a crotch strap, complete with dildo. So did Fanni, but minus the shaft. Tyler said Paula liked her slaves to arrive already heated, as it were.

"Fanni, let me help," Madame had pleaded earlier. "We've known each other all these years..." she whined.

"Ah, Madame, you make it sound as if we were star-crossed lovers. The only reason I'm in this mess in the first place is because you had me hanging from the goddamned ceiling when you and your friends got your little visit from your other friends out there. I would trust you just about as far as I could throw this building." And then Fanni tied her up.

"That gag with the rubber strap over the top is pretty good," she mused. "Think I'll use that again. Open." When she was done, Madame's lower face was covered with a skintight black band just as before. Fanni snapped a leash onto her collar, severed the first ankle band and led her out of the room. She brought another hobble and gag for herself for the charade at Paula's place and a cape-like affair she'd found in one of the small office areas. A small bit of subterfuge, here.

The three of them plodded down one of the seemingly endless corridors toward the car Tyler had driven in through one of the large doorways in the building under Fanni's watchful eye. It had been parked just outside and Tyler said it was his. At least he had the key. The three sets of footfalls echoed loudly in the stillness. The rain had pretty much stopped. The gloom of the place had begun to wear on Fanni; she would be glad to see lights and the sky again. She still had the Armbrust for no particular reason. The pistol was stuck through the belt of the crotch strap; Fanni the Desperado, she thought. The utterly black bars of shadows flicked over the backs of the two figures before her as if someone were turning a light on and off. She made them stop, once. The silence was

stultifying. Tyler kept glancing back and seemed nervous. Fanni had the transmitter in her left hand, the launcher and Madame's leash in her right.

"Hold it right there," was the voice from directly astern. "Move and yer dead!"

Tyler and Madame complied instantly. Fanni didn't and stumbled into Madame's back and had to grab out and steady herself against the shelving with her hand. The pistol was in her other hand under the cloak; the leash was dropped; the launcher was pinned to her side under her arm.

"Now turn around slow and get your hands out where I can see 'em," was the command.

Fanni slowly turned, keeping the one hand high and visible, then as she completed the turn and the cloak opened she dropped to a crouch and whipped out the gun, the launcher clattering into the shelving at her side. Which probably saved her life. The guard was fast but the minor distraction had fouled his aim and the bullet spanged into a box of hand radios. Fanni's shot smashed down the narrow corridor and, like the guard's shot, missed, punching through a line of lockers at the end of the passageway. The shot was deafening. Madame was screaming. Tyler was screaming not for them to shoot him.

The guard crouched behind the corner of an intersection in the corridor, yelling for his fellows, of which there appeared to be at least two, judging from the answering shouts. She could hear him talking into one of the omnipresent hand radios.

She dropped flat to the floor. The bottom shelves of the stands were elevated a full six inches from the cement itself and through this gap she could see the guard's feet and one knee as he waited for help. She stuck the gun out before her and aimed carefully. The muzzle blast blew dust off the floor in a circular fan as the gun recoiled up into the overhead shelf with a clang nearly as loud as the ear-splitting explosion itself. Fanni was nearly deafened by the incredible blast searing out from beneath the plate. The huge 240-grain wadcutter punched through the guard's knee in a wet explosion of bone and gristle and imbedded itself in the wall behind. The man's shriek was a high, keening wail of pain cut off as he fainted and slumped to the floor. Fanni could have finished him with another shot through the forehead, but she only had four rounds left now, and the others were closing in.

"Up, up, up! MOVE, goddammit!" she screamed, booting and pushing Madame, paralyzed, quaking against the storage. She shoved her bodily back against Tyler, still yelling to his comrades not to shoot him, and got them moving. They HAD to get out of this tunnel! Somehow, the Armbrust had been picked up and was not in her hand with the leash and the transmitter.



An intersection, any intersection! They were few and far between. And the guard's friends got a lot closer.

Forty yards. Madame's hobbles slowed her progress to little more than a crawl. Tyler slipped and fell flat on his face, nearly tangling both women in his sprawl. Instantly he was back on his feet and pounding toward the end of the passage. Fanni's eyes were alternately cast over her shoulder and hard on her two charges. Thirty yards, and she could see they weren't going to make it. Twenty yards. A shot from behind and a metallic ringing as the bullet punched a small, neat hole through the flapping end of the cape. Fanni spun and brought up the gun as the man ducked behind the shelter. Tyler looked around from the corner of the passage, eyes huge. Fanni scrambled to her feet as another man leaned around the shelving and carefully pointed a machine gun.

"Stop shooting, goddammit!!" George shouted. "Are you bastards CRAZY! Don't you know where you ARE? One bullet in the wrong place... fuggin' idiots!" The man squinting down the machine gun's barrel swore to himself, the woman's figure neatly surrounded the sights as she scrambled to her feet and disappeared around the corner. Shit; he'd had her cold. It was then that he noticed the huge mound of ammunition boxes directly behind where the woman had stood. And damn near fell down. George lumbered down the passage past his shoulder and the man with the gun followed.

Fanni could hear them. The car was still a long way ahead, particularly with Madame hampering the run. Idiot, Hall, she raged at herself, you should have thought about this!

Another guard in an aisle parallel to that they'd just quit came suddenly into view, running full out and smack into the side of the car. He bounced off and fell to one knee as his Uzi clattered to the floor. He was very young and very nervous and quite prepared to kill all of them. He had the gun nearly up when Fanni's first shot peeled the car's right outside mirror off the door like a gum wrapper and hurled it twenty yards down the bay. Startled, the man almost dropped his gun again, and then her second shot bashed into his right shoulder and spun him flat onto his back. His mouth was open in a gape of surprise and pain and he grunted like an animal, writhing and twisting on the floor.

Fanni booted his gun under the shelving as she and Madame came upon the downed guard and the car. Tyler was around the other side and jerking at the driver's door. Fanni flung Madame through the right rear door onto the seat then spun to face the attackers.

Another man flew into view, sliding on the glassy pavement, and Fanni fired another shot. A miss. George stuck his head around the corner for a second and jerked it back an instant before her next shot caromed through the metal leg at the juncture.

"That's six, honey," George gloated. "I've got a good head for numbers; Tyler doesn't believe in reloads." The man with the machine gun behind him was very anxious; he wasn't about to miss another opportunity.

George stood and carefully stepped around the corner, motioning his hand for the man to remain behind. The man fumed. "Give it up, honey. Make it easy on yourself." The range was over fifty yards and he didn't at first notice the dull green plastic tube under the cloak, but he recognized it instantly when she flipped it up over her shoulder. The Armbrust.

"Oh, shit..." George began and dove behind the corner again, The man with the machine gun chose this time to stick his head around the corner, just as George flew into him.



Fanni triggered off the round. The Armbrust, gentle readers, is simply an open-ended, optically sighted, fiberglass tube with an explosive projectile at the front end and an equal-weight counter-mass in the back end. The propelling charge is between the two and when it's fired, the projectile flies out the front end and the counter-mass goes out the back, totally eliminating recoil. For fairly obvious reasons, one would not want to stand immediately behind the weapon when it was fired. The projectile itself, a hollow-shaped charge in this case, is nominally capable of punching through some 300mm of steel armor plate and is quite capable of taking out a main battle tank at ranges up to and including 300 meters. The fifty-five-gallon gasoline drums it hit instead proved, not

surprisingly, to be no obstacle at all!

The missile and drum blew up into an almost perfectly round fireball ten yards in diameter, blasting shelving, boxes, gear and the other drums outwards and upwards through the walls and roof. Fanni was slammed back into the car door by the searing heat and concussion. Another gasoline drum exploded with a dull thump and spewed gallons of burning fuel over the pile of ammunition. The sea of flames was nearly to the car, itself punched through with holes and tears. The rear window was gone, and Madame was huddled beneath thousands of small, irregular chunks of broken glass. Fanni leapt atop her and screamed for Tyler to go, his face red and filmed with sweat by the light of the flames. A single sharp crack announced the imminent eruption of the stored ammunition. Fanni was particularly worried about the mortar bombs racked in their hundreds not ten yards from the ammunition. When they went....

The car, tires screaming, lunged through the opening where the door had stood, now smoking and hanging from one hinge. The hinge expired and the fried metal clattered onto a torrent of gasoline running out onto the loading apron. The men who had been running frantically toward the building changed direction and beat it away with the same urgency. Rifle rounds were ripping through the walls in a staccato roar.

The three fleeing the scene felt more than heard the final explosion. The walls of the building bowed out into a gigantic pumpkin shape for an instant before disintegrating and the roof, nearly intact, was catapulted nearly a hundred yards straight up into the sky, then slowly, almost gracefully glided down onto a parking area and its resting cars and fleeing men. One of them, several hundred yards away, stood, one hand braced on the doorway to his office, watching the car flitting away through the trees.

The night's storm was a wolf in the east snapping at the dawn. The dawn wasn't much impressed; it had seen a lot of wolves and they got old and tired and their teeth fell

out. Trees dripped with an erratic pocking sound and their leaves hung limp and sodden. A broad unmarred sheet of water filmed the road, traversing the pavement from one side to the other as the streamlet carried the night's excess away. A single maple leaf was borne past the car on its transparent surface. Regal. Dead.

The house was large; isolated. Huge oaks ringed it at a distance. The sward stretching before and around was nearly a hundred yards in depth. Impressive, even at dawn. Dawn was still having some trouble with the wolf.

Tyler started the car and pulled down a small road heavily overhung with trees. Drops banged on the roof from the trees and heavy underbrush hissed past the doors.

"Remember, Mr. Tyler, don't get too close to the house with the car and keep the front end toward the house; I don't want any funny questions about the holes, or that back window. I won't bother to remind you again what happens if you pull anything stupid," Fanni finished.

Tyler nodded, rather stiffly, from the front seat. "You can see the house a little bit further on," he said.

"Stop the car," Fanni ordered. "Keep your head screwed on, Tyler, and you'll come out of this with all your parts." She leaned forward and strapped the hobbles around her ankles and tightened them deliberately. Then she sat forward on the seat and worked the ball into her mouth and adjusted its strap at the back of her neck so that her mouth was totally packed and sealed. Several turns of the rubber strapping completed the gag. She snapped the other end of Madame's leash onto her own collar and then tied the cloak so that her upper body didn't show from the outside. The final act was to cross her wrists behind her back beneath the cloak's veil and sit back against the seat. Tyler was watching. Fanni looked over at Madame and then at Tyler and motioned forward with her head. Tyler turned and put the car in gear.

They were watched all the time they were in view of the house, from the moment they came out from behind the tree's cover, up into the tiny parking area and as they approached the steps leading to the house. Tyler had told Fanni about that, and to expect it. He was right. Fanni glanced up toward a dormer window near the roof as they drove up to the steps. A man was looking down at them. He had a pair of binoculars in his hands. She was glad she'd put on the gag while they'd still been concealed. She hoped they'd been concealed! If she was right, she and Madame appeared to be nothing more than a pair of slave girls, bound and being delivered like vegetables to the back door. Tyler pulled Madame by an arm and Fanni followed on their shared leash. They clattered up the steps.

At the top of the short flight, they stopped. Another man emerged from behind a heavy wood and glass door and efficiently frisked Tyler. Tyler had clearly gone through this before. With a thrill of near terror, Fanni thought that at first the man intended searching them as well, but after a quick, disinterested glance, he turned around and signaled with a flick of his hand.

The girl who bobbed around him and stood with hands on her hips was elfin; slender, with a rounded helmet of hair framing a rounded face that ended in a dainty chin. The lips were full and stretched into a lascivious grin. The eyes were huge and green and behind

the twinkle lay something else entirely; a darker side; a shade of barely controlled menace. Fanni pitied any little girl who would exist by this one's sufferance. "You must be Tyler," she said, ignoring him. "When Paula first told me you were bringing new toys I was jealous as hell, but she says that since there's two of 'em, we share the spoils and that's just fine with me." She licked her lips. She was looking back and forth from Fanni to Madame as if choosing which she liked better. "Bring 'em inside; Paula's waiting."

Paula wasn't alone. In fact she was in a conference with three men and another woman. Two of the men were young and stood behind the chairs occupied by the other man and the solitary woman. The third man was much older, probably in his early seventies, and was prodding a recalcitrant pipe. The woman was in her early thirties and looked lethal. She coiled in the chair like a mink and, indeed, wore a gorgeous, full-length coat made of that unfortunate animal's fur. She was in animated conversation with the second woman in the room, seated behind a desk that looked as if it grew from the floor. Or was about to fall through it.

Fanni was immediately intrigued by the mink-woman. She fairly oozed money and power. Especially power. The old man next to her probably accounted for the money. The two standing in the corners were the muscle. Fanni bit hard on the gag and wished she could hear the conversation, but the thick pane of glass separating the room from the tiny chamber they were now jammed into prevented it.

Their elf-guide watched silently for several minutes until a lapse in the conversation came up and then pressed a small switch inset into the wall. The woman behind the desk glanced down as a light beamed on the surface of the desk and excused herself from the party and walked out another door in the chamber. The guests continued on with their talking. The old man's pipe was still out.

The door through which they'd entered the chamber swung open and the woman behind the desk entered smiling a tight smile. Paula, Fanni presumed.

"Tyler, my friend. I must say it has been a long time since your last visit of mercy, so to speak. So these are our guests." Paula was the archetypal businessman's stereotype of the businesswoman as seen through the businessman's eye: prim, proper, with a somewhat severe but nonetheless attractive tailored suitcoat and skirt. Her hair was long, but was drawn up behind her neck in a bun. Her gaze was through horn-rimmed glasses and was that of one long used to qualifying and evaluating female flesh.

She walked first to Madame and around her, ducking beneath the leash that still joined the two, examining the total package. "Excellent body, excellent bondage, Tyler. Very nice. The strap around the neck holding up the hands is very tidy. Did you do this, or George?" Tyler muttered something unintelligible. Paula wasn't listening. "The gag's nice, too. What's under there, a ball?" She was smiling. Tyler nodded, swallowing. He glanced at Fanni.

"How's that dildo, honey?" she hissed into Madame's ear, pulling up on the strap between Madame's legs and pinching one of the jutting nipples. "I'm going to eat you alive," she moaned, grasping a full handful of Madame's breast and kneading. Fanni looked, from her position behind the two, directly past Madame's shoulder and into Paula's face. The woman was getting worked up. There were too many goddamned people here. The situation was getting dicey. She hadn't counted on a conference.



Paula suddenly released her ever more lecherous hold on a by now squirming Madame and backed off a couple of steps. She looked at Fanni. "Done the same?" she quizzed, indicating the bondage. Another nod from Tyler. "Why the cape?"

Tyler held both palms up. "I just do what they tell me. They just said bring 'em here. I don't ask about the clothes."

The woman looked back at Fanni, then longer and harder at Madame. "I like this one here," she said to the elf, indicating Madame. "You can have the caped crusader, there. Take them downstairs and prepare them; I've got business to attend to here for another hour or so. Be seeing ya later," she promised to Madame, reaching out for another nipple squeeze. Madame jerked back, almost

tripping. Paula gave a laugh deep in her throat and walked out, closing the door behind her.

Fanni thought they must be beneath the house, the walls had changed from richly papered and paneled excursions into blatant opulence to unpainted cinderblock and dark green linoleum tiling. The corridor was long and pierced at intervals by heavy steel doors bolted from the outside and provided with small rectangular spy-hatches to peruse the occupants of the interiors. The silence was total but for elf and Tyler and the two slaves bumbling along in their hobbles.

As they neared the end of the passage a door opened next to them and a stunningly beautiful girl was pushed out into their path. Blonde, with shoulder-length hair, she silently looked at the procession, eyes huge and wet with tears. A black plug of leather had been forced into her mouth and was held in place by a green nylon strap buckled at the nape of her neck. Her wrists and elbows were joined by steel bracelets. Her ankles were hobbled with an absurdly short six-inch chain and another chain ran in a taut silver line from her manacled wrists to the hobble, forcing her to arch her back as she took tiny mincing steps.

The apparition that succeeded her was female and stout as a boar. Her short grey jacket and longish skirt in a matching color bespoke a uniform. The bound girl's neck was encircled by a thick leather collar and its leash was in one of the woman's hands while a heavily padded leather blindfold dangled from the other. Elf stopped before the carefully bound girl and smiled up at her.

"Sorry to see you go, Cheryl. We had some good times, didn't we?" Even though the girl was fully clothed in a short leather skirt and top and thigh-high boots, Fanni could see the goosebumps of fear erupt on her flesh. "But business is business, as they say. You'll be happy to know that your new owner thought enough of you to have those custom-made chains sent along for your delivery. We're throwing in the gag for nothing." She toyed with it, turning the girl's head back and forth. "It's my favorite. When Paula and I play I always wear this one. Get used to those chains, hon; you're going to be wearing them from now on." A medium-sized tear rolled down Cheryl's face and into the nylon strap.

With a nod of her head, the girl was shoved out and away from the door and stood forlorn and weeping silently as the door was bolted. Finished with that task, the guard prodded her down the hall in a teetering, stumbling shuffle. Elf's pull on their leash guided the other two captives the other way. Fanni felt sorry for the girl. Elf had a nasty surprise in store for her.

They continued to the final door in the series. Their guide fished around in a pocket and brought out a small silvery key and fitted it to the door's lock. The room revealed was almost decorous, considering the ambience of the place. Maybe even too much so.

The rasp-finished cinderblocks had been replaced by odd-shaped smooth black chunks of what appeared to be basalt, dense and cold, almost oily to the touch. Floor, walls, even the ceiling were finished in the stone. There were no openings to the outer elements and fresh air wended its feeble way across the room via two small openings near the floor. The openings were heavily grated. The only light was artificial and that consisted of one small but powerful tungsten light set in the center of the rocky ceiling. It was without a doubt the grimmest place Fanni had ever seen.

Adding to the gloom was the impedimenta strewn around the walls and, most importantly, squatting squarely in the center of the floor a rack, gimbaled at its extremities and itself sitting on a swivel of some sophistication prying its way, seemingly, through the chunks of rock. Not a sight for sore eyes. In one corner sat a brazier, cold and floored with the irregular grey lumps of consumed charcoal. The brands hung neatly on an adjacent peg. Fanni couldn't discern the letters through the gloom. Tyler stood with his mouth hanging open.

The erratic surface made for a certain amount of floundering for Fanni and Madame as they were brought further into the room. More details became evident. Fanni saw an inordinate number of rather pedestrian but very well-made bondage gear including the usual straps and chains, not too much rope, gags in a profusion of shapes and discomforts, crotch straps and dildos, even a metal brank. Nothing like having a little bit of everything, she thought.

The elf was looking for something, booting her way through the clutter. Fanni swept her eyes around the room; Tyler was still gawking, Madame stood with her eyes cast to the ground and the elf still rummaged. The time looked about right. Fanni began to slide her arms down her back. The pistol still adorned her belt beneath the cape.

An insistent hammering began at the door. Fanni pulled her wrists back up high as the girl before her stood and twisted around toward the annoyance. "Don't go away, ladies," she quipped as she flitted away toward the door, bounding through the wan circle of light flushing the rack and almost disappearing into the stygian pall on the other side.

The door opened into the relative brightness of the corridor outside, outlining two figures as black silhouettes. The smaller of the two walked a short distance into the room and went into a huddle with the elf while the other, very much larger and obviously a man, remained just without. Fanni had the impression that he, too, wore a uniform. Guards?

The discussion ended and both women came quickly toward the trio standing in the darkness.

Elf got there first. "Paula wants you, honey. She's got some other ideas. She wants you set up right now." The other girl had meantime severed the leash holding Madame and Fanni together and with short, hard jerks began dislodging a by now very disgruntled Madame back out the door. Fanni dearly did not want to be separated from her treacherous companion; as soon as that gag came out of her mouth, the proverbial jig would be up. But what could she do with that oaf in the doorway? Madame was outside and the three figures disappeared with the slamming of the door. Shit. Had to work fast.

"You, whatever your name is... Tyler, you've done your little duty and delivered your charges through the vigors and ravages of sleet, storm and rain and other such bullshit and we will now tuck them safely into the fold. In short, get lost; tell one of the girls upstairs to entertain you till we get in touch." Fanni gave him a level stare. Poor Tyler was torn between executing the command and knowing what the consequences would be. He stood, looking sheepish, eyes flicking from one girl to the other. "I said move, dammit," continued elf-person. "Are you deaf..." and then she noticed the eye contact between Fanni and Tyler. "What's going on here?" she challenged, in her turn looking from one to the other, hackles all raised and eyes hard and suspicious.

As her eyes swept to Tyler, Fanni brought her arms down and forward in a smooth continuous sweep, plucking the pistol from the belt and shoving it through the gap in the cape. The movement initially attracted the elf's attention but what really got her total, undivided, absolute and complete attention was the sound of the gun's hammer being pulled back and the sight of the huge muzzle staring back at her as the cylinder rotated to bring a brand new squeaky-clean .44 Magnum round into index with same.

Elf's eyes were enormous. "What the HELL is going on... Tyler, you sonofabitch. When George hears about this..."

"George already knows about it, kitten," pleaded Tyler. "This one and her friend blew up the damned factory, the whole damned thing. There's nothin' left. Nothin'!"

"What's she doing here, then? You mean you just drove them over here?"

"Look, baby, there's nothing I can do; she's got me wired up like a fuckin' bomb; I make one wrong move and that's it!" Tyler whined. "It's that little box she's got in her hand there!" Fanni wiggled it obligingly.

The elf would have continued but Fanni motioned with the gun. She made both of them kneel and then lie flat on their stomachs with their fingers intertwined atop their heads via the appropriate gestures. Only then did she switch the pistol to one hand while, with the other, she unwound the rubber strap and then unbuckled the gag, a task not made any simpler by the fact that the transmitter was getting in the way. She knelt herself next and removed the hobbles.

"Mr. Tyler, there's a pair of handcuffs on that stand next to you. Pick them up and attach yourself to the base of that amusing contraption this little lady thinks enough of to bathe with so much light. They better be on tight, too; I'm gonna have a test later." Tyler scurried toward the rack, handcuffs dangling. The sharp snickering of the ratcheted teeth came clear through the air. Then the other wrist.

"As for you," she went on, "put that on. Quick, like a bunny."

"Fuck you!" Not very friendly, the elf.

"Don't have time for this right now, kid," said Fanni. "No time at all." She hefted a thoroughly scroungy blanket from the muddle and swaddled the muzzle of the gun, building up a thick bulky lump with subsequent turns of the cloth almost as if someone had stuck a fabric basketball on the end of the piece. "I'm going to tell you one time and one time only. Then, if you don't, I'm going to blow your head into a fine red spray all over that wall back there. Any sound that gets out of this rag will probably get soaked up by the walls. Put it on. Now"

The elf's hands were all aflutter on the floor crabbing for the 'it' at issue. She was a convert.

"It" was a clever and quite sturdy gag/collar combination. The gag itself was a heavily padded oblong of leather from the inside center of which protruded a very large and even more heavily padded rubber-coated sphere. This sphere, though huge, could, by dint of considerable pushing and shoving, be compressed enough to fit in the human mouth. Once released, the jaws were spread to the utmost. The long strap running through the oblong pressed its softer padding to the lower face and completely sealed the lips. The strap itself was longer than normal and, once tightened with a friction buckle at the back of the neck, was wound forward around the throat and buckled. A heavy inset ring provided an attachment point for a leash... or whatever.

This "it" was what the elf began shoving, inch by inch, into her mouth; working alternately at the sides and top and bottom. It took some time to get it in and when the elf had finally buckled the strap beneath her chin Fanni was nearly jumping up and down in frustration. She expected pounding on the door and leaping dogs and flaring guns on the instant. Oh, Paula, she wished fervently, feverishly, keep that bitch Madame gagged a little longer!

Elf sat with her hands in her lap looking disconsolate. Tyler peered out from beneath the rack and jangled. "Lay flat on your belly again and put your hands behind your back."

In instants, it seemed, the elf's wrists were corded hard together with her hands back-to-back and her back was being bent into a beautiful, albeit painful arc, as Fanni bound her



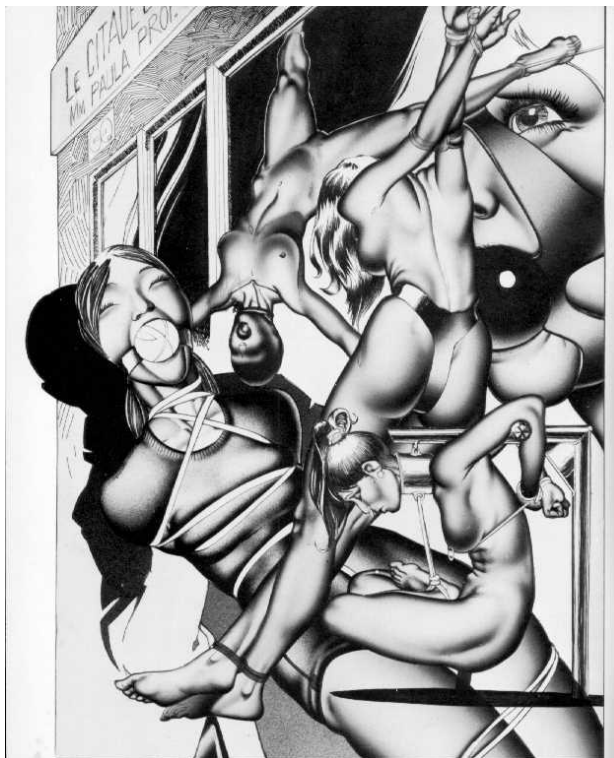
wrists to her ankles in a very stringent hogtie. She then ran to the other side of the room and returned with a longer length of rope which she threaded through a heavy rusted iron ring set into the ceiling. Once done with that, she dragged the straited elf directly beneath it and ran the ceiling cord between the tied arms and legs and knotted it. She grabbed the other end then and pulled hard, lifting the human bow that now was elf into an even more strict contortion. The elf groaned behind the gag. Fanni pulled a bit higher, then tied the rope off. The only part of elf that touched ground was her stomach. Elf's breaths were heavy and articulated by more moans, She didn't like the position, Fanni guessed. She picked up another gag and ran for Tyler. He'd done a good job with the handcuffs. Good boy. Go to the head of the class.

She hoped the big oaf wasn't standing just outside the door when she opened it. Nope, nothing but corridor. And that enticing row of doors shrinking in the perspective of distance. Fanni couldn't know for sure where Madame was stashed, but she had a strong feeling it was downstairs with the drones; upstairs was a little showy for this kind of carrying-on, but then again you never could tell. Her bet was on one of the doors. She could have asked the elf-type, but she didn't want to risk having her bluff called. Or was it a bluff? At any rate, she was glad of having found the three speed-loaders for the gun in Tyler's glove box; George didn't have such a head for figures and bullets as he'd thought.

The floor was smooth and cool under her toes and she padded down the aisle in a trot, peering into each door through the hatch. Such a lot of girls! If the ever-shadowy Old Man was getting out of the body-business, Paula and her minions definitely weren't! All shapes and sizes and colors. AND all were lashed into positions guaranteed to keep their various attentions. Some were gagged, some not, but all were restrained. Redundancy in restraint. She liked the ring of that. We all have our hobbies.

Fanni was coming perilously close to the nether end of the corridor and still no Madame. Had she spilled the beans? A chill ran up and then down Fanni's spine. No

alarm bells. No rushing feet and shouts. She kept going. Maybe there was hope yet. Christ.



Voices! Where? From the door to the corridor itself? Fanni tensed against the wall, gun straight out before her, sights centered on the expanse of painted metal. The voices stopped and Fanni sent a yearning glance back to the door at the other end. Too far, much too far! The voices again and with them the rushing relief of discovering that they were emanating from behind the door of the last cell on the aisle and not from the hallway without. The voices were unfamiliar and she couldn't recognize what was being said. She moved forward, carefully, still pressed to the wall and rasping her skin against the

rough surface. It was only one voice. It was Paula's, and she wasn't so much talking as yelling. Screaming, maybe. The obvious object of her wrath was Madame, and Madame was clearly having some estimable difficulties.

She was hanging inverted from the ceiling, legs spread wide apart by a shiny black cylindrical bar. Her arms were bound tight together and then down to a ring in the floor. Her hair was bundled and tied back to a belt around her waist. Her racked gasps of pain merely from the position itself were powerfully audible through the door. Her screams at each impact of the broad leather strap Paula was wielding were even more intense and the walls almost seemed to vibrate with a kind of sympathetic harmony at each piercing shriek. Fanni's hand on the door could feel the oscillations, she thought. Madame fainted and out popped the oaf from a blind corner of the cell and splashed her face with cups of water. Some ran into her nose and she reawakened to her world of searing pain with a spluttering moan. Paula was wiping the strap with a piece of green chamois, glaring at the wealed and ridged Y dangling before her. The oaf turned back to his corner.

Fanni pounced into the room and slammed the door behind her. The cell was padded. Nice. "That will be quite enough, Bitch," she gritted. "Don't try it," she shouted as the oaf, swiveling around, began fumbling for the gun in his belt. "Don't try it!" she yelled again. The man kept swiveling and the gun was out. He was facing her fully now, a curse forming on his lips and the gun coming diagonally up across his belly from its holster on his left. Fanni fired and the 240-grain pill caught the man directly at the base of the sternum. His face was instantly a mask of stupid surprise. He stood looking at no one in particular for a second and then his gun fell to the padding. He looked down at the hole stuck in his chest and started to look back up at her, then his knees buckled and he went forward fiat onto his face. His feet did a grisly little tap dance against the floor and then he was still.

Paula's stunned face was sitting square atop the front sight of Fanni's gun during the ending of the latter performance. Fanni's ears were ringing, but most of the blast seemed to have been sucked up into the cell's padding like water into a sponge. She doubted that anyone but present company had heard anything.

"Let her down," she growled. Paula was stupefied. "Let her down or die." In jerks and starts, like someone with palsy, the woman began moving again. It was almost as if she had been literally petrified by the experience. Her hands went to a control board at the back of the cell. "If you push, one of those but tons and I hear even the faintest inkling of

anything even resembling an alarm, I will kill you. Do you understand that?" Paula nodded, quivering.

She punched a button and an electric winch began to whirr from somewhere overhead. The line holding up the spreader bar began paying out from its small grommeted hole in the ceiling. Madame began folding up on herself like a road map. The winch kept whirring. Paula's face was an ashen white as she looked back over her shoulder towards Fanni, who still kept the gun pointed directly at her from across the room.

Fanni was nervous all the way back down the corridor to the elf and Tyler. Paula had regained at least a part of her composure and was becoming, if not surly, at least very tense, and watched Fanni's every move as if she were waiting for the smallest chance to strike. Fanni gave her none. Paula had Madame under the arms and was dragging her back with Fanni proceeding her and keeping a careful eye on the doorway; like the old saw about rattlesnakes, where you find one you're bound to find another. She was thinking about the unlucky oaf. She preferred no surprises.

Tyler looked up at their passage from his dwelling beneath the rack. Elf was emitting a chorus of moans and her hands were turning interesting colors.

Paula seemed genuinely shaken, then outraged by her pet's appearance. She turned and raged at Fanni. "You filthy bitch! Why did you have to do that to her! Oh, my poor baby..." she frothed and then lunged at Fanni. Fanni had been expecting it and adroitly stepped aside as Paula, feet tangled in accoutrements of her own possession, went down hard, catching herself on her hands at the last second. Lithe and powerful, she twisted out of the entanglement and again jumped at Fanni, teeth bared, fingers like claws. She emitted a low bestial growling from her throat like an animal. As she lunged at Fanni, both hands outstretched for the strangle- hold, Fanni ducked low and, holding the gun and its barrel with both hands, brought the muzzle hard up into Paula's unprotected stomach with a meaty thump.

Paula's breath went out in a wheezing grunt and her face purpled as she frantically fought for air, groveling and kicking in the clutter. Fanni ignored her and examined Madame. And breathed a sigh of relief; it wasn't nearly as bad as it had first looked. The broad strap had produced more visual than physical damage, although Madame was going to be exceedingly uncomfortable for awhile. She seemed to be asleep. Fanni was taking no chances, nonetheless, and handcuffed her hands and feet. Then she turned back to Paula.

Getting that last ankle in the grip of its appointed cuff had been no easy trick. Fanni had horsed Paula, still gasping like a carp landed on shore, to the rack and thrown her on. Her



wrists had gone first and had been the easiest, but her developing plight had not passed unnoticed and the first leg had been something of a struggle, the second something akin to Armageddon. Kind of.

Paula lay still now, sweating and gasping for breath again, as much from the exertions of combat as the pain of the blow to the belly. Fanni reached over the side of the rack suddenly and jammed a large handful of cloth into Paula's mouth and wadded it in, tying it finally with thin cords. Paula's glare was a visual venom over the packing. Fanni returned to the door and peeped out. Still nothing. She was beginning to feel somewhat more confident. She'd been nervous about that shot; sound insulation theories are one thing but reality...

She returned to the side of the rack and its occupant. Tyler was tethered over to one wall now. Mustn't have unnecessary objects in the way of work. The elf had, similarly, been moved and wore less painful and substantially more secure steel bracelets. She still wore the enormous gag. Her eyes were as furious as Paula's. And as helpless.

Fanni began tearing at Paula's dress. The thin material came away in skeins and bolts, ripping and shredding like a cobweb under Fanni's somewhat overly forceful ministrations. Several small, frightened cries filtered through the packing before, once again, Paula's fear was replaced by anger. Her eyes remained stony and unafraid while the rest of her garments went the way of all things manufactured and thus frangible. When the girl on the rack was completely naked, bereft of even the slightest covering but that she'd been born in, Fanni stopped, glaring back with equal intensity. The proverbial daggers flew like locusts.

Fanni ripped out the gag. "How much did she tell you?" she demanded, indicating Madame lying in her thrashed and somnolent stupor. "How much? Quick!" The lash of the cane was a streak of blurred tan light that buried itself in the soft flesh of Paula's upper thighs. Paula's gasp was accompanied by a wrenching, jolting jerk against the straps. Fanni had been thorough: she couldn't move a millimeter. "How much?" Another blinding, searing bite from the rod. Fanni's arm came back for yet another blow.

"She told me she was a friend to the Old Man!" was the cry; half shout, half scream.

"Why the beating, then!"

"I got a call from a friend. He works over by the warehouse they say you and she blew up. He said to keep an eye open for you. Everybody's looking for you. The Old Man wants you real bad. That was just a little after you got in." Paula paused, gasping some more.

"That doesn't really answer my question, though, does it?"

Paula gave her a murderous look, then continued in a strained voice. "I..." she turned her head partially away, "thought maybe ...you know, that I might get something out of her myself; kind of do a favor for the Old Man... one hand washes the other?" She paused and then turned back, the old verve back in her eye. "Besides which, you usurping bitch, I enjoyed every goddamned minute of it!"

Fanni fought back a quick-forming smile. It wasn't, after all, that Madame didn't deserve a sound and thoughtfully applied beating for her woeful treachery. By rights, though, it should have been Fanni wielding the strap. Who was the usurper now? Will the real usurper please stand up? Enough of this levity. On with the catastrophe.

Fanni walked away from the rack, thoughtful, hand in chin. "How many people know we're here, then?" she loomed over her shoulder.

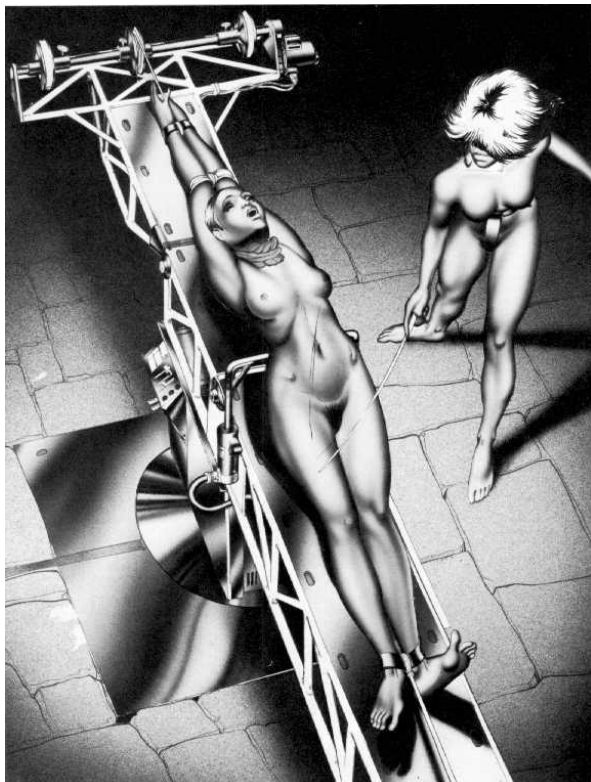
"Just Kit and me and Ralph."

At least now Fanni knew the names of the elf and the man in the other cell. "Nobody else?" she hissed, eyes gleaming, bending back down over the table. "Nobody!" A handful of Paula's hair was slowly being ripped from her scalp.

"Nobody!" was the screamed reply. "Nobody! I swear!" Fanni dropped the hank of hair. Better and better. If true. Fanni didn't know to what degree she could trust the bitch and she suspected it wasn't very far. She began a long slow traverse of the rack, poking and prodding, spinning a wheel here, pulling a lever there. Paula stared at her like the entrapped fly regarding the spider. The machine, despite its visual complexity, appeared easy to operate. So much the better. For her.

She stared down at Paula, the silence stretching into almost an embarrassment. "Where's the Old Man? How do I get to him?"

Paula's eyes bulged. "You must be out of your goddamned mind! Even if I knew, do you think I'd tell you? They'd kill me and her and..." Her reply was cut off and transformed into an incredulous grunt of pain and surprise as the bottom of the rack dropped a full twelve inches and left her suspended by her wrists and ankles. Her buttocks were a good eight inches from the descended surface. Fanni twirled a knob and punched a small blue



button in the gizmo's control panel and the straps holding the outstretched arms and legs retracted slowly, purposefully, into the ends of the frame, pulling Paula inch by inch into a perfectly straight line. Her gasps were high and shrill with pain. Kit leapt against her restraints, nearly tearing the flesh and howled into her gag, eyes hot and frantic. Tyler tried to ooze into the cracks between the stones.

"And once more into the breach, my dove. How do I get to the Old Man? All you have to do is tell me and this'll all be over," Fanni said with what she thought to be a perfectly reasonable suggestion. Silence but for Paula's desperate breaths and Kit's subdued invective.

Another button went home and a thin steel bar began raising, spanning the width of the rack until it just touched and crossed the small of Paula's back. And continued to rise, carrying Paula with it and bending her upwards into a shallow V. She vented a scream then, high and shocking in its intensity, causing Fanni to jump with fright. She stopped the bar. Paula's eyes were wild in her head and they wouldn't focus on anything. Her hair was a sodden mass striating her face. Her breaths were convulsive lunges of her rib cage and each rib itself stood out like a curved

column. Fanni's distaste was beginning to make her wretch; she had no liking for this, even if Paula obviously enjoyed inflicting the same on others. But her life was absolutely on the line here. Her options were nonexistent. She had to know. The cane nearly disappeared into the distended flesh of Paula's belly and then quite literally vanished into her breasts. Paula's screams were those of a mad thing driven into a world of the most exquisite and inescapable of hells.

Kit was leaping against the bracelets in a perfect frenzy of despair and hatred for the ghoul flensing the flesh from her love's body, filled with horror and nearly mindless black fear for Paula. The Hall woman was crazy! She would kill Paula! Kit screamed again and again into the gag. Stop! Stop! STOP!

And Fanni stopped. She was looking at Kit, a curious expression on her face. "How about you, little one? Or do you enjoy watching this? Care to comment?"

"You keep your mouth shut, you little slut!" Paula ground out through her pain. "You don't say anything. Anything!" And that was the end of the coherency of the message because Fanni branded her again and then yet again with the cane and Paula's voice was now that of an intolerable, excoriating agony cut suddenly off as Fanni jammed the packing back into her mouth.

Kit's face was wringing wet from tears and they beaded the surface of the gag. "How about it, kiddo? I can keep that up longer than she can. Feel up to some useful conversation?" Fanni stood before the girl, one hand leaned against the wall next to the flushed and stuffed face. Paula groaned behind her gag. Kit's eyes were enormous over Fanni's shoulder at the convoluted figure strung like a line between the ends of the rack. Her eyes flickered back and forth like gnats around a flame, going first to Paula and then back to Fanni. Her agony of indecision must have been excruciating.

"Well, think it over. When you've come to some kind of decision, just holler," and Fanni turned back to the rack. She picked out a whip like six feet of oiled black flame from a wall peg and snaked it through the air horizontally. The resultant crack was terrifying in the stillness. Fanni positioned herself near Paula's side and took a stance. Her arm came back.

And Kit was like a wild thing at the end of the chain. Her flurries of abysmal violence toward escape and succor for Paula had reached an absolute zenith of effort. Her cries were barely contained by the gag. Fanni stopped with her arm still poised, the whip dangling behind her in the dark, visible only as a delicately curved line of highlights winking on and off like tiny malevolent eyes.

"Talkee time?" she queried, eyebrows arching up and down like Groucho Marx used to do. Like Tyler, the nods came thick and fast. "That's what I like to see: an enthusiast." She walked slowly to the girl, coiling and uncoiling the slash of a whip in an almost lascivious caress. "You'd better have some good news for me, chicklet."

Kit slumped into the wall spitting like someone with a tiny bit of hair stuck resolutely to the inside of their lip and working her jaw up and down and around. The gag, ball still glistening from her saliva, was slung loosely around her neck. "Ready?" Fanni asked, all solicitous. Kit nodded. Paula's discouragement from the other end of the room was ignored by both of them.

"She doesn't know anything. Neither do I." No cringing, no groveling. She looked Fanni straight in the eye.

"That isn't what I wanted to hear," Fanni replied, but with a sick feeling beginning deep in her stomach.

"I'm telling you the truth. We haven't even seen the Old Man for six months, let alone know anything about his whereabouts. Even when he was really in the body-business, he and Paula weren't all that close. They were more like businessmen with the same business except the Old Man was a lot bigger; then he kind of moved out into other things and Paula took over. That's why we were both so surprised when Tyler brought you two over." Another damnable dead end, Fanni thought bleakly. Where could she go from here? Then she had a thought.

"You said Paula took over from the Old Man, right?" Kit nodded cautiously. "Then you handle some of the Old Man's ex-clientele." A flicker of something like recognition flashed across the girl's face and she shook her head no, then said, "Aahh well, no, or ...I don't know, I don't think so." The air from the rack was electric; Kit was treading on thin ice, but wasn't exactly sure why, only that Paula had suddenly assumed another full increment of tension. The quiet was total. Fanni took a stab in the not-quite dark.

"Who was that broad in the mink coat upstairs?" Kit's obvious ingenuousness when she gave Fanni a blank stare was reciprocated by the startled intake of air rushing into Paula's nose with surprise. "One more time; who was it?" She was looking over her shoulder at Paula. Silence from that end of the room. Total. "She's in with the Old Man, isn't she? And who was the old fucker with the pipe?"

Fanni stood now, right beside Paula, looking down at the sweating face and form, leather cuffs digging deep into the skin at wrists and ankles, mouth packed with cloth, eyes clear and cold and looking back without flinch or quiver. She wouldn't talk, Fanni decided.

Further Complications

Part Three

Written by Robert K. Bishop

Illustrated by Robert Bishop

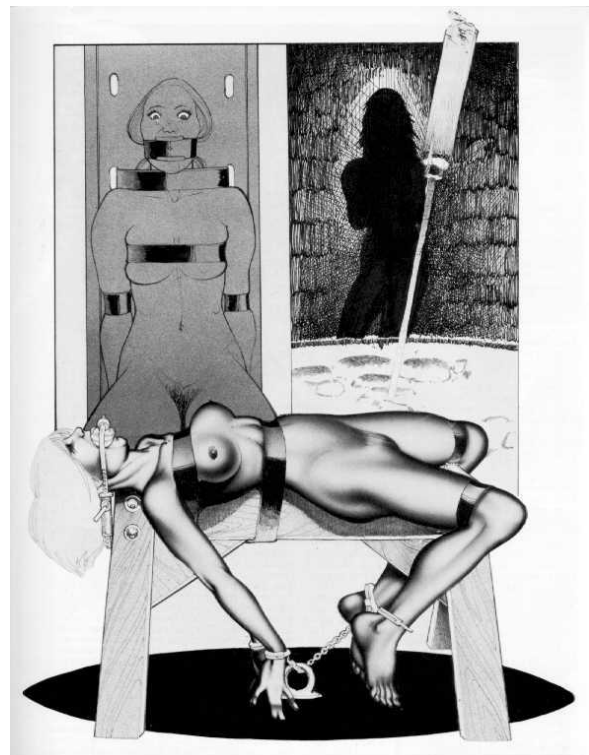
Transcribed by guardian46w

The briquets of charcoal glowed out at her from their nest of grey. Only the very smallest of the edges were still black; the rest of the chunks were an ominous reddish-orange capped with small twirls of smoke wandering towards the air exit near Tyler's feet.

The largest of the brands stood like a miniature steel telephone pole from the center of the near-molten pile. Fanni took it out and tested it against a wooden crate she'd found while the coals had come up to heat. The smoke from the resulting trench was harsh and pungent. A huge letter P was left where the metal had touched. P for Paula, Fanni thought. Quaint. She turned the box around so all four sets of eyes could see. Their attention was total. Fanni replaced the brand, working it deep into the coals.

She said nothing and hadn't said anything for quite some time. Cupping one hand in the other behind her back, she toured the noisome room, pausing before each of her catches and perusing them speculatively. Not a word did any of them say. Madame now stood with her back to a wall, her hands braceleted behind her and her mouth around one of the ubiquitous balls. She couldn't meet Fanni's gaze. Fanni walked on, wafting a glance at Tyler, easily the most frightened of the three, crouching in the corner, eyes intent on the brand sticking up out of the charcoal. Paula still glared back, but the entrance of the branding iron had her at her most tense yet. Fanni thought that if she hit her with a hammer, she'd shatter like a vase. And then on to Kit....

She lay on her back atop a sawhorse affair Fanni'd found with the crate. She was now naked, like Paula, and the position was anything but made for modesty. Her knees were spread wide by a length of wooden bar running at a ninety-degree angle to the piece upon which she reclined and were strapped firmly into place. Her ankles were drawn down and back by a rope attached to their cuffs and run through a ring in the floor. The other end of this rope served to pull her wrists toward the ring as well. Leather straps above her breasts and at her waist melded her body to the bar. An inverted U-shaped



piece of metal rod fit along both sides of her face, the legs fitting into matching sleeves bolted to the sides of the bar. The closed end of the U held a large rubber plug which fit, barely, into Kit's mouth. The U was held down thus by locking adjustments that fit into teeth in the U's legs. Kit's head was locked and totally immobile. Her eyes were frankly terrified; she knew in her heart who the brand was for.

Paula and Kit were side by side when the preparations were complete. Fanni had used more of the rack's almost limitless adjustments and Paula now sat bolt upright facing Kit. The brazier blazed white-hot and the entire room was suffused with the stench of hot metal and charcoal.

Fanni noodled away with the iron, grabbing carefully with a copiously wrapped hand the by-now smoldering wooden grip. The tip bulldozed around beneath the coals like a mole, leaving cascades of sparks in its path and floating incandescent in the air. The light from the furnace was blood-red on her face and hands. From time to time she'd cast a glance to the pair of women. Paula still glared; Kit couldn't look at the thing.

Finally, with a flourish that belied the thing's heft, Fanni whisked it out of its fire bath and walked to the side of the rack. The brand hissed in the cool air, nearly white-hot and shining like a torch. Madame swore she could feel the heat from her spot twenty-five feet away.

Fanni didn't even look at Paula's face beneath her, merely sidled close up to one stretched thigh and poised the brand and began lowering. Inches from the skin, the gossamer strands of hair on her leg began twisting and contorting in the approach of the unbelievable heat. It came closer yet. Fanni flicked a peep towards Paula and saw her still as a board, hands knotted into white-knuckled fists and eyes tightly shut, teeth clenched hard into the gag. Not a protest did she utter; she had accepted the fate she'd blundered into and was prepared to pay the price. About like Fanni had figured, she wasn't going to talk. Fanni heaved a sigh and lowered the brand head onto the side of the rack and stood watching as Paula peered out cautiously, first with one eye and then both. She looked at the still-red prod, almost mesmerized, for several seconds, then looked up at Fanni. "I just wanted to be sure, lady," Fanni said and replaced the brand in the brazier.

She returned after making sure the brand was exactly where she wanted it and pumping on the bellows a few wheezes. "Actually, I never did really think you'd give in; I have a queer kind of knack for that, just as I was pretty certain Kit would spill the beans to protect you. Unfortunately, she just simply doesn't know what I need to know. And I will know it before the night is done." This last was said in a distinctly frightening tone of voice and her eyes were hard on Kit.

Time ticked away, measured by the odd poppings of the charcoal; a shallow cough from Fanni too near the smoke; the creak of Paula's straps; an occasional clink of chain from either Tyler or Madame. Kit made absolutely no sound at all. Her only movement was the gentle flare of her nostrils with each breath and the blinking of her great green eyes. They would witness her immolation tonight or, at the very least, her permanent maiming and disfigurement. A tiny bright tear welled at the corner of one eye. A figure swam into her field of vision, blurred, silent. Kit focused her eyes. The woman.

Fanni gazed down at the form strapped to the bar and then cupped one small round breast with one of her hands, then drifted the hand down the smooth, soft belly to the fur

at the juncture of the gaping legs. "I must admit that you have excellent taste, Paula. Excellent. She must be a joy to you in bed. So soft; so young; so pretty, especially those scrumptious little titties and this bushy little thatch. Yummy," she concluded, rubbing an area of flesh very sensitive to Kit. Her squirms were virtually non-existent courtesy of the straps. She bent her eyes over as far as possible and was just able to see the fiery expression fulminating behind the woman's back. For all the fury of the look Paula, too, could not move a muscle.

"I wonder how much you'll like her when I get through?" Fanni said seemingly to herself and pinched one tender bud of nipple between her thumb and forefinger, hard, then harder still. Kit gasped and strained against the binding, eliciting no more than further exacerbation for her already livid restraint marks. She had visions of a weasel with her breast in its sharp white teeth and the jaws were closing ... closing. Suddenly, with an almost electric thrill, the grasp was gone and she wept against the plug in her mouth. The Hall woman was doing something by the sides of her head and the gag was suddenly lifted vertically away from the bar and Kit's mouth. Fanni threw the device to the floor with a steely crash and turned to Paula as she strode purposefully toward the brazier. "I wouldn't want you to not hear her screams full volume."

And the brand was lifted from the hearth; incandescent ice; almost translucent. It bobbed its way toward Kit like a beacon of death, the gloom seeming to intensify at the sides of the brilliant spectre. Kit screamed in pure fear. Paula's eyes-finally-were bulging and fearful.

Fanni was at Kit's side, the brand being slowly rotated so that its signature was down toward Kit. Kit's head was rocking to and fro on the bar, her cries guttural, incoherent, her face glistening with tears and sweat. Once again the brand descended, aiming at one small perfect breast. "P for Paula on both tits and then burned into that no-doubt tasty little quim of hers."



Suddenly, to Paula's gaze, the brand darted down and to the side in a white arc that burned itself into her eyes, the tip of the thing just brushing Kit's nipple. Her scream was so desperate and shrill that Paula thought at first that the woman had killed her. "And then I mark her face. Both cheeks." The tendons in Kit's neck stood out like cords; her face was a mask of incredulous, mind-boggling pain as the brand was once again poised for swift descent.

Paula had watched the spectacle as a statue frozen into position by the horror of the experience and hadn't so much as blinked since Fanni had returned from the fire. She was maintaining her stillness, but at what

price! What price! The brand slowly, smoothly, began to lower itself to be imbedded into Kit's breast, Fanni all but invisible behind the hellish gleam. Kit was delirious more with fear than pain; the previous quick kiss of the brand had so heightened her tactile awareness that it was as if her whole chest had exploded. She would experience the true monstrosity of the brand this time. Fanni had eyes only for her target.

Paula was shouting into her gag and writhing in the rack's grip. Fanni spared her an indifferent glance and continued the brand's journey. Paula's efforts were truly desperate now; she was throwing all her weight into the jogs and twists, roaring and screaming through the gag-packing. The brand was bare inches from the white softness of Kit's breast. Its actinic whiteness had become a venomous light-yellow glow which illuminated the entire front of Kit's body. A change, then; Paula was pleading, not hurling invective; begging, not demanding. The closer to Kit the brand came, the more adamant and distinct the change became. She was weeping and screaming in as much fear for Kit as Kit was for herself when Fanni finally stopped the brand. She again strode to the brazier and threw it in. Paula slumped into the straps and sobbed hoarsely. Kit seemed to have passed out.

"Well, I never cease to amaze myself with my own perspicacity. Right again, Fanni, you little jewel," and she ran kisses up and down her forearm. "Talk fast, bonzo, I don't have much time and I can still strike while the iron's hot, so to speak," she said, indicating the motionless Kit with a thumb over her shoulder. Paula's gag dangled from her hand.

"The girl's name is Dawnelle something or other," Paula groaned, piquant and probably fatal future confrontations with the Old Man and his minions burning hard in her mind's eye. "She runs a part of the Man's organization. The Mideast section, I think. I'm not completely sure about all that, but I know she and the Old Man run together. He and I could have at one time, except that I'm a lesbian, you know, and he likes girls that like guys. And..."

"She actually runs a part of his outfit? A woman?" Fanni was stunned. On her two previous encounters with the man in question, she'd had an impression of an overwhelming chauvinism.

"I think so," Paula said. "The Middle East or in Eastern Europe or somewhere in those little fucking countries near Russia."

"How do I get to her?"

"You don't have to; she's coming back here. Tomorrow morning!"

"Why?" Fanni breathed, fighting to keep any vestige of burgeoning hope out of her voice. It was the first, and thus far only, significant breach she'd found in an otherwise impenetrable organizational armor. She couldn't allow Paula to stiffen up on her; she'd never be able to carry out the threat with the goddamned branding iron.

"She wants a new pet. And you know the kind I mean," Paula continued, with a voice almost so small as to be incomprehensible. "I was going to fetch one up ... when you and the other one got here."

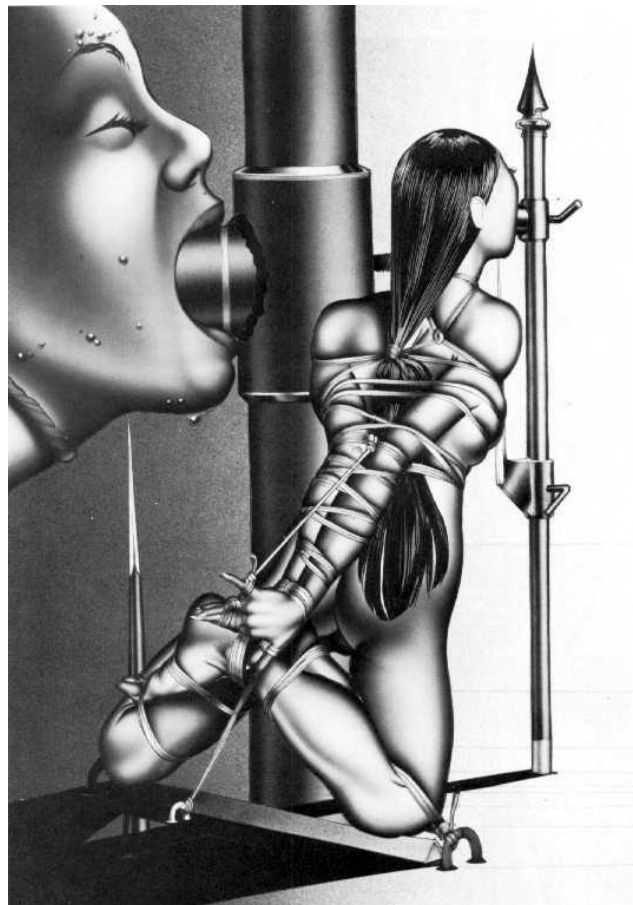
"Is the girl here?" Fanni asked.

"Down the hall. Number 8," was the exhausted reply. Kit moaned and tossed her head. She would be regaining consciousness soon. That was good, Fanni guessed; didn't want to kill the little bitch, after all. She'd be favoring that left boob for quite some time to come, though. Fanni almost grinned at that. Maybe, just maybe, things were beginning to look up. For a damned change.

Ten ... nine ... eight ... there! Fanni stuck her nose against the glass of the spy-hole. An Asian lady. And a beauty to behold, Fanni thought with genuine admiration. The mink-woman was a misogynist. And with damn good taste!

The Asian lady at issue might or might not have agreed with the assessment but under her particular circumstances she would have found them to be of a highly academic status. Paula, or more probably, Kit-had not been kind to her this day. Her knees had been splayed wide and tied to rings in the floor while her ankles were crossed and bound. Her trim feet had been lashed tight to the calves of the crossed legs and to the taut X of her ankles her wrists had been brought right back and attached. Her forearms were festooned with thin cords etched into the golden skin, welded solidly together in the cocoon of fibers. Her sleek glistening long hair had been brought back and entwined with the cords at her elbows causing an inevitable and excruciating, and thoroughly beautiful, bow to her back, with which Fanni was so trenchantly familiar.

The true crown to the setting was not the bondage itself, however; Fanni had seen infinitely worse. That restraint accolade was reserved for the method that held the girl in such motionless, poised posture. She had been leaned forward from the pivot of her knees, themselves atop a cunning and diabolical, in the extreme, triangular dowel of wood, so that her body was slanted across the floor at some considerable angle. A post upright from the floor was adorned with a large metal knob at the appropriate height and this knob the girl had inside her mouth. There was no strap to hold the gaping lips around the novel gag and it was possible that she could have extricated herself from the device, but for one small refinement. The refinement was a spike paralleling the post and several inches in front of it. It tapered to a needle-like point and this point was squarely beneath her chin. Should she, thus, have chosen to release the gag, she would have fallen onto the needle with disastrous, to put it mildly, consequences. It put all Madame's "volunteer" gags to shame, and then some.



Fanni walked into the room and around the girl panting away on her three-point support. The thin edge of the dowel was sunk deep into her knees and her teeth gritted on the knob as saliva pooled on the tiles of the floor beneath her. Her eyes fluttered once, but never fully opened; she couldn't afford the distraction in her concentration. Fanni wondered how it was physically possible to maintain such a fearfully strained position for so long, then thought back to her own experiences on the saw-edged surprise that Madame had once set for her. It could be done.

The problem now was to get the girl out of the position without skewering her like a moth in a collection box. Fanni cast a quick glimpse out the partially opened door and then walked up behind the bound figure and, stooping, put her hands and forearms under the rounded shoulders.

"I'm going to lift you away from the post," she spoke softly into an ear peeking from beneath the hair. "I've got you; you aren't going to fall. Just open your mouth as much as you can and I'll pull you off the ball." The girl's breaths came faster now. She hadn't the strength to signal compliance. Fanni lifted, paused to shift a foot forward, and then began a steady, slow pull. The Asian girl's head turned and twisted as she feebly sought to escape the knob. For a second, Fanni thought it would be a no-go, but abruptly the girl came back in her hands so effortlessly that Fanni nearly lost her balance. She caught herself, steadying the both of them, then laid the securely trussed figure onto the floor and began untying the cords; no easy chore without a knife. The Asian girl lay quivering and racking sobs shook her delicate frame as the ropes slowly, reluctantly, gave up their grasp of her. Several times she wretched and Fanni feared a mess, but nothing came of it. She tugged away at the knots. Patience, my child, she thought, cursing the rope- burns in her fingers.

Her name was Suni Ling and she was from China, but the British version. Hong Kong. The accent might well have come from Piccadilly Square but the face and figure and color were from far, far to the east. Rubbing her arms and hands and the fiery indentations in her legs, she volunteered virtually nothing about herself as she strode around the room shaking warmth and blood and feeling back into her limbs. She had paused from time to time to look into the faces of Kit and Paula, both alarmed to a point of near catatonia by the feral stares.

It was only when Fanni touched on the incident and subsequent fireworks at the storage facility that her interest was piqued and she spun on one tiny heel at the mention of the weapons. "How long ago was this! Where! How many weapons! What kind!" It was a rush of questions, more demands than queries and tripping over themselves, strung together like a speeded-up recording. Fanni held up her hands to slow down, if not halt, the torrent and told her most of what she knew. Another spark of agitation flared across the girl's face and eyes at the mention of the agent burrowing in Madame's hostel of pleasures, even more intense than the first. Fanni, somewhat at a loss, described the meeting and the man. Suni almost seemed to faint, sitting quickly and putting her hands over her eyes. "My partner. I thought he was dead. I thought the swines had shot him!" Fanni thought she might collapse into tears but she didn't. The girl was absolutely silent, at one with herself and whatever private emotions she was experiencing at the moment,

then she stood, lithe and agile as a cat and walked to face Fanni, the beginnings of a very small and tightly controlled smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"I'm sorry about the way I took on when you first released me; I didn't know anything about you and all the rest of it. My experiences with these two..." she indicated Paula and Kit with a contemptuous shrug over her shoulder "...over the last couple of weeks has brought about a certain degree of suspiciousness, you might say." She sat on the edge of the rack, the smile broadening. "My partner and I had been snuffing about here in the States for the last couple of months keeping our eyes peeled for some ... property of our government. We had a fairly nasty bangup with some of the locals and they grabbed me and I was sure I saw my partner go out. When I woke up I found myself all nice and done up in the back of some wretched van and then popped off here. Since then..." she gave Paula another look " ... my quiet U.K. background has received rather a stiff pranging." She rubbed some more at the lingering weals on her wrists.

"That should go away in a few hours," Fanni commented.

"I know; believe me I know," was Suni's reply. "What about this woman you told me about, the one with the furs?"

"She's about the only one I've come into contact with so far who might be able to lead us to the top man. At least it's a possibility, and a good one."

"A nice quiet chat by the fire, eh?" Suni mused. "Might be just the thing at that. Let's take that cannon of yours and get a bite to eat. Should be deserted upstairs at this hour. All the gentlemen visitors will have retired to their wives and kiddies by now, I think." Fanni's pause of caution was met with cheerful scorn. "I've been here a bit longer than you, remember? Know my way about and all that." Fanni examined the four still bound and silenced and followed the girl from the room.

"What about the guards I saw when we came in?" Fanni hissed as the doors in the corridor drifted by. "There's at least two of them that I saw." Fanni checked the gun and its spare speed-loader.

"Not to worry, not to worry. The one you probably saw stays out in a little gatehouse most of the day and chases away the drunks and the other one stays upstairs all the time and keeps an eye out on the grounds. They don't figure on having trouble on the inside, only on having unexpected guests and that's usually the local cops making what Paula laughingly refers to as a raid. By the time anybody does get through the gate and then the door and inside, the door to down there is all sealed off and camouflaged, you can't tell where it's at from upstairs, as you must have noticed, and we ladies-in-waiting are all lashed to the wall and our mouths stopped up. No, the upstairs lot won't be causing us any bother." Fanni wasn't entirely convinced, but the other girl's obvious confidence buoyed her enough to take the risk. Besides which, she always had old Model 29. And she was awfully hungry. Plus they had a lot of preparations to be made before Dawnelle and entourage returned.

"Darling! Paula, darling! What a perfectly fucked-up day I've had. Genuinely awful. The pits." Dawnelle plumped herself down on the ornate stuffed chair, the mink, spotted by a few of the drops of rain now pecking at the double glass in the window, sliding open with

a sibilant susurrus to expose black nylon-clad legs ending in gleaming black shoes. Her gaze swept the room, warm and secure against the burgeoning storm outside. One of her bodyguards swept moisture from the front of his coat and repeated her scan. Both sets of eyes acknowledged and quickly passed over the other woman in the room with Paula, and returned to the newcomer. "A new recruit, Paula?" Dawnelle cooed. "Very nice, but you really ought to do a rethink on those uniforms your people wear." Fanni stood to attention in a corner, eyes seemingly fast on the wall opposite her. Only the one ogre had come in. The other was still in the car, she supposed.

"Uuhh, yes, just got her. I'm having her take care of our little Miss Ling." Paula gave Fanni a level glance, knowing without being able to see that Fanni's right hand held another transmitter similar to the first which would flash a signal through the house and into the tiny black plastic box that now was bound around Kit's loins as it had previously been attached to a now-greatly relieved Tyler. The first sign of treachery would prove to be execrable and probably fatal to Kit.

"Aahh, yes, our Miss Ling," Dawnelle breathed. "And how is our little Britisher piglet? I've wanted a taste of that one for years; I was the one that spotted them sneaking around asking their god-damned stupid questions, didn't you know? Is she ready to go?" The woman seemed positively rabid to sample the new possession. She had the same unmitigated and barely controlled ferocity that Fanni had seen lurking behind Kit's eyes there on the stoop. Visions of Suni's flayed skin hanging out on a line flapping in whatever breeze wandered along weren't hard to come by. Kit at least was young and her potential viciousness wasn't yet tempered and honed by an acquired taste for increasingly sadistic predilections garnered over years and years of screams. Dawnelle seemed to click into place, indexing somehow into the parameter of general behaviors Fanni tended to lump into the generalization of "hard-core sadist." Not a nice lady. Fanni wondered if she killed the minks for her coat with her own hands. Beat the little bastards to death with a stick. Probably had a nail in it, to boot.



"She's downstairs, waiting. Will you come this way, please?" Paula seemed nervous, but controlled it well enough. It didn't show to anyone not specifically looking for it; like Fanni. Her fingers tightened on the button.

"I'd really prefer, darling, that you have somebody bring her up here. I am, after all, paying you a goddamned great fee for this little bitch, and I think I'm entitled to certain amenities," Dawnelle sniffed. Paula nearly froze halfway through her motion to vacate the chair. She licked her lips, eyes on Dawnelle. Fanni stared straight ahead. Dawnelle fiddled with her nails, then glanced over at Paula, insolent, adamant. She would have her slave

paraded around before her, as befitting the new owner; protocol had to be observed. Fanni had expected it.

"Fanni," Paula spoke up, finally, voice almost choked, "would you go down and fetch Number 8 up here. And be quick about it, please?" Her tone came out as adequately obsequious. Dawnelle smiled down at her scarlet claws, the expression only partially concealed beneath her thick fall of hair.

Fanni moved then, fractionally, her head swiveling to regard Paula with a noncommittal look. The two of them had discussed just this contingency before the limousine had arrived. Both of them knew full well that it was a calculated risk on Fanni's part to allow Paula out of her sight for even the shortest period of time. But Fanni held the transmitter and Kit wore the blasting caps. And Paula remembered all too vividly the cataclysmic encounter her guard had suffered at the hands of this witch-woman with her big gun. Treachery would cost her dearly. Was it worth it? Was Kit irreplaceable? Not in a long time had she met and known anyone as vibrantly perverse as the youngster wired like a bomb in the basement. Fanni drew the steely little box out from her side just enough for Paula to see it and walked with firm, resolute steps from the room, carefully closing the door behind her.

Dawnelle's expression had altered subtly but distinctly. Fanni? The name was vaguely familiar; but from where? Where? She rubbed the mink between her fingers, savoring the bristly-satin dichotomy of its texture. Was it something Donald had mentioned?

Ruminations, hers and Paula's and, presumably, the guard's, came to an abrupt close with the opening of the door so recently used by Fanni's disappearing, uniformed backside. An Asian woman of startling beauty had been shoved into the room, hobbled and roped and gagged with a broad leather band. Her skin was satiny soft and smooth, powdered. Her breasts were high and firm, the nipples like pegs in their dark areolas. A polished leather strap encircled her waist and anchored a crotch strap diving down into the ink-black curls at her thighs, disappearing to re-emerge between the almost perfectly rounded twin moons of her buttocks. Her eyes were furious over the gag, searing them all with their intensity. The guard woman shoved her further into the room, toward her new owner. Nice touch, that, Dawnelle thought. The woman fought her bondage, cries struggling past the leather plug in her mouth, but the guard handled her admirably, maneuvering her with deft flicks of the crop she carried, until the beauty was standing directly before and over Dawnelle.

"I like my slaves on their knees, guard," she crooned. "I don't like looking up at them."

The guard flicked an arm forward and tangled its hand in the girl's hair, pulling her head back viciously while simultaneously kicking forward at the girl's knees. She went to the floor with a bump, nearly ending up flat on her back but for the hand still deeply entwined in her hair. The guard released her with a quick forward shove and the slave straightened, tears welling at the edges of her eyes, as much from the mortification of being handled thus as from the pin-prick stars of pain emanating from the torn hair roots. Some fear had taken the sharp edge off her initial fury. She looked up at Dawnelle, miserable, mastered, humiliated.

"Better, my pet, much better." The guard walked around behind her and resumed her position of attention. "You and I are going to have time for lots of new experiences,

bitch. Experiences like you just wouldn't believe," Dawnelle purred, pausing to light a cigarette. More fear began creeping into Suni's eyes. Dawnelle ran a wet pink tongue over her lower lip, then curled it back over the upper. "Just like eating candy."

Dawnelle tapped out a length of light grey cigarette ash onto the tray provided at the side of the chair and turned to the bodyguard standing stolidly just outside the doorway. "It's all right, Malcolm. Tell Howard things are fine in here. Bring in the money." Malcolm pulled a two-way pocket radio from beneath his bulging topcoat and spoke into it in low tones. No one moved except for Dawnelle, plying her cigarette. In a moment there came a clattering on the painted wood of the stoop and then a musical ring of the doorbell. Malcolm turned, dropping his arms from their position crossed over his chest, and opened the door to the second man. He carried an attaché case across the floor and placed it on Paula's desk, turning it so that the latches were toward her after he had snapped them open.

"It's all there, Paula, my dove, every last little dime and cent," Dawnelle said, the tone of her voice indicating the end of the discussion and of the transaction. She began arranging her coat to don it. "We'll have to do this again some time." More rain pecked at the tall paired windows at the side of the room. Dawnelle glanced at them and grimaced. "Shit, more goddamned rotten weather," she clucked to herself. "Howard, go out and pull the car around in front of the porch. I wouldn't want my new tidbit here to get herself damp." She plucked at a vagrant strand of the black hair waterfalling before her and gave it a nasty snapping yank.

The bodyguard complied, stepping back from Paula's desk as the latter seemingly rummaged around in the neatly rubber-banded stacks of bills, and he walked to the door. In a second it was heard closing on the elements. One down. One to go. And Fanni didn't entirely trust Dawnelle not to be armed in one fashion or another. Caution here. Very careful, lady.

"Malcolm, my dear, come over here if you would, and carry our little Miss Ling out to the car. That's a good boy." The mink coat was on now, and Dawnelle was tugging on some long black gloves. Fanni walked over near Suni, ostensibly to lend assistance. As the man bent to gather up the girl, Fanni coshed him tidily with one of Paula's liberated saps and the man fell half atop Suni in slack silence. A two-hundred-pound bag of cement.



Dawnelle's eyes had widened for an instant and then, incredibly fast, she whipped out a small automatic pistol and fired once and then again as Fanni spun onto the floor dragging out the Smith & Wesson. A pane of the exquisite, chamfered glass behind her shattered to Dawnelle's pistol's toylike poppings and the second round thunked into the walnut paneling adjacent. Fanni rolled, desperate. No cover! Another shot and she felt a brief flaring bite along the outside of her right thigh. Gun still wasn't out. No time. She flicked the sap at Dawnelle's wide-legged, two-handed firing stance, the leather-covered missile a black blur through the air. As Dawnelle squeezed off her next shot the sap caught her square across the bridge of the nose, where it meets the forehead, and she fell straight

backwards, legs buckling beneath her like dynamited bridge supports, and bumped onto the floor. The stars behind her eyes dissipated almost instantly and she was lurching across the floor to the gun, vision still not quite cleared. Where was Howard! Her fingers made pale hooks splayed for the pistol when a giant concussion shook the room and the little pistol exploded into fragments that whizzed off into the dark corners of the room like shrapnel. Fanni finally had gotten the Howitzer into action!

Another report! Higher pitched! Howard's .357 Magnum! One shot. Why didn't he finish the bitch! Scufflings from his position, then another huge blast right next to her ear, then another. She was caught in the middle. Dawnelle covered her ears and screamed. The bitch was hiding behind her, lying on the fucking floor, using her as a bunker! Howard, you prick, don't you dare shoot! The woman fired again and Howard's position was pinpointed to her ears by the resultant hoarse shout/scream. Howard was hit! His footsteps lumbered down the hallway drunkenly and slammed through the door. The woman was off after him like a panther, bright spent shell cases tinkling on the polished floor in a brass rain of gyrating, still-hot hulls as she flipped out the cylinder and lined up Tyler's speed-loader. Instants later its black plastic form was hurled back into the room and the cylinder latched back into battery with a solid clink. The woman dived to the floor fractionally before three shots smashed through the glass and splattered razor-sharp shards and glittering needles of glass clear to the wall. Fanni lifted herself from the floor quickly, expecting perhaps another shot, then steadied herself on one knee, the muzzle of the gun tracking, following a running figure Dawnelle couldn't see. At the first report, the remainder of the glass still in the doorframe was blown out onto the porch by the muzzle blast. The second shot followed moments later, then the woman flipped the muzzle up, shaking her head, swearing to herself.

Then Fanni was up and running in a crouch, pistol held out and before her, swaying like the head of a cobra lined up directly with Dawnelle's eyes. Fanni ran a rapid glance to Paula, standing motionless behind her desk, a stack of bills dangling from between her fingers like a gigantic cigarette destined for the ashtray. "Up, up, up, asshole! We've got to get the hell out of here. I hit your friend out there a couple of times but I didn't take him completely out. We've got to move! You, get over here! Untie Suni. Move your ass, dumbfuck!"

Howard blundered through the waist-high grass, sodden with the new and previous rains, tearing at his legs like blankets, clumsy hands, almost malicious. His breaths were sobs of pain and fear and hate. A broad. A goddamned broad! He had two more holes in him than God had intended to exist and they wept like the sky, only the color was different. The ache from the shoulder was dull; more astringent than the one along his side; he thought it had taken out a chunk of rib. The Python dangled from his right hand, snagging in the tops of the grasses. He'd always hidden a glib smirk at the snub-nosed little toys his buddies used; the big .357 Colt Python was a man's gun. This was his first encounter with a .44 Magnum. He spashed down the road. A fucking broad. With a gun bigger than his. Shit!

To anyone in the house who could have heard them, the three AH Mk.I Gazelles would have seemingly heralded the approach of the breath of ruin itself. The trio of 858-

horsepower turbines shrieked amidst the metallic clatter of rotors tearing at the sky and blowing out giant fans of leaves and wet grass as the landing skids pounced onto the land and the bulbous-bodied, sting-tailed fliers squatted, one in the parking lot, the flail of its rotor rocking itself and the ruined Chevrolet, and the other in front, in the temporarily unoccupied visitor's lot. The third remained in the air, directly over the house and watched, seemingly, as the contoured doors of the first two ships popped open like the lids of cans and the occupants sprang out and headed for the house itself. The ships, like their occupants, bore no identifying markings and the faces of the men might well have come stamped from the same mold. Their weapons were well-oiled and silenced.

To any visitor in the house who might have seen, the already mangled front and as yet untouched rear doors shattered into the house in bits and pieces as the Cro-Magnons applied for admission, leaving grimy wet footprints on the floor beyond. The eyes and the silencers flicked ceaselessly. The man in the grey suit in the helicopter above waited, gazing with a deceptively impassive expression at the now-vacant ships awaiting word from his personal commandos. Occasionally his look would shift to the face of the watch around his wrist. The man behind him with the headphones pressed into his ears jerked, suddenly, and signaled to him that it was now safe to descend. The man nodded his head and the Gazelle dived for the ground.

The Old Man's footsteps banged off the walls as he strode down the hallway. Two of his men stood at either side of the opened door at the end. There wasn't much light from the inside. The Old Man recognized the faces within immediately as he came through the door. Paula and her latest lesbian slut were huddled in one corner. The woman he knew as Madame was slumped between two of the beefy guards. Her eyes went wide and frantic as she saw him. His group-leader was in an intense whispered conference with an obviously exhausted Tyler. A man ran from the room. The Old Man walked with measured steps toward Madame, gesturing for one of the commandos to give him a gun. As his fingers closed over the butt and Madame began sinking further and further into the hands supporting and more importantly restraining her, his second came running over.

"Sir," the man whispered. The old man began to aim at the woman. He knew vaguely that something wasn't quite right, but his rage at a confrontation with the harpies that had cost him so very, very much money would have to be thinned a bit before he sat down to ruminations. "Sir!" More insistent this time. As his finger began squeezing the trigger, the other's hand fell on his shoulder and spun him harshly. "SIR!"

The Old Man turned with a jerk, the fury almost a froth upon his lips. A black blanket seemed to be falling over his eyes. Was the fool out of his mind! "You can't do it, sir. The other one got away! We NEED this one!"

What the hell was he saying! The gun in his hands trembled. Maybe he should shoot the sonofabitch and get back to business with the woman. "We will need her, sir. We can't take the chance if she gets away from Hughes and Maybry in the helicopters. This bitch here will be the only chance we have if they don't find her." Tyler nodded his head in agreement from behind the soldier's shoulder.

"It's true, sir," Tyler continued. "Hall, the other one, got out about fifteen minutes ago. She's the one that did all the damage back at the shop. And she's got some Asian

broad with her. I think she's from English Intelligence or something similar. They took the other woman with them when they left."

The Old Man was still trembling, but a semblance of reason had leaked back into his eyes. Madame was forgotten. For now. "What other woman?" he hissed. Tyler shook his head dumbly. He didn't have the name.

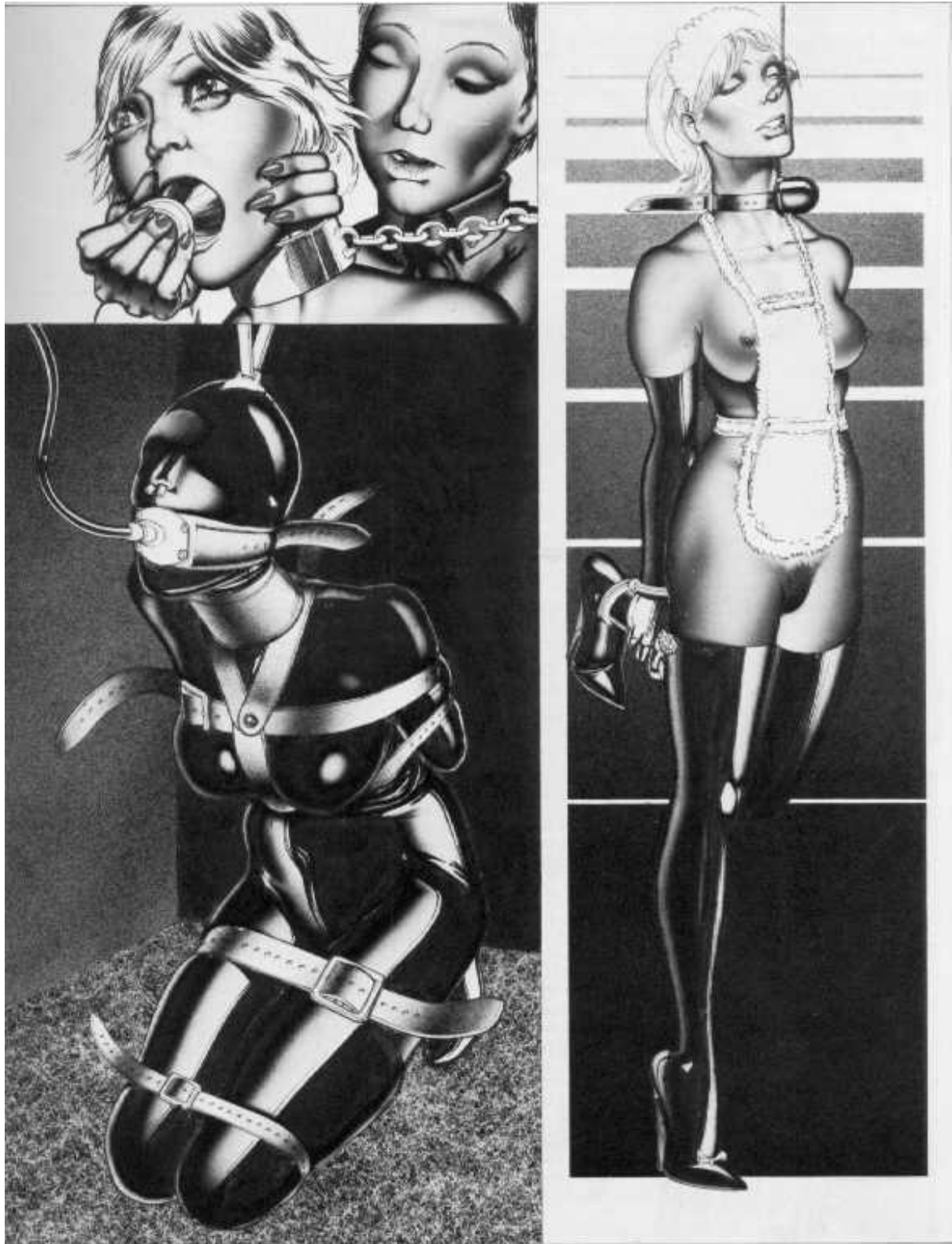
"You! Paula! Who was the other woman!" The Old Man had a bad feeling coming on.

Paula cast terrified eyes his way and went back to cuddling the near-hysterical Kit. "Who!" was the roar.

"Dawnelle," was the reply. "Dawnelle. She came for the Asian. She set her and her partner up when she saw them sniffing around. They were after those Enfields you liked so much. Dawnelle wanted the Asian for herself."

The Old Man stood as if transfixed by a pole running vertically through his body. Before the eyes of his troops and his captives he seemed equally as menacing to either side. His face went mottled then dark red and his eyes bulged. The plastic butt of the machine pistol cracked conspicuously in the grip of his fists and his breaths came faster and faster, like some peculiar human steam engine, dragging a lot more cars than it could. "Bitch!" he ground out, finally. "Stupid, empty-headed bitch." Beneath the fearsome exterior, however, the Old Man was feeling starkly horrified; Dawnelle knew so much! So much! The butt of the gun began to bend.

He whirled on Madame and she jerked as if stuck with a prod. He glared, voiceless for seconds that dragged on nerves like fingernails across a blackboard, then nodded twice, a nasty quick bending the thin slit of his mouth. He hefted the gun, seeming to notice it fully for the first time. "We'll keep her. We'll keep her! You may wish in the future that I'd ended it here and now, bitch. You may bloody-well scream for it!" With that pleasantry he pitched the piece to its owner and strode for the door. "Get Hughes and what's-the-other-one on the radio. They'd better get that cunt." The rest of his invective was for himself and was lost to the sudden cacophony of bodies walking and being shoved through the door after him.



The cunt, or cunts, rather, in question were unaware of the happenings back at the ranch. Previous and painful escapades made them routinely wary, on the other hand. The Old Man had long arms, Fanni suspected; very long. She threw the car left and right and then right again, trees and the odd pole set into the ground adjacent to the road flashing by in a blurred mosaic of sound and color. The tires' open tread whirred on the road, still wet and in some places soaked. She was driving quickly, but extremely carefully; ending up in the ditch would be worse than useless at this stage of the game.

Suni and Dawnelle were in the back seat, the former with her eyes adding a full 360 degrees of scan to Fanni's more limited range. Nothing. The car was one of Paula's, a nicely plebian and thus, hopefully, inconspicuous station wagon, and its handling was awful! Especially in the wet. Fanni would have preferred Dawnelle's big Mercedes but it wasn't exactly a low-profile vehicle. They didn't need any more attention directed to themselves than absolutely necessary, especially if, as Paula had intimated, the local cops were in on the Old Man's machinery, however peripherally. A nice scroungy station wagon would do nicely. She hoped!

From her perch several thousand feet above the ground Madame looked out on the terrain unrolling beneath her like a rug. The translucent, barely discernible reflection of her own gagged face bounced back at her from the slick glass canopy section set into the door. Her world was the clatter of the rotor overhead pursued by the whine of the engine; the tight agony at her wrists and mouth; a faint but pervasive stench of plastic and kerosene and smoke from the cigar that the man in front was now chewing to wet ribbons, and a gut-deep, sickening terror. She knew she would die in the future ... the very near future! Her eyes were wide and staring. And they saw nothing but her death.

Dawnelle, conversely, saw nothing but the back of the front seat and vivid slashes of blue sky being strangled by another encroaching storm. Rotten weather. Rotten circumstances. She twisted in her restraints, still furious, still seething. The Asian looked down at her. Suni's left cheek bore a nasty bruise running from just beneath the cheekbone nearly to the corner of her lip. It had taken both the Hall woman and little Miss Slant-eyes there to stuff her into the leather jacket, and they had both paid prices for it. They had a lot more to pay. A lot more. The tips of the sleeves came to closed points and these had been drawn so far forward around her sides that they almost met across her stomach. Dawnelle breathed with some difficulty at first. She twisted again in the creaking hide and mouthed the word "bitch" at the Englishwoman. Suni gave her a snorting grin and returned to the job of "see-the-bad-guy-before-he-sees-you." Dawnelle's ankles were strapped together and the loose end of the binding had been drawn up and threaded through a buckle at the back of the jacket, effectively hogtying her. Her mink coat lounged on the seat beneath Suni's knees and seemed somehow to mock Dawnelle with its reminders of its wearer being so recently and abruptly sundered from its implied opulence. There would be an accounting for this.

They were on the town almost before they knew it. The sign was mostly hidden by a pernicious little pine that only months previously probably wasn't more than a foot high and now stretched its prickly self a good four feet closer to the sky. From behind the wind-blustered branches the sign feebly proclaimed, "PROSPER. One mile. Pop. 412." Megalopolis incarnate. People, and with them, potential bothers. The road shot like a wet, black rule straight past the beginnings of the burg and the ubiquitous portender of civilization, a gas station. There were no side roads of any mention. Fanni slowed to nearly a crawl and yelled back to Suni. "Gag her and get her down flat on the floor; and cover her up with something. Then get up here with me!"

Suni leaped down into the bowels of the footwell and came up with a dirty once-upon-a-time reddish shop rag. It wouldn't be enough. She'd need more packing for Dawnelle, she realized. A lot more. The latter already glared at her above tightly clenched jaws. Suni's hands flew to the coat beneath her, diving into the pockets. A scarf. Slinky. Thin as

air. Silk. No go. Other pocket. A pocket- book, no, a change purse, rather. And such a purse! Mink-to match the jacket-and just about the right size. Suni looked up and smiled a smilish smile at Dawnelle. "Open wide, sweetheart." Began the battle.

Fifty feet from them the light turned red. A town of 412 people and a goddamned stop light. Fanni expected to see chickens and a cow or two malingering around in the middle of the street. Old buildings and older people, most of the same indoors probably swapping yarns about the year's best manure spreader, or some such bucolic rot. Fanni wasn't a farmer. And, yo and behold, coming around a corner directly across from them, just about the brand spanking newest, shiniest, cleanest police car either of them had ever spied. The cop was built like a toad and was chewing on a wad of elephantine proportions as he, too, stopped for the light. They stared across the distance at one another. The light changed and they moved forward, the cop leaving first. His head swiveled on a non-existent neck as the cars passed.

Dawnelle, under the coat now, mouth packed with the purse and knees tied hard up under her throat, heard the other car's passage and howled through the gag. The cop didn't seem to notice. His head popped back forward and the car swerved down into the inundated gravel parking lot of a diner named "EAT." The road leaving town was as arrow-straight as that entering and Fanni eyed the cop as he slowly dwindled behind them. She thought he walked into the diner. But she couldn't be sure. She needed a side road. The howls still filtered through all the fur. Suni suddenly leaned clear back over the seat and gave Dawnelle a resounding crack. "Shut the fuck up down there!" Silence.

Further Complications

Part Four

Written by Robert K. Bishop

Illustrated by Robert Bishop

Transcribed by guardian46w

The phone on Paula's desk jangled for attention. It jangled for a long time before Paula got round to answering it. "Yes?"

"Paula? Homer, down at Prosper. How y'all doin'? Reason I called was to tell you I seen that little white station wagon of yours drivin' through town with two little fillies in it. Thought I'd kinda check in with ya first before pullin' the little ladies over."

A sudden change came over Paula's voice when she replied. Homer didn't seem to notice much. "Where are they now?"

"Wull, like I jus' said, they was just cruisin' through town a couple minutes ago, headed west. I can sure stop 'em if ya want..."

"NO! That's quite all right, Homer. Quite all right. They're doing an errand for me and have my permission to use the car all they like. No need to bother them. Just let them go, please." Her voice seemed a little nervous.

"Okay, ma'am. Jus' wanted to be sure. Y'all take care, now." Homer hung up the phone and looked out the streaming window with a peculiar expression on his face. Mighty strange people around these parts the last few years. Didn't seem to bother nobody, though. He shook his head and plopped himself onto a worn leatherette stool at the greasy counter. "Coffee, Millie." He shook his head again and quite forgot the incident.

The man standing behind Paula straightened as the phone returned to its cradle and dragged out a portable transmitter. The Old Man would want to know this. "Where's Prosper?"

The car slid and grumbled down the road. Dawnelle finally gave up trying to push the purse out of her mouth past the shop rag. Almost she was thankful for the thick coat covering her flimsy dress and providing at least a modicum of relief from the clamminess of the car's interior. Neither of the two crazies in the front seat apparently cared for the heater. They hit an especially cavernous pothole and her knees dug into the ribbed rubber floor mat. She contented herself with visions of the revenge to come. The storm worsened and the sun dived for the horizon as if in fear.

The weather and the time of day combined to favor Fanni and Suni, flying conditions were deteriorating rapidly and the light was failing in step. Which, unfortunately, didn't keep the one Gazelle assigned to their search quadrant from finding them.

Maybry squinted out from the canopy at the vehicle flashing through the trees below him. Blind luck. Pure fucking blind luck, he thought. He could only barely make out the car and had it not been for its white paint scheme, he would never have seen it at all. He waited, hoping for the car's lights to go on and provide him with a clear target. The Old Man's orders had been succinct: destroy the car and everybody in it. Cutting losses, Maybry thought. He'd heard one of the women inside was supposed to be a friend of the Old Man's, but orders were orders. The trees and the land beneath were merging into one indistinct blur, only the car weaseling along the miserable road providing any animation to the picture. He checked again to make sure the running lights were turned off.

Dawnelle was lying on her back across the rear seat; Suni had finally favored her enough to release the knee ropes. Her gaze was nearly straight up out the window. The Gazelle was like a wraith, barely recognizable against the scudding clouds and waning light. Her heart leaped. He'd come! She bit on the gag savagely, its bulk distorting her grimace of victory and the shop rag obliterating it altogether. She couldn't see the figure leaning out the partially opened port door with the grenade launcher.



Fanni pulled out the light knob and the road was flooded before her with the light and the flickering bright lines of rain. The man above aimed the bulky weapon against the blast of the wind. The trees were going to be a problem. The car slowed for a more torturous segment of the road and the man fired. An instant, it seemed, after the gun banged into his shoulder, the ovoid grenade completed its sluggish parabola down toward the car and, as he'd seen time after time, curved back and away as if the projectile had a volition of its own. Shit! He hadn't led the car enough. It detonated with a dulled thump and a flash instantly swallowed by the wind and rain. Swearing, he broke the gun and began horsing another round into the chamber.

Inside the car, the atmosphere clicked from an almost soporific torpor into an eyes-wide, oh-my-God, it's-the-end-of-the-fucking-world frenzy; the girls had begun to believe they'd pulled it off. Dawnelle stared at the writhing machine above them, incredulous. The Old Man MUST know I'm in here! He must! She still couldn't see the man with the now-reloaded gun.

As if by some kind of sixth sense, Fanni simultaneously slammed on the brakes and cut the lights. The second grenade blew out a huge gob of mud and water directly in the middle of the road, but 30 yards in front of them. Shrapnel pinged off the front of the car and Fanni imagined she could hear the tinkle of at least one of the lights being smashed. How had they been located so fast! How! Even as she said it, she knew it didn't matter. Survival was on the plate.

Maybry, eyes flicking back and forth from the ground to the business of flying the helicopter, lost the car the instant the lights went off. The feeble glow of the brake lights disappeared almost as soon as they appeared. He cursed and threw the Gazelle into a tight, arcing loop that brought him back over the road and snapped on the Nightsun. The bare tips of trees seemed to leap up at him and his co-pilot gave an involuntary lurch back in the seat. The car was nowhere in sight. The element of surprise had failed; now it was just going to be a short, slogging search. Pellets of rain flattened into discs instantly whipped away in streaking tails along the canopy. The gunner, still perched halfway out the door, yelped at the first bites and slammed the window.

The light quickly picked out the sheen of the road and Maybry swept up it, the copilot guiding the light. The trees formed an almost continuous spidery framework of limbs over the road like a tent. Maybry shook his head. There wouldn't be any landing for confirmation. The Old Man wouldn't like that.

He saw the car before the light illuminated it, an indistinct, light blur against the brown/black of the trees. The copilot had been sighting along the Nightsun's beam and found the car only when the light did, overshooting it slightly before jerking back on target. The gunner's window slid back with a clank.

The car was sitting sideways and skewed, square in the middle of the muddy track. All four of its doors were open and the Nightsun confirmed its emptiness. The gunner's weapon followed it as Maybry whirled the helicopter in a tight circle overhead, scanning the car and the edges of the trees. It would be a tight fit, he thought, but the trees had thinned out considerably here, and he thought he might be able to set down a short way in front of the deserted car. He steadied the craft against a short vicious gust of wind as he called his control. The Old Man himself came on, rage hard in his voice, and told him to descend. The implication that came over the speaker was not to consider coming back if the women weren't found. With the weather becoming worse and worse, Maybry was the Old Man's last chance for the day; the ground forces necessary to mount an adequate search wouldn't be available until later the next day; plenty of time for the trio to be long gone. Dawnelle was to be dead or in his hands long before then.

Suni and Dawnelle were by the time nearly 300 yards into the bushes, Dawnelle considerably more pliant than before, the grenades had shaken some of the bravado out of her. Suni burrowed them down into a small copse of thornish bushes and secured Dawnelle to a thin tree trunk with her belt going around the girl's throat and the trunk. She strapped her ankles again and ran the long end around the trunk as well. Finally, Suni checked the shop rag to be sure it was still tight and holding in the wadding, not that any noise that Dawnelle might voice would be heard over the wind and clattering of the branches overhead. Her charge tucked away, Suni checked her bearings as best she could and ran back toward the howl and light of the prowling helicopter.

The skids sank nearly two inches into the muck and Maybry peered out of the cockpit with something akin to panic, but then the craft stopped and settled. The gunner was out in a bound, slinging the launcher over his shoulder and pulling an automatic pistol from a shoulder holster. The copilot swung the light through the trees in a series of quick jerks, returning from time to time to the clearing. The glare was so intense that raindrops falling through the beam seemed to have a light of their own and were nearly blinding. Maybry

squinted his eyes and hoped for the best, knowing secretly that there wasn't a chance in hell of seeing anything through the downpour. Shit. Besides, he was getting nervous; they'd left the cathouse in such a hurry that he only had the one killer with him. The other two had been left behind in the rush. Their one man was somewhere out in the rain. Maybry tried to wipe the rapidly forming condensation from the inside of the canopy. The copilot kept sweeping with the light.

Squeezed between the bottom of the car and the mud beneath, Fanni looked out as the killers arrived in the helicopter and was both relieved and amazed that only one hopped out. Others might have stayed inside, but she doubted it. The Nightsun was just high enough on the nose of the ship to be unable to shine directly under the car and Fanni found herself in a pool of what must have been impenetrable darkness as seen from outside. She'd risked everything in the hope that since the car was obviously empty the people in the helicopter would refrain from blowing it to hell and gone. Those first few circlings of the helicopter had been some of the most tense moments in her life. It seemed to have worked. So far.

The boots slogged near, their shadow like a wavering ink curtain snaking toward her position under the car, then dying in intensity as the light was swung away. As it did so, she slid out from under the car directly behind the tailgate. With rain hissing onto the mud and the wind razoring through the trees, she didn't think the man could hear her.

As he rounded the end of the car she drove her body up violently and swung her knee hard into his groin and as his head snapped down bashed him viciously at the nape of the neck with the butt of the pistol. He fell like a shot but in hitting his neck she had raised herself over the back of the car. She ducked instantly, squatting on the killer, and snaked the gun around the fender aiming at the dimly seen figures in the cockpit. There weren't any shouts. Or shots. The Nightsun still flicked through the trees. And stopped. Had they seen Suni? If they had, they might take off. She had to have them on the ground! She sprinted, desperate, for the helicopter.

"What is it!" Maybry shouted, pointing. "Over there!" The figure was only fifty yards away, or so it seemed. Then it disappeared. The copilot wiggled the light around the sodden strands of pines and over leaves that had attained the consistency of mush. Nothing. The left rear door crashed open. The killer had returned. "Over there, Henricks, Goddammit, over in those trees where we've got the light! Move!"

"Henricks is out sleeping in the mud," came to his ears the same instant as the muzzle of the pistol made a shallow circular dent in the back of his neck. The copilot spun, Maybry froze. "Keep your hands where I can see 'em. Any mistakes and you're dead, both of you. You," she indicated the copilot, "unbuckle your seat belt. Now turn the light on the car and leave it there." The man complied. "Now, both of you, out through the left side and walk to the car and stand in front of the hood with your backs to me. Hands on your



heads." Maybry couldn't believe what was happening. The copilot moved with considerable alacrity.



A vague shape detached itself from the trees and materialized outside the canopy. Suni. She ran to the ship, crouching, wary. She had seen Fanni pop in the opened door on the other side. Suni had a gun in her hand, too. Paula the Provider. Unwilling, but ample. She flipped open Maybry's door and stuck the gun in his face as if to reinforce Fanni's command. Maybry wondered how the hell he was going to explain this. Then thought that he probably shouldn't stick around long enough to do so. The Old Man was a rotten loser. Rotten.

"Outside!" The two men crouched miserably in the blinding light, huddling against the rain. The third man's feet could just be seen poking out from behind the car. Fanni sat in the helicopter watching them through the opened door. Suni was

back in the bushes retrieving Dawnelle. With a crash, the two figures blundered out through the night and stumbled to the other door. Suni yanked it open and shoved Dawnelle, grimy as a drowned rat, into the back seat and roped her into place. The men at the car didn't seem to notice.

"Buckle up, Fanni. It's been awhile since I've flown one of these about, but I shouldn't have all that much trouble," Suni said as she scrambled into the pilot's seat. She scanned the ceiling and console controls, as if familiarizing herself, then grabbed for the cyclic and collective pitch levers. The turbine began a higher whine.

"Hold it a minute," Fanni said. Suni paused, hands still on the levers. The altered engine note had gotten Maybry's attention and he'd turned, against the copilot's advice. Fanni yelled at him, at both of them, to get away from the car. At first they didn't seem to understand, but when she put the grenade launcher to her shoulder the message became glaringly obvious and they sprinted off like hares. Fanni turned to Suni and motioned upwards with her hand and the Gazelle sprang off the ground to hover a hundred feet overhead.

Fanni watched as the stunned killer lumbered after his compatriots, then she took careful aim and fired at the car. The shot wasn't perfect by a damn sight but the explosion shattered the engine bay and its contents with a satisfyingly fiery bang. Spilled gasoline ignited and the car's remains were almost immediately bathed in flame. Maybry was going to have to walk home. Fanni threw the gun in the back, gave the soaked and shivering Dawnelle an appraising look and settled herself into the seat, closing the door to the storm and the conflagration below them. Suni moved the controls carefully and the helicopter whizzed up and over the trees. This time, at least, she could enjoy the ride, Fanni thought to herself.

In back, Dawnelle shook and cursed to herself. The Old Man had tried to kill her! From the instant the first grenade had cleaned out the vegetation behind the car she'd felt it, without being absolutely sure. He'd written her off in his lust to kill the other two. Then in the forest, tied to the tree with the storm raging overhead and the helicopter searching, searching, with all the guns sticking out the windows, she became more and more sure. Finally, as Suni had thrown her into the back seat, she'd caught a glimpse of the pilot's face and, even turned away as it had been, recognized him as one of the Old Man's people. It was as if her substance had exploded out of her at the confirmation and she was like a husk, drained, empty; all the parties, all the power games both large and small; all the intrigues; everything, had come to nothing more than herself tied up and gagged in the back seat of a beat-up station wagon with the Old Man's troops doing their damndest to kill her. She didn't even really have the solace of her eventual revenge against the two women up front to console her anymore. The leather straitjacket had begun to dry in the heat. And to shrink. Dawnelle hardly noticed.



Fanni was riffling through a thick packet of charts, the first of which indicated their rough immediate area. She recognized the large area and where she wanted to go, but couldn't trace exactly their departure point from the woods. She noted their direction of travel on the compass, then after several moments more staring at the chart, gave Suni directions. They had to find some more recognizable landmarks. It was going to be a very long night, she thought. She brushed at the mud crusted on the front of the uniform. Tacky. Damn, she needed a bath!

The cabin was sunk, seemingly, into the moss which covered it and was as ugly as a stump. But it was warm inside and there was lots of food in the cupboards and the water heater hadn't broken down since Fanni had last been there. The gas bottles at the back of the place were large and numerous. Fanni twirled the knob on one of them to charge the system in the house. She had nothing against returning to nature, per se, but hot baths were something one didn't do without and the purists be damned. She glanced once over at the Gazelle sticking out from under the incongruous pelt of tree branches and small bushes she and Suni had heaped on it. The builders would have been outraged. At least the rain had stopped.

Two hours later, and with them the close stillness of the cabin and the warm orange chuckling of an enormous fire tumbling in the hearth. Suni burrowed deeper into the terry cloth robe and was consumed by another in an almost endless string of yawns. Light creeping in though the small windows was a wan and grey pall thrusting at the glass and reminding her of its immediacy with solitary lonely pecks of rain. Somewhere out in that misery was Fanni, gone bumping and lurching down a squalid mud road on a dirt



bike. She'd wanted to make contact, she'd said. The cabin lacked a phone. The room was dissolving into a cozy haze.

Dawnelle, too, fought the soporific legions in the cabin, but for rather a different reason: she only faced one opponent now. Both Suni and the other one had bathed and preened themselves; Dawnelle was left cold and dirty. And alert. Fools, she thought.

The leather straitjacket lay stiff and cold in the corner where they'd thrown it. Her shivering had reached spasmodic intensity as the cold reached for her from the hide. They didn't want their little subject to get inconvenient and catch pneumonia on them. Questions, questions, questions, first. Then catch the pneumonia. Bitches.

While the Hall woman had been out behind the cabin, Suni had tied Dawnelle to a chair with her wrists crossed behind its back and linked to her ankles pulled up under the seat. In and of itself it was a simple and effective position. But the dummy hadn't tied the ropes tight enough. Dawnelle's near death throes and wretched mien had been enough, seemingly, to cause the Asian to tender some solicitude to her. Sloppy. Dawnelle would never have made that mistake, she assured herself. As the ropes on her hands slid further and further down, she fought to maintain her carefully cultivated air of abject surrender.

Suni was never to know just how long she dozed; never able afterwards to attach any quantity of minutes to her exhausted sleep. All that mattered was that her warm dark tunnel was suddenly, blindingly, exploded into splinters as she was dragged up and over the back of the chair by a thin white line of nylon burying itself into her throat. Eyes goggling, already fighting for breath, her fingers clawing at the cord snuffing her life. She kicked up and back, landing on Dawnelle on the floor. Dawnelle merely rolled with her, pinioning her with her legs, and hung on. Suni's head was filled with a tremendous pressure and a buzzing that threatened to rupture her eardrums. Her vision blurred and then was black. Her limbs were numb and her conscious flickered, flickered again, and was gone.

Again time went by, and now it was Dawnelle's turn to stifle the yawn. The so-recently vacated terry cloth robe now covered her as she sat, bathed and clean and warm, in the chair before the fire, almost, she thought, still radiating the warmth of its previous occupant. The gun was a hard cold presence between her legs. It would warm up.

She didn't even glance at the still figure softly illuminated by the fire. Suni hung from the ceiling beams in a corner near the door. She yet lived but the livid line around her throat attested to just how close it had been. A line round under her arms held her aloft. A shorter line bound her ankles and was in turn lashed to the flooring two feet beneath her toes. Another line about her waist dived down between her legs and pulled her corded hands into her bottom. The silken black hair of her head was pulled back to twine with

the shoulder cord, and her mouth was packed full to overflowing with a fuzzy pink face cloth. Her gentle breaths fluttered one exposed corner of the wadding. There were no loose knots; no slack cords.

Despite her overt fieriness, Dawnelle possessed that one absolute requirement of the true predator, patience. A soft gag-muted moan signaled the budding return of the world to the Asian bitch. Dawnelle ignored her. There would be more than enough time to tend to her later. One down, one to go. First things first.

Through the rain at the window, finally, she heard it, the erratic buzzing of a two-stroke motorcycle engine, soft at first, then more and more omnipresent. Dawnelle picked up the gun. And smiled.

The End of This Fanni Hall Adventure