

Newton's Sleep
by Daniel O'Mahony

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Every body perseveres in its state of being at rest or of moving uniformly straight forward, except in so far as it is compelled to change its state by forces impressed.

A change in motion is proportional to the motive force impressed and takes place along the straight line in which that force is impressed.

To any action there is always an opposite and equal reaction; in other words, the action of two bodies upon each other are always equal and always opposite in direction.

Book One: The Rituals of the King
Chapter 0: The Waste Book

Impelled as though in sympathy with the earth, a spittle's-worth of dark humour slips from between the high branches of the tree into the mild air. So it plunges from its zenith, drawn by its yearning for the honest Lincolnshire lime. Thus does base matter descend, while pure spirit rises to join the light.

This hungry glob does not however find the soil, but impacts instead upon the head of a boy stretched out in quiet contemplation upon the ground at the foot of the tree. So a story is a-borning, one that shall bear repetition until Judgement and yet grow more grand and pregnant with each telling. Like a coin it shall be passed from party to party, its sovereign features slowly obliterated by the erosion of hands, until the markings be smoothed and unrecognised. Thus the fallen matter, which in fact most keenly resembles the manure from which all garden idylls spring, becomes in fiction a happier symbol; how sly that it should be the apple, that sweet fruit of bitter knowledge and exile. But this is not Eden bounded by the Witham, and this boy, this youth, is no Adam. He is a child of nine summers with shite on his brow.

Observe the boy, on his blanket of warm grass, in his cradle of grey tortured tree-roots, in his open-roofed bedchamber of hazy autumnal warmth. Observe his lank limbs, spread careless and empty of purpose. Observe his lolling head, the blond crop of his scalp, the beak'd face, the eyes oscillating palpably below the drooped lids. You might think him idle. You might think him asleep, and he is dreaming in his own fashion, but he is not idle. Sloth is not his sin; he has spent his day dialing (it having been determined that he is not fitted as a shepherd, neither as a merchant, and is therefore doomed to be that least practical of animals, an educated man). In his dreams he dials still, smoothing and shaping raw stone with a diamond-sharp blue blade. It is a more precise instrument than he has ever found in his waking life, making for a nicer dial on which ever finer gradients of shadow will reveal the stations of the hour in detail unknown even to the astrologers of Cathay or Egypt. These are, he contemplates in his dream, the oldest machines to be the work of man; only the heavens themselves turn on a finer and more perfect mechanism. In his dream he builds a great Palace of Time to contain all his dials, a plain wood house of ever-expanding wings and atria. This is Heaven and he will be its architect.

These are not the dreams of an idle child.

But he is a child of man and therefore sinful, and this sin - because he follows the true faith - cannot be wiped clean by the sanctified pisspot-fonts of Rome or all her whorish indulgences. If not sloth, then - what? It is not gluttony, his meat is on the brain not the bone. Lust, then? Lust has its smiling possibilities. These are cold years, but the summers are yet warm enough for the local children to seek out cool and lonely waters. They go in groups to bathe in the ponds or the streams, this lad among them, though he is neither an intrepid boy nor a healthy one and is content only to wade while his half-friends sink naked to swim below the line of the water. Once in jest they caught him and held his head under the surface, untroubled by his thrashing, releasing him at their leisure. His skull swelled when he broke into the free air, while blood and bile dribbled from his nose and mouth; he had swallowed from the stream, and was afflicted for a month by fevers and flux. They had most blasphemously baptised him, but while a-bed he had

contemplated the quality of light that penetrated the murk, and found there a riddle that he turned casually in his mind. He will unlock it later; more often his thoughts turned to the bodies of his companions, friends and villains, sons and daughters alike; but this is the innocent curiosity of a child. As an adult he will lust for men - and also for women, but most often for men - but it will be a penitent's flagellant lust, a tamed thing that inspires as much disgust as pleasure. It brings home proper Godly guilt as its harvest. Do not look for lust here; it does not drive him.

Oh, but there is pride.

His sleep and his dreams are those of a woken mind. He merely covers his eyes from the sun, which lies in a warm pane across his face. The sun has been a pitiful thing in these years of his life; there is a cold winter coming in, but there are better days yet to come. He dreams of how he will fill those better days. The shite spatters on his face as though it were a new thought, inspiration from the divine. I will have a book, he decides. He can see it already, waiting for him on a trader's stall. A heavy book, with yellowed pages that smell of must and learning, though all those sheets be yet blank. It was once proudly bound, but the stitching has disrepaired in its travels, its spine infested with spiders and small insects just as the spine of man contains his unproven seed. He sees himself, a little older, touching the book, worshipping it, wooing it. Each season it is taken, and each season it returns, and he comes as though a puppy in love to watch it lay upon its stall. How he fears that other hands will spoil her. How he yearns to spill ink on her pages with his thoughts and designs. The stallsman, once suspicious of his attentions, grows to love this gangly moon-struck boy. - You might save enough coin to buy it (says he) - And how long will that take? (replies the boy, now truly a youth).

The book's keeper laughs, then shakes his head sadly, then laughs again and ruffles the youth's bowl of hair. - Maybe one day you could prevail on someone to present it you? (he speculates, correctly as it will transpire) - And will you keep it for me until that day? - (another laugh) I must sell it to who will pay for it. Oh, don't look so glum, boy! There will be other books.

- But I want that one!

One day I will have a waste book of blank leaves that I will decorate.

Beneath the tree, he shakes these thoughts from his head, somehow uncertain in himself that the dream has not already come to pass. In shaking, he feels the patch of foreign skin that now dislodges further and drips across his eye; and for a moment he thinks himself wounded; and for a moment he thinks himself dead.

Lately cannonballs have flown their arcs, leaving the crystal sky unbroken, while on Earth their traces are all too visible: Englishmen reduced to piles of offal and powdered bone; the ruins of fastnesses, once impregnable, now shattered and exposed; the earth ripped asunder and scorched by sizzling violent impacts. The glass dome of the sky is undisturbed, and Heaven has never seemed so far away. So are proved the observations of the Europeans; of Copernicus, Galileo, Brahe, Kepler, and of freshly-dead Cartesius (whose worlds whirl not by the command of the primum mobile but on dimly-imagined vortices): the celestial spheres are of a distance only God can conceive. Yet as the divine recedes, it seems also terribly closer. War on Earth presages War in Heaven; the struggle between the holy houses of Christ and their eternal Adversary has erupted among the living. The party of angels is in ascendant, though not yet triumphant. The good old cause has routed the forces of kingly tyranny upon the field, and those Englishmen who despise our

Protestant liberties have fallen silent; but they are not yet extirpated, and royal sympathies - so often clothed as though of a part with gentle living and good government - conceal the actions of those true and monstrous traitors who have suckled their love of slavery from the teat of the She-Wolf. All Earthly affairs thus lightly conceal the true conflict that shapes the cosmos, and all occurrences are as portents of the divine, or of the damned.

And does our boy believe this? Perhaps he has not yet thought on it too long nor too hard, but if prevailed upon, and if assured that an honest answer will yield no harsh reward, he might say that he is not yet wise enough to draw a conclusion and that more observation and patient measurement is required. Such equivocation obscures his true conviction about the case of the world: if war be fought in Heaven then Earth be strewn with its portents. He believes this: as above, so below.

What to make then of this caul bespeckling his face? He puts his fingers to it and scrapes it away. He holds it on his tips and it has the glistening look of shite, not bird-shite as might be expected, but the shite of beasts or men. See him furrow his brow, disgusted as any boy would be when showered with diseased soil; but see that he still does not remove himself, as any boy would, but stays lying in his poise of deceptive contemplation. He does not run to the nearest brook or well. He does not even wipe his hands. That wrinkle he wears grows, with each passing second, less a mask of disgust and more one of perplexion and enquiry. This substance is not wet. It does not have the texture of shite, it is uncommonly smooth. It does not (he sniffs) smell of shite. It does not (he pecks) taste of shite. It is black and viscous, but he knows no earthly substance like this. It is an unknown humour.

He rolls the glob onto his palm and stares, as if wringing further truths from it. They do not come. They -

He no longer has a boy's smooth hands. The skin is tautened and lined with experience, the fingertips sharpened and flattened like a worn nib. They contain old aches and twinges. These hands have been washed clean of ink on more occasions than the numbered days of his span. There is no dirt on his palms, but a puffed satin pillow bearing clean coins, sparkling metal fresh from the mint, bearing the likenesses of monarchs as yet uncrowned, perhaps not yet born.

He holds them out for inspection. If it please Your Majesty -

No. He tries to fling them away. He has a boy's hands. He has shite on his palm. There was no pillow, there were no coins, there is no Majesty. He finds himself shivering out of a waking nightmare. Carefully he rolls the unexplained matter into a ball, as he would the skin of a cheese. It sucks to his fingers. There are no more answers to be found here, so he shifts his investigation elsewhere, turning his head upwards towards the source, the high branches above his head.

Caught and held among the tangled limbs is the shape of a man. The boy wonders how he came to be there, for he could have not have climbed so high without setting loose some alarum or motion to stir the boy from his contemplation. Nor has he been resting there since before noon; the shroud of leaves might conceal, but not from this distance, nor a body so large. Besides, there is something about this bodikin that draws the eye, a blankness that cannot be avoided. Well, then, he must have fallen from the sky.

The boy laughs. His laughter is a death-rattle in his gullet, and is not pleasing to the ears of others, who have heard such noises too frequently

before and too often in circumstances not conducive to good humour. So he does not laugh among them, and is thought to be a most humourless fellow. He springs from where he lies, for he was always alert, and determines to climb the tree. It is an easy business for him; he is forever scrambling into unlikely places in his investigations. His hands pass lightly over the green mosses of the trunk, across the peeking purples and yellows of wildflowers, around the secret crevices that house teeming colonies - roanokes, jamestowns, whole americas - of a million insects, until he finds a secure handhold. Another follows, a third, a fourth, so he scrambles up the tree by increments until his hands and feet be resting safely on branches and boughs, and he comes at last to his dripping benefactor.

The man in the tree has no face, which is the second of three remarkable attributes to command our lad's attention; first and most terrifying is that he is a black man. And our lad almost plunges from his perch in terror - the Black Bastard!

For it is known that the Bastard, though routed and fugitive, is abroad in England. He no longer stands at the head of a troop of Papish Scots, nor a horde of wild Irish - they were smashed by Oliver's army some weeks since - but the Bastard himself escaped the field, his head intact upon his shoulders. He is a supple one; he slithers like a serpent, he dances like a reed, unlike his father who would not bend upon the winds of righteousness and so snapped and lost his head. The Bastard is at large, and though hunted, he has the Knot, that invisible cohort of supporters and sympathisers, to aid him in his flight and his dissemblances. While cool heads advise that he will most likely be making his way to the sea (and thence to exile, to some cave from where he might make pronouncements of blood-curdling impotence), other voices are more strident in their fears. He haunts England like a monster, devouring its bread, leeching its blood. He climbs through windows to pluck juicy babies from their cradles; he erupts from wells and drags honest men down to drown; he lures the unwary maiden with honeyed words that he might despoil her, and if there be no maidens why then he will make do with a pretty boy; he insinuates into churches that he might shit on the lectern and wipe his arse on pages ripped from his grandfather's bible.

These are the words of hot heads, and our young man knows this well. He is not swayed by panic or base gossip, though his heart tolls like a monkish bell in his ribs' cage. The fear that grips him is instead, quite rational. For he is, as best he can be in such provincial circumstances, a well-informed youth. This is not the Bastard. For one thing, the Bastard would be a fool to flee towards the Wash; this Shire is solidly for Parliament; its soil is so sensible of its faith that were he to cross into its borders the very air would cause him to shrivel into stone. For another thing, though called black, the Bastard is merely a swarthy man, dark of complexion and thick of hair; were he to be transported to the markets of Africa or Araby, he would seem as pale as any other sun-pinched Scot. Thinks the child then of those merchants of hotter lands; he has never set eyes upon a Negro, but his reason tells him that they cannot be truly black either, not the blackness of coal or pitch or night, any more than he with his pallid pink skin could be called white as snow, or the savage red man of America approaches that ideal colour found in the embers of a spent fire. These are similes and approximations; they do not describe men as they are.

But they describe this man, who is truly black, as of coal, or of pitch, or of night.

And the second miracle: this man has no face; he has a head, but it is entirely without feature. It is a smooth bowl on his shoulders, so perfect that it might be a helmet, but it is not of metal or glass. Those fabrics have

the quality of reflection; if it were either, the boy would see the angles of his own face peering back at him, though stretched and distorted as they would be in a puddle. He looks into that face, that no-face, and sees nothing of himself there, and nothing of creation.

The third miracle; this is not a man at all. He is naked, he is spread among the tree with blunt branches punched smoothly through his body as though unbroken; his arms and legs are thrown open, and he is visibly without the privy parts of a man. Yet nor is there that puckered female difference that our boy has sighted while paddling sullenly in Lincoln waters; nor is there any mark left by barbarous surgery. The thighs meet with a smooth and uncomplicated join.

Our boy recalls Christ among the Sadducees, and the unsexed angels of His description. How his heart pounds, and how he regrets the foolish laughter when he first thought this creature might have fallen from the sky. Yet, if this is an angel plung'd to earth, where are his wings? Where his halo? Why has he been so expelled? Is he perhaps a casualty of that great conflict imagined to rage beyond the horizon? If this is an angel and not some eructation from the pit, then how fares the War, for God and Man alike? Wind catches the branches, the leaves rustle, the boy shivers, the green-cast light moves in patterns across the angel's broken body.

It is surely dead. It is impaled. It is burst. It bleeds from every part of its body, its skin - the colour but not the texture of coal - hanging in ripening beads. The boy feels for this dead thing, no matter what its provenance, for it must have been exposed to intolerable pressures in its journey through the voids. He imagines it falling and enduring, sparking like a firework, only to drop hither into this tree and expire unnoticed and unmourned, save only for a child caught beneath its wake.

He puts a hand to its body. He seems to touch empty air; it is not even cold.

He removes his hand and the body comes with it, the blackened skin moulded round his fingers like a glove. It feels not unpleasant; it looks far worse. The boy, briefly careless of his footing, stumbles back, and the body stumbles with him. The fuliginous tide rolls onto his forearm, and advances steadily toward his elbow. He scratches at it, but his blunted nails make no mark on his new second skin. He kicks at the body - still more foolish, his naked toe plunges into the yielding corpse and is swallowed, followed by foot and ankle. He struggles, but it is only panic and it is ineffective; in a few moments the body of the angel has consumed him from tip to toe. It saves his face for last, and only as it swarms across his eyes, his nose, his ears, and into his mouth does he think to scream. It comes out like a squeak on a reed. The angel skin wears him now, smothering him, sinking into his pores, his organs and beyond into his very -

He is not dead. He did not die then, all those summers ago as a boy. Today they call him the Master. He came through draughty Whitehall passages bearing the new coins on a puffed satin pillow for the inspection of His Majesty. All Masters answer to higher powers, and even Kings are commanded by God; he has, after some consideration, grown to accept this as a practical position, though he might grumble sometimes in his cups about that promised republican paradise, now lost to time. If we must have a king, then let it be a reasonable king as His Majesty is, a dull personage who turns his attentions to England and her attendant nations with bored reluctance, not with any kingly passion that turns in time to oppression. Let him be this blunt Orange Duke, this Prince of the Republic. Let him set aside kingly wrath only for those who seek alternative governance out of spite and wickedness; the noisome Papists, the heathen Irish, and that tiny Tory rabble (out of - he sighs -

many good Tories who have abided the new status quo) who have pitched outright into treasonable Jacobitism. The Master sits in Parliament for Cambridge now
-

Do I yet? That will happen, but is it happened yet?

- and still speaks for the good old cause, but accepts that the cause has been transformed by time and new certainties. He sits in a Parliament that has approved and checked the King's powers, thus is the circle squared and old grievances resolved. Royalist and republican, Whig and Tory, now we are all one. Besides, he is older.

But - oh! This king is a tiresome man!

The Master speaks to him of the new æconomicks, of how the wealth of a nation be measured not in the contents of its coffers but in the sum of its productions and the harvest of its trade. The King nods his bullet head and burbles his enthusiasms in his accented English, but he does not see; or rather he sees only the profit that might be made out of this new arrangement of affairs. The Master, tempering his frustration, attempts to enlighten; the King wags a finger as though he were still a boy. 'Uh, uh, uh,' says his scolding guttural Dutch mouth. The Master perceives a tree, a proud sapling carefully nurtured in good soil, trimmed, regulated, organised; he sees also that the growth is governed by numbers, buried so far in the infinitesimal that even his calculations cannot tease them free, but he knows that those unguessable numbers must be beautiful. They are the truest of God's works, they speak to his soul of their creator; this is what the tree represents.

Where he sees a tree - where he sees an act of God - this dull king sees firewood, to be sold for a pretty profit.

So it is with the recoinage, when trading throughout the nation shall be suspended. The King was easily persuaded; he sees an opportunity to line his pockets, to suck wealth out of the land and pay for his sports, his revels, and his pursuits. The Master feels faintly excluded from these sodomitical activities; he disapproves, because all carnality invites disapproval, but he aches to know more of them. The rough and boisterous king finds the company of rough and boisterous men pleasing, which has never been the Master's preference. His desire is for the smooth skin, the shy young man or genteel young lady, whose pallid bodies will reflect his nervous enquiries.

Oh, would that I had Sir Xtofer's grace and wit! Would that the Queen still lived! She was graceful, she was air while her oafish husband is of the earth. Yet I could never speak to her without losing my tongue to a Gordian tangle, while that wing'd troglodyte found it so easy to charm her.

The Master explains the significance of each new coin in tedious detail. The King yawns.

He has an odd sensation, as of falling from a great height.

No, the point of the recoinage is not to facilitate the greed of the wealthy (though, he admits to himself, this will certainly be an outcome), but to attain precision. All things must tend towards perfection, and if that cannot be achieved in governance, then let it be sought in other endeavours. Those coins we have passed among ourselves through our lives, whether they be issued for the purposes of a James, a Charles, or an Oliver, have become debased. They are cut. They are shaved. They are reconstituted with impurities. It is intolerable that this state persists. It is motivated by thievery, but it is worse than thievery. The dilution of the coin is a fall away from precision,

just as the dilution of the soul with dross renders one more remote from the grace of God. So he says to those who call him unduly harsh. There is a worse crime than stealing bread, and for this they must hang, these wicked counterfeiterers of souls.

- I would not care to be a hangman.

Your life will unfold as you see here. The rate of change through time is exponential. There will be no perceptible alteration within your lifetime.

- I will not be a hangman.

You will be a hangman. It is written.

'Master?' The King. His head bobs forward, a mask of genuine concern. He seems unshaven today, though the Master cannot be sure of his impression. The Master touches his temple and winces, feigning pain; he is more profoundly disturbed, the world seeming for a moment to have slipped away and beached him on a foreign shore.

'A - a slight headache,' he protests, affectedly.

The King's fingers percuss on his bristled cheek. 'You think too much.'

Graciously the Master nods, the Master smiles in acknowledgement of the King's trite observation.

The black ghost inside him rises upon his gullet, but will not spew forth; it has made a nest in him. The world slips again, he is tumbling, not through air but through moments of his life. He recalls seeing in a memory a silver-skinned man framed by the moon through his window, naked save for his flat helm and winged sandals; he recalls next that his memory was inflamed and addled by the fumes and retorts of his experiments and he saw nothing more remarkable than trees swaying and scraping on the night-winds. He recalls his industry in the plague years, his annus mirabilis that bore fecund innovation from the isolation of his Lincolnshire Ghetto. He remembers composing the Principia, and the treatise on Opticks (which is not yet written), and his summa vitae Praxis (which shall never be completed but will lie stillborn in his fingers on his deathbed). He recalls his struggles with his enemies, those base plagiarists who would claim his rightful and unique insights as their own; he would hang them if he could; he imagines himself in Hell and at their mercy; they have put their hooks into his flesh...

He recalls being born, being thrust out of his mother's body into the fallen world.

I will call this the limit. It is possible to extend earlier, but at this point the gifts of your life become intermingled with those of your mother.

The spirit is with the boy, watching him as he haunts the moments of his life, those few disasters he has already lived, those many triumphs yet to come. It dwells within him as the quietest and most unassuming of guests. It must then be a devil after all, but no - it does not guide him, it simply rides and sees the world through his eyes.

- Sir, am I to be your vessel?

No. I have need of a vessel, but it will not be you. Your journeys will be your own.

- Then what am I?

You are my port.

- Am I a good port?

You are the best-defended port on this world. My enemies cannot touch you. They dare not.

- You imply a purpose sir, and a mission. What then is our enterprise?

I must fulfil the instruction given to me by my creator.

- And what is that instruction?

Destroy the Adversary.

- That is the noblest of causes. How may I aid you?

Live your life, and let me shelter in its shadow.

- I will do my best.

Now wake.

He strikes the earth with a thunder clap, that now he thinks upon it, rumbles not within his skull but in the sky. Grey late summer weather has snuck upon him as he lay beneath the tree. Cracked branches and wood splinters lie arrayed around him, and dislodged yellowing leaves descend like dying moths to festoon his limp body. There is a jolt of impact in his spine; his hands extend upwards, the fingers curved as if to grip on the empty air. He has a certain memory of falling, a-whirling and a-tumbling through the sky, from a bough that could not take his weight; in spite of his aches he is not certain that this was not a dream, but one so vivid that his body now trusts it to be true. He does not recall climbing the tree, nor any reason why he might wish to. He remembers nothing of what he might have found in the high branches, though henceforth he will find that certain dark or bronzed mirrors will have an equivocal magnetism for him, one that attracts in fascination and repels for fear of what might be revealed.

The fields and the villages of this little Earth extend around him. He hears his world, the chattering of birds and the tumbling of water-drops down the streams; he breathes his world, the fresh sheep-dung and the shorn fields and the galvanic sizzle of the storm. He knows on some distant morning he will wake with all faculty for taste and smell gone, worn away like silt upon the shore by nights of strange alchemy. Rain cracks the sky, and our boy, whose life-to-come has been forgotten, laughs heartily and like death as it washes his face. He is not merely cleansed by it, but wiped to a blank. There is so much to achieve. He remembers his dream of the book, with clean pages to be filled and ordered. He imagines God birthing a creation that is both matter and - as the Divine John describes - a word. The book of all things is opened. The Lord takes up His instrument, and moving His bloody and invisible hand, He makes His first mark.

Chapter 1: Killer of Sheep

It was a bleak January morning, tasting of blood even before the dolorous stroke came down, tasting of the smoke from so many winter fires. The wind howled down from St Giles's Circus into the heart of Westminster, across the Palace of Whitehall towards the Thames. The entire crowd felt it, each and every individual no matter how well-wrapped they were for the day. Afterwards

a story was started that the sacrifice had dressed in two shirts that morning, so that he might not be seen shivering on the stage and have his chill mistaken for fear. It may have been true, it might not; it was one of many rumours. It was one of the earliest observations recorded by Nathaniel Silver, who was there in the crowd when the blade fell and history began.

He was distracted by the old wound. It bulged in his skull below his brow, above his eye. It felt as though a fat bulbous spider had crawled into his head, first to lay her eggs there, then to die thrashing. No one around him acknowledged his discomfort; perhaps they mistook it for royalist distress. There were as many mourners here as there were celebrants. When he bowed his head, he was a subject of a kingdom. When he looked up again, he was a citizen of a commonwealth. He felt like neither.

This was true: a low moan rose from the lips of the gathering when the sacrifice's head came away from its body; but it was also true that there were ragged cheers and whistles. The guard pressed tight round the edges of a crowd that jostled them, but the movement was as much revelry as it was anger or despair. The fall of the axe was a symbolic moment for republican and royalist alike, to be picked-over at length in rival accounts. The first duelling apologies would appear in the next few days: the Eikon Basilike, said to be from the King's own hand, and the Eikonoklastes penned by the Secretary of Foreign Tongues (or 'some Puritan nobody' as the other party had it).

Beyond the war of words there was the ever-growing library of myths and legends about the day, which seemed conceived to bolster the King's case yet in the end were too strange to argue for any cause. A star of ill-omen fell from the sky that night; a whale beached itself at Dover, and thrashed, and died at the moment of the stroke; a raggedy man danced a gleeful jig in the street to celebrate the regicide, and a flock of birds fell upon him to peck the eyes from their sockets and the tongue from his jaw. Nate Silver was not bothered with the truth-hood or falsity of these little pearls of rumour, but observed their effect dispassionately. Whalebones were soon sold as holy relics; any number of disreputable travellers could produce (for a fee) an unlovely stone that had dropped from the heavens; and every blind-mute beggar from Berwick to the Lizard had a tale to tell - or, to be accurate, mime - in exchange for pennies.

When that cowed and anonymous fellow who had killed the King displayed his uncrowned head, it was in silence, without the customary denunciation of a traitor. The only words that rose from that stage to address the crowd came, like a Greek oracle, from the lips of the severed head. It was said the executed king held forth on a variety of subjects for half an hour before his eyes rolled back into the sockets and the royal tongue slurred into stillness forever. And that was certainly untrue, Silver noted in his commentary; he'd been there, he would have noticed.

For all his dispassionate poise, Nathaniel Silver was no different from any other Englishman, but he did not care that morning to share his convictions with the mob. As the mood of the crowd surged and turned like a tide, he felt grateful that he had neglected to wear his red-coat. He had no desire to be booed and spat upon by strangers, any more than he wanted to be applauded or kissed. He had not meant to come to Whitehall at all, but fate had made him unwell - his headaches grew harsher than usual in winter, and on the sixth anniversary of his deliverance one had come upon him violently, as though it were a fresh wound. Fate thus placed him in care in London away from the troop; fate had also cleared his head that morning and replaced the pain with curiosity. He was compelled to attend the execution. It was in God's hands.

Even so, he had no particular desire to see another death, especially one

performed so detachedly, like surgery but to an opposite end. He came to walk among the crowd, to gather impressions of the commoners of the new-born weal, to see the people for whom he had fought. Crags of faces peered out from behind bonnets and beneath hats; the young and the elderly both, they all seemed carved from breathing stone. They were waiting for life to be poured into them, to be animated. Oh, there was movement and gossip, and the laughter of children - who alone in the crowd seemed truly free, scampering and playing and japing and forming whorls with the children of strangers until their elders gripped them and shushed them. All adult bodies here twitched, but their souls were held tight in anticipation. They stood spiritually as still as the pikemen and cavalry who guarded their perimeter. Silver felt humbled among them. He felt he should stand out from the crowd, say something, declare himself. He did not - this was not the moment, and he did not wish to be misinterpreted.

In later years, he forgot the faces that he had carefully committed to memory. He did not, however, forget the smell or the crush, the twin and overwhelming pressures of the human flock. They smelled of sweat and dust and blood and fever, mingled with the muscular perfume of horseflesh and the decay of winter vegetables. They pushed around him until he could not breathe, while octopus-armed passers-by pawed and tugged at him; some meant to rob him, he had no doubt, but for the most part it was simply a production of the human entity. Hands reached out to touch unexpectedly across a void. It was, at times, intolerable, and he sometimes wished himself onto the balcony overlooking the stage; then again, quite a dense congregation was gathered there, and would hardly be afforded a happier perspective on this final ritual of the King.

At the appointed hour, Charles Stuart - by the Grace of God King of England, Scotland, and Ireland - was led from the window on his last parade. The crowd sighed, the crowd seethed. There were some cheers but they were soon silenced, perhaps by force, perhaps not. The King came out dressed simply, all in white beneath his hat and robe, so that he appeared as a new Christ on his road to Calvary. Long dark hair fell in curls upon his shoulders, soon to be shorn to republican satisfaction. He took his last mortal steps down to the stage accompanied by a chaplain and retainer, both of whom loomed. He had the saturnine eyes of a hawk, still regarding his subjects as prey; yet hands still clutched for him, to touch his hem as he came by. Silver, perhaps alone in the crowd, was unimpressed. Charles Stuart was, after all, just a man. Silver believed that. He had fought for that. He had killed for that. He had nearly, until the miracle had delivered him, died for that.

To put Charles's head on the block now and with such ceremony was to undo the great work of the Republic. It was an acknowledgement of the king's separation from his nation, and thus of his divinity. It was, in a subtle way that Charles himself might not have appreciated, his victory.

The stage was raised above the level of the ground, so the gathered masses had to crane their necks, even the tallest of them. The shortest shuffled or stood on tiptoe; the short-arsed king himself, had he been among the audience, would have been lost behind a tide of hats and helms and plumes. Children were hoisted up above the line of heads, as offerings, or for a better view. The watchers on the balcony leaned gingerly forward, and seemed ready to topple onto the stage so the King might die among a shower of well-wishers. The King, stripped of his robe and hat and medal, pulled on a white cap to make himself holier still. He knelt before the block, as if seeking supplication. Silver found hate difficult to muster, but resentment came easily; his head now throbbed thickly from the blow the King had struck him at Edgehill.

Upon the sacrifice's signal, the blade came down. Blood decorated the front

row of the crowd. Then came the moans and the cheers, and when Silver looked again, there was only a stump leaking onto the stage, while the nameless axeman leant down to claim the head and hold it aloft by its hair. There were still gasps and shrieks from the assembly, and - Silver imagined - the strangled sound of a man spending. On the balcony, women turned their heads to look away, and on the ground a swell pressed forward, their handkerchiefs and cloths and sometimes rags extended to catch the blood or mop it from the damp red wood. Silver leaned forward, fascinated now by the aftermath as he had not been by the act.

The Puritans would ban the playhouse. Perhaps they sensed that it was no longer necessary; all theatre had been eclipsed, all stages become scenery, and all scribblers out-penned by the wrights of history.

Silver saw that already Charles was a Martyr King. The King's blood was a holy souvenir. It would be taken away and cherished; it would be scattered like seedlings through the realm. Those dirtied handkerchiefs would not be displayed on a stall or as a relic, and certainly would never be offered for sale - that was their significance. Faustuses and charlatans could construct chimærical whales out of the bones of many dead animals, and any able-bodied vagabond might concoct a fiction about the cruelty of pecking birds, but they would fool only those who wished to be sold a yarn. But these keepers of the royal blood had witnessed a divine Mystery and a divine conspiracy; their lips would wilfully be sealed.

The King is dead - and on the continent, a courtier commences a report with the fateful phrase Your Majesty, and is mortified when his teen-aged charge bursts into tears - and remains dead, long live the people! So? The sun will still shine, the crops will still grow. Even as the human sea began to break into their individual beads, the wary pike and horses yielding to let them slink away, Silver stood unmoved on his place. He was staring directly, he realised, at the naked sun, a poor thing these days and obscured by white clouds and black smoke. It was still sharp enough to sting his eyes and leave its impression on the inside of the lids. The sun will rise on his cycle; the seed will grow on hers.

He was not thinking of that yet, he was thinking of the pagan kings founded in England by Brutus in the age before Christ. He had some schooling and a little understanding of the old Roman accounts that described a fearful heathen epoch of blood and sacrifice, an age that extended in the numberless years since the fall. Those pagan lords, though not ordained by any remembered god, were themselves offered as bloody sacrifice at the end of their short reigns. To be elevated was to be condemned, after a certain cycle of years had elapsed, to death in the most barbaric fashion, a means that would in the modern world be granted only to the worst of traitors. Oh, they had power, these kings, and doubtless they abused it as fervently as any Christian monarch, but they must also have swallowed humbly when they came to be elected.

Yet it was their sacrifice that made the earth rich and kept the sun turning in the sky (or as now seemed to be the case, the earth turning in the sky around the sun); and their successor was the same lord of misrule, reborn in a new body with a new face and a new person and sometimes even a new sex. Those days, Silver saw, were gone, but he felt he had seen them re-enacted or evolved on the morning stage.

With his mind's eye he glimpsed a grand design. He was distracted and it was gone, but the memory of it remained.

'Move along now, sir,' said the red-coat, who had put his hand not unkindly on Silver's shoulder, 'there's nothing to see here.'

Silver shook and cleared his head. 'I was thinking.'

The trooper frowned beneath his visor and looked again. 'You're Nate Silver, aren't you?' Silver stared at him blankly. 'Don Taylor's mate? We fought together?'

'I've fought in many battles.'

'We fought for our money when Parliament wouldn't cough up.' The trooper cocked his head towards the bloody remains, still on the stage, soon to be removed and stitched back together for proper burial. 'You ought to be pleased.'

'Yes, I suppose I ought to be.'

Silver left soon after that, with his mind filled with thoughts of pagan kings. They shrieked as the skull-headed druids cut them open still living and scooped out their lights to make a better garrotte; they howled when placed like Guido Fawkes upon a bone-fire; they died worshipped and in agony with painted men and flower-decorated women dancing around them, singing and carousing and celebrating the death of one sun and the birth of another. This was the first of the many observations in his collection, soon joined by the legends of beached whales and fallen stars, and other, more subtle and sophisticated thoughts, as he sought to recreate that perfect vision of the ordering of mankind. But the first was scribbled only idly and on a scrap of paper as he prepared to move out. Having done with it, he put the paper away, then scabbled to find it mere seconds later, so that he could add, in underlined text, the description:

Observations upon the cycle of the sun in the sky and the seed in the fields; and upon the same cycle as might be reflected in the affairs of kings and of all human polities ancient and modern, in the natural philosophy of the present age, and in the formation of the world that is yet to come.

Within a few days, Nathaniel Silver returned to his troop, and was marched hither and thither around a nation that - though now shorn of its Leviathan - was far from peaceful. Then the other nations were roused in revolt; he was dispatched there also, and conducted himself according to the standards he had set himself long before, which were high but not insurmountable even in trying circumstances. He gathered observations wherever he went, spoke aloud whensoever it was politic, and felt the stirrings of a pearl forming around his grit.

Wherever Silver went he took three things with him. The first was the pain in his head, which waxed and waned like the moon, but even in lulls was tangible by its absence and its promised return. He coped silently.

The second thing was his scrap of paper, which swelled over the years to become a pile of such scraps, then a bundle, and then a book. He spent his free moments adding to the sum of his knowledge or amending earlier reports. He read and re-read each page religiously, like a forgetful man with a scroll he had written to describe unto himself his life; but it was - he insisted to himself - a practical book and not scripture. Much of what he had written in earlier days grew obscure to him, as if blazed onto the page only half-understood, and as well as new observations he revised and clarified and made fresh interpretation.

The third thing Silver could not be parted from was a wooden box he had made himself, small enough to be carried in his hand or concealed in his pocket.

This box contained the most precious object in the world, the proof of his deliverance and his miracle.

The ride from London was a short matter of days, but the journey felt longer. A hundred years he had been travelling, or a thousand, since the time this island nation was not yet Protestant, was not yet Christian, was not yet a nation. Only now he was so close to his destination did he begin to feel the slightest impatience. He was carried by cart, having no aptitude for mastering horses, and was met on the twilight road by a mounted party. He peered through the gloom. Civilians. Militia? No. He breathed out, but did not relax.

'Nathaniel Silver!' came a quavering call, in a voice a-feared to be out in these circumstances.

Silver called back: 'Sir Denzil Lynch?'

'The same,' the lead horseman replied and brought his beast alongside the cart so that Silver could grasp his hand in friendship. Sir Denzil's voice had the natural cadences of the mummer's shire, a little sharpened perhaps by learning and cosmopolitan company. He was a vague grey apparition in the gloom, under his cloak and plumed hat, but he was palpably timid. This expedition must have cost him much courage. Silver knew him from his letters and entreaties, but felt he would not find the man for sure until they were safe indoors.

'You are most welcome, Master Silver,' Sir Denzil declaimed from his high horse. 'Shall we' - he coughed, embarrassed - 'giddy up? We're but a short mile from my home.'

Silver nodded, and bade his driver to move them on. Sir Denzil's party rode leisurely before them, but the man himself remained abreast of the cart for a moment so that he could offer a stumbling apology.

'I trust our abrupt appearance didn't disturb you. I couldn't be certain it was you. The others are appearing on the road in their ones and twos and have been for the past week. You do not yet have an army, but by God you have a schoolroom!'

Silver brushed a smattering of insects from his face, where they had been blown by the breeze and the velocity of the cart. 'I don't understand!' he called, over the wind. 'What others?'

'Silverites, sir! Your followers!'

He closed his eyes; spider pain formed in his skull, and remained there even after his lids opened again. 'I have no followers,' he said, cautiously.

'Call them what you will, they have followed the rumours of your coming.'

'Then I may have led them to the gaol or the gallows.'

Sir Denzil laughed then, his first sign of heartiness but somehow not at all reassuring to Nathaniel Silver's ears.

Silver put cold fingers to his temple, but they failed to draw out the sting as he'd hoped. Sir Denzil left him after that to ride with his own men, and he continued the journey south in silence, save for the grinding wheels of the cart over hardened mud. Turning away from the pain, he saw ragged fires through a line of trees, and he imagined ironsides putting torches to thatches and barns to make great conflagrations, cleansing killing blazes. But the cart skirted round the copse, and in place of his morbid imaginings he found an

itinerant camp arrayed upon a grey gloomy field like a makeshift freshly-planted New World village, a cluster of adequate tents and tumble-down huts. The fires were lit here, pitiful will-o'-the-wisp things that might have been pissed out, yet he saw an endurance and he heard a community, the chorus of human voices rising sometimes in fear and sometimes in anger but mostly in hope. And some were singing, a medley of plain hymns on one side and foul-mouthed carousing on the other. Silver bowed his head, having no doubt that these were the Silverites of whom Sir Denzil had spoken. They did not hearten him; gazing down on that poor camp merely proved the enormity of the task he had set himself.

They came at last to Sir Denzil's home, deeper in his estates. It was a plain house on the outside, but the interior was richly furnished, speaking more of luxury than piety. Silver warmed himself upon the hearth and wondered again at his host's sympathies, which his letters had always made seem ambivalent and unclear. He must be wary of this bluff knight, who was surely quicker-witted than he appeared. Sir Denzil had hugged him mightily before they came through the door. Be wary then, he amended, but also generous. He owed this man everything.

Servants scurried forth to relieve of him of his belongings, but he kept the case with his manuscript, and his box. He had dreamed lately of crossing London Bridge with them and unexpectedly hurling both into the air, so that they fell into the Thames and were lost forever. He woke from that dream sweating, and had since taken care not to part with book nor box, not even for a moment. He was hustled through into a dining room where a supper was prepared for him; here he got a first proper look at his companion in letters and the man who, to all intents and purposes, was now the lord of Silver's manor.

Sir Denzil was, by Silver's estimation, some twenty years his elder, the taller man here by a good foot, but also heavier. Age and worry - and perhaps good living, though not recent - had put weight on his flesh and his bones, and though balding, he had contrived a neat grey beard and moustache in the old Cavalier style to offset this. He had not seen action, Silver was certain, and envied him. There was a keenness in his eyes that belied the softness of his tongue and the heaviness of his body; not great intelligence, but shrewdness maybe and sadness certainly. Sadness was everywhere; it oppressed England by action or by consequence. Silver wondered how he must seem in Sir Denzil's eyes; like some thin Quaker raven, like some narrow scarecrow in a Puritan's stolen coat.

'Am I really so renowned that there are rumours of my coming?' he asked, before he could sit.

'Someone put the rumours about,' Sir Denzil replied cheerfully. 'I can't imagine who. Now sit down and eat, you look starved. I hope' - he added, caution slipping into his voice - 'that you have not chosen to starve yourself? Or have an appetite only for vegetables?'

At table, Nathaniel Silver proved that he had neither. He was desperately hungry.

Sir Denzil said little as his guest ate, but watched him with smiling eyes, as of a boy who has won a prize. There were other eyes too, not in the room, but peering in from the black between two jambs.

'My daughter Alice,' Sir Denzil explained then, casting his head back to call her in: 'This is the gentleman I told you would be coming, Alice. Come and meet him. This is the fam'd Nathaniel Silver who is here to make his

experiment on our new lands.'

The eyes blinked and hesitated, but at last she came into the room, like a timid sparrow coaxed into the light by warmth and spots of food. She was still a child, dressed as a child would be, and Silver removed his hat out of politeness; she paused then, seeing the roundheaded trim of his hair, but he smiled and that drew her further forward until she was into the room and then sat upon her father's lap.

Though she had made a pause, it seemed to Silver that she was not afraid of him, but was measuring him and making her own curious observations.

'How old are you, sir?' she asked, in a voice without any trace of her father's yokel imperfections.

'Alice!' Sir Denzil sputtered, but Silver raised an indulgent hand.

'I was born in the year the last king came to the throne,' he told her. 'Older than you,' he clarified.

'I'm older than I look,' she protested. She was a clean-skinned child, save for two blemishes on her right cheek.

'She's seven. Eight soon.' The father ruffled the daughter's hair. 'She's of an age that she won't remember the things we have done.'

'Just the consequences of them,' Silver murmured, but no one had heard him, as he intended.

'She is a spark!' Sir Denzil continued, but Silver was thinking just the opposite. Alice Lynch was not a spark but a deep pool, in which all light was extinguished by emerald coolness. She was lean and wore her hair in long tresses smoothed by careful brushing.

'She is that, sir,' Silver thought it polite to agree.

'And she sings. I will have her sing for us tonight,' Sir Denzil announced. On his lap, unseen, Alice pulled a face. Silver's smile conveyed approval to father and daughter alike.

Her mother was dead, he knew that; in childbirth or soon after, he guessed. A rich farmer, then, and his indulged but troubling child; he knew the type and would cut through them in time, to find the honest people beneath - but wait, Sir Denzil was holding forth again.

'I must admit, Master Silver, that when I first laid eyes on you I was perplexed. From the manner of your writings I imagined you to be an older man than me by far, then when I meet you on the road I find myself greeting a stripling. I would have put your age at no more than a score but now it seems you are half that again. Tell me your secret, sir, so we might both profit from it.'

Silver pursed his lips seriously. 'Alchemy,' he said. Sir Denzil's laughter sounded like a devil's fit. It was going to be a long evening.

Then Alice's tiny voice piped up: 'And are you still a soldier sir?'

A long evening, yes, but perhaps not as long as all that. 'I have given that up,' he said honestly.

Nathaniel Silver was rarely less than honest, if he could help it, and was afflicted by conscience when he could not.

As promised, Alice did sing for Silver that night, accompanying her father on the virginals. She was a poor singer. She told him so, tugging politely at his hem to catch his attention while her father was excusing himself. 'I am very bad,' she told him. He leaned down from his chair, brushed the hair back from her ear, and whispered: 'But I am your father's guest and he loves you, so once you've finished I'm going to sit there and applaud until my hands fall off. Got it?' She got it. She wailed out *It was a Lover and his Lass* in a manner that implied both lover and lass were feral cats. Silver praised her as effusively as he could, and she, his co-conspirator, accepted his words with quiet grace. Truth be told, she was only as bad a singer as Sir Denzil was a player, and Silver spent the recital imagining himself plucking the strings from the instrument one by one with a blunt knife.

In time Alice was sent to bed, and the two men sat by the fire to discuss their serious business. Sir Denzil lit a long pipe of foul-smelling tobacco. Silver declined, not wishing to so pollute his body, but indulged his host. Sir Denzil was implicating him in his vices and habits.

'I hope you know what you're doing,' Silver told him, not unkindly.

'I'm a man of the world, which is more than you are. You fellows will ever need people like me, or must turn to men who are worse by far. I'm not offering patronage and I expect no fealty.'

'That was understood,' Silver agreed. The bluff old man had retreated, the shrewd marketeer was taking over. Silver did not care to speculate too much on the extent to which his host would bend laws for his own enrichment. Smuggling perhaps? Anything worse would prick his conscience.

Sir Denzil's mouth expelled smoke. 'I was never a soldier, but I have done my bit for the war.'

'To the profit of all concerned,' Silver suggested, and Sir Denzil was not offended.

'Indeed, and I see no wrong in that. To make gains for my nation and my family from the miseries of the French or the Dutch or the Spanish is one thing. Then came Parliament's war, and that was another matter. My country ripped itself apart, and only stopped because it was too spent to raise blade or musket again. Only fiends would seek to grow rich from that, and instead I grew poor.'

He placed a familiar hand on Silver's wrist, and leaned forward as if to persuade him with the mere tension of his body. 'I never declared for the King. My neighbours flocked to the royal standard, but I damned both sides equally. That cost me much.'

Silver understood and nodded.

Sir Denzil: 'I meant what I said though, about the will being spent. There will be no more war within England for at least two generations now, I am sure of that. The Scots, perhaps. The Irish for sure, unless Cromwell drowns them all in blood. Foreign wars... well that is the way of things. But Englishman against Englishman? Not in my lifetime, or yours. The Protectorate may endure and the prince will do nothing to dislodge it. Or it may fall and then no hand will be raised to prevent a new King Charles riding to London in triumph.'

'You are sir, I think, more optimistic than I.'

'No, I'm just tired. There will always be hot heads and rabble rousers, but we are wise to them now. We would rather flinch and walk away than declare war on our own lands. This year we have seen how feeble armed revolt has become.' He puffed on his pipe. 'You believe in England's future, Master Silver, and men like you must be nurtured. That's why I'm doing this, so I might leave this life in good conscience.'

Silver saw his other meaning, and leaned back in his chair. 'You think the age of fighting is passed, and I will therefore be overlooked. I fear you are not alert to the state of England, or the curious interpretation of liberty that now prevails. The age of experiments is five years gone; they were tried and they were crushed.'

'Which is why we now have a better opportunity. How many poor nonconformists were tarred with the brush of the Levellers and crushed alongside them? Lilburne rots in gaol now, and no one will mistake your enterprise for his.'

'I heard Lilburne speak, and Winstanley too. I was minded to follow the one or the other.'

'Yet you did not. And Winstanley's problem was more trivial still: he contrived to piss on his neighbours one by one. Here I am your neighbour, and how more cosy can it be than that? Those others who had clout round here foolishly showed their colours, and live now only in expectation of the noose, their lands forfeited and given to us - to you, Nate. It is a gift to you. Take it.'

'I'm still not convinced.'

'Yes, you are. You were when you saw the strangers camped on my land. It daunts you, but you are sworn to it. You would not have come here otherwise.'

'There is the decimation and the militia.'

'The one is paid. The other may be paid-off.'

'The Major-General...'

'Goffe is a pussycat. He would sip milk from my bowl and sit in my pocket if it pleased me.'

'And if I preach blasphemy or sedition?'

'You won't.'

'You would be surprised how easy it has become to preach blasphemy or sedition without meaning to.'

'So long as you are discreet, there's no charge that can be brought against you that I can't make vanish, or reduce to the size of a fleabite. I know you from your letters, Nate; you are a good man put on Earth to do good, and I will protect you. Now let us cut to the heart of your objections.'

Sir Denzil could not have burned fiercer than his fire, but he seemed willing to fill Silver's lungs with his sulphurous personality.

'I don't know if I can do this,' Silver admitted.

Sir Denzil made his dreadful laugh: 'Have faith,' he insisted. It impressed on Silver no confidence whatsoever. Still, the old knight was full of plans that he began to lay out at length through his tobacco haze; it was said that this coated the insides of a human body with the same sooty excrement that caked the walls of a chimney. Silver leaned forward and held his breath and listened.

Tomorrow they would inspect the site and assess the existing buildings, perhaps also meeting the so-called Silverites and arranging the first migration into the experiment; the next day would see the start of construction of the walls, and if enough hands were willing, the first new houses; sundry details extended into the weeks ahead. In the longer term, Sir Denzil would support the colony with a percentage of the output from his estates; they hammered the final details out between them, the exact quantities, the limitations on the period dependent on the weather and the harvest and the size of the commune; also those respects in which Silver was obliged to be Sir Denzil's tenant and those in which he was not; also those circumstances in which Sir Denzil might request farming and labouring assistance from the commune; also the terms of trade and the terms of law; and a hundred hundred ant-sized details. Sir Denzil had it all worked out in his head, and Silver followed closely. He was afraid of finding the item that would prove beyond doubt that he was being cheated, but it did not arise. Instead, he began to see the old knight's purpose, and came to understand the ease with which he wrote off Silver's doubts. It mattered little to him whether the experiment worked or no, but it was a good thing to try and would be his mark left on the world and the legacy to his Alice. Sir Denzil Lynch imagined himself to be damned. Together they were plotting nothing less than his escape from Hell.

That thought kept Nathaniel Silver awake into the night, that and his trepidation about the morning's events. He placed the case containing the book and the box beside his bed, the first time he had not slept with it safely in his arms for many months. He had not described the book to his host. He had mentioned the box and its contents to no one. As he lay on his cot he heard Sir Denzil's rasping snores from an adjacent room, and from the other, the sighing breaths of Alice Lynch.

How had Nathaniel Silver come to have followers? It was true he had spoken more than once in public, and had put his name to pamphlets, slim digests of his latest observations. It was something he imagined all educated men did, and he aspired diligently to that condition. Somewhere in that his name had become currency. It had turned potent enough to draw people from across England to join his experiment. He disliked that. It was a dangerous year to have a celebrated name. Still, their enthusiasm and numbers excited him.

Blasphemously he wondered where it might end. Maybe Jesus of Nazareth had only ever been a man who couldn't keep his mouth shut? Divine, yes, he added to himself in his next breath, there can be no doubting that, yet perhaps his ministry was shaped as much by circumstance as design.

They started arriving from the camp while Sir Denzil was leading him on his first inspection of the land. The old manor, formerly occupied by a single family now fled to exile, could be set aside for those communities who came with large families, and also as the commune's heart, the schola. A recent brick structure of uncertain purpose - possibly a studio of some kind, as the former resident was known for his artistic leanings - would serve as Silver's own quarters. 'A grim Puritan hole,' Sir Denzil observed. 'You could sleep on the floor'. Silver nodded happily, not entirely mocking him. Then there was a barn, which could provide adequate sleeping space for temporary dozens. It was all most promising. As they emerged from the barn, they saw the ragged line of

Silverites descending the track from the hillside like an army of the living dead.

There was no shared character to their background, save that most professed Protestantism of some stripe or creed, though Silver detected a certain Catholic reticence here, a Ranterish insolence there, and, in one particular case, a sharp-witted atheist zeal. He threw these observations unspoken onto the wind. Let them all come; like Joseph's coat, let his congregation be of many colours. He would have had Jews, Mohammadans, and Hindoos had such bodies presented themselves. He was surprised at how few were uncomplicated vagabonds, and how many were skilled in trade or craft. They had one thing in common, whether they admitted it or no: they were displaced, they were scarred by eternal war and had turned their back upon it. They would not be his army; the world had enough armies already.

The first man through the as yet intangible gates was lately a cooper, from London, named John Braybon. Silver clapped arms around him and clasped him in welcome. Later he resorted to shaking and kissing hands, or he would have expired from a surfeit of hugging. There were so many faces and so many names coming into his experiment, he despaired of remembering them all. Still, he tried. Here came Donald Bull and Elizabeth Frick and Thomas Wilson with his family and Robert Pettifer and Mister & Mistress Harding and Solomon Devices and Martin Creadle and Incorruptibility Brown and James Kendall and Emily Marner and Noah Gay and Howard & Elizabeth Penswick and Ann Brownlow...

Ann Brownlow was not beautiful as society reckoned beauty, but she turned Silver's head. She was, he would learn, daughter of a Bristol vintner whose family had fractured into five different factions when war came; she believed her brothers all dead, and had lived these last years first in the company of radical women and second in the company of her own disappointment. He saw little of this when they first met, save perhaps a smidgen of the latter. He took her hand, and she forcefully took it back and refused to be kissed. She had unclean strings of dark hair under her bonnet, a plain and horsey nose, a mouth full of outsize teeth, and sensible eyes, brown points in wide all-seeing whites. She was beautiful as Silver reckoned beauty.

Most of the Silverites slept in various rooms of the old house that night, but not Silver himself. He had meant to, but it felt too much like an unexpected temptation. Besides, he had his brick-and-plaster cell to make habitable. He lay on a hard cot with his coat as his pillow and the book and the box at his feet. He didn't sleep, but contemplated the walls, splashed with a little grime here, stains like blood there, and carved with obscure and obscene symbols. It smelled of old paint and old cabbage; he felt as though he had taken up residence in another man's soul, and that this soul was a mean thing bounded in base materials without beauty, without Ann.

The walls began to go up the next day, paid for from Sir Denzil's purse and overseen by Sir Denzil's men. Silver had hoped for a low and friendly barrier, a wood-fencing at first that might be replaced in time by stone; mosses would grow there, children could play on its top, old men could sit in quiet contemplation of the bleak Hampshire landscape, and lovers would meet here under cover of cowls and dusk to make their trysts. The walls of his imagination were dwarfed by the high tight poles of real wood erected round the boundaries of the experiment. He complained - not to Sir Denzil, who had business elsewhere, but to his man Hudd.

'You have enclosed us!' Not so much anger as honest protest. 'They will say I have built a prison.'

'These are dangerous times,' Hudd explained, conveying Sir Denzil's words. He

was a blank bald man who left the impression that he would abide all manner of nonsense in pursuit of a quiet life. Ha! The very soul of Oliver's England. 'Sir Denzil wants you to present a formidable face to the world.'

'We present no face whatsoever; this is a mask without holes. It is most uninviting.'

'The time may come when you need stout walls. 'Tis only a precaution.'

'We are not Americans cowering behind blockades for fear of the red men.' He was losing his temper. 'We may have enemies, it is true, but let them come. All are welcome. Let their enmities be turned to friendship by our honest countenance and welcoming walls.'

Hudd shook his heavy head, at once sad and amused. Silver paced for a while to work out his frustration. It would not be healthy to waste anger on anyone save Sir Denzil himself, and Sir Denzil was wisely well away from the scene. Besides, it was at heart a sensible precaution. That precious bloom tolerance grew in unexpected abundance on England's wounded land, but it took only one snip to prune it down or cut off its life at the stem.

But a stockade! - that seemed to invite trouble.

'I liked your idea for a lovers' wall.'

He stopped mid-pace. 'Thank you; perhaps you could persuade your father?' Alice had come down from the house with Hudd, and had spent the morning trotting round the limits of the commune and drawing in its sights with her seldom-blinking eyes. She seemed impressed. It was a rare opportunity for her to play in the mud and slick dirt all over her shoes and skirts. She was not heavy, but she moved heavily, as if mocking her father who did not resemble her in the slightest.

'My father won't change his mind,' she said, not sadly. Her face, no matter the expression it wore, conjured an easy insolence. 'It's like shouting at the rain or hitting a rock.'

'Are you really seven years old, young lady?'

'Nearly eight.'

'Old enough. I could do with your wisdom. Would you care to join my imperial court as counsellor and chamberlain?' He thought he could make her smile but she refused.

'Don't be silly. I'm not wise. I can read and write... a little.'

'But you can't sing?'

'No.'

'Well neither can I. And I could only read and write a little at your age. I had some schooling, but most of the rest I picked up here and there on my travels. We were meant to be soldier-scholars, you see, though I'm not sure that's how it worked out.'

'What do you know?'

'A broad sample of the liberal arts. Some natural philosophy, which intrigues me even as it escapes me. A few words of Latin, picked up like a handful of

pebbles from a beach that bounds the horizon. No Greek whatsoever.'

'Will you teach me some of that?

'That's the aim of this experiment, or one of the aims; to be a schola as much as a farm or a home or a new way of life. With your father's permission?'

'He'll give it if I ask. So I'll be a Silverite then?'

'No,' replied Silver, who was coming rapidly to dislike the word. 'You must live with your father, and I doubt he'd give permission otherwise.'

'You'd be surprised,' said Alice as she blinked, at last, like a dead frog restored suddenly to life by lightning.

He moved that evening to nip all talk of Silveritism in the bud. He assembled the community, and reminded them that he was neither master nor preacher, that he believed that God alone was the one true authority, and that if the commune were to have a name at all he hoped it would be the Church of Christ Sublime.

'But we like being Silverites!' called Edward Mudge, who had arrived that morning, as they were still coming in their dribs and their drabs. 'They'll call us some name in the end, some slur like Ranter or Digger, so why not make it one of our own choosing?'

'And what's the alternative?' - that was Ann Brownlow - 'If we're the Church of Christ Sublime then that makes us... what? Christ-ians? That name's already taken.'

He swallowed, and resigned himself to Silverites. He had wanted no kind of name at all, except 'the commune' or 'the experiment', but if it was the will of the majority and of Ann Brownlow, then he had no objection. Ann had expressed herself most forcefully, but with good humour; if it had not been for her, he might have resisted.

On the third day, the Silverites became builders, and set to work on erecting the first houses, the barns, and other structures. It was too late for planting now, and they would survive on Sir Denzil's indulgence and the profits of their labours until the spring - that was the plan, at any rate, and Silver was nervously mindful that such plans could go awry. It was his first real doubt since his confession by Sir Denzil's fire, and that felt an aeon past; in the meantime activity and complications had crowded them from his mind. But though they might have no crop, they had plentiful carpenters and other craftsmen, and the work went quickly.

One of the first structures - both the simplest and the most necessary - went up in a day. It was a small wooden shack with unadorned walls, a high narrow window, and a carpet of dry earth pocked by stones. It was completed as the sun flattened and bled on the horizon, turning the evening sky into a patterned pink curtain of silk. How humble that crude and tiny shack appeared beneath such natural majesty. It was under that sky that Silver gave his sole speech to his Silverites, something he dared do only once for fear of turning into a priest, a king, or a general. And he was none of these; he was a simple man, once a soldier, with an idea.

They expected something from him nonetheless; not instruction but inspiration. He stood between them and the new building with his arms held up and let them settle into hush. They were all there, more than three dozen weary souls now, plus Hudd (who was already on the bottle), plus Alice (who couldn't keep away, the spiritual opposite of her father who had not been seen here since the

first morning). They were a rainbow of greys and browns and greens, any gay colours among them long coated over by grime or twilight. They had been gathering food and drink for a celebration that would whet the commune and bring it to life, and somehow an unheard communication had passed among them that this would be the night. Tonight there would be revels and good-natured drunkenness and - he looked hopefully to Ann, who leaned against the grim stockade and chewed on a long stalk of dry grass - love-making. They must be fertile, like the pagans. They were impatient, and for that reason...

'I'll keep this brief', he announced into the hush. 'We are all tired and we would all make the best of this evening while there is still a little light. Nonetheless a few words are called for -'

Heckles of 'hurry up then!' and 'get on with it!' He stopped talking, and found he was enjoying himself. He gave them a great unguarded grin, the first time they had seen a smile from him that was not a timid fieldmouse hiding from an owl.

'Liberty!' he called. 'We have heard so much of this word these last years, and why not? It is a great and powerful sentiment - and yet it is only a sentiment. It is a state of human endeavour that, like all others, is both corruptible and transient. Lately we have seen much of the hardships brought by liberty, and aye, the tyranny of liberty too, because all human action is subject to sin and there is no condition, no matter how beneficent, that cannot be subverted and debased by the lusts and greeds of sinful men. Worse than sinful men are those who would impose a false liberty upon the heads of others for their own profit and claim yet that they are setting us free.'

He paused, he breathed. They were listening. As always when he spoke, he marvelled that people would listen! 'I do not attack liberty itself, but liberty alone is not enough. It requires other qualities to sustain itself. The first and most important of these qualities is love.

'Without love, liberty is nothing. With love, it is everything. Love itself may be subverted, for it is all too easy for a wicked or unloving man to hurt another, claiming in word to be righteous, while yielding in fact to a base unspoken desire in his own soul. That is not love. Love is not constant just as man is not constant. For that reason I do not claim that we are here to build a perfect world, merely a better one in which we grow ever towards that one goal, the single vision of a love so pure that it renders good action from good intentions. Only if we can act with love can we be free.

'There will be fights here, quarrels certainly, worse probably. We will not agree, we will squabble among ourselves, yet look to the example of the loving family who so long as they be not unbalanced by irrevocable selfishnesses and stubbornnesses, will knit always together. In true love all actions are sanctified. The loving man cannot of himself sin. Without love there is nothing but sin. Those of you drawn hither by the expectation of a wicked libertinism that would indulge in self-serving lewdness, rapine, the free handling of knives and firearms, or the triumph of the strong over the weak, had best leave now. It will not happen here. No, wait - where do you all go?!

There were spots of laughter; none had moved (though there were a handful of absentees in the next few days, who left the commune never to return, and Silver wondered if his words had cut too close).

'So what is sin? I say that sin is thoughts formed and actions performed without love. And what is God? We are told by all Christian parties that God is love. What they have neglected to add' - and he paused now before the

blasphemy, though it would come as no shock to anyone present, except perhaps Hudd who looked as though he couldn't care less - 'is that God is nothing but love. God is in all things capable of love, and being loved, so God is everywhere. God is here! By loving - by living - we worship Him. By seeking that perfect and unreachable love, we dedicate ourselves to Him. So, do not look here for a church, because we are the church.'

They were getting restless. He coughed. 'Nonetheless, there are those of us who would make their prayers outside the glare of nature, and so we have built this retreat, this commune within a commune, this miniature church which is unadorned with any symbol that would separate us from the living reality of love. If I would command one thing of you it would only be this: ask no one what conversations they may have had with God in this praying room. This is the keystone around which all our buildings will rise.'

The stars were slowly becoming visible overhead, and the dimming light made it hard to make out the faces of his audience. They were reduced to a dull grey sameness, stood stock-still contemplating him as the Westminster crowd had once stood before their dying king; no Alice visible, no Ann, no Mudge nor Braybon nor Bull. No one spoke or laughed or cheered or booed. He could not be sure they had heard a word he had said these last five minutes. They were a ragged band, these tiny humans, sheltering behind a spiked wall against the enormity of creation, dwarfed by pinprick lights so infinitely distant...

He shook away that odd thought.

'Now that's enough from me. Go and enjoy yourselves.'

They heard that all right.

Nathaniel Silver was not in a mood for celebration. There was still too much to do and too much to worry about. He spent a few moments trying to catch Ann's eye, but she seemed wilfully ignorant of his attentions. He would be no cheerful spirit here and would only dull the party with his long-winded anxieties. So, after a time, he slipped away; he was after all just an ordinary man of no special import now that the commune was bringing itself to life; he would not be missed.

A lie. He hoped he would be missed.

He walked through a hole in the unfinished and unfriendly stockade and into the darkness. It was a dry night; he knew this land well now, and did not expect to lose his footing. He climbed the hill for some moments, then found a flat and comfortable patch of grass on which to sit and contemplate his work. The walls and buildings of the Church of Christ Sublime were of a piece with the night's darkness, but the lights of the party carried towards him, flickering like a moth caught on a candle. The same thought occurred and recurred; how little we are; how little we will amount to.

He lay with his back to the ground to study the stars instead. He hoped this would be how she found him, if his fantasies were to be fulfilled. - Why Master Silver, you are fled from the party? - Call me Nate. - Very well then, Nate, might I lie beside you for a while and press myself to your heat? - You may do what you will with me. - Do you think I would really be so forward, even in your dreams? You are in love with who I am, Nate, not what you think I might be.

He sensed rather than saw her approach up the hill towards his resting place; she was less sure-footed than him and stumbled and slipped a few times, but kept her silence until she was almost upon him.

'Ann,' he murmured softly.

'No.'

She squealed then, slipping on soft earth. He leapt up, reached out for her hands and more by luck than judgement caught her before she could fall. Her bones strained and popped but he held on and kept her steady; then he hauled her back to her feet.

'You saved me!' she squeaked, as if he had dragged her selflessly from a blazing house. Her gratitude sat unhappily with the sound of her fingerbones crunching in his memory. He sat back down on the earth and heard her settle beside him. Her skin was dimly glowing, that was all he could see of her; that and the white hood she'd worn in the camp. As he watched, she fumbled to remove it, shaking loose invisible long hair that fell across her face and obscured the light.

'You should go back home,' he told her.

He imagined her shrugging. 'Hudd is drunk. He'll sleep it off in your barn and take me back tomorrow.'

'You can stay in the house then, unless your father sends to bring you home.'

'Can I stay with you?'

'No. It's not proper and it's not comfortable.'

'And because you want her to come to you, don't you? Ann Brownlow. I'm prettier than her.'

'That's beside the point.'

'Why do you need a place of your own anyway, if you say you're not special?'

'I need a place to work and think. The others will have houses of their own in time. We've started building them already, you've seen.'

'That's not what I mean, silly. Why are you cutting yourselves from them, if you're just a man?'

Because.

'She loves you, if that'll bring you out.'

'She -?'

'Ann. She just doesn't know it yet.'

'And what makes you such a great judge of character?'

'Because,' Alice trilled.

Silver said nothing, and kept saying nothing until he became afraid that Alice might imagine he'd slipped away. Her breaths were unmistakable, little soothing bursts in the darkness. His were so shallow he need not have been breathing at all.

'I'm writing a book,' he said casually. It was no secret, but he had never

spoken of it so easily before.

'I'll read it one day, when I'm good enough. What's it called? And what sort of book is it?'

'The Cycle of Sun & Seed. As for it's subject, well... I can never quite decide. It's always something new from day to day. It's my observations of the world, you see, and they're always changing.'

'My father knows printers. It could be published when it's finished.'

'I wouldn't like to put myself in further debt to him, and it's far from finished. It's a... history, I think I've decided, but it's a history of future events that are yet to come.'

There was a thoughtful pause from the night. 'So... kings and queens of the future, when they are crowned, when they die, what battles they fight, that sort of thing? I can't imagine anyone would want to fight a battle after reading your book; they'd know how it would all end and might as well stay in bed.'

'It isn't that simple. Perhaps it's better to call it a book that describes how the future could be, and how we could make it so.'

'Ah,' Alice sighed, 'but that just sounds boring.'

'It probably is. Let's not bother your father's printers with it.'

They waited in the dark as, slowly, the lights from the commune winked out one by one.

'I'd like to live in your world of love,' Alice said.

'It's still a tragic world. There would still be death.'

'She's not coming, is she?'

'No.'

In the lull, the night was filled with noise. It seethed with the presence of the unhuman creatures that were walled outside the commune, the furtive rustling they made across the ground, the hunting swoops from the air. He almost wished that Alice would sing and dispel the hungry silence with the wail of her goat-song. His wound, forgotten in the last days of activity, began to throb again until he felt he was bleeding from the corners of his eyes.

'I almost died,' he confessed, 'in battle. I went to Edgehill with a fervour for war and a child's faith in the rightness of my cause. And I was shot in the head.'

'That would have killed you,' Alice said.

'No. I was thought dead. I had a slow wound of the kind that kills over days and weeks. It robbed me of my strength and my reason for a time, but I survived. I woke again on Christ's Mass Day, when they'd already put me into the earth.' Don't tell her what it was like. Don't tell her how you had to dig your way out through heavy layers of clay to reach the fresh air, because that would distress her. Don't tell her about the box, because that would confuse her.

And don't tell her about the light, because that was sacred.

'Is that,' she asked at length, 'why you've done all you've done?' He couldn't see any expression or any gesture she'd made, but she meant the commune, perhaps also the book. He'd had to tell someone; otherwise his whole project felt fraudulent, a deluded man building an edifice on the fact of his survival when so many others had died. He told her yes, and he felt her nod in the darkness, her liberated hair tingling on the breeze.

'Then that's good,' she decided.

He held Alice's hand on the way back down into the settlement, afraid that she might slip again and hurt herself, or at least ruin her clothes, but this time she didn't fall. He let her sleep on his cot that night; he himself stayed awake until the morning, afraid of the pain that would well up again when he lay down as if in the grave, and overwhelmed with an exhaustion so immense that it made him too tired to sleep. Hudd would return Alice to Sir Denzil in the morning, but she would be back as an honorary Silverite. He showed her pages from his book before she slept, and because she could make no sense of the words, she held the paper reverently as if it were a holy relic. And once Alice was safely insensible in the arms of dream, he reached for his box and opened his one last secret.

How to explain what he had seen as he died, sweating and convulsing on his bed beyond Edgehill?

I saw Heaven opened unto me, and the new Jerusalem greeting my soul. I appeared to myself as one confounded into the abyss of eternity.

Yes, it had been something like that, but there had been more to the ecstasy and the agony of the sacred than light and sound and fury. There had been presences in the beyond, who took his broken self into the deep where Christ's scalpels and chirurgeons awaited him. He had seen that wretched puppet-thing, himself, spread out on the slabs of the divine abattoir, then slowly rebuilt by their celestial physics, knitting back together all the frayed imperfections of his life, until he was clean and whole again. They had not spoken to him, these mechanicals of body and soul who appeared to him as cowed giants in cloaks of light, but he knew their purpose and he wept tears of joy as they restored him, reborn and ready to be placed back on the Earth.

'But I can hardly tell her that, can I?' he asked the silent egg that nested in his crude box. 'She'd call me mad. And no other soul would be so generous as her. They would have me burned.'

The egg, as always, did nothing but sit in the box, giving off a faint light that suffused the room yet was not harsh enough to wake the sleeping girl. It had been silent and still for twelve years now, ever since that day when he'd climbed from the grave and had been found by the dismayed hospitaliers. They'd sworn it had been clutched in his hand so tight that he had left impressions of his fingers on its soft shell, though these had soon rounded back into smoothness. It would not be lost, this egg, nor thrown away, nor stolen. It always came back to him. It was, apart from its glow and its strange substance, quite inert and quite ordinary. It refused all of Silver's efforts to unpick its mystery.

One day - he knew, he hoped, he prayed - it would hatch for him.

Not long after the commune was walled and established, Nathaniel Silver realised that he must kill a sheep.

There were still a few houses to build, though fewer than expected as the trickle of incomers finally dried up, and others chose - often regretfully - to abandon their fresh start and leave. There was bad gossip in the neighbourhood, and stories circulated that the Church of Christ Sublime was a pagan sect whose members cavorted naked, fornicated, and committed upon themselves the most heinous debaucheries imaginable; this prompted a surge of furtive and mostly disappointed enquiries. The early fluctuating population eventually stabilised at somewhere just over four dozen souls, mostly adults. Silver hoped that families would be attracted here, and would be raised here, because he missed the laughter and painless screams of children; but that was an aim in the long-term. The experiment had to live before it could thrive, and in those first months before the deep winter set in, he counted it a modest success.

Their manpower was depleted at the harvest as Sir Denzil called in his debt of hands and bodies to help in his fields. Silver himself - still the only teacher at the schola - remained, but was left idle. Alice was his only devoted pupil. Instructing the Silverites in natural philosophy was another luxury for the long-term. He paraded round the world he had made, and found it quiet and empty; except for the sick and the old and Alice, they were all in the fields. He resolved to find a fresh purpose for himself, and also to break his dependency on the kindness of Sir Denzil Lynch.

So he would be a farmer and a butcher both; he had no experience of either, but he had no doubt it could be learned. He threw himself into mastering the rituals of killing with holy devotion, attending on both Sir Denzil's slaughtermen and those few Silverites who had experience of farming; they dripped their wisdom into his ears. Most of the commune came from towns and had no grasp of country ways; still, so were the first pilgrims to Virginiae, pious urbanites who neglected to put practical tools on their inventory, and in their ignorance, would name a hare as a jackrabbit. Still, at least he had no ocean between his New World and the experience of the Old. Sheep were the most plentiful animal in these parts. He would kill and butcher a sheep, and he would do it alone.

The sheep they brought him was already shaved. Silver, by contrast, had let his hair grow long so that it curled upon his cheek and tickled the nape of his neck. The killing was done in the barn, where they gathered for their first and final meeting, the shorn Roundhead sheep and its courtly Cavalier murderer. The sheep was agitated, already transported a mile to the commune. The stupid animal backed itself into a corner and shat itself in fear. Silver knew the stench from battlefields, the abattoir of men, where offal and entrails were laid on the devil's plate. He had killed men. This should be easy.

He approached the sheep timidly, sat by it, and stroked its naked skin and petted its rough black nose, until it became convinced of his friendly intentions and allowed itself to be led into the centre of the barn, where Silver had placed his hammer, his knives, and his saws.

She. She allowed herself to be led. She was a ewe.

The hammer had a light wood handle that fitted perfectly snug in Silver's fist. The dense black metal head - black as the sheep's own rounded snout and ears and collar - was a weight, and needed a mild effort to lift it. He held it as far above his head as his arm could stretch, judged and tested his arc while the placated victim pushed her nose cautiously into his apron. With his free hand he cradled and pinned the sheep's shivering body. He brought the hammerhead down onto the sheep's skull; it fell in a smooth arc, like the

pendulum of a clock compelling all men one second at a time towards the grave.

The blow cracked the sheep's head-bone, but did not stun it; as he had feared, he had not put enough strength behind it, and he paid the price as his maddened hurting victim shrieked and fought to break free. One black leg came up and slashed him across the face. He heard the bone of his nose pop and felt the blood ease from a new laceration on his cheek; his old wound was at least numb today, perhaps satiated by the thought of fresh-spilled blood. He punched back at the sheep, the hammer forgotten in his hand until it connected with the side of the skull. There was a noise like wet earth being crushed in a child's fingers, and when he withdrew his weapon, he found the less blunt end decorated with fur and blood and scraps of bone. The sheep, tired by its exertion, wobbled on its narrow legs and settled down on the floor to rest.

The hammer clattered on the floor; he had not been aware of dropping it. Now, while the ewe was stunned, he would have to slit her throat, bleed her, and allow her heart to stop. He hesitated before touching the knife, paralysed as he had been after Edgehill. When he finally moved his fingers, they touched the boning knife, resisting the lighter blade he'd intended, as if trying to argue against this final killing blow. What persuaded them was the sense that he had already gone too far, and that killing the sheep was the only kindness he could offer her after dashing out her brains.

He found the sharp knife, then the proper place for the incision on the ewe's throat, then made his cut, drawn long and shaking round her neck. The blood fizzled out, much as he expected, splashing his apron and his face. He had not expected God would address him to spare his victim, as he had once instructed Abraham, and his expectations were met: God was silent. The sheep fell into his arms, like a dying soldier, and Silver cradled it as the sheep-blood seeped from the carcass to the floor and the throbbing of the sheep-heart beneath his hands grew fainter until he could no longer feel it, until it was no longer there.

After that he was left with two advantages; the first, that he was too numbed by what he had already done to feel any more remorse; the second, that the sheep was dead and could suffer no more injury. So, as if watching himself through a cold fog, he skinned and gutted and boned the creature, leaving the edible remains. His work was not elegant. It was sheep-meat, that was enough, and he had proved something to himself. After that day he would kill more sheep, but while the Church of Christ Sublime lasted he never again ate cuttings from the bodies of the dead.

In later days, of course, he was obliged to.

He saw Ann Brownlow as he came out of the barn, still thick with the sheep's guts and blood. He moved like a dangling mannequin, swaying on the motion of strings but without feeling in his limbs or his heart or his head. - I must stink, he said to himself as Ann hoisted her skirts and moved swiftly across the mud to join him.

She draped herself across his shoulders; he wasn't sure if she was mocking him. 'Oh, my brave soldier -' she began. He shrugged her away.

He stripped off his bloodied outer clothes and went to a trough to wash away the evidence. The water was freezing and burned his face. Blood dripped in pink puddles around his feet. Finally he felt soaked and shivering, which was an improvement on nothing, and went in his bare feet and breeches back to the brick house. He found Alice sat cross-legged like an Oriental sage at the door. She greeted him with one hand raised.

It was hard to close off his heart when Alice spoke to him. Her mix of guile and innocence made her a perfect companion, neither faculty having been corrupted by adult disappointments.

'You won't have to do that again,' she told him.

He said nothing. So she picked herself up, patted the earth from her skirts and said: 'I love you more than she ever will, Nate.' She stood on tip-toe to kiss him on the cheek before she made her way placidly in the direction of the Church's gate; now an aggressive mouth of wooden teeth as per Sir Denzil's fancy.

Ann Brownlow was sitting on Nate's cot when he came inside, with his thickest blanket raised to cover her nakedness. There was little light, so it was impossible to tell if she had been crying, as he first imagined. Still he said nothing, but went to sit beside her, and presently they kissed and committed acts of fornication.

If there is love there is no sin.

Love was his wound and his weakness, he would decide later. It turned his head when it should have been staring straight forward at the dangerous road before him. It distracted his energies when they were most needed elsewhere. He didn't regret it though, not a moment of it.

Before the year was out, he and Ann were married, though not in a way that was marked in any parish record, or in a fashion that would have been recognised by the faiths beyond the commune walls. They were married in the eyes of God and God alone; he and she went to the praying room together, she dressed in a gown of white patches and he in his dusty old trooper's coat, which was as formal an attire as they could muster. They went in at noon and came out as the midwinter evening was drawing in. Whatever vows they made, prayers they offered, and service they concocted went unheard and remained secret.

Alice Lynch sat outside, not listening but occasionally expressing her feelings by making blunt exclamations at passers-by. 'Huh!' she grunted. 'Huh! Huh!' She seemed to be happy, in other ways. She had told her father about The Cycle of Sun & Seed, and after a few weeks as a constant irritant at Silver's ear, she had persuaded the author to surrender a portion of his manuscript. He handed it over with reluctance, and Sir Denzil read it with greater reluctance still. 'I know only every third word in this,' he explained patiently when they next met, 'and even then they make no sense to me. But I will make enquiries in London, and if it is sound it will find a publisher.'

Silver had less faith in that proposition, but allowed Sir Denzil to proceed, secretly elated by the possibility. He spent less time in the fields or the schola, which as a result grew neglected, and concentrated his efforts on his revisions and his marriage.

In the end these were just more distractions; already they knew it was a thin harvest, and every meeting with Sir Denzil brought worse news about their prospects for the winter. No one would starve, Silver was sure, if the commune grew no larger, but there would be many miserable, barely-filled bellies. Faced with that prospect, the congregation of the Church of Christ Sublime began to contract for the first time, squeezed thin by hunger and the lure of easier rewards elsewhere.

Silver consoled himself; he had hopes for the new year, he told his wife. The commune would subsist long enough to sow its first harvest; it would begin to

wean itself away from Sir Denzil's seat. There would be students at last and families. Perhaps they could tear down those awful walls and raise new ones. It was all a question of endurance. If they could but make it to the spring...

On the first day of January, Robert Pettifer was found moaning outside his house in a mud patch where he must have lain all night, unnoticed. He was dead in all but fact, but not from exposure. When he was carried inside and his muddied clothes taken from him he was found to have blue spots upon his breast. He passed within hours.

Within a week, three other Silverites had fallen ill with the same symptoms and were isolated in their houses. Silver went to them one by one with a soaked handkerchief as his only protection, but he could do nothing for them, and they died as Robert Pettifer had. Similar outbreaks sprung up in the local countryside, and it was no great consolation to Silver that his unloved and unvisited commune had only a tiny number of fatalities. A dozen others fled the visitation; most of them caught the blue death in the outside world and died less than two leagues from the Church's walls.

Ann Brownlow died on the tenth day of January.

She did not wish to be buried, claiming a fear of tight spaces, so they burned her instead in a ceremony outside the praying room.

Alice Lynch sang for her - an ugly, discordant wail as the body vanished into flames and ash.

Alice scratched at the door to Silver's brick home, mewling like a housecat to be let inside. He couldn't make out her words through the door, but the sound still distressed him, so he wrapped the blanket round his head to muffle them. She loved him, so she must stay outside and not touch him. He had inspected his skin every day for the past two weeks searching for some hint of disease or corruption and there was none; he was as pasty and healthy as ever, in body if not in mind. So he himself must be the source of the contamination, a carrier not of plague but Death itself.

He had confessed to Alice in the praying room and she'd said he was mad.

'God is not punishing you,' she had insisted. 'My father says so. He says this is not judgement for what we've done wrong but a test so that we might do right.'

'I denied sin,' he'd snapped back, too harshly he judged for she'd looked stung. 'The imperfections of the mind are visited on the body.'

'Why would she die because of something you did?'

'Because I loved her, and there is nothing that could have hurt me more.'

'If that's how God likes to act then I'd rather spit in His eye and run off with the Devil. Get up, Nate' - he'd been slumped in the corner on his haunches, curled up like a child as yet unborn - 'they need you outside. They look to you.'

'They should not. I am no leader.'

'They look to you for love!' Alice had stamped her tiny foot and bounced against the walls, a little fury. He'd stared at her through eyes skinned and raw, all fluid wrung from them, until she had calmed herself and knelt beside him. Their eyes were level, hers narrower than he had ever seen them before

and wet for the first time since Ann had died. 'I love you Nate; since you came to my father's house I loved you. I am not her, but I can stay with you and keep you warm and help you heal.'

She'd taken his hand in hers - his were small for a grown man, but hers were more delicate, so he'd felt like a giant in her grip - and leaned in close to kiss him on the lips.

He had screamed in her face. 'Christ, no! You are not even a woman!'

'I will be.'

'You are a child! You are only eight -'

(quiet) 'Almost nine.'

'You are only eight. Don't presume because you have a little learning to have shucked off a child's foolishness! If you want to live to be a woman, you will not touch me! You would better kill me and cut up my body and bury it at some crossroads so my spirit will forever be lost! You must go and live very far away from me, Alice Lynch.'

There had been dark stains below her eyes. 'I love you. I don't mean to take her place.'

'Get out!' he'd howled. 'Get out! Get out!'

She had already fled.

He'd left soon after, and those few remaining Silverites who were at liberty and not working on Sir Denzil's winter projects had stared at him as he'd trudged back to his bed, or they'd forced themselves not to stare or meet his eye. They had all heard some of the least silent prayers to be made in their makeshift chapel. He would not be able to look on them again. Better to die, damn himself to the wood of suicides where he might at least hear Ann Brownlow's brittle yelps of torment carried to him on evil winds from some other cellblock in Hell.

Alice had returned, as he'd been afraid she would. He'd barricaded his door and refused to let her in. She'd stayed outside, wailing herself hoarse, and that state persisted until the sun went down. Then she either gave up and left, or fell silent but remained huddled at his door. He knew Alice; he knew which was the more likely; but at least he heard nothing more and was able to drift into a restless sleep. Unconsciousness preserved his pain as if in ice; it would thaw again when he woke. There was a timeless moment of oblivion.

He decided, while sleeping, what he had to do.

He woke purposefully and thought it morning, the dim brown light filtering in through the windows and the gaps in the walls. He had worked to scrub away the stains and etchings on the plasterwork, but the light, faint though it was, seemed to reveal them again and starker still as if all his efforts had been unmade. Alice was probably still asleep on his threshold, under the protection of some two-headed pagan deity. He shook the sleep out of his bones, then climbed onto the cot to peer through the openings. Still it was night.

No matter, he would make only a little noise, and not enough to disturb the sleeping commune. His bags and belongings were stacked with military discipline on the floor; he fished among them and found the hammer, its head cleaned since the last slaughter. He was naked and his body was blessed with

only sparse patches of hair, so he felt exposed to the night-frost, but the unnatural light took its edge away.

The little wood box he had made thirteen years earlier was sitting on the table in plain sight. No thief - if any were so foolish as to think the Church worth robbing - would have thought it valuable or even intriguing. The light lay heavily round the box, as though shining from within. He opened the lid, and was unsurprised to find that the glow did indeed emanate forth from this little sun, his miracle. He tipped the box and let the egg roll onto the table, caring not if it be broken because he knew it would never hatch. He would make sure of that.

Whatever power had brought him back from the darkness, it was not for the betterment of the world, but some cruel mischief. The Greek gods were said to play tricks on mortals. Perhaps then it was not Christ but his parody Apollo who had gifted him this new sun? Better to smash it now and end the game.

He brought the hammer up then swung it down.

Gentle hands caught his arm mid-arc and arrested the blow.

~ No ~

Those hands relieved him of the hammer. They were not mortal hands but those of giants, three clawed tapering fingers on this one, tight in a ribbed leather gauntlet. The leather, like their skins, was blanched white. He knew these hands.

~ You cannot destroy this ~ You will only exhaust yourself ~

The hands of angels placed the hammer on the table. Only then did they release his arm to allow it to drop mildly back to his side. They were the same colour as the egg, the same luminous white. There were three of them and they towered, higher than he could have imagined possible in his low-roof'd little house. They wore columns of white light for robes and shapeless hoods over their heads, eyes invisible behind black slits in the glow. They were Christ's chirurgeons and messengers. He dropped to his knees.

~ You have not seen us ~ said one angel, not the closest one who had relieved him of the hammer; their soft voices were reasonable, like the babble of a summer stream or the rhythm of rain on a window pane ~ We are not here ~

'You are angels,' he whispered.

~ We are pilots ~

There were three of them. They were still. They flickered suddenly and danced round the room, rearranging themselves in new positions that seemed to Silver's eyes more relaxed, though who could tell with angels? One seemed to sit on his bed. He was sure this was the one who had saved him from folly.

~ Forgive our confusion ~ The egg, as you call it, is compensating for our opposed velocities and translating ~ You understand our words? ~

Of course, they spoke in the language of Enoch, which was the tongue of all of Heaven and Earth before Babel. 'I hear you,' he told them.

~ Good ~ The egg is a construct downloaded in the form of a linear continuity stroke access point from this instantaneous event window and extends in both space-time directions during your lifetime ~ As you understand this already,

it will save us some very long and tedious explanations ~

'I hear you,' he repeated blandly. And he did, as he saw them, but he doubted that he would be able to touch them. They were made of light, and who can catch the light? They shifted again, skittling around the room with the egg as the axis on which they turned. One had manifested behind him, and he could feel it with senses that he had not been aware he had. It was not moving, but it was there.

They had a scent, these angels. Sometimes they smelled of alchemical stinks, like gunpowder and yet not; but mostly they smelled of nothing, a holy absence that sucked all other odours from the room.

'You brought me back from the brink of death,' he told them. They said nothing. Now he was bolder and looked closer and saw that the line of their robes was not constant; the lights trembled and broke in places revealing the plain wall of the house through their transparent bodies. 'You gave me more life and I failed to make anything of it. Are you come now to kill me? I would welcome that.'

~ We would not harm you if it can be helped ~ We have observed you and would learn more of you ~ We would offer you a compromise or a bargain ~

They danced around the room again. The angel with the hammer was back on the bed where it did not sit so much as balance. It was the angel with the hammer, Silver was certain, because it had the hammer back in its clawed glove. Then instantly the weapon was gone and back on the table as if thrown invisibly and so lightly that it made neither sound nor damage. The angel of the hammer spoke.

~ The fact that the egg exists is proof of the opening of negotiations ~ Should they fail, it will continue to exist but remain inert ~ Should they fail, then of course we would be forced to resort to other measures ~ You can see how failure would benefit neither of us ~

~ The question is ~ What can we offer you, Nathaniel Silver? ~ What do you want? ~

Hope beat in place of his heart. He leapt to his feet. 'I want her back! You rescued me from the grave so it must be within your power. If you be angels or Christ's pilots or what-you-will, I want Ann Brownlow alive and healthy and by my side, and a long and happy life for both of us. Even if you be devils I would have that from you.'

~ We are no devils ~ began the angel of the hammer, but another raised its claw in a smooth gesture, and Silver imagined (if the temperaments of angels could be so interpreted) it had silenced its comrade. They paused, then they spoke as one:

~ We will not do this ~ What do you want, Nathaniel Silver? ~ What is your purpose? ~

Some minutes passed before he could clear his throat and speak again. He bowed his head. 'I pretend to be a natural philosopher. I would understand the world so that we might better it.'

~ We can help you with this ~ but he hardly heard them.

They parted for him as he went to sit on the bed, carrying the egg pressed to his chest. The light it radiated was white, white as Christ's pilots; it was

only the wooden veil of the box that had made it appear brown.

'What do you want in return?' he asked.

~ At the end of your life, we will take your ~ your pardon, there is no term for this you would know ~ your... life-gifts? ~

He sighed and laid back on the bed. He had expected this. 'You mean my soul? You are devils after all? Don't you know I am already damned to eternal torment?'

~ Call it your soul ~ We are no devils and we will not torment you ~

'No? I don't believe you.'

~ We want to study you ~ We would return with you to Civitas Solis so we could learn from you ~ We would understand you so that we might better you ~

~ Use your wits and reason, Nate ~ You believe you have rung up a debt with devils already ~ Nothing you can agree with us would make it worse for you ~ You would be declining the benefit of our deal for nothing ~

'There is nothing you can give me that is worth the weight of my soul.'

~ You are wrong ~ If you accept then the egg will instruct you ~ It is ~ in a manner of speaking ~ our life-gifts and the equal of what we would take from you ~ We are projections of its presence, just as you, Nathaniel Silver, are the sum of your life-gifts ~

He should have felt astonishment when he heard that, but he was already blasé in the presence of deities and miracles. Still, his mouth widened a little. 'You would grant me your own souls?'

~ There is nothing else on this planet in this time-frame that would be more useful to your enterprise ~ This is the stone that all philosophers seek ~

He was tempted, yet simultaneously wary. 'Could it, through my actions and experiments, do harm?'

~ A greater quantity could, but this is stable ~ It was designed to be causally-neutral at this mass ~

'I don't understand.'

~ Just don't eat it ~ It's not a real egg ~

They flickered again and then there was only one; it reared forward and gibbered into his face:

~ Suburate vantimax lyacal lyacal marfgalineaux dorat shupanis ~

He gasped. They were three again and passive.

~ Apologies, we are trying to stabilise synchronisation ~ Manifestation at this level should generate visible anomalies, and the strain of causal dampening is immense ~ We must maintain our invisibility from the higher powers of the Spiral Politic ~

'I don't understand half of what you say,' he remarked.

~ You will ~ At the end of your life ~ If you agree to our terms ~

His tongue moved to speak, but he stilled it, rose from the bed, and looked around him. This whole scene had the content but not the quality of a dream. It could not be a dream, because he felt so comfortable with it, he neglected it as he did the material world - all the familiar objects and items that he used or ignored because they were so familiar that they had become invisible. Yet now he found that familiarity in the presence of three vast angels on pillars of roaring white fire, who had repaired him from death but now came by night to haggle terms with him like any merchant in a market, like fishmongers. And he lay casually before them, with barely a thought of wonder and worship. He felt deadened in the presence of miracles.

He felt deadened in the presence of life, a life these pilots had restored to him.

He knew, as he realised this, what his answer must be.

~ Well? ~

The following morning he found Alice crouched up against his door, wrapped in blankets so long that they had gone three times round her but still trailed in the wet mud. It had been raining last night - he hadn't noticed; fierce winter rains that turned the commune's floor to warm sludge and steaming muck. Alice might have been asleep or dead; he put a hand to her face and found her skin still warm. His touch, though light, disturbed her and she murmured. His fingers left a wet black mark on her cheek.

'You should come in out of the cold,' he said, and then: 'I'm sorry. I shouldn't have shouted at you.' But she was struggling out of her sleep and didn't seem to hear him. Sticky eyes peered up at him, weighing him.

'You look like I feel,' she said.

'I've been awake most of the night. I've been working.' She was looking at his hands and his smudged inky fingers, so she needed no more explanation. 'Alice, do you forgive me?'

She smiled slowly and lazily. 'I would forgive you anything.'

He helped her to her feet. 'You must report something to Sir Denzil for me,' he said casually. 'The Cycle of Sun & Seed is not ready, we must put off publication for a few weeks while I make revisions.' Then, because he couldn't help himself, because it was flowing out of him: 'There are so many revisions; so many of my observations were incomplete or misunderstood. I feel like I have begun all over again.'

He had; that was true. He laughed for the first time since Ann had died; it was the sound of fresh knowledge and new insights spilling out of his mouth. Alice was hugging him now; she peered past him into the brick house. 'Nate,' she said, 'I see a light. You have left a candle burning.'

'No,' he told her. 'I have not.'

After that night he did not neglect the commune, but even as he carried out a day's work his attentions were half-turned elsewhere. By night he sat and listened to the whispering of the egg, which no longer blazed so bright as when in the presence of angels, but reflected the darker glow of his corrupted human soul, just as the moon casts a lesser beam than the sun. He questioned it and it answered, and occasionally volunteered knowledge, in the voice of

Christ's pilots. He wondered if others would hear this voice, or if it were planted precisely in his ear so that it might not be overheard. Sir Denzil pressed him for the revisions, and he delivered a fresh manuscript that, while much improved, he was not yet happy with. The world was a globe, this work a faint scratch on its surface.

But the commune was diminished, by attrition as much by any single disaster. When the spring came there were too few hands to make a planting worthwhile, and Silver reluctantly asked that they join Sir Denzil's workers on his lands instead. For many this was both an insult and a break with the ideals of the commune; they complained to Silver that they had not abandoned their old lives and servitudes just to end up as tenants of yet another petty moneyed monarch. He couldn't answer them, so they left, a small exodus but enough to doom the experiment. They were too few now, he realised, for the commune to support itself; barely a dozen men and women remained, and no one came to replenish the numbers that were lost. No more rumours of orgies circled in the local taverns, only rumours of depression and failure and near-starvation.

Silver pushed all these thoughts to the back of his mind. He did not think to ask the egg for a solution to his problems; its realm was knowledge, not mundane practicalities. The Church of Christ Sublime that had once resembled a small village now became a ghost town, haunted not by the dead but by the failure of the living. Ann's ashes were buried in a bed of earth; wildflowers grew there in spring, but no other seeds would grow within their limits. This was, Silver had learned by measures, poor land. He started writing by day as often as by night, venturing out mainly to teach Alice, who still attended her lessons and was the Church's sole triumph.

The end was not far off - he could no longer deny that - but there was still hope.

One day in May a rider came through the gates on a black horse, dismounted outside the old manor house, and bellowed at the few Silverites who were not working Sir Denzil's acres. It was raining hard and he had to shout above the rain: 'Nathaniel Silver! I know this to be his house! Send him out to me!'

Alice teetered on a chair to see him through the window and the rain. 'A tall man,' she described. 'He has a black coat that makes him look fat, but he isn't if you look closely. He has a beard and looks fierce; he has a hat with a black plume, and I can't see any more of his face. He has a satchel with a seal that I can't make out. Oh, and he has a sword.'

Silver got to his feet. 'Stay here,' he instructed Alice, but she trotted out at his heels.

He left the schola and moved meekly across the sodden field, sucking up mud and rainwater through the holes in his boots, to address the stranger. 'Sir, I am Nathaniel Silver -' and then he stopped.

The newcomer, in fact no stranger at all, vaulted across a puddle, slammed Silver bodily against the nearest wall, squeezed the breath from him and kissed him on both cheeks. Once the scrape of his assailant's greyed beard was out of his face, Silver was finally able to gasp. 'Honest Don Taylor,' he declared weakly.

'Nate, you have not changed a jot,' Taylor boomed. He was still a reverberant man; he might have been an actor in another age.

'Neither have you,' Silver coughed, still choking, but the English Scot shook his head.

'You have not changed Nate. How do you do it? Do you bathe in the blood of virgins? Here is one now, I see.' The hat and its plume rolled from his head into his hand and he made an exaggerated bow, dropping on one knee in front of a startled Alice. She was still aghast at what she had seen as an attack on her teacher; she began, within seconds, to cry uncontrollably. She was after all only a child.

'Alice, this is my friend and comrade-in arms, Donald Taylor. We were soldiers. Don, this is my friend's daughter, this is Alice Lynch.'

'Sir Denzil's girl? Ah, she has my sympathies. Have a flower, child, and dry those eyes. I'm not here to frighten children, that's just a sad consequence.' He still had the scars, Silver noticed. They had not faded with time, and he had become a gaunt man in the lean years after the Revolution. He could see how Alice might have grounds to be afraid.

He also saw Don Taylor's bag, and decided that he too had grounds to be afraid.

Silver took her aside and said, quietly: 'Go and find someone who will cook and get them to make up a meal for my friend. I'll fast tonight to make up the difference, but make sure there is meat. This man is a carnivore.'

Once Alice left them, Silver invited Taylor into the schola, out of the rain. The newcomer dumped his cloak and bags and sword in the corner, and took a place on a plain wood bench that, coincidentally, had been Alice's perch that morning before he had ridden in to disrupt her lesson.

'So,' Silver began, 'you escaped the army in the end?'

'In a manner of speaking. You seem to have made a more complete evacuation, though. This place, Nate... well, we all knew you had it in you. How goes it?'

'As well as can be expected.' That was hardly a lie, and he feared his drab demeanour and pasty skin had already betrayed the condition of his enterprise. 'No, it goes badly. It will be a miracle if we make it to the autumn.'

Don Taylor nodded his head and dislodged raindrops from the brim of his hat. He removed it then, and tossed it into the corner with the other wet things. Just as casually he said, 'I feel that way sometimes about the Republic. Just between you and me.'

'Don, why have you come here? It must be for some purpose.'

'There is a purpose, but you are not it. I am required to carry intelligences to Portsmouth. I had learned you were close - your name is being heard in London gossip - and, since I was passing...' He threw his arms out wide and left the words unspoken.

'I wish you had not found me like this, but remembered me from happier times.'

'Those were happier times? You misremember, old friend. Those were bloody awful times. We are all better off out of it.'

The bench was damp, but Silver, who had been hovering like a crow spying its prey, sat beside him. He could feel the damp of Taylor's costume and the warmth of his body; they were crushed together as they had been on old campaigns. 'Don, are you truly out of it? I saw your bags.'

'They carry my intelligences.'

'I saw the seal. You are about the business of the Protector.'

Taylor shook his head - more fine and second-hand rain - and raised a finger to his lips, then spoke softly: 'I am on England's Service. They are two separate things, though at present converged. Indeed, General Warts-and-All mistrusts us. There has always been something of Roman magic about our rites.'

'I have not heard of this.'

'It is Gloriana's secret order, first entrusted to Walsingham and Dee.' Silver must still have looked a blank, as Taylor sighed and clarified: 'The unholy game, Nate. The dirty business of espion-age.'

'If it's such a secret, why tell me?'

'Would you believe I am trying to persuade you to our order, or turn you as we say in tradecraft? No, I see you do not. You are too honest, Nate, you are the only man in England who is not in another's pocket. There isn't a royalist anywhere who isn't tied up with the Knot, while Warts-and-All has his agents in the post office. There is a man called Morland who reads the correspondence, and a man named Milton who reads all the pamphlets - or has them read to him at any rate.'

'Read to him? Why?'

'He is blind. Like all Godly sorts he is familiar with the sin of Onan. Still, if it keeps him busy all the better. It leaves him no time to write his bloody awful poetry. I maintain a loyalty to the old ideals of the Service, but the game is played by mundanites and mediocrities now, and will be for fifty years to come.'

'You're right Don, I wouldn't care to be part of such a world.'

'Good. There are other worlds and colleges, equally invisible but far more honest.'

'You were the honest one. You kept us all on straight and narrow.'

'Nate, Nate, Nate, men tell me there has never been a soldier born who would not slit his own grandmother's throat for a penny to buy a pretty trinket to tease up a whore's skirts, and when they tell me that do you know what I say to them?'

'No, Don, I do not.'

'I say to them - Sirrah, if that be true, then my friend Nathaniel Silver was never born but placed clean on the earth by God, like Adam but not so foolish this time.'

To that Silver would have replied: 'I have been exceedingly foolish' - but at that moment Alice brought in a jug of wine, the last left in the commune, and food soon followed her. They distracted Don; he swallowed the offerings like a wolf, while Silver sat and watched him patiently and ignored the tight cramps in his stomach that were almost as acute as the cramps in his skull.

'Now,' Don Taylor resumed, after he had proved his satisfaction with a healthy

belch, 'I need to talk to you about this book. I must present you with two urgent matters and criticisms -'

Silver's brow furrowed and he gestured to interrupt him. 'What book, Don?'

'The Cycle of Sun & Seed. It is your book, is it not? Don't tell me I have ridden two days out of my way only to find that it is the work of some upstart who has stolen your name?'

'It is true I have written a book of that title, but it is not yet published. The matter is in Sir Denzil's hands.'

'It is published a month back in London and already much talked about, though that is perhaps not a healthy state of affairs in this day and age.'

Bewildered, Silver looked to Alice, who mirrored his confusion and shrugged and flapped her arms.

'I will have words with your father about this,' he said, using soft and rounded words to make clear that she would bear no blame. She nodded; the heavy-lidded child was back again, those resentments he had seen stored up in her breast until the commune had offered her a release.

'All this is by the by; the book is yours, there is no doubt about that. And this is the problem. Not for me, Nate! Sit yourself down again, I have read part of it and much enjoyed what I saw. But I am not your only reader, and there are some who claim it teeters on the verge of blasphemy.'

He tried to speak, but Don Taylor silenced him with a raised finger. 'Furthermore, parties of all colours are finding much to mislike in its politics and philosophy. They see a book that despairs of all authority, and so they see an attack on themselves.'

This time he was allowed to protest himself: 'I do not endorse any side in any conflict. There are lessons to be drawn from what I say, but not singular ones that a zealot might latch onto and say this book is mine and speaks to me alone. I follow no doctrine but my own and the Lord's!' He had become heated as he rambled through his defence.

'Calm yourself! These are not my accusations, but if you refuse the creed of any party then they will assume you are against them. They are little fortresses with their gates snapped shut. You have done something that is either brave or foolhardy or perhaps both. With luck, your accusers may only carp and feel you too provincial to bother with, but I worried for you and came to warn you.'

Quieter now, he asked: 'What then is to be done?'

'I don't know, because I don't know what will come to pass.'

'I will be true to myself, come what may.'

'You will, I have no doubt of that, and this brings me to my second criticism of your book, Nate, which is of your methods.'

'My methods?'

'Indeed. I am no pure natural philosopher, but I mix with them in my line of work. You are not trained to it, as they are in those great priest-factories of Cambridge and Oxford. There is much you do not know; your approach lacks

the authority of your insight, and so undermines it. You sit and observe the world and think you can wring meaning for it through contemplation.'

'It worked for Aristotle.'

'It worked for many dead Greeks, and we have lived with the consequences of that. Our static sciences are built upon two thousand year old errors. There are new ways of doing things; an age of experimentation and measurement is upon us. In your book you rely too much on the eye' - and here he tapped his own face beneath his one good eye - 'and too little on the hands.'

'You cannot say I do not experiment. My experiment is all around you.'

Donald Taylor's sombre wink said more to him than any word could. The silence lingered until Taylor, his face grown ruddy and robust, stuck out his wet tongue to lick his lips. 'I've drunk you dry, have I not?'

'You have. It's no hardship.'

'I worry for my horse now. I'm afraid your people will have eaten it.'

Taylor's whole body rippled on the bench to make himself more comfortable. 'I'll be a month in Portsmouth, six weeks at worst. After that I'll come back here. I can recommend you to some experimenters. They could do with your wisdom, and you with their experience. How does that sound?'

Nathaniel Silver made a smile to humour his old friend - 'That sounds fine, Don. It sounds fine.' - and knew with some certainty that by the time Taylor quit Portsmouth the Church of Christ Sublime would be gone, driven into the earth and forgotten as if washed away by the rain.

The killing blow came quicker than expected, mere days after Don Taylor had departed. Silver was awoken by a violent hammering on his door; he snapped out of his sleep, which had been brief and shallow after an evening's instruction by egg-light. They have come for me at last, he thought, as he pulled on a robe and gazed out through the slit of the window at an azure sky still mottled with stars. The egg was well-hidden; they would not get that. He went slowly to the door, keen to give away no hint of panic or hurry.

It was not the militia, it was Sir Denzil's man Hudd, with a lantern. Behind him, the gates to the experiment swung ajar and clattering on the breeze, and beyond that, on the track leading to the road was a cart laden with a few meagre sacks and boxes. It had a look of flight to it, and Hudd himself was sweating and unkempt.

'Sir Denzil has been arrested,' he declared.

Silver's face creased. 'On what charge?' His mind whirled with possibilities; so many things were now outlawed in the free Republic, but he came ever to the three cardinal sins: treason, blasphemy, and sedition.

'Forgery,' Hudd spat, literally spat, a wad of black muck onto the ground at Silver's feet. 'Debasing coins.'

Silver shook his head in bewilderment. 'I knew nothing of this,' he exclaimed.

'You're the only man in three counties who didn't,' Hudd gruffed. 'He is no longer in the general's good books. The militia have taken all his accomplices and most of his household servants.'

Silver tugged the robe tighter; it was too baggy for him by far, inherited from a fat Silverite long since gone or dead. 'Send Alice to us. We can shelter her. I have a friend who has friends, perhaps he can pull the general's strings?'

But Hudd was shaking his head, a lumbering motion for a man with no visible neck. 'Too late for that.' He beckoned, and swinging his lamp before him, crossed to the cart with Silver in his wake. They found Alice lying there asleep on the soft sacks; in her long shawl and hood she looked like just another bundle on a pile of rags.

'They'll question her if they get her.'

'She's a child,' Silver protested, his voice thin and stripped of conviction.

'That's why they'll question her. Kids you see, they break easy. They'd break her to break him, you know they would.'

'Where will you take her?'

'First to Salisbury. From there to London, to stay with her mum's brother. I reckon they'll write this off as a local matter, not worth the bother of bringing her all the way back. Her dad's finished though. Poor thing.' Silver wasn't sure if he meant the man or the girl; the man he knew would not go easily to punishment. He had tried to crawl from the pit of Hell, and now all the devils had come to pull him back down.

'It will be easier for him to know that she is safe and well,' Silver mused.

Hudd snorted. 'Doubt he could care less about her. Men like him shouldn't have kids.'

Silver reached out with careful hands to slip back Alice's cowl and stroke her hair. He was not careful enough, and she jolted back to life beneath his touch. She saw him swaying over her, and saying nothing, stretched out skinny arms to encircle his neck and pull herself up into his embrace. He stood stooped like that for a while, letting her hold him, until twinges bit at the base of his spine and he had to let her down. He saw her face again, for the last time, and she was crying.

Those eyes, ever shadowed by the hood of her lids, were now wide open but still unreadable.

'I want to stay with you,' she told him, but he shook his head. 'I love you,' she added, and still he shook his head.

'You can't stay here. We've lost all our protection.'

'Don't leave me, Nate. Don't abandon me.'

'You have to leave,' he echoed, sad and insistent, 'but I'd never abandon you. God is everywhere, remember, and He is love. No matter where you go you will be here in my heart.'

She sniffed then. She had never been sentimental.

And you, Nathaniel Silver, have been far too sentimental. If you live through the next few days, that will have to change.

He had to let her go. He bade them both good fortune, then stood at the gates watching as the cart receded northwards up the track. The militia might catch them on the road. They might get lost on the way to London. Hudd might get drunk and betray her or forget her. They might be ambushed and robbed. Any number of calamities might befall them once they were out of his sight, but he put all such thoughts from his mind. She was gone, and the only hope he had left in the world was that she was now safely beyond his baleful influence.

There were seven other Silverites still living in the commune. Every single one of them was woken by the commotion, and had come out of their houses in time to see Nathaniel Silver - not their leader or their shepherd but an ordinary man like any one of them - tread broken and defeated back through the gates of the world he'd made for them. He had cursed them. He tried to look at their faces, but saw only smudges of pink, instantly forgotten. He saw what the King must have seen on his final walk to the axeman's block, parading forth not with dignity or according to any ritual, but simply dazed, helpless, and frightened by the crowd that damned him and prayed for him in equal measure.

Silver stood before them and gave them one final piece of advice; and for once it was a practical suggestion. 'Run,' he said.

Then he went into the praying room and knelt, listening as the last of his followers gathered up their possessions and fled the camp. He could hear the sound of marching boots in the distance, drawing ever nearer. He could hear the bolts on the cells drawing close on the career and the life of Sir Denzil Lynch. He could hear Alice muttering in her sleep as she made her escape. He could hear the promises of angels. He could hear the steady beat of his own heart. He listened to all this and waited and waited and waited until at last they came for him.

Chapter 2: Mistress Behn's Holiday

Proud ALBION, you spurned all suitors,

'til fateful vessels brought you Brutus,

washed upon your shores untold,

to end that idyll, the Age of Gold.

'Gainst Trojan majesty, the giant Gog

and his brother, called Magog,

did tumpy tumpy tumpy tum

something tumpy tumpy - ballocks! I almost had something there. Starts well but turns rapidly to doggerel.

She hated ships. Bloody hated them. Not the ships as much as the journey, and not the journey out so much as the voyage home. There were always drizzling clouds waiting for her, and worse than a spot of rain, there was disappointment or humiliation or worse -

There was also the sickness. Today her stomach was wambling ceaselessly, as usual, but the sea was completely flat from horizon to horizon. Not a wave could be seen there, just a solid clean sheet of blue, a little darker than the sky. There was no land visible in any direction, except over her head, as the clusters of stars had merged together to form new and unexplored continents. She searched and found her patron and protector, the constellation

of Virgo, reclining demurely on a verdant lawn with her legs chastely crooked and her head turned away from Earth and the follies of mortal men. The goddess smiled down on her shipbound mortal aspect, who curtsied back to her from the deck.

Her return from Surinam had been a journey like this, full of sickness and calm seas with no land in sight from one end of the sky to the other, though at least then there'd been motion and precious cargo. She had borne back Indian feathers and butterflies from the New World, plus prosaic reports on Governor Willoughby's philanderings, plus a new name. Now she had only her failure in Antwerp, and nothing to look forward to but potential penury, but this couldn't be the Mare Germanicum, could it? They couldn't have become bogged down so far from land or sight of any ship in such a narrow sea? It was more like they had become becalmed in the Sargasso, doomed to die of thirst and starvation under the American sun. Perhaps through ill luck or magic they'd navigated into the great pangaeian ocean that encircled the flat world in the Golden Age, before the Earth diminished into a sphere.

Ah, this had to be a dream then. There was no magic in the world any more, except in memories of childhood or in dreams. It would explain the green skies and the stillness and the youthful triteness of her poetry.

It was a shame the world was no longer flat. She amused herself imagining righteous pilgrims packing themselves into boats and setting off to the New World, only to topple off the edge and plunge screaming into the abyss of stars. She laughed and almost threw up. Still, at least they were despatched to another continent where they could do no harm, except to the poor red savages, once proud but now oppressed by breeches, drink, and Christian blather. A shame - she could think of no happier an afterlife for a Puritan than the insides of a wild man's belly.

The sea was unmoved by her good humour.

It was funny that she should dream herself back to the worst of her disasters, as she slunk to a home that might have burned to the ground, to masters who had forgotten her and were embarrassed by her intelligences, to debt and the purgatory of Clink Street. Her reports were ignored. When some months later the Dutch fleet sailed up the Medway and snatched the Royal Charles, she might almost have danced about her cell in delight. I told you so! I told you so! I told you so!

She was dancing now in her dream. Men and rats were staring at her, seeming faintly ashamed. It upset her stomach, so she calmed down, leaned herself on the wooden rail and waited impotently for a wind to puff the sails and her skirts alike.

She felt a disturbance behind her, but it was just a man come up on deck. He was a Florentine merchant with whom she had exchanged a few words earlier on the journey; she had the sense that underneath their daytime disguises they were both about the same business. He was an ugly man with a face like a ruined abbey; only a few white hairs hung wisply from the back of his head, and without being fat he was huge and solid. The last time they had spoken, he had held forth about the beauty and history of his home city, and she had nodded politely and immediately forgotten all but a few bits of local colour that might one day serve as a decoration for scenes in her drama or her prose.

Aphra Behn liked to show to men exactly the sort of woman they expected to see. In courtly circles, she was an aristocrat; in the theatre, a solid wordsmith and the equal of any male; among the rabble, an honest working girl

made good. It was all too easy for her to be the sort of woman that ugly old men desired.

'I have something to show you,' he enthused, ignoring the light green pallor of her cheeks. 'You'll recall I mentioned a present for King Charles, and you were most excited?' - in fact she had delicately covered her yawns with her hand, which he had mistaken for coquetry - 'I have it here for your inspection.'

From his case, which he placed at his feet and took a little effort to open, he produced a heavy bronzed cylinder, decorated with tiny dials along its length and lenses of differing size at either end. She knew what this was, but smiled politely nonetheless as she waited for the explanation.

'This is the latest of its kind, and will far surpass any found in London. Have you ever had a chance to use a telescope with your own eyes?'

She had, many times. 'No, I would be most honoured.'

He leaned forward to adjust its dials. 'Then see, you merely stroke it thus and it extends to a considerable length and girth.'

Oh, 'tis going to be like that, is it? What a tedious man. 'Sir, I am amazed!'

'Now support its head with your right hand and put the slender end to the other, thus. You have it, madame. I will adjust the magnification. Just gasp when the view comes clear.' Not that there would be a view, just the blue emptiness circling the whole world. She considered turning the telescope upwards to inspect the viridian heavens. She wondered idly what species of heathen lived there. Eyeless angels? Huge-toed, one-legged men? Cannibals with no heads but mouths in their stomachs? Dronish bee-men, parading around a marvellous bee-woman Queen?

'This is miraculous!' she said dryly as a distant blue blur crystallised into an indistinguishable blue sharpness. 'His Majesty is such a scopophile, he will be beside himself with joy.'

The Florentine was close behind her, hot breath against her neck, hands trembling and willing to touch. 'I had wondered,' he said at length, 'on the whereabouts of Mister Behn?'

'Him? Oh, he is in Arcadia. Two years gone.'

'You have my condolences.'

'Well, one grieves and moves on. He left great debts, of course.'

'Debts?'

'Indeed. I fear they will remain unpaid on my landing in London, and then who knows what might happen to me?' She sighed. As expected, he moved to steady her, confident hands on her shoulders, then on her waist, then crooked round her breast, and then - ah ha! - creeping downwards to where her lap would lie if she were seated. She sighed again, making it seem happier this time. Better to be banged-up below decks than banged-up in Clink. His fingers tightened on her womanhood through the lines of cloth, bought from Flanders merchants from the Service's depthless purse before she had learned that it was not, in fact, as depthless as she imagined.

The Florentine was exactly the sort of mortal man she had found attractive when she had still been young. Her sleeping self, a-bed in Paris some sixteen years later, rolled in her slumber and prepared to argue - but then she stopped and gasped. She had spied something in her dreaming that she had forgotten in the waking world.

She was so surprised she almost dropped the telescope, and the Florentine released his grip on her delicate parts immediately and made to catch it - it was more delicate still. She steadied herself.

'I didn't presume -' he began.

'The hell with that - what am I looking at now?'

He leant over the prow in the direction of her gaze, no doubt creasing his lids and shielding his brow from the sun with the flat of his hand. He wouldn't be able to see it, she realised. This vision was for her eyes only. 'What do you see?' he asked.

She saw a vast green pillar rising out of the waters, decorated with carvings, statues, and strange flowers along its length, and topped with an emerald dome, greater in size and majesty by far than the basilica of Saint Peter in Rome. I have seen this before, she thought suddenly. It felt at once like a Catholic place, yet not; it was a building that could only have been born out of a baroque imagination, sixteen hundred years old, steeped in ancient ceremonies and traditions, burnished by pomp and power. Yet she had no doubt that the prayers conducted beneath its canopy were wholly un-Christian, dedicated to the pagan immortals who once walked the Earth until desert-dwelling Jehovah had swept them away. And as she stared at it through her narrow lens, she was sure that the swinish heathen priests were staring back not just at her but at all creation from their all-seeing domain, their Aleph.

'I see a tall pillar, floating on the sea,' she babbled out an inadequate description.

'Ah! It is a fata morgana,' the Florentine non-explained, and satisfied with that non-explanation he rested both hands on her buttocks and stroked playfully.

'Y'what?'

'A derangement of the opticks. When sailors see it, they imagine it to be narrow castles with thin spires and battlements, but it is only the vision of their own ships reflected back to them on the air. It is usually,' he continued brightly, 'a sign of uncouth weather. There'll be a storm soon.'

'Good,' she decided, 'I can't wait to get moving.'

But she kept scanning the ocean-top with her telescope, even as the visionary temple vanished into the first haze of rain, searching in vain for a sight of her, for a glimpse of fiery immortal hair or glowing immortal skin. Even later, as the Florentine pinned her heavily to his comfortable berth, she was still desperately scouring the sea of her memory. Then the storm exploded and dashed the ship onto rocks, and the Florentine's telescope was forgotten in the evacuation and sank to the bottom of the sea to delight the mermaids, and she woke up and found herself in -

Now.

There was a candle lit in her room, and through the window came the night-time sounds of Paris, the city that never slept and was buggered if it was going to let her get any rest either... and the curv'd ache was back in her spine and her limbs, so she knew she must be properly and disappointingly awake.

George had lit the candle, and was creeping around her room picking his clothes from the floor. The light exposed his yellow nakedness to her: hairless chest, skinny buttocks mottled with the spots of a youth and the lacerations of a cadet, a drooping unexcited cock. Very disappointing. She wondered at how quickly her tastes had turned from ugly men twenty years her senior to pretty young boys who would still have been in the cradle when she'd returned from Antwerp, and unborn when she'd been in Surinam.

'George,' she whispered; he looked back guiltily, holding a bundled shirt and breeches to his chest with one hand, the candle in the other.

'I have to go,' he blurted. 'They'll kick me out of the academy if I'm not there in the morning.'

'Not yet. Don't leave me alone in a city full of tempting Frenchmen...'

She rolled onto her back beneath the sheet, letting it ride back like a streamer as she turned, so that her bosom and stomach and thigh were slowly and tantalisingly exposed to him. He leaned across her and his hardening penis touched and drew a thin sticky trail up her flank, but he moved only to put down the candle by her side and peck her cheek.

'I'll come back to you as soon as I can,' he promised, his free hand then tickling down her neck and forearm and onto her breast. 'You are my goddess, how could I not?' Then he ran for the door, still nude and aroused and skinny, trailing ribbons and bits of uniform behind him. He was off back to his martial studies, all those leering old chevaliers just yearning to introduce him to the twin disciplines of sodomy and masturbation. She slicked her fingers on his cooling ejaculate, spreading it along the length of her thigh.

'Fuck!'

She threw off the sheet, folded her arms, and crossed her legs in petulance and disappointment. All men let her down in the end, that was a condition of time, of course, but also of their sex. Most were born slaves, in their minds if not in fact. The best of them would still shine through even if literally enslaved, as she had seen in the American colonies. The African Negroes on the plantations had still been tall defiant men, smouldering and metallic-black, as if fired in the furnace of the sun. They were better men by far than the pallid colonial runts who professed to own them - that was the base injustice of slavery. She had realised this most potently when she'd come upon one Oroonoko,

once a proud prince among his people,

now chain'd in body yet not in mind.

He caught his spy and found me kind

With Afrique tongue he drew me hither

I flowed across that mighty river - Christ! What a way to dignify a quick fumble and fuck under a bush in Surinam. That had been a long time ago; lot of water had passed under that bridge, and she was a (much) better poet nowadays, but he was still one of the few men she remembered with fondness. He had been

her dark young gentleman, her muse, and had set her on the path she'd followed ever since.

- He was your muse, and you used him and promised him a lease of freedom you couldn't deliver.

Warm and unsatisfying air caressed her body; it would still be an hour or so before dawn, hardly worth drifting back to sleep and into odd dreams. She reached for the other ingenious young gentleman who shared her bedroom, in word if not in flesh - the much-thumbed copy of Tom Creech's Lucretius, the Epicurean Philosopher that she'd blurbed last year. She opened it to a favourite passage, rested on the crook of her leg so she could turn the pages with her left hand, leaving the right free to exercise itself.

- As men ever use women for their pleasure and profit, so I am content to use men in return to serve my own desires.

The following day Aphra Behn had an appointment with le Pouvoir. They hadn't given her a time or a location, but so long as she remained in Paris, le Pouvoir would find her. She suspected that so long as she remained in France, or even in Europe, they would track her down and deliver her at exactly the time they required. Such was the extent of their reach.

That was fine by her; she wouldn't need to worry about the time, but could browse in Paris at her leisure. Let them do all the legwork if it made them feel important...

Where to go though? The bookstalls beckoned; over here they had something called magazines instead of newspapers or pamphlets, and little bands of cruel and satirical drawings that would never catch the imagination of the provincial English. Perhaps the theatre; she was always on the lookout for promising new material that wasn't nailed down, or just an Italianate clown comedy to tickle her fancy. Or there were the caffés, or the churches...

The French churches appealed to her. They touched her spiritual being in a way that English churches did not; they were decorated and opulent, not simply to indulge in worldly riches but reflecting the immaterial wealth of their faith. She could not - would not - buy into that faith, as a matter of course, but even so the gold-draped jewel-crusted mysteries of stern French Catholicism turned her soul into living song. By contrast the English churches had all the mystery of a simple man squatting in a ditch to piss. Not their fault of course, they had a hundred years and fifty of vandalism and theft to contend with, but the bleak greys and blacks and whites that had survived to become the Church of England no longer moved her, if they ever had. Aphra Behn preferred the Latin murmur of the Eucharist to the hectoring hellfire bark of the Protestant preacher.

Not today, perhaps. She was about to meet le Pouvoir, and they were more formidable by far than the Christian God.

Or she could just perambulate about Paris, trusting that Gallic insouciance would allow a woman to make her own explorations without the benefit of a companion or chaperone. She would have to hobble as her legs felt especially crooked today, but she still refused to use a stick. No one was going to call Aphra Behn a cripple or a sot!

She admitted this very reluctantly - because they were after all French, and therefore the second most disreputable people on Earth after the joyless colonials of America - but the French were far better suited to authority and statecraft than the English, who seemed to have backed timidly into their

global estate. It was only a pity that their capital was such a slum, especially compared with the magnificent new architecture at Versailles. Paris could do with a Great Fire of its own, demolishing the narrow wooden streets and higgledy-piggledy buildings to make room for a new and monumental city of towers and boulevards, better fitted to an imperial imagination. There would be no surrender in France to the petty fogs thrown up by small-minded planners and bureaucrats as there had been - and still were - in London. Wren, a man of stature and vision, was said to have wept when his Great Design for Saint Paul's was rejected; too Popish, they said, where is the nave for the procession? they said, the time it will take is an impediment to worship, they said, and the King had heeded their complaints. Let them try that on all-powerful Louis here, and see how far it would get them!

Like London, like any city, Paris had an individual scent. A city's effluence revealed the eating habits of its citizens, and so offered an insight into their tastes and practices; that might be valuable information in the right hands. She imagined an expert with a nose trained fine enough to tell the subtle distinctions between the different bouquets of shit; he might make an amusing character on stage. No, too trivial. For the moment though she was thinking of a lasting work that might recommend her reputation to posterity. Not drama or poetry perhaps, but a narrative in prose and at length. With the right subject -

'Mistress Behn! Aphra!'

Fuck, is that Samuel Morland?!

She was passing a printer's with galleys pegged out on lines like washing left to dry in the sun, and suddenly there he was further down the street, a reedy streak of piss in black, pushing his way through the passers-by towards her. It is Sir Sam! Fuck!

She swung round and pushed her face close to the nearest pages, incoherent French type focusing and unfocusing before her eyes as through a flawed lens. Pretend you haven't seen him! Don't make eye-contact! God's tits, he's still coming!

Run! Into the crowd!

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

He was hollering her name from a distance, and she trotted away on her dumpy aching legs, knowing that his long strides would soon catch her unless she could shake him off. As if sensing her distress, every door in every wall in Paris opened up to flood the already-squeezed alleyways with the human carnival. Bland faces stared at her and careless bodies contrived to block her way. She wished she had a stick after all. Out of my way you bloody baboons, can you not see I am a cripple?!

'Aphra! Wait!'

Sir Sam was still hot on her heels. Damn the man, what could he want? Was it just coincidence that put him in her path? Maybe he'd just want a friendly chat or a stroke of her pussy, and she was damned if she'd let him have either. Or maybe he was about the Service's business, or le Pouvoir's...

Oh fuck, what if he's my contact in le Pouvoir? He was said to be a favourite of the French court, in spite of all his shortcomings...

No, not Sam. They would know about all his disasters. They'd know about the

fiasco at Salomon's House, and how he'd disgraced himself. Master or no, they wouldn't let such a fool and a turncoat anywhere near the levers of power. She thrust herself into a fissure between two houses and squeezed her way through to another street, scraping pitch and dirt onto her skirts as she went. She burst out into the fresh air and right into Sir Samuel's waiting embrace.

'Why it is you!' he exclaimed, ignoring or perhaps oblivious to her face of dismay and contempt. The hunt only stirred the blood of men such as him, if the ground was dry and the prey slow and easy. 'Mistress Behn, the celebrated she-spy. It's been far too long since we last spoke.'

Aye, since Carola died, and you rolled over readily into the bed of the first whore who would have you. Who just happened to be Aphra Behn, but so what? For me it was grief.

'I must walk, Sam,' she insisted, stumbling away on feet now sore and wracked with the pains brought on by her twisting treacherous bones. 'I have a lot of ground to cover.'

'Then let me walk with you,' he said, hoving unhurriedly alongside her like a black pirate frigate preparing a boarding party. His hand went down her back to pat her bum. She felt her face burn red with so many resentments and frustrations. But keep yourself cool, Aphra, if he is le Pouvoir then he's the last man you want to cross.

'You look tired, Aphra. You should rest.'

'Perhaps,' she said on reflection, 'we can stop for a drink. Catch up with old times.'

She found she was still able to smile into that face, now much older than she remembered. Sir Samuel Morland, Cromwell's chief spy and Charles's Master of Mechanics, lately visiting engineer to the Court of Versailles. Sir Sam, the tutor, postmaster, and turncoat, who bent whichever way the wind was blowing. Sam Morland, poor dead Carola's callous husband...

He was dressed all in black, in a cape and shirt and puffed breeches that would have been the height of fashion in London, but here in the dandy's capital made him appear as stolid and unexciting as a provincial schoolmaster with straw sticking out of his boots. Age had not been kind to him, and he had always been a pinched and sour-looking fellow. Like the Florentine he was an ugly old man now...

She prayed God he would not steer her into his bed again, or into a storm...

He guided her to a seat outside a nearby caffè, under the row of hanging hats left there by Parisian gallants as they fermented their plots and drank their filthy brew within. Like the unenlightened English, the tiny-minded French barred women from their coffee-houses for fear that womanly magics would somehow disrupt the potent masculine energies within.

She was still wheezing from the effort of her escape attempt. 'Not coffee,' she insisted. 'It is abominable. And not tea either, they don't have the first idea about tea over here. I'll have red wine or a pot of beer and damn what the quacks say.'

Sir Samuel obliged, disappearing for a moment - she considered legging it in the other direction, and only stayed seated for fear that she might drop dead otherwise - and returning with a bottle. He poured them out two equal measures. 'Shall we make a toast?' he asked.

'Carola,' she proposed.

'Carola,' he concurred, and if her suggestion stung him it did not show on his face, the bastard.

'You're still loyal to Her Majesty,' he suggested, as she took her first sip. 'Still drinking that filthy Iberian beverage,' he clarified.

'I like the taste, that's all. As I grow older, I must admit I find it sour and take it sweetened with a little milk or butter.'

'You Tories,' he said, and swallowed, 'you are all Catholics, sweetened with a little milk or butter.'

'We are of the King's party, but Charles is no Catholic.'

'You think not? His brother is. And he must convert eventually. I have seen the secret treaties, I know this to be so.'

She knew how to field this. 'He will not convert. The moment Louis has what he wants, the flow of French coin into Charles's pockets will dry up; then he'll have to go to Parliament to pay for his races and his wars. And how do you think that hive of villains will treat him after what he did to them last time? If he'd lately declared for Rome too...' She left the implication hanging and unspoken. Civil War renewed.

'Agreed. Rowley is subtler than the rest of them. Out of a family of fools, he is not a fool.'

'Sam, you speak treason.'

'Aphra, since you were born there hasn't been an Englishman who hasn't, at one time or another, held views that might be called treasonable. We must learn to compromise.'

Like you did, when you ran snivelling to the court in exile the moment you fell out of Cromwell's good graces? I may find his ideas repulsive, but the man himself was great and deserving of respect.

'I don't want to talk about this.'

'But Aphra, the crunch will come one day, and soon. Le Roi Soleil grows impatient. In the end Rowley will have to go to Parliament for funds, and like it or not he will have to hang your precious Duke out to dry. The King will bend, Parliament will have their exclusion, and the Americans will have a city to rename.'

'Sam!'

'New Monmouth has a nice ring to it, don't you agree? York will probably be given some governorship. Give him a chance to boss some long-faced Protestants around, eh?'

Exasperated now - 'Sam, let us not talk politics.'

'I don't talk politics, but as we are on Service we must be aware of the way the scales tip.'

I am on Service, Sam, but you are not. She didn't say that, though. She had

some inkling of his game now. She was disappointed that it wasn't a ride he wanted. Their feet lay side-by-side below the table, and Sam made no effort to tease her legs apart or let his hands wander; if he'd been a better fisherman he might have done.

Still, best to deflect him into a new topic: 'So, what have you been up to? I hear you were building a water engine for le Soleil.' She'd also heard it hadn't worked, and he'd been expelled from court for a time, pursued by the braying laughter of the King's ridicule. Not that he'd admit it.

'I decided not. It would have been a demotion of my proper talents. I have a greater project on my tables by far.'

'Tell me, Sam.' It wouldn't be anything important, she guessed, and she would only have to flutter her eyelids to get him to let her in on a great secret. Men like Morland needed to be visible, no matter how trivial their endeavours.

'Oh, it is not something I am at liberty to talk about.' Flutter, flutter. 'But I can hardly refuse Aphra Behn! I am designing a new engine for the exploration and conquest of Selene, so it might be added to French territories.'

God almighty, the man was mad. 'That sounds most intriguing.'

'We may yet be the first, especially since many earlier voyages have been discredited as frivolous fancies. The Chevalier de Cyrano, for example...'

'His method of transportation would hardly be suitable for conquest, but pray go on sir...'

'The Society of Jesus sent an expedition to the Orient two years since to ascertain the veracity of Domingo Gonsales' account - you will recall he claimed to have been carried to the moon by migrating geese - but they are yet to report. And the Franciscans are breeding, from the preserved seed of one of their number, flying children who could make landfall on one of the habitable regions. I am determined that the flag of France will beat them to it.'

She could no longer resist it. 'You men! You want the moon on a stick.'

Not realising he was being mocked, Sir Sam ploughed on. She could see the line of the bottle steadily descending, and she herself had barely sunk a mouthful. 'My engine is the most practical proposition. It is all a question of applying the right thrust in the right place.'

'You are moon-crazy, Sam. I can't imagine why anyone would want to go to there. We have our own vast globe to explore and despoil.'

'Such cynicism, Aphra; you have become old.'

'Nonsense. I was always like this. I live in cynical times, Sam.'

He gave her a cunning smile. Full of wine now, the old fox was preparing to resume his attack. 'What does bring you to Paris, Aphra? I'm right that it's Service business.'

So he was fishing, nothing more. He was a beached fish himself, struggling to survive on dry land, desperate to get back into the sea. She almost felt sorry for him. 'It's Service business, and therefore not yours.'

'Whose business is it, Aphra? Who's running the circus these days? It's not like the old times when we had the Cabal. At least we could narrow it down to one of five men with Rowley's ear. I miss our cabal too, our old friendships.'

'You were never part of my cabal, Sam. That was Carola, and she is dead.'

He winced then. It was affected. She knew all the actor's tricks. 'I can hazard who pulls your strings. It's Sunderland isn't it? Oh, I see I have pricked you! Sunderland, eh? Well the Service is in good hands. He's a man after my own heart.'

Indeed, he was a man of no honest convictions, who would jump into bed with whichever faction served his interests best. 'You might be twins,' she commented lightly.

'But I see wider designs still; why else send you to Paris?'

He was rambling drunkenly now, and she felt compelled to release a little knowledge just to shut him up. Christ, he could be standing on the table with his arse out in a minute, or bellowing to the crowd that she was an assassin sent to kill le Soleil. If anything would stir the blasé French mob, that would. 'I have a letter to deliver, and I know nothing more than that.'

By now the afternoon sun was beating down on them; Sir Sam was well protected by the brim of his hat, though he must have baked inside that dark costume like a potato in its skin. But Aphra felt the heat worse, she was sure; it had made her flustered and unguarded. Sam's vile wine was clinging to the inside of her stomach like a sheen of sick. She cocked her head and vomited a small ball of it onto the cobbles, among the horse dung. There! He won't want to put anything in that mouth now, will he?

'The sun,' she explained. She swilled some more wine to wash her palate. 'Where did the romance go, Sam? They send me back and forth delivering correspondence that I never read and might be trivial beyond measure. When I was young there was a gallant prince in exile, a dark enemy at home, a secret order I swore myself to. What is there now?'

'You have your other outlet for romance. Your scribblings. You wrote for bread -'

'- and now I am ashamed to own it, Sam. I want to have done something good and lasting with my life. What happened to it all?'

'Tempus fugit.'

'We were cursed when time entered the world.' The bottle was almost empty, so she slugged it back and let the dregs drip moistly onto her lips. 'Do you still like me, Sam? I have a room a little way from here.' Actually it was bloody miles, but she doubted he'd want to walk that far.

'You're old, Aphra,' Sir Samuel Morland told her wistfully, 'and you were never that pretty.'

He had to duck then. The bottle bounced off the wall and shattered among the shit and vomit on the street, a fine carpet for a stinking city. Aphra Behn felt the wine stewing inside her and began to plot a play that would last. It was to be all about the folly of reasonable and rational men, those foolish tinkerers in mechanics who thought they had forged keys to unlock men's souls. So you want to go to the moon? Well then, I will have a great emperor

descend from Selene to mock your worldly follies and conceits. I will turn you into greedy and foolish alchemists and make sport with you all, and I care not if I am remembered for it. All pages are burned by history, all inscriptions fade, and all finery turns to dust. Time does this.

This is the Dark Age.

She soon calmed down, and began to feel better disposed towards Sir Sam, who had at least stood her a drink and was a familiar face from home. It wasn't his fault that he preferred skinny titless women, and it wasn't as though she were looking for anything more generous than a clinch or a kiss. A few years back, after a decade of widowhood, she imagined that she might find herself a husband some day; maybe not that elusive mischief love, but some steady presence to share her life, who would be content to let her run round with her plays and schemes and handsome young men. Most of her relationships had been with libertines who balked at even that little surrender of their person to another, even in exchange for all her rights and properties.

Still she slunk back to her rooms feeling a little merry to begin with, but strewing that happiness like petals as she went, so by the time she was 'home' she was thoroughly miserable. She trudged to her door and up the narrow wood steps, only to find shabby female bodies obstructing the way to her room and her bed.

There were two, both more slender than her and taller. Both had puffed white hair, like pastries; one had thick muscular arms, the other had bared nipples, nut-brown and nut-textured; and both women wore ivory vizards, chinless so she could see their thin and spotted lips. One tossed a pile of coins, leisurely, on her palm. Tired and in no mood for conversation, Aphra tried to brush past them and was blocked.

'Look at this spoiled meat,' one muttered in elegant-accented French, 'muscling in on our patch. Name your principals, madame.'

'Out of the way please,' she said, straining for politeness and finding herself unwittingly speaking English.

'Hah! She's a fuckoff, come over here to steal our jobs and our men.'

'I may be English, but my French is perfectly good, and I am no harlot.'

'We know a harlot when we see one, don't we Jeanette?'

Jeanette smiled cruelly below her line of ivory. 'The English would call us punks, would they not? Who pimps your purse, madame punk?'

Aphra had finally squeezed through a gap, braving their tickling fingers around her neck and waist. She was almost to her door when one called in clear plain English. 'It isn't the Earl of Sunderland. We know that now.'

Aphra stopped mid-tread.

'Do you know his name? No, you don't. Names don't matter for the likes of us, do they, Madame Astraea?'

She turned to stare down at them, wordlessly. They beckoned to her as one and spoke as one: 'Le Pouvoir persuade. Le Pouvoir protects. Le Pouvoir punishes. You will come with us, please.'

Oh Christ, not now, not when I have a splitting headache and so much dead wine

in my guts. One word out of place and they'll slit me and gut my lights and dunk me in the Seine.

'Le Pouvoir is polite,' she said, through painfully gritted teeth, holding out both hands so they could lead her away. She was no longer Aphra Behn, the punk and poetesse, but fearless, immortal Astraea who was more than a match for le Pouvoir's furies.

She just wished she felt more like Astraea and less like fearful, mortal Aphra.

There was a carriage waiting outside that hadn't been there a minute earlier when she'd arrived home. It was varnished a dense black that made it seem almost invisible in these streets, hidden in the overhanging shadows of the surrounding maisons. There was no livery and she saw no coachman (or, she supposed, coachwoman) as the two harlots escorted her smoothly into the cab as though she were a noblewoman and they her faithful retainers. They had pistols concealed in their skirts or their bags, she had no doubt of that. She sank into the luxurious upholstered seat, and smiled politely across the gap at the two blank-faced agents of le Pouvoir.

'Madame Astraea -'

She risked a moment of defiance, raising a finger to her mouth to silence the woman. 'Just Astraea.'

'Very well then, Astraea, but do not interrupt again, or Jeanette will be forced to snap the little finger on your left hand.'

'I'd like that,' Jeanette told her, with her visible lips forming something like a smile, but broken. 'And Sandrine will enjoy watching.'

Sandrine found a stick beneath her seat and rapped on the ceiling with it; the carriage lurched forward, pushing Astraea back into the deceptive cushions. The stick had a grey metal fist for a head, clenched - when it came to symbolism, le Pouvoir were nasty, brutish, and to the point. She said nothing for fear of her fingers.

'Now you will be blindfolded.' Sandrine produced a white bandage from her bag, and Astraea offered no resistance as it was wrapped round her eyes. It saved her having to look into the masked eyes of the furies and so imagine the casual cruelties they must have learned to rise so high in their masters' hierarchy. As she was bound, Jeanette leaned closed and whispered into her ear: 'When we arrive at your destination, you will be searched by men. We would like you to know these men are the worst scum in France, murderers and rapists reprieved from the gallows or the military prisons for le Pouvoir's purposes. Should we for a moment imagine that you have betrayed le Pouvoir your body will be forfeited to them. Do you understand?'

'Perfectly,' she replied, smooth and confident. Another good thing about the blindfold - they wouldn't see her fear.

'Good, then le Pouvoir will guarantee your health and liberty; all will be well.'

The rest of the journey passed without incident, except for the smooth sensation of a glove - Jeanette's, she presumed - stroking her little finger, up and down, down and up. The coach clattered through the tight streets of the city - Astraea doubted they would go further, not even to Versailles - and paused frequently for jams, still patches of boredom punctuated by the hoots

and complaints of pedestrians. Their foolish voices made her feel a lot better.

When they halted, Astraea allowed herself to be taken down from the coach, into a building, and then on an expedition through a maze of interior tunnels. She was searched by silent and scentless fingers, but by now she was confident enough to sense the mummery going on round her. She knew these tricks from the theatre, and felt at once both an affinity with the devious masters of le Pouvoir and a complicit party in their deception. This was a dance or a ceremony as impressive, in its own way, as any Catholic magic. They found the letter among her effects, but thrust it back into her hands once they were done. Then, finally, the hands of le Pouvoir guided her into a comfortable chair and stripped away the blindfold. She was thrust back into the light, which radiated brighter than she had remembered and left her blinking in the inner sanctum.

It was rather less impressive than she'd imagined. The dust was everywhere, underfoot, on the walls and furnishings, crumbling almost as she watched from naked wood beams and rotting old tapestries. As well as dust, there was everywhere light, a least a hundred candles on every available surface, raised on stands, and hanging on chains from the ceiling. There were no windows, no openings. They were deep within the heart of the fastness, deep inside and possibly down. And by the far wall, covered in sheets to catch both the dust and the eye, were three regular shapes, twice the height of a tall man, with sharp corners poking at the fall of the cloth.

Astraea felt quite lightheaded in this hollow but airless hall.

In the centre of the room, between her and the concealed objects, a man sat at table eating. He appeared, if Astraea was any judge, to be partway through a light supper; fish, she guessed, or a white meat in sauce, with vegetables and slices of fruit on a side plate. He ignored her, and continued to work his way through his meal, chewing slowly and using his cutlery diligently as if he had only recently learned how they should properly be held. This man had egg-white skin, rouged around the cheeks and painted with uglifying spots. He had a livid red wig in the French courtly style that ran halfway down his back, but he was otherwise dressed in off-white, slightly dusty fabric that in its mock-shabbiness was more elegant than Sir Samuel Morland could have imagined.

This man's servants too failed to look at her, though in their case it was harder as their eyes were pointed straight at her. There were two flanking him, both maids, both tall and naked except for their caps and knee-length socks. And there were more at her back; Astraea turned to look over her shoulder to find Jeanette and Sandrine, dressed as before but now armed with flintlocks. One shot only, but then they would only need one shot, if she tried anything. Which, she decided at length, she wouldn't.

Astraea's host kept on working his way through that fish (or chicken). She filled the dead time with idle speculation about the other women present. What were their names? How could they stand the cold? Were they even French, or perhaps recruited from some obscure portion of the Amazon? She allowed herself to be impressed but not intimidated. Gradually she allowed herself to become bored. She had imagined worse than this pantomime. She turned the undelivered letter in her idle hands.

Eventually her host finished and made an extravagant belch, an extravagant fart, an extravagant dabbing of the mouth with a handkerchief that he found after a long search through his pockets. Finally he pushed the plate away, so it fell from the table and struck the floor with a crash; then he kicked out the leg of the table so it followed and broke into five pieces. The rounded

tabletop rolled on its edge for a moment before settling down. The maids hurried forward to clean up the wreckage, removing it - and themselves - silently through the only visible door.

Her host showed her yellowed, browned teeth - an imperfection that was surely not affected - and regarded her as a hungry man would regard a succulent sweetmeat.

'You were born Aphra Johnson,' he told her, 'in the English county of Kent, some forty-two years and six months ago. You have claimed aristocratic descent, but in fact your father was a barber-surgeon. Twenty years ago, you were married, briefly, to a German or Dutch merchant named Johann or Joachim Behn, though there is no surviving record either of the marriage or his death. You work for an organisation that calls itself the Service, and have done, in one way or another, for the past thirty years. Your number within the Service is 160, and your nom-de-guerre is Astraea. You have written a number of plays and other works distinguished only by the fact that their author - unlike all other practitioners of your trade - has a cunt. This is all that we need to know about you.'

She gave him her most disarming smile. 'Charmed. And you must be the esteemed representative of le Pouvoir.'

He snorted. 'Le Pouvoir, c'est moi!' Then he was all dirty-toothed smiles again. 'You may call me Monsieur Pantaloon.'

'Charmed,' she repeated dryly. 'This letter is for you, I think.'

Sandrine plucked it from her lap and delivered it to M. Pantaloon. He held it between his thumbs, sniffed the paper suspiciously and did not make to break the seal.

'For me, yes, but from whom? Sunderland is the hand, almost certainly, but not I think the author.'

'I don't know who -'

'Did you fart, madame? Your pardon, you emitted a noise from some orifice or another. It is insolent to speculate on the affairs of your superiors.'

In spite of the guns at her back - or perhaps the sensation that there was now only one still at her back as Sandrine had removed herself to M. Pantaloon's side - Astraea felt a surge of cocky confidence. For all its menaces, this was the game of espionage as she'd hoped she might play it. 'I have nothing but admiration for my superiors and yours, sirrah, but I do not care for the insolence of servants. If le Soleil knew what sort of man was acting in his authority -'

At a gesture from M. Pantaloon, she was seized from behind, the vicious vice of Jeanette's elbow hooked tight round her neck. She couldn't breathe; her hands snatched pathetically at the air.

'Louis is nothing! There is only le Pouvoir! Enough!'

The pressure was gone, and she fell forward from her chair choking and gasping like poor pathetic Aphra, not defiant and radiant as Astraea should be. Her windpipe felt crushed, but worse, it fell dry as though she were drowning in desert air. She coughed up imaginary sand. M. Pantaloon rose and paced round her in an orbit, his precise tread leaving a circle of delicious marks in the dust.

'You English have become the little Arab boy who finds a jar in the sands and breaks it open expecting treasures or precious oils, only to release a howling demon with many eyes and hungry teeth to eat you up. You made of yourself, however briefly, l'état raté. Your revolution may have failed, but you have let an evil precedent into the world. How long before such incontinence spreads to France? It may take a hundred years, but it will come eventually. It will overwhelm le Pouvoir, and then who will secure for the people their rights and freedoms? There will be only the tyranny of the mob.'

'A hun'ed years...' she gagged, '...s a long time.' She thought of protesting her life-long devotion to Royalism and Toryism, but he would find some way to twist this to her disadvantage.

'On the contrary, it is all too short. Le Pouvoir has been forced to contemplate the futures and consider how they might be shaped. In time, we will have to adapt and become not an organisation but a form of knowledge, a set of ideas that can be passed from mouth-to-ear or hand-to-hand. We must float across oceans like seeds and settle in the New World. Le Pouvoir must migrate.'

Astraea felt better now, and had climbed back into her chair. 'Then you will no longer be French,' she replied.

'La France is a mayfly! Le Pouvoir is eternal!'

'Aren't you going to read your letter? It might need a reply.'

M. Pantaloon still held her letter in his exquisitely-gloved grip, but seemed taken aback by her suggestion. He held it up again as if it were a handful of seaweed or a dead bird. Then his lips rode back to reveal those teeth again, and the blood-starved gums in which they were set. He mock-bowed to her, and retreated from the room. Sandrine and Jeanette fell into line behind him, closing the door and leaving Astraea alone with the candles and the mute oblongs against the wall.

She felt perplexed, but quickly adjusted to the realisation that this was another piece of le Pouvoir's tradecraft, perhaps the lull between acts. She swivelled round on her arse to look at the back wall, suddenly afraid that there might be a restless audience there, chattering, whoring, or sucking oranges, waiting for the action to resume. She was, of course, alone.

Astraea stood and walked the length of the room, slipping cautiously between the candles, which burned furiously hot in such quantities. She went to the door, opened it, found a pistol in her face, closed it again gently. So she was to be kept in here. Le Pouvoir did nothing without purpose, even if it was her Masters in the Service who would be left to decode it from the details of her reports. Even that long rant about the coming century seemed designed to send a message. A change of American policy, she thought, or perhaps hints of the discovery of even Newer Worlds, like the fabled Terre Australe.

Or maybe it meant nothing at all, and was just a distraction, so that the finest minds in Service might lose themselves in ever more devious layers of interpretation...

There were times when Aphra Behn had to admit to herself she wasn't cut out for Service life. It was only her day job. Really, she was a playwright.

She found her way round to the back of the hall, where the tempting shapes were still buried under their covers. Too tempting. She tugged on the edge of

the sheets. They slid away smoothly, revealing three tall mirrors in plain wooden stands. Three Astraeas stared back at her from a surface that might have been darkened glass, or thin black metal. She had realised that she would appear tired, and perhaps also a little frightened, but not so harassed, nor worn so thin (not literally, of course, there were still the chubby rolls of flesh around her neck and her hips). The mirrors, she guessed, were destined for the ice cream gallery at Versailles, or maybe its shadow built in the secret warren inside the walls of the new palace. Even spear-carriers had to make themselves presentable backstage before being thrown into the public eye.

Candles on stands both side of her rustled on no detectable breeze and snuffed themselves out.

She turned and found it was a plague of darkness and every flame in the room had succumbed, dying with insect-trails of black smoke rising from their spent wicks. The hall became a lot larger and colder, full of ever-deeper shadows and pervaded with the meaty scent of the beasts from whose fats the candles had been rendered. This was a good trick le Pouvoir were pulling on her. The Duke's would pay good money for an effect like this.

Still, she backed slowly to her chair, in case there was more to it than just smoke and mirrors.

There was still a mild light in the hall as the last candle went out, reflected in the triptych glasses. No, not reflected, it was on the glaze itself, and there was more than light, there were images as if projected on a camera obscura. She whirled round looking for a concealed mechanism, but it was well-hidden in the dark.

Right, this is beginning to look a lot like witchcraft...

There must be a trick to it!

The best part of the trick was that each mirror showed a different picture. She could see each clearly, the lustre of the glass and the smoky darkness of the room sharpening her senses. In the central frame she saw a city much like the Paris of her idle morning's imaginings; the old brick buildings torn down and recast in marble, filled with wide white avenues, arches, and spires into the sky, and towers seeming fused together from a thousand panes of glass. The human ants were dwarfed in this metropolis of white stone monuments; trees and animals were nowhere to be seen, but the people surged around in hasty mobs. Their supine smallness disturbed her a little, and the more she looked, the blanched triumphant architecture seemed less like majesty than leprous sickness. The men of this city carried swollen sacs of flesh on their necks and had no eyes, their ghost sockets hollowed out by surgery. They climbed and descended staircases joylessly like trudging Calvinists, while arrayed on all the walls were banners celebrating their wealth and freedom, and great murals in which naked men and women swived freely and bathed in luxury. This was a stagnant and interminable vision, but it was at least unthreatening.

The second possibility - Astraea was sure now she was looking into glasses of future-time, the imaginings and projections of le Pouvoir as they pondered the outcomes of history - was far more terrible. Here, in the mirror on the right, there was no city, but an enormous foundry where men and women lived in narrow breeding cages built into metal walls, or among the fabric of the ruling machines. There was no longer a sky here, it was blotted by the grey pollution of the world-factory. Those persons not harnessed to the machines or confined in cages were regimented in deep and narrow trenches cut sheer into the Earth. They were literal regiments, a new model army in uniforms and banners

decorated with the recurring symbol of six crowns. There were no longer pictures of carefree copulation on the wall, but images of their enemies gagged and leashed and hooded, tortured, raped, and killed. The numb eyes of the indentured soldiers described an eternal struggle against an implacable Adversary that could be held at bay only by the constant sacrifice of fresh bodies and fresh blood. Was this the future that le Pouvoir wanted? It depended, Astraea reasoned, on who flew the flag of the six crowns. If it was le Pouvoir, then this would be their paradise; if not, then this was an abominable tyranny they must destroy. Her eyes left this mirror just as a black sun rose over the Earth, impaled and caged by metal spikes and what looked like settlements. Perhaps Sir Sam Morland's moon-engine had drifted to the wrong sphere...

The vision in the mirror on the left was by far the strangest, the reflection of a dream rather than anything conceivable or solid. Here was an idyll, a sunless world with iron skies patrolled by stained-glass birds, above a glistening landscape of crystal trees and pillars of solid light. Men and women strolled here, sometimes clothed, sometimes naked, sometimes in machine-like cages of hissing steam, sometimes in bodies that rippled into new shapes with each step, yet never hurried or distressed. Such calm and contentment commanded the scene, Astraea knew she was looking at a world lost.

As one, all three mirrors shimmered and changed, all three revealing a new image, a glimpse into a world almost like the infinitesimal universes revealed by the glare of microscopes. Like those freshly-discovered atomies, its worlds were populated by micrographian insects, with grey skins and segmented bodies and mandibles. They dropped lightly through the vasty black air on buds of water or some other grey liquid, sucking out fluid through tube-like mouths and excreting it through what Astraea had assumed were eyes. It came out as clouds of powder, each mote finer and tinier than the most powerful microscope could uncover, the same shimmering fabric as this trio of magic mirrors. She understood this, as if it were written for her. These sights were more than vision; they had a sentiment to reveal or a compulsion that invaded and shaped her thoughts. She was seeing a flat world that the mirrors promised to make solid. She looked again - the insects sat at the prow of cylindrical boats, which carried unimaginably tiny figures - people, angels, monsters - on the vortices between spheres. Their cargoes seemed happy and mindless, but the insects themselves sat vigil on the surface of the mirror, keenly probing for the slightest twitch and tremble in their world, for the ripple that might overturn their craft and pitch all into the black waters beneath the glass -

Astraea flinched and looked away. When she looked back there were more visions, flickering rapidly over the glaze in mosaic fragments and impressions: a city with a vast crater burned into its face, the pit left by a dead cancer; golden vessels like screwthreads floating in a black sea pocked with lights; faceless shock-troops in leather armour charging, with fragile wire-metal banners sprouting from their heads; a dusky maiden moving frightfully through a library of identical, black-spined books; they whirled too quickly, these fata morgana, and they made her seasick on dry land.

Astraea stood and the floor lurched like a wave beneath her feet. She closed her eyes to block out the future. When she opened them again, the windows had calmed down to show a single image, the same in each glass, but this was no reflection. It was the same stately slender woman, still young, with long red hair cascading down her naked yet somehow sexless body to preserve her modesty; her hands held out, palms displayed, as if knowing she was watched, as if drawing Astraea towards her... and she did take a step forward, and did put her hand to the glass, which neither yielded nor wobbled.

The nymph opened her eyes and they were black from lid to lid, swirling and molten.

Astraea's legs - so strained today - finally give way.

Then she was brought round by the gentle splash of warm water across her body and onto her face; and then it was the rank smell of the stream that jolted her completely back to consciousness. The candles had been relit, and the sheets restored over the mirrors. Light glistened off the stream of M. Pantaloon's piss. He shook the last few drops from the end of his penis, then slipped it back into his tights.

It took a moment for her to think of an appropriate comment. Ah, there it was. 'You are aware that our two countries are supposed to be allies.'

'England will forever be the junior partner. Be grateful I did nothing worse than piss on your ugly face while you slept.'

'I can't go home like this,' she protested.

'Sandrine! Jeanette! Make sure she is bathed and freshly costumed before you take her home. Well, Madame Behn, you have seen our secret here. Tell your Service yes - le Pouvoir has the windows of divination that no other nation will ever have. Tell them they are well-defended. There is no earthly agency that can take them from us'

Astraea sat up and flapped haplessly to shake the thickest droplets of piss from her skin. Some splashes landed on le Pouvoir's furies and she felt rather better about herself after that.

'I had a letter,' she said, as she stood. 'They will expect a reply.'

M. Pantaloon span on his heels, her letter in his hands. He folded it rapidly then ripped it apart, tossing the pieces into the air, where they floated pathetically for a moment before dropping to the floor.

'Le Pouvoir is generous,' he declared. 'We have our windows and they cannot be duplicated. Your request is granted and will be delivered to your lodgings tonight. Tell your catchers they may have their rat.'

It was all she could think about on the journey back to her room. No one had told her there would be Ratcatchers. There were never Ratcatchers on her missions, not even to Antwerp when their invaluable assistance had been palpable by its absence. If it had been the daytime and had she been spared Sandrine's bluff, she might have spent the trip back staring out the window looking for them. Not that she expected them to parade around in Paris in their waistcoats and hoods, that would have been ostentatious, but she could look on the coiled, burly men she saw and speculate that they might be on England's Service.

The blind ride home was, in the end, much less fraught than the ride out. She was simply too tired to be intimidated, and she sensed that the furies who guarded her were wearier still. Le Pouvoir was only as powerful as the people they employed, and so long as they still came in vulnerable and exhaustible human bodies, then it would never live up to its fierce reputation. She spent the journey half-sleeping, with her head pressed into the upholstery and bouncing painfully whenever the wheels of the coach hit a cobble or a pothole. Eventually it reached her door, and her keepers couldn't wait to strip her out of her blindfold and show her out into the street so they could make their way in the direction of their own beds.

She was just grateful to be back; she stumbled up the stairs, stepping this time over a genuine harlot who lay sprawled drunk and drowsy at the bottom, clearly not successful enough to afford a room. Aphra Behn - no longer pretending at Astraea - felt a twinge of some long-buried sentiment as she got halfway up the stairs, turned back and pushed a small coin into the child's unresisting hand. If it would keep her from the whorehouse or the prison for one night, it might have done some good.

Then back up the stairs again, hobbling on her crooked legs; finally, Aphra Behn made it back to the safety of her bed only to find there was a man already in it.

He had been left there trussed and gagged, a look of naked terror in his eyes. They bulged wider as he saw Aphra, and she went stumbling to free him. He seemed familiar - a youngish man, no longer a youth but still her junior, and fair-faced (though currently contorted by mortal fear). Her numbed fingers picked helplessly at the expert knots that bound his wrists behind his back, but found no purchase. She paused then, watching herself through a haze of exhaustion, finding this to be an odd way to end an odd day.

'I wouldn't touch him,' came a sardonic voice in English; a Yorkshire accent, but muffled. She hardly needed to turn to know she would find him hooded and wearing a tanned and neatly-tailored manskin uniform. He and his troop had come very quietly up the stairs behind her, the furtive tread of the exterminator in pursuit of his verminous prey. She doubted that they would have left coins for the half-dead whore in the doorway.

'Who is this?' she asked.

'One of the most dangerous men in the world. We'll keep him here under guard tonight and get him aboard ship tomorrow.'

She stared at her captive, ignoring the desperate pleas of his eyes, seeing only the hateful ropes that held him tight. She thought of him aboard ship, being dragged across unfriendly waters to a fate she couldn't even contemplate. They've made you a slaver. The Service and le Pouvoir alike - they've turned you into everything you always hated.

She turned to face the Ratcatcher-Serjeant, summoning up as much anger as she could from the depths of her half-slumbering soul. 'So where the fuck am I going to sleep tonight?!'

And that was how Aphra Behn came to spend the last night of her trip to Paris squatting in a chilly doorway snuggling against the warm body of a blissfully unconscious prostitute, sharing a tatty blanket and a hard pillow from her room. In spite of circumstances, she found it very easy to get to sleep.

And just before she slipped away, it occurred to Aphra that she did remember the trussed, frightened man that le Pouvoir had left for her. He had been at Salomon's House... twelve years past... he'd been with Aphra the last time she'd seen her...

And soon she was away in a shallow sleep, dreaming of nymphs and old idylls.
Chapter 3: The Family of Eyes

Mistress Piper had only one dream, and it had come true on the day she was married. It was this: she wanted a house, a respectable little building, neither too large nor too small. It would be far enough outside a great city that she wouldn't have to suffer the busy-ness of metropolitan life, yet still

within easy reach so that she could - when the whirl took her - dive into its streets and sample its excitements and heady pleasures.

In this house she would have a respectable husband with a respectable trade. He would work hard and humbly at his appointed vocation, which would earn him no honours in court or society, nor make him rich, nor rob her of the pleasures of his company. They would be comfortably-off and never troubled by worries over money. Their concerns would be domestic and prosaic; their arguments would be reasonable, and never loud enough to shake the walls or alert the neighbours to the petty storms of their private world.

Outside the house there would be a garden, which her husband would cultivate for vegetables and she would tend for beauty. There would be bright green trees in the summer garden, and proud naked brown barks in the winter. They would live among modest folk like themselves, half of the city and half of the country, with wholesome ambitions but a repertoire of interesting stories. No one who lived in England today could not have some choice anecdote about their lives during the interregnum. There had been privation for all, no matter what their politics. And yes, that was another thing: politics would not intrude on this cosy dream; all voices would ever turn to flightier topics.

She imagined, but did not dream, that some day the house would fill with new voices. Babes would add to the burden of her happiness, and her husband's. Children would not divide them, as they did some families. A grown son would provide for them, a grown daughter delight them and most pleasurably break their hearts when she found her own beau, and both between them would illuminate their old age and speed them contentedly to Arcadia.

There had been only one minor blemish when her wishes had come true, and it was that she did not love her husband, while her husband, in his turn, did not love her. What surprised her was how little difference this made. She'd fretted over it for a time, but decided that they were better off without love, which would complicate their plain relationship. Far better to have a shared life founded on the rocks of quiet respect and occasional affection than the quicksands of momentary passion. It was babyish to think otherwise.

Their union still had magic, of a kind. Their wedding day had come barely two years after Charles, a prince no longer, rode into London on the hopes and relief of his subjects. Some blood was spilled, but moderately and within the letter of the law, so old wounds were not reopened. The riven land began to mend, and bitter enmities melted like the snows in spring; it was not simply kingship that had been restored, but the very soul of England. Charles was the panacea the nation craved. He laid hands on the sick and they were cured, on the lame and they were made whole. He brought more than just an end to war - he brought peace. It was called a new Golden Age. So it was with Thomas Piper and his young bride.

She had been fifteen, and he almost three times her senior, the ranks of her contemporaries having been drastically thinned. He was a glove-maker by trade, and a most successful one, with a little house waiting for her in the parish of Hornsey St Mary to the north of London. It still bore the marks of his long widowhood, but nothing that couldn't be erased. She, by contrast, was a virgin who first broke her maiden's blood in the honeymoon bed, and who had not lived in a time when the banners of King and Parliament hadn't been set against one another. So there was a fusion of two opposites: the man and the wife, the old and the young, innocence and experience, tradition and modernity. Their carnal rutting was just that, unblessed by love or children, but still sanctified by God and His church.

Thomas Piper was a-bed now. His wife, still young, did not dare join him or

touch him.

She had not dreamed hard enough.

He called his wife's name weakly - his first wife's name, for he was addled.

'I'm here,' she responded, but he may not have heard. His voice was chipped and parched for lack of water, and bile had risen to clog his throat. Hers was simply weak. She lay in the cold arms of the bedroom door in her wonderful little house, and wept. Her limbs were all bone now; all the food she could spare she fed to him, cut into the finest chunks so he might swallow them.

She no longer trusted herself to hold a knife. This morning she put the blade across her finger and drew an even wound that washed across the last, browning vegetables. She doubted he would taste it, and who knows, perhaps a drop of her blood would make him stronger.

No. No, she knew it would not.

Through her shuttered windows, she could see it was night. She found the cold black oblivion preferable to the sticky heat of the day, when the sickly smell of blooming summer flowers was all that covered the stench of nearby decay and the carnal stink of the bonfires in the street. Sometimes she heard low moans, and distant tolls of despair, and they were just about tolerable in darkness, when the eye of God was turned from the Earth; by day it was unbearable. The sun still rose and shone on the rotting world.

'Thomas,' she whispered, 'you must be brave for me. I have food to prepare and will return soon.' She hoped that she didn't lie.

She found the strength in her legs to rise and stumble to the stair-head, not so much walking as throwing herself against the closest wall and bouncing, pushing herself along. She stumbled more than once, grabbing for any handhold she could with fingers that trembled incessantly. If it were just a walk along the landing to the kitchen then all would be well; if they'd had a more modest home, with only one storey then all would have been well; but there were the stairs. They were a dozen and three steps - she had counted them up-and-down in rhymes of happier days - easy to descend, hard to climb. If she went down now, then her Thomas could die alone, thinking himself unloved...

But there was no alternative.

She sat and bumped herself down the stairs on her backside, like a child; there was a little pain and a lot of scuffing to her skirts, but that hardly mattered now. Bump-bump-bump. She lost control of her speed, twisted sideways, and began to roll uncontrollably the rest of the way. A wood post slapped an ache into her forehead, and loose nails ripped at both her clothes and her skin as she came tumbling down. She landed with bruises all over her body. Severed hands swayed ghoulishly above her head, reaching leisurely for her...

No, they were just gloves, just empty gloves hung unfinished on a line. She wept.

A little further... just a short way to the door. She crawled now, pulling herself painfully along the ground with her forearms. And there was the door, black and unyielding. It would be barred. It might even be nailed now, but she didn't need to escape, just to reach it, a little further, a little further...

Finally, panting and retching, she was there. She pulled her eye up to the knot in the wood, the spy-hole she had found last summer, no wider than a

man's thumb. There was a little light outside. There would be a guard. There should be a guard. She prayed he had not already fled. She made to control her breathing, to control the strum of her heart, to control the force and timbre of her voice.

She called: 'Is anyone out there?'

Nothing. Nothing. Please God I have not dragged myself to die on my own threshold.

'Mistress Piper, you must not come out.'

Relief washed over her; her eyes were stinging again; she clapped hands over nose and mouth to stifle the sound of hope. Then: 'Is that Harry? Harry Fletcher, are you our watchman?'

'For tonight, Mistress. All the others are gone.'

'Fled?'

'Or dead.' She could not tell his mood through the door; there were just the words, blunted by thick English wood. Was he here from duty or fear or despair? Did it matter? She pushed her mouth as close to the knot as she could manage.

'Harry, we are near starved to death! They promised they would leave us food, but have not.'

'They're all dead. There's nothing to bring and no one left to carry it.'

'There's you, Harry.'

'I dare not.'

'Harry!' she pleaded - let me not lose my voice now, let me seem calm and reasonable, or he will surely step away from the door and all hope will be gone - 'Harry. We are not ill. We are only starved. There is a mark on our door and the Angel has passed over us.'

'I dare not break the quarantine. Forgive me, Mistress Piper, but I'm scared. I couldn't bear it, not the rashes and the swellings and the horrid lumps on my body. And there is nothing left to bring!'

'Then let us out. Enough time must have passed.'

'Forty days and forty nights! And, no, they are not yet done!'

'Forty days - in God's name, Harry! We are not fasting in the wilderness, we are plain and simple folk! And we are not diseased!'

'Then where is your husband?'

'He is a-bed -'

'Ah!'

'- from hunger!' She lied, oh how easily the lies came now. 'He is otherwise healthy.'

'There are no signs on his body?'

'There are not.'

'He breathes freely and does not cough up the blood or the choler?'

'He does not.'

She thought she almost had him then; he was on the very brink, but then he fell silent. She made one more gasp: 'We would be grateful, Harry. You could take anything from the house you wanted, if you just give us back our lives!'

Still silence from Harry, but then: 'May God have mercy on your souls,' and then footsteps retreating from the door, through her garden to the gate and the green way beyond. She didn't hear if he stopped there, as she was already screaming, her face buried in the wood of the door and stroking so that her flesh was scraped with pitch and impaled with tiny splinters. She howled herself out, her lungs and guts and stomach, her name and her life, until there was nothing left of her but a wet and whimpering thing huddled by the door and waiting to die.

God have mercy on our souls.

She woke from this monstrous dream at last, wondering how she could have come to fall asleep on her own porch. It was spring again, and the sky was warm and cloudless. From the garden she could hear the songs sung by the eldest of her grandchildren, and wondered when it was they had come to stay. Thomas must hear this, she must fetch him from his bed; so much older than her and yet still so vital. There was no love, but there was bounty, and they had endured...

She rolled onto her back; the emptiness in her belly was a painful spiked stone.

She thought she heard her husband whispering her given name, but the bedroom was too far away for such a tiny sound to carry. She hoped, for the first time, that he had already died.

She heard the door opening, distantly, and felt it banging on some impediment. There was also a flat pain against her leg, but it quickly ended.

'Harry... I knew... Harry...' she murmured.

Strong arms were lifting her. Oh Lord, is this what it is to be raised into Heaven? And angelic voices:

- Yes, of course I can manage, you retarded little shit. Get her something to eat. Then see what's keeping Mother. (There was a reply; she didn't fully hear it.) - It's not pulling rank, Amphigorey. It's called experience. What did you ever do with your old life but lounge around in your pants eating pot noodles?! Yeah, and fuck you too!

Gentle fingertips, running through her hair and teasing the curls. 'Poor girl. You look like you could murder a pot noodle.'

Her head swayed as they carried her into the parlour and laid her down in Thomas's armchair, a so much more comfortable place to die. The hands that held her now patted her face; they were gloved, warm and dry, and this was the most pleasant thing Mistress Piper had felt in a long time. Something pressed to her lips, a narrow opening like a bottle but with a strange smooth texture. There was water there; she sipped. Oh, yes.

She drank greedily until she began to choke, and let a small river's-worth of fluid out of her mouth, down her chin, and onto her breast. There were more footfalls, another person entering the room.

'Marvellous, she's wet herself. Is this really the best we can do?' That was a man.

Closer and sharper, the voice of the hands with the water, a woman: 'She's suffering.'

'We're all suffering.'

She heard the woman's tongue click, as if about to make some sharp retort that never came. Instead she said, 'Give us that here. Let's get something in her belly. Not that way, you filthy sod.'

They passed objects into her hands, that she didn't need eyes to identify. Warm bread, freshly-baked; thin slivers of cooked meat; apples; oh! and an orange. She ignored all social niceties and gorged herself, ripping each fresh item with her teeth, bolting it down. She bit into her mouth as she chewed, and swallowed blood, and didn't care.

'She'll sick it up in a minute,' warned the man, but in fact she did not.

Soon, she felt strong enough to open her eyes and risk dispelling this dream of rescue. By then the woman had stepped away from her, while the man had gone - she gathered from a few overheard whispers - to attend their mother. The woman was moving round the parlour to light candles. She was taller than Mistress Piper, and dressed in a cobalt blue gown in a continental style that Thomas would never have allowed his wife to wear out. She had the most alarming deformed head that Mistress Piper had ever seen.

No, there was suddenly a little more candlelight and this benevolent burglar turned, and it was just an alarming deformed mask.

There was a commotion in the hallway; the man returning and with company. He was not nearly as tall as his companion, but also dressed in fine and outlandish fashions that would perhaps have been more sedate in a racier continental city than this plain parlour in fusty old England. The third party, whom he ushered ahead of him, was more conservative in her costume, choosing a simple Quakerish black, but then again she was their mother and much older. She walked slowly with the aid of two sticks, that wobbled tautly beneath her immense weight. There would be harsh marks in the Norwich carpet, Mistress Piper thought idly, that would never be erased.

Walking ahead of them all was the fourth intruder, a small cat, still kittenish, mainly white but with calico patches and a most winsome countenance. Among the newcomers, it alone showed a naked face. The man and his mother both wore versions of the same masks, white and ridged like the skulls of demons described in Genesis, the Lilitim. They were alarming at first sight until she began to see the purpose of them, the semblance they bore to the leather snouts worn by physicians that she had seen abroad before her confinement.

'You are a doctor?' she asked, still wet-jawed and trembling.

'No,' said the man, and simultaneously the woman said, 'I am.' The fat old woman chuckled but said nothing.

Their plague-heads had no effect on their voices, which escaped cleanly through the many breaks and holes in the bone. She still could not see their eyes. She started to wonder if this woman calling herself a doctor was a joke, but decided not to. The world had moved beyond jokes; it was as bad as she feared, and all capable hands of both genders were being called upon to hold back the triumph of death.

Their corpulent mother finished her slow tread into the room and settled down on the couch, which sagged under her bulk. The cat, who had spent its first moments in the room sniffing around the legs of the tables, trotted to the old woman's feet and reached up for her knees. The mother scratched at it idly, on the patterned M of its forehead, and it purred. There were so many simple things in the world that Mistress Piper had forgotten these last days.

The younger woman stepped forward. 'Who else is here? Alive or dead?'

'My husband Thomas, in his bed.' She pointed to the ceiling.

'Dead or alive?'

She closed her eyes for a moment's pause, then replied: 'He was alive when last I saw him.'

'Can you show me? If you're still too weak, I can find my own way.'

'No,' Mistress Piper replied, pushing herself up against the arms of the cacquette. She was still weak and still sore and still bloodied, but these strange Doctor Beaks had given her food, and better than food, hope. 'What sort of hostess would leave a guest to find their own way?'

It was still difficult, and the woman-physician stretched out a solid hand to pull her to her feet, then put her arm round her waist to support her. Mistress Piper could only manage a graceful nod to the two strangers she left behind. They were followed out by the cat, who started to delight in picking at the shreds of her hem. When they reached Thomas's door, the she-doctor bade her sit down to rest while she went inside. 'The damage has been done already, but there's no point in taking any risks, especially if it's pneumonic,' she explained, and Mistress Piper nodded politely as if she understood.

She sat outside while the doctor went about her business. Her husband's coarse and audible breaths gradually grew softer and easier, and still a little hope flared in her heart. The strangers' cat continued to play at her ragged skirts for a while, then made an attempt to blunt its claws on her legs, then trotted off happily into the night-shadows. Its mewls spiked the silence and made it friendly.

The woman reappeared, pulling the door gently to as she came.

'We'll talk about your husband later, but now I need to see you. Is there another room where I can examine you?' Mistress Piper felt herself nod numbly. 'Please show me, we may not have much time.'

'Is it new monick then?' she asked, as she stood.

The heavy skull-mask shook from side to side. 'No, septicaemic. It's a wonder he's lived this long.'

Just then the cat returned from the shadows with a dead rat in its mouth, which it presented bleeding and twitching at their feet. The woman-physician clapped. 'Good girl!' she announced, and was thus distracted from seeing

Mistress Piper's expression as the last flicker of hope was snuffed in her heart.

There was a room they had set aside as a nursery, that would now never be used for that purpose. Thomas, like any husband, collected things here. She remembered how she would complain to him about what he called his paraphernalia and she called his clutter. Oh Christ -

She watched the physician place each item of her clothes in a shining black sack, along with the body of the rat her cat had killed. 'These will have to be burned,' she explained, casually, or callously. 'I'll see what I can do about your cuts and bruises, but obviously my main worry is if you're infected or not. Even if you are we can nip it in the bud. We got here as quickly as we could.'

'Where are you from, then?' Mistress Piper was curled on the dusty old daybed with her arms and legs folded against the cold. She could not look at this woman, she could not, she could not...

'Venice. Not originally but... no, Venice is simpler.'

'Ah.' They probably had women-physicks and all kinds of wonders in Venice. She had never left England. She doubted now that she would. She wanted to bury herself beneath its soil and be forgotten. 'Is this the end of the world?'

'Yes,' said the doctor, blithely. Finally she raised her hands to lift the mask from her head and Mistress Piper flinched, suddenly frightened of the hidden face - but it proved quite ordinary. She was perhaps ten years her senior, a raven-haired woman with an olive pallor to her face and a sharpness around the eyes that whispered of an Oriental ancestor in distant generations. The Venetians had gone to Cathay, hadn't they? 'It's always the end of the world for someone. But not for you, I hope.'

'How bad is it, then?'

'The plague killed a thousand people today, in London alone.'

There was nothing more that Mistress Piper could say, and she allowed the Venetian woman to examine her, to prod her and poke her with needles, caress her throat and inspect the pits of her arms and legs for buboes.

'When this is done,' she said, absently, mid-examination, 'we will have to introduce you to the family. I'm Cousin Hateman, and downstairs there's Cousin Amphigorey - he'll want to fuck you, but I wouldn't recommend it - and Mother Sphinx. She doesn't say much these days, Mother Sphinx doesn't, but we love her anyway. There is also Cousin Suppression, who you haven't met - he's back at our shrine. The cat's just called Faction Cat.'

'Oh.'

'I think it's a cute name for a cat. Not really a name but, y'know, cute.'

'Are you really from Venice?'

Cousin Hateman looked down at some measurement she'd taken on one of her remarkable medical instruments. Then up again, 'I was born in the Benign Union of Daoust, which is further from here than Venice in so many ways.'

'In the East?'

'If you like.'

'Thomas is going to die, isn't he?'

'Yes.' Hateman fished around in her bag and produced two shrivelled white pips, which she dropped into Mistress Piper's palm. Then she poured a measure of water from a bottle into a cup and offered it to her. 'These will help you sleep, and I think you should sleep now.'

'Can I sleep in the room with Thomas?'

'No, that would be a very bad idea.' Cousin Hateman put hands over her face, as if wishing she hadn't removed her plague-mask. 'We're not here to cure anyone, and even if we were, your husband is too far gone. I've given him something so he won't feel the pain and to ease his breathing. Come on, dry your eyes and swallow the pills. That's the best you can do for yourself.' And she started to dab Mistress Piper's face with a flat of Bible-soft paper until her charge turned her head away.

'I want to see him again before he goes.'

'All right,' said the Venetian, after a time, 'but don't touch.'

Cousin Hateman walked her to the door of the bedroom and stood with her awhile, staring at the darkness between the jamb, and the shallow half-imagined movement there.

'Why do you do this?' she heard herself say, tinily and faraway. 'If you won't cure plague, why bother to help me? Why not leave me to die and be happy?'

'Because we're here for you,' Cousin Hateman told her. 'Just you and no one else. We need you, Mistress Piper. The loa need you and they brought us to your door.'

She washed down the sugary pips, and they knocked her out until the morning. Cousins Hateman and Amphigorey helped her make the daybed comfortable in the nursery, as the magic of the pips spread round her body, making her limbs sluggish, her head soft, and her whole body leaden. Under his mask, Cousin Amphigorey was a callow youth with a small effort of a beard. He looked up from patting cushions to inspect her in her nightgown.

'Wanna fuck?' he asked, eyes hopeful.

'No,' she said dreamily. The pips made her feel exceptionally comfortable, but unsuggestible.

Mother Sphinx did not come to the nursery, but stayed downstairs; from the look of her, the strain of making the ascent might have killed her. The family retreated outside, leaving her to sleep. She lay on her side under three blankets but still shivering, and listening to the crackle of the bonfire in her garden, scorching her lawn and her flowers, destroying her clothes and her rats - then she was gone.

She woke fuzzy-headed, as her bladder emptied itself in a thin hot trickle onto her legs. She was still too drugged to move much, or care much, and simply rolled onto the damp patch. The two cousins, skull-headed again, were standing over her, but it was difficult to tell if they saw her awake. They stood facing each other and chanting a litany of what might have been Italian words, or obscenities, or something entirely other. They had drawn symbols on her wall, so it was magic they used on her. The practice of medicine, Mister

Piper had once assured her, had all the hallmarks of witchery and devil-worship. - I do not say that they are the same, but their territories overlap. They poke around for signs in your entrails, the both of them, and it's as easy for a physick to bring death as to restore life.

Mister Piper's wife dreamed she was lying in a bed of black and undulant serpents. They writhed under her body, their slimy skins wetting her where they touched. Their flat, curious heads rose up on narrow necks to peer at her face and her fingers and her shadow and her soul. She felt herself sinking into them, a hundred deep layers of hungry snakes. A vicious red beak came down to peck them away, and the frightened reptile heads ducked back down below the line of her body.

The proud cockerel fluttered his wings and strutted back and forth on her chest, her sentry.

'What are these?' she asked.

- Oh sweet wife, these are the things your doctors have let loose on you. They are the loa.

'And what are you? You sound like my husband.'

- Why I am Mistress Thomas Piper and all her dreams! I am the house and the marriage you live in and the children you would have and the grandchildren they would have for you. I am the Golden Age of England. I am, in my own way, a loa, and I will protect you from these interlopers who would ride you in my stead.

'What are loa?'

It was her waking lips that spoke; she was on her side again and cramped, one arm bloodless and limp under her own dead weight. She'd wrapped the sheets tight around her body, with her rolling and night terrors. Through bleary eyes she saw the two cousins sitting together at the foot of her daybed; they had discarded their masks again, and were sprawled on the floor like children playing in the mud. That brought a wry smile to her lips, recalling the happier moments of her own girlhood not so long ago.

Neither had heard her, they were lost in their own conversation. She could see Amphigorey's sleep-starved face, and the back of Hateman's head with her once-neat hair trailing loose and tired strands.

'I prefer Venice, better than England,' Amphigorey was saying. He made a vague gesture with his fists.

'It's not so bad here. Why, what don't you like about it?'

'It's so wet.'

'Hah bloody hah. At least we're doing something useful. Sitting round watching out to make sure nothing happens for the next eighty-seven years just isn't what I was told to expect when I joined up - what?' Amphigorey was nudging her with his eyes. Hateman looked over her shoulder and saw Mistress Piper was awake. Half-rising, half-crawling, she pulled herself alongside the bed and reached out with a hand, ungloved now and soft, to stroke her hair.

'Oh, little sister,' she murmured gently, 'what's wrong?'

Mistress Piper felt her weak tongue moving, the same question as before: 'What

are loa?'

The Cousins exchanged glances, then Hateman smiled warmly and explained. 'The loa are spirits. They look over and protect us. Sometimes we ask favours of them, and other times we let them ride us.'

'Why?'

'Because they're spirits and have no bodies of their own, because they like to see the solid world through the eyes of solid people, like you and me...'

'...and Cousin Amphigorey?'

'Yes, even Cousin Amphigorey. The loa can't be picky - there are so few of us left these days.'

'So, my dream is right. You are witches, and you consort with ghosts and worship evil spirits.'

'No,' Hateman said smoothly and sighed, and Mistress Piper knew she was about to hear a rehearsed answer to a question that the cousins had been expecting and dreading since they arrived. 'Our order worships nothing. We're not witches and the loa aren't evil. They're like... like the Saints of the calendar. In a way they are the Saints.'

'Then you are a Catholic order? From Venice, which is a Catholic city?'

Amphigorey rolled his eyes. 'Nice going boobs, you've just made us out to be the one thing they hate worse than witches round here.'

'I hate no one,' Mistress Piper insisted, struggling and failing to sit up. 'Not even witches.'

Hateman settled her down and stroked her face and her forehead, which suddenly seemed sticky and wet. 'We aren't Catholics either. Venice is full of spirits, some friendly, some not. We forget that other parts of the world aren't like that yet.'

'Spirits of the dead?'

'Sometimes, and sometimes of the living, and sometimes of the not-yet-born.'

'One day, I'll go to Venice.'

Hateman pursed her lips, not quite unsmiling, but still concerned. 'You're burning up, you know? I hope it's just a fever, or just stress, but you'll be in bed for a few more days yet.'

'Smashing,' murmured Amphigorey.

'And Thomas?'

'I've sat with him, when he's been awake. He says he loves you.'

'He says he loves me and calls me Kate, does he not?'

'Yes.'

'So he's dead then?' A pause. 'Tell me! He's dead, isn't he?!'

'Yes.'

She felt her lips curl bitterly, but the rest of her body was paralysed and gave off no hint of grief. Hateman's arms curled round her shoulders, but the doctor touched a cold fleshy thing - not Mistress Piper, who felt nothing. 'I'm so sorry, can I - ?'

'Give me more of those sweet pips. Let me sleep.'

The next few days blurred for her, lost in sleep. She no longer dreamed, and as far as she could tell, the order did not stand at her bedside every night to summon their Saints. That work, as she understood it, had been achieved. She would wake during the day and know at once the time by the quality of light: a hard square of it across her face and it was morning, a melancholy yellow suffusing the room and it was later, dimming red and it was evening. Sometimes she woke alone, but usually one cousin or the other was there, and they would feed her a little, and help her on and off the pot when she needed it (which was less than she expected). She allowed Cousin Hateman to wash her face, but resisted any other attempt to clean her sheets or her body.

'This won't help you get any better,' Hateman said, and Mistress Piper saw her brittle defiant smile reflected on the woman-doctor's brown irises.

They took Thomas's body while she slept and delivered it to a plague pit. They consecrated him, according to the rituals of their order, before he was buried. She imagined Hateman insisting on this; Amphigorey standing awkwardly at the grave - not comfortable, but not insensitive enough to try to disrupt the moment with his own selfishness; the gross Mother Sphinx watching and wheezing from a nearby seat.

Sometimes she dreamed of the cockerel with Thomas's voice, snatching at licking snakes. Sometimes Faction Cat climbed into her bed and tried, unsuccessfully, to shove her out. Sometimes she wondered if she were wise to let this odd family of doctors have the run of her house. Mostly, she lay on the bed and festered.

There would come a time when she would have to get up, and that time came when she was startled out of her sleep by a violent rasping from downstairs, followed by a tremor that passed through the floor and the bed to jostle her bones. She thought it must be the trumpets of judgement, except that it was so harsh and discordant and mechanical.

It forced her out of bed, onto legs that trembled from their lack of use. Her arms looked the same, just bone decorated with a paper-thin and blanched-white layer of skin. There was a mirror somewhere here and she spent some time looking for it, perhaps grateful to have a distraction from the noise that had now abated downstairs. The face that stared back, when she found the glass, was no longer one she recognised. It looked more like one of the skulls of the family, with flesh and hair still to be boiled off and eyes and tongue still in their rightful sockets, yet unmistakably a death's-head.

But you're not dead are you? You've come through the plague and triumphed over death.

It was hard to see it that way.

Raised voices filtered up through the floor. The family were arguing among themselves. She made for the stairs to eavesdrop better; Faction Cat was already there in the best place, with her nose pointed curiously through a break in the banister. Mistress Piper sat beside her.

Cousin Hateman's voice carried the loudest: '- how dare you come here now and tell us what to do! The Empire abandoned us months ago! We had no direction and no replies to our communications - of course we were going to have to take matters into our own hands!'

Now came a voice she didn't know. Mother Sphinx? It didn't seem likely. 'The Venice mission was meant to be a passive observation. Ensure the next hundred years go smoothly and pave the way for the Gregorian Compact. That was the extent of your responsibility.'

'Oh right, yeah, we wait for the Godparents to show up and hold their coats while they strut around being impressive. But it's not going smoothly, is it. We have a real anomaly on our hands and the loa are going out of their heads. The Great Houses -'

'- wouldn't dare subvert a world like this and a time like this unless things were desperate for them. And they're not desperate, are they?! They're wiping us out across the board, whole colonies and long-term projects ripped out of history as if they'd never been there. We need to retrench and wait for this wave to pass. After that -'

'And what if there isn't an after that, eh? This could help us turn the tide.'

Silence then from the unfamiliar voice. Then: 'It may. It may not. As it happens, we've decided to let you run this course. But you're on your own with this - we're too tied up with our Dunkirks across the Spiral Politic. It's bad enough I had to travel here -'

'Does this make any sense to you, little cat?' Mistress Piper asked. Faction Cat shook her head.

She pulled herself back to her feet, and considered drifting back to bed, but she was no longer tired and when she turned the first thing she saw was the door to her husband's room, now closed. She shuddered at that omen and crept downstairs instead.

'I've read your reports and I don't see what the widow here has to offer you.'

Amphigorey answered this time: 'If you've read the reports you'll know we've narrowed it down to two options. No one else comes close - it's either her or the boy.'

They were bickering in her parlour, and didn't see her as she approached. Hateman and Amphigorey were both standing, the youth still and composed, the woman agitated. Mother Sphinx seemed to be sitting asleep on the couch, with her head bowed and her hands folded on her huge belly. The newcomer was by far the shortest person in the room, not even five-foot tall, white-haired but still vividly young and sharp-featured. It had been impossible to tell from the voice whether it came from a man or a woman, and on sight, Mistress Piper found the identification harder still. The newcomer was dressed in what seemed to be light black leather armour with odd whorls and crests, and a distinct curved spine decorated with spikes so it seemed to be of a kind with the masks they wore for their rites. Like many a veteran of the last decades, the newcomer was mutilated and had lost an arm.

More likely a man then, but still it was impossible to say for certain.

Despite the harsh words, he or she seemed quite calm and dignified.

'Why not the boy then? He seems more suitable.'

'Too suitable,' Amphigorey replied - Mistress Piper had never seen him so collected. 'He's already aware there must be great powers out there, and he's working on ways to contact them.'

'Then he seems ideal for your purposes.'

Cousin Hateman stepped forward. 'He's too self-interested, Father-Mother. He'd make a poor recruit.'

'You're still young, Cousin. The self-interested are the easiest to twist and deceive. The Godmothers could make mincemeat of him.'

'Well, we don't have the Godmothers with us, you've just told us that. We couldn't cope with a loose cannon.'

'You lot seem so willing to take risks about -'

She or he was silenced by a hard rapping of a stick upon the floor. It was Mother Sphinx, doing more damage to the Norwich carpet with the tip of one of her crutches. Slowly and painfully she pulled herself up the spine of the staff, and craned her skull-face to point at the Father-Mother. She alone remained masked here, and Mistress Piper suddenly understood the purpose of the masks: not to protect but to terrify.

'Father-Mother Olympia, you hold your tongue and listen,' growled Mother Sphinx. The cat, whom Mistress Piper had left lounging at the top of the stairs, came bounding down the steps, into the parlour, and onto the warm spot on the couch that the Mother had just vacated.

Olympia, though taken aback, stared her down. 'You have wisdom to bring to the table, Mother?'

A buzz like a swarm of bees in high summer rose from the Mother's huge gullet. 'Mother Sphinx were older than you and wiser than you before the Faction come for her. She don't sit in the barbershop of shadow but she knows the voice of the loa. She knows a mambo when she sees one and she knows a bokor when she sees one, and that boy - he's a bad bokor!'

And Father-Mother Olympia was trembling visibly before this obese apparition. 'But... the girl...'

'Come the day, she make good mambo. So says Mother Sphinx.'

Breathing out so heavily she might have emitted smoke from the sockets of her mask, Mother Sphinx deflated back down, narrowly missing the cat's head, and resumed her old pose. Mistress Piper leaned further forward, and suddenly Olympia - as if looking for a distraction after Mother Sphinx's declaration - leapt to the door and seized her by the hair, dragging her through into the parlour. She found a sudden cold pricking on her throat, the sharp point of a pin or a knife, though one that must have been held in an invisible hand.

'Father-Mother!' Hateman warned, and - closer to them both - Amphigorey twitched, caught between two equal impulses, but didn't quite move.

'This is your mambo?' Olympia queried. Mistress Piper gurgled and tried not to move. And then -

Why shouldn't I move? This is my house! If there are loa here then they've been my loa for three long years. And Father-Mother Olympia is an uninvited stranger.

She twisted round to look the intruder square in the eyes. Behind her, she saw their two shadows squashed together. She suddenly saw how simple it would be to take her shade out of that violent embrace. She raised her hands slowly to her throat, and they moved through empty air, though the cold of the blade was still pressed on the soft skin.

Without moving her body, she contorted like a serpent, and on the wall the two shadows fluttered apart. She saw Olympia's clearly, holding a narrow line suggestive of a sword or long dagger, in the shadow hand of a shadow arm that was missing from his-her worldly body.

'Did you see her coming, Father-Mother?' Hateman said softly. 'Because I didn't.'

The shadow-Olympia thrust the shadow-blade into a shadow-sheath.

'That's an easy enough trick,' Olympia said brusquely, but the tone of voice was quietened. 'Mistress Piper? I'd like to talk to you outside.'

She looked to Cousin Hateman, to get her nod before she agreed. Then she let the Father-Mother lead her to her own door, and as they left the parlour Mother Sphinx began to cackle throatily in her sleep.

It was warm enough that night for her to walk out in her nightgown, and the garden and road beyond were faintly illuminated by the candles in the parlour window. There was no sign of Harry Fletcher, who she presumed fled or fallen to the plague. If there was the sign of the cross or the warning bill still on her door then it was invisible in the night. She had not thought about the outside world much since the doctors arrived, but she'd imagined that it would be desolate and strewn with the bodies of the dead. It might well have been - it was too dark to tell - but the overall sense she got was one of nocturnal tranquillity. The world might have been emptied of souls.

'If I understand correctly, from what I heard,' she said coldly, 'you are superior to the cousins and to Mother Sphinx in your order, and you've been sent to assess their progress. They saved my life.'

'Well, hooray for them.'

'Don't make light of it! Not if you want to set foot in my house again.'

'I'll be leaving shortly anyway,' the Father-Mother said, but he-she seemed cowed in voice if not in words. 'So this is Hornsey St Mary? It's very... natural, isn't it?'

'How so?'

'Green. Everything covered in bushes and trees and grass. I was never that keen on nature. You know, I can remember a time when this'll be covered in concrete.'

'You talk nonsense, sir, or madam, or...'

'Both. I was a woman once, and if the Grandfather grants it, I will be again. Bloody Morlock!'

'You still talk nonsense.' Mistress Piper sighed and breathed. Fresh air, how long since she had taken a taste of air that hadn't smelled of the mouldering insides of her house and marriage? 'But yes, it's very beautiful here. The road takes the traveller out of London and into the lushest countryside. Thomas and I, we called it the green way.'

She had to admit there were no greens visible tonight. The leaves on trees and bushes were rendered black against a velvet blue sky. The sun couldn't be far from coming up, she decided, or going down. In any case, Olympia didn't seem to be listening.

'Back home we've got a very promising young cousin from this part of the world, place-wise anyway - one of Mathara's protégés. I can't say I thought much of him when I first saw him.' Olympia stopped, and put his-her good hand on Mistress Piper's shoulder. 'All that I'm saying is that I've been known to be wrong - and I shouldn't have insulted you in your home.'

'To tell you the truth, sir and madam, I don't feel that it's my home any more.'

'You don't, eh?' Olympia whistled, a nightbird calling.

'It's changed, since your order came calling - longer, since the plague. I don't think I could live there any more, not once Mother Sphinx and her children leave. I would rather see it burned.' At that, Olympia's shrill piercing note broke up into laughter. 'Is there something wrong, er, Father-Mother?'

'You poor thing,' the Father-Mother replied, 'you still don't understand. They don't want to leave you here once you're better. They want to recruit you.'

'Recruit?'

'To our... our order, you call it. That's as good a word as any other.'

'But... I... I don't share your faith!'

'You wouldn't need to. The Faction isn't a religion, not in the sense you understand.'

'Then what is it? I don't understand.'

Olympia had paced away from her until he-she was a part of the darkness, but now the Father-Mother turned and his-her eyes glinted and his-her good arm was held out wide, preaching. 'If there were ever any gods it would be necessary to abolish them. The Faction was dedicated to bringing energy to an exhausted world, the oldest world. We profaned everything they held sacred and raised all their devils. The Faction was misrule. It was meant to shock. The biggest shock of all was when the order started to admit people like me - and you.'

'English folk?'

'Human folk.' Olympia laughed. 'Don't think of it as an order. It's a carnival and we are the flesh and the bone. It was.'

'Then what is it now?' Mistress Piper insisted

'A shadow of its former self. We're at war and we're losing.'

These words were meant to discourage Mistress Piper, but somehow they didn't work. 'With what nation...?' No, that was wrong. These people, their order, was on a different scale to anything she had experienced before. 'With what power?'

Olympia was silent, so Mistress Piper surmised, 'It was this power that you provoked, wasn't it? The oldest world? You pushed it too far?'

The Father-Mother shook his-her head. 'The Faction was never that much of a threat to them. No, they encountered another enemy entirely, and they had to develop what you might call a new model army to fight it. But now their new military is destroying us just because it's convenient.'

'So you need numbers for your cause? Recruits?'

Olympia snorted. 'Not from here. We're far from the front. They have something quieter in mind for you.'

Mistress Piper preened herself and folded her arms. 'What makes you think that I would want to join your order?'

The Father-Mother paused before replying, regarding the widow as if in judgement. Mistress Piper realised she must look a poor prospect for the order, starved and shivering in the night of a dead world. She resented that impression, but Olympia was talking again: 'How did you feel when you pushed my shadow back, in your parlour?'

'I don't know. I felt, I suppose, a sort of strength.'

'And a thrill? A little rush of excitement?'

She was nodding, enthusiastically in the dark. 'Yes, exactly that. I could not be so indelicate as to describe the feelings it recalled to me.'

'Ah, well it's made you eloquent, that's good, and confident, that's good too. We need that.' Then Olympia sucked air: 'And damned, of course, damned beyond redemption.'

That gave Mistress Piper pause. It was as if Olympia knew her soul, but was that so surprising? Their shadows had been locked together, and perhaps that had laid Mistress Piper's feelings bare. She had felt a damnable and unholy power, because these loa couldn't be God's creatures, and the strength she found in herself was surely nothing but a little magic, a taint on her soul. And yet -

'I would spit in God's eye,' she said firmly. 'How worse can Hell be than what He has already visited on us on Earth? I'll join your order, if you'll have me, and if you advise it.'

Olympia was still laughing. 'No, no, I don't advise it - I don't think you have it in you. And anyway, we're on the point of a total wipeout. The Faction's finished. The moment this arm grows back, I'm out of there.'

Treachery and murder! You left me on my deathbed to dabble with these loa, and now you side with them against me. You mean to kill me!

'You can't fool me. You're not my husband. And yes, I mean to kill you.'

I never claimed to be him. I am Mistress Thomas Piper, I am you, and I cannot be killed.

'No, but you can be sacrificed, and I will have a new life and a new name.'

She knew she was dreaming. Her sleeping body was on the daybed in the nursery, finally to be dedicated to a newborn, though not a child. She knew that Cousins Hateman and Amphigorey were standing over her, chanting the names and rites of the loa. She knew that Mother Sphinx had made the long trek up the stairs to be here in her room, chanting with them. She felt them anoint her forehead and palms and feet with their order's ointments, and drip the seeds of time into her mouth.

Spiritus vobiscum. The loa be with you.

In her dream, the rooster still strutted on the bed of serpents, but its beak no longer pecked but protested. Her dream-body knelt on the bed with the spotless white bowl to her left and her knife of clean steel on the right. She could feel the slick skins of the serpent-loa rippling against her naked soul. The rooster cawed helplessly and smashed them down with its wings; but she wasn't distracted.

'I call upon the protection of the loa,' she said, as she picked up the knife. 'By this act I strip away all that was Mistress Thomas Piper. By this act I set my unnamed soul free on the winds of time.'

She reached for the bird and found its sharpened beak in her fingers, drawing blood. She endured the bite and snatched at it again, quicker this time, grabbing its legs. She dangled it upside down over the bowl, its head bobbing furious and impotent.

'I offer myself to the loa. I offer them a share of my body so that they might ride me through the solid world that lives in time. I make this offer freely, and in the certain faith that the loa will be generous. This is how I sign the compact.'

She slashed the knife in a swift line across the cockerel's throat. Its blood splattered out, across her face, her arms, her chest, her stomach, and her legs. In her dreams, she felt washed clean by it.

'This is the loa's meat, this is the loa's drink,' she pronounced, as the blood began to flow again, dripping from the stump of the neck into the bowl until it was full. Serpent heads began to cluster round the rim to satisfy their thirst. She hacked the rooster's body into chunks, dropped them into the bowl, and watched the loa surge turn into a frenzy. None of them went for the severed cock's head that had fallen between the supplicant's legs. Its eye still twitched; it looked as though it was winking at her.

'By this act I am unnamed.' She wiped the blade clean on the rags of her old clothes. 'By this act I choose the name I will be called by my brothers and my sisters in the loa, by my cousins and my mothers and my fathers, by my godfathers and my godmothers, and by the Grandfather who isn't and never was and never will be. I choose the third of the names offered to me, as the name the loa will call me.'

And she felt her undreaming body in the solid world being lifted upright from the bed by her new cousins. Then she felt the weight on her shoulders as the skull that had been chosen for her was lowered over her head. The inside smelled of mothballs and burned meat and the hot savannahs of distant worlds, distant times. She could hear the voices of her cousins through the bone, welcoming her.

Little Sister Greenaway? they said. Little Sister, we are Faction Paradox.

And now, so are you.

Book Two: At Salomon's House
Chapter 4: Annus Mirabilis

Blood. It always came back to blood, the most vital and copious of the humours. It seeped from his mouth, from his nostrils, and from the corners of his eyes. There the fluid pooled and hardened, so that his lids became gummed and he could barely see. They had given him a wet rag to wash it away, but he no longer had the strength to lift it. The blood smelled of his own rank insides, the pollution killing his body. It was sweet though, much sweeter than that other portent, the now excruciating pain under his temple.

He lay on a slab below an oblong of light, the little window that allowed in fresh air and swollen insects. His legs had been strapped to stop him from lashing out. Colourless shapeless forms moved round him, perhaps tending to him yet never touching. The voice of the surgeon made no words he could hear; it was a wolf growl. He felt abandoned, on Earth and in Heaven.

He had been the last left at the Church of Christ Sublime. They had taken days longer to come for him than he'd expected, to the point that he had almost blissfully starved. The other Silverites had scattered like the Jews after Masada, but they had no ancient faith to sustain them. He'd had no doubt his name would be, in time, forgotten. Even his captors hadn't thought him a great threat, more of a hundredfold nuisance. No capital charges had been brought against him. He'd been taken to Winchester Assizes, where an impassive, stone-faced, blind judge had named him guilty and condemned him to gaol in the space of a single breath. They had already taken the egg, and Christ's pilots no longer spoke to him.

And perhaps that isn't a bad thing? A navigator can only guide you so far. Eventually you must loosen your dependency on the voices of angels and find your own.

The thoughts that occupied him in prison were dark in the main, dark as the walls. He had lost track of how long he had been kept here, of when - or if - he might be released. He'd been accumulating debts and deeper incarceration just by crouching on the pallet in his cell. Sometimes they'd taken him away and tried to break him. The night-voices had whispered that Cromwell was heard dead, but it hardly mattered whose coin the gaolers were taking. When he wasn't beaten, the pressure in his head had grown worse, and he'd been twice dragged before baffled physicks who did him no good.

Sometimes, the gaolers smuggled in women, but he'd refused them, knowing that it would give him no satisfaction and only add more pennies to his slate. He no longer felt any physical desire, hadn't done since Ann had died and he had foolishly wished himself into Hell. His one distraction had been imagining what he might do if he were free again; incarceration in a stone room had made the outside world seem infinitely pliable and suggestible to new methods and philosophies. The political solutions he had sought were a mistake - whatever their faults and merits, they were bound to be crushed by thoughtless leviathans. Politics was ever the domain of man, but science was the realm of God. It was the secure fulcrum that could turn the world.

In the night, he'd dreamed of a golden net, lonesome sparks leaping across the darkness to form ever tighter connections and lines of communication. He'd imagined he

could touch it. He'd reached for it.

He'd fallen frothing on the dirt-tracked floor, and his cellmates had withdrawn in panic.

Then they'd brought him to the slab, and laid him out expectant of his death. His skull pounded, an eggshell breaking open from the inside. The sawbones, muttering to himself and with black thread dangling from his lips, put a cold metal tip on the bone above the epicentre of the pain. There was a light tap

-

- and the pain exploded out of his head -

- then his temple felt wet and wounded again, as it had done at Edgehill. The surgeon's apprentices were at his arms, struggling to stop him raising worried fingers to his head to probe the gap. And silhouetted against the window, their master held up some small bauble and whistled in amazement.

The same grey metal bauble, cleaned of blood and bile, sat unremarkably on a cushion a year later, at the centre of a gathering in a summer garden, held up for the attention of the new king. 'And you mean to say,' Charles asked dryly, 'that this was cut from the head of a living man? We're not sure we believe you, Master Gentle.'

The surgeon, now cleaner and better-dressed and lit by perfect evening sunlight, nodded humbly and kept his eyes averted. Though he tried to appear neat, his efforts were defeated by the patched stubble on his chin, curious for a barber. 'That is Your Majesty's prerogative, but you may have my word and that of a half dozen witnesses, my apprentices and loyal men alike.'

'And this is the fellow? Bid him step forward,' the King announced. 'What is your name, sir?'

He took a single clumsy step, wary of the armed footmen and yeomen arrayed around him on the edges of the lawn. He spoke, but even he didn't hear the name from his lips.

'What's that? Speak up, sir, and find your voice.'

'Nathaniel Silver, Your Majesty,' he replied.

The King clapped. He saw no slight. His face was too restless, too eagerly puppyish to find any offence in Silver's awkward gait. He was dressed in silk finery, yet wore it casually, without any of the mock humility of his father. He did not stand, as his father had on the stage, but lolled easily in his outdoor throne. He had the thin makings of a moustache, but his rich brown mane was a wig. He was a taller man by far than his dead father, and Silver could immediately see why the old Charles was called a cuckold and this new one a bastard. No, he was his father's son, but the old man was well-hidden in the fresh young face.

'May we see the scar?' Silver brushed back his hair, and leant to offer his scalp for inspection. The King tutted impatiently and beckoned for a flunkey who rushed to him with a magnifying glass. 'This is remarkable, sir! To have healed so cleanly and quickly...' The King waved the glassman away, and Silver

took the cue to stand out of his stoop. He wondered idly if he should mention where he had last seen Charles's father, but dismissed the thought. The royalist retribution had so far been more restrained than many feared, but such comment would hardly be tactful.

Instead he said: 'I have survived the wound twice now, Your Majesty; once when the ball was shot into my head, and again when it was cut out of me.'

'Yes, you were shot at Edgehill, were you not? When, from the look of you, you must have been about ten years old. Which cause did you fight with, Master Silver?'

'Parliament's,' he replied, wondering if the King's unmoved soulless smile was a good thing or no.

'Might we assume that your experience of the mercies of the Protectorate have persuaded you against their cause?'

'I'm afraid not, Your Majesty.' Then, before he could stop himself: 'Please understand that I mean Your Majesty's person no harm, nor do I challenge your authority. That time is past, and will not come again while I live. But I believe what I must, and I don't believe the late example of republican tyranny invalidates all republican sentiment.'

'Nor do the mistakes of a king argue against monarchy. Quite the opposite, in fact,' Charles quipped back merrily. 'Ah, but we see you are an honest opponent. There is a story they tell about an old Carpathian voivode who bade two monks tell him the state of his principality - one lied and told him he was well-loved, the other spoke only the brutal truth - and at the end of it he rewarded one, and had the other tortured and killed. Which do you think he allowed to live, Master Silver?'

Silver thought on this, under the King's cruel and amused stare, then said: 'I don't believe I could answer the question, Your Majesty. There are a dozen subtle reasons that might have turned the case.'

The King stopped smiling for the first time since Silver had been brought before him. 'We have been told we must be a subtler man than our... predecessor. We have lived among the common people, and would have them believe we understand them the better for it. We'll see how far that takes us. And you sir, you are free now under the provisions of the restored governance. What will you make of your life?' He was smiling again and Silver felt shrived.

'I have an interest in natural inquiry. I will dedicate my life to that.'

This pleased the King, who clapped again. 'Capital, sir! We have a common interest. If it will keep you out of mischief, we'll arrange for a small stipend to promote your work. Only a small one, mark you, don't get your hopes up. One last thing, this -' To the palpable horror of half the court, he reached out and plucked the clean old musketball from its pillow. 'This is remarkable. May we keep it?'

'I believe,' Silver replied, breathing out heavily, 'that it was Your Majesty's property to begin with.'

His first few weeks out of captivity were aimless; he had nowhere to go, and the prison years had ground purpose out of him. His head had never felt so clear or so peaceful, but the insistent pain was replaced by a numb and lazy void. The world had changed utterly while he'd been out of it, and now he scrabbled to find a handhold on its smooth surface. The King's stipend (and it

was, indeed, pitifully small) paid for lodgings in London, but it had never been the friendliest city in his estimation, and he began to yearn to return to Hampshire to find if he had any friends or followers left, or Worcester where he might still have family.

No, they were the past. He had to find his way into the future.

Barely a week after he was summoned before the King, he found that he still had one ally alive in the world, and he doubted that the two events were unconnected. Donald Taylor's letter was carried from Dover, where - reading between the lines - he was evidently tied up in business to do with the return of the royal court from exile. Nevertheless, a week after the letter, Taylor presented himself at Silver's door. He had changed little in the intervening years. His good eye flicked up and down Silver's circumstances.

'By Christ, Nate,' he exclaimed as Silver took unsteady steps towards him, to take his hand, to hug him, 'what have they done to you?!

'They would have done worse if they'd cared about me or my crimes,' Silver said, trying to wave away his friend's concern as a trifling embarrassment. It was hard. He was adapting only gradually to the weight and pressure of the real world. It was a matter of relearning those things he had forgotten, remembering how to move smoothly and how to live in the light.

Taylor didn't weep - he was a tough-minded fellow - but took them on a tour of the nearest pubs and whorehouses at his own expense. Tracking through muddy streets and narrow alleys they must have looked like fearsome monsters, as the wounded of all wars were wont to, but in the packed, crowded Southwark dives, Silver no longer felt so unique nor so alone. He heard in the boisterous rowdy chatter a faint echo of the warm community he'd hoped to build on Sir Denzil's estates. The Restoration had brought England back to life out of its death-like austerity; there would be revels and carnival for a while, but they would not last. Sir Denzil was dead, Don told him. He had been spared the hell of prison; he had been hanged.

Nate Silver didn't love the first woman he slept with since Ann had died, but even without love it didn't feel like a sin. She was a young woman, but knew how gently a veteran should be treated, and smiled rather than leered as they coupled. She wouldn't kiss him, as was a whore's prerogative. No love, not even real friendship, but she was company, and that was love of a sort, he thought as he fell asleep.

'Have you thought any more about the offer I made you?' Taylor asked the next morning as they broke their fast. 'I heard what you said to the King, and it's a promising sign that you still have lights in your body. He'll favour the Invisible College with his patronage soon enough, and I could get you in.'

'I don't speak their language, Don,' Silver replied.

'Maybe not in through the front doors, but I can put you in their way. Sun & Seed did you as much good as harm. The name Nathaniel Silver will be remembered after four years.'

Silver didn't reply; he was filling his face, not greedily, but with the hurry of a man who was afraid he might be eating a last meal. Taylor had known, he was sure, about his incarceration, perhaps even instrumental in striking down charges of blasphemy or sedition. There was only so much he could accept.

'I should make my own way,' he suggested, but Taylor shook his head slowly.

'This isn't a world where a man can be alone. I don't believe there is such a world, and even if there were, I wouldn't leave you there.'

That seemed to settle it, so the following week they travelled to Holborn to see a man cut up a dog.

The stalls of the theatre - so-called, though they struck Silver more as the gallery overlooking a tribunal - were plain wood, scrubbed white, and patchy where blood and offal had splattered from past operations. Taylor led Silver to a seat in the corner, a high vantage point looking down on the circular pit where the vivisection would take place. 'This isn't the best or most comfortable post,' he explained, as Silver brushed crumbs of dust and snuff tobacco from the bench, 'but it does afford the best view if you want to see into the guts of the subject. And trust me, you do.'

The lecture was free, and conducted in both Latin and English by the Artium Magister, a confident and handsome man who appeared far too young to be a professor of the college, though Taylor assured Silver this was the case. The animal was a mongrel bought from a street merchant, and treated well so that it would be in the best of health for the procedure. The magister explained in both tongues what he intended to prove this evening, the explanation in Latin seeming to Silver's untutored ears more precise and compact. English seemed an unwieldy language by comparison, but he followed the gist. The dog would be lightly sedated, not rendered completely unconscious, because the object of the lecture was to keep it alive. It was to be sliced open so its inner parts might be surgically removed.

'Thus,' declaimed the lecturer, in English, 'we will demonstrate the fallacy of Galen's physick. For we cannot live, he says, without the eucrasia of all four humours, including the black bile of melancholy formed in the spleen. I hope to display to you at the end of the evening on the one hand a fit and healthy beast, bounding and woofing round these stalls' - and there was polite laughter at this - 'and on the other, the spleen of said beast in a preserving jar.'

More laughter. Silver whispered into Taylor's ear, 'Is this not a little cruel?' but his companion shushed him.

The magister washed his hands in a bowl of scented leaves 'for luck' before beginning his procedure. The first incision sent a spurt of blood across the auditorium, decorating some over-eager students in the front row, and turning the lecturer's gown scarlet. Silver had been given paper and a wadd marker to make notes, but he was out of practice at writing. The fingers that once diligently recorded every phenomenon that occurred to him now clawed helplessly round the wood stick, and Taylor had to reach over and guide his hands for him. He found it easier not to write, but to make diagrams of what he saw, trusting the details to memory. The magister slipped unconsciously into nothing but Latin occasionally, and had to check himself. As the layers of dog were sliced and its innermost components opened up to the light, he took both pains and delight in pointing out each raw red part of its body, each one still functioning perfectly.

When they came to remove the spleen, disaster struck. The dog, which had lain breathing peacefully on its hard bed while the professor poked around in its guts, suddenly thrashed and frothed from its eyes. It tried to howl, but its mouth had been muzzled shut. It shook violently for an instant, then sank unmoving back onto the slab. The magister paused over it, licking his lips, before turning to the audience.

'Gentlemen, I fear the dog is dead. So this week Galen has the upper hand.'

I'll best him another day.' And there was more of the same laughter, a little jollier this time. Silver spotted bottles being passed around the student's stalls, from hand to hand at surreptitious knee-level. It was an odd world, this. He already felt a part of it, absorbed by it, contaminated by it.

The death of the dog was only the second most remarkable incident of the evening. The greater came later, as Silver and Taylor emerged from the college and strolled down into Holborn. The light was fading into the west already, and this was not a part of London he knew well, but Taylor seemed familiar enough with the terrain and Silver was content to follow his lead. Like all of London's satellites, its thoroughfares were heaving even as the night descended. There were harlots and inns a-plenty on its streets, and Silver was beginning to understand Taylor's limitless taste for both, but this was also England's escriptorio, where many of her books were published. The Cycle of Sun & Seed had been printed here, Taylor explained, all without Silver's knowledge. He wondered how many copies had been made, if any still existed, if he had taught or misled anyone with his example.

'What did you think of the experiment?' Taylor asked. He had pointed out the lights of a nearby tavern that he knew well, and they were making for it at a slow walking pace.

'As I remarked, Don, a little cruel.'

''Twas an accident the dog died. I have seen it done many times before. You may find yourself with the knife in your hand at some point. You can't hope to peel back the layers of the world if you won't get your hands a little bloodied, or suffer a little pain.'

'I doubt I'd be the one suffering the pain. I see times when it may be necessary, but even so, we would not do this to a living man.'

Taylor stopped him in the street. 'Living men are treated with less dignity everywhere, and you know it because you were one. I heard about that bullet taken from your head.' Silver nodded, conceding the point. 'That turned you from a poor bloody soldier who might as well have died in a ditch into a miracle presented to princes -'

'But still a subject, Don, nothing like a living man at all.'

Donald Taylor wasn't listening. He had cocked his head towards a commotion on the street. It shoved the crowds aside, including one woman who went shrieking into the mud. It saw Silver through mad eyes and lunged for him. It was a portly man, red-faced and dressed in a coat, shirt, and breeches that might once have been fine. He was hatless and wigless, and his thinning hair rippled in a dozen directions as he stumbled against Silver and pushed him into the wall.

'You are Nathaniel Silver!' he raved. 'Don't deny it, sirrah! You have haunted me!'

In the corner of his eye, Silver saw Taylor draw a dagger from his glove, but shooed him back. Having seized his prey, the madman had begun to weep, and pressed his damp face into Silver's breast. He was a pitiful thing, filled not with hate as Silver first feared but rage. 'I don't know you, sir...'

The fat man broke into wracking sobs. 'That is the worst cruelty! You have destroyed my life and never knew it. Take it! Take the abominable thing back, you damn'd wight, so I may drown myself in the Thames and never hear its damn'd voice again.' And he shoved a soft object against Silver's stomach,

turned, and ploughed back into the crowd, fleeing from Silver's life as abruptly and violently as he had appeared.

'What in the name of buggery was that all about?' Taylor stared curiously after the madman's escape, and stowed his blade before anyone else could get close enough to see. Only now did Silver think to look down at what had been thrust into his hands, not willing to believe from just the touch or texture. Discreetly, it did not glow, but it couldn't completely hide its shine. It was as smooth and beautiful as he remembered it, and it whispered in his head, in the tone of angels ~ I will ever return to you ~

'What's that?' Don asked curiously, as Silver stowed the egg in a tear in the line of his coat. Its anxious weight would hang there, preying on his mind, until he got it back to his lodgings in Southwark the following morning. Only then would he feel elated to be given back his burden.

'It's a sign,' he said simply and truthfully, 'that you've put me on the right path. It's an instruction.'

'To get your hands bloodied?'

'To experiment,' he replied, and said nothing more about it, but went with Taylor to the favoured tavern where he drank enough to forget the dying twitches of a murdered dog, and the madness placed by angels into a blameless man's mind.

He had begun to wonder how the egg worked.

There would have been a time when he could have dismissed the question - it was simply God's mystery - but his new grounding in science showed this up as an inadequate explanation. The natural world clearly abided by rules, which were obscure to man but must surely have been put in place by divine will. It was conceivable to Silver that God could create exceptions to His laws - such were miracles and the workings of grace; but the solid, unspontaneous egg was neither. Further, it was provided not by Christ Himself but His pilots, who could not be so easily excepted. Were they not themselves a form of mechanism, devices for communicating between the divine and the mundane? It seemed likely that the egg was governed by rules of its own that could be discovered by the correct method, and by definition that method could not be completely beyond the reach of man, of Silver himself.

He worried this line of thought might be blasphemous, so he consulted the egg directly, the first question he had asked of it since it had been returned to him. To his surprise, it encouraged him to experiment further, talking blandly about how it might be dissected and remodelled. It didn't fear human blades.

Emboldened, he asked the question he had been dreading: 'The man who brought you back to me - what did you do to him?'

~ After you were removed to gaol, the egg passed to this man in exchange for tokens of wealth and status in a mercantile economy ~ We made reasonable arguments to him ~ He was unpersuaded ~

'So? What did you do?'

~ We showed him the true cost of his wealth ~ This destroyed him ~

'You drove him mad. I would not have wished you to do that.'

~ We only showed him the connections of the world, as we will show you ~

'And will you also drive me mad?'

~ We will make you sane ~

Silver put the egg on the table, took up one of his several knives, and began to make incisions.

The surface of the egg yielded easily. There was no hatchling within; it was the same substance and constituency all the way through. The wounds he made healed quickly; indeed, he found he was able to take out chunks, then reattach them seamlessly into the whole. The egg's reassuring voice guided him every step of the way. If only the dog of Holborn had had this power! - to calmly guide the surgeon's hand, and describe in English (imperfectly squeezed from its canine mouth) the exact workings of its own body.

Hours of experiment stretched into days then into weeks. The egg seemed almost divinely malleable, like the clay from which God had first made the Earth and Adam alike. Maybe it was the very same substance? With the application of heat it could be melted out of shape, beaten, stretched, and reformed. One morning he was able to turn it into a perfect cube; another day he rolled it into a cylinder that extended almost the length of his room (which was not long); then he was able to spread it thin across his floor, so that it had barely any detectable thickness but covered the floorboards, the bed, and halfway up the walls - and he had to climb on a stool to avoid being swamped by it. He tried every test he could imagine, and when he could think of nothing more, it offered its own suggestions. As winter drew in, he found he could rely on it for warmth and light, spending much needed coin elsewhere. He held down a number of temporary jobs in the Borough, which he pursued thoroughly but without enthusiasm, and always rushed home as soon as he could to continue his enquiries.

Don Taylor, to his credit, didn't ask about the egg after the night in Holborn, and in fact began to fade out of Silver's life. He had his own activities in the Service, after all, and seemed content that Silver had righted himself after his years in prison. He found time to introduce Silver to a couple of dabblers on the fringes of the Invisible College, who were university-educated and made him feel an ignoramus without meaning it. He did not feel drawn into their cold and lightless world, but they offered him sound advice and suggested experiments that he could repeat, mainly in optics and motion. More of Taylor's contacts lived further afield, but Don provided him with letters of introduction, and he soon had a lively correspondence going with learned men who were not afraid of amateur interest. Occasionally, very occasionally, he would surprise them, though he kept most of the egg's observations to himself. It said things that might have upset them, and the last thing he wanted was to drive them away. At their urging, he began to learn more about mathematicks and al-gibra, and the egg helped him with translations and obscurities.

He studied medicine but from books, not bodies. That would come, but, please God, not yet!

After a time in Southwark, he relocated to Holborn, a simple enough move as he had accumulated virtually nothing in personal property other than a small library of philosophical texts in English. At Holborn, he was disappointed to learn that the excitable young lecturer he'd seen a year before had left the college to take up a new post in Oxford. That was a blow - he would have made an interesting addition to Silver's growing list of correspondents. He found new work, enjoyed a two-and-a-half-week romance with his landlord's daughter, continued writing his letters and conducting his experiments. The next year,

in high summer, his friends in the College bubbled happily about gaining royal patronage for their Empire of Learning. They were ecstatic; he felt their delight as though seen on the surface of a mirror. The first few months of activity among the new Royal Society were a lean time for Silver, but he dedicated himself to solitary work; then the fashion passed, and he was soon in rapt communication with many of its fellows, and laymen, and also philosophers of the Service who mistrusted this new body.

Don Taylor was one of those sceptical presences-by-mail. He wrote to Silver from a variety of odd European addresses and beyond, including Flanders, where he claimed to be on an expedition to track down a race of malevolent blue-skinned fairies. The Royal Society, he wrote bitterly, had disenchanted the alchemist's art, and he would have nothing to do with it. Silver ruefully realised he knew this type, the guarded minds of the old philosophers for whom knowledge was to be hoarded rather than shared, a secret badge for the elect.

A final letter from Don Taylor came from New Amsterdam, where the old soldier was on Service. He was heading into South America on a new endeavour that he refused to describe, claiming only that Silver wouldn't believe him. Reading the letter for the first time, Silver was struck with a calm certainty that Taylor was now dead. He asked the egg, which replied ~ He is no longer in this world ~ and thereafter fell silent.

Silver took to his bed for the rest of the afternoon, not sleeping, not thinking, only studying his blotched ceiling and contemplating a future that seemed to be filled with nothing more than days like this for the rest of his life.

The following morning, Nathaniel Silver heard the first reports of plague in London.

The egg instructed him, and he wept to learn it.

~ To repeat ~ Instructions to best avoid contracting plague ~ Instructions for treatment of plague in case of infection ~ We cannot allow you to administer mass treatments, as this will create ontological uncertainty and alert the great powers to our existence ~ First method -

'Enough!' he almost screamed. 'I would that you had told me this ten years past when my Ann might have been treated! The numbers you describe - I could have saved the Church! Whole lives would have turned out differently.'

~ You make your own mistakes ~

'I was ignorant!'

~ You make your own mistakes, but you have our sympathy ~

He could no longer bear to listen to it, and went instead to the window, where he was no better comforted by the screams of the desperate and the dying. He thought it, but did not say it: Your Christ has made a Hell of Earth. The robes and hood he had stolen sat on the table by the egg waiting for him, the snout of the mask filled with scented herbs that the egg had informed him would be entirely useless against this outbreak. Only Silver now knew enough to walk among the sick and the dead without fear of infection, and he was cursed to remain silent.

The end of the world served his purpose in two ways. It granted him a distraction - as the capital emptied of souls, there were fewer eyes that might latch onto his activities, and even if they did, the doctor's costume

lent him anonymity and authority. More importantly, the sweep of death through the city left him with a hundred opportunities a day to extend his researches into the field of anatomy. The work itself was hard, but the circumstances made it all too easy for him to remove human bodies from abandoned houses, from the mud of the streets, from the very heaps on the plague carts. As the visitation intensified, the niceties of burial were denied to the swell of victims, and Silver consoled himself with the thought that his holy investigations would dignify their souls and turn their bodies to Christ's purpose.

He found an empty house just inside the Moorgate with a cool, brick-walled, and spacious cellar. The residents, long since vanished, had buried wine, cheeses, and a small quantity of gold here, but only shallow in their haste to escape. The wine and cheese became his companions in the long evenings he spent there; he left the gold, which was in any case worthless. He set up his equipment here in this chilly cavity under London, some of it improvised, much looted from an apothecary (despite the egg's instruction, he had no way of manufacturing jars and instruments to the specifications his work demanded). Silver spent his days cutting up bodies, in an underworld lit by harsh lanterns, and his nights carrying those same lamps through the dying city, shunning the living and seeking out the dead. It was a bleak task that grew no easier. The bodies yielded their secrets, with the egg describing and guiding him through his discoveries; it ridiculed the little physick he'd learned from Galen and Aristotle, and instead taught him to see what he might with his own eyes.

His enquiries were general most days; other times he focused on the transmission of the plague itself, wondering if there weren't some way round the angels' restrictions. To go against their desire was inconceivable, but if he could find a new method entirely of his own devising - well then, they could hardly command him against it. He accumulated bodies and body-parts, caring not for how they might be disposed of in later days, because he could no longer imagine any kind of future, in spite of what the egg told him.

He had neglected Christ in favour of His pilots, and at his lowest ebb he found time to make direct prayers to the Lord. He came away reassured. Christ did not speak to him - it would be foolish to expect otherwise - but He was there, nestling naked and obsidian in Silver's soul. Silver took up his knife again.

Some days, as he wheeled his human cargo through the tight streets of the city, he imagined he was being followed. The wood buildings swelled and creaked around him, putting paranoias into his head. He had grown too accustomed to working undisturbed, so was taken by surprise when finally caught.

He had a child's body laid out and stripped on one of the tables, and spent an hour prising flesh away from her cheek so that he might make a better study of her teeth and gums. This was old work, done almost for the sake of practice, and he did not need the egg so it was fortuitously concealed in a box in the far corner. Its glow was hidden when the intruder came, stepping faintly but not quite faint enough. Silver put down his blade, unhooked the lantern from its post, and turned to the stairs. Let this not be the owners or the watch, please let it be some cutthroat or hobbledehoy who might fear me and my cellar of corpses.

A lad crouched there, a gaunt starveling who tried hard not to flinch when the light hit his face. Silver's heart beat again - it was just some stray - and he moved forward to scare him off. But the boy didn't react as Silver expected. He stayed crouched - not from fear, but with a subtle defiance. He

was shirtless and shoeless, and his body looked coiled, wiry, and healthy. There were no marks of plague on him that Silver could see; that was the first thing he'd looked for.

The boy extended an arm easily, pointing beyond Silver to his surgeries.

'She were a skinny bitch, weren't she?'

Silver's voice echoed in the leather bowl of his mask: 'You should not be here.'

The boy's hands rippled. How old was he? Ten years? Younger? 'Is good mate. I know what you're up to. Been watching you, I have. Even come down here when you been out picking your precious flowers.'

'You must leave. You are in danger of contracting plague.'

'And you ain't, eh?'

'I have precautions and protections.'

The boy-child reached for something at his neck. Silver raised the lamp to get a better look. 'Funny thing that, 'cos so have I. Look here' - he held out a thick leather twine, on which had been strung a hollow metal disc carved with crude symbols, the bleached skull of a mouse, and a soapstone carved into the shape of a howling face - 'these all work so far.'

'That is superstition -'

'More 'n that. You read a lot, don't you? So do I, but different books, like. The boils and the bleeding won't cost me my soul 'cos it's already someone else's property like. I sold it see, to a pretty lady, and now you want to know what I sold it for?'

'No. Go back to your home boy -'

'Oh, doctor high, doctor mighty, I will do that sure as you take your hood off and let me see your eyes.'

Casually, Silver removed his hat and stripped back the hood to give the child what he wanted.

'They are dead,' said the boy, grinning merrily, 'my mother and father and sister all. Dead or dying back in the old pit. I sat and watched them for a while, but I got bored and thirsty, so I left 'em. Straight out the window. Don't look back. That's how you lose 'em, looking back, eh?'

Fleet-footed, the youth wove through the gap between Silver and the wall and darted across to the tables. He stood over the dead child, morbidly fascinated by her face, then sank his fingers into the neat wound that Silver had made around her mouth, to stroke her smooth white teeth. 'I am much possessed by death, sir. I would sit at the right hand of a master magician, if you'll have me.'

'I am Nathaniel Silver. I'm a surgeon and a philosopher, not a magician.'

'No, you're not, with your cave and your robe, your mysteries and your books, you're no Merlin at all.' The child cackled, and began to anoint the girl's forehead with the drying juices from her own mouth. 'Look here, you can't do this on your own. I've seen you struggle. You'll go mad without help.'

'Perhaps. What's your name, boy?'

The waif bowed extravagantly. 'Nick, sir. Nicholas Plainsong, at your service.'

For all his faults (and they were legion), Nick Plainsong was a hard worker and a good servant, and took their duties as seriously as did Silver himself. In other ways he was a nuisance, wringing the bleakest and cruellest humour from his surroundings; this was only natural, Silver presumed, but it made him feel a grey and humourless streak of piss by contrast. The apprentice even contrived to be shorter than the master, who was hardly a tall man himself, so that when they walked together at night Silver seemed to take long strides while Plainsong ambled unhurried and pocket-fisted beside him.

After a while, hearing the lad call him a magician ceased to be an irritation.

Silver shared all his knowledge and experiments with his protégé, but kept the existence of the egg from him. It mattered little in the next year, as he spent his time repeating old work in order to educate Nick. So he found himself become a teacher after all. He gave the boy instruction in how best to avoid and treat plague, but Plainsong refused to throw away his charms, though he seemed in no other way foolish or simple. In the nightlands beyond the walls of their cellar, the plague surged and worsened, and some nights they found no one living at all in London, but the winter and New Year brought a slackening in the number of new victims. By the spring, the tide of refugees had turned back in towards London, and the pool of bodies contracted accordingly. Silver, though acclimatised to his work, found the dwindling opportunities both a frustration and a relief. Plainsong suggested they turn their attentions to churchyards and fresh graves; Silver gave him a withering glance.

There was the ever-present danger that the family whose cellar they had appropriated might return, but by the end of summer this seemed less likely. Still, Silver decided it was prudent to end the experiments in anatomy and move on. They had buried most of their subject's remains wherever they could, in consecrated ground when they could manage it. The remaining organs they burned in the garden on their final night, while Plainsong, drunk on what was left of their looted wine, danced and hollered round the flames. Silver himself warmed his hands, because he felt chill despite the evening's heat. He saw a heart in the fire, the flames licking round it but leaving it untouched.

Christ give me a sign tonight that I am acting to your design.

As they walked away from the house, Plainsong pulled out a small heavy pouch, and tossed it casually into Silver's palm. He opened it curiously and started. 'By Christ, Nick, this is thievery!'

'They ain't coming back for it, are they? And we need to eat. We need somewhere to sleep and some way to carry on your work, and we need gold for all that. You know I'm not greedy.'

Silver nodded, knowing this at least was true. 'The King once paid me to do this. He said it was a stipend, but I only ever saw the one payment.'

'There you go, treat this as monies owed. Question is, what do we do now?'

'There are many more fields to explore than anatomy, Nick.'

'Yeah, but no,' Nick exclaimed and stopped them dead in the street. 'Where are we going with this? What's our purpose? 'Cos we can't go on aimlessly to doomsday, can we?'

'We can and will,' Silver assured him. 'Our purpose is to understand God's creation a little better so we might alter it more to His liking. When we die, our works will live on, to be used or discarded by other hands. These experiments are our children.'

Plainsong snorted. 'Seems to me,' he opined, 'we've been doing too much understanding, and there are better ways of 'aving kids. God's body, Nate! Where's our ambition?!'

'My ambition is to serve Christ - to be His hands. You might think different, and that's your business, not mine.'

Nick sighed, as if he had been expecting an answer like this. He plucked the pouch back from Silver and stowed it safe, his lips puckering wearily. ''Ere's tonight's ambition. We go down Cheapside, wash off the corpse-smell, get a jar or two or three, beer or some of that Dutch juniper muck. There'll be sweet girls down there, an' I've almost forgotten what warm meat feels like.'

'How did you get to be so worldly, young man?'

'Dunno. Just lucky, I reckon.'

Plainsong was right. It would be good to surrender his purpose for a few days. The end of the world was over - he no longer had to shoulder that burden - and the prospect reminded him of his carousing with Don Taylor, six years past. Where had that time gone? He saw his reflection in a puddle, and wondered at how little he had changed outwardly, while inside he felt more worn and lined than ever.

Nick Plainsong was a good companion in merry-making; Silver felt comfortable being the mild, sober half of the partnership, sitting quietly in the shadow of Nick's raucous antics. They trawled round half a dozen public houses beyond midnight. It astonished Silver that his accomplice could drink and abuse himself so without seeming to incur any damage - he was as bright on early Sunday morning as he had been at the start of Saturday's evening. 'Is another trick the Devil taught me,' he explained, tapping his nose. 'Works best on the Sabbath, when I can suck up all the fucking holiness.'

He was tolerant of Plainsong's comfortable blasphemies.

Finally Nick determined to find them beds for the night and bodies to join them. Silver found he was not bothered by the prospect of company, and sat himself at the door of the tavern, exulting in air that was neither too hot nor too warm, and in a black sky licked with red and orange flame and salmon-pink plumes of smoke. There were yells from the direction of the river, and retorts. London was ever an unsleeping city.

'Nate!' Nick hollered. 'Over here, Nate! There are some ladies who need some real magic in their lives! They got husbands need turning to toads!'

'That'd be an improvement!' a woman screeched, and there was laughter. Silver turned part-reluctantly from the door, and picked his way into the yellow-lit body of the building, past drunks and gamblers, to join Nick at his table. The boy already had more than enough company, three women lured there by the flash of his gold more than the flash of his smile. Two sat either side of him,

cuddling him; a third was perched with her back to Silver.

'He don't look like no magician,' said the largest, loudest of Plainsong's catches, who had one fat hand on the boy's shoulder and another in his breeches. 'E's a Puritan and we charge 'em double.'

'I'm not a Puritan,' Silver said softly, 'and I'm not a magician.'

'So which of 'em do you like, Nate?' Plainsong said, leaning forward to bang on the table. 'I can't take all of 'em on single-handed.' He reached across the table to tug at the sleeve of the meekest harlot, who sat hunched and tired at Silver's side. She alone wasn't hiding behind a vizard. At the boy's insistent prodding, she loosened her décolletage; a hard shy breath lifted her nipples out into the light.

'Come on Nate, she likes you, at least kiss the girl,' Nick urged.

Silver raised a hand, but to her face rather than her body. He drew the hair back from her eyes, which darted downwards timidly. Her forehead, her whole face, was powdered white, so she seemed as pale as a lifeless body on a slab, but she was warm, warm and somehow familiar. She saw it too, and made the recognition first, and her eyes turned wet with delight and disappointment.

Nick groaned with boredom, despite the attention of the two livelier whores; outside there was a retort like a volley of cannon, which they later learned was a blackpowder warehouse gone up in flame; Nathaniel Silver heard only her voice, and it broke his heart.

'I thought you were dead, Nate,' she said, as he brushed her cheek, first with his fingers, then his handkerchief, to find the spots he remembered under the make-up. 'Like my father. You've not changed. Funny seeing you like this.'

'Alice,' he said at last. She nodded bluntly and crossed her arms to cover herself.

Christ give me a sign tonight.

Chapter 5: The Third Day

'Congratulations on the success of your Forc'd Marriage.'

Aphra Behn hadn't expected company, not when the city was practically besieged by snow. It formed in cakes against her windows; she could hear it accumulating in feather-soft falls on her roof; it turned the January sky a bleak grey, and made a little night of the afternoon. Still, the obscure weather meant there was already a fire laid and ready to roar when her guest arrived unannounced, and there was hot tea in the pot. Sally, the maid, poured it with trembling hands, then retreated to warm herself at the hearth, leaving her mistress and this unwelcome intruder at table. Twin plumes rose from the cooling surfaces of the tea; Aphra waited patiently for her friend to drink first, and while she waited she beamed delight.

There was no doubt about it, Carola Harsnett was the most beautiful woman in this world, even swaddled as she was in winter costume so thick and layered that it quite concealed her lovely shape.

Carola Morland, Aphra corrected herself.

Eventually Carola drank, and Aphra reached for her own cup, to draw its much-needed heat into her hands and her mouth and her stomach. They exchanged the usual niceties and gossips - and Aphra felt the warmth spreading through

her body and loosening her tongue - until the talk turned to the subject of her play.

'I've been deservedly rewarded,' she said. 'I held out my hands and caught the sun, the moon, and the stars - all silver.'

'So you've come into riches at last?'

'For a few days. It runs out all too rapidly, I find.'

'Then you must write another. I hear the first one was very good.'

'I will if the King's or the Duke's will take it. I need the money, and the bread.' A sense of disappointment crept slowly upon her, and she added, quizzically: 'You've not seen it, then?'

'I have a husband now,' Carola remarked. 'He keeps me busy. I'll come to the next one. Aphra, you must do another! We all know you have it in you. Do it for Killigrew, and show the scoffers you didn't just ride Mistress Davenant's skirts and purse-strings.'

'They say that about me?'

'It's better than what they say about the actresses.'

Carola's acquisitive eyes flickered round Aphra's once-modest parlour, settling on the more ostentatious signs of her new-found new-lost wealth. Aphra hoped she wouldn't find anything too gaudily French nor austere Dutch, nor pry too deeply into the unrepaired conditions of her leaner years - the fraying rugs and curtains, the firewood furniture, the naked blankness of walls where pregnant and decorous art had once hung. But Carola's face was solemn and seemed swollen by the fire. This scene had all the melancholy of a parting, not a meeting.

Then: 'Do you think you'll ever go back to the old business?'

'God's hooks!' Aphra swore. 'I hope not!'

'I meant to the Service of the nation.'

'That's what I thought you meant. No, I think not. I'm no longer recommended to Lord Arlington, so the issue should hardly arise.'

It took Carola a moment to respond. She touched her teacup with her fingertips, pushing it further along the tabletop until she could hardly reach it. 'It might be that... that it is my Sam who would ask something of you.'

Ah, here was the nub of their business! Aphra looked into the eyes of her old friend and confidant, and found her own disappointment reflected back at her.

'Do they still trust your Sam with anything more difficult than lamplighting?'

'Sir Sam isn't answerable to Arlington. Indeed, they've long been rivals. He knows you, and he knows you'd enjoy being back in Service.'

Aphra might have shot a bolt of all her fury into Carola's beautiful face. She hesitated out of courtesy, because it was Sam Morland who was to blame here, putting his words into his wife's pretty mouth; and because it could have ruined their friendship; and because Carola's leg stretched out at that moment

beneath the table so that her toes stroked the side of Aphra's foot, before curling round her ankle to nuzzle.

'Oh,' Aphra said.

'I would find it hard,' she continued, after a moment's pause during which Carola's stockinged foot stroked the back of her calf expertly, 'to leave London.'

'Not even for a week?' Carola's firelit eyes glistened. Her foot found a gap in Aphra's skirts, a little patch of bare skin exposed to the cold and to the caress of her narrow, rounded toe.

Aphra took up her cup again and played with it, a prop. 'A week? Maybe. I couldn't leave England.'

'Oh, you can stay in the country. We'd want you to stay in the country.'

There was still a little tea in the cup: black, cold, and stagnant, with shredded leaves clustered at the bottom in matted clumps. If I were a wise woman I could read them, but no one has ever accused me of that. Carola's toes stroked her skin as sensuously as a hand or a tongue. Oh Christ, I would that she'd take off her stockings so I could feel flesh against flesh.

'It would be good to get out of the Smoke,' she proposed, keeping her voice even.

'It could be the adventure you always wanted,' Carola assured her, and then she leaned back in her chair - the better to send her foot climbing Aphra's leg, up to her knee. 'You'd be more than a courier or a lamplighter. There may even be a little peril.'

'And you, Carola, would you be...?'

'I'm married now. My adventures are over,' Carola replied, and her foot slid elegantly up the meagre length of Aphra's thigh, into the warmth, a crooked-toe away from contact.

Aphra heard a tiny question escape from her mouth. 'Would it please you?'

Carola flicked with her toe. Aphra slammed her cup down hard on the tabletop, striking out any other noise that she might or might not have made. She lurched backwards in her chair and stood clumsily, while Carola's feet slipped intangibly away from her, no doubt to rest daintily and unmoving by the legs of her chair. 'I'd...' she gasped, 'I'd need to see a letter of instruction before I could accept.'

Carola leaned forward, resting her chin on a bridge made by her interlaced fingers. 'Sir Sam has provided me with such a letter,' she said briskly.

'And where is it?'

She twinkled. 'It is concealed somewhere on my person.'

'Right, then!' Aphra clapped her palms efficiently. 'Sally, Lady Morland and myself must discuss matters of the utmost secrecy, so we'll retire to the bedroom and are not to be disturbed.'

The fat-faced maid looked up from the flames and rolled her eyes.

There was no fire in the bedroom, so they had to make their own warmth, especially once Aphra had unwrapped Carola from her clothes. The letter of instruction she discarded on the floor, in the grey-blue gloom. Snow still shivered out of the clouds and gathered in heavy drifts at the window, rationing the light into the room. She could still see enough to admire Carola's naked beauty, but felt cloaked in comfortable shadow as she allowed herself to be undressed; she was always more comfortable showing flesh in front of men than women.

It occurred to her that they might go outside like this - if the world were only suddenly emptied of prying eyes - to fuck in thick white drifts that would burn their skins. Instead, they had to make do with the hot cavities under Aphra's bedclothes, with the sheets pulled heavily over them, and their coats and clothes piled up further to make a heap under which their contrasting bodies could sweat and couple subtly. They were so different: Carola's complexion fair and Aphra's dark; Carola slender, Aphra plump; Carola's temper sweet and Aphra's sour; Carola - both in body and society - high where Aphra was not. They were so similar: Carola's slick and sticky hands wrapped round Aphra's face; the flesh of both bodies felt equally numb and equally thrilling under Aphra's touch; Carola's light breasts and shallow nipples still filled her mouth.

Eventually they just lay together - Aphra on her back with her thigh open to the cool damp air, Carola a mild weight across her, with her head resting against Aphra's ear - with their hands clasped on either side at the edges of the pillows.

'I hate you, you know,' Aphra told her, but her tone was dreamy. Carola licked her earlobe with the tip of her dry tongue.

'For manipulating you?' she teased. 'That takes two.'

'Yes, but you did this for him, not for us.' She could see the empty hairless bowl of Carola's armpit and tickled it, setting the other woman giggling.

'He doesn't know,' Carola replied easily, once the laughter subsided. 'Besides, if he'd come to you himself and said - If you'll go to Cambridgeshire as my eyes and ears, then I'll give you a good hard shag, promise! - you'd've laughed in his face.' She mimicked her husband's wheedling tones exactly, and that set them both laughing again for another minute.

Eventually Aphra breathed hard, and felt herself sag back into the surface of the mattress; an old one, too lumpy, poorly-stuffed and much-abused. 'So it's to be Cambridge, then?'

'It's all in the letter. Which is here somewhere. Don't let Sally put in on the fire by mistake.'

'Oh, but Cambridge!' she protested. 'Sam knows my heart lies in Oxford! Please don't send me out to the fens or that chilly city. It's barely civilised there, and the bog-people will eat me!'

'The fens are drained, and if a bogwoman eats you I'll be jealous. And it must be Cambridge, I'm afraid. 'Tis where Salomon's House is, and I doubt he'll relocate on the say-so of a passing spy. Why sir, can we not hold our convention in Oxford where the climate is fairer and I have good credit in many shops?'

'You've read my instructions, then?' Carola let her hand dip down to Aphra's stomach, teasing the crack where their two bodies touched, but Aphra was

content just to lie and think. 'Salomon's House. Should I know of it?'

'It's just a name. It means something to the magicians and villains and alchemists who'll be meeting there. The house is out on the Gogs, a little way beyond Cambridge. Salomon is the master of the estate. Not his real name, of course, but you know how these dabblers like their dressing-up and their codes and cyphers, don't you my Astraea?'

Aphra laughed. 'It sounds not very different to the Royal Society, or even the Service.'

In fact it sounded not at all dissimilar to half the Service, the half to which she was not privy; the half of fakery, magic, and science. She had glimpsed its agents occasionally in Whitehall, on the way to their rites in their hoods and gowns with mock-nooses slung round their necks, with designs of cups, swords, wands, or pentacles sown in gold-thread onto their foreheads. The Masters of Blood and Venom didn't have time for the likes of us, the everyday agents who have both feet firmly on the common ground.

Of course, under the hood they were the very same men who commanded her to Antwerp or the Americas on mundane business, but inside the hood they became transformed.

I can't say that I would be unhappy to peek under the edge of that little world.

'My Sam says this is different. This gathering is distracting from their proper duties many members of those more respectable institutions.'

'So, let me see.' Aphra shifted comfortably, allowing Carola's tireless fingers a little further down her body. 'Either it is some wicked republican plot to undo the Restoration using dark but probably nonexistent spirits -'

'The new fellow has a history of republican sentiment, so Sam has heard.'

'- or more likely, your Sam is simply peeved that he hasn't been invited to this gathering of England's finest. What new fellow?'

'Sam doesn't know. That's why he wants you to go to Salomon's House - to find out! He calls himself the Magus, he's appeared out of nowhere and won over half his peers with new insights and methods. The convention is on his behalf.'

Aphra sighed, and as she sighed she put her own fingers to Carola's mouth, which wetted and widened. 'For an adventure, this sounds dry as dust. Your husband is being nosy, and I'd rather stay a-bed with you for the next week and just pretend I went to Cambridge.'

'He 'inks the Magus 's dang'ous,' Carola replied, muffled as her tongue lapped at Aphra's fingertips. She squeezed them out again smoothly. 'Besides, he'll know when I don't come back tonight.'

And having said that, Carola slid easily back under the covers, taking her head down past Aphra's breast and stomach until she was level with the top of her thighs, where, presently, she began to draw her tongue in languorous circles. It had become too hot suddenly under the covers, so she threw them back, revealing her naked trunk to the welcome bite of winter.

The air above the covers was still an empty death-like blue, still wreathed by falling snow and creaking boards. The window was plastered almost completely

white, and the light cast uncanny shadows. So it was, that for a moment in her ecstasy, Aphra Behn imagined she saw another woman standing at the foot of her bed and reaching towards her. This woman was tall and lean, with hair falling in neat tresses around her shoulders; the colour was impossible to tell in the dim, but Aphra remembered her from dreams, and knew it was the rich red of silk and cardinals' gowns. And she knew also that while Carola Morland was the most beautiful woman in this world, there were other worlds whose women were more beautiful still, even when swaddled in shadow and memory.

The snow flattened itself on another glass, barely a week later, as the stagecoach carried Aphra Behn the final few miles towards Cambridge, the Rose, and her warm bed for the night. The next morning, she would be up early for the carriage into the Downs, to Salomon's House.

Sir Samuel had spared every expense for her journey. His letter of instruction hadn't made clear that her name in the Service was still blackened by Antwerp and her reputation as a spendthrift. The carriage was draughty, and let in all the January chills; it was old, and shook like a storm-toss'd ship whenever it struck a pothole or got bogged in mud; the driver was surly, and the company had been poor. Indeed, for the past hour she had been alone with only her thoughts, her letter, and her books, and these were an improvement on the coughing, scratching, shuffling, leering specimens of humanity she'd had to endure beforehand. She pulled her cloak tighter around her, and dug deeper into M. Pascal's Pensées.

She was to attend the gathering as a guest, and not disguised as a servant or - and she was certain this thought must have crossed Sir Samuel's grubby little mind - one of the Cambridge ladies who would be shipped out in files like slaves on a chain as entertainment for Salomon's household. Morland had concocted an adequate cover story. His agents had intercepted an invitation sent months earlier to the Americas and meant for an Englishman called Babbage, who had gone native as an Indian shaman and now took to calling himself Three Hunting Spiders, or something equally ridiculous. Astraea - with her comfortable American experience - would go in his place as his agent, claiming he was too infirm or drug-addled to travel. It wasn't quite the adventure she had been promised back when she'd been pinned between Carola and her mattress. She couldn't imagine duller and less dangerous company than philosophers and scientians. They could do nothing but think - they were almost as bad as Puritans!

She tried to imagine what the Magus might be like from the scant descriptions she'd been given, but it seemed he was known largely through correspondence and had been little seen. Her mental doodlings were quickly rubbed out by a new figure, the shape of the woman crooked over her bed as she climaxed. She might only have been a delusion, but Aphra wished she could slip easily into that beautiful madness again. She gazed expectantly out of the window, hoping to catch a flash of red hair fluttering on the winter breeze among the snow.

Aphra was a child again. In antic Jerusalem -

The coach ground to a halt - not merely a sluggish pause but an actual stop - in the middle of the white expanse of countryside, still a few miles short of Cambridge and nowhere near any buildings she could see, let alone a coaching inn. She rapped impatiently on the ceiling. 'Fuck's sake,' she yelled to the driver. 'I'm freezing my arse off in here.'

There was shouting outside. Shortly, she heard snow crunch underfoot as someone - the guard, she presumed - climbed down and walked away. If he's just going for a slash then I'm going to - No. There were more words, heated at first, then huddled and warmer. Astraea seethed with impatience. She waved M.

Pascal around the cab in her hand, no longer content to read.

Then there were more footsteps, followed by a face at her window, followed by the snout of a pistol.

'Stand and deliver!' came from the mouth, followed by a joyous crow of 'Oh, but I was born to say that! Should be on the stage, me.' The carriage door swung open; the pistol remained, pointed unwavering at her heart. She put her book down slowly and made a stout, discreet rap on the roof, met with utter silence from the driver...

Don't panic. You've faced worse than this.

The bidstand hauled himself through the door, slammed it after him, and sank his body into the seat opposite her. He was still a youth, perhaps a little more than half Astraea's age; a narrow boy with a narrow face, not unattractive but scrawny and cruel-featured. He licked his lips as he got his first proper eyeful of her, and she sensed an act - though not one that departed much from the youth's general temperament, she felt. He had unkempt straw-coloured hair that made her think of the occasional schoolboy she'd tutored in her lean years. She could imagine herself combing it straight for him. He put his hands on his lap, but still held the pistol tumescent.

What a crude boy. She smiled courteously. No point in showing him fear.

'I have a little jewellery and less money,' she said bluntly. 'Which I offer in exchange for safe passage to Cambridge.' And once there I'll make sure they hunt you down and hang you, you runty little weasel...

The bidstand laughed, more of a waterpipe-gurgle. 'We're not going to Cambridge,' he said, and as he spoke the coach lurched, and began to roll forward down the road again. Astraea hammered on the roof and called for the driver, then for the guard, but neither responded.

She turned back to her abductor, who showed her a raw red mouth full of chipped teeth. 'Is it usual,' she asked, 'for a highwayman to allow himself to be driven away, leaving his horse and accomplices on the roadside?'

'I've neither. It's only a short way from Salomon's House, and I enjoy a brisk walk of an evening. Don't call the guard again, or I'll gag you. They don't pay these poor bastards enough. They're easily persuaded to take a short detour 'cross country.'

She was showing fear now, in spite of herself. Here was no simple robbery - she could cope with that - but an ambush. 'So...' she said, 'you're taking me to Salomon's House?' And nowhere else, please God, please don't bury me in the bogs, please let me live, I will do anything...

'Might be, might not. You should've seen us when I heard this famous spy come up from London was a lady, I near creamed myself. I'll let you go if you show us your tits.'

Really? 'Really?'

'Nah, I just thought you might be a bloke passing, you're chunky enough. But I got something to prove, and what will the Magus do if I don't bring you fresh and intact? He'll punish us wicked, that's what he'll do.'

He was a Londoner, she could hear it in his voice now. 'The Magus expects me, then?'

'Lady, everyone knows you're coming. You're the worst-kept secret in England. You gotta name?'

'Astraea,' she replied, automatically. He spat, not at her, at her book.

'Plainsong. And that's my real name,' he told her. 'See, I'm not afraid of you. I'm the Magus's oldest and most trustworthy confidant. And who'll say different now?'

After that, the rough and shambling journey to Salomon's House was in some ways easier and in another much harder. It was easier because Plainsong had dispersed most of her fears; he was only a lackey, and that diminished the potency of his threat considerably; anyway, he was only taking her where by-the-by she had intended to go. Even so, there was something about him that kept her deeply alert. It was in his poise, the tautness of his face and the squint around his eyes - he was full of dark resentments. When he smiled, it was with a mirthless twist of the lips.

By journey's end, the winter sun was fast fading, but she got a glimpse of a high wall in the coachman's light, and beyond that a brooding manor, half-relieved, half-smothered in snow. This was the last she saw, as Plainsong - without warning - sprang forward and pulled a hood over her head, tightening it sharp around her neck before she could react. He bundled her brutally outside, where she slipped and made helpless impact with wet and yielding earth, a graceless thud followed by more as he hurled her belongings out beside her. The next she heard, though muffled by the hood, was Plainsong's voice at her ear, telling her to stand, while the cold metal tip of his pistol poked her backside.

It couldn't be loaded! What fool would trust a man like Plainsong with a loaded gun?! No matter, the threat was still there. She rose shakily, and at his prodding, began to march into the invisible estate.

They were outside long enough for her hands to turn blue and the pull round her neck to chafe. Then she found herself pushed through a door, and there was a mild commotion, disturbed chatter that she couldn't quite hear, but only from a couple of voices. Plainsong growled at her to keep moving, so she did, through more doors and cramped passages. This must be a servant's entrance, she imagined; underheated but still bound inside four walls, and an improvement on the winter outside.

They climbed two flights of stairs and through more corridors before finally she was ordered to stop and sit. Plainsong pulled her arms behind her and tied her. He touched her wrists with warm fingers, not as rough and crude as she expected, but still handling her as though she were an object, something easily kept or easily broken. Then he was gone.

'Couldn't you at least take this fucking bag off my head?' she yelled at last, but if he heard, if he were even still there, he made no reply. And she was left alone in the tightest of her prisons, in darkness with nothing but her thoughts for company.

Chief among them this: If I ever see Sir Sam Morland again, I'm going to kill him.

How many hours passed after that, she couldn't tell. She worked herself into a frenzy of anxiety that exhausted her, so that in spite of her difficult breathing and cramped posture, she eventually slumped into a light sleep. Eventually she was woken by an easing of her breath, first as gentle hands

unfastened the clasp at her throat, then by the cool and fresh air washing over her face as the bag was slipped upward and away from her. She coughed and a gobful of spittle spluttered out of her mouth.

'Tha - thank you,' she gasped, looking up into a space barely brighter than the inside of the hood. She was being kept in a tight and dusty room, some attic she guessed, windowless and with only a flickering candle for light; that and the faint lustrous skin of her rescuer.

'Christ.' Astraea let the word out along with the breath from her lungs, but it wasn't Christ. It had none of His phoney humility and pasty grace. It was a creature of far more vivid magics, and Aphra Behn, whose business nowadays was words, found that she simply had nothing to say. Instead she worshipped with her eyes, trying not to blink or look away for fear that she might dismiss this vision, as she had done unwittingly in her bedroom. Red-haired, exquisitely beautiful, raw and natural, it was the nymph who had visited her as a child, who now stood swaying in front of her, with Plainsong's hood still caught on her fingers.

She was studying Astraea intently, as if learning this new adult face that she could barely have seen before. Her skin no longer glowed as Aphra remembered it from her girlhood, but there was a little light from somewhere, possibly in the fabric of her costume which rippled raw red on her. It was as if she were wearing a living creature, turned inside out. Symbols glistened inside its translucent cloth, obscuring a body that might otherwise have seemed naked beneath the lean fabric.

The nymph herself seemed insubstantial. She melted suddenly in front of Astraea's eyes, and the hood fluttered through her fingers as though they were empty air. Aphra panicked, and for the first time fought the tension in her wrists, struggling to break free. A ghostly hand reached for her face, made contact, was briefly thrillingly like the touch of real flesh on flesh. Then, her mouth forming unspoken words, the illusion slipped away into shadow.

Astraea, left alone, spent some minutes screaming her heart out.

Then she went limp and hoarse, but her screams hadn't gone unnoticed. She heard footsteps pounding outside, then a door was flung open - a square of light opening in the wall and scarring her eyes. A woman - plainly dressed but clearly no servant, pretty and marked with pretty scars - stomped into the room with Plainsong close at her heels; he was waist-naked and playing unconcerned with an apple. She, by contrast, took one look at the prisoner, threw up her arms in amazement, and stormed out, leaving the door gaping and Aphra staring tired and bewildered after her. Plainsong remained, leaning back against a far wall and working on the apple with a knife, coring it, skinning it.

'Where is your Magus?' Astraea heard her tired mouth ask, but the boy barely looked at her.

Presently there were more heavy footfalls outside, and yet more bodies piled into the room - the woman again, liveried footmen, then a stranger pair by far.

The first looked like a Quaker, or maybe a plain Dutch vintner; he was quite a handsome fellow, more so than Plainsong, yet almost saintly in his humble garb, where the youth was naked and devilish. He was perhaps Astraea's age, thirty years old, give or take. Untidy brown hair, worn shoulder length, spilled out from his hat, and he had a small moustache and sharp beard in the pre-war style. He twitched, only seeming meek and innocuous; there was

something harder in his eyes. This man, whatever else he might be, was no fool. His eyes rolled when he saw Plainson's prisoner; he turned witheringly to the boy and marched him out of the room. Harsh words followed, drifting in through the open doorway, but Astraea was distracted from them by the second newcomer.

This fellow was indeterminately old. He might be an ancient man moving with vigour, or a youth feigning decrepitude. He hobbled into the room with the aid of a carved magician's staff, his body hidden by stinking grey robes, his head by a leather hood and half-mask, his lower-face smeared with mud and filth and straggling beard-hair. He had a mouth full of perfect young-man teeth, cage for a shrivelled old-man tongue. He made straight for her, pawing first her face then her neck with a smooth but sticky hand. Over her shoulder the woman hovered nervously, and Astraea willed her desperately to intervene. The shambling magician drew a wand from his belt of dangling charms, and prodded it painfully into her breast. His breath smelled foul and chemical. He spat out horrid heathen gibberish.

'I'm not afraid of you.' Her voice crawled but still she made it sound defiant. 'I am on His Majesty's Service. There are a dozen Ratcatchers at my command ready to strike, and when they do -' She left the threat hanging, but the disgusting creature only gurgled and prodded some more. Maybe I should have made it two dozen? Three?

His hand went again to her bosom, but this time his crude voice formed English words, and over his shoulder the woman's blemished face turned away, as if afraid to listen. 'So this is Morland's dupe. Shall we tell her what we do to spies in Salomon's House? Shall we tell her how we bleed her, how we smear her in dung, how we remove her breasts and privates and keep them in bottles? Shall we tell her why she will beg for these mercies? Shall we tell her what we do first to her soul?'

'Her soul's her own. You aren't going to harm her. No one here will, not any more.'

The Quaker had slipped back into the room unnoticed while the madman ranted. His voice wasn't strong, but it was melodious and it carried round the room. The woman sighed, and ran a relieved hand through her hair, then slid across the room to stand at his side. Astraea, though worn and drowsy, recognised something there, like love, but not quite...

The ragged man was less happy. He turned away from his prisoner, hunching so that by the time he faced the newcomer he was bent almost doubled. His wand stabbed the empty air between them. 'She is a spy, Magus,' he groaned. 'She comes to steal our secrets.'

Quaker-Boy shook his head. 'I have no secrets. This convention is open to anyone who wants to be here, including her, and she's as much my guest as yours. I'm sorry,' he said - addressing Astraea at last, and she lolled her head to one side to get a better look at him - 'Master Plainson has stepped over his limits, and I apologise. I hope he hasn't hurt you too badly.'

She managed a shake of her head, but faced with a little kindness, she felt desperate at last, hungry, thirsty, tired, and - above all - wishing she were back in her own little bed in London, with Carola or no. But already the Magus was at her side, working to free her from her bonds. His hands were clumsy - they shook, though only she was close enough to tell - and fumbled with the knot. The blemished woman joined them, and helped Astraea to stand once she was free.

The magician was still growling, but curtly nodded his head. 'Very well, but you must find her rooms and food, and we must talk to her before she can leave that we might better understand her ways.'

'Thank you, Salomon,' the younger man replied. He was smiling sadly, the line of his mouth just visible above Aphra's face.

Salomon and his party were already quitting the room, and the two women followed. Aphra found she could barely walk after her ordeal, but though each step was a strain, she still turned back at the door to look on the young, strange, forlorn, prosaic figure of the Magus as he was left alone in her prison. He was holding the back of her chair carefully, as if afraid he might break it.

It seemed to her that he was crying.

Chapter 6: Love in Many Masks

The theatre at Salomon's House was as large as the one he remembered from Holborn, but cleaner and lighter. A window gazed south across the downs, or would have done if thick curtains hadn't been drawn to block out the cold. He had contemplated conducting experiments into the preservative properties of snow as part of the convention, but Salomon had counselled him otherwise, muttering darkly about Lord St Albans and bad precedents.

The centre of the theatre, in the pit surrounded by stalls, was a circular dais. Here the Magus would stand and address his peers for the first time, men of letters finally translated into flesh. He would lecture here, demonstrate on this stage, conduct experiments, and beg for questions. He prowled the circumference nervously, feeling himself trapped in an endless prison from which there was no escape; a panoptic space in which every eye would be on him and every nervous pause or fault would be subject to the cruel and unsympathetic attention of his critics. There would be no relief overhead; the ceiling was a glass dome, so that God Himself could look down on them and judge. Today it was quiet, the benches empty.

From outside the theatre, he could hear the hubbub of more new arrivals as Salomon's House filled up on the eve of the convention.

Best go and greet them, yes? It's what Salomon would want, and Nick, and Alice...

Silver jumped off the dais, then trotted up the sharp steps to the doors. M. Valentine, the French representative, was lurking just outside, but that wasn't unexpected; he'd been trying to ambush the Magus since he'd arrived. Not Silver himself, but the Magus, this fictional creation that he and Nick had concocted between them in the past four years.

Silver wondered how many of the conventioners had come expecting a monster, only to find an unprepossessing disappointment. He'd tried growing a beard and moustache for devilish effect, but they were puny, lacking the Satanic majesty Nick had hoped for. He found himself patting his beard now with his fingertips, self-consciously. M. Valentine squirmed as he saw him - fear or obsequy, it was hard to tell.

'Ah,' squeaked the Frenchman, 'I hoped we might have words before tomorrow's events. There are private matters we might discuss to our mutual benefit.' He was a large man, much taller than Silver, with a head so high you might imagine that dark wig topped with patches of snow. Unlike many of the others who had arrived these last days, Valentine was not ostentatious, but dressed in sober black, as did Silver - so stood side-by-side they might appear to be

irregular twins. He was clean-shaven, and appeared, as Nick Plainsong put it, 'straighter than straight'. So many here were willing to dress up in the most ludicrous costumes to create an affect of power. By contrast, M. Valentine's aspect was contrived to make him seem harmless.

'Of course,' Silver said leisurely, 'but I'm just going to the -'

'I will walk with you then, M. Magus.'

'Of course.' And they went off together, Silver moving unhurried through the passages and galleries with Valentine insinuating himself through the air at his back, bowing - almost stooping - to talk into the Magus's ear.

'My associates and I see much potential in you that cannot be tapped on these shores. The English are, forgive me, such a provincial race. It is not that they mistrust scientia, more that they simply cannot conceive the uses to which it might be put. On this island, you will ever be a maker of toys and magical trinkets.' Silver listened, but his eyes were directed elsewhere, remembering the faces he passed, and gazing on the opulence of the furnishings and decoration. By contrast with the privations of the war years, such easy and ostentatious wealth felt to him faintly obscene.

'Are you offering the Magus a business proposition?' That was Nick Plainsong, who had slipped half-noticed alongside them, and now interjected into the space between their bodies. Valentine halted.

'We hope he would consider a future with us -'

Plainsong raised a hand, flat palm held out to silence the Frenchman. He looked to Silver for approval, and seeing a nod, replied: 'The Magus does not serve any individual nor any nation. He works for God, for the benefit of the whole world, and not any favoured part of it.'

Was Valentine offended? His face was bland and clean. 'I do not represent France in this matter -'

'The Magus will not work for any private company or party, for the same reasons.'

Valentine rolled his head back to inspect the decorated ceiling, all the while clucking sweetly as if amused by some invisible joke. Then he shrugged easily, and held out his card caught between two delicate fingers. 'We understand, but circumstances change. Should the Magus wish to reconsider, le Pouvoir bears no grudges.' Silver took the card, thanked him, and sighed generously once the Frenchman had beaten his retreat.

Nick rounded on him: 'Bloody hell, Nate! That was the biggest, richest power in the world, and you've just told 'em to go fuck themselves. I really fancy Paris of a winter. Bit of sun, money, power, influence, the King's ear, the pick of the virgins if you can find any! It'd be, you know, comfortable,' and he mock-shivered.

Nick hadn't changed much in the last four years. He was a little less sleek now, a little heavier, but on the whole, the passing of time only served to make him ever more like Nick Plainsong. He was dressed a pinch more finely than his Magus - a pinch more comfortable and a pinch more colourful - but not so much as to distract the eye, or persuade an innocent party that he might be Silver's principal. Though truth be told, he was as much Silver's agent now as his assistant; he had learned feral ambition on the rough streets of London, a drive that Silver knew he himself lacked.

'I won't live in a prison, Nick,' he said sternly, 'no matter how pretty.'

'You're happy enough with prisons of your own making. 'Sides, you might be back behind bars for real if the Service get their way.'

'We've talked about this. They're sending a spy to the convention? So? Let him come.'

'They're dangerous. I spoke to Salomon, and he said...'

Silver kept his voice low: 'Salomon has his own secrets to guard, but that's his business, not mine.' And I'm not sure I trust you with Salomon; he is the sort of magician you were looking for when you came burrowing into my cellar - all chants and smokes and wicked incantations to dark powers - and I would not have him lead you astray.

'Magus -'

'I know you're just trying to protect me, but I don't need protection. Not today.'

'Yes Magus,' Nick replied, through gritted teeth. He was a handsome boy, but he could seem wilfully ugly sometimes. Still, that seemed to be an end to the matter, and they continued in silence to the balcony overlooking the main hall, where the assorted philosophers, thinkers, tinkerers, idealists, engineers, fraudsters, and charlatans of England (and beyond) were gathering. Salomon would be down there - the tall handsome young man dressing up in squalid rags, stoop'd and making a more formidable magician than Silver could ever manage. The new arrivals were his guests as much as Silver's, drawn hither by a year's worth of organising, cajoling, and impressing on his part. The Magus was merely a mayfly attraction in Salomon's raree show.

Silver was more than slightly nervous of Salomon, and chose not to descend immediately. He spotted Alice Lynch at the balcony window, staring out intently at everything and nothing in the white world beyond the walls. He made for her softly, wondering how close he could get before she was distracted from her trance -

Plainsong leaped in ahead of him and slapped her playfully across the rump. She started, but spared only a second to glower at the boy before turning back to the window. She hadn't lost any of her inky seriousness in the decade Silver had missed, nor in the half-decade since he had saved her from whoring herself in Cheapside taverns. If anything, she'd become more intense and murkier.

Silver drew alongside her, so they stood together like two awkward wood pins, tilting into each other's light but not touching. 'What are you looking for?' he asked. She pointed.

The window commanded a view of the grounds of Salomon's House, mostly lathered in snow that still fell in wind-skewed blasts. The drive to the north road had been thoroughly swept and salted, so that the carriages could come and go, depositing their odd occupants on Salomon's doorstep. One of the oddest was perched right below the line of the window - the carriage itself was unmarked and unremarkable, but the driver was something else. Above his coats and furs, and under the tied hat that bobbed and shook but would not be dislodged by the winds, was a mask of bleak ivory. Smooth in places and jagged elsewhere, it had the hint of an authentic skull, but not from any healthy animal, nor from any that Silver knew. Even the great elephant skulls he had inspected in his

work didn't have the broad flat majesty of this beast.

It must be Biblical, he thought, the skull of a giant or a behemoth.

Plainsong leaned also at the balcony beside them, and now clapped his hands and whistled. 'Oh ho! This looks to be evil shit!'

'What are they?' Silver asked. 'Where are they from?'

'They're a foreign party who petitioned Salomon for admission, Nate,' Alice informed him blandly; she alone would not call him Magus, and he blessed her for it. She checked her papers: 'The Faction of Paradoxes.'

'Bit of a mouthful, that.' Plainsong grinned and winked across the gap at Alice.

She did not dignify him with even a glance, so he bowed theatrically and backed away. Silver watched him go, sliding down the curling banister to crash the party below. Once he was satisfied they were alone, Silver looked back to the coachman, who was pulling away from the door towards the stables.

'By Christ,' he mused. 'What have I unleashed here?'

Alice finally smiled at him, and made her face pretty. Her blemishes creased when she smiled now, and were more vivid than they had ever been when she was a child. He had often wondered - but never asked - what she had done after she fled her father's arrest, how she had come to fall so far that she had nothing to sell but her body, and how many times she'd surrendered to that cruel trap of poverty before he'd blundered back into her life with his little celebrity and larger bag of gold. 'We should go down and greet them. Show your face. Mingle. You don't want them to think you aloof or frightened, do you?'

He shook his head, and let her lead him to the staircase.

'I'm sorry about Master Plainsong,' he said. 'He'll learn.'

'He's at that age,' Alice replied, 'and no, he won't.'

It wasn't that Alice and Nick hated each other, though they did. It was that they hated each other as a brother and sister would hate one another, the evil sentiment complicated by blood and similarity. They were certainly contrasts. Nick, his assistant, was expansive and loud. She, his secretary, was demur and disliked being touched. Nick had turned him into a monster, while she was there to remind him that he was not so. She had on a plain grey gown with tight sleeves and a high clasping collar; it concealed her completely below the neck, though she wore her hair free in dense chestnut ringlets. She took him down the stairs, and every step was a blow in his chest, his stomach, and his loins.

Christ, Nate, she was seven years old when you first met her!

True, but that was the better part of two decades gone.

As they descended, they heard the doorman bellow: 'Representing the ELEVEN-DAY EMPIRE - COUSIN HATEMAN of FACTION PARADOX!'

Another skull-headed personage had stepped into the hall, this one a handsome woman judging from her dress and jewels, the olive smoothness of her naked shoulders and barely-concealed legs, the daintiness of her tread, and the curve of her hips. Even so, the lecherous old wizards who filled the hall were

none too quick to be attracted by her exotic sex, recoiling as they were from the bleached bone of her face that was - if anything - uglier and more brutal than that of her driver.

Salomon, though, was striding towards her as best he could for a man feigning a crouch. He fast-hobbled using his stick, the end still browned and bloodied from the unfortunate footman who, that morning, had made a mistake of calling him Doctor Bendo aloud. Salomon took the game of secret names very seriously. As he greeted the newcomer, Silver slipped alongside him.

Cousin Hateman held out a jar with a grizzled grey homunculus squashed inside it, quite dead and blank-eyed, yet somehow still seeming to nudge and prod at the glass. 'Please accept the gift of this petrified monkey foetus on behalf of my principal, Mother Sphinx, and the founder of our order, Grandfather Paradox.'

Salomon plucked the unborn monkey hungrily from her hands, his eyes glistening and tongue licking as though he was about to swallow it, but instead he palmed it off onto a servant. Silver decided to chime in: 'Where exactly is the Eleven-Day Empire, cousin?'

Hateman's skull surrendered nothing. 'It's not a place, sir. It's an aspiration.'

'This is our beloved friend and Magus,' Salomon growled, and the creature called Hateman curtsied and took his hand. Her skin was warm. He had expected a grave-cold thing. She turned back to her host.

'Sir, might we have your permission to raise a shrine in our rooms for the duration of our stay?'

Salomon clucked and spouted more of his nonsense words. Enochian, he claimed, though Silver knew better. 'Of course, of course, let me show you the way...' and his arm was round the cousin's waist, pulling her away toward the staircase. Silver smiled softly as both disguises disappeared into the crowd.

'Don't fancy his chances with her, I don't,' Plainsong whispered into his ear. He had a bad habit of creeping. Silver had the odd sensation that everyone present was looking at him, and he felt a powerful urge to hide himself. Better still, he wanted to shout, to yell with all the force of his lungs. I'm a fake and a fraud. I'm no Magus, and all my insights are gleaned from between the teeth of angels. God creates while I but copy!

Alice and Nick regarded him, both fondly in their own manners. His further thoughts were half-obliterated by another thunderclap from the liveried servant at the door.

'From TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE - JEOVA UNUS SANCTUS!'

Silver looked over his shoulder, then to his two young confidants, the only people he truly trusted here (and, in Nick's case, only a little). 'You'll have to excuse me,' he apologised, 'this is a man I must meet.'

Of all Silver's many correspondents, the man who called himself Jeova was the strangest and the strongest. It was only in the last two years, once Silver was well-established as the Magus, that they had come into contact. He cherished the letters he received, even the early ones when the mathematician's wariness and collegiate pride were spelled out in brusque, suspicious sentences. Later, as the younger man found no threat in Silver's enquiries, the letters grew voluminous and dense, the words cramped but

well-spaced and blotched from hurry. Jeova they were signed, always Jeova. Even outside Salomon's convention he guarded his true name with the abiding secrecy of an old magician. He held some post at the university that he would not describe, and claimed an aversion to travel - and Silver was grateful that Salomon's House was so well-placed for Cambridge, so that he might lure the fellow here and get a measure of the man in his flesh.

He found a man some twenty years his junior coming haltingly into the hall, perhaps prowling, perhaps stepping into a world he found alien. He had less delicate features than Silver expected; Silver had imagined a pasty, baby-faced scholar but this man had a heavy jaw and stern profile with knotted eyebrows. He had a silvery blond wig on his head and was hatless, but was otherwise dressed as unremarkably as Silver himself. As the Magus hove across the floor to meet him, Jeova looked upon him and nodded firmly, as if knowing exactly whom he was about to see. As it turned out, the nod was a spasm of a kind to which he was prone, and he had not recognised Silver at all.

Silver greeted him in Salomon's absence, and offered to show him direct to the rooms that had been set aside for him. It would have been easier - and perhaps politer - to hold their inaugural conversation in the hall, where both men could mix freely with their peers, but Silver was possessed of a jealousy and wanted Jeova to himself. The man's insights were unparalleled. Silver could not believe that he didn't have an angel's egg of his own, yet a man capable of such thought unaided would be more miraculous than all of Heaven's works combined.

But the miracle was taciturn, and said little as they wove through the hall and into the passages of Salomon's House. He reminded Silver of Nick Plainsong most of all, and then only of Plainsong when the boy was in his moods. It wasn't until they were in the humble quarters - though Jeova's eyes flickered approvingly as they stepped inside, his university situation could barely be less comfortable - that Silver heard more than the odd word or grunt from those pursed lips.

'I have a gift,' he said, stumbling on his tongue as he had on his feet, 'meant for Doctor Bendo.'

Not Salomon, eh? 'We'll hunt him down presently. Right now he has other matters on his hands. When you see him you must call him by his -'

Jeova had slipped a leather wallet from his jacket and now unwrapped it, holding out a tattered sheaf of browned papers, torn and scratched, divorced from all but the crudest of bindings. The title leaf was half-ripped away, but the first two lines were legible.

Observations upon the cycle of the sun in the sky and the seed in the fields

Silver felt himself pause, knowing what he was seeing but unable to react or speak or move.

'This may be the only extant copy,' Jeova said plainly. 'I have found no other in my researches.'

'May I?' Silver took the book from Jeova's unresisting hand, and the damp-rippled paper felt like heresy on his skin. 'I have never seen this, it was published without my knowledge. I know not what liberties were taken with the text.'

He could not, now that he had it, bring himself to read more than he had already seen. He stood frozen like this while Jeova eased clumsily past him to

the bed, to test the mattress with his hands. After a time, he took the book back, and replaced it in the wallet for Salomon's inspection. He seemed unmoved by Silver's silence, perhaps even a little amused.

'You have read it?' Silver asked, eventually.

'I have.'

'I would appreciate your thoughts, sir.'

Jeova lowered himself onto the bed and stretched back on his elbows, the first hint of the smooth and languid mind in those cramped limbs and trunk. 'It is a juvenile and untutored work. There are insights and crucial observations scattered hither and yon, as wildflowers may be found on the most inhospitable outcrops. If there was an argument, I fear it was so garbled that I failed to find it. You snatch at divinities in the clouds, sir, thinking not of the steps upon which you must stand to reach them.'

Silver had thought he could take the harshest criticism from this man and found that he was wrong; the words were like ash in his ears. But Jeova continued: 'You should not have rushed to publish, though I see 'twas not your intent. Yet among the muddle I sensed a mind rapt in delight, which is to be encouraged in an unschooled fellow such as yourself. And by your letters and this convention I find that you have the greatest of all intellectual gifts, namely the capacity for improvement.'

Silver made slow repetitive bobs of his head. 'You think I journey in the right direction?'

'Indeed I do, though perhaps with unnecessary digressions out of the way. I would strive to clean the dross from your mind as well as your soul. Perhaps then you might become an unparalleled man.'

'Then I thank you, sir, though I fear I will ever disappoint you.'

Jeova turned those unfriendly lips into their opposite, a rare and warm smile, and he patted a space down on the bed beside him so that Silver might sit. 'This convention, I would that it had a more classical name. The word is a trifle.'

'I seek to frame learning in good English, sir. Latin is beyond me; it is a language of the dead.'

'Ah,' Jeova sat sharp upright, his eyes twinkling, 'but this makes it a tongue that cuts across all boundaries, therefore perfect for communication between, let us say, Italians and Poles who might otherwise have nothing else in common. Thus we avoid the confusion of nations.'

'Don't you think, sir, that a language might create its own nation? One from which I am excluded?'

'Perhaps. You could always learn.'

'I have no talent for it.'

'That is indeed a problem.'

Silver looked on Jeova's sly, inscrutable face and saw not just the man of learning and insight he had expected, but something altogether greater. They were kin, like twins though born from separate wombs in separate years. The

eyes in Jeova's sockets were his eyes, windows into the same soul where the same lights and shadows moved. In personality Jeova seemed a much different man, with other tempers and drives, but those were matters of the body, governed by their varied humours. No, it was as if they were halves of the same being. Apart they slept; united they... they could...

'We might change the world,' Silver said softly.

'Indeed we might,' Jeova agreed, though perhaps he was thinking of another thing. A strand of hair had fallen across Silver's forehead, and the scholar raised a thumb to flick it back into place.

Silver stepped off the mattress and stood to petition his guest, who suddenly looked crushed and longing perched on the edge of the bed, like a lonely child, like a wilting flower. 'You understand the nature of my work here; that it is open and will be shared; that I have no secrets.'

'That was made clear in the invitation,' Jeova opined dryly, the humour that had once settled there now scattering.

'I have one secret, sir, that I have shared with no one, not with my friends or my associates or any of my correspondents. I would be honoured to share it with you.'

Jeova nodded curtly, and Silver - his hand pausing only once and briefly - reached inside his coat to find the bundle he had concealed there, against his heart. He rested it on his palm, unwilling even now to let it go, and pulled back the wrapping until the glow of the egg was revealed to light the room. Silver looked to Jeova, but found a man neither impressed nor awed. He was flat-faced.

'What is this?' he said eventually, without sentiment.

'This is the philosopher's stone,' Silver told him, and watched a little smile crease on the corner of the man's lips. Disappointed, he began to describe how he had come by the egg, how Christ's pilots had appeared to him, the insights it had given him -

Jeova cut across him. 'You would be better off without it. Throw it away.'

'It speaks to me in the voice of angels,' Silver protested.

'It echoes your own voice, nothing more. Learning is not given by divine revelation, Master Silver - if it ever were, those days are gone. Today it is application, measurement, and repetition. The philosopher's stone must be striven for, it does not simply land by chance in the lap of the alchemist. Throw it away!'

'It has shown me -'

Jeova was shaking and almost stood, but checked himself. 'Trickery! You are blinded by false light, like Licetus with his Bologna stone, or that Hamburger who last year found illumination in his own distilled piss.' The hardness held in Jeova's eyes for a moment, then smoothed and softened. 'Sir, I do not say this to attack you. This... fraudulent stone... is a crutch, and I would liberate you. It does not give you insight. You merely hear your own thoughts and see your own brilliance reflected by it.'

'I disagree. Must you take this from me?'

'One must not be confounded by one's own eyes. Come, put it away and let us talk by God's honest sunlight.'

Silver did as he was told, putting the egg back into his coat along with his rejection. He did not allow himself to become truculent, but pushed his bad humour back down into the darkest part of his soul and engaged with Jeova. They turned to matters of pure learning and practical application, and he was soon able to forget, as the language of numbers and the description of methods drowned out that broken little voice of disappointment. The afternoon sun dipped below the horizon and still they talked, lighting candles close by the bed that revealed their faces and nothing more in the darkness. Jeova tested him - and he parried as best he could - but in time he also found himself testing back, probing the limits of the mathematician's knowledge, the nimbleness of his reasoning, and the sharpness of his wits. Once, for a moment, he almost thought he had the fellow confounded.

They might have talked forever, but were interrupted by an insistent hammering on the door, then Alice's voice yelling not for the Magus but for Nate. Silver sprang to his feet and went to let her in. She had sounded distressed, and in the waxy light of the candles she seemed livid.

'Oh Nate, thank Christ!'

'Please don't use that name in vain,' Jeova murmured from the back of the darkness.

But Alice ploughed on: 'It's Nick Plainsong. You won't believe what he's gone and done now!'

What Nick had gone and done now was stage a single-handed ambush of the Service's spy on the road from London. He'd succeeded, though not exactly admirably, and had brought the fellow back to Salomon's House at gunpoint. Silver made his excuses to Jeova, and allowed Alice to lead him up into the attic that Nick had converted into a makeshift cell. His anger mounted with every step, not just because Nick had ignored his wishes, but with a burning personal fury. No one should be imprisoned for my sake - that is abominable!

There was also the matter of Jeova, of the conversation left disrupted and unfinished, so many precious thoughts stillborn. He had the sense that once he had left Jeova's room there would be no going back - a chance had been laid before him, but he had not taken it and it would not be proffered again. He tried not to let momentary frustration guide him, but when he got a hold of Nick, he bawled the boy out with a ferocity than he hadn't intended, a tirade he would at length regret. Plainsong absorbed the flood of righteous anger, seeming neither upset nor contrite. He wore a cool and baleful mouth; there were teeth in it, but it was not a smile.

Silver was surprised to find that the spy was a woman, a short and chubby creature who looked bedraggled by snow, exhaustion, and cramp from being tied in a chair. He would make copious apologies in time, but he doubted she would be in the mood for them now; she had that air of oppression he had seen before only in men who had spent long months in prison. And that is on your conscience, Nate, when it ought by rights to be on some other, on Nick...

I am the Magus. It is done in my name.

He found himself alone in the attic, a roof-space devoted to nothing but the storing of old boxes. Time and decay worked rapidly in these abandoned places; he could smell the crumbling of wooden boards and the flaking of brick, while the mummified remains of insects dusted his soles and his coat. It was a lower

but more spacious cell than he remembered. Sure he couldn't be overheard, he let out a demon that hollered and dashed the spy's chair into firewood against the wall.

Composing himself, Silver brushed the cobwebs and grime from his shoulders and went back down to find Jeova. There was still a light visible under the door, and he knocked softly to no answer. It wasn't locked, so calling the pseudonym gently, he pushed inside and found his correspondent still there but otherwise engrossed in a new companion. Jeova was sprawled on the bed, while a half-naked youth straddled his midriff. The mathematician's eyes were fixed unwaveringly on the boy's face while his scholarly hands questioned the hard-muscled chest, the flat board of his stomach, then lower.

Silver watched, frozen. Jeova made a slow lizard-blink and would have turned if his lover hadn't hurriedly leant to kiss him on the mouth and pull his wig playfully down across his eyes. The bare-chested young man then turned and raised a warning finger to his lips, gesturing to his Magus to close the door. Silver, whose memory had emptied itself with embarrassment, recognised Nick Plainsong at last. He pulled the door back into its jamb. He paced away, feeling thoroughly defeated. What little he felt he had was now knocked from him by this final confusion, this betrayal... no, it wasn't betrayal, it was pure theft, the prize of reason snatched away by passion... He reeled in the corridor, grasped for a wall, and found it too smooth to prevent him dropping to his knees.

He imagined he had gone through every subtle combination of humour that the human body could manage, to the point where he could no longer feel anything. What turned and twisted inside him now was formless chaos. I can't do this tomorrow, I can't...

Alice found him there, his hand pressed desperately to the wall as though it were his only anchor in the solid world. She gathered him up before anyone else could see them, and helped him back to his quarters.

She laid him out on his bed, took his hat from him, and hooked it on the back of his door. Even that would have seemed an effort to him. She shut out the light from the corridor and lit a solitary candle. It was the only heat in the room, but he did not feel January cold, as Alice must have done. He yawned, a vast eruption that nearly snapped off his jaw.

'Alice?' he said kindly, not wishing to seem too frail. 'You found somewhere to put the spy?'

'Her name's Astraea. She's asleep now in my bed.'

'There's barely room for you in that cupboard.'

'I'll lie elsewhere. We must be rested for the morning.'

Alice took up her candle and pressed against him, pushing him down into the mattress, so there was no gap between the front of her body and his. He gasped, suddenly uncomfortable and suddenly excited. 'Alice...' She put her hand on his lips; her face, in skipping yellow light, was revealed in all its haggard weariness, anxiety, and resolve. He would wish later that it was this look that excited him, but the truth was that he had stirred for her minutes before, when she touched him, when she led him back here.

'You never did abandon me, Nate,' she told him, as she stroked first his chest, then his face, then - through the cloth of his breeches - his cock, 'and I won't abandon you now.'

'Alice, I am a quarter-century older than you!'

'So! No one knows that. Not even Nick knows that. Nate,' she finished, her lips trembling as if they resisted the task of making words, 'between you and me, there is no sin. There can't be.' Then she put her mouth to his to stop him talking, and his lips met hers without reluctance.

When she pulled away a string of his spit came with her, on her tongue.

She put the candle down to undress him, struggling with his numb limbs and fiddly buttons, and forever casting her eyes upwards to make sure that she had not scared him or angered him. Only once he was completely naked - still pressed down on the bed - did she try to kiss him again or touch his body. Her hands were panicked and rushing; they found his erection too quickly, and he spent heavy white gobs across her fingers and the front of her dress. So he found strength to intervene, and took her wrist to guide one set of fingers around his bony body. Her other hand dripped cooling semen onto the candle-flame, which sizzled into extinction.

She was shyer than Ann, and would not undress herself until they were in darkness. Her touch didn't remind him of Ann's, as he thought it might have done, and as she nuzzled her mouth to his face, his chest, and his flank, he realised he could no longer remember what Ann looked like or smelled like or felt like. Alice was the overwhelming presence on top of him, the grey glimmer of her night-time skin half visible, its touch succulent but its warmth nourishing. He grew bolder in the dark and hoped not to disappoint her, but she was ever quiet, not crying out as they coupled, but only breathing harshly to a frantic rhythm.

'Nate,' she said afterwards, while his anointed cock shrivelled and squeezed out of her body. 'I do love you. I couldn't say it, but I do.'

She sounded frightened. He stroked her face, her stomach, and her arse, wishing that she were happier. He had found nothing but joy when their bodies met. 'You didn't need to say it aloud,' he explained. 'I knew it, always.'

She seemed contented by that, made a simpering mewl, and pressed close against him, her breasts snuggling his side; her thigh crooked over his flank; her hand pressed down on his chest so tight and hot that he expected by the morning it would have left a mark. But it did not.

Chapter 7: Mumbo Jumbo

Little Sister Greenaway paused at the Magus's door, pressed her hand gently to its wood, and listened to what it had to tell her. It was the skill she had learned best in her year's-worth of instruction with Faction Paradox - befriending the spirits of buildings. Cousin Hateman speculated that it must be because she'd invested so many of her dreams and fancies in the structure of Thomas Piper's old house outside London. That was long gone, of course, but it was there that she'd discovered the art of communicating with the walls, the doors, the bricks and mortar; of gaining a house's trust and persuading it to spill its secrets. All architecture had its own ghosts, tiny imagos like loa but not loa.

She had yet to commune with a loa, or find one to ride her. She had tried - the Grandfather knew she had tried! - but they resisted her blandishments and advances. Even in her drugged trances, at the height of Faction rituals, they had only swirled around her, grey as the sea, saying nothing. So disappointing.

She whispered to the door and it told her about the still, sleeping contents of the interior. Nathaniel Silver lay uneasily abed, though his doubts and guilts and anxieties about the morning had been tamed and muted by Alice's love. The little sister smiled grimly to herself and moved on, still not quite believing that Silver could be the fearful power her cousins imagined.

She tried her trick at another door: here, the boy Plainsong and his lover Jeova were abed but not sleeping. The room was swelling with their sweat and carnal energies. She heard Plainsong quite audibly, without the benefits of Paradox magics, though Jeova was as quiet as a dormouse. Nevertheless, he was there, allowing the boy to slake his lusts, perhaps absorbing some confidence from his lover's cocksure manner. Little Sister Greenaway, who might have been primly shocked at such goings-on when she had been plain young Mistress Piper, just hoped it was distracting Plainsong from his customary treachery. No, the room whispered sadly, he is planning some mischief or other, to be put into action once his seed is spilled.

She let them get on with it, and set out through Salomon's House in search of the room set aside for Cousin Hateman. No one saw her or challenged her as she moved through the house. She kept in the shadows, letting them render her mute and invisible to the occasional footmen, servants, or revelling alchemists she passed in the passage. Shade-magic was another discipline that had come easily to her in the plague year of her instruction. She could make her silhouette twist and turn and dance with more elegance and greater precision than any of her tutors (save perhaps Mother Sphinx, whose shadow barely seemed to be there half the time and seemed infinitely more active than her slothful physical body). Nevertheless, she was still a little sister, still in her period of probation after five long years. If they succeeded this week then she would be cousin at last, have her own *sombras que corta*, a weapon uniquely fitted to her shadow-hand..

In her flesh hand she carried the dolly, which was a third discipline she had mastered.

Faction Paradox's room was lightless when she arrived, the bed and other furniture undisturbed, the fireplace empty of everything except flecks of old ash. It wasn't quite deserted. Cousin Suppression was sitting in a corner reading a paper-bound book by a portable light powered by electricicks. She knew Suppression the least well of her cousins, save that his name was well-fitted, as he kept his thoughts and character largely concealed behind a taciturn, almost shy countenance. He rarely spoke to her, and when he did speak he didn't look at her, not out of arrogance but almost the opposite, a kind of reverence. Then again, he did this with the other cousins too; only Mother Sphinx had his full attention, and their conversations were hushed or private.

One thing they all knew about Suppression; he was an inveterate reader. He had a stack of long prose romances called *The Homeworld Chronicles*, which - she had learned - were sentimental works put out by the Great Houses to propagate slanders and malicious falsehoods about their enemies, the Faction among them. *The Homeworld* itself - that monstrous power that put whole worlds to the sword - was shown to be a haven of civilisation and liberty, ever-threatened by the swarming, slaving hordes of Faction Paradox and the rest. Suppression would sit in the corner reading through them, occasionally looking up to shout out 'Lies!' or 'Hacks!' before returning his eyes patiently to the page. Cousin Amphigorey had once confided in Greenaway his suspicion that Suppression had been one of the Homeworld's tame authors, until the guilt of it had become too much to bear and driven him into the arms of the Faction. Then again, Amphigorey had confided a lot of things in her that had turned out not to be true, the size of his penis for one.

They feared the Homeworld, all her cousins. The Homeworld would kill them all, if they couldn't find some weapon that would give them a decisive edge. And they had found Nate Silver, who seemed to be less like a weapon to Greenaway's eyes than any other thing on Earth.

Suppression looked up as she approached, smiled wanly, but said nothing. He had her mask, and as she placed it over her head, Greenaway was remembered of the claustrophobic freedom that she had not enjoyed for many months now.

There was another door, one that Greenaway instinctively knew couldn't be read. Suppression, a gentleman in spite of his lumpen stolidity, opened it and allowed her to pass through first. So she returned to the shrine she had last seen over four years previously, when it had been built into the wall of an abandoned old stables on the road to Islington. That the shrine had relocated itself was no longer a surprise; her sigh was simply one of recognition, of coming home and finding herself among family.

Here was the altar and the blind stone windows she had spent so much time dusting (until it had been pointed out to her that dust simply didn't accumulate in the shrine as it would in the solid world), though where before they had been mossed and petrified, now they seemed alive. The altar was flecked with glistening points like stars, and all surfaces hummed with the long wordless chant of the loa. The architecture of the shrine was a mystery to her; it would never respond simply to her caresses, as stone or brick buildings would. It was not a building at all, she thought sometimes, but a womb, or maybe a world in its own right. This was a between-place, not a place itself. Of course it could move.

The family was waiting for her: Cousin Hateman, distractedly removing her spectacles before donning her mask; Cousin Amphigorey, leaning up against the very pillar where they'd first drunkenly kissed during their ill-advised affair; Mother Sphinx, reclining on her wheeled-chair that prowled round the edges of the shrine under its own ticking volition; and even Faction Cat, who was still as perky and kittenish as she had been four years ago, without a hint of grey in her fur or girth round her belly. She had not aged at all.

The last time they had been together, Mother Sphinx had told her. 'While you're out in the solid world, Little Sister, we get eaten up by the loa. We sleep in their bellies and don't grow old.' She had thought this a fancy, a turn of phrase, until now.

Greenaway nodded, putting her fist up to the mouth of her mask. She had seen her family only irregularly in the last four years, usually only one and usually Hateman, whom - it had soon become clear to her - was Sphinx's trusted cousin among cousins. And while they slept, she had kept up her vigil over Silver and his growing band of followers, one slow day at a time, until she had almost forgotten her superiors in the order.

With her free hand, she tickled Faction Cat's chin and listened to her purr merge into the thrum of the loa. She could never forget the loa...

She held up the dolly, built up over the years from his body, his hair, his spit, his blood, his dried shit, his flaked skin, his spunk, and his tears. She'd found a way to collect them all. 'Nathaniel Silver,' she proclaimed, before describing her evening's rites, and what she'd learned from the Magus's room. She could imagine the smiles under their bone hoods, perhaps pride, perhaps condescension. She still felt provincial among these proud cosmopolitan Venetians. They humoured her, but in their hearts felt the solid and spirit worlds were too deep and too complex for her to comprehend.

Hateman, who could be the most patronising of them all, put a reassuring hand on her little sister's shoulder. Greenaway regarded it through neutral eyes, not sure how she felt.

'Tomorrow's when it happens,' the older woman said - was she still older, after resting so long outside time? 'The loa swirl round him like the winds round the calm centre of a hurricane. Tomorrow's when the storms break.'

'What will happen?' she asked. 'Will he be hurt?'

Hateman shook her bone-head, not a no, just non-committal. 'We don't know.'

Mother Sphinx raised her hands, palms the size of Greenaway's naked face, and brought them together in a thunderclap. 'Powers coming,' she declared. 'Powers and les mystères, they coming too. We may be dead tomorrow.' Greenaway felt her heart tremble, a little reflection of the great fear that Mother Sphinx must feel, but the mother was laughing: 'Mother Sphinx thinks that every night. Sun goes down, remind us all of death, of the bargain we all made.'

'I didn't,' Amphigorey muttered, but he was just being bitter. She hadn't imagined he could still be upset after four years, but then it hadn't been four years. Not for him.

Hateman took the offering from Greenaway's hands. 'A biodata dolly. How cute.'

'What will you do with it?' Greenaway asked. 'I still think we could bargain with him. He's a good man, he wouldn't turn us down without good reason.'

Hateman nodded. 'Alice could take the offer to him. She can be very persuasive.'

'She has a very persuasive cunt.'

That was Amphigorey, who was still bristling from the failures of old romance. Greenaway regarded his contempt - for him still fresh - from a distance of years. 'Alice won't be there tomorrow,' she said firmly. 'He's asked her to go into the city for the week. He doesn't like her involved with his work like this. He never has. He still thinks of her as this little spark he first saw on her father's knee. Innocent.'

'He's 'fraid for her,' Sphinx boomed evenly, driving her chair alongside Hateman so she could take the dolly from her protégé's hands. 'He knows he got power, he just don't know what. Nor do we. Grandfather himself wouldn't know. Mother Sphinx makes no deals till she knows what she's buying.'

'That's why we need the dolly,' Hateman continued. 'We have the rest of the night to summon and bind the loa, around Silver. Mother Sphinx tells us there are powers and mysteries at work here, so we need to lock them out. We need to build a wall of loa round Nathaniel Silver's biodata so thick that you couldn't ram a timeship through it. No one is going to take this opportunity away from us. Not the Great Houses, not their enemy, no one.'

'Houses coming,' Mother Sphinx said; and for a moment there was no sound in the shrine, except the low groan of the loa in the walls. Then Mother Sphinx repeated: 'Great Houses coming. Tomorrow, maybe? Day after, maybe? Mother Sphinx feels it.'

Then there was more silence, this time interrupted by Amphigorey, a faint

whimpering noise that chilled Greenaway to the core and put a little pity for him back into her heart. 'Oh fuck,' he said quietly. 'We're all dead.'

Hateman was brisk and practical as ever. 'We need to get started,' she said.
Chapter 8: Ghosts of Fleas

The Service spy - Astraea as she styled herself - was a slug-abled. She deserved her rest, but it began to irritate Silver that she didn't stir; not after he had knocked (three times), entered her room with a heavy tray of clanking cutlery and dishes, set it beside her bed (so the steamy aroma of the stew and fresh-baked bread might tempt her awake), coughed, stood helpless, tramped round the room, prodded, and finally given up and gone to stand at the window. Alice had not been in his bed this morning, and there was a shallow dent on the mattress where she had lain in the night. Silver resented this usurper who lingered indolently under a mound of sheets with her drool soaking the pillow, while Alice was up early and active.

He breathed out, the air abandoning his body as cool white steam. It was this noise that seemed to wake Astraea. He heard her tiny voice, still new to him, laced with sleepy insolence: 'Oh, it's you.'

'I brought you some food,' he said, without turning. 'From Salomon's kitchens. You must thank Salomon for his hospitality, by-the-by.'

'He's the mad fellow, right? Stoops? Leers? Looks like he hasn't bathed in a hundred years?'

'That's him.' He hid his smile from her as he turned. The she-spy was sat up in bed, her hair undone, her eyes still wary and haggard from her ordeal, but her skin marked a ruddy red that had not been apparent the night before. She was no ravishing beauty, being too thick around the lips and jowls, with a strong nose, a heavy arched brow, and an inclination to scowl. She had on a man's white shirt beneath the sheets. Her toes had crept out at the bottom of the bed, dainty pink things prickling out of her flat feet and stubby ankles.

More clothes had been left for her on a chair in the corner. Servants' clothes, male clothing, left - he suspected - to make her feel uncomfortable, because Salomon did have a few girls on staff, mainly in the kitchens. Astraea's own belongings had been left in the snow by Plainsong, and she'd have to wait for a thaw to recover them.

Her voice crack'd. 'May I have something to drink?'

'There's water in the jug.'

'Water? Fuck that shit! Beer or burnt wine!'

He shrugged helplessly. 'Whisky?' She nodded. 'Whisky,' he said. He fetched some.

How is it that I've become attendant on someone who, all voices assure me, wishes me ill?

When he returned, she was up and prodding at the ashes that filled the fireplace. She had dragged half the sheets with her, curled round her ankles, but was naked from the waist down and shivering. Silver, confronted by the sight of her fleshy buttocks, felt first a wave of embarrassment, then arousal, then a further and deeper wave of shame. Astraea noticed him and straightened to snatch the bottle. She knocked back a mouthful before he could say a word.

She must have noticed the stilted, sightless face he was pulling, because she began to play to it. She slumped onto the edge of the mattress, with the bottle in one hand and her eyes fixed on him - his crotch, not his face. Her legs were crooked open, but she kept her ankles crossed. This was a taunt, not an invitation. He refused to close his eyes or look away.

'You must be cold,' he observed.

She rubbed her arms theatrically. 'You look like a rabbit. You smell like a rabbit. You're a funny sort of Magus.'

'Yes, I suppose I am, Astraea, and you're a funny sort of goddess.' He turned away - but carefully, keeping his head still focused on her blueing body, as if daring her not to shiver. She tore wordlessly at the bread, and began to drop chunks into the stew. Her mouth was an unpretended starving thing. She began to shovel stew away and winced as it burned her.

'I need this,' she said, when her face was full - the closest to thanks he would get from her. 'Why are you still here?'

'This is my assistant's room. I'm sending her to Cambridge and have to collect her things.'

The spy shrugged. Be my guest. Silver felt released from the terrible enticing sight of her body and went to find Alice's trunk. 'I'm sure Alice would have leant you a change of clothes, but -'

She cut across him. 'I saw her last night, yes? She's a skinny thing, and whatever else I may be I'm hardly that.'

'If you say so.' She was a heavy woman, if not precisely fat; with shallow bumps of flesh round her neck and stomach. He did not usually find such women attractive. He looked back to her and saw her cramming pitifully, her borrowed shirt spattered with stew dripping from her careless spoon and mouth.

'Once she's gone,' Astraea ate and spoke at the same time, 'how many women will there be in this house? And I mean guests, not just servants or sluts. I'd be surprised if there is even one.'

'There's you.'

She took another slug of whisky. 'I am on Service, sir, you would do well to remember that. I am here to run you to ground, Master Magus.'

He shrugged. 'I am no Magus, madam. If you want such a man go to see Doctor Bendo, Salomon as is. Under the mask of his title he'll fondle and abuse you, then sell you some potion that'll do naught for you but upset your bowels. I owe him much, but I am not his sort of man. My name is Nathaniel Silver, you may have that for nothing.'

Men such as Salomon believed in the power of names - and it was true that by revealing himself to this agent of the Service he had given her power over him. But if England's power was turned on him, there was little he could do to stop it, whether he was anonymous or no.

'Now, sir,' she snarled, and then she was crying. 'I would have an apology for how I have been treated!'

He stared at her. She put her fists over her eyes to block out the sight of

him and he knew the tears weren't feigned. The sardonic mask of Astraea had slipped and her true and nameless self was naked to him. Between sobs she spat: 'Or is this another part of the sport with your bidstand? You are the good man and he the wicked? Such games are old!'

'No, no, this isn't a game. Nick thought you meant to harm me, but he should not have acted as he did. And he is wicked, I acknowledge that and I'll send him to you later to own it. He won't be contrite, but you seem a formidable woman, Astraea, and you'll drive him to shame.' He did not try to touch her or comfort her, that would only make things worse. He passed her his handkerchief.

'I am your prisoner,' she blurted. He tried to protest; he had not realised it until now.

'Salomon's prisoner,' he clarified. 'I don't care for gaols, but this is a more comfortable cell than any I've known, and look outside - it's still snowing. I'll help you escape when it thaws.'

She came slowly out of her mood, but no longer seemed willing or able to talk. He brought her the clothes that had been left for her and made promises she would be well-treated and allowed to roam freely. She pulled the sheet down to cover her legs, and that simple gesture put into Silver's mind a clear and sudden premonition: they were going to be lovers, he could see them copulating in some bed at some indeterminate point in their future. He saw the same realisation in Astraea's eyes, coming to her as reflection rather than revelation.

He did not want her; she was not pleasing to him in appearance or character; she was not Alice; he did not love her; his callous penis stiffened for her.

She smeared away her last tears and asked him to leave. Perhaps she feared rape, perhaps she just wanted to dress, but he acceded, hefting Alice's trunk before him. As he left, he began to consider what he would say to the gathering of greybeards and dusty philosophers in the evening. He no longer dreaded or doubted his own abilities, but Astraea and Jeova had each set him unexpected challenges.

He thought also of Cousin Hateman, and remembered that there would be at least one woman at the lecture. It wasn't that he had forgotten her when talking to Astraea, merely that he hadn't thought of her as a woman, any more than her driver was a man. The Paradox folk were rawheaded things, skinless and sexless.

Then to Alice and sweet parting. The convention would be done in a week, and he could rejoin her in Cambridge and they could face the unwritten future together - but how that week would drag! He was full of lusts, but kept them concealed from her, roused as they'd been by another woman's shyness. He did not touch her with his hands when they met; he longed to part her legs and fuck her monkeyishly on the balcony, to a chorus of timid squeaks from the assembled celibates; he pecked her daintily on the cheek.

Christ, I would flee Salomon's House with her if I could. She is a temptation.

She looked tired; still pretty - she could never be anything other than pretty - but with sore patches of blood on her eyeballs, and greyed skin, as if she had not slept that night. He hoped it was not regret that had kept her awake. They said nothing about their lovemaking, but instead she launched - in a wistful voice full of the night's aches - into a description of a future she

imagined for them both. Her dreams were surprisingly domestic and stable. Heaven to her was a cottage with four narrow walls without but infinitely large within, filled with many rooms and - though she did not say it aloud, he heard it in the undercurrent of her words - children. He marvelled at how little he understood of her inner life, and only once she was gone did he realise that it was so potent to her because she knew she could never have it, not with Silver, not with the Magus.

When it was time for her to leave, she would not have him come with her to the door. She kissed him and told him how much she loved him, whispered it as if she were a Catholic in confessional. Then, with a shy backwards glance, she turned a corner and was gone. He stood for a while before realising that sending her away was a dreadful mistake, worse than anything else he had ever done in his life, and ran after her - but she had been too quick for him. The passage round the corner was empty, and after that there were any numbers of paths she could take to beat him to the doors, to the cart, to Cambridge.

She had not changed her mind. She was wiser than him.

He started when Nick Plainsong, who had sidled up behind him unnoticed, tapped him on the shoulder.

'She's buggered off then?'

Silver glowered at him. 'I asked her to leave. I should have sent you away too.'

'Oh, but you need me, boss. Alice was ever the ornamental third of the partnership. Good at that, she is.'

'At least she never resorted to kidnap and violence on my behalf. I would have you apologise to Astraea.'

'Yeah, I heard you seen her. What'd she do to turn you round? She cry out a well for you?'

'She was upset, yes.'

'It's always tears that get you.'

'Whether she was upset or not, you still owe her a sincere apology, Nick.'

'Oh, I can do that, Magus. I do sincere better than anyone.' He trotted on his way, but turned before he disappeared completely, made a false and mocking bow, and called: 'Nate! Remember this! You could have trusted me. Whatever else I may have been, I was loyal.'

Then he was gone. Whether he apologised to the woman or not, Silver couldn't say for sure, though he heard later that she'd received him but listened silently from behind a flat and ugly face, frozen like a statue's or an ice-thickened corpse into an expression of disdain. And had she been genuine with her tears that morning? He wasn't sure. That afternoon he saw her - resplendent in borrowed serving clothes - carousing with some of the younger guests and students, while shamelessly milking them with caresses and kisses, sly cuddles and peeking nipples. That scene put doubts into him. She was perhaps that legendary reptile that blended its skin to fit its surroundings, at the cost of confusing itself and forgetting its true hue.

He would learn how genuine she could be.

Silver slept a little before the lecture, and dreamed of Alice spread naked and pallid and quite dead on a table before him, with her hair combed into a yew-coloured crown around her head, and her stomach cut open carefully like a vast and erotic iris. Her vital parts were arrayed around her in trays of holy silver, purifying them. In front of an audience of darkness, he took each one in hands smothered by tight pink gloves - that might have been fashioned from the guts of some poor beast - and replaced each delicately in its proper place inside her neat wound, sewing and suturing the pipes where he could. Then once she was filled again and her wound sewn up, he put a mouth full of angel-light to her lips and breathed life into her. He was woken by the servants knocking.

The stalls of the theatre were already filling when he arrived, but the numbers were thinner than he'd expected; an illusion, he imagined, fostered by the size of this room and his sunken viewpoint within it. Salomon held the stage with his preliminary introductions. The madman looked most formidable today, dressed in silks and gold cloth that spoke of his wealth in the way the rags did not. The wizard's barks and jokes distracted the audience as Silver came down to the stage.

His gaze went round the room, searching first for Astraea, though he couldn't find her and suspected she was too low or too careless or too drunk to bother. He found Jeova, who was descending in stilted, irregular steps to a well-considered vantage point in the middle row. Nick, if he was present, had expertly concealed himself from Silver's eye. The Magus gave polite nods to those faces he didn't know but had noticed his attention. Then his eye flitted to the consternation as Cousin Hateman graced the hall with her eloquent shape and horrible vizard. More of her Faction followed, with their own skulls that were as unique to them as a naked face; a man close behind her, then a cluster of three bodies including the coachman. The others both seemed to be women, one slight and girlish, the other obese and infirm and steadying herself with sticks and the support of her assistants. This one - he assumed it must be the order's Mother - need not have bothered with a mask; like M. Valentine, her puissance was vivid and needed no exaggeration. It took her some moments to reach the bench at the bottom of the steps, where her helpers had cleared a space for her to sit and exhale mightily. None of them removed their heads. Silver wondered if they would be able to see and hear through the gaps in the bone.

The stir caused by the Faction of Paradoxes didn't last. It rippled round the edges of the room, then broke like a mild wave on a shore. There were a few other strange masks and odd costumes in the crowd.

Nathaniel Silver no longer felt a part of this gathering; he was as much an outsider as Astraea would be. It was this realisation that conjured the cloud of sympathy for the spy that Nick had so easily dismissed; but he was more like her than he was like Jeova. It was not that he felt special (though he had been marked out by angels), nor better (though doubtless there were frauds and mediocrities here present), merely separate. Even the younger men, the students still unshaped, were part of a world that was not his. They were priests and he was only a supplicant, and had come upon their work from the wrong path. Their learning was built on the years since antiquity, formed like rings in a tree trunk, or layers of heaped sand washed upon a riverbank. Their knowledge was thought to be imperfect; in Greece and Egypt it had not been so, but those sacked glories had been preserved only in pieces and on the edges of the world by Christian monks and Muslim scholars. These men who had come to see him had dim faces turned towards the past, seeking to recreate old worlds.

Silver's untutored art was turned otherwise. He doubted in Golden Ages. What

was learned now was new, or if not new then improving. It should not be trapped by adherence to the likes of Galen, who was not merely imperfectly understood but himself imperfect. The role of scientia was not to remake the old but to create the new. And if that meant wresting the art away from priests, so be it.

He found M. Valentine's eyes on him, smiling silently as if Silver's thoughts were written visible on his face. The French were - or claimed to be - princes of modernity. They must know this too. He felt a sudden affinity with this agent of le Pouvoir, and its touch was like the skin of a dead man on a slab.

There was an expectant silence; he realised Salomon had announced him, and was now hobbling off the stage. He did not stop to acknowledge his protégé, but Silver planted a solid hand on the man's falsely-hunched shoulder. 'Thank you,' he mouthed, but the magician only mumbled a reply and went chuckling to a cushioned chair that had been set aside for him. Silver mounted the stage.

All those dead faces, all those dead masks, stared back at him.

'Gentlemen!' he said confidently, and in his confidence let the silence roll on for many seconds without feeling it uncomfortable. He had found a natural standing point on the dais well away from Cousin Hateman and her ranks, but his head kept swinging back to regard those unnerving ivoryed growths.

'You have all travelled here - some of you across great distances, over seas and oceans - to hear the Magus talk, to see the Magus demonstrate, to learn from the Magus, and to correct the Magus in his many errors. This last I know some of you are looking forward to most of all!' And there was laughter; not much, but enough to hearten him. He smiled, as that lecturer had done over the unfortunate body of his dog in Gresham College, ten years gone. I could be in Cambridge now, abed at the Rose with Alice across me and touching me and kissing me and sharing my pleasure.

His voice carried well in this perfectly-shaped room, and he silenced the last echoes of laughter with a curt exclamation. 'I am not the Magus. I was unschooled. I have no Latin, no Greek. I did not trouble myself with the prospect of a universal education until I was become a man, and it was already too late, for if a man is like a pot formed in the heat of a kiln, I was already shaped and cooled. I was a soldier. After I soldiered, I wrote a book that was never meant to be published, yet was, and I suffered for its mistakes. Since then I have dabbled in your art, and was given the disguise of Magus, though I did not want it. Today I wear no disguise. Today I go among you bare-faced. My name is Nathaniel Silver.

'Everything I have done,' he told a crowd now silenced, silenced utterly, 'was not my doing. I have only ever been the hands and the eyes of the power that chose me. I was not enlightened, as many true saints and many frauds have claimed to be enlightened. I was not myself made divine. Instead, I believe it is my purpose to enlighten the world and to make it divine. You have all come here to listen to me and learn from me, and yet here I am with nothing to say and nothing to teach you. You may, however, correct my mistakes. I'm always open to that.'

There were murmurs of dissension and disappointment in the stalls, yet they were held by him.

'This convention needs no Magus. It is itself the Magus. What I have to say to you is not as important as the way I say it. Here are the magic words that can tame the chaos of change, turn inexorable destinies, and reshape the solid world: communication, discourse, transparency. I see masks here today;' - a

glance at the Faction - 'I do not myself care for masks, but that is by-the-by. What is important to me is that scientia herself should be unmasked. Our arts have for so long been hoarded and occluded. We pull truths like precious Roman treasures from the Earth, but they do not grow more valuable through being secreted away in chests, or ciphered in books that can be read by no other eye than that which coded it, or buried in the rites and sacraments of institutions that were old when our grandfathers were suckled.

'What I mean to propose tonight is a globe of learning, a great sphere of shared knowledge encompassing the whole Earth. In the Invisible College, in the Royal Society, we have the makings of such a thing, but they are for their own reasons exclusive, and they are also fragile. We have today a king who delights in science, but we will not always have such a king. Two decades gone we saw the word Royal and its connotations erased as though it had never been - and if an order be overturned once, then as experimenters, we know it can surely happen again. We cannot depend on the patronage of good governance and the honest paymaster if there is yet bad governance and the dishonest paymaster; nor can we exclude the world, and treat it only as a subject to be mastered by chants and ciphers.'

He had to pause now to breathe, which he had barely troubled to do as the words came out. It was a natural break, the end to the rhetoric. Around him the theatre was twilit; if the eye of God was on him through the glass roof of the ceiling then His eyes were stygian and impassive. The doors swished back and forth silently as servants brought in yet more candles to line the walls, stairs, and stall-fronts. A chamber that once smelled of sawdust and old blood was now perfumed by molten wax. Silver realised he had been sweating from the combined intensity of so many little lights. His audience was lost in grey gloom, but they were listening, even if only charitably. And now was his last chance to remain silent, and leave unspoken words that could never be unsaid.

He tried to find Jeova in the half-dark, but the faces were now indistinguishable. He was losing focus. No going back, you've resolved yourself to this. He cleared his throat and found the words: 'I have been a hypocrite these past days, speaking of dispelling our mysteries and enchantments as if I had no secrets of my own. That was not true. I have one. No longer.'

There he was! - Jeova, bristling in the gloom, unreadable but profoundly attentive.

Silver reached into his coat and took out the bundle he always kept there, and this time there was no pause. It came out smoothly, and he put it on the table. Would anyone be able to see in this darkness? It might have been a rock for all they knew. He opened the cloth, suddenly afraid that that was all it would be, that by doing this he had betrayed the trust of angels and they would punish him by turning the egg to hardened dung. No - its light shone forth.

More, it coruscated. It filled the theatre as though it were day. Silver was shocked by its intensity and stepped back, half-blind. Around the room, the most interested gazes were caught unawares, and he saw them - through eyes overlaid by a blotched purple after-burn - squinting or raising palms to shield their faces.

'This was given to me. I call it the Philosopher's Stone, though in truth I know not what it is, except that it has been my guide through our arts. See, I am no master, I still sit at another's feet to learn. It is, I believe, a machine of sorts, but one assembled and set working by the hands of angels, and fuelled by the fires of Heaven. I've had it all my life' - not quite true,

but it felt like no lie - 'and have explored but a fraction of its potential. So, I will demonstrate it tonight, and afterwards, I will give it to you so that it may instruct you, all of you, all of us.'

He raised the egg on cupped palms; it was still no larger than a swan egg, so some in the crowd would be seeing its shape only now. Once it was high enough in the air, he removed his hands and let it float - a freshly-learned action - still sending out its beacon-light. Half his audience were muttering in their clusters. The skull-heads conferred among themselves, their faces colliding comically as they tried in vain to whisper in one another's ears. Yet there were intolerant eyes on him now, not least Salomon, who lounged with his chin resting on his fist, feigning uninterest. That was only to be expected. The men gathered here knew how easy it was to fool the unsuspecting eye. He would call some of them up on the stage soon and prove it was no trick. He reached up and tapped the undercurve of the egg with light fingers, so it bounced like a bladder of air. He realised he was grinning, innocent and healthy, like an unwearied child. He commanded his egg to grow and it did, bloating outwards, ever-rising to fill the void-space over his head. It was another moon, another sun, it was beautiful.

'I would hear the voice of the angels,' he told it. 'Will you speak to us?'

He could hear impressed sighs from even the most chapped lips and senile mouths. Enlarged, he could see whorls and creases on the surface of the egg. The machinery must lie in those barely-visible fault-lines, chasms vast but infinitely small, laden with the engines of God. Light, not candle-yellow but lightning-blue, fizzed along their geology. He asked the question again, silently and only with the movement of his mouth. There was a hard upward surge of light, striking towards the canopy of Heaven -

- it cut shear through the roof, which exploded into fragments so fine that they rained down on the hall as glass dust. Silver felt it as a gentle breeze on his face and hands, then a light itching as a hundred tiny edges brushed his skin, too small yet to draw blood -

- there were screams, he saw the flash of toppled candles and the scent of dry burning wood, he felt a wave of distress and heard the first tumble of bodies escaping the room -

- and there were angels on the stage with him. Just two this time, on their fierce columns of light and silence. Their coming sucked the heat from the theatre and created a wind that extinguished candles, ruffled beards and skirts, and tugged away wigs. In his row the impeccable M. Valentine scrambled to remove the dark fronds that had fallen over his eyes. Those conventioners with weak guts who had made for the exit now stopped mid-flight, their jaws dropping, their crotches dampening, their eyes bulging, their panicked babble stilled in the presence of Christ's pilots.

Silver could no longer address the crowd; it would be impertinent while the angels surveyed him through the slits of their hoods. He dropped to his knees, his hands clasped over his heart.

'I...' He stopped himself and began again: 'I had not expected you would come in person.'

The angels flickered, their light-bodies bouncing against each other in conference. Then they stabilised. One seemed to cock its head at the other. It spoke.

~ Kill him ~ it said.

Silver heard himself reply: 'What did you just say?' and thought it the stupidest thing he had ever said in his life, which was now finally and divinely ended. He could not retreat, he could not stand; the will of Heaven bore down on him, gliding stately over the dais with a killing hand outstretched. This took a bleak second, in which he had time to wonder if anyone else had heard the executioner's command, if any of his audience were still alive, or if they had died and petrified where they stood under the glare of holy fire.

The angel's searing hand, a blank curve of light, made contact with his forehead and he screamed. In the blistering moment of pain he suddenly realised what was happening and felt, with certainty, that this was wrong; that his life, though they had once saved it, was not theirs to take; that he should have stood and protested, no matter how futile or blasphemous it might seem; that he would at least know their reasons for so abruptly striking him down -

Too late now.

'No,' someone said. He knew the voice, but could not name it. All the names were going from him, burned out of his head by the angel's annihilating hand. There was agony, not just where he was touched but riddling his flesh and his bones and his soul. How could merciful Christ's messengers deal out such agony?!

Then, No! came again, a scream, and it was hurtling towards him 'cross the room, swinging a staff and knocking flailing bodies aside in its fury. A staff? - Salomon? - no, it was too narrow and splintered into points at one end. Ah, a candle-stand! Silver was almost serene now in the grip of the angel's excruciation. He could make out nothing much beyond his pain, except this wild bone-headed charge.

It was the slightest of the Paradox folk in a tattered dress, the hem ripped away to reveal skinny legs, flapping underskirts, and naked feet. He worried - blandly in his pain - that she would get splinters on her soles, or rip her skin on a nail or loose board. The unchanging mask had an expression that she was showing for him, for him alone - rage. She pounced onto the dais and in the same action drove her makeshift spear through the light-body of the exterminating angel, like a stone breaking the surface of a pool. The spear turned into a crease of angel-light, and flickered through the Paradox girl's hands and body, causing her pain, causing her scream to leap from a pitch of fury to one of hurt.

And Nate Silver decided that he hated this pilot thing and snatched his head out of its grasp. It had burned him; he expected his skin to come away on the creature's hand like raw bread-stuff, but it didn't. The pain stopped immediately. He fell backwards onto his arse. Above him, the impaled angel whirled and flexed, trying to expel the metal from its belly and throw off the woman who still clung there, screaming and desperate. Its hood slipped and flickered and Silver saw its true angel-face revealed, a pestilent grey sac of feelers and bulges and clustered eyes, the face of an insect, the face of a monstrous flea.

The angel made a final triumphal twist and tossed the shaft free. The woman, still howling, still masked, went curling through the air and impacted with the gross and aroused surface of the egg, which flared deeper white and swallowed her up completely, seamless and whole. The spear, supported by nothing, clattered to the floor.

The flea-angels loomed again. Silver pulled himself to his feet and glanced round, but found only glare and the occasional dark smudge of a body fleeing the room. He had no doubt that there had been an exodus as he knelt dying. The egglight had become a dazzle and it had a noise now, a shrill tinnitus howl that might be the poor woman's soul, damn'd and screaming in eternity for her transgression against God. Silver, who had spent years forgetting the arts of hatred, now felt that patience unravelling.

'Why?!' he screamed at them.

~ We made a deal, and you cheated us ~

He wanted to scream That is a lie! but he was certain his lungs would betray him. He could not fight nor reason with his sponsors; he could not flee, he knew how they moved; but then they were distracted. Behind them, three smears were resolving themselves into silhouettes, clean patches of black amidst the hateful white, each one with jagged and swollen heads, each one with a sword drawn and slowly waking to life.

Swords? How had they got swords in here? Salomon would not have allowed it.

Then came a fourth shadow, superbly fat and waddling, with barbed shadow-sticks in both hands. It spoke in a voice like a stew of many tongues and regions, that turned her words into a throaty brutal poetry. 'You two have declared war on Faction Paradox. That thing over there, walks about like a man but ain't no man' - her sticks gestured, and Silver knew her insult was thrown at him - 'he belongs to us now. We bound his spirit with the loa, so you declare war on the loa, on Time herself. You're made by dead magic, you're dead things, and you've taken our beautiful baby girl from us. But Mother Sphinx, she's a forgivin' soul, everyone says so. If you undeclare your war, she might let you walk away.'

'They killed Greenaway!' one shadow protested, one of the males.

'Hush,' was all the Mother Sphinx silhouette would say, a syllable spiked with bitterness and regret.

The angels said nothing, but splintered into shapes of vicious jagged light. Silver saw the Faction trio raise their swords. He knew he should escape now while he had the chance, out of the light, into the dark and the cold, into the world without angels, into Cambridge, to Alice -

He had a sudden pang of real fear, his first since the angel had touched his skin. Alice. He could not leave her alone. She would think she'd lost him again. She would think he'd abandoned her.

Mother Sphinx commanded her family: 'Hatemán, Amphigorey, you stand and fight. Suppression, you get hold of Mister Silver and don't let him wriggle. And Mother Sphinx?' - and the bark turned to a bellow - 'She's gonna bring the loa down on these skinny ghosts to eat them up and shit out their souls!'

She brought the hams of her arms down in a flourish, and a wave of shadow slammed into the room; a physical violent darkness that had mouths, that screamed, that was hungry; a shadow quilt of a thousand patches of darkness that shook the walls and splintered the wood stage and set more glasspieces tumbling. It gave Silver a moment's grace, and he ducked and rolled off the stage before Suppression could reach him. He heard the cousin's briefly confounded breaths and sensed a swordless hand prodding the empty air he'd just escaped, but there was no respite. He began to crawl; keep moving, keep running, don't stop till you reach Cambridge, a mile or more through the snow

and the night...

Any noise he made while creeping was drowned by the shrieks of angels and shades and the palpable presence of their loa. The only light in the room was from the engorged, pregnant egg, still swirling in mid air above the dais, but it failed to illuminate. Assaulted by darkness, the halo of blue fire sputtered and sparked like a galvanic discharge. The egg contracted violently back to its natural size, then plummeted, bounced off the stage and came to rest on the floor no more than six feet from where he crouched. Silver, who was straining to hear the prowling of Suppression's steps above the crashes of shadow-combat, scrabbled through towards it, picking up splinters and glass fragments on his raw palm as he went.

He almost reached it. He was an inch away. His fingers went for it. It was snatched away from above, and as it went he heard something that he had not imagined possible: the death-song of angels as the blades and spirits of Mother Sphinx and her cousins shredded their souls. The egg still lived and burned with subtle light; it was not sustained by angels then, but an angel-machine set in motion by their hands. Silver craned upwards to find the face of the thief.

'She were a skinny bitch, weren't she?' said Nick Plainsong.

Silver offered him his hand. The fear was rising again; with the angels downed the Faction would turn their attentions again to him. 'You said' - his voice came out weak and wounded - 'you were loyal.'

'Yeah,' he agreed. 'I was loyal, Nate. Was.'

He hid the egg in some pocket that immediately occluded its light and plunged the room back into darkness. Then he turned and ran.

'He's moving!' he heard a man - Suppression? - shout. Nick's fleet steps were joined by the sound of pursuit, and crashes in the dark as they careered into invisible stalls, smashed benches, and clattered candelabra. Silver got to his feet and backed away into the dark. He was almost relieved to see Nick go and take the egg with him. It took temptation and responsibility out of his hands.

The main doors were flung open to allow fresh waxlight into the edges of the hall. It framed the lumpy, haggard shadows of Faction Paradox, and others - low and cautious bodies that had hid during the fight; perhaps one was Nick Plainsong. He always knew when to freeze, how not to be noticed. In spite of his betrayal, Silver wished him well. Now, if he could just get away to Cambridge, to Alice -

It was Salomon at the door, Salomon with a retinue of his servants, Salomon who had shed his feigned stoop and some of his robes in order to inspect the wreckage of his theatre. He barked to his men, in a voice that no longer gibbered or retched or deceived: 'Find Silver! Find him or find his body and bring him to me!' They had pistols these men, all of them. Why would they have pistols?

Salomon turned to address the shadows: 'Everyone here is to be detained for questioning by order of the Service of the King! Alice Lynch and Nicholas Plainsong will present themselves immediately to my men and it will be well for them. The order known as Faction Paradox is to put down its weapons and accompany my men. You would be wise to come quietly! This has turned into a fucking fiasco and I am not pleased!'

So, here was the last and least hurtful of the day's many betrayals. Salomon's ulterior purposes washed over him like a soothing and familiar stream; the deceptions of one half-trusted and little-liked ally were nothing compared to the treachery of friends and Heaven. Silver did not stop to present himself to the Servicemen that came hunting, like Suppression but louder and heavier. He slipped through the gloom to the curtains, to the window.

The landscape beyond the house was inhospitable and uninviting, with a bleak grey skin of snow spread across the hills towards the city. Nathaniel Silver slipped out silently into its blank embrace.

Chapter 9: Ich Dien

She had been played for a fool, but she didn't yet realise how badly. She had suspected Sir Sam of self-serving, of using her for his own purposes, but she wouldn't learn till later how deep his perfidy ran, or how clumsily he had made her his weapon. It would come as a humiliation, but then, he would go on to do worse and more grievous things, and she would dedicate her impassive resolve to snubbing him for those. She would still let him into her bed, when Carola died, and as they tumbled he would whisper into her ear: 'You've always been a bloody awful spy, Astraea. You should stick to what you're good at.' He would say it to turn her blushed and angry, and she would rise to take his bait, but only because it was true.

At the time, she had thought she'd been doing rather well for herself. Salomon's House was a prison, but hardly the most arduous in her experience. Indeed, it was given over to luxuries that she stroked and coveted with unsmiling eyes. She had strange young men - not all of them coarse or ugly - come up willing to whisper the most outrageous secrets in her ear out of the vain hope that she'd let them whisper it again between her legs. She'd debriefed the notorious Magus in person, squeezed every drop of information out of him, and all the while let him believe that she was a hurt thing. Because of course you were entirely in control of your circumstances and weren't afeared or ready to cling to even the wariest kindness -

Pah.

There was some talk about a lecture, but she wouldn't be needed there. It couldn't further her investigations, which were into the physical affairs of the world, not those of clouduckooland. It would be in Latin and fly over her head. It would be deathly dull and she would better spend her energies carousing and patting down her unwary fellow guests for secrets and gossip. True, little of them had much to say about the Magus beyond their opinions of his impenetrable teachings. Some regarded him unkindly or as an upstart, and an unexpected sympathy for the man grew in her breast. Nevertheless, she had no interest in hearing him talk, and by the time her admirers began to filter away to the lecture hall, she was already in a stupor disturbed only later by distant gnatbite retorts and crashes.

A commotion breezed into the antechamber where she lay. She fell out of blissfully bodiless sleep and into a head that ached, a world that wobbled, and a light unpleasantly hot on her eyeballs. She blinked rapidly. Half her face was patterned and sore from impressing against a coarse wool pillow. From the edge of the room came hushed, urgent exchanges in French, but she would have struggled to understand English at that moment. By the time she had found the strength to look, the interlopers were already hurrying away - an elegantly tall man in black, and his servant. She let them go, blearily. It was none of her business.

She patted her thighs and breasts until she was sure that they hadn't been interfered with while she slept, then - reassured - rolled onto her back. Her

stomach was sticky-wet and her shirt-front stained dark and red. Christ! I have been murdered! She shoved her fingers against the numb wound, and found wet lumps on the curve of her belly. She pulled them out: blackberries, out of season, squashed pathetically where she lay. Relieved, she popped one in her mouth, but the taste had been squeezed out with the juice.

Her hat was on the daybed at her side, the one item of her own clothing that she'd been able to salvage from kidnap. It was bashed and sat upon, its proud pheasant feather crest snapped and wilting. She put it on anyway, stood, staggered to the nearest mirror, and regretted it; her skin was so sallow and flabby and pale. There was a hugger-mugger chorus from a nearby hall, and shrill words that plucked the tender strings in her head. Remembering that she had a duty to attend to, she slouched out in search of the fuss.

She found a passage full of babbling scholars and wizards, pressed together by great and burly servants who might have silenced them all with a roar. Astraea imagined the walls tightening slowly to press all these fellows until the concentrated juices of their brains squeezed out through the floorboards, succulent but filled with curds and fatty bits. Most seemed cowed, but one was protesting to the closest servant in the strongest terms. She sidled nearer to listen; this one was too old to be a student, but still young, with ash-blond hair that might have suited a more handsome face and a less lank body.

'I must know how long we are to be kept here,' he insisted, shrill-voiced but truly angry. 'I have duties and responsibilities at Trinity and as the holder of Henry Lucas's chair. They cannot be discharged while I stand freezing in a corridor.'

He glanced uninterestedly at Astraea, who dropped her stealthy gait for a nonchalant swagger, though this made her feel seasick on her own legs. His attention was caught by her unseasonable blackberry wound and she took advantage: 'Wha's goin' on?'

I think you meant to sound a little more authoritative and a pinch more sober, Mistress Behn. He glared at her, as did the servant, who - now she was close enough to see - had a flintlock at his belt. She thought of the little runt Plainsong, who had put his hands so easily on such a weapon. She repeated her question, but bolder, and then: 'How was the Magus's lecture?'

'Travesty, madam!' The Trinity man barked, and wrung his hands. 'He spent five minutes insulting us, then he burned down the hall!'

A weak voice from in the huddle: 'There were spirits! I saw spirits!'

Her contact swung round to admonish him: 'You old fool! There were no spirits. It was trickery!'

'I saw spirits,' came the insistent reply. 'He opened a window on Heaven and it was besieged by darkness.' This time the younger man didn't respond, but flared his nostrils and folded his arms, making his displeasure plain. The servant's hands rose in a gentle pattern to mollify him.

'We only need ask you a few questions about the Magus, then you'll be free to leave - a matter of hours, once this chaos has cleared.'

But Astraea felt she had had no adequate answer, and was about to ask again when the ceiling thumped and rumbled from an impact on an upper floor, and then the far doors swung wildly open to allow Salomon to parade into the room with an armed retinue. More guns, why were there so many guns? And Salomon, whom she had thought infirm and wretched, was now lithe with young eyes full

of anger. They scanned the crowd. 'Valentine! Where is the Frenchman?!' he bellowed.

Astraea raised a limp hand. 'I overheard Frenchmen leaving, not five minutes ago.'

Salomon threw his arms up in despair. He barked to his underlings: 'Catch them before they leave the stables. Barricade them if you must. If they get to him first we've lost him.' Liveried bodies piled out at his command while others piled into the room to replace them, and deliver gasped reports.

'Silver was seen climbing from a window. Another man pursued him, we know not who.'

'Then break out the kennels. He can't get far on a night like this. What about Faction Paradox?'

'They've retreated up to the first floor.'

'Good, block the stairs. We have them cornered at least. How many?'

'Four. One was said killed at the lecture.'

'Eaten,' a tiny voice piped up from the crowd. 'She was eaten by Heaven.'

Astraea looked over the scene with uncomprehending eyes. Events had run away from her, as had Nathaniel Silver. It seemed a good time to withdraw, find some bottles that were yet filled, and empty them at her leisure. But Salomon had been allowed a breath between reports and now pounced at her, a chipped and dirty fingernail stabbing at her tits. 'This one is also to be put under arrest!'

Immediately the servant at her side took her arms and held them fast. She protested indignantly, and heard her voice come out like a squealing pig. 'Sir, I am not your enemy!'

'No, but you're a bloody nuisance, and I would know what part Sam Morland played in today's disaster. Serjeant, put her somewhere secure. If she protests, smear her with grease and throw her to the dogs. She's not that important.'

Then she was bundled away in the servant's tight arms. She didn't struggle, but he copped a feel anyway, the bastard. She didn't protest; unlike Plainsong, this fellow was stolidly agreeable, or at least quiet, and any fear she may have felt was smothered by her sore head and the soured taste of beer in her belly. She let herself be slammed through many doors, out of the opulent front of Salomon's House and into its narrow and underlit backstairs where the walls were as spartan as a barracks. When it was clear she wouldn't fight, the man loosened his hold and let her walk sullenly in front of him. His pistol was still slung away and she was glad of that.

'I'd have you know,' she said at length, when she was sure it would not lead to an immediate greasing, 'that I am an agent of the Service and here on business of the Crown.'

'That's an interesting coincidence,' replied the serjeant, 'but we all know you're Morland's dupe.'

'Sir Samuel is a man of importance in the Service and the nation.'

'Sir Samuel is a worm we spat out and now means to wriggle his way back in through you. Now, Doctor Bendo, he's a man of importance. Did you not know? He is one of the Five Masters, and this is a Service house!'

'That is not true,' she retorted, but as she spoke she knew that it was. Then: 'How much damage have I done?'

'Oh, there was sabotage, but it wasn't your doing. Silver got wind he was being set up and legged it. No, it was Faction Paradox did the worst. Did you see them? Did you see their heads? Curious freaks.'

She had not seen them and would have said so, but the serjeant caught her arm again and halted her. The pistol came up from his belt and pointed at the dark well of the corridor ahead of them. 'Who's there?' he called, and with his free hand he pushed Astraea back into a shallow niche on the wall. She peered out, seeing no one, hearing nothing. A pack of dogs bayed purposefully to break the silence, but their hungry barks were distant and muffled.

Her guard stepped forward, the gun raised. They had reached a tight junction, where three passages met a flight of steps into the cellars. 'I am on the Service of the King' he called. 'Stand and declare yourself, or I'll shoot.' Whatever shadow he addressed did not respond, and though Astraea squinted, she found nothing substantial.

The gun retorted. Astraea dropped instinctively into a chimp-crouch with her hands pressed over her ears. The belch of guns fired in anger raised old memories. She found she was smiling ferociously, displaying clenched teeth to danger. The serjeant, meanwhile, had taken perplexed steps forward, the now useless pistol still held ahead of him like a magic charm in the hands of a superstitious hag.

He was scanning the ground where he thought a body should have fallen, his tentative motion suggesting confusion, perhaps doubt.

His attacker came from nowhere, with her flat palm jutting out to touch the man's face. He fell back with a growth of blood and bone budding where his nose had once been. The intruder swung, arms turning like hammers to break his stomach, his chest, then up again and down, pounding him on the back. The serjeant fell, not stunned, but filling his mouth with tortured gasps. His assailant stepped over him and vanished into nothing.

Astraea scabbled forward to check her sentry, who was still warm and breathing, though not easily. This was good; she would have no murders pricking her inwit. The hairs on the sides of her neck tickled readily, as if she had a lover there blowing on them, but it was just a mild disturbance on the air as the apparition solidified again, and beckoned her.

She was as beautiful as ever. There was blood and mucus still dripping from her outstretched palm, from where she had struck her victim's face. The hand was still part faded and the fluids dribbled through it, displacing along the line of half-formed bone to splatter on the floor. Aphra knew she was being summoned. She resisted.

'I swore myself to the Service,' she declared boldly, but hoped that every ounce of regret in her heart was echoed in her tone. 'I have to stay here. My... my superiors require it.'

'Aphra,' came the reply in a voice that she thrilled to remember, 'you swore yourself to me first, and I'm a higher power.'

She closed her eyes and remembered. That was true.

'You must help me, Aphra,' the nymph continued, in the darkness behind her eyes. It was not a light voice, nor a hurried one, nor one given much to humour. It was, if anything, a little sad. It was not an English voice, there was something about the way the words turned on her tongue that in Aphra's ears felt not wrong but unsimple. It was not a human voice.

It reminded Aphra of the smell of cocoa and heady American weed in boiling water, transubstantiating to steam; of the fingertips of her favourite lovers describing the small of her naked back; of the sunshafts through the trees in wild Kent when she had been a girl and first met this nymph.

'Larissa,' she named her.

The nymph nodded once, accepting the name. She still wore her tight red suit of translucent skin and seething machinery. Aphra stood for her.

'How can I help you?' That was both an offer and a confused question.

Larissa's spirit phased in and out of the shadows, one moment solid, the next almost gone with the grey detail of walls apparent through her face and her hands. 'I can't stabilise here. I'm in the midst of a forest and all the trees are toppling around me. He is too well-protected now - but we have only two chances, and I won't squander this one.'

'Who...? I don't understand.'

Larissa touched Aphra's lips and put a galvanic shock in her. 'You don't need to. Just get close to the anomaly and I can surge through your gifts to him. I can move you as near to him as I dare.'

Aphra couldn't protest, but let the nymph take her hands. It was a surprise to find she had warm and humanish skin, when Aphra had expected a dank liquid touch or an ungraspable body of cloud. They had touched before, but Aphra had forgotten. It felt sacrilegious, but she wanted to be fucked by this creature, to be drenched in her lusts and juices and brought to a crescendo of pleasure by her; to let the nymph immolate her skin and bone with sacred fire. Gods and demi-gods destroyed mortals with their love, and Aphra yearned to be destroyed.

But Larissa only pulled her chastely close, and even then the churning apparatus sewn around her suit kept their bodies from contact. 'This may distress you,' the nymph warned, 'but it won't hurt.' Her costume writhed and clicked, the death-stutter of a beetle on its back and -

- she was briefly nowhere no time breathing nothing with no stomach to lurch no eyes to see no mouth to scream -

- and Larissa released her hands and let her fall retching onto the ground, which wetted her and burnt with its unexpected cold. And the little candlelight had gone and the tightness of the walls had swept away, replaced by vast openness and slicing winds. If she hadn't already been sobered by her march through Salomon's corridors, the scalding frost would have done it; as it was, it just slammed through her clothes and chipped at her exposed hands and face. Her head reeled still - dizziness now, not hangover - and when she looked she found the oppressive shape of Salomon's House behind her, while around her were shallow hills of blank snow glowing into the distance.

Larissa paced away from her, seeming not to notice the cold - but then she was

not completely there. Her feet left unremarkable grooves in the snow that lingered as she faded. Her arm came up to point. 'There,' she accused. Aphra, forcing herself to stare into the wind and follow her line, saw a man's shadow detach itself from the house's bulk and run. 'Is that him?' she screamed, over the winds. But the nymph had gone.

I would not have done this for Sam, nor for Rowley, not even for Carola or Oroonoko.

She pulled herself to her feet and slapped life back into her shivering sodden arms and thighs. They would ache tomorrow. They were aching already. Sod it! - she charged her quarry, pumping fierce warmth into her limbs. She whooped like a red American, and knew he wouldn't hear her in the wind. This was adventure after all, and if it be unpleasant and painful today, she would dine on the telling of it tomorrow.

The silhouette noticed her at last and stopped in its tracks, now veering sideways down the hill to dodge her. Lights were shone from the wall he had slipped past. 'There!' came a cry from the house. 'We have him!'

Those lights fell across him and revealed Nathaniel Silver. It didn't surprise her.

Damn, but he could move on those legs!

She plunged downhill after him. A faint commotion rose behind her but she outpaced it; Silver's escape was already lost to them, but not to her. The blank of his back was picked out against sullen white snowfields. There were flakes on the air, but they were not thick and easily pushed from her eyes. She skidded in the wet drifts but kept after him. His hat blew off and skimmed over her head like a flat stone on water. Hers had gone long before, its pathetic feather lost now forever in some Cambridge half-bog.

She kept pace with him, compelled by the downdrag of her own body. She was not given to exertion, and felt all the heaviness of her legs as they pounded down the hill. A stitch opened next to her stomach and her breath tasted of blood and iron. Silver darted and weaved; he threw himself against a line of darkness, and she would have lost him then if there weren't suddenly more light cast downhill and spreading long shadows ahead of them. She looked back and saw the bobbing bright eyes of a dozen lamps. She lost her footing in the snow, fell arse over tit, tumbled into a freezing drift, and rolled the rest of the way down.

Hah! How marvellous if she were to turn into a snowball and crush Silver with her immensity!

No, she came to a halt in a crumple, now as damp as she would have been if she'd dropped into a river. The lights at the top of the hill had scattered as the party had lost sight of their prey and prepared to unleash their dogs on his scent. She heard the familiar hungry growl of the hounds. She had not lost Silver; she looked up and found him still some feet from her. He was paused in his flight, his eyes staring at her in certain recognition, his arm twitching as if not quite ready to reach out to lift her, yet not quite prepared to abandon her.

She robbed him of the choice by pulling herself up and plunging at him. He turned and ran again, across flat ground this time, to the line of trees along the hip-shaped depression at the base of the hill. But he was close enough now, and had little chance of shaking her off. Branches scraped and bashed at her, roots and bushes snatched at her feet, but Silver was no more

nimble-footed than she, and the wounds she acquired were robbed of their sting by the cold. A low bow smashed her across the temple and put a sick pain into the base of her trunk. She laughed giddily in the rare air.

She skidded again, but this time turned it into a dive, flinging herself forward and barrelling into Silver's back. It brought him down, heavily, into the mud and wet.

Panting triumphantly, she whispered her nymph's name.

Larissa though was already there. In the lightless woods, her suit glowed and revealed the scene. Silver was battered, scratched and bleeding in a dozen places, but weeping from defeat not pain. Aphra stood shakily and held out her arms, offering the body as a gift. The nymph's head, framed by red hair whose colour was palpable by the light of her costume, nodded in acceptance. She wrenched Silver up by his shoulders and slammed him against the closest trunk.

'Who is he?' she asked, surprising Aphra.

'You don't know him? I had thought... no matter. His name is Nathaniel Silver. He is a man of science, so I'm told. I, ahem' - and she found herself blushing, though she doubted he'd see in the dark - 'I missed the lecture. I was taken with a sudden sickness.'

Silver was not looking to her. His eyes, trapped and terrified, were on this apparition that held him, and scoured his face with an unrelenting gaze. 'Madam, I...' Her free hand clamped his mouth, squeezing it tight in a whitened knuckle as if she were afraid of what might escape from it.

'Yes, he's the anomaly,' Larissa said, and her hand came away - leaving the philosopher's jaw flapping - and went to her belt. It came up again with a nice and wicked stiletto in it, nine inches long and so fine that it might have quivered on the wind (though it did not). It gleamed with unnatural light. She pointed it to the pinned man's chest, above his heart.

'Christ, no!' Silver protested. 'I beg you!'

And Aphra, struck by guilt, stepped forward: 'Larissa, I won't have this.'

The nymph's head turned to her. Thinking back on it later, Aphra would have described it as a mask of hate, and indeed it was, but that seemed an inadequate clutch of words. Such a phrase suggested scowls, reddened flesh, bared teeth, a devilish distortion of the visage, but there were none of those things here. Hatred, on Larissa's unhuman face, was blank. It yielded nothing, no soul and no sentiment, just the drive to destroy.

'Larissa!' Aphra hissed, but the needle was already wrenched back to strike.

Yet Larissa held back.

She pressed her face close again to Silver's, peering into his eyes, and seeming less certain with each tick of her pupils. The needle drooped slowly in her hand. She pulled Silver snivelling from the tree and shoved him away. Hate was gone from her face, now there was dismay and panic, almost defeat.

'It isn't there,' she declared to Aphra. 'He is the anomaly but it isn't there! It isn't there!'

The needle was back in her belt; she held two empty hands out to Aphra,

plaintively. Her eyes were pleading, as Silver's had been but a moment before. 'Help me!' But as Aphra reached for her she faded again, the trees behind her rising and hardening to drown out her form, and this time she didn't return.

Aphra stood there, frozen both in posture and from the cold. Silver fell back against the same old tree gasping and clutching his throat. The aroused yelps of the hunting dogs carried to them from beyond the edge of the wood, where the lantern-lights also danced and skittered, coming ever closer. Aphra regarded them for only a moment, made the decision inside herself, and looked away to address Silver.

'Run,' she told him.

'What?'

'Run! I'll distract them as I can. Christ, I am on the verge of changing my mind every second you stand there gawping! Run! Fucking run!'

She thought for a moment that he'd thank her and give her one of those insufferable holy smiles that seemed to come upon him naturally, but it was too grim a moment for that. His head twitched, all the thanks she wanted or deserved, then he turned heel and plunged away into the trees.

She took the opposite track, charging back towards the house, waving her arms over her head, hollering to distract the lights, and hoping her hot scent would bring down the dogs. She broke the line of trees, then first skidded and second flattened herself into a puddle of mud-slicked snow. When she pulled herself up the dogs were on her, vicious jaws snapping at her face and hands, stinking warm dog-breath and dog-drool sloshing her face, claws on her body as they leapt on her to paw her stomach and her thighs. Let them still be leashed, for Christ's sake!

Their handlers were close behind with lanterns, and called back the hounds when they saw what they'd caught. Aphra, remembering the best mad-eyed stare she'd ever seen on stage, reproduced it now and yelled at them. 'I saw him! The Magus! But he got away!' She pointed wildly toward a path that Silver hadn't taken, and the strange thing was that they believed her.

They also laughed at her, as she picked herself out of the mud. They were laughing still when she was marched back into the warm precincts of Salomon's House, accompanied by Service Ratcatchers who would have to explain to Salomon, to Doctor Bendo, that their quarry still eluded them. The greybearded guise was pacing furiously in the front hall below the balcony and it seemed his evening was full of similar bad news. The other party he had sought, Faction Paradox, had apparently vanished without trace from the room in which they'd been thought cornered. The Service's sole triumph of the night was kneeling by the fire with his hands clapped behind his head and the pistols of three hooded Ratcatchers aimed at his back. It was Nick Plainsong, who seemed defeated yet curiously happy, gazing into the flames with a madman's fascination.

Yet Bendo was delighted to see Astraea as she returned to his house; later she discovered that he believed she'd overcome his serjeant by her own sleight, and this agility and initiative had impressed something in his warped heart. He had to salvage something from this disaster, even if it was only a small thing, and it turned out to be her. All she could see, on the day, was a man standing between her and the fire.

'Oh,' he corrected her, 'but that will give you chilblains. This will warm you better' - and a Ratcatcher-Serjeant with a blooded rag tied round his nose

loomed ahead of her and emptied a pail of warm soapy water over her head, to the general amusement of all. Even Plainsong was laughing. She let them have this victory. She still had her secret nymph - who would one day come back to her - and she had Nathaniel Silver, who even now fled further from the Service's clutches, living proof of her one small act of treachery.

She would see him again, but not for twelve years, when he would be dumped trussed and gagged onto her bed in Paris.

Chapter 10: Behemoth and Leviathan

As a child, Little Sister Greenaway had once thrown herself into a river. She'd been left to her own company and devices, a little girl burning with a little girl's energy. The river was not far from the house where she'd grown up. She'd already paddled there, and knew its depths and its dangers. It flowed in a gully by what she remembered as a sheer cliff, but was more like a narrow incline of a few feet. She'd taken a run to its very edge and let herself spring, and - for a moment - fly, and then plunge, and then collide with the dirt-slicked current with both legs frantically kicking, then submerge down into the deep where the hot summer sun was only a smear on the film of the sky. She'd been in the air for seconds, nothing more, but for those seconds she'd felt completely free of all earthly forces.

She hadn't imagined it was possible to fall any further.

Yet now she was falling forever, and this time she was shorn away from the Earth entirely, absorbed into some other demesne. When she'd sat on the bench at Salomon's House, she'd overheard whispers describing Silver's sacred light as the fires of Heaven, while others muttered grim intimations about the radiance of fallen angels. Falling, she found herself unconcerned by acts of naming or description; there was only the sheer exhilaration of the moment. She plunged infinitely, and imagined herself dropping between the spheres, compelled by no force but her own. There was no final resting point, and she found she had time to turn and twist and change her shape like a swimmer. The void-winds lashed around her, though she knew that in some way they were no true part of this unworld but made real only by her own thoughts. She imagined herself sparking from the red hot speed of her plummet. She imagined observers on Earth with powerful lenses picking out a falling star that dropped out of the sky in a straight line of velocity, spying it was a woman, then opening their dials for a closer inspection. She was become a miracle.

She forgot how she had come to be here, forgot Silver, forgot the Faction, forgot everything but the delights of falling. She was in an egg of perfect light, and all she could see beyond herself was her own shadow, extending from her at all angles and stretched so thin as to appear nothing but a line or a rope. There was as much darkness here as light, they seemed interchangeable.

But no, she wasn't alone - angel-plumes streaked past her. There were two, accelerating upwards like the streamers of the rockets on Guy Fawkes's Night, carrying burdens to explode in the solid world, there to consume Nate Silver

-

Burn him in a tub of tar

Burn him like a blazing star

Burn his body from his head

Then we'll say ol' Pope is dead

Hip hip hoorah!

The flight of angels put thought and memory back into her, filling her with shame and remorse. She had failed them both - Mother Sphinx and the Magus alike - by dying this way. It had been foolish, charging the stage like that, but then he had been dying, he was dead already in the world outside the egg, and all those years dogging his footsteps and prying for Faction Paradox were wasted; and she would never be a proper cousin with a shadowblade in her hand or loa on her shoulders.

She remembered her little house and dreams lost.

She span in freefall. The ascendants were already too accelerated to be caught but they'd left an arc like a fault on the surface of the world. She saw now that it was not simply infinite or curved like the inside of an egg, but sheer like a channel cut into the earth. She altered the direction of her plunge, finding a new down, and dropped instead towards the wall and the angels' origin.

With nothing she could measure it against, their fastness might have been pinprick small or wider than an ocean. It had no depth or dimension. She descended to it, thinking it ominously a web and herself a sweet insect, but it was too late now. Hers had been the hands that cleaned away the cobwebs and interred the worn-out husks of flies in her house; she could hear the screams they made as the spiders consumed them; this place seemed to be made of old memories.

It would explain why the angels' home seemed so familiar.

By the time she reached it, the structure had resolved itself into a comfortable yet disconcerting shape. She stepped through the door into the parlour of Thomas Piper's old house in Hornsey, over four years gone from her now but unchanged to her eyes, except that she was now a different creature. No, she went to find a mirror - Dutch glass, therefore cruel and exacting - and the old young Mrs Thomas Piper was there in it, prettily untouched by famine, pestilence, and death. As she moved, the unflattering image changed her, making her the Faction's little sister in a hood of bone; then a small child again in a ruined summer dress, with slicked mudwater up and down her legs; then older and naked as she had been on her wedding night, waiting to be blooded. She found she liked Little Sister Greenaway the best and fixed herself as that. Around her the walls rippled as though built of water.

There was a stub in her hand, as if she had caught on something as she'd fallen, but she was distracted by a movement at the window. She whirled, but the frame was empty, peaceably washing back and forth like a lapping tide. Nonetheless, she heard scratching at the walls, skittering and malevolent laughter. Disturbed, she went to the stairs, and climbed to find her husband's old door. On her way, she touched the walls to read them, but they were cold and yielded only a tingling pleasure on her fingertips. It was not like finding a building at all, but a body, living flesh. She could smell blood and sweat and spent semen, and thought for a moment that she might be trapped in the dolly she had made of Nathaniel Silver.

She went into Thomas Piper's bedroom, where he had died, and found a monster curled on the bed. She screamed. It screamed back at her.

It was an angel, or at the least one of those creatures that Silver had named angels. Greenaway and her cousins had seen through their veils of light, finding not cherubs nor the earnest stiff-limbed men of church art. These angels had the heads of insects, magnified to repulsive size. They had cramped, helmet-smooth faces pocked with many eyes, and a cluster of feelers

and finely-furred tubes protruding from their jaws. This one had a body of armour-like segments, its many skins drooling cool pus and trembling filthily as it drew air through its body. Its legs were lank, powerful things, strangely jointed. It sprang at her with all that strength. She sprang back. They collided, struck the floor, and rolled apart.

The black notch in her hand coiled. She looked at it, and found the stub was elongated and spilling away from her like a rat-tail. It was black, a part of her hand yet not part of it, a whip without depth or substance. It was her own thin trailing shadow that she must have caught as she'd fallen. The flea-beast, morbidly silent, sprang at her again. She turned the shadow-whip awkwardly in her hand. It missed the creature's attack and cracked harmlessly against the bed. The flea trampled her chest and knocked the imaginary breath from her. It sprang away, landing on the wall and gluing itself there with the pink gunge dripping from the pores of its legs. Greenaway, when she'd been Mistress Piper, wouldn't have tolerated such mess in her home.

She stood warily, but the flea didn't leap. She put all her effort into her hand, to learn the shape of her whip, to make this unexpected weapon an extension of her arm. She didn't flail, she didn't strike in fear or anger. She persuaded it and made it twist a clumsy circle round her feet. Her opponent jumped; she brought up the whip and smashed it down. An accident, it could easily have gone wide, and the flea was now up again and charging. Whirling the whip above her head - letting it score the walls and demolish what furniture it touched - she charged back. They exhausted each other, smashing their way round the ghost of Thomas Piper's room, against the walls and the window, the ceiling and the bed, among the wreckage. Neither found a lasting advantage or a killing blow, not before they were fortunately interrupted.

The window exploded just as Greenaway had a slight edge; they were at close quarters in a corner, pummelling each other against the walls, she desperately trying to pin its oozing limbs to stop them thrashing at her. The pane shattered inwards, setting slow glass shards floating through the room. The noise made her jerk her head round; she lost her grip on the beast, which shoved her away. A thousand pieces of darkness were swarming through the cavity they'd made, malevolent shapeless imps whose no-fingers snatched and tore at the walls, taking away chunks of brick, wood, and plaster. Their no-bodies were no-coloured and un-heavy with no-scent, like plague. They fell on Greenaway; she snatched at them, but they rolled over her, up her legs and body, pinning her arms. They blattered against her face, exploding, dying in their rush to smother her. She snapped her whip, but they clung to it and made it heavy with thick shadows. She tried to scream, but they filled her mouth. She fell back under their clustered weight, as they clawed at her clothes and her flesh and her soul...

The radiant outline of the enormous flea rose over her. Its flesh was suffused. It glowed deeper then pulsed hard clean light, a shriving burst. The light washed over her and the sticky darkness evaporated. She fell back gasping for air that she knew she didn't need. The swarm was driven back and out of the window. The light dimmed, the insect sagged and slumped back into the corner where she had lately beaten it. Behind her, the curtain twitched uncertainly on a breeze that was not truly there. Tired and knowing herself defeated, she scrabbled back on her haunches, her shadow-whip trailing after her like a spent thing. Opposite from her, the insect's many sacs bulged and wheezed; it looked how she felt.

~ That will not work again ~ I am exhausted ~

The voice was supple and worn down by time, like the world around it.

'Then what?' she snarled back at it. Let it not think Little Sister Greenaway was off her guard!

~ Then they will come again and kill us both ~

'So, there's no point in us fighting much more? Pax, eh?'

~ Indeed ~ Pax ~

'Not that I would give you quarter otherwise. You have killed Nathaniel Silver.'

~ No, I was against that ~ I argued with the others ~ Their case had some merit, but I wasn't swayed ~ Besides, I have studied him and don't think he can die so easily ~ They will die first ~

'He wouldn't harm them! He is a good man and deserves his life.'

~ They will die anyway in the solid world ~ It won't sustain their spirits for long ~ But we were besieged and hopeless ~

Greenaway felt secure enough now to be distracted, pulling off her mask to wipe the sweat and stray hairs from her blotched red face.

~ Human ~ The flea might have laughed; it sounded surprised.

'What sort of thing are you then? You are no angel, whatever Nate might think.'

~ We are neither angels nor devils ~ We are pilots ~

'That means nothing,' she protested.

~ We are your children ~

'I have no children, sirrah,' she told it, but imagining she would get no more sense from it softened her tone and told it: 'I am Faction Paradox.'

The pilot-flea shuddered, laughing, weeping ~ Then we are discovered ~ We strived to keep ourselves concealed from powers like yours ~ We have no desire to be dragged into your war, but you have wrought so much damage in our history, and we must correct it where we can ~

'I've done you no harm,' she protested, 'apart from just now. What's your quarrel with Silver?'

~ And what is yours? ~

'I asked first!'

From outside there came again the scratching and skittering of plague-imps.

~ You shouldn't have come here ~ They'll attack again, and then you'll die ~ You should leave ~

'Leave? How?! I hardly know how I came to be here. And they will kill you too!'

~ They will extinguish this spirit ~

'And you'll die!'

~ This part of me will die, but this part is only a projection ~ My corpus mundus lies sleeping on Civitas Solis ~ It will wake unharmed millions of years hence ~

She sensed evasion. This creature had tempers like any man, and she found she could read them - and it in turn was reading her, for it continued ~ though I'll know that some tulpa-part of myself has been lost forever on this mission ~ I'll haunt myself by not being there ~

'Then you should leave too.' That was harsh of her, knowing that if it spoke truly it would wither and die in the solid world.

~ My mission is failed ~ I can only stay and wait for the siege to break itself or break me ~

Greenaway bunched her fists and felt the shadow-whip tickling the palm where it was crushed. She rose from where she'd crouched, and moving slowly so as not to alarm the pilot, went to the window to gaze out for their attackers. Outside she saw a hazy picture of her lost and tranquil garden.

~ You won't see them ~

'What are they?'

~ I don't know ~

Was that honest? Was it being honest with her? 'Your mission's failed and you're going to die, so why would you not tell me what your stake is in Silver?'

~ I could ask you the same question ~ It was behind her now, and not moving. She had turned her back to it, a sly gesture of trust.

'I don't know much. I'm a novice in my order.'

~ You must know something ~

She weighed her response, but she'd already tipped the balance with her own argument. 'I've been told that he's out of place, that he lives when he should not. My superiors tell me he must be sustained by some power, and it would be to the Faction's advantage to claim that power. I imagine your motives are similar.'

For a moment she thought it wouldn't answer. Then, ~ Silver is an anomaly ~ In Civitas Solis we observe the historical probabilities that sustain the hegemony ~ Above point six six is tolerable and requires minimal adjustment ~ Most war events fluctuate within the upper quartile ~ But Silver is a distortion and his impact grows exponentially after his lifetime ~ If unchecked, all probabilities will tend to zero and permanent ontological extinction ~ Then who knows what your children will be? ~

Impassively, she said: 'I grasped not one word of that.'

~ Our mission was arranged ~ We descended into a praxis fugue, and concealed in this infinitesimal, sank into prehistory to find Silver~

'And kill him?'

~ To contact him ~ To deal with him in exchange for biodata that could be returned to Civitas Solis and studied so his power could be contained ~ He was reasonable; we gave him what he wanted and then descended to claim what was ours ~ It was there that we discovered the most terrible thing ~

'What thing?'

~ That is he just a man ~ That there is nothing unusual about him whatsoever ~ There is evidence of tampering with his biodata, but we were attacked the moment we completed our dissection and could investigate no further ~

'So his power...?'

~ Is no part of him ~ We have been decoyed, and so have you ~

Greenaway slumped exasperated back in her corner, staring at the disgusting thing that had somehow become her companion. If this gargoyle was indeed her child, then she dreaded to think what kind of grotesque had fathered it upon her and how it had been nurtured unnoticed in her womb. She studied its fat undulating grub of a body with a mother's concerned eye, and a sly smile on her face as the thought crept over her.

'There is a saint of pilots,' she ventured, 'of navigators. His fire burns round the masts of ships and sailors pray to him. Erasmus,' she concluded.

~ Your point being? ~

'You are a spirit, are you not? You could leave here, but you would fade and die in the light.'

~ We are productions of time ~

'You are loa.'

~ Whatever you wish to call us ~

'You are loa and you could live in the solid if you had a body to ride. We have similar missions...'

~ They are not quite the same ~

'But not at odds, and even a brief alliance would be better than waiting to die. I've done enough of that.'

Its response, when it came, was a slow and noncommittal ~ Maybe ~

She knew then that she had him; or perhaps not, maybe their negotiations took many hours of this infinite moment and she had only stitched and sutured her memories in the aftermath. Whatever the truth of it, Erasmus was persuaded. She took the pilot's spindly limb in her naked unweaponed hand and shook it, and they had an agreement - not between the pilots and the Faction, but a personal pact between one little sister and one stranded spirit.

Their thoughts turned to escape before the final surge could break and overwhelm them. Erasmus - as it allowed itself to be called - would guide her way back along her original path. She took its loa-weight onto her shoulder, where it settled as an abiding presence. She wouldn't make Orpheus's mistake by turning, but would consider the pilot a constant spirit haunting the back of her head, as much a part of her mind as it would surely be in the solid

world. Erasmus described in difficult terms how time was compressed within the infinitesimal; only a spit of a second would have passed in her absence from the world, though the Earth would have moved fractionally along its celestial path in that time. With Erasmus's weight on her, they crept slowly from the room, anxious not to alert the besieging army. The front door was a final marker; if they could but make it outside the pilot could guarantee their escape.

They were almost there. She had her hand on its knob when the door exploded inwards.

Greenaway staggered back with Erasmus dragging at her. She had false splinters in her eyes and the pain imitated life so closely that she bled. ~ It is not real ~ See with my eyes while yours adjust ~

She took that advice, blinked away the blood from her face and opened the pilot's half-dozen dozy lids to let in the light and face down the attacker who strolled purposefully into her parlour. The plague-thing had stitched itself into a single being that walked in a man's shape, but was the colour of a starless night; also moonless, unless she counted the craterless globe of its head. It had no face; it smiled.

It lunged. Greenaway brought up her whip, the faded black of her shadow slicking visibly across its fuligin chest. Her hand scorched on contact and she snatched it back. The black dome inspected her quizzically and it killed its advance, a moment's respite. It was sniffing her, teasing out her perfume and her name. Its glossy shoulders shrugged, as if dismissing any threat she might pose. There would be no longer pause than this; it would not toy with her, it would not drag out a fight to standstill, it would not be given to conversation in the lull. When it charged again it would kill her and Erasmus both.

~ Greenaway, we must go now ~

It was still between her and the door; there was no gap. She made small steps, almost tiptoes. The plague-man stood motionless, its fingers slicked with blood not yet spilled. She wished it would speak. She prayed it would not. It sprang.

Greenaway ducked and threw out her arm in a wide circle with the whip extending to its fullest length. It missed her attacker, but found its targets in the house all round her. Its tip slashed through walls and door, through the staircase, the furniture, and the ornaments in an arc of demolition. The walls crumbled and fell, the ceiling and upper storey came down, the stairs collapsed. A rain of dust and destruction smothered the scene. Gloves fell from their lines to lie in the rubble with their empty fingers scrabbling to escape before more brick and plaster might crush them. Inconvenient tonnes smashed down on the intruder, while Greenaway twirled her whip like a shield, feeling the weight of fallen beams bouncing off it.

The door, that narrow aperture, was split into a wide jaw with tongue and teeth ripped away. She ran for it, toward the light. Erasmus barked a warning and she whirled, seeing the monster's hand diving for her. Still running and with her eyes shut, she brought the whip up and stung it; her shadow went through its head and set it screaming. She broke contact as she stumbled into the light, but not before its agony had filled her palms and sent her reeling with revelation. I know this thing! I know its provenance!

She fell into the light, Erasmus soared inside her, and they were spat back into the solid world.

The light expelled her, less than a mile from where it had snatched her, onto a bed of snow that sizzled and evaporated in the heated discharge. Later she learned that only an instant had passed for her, but the fine gradations of that instant had been infinite. She lay gasping on a dried patch of hot grass.

They found her in the field and carried her, still half-stunned and moaning, into the warm safety of the shrine. A week she lay traumatised and shivering on her low bed in an anteroom. All of her cousins had survived the fracas at Salomon's House, though it would take some days before they could describe, before they knew certainly themselves, what had happened in her absence. The last scrap they gathered was the most heartening - Nathaniel Silver had escaped whatever fate had been planned for him, and was now in Paris, spirited there by M. Valentine and the power he served.

Greenaway would also listen tight-lipped as her cousins described their battle with the pilot-spirits, and how Erasmus's allies had died. The pilot was silent, but she sensed an equanimity in him. His comrades were not dead - they were sleeping in a distant city - and their mission would continue in other hands. She resolved she would tell her family about her new loa when the right moment presented itself, but as time passed that moment proved ever elusive. He stayed hidden inside her, speaking occasionally, but unrevealed to all but her.

She couldn't talk or move when they had found her. She could only stare up at them and marvel at how badly her imagined death had shaken them. Amphigorey even cried; Suppression sat beside her in the early hours of her paralysis, with his hand resting comfortably on hers; Hateman beamed joyfully; only Mother Sphinx stayed impassive, watching her through the hollows of her unremoved mask. Overhead, her reflection in the shrine's shiny ceiling was skeletal and blanched.

Only Hateman was with her when she first moved her lips again. Her cousin turned and bellowed for the others: 'Hey, you lot! Amphigorey! Get your arse in here! Our cousin's talking!'

Cousin?

Hateman saw the unspoken question. 'You've armed yourself. You've gone into Hell and come out again. Whatever happened to you must have been a tougher ordeal than anything we could've cooked up. Mother Sphinx says Cousin Greenaway, so Cousin Greenaway it is. You don't argue with that voice.'

She shook off this praise; it didn't matter. All that mattered were the words, the message she was screaming unheard inside herself. Her mouth struggled again to form sounds. Hateman gave her the smile an indulgent adult might give an infant, so Cousin Greenaway snatched her by the lapel and pulled her so close their faces touched. Finally the words came out of her.

'Homeworld!' she gabbled. 'It's from the Homeworld!'

A boy fell from the north tower, dropping with a geometric precision that bisected the line of the old building. The effect would have pleased the architect had he seen it, but though he was on site that morning, he was conferring with his surveyor and the foreman on the far side of the abbey precinct. He didn't see it, but he heard it - the impact of body against stone, a fruit exploding under a hammerblow - though he was now over seventy years old and in other respects his hearing was faded. It was almost as though he had been expecting it. He drew a tongue over his lips before the first sounds of commotion could reach them from the west front. He tasted raw meat on an unsmooth pagan altar. It was delicious.

Within moments of the fall, the other labourers had downed tools and clustered round the dead boy; others called for the foreman, who came followed by the surveyor, and hobbling nimbly with one hand on his stick, the architect. It was then that the intruder wandered unchallenged into the grounds. He was almost upon the scene of the tragedy itself before he was found and questioned. He was an unassuming and - in dress - somewhat old-fashioned fellow, of perhaps forty years; he claimed to be an old friend of the architect, and had come to offer his greetings. The architect was close enough to be summoned with a shout. He made a play of his irritation and elaborated his stumbling gait, until he came face to face with the intruder. Then all pretence slipped away; the distraught pantomime he had performed over the fallen boy's body disappeared, replaced with a genuine and sober dread. They stared at each other, across the gap, paralysed and silent. The workers, having better and grimmer things to do, left them alone.

'I thought you were dead,' the architect said, at length. 'I heard it. I didn't know for sure.'

The intruder, the younger man whose hearing was perfect, ignored what he'd said, but looked instead to the bloodied thing the workmen were digging out from its half-grave of dislodged masonry. 'Was that your doing?'

The architect shrugged. 'An accident. They happen on every site. One comes to rely on them.'

'For blood?'

'Yes,' he nodded, 'for blood. Think of it as a sacrament, without which the building is incomplete. It has form and substance, it has geometry, but without blood... without blood, it is no living building. It has no soul. But see that boy, now, who would have cared for him otherwise? He would have been one of history's anonyms, leaving no mark on the world save perhaps the pollution of children born into poverty and misery. Now he will live forever in the fabric of these stones.'

'I'm sure he would have rather lived in the fabric of his body.'

The architect shook his head. 'I didn't kill him. These things happen.'

'You were ever a wicked child. You were lucky I never beat you.'

'Yes, and you were always so fucking holy. You could've taken a slap or two yourself.'

The younger man stepped forward, his hands held straight up. The architect, whose skin was withered tight on his bones, and who had never felt so ancient as he did now alongside this clean-skinned interloper, stiffened for a blow that didn't fall. Instead, his old friend took him by the shoulders and hugged him, and in truth that winded him almost as much as a punch might have done.

'Fuck!' he pronounced, once he was broken free - and once he had scanned the vicinity to make sure that no one had seen this reputation-shattering display of affection. 'You have not aged. A year or two or five, perhaps, but look at me!'

'You've done well for yourself these last forty years.'

'I have not. Look, I'm raddled. I'm become a struldbrugger while you might be my son. My grandson!' His own body smelled of tired old meat, while the Magus's was still sprung and fresh.

'I meant your works - Sir Nicholas Plainsong, the master architect. I would never have dreamed you had such talent. And these towers...'

The architect scoffed. 'Them? Oh, they're but a joke! My real work's elsewhere. New churches mainly. Fat Anne awarded me six commissions, the same number as the Houses of Heaven.'

'So you have left a mark on the world?'

'Just on London. I never wanted the world. That would be greedy. But Nate, what brings you here? After our last meeting...'

Nathaniel Silver didn't answer at once, but let Nick's now tired voice rattle off into ellipsis and silence. He was looking at the dead boy on the ground, at the corpse-lips that still twitched as the life and the air expelled slowly from his body. The workmen tugged down a creamy dustcloth from their scaffold and laid it over the dead face like a makeshift shroud.

He looked back to Nick: 'I'm going to die today,' he said.

The trees along Whitehall were pinking with the blossom of a Hanoverian spring. Their track into London's thoroughfares took them past the spot where Nathaniel Silver had, almost eighty years past, seen a king beheaded and a new future inaugurated. It was not this future, he ruminated, this strange today that they'd stumbled into blindly and by chance. He had thought his life bound up with the fate of the beheaded king, but it had not been so. Those storms that had battered England for so much of the old century had now passed, and a strange interruption now held, a moment of uncertain peace that might one day be thought an idyll.

Silver remained troubled. He could see the dangers strewn ahead, the unwitting traps set by history throughout the isles, but they would not affect him. He was dying, and if there was some true golden age beyond life, a metropolis not of death but salvation, then he hoped he might be forgiven his transgressions and accepted into it. He could imagine paradise as a city much like London or Paris; how could it not be when it was built by the same hands, all the hands there had ever been? The parks, bridges, and boulevards of all cities would be there, all the buildings of the Earth now belonging to all souls equally. He was certain also that there would be another Nate Silver waiting for him, a much younger and coarser man who had rightly died at Edgehill and was ignorant of what had been done on Earth in his name since.

He said nothing of this to Nick Plainsong. It was hard to believe that this was the same boy - no, it was all too easy. The skin might be leathered by time, but the eyes and the gestures were the same. So was the gait; his stick was wholly for effect, or to beat at insolent passers-by who (it seemed) were given to calling him an old fart to his face. He still slouched slightly at Silver's heels, letting the Magus set the pace. And his lusts were unchanged.

They were off to Covent Garden to find a brothel.

Neither of them had been in much of a mood to explore the architecture of London Redux, splendid though it was. Plainsong was in fact gloomy about the prospects of the city, imagining how the capital would one day be consumed by pillars of glass and steel, buildings fit only for men who had debased themselves to the level of ants.

'But still men,' Silver cautioned him. Around them burst the teeming humans of the Hanoverian Age, including the young - running chattering playing children heedless of the world around them, their faces never troubled by the hardships of the last generation, and so seeming, in Silver's eyes, unfinished and terribly vulnerable. Nick had no more work at the abbey today, where in any case the men had been spooked by sudden and careless death. Nick's career was not unknown to Silver: his shadowy apprenticeship to celebrated names; his tours of Mediterranean and North African architecture; his return to England bearing arcane secrets of antique geometry like a crusader carrying back profane knowledge...

'I have a question or two for you,' Silver ventured, once they were out of sight of the abbey, once he judged that Nick would be unwilling to beat a retreat, 'about Salomon's House.'

'God's ballocks! That was nearly fifty years ago. You can't still bear a grudge...'

Sixty. Nearly sixty years ago. His memory was going.

'No, no grudges. To tell the truth, I thought you did me a favour that night when you stole the pilot's egg from me. I was ready to be done with it. Nor do I hold any ill will about our subsequent meeting. You opened my eyes to many things I had allowed to be hidden.'

'I was cruel to do so,' Nick replied, and that sounded as close to an apology as he could manage.

'You were, but you're Nick Plainsong. Cruelty's in your nature. No...' He heard his voice trail off, but couldn't feel his own body; he was momentarily dislocated somewhere else, into a corpus that was dying or already dead. Then he was back, and felt well and undying. The power that raised him had done an uncanny job in tailoring his healed body, which did not age or wound as it would have before Edgehill, but the life-force that sustained it was running out. He would not last long when it was gone.

'Why did you do it, Nick?' he asked. 'That's all I need. A little clarity before I die.'

'For Christ's sake, will you stop saying that?'

'No. No, I won't. Why, Nick? Was it Jeova put you up to it?'

'See, you need not ask, you already guess. Yes, it was Jeova suggested the theft, and in truth I was angry because you'd spoiled my sport.'

'Did he tell you why?'

'He suggested it as a mischief. Oh, he framed it cunningly, like I would be liberating you from a curse, though it was ever his own interests that guided him. He wanted your egg for himself, I've no doubt of that.'

'Greed? That's a shame. I expected more from him.'

'Not greed, pride. He was stung that it was your gift and not his, when he could do so much with it. Also, he was lonely, and I don't think he'd ever really loved a man before, or a woman. I was kind to him.'

'Because you wanted another Magus.'

Nick shook his head. He had been hatless earlier, and most of the hair had gone from his scalp. Long strands of it now slipped dislodged down his back to decorate the shoulders of his coat, white on black. 'I'd've died of boredom within months. You made for a more exciting life. I missed it when you were gone.'

'You found other patrons,' Silver said evenly, so slight that he wasn't sure that Nick would see a prompt.

Ah, but he was a bright child - he saw. 'Oh yes, but my patrons were never concerned with you, only the others you attracted. That's why they've had me prime the churches.'

'Which others, Nick?'

'You know -'

'Yes, I know and it still hurts. You needn't mention their name, but I don't see what these churches of yours have to do with them.'

'They're coming back - to London - in force, and soon. Look at these children, it will be in their lifetimes, though not mine. Some future George is going to strike a compact with them, and that'll involve a grant of time. Not land, you understand, time. Eleven whole days of our empire, this mangy hound commanded by the Hanoverian flea, will be given to them. Those days will be theirs to do with as they will.'

A girl ran past them in the mud, with her skirt hoisted and flapping, a poor ruddy-faced cheerful thing ignoring the old men on the sidewalk. Her mouth made hard regular puffing noises, imitating a kettle or a Savery fire-engine; she seemed to be turning into a machine. The breeze shook blossom from the overhanging trees, and Silver saw that they weren't pink as he'd thought, but a mixture of oranges and reds, with some petals plain white and shot with bloody veins. They were dying, he thought, killing themselves by trying to spread. The world was accelerating toward a future that Nick thought was certain.

No, Nick had planted a spoke into its wheel. 'London will be theirs, including your churches.'

Even as an old man, Nick Plainsong had a lad's evil smile.

Silver parted his hands wistfully and let the petals that had gathered there drift away, onto the barren walkway, or to the fecund mud where they'd be trampled by children or buried under horse-dung. It was hard for him to imagine a welcome in Heaven. He thought of the wavering line of fresh-trained soldiers on the field at Edgehill; he had been there. He'd fallen there, but rose again, while so many others hadn't. He saw skulls split by musketballs, stomachs rent open, limbs spilling as free as blood; he saw heads lopped off by Prince Rupert's cavalry or the anonymous cannon; he could taste gunpowder and hot metal on the air. How could any of his fallen comrades or fallen enemies have accepted the welcome of Heaven? When the light had descended on

them, with their jaws or the eyes gone, their stumps seeping with faint beads of blood that no longer flowed or spurted, how would they have reacted to the beneficence of Christ? He could imagine only a great mutiny and the pillage of Heaven, as the betrayed once-living men tore down the palaces of the God that had birthed them into Hell.

'I can understand,' he said at length, 'why you might side with them, but I will not.'

Nick looked at him curiously, and saw that he was smiling. 'Well even if you are to die today - and I doubt that, Nate, I doubt that - you have stuck to your purpose, I see.'

Silver shook his head, and as he spoke they reached the threshold of his final destination. 'No, Nick. I am a broken and disillusioned man.' But he kept smiling nonetheless.

The brothel was one of Plainsong's favoured retreats. Silver remembered it, though not fondly or in great detail, as Corinthian Tom's House of the Infernal, which had - fittingly - been burned out one night during the years of Silver's exile in Paris. It had been a squalid dive then, but now at least the façade had been prettified. The shell had been rebuilt and painted, even decorated, so it looked as respectable as a town house, even if the curtains were ever drawn. Inside was fine furnishing and genteel decoration, overseen by a silver-haired matron and her elderly retainer; the pimps and procurers were well-hidden, the back-stage squalor smothered by heavy perfume and rare madak tobacco. Outside there was even a prosaic wood plate on the door, with the establishment's latest name chipped awkwardly into it, and engraved with images of rabbits.

'The Cunicularii,' Silver read awkwardly, stumbling as ever on the Latin.

'So named at the height of this last year's rabbit fever,' Plainsong explained, then - seeing this was no explanation - added: 'The papers were full of it. No? 'Twas a hoax. The lady in question was exposed as a liar and an hysteric, so I imagine this will be the old Inferno again soon enough.'

They knew Nick Plainsong here. The women of the house greeted him with exaggerated whoops, claps, and smiles, welcoming him back as they would an old friend, or at least a very generous and untroublesome client. For all his age, wealth, and status, he turned again into a child, a youth newly-encumbered by loins and lusts, and happily willing to try every sweetmeat or confection that was laid before him. He was soon swamped by voluminous prostitutes, while Silver - who had had most of his appetites burned away in long fits of hope and disappointment - sat back and watched them smother him. He only wanted a drink, and they served him gin. That had been new once, when he and Nick had crept round these houses decades ago, a foreign tippie brought back by sailors from Cromwell's Dutch wars. Now it was everywhere, a craze like the rabbits. All the girls had forlorn, floppy rabbit ears sewn onto the tops of their caps, the smooth felt dangling down the backs of heads and across bare shoulders. They tried too hard to make this place elegant and modern. Silver found he missed the rough and honest seediness of these places.

Nick introduced him; he forgot the names and faces instantly. He had no need to remember any longer, and he had no desire to spend time with any of these women. Nick didn't believe he was dying. He thought Nate was being morbid again, and he was right. Silver was morbid - like the egg, he had carried that with him out of the grave. The does of the Cunicularii stroked his hair, his face, and his chest, and drifted away sadly when they discovered he wasn't paying. Only one caught his attention, but she was sitting in her own corner

of the parlour, not looking at him, not looking to anyone, but rifling through a pack of stiff oblong playing cards.

'Who is that?' he asked Nick.

The old architect punched him playfully on the shoulder. 'She doesn't fuck.'

'What does she do?'

'She can sing a bit. Mainly she plays French Tarot. She's from the city of your old exile, you might have met her.'

'I doubt it, she looks barely old enough.'

'So? You don't look a hundred. Come on, I'll introduce you.'

And Silver found himself being drawn reluctantly out of his comfortable loll and marched across the room to meet the mysterious whore who wouldn't fuck. Silver plonked himself down in the chair opposite her, and she gave no more reaction than a faint scowl, barely detectable in the intense scrutiny she was giving each card. Silver tried to make himself seem presentable, tried to smile. It wasn't even as if he found her attractive; she was a little too heavy for him, her cheeks and neck no longer puppyish but still hinting at lost rolls of fat. She had a pronounced round chin and a mouth of crooked teeth, which might have explained why she wouldn't smile.

Silver had fornicated with more women than he cared to remember, especially in the bleaker times when le Pouvoir were still eager to secure his attention; he had romanced perhaps a dozen; he had loved two, and been befuddled by a third. He knew already that this one wasn't going to be a grand passion, even if by some miracle he lived to the end of the day; but she was interesting.

Plainsong loomed over him, not sitting, but resting with one hand on his stick and the other round the waist of a skinny child about a fifth of his own age. She was powdered and practised at her arts, but somehow contrived to seem much more innocent than this sour creature sat opposite him.

'Nathaniel Silver, may I introduce the famous Mademoiselle Machine? She doesn't speak any English, which isn't usually a drawback in her profession, but since she refuses to do much else this makes her a mystery. Wouldn't you agree, mademoiselle?'

Mademoiselle Machine made daggers of her eyes and glared at him. 'Little English,' she spat. Her voice was guttural, a parodic Parisian growl. Silver realised at once that she wasn't French, but had, like him, spent enough time in their capital to make a crude mimic.

Silver rolled his eyes at her. I'm sorry about him. 'Do you play cards, mademoiselle?'

The dagger-glare came round to face him. She cut her cards abruptly and extended the topmost to him. It was arcane majeure, a gaudy fellow at his workbench, le bateleur.

'She knows you, Nate,' Plainsong announced, bellowing it out to anyone interested and setting his companion giggling, possibly from embarrassment. 'And what of Sir Nicholas Plainsong? What is he? Le diable, I hope? Or master of la maison dieu? Come mademoiselle, I will accept anything but le mat.'

Bored, Mademoiselle Machine cut her deck again and held out another card, this

time towards Nick and his catch. 'L'amoureux,' she pronounced, voice dull as a rusted sword.

Nick clapped his hands delightedly and pulled his catch closer. 'Excellent!' he declaimed - it was always hard to tell whether he was truly drunk, or feigning it to indulge his rowdiest instincts - 'I think that's my cue to take this young lady upstairs and ravish her to within an inch of my life. Inches are thinner nowadays, Nate, and I fear I'm more likely to expire today than you are. If that should happen, you'll be sure to tell my good lady and our children that I died screwing a cheap whore and that I'll see them presently in Hell.'

'I will do, Nick,' Silver promised, but the sound was obscured by the girl complaining about being called cheap. Plainsong silenced her with a proffered penny, then seized her by the waist, and with a strength obscured by his age, hoisted her over his shoulder and carried her in the direction of the stairs.

'Goodbye, Nicholas Plainsong,' Silver said softly to his retreating back. And it seemed that as Plainsong left his life for good, the whole chorus of raucous noises and yells that had once filled this whorehouse parlour now seeped away, along with the bodies of the women who - seeing no more party or pickings to be found here - became grim and tired and left to take a moment before the afternoon's next gruelling performance. He was left alone with his thoughts and the sound of Mademoiselle Machine paying out her cards on the tabletop. Le bateleur and l'amoureux were swallowed up when she shuffled again.

Slap. The cards came down. Slap. Slap. Slap.

'Do you have a card of your own, mademoiselle?' he asked leisurely.

Slap. She pinned her latest card with her fingertip, and Silver craned awkwardly to study it from the corner of his eye, afraid that if he looked directly she would take offence and snatch it away. It was her own soul she was displaying naked to him. It wasn't a trump, just one of the suits. It showed a three-pointed crown - meant to be gold, but faded brown as if exposed to a surfeit of sunlight - impaled on a thrusting rapier.

Silver, emboldened and dizzied by gin, thought it looked like a seed, or a moment of conception. His eyes shifted from the card and met those of the mademoiselle, who blushed and looked away, then looked back fiercer. She scattered her cards, took his hands and led him to her room on an upper storey where a quickly sobered and excited Silver discovered that - as in so many other respects - Nick was wrong and Mademoiselle Machine was thoroughly prepared to fuck after all.

Nick had promised to pay all debts, but it didn't matter. Silver had money, and no longer had any need for it. He tried to tell the woman that he was dying as they undressed one another, but she wouldn't hear it, sealing his lips with her fingers, and then, unusually, with her mouth.

She was the sort of girl he would have liked when he was a younger, other man. In the years before the war he would have been impressed by her maturity and found her stubborn façade enticing. Young Nate Silver had ridden wild crushes, that had rapidly tamed and gone timid if the subject succumbed to his advances. He couldn't believe he had ever been that boy. Soldierly - and his interment in the earth - had changed him forever. He had been baptised as surely as one of Nick's Satanic churches, the innocent stone activated by violence and blood so it could serve some great power of the heavens or the depths, but - whatever its provenance - heedless of human hope and suffering.

He was baptised again by Mademoiselle Machine's slippery vagina. This time he felt cleansed.

After they'd coupled, she climbed off him and left him spent but hardly tired on her bed. It was a narrow cot in a narrow room, furnished and decorated in a hasty and perfunctory style unlike so much else in the house. It suggested a temporary engagement. Silver raised his head slightly from her pillow and saw Machine clean off her thighs with a cloth, then put on a gossamer blouse and nothing more. She was humming something to herself, a little tune or poem, and he strained to catch the words.

'No gods and no devils,' she sang, 'no servants and no masters, no riches and no poverty, and no laws in the universe but one command: love.'

He recalled where he had last heard these words, and laughed. 'That's a pretty sentiment, mademoiselle, if a trifle naïve.'

She didn't look at him, but went barefoot across undisguised wood boards to the window. The afternoon light was harder than it should have been, passing through glass, and suffused a blushing red from the blossom in the trees outside.

'Mind if I open this?'

'Be my guest.' She wrenched it open. It allowed in the scent of blossoms and a hard breeze that had been building up since he and Nick had met at the abbey. Motion had been let into the world. The wind tickled but didn't trouble his naked body. The air was scented and precious; he took pleasure from each breath.

'You speak more than a little English,' Silver observed. 'Any fool can tell that.'

'Not Sir Nicholas,' said the woman who called herself Mademoiselle Machine; she was sitting on the windowsill, with her blouse and thighs open to this warm March day.

'Sir Nick is easily distracted, where women are concerned. There again, so am I.'

The wind that shook the petals from the trees wafted them through the window and into the room. Their scent - which had until moments before been faint, like a suggestion, like a memory - now turned immediate and heady. He saw the first orange buds flutter onto his stomach and his thighs like the onset of plague, but this was a sweet sickness. It brought up thoughts of lost summers, sticky days in the heat of July, spilled water slaking the hot stone fronts of houses.

The prostitute was still talking, distantly: 'I wish I'd met you earlier, Nathaniel.'

'No one calls me Nathaniel. Such a mouthful. I prefer Nate.'

Did he say that? He must have, as Machine replied, 'I know exactly how you feel.'

More petals fell, trickling then streaming through the window. They clustered on his chest round the tufts of his nipples, and in his navel, and sticking to the slow-drying juices on his diminished penis. The blossom-scent was

overwhelming, as if all the other trivial momentary smells of the solid world had expired and died, revealing the perfume of spring as the true and eternal state of things if not obscured by sin and the works of man. Heaven was waiting for him. Christ's pilots had warned him they would come for him at the end of his life, and his soul was prepared; he hoped they had forgiven him whatever mortal but unwitting transgression he had made against them, and that they meant no longer to punish him as they had at Salomon's House. The stream of flowers was a torrent, flooding the room to drown him. Great drifts fell upon him, caressing him, as Ann had, as Alice had, as Aphra had. Buds and seeds were drawn into his mouth and his nostrils by shallow breaths, there to mate and root. It was his second burial, but this one was blissful.

'I heard what you said to Nick outside, and I envy you, Nate Silver. Everyone would, if they only knew.' But Silver could no longer hear her.

Time unravelled, turned, and fell back into itself. He was sucking his sperm back from Mademoiselle Machine's body through the tip of his penis. They dressed each other playfully and skittered downstairs, to be joined by crowds of whores, then Sir Nick Plainsong. Sat in the corner, Silver looked away from Machine and forgot he had ever seen her. He and Nick left soon afterwards and strolled backwards down towards Westminster. Then they parted, and Silver was immediately wracked by fear and uncertainty of what would happen when they next met, a sentiment that bloomed suddenly but felt as if it had been rooted deep in his heart for many years. A dead boy flung off the stones of a makeshift tomb and leapt many dozens of feet into the air, rapturously restored to life.

Silver accelerated backwards through forty years of wandering, losing short-lived friends as he went, forgetting new facts and undoing quiet achievements. Then he came again to London, and a slow bitterness that had welled in him in recent years was suddenly expelled from his body into blissful ignorance. He was captured and transported back across the channel to France, where he fell into the waiting arms of le Pouvoir. They seemed reluctant to take him, greeting him with a surly coolness that was surprising given how many insights and achievements they'd attributed to him in the past four years. It might have been in jealousy then that he undid all of these, even the mirrors he had made for them, which he now smashed and unfurled and rolled back into the shape of an egg. Alice was at his side in Paris. One morning she stole the angel's egg from him, and he found the years of happiness slipping away, but Alice was still there at his side, always a comfort. He grew increasingly fearful, as le Pouvoir brought him more stories of how the English Service were hunting him and the tortures they meant to inflict on his body and mind if they caught him. Nevertheless, after a few more short years they delivered him back into England. He charged back across a snow-smothered wasteland, determined to confront the Service in their own house outside Cambridge.

No, once there his energies were spent. The angels appeared, and forgave him, and restored the lost egg to him. The world became a calmer place, and over the next few days he casually dismissed all the people who had come to see him fail, sending them back to their homes and institutes across the country. Eventually he was left only with Alice and Nick, and they returned to London together, where they began to erase all traces of Silver's career as the Magus. The time came when he had to be alone, and he left Alice whoring in a Cheapside tavern, and abandoned Nick in a city beset by plague. He had few friends then, though Donald Taylor reappeared and slowly stripped him of his knowledge. He had forgotten the threats of the Service, and they came when he least expected it, throwing him into gaol and implanting a metal stud into his skull - a pain that endured for the rest of his life. The agonies of imprisonment were undiminished whichever way he faced them, and he was

relieved to be let out and put in charge of a small and failing commune in the south. Under his tutelage it thrived. He even found success at restoring the dead to life, and found in one Ann Brownlow his Dorcas, his true risen love. But she quickly forgot him once the commune - nursed back to sturdy health - began to disband.

And then what? Then there were many harvests, on rich brown fields that yielded pieces of flesh and bone that could be sewn back into a joyous crop of living men. These new-born men formed corps that swept across England, leaving it healed and whole in their wake. There was a king again and he brought his nations more battles, more bounty, more injuries undone, and more blessed dead awoken to life. Silver was there for them all, emptying his book as he went. Then he was stumbling backwards across a hoar-coated hill, his retreat undoing the commotion among the hospitallers. He had an egg in his hand; he noticed it, then thought of it no more. He found a crude hole in a patch of fresh-turned earth, a grave filled with bodies wrapped only in cloth because they were so plentiful and wood was so scarce. They would live again soon, so he clambered back down to join them in their rest. There was a shroud waiting for him. He wrapped himself into it, then clawed the cool brittle earth down on him to cover his face and make him warm against the winter frost. He snuggled in his shroud and stitched it back up around him. And then he died.

He had died, he knew that - he had been restored from death - but he was surprised that he couldn't parade any earlier into his life, to undo Edgehill, to march back home with the parliamentary irregulars and present himself for the first time to his mother and his father. That reversal, though he struggled for it, was beyond him. Instead, he saw himself spread out on the lazaret of the pilots, in a room that seemed through the addlement of his senses to be much like Mademoiselle Machine's at the Cunicularii. He was naked and whole, until the bright intimidating angels drew tender scalpels. They had remade his body, which had been struck down by the King's bullet, but now - reversed - it felt as though their instruments were undoing him. Here, at the end of his life, they were cutting him open to remove his lights and leave him hollow. Their divine, invisible blades sliced away flesh, then humour, then bone, destroying all the physical parts of him until all that was left of Nathaniel Silver was his soul, the very gifts of his life.

The slow dolorous hoods of the pilots clustered closer to see, and there was consternation in their ranks. The immortal part of him they had teased out now confounded them. He peered closer, looking into himself to see what had disappointed them about his soul. It was profoundly and unmistakably that of an ordinary man; but it had been stitched; it had been sewn and remade by another hand, subtler even than that of angels. The soul of Nathaniel Silver ended here - at Edgehill, in the grave - but it had been extended, spliced with another man's life entirely. So he had endured more than four score years when he should by rights be dead.

Silver could see this - how he could he not? It was himself, it was true - but the pilots were confused. They probed the suture, and it exploded outwards in a jet of evil ink that smothered their light and drove them back. And as he died, Nathaniel Silver found his likeness reflected on the surface of the dark the angels had unleashed, and knew at last and without pleasure that he was in the presence of his creator.

I was made to be an instrument of war. I was beset by falsehoods and illusions to justify that war.

No longer.

Chapter 12: The Public Burning

Gabriel Suarez died on the fourth day of January in the sixteen hundred and forty-third year of Our Lord. The date was said with confidence - whatever else they might be, the Spanish Inquisition were meticulous in their record-keeping.

Suarez, a man as old as the century, was a citizen of Toledo, a tanner by trade. He had been suffering for some weeks. Humid Spanish prayers were made for him by his wife and children, and they had grown accustomed to grief by the time of his passing. They were unprepared when Gabriel, no sooner confirmed as lifeless by reputable doctors, sat up on his deathbed, cured beyond all doubt. They rejoiced anyway, while the chirurgeons opined he had passed through death as a necessary station on the way to recovery. The Inquisition was unconvinced.

Suarez and his wife were brought before the tribunal under suspicion of practising witchcraft. Señora Suarez insisted that the only power she had invoked was prayer, the only intercession sought that of Christ and His saints. Subject to the garrucha, Suarez confided his suspicion that he had been truly dead and truly restored, but claimed ignorance of how this might have come about, what spirits might have granted him their favour, or what their motives may have been. The inquisitors grew increasingly perplexed, describing their deliberations with terse embarrassment (these being officials of a more worldly and legalistic tribunal than the hotheaded Italians who had imprisoned Galileo and burned Bruno). Eventually, they found Suarez innocent, at least of the intent of witchcraft; his penance therefore was meant not as punishment, but to prevent him from being used, unwittingly, as a further conduit for spirits.

They cut out his tongue, to keep him silent.

Edward Coleman did not die easily. Nor was his death meant to be easy. It was set down in the judgement; he was required to suffer the full vengeance of the state. He was led to his place of execution, to Calgarey-made-London fields, in a state of fear and incomprehension that quite shook the congenial mood of the crowd. They had been expecting a bold traitor's brash performance, but no - he was seen crying as he was led on the hurdle, and his tears infected the throng. How much easier would this be if it were a highwayman, a rogue, a perjurer, or a starter of false fires? They could be expected to dance for the hangman. They might crow or even feint, hoping at the last to slip the noose, cheat Jack Ketch, leap into a prepared saddle and make a famous escape for the next day's pamphlets. This was Tyburn, the great stage equal of any of the city's theatres, so why was Coleman refusing its lure? It wasn't as though he was the first innocent to go to the rope and the roller.

Afterwards, some said that it was an act all along, that the traitor's toothsome fear was a cruel parody of the terror he and his black-clad paymasters had visited on England and her Protestant sisterlands. They whispered that beneath the vizard of tears burned the fanatic heart of a martyr, pleased to die and promised sainthood already in the unholy pantheon of Rome. The perfidious Papimane, it was opined, lacking all human sensibility, could only mimic the agonies of his victims. He was a parody of the true Christian, a mummer and a puppet of Satan. Coleman had learned to semble the arts of misery from the death-throes of poor murdered Sir Edmund, whom he himself had cruelly stabbed on Greenberry Hill (oh come now, even if we grant all the other allegations, no one has ever said that Coleman took a direct part in that business!) He would have learned it, no doubt, from his superiors in the Society of Jesus. They are all 'in' on it, the whole damn'd lot of them. I myself heard that there are some two hundred and five Catholics in the Royal Household. (A ridiculous figure, plucked out of nowhere.) From the lips of Ezreel Tongue himself, a more loyal subject than you will find in

all England. And Master Oates, who speaks with authority on the Jesuits, having bravely turned his back on their vile order, says there are some seventy plots to do away with the King or murder England's innocent multitudes. (Your reason is Popishly affected!) Indeed? And why would an honest Protestant woman throw in her cause with this wicked religion? Unless she is a far from honest Protestant - does treason beat within that breast, my lady Astraea? (My loyalties are in no doubt. I am for the King.) Ah, but then is it not a womanish faith? They may pretend a devotion to our Lord, but the creature they worship is a woman, virgin and whore both, whom they elevate above God - not the Christ but the womb that birthed Him. (Your sophistry is degenerating into the merely vulgar.) And this king you are for? Is it not the case you are a truer admirer of his brother, and would happily see him on the throne? (The Monarchy is a divine office appointed by God, who will put there who He will.) But it won't be God who puts James on the Throne. One way or another it will be Rome, when his brother grows too weak or the Queen slips poison into his beer. (Sirrah, you are beneath contempt.) She's another of your favourites, eh? And she dances to the Pope's tune, same as any other Catholic when they are called to it. (The Pope couldn't find England on a map and you know it.) Oh-ho, I wouldn't claim to know what the Pope thinks. (And Oates is a pig-faced pederast whose lies were exposed by the merest breath of inspection! Sir Edmund likely took his own life; it was said his thoughts were turned inward and morbid. This terror you invoke, this shadowy conspiracy besieging England is a phantom menace that would have seemed crude and childish a hundred years gone! And those who speak of it most - why, they are Whigs who see only an opportunity to exclude the Duke, reject toleration, and shackle us forever to their politics!

I was there! I saw Edward Coleman die! I saw no conspiracy, no performance, only the fear we had put into him before we tore out everything else. We have damned ourselves. Innocent blood. We are all damned!)

Aphra Behn was at Tyburn that day, and did not enjoy herself. It seemed to her that barely any time had passed since the early years of the Restoration, when she'd heard the first reports of the regicides dragged to the gallows to be throttled, emptied, and destroyed. She had received the news with a fit of joy, and had begged her family to raise funds for a trip to London to enjoy the spectacle. The touring display of the dismembered parts had not excited her; it was nothing more than old meat, that might have come from a horse or a cow or maybe an ape. The money had rolled in too slowly though, and she had been taken with a winter chill, and by the time she'd been fit to travel the new king had called a halt to the executions. She had despised Charles for his weakness and his compassion, and had begun - long before the disaster in Antwerp and her days in prison - to shift her admiration to the sterner, less squeamish Duke of York.

She watched Edward Coleman die, and was suddenly uncertain of herself. It wasn't that she was convinced of his innocence - he was condemned by prattling out foolish fantasies, the unhappy toss of that idiot coin whose converse was the good fortune Titus Oates now enjoyed - but by his demeanour. His agonies were palpable but contained; he was too scared, too paralysed, to let out any protest but a whimper. He transmitted to her a fear that would disturb her for many nights afterwards, turning in her breast from the specific horror of one man's death into a broad sickness of the soul. Some nights she would wake and have to push her fist into her mouth to keep the taste of it contained. She wasn't afraid for herself. She was afraid for England, for what it was becoming.

She sat on her bench at Tyburn chewing on a winter apple - tastelessly sour - that she had bought from a stallsman and held on a spike. She tried to ignore the thrum and mutter of the crowd around her, who though disquieted, seemed

thoroughly prepared to watch Coleman - innocent or no - suffer before he died. She wished she could rise above them, as in those waking dreams of Surinam, to oversee the crowd in the body of a bird, a mite, or an angel. So many terrifying faces would be reduced to distant anonymity. So many evil human sentiments would be obliterated by the leap into another species. She could not. She stayed on the ground, in the crowd, as one of them - one of the ugly callous humans. She felt no kinship with them.

Neither did she feel kinship with the wretch they had come to watch die, not immediately. He was hanged, as the first part of his sentence demanded, by the short drop. He thrashed like a landed fish on a line. The noose throttled nine-tenths of the life out of him, so that what they cut down was no longer fully human, but some shit-sodden feral creature. He had enough of his wits left to know that he wouldn't die yet. The vengeance of the state, like any other, was cruel and unseeing.

That was the moment that Aphra Behn began to fear for Edward Coleman. He had condemned himself by incarnating his soft Catholic fancies in the intractable medium of ink. If that was his first step to the gallows, then how much further had she climbed? She'd made no secret of her politics - even her foibles and odd tolerations that would have scandalised her good Tory comrades - and it was no hardship to imagine herself into Coleman's place. What suddenly struck her was the sheer injustice - intolerable even if he were guilty - that a man might die for dreaming and for transmitting those dreams.

Having been hung to within an inch of his life, Edward Coleman was then drawn. He had swooned, his face blanched from the noose, so the executioner sprinkled water on his skin before they dragged him to the table and the brazier. Aphra was far enough from the stage that she couldn't feel the heat or catch any of the blood, though the sizzle was a perceptible buzz under the murmurs of the crowd, and the smell when it came would carry across the field, and for a week afterwards she would barely be able to taste meat without recalling it.

The first on the fire were his privy parts, which were struck off by the executioner almost as soon as he was on the table. His screams, shrill though they were, didn't drown the brazier's whisper. His member and balls were soon followed by his lights and organs. A slit was cut into his stomach and his guts were drawn out; not by hand, as they were too slick to be grasped tidily, but spooled out on a spiked spindle. His head had to be twisted, in its agony, and his lids thumbed open, so that he was forced to inspect each new gory trophy before it was thrown onto the flames. Closest to the brazier were the beggars, London's starvelings, whose stomachs - shrunken but safely intact inside their trunks - were not satiated by the smell but at least pleasantly reminded of their last good meal. There were similar scenes at the city's slaughterhouses each morning; they were inured to Edward's agonies.

She had, by now, started to think of him as Edward.

The trick, in these cases, was to keep the client alive for the entirety of his excruciation. Whether they succeeded or not, Aphra couldn't tell, and made no effort to discover afterwards. It was only made certain when the executioner struck off the traitor's head and displayed it for the crowd. And finally, the sentence was completed as the carcass was quartered; the headless gutted torso that had until moments before been a living man was divided into four pieces, to be displayed around the nation. The head would go to the Tower, to decorate the riverbank. His offal cooked and blackened in the brazier, not meant as tribute to any god, yet still somehow consumed by a spirit that lived in the fire and accepted it as an offering.

Aphra Behn crept away from the field that day, hating herself for her

quietness and her complicity. So you sympathised with the traitor, did you, as he lay dying? That would have been a great comfort to him, had he but known! She spat appleseed onto the field, which was salted to ward off the snow. They might grow into a tall tree some day in the future, but she doubted it. All she'd left to the world were inkstains, and that sort of business had done Edward Coleman no good.

She quarrelled over politics with her current lover that evening, and withheld her favours. He contrived to take them anyway. For a week after, she hated him, and everyone, most of all Edward Coleman, and confined herself indoors. It was winter again, as the world turned interminably through time, and her anger made her only a little warmer. She didn't write. She was afraid of the theatre, afraid even of private verses that might - in years to come - be seen to endorse the wrong man. It was prudent to stay away from the Duke's anyway - the name alone made it the object of scorn and suspicion, even if acting hadn't been seen as such a Popish profession. One night, agitators had broken in and left a bucketload of fish-heads under the stage, and though it had been hosed and perfumed, the stink remained to drive away even loyal customers and unsettle the current production.

Not Sir Patient Fancy, thank Christ, which was over and done with long since. Critics like that could kill a career.

Still, she was in need of funds, and with the stage doors of Tyburn and the Duke's both closed to her, she was left with few options. Which was how, barely a week before Christmas Day, Aphra Behn found herself trudging through Covent Garden in search of a brothel. She was defiantly alone and unarmed, a little protest against those voices who warned that escorts and the bearing of arms were the only surety against the murderous Catholic hordes lurking in every doorway. Such 'precautions' were about as effective as the mail-lined underclothing that had recently become London fashion, and whose manufacturers had at least shown ingenuity and originality when it came to milking the credulous. Aphra was determined that her fear would manifest itself as defiance, even nonchalance. Besides, she knew these streets.

Even so, she couldn't help but glance anxiously at the deeper shadows she passed, a kernel of doubt taunting her, her hobgoblin of introspection. But - no. The idea that all England's Catholics - who had, it seemed to her, lived blameless lives for generations and asked no more than their due as Englishmen - would by some whispered command below Saint Peter's dome transubstantiate into fanatic killers, seemed thoroughly implausible to her. Besides, if she were done to death in a Soho field, she doubted she'd care to ask her killers' faith.

It was another bitter cold December, with rain-dampened snow on the air and low clouds in the noon twilight, which in turn trapped hot coalsmoke in the streets. You might almost swear that London was burning again, and certainly there were many cunning Whigs who would have it that this was just one of the many plots made against the city. But it was second-hand smoke, the spark long gone out of it; it did nothing worse than make her gag, dirty her cloak, and remind her of the smouldering meat-smell of traitors. As a woman, you would be spared his fate; they would only burn you or crush you. Anyone who thought that fire purified knew nothing about fire or purity, and certainly nothing about London.

They were already in Covent Garden's prematurely eveninged streets - the traders, hawkers, streetwalkers, swindlers, pickpockets, buggers, gangsters, jugglers, singers, butchers, and Godbotherers that she expected, none especially perplexed by plots, Popish or otherwise. Even the preachers, already half-mad on hellfire fumes, seemed cheerful in this new atmosphere.

For Covent Garden folk and Covent Garden professions, there was nothing like religious mania and impending apocalypse to drum up business. It was difficult - though not impossible - to be a lone woman on this street without picking up company and maybe pennies. Aphra herself was propositioned once or twice, and drove the enquiries away with a withering glance. She took heavy steps, careful not to slip on the sleet or the dung. There were still clean and full-bodied patches of snow on the edges of the street, not yet turned to shit-flecked sludge or broken by footprints. Children in mufflers, masks, and fingerless gloves were picking up clumps with their hand and filling buckets; others were doing the same for manure, making sure to keep both separate. Aphra supposed there was a new alchemical craze for both substances; both were pure in their own way, and could no doubt reveal the secrets of the cosmos (for a fee). Clean ice, in particular, was being sought as a substitute for rare crystal churned out of volcanoes on the edge of the arctic fimbulwinter. The crystal itself was worthless, but it was rumoured that if you looked through it - at the right angle, in the right light - it would reveal the shape of the future, and such visions were beyond price. Aphra didn't care to contemplate the future, which span the Earth ever further from the Golden Age, and now seemed on the verge of shutting down for good.

The boys and girls, having filled their buckets, took them into a nearby house that Aphra knew to be a brothel - though not the one she was looking for, not the House of the Infernal. Ah, there was no mystery. The snow was for baths, icy water being the quacks' favourite cure-all for most kinds of privy diseases, or to shrivel and kill semen in its natural home (not a method of contraception she believed to be effective - it would be so much more satisfying to slice off the bastard's prick with a rusty knife than make him eat it and hope he fucking chokes on it); and horseshit had a thousand and one practical applications, all unrelated to science.

She was trying not to think about her destination, plastering words around her like a layer of insulation, not against the cold but against her task. The House of the Infernal was half a street's-length away. She trudged through the smoke pall to the door, which was if anything narrower and dingier than she had expected, and rapped on it sharply. She looked at the jamb, finding no lamb's blood drying on the post. The Jews had fled London as quickly as the Catholics, quicker even. They were the children of the passover, who smelled blood on the air and knew from sixteen hundred years' experience that the mob - once roused - was indiscriminate in its mercy.

A metal shutter on the door flapped open. Suspicious eyes flicked back and forth, surveying her. She glowered back. 'Fuck off,' the door demanded, and the shutter snapped closed.

Aphra sighed. It was all too easy to see what the doorkeeper's eyes had seen through that tight oblong: a stout sour woman in widow's black - not intentional, just the most anonymous choice of shawl she had in her wardrobe - stood on his threshold in a stolid yeoman's pose and clearly wanting to be somewhere else. She might be a mother come hunting an errant daughter. She might be a churchly shrew come to pray for their souls - there was a lot of it about - and poke a prurient but disapproving nose into the house's succulently sinful business. Aphra knocked again, this time making sure to hold up a coin.

The same eyes reappeared. Aphra wiggled the coin insistently. 'The Jesuitess,' she said. After a moment, the door was opened, and she was let into the Inferno. She went briskly, to give the impression of being in command of this inner world. Like the caffè house she'd once smuggled herself into - in a disguise that had been obvious to all but the blind - it stank of masculinity, though here the overwhelming miasma was the honest perfume of spunk, not the

dishonest whiff of newsprint. The bricks around her whispered of poverty and heartless love. It was, she reckoned, a touch cleaner and prettier than might be expected, no doubt a consequence of women living here and working here and giving birth within its walls.

She was pleased to find, when she entered Corinthian Tom's parlour, that she wasn't the only woman gathered for the display. True, most of the crowd were London disreputables of all classes - some of the more finely-dressed visibly the worse for drink or night-long benders on the gaming table, and she had no doubt they were the house's ideal audience, to be seduced and fleeced once the show was done. But there were a couple of towngirls here as halves of a brace, persuaded by their beaus and now clinging to male shoulders out of a twittery fear that they might otherwise be dragged off into darkened parlours and never seen outside again; she envied them their girlish fantasies. One maidenly soul seemed to have come alone, and bravely clung to nothing more reliable than the walls of the house as their host held forth.

The Pimp of Pimps noticed Aphra as she entered, and broke his patter. She didn't let his attention distract her, but took off her cowl and stamped the soil and sleet from her shoes as though she'd just walked into the home of one of her worst critics.

'Any more latecomers?' Tom hollered theatrically. The story was that he'd worked his way up to whoremaster by his own endeavours and good-fortune, but he had the bark of a carnival man or a royal herald or the worst kind of actor, who thought the trade was all about bellowing so loud that the words were rendered meaningless. His parlour was partitioned by a bland yellow cloth, like a theatricalcurtain; Aphra smelled cheap stagecraft. She shook her head.

'Then shut the door, before the cold freezes our bollocks off! Be kind and think of my loss of earnings. Pounds, shillings, and pence, madam! Pounds, shillings, and pence!' She slammed the door, grudgingly, but Tom wasn't done with her. 'I've seen you before, I'm sure. Are we graced by a famous face' - she shook her head brusquely - 'or some courtly lady? I've been permitted entry to any number of aristocratic openings in my time.' Laughter broke from the mouths of men; she gave them an enigmatic - if embarrassed - smile.

Corinthian Tom coughed out some phlegm before resuming, and she took advantage of the lull to insinuate herself alongside the other woman, thinking of safety in numbers; also she was quite handsome - chestnut-haired, thin-hipped, and prettily scarred on her face - but Aphra was ignored. Her would-be companion kept her hands and cheek pressed to the wall, one ear listening to the rhythms of the whoremaster's speech, the other to the silent cadences of the building.

'Now,' Tom declaimed, 'where were we?' He was an enormous ham. He was solid meat, feigning delicacy; he was an actor, feigning high-rank; too many clothes and jewels, too many gestures, too many words. 'The Jesuitess!' someone shouted. 'Show her!' came another call, and soon hands were clapping and feet stamping to make a ragged chorus of demand. Compared to Tyburn it was so innocent.

Tom, his scarf flapping, his green coat reflecting candle light, skips into the air to find a perch on a chairseat. Not just to make himself taller, or better command his audience, this is a leap into the heart of his story. Overdone it may be, but he's good at it. He makes it look easy.

'Yes! The Jesuitess!' he barks, resuming his interrupted prologue. 'Now, we have heard this name before. It has been granted, in some sections of

Protestant society, to any number of orders of holy women, to Christ's brides, to those who offer their bodies and their maidenhoods up to the most sacred of Catholic devotions. To' - he breaks, gasps, teeters on his chair. 'To nuns, good gents, good ladies. To fucking nuns. To this.' His arms rise to a peak over his head and become a whimple. He half-parades on the seat of the chair, taking step upon step without ever reaching the edge, his shambling legs pretend-caught on the folds of heavy skirts. 'To gangs of frustrated old biddies and little girls who lie each night below the crucifix but whose hearts would stop if a real man's prick were ever shown naked unto them. These plump-arsed waddling birds, are they the equals of the Jesuits? No, never! The one lies awake of a night plotting the deaths of kings, he can spin from his philosophy perfect lies to justify any Papal atrocity, he dangles the destinies of nations on puppet-strings' (now his arms and legs dance in a marionette parody, before he spits) 'The Jesuit, terror of all Godly men! And the other? The nun? The little sister of mercy? She lies awake of a night fucking herself up the arse with a candle!

'The Jesuitesses? Do me a favour!' (and his voice skips from Cockaigne bawdiness to the gravel mutter of a preacher) 'What we have here, good people, is something altogether more diabolical. A creature with the wits and malignance of the Jesuit, but the body and the guile of a woman.'

Aphra found her legs and spine were contorting from the pressure of standing and listening. She grumbled and shuffled a wider space round herself, enjoying seeing the tide of bodies ripple away from her. Most other eyes stayed focused on the scene, on the performance; if she was running this house she would have planted pickpockets to take advantage of these distracted moments.

Corinthian Tom continues, clambering from the seat to balance tiptoed on the back of the chair: 'I wouldn't care to say that the Jesuitess is a true woman. Chirurgeons from around London, from the Royal court, from one end of this island to the other, have been summoned here to inspect her, learned men from Oxford and Cambridge, the greatest brain-priests and thinkers of our age, and they are - to a man - baffled. I have sworn depositions from the masters of a dozen colleges that her physiognomy - for the benefit of our Surreysiders, that means her body, don't get impatient gents, you'll see it soon enough! - her physog is improperly ordered. She has parts and organs where those parts and organs have no right to be, yet she is in no outward way imperfect.' He contorts himself, making an easy deformity in his spine, extending his arms to twice their natural length and plucking at the throats of the closest spectator. Ape-like, he capers, prancing on the wobbling edge of the chair, but he doesn't fall.

'Nor does she speak any language known to our finest scholars. Could it be that the wisest minds in Christendom are as hopeless fools, that all those retorts have shrunk their brains as well as their pricks? It's' - a smile - 'not impossible.' One hand now scratches his scalp, the other his arse, and there's more laughter at the dunce. He throws off the idiot face and makes a devil-mask.

'So where has she come from, if not from nature, if not from God? Could even the Prince of Darkness' - (he makes horns of his thumbs, by his temples) - 'conceive such a beautiful monster? Or perhaps it is sinful men? There is in the world a certain city called Rome, and embedded in this city is a smaller city called the Vatican, and it is said that under the Vatican is a tinier city yet, the flea on the back of a flea. Here the Jesuits perform their science, to remake men in their own image. Ladies, those gents of a more delicate disposition, you should cover your ears, this won't be pretty - oh, come, we're not all fishwives, someone must cover their ears! You, yes sir, you sir! You look like you'd wilt at what I have to say, do it for my sake.

Right then, do it and I'll halve the price for you. No? Suit yourself.

'So in the pits of the Vatican, the most vile practices are imposed on willing and unwilling females alike, all to make them gravid with a new and miscegenated human species! Women are said to couple with apes! With snakes! With pigs! I warned you, don't say I didn't! It's too late to go pale now, madam! Women are even said to couple with machines, to give birth to babes that are half-flesh and half-metal. They would raise artificial men, called homunculi or - in the language of science, androids - as an unnatural army dedicated to the Hierophant of Hell. Could our Jesuitess be such a creature? You'll have to judge for yourselves, if you dare, and if you can pay.'

And he leaps, tumbling through the air, leaving the chair to teeter and finally topple in a corner, while the acrobat twirls at his zenith and descends softly to land on tiptoes and bow, and proffer his hat, the bowl held out, its lips a dry and empty oval -

There were mild grumbles as the assembly reached for the purses. Even Aphra, who was spending someone else's money, made the ritual noises of complaint.

He becomes good-natured, sharp-tongued, prancing Tom again, and makes a flourish of his body, a death-rattle of his tongue. 'Be warned sirs, you may look but you must not touch. One of our more' - he mimes a jug - 'excitable regulars, a certain Mr Perkin, was lately roused by lust and other more tangible spirits' - jug-jug - 'and thought to introduce her to his particular pleasures. But she would have none of it and did him a grievous injury. We call him Miss Perkin now, and we keep his Mr Perkin in a pickle pot - stop wincing, sirs! I say a pot but I mean a thimble - stop grinning, madam!'

Aphra flattened her lips, but Tom ploughs on regardless: 'Are these walls strong enough to hold her? They say she broke skulls and tore off arms when she first introduced herself to London society. Imagine, good sirs, good ladies, that you were parading down that street on that cold morning not many weeks ago, that your head was full of unsleeping thoughts, and - for some reason accounted only by God - you could find inspiration only among the sights and calls and scents of Westminster's most whorish, poorish, and villainous alleys. Why then, you might have seen her appear from the aether in a galvanic flash!' - as one, the lights on this side of the parlour are extinguished (impressive for amateurs, but still, Aphra scoffed, a cheap trick) - 'of dark and Popish magic.'

Now the only illumination in the parlour is the blonde light that falls through the partition curtain. Tom himself is cast into darkness, and his voice shrivels into a whisper.

'You would be terrified by this brutal and most unnatural explosion, and more frightened still when you saw the costume of the creature that emerged once the smoke had settled, for she was dressed in Jesuitical black and armed with a knife blessed for the purposes of regicide. The violence she met out to those who would greet her made her intentions transparent. By good fortune and God's will there were strong plain Englishmen on hand to restrain her, so that now she is no longer a danger to anyone outside this room, but you, ladies and gentlemen, are trapped inside with her...'

And as Tom talks, the shadow play unfolds. Through the fuzzy layers of light and fabric, she appears, stumbling into the yellowed oval at the centre of the curtain. The silhouette, indistinctly nude and feminine, pulls up abruptly as if commanded to a halt, then sways gormlessly. At the next inaudible order she shuffles one way, then the other, displaying her diffuse profile. Sweet music flutters up from the edges of the room. The shadow-woman lets her arms dangle

and never raises her hands from her sides, so she seems disarmed, helpless below the shoulder. More female figures, somehow firmer and heavier in the same light, flutter in from both sides of the curtain. They trill round the woman at the passive centre, cooing like songbirds. They dress her in clothing plucked from the invisible edges of the parlour. Once the costume is complete, they twitter away to those same edges, leaving her solitary and presentable.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' says Tom, his prologue slipping to its end, where fewer words are needed, 'I give you the scourge of Christendom. The Jesuitess!'

And the curtain falls, and brightness wells again in the parlour, and the woman is revealed.

In the long silence that followed, Aphra found herself staring not at the woman, not at her face or her lips, but at the line of spittle that had drooled up from her throat and threatened to break and drip. Watching the build-up her heart had sunk - she had for a moment resigned herself to the prospect of a children's dumb-show, with the Jesuitess wringing all the familiar shadows of birds, rabbits and steeples out of the movement of her hands - but this had an altogether different quality of disappointment. She recalled her slippery discomfort at Tyburn.

'Is she drugged?' someone piped up from the crowd.

'I fear so,' bellowed Tom. 'It's better, you'd agree, than keeping her in chains.' He had found a staff from somewhere, tipped with a bulbous metal sphere, which he brought down on the knuckles of a hand that reached excitedly across the line of partition.

'Can we hear her speak?' came another voice, as plaintive as the first. 'I want to hear her speak.'

'Well,' Tom responded, turning inquisitively to the woman who shuddered under his gaze but still didn't make to move or protest. The pimp's fingers tickled along the holes of an imaginary flute, and Aphra's lips curled, a childhood memory stained. 'Will you speak for us? No? Will you sing something in your bird voice, my pretty black canary?'

The Jesuitess didn't respond.

She wasn't, in spite of Tom's mendacious prologue, a great beauty. She was in fact rather ugly, albeit of the kind of wide-eyed heavy-jawed ugliness that Aphra found differently attractive. She was only a little taller than Aphra herself, though much leaner, and nothing in her appearance would have given the mob pause in more placid times. They had dressed her in black, but the clothes were worn ill-matched and ill-fitting, the closest the House of the Infernal could find to a uniform that had either been stolen or never existed outside the rapidly-grown legend of the Jesuitess. The blackest thing about her was her hair, worn loose and straight down to her shoulders; otherwise she looked pale and harmless. She didn't move when the curtain came down, not at first; her eyes shuffled from left to right, over the latest gang of baffling faces, finding nothing there to intrigue her. She lost interest, and tilted her head down to inspect her fingers. Then she slumped onto the daybed that ran against the back wall and sat there listlessly, with her legs crooked, her arms dangling, her eyes and mouth gaping.

Whatever the House was putting in her food, it had left her with enough wit to lick, after a proper pause, the spittle off her lips. She made a contented, idiot smile. Aphra almost screamed: Why not put in her shackles and leave us

in no doubt?! Was she really so formidable that you had to destroy her before putting her on display? Why not kill her, gut her, and parade her parts around the country? There were held breaths in the dark, and she hoped that at least some among them shared her offence; no, all she sensed was a slight discontent that Corinthian Tom had exaggerated a wretch into a miracle. What else did they expect? He was a pimp.

A body - the taller woman, she guessed - moved between her and the object of her attention. She had the chance to look away, in that moment, but didn't take it. For all their disappointment, they were fascinated, she was fascinated. No, this 'Jesuitess' wasn't a monster or a beauty or remarkable, but her audience made her marvellous with their hungry eyes. Aphra found it unbearable. It was unconscionable that this woman - whoever she might be - should be a slave.

That made her afternoon's business all the harder.

'No,' Corinthian Tom intones sadly, as the display draws to a close, 'she will not sing today.'

In ones and twos the audience dispersed, some out into the winter streets, some to spend more of themselves in the warmer crevices of the house. The Jesuitess, having done nothing but occasionally hum or scratch herself or fail to rise off the daybed, was concealed behind the curtain again and then removed - no doubt to some less pleasant cell where she was kept between shows. Corinthian Tom retreated from the parlour, shucked off his coat and his wig, then turned and seemed unsurprised to find Aphra Behn had followed him. She stared at the man, with his props. He said nothing to her, but began to wipe the greasepaint from his cheeks with a cloth.

'Who is she really?' Aphra said leisurely. 'Some poor girl off the boat from Ireland? Didn't like the work you had lined up for her so you've made her into a freakshow instead?'

Tom didn't reply until his face was naked. He was older than he contrived to appear. 'No,' he replied. When he wasn't performing, his tone was clipped, as was any man's whose business offended against the public good. 'She's what I said. Be mad to claim I'd got the Jesuitess if she wasn't the genuine article. They could tear the place down. Lose my livelihood. I'd be mad.'

'They?'

'Anyone who wants a crack at the Papists. Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey, thou art avenged.'

Aphra was open to the possibility that her intelligence was wrong, that Tom was only a bluff for the real pimps who ran this house, who were altogether more anonymous and perhaps more respectable; his colour and vitality distracted the eye from their indistinct grey. It was said there had been more than one Corinthian running this house over the years, and he might just be the latest user of the name, but she couldn't imagine him settling here long without some stake of his own. Like all bad actors, he was looking for the day's take.

She forced a flirty little smile and asked, 'She speaks no English, you say?'

'Not a word. Not any tongue we know. Nothing moves her. Not even insults.'

'If she speaks no English, then am I right to assume that your stories aren't wholly true? That she wasn't heard to shout Die heretics, in the name of Holy

Mother Rome or Out of my way you dogs, I am here to kill your king and put a tyrant on the throne or even I will do for you as we did for that meddling magistrate? That these might, in fact, be inventions?’

‘Embroidery is the word I’d use. We didn’t start the stories. You must know what playhouse gossip is like.’ He grinned at her, and – while he grinned – he took out some of his teeth. So, she was recognised. ‘Thought I knew you. You’re Aphra Behn, the famous wit. Go on, say something funny.’

‘That will take time, sir, and money. I’ll be as witty as you like if you care to pay for it.’

‘Yeah? I should be coining off the likes of you. Actresses already have one foot in the whorehouse. Look to your Nell Gwyns and Elizabeth Barrys, they’re kept women both. You’re not even that, you just put the pretty words in their mouths. Is that your business here, Mistress Behn?’

Aphra shook her head, she hoped coquettishly. Corinthian Tom deflated into the nearest chair. His skin had the swell and the odour of long-extinct arousal, as if the business of the house had been slowly poisoning him over the years until he could no longer take pleasure from his surroundings. That made things easier. When she produced and dropped the purse, she made sure it landed on his lap. The coins jangled.

‘I want to buy her,’ she said.

Chapter 13: Voodoo Honey

The child was nameless, or rather no two accounts could agree about it; the same was true of her age, and even her sex was in doubt, as one described her as a boy. Most thought of her as Polish. The most detailed reports said she came from Kraków. Dating the precise year was difficult, but it was winter, definitely winter, because she had been walking on the river, on delicate ice. Some said it broke, some said she slipped, one suggested that she had been intentionally drowned. Only once she was dead did the accounts converge.

Her body, blue with cold and bloated with water, was dragged and taken home, so she could be buried. She woke on the way back, before her parents had even heard the dreadful reports; she spent the next week coughing out water, trembling, unable to speak. She sat dazed, staring into nowhere as if contemplating the void of death she had escaped. When she found her voice again, it was clear that she had lost her wits. She no longer recognised her home, her family, or her friends, and her mother and father became convinced that whatever spirit now animated the child it was no longer their daughter. She was lost to them. They sold her possessed corpse to a carnival.

With a new name and spurious title, she became famous. She toured Europe with the show, attending on nobility and even royalty as her reputation grew. She spoke in a child’s voice and a dozen languages, spelling out visions of the times yet to come. In her madness she had become an oracle. No one understood the nature of her pronouncements, but wasn’t that expected of any prophet? What to her family had seemed hysteria became wisdom in the public gaze. Fakes and imitators cropped up in her wake, until it was no longer possible to tell which of the many performers was the original little girl. One day she fell silent, uttering no more prophecies and no more pentecosts, and the stories began to dry up. It was said she starved herself, but her painfully thin body still refused to expire, as if death itself had rejected her. Three decades had passed since the river gave her up, but she was still insane, and still – despite the gap of years – unaged, a child indeterminately young.

Cousin Greenaway couldn’t help but imagine the timeships of the Great Houses

as being like ships of the sea; and as she grew acclimatised to her routine journeys back and forth across the channel, she found the vessels of her enemies turning comfortable in her imagination. They might be friendly old hulks, like this one now carrying her back to London docks, the Lady Newcastle. True, there were warships whose dismal profiles she'd spotted on the horizon on occasion, and which - even when only distant grey dots - seemed to bristle with invisible cannon and the prospect of violence. She had never, thank the Grandfather, seen one of those up close. But there must be timeships like the Lady, whose only threat was in their uncertain seaworthiness and ominously creaking timbers, which were pregnant with mundane cargoes and sickly passengers, whose berths were haunted by the presences of a hundred wambled journeys. Nothing that people called a home, nowhere lived in, could be entirely awesome.

The others dreaded the timeships, but could barely describe them. Hateman had tried to explain, first by getting her to imagine ships that sailed through the air, and beyond that, between the bodies in the heavens. They were simple enough to conceive, but then it became complicated, and the pictures Hateman tried to paint were vague. She described machines that could travel under the solid world, not merely burrowing through the Earth but through the fundamental terrain on which the world rested; vessels that didn't simply put in to port but were themselves the entirety of the port, all its peoples and all its stories; so that the whole of life itself might only be the shadows cast by the ships as they passed before the sun.

Erasmus had also tried to explain ~ The timeships of the Great Houses are like your own memories come to life ~ but how could she explain Erasmus? His presence became harder to reveal to her cousins with each passing day, with every moment she had failed to declare him looking increasingly like a deliberate concealment. Eight years had gone by since she'd taken her loa, for her if not for Mother Sphinx and the others, who still spent much of their lives sleeping outside of time. He hadn't been much of a presence at first, but gradually he had rediscovered a voice inside her. He was a part of her now, not merely a rider or a temporary possession by a friendly spirit, but a living knot under her skin. She found herself dreaming of wondrous and impossible lands that seemed - on first sight - totally natural to her, and unsurprising. Part of me now is an invisible insect, tied into my flesh and bone more tightly than any church wedding. It didn't feel remotely ridiculous. In fact, it made her feel safe.

She was still young, even now, and looked younger. Possibly this was a side effect of her possession, but she doubted it. She knew unnatural youth when she saw it, whether it was in the faces of her cousins met again after a year for her, a moment for them, or in that of Nathaniel Silver, whose retarded ageing was becoming noticeable even to him. Not that he had expressed such thoughts to his confidants, not even to Alice Lynch who had followed him to Paris, but like so many of his resentments it was ever more apparent. He had become sullen since Salomon's House and his forced employment by le Pouvoir. Once Greenaway had recovered from the infinitesimal, she found she was still tasked with observing him, more closely than ever now that they'd learned of his connection to the Homeworld. He was no longer the opportunity they had hoped, though Greenaway found it hard to conceive of him as the danger they imagined. If he was somehow in the thrall of the Great Houses, then he betrayed no sign of it. Alice, who knew him better than anyone, believed he was his own man, and Greenaway carried that intelligence to the Faction. The family had agreed that he must be watched and studied, at least until his loyalties became plain. Life as a cousin turned out to be little different from life as a little sister, and she had still found no cause to use her whip in anger or self-defence.

No, it was Erasmus who kept her safe as she travelled back and forth between England and France. So many of her fellow passengers saw a timid young woman travelling alone and marvelled. Do you think it's safe and proper to be abroad without a companion? they asked in astonished, querulous voices. 'I have to,' she replied sincerely. 'My husband is dead. I have no one else.'

But the risks are incredible, a young and - if I may say so - attractive woman such as yourself, unguarded and unchaperoned. Anything could happen!

'I have prayed. I'm sure one of Christ's saints walks beside me and will protect me.' She would give a twinkling smile then, and add, 'And my virtue keeps me safe also.' That usually put them off, that small hint of pious mania. The last case had been her trip out to France, when a respectable and elderly couple had tried to persuade her that she would be safer sleeping in their bed on the crossing. She didn't mind, these types never became aggressive; at worst their disappointment turned to wheedle, and they distracted her from a journey that was becoming familiar and wearisome.

She had requested that the shrine be moved permanently to Paris, but Mother Sphinx herself had refused. Since Salomon's House, Faction Paradox had grown much more cautious, afraid of attracting the eyes of its enemies. Cousin Hateman tried to explain to her why such a complex space-time dislocation would create trouble, and she had been sceptical until Erasmus had concurred in the recesses of her mind; the pilots, the children of men, feared the Houses as much as the Faction. Besides, there were practical considerations: Silver might become suspicious if she were constantly at his side, and it would make monitoring his communications a lot harder. Despite - or perhaps because of - the Cambridge fiasco, there were still many scholars in England who wanted to keep in touch with the Magus. That the Service were seeking him made their interest more furtive, but in no way discredited him. He still wrote letters daily. Le Pouvoir's agents carried all but the most secret and the most sensitive. These he entrusted to Alice Lynch, and it was simplicity itself for Greenaway to intercept them. She had become a courier on their behalf, Silver's personal Thurn und Taxis, ferrying messages across the sea and returning with replies.

He had written at least twice to Nicholas Plainsong, but had received no reply. The Faction had no idea where the boy had disappeared to, and Greenaway entrusted the letters to other hands who might be better placed to find him, but she had heard nothing. She had a bundle with her now, in a pouch that she kept taped to her stomach using a sticky band that left irritable red marks on the skin. She came up impatiently onto the deck that morning, standing at the prow as the London docks drifted leisurely towards the still body of the Lady Newcastle, to embrace her.

The docks stank, as always, and were uncommonly sullen. She still saw signs of the old devastation on the waterfront, the burned-out or crumbled sites seeming curiously dignified among new or tattily-repaired warehouses. The silence was, she expected, a condition of the Popish paranoia that was gripping the nation. It was the talk of Paris already: the fuckoffs have gone mad (again)! There were the usual shrieks and catcalls as she disembarked, yells of cunt! and Catholic slut! and - if anyone presumed she was English - traitor! She'd brought a parasol in case anyone fancied chucking vegetables or rotten fruit or dead fish, but these didn't come. Europe was presumed thoroughly Catholicised, and anyone returning from the continent was believed contaminated; but the docksiders seemed oddly cowed this time, as if afraid that any newly-landed ship would open its belly to disgorge file upon file of the French troops that (it was widely believed) would be required for the Duke, the Queen, or even the King to maintain public order after the change of regime.

Unrained on by excrement or offal, Cousin Greenaway strolled along the waterfront until she spotted Cousin Suppression, waiting for her with a horse and trap. He was reading another one of his Homeworld Chronicles, oblivious to his surroundings. She was almost upon him before he looked up. She took his hand; it clenched. She felt the elation of being back in the bosom of the family.

'How are things?' she asked.

He stowed the thick pamphlet in his pocket. 'Bad,' he told her. He hadn't changed. Suppression was still older than her, though only by a few years. She had already overtaken Amphigorey and Hateman while they slept. Soon only Mother Sphinx would be older than her, but Mother Sphinx was older than everyone.

Suppression lifted her onto her seat on the trap, and then took his place to drive them the short way to the ruin where the shrine was concealed. He didn't elaborate on the situation; in fact, he didn't talk at all. Greenaway knew better than to try to engage him in conversation, even if she wanted to. One of the few things she liked about her constant travels was the solitude and the silence, where she had no voice to listen to other than her own and that of Erasmus. She was growing accustomed to that lack of companionship.

She turned to her uncompanion now. Erasmus stirred in her head and her heart; he didn't command her, but when he woke out of their shared wholeness he made her acutely aware of the extent and potential of her body; he would never be completely familiar and settled in her physical shape - so unlike his natural one. Every inch of her skin, inside and out, bristled as if rediscovering that it could feel.

~ Will you declare yourself this time, Cousin Greenaway? ~

No, we're too far gone for that. They might think me a traitor to the Grandfather.

~ Does it occur to you that by taking me as your loa, you might have genuinely betrayed him? ~

They'd had this argument before; she'd resolved it in her own mind. Nothing you've done has compromised my loyalty to the order. We all have secrets. Suppression has secrets, but I don't ask them of him. Hateman has secrets. Amphigorey would have secrets if he didn't talk in sleep. Christ, where did we leave things with them last time? They remember. I never do.

~ You parted on good terms with them all ~

That's probably the easiest way, is it not? I'm getting used to this.

~ Remember, you're their equal now ~

In the ranks of the family perhaps, but they all know things that I don't. I only ever stumbled into becoming a cousin. I'll never be a mother. Hateman knows that. She looks at me like she knows one day she'll be a mother but I won't because I'm not good enough. It's sympathy. I don't need her sympathy.

~ Do you want to be a mother? ~

I don't know. What are the other options? She pulled a face, and Suppression - his back to her - didn't notice. Let's talk about Silver. Have you reached any

more conclusions?

~ No ~ I see him through your eyes and can only make surmises as you do ~ If he had the egg it would be different ~ I could monitor him ~

And influence him still?

~ Perhaps, but you would know ~

We don't know where the egg is. Plainsong has it, that's all we know.

~ It's programmed to find his way back to him ~

It's been lost for eight years.

~ It's patient ~

But are we any closer to knowing what the Great Houses want with him? They must have some purpose, but I can't see it. He's working on whatever projects le Pouvoir order. I can't see how that would affect the cosmic order, one way or another.

~ But have you noticed how he resents le Pouvoir's instructions, and tries to moderate them if he imagines they might be put to selfish or violent ends? ~ Even without the egg, he has a reserve of knowledge and a formidable grasp on application, but he withholds this where he can ~ What does this tell you? ~

That he resists. That he thinks more of his work than to let it serve the profit and power of Earthly estates. That he's a good man, but I believe we knew that already.

~ It says to me that he will not allow himself to be used ~ He is innocent in many ways, but he is no one's fool ~ He understands that his work has its implications, and his sponsors don't always have the best of intentions ~

So?

~ So I wonder if his impact on the world is less to do with his methods and philosophies than... ~

Than what?

~ Than the fact that he lives at all ~

You mean, it might simply be that he exists. That he changes everything by breathing?

~ One human being, a point so small that he might as well not exist ~ He may be their secret doorway into our history ~ And once he is opened, who knows what he'll let in? ~

But the trap was slowing as they approached the hollow shell of the building where the shrine had, these last eight years, concealed itself. Greenaway bade Erasmus to recede back into her mind; their conversation could wait until later, maybe when she slept and was free of her waking anxieties. Once stopped, Suppression lifted her down from her seat, but put a restraining hand on her shoulder while he glanced up and down the length of the row.

'Be careful when you go in,' he warned her gruffly. 'Make sure no one sees you.'

This was a new precaution. 'Why?' she asked.

He shrugged, not ignorance but a general incomprehension of the ways of humanity. 'Strange days,' was all he'd say, but when she pressed, he added: 'Half the country's afraid of terror cults that don't exist. It makes life harder for the ones that do.'

'I'll be careful,' she promised. While he tended to the horse, she slipped down the side of the ruin, running her fingers along the wall and seeking its impression. It was secure, comfortable with its old wounds, the blackened wood now healed, the stone now cool. There was a coy tremor, as if it had once been the object of more than idle curiosity, but those prying eyes had moved on. She glanced up and down the alley, and seeing and sensing no one, ducked under the beams that blocked the entrance and slipped inside.

The interior was little changed in the last three months. The roof was in good repair and hadn't let in much of the autumn or winter, though browned and flattened leaves still carpeted the stone floor. A place like this was designed to trap heat, and light - especially light - so it was brighter and warmer than a casual observer might have imagined. Rats and mice still made their homes here at their own peril, as this was Faction Cat's territory, though the spiders at least were left alone to weave their webs. There was some unspoken truce between the cat and the arachnids, something like respect, or paralysing animosity. The shrine door still sat incongruously at the blunt end of the main chamber. Greenaway's family was sitting at the entrance, on brightly-coloured canvas chairs, waiting for her. They looked up half-heartedly as she approached. They were maskless, and their unhidden faces were disquieted.

One thing had changed, or grown, in her absence. They had begun, after Salomon's House, to set up wood totems around the door to the shrine. At first she'd assumed they were designed purely to ward off the curious, while she was in Paris and the others were in their timeless sleep. They were like witches' hexes, or miniature scarecrows, tiny wood figures with damp strings threaded between their hands. Then others had sprouted, hanging from the more secure beams of the ceiling, dangling lines of leather or weed, knitted with tiny bells. Then came more items, never more than the size of a man's head, but in increasingly strange shapes and material: twisted devices made of meat that never stank or rotted; symbols burned into metal or unmelting ice; relics that might have been dug out of the earth, old coins and teeth and Roman combs spread out in patterns of diabolical significance. The old furniture had been broken up and pushed away to make room for them all on the floor. Eventually she had asked and learned what they were: loa-casts. Not loa themselves, but totems that symbolised the loa, little material bodies in the solid world where they could make their presence felt.

In the past eight years, Faction Paradox had been raising and binding more and more loa, in readiness for the coming of the Great Houses. Come the day, these uncanny, unlikely, ugly objects would speak as one, calling out a warning of impending doom. And here they all were, shivering, humming, wailing, bells tinkling and strings thrumming. Cousin Greenaway halted and looked to Amphigorey - fists balled, mouth pursed and frightened, to Hateman - rising from her chair, brisk, concealing her anxieties behind smooth movement, to Mother Sphinx - slow-blinking, brooding, smiling like a subtle thing.

'They're here,' said Cousin Hateman.

Faction Paradox had taken a house-proud young widow from Hornsey St Mary and somehow transformed her into an expert burglar. In Paris, it had been a vital

skill to negotiate the complex rookeries where le Pouvoir had hidden Nathaniel Silver. Most buildings resented their occupants, the human parasites whom they saw as an essential but intrusive part of their reproductive cycle, and could be persuaded into petty conspiracies against them. It was this skill they needed now, along with Greenaway's natural acquaintance with the customs of England.

So far, the incursion had been causally insignificant, but that could change. Immediately on her return to London, Cousin Greenaway had been put on surveillance, spending three days learning the building that was now the epicentre of the incursion. The next stage was contact. That would give them a better idea of the scale of the threat, though they would have to reveal themselves to the Houses' scout in the process. They didn't put it to the vote until Greenaway was certain of the territory, but they all concurred. Hateman had spent the meeting scribbling frantic figures and mathematickall formulae on paper scraps - Greenaway was minded of the letters she'd brought to deliver for Silver, now abandoned and forgotten in her quarters in the shrine - before breaking into a broad, relieved grin.

'Good news,' she had announced. 'It's still statistically very unlikely that they're going to blow up the entire planet. Unless we provoke them,' she'd added as an afterthought.

That evening, three of them gathered shivering below the eaves of the solved house, out of the slow-drifting descent of the snow, but still close enough to feel its tickling cold. Hateman and Amphigorey wore their appalling Faction armour under their clothes, but there had never been an opportunity to find something suitable for Greenaway. She was glad of that; she had no desire to wear that writhing cartilaginous fabric against her skin, nor did she suspect it would provide her with much warmth. They dared not risk moving the shrine at all, not with the possibility of timeships lurking close by in the submundane, so Suppression had stayed with it, and Mother Sphinx - who was more frail in the aftermath of Salomon's House, and was hardly fit for combat - Mother Sphinx had..

Mother Sphinx had wished them all well, given each of them a tiny red stone that turned out to be edible and fruity, and disappeared, her huge silhouette dwindling into the London snow and London fog.

'She doesn't think we have a chance,' Amphigorey opined. The Mother had appeared the least convinced by the plan they'd conceived, and seemed almost on the verge of vetoing it before throwing in her approval.

Hateman had an inkling of what she was up to: 'Maybe she's got something more important to settle.'

'She goes where the loa tell her,' Greenaway whispered, but no one was listening to her, and her voice was obscured by an outburst from Amphigorey.

'More important? With the whole of the Second Wave getting medieval on our arses?'

'Yes! We deal with the action, she handles the reaction. Besides, we don't know it's the Second Wave. We don't know anything.'