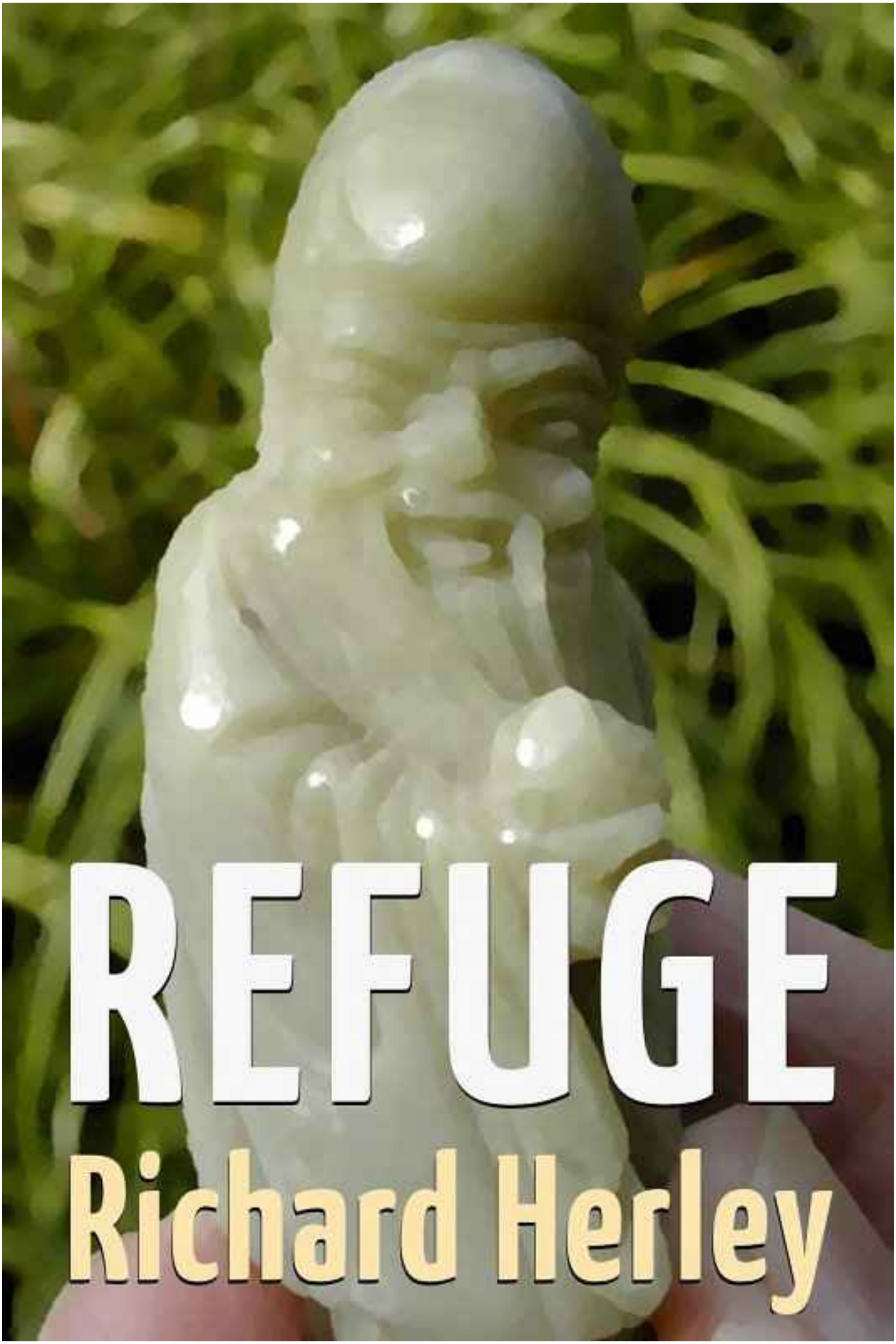
REFUGE
Richard Herley

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Belial came last, than whom a spirit more lewd
Fell not from heaven

— *Paradise Lost*, 1.490

PART ONE

1

Suter halted, his heart pounding, and crammed his binoculars to his eyes. What he had just glimpsed now lay before him in fearfully magnified view, snagged in the branches of a fallen willow some way downstream.

A man's body. Putrefying.

His terror was complete. It was a measure of his character that he could make himself stand there for as long as he did, adjusting the focus, examining and exploring the image.

At last, unable to bear any longer the torment of looking, he got behind the bole of the riverside copper beech and tried to think.

Where had it come from? How long had it been in the water?

'No,' he insisted. 'You're seeing things. When you're ready to come out in the open, it just won't be there. All right?'

'All right.'

'I thought all that was over with.'

'Over with.'

'Over and done.'

His breathing had become more regular now. He touched the stock of his shotgun, hanging against his thigh.

'You're OK.'

‘I am?’

‘You are.’

The beech tree was a personal friend. He loved and revered it, knew it in all its seasons. The grey bark lent it the gentle, benign air of an elephant. With one hand flat against it, Suter peeped out, along the riverbank.

He had imagined nothing. The body was still there.

‘God help me.’

Suter did not much care for God. He had said this as part of the continuous dialogue his two selves maintained aloud, a perennial, dreamlike commentary on the progress of his life. Certainly he did not expect help from any quarter, least of all from above. The very idea of help, of another’s assistance or intercession, had long ago faded from his mind.

‘You’ve got to,’ he told himself, as he turned and started back, towards his house. ‘That’s all there is to it. I’m having no arguments. Get that … what d’you call it? Gripper. Grapple. Whatever the hell it’s called.’

The grapnel made its arc over the river, hit and bounced off the willow branches, fell uselessly into the water. He retrieved it and tried again.

After several attempts, one of the hooks caught in the man’s jacket. Leather, it looked like.

Suter hauled. The body came free of the willow, floated clockwise, and into the current, which instantly began contesting the prize.

He was still face-down, a tall and well-built fellow, a heavy burden for one in Suter’s frame of mind.

Suter thought of letting go. If he did that, the man might drift fully away, as far down as Uxbridge, even, or into the Thames at Staines. Suter imagined him passing later that

day through London, unhindered, unobserved, under the bridges, out to Essex, to Shoeburyness, say, and on into the October stillness of the North Sea. Then Suter could forget about him, pretend he had never been.

But he did not let go; and when the body grounded, its upper half in the bed of decaying flag-irises that fringed this side of the river, he took out his knife and got down the bank. For the first time in over twelve years, he was about to come face to face with another human being.

The smell was abominable.

With his boot he turned the body over. He made himself look.

The facial tissue was putrid, monstrously bloated and discoloured. The beard had continued to grow somewhat – assuming the man had been clean shaven at the time of death. His eyes had been removed, perhaps by crayfish. Or by the person or persons who had, with some big-bladed weapon, cut his throat so savagely as almost to sever the neck.

Suter looked down at the knife he himself was holding and could not remember unsheathing it. He put it back where it belonged.

His gaze returned to the body.

Where this had come from, there would be another.

'Admit it.'

'I won't.'

'You must.'

The victim had been quite young, in his twenties or early thirties. His blond hair had remained uncut for some years, and was plaited in a sort of pigtail. Suter eyed the leather jacket, the dark corduroy trousers, the bare, uncalloused feet. There were distinct abrasions on the right ankle.

The wrists, too, showed signs of rope-burn. Using a stick, Suter levered back the right sleeve. A length of weed-stained nylon cord remained tied around the wrist, so tightly now that the knot was almost hidden. A few inches hung freely, cleanly cut.

'Crummy jacket.'

'See? You spoke to him.'

'But did he answer?'

In a daze, Suter fumbled with the zipper. It was made of nylon or something of that sort. After a few stiff tugs he was able to undo it. Underneath was a dark sweater with a crew neck. This had shrunk, was impregnated with weed and mud and putrefaction. Under that, a blue twill shirt.

'I don't want to be doing this,' Suter thought, rather than said aloud, and at that moment realised his life had irretrievably changed. His former existence had slipped away, like something dropped by mistake into the abyss. It was as though he had just made a last, desperate attempt to catch it, to grab hold of the strap, but it had gone, falling and falling, and there was nothing he could do to get it back. He had imagined himself the most miserable, the most forlorn of men, but now he saw that, in his fashion, he had been happy.

He forced himself to search the jacket pockets. In the left outer pocket he found a few galvanised nails and a large staple. From the right outer pocket he retrieved an unopened packet of Wrigley's chewing-gum.

In the inner, right-breast pocket, wrapped in what had presumably been a clean white handkerchief, he discovered a figurine carved from green soapstone. About two and a half inches high, it had the form of a little old man of oriental appearance, long-earlobed, grinning, with a domed

forehead and a flowing beard. His right hand cupped what looked like a coconut, or pomegranate; his left, hidden in the fold of his robes, he was holding behind his back.

The rest of the victim's pockets were empty.

Suter could take no more. It had been a very long time since he had searched a body. Once, he had grown used to the horrible passivity of corpses, but now he had reverted to squeamishness. He scrambled up the bank, getting away, also, from the smell. He knew he ought to remove the clothing, to see if there was something underneath, a tattoo, an identity tag, some clue to the man's origins and background.

He retreated a few steps upwind, upstream, descended the bank again, washed the figurine and his hands in the river and dried them on his trousers.

Taking the figurine in his left hand, he remounted the bank and studied the body through his Trinovids. The head was at the limit of his close focus: three metres. It filled his field of view.

He allowed the glasses to range about. The fingernails, deeply buried in swollen fingers, did not look as if they had known much manual work. The implications of this were ominous, ominous in the extreme. But then, how did one account for the staple and the fencing nails in his pocket?

Was it possible that some sort of society had harboured him for the past twelve years?

Or had he lived alone? Had he, too, fondly imagined himself the last man alive? And had the Supreme Being, with his infinite taste for jest, finally chosen to effect this droll introduction?

Of course not – because some other, mortal, joker had tried to cut his head off.

Perhaps he had transgressed. Maybe he had deserved it.

'You ought to bury him.'

Suter let down his binoculars and scrutinised the figurine, bringing its bearded face closer to his own. He rather liked the feel of the soapstone under his thumb. He stroked the little man's shoulder, turned him round and admired the clever, economical way he had been carved. The expression was uncanny: knowing, jovial. Nothing could surprise a man like that, not even the turn of Suter's life. He looked like a priest, a bonze or even a holy sage. He had survived everything, even his downstream odyssey, entombed in the pocket of a corpse.

Suter remembered himself. He had become so absorbed in his find that he had forgotten the basic rule of his existence. He looked defensively around.

Then, reassured, he slipped the bonze into his own pocket and drew out his knife.

The blade was deadly sharp. Twice a week Suter honed it on an oilstone and strop. Under his microscope, the edge appeared virtually straight, without nicks or jags: he had once so examined it. Slicing through the sodden sweater and shirt, the knife revealed an unadorned torso. Suter cut the belt, peeled back the corduroy trousers. Nothing. Not even a scar.

He retreated once again and took out his notebook. In his close, orderly, Pitman's shorthand, he wrote:

11 October, 0800 hours

Body in river at Tilehouse Bend

Caucasian male, aged about 28. Height, weight above average. Appeared well-nourished. Not obese. Blond hair, shoulder length, plaited, fixed with 2 black elasticated bands.

Body swollen and disfigured. Putrefaction not very far advanced. Dead a week? In water same period?

Throat cut, big blade, much force. Rope burns on wrists and right ankle. About 15 inches of blue cord remaining on right wrist.

Some old amalgam fillings in upper and lower molars and premolars, no recent dental work. No eyes. Eaten by crayfish?

Newish clothes. Chrome leather jacket, zipper front, 3 pockets. Label: Sportster. Corduroy trousers, dark green, no turn-ups, not repaired. Pockets empty. Label: Levi-Strauss. Woollen sweater, clerical grey, round neck. No darning. Label: St Michael. Blue twill, long-sleeved shirt. Button-down collar. Label: Van Heusen. White, thermal-type brushed cotton vest and underpants. Label: St Michael.

Not circumcised. No scars or tattoos. No jewellery or watch. No socks or shoes. Hands and feet showed no obvious callouses.

Jacket pockets:

Left outer: 3 round wire nails, flat head, galvanised, 3"; 1 netting staple, 1", galvanised. All unused.

Right outer: 1 packet Wrigley's chewing-gum, peppermint flavour, unopened.

Inner breast: white cotton handkerchief wrapped round soapstone ?Buddhist figurine.

'That's it. You can do no more.'

'All right. Now what?'

'Get the barrow.'

2

Seumas lit a new cigarette and threw the other one into the water. His Kalashnikov, on its shoulder-strap, was bumping rhythmically against his hip as he and Bex were walking along the riverbank. He felt the languid beginnings of a new erection.

'I haven't yet decided what to do with her,' Bex said. 'I might give her to Gil.'

'How old is she?'

'Twenty-nine.'

'That much.'

'We could just shoot her.'

'In the head?'

'Wherever you like.'

Seumas, in laughing, turned and again met the gaze of his idol. The eyes were dark-brown, made mysterious by the depth of that lucid, omnivorous soul; mysterious and beautiful, like the symmetry of the face in which they were set. Seumas's arousal suddenly grew, and he wondered again how soon their next opportunity could be contrived.

He was eighteen. Last night, after four months of supposedly secret yearning, he had discovered to his amazement that Bex was not averse to granting him what he craved.

His seduction had ascended one level of boldness after the next, until, naked together at last and enclosed by the rich, heavy drapery of the four-poster bed, they had enacted every perversion Seumas had ever dreamed of: excitements so loathsomely exquisite, so painful, feverish and vile, that mere sex had evolved into something with

the semblance of the metaphysical, the universal and the profound.

In the early hours of this morning, once he had crept from Bex's room and returned to his own, the turmoil in Seumas's mind had threatened to undo him completely. It was not so much that Bex, whose public opinion of sodomites Seumas had seen expressed with the muzzle of an automatic pistol, had been revealed as one himself. On reflection, Seumas saw that this was unsurprising, even inevitable. For Bex was all things. He encompassed everything. He could do, did do, whatever he liked. Bex was capable of the greatest refinement and, in almost the same moment, the greatest depravity. What few constraints he permitted on his genius were self-imposed and designed, like some of the manipulations he had taught Seumas last night, only to delay and hence to intensify his gratification.

When Seumas had joined the New Order, he had been inchoate, to use Bex's term: ill-formed, unready, easily shocked. He had come a long way since, seen and tasted many things laid before him by the immortal, the invincible Bex. For all that, Bex had taken leave of his stronghold to show Seumas favour. Such honour could scarcely be comprehended.

After breakfast Bex had invited him to stroll in the Manor House grounds. They had crossed the parterre and, having descended the dew-soaked slope of the lawns, had come to the riverbank.

The sun felt warm, though autumn had indisputably begun. The season was heading majestically down into winter. Every year the winters got colder and snowier. In time, Bex had said, an ice age would begin, a time of

absolutes, an epoch of dazzling white and deep blue shadow, infinite nights full of stars.

Seumas was still waiting for him to refer, however obliquely, to what had happened last night. For now, Bex was continuing to talk about the head man's daughter. He explained that, while he had not himself penetrated her, he had nonetheless been schooling her in certain humiliations, which he proceeded to describe in vivid detail.

'You know,' he said, speaking of the last, 'I really think she's developing a taste for it.'

Seumas smiled uncertainly, becoming anxious. Bex was quite capable of denying that their congress had ever taken place, or of arbitrarily deciding that Seumas had broken the Covenant and should be executed. First he would have to confess his apostasy. Such confessions were conducted using water. The victim's head would be held under the surface until he began to drown.

They were approaching the riverside ash-tree.

'Seumas.'

'Yes?'

'Do you believe the tarot is truly puissant?'

'Of … of course,' Seumas said. 'It's the *Book of Thoth*.' Had Bex not told him so?

Yesterday evening Bex had again performed a divination, which Seumas had naturally enough attended. During it their fingertips had made momentary contact and in that moment, it now seemed to Seumas, a faint but special sort of tingle had been exchanged.

In the candlelight, on the scuffed surface of the long table in the dining hall, Bex had placed ten cards in a pattern. The sixth card, to the left of the significator and its

cross, had happened to lie directly in front of Seumas. According to Bex, the sixth card indicated what was to happen in the very near future. That card had been the Moon, eighteenth of the Major Arcana. It showed a dog and a wolf, standing at the water's edge and howling at the silver orb as it rose between two lofty towers. Behind the dog, a crayfish was struggling to crawl from the slime.

The question posed in the divination had not concerned Seumas or even Bex. Yet, in placing that sixth card on the table, Bex's fingers had briefly touched Seumas's and, even more briefly, Bex had glanced at him. In a state of rising excitement and certainty, Seumas had waited for the divination to end and for Bex to announce his decision to retire.

'The Moon in this position,' Bex had explained, 'signifies peace. Calm shall come upon the animal nature, while the abyss beneath shall cease from yielding up a form.'

Seumas, staring at the card, had interpreted the crayfish as his inchoate self, striving to metamorphose into the dog, companion of the wolf, Bex. The filth from which it was crawling represented the misplaced shamefulness of his desires. The inscrutable moon, shedding dew into a velvety sky, symbolised bliss, and the twin towers, towards and between which a faint path led from the place where the crayfish was trying to emerge, had seemed to him as nothing but paired and opposed members, strainingly erect. In short, the Moon portended, as eloquently as any of the cards whose exegesis Bex had already expounded, their union. And so it had proved.

They reached the ash-tree and stopped.

Seumas remembered that it was here that What's-his-name – Martin – had breathed his last. Hanging upside-

down, his hands tied behind his back, Martin had watched in full comprehension as Danzo had wielded the machete.

'What card springs to mind?' said Bex.

'The Hanged Man.'

'Very good.'

All trace of the ridiculous Martin had disappeared, except for a bit of blue nylon cord still attached to the bough from which, by one leg, he had dangled. After Danzo had performed the ritual of taking meat, the corpse had been heaved into the water and left to float downstream.

'We slaughtered him because we wanted to,' Bex said.

'I know.'

'Because we felt like it.'

'I know.'

'"Out vile jelly!"'

Seumas did not even try to understand. Bex was given to uttering incomprehensible quotations, sometimes in foreign languages.

'We can do anything we want. Anything. That's the Covenant, Seumas. Do you see?'

Bex had put himself beyond earthly powers. He had made himself invulnerable and immortal. And though they would never become immortal, his followers could share his invulnerability. As long as they swore allegiance and pledged service to the will of Bex, and hence to the will of Satan, nothing could ever harm them. He had proved that over and over again. If they carried weapons at all, it was only as a mark of their puissance.

'Do you know how the Covenant came about?'

Seumas hesitated. 'The Dark One … he appeared to you.'

‘I have never told anyone precisely what happened. What he wanted in return. But now, Seumas, I can tell you.’

Bex started walking again.

He said, ‘What is the fifteenth card of the Major Arcana?’

‘The Devil.’ The twenty-two tarot trumps, Bex had taught his disciples, formed a symbolic picture-book. The cards represented the stages of the spiritual journey, or a history of mankind, or an unfolding of the subconscious. In short, a pathway to the Golden Dawn.

‘And the sixteenth card is?’

‘The Tower,’ Seumas said, seeing its image in his mind’s eye: a high tower set on a rocky promontory, its crown dislodged by a bolt of lightning, flames licking from the windows, from which a man and a woman were falling to their death.

‘Forget the other meanings,’ Bex said. ‘The tower is the phallus.’

‘What’s that?’

‘A symbol of the penis.’

‘What?’ Seumas said, unable to help himself.

‘The lightning is puissance. Occult puissance. Where do you think this puissance comes from?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘From the previous card. From the Devil. From the flaming brand in his left hand. In exchange he wanted what I took from you last night. So that’s what I gave him.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Seumas said. ‘I mean —’

‘I let him pole me.’

‘What, really?’

‘Really.’

‘What did he look like?’

‘He manifested as Eblis. No goat’s head or cloven hoofs. No leather wings.’

‘Did it … did it hurt?’

‘Not much. I was frightened at first but it was OK. Except for his spunk.’

‘What about it?’

‘It felt strange. Inside me. Hot. Buzzy, like something electric. And there was so much of it. He kept coming, over and over again.’

‘Where did it happen?’

‘In the woods. You know about the ceremony, about the way I summoned him.’ Bex paused. ‘When it was over, he told me his seed had made me immortal, and that mine would do the same for anyone I chose. That means you have become immortal, Seumas, just as I did.’

‘Really? I’ll live for ever?’

‘Of course. You can see now why I have to keep this secret.’

Overwhelmed, exultant, Seumas could barely breathe.

Bex said, ‘That’s why the others mustn’t know. They’d be jealous.’

Having left the river behind, they had arrived at the brick dome of the ice-house, which Seumas and Matt and Danzo had explored ten days ago. From the heavy oaken door a flight of brick steps led down ten or twelve feet to a cool, stone floor.

They were completely alone here. The villagers had been sent about their chores, as usual, and the other followers, Seumas guessed, were either in the Manor or in the various houses they had commandeered.

‘Teach me, Bex,’ he said. ‘Teach me all you know.’

Bex looked around. No one was to be seen. The rise of the ice-house was between the two young men and the distant façade of the Manor.

He raised the latch, opened the door, and led the way inside.

* * *

Bex had known from the start that Seumas was queer. Bex had also seen that he would provide an agreeable way of getting rid of Danzo.

Danzo had become a threat. He was the most intelligent of the disciples and Bex had, albeit long ago, committed the cardinal error of taking him to bed. Though Bex preferred women, he denied himself nothing in that department. Limitless gratification was, after all, his perquisite.

Danzo would inherit Seumas in due course. Then the two would be caught together, in the act, and Bex would have them both condemned.

Of course, there was a risk, however remote, that someone might come now to the ice-house and catch Bex himself. He had wedged a beam of wood against the door but there were gaps around the frame to which an eye could be pressed. They were admitting enough daylight for him to have derived visual as well as every other kind of stimulation from the ardour of Seumas's embraces, and had just allowed Seumas to find the least uncomfortable part of the floor on which to kneel to receive his due.

Bex's buttocks were making contact with the rough planks of a sort of low bench, or shelf, which at a convenient height ran along one wall. As Seumas began his work, Bex leaned back and opened his thighs more widely. Part of him remained detached; the rest was becoming

intoxicated by sexual pleasure. The neophyte's technique had already improved.

The cool, earthy air, the diffuse fragments of light reaching the flagstones, the accumulation of dust and spiders and other evidence of abandonment: all these put Bex in mind of a dilapidated potting-shed at Byfield whither he, aged twelve, and a fourteen-year-old girl, named Magda, had been accustomed to repair for their increasingly fervent fumblings. Only in such a place, away from adult supervision, had Bex been able to act without restraint. Its decayed atmosphere was for ever associated with tumescent flesh, the delicious danger of discovery, and the smell of semen.

Bex placed his hands on Seumas's head and gave vent to a groan.

It would not do to squirt too soon, to vouchsafe so readily, to such terrestrial slobbering, the divine ejaculate. Aware that he was becoming so carried away that he might not even hear approaching footfalls, Bex raised his eyes to the door at the top of the steps.

No one was looking down through the gaps round the frame. No one could see what Seumas was engaged upon with his leader, the perfect being, scourge of all weakness, source of all wisdom, effulgent centre of the universe.

At any moment, that might change.

Risk kept boredom at bay. It was indivisible from fun.

The strategy for disposing of Danzo was in itself risky. Danzo would try to defend himself by denouncing Bex to the others. These echoed accusations would naturally sound as unimaginative as they were predictable and Bex would win the day.

The chance that he might not, that Danzo or even Seumas might be believed, that their word might prevail against his, provided the essential frisson of danger that had set Bex on this course of action.

Danzo was one of the few disciples who could read. Using a book called *Test Your IQ*, Bex had measured Danzo's at 121. His own came in at something over 170.

Bex had never met anyone whose intelligence he could respect. He somehow knew everything he needed to know, in an effortless, osmotic sort of fashion. Apparently he had taught himself to read English by the age of four, French and Latin the year after. By the time the pestilence had started he had been reading the easier Greeks – say Thucydides and Xenophon – in the original.

He had been nine then, ten by the time the epidemic had finished.

Bex had no feelings about his life as it might have been. He gave it no thought. The past was irrelevant, the present a beautiful illusion, a manifestation of something else. It was like the cleft made in fast-flowing water by a pendent branch. As for the future, that was just another aspect of the thing called 'now', and so it too was an illusion.

The future.

At Byfield, his first home after the plague, they had been obsessed with nothing else. And since the villagers there had hated the present so much, since they had so badly wanted to team up with God, he and Danzo, with the help of two HK53s, had decided to do them a favour and speed them on their way.

He could still see their faces, hear their cries for mercy, smell the blood and shit and cordite. That had been his first real taste of his own transcendent power and authority.

Everything else had been constructed on the laystall of Byfield.

At first he had thought it all bollocks: the spirit of Aleister Crowley, the Secret Tradition, the pact with Satan, the New Order of the Golden Dawn. He had believed that a virus, not Belial, had brought about the plague. There had been, then, no mission to kill his foe's believers. Byfield had just been a massacre. An atrocity. Extreme fun.

But now he knew differently. His account of his date with the Devil may not have been literal, but, in the language of symbolism that had come to inform his life, it rang true. Something remarkable had happened, was happening still, was just beginning. Bex had left them behind, the philosophers, the Nazis, the gangsters and conquistadors, the dabblers and half-hearted fakes. The whole course of history had been a prelude to this era of silence and depopulation. Nurtured by the apparatus of civilisation, yet also overwhelmed by its hubbub, the collective human consciousness had been brought to its maximum pitch: then set free. Only now, in the sudden absence of clamour, of external control, of morality, was it possible for a superior man to explore the infinite and make it his own.

At an early stage in his development, Bex had recognised the unique qualifications that he possessed. Just as language and emotion had differentiated humans from beasts and allowed them to evolve, so did silence and contempt differentiate the superior from the inferior man.

Bex's heart was made of the coldest, smoothest stone. Each day he checked its surface for pitting or fault-lines and found none. Each day he became purer, more polished, more befitting his destiny.

His talent was evolving. Years ago, he had disencumbered himself of what little emotional baggage he had been born with. Aged six, he had seen off one of his more kindly and enduring 'uncles' by planting, in his mother's mind, the idea that the fellow had been a latent paedophile. Bex's innocent questions had been fabricated with masterly skill. Or again, at Byfield, when Magda had become pregnant, Bex had successfully implicated a much older boy, a booby who had once dared to slight him. Forced by the elders into betrothal, Magda had fatally tried to induce her own abortion. The putative father, blamed and shunned by the whole village, had hanged himself in the church. Standing beside the suicide's grave at the crossroads, Bex had felt his stature grow. He had deftly disposed of three impediments: Magda, the unborn child, and the protesting groom.

Blunt the sharpness; untangle the knots; soften the glare; let your wheels move only along old ruts. Thus spake Lao Tzu. Disentangle, simplify; get rid of all encumbrance. In his quest for purity, Bex had become streamlined. He left a clean, untroubled, otter's wake. It closed immediately after he had passed, concealing for ever, in dark, weedy depths, the chaotic rubbish of the past.

He groaned again and turned his gaze from the ice-house door. The ecstasy Seumas was generating could no longer be resisted.

Bex let his fingers tighten on the plush surface of his victim's skull, holding him firmly down, and for the next fifteen seconds abandoned himself entirely to simplicity: extreme, selfish, and absolute.

3

Philip Davies opened his eyes. How long had he been asleep? A few minutes? Longer than that – the light in the cellar had changed. From the small amount leaking in he could tell that sunshine was now illuminating the valley outside.

He knew its slopes so well that he no longer needed to see them to take his leave. He would never see them again. Soon, Bex would send someone to kill him. Davies expected it every time he heard the key in the lock.

Lying on his bunk, the hostage closed his eyes once more and allowed his thoughts to drift. He no longer needed to stand on the bridge to draw comfort from the river, or to watch the freshly fallen alder-leaves, still green, sliding singly or in unrelated groups towards the weir.

Maybe he had dreamt it all, the whole passage of his life: his work as an economist at the Treasury, his marriage, the plague, the years in the village, their trials and rewards.

It no longer seemed even plausible that there had been another world before. The daily journey by tube. The people, the crowds. London. All gone, overwhelmed by decay.

The landscape spread before him in his mind. Where once there had been well-ordered farms, gardens, metalled roads, weed-free pavements, now there was chaos, various and vigorous and full of life.

It had fascinated him to see how systematically nature was winning back the works of man. So little was needed to claim another building. A door left open, a broken pane

or missing tile, a blocked gutter or ventilation brick, even flaking paint, would let the damp come in and spell the end. Damp allowed the omnipresent spores of dry rot to germinate and flourish. This alone could destroy a house, digesting it with smothering masses and festoons of spongy white, yellow, grey and cinnamon. Or a single conker, squirrel-brought, might sprout in the soggy compost of rotten furnishings and collapsed timbers by the dining-room window, filling the space with branches, reaching up for the holes in the roof, distending the foundations, until the whole structure cracked and sagged and gave way. Tumbled masonry then fell victim to lesser plants, to goosegrass and ivy and bramble. Runners of buttercup and barren strawberry crept across paths and hardstanding, snagging and consolidating the debris from autumn upon autumn of eddying leaves. Soon no trace of habitation would be visible, and another house had gone.

Thus it had been with Davies's own house in Chorleywood, with the whole of the affluent village that had once been his home.

All had been reclaimed, even the M25 motorway orbiting London. Silence hung in the branches of larch and birch, in the wellingtonias by the ruins of the tennis club. Season after season drifted unwitnessed through Chorleywood. Its air was transparent, utterly pure. The Milky Way, which had been hardly detectable from his garden in the latter years before the plague, now arched triumphantly across the night sky. The moonlight had been purified, rendered brilliant, bone-white, falling through an atmosphere so clean that the population of visible stars had doubled, quadrupled, octupled. And when the air moved, it was redolent of far-off places, estuaries and the sea, pine

forests, deserts, tundra; or it smelled of nothing at all. Passing among the sagging boughs of the wellingtonias, it released and carried onward their aniseed fragrance. Sometimes, in the fields, when the wind was in the east, Davies fancied his nostrils could, just faintly, register the scent of anise, and he thought again of the tennis club where he had met his wife.

She had died soon after the start. She had been comparatively lucky, spared what was to come. At her death she had still been part of a civilisation. She had had doctors to tend her, hospitals, a grief-stricken family; she had had journalists demanding that science provide, if not a cure, then at least an answer, or even an estimate of how far it would eventually go.

It had not been until he had been some time at Shanley that Davies had begun to chronicle the plague. When, Crusoe-like, the earliest villagers had made repeated sorties to gather supplies from the wreck of civilisation, they had assembled a reasonably complete series of the more intelligent newspapers and scientific journals containing facts about the disease.

He had written on acid-free paper, in permanent ink, with the same pen he had used at the office. The process had been soothing as well as cathartic. His script had become steadily more flowing and regular, as it had been in the old days. After several drafts he had completed what he had perceived to be an impartial account of the epidemic. He had bound the fair copy into a lever-arch binder, together with newspaper and magazine cuttings presented in date order, and prepared labels for the spine and front cover that simply read:

Together with the Bible, this document had given authority to and formed the foundation of village law. Lodged in the Manor House library, it had been available to everyone, young or old. Though no one much looked at it any more, Davies occasionally took it down. Every time he did, the story seemed more unreal.

Some time before the autumn of 2016 a virus endemic in the crested mangabey, a monkey native to Central Africa, mutated and jumped the species barrier to man. Bush-meat hunters were believed to be the first to be infected. The mutation also changed the behaviour of the pathogen, and IVN, Infectious Viral Necrosis, was born.

Symptoms of infection bore little resemblance to the general debilitation produced in the mangabey, and were so remarkable that the disease immediately came to scientific notice.

Infection was first manifested by a feeling of lassitude and despair. At this stage the disease also became contagious. The salivary glands enlarged, distending the face and neck. The tongue, gums and cheek linings turned black, the breath smelled foul, and in some cases the teeth became so loose that they could be painlessly pulled out with the fingers. By now the kidneys, liver and lymphatic system also started to deteriorate. Prostration soon followed.

Death was preceded by rapid and widespread necrosis of the flesh. The actual cause of death was usually heart failure. The period from infection to death ranged from four to sixteen days, with an average of about a week.

By 1 November, 2016, twenty-three cases had been reported from Equatorial Guinea and two from Libreville, just over the border in Gabon. By the 12th, the outbreak had spread as far as Nigeria: seventy cases had been notified in urban Lagos alone.

No antidote or even treatment was known. Meeting in emergency session, the United Nations declared IVN epidemic throughout Central and West Africa and proscribed cross-border travel as from noon on 15 November.

In the early hours of 14 November, a recently arrived Nigerian businessman was admitted to a Paris hospital. Although he said he had felt unwell on the aircraft itself, he had not told the flight-crew. They, many of the passengers, and numbers of cleaning, customs, and other terminal staff at Orly were diagnosed in the following days. The businessman passed into coma and the presence of IVN in Europe was confirmed.

As the story broke, the UN tried to forbid, for an initial period of one month, all air-travel throughout the world.

They were too late. Despite the fact that, by 25 November, almost every country in the world had closed its borders, the virus continued to spread, probably by means of the atmosphere. It reached Australia early in December and was finally acknowledged as global on the nineteenth of that month.

By then, cases in Europe and North America were being numbered in thousands. The disease was so contagious that medical workers everywhere were refusing to report for duty. By the first week of January untended bodies were appearing in the streets of London.

The exodus from the cities precipitated the collapse of the internet and the world banking system. Wherever the refugees went, whatever indescribable scenes ensued, IVN followed. It had stumbled upon a vast, untapped and uniform biomass: the warm, evenly regulated bodies of six billion people. As if intoxicated by the possibilities of its own discovery, the virus sidestepped each obstacle to proliferation, each attempt to find a cure. It had become the most successful organism ever, generating new, viable, and even more dangerous mutants almost by the day.

The BBC World Service kept broadcasting till the end. With Helen, his surviving daughter, Davies had listened long into the night, the voices fading, coming back. They spoke of nothing but the plague, *la peste*, *die Pest*. It was further advanced in Africa and Europe than in Asia. North and South America, like Australia, seemed to be a little behind.

Madmen were given air-time. They said the disease was caused by a fog from outer space, sprayed by aliens who would herald a new order of peace and understanding. Hitler had been reincarnated and was enacting global revenge. Those who had died believed not in the Lord. They were impure in spirit, fornicators, corrupters of children, and would burn for eternity. The only scientific antidote consisted of 7,777 daily recitations of the name of Krishna. Nostradamus had predicted the pestilence in detail: when Neptune aligned with Mercury it would pass as quickly as it had arisen. Wear a yellow silk handkerchief at all times over the mouth and nose. It had to be yellow, since this was the colour of hope.

Yellow, like the mycelium of *Serpula lacrymans*, the fungus called by laymen *dry rot*, prince and inheritor of the world's estate.

Helen had been born in that house, in 2000.

Her elder sister had died on 25 February, 2017.

One Thursday in early March, Davies drove Helen a few miles west and north, deeper into the country. He had wanted to find somewhere familiar yet relatively undeveloped, by a clean river for water and power, with fields and woods around, and it needed to be within striking distance of abandoned shops and warehouses, for supplies.

They arrived in Shanley at midday, finding, to their surprise, an elderly man left alive in the village, a Mr Templeton. He died the following Saturday.

When they buried Mr Templeton, Davies told his daughter that he thought they were alone, not just in the village, but in the whole of Buckinghamshire, in the whole of England, even in the whole world. London was deserted. He and Helen had been there by road, several times, driving slowly through the car-strewn streets and sounding the horn. To no avail. There had been nothing on the radio for weeks. Davies's own broadcasts, which he had set up to run automatically, had received no response. He knew neither why God had spared them nor whether they would continue to be spared.

They knelt down in the church to pray for Mr Templeton and for everyone else who had died. Helen looked up at the stained glass window behind the altar, at the beautiful, winged figure of St Michael in his radiant armour, with his lance and shield, quelling the dragon.

‘I asked St Michael to help us,’ she whispered to her father, as they got up to go.

‘Which one?’ he said. ‘There are two St Michaels in the window.’

She pointed.

Her father indicated another young man, to the right of the first, holding a pair of scales. Behind him was a host of people, men and women, in white robes. ‘That also is St Michael,’ he said, ‘weighing the souls of the risen dead on Judgment Day.’

While Helen watched, Davies went to the eagle lectern, turned to the Book of Revelation, and read some words to the empty pews. ‘*And the seventh angel poured out his vial into the air; and there came a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done.*’

With that, he shut the book and walked with her out into the evening sunshine.

When they got back to the house, it was Helen who noticed that in their absence the display on the computer had changed. The software was set to actuate if the radio drew a response.

A man’s faint, crackling voice said, ‘I hear your message, Philip Davies. Repeat, I hear your message on 15,150 kilohertz. I am on Scolt Head, in Norfolk. I have been alone since February. I will call you on the hour, every hour, until I hear from you again.’

That was Jack Sturges, a fifty-year-old fruiterer, the first of the villagers. His 4×4 arrived late the next day. It came at speed up past the mill and stopped where Davies had tied a huge bunch of balloons to the wrought iron gates. And although Sturges had been a stranger, he and Davies and Helen embraced on the garden path, weeping for joy.

Perhaps it was those balloons that had inspired Jack's scheme to locate as many survivors as he could, for without a community there could be no future. With Davies he took a lorry to Watford, a town five miles to the east. Armed with a copy of the Yellow Pages and a street plan, they found laser supplies, cases of balloons and cylinders of hydrogen and helium. The balloons were released in batches from the church tower, in winds of varying speed and direction. Each balloon carried a piece of fluorescent card imprinted with the current date:

3 April, 2017
SURVIVORS! JOIN OUR COMMUNITY!
We are at Shanley, Buckinghamshire,
England, 51°43'23" N, 0°18'41"W, TQ 166038.
To hear our message, tune to
15,150 kHz short-wave!

In all, over a period of three years, a hundred and twenty thousand cards were printed, each of them borne away by balloon. The first two responses came at the end of May, within a few days of each other, from Muriel Taylor in Northwood and Leigh Fernihough in Pimlico. More responses came in June, either from the balloons or directly from the 'commercial', as it came to be known, endlessly broadcast via a short-wave transmitter driven by a petrol generator.

Martin had appeared a month later. He had been only sixteen then, a year younger than Helen. They had married in 2021. No children had been granted to them.

Martin's love and courage had been repaid with blasphemous sadism. With a single tremendous machete-

blow, the one called Danzo had almost severed his head. Then Bex had told Danzo to gouge out the eyes.

Martin had died a week after their arrival. On the first afternoon they had shot Jack Sturges and Vernon Howarth. More had probably died since.

Davies had often suspected that other communities might exist elsewhere, but the airwaves had remained silent, and, as the roads had become less and less easy to traverse, as petrol supplies had dwindled, the village's car-borne searches had become fewer and fewer and eventually had been abandoned. After that, Davies had become fearful of making contact with others: perhaps rightly so.

He knew that Bex would soon weary of the village and move on. He and his followers would not leave anyone behind. They must have done this at least twice before. With the new recruits from the village, the gang now numbered fourteen.

Bex, or Bexley, or whatever his real name might be, was probably the first of them to have been ejected from whichever group had nurtured and failed to contain him. One or two of his closest henchmen may have been expelled at the same time, or may have chosen to join the outcast.

Bex had then located and gained access to a new settlement, doubtless knowing he would find there other disaffected youths like himself. Anyone might understand their impatience with chopping firewood and milking cows, with a necessarily conservative hierarchy, with life in a small and inward community. Davies was pretty well sick of it himself, even though he was – had been – head man of Shanley village these twelve years past, even

though he had occupied this manor house and freely enjoyed every privilege of his office.

Since the first days of the community, Davies had placed importance on keeping a route open to the town of Watford, an almost inexhaustible repository of food, tools, clothing, medicine and fuel. That was how Bex had found the village. He had encountered the open lane, deduced its purpose, and simply followed it west.

Davies saw now, only too clearly, that he should have listened to those who had advised him to relinquish this route, to let those lanes, too, fill with fallen trees. It was his fault that Bex had come.

Unlike poor Martin, Davies had never subscribed to pacifism. He should not have left the village undefended. He should have been expecting someone like Bex, someone with automatic weapons.

Davies was trying not to think of his daughter. Her fate was unbearable. It was eating him alive, and it was all his fault.

'Dear Christ,' he breathed, the words coming of themselves, 'if you love anyone at all, don't let them harm her.'

The cellar door opened. Shielding his eyes from the light, Davies tried to make out which of them was coming down the steps.

'Grub time.'

The voice belonged to a boy named Matt. He was not quite as bad as the others.

'Did you speak to Bex for me?'

Davies had again asked for an interview; was not even sure what he would say, how he would plead.

'Might have.'

‘What did he say?’

Matt, in his plaid shirt, placed the tray on the floor. ‘Rabbit stew. Like you had before.’

‘What did he say?’

Matt directed his flashbeam into Davies’s latrine bucket. ‘I’ll get you a fresh bucket this afternoon.’ He shone the light around the walls and ceiling as if searching for signs of attempted escape, returned to the steps and started to climb.

‘What did he say?’

‘Said you were holding out on him. So you could stew a bit longer. Like that rabbit.’

‘We don’t know of any other villages! Tell him it’s the truth!’

A moment later the door slammed and Davies heard the key turning in the lock.

4

In the end, digging a grave proved too hard, so Suter trundled the body into the thistle-grown pasture at the edge of his orchard, drenched it in creosote, and set it on fire.

The time was now early afternoon. He had wasted the best of the day and still had not even made a start on his household chores.

This disturbance in his routine had awoken in him a feeling he had not known for years. He felt resentment, even anger, towards his uninvited guest. He told himself that the use of creosote had been forced upon him: his

stocks of petrol, paraffin and the like had become dangerously low.

But, as he watched the black smoke billowing towards the lake, Suter regretted his choice.

'You ought to say something.'

'Such as?'

He remembered the figurine and took it from his pocket. Had the man been a Buddhist? Did Buddhists follow a funerary tradition? Cremation, surely. So this might have been the right thing, after all.

Still Suter could think of nothing to say. As if seeking inspiration, he turned back to the figurine. Its eyes, creased in mirth, seemed to have remarked his meanness over the creosote. What was the little man holding? If not a coconut, could it be the planet?

Surprising himself, Suter blurted out, 'Hard luck, whoever you were. And sorry about the creosote.'

'Now that's what I call a real valediction.'

'Get lost, you.'

Collecting his spade and pickaxe, he took the wheelbarrow and trudged back to his house.

He had known the place, from the outside, since his early boyhood. Its elevations were now partly hidden by dark masses of ivy and pyracantha and akebia. The stone terrace overlooking the river, the sweep of what had been the gardens, were overgrown with elder, buddleia, goat willow. The kitchen, where he spent much of his time indoors, was at the south-eastern corner. He kept his most valuable possessions in the cellar; the garage block, with chauffeur's flat above, had become storage for a prodigious number and variety of tools, most of which Suter had

gathered by Land Rover in the first months of his occupancy.

He cleaned and hung up the spade and pickaxe and stood the barrow in its place by the wall.

Other men, other human beings, were still alive. He knew he had yet to grasp the full implications. Until this morning he had been living in ignorance. 'Fool's paradise, more like.'

As he shut the garage door, he said, 'You know you're going to have to leave all this unattended, don't you?'

'I wish, sometimes, that somebody else would answer.'

'Do you think he spoke English?'

'What else?'

'He might have been foreign.'

'They're all foreign. Whoever they are. They always were.'

By now he had reached the kitchen porch. He pulled off his boots and went inside.

'Foreign to me, anyhow.'

The events of the morning had brought back to Suter the insoluble equation he had almost forgotten. Other people, even dead ones, equalled inconvenience, unpleasantness, expense. They were impossible to understand. As a child he had been open-hearted and willing, but had always found himself excluded, pushed to the edge and left there, unable to fathom the enigma: what did they want of him?

He found out in his adulthood. They wanted two things. His money and his absence, in that order.

Suter peeled off his thick outer socks, rolled them into a ball, and pushed his feet into his house-shoes. As he did so, with rare vehemence, and for the first time in many years, he uttered the single word of the foullest oath he knew.

Despite his overwhelming reluctance even to consider the matter, he knew there was no choice. He would have to find out where the body had come from.

Not to make contact, but just to know. Without such knowledge, he could never have peace of mind again. They – the murderers – were almost certainly to be found upstream. A long way, Suter hoped. A very long way. If they had a settlement, and if it were permanent, so much the better.

Why had they survived? Why had he found no trace of them before now? How many others were there, in this country or abroad? Should he resume his search of the radio frequencies?

'One thing at a time.'

Suppose there were settlements. They would surely be small, isolated and few in number. Any normal social structure would have collapsed, making way for who knew what.

Suter wanted none of it.

He took off his binoculars and zipped them into their leather pouch, which without thinking he placed, as usual, on the windowsill.

Everything he did was neat and methodical. He had long ago seen that avoidable spontaneity in his life entailed unnecessary work, bother, even mortal danger. He drew comfort from order, from making and keeping schedules and lists. And indeed, without this he would long ago have been lost. He would have become forgetful. Vital maintenance would have been left undone. He would have run out of something important, or a shotgun would have jammed at a critical moment, turning him into dogmeat. Monday, Wednesday, Saturday: clean the guns. Saturday

morning: rifle practice, three rounds only, into the rusty plate of mild steel hanging from the horse chestnut on the lakeshore. Now more holes than plate. When he got back, he would find another one.

'If you get back.'

'Oh, I'll get back all right, don't you worry.'

He had two 7.62 millimetre sniping rifles, an Accuracy International Model AW and a Mauser SP66. There was a night sight, a Maxi-Kite, for the AW. Where was it? Upstairs. Better check the alignment. Dry-zero the zoom scope as well.

His plans for lunch having been spoiled, Suter opened some mackerel and ate it straight from the can. He spent most of the afternoon and early evening indoors, packing food, choosing clothing, preparing equipment. Towards dusk the sky clouded over. Drizzle began to fall.

By the time he was able to sit down and relax after supper, the drizzle had intensified to rain.

'What do you think of it all, then, Rees?'

His cat – the cat – usually became more attentive when the weather got worse. He jumped up into Suter's lap and allowed himself to be fondled, eyes closed, neck sunk, head raised.

'Hmm?'

As ever, Rees had little contribution to make. His mother, also a tabby, had been a feral cat who, little by little, Suter had managed to bring into semi-tameness. Before, he had never much liked cats, but had become fonder of Rees than he wanted to admit. He disapproved of keeping animals prisoner: Rees was free to come and go just as he pleased.

On cue, he jumped down and curled up on the hearth-rug.

Suter leaned over to place another log on the range and drew the lamp closer to the arm of his chair.

He opened his diary. It was over a week since he had made an entry. He leafed through the pages. Birds seen. Resolutions, mostly unkept. Plans for growing more and better French beans. A thundery afternoon in August when, swimming in the lake, he had been trapped in the water for two hours by dogs.

He pressed, thrice, the button on the end of his pencil.

Thursday, 11 October, 2029. Calm, golden. Rain at nightfall.

Then: *Saw a body in the river. Got behind the copper beech. Thought I was mad again.*

He sat back. It was not pleasant to be reminded thus of the first months on his own, of the first chapters of his journal, the shorthand itself as crazy as the things described.

For over two years during and after the plague, at first crisscrossing Britain in his fruitless quest for survivors, Suter had been out of his senses. That Suter, the extinct Suter, had raised solitude to godhead. He it was who had exulted in ruin, who had raised his arms to the sky and yelled blessing on the pestilence, who had cast away his name on the surface of the swirling Thames; who had owned all the seasons and the rich, glacier-scoured lands of his childhood whereon he chose to dwell. In the frenzy of his writings could be traced the emergence of a peculiar literary intelligence: gloating, triumphant, the towering construction of a psychotic visionary, a zealot bathed in dazzling light, a tattered prophet from a painting by Blake,

speaking in tongues or babbling the Elizabethan language of the Geneva Bible. His eyes, that beheld the landscape of the Revelation, had been clear and grey, with flawless sight. His body, then, had been young and strong, nearly as strong as his mind. Had it not been for that, he would not be sitting here tonight, grizzled, marooned, becalmed in middle age.

14 November, 2016. That's when news of the pestilence had been made public. 9 January, 2017: Helen's death. 15 March, 2017: Suter's last words with a living human being. 25 April, 2019: his resurrection, his recovery, the first resumption of his sanity.

He had come back to this district because he had grown up here. The rivers and hills of his childhood, at least, were familiar, would keep him company. In his testament dated 25 April, 2019, he had renounced all hope of ever finding others alive. Since then he had hardly ventured more than four miles from his house and had never spent so much as two nights together away.

Tomorrow, he continued, *I shall set out to investigate. I must know where he came from. I shall just look, make no contact. If the murderers are within 10 miles and in substantial numbers I must think about finding somewhere else to live. Such an upheaval is almost unthinkable.*

He took another sip of brandy.

Without roads I cannot relocate single-handed. Besides, this place is my home. I do not see why they should make me give it up. They have already destroyed my equanimity. Without even knowing it, without caring, they have muddied the water of my mind.

Each drop of rain hitting the window made its own report, distinct from the drumming on the tiles of the roof

and the splashing in the concrete yard, distinct from the trickling in the gutters and downpipes, in the conduits and soakaways deep below ground.

'I love the rain,' Suter thought; or murmured. Rain was the music of solitude, of humility and resignation. Falling drop by drop across the landscape, it collectively found its way into the water table, into the springs and tributaries, into the river that flowed past his house, and into the lake, the broad flooded pit that stretched away south.

The lake had been instrumental in drawing him back to take up residence here. Its site had formerly been laid to rushy pasture, a river moor intersected by hedgerows. Its destiny had been sealed just below the turf, for millions of tons of gravel had lain there since the last ice age, brought down by the melting glacier that had made the valley and the river.

The machines arrived in Suter's boyhood: Ruston Bucyrus cranes, a Niagara wash-tower, yellow Volvo earthmovers, fleets of premixers and thirty-ton Fodens taking the dripping aggregrate to the expanding suburbs of north and west London. Snarling chainsaws made short work of his beloved trees and hedgerows. The turf in the places where he had found blackcaps' eggs or lain watching stoats was clawed up, the topsoil spirited away. Indefatigably swinging back and forth, steel jaws ate at the ground. The vacancy they left was at once filled by water: the lake had started to form.

For the sake of the new birds that appeared he forgave the machines and even acknowledged the sense of excitement brought by the chaos of noise and dust and glare. In the school holidays he would spend nearly every day at the gravel-pit, in shorts and T-shirt, binoculars

round his neck, sometimes riding his bicycle along the adjoining canal towpath or down the track along the shore.

The workmen, he knew, had tolerated the distant, obsessive, solitary trespasser; had probably shared jokes about him.

'Tolerated,' Suter said. 'That's the word.'

He took up again his Ordnance Survey maps and studied them in the lamplight, refreshing his memory of places he had not visited for years.

For much of its length the river and two of its tributaries had been canalised, but he had in 2019 chained the locks as far up as Tring, making a huge reed-marsh of the middle valley. Had he not done so, the body would never have found its way past his house.

Dead a week? the notebook read. *In water same period?*

Even from Tring, a freely floating object would take no longer than a day to fetch up at Harefield. Thus the body must have been delayed elsewhere, perhaps several times, by catching in fallen trees or by grounding at bends. Grounding seemed likely: *No eyes. Eaten by crayfish?*

It would have come free with a rise in water-level, or by the accumulated force of current breaking the impeding branches.

With his pencil, Suter marked on each tributary the obstructions above which he knew the site of the murder could not lie. He was left with some twenty miles of watercourse to explore.

Twenty miles, no more.

Everything he had believed in had been turned upside down.

He put the maps aside, in favour of his diary, and resumed writing.

I have just decided that I cannot, will not, change my place of abode. I shall set out tomorrow. If I find a settlement no nearer than 10 miles from here, I shall observe it for a while in the hope that I can afford to withdraw without making contact. If I find a settlement within 10 miles and it has more than, say, 15 inhabitants, I shall observe it for longer in case I decide that I have no choice but to make myself known.

Before rising from his chair, Suter drained his brandy-glass and, in his neatest Pitman's, believing it as he wrote, formed the final sentence of the day.

If there are fewer than 15, I shall shoot them all.

5

Suter found the village at dawn on the third day. At about noon, having spent the morning watching the place and trying to come to terms with his discovery, he was on the point of deciding to change position, to move to the other side of the valley, when he was taken unawares by someone coming up behind him.

He heard a woman say, 'Who are you?'

Either she had approached in silence or, more likely, he had been so engrossed in thought that he had simply failed to hear.

'No!' she cried, as he rolled over. 'I'm unarmed!'

In blind consternation, he kept the Glock, double gripped, pointing at her head. His hands began to shake uncontrollably as he realised the enormity of the blunder he had made: he looked furtively about and raised himself

from the supine to the sitting position. Never, never before had he been so lax, so negligent, so deserving of death.

But the woman seemed to be alone.

She was no longer young, or even middle-aged. A basket with an open top hung, rucksack-style, at her back. His eye took in the drab headscarf, the rainproof jacket, the muddy jeans and boots.

'I … I've been gathering fungi,' she explained, to placate him. 'That's the only reason I saw you. I wasn't on the path. Otherwise …'

Still he kept the pistol levelled.

'Don't shoot me.'

Her calmly uttered request sounded so reasonable that it penetrated Suter's consciousness enough to register, and he understood then that she did not wish to be shot, to be torn in half, blown to pieces with a lacerating burst of fire. He noticed the perilous firmness of his grip on the trigger and made himself ease the pressure.

And then, with four simple syllables, he broke the spell and put an end to his twelve-year sentence of solitary confinement.

'What is your name?'

'Muriel. Muriel Taylor.'

'Are you alone?'

'Yes. I promise.'

Again Suter looked about him. He was just inside the wood here. Most of the tree-trunks were too narrow to conceal a hiding man.

'I assure you,' she said. 'I'm alone and I mean you no harm. Please lower your gun.'

Not taking his eyes from her face, nor yet lowering the pistol, Suter rose smoothly to his feet.

Despite the Glock, she was regarding him almost sympathetically. He discerned openness, resolution, in the cast of her features. In her youth she could have been handsome. She could have belonged to that race of Englishwomen which had enabled and indeed taken a prominent role in winning the Empire. The sort who had ordered natives about and been worshipped in return.

He should have been nonplussed, but was not, when, apparently apropos of nothing, she said, 'Do you believe in God?'

'I do not.'

He lowered the pistol, unable to comprehend the fact that he was holding a conversation, that some person other than himself had spoken and was now listening. 'You caught me on the hop,' he said.

Now it was her turn to look uneasily around. 'There's no need to speak so loudly.'

'Am I speaking loudly?'

'Very.'

He heard himself saying, 'I didn't mean to.'

'You haven't told me your name.'

He saw no harm in revealing it. 'Suter.'

'Do you have a Christian name?'

'A forename. John.'

'That is a Christian name,' she said, subtly emphasising the second and fourth words.

'It's my name.'

'May I call you by it?'

He assented. 'What made you look over your shoulder just now?'

'You're nothing to do with them, then.'

'With whom?' he said, disingenuously.

Looking at the place where he had been lying, she allowed herself a less guarded inspection of his baggage and equipment. 'With Bex and his friends.'

He did not reply. Shortly before the woman had arrived, Suter had resolved to spend another day, at most, in observation before retreating permanently to his own domain. He had already decided that there were too many people in the village for him to dispose of, even had he really been able to bring himself to do such a thing. Something horrible had befallen the place. He had no intention of becoming part of it.

She said, 'Do you mind if we sit down?' and, without waiting for an answer, unhitched her fungus-basket. From her jacket she took a yard-square sheet of thick polythene, which she spread on the ground. Suter sat too, cross-legged in his waterproof trousers, heedless of the withered stems of dog's mercury carpeting this part of the wood.

He admired her pluck. She had been afraid that the Glock might go off, but she was not afraid of him – notwithstanding his camouflaged clothing and corked, bearded face, notwithstanding the twelve-bore pump-action Remington 870, the canvas bandolier, the holstered Browning at his belt, the saw-backed knife strapped to his leg.

She said, 'Have you come to kill Bex?'

He lightly shook his head.

'Then you aren't from some other place where he's been?'

'You sound disappointed.'

She looked at him askance. A moment later, she said, 'How long have you been on your own?'

Should he tell her? Why not? 'Ever since the plague.'

‘What?’ she said in amazement. ‘Completely?’

‘I thought I was the only one left.’

‘Where have you been living?’

‘Somewhere safe.’

She ignored the rebuke. ‘You must be a very remarkable person.’

Suter smiled, for the first time, rather wryly. ‘That’s not exactly the word I would use.’ With a vague gesture he indicated the village, behind him and to his left. ‘Is it still called “Shanley”?’

‘Do you know it? I mean, did you know it, before?’

‘I came here sometimes with my parents. Or on my bike. When I was a boy. The church tower’s got some nice gargoyles, as I recall. Is the Manor House still habitable?’

‘Our head man lives there. Rather, he did live in the Manor. Now he’s being held hostage there, in the crypt.’

‘By Bex?’

‘By Bex.’

Suter took out his notebook. ‘My memory isn’t what it was. I have to write things down.’

‘Then – do you want to know about Bex?’ He could see that she wanted to add, ‘And will you help us?’

To which the silent and unequivocal answer was ‘No.’ But Suter had come here to gather information and anything she told him would add to his store. In particular he wanted to know what chance there was of any of these bastards finding their way downstream as far as Harefield Moor: as far as his house.

‘How old is he?’

‘Twenty or so. They’re all about that age.’

‘How many of them?’

‘Twelve. I mean, fourteen. Two more have joined them.’

‘From the village here?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are they all males?’

‘Yes.’

Suter added more outlines to his notebook. As he did so, without looking up, he said, ‘When did they arrive?’

‘About two weeks ago. At Michaelmas.’

‘On September the twenty-ninth itself?’

‘Yes, in the afternoon.’

He recalled that Shanley church was dedicated to St Michael the Archangel. How he had remembered this he could not say, but the haphazard conjunction of facts served only to heighten his growing sense of illogicality. He was talking to this apparition, this Muriel Taylor, in just the same way that, for the past twelve years, he had been talking to himself. What in God’s name did he think he was doing, squatting on the ground, conversing with some phantom? Maybe none of this was happening. Maybe he had, after years of teetering, finally and irretrievably gone off his rocker.

‘Is something wrong?’ she said.

‘Everything’s wrong, far as I can make out. How many have they killed?’

‘Three. Two by ritual.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Satanic ritual. They worship Satan.’

‘Satan.’

‘Yes. Bex … he’s taught them to eat flesh. Human flesh.’

Suter continued looking at her. She was in complete earnest. ‘When did these killings happen?’

‘Two on the day they arrived. The third a week later.’

‘How many have they wounded?’

‘Five. No, six. There was another one yesterday.’

‘How many assaulted?’

‘Nearly everybody.’

‘Rapes?’

‘Yes. All the time.’

‘Like this morning,’ he said. ‘In the meadow, by the bridge.’

‘You saw it, then. With those, I suppose.’ She indicated his binoculars. ‘It’s usually like that. Five or six together.’

‘Have they …’

‘They haven’t done it to me yet, if that’s what you’re asking. It’s the younger ones they want.’ Her eyes blazed. ‘Bex took our head man’s daughter. We haven’t seen her since the day they murdered Martin. That’s her husband. He —’

‘What sort of weapons do they have?’

‘Machine guns. They got them from the RAF place at Halton. Rifles. Pistols. Knives, machetes.’ She looked at him with new hope, encouraged by the turn his questioning had taken. ‘They’re stupid, most of them. Bex is the only one with a brain. If we could just get rid of him, the others would run around like chickens with their heads cut off.’

‘Do they have any dogs?’

‘Dogs? How do you mean?’

‘Tracker dogs.’

‘No. No dogs.’

‘What about infrared? Image intensifiers, anything like that?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Any special equipment apart from the guns?’

‘No.’

Suter was taking a verbatim account of everything she was telling him. 'How did they find you?'

'Philip – that's our head man – Philip said Bex told him he had found the lane.'

'What lane?'

'We kept a lane open to Watford. It runs up behind the Manor. You can't see it from here.'

Suter expelled his breath.

'You don't think that was very clever of us, do you?'

'Is anyone left alive in Watford?'

'No. It's in ruins.'

'Do you know of any other survivors? Anywhere.'

'We always assumed there were some. Maybe in another part of the country, or abroad. After all, we'd survived and were able to find each other. Philip was the first. He and Helen —'

'Who's that?' Suter said, startled to hear the name spoken by other lips, disturbed that it had been misappropriated and attached to some other female.

'His daughter.'

'Martin's wife?'

'Yes. She's the one Bex is holding. Philip and Helen were the only related survivors. Everyone else came singly. My husband died just before the plague, of cancer. We lived in Northwood.'

'Did you have children?'

'A son, in America. I never heard anything about him.'

'How many children have been born since the community was founded?'

'Nine.'

Suter turned back to the previous page, reviewing what he had written so far. 'So how many villagers are there in all?'

'Forty-seven. There were fifty-two.'

'And Bex lets most of you go about your business?'

'As long as it meets his approval. Gathering and preparing food, mainly.'

'Has anyone run away?'

'He says he'll kill Philip if they do.'

Suter saw that she already knew that Bex would, sooner or later, kill them all. He said, 'Do you have any vehicles besides the two tractors?'

'A lorry. We keep it in the big barn. Over there.'

'Any motorbikes?'

'No.'

'Quad bikes?'

'I don't even know what they are.'

'Four-wheeled motorbike things. For rough terrain. Good for sheep farms.'

'We don't have any sheep.'

'I know.' As he was writing, he could feel the increasingly anxious force of her gaze. He wondered how fifty survivors had managed to come together, form a stable community and live together for so long, presumably in harmony. 'Has anyone tried to do anything about this Bex?'

'Only one.'

'Martin?'

'He didn't have a chance.'

Cowards, then. The other men in the village. As usual. 'I think I may have found Martin's body,' Suter said. 'Was he thrown in the river?'

‘Yes. Yes, he was.’

‘Did he have blond hair, a leather jacket, corduroy jeans?’

She put a hand to her face. Suter noticed the gleam of tears.

‘What did Bex do to him?’

‘In person, nothing. It was the others. They tied him upside-down and tortured him.’

‘No one tried to help?’

She shook her head. ‘How could we? Then … then they plucked out his eyes. Bex ate them.’

‘What?’

She did not answer. Suter realised she was in a state of extreme shock, possibly nearing mental collapse. ‘I cremated the body,’ he told her, stammering slightly. ‘I said a few words, though I didn’t know who he was.’

She stared at the ground.

He reached into his pocket. ‘I found this,’ he said, handing her the soapstone bonze. ‘It may have meant something to him. Give it to his wife when you can. If she’s still alive.’

The woman wiped away her tears and took the figurine. ‘I don’t recognise it,’ she said. ‘But I’m sure Helen will. She’ll be very grateful. For everything you did.’

Suter snapped the elastic strap keeping his notebook shut. He slid the notebook into his inner jacket pocket and beside it clipped his propelling pencil. Again he felt her gaze following his every action. He knew what was coming next and had already decided how to respond.

‘John,’ she said, using his name for the first time. ‘You did say I could call you that, didn’t you?’

He looked up.

‘Will you help us?’

‘I’m sorry. None of this is my concern.’

‘But —’

‘If I were one of the men in your village, I would have fixed things already.’ He nodded at the fungus-basket. ‘Poison him.’

‘Helen has to taste all his food. He’s confiscated everything that can be used as a weapon.’

‘Use a brick.’

‘No. There’s nothing we can do.’

‘There’s always something you can do.’

‘I’m begging you. You’re our only hope.’

Suter was on the verge of saying, ‘I thought you believed in God.’ Instead he got to his feet and held out a hand, which she disregarded, standing up unaided.

‘Do you know,’ she said bitterly, ‘just before I found you I was praying for a miracle. When I saw you lying there I really thought my prayer had been heard. I really thought you were an angel come down from heaven to help us.’

God’s like that, Suter thought. *Bit of a practical joker.* ‘There’s only one way to deal with your problem. The plague must have taught you that. If you don’t collectively do what has to be done, you’ll all end up dead. Better to lose a few than lose everybody.’

‘I was going to invite you to join our community.’

‘I live alone.’

‘Please. Please don’t just walk away.’

Suter reconsidered what he had said and could find nothing wrong with it. He liked this woman, respected her decency and courage, and for that reason might even at one time have been willing to help her. But he cared just as much about the people of Shanley as they cared about him,

or would care if they knew of his existence. Which was to say, not at all.

'I won't help you myself,' he said, at length. 'But you can have this, if you like.' He proffered the Glock; he had duplicates at home. 'There must be at least one man in your village brave enough to use it. Give it to him. Tell him to shoot Bex first, in the upper body, at least five times. Then he must get as many of the others as he can. If you can devise a plan involving a number of villagers, so much the better.'

Slowly, reluctantly, she reached out.

'It's called a Glock 18,' Suter said, as she took it. He stood beside her. 'There's no conventional safety catch. This second trigger is the safety spur. Just pull the whole assembly when you want to fire. Keep the trigger squeezed to go into cyclic mode. That means continuous fire. In cyclic mode a magazine lasts one and half seconds. When the magazine's empty you plug in another.' He reached into a back pocket. 'The one in there's full. Here's a spare. Thirty-three rounds, so you've sixty-six in all. Nine millimetre calibre, high muzzle velocity. Tell your man it's effective up to about fifty yards, reasonably accurate up to thirty or thirty-five. If he's never fired one before, he should just get in as close as he can.'

He stood back. 'Can you remember all that?'

'I should imagine so.'

'It's very, very dangerous. I suggest you wrap it in that piece of plastic and hide it on the outskirts of the village. Your man should recover it at night, preferably in the early hours. Say four o'clock.'

She eyed him reprovingly. 'Can we have your shotgun, too?'

‘I need that. For dogs.’

‘What’s in the case?’

‘A rifle.’

‘Can we have it?’

‘No.’

She did as he had suggested and wrapped the Glock in the polythene, then bent and concealed the bundle in her fungus-basket. ‘I’m not going to thank you,’ she said. ‘If I were you, I’d be feeling rather ashamed of myself.’ She hoisted the basket on her shoulders.

‘Don’t forget,’ Suter said. ‘Upper body. Minimum of five rounds.’

Without another word, she turned on her heel, towards the interior of the wood, and set out.

6

Despite everything, the daily work had to go on. The bread had to be baked, the chickens fed, the herd of Guernseys milked. Since dawn, Leigh Fernihough had been one of those forking up maincrop carrots in the rain, repeatedly trudging through the furrows with his mud-clogged basket on his shoulder and tipping its contents on the growing pile in the cart. At midday, Goddard had hitched one of the draught horses to the cart, which he had then driven down to the farm. Two of the diggers had got a lift back with him, legs dangling over the open tailboard, but not Leigh Fernihough.

In the hierarchy of the village, Fernihough occupied a place somewhere near the bottom. He was not allowed to

operate machinery, even though he worked mainly in the orchards, fruit-cages and vegetable fields. His customary pew was located at the back of the church and only occasionally was he asked to read the lesson. Yet, always equable, always content with whatever decisions the Council handed down, he seemed a man devoid of ambition.

Fernihough had been among the first to respond to the founding balloon-messages sent out by Philip Davies. He arrived at Shanley on 29 May, 2017, a week after his twenty-third birthday. By then, Davies was already styling himself 'head man' and had adopted the habit of issuing orders to everyone else: to Helen, of course, to Muriel Taylor and Jack Sturges, and then, in turn, to Fernihough. The democratisation of society, its feminisation, its consequent decadence and collapse, had no place in Davies's scheme for the future.

His interrogation of the newcomer was unskilful and easily circumvented, typical of the civil servant that Davies once had been. Fernihough failed to divulge certain facts about himself: such that he had rejected the opportunity to read maths at Oxford, preferring to leave school at eighteen and join a merchant bank, or that he had, during his four years in the City, probably earned more than the would-be hierarch had in his entire career.

Fernihough's reticence sprang from a desire for self-preservation. He immediately perceived the way the government of Shanley was likely to be conducted. He had no time for any deity, certainly not the vengeful tyrant of the Old Testament nor his deluded son, but Shanley was the only haven on offer and Fernihough knew full well that he could not survive without one. He therefore acquiesced

in Davies's view and became a member of the congregation.

For several years he lived a dual existence. In the fields, in the church and at social events, he played the simpleton. But on retiring to the cottage where he dwelt alone, he escaped into his books. His library he kept out of sight, in a spare bedroom, and allowed at most one volume downstairs at a time. Many of the titles had been gathered in his first few months in the village, on excursions to Watford and elsewhere. His mind was nurtured by a secret world of the imagination, over-arching the two-dimensional life of the village. He entrusted his sanity to his pantheon of dead authors and poets. They kept him company and made his very existence tolerable.

It had astonished nearly everyone when, at the age of twenty-nine, he had proposed to, and been accepted by, Melissa Hallam. Even though there was little choice of eligible men in Shanley, and even though he was supposed to be reasonably personable, Fernihough knew the other women felt she had married beneath her. Her former husband and small son had died in the plague. With her university education and her capacity for clear thought, she would surely have served on the Council, had she been a man. Her wedding to Fernihough had coincided with her thirty-third birthday. She had given birth to two daughters, now two and four years of age.

Outside his back door, Fernihough fitted the right heel of his gumboot between the horns of the cast-iron beetle and pulled. As the boot came off, Melissa appeared at the threshold, drying her hands on a towel.

'Leigh,' she said. 'There's been another rape.'

* * *

Bex, ensconced in one of the big sofas in the white drawing room, crossed his legs and admired his new boots. His chinos, too, were new, as was his plaid shirt, green and grey and white. He liked the feel of fresh clothes, clean underpants. In matters of grooming, no effort was too great to spare. He was most particular about his hands, and especially his fingernails. The nicotine stain between the index and middle fingers of his right hand had deepened sufficiently for him to resolve to find a cigarette holder.

Danzo was waiting for him to reply.

The silence grew longer.

Since early today, Bex had again been experiencing the sensation that other people, including himself, were nothing more than apes, as absurd and predictable as they were voluptuary and pretentious. Danzo, for instance, exhibited many simian characteristics. His melancholy brown eyes resembled exactly those of a chimpanzee; his voice, with its woolly timbre, would be ideal, once he had hoisted himself into the tropical canopy, for hooting defiance at a neighbouring but unseen troop of rivals.

He heard him say, 'But I want to, as well.'

Bex looked up. Ape-vision, as he privately termed it, was he supposed just a corollary of skeleton-vision: that phenomenon of consciousness during which he became aware of others' bones and skulls and articulations, especially when they were moving about, and sometimes, very disturbingly, when he was engaged in sexual intercourse.

Bex said, 'No. Not yet.'

'Fuck it, Bex, we've been here, what, over two weeks. How much longer?'

‘Till I say. Then you can all do whatever you like. As a matter of fact, I’ll participate. Show you spastics how to inflict.’

‘The other guys —’

Bex held up his left hand as if to say, ‘That’s it.’

‘Sorry, Bex.’

‘Puff.’

His apish bronchi again craved baccy: tar, nicotine, carbon monoxide. He was smoking too much these days. His intention to stop, which at present had the status of mere velleity, needed to be upgraded to a proper decision: he despised addiction of any sort. Apart from moderate quantities of alcohol, tobacco was the only drug he permitted his disciples. Anything more interesting might lead to insurrection on their part and loss of authority on his.

Danzo, a subordinate male, duly tossed him a packet of Marlboros. He was seated opposite, on a second sofa. ‘We’re fed up, ’s all.’

‘Look. No one else gets washed till I say. Not yet. Understand?’ He regarded Danzo coolly for a moment before lighting up. ‘Once we start on that kind of fun, we’ve got to finish it. That means moving on again. And the omens are not yet favourable.’

‘*Excrementum tauri.*’

Bex gave an acid smile and inclined his head, acknowledging his own phrase. ‘Do you presume to question the puissance of my occult powers?’

‘No, Your Omniscience.’

Danzo had been with Bex from the beginning. They had grown up together at Byfield. He knew the origins of the New Order; knew the way Bex had fabricated its elements.

His prosaic intellect was incapable of understanding how matters had since evolved. When alone with him, Bex had to keep up an act. That was another and even more compelling reason why Danzo had to go.

'We need more truck trips,' Bex said. 'Get extra puffs, if nothing else. Better hardware, maybe. I'll send Redmond and Stolly this afternoon. All in, I reckon another week in this hole. Thing is, I don't know where to make for next. I'm still working on friend Philip.'

'You think he's holding out?'

'Can't say.' Bex realised he had not really wanted his cigarette and flicked it, smouldering, on the Persian carpet at his feet.

Abruptly he stood up, went to the French window, and looked out into the rain-sodden grounds. What he had just told Danzo was true: he did not know where next to lead his disciples. He was beginning to believe that the head man really wasn't in contact with any other settlements. As for the other villagers, none of them, even under duress, could provide a clue.

Without looking round, Bex said, 'Shog off, Danzo, there's a good chap. And tell Redmond I want a word.'

* * *

No sooner had the woman disappeared among the trees than Suter regretted the quixotic impulse to which he had given way. Perhaps the hallucinatory experience of meeting and talking to another human being had caused his lapse of judgement. Whichever way he looked at the encounter, he saw that he had acted foolishly. To have handed her the weapon at all, to have given her the opportunity of shooting him, was an even bigger mistake

than letting her creep up on him in the first place. And now he had let her take a Glock 18 back to the village, together with an accurate description of him and his whereabouts.

'Cretin.'

'You should have pulled the trigger when you had the chance.'

He thought of running after her to get his gun back.

Instead he bundled up his belongings, left now with no realistic option but to keep to his original plan and continue his reconnaissance from the other side of the village. He certainly could not stay here.

Continuing to curse himself under his breath, he donned the burden of his pack and, adjusting the frame, made the weight as comfortable as he could. He hung the rifle case from his left shoulder. The shotgun he carried, as usual, in the crook of his right arm.

The ground showed unmistakable signs of disturbance: crushed and flattened stems, disarranged leaf-litter. With his boot he covered the core of an apple he had eaten earlier.

'Don't worry about it,' he breathed. They probably weren't up to tracking, wouldn't have the skill or patience, or else they'd be out of their heads on drugs. Nevertheless, he trod gingerly, covering the first fifty yards with all the caution he could muster. When he came to the path he stepped right over it and continued through the light understorey of bramble and holly.

The woods here comprised mainly beech, with a scattering of hornbeam and cherry. The slope, the character of the woods, the quality of the place: all were quite unfamiliar to him, though he knew he must have walked

this ground as a boy. What would he have made of this future, had he been able to foresee it?

Pausing now and then to check the compass, he found his way back to a narrow but well-defined footpath. This led to the low footbridge by which, at first light today, he had crossed to the northern side of the valley. As he drew near he stopped more and more often and for longer periods, straining for sight or sound of people. He detected neither, and at last decided to step out of the trees.

The footbridge was located in a small clearing among stands of goat willow and stood upstream from a kind of fish-trap, panels of wattle forming a funnel behind which, he supposed, a net could be fixed. At dawn today the dismaying sight of this structure, and of the footbridge beyond, had been his first unequivocal evidence that he really was close to an occupied human settlement. The village itself, he had discovered later, lay upstream from the footbridge. Beyond the bridge the path divided and disappeared into a rank growth of willowherb, the stems and leaves now turning brown.

At dawn, mist had fumed the river. He had crossed quickly, wraith-like in the twilight, and vanished into the woods, there to try to suppress the feelings of certainty and dread that had risen in his breast.

Now, as he approached the bridge for the second time, he no longer knew what he felt, except perhaps an overwhelming desire to get away.

The air was cool, motionless but for the rain and the gurgling of the current. A moorhen's cry, 'Jekyll!', broke from the bur-reeds and sedges downstream.

Suter deemed it safe to proceed.

Just as he set foot on the wooden surface of the bridge, he heard but did not at first recognise, from the direction of the village, a brief and muffled crepitation. It was followed by another, somewhat longer, and yet another, yielding abruptly to the appalled silence that follows the sound of automatic gunfire. Glock fire.

'You've done it now all right, you stupid cunt!'

In an agony of self-revilement he sprinted across the bridge and through the willowherb.

Maybe it hadn't been his own pistol. Or maybe, hope against hope, Muriel had actually nailed Bex with one of those three bursts. For, knowing there was not a single man in the village worthy of the name, she must have marched straight back there to kill her chief tormentor.

'Think!'

Suter couldn't just leave. Much as he wanted to.

If Muriel wasn't already dead, they would soon find out about her cork-faced Quixote. It was too late to care about that: what mattered now was that they didn't find out where he lived. They might after all be able to track him to his home. If he ran for it now he would not know whether anyone was following. On the other hand, if Muriel remained for one reason or another silent, or if at any rate no search party were seen to start for the place where he had met her, he could retreat in a more orderly fashion.

Mind working furiously, he punished himself with maniacal exertion. He drove himself uphill, at the edge of a rough pasture, keeping close to the hedgerow on its side farther from the village. Three hundred yards on he plunged once more into woodland. From the pocket on his trouser-leg he snatched out the map case and with a trembling forefinger traced the route he needed to take.

Circle round to the south-west. Get up on that scarp above the Manor House. Make sure no one sees you. Imbecile. Fucking imbecile.

'You've killed that woman.'

'It wasn't my fault! She should have done what I told her!'

'No excuse.'

Entirely predictable, a third voice remarked.

'God, O God!' Suter groaned, starting off again.

This time he kept to the footpaths. He told himself that the shooting would have attracted back to the centre of the village anyone who might have been out here, and it had now become imperative that he should leave no obvious tracks. Last night he had covered the moulded soles of his boots with canvas galoshes, making his footprints anonymous and difficult. Even so, he did his best to avoid treading in open mud.

About fifteen minutes later he had circled the village and brought himself within sight of the Manor House on its south-western side. He was looking down from the edge of a high copse, through the wire strands of an ancient sheep-fence. The copse, mainly of hazel and oak, laid here at its edge with bracken, overlooked much of the valley and the trackway leading from the church to the river. That was the way a search party would probably go. If it hadn't already gone.

'Calm down. Just calm down.'

He shed his pack, dropped to the ground and, crawling backwards on his stomach and dragging his equipment with him, retreated into the bracken so that he was almost completely hidden from view. Stuffing bits of fern under

the netting on his hat, he remembered his camouflaged mittens and pulled them on.

Suter became invisible.

This was how he provided himself with venison: red and roe deer, muntjac, Chinese water-deer, the occasional fallow. As part of his new education he had read everything he could find about fieldcraft, about tracks and signs, about wind and rain and snow and mud. Ten years of theory and practice had made him an expert in concealment. Even the binocular he had chosen for this expedition, a Zeiss Dialyt 8×30, was covered in olive-green rubber.

He took it from inside his jacket and studied the Manor House. The soft, Tudor brickwork was just as he remembered it. So too were the leaden guttering, the uneven tiles of the roof, the fantastically carved and twisted chimneys, each unique. The oak-framed casements all remained firmly shut. No one was visible on the broad, flagstoned terrace, on the lawns or pathways.

Nothing.

He looked at his watch. One thirty-three.

The people in the village had lovingly maintained the Manor House gardens, the parterre, the topiary, the intricate hedges of box and yew. Beyond the pear orchard, at the rear of the walled kitchen garden, the ice-house was still there, and beside it the large, ornately carved dovecot, upon the shingled roof of which three white doves were sitting in the rain.

Despite his remorse, his constant thoughts of what Muriel must have done, it was perhaps the sight of the doves that brought the first stab of personal pain to Suter's heart. Seeing the Manor House like this made him realise

what for the past twelve years he had gone without. He thought of the overgrown gardens of his own abode. He never tended them. Not only could he not spare the labour but, more important, there was no one to admire his handiwork. No one but himself. And he didn't count.

It was an extraordinary sensation to look at the Manor again after all these years, to find it intact, barely changed. He still could not absorb the idea that survivors had been living their lives no more than six miles from his domain. He had imagined himself an emperor, when he had been no more than a hermit.

For a moment or two he returned his gaze to the house, then looked again at his watch. 'If nothing happens, wait here for an hour.'

'Then what?'

'Then depart, that's what.'

He continued his reconnaissance.

The other dwellings in the village had for the most part been allowed to decay. He had seen no more than about twenty which seemed to be occupied. These were the better houses, those occupied at one time by those with money. The rectory was in use, likewise the converted mill whose extensive lawns had once been stalked by peacocks, but the labourers' cottages facing part of the green and along the overgrown course of the Chesham Road had returned almost entirely to nature.

Sweeping round to the south-east, Suter turned his lenses on the well-kept buildings of the village school.

7

What remained of Redmond was lying where it had fallen. Reeking of cordite, the air in the white drawing room had been obscured by a drifting, particulate fog of pulverised plaster. Lines and spots and spatters of crimson seemed to be everywhere: on the walls, the carpet, the pictures, the curtains.

'Where did you get the gun?' Bex said, for the fifth or sixth time.

The old woman looked up at him blankly. She was naked. Danzo had already knocked her about a bit, but she could still talk.

Bex examined the Glock again. How long would it be before Pinch or Matt or any of the others understood that one of his disciples had not been invulnerable, after all? What should he tell them about Redmond? That he had broken the Covenant? If so, in what manner?

Bex ejected the used clip and took up the fresh. Somehow, this old bag had shot Redmond. Somehow, she had got her claws on this top-grade, superbly maintained, special forces machine pistol, and with it had torn Redmond apart, ripped him into ten or fifteen ragged chunks and splattered the rest in all three dimensions behind and beyond the place where the silly little tosser had been standing. The place where, grappling with Muriel in his role as humble ordinand of the Golden Dawn, he had successfully deflected this most grievous and unexpected scathe from the sacred person of his leader. During which time, Bex had prudently dived behind the massive

upholstery of the sofa, emerging only to disarm said Muriel before she could reload.

He drove home the magazine.

He wanted to blow her head off.

To Danzo, he said, 'Take her outside.'

* * *

While studying the church, Suter heard raised voices from the Manor and, simultaneously, a crash of splintering wood and breaking glass. One of the French windows had been flung open. By the time he got the terrace in focus, three or four men, young, energetic men in brightly coloured clothes, had spilled out. Still unused to the sight of people, his brain struggled to assimilate the movement of legs and arms and heads. More men emerged. The two or three who came last were pulling something heavy across the threshold: a naked human being, perhaps a body. An elderly woman. Muriel.

She was face-down. The way her feet and toes were dragging across the terrace, down the balustraded steps to the lawn, gave him a moment's hope that she was already dead, but then something in the tension of her arms and shoulders told him that she was not only alive, but conscious.

Passing among specimen yew-bushes, the group was descending towards the river. Satanists, she had said. Cannibals. Degenerates. Believers in who-knew-what. Which of them, if any, was Bex? There was no obvious leader. Maybe he was already dead or wounded.

Suter counted them: nine. Despite their disparate heights and build, they looked remarkably similar, as, he supposed, they would. Their heads were all closely shaven. Two or

three had beards. Each wore more or less baggy trousers and lumberjack shirts in shades of red, yellow or green. The shirts were worn over pale T-shirts or sweaters.

'Like a uniform.'

Suter did not realise it, but he was already in the grip of rage.

They must have been at more than the Halton armoury. The one in front was carrying an assault rifle, an FN FAL with a fixed butt. Two others had bullpups, infantry-model Enfield L85s, by the look of them. Another had what seemed to be a Kalashnikov AK47. The rest were apparently unarmed.

Given the whole arsenal of southern England to choose from, they couldn't know anything much about weapons.

Already, surreptitiously, ominously, part of Suter's mind began to draw comfort from this observation.

He watched them dragging Muriel across the lawn and down towards the river. It was obvious what they were going to do. There was no more painful torture than drowning. She would divulge everything they wanted to know. Who had given her the Glock? Where had he given it to her? What other guns did he have?

He wouldn't blame her if she had told them already. On the contrary: he hoped she had. Now, perhaps, they were just going to punish her. Execute her. Nine men, one elderly woman.

They reached the bank. He saw some of them full-face as they positioned themselves and pulled her head over the water. He heard a shouted question, a demand for information, to which there was no reply. A boot was placed on Muriel's neck and she went under.

'I'm not having this,' Suter said.

He quickly lowered his binoculars and busied himself with the rifle case.

'Are you crazy? What are you doing?'

'Shut up!'

'She's dead, whatever happens.'

As he extended the bipod he tormentedly wondered whether he must shoot Muriel or leave her alive. He didn't know, had not decided, even as he cocked the rifle, got down behind the neoprene hood of the eyepiece and focused. He had brought the zoom sight, which he now adjusted for windage and elevation and turned up to full, ten times, magnification.

'I'm warning you, don't do this! It's her fault!'

Suter wasn't listening. He prepared to fire. He supposed there was a remote chance that Muriel could yet survive. What she needed was a diversion.

'You're first, Mr Kalashnikov,' he silently informed the face in the graticule.

The bullet entered the youth's head below the left eye, a couple of centimetres from the nose. Suter's retina just had time to register there a small, dark hole. The target may have moved slightly, in the quarter of a second it had taken the match-grade, mercury-charged 7.62 millimetre round to travel the two hundred metres from the muzzle of Suter's rifle.

Instantaneously, the head exploded in a shower of pulp.

Thanks to the built-in flash hider, there was nothing but the noise of the report to reveal his position. He cocked the bolt again.

'You next.'

The group had not yet had time to react with anything but incredulity. Suter took aim at the one with his boot on

Muriel's neck, the graticule centred now on his chest, since a head shot would no longer be reliable. He compressed the trigger.

The victim fell forward into the water, a huge pit blown in the front of his T-shirt.

By now a number of the group had realised what was happening. Suter heard desperate shouting and saw some of them dropping to the ground, slithering down the bank to gain what cover they could.

He had eight rounds left, one in the chamber and seven in the magazine. Were it not for the weapons they were carrying, he could easily have killed the lot of them. As things stood, Suter had only a very short time in hand. The two L85s were equipped with telescopic sights, probably the infantry's standard four-power SUSATs.

'One more. You. You with the earrings.'

As Suter squeezed the trigger, the target half turned to get down the bank. The shot drew only a plume of water.

Suter swore.

With that, the first return fire came up from the Enfields. He saw both muzzles flashing, heard the whiz of two or three bullets, and the stuttering reports reached his hearing. Impacts were riddling the vegetation all around him.

'Holy shit!'

They had a more accurate idea of his position, and were very much better shots, than he had supposed. One round had already trashed the middle of the nearest fencepost, three feet from his head. If he stayed here, within a few seconds, at most, he would be hit.

He did not know what had happened to Muriel and could not wait to find out. He was already crawling

backwards at maximum speed, keeping as low as he could, dragging the rifle with one hand, his shotgun and pack with the other, his progress terrifyingly hampered by the bracken. The rifle case with its precious night sight he had, perforce, abandoned.

The Enfields had been joined by the AK47 and the FN FAL. They could obviously see the bracken tops moving. Branches and trunks above and around him were splitting, shredding, splintering in the torrent of automatic fire. He shut his eyes, expecting a ricochet. With every movement backwards he was getting further and further below the enemy horizon and there was no longer any possibility of a direct shot.

A couple of yards more and the bracken started to thin. The shooting had become intermittent, as if they knew they were now wasting ammunition. With the front of his clothing filthy and with wood fibres, chunks of bark and fragments of leaves and bracken adhering to his back, Suter rose to a crouching position and moved, crabwise, deeper into the copse.

'Can't leave the pack.' Much as he wanted to. But the rifle was too heavy, and pretty useless, really, under the trees. And in the open it would be no match for assault rifles.

A better plan had already started to form.

'Think what you're doing.'

'Just for a change.'

Still crouching, he stopped and contemplated the rifle.

It would take him too long to remove the bolt. Although they had 7.62×51 millimetre NATO ammunition, it was most unlikely that they would have a magazine to fit an

AW. He unfastened the magazine from the receiver and slipped it in his pocket.

In a few minutes' time they would feel confident that there was to be no more sniping from the hillside. Very soon after that they might come after him.

No, not 'might'. Would. He had left them no choice. Absolutely none.

Five hours to nightfall. Map, compass. Binoculars damaged, eyepieces crammed with dirt. Might wash out.

Suter rose to his full height as he scrambled into his pack. Except in the direst straits of self-defence, he had until this hour never killed another human being in cold blood. 'Never in cold blood,' he breathed, seeing again the youth's head exploding, his co-victim folding, collapsing, into the river. 'Never like that.'

'But my blood wasn't cold.'

'Yes it was.'

He refused to answer himself.

'Isn't that why you gave her the Glock?'

He fastened the pack-buckle at his waist.

This time, Suter knew he had gone too far. His death was coming. It was imminent, the long slithering slide down the scree-clad slope to the end. That's why he had given her the Glock, why he had squeezed the AW's trigger and shot, killed, murdered those two. As precisely engineered as the sniping rifle he had been hoarding all these years, his mind had known exactly what it was doing. It had known what he wanted, what his soul craved, and in the last split-second before his headlong run began, it gave vent to this ambiguous, exultant whisper of self-encouragement:

'Go!'

8

When the cellar door burst open, Davies understood at once that they had not come this time with food or water or a change of bucket. There were two of them, one carrying a sub-machine gun.

'What do you want?'

'Get up!'

Though Davies struggled to obey, he was not quick enough for their liking. They dragged him to his feet.

'What is it? What do you want?'

With the muzzle of the gun pushed into his back, they forced him up the steps. For some reason they were not going to do it in the cellar. He wondered which of the villagers had been killed already, in the firing he had heard earlier. He hoped Helen … Helen … anything, as long as she was spared.

Reaching the top of the steps, Davies realised he would never climb them again. Still wincing against the unaccustomed light, he looked around him at the passing view of the scullery, the kitchen, the corridor.

Bex was seated at the head of the dining table.

The patina of its surface was now almost everywhere scratched and pitted with ground-in dirt. Here and there it was scorched, or puddled with candlewax.

Davies raised his eyes. The small, dark goatee Bex had sported when first they had met had grown longer and more luxuriant. He was still wearing his gold pirate's earrings. He was the only one of the group to have them, like a badge of office.

'Hello,' Bex said flatly.

Davies again lowered his eyes, confused by the turn events were taking. Five other youths were standing behind and beside Bex's chair. The ones called Stolly and Pinch, two of the most volatile and dangerous, were among them. More were over by the windows: Davies had not yet dared to look at them directly.

Bex calmly, menacingly, spoke again. 'I've got some questions I want you to answer.'

Davies knew then that something had happened that was bad for Bex, for all of them. What? Resistance? Had one of them been attacked? Killed, even?

Over his shoulder, to Stolly, Bex said, 'Bring her in.'

A moment later, from the door behind him, accompanied by Stolly and Carl, Helen entered the room.

Davies started forward, was restrained. Helen tried to force a smile. She seemed to be uninjured, though her hair, her beautiful dark hair, had been crudely shorn, hacked away, and her face looked wan, smudged with exhaustion. But what distressed Davies most, what pained him beyond belief, was her expression. The light had gone from her eyes.

'It's all right, Dad.'

Bex was watching him closely. He reached into his coat pocket and produced an evil-looking machine pistol, which he placed on the table. 'Do you recognise this?'

'No,' Davies said. 'You've got all our guns.'

The pistol was unknown to him. It must have derived from outside the village. That meant someone, or some people, had come looking for Bex. The sound of gunfire was now explained. Who, if anyone, had been shot? The newcomers? Some of Bex's gang? No one from the village, Davies prayed.

‘I’ve never seen it before.’

‘You say.’

‘It’s the truth. I swear.’

Bex picked up the pistol and pointed it at Davies’s face. ‘Do you recognise it now?’

‘No.’

‘How many villagers were there, on the day we arrived?’

Someone had come for Bex. There could be no doubt. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The question’s simple enough.’ Keeping the pistol raised, Bex glanced sideways, at Pinch, before looking back. ‘Answer it.’

‘There were fifty-two, on the day you arrived.’

‘Not fifty-three? Or fifty-four?’

‘Fifty-two.’

‘Whom do you know outside the village?’

‘No one,’ Davies said. His questioner’s use of the objective case made him engage his eyes, as if Bex could somehow be reasoned with, as if his knowledge of the English language made him better, more civilised, than the others. ‘No one at all.’

‘Are you quite sure?’

‘Yes. There must be other settlements, but we never made contact. As I’ve already told you.’ Of course there were other settlements: where else had Bex himself come from?

Bex took more deliberate aim. His finger curled round the trigger and appeared to be exerting pressure. His pupils suddenly distended. There was something perverse, depraved, in his expression Davies had never seen before.

‘You can lock your door against a thief, but not against a liar.’

‘I’m not lying.’

‘I say you are. And I thought we were friends.’

Bex swung round in his seat and pointed the pistol at Helen.

‘No!’

‘Be a shame to waste totty like that,’ Bex said, ‘but I’ll do it if I have to. You’ve got five seconds.’

‘What do you want me to say? I’ll tell you anything!’

‘Not good enough.’

Bex turned the gun back so that it was again pointing at Davies’s face.

The muzzle made a single hypnotic eye, its pupil also distended, as if in tune with its master’s increasing loss of control. Beyond this eye lay neither mind nor conscience: only a lightless void that was indistinguishable from Bex himself.

‘Three. Four. Five.’

In obedience to Bex, the gun alone then seemed to utter the words, ‘Time’s up,’ leaving no further margin of life for Davies to take his leave, to react, or even to flinch, before the first of its high-velocity bullets hit his head.

* * *

Still holding the night sight, Danzo bent to examine the sniping rifle.

‘Ultra piece of kit, this,’ he said, lifting it to confirm that the magazine had been removed. ‘Braked muzzle. Short-action bolt. Explosive ammo. Even so, bloke’s a lux shot. Seen the way he took Terry’s head off? I never could’ve done that first round, not with that drop. Not at two hundred yards.’

Steve leaned closer. ‘What else you think he got?’

Danzo indicated the disturbed soil and the crushed and broken stems of bracken. 'Covered in shit.'

An avenging angel, come down from heaven. Those were the wonky words Muriel had used to define him, not half an hour ago, just before she'd pegged out. Like the other villagers, like most of the people Danzo and Bex had encountered on their passage across the country, Muriel was – had been – a fundamentalist, jolly for Jesus, spouting the scriptures chapter and verse. It had been the same at Byfield, where Danzo, having escaped London at the age of eleven, had been raised. There, as elsewhere, survivors of the plague had imagined themselves favoured by the Almighty. In demonstration of their gratitude, and to make him think twice about changing his mind and infecting them after all, they had spent their time in praise. Had anyone been so crass as to remark that, surely, it had been the old codger himself who had sat by and done nothing to stop the pestilence, the answer was simple. All was his will! He had swept away the unrighteous, suffering the chosen to endure!

Danzo himself had never believed a word of it. Neither had Bex. That's how they had first got close. At Byfield they had formed a society of two. Them against the rest.

In the time they had been travelling, everything had gone their way. Any opposition had been easily quelled. They had found it easy to make recruits, to do whatever they wanted. There had never been any trouble.

Now it looked as if that might have changed.

Danzo stood up and put the night sight into his haversack.

'We're going to get him, ain't we, Danzo?'

‘’S up to Bex.’ Danzo slowly moved forward, casting a knowledgeable eye over the ground, hoping to find blood. At the first semblance of a print, he bent over again. ‘Look at this. What size foot would you say?’

‘Eleven, easy.’

‘What about the pressure?’

‘No one weighs that much. He must have a pack.’

‘My thought exactly, Steve. He put it on over there. A heavy pack. Meaning?’

‘He’s from outside the village?’

‘Correct. He probably don’t have a camp, which means he’s come some way. Could be miles. He’s dumped his tool. So maybe he’s got others, if not on him, then somewhere else. In any case he don’t want to carry that one, but he had the magazine away. Why would he do a thing like that?’

‘To stop us using it.’

‘Also correct.’ Danzo stood up again. ‘Let’s go on a bit,’ he said, feeling even more apprehensive. The man they were dealing with was not a beginner. He had not panicked, despite the wall of fire they had sent up from the riverbank. He did not seem to have been hit. He was physically big and strong. He knew how to shoot. He had a source of primo hardware, like the night sight, like the rifle, like old Muriel’s Glock. And he had missed Bex by a hair’s breadth. That had left Bex very angry. More angry than Danzo had ever known.

Again Danzo wondered how Bex was going to explain the death, in one afternoon, of no fewer than three of his disciples. How could he square that with what he had told them? Had they not been initiates of the New Order, flameproofed by Beelzebub himself?

Still, Bex could sell anything. Sometimes Danzo almost believed that Bex really was immortal, that he really had entered the Covenant. Sometimes, he thought, Bex even believed it himself.

About a hundred yards from the edge of the escarpment, the trail of the unknown sniper joined the muddy surface of one of the regular village paths. Ten or twelve paces later, Danzo was dumbfounded to see that the man had stopped to remove the galoshes from his boots.

Danzo dropped to his haunches and with his fingertips traced the impression of the moulded boot-sole, crisply printed in the dark, squidgy autumn mud. The man was inviting them to follow. Meaning: he'd be waiting somewhere. With an unpleasant surprise. Involving firearms.

Without speaking, Danzo read the mirror-written name at the centre of the instep. *VIBRAM*. Composition sole as fitted to the finest walking boots. Dog durable. The preferred brand of cognoscenti.

In vain he looked for explanation at Steve, who had also squatted to examine the print.

They rose to their feet. With one last glance at the northward-heading trail, Danzo gestured decisively at the escarpment. 'Bring the rifle and the case,' he said. 'Quick as you can. I'm going back to Bex.'

* * *

Suter's plan took less vague shape as he forced himself onwards.

His overriding desire was to keep the whereabouts of his house secret. On the way to the village he had not been as careful as he might, and it was possible that the trail he

had left could still, by an expert, be traced back to Harefield. He had arrived from the south-east. He had, therefore, left Shanley by circling round to the north-west.

According to Suter's sums, there were now no more than twelve of them left alive. Fewer, if Muriel had done any good. How many would be in the search party? Unless Bex had decided to move on already, his problem would be to send enough men to do the job while leaving behind enough to keep the village secure. This equation had occurred to Suter even as he had been crawling backwards through the bracken: he had estimated that no more than four would be sent after him. Probably three. The group would include their best tracker, if they had one, and would, doubtless, not include Bex himself.

If Suter could kill the search party, only eight or nine would be left in the village. By the time they realised the others weren't coming back, his original trail would have disappeared completely. If he then took a circuitous route home, their chances of finding him would indeed be remote.

Though he had made himself think these thoughts, his mind was in ferment. He could not stop remembering what he had seen through the zoom sight. Nor could he stop reliving the reaction those three reckless shots had unleashed, the release of so much firepower, so accurately delivered.

And that was just the beginning. Just a foretaste.

'Enough! That's enough!'

No more: if he continued like this he'd have no chance.

His self-winding Seiko incorporated a stopwatch, which he had started soon after leaving the scarp. Suter checked

the map again and saw he would have to increase his speed or risk the failure of his whole plan.

He was already panting, already physically distressed. He had at least another eight miles to do, with pack, with shotgun, before he could rest. Including the valley wall. Including God knew how much scrub before he hit the lane.

For the first part of his run he had used relatively open ground, relying on the belief that his pursuers would have needed time to consider what to do, gather weapons, take orders. From the open ground he had turned due north, through the thick scrub of hawthorn and birch that everywhere had invaded pasture and arable land. Then he had headed west, along a track leading down to a crossroads. This was the junction of the Chesham Road and the old lane from Shanley up to Flaunden. The lane crossed the river by means of a brick bridge, still intact.

On the other side of this he slid down the nettle-grown bank. A waterfall debouched here from the course of the river to the west, which had long ago been widened to ornament the grounds of Iwaden House.

Grasping at each breath, Suter looked yet again at his stopwatch, bent down, drank, and refilled both of his felt-covered flasks. He next removed his binoculars and waggled them in the clean, cold flow. Most, and then all, of the soil dissolved away from the eyepieces. The right-hand object-glass was scratched. Otherwise, the instrument seemed serviceable.

Just as well.

'*Zeiss oder Leica, Leica oder Zeiss,*' he thought: an old mantra. Praise be to long-dead Germans for making such things. Zeiss or Leica. Or Swarovski. He never could decide

which was the best binocular ever built. Rubber-armoured, nitrogen-filled, he could probably have stamped on this 8×30 with no ill effect. It was engineered to suck information from the view, to deliver every last scrap of light and colour and detail.

He'd spent nearly two minutes here. His merciless stopwatch was telling him so, was already continuing into the future without him.

'Up, up!'

He climbed the bank. He felt terrible. His legs had turned to porridge.

'Not quite as fit as you thought.'

'You're too old for this.'

'Much too old.'

'Not to mention stupid.'

'No fool like an old fool.'

Still reproving himself for what he had done, Suter resumed his course towards the town.

9

Set up on its bipod, the rifle lay lengthwise on the dining table. It formed a barrier between Bex and Danzo, seated as they were on opposing sides. As Bex listened to the news from the escarpment, he distracted himself by letting his gaze dwell on each uncompromising detail of the weapon. The whole thing was olive green except for, here and there, a tiny highlight in white. Engraved figures, for example, surrounded the little turret of the zoom control on the telescopic sight, each with its corresponding graduation

marking the increment in magnification from 2.5 to ten times. Below the turret, mounted on the side of the sight, a finely knurled wheel bore the legend *FOCUS*, incised in the same white-filled typeface. This was the thing that he – whoever he was – had adjusted in the moment before sending an explosive round into Terry's skull, in the moment before almost doing the same to Bex himself.

Bex reached out and put his finger through the thumb-hole let into the forward part of the stock, which was moulded from some sort of high-density plastic. A webbing strap connected the D-rings at either end of the stock. It looked brand new, unworn, and may never have been used to carry the gun at all.

'Let's think about this for a minute,' Bex said, when Danzo had finished his report.

It was Danzo who had suggested that they retreat to the dining hall for this conference, just the two of them, away from the ears of the others. Though Danzo had said nothing on the subject, Bex well knew how dismayed he had been to find, on his return, that the head man had been shot. The unspoken criticism rankled with Bex, especially as he himself did not understand why he had popped the head man. He had felt like it, perhaps, had not cared about losing a bargaining piece; and had wanted to teach the insufferable Helen a lesson. Davies had reminded him of the head man at Byfield. A sanctimonious Bible-bashing creep, reserving the best in the village for himself. The motive was compounded of all these things, and others: Redmond's death, the shooting of Terry and Beezer at the river, and of course the unaccountable Mr Nemesis, bearing a great big grudge, at large in the countryside.

Bex became conscious of the weight of the Glock at his side. He considered firing through his pocket, letting Danzo have it under the table. A burst of nine-millimetre slugs in his pelvis would certainly put a crimp in his lovelife. It might be worth it, if only to see the look of surprise on his face.

But no. Not just yet. And he would need Danzo shortly, in the Long Room, where preparations were in hand for a divination.

'As usual,' Bex announced, 'we have two options. We can do something, or we can do nothing. If we do nothing, we risk a repeat performance. He's out there. Inviting us to get more closely acquainted. For some reason I can't quite get a handle on, he's not our friend. As you say, he could continue picking us off for as long as we hang around here. If we move on, he could follow. It looks like we've got to do something. Question is, how are we going to do it?'

'Do what?'

'Kill the bastard, of course.'

'Where d'you think he come from?'

'Not from Shanley. He would have acted earlier. Essendon, maybe. Pinstead.'

'We didn't leave anyone behind.'

'As far as we know.' Bex stood up and went to the window, glad to be looking away from Danzo. Rain was still falling. Inducing mud. Blurring trails. 'That's a good stunt with the galoshes. He's a clever boy, all right.'

'Just what I reckon.'

From here, looking across the lawns and beyond the yew hedges, Bex could clearly see the escarpment where the man had lain in wait. Stained by autumn, the bracken there seemed disordered, disarrayed, as well it might. The

branches above it, some freshly smashed and splintered, also bore witness to the events of the afternoon. But higher up, and to each side, the nobility of the trees remained undisturbed. The brow of the escarpment marked the edge of the forest, no man's land.

A discourse between Bex and the sniper had already begun, a dialogue without words. The language consisted of deeds, intentions, guesswork.

Bex said, 'Who knows anything about tracking?'

'Me.'

'Who else?'

'Steve. He knows a bit.'

'Yes. He does. He can lead. Two more. Carl. Gil. We'll send them after him. Right now. Double pace.'

'I'm better than Steve, Bex.'

Bex turned round. 'More than better. You're a phenomenon. You can follow a gnat by its droppings.'

'But —'

'I've got something more important for you to do.'

* * *

Danzo knew Bex for what he was: calculating, wilful, cruel to the point of madness and beyond. When they were apart, or when Bex, as he often did, was keeping him at arm's length, Danzo regarded him with something like disdain. But when they were together, and when Bex chose to let him, Danzo still succumbed to the old fascination, the romance of Bex. He was so far ahead of everyone else that the privilege of being allowed to share his presence had become for Danzo an intoxication he could never renounce. He loved just hearing Bex speak, no matter what he was saying, no matter in which language. The quality of

Bex's voice, the rhythm of his speech, had, all those years ago, been Danzo's undoing. That, and his physical beauty. He had the most magnetic eyes. In their expressive light, breathing the heady, seditious atmosphere of the potting-shed which he and Bex had used for their meetings, Danzo had willingly allowed himself to be seduced. Danzo was the elder by a year, but it was Bex who had shown him the way.

Danzo had been sixteen then. That particular form of experimentation was long finished, though not by Danzo's choice. Every time he saw or spoke to Bex the old yearning was never far below the surface. Now, as he stood behind Bex and helped him to adjust the ephod, Danzo was taking the opportunity to study him without his usual, feigned, heterosexual indifference.

Three candles were burning in this side-room. From the doorway came the smell of incense: the other disciples had already prepared the altar. As Bex tightened the girdle, Danzo felt an urge to lean forward and kiss the exposed skin at his neck.

'Are the shoulders straight?' Bex said, looking from side to side.

'Yeah.'

The ephod, perhaps, was the most magnificent part of the entire vestment. They had found it, together with most of the other things, in a synagogue at Barnet. In sumptuous purple, blue and scarlet, richly embroidered with gold, it bore, one on each shoulder, two onyx stones graven with the twelve names of the Children of Israel. These Bex had turned upside-down. The matching girdle and embroidered robe he had left unmodified, but the plate on the forehead of the mitre, which had been inscribed with the Hebrew for

‘Holiness to the Lord’, Bex had cut off and replaced with a wooden plaque on whose surface, with a hot poker, he had burned an inverted pentagram. And in the folded linen breastplate he had sewn two cards from the Aquarian Tarot: the Magician, first of the Major Arcana, and, inverted, the Last Judgment, the twentieth.

The complete vestment was kept in its own black rucksack, carefully folded and packed in polythene. Bex wore it only when, as today, he needed to make a specially deep impression on his followers. He had considered using the parish church for this performance, but he had decided that the Long Room was better suited to his purpose. According to Aleister Crowley, Bex had said, occult ceremonial conducted inside a house of God could produce unforeseen effects, and this afternoon, above all, he needed to be in full control. Furthermore, the windows in St Michael’s had no curtains, so the nave, and particularly the altar, could not be effectively candlelit till after dark. Since today was a Sunday, he would also have had to cancel the villagers’ evensong, and he and Danzo were inclined – for practical reasons – not to disrupt their pattern of worship.

Bex had therefore ordered Stolly and Pinch to make ready the Manor House Long Room with many candles and with incense, smoke, purified blade and hepatoscopic silver. He had told Seumas to lay out, on a cloth-covered table in the side chamber, the components of the demonic vestment. Seumas had now retired to the Long Room, joining the others to await the advent of the Master.

Danzo, dressed entirely in black, took up the robe and helped Bex into it. Finally, Danzo placed the mitre on his head.

Without another word, Danzo went through the door to the Long Room.

Six of the disciples were missing. Steve, Carl and Gil had already set out from the top of the escarpment. The bodies of Redmond, Beezer and Terry had been dumped in a barn. The unspoken implication was that they would be buried in the morning, though Danzo knew that, in the end, no one would bother. Indeed, he was glad to see the last of Terry, and the other two were no great loss.

Their deaths had made Danzo think about his own. Death: that was all the future held. In going from place to place the Order would gather more recruits. If its size was to remain within bounds there would have to be continual losses, like Redmond, Beezer and Terry. Danzo might survive all that. But afterwards? What then? There could be no question of life. Life meant boredom, drudgery, despair. Life was the antithesis of Bex: which meant that Bex was death. And since Danzo had devoted himself to Bex, and Bex, in his way, had accepted this devotion, the two would eventually travel together to Acheron.

Danzo wanted nothing more.

He nodded at Coco, who began, slowly, and with the prescribed beat, to strike the makeshift altar with the caduceus.

Pinch, Dave, Stolly, Matt, Seumas, Coco: each disciple wore the torque Bex had given him, made of twisted copper cable, which signified entry to the Order. Each ignorant, shaven-headed youth, cozened, gulled, bamboozled, had turned his expectant, shining eyes to the door through which the Master, decked out in all his finery, now made entrance.

‘Father! Behold your servant! Like unto Manasseh I humble myself before you! Like unto Amon!’

His voice rose, sonorous, to the smoke-wreathed rafters. These were the opening words he used at every ceremony. Danzo knew the formula, had watched it evolving.

Keeping to the rhythm of the caduceus, the disciples began their low chant: ‘Umin, umin, umin.’

Bex raised his arms and began to recite his own perversion of the fourth chapter of St Matthew’s gospel. ‘Then was Jesus led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil. And when he had fasted forty days and nights he was afterwards hungered. And when the Tempter came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. And Jesus did command, and ate thereof.

‘Then the Tempter took him up into the holy city, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple. And said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, he shall give his angels charge concerning thee. And Jesus did cast himself down, and was whole.’

‘Umin, umin, umin.’

Bex raised his arms higher. His voice was like the heavily fragrant smoke, like the uncertain light of the candles on their stands, pervasive, mysterious, shadowing the chant, weaving with it. Despite his knowledge, despite his scepticism, Danzo again felt himself becoming mesmerised, borne aloft, along with all the others.

‘And the Tempter took him up into an exceeding high mountain, and showed him the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them. And said unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. And

Jesus knelt before him, and weeping said, Thou art my father.'

'Umin, umin, umin.'

Danzo responded: 'Thou art my father!'

'Then the Devil leaveth him, and, behold, demons came and ministered unto him. Asmodeus set up over his head his accusation, written: *This is Jesus the King of the Jews.* And from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land unto the ninth hour. About the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?'

All the disciples responded: 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?'

'And Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up his ghost.'

'Umin, umin, umin.'

'And was hurled down.'

'Umin, umin, umin.'

'Into the furthest pit of hell.'

'Umin, umin, umin.'

'Glory be to Satan!'

'Glory!'

'Father, we stand before you! Like unto Saul, at the gates of the witch of Endor, do we stand before you! Behold these your suppliants! Mecascheph, indeoni, ithoberon, menachesch! In your name, O Azazel, we crave guidance! In your name, O Abaddon! Come forth in me!'

Bex stretched his arms yet higher. 'Through my urim and thummin, through these next my heart I crave you, O Father! Through my urim and thummin, through these next my heart, O Ahriman! Begetter of the Antichrist, come you forth in me!'

He clapped his hands and dropped his head, to signify that he had been possessed. The chant ceased and Danzo,

standing by the altar, snatched away the sheet covering the old woman's naked body. In accordance with Bex's instructions, she had been laid along the trestle table, face up, her arms folded across her flaccid breasts, right hand on the left.

When next he spoke, Bex's voice sounded thick and strange. 'Give me the blade.'

Danzo watched in fascination as Bex deftly cut her open and set about removing the liver.

'Umin, na umin na. Hereto my hand worketh wondrous art.'

'Umin, umin, umin na.'

'Bring silver,' Bex said, and Coco, hesitantly moving forward with a large and highly polished salver, caught the organ as it slipped from the bloodied fingers of the Master.

* * *

At last Helen began to resolve the events of the day. She understood that her beloved father, like her husband, was dead. His body had been wrapped in one of the rugs from the dining hall and conveyed elsewhere. Dragged along the corridor, no doubt, back towards the cellar, where, as far as the rest of the village was concerned, he would probably remain alive for as long as necessary.

Just as she had been made to watch Martin's end, so had she witnessed the death of her father. She had actually seen Bex pull the trigger.

In the moment of firing, Bex had lost control. Helen knew very well what he so feared. An angel of the Lord, St Michael himself. That was exactly how Muriel had described him, the being who had given her the gun.

Muriel dead, too.

That someone so gentle could be treated thus, that someone so dedicated to others could be so comprehensively let down by her community, that someone so devout could be abandoned by God in her moment of need: all this might have been enough to cause what remained of Helen's faith to crumble.

But then …

She looked again at the soapstone bonze, his face becoming ever more indistinct. She was lying on her bed, locked in her room, the velvet curtains drawn. Cradling the little man in her hands, she closed her fingers and, clutching him to her breast, concealed him entirely from view.

A matter of minutes before her father's death, Bex had told her to get rid of Muriel's garments. Even had he not, Helen would have volunteered, just as she had wanted to help lay out the body. That had been denied her, but not the disposal of the clothes, which had meant that Helen's hand, and no one else's, had delved into the coat pocket to find the bonze.

There could not be two such pieces in existence. The bonze had been Martin's mascot. She was certain it had been in his jacket when he had been thrown into the water and left to drift away. Somehow, like the gun, it had come into Muriel's possession.

Martin had never been able to embrace Christian orthodoxy. His beliefs had been his own. For fear of expulsion he had had to keep them hidden from everyone but his wife. Sometimes in church Helen would see that, during the sermon, he had secretly taken the soapstone from his pocket. Like her own soul, it had become polished by his touch.

Martin had not been opposed to Christianity. It was just that it could not encompass the breadth of his world. There was much in the New Testament he had agreed with. 'That's good Zen,' he had once told her, speaking of the Sermon on the Mount.

What had happened to his body?

Surely no one could have found it. No one lived downstream. How, then, had the soapstone made its way into Muriel's pocket? Who had given her the gun? Who had been up on the rise with that rifle?

The absurd thought had already occurred to Helen that Martin had risen from the dead. She now went back to it. Was it so absurd? Was not the whole of her faith anchored in the Resurrection? If Christ, why not Martin; why should her prayers not have been heard?

She knew why. Because Jesus said, 'But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.'

In her prayers she had called for vengeance, the kind that Martin would never have countenanced. Whatever the provocation, he would never have fired on another human being.

Muriel should not have done so, either. Had she followed her Saviour's teachings, had she not allowed herself to be blinded by anger, she and Helen's father would still be alive.

Martin had believed in the transmigration of souls. Reincarnation was quite different from resurrection. If he came back on his terms, if he came back at all, it would be as somebody else. He would not rise from his sepulchre bent on revenge. Besides, ten days had now elapsed, not three. So why hadn't he been here a week ago?

O Heavenly Father, was she losing her reason? Even to be thinking these thoughts was a form of blasphemy. A pistol, a rifle, the bonze: these were solid, material objects. No angel, but some real person, must have found the bonze and given it to Muriel. The same who had given her the pistol and been up on the rise with the rifle.

From what Bex had said, from his mere existence, Helen now knew that there must be communities elsewhere. That's where the man had come from.

She sat up and dried her eyes with the palms of her hands. Bex had ordered her to keep the curtains drawn. She fumbled for the matches and, raising its glass chimney, lit the bedside lamp. As soon as she reseated the chimney, the flame evenly encircled the wick: she adjusted the wheel so that the light burned as strongly as possible without making smoke. She rose to her feet, wondering where in the room to hide the bonze.

Behind her, on the wallpaper above the bedhead, a faint outline showed where, on that first night, Bex had removed the crucifix.

* * *

After the ceremony Bex helped himself to some cold chicken-breast in the Manor House kitchen and, though he already felt high, opened a bottle of wine. He was pleased with the way things had gone. A lie was always more convincing if it merely twisted the truth. He had informed the assembly that, yes, it really had been St Michael up there on the escarpment. God had finally been moved to act. The showdown was coming. Colossal forces were at work. Even the power of the Covenant was being put to the test. That was why, in the case of Redmond, Terry and

Beezer, the mighty armour of Satanic invulnerability had proved ineffective.

In Muriel's body had resided the secret of her last hours, her meeting with the angel. Bex had thought of improving the spectacle with a display of necrophilia. Gil would have done it: he'd fuck anything, but he was elsewhere. So Bex had settled for the next best thing.

The cold chicken helped to mask the taste of Muriel's liver. Together with everyone else, Bex had eaten some of it raw. He smiled and took another bite of chicken. That batty old woman had given him the key. It was her brain they should have eaten, nicely cooked by years of religion.

The excitement of the ceremony, the dressing up, the sensation of daring to venture further, had left him wanting something more. He recognised the symptoms of old. There was only one way to find relief.

From the long cupboard over the peninsular counter he took down two glasses and, in the gloom, proceeded along the corridor to the staircase.

The Manor House was much to his liking. In some ways it would be a pity to set fire to it, as he had already resolved to do. He had found a book in the library detailing its history. The earliest known part was the crypt in which Davies had been confined. It was dated about 1250. Its stones had been laid at the height of the Middle Ages, that time of cathedrals and monasteries, coffins and worms. The Crusades had been yet in progress; the authority of the Pope had been at its height. No one seemed to know exactly what the crypt had been used for. Perhaps bodies had been stored there, a hundred years later, during the Black Death.

Bex liked all the old wood, the panelling, the low ceilings. The builders who had restored the house during 1523-6 had also worked on Hampton Court. The floors downstairs were of stone; above, like the stairs themselves, they now creaked with almost every step. Disembodied groans and lame footfalls, said to be those of Henry VIII, had sometimes been heard on the stairs and along the gallery approaching the bedroom where Catherine Howard had repeatedly betrayed him with Thomas Culpeper.

Helen's room was further along the same gallery. Bex took the key from his pocket and opened the door.

The rattle of the lock seemed to have caught her in some guilty act. Standing between the end of the bed and the big oak dresser, she had hurriedly composed herself to be seen.

'Hello again,' Bex said, looking beyond her, at the dresser. He set the wine glasses and bottle on the bedside table, next to the lamp. 'What have you just hidden?'

'Hidden?'

'Something in the dresser, I should say.'

'What are you talking about?'

Bex opened the top drawer. Her agitation grew. 'You're not a very good liar,' he told her. 'You should leave it to the experts.' He took a few moments to examine her face. 'You may as well tell me what and where it is. If you make me search for it, I shall be displeased.'

'I haven't hidden anything.'

'A gun, perhaps,' he said, unable to keep the edge from his voice. He took the Glock from his pocket. 'Like this one.'

'No.'

'Tell me.'

Resignedly, she reached past him, into the back of the drawer. He suspiciously grabbed her hand; she withdrew. Among the silk scarves, Bex felt something small and hard. A greenish figurine.

'What's this?'

'It belonged to Martin.'

There was a chance that the figurine had lain there for weeks, that she had just made it into a decoy to distract him from the object she had really concealed: but no. Watching her eyes, Bex knew she was speaking the truth. He was good at sniffing out falsehood.

'How did you come by it?'

'It was in Muriel's jacket.'

'And how did she come by it?'

'I don't know.'

'Was Martin in the habit of carrying it on his person?'

'No.'

'Now, now. You can tell your Uncle Bex.'

She said nothing.

Bex moved to the lamplight, held the figurine close to the glass. It looked oriental. The features of the little face were unmistakably Japanese, but vaguely Indian, also. Bex was reminded of depictions of Bodhidharma, the monk who was said to have carried Zen to China and Japan.

'Was your husband a closet Buddhist?'

'He was a Buddhist. Yes.'

Bex stood upright. Watching Helen's reactions, he placed the figurine on the table and smashed it with the butt of the pistol, leaving a heap, greenish white, of fragments and dust.

'So much for Buddhism.' He smiled. 'Come here.'

She shook her head, her eyes fixed on him in horror.

‘I won’t tell you again.’

At gunpoint, he made her drink a glass of wine. He drank one too.

It gave him, now, an intense and special pleasure to force her to remove first his clothes and then her own. In the lamplight he did not regard her body as particularly desirable. She was by no means amply formed but, having spent last night with Seumas, he found her breasts and hips overly abundant, a superfluity of flesh. The dark, shadowy vacancy between her thighs resolved itself into the essence of the feminine. *Women are creatures to which things get done.*

Physically, although she was not bad-looking, she held no particular interest for him today. It was, rather, the circumstances that excited him: the knowledge that he had, this afternoon, cut down her father before her very eyes; that she was completely helpless, because he had already murdered her husband, again in her presence; and that her grief and horror were copiously admixed with an amalgam of memory in which all the sordid acts he had made her endure were at once confused and disgustingly fresh in her mind. Such was her mental strength, however, that she had still not reached rock-bottom. She was still managing to resist. It was this that inflamed him.

She had taken her time undressing. Each item of clothing had been folded and laid across the armchair. But now no obstacle, no delaying tactic, remained.

He turned back the bedcovers. Her brown eyes, mutely pleading, did not leave his face as she climbed between the sheets. Bex got in beside her, his arousal so extreme that it was almost causing him pain. In that curious moment he

thought of the tarot Tower, struck by diabolic lightning, of the two white-clad lovers falling to their death.

'Go on. Grab it.'

He again seized her hand, and made her comply.

It was then, perhaps, that he received, as if from far off, from some distant outpost of her being, a whiff of otherness, an indefinable odour as of an orchid's stigma, deep in the forests of Brazil: the petals waxy white, blotched with rust, the labellum twisted and disguised as something it was not, a cunning lure for carrion-minded beetles, brushed and rebrushed with pollen. As he mounted her, taking her from the front, Bex could not rid himself of the feeling that her disgust, her shudders, her limpness, had somehow been infected, in one tiny spot, with pretence. There, in the extravagant way her head had turned aside on the pillow, lay the very base of her grief. He had destroyed everything. Tears glistened at her tight-shut eyes. Not pausing as he rammed her, Bex instinctively bent and nibbled her left earlobe.

At that, the spot of infection suddenly grew. It may even have been detectable by her conscious mind. He had dragged holiness into its own carnal filth, made it recognise itself.

For the woman, there could be no sensation more degrading in all the world.

Bex told himself that she had been too ready to give up her husband's figurine. She had allowed him to find it too easily. She had divulged information about it, sealing the angel's fate. And when Bex had crushed the thing, when he had pulverised her husband's memory beneath the heel of the gun that had shot her father, her horror had not been complete.

He felt orgasm attempting to overtake him. He tried to resist. He had wanted the time to tell her about the divination, but a moment later his mind encountered the knowledge that she knew full well he had eaten Martin's eyes. That same night, in this same bed, he had taken pains to tell her so. His whispered account of the taste and sensation, the effect it had produced on his listener, now became fused with the memory of the abominable act itself, of Danzo's hooking motion with the point of his knife, of the first of the two proffered morsels, of the sacrificial blood-taint of that vile, resistant jelly on his lips. And it was he, Bex, no one else, observed by the overawed faces of his disciples, who had calmly chewed and swallowed and held out his hand for the second of the pair.

Stimulated beyond measure, he exploded inside her as though struck by all the lightning in hell.

PART TWO

1

Four and a half miles on from the Manor House, having described a broad curve from north to east, Suter hit the lane at Sarratt. This, he hoped, was far enough ahead to prevent his pursuers from guessing his purpose too soon. If they did that, they might go back to Shanley, fetch the lorry, and overtake him on the road. Moreover, it was now ten to five. The rain had not relented. Under this sky no more than a couple of hours of daylight remained. Even if his new friends were close behind, he had not left them enough time for such a manoeuvre.

Using the compass, he had threaded his way uphill through woodland and scrub, through overgrown gardens and the remains of a straggling line of cottages and village houses, and had come at last to a broken-down front gate in Victorian cast iron, set in a low flint-and-brick wall buried by bindweed and greater periwinkle. Beyond the lane, a hundred-yard width of young birch-scrub separated him from the row of houses opposite. He had, precisely according to plan, reached the old village green.

Here the Gunpowder Plot had been commemorated each November with fireworks and a bonfire. The Half Moon, one of at least three pubs he could remember in the village, would be a little way along on the left. It had faced the green. There, on Bonfire Night, 2014, he and Helen —

'*Keinmal die* Helen!' he hissed. '*Gar nichts!*'

His internal language this afternoon had been heavily flavoured with German, a schoolboy German that always seemed to surface when the memory of his fiancée threatened to become too acute. 'None of Helen! Nothing at all!' Muriel had set it off: she had uttered the name. It applied now, apparently, to the head man's daughter, the widow of the man Suter had found in the river. She might well be the only Helen left alive, anywhere in the world. He wondered how old she was. What she looked like.

'Get going,' he said.

He was still finding it hard to believe that he had actually spoken to someone today. Yet there it was, the scratch on the right-hand objective of his binoculars, sustained during his retreat from the escarpment. The scratch was proof, like the loss of his rifle, like his very presence on this spot, that those events had taken place. He had found the body; Muriel had found him; he had seen her being tortured and felt impelled to intervene. The chain of happenings even assumed a sort of inevitability, like the garbled logic of a dream.

'Nightmare, more like.'

Squeezing past the gate, he peered cautiously from side to side. No one. The binoculars confirmed it.

He stepped into the lane, turned to the left, and set off. He had not walked along an uncluttered road for – what? – eight years? Nine? Despite his weariness, it felt too easy to be proceeding like this, unencumbered by vegetation, to have his boot-soles met by such artificial firmness. It reminded him that long ago, before the plague, he had sometimes dreamt that he could fly.

The villagers must have worked hard to keep this open. The verges had been regularly trimmed, with tractors, he

supposed. That would make it even harder to detect a trail: to detect whether a man walking along the lane, a man such as himself, had decided to strike off at an angle and lie in wait with a pump-action shotgun. Those coming after him would have to travel very slowly, scrutinising every yard of either verge. Suter had taken such caution into account when planning his route. He needed the extra time it would buy to get ahead. For he knew the outcome would probably be settled the following day, and if he were to stand any chance at all it was imperative that he provided himself with comfort tonight. He needed a secure place where he could dry off, eat, and maybe get some sleep.

The pub was approaching on his left. It stood a few yards back from the road, sheltered behind pollarded limes which, untended, had sprouted out of all recognition. As pubs went it was not large. It dated from the seventeenth century, with a low, uneven roofline that Suter now saw had almost completely collapsed.

He stopped opposite the entrance to the saloon bar. A small and irresponsible part of him wanted to make a sentimental investigation, to look inside, to try to identify the spot occupied by the tiny table where he and Helen had sat that night.

'*Nur weiter!*'

But he did not move forward. Having taken another backward glance along the road, he found himself pushing a hurried way through the dense, rain-soaked foliage of the lime suckers. Underfoot, the shingle hardstanding had disappeared beneath twelve years of leaf-litter. He reached up and with his fingertips tried to rub the algae away from the door-lintel, to expose there the painted sign bearing the

name of the licensee. A few letters, a syllable or two, were all that remained.

The door stood open.

'You've seen enough.'

But he might never come this way again.

'*Zwei Minuten.*'

He even checked his stopwatch before attempting to venture beyond the vestibule. He did not get far: the saloon bar was unrecognisable, heaped with rubble and rotting furnishings where the ceiling had caved in, borne down by tons of roof-tiles. He discerned a possible outline of the bar and, to its left, a hole in the wall that had been a window. That, *there*, had been the space where the little iron table and two bentwood chairs had stood, crowded in by others, surrounded by standing drinkers who had earlier been outside on the green, watching the fireworks.

'Bitch!' Suter said, tears prickling his eyes, and barged back into the open air. He had not realised it would hurt him so much. Scarcely conscious of what he was doing, he returned to the lane and continued on his way, even faster than before.

She had been drinking white wine; he, ever dutiful, tomato juice. They had driven here in his car, from her parents' house. On the village green they had watched the rockets going up, showering the sky with light and exploding like shells, some so loudly that they had made her jump. It had been a hopelessly inappropriate moment to propose. He had been as much amazed as elated by her happy acceptance. And when, in the pub, she had let him put the engagement ring on her finger, his entire view of himself had been inverted. For the rest of the evening, for over eighteen months to come, he had been allowed to

forget his deep-seated sense of worthlessness, his total lack of self-esteem.

He had been twenty-six then. His work as a plant physiologist for Cornutus, the Swiss chemicals company, was based at their facility in Stevenage, an hour's drive from Gerrard's Cross, where his parents lived and where he had been born. He often came home for weekends or just the odd evening, mainly to see Helen. Sometimes she went to Stevenage to see him. In 2014 Suter had been promoted, attached to a project to design synthetic auxins, and his salary had increased to the point when he could consider buying a house and getting married.

Apart from an unsatisfactory romance with another biologist while doing his doctorate at Northwestern University, he had had little success with women until Helen came along. He was too shy, too unsure of himself: and he was too conscious of and repelled by the hypocrisy of the rituals surrounding the act of human procreation. Before meeting Helen, he had been convinced he would never marry.

'And you never did.'

'*Genug davon!*'

'*Genug der Petzescheiss!*'

Enough! Enough of all that! Thirteen years of bitch-shit, feeding on nothing else for hours on end, his whole world Helen-obsessed, Helenocentric, until, simultaneously with all his other feelings, he had genuinely come to hate her.

'Shut up!'

'You shut up!'

'Are you talking to me, you frigging control-freak?'

Herr von Christus, but hadn't he driven himself stark staring bonkers, the loony legend made flesh, mental

madness personified, way off on an apogean tangent, somewhere round the arse end of Saturn?

'I like that. Apogean. It's going in my diary. What does it mean, pray?'

'Stop it! Stop it! You're in enough trouble as it is!'

He, Iron Man Suter, should never have contrived this Sarratt business; never have gone near the sodding pub; or at the very least, since his route had been made inevitable, he should have had the fortitude to keep on walking, not looked inside or risked such a shortcircuit, a brainblitz, a hundred megawatt misery overload. Yet had he not seen it coming all afternoon? Sarratt, indisputably, had been waiting there on his map ever since the moment it came off the presses: for Pathfinders were printed in four colours, needing four machines, one for the orange roads and contours, the next for the blue ponds and rivers and lakes and sea, and next the green, the village green, and finally, finally, its black bloody name, branded into his skull with Helen's red-hot rejection-poker, a colour not permitted or admitted in the official Ordnance Survey palette …

'Just … just.'

He came to a halt in the rain.

'Just stop it. All right?'

Quite enough trouble. They were the reason for it, of course. What had happened today might unhinge anyone, not least a man of forty-one who had believed the world at an end and needlessly spent the past twelve years entirely on his own.

'Bastards! Bastards!'

Why couldn't they have left him in peace? Just when he had come to terms with it, just when he had devised a system for coping, they had sent that body floating,

drifting, bloated, slowly turning and part submerged, downstream past his home, until it had snagged in the fallen willow and remained there for him to find on his morning round. He wished, now, that he had let go of the rope. Wished with all his heart that he had heeded his own counsel and let it go. They would never have found him. Never would have found his home, his refuge, his secure headquarters, Fortress Suter, safely buried among the trees and hidden from all eyes.

He discovered he was walking again. The worst was over. The pub had done it. Brought the memory to life. But now he was all right again.

'*Absolut?*'

'*Jawohl! All ist in Ordnung!*'

Ordnung. His catchword. In German, *natürlich*, the language of order, precision, utter correctitude, his comfort in times of stress, distancing him from his unruly native tongue. He had learnt it at school, enough to read scientific papers, anyway. Used it at Cornutus, conversing with the management. On trips to Geneva and Zürich and Bonn.

They had been bastards, too.

He checked his stopwatch. Three hours, twelve minutes, nine seconds. Thinking about the way he had come, about all the things he had done to confuse and evade, a wry smile formed on his lips. Progress through the scrub had been hard for him, but it would be very much harder for them. Serve them right.

A new idea seized him. He'd just solved the main problem. The pass-in-the-night problem. It had been bothering him for hours.

In better spirits, the pub almost forgotten, Suter continued on his way.

* * *

The western side of St Michael's churchyard adjoined the Manor House grounds. To the south stood the school; to the north lay the disused vicarage with its wide-ranging views across the valley. The churchyard, extending mainly to the east, was hemmed in on its south side by a flint and brick wall enclosing a yew hedge. The diffuse crown of a single huge yew tree almost completely obscured the church tower from the north and east sides. This tree, its cavities repaired with concrete, one ponderous branch supported on a wooden crutch, had been judged to be at least a thousand years old, predating the existing church by centuries. Rows of closely trimmed Irish yews, of inferior age, formed an avenue from the lich gate to the porch with its massive, iron-studded door.

Between these yews, the York stone path gleamed wetly. The rain had settled into a steady, consistent fall, soaking the monuments and slabs, the turfed mounds, the simple, uncluttered Anglican headstones. Water was gurgling through the leaden drainpipes and dribbling from the gapes of the gargoyles on the tower high above.

As he emerged from the porch with his wife and two small daughters, Leigh Fernihough opened his red-and-white golf umbrella. A few members of the congregation had preceded them; many more were coming behind.

Normally on Sundays there were two services at St Michael's, both conducted by the head man. But today, as last Sunday and the one before, there had been no matins, and evensong had been a sombre, heavy-hearted affair. Fernihough was surprised that Bex had not forbidden worship altogether, or indeed any gathering of more than half a dozen villagers. Plainly, Bex's contempt for the

village was such that he had no fears of revolt. After all, he was holding the head man hostage. If anyone doubted his threat to kill Philip, if anyone thought of offering resistance, they merely had to remember what had happened to Jack, to Vernon, to Martin, and now – in as yet unexplained circumstances – to Muriel.

Today the deputy, Goddard, had led the service. After prayers for Muriel, he had taken for his sermon Isaiah, chapter twenty-five. For once Fernihough had listened intently.

Thou shalt bring down the noise of strangers, as the heat in a dry place; even the heat with the shadow of a cloud: the branch of the terrible ones shall be brought low.

A knot of people was standing under umbrellas, discussing Muriel's death and the gunfire everyone had heard this afternoon. At the threshold, Goddard accepted Fernihough's hand and shook it.

Fernihough said, 'Will you come to supper with us, Peter? This evening. I'd like to talk.'

Goddard looked at him narrowly. 'What about?'

Fernihough's wife, Melissa, cradling the two-year-old in her arms, moved closer to her husband, ostensibly to gain more shelter from the rain. 'Philip. We want to talk about Philip. I think we should be allowed to see him. And Helen. No one's seen her since yesterday.'

'The Council has everything under review.'

'Please,' Melissa said.

People were pressing from behind, trying to leave the porch.

'Very well,' Goddard said. 'What time?'

'Seven-thirty?' Fernihough said.

'Seven-thirty it is.'

He reached past Fernihough and shook someone else's hand.

* * *

A mile from the borough boundary, open countryside was replaced by an extensive interwar housing estate. Having now become a residential road called Baldwin's Lane, the lane continued through it, slowly descending, Suter knew, towards the Metropolitan Railway and the course of the Grand Union Canal. A dormitory for London, this place had been almost contiguous with its suburbs, but not quite: the cheaper side of Metroland, a speculator's paradise of flimsy bungalows and semi-detached houses. On Suter's right approached what had been a parade of neighbourhood shops: the newsagent's, the chemist's, the hairdresser's, the hardware store. Here the broad stripes of a zebra crossing led across the road, almost perfectly preserved, down to the defining square studs of shiny aluminium let into the asphalt on either side. The Belisha beacons on opposing kerbs yet remained. He half expected to see their orange-yellow globes alternately flashing, blinking on and off, protectively ushering, or hoping to usher, pedestrians from one side of the road to the other.

The rain had stopped half an hour ago. Suter's feet passed over the crossing and he quickened his pace. The time was six thirty-seven, well past sunset, and though the light was failing rapidly he allowed himself a momentary sense of triumph. He had reached the built-up zone within schedule and still had some time and strength left. After Sarratt, after the pub, he had got his second wind. Twelve years of constant walking, swimming, wood-cutting,

burden-carrying, had put him in his prime. Perhaps he was not too old for this, after all.

'You're wilier than they are, too,' he whispered. 'More advanced.'

'What the hell are you on about now?'

'Don't know.'

'And what are you whispering for? They're miles away. Probably given up already.'

'Yeah. Sure they have.'

The road here was lined entirely with pairs of semi-detached houses, pretty much as he remembered. A former grass verge, varying in width from three feet to about fifteen, divided the kerb from the footway, next to which ran the old line of low garden walls and fences. The front gardens were not deep: thirty feet at most.

He began looking out for two houses having certain characteristics. They needed to be within sight of one another, unobstructed by trees or overgrown shrubs, and staggered on opposite sides of the road.

'What about those?'

The nearer of the two, on the right, looked ideal. From this angle it appeared to have remained entirely sealed, somehow escaping the attentions of looters and weather and wildlife. Laying his shotgun flat on the road, Suter used both hands to raise his binoculars and study the upper floor. The bedroom curtains were closely drawn. They showed no sign of rot.

'Yes,' he whispered. 'Good. Very good.'

It was just the sort of place where they would expect him to spend the night.

The house on the left, thirty yards on, looked much less inviting. Although the roof was intact, one of the big

windows in the ground-floor bay had been smashed, losing about a quarter of its glass. He arrived at a point opposite the broken window and again laid down the gun.

Now Suter's Dialyt came into its own, mopping up every spare photon and channelling it to his brain. His vision began to adapt and penetrate the dank, derelict darkness of the room. Almost impossibly, stretching the laws of optics to their utmost limits, after a few moments he resolved peeling floral wallpaper, a white plastic lightswitch. A high-handled interior door.

'Yes!'

It was shut!

The house was the left-hand one of the pair, another auspicious sign.

'It'll do.

'More than do.'

'Whatever you say.'

He retrieved the shotgun and went back to the first house. No one was coming: he confirmed it, one-handed, with the binoculars before stepping up from the roadbed and into the wet, rank vegetation of the verge.

Leaving behind a wide swathe of damaged stems, he forced a path into what had been the front garden. A prefabricated concrete garage stood next to the house. The metal up-and-over door, painted maroon and firmly shut, confined for ever a white Toyota which Suter saw through the rear garage window. The people living here had not fled by car, not unless they'd had another. The drawn curtains upstairs suggested they had been abroad when the plague had struck, on holiday perhaps, stranded in Majorca by the embargo on air-travel, turfed out of their hotel and left to fend for themselves until the disease got them too.

‘What, in November?’

‘They might have been pensioners. On a cut-price break.’

‘Too much imagination, that’s your trouble.’

The back garden was a jungle. By the French window Suter found a concrete squirrel, life size, almost hidden by weeds. He examined it in the twilight, acknowledged what it was, then averted his face and smashed the glass. The noise seemed appallingly loud: a nearby blackbird shrilled its cry of alarm.

His groping hand found no key in the lock, so he broke more panes and enough glazing-bars to let him step inside. Before doing so, he shed his pack and extricated his flashlight.

The beam revealed domestic details unseen for twelve years or more: a tiled mantelpiece with clock and dust-furred knick-knacks, a gas fire with imitation coals, a huge TV on a stand, a three-piece suite in striped moquette, all set upon a swirl-patterned carpet. Extravagant cobwebs festooned the walls and furniture. A musty smell, far from healthy, pervaded the air, becoming stronger as he crossed the reception hall towards the kitchen. If a house contained no bodies, this smell usually had its origin in the freezer cabinet. He had detected it many times, in many dwellings, large and small.

After a while, all these places began to look the same, whatever their size, whatever their erstwhile value, whatever the pretensions of the people who had furnished them. At one time Suter had derived voyeuristic interest from unfettered study of abandoned houses. He had read letters and diaries, poked into cupboards, examined photo albums and collections of books. Much of his library derived from this source. Occasionally he had fired a house

or block of flats, just to see it burn; once an office building, a district headquarters of the Inland Revenue. Watching it disintegrate, Suter had finally accepted, emotionally as well as intellectually, that there would be no more government to coerce and constrain, to order him about and waste his time and energy. That had been one of the better days of his first year alone.

He started up the stairs. In households such as this, which had obviously included a female inhabitant of middle age or above, the lack of a sewing box in the living room often indicated the presence of a spare bedroom adapted, or entirely dedicated, to needlework and the like. It was usually the smallest of the three.

The sewing machine had been set up by the window. Its yellowing PVC cover bore a brand name: Bernina. He owned a Bernina himself, though he rarely needed to use it.

The table drawer held a collection of cottons. He pocketed one reel of navy blue and another of black and hurried back downstairs. In the dining room he rummaged in the sideboard, looking for candles, but found none. This drove him into the kitchen, where, wrinkling his nose, he unearthed a packet of birthday-cake candles at the top of a larder-cupboard.

'I hate baked beans,' he said, eyeing a medium-sized tin.

'Take them anyway. And the peaches.'

He was glad to get out in the open air and resume the familiar weight of his pack. Exactly following the blatant trail he had made earlier, and being very careful not to fall over, he proceeded backwards along his course between the garage and the side of the house. When he reached the

road he turned to his right, back towards Sarratt, and took half a dozen steps.

The anticipation of difficulty had become so much a part of his nature that he was not in the least surprised to find there was too little of the black thread to span the road. Aided now by his torch, he knotted the end of the black to the blue and continued across to the other verge. Here he tied the cotton part-way up a young blackthorn bush, at about knee height, then snapped off the rest. The line was taut as well as reasonably level, fixed on the far side to an elder stem.

'Good. *Sehr gut.*'

The daylight had almost gone. Just enough remained for him to see the silhouettes of the roofs and chimneys. Having checked the map and walked down the road some three hundred yards past the second house, Suter took the first turning on the left. He picked a way among the clumps of grass and ragwort growing through the road-surface, avoiding as far as possible any disturbance of the humus of fallen leaves, twigs and branches.

According to the map, the next road ran parallel to Baldwin's Lane. He was greatly tempted to take it, for he was almost out of stamina and did not relish the idea of breasting the width of twenty-two rear gardens, still less that of having to kick down or climb over twenty-one wooden fences. However, the map gave only a stylised summary of the boundaries between the houses, and he could not tell whether the two sets of gardens backed one another precisely, nor could he well afford to lose count.

'There's nothing else for it.'

Using all his skill to minimise and generalise his trail, he entered the driveway of the house on his left. Presently he

came to the bottom of the rear garden and, kicking down a rotten panel of larchlap fencing, drew one obstacle nearer to his lodgings for the night.

2

'What will you have to drink?' Fernihough said, once Goddard had removed his gumboots and relinquished his raincoat, which Melissa had hung up in the hall.

'Whisky?'

'With water?'

'Please.'

Wearing the sheepskin slippers Fernihough had supplied, Goddard crossed to the hearth-rug and stood warming his back at the fire. He looked round the room.

'Cosy place you've got here.'

As they both knew, the cosiness was an illusion. At any moment one or more of the gang might choose to enter and perpetrate some outrage. That they had not yet done so in his house was to Fernihough a continuing source of surprise.

He and Melissa rarely entertained anyone, let alone the village deputy, who, as far as Fernihough could remember, had never before so much as deigned to put a foot across the threshold. Tonight she had made a special effort to make the house welcoming. The children were in bed; enticing smells from the kitchen were finding their way along the passage; and the sitting-room fire had been lit over an hour earlier, laid with seasoned beech and scented with the cones of larch and Norway spruce.

‘Please, Peter. Sit down.’

‘Isn’t your wife joining us?’

‘Not for the minute. Important business in the kitchen.’

Goddard took the seat Fernihough had indicated, a loose-covered armchair pleasantly close to the fire.

As he prepared the drinks, Fernihough felt his misgivings grow. Besides the obvious consequences of the arrival, a fortnight earlier, of Ian Bexley and his followers, the catastrophe had brought nearer to the surface an undercurrent of dissent that previously had remained hidden. For years, the village had been divided in two. There was the minority with children, and the rest.

Thanks to the industry of the villagers, and to the hoard of goods available in the nearby town, the community was materially self-sufficient. It needed no outside help, no trade. All the same, the question of making contact with the other settlements which, somewhere, somehow, surely existed, of allowing expression of the human urge for communication, had been repeatedly raised at meetings of the Council, for if the children of the village were ever to flourish, some at least would have to marry outside Shanley.

While acknowledging the strength of this argument, the leadership had always opposed it. So many years had passed since the plague that it was impossible to say how other settlements might have developed. There was no need to go looking for trouble. As long as Shanley remained isolated it would remain safe. If there were God-fearing communities elsewhere, and if it were God’s will that they make contact, then such contact was sooner or later inevitable.

The pronouncements of the Council, no matter how wrong-headed, were usually couched in such terms. The piety of anyone who disagreed was automatically suspect. Lack of piety caused a reduction in social status. Those of lower status – and their children – enjoyed fewer privileges. Thus people like Fernihough, even had they been allowed an effective voice on the Council, could not risk expressing themselves too emphatically.

The elderly Goddard lived alone. He had, apparently, never been married. The contrast between his bachelor household and this one might strike unpleasantly. Except for the usual courtesies of the village, Goddard had never shown much sign of friendship towards Fernihough; and indeed, Fernihough now remembered, at a couple of gatherings he had made little effort to conceal his sense of superiority.

His face, weathered from long exposure to the open air, had already taken on a redder hue. What was left of his hair was pure white, hastily brushed. As he reached up for the whisky glass, his blue eyes fixed themselves on Fernihough. 'I don't feel much like offering a toast to anyone, do you?'

'No, not really.'

Goddard took a sip. After a moment, he said, 'What's this all about? Bexley?'

'Yes.'

Goddard leaned forward and accepted a small dish of salted savoury biscuits. 'Are these Paul's?'

'Yes,' Fernihough said. Paul Aziz was the best baker in the village.

'The Council position is quite clear,' Goddard said, and took a few of the glazed biscuits, which he thoroughly

crunched before swallowing. Fernihough caught a glimpse of false teeth. 'We must do nothing while Philip is being held.'

'But your sermon. I got the impression —'

'That I was inciting the village to take up arms against the strangers?'

'Well, hardly.'

The words of the sermon, and the atmosphere in which they had been received, had persuaded Fernihough that Goddard was just as angry as he: that Goddard and the rest of the Council, having, like him, considered and reconsidered all the options, had at last accepted that a direct attack, no matter how costly, was the only chance of salvation for the whole village.

Goddard said, 'It was all I could do this afternoon to convince Bexley that Muriel had been working alone.'

'You told him that?'

'I did.' Goddard's gaze became even chillier. 'I'd no idea she'd got hold of that gun. If I'd known, I'd have stopped her.'

'Supposing she'd killed him?'

'Then matters would now be quite different.' Goddard took some more biscuits. The way he did it somehow bespoke the low regard in which he held his host. He knew everything; Fernihough knew nothing. Goddard was the village deputy, prominent on the Council; Fernihough was a digger of carrots, a man who walked home, alone and vulnerable, through the mud.

Fernihough asked, 'Does anyone know anything about the gun?'

'It's a complete mystery.'

'You've seen it, I'm told.'

‘Yes. An automatic pistol. Austrian thing. Glock, I think it’s called.’

Village law was strict on the question of firearms. Only breech-loading rifles and shotguns were allowed, for shooting vermin and game, and as defence against dogs. Every one of these weapons had been accounted for and confiscated by Bex on the day he had arrived.

‘Who could have given it to her?’ Fernihough said.

‘The same man who shot those two by the river.’

‘Yes, but who is he?’

‘We don’t know where else Bexley has been. Where he was before this.’ Goddard’s manner softened, as if he were explaining something to a child. ‘You mentioned my sermon. I’d hoped I’d made things clear. Violence never solves anything. It is our Lord who will bring Bexley’s branch low. Our Lord alone. That is the message of comfort in Isaiah. If Muriel had heeded her Scripture she would be with us now.’

Fernihough was struggling to maintain the placid exterior he had so painstakingly constructed throughout his life here. ‘Alan says there was more shooting, inside the Manor House. Just after the gunfight in the grounds. Four shots, he says.’

‘Yes. Four.’

‘What happened?’

‘Bexley told me he was trying out the pistol.’

‘Did you ask him?’

‘He volunteered the information. In a fashion.’

‘But suppose he actually shot someone. Suppose he shot Philip.’

‘I’ve already had this discussion several times today. Philip is Bexley’s main bargaining counter. If and when

Philip is killed, they'll start killing everyone else. Since that hasn't happened yet, we must assume that he is still alive.'

'Is that the Council's view?'

'Yes.'

'You're just waiting for Bex to start shooting?'

Fernihough at once regretted his words. He saw that any notion he might have had concerning Bex, when put to Goddard, let alone the whole Council, would meet with rejection.

'I didn't come here for this,' Goddard said. He reached out and placed his glass on the edge of the sofa-table. 'Perhaps I'd better leave.'

'No – please. I'm sorry. I'm pretty well beside myself. We all are. I just wanted to talk. Maybe there's something we haven't thought of. Some way of dealing with it all.'

Goddard looked up as Melissa came into the room to join them and rose punctiliously to his feet, forcing Fernihough to do the same.

* * *

Despite his extreme fatigue, Suter lay awake, fretting and unable to sleep, until the early hours.

He had encountered no bodies in this house, only the mummified remains of a terrier-like dog. Thanks to the broken bay window, the living room was quite uninhabitable, but the rest of the building had fared much better. Luckily the door of the back bedroom had stayed shut for all these years, so the dust there was not too bad. Suter had opened the fanlight and drawn the curtains, bundled up the bedclothes and dumped them in the bath. In the airing cupboard he had found enough linen and clean blankets to make up a bed of sorts. After a cold, grim

supper of tinned luncheon-meat and sweetcorn, followed by rice pudding – all of which he had taken from the kitchen – he had sat for a while in the bedroom armchair, surrounded by birthday-cake candles and trying to browse through one of the household's sparse stock of books: *The Monument Builders*, an illustrated account of the achievements of early man. He had been unable to read more than a few words together. More had happened to him during the preceding day than in the preceding decade, and tomorrow, as a direct result of his own foolishness, he would almost certainly be killed.

At about half past seven he had laid the book aside and retired.

Three hours later, or so it seemed, he became convinced that sleep was going to elude him entirely. Without it, he stood even less chance of survival.

'Isn't that the general idea?'

'Funny way to go about it. That's all I can say.'

'To go about what?'

'You know.'

'Do I?'

He could hear the breeze. Chilly autumn was passing among the limes and sycamores, the larches and poplars and maples, moving every spray of leaves. He could remember even now some of the stages in the biochemistry of chlorophyll deconstruction and anthocyanin synthesis. The yellow hues were the product of plastid residues, carotenoid pigments masked in summer by green chlorophyll: beta-carotene, lycopene, luteol, neoxanthin, cryptoxanthol, and all the others whose molecular formulae and isomeric properties he had once found so fascinating. Was he not a plastid residue himself,

visible only because everyone else had died? Or should he be likened to a single yellowing leaf of birch or aspen, still hanging on by a few strands of xylem or a shred of cuticle, his abscission layer gone, waiting for one more breath of wind to make him fall?

Yellow, he recalled, was the colour of cowardice.

'Stop it!'

A multitude of unwanted associations, barmy symbolism running on without check: these were the most distressing symptoms of an isolated brain. Usually he could keep a lid on it, but not now, not tonight.

The darkness was no longer endurable.

He snapped on his torch and looked at his watch. Two nineteen.

'God Almighty!'

Seven hours, nearly, not three, he had been lying here, exhausted, rigid with worry, regret, fear, going over his plans and contingencies again and again and again. If only he'd had more foresight, he could have taken advantage of the situation. He could have used the house opposite to kill one or more of those following. At home he had explosives and everything else he needed, like pressure pads and radio-controlled switches, among the cases and cases of electrical components and equipment he had assembled and catalogued during his first year or so of residence.

But he hadn't been able to see this far ahead. He had left home at half cock, ill-prepared, driven more by emotion than logic.

There was no point worrying about it. Shining the torch around the room, examining its unfamiliar shapes and angles, he told himself he should have known better than to have compounded his stupidity by losing so much sleep.

‘Sufficient unto the day is the leak thereof.’

Thus he acknowledged that he needed once more to urinate. He climbed out of bed. Indelible conditioning led him into the bathroom, where he even raised the seat before releasing his flow.

He had little recollection of returning to the sheets or of resignedly looking for his matches in order to open *The Monument Builders* and pass the candlelit time before dawn. A moment after having this idea he awoke to find full daylight pressing at the edges of the curtains.

His sleep had been dead and dreamless, leaving him groggy and disorientated. He did not at first even understand where he was. He knew only that he was not in his own clean and civilised room in his clean and civilised house by the lake. He was somewhere else, miles away, in trouble, more trouble than he had ever known. Then it all came back to him.

The time was twenty to eleven. He had overslept by four and a half hours. His plans were in ruins.

What had woken him? The sound of entry? Were they already in the house, downstairs?

His palm found the rough-textured, anatomical butt of his GP-35 in its place beside the pillow. His thumb swung down the safety catch.

His heart was thudding so loudly that he could scarcely hear. He made himself sit up, fully expecting the bedroom door to burst open in a storm of automatic fire.

Nothing.

Exchanging the pistol for his shotgun, he padded barefoot to the door, opened it a fraction, listened. Still nothing. He came out on the landing, approached the

banister rail, peered over and down. He craned his neck. Still nothing.

If they'd been in the house, they would have done something by now. Wouldn't they?

He thought of calling out.

His pulse was slowing. Getting down towards the resting rate.

More nothing; the mewing cry of a buzzard somewhere beyond the roof. The day, so far as he could tell, seemed dry. Sunlight briefly lit the grimy rectangle of the landing window.

'Are you going to look?' he whispered.

'Why should I?'

'To prove you're not a coward.'

'Do I have to?'

'Yes.'

A minute later, still wearing only his shirt and underpants, Suter came back upstairs. He had found no sign of intrusion besides his own.

After visiting the bathroom, he took his binoculars and went into the principal bedroom. This had a bay window corresponding to the one directly below and commanded an excellent view of the first house he had entered yesterday evening. Although the glass was filthy with algae and rain-washed dust, he could see that no one was on the road for a couple of hundred yards in either direction.

Four possibilities existed. One: they had passed him in the night. Two: they were inside the first house, or staking it out. Three: they were at this moment following his trail here, through the back gardens. Four: they hadn't reached Baldwin's Lane at all; might not even be following.

He weighed up the odds for a moment longer. If he opened the window, the sound and glint and swinging motion could advertise his presence. If he did not open it he would be unable to see the cotton.

The wooden frame of the casement had swollen and warped; the hinges had rusted; the ledge and rabbets were thickly populated with spiders, both dead and alive, and crammed with a mass of dried insect corpses. But he did not want to break the glass.

By applying judicious pressure in the right places, and by dint of his very considerable strength and will, he finally made the window burst open.

He knelt down and rested the binoculars on the ledge to gain rock-solid stability. He adjusted the eyepieces. There, nicely visible, was the line of thread. Either they'd seen and stepped over it or they hadn't yet arrived. He next focused on the trail he had made, up past the concrete garage and back. Detailed scrutiny persuaded him that no one had trodden it since.

Comforted, becomingly increasingly reassured, Suter drew the window as far shut as he was able.

What had happened to them?

He had been expecting them to appear at dawn or soon after. He had hoped merely to observe his pursuers, then follow them to the town. Maybe they'd lost the trail. Or maybe they'd changed their minds.

He dressed completely, laced his boots and holstered his Browning. To his annoyance he found that he had fallen asleep last night with his torch switched on. The batteries were dead. He had no means of recharging them till he got home. He slid the torch into his pack before taking one last look round and returning to the principal bedroom.

Here, keeping the road in sight, he ate cold beans with a spoon and opened the tin of peaches. Before eating the fruit he drank the syrup, for he was worried that his water might not last until he could safely replenish the two flasks. He drank only a cupful, and then poured just enough to clean his teeth.

Fear of developing an abscess, or even a simple cavity, and of having to treat it himself, had made him very particular about oral hygiene. At home he kept an arsenal of toothpastes and powders and floss and brushes of every shape and size, both manual and electric. On those rare occasions when he was away for the night, he carried a comprehensive kit which he never failed to deploy after a meal.

With another glance at the empty road, he wiped the dust from the central mirror of the kidney-shaped dressing-table and sat down. From his kit he took a brush and a canister of polish and began scrupulously cleaning his teeth, upper row first, working anti-clockwise, as he always did.

It looked like they weren't going to show.

How long should he wait here? Till noon? One o'clock, say.

How to get home? Along the riverbank? He might take a boat and drift down the canal. That was appealing.

He wondered how Rees was getting on. He'd left the cat plenty to eat. Not that he needed it. He preferred catching small mammals and, for preference, drank straight from the river.

Yes. It was all over. Suter had given them the slip. His life of ease and safety, of peace and solitude, could resume. Things would not be the same now, of course, for he would

always know that, a few miles away upstream, there was, or had been, a village called Shanley full of survivors.

He paused and spat on the floor. He was about to continue, to finish brushing and rinse, when he heard, quite unmistakably in the west, the rattle of an approaching diesel.

3

The lorry was moving at little more than walking pace. By the time it arrived, Suter had already carried his pack downstairs and double-checked that the front door would open freely. Having left the pack by the newel post, he had raced back up to the principal bedroom to watch.

He had taken up a position as far from the window as he could. Although his vision was impeded by the dirtiness of the glass, his line of sight, towards the west-south-west, was favoured by the intermittent morning sun. Conversely, their view would be impaired. His particular window, and he himself, standing deep behind it, would be all but impossible to single out.

He raised the binoculars. The lorry, a white, ten-tonne, box-bodied Mercedes, slowed even more as it approached the first house he had entered last night. Sunlight flashed obscurely on the windscreen: through the fog of grey-green grime, Suter distinguished the forms of three men in the cab. He had been expecting precisely that number, but would there be any more, hiding in the back?

Cannibals. Degenerates. 'Bastards!' he said, feeling his chest constrict yet more. He had not actually set eyes on

the lorry before now; had not anticipated this fresh challenge to his cowardice. For still he could not absolve himself of guilt over what he had done, or let happen, to Muriel. She had been in no condition to take the Glock. He had known it. In effect, he had killed her. And now he was being punished.

Suter tightened his grip on the dense rubber casing of his Dialyt. The normal tremor of the twin worlds of convergent light, the amplified shake of a frail human grasp, had grown so much that he was having trouble keeping hold of the image.

His fear intensified as the blackthorn on the northern verge and the elder on the southern gave a unified twitch. The lorry had just broken the thread. It was here. Really here. They had gone back to Shanley for it. Set out this morning at their leisure. Driven all the way from Sarratt in low gear, looking from side to side. Looking for him. And he, who had overslept like the fool he was, had no idea how he was going to get out of this mess alive. Had he really imagined that they would simply pass by and leave him undiscovered?

The eyepieces started knocking against his nose. He let the binocular down and left its weight to the lanyard.

The lorry halted just short of the trail he had made across the verge. It waited there interminably, the engine ticking over. No one got down. As Suter watched, the complete absence of motion became increasingly, unbearably, sinister and unnerving. He had underestimated them. They weren't just going to blunder in. Weren't going to fall for any of his nonsense.

He became aware that everything he had been at such pains to devise had disappeared from his brain. His mind

had been wiped clean, set at zero, leaving only the blank, impotent vista that infallibly precedes an attack of blind terror.

‘Do something!’ he urged the unseen men in the cab.

As if to oblige, one of them inexplicably sounded the horn. There was something tentative about its note, experimental.

To Suter’s horror, the lorry started rolling forward again. He involuntarily shrank back as it came closer. He glimpsed the face of the man in the nearside seat, his shaven scalp, his red plaid jacket, the muzzle of an assault rifle standing between his knees. Next to him, an impression of the bejeaned legs of the one in the middle, enclosing another assault rifle. A plaid-sleeved arm ending in a confident hand on the gearstick.

The driver seemed to know what he was doing. Suter wondered when and how he had learned to control a ten-tonne truck.

They were looking everywhere: at the verge, at the road ahead, and especially at the houses. Redjacket’s gaze swept across Suter’s window and passed on without pause.

The lorry was proceeding so slowly that, whenever the vegetation permitted, Suter could see the Mercedes triangles revolving on their hubcaps. The rear doors became visible: he raised the binocular and frantically tried to hold it steady, to elicit some information about the locks, the handles, but could discern nothing of value. The lorry passed more and more into three-quarters view and Suter made himself move further forward, into the bay of the window.

‘Yes,’ he murmured, not even daring to think of what might happen next. ‘That’s it, you bastards! Keep on going!’

But they didn’t. The lorry halted again, at the first left-hand turning. The turning the stupid, over-confident Suter had taken in the dark, following the wavering pool of torchlight, unable properly to see where he was treading, unable to make sure of, still less doctor, his own trail.

The nearside door swung open. A black combat-boot appeared and the red-jacketed youth jumped down, gripping an AK47. A bulky, olive-green haversack was slung diagonally across his shoulder. He ran, half-crouching, into the side turning and was lost to view. He could not fail to find Suter’s trail to the kitchen door. In five minutes he would be here.

Simultaneously the lorry started reversing, at aggressive speed, all the way back to the first house. Before it had fully stopped moving, the nearside door opened again and disgorged a second youth, the one who had been sitting in the middle: taller than the first, heavier, with a blue-green jacket, a closely shorn head and a blond beard. Suter thought he recognised his face. He could have been one of the party in the Manor House grounds. He too was toting a Kalashnikov assault rifle, an AKMS with the metal butt folded forward: he too was carrying a bulky, olive-green haversack.

Suter’s mind remained blank. He stared uncomprehendingly, so frightened that he was unable even to begin with himself the debate whose outcome would determine his survival. As he watched Beard skirting the front of the lorry, the horn sounded again and the engine died. The driver descended, a third skinhead, wearing a

blue and yellow plaid jacket, equipped, like the others, with an assault rifle and a dark-green haversack.

He crouched down on what had been the pavement in front of the garden wall, while his companion retraced Suter's steps between the garage and the side of the house and disappeared.

The driver edged to his right until he was kneeling next to the brick pier of the gateway. He peeped over the wall and immediately ducked down. His rifle was a squat Enfield L85 bullpup, perhaps one of the two that had been discharged at the escarpment above the Manor House grounds.

Faintly, Suter heard a shout. 'Go for it, Steve!'

With that, the driver – Steve – got to his feet and, levelling his L85 diagonally across the front garden, discharged a stream of fire at the ground floor bay window. The whole structure imploded in a blizzard of glass and timber. The muzzle was raised, dealt the same treatment to the windows above. It seemed to Suter that more shots were simultaneously being fired, that more ruin was being unleashed, at the back of the house: the shout had clearly been a synchronising signal, but he had no time to consider it, because he saw Steve draw back his arm and lob something small and heavy through the first of the gaping apertures he had made. Before Suter's memory could retrieve the information necessary to permit understanding of what this meant, the hand-grenade detonated with a double thud and the remainder of the window preceded a disintegrating spray of debris that spewed into the front garden. No, not a double thud: there must have been another grenade, at the back, hurled by the one with the beard.

Steve emerged from the shelter of the wall. A third and then a fourth grenade went sailing through the upstairs windows, front and back. Steve, squatting again, snatched a magazine from his bag, plugged it into the rifle stock and stood up. Holding his Enfield at hip level, he moved into the driveway and towards the house.

As smoke started issuing from the windows, Suter's mind slowly began to work.

He had finally remembered the one in the red jacket, who even now was following his trail across the rear gardens to the back door and the kitchen below; who also had an assault rifle and no doubt a supply of hand-grenades. While Redjacket found the house and went in from behind, the other two would be covering the front.

All of which meant there weren't any more of them in the box.

At least one of the two would have to go inside the first house and look for a body before the flames there took hold. Perhaps, if the fire developed too quickly, both, leaving the street momentarily unattended.

Suter looked at his watch.

How long had it been since Redjacket had alighted?

Too long.

Suter's descent of the stairs was as rapid as the paramount need for silence allowed. He hefted one strap of the pack over his shoulder. There was no time to get his arms into it. He renewed his grip on the shotgun and gingerly opened the street door.

From this angle and elevation he was able to see little of the other house. But he could see the smoke, rising to roof height before being carried away on the breeze. Expecting at any moment an attack from the rear, he emerged from

the porch and, drawing shut the door behind him, parted the mass of herbaceous vegetation that once had been a front garden.

He came to the boundary with the pavement and looked to the right, along the road. There was the lorry and, sure enough, no sign of the two skinheads. They would be at the back of the first house or, even better, inside.

Now was Suter's chance to turn left, to leg it away down the hill unseen.

He did not know whether he had whispered, or merely thought, the words: 'Let's be creative'; did not give his other, eternally carping, self the opportunity to intercede or even complain; did not even, really, know what his adrenalin was doing as he found himself running at full tilt across the road towards the lorry, as it drew inexorably nearer, becoming larger, looming whitely before him.

'The keys!' he gasped, as he approached the driver's door. In his panic he had forgotten that vehicles had keys. Engines wouldn't start without them.

It was too late to care. With superhuman strength he threw his pack into the cab and hoisted himself and the shotgun into the driver's seat. A glance through the observation panel behind him revealed that the box was empty.

And there they were. The keys. The beautiful keys. Already in the ignition lock. Not in Steve's pocket!

He yanked the key clockwise and touched the throttle.

Making an excruciatingly loud noise, the starter motor turned: and that was all.

A yellow lamp had started glowing on the dashboard. What did it mean? He knew nothing about diesels; had

never driven anything bigger than a Transit van, and that had run on petrol.

Again he turned the key, this time without depressing the throttle. Again the engine wouldn't fire. A red lamp, next to the yellow one, now lit up as well.

'Jesus Christ!'

The gap between his two selves had become a gulf: he was seized by panic, rendered useless, hysterical; and he was supremely calm, ironic, masculine, in perfect control.

'You're dead, you're dead!'

The cab reeked of tobacco smoke. An open packet of Marlboros on the dash. Rubbish on the floor. As if in a dream, part of him was taking in every detail.

'One more time, Nitwit. Still no throttle.'

He paused a fraction of a second longer, during which he seemed to utter, or caused to issue from the maelstrom of his brain, what might just have been construed as a prayer. He turned the key. Something engaged, something right, something solid and German and well-engineered, and sweetly the engine obeyed. The red lamp went out, and the yellow.

When unladen, the power-to-weight ratio of a lorry like this enabled almost car-like acceleration. Suter was already in gear, applying torque, when he detected new colours and movement in the long oblong of the door-mirror to his right. An angry man in a blue and yellow jacket.

Suter's boot floored the pedal and the shooting began. The opening burst flew wide: the next spattered into the box, smashing the observation panel behind his head and strewing the cab with tiny cubes of safety-glass. Crouching as low as he dared, he clumsily changed up, mangling the

clutch, crashing the gears. At eye-level, the scarlet needle of the speedometer was already touching 40.

‘Crappy L85! Couldn’t hit a barn door!’

But the next and final burst caught the rear tyres which alternately exploded and hurled away their violently flapping shreds of steel and vulcanite. Suter heard and felt the lurching rear of the lorry drop as the rims made grinding contact with the road. Raising himself fully upright, wrestling with the wheel, he glimpsed in the mirror a spume of molten shards showering from the offside mudflap. The lorry started to yaw.

Suter was fighting for control. He did not see Redjacket as he came running from the second house: was otherwise engaged.

Redjacket’s AK47 delivered its full magazine of thirty rounds at the cab as it passed. By now Suter had changed up into third gear. He had reached a speed of over fifty miles an hour. Three or four bullets shattered the nearside window and the screen, showering him with yet more glass: but the Kalashnikov had aimed too quickly and too high, missing its target, and now, in over-compensation, sent the rest of its shots too low, straight into the transmission under the seat.

Suter managed to punch a hole in the white fog of the windscreen. At every moment he was convinced he would be hit, that the lorry would lose the road, strike the kerb, overturn, burst into flames. He was waiting for the second Kalashnikov to start up, for the L85 to reload. For several seconds now, acrid smoke had been gushing up through the floor. He could smell burning oil and rubber. There was an especially loud, ominous-sounding bang, and the

gearbox added its own howl of agony to the lorry's cacophony of mechanical despair.

The gear lever was jammed solid. Depressing the clutch, he found he was stuck in third. He brought the engine speed down. At once the steering became easier.

In the mirror he saw the three of them a long way back, idiotically running after him in the middle of the road. The AKMS must already have been discharged. He hadn't even heard it. Maybe it had missed him altogether. He risked another glance. They were receding at a most satisfactory rate.

'Eat my dust, you numskulls!'

Suter laughed aloud, despite his bleeding left hand and the alarming judder that had just arisen in the steering column, despite the noises of damage and imminent failure rising from under his feet.

'Yeah! We got the Mercedes Benz!'

He was halfway down the hill. Below and before him he could see the tree-clad embankment of the Metropolitan Railway and its rusting bridge over the road. A few hundred yards beyond that, he knew, he would find the river and the Grand Union Canal. There he would abandon the lorry and refill his flasks before proceeding on foot into the ghostly, unfathomable maze of the town.

One more look in the mirror. He craned his head. His three little pals were no longer visible.

He had left them behind.

4

From its days as a sleepy Hertfordshire market town, twenty miles north-west of Charing Cross, Watford grew in parallel with the Industrial Revolution. Brewing, paper-making and printing brought its first factories and streets of terraced houses. The Grand Union Canal, the London and Birmingham Railway, the Bakerloo and Metropolitan lines, and the M1 and M25 motorways, each in turn, enhanced its prosperity. Close to the capital yet remaining distinct from it, the town had through the twentieth century increased steadily in population. By 2016, when the plague had struck, over a hundred thousand people had lived in the borough.

Suter had known it quite well. A married aunt had lived there, in one of the quieter and more expensive residential streets adjoining a spacious park. This incorporated a picturesquely landscaped section of the canal, abutted what had seemed to a romantically inclined ten-year-old an impossibly vast expanse of deciduous forest, and finally, further west, yielded to farmland which rolled out to Sarratt, Flaunden and the Chilterns beyond. When older, staying perhaps for a few days in the holidays, he had on occasion borrowed his uncle's Raleigh and cycled half a mile to the shops or cinemas.

He remembered without affection the town centre and its marble-floored mall, and he remembered with distaste the buildings and environs of Watford General Hospital, sited right next to the stands and floodlights of the football ground. Even through double glazing and thick concrete walls, patients on the ward could not ignore the roar of a

capacity crowd. One Saturday afternoon in January, the air saturated by obscene chants rising from the terraces, he and his parents had sat by a bed on the fifth floor and watched his uncle struggling with the final stages of bowel cancer.

The hospital had evolved on the site of the old workhouse, south of central Watford and a mile east of the place where the canal passed under the villagers' route to the town. Since Suter had chained the locks, the canal was no longer that, but a river again, tranquil, untrammelled, clean, the stately volume of its flow impeded here and there only by fallen willows or the decaying hulks of narrowboats, sunk at their moorings or grounded adrift.

Cresting the bridge, Suter turned off the ignition and let the clutch effect a halt: the airbrakes had failed. The lorry had no more than a few yards of life left in it. When he jumped down from the cab and saw the extent of the damage, he was surprised it had even got this far.

Having helped himself from a case of provisions he had noticed in the back, he dropped the rest over the parapet and made a passage down the embankment to wash his bleeding knuckles and refill his flasks. Two minutes later he regained the roadway and set out at the fastest trot he could manage.

On his journey to this point from Shanley, Suter had guessed – correctly, as it now turned out – that the villagers' route would eschew the main highway into Watford and follow instead a minor road which, branching off to the right of a roundabout just beyond the canal, climbed gently but steadily towards the south-western part of the town. By taking this minor road, the route was made to pass among many more houses. The side-streets held yet

more: long rows of sturdy, two-floored workmen's houses dating from the final quarter of the nineteenth century. After the widespread looting of the plague, such houses became the best remaining source of tinned food, timber, furniture, clothing, of almost everything needful. As Suter urged himself uphill, he saw that most of the houses on either side had been forced. Not a few had succumbed to rain and fungi, and some extensive sections of roof, spanning as many as ten or fifteen individual dwellings, had long since fallen in.

Houses could not provide much in the way of medical supplies: he had also guessed that the people of Shanley would have kept a way open to the hospital. At the second crossroads the route turned in that direction, to the right. The other three roads had been abandoned, to be throttled by the succession of plant growth, burying the tarmac and kerbs and footways and overgrowing the rusting rows of particoloured cars.

All that, the urban environment everywhere, once so obsessively controlled and squabbled over, had become wilderness again. Like the clean-slate landscapes left by volcanoes or glaciers, it offered novel opportunities to plants and animals. He did not doubt that certain species of spiders had learned to exploit rotting vehicles, for example, or that hydrocarbon residues in dead sumps and tanks and bearings were the substrate of new strains of fungi and bacteria. Rubber, putty, paper, electronic circuit boards, bicycle saddles, gas stoves and street lamps, telephones: everything, everywhere, was home or food to something alive. Over the whole face of the planet the work was inexorably proceeding. Earth had given the order. The

mark of *Homo sapiens*, her fascinating but unsustainable blunder, was to be effaced.

The grey bulk of the hospital buildings approached on his right hand side. He drew level with the main turning into the grounds. A narrow way threaded among the higgledy-piggledy clutter of disintegrating vehicles. Some had been bumped, dragged or rolled aside. Several lay on their sides or roofs. The car-parks, both open-air and subterranean, he knew, would be crammed to capacity. In the early stages of the plague, hospitals had been besieged. Later they had been avoided. At the end they had again been the scene of chaotic activity.

Suter passed on, indifferent to the tracks he was leaving, making for the football ground.

'Wilier than them. More advanced. O yes.'

Look at the mess they had made of Baldwin's Lane.

He grinned as he thought of their hand-picked provisions, hitting the canal with a splash. They couldn't just go back to Bex without the lorry, reporting failure. They had to follow and finish the job.

Thanks to the lorry, he'd had a headstart of about three-quarters of a mile. At five miles an hour, say nine minutes. He'd spent three at the bridge. If his pursuers were more than six minutes behind, he was doing well. It was even possible, on the way up the hill, where the road was straight, that they had glimpsed him in the distance.

They were armed with assault rifles and, presumably, still had some hand-grenades, together with whatever else was in those nasty green haversacks. In open space even a pump-action 870 was no use against assault rifles. Inside a conventional building it was not much better against hand-grenades. Suter needed an arena of his choosing where he

could dictate events, a compromise between an open and an enclosed space.

He had never been to a football match, had found the game, like most sports, tedious, a needless demonstration of the futility of all human activity, but he remembered enough about it to know that money had been its wellspring. Unless you paid for a ticket, you didn't get to see the match. The tickets cost plenty. This explained the exaggerated height of the wall, in fawn brick, that divided the ground from the roadway. At intervals, wide and uncompromisingly solid doors, still bearing peeling yellow paint, no doubt concealed the turnstiles. Suter had hoped to find at least one of these doors open: with growing dismay he realised they were all locked. He came to the corner where the wall, in turning, adjoined a pair of high yellow gates and then the precinct of a petrol station. The gates too were locked.

He looked at his watch before hurrying across the forecourt and through the crazily twisted door of the station shop. The shelves had been stripped; the floor was ankle-deep in soggy rubbish. He removed his backpack and set it down in a dark, confined space behind the rotting desk in the back office.

'Damn,' he said, on seeing the torch protruding from one of the pockets. 'I might have needed that.'

'Too bad.'

If they found the pack, also too bad.

He thrust a flask of water into his jacket pocket and, unencumbered now except by his shotgun and bandolier, returned to the main shop, where a rear door, hanging open, gave access to a squalid yard. To the left, the yard lay open. Straight ahead, it was bounded by the back of

another building. To the right, a close-boarded fence rose to a height of nine or ten feet and was topped by loose curls of barbed wire.

By getting up on an oil drum and thence on the curved lid of a dumpster, he was able to look over the fence and down into a roadway behind the yellow gates. This, bordered on its far side by a tall, corrugated iron fence, ran along the north-eastern boundary of the ground and was probably the way most of the spectators would have come and gone. Behind the iron fence he could see the rear of the covered stands, rising to a height of perhaps forty feet.

He climbed down from the dumpster and checked his watch again.

'Tick tock.'

'Hickory Dock.'

Without regular maintenance the close-boarded fence had fared badly. As he set about it, Suter noted that its erectors had used the wrong sort of nails. They had rusted, shrinking in the process. A few more sturdy kicks put paid to enough of the panel to let him through. He emerged in the roadway just behind the gates.

'The mouse ran up the clock.'

For the next sixty yards there was no break in the iron fence. He trotted beside it until he came to a wide flight of three concrete steps. These had led the faithful up into a broad propylaeum fitted with three turnstiles, all of which had seized. But the service door on the left yielded to his shoulder: he passed through the remains of a ticket office, out through another door, and found himself at last looking out over the ground.

It was enclosed on three sides by stands, two of which had deeply overhanging, cantilevered roofs. Just as he had

expected, the pitch itself, unmown, unrollered, unhallowed, had been seeded by bramble, birch and blackthorn, with here and there sycamore, lime, even horse chestnut, and was a dense tangle of twenty-foot scrub well on its way to becoming woodland.

He moved down the ramp to the clinkered surface of the perimeter track. This had been more resistant to invasion, and was but sparsely covered with brambles and buddleia, allowing him to pass fairly freely. He turned south-eastwards, to his left, and resumed his trot. He wanted to get round to the opposite side of the pitch. The players' tunnel would lead to the dressing rooms and the labyrinth of offices and whatnot where the day-to-day management of the club would have been conducted. The tunnel, the showers, the stairways, the directors' box, the corridors, the tiered seating: all these would provide him with opportunities to separate his pursuers and deploy the shotgun to maximum effect. On the way, he wanted to check the south-eastern side of the ground in case he needed to make an emergency exit.

He came to the corner and turned right, parallel to the goal-line. Above him and to his left rose a terrace of open-air seating, backed by iron fencing and sectioned off by crowd screens. Two of the five crush-gates were standing ajar. By the time he reached the goalposts he saw that part of the rear fence some way further along, next to the hospital grounds, had blown or been broken down. Nothing was visible in the gap but bright noonday sky. There might be a way out on the other side – or a sheer drop.

As he debated with himself whether he had time to go and look, Suter felt a familiar chill tightening his neck and

shoulders. It was as if he had developed an eye in the back of his head, an eye whose vision was attuned to one thing only, to one stimulus: to the cunning, confident, following lope, to the detection and pursuit of his vulnerable human reek, to his inclusion in an age-old conspiracy of cooperation and intent.

He jerked his head round.

'Oh, no.'

'Not now.'

More proof of God's malevolence. Just as if he needed it.

Seeing his face, perhaps, the dog-pack hesitated and came to an indecisive halt, twenty yards behind him on the clinker.

There were seven altogether, in their loose, silent group, unmistakably bound together by long experience of hunting success. More might be hiding in the vegetation of the pitch. Yet more might be approaching in the other direction.

The leading animal had much of the rottweiler about it, though all were mongrels, and about the same size. Two resembled Alsatians, another looked like a Labrador, another a lurcher, another a large terrier, the last a Doberman. As time passed, the various breeds were reverting more and more to type. Soon they would all look the same. Something could be inferred about the Germans by the selection of breeds that had survived and come to dominate: rottweiler, Doberman Pinscher, German shepherd. And about the Americans, who, Suter believed, had perfected that most bloodthirsty monster, the bandog.

Dogs had acquired a taste for human bodies, dead or alive, in the first few weeks of the pestilence. They had also eaten whatever livestock had remained. Then they had

started on the rats. Then, Suter supposed, they had eaten each other, until, now, only the big ones were left.

As the numbers of rats had dwindled, so too had the dog population. There was today roughly one pack, averaging about twelve animals, to every twenty square miles. Their diet consisted mainly of the deer and rabbits that had thrived in the absence of human interference, but they would eat anything else they found, including carrion. They had assumed the crown of top mammalian predator, utterly ruthless, usually unstoppable except with a repeating shotgun. For this reason, Suter had to carry one every time he ventured out of doors, even to visit his latrine. He favoured the Remington 870 for its reliability and kept several spares. Disdaining oil, he lubricated the lock with gin, which imparted a crisp, foolproof action, no matter how rapidly he needed to fire.

Although they had momentarily interrupted their advance, the dogs had by no means remained stationary and, under the authoritative leadership of the rottweiler, were beginning to increase the rate at which they were inching forward. By now they were no more than ten yards away and had spread out to either side, widening their front in a classic display of canine tactics.

The rottweiler began to growl.

They may well have heard him kicking down the fence and followed him into the ground. In that case, he was looking at the whole pack. If not, he was up the creek, and no mistake. In a razor-wire canoe. *Ohne ein Paddel.*

His three friends from Shanley might already have discovered the freshly broken fence and deduced its meaning. At any moment one or more of them might appear along the touchline. But, however much he wanted

to look, he couldn't afford to take his eyes away from the dogs, even for an instant.

'OK,' he said. 'Who wants it first?'

Sometimes, if rarely, a simple face-off sufficed. The trick was to think ugly thoughts and engage the gaze of the dominant beast. Suter was staring at the rottweiler's face with all the aggression he could muster. The brown irides were dung-coloured, the pupils slanted and alien. Its nose glistened. Saliva had foamed at the corners of its mouth. He focused again on the eyes, filling his mind with images of previous encounters that had ended in extreme violence, of oncoming dogs being mangled, mutilated, left trying to crawl away.

The growling ceased. A bad sign. Very bad. If it started again he might have a chance. If, after that, he could make any of them bark, he might be able to avert his eyes, show submission, and get away without the fireworks.

'You,' he said, directing all his attention into that inscrutable brain. 'Yes, you. If you give me grief I'll blast you first.' It did not take much imagination to picture and, with luck, transmit, the effect a close-range, twelve-bore charge would have on that crumpled face: he had lost count of the dogs he had been compelled to shoot in the past twelve years. 'That's right. I'm talking to you. You're up against an adult male human. A big one. Me. I'm the most dangerous animal you're ever going to meet. That's because I'm intelligent and you aren't. I've got a shotgun and you're so stupid you don't even know what that is, you cretinous mutt.'

Suter did not look away from the animal's eyes.

The rottweiler, uttering a further puzzled, almost inward growl, stopped moving forward. The others took its cue.

They knew something was amiss, but could not understand why their leader had not simply sprung at the prey. After all, it was alone and helpless. They were seven, and they always got what they wanted.

This was the critical moment. If Suter tried to retreat, if he revealed the slightest weakness, he knew they would attack.

To his left, somewhere beyond the scrub, from the direction of the vestibule he had entered just now, he heard a shout.

'Steve! Any sign?'

Behind him, from the south-western stand, came the reply. 'No!'

By sheer chance, Steve had chosen to circle the pitch anti-clockwise.

'Get some height, Steve!'

The urge to look, to take his eyes away, was overwhelming. But he didn't. Nor, apparently, were the dogs distracted by the shouting, which made it, in the instant when he realised what was about to happen, all the more inexplicable and unfair that the rottweiler, jaws opening, had already bunched its muscles and sprinted into the charge, drawing the others along in a widening formation so that, whatever he did, one or more could jump him from behind.

If he fired, he would give away his position with almost pinpoint accuracy. Steve and his companions could rake the goal-line and be sure to cut him in half.

It took the rottweiler no more than two seconds to come within fifteen feet, the range of certain fatality. Suter thumbed the safety catch and blew away its left haunch, stopping its onward rush and throwing the corpse

sideways. The next booming explosion destroyed the Labrador to the right, spraying flesh, then an Alsatian, the terrier, the second Alsatian. Shooting from the hip, absorbing the recoil, Suter was aiming by reflex, reacting and working the pump so quickly that he scarcely knew what he was doing. The Doberman took two shots before he'd blown it to bits. One of them had also mortally wounded the lurcher. It fell to the ground, writhing, and lay still.

As, his ears ringing, he started to replenish the Remington's magazine, he heard the echoes of the outrageous noise he had made returning to him from the vast caverns of the stands, crossing and recrossing the ground, rising above the skeletal pylons of the floodlights, dying away towards the hospital. He had expected an immediate sweep from the assault rifles. When it didn't come, he saw that his shots would have made the three men take cover, albeit briefly, and the echo would have disguised, to some extent, their source. He had unwittingly bought himself a few seconds of advantage.

How to use them?

He could make for that gap in the fence. The L85 was equipped with a telescopic sight. To minimise his exposure to it, he would have to use the cover of the scrub to get as far along the goal-line as the next corner before climbing the terrace. From that angle, the direction of the light would also be in his favour.

Alternatively, he could crawl into the scrub and from there, if God was on his side, get into position to do battle as planned.

He took a final glance at the dogs' bodies, hideously becrimsoned, broken, lumps and scraps of heated, oozing

flesh, fur, bones and teeth strewn in outlandish attitudes across the clinker.

If God had a side, Suter had never been on it.

He began sprinting along the goal-line.

Before he reached the next corner, he heard unintelligible shouting behind him and to his right. They were on both sides of the ground still. Steve, the one in the south-western stand, had obviously not yet got sufficient elevation to see him. They were not going to waste ammunition on a speculative sweep.

Suter reached the corner. Without pausing, he turned to his left, almost directly into the sun, and passed through the open crush-gate. Of necessity he would have to follow the gangway between the seats. As he took his first step up, the expanse of his back felt unnaturally broad. His head, too, felt as if it were there for no purpose but to take an impact, a 5.56 millimetre NATO round arriving at six hundred metres a second. He imagined Steve's grip tightening on the L85, pulling it harder into his shoulder as Suter's form rose in the sights and crystallised at the centre of the crosshairs.

'The clock struck one,' he said, only half crazily, for the hour really was nearly that: the sun, on the shoulder of its zenith, glaring into their eyes, was his only friend in all creation. It was inviting him to rise, to follow, to come closer, Icarus in camouflage. He heard more unintelligible shouting, disregarded it and, bending low, began making his way to the top.

The bullet arrived in silence. With a plangent, tangential ping it struck the rim of a seat-back a few yards to his left and spun viciously away, bringing in its wake the sound of its report, and the next, and the next. The chatter followed

Suter diagonally, up two and three levels of terracing, chewing out a course of fragments from the seating which ended by spraying his head and shoulders. A shard of perished plastic stung his right cheek as he turned back on himself, dodging down again and out of the line of fire, which continued across to his right for several feet more. And stopped.

Thirty rounds in an Enfield's box. At most. Steve would have to reload.

Suter started again. The gap in the fence drew closer.

Behind him and to the left, shooting started from the other side of the pitch, a more ponderous, old-fashioned, lethal noise: the Kalashnikovs, maybe both of them.

Now, surely, he would be killed.

A row of loud, bright holes raked the metal fence from left to right, ending in space, ending where Suter would have been an instant later had not some deep instinct made him dive to the ground. His knees took the brunt; his hands took the rest. His shotgun clattered to a halt. He rolled on his side and looked back, above the regular rows of seats and across the pitch. A muzzle flashed from the stands there, preceding by half a second the next train of bullets to blast its way towards him.

When he opened his eyes he found himself whole. In grabbing his shotgun and rising to a crouching position he saw new movement lower down, near the pitch.

Dogs. More dogs. Coming up the gangway. After him.

There were three or four, perhaps even five. He did not have a chance to count them, because by now he was teetering at the very edge of the concrete slab where the fence had fallen away. It had reclined at an angle, a rusty, corrugated chute leading down to and partly overgrown by

a mass of stout brambles, beyond which ill-seen scrub covered the face of a low embankment abutting the hospital grounds.

Suter hit the fence with a crash. Half sliding, half bouncing from the force of his fall, clutching his Remington as life itself, he was propelled boot-first into the brambles.

5

Tangled in the brambles' claws, Suter looked upwards and back to see the dogs arriving at the edge of the slab. Three were joined by a fourth, peering down at him and sampling the scent of blood, crushed blackberries, high explosive, fear and sweat rising from their would-be prey. In that moment it seemed as though they would jump after him.

Ripping his hand free, twisting at the waist, he raised the shotgun to his shoulder and fired. The pellets may have blinded a couple of the dogs, or done worse. At any rate they all disappeared.

Even trying to get to his feet caused the hooks and prickles to strengthen their grasp, snagging and tearing at his skin. Spotted lines of new blood covered his hands. His right foot was being supported by something unstable, an old paint-can or an object of that sort, which collapsed without warning and pitched him forward. He shut his eyes as tightly as he could, using his arm and the shotgun to ward away the brambles directly in front of his face.

'God damn it!'

Opening his eyes, he rejected the idea of trying to roll his way out. It wouldn't work. He'd just get in deeper. Nothing for it but to tread them down, tear them aside, cut the thickest with his knife. However sharp the brambles, whatever layers of his skin and clothing they tore, he'd be dead if he didn't get out of here this instant. He wondered if both sets of his pursuers, men and dogs, would meet. How long would it take the three men to run from the stands and reach the top of the terrace?

Terror again threatened to overwhelm him as he made his way to the edge of the bramble clump. Now, at mid-October, the plants still had a few ripe berries, each one a complex mathematical arrangement of domed druplets, the clusters here and there left incomplete, a bare receptacle showing where a thrush or whitethroat had plucked the fruit. In his former life, Suter's private studies of lowland English botany had encompassed a fair knowledge of the various species, hybrids and apomicts of the *Rubus fruticosus* aggregate. He thought he had known the plant through and through, the dark, rosaceous perfume of the leaves, the profile, angled or terete, of the stems, the tenuous shades of pink and paler pink investing the petals. He had studied it on the chalk, on the Lower Greensand, on the London Clay. He had picked and eaten the berries straight from the bramble-patch, or taken them home to stew with apples or store in jars. He had come closer to this organism than most of the people who had ever lived, yet now he found he knew nothing about it except its silent, God-like malevolence. Though he professed not to believe in God, he was quick to utter his name: where else had been directed the one-sided conversation he had been babbling these twelve years past? Silence, immanent

silence, had been the only reply. In struggling to get free of the brambles, he hated them, just as he had come to hate the universal silence of which they formed a part.

Half mad with fear and pain, he saw that God and the bramble were the same. A single long stem, the colour of congealed blood, when encircled and plaited, would make a perfect crown of thorns.

Suter heard shooting from the other side. The remaining dogs were being dealt with. And then he found himself stumbling through the space between tightly packed rows of cars, across a moss-covered concrete apron. He had reached the hospital grounds. His hands, his face, his lips, were bleeding profusely. His groin and the right leg of his trousers were drenched, but not, as he had at first supposed, with blood. The cap of his water-flask had merely burst open in the fall.

He clapped a confirming hand to his waist. The holster and its Browning were still there. But his knife, his trusted friend, had gone from his calf. He remembered wielding it, cutting branches, frenziedly slashing. He should have returned it to its sheath, but he hadn't, and he would never see it again.

Still, he had his shotgun and the bandolier full of shells. The Dialyt was inside his jacket. Round his neck, under his shirt, on a length of white cord, hung his army compass.

Ahead loomed a huge concrete building, six or seven storeys high, adjoined by a brick-built extension that might have housed a generator. Beyond lay more buildings, the silvery column of a furnace chimney, walkways, a flight of ivy-covered steps. Entering shade, he passed under a concrete overhang and ran along a broad pavement beside a row of grimed windows, some smashed by looters or

rioting relatives, some whole, with or without venetian blinds. Through the intact window of one office he glimpsed a dusty but bizarrely ordered desk, the back of a computer monitor, a curled calendar, two filing-cabinets against the wall beyond.

Two low, paved steps led up to the threshold of a pair of glass-and-timber doors. All four panes of the wire-reinforced glass had been knocked in. The right-hand door opened, but with difficulty, since it had to push aside an arc of thick leaf-mould.

Suter reached under his shirt for the compass and started along the corridor.

* * *

Sitting on the floor with his back to the bed, forearms resting on his raised knees, Seumas smoked a cigarette while watching Bex eat lunch. Seumas had carried the meal on a gilt tray, up from the kitchen for the head man's daughter to taste. Mostly Bex took his meals in the dining hall, holding court with the others, but sometimes he ate alone, or just with the woman, in this fusty, old-fashioned room.

The furniture and tapestries looked really old, contemporary with the house. According to a history of the Manor House that Bex had found downstairs, Queen Elizabeth I had slept here several times, in this very bed. Bex had told him all about her.

The windows overlooked the gardens. A Turkish hazel, planted by the fourth Earl in 1707, stood in the middle of the lawn below. Seumas thought the room creepy. Once it had been the head man's. Now, for the time being, it belonged to Bex; was the scene of their nocturnal trysts.

They had spent at least part of three of the last five nights together. On the second night, Seumas had relived the rapture of the first. But on the third, last night, it had been different.

As he watched Bex plying his knife and fork, Seumas wondered if he could be mistaken. Did he really love Bex? He had never been in love before and didn't know the signs. Surely it was authentic, what he imagined he felt.

At the divination yesterday afternoon, Bex had performed what he called a hepatoscopy. This meant examining the liver of some dead person involved in the question being posed. Muriel's liver had borne signs that the creature she had met was not human, but an angel. Conducting the ritual of taking meat, Bex and the others had then eaten the raw organ as the prelude to the most arcane and terrifying ceremony of all. From his copy of *The Secret of Gilgamesh*, inscribed in Greek by himself in lamb's blood on vellum, Bex had recited the Ninth and Thirteenth Canticles. These two canticles embodied the ancient Enchantment of Theurgy, the most puissant spell of Gilgamesh, conveyed to him in the Abyssal Kingdom by the necromancer, Azdoth.

During Bex's utterance of the Thirteenth Canticle, all but one of the flames in the Long Room had suddenly gone out, the air had turned freezing cold, and the crimson shadow of Satan had appeared on the wall. Muriel had risen from the dead and, displacing Satan, had taken possession of Bex's soul. Bex had collapsed on the floor. When he had come round, he had been able to report that he had relived her meeting with the angel.

Specifically, Muriel had identified him as St Michael the Archangel, patron saint of Shanley. He had been sent down

from the Third Circle by God, first to avenge Martin and the others, and secondly to join battle with the New Order. The angel had been given earthly form and could only be defeated by earthly means.

Before the ceremony Seumas had heard mutinous voices half-heartedly raised against the Master. But now, if that was possible, his standing with the others was greater than it had been before. They believed absolutely that the gunman was supernatural, that he had been deputised by God, and that he was hence capable of penetrating the shield of invulnerability conferred on the New Order by Satan. In vowing to kill St Michael, Bex had triumphantly confirmed his position. He was everything to Seumas: priest, visionary, hero, father.

Seumas could not remember his own father and was unsure whether he had even had one, except as an abstraction, a single inconvenient spermatozoon. His mother had reared him and his older half-brother and half-sister in a council flat, high up in a block somewhere. Harlow, perhaps – he knew it had been to the north and east of London. Her face had become vague. Blonde hair, possibly dyed, rather frizzy; an irritable voice, always complaining; a tendency to fat, exponentially accelerated and then cut short by her swollen-faced death.

The six-year-old Seumas had been found wandering the streets, crying and alone. He remembered a large black lady, driving a big car and searching for survivors. She had taken him to a village in the country, to be received with much rejoicing.

There had been about sixty people at Chilton. Looking back, Seumas realised they had been completely mad. Their rituals had involved making vast grids of braziers on the

ground. Until Bex had told him otherwise, Seumas had believed that the Grey Beings of Fornax-5 had induced the plague to cleanse the Earth of the unworthy. Gigantic spaceships, pulsing light, had descended to evacuate the Purified, but by some incomprehensible oversight the occupants of Chilton had been left behind.

Life there had not been happy. He had never been able to rid himself of the idea that there had been something wrong with the Caller and his consort, who had rarely spent a night without at least one little girl in their bed.

Bex and six others, including Danzo and Pinch, had arrived there last June. Having ingratiated themselves with the Caller, and having learned that Seumas and Redmond – the Filthy Irish, as they were known – were at odds with the rest of the village, they had shot everyone else with two sub-machine guns, set fire to the place, and moved on towards Essendon. On the day when Bex had thus set him free, Seumas had fallen in love: not just with him, but with the glamour of everything he said and did. Yes. He was sure. He loved him.

Bex looked down from the table. 'This is pretty good,' he said. 'Who cooked it? Stolly?'

'Coco.'

Bex glanced at Helen, who was seated in the armchair by the window.

'I like trout, dearest.'

At the unexpected word, her eyes briefly but without interest searched Bex's face before she again looked away.

'Their dorsal spots blend so charmingly with the pebbly bottom of the brook. A trout's back is just the same colour as that browny-green stuff that clings to the stones. Did you ever stand on a bridge and watch the trout, dearest?'

Bex waited for her to answer. When she remained silent, he politely went on speaking. 'I do like the way he weaves with the current. Very fishy. One moment you see him, the next he's just a bit of turbulence. Then he reappears. You must have seen it, living next to the river as you do.'

'No.'

'That's a pity, dearest. You are my dearest, aren't you, Helen?'

'If you say so.'

'Hear that, Seumas? She's my dearest.'

Seumas was not sure how to respond. He had recognised the beginnings of one of Bex's games. The rules were made up as he went along. The object of the game was always to demonstrate the dullness of the victim: in this case, Helen, whose lurid religiosity Bex found both offensive and laughable. Play took place in the stadium of his imagination, where, revelling in his own intelligence, he could show off his repertoire.

'Do you think she's pretty?'

'Never thought about it,' Seumas said, although, in truth, he had been unable to help admiring her. She was not exactly beautiful, especially now that Bex had had her hair cut short, 'like a boy's', as he had informed Seumas. Whatever it was she had, it seemed to come from within. Sitting there, the sunlight falling across her skirt to the floor, she appeared even more self-contained, as though she had retreated yet further into herself. Seumas had conversed with her only once or twice. He liked her soft voice, her brown eyes.

'My friend here is a homosexual, Helen, did you know?'

The bewildering onrush of shame did not overtake Seumas for several seconds. He knew he must have

misheard: yet he felt his cheeks turn crimson, so the words must have been spoken. He stared at Bex, unable to comprehend the magnitude of his indiscretion, of his betrayal.

'Yes,' Bex continued, smoothly, in a matter-of-fact tone. 'Seumas likes nothing better than a nice length of cock. In that very bed, actually. Last night, for example, he sneaked in here unbeknownst and let me plug him up to the hilt.'

If he was telling Helen, why shouldn't he tell everyone else? Pinch, Stolly, Danzo? Or was Helen about to die? Was this Bex's way of telling him they were going to pack up and leave the village?

'Tell her it's true,' Bex told him, setting aside his plate and contemplating the chocolate mousse. 'I love making her jealous.'

Seumas no longer understood what Bex was doing. He wanted to speak but was unable to formulate any words, still less utter them. He felt as if he were falling into a great void. In one swift movement he had been expertly opened up, his vital organs exposed to view, and pushed over the brink.

Bex said, '"Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination". Leviticus eighteen, verse twenty-two. Right, Helen?'

In her eyes Seumas saw something new and disturbing, akin to resistance.

'Do I know my scriptures, or what? I must say that Levitical law can seem a bit abstruse. I understand it's mainly a matter of desert hygiene.'

She was regarding him levelly.

'Those old fellows, they knew their hygiene. Take buggery. The only problem, as everyone knows, is the

fudge you get on your plunger. All very well in the heat of pleasure. You don't mind it then. But afterwards, when the bird's back in his nest, so to say, you get this pong. Reminding you what a hopeless sinner you've been.' He smiled. 'Unless you give it a thorough scrubbing. Which, this morning, because it was so delightfully sore, I signally failed to do.' He opened his legs and looked down at his lap. 'Do come and have a sniff, dearest. Savour the aroma. Even better, you can have your pudding while I eat mine.' Holding her gaze, he beckoned with his forefinger, which he then extended diagonally and slid into his mouth.

She did not move.

'Come here.'

'I will not.'

'Ah! At last!' He smirked at Seumas.

Seumas's own pain was momentarily forgotten. Helen had defied Bex. The last person to do that had been her husband.

Even more remarkable was the stillness that had stolen across her body. Her eyes, normally so lacklustre and evasive, were becoming increasingly fiery: they had arrogated to themselves all the energy she had once expended on yielding to Bex's will.

'If you're going to shoot me, do it now.'

'Shoot you? Shoot you? Why should I do such a horrid thing?' He turned to appeal to Seumas. 'Seumas, have you ever known me to shoot anybody?'

Seumas saw yet again the head man's execution. He would never forget it. Most of all, he remembered the purity of the pitilessness Bex had displayed. Dispassionate, sleek, streamlined cruelty, shorn of all impediment: this was the key to the Golden Dawn. To protect himself, God

had created guilt. Without guilt, without all the emotional jumble with which he had surrounded human beings, God had no defence against the thrust of that long, rigorous blade. Fashioned in the hard steel of inhumanity, cruelty alone could cut through all the imposture and reveal God for the fraud he was.

A glimmer of understanding came to Seumas's rescue.

'No, Bex,' he said. 'I don't think I ever have.'

'There, Helen,' Bex said. 'See? What can you be thinking of?'

Seumas was struggling to keep up. It seemed that, by undermining her beliefs and making the most disgusting suggestion he could, Bex had manoeuvred her into defying him. By mocking her defiance, he had shown that it had been of his making, not hers, and, as the final humiliation, welding together her faith, its lack of efficacy, and her present situation, he had forced her to relive, as vividly as possible, the scene of her father's death.

Despite himself, part of Seumas found her impressive. She had been goaded far beyond the point of endurance and still she had not lost her composure. Seumas looked at Bex, trying to catch his eye.

Bex avoided him. Had their eyes met, he might have burst out laughing and that would have ruined everything. 'And how dare you suggest that Seumas is bent? He's as normal as you or me. As me, anyway, knowing some of the things you like getting up to.' Bex shook his head in disapproval and dipped his spoon into the chocolate mousse.

Seumas was watching her face closely, eager to detect a sign of weakness: if not a teardrop, then at least a crack in her mask of piety.

‘God forgive you,’ she said, at last.

A subtle, triumphant smile forming on his lips, Bex licked his spoon and again dipped it slowly into the mousse.

6

Steve proceeded beside the wall under the overhang. He stopped as he came to each of the windows, his back pressed to the brickwork, and, with a darting motion of his head, looked round the edge of the frame before crouching down and moving on to the next. As far as he could tell, the angel and his shotgun were not in any of the rooms.

He passed the final window and came to the doorway.

A long corridor, receding into gloom. No one there either.

With his left hand, Steve beckoned to Carl. Carl left the shelter of the corner, crouched down below sill height and ran the length of the wall. When he joined Steve, he too stood upright, his AKMS braced across his chest.

Gil now left the corner and caught up with Carl.

Steve bent down and extended a forefinger to the lower of the two steps. A small drop of blood there, minutely splashed on its circumference, still felt liquid to his touch. He showed his fingertip to the others, then wiped it on his trousers.

Carl looked impressed. ‘You said he’d go in this door.’

‘How long ago?’ Gil whispered.

‘Few minutes.’

They had been delayed by the dogs, by the need to find a way round the brambles, and by the possibility that he might be lying in wait, perhaps behind one of the windows. That's what Steve would have done himself: he'd have fired through a venetian blind and got at least one of his enemies like that.

Steve peeped round the doorframe again. He wondered where the blood had come from. Just the brambles? Or had he been hit?

'He could be anywhere inside,' Steve told the others.

'It's a hospital, right?' Carl said. 'If we go in we might catch something.'

'You ain't going to catch nothing.'

Steve could not prevent himself from shaking his head. Why Bex had lumbered him with these two morons he would never know. Especially Gil. He had been getting on Steve's nerves ever since they had left Shanley. It had been Gil's fault that they had missed the angel back there, at the house where he had spent the night. Gil's, and Carl's.

'Plague's over and done with. Believe me, you won't catch nothing.'

'So what we going to do?' Carl said.

'How many bangers you got left?'

'One.'

'Gil, you still got all yours?'

Gil opened the flap of his haversack. There, on top, like the tessellated eggs of some small, metal dinosaur, rested a clutch of three lever-action grenades.

'Giss one,' Steve said, and slipped it into his jacket pocket.

'We could always set the fuckin' place on fire,' Carl said.

'Too many exits. 'Sides, it'd take too long.'

Whatever else they did, they would have to go in after him. Steve did not welcome the idea. He thought for a moment longer. 'We got to split up. I'll follow the blood. I reckon he'll go in deep as he can, into darkness.' He reached into his haversack and made sure of the night sight. 'You two keep to daylight. Don't take no risks. He's a dodgy bastard. Try to trap him. Get him into a small room and use a banger. Carl, you work left. Gil, work right. And for fuck's sake don't shoot each other. Or me. Especially me. Understood?'

'Sure, Steve.'

Steve was issuing orders with all the authority conferred on him by Bex himself. 'He might get out while we're inside. But I don't think so. He wants us off his case. That's why he led us into the football ground. Thing is, he didn't plan for no dogs.'

In the space of a few seconds the angel had turned the main pack into so much mincemeat. There had been seven consecutive reports from his shotgun, which meant the shotgun had a seven-shell magazine. Because the angel had abandoned his sniping rifle yesterday, and because he had not tried any shooting before stealing the lorry, Steve had already surmised that he was probably armed with nothing more than that: a pump-action shotgun. Wherever he kept his cache of arms, it was nowhere on the route from Shanley to here. Maybe he kept them in heaven.

'I'll go in first,' Steve said. 'You two count to a hundred, then follow.' Gil looked blank. Steve remembered that he couldn't count beyond ten. But Carl could. 'Don't forget,' Steve went on, pointing at them alternately, 'you right, you left. Give it about two hours, tops. We'll meet back here. If

you score, make sure he's dead before you get your blade to him.'

Bex had told them to bring back the head.

'All right?' Steve said.

Gil nodded.

'See you later, then,' Carl said.

'Yeah. Start counting.'

The business of giving orders, of being decisive, had given Steve a brief respite. However inadequate the other two might be, at least when he was talking to them, when they were depending on him for guidance, he was no longer alone with his thoughts. But as he started along the corridor, leaving them behind, he immediately re-entered the mental state he had occupied ever since Bex had handed him this mission. Yesterday evening, when they had been forced to retrace their steps to Shanley, he had hoped that Bex might have called the whole thing off. No such luck.

Even as he checked the first room he came to, Steve was debating with himself whether he should just forget it all. Forget this pesky old twat, about whom he cared nothing. Forget Carl and Gil. Forget Bex and the New Order of the Golden Dawn. He could function on his own. Eventually he might find another settlement somewhere. Persuade them to take him in. Become a good boy. Spend the rest of his days weeding cabbages.

What cabbages?

There were no cabbages. He might wander for ever before encountering another village like Shanley, where the people were basically all right. The alternative was the sort of place like Pinstead, where he had been raised. No way would he ever go back anywhere like that.

‘No way,’ he whispered.

He was stuck with Bex. He had made his choice at Pinstead. And, even though he had never really bought into that Golden Dawn shit, the exhilaration, the freedom, were hard to resist.

Yesterday night, on his return to Shanley, the others had told Steve about Bex raising Muriel from the dead. It was the scariest ceremony the Order had ever performed. Steve was very sorry he had missed it, despite his suspicions that not everything at these events was as it seemed. Danzo always seemed unusually busy.

Steve knew his Bible. At Pinstead it had been forced down his throat every day. Even in the Old Testament, he could recall nothing being said about pump-action shotguns. And did angels, clad in camouflage fatigues, really hide in the bracken with state-of-the-art sniping rifles, cleanly squeezing the trigger to deliver explosive rounds, one after the other, into people’s heads and torsoes?

Whatever was going on here, Steve was determined not to get himself killed, or even hurt, for Bex’s sake.

The further he went into the building, the worse the smell became. At the end of the corridor he peered through the cloudy perspex window of one of a pair of floppy doors and found himself looking out on what must have been a waiting room. Rows of fixed seating in brown and orange plastic faced a pair of reception windows set in the partition wall on the left. Near these windows stood three vending machines. Straight ahead, the corridor resumed and widened: this had obviously provided the main access. To the right were a number of doors, some ajar or askew, torn off their hinges.

St Michael was nowhere to be seen.

Like the corridor behind him, this waiting room, in the final days, must have been used as a ward. It was lit by eight large skylights, now extremely dirty, which shed a serene, spectral glow on the human forms sprawled in various attitudes on the rows of seats. Varying amounts of mummified flesh, blackened or the colour of rotting leaves, adhered to the bones, which were further clad in the verminous remnants of clothing or blankets. Those without any such covering seemed paradoxically less naked, less immodest. Few of the corpses remained intact. Many had been completely dismembered. More bodies and parts of bodies, also ravaged by rats and dogs, lay about on the floor. Steve's eye fell on a clean-picked skull, minus jawbone, resting upside-down in the dust like a child's abandoned top.

The bodies in the corridor had been little more than scattered collections of bones. These here, however, unventilated, protected from the elements, had been better preserved, maintaining this tableau of suffering, this vision of hell.

'Jeez, what a niff,' he muttered, opening the floppy door and taking his first breath of waiting-room air. The bacterial reek of putrefaction had long ago departed from the bodies. It had become changed to something else, something that had migrated into the floor, walls and ceiling and now permeated everything equally, a foul, sweetish exhalation that had become one with the fabric of the building.

The smell was the signature of humanity. The diseased and dying people who had made their way here surely

could not have hoped for a cure. They had come only to be together.

Though he had seen plenty of bad things during and after the epidemic, Steve had escaped London before it had really taken hold. At Pinstead, as a boy of seven, he had been shielded from the worst. His imagination had never had to absorb anything like this.

The angel's trail was faintly and intermittently visible in the dust. He would be quite easy to follow, after all.

Steve thought of waiting for Carl and Gil, then decided he was safer without them. He crossed the room and entered the further corridor which, like the waiting room, was littered with human remains. In fact, the whole hospital was a charnel house, a place of the dead. The smell here was even more powerful than it had been in the waiting room.

Further on he found another drop of blood, elliptical, its long axis indicating the direction of travel. St Michael had been in a hurry, almost running where he had not been forced to avoid or step over bodies and bones. His stride-length occasionally became even greater than it had been on the road. In one place he had tripped and fallen, apparently scuffing the floor with the muzzle of his shotgun. Now and then, coming to doorways or intersecting corridors, he had stopped to consider.

Daylight dwindled, might soon be left behind. Steve reached into his haversack and brought out the night sight. Using a pair of rubber straps given him by Danzo, he fixed it between the telescope and the barrel on his Enfield.

The night sight had belonged to his quarry: Danzo had picked it up on the escarpment. The angel would know it had fallen into the hands of his enemies. Unless he had

another, he would not dare to venture into the dark for fear of being shot unseen. At the same time, since he was in the lead, darkness would provide his best defence. The oncoming torch-beam of a pursuer would make an ideal target.

Reluctantly, Steve found and tested his miniature Maglite. When the daylight eventually failed, he'd be unable to follow the trail without it.

Eighty paces on, the main corridor ended. The last direct rays of sunshine were now far behind. In the gloom ahead Steve made out the form of two lift doorways in shiny steel. Set in the wall on his left was another, wider, door, also in stainless steel. A quick flash of the beam showed this too gave access to a lift, a bigger one for trolleys and laundry baskets.

On the right rose a flight of stairs. The dust and debris on every second tread had lately been disturbed by a pair of heavy boots.

Steve shut off the torch and edged forward. When he was almost within touching distance of the left-hand banister rail, he risked a peep up the stairwell. Just enough light was filtering in from each floor to show that the stairs turned five or six times in their anti-clockwise ascent. He glimpsed a damp-stained ceiling, far above, and immediately pulled back.

'Weren't born fucking yesterday,' he breathed, and produced a grim smile, picturing the angel hiding on the stairs just above a half-landing.

At Pinstead, Steve had spent most of his days and nights in the woods with the other hunters. No one had been faster at snap-shooting teal or snipe or woodcock. No one had been more deadly in exploiting the split second of

visibility that often was all a fleeing deer allowed. Given the crass opportunities he had been presented with today, he was amazed he had not already killed the bloke they were after. It was true, what he had told Carl and Gil: their prey was a dodgy bastard. His cunning, and a streak of luck, had so far kept him alive.

Reflex action, snap speed, were nothing without foresight. From an early age Steve had been taught to observe, to read the ground, to anticipate. However lucky or cunning the quarry, it could usually be out-thought.

His assault rifle held ready, he waited at the foot of the stairs. As he listened, his right index-finger absently caressed the warm, smooth metal of the trigger. Staring sightlessly at the dimness of the floor, he inclined his head, presently moving it from the left to the right, all his attention centred on his hearing. The silence above him possessed a quality of occupation, menace. It was not the silence of an empty space. He told himself that the angel was definitely on the stairs. But between which two floors? Probably the fourth and fifth. Climbing four flights would be enough to leave the expected follower out of breath. His pulse would be elevated, his hearing less acute, his aim less precise. By then, also, it would seem obvious that his quarry had gone all the way to the top and his caution would be correspondingly reduced. Rounding the final half-landing, he would have perhaps half a second's grace before the shotgun went off. Boom.

On the way to this spot, Steve had passed a crossroads in the corridors. A little way along one of the side corridors he had noticed a pair of glass doors that opened on another, subsidiary, staircase.

He decided to go back there, moving as quickly and quietly as he could. He would take that staircase all the way to the top, then silently descend this one, catching his quarry unawares from above and behind.

Listening a moment longer, turning his plan over and over in his mind and finding it good, he heard a muffled, very distant crash, as of something being knocked over. From the direction and elevation of the noise he deduced that Gil was responsible.

'Clumsy sod,' he thought, turning away from the stairs and heading back down the corridor.

* * *

Suter heard the crash and every muscle in his body tensed. The sound may have come from a long way off, from another part of the building entirely, but it confirmed that they had followed him in.

Again he wondered whether he had adopted the right course of action. By sitting here between two floors, he had given himself at least a chance of getting in an effective first shot. The price of this stratagem was to trap himself in the stairwell. If, simultaneously, one pursuer came from above and another from below, he would be in terrible danger.

But such cooperation was unlikely. Since the hospital was so large, the three of them would have split up. His best option was to try picking them off one by one. To do that, he had had to use his trail to lure the first of his victims into place. As soon as he had disposed of the first, the nature of the game would change. The next would be much harder. The third, the survivor, would be easier, might even run away, or give up without a struggle.

Suter's calculations formed an amorphous mass of indecision, generated by the terror that had invaded and pushed all else from his mind. Only a single shred of logic remained to stop him from embracing the siren of retreat: he knew he would eventually have to face these three men. Better, safer, to do it in a place of his choice.

He was seated on the fifth step down, close to the railing, the Remington across his knees. Light was seeping into the stairwell from two broken windows on the floor above. In the past fifteen minutes of listening, he had taken in every detail of his surroundings.

Each flight of stairs comprised twelve concrete steps, faced in pinkish marble with a non-slip carborundum strip near the edge of the tread. This particular flight, between the fourth and fifth floors, was more sparsely littered with human detritus than the others, though on the half-landing below lay at least two complete skeletons, one belonging to a child of about ten. Flat brass handrails, tarnished to the patina of a garden bronze, ran down either side of the stairs. The handrail on Suter's right formed part of the metal banisters that looped all the way to the ground floor. The rail on the left was fastened to the wall with a series of brass brackets, each having a circular base fixed with four cupped screws. A marble-faced dado rose a foot or so above the staircase. The wall itself, anciently emulsioned in pale green, the minute roughness of its finish coated with dust, still bore two staggered picture-frames, grimed with neglect. The frames held the sort of images formerly displayed in the corridors and stairways of public buildings: *The Bridge at Arles* by Van Gogh filled the nearer. The other print, also a landscape view, Suter did not recognise.

These observations had served only to reinforce the hallucinatory strangeness of enforced inaction, of feeling the hardness of the step eating steadily into his backside. The stairwell was itself a place of dread, of some dimly threatened but inhuman punishment. Hospitals, schools, prisons: all were designed and built to impose the will of others unseen. In his stew of fear and doubt, Suter momentarily felt a craving to belong in an institution such as this, to be suspended here for ever in this cool, indirect light, cared for, given calming drugs, monitored, all responsibility gone. His own bed and locker and armchair would constitute home. He would need no more. To them would he be returned by kindly orderlies when he had strayed too far. Such an existence would be like an everlasting childhood. He would never have to grow up or learn to interact with his fellow men.

Fantasies of this sort had accompanied him, on and off, for the past twelve years. He had even committed some of them to his diary.

He had fantasised, too, about being visited by Helen. She might sit anxiously at his bedside while he lay semi-conscious, recovering from some glamorous accident or disease. She might be with him in the palm-filled conservatory, reclining in wicker furniture while snow fell outside, or she might accompany the invalid on his first tentative walks in the grounds, her mere presence confirming her devotion and her regret for all that had gone before.

'*Keinmal die* Helen,' he whispered. '*Keinmal!*'

He checked his watch, the back of his hand a congealing mass of bramble-tears. Seventeen minutes had passed by. Three more to go: he had determined to wait here for

exactly twenty before abandoning this plan and going in search of his enemies.

And then, from somewhere below, he heard a click, the beginnings of a slight, rolling rattle, the sort of noise a small human bone might make on a hard surface if inadvertently knocked by the toe of an ascending combat boot.

Two floors down. Maybe three.

It was working!

The beating of Suter's heart suddenly swelled to fill his thorax, his throat, his head, drowning his hearing. He edged away from the banisters, more into the middle of the step, recalculating the angle of approach. His hands were shaking as he confirmed that the safety catch was off. He raised and turned the muzzle of his shotgun.

Having left his trail on the main staircase, Suter had climbed to the top floor before making his way back to, and part way down, this other staircase. Whichever of the three had been following him, in doubling back, would not be expecting him here.

Only half heeding, much too quickly, the man rounded the bend in the stairs. Suter glimpsed a shaven head, the yellow and blue plaid jacket. He fired.

The decompacting thunder of the report, expanding to fill the stairwell and amplified by the hardness of the marble and concrete, was so loud that it hurt Suter's ears. The fist of lead shot struck the oncomer in the neck. He staggered backwards against the precursive patch of his own tissues, blood, clothing and pellets that had already been embedded in the plaster of the wall. His eyes, his brows, what remained of his face, registered pure astonishment.

The second round hit his chest, delaying gravity's progress in bringing him slithering, in a broad trail of blood, to the floor. Still breathing, his robust heart still dazedly managing to pump, he was left sitting upright like a rag doll, legs splayed, arms at his sides, head hanging forward.

He made a gurgling noise and it was over.

Suter got to his feet. He knew he should search the body. He knew he should take the haversack and the assault rifle for himself, and he knew he should do these things without delay, before the other two got here. He also knew that he should withdraw two new shells from his bandolier and replenish the magazine of his shotgun. But the shaking of his hands had become uncontrollable. It had spread into his arms, his whole body, his mind. Never before had he killed anyone with such deliberation or at such close range. The two at Shanley, the two torturing Muriel, had been bad enough, but this murder belonged to another order of magnitude.

Ever since finding that bloated corpse in the river, ever since arriving at Shanley, he had been no more than a few steps ahead of blind funk. Each episode of exertion and horror had let it come closer to his heels, and now it had overtaken him completely. He saw now, too clearly, that he had brought all this upon himself. He should never have interfered at Shanley.

No good ever came of meddling in other people's business. It had been provocative enough to give Muriel the Glock, but aiming the AW and opening fire, actually opening fire and in consequence shooting two men – that had been an act of lunacy.

He should have followed his own advice and fled. Gone home.

It wasn't too late. All he had to do was get out of the hospital in one piece and be careful about his tracks.

He had already freed the blood-stained haversack from the body. Slinging it across his own shoulder, he seized the assault rifle and started up the stairs.

7

Nylon blinds, wrecked, tattered, green with algae, lightly clacking in the breeze, were still hanging at the tall window-frames of this ward on the western side of the top floor. All three windows had been broken and the ceiling had sprung leaks. Nearly everything organic had rotted away: each rusty bedframe supported a matrix of corroded springs upon which reposed fallen equipment or broken glass, together with whole or partial skeletons. The flooring, immune to decay, was more or less covered with rubbish, such as the remains of bedside chairs and trolleys, cupboard handles and hinges, dislodged ceiling tiles and light fixtures, a smashed TV, bedpans, scattered teeth, fragments of glass and crockery, more and yet more bones. Over the years, windblown grit, leaves, twigs, feathers and bird droppings had conjoined with and bound this mass of debris into an uneven layer across which it was impossible to walk without leaving signs of passage.

Suter moved to the middle window and looked down. Shimmering rainwater filled most of the flat roof below, making a lake, dazzling in the afternoon sun.

He craned his head but could see nothing he recognised. To his right jutted another wing of the hospital. It concealed the football ground, and the road, from view.

Almost as soon as he had again reached the top of the stairs and started back the way he had come, he had realised that he must have taken a wrong turning. In trying to correct it, and without a light, he had become, in the warren of corridors, wards and offices, completely disorientated. Because of all the steel in the shell of the building, the luminous blob on his compass needle had offered no help. All he had to go on now was his map and the direction of the sunshine.

The sun felt warm on his hands. Across the rooftops of the town the land dipped, then rose towards a distant ridge of forest, mauve with haze. The trees there formed a mass like a long bank of cloud, its upper surface here and there projecting ambitious wisps and billows of overtopping foliage against the glare of the south-western sky.

Suter had grown up among contours such as these. The landscape should have had a comfortable, domestic feel, but, left untrodden for twelve years, it had slowly been resorbed into the wilderness. The woods were coalescing, becoming continuous again, like the forest of oak and lime that in prehistory had stretched from sea to sea. Only the environs of his house remained friendly: his river, his valley, the narrow paths he had forged or kept open. At Shanley he had scarcely been able to recognise the parish he had once known. That too was being resorbed. The strangers who lived there today, the fate that had overtaken them, were all part of the new order of things. Suter was the sole relic of the past. His feelings had been

shaped by civilisation. They were nothing more than an anachronistic burden.

But he could not shake off his reaction to the creature he had just killed. It clung to his mind like an incubus. His hands would not stop trembling. He lifted the binoculars anyway, his attention drawn by something half a mile or so away and somewhat to the left: a lightning-shattered church spire.

Part of the structure still hung loose. Some of the broken beams were visible, charred and as yet unaffected by rot. As if dislodged by the arrival of Suter's gaze, three starlings, perching there, jumped into the breeze and took flight.

Although he had intended to leave the hospital as he had entered, he saw now that all he really needed was another staircase, any staircase, which led to the ground floor. With suitable caution, he could then find his way outside and get away unseen.

Suter lowered the binoculars and drew back from the sill. He was about to turn when, at about ten yards' remove on the level below, he felt and heard a massive thud. The floor under his feet bulged, rising in a shock wave that instantly passed on, dissipating in all directions, and was followed by the sound of a coarse voice shouting someone's name.

'Carl! Carl! It's all right! I got him!'

A moment later Suter answered under his breath. 'I wouldn't be too sure of that, if I were you.'

'Carl!'

Could it be true? Mad and black as it seemed, there was no other explanation. The two surviving skinheads, drawn by the sound of his shotgun, had apparently converged on

one another from different parts of the building. Each, in his extremity of trepidation, in his eagerness to put an end to Suter, had allowed himself to become hyperreactive, so much so that one of them, on tracking the other down, mistaking him for their common prey, and perhaps cornering him in some unlit washroom, had, through the open doorway, rolled a grenade.

Suter stole to the end of the ward, heading for the staircase. His defeatism had vanished. It might never have existed. His intellect was again forging ahead, drawing inferences, making connections.

Once the survivor had realised he was on his own, what would he do? Leave, of course: if not altogether, then the building at least. But might he lie in wait by one of the exits, hoping to catch Suter unawares? Or might he choose to follow at a distance, waiting for an opportunity to shoot? At the very least, if Suter failed to catch him now, he would be able to return to Shanley with an exact account of events. And of the place to resume looking for Suter's trail back to Harefield.

'Carl?' A note of profound alarm had entered the young man's voice. He may by now have returned to the scene of his error, on the point of directing, through thick and pungent smoke, a torch beam on the grisly consequences.

Going as quickly as he dared, Suter hurried along the corridor. He passed the counter of the nurses' station and turned right. Yes. There, in the twilight ahead, through that familiar intersection with its dust-filmed fire extinguishers in yellow and red, lay the right way to the staircase.

* * *

Emerging at last from the same door through which he had entered the building, Suter had his first plain sight of the youth he had been hunting for the past half-hour: the one in the red jacket, with the AK47, the one who had entered the rear of the house in Baldwin's Lane. By the time Suter came out on the doorstep, the youth was fifty yards ahead, the speed of his run belying his size. He was still carrying his Kalashnikov. There was nothing to prevent him from stopping and turning to fire. Nothing except the cowardice that had manifested itself during the protracted, largely silent, guessing game of descent. He had just kept going, committing an occasional clumsiness to vouchsafe some sound or other that had drawn Suter on. At every possible place for an ambush, Suter had expected to find him waiting. He had been, was still, running away, and in a few seconds more he would reach the corner of the generator house and be lost.

Suter raised the captured L85 and snugged it into his shoulder. He had left his shotgun in one of the corridors; would go back for it when this was resolved.

The stock and handgrip were slippery with sweat. This model had a reputation for lax quality control. He was familiar with it, and had handled several during the painstaking assembly of his armoury, during his long trawl of the barracks and guardrooms of Northwood and Pirbright and Aldershot. His thumb checked that the selector was set to automatic fire. Simultaneously his index finger found the safety bolt above the trigger and pushed it all the way to the left.

Lit by October sun, vivid, surreal, the youth's glaring head, neck and red plaid shoulders seemed, instead of retreating, to be swelling to fill the fly-specked field of the

four-power telescope. The skull had been scraped blue. From behind, the ears looked absurdly prominent, an emblem of ugliness.

Five yards, no more, of unrestricted view remained.

Suter centred the shoulderblades and habit took over.

The violent reciprocation of the gas-powered piston, the rotation of the bolt, the hammer-blows of exploding propellant, took him by surprise. It was his fault: he had presented badly. The recoil had turned the weapon against his shoulder and flung the rounds like a diagonal line of grape-shot across the intervening space. His eye received a crazily graticuled image of mortar courses and lichened bricks high in the wall. Looking aside from the rifle, he regained sight of the red jacket just in time to see its wearer crashing headlong. A scream reached his ears. The Kalashnikov clattered to the ground.

Even as Suter came up, the youth was still writhing, groaning now, trying to crawl towards the corner of the generator house a yard or two away. The AK47 had been forgotten. With his right boot, Suter warily pushed it yet further aside.

Judging from the two big holes in his jeans, the youth's left thigh and buttock had each taken a hit. The leg, dragging uselessly, lay at a most alarming angle. The head of the femur, probably also the pelvic girdle, had been smashed. There would be vast internal damage. Blood was not just haemorrhaging, but surging, from the lower hole. Suter must have severed the femoral artery. Without the sort of attention once available in the surrounding buildings, such injuries were terminal.

Suter took another few steps and stood blocking the way. 'Where d'you think you're off to?'

When he tried to look up, the doomed youth's eyes registered fear and perplexity as much as pain. His contorted features were those of a small child on the point of bursting into tears. The injustice Suter had dealt him was so monstrous that it could not be comprehended.

Utterly bewildered, he managed to say, 'Why'd you do it?' and fell forward once more.

Like the conversation with Muriel Taylor the previous day, like everything that had happened since, this exchange of words had the elastic quality of a dream. Suter wondered if he had again spoken too loudly. This was the first time since 2017 that he had spoken to any male other than his cat and, of course, himself.

He dropped to his haunches, the muzzle of the L85 close to the youth's bumpy, phrenologically dubious cranium.

'You shouldna done it,' the youth groaned. 'I know I've sinned. Help me. Help me. Get God to help me. You can do it. I know.'

Get God to help him?

Suter examined more closely what he could see of the youth's face. His cheek was pressed against the asphalt, the lips distorted. His one blue eye stared at the ground, too close to focus, filmed with agony.

Suter asked him, 'Who am I?'

'I'm sorry for what I done.'

'Tell me who I am.'

'Bex said … that old woman … Bex said … you was an angel from heaven.'

'An angel?' Now it was Suter's turn to be perplexed. He suddenly remembered Muriel's unanswered prayer, her bitter remonstrances.

The youth groaned again.

‘Which angel?’

‘St Michael.’

‘What did you say?’

Surely this wasn’t happening. Surely he was mad, as he had imagined himself to be when standing by the copper beech: for the name summoned to mind the four-square church tower at Shanley and its complement of mysterious, overhanging, weathered gargoyles; it recalled the arrival of Bex at Michaelmas, the feast of St Michael and All Angels, the twenty-ninth day of September, the quarter-day when magistrates were elected and outstanding rents fell due; it even recalled the putrid, sodden clothes-labels of the man in the river, a man whose height and build and colouring had been just like Suter’s own. But no, no: he was here, and he was perfectly sane.

‘What did you say?’

‘Bex … I … you … I only did it ’cause … Steve … he … you shot him too … fuck it, Bex told us …’

‘What did Bex tell you? That I was St Michael?’

At that moment a new wave of pain overtook him. He began uttering animal sounds, horribly low and disturbing. Despite all further attempts at questioning, he could no longer utter an intelligible word. The contents of his pelvis, the organs, the bowel, the spinal column there, had been destroyed. Pain was turning him into a beast before Suter’s eyes.

Suter knew that he should take out his pistol and put an end to it. But he could not forget what this youth and his two companions had attempted, and he could not forget the open doorway of the linen-room on the sixth floor and the work done there by the hand-grenade meant for him.

He rose, resplendent, to his feet. Brilliant in the sun, a big pool of blood had already accumulated. The youth would bleed to death. Any suffering he endured in the mean time was no more than his due: for Muriel, for all the others unseen.

So certain was Suter of the rightness of this verdict that he took a couple of steps back towards the doorway before coming to a halt and unfastening the leather flap at his hip. He reconsidered for an instant before allowing the kilogram weight of his GP-35 to lower the blued steel of its barrel.

A moment later, when he had pulled the trigger, he found that his hands had altogether stopped shaking.

8

The valley where Suter lived had been formed by glacial action fifteen or twenty thousand years before. As the ice-sheet had retreated, so the valley had flooded, forming an immense wetland contiguous with the Middlesex plain and the marshes of the Thames.

Restoring it had been one of his earliest projects. In 1805 an engineer named Jessop had imprisoned the river system with his Grand Union Canal: Suter decided, two centuries later, to set it free. On 2 May, 2019, he accordingly set out for the yard of a public works contractor at West Hyde, a mile or so from his new home. Here he found a mass of chain.

Working upstream for a distance of twenty-five miles, he dealt with each of the thirty-eight locks in turn. Using a

bargee's key – a sort of cranked spanner – he first opened each set of downstream paddles, emptying out the lock, then opened the downstream gates, flung chain across and yoked the beams. Next he opened the paddles of the upstream gates, allowing water to gush through, knowing that each pair would eventually succumb to rust and rot. At Tring, the highest point on the section between London and the Chilterns, he forced the valves at Marsworth and Wilstone Reservoirs, releasing some fifty million gallons – the equivalent of a thousand lockfuls – straight into the canal.

The Rivers Bulbourne and Gade, and the lower Chess, all burst their banks and the twelve-mile line of flooded gravel pits from Watford to Uxbridge formed the basis of the marshes. The largest reed-beds spread around Maple Cross and Mill End, where the valley was at its broadest and most rich. The flooded gravel-pit at Harefield, the one overlooked by his house, which had been vast enough before, eventually merged with two others to become a sheet of water over two hundred acres in extent.

The absence of human influence had already permitted an explosion in the numbers and diversity of every form of indigenous life. Now wildfowl in the valley, their ancestral home, began to flourish with almost supernatural fecundity. Ten years on, some species were still increasing. In winter, the populations were swollen by visitors from further north and east. According to Suter's census, last winter tufted duck had been up to about six thousand, pochard not far behind. Mallard had reached fourteen thousand, teal nine. Shoveler had peaked at three thousand five hundred. Pintail and gadwall seemed also to have

peaked. Goldeneye, goosander, smew, and most other diving ducks continued to increase.

In the course of his affairs the previous year, Suter had seen or heard at least two hundred and twelve different species of birds. Glossy ibis had occurred for the first time, together with great snipe. The lagoons of the middle valley held, besides the expected species, breeding bittern, black tern, marsh harrier, spotted crake, bearded tit, and marsh and Cetti's warblers. A pair of spoonbills had attempted this year and would probably be back the next. Feral pigs dwelt among the reeds. Otters had become a frequent sight.

Through this paradisal valley the canal flowed from north to south, a canal no longer, but a smooth river, glossy, myrtle-green, swarming with fish.

At about five-thirty, having left the hospital behind, Suter set himself afloat on it and with desultory rotations of his paddle guided the canoe along. He had just salvaged this vessel, made of fibreglass, at Watford Marina. It had been left lying upside down, with several others, in a covered rack hidden by osiers. The paddle, of aluminium, he had found in the ruins of the Marina building.

He kept a little dinghy at home and often amused himself by tacking across the lake, sometimes visiting the islands to monitor the progress of otherwise inaccessible scrapes and nests, but he had not navigated the canal itself for many years.

With dripping blades he steered himself downstream, consumed by visions. His brief foray, his contact with the human race, had ended in the only way possible: in disaster. Enough had happened to feed his nightmares for the rest of his life. His mental state, the calm he had been

cultivating so assiduously for the past ten years, had been demolished. For the better part of that period, right up till the moment of finding the body in the river, he had lived so much as part of his valley, had gradually become so absorbed in it, had so much admired and worshipped its beauties and its powers of recovery, that he had thereby, and quite inadvertently, forgotten to be lonely. Until that moment, his solitude had become constant, almost companionable, a small price to pay for the privilege of owning the world.

Now everything was different. He had learned that other people existed, and not so very far away. He did not, after all, enjoy sole possession of the landscape. In future his life would be circumscribed by fear of discovery. Far worse than this: his loneliness had returned. It had been there all the time, intact, unchanged, just waiting to re-emerge and manifest itself. He equated this intolerable isolation with the insanity that had gripped his first two years after the plague. And it was back. Hiding behind the trunk of the copper beech, that was what he had seen and feared.

His alga-stained canoe glided under the next railway bridge and turned a rightward bend. The left shore was bedded by a mass of reed sweet-grass of a verdancy and luxuriance which, before the plague, he would have found simply incredible. As he approached it he felt his heart want to lift in the old way: dazzling among the sweet-grass, a snow-white egret, having hesitated for several seconds, hoisted itself aloft. Even after twelve years, its race was still imprinted with fear of the hated form. On incurved wings, black legs outstretched, yellow feet dripping, the bird rose through the canyon of waterside trees and into the glancing sunshine above.

It silently rose higher. The sky was a watery blue, an October blue, washed with high, thin cloud. The egret slid sideways and disappeared. From its altitude and the direction it had taken, Suter guessed it would come down no more than half a mile to the south.

An hour of daylight remained. From here it was six miles to his house. The current ran at about four miles an hour. If he paddled more vigorously, and if he met no obstacles on the way, he could be home before nightfall.

Almost at once, however, he was confronted by a mass of willow branches: two large trees had, since Saturday morning, when he had last walked past this spot, crashed diagonally and almost side by side across the canal. The portage through thick vegetation and past the fallen trees cost him at least fifteen minutes.

Had these two willows fallen a week earlier, the dead body, Martin, Helen's husband, would never have got past them in one piece and none of this would have happened. The body would have decayed, nibbled by fish, its bacterial soup carried off by the current. The clothes would have disintegrated too, but more slowly. Over time, the inorganic components – the zips and studs – would have been released and sunk one by one to the bottom. The same with the irreducible contents of the pockets: the chewing gum, the nails and staple. And the figurine. The soapstone homuncule, whose mirthful visage had overseen everything since Thursday, he too would have been released from his enfolding handkerchief and allowed to drift down into the soft, benthic mud, there to lie for ever – or until the next glacier remade the valley.

As he put the canoe back in the water and reloaded it with his pack and weapons, Suter's feelings became

augmented by a deep-seated sense of unease. The figurine's smirk was not entirely benign. It was the smirk of someone who knew the futility of giving advice, who was content to see whatever outcome human folly might produce. Suter had been left to exercise his free will. He had seen fit to hand Muriel a nine-millimetre machine pistol: and in so doing had brought the heavens down upon them both.

He recalled the way he had given her a gratuitous lesson in murder, the Boy's Own, strong-but-silent vocabulary of his lecture. *Can you remember all that?*

'I should imagine so,' she had said.

Even more affected and grotesque had been his manner when informing her that he had disposed of Martin's remains. The histrionic way he had passed her the bonze. *Give it to his wife when you can.*

The bonze.

It might have been Martin's most personal possession. One that, Suter had just realised, Bex could have discovered in Muriel's pocket.

He had sent three men to Watford. That had left eight or nine at Shanley. Just how many would be needed to secure the village? Yesterday, Suter had assumed they would all be needed. But, since Bex was holding the head man hostage, he really only wanted three, including himself.

'Three,' Suter said. 'Four at most.' Leaving four or five available.

Why hadn't he thought of this before? Why hadn't he, the doctor of philosophy, with his much-vaunted capacity for analysis, grasped the obvious fact that Bex knew very well that Martin and his bonze must have been washed downstream from Shanley? And that, whoever had found Martin, whoever had handed Muriel the bonze, he too

must have been downstream; and that, in all probability, downstream was where he dwelt?

'You imbecile!'

With strenuous scoops of the paddle, Suter turned sharply to the right and thrust the prow of the canoe among the rushes on the western bank. This was the bank where he had passed and repassed on Friday and Saturday while looking for the origin of the body.

The old towpath was submerged and overgrown. Soaking his boots, he jumped out and, dragging the canoe higher, splashed ashore.

Here in the shadows, evening had already arrived. Almost at once he found his two-day-old trail, under the overhang of maturing ash-trees and sycamores. It threaded a way through a tangled, rowetty understorey of holly and slender ash-whips, dwarfed by lack of light: he needed only a glance to satisfy himself that no one had walked this way since. Nonetheless he got down on his knees and examined one of the trodden saplings. The stem had recovered much of its verticality. Phototropic adjustment, by which the deranged laminae of the leaflets were brought back into the optimal plane for light-gathering, had been fully accomplished. He quickly studied a second sapling, together with some broken-off ash foliage which had already begun to wither, and the crushed, white-bloomed remains of flowerless enchanter's nightshade. With his face an inch from the ground, he let his eye range across a faint depression left on Saturday by his left boot on its southward journey. The footmark had been rained on since and had swollen back almost into the horizontal. Furthermore, the layers of dead leaves and tiny twigs had been extensively rearranged by litter-dwelling beetles.

No fresher trail was present.

He straightened up, the soapstone smirk hanging vaguely in the air.

Suter cried out in anguish. 'What the hell is wrong with you?'

There was no point in looking here! Neither the body nor his pursuers would have come this way at all! They'd have come along the Chess, which joined the canal further south, at Batchworth Lock!

By the time Suter reached the confluence, he had been delayed yet again, by the wreckage of submerged longboats at Lot Mead. As he tried to read the surface of the road-bridge he was fighting back panic. He had again failed to exercise the requisite foresight and now he was in deep, deep trouble. There might be men with guns inside his house.

The sun had already dipped behind the valley wall. The light was failing and without the beam of his torch he could no longer tell whether pursuing feet had, yesterday or today, trodden this carpet of humus and leaf-litter.

'Hell and damn! Damn it all to hell!'

On hands and knees he was scrutinising the concrete ramp, bounded by bryony-grown railings, that led down to the towpath from the old footway at the top of the bridge. No sign of any tracks but his own. They would have had to use this bridge, or swum. Unless they'd crossed further up, at the timber mill. Assuming that bridge was still standing. He took out his notebook, opened it at two blank pages and held them at an angle to the brightest part of the sky, trying to use the white paper as a reflector. It made little difference.

He turned to the last notes he had made.

‘What about infrared?’ he had said, asking about the enemy’s capabilities.

To which Muriel had replied: ‘I don’t think so.’

In other words, they might have night vision, they might not. His own Maxi-Kite, at least, he had recovered at the hospital, strapped crudely to the barrel of the L85.

‘What the hell am I going to do?’

‘Pull yourself together. That’s what.’

He stood up and, with one hand on the overgrown railings, contemplated the reflected sunset in the eddying, fish-dimpled surface of the canal. What if Bex and his henchmen had not, after all, found the figurine? Even then, they surely would have known enough to look for Suter’s inward trail at Shanley. The fieldcraft of the three who had followed him to Watford had been such that his adversaries were no longer to be underestimated.

If they were good enough to find his trail, they would know how to follow it invisibly. The technique was simple enough. One kept tabs on a predicted trail by means of a series of lateral loops, making each contact where the ground and vegetation were most favourable. If the contact proved negative, one retraced and then repeatedly halved the last loop until contact was re-established. Provided one knew what one was about, the original maker of the trail, coming along behind, would have no idea what had happened.

Since, on his northward walk last Friday morning, Suter had kept close to the canal bank, these loops would have had to be made on the landward side of his trail. By adopting a parallel course, fifty feet or so from his original, he would intersect them. As soon as he found convincing

evidence that the loops had indeed been made, he would be forewarned that Bex's men were waiting in ambush.

Unfortunately he needed strong daylight for such an exercise. If he wanted to wait till morning he would have to find somewhere safe to spend the night. That meant a building he could secure against dogs. Even with the benefit of a torch, looking for such a place at dusk or afterwards could be extremely dangerous.

He considered for a moment longer and came to a decision.

'Sure?'

'Absolutely.'

There was no need to check for an enemy trail, because he had to assume that they had made one anyway. If his assumptions were correct, they would be lying in wait for him at or very close to his house, since they would be unable to predict from which direction he would return. They would not wait upstream, by the canal, in the unlikely event that he might go past by boat. So he was at small risk of being shot in passing. Even so, it would be safer to continue downstream in darkness. And as far as dogs were concerned, he would be safer on water than on land.

He clambered back into the canoe and shoved off.

9

Approaching the barn, Seumas looked up at the remnants of the sunset. A few rooks and jackdaws, blacker than death itself, were moving across the afterglow, heading for

their roost in the woods above the village. Like evil spirits, they would be back tomorrow to haunt the fields, the riverbank, the battlements of the church tower. He had seen them earlier today, swirling above the chimneys of the Manor House, making shadows on the leaded panes of Bex's window.

His hurricane lamp swinging, Seumas lifted the latch and swung open the door. The sweet, warm smell of straw and horses met his nostrils.

Coco and Stolly came behind.

'I still don't see why I should have to do it,' Coco said, continuing the monologue of complaint he had kept up all the way from the house.

Seumas said, 'Bex told us three, so three it is.'

'Why don't he never do fuck all?'

'Can it, Coco,' Stolly said.

'I had to make the dinner again, 's all I'm saying. 'S time Dave took his turn. Or Matt. Where is he, anyway? He's always hiding somewhere when Bex give out the orders.'

Seumas held up the lantern while Stolly pulled aside the tarpaulin. A grimace forming on his face, Stolly bent to take his first close look at the corpses of their three comrades. He turned to Seumas. 'Where's Terry's head?'

Seumas shrugged.

Coco said, 'I'd heard he lost it. Over some slit.' He was unable to suppress a snigger. 'What about old Redmond? Red's about right for him. How many slugs you think he took?'

'Twenty,' Stolly said. 'Maybe more.'

'Jeez-us. Talk about Irish stew.' He glanced round. 'Sorry, Seumas. I forgot you was a Mick.'

There was no danger here. Bex had told them the angel had, at least for the moment, left the village. But, if the creature was elsewhere, why did Seumas feel its presence now? He had the sensation that they were being watched. Out there, close by, something was watching. Listening. He turned to look, but the doorway of the barn showed only darkness.

Because it had been sent to do equal battle with Satan's warriors here on Earth, the angel had been given human form, modern weapons, everything. Even a night sight, which Danzo had found on the escarpment. Maybe other things, too.

'Let's get on with it,' Seumas said.

Stolly unscrewed the cap from the canister of white spirit and doused the bodies. Holding the emptying canister at arm's length, he then performed a frivolously balletic sweep of the area round about, draining the last of the spirit in a line towards some bales stacked against the timbers of the wall.

'What about the horses?' Coco said.

'Bex didn't say nothing about them,' Stolly said.

The barn was also used as a stable. There were three stalls, each holding a plough-horse. They were looking on. The nearest one, with a white blaze on its face, was named Amos. Seumas had once heard a villager calling it that. He thought of sending word back to Bex, asking what to do. 'Burn the barn,' Bex had instructed them, simply, finally, settling the disposal of the three corpses, which had only occurred to him as an afterthought, or a whim, and then he had gone upstairs again to Helen, with the avowed intention of driving her mad. There was no breaking that stupid bitch, he had told Seumas. He could easily have

throttled her, but he wanted to strangle her mentally, just to see how long she would last.

Seumas knew that Helen had become for Bex a fascinating symbol, a martyr without audience or hagiographer, clinging in private to the papier mâché rock of her faith. At the other villages he had destroyed – especially at Essendon – Bex had been able to make everyone recant, to say anything he told them to say, to make them wipe their arses on tissue-thin pages torn from the New Testament. Even in those few places where fundamentalist Christianity had not dominated, he had taken pleasure in subverting their beliefs. For all had subscribed to the notions of 'goodness', 'humanity', and suchlike woolly-minded shit.

It had been so even at Chilton, the village where Seumas had lived. At Chilton they had worshipped not God, but creatures from space. The idea of 'goodness' had dominated their thinking from the start. The plague, they had believed, had been sent to rid the planet of iniquity: the New Home on Fornax-5 was an Elysium of enlightenment. Here the Grey Beings were re-educating the Purified and preparing them for their eventual return to Eden.

Faced with the muzzle of a machine gun, the Caller at Chilton had wasted no time in admitting it was all rubbish, invented for his benefit. Just like Christianity, also made up for the benefit of certain privileged persons, there was no sense in it whatever. It had been an excuse for him to screw anyone he wanted, like any of the young girls of the village he and his woman had taken to bed. His pursuit of 'goodness' had produced only suffering. That, Bex had said, was all any religion ever produced. Religion was hypocrisy,

religion was muddle, religion was the tangle of undergrowth where bullies and madmen lurked. And the worst, the worst ever, was Christianity. Without Christianity, Bex had explained to Seumas, the Roman emperor Constantine would never have been able to cling to power. Without him, a thousand years later, the Renaissance would never have happened. Without the Renaissance, there would have been no work ethic, no Industrial Revolution, no overpopulation, and no plague. Christianity had poisoned the garden of the world. Satan, in his aspect as Pan, horned, cloven-hoofed, had been displaced from his throne. He wanted it back; was nearly there.

Hearing all this had been a revelation for Seumas. He had been even more taken with Bex's views on evil itself. The practice of 'goodness' led to suffering because evil was inherent in the human spirit. Conversely, the conscious pursuit of evil led to purity and simplicity. And because evil was inherent in everyone's breast, it was also natural and enjoyable. In order to realise his potential, a man had to embrace evil. He had to recognise as hypocrites all those who blocked his path.

Seumas thought again of the inspiring way Bex had shot the head man. Bex was already free, unfettered, a golden being.

The horses belonged to the village. They were part of its apparatus of oppression. The simplest thing to do, the purest and most exciting, was to burn them where they stood.

On the other hand, Bex might not want them burnt. Besides allowing the villagers to continue harvesting their

crops, they might prove useful, when the time came to leave, to the Order itself.

Horses were big animals, like cows. At Essendon Seumas had heard the noise of the cattle imprisoned in the milking-parlour, which Danzo had set on fire. He would never forget it. Even if the three horses had to die, might it not be better to shoot them rather than listen again to those screams?

Seumas reached in his pocket for matches. He felt the box, its corners, the roughness of the abrasive strip. He knew what Bex would do. Strike a match. Now. Right away. And, laughing, leave the horses to burn.

Again he felt as if something were outside in the darkness, watching him through some powerful and mysterious instrument, reading his thoughts, awaiting his decision.

'We just going to torch them?' Stolly said.

'Better not,' Seumas said. 'Like you say, Bex didn't tell us to. It might piss him off.' He turned to Coco, including him in the debate. 'Let's take them outside first. That one's called Amos.'

* * *

At seven o'clock the moon climbed clear of the hybrid poplars on the lakeshore. Suter had been waiting for it to do so, watching over his shoulder: a day or two in advance of the first quarter, the right-hand side of the disc was lit. The Man in the Moon was looking down on Harefield with only one eye. He was already rising through Pisces, unhindered by cloud, and bright enough to obscure adjacent stars.

Suter looked away, not wishing to delay his dark adaptation any further. Until five minutes ago he had been using the night sight to examine his house, eighty yards away. The drab, particulate image had revealed no sign of intruders. Everything appeared to be normal and intact, just as he had left it. The place seemed empty. He told himself his fears had been paranoid. No one had followed his trail.

'*Mit Vorsicht, immer Vorsicht!*' he breathed. Caution cost nothing. How many times had it saved his neck?

Behind him the poplar leaves were clattering faintly. The bulk of them had yet to fall. The trees were now gigantic. When he had first moved here they had been less than half their present size. They were not native and did nothing for the landscape. He should have cut them down years ago and made them into firewood.

From time to time he could hear the river's soft voice, below him and to the right. On this broad, sullen stretch, the current made its way in virtual silence. Under the surface, long tresses of weed hung downstream, raising an ever-changing flux of ripples. Only the spasmodic nodding motion, set up here and there, of bulrush stems, entire or bent back on themselves, produced an identifiable sound: yet the passage of so much water, in contact with so many small obstacles, could not proceed for long without giving itself away.

The river and canal diverged just above his house. Suter had hidden the canoe a quarter of a mile above that point and made the final approach on foot. By taking paths through the woods, he had skirted the house itself and come out by the river to the south.

Walking the woods at night was not a good idea. Every minute he spent outside like this increased the chance of discovery by dogs, and he had been lying here for half an hour. If there were men in his house they would not be expecting him to risk an arrival after nightfall. That, he supposed, was something to his advantage.

He raised the binoculars. His dark adaptation was nearly complete. He could clearly make out the balustrade on the terrace, the dense mass of shrubs against the walls, stirring somewhat in the north-westerly air. His field of view travelled to the back door, just visible. There was his yard-broom, head upwards, exactly where he had left it on Wednesday afternoon. He studied the bedroom windows and above them the gutter, now casting shadow along the stonework. Three dormer windows, each with its silvery bib of sheet-lead flashing. A chimney-pot.

The line of the roof cut across the stars. From this angle it seemed to be rising too, like the hull of an immense submarine.

His house was an island of straight lines in a sea of fractals. Everything else conformed to nature's geometry. This single piece of architecture was all that remained to connect him with man-made order, with civilisation itself.

Suter felt a surge of affection for the building that had sheltered him for the past ten years. He was eager to set foot in it again, to reacquaint himself with his routine and try to put the nightmare of Shanley behind him.

Not that he ever could.

He made a minute adjustment to the focus of the left-hand eyepiece. An 8×30 was unsuitable for night use. It provided an exit pupil of only 3.75 millimetres: thirty millimetres divided by eight. He could handle almost twice

as much light-gathering power. Inexplicably, his eyesight had been improving since the plague. His dark-adapted pupils were as wide as those of a sixteen-year-old: lately he had discovered that he could distinguish, at twilight, between the brightness of a 7×42 and that of a comparable 7×50.

The Dialyt was struggling to separate the acanthus leaves on the stone moulding round the doors from the drawing room to the terrace. Suter's brain wanted to fill in remembered detail; he tried to stop it from doing so. He looked aside from the moulding, allowing its image to form away from the centres of his retinas. Brightness improved, but at the expense of detail.

Having established how well he could see the moulding, he painstakingly quartered the doors themselves: the frames, the glazing bars, the handles, the central crack, the heavy curtains hanging behind. The doors were properly shut. The curtains were drawn back, held with silk ties which he knew connected with braided brass hooks set in the wall. They too looked undisturbed.

His gaze passed beyond the curtains and into the room. From this low vantage he could see almost nothing of the interior. The ceiling. A hint of the cornice. A stray moonbeam was catching something high above the fireplace: the cylindrical brass shade of the picture lamp.

With the same intensity, Suter examined the back door and each of the visible windows on the ground floor. He did the same to those on the next level. Everything was fine. His confidence grew. He moved to the first of the three dormer windows. Unchanged. And the next. Likewise the third. The curtains in all three were drawn. He kept

them like that, to prevent the sun from spoiling the objects he kept there.

He felt something catch in his memory. On Thursday … on Thursday afternoon he had gone up to the servants' quarters to get the Maxi-Kite. His inventory had directed him to the tall whitewood chest. He could still see the night sight reclining in its plush-lined case. He had opened the case up there to take a look, in daylight. That meant he must have opened the curtains at the nearby window. Of course he had. It was only natural.

The question was, had he shut them again? He had no recollection of doing so.

Of course he would have shut them. That was how he did everything, by rote. He would have drawn them carefully together, placing one seam over the other to exclude all sunlight.

As he focused on the third dormer window, Suter felt his heart thumping. From the panes and the drawn curtains behind, second-hand moonlight, the colour of pewter, made its devious, reflected way through the anti-glare lenses and prisms of his little rubber-armoured Zeiss.

He averted his gaze a fraction. An uncertain impression had reached him. Were the curtains slightly apart? He looked back. He strained to see. The light was seething, jostling, like something alive. He couldn't be sure.

'Don't strain.'

Resting for a moment with his head on his forearm, he shut his eyes and took a deep breath. Then he looked again.

It was all right. They were overlapping, left on right.

'*All ist in Ordnung, alter Knabe.*' Everything's in order, old bean.

Should he get in closer, make another examination, perhaps from another angle, before attempting to enter the house?

'Perhaps.'

'Perhaps not.' He hadn't forgotten the dogs. 'You can be too cautious, you know.'

'*Einverstanden.*' Agreed.

'*Warum sprichst du Deutsch?*' Why are you speaking German?

'Am I?'

He already knew the answer. It was the woman. Helen. The woman in the village. He had been thinking about her again, at the back of his mind, as it were. Speculating. What did she look like? Was she dark, as his Helen had been? Was she pretty?

'What do you care?'

Nothing. Except that Muriel had seemed very fond of her. Muriel had been prepared, by taking his Glock, to risk her life in defence, not of just the village, but of the head man and his daughter too.

He wondered whether she had received the bonze.

'My God, what's the matter with you?'

This other Helen was a stranger. She had nothing whatever to do with Suter. And even were that not so, her husband had been dead scarcely a week. Had not Suter himself recovered the body, two minutes from this very spot? And had he not with his own two hands drenched it in creosote and set it on fire? That murky smoke resembled nothing so much as the unheeding drift of his thoughts.

Who knew what she was enduring at Bex's hands? She had been brutally bereaved. Her father was being held at gunpoint. She had never laid eyes on Suter and never

would. Even if she did: what would she see? Martin, her late husband, had been about twenty-nine, Suter's exact age at the end of the plague. Twelve years had gone by since then, twelve years during which, unseen by anyone, Suter had become steadily older and uglier. Now he was a middle-aged hermit. He was bearded, suspicious, a confirmed assassin. He was a coward and a sneak, to boot. He had run away from Shanley, despite Muriel's pleas, her faith in him. His heart was blacker than that creosote-smoke.

Muriel had told him, 'I'd be feeling rather ashamed of myself, if I were you.'

Suter remembered the way he had stood with his shotgun on the landing in the house on Baldwin's Lane. Wearing only his shirt and underpants, he had forced himself downstairs to prove he wasn't afraid. He saw now that he had taken the lorry for the same reason.

Forget! Forget everything! Everything! And no more German, d'you hear me?

His loneliness was still growing. It was coming back in all its force, as bad as it had ever been, even just after the plague, when he had thought himself the only human being left alive. Under gloomy March skies he had wandered London. Avoiding bodies and abandoned vehicles, he had crossed Westminster Bridge towards the Houses of Parliament. Halfway over he had stopped and climbed the parapet, intending to leap into the Thames.

'You can shave that beard off, too.'

'What are you gibbering about now?'

'Shave it off. You've been hiding behind those whiskers ever since. Look at yourself full face. See what you've grown into.'

There, in that moment on the parapet, arms raised, he had undergone his epiphany. He had drawn strength from the very river itself. Its course wound magnificently through the rich heart of England, carrying everything down towards the sea: leaf-mould, silt, youngling salmon, the gold and scarlet progress of the Royal Barge. And he, Suter, he alone was its sovereign. Exulting, shouting defiance into the sky, he had railed against God and dared him to contradict. But God too had been hiding behind his whiskers. For it had ever been so, and ever would.

Did he say that aloud, or only think it?

He whispered, 'Sweet Jesus, am I really off my head again?'

To distract himself he raised the binoculars. Though he had already convinced himself that no one had invaded his house, he wanted, out of habit, out of caution, to take one last look.

It was then that he saw, moving in the corridor beyond the drawing room, the dim and momentary play of a flashlamp.

PART THREE

1

Danzo called out to Pinch, as loudly as he dared, 'Switch that bleeding thing off!' and the torch beam instantly disappeared.

While Pinch blindly made his way back along the corridor towards the kitchen, Danzo tightened his lips and shook his head in the darkness. He had to control his temper. If he finally lost it with Pinch, all his painstaking work would go down the tube. And he was very close. Pinch was unable to follow the simplest orders. He argued at every turn. As a result, it was Danzo who had done everything. Pinch had hardly helped at all. At the one difficult point in the tracking, his big feet had cost them over half an hour, for he had actually gone on ahead without permission and trodden the man's trail.

Danzo was seated in a fireside armchair in the main kitchen. He had set the chair so that it faced the entryway from the back porch. It was this porch that the single occupant of the house habitually used. The other external doors were opened either very rarely or not at all.

The occupant of the house, the sniper, the so-called angel, St Michael, was not only mad but obtuse. He had been so unthinking as to have given Muriel a little stone figure which had been in Martin's pocket. This, Bex had seen at once, tied the sniper to Martin's body. St Michael had obviously found it somewhere downstream and

followed the river system back to Shanley. It could hardly have been simpler for Danzo and Pinch to locate the place where he had started. The walk had taken them no more than a few hours. Almost as soon as they had got here, they had even found the patch of grass where he had burned the body. The cremation had taken place within the past week: last Wednesday or Thursday, to judge from the state of the ashes.

Since arriving this morning, Danzo had been able to deduce a great deal more about their dim-witted angel. A photograph album cum scrapbook, among various other documents, revealed that his name was John Suter. The inadvertent detail provided by the album disclosed that his background had been inconceivably privileged. His good luck had not stopped there: he was tall, proportionately formed, with blond hair and grey eyes. There was one professionally taken picture which Danzo had studied with particular resentment. In July 2004, aged sixteen, dressed in a tie and posh blazer, he had been captured at a school speech-day in the act of receiving, from a man wearing a black gown and mortar-board, some expensive-looking book, his reward for winning the school's 'Goodridge Prize for Biology'. Then, later, he became a university student. He was shown sitting cross-legged in 2007 among other young people on a lush lawn beside a river. Later still, in 2010 and 2011, he spent time in the fabled, legendary land of America, at a place called Northwestern University. Danzo had plucked from its mount a postcard dated August 2010 and addressed to 'Mr and Mrs R. Suter' in Gerrard's Cross, Buckinghamshire, England. The card showed an amazing vista of skyscrapers, black and white and grey, with blue water beyond, and was labelled

Looking north from the Sears Tower Skydeck, 1,353 feet above downtown Chicago. The message, in neat black handwriting, read *I'm doing all the touristy things you're supposed to do here. You'd love it! Lunched on pike at the Navy Pier. Yesterday we drove up to Waukegan and swam in Lake Michigan. Start work next week. Letter very soon. Love, John.* After this, the exhibits in the album became fewer, with English or continental settings. A number of pages bore marks where photos had been torn out.

The album provided information on the man's appearance and upbringing. His personality was hinted at by the manic tidiness of the house itself. There was no sign that anyone had ever shared it with him. He had apparently been alone since the plague, and was plainly off his chump: hence his behaviour at Shanley.

The tens of thousands of books and discs on his shelves were arranged according to some obscure system of classification. His monkish bedroom was ornamented solely by a Questar catadioptric telescope on a tripod, left focused on an island in the lake. The matching crockery and stainless steel utensils in the kitchen had all been cleaned and put in their places. Even his fuel-store bore witness to the manner of loony who had dared cross swords with Satan. It was vast, constructed of angle-iron with a sloping roof of corrugated fibreglass, and its racks contained at least a hundred cords of seasoning oak, beech, alder and ash logs, each square-cut to a standard length of eight inches, left whole or split lengthways into halves or quarters. A covered walk, also of corrugated fibreglass, came up to the kitchen porch so that he could refill his logbasket without getting his slippers wet.

Danzo knew all about fuel. At Byfield he had been one of those appointed to scour the woods, to wield a chainsaw, to load the timber on the cart, to operate the bench saw, to raise and raise and raise again the heavy arm of the log-splitter. Firewood, its preparation, the boredom and labour involved, epitomised the reasons why Danzo had succumbed to Bex's persuasion: and why he had pulled that Heckler and Koch machine gun on the chief elder.

This man living here must have spent months or even years obsessively storing books and cutting wood for his old age. With the same robotic tenacity he had catalogued the huge quantity of objects he had salvaged from shops and houses and factories. A few of the ledgers were written in a peculiar scribble that Danzo could make neither head nor tail of, but most were in the form of printout from a computer database. Everything was cross-referenced to a series of box files which held instruction manuals, parts lists and circuit diagrams.

From the armoury on the top floor, Danzo had helped himself to a brand new Calico sub-machine gun, which he was now holding in his lap instead of the FN he had brought with him from Shanley. In another of the cupboards upstairs the catalogues had led him to a pristine set of Diurnox image intensifying goggles, complete with belt-borne power pack.

The pack, holding ten penlight cells, could be recharged merely by plugging its adapter into a wall-socket. There was a bridge over the river just above the house. Next to one of the stanchions, the mad monk had installed a turbine. By means of a worm drive, this worked a dynamo housed in a concrete coal-bunker sited on the bank. The output had been marked by the manufacturer: *12V DC*. At

Byfield they had used similar technology, as indeed they still did at Shanley. From the bunker an armoured cable led to the garage and a row of lead-acid batteries. These in turn were wired to the old ring-main, allowing access to the current from any of the sockets in the house.

Besides battery-chargers, the house contained all sorts of electrical appliances, designed or adapted to run on DC: halogen lamps, laptop computers, an inverter in the kitchen.

It had taken no more than two hours to charge up the goggles. At nightfall, having moved the armchair into place, Danzo had donned them in preparation for St Michael's return.

Despite the lack of fresh tracks, he and Pinch had half expected him to be here when they had arrived. They had approached the place as though he were, finally entering and going from room to room. His continuing absence gave Danzo hope that Steve and the others might have got to him first.

Still, Danzo had to assume they hadn't. Bex had told him to wait here three days if necessary before heading back to Shanley.

'What is it?' he hissed, when he heard Pinch entering the kitchen. 'What the fuck do you want now?'

'I ain't sleepy.'

Danzo had told him to stretch out on a sofa in the big drawing room. They were supposed to be taking shifts in keeping watch.

Pinch said, 'He ain't coming in the dark, Danzo, that's for sure. I thought we might have something to eat. See what else he's got, yeah?'

Pinch had the irritating habit of appending this word, spoken in a rising inflection, to his most infuriating idiocies. 'You can't still be hungry,' Danzo told him, struggling to retain control. 'Not after what you stuffed down your neck.'

They had taken only the best from the loony's larder. In various caches upstairs and down, he kept gargantuan stocks of tinned and dried food, gallons of ghee and olive oil, vacuum-packed cereals, powdered milk and egg, dried fruit, nuts, army rations, lux grub of all kinds. Once their host was dead, Danzo would bring Bex and the others here. This would make an ideal base. There was enough ammo upstairs to supply them for ever.

'Anyway,' Pinch said, 'it's boring on me own.'

Danzo was about to reprove him when he distinctly heard, just beyond the kitchen porch, an unwonted noise. Someone was outside.

'He's here,' he whispered urgently to Pinch, as he scrabbled at his waistline for the switch on the power pack. 'Get down. Keep quiet.'

The goggles came to life and the darkness gave way to a flat, monochromatic, apple-green view of the kitchen: the dresser, the range, the inner door standing ajar, its handle, the painted jamb. Through Danzo's mind flashed the thought 'These are the mutt's nuts,' and he remembered then the conversation he had had earlier with Pinch: they had concluded that the man would not dare to stay outside for fear of dogs. If he was crazy enough to approach after nightfall, he would certainly try to get into the house.

Danzo excitedly raised the Calico. His index finger curled round the trigger. His left thumb met the resistance

of the safety catch and stealthily pushed it all the way forward.

He was watching the oval brass handle on the outer door, waiting for it to turn, even by a fraction, before delivering one hundred parabellum rounds through the wood and frosted glass and into the idiot standing asking for it on the scraper-mat at the threshold.

'Come on, John,' he breathed. 'Don't be shy.'

In the time since switching on the goggles, all Danzo's systems had gone from inertia to the maximum pitch of expectancy. He badly wanted to pull the trigger. He loved guns. He loved killing people. At that moment he thought of Bex, vaguely, not specifically, but as an eternal presence entwined with the pleasure of dealing death. He was the crimson shadow on the wall, fake yet real, more real than anything in the world.

The door handle remained unmoving.

There was no further sound outside.

In growing disappointment, and without taking his eyes from the door handle, Danzo warily rose to his feet.

Suddenly, right inside the porch, there was a bang, not loud, but it made Danzo jump all the same. It had come from the lower part of the door.

He just stopped himself from firing. The front legs and head of a compact, self-contained, monochrome cat, tabby green, were followed by its body and hind legs and tail, and then the plastic flap, green against paler green, fell back behind it and swung to a halt. Disdaining him, disdaining Pinch, the cat strolled to the kitchen range and inspected the empty green dish set on the floor there. Could cats see in the dark? Danzo didn't know.

‘Only the cat,’ he explained to Pinch, who was crouching behind the chair.

Before he had finished speaking, Danzo’s senses were assaulted by an explosion behind him. On the far side of the kitchen, just out of his direct sight, a corona of jagged flame lit the walls and ceiling and, for a split second, as Danzo turned his head, revealed the face and half-turned torso of a camouflage-clad figure holding at arm’s length a big handgun. In the confined space the shot had sounded like a bomb going off. From the angle and downward direction of the man’s arm, Danzo guessed that Pinch might have been hit, even killed. When the goggles came to bear he saw that the muzzle was now pointing approximately at the armchair and himself. The man was firing blind.

The gun discharged again. For a second time the intensity of the flash confused Danzo’s vision, but he had seen enough to know where to aim. The shot had missed him.

There was a third shot, which also missed. Danzo whipped the Calico into the horizontal and feverishly squeezed the trigger. The man had entered the room just as Pinch had, from the corridor, and had shot from the doorway.

In the instant before bringing the gun to bear, Danzo had glimpsed his feet. He was barefoot, like a saint or penitent, like the dead man walking Bex had once shown him in a coloured Albigensian almanac.

Even as Danzo sprayed a broad arc across the doorway, smashing china and glass, ripping plaster from the walls, part of his mind remained detached. He was marvelling at the incorporeal stealth and strangeness of the initial attack.

How had the man, how had Suter, how had he seen Pinch down there? How had he known where to aim? Could Suter and his tabby-cat, his familiar spirit, somehow have been collaborating?

Danzo stopped firing when he knew that Suter was certainly dead. Gripping the gun with both hands, he moved towards the doorway. The cat was nowhere to be seen. It must have streaked back through the flap at the first of its master's shots. Maybe it had heard or smelled him before, or sensed in some feline way that its benefactor had returned. But that didn't explain how Suter had known where to point his gun. His catalogues listed only two image intensifying devices: the Diurnox high resolution goggles and a Pilkington night sight for a sniping rifle, the very same that Danzo himself had picked up on the escarpment overlooking the Manor House grounds. Steve had taken the night sight. Danzo had given it to him, together with two rubber straps to fix it to the barrel of his L85.

What, then, had happened to Steve and Carl and Gil?

Danzo reached the doorway. He was expecting to find the body a few feet back, out in the hall.

It wasn't there. Like his cat, the angel had disappeared.

'Pinch?' Danzo said, half over his shoulder.

There was no reply.

* * *

Danzo's search of the house did not get very far. Having looked into the rooms on either side of the main corridor, he arrived at the open double doors near the end. These led into the drawing room where he had told Pinch to sleep. The goggles revealed the sofa Pinch had vacated, the

pillows, the duvet which had slithered to the moonlit surface of the parquet floor.

The haversack in which Pinch had been carrying spare clips for his assault rifle, like the rifle itself, had gone. Beyond the grand piano, one of the doors to the terrace was standing open to the night.

Alone in this cavernous space, Danzo swore to himself, trying to reassert his bravado, to quell his growing terror. The hermit, the loony, Suter – whatever he was – had killed Pinch in pitch darkness. He had unerringly pointed his semi-automatic at Pinch's head and put a single shot straight through his brain.

It had been the same with that superhuman display of shooting at Shanley. The guy couldn't miss. Not unless he wanted to. If he missed, it was by design. It was only because he meant to lure his victims on.

Danzo's mind was struggling to make sense of it all. Until now he had dismissed Bex's explanation as a copious and especially smooth helping of the stools he so freely fed his followers. He had thought that Bex believed it no more than he did. It was true that, in the past, Danzo had sometimes felt that Bex was beginning to believe. But that, surely, had amounted to no more than getting carried away. Recently Bex's demeanour had changed. His manner yesterday at the divination and afterwards had been unnerving, as if he had finally and incurably caught the disease he had given the others.

The divination had been conducted with the usual mumbo-jumbo, including the projector to cast the red shadow on the wall. As always, Bex had relied on Danzo's complicity. But now it seemed that Danzo might have been the only non-believer present. And if Bex himself believed

that an angel, that St Michael himself, had been sent down from the Third Circle of Paradise, then, Danzo was asking himself, might it really be true?

Danzo had thought that they – Bex and the New Order – were chasing a rogue survivor from elsewhere. But this was no mortal being: and, it seemed, he was chasing them.

The angel, God's representative on earth, who had been appointed to use earthly means to overcome the foe, had set an elaborate trap. Why else had he removed his galoshes, if not to identify his first trail? His distinctive boot-soles had led them all the way here.

Danzo suddenly saw that the gift of the green figurine, the Buddhist thing Suter had handed to Muriel, had been deliberately made. It had not been a mistake, but sucker-bait. St Michael had suckered them all. Divide and conquer. What had happened to Steve and the other two? Why, he had shot them, of course! How else could he have got the Maxi-Kite back? For he must have used the night sight to make his silent way, barefoot, through the house. Earthly means, he had to employ earthly means: Bex had been quite specific on that point.

St Michael had obviously heard Danzo and Pinch talking in the kitchen. Sneaked up, making no noise. Watched them through his night sight. Got his bearings. And fired. The cat had had nothing to do with it.

But, if the angel had come down from heaven, what about the persona of John Suter, the man Danzo had inferred from the contents of the house? And what about the building itself? Was any of it real? After all, no one could have survived alone for twelve solid years. Maybe the whole thing had been conjured up by God. Suter, the photos, his background, his possessions – these were all

part of an illusion being projected, like Satan's shadow, for Danzo's benefit. And now that he understood what was happening, he also understood that it might vanish at any moment, leaving him at St Michael's mercy.

Aware that the door to the terrace had almost certainly been left open on purpose, Danzo returned to the kitchen porch. He paused on the threshold. No one was to be heard or seen.

Without so much as a backward glance for Pinch, he ran out past the woodstore, across the courtyard, and on into the moon-bathed landscape of the night.

2

Helen did not want to listen. Bex was talking, holding forth, inflicting again the sort of apparently aimless disquisition which came eventually to a unified point. When that happened, she knew what to expect.

She was trying to concentrate on her mental image of the Rood. At one time, before, she had entertained only a generalised vision of the Crucifixion. This had derived from all the representations of Calvary she had ever seen. But now a single image had emerged. Intensely detailed, it was all she had left to sustain her. The man on the cross was real. His agony was real. His doubt and despair were those of Helen herself.

Bex had been talking for some time. So far this evening he had not touched her. Soon he would. She would be compelled to take off her clothes, to lie face up or face down, to kneel, to open her legs, to submit to more and yet

more depravity. He would go on speaking. He knew the exact words to cause her the most distress. Even as he violated her, he would utter them in whispers, without hesitation, moving fluently from one source of pain to the next.

Whenever she submitted to him, she now always found herself unable to stop seeking oblivion in her vision of the cross. Christ in his agony was quite different from the wholesome, white-robed figure she knew from the plates in her Bible. His skinny, contorted body bearing the marks of the scourge, his stained breech-clout, even the iron nails in his palms and insteps, had become irrelevant, just as Helen's own body had become irrelevant. All his being was concentrated in his face, in his eyes. As, through his crown of thorns, he looked yearningly skyward, Helen knew that soon, very soon, she would be with her heavenly Father. And she would be with Martin again, and all this would be nothing.

It seemed as if she had been imprisoned in this room for ever. Bex was at present sitting in the easy chair by the window, legs crossed. Helen was in a corresponding chair on the far side of the bed. Both lamps were burning. Whether for his own security or so that he could watch her reactions, he always left at least one alight.

Across the expanse of the counterpane, she saw him insert another cigarette in his tortoiseshell holder. She had not seen the cigarette holder before tonight, and dully wondered why he had started using it and where he had found it.

With a soft snap, he shut his gold cigarette case.

'Well?' he said.

'Yes. I've heard of them.'

‘Have you ever read one yourself?’

‘Only at school. That was a long time ago.’

He grunted. ‘As I say, *Lear*’s my favourite. Even ahead of *Othello*. But there’s another you might like. *All’s Well that Ends Well*.’

She must have looked at him uncomprehendingly, for he said, ‘That’s the title. Of the play. By William Shakespeare. The excellent Master Shakespeare. You know. The Elizabethan playwright and poet, said to have slept in this very house. The fellow we’ve been discussing for the past ten minutes.’

She said nothing.

Bex affably continued speaking. ‘The play – *All’s Well* – it’s about this bint. She’s creaming herself over this bloke. Trouble is, she doesn’t think she’ll get a look-in. Her old dad’s dead, you see. She’s a lot like you in other ways, too. Big on Jesus. Guess what her name is.’

‘I’ve no idea.’

‘Helena.’ Bex struck a match. ‘I expect the Immortal Bard named her after St Helena.’ He inhaled. ‘“Who was that?” I hear you ask. Well, she was big on Jesus too. In fact, she’s the Mother of the Church. O yes. She’s the one who found the sepulchre. Also the original cross, and the three nails, some do tell. You’d never have thought she was married to a Roman emperor.’

His tone was changing.

‘They had a son, you know. In 272 AD, if my memory serves. Named him Constantine in honour of his pop. Now, when young Constantine got to be caesar, things weren’t going too well for the Roman empire. He asked his minister what to do. “Well, sire,” says the minister – that’s the way they talked back then, in Latin and everything –

“Well, sire,” he says. “I’ve got an idea. There’s this obscure sect out there. They believe in some prophet who’s supposed to have risen from the dead.” “Risen from the dead, you say?” says Constantine. “Yes, Your Emperorness. Risen from the dead. They’re called Christians.” So Constantine says, “Not the ones we feed to the lions, by any chance?” “The very same,” says the minister.’

Helen looked down at her skirt. *Make him stop.*

‘Then Constantine says, “My ma was always on about them, but I never listened. What’s their angle?” So the minister says, “They think the meek will inherit the Earth.” Constantine says, “All the meek ever inherit is a boot in the neck.” The minister says, “You know this, mighty Caesar, and I know it, but they don’t.” So Constantine says, “Let me get this straight. You can do what you like to a Christian and he’s happy because he thinks he’ll get his reward up there while you’ll be eternally tormented down below.” The minister says, “You’ve got it in one, sire.” So Constantine says, “This Christianity sounds just the ticket for my ailing empire. Get my secretary to found the Holy Roman Church first thing after lunch.”’

Bex was smiling thinly. ‘Of course, they didn’t have it all their own way for ever. In 1517 Martin Luther started the Reformation in Germany. Over here we had Henry the Eighth. Who also slept in this very house. Whose groaning shade, with limping footfalls, stalks the gallery at night. Why limping? Because his leg was ulcerated at the time. It helped do for him in the end. And why does the ghost groan? Because in this house his second queen Catherine was humping one of his courtiers. Namely, Thomas Culpeper, esquire. That was in 1542, in case you didn’t know.’

‘I know about the ghost,’ Helen brought herself to say, hoping the subject was now moving away from religion. ‘But I’ve never heard it.’

‘You wouldn’t. You’re too pure. Like Catherine. Her name means “pure” in Greek. She was so pure he cut her head off. Like Anne Boleyn in 1536. Whom he secretly married in 1533, when she was already up the spout with Elizabeth. They came to Shanley Manor in 1534 with the babby in tow.’

Helen had read the guidebook too.

Bex went on, ‘You want to know what he did that same year? He passed the Act of Supremacy. Told the Pope to go fuck himself. Grabbed the monasteries for himself. Started the Anglican Church.’

He lazily scratched his left armpit. ‘That’s right. Your precious Church of England was founded by a serial killer.’

‘Please.’

‘No, my dear. You’ve got to face it. Christianity is just so much doo-doo. Political expediency. A power game. That’s all it ever was, and remains. Those self-serving bastards made it up as they went along. Even old Helena wasn’t real. She was only loosely based on a historical figure. Have you read any Homer?’

The sudden change of direction caught her by surprise. ‘I don’t know what that is.’

‘Not “what”. “Who”. He’s an epic poet. Greek. Makes Shakespeare look like an amateur. Provided you read him in the original. Which I can.’

‘I’ve never heard of him.’

‘So you’ve never opened the *Iliad*.’

‘No.’

‘Even though you’re in it?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Helen is the daughter of Zeus and Leda. Wife to Menelaus, King of Sparta. She’s trouble. Big time. But even Homer didn’t get her from nowhere. She goes right back. In European mythology she’s the queen of the dead. She’s goddess of the ninth earth. That’s the nether world. Hell. Hence her name. Her bed is called *Kör*. That’s their word for sickness. Disease. Pox. Cock-rot. She lives under the roots of Yggdrasil.’

Helen gripped her thumbs.

‘What is Yggdrasil?’ Bex went on. ‘The sacred ash-tree. You’ve got a nice specimen here, by the river.’ He paused, the smile still on his face. ‘It was no coincidence I had him hung upside down where I did.’

Make him stop.

‘A handy word, *kör*. It’s the stem of the Attic Greek *koré*. A noun of the first declension, meaning “girl” in the sense of “maiden”. Or “daughter”. Like Persephone, another of Zeus’s nippers. Zeus being the supreme deity. Head man up there on Olympus. Sometimes Persephone was just called “Koré”, meaning “the Daughter”. The head man’s daughter. She was that tasty, she got herself dragged down to the underworld by its ruler, Hades. Pluto of the Romans. Satan, if you like.’

Bex examined the ash on his cigarette, revolving the holder in his fingers, then looked up and raised his eyebrows.

‘To be his queen.’

Make him stop. Dear Christ, please make him stop.

‘Words reveal everything. Every symbol lies hidden in language. All you have to do is look. “Hell” is the same word as “hole”. At least, it’s cognate. In Anglo Saxon, say,

Dutch and Icelandic, it's *hel*. German: *Hölle*. The verb "hele" means "to hide or cover", and "hell" means "that which conceals". Concealment is the essence of woman. Deceit. What is her secret garden, if not a hell-hole where cock-rot lurks? Far from being the Mother of the Church, you're the Queen of Hell. Of course, you know that already, you fuckworthy slut. That's why you enjoy it so much. Although, true to your nature, you persist in pretending otherwise.'

Bex stood up. The smile had gone.

'You know what to do,' he told her.

* * *

Suter reached his kitchen a long time later. As best he could, he had used the Maxi-Kite to make a careful search of the house. Though he was by now sure that none of the intruders remained inside, it still took all his courage to switch on a torch.

Pistol in hand, the shotgun slung over his shoulder, he shone the beam on the body slumped up against the armchair. The deformation of the youth's cheek and jaw, pressed into the fabric of the chair-back, reminded Suter of the one he had shot outside the hospital.

He crouched down beside the body and moved the torch closer, causing the passage of enormous, infinitely mobile shadows on the alien walls and ceiling of his kitchen. These bloodied teeth and swollen tongue, the bulging eyes starting from their sockets with the impact of his bullet, had remained like this all evening while he had been searching upstairs and down. His house had already been polluted by the mere fact of its discovery, but this corpse, exuding the poison of its presence for hour after hour into

his favourite and most personal room, this made it uninhabitable.

Suter's anguish was complete.

This boy's skull, too, was shaven. The mousy hair had grown since the razor had last passed across its skin: was growing still. The bullet had entered the back of the head at an angle, off-centre, and had emerged through the left wing of the nose to disappear into the upholstery. The broad, irregular stain there consisted of more than mere blood. Suter felt his gorge rising.

But it was the other one who mattered, the one wearing a Diurnox headset and wielding a machine gun. Suter's failure to kill him had been a catastrophe. Always assuming there hadn't been a third, or even a fourth.

He extinguished the torch, stood up, and took an irresolute step away from the chair. His universe had turned in on itself and collapsed. The sanctum of his house had gone. He could not stay here. He had been cast upon the wind. As in the days of the plague, he had nowhere to go. Nowhere, and everywhere. Twelve years down the line, he could never hope to establish another residence, still less duplicate this. Left alone, he might have seen out his natural term. Not now. His foreshortened future would be a miserable affair, curtailed by dogs.

He did not know what to do. He wanted a hot shower, a proper meal, and then, above all, clean sheets. He could not remember ever having felt so tired as this, but he could not rest. Nor could he risk showing more than a few glimmers of light. The other one, and his possible companion or companions, might be only a few yards away in the dark, choosing a moment to return. Alternatively, he or they

might already be returning to Shanley to render an account to Bex.

As long as Bex and the others remained alive, Suter could never sleep in this house again. Nor could he come back once he had left it. He could not even risk going upstairs one last time. The ammunition chests were out of reach. Effectively, the whole house was ceasing to exist.

He padded to the drawing room and through the open door to the terrace. His feet were already freezing, but the York stone slabs felt especially cold against his soles. In the moonlight, avoiding the bramble-runners, he descended the steps to what had once been a lawn.

It took a minute or so, and a few probing flashes of his torch, to find his boots and socks, hidden in the shadows of a viburnum bush. He had lain here for over an hour with the L85 aimed at the terrace door.

Distractedly, he pulled on both pairs of socks. His left foot found its way into its boot. He took the ends of the lace and started winding them alternately across the cleats, slowly ascending his instep. With each turn, as if in self reproof, he yanked with unnecessary firmness. Why hadn't he let go of that rope? If only he had let the body go, grapnel and all, it would have been carried half a mile down to the weir, bobbed clear of the backwash, and continued south to the Thames.

He thought, 'Regret, where is thy sting?'

It was here. Here in his heart, dug in like one of the steel points of his grapnel. It had caught and could never be dislodged. The nylon line stretched all the way back to Shanley. Taut, tugging. The single straight line in a sea of fractals.

'I won't.'

‘You must.’

‘That’s what you said before.’

He pulled on the right boot. The terrace rose above him, the balustrade, the house itself. He took one last look.

‘What about Rees?’

‘He’ll have to find a Mrs Mog and settle down.’

‘Doesn’t sound much like him.’

Suter tied the bootlace and refastened his canvas gaiter. His jacket pockets were bulging with the booty he had been able to collect during his search: AA batteries for the torch and the night sight, two clips for his Browning and a hundred and twenty rounds for the captured Enfield.

His pack was still down by the river. The dead youth’s haversack and AK47 were here under the viburnum. He decided to leave them where they were.

Suter stood up, mindful of a bungalow ten minutes away on the other side of the canal. It was hard to find, dry and dog-proof. There might even be some tinned food left in its pantry.

He started for the river and his pack.

* * *

At mid-morning, presaged by thunder, a mountain of dark cloud overtook the village from the north-west. Rain arrived with it, soon becoming heavy, falling so densely that it dimmed the view of the church tower from the Manor House.

Leaning on an upstairs windowsill and staring out at the storm, Seumas saw movement in the graveyard. A solitary figure had climbed the waist-high flint wall on the far side and was taking a shortcut among the yews and headstones.

Seumas recognised Danzo's gait, his shaven head and broad shoulders: but where was Pinch?

Danzo's clothes looked sodden. He was carrying an unfamiliar machine gun, his haversack at his side. He strode through the open wrought-iron gates of the Manor, crossed the shingle to the main entrance directly below, and disappeared from view.

By the time Seumas got downstairs, Danzo was standing by the long kitchen table, rubbing at his head and face with a fluffy, peach coloured towel. Stolly was with him, holding the machine gun by both grips and aiming at the nearest window. He turned to greet Seumas. 'Seen one of these before? Calico M-960. Danzo brung it back. Put a hundred up your pipe in eight seconds flat. Puissant, or what?' He squinted along it again. 'Pinch really fucked up this time. He's dead.'

'What?'

'Bullet through the brain. The angel done it. Danzo reckons he hosed Steve's lot and all.'

'Where's Bex?'

'Coco went to find him.'

Danzo emerged from the towel. Seumas said, 'You OK, Danzo?'

'What do you think?' He began unbuttoning his dripping jacket. 'I'm wet. I've been shot at. I spent last night in a rat-hole. I've had no breakfast. Then I had to run about ten miles back here. Course I'm not OK, you fuckin' pratt.'

'What about the angel? Did you see him?'

'I saw him.'

'What does he look like?'

'He's all in white. With wings.'

At that moment, followed by Coco, Bex entered. Seumas had not set eyes on Bex since the previous evening. According to Coco, he had spent the night in Helen's room and breakfasted with her. Coco had taken up the tray. Though pretty far gone, Coco had said, Helen's sanity was still, heroically, holding out. Bex had not long ago bathed and washed his hair, which remained damp. He had changed into fawn chinos, an off-white cashmere sweater, and a new plaid shirt with a button-down collar. He looked at Seumas. 'Stolly,' he said. 'You and Coco, rout that old fart Goddard and bring him here. You know his place?'

'Off the green?'

'That's the one. If he's not there, find him. Don't tell him anything. Just get him here. Right now.' He turned to Seumas. 'Fetch Matt and Dave, then wait in the dining hall. I want to talk to Danzo on my own.'

'Can I take this?' Stolly said, meaning the machine gun.

'Where'd you get it?'

'At his house,' Danzo said. 'He's tooled up for World War Three.'

To Stolly, Bex said, 'Leave it on the table. But don't go without a piece. You too, Coco.'

Seumas found Dave upstairs, lying on his bed, smoking and leafing through some of the amazingly pornographic magazines Gil had found on a lorry-trip to Watford.

Dave said he did not know where Matt had got to. Sheltering under an umbrella, Seumas hurried across to the church tower and rang one of the bells a couple of times, giving the pre-arranged signal to assemble at the Manor House. Matt appeared a few minutes later: he had been searching through nearby cottages, looking for a better waterproof jacket.

The three of them went into the dining hall and sat morosely at the table, Dave at the head, Matt almost opposite Seumas, who had his back to the main doors.

Unable to maintain the intensity of its first onslaught, the rain had now settled for a more realistic, but steady and unvarying, rate of fall. The air had turned noticeably colder. The interior of the dining hall had become very gloomy. Again Seumas felt the presence of something sinister. It was almost tangible, suffocatingly close. He looked at Matt. They exchanged apprehensive glances.

What manner of being were they up against? All in white, Danzo had said, with wings. First Redmond had been killed. Then Terry and Beezer. Now Pinch too. Steve, Carl and Gil were missing. That made seven. By normal standards, each of them had been invulnerable. This time on Sunday morning, the Order had numbered fourteen. And today was only Tuesday.

Seumas had known Redmond most of his life. When Bex and the others had liberated the two of them from Chilton, Redmond had embraced the novelty and excitement of the ideas Bex had brought. But somehow, at bottom, it had all been, for Redmond, an adolescent game. The evil Bex had spoken of, the rites and Satanic possessions, the occult practices, had not really meant anything to Redmond. In some vague manner, Seumas had sensed that Redmond had assumed Bex was making it up.

Seumas had known that Bex had meant every word. And now he understood that the evil they had been so eagerly summoning had heeded the call. Finally, on this wet October morning, it had arrived. He could feel it. Cold, clammy, utterly black: evil had entered the walls and

boards of this old house. Seumas was powerless to escape. He had been clamped into his seat.

Satan was here, in this room.

He was inspecting his troops. One among them, Seumas, had become immortal. God and all his legions couldn't kill him now. But what terrible and deathless form would the conflict take?

Seumas dared not take his eyes from the table-top.

Reaching into an inside jacket pocket, Dave produced one of his magazines, folded vertically. He laid it on the table and spread out the pages. 'Here,' he said, pushing the image of three obscenely entwined women towards Matt. 'You can read. What's this say?'

'No, Dave, I can't read,' Matt said, eyeing the photograph.

'Nor me,' Seumas managed to say. Whether under glaring studio lights or in the secrecy of a canopied bed, whether performed for the gratification of inadequates or indulged for depraved pleasure, however personal and acute, there was no qualitative difference between these three women and Seumas's memories of himself and Bex. He thought of Bex in the lamplight and in the dimness of the ice-house, his hoarse, urgent instructions, the lubricated, enteric stench filling the sheets, the burning copulative pain. And Bex, kneeling behind, had gripped him so that he could not get away. It was he who had rendered Seumas powerless to escape.

Seumas heard Stolly and Coco coming into the room. They laid their assault rifles on the table and sat down. Stolly reached out and dragged the magazine towards him. He took a glance, then slid the image back to Dave.

Seumas felt his spine grow cold. The thing was drawing even closer. It was out of control.

The others seemed to be oblivious. 'Think these three are really doing it?' Stolly said.

'Don't know,' Dave said.

'Reckon it's posed.'

Only one of the women, the blonde, was showing her face. Dave's forefinger touched the ecstatic features. 'She likes it.' He licked his lips. 'What's it say, Stolly?'

Stolly again pulled the magazine across the table, and perused the line of text below the picture. 'Just good friends.'

'What?'

'That's what it says. "Just good friends".' He thumbed through a few succeeding pages. All the photographs, large and small, seemed to be of naked women in pairs or threes or fours. He turned back to the cover and examined it. 'You shouldn't be reading this, Dave. It's for dykes.'

'Get rid of it,' Seumas said.

'What you on about?' Dave said.

'It's filth.' The presence was all round him, heavy as stone, overwhelmingly disgusting and vile.

'You joking?'

Seumas looked from face to face. They were regarding him curiously. He found he was gripping with both hands the forestock of his AK47. He made himself produce a sort of smile. 'Yeah, just a joke.' He let go of the gun. 'Stolly,' he said. 'Do you know what's going on? With Goddard, I mean?'

Stolly pushed the magazine back to Dave. Then he said, addressing the whole table as if in private anticipation of

some tantalising pleasure, 'Reckon we might soon be on our way.'

3

Suter spent most of the afternoon in the woods on the northern side of the village, sheltering under a camouflaged nylon cape. The brim of his waxed cotton hat protected the eyepieces of his binoculars from the rain whenever, through gaps between the trees, he chose to resume his study of the village. Now and then he got up to move cautiously about: to stretch his legs, to urinate, once to defecate. At three o'clock he ate some tuna, then spooned apricots from a tin. The litter he returned to his pack.

It was near this spot, on Sunday, that he had left an apple core behind. Over there: that was roughly where Muriel had surprised him, coming through the trees with her basket.

Just before I found you I was praying for a miracle.

That's what she had said. He remembered her words; had felt no need to commit them to his notebook. And he remembered what he had heard outside the hospital. It had haunted him ever since. *That old woman … said … you was an angel from heaven.* St Michael the Archangel, protector of the faithful. Prince of the celestial armies. Walking in the ways of righteousness, a dazzling vision of refulgent light.

Despite the scabs left by windscreen glass and brambles on his skin, he was beginning to doubt the truth of any of

it. His mind felt as if it were unravelling, just as it had when he had wandered the land, a homeless tatterdemalion, his sanity overwhelmed by isolation.

But his solitude had not started with the plague. It was genetic, had resided in him always: was part and parcel of his earliest memories. In its company he had traversed these woods as a child, his apparent passion for bird-watching a mere ruse allowing him to spend more time on his own. Even then he had been inclined to invisibility and camouflage, to keep his distance.

He would never forget his first pair of prismatic binoculars, army surplus Kershaws. He remembered the odour and the crimson felt lining of their solid hide case, their angular, tropicalised weight and substance, the ravishing quality of the image they conveyed to his wondering eyes. Above all he remembered discovering the sense of safety they conferred. They simultaneously brought the world closer and kept it at bay. Their glamorised version of reality was cleaner than the original, simpler and easier to contend with.

Using them then, what, indeed, would he have made of this future, this wet and decidedly unrefulgent Tuesday, had they been able to see that far ahead?

He took another swig of water. Smoke was still issuing from the embers of one of the barns in the farmyard on the western side of the Manor. It was rising diagonally into the rain, drifting away from him and to the left. Apart from this, there was no movement in the village, no sign whatever of human life. Perhaps the rain was keeping everybody indoors.

The other thought had already occurred to him. The trail he had followed back here had been made by one man,

travelling at speed. This, undoubtedly, had been the second man in the kitchen last night. Suter estimated that he had arrived in the village at about ten-thirty this morning, three hours ahead of his own arrival. Those three hours would have given Bex time enough to take his leave. The fact that there was now no sign of people might be very simple to understand.

However, the barn had been burning for twelve hours at least. Maybe Bex had not waited. Maybe he was long gone. Maybe, Suter thought, when he finally got to examine the ashes, he would find the forty-seven bodies of the villagers there.

No more than eight of the original fourteen gang-members remained. He had to account for them all. If he left even one alive, or if Bex had already departed, Suter could kiss goodbye to his house for ever.

He looked again at his watch. Nearly three hours till dusk.

In the bungalow last night he had found a polythene mattress cover which he had cut up and adapted to protect the L85. Tied at either end with string, the rifle now lay in the autumn leaves at his side. Rain had gathered in the folds of plastic. This weapon would prove his principal ally in the task that might lie ahead. He wished he could have brought the Kalashnikov as well, but there was only so much he could carry.

Suter was sitting cross-legged under his cape, motionless but for the regular rise and fall of his chest. For the first time today he felt perfectly calm. His very posture lent him control, poise, tranquillity.

Even he did not fully realise how much, like the dogs who competed for his space, he had reverted to type. For

tens of thousands of years men just like him had roamed the forests of northern Europe. His intelligence had become again a hunter's intelligence, forward-thinking, self-reliant, endlessly receptive to subtle patterns and change. He had regained the ancestral faculty of patience. Lying up in dense vegetation, he might have to wait half a day for the correct moment to shoot.

The rain did not cease. It pattered on the cape, on his bracken-clad hat, on all the complex surfaces of the woods around him. He allowed his thoughts to disconnect. His eyes were open. He was aware of his surroundings, yet he dozed.

A faint rustle of dead leaves revealed the nearby presence of a bank vole. He saw it, russet and grey, emerging to squat on a hazel root, sniffing at a minute sample of his air. The whiskers twitched. Suter's smell meant nothing specific: only unfamiliarity, hence danger. The tiny, bulging eye-beads could register only myopic vagueness. Suter was colossal, a mountain, the Kamakura Buddha, far too big to comprehend. The vole's life comprised a string of vast, unimaginable terrors, any of which might crystallise at the instant of death into an owl, a kestrel, a cat, a stoat or weasel. Taking no chances, it dived for cover.

Birds came and went: two jays, collecting nuts; a party of tits, among them the needle-thin calls of goldcrests. A treecreeper was with them. Unaware of his presence, it clung for a few confident seconds to the ash-stole three feet from his face.

Suter's consciousness drifted like the smoke from the barn, across the village and the soft Tudor chimneys of the

Manor. Detached, nowhere, the hunter meshed with the prey.

All. He was fated to account for them all.

To his surprise, he noticed that the daylight had already started to go. He became aware that his legs had fallen asleep. He uncrossed them, stretched them out, massaged the muscles.

He momentarily bared his watch to the rain. Two hours had flown by. Two hours of Seiko time, a few minutes of his.

Though he was not hungry, he decided to take another meal, since he did not know when next he might. From his pack he produced a foil sachet marked *CHICKEN TIKKA 200 GMS: EAT OR DESTROY BEFORE 20-JUL-2019* and, below this, *PROPERTY OF MINISTRY OF DEFENCE*. He took out his spoon and broke the seal. According to the label, the contents should have become toxic over ten years ago. Military rations seemed permanently resistant to decay. Possibly to digestion, also. He had always liked that phrase, 'eat or destroy'.

To get rid of the taste he ate one of his own apples and a couple of glacier mints. Afterwards he brushed his teeth and spat white foam into the leaves. He concealed it from view and, crouching now, put away his dental kit.

He stood up and took a few paces towards the edge of the wood, confident that in the waning light he would be even harder to see from the village. If they were still around they would be expecting him, of that he was sure.

He leaned on the trunk of a young oak to steady his hands. The Dialyt's circular field travelled from one building to the next. Touchless, noiseless, it lingered about the leaded casements of the Manor and on the doors and

downstairs windows of the houses near the river. It inspected the remains of the barn, four hundred yards away. It tarried at the church tower and, over to the right, at the escarpment where on Sunday he had fired those first three shots.

Its lateral passage revealed its edges as somewhat convex, an artefact of the Zeiss roof-prism system. Suter's heartbeat was slow and steady, as solid and reliable as the binocular in his grasp. At Baldwin's Lane, looking out of the window at the men arriving in the lorry, he had been the pursued.

Now the tables were turned.

In scanning the rear of the houses along the Chorleywood road, he almost missed the light. He back-tracked, and there it was: the first glimmer of an oil lamp, in a kitchen window and the adjoining glass of the door. Soon a second light appeared, and a third, and a fourth. As the darkness grew, many other, similarly dim and yellow, lights began to appear. Open curtains were drawn together. A halogen lamp showed downstairs in the Manor.

Suter returned to his pack. With his hand cupped over the lens, he quickly tested his torch. Temporarily doffing his hat, he removed the cape, shook it, and folded it away. He checked the magazine in his Browning and refastened the holster. He checked his two boxes of 5.56 millimetre ammunition and put them in his jacket. He checked the bandolier, heavy with Webley high-power shells, and fastened the shotgun crosswise across the top of his pack.

'You're really going to do it, then.'

'I am.'

He was as if standing on the edge of a precipice high above the crawling sea. The imp of vertigo was dragging

him forward, urging him to fall. A sturdy breeze of self preservation, bringing ocean salt and the smell of weed, was pushing him back.

The decision had been made last night, in the moonlight. Nothing remained to debate. There could be no question of changing his mind.

'Now this.'

He struggled into his pack and locked the alloy buckle at his waist.

'And this.'

He stooped and picked up the L85. He unfastened the knots at either end, slid away the polythene sheath and crammed it in his pocket. Guitar-fashion, he set the sling over his shoulder. The weapon hung loose, balanced, the grips ready to hand.

He was ready. He straightened his shoulders, just as he had on the escarpment on Sunday afternoon. Ahead now, below, horizonless, lay the longed-for gulf of suicide and release, of perdition and oblivion, the sea of nirvana.

His mud-caked boots, in travelling forward, towards the village, stepped without hesitation over the edge.

* * *

He approached using every scrap of cover and making detours to avoid exposure to the most obvious points of vantage, such as the church tower. During the afternoon he had already chosen a relatively isolated cottage, white-rendered, with a tiled roof, standing in a plot screened on the Manor House side by a privet hedge.

A sprung wicket gate gave access from the meadow. He shut it behind him and eased the catch into place, the horizontal muzzle of his shotgun almost touching a pane of

the small, aluminium-framed greenhouse. This end of the garden was given over to tilled rows of leeks, sprouts, onions, the feathery fronds of carrots. Like Suter's own, the runner bean frame had not yet been taken down. The leaves, glowing yellow, disembodied, seemed to stand forward in the dusk.

His burdened form passed before them and along the concrete slabs set like stepping-stones in the turf path. Moth-like, he was drawn to the illuminated window at the side of the house. Trespassing on the flowerbed, he put his face, sooty with cork, very close to the frame. A scent of nicotiana rose from the turned earth at his feet. The window was steamy. From within Suter thought he detected the smell of cooking cabbage.

He grasped the L85 with both hands and risked a peep into the room.

An oil lamp, brass-bowled, with a white glass shade, stood on a table just inside the window. The table had been set for a meal. Before he pulled back, he glimpsed through the mist a single place-mat surrounded by steel cutlery, a side-plate, a jug of water, a bowl of pears and apples, a rolled napkin in a wooden ring.

When he next looked, someone was sitting at the table: a spare, elderly man, white-haired, with glasses, wearing a blue cardigan with leather-clad buttons. His paler blue shirt lay open at the collar. As Suter watched, he conveyed a forkful of food to his mouth. He seemed to be concentrating on something out of sight, perhaps an open book.

Suter let him swallow before he tapped twice on the glass with the middle finger of his left hand.

The man jumped in his seat, dropping his knife and fork. Shrinking back, he stared with undisguised terror at the apparition in his window. In a desperate, inadequate attempt at reassurance, Suter raised the palm of his left hand, then held the index finger across his lips. He pointed with urgent motion along the house wall, towards the back door.

For a moment Suter thought the poor old chap was going to collapse, but no. Evidently he was made of stronger stuff. He pushed back his chair, turned away from the table and headed across the room.

Suter moved to the rear porch and the old man's distorted image appeared in the figured glass of the door.

* * *

'There's nothing else for it, Mel,' Fernihough said, yet again. He was sitting at his kitchen table, leaning on one elbow and regarding without appetite his evening meal.

He looked up. His wife was in no mood for eating either. She had just bathed their two small daughters and put them to bed, while he had finished the cooking and served the casserole. The oil lamp at one end of the table was burning steadily. He noticed as if for the first time the peculiar ruby-red refractions it produced in the bottle of claret that he had set out but failed to open.

Even in the worst days of the plague, Fernihough could not remember having felt so weary, so heartsick, so impotent. He could no longer even think properly. Lack of sleep had left him exhausted mentally as well as physically. He had gone over the logic again and again and again. It was irrefutable. He and his family had to get out of the village or die.

For the past seventeen days, the whole population had had to assemble in the church each morning at nine, to be counted. Bex or Danzo would usually be there, with several others. Sometimes Bex would mount the pulpit and deliver a mock sermon. Today, at noon, there had been a second and unexpected convocation, at which Bex had summarily announced that, as from one o'clock, no one was to be allowed outdoors. Anybody seen outside without his permission would be shot. With that, Bex had made arrangements for milking the herd and dismissed the congregation.

The Council had done nothing to defend the village. It was ironic that the autocratic Philip Davies, who alone had been responsible not only for the ethos of the Council but also for the decision to keep open the lane to Watford and hence precipitate the arrival of Bex; it was ironic and also apposite that Philip should now be the victim of his councillors' pusillanimity.

Ever since his arrival here, twelve years and more ago, Fernihough had felt himself squeezed out. Despite his best efforts, he now saw that he had been unable to disguise his lack of belief. He had worked hard, done whatever they asked, and shown only kindness to his neighbours, yet it was not enough: it could never be enough.

'Fuck them, that's what I say.'

Melissa said, 'They're not all like Goddard.'

'If they side with him, then they are.'

Later, she said, 'What have you decided, Leigh?'

During the afternoon they had discussed at length the chances of escape. If they travelled at night, carrying the girls in papooses, they might get far enough away by morning to evade the coming massacre.

Throughout Monday, Fernihough had tried to enlist help. He had expended all his powers of persuasion to no effect. He had spoken jointly or severally with James Semple, Trevor Grady, Mick Brice, Bryan Hockaday, Alan Fenwick, Jason Matcham, Paul Aziz, Mike Wallace, George Abercrombie. Only Matcham and Aziz had declared a willingness to resist. Semple had actually threatened to report the conversation to the Council, on which he served.

Fernihough said, 'We're going.'

'What time shall we start?'

'As soon as we can.' He clasped her left hand.

She said, 'You'd better eat your supper, whether you want it or not.'

If anyone tried to escape, Bex would shoot Philip. That was the threat. But Fernihough believed Philip was already dead. When the final massacre came, everyone would be killed anyway.

'Yes,' he said, as if speaking to himself. 'As soon as we can.'

He heard the knocking on the glass pane of the kitchen door, but did not realise what it meant. The idea that anyone could be outside, that anyone could have defied Bex and his curfew, lay so far out of the realm of the possible that Fernihough at first attributed it to some inanimate cause. But Melissa was already crossing the room. She opened the door. As he got to his feet, Fernihough recognised the soft voice of old Sidney Pellew, who lived alone on the other side of the village.

Sidney came fully inside and Melissa shut the door behind him.

'What is it?' Fernihough said.

‘He’s here.’

‘Who?’

‘He’s at my house, man. Come and see.’

4

Through the rain and gloom, Fernihough saw the front elevation of Sidney Pellew’s cottage, clad in dark-leafed creeper, materialising on the left. The rear garden looked out towards Frith Wood, which was where Sidney had said the man had told him he had spent the afternoon.

The front door swung open at Sidney’s touch. He parked his umbrella. ‘He’s in the kitchen,’ he told Fernihough, over his shoulder.

Fernihough had visited this house before. He knew the layout of the downstairs rooms. He knew their characteristic smell: not unpleasant, but musty and old-fashioned, the smell of a house occupied by an elderly man of frugal habits. As the front door closed, Fernihough recognised in addition the odour of cooked Brussels sprouts. Light from the half-open door ahead threw shadows towards him down the hallway.

Worry and exhaustion had left him delirious. He was unprepared for the shock of seeing, seated at the pine table in the cosy, lamplit kitchen, the imposing form of a large and well-built man with the aspect of a guerilla, a partisan, a commando comprising a force of one. The man exuded independence. His presence at Sidney’s table was inexplicable: he belonged outdoors, doing whatever he did out in the weather, out among the trees.

His lucent, intelligent grey eyes looked up from pale orbits in an otherwise darkened face. His beard, shaggy and dark blond like his unkempt hair, had also been deliberately dirtied. Thorn or bramble scratches covered his face and hands. Fernihough's gaze became momentarily lost in the disruptive pattern of his jacket, camouflaged in grey and mauve and brown and buff. It looked three-dimensional, mimicking natural vegetation so cleverly that the man sitting there seemed for an instant not a man at all. Then Fernihough saw the assault rifle lying on the table in front of him.

He was rising to his feet. He was at least a head taller than Fernihough. His trousers matched the jacket, and were furnished with large, flap-topped pockets on the thighs. A webbing belt encircled his waist and bore, on his right hip, a pistol in a chrome leather holster.

'John,' Sidney said, 'this is Leigh Fernihough. I've already told him what you told me. Leigh, this is John Suter.'

Fernihough took the man's outstretched hand. The grip felt warm and dry. He gave an impression of strength and calm, and suddenly Fernihough allowed himself a glimmer of hope. It had happened: after all the speculation, the mysterious gunman, the supposed saviour of the village, heaven sent, had returned. For it was this man who had given the Glock to Muriel, and he who had shot the two on Sunday. And according to what he had already told Sidney, he had disposed of four more of them yesterday.

That meant that only seven remained. He had also told Sidney that he had been led here by the discovery of Martin Wilton's body in the river. Had he not found it, he would never have known about Shanley at all.

He had lived alone ever since the plague. Except for finding Martin's body, he had had no prior contact with Bex, which made his actions on Sunday even harder to understand. Unless, as many of the villagers believed, he really had been sent in answer to their prayers.

Fernihough asked Sidney whether they might all sit down. Sidney showed them both into his living room, where the curtains had already been drawn and a fire was burning in the grate. He offered drinks, which both refused.

'My boots,' said the man in camouflage, with absurd incongruity, as he settled at one end of the sofa. They were muddy.

'Forget it,' Sidney said.

Fernihough knew then that he must be dreaming. Ten minutes ago he had been sitting with his wife, planning their midnight escape. Now, it seemed, he had been catapulted here. In his delirium he hardly understood how or why. He had not even spoken directly to Sidney of resistance. Someone else must have told him. Paul Aziz, perhaps, or Jason.

The man on the sofa started speaking. His voice sounded educated and reasonable, if rather loud and unmodulated, perhaps because he was no longer used to addressing others.

He was asking questions which Sidney answered one by one. What was Bex's routine, if any? Was there a daily roll-call? How many able-bodied men remained? How many villagers had been wounded?

Fernihough saw that this odd, intense person had been turned by the past twelve years into a being never anticipated by God or Darwin. Humans were social

creatures, tied by innumerable threads of convention, by others' expectations. For this man there had been no others. He had lived in isolation, so much so that he had almost ceased to be human at all. His personality had been distilled, made transparent. He was the ultimate product of the plague.

He retained full control of himself, yet he was also lost. The real John Suter was elsewhere: he was stuck in the plague, in the last months of 2016 and the first of 2017. Before his independence, before his survival-guilt, he might have been diffident, self-critical, perhaps even shy.

Suter now expressed the view that Bex was probably waiting for Steve and the other two to return from Watford. Since Bex would be supposing that they still had the lorry, he would not wait very long. 'Noon tomorrow. Something like that. Maybe sooner. In any event, we can't hang about.' He turned to Sidney. 'About your head man. Are you sure he's still alive?'

'No,' Fernihough said, before Sidney could reply. 'I think they've already shot him.'

'And his daughter? Helen?'

'No one's seen her since Sunday.'

'Where does Bex usually sleep?'

'In the Manor House.'

'How many of the others sleep there?'

'I don't know.'

'Who else is in the Manor House? Which of the villagers?'

'Just Helen.'

Suter contemplated the fire. Then he looked at Fernihough. 'Sidney tells me you're one of the few brave men in the village. Can you use a shotgun?'

‘Just about.’

‘Is there anyone else who might help us?’

Fernihough thought at once of Jason Matcham and Paul Aziz. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Can we count on them?’

‘Yes.’

* * *

Danzo was sitting in a soft, white armchair in the music room, alone with Bex, listening to dreary motets by Bach, poured at low volume from the studio monitors on either side of the fireplace.

Bex liked this stuff. He said he found it soothing. Danzo preferred rock, though the system here didn’t much lend itself to that.

Dinner was nearly ready. Danzo could detect the aroma of chateaubriant wafting along the corridor. Ten days ago they had ordered the slaughter of Shanley’s prize bull.

He lit another Marlboro and drew its calming smoke deep into his lungs. Ever since running away from that house by the river, he had been growing increasingly anxious. He knew he ought not to have returned to Shanley, for that would only have drawn St Michael, or whatever he was, straight back to Bex. But what had been the alternative? To remain on his own?

He had related everything to Bex: what he had found and what had happened at the house, the true appearance of Pinch’s killer, his own perfunctory resistance and the way he had fled. So far, for the benefit of the others, Danzo had managed to keep up a front. He was not sure why he had described Suter to Seumas as ‘all in white, with wings’. There had been no opportunity afterwards to set the irony

straight and, far from disabusing his disciples, Bex had encouraged them in this vision. Danzo could not work out why. Seumas, especially, was becoming increasingly fearful, and his fear was beginning to affect the rest. And even Bex, Bex himself, seemed to prefer this depiction of their enemy.

Danzo had been drinking for much of the afternoon, but he was by no means drunk. Indeed, his mind seemed to be working with unusual clarity. The alcohol was helping to hold his anxieties at bay. It was allowing him to savour the pleasurable sensations of the moment, of sitting here in comfort, of sharing Bex with no one.

Among other novel drinks, Stolly had found a crate of porter at the mill. He and Coco had brought it over to the Manor. Danzo had never tasted it before: black, rather bitter, with a foamy head the colour of hay.

Bex held his bottle up to the light.

Danzo studied him ambivalently. Trudging back this morning alone and wet, he had realised that he hated Bex almost as much as he craved him.

Still looking at the bottle, Bex said, 'It's coming. Can you feel it?'

'Feel what?'

'The absolute.' He turned to Danzo. 'You've got no idea what I'm talking about, have you?'

Danzo knew very well what he was talking about. Bex had in the past voiced grandiose, incomprehensible theories about the 'absolute'. According to himself, he was in the process of metamorphosing into a 'superior being', *the* superior being, the first and only.

'The Antichrist,' Bex said. 'That's me. At least, they think so.'

‘Who?’

‘Steve. Carl. Gil. I just felt it in the air. The chilly breath of the absolute. Those three won’t be coming back. And I’ve got the blame.’ He fixed Danzo with a curious gaze. ‘Because now,’ he said, ‘I’ve become Belial himself.’

Belial was one of the principal demons, Bex had said, in *Paradise Lost*, but by transference, and in his normal conversation, Bex used ‘Belial’ as another name for Satan.

It was true, then, what Danzo had suspected. Bex had swallowed his own propaganda. The New Order was no longer an invention. In his own head, at least, the Golden Dawn had been realised. Bex and Satan had merged, become one being, with a single goal.

Bex said, ‘Are you ready to cross swords with the Big G?’

He meant it. He meant every word.

‘Speak to me, Daniel.’

Bex never called him that. Danzo’s mouth felt dry. He lifted his own bottle and took a gulp.

Bex said, ‘Will you take your machete to an archangel, if I ask you to?’

‘Are you talking about him? Is he the absolute, like what you said?’

‘Who is “he”?’

‘Suter. The bloke.’

‘The bloke. Ah yes.’

They had posted watch for a stranger and would shoot on sight. That was the reason for the curfew.

‘I meant God, as a matter of fact, not his poxy emissary. The God who created existence and holds it in his sway. The God of Boredom. That one.’

Danzo remembered again his thoughts in the moonlit drawing room, the sensation that everything was an illusion projected by God. 'Are you saying this bloke's really St Michael?'

'What else?'

'This is me you're talking to, Bex.'

Bex gave a dreamy smile. 'You mustn't take life so literally, my dear Danzo. That way you'll never see the wood for the trees. Old Muriel, now, she saw it. Crossing the bar. *In extremis.* She told us he was an angel. And she was right. She divined the essence of what's happening here. Extraordinary, I'd say. If we hadn't kicked her about like that she'd never have twigged it.'

'What … what's happening here, then?'

'Can't you see? Even now?'

Danzo shook his head.

'We've almost brought him out of hiding. The absolute. God. Whatever you want to call him. He's on his way to us. Tonight. To do battle. If he wins, we fry below. If he loses, everything up here changes. Whatever happens, it means no more boredom. No more … Helen.'

Now Danzo began to understand, and, understanding, saw his uncertainty resolved. The question had been simple. Was he prepared to follow Bex, even down there?

'He'll get through,' Bex said. 'He might already have. He's clever, you know. But not quite clever enough. My guess is we'll be leaving tomorrow, as planned. Once he's dead, that is. Once we've killed him for good and all. You can do the honours, if you like, with your gleaming blade. Are you up for it?'

Danzo did not answer.

'Are you up for it or not? All the way?'

Yes. Danzo would follow. Wherever he went. Even unto Acheron.

Bex smiled again. He had read Danzo's face.

'What about the villagers?'

'Oh, I think I'll start that off myself. We'll line them up in the pews as if for the count. I'll have this little beauty in the pulpit with me.' He indicated the Calico, lying beside him on the sofa. 'It'll do wonders for the sermon. You and the others'd better stand in the north aisle, so you don't shoot each other.' He exaggeratedly clenched his fists, stretched out his arms, and yawned.

Danzo said, quite evenly now, 'And Helen?'

'She can watch.'

'Then what?'

'Who knows? Who cares? Or, to adopt your idiom, Danzo, my fine fellow, who the fuck gives a flying shit?'

'She ain't planning to recant, then.'

'That she ain't.' Bex raised his bottle to his mouth and drained what was left. Then he said, 'You could be right.'

'About what?'

'The Anointed One.'

'Who's that?'

'Helen.'

'I didn't say nothing.'

'Ah, but you implied.'

'What did I imply?'

'That my little project is unfinished. That I have failed. I suppose we could always take her with us. But we ought to finish it here. After the service.'

'How do you mean?'

'We're having a celebratory bonfire, aren't we?'

This was becoming a custom.

‘Suggestion,’ Bex said, sitting up in his seat with new energy. ‘We furnish ourselves with sledgehammers. Axes. Chainsaws. We get what wood we can from the church. Anything carved. Sacred stuff. Pew-ends, the rood-screen, crucifixes, all that shite. Then we trash the hymnbooks. Et cetera. The big Bible. The lectern too. Make everything into a big untidy heap. We tie her to a stake in the middle. Maybe dress her up in armour. Wire some saucepan-lids together. Colanders for her tits. Put a saucepan on her head with the handle pointing backwards. Make her into Joan of Arc. What do you say?’

‘Sounds good,’ Danzo said, wondering who Joan of Arc was.

‘Give her something to be saintly about. She wants to be martyred, after all. Maybe we’ll give her a good seeing-to first. Each and every one of us.’ Again he looked at Danzo. ‘Any who feel inclined, that is.’ Bex picked up the Calico and pretended to examine it. ‘I meant to ask you, Danzo. Have you noticed Seumas?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Looking your way. Making sheep’s eyes.’ Bex aimed at the piano. Danzo thought he was going to pull the trigger there and then, to create a cyclone of splintered wood and metal and bullets impinging on strings and wires to produce insane music, condensing into a few chaotic seconds the whole future career of the instrument. But he didn’t.

Danzo was not sure how, or even if, he was meant to answer.

Bex said, ‘Would you like to tup him?’

‘I —’

‘You can’t tell me the idea hasn’t crossed your mind. A boy like that. He’s plainly gagging for it.’ Bex put the gun down. ‘There’ll be no objections from me, provided you’re discreet. He’d be good for you. Get rid of those excess phosphates, if nothing else.’ He took up the banjo opener and levered the cap from another bottle. ‘Anyway, I’ll leave you with the thought. You know where his room is.’

So stunned was Danzo by Bex’s proposal that he was unable to speak. Given what had just passed between them, it was abominable. It was proof that Bex had never cared for him. He felt a rush of anger. His vision even blurred. Danzo was not like the other members of the Order. He was Bex’s second, privy to inside information. Without Danzo, the Order could never have formed and would be unable to operate. There was also the matter of Bex’s public attitude towards homosexuality, something that Danzo had always left undisturbed.

Danzo felt hatred fulminating in his breast. He did not want to acknowledge what Bex had, obviously, already divined: that he had indeed, for some time past, been musing upon the forbidden subject of Seumas. Could nothing be kept secret?

Bex was following the changes in his expression with interest. A glint from the halogen lamp beside the sofa struck one of his gold earrings. The widow’s peak of his dark, cap-like, closely shaven hair seemed to have become more defined, like the sideburns and the goatee beard. His face was forming into an ever more mephistophelean smirk. Danzo felt his right hand involuntarily tense, as if it were about to reach under the looseness of his brushed cotton shirt and snatch the .38 from the holster at his armpit.

The room fell silent. Danzo had almost forgotten about, ceased to hear, Bex's choice of background music.

The disc transport slipped into standby mode, awaiting the next beam of instructions from the handset at Bex's side.

'*"Komm, Jesu, komm!"*' Bex said. 'That last one. I like that. Catchy. Like the plague.' He raised the handset and, pointing it at the plate-glass shelves of equipment, pressed a single key and switched everything off. 'Do you think he's going to come, Danzo? Tonight?'

'You're out of your fucking mind,' Danzo said.

'That's a distinct possibility.'

Suddenly Danzo saw that he had been duped. Yet again, Bex had run rings around him. 'Belial, my arse,' he said and, with a grudging smile, felt, despite himself, his anger ebbing away. Bex's own smile came back then, perfectly sane, with a flash of his white, even teeth.

'You nearly had me going there, Bex.'

'I meant what I said about Seumas.'

Coco's yell carried along the corridor.

'Chow time,' Bex said, obviating Danzo's need to reply, and hoisted himself from the deep upholstery of the sofa.

* * *

When Danzo sat down to eat, he wondered whether he might be drunker than he had thought. He looked with surprise at the elaborate preparations for the meal: a pure white cloth in heavy linen, stiff with starch; matching napkins at each place setting, crystal goblets and silver knives and forks and spoons; and four elegant silver candelabra, each with four white candles, just lit.

He turned to Bex, who was already pulling a bread-roll to pieces. 'What's all this?'

'It's our last supper,' Bex said, watching for a reaction from Helen.

There was none. She was at her appointed seat on Bex's left, hands in her lap, staring vacantly, straight ahead, straight at Danzo.

He had never seen her in a dress before: this also was Bex's doing. She was wearing make-up, too. Eye shadow. Lipstick. Perfume. In the candlelight she nearly looked like a woman again, as she had on that first afternoon, on September the twenty-ninth, that windless day of hazy sun, when Bex had first presented to his disciples the peaceful vision of Shanley and vowed to drive from its boundaries all trace of their enemy.

Helen and her husband had been among the first to emerge in greeting. It had taken Bex, and his HK53, no more than a few seconds to set them straight.

Danzo regarded the swell of her bosom. His eyes followed the line of her dress, observed the necklace at her throat. He had a vision of Bex standing behind her, fixing the clasp, leaning forward as if to whisper something in her ear, then remaining silent. Much as Danzo had on Sunday night, when helping Bex with the ephod.

The ephod. The New Order. It was all bullshit.

Excrementum tauri. And it was all real, and profound, and symbolic of greater things. Every bit of it. Like the angel. And like this, like the way Bex had made Helen get herself up. Danzo felt wired. Not just drunk. He was strung out, floating, giddy with some aphrodisiac excitement he had never known before.

He glanced in anticipation over his shoulder, towards the corridor and the kitchen.

Stolly was the best cook, but Coco came a pretty close second. Danzo assumed he was at this moment being helped by Seumas. And by Matt. The other two, Dave and Stolly, were elsewhere: watching for Suter, one on the church tower with the goggles, the other overlooking the lane from Watford.

Even with her hair shorn, or perhaps because of it, and even after everything Bex had been doing to her, Danzo could see how Helen might yet appeal to the male psyche. Looking at her now, he realised that, while gazing appreciatively, while noticing her perfume and the smoothness of her neck, he had really been mindful, was mindful still, in a blurred, off-centre way, of Seumas. 'Would you like to tup him?' Bex had said, placing the word, like a black pebble, at the apex of Danzo's depraved and gelatinous mind. Bex had opened his fingers and let it go, let it drift slowly down, and now, with the image of Seumas helping in the kitchen, the pebble had reached the bottom and come to rest.

Of course Danzo would like to tup him. He had been restrained until now only by Bex. But Bex had, five minutes ago, bestowed his blessing on the idea.

Though he was trying, Danzo could not analyse his feelings. He said, 'If this is our last supper, which one of us is Judas?'

'That remains to be seen,' Bex said. 'As the cat remarked when it shat upon the carpet.'

'What cat?' said Danzo, seeing again the greenish, unearthly glow of Suter's tabby.

‘You’re pissed,’ was all Bex said in reply. He reached out and lifted Helen’s chin. Danzo noticed that she no longer shuddered when he touched her. ‘Speaking of the Last Supper, do you really know your gospel, my little food-taster?’

She remained inert. As if she had answered affirmatively, he said, ‘In that case, you’ll be familiar with the central postulate of its protagonist, the noted dialectician and mystic, Mr J H Christ. Concerning betrayal. Of which Judas is the apotheosis and the eternal symbol. Betrayal. Our Redeemer thinks it’s fundamental. Not only to relations between people, but also, and more especially, to relations between man and God. Without betrayal, he says, there can be no release and, therefore, no freedom. Without betrayal there can be no redemption. This he made plain before yielding up his ghost. “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Remember?’ Bex let go of her chin. She took the piece of bread-roll, to which he had added a chunk of butter, and put it in her mouth.

Danzo had not understood what he had said, but thought it probably nonsense. Bex seemed unusually expansive tonight, almost happy, and Danzo suspected that he too had become drunk. His dark eyes were shining. He looked more beautiful, more magnificent, more lustrous than ever.

It was impossible to be angry with him for long. His outrageousness was part of his allure, like his independence and his intellect. All were bound up with his physical beauty. To tup Seumas would be vicariously to tup Bex himself. To do all the things with Seumas that Bex had once done with him, to do all the things that, since Byfield, Danzo had only been able to do in his head, to do them at

last, soon, tonight, with a good-looking boy who was 'plainly gagging for it': this was the genie that Bex had released from Danzo's bottle. It was expanding still, looming over him, enveloping him in its dark-green miasma, raising the pitch of his excitement. He had already left discretion behind. He no longer had any choice. The genie was Bex. Its stuff, its intoxicating, gaseous tentacles, had invaded and infected every cell of his body.

This room, with its low ceiling, with its heavy beams and stone floor, was at once timeless and ancient. No wonder Bex liked it so much. The lamps and candles were illuminating a present that belonged simultaneously to the far future and to the distant past. Anything might happen this evening: terror, vengeance, requital for all the madness since Byfield. The angel might show up, or he might not. Stolly or Dave might kill him, or they might just fire the warning shots that would alert Bex to his arrival.

Danzo put a hand to his brow and ran it across the bristly resistance of his scalp. He looked up and encountered Helen's eyes. Still chewing, she was again staring straight ahead, straight through him.

There was no doubt about it. Danzo was drunk. He should have been afraid, like the three in the kitchen, like Coco, and Matt, and especially Seumas. He should have been afraid, but he wasn't.

'You see,' Bex went on, addressing Helen, disregarding Danzo, 'human beings are essentially apes. As soon as you know how apes behave, human nature becomes understandable. On the one hand, apes are social. On the other, they are self-seeking and venal. One ape will betray another for nothing more than a quick poke in the bushes. Or for thirty pieces of silver.' He studied her for a moment

before eating a piece of bread himself. 'Jesus knew this. He couldn't escape it, because he was human.'

Danzo said, 'But you can.'

Bex apparently failed to hear: for at that instant Coco, coming through the doors with his helpers, heralded the arrival of the food.

5

The smell of the wet, invisible foliage of these yews reminded Suter of the garden of his childhood in Gerrard's Cross. He had almost forgotten the faint pungency of yew needles, subtly disinfecting the surrounding air and so hinting at the toxicity of the foliage. *Taxus.* That was the botanical name. *Taxus baccata.* 'Baccata' meaning 'set with pearls', referring presumably to the unripe arils. How did he know this? Why did he have no control of his head? Twice a year, in May and August, the yew hedges in that far-off, sunlit garden had been trimmed. He remembered the sound of his father's shears and could see again the clippings as they tumbled to the groundsheet below. The oil responsible for the smell had been used in cancer therapy. And now, after thirty years and more, this selfsame chemical was again stimulating his olfactory membranes, his sense of smell, his whole cerebral cortex, generating spontaneous and invasive associations, visions, sounds.

His sanity was on the verge of crumbling into dust, dust as fine as the powdery soil under his father's yews.

In an attempt to regain himself, Suter stopped moving forward.

'What is it?' Aziz whispered.

'Nothing.' Suter raised the night sight.

'See anything?'

'No. Are you sure he's up there?'

'I can't say I am.'

Suter could not get over the sensation of being in the company of, still less cooperating with, another human being. He had known this Paul Aziz for less than two hours, but already liked him, liked him much better than the other one Fernihough had produced. He had lived in Britain since the age of two and spoke with a Midlands accent, Coventry or Leicester. About fifty, he was round-shouldered, but at least as tall as Suter, with glasses, and had lost most of his glossy black hair. From a couple of remarks he had made, even in the circumstances of the grim conference over Sidney's kitchen table, Suter had seen that he was funny as well as intelligent.

They reached the church porch and moved inside, out of the rain.

'Let me,' Aziz said, operating the latch on the iron-studded door so carefully that it made not the slightest noise. 'There's a couple of steps down.'

'OK.'

'Suppose he saw us?'

'Then he'd already have fired. Besides, he'll be looking the other way.'

'Maybe he's not there at all.'

Word that two of Bex's men had been posted guard had come from Jason Matcham's wife, who at six o'clock had watched them leaving the Manor carrying haversacks and

assault rifles. Since then they might have changed position, or gone back to Bex.

The man Suter had shot at and missed in his kitchen had been equipped with a Diurnox headset, probably Suter's own. Thus at least one of the guards might have night vision, perhaps both.

One of them had gone to the mill-house, which overlooked the lane from Watford. Fernihough and Matcham had undertaken to deal with him, while Suter and Aziz had set out for St Michael's and its tower.

The interior of the church was almost lightless. It smelled of stone, of musty hassocks and hymnbooks, of old wood polished with beeswax. The cool, tranquil air felt somehow spacious, as if Suter could feel the upward thrust of the pillars following through to the vault high above. In here, any sound would be attended by an echo.

During his childhood and adolescence Suter had visited the environs of the church several times, but he had never before set foot inside. He knew only the skin of the building: the flint facing, set in age-hardened cement; the three black dials and faded gilt numerals of the clock; the tarnished weathervane, revolving aimlessly and inaccurately in the breeze. He had been much taken with the four stone gargoyles, one at each corner of the tower, their cheeks produced forward into leaden spouts. Each of the demonic faces was different, hideous in its own way. They were part of the church, made and fixed by the same medieval craftsmen who had fashioned the gutters and downpipes and the leaden sheets on the roof; and they were also alien to it, sinister and profane, belonging to a parallel, much older tradition. Such visages might have figured in the occult ceremonial of the Rosicrucians or

Knights Templar. Blank-eyed, they spewed the tower's rainwater away into the half-points of the compass, where it vanished between the straightforward, cardinal dimensions of everyday life. Looking up at them with his new Kershaw 6×30s, seeing them for the first time, the innocent Suter had felt fear as well as wonder. There was more to Christianity than the morning assembly or the platitudes of Sunday school, and he had received an inkling then that he wanted no part of it.

The gargoyles, he now realised, made him think of the little soapstone man he had handed to Muriel. Even here, in God's house, the crinkled eyes were still laughing at him through the dark.

'Ready?' whispered Aziz.

'Yes.'

Suter kept close behind him. Aziz turned to the left, took half a dozen short paces, passed through an unseen archway. Finally he switched on the needle-thin beam of his torch. In Sidney's kitchen they had hastily improvised a cardboard shade and glued it to the lens.

The beam found the iron ring-handle of the narrow door to the tower. Suter began unlacing his boots.

Even more quietly than before, Aziz whispered, 'Are you still sure about this?'

'Yes.'

'I'm ready to do it. Or I'll come too. I've no love for Blackstock.'

'We'll keep to the plan.'

Suter placed his boots side-by-side and into them stuffed his socks. He gave the night sight to Aziz and unfastened the flap of his holster. Aziz, shouldering the L85, handed him the torch.

‘Don’t forget to count,’ Aziz said.

‘I won’t.’

‘See you in a bit, then. Good luck.’

The wall of the tower, massively thick, was pierced by six lancet windows open to the air. A cramped stairway ascended it anti-clockwise by means of eight flights, each with fourteen risers, bounded on Suter’s left by an iron handrail. His hand touched the rail. His bare left foot made contact with the dished stone of the first tread, and he began.

‘You’re going up in the world,’ he told himself.

He knew he mustn’t lose count.

‘Thirteen. Fourteen.’ The first turn: the first lancet, facing north over the valley, admitting damp air and the sound of rain.

‘Eighteen. Nineteen.’

He knew what awaited him at the top. Fernihough, Sidney, Matcham and Aziz had coached him exactly. He could visualise the beams of the belfry, the suspect floorboards, the cobwebs, the clock-case with its long-silent mechanism, the fallen sticks and droppings from the jackdaws’ nests. And then, the final short stairway to the roof: and out upon the oxidised leaden sheeting, contained by a battlement with lightning-rod and worm-eaten flagpole from which, long ago, had drooped the cross of St George. In daylight, they had told him, you could see to Watford and beyond.

‘Sixty-four.’

The handrail had become rickety. He moved even closer to the wall. Dry twigs littered the steps, occasionally paining the soles of his feet. From time to time he was unable to avoid breaking one. At the sound of the snap he

would pause, measuring it against the wind and rain, wait a few seconds, and cautiously resume.

'Ninety-nine. One hundred. And one. Two. Three.'

His head was coming level with the framework of timbers enclosing the bells. The biggest bell weighed twenty-three hundredweight, Matcham had said, and could be heard, on still evenings, as far away as Sarratt.

'Eleven. Twelve.'

Feeling with his toes for loose or rotten planks, Suter stepped on the platform of the belfry and reached in his jacket for the knife: a horn-handled carver with a ten-inch blade, taken from a boxed set in Sidney's sideboard. The grip felt flimsy, unbalanced, possibly unreliable. Suter mourned the loss of his own knife, orphaned in the brambles. 'Now there was a blade,' said the voice inside his head. He saw himself dribbling oil on the worn India stone in his workshop, the ritual preparation for the act of honing, making the knife so sharp it would slice a sheet of paper dangled in the air. And afterwards, on one mad April afternoon, he had fitted a 50× turret to his dissecting microscope to view the flawless edge he had made, ruler-straight, like that of a new razorblade fresh from its packet.

He disliked the idea of another man's knife, one over which he had had no control. Especially a domestic knife, meant for nothing more than carving the Sunday roast.

He edged forward. It was much too dark to see. Up here the night sight would be useless, unable to focus in the confined space, but it was with great reluctance that he had left it below. He drew out Aziz's torch and fleetingly pressed the button. The beam darted across the belfry. In the edge of his vision, on the left, he had gleaned a better idea of the cluster of massive domed shapes. Ahead he had

glimpsed more stairs, wooden this time, rising to a low, narrow doorway. The door, he thought, was standing ajar. The man behind it was armed and might be wearing a Diurnox headset.

Suter realised at last that he was terrified.

Why was he doing this? For himself? No. For Muriel, then? To prove what? That he was brave? Or for Helen, perhaps. His Helen, or the one in the Manor? The two were becoming the same.

'Get on with it.'

Yes: act now, before Fernihough and Matcham had had a chance to screw up with the other guard, Stolly. Before Stolly could fire a warning shot.

Suter continued to hesitate.

Had the door been closed, he was supposed to have tapped on it, drawn the curious guard forth. But it was open, a far more dangerous proposition. He had to gamble that his victim was looking elsewhere.

'Now. Do it now.'

And besides, wasn't this just what he wanted? The opportunity for heroic suicide?

When, with infinite slowness, he came out on the rain-lashed surface of the roof, Suter surmised that Matcham's wife had been mistaken, that no one was here.

Thick though the clouds were, the moon was somewhere behind them and the night was not completely black. Suter became conscious of the deeper darkness of the parapet. His gaze ranged along the crenellations, searching for the irregular shape of a standing man keeping watch northwards. There was none. None that he could see.

Suter wondered whether the man might be lurking somewhere behind the low, lead-covered slope of the

doorway. He turned his head from side to side, looking over his shoulders. Still nothing.

What had happened? Had Dave, David Blackstock, the man he was seeking, had he even been up here in the first place?

Fernihough had been unwilling to deal with Blackstock himself: for Blackstock had been one of the two recruits Bex had made here in Shanley on the day of his arrival. The other, named Terence Collins, was the youth whom Suter's rifle had decapitated on Sunday.

The rain seemed to be falling in diagonal sheets. Water trickled down Suter's neck as he stood there, immobilised by indecision. Above the ragged sound of the rain he could hear a steadier flow, coming from more than one direction, from each corner of the battlement: a pouring away, a smoothness suspended for a few seconds in space before splashing on the sett-lined channel far below. He could hear the gargoyles.

The sheet lead under his feet was strewn with wet leaves borne up here by autumn gales, trapped behind the parapet and left to decay. More were probably landing even now.

He was on the point of switching on the torch when, to his astonishment, almost directly across the roof, he saw a goggled face three-quarters turned away, bending forward, illuminated by the flame of a cigarette lighter. Although Blackstock's hand was cupped round the flame, it instantaneously died or was swept away on the wind.

The flame flickered into life a second time, just long enough to leave an orange spot, moving upwards and back. For a moment the spot glowed more brightly, then disappeared, sheltered by his fingers. His rifle, if he had one, must have been left leaning against the parapet.

Suter waited for the indirect glow of the second drag to guide his approach. His left hand grabbed something confusing: close-cropped hair, an ear, a buckle and part of the elastic webbing of the goggles. His right had already driven the point of the carving knife upwards, through several layers of clothing, a waxed cotton jacket and its lining, a sweater, a shirt, and onwards, deep into the right flank where the kidney lay.

As Suter extracted the blade there was a hoarse, garbled cry of indignation and surprise. He struck a second time, just as powerfully, higher up. The point drove slantwise through the ribcage, into the body cavity, into the lung. Simultaneously he pulled as hard as he could with his left hand. A clump of something, perhaps the ear itself, came free.

'What? What?' Blackstock shouted. 'You what …'

The delay before realisation, Suter's advantage of surprise, was suddenly terminated by an insane frenzy of resistance. Hot, slippery blood welled over Suter's hand: he was trying not to let go of the ribbed horn handle, but felt it beginning to slide from his grasp. His other hand, also bloody, now dropped the goggles. He had torn them wholesale from Blackstock's head. As the two men struggled, moving somewhat away from the parapet, Blackstock's fist struck Suter full in the face. Suter wildly attempted to find and seize Blackstock's errant forearm, but the next punch, much harder than the first, caught him on the left cheekbone. He lost his balance, slipped on wet leaves and, staggering backwards, still clutching the handle of the knife, brought the entire weight of his victim down with him.

There was a liquid quality to Blackstock's grunt. Even as Suter understood that the blade had snapped in two, as the knife-handle came uselessly away in his grasp, the back of his head struck the leaf-strewn leaden sheeting and he felt a rush of warm and viscous fluid on his neck.

Blackstock would have guessed by now that he had not merely been punched, but stabbed. He was on top of Suter, bearing down on him. His hands sought Suter's throat. He gave another retching grunt and more blood issued from his mouth.

'You … what …'

Use a knife, Suter had told Fernihough, *use a knife*, preaching what he himself had meant to practise, the slick, pre-emptive dispatch of two more of Bex's disciples. Not that he'd had any idea what he'd been talking about. In untrained, irresolute hands, a knife was neither quick nor silent. Instead it opened up a whole new world of horror.

Suter knew he was grunting too, fighting back, fighting for air, the taste of his victim's blood on his teeth and lips. He remembered his faithful Browning, far away, unreachable in its holster, unable to come to his rescue; never mind the noise of the shot, even if it brought all the demons running from hell, even if they broke the earth itself asunder and let loose the living dead: for he wanted only to breathe, to take down into himself just one more draught of cool air, night air, October air, the same sweet and natural air that in its passage had snatched aloft the autumn leaves of oak and beech and cherry, brought here from the woods above the escarpment, from the deeper forest far away where he belonged, where his other, older self yearned to be. But Blackstock's grip had tightened. The stricken man was inhumanly strong. Though Suter could

get no air through his nose, he could still smell blood and the reek of sweat, commingled with another suffocating odour: that of the proofing wax used on Blackstock's jacket.

The sound of his voice reached Suter then, thick, congested with blood. 'Barss … barss … bastard …'

Suter felt himself becoming light-headed. Much more of this and he would pass out. His inefficient, ineffectual grip on Blackstock's arms was growing ever feebler. For two or three seconds now he had even stopped arching his back and trying to bring up his knee or use the strength in his legs to tip his burden aside.

Then it happened. Blackstock let go, seeming to fall away into the darkness. Suter did not at first understand why.

He heard Aziz speaking close by his side. 'Are you all right?'

Suter could not answer. He managed to get up on one elbow, coughing and choking, ministering to himself with his right hand. His eyes were watering. His face and chest were covered in sticky blood. A bitterness ascended his throat and brought with it a rancid taste of vomit. He recognised the chicken tikka he had eaten earlier: he instinctively drew himself higher, his head away from Aziz, and threw up.

Presently, when the last of Suter's convulsions had ceased, Aziz said again, quietly, 'Are you all right?'

'Yes. Thanks.'

'Blackstock's done for.'

Clean, heavy, welcome rain was falling on Suter's face. He dragged a hand across his mouth. The pain in his jaw

was growing worse. It hurt him to speak. 'What … what did you do to him?'

'Hit him with the rifle butt. I knew it was him. I could see his head. You'd been gone such a long time I thought I'd better come and find out what was happening.'

It was too dark to see much of the body lying beside them. Suter could imagine the gory outflow from the terrible wounds he had made, from the shattered skull, merging with the rainwater, finding its way past sodden leaf-litter and sliding in all four directions down the slightly peaked incline of the tower roof. Diluted, the palest pink now, like an infinitely faded cross of St George, Blackstock's blood was already being projected by the gargoyles into unconsecrated space.

Suter's hands were trembling, just as they had at the hospital. He felt cold and drained, weak with shock: so weak that he seriously doubted his capacity to see through the rest of the nonsense that he and the other would-be men of action had so airily concocted in Sidney's house. This, what had just happened here, this was the reality of hand-to-hand combat, of trying to kill another man. And there were five, perhaps six, more to go.

Aziz said, 'Maybe I'd better watch the stairway.'

'What's the time?'

'About ten-thirty. No more. You still think midnight for the changeover?'

'Just a hunch.'

'No sign of anything from the mill,' Aziz said. 'I think Leigh must have connected.'

The goggles had been ruined. Aziz found the torch and then Blackstock's gun. He said, 'You're covered in blood. Are you sure you're OK?'

‘Yes. Thanks to you.’

‘I’ll do the rest up here, if you like. You go back to Sidney’s.’

‘I need to see this through.’

Aziz tried to dissuade him. Suter refused to listen.

‘Let me get your boots, then, if nothing else.’

‘All right,’ Suter said. ‘But mind how you go.’

Aziz departed.

Suter pushed back his bloodied hair and rose slowly to his feet.

6

Heavy with dread, Seumas escaped to his room at about eleven-forty. Bex had also just retired, with Helen, to the state bedroom, but Danzo had remained downstairs with Coco and Matt, smoking the head man’s cigars and surveying the ruins of the evening meal.

Tonight Bex’s blasphemy had exceeded even itself, entered an unknown territory of sacrilege where no one had ever before dared to tread. He had taken as his text St Matthew twenty-six, the story of the Last Supper, which he knew by heart. Seumas could no longer remember all the clever things he had said, but he could still see the lifeless expression on Helen’s face, and he could still hear the tone of Bex’s voice when, on getting up from the table and taking hold of her arm, he had instructed his followers, ‘Sleep on now, and take your rest: behold, the hour is at hand.’

The hour is at hand. What had he meant by that?

At midnight the guards were due to change.

Seumas could not understand why the Order hadn't already, this evening, packed up and left. It was almost as if Bex wanted the angel to come. What use were two mere sentinels, one on the church tower and the other at the mill?

And why had Bex refused to call upon the tarot to predict the outcome?

At supper they had drawn lots for guard-duty by cutting the cards. This had left Seumas even more frightened than before. Bex always kept his pack wrapped in a scarf of purple silk and unveiled it only for a divination. The strange designs on the cards, fused in place with their own intense, theatrical light, had burned themselves into Seumas's imagination. The people and things represented there inhabited a world too sacred and profound to be exposed for such a trivial purpose.

The tarot, Bex had taught him, was Satan's picture-book, a sublimation of the *Great Book of Thoth*. Its tradition stretched back through the Gypsy Kings to the Albigensians in the thirteenth century and the Bulgars in the twelfth, to the Crusades and the Baphometic idolatry of the Templars. The Greeks had acquired it from the Phoenicians, who themselves had drawn the veiled secrets of Thoth in a tenuous line from the priesthood of Isis. The tarot had been old even at the time of the pharaohs: its Satanic origins lay much further back, even beyond Gilgamesh, in prehistoric India. The word 'tarot' was itself Sanskrit, an esoteric inversion of the Indo-germanic 'rota', meaning 'wheel'. The Wheel of Fortune occupied the tenth place of the Major Arcana. It informed and influenced the rest. The Hermit, the Emperor, the Hanged Man, Justice,

the Tower: all revolved around it and were brought to culmination in the twentieth, The Last Judgment, which showed Gabriel with his trumpet and the world's dead rising from their tombs.

And the four suits of the Minor Arcana, the Rods, Cups, Swords and Pentacles, from which modern playing-cards were derived: these portrayed, buried deep in symbol and meaning, every permutation of the endless, repeating spiritual journey embodied in the twenty-two trumps. The twenty-first trump, The World, effectively depicted the bribe offered to Jesus in the wilderness, by Satan in the guise of Arch Tempter: and the zero card, which then followed, was the Fool, which Christ, in rejecting the world, duly became.

The tarot subsumed every religion and every metaphor. At its heart lay the majesty of numerology. Seumas now regarded its puissance with such awe that, when Bex had shuffled his pack and unceremoniously laid it among the debris of the meal, he had felt his blood run cold.

Coco had turned up the Nine of Swords, but Seumas had drawn the Page, so Coco had lost, and would be relieving Dave on the church tower. Matt had lost to Danzo, who had drawn the King of Pentacles. Matt would soon be setting out for the mill.

The mill was elegant and spacious and full of antiques, fitted throughout with polished flooring or white, pure wool carpet. It had belonged to a man called Howarth. Stolly had shot him on the first day. Since then a number of the disciples had used it for sleeping or as a sort of clubhouse. They had done a great deal of damage. Seumas had been there when Carl, amid laughter, had stuck his

bare behind over the open edge of the chest freezer and defecated.

The first-floor balcony gave the best view of the lane down from Watford and, a hundred yards along it, the stile to the footpath from Frith Wood. This was the earthly route, Seumas knew, somehow, that the angel would take. St Michael could assume any shape or form, could sprout wings and fly, or he could disappear and reappear the next instant a thousand miles away, but God had charged him with using mundane means, and so he would walk, without effort or fatigue, his feet making no sound.

Bex had explained about angels and their place in heaven. There were three circles, each of three orders. The first circle, the lowliest, comprised the seraphim, cherubim and thrones. The second circle consisted of dominions, virtues and powers, while the third, the most exalted, held the principalities, angels and archangels. Of the third circle, the three most important were Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel. The archangels Michael and Gabriel were among the seven spirits standing before the Throne of God.

Archangels did not breathe air but cosmic ether. Quicksilver flowed in their veins. St Michael had at his command the whole heavenly host. He was commonly depicted with a sword or lance, slaying the dragon, Satan. Here again he had been charged with using earthly means. He was conflated with the Knight of the Red Cross, St George, the patron saint of England. That was one reason why the church in Shanley had been dedicated to St Michael, making him the patron saint of the village.

Talking with Stolly and Matt and Dave and Coco, Seumas had become convinced that St Michael had already killed Steve and Carl and Gil. At a paranormal house

downstream he had shot Pinch in total darkness and scared Danzo out of his wits. Danzo had run all the way back here to Bex.

Bex had announced that the Order would be leaving tomorrow. To Seumas, that meant only one thing. St Michael would be coming tonight. He was on his way, eerie and silent, moving physically along the valley, mile after mile. That was the solid St Michael, the fleshly St Michael, the one who had been up on the rise and left bootprints in the mud, but there was another St Michael, who was everywhere, watching, listening in the dark. He had heard and noted each of Bex's jokes about transubstantiation, watched his pranks with the fried potatoes and the port, seen Helen's dead, reactionless gaze. He knew what Seumas had done with Bex beneath the four-poster's fustian canopy. His eye had been pressed to the crack in the ice-house door. He had been watching that night at the barn when Coco had led the cart-horse Amos to safety. He had been there when they had opened up Muriel's side, when Bex had eaten the eyeballs, and when he had shot the head man full in the face. He had been there at the very moment when they had hung Martin upside-down; he had been there while they had mocked and tortured him; and he had been there when, finally, Danzo had opened up his throat with an expert, fluid swipe. He had seen the body splash into the river and drift away. He had seen everything. God had seen it too. And now God was sending him here tonight, direct to the Manor House, to do battle with the entity the Order had raised and from whose scaly presence Bex drew his power.

Satan was strong. Figurations of St Michael slaying him – like the one in the church window – were nothing more

than wishful thinking made manifest. He was strong, and he was intelligent, like Bex. Killing him would be no easy matter. God knew that already.

Satan had made Bex immortal. Bex had done the same to Seumas. Seumas was no longer like the others. He and Bex would be caught up in the battle, perhaps for ever; the others could escape it, by welcome death.

The rain was still falling. In his T-shirt and underpants, Seumas went to the window and put his face close to the leaded panes as if trying to see what he could see in the daytime: the church tower, the ancient yews and to their left an opening view of the valley, with broad meadows and a line of dark alders along the riverbank beyond the farm. But now, of course, he could see nothing but the raindrops streaming down the black surface of the glass and the reflection of himself inside the room. The electrics in the Manor did not run to halogen lighting upstairs. Seumas had found his way using a torch. With his lighter and a taper he had lit the oil lamp on his bedside table. Its yellow glow would be visible outside, from the river. To that distant but percipient pair of eyes he would appear as a silhouette, alone and afraid.

Did the angel know that he no longer even wanted to be summoned to Bex's bed? He and Bex would never be together like that again. As recently as this afternoon Seumas had felt a sort of jealous resentment, towards Bex, towards Helen, but now he was glad that Bex had lost interest in him.

He drew the curtains.

Something had surfaced in his memory, surfaced from his misery, something he had seen at Pinstead. Hesitantly, self-consciously, he got down on his knees on the bedside

rug. He rested his elbows on the blankets, clasped his hands and tightly shut his eyes.

Images of the tarot would not leave him alone. The Magician with his caduceus. Death on his pale horse. Fortitude subduing the lion. The Magician had merged with Danzo, Death with Bex. And Fortitude, in her colouring, her manner and sweetness of expression, suddenly became, in his swirling, overwrought imagination, disturbingly confused with Helen.

Trying to shut it all out, he said, 'I don't want to be immortal.'

At Pinstead he had seen a man praying, kneeling in his garden and asking God to forgive them. Gil had shot him in the act, through the back of the head.

'Let me die. Please let me die.'

A door slammed downstairs. Coco and Matt were setting out to relieve the others.

'That's all I've got to say.'

The hour was at hand. Seumas climbed into bed and blew out the lamp.

* * *

'Yes, Jason,' Fernihough said. 'You did it. You killed him.'

Jason was on his haunches. He seemed unable to stop playing his flashlamp on the damage he had inflicted. The round, shaven skull of Matt, the youth who had arrived punctually at midnight to relieve Stolly, had been stoved with a single blow. There had been no doubt about the result of his unexpected, face to face contest with the forged steel head of a ten-pound sledgehammer. The lifeless body had crashed sideways and back, knocking over and splintering a plant stand.

Fernihough retrieved Matt's assault rifle and slung it over his shoulder. John's shotgun, which he knew how to work and with which he felt more confident, he returned to its place in the fold of his right arm.

'My God, Leigh. Just look what I did to him.'

'We have to go.'

'You don't think he might still be alive?'

Fernihough bent down and tried to lift the younger man's elbow. 'Come on, Jason. There's not much time.'

The smell of the river and the roar of the race pervaded the mill-house. While waiting for the relief guard, having already done the other one to death, Fernihough had remembered the Council's muddled and oft-postponed plans to install a new wheel, and he had thought of Vernon Howarth, who, having lived in this building ever since the founding of the village, had been murdered by the newcomers on the very first afternoon.

Each taking an ankle, Fernihough and Jason had dragged Stolly's ponderous corpse away from the balcony and well into the adjoining drawing room. Three minutes before that, Fernihough had volunteered to wait just inside the French windows with a knife while Jason made a distracting noise deeper in the room. When Stolly, switching on his torch and coming inside to investigate, had crossed the threshold, Fernihough had leapt from hiding and plunged the knife straight into his heart.

Stolly too had been armed with an assault rifle.

'Jason,' Fernihough said, more sharply. 'Stop fucking around.' This was something the village couldn't afford. Jason had already had the best part of two hours to come to terms with what, jointly, they had done to Stolly. Their action had been appropriate and correct. On arrival here,

Bex and the others had been welcomed by the whole village. It was Bex, Bex and his eleven thugs, together with the two defectors from Shanley, who had determined this. They deserved neither pity nor remorse. And although it was true that Matt had not been quite as evil as some of the others, it was also true that he had thrown his lot in with Bex. He had been one of the disciples, and as such had reaped the consequences.

'Get Stolly's rifle,' Fernihough said, with undisguised anger. 'We've got to meet up with John. Right now.'

* * *

Even at home in Chorleywood, long before the plague, her father had accumulated an extensive library. One Saturday morning, aged twelve and needing a reference for her homework, Helen had taken down a certain volume. In super royal quarto format, thirteen and a half inches by ten and a quarter, it comprised a magisterial survey of the middle ages, lavishly produced, printed on art quality paper and illustrated with hundreds of maps, architectural drawings, woodcuts and photographs, representations of contemporary craftsmanship and art.

Somewhat over halfway through the book, on a broad fold-out, Helen had come across a full-colour plate that had left her transfixed. It reproduced a detail, part of the central panel, *Hell*, from *The Last Judgment*, an altarpiece painted between 1430 and 1450 by the German master, Stephan Lochner.

Lit by a nearby window, the vast, silent image had in a flash been transmitted down five centuries from Lochner's consciousness to her own. She had stared in horror. It had seemed to her that this man had actually been present. He

had been to Hellmouth and back. He had breathed the sulphur. Disregarding the smoke, the screams, the crackle of flames, he had worked stolidly on his commission, piling detail upon detail. Detached, professional, industrious, he had observed and sketched the crowds of arriving sinners. From some slight elevation and place of safety, he had watched a platoon of fiends, their eyes glowing with pleasure, dragging naked and swollen-bellied kings, merchants and prelates, even a pope, into the pit of fire. The creatures had been rendered with repulsive, almost pornographic realism. Each one was unique. Most had horns, curved or straight. Many had bats' or bears' or asses' ears, fangs, prominent and bloody tongues. One, with scarlet horns, breathed fire. Some were black, velvet-skinned or furry; others were blond, or ginger, or green, spotted or not with reptilian roundels in red and black; their feet were hoofs, or taloned, with obscenely prehensile toes. Some bore webbed, translucent wings. Some had secondary faces set in their bellies, shoulders, or knees. All gave an impression of uncompromising muscularity, seizing the resisting sinners by an arm or waist or ankle, or herding yet more in chains towards the abyss. One, with a slavering expression, bearing an elderly man on its back and between its wings, its hands greedily gripping the flesh on his arms, carried its burden down a rocky slope leading from a castle gate. Elsewhere, two or even three fiends had overpowered and were setting upon a single sinner. At the very edge of the pit, the throng was being forced on by demons flailing iron hammers or double-pronged goads heated red. A priest's censer had been hurled into the air above the mêlée. Dice and gold coins strewed the beaten soil. At the bottom left, where angels were trying to drag a

few of the damned back from the brink, the ground was covered in grass among which grew isolated, emblematic flowers. Looking closely, Helen had recognised poppies, violets, wild strawberry and Solomon's seal, all of which were to be found in the gardens and hedgerows of Chorleywood. Over everything hovered the archangel Gabriel, deaf to the despairing pleas of the multitude beneath.

Although she had subsequently seen other medieval depictions of hell, including those by Hieronymus Bosch, it was the Lochner that had cauterised her young and impressionable mind. For a long time afterwards, months, even years, his painting had surfaced in her nightmares. Whenever she had thought of hell, she had thought of this.

Tonight, before dinner, the altarpiece had come again to her mind. She had almost smiled at its ingenuousness. The artist, a mere draughtsman, a jobbing painter, had known nothing about hell. Nothing at all.

It was now a few minutes after midnight. A while ago, Bex had ascended with her to the state bedroom. He had shut the door and, lighted match in hand, had lifted the chimney of the porcelain-bowled oil lamp on the oak dresser. From there, watched by her, he had returned to the door. Locking it behind him, he had gone off to perform his lengthy and fastidious ablutions.

When he came back, Helen was still standing just as he had left her, fully dressed, in the middle of the room. Wearing only his trousers, he deposited the rest of his clothes, folded, on a brocade-covered chair and against it leaned the sub-machine gun that had accompanied him for most of the day.

A nauseating thought then struck her unawares, slipping through her defences. She had noticed, as if she had never seen it before, the smooth, firm musculature of his torso. The regularity of his features, the dark eyes, the wispy beard and heavy earrings: all these lent him an air of louche subversiveness which, fifteen years ago, she and her schoolmates would have found exceedingly attractive; and which, she now discovered, to her unspeakable disgust, some small, secret, and loathsome part of her had found attractive still.

She had in an unguarded instant betrayed everything she held precious. However hard she tried to undo the thought, it could never be expunged.

He approached. His breath smelled of peppermint.

'You look very beautiful tonight, Helen. Do you know how beautiful you are?'

She continued to stare straight ahead as he moved behind her. He leaned close to her right ear and began to whisper.

'I'm going to let you into a secret. But before I do, let's get comfortable.'

Her flesh had started crawling even before he put his hands to her waist and began steering her towards the four-poster bed. The curtains had been looped back. The bedclothes had been straightened. She did not resist. She no longer knew how to.

Bex made her lie down on her side. He lay down behind her, so that his mouth was again next to her ear and, in the same creepy whisper, resumed praising her loveliness, her femininity, her grace. He was sorry now that he had caused Coco to cut off her hair. 'It'll grow again,' he said. 'And then you'll forgive me. You will. I know you will. Because

you love me, Helen. That's why you'll forgive me anything. You see, God has taught you that life is precious and sacred. You would never do away with yourself, no matter what happened. Would you?'

Eyes tightly closed, she was concentrating with ferocious intensity on her image of the Crucifixion.

'Suicide is for cowards and unbelievers. Not for those who put their faith in the Resurrection. Not for those who serve both God and Satan. For Satan needs the faithful. Evil must have its vessel. You are that vessel, Helen. Without you I could not be bad. And without me you could not be faithful. That's why you love me. More than you could love any mortal man. Are you beginning to guess it, my darling, who I am?'

There had been three crosses at Calvary. How she yearned to be nailed to one of them!

'But you know my name already. When you serve your Lord, you're also serving me. You know who I am. You know who's inside you, who's up you, spending his seed, making you complete. Just the way we're going to be tonight.'

She longed to be at Christ's right hand, her head hanging, yielding up her spirit, rising just before him to the gates of Paradise.

'All your life you have been expecting me without knowing it. Every day, at the back of your mind, you have been expecting completion. He may be the Alpha, but I am the Omega. I am that which awaits. I occupy the end. I am your fulfilment. You know who I am.'

She felt his fingers on her neck.

His was the same flesh, the very same, that had sought out and, through humiliation and degradation, had touched the unthinkable.

His fingers, fondling, obscenely prehensile, in moving to her cheek, now triggered in her mind, in explosive and eidetic detail, every brushstroke of the Lochner altarpiece. Here, she realised, was the landscape of the thing that Bex had reached in her. The pink, squirming, orgiastic bodies, the gleeful infliction of pain, the overt, domineering bestiality of the fiends: these, truly, were sexual images of the most filthy and perverted kind. That was why it had fascinated her so. That was why, as a girl of twelve, she had stared and stared and stared. The painting had been commissioned by the Church at the very pinnacle of its wealth. Lochner had worked in Cologne, site of one of the most ambitious and vertiginous cathedrals ever built. The cathedral not only exalted the god of its bishop; its splendour also intimidated the credulous peasants who had paid for it all. Ordinary communicants would never have got close enough to the altarpiece to see that every class of cleric, including the Pope himself, was bound for the pit. And, high above this private joke, there would have loomed a colossal sculpture of Christ in his agony. With a sense that her mind was coming undone, Helen saw that this too was an object of secret fetish: the scourged contours of his ribcage, the nails driven through his hands and feet, the folds of his breech-clout slipping ever lower on his hips. Most of all, the submissiveness of his upturned eyes, of his supplication to God, this too was perverted and wrong.

Bex was still whispering. ‘And about the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama

sabachthani? That is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'

Helen, forsaken too, could stand it no more. She had just lost her faith, and now she was losing her mind.

Bex continued breathing in her ear. 'If ever I am to be defeated, you must leave it to the Lord. Remember the ninety-fourth Psalm: "O God, to whom vengeance belongeth, show thyself!" But when? When will he come? Why is he so reticent, Helen? Why does he never answer your prayers? Because he is afraid.' He leaned yet closer and whispered the words again. 'He is afraid.'

She understood then that he was unfastening her dress.

Pulling on her shoulder, his face coming into view, he said, 'Not even St Michael and all his legions will dare come near. Not while I have you.'

7

Suter did not know what to make of Leigh Fernihough. With his compact physique and his self-effacing manner, he seemed one of the least likely champions the village might have produced. At Sidney's house he had given no indication of the chilling ruthlessness with which he had set about his evening's work.

Suter heard him say, quietly, 'Looks like they're all upstairs, then.'

The two men had nearly finished exploring the ground floor of the Manor House. In trying to keep up with the beam of Fernihough's torch, Suter was finding his legs

reluctant to respond. His knees felt weak. He was afraid he might collapse.

Congealed blood had encrusted his beard and covered the front of his jacket and part of his trousers. His head ached. Blackstock's first punch had left his eye puffy and swollen; the second, with its legacy of tremendous, throbbing pain, may have broken, or at least dislocated, his jaw. And, whenever he felt with his tongue, one of his left upper molars waggled alarmingly. The thought that he might have lost such a tooth distressed him out of all proportion.

Matcham and Aziz were waiting outside in the rain, one on the terrace, the other on the shingle drive, each armed with an assault rifle. Fernihough still had the shotgun, Suter an L85 that he and Aziz had taken in the belfry from the one called Coco.

From the scullery, Suter and Fernihough had descended a stone stairway to the cellar and there found, wrapped in a blood-soaked Chinese rug, the body of the head man. Only part of the head remained. He had been shot four times in the face. 'I knew it,' Fernihough had said. 'He's been dead since Sunday afternoon.'

'Why you say that?' It now so much hurt Suter to articulate his jaw that he was abbreviating his speech, and what came out sounded forced and stiff.

'We heard the shooting. O Jesus. Poor Helen.'

They were still working on the assumption that she was alive. Had it not been for that, the job of killing the three surviving gang-members would have been much easier. From the identities of those who had already died, Fernihough and Aziz had deduced that, besides Bex, the

survivors were his second in command, called Danzo, and a youth named Seumas.

Observed by Suter from the gardens and Aziz from the church tower, lamplight had shown in the windows of three first-floor rooms: the state bedroom, the Chinese bedroom and one of the guest bedrooms on the north gallery. It was reasonable to suppose that Bex was occupying the largest and most luxurious bedroom. The Chinese bedroom was almost as commodious, which suggested that it had been taken over by Danzo. That left Seumas in the north gallery. A male silhouette had appeared at the window. Its left arm had tugged on the cord to draw the curtains, but not before Aziz had got the binoculars on the face. It was indeed Seumas in that room.

But where, if anywhere, was Helen?

Unless she were alone in some dark, fourth room, she was probably with Bex.

Suter and Fernihough had originally entered the house via the broken French window, the one that had been thrown back on Sunday to allow Muriel to be dragged down to the river. From the white drawing room – no longer white, but spattered with red, with a black bloodstain in the middle of the carpet – they had travelled the corridors to the Long Room, the billiards room, the blue drawing room, the morning room, the library, the kitchen and scullery, and the cellar.

Many of the rooms had been wrecked. In the blue drawing room, for example, the china cabinets had been shattered, with shards of Ming and Worcester and Staffordshire strewn on the once-polished boards and on the Mirzapur carpet, upon which someone had also deposited a drying pile of human faeces.

From the cellar, Fernihough led the way upstairs and towards the dining hall.

This room, in which two halogen lamps had been left burning, produced the strongest impression yet of occupation, of nearness. The table, improbably spread with white linen and bearing the remnants of an elaborate meal, had been vacated so recently that the smell of fresh cigar smoke still lingered. Two or three stubs of candle were guttering in their stands.

The malignance was very, very near. Suter's gaze rose to the ceiling.

'That's the state bedroom,' Fernihough whispered, pointing upwards.

'You hear it?'

'Hear what?'

Suter looked up again. Almost at the limit of human audibility, he had detected a rhythmic creaking overhead.

'I can't hear anything.'

Suter moved to the table and fetched one of the Chippendale-style chairs. Setting it where he had been standing, he climbed up and placed his palm on the low, uneven surface of the ceiling. He felt the regular, telltale pressure against his hand. It was being transmitted through the carpet and floorboards, through the ancient laths and plaster, from some solid, extremely heavy framework, such as that of a four-poster bed.

Fernihough suddenly seemed to understand.

Suter got down. 'Where next?'

'Music room.' This was all that remained to be searched.

It was empty. Another halogen lamp, on a long, curving neck overhanging the biggest sofa, had been left running here. It cast a big shadow as Suter crossed the floor and

crouched to scrutinise the plate-glass shelving of the hi-fi stack.

Joining him, squatting too, Fernihough whispered, 'What have you got in mind?'

'Seumas in north gallery.'

'Yes.'

'Take him first.'

'All right.'

'Knife again, maybe. Then we go for other one.'

'Danzo?'

Suter nodded. 'Bex last. Need him on his own. Away from Helen.'

Fernihough nodded.

Suter touched a small, round button on the fascia of the CD transport. The display lit up. 'Disc already in there,' he said. 'Play it very loud. We wait outside his door. With shotgun.' He met Fernihough's approving eye, and noticed to his surprise a gleam of admiration there.

'It's not going to be easy,' Fernihough said.

Using his eyes, Suter agreed.

They both stood up. Then, slowly and painfully, Suter said, 'Let's get Paul and Jason inside.'

* * *

Danzo could restrain himself no longer. Having already visited his room and taken off his overshirt and boots, he was proceeding, like the supposed ghost of Henry VIII, along the ramshackle gallery towards the north wing. He had left behind the AK with which he had replaced the Calico commandeered by Bex, and was armed now only with his revolver.

He had to be quick, before Dave and Stolly returned. They would probably get themselves some grub and stay downstairs for a while, but there was no guarantee of that.

Fuddled as he might be, Danzo felt confident that Suter wasn't going to show. It would be insanely dangerous to attack the Manor, even for an authentic archangel, still less a dim-witted hermit operating on his own. Posting the guards had been a waste of time, although the temporary absence of everyone but Seumas and Bex had, at least, worked in Danzo's favour.

Drab oil paintings, ancestral portraits of centuries-dead toffs, lined the right-hand wall of the gallery. On his left the oak balustrade, lit by the moving yellow cast of his flashlight, divided the gallery from the unseen space above the flagstoned hallway below. The pattern on the carpet at his feet was now too faded to make out. Enhanced by the rain and the dampness of the air, a mildewed smell rose from its fibres. The whole building was like this: rotting, beetle-infested, quietly being eaten to oblivion. Toadstools sprouted in the crypt where Bex had stashed the head man, where his corpse was even now adding to the general run of decay.

Well, tomorrow all that would come to its timely end, purified in flame, like Joan of Arc.

Danzo's eyes gleamed at the thought of it.

He would have preferred not to pass the room being occupied by Bex and Helen. He would have preferred that Bex's acute hearing did not detect the stealthy creak of floorboards, that his lips did not form into yet another omniscient smile.

Light was showing under the door. Danzo switched off his torch and paused. He could hear a low voice. Bex was

talking. Danzo listened further. He could make out no distinct words. His eye fell on the porcelain swing-cover of the keyhole. Might there be a similar cover on the other side of the door? If not, would the four-poster's curtains be drawn? Would he be able to see what Bex was doing to her?

He decided that he didn't want to know. He moved off.

The idea that, at this moment, Bex was subjecting Helen to some odious act was simultaneously sobering and stimulating, just like his giving Danzo permission to go ahead with Seumas. This conspiratorial ambivalence, this ambidextrous manipulation of Danzo's motives and feelings by the bisexual Bex, this, he thought, was what had hit the spot. This was what had caused his smouldering libido to catch fire, and this was what gave such mounting excitement to each illicit step along the gallery.

During dinner he had studied Seumas with keen yet apparently offhand interest. Once or twice he had caught his eye. Seumas too had seemed distracted. Though he was meek and quietly spoken, he was not obviously effeminate. Yet there was something about him which proclaimed his predilection. His mouth, perhaps; the lily-white texture of his skin; the suggestive slenderness of his well-kept fingers. Even his clothes had struck Danzo as erotic. His T-shirt was there for no purpose but to be removed, to reveal his anaemic, underdeveloped chest and the small, dark-brown nipples that last summer had excited Danzo's notice.

The spell had been building all evening, all week, ever since Michaelmas, ever since the summer. It could not be resisted. Danzo was firmly in its grip.

Like static before an electric storm, inevitability had charged the air. It had been exactly the same at Byfield, in the potting-shed, when he had understood that Bex had wanted just what he did, and now it had guided his steps to this third door along the north gallery.

He reached for the handle and was about to turn it when he froze. He had glimpsed a flicker of light at the end of the gallery, in the stairwell.

Someone, Stolly or Dave, was coming up.

A monosyllable escaped his breath.

Two stairways led from the ground floor to the first. The far end of this gallery was served by the lesser of the two, a spiral staircase, enclosed by oak panelling, with room on each tread for no more than two tiny, Elizabethan people abreast.

Neither Dave nor Stolly belonged in this part of the house. Their rooms were elsewhere. He could not understand why either of them would want to use this route, but whichever of them it was would see immediately that Danzo had no business in the north gallery, no business but Seumas.

Although he did not want to retreat, he could not now escape notice merely by dodging into Seumas's room, for Seumas, whatever his reaction, was bound to say something that would be audible from the gallery, even from the stairwell.

But if Danzo retreated, that would mean a return to his solitary bed, perhaps for the rest of the night. Since the Order would be moving on tomorrow, he did not know when another opportunity would ever present itself. This rambling junkpile of a house, bogged down in its own history and doomed by Bex to flames: this was the perfect

venue for the culminating seduction of Seumas. Tomorrow night, nothing but hot, ash-filled air would occupy the place of his room, his fetid mattress, the stained and wrinkled sheets they would be leaving behind. The furniture, the walls themselves, would be gone. There would be no witnesses.

The light in the stairwell had grown. He retraced his last few steps and came to the next door along, knowing he could hide in the empty bedchamber there until the danger had passed.

He extinguished his torch and stepped inside.

* * *

His frown steadily grew. He pressed his ear even harder against the door. What was that he had heard outside? Had it been the click of some mechanism like a latch, preceding the revolution of columned brass hinges and the wide, inward passage of an expanse of oak panels and stiles and rails, drawing in its wake a furtive sweep of air; had an unknown hand just opened the adjoining door? Was it being eased shut? And was someone even now approaching the bed where Seumas lay: where he lay not asleep, nor yet dreaming of Danzo, but anticipating the punctual arrival of Stolly or even Dave?

What, after all, did Danzo know about Seumas? Suppose Stolly had been rodding him all along! You could never tell anything about anybody! Or Dave, from Shanley here, who had been in the Order for less than three weeks, what did Danzo know about him? Dave, who had represented himself as the hardest man alive, who had so relished buggering the wives and daughters of his erstwhile neighbours and betters, could this same Dave share, or

could he have already enacted, Danzo's most treasured fantasies of the lily-white Seumas? Was he also a queer, a homo, a pansy faggot? Did he, like Danzo, merit the ridicule and condemnation of Bex and all his tribe? And had he, like Danzo, and possibly Seumas too, already tasted the albuminous sweets offered in private by its leader, its arch hypocrite, manipulator, and pimp?

In its access of humiliation and jealous rage, Danzo's heart gratefully seized upon the central and obvious source of relief. He would kill Bex. He would find him lying in bed next to the just-fucked Helen and stick the muzzle of the .38 up one of those perfect nostrils, distorting his nose, causing his terrified eyeballs to cross and focus on the uncompromising length and hardness of its barrel. And then, taking his time, Danzo would tell him … no, he would just pull the trigger and blow his fucking brains out! Like grey diarrhoea, like gruel, like the repulsive silver shit of some slimy reptile, they would get sprayed with condign suddenness all over the pillows, across Helen's skin, everywhere, and the contents of that poisonous head would never do harm again! And finally, before she had stopped screaming, Danzo would shoot her too and grab the leadership of the Order for himself! He knew as much about it as Bex: more!

Danzo's right hand found the grip of his revolver. He drew the weapon out and, stepping silently into the corridor, prepared to switch on his torch.

The way to the state bedroom lay to the left. But first he turned to the right, intending to listen at Seumas's door and, by putting an eye to the keyhole, perhaps learn the identity of his lover. His left thumb activated the torch-switch. Because the batteries were getting low, the bulb

gleamed but feebly, filling the reflector with yellow light. In its subdued beam he saw, in the middle of the gallery, guarding Seumas's door, the same camouflage-clad figure he had last seen standing sideways in that phantasmal, apple-green kitchen. The angel. St Michael. He was here.

Danzo fumbled drunkenly with his safety catch. The angel raised his assault rifle. He was carrying a bullpup with a telescopic sight, an Enfield, like Steve's or Coco's. He aimed at the torchbeam: at Danzo.

Nothing happened. The rifle had jammed.

Danzo fired. The bullet hit St Michael in the left flank. He folded as if he had been punched, but did not drop his weapon. Danzo prepared to shoot him again, aiming for the head.

Seumas's door burst open and someone came out, someone in an olive-green jacket, rain-wet, fresh from a killing.

In an instant, Danzo apprehended the identity of that dark, derided face. The bald pate, the oval, gold-rimmed specs: these belonged not to a second angel but to the wog, one of several in the village, the chicken-shit Aziz, whose ugly but young wife Gil and Dave and Beezer had rogered half to death. It made no sense.

Danzo actually saw the first incandescent muzzle-flash of the angel's Enfield. Spiky, white-hot, tinged with blue, it expanded in the darkness of the gallery, a bloom both heavenly and strange. He even felt the astral momentum and ferocity of the initial onslaught, tearing him apart, throwing his limbs and body into a dozen attitudes of frenzy, seeming to sweep him along the fading gallery and back, back towards the crimson shadow and the eternal, unchanging presence of Bex.

8

As soon as Bex heard the shooting he knew what it meant. Even as he leapt out of bed and struggled into his clothes he heard the first urgent, panic-stricken cries and the sound of heavy boots on the stairs and along the gallery. Men's names were being shouted. 'Paul! Paul!' And then, from further off, with a Coventry twang: 'John's been shot!'

John. The name of him who went before, preparing the way; of him who ate locusts and wild honey, and who preached, 'There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose'. John: the alias Danzo had found among the angel's effects. He had arrived at last. And surely it had been Danzo, the next-in-power to Bex, who had cut him down.

Bex fastened his belt and forced his feet into his boots. He knew the door was already locked. He flitted to each of the windows and drew the curtains. From its place against the armchair he took up the Calico and opened the safety catch.

He looked at Helen's form, still lying face-up, unmoving, a forearm across her face. She hadn't reacted at all to the sound of gunfire. She was empty, vacant, a mere shell. Her mind had gone.

Bex had succeeded. He had exorcised his foe. He had driven him out and left him homeless, at large in this rainy October night. His plaintive, oversized face, white-bearded, was pressed to the window-glass. He was rattling all the locks, circling the Manor, desperate to get back in. But he

never would. Bex was invincible. He bestrode everything. The oracles had been fulfilled, all the prophecies, the writings public and arcane. All human thought had been made redundant. It was converging and becoming concentrated in the universe of knowing that was himself. He was the dark core of collapsing matter that embodied all science, religion, art. Every poetic impulse was being sucked into it: Homer, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton. Black-armed, swinging his silver blade, defiant Bex had opened the underbelly of Paradise. Its swarming contents, fabulous and multifarious, were showering down like that original fall of rebel angels in which he, the spirit most lewd, had once been driven from his rightful place in heaven.

He grinned exultantly. St Michael dead, his legions routed!

By now he had taken up his stand by the wall, next to the door. He was waiting for the wheedling to begin. In the Calico's magazine, geometrically packed, waiting, lay one hundred factory-fresh rounds. They were destined for the residuum running around his feet. The final battle, mind against supernal mind, would be engaged later.

'Bex!'

Which was the first of them, outside his door?

'Bex! All your men are dead!'

'What are you?' Bex shouted, pretending to become angry. 'Who dares abord the Hornèd One?' His grin widened.

There was a hurried consultation, too low to be made out.

Bex cried, 'Who speaks? What is your name?'

'Fernihough.'

‘What sort of name is that?’

‘Did you hear me? All your men are dead.’

‘They’re not men. They never were. They’re cacodemons. Unclean spirits. Parasites. They feed on me. They suck the venom from my teats.’ He edged closer to the jamb, trying to gauge the position of the man outside. ‘They can never be weaned.’

‘Let Helen go.’

Bex raised the Calico and switched it to single fire.

‘Let her go and we’ll spare your life.’

‘She’s already gone,’ he said. ‘Boy, has she gone!’

‘What do you mean?’

He made no reply.

Not yet wishing to wreck the door, nor wishing to let them know he had in his expert hands a brand new M-960, he fired just one round, making a clean hole corresponding to the place where he thought Fernihough was standing. Splinters flew on the other side. Bex ducked back behind the wall and turned to Helen. She was watching him.

‘You. Brain-dead. Get dressed. Now.’

Like an automaton, she rose from the bed to obey.

‘Unlock the door,’ said Fernihough outside. Plainly, he had not been killed.

‘You don’t get it, do you? I’m the one calling the shots!’

The voice remained silent.

‘I can fire out, but you can’t fire in. Understand?’

‘We understand.’

‘In exactly sixty seconds I’ll be coming out. With Persephone. My bride. Right?’

‘I hear you.’

‘We demand free passage. What you —’

Bex became aware that the nature of the illumination in the room was changing. New shadows were appearing, new areas of light. The oil lamp on the dresser had been raised into the air. Helen, standing naked, had lifted it up. He turned to see her arm being drawn back, emphasising her breasts, momentarily reminding him of some image, a frieze, a statue, of the formidable goddess herself. He saw the motion of her throw, the calm, measured trajectory of the lamp as it came across the room towards him. Full of paraffin, made of glass and china and bits of flimsy brass, its wick alight, the object arrived and struck the wall next to his head. It smashed. He was hit with fragments and drenched in tepid fuel, soaking his shoulder and neck, his scalp and beard, spreading down his shirt to his trousers. To his astonishment, and before he could swing the gun round to shoot her, he burst into flames.

* * *

In a few moments he was engulfed. Helen watched him drop his machine gun. He was squirming, bending, straightening up, beating at his blazing face with his two blazing hands. And he was screaming. She could smell the paraffin and, growing stronger, the pork-like odour of his burning flesh. The wallpaper was already on fire. He lurched against the royal tapestry with its heraldic beasts, its Tudor designs of warriors, shields and swords. The tapestry shared his flames and in seconds it was burning independently, fire wreathing the ceiling and its oaken beams, black against the lurid orange of the plaster. She looked again at Bex. He was upright, staggering towards the door.

Dark with paraffin, the carpet had begun to burn. Flame was creeping towards the bed and its combustible hangings. Unaware of any danger, Helen shrank back, fascinated by the growing warmth and brilliance of the room.

She did not yet understand what she had done to him. She knew only that she could not take any more. When he had said 'I'll be coming out' she had seen herself being dragged somewhere again by the wrist. If anything, she had meant to hit him directly. Providence had deflected her aim and made the missile vastly more effective.

A long time seemed to pass. The fire grew stronger. She heard the thump of the sledgehammer as at a vast distance. The lock and door burst open under the weight of its single blow. Air rushed in with a roar of heat. At its centre, brighter even than the rest, stood an effigy of flame, bifurcate, unquenchable. With its last reserve it tottered forward and out, beyond the threshold, out towards the blackness beyond. Men were there, men with illuminated faces. They stood aside, moving back as the figure opened a way among them. Its travel was checked for a moment by the balustrade, and then Bex toppled forward and fell, unimpeded, out of her sight at last, down and down into the unseen darkness of the pit.

One of those in the gallery now started through the inferno, his face protected by his sleeve. Another, carrying something over his free arm, entered just behind.

'Helen! Helen!'

She thought she recognised the voice.

The man reached her. He took his sleeve away. She saw his brown face and bald head, the gold-rimmed lenses of his spectacles. Now the second man arrived. Leigh. Leigh

Fernihough. He had been carrying a heavy coat over his arm, glistening with rain: she felt her shoulders being grasped and the coat was placed around her.

Paul spoke to Leigh and without ado took off his own coat, exposing himself to the heat.

Leigh was shouting instructions.

She tried to take them in.

'Helen, just let us guide you! Do you understand?'

Everything went dark. Paul had put the weight of his coat over her head. An arm encircled her waist. She was moving forward, running through fire, her bare feet visible, treading the flames. Two, three, four steps more and they were outside, standing on cool, seemingly damp carpet. The coat was taken from her head. As she was being led away she looked behind. The state bedroom was becoming a furnace fuelled by wood and paper and antique fabrics. Tongues of flame explored the edges of the doorway, seeking to extend their domain. The gallery was deserted. The other men were with her, with her and Paul, hurrying down the main staircase.

The hall below and to the right was being lit by something like a heap of coal, spreadeagled on the solid slabs of the flagstone floor. He was burning, melting, a fat-fire consuming in its fury muscle and bone and brain. As if eager to get back upstairs, his smoke and stench were rising to the balustrade and beyond.

'Come on, Helen.'

The ceiling far above was burning too, and a section of the balustrade. The bedroom windows had just blown. Oxygen was pouring into the house, driving night air, rain and steam into the heart of the conflagration. As Paul hustled her away from it, Helen heard a bang, then

another, then more, many more. The ammunition in the machine gun was being set off, spinning it round, exploding in all directions in the horizontal plane. Even as the humans retreated, the first floor was becoming uninhabitable, a terrifying arena of the gods: flame versus smoke, heat against cold, light against darkness.

Paul was a comfortable, familiar presence beside her. He and Martin had been friends. He led her into the vestibule. A crowd was there. She saw Sidney Pellew, Mike Wallace, Alan Fenwick and others, apparently clustered round someone lying on the floor. Paul drew her past.

'Who was that?' she said, uselessly looking back, as they emerged from the vestibule and descended the steps into the rain.

'The man who saved us.'

'What man?'

'I'll tell you later.' He stopped and fastened the buttons on her new coat. 'I'm going to carry you. Hang on to my neck.'

He lifted her up.

'Where are we going?'

'To the Fenwicks'.'

'No. I want to stay here. I've got to see.'

He ignored all her objections. This had been her father's house, her home since the plague. She had been married from there; she and Martin had occupied their own suite. She couldn't just turn her back on it now. But Paul was stronger. Bearing her weight with some difficulty, he crunched his way across the shingle of the drive. More people were arriving. Some briefly gathered, brought their faces close, called her name. Paul kept going.

Over his shoulder she saw that the fire had already spread to the uppermost storey. Underlit smoke was escaping from the tiles of the roof. Even as she watched, three more windows on the first floor blew out, followed immediately by billows of leaping flame.

Paul passed through the wrought-iron gates.

'No, wait!'

Somewhere high up, deep inside the central section, she could hear explosions. Their bullets and grenades were being made safe.

The fire was working its way through the house and doing battle with their presence, cleansing everything they had touched, incinerating the air, cremating their very bodies. The rooms where they lay would be by now white with heat, its light too dazzling for mortal eyes to behold. The only shadow there would be the charcoal of their skulls and skeletons, slowly distorting, a single dwindling arm perhaps being caused to rise in inadvertent protest or farewell.

Helen shut her eyes. She had reached the limit. She could bear no more. She clung ever more tightly to the neck of the man carrying her. She had forgotten who he was and where they were going. When she found herself seated in a calm, lamplit room, she watched without undue concern as Josephine Fenwick slid a hypodermic needle into her upper arm. A friendly embrace laid her sideways and covered her with clean sheets.

Her head sank into the pillows and she tried to look up reassuringly at Josephine's anxious face, but already she was swooning, falling inward, being overtaken and borne away in a phosphorescent avalanche of bliss.

9

Suter remembered hearing church bells clanging interminably not far away, the sound diffused and made duller by intervening masonry and the closed windows of his room. At first he had not connected the bells with anything, not even the church, and certainly not celebration. They had rung all through one cloudy morning, when he had been comparatively lucid. Perhaps yesterday. On that day, or another much like it, he had passed his hand across his face and found it smooth. The women nursing him had shaved off his beard while he had been asleep, or unconscious.

He knew he had been anaesthetised early on, at the beginning of his time in this house. He distinctly recalled the moment when he had been given release, and he recalled afterwards feeling sick, and retching in the darkness. Or that might have been on the tower, long before he had been shot.

They had opened him up and removed the bullet. The pain in his side had yielded to something less grinding and variable. He could feel bandages, tightly wound. He could smell disinfectant. And he knew his jaw had, for several days now, no longer bothered him. They had reset it. He probed once more with his tongue and found the healing gap where his molar, the first on the upper left, had been.

He smiled inanely.

Later he was awake again. The day had noticeably faded. Lying on his right side, in his cocoon of foetal warmth, he tried to make sense of what he could see. The furnishings he mostly recognised. A bedside cabinet or locker. Beyond

it a lightweight armchair upholstered in some old-fashioned union cloth. Two tall sash windows, each with floral curtains hanging from polished poles terminated by oversized acorns. Wallpaper patterned with bamboo and oriental birds. Between the two windows, a polished semi-circular table with three legs, solid fruitwood or veneered, bearing an ironstone vase with an arrangement of flowers: chrysanthemums, mainly, in white and cream and yellow. Through the right-hand window he could make out a distant shrubbery, perhaps limiting a lawn that sloped downhill to the river. Beyond that, its bronze crown lit up by the setting sun, rose the aristocratic mass of a copper beech.

Behind him he heard the door opening. The eldest of the three women circled the end of his bed and shut out the tree. She was bending towards him, wearing a blue overall.

'Did you have a nice nap, John?'

'Yes. Thank you.'

She was about sixty, thickset, maternal, with a kindly voice.

'I'm so sorry,' Suter said. 'I've forgotten your name again.'

'Josephine.'

One of the others, the middle one, was called Sally. He remembered then the man who had operated on him. Alan. And what he had said. 'You're lucky.'

Josephine waited, eyes averted towards the garden, while he filled his bottle.

The effort of sitting up somewhat had cost him all his strength. When he tried to settle back as he had been before, the sword-thrust of pain almost made him cry out.

He felt her soothing hand on his brow. His eyes closed; his mouth involuntarily opened. Presently the hand went away.

The next time he awoke he was again lying on his right side. He thought his pyjamas had been changed. The curtains had been drawn and the bowl of flowers removed. It was night, or anyway after dark. He knew this because a small electric lamp was burning, out of his direct sight, perhaps on the table by the door.

Someone was sitting in the armchair. A woman. Too youthful to be Josephine. Neither was she Sally, nor yet the youngest of the three, whose name he had again forgotten.

He narrowed his eyes and watched her through his lashes. She had just looked beyond the bed and towards the mantelpiece with its noiseless clock. The erect, dignified way she held herself was unmistakable. Her eyes, her nose, her soft lips, the perfectly defined shape of her eyebrows, had changed not at all. Only her hair was different: short, much too short, as if it had been cut as a form of punishment.

Helen.

In his consternation, and before she could look back from the clock, he shut his eyes and tried to pretend that he was still asleep.

It was not possible. She could not be alive. For if she were alive she could not have died. If she had not died, then there had been no plague and the past twelve years could not have happened. The first two years of madness, his April testament, the succeeding years of erratic solitude, chaining the locks, the valley, the river, finding the body of that young man and hauling it to the bank: none of this could have happened.

He had last seen her, spoken to her, kissed her, on 27 May, 2016. They had sat in his car. It was over, she had told him. She no longer felt the same. Why couldn't he understand that people changed? Why did he have to be so logical about everything? People weren't like that. She wept. She gave him back the ring. A diamond set in white gold, among sapphires. It had cost him three months' pay. He asked if there was someone else. No, she said. But there was. He found out by chance. A few weeks later, at the mall, he saw them together. The boyfriend was saying something she found amusing. They entered the main department store. Suter followed, hiding behind pillars as they wandered among the dressing tables and wardrobes. They stopped in the bedding section. Showed interest; were approached by a salesman. Suter fled.

He never knew what happened to the boyfriend. Helen died two hundred and twenty-seven days later, at the height of the plague. Suter heard the news from her sister, who herself lasted only another six weeks.

But he survived. Got himself left behind. Some intolerable quirk of genetics, some molecular oddity in the structure of his microsomes, had spared him while the rest of humanity perished. He came through, and for over twelve years, till that morning on the riverbank, was left alone to wonder why.

It was impossible that Helen, his Helen, was still alive. She whom he had grieved, whom he had adored, she who had grown away from him in the realisation that he was not for her, who had wished to postpone the wedding and then finally, cruelly, decisively, had rejected him in favour of another; she could not be alive.

His febrile sanity hinged on this fact.

He forced open his eyes.

The chair was empty. Just as before, just as it always was, the chair was empty.

He had imagined her. Maybe they were feeding him drugs for the pain. Drugs to affect the mind. This room, for example. It seemed too familiar. From what he had been told, he believed he was still at Shanley, in the Rectory, where others of the village wounded were being treated. Yet hadn't there been, wasn't there now, a room exactly like this in his house by the river?

He didn't know. Couldn't remember. He fell asleep, trying. Later he woke again and the lamp had been switched off. Moonlight framed the curtains. Deep, supple silence reigned.

* * *

In the morning Suter felt better. Josephine brought his breakfast. She was married to Alan, who acted as the village doctor. They lived in the Rectory; this was their home. One of the reception rooms had been fitted out as an operating theatre equipped with everything they needed.

With the barest hesitation, Suter said, 'Did I have a visitor last night? A young woman, sitting in that chair.'

There had already been other visitors: Fernihough, for one, and Aziz, and a man called Goddard who had made what had amounted to a pompous speech.

'A visitor?' Josephine said, placing the tube in his mouth so that he wouldn't spill his milk. 'Not that I know of.'

Suter's abdomen seemed less swollen. The pain was definitely less.

'You're healing up,' she said, as she bustled around him. 'My husband looked at you first thing. He says you're

remarkably fit. Because of that, he says, you're going to be all right. He's already scaling down the morphine.'

Morphine. That would account for it.

After breakfast she helped him to wash. His face rasped: the beard was quickly growing back. He decided to begin shaving again. But not today.

After these exertions Josephine left him alone and he rested, lying on his right side in the attitude that seemed to offer most relief from pain. Lying there, he saw for the first time that nothing but his infirmity remained to prevent his returning home. He had achieved his goal. He had removed the obstacle of Bex.

That stretch of the river below his house, the precise place where he had waited in the moonlight, was colouring and influencing his mind. It lay behind it like a background projection, sometimes obtruding into his thoughts. The lake was calling out to him. His simple, uncluttered existence there had suited his temperament. He might have been made for such a life. If the plague hadn't happened he might even have wished it into existence merely to conjure everybody else away.

Bex had confirmed the wisdom of minding one's own business. Nor had Suter been much impressed by the collective behaviour of the village, neither by its criminal folly in allowing Bex to take over in the first place, nor by the craven submission of most of its menfolk. Seven villagers had died in consequence. Eight more had been wounded, three so badly that they might not live. The whole population had been traumatised. Even the Manor House had been allowed to burn to the ground. One of the supposed objects of any community was to present a united front. As soon as Bex had arrived, as soon as an

external threat had materialised, that front had collapsed. Every man had then had to look out for himself. No one had stood up for the head man, for Helen, for Muriel. In that respect Shanley was like every other community Suter had known or heard about.

But he was troubled. He liked a number of those he had met: Aziz, Fernihough, Josephine, old Sidney. There might be others he could take to, for all he knew. Goddard had said something or other about wanting him here. If he stayed, that would mean losing his independence.

People meant trouble. It had always been easier and safer to remain on his own. He had more to contribute than society could ever offer him: he would always be out of pocket, as he had been before the plague. The price they had demanded of him, both in time and taxes, had been far too high. If he remained in Shanley the same thing would happen again. And he would have to conform, to share an arbitrary set of values and beliefs. They might even expect him to go to church. Fools like Goddard, who seemed to be some sort of politician, would for ever be telling him what to do.

This was the crucial dilemma. It underpinned the insoluble equation in his life. People were trouble, yet he was not meant to live alone.

Suter's thoughts became disjointed. He fell asleep.

At some stage when his sleep was at its lightest, he emerged to find the armchair occupied once again. The young woman sitting there, although dark, was certainly not Helen. Her hair was far too short. It had been trimmed into shape, but the cut appeared crude and uneven. Her pale face showed signs of exhaustion, of some physical or psychological ordeal, mental torture.

He had already guessed who she was. The head man's daughter. The other Helen.

Her garment was a plain pullover in camel-coloured wool, worn over a tweed skirt. A silk scarf at her neck, predominantly white, carried some sparse pattern in yellow and brown. She was watching him.

'I'm not supposed to be here,' she said, when she saw that he had awoken. 'I came to thank you.'

She extended her hand. Her fingers took his own and he realised he was touching another living person. Until coming upstream that had not happened since the plague, and until this moment he had hardly touched anyone except in a desire to push them away. Human contact had no place in his world. The warmth and animation of her grasp conveyed something else that was strange: regard.

She, like himself, was still suffering because of Bex.

Suter felt very tired. He was having difficulty keeping his eyes open. She said, 'You found Martin, didn't you?'

Yes. He had found Martin. Had uttered a few words. Or so he had told Muriel.

Startled, she raised her eyes to the other side of the room. Suter assumed the door had opened. To his disappointment, she let his fingers slip.

In that attitude, in her countenance and the way she held herself, she seemed just as beautiful as the other woman had, last night, when looking at the clock.

Josephine appeared. Without asperity, she said to Helen, 'What on earth do you think you're playing at?'

She rose. 'I'm very sorry.'

Josephine put an arm round her shoulder and started moving her aside. 'You're in no state for visiting. And, this morning, neither is he.'

‘He’s going to be all right, though?’

‘Yes, he’s going to be all right.’

Suter allowed his eyes to close. He could still feel the sympathetic touch of her fingers. He hoped she would come again. He knew she would. She would sit talking at his bedside and, later, as time passed, she might stroll with him, out there in the gardens, keeping him company while he recovered his strength. They would cross the sunlit lawns to the river, to the shade of the copper beech, and rest for a while on the cast-iron bench.

Sleep, like the river, wished to claim him.

He did not resist: for he had just decided that, if ever she asked him, he most willingly would stay.

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