

One theme of this novel is the abuse of power by government ministers - and the ambitious staff of the agencies which they create and exercise some, but perhaps not sufficient, control over. As with Frankenstein's monster, these creatures, synthesized in the great UK laboratory-of-the-police-state, may yet embarrass their political masters.

The United Kingdom as a totalitarian state, ruled by an invasive, omniscient, executive power, was best exemplified by George Orwell in the novel *1984*. Many of his 'Big Brother' predictions are now coming to fruition thro' the proliferation of cameras, databases, profiling, and information-driven policing by a myriad of competing agencies, in what is aptly described as a surveillance society.

Despite massive immigration in recent years, Britain retains a largely homogeneous Anglo-Saxon population, with the Teutonic tendency to march in-step and repress radical expression. The largest media organization, the BBC, on whose practices Orwell modelled his Ministry of Truth, and which inspired the term 'newspeak', is more beholden than ever, in a fractured market, to its political paymasters. There is no written constitution, and despite notional developments in human rights law, savagely criticized by the media oligarchs and the demagoguery, recent trends in UK government policy are geared towards policing without the expense and inconvenience of the courts.

The other theme of this novel is fantastical. Utilization of a supernatural myth which, unlike Orwell's inspiration for his keenly sketched description of dystopic government ministries, is not sourced from contemporary reality.

These disparate themes are linked by a common question. What dark force drives the controlling instinct, for some it is a compulsion, in that most dangerous of entities in the digital age - the politician?

The Icelandic Old-Norse word *Ragnarok* roughly translates into 'doom of the gods'; and in the context of the

novel, it refers to apocalyptic supernatural events which strike London, the modern media-centric equivalent of Asgard in the UK, causing sufficient dislocation of government to permit a coup to be staged by extremists in the British establishment. To this end, an elite surveillance-security unit would be needed with a similar ethos to the German SS which destroyed the rival SA. The 'anti-terror' police, perhaps. The media currently parodies some aspects of anti-terror policing in subtle ways by reporting their involvement in minor cases which have nothing to do with terrorism. This situation has arisen from the misuse of Draconian powers which Parliament granted the police and security lobby without regard for civil-liberties.

Readers of the Levin Plays will note that all the recurring characters from past plays feature in this single tome and face a literary *Ragnarok* of their own. Jane, the wealthy financier; Kate, the archaeologist; Julia, the investigative journalist. Even Irene de Beauvoir, the actress whom Julia discovered has not aged since 1940, makes a brief cameo appearance.

This will not, of course, mark the end of the anthology, or even inhibit the drafting of future Levin Plays; but these new stories will have to take the form of prequels, occurring in the months or years before the totalitarian Apocalypse strikes.

By Tax Fries:

A Spider Ballet

The Wulfmarsh Weekend

Levin Plays

Lansley Plays

RAGNAROK

Tax Fries

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1

Early evening shadows stirred from their recesses in the unlit office and began creeping over the carpet towards a female figure poised near a window. The dendritic fingers sought to detain the handsome silhouette, struck against the dull glow from the leaden sky over Whitehall, but the recusant civil servant ignored their unsubstantive grasp and resumed her task of packing a briefcase with personal effects and a few innocuous looking sheets of paper from her desk.

She closed the briefcase and turned her attention to an impressionist oil canvass of Parliament and the Thames.

The painting beckoned.

The civil-servant approached, as if for a closer view; but then reached out a hand to slide it aside, exposing a small safe built snugly into the wall. She twisted the dial, pulled the handle, and retrieved a vanilla envelope containing an unusual artifact - a small T-shaped amber cross, about an inch in length. An old leather chord, frail and delicate with age, had once allowed the trinket to be worn.

Revering its antiquity, she discarded the envelope and wrapped the artifact in cotton wool before secreting it within herself.

The civil servant closed the safe and replaced the painting, then combed her long hair into a pony tail and secured it with an elastic band in preparation for the night.

She collected the briefcase from the desk and paused to view the jagged Gothic outline of the Palace of Westminster for one last time before departing with the bile of contempt still rising in her throat.

Ministry of Justice Security-Surveillance Police guarded the entrances to all key government buildings against the twin threats of terror and subversion; and to protect all the interests of government.

They were a breed apart, quietly referred to as ‘Crows’ for their black uniforms - overalls, berets, boots, and 9mm standard issue side-arms. The black gloves they wore added to the sinister demeanour of a law-enforcement agency equally adept at law-breaking, which was consistent with British policing trends in the digital age.

These were the modern plumbers, though far more ruthless and efficient than their shadowy American predecessors. An elite and secretive formation recruited from behind the shield of national security, and they were different in other ways.

The power-suited apostate was duly observed on camera crossing the foyer floor, her strident gait the subject of intense scrutiny. The civil servant was intercepted near the exit by two pallid faces, each bearing a blank, inquisitorial expression crowned by a beret.

The woman smiled to disarm them, her steely blue eyes peering furtively into an empty chasm which should have housed a soul. She suppressed a shudder at what she saw there. The leading security guard stepped aside and bade her goodnight as she passed. She responded with a wary nod, then reached out to push open the glass door, resisting the urge to panic and run.

“One moment, ma’am,” the other man called out.

She cursed silently, then turned to face him, ready to resist any attempt at ritual interrogation.

“Been working late, have you?” he inquired bluntly.

The question was impertinent, as was his tone.

“My work is no concern of yours,” she answered sharply.

“Wrong answer, ma’am. Your work is of great concern to us. So much so that we’ve been ordered to carry out a security review.”

“Ordered by whom?”

“That information is restricted.”

“This is a very serious breach of protocol. I’m informing the permanent under-secretary,” she announced, slipping a hand inside her jacket pocket for a mobile phone.

“Slowly ma’am,” he warned, holding up the palm of one hand whilst reaching down to unclip the safety strap on the holster of his side-arm with the other. “We don’t want any misunderstandings.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she chastened him, though withdrew her hand very slowly to reveal a mobile phone, then began pressing a sequence of numbers.

“The minister will be informed immediately and a protest lodged in the strongest possible terms at the behaviour of his private army.”

The Crow seemed unperturbed by the threat. He reached out and seized her wrist with a clothed-hand, as if she were brandishing a dangerous or prohibited item.

“Do you have a licence for this?” he inquired, taking the phone from her grasp and cancelling the call.

“Of course I do!” she retorted angrily.

“Let’s see it then.”

“It’s in my file.”

“We could detain you until we confirm it. You know the law, you helped to write it,” he smirked.

She produced a small, laminated photo identity card from her jacket pocket as required by the Protection of Communications Act. He took it and checked the serial number against the phone.

The first man, who had said nothing since bidding her

good night, chose this moment to step forward with what seemed like a disingenuous assurance.

“This is just routine, ma’am. Nothing to worry about - unless, of course, you’ve got something to hide.”

“In that case, I’ll have my phone back. Security checks are for people entering the building, not leaving it,” she protested.

“We know you’re not a terrorist,” he conceded, taking the phone and the licence from his colleague and handing them back to her. “But it’s been a heavy month for leaks and we’ve been ordered to plug it before anything else spills out.”

“If I wanted to leak something, I wouldn’t walk out with it under my arm.”

“So how would you do it?” he asked.

She glared at him without answering.

“Take off your jacket,” he ordered sternly. “Or would you rather undergo a more probing examination down in the cells at Scotland Yard?”

She wasn’t sure what he meant by ‘probing’, and had no wish to find out. She casually put the phone back in her jacket pocket, then removed the jacket and held it out for him.

The first Crow took the garment and searched the pockets, whilst the second kept his beady eye fixed on her attractive figure, clad in a fetching blouse. The first Crow found nothing and handed the jacket back to her.

“Anything else?” she asked, as she slipped the jacket back on.

The second Crow paused for a moment’s deliberation before answering.

“Open the case,” he commanded quietly.

She lifted the case off the ground by the handle then held it out with both hands, as if it were a salver bearing an offering.

The lid flipped up without warning, like a conjurer's prop, causing the Crow to step back in surprise. He quickly recovered his poise and peered down at the contents without actually delving into the esoteric sheets and memos.

"Do you know what you're looking for?" she taunted him. "I hope you have the right security clearance - otherwise you could be in breach of the Official Secrets Act."

He lifted the papers to check there was nothing underneath, then snapped the lid of the case shut and handed it to the other Crow to hold.

"I need that case, I'm responsible for the papers it contains," she protested.

"In a moment, ma'am, first there's one other thing to check," the crow advised.

The Crow stepped behind her, as if to cut off her escape route, whilst the other put the case down and stood in front of her.

The civil-servant glanced over her shoulder at the crow behind just as he pinioned her arms. She struggled, but he held her fast.

The crow in front reached out to grip her by the throat.

"What are you doing?" she cried out. "There's a security-surveillance camera recording all of this."

"Don't worry about the surveillance-cameras," the crow behind whispered in her ear. "We'll just wipe that portion of the tape. Standard procedure when police officers are caught on camera."

"Open your mouth!" the crow in front commanded, squeezing her throat to encourage compliance.

The civil-servant reluctantly opened her mouth.

The crow in front shifted the grip of one hand around to the back of her neck to hold her head steady, and shone a small torch beam into her mouth with his other hand.

"Wider!" he ordered.

The civil-servant had little choice but to obey.

The crow inserted the cylindrical torch into her mouth like a miniature phallus, to probe her cheek walls and under her tongue, then withdrew it and grunted.

“Satisfied?” she taunted him defiantly.

He put the torch away in a zip pocket and began pressing her hair with gloved fingertips for anything concealed against her scalp. He snapped the rubber band holding her ponytail together, expecting something to fall to the floor as her hair sprung apart, but was again disappointed.

She smiled - subdued triumph.

“There is, of course, one other place,” the crow mused. “The most obvious, of course; I thought a bit too obvious ...”

The triumphant smile faded to a disconcerted anticipation.

In a swift movement with both hands, the crow ripped open the front of her blouse, revealing modest cleavage over a white bra - and a small silver medallion on a fine chain.

The crow in front fixed his gaze on the medallion, which seemed to catch the light and sparkle, but then shook his head with another grunt.

The crow behind released her, while the one in front rudely pushed the case, with jacket folded over it, into her chest while still clutching the case in his hands.

“We know all about you,” he whispered sternly, lips so close that his breath struck her cheek like an icy draught.

“Do you?” she answered quietly, raising her eyebrows and feigning bemusement as she stared back at him.

A cognitive shadow fell across his face as she unexpectedly revealed something more about herself than perhaps she had intended, and his complexion darkened with ideological fury.

Without any further delay, she pulled the case away from

him, pushed open the glass door and strode out onto the stone steps leading down to the pavement. She was immediately hit in the face by the wind and her long, fine hair; no longer held in place; was dishevelled by fierce gusts from the developing storm.

She heeded the warning from the elements, and paused only to put on her jacket; then, with hackles rising, hurried to the car park reserved for middle-ranking civil servants. The hour was barely past eight and yet there was no longer even a dull glow in the summer sky; merely a thick blanket of rolling cloud excluding the light. The air was chilly too. More like December than July.

Usually there was someone around to provide low level security for people and property in the official car park, but the attendant was not in his booth and the remaining vehicles had been left unsupervised. At least the exit barricade was up so that there would be no need to wait for his return.

She approached an ostentatious looking silver Saab with the key-set clutched tightly between thumb and forefinger, waiting until well within range before raising an arm to deactivate the locking mechanism. Her hand was trembling from the recent encounter and she fumbled her grip before fully depressing the button.

The key-set fell to earth with a dull thud, lost in the murky shadow cast by the wing of another car parked beside hers. She looked around the deserted car park, afraid of something which would be imperceptible to the rational mind until it was too late, then put the briefcase down and dropped to all fours; oblivious to the pain caused by her knees scraping on the rough tarmac as she groped for the lost item in the gloom.

Seconds ticked by, and though she maintained her inner calm when panic might have set in, she could not find the keys. They seemed, illogically, to have just vanished.

Knowing the key-set must be somewhere, she began making wider systematic sweeps with her palms, arms extending right under the other car to explore hitherto uncharted territory.

The sound of heavy footsteps approaching made her look up anxiously whilst still kneeling. The glare of a powerful flash light dazzled her and she held up a hand to block out the light, able to discern no more than a large pair of hobnail boots on the ground. The unmistakable sound of breaking plastic and metal grinding against concrete came from under one of the boots, confirming the location of the lost keys.

“Wot ya doin’ down there, ma’am?” a deep, drawling voice inquired.

“I dropped my keys,” she explained. “I think you’re standing on them. Please, take that thing out of my eyes.”

An insolent delay followed, but then the light was extinguished, leaving her with temporary night-blindness. She got to her feet, blinking rapidly to restore her vision.

“Who are you?” she asked warily.

“Car park attendant.”

“I haven’t seen you here before.”

“Other fellow is off sick. It’s all this inclement weather, it’s bad for the lungs - like the ol’ peasoupers we used to ’ave in London in the days o’ Sherlock Holmes.”

In the dim, deceptive twilight, he seemed to be of enormous stature, with broad shoulders and long grey hair, dressed in a set of blue overalls and wearing an odd-looking broad-rimmed hat. He appeared to have only one eye, which seemed to glint silvery-blue in the dark, and wore a black patch over the other, which gave him a sinister appearance.

He bent down, picked something off the ground and held it out with a gorilla-sized hand.

“This ’em?” he asked.

“Yes, thanks,” she confirmed, taking the keys.

“You alright, ma’am? You look a bit peaky.”

“Yes,” she replied wearily. “It’s been a long day, that’s all.”

“Give you a hard time, did they? ”

The eyes of the civil-servant narrowed suspiciously, and she was reminded that her blouse now lacked buttons. She looked down at her front self-consciously.

“Right then, I’ll get back to my cubby. You fancy a shot of mead in a brew?”

“No, thank you, some other time. I still have work to do this evening,” she replied, buttoning her jacket.

“Alright then. Good night miss, drive safely.”

The old man strolled away. Despite his limited perception of her world, he had provided an illusory sense of paternal security, and with his passing she suddenly felt alone and strangely vulnerable once again.

The dissident civil-servant lifted her case and, belatedly it seemed, pressed the key button with her thumb. Nothing happened, no clicking locks or flashing lights. She tried again in vain. The impact with concrete, or the pressure of a heavy boot, must have damaged the emitter and she was reduced to probing with an old-fashioned chrome key. Finally it slipped in, much to her relief, and with a jerk of the handle the door opened.

She threw the case onto the front passenger seat and climbed inside, pulling the door closed and resting her fore head on the padded steering wheel. With eyes closed, she felt some of the tension from recent weeks slipping away.

The relief was short-lived. A muted but incongruous sound alerted her to an unexpected presence inside the car. With a sense of dread anticipation, she slowly raised her head to glance in the rear view mirror, stealing herself for the worse. But the reflection revealed nothing more than the usual innocuous view of an empty back seat.

Still suspicious, she spun round and looked down to see a superfluous polythene bag accidentally discarded from a recent trip to a supermarket. The bag had become billowed by the draught from the car door opening and was now settling with the occasional crackle.

She helped deflate it with an angry fist before starting the engine and launching the powerful vehicle aggressively onto the public highway.

The stream of traffic flowed freely along the Victoria Embankment to Whitechapel and on through the East End. The driver turned off Mile End Road and drove around Bethnal Green knowing that the cameras were reading her number plate and monitoring her movements.

Ignoring the proliferation of double yellow lines, she pulled up within sight of a post box planted on a grimy pavement outside a battered looking row of shops, one of which was a newsagent and convenience store.

Without buttons on her blouse, her neckline plunged conspicuously until the lapels of her jacket overlapped. She was not overly concerned about displaying her cleavage, but did not want the male camera operators to notice and zoom in on her face.

Fortunately, a small safety pin sat in a console tray in front of the gear stick for just such a wardrobe malfunction, and she was able to fasten the blouse with it just above the lapels and thus cover her bra.

Stepping out onto the pavement of this deprived area just a few miles from the splendour of Westminster made her feel like a self-made individual returning to her earthy roots. She was part of the pretentious highbrow world of the graduate civil service and that career had steered her away from the aesthetically challenged areas of the city, though now she felt content to imbibe and be revitalised by the vibrant, non-conforming spirit of this concrete slum.

It was easy for her to understand why, despite its many hardships, so many doctors, scholars, teachers and clerics had loved the East End. But that was the old East End with its deference to authority. The white middle-class patrician had passed into history, or rather moved into the plush, renovated docklands, to be replaced by the jihadist cleric and the drug-dealer-turned-youth-leader.

The driver left the car dubiously parked on the single yellow line, and strode quickly over to the shop. She was inclined to run, but did not want to draw attention to herself.

The crowded interior of the small shop was packed with all the essential merchandise for bedsit life - alcohol, paracetamol, bread, milk, frozen meals, tins of processed food, newspapers, magazines, DVDs, and stationary. If illicit drugs were available over the counter, they would have been there too; and for all she knew, they were available under the counter.

She lifted up a small padded envelope from an unsorted pile and took it to the counter where she was served by a young Asian girl of about seventeen.

“Fifty pence,” the girl respectfully informed her.

“Do you have any stamps?” she asked.

“First or second class?”

“First.”

“Six or twelve?”

“Six should be enough,” she decided, studying the youthful face, in such a pristine state of life, and wondering what the odds were on her surviving the carnage in the week which was to come. She wanted to warn the girl to get away from the city where the destruction would be greatest - but said nothing - knowing that, whatever else, she would not be believed.

A camera fixed to the wall recorded the transaction - images which would be studied by the Crows in due

course, if not being monitored at that instant.

The civil servant left the shop with her purchases.

Once back in the car, with the door closed, she retrieved the little amber cross she'd been carrying and discarded the cotton wool on the floor in front of the passenger seat before putting the artifact into the small padded envelope.

The civil-servant scribbled a note on a memo sheet, then folded and placed it with the artifact before sealing the envelope. The package was fairly light, but taking no chances she peeled all six stamps from the book and stuck them on the front of the small envelope, leaving just enough room to write a name and address.

The postbox was only a few metres from where she was parked, but there was also a surveillance camera recording the images of all who used it. Even poor boroughs such as this received ample government cash for cameras, ostensibly to make the borough safer, but also to achieve blanket coverage of the city so that those who came to the attention of government agencies could be identified with image recognition software and their movements logged for their file.

She wanted to err on the side of caution and drive out to a rural postbox without a camera, but London was fast becoming a twenty-four hour city with a restructured postal service and the last collection of the day had yet to be made.

She watched the camera as it slowly traversed on its high pedestal, like the electronic eye from H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. It was hard to imagine that there was a real human being at the end of the cable, and not a reptilian creature from an occupying army of aliens; but then, it was hard to imagine real human beings routinely shipping millions off to death camps, but there was never any shortage of personnel for such public-sector work when vacancies arose.

She waited until the camera was pointing away from her, and the postbox, then dashed from the car and pushed the package through the slot. The camera began to traverse towards her again, but now she was back behind the wheel and confident that the package was safe, for the time being.

Across the street, a group of young men piled out of a pub from where they had made an early start to the weekend. One caught sight of a smart piece of West End totty and whistled at her, trying to provoke a reaction. She ignored him and drove off, anxious to get home before the night grew any darker.

Not one to hang around at the best of times, she drove quickly along the A12 to escape the Machiavellian stain of the city as the soothing strains of an adagio on the radio eased her meditation.

The idyllic pastoral sanctuary of her country home lay just off the M11 near Epping Forest in the Essex green belt. She sought its company as if it were an absent lover. To walk in its garden, listen to the trickle of the stream, and embrace the great ash tree which was older and wiser than anyone knew.

She thought about the very small coterie of people she had come to know intimately and wondered whether to tell someone, then decided against the idea; it would serve no purpose other than to weaken her resolve, and they couldn't possibly comprehend the forces at play.

It was beyond her power to change anything now. She just hoped that when the time came they would understand. As the fond memories came flooding back, the music grew louder, and her foot grew heavy on the accelerator.

2

The evening traffic flowing north through Essex on the M11 had thinned to a trickle of about half a dozen cars a minute, mostly in the first two lanes. A police-car cruised between two heavy goods vehicles in the slow lane, effectively hidden from anything speeding passed. The lorry drivers were co-operating out of boredom and in the hope of glimpsing a few seconds of the drama when the trap was sprung by a rep or a boy-racer. The dedicated officer was after one last meaty catch before his shift ended, and this was a sure way of getting it.

Several potential law-breakers passed each minute. Mainly medium-powered saloon cars just over the speed limit. Occasionally, a company director would pass in a middle-of-the-range fleet car, no doubt bemoaning his waning virility and reliving his better days, but the policeman still wasn't tempted. He wanted something worth the electronic paperwork. What he eventually got was a silver Saab which flew past as if chased by the demons of hell.

Delighted, the policeman switched on his video pursuit camera, pulled out and accelerated after the offending vehicle, which was rapidly receding into the maw of the night. Hanging on to the sight of the rear lights as the powerful patrol car gathered momentum, the policeman glanced frequently at his speed indicator.

Eighty, ninety, even at one hundred miles-per-hour the

other car still seemed to be drawing away. With adrenalin pumping and caution thrown to the wind, he depressed the accelerator further and took the powerful cruiser to one hundred and twenty, with camera rolling and blue lights flashing to clear the fast lane ahead.

The miscreant ceased to recede and the policeman took pride in the performance of his vehicle, like a jockey on a winning thoroughbred. His only regret was that it had been so easy. He had hoped the other driver would give him a run for his money and a worthy collar at the end. A subversive blogger or a drug-dealer with a boot full of gear.

The other vehicle slowed rapidly, the driver deferring to the sight of blue lights flashing rapidly in his rear view mirror. Without further urging, the Saab indicated left and crossed over onto the hard-shoulder about half a mile short of junction five.

The policeman drew up behind and keyed the vehicle registration number into his computer, wondering whether to expect simple contrition or a lame excuse from the driver. The name and address appeared almost instantaneously. He keyed for a cross reference identity check and half a minute later, a surprising set of personal details came up next to a headshot of an attractive female face bordered by long hair. The sort of fresh face often used to front media broadcasts and PR companies.

Taking note of the name, date of birth, and occupation for identification purposes, he got out of the car and approached the Saab armed with his digital notebook, thinking this one might be awkward given the driver's obvious political connections.

The engine of the Saab was still running and he could not see inside the tinted window. He tapped impatiently on the glass with his ring, expecting the driver to wind the window down. Instead, the engine suddenly roared up

again and the sleek aerodynamic vehicle shot off, leaving him choking on a cloud of burnt rubber.

He ran back to his car, clambered in and set off in pursuit, excitedly reporting the situation on the radio and requesting the assistance of a female officer so that he could make an arrest.

The initial acceleration of the Saab gave it an excellent start and the policeman was impeded in his pursuit by a small cluster of slower vehicles, which penned him in on the hard-shoulder for several vital seconds. By the time he moved out into the fast lane again he had lost sight of the fleeing suspect.

The police-officer looked down at the address on the screen and presumed that the other driver would have left the motorway at junction five. He advised the control operator of his suspicion, and it was confirmed that surveillance cameras had recorded the Saab leaving the motorway.

He turned off at the junction to glide quietly through the villages around Epping Forest, no longer speeding as in a reckless pursuit but moving swiftly along the less familiar country roads. His global positioning system took him to the village he sought where he was joined by a local officer in a less powerful patrol car who knew the area intimately.

The earlier wind had dropped and the cloud was clearing overhead to reveal a full moon rising. The traffic officer was grateful for the company as the pair drove in convoy beneath the shadowy canopy cast by the remnant of a once great forest. Something wasn't right about this.

He had the vehicle owner's file up on his screen. Kristin Sigrun, a civil servant from the Ministry of Justice. The driver clearly had something to hide, perhaps more than just alcoholic breath.

The sleepy hamlet was in the middle of nowhere and they turned down a narrow leafy artery which stretched a

mile or so out of the village before narrowing to a bridle path and leading into the wooded countryside beyond.

The houses were all large, detached, secluded, and set back from the road in spacious grounds. The police officer wondered how a single, middle-ranking civil servant could afford to live here. There was no mention of a spouse or independent means, or even a disclosed relationship in her file.

The obscure name plaques were difficult to read at night, and the front patrol car paused several times at different gateways to read a plaque on a gate post before driving on slowly to the next one. Eventually the lead vehicle turned into a narrow gravel driveway flanked by a high fence on one side and a hedge on the other.

The larger patrol car followed down what seemed like a tunnel lit only by their headlights. They emerged to park side by side in the secluded gravel forecourt of an old timber-framed country house. The Saab was parked near the front door.

The traffic officer radioed in a report as the other police officer took a flashlight and approached the vehicle cautiously, thinking the driver could still be inside. The tinted window reflected her torch beam so she tried the door handle. It opened obligingly, inviting her to look inside. The forensic mind of the officer wondered why the driver leave such a valuable car unlocked? In a hurry, perhaps? If so, to do what?

The vehicle was empty, with no indication as to who the driver might have been but for the faint smell of feminine perfume and an air freshener fixed to the console. The interior was immaculately kept, though she noticed a piece of discarded cotton wool on the floor in front of the passenger seat. She picked it up for examination, her torchlight revealing a small, but noticeable, bloodstain.

“The car is empty,” she stated, as the male officer joined

her. "But she's on the rag. Could be significant. Nice interior, don't you think? I wouldn't mind one of these to run around in."

The female officer replaced the cotton wool carefully where she had found it, just in case, then closed the car door and laid the back of a hand on the bonnet.

"The engine is still warm. She only just got here ahead of us. She could be inside raiding the drinks cabinet to cover her breath. C'mon Starsky, let's go kick some arse!"

Together they approached the handsome varnished door. A heavy brass door knocker had been set into the wood just below a small fan-shaped window. The door knocker bore the face and fangs of a terrifying canine apparition - a purely decorative feature since a modern doorbell had been built into the frame.

"Enough to scare the in-laws away," the man joked, as he pressed the button and listened for the buzzer inside. "If she had any."

There was no response to the buzzer and no sign of a light appearing through the net-covered window. After a respectable minute had past the other officer put her hand on the brass door knob and twisted it. The door was locked securely.

They stepped back and craned their necks to look for signs of life on the upper floor. The house wasn't particularly large, but it was, nonetheless, a desirable residence in a beautiful garden and the price tag would have been well beyond the reach of most people, including single middle-ranking civil servants.

"Makes you wonder about the rewards of speculation," the woman surmised.

There were no lights on in the house, but the window curtains were all drawn back, allowing the officers to peer into the lounge with their flashlights. It seemed tidy and spartan, with no sign of the occupier.

“Try round the back,” the male officer suggested.

The woman concurred with a nod and they took separate routes by torchlight around either side of the house until meeting up again on the rear patio paving.

An extensive, perfectly-manicured lawn, punctuated with rosebeds of luscious petals and bordered by trees filled most of the space at the back. One great ash tree sprouted at the far edge of the lawn. Its huge boughs spread before the visitors in paternal welcome.

At first the police officers were preoccupied with the back of the house. The only way in, aside from the windows, would be through the sliding patio doors or the back door into the kitchen, but both were firmly locked. No lights seemed to be on inside and there were no visible signs that anyone was at home.

“Stalemate!” the woman declared, knocking on the glass with the tip of her baton. “Open up, it’s the police!” she shouted for anyone hiding inside to hear. “We may have to break a window to gain entrance,” she suggested to her colleague.

The male officer heard the suggestion but he wasn’t listening attentively. He was staring at the garden stretching away into the night as if it were leading to another world. He felt a deep sense of unease being here in this dark, eerie place, despite his legal authority, as if he were an unwelcome intruder in the grounds of an alien embassy, or a secular agent expected to exert authority in a spiritual regime. The stormy winds had died away and a spectacular full moon had emerged through a gap in the clouds; enough to illuminate the massive ash tree at the bottom of the garden.

He left his colleague knocking on the windows and walked down towards the ash as if summoned by its majesty. He halted within about fifty feet of the tree, the beam of his flashlight having illuminated something unusual lying

on the ground.

He took a few steps more, then bent down to examine a neatly folded set of clothes, including a matching skirt and jacket, lying on a polished pair of shoes.

“Come and look at this,” he urged his companion.

The other officer trotted over and bent down to examine the clothes.

“Is this what she was wearing?” the female officer asked.

“I don’t know, she didn’t wind the window down for me to see.”

“If she’s stripped off out here, she’s obviously stoned or lost the plot. She’ll be about here somewhere, hiding in the bushes,” the officer whispered, looking around as if tracking big game.

They both pointed their torch beams in the direction of the massive tree trunk, and slowly began to advance toward it, spreading out to pass on either side.

The man’s beam found her first and he froze for an instant, confused by the scene. Several crucial seconds passed before he found his voice.

The other police officer joined him and followed the path of the beam into the shadowy gloom beneath the far boughs of the tree.

The strange figure facing them seemed to glow faintly, like an unearthly apparition, and they both briefly entertained the possibility that they were seeing a ghost. But then their sceptical minds began considering more rational alternatives.

Her skin was pale, and her long, auburn hair, draped over her shoulders, seemed energized by the moonlight. She wore a light, sleeveless robe of reflective white linen, secured by a chord around her waist, as if a guest at a fancy dress party or a performer in a medieval play. Her eyes were wide and maniacal as if in a trance, and she made no attempt to shield them from the harsh beam of

light. They approached her cautiously, even more so when they realized she was clutching a knife - a lethal looking dagger with a long, thin triangular blade.

"I'll get behind her," the female officer whispered, vanishing from sight.

The man stayed facing her with his flashlight as the other officer worked her way round in the shadows to the far side of the tree. He was shocked by her fierce, almost maniacal, expression - like a Druidic priestess wanting his head.

"Put the knife down," the constable counselled quietly, stepping closer while his colleague did the same from behind, hoping to disarm her before anyone got hurt.

The oddly-garbed figure raised the blade to ward him off, then suddenly declaimed an eerie guttural invocation in a language neither officer had ever heard before.

In the darkness, concentrating on the knife, he failed to appreciate immediately the significance of a high bough which curved to the ground unnaturally. Its tip was staked down with a loop of clothes line tied to a couple of tent pegs driven into the ground.

"She's got a tow-rope ..." he suddenly tried to warn his colleague, but before he could finish the sentence she had used the blade to bite through the tether.

The branch above her head began to straighten out leisurely like a turgid penis, initiating the woman in a macabre act of levitation. The two horrified police officers lunged forward and collided like a pair of Keystone Cops in the space occupied a second previously by the woman whose feet now kicked like a puppet in the air above their heads.

"I'll give you a shoulder lift!" the male officer suggested quickly. "Try and pull her down."

"More likely I'll pull her neck out," the female officer countered. "Climb up the tree and cut the rope on the

branch.”

He shone his torch up at the high branch with serious misgivings.

“Maybe you ought to do it. I was never very good at climbing trees.”

“I’m a girl,” the middle-aged woman protested. “Get up there now!”

“Alright, where’s that knife?”

He shone his torch around on the grass where he thought she must have dropped it.

“She’s still got hold of it,” the other officer declared grimly, illuminating the hand that still clutched the knife despite her consciousness slipping away, her kicks becoming feeble as the noose tightened around her neck.

The female officer took something from her pocket from which she flicked open a stiletto blade.

“Use this,” she proposed.

“Where did you get that from?”

“A ten-year-old.”

The policeman shook his head in disgust as he took the handle, folded the blade, and slipped the knife into his pocket.

“Give me a leg-up.”

The female officer crouched beside the massive trunk with her hands cradled to provide a first foothold. He stepped up on it and reached overhead to grasp one of the lower boughs before pulling himself up like a monkey with his arms and legs wrapped around the bough, knowing the dirt and moss stains would never come out of his pressed shirt and trousers.

He dragged himself on top of the bough and crouched gingerly on the narrow platform with a palm against the bark of the trunk for balance. He rose up until he was able to grasp the next bough and pulled himself up onto it, then began to crawl with growing confidence and a sense

of urgency towards the rope coiled round the branch about twenty feet away.

The woman had ceased her struggle. She hung still, save for the gentle sway of her body dissipating her final energy with each swing. The knot had bitten into the flesh under her chin and her head had lolled back so that he could see her face. Her eyes were closed and she seemed at peace, as if merely sleeping.

He was acutely aware that with each passing second her delicate brain would be dying. The damage might already be irreparable. He quickly shuffled along the branch like a human caterpillar until he was near enough to touch her head. The only way to save her was to cut the rope and trust that his colleague would break her fall. He took out the knife and flicked open the blade.

“I’m cutting the rope! Get ready!”

“Go ahead!” she replied.

He lay on his belly on the branch with arms and legs dangling on either side like a leopard, then gripped the taut rope with one hand and put the blade to it with his other. The rope was at least two inches thick and he was not entirely sure that the knife blade would prove to be an efficient saw. But as the blade bit into the rope, the woman he thought was unconscious suddenly opened her eyes and stared up directly into his. Her face now seemed terribly distorted by the pressure on her neck and the bloodshot eyes filled him with an appalling sense of dread. He began to saw frantically, not just to save her but to escape from the glare.

She raised her right hand, still holding the knife, and he grabbed her wrist with his left, thinking she was going to strike him with the blade, but he couldn’t hold on. Her strength amazed him, and he was unable to prevent the wrist from pulling away.

All he could do was watch in horror as the hand

clutching the blade flew downwards in a curved arc, the motion slowed by his senses, and struck the woman under her left breast, piercing the thin garment and sinking deep into her torso.

The blood flowed immediately as the heart and lungs were punctured, and a red stain began to spread rapidly across the front of the white gown. He quickly sawed through the rope and his colleague risked the embedded blade to break the fall of the limp body as it fell.

The policewoman laid the victim out gently on the grass, taking care not to disturb the knife which was stuck firmly in her chest, and made an emergency call for an ambulance - though knowing that there was nothing they could do. There was nothing anyone could do now - except, perhaps, a priest.

The officer in the tree swung under the branch by his hands before dropping heavily onto the grass. He had the sense to bend his knees, lean forward, and roll over on impact to avoid injuring his spine; but guessed that it would hurt later when the adrenalin had cleared from his arteries. He stared at the dead woman and dropped to his knees, feeling numbed by a sense of shock and guilt at the thought that his actions had somehow led to this. As a traffic cop he'd seen his fair share of carnage on the roads, but this incident seemed more tragic and pointless than most.

"She went to a lot of trouble to avoid a speeding ticket," the other officer observed drolly, putting a hand on the shoulder of the young man who was on one knee with his head bowed as if in prayer.

3

Under sufferance, press photographers and television cameras were permitted to gather behind a waist-high barrier of portable steel railings in the courtyard of the British Museum and Library in Russell Square.

The inclement evening weather added to the discomfort of a grumbling collection of paparazzi. Daniel Levin stood with them, sheltered from the rain by a shared umbrella and a raincoat with the collar turned up, anonymous and obscure as a bird-watcher in his hide.

“What are you doing here?” a photographer inquired brusquely.

Dan stamped his feet to counter the unseasonal damp chill.

“I’m just as curious as you are about the latest adventures of the darling Dr Kelp. Probably more so,” he replied.

“I thought you two used to hang out together?”

“Academics don’t hang out - they collaborate.”

“Whatever.”

“I haven’t seen her for a while - in the flesh that is,” Dan smirked. “They say everyone is famous for at least fifteen minutes. You never know who’s going to be next, Joe.”

“I can tell you who it’s not going to be,” Joe declared wearily. “Are you sure it’s her you’re really interested in?”

“Why not? She’s an attractive, intelligent mix - for an

archaeologist.”

“Was that mix - or minx?”

“Minx.”

“She’ll do for old bones what Jane Goodall did for gorillas,” another one of the press photographers remarked.

“I’ve heard she’s doing already it,” a third pitched-in, with a wry chuckle. “For old bones that is.”

“Dyan Fossey did Gorillas, Jane Goodall did chimps,” Dan pointed out pedantically.

“They’re all monkeys to me,” Joe remarked drolly.

“What’s this about old bones?” Dan probed.

“You’ll see when she arrives,” Joe smirked, glancing at the other photographers with a knowledgeable grin. “She won’t be alone.”

Dan feigned his ignorance with a nod and a wry smile, choosing to patiently bide his time, knowing that all would be revealed in due course. He watched with interest as the great and the good continued to arrive.

Ushers were on hand to open doors and greet guests emerging from the procession of black cabs and limousines which had been allowed to enter the cordon. In pairs and foursomes, the guests were escorted up the stone steps into the historic old building, like the creatures of the Biblical Ark; some glancing casually over their shoulders at the press before disappearing inside, others blithely ignoring the media presence like seasoned campaigners.

Dan clocked the myriad of faces. A surprisingly high proportion of them were familiar to him from somewhere or other.

“Aren’t you going to take some pictures?” he ventured to Joe. “Some of these people have washed especially for the occasion. They’ve earned the right to appear in the Sunday supplements.”

“That’s about the only right left to anyone in this country,” Joe reminded him. “But I’m just after the one

shot,” he revealed nonchalantly, as he handed the umbrella to Dan. “Here, make yourself useful for a change.”

Dan took the umbrella, allowing Joe to focus his optical zoom lens on a subject, as if he were a sniper testing his sights. Dan observed a palpable lack of activity or excitement among the entire posse of cameramen and women.

“It looks like you’re not the only one. It’s odd that they should be so interested in Kathryn Kelp when you think that your average press photographer has a degree in media studies.”

“Do I detect a whiff of academic snobbery coming from somewhere nearby?” Joe surmised, sniffing around with a frown.

“No, just a light-comic-touch and a sense of irony.”

“You don’t need a university education to take pictures, just a degree of common sense, especially with the Crows about.”

“Talking of academic snobbery, have you noticed anything unusual about the guests?”

“The God Squad are here,” Joe noted, observing a small group of bishops emerging from a Rolls Royce. “Keeping a wary eye on heathen scholarship no doubt.”

“What else do you notice?”

“Cogs and dirty oil,” he remarked, then added, “minor celebrities and the gangsters who like to be seen with them.”

“So we’ve got actors, gangsters, and bishops. But where are the professors? You would think archaeologists up and down the country would be interested in this.”

“Maybe they can’t afford the price of a ticket, or maybe they just haven’t been invited. They could end up asking awkward questions; like why haven’t they been allowed to examine the find for themselves?”

“You think she’s a fraud?”

“Who knows what she is? Who cares so long as she gives

good face. Dumbing up is the latest fashion, like going to the Tate Modern and interpreting the nuances of a blank canvass.”

“That’s a fairly cynical view,” Dan mused.

“I always get suspicious of scientists who set out to court the media and the government. They should stick to what they know.”

“Is archaeology really a science?”

“Ask Kate - she ought to know.”

“She won’t tell me anything now. She thinks I’m a plagiarist.”

“What’s it like being married to a woman who’s smarter than you?”

“She’s not smarter than me, she just takes her work more seriously - a girlie-swat,” he protested, like a delinquent boy making excuses for his poor academic grades of late.

“This could be them now,” Joe speculated, as a clamour began at the sight of a police motorcycle escort followed closely behind by a distinctive black ministerial chariot.

“Them?” Dan queried.

The limousine halted and a theatrical figure in a dark suit and night-vision sunglasses leapt out from the off-side rear passenger door, slamming it closed before positioning himself between the vehicle and the press-pack, and talking to his cuff.

A second action-man in similar suit and shades disembarked from the front passenger seat and after a quick precautionary glance around to assess any threat opened the near-side rear passenger door.

“James Bond and Gordon Liddy,” Joe remarked.

To the press-pack, the balletic manoeuvres were all part of the familiar repertoire of government security for ministers. Feet began to stamp and shuffle as they waited impatiently for the all important passenger to emerge. A woman appeared first, her face familiar thanks to recent

television pictures. She wore an elegant, tight-fitting navy coloured dress with glittering silver sequins, doubtless chosen to complement her blue eyes and fair hair.

The flashlights and shutters of the press pack began to fire away with great enthusiasm, like safari tourists suddenly rewarded by the arrival of a lion with exceptional mane.

A greying figure with angular features, wearing a dinner jacket, emerged from the vehicle and stood beside her like a mentor with his protege; his confident demeanour and casual smile contrasting with her diffidence. She moved slightly closer to the man who put a protective arm around her shoulders, enveloping her with his self-assurance. Such familiarity resembled that of lovers and came over in such a brazen fashion that Dan's jaw hung limp for a second, rendering him speechless.

"Now do you understand?" Joe called out, over the noise of the press-pack.

"I don't believe it, he's a monster," Dan moaned, as if his faith in human nature had just trickled away like grains of sand through his fingers.

"So was Henry Kissinger." Joe reminded him. "In comparison, John Surt is a fine-looking man."

"But he's a jack-booted Puritan. A weasel-faced opportunist. How the hell is he going to get away with this?"

"Ask his spin doctors, they'll have a well-oiled brief. Even Puritans are allowed an occasional girlfriend to advance their career, so long as it's just one at a time and they stick to the missionary position. It's not as if he's married or anything, and even if he were, don't forget that England is the land of the hypocrite."

"You mean the political hypocrite?"

"Societies get the hypocrites they deserve."

"How are they going to explain the fact that he's twice her age?"

“Not quite. By Hollywood standards, it’s a fairly respectable match. You made no protest when Jane Conway married Rufus Muspilli.”

“That was a shrewd move by a businesswoman. Kathryn is different - she’s an archaeologist like Kate, dedicated to her work.”

“Why are all female archaeologists called Kathryn or Kate?” Joe mused.

“Not all - just the ones from the Home Counties.”

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were jealous.”

“Jealous of what?”

“Him.”

Dan frowned sceptically as he held Joe’s umbrella high above their heads while the photographer zoomed in and snapped away before the moment passed and the couple disappeared inside.

“Make sure you get a good one of her,” he urged, nudging the photographer’s shoulder.

Joe paused to glare at him.

“Do I tell you how to sharpen your pencil?”

“I’m all ears,” Dan muttered, as the couple receded from view like a pair of movie stars at a premier.

Dan handed the umbrella back to Joe and slipped out of the raincoat to reveal a sartorial elegance of his own beneath the old mac.

“Time to go to work,” he proposed, folding the coat over his arm.

“How are you going to get in? If you’re not on the guest list they’ll throw you out on your ear no matter how smart you look.”

“I am on the guest list - two free tickets came courtesy of Rufus Muspilli.”

“Muspilli paid for you?” Joe gasped. “He must want something in return. You know what they say about supping with the Devil. You’ve probably sold your soul.”

“He *is* my publisher. It would have been impolite to refuse.”

“You said two tickets. Who’s got the other one?”

“Kate is inside with the Muspillis now,” he divulged, as he started to walk away. “Don’t forget to send me one for the dartboard.”

Dan could have walked round to the cordon and shown his invitation to the security people there. Instead he swung his raincoat over his shoulder, put two hands on the railings, and hopped over like a cheeky adolescent taking a short cut.

As he approached the empty ministerial limousine for a closer look, he was immediately challenged by one of the bodyguards. A tall, bulked-up creature with an extraordinary tan and a litre of gel in his crew-cut.

Dan took a precautionary step backwards until just out of reach before delving into his dinner jacket pocket and producing the garishly inscribed invitation.

The other man did not react. His stance and expression remained fixed like granite. Only his eyes gave away a hint of primeval anger which might have killed a stranger crossing his path in a previous epoch.

An usher saw the drama and made a timely intervention, inviting Dan to accompany her. As he was led away, Dan was briefly struck by the notion that he had just stared Death in the face.

4

Dan left his coat at the cloakroom desk and returned to his table, which was elegantly laid out in preparation for dinner. There he had left Kate alone in the company of Rufus and Jane Muspilli, with the excuse of a trip to the washroom.

“Where have you been?” she growled, half an hour later.

“The gents,” he replied.

“All this time?”

Dan took his seat at the table facing Muspilli. The billionaire publisher was about twenty-five years his senior, but still endowed with a youthful sense of political mischief which made him dangerously unpredictable. His wife, Jane, was a devious and stunning ex-financier who’d done some serious prospecting at the height of her charm and struck a rich vein in Muspilli.

Jane was an old friend of Dan from student days who had since consulted him on several occasions when confronted with inexplicable phenomena on the sites of antiquarian property acquisitions.

“It’s the excitement of the occasion,” Dan confessed. “You know how it is, being here amongst so many famous people.”

“No need to flatter us, Dan,” Jane insisted, in a patronising tone. “We know how you feel.”

“You don’t know how I felt just now trying to pee bet-

ween a pair of nose pop stars.”

“I hope you satisfied their curiosity. You forgot to dry your hair though,” she noted, as water dripped from his fringe onto the immaculate white table cover.

“Alright, so I nipped out for a chat with the paparazzi,” he conceded. “I was dying for a cigarette.”

“Does he smoke now as well?” she asked Kate, in mock-horror.

Kate frowned and shook her head slowly.

“We’ve just been having a very interesting conversation about you,” Jane informed him.

“I don’t want to hear the details,” he declared, in vain.

“Those best-selling stories of yours actually come from Kate’s research.”

“Some do,” he had to admit.

“So where do the others come from?” Jane inquired teasingly.

“That’s difficult to explain,” he insisted coyly. “But in some cases, you were to blame.”

“Did you really did spend a night psychoanalysing the ghost of a dead nun in Jane’s country house kitchen?” Rufus queried.

“She wasn’t a nun,” Dan insisted.

“But she thought she was going to be dragged down to hell before dawn by a host of demons?”

Dan took a deep troubled breath and exhaled slowly before answering.

“Maybe she was - people took religion far more seriously in the sixteenth century.”

“Do you think John Surt has fixed a date yet for *Kristallnacht*?” Kate queried, changing the subject.

“You shouldn’t be so cynical,” Rufus advised. “Men like Surt make the trains run on time.”

“It’s where the trains go that worries me.”

“Kate is right to be cynical,” Jane stated boldly. “This

country is like an over-ripe plumb swaying in a breeze - just waiting for an ambitious tyrant like Surt to swallow it whole.”

“If he did that, he’d probably choke on the stone,” ventured Rufus. “Surt is enjoying the superstar spotlight for the moment, but opportunist politicians fade faster than the latest pop stars. I’ve seen it all before many times,” he sighed. “He’ll meet with disaster long before he reaches No. 10 - or very soon after. They say a week is a long time in politics because there is always vicissitude - an unforeseeable epic change of fortune just around the corner.”

“I’d like to know how many Crows he has on the payroll,” Dan revealed. “Their manpower strength is a state secret. You need two things for a *coup d’etat*. A private army and control of the media. I’d say Surt has both.”

“He doesn’t control the media - at least, not by himself,” Rufus pointed out. “He would need a power vacuum to fill. You don’t get that sort of opportunity in a mature, stable democracy like ours. When he gets too big for his boots, or steps on too many influential toes, his own party will cut him down to size just like the Republicans did with Joe McCarthy, and the Conservatives with Margaret Thatcher.”

“How can you be so sure? What if he makes his move before that happens - during a time of dislocation?”

“What sort of dislocation?” Rufus inquired, his eyes suddenly alert to anything on the political grapevine he might have missed.

“I don’t know yet,” Dan conceded. “I get the feeling there’s a political storm brewing.”

“Premonition?”

“No, just a sense that something has got to change. During the Cold War, it was calculated that the power of national government would break down completely if the country took about thirty percent casualties in a nuclear

strike.”

“Thirty percent? That’s a bit extreme. Who’d want to rule over a nuclear waste dump with a third of the people laid up in hospitals and morgues?”

“There’s not likely to be a nuclear strike,” Dan assured him. “But you could dislocate the government by taking out a big enough proportion of the ruling class.”

“How?” asked Rufus, raising his eyebrows as if intrigued by the prospect.

“By poisoning the gin in the House of Commons bars,” Dan quipped, lightening his tone.

“A terrorist barman could wipe out the entire cabinet with a toxic tea towel,” Kate chuckled. “The drinks cabinet, that is. Dan’s been reading too many Fu Manchu stories.”

“Even so, I’d keep those conspiracy theories to myself if I were you, Dan,” Jane advised. “The Crows don’t know how to spell *habens corpus*.”

“The economy is doing fine at the moment. Low mortgage rates, low unemployment, plenty of money splashing around. What more do you want?” Rufus asked him.

“A bit more faith in our political masters,” Dan posited gloomily.

The food was reasonable, though predictably not worth the price of a ticket. But then the four courses were simply *hors d’oeuvres* washed down with wine and small talk. The main event was still to come - after the plates had been cleared.

The guests of honour all sat at a table on a specially erected stage some distance from Dan’s seat so that he had little chance to observe them closely. But now a lectern and microphone had been placed in front of the table, awaiting the speakers.

First up was a short, stocky man in his late forties, whose gruff manner and base northern accent seemed incon-

gruous to the venerable institution he represented.

“I always thought museum jobs went to those queer antiquarians from Oxford or Cambridge?” Dan whispered to Jane, as the man introduced himself as the new director of marketing and finance.

“The cold war is over,” she reminded him. “We’ve run out of Soviet spies to hide. He may not know much about antiquities or the ancient world, but he’ll know how to make money out of them.”

The finance director explained that museums were falling on hard times and introduced his latest promotional scheme; a credit-card bearing the British Museum logo, which he held aloft while inviting people to pick up an application form on the way out.

The plummy accent and effete mannerisms of the next speaker were more to Dan’s liking, or at least his dated prejudices. The cultural director introduced himself, and in a silken tone began describing the history of the museum, from the original library and art collection of Sir Hans Sloane held in Montague House right up to the present day.

The cultural director gave way to an even more venerable elderly bishop with a shiny head, one of the spiritual legislators clinging on in the House of Lords, and the only man on stage wearing a clerical dog-collar with his dinner jacket. The Bishop, as it turned out, was an expert in the field of ancient pagan religions, and began a lecture on comparative beliefs and the different roads to God.

“Why is it that so many bishops have shiny bald heads?” Dan quizzed Jane, who knew a lot more about the chattering classes than he did.

“They must have been incredibly virile at some time in their lives,” she sighed.

“Then why become a priest and waste all that creative energy?”

“When the church is quiet and empty, respectable women, who are otherwise chaste in every way, quite like the idea of being fucked on the altar by a well-hung priest in his cassock, with a jealous Jesus looking down from the cross,” she revealed dispassionately.

“Priests wouldn’t do that, not even the Catholics,” Dan declared in disbelief.

“Wanna bet?” she smirked.

Dan listened more attentively now to the clergyman as he lectured on faith in a Christian god who redeems mankind and sets him above the animals. And yet he was a keen scholar with an obvious affection for the old Germanic deities.

“I thought bishops were supposed to condemn pagans,” Rufus chortled. “He sounds as if he’s forgotten the First Commandment.”

“It’s not the heathens they’re worried about these days, it’s the secularists,” Kate pointed out.

The bishop eventually gave way to the Vice-Chancellor of University College London (UCL), Dr Kelp’s academic home. The VC praised the tenacity and academic brilliance of the archaeology team in general, and Kathryn Kelp in particular; comparing her enterprise favourably to those of Heinrich Schliemann and Howard Carter, knowing full well that the publicity would ensure future endowment funds and a flood of applications from prospective undergraduate and research students wishing to join the faculty.

His speech was refreshingly brief, and as he sat down the Justice Secretary rose to speak.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Surt began. “We have all been hearing fitting tributes to Dr Kelp and her team, and no doubt the entire story will emerge soon in the serialization of her forthcoming publication, which I hope many of you will enjoy reading. So let me briefly explain how the Ministry of Justice came to be involved in this project. The

purpose of the Ministry is to make our society safer and more secure, which we can do through a greater understanding of our past culture, and funding ways of investigating the past. The twin pillars of psychology and forensic archaeology are playing increasingly important roles in the governance of our country ...”

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Dan blurted.

“Don’t!” Kate advised. “You’ll offend the chef.”

“The man is a closet Nazi socialist - he should be the leader of the NHS.”

Surt continued to develop the theme of his speech.

“As an undergraduate studying history at Oxford, I was fascinated by that period commonly referred to as the Dark Age. Dark because the Roman Empire in the West had collapsed and the Germanic tribes who invaded our island were assumed to be illiterate and therefore incapable of leaving any permanent contribution to the written historical record. But now, the science of archaeology is shedding light on the darkness and revealing once again, after all these centuries, the art and culture of these early Englishmen. Imagine then, what an honour it was for me, as a government minister, to advance the work of Dr Kelp’s team in the field. And so it is with great pleasure that I invite her to speak to you this evening ...”

“Now you know why he’s interested in old bones,” Rufus Muspilli commented wryly. “He makes a patriotic flag out of them to fly over his head.”

“A Jolly Roger,” quipped Jane.

“It’s worse than that,” Dan moaned. “He’s seeking to use recent technical advances in archaeology and the latest pseudo-scientific fashions in psychology to extend the powers of his office. Kathryn is merely a pawn on his chessboard.”

“But what does she see in him?” pondered Kate.

“Maybe she likes older men,” Jane jibed.

“Is that why you married me?” Rufus teased her.

“Of course not, I married you for money.”

They fell silent as Dr Kelp began her speech in the usual manner, thanking everyone from her political patron downwards. She started off with a few outdoor jokes about trowels, trees, and the call of nature; and was rewarded with polite laughter from the audience. The story was old by front page standards, but the human interest lingered and Kelp soon got into her stride for the occasion, speaking in a relaxed and elegant manner, as if addressing a Thursday afternoon lecture of dosey undergraduates. All diffidence vanished with the more amusing anecdotes, some of which were known, others less familiar; all just probable enough to be believed. Details of the excavation were still sketchy, since much of the information was being withheld for serial rights to the book.

As she spoke, it occurred to Dan that she was staring him straight in the eye. Though flattered, he dismissed the significance of the event as coincidence or solipsism. He was simply one of her marks, an obscure face for her focus near the back of the audience. By the time she had finished, Dan had lost track of what she was saying, but was trying to evaluate what political significance, if any, her work might have. He was also uncomfortable at being seduced by her speaking style. Cotton Mather would have called it bewitchment. He noticed Surt was also staring straight at him like a jealous spouse. Both together seemed unlikely. It both amused and unnerved him slightly. After the speeches had finished, the finance director rose again to thank everyone and remind them of the credit-card scheme, then the guest speakers retreated out of sight behind the stage partitions to polite applause.

“At least it didn’t go on for too long,” Jane judged.

“I think I’ll just pop backstage and ask the Justice Secretary for an autograph,” Dan announced, rising from his

chair.

“Your invitation doesn’t extend that far,” Rufus warned. “Only the most favoured get to touch his hallowed hands and feet.”

“Maybe he’ll give doubting Thomas a chance to reaffirm his faith.”

“We’ve got to go,” Rufus announced, rising from his chair to shake Dan’s hand and kiss Kate on the cheek. “Australia should be batting soon.”

“This early in the morning?” Kate queried.

“It’s mid-afternoon in California.”

“Rufus has sold cricket to the Americans,” Jane explained. “That feat alone should earn him a place in the cultural history of the West.”

“Would you like to come with us and get away from this loser?” Rufus proposed to Kate.

“No, thanks, I’ll stick with him a while longer,” Kate decided, after a moment’s pause to consider the offer.

“Alright, good luck, and if you get into any trouble - don’t call me,” Rufus warned them both.

Jane bid them goodnight and left with her husband, leaving Kate alone with Dan.

“What sort of trouble?” she wondered aloud.

“Sedition, treason, that sort of thing,” Dan revealed nonchalantly. “Your loyalty is flattering, but maybe I should do the old-fashioned thing and put you in a taxi. It could save you having to spend a night in the Tower.”

Kate put her hands on her hips and grinned wryly.

“Since when did the old-fashioned heroine ever go home early and miss out on a night in the Tower? That wouldn’t be much of a movie.”

“In that case you better lead the way.”

The intrepid couple slipped round the back of the temporary stage as the other guests were making for the main exit on the other side of the hall. A single, unprepossessing

wooden door marked the rear entrance through which the speakers had presumably retreated. The door filled its frame like a humble sentinel, but was unlocked, and the daring duo were not dissuaded from discretely slipping through the portal into the unknown.

5

Faint light from beneath the sill of a doorway shone like a beacon at the far end of a dark corridor. The adventurous pair moved cautiously towards the light, guided by the narrow walls which confined them in the tunnel-like passage. Kate had by now decided that discretion was the better part of valour and was allowing Dan to lead the way.

“Why is it so dark?” she complained, keeping close to him.

“Museum atmospheric,” he proposed, feeling her pert breasts pressing against his back. “Wouldn’t be much of a movie otherwise,” he reminded her. “Mind you don’t get groped by the Mummy.”

Kate frowned. “This ain’t the Egyptology section.”

“If you say so. I haven’t got a clue where we are in the building. We could trip over King Tut at any moment.”

As they neared journey’s end, they thought they could hear voices being channelled from an unseen source some where ahead. They couldn’t make out the words but the conversation sounded light-hearted. The corridor led towards what appeared to be a small, dimly lit atrium which provided access to other rooms.

Dan licked his lips in nervous anticipation at what they might find there, while Kate could feel her heart beginning to race with fear and excitement.

Before they were clear of the corridor, a large body sud-

denly appeared in front of them, blocking out the promised blessing of the light ahead.

Kate gasped at the square shoulders which could have belonged to the Mummy in one of those old movies.

The face was in silhouette, but Dan recognized the broad outline and the thickset neck. It was the bodyguard who had challenged him in the courtyard. A courtyard of witnesses. There were fewer witnesses about now.

“We’re here to see Dr Kelp,” Dan explained.

The man put his right hand inside his jacket, as if reaching for a gun.

“Dr Kelp?” Dan reiterated, raising his voice in the hope of attracting attention to their predicament, as if trapped by a rogue guard dog in someone’s garden, and in imminent danger of being mauled if the owner didn’t show up soon.

The bodyguard produced a miniature, silver-plated pistol. He pointed the gun menacingly at Dan’s midriff while taking a loose cigarette from his left pocket and putting it between his lips. He pulled the trigger and a small yellow flame appeared from the muzzle of the imitation firearm. He lit the cigarette in a cavalier manner, then put the lighter back into his right pocket.

“Full marks for style,” Dan noted, with grudging relief.

“This way,” the bodyguard informed them, turning his back and proceeding towards the light.

They were not altogether reluctant to follow him out of the shadows. He led them in the direction of an open doorway. A voice from within invited them to enter.

The bodyguard moved his considerable bulk to one side, allowing them to walk into what looked like a private study, complete with a desk and walls lined with books.

The sole occupant was Kathryn Kelp, still wearing her evening dress, but consulting a text from the shelves as if seeking the answer to a question which couldn’t wait till

morning. She turned and recognized the familiar faces of her colleagues.

“Dan, Kate - what are you doing here?” she inquired brusquely, taken aback slightly by the sudden appearance of the gate crashers.

“To offer congratulations - on your achievement,” Kate answered breezily.

“You don’t know anything about my achievement,” she insisted warily.

“But I should, it’s my field too,” Kate reminded her.

Before Dr Kelp could reply, one of the speakers popped his head around the door.

“Kathryn, why don’t you ask your friends to join us for a drink?” he suggested, with a friendly grin.

She glared discouragingly at the gate-crashers, as if hoping they would gracefully decline the invitation and return the way they had come. “I don’t think that would be a good idea. You better go now,” she informed them. “You really shouldn’t be here.”

“Actually, I’m dying for a drink,” Dan confessed, glancing at Kate.

“Me too,” Kate concurred, then suggested shrewdly, “I almost get the feeling we’re expected.”

“Alright, if you insist,” she conceded, turning her back and leading them out of the office and down a second corridor.

They followed her into an even larger office-cum-study lined with books up to a high ceiling which only a steeple-jack would be comfortable retrieving. It seemed as if there was no getting away from erudition in this place. The speakers were all present. The brace of museum directors, the bishop, the vice chancellor, and the Rt Hon John Surt MP.

“Drink, Dr Levin?” Surt asked urbanely.

“Scotch, with ice,” Dan replied, not reacting to the un-

expected use of his name and title.

“And Dr Vail?”

Kate was surprised he knew her name too. Unlike Dan, she’d never popularized her work and was unknown outside of her academic circle.

“I’ll have the same,” she replied, slightly uneasy in the circumstances and not wanting to make an awkward or inappropriate request.

“So what did you think of the speeches?” Surt asked, as he scooped ice into a pair of short glasses.

“Quite interesting,” Kate replied.

“Quite interesting sounds like - a bit dull.”

“I learned a few new things about the British Museum. But I still don’t know what Kathryn has actually discovered to cause so much excitement.”

“Neither does she,” Surt revealed, as he poured whisky from a decanter into the glasses and handed them out.

Dan immediately glanced at Kathryn for a reaction to this curious statement, but her expression remained impassive.

“It may not be worth getting so excited about after all,” Surt decided on reflection, raising his glass to the gate-crashers.

Dan and Kate accepted their drinks with the grace of uninvited guests.

“Some people are concerned that independent scholars haven’t been permitted to inspect the site or examine whatever it is you - or Kathryn - have found,” Dan pointed out.

“All in good time,” Surt replied wearily, as if bored with the subject. “For now preservation and security are all that matters. In 1972, the *Codex Regius* was returned to Iceland by ship because it was considered too valuable to risk on a plane.”

“You’ve discovered a manuscript!” Kate presumed, her

eyes lighting up with excitement.

“That, as they say, would be telling,” Surt sighed. “But it is remarkable that so few sources have survived. They’re out there - preserved underground in burial chambers. It’s just a question of knowing where to look.”

“How did you know where to look?” asked Dan.

“You’ll have to ask Kathryn about that,” Surt replied, deflecting the question with the skill of a former barrister turned politician.

“Dr Levin used to lecture at UCL,” Kathryn revealed diplomatically, to change the topic of conversation.

“What does he do now?” the bishop inquired.

“He’s a ghost-hunter.”

“Really?” The bishop was pleasantly astounded. “Has he managed to find any?”

“Enough to keep his publisher happy.”

“Who is his publisher?”

“Rufus Muspilli.”

“Champagne socialist,” Surt quipped sardonically.

“Rufus isn’t much of a socialist,” Dan insisted. “Though some might consider him a National Socialist.”

“Does *he* believe in ghosts?” Surt wondered, raising his eyebrows in an amused fashion.

“I’ve never bothered to ask him,” Dan confessed.

“What is it you’ve come here to ask *me*?” Surt inquired bluntly.

“Ask you?” Dan queried.

“You’ve gone to a lot of trouble this evening just to get here, so don’t be coy, Dr Levin; now that you’ve finally come to the mountain, so to speak.”

“I don’t understand?” Dan vacillated, wary of where this was leading. “I’m not a journalist seeking an interview - I came back here to see Kathryn.”

Kathryn retained her steely eyed expression, unmoved by the dubious claim.

“Then let me help you,” Surt proposed. “Why don’t we start with the question of MoJ SS police manpower? You would like to know how many Crows I have on the payroll.”

“I’m impressed,” Dan conceded with a frown. I didn’t realize your surveillance activities extended to our dinner table.”

“I’m disappointed that you should be,” Surt revealed. “Have you not heard of the Surveillance Society? We have blanket coverage in the most unlikely places. My critics in the press should consider that when they are making love to their wives.”

Dan was suddenly uncomfortable for Kate’s sake. This unspoken blackmail by the security services against the media and opposition activists was a key strategy in the drive to extend ministerial power.

“The number of Crows is not that great,” Surt insisted. “About 5,000 - set against 100,000 regular officers in the Met and the county forces. Certainly not enough to stage a *coup d’etat* in a country of this size - even with the blessing of so many cameras and computers.”

“That’s a relief to know,” Dan confessed uneasily.

“But what is it you really want to know?” Surt pressed, his features hardening until his steely blue eyes seemed to bore into the other man’s and illuminate the thoughts hidden within.

Dan almost felt himself bodily lifted by the intensity of the man’s glare, as if he possessed some sort of psychic power.

“When?” he whispered quietly, in spite of himself, as if manipulated like a ventriloquist’s dummy and compelled to ask.

“Soon,” was the reticent reply.

Dan glanced around at the other faces in the room. Kate was naturally puzzled by the cryptic exchange. The men

stared at him blankly as if entranced. Kathryn Kelp seemed uneasy and avoided eye contact.

“That’s what they used to say about the second coming,” Dan noted cynically. “But after 1500 years or so people grew tired of waiting and began turning to science and humanism.”

“They won’t have to wait much longer,” Surt assured him. “I’ve read your books. You’re an unusual character, Dr Levin, to have spent so much time in the company of Death and survived. Borrowed time, perhaps. You may meet Death again soon. Pray that she still has a use for you.”

Surt sought the bodyguard who was standing quietly nearby.

“Conduct them safely,” he instructed the silent figure.

The words seemed curiously archaic and less than reassuring to Dan as he drained his glass, before bidding Dr Kelp and her guests goodnight.

He filed out of the room behind Kate and the guard - who began to lead them on another tour of the darker passages of the old building. This tour-guide was silent as an axeman on duty, which added to the concern of his charges. The man halted abruptly and looked down menacingly at Dan, then pushed open a fire-escape door for them to escape from the building.

“Some questions are best left unanswered, if you value your soul,” he declared grimly, as they exited passed him.

The door slammed shut behind them with a loud clunk.

“Let’s get out of here,” Kate urged, holding on to Dan’s arm whilst looking anxiously into the shadows.

They hurried round to the front of the building like a pair of fleeing convicts on a jail break, then crossed the courtyard to Gower Street where Dan waved down a black taxi.

“I’m glad to be out of there,” Kate revealed, as they

clambered into the back of the vehicle. “What the fuck was that all about?”

“I’ll tell you when we get home.”

“Where to Guv’ner?” the driver asked in a hoarse voice.

In a moment of caution, Dan leaned forward to glance at the face and check it against the photo licence on the screen.

The driver had two highly distinctive features - his head was of considerable size and he wore an eyepatch over one eye. Satisfied that the face and picture matched, Dan gave the name of the suburban railway station where their car was parked, before sitting back in the seat as they sped away.

6

Joe's flat was part of a converted Georgian building about ten minutes walk from Russell Square. He hurried home soon after Dan's valediction to upload the contents of his camera to a computer for distribution to newspapers and magazines. He wasn't confident of stirring much interest on this particular occasion, but there was always an outside chance of having captured just what a night editor was looking for.

He transferred the images, then opened and examined each one in turn. The evening spent standing in the drizzle had not been a complete waste of time, he had at least six or seven very good shots of the posing couple, though there'd be no shortage of similar material from other sources, given that dozens of other photographers had also been there.

One was a close-up with her head resting against his cheek. An intimate moment of contact, perhaps lasting no more than a fraction of a second, in which feelings were revealed and captured by the lens. They may as well have been sitting for a portrait. He couldn't recall actually witnessing the pose and was struck by the thought that perhaps no one else had caught the ephemeral moment with such clarity and precision.

Joe emailed the digital photos, then went to the kitchen to make himself a coffee. Ten minutes later he returned to

his computer and examined the images again. It was only then that he noticed something odd about one of the photos - something he hadn't noticed before or he would never have included it in the batch - at least not without some doctoring.

The phenomenon of double exposure was well known to film-photographers, he'd seen it on many occasions and even played with the technique himself to produce fake ghost pictures. But this was a digital image, from a digital camera, displayed on a digital computer.

Joe was both angry and alarmed. He took his work seriously and wasn't given to frivolous pranks - this could reflect badly on his reputation. He was mystified by how this could have occurred, and how his keen eye had failed to notice it before. It just didn't seem possible that it had been there ten minutes earlier - but of course it must have been.

Like a primitive being observing the inexplicable, Joe felt a sudden chill pierce his gut, and prayed for the protection of a benevolent god. He attached a copy of the image to a hastily typed out email and sent it off to someone who might know the answer.

7

Manifet was the name of the Essex farmhouse which Kate and Dan shared. The site of the house had a long and intriguing history. Kate had first come across it whilst on a dig. The building had been abandoned and was derelict. Driven by a strange compulsion, which stemmed from her work on the site and contact with an ancient artifact, Kate had plunged all of her savings and most of Dan's into buying and restoring the property. With Dan's help, she had resolved a personal crisis, initiated by the house and her work, which had posed great risk to them both, and to a journalist friend of Dan's - Julia Barnes. Since then, *Manifet* had become an elegant, desirable home - at peace with itself.

Dan had said nothing on the drive from London. He sat silently in the passenger seat, absorbed in thought, until Kate, the designated driver, pulled up in the gravel courtyard in front of a bay window. They left the car and went inside.

"What is going on?" she demanded to know, button-holing his lapel in the lounge.

"I'm not sure," he confessed with a sigh, collapsing in a comfortable armchair like a weary old man in his twilight year.

"Surt seems to know a lot about you - and maybe about me."

“He reads stuff. He readily admits to a fascination with the Dark Age.”

“There’s more to it than that,” Kate decided. “What do you think is going to happen?”

“I don’t know - I have a bad feeling about this government.”

“I have a bad feeling about all governments in the digital age,” Kate concurred. “They have so much power, unchecked by law. “But Surt is like a mafia boss with that gorilla guarding him. Why do you think he let us get so close to him tonight?”

“To find out what we know.”

“He found out we know nothing.”

“We know something now - they found a manuscript - possibly one which could rival the *Codex Regius*.”

“He hinted at it, he didn’t actually confirm it,” Kate recalled.

“Maybe not, but that’s what they’ve got,” Dan concluded.

“Surt is a peculiar man ...”

“He’s a politician!”

“But why all the secrecy - then give an after dinner speech and let a pair of nobodies in on the reason for the mystery?”

“He has a problem with leaks to the press,” Dan speculated. “By manipulating the media himself, he keeps the story simmering without boiling over. I expect he’ll hold a press conference in the next few days and reveal all.”

“Isn’t he setting himself up for a fall? If the wires start buzzing about a new *Codex*, he better have something damn good when the curtain finally goes up.”

“What would you most like to see?”

“A sixth-century manuscript would be worth selling your soul for,” Kate ventured boldly.

“Written by whom?”

“Romano-Celts, perhaps - or the pagan Germans.”

“But how could the pagan Germans have written anything?”

“They had a runic alphabet. It wouldn’t take much to inscribe the symbols on velum or sheepskin.”

“Do you know who disturbed me the most tonight?” sighed Dan.

“Kathryn?”

“No, Rufus.”

“Why Rufus?”

“He supplied the tickets. Without him, the meeting afterwards would never have taken place.”

“Do you think Rufus has some political connection with John Surt? I thought they loathed each other.”

“Maybe they do. But they both play poker - at the same club,” he revealed. “You have to wonder what really goes on between them when they meet like Molotov and Ribbentrop.”

“I’ll put the kettle on,” Kate proposed, disappearing into the kitchen.

Dan felt incredibly tired, as if he was about to fall asleep in the chair. He sensed it was a reaction to his encounter with John Surt - a man of considerable and unquantifiable power. He felt serenely calm, as if about to slip away into oblivion and never wake again.

A dark, shadowy figure began to materialize in front of him. Nebulous in form, though certainly female. Dan strained to make out her features, but there were none, just the shimmering outline of the face.

Dan recalled the words of John Surt, and wondered whether this was Death, finally come to claim him. Surt was right, he’d gotten too close to her on too many occasions in the course of his life’s work, and now it was only a matter of time before the final embrace.

The figure began to speak in a strange language. The accent was foreign and guttural, yet the voice familiar. The words, too, were familiar. He recognized the words from somewhere - some esoteric source he had studied.

“Dan! Dan!!” Kate barked in his ear.

He was drawn back to consciousness.

Kate was standing beside him holding a couple of mugs. He took one and thoughtfully sipped the warm liquid.

“What were you seeing just now?” she asked, concerned at his wide-eyed stare, and putting a hand on his forehead to gauge his temperature.

“Kristin Sigrun,” he sighed. “I think it was her, I didn’t see her face. She was just a shadow - reciting the words of *Voluspa*.”

8

The light of the bedchamber was soft and complaisant, like that of a familiar serving the aesthetic eye with a luminous glow in the ghostly form of blue starlight. The fair-haired woman was lost to a sensual suspension of time and detachment from space more conventionally achieved by illicit substances or hypnotic illusion. She was floating on an uncharted sea of her own consciousness. The wind was light and fair and she was content to drift on the breeze and be steered by the strong hands on her shoulders which massaged away the tension of the day.

She arched her head back and whimpered softly as her dress billowed and slipped from her smooth skin. Fully trimmed, she surrendered entirely to the hands of the navigator who carried her over the sandbanks on the rising tide of her passion.

The orgasm left her drained but satisfied, physically at least. The emotional void was something more perturbing, as it emerged from the crestfall of her desire. She turned on her side, away from him, filled with the same inexplicable guilt and dread as before; but just as the intensity of the orgasm was greater than ever, so the anxiety after was yet more acute.

She realized, rationally, that there was something in her head, something Catholic or Freudian, which was punishing her for enjoying a sexual relationship. This seemed

remarkable given that she wasn't a Catholic and her pampered, privileged childhood had been entirely happy. She had never felt guilty about sex with anyone else, but he was different, and she decided, in her mind, to blame him entirely for her guilt and shame; a man she both feared and desired without fully understanding why.

The fear seemed almost primeval, emanating from something buried deep in her psyche. The desire, she knew, came from his power to control others and to shape events. The power was unnatural and fascinating.

She pondered the full extent of his gift, whether it went beyond the trappings of high office and social grace. It had yet to be tested by the sort of crisis which defined true greatness. Perhaps he would discard her before then. She partly hoped so, even though her fate was intrinsically linked to his. She was beholden to him, and yet feared a loss if he relinquished his claim to her. She also knew that by staying with him, her knowledge and understanding would grow. She dared not abandon her *raison d'être* now when so close to its fulfilment. In the meantime, she longed for the light of day and the relief it would bring from the darkness.

9

By early morning the inclement weather had ceased, giving respite to the summer sun. By mid-morning, the golden orb had burned through the damp mist shrouding Epping Forest, a 50 square kilometre remnant of the ancient deciduous woodland which had once covered Northwest Europe. That even this pitiful remnant had survived was all the more remarkable given its location within the orbit of the M25.

Sunlight began evaporating the excess of moisture in the endless cycle which produced the clouds and the rain, and sustained pseudo-intelligent life on the planet - like Councillor Lorenz Kee - who also just happened to be the county archaeologist, responsible for authorizing and supervizing all local digs in the historic country of Essex - once settled by the East Saxons. A none-too-bright specimen by academic standards, but one cognizant enough to prosper and thrive in the stagnant murky pools of local government which support all manner of pondlife.

He took advantage of the respite in the weather to load Garm, his Great Dane, into the back of his Range Rover and drive the mile or so from his country home to Epping Forest, where he liked to stroll around and keep a chary eye on the dissolute behaviour of young people.

His exploratory trek was rewarded, on this occasion, by an unusual discovery deep in the heart of the forest. It was

not exactly serendipitous, for a shadowy source in the Ministry of Justice had warned him of strange goings-on in central government and advised him to take a flashlight and search the area. Heeding the advice, he came across a ground sheet of camouflaged tarpaulin, about half the size of a tennis court, spread out between a horseshoe configuration of trees.

Curious about what was going on in his ward, he lifted a corner of the tarpaulin to discover the excavation beneath, exactly as described to him. He spent some time alone underground in this eerie chamber of antiquity, and was enlightened as to his destiny, just as Alexander and Napoleon had been in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid.

An hour later, he emerged into the sunlight again, now diminished slightly by a passing cloud.

"Mr Kee?" a female voice inquired, to get his attention.

Kee spun round in alarm and found himself confronted by two attractive young women dressed for the outdoors in slacks, hiking boots, and hooded-parkas lined with synthetic fur.

The woman who had spoken was tall, with saturnine hair. She held a microphone in one hand, which was attached by a long cable to a shoulder held video camera carried by her companion. The camera was pointed at the man.

"Councillor Lorenz Kee?" she queried rhetorically, speaking into the microphone.

"Er, yes?" he replied, unsure as to what was going on.

"I'd like to ask you a few questions about this site."

Kee was wary of her agenda.

"Not now, I have an appointment to keep ..."

He hurried away, but the woman shouted out after him.

"Do you have another meeting planned with the Justice Secretary - to discuss *Ragnarok*?"

Kee froze in his tracks. He turned to face her.

“Who are you?”

“Julia Barnes,” the woman replied.

“What news organization are you from?”

“I’m freelance.”

His eyes narrowed with suspicion.

“What do you know about *Ragnarok*?” he asked.

Julia and her colleague closed the distance between themselves and the prey like a pair of hunting she-wolves.

“Perhaps you should tell us what *you* know. What were you doing in there just now?”

“Just checking that everything was in order.”

“What were you expecting to find?”

“Nothing - that’s how it should be. I was making sure that no one was squatting down there.”

“Why would anyone choose to squat underground?”

“Why not? People live in trees for months at a time to hold up developments.”

“Including government developments. What does *Ragnarok* mean, Mr Kee?”

Kee smiled with tangible relief at this hint of ignorance from her lips.

“How should I know?”

“You’re an archaeologist working in the East of England. Perhaps not in the same league as Dr Kathryn Kelp, but you should know something about the people who used to navigate their way up the Stour and the Blackwater, and raid the Saxon settlements.”

“Norse mythology, isn’t it?” he answered casually. “Some thing to do with monsters and the apocalyptic end of the world.”

“You seemed to know a lot more a moment ago,” the journalist recalled shrewdly. “You were concerned at what I might know.”

“What do you know?” he asked warily.

“Enough to warrant further investigate. What relationship do you have with John Surt? You’re not even members of the same party.”

“I meet with MPs from time to time to discuss local issues. Now if you will excuse me ...” Kee began walking away.

“And Kathryn Kelp? This is the site she discovered, isn’t it? The one John Surt is keeping secret. What does she know about *Ragnarok*?”

Kee paused again, momentarily, then carried on walking until he thought he was out of Julia’s sight. Then he took the cell phone from his pocket and made an urgent call.

10

Midmorning. Dan was working in his study in *Manifet*. Kate walked in with the morning post and dropped some letters on the desk.

“Take a look at this,” he urged, bringing up the image which Joe had emailed the previous evening. “I asked him to send me one for the dartboard, but I wasn’t expecting this.”

Kate stood at his shoulder and looked down at the image on the screen. John Surt and Kathryn Kelp were accompanied by the faint ghostly image of a skeletal figure in medieval war-dress.

“He’s been playing around with his computer,” she presumed, bending over to get a closer look. “Full marks for accuracy though. Can you print it out?”

Dan sent a copy to the desktop printer.

“I wonder how he did it?” she mused, taking the sheet and standing by the window.

“Joe says he didn’t do anything. That’s how it came out of the camera.”

“Yeah - right.”

“Read the message - he wants to know how it could be done.”

Kate shrugged uneasily, looking again at the figure in the photograph which stood just behind John Surt like a vigilant bodyguard. Though this bodyguard was dressed

like a medieval warrior. The face was obscured by a war helmet with a nose guard, but it had a skeletal appearance, with black eye sockets. The terrifying figure wore a heavy cape from which skeletal arms protruded, and clutched a battleaxe with skeletal hands.

“Norman, Saxon, or Dane?” asked Dan.

“Normans stopped using battleaxes soon after they settled in France. He looks like a *Huskarl* - a bodyguard of a Scandinavian king.”

“He’s standing right about where Luca Brasi stood last night,” Dan recalled.

“Joe inserted one figure over another,” Kate surmised dismissively, putting the paper down and leaving the study.

Dan lifted a curious little jiffy envelope from the pile of mail. His fingertips could detect something solid inside and he wondered what it might be before opening it.

The sender had used a ballpoint pen to write Dan’s name and address in a flowing style which he recognized. He slit open the bag and drew out a sheet of folded paper - a memo slip from a government department.

Dan was surprised to see the Ministry of Justice letterhead. He was even more surprised to read the neat handwritten message:

Goodbye until Ragnarok.

The envelope also contained a curious little T-shaped crucifix made from some sort of shiny polished yellowish-brown stone which was attached to a thin leather cord. He got up and left the study to catch Kate before she left for work.

“What do you make of this?” he asked, as she packed some books in a bag in the lounge.

“Must be from Kristin,” Kate presumed. “She’s the only one who would send you a present with a love-note writ-

ten on ministry paper. You should tell her not to send valuables through the post.”

“It’s her handwriting but it’s not much of a love-note,” he protested, recalling the vision he’d had the night before.

“I didn’t realize you were still seeing her,” Kate observed wryly, as she took a closer look at the crucifix.

“I’m not. You know Kristin doesn’t have affairs with men.”

“I know she always claimed to be saving herself for the right one. Maybe she thinks you’re it. Odd that you think about her the night before and this comes in the post the next morning.”

“Synchronicity. We meet up occasionally and talk about work, but it’s strictly platonic. It always has been,” he insisted, holding up the cross. “This looks like an amber trinket from a craft shop?”

“*Mjollnir*, the hammer of *Thor*, the Norse god of thunder. Warriors and seamen were thought to wear similar things as far back as the Stone Age,” she explained.

“Is it valuable?”

“The material isn’t - unless there’s an insect trapped inside full of dinosaur DNA in which case you’re a rich man. Amber jewellery was fashionable in antiquity. It makes you wonder where it came from - without that context it’s not much use to an archaeologist,” she mused, raising a speculative eyebrow.

“Kristin could have been liaising with Kathryn Kelp’s team. You don’t think she would have ...”

“Why don’t you ask her?”

“I will - in a moment. What does *Thor*’s hammer have to do with *Ragnarok*?”

“*Ragnarok* was the mythical battle in which the Gods and demons destroyed each other.”

“But there’s no mention of *Mjollnir* in *Voluspa*,” he recalled.

“Snorri’s *Edda*,” she suggested.

Kate departed, leaving a mystified Dan to try Kristin’s mobile number. Her phone was switched off. Assuming that she was probably in a meeting, he left a message asking her to call him back.

11

The TV monitors were pouring out the midday news in a Covent Garden bar, though only those patrons within spitting distance of the well-flossed presenters could actually hear what they were saying. One of these was Joe. His empty glass was refilled by an attractive barmaid wearing a tight fitting white t-shirt with the text of a provocative sexual innuendo scrawled across the front. Some parts of London were still holding out against political correctness.

The routine twenty-four hour news commentary competed for his attention with the usual distracting thoughts of the day - until the sudden mention of a name he recognized, that of someone he knew, snapped him back to the here and now.

“... news of the tragedy reached the Minister just minutes before he was due to face questions in the Commons. In his speech he paid tribute to Kristin Sigrun, blaming the pressures of modern life for the tragic loss of a gifted young woman. What reasons Ms Sigrun might have had for taking her own life are unclear, though it is understood that she was the subject of an ongoing internal inquiry into the leaking of documents ...”

The glass which Joe was clutching slipped from his hand and smashed on varnished wooden floorboards. Voices nearby fell quiet for a few seconds, whispers linking the

melodrama of the glass to the report, then rose again as life carried on within those other spheres of solipsism.

A young barman dressed like a waiter appeared from nowhere with a dustpan, brush, and cloth. He efficiently swept up the pieces, then wiped the floor with the cloth and was gone - like an automaton from a sci-fi movie.

Joe knew Kristin through Daniel Levin. The impact came not just from the news of a tragic death, but a sense that some wider calamity was taking place to which this was merely another shocking portent.

He took out his phone to call Dan, though hesitated, not sure what he would say other than to express his condolence. Dan had, presumably, heard the news - but what if he hadn't?

The phone in Joe's hand began to ring from an incoming call. He pressed to receive and held the device to his hear.

"Hello Joe, this is Julia," a female voice informed him. She sounded nervous, very nervous.

"Hello Julia, how are you?" he replied flatly, his response perfunctorily due to the strained circumstance.

"Er, fine. Are you at home?"

"No, Covent Garden."

"Can you come over to the flat - right away?"

"Why? What's up?"

"We've got something we want you to see. I can't tell you over the phone. You know what it's like - the Crows monitor our calls ..."

Her voice was trembling and the hackles on the back of Joe's neck suddenly rose. The mere mention of the Crows filled him with unease. He was just a photographer who occasionally got into a scrape with the authorities, but Julia was an investigative journalist, and the profession was not without risk in the digital age with the government monitoring a significant proportion of all communications.

"Alright, I'll be there in twenty minutes," he informed

her, then put the phone back in his pocket.

Joe walked to Leicester Square tube station. The human congestion on the Northern Line at lunchtime was bearable, giving the impression of an efficient, underutilized transport system, and taking a train was marginally quicker than walking the half-mile or so up Charing Cross Road. Minutes later he got off at Tottenham Court Road station and walked to Soho Square.

Julia lived and worked out of a flat in a seedy little building in an alley off the square - owned by an actress called Irene Benson, whom she had encountered and befriended in the course of a previous investigation. The two women shared something in common - though Joe had never discovered what it was. Mutual sexual attraction seemed unlikely given their proclivity for men.

Joe knew the area and the location of the flat well enough. The entrance to the apartment building posed no barrier to visitors, the steel door having been ripped off by a previous generation of vice-squad officers after someone had skipped two monthly payments. But that was the old Soho, before the sex industry had moved into cyberspace.

Joe walked up a flight of stone steps and passed several solid-looking doors on the first floor until he came to the one he was looking for. A pale, varnished hardwood, equipped with mortise and Yale locks, a spyhole and a cute little door bell.

He pressed the buzzer and waited for about half an minute. No response came from the other side of the door. He pressed the buzzer again and knocked on the door impatiently with his knuckles. To his surprise, it yielded to the light pressure and swung inward slightly.

Surmising that someone must be in, Joe stuck his head round the open door called out, "Hello! Anyone at home?"

There was no reply. Perplexed, he stepped inside and

closed the door behind him. No one in London, especially this part of London, went out and left their door on the latch.

A dark green carpet ran the length of the white-walled corridor, bare of furnishings except for an abstract expressionist oil painting by a famous American hanging on the wall.

Joe paused to look at the painting. It was part of Irene's collection of art from the 1950s. Paintings of dubious or no aesthetic value compared with, for example, the beautiful Romantic Art of the early nineteenth century, and yet more highly valued by a contemporary art market fueled by speculation.

Joe had seen the painting before, and the others she owned, when a guest of Julia's; and was always puzzled as to how Irene had managed to acquire art with such a high market value.

"Hello? Julia? Irene? It's me, Joe!" he announced, just in case someone was asleep or in the shower. There was no reply.

He paused at the first bedroom. A quilt was spread evenly over the bed and the room was neat and tidy. He moved on to the kitchen. A few dishes had been left to dry in a plastic dish-rack, but otherwise it seemed immaculate, not at all as he remembered it. The second bedroom was being used as an office. The evidence was still there; a desk with a phone, shelves fixed to the walls, and an old steel filing cabinet sitting in one corner. A computer, printer, and scanner sat on the desk and the wall shelves were crammed with DVDs.

The lounge, as he recalled, had some very unconventional decor. The door was firmly closed, though exhibited an incongruous and disturbing feature. The knot from a leather belt was jammed between the top of the door and the sill.

Joe felt a sudden chill in his guts - something was suspended by the belt on the inside of the door. He thought he knew, from his years as a war photographer, what to expect, and returned to the kitchen. In the cupboard under the sink lay a length of nylon clothes-line, thin but with a high tensile strength. He carried it to the lounge door and looped a slipknot around the knot of the belt, then tied the line tightly to the door handle.

He twisted the handle and tried to push the door inwards without success. It was jammed by the thin strip of leather. He had no choice but to force the door with his shoulder. As the wooden panel cleared the sill the knot jerked forward, pulled by a considerable weight, but was arrested by the nylon clothes-line.

Joe pushed the heavily-weighted door inward. As the gap opened he was struck in the face by a draught of foul smelling air as if from a cesspit. Looking in, a terrible sight came into view.

Irene was hanging by the neck from the attic hatch in the centre of the lounge. Her hands were tied behind her back as if an execution had taken place.

Joe stepped into the room and approached the body. Her bloodshot eyes were wide and empty of sight. He put a finger to her neck in search of a pulse but found none. She was dead now, though recently alive - the flesh was cool, but not yet icy cold.

He turned to see Julia hanging from the door beside a leather footrest, though her neck was twisted at such an angle that she was grimacing at the ceiling. The belt around her neck had caused an ugly weal under her jaw caused by the imprint of the metal buckle.

Joe thought he was accustomed to the sight of death, having witnessed so much on overseas assignments, but on this occasion he was overcome by a wave of nausea. His legs felt weak and he thought he was going to pass out

as he staggered along to the bathroom and retched into the toilet bowl. He made sure the toilet flush removed all trace of his stomach contents before returning to the lounge. His instinct was to phone the police anonymously and get out of the charnel house as soon as possible, but first he felt compelled to discover for himself as much as he could.

He covered his nose and mouth with a handkerchief to prevent the smell of soiled clothing making him retch again as he bent down to check in vain for a pulse. He straightened up and looked around for clues to what had happened. A small phone-pad and pen lay on the coffee table with a message written on the pad:

The bitch betrayed me!

So that was it. An obvious motive. Too obvious, Joe immediately decided. He knew Julia would never write such a note, their relationship was not based on conventional notions of fidelity. He knew she'd had relations with many men, including Dan Levin.

The writing was scratchy, as if from a shaking hand. He studied the pathology of the crime as objectively as he could under the circumstances. Irene's death was clearly murder but Julia's could well have been suicide.

A slight groove had been scored into the top edge of the door consistent with a belt supporting a heavy weight. The groove matched up with a point on the sill where the white paint had been marked by the jammed belt. How could someone have made her hang herself from the inside of the door, using a knot to hold the belt, and then slip out afterwards without the body dropping to the floor?

Joe studied the scene dispassionately, as if it were a popular TV crime scene show rather than a real murder scene,

until his sharp eye made the key observation which confirmed foul play. Now he was able to piece together in his mind a sequence of events which could have taken place.

Joe never left home without a compact digital camera and took one from his pocket to photograph the evidence he needed. He recalled happy memories of Julia and Irene, of drinks and laughter here in times now far removed, and he sensed their spiritual presence still within the room, guiding him to the truth.

He returned to the office-room and hastily flicked thro' the printed papers on the desk. There was nothing of obvious interest among them, nor was there any way of telling whether anything had been taken.

Joe recalled Julia's last trembling words. Had she uncovered something, or was that just a ruse to get him to come round? Why would she have called him if she had just killed Irene and was about to commit suicide? People do crazy things, but he calculated that she had phoned with a gun held to her head. But why was he chosen for the call? He realized he was being set up for something.

It would be difficult to deny having visited the flat, given his phone records and the CCTV which would have tracked his movements from Covent Garden. He could leave quietly, take the doorlock off the latch with a handkerchief on his way out, and claim that there was no one in when he called. But that would mean leaving them lying here.

Joe took out his mobile phone and pressed 999.

Too late, he heard the sirens approaching. As he gave his details to the control-room operator, he heard the clump of heavy boots stomping up the stairs and the crash of a scrum of police officers charging into the flat through the door.

12

Dan heard the news of Kristin's death on the radio whilst taking a break for coffee. For a moment he was stunned and speechless. Kristin was one of the few people in his life whom he had cared about passionately. She had obviously sent the hammer and the note just before her death, and now the onus was on him to find out why.

Jane Muspilli answered the phone at her luxury home in Hertfordshire.

"Is Rufus there?" Dan inquired.

"I'm sorry, he isn't," she replied.

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"What's going on, Dan?" Jane queried, alerted by his brusque tone.

"Kristin Sigrun is dead," he revealed.

"What? How?"

"She may have killed herself. It's been on the news, I'm surprised you haven't heard."

"I haven't listened to any news reports this morning," she confessed. "They're all so depressing. And none of my staff would know who she is - or was."

"I need a source inside the Ministry of Justice."

"What makes you think that Rufus has one?" Jane inquired, with overt scepticism.

"Because of what he has. The government would never have been elected without his support."

“What kind of source do you need?”

“Someone who knows what Kristin was working on.”

“Don’t say anything to Rufus,” she advised. “He doesn’t like admitting that he has dealings with this government. Leave it with me, I’ll see what I can find out for you.”

“Thanks,” he replied, putting the receiver down.

Dan knew that Jane was right, he would get nothing useful out of Rufus Muspilli. He was also doubtful about her assurances, but had little choice in the matter. He had always been curious about the degree of her autonomy within the Muspilli organization and why he had married her. Their marriage was based on a mutual love of power rather than each other. But why would such a powerful oligarch allow a Trojan Horse like Jane into his camp? Or was she built to wheel out into other camps? Only time would tell.

In the meantime, he had his own source, one which he was loathe to use. He dialled the number and waited for a man’s voice to answer.

“This is Daniel Levin. What can you tell me about Kristin Sigrun?”

There was a pause on the line and what sounded like an angry exhalation of breath. Then the comment. “Naturally we’re all very sad to hear of the death of Kristin. She was a well-respected colleague within the department and will be sadly missed ...”

“What was she working on?” Dan interjected.

“I couldn’t possibly comment on that,” the voice gasped indignantly.

“Was the John Surt aware of her current assignment?”

“I have to go now,” the voice informed him.

“Alright, thank you,” Dan replied quietly, putting the phone down. By his actions he might have lost a good contact, but at least he’d let it be known that he was looking for information.

One other possible lead came to mind. He telephoned the archaeology department at UCL and asked to speak with Kathryn Kelp. He was put through to her office phone which rang a few times, then the answer machine cut in, inviting him to leave a message.

Dan gave his name and number, and asked her to call him back. Then, for good measure, he ended with the comment, “Goodbye until *Ragnarok*.”

13

Dan set out westward across the county of Essex. He felt as if he were on a journey to meet Kristin again, even though that was clearly impossible. It was simply the ritual of visiting a place associated with a lost loved-one which humans had followed since the earliest spiritual stirrings in Palaeolithic times.

He was haunted by memories of her - remembering the last time they had spoken. It had all been so fleeting and casual, precious time frittered away like gold dust on a breeze; but then he had no reason to suspect that he would never see her or speak with her again.

His was a world of frail mortals, yet her unexpected passing was difficult to accept or understand. The enormity of events weighed heavily on him and he held to a forlorn, irrational hope that some error had been made and that she wasn't really gone.

It took about half an hour to drive from *Manifet* to Epping Forest. Dan found the big old house at the bottom of the leafy lane, with its ubiquitous pony riders, easily enough from memory.

Expecting to encounter a police officer on duty and a scene under investigation, he parked near the gate posts and walked along the tunnel drive to the partially secluded house. Much to his surprise, there were no police or forensic vehicles in sight; just some crime scene tape prohib-

iting entrance to the garden.

Dan ignored the warnings and ducked under the yellow tape to explore the half-acre of picturesque English garden, with finely-manicured green lawn and neatly cultivated flowerbeds. A cordon of tape and iron stakes had been erected around the spreading ash tree at the bottom of the garden. He recalled that Kristin always had a love of trees, and so it seemed a fatal irony that one should play a part in her demise.

Standing next to the tape, he could see the remains of the rope coiled around a high branch and cut near the binding knot. On the ground beneath it the grass and soil were stained with brown - the remains of her oxidized lifeblood.

The sound of a diesel engine intruded into his thoughts. A van had pulled up in the drive at the front of the house. A police forensic team, perhaps - or the Crows. The engine fell silent and he heard the clunk of a heavy door opening and closing, then another door opening, presumably the driver gaining access to equipment in the back.

Dan wondered whether it would be prudent to hide - at least until he had some assurance that the new arrivals were not Crows. He began back-stepping around the tree, in the direction of the bushes beyond, when suddenly a dark creature came into view from the side of the house. It was trotting at first, but then spotted him and immediately began to charge.

Dan was rivetted, knowing he could not outrun the thing. If he dived into the bushes it would simply follow and drag him out. But what was it? His first conclusion was that it was an escaped bear. But as it bore down on him, fangs glistening, he realized that it was a very large dog.

Despite the terrifying prospect of being severely mauled, or worse, Dan remained calm, evaluating the crisis and

anticipating the events which would shortly unfold. The beast would leap at his face, he would raise his left arm, the beast would seize the forearm in its jaws, knocking him backwards - but in that instant he would kick hard into the stomach of the beast and when he hit the ground he'd roll over on top of it and punch it in the throat in a desperate fight for life - man against beast.

Just before the dog leapt, Dan caught side of a figure standing at the spot from where it had first emerged. The figure had the paramilitary accoutrement of a policeman - dressed in black trousers and body armour, with a black beret. This momentary distraction was Dan's undoing.

The dog struck his raised arm with the force of a rugby forward, knocking him flat on his back and wounding him severely. There was no question of taking the offensive.

Dan defended himself as best he could, receiving numerous bites to both forearms from a beast determined to get at his face and throat with its gnashing fangs. The dog was incredibly strong and it was only a matter of time before he would succumb. But then, suddenly, the onslaught ceased, and the weight of the dog was, quite literally, lifted from his body.

Dan assumed that the handler had called off the dog, but looking up from his prostrate position, he saw, silhouetted against a sky suddenly black with thunderclouds, an incredible struggle taking place. Two gigantic muscular figures, one on hind legs with the head of a savage dog, were grappling like wrestling Titans. Dan blinked as a sunbeam suddenly shone through a hole in the thick cloud, causing his eyes to water as he strained to make sense of the scene.

The figure with the head of a man had his hands around the throat of the theriomorphic beast to ward off the giant fangs. The man struggled with the dog for several seconds before flinging it bodily through the air in a feat of great strength.

The anthropomorphic dog figure seemed to transmogrify in midair to its natural form before landing on the grass some twenty metres away. It rolled several times before regaining its feet and running off towards the side of the house from whence it had come. There was no sign of the handler, but shortly afterwards came the sound of van doors closing; then, having collected his charge, an engine roared and a vehicle drove away.

Dan looked up into the face of an old man with long grey hair and a weather beaten face, like an ageing country music singer. He wore a wide-brim hat and an eye patch over one eye which gave him an eccentric and slightly menacing appearance. His boots, jeans and chequered workshirt were the likely apparel of a lumberjack or a tree surgeon.

He extended a powerful hand to Dan and pulled him to his feet.

“You should have those bites seen to,” he advised.

“Thanks - I will,” Dan confirmed, surprised that the man seemed to have none of his own.

Dan’s blood was congealing from half a dozen wounds and the muscle in his left forearm, which had borne the brunt of the attack, was growing stiff; but he was intrigued by this extraordinary character who had arrived on the scene in such a timely manner, and wanted to find out more about him.

“Who are you?” Dan asked the big old fellow.

“I used to tend the garden here for Ms Sigrun - before she topped ’erself,” he replied.

Dan studied the man with a journalist’s scepticism. He was immediately struck by the resemblance to the taxi driver the previous evening.

“I didn’t know Kristin had a gardener,” he answered, knowing perfectly well that she must have had some help to maintain it in such pristine condition.

“There’s probably a lot of things you didn’t know about her - unless you work for the Crows. I came over when I ’eard talk in the village to see what was ’appening. Lucky for you that I did.”

Dan glanced at the yellow tape surrounding the tree trunk. “Do you know what happened here last night?”

A light breeze suddenly caught the branches of the tree and they both looked up to see its canopy billow like a giant sail.

“What a magnificent specimen. Look at the size of it,” the old man observed in admiration. “One of Nature’s great wonders.”

“If you know anything about what happened to Kristin, please tell me,” Dan implored.

“She was being chased by the police and ’ung ’erself from this ash tree. But the most puzzling thing is the way she did it. She staked the tip of a branch close to the ground using two iron pegs with eyes through which to feed the line.”

The old man ducked under the tape and put a hand on one peg driven into the ground, then moved to the other, about thirty feet away.

“She stood ’ere, in a plain linen gown, like a sacrificial offering, with a noose around her neck tied to the bough just overhead. When the police arrived, she cut the twine with an old ceremonial dagger and up she went.”

Dan listened in horrified fascination. The remnants of the rope and the cut twine, still dangling from a single high branch, supported this theory.

“Why would she do such a thing?” Dan posited rhetorically. He could hardly expect the gardener to know the inner workings of her mind.

“Maybe she was after the secrets of the runes,” he grinned, somewhat devilishly.

Dan was taken aback by both the remark and the mania-

cal expression.

“Why do you say that?” he probed sternly.

“It’s all in *Havamal* - the words of Odin, who sacrificed himself. But you’d know all about that, Dr Levin, being so erudite, and having the devotion of a Norn in your midst.”

“A Norn?”

“Perhaps I should say Muse. The British Empire was founded on a civilized Graeco-Roman tradition - not the wild and savage poetry of the Northmen.

“There’s blood on the ground,” Dan noted sternly.

“When the police tried to get her down, she plunged the blade into her heart in a bloody climax to the ritual.”

Dan thought he could detect the faint odour of stale beer on the other man's breath.

“How do you know all of this?” he asked sceptically.

“It’s what I ’eard around the village this morning.”

Dan frowned, doubting the reliability of this source. “This village must have one hell of a grapevine.”

“No more than an other.”

The old man read his thoughts and responded with a worldly-wise smile.

“The question you should be asking yourself is not so much how, but why? Have you ever read *Gautreks Saga*, Dr Levin?”

“Yes,” he replied.

“Then you know what ’appened to Vikar.”

“I’m familiar with the legend.” Dan confirmed, glancing up at the tree branch again as his brain compared the details of an Old Norse saga with this modern tragedy.

“You seem to know who I am,” he observed wryly.

“I read. And I go to the opera,” he revealed. “Do you ever go to the opera - Dr Levin?”

“No,” he replied.

“Do you know what a Valkyrie is?”

“A woman in a horned helmet with a loud voice,” Dan

proposed, tongue in cheek. “Sigrun was the name of a Valkyrie in the *Elder Edda*,” he divulged, anticipated the next didactic comment.

“I liked Ms Sigrun,” the old man revealed. “She didn’t ’ave any kin but she was like a daughter to me and in some ways she was like a wife to you,” he added, to perplex Dan further. Perhaps Kristin had spoken to him of their relationship. “So now I’m giving you a bit of advice. Hold on to *Mjollnir*, and don’t let anyone take it away from you - no matter what.”

“*Mjollnir*?” Dan queried, partly to refute that he had possession of the amber trinket, and partly to solicit more information.

“The Hammer of Thor!” he growled impatiently, as if suddenly angered. The sound of thunder rent the air and the ground seemed to suddenly shake from a tremor.

Before Dan’s rational mind could comprehend the evidence of his senses, he was startled by a piercing cry in his ear which cut through his brain like a steam whistle.

He turned to see a huge raven perched on the tree branch a few feet from his head. The bird spread it’s wings to reveal a span of at least a metre and launched itself into the air, causing Dan to duck in alarm.

When he straightened up, the old man had vanished and the earth had quietened. There was no sign of him anywhere in view, nor of the bird in the sky.

Dan fell to his knees, feeling the onset of shock and trauma from the incident with the dog - or was it from the aura of the man he’d just encountered. An aura more powerful by an order of magnitude than that of the secular politician, John Surt.

Knowing his arms needed urgent attention, Dan rose to his feet and staggered from the garden to the house, and hence down the drive to where his car was parked in the lane.

He removed his jacket to reveal bloody arms and polyester-cotton sleeves stuck to congealing wounds. Fortunately, he still had power in his right arm, and could drive after a fashion, but his left was growing stiff rapidly, which made shifting gear difficult and painful.

He was treated promptly at the accident and emergency centre of a local hospital. A stern and formidable nurse gave him a tetanus jab, then cut away the shirt before cleaning and bandaging the wounds. She wanted details of the incident for the police, which he declined to answer, merely stating that a dog had bitten him.

He left the hospital, shirtless, wearing only a suit jacket over a white t-shirt like an eighties popstar. The phone rang in his pocket and he was greeted by Jane's husky voice.

"I have something for you," she informed him.

"I'm listening," he replied wearily.

"Not over the phone, you'll have to come here."

Normally, Dan would have been intrigued, even delighted, to receive such an invitation, but in the present circumstances he was not only fatigued, but also highly suspicious of anyone with *femme fatale* potential, never mind the beautiful wife of one of the richest and most ruthless men in the country.

"Is it that important? I've had a hard day, I was going home to get some sleep," he revealed.

"It was important enough earlier today when you called. I've gone to a lot of trouble for you, Dan. You don't sound very grateful," she remarked.

"Alright, where are you?"

"At home, of course."

"Yes, but which one?" he queried, hoping she'd say Scotland and that the helicopter was being serviced. She was right, his investigative ardour was waning as the day grew longer. He would start again fresh in the morning, so

he hoped.

“Hertfordshire,” she replied. “You could be here in an hour, traffic permitting.”

“Traffic permitting,” he reiterated drolly.

Though as events transpired, the five pm traffic on this Friday evening was remarkably fluid, as if the gods had ordained that Dan should keep to his tight schedule.

14

The Muspilli's secluded neo-Gothic granite 'castle' lay nestled among the trees between sleepy hamlets in the Hertfordshire green belt which had once been the hereditary playground of the ruling class.

Dan had made several previous visits to the residence; which had formerly belonged to a good family, until birth-right alone could no longer protect them from the insidious force of mercantilism and the spiralling tax demands of local government.

Muspilli's new money had bought up the estate and now used it to entertain businessmen and foreign dignitaries who could be useful to his global enterprises and aspirations for world domination. Fencing and high walls prevented casual intrusion, and strategically planted woodland concealed the mansion from prying lenses on the road.

Dan pulled up at the formidable wrought iron gate barring the entrance. There was no one to greet him. Uniform guards sitting in draughty little cubbies reading a paper back were a thing of the past in the security and surveillance business.

He wound his window down and smiled cheesily at the camera mounted on the wall. Seconds later the gate swung inward as if he were being welcomed by a ghost rather than a powerful servo-motor operated from a control room.

The guest engaged gear and drove through, watching in his rear view mirror as the gate closed, shutting off his escape - perhaps indefinitely. He was controlled by his hosts now, who were the sovereign power on this mini-state, which made him feel like an expensive whore.

It was six pm and some daylight still filtered through the clouds. The jagged mansion, curiously Gothic given Muspilli's known republican sympathies, came into view; then disappeared behind a copse, before looming out again, larger than life, like a sleeping dragon waiting for its prey to venture near its jaws.

Dan parked the car in the forecourt and walked up to the entrance, studying the facade of the late eighteenth century building with its ridges, spikes, and gargoyles. He'd never seen it in daylight before. His previous visits here had been for evening functions in winter when the facade had been lit up garishly and many of its nuances hidden in shadow.

Jane came out to greet him, looking business-like in her dark power suit, as if just home from work, despite rarely leaving home for any reason other than entertainment or pleasure. Not that she didn't work; quite the contrary, she was a workaholic.

She kissed him on the cheek and noticed that he wasn't wearing a shirt. The sleeve of his jacket was irredeemably bloodied from the earlier misadventure, whatever the miracle cleaning products might say.

"What the hell happened to you?" she asked, putting a hand on his forearm and causing him to wince.

"I was attacked by a dog," he revealed. "It's a long story, can we go inside," he urged, preempting further questions for the moment.

She led him past the grim faced stone sentinels and into the building.

The vestibule was decorated with various rare and cur-

ious artifacts, more suited to a civic hall than a domestic residence. She steered him into a lounge and sat him on the sofa before pouring a couple of drinks.

Dan accepted without protest as she removed her jacket to reveal a trim figure and attractive bust beneath a white satin blouse, before sitting next to him and handing him a glass of brandy. It was just what he needed after an exceptionally hard day.

“What did you find out?” he asked.

“You look tired,” she vacillated, rubbing his thigh with her hand. “Why don’t you take off your jacket?”

“Is this one of those hidden camera set-ups where you strip me down to my underwear and the husband walks in with a shotgun?”

“I don’t think Rufus would participate in such a tiresome game,” she assured him. “He’s far too busy making money.”

“Maybe not personally - but he might use the butler as a proxy.”

“Rufus is terribly old-fashioned with regard to domestic arrangements. As mistress of the house, I employ the staff and manage the estate. The butler works for me, as does everyone else around here. We won’t be disturbed.”

“Where is he now?”

“The butler?”

“No, Rufus.”

“London. He won’t be back,” she assured Dan.

“Not ever?” he quipped.

“That would suit me - up to a point,” she revealed. “He has two children by a previous marriage so I don’t want him to croak just yet - not until I’ve amassed sufficient assets of my own to maintain this place independently.”

“I’m surprised you don’t have children of your own. It would be a shame to lose your looks to posterity.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled, as if genuinely pleased by the compliment. Dan wondered why, she must have heard it a thousand times.

“Why did you marry him?” he asked.

“You’re not quite as cynical as you pretend to be - or you wouldn’t ask such a stupid question.”

“Is money that important to you? You were independently wealthy before you met him.”

“We have to accept the cards which fate deals to us. In my case it was a choice between acquiring lots of money or very little. My karma chose the former pathway. There is a big difference between being a billionaire and a humble millionaire who can’t afford estate duties.”

Dan nods and sips his brandy before addressing the purpose of the visit.

“So what have you got for me?”

“Kristin Sigrun worked for the Ministry of Justice.”

“I know. What else?”

“She was assigned to liaise with Kathryn Kelp and her team as they dug up a piece of Essex in search of something archaeological.”

“Do you know where?”

“Somewhere near Epping Forest. The stuff they found was taken to an MoD bunker for security reasons. But a valuable item went missing and caused a hell of a row between the Ministry of Justice, the MoD, and the academics involved.”

“Do you know what it was that went missing?” Dan inquired, self-consciously putting a hand to his chest and feeling the relief of the cross under his t-shirt.

“No. But the Crows got involved. They searched everyone’s house last week, including Kristin’s.”

“There should be a record of the warrant and the search I can investigate,” Dan noted.

“The Crows don’t need a search warrant. A cabinet sec-

retary like John Surt can authorize a search under the Protection of Communications Act if a public security threat is suspected.”

“Why would archaeology have any connection with public security?” asked Dan, with raised eyebrows.

“I don’t know. No one seems to know. I couldn’t tell you over the phone, it would have compromised my source.”

“You could have sent an encrypted email,” he suggested.

“That’s illegal.”

“I know, but everyone does it these days to keep out the snoopers.”

“I was feeling lonely,” she confessed, shifting closer to him and pressing her lips against his.

Dan indulged the kiss for a few seconds then drew away.

“It’s not fair on Kate,” he explained, affectionately cupping her cheek with his hand.

“She need never know,” Jane purred.

“I’ll know when I’m with her.”

“Do you love her that much?”

“As much as I loved Kristin.”

Jane moves away slightly.

“I didn’t know. Sorry.”

Dan smiled and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder as he rose to his feet. “Thanks for the information and the drink. I’ll let you know if anything comes of it.”

15

The drive back to *Manifet* was uneventful, aside from the attention of a police helicopter flying alongside the road for about ten miles.

As he parked near the front door, he assumed from the empty courtyard that Kate was still at work in London. But as he entered the lounge of the house, he suddenly became aware that someone else had been in the room before him. There was a faint and unusual odour in the air.

Dan grabbed a kitchen knife and immediately started checking every room in the house for an intruder; and when he failed to discover anyone, he began wondering whether a subtle search for the hammer had taken place.

He recalled Jane's comment about the Crows carrying out recent house searches. But why the subtlety? Usually the Crows would just charge in with a ministerial writ signed by Surt and trash the place.

A perplexed Dan quickly changed out of his suit trousers and into a pair of casual slacks to go with his t-shirt before booting up his password protected computer and checking his encrypted email. He was sitting at the computer when the doorbell rang. Unexpected callers to this secluded place were extremely rare, so he logged off and approached the front door warily.

Through the spyhole, he viewed an incongruous, yet very familiar, female face. He opened the door immediately and

confronted a fair-haired young woman wearing a short safari skirt, hiking boots, and a hooded jogging top.

An ostentatious and unfamiliar car with the latest registration plate, was parked next to his more modest vehicle.

“Yes?” he inquired.

“I got your message,” she replied. “Would you like to know more about my research?”

16

Joe lay on a bunk in a small, windowless, airless cell in the bowels of Scotland Yard with a bucket for company. All the dramatic details of the day were flashing across his synaptic junctions in a code not yet fully understood by the hairless apes. He knew that Julia and Irene had been murdered, and that now he could be in the frame for their deaths, but he didn't know why. He was torn between grief and fear for his own safety - and not just because he was at the mercy of the criminal justice system. Julia had mentioned uncovering something on the phone as a pretext to draw him round - or perhaps she really had discovered something politically sensitive which had cost her and Irene their lives?

He heard the sound of heavy boots clunking past in the corridor outside the door of his cell. A disturbing intrusion into his thoughts, but the impact of heels on stone soon faded away. Though minutes later they returned and passed his door again.

Light from a low-powered bulb fixed to the high ceiling and guarded by a cage bounced off the yellowing white-washed walls. Suddenly the bulb began to fizzle and grow dim. Then it announced its own extinction with a metallic ping, plunging the windowless cell into darkness.

Joe sat up in alarm, wondering what this unexpected development would portend. He half-expected police officers

with flashlights to enter the cell and beat him senseless with their batons. Or had there been a power surge or a supply failure affecting the wider area, and he was trapped in here, perhaps forgotten until the crisis was resolved.

He thought he heard a faint, though penetrating, high-pitched note; like a distant hunting horn, carrying from afar. This new and incongruous sound perplexed him at first. No one hunted foxes in this part of London anymore. Probably not since the Middle Ages. The source had to be someone's car alarm in the street, filtered and distorted by the walls of the building, he assumed, until the noise began to grow louder and louder.

As the note reached a crescendo, Joe instinctively put his hands over his ears and cried out in pain. He thought he heard shouts and screams above his own; and the blank walls seemed to come alive with faint projected images of flaming buildings and strangely garbed people fleeing in terror from a monastery, pursued by maniacs wielding axes and swords.

Joe sank into a corner in terror as flashbacks from his past struck him like thunderbolts, interspersed with visions of Armageddon. The barrage came from the casualties he had witnessed in war zones around the world. The cumulative memories of war infected his brain like a disease and he cowered in the corner like a child, his knees tucked up and his head buried in his arms, but he could not make them go away.

All he could see were the torn and mangled bodies, all he could smell was the cordite and the burnt and rotting flesh, all he could hear were the screams of the dying.

Every scene of death which he had witnessed and photographed over the years came back to haunt him with terrible intensity. The victims mocked and taunted him as if he were the cause, and not just the chronicler, of their fate.

In the vanguard stood Julia and Irene, their faces distorted by the nooses tight around their necks. But the leader of this dead horde was one whom Joe thought was still very much alive.

Kathryn Kelp emerged through their ranks. The shaft of a battle axe rested on her shoulder and her white gown covered in blood. Except the blood wasn't hers, rather it seemed to emanate from the object he held aloft by the hair. As it rotated around, Joe was horrified to see Daniel Levin's face on the decapitated head.

He screamed at the horror of the vision and tried to turn away from the voice which was calling him, and the hands on his shoulders which were shaking him roughly in an effort to restrain him.

17

A constant stream of data flowed into the met office from satellites in orbit across the globe. Most of it went straight into a vast digital archive, destined never to be seen again. Data is also used in the art of weather forecasting, and a fairly junior meteorologist in the employ of the government watched events unfolding on his computer screen with a mixture of professional curiosity and personal alarm.

He consulted with a more senior colleague who liaised directly with the director of a stable of TV weather girls. After examining the data, the senior meteorologist passed on his concerns to the director, who then briefed a girl in a fetching knee-length skirt and tight sweater.

And so it was she who went on national television early that evening to inform the nation that a very intense low pressure region was building over Scandinavia, and should it move across the North Sea there might be some high winds and a spot or two of rain. No, it wasn't a hurricane, she added hastily. They came from the other direction, and in any case never reached Britain. This was just a very unusual summer storm.

18

Dan sat in the passenger seat of Kathryn Kelp's car as she drove towards Epping Forest. Listening to a very unusual forecast on the radio, he noted that the weather was indeed looking stormy and oppressive as leaden clouds gathered overhead.

The rain was holding off for now, but he was wearing a bright waterproof lycra jacket just in case. He had asked the driver where she was taking him, but received only a vague reply that the location was classified, so he contented himself to sit quietly and wait.

He was reluctant to trust Kathryn, despite their previous relationship, now that she was sleeping with the enemy; but he was keen to discover more about her work and hence Kristin's death. The possibility of a link seemed too great for caution or concern over his personal safety. Besides, he was imbued with a powerful sense of fatalism which was fueled by the unsettled, and unsettling, climate and the sense of political oppression. As John Surt had noted, he was living on borrowed time.

The mobile phone in his jacket pocket went off to interrupt his thoughts and he listened to Joe's blunt tone.

"Where are you?" Joe gasped.

"Somewhere near Epping with ..."

Kathryn slapped his thigh to get his attention, then pointed to herself and shook her head to indicate a desire to

remain *persona non grata* in any phone communication.

“With whom?” Joe queried.

“I can’t tell you that. Too many ears. But you should be able to guess from our conversation last night. We used to hang out together.”

“I think you could be in danger.”

“So what’s new?” Dan mused, conscious of Kathryn’s ear beside him, pricking at the mention of a conversation last night.

“There’s so much stuff been happening lately - you don’t know the half of it,” Joe insisted, sounding agitated.

“I got the weird photo you sent,” Dan confirmed. “Is there anything else I should know?”

Even if they were face to face, Joe knew that it would be almost impossible to convince the other man that a bad-trip premonition was anything more than a coincidence, but restricted as they were to coded voice-messages it would surely be impossible.

“I saw Kathryn Kelp hold up your head,” he blurted. “She was carrying a battleaxe. There was a lot of blood - but no sign of your body.”

“How ?” asked Dan economically.

“About half an hour ago, in a very dark police cell. It was a dream, or a vision, or a hallucination - but it looked real, and terrifying. People were being butchered by Vikings in some sort of Apocalypse, some from the present, some from the past, the medieval past ...”

The colour drained from Dan’s face at hearing this - as if he really had just been decapitated. Joe was usually solid as a rock. He wasn’t prone to flights of fancy.

Dan swallowed to clear his throat. “Anything else?”

“No,” Joe concluded resolutely. “Except that Julia and Irene are both dead ...”

“What?” blurted Dan.

“... and I’ve been arrested on suspicion of murder. This is

my ten cent call from Scotland Yard - so take it seriously.”

The call ended abruptly.

“Thanks, that could be useful to know,” Dan answered calmly, replacing the phone in his pocket and wondering what on earth to make of Joe’s shocking revelations.

Julia and Dan had been lovers briefly whilst he and Kate were estranged by the supernatural events in *Manifest*. He desperately wanted to find out more, but he was also investigating Kirstin’s death - and there was Kathryn Kelp to squeeze until the pips squeaked - though he suspected that she was about to do the same to him.

“Anything important?” Kathryn inquired, with a disarming smile.

“No, just routine from the office,” he lied unconvincingly.

“It didn’t sound just routine from your reaction.”

“According to my agent, the publisher has brought forward a deadline.”

“Can he do that? Don’t you have a contract?”

“He’s Rufus Muspilli, he can do what the hell he likes.”

Kathryn drove along the A104 for about a mile, cutting into the heart of ancient oak, before turning down an old dirt track which meandered aimlessly beneath the forest canopy. She eventually halted in a small clearing.

“This is it, journey’s end,” Kathryn informed him wryly, as she got out of the car.

Dan also got out and immediately noticed a large number of criss-crossed tyre tracks in the ground on either side of the gravel track where other vehicles had recently parked or turned.

“We walk from here, through the trees,” she announced, setting off into the forest.

Dan followed close behind.

“Do you make a habit of taking strange men out to remote sites and showing them your fieldwork?”

“I like to be accommodating,” she revealed, leading him along a narrow path through the trees. “We had to leave the vehicles and walk two hundred metres into the forest every day for the dig.”

“You could have cut a trail for the vehicles,” he suggested provocatively. “Blame it on Forest management.”

“We didn’t want to attract any attention, especially eco-protesters, so we were dropped off in the morning with whatever we could carry and collected in the evening.”

“Dropped and collected by whom?”

“Ministry of Justice people - maybe Crows in plain clothes. They didn’t talk much.”

The trees gave way to a small clearing and a camouflaged tarpaulin which seemed to cover a low-lying mound.

“Excavating this thing was a nightmare. We didn’t want to rip out the trees in case the roots disturbed anything underneath, so we just tunnelled in like rabbits.”

She removed a green polythene sheet which was lying flat against the sloping grass at one end of the mound to reveal the narrow entrance to a crude tunnel. She disappeared inside.

Dan reluctantly followed down some wooden steps into the underworld.

“Is it safe?” he wondered. “I mean is it shored up properly?”

“Most of it is fairly secure,” Kathryn answered, less than reassuringly. “Mind you don’t bump your head though, or you might precipitate a cave-in after all the rain we’ve had lately.”

Dan felt for the security of his mobile phone in his jacket pocket and mentally rehearsed the confused directions he would have to give to the emergency services when pinned under twenty tonnes of mud. A pointless exercise, since the signal would not propagate through the ground. The damp, earthy smell reminded him of a graveyard and the

claustrophobic gloom made him feel uncomfortable. This was as near as he ever wanted to get to being buried alive.

His forehead brushed against the tangled roots of an overhead tree as he followed the torch beam, causing him to duck instinctively and remain that way until she stopped just ahead of him.

“This is it,” she announced.

Dan took his cue to slowly straighten up again and look around. Her flashlight beam revealed that the ceiling was higher now, and made of the green tarpaulin which provided shelter from the elements.

They were on the floor of an excavation, with ancient post-holes visible in the mud.

“How did you manage to excavate so much earth with just picks and shovels?”

“We didn’t,” Kathryn admitted. “We made a start on the surface, on day one, and when we returned the following day the earth had been removed and piled along the sides, as you can see. But none of the archaeology had been touched. It was as if someone, or something, had scooped out the upper levels and left the final layer for us to work.”

“Who could do such a thing without machinery - and a great deal of expertise?”

Kathryn shrugged. “A team of miners carefully directed by an expert who knew exactly when to stop digging.”

“Or the Crows.”

“The Crows were responsible for the security of the site at night - but we never actually saw any in the evening before we left, or in the morning when we arrived.”

“What is this?” Dan asked tentatively. “A ship burial?”

“The remains of a pagan temple,” she announced proudly. “More than fourteen hundred years old, but firm evidence of pagan worship in the sixth century.”

“Is this what all the fuss is about?” he sniffed, decidedly unimpressed. “It’s not exactly Tutankhamen’s tomb.”

“No, it isn’t,” she conceded. “But this was Dark Age Essex, not Ancient Egypt. To build pyramids you need sandstone and a dedicated civil-service to whip the slaves into shape.”

“Is that a reference to Kristin Sigrun?” he inquired sternly.

Kathryn frowned momentarily, then elaborated through well-versed exposition. “An efficient civil service was needed in ancient times to organize large scale projects,” she explained. “Things changed, of course, when the northern barbarians discovered heat-energy equivalence and formulated the first law of thermodynamics. Then the questioning free spirit of Protestantism began to find expression through science and engineering, just as the previously more advanced and progressive Mediterranean civilizations became stifled by the dogma of Islam and Catholicism. Theocratic rulers regard secular philosophy as highly subversive. Too many Ys.”

“You should be writing speeches for Surt.”

“I’m really not interested in politics.”

“Just the politicians?”

Kathryn sighed impatiently at the juvenile quip, then continued with the tour briefing. Dan was still wondering why she had brought him here, and what the limit of her patience would be.

“The temple was built on a raised earthwork above our heads,” she explained. “The people would watch as the priests offered sacrifices to the heathen gods. This peaty soil is amazing for preserving things. Votive offerings like swords and shield bosses.”

“What about human sacrifices?”

“We did find some human remains,” she revealed. “We don’t know how they died. You can’t always tell with bones that old.”

“Could they have been decapitated? With an axe?” he

ventured. The gruesome proposition had slipped out almost unwittingly, prompted by Joe's warning.

"No, you can usually tell if the neck has been severed by a blade."

"Could they have been hanged?"

"It's possible. The cervical vertebrae don't always part. Why do you ask?"

"Morbid curiosity."

"You're still thinking of Kristin. I brought you here because I wanted you to see that there's no great mystery to what we're doing," she revealed. "The Justice Ministry financed the dig and they're naturally secretive about every thing. But we don't want hippy mystics and metal-detectorists trampling all over it either."

"Last night, I asked John Surt how he knew where to look? He suggested that I ask you. What made you decide to dig in this part of Epping Forest?"

Kathryn paused before answering, as if giving up state-secrets. "A metal-detectorist found something unusual in the upper level whilst digging up an old tin can. It was a small t-shaped amber hammer of the sort worn by Viking warriors who worshipped Thor - the god of thunder."

Dan listened impassively. "And that was enough to initiate all of this?" he queried, gesturing to the cavern.

"As I said, it wasn't my idea to dig this far down. Without assistance, these post holes would have remained uncovered. The metal-detectorist had no idea what the amber hammer was - just a misshapen trinket on a leather cord which could have been dropped by a hippy in the 1960s. But he took it to his local museum director, who recognized a possible Viking artifact and contacted the Crows, as he is required to by law if anything unusual is found in the ground. Somehow, this came to John Surt's attention, and he approached me to carry out an excavation."

“Why didn’t he use the county archaeologist?”

“The county archaeologist was never informed. He still doesn’t know this exists. The whole thing has been carried out like a security and defence project.”

“But why? It’s just archaeology!”

“Don’t let Kate here you say that.”

“She feels the same way. The government has appropriated the field of psychology for political purposes for nearly a decade now; and maybe they think they can make use of archaeology to extend the power of the state.”

Kathryn shrugged. “They fund my research - ours not to reason why.”

“Would you still feel the same way if your research was into Zyklon B?”

“No one has ever used the research of an archaeologist to commit mass murder,” she retorted angrily.

“Maybe not - but it can be used as a justification within the sophistry of our political leaders.”

Dan waited for a spirited reply to this attack on the demagoguery of John Surt. Surprisingly, given her perceived passion for Surt and archaeology, none came.

“What about the other artifacts you discovered?” he pressed. “What have you done with those?”

“They’re being examined and restored. They’ll go on public display in due course.”

“Examined by whom? Your people or the Ministry of Justice?”

“We’re talking about things which are unique and quite literally priceless national treasures.”

“So where are they now?”

Kathryn paused for a moment, then answered, “It’s getting dark outside, we better head back.”

“Is Dracula going to rise from his tomb?”

“Maybe something worse,” she suggested wryly.

“What about the hammer which started this whole bus-

iness off? Is that in the local museum, or under lock and key in a Ministry of Defence bunker?”

Kathryn flashed dagger-eyes at him, as if wondering how much he knew, but being unable to ask directly.

“The hammer is missing,” she revealed, calculating that he already knew. “We think Kirstin took it.”

“Why would she do that?”

“She was mentally unstable - her suicide confirmed that she had developed an obsession with the mythological past.”

Dan paused to look again at the excavated cavern.

“I don’t understand why you brought me all the way out here just to show me a bare hole in the ground?”

“With your level of erudition in this field, Dr Levin, I hoped you might appreciate that it was more than just that. I wanted to see your reaction.”

“My reaction?”

“You have a reputation for being sensitive to historical surroundings. You’ve documented several cases in the past of what some people might call hauntings. Do you sense anything here?”

“I’m not a spiritual medium,” Dan shrugged. “What is it you expect me to sense?”

“Others have been affected by this place. Members of my team - and the civil servants like Kristin.”

“Kristin came here?”

Kathryn nodded.

“What did she experience?”

“Something enlightening - and disturbing. She refused to describe it, but I could see it in her eyes - like a vision of destiny.”

Dan recalled his own vision of Kristin as a seeress the previous evening, Joe’s call barely half an hour ago, and his conversation with John Surt. Something inexplicable was happening in a technocratic age in which such things did

not belong anymore.

“Have ever you experienced anything like that in here?” he asked.

“No,” Kathryn answered flatly.

“What about John Surt?” he asked.

“What about him?”

“How did he react when he came here?”

Kathryn glanced at him briefly. A puzzled glance inadvertently revealing some inner confusion.

“John has never been here,” she answered.

Dan found this difficult to believe given the extent of his involvement and obvious intent to exploit political capital from Kathryn’s research.

“Not even with the Crows guarding him?”

“Not as far as I know,” she insisted.

“So he might have been here without your knowledge?”

“Why wouldn’t he tell me if he had?”

“Perhaps he didn’t feel the need to. Or perhaps he was affected in some way, as you suggest happened to Kristin.”

Dan looked around at the bare earth, wondering about its past, and the secrets it held. He pressed a hand against the mud wall.

“This was once a place of worship and a seat of political power,” he proposed. “A source of answers for desperate people clinging to the edge of survival in a dangerous world of uncertainty. A way of explaining the natural world, or even harnessing its forces.”

“What sort of forces?” she queried.

“Elemental nature in a harsh and violent milieu of blood feuds and natural catastrophes. Northern pagan religions were a product of that environment.”

Kathryn considered this. “The Celts believed in a pantheon of spirits inhabiting rivers and trees, but the Germans developed anthropomorphic gods, like the Ancient

Greeks and Romans, to explain the creation and destruction of the world. But unlike the Greeks and the Romans, they lacked an efficient form of script, and much of the physical evidence of their beliefs was destroyed by the Christians who viewed it as dangerous to their own evangelical hegemony.”

“The minister hinted at the discovery of a revelatory new manuscript last night,” Dan recalled.

“We found a complex set of runes which are quite unlike anything previously discovered,” she revealed. “A sort of Rosetta Stone from the Dark Age. When finally deciphered, they could well revolutionize the study of Germanic heathenism, but they could also be used for political purposes and that’s why we’re keeping them under wraps. We don’t want this place to become a Mecca for skinheads and neo-Nazi thugs.”

Kathryn led him back above ground. The overcast cloud was severely reducing the light from the declining sun, though he was grateful enough just to breathe the fresh air again, with or without a spectacular glowing sunset.

“Isn’t the government being a bit overcautious?” Dan proposed. “This is a mature and stable democracy, not the Weimar Republic.”

“I’m just an archaeologist,” she insisted.

They drove away without saying much more. Kathryn seemed to have volunteered all the information she wanted to for now.

“Where are we going?” he asked, as she drove towards London.

“My flat - I have some documents to show you.”

19

Dan walked through a sliding door out onto a narrow balcony which provided a spectacular view of the Thames. The apartment block on the tip of the Greenwich peninsula was one of half-a-dozen built on the former site of the Millennium Dome.

He stared out over the murky water which hid so many secrets from the past and blithely wondered whether there might not be something unnatural about the dark, metallic colour of its choppy surface. Weary and irritable at the end of a long day, his strange affinities had even extended to the rough angry waves, churning-up the chemical effluent which they were forced to carry from the city.

Overhead, a thick mass of low cloud was tinged with the same dull, leaden hue which instilled in him a deep, primitive sense of foreboding. The Thames was one of the most crowded inland waterways in the world and river traffic was obliged by law to display navigation lights. The lights of many craft were already on and it was only eight-thirty. Soon it would rain again, and the swollen river would rise higher. The flood defences could, in theory, cope with any reasonable amount of rainfall, but what if it continued to rise?

“You have a wonderful view from here,” Dan observed, as Kathryn stood close beside him. “Wasn’t this the site of the old dome?”

“It was - until a few ex-government ministers discovered a lucrative way to finance their retirement.”

“How do you afford to live here?”

“Why do people who live in London always get asked that?” she sighed.

“Because it’s so damned expensive.”

“I’m not just an impecunious academic these days,” she revealed, with a shrewd smile. “I am now a government consultant employed by the Ministry of Justice. I’ll make some coffee. Take off your coat and sit down.”

Kathryn went inside.

Dan viewed the spectacular river for a few seconds more - then returned to the lounge. He took off his waterproof jacket and draped it over the back of the sofa before sitting down and fighting the urge to close his eyes.

Kathryn returned soon after with two mugs.

“What happened to your arm?” she asked, noting the dressing as she handed him a mug.

“I was attacked by a dog,” he revealed.

“What sort of a dog?”

“A big one. The sort the Crows set on people.”

“The Crows set a dog on you? Why would they do that?”

“I was in Kristin’s garden earlier today. I think they were trying to scare me off.”

“You’re lucky you weren’t more seriously injured, or killed. It could have torn out your throat,” she noted, probing the dressing with a finger. “Does it hurt?”

“Not now, it’s sort of numb. I was wearing a jacket so the wounds were superficial.”

“How did you get away from it?”

“Kristin’s gardener showed up. A really big old fellow with an eyepatch, he seized the thing by the collar and lifted it into the air.”

“Did he kill it?”

“No, it ran off.”

Kathryn frowned sceptically.

“So why didn’t the Crows arrest the pair of you for mistreating their pet?” she queried.

“I don’t know. The old fellow was an independent witness, maybe that discouraged them.”

“The Crows don’t usually worry too much about witnesses - they’re not really accountable to anyone except the Justice Secretary.”

“He was a very strange man,” Dan had to admit. “A *maquisard* figure who would have caused them some difficulties.”

Kathryn pressed a button on a CD player before sitting in a chair opposite him. Strings of Wagner soon filled the air.

“A precaution,” she advised. “In case anyone is listening.”

“Do you think your boyfriend has bugged your flat?”

“What boyfriend?” she inquired coyly.

“The Rt. Hon. John Surt MP.”

“Does that relationship bother you?”

“Let’s just say I wouldn’t expect you to be one of his girls.”

“You make me sound like a whore.”

“I know you didn’t do it for money.”

“Didn’t do what?” she queried.

“Sell your soul. You’ve made a Faustian pact to aid your research. But I don’t understand what’s in it for him? Aside from the very pleasant company of course.”

“You think Surt is some sort of Mephistocles?” Kathryn noted gleefully, finding light relief in the outlandish suggestion. “You give him far too much credit. He’s just an opportunist politician who knows how to exploit the current fashion for extending the powers of ministers and the state in the digital age. With no written constitution to protect human rights, we’re all pretty much subjects of the

new political barons in the Cabinet.”

“If you’ve read Faust, then you’ll know what happened to Gretchen.”

“Wasn’t she’s reprieved at the last moment?” Kathryn recalled, with a wry, pugilistic grin.

“You’re not the sort who’d cheer at the Nuremberg Rally so what was the deal between you two?”

“There was no deal - he’s a well read man with an interest in early medieval history ...”

Dan’s eyelids began to flicker and close. Kathryn lunged forward and caught the mug of coffee just as it was slipping from his grasp. She placed it on a table then lightly slapped his cheek.

“Dan? Dan!!” she iterated sharply to try and rouse him.

There was no response.

Kathryn lifted the jacket, which was draped over the sofa, and searched for something in the pockets. Finding nothing there, she put her hand into one of his trouser pockets then rolled him on to his side to search the other. She pulled out a wallet, some keys, and loose change - but not the object that she was looking for.

Sighing heavily with desperation and despair, she pressed her fingertips into the padded dressing on his arm to see if it was concealing anything. Finally she rubbed her palms across his chest - and detected something small and hard beneath the material of the t-shirt. A fine leather cord around his neck enabled her to pull the object from under the t-shirt and over his head.

Kathryn held up the object with an unabashed grin of triumph grin spreading across her face. She put her head through the loop so that the amber hammer nestled against her cleavage and stepped over to a wall mirror where she stood and admired the trinket as if it were a finely-cut diamond.

She failed to notice the movement behind her until a pair

of hands grabbed the cord and pulled it tight around her neck like a tourniquet, cutting the flow of blood to her brain.

Dan caught her limp body as she fell back and laid her out on the sofa, then retook possession of the hammer and sat in a chair opposite, waiting for her to regain consciousness. A few minutes later her eyelids flickered, and she began to stir. In a panicked reflex, she sat up suddenly and raised her arms defensively, then she put a hand to her throat and glowered angrily at him as full cognizance returned.

“So this is what you’re after,” Dan surmised, from where he sat, holding up the little amulet for her to see.

“It looks quite old,” Kathryn suggested innocently, recovering her poise. “What is it?”

“You’re the expert, you tell me?”

She reached out just a little too eagerly, and he drew back to deny her the chance of taking it again.

“How can I tell you if you won’t let me examine it?” she protested.

“I’m a bit short on trust at the moment. Someone searched my house just before you arrived. Is this what they were looking for?”

“I don’t know anything about that,” she insisted earnestly.

“Did you know that Kristin’s house was searched a few days ago?”

“That was part of an internal inquiry by the Ministry of Justice. Nothing to do with me.”

“Why did you put a drug in my drink?” he asked.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Kathryn insisted, maintaining her innocence. “You collapsed and I was just trying to help you.”

“By rifling through my pockets? What did you put in the witches brew?”

“Nothing. I was just trying to help you breathe. I was about to call for an ambulance,” she claimed.

“In that case - drink,” he suggested, holding up the mug.

“This is ridiculous - I think you should leave,” she snorted angrily.

Dan put the cup down on the table and lifted his jacket.

“Are you sure you want me to go - you went to a lot of trouble to get me here?”

Dan held up the hammer by the cord again for her to see.

Kathryn sat down in the chair with a wistful sigh.

“This is the artifact which the metal-detectorist found, starting the whole thing off - isn't it?”

It was a fairly unimpressive looking little trinket, but Dan knew her gaze was drawn eagerly to it even as she glared at him defensively.

“*Mjollnir* - the hammer of *Thor*,” he proposed.

There was a sudden glint in her eyes.

“Call your friends in the Ministry of Justice and tell them I've got what they're looking for,” he suggested boldly. “But when the storm troopers burst in, I'm going to throw it over the balcony and into the river - so tell them to have some frogmen standing by.”

For the first time he saw genuine fear cross her stern features. The implication disturbed him. He sat down on the sofa clutching the trinket in one hand and his mobile phone in the other. His wild card, since she had no idea who he might contact next.

Kathryn walked out of the lounge and Dan heard the sound of a bedroom door closing. He felt as if he'd just stuck far too much of his head above the parapet. He was living dangerously and knew he would pay a high price if this matter wasn't resolved soon. Now they knew for certain that he had the hammer. Sooner or later they would come for it.

Kathryn reappeared in the lounge doorway wearing only a nightshirt which barely covered her underwear.

“Have you sent for the Crows?” he inquired calmly, ignoring the obvious attempt to delay his departure.

“If you’re so certain that I’m one of the bad guys, why did you let me drive you into the middle of a forest?” she asked. “I could have arranged for the Crows to jump you then and dispose of you in the woods.”

“Maybe you wanted to be sure that I had this before throwing me to the wolves - for old times sake.”

“I’m just as wary of the Crows as you are,” she insisted.

Dan eyed her suspiciously as she crossed the floor and sat in a chair again, and crossed her legs seductively.

“Tell me what you know about *Ragnarok*,” he urged.

“An ambiguous Norse myth describing a final battle in which the gods are destroyed. In some ways it is like the Apocalypse in the Gospel of St John. It’s described in Snorri Sturlason’s prose *Edda* and in a poem called *Voluspá*, or the Seeress’s Prophecy, in the poetic *Edda*. An apocalypse is foreshadowed by earthquakes, storms, and civil disorder. Monstrous creatures like the Fenris Wolf and the Midgard Serpent will break free to terrorize the world. The horn of *Heimdall*, the watchkeeper, will warn the gods of *Asgard* of an invasion by dark forces, and in a final battle all the gods and demons will perish, and fire will destroy the Earth.”

“Is it the end of the world or the beginning?”

“A lot of Old Norse poetry was written down in Iceland in the thirteenth century after Christianity had displaced the old heathen religion. The author who recorded *Voluspá* appears to have given a Christian twist to the end. The old gods - *Odin*, *Thor*, and *Loki* are all destroyed, but the earth grows green again after the apocalypse and people, led by the off-spring of the gods, emerge to repopulate the world like Adam and Eve. The word *Ragnarok*

means doom of the gods. Rok means doom, but the word rokk means twilight, which is what inspired Richard Wagner to coin the term *Gotterdammerung* for his opera.”

“But what has it got to do with the world today?”

“It’s a code for the constitutional changes which will take place soon.”

“The government have announced no plans for change.”

“That’s because most people in the government don’t know what’s going on. Executive agencies such as the Ministry of Justice are now highly autonomous, like the fiefdoms of old, and implement policy initiatives to further the personal agendas and extend the power of their leaders.”

“Did Kristin Sigrun know what was planned?”

“She was appointed to keep an eye on us. Did she say anything to you about our work?”

“No.”

“Then how did you know that she was involved?”

“The Ministry of Justice is not watertight, despite the vigilance of the Crows. Things have a habit of leaking out from behind closed doors.”

Kathryn moved onto the sofa next to him and brought up her palm until the artifact rested on it while he kept hold of the cord.

“Why did she give you the hammer?”

“It was posted to me in a plain envelope with an anonymous note - Goodbye until *Ragnarok* - written on Ministry of Justice paper. The same message which led you to me.”

“Do you always wear the anonymous things people send you?”

“I thought it might be valuable.”

“The hammer is very valuable - to my research. We’d like it back quickly and discretely. I was hoping you would be prepared to cooperate once you understood how important it is.”

“When you say *we* need it back, who exactly do you mean?”

“I mean me,” she divulged. “It’s a key find, an essential part of the paper I’m writing. Without it my theory can’t be proved. It’s like a buttressed cathedral. Without all the evidence it falls over.”

“Tell me more about this theory of yours,” he urged.

Kathryn smiled uncomfortably and took a deep breath, as if reluctant to divulge her theory to a mere layman, especially a popularizer such as Dan. “I’m not sure I’d trust you. You’ve made a career for yourself by plagiarizing and perverting Kate’s theories.”

“You don’t have much choice - if you want the hammer back.”

“The metal-detectorist found more than just the hammer. He kept digging until he found the end of the cord wrapped around the partially preserved corpse of a man - clutching this in his decomposing hand.”

Dan looked at her in disbelief, then glanced again at the amber hammer and shuddered inwardly at the thought of the previous keeper and his skeletal grasp, but retained a firm grip on the cord. Was this just a grisly tall story to persuade him to part with it?

“Go on,” he urged stoically, determined not to relinquish possession until he was ready.

“Essex Police were about to begin a murder inquiry - but then Surt ordered the Crows to throw a blanket of secrecy over the discovery - citing public interest to gag the police and the press - and he approached me to determine the age of the body - about 1400 years.”

“How could Surt have known in advance that the body was not just a contemporary murder victim?”

“Intuition, I suppose. The corpse was very unusual,” she explained. “There were burn marks on the mummified flesh and bone.”

“Why is that unusual? Some pagans used to cremate their dead.”

“This wasn’t a cremation. The burns were not postmortem. According to a government pathologist the most likely cause of death was electrocution from a lightning strike.”

“How can they know that - so many centuries later?” Dan quizzed her in amazement.

“From the burn pattern on the arm and the lower legs,” she affirmed. “The effects of lightning strikes are well documented in pathology labs around the world, but our find is by far the oldest example on record of such a victim.”

“I still don’t see why the hammer is so important to you if it’s just a grave trinket.”

“We think the victim was a sixth century Saxon priest paying homage to *Thunor*, the god of Thunder, from his temple during a storm. He held up the hammer in salute and was struck by lightning which travelled down his arm and earthed through his feet. His disciples buried him where he fell and abandoned the temple. For centuries, scholars have argued that the heathen gods were the subject of fairy tales and camp fire stories rather than the objects of worship by an organized religion. Here we have good evidence to the contrary. The temple, the priest, the religious artifact, the lightning.”

“I’m impressed - and tempted to just hand it over to you,” he proposed, admiring the courage of an academic willing to formulate and expound radical and controversial ideas of the sort which both make and destroy careers. “But first I want to know what drove Kristin to kill herself. Do you know how she died?”

“Only what I heard in the news reports.”

“She staked a tree branch to the ground, then put a noose around her neck. When she cut the tether she was hoisted up by the branch as it straightened out, then she

sank a knife into her chest as a pair of police officers tried to rescue her. A very elaborate and determined way to kill yourself.”

“She must have been very disturbed to have taken the hammer in the first place. It was a serious breach of trust and protocol. Maybe she thought the Crows were on to her. Having to resign and face criminal charges may have been more than she could bear and the prospect of it pushed her over the edge.”

“But what about the way in which she took her own life? Doesn’t it strike you as being ritualistic - like a sacrificial act?”

“Suicide by hanging is not uncommon.”

“*Odin* was known as *Hanga-God*,” Dan recalled.

“*Odin* had several nicknames. He was also called the One-Eye God, the All-Father and the Wise-One. He is portrayed in *Havamal* as a shaman who hangs from a tree for nine days and nights to learn the secrets of the runes.”

“Kristin would have known that, she was a medieval language scholar. Is there anything in Norse mythology which resembles her death?”

Kathryn slowly shook her head. “I can’t think of anything,” she insisted, her blank, innocent expression giving him no reason to doubt her, though this time he knew she was lying.

“You must know the story of King Vikar?”

She nodded and smiled wryly. “Thank you for reminding me.”

“In *Gautreks Saga* there is mention of a King Vikar who offers himself in a mock sacrifice to *Odin* for a fair wind,” Dan recalled. “But *Odin* was angry at this and caused the tree branch to straighten out and a blunt stick to turn into a sharp spear. Vikar was pulled up to his death with a spear in his side. Could Kristin have reenacted the sacrifice of King Vikar?”

“Why would she do such a thing?”

“You tell me.”

“I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“I’ve already told you, Kristin was under a lot of stress. Maybe she cracked-up and couldn’t take any more.”

“As far as I know there was nothing wrong with her psychological state.”

“Maybe that was the illusion she sought to give. The need for absolute security around the excavation was getting her down. We were all subject to intense scrutiny by the Crows, Kristin more than anyone. Someone on high just didn’t trust her.”

“Why is everyone so secretive about your work? Anyone would think you were designing a weapons system rather than just digging up old bones and trinkets.”

Kathryn blinked and smiled at this remark as if to cover any revelation in her expression.

“That’s a good analogy,” she admitted. “You hinted that runic symbols could be used as a potent political device in the hands of right wing groups and fascists. Since 1945 the once fashionable study of Germanic heathenism has become associated with fascism. In today’s multicultural society it is viewed with a great deal of suspicion. Right wing groups all across Europe have co-opted the symbols and ethos for their boot-boy organizations. If we opened an exhibition tomorrow we’d have neo-Nazis and anti-Fascists throwing bottles at each other in the car park.”

“Who is the metal-detectorist who started this whole thing of?”

“Do you want his name?”

“And his address and occupation.”

“You sound like the Crows.”

“Well?”

“I don’t know - we never met - they said he was a big old

fellow with a hat and an eyepatch.”

Dan frowned. “Like the Anglo-Saxon description of Woden?” he proposed.

“Except that he wore modern shirt and trousers.”

“Sounds just like Kristin’s gardener.”

“They say Woden roams the English countryside, indulging in wily mischief.”

Exactly how old is the hammer?” asked Dan.

“We don’t know,” Kathryn insisted. “Carbon dating destroys the sample being tested and in any case it doesn’t work on amber. All we can say is that it was found in situ with materials which is about fifteen hundred years old. This hammer could be much older. There’s one just like it in the Swedish Museum thought to be over two thousand years old. People used to wear them for luck.”

“It hasn’t brought me much luck,” he noted wistfully.

“Maybe I should hold on to it for a while longer.”

He got to his feet, put his head through the loop of the cord and tucked it into his t-shirt so that it rested against his chest, signalling his intention to keep it for now.

Kathryn stood up to confront him.

“How do you know it hasn’t brought you any luck? You’re still alive aren’t you?”

20

The night of the great storm witnessed a less than stormy debate in the House of Commons. The burgeoning power of executive government ensured that torrents of legislation could pour through the constitutional floodgates with very little inhibition, rubber stamped by gnomish MPs in return for patronage and expense payments.

This pleased everyone from the civil servants who could shift bills through the legislative process like cans of cola and so fulfil their production targets, to serious parliamentarians who could spend more time reminiscing in the bars - knowing that whatever fine, eloquent contribution they may make to any debate would make absolutely no difference whatsoever to the outcome. In the post-industrial age of information, the government technocrat ruled supreme, and the illusion of democracy, like the illusion of an Abrahamic god, was essentially dead.

Reports of pagan nature gods assaulting the city gradually began to filter through to those in the chamber and the bars and they began drifting away from the lame debate to see for themselves the dramatic TV pictures of huge storm waves breaking over Waterloo Bridge.

As if this were not enough, there were subversive physical assaults on the Palace of Westminster itself, as debris was hurled through glass windows like bricks from the hands of the demonic winds. There were even some cas-

ualties among the demagoguery, grazed by wood splinters or cut by flying glass.

Realizing that an emergency was developing in vital regions of the media-focussed capital, the vote on the bill was set aside and the ministers present were whisked away to the Cabinet Room in Downing Street for an emergency meeting, with a diligence designed to impress the media commentators and generate favourable headlines the following day.

Joe knew nothing of this at the time. He sat facing a thuggish looking detective with a shaved head in a sound-proof interrogation room. The wheels of the tape recorder could be heard revolving slowly in the background, and a heavy set uniformed officer stood in the corner like a sentry in case extra muscle were needed to subdue him.

A second detective facing him had a more urbane appearance. He was younger looking, wore a more expensive suit, and retained a soft fringe to border his youthful face. Joe was not entirely surprised when informed that the younger-looking man was a detective inspector and the senior officer in the investigation. He could have been hired for the day from Central Casting via the fast-track graduate scheme.

There was no pack of cigarettes on the table - smoking had been outlawed in the workplace - and in any case Joe had recently given up. This wasn't his first experience of interrogation by police officers. He'd once been a guest of an African dictator for two very precarious weeks, though he had been less fearful then that he was now, despite probably being in far greater danger. There was something uniquely sinister and Orwellian about United Kingdom law enforcement by a paramilitary police service in the digital age. A shift in ethos had taken place from serving the populace to protecting the political establishment from criticism and subversion - and any chief constable who

didn't like it was eased out of a job by the Home Secretary.

"Tell us what happened," the inspector proposed.

"Where do you want me to start?" Joe prevaricated.

"The beginning."

Joe explained that he'd received a call and went round to the flat where he discovered the bodies of the two women.

The other detective, a sergeant, took a series of digital prints from an envelope and laid them out on the table. The images of death were stark and disturbing.

"Where did these come from?" the sergeant inquired.

Joe kept his eyes on the photographs.

"My camera," he replied.

"Why did you take them?"

"I'm a photographer, it's what I do. They were victims of foul play. I wanted to preserve some independent evidence from the scene."

"Have you ever photographed a crime scene before?"

"I've done similar things in war zones - helping the UN catalogue war crimes."

"Why didn't you just leave it to us? Our people do a far better job," the sergeant asserted, regarding Joe's efforts with some disdain.

"I had misgivings about how the investigation might be conducted."

"Misgivings?"

"Julia was a journalist - working on something sensitive."

"Do you suspect foul play?"

"Yes."

"How do you know it wasn't a case of murder, then suicide?"

"Because I knew them both."

"Did you know them well?"

“Fairly well.”

“How would you describe your relationship with them?”

“We were friends.”

“Just friends?”

“Just friends,” Joe reiterated testily.

“Did you have any form of sexual relationship with either of them?”

“No.”

“How long have you known them for?”

“About two years. It was set up to look like Julia had killed Irene then committed suicide, but I think they were both murdered shortly before I arrived.”

“How was it set up?” the inspector interjected.

“There was a suicide note, written by Julia, claiming that she’d killed Irene. It was then made to look as if she had hanged herself from the inside of a closed door with no one else present.”

“Is this the note?” the sergeant asked, taking a sheet of paper in a protective polythene cover from another envelope.

“That looks like it,” Joe confirmed.

“Who do you think wrote the note?” the inspector inquired.

“Julia wrote it under duress, as you would with a gun pointing at your head. You can see that the hand was shaking.”

“How can you know for certain she hadn’t just killed her girlfriend? That would account for the shaking hand. By all accounts they were an unusual couple.”

“They weren’t a couple - in the sense that you mean.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t - for certain. But Julia once told me that they shared a bond through common experience - not sex.”

“So maybe the bond became too much for one of them,” the inspector suggested. “People who follow alter-

native life styles can be impulsive and unpredictable, especially if they're abusing substances."

"They didn't use drugs," Joe blurted.

"How do you know?" the inspector asked again.

"To the best of my knowledge they didn't use drugs. In my business you get to know if someone is - unreliable. There was never any suggestion that Julia unreliable."

"And Irene?"

"Irene wasn't a journalist. You'll have to ask her showbiz friends about her work."

The brace of detectives exchanged a curious glance which Joe register and realized was based on information he was not privy to.

"We're supposed to think that Julia got up on the footrest with the belt round her neck," Joe proposed. "She put the knotted tail end over the door and closed it so the knot would jam against the sill. Then she kicked the footrest away."

"Why did she need to use clothes-line as well?"

"She didn't," Joe admitted. "I secured the belt to the outside door-handle, then forced the door open."

"Why?"

"I saw a similar thing once before in Iraq as a photo-journalist. You can check the exit visa in my file. A US marine pushed the door in on a raid against insurgents and a mortar shell dangling by the tailfin on the other side hit the ground with a loud bang."

"Was he killed?" the sergeant asked impulsively.

"No, but the wooden door shattered along with his ear drums and the blast blew him across the room. What you might call cartoon violence."

"And you thought someone was trying to blow you up in a similar fashion?" the inspector inquired, with raised eyebrows.

"The possibility did cross my mind," Joe had to admit.

“In London?”

“Why not? After the Iraq invasion, the UK government began employing anti-insurgency-style policing against the UK population with cameras and helicopters. How long before the Crows begin acting like insurgents?”

“But why would they target you?”

“Not me - but Julia. I thought I was being set up to trigger an incendiary device which would destroy any evidence in the flat.”

“They could have set a bomb off themselves with a timer. Why take a chance waiting for someone to come along?”

“I was a friend, colleague, and confidant who could have been silenced at the same time. When you’re in that situation, you think of worse-case scenarios.”

“But on this occasion your paranoia was unfounded?”

“On this occasion.”

“If you thought there was a bomb on the other side of the door, why didn’t you just call the police?”

“The imperative of most people is to avoid coming to the attention of the police under any circumstance in the digital age.”

“Even if it means saving lives?”

“Julia called me in confidence. I wanted to protect her as far as I could. I didn’t know she was hanging on the other side of the door.”

“In that case it looks like suicide,” the sergeant proposed. “If someone had forced her into that position, how would they have got out afterwards?”

Joe leaned forward, picked out one of the photographs, and pointed with his finger.

“You can see here the belt above the knot has been stretched and crushed by a strong grip. That’s why I took this photograph. Someone, probably wearing gloves, wrapped it around his fist and pulled her up from behind the

door before pulling it closed so that the knot jammed against the sill. The footrest was just a prop to make it look as if she hanged herself.”

“I’m impressed, Miss Marple,” the inspector admitted, in an amused tone. “Don’t you think we would have noticed things like that for ourselves - eventually?”

“I think you might have been persuaded to overlook it, in return for some extra cash-funding from the Home Office, and to embellish your clear-up rate and your position in the league table.”

“Persuaded by whom?”

“A higher authority.”

“You mean the Commissioner?”

“The Justice Secretary.”

The inspector frowned as if the suggestion was offensive or in poor taste.

“I don’t see what this has got to do with the government? However tragic it may be for the victims and their families, it is still a straightforward criminal case. Why would the government get involved?”

“Because I think Julia stumbled onto something politically sensitive in the course of her work.”

“Do you know what she was working on?”

“Not exactly, no.”

“But you do have some idea?” the inspector pressed.

“She was a freelance researcher.”

“Research can be used for blackmail.”

“To the best of my knowledge she never blackmailed anyone,” Joe replied sternly, his anger rising at the slur. “I do know she was investigating the activities of a government minister and expected to be raided by the Crows at any time under the Protection of Communications Act.”

The two interrogators exchanged another wary glance before the inspector asked, “Which minister?”

“John Surt.”

Smirks appeared on the faces of the two detectives though the presence of the tape inhibited them from making any contemptuous comment. The inspector leaned forward impatiently and lowered his voice as if to offer some advice.

“That’s all very interesting, but we don’t have much time for conspiracy theories. We don’t need them. We solve ninety-nine percent of domestic murders within twenty four hours. Everyone knows it’s the boyfriend at the press conference. It’s always the boyfriend. We think you went round there for a bit of unusual hanky-panky, but something went wrong with one woman so you had to kill the other one and make it look like a murder-suicide.”

“Julia was a big girl. I doubt whether I would have been strong enough to hold that belt on my own,” he proposed.

“So maybe you had an accomplice,” suggested the sergeant.

“You show me this accomplice, and I’ll confess to being Lord Lucan,” Joe answered scornfully.

“This is England, not some banana republic,” the inspector stated softly. “MoJ SS Police do not go around murdering journalists. But if you believe they do - and want to pursue a defence of insanity that’s up to you. I’m only interested in the facts of what happened.”

“MI5 were linked to several mysterious deaths in the 1980s,” Joe reminded him.

“Those were never proved,” the inspector replied. “Left wing groups spread those sort of stories to embarrass the government.”

“What if the Crows suddenly take over this investigation? Won’t that make you a bit suspicious after what I’ve told you?”

“If there’s a communications element to this case then they are the people to investigate it, but all the evidence so far points to an ordinary murder. Notice I said murder,

not murders. I think the first woman's death was an accident. You panicked and silenced her friend. Do you want to admit that's what really happened?"

Joe glared at the other man for a moment, suddenly realizing how flawed the case against him was. There would be no trial, but extricating himself from the police and then the Crows would be difficult.

"That's bullshit and I can prove it," Joe answered boldly.

"How?" the inspector challenged him.

"The police arrived just as I was making a 999 call."

"You heard them coming and reached for your phone."

"So who phoned the police?"

"A protected witness source."

"You mean someone who cannot be cross-examined in the event of a trial?"

"That would be a decision for the Justice Secretary to consider - in the public interest."

"You don't know who the caller was and you never will. Ministry of Justice will use witness protection legislation to muddy the water until the trail goes cold."

"Do you have any history of psychiatric treatment?" the inspector inquired wryly.

"If I had, it would be in my government file."

"We have no record of treatment by government doctors, but you may have consulted a private clinic. My officers tell me you had some sort of fit in our cells which left you mentally incapacitated for several minutes."

"I fell asleep and had a nightmare. An Orwellian nightmare." Joe leaned forward to eyeball the detective and the sentry approached him from behind. "You know where I was when I received the call from Julia. You know how long it takes to get from Covent Garden to the flat. And, of course, you know the time your officers arrived, tipped off by a protected witness source. I had only been in the flat for a few minutes when the Keystone Cops came pil-

ing in through the door. Nowhere near long enough to play out the elaborate charade you have contrived.”

The inspector smiled smugly, conceding that the aggressive line of interrogation had been a pretext for something else. “You’re right,” he conceded.

Joe’s eyes narrowed angrily. “Then why waste everyone’s time?”

“People are more forthcoming when they think we have a case against them. But this incident has thrown up a curious question which will be of some interest to the MoJ SS police,” he revealed.

Joe shifted uneasily in anticipation.

“Who is Irene Benson?” the detective posited.

“A friend of Julia, that’s all I know about her.”

“Did you know she was a London actress in the 1950s - calling herself Irene Foucault?”

Joe leaned back and smiled at the absurdity of the statement. “No, I didn’t,” he replied, shaking his head.

“And there is evidence to suggest that she was a Paris actress in the 1930s - calling herself Irene de Beauvoir.”

“I think your soft-intelligence may be wrong on this occasion,” Joe advised.

The inspector opened a loose leaf folder containing old black-and-white photos and scraps of paper. He handed a 6x4 print to Joe.

“These are some of the papers we found in the flat. Would you say that is Irene?”

The rear of the portrait photo was stamped with the imprimatur of Cecil Beaton. It captured the beauty of the actress sitting in a studio with crystal clarity.

“Yes, it looks like her - in a 1950s period setting.”

“Cecil Beaton was a famous wartime society photographer.”

Joe nodded. “But anyone can create nostalgic publicity shots like this and stamp Beaton on the back. Modern day

Burlesque performers, for instance.”

“Here is a receipt for a painting purchased in New York from an artist by the name of Jackson Pollock. Ever heard of him?”

The inspector handed Joe the receipt.

“The painting in the hallway,” Joe surmised. “So that’s how she acquired it ...”

A uniformed constable with a shocked expression burst into the room without knocking.

“Sir, you better come and hear this,” the officer announced, before anyone could comment.

“Can’t it wait?” the senior detective snapped angrily. “I’m conducting an interview!”

“No sir, it can’t,” the messenger insisted firmly.

The senior detective suspended the interview, switched off the tape recorder and left the room. His colleague, with a perplexed expression, got up and followed him out to find out what was going on.

The bullet-headed sergeant returned moments later, looking visibly shaken by whatever he had heard. He curtly informed Joe that he was to be detained pending further inquiries by the Metropolitan Police and the Ministry of Justice Surveillance-Security Police.

21

Dan opened his eyes and blinked, realizing that he'd been woken by the sound of a commotion, though for the first vital seconds of consciousness he was uncertain of where he was or how he had come to be there. He glanced at his watch and noted that several more hours of the evening had passed. This day seemed interminably long - as if it were his last. He put his hand to his chest and felt the hammer underneath his t-shirt.

The scuffling sound which had woken him caught his attention and he focused on the source. The sliding door to the balcony had been left open and the frail white curtain was billowing in and out. Dan could hear the crashing sounds of wind and wave crowding violently into the lounge. He recalled the earlier storm warning and got up to shut out the intruding elements. As he put a hand on the sliding door handle his shoe squelched on a wet patch of carpet and the driving rain struck his face.

Glancing out across the river he witnessed the far bank lit up by a lightning strike. He could guess at the chaos and disruption being caused by the high winds and torrential rain.

Inexplicably drawn to the dangerous elements, he stepped out onto the balcony and slid the door closed behind him to save the carpet from further drenching. With hands on the iron safety railing and the rain striking his face he

stood humble before the gods with only the amulet for protection, and cast his mind back fifteen hundred years to the fate of a dark age priest.

The power of the storm was invigorating. He could feel the shock waves travel through the wrought iron railing each time a gust of air buffeted the side of the building like a giant mallet. He gripped the railing tightly, feeling the bruised muscles of his upper arm throbbing as they healed.

Near the bank he could see the white crests of the rollers assaulting the shore. But further out, the river and the city were darker than he had ever seen them before. The lights were out on the river, presumably the rough weather was making navigation impossible for small craft, but where were the larger vessels which usually ploughed their trade up and down the main artery of the city come hell or high water?

The far bank was in darkness, as were large chunks of the city, so it seemed. The kaleidoscopic continuum of speckled lights had aggregated into galaxies with huge expanses of dark space in between. Parts of the city had suffered a blackout, presumably because of fallen power lines. Then, something on the water caught his eye. There was a faintly glowing patch of green mist in midstream moving with the wind.

Dan strained his eyes but couldn't make out what it was. He'd never seen anything like it before. A shadowy craft of some sort began to emerge from the mist. He waited for nearly a minute before it came more clearly into view and made him gasp in amazement.

The water of the Thames was as rough as he'd ever seen it and he thought the wind would tear any sail from its mast, and yet a whole flotilla of sailing craft appeared to be heading upstream towards the capital under full, dark sail - their sleek bows cutting through the rollers. The

wind, though turbulent, was behind them, and they were making good speed.

Dan tried to count the craft. There seemed to be dozens, perhaps as many as a hundred. They all looked terribly worn and battered, not at all like modern yachts, more like replica longships or museum pieces which had reenacted a crossing of the treacherous North Sea.

He could just make out a few crew members - dark, shadowy figures with red glowing eyes - and thought of those described in *The Ghost Pirates*, an early twentieth century tale by William Hope Hodgson.

Dan stepped back into the sanctuary of the flat. All sound of the storm ceased as he slid the door closed, then went to the bedroom where Kathryn lay on her side on top of a quilt, her cheek buried in a pillow. She was twitching and murmuring as if having a bad dream.

Did she expect him to slip out of the door on this inclement night without saying goodbye. He sat on the bed and whispered in her ear.

“What are you dreaming about?”

“Sails,” she answered groggily. “Black sails. Funeral ships. *Naglfar* ...”

Kathryn opened her eyes and looked around as if panicked for a moment, then sat up and gathered her wits.

“What are you doing here?” she inquired anxiously.

“Don’t you remember?”

She looked around the room, recalled events, and asked, “What time is it?”

“Nearly midnight.”

“What’s happening outside?”

“Nothing much, why?”

“Yes there is, there’s a storm,” she insisted, sensing the slight movements of the floor induced by winds buffeting the walls of the apartment building.

“Just now, you said you were dreaming about funeral

ships - and *Naglfar*.”

Kathryn looked puzzled.

“I must have been having a nightmare.”

“About a death ship?”

“*Naglfar* was a ship from the east which brought dark forces to battle at *Ragnarok*.”

Dan shuddered.

“I’ve just seen it,” he confessed.

“What?”

“Or something like it on the river. Not just one - hundreds of them. An armada.”

Kathryn got to her feet and followed him back to the lounge and out on to the balcony. There was nothing in sight now, except a patch of faint glowing green mist in the distance, moving upstream into the heart of the capital.

They went back inside.

“This barometer has fallen off the scale,” Dan remarked, reading from an ornamental instrument on the wall.

Kathryn switched on a television set and flicked to a twenty-four hour UK news channel broadcasting the events of the storm with great excitement, like a foreign war or a big sporting event.

The presenter was urgently issuing storm warnings as she described the freak weather which was wreaking havoc across London, causing traffic accidents and damage to buildings. She used the term hurricane despite the unusual pedigree of the storm, though the epithet seemed justified given the buffeting the studio building seemed to be receiving.

“That’s odd,” Dan noted with some concern, as he watched the performance.

“A hurricane in London is more than just odd,” Kathryn concurred.

“Not the hurricane, the newsreader. Usually they look so

false when they emote, but she really does look afraid.”

“Maybe she went to drama school, or she could be worried about the wind blowing her hair out of place - or the roof off of her apartment building.”

“How safe is this building?” Dan asked, looking up at the ceiling.

“It’s fairly new. Beyond that, I’ve no idea.”

“The close-set buildings in this development could set up tornadoes. A two hundred mile-per-hour wind can rip anything apart.”

“We’re in the hands of the gods,” Kathryn decided casually. “I hope you haven’t pissed them off too much lately.”

“That’s not a great source of comfort,” Dan confessed, putting a superstitious hand on the hammer he was wearing - realizing he was becoming increasingly attached to it, which wasn’t healthy for a rational mind.

The intrepid outside broadcasting teams of the various major news organizations brought pictures to the screen which were both dramatic and disturbing. Tornadoes, it seemed, were tearing down buildings all across London like the scythes of a vengeful reaper. It was as if the city were under siege and being pummelled indiscriminately by artillery and air bombardment.

A dark vortex of spinning air was caught on camera in a spotlight as it tore up everything in its path. The twisters were ephemeral, followed erratic paths, and couldn’t be tracked for long in the darkness; but still, frightened people stuffed their cars and took to the already choked roads; trusting to luck and statistical improbability, though creating impossible congestion problems as they sought to escape from the city to the perceived sanctuary of the open countryside.

Where the path of a tornado coincided with a traffic jam, hundreds of cars packed with people were thrown into the

air like toys and propelled, like missiles, into buildings.

Experts were already talking about billions of pounds worth of damage, and the economic effects and political fallout of dislocation, while the emergency services estimated that several hundred thousand people had been killed, mainly in collapsing buildings.

Anti-social elements from the populace were emerging to take advantage of the situation, adding to the destruction and carnage, as gangs armed with axes, swords and guns went on looting and mugging sprees. Their targets were banks, department stores, and anyone they caught in the streets - including the emergency services.

The police were fully deployed and army units had been brought in to help maintain law and order. Suddenly the television picture switched to a very frightened looking reporter standing outside 10 Downing Street. She was surrounded by wailing sirens and flashing lights with fire-fighters going in through the front door. Stretchers loaded with bodies, and body parts, were being carried out and loaded onto ambulances.

“What the hell has happened there?” Dan queried rhetorically.

The reporter stated quite clearly that an explosion had occurred in the Cabinet Room. Most of the leading Cabinet members had been present, including the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Home Secretary, and the Foreign Secretary. The explosion was presumably caused by a bomb, although before she could speculate on how a bomb could have got into the cabinet room there was a commotion with what looked like a unit of Crows and the picture went blank.

The face of the studio newscaster filled the void a second later and this time there was no doubting that she looked very pale and shaken. She promised more news on the story as soon as they received it.

Dan stood dumbstruck before the TV screen. He switched channels, hoping against hope that it might be an outrageous hoax being broadcast opportunely with the storm, in the manner of Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* broadcast in 1938, but the news pictures were the same on all channels.

"It's begun," Kathryn murmured.

"How do you get a bomb into the cabinet room?" he asked incredulously.

"Subterfuge. Inside help. In July 1944, a briefcase bomb was smuggled into Hitler's bunker."

"This isn't Nazi Germany," Dan reminded her, "despite the Crows and the surveillance culture."

"In *Voluspa*, Loki used the blind god Hod to kill his brother Baldr," she reminded him.

Dan recalled the the poem. "The Home Secretary is blind," he noted.

Then the floor beneath their feet began to oscillate. The first vibrations were slight, but the amplitude continued to build.

Dan grabbed Kathryn's arm and dragged her down onto the floor behind the sofa, hoping the sloping back might offer some protection if the ceiling collapsed.

The vibration ceased, and as the seconds passed he began to feel both foolish and afraid at the same time. The next tremor hit with a vengeance, shaking the apartment building from the foundations up. The tremor intensified and Dan felt his skull being rattled as if he was operating a pneumatic drill.

"Next time, you should consider the ground floor option," he joked grimly, as he gallantly wrapped his arms around her. "Is this building earthquake proof?"

"I don't know, I'd have to check the lease."

An exterior wall collapsed without warning as if to answer his query, tumbling out rather than in. Dan

thought he heard the splash of bricks falling into the turbulent high tide despite the noise of the storm raging outside. By luck, he realized he had chosen the right corner to crouch in, but now they were exposed to the elements.

Worse still, the roof and ceiling were without the support of the wall, and collapsed moments later. Heavy lumps of plaster, tarmac, tiles, and timber rained down like missiles, devastating the interior of the flat and destroying its contents. Heavy masonry plunged through the floorboards into the flat below like shells through a lightly armoured deck, making the floor treacherous to walk on.

Fortunately, the back of the sofa provided the couple with an effective shield against a heavy beam which now lay across it. Dan timed the tremor in his head, knowing that it would seem to go on forever, when in fact the duration would be less than half a minute. As soon as it had subsided he crawled out from under the improvised bivouac.

“So much for building regulations. We should get out of here before the next one strikes,” he advised.

Kathryn needed no second telling and followed him as he carefully picked his way around the gaping holes in the floor towards the exit. He collected his waterproof jacket en route and checked the pocket for his keys and mobile phone.

“What about the people down there?” Kathryn proposed, pausing to look down into the flat below through a hole in the floor.

Dan cocked his ear for a second to listen for cries of help while sincerely hoping to hear none.

“There’s no one down there,” he concluded thankfully, shepherding her towards the exit, and thence to the stairwell where other people were gathering and beginning to flee.

They felt more tremors as they hurriedly descended the stairs to the ground floor just as the power failed and the darkness rushed in around them like floodwater.

Screams went up in response to the loss of light, though in the lobby there was a guiding glow from a battery operated emergency exit sign allowing them to evacuate the building.

22

Out in the open air of a horrendous night, the driving wind and rain made speech communication difficult.

“We must be very near the epicentre for the after shocks to come so quickly,” Kathryn ventured loudly, as they walked away from the building, fearing its imminent total collapse.

“How is it possible?” Dan yelled out. “There are no major plate boundaries in Britain.”

“There are plenty of local earth faults to produce tremors.”

“Would a local fault be enough to cause all this?” Dan wondered sceptically.

“I saw the effects of one in Mexico once. You don’t take it so personally when it’s someone else’s home,” Kathryn realized, surveying the ruin of the apartment block.

“It’s been one hell of a day,” he remarked.

“Yeah, but it’s not over yet.”

“It’s ten past midnight.”

“Give me the hammer.”

“Why?”

“In case anything happens to you. It’s no use to you now, you ought to get back to your own home - make sure that Kate is alright.”

Dan was about to lift it from around his neck and hand it over as if it were a debt needing to be settled. But then he

remembered the words of the old man.

“No, it stays with me,” he decided.

“Till when?”

“Till *Ragnarok*.”

“This is *Ragnarok*,” she revealed. “The storm, the chaos, the carnage ...”

“In that case - till I hear from Kristin.”

“You’ll hear from Kristin when you’re dead,” she informed him grimly, then turned and walked towards her car.

There were people milling around in confusion. Others were standing in small groups looking shocked and dazed, facing the reality of homelessness like people in a news report from a catastrophe in the developing world. Those lying on the ground with obvious injuries were being tended by friends and neighbours with a minimal knowledge of first aid and virtually no drugs or equipment.

People were erecting makeshift shelters against the rain with timber, blankets, tarpaulin, and flimsy polythene refuse bags, giving the car park the impression of a shanty town. In the distance, the faint sound of sirens attending a call miles away could be heard, though there was no immediate prospect of the vastly overstretched emergency services attending this particular incident, even if they were aware of it.

For a short time the apartment building, with one wall missing, looked like a grotesque, severely damaged, architectural model designed to show the living space inside. The roof had already collapsed, and within minutes the remaining walls fell outward and the floors acceded to the law of gravity. They struck the ground with a dull, but violent, thump - throwing up a cloud of dust which was quickly dampened down by the rain. Everyone in the vicinity crouched and covered their heads against the flying debris.

In the courtyard, rubble from the collapsed walls had

been strewn everywhere. People were walking around with flashlights, with the headlights of parked cars provided some additional illumination for those who sat huddled in the rain, but otherwise the night was black as the ace of spades.

Many of the parked cars had suffered fairly severe damage to their glass and bodywork. Even those which were miraculously untouched were hemmed in by the lumps of masonry lying around like erratic boulders dumped by a melting glacier.

“These people need to find some sort of shelter,” Dan proposed, crouching behind the boundary wall of the courtyard close to where Kathryn’s car was parked. “They can’t stay here in this weather.”

“Where can they go?” Kathryn replied, through the driving rain. “The effects of the quake won’t just be confined to Greenwich, it must have struck the whole of London.”

Dan tried the emergency services on his mobile but wasn’t surprised to find it engaged. He dialled Kate’s number but was informed that all lines were busy, the mobile communications network was being swamped into oblivion. Then the phone suddenly beeped to indicate an incoming text message. He looked at the screen. It contained a message, though not one which he could understand.

“Do you know much about youth culture?” asked Dan, as he showed Kathryn the display.

“It’s a message for me. He wants me to join him.”

“Who does?”

“My political sponsor. The Cabinet Secretary you’re so curious about.”

“How does he know you’re with me?”

“I told him you’ve got the hammer. He’s waiting for you in Westminster.”

“Waiting for me? Why me?”

“He wants to form a government and you have some ideas which interest him.”

“We’ve been hit by an earthquake and some freak weather, not a general election.”

“And a terrorist attack,” she reminded him.

“We don’t know that for sure,” he remonstrated, looking down at the novel characters on the phone display. “Anyone could have sent this text message.”

“With all the communication lines jammed?”

“This could be anything from anyone.”

“The entire Cabinet have been wiped out by a bomb,” she insisted sternly. “Now there’s going to be a reshuffle. Call it - night of the long knives.”

“Surt would have been in the Cabinet Room too,” Dan pointed out. “If there was a bomb, he’ll be dead with all the others.”

“Not if he excused himself at just the right moment.”

Dan thought such a proposition unconvincing, but the sudden collapse of the last wall of the apartment building put further questions on hold.

“There isn’t much time,” she insisted. “We have to give him the hammer.”

“Why would a politician care about an old amber trinket in a time of national crisis?”

“There’s no time to explain. Either come with me or let me take it for you.”

Dan hesitated, his gaze surveying the wreckage around him.

“The hammer is an important cultural icon. It could have a great bearing on our future. Present it to him and he’ll reward you for it,” Kathryn urged. “A peerage, a title, whatever you want!”

Dan was perplexed, thinking she was mad to make such claims, and ever madder to think he put such little value on his integrity.

A huge explosion lit the night sky of the far bank. He felt a chill in the pit of his stomach and the sensation of his blood turning to ice as he witnessed the huge ball of smoke and flame mushroom into the sky. He braced himself for the thermal shockwave which would lift their frail bodies like the toys of an angry god and instantly incinerate them.

Fortunately it never came. Dan sighed with relief as the flames turned a conventional shade of orange and began belching black smoke.

“A gasometer,” he proposed, evidently relieved. “Or a fractured gas main.”

“Sabotage,” she ventured.

A petrol station suddenly exploded in the distance. A great ball of black smoke and orange flame rose into the air, followed half a minute later by the sound of other explosions and the sight of fireballs sprouting like mushrooms in a field. The city across the river began to burn in many places.

“How many filling stations are there in London?” Kathryn pondered. “How many litres of petrol? How many tonnes of explosive chemicals? A leader has to establish order before anarchy and chaos consume the entire city.”

“You mean a dictator,” Dan noted disapprovingly. “Politicians are insufferable at the best of times.”

“The negative connotations have only arisen in modern history. Roman dictators were often admired.”

“This is the twenty-first century. The nation state no longer needs a strongman at its head to survive.”

“The nation state may not. But you and I do,” Kathryn assured him.

Kathryn’s car seemed to have fared better than most as they cleared the rubble from the roof and bonnet with their hands and kicked a few bricks away from under the

tyres. The bonnet had been dented, ominously, by heavy impact, but when she turned the engine over it started first time.

Dan sat in the passenger seat as Kathryn weaved out of the courtyard and onto the main road, taking care to avoid passing over anything which might damage her tyres or anyone sitting or lying in the way. She headed south for the entrance to the Blackwall Tunnel, but by now it seemed like the rest of South-East London was out and on the move. The sheer scale of population movement in the atrocious weather conditions was staggering and they were soon caught in the inevitable traffic jam.

“Is it a good idea to drive through a tunnel after an earthquake?” asked Dan.

“The Department of Transport haven’t closed it yet,” she replied nonchalantly.

“They probably haven’t had time to put on their hardhats and inspect the cracks.”

“I’ll risk it if you will,” she proposed.

“What if I say no?”

“Then I’ll risk it without you. It’s probably safer than using a bridge. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Dan stayed on board and tried not to think about the worst as the car limped through the night towards the gaping mouth of the tunnel.

No one seemed to appreciate the full extent of the danger. Further disaster was about to engulf the Greenwich Peninsula and the Isle of Dogs. A Tsunami set up by the quake had surged up the Thames, overwhelming the flood-barrier at Woolwich, smashing improvised defences, and inundating the lower levels.

All the street lighting had failed, and with the moon obscured by cloud, visibility was restricted to the range of a headlamp. Looking sideways, the motorists in the queue could barely see more than fifty yards.

Kathryn's car was about to enter the tunnel when the ground began to shake again. This was a different sort of vibration, less violent and of higher frequency, though the distinction was largely lost on those terrified people sitting in their vehicles, praying to their gods and fearing the worst of Nature's wrath. The new vibration was slight at first, though seemed to grow in intensity.

"A train?" Kathryn speculated.

"That Mexican earthquake - was it near the coast?" asked Dan.

She looked at him and he stared at her in disbelief as the noise reached crescendo.

"Oh shit!" he cursed, as he sighted the black wall of death barely fifty yards away through the passenger window. "Get off the road!"

There was no time to escape but she revved the engine and spun the wheel so that the vehicle was carried clear of the tunnel mouth as the water struck, lifting the car like a bath toy. Others were not so fortunate as several million tons of water poured into the tunnel mouth in less than a minute, carrying all in their path.

For the thousands of people already trapped in the twin tunnels there would be no escape from the rising water. Only those on the far bank where the tunnel emerged on the East India Dock Road were able to abandon their cars and flee in search of higher ground.

Dan and Kathryn were swept along by the momentum of the water as it flooded into their vehicle soaking their legs and feet. The cars ahead which had been carried past the tunnel mouth by the torrent suddenly seemed to vanish beneath the water's surface as they were carried into the river to sink like stones.

"We must get out," Dan warned, trying to control the panic in his voice. "Take off your seat belt and wind down the window. Be ready to crawl out if the door won't

open.”

Kathryn nodded, removing the belt and pressing the button on the door handle to wind the window down. She gripped the steering wheel tightly to brace herself. Dan held the inner door handle with one hand and the stalk of the seat belt fitting with the other.

More water poured in, soaking them up to the waist, and then, suddenly, the car leaned over on its off-side and began its plunge into the abyss. The dark night went black for the occupants as the vehicle submerged.

Dan had the sense to take a deep breath as the car began to roll and the water rose over his head. He waited for the impact with the riverbed, which seemed to take an interminable time. Finally, the car came to rest on its passenger side, completely void of air.

Weightless and disorientated, eardrums pressed in by the water pressure at depth, Dan probed with his hands for the windscreen. He had no idea which way was up or down in this weightless environment and his hand encountered the mud of the river bank pressing up into the car through his open window.

The trapped passenger knew that panic would kill him quicker than anything in this situation and fought to stay calm as he went through an improvised escape drill. He pinched his nose, blew and swallowed to ease the excruciating pain in his eardrums before resuming his quest for life.

Pushing away from the mud and rising, Dan immediately found the steering wheel. The weight of his waterproof jacket was cumbersome, but he didn't want to risk getting tangled up trying to remove it in a very confined space.

To his relief, Kathryn was no longer in the driver's seat. Her flaying limbs and panic-stricken presence might have trapped them both. His hands found the sill of the open window and he pulled himself up through the portal. The

water chilled him to the bone and swirling currents and eddys tossed his body around, preventing him from breaking the surface.

Dan resigned himself to drowning as he realized that he was about to black out from lack of air and sentimentally thought of Kate, wondering where she was at that moment, and wishing that he'd been able to speak to her one last time. But it was not his destiny to lie beneath the stormy waters, and he regained consciousness minutes later on the surface.

Something or someone was gripping his arm and holding his chin above the water. He coughed, choked, and instinctively struggled against the restraint.

"Dan! Dan!! Keep still!!" a female voice screamed.

He looked up to see Kathryn leaning over the gunwale of a tiny rowing boat which had broken free of its moorings. She was desperately clinging on to him, but his sodden clothes were adding to his weight and she couldn't hold on for much longer.

He turned around to grip the gunwale of the boat, and after few deep breathes to clear his head pulled himself aboard where he lay on his side and vomited up what seemed like a gallon of filthy water.

"When did you hijack this?" he joked grimly, lying in the bilge with his eyes closed and feeling intensely grateful to still be alive.

"It just drifted passed. It must have broken free from its moorings."

"You were lucky."

"You mean you were lucky. I could have swum to the shore."

Dan sat up and looked out wearily over the great expanse of choppy water as if they were adrift at sea.

"What shore?" he wondered aloud.

In the darkness, it seemed that the Greenwich peninsula

and the Isle of Dogs were no more, consumed by an incursion from the North Sea. The physical geography of the sceptered isle had been violently altered. Ragged outlines of wrecked buildings were sticking out of the smooth surface like broken tombstones. A few cars remained afloat, buoyed by air trapped in the boot. Floating grave markers for those still inside.

Kathryn fitted the oars into the row locks and began to row vigorously.

“Shouldn’t I be doing that?” Dan suggested, in an attempt to recover some of his dignity.

“You can take the next shift, if your arm can stand it. Sit down before we capsize - and use that bucket to bail out the water or we’ll sink in half an hour.”

The low freeboard of the little boat made it vulnerable to the lapping waves. Dan sat down in the stern and used the bucket to bail out some of the green water collecting in the bilge.

He worked furiously at first, fearful of going back into the drink, but once on top of the situation he paused to look out over all the horizons for a landmark. All he could see were isolated pockets of orange and yellow flames, together with other more exotic colours. Reds, Greens, and blues flashed intermittently as fallen power lines thrashed about and set up arcs in the damp air until they ignited something combustible.

In the dark, no landmarks were visible, and the heavy cloud obscured the moon and the stars, leaving anyone on the water, or unfortunate enough to be in it, completely disorientated.

Dan thought he could hear cries from other people in the water, but with near zero visibility and the sound of the storm crashing in his ears he could not even determine the direction from where the cries were coming.

Soon they died away, to be replaced by another, fainter

set of cries in the distance. Kathryn ignored them and maintained her course with determined strokes.

“If we circle about we can look for survivors!” suggested Dan.

“If we turn in this wind we’ll be swamped!” she replied.

“Where are we heading?”

“Due west.”

“How do you know which way is west?” he asked, peering through the gloom.

“Penny compass,” she replied, holding up her key ring.

For the next four hours they were blown along on the choppy rollers, shivering like shipwreck survivors, each taking a turn at the oars when the other tired. Dan felt nauseous and would have wretched over the side again if he had anything left to wretch in his stomach.

His weakened arm gave him some difficulty pulling even strokes with the oars when he came to row. His hands were soon blistered by friction with the wood and he could feel every muscle and tendon in his arms and back screaming out for rest. He was grateful for the weather gauge and the favourable tide. Progress against the driving wind would have been impossible. But then, at about three in the morning, as the river was taking shape again, they began to lose that dubious blessing.

Kathryn was the first to notice it, after she’d taken over again, but simply carried on rowing and said nothing until the wind had shifted around and was driving the vicious spray directly into their faces.

“We need to make landfall soon or we’re going to sink,” she warned, on assessing the situation.

She dropped the oars and began bailing frantically.

“Where are we now?” he shouted out, trying to identify a landmark in the distance.

The night had not yet passed but breaks in the cloud cover revealed a full moon which enabled them to survey

a truly devastated city.

“It looks like Wapping,” Kathryn suggested.

Dan took her place at the oars and began to row for the northern bank, ignoring the pain in his arms, chest, and back. As they crossed the river to within about fifty metres of the far bank he noticed she had stopped bailing and was looking straight ahead over his shoulder.

“We’re not there yet!” he warned.

Kathryn seemed not to hear him. Instead she stood up precariously in spite of her earlier advice. He turned his head to see what she was looking at, in time to see an amorphous mass loom into view. The approaching cloud seemed to condense into a group of dark sails, perhaps two hundred metres away, though heading straight for them.

“They’ll get us out of this leaky tub and under a hot shower,” Dan predicted, grinning joyfully. “They might even have some brandy on board.”

“I don’t like the way they’re bearing down on us,” Kathryn muttered, grabbing one of the oars from his grasp and sitting down on the rowing board beside him. “Row!” she ordered.

“What?”

“As hard as you can or they’ll cut us in two.”

Dan took the hint and put his last reserves into powerful strokes with the single oar.

The flotilla seemed to be riding the wind, literally, and covered the distance in less than a minute. The sails of the ships were unusually square and black, like the ones Dan had seen earlier from the balcony, and as the craft approached they revealed their unusual lines. Nothing like modern racing yachts, the bows seemed to rise up like the heads of sea serpents.

“My God, they’re longships!” Dan gasped, resting his oar in astonishment.

“Keep going!” Kathryn barked, as the little boat began to deviate from its course.

Kathryn’s concern was well founded and Dan quickly began to match her strokes again. The longship on the flank of the flotilla was bearing down on them, its bow churning up an enormous white wave, and the dragon figurehead on the prow seemed to move its jaws independently of the surface motion - belching smoke and fire as if eager to devour them.

The vessel seemed more like a living, breathing serpent in the shape of a longship than an inanimate creation of man from dead wood or ancient timbers.

They slipped into a sheltered inlet just as it passed swiftly by with an unearthly chorus of roars, like the battle cry of a raiding party. A loud clunk startled Dan and he looked down at his hand on the gunwale. Inches away, an axe-like projectile had bitten into the wood. He gripped the shaft with both his blistered hands and wrenched it free.

“What the fuck is this?” he asked.

“A battleaxe,” she replied. “You’re lucky it didn’t split your skull.”

“Bastard!” he yelled out, cursing the ship as it sailed away before examining the axe again. “Why did he throw it away? Isn’t it valuable?”

“It could be very valuable. You better keep hold of it,” she suggested quietly.

“Well he’s not getting it back, that’s for sure,” Dan decided, snarling with aggressive indignation and waving it in the air before nearly losing his balance and toppling over the side. He crouched down in the rowing boat again as it bobbed around in the small inlet, keeping a curious eye on the fleet of sails, now retreating down the Thames towards the North Sea.

“Sailing in this weather?” he queried.

“Let’s put it this way, they’re not returning from the

Henley Regatta,” Kathryn answered glibly.

“I didn’t realize there were so many replica longships in existence.”

“I don’t think they were replicas.”

“Whatever - they could at least have offered to pick us out of the water.”

“You may not have enjoyed their hospitality if they had.”

“Better than drowning in this little tub.”

“Cutting the blood-eagle is probably a fate worse than drowning.”

“Cutting the blood-eagle? They don’t have to initiate us into their club, just give us some grog and drop us off on dry land.”

“The storm is dying away,” Kathryn noted, looking up at the sky. The colour had shifted from black to indigo and the eastern sky was beginning to light up with the approaching dawn. “We can resume our course now, the water will be calm soon,” she predicted.

“Why not get ashore and walk?”

“Safer by water. London will be in a terrible state of anarchy and mob rule. This little tub is our lifeboat in more ways than one.”

Dan knew that meant more rowing and bailing. Kathryn’s prediction about the storm proved correct though. Within half an hour the winds and rain had vanished and the water had calmed and settled, its smooth flowing surface becoming like a mirror, save for the gentle undulation of the occasional long wave.

A blanket of fog descended on the city like something reminiscent of the old days of Dickens - smog, pea-soupers, and *Fanny by Gaslight* - before the use of natural gas and smokeless coal; but still they could see the fires raging in the distance like in the aftermath of a Blitz bombing raid. On the calm water, the exhausting chore of bailing was no longer necessary as they drifted through the ghost-

ly waters shrouded in thick mist.

They could still hear the cries of people and animals in the distance. It was hard to tell the difference, just as it was hard to distinguish between agony and despair. Dead bodies began floating past, some horribly mutilated, headless, limbless, disembowelled, as if victims of a terrible medieval battle rather than a mere violent storm.

The river began to take recognizable shape again after they had passed Wapping, and they sought to avoid being swept too far into the centre where the ferocious currents and maelstroms would swamp the little craft and suck them under like a modern Charybdis eager for souls.

The sky had cleared of cloud completely by the first glimmer of dawn. The moon was huge and surreal, and Tower Bridge was the first familiar landmark they encountered, looming through the swathes of mist. The towers, though battered, were still standing, but the central span had been ripped away as if by a giant claw.

The remains of the old navy cruiser HMS *Belfast* lay partially submerged in the middle of the channel. Once a popular tourist attraction and veteran of the last great European war, she now lay with her back broken, violated by the oily bilge and murky waters which had flooded her machine spaces and compartments.

Dan marvelled at the awesome power of nature which had so easily crumpled one of man's great war machines.

"She must have broken her moorings and drifted into mid-channel," he proposed.

"You think this was a natural event?" Kathryn responded acerbically. "What do you suppose broke her back?"

"Typhoons sink ships in the Pacific."

"This isn't the Pacific. Look at the way she's lying across the river like a blockship."

Dan's agnosticism was challenged further by the shattered state of London Bridge, which loomed out of the mist

missing a forty metre section of its central span, as if it had been blasted away.

Kathryn began singing an odd little tune - *London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down; London Bridge is falling down, my fair lady ...*

Dan attributed this eccentricity to stress. He watched silently as they passed under, or rather through, the ghostly forms of a succession of destroyed bridges - looking now like ruins from the ancient world; Southwark, Blackfriars, Waterloo; only the wobbly St Pauls-Southwark footbridge remained surprisingly intact.

"Those bridges didn't just collapse, they were deliberately taken out," Kathryn claimed, as they approached Waterloo Bridge.

"I didn't hear any planes."

"Not by planes ..."

"By what then?"

As she was about to answer, they struck a submerged object and the boat came to an abrupt and immediate halt. The inertia of their moving bodies carried them both forward to the prow. Both cried out desperately on impact as they greatly feared the consequences of even a minor broken bone.

Dan landed heavily on his injured arm, but gave an atheist's thanks to the Almighty that he could stand again without obvious injury. He helped Kathryn to her feet. She, too, was fortunate to have sustained only bruises.

"What was that?" she gasped, as the boat slowly turned beam-on to the water flow then came to a halt again.

"We've run aground," he proposed, looking down to see the murky tidal flow passing under the boat.

"In mid-channel? It's at least thirty feet deep."

"There must be an obstruction in the water. Whatever it is, we're stuck on it."

"The Midgard Serpent!" she gasped.

“What?”

“Nothing - just an unpleasant thought.”

Kathryn looked up at the gap in the stone arch over their heads, and in her mind formed a picture of the collapse taking place.

“We’re on debris from the bridge, or a large sunken vehicle, a lorry or a double decker bus perhaps,” she speculated grimly, taking an oar and sinking it into the flow to investigate the hidden depths beneath the surface.

Sure enough, the oar struck something solid. The suggestion that they had collided with a sunken passenger vehicle was a chilling reminder to Dan that they were floating on a watery graveyard.

He took up the other oar, and at great risk of capsizing the little vessel stood beside her and sought the obstruction to push against. For close to half an hour they tried to push the boat away against the tide, but being positioned over the submerged object made it difficult to purchase any leverage. They seemed trapped between more than one projection from the obstacles beneath the surface.

“It’s no good, you’ll have to go in the water,” Kathryn decided at last.

Dan looked down at the slimy brown water churning with effluent, then glanced at the once sterile white gauze on his arm, now a filthy grey from the previous immersion, but held firm by the dressing tape.

“My arm is still prone to infection,” he reminded her.

“You’re the heaviest,” she pointed out. “If you get out and stand on whatever’s down there the boat will rise up and we can push it off. It’s either that or we sit here and wait for the tide to rise - or another longship to pass by.”

Despite Dan’s reluctance to go back in the water, the prospect of sitting under the remains of Waterloo Bridge, exposed to the elements for another twelve hours held even less appeal. His clothes had partially dried out since

the rain had ceased, and he stripped to his underwear to save them from another soaking, though he put his shoes back on to protect his feet from whatever they might encounter in the dark water and kissed the hammer he still wore round his neck for luck before gingerly lowering himself over the side, blocking out all thoughts of what might be lying in wait below the surface.

It felt cold, much colder than before when, pumped with adrenalin, he had escaped from the car. The water rose to his waist, but he felt nothing except the flow and the occasional piece of submerged flotsam which brushed lightly against his legs before continuing on its way.

He began to wish he had kept his trousers on. Despite improvements over the years, the Thames was still filthy at the best of times and now in full spate it seemed to carry all sorts of stomach churning garbage and slime. The dressings on his arm seemed to be holding on yet again, but he didn't even want to think about the infectious crap which might be seeping through into the wounds.

The water had almost reached his nipples when he encountered a rough solid surface inclined at a precarious angle to the horizontal. With his feet firmly planted on what felt like a concrete incline, he pushed against the side of the boat in conjunction with Kathryn's efforts with the oar.

The vessel barely moved an inch, scraping its keel along whatever held it beneath the waves before coming to a halt and obstinately refusing to move again. He continued pushing, but could not get sufficient purchase from feet which were sliding off the angled surface on which he stood with shoulders just above the water.

Breathing deeply in frustration, he bravely reached beneath the keel of the clinker hull of the wooden boat to investigate the nature of the impediment. The hand encountered a wall of concrete projecting up from the base

on which he stood to within about a foot of the surface. The boat was solidly grounded on sunken masonry.

“It’s no good, m’lady. You’ll have to join me,” he smirked irreverently, like a dissolute Crichton.

Scowling at his humour, she stripped down to her underwear and shoes, then lowered herself over the side, seeking a foothold on whatever platform was supporting him in the deep water, though having to remain on tiptoes to keep her chin above the surface. She weighed about ten stone, enough to give the boat a few more inches of freeboard.

The loss of ballast allowed the force of the current to drive the keel over the concrete obstacle with a tortured grinding sound until the craft was free to drift away.

Dan had the presence of mind to hang on to the gunwale and float with the boat, but Kathryn was more concerned about retaining her toehold and lost her grip. She began to scream as she was left floundering in the water.

Dan cursed his cavalier attitude towards her as he pulled himself aboard. He reached out with an oar as the boat and the thrashing woman drifted apart.

She tried desperately to swim towards the boat but the treacherous eddys and undercurrents of the river in spate combined to intrigue against her. Several times he saw her sucked under and pop up again like a cork in a different position. He knew she wouldn’t have the strength to stay afloat for much longer, and patches of mist still hovered over the water, threatening to envelop her from sight.

Kathryn gave up fighting to reach the boat and turned for the bank, a risky endeavour under normal circumstances but on this particular day fraught with added danger. From Dan’s vantage point, standing on the boat, he could see a series of partially flooded outlet pipes which would claim any swimmer who ventured close enough to be sucked in.

“No!! Stay where you are!” he yelled out, positioning the boat with the oars so that she lay just off the stern, both boat and swimmer being carried along at roughly the same speed.

There was an old length of rope lying discarded in the bilge keel which he gathered into coils and threw one end to her some thirty feet away. The rope hit the water several stroke lengths from her and she reached out to grab it tightly; but as he began to pull her in, something emerged from the midst and moved towards her, making his stomach churn.

He heaved on the line as the monstrous thing glided on the water’s surface like a primeval reptile homing in on its floundering prey. The object was a headless corpse, animated by a sieving mass of rats which had taken refuge on it as a liferaft. Current and fate now carried the corpse, and its rodent crew, straight for Kathryn.

Dan could foresee the consequences and pulled rapidly on the rope, praying that she wouldn’t turn around or let go until he could reach out and grab hold of her, but the corpse was being carried swiftly on the water’s surface and struck the back of her head.

“Hang on! Keep looking at me!” he pleaded desperately.

And so she might have done, were it not for the slippery rats jumping ship and scratching her face with their claws as they sought to balance on her wet head.

Kathryn screamed and immediately let go of the rope. She went under the surface, which dislodged all but one of the rats, a tenacious individual which had wrapped its claws in her hair. When she resurfaced, she thrashed around in a panic to get rid of it, wrenching it bodily from her hair and throwing it some distance to land with a splash in the water.

Dan tied one end of the rope around his waist and the other to one of the rowlocks and lowered himself over the

side rather than diving in heroically and risk striking his head on another submerged object.

A few of the rats swam towards him but his freestyle was too fast for them.

By the time he reached her position she was under the water again. He looked around and called her name in vain, desperate not to lose her now in such a pointless manner and furious with himself for making her get out of the boat. He had, for a moment, allowed himself to forget how vulnerable they both were in this post-apocalyptic world, with Death hovering over them like a constant vulture.

Fortunately for his conscience, she resurfaced again a few seconds later, gasping for air.

“It’s alright, it’s me! I’ve got you,” he urged, trying to calm her down.

He’d never taken a life-savers course, but knew well enough the danger of trying to rescue a panicked swimmer.

“Hold on to my shoulders! I’ve got a rope.”

She took heed of his instructions and gripped his shoulders tightly. He took a deep breath and pulled on the rope drawing the boat towards them.

An enterprising rat was also crawling up the taut rope to seek sanctuary in the craft ahead of them. It dropped out of sight just as Dan reached hold of the gunwale and he knew there would be another problem to deal with as soon as they got aboard. He had Kathryn grip the side while he pulled himself into the boat, then helped her do the same, momentarily forgetting the pain in his arm.

The stowaway rat sat quietly in the forward bilge watching them intently.

“Aren’t you going to get rid of it?” asked Kathryn, as she sat clutching her clothes defensively across her flesh and shivering on the seat. “If it pisses in here we could both

end up with Weil's disease."

Dan privately doubted whether, at this rate, either of them were going to live long enough to worry about diseases.

"How do you suggest I get rid of it?" he replied.

"Kill it with the axe."

"That way it'll piss all over the place. It just wants to get ashore just like us," he decided, admiring its tenacity for life and irritated by her lack of compassion after she herself had come so close to death. It didn't seem like a very thoughtful human reaction. "We're nearly there now, we can co-habit for a while longer."

They dressed their filthy soaking bodies and Dan rowed slowly towards the remnants of Westminster Bridge. Kathryn sat on the stern seat, clutching the axe with her eyes fixed keenly on the rat.

In less desperate circumstances, he would have had some concern for her mental state after the incident in the water, but, like Weil's disease, it wasn't his most pressing concern.

With the glimmer of dawn, they began to notice more and more objects floating passed. The nearer ones they recognized as human, and were staggered by the numbers they could count - as if the population of the city had been thrown into the river and was being carried out to sea like nineteenth century effluent.

On their port side, they passed a segment of the London Eye sticking out of the water. The great wheel had been torn from its mounting by the wind and embedded itself in the river mud like a discarded bicycle wheel.

Dan steered towards the west bank beneath the bridge whilst keeping a chary eye on the rat. The rat did likewise, respecting the power of these apparently omnipotent gods like a child - blissfully ignorant of its parents feeble shortcomings in a hostile world. He was physically and mentally

exhausted, more so than he could ever recall, and the thought of sleeping peacefully, even in the open air among the ruins of the city, was an attractive proposition.

They clambered out of the boat, leaving the rat as second mate in charge of the ship, and began to survey the devastation which had befallen the historic city.

A sense of history overcame Dan's discomfort and fatigue as he witnessed the destruction, not just of buildings but of institutions, and began making mental notes of how to chronicle this for posterity after reconstruction. In his preoccupation he failed to notice that she was still carrying the axe.

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The Treasury and Foreign Office buildings were still standing, but showed severe structural damage from the storm and the internal fires which still raged. Dan paused for a moment by the undamaged cenotaph with his head bowed. He'd always had ambivalent feelings toward the monument and what it stood for - mitigation for the diplomatic and military follies of the Great War committed by an incompetent ruling class; but now, in the face of devastation and disaster, the stability of an imperial motherland of birthright-privilege and blundering hypocrisy didn't seem like such a bad old place.

Dismissing this cultural nostalgia brought on by stress and fatigue, he rejoined Kathryn as she walked towards Downing Street. The anti-terrorist gates had suffered the fate of other man-made barricades. The bars of mangled steel had been twisted and torn apart as if by the hands of angry giants.

Kathryn and Dan slipped through the gates and walked towards the traditional residence of the sovereign's first minister. The bodies of soldiers and police lay where they had fallen, as if they had fought a running battle from the gates to the door of number 10. The terrace building itself had been completely demolished, presumably struck by the full force of a tornado, and was now no more than a long pile of rubble.

“Reminds you of the Blitz - or the Berlin Chancellory in 1945,” Kathryn noted grimly. “The new leader will have to build a new residence. Perhaps even a new capital.”

Dan continued to be grateful for his empty stomach as he examined a few of the gruesome corpses.

“These people weren’t killed by the storm. They look as if they’ve been butchered with knives. What the hell is going on?” he demanded to know, as if Kathryn were somehow responsible.

“Gangs of anarchists taking advantage of the chaos,” she proposed, shrugging her shoulders.

Dan looked again at the bodies spread over the grass and the road. There were a few civilians, but most wore police or army uniforms. They lay as if they had died dutifully defending the prime minister’s residence. He bent down to look at some of their wounds.

“These aren’t bullet wounds. They’re more like what you’d expect from swords and axes. How could a gang armed with swords wipe out a heavily armed police unit?”

“They must have been overrun by weight of numbers.”

“Then where are the other bodies?”

“Carried away by their comrades.”

Kathryn dropped the axe she was carrying and lifted an assault rifle from the grasp of a dead police officer. She squeezed the trigger to determine that the magazine was empty, then took a spare magazine clip from the dead officer’s belt. She expertly loaded the rifle and fired a single round in the air to check that it was working.

Dan lifted the axe and gripped the shaft tightly with both hands. He had the weapon which Joe had warned him about, but now Kathryn seemed more preoccupied with a deadlier toy.

“Where did you learn to do that?” he asked, less comforted by her display of proficiency than perhaps he should have been.

“TA,” she answered, taking the battleaxe from him and thrusting the weapon into his grasp.

“Why give it to me?” he queried. “You’re the one who knows how to use it.”

“It takes two good arms to swing an axe,” she explained, clutching the shaft with both hands. “You’ve only got one.”

“I’ve always been a bit pinko when it comes to guns,” he confessed, peering into the sight of the exquisitely engineered instrument of death and feeling slightly more secure for it in her unpredictable presence. “They should all be put in the crusher.”

“Tell that to the next bunch of thugs or psychopaths we meet in our brave new world,” Kathryn advised, turning away with the axe on her shoulder. “Samuel Colt made all men equal.”

“Edward Teller did a similar thing for nations. Do you plan to search all of Westminster?” Dan asked wearily, now so tired that he felt physically sick.

He wondered how soldiers managed to go for days without sleep in battle conditions. This was no ordinary battle on a foreign field though. He was witnessing the devastation of his homeland and the loss of a privileged existence which, for most of humanity, was unprecedented in history. Dan felt sure that if he simply laid down in the road and closed his eyes he’d be unconscious in seconds, and when he awoke, it would be in his bed after a most incredible dream.

“We can’t stay out here much longer, we need to find food and a place to sleep,” he argued.

“There’s no time for sleep,” she insisted. “Not till we find *him*.”

Kathryn headed for Parliament Square with Dan following some way behind. He anxiously held onto the gun and prayed that he wouldn’t have to shoot anyone, but

fortunately the few survivors who were wandering around seemed in a state of shock and confusion like zombies. No one living seemed keen to approach the fierce-looking, mud-spattered pair of strangers carrying an axe and an assault rifle.

The historic neogothic Palace of Westminster, bastion and visible redoubt against the dreaded *liberte, egalite, et fraternite* of republicanism - and subject of so many delightful picture-postcards and watercolours - had been reduced to a smouldering ruin. Flames could still be seen billowing from the roof and windows like joyous vandals looting the interior. The thick belching smoke from burning tar hung in a black cloud over the grand old Victorian building, polluting the misty air with its foul smell.

As Kathryn and Dan approached Parliament on foot, more daylight from the dawn began to filter through the blanket of mist and smoke to light their way. Bodies lay everywhere - as if a terrible massacre had taken place under the cover of night and the storm. He followed her with the gun pointing ahead and his nervous finger on the trigger despite his liberal convictions.

Some fragments of oak still hung from the door hinges of Westminster Hall, but the doors themselves appeared to have been shattered by a great force pressing inwards.

Kathryn took a scarf from a dead soldier and tied it across her mouth and nose before entering the burnt out building. Dan followed her to view the interior, completely blackened by the flames which were now high up in the roof.

They continued to advance into the ruin, their eyes adjusting to the gloom, until they came to the entrance of the Commons debating chamber. These doors had also been shattered inwards by an irresistible force. Despite the gloom they could make out the charred corpses which littered the benches and the floor within, and the stench

was unbearable.

“Black Rod never managed anything like this,” Kathryn observed in amazement.

“Black Rod is just an old man in tights,” Dan replied, putting a handkerchief across his mouth and gagging into it.

“Was an old man in tights.”

“This must have been done by a tank armed with a flame thrower. But where is it now?”

Kathryn ignored the question.

“He’s not here,” she decided, after a cursory inspection.

“Who isn’t?”

“John Surt.”

“How can you tell?” Dan exclaimed, trying to excise from his mind the image of shrunken, twisted corpses, burnt beyond recognition.

“Think about what’s happening here,” she advised. “It’s all part of an intelligent design.”

“Intelligent design for what?”

“Nation building. Reconstruction.”

Overhead the timbers began to groan. In reflex, he looped an arm around her waist and pulled her back the way they had come just before the entire roof fell in.

In the open air again, they breathed deeply with relief and to clear their lungs of the noxious gas and choking dust.

“You seem to know a lot about what’s going on here,” he proposed sternly. “And you take it all in your stride. I want some answers now, or else ...” he paused fatally, losing the initiative.

“Or else what?” she replied defiantly. “Are you going to shoot me?”

Dan raised the barrel of the gun ever so slightly as if tempted, then lowered it again.

“Or else we part company here and now.”

“Would you shoot me if your life depended on it? Or the lives of others?”

“This isn’t the time for stupid questions,” he growled. “The army will be here soon to restore law and order, and then we can start clearing up this mess.”

“Army? What army? Do you think there is an effective army unit left anywhere in the country? Colchester is an hour’s drive from London so why aren’t they here by now?”

Dan had to admit that he was a little perplexed by this.

“Traffic congestion,” he proposed.

“It’s twenty minutes by helicopter.”

She paused and cocked an ear.

“I don’t hear any choppers. In fact, I don’t hear anything at all. A peacetime army on home soil is a fairly easy thing to disarm and subdue, especially if you are the sole surviving Cabinet Secretary. You send the Crows out to arrest every senior police officer and everyone else above the rank of major, take them into the woods and quietly dispose of them with a bullet in the back of the head. The Crows would have had a busy night last night.”

“How can you be so sure that an organized coup is taking place? All I see is storm damage and mass murder.”

“Where are the dead Crows? All the casualties we’ve seen so far have been from the police and the regular army. You don’t commit your strategic reserves until you are sure of victory. The Cold War plan after a nuclear strike was to divide Britain up into twelve regions each ruled by a commissar with absolute power. The Crows will provide that power and each commissar will owe allegiance to John Surt, like thanes to their king. This is year zero, the start of a new Dark Age in English history. A few lords ruling over the peasants without the intelligentsia getting in the way. In time, the thanes will conspire to present the king with a Magna Carta and a new privileged

class of landowners will form their own parliament, but that could take decades.”

Her callous tone angered him. He aimed the gun at her feet and squeezed the trigger. A single round struck the tarmac in front of her with a loud twang and ricocheted away into the distance. She slowly turned to face him with the axe poised in her hands, and her harsh gaze boring into his, as if she were about to strike. His impulsive action seemed reckless now, though he followed it up with a verbal challenge.

“You can’t take over the whole United Kingdom with just a few thousand men,” he protested. “Even John Surt admitted that the night before last.”

“Who said anything about men,” she replied.

“What are you saying?”

“The crews of those longships we passed on the river were *Jotnar*. The demons of old who fought the gods. They could destroy London and all its inhabitants, or any other city on the planet, if invoked to do so.”

Dan was too weary to laugh in disbelief.

“The Americans and the EU states will intervene. They’ll set up a provisional government and implement some sort of Marshall aid plan to prevent starvation.”

“They won’t come, not unless invited in by the sovereign power, and right now there is no sovereign power. There’s what you might call a disputed succession. In years to come a new Shakespeare will write about the triumph of King Jack.”

“They’ll come,” Dan predicted confidently. “There must be at least half a million wealthy foreign nationals in London at this time of year.”

“They might try some sort of civilian evacuation programme, in and out quickly, but they’re not going to interfere in the fighting. Don’t forget, there could be someone walking around this city with a nuclear key in his

pocket and a trident submarine lurking beneath the Atlantic waves thinking this is Armageddon. First we find John Surt, then you decide what title you want.”

“You think I’d sell my soul for a title?”

“Why not? Englishmen have been doing it for years. He must be waiting for us in Westminster Abbey.”

Kathryn walked towards the historic site of investiture which lay just across the road. Dan followed some distance behind, wondering whether she might be leading him into some sort of trap. Fatigue and repeated surges of adrenalin were seriously impeding his critical faculties to the extent that he could not fathom what her real purpose might be.

He clutched the gun like a zealous bodyguard, determined that neither of them should become victims of a mindless moron on a lesser quest.

The doors to the Abbey had received the same irreverent treatment as those of Parliament and there were a number of dead soldiers lying around the entrance. The arched portal was normally barred at night but the old oak doors had been battered inward. One still hung limply from a twisted but tenacious hinge, the other lay shattered on the ground like a fallen sentinel, crushed and trampled by the invader. The violation of the enfranchised church was a further debilitating blow to Dan’s bleak outlook on the constitutional future of his nation.

Yet another horrific sight greeted the visitors before they entered the building. A man in his late fifties or early sixties had been stripped to the waist and crucified facing a railing. His back was a mass of torn flesh and congealed blood as if the ribs and organs had been removed.

“Is that what you mean by ’cutting the blood eagle?’” Dan asked grimly.

“I’ve never actually seen it done before,” Kathryn confessed, with morbid curiosity. “But it certainly looks like

it.”

“What did he do to deserve that?”

“It’s not what he did, but who he was. It’s symbolic. This is how you sacrifice your most powerful enemy - the chief priest of the Christ-god.”

“Sacrifice to whom?”

“Whichever god gives you victory.”

“What about the Royal Family?”

“Dead, I expect. In a palace basement, like the Romanovs - if they’re lucky. It may seem like mindless barbarism to you, but there is a subtle code of ethics at play here. Think about it as the rules of a very brutal game,” she advised. “One which has not been played in this country for centuries, but was once quite common across Europe in the Darwinian struggles between competing dynasties.”

He followed Kathryn inside the temple of state to witness a wanton scene of vandalism and desecration. The stain-glass windows had shattered outwards as if pressured by a blast. The wooden benches were torn and splintered, the altars smashed. The accoutrements of worship - the prayer books, candlesticks, and chalices - were scattered over the debris as if a demonic fury had swept through the house of the Christian god.

“Behold the new Reformation!” Kathryn cried out maniacally, raising her arms, one of which still carried the axe.

Dan passively allowed himself to be led down the aisle as Kathryn picked her way forward like a surveyor assessing storm damage. He was conscious of being led, his senses numbed by the sight of so much destruction and carnage.

A cold, unearthly silence seemed to linger in the ruin, until the timbers overhead began to creak and groan, and the cracks in the walls began to widen. If they had come seeking Death, then they had found his domain. The Christian god had clearly fled in the night.

Dan halted and pulled Kathryn back, recovering some of

his wits and looking around anxiously.

“Let’s get out of here,” he advised. “It isn’t safe.”

“Not yet, he could be in here somewhere,” she insisted.

“Why would he still be in here? This whole place could collapse at any time.”

Kathryn ignored Dan and continued walking, leaving him standing in a quandary. He rationalized his fears by convincing himself that the roof was about to give way, but in truth he was more fearful of the cold and the unearthly silence which lingered in the ancient ruin.

Dan called out to Kathryn again, but she continued striding forward through the debris. The choice was stark, either leave her and save his skin or drag her out, kicking and screaming if necessary. Cursing, he caught up and seized her arm. She shrugged him off, but at that instant he heard a groaning sound overhead which made him pause to look up as the beams collapsed onto the space where he would have been walking.

“There’s no one in here except ghosts,” he maintained.

Kathryn ignored him, and he continued to follow her into the plush sweeping vestibule which usually greeted guests with ostentatious grandeur, and followed the line of her sight to a great throne at the far end of the central aisle, placed as if set out to greet them.

The throne was occupied by a figure slumped forward, wearing all the trappings of pomp and pageantry which empire could bestow. The shoulders were draped by a coronation robe of red velvet and white ermine. The right hand clutched a sceptre, the symbol of sovereignty and majesterial rule, but the crowned head was bowed as if by the weight of disaster which had befallen his kingdom. There was no one else in sight. They approached slowly and cautiously, as if humbly seeking an audience.

Kathryn suddenly gasped as she recognized the figure and stepped behind Dan as if to conceal herself.

“Oh my God! You must kill him,” she whispered in his ear, as if they were in the bush stalking a wounded lion.

“What?”

“Kill him now!” she insisted, raising her voice. “You won’t get another chance.”

The pathetic figure on the throne heard his death sentence pronounced and slowly raised his head, revealing his pale manic features for the first time. His face, though horribly distorted, was unmistakably that of a Councillor and local government archaeologist - Lorenz Kee.

Dan felt something akin to pity for this poor wretch. The recent horror had clearly been too much for him and he was now seeking escape in the pompous ritual of a constitutional pantomime.

The sad clown began to quote from *Richard II*, in a clipped tone, like an actor with the RSC.

“For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings. How some have been deposed, some slain in war, some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed, some poisoned by their wives, some sleeping killed, all murdered. For within the hollow Crown that rounds the mortal temples of a king keeps Death his court, and there the antic sits scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp ...”

“He’s totally lost the plot,” Dan sighed, weary and disheartened.

“No, you don’t understand!” Kathryn cried, dropping the battleaxe and seizing the gun from him. “It’s Loki!”

Dan grabbed the weapon back as she squeezed the trigger and let off a volley of rounds which impacted with stone and plaster behind the throne, but which miraculously missed the intended victim.

Kathryn released her grip on the gun and lifted the battleaxe. Dan watched in disbelief as she screamed and charged the figure like a berserk warrior. Kee rose slightly

from the throne, almost in slow motion, as she wielded the axe through a high arc and brought it down towards his head.

Dan winced and looked away, feeling squeamish about seeing a human head split open like a water-melon. Instead he heard a metallic sound ring out and looked back to see that Kee had parried the blow with his sceptre.

Before Kathryn had the chance to strike again they were surrounded by men in black uniforms armed with semi-automatic pistols. Two stepped forward and seized the arms of the madwoman. Another took the axe from her then bowed his head as he offered it to Kee.

The usurper took the axe and smiled grimly. He put a thumb on the sharp blade then gripped the shaft with one hand and wielded it in circles as if to demonstrate his prowess.

Dan was still armed but knew that a dozen pistols were pointing at his back.

“I need the hammer,” Kee confessed, stepping closer to Dan as he continued to swing the axe menacingly.

“Who are you?” Dan asked urgently.

“You are now my loyal subject, Dr Levin,” Kee answered majestically, stretching out his left arm and placing the tip of the sceptre on Dan’s shoulder. “Kneel, Sir Daniel, and pledge allegiance to your new king.”

Dan studied the face again, this time at a much closer range. The ashen skin was lined with creases and the eyes were sunken and dark, but now Dan interpreted the signs of mental breakdown as menacing and a distillation of evil, like the face in the portrait of Dorian Gray.

“Kill him while you can - before he kills you, and all of us!” Kathryn screamed, as a gloved hand covered her mouth, silencing her.

Dan suddenly realized the mortal danger they were both facing. He had only a split second to make a fateful dec-

ision, but it was time enough under the dreadful circumstances. He realized that he had become a political assassin as he raised the muzzle of the gun, and accepted the condemnation reserved for such men as he levelled the barrel for the sake of a future democracy.

The trigger seemed momentarily unresponsive, delayed by some metaphysical power which he could not explain. He felt the blade of the axe bite deep into his chest and cleave open his sternum. He fell backwards, firing the weapon harmlessly into the air before landing heavily on the stone floor, his torso in a seizure, his lungs in agony as if seared by fire as he tried to breathe with the heavy iron embedded in his chest. Mercifully, the pain was short lived. His ruptured heart failed and he receded into the dark chasm of oblivion.

Kathryn stopped struggling with her captors and watched anxiously as Kee put a foot on Dan's neck and roughly pulled the battleaxe free of his chest. He turned to Kathryn and held up the dripping axe like a trophy.

"You disappoint me," he smirked. "You should have chosen a better champion than this to escort you here. He's no warrior."

"It's not over yet," she contested bravely.

"It is for you."

Kee nodded to one of the Crows, who then bent over Dan and tore open the bloodied t-shirt to expose his torso. It was a ghastly mess of blood and bone but nothing more. The Crow then checked his pockets, but without finding what he sought. He straightened up and shook his head.

Kee's expression changed from triumph to one of puzzlement as he sought an answer from Kathryn.

"Where is the hammer?"

"He was wearing it," she insisted. "He must have dropped it in the Thames when he was in the water. A votive

offering to his god.”

Kee considered this carefully, noting the damp, filthy state of her clothes and hair.

“Daniel Levin doesn’t have a god - but tis no matter, now that he has gone,” Kee decided.

“Where is John Surt?” Kathryn demanded to know.

“He died with the rest of the Cabinet.”

“That isn’t possible. Who invoked the *Jotnar*?”

Kee smiled triumphantly.

“How could you? You don’t have the power in this world.”

“Soon I will have all the power in the kingdom. Only *Mjollnir* can banish me now,” Kee declared. “And you say it’s lying safely in the mud beneath the murky water of the Thames for future archaeologists to find?”

Kathryn nodded.

“Release her,” Kee commanded.

The Crows flanking Kee stepped away from her. She glanced to either side, then fixed her gaze on Kee.

“Now take off your clothes,” he ordered her quietly.

“Why?” she challenged him. “I haven’t got it.”

“We need to search you - thoroughly.”

Kathryn stepped backwards instinctively, only to collide with the Crow blocking her retreat.

“The Crows can do it for you - if you prefer,” Kee insisted.

Kathryn realized there would be no reprieve from this humiliation. She had backed the wrong candidate. She slowly, fatefully, slipped off her shoes and out of her jeans.

A Crow stepped forward and gathered the garment for inspection. She unbuttoned her shirt and removed it, though held it across her her cleavage for modesty. The Crow snatched the shirt away, leaving her standing in once white underwear and bra, now discoloured by the river water.

Kee turned and pointed with his sceptre to a large noose dangling above a wooden bench. Kathryn covered her body with her arms but was seized, wrists bound behind, and dragged to the noose. The Crows stood her on the bench with the noose pulled tight around her neck.

“You have been found guilty of inciting treason against your sovereign,” Kee pronounced.

“Fuck off,” was all she could think of to say.

“Tracherous, but brave. We can wait till you are dead before we look inside you.”

He slowly walked away, leaving his troops to complete the execution.

As the noose tightened, and all thoughts and vision faded away, Kathryn thought she saw a strange shape, ethereal but anthropomorphic, almost certainly female, hovering over Dan’s body, and a ghostly pair of hands holding a cord from which the hammer was suspended.

24

Kate had been working late in her office at UCL when the storm hit. At eight pm she was leaving to go home when the weather turned violent and she was forced to retreat back to her office. University security staff warned her that chaos had enveloped the city, then disappeared on their rounds, or deserted their posts. Kate never saw any of them ever again.

She switched on a radio and began monitoring news reports of the dramatic incidents. She tried phoning Dan on his mobile but was unable to get through to him, or to anyone else. Presumably the network was flooded with emergency calls and conversations between excitable teenagers fearing an imminent loss of the phone masts to the wind which would blight their lives for twenty four hours. When she tried using a landline she could get no dialling tone. The phone was dead as if the line had been cut.

Kate decided not to attempt the journey home until weather had decidedly improved. She could remain in the office for the whole night if necessary. Then came rumoured reports of an explosion in the Cabinet Room and she began to fear the worst. Like all sane and intelligent people she feared the anarchy which would ensue without effective government and the Philistine dictatorship that could easily replace it. Being an academic made her feel particularly uneasy. She would be an obvious target in any

roundup. As midnight neared, the news reports began to dry up and the London based channels began going off the air for no apparent reason.

A power cut plunged the office into darkness. She groped around for a candle to provide a modicum of light and a battery operated transistor radio which had lain in a drawer for years. She fitted a couple of batteries to it and was amazed to find it worked, but the only signals she could pick up were broadcasting in foreign languages on medium wave.

All Kate could do was sit in the darkness and watch through a window as parts of London burned, whilst others were ripped apart by tornadoes. Stepping out on the street would have been risky, and attempting to journey home by car would have been suicidal. She heard the faint chimes at midnight over the roar of the winds.

The raid on the faculty came without warning in the early hours. The door burst in and suddenly the space was filled with burly figures dressed in black uniforms and carrying bright flashlights. She tried hiding under her desk but was dragged out, blindfolded and taken down to the street. In the distance she could hear a sharp staccato on the wind which she took to be sporadic gunfire.

They loaded her into the back of what she assumed was a truck and drove off. Her hands were bound behind her back with plastic flex so that she was unable to remove the blindfold. She was aware of other people in the truck, some were weeping but most were silent, and there was a stale smell from those who had lost control of their bowels.

Kathryn assumed they were blindfolded like herself. The journey was terrifying, for it sounded as if they were driving through a battlefield. The sound of gunshots and explosions could be heard coming ever closer, then fading into the distance, only to be replaced by yet more sound

of fighting.

Eventually the truck stopped, she knew not where. The prisoners were unloaded down an inclined ramp and led along an old stone path. Kate could feel cobbles under her shoes. Suddenly the fresh air became foul again and she heard a heavy door close behind her. All around she could hear people crying and weeping, but the blindfold denied her sight. She tentatively took a step forward, then another.

Someone cursed her angrily for stepping on their hand and bit her leg.

She cried out in pain and stumbled, whispering, "Help me, please, take the blindfold off."

"What blindfold?" a gruff male voice replied, with a scornful lack of pity.

The remark was chilling. She kept edging forward, ignoring the complaints, until her face touched the cold hard stone of a wall. She turned and leaned her head back against the wall until she felt the blindfold knot then sank down to her knees and stood upright again repeatedly in an effort to dislodge it. Eventually, after numerous attempts, she was able to shake the blindfold free, but to her horror she was completely blind.

A sense of suffocation followed and she sank to the floor, taking desperate panicked breathes. The attack lasted several minutes, and as it subsided she began to critically analyse the situation. She was partaking of a form of justice from the great age of monarchy. No amount of erudition could have prepared Kate for the terror of internment in a medieval dungeon. The cruel practice from a barbarous age, previously no more than a historical curiosity, had become reality as if by a stroke of divine vengeance.

The oppressive darkness, impervious to the eye, felt as if it might literally suffocate her. She controlled her breath-

ing as best she could, knowing that even the least imaginative would suffer a succession of panic attacks at being interred alive, until a form of resigned insanity numbed the mind and rendered the prisoner little more than psychotic - tormented by memories of daylight.

No one spoke, but the sounds of coughing and weeping echoed softly around the room, and the inevitable smells of humanity confined without sanitation had polluted the stale, musty air. Soon the dying would begin, if it had not already begun. There was no way of telling how many corpses were lying at her feet as she sat hunched against the cold stone wall.

Kate felt something wet and furry brush against her ankle. She heard a hiss and a squeal and instinctively kicked out at it. Her foot impacted on something dull and heavy, and she drew back the limb in shock. Seconds later, it seemed like eternity, she was relieved to hear a murmur of protest from the body.

Soon they would be released, or die of suffocation and neglect. In a sense, the darkness was a comfort, a sanctuary. Kate longed for daylight though she knew that Death would come for her when the sanctuary was violated.

They'd been stripped of all jewellery before being consigned to the darkness. She had wondered if it had been just a spiteful, opportunistic act of looting, but the thorough manner of the search, without regard for the material value of the more ostentatious pieces on display, suggested that someone had issued a precautionary order. Either way, her cheap wrist-watch had gone to the enemy cause, not that it was much use to her without a light source. Without it she had quickly lost track of time, there being no reliable way of estimating how many hours had passed. Sleep came and went. Each time of waking in the darkness among the muted cries, she would begin to panic once

again before gaining some modicum of self-control.

The sound of footsteps returned. Alerted by the clank of keys and the percussion of heels on stone, Kate waited for a fresh injection of prisoners into the maw of the Tower. The imminent activity, though threatening, was greeted with almost eager ambivalence, breaking the monotony of torturous uncertainty. A key slotted noisily into a lock and turned, hinges creaked, and a heavy door swung open, allowing a few shards of light into the cell to tease their starved orbs. But there were no more prisoners to deliver into the crowded cell.

A number of men in the now familiar dark uniforms and berets entered with flashlights and herded the cowed, disorientated occupants against the walls. Those confused enough to look straight at the flash beams cried out in pain before turning away and grasping at their eyes as if to tear out the offending orbs. Those who were too weak or slow were brutally beaten with batons until they lay still and had to be dragged out by the ankles.

Those remaining on their feet were collared to a long chain, then led up the stone steps into the light of a grey morning. Those who collapsed were simply dragged by the momentum of the others, twisting and choking until a baton blows until they could regain their feet.

After the time in the cell, the pure, sweet air made Kate feel nauseous, and she strongly resisted the urge to take deep breaths, which would lead to the inevitable consequence.

Others were less circumspect and vomited what little remained in their stomachs. As her eyes adjusted slowly to the light, Kate realized that they were in a courtyard. The sound of engines revving up was loud and disturbing, polluting the air with the obnoxious smell of diesel fumes which burned into raw lungs.

Kate saw a cab-rank of four-ton army trucks waiting to

be loaded with passengers for another journey. She looked around at the obvious escape routes to which she could have edged towards and perhaps slipped away where it not for the chain linking her to so many others, and the ring of armed men in black paramilitary uniforms. She heard a voice risk a beating by whispering her name and she turned, squinting, her vision still impaired, to make out a familiar face.

Joe was standing immediately behind her looking dishevelled and unshaven. One eye was tight shut from a blow. Bruised lips and the blood around his mouth suggested that he'd lost some teeth.

"Rough night?" she quipped.

"I didn't think much of the towels," he concurred.

"No stars for the accommodation then," she decided, as a nearby truck engine revved up and the Crows began to herd them up the steep ramp and into the back.

"When did they get you?" he asked.

"Last night. They raided the faculty."

"That's what you get for working late."

"I think they were just as likely to pick me up at home. What about you?"

"I was already in custody. The Met handed me over to the Crows. They wanted to know all about Kristin and Dan and they became quite persuasive."

"What did you tell them?"

"Anything I could think of."

"Good for you. What happened to Dan?"

"I don't know," Joe replied. "I haven't seen him since Thursday night."

A passing Crow struck Joe on the back of the head with a baton.

"No talking!" he barked.

Joe winced and bowed his head in show-trial contrition, waiting for the black-uniformed figure to pass before con-

tinuing in a defiant whisper.

Just ahead of them, an old man who was having difficulty with the incline and holding up the queue was unlocked, pulled off the ramp and roughly pushed onto the stone cobbles. He landed heavily on his shoulder and his face grimaced with pain as he tried to get up, but he made no sound. Once young and virile, with no appreciation of the brief blessing of youth. Now, in old age, he had learned to endure.

Kate watched in horror as a Crow put a pistol to the back of his head and pulled the trigger. Blood spurted from the bullet hole and the body slumped instantly like a deflated toy. A few other men in the line cursed the Crows and made menacing movements, but with their hands bound they were helpless to act and were loaded into the cattle truck with the rest.

25

The warrior woke to the musty smell of damp wood, hissing and cackling like an old hag as it burned on the fire. The flames danced around like elemental spirits, releasing their noxious gases into the air. Most rose straight up through a smoke hole as if eager to escape into the night, though some lingered awhile around the fire before diffusing into the smoky air. Staring up through the smoke hole, he could see brilliant stars in the crystal clear sky.

Elsewhere, he could see a high, vaulted ceiling resting on the limbs of trestles lit by the leaping flames. His eyes focussed with child-like awe on the joists high overhead, supporting a roof built on a scale of splendour previously unbeknown to him. His primitive senses were struck by the wonder of this marvellous feat.

He tried to rise but was weak and rendered powerless by a firm pair of hands pressing down on his bare shoulders. A head looking down on him blocked out the view.

A woman, of that he was certain from the scent of apple blossom on her skin, from the curve of her cheeks, and from the silky brush of her long auburn hair on his chin and forehead; though her features were obscured by a shadow across her face.

He laid back his head on a rolled up sheepskin, closed his eyes, and tried to recall the events which had brought him to this strange place. Memories were vague and even

the simple knowledge of his own identity eluded him. There had been a great battle and he recalled being struck down.

Tilting his chin, he looked to his chest, waiting for his vision to adjust and imbibe the expected horror of a battle-mutilated body.

There was a single great cleft where the blade had split his sternum, but no trace of blood. His deathly pale skin was kept warm by the heat of the fire and the unearthly radiance of the woman which enveloped him as a star would its planetary child.

Her smile materialized through the veil of shadow to reassure him, though her beauty was unnaturally fine and disturbing to his senses.

He tilted his head again and looked up into the woman's eyes, seeing her clearly now for the first time. She seemed vaguely familiar and yet idealized beyond any being he had ever known - except perhaps one. She, too, once had a striking appearance, more than he could ever have imagined, but less than he could fully recall.

The vision haunted him, the physical embodiment of a primitive abstraction. A tenet of every excess, every sexual and emotional urge and desire of a dissolute life had condensed into this alluring physical form which he found overwhelming and irresistible. He wondered whether a fragile mortal would survive the encounter with such an unworldly aura.

Then he realized the irony of it all through a glimmer of his former consciousness. It made sense to accept that he was already dead. With the surreal black humour of a fatalist, he accepted that she didn't exist at all outside the confines of a dying brain. This was simply the final lonely dream, inspired by a residual spark of imagination before the candle was extinguished forever.

She gently stroked his cheek and leaned over his pros-

trate form to impart a kiss, her full lips pressing against his. Energy flowed across the arc as she breathed life back into the enervated body. He felt his heart start to beat, and his chest began to close, enabling blood to flow again from his marrow to fill the empty vessels; to resurrect the tissue, and revive the sensation in his limbs.

The caress of her lips and her hands invigorated his entire body until fully charged with the power and strength of a living being. A hand resting on his chest pressed something into his skin. He recognized the cross-like hammer which he had worn.

“Where am I?” he finally asked.

“*Valboll*,” she answered. “I carried you from the field. It was the wish of *Othinn*. *Othinn* has need of heroes slain in battle.”

“Why me?” he asked, haunted by a vague memory of cowardice and indecision at a crucial time. “I wasn’t a hero, I, ...”

The low pitch of a hunting horn suddenly filled the air, rising in volume to shake the very rafters of the hall.

“*Gjallarborn*,” she informed him. “*Heimdall* is calling all the warriors to the plain for a battle against the *Jotnar*.”

“I must go,” he insisted urgently, struggling to sit up.

“No, not yet, you’re not strong enough,” she replied, pressing his shoulders down again as if to confirm his weakened state, before pouring mead into a jug and putting the liquor to his lips.

He sipped at first, then drank deeply to imbibe the narcotic power of the fluid which seemed to give him strength.

“Sleep now,” she advised, putting a hand over his eyes.

He lapsed into a delirium in which he was drowning in a tunnel of darkness and sensory deprivation. Knowing he had to get out or be trapped and succumb to oblivion, he began to fight and struggle in a protracted battle for con-

sciousness.

A ringing sound grew louder in his ear and agonizing pains began to pervade his body as he rose nearer the light before suddenly bursting out into the world like a newborn infant.

26

Dan woke with his back propped up against a heavy pillow, though this time reassured by the tight pain in his chest and the cold harsh certainty that this was no dream. He felt as if he had been kicked in the chest by the proverbial horse. He blinked, gazing around at the unfamiliar surroundings, his psyche shielded from the enormity of recent events by a sedative of incredulity and disbelief which was wearing off faster than any opium-based pain-killer.

He was in a hospital, wakened by a cold stethoscope being pressed against his chest by a weary-looking young doctor. The dozen or so other beds were filled and stretchers bearing the injured, the wounded, the dying, and the dead littered the spaces in between. Everywhere, people were moaning in anguish or agony while the cries of those lying out in the corridors accompanied the wretched chorus. The unsanitary stench of death was evident, even to the inebriated senses of one so recently pole-axed into the next world. It seemed to Dan that he had awoken in a charnel house, a twenty-first century purgatory.

As the patient regained consciousness, the doctor stepped back and managed a professional smile in which Dan might have found some comfort had he just been revived after a simple car crash. He looked down at his neatly ban-

daged torso. The sterile swathes hid the obscene mess of blood and bone as if decency rather than medicine demanded that his viscera be covered. He laid a self-conscious hand on his chest, recalling the memory of the dream, then glared at his saviour, as if accusing the already harassed doctor of an unnatural act.

The young man in the loose white coat registered this attack on his integrity. His thin lips drew tight against a pale face framed by unfashionably long hair; his hurt finding an outlet in the pained expression of a martyr.

Dan suddenly regretted his lack of grace and offered a temporary reconciliation with a grim smile, grudgingly conceding to the healer the benefit of the doubt, for now at least.

“How do you feel?” the doctor inquired.

“It hurts,” Dan muttered glibly, trembling inside as he gestured to the bandages. “Did you do this?”

“I operated, if that’s what you mean,” the doctor answered, sounding almost apologetic, his voice succinct and clear. “A nurse did the rest. I’m sorry, but conditions are worse than primitive around here.”

“Maybe you should let the world know your secret, Dr Frankenstein,” Dan quipped wryly.

“In that case, Dr Levin, you may consider yourself my monster.”

“I have to get up ...”

“You’re in no condition to move. Lie still. I’ll have the nurse bring you a sedative - if we can spare it.”

“Give it to someone else,” Dan declared, throwing aside the sheet covering his lower half and pushing down with his palms while trying to swing his legs off the bed.

This heroic endeavour was immediately rewarded by excruciating pain. Dan gripped his chest in sheer agony, his face twisted, his eyes shut tightly. He suspected a heart attack and immediately regretted his rash bravado as the

chilling fear of his own mortality suddenly returned to haunt him.

He felt strong hands grip his wrists and heard a mellow voice call his name from afar. The pain and the fear began to recede. He opened his eyes and focussed on the doctor once again whose angular features were only inches away. His expression was one of concern, his gaze mesmeric, his soft lilt poetic as he entreated Dan to disregard the burden of the pain.

The hypnosis left the patient feeling light and euphoric and in a state of divine love with the man who had removed the affliction of his mortal coil. Dan felt a tear run down his cheek, flowing with the spiritual transference.

“We’re trying very hard to save you, Dr Levin,” the doctor advised him sternly. “Now please lie still and don’t cause any more trouble.”

“Who are you?” he gasped accusingly.

The doctor made no reply as he put the stethoscope to Dan’s chest again.

Dan glared at the other man. His body was weak, his face blank, and his mind ill-equipped to comprehend the events of the last twenty-four hours. His lips silently enunciating the word, “Why?” as the doctor moved away to tend another patient. “Why me?”

A little old man with a bald head and a large nose standing near enough to witness the exchange sat down in a chair beside the bed and smiled urbanely.

“You shouldn’t think too badly of the boy,” he urged, with the accent of the Yiddish East-End. “Would you want his job? He’s got the hands to heal but he can’t save everyone. He’s got to decide who lives and who dies.”

“This place resembles a casualty station after a battle,” Dan growled, like a disgruntled patient.

“Because that’s what it is,” the old man confirmed.

“A battle between whom?”

The old man smiled, as if amused by the question.

“Well, in the good old days it would have been light versus darkness. But that’s when everything was in black-and-white and everyone had perfect skin. In these days of morally ambivalent colour, it’s not easy to tell the good guys from the bad. I’d say its between those who are certain they are right and those who are not so sure.”

“Not so sure about what?”

“Where power should lie - and where it comes from.”

This sounded to Dan like the sort of nebulous question which gets thrown up at the start of a politics seminar.

“Why do I get a bed when they’re all on the floor?” he wondered, afflicted with the cynical guilt of a survivor.

“You’ve got health insurance.”

Dan looked at him in blank confusion for a moment, the recent trauma having dulled his wits.

“This is the private ward, I suppose?”

“Gold card virtue only.”

“Well, actually I was always a bit lapse with those premiums,” he confessed drolly.

“Nurse, get this boy into the corridor, he hasn’t paid his dues!” the old fellow sang out excitedly, with Yiddish humour.

A harassed looking nurse was momentarily distracted by the bizarre suggestion from the funny little man, who waved her away with his hand, disgusted by her lack of humour.

“Young women,” he grinned. “Still no sense of humour. They haven’t changed since the days of Eve.”

The deadpan delivery made Dan smile; something he hadn’t felt like doing for a long time. He felt a need to talk to someone and this old man was the only soul available.

“This may not make much sense, but I was dead, I know I was,” he tried to explain, before considering that he could be in shock and deranged. “It’s not the sort of thing

you can understand unless it happens to you.”

“I suppose not,” the old man concurred. “But if you were dead, you wouldn’t know you were dead, would you? How could you? *Je pense, donc je suis*. It doesn’t make any sense.”

“That’s what an atheist would say.”

“Are you an atheist?” he asked. “Surely a hard-bitten cynic like you needs something stronger to believe in?”

“I don’t know what I am,” Dan confessed bitterly. “If you woke up in a hospital, apparently on the road to recovery, after seeing your chest being hacked open with an axe, wouldn’t you be a bit nonplussed?”

“Like I said, that boy works miracles with his hands. But for him they could write *Lasciate ogni speranza* over the door for all of you.”

“Are you a cleric?”

“In a manner of speaking.”

“You have me at a disadvantage.”

“That’s because I went through your pockets when you were brought in - you didn’t have much to steal.”

Dan looked down at his groin. He was wearing only boxer shorts for modesty. He put his hand on his chest again, a reflex brought on by a memory.

“When I was brought in, was I wearing anything around my neck?”

The old man shook his head thoughtfully.

“Not that I noticed. Maybe something slipped in and got sewn up inside you.” The old man chuckled. “Do you like medical humour, Dr Levin?”

“Not when I’m the patient,” Dan frowned. “Where am I? Still in London?”

“University College Hospital.”

Dan could see distant palls of smoke through a window.

“Lucky this building and its staff were spared,” he noted piquantly.

“Death passed right over us,” the old man confirmed.

“How did I get here?”

“An angel brought you in. A female paramedic. She said she’d be back to check on you later.”

“What are you doing here? You don’t seem to have any injuries.”

“I’m just an old rabbi come to lend a hand,” the old man explained. “The boy is my son. He called me here to comfort those he couldn’t save.”

This time there was no humour in the kindly face and the prophetic nature of the words chilled the patient’s blood.

“I thought I was making a recovery?” Dan remarked.

“Let’s just say you’re not out of the woods yet,” the old man proposed, smiling again before looking away as if growing weary with the conversation and seeking a distraction. His attention settled on a small group of men and women clustered around a television set. Dan turned his head slightly to catch sight of the screen, thinking it must be a DVD recording.

“Is anyone still broadcasting?” he asked.

“Of course. Not even Armageddon would stop the BBC from broadcasting its soap operas.”

“I thought the power was down.”

“Hospitals have generators.”

“To waste power on television?”

“When a generator runs you either use all the power it produces or lose it.”

Dan could only glimpse part of the screen, but it seemed as if they were watching an episode of an Australian soap opera.

“How can they do that?” he murmured.

“They wouldn’t wanna miss one,” the old man chortled.

“I mean how is it technically possible for someone to be transmitting with the city laid waste?”

The face of the old man suddenly set like granite.

“Wait till this finishes, then you’ll see.”

The distinctive title music cut in moments later and played out thirty seconds of credits before the channel switched to an outside broadcast. Those watching the television set parted slightly to allow Dan a better view of a screen which had come into vivid focus. He knew Hyde Park well enough, but never thought it would be used like this in his lifetime. The camera swept over a cheering crowd with blood lust in its eyes before returning to the figures dressed in black on the platform.

Dan gasped, recognizing the figure of Lorenz Kee.

“Is this live? Why the outside rally?”

“It’s their way of celebrating the new dynasty. It’s all about Year Zero - getting back to basics. The first rule of any coup is to broadcast that you’re in charge. The second is to eliminate the people who don’t agree with you and might form an opposition. The third is to keep the masses happy. You can see that they’re having a good time. What you might call the spirit of excess in the well-organized crowd. The speeches, the rallies, the torches, the sophistry that makes everyone cheer. It’s always the same,” he yawned. “Stalin would have done it quietly, but these fascists like to put on a show.”

“They’re in shock, or they’re angry, or afraid,” Dan insisted, thinking the old man stupidly naive. “Look at their faces. They’ve just seen their city destroyed, their homes are gone, their families have been killed.”

“Then why aren’t they grieving? I’d say they’re more interested in paying homage to their heathen gods. But who are they going to sacrifice in our blameless multi-cultural society? Not my people for once. This time, it’s not race or religion that’s to blame. Society has moved on since the days of the pogrom. Now it’s the troublemakers they’re after. The academics, the serious journalists, and

the artists. Anyone who might question the way of things. Enemies of the new light, captured in the fight and offered to the god of battle. The mob have rediscovered something better to watch than football.”

The camera hovered on the platform, picking out Kee’s crossbench team of anti-libertarian establishment figures - politicians, media barons, and former quango appointees in their polished boots and brown shirts - all members of the same party now. Then the camera switched to a second platform built between a pair of close standing oak trees.

Most of the victims waiting on the scaffold had their heads bowed as if in contrition for their sins against the people, though one or two bruised, bloodied, or tear-stained faces looked out over the crowd with pity or contempt. He recognized a few faces, some famous, others he had known personally through his profession.

Rufus Muspilli was, inevitably, one of the brown shirts. Rufus had a reputation for always backing, or at least positioning himself behind, the winning side in British politics. Jane stood on the platform with the prisoners. Hell of a way to get a divorce, Dan thought to himself.

His attention to the broadcast was shattered by the sound of commotion and voices shouting in the corridor outside of the ward, followed by a shrill piercing scream of helpless agony. Dan tried to rise but the old man put a hand on his forearm and held him down with a grip of iron. Dan was amazed that any human being could possess such strength, never mind a senior citizen, and presumed that the man had worked as a docker or a costermonger or some other East End manual trade. The commotion reached a crescendo with a shrill piercing scream which barely sounded human and filled Dan with a new sense of terror.

“They’re finishing off the undesireables - the ones too

badly wounded for the show,” the old man informed him.

Seconds later, three armed men dressed in black entered the overcrowded ward and scanned the faces of the helpless in the beds and on the floor. Each had a bayonet covered in blood attached to his assault rifle.

Dan looked straight at the young doctor who hovered at the entrance to the ward, restrained by several nurses. The doctor looked distraught and caught Dan’s glare as he silently implored him to do something.

The Crows were wearing riot helmets with dark visors over their faces. One approached Dan’s bed and stood poised to push the bayonet into his throat. Dan knew that his much photographed features would be instantly recognizable to a well-briefed Crow.

Dan swallowed hard and tensed his body for the impact. He suddenly felt strangely calm. Having died once, he seemed more able to face the ordeal again; but he felt sad and frustrated that his death would serve no constructive purpose and he could do nothing to change events. Kee and his kind had won another victory. Perhaps some future war would restore the lights at the cost of millions of lives. A war he would be spared, yet it all seemed so unnecessary, so tragic.

The old Yid squeezed his hand ever tighter and smiled the way idiots do in serious circumstances beyond their comprehension. Dan took a deep breath and closed his eyes, not wishing to see the blade plunge.

He waited for a long, drawn-out second, then another, even to a third, then he heard the sickening thud of the sharp blade slicing through flesh and gristle, but he felt nothing; no impact, certainly no pain. He wondered if it was all part of a continuous dream in a surreal world where reality had lost all meaning. Then he felt the weight of a body slumped across his, and the gurgling sound of someone choking on their own blood.

Dan opened his eyes, thinking the foolish old man had somehow got in the way. But he was still sitting at the bedside with a psychotic grin on his face. The victim had been the young doctor. He lay on his back on the bed with his feet still on the floor, arms spread as if crucified, with blood pouring from his side and his mouth as his heart continued pumping his veins dry. Satisfied with the soul they had collected, the Crows turned and marched away. The weeping nurses came in as soon as the Crows had left the ward and carried the body away.

“Why did he have to die?” Dan asked quietly. “They were after me.”

“So that all men might live.”

Dan tried to make sense of this gibberish.

“They were after me. Why didn’t they finish the job?” he inquired bitterly, as if the old man were somehow complicit in the actions of the Crows.

The old man shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. “Just be grateful that his soul was enough to satiate them.”

Dan realized the old man was still holding his hand and angrily pulled it away.

“You said he was your son!” he stated accusingly. “You don’t seem to care that he’s dead!”

“I can’t have favourites, it ruins the game,” the old man revealed, turning away from Dan and looking at the television screen again. “You’ll like this bit - it’s pure theatre.”

The crowd were cheering, it seemed, but then fell silent to allow Lorenz Kee to speak. He was dressed in a black uniform with a scarlet armband, and he gesticulated aggressively with his arms as he spoke like a stump speaker from the 1930s.

“This bunch are much like all the others - but they’ve broken a cardinal rule - and for that they’ll have to pay a penalty,” the old man explained.

“What rule?” Dan forced himself to ask.

“Usually, politicians lie and cheat their way into power, with some connivance from the populace who don’t much care about inconvenient rights and rules. People never learn that politicians are the most dangerous entities on this earth with the power to vanquish millions. But this bunch went even further than most and enlisted the help of an outside agency.”

“What agency?”

“You might say they managed to invoke the Devil, but then, Christians like to blame him for their own evil deeds. The Devil gets a lot of bad press, but he’s not as wicked as some Christians I have known.”

“Is there a Devil?”

“There is an elemental power to fashion at will, according to whatever myth or creed drives you to kill.”

The image of Kee on the podium burned into Dan’s retina and brought back the recent memories of carnage, stirring a maniacal fury into his mind, igniting a desire for vengeance in him which hardly seemed human. He realized the drugs he had received were effecting his brain, but they had also reduced the pain in his chest so that he could sit up in the bed. He could still feel a tightness around his ribcage, but at least he could breath and he felt able to stand. That was enough. He threw off the blood-soaked sheet and sat up.

“Where do you think you’re going?” the old man asked, eyebrows raised in surprise. “You’re dead, remember?”

“You seem to know all the answers, where do you think?” Dan answered, lowering his legs onto the floor, stretching to his full height, and taking a deep breath to see how much more his ribcage could take. He noticed the stitches in his arm had been removed and he felt the blood pumping through his upper arms as if he were on steroids.

The old man responded by reaching under the bed and

pulling out a bundle of clothes.

“Only Superman saves the world in his underpants,” he grinned, slapping Dan in the stomach with a pair of trousers. “Mind you don’t end up swinging from a tree like one o’ those heathen Christmas decorations.”

The clothes seemed very old, but recently laundered, and Dan felt disinclined to inquire about the previous owner. He dressed quickly and made a valedictory remark to the old man who simply nodded grimly in reply.

The denim trousers, blue heavy cotton shirt and ill-fitting boots gave him the appearance of a boiler worker, or an escaped prisoner, as he made his way along the crowded corridor, stepping over the patients, and following the brightly coloured signs down a set of stairs to the exit.

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The scene outside the hospital was one of grim devastation reminiscent of the wartime Blitz. Virtually every building in sight exhibited some form of structural damage. Rubble and smashed vehicles lay strewn on every street, including the iconic red double-decker buses lying crushed and twisted like toys.

There was no one to collect the corpses and Dan had to walk round countless putrefying bodies, which appeared to have been hacked or bludgeoned to death, as he made his way along Gower street.

He recalled Eisenhower's description of the dead in the Falaise gap after the Battle of Normandy. Twenty four hours earlier he would have felt like retching with every step, but now the deaths of so many strangers seemed of little consequence to him.

Dan jogged as fast as he could, racing against time with the pain in his chest returning and becoming steadily more acute. Here and there people were wandering aimlessly or scavenging like vultures, reminding him in his weakened condition that this was now a lawless world and *the best laid plans o' mice and men gang aft agley*. The pain in his chest slowed him to a walk and he knew he'd never be able to cover the four miles to Hyde Park on foot.

There were plenty of abandoned cars on the road, most with their windows smashed and body work dented by

heavy blows. Their former owners lay scattered on the road and pavement where they had fallen, cut down like fleeing game.

In his mind's eye it was easy to reconstruct the scenario. In trying to escape the carnage some panic-stricken drivers had crashed, causing an inferno which engulfed their vehicles and left their charred bodies still sitting like hideous skeletal mannequins at the wheel. Some of the people who had tried to run still clutched key sets in their hands, held aloft by arms reaching up as fire stiffened their limbs to create grotesque museum pieces.

But even if Dan found and matched a key-set to an undamaged vehicle, he would still have to extricate it and negotiate his way around countless other obstacles.

He needed something more mobile and surveyed another hundred yards of carnage before he found it - a light motorcycle lying on its side with no obvious signs of damage.

The former owner had been unlucky since he had possessed the means to escape the slaughter, but was unlucky enough to have caught a blow to the neck from a sharp instrument. A circular pool of blood had spilled from his decapitated trunk and congealed on the tarmac with elegant symmetry, like a grotesque statement of conceptual art. The helmet, containing a head, came to rest further down the street, still faithfully protecting its charge from any impact.

Numbed by brutality, Dan feared only for the condition of the bike which had slid some distance on its side after the rider had been unseated. He lifted the machine and checked it for visible damage. The tank was dented and there was a strong smell of leaking petrol, but the engine casing seemed intact. The forks were straight and the wheels unbuckled.

Dan checked the ignition. The key was on but the igni-

tion light was out, having drained the battery in the hours after the bike had stalled. He squeezed the clutch and kicked the starter pedal, feeling a sharp stabbing pain in his chest in response, warning of his limited capacity for physical exertion.

He slowly allowed his lungs to reinflate before kicking again and again. On the fourth attempt, with the choke lever on, the powerful little engine sang out to his blissful ears. He selected first with his toe and shot off, swerving round a toppled double-decker bus lying on its side like a huge red whale.

Dan rode with the reckless speed of a dispatch rider, mounting curbs and jumping islands to facilitate the passage along Gower Street, past Bedford Square, and into Bloomsbury Street. No one paid any attention to the traffic violations, the only people he encountered before the intersection with New Oxford Street were dead or dying, but the speed-cameras still flashed their disapproval at him.

He slowed at the intersection, manoeuvring between crashed cars, then roared off towards Oxford Street with flagrant disregard for the one-way signs. Nearing the once busy shopping street, he noticed a figure emerging from the steps leading down to Tottenham Court Road tube station. A few others followed, perhaps once well-organised people, but now dishevelled zombies seemingly going nowhere.

Travelling west along Oxford Street, he noticed people congregating in ever increasing numbers as they drifted along the road like a stream of humanity swelling into a river. They seemed docile on the whole, almost in a state of shock, but here and there were the inevitable few ready to take advantage of any situation. Human scavengers, flushed up from the sewers with the rats or flown down from the roosts like the crows, and now looting and

preying wherever they could. Humans, like rats, would survive in one form or another come what may.

Now that it seemed likely to Dan that he might actually reach his objective, he began to think rationally about what he was going to do when he got there. He had taken the old man's advice onboard and was determined to avoid getting caught up in the proceedings, but approaching Kee entailed enormous risk.

Something caught his eye as he sped passed. He braked hard before swinging the machine around and accelerating back the way he'd come, then turning into Sedley Place and circling the gruesome remains of an armed police unit which had retreated into a death trap. It was like entering a nineteenth century butcher's shop, with flies buzzing around feverishly, excited by the stench of congealed blood.

Without dismounting from the bike, Dan reached down and took an unused semi-automatic pistol from a holster. Not much use in a battle with the heavily armed Crows, but easily concealed.

There was a problem though. He had never fired a handgun before. He aimed it at the wall of a building, some distance away, and squeezed the trigger. It held fast, refusing to yield.

Dan flipped off the safety clip, but now the trigger was limp and the gun would still not fire. He tried sliding back the lever like they did in the movies. That cocked the hammer and loaded the first round from the magazine into the chamber.

He aimed again and braced himself for a loud report, confident this time that it would fire. The sound reverberated like a thunderclap against the nearby wall and the pistol bucked violently in his hand, but he felt grimly satisfied, even god-like, with the power which it projected, dislodging a piece of brickwork fifty feet away.

The gunshot attracted the attention of a pair of dubious

looking characters who suddenly appeared at the entrance to Sedley Place, blocking his exit. From their appearance they were used to sleeping rough and Dan was unsure of their intentions.

He revved the bike and fired a warning shot in the air before charging through them; then roared off towards Marble Arch, on the corner of Hyde Park, like some sort of latter-day urban cowboy. Back on the main street, the shots seemed not to have disturbed anyone, and the majority paid little attention to the noisy bike speeding past them.

Dan wondered if they'd all lost their wits. They were all heading in the same direction. His direction. Ignoring the stores brimming like Aladdin's cave with material things.

Not until he was within sight of the multitudes gathered in Hyde Park did Dan begin to appreciate the full significance of the event. It seemed that much of the surviving population of Central London who were physically able to, were making the pilgrimage to Hyde Park. Even the heavy, leaden clouds in the sky seemed to be converging overhead to swirl around a low pressure vortex.

Dan had to ditch the bike at Marble Arch. The human current-density had so increased with convergence that now the only way forward was to join the flow. He climbed onto a low wall and stood up to survey the way ahead before committing himself.

The sea of humanity was a staggering sight - the mother of all pilgrimages. Dan estimated that a million people stood between him and the platform on which Kee was heralding a new age. The survivors of this city after Armageddon.

What of the other cities? What state were they in? Were they witnessing similar events, ruled over by Kee's loyal, self-serving, thanes who had previously been in charge of government departments or public-sector agencies? Was

Britain now like revolutionary France in the eighteenth century, with the other European powers poised to intervene and restore the old monarchy?

He rejoined the flow, dodging in and out of the spaces like a rugby player, occasionally barging someone on the shoulder and attracting an angry shout, but most of those he passed seemed little concerned with their fellow travellers.

Dan himself felt carried away on a wave of excitement which was both elating and disturbing. He, too, was infected by crowd hysteria as the mob flocked towards the new Messiah for his blessing.

Dan had little time to confront his own terrible admiration for Kee and what he had achieved. The old institutions of church and state which had for centuries maintained effective order in the land had proved in the end to be no more than a plug in a volcano. Kee had released that plug explosively - with huge destruction of life and property. Now Dan was conscious of having the mindset of a Princip or a Sirham, but he was determined to save or avenge the flawed society which Kee had sought to destroy, and was no longer concerned with the judgment of history.

Within fifty or sixty yards of the platform, the crowd became densely packed and he had to push the people apart in order to make any headway. Then, suddenly, a cheer went up, and the crowd surged with excitement as the first rope was cut from a tethered bough and a row of votive offerings lifted nearer the clouds to appease the gods and pay for the blessing of victory.

Desperate to get closer, Dan struck out wildly in a reckless attempt to push through the last stretch of the human barrier. He considered using the gun to part the crowd but discounted the idea. In their frenzied state he guessed they would turn on him without personal regard

and tear him to pieces. His agitated probing was risky enough, but in frustration he threw caution to the wind.

“Hey, wot ya fink yore doin, pal?” A male voice asked as he forced his way through.

“Oil wot’s ’e doin?” another member of the same clan demanded to know.

Dan took no notice.

“Ere, we all wanna look mate, wotcha think yer doing?”

“E wants some,” someone else remarked. “D’ya think ’e wants some? C’mere ya coont.”

Dan kept pressing ahead, but was soon seized by the collar from behind by a burly looking skinhead. He turned and instinctively headbutted the assailant, taking brutal pleasure from the sound of breaking cartilage in the split-second before the attacker collapsed with a hand over his nose in a useless attempt to stem the flow of blood.

The maleable crowd seemed to part slightly on either side, allowing Dan to give him a kick in the face for good measure before turning straight into another man who grabbed his lapels. Dan brought his knee up hard into the man’s groin, but was immediately tackled by a third who dragged him to the ground.

The people around parted as far as they could from the fight that ensued. The heavier man soon had Dan pinned down and was raining wild blows about his head, mostly missing, but one connected, shattering his cheekbone.

“Yer want some, huh? Yer want some o’ this, ya coont?” he yelled in a strange northern vernacular.

To Dan it seemed atavistic, like the battle cry of an enemy tribe into whose territory he had strayed. The blow had numbed the side of his face like a dentist’s anaesthetic and his brain, too, felt numb, no longer able to cope with the strange and surreal turn of events.

He decided to end it all by reaching to his belt and drawing the gun. There was no time to aim, he simply pointed

the barrel skyward and squeezed the trigger. As if by magic the top of the assailant's head seemed to explode like a ripe watermelon and the body jerked upward in a brief spasm before collapsing in a heap.

Pleased with himself, Dan pushed the dead man aside and climbed to his feet again, only to feel the numbness down one side of his face rapidly retreating in the path of a searing pain from his broken cheek. But the gunshot had affected a miracle of sorts. A parting of the sea of people as they drew back in primitive fear of the boom-stick.

The way ahead lay clear for some yards and Dan ran forward, holding the pistol in the air. He would have discharged more bullets but wasn't sure how many were left in the clip. One clear shot was all he needed to send Kee back to hell. Then the spell over the Crowd was broken by another voice, this time a female with tattooed arms and an unshaven chin, seeking revenge for the death of her mate.

"Get him!" she screamed with a loud fanaticism, her loins heated by the scent of blood. "Kill the bastard!"

Someone responded to the matriarchal order immediately by tackling Dan from behind as he ran, knocking him to the ground and winding him. He tried bringing the gun to bear but this time a strong hand pinned his wrist. The crowd hesitated for a moment, then closed in to set about their messy work with a vengeance, kicking and stamping on the recently discharged patient until he moved no more.

Giving him up for dead, they left him face down and crumbled up like a broken toy before returning to their families and the new reality entertainment provided by the incoming government.

The crowd walked around the dead man as it drifted slowly forward towards the altar erected with scaffold, not in respect but caution, as if he were the bogeymen of their

ancient, superstitious fears who might now reach beyond the grave to claim vengeance. Only a solitary figure in a white coat, stained with blood, presumably a doctor from a local hospital, came forward and bent over to examine him, as if to administer some treatment to the mangled wreck when all that was left to offer were the last rites.

The doctor knew better than to attempt any form of resuscitation, though he was gracious enough to pray to his god.

“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” he whispered, before gently placing a little cross-like hammer made of amber into the open palm of the victim and closing the bloodied hand around it. “Thy will be done on earth ...”

The young doctor stood up and melted away into the throng as the clouds burst overhead, accompanied by a deafening clap of thunder.

28

The day had been downcast from the outset, but overhead the leaden clouds continued to gather like so many black-clothed judges, eager to witness the execution of their sentence. The rain began to fall just before Kee had finished his speech. Light drops at first, gradually becoming heavier, filtered through the canopy of the tree to compound the misery of those whose last memory, sight, and experience would be a grey view of the smoking ruins of the capital.

Kate silently prepared herself for death by the ignominious manner prepared for all the victims on the scaffold. Struggle was useless, her hands were tied behind her back and the noose taut around her neck. Even if she could have freed herself there was nowhere to run but into a hostile crowd. In a sense, she was grateful for the rain soaking her face, cleansing the grime; tears of pity from a sympathetic Mother Nature for the victims of her querulous brood. But then the killing began and the weather no longer seemed to matter.

Not wishing to be an accomplice to the spectacle, Kate averted her eyes as the first bough straightened, lazily lifting its living burden into the air to perform a hideous dance for the edification of the cheering mob.

In England, the revolutionary terror had begun, and Joe stood silently beside her like Sydney Carton; his wit having

finally deserted him. The struggles of the first sacrifices abated save for a few involuntary twitches which were not pronounced enough to entertain. A second row was snatched up like rag dolls into the dark sky and the cheers resumed.

Kate recognized a victim in a crumpled power suit. It was Jane Muspilli. She recalled Thomas Hardy's poetically morbid description of Martha Browne in her black silk gown, hanging in the misty rain, from an English seminar. Looking out at the faces of the cheering mob, Kate realized how little people had changed since then.

The roar of the crowd was deafening, and every now and then the chanting seemed to resonate in phase through a single communal organism with cries of IN-GA-LAND! IN-GA-LAND!! IN-GA-LAND!!! and the faster staccato shouts of "LO-KEE! LO-KEE! LO-KEE!"

At one point, she thought she heard a sound from the mob which might have been a celebratory firework - or a gunshot. The crowd seem to part for a few moments only to come together again in a homogeneous mass like a school of bait fish, and the proceedings on the stage continued like a well organized pop festival.

Kate knew that it would be her turn soon. She braced herself and cleared her mind of all thoughts except one, closing her eyes tightly and imagining herself with Dan in a place far away. She wondered if he had survived and was in hiding somewhere, planning to organize resistance against the new tyranny which would be anathema to everything he believed in. As she waited, she felt her dishevelled hair rise from her scalp, drawn up by a static charge, and in surprise she opened her eyes to see a fork of brilliant light strike the sea of heads less than a hundred yards away.

The shock wave from the flow of charged particles from molecules rent asunder was deafening, though distinguish-

able by a fraction of a second from the booming roar of thunder which followed. It seemed as if an angry god had not yet finished with presumptuous man.

Briefly, Kate witnessed a multitude of heads engulfed by a faint luminous blue light as they looked skyward with the anxiety of souls awaiting judgment. She also looked up, as if appreciative of this gesture of divine solidarity.

An eerie silence descended on the mob. Another gap had opened up briefly and Kate caught a glimpse of a blackened body lying face down in the scorched trampled mud.

This time the crowd remained apart, fearful not of the corpse but of the steaming earth around it where the lightning had struck. Some panicked and fought to get away, most simply stood as if waiting for something to happen.

Kate sensed salvation and looked towards her chief persecutor for a sign. Kee's face had darkened and he too seemed concerned by the unexpected *deus ex machina*. He ordered the executions to continue and another rank of sacrifices were added to the tribute, though this time the cheers were more muted.

The people in the front rows were restless and agitated, less interested in the proceedings now than in what was happening behind them. Restrained from moving forward by the barriers and Kee's black guards, they bellowed like a herd of cattle sensing a predator hidden in their midst.

The lightning had struck Dan's lifeless body, animating it with electro-convulsions as the current flowed through the synaptic junctions of his nervous system. An ethereal blue glow lingered on the tattered remnants of damp clothing which clung to his skin, like St Elmo's fire; a seemingly novel electrostatic phenomenon arising from the freak weather.

The convulsions grew more violent as the seconds passed, causing the body to flip over and finally sit up, revealing the grisly features of an agonized death-mask;

swollen cheeks, lips split and drawn taut to reveal broken teeth clenched together; with eyes huge and bulbous as if conflated by dark anger.

The figure raised a shattered arm to the sky with fist clenched in defiance and the broken bones appeared to set and reform into a powerful limb. Those horrified onlookers who were near enough to witness the unholy miracle were reluctant to renew their assault. They could see a small amber hammer dangling from a chord clenched by the hand.

By invitation, it seemed, the lightning struck again, traveling from the fist down the limb into the body where a terrible regeneration was taking place beneath the orchestra of thunder. The form which had been Daniel Levin rose slowly to its feet with immense physical stature - no longer a man but a god.

He advanced into the crowd with the fury of a beserk. Most people tried to get out of his way. Those who could not, or chose to fight, were thrown into the air. Those with weapons tried bringing the giant down but to no avail, his tissue had condensed into steel and the little amulet had transformed into a mighty hammer which he wielded like a scythe, cutting a path through humanity as if through a corn field. Only in the face, carrying the fierce, angry features of a vengeful god, did Kate recognize a trace of the old humanity - now corrupt with absolute power and filled with a terrible rage.

He raised two huge muscular arms to the sky and roared. This terrible reverberation caused the ground to shake, and people to lose their footing. The battle cry concussed and deafened all those in the immediate vicinity.

From the clouds overhead, a shattering thunderous chorus accompanied his cry, causing the earth to quake and the puny primitives to tumble or scatter like skittles, or to simply cower, rendered helpless by a primordial fear.

Only Kee and his Crows held their ground.

“Kill him!” Kee ordered, now enraged. “Kill them all.”

Kate witnessed the battle commence just as the bough tether was cut and the noose dragged her from the earth. She remained conscious and transfixed on the scene for some seconds before the constriction around her neck began to dim her senses.

The guards were firing their machine pistols indiscriminantly, many bullets missing the monstrous thing which had been Dan, only to mow down those people unfortunate enough to be in the line of fire. Many hundreds, perhaps thousands, fell in this way. The terrified crowd stampeded away like cattle, trampling to death anyone who lost their footing.

The bullets striking the creature took some toll, it seemed, for the incarnate deity roared in pain and fury. Encouraged, the Crows brought up shoulder-held rocket launchers and scored a number of direct hits on the maniacal being. But even these were not enough to stop it.

Withstanding the destructive hail, the Norse god swung the huge hammer and uttered a dedication to Odin in a strange guttural tongue before releasing the huge projectile.

For Kate, time seemed to suspend its inexorable march as she watched the hammer fly like an artillery shell in slow motion, homing in on to its preordained target in a gently curving ballistic trajectory. She noted with satisfaction the look of horror on Kee’s face as the inbound missile sought its target.

Strangled by the noose, Kate’s eyelids grew heavy and closed over her delicate retinae just as the brilliant detonation blinded those who witnessed the terrible glory of matter transmuting into energy.

Kee was banished from the realm of political ambition by the cataclysmic hammer of vengeance, and his constit-

uents were consigned to a dark oblivion, vaporised by heat and light, leaving only a multitude of shadows where once they had stood in the guise of iniquitous flesh and blood. The blast tore the blackened trees from their roots, carrying them into the air.

Kate was cut free from the tree by the same blast which torn at her clothes, though through some miracle it seemed, the lacerations to her skin were no deeper than a scratch. She was untouched, save for the strong turbulent hands in the company of an ethereal face in the cloud, which seemed to shelter and cradle her while raising her up, higher and higher, to escape the scorching cauldron far below.

She opened her eyes and looked down on the swirling mushroom cloud, then floating on the thermals as she drifted gently back down to earth like an autumn leaf through the now dark clouds from which drops of snow and ice were beginning to fall.

Stripped naked by the blast, she rested on the scorched soil in a state of Biblical innocence, as a blanket of snow began to collect on the ground, a dressing over the wounded earth. Sleep came naturally, whether to restore life or invite death she knew not, but she dreamed wistfully of some demi-paradise of trees and pastures where peace and tranquillity might exist for a while without the destructive activities of man.

But the dream was fleeting, disturbed by the incongruous sound of helicopter blades sweeping overhead and the down-draught of warm air scourging her back.