

This Dying Machine

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ABSTRACT

The following Creative Writing PhD thesis consists of two parts: the original novel 'This Dying Machine' and a critical exegesis. The novel "This Dying Machine" is set in Glasgow in 1922. Having returned to Scotland from First World War France and suffering from neurasthenia, the protagonist, Robert Grant, struggles to reintegrate into Glasgow life. Amidst a backdrop of strange events that plague the city, Rob learns that his brother-in-arms Victor has gone missing. Resolving to search for his friend, Rob uncovers an uncanny and sinister force that threatens not only Victor but also humanity itself. The exegesis that follows the novel provides a critical commentary and exploration of the Creative Writing PhD dissertation, focusing on the development of the novel and its emergent poetics, its intertextuality and place in the literary canon, and how it contributes to the field of Creative Writing.

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Part One: This Dying Machine

Chapter 1: Candles In The Dark

A sinew of black smoke rippled up from the candle on the wall. Sitting in the gloom, his back bent against the cool, damp clay, Rob's eyes followed the roiling smoke as it fanned out across the ceiling of the cramped mine. The dull, orange flame and the pool of light it cast round him undulated slowly, languidly. Rob's world heaved and rolled with it. Like he was underwater, confined within a watery abyss. His eyes focused on the wavering naked flame. Too little oxygen, he thought to himself, his lips parting. He drew a deep breath into his lungs as quietly as he could. Beside him, he heard Victor do the same. The air—what there was down here—tasted of earth and chalk, smelled of smoke and stale sweat.

Some five feet away, the little mine-car and its load of clay, piled in thick muslin bags, obscured the long, silent gallery behind. Rob could just make out the car's small rubber wheels in silhouette and the wooden rails sunk into the mine floor. The latest section of track brought them out past one hundred yards, a candle marking off rough twenty-yard sections. Thirteen candles now, Rob tallied: five to the nearest and deepest shaft, another five to the shaft at the end of the middle gallery, and a further three through the shallowest tunnel to the surface shaft. To the clamour and horror of war.

Thirteen candles was a world away. Away from the cold, the wet, and the reek. Away from the cloudbursts and whizz bangs of artillery fire, from the staccato rapping of machineguns, from the pop and hiss of gas shells, and the cries and screams of dying men. A world away, Rob contemplated, and yet only one hundred feet below the German lines. Burrowing in the dark. Noiselessly.

Down here, under the earth—under old Jerry—sound was the killer. The Germans were here too after all: living, working, and tunnelling. So Rob and Victor squatted in the flickering gloom, inching forward like worms, digging through the earth. Keeping still, keeping quiet—silent as the grave. And old Jerry did the same.

Rob turned away from the candlelight and closed his eyes. What he wouldn't give to be back in Glasgow, relaxing on the Green or down the pub with his mates. Home—home for a rest. He took another deep, quiet breath. As the afterimage of the flame faded from his retinas, he ran a clammy hand through his hair.

The pressure was getting to him. He could feel it. Despite two years working in the Daldowie coalmines in Glasgow, Rob couldn't escape the wind-up down here. The slow, encroaching fear—so different from the sudden shocks, the terror above, in the trenches—crept up on him every time, after a few hours. And it would stay with him for hours afterward. Long after he had left the pit behind.

Twelve hours was too damned long, he thought to himself, too long to be down here, pushing his luck. Something was bound to happen. Maybe the air would go bad, a section of the mine would cave in, or the floor would give way and he would plummet to his death like Gilchrist had last month. The chalk round here was riddled with open pockets and natural caverns. Every descent, it seemed, came with some new misadventure: cracks forming under his feet, tunnels subsiding, or walls of chalky clay collapsing.

Rob registered movement to his left and opened his eyes: it was Victor. The engineer's thin, lanky form moved spider-like, raising the shovel blade up and then carefully sinking the tip of it into the clay two inches above the last cut. Lit from behind, Victor's unkempt blonde hair burned an orangey brown. A dark hole hung where his face should be, his sharp features and bright blue eyes obscured completely. Rob raised his right hand mechanically to support the clay as Victor sunk the blade in. They had been at this for nine hours now: cutting into the clay face, packing the slabs in heavy muslin bags, and loading up the mine cart. Rob was bored, weary, and hungry. But Victor seemed unaffected. No matter how long they worked, nothing seemed to faze the man. Rob admired his persistence and his constitution, but felt jealous at the same time. His own weaknesses emphasised by Victor's determination and resilience. Mining might be in Rob's family, but it was not in his blood. He would have to find some new occupation, he realised—if he came out of the war alive.

Rob took the weight of the clay slab as it broke free. He brought up the heavy muslin bag and carefully lowered the slab inside. He then stowed the bag beside his hip as Victor automatically raised the shovel blade another two inches. It was almost a year to the day since he and Victor had been paired up. The first bit of good luck Rob had got after arriving in France. Though he looked a bit rough, Victor was good fun—a right laugh sometimes—but also serious and clever when he needed to be. He

had a proper engineering degree from Glasgow and some said he should've been an officer. He wasn't far from old money—a lot of it, rumour had it—and was well connected in the city. Rob had often thought they were like chalk and cheese, apart from being roughly similar in age. But somehow it worked: they worked.

Pulling his mind back to the present, Rob slowly woke to the realisation that Victor's shovel blade had still not pierced the clay wall. A chill shot through him: something was wrong.

Glancing up at Victor, Rob saw that he was perfectly still. His shovel hung motionless in the air. He was listening.

A moment later, Rob's ears picked up a distant, muffled sound. Out of the corner of his eye, he spied the wooden box that contained the Geophone. He was about to reach for the listening device, when he heard the sound again—closer, louder. It came clearly from the top edge of the clay wall ahead. It was a man's voice. Low, sweeping tones. Then another joined it, higher and more clipped. Rob saw Victor curl forward and gently lower the clay shovel until it was secure on the gallery floor. The engineer's face turned toward Rob in the flickering gloom. More voices came through the clay. Bloody hell, Rob thought, it must be a hall or barracks. They were right on Jerry's doorstep. His heart pounded in his chest.

Rob saw Victor gesture that they should scarper. He nodded his agreement. Victor turned, leading the way, and Rob rose slowly behind him, discarding the bag of clay.

They took no chances with the mining car. Rob moved quietly around the right side of it while Victor took the left. As Rob passed by the candle, it guttered and went out, but not before he caught the look on Victor's face. His blue eyes glistened and shone with excitement. Excitement, not fear. His own panic, he felt sure, was visible on his perspiring face. He saw Victor dart ahead of him, on his way to the next candle. Rob did his best to move silently down the long gallery behind him.

One candle, the next, and the next. An age seemed to pass before Rob reached the worn ladder at the base of the shaft leading up to the middle gallery. Somehow Victor was already near the top. Rob swore under his breath and started climbing. A moment later, above him, Victor was gone.

He wouldn't leave him alone—would he?

Every sound he made seemed exaggerated: the fabric of his worn khakis rubbing together, his hands and boots clapping on the wood rungs. His panting sounded like a steam train in his ears. If the Germans had broken through the clay, they could be grasping at his heels at any moment. Rob wanted to call out, to tell Victor to wait, but he knew he mustn't.

The darkness around him seemed to swell and bloom. His grip on the next rung slipped and he had to catch himself. Too fast, his mind shouted, too ruddy fast. He started again. He could feel his limbs shaking as he ascended. His breath caught in his throat. His lungs burned.

Suddenly Rob heard a scrabbling sound followed by a low groan above him. He reached the top of the shaft and could see Victor halfway down the middle gallery. He was on the mine floor next to a wooden brace, not far from one of the candles, rolling about and grasping his left knee. He groaned loudly—much too loudly for Rob's liking. It echoed down the long chalky corridor.

Rob climbed out of the shaft and rushed forward. Victor remained on the mine floor, cursing under his breath. Rob could only assume that he had tripped on a rail or slat. But as he sped past the third candle, Rob saw the truth of it: a wide crack had formed in the gallery floor and Victor had tumbled over it.

Rob slowed, crouching beneath the low ceiling, suddenly mindful of his footing. Rather than a mile of solid earth and rock beneath him, he imagined only inches. He watched as Victor pushed himself up to sit on the floor. The engineer coughed, brushing clay dust from his side, and cradled his knee.

'Are you all right?' Rob whispered.

Victor nodded his head.

'You're lucky it didn't swallow you whole,' Rob added.

'Bloody thing half opened up beneath me,' Victor spat, wincing. 'Watch yourself... I don't know how secure it is. More might crack off any moment.'

Rob didn't wait. He moved forward, taking care to step only on the broad, wooden slats of the rail track. The gallery floor looked stable up to a point five feet ahead of him. Victor was sitting a few feet beyond that. We need to get out of here, Rob thought to himself, no time for this.

‘Cross on the rails,’ Victor muttered. ‘Safer still.’

Rob nodded and mounted the thin wooden rails. He was nearly bent double beneath the low ceiling, steadying himself against the gallery walls, as he shuffled forward. Ahead, the jagged gap in the floor was only four feet across at its widest point. Just four feet.

‘That’s it,’ Victor said encouragingly and lifted himself up onto his feet, clapping more dust from his khakis. As Rob slid forward on the rails, Victor tested the edge of the crack nearest him. He leapt back almost instantly as a great section of rock gave way and plummeted into the darkness. ‘Judas Priest,’ he cursed and took a further step back.

Rob’s pulse quickened as he moved out over the crack. Victor was saying something, but Rob’s focus was on the dark pit and the bowing, wooden rails. The muscles in his legs were shaking. He was all too aware of the slippery clay wedged into the soles of his boots. Victor rambled on, telling him to be careful and saying something about Gilchrist. Rob wished the man would shut up.

He was midway across when something in the dark pit drew his attention. It was like a lattice or web, perhaps a root network, but it shone with an eerie glow. Rob didn’t let his attention linger. He had to maintain his momentum; he just had to get across.

He took a careful step and another, but froze when a strange shape moved in the deep. Whatever it was, it was huge. He couldn’t stop himself from looking down. He had to see.

Reflecting the pale luminescence or luminescent itself, a vast and oddly fluid silhouette surged whale-like in the abyss beneath him. Rob could not fathom what it was. The shape—or, worse, shapes—didn’t make sense. A sudden, preternatural fear rose up and burst inside him. Instinct took over and he leapt carelessly from the rails to the mine floor beside Victor.

‘Christ!’ he swore breathlessly. ‘Jesus Christ!’

‘There’s something down there,’ Victor said quietly, drowsily. ‘Take a dekko.’

‘To hell with that—let’s go,’ Rob exclaimed and pushed ahead, rushing down the length of the middle gallery. ‘Leave it, Victor,’ he implored, calling behind him.

Rob didn't slow until he reached the next candle. Once there, he turned to glance down the mine gallery.

Victor had not followed. Rob could see the engineer kneeling beside the crack in the floor, peering down into the darkness.

'Goddamn it, Victor—let it be!' Rob called impatiently.

Victor remained fixed. 'I've never seen anything like it,' he mumbled. He sounded distant and confused, as though he had just awoken from a dream.

'Victor—Jesus!' Rob pleaded. 'Get away from—'

A great spray of dust shot up from the pit. The candle beside Victor nearly guttered, its flame bobbing and trembling wildly.

A gust of cool air rushed past Rob, causing the candle nearest him to sputter and sway. At the edge of the pit, Victor's shadow danced mesmerically about the gallery walls and ceiling. Rob opened his mouth to speak when Victor suddenly raised his right arm upward and outward. Something near the mine floor responded, reaching up into the quivering candlelight.

The thing that arose from the pit defied all reason. In the wildly flickering, blood-orange glow, it curved and flexed upward into an impossible, strangely organic form. From a central twisted and bladed trunk, it fanned out and extended a series of long, vaguely scythe-like structures. Every aspect of the thing bore a revolting elasticity. Its entire form was in constant motion: blistering and quaking with feverish activity. From some pore or stoma, the thing hissed and the air in the mine filled with a sweet smell like honey.

Rob was stricken and utterly frozen with fear. The earth around him shuddered. Something drummed and clawed at the stone under his feet. But his eyes did not leave the creature.

As he watched, one of the scythe-like forms extended and flared out towards Victor's hand. Pushing and pulsing outward, it unfolded like a grotesque flower, a pointed aperture spreading open at its centre. Spilling from this newly formed mouth came a series of smooth snaking appendages. Writhing and inching, these worm-like, grasping organs wrapped themselves around Victor's forearm.

Rob shook, his body convulsing at the sight. All around him now, the mine floor and walls juddered with heavy impacts—banging, thundering, clawing. Dust

and chalk clouded the air. Through it all, Rob kept his eyes trained on Victor and the thing that now seized him.

Suddenly, through the haze, Rob saw Victor turn his head slowly, almost mechanically. His mouth gaped open unnaturally. His eyes were unfocused. His lips trembled and finally he exhaled a tortured, rasping groan: 'Get out.' The sound chilled Rob to his core. 'Rob, get—'

In a swift and terrifying motion, the thing pulled Victor bodily into the pit, extinguishing the candles nearby and leaving Rob shaking in the dark. Beneath him, the mine floor cracked, loud as thunder.

Booming echoed all around him. The narrow garret door rattled in its frame. The furious knocking on the other side threatened to bring the door away from its hinges.

'Rob! Get up man,' a woman's voice called through the door. Barely a moment passed before a new attack on the door followed. 'Come oan!'

He stood shaking, his hands gripping the wooden frame of the washbasin. His knuckles were white, bloodless. The small, cracked mirror that hung above the basin reflected back a ghostly visage: pale skin, glassy eyes, and a mouth open in terror.

Christ, Rob thought, it had happened again.

He swallowed hard and took a breath. His nightshirt was damp with sweat and clung to him like a shroud. He couldn't remember standing up, leaving the bed, coming over to the washbasin. How long this time? He couldn't remember anything.

It didn't matter, he assured himself, it was over and he hadn't come to harm. But it was happening more often: the hallucinations, the waking nightmares, the lost time, and other symptoms of his neurasthenia. Shellshock. He hated the term, regardless of its appropriateness to his case. Over the past year, he had been making good progress. Why was it returning now? He had to get to grips with it, he knew, or they would have him in the hospital again. And he would likely never leave it.

Rob released his grip on the washbasin and slowly stretched out his fingers. The pounding at the door came again. His hands shook—the way they had when he first arrived in France, when he first realised the full scale of what he had signed up for.

'I'm... up,' he croaked, his voice breaking. 'I'm up.'

A sigh of relief sounded through the door. 'A lady... a lass has come fae ya. Dolled up n'all. Wishes ta speak with ye, so she says. I told her it's a gentlemen's club, but she's insisted.' It was the cook, Irene. 'She's in the parlour the noo. It's no my job this, Rob... ye ken what I'm saying? No my job.'

'Aye,' Rob replied. 'I ken right enough, Irene. Ah'm sorry.' He clasped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. 'I'll be right down.'

Through the door, he heard the cook turn round and descend the squeaking attic stairs. 'Bloody bampot,' she muttered, none too quietly.

Still shaking, Rob ran his fingers through his hair and finally turned away from the mirror.

Chapter 2: Anna

Reaching the bottom step of the grand staircase, Rob paused. The oak-panelled hall of the Merchant Club stretched off to his right and left. Directly ahead of him through an ornately sculpted archway was the Club's rich foyer. Maybe it was from sleeping badly or maybe from standing at that washbasin, but the muscles in his wounded hip pained him terribly. His hand instinctively went to the site of the wound an inch below his waist. He knew better than to rub at it. That would just aggravate the tight network of scars that crisscrossed his left hip and upper thigh. Instead, he pressed his hand down over the knotted skin and muscle, hoping the pressure and the heat from his hand would have some soothing effect.

He would never be entirely free of pain—those were the words the consultant surgeon had offered him after the final reconstruction. Not the comforting sentiment Rob had hoped for at the time. 'But you'll survive, Mr Grant. Mind over matter,' the man had intoned confidently. 'Mind over matter.' Rob could still see the surgeon standing at the end of his hospital bed: a thin, elegant man with a pronounced English accent, a pinstriped suit visible beneath his white gown—all but telling him that his life was over.

No, not over, Rob corrected himself. Just never the same.

Still, he had done better than they thought he would. Off the crutches in a little over six months and then walking without a cane in a little over a year. Not bad for a man who had been pulled out of a mine in France with two broken legs, a crushed hip, and a litany of smaller breaks and fractures—ribs, fingers, forearms, and, of course, skull. Rob lifted his hand away from the wound, feeling the pain slowly ebb away.

The physical pain he could manage: he had learned to over time. It was the mental trauma that proved hardest to deal with, that had threatened to drive him out of his mind. Soon after the mine collapse, nightmarish fantasy began to flood in and wash away his reality. He would find himself in strange places with no knowledge of how he got there, no awareness of time passing. Even his identity seemed to ebb away from him. For a short time in hospital, his reality had become so warped, so

populated with mad and gruesome phantasms, that he had persisted solely in a state of delirium. He was paralysed for a time, unable to distinguish between fact and fiction, robbed of his ability to act. He might have gone insane then—others had. But somehow he maintained a hold on what was real and learned to push back the maddening influence. Or at least he thought he had.

Rob flashed back to standing over the washbasin, his fingers clenched in terror, his face a frozen mask in the mirror. Why were the nightmares always so vivid, so convincingly real? And why that one, that particularly grotesque fantasy? Rob could feel the pull of it even now, as though something inside his mind was trying to draw him back into that delusion, into that crumbling mine. He shook it off. You know better than this, he reprimanded himself. Focus on the present. Focus on being here, on now. Taking a deep breath, he stepped away from the stairwell and checked the ring of keys on his belt.

Sunlight was streaming in through the etched glass on either side of the club's huge, front double-doors. The waxed floors shone with hazy rainbows. Outside, Rob could hear the sound of horses' hooves on the cobbled streets and the occasional raised voice. Inside, meanwhile, the house was still and quiet, except for the soft sound of singing coming from the kitchen at the back of the grand Georgian mansion.

Rob glanced down the wood panelled hall to his left. At its end, he saw the parlour door standing ajar. He had no idea why a woman would come calling for him at this hour—or at all, for that matter. Perhaps she was wishing to enquire about work? But there were no positions available in the house and precious few people knew about the gentlemen's club to begin with. No, Rob decided, that made no sense. He straightened his jacket and turned into the hall.

Walking slowly, so as not to irritate his hip, he approached the half-open doors. Just outside the lavish room, Rob slowed and glanced at himself in the gilt mirror that hung to his left on the wall. His thick, wavy brown hair had refused to flatten in the garret above and still stood at an unfortunate angle above his heavy brow. His pockmarked skin was blotchy and red from exertion, and his deep brown eyes were bloodshot. Jesus, he thought, I look like hell. Turning his head to the side, he tried to spy the long vertical scar that ranged from behind his left ear to a point

midway up the rear quarter of his skull. It was nearly invisible—to him, at least—beneath his hair, which he wore longer than was fashionable. It did the job of partially obscuring the scar when he couldn't wear a hat. Self-consciously, Rob reached up to ensure that his hair covered as much of the scar as possible.

From inside the parlour, he could make out the soft click of a woman's shoes on the oak parquet floor. Rob let his hand drop and moved to the half-opened door. The fragrant smell of last night's cigars and cigarettes still permeated the room, dulled only slightly by the scent of bleach and floor wax. Morning sun and birdsong filtered in through the windows' bright, billowing curtains. On the other side of the parlour, a woman was standing next to one of the high-backed leather chairs, looking out into the garden beyond. Her back to him, Rob could not imagine who she might be. She was several inches shorter than him—perhaps five foot four or five—and wore a flowing lilac dress. A cream-white cardigan was pulled round her shoulders and she sported a light purple cloche hat that very nearly matched the colour of her dress. Beneath it, her lustrous, black hair was cut in a short bob, exposing the back of her neck. She turned her head suddenly as if she had become aware of him.

Rob recognised her immediately. 'Anna?'

'Rob,' she said, smiling. Her hazel eyes shone in the sunlight. 'I'm sorry to bother you. I know I shouldn't have come, but—'

'—Don't be silly. It's fine, of course,' he interrupted, stepping into the room. He couldn't quite believe it was her. She looked so different with her hair cut so, a little makeup on, and no uniform. Of course she would no longer be in the Royal Army Medical Corps. How many months had it been since he had last seen her last? 'It's just a surprise,' he continued. 'And a very welcome one, at that. I'm just a bit taken aback.'

'I suppose it is a bit taboo, isn't it? A woman in a gentleman's club,' Anna said in whisper, crossing the distance between them. 'Of all places,' she added dramatically. 'But how are you? You look so well!'

Rob noted Anna's fingers worrying the cuffs of her cardigan. 'Well enough, aye, thank you,' he returned. 'And you—you look a proper different person. A very fashionable Miss Anna MacGillivray now. I nearly didn't recognise you.'

Anna laughed. ‘Nor I you, Mr Grant. In a suit, looking very accomplished, and with no cane. Is it safe to assume that things are working out then? How long have you been here now?’

‘In the Merchant Club? It’s a little over six months.’ He paused. ‘Aye, I think that’s right. I’ve a little apartment in the attic. Suits me well enough. What about you?’

‘Training at the Western Infirmary, domiciled in the Nurses Home behind. It’s lovely actually, really lovely—mind you anything would be after the field hospital at Étaples.’

‘I imagine it would, aye. But what brings you all this way? To the Merchant Club.’

‘Oh, you,’ Anna replied. ‘I came looking for you and... well, I was hoping you might know where Victor is. If you’ve seen him.’ Her smile faded.

‘Victor?’

‘Yes. He tells me that he’s in and out of here most nights. And days, of course,’ Anna went on. ‘Making business deals, meeting with friends. With you.’

Rob’s face flushed hot and his pulse began to race. He considered the significance of those two final words, that short phrase. Did she know? ‘Ah, no,’ he stumbled. ‘I haven’t—I’ve not seen much of him of late. To be honest.’

‘But he has been here?’ Anna asked.

In truth, Rob hadn’t seen Victor in more than a fortnight. They had met purely by chance at the Nelson monument in Glasgow Green on a Sunday night. Victor had been cold and acted peculiar—more peculiar than normal. Rob could remember him talking nervously about the weather and other trivialities. It had seemed as though Victor had wanted to be rid of him. They hadn’t gone away together. In the end, Victor had nearly run from him. Rob hadn’t seen whom he went with, if he’d found someone that night. That was a full three weeks ago, Rob realised.

‘Aye, he has,’ Rob lied, instantly wishing he hadn’t. ‘As you say, he comes and goes. But I haven’t seen him of late, I’m afraid.’

‘He wasn’t here last night?’

‘Well, I couldn’t say,’ Rob stammered, having the sudden feeling that he was being interrogated. ‘I’m usually in the back or upstairs when the gentlemen are here—unless there is a problem.’

Anna nodded, her short jet-black hair swaying forward and back. ‘But do you know anyone who might have seen him?’ she pressed.

‘Not really, no. Look, is there some kind of problem?’

‘I don’t know. I just need to talk to him,’ Anna answered enigmatically. ‘I feel like he’s been... avoiding me recently. No, actually, I know he’s been avoiding me. I don’t know how much he’s told you. Victor’s so secretive.’

When Rob didn’t react, Anna continued. ‘We started seeing each other a while back. I don’t know if you knew. It was over almost as soon as it started. Honestly, we should have known better. But for a time we—well, I tried to make it work.’ She paused. ‘And I was the one who broke it off. Victor had grown so distant. He wasn’t the same man—he seemed different, cold, always preoccupied. We barely saw one another. I suppose... I suppose I didn’t see the sense in continuing, so I ended it. Maybe that was selfish. Looking back, I guess it was. I thought it was the best for both of us. We promised to stay friends—the way you do. Then he just vanished.’

‘You and Victor?’ Rob stood stunned. What was Victor playing at? ‘No, I—I didn’t know,’ he admitted.

Anna blushed. ‘Oh, I just assumed he’d talk to you about it. He was always going off to meet you.’

Rob shook his head.

‘You really haven’t seen him, have you?’ Anna probed.

‘No,’ Rob muttered dumbly. ‘I haven’t.’

‘He didn’t tell you about last night then.’

‘What about last night?’

Anna frowned. ‘When we split up, I made him promise that we would all get together for a drink. The three of us, just as friends. He promised—he said he would arrange it with you. It was meant to be last night. Seven o’clock at the Hebridean Vaults. I waited there from half-six. I took the nightbus back to the Infirmary after nine. With neither of you showing, I thought something must have happened—

something that kept the two of you away. But then, later... well, I really began to worry. With all the stories in the papers about people going missing... you can imagine.'

Rob nodded dumbly. 'What people?'

'In the papers?'

'Aye?'

'You must have heard? Seems like every day there are new stories of people disappearing,' Anna replied. 'The police think it's related to the gangs or possibly the war. There's a terrible amount of soldiers that just seem to have vanished—I can't remember the exact number, but it's shocking. And there have been stories of women and children as well. It's happening right across the city, Rob—everywhere. That's what worried me. There are posters and flyers out on the streets. Surely you've seen them?'

'I don't get out much,' Rob returned.

'What about with Victor?'

'Not as much as you think. Certainly not of late.' Rob paused. 'You think something might have happened to him?'

Anna stiffened. 'I don't know. You probably think I'm overreacting. But there was something different about him the last few times we went out. Something wrong. And now this.'

Rob took a step back. So much of what Anna said mirrored his own experiences with Victor of late. It was disconcerting: what if something had happened to him?

'Do you have any idea where Victor might be?' Anna asked.

'No. I don't know,' Rob said absentmindedly. 'Could be in his flat. Could be anywhere.'

'Right then, that's where we'll start. Tonight.'

'Tonight?' Rob hesitated. 'What exactly are you suggesting?'

'That you and I call on Victor at his apartment and make sure he's all right. Then maybe we can have that drink after all. You look like you could do with a drink,' she wheedled.

'I don't know...'

‘Yes, you do. Just come as soon as you can. Outside the Nurses Home at the Western Infirmary, after seven.’

Rob could see that she was really worried. Should he be? ‘After seven,’ he repeated, adding: ‘I’ll see if I can’t get use of the car then.’

Anna took a deep breath. ‘You’re a star, Rob. I just need to know—you understand—that Victor’s safe and alive. Even if I decide to murder him myself afterward.’

‘Don’t worry. We’ll find him,’ Rob said, trying to sound reassuring, hiding his own growing anxiety. ‘And we’ll get some answers.’

Chapter 3: Lock And Key

Shifting gears, Rob manoeuvred the Merchant Club's six-seater Crossley into Winton Drive. The broad residential street was populated by a few parked motorcars and carriages but was otherwise free of traffic. To his left, Anna sat in silence, holding herself steady on the sprung leather bench of the lavish motorcar. Her head turned this way and that as she gazed into the opulent front rooms of the villas and mansions they passed by. Just as he had done when Victor had first brought him here. The wealth on display in this quiet corner of Glasgow's Kelvinside rivaled that of the rich apartments and residences in Park Circus, where the Merchant Club—now his home—was situated. A year ago, walking up this same drive with Victor, that affluence had shocked Rob; it still made him feel uneasy now. Like an outsider.

Glimpsing the Campbell villa ahead on his right, Rob put the Crossley in neutral and pulled off to the side of the street.

'This is Winton Drive?' Anna asked incredulous.

Rob brought the motorcar to a standstill and applied the brake. 'Aye.'

'Victor told me he lived in a flat,' she said. 'Not a mansion.'

'There's a ground floor mews at the back, behind the main house. He lives in that. More like a little cottage than a flat though—you'll see.' Rob paused. 'To be honest, it's not even 'little.' But Victor still calls it a flat. I've never been in the big house itself. Victor won't set foot in it.'

'Why not?'

'His family still uses it,' Rob replied. 'When they come down to Glasgow from Argyll, I guess. And Victor refuses to associate with them—especially with his father. They've never been around whenever I've visited. The villa has always been empty.'

'No housekeeper or maid? No cook?' Anna asked.

'Not that I've seen. They must come and go with the family. Victor wouldn't put up with a maid or housekeeper though, would he—likes his privacy too much. As for a cook, he always eats out. I've never seen him use the kitchen.'

'How often have you visited?'

‘Only once or twice,’ Rob lied, staring out the windshield in front of him.
‘Months ago now.’

‘So Victor lives all alone in this mews behind the house.’

‘There’s only the one bedroom, so... aye.’

Anna looked at Rob, her eyes searching his momentarily. ‘Well, let us see whether the master is home,’ she said, opening the passenger-side door and stepping out of the motorcar. After securing the Crossley’s door, she leaned in through the open window suddenly, a quizzical look on her face. ‘Have you ever been able to figure out why Victor and his father don’t get on?’ she asked.

Rob inched closer to the driver-side door, taking care of his wounded hip. ‘All I know is Victor hates his father. Detests the man,’ he related. ‘From what I could gather, they fell out before the war. I think his father wanted to keep him out of the fighting altogether. When that failed, he pulled strings to set Victor up to be an officer, like his older brothers, who were all kept well back from the front lines, I guess. But Victor refused. Absolutely refused. God knows why. Pride maybe. I do know that he hated the idea of being seen as a coward. He would’ve done nearly anything to avoid that.’

‘Victor cares too much about appearances,’ Anna remarked coolly.

‘Aye, but I think it was more than that. You know what he’s like,’ Rob said, opening the motorcar door. ‘He wants to be everything to everyone. And everywhere that matters. He told me once that he felt like he had to be at the front—had to. He actually wanted to be there.’

‘What about you? What did you want?’ she probed.

‘To survive,’ he answered truthfully.

Anna nodded in agreement. A moment later, her eyes darted to Rob’s hand on the handle of the driver-side door. ‘Wait one minute, I’ll help,’ she said.

‘No need—’ Rob replied, but it was too late. He watched as Anna ran round the front of the Crossley’s glossy, deep-red bonnet. Reaching the driver’s side, she held the door open as he moved to exit. Grasping the top of the door and the edge of the cream canopy, Rob pulled himself up, keeping all weight off his hip until the last moment. ‘Being at the front bloody terrified me,’ he continued. ‘I lived in a kind of

panic—terrified of being shot, or gassed, or bombed—nearly every moment I was in France. I tried to act strong like the others, but, if I’m honest, I wasn’t. Not by half.’

‘What made you join up in the first place? You never told me.’

‘I was working in a coal mine on the south side. One day all the boys down the mine—almost to a man—joined up after one of the Prime Minister’s speeches. I guess I didn’t want to be left behind, or left out. I just... went along. I remember sitting in the pub afterward, everyone drinking and singing around me, thinking: ‘What the hell have you done, Robert Grant?’ Next thing I was on a train for England. What about you?’

Anna stepped away from the motorcar, giving Rob room to close the door. ‘I didn’t have any grand designs. I just wanted to help. I’d had near a year’s training as a nurse and... I just thought it was the right thing to do.’

‘Aye, I think we all did,’ Rob said, pushing the driver-side door closed. ‘At first.’

Anna nodded. ‘At first.’ A moment later, she turned to glance across the lane. ‘So, which mansion is it?’

‘The white one with the portico there, bay windows to either side,’ Rob replied, directing Anna’s attention to the three-storey villa diagonally across from them. Up and down the length of Winton Drive, there was no movement apart from chimney smoke drifting lazily up into the darkening sky. The only sound was the clatter of horses’ hooves on distant cobbled streets.

Rob walked out into the empty lane and Anna came up beside him, matching his pace. Together, they mounted the pavement on the other side of Winton Drive and made their way towards the quartz driveway running down the left side of the property. A sudden spike of adrenaline shot through Rob as he considered how Victor might react to seeing them turn up at his door unannounced. Would he suspect that Rob had betrayed his confidence or feel compelled to tell Anna the truth? Either way it could spell the end of one friendship, Rob realised, and it might mean the end of everything. He couldn’t imagine any good could come from such a revelation.

Sinking unevenly into the quartz stone driveway, Rob shifted his balance. The resulting pain in his hip drew him from his reverie. To his and Anna’s right, the corner of the white villa rose up like the prow of a tall ship. The main house was

indeed dark, as Rob had suspected it would be. There were no signs of activity from within the wide bay windows. A moment later, he and Anna reached the rear of the property. The ground floor mews was exactly as Rob remembered it: a single white storey stretching out from the main house with a sloped, blue slate roof. The windows were all shaded, but a light shone over the topmost edge of the drapes in the mews' sitting room.

'Not much smaller than my parents' house,' Anna commented.

Rob made no reply and the two of them climbed the three shallow steps before the mews' gloss-black door. The faint scent of pipe smoke wafted outside. Cherry and vanilla tobacco. Victor didn't smoke a pipe, Rob thought momentarily. He only smoked when he was drinking and then only usually Gold Flake or Woodbine cigarettes. Never at home and never a pipe. Beside him, Anna shifted her feet nervously. Rob reached up and rapped the brass doorknocker hard against the plate beneath—much harder than he had intended. The sound rang round the back of the villa and boomed through the thick door.

'That's it, Rabbie,' Anna tittered. 'He will have heard that. His neighbours will as well.'

But there was no answer: not to his first knock or to his fifth.

'Would he normally leave a light on like that if he was going out?' Anna asked, after a moment. There was a hint of worry in her voice.

'I've never known him to,' Rob answered.

'What about a spare key? Do you know if Victor has a spare key hidden somewhere?'

Out of the corner of his eye, Rob glanced over to the overgrown flowerpot that stood at the intersection between the main house and the mews. Beneath the mouldy pot, Victor had shown him the small leather wallet that he kept his spare key in. Just in case Rob ever needed it. That was before Victor had found him the custodian position at the Merchant Club. But it was probably still there, Rob reasoned. 'We can't simply barge in, Anna. For all we know, Victor is just out.'

'We aren't barging in,' she replied calmly. 'We are just seeing if Victor is safe. Looking for a sign. Imagine if it was me. If I were lost, I would want you and Victor to do the same. I would want to know that you were out there looking for me.'

Just like we are now. For him.’ She paused. ‘Let’s just have a quick look while we still have some light left.’

Rob watched Anna move down the left side of the house toward the nearest window. Standing before the threshold, he could feel his muscles tightening, growing rigid as stone. At the same time, his heart began to race and he realised that he was frightened, petrified of what might be on the other side of that door: the possibility that Victor might truly be lost to him. Dead, or missing, or simply having moved on to another lover: it was that knowledge he feared, that he didn’t want to know and simultaneously needed to know.

Rob turned back to face the great black door. His eyes were drawn to the brass lock on its right side and he reached out for it. His fingers traced over the flat features of the lock and keyhole. It was warm, though it should not be. And it glowed faintly, when it could not be. Rob’s hand wavered, but he sensed no threat behind the warm glow. No, quite the opposite. It was familiar and he found himself drawn towards it.

Suddenly the door ahead of him opened. The broad, square shoulders of Second Lieutenant Lionel Bertram Ewart of His Majesty’s Royal Engineers very nearly filled the open frame. Rob took a step back. The man was shaped like a Minotaur. A giant in starched khaki. Two penetrating green eyes glowered above a bushy red moustache. ‘Grant, is it? Sapper.’

‘Yes, sir. Robert Grant, sir.’

‘Another Glasgow man?’

‘Aye, sir. Yes, sir,’ Rob corrected himself.

A great toothy grin crossed Ewart’s face as he stepped back and rose up to his full height, dwarfing Rob in the process. ‘Either will do, sapper Grant. Come in. Don’t bother having a seat. You won’t be staying.’

Rob walked into the small room. The fading, peeling paper on the wall suggested it had once been a bedroom or perhaps a dining room in the dilapidated French farmhouse—now the Engineers’ forward command east of Sint-Jan-ter-Biezen. It contained a single, high table, functioning as the Second Lieutenant’s desk, three worn wooden chairs, and a collection of wood crates turned on their side to form a filing cabinet of sorts and piled high with papers and rolled maps. A single

window across from Rob was half-open. A gentle morning breeze and the sounds of nearby parade drills floated in. Sitting forward in one of the chairs was a blonde soldier who appeared to be roughly his age.

‘Grant, this is Campbell,’ Ewart stated perfunctorily, closing the door behind him. ‘Campbell meet Grant. As you might have surmised, we’re putting together new mining teams and you two have been selected, paired up. And that’s that. I’ve heard you are hard worker, Grant. Reliable. That’s good. Campbell here will match you—I have no doubt—step for step. You’ll work together on a new shaft at the front, alternating with two other teams. Twelve hour shifts: two teams on, one off. Campbell, you know the drill, so bring Grant up to speed—fast.’

‘Sir,’ Campbell replied curtly, rising to his feet.

He was a little taller than Rob and a great deal thinner. His short blonde hair was the colour of wheat and thinning, particularly at the temples. His face was narrow, his cheeks slightly sunken, but not unattractively so. His long, Roman nose had been broken once—if not more than once—and, beneath a heavy brow, his deep blue eyes were almost ultramarine. Standing at attention, his jaw set sternly and his thin lips pursed, Campbell saluted the Second Lieutenant. But when Ewart turned back to Rob, the expected formality faded from the soldier’s face and Campbell shot Rob a mischievous grin. It lasted only a second, but Rob was surprised how completely it altered the man’s look. That smile surprised him, struck him, and Rob felt his heart beat faster.

‘Grant, I expect you to keep up. Campbell’s proven himself one hell of a military miner. Don’t mistake his age—or his proclivity for making trouble... for himself and others.’ The Second Lieutenant put great emphasis on that last point. ‘He’s a bloody good engineer when he puts his mind to it. So listen to his every word. And learn all you can. We can use more bloody good engineers round here.’ The Second Lieutenant paused, those great piercing, green eyes scanning Rob’s face.

‘Yes, sir,’ he answered, a little late.

‘Good! You’ve got two days. Get to know one another. You’ll be briefed on arrival. Dismissed.’

Rob raised his hand up to salute, but the Second Lieutenant was already fading. A second later, the French farmhouse was gone as well. The cool morning

breeze was replaced by a warm evening draught smelling strongly of birch bark and honeysuckle. Rob lowered his arm and trained his gaze on the brass door lock once more. The image of Victor standing to attention lingered in his mind's eye, as though he still might be there just beyond the door.

'I haven't lost you yet,' Rob murmured, finding some resolve in himself. Stepping down from the stone steps, he strode towards the overgrown flowerpot and tilted it, just as Victor had done so long ago. A spider scuttled away from view as Rob bent down slowly and retrieved the small leather pouch. Grasping the pouch in his hand, he could feel the outline of the heavy brass key within.

'Anna,' Rob called out, replacing the flowerpot on the ground and walking back towards the door. He held the leather pouch up and pointed to the entrance. Anna came running from her position down near the rear of the mews.

'You star!' she applauded. 'Where did you find it?'

'Under the flowerpot in the corner,' he replied, removing the key from its pouch and slotting it into the brass lock. The mechanism turned with a satisfying click. Rob's heart began to pound again. Taking a deep breath, he pushed the gloss-black door open and stepped over the threshold. 'Victor? Hello! Victor? You there?'

The strong scent of cherry and vanilla tobacco hit Rob first, followed by the odor of something sour and awful. The door to the sitting room ahead on his left was open a crack. A wedge of bright electric light escaped from it, slicing through the gloom of the vestibule and the hall beyond. Behind him, Anna slipped on the terracotta tiles and sent something bright skidding along the floor. It was an envelope. Looking down, Rob could see that the vestibule floor was littered with discoloured envelopes and notes. A great swathe of them had been forced upward and crushed against the wall behind the front door. Like a snowdrift of unopened mail.

'Victor! Anyone home?' Anna called inside the mews. 'It's Anna and Rob. Victor? We just want to know you are safe.'

There was no response.

Behind him, Anna crouched down to examine the pile of envelopes.

'We shouldn't be in here,' Rob whispered quietly.

Anna hushed him and immersed herself in her investigation. Rob walked out of the small vestibule and into the hall. He was surprised how the plan of the place came back to him. Outside the sitting room door, he found and activated an ivory light switch. Cold light flooded the space, highlighting the hall's white-corniced ceiling and deep, wine-coloured walls.

'A lot of these are mine,' Anna announced, pulling envelopes free of the crumpled mass. 'He never even read them.'

Rob pushed the sitting room door open wide. 'Oof,' he exclaimed, his nose wrinkling. 'I found the source of the smell. Jesus! Looks like someone has been squatting in here.'

Anna stood up and shuffled over to his side, a collection of crushed envelopes in her hand. 'Look at these,' she began. 'This one is from the Bank of Scotland. This one from Clydesdale. This from an investment firm on Renfrew Street. All addressed to Victor, all marked urgent and months old. They look like warnings.' Anna lowered the collected envelopes and turned to survey the sitting room. 'Oh! My goodness!'

The leather chesterfield closest to them was piled high with various blankets and throw pillows. The long coffee table before it was covered with dirty dishes and teacups, some discarded cutlery, a bottle of spoiled milk, a pile of unsealed food tins, a few stained tumblers, and four empty bottles of whisky. A fine china bowl had been used as an ashtray and was filled with spent tobacco ash. The two leather chairs to the left of the coffee table were respectively home to some books and papers, and more used dishes. The upholstered loveseat on the right of the table was taken up with two open suitcases and, beneath it, two pairs of trousers and a pile of socks and undergarments lay apparently forgotten. Rob noted that the black marble mantelpiece over the fireplace on the opposite side of the room was uncluttered and untouched. So too the grand piano to the right of the hall entrance and the large desk beneath the far window: they were all clean, apart from a layer of dust. It was as if someone had claimed the rectangle containing the coffee table and chairs for their own, encapsulating their world within it, and ignored the rest of the room. It was like a lair or a nest, Rob realised.

'What a foul reek,' Anna protested. 'This can't be Victor's doing?'

‘This pigsty? No.’ Rob shook his head. ‘This isn’t Victor... this isn’t him at all. For one, Victor doesn’t smoke a pipe, on account of his father, and he’d never resort to drinking Red Tape whisky. He’s too much of a snob for that. Besides, his bedroom is round the hall at the back. No reason to kip here. Let’s have a quick look round the back.’

Rob turned and proceeded down the hall. After a moment, Anna followed, her heels clicking on the polished oak floor. ‘Victor?’ Rob called out again, as they walked past the small dining room and kitchen. There was no response. Neither was there any sign that either room had been used recently. Rob turned the hall corner and sped past the toilet to the open door of Victor’s bedroom at the very back of the mews. From the interplay of light and shadow ahead, Rob could immediately see that something was amiss. As he searched for the light switch, a vision came unbidden to him: Victor lying on the mattress, his face a frozen mask, his body unmoving—cold and lifeless. A second later, Rob found and activated the switch. He was unprepared for what he saw next. Beside him, Anna inhaled sharply.

The wardrobe that had stood on the opposite side of the room had fallen, or been pulled, down onto the far side of the bed. The bed itself was a shambles. Victor’s goose-down duvet had been wrenched up from the bottom of the bed and lay at the head atop the pillows. At the foot of the bed, the decorative mirror that had stood atop an antique chest of drawers lay in jagged shards on the floor. Each of the drawers had been pulled out and rifled through. The same was true of the drawers in the delicate desk beneath the bedroom window. The top of the desk had been wiped clear. Victor’s inkwell, fountain pens, and papers were scattered on the floor beside the base of the wardrobe.

Taking a step into the room, Rob’s attention was drawn to the side table and bronze table lamp that stood left of the door. Both had somehow managed to weather the storm that had hit the bedroom. Splayed out near the base of the bronze lamp were four small photographs—photographs he recognised. Rob quickly blocked Anna’s view, stepping in front of the table, and waited nervously until she slipped into the room behind him. He watched as she headed straight for the disheveled bed. Only when he was sure that Anna was properly occupied, did he chance another look at the four photographs.

They would look innocent enough to others, Rob knew, even to Anna. But Rob was familiar with the interior of the room the men were seated in. He had once sat on the plush bench and the chaise lounge they were seated on. He remembered the colour of the furniture, of the paper on the wall, the carpet on the floor. More to the point, he knew the faces and identities of each of the young reclining men. The pairs huddled together, their arms and occasionally their knees touching. And in the last photograph, he recognised his own bland visage leaning in—much too suggestively—to Victor’s proud, smiling face.

Looking back to ascertain that Anna was still engaged, Rob scooped the photographs up. He shoved them deep inside his jacket pocket as heat rose to his face and his guts knotted. His fingers found the small button inside his pocket and he quickly threaded it through the silk buttonhole, sealing the photographs away. Then, as adrenaline washed over him, he took a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair.

‘Blood,’ Anna muttered behind him.

‘Blood?’ Rob queried, surprised.

‘Drops of blood, yes,’ she clarified. ‘Here and here. And then a trail here on the floor leading out of the room.’

Rob walked quickly over to the bedside. Anna had removed the duvet from the head of the bed and cast it over the top of the fallen wardrobe. Rob’s gaze focused down onto a series of small, rust-coloured spots: three on the pillow nearest him and another two on the mattress cover below it. Anna stepped back and pointed to the floor, directing his attention to more drops of dried blood on the hardwood, a broken line of dots leading toward and out the bedroom door.

‘A nose bleed?’ Rob guessed.

‘That is one possibility, yes. Or a small cut in need of bandaging,’ Anna replied. ‘But how, pray tell, does it relate to this?’ She raised her arms to indicate the chaotic state of the room around them.

‘I don’t know,’ Rob shrugged.

‘Could Victor have done it?’

‘Sure, aye. But then I could’ve—you could. But why do it at all?’

Anna shook her head. ‘I have no idea. Out of anger?’

‘Hmm, looks more like someone looking for something,’ Rob suggested.
‘And not finding it.’

‘Not Victor, but someone else altogether, you mean. Perhaps whoever is, or was, staying in the sitting room?’

‘It’s worth having a look, aye. But quickly.’

‘We should call the police.’

Rob froze. Anna’s hazel eyes were fixed on him, but he prayed that she might not see the panic rising within him, the threat of exposure written onto his face. If they had to go to the police, it would be the last thing that he would do. ‘Let’s see what we can find first,’ he proposed. ‘We’d need evidence of something. If it comes to that, I know someone in the police. A friend who can help us.’

‘Good. All right, fine,’ Anna replied, moving to the bedroom door. Rob saw her take care not to step on the spot of dried blood on the floor. ‘What should we look for?’ she asked, stepping into the hall.

‘Anything that tells us who the squatters might be, for starters,’ he replied. ‘How they got in... or what they were doing here in the first place. Anything that connects them with Victor. And that might tell us where he is too. That’s what we need.’

Together they moved down the hall, Rob taking up position a few steps behind Anna. When they reached the toilet, he peered inside the small room, but could find no trace of more dried blood. The trail seemed to end just before it reached the toilet door. Perhaps Victor—or whoever it was—had managed to staunch the flow of blood by then. Anna reached the sitting room ahead of Rob and went straight to the pile of books and papers strewn over the two leather armchairs. Squinting in the light, Rob moved opposite her and quickly began to rifle through the suitcases on the loveseat. The clothing he found inside was smarter than his own, but not so dressy as to be formal. Perhaps something a businessman or a high-ranking civil servant might wear, he guessed. Rob could find nothing out of the ordinary and no sign as to the man’s identity.

‘All these books are by the same author,’ Anna announced behind him. ‘Dr Sinclair Alfred Sleeman.’

‘Never heard of him,’ Rob replied, distractedly.

‘No, I don’t think you would have cause to, unless you were studying theology.’

‘Theology? Like the Bible?’

‘Yes, but none of the titles mention the Bible or Christianity,’ Anna answered. ‘This one, for example, is ‘A Treatise on Esoteric Theism’... then there is ‘The Question of Providence,’ ‘Magic and the Occult Tradition,’ and ‘On Arcane Mysticism,’ et cetera. All the papers and these two thin chapbooks are much in the same vein. Victor never mentioned an interest in theology to me. Anything you know of?’

Rob stood up, giving his back and hip a rest. ‘Not really, no. If anything, Victor’s interests were in philosophy and politics. He would whinge on about politics for days. But I don’t think Victor read anything particularly serious.’

‘Well, this is pretty strange stuff. Look, here’s a bookplate of Sleeman.’

Anna presented Rob with a hardback tome open to a photographic plate of Dr S. A. Sleeman. He appeared to be in his late thirties and looked the part of a stereotypical academic. His face was stern and serious with a beard and round spectacles. The only thing that caught Rob’s eye was a narrow scar down his left cheek. ‘Any connection with Victor?’ he asked.

‘Nothing so far. I’ll keep looking.’ She turned back to the pile of books. ‘Strange that they are all the same author though, don’t you think?’

Rob didn’t respond. Turning back to the upholstered loveseat, he closed the top of the suitcase he had examined. In doing so, he revealed the edge of a worn, leather notebook tucked behind it. ‘Now that I recognise,’ he muttered aloud, reaching down to retrieve the book.

‘What is it?’ Anna asked, preoccupied.

‘It’s Victor’s notebook,’ he explained. ‘He carried it everywhere across France. He used to do little drawings.’

‘I remember. They were quite good,’ she said.

‘There’s a wee envelope inside,’ Rob said, pulling it out of the notebook. ‘And, Anna, look what’s inside.’

He turned round to face Anna, who lowered a handful of papers onto the leather armchair below her. She stepped to the left of the coffee table and drew up beside him. ‘Newspaper clippings?’

‘Clippings about missing people,’ Rob clarified.

‘Quite a few clippings. Can I have a look?’

Rob passed Anna the envelope and returned to Victor’s notebook. Flipping the book open, he quickly leafed through the first twenty or so pencil drawings. ‘A couple from Glasgow. London. Dover.’ Rob turned over the next few pages. ‘Fields. More fields. Trees. Look, that’s No Man’s Land. Christ, see how good that is.’

Anna glanced over. ‘That’s a bit eerie. The trees look like knives or broken blades stabbing up from the ground. But then they did, didn’t they.’

‘What was left of them, aye,’ Rob said, quickly flipping through the next few pages. ‘Here, look. The forward trench, the signpost in the supply trench... one of the mass graves. Then just blank pages—no, wait, what’s this?’

The page held a roughly drawn symbol comprising a thick, black square within a dark circle. It was rough: the square was drawn at an odd angle within the circle. A collection of strange figures radiated out from the circle’s edge.

Rob flipped to the next page and the next. ‘What the hell,’ he murmured aloud. Each following page held another version of the symbol, more clearly or precisely drawn than the previous.

‘Wait, I’ve seen that before,’ Anna said and ran round the table to the stack of papers on the armchair. A moment later, she returned holding a torn sheet of paper. It was a small theatrical playbill—the sort that was posted up all throughout the city announcing musical hall acts or vaudeville shows. And the curious symbol Victor had drawn took pride of place at its centre.

‘True Providence Meeting – July 12th at 7.00pm – Britannica Panopticon Music Hall,’ Anna read aloud, jumping next to a quotation that ran along the bottom of the playbill: ‘There is no certainty, no motive, no reality but what true providence shows us.’ – Dr S.A. Sleeman.’ That date, Rob, that’s just a week ago.’

‘Christ,’ Rob cursed, closing the notebook. ‘Victor is nowhere to be found, his bedroom has been turned upside down, he’s been collecting newspaper clippings

about missing people, and now his drawing shows up on a playbill for some kind of religious meeting? None of this makes sense.'

'And we are no further to figuring out where he is,' Anna added.

'We're not done yet. There are a few things here we can follow up on.'

'Your friend in the police?'

Rob took a deep breath. 'Aye, and a little legwork I can do. But, for now... let's get out of here.'

'What about this?' Anna asked, holding up the torn playbill. 'Do we leave it or take it?'

'We take it.'

Rob returned the suitcase to its former position and followed Anna out of the sitting room. Walking through the vestibule, he quickly closed and locked the mews' front door behind him before returning the spare key to its place beneath the flowerpot. Together, he and Anna walked out of the shadow of the main house and down the quartz drive.

'Rob, look,' Anna whispered suddenly.

At the front of the property, walking up Winton Drive, Rob observed a man in his early fifties flanked by two tall, younger men. The older man was clearly tracking Rob and Anna's movements and the trio looked set to intercept them at the gate ahead. Between the long, measured steps of the younger men, the small man scuttled beetle-like. His hair was a fine, silvery grey, so too the goatee that framed his mouth. His face had a rough rectangular shape, owing to his wide-set jaw. He wore a tailored brown suit—similar in colour to the one Rob was wearing, but considerably more expensive—and carried a black briefcase in one hand. The stranger also sported round spectacles that shone in the available light.

'Do you recognise him?' Anna whispered.

Rob shook his head.

As the two parties approached the property's gate, Rob could almost feel the gaze of the peculiar trio upon him. The two younger men were larger and more muscular, both having short-cut, dark hair. They looked remarkably similar. Rob might even have mistaken them for twins were it not for the difference of a few inches in height and the shape of their face—one round, the other markedly angular.

They both wore dark blue mackinaw coats over black trousers. But it wasn't their look that caught Rob's attention so much as the way they moved: slowly, precisely, as though every motion was practised. Like soldiers on parade, he realised, or actors who had thoroughly rehearsed a scene. They aligned themselves mechanically to either side of the elder man as he reached the edge of the quartz driveway. Rob and Anna slowed until they were a few feet from the three men.

'Good evening,' Anna greeted the odd trio.

The older man's gaze never left Rob. His grey eyes darted about Rob's face and his chest, as though analysing, cataloguing. When Rob took a step sideways, those rheumy eyes observed him coolly, growing wide with interest. Slowly a toothy grin crossed the man's face, pulling his thin lips taut, baring glistening pink gums. To either side of the old man, the younger men did not react, standing like statues.

'Good evening, yes,' the man replied finally, glancing in Anna's direction. The strangely satisfied smile never left his face.

'We were just looking for our friend,' Anna began. 'Victor Campbell. He lives here... in the mews round the back of the house. Perhaps you have seen him?'

'I know Victor, yes, of course... of course. But I cannot say that I have seen him recently. I have not seen Victor. Not for some time, yes,' the elder man replied, his words strangely halting. 'But then I do not expect to. He is away. I know Victor is away, yes. Temporarily, yes—on business.'

The pair to either side of the old man did not look away from Rob. Their black eyes were trained on him, staring at him openly. More oddly, each man seemed to be humming to himself. Doing his best to ignore them, Rob turned to face Anna. She seemed unfazed by the men's strange behavior.

'Business,' Anna rejoined. 'Victor didn't say anything about going away on business.'

The humming was growing steadily louder, droning on incessantly, but neither Anna nor the three men opposite her seemed to react to it. They went on as though nothing was happening.

'Ah,' the elder man replied. 'You must be Miss MacGillivray, yes?'

The humming grew stronger still. Confused, Rob shook his head, but this only succeeded in causing a strange buzzing to develop inside his ears. This new maddening noise vibrated at the same frequency as the humming all round him.

‘I am, yes,’ Anna responded.

Rob looked to Anna again. She could not hear it, Rob realised, none of them could. It was all in his mind. Another hallucination. Just ignore it, he told himself, it’s not real. As if in response, a sudden burning pain flared up within Rob’s skull, as though a molten spike was being slowly forced into his brain.

Rob stepped back. His pulse sounded like thunder in his ears. A further stabbing pain coursed up his spine and exploded in the back of his skull. His right hand shot instinctively up toward his neck. The damned buzzing grew louder still, as though bees or flies were swarming over his ears. Motes of dust seemed to sparkle in the air between him and others.

‘And then you might be Mr Grant, yes?’ the old man said, turning to Rob. ‘Victor said that you might arrive, yes. He implored me to apologise, on his behalf, yes, for his hasty departure. But his need was pressing. Yes, most pressing.’

Rob watched as the small man scrutinised him, slowly inclining his head to one side. He made no attempt to hide this examination. Again Rob had the unsettling feeling that he was being inspected, studied.

‘If that is the case, can you tell us where he has gone?’ Anna enquired.

‘Only that he is out of town, yes? Making preparations. I’m afraid I cannot say more.’ The old man paused. ‘Not at the moment.’

‘Rob, your nose,’ Anna said suddenly, looking at him concerned.

Rob clutched at the pain in his skull. The sparkling in the air around him intensified, surrounding him in a pulsating halo. He lifted his left hand to his upper lip and nose. His fingers came away red. Blood red. Rob’s vision blurred. ‘Oh... Christ,’ he muttered.

‘I think I have a handkerchief,’ Anna announced, hurriedly opening her purse.

‘It’s fine,’ Rob returned, searching his pockets for his own handkerchief. ‘It’s just a—’ He broke off as his eyes were drawn to the muscular forms of the two young men. Their bodies had begun to shake violently, their very forms threatening

to tear apart. Only their eyes remained static, still trained on him, unmoving. Rob stared at their fluctuating bodies. Was any of this real?

‘Come with us, yes?’ the old man said suddenly, taking a step forward. ‘To the house. We will look after you. After you both, yes?’

Rob recoiled and his world spun around him. Motes of dust as bright as stars orbited him, blinding him. He wanted to close his eyes, but he could not tear his gaze from the two tall men. Their protean shapes quivered and altered—bulging and bubbling grotesquely—as though they were being boiled from the inside. As he watched, their arms and legs began to stretch and contort beyond all possibility. Horrific inhuman shapes began to emerge and branch off from their bodies, extending out through the shimmering space, forming and reforming. Only their black eyes were immune to this hideous transformation, beholding him indifferently as their frames began to rip apart. Abruptly the buzzing in his ears became a scream and a sickly sweet odour filled in the air. Rob felt faint, like he was going to be sick. Honey—it smelled like honey.

‘Take this,’ Anna said, holding an embroidered cotton handkerchief up to his nose. In that moment, the scent of Anna’s rosewater perfume buoyed him, somehow brought him back to his senses. The perfume and the handkerchief were real, he told himself, Anna was real. The thought anchored him and Rob managed finally to close his eyes, to block out the unstable monstrosities. Anna was real and, for the moment, that was all that mattered.

‘You must come with us, yes,’ the old man commanded.

‘No,’ Anna countermanded. ‘Thank you. It’s late and we’ll be going. Now.’

With that, Anna shepherded Rob across Winton Drive to the waiting Crossley. Glad of the help, Rob didn’t say a word. He kept his eyes down and let himself be led across the street. Behind them, the three men did not move for a moment. Rob felt certain that they would somehow try to stop them, to impede their escape. But then he heard the receding sound of their shoes crunching on the quartz driveway behind him. The buzzing in his ears faded. He chanced a look and saw the trio heading toward the mews at the back of the villa. The pain in the back of his skull lessened. Beside Rob, Anna opened the driver’s side door.

‘Do you want me to drive, Rob?’ she asked quietly.

‘No,’ Rob noted that his nosebleed had stopped. ‘Just give me a moment,’ he continued. ‘And thank you for the handkerchief. I’ll buy you another, I promise.’

‘You are welcome and you will do no such thing.’ Anna looked over to the Campbell villa and sighed heavily. ‘Do you believe a word of what he said?’ she asked, changing the subject. ‘About Victor?’

‘About his being away on business, you mean,’ he returned. ‘No, not a word. And did you see the scar on his cheek?’

‘The older man?’

‘Aye, him,’ Rob said, carefully moving into the driver’s seat. ‘He’s older now, but that’s your Dr Sleeman. I’m sure of it.’

Chapter 4: The Road

It was beginning to rain when Rob pulled over to let Anna out before the Nurses Home. He turned off the ignition and applied the brake as rain drummed down on the canopy of the Crossley. 'I should have brought an umbrella. Do you want to wait it out?' he asked.

'I had better not,' Anna replied. 'Besides, I know you need to get back. You will take care in this rain, won't you?'

'I will. I might sit here a moment.'

'And tomorrow you will talk to your police friend?'

'I'll get his advice, aye,' Rob said. 'See what he knows and if he can help.'

'I wish I could go with you, but I promised to cover Mary's shift ages ago.'

'Don't fash yourself,' Rob reassured her. 'There's a couple things I can look into. I'll let you know everything when we meet up again. Sound fair?'

'You are sure, Rob, you are all right? Promise me.'

'Aye, I promise. Just a nose-bleed.'

'Fine,' Anna smiled weakly. 'Right. Talk soon then.'

'Talk soon.'

Rob watched as Anna plunged into the rain, throwing the Crossley door closed behind her. Waving goodbye, she disappeared into the downpour. Inside the dark motorcar, Rob leaned back and tried to relax as dark rivulets of rainwater streamed down the windscreen. He took a deep breath and reached up to his jacket pocket, checking that the photographs inside were secure. Satisfied, he leaned forward to the Crossley's dashboard and retrieved Victor's leather notebook. He turned it over in his hands. 'Where the hell are you?' he murmured aloud. 'And what have you got yourself into?'

The rain intensified, pounding down onto the Crossley's canopy. Outside, a cart lumbered by the automobile on the narrow street, its wheels beating out a steady rhythm on the rain-slicked cobbles. Rob's fingers drummed absentmindedly in time with the sound on the leather seat beside him. One-two-one-two. Rob closed his eyes. One-two-one-two. Left-right-left-right.

‘Off the road,’ the platoon sergeant shouted harshly over the rain. ‘Off the road and stand down. Let them pass!’

Ahead of Rob and Victor, the long line of marching men slowly broke formation and stepped down into the muddy field at the side of the road. A crack of white lightning split the grey sky above the field next to them, followed by a thunderous boom. Rob’s boots sank into the mud as he tracked after Victor toward the broken stump of a tree. All around them, men were busily slipping their heavy packs from their shoulders and digging for their rations.

Reaching the jagged trunk, Rob saw Victor remove his pack from his shoulders and lean back against what was left of the tree. Rob moved next to him, peering through the rain into the wasteland beyond. What was once a farmer’s fields was now a vast and bleak expanse of muck and churned earth. He let his own pack slip from his shoulders and spun it round so that he could access it. Beside him, Victor had already found his half of the baguette that they had purchased the day before. Victor picked at the stale bread, carefully removing the bits that had gone too moldy to eat. Rob found his half still in its wax paper and unwrapped it. He tore into the dry loaf with his teeth and greedily swallowed a mouthful. He took another bite when Victor nudged him hard on the shoulder, nearly knocking him off balance in the muck.

‘You’re not having mine too,’ Rob warned, his mouth half-full of bread, and slung his pack back onto his right shoulder.

‘Look,’ Victor demanded, nodding in the direction of the road and the line of military supply carts passing them by.

‘Aye. So?’ Rob queried, glancing up at his friend. Victor’s rain-streaked face looked grim. His normally bright blue eyes looked ashen and grey as they flashed from Rob to passing carts. Victor nodded once more in the direction of the road. ‘Just look,’ he repeated dourly.

Rob looked up to the line of horse-drawn carts drawing past. The horses’ hooves stamped and skidded on the road as they fought for purchase in the dirt and gravel. Behind them, cart after cart creaked and moaned onward, their wheels slipping from one rut to another. This sort of resupply train was common. It wasn’t the first time they’d had to move off the road to let one by. The roads of France were

full of such convoys, carrying thousands of tons of supplies inland to the trenches daily.

Rob watched the carts roll noisily by, wondering what it was that he was meant to be looking for. The horses and their bedraggled drivers, and the few men walking silently beside the wagons, looked tired, worn out. Heads down against the rain, they trudged through the puddles and mud like mute automata. Rob wondered how long these men had been in France: was it months or years? How long, he speculated, would it take before he wore a similar expression? The supply train rolled on. The line of horses, men, and carts snaked downhill for more than a mile. While behind them, still more carts were rounding the hill into view.

Rob turned back to Victor, frustrated. 'Aye and? Just what I am supposed to be looking at?'

Victor's face was as rigid as stone, his blonde hair soaking wet, flattened over his skull. 'The cargo.'

Rob turned back, focusing his attention on what lay under the sodden tarps of the carts. Looking up the line, he could make out wooden boxes and barrels, sandbags, metal sheeting, rolls of chicken wire and barbed wire, and what looked like cooking pots. In the beds of the carts passing them now he could see thin planks of wood packed tightly together and bound with rough twine.

'Wood. Timber slats,' Rob said, turning his head. 'Duckboard?'

Victor shook his head.

Rob took a bite from his baguette. 'What does it matter?'

Victor looked into his eyes. 'It matters, Rob. It's not duckboard.'

Feeling exasperated, Rob looked back to the road and the long train of carts. A tall brown mare passed by them, its breath a great billowing mist. The cart behind it was again full of the same bundled wooden planks. Just pieces of wood, he thought to himself, just—.

Suddenly, he saw it. Victor was right. It wasn't duckboard or simple wooden slats. Rob wondered how he hadn't seen it before. 'Jesus,' he exclaimed as the realisation hit him. 'Crosses. Grave markers.'

Victor nodded. 'And not just a few... cart after cart full. That's a hell of a lot of crosses.'

Rob's stomach tightened. He grimaced, exhaled deeply, and stuffed the remaining baguette back into its wax paper, and then deep inside his pack. Glancing around, he saw that few of the other soldiers seemed to have noticed the conspicuous contents of the carts. Or perhaps, out of fear or respect, they weren't letting on that they had.

'They just trot them out like that,' Rob muttered angrily. 'Right in front of everyone, in front of us and all.' But even as he said this, he realised he shouldn't be angry or surprised. Death had been all around him since his arrival in France. It was everywhere. Even before he had left Glasgow, he had seen the casualties listed in the newspapers—tens of thousands killed every month. There was no hiding the heavy toll the war had taken.

Victor made no response, his gaze tracked each passing cart, one after the other. 'How many do you figure?' he asked a moment later. 'How many even in just one cart?'

'No idea,' Rob mumbled.

'Must be a hundred at least,' Victor guessed after a moment. 'Bloody hell.'

'More than bears thinking about,' a voice said behind them.

It was McRae, a smelter from Perth and one of the oldest men in the squad at thirty-two. 'I saw them in Abbeville, making crosses,' he continued. 'A bunch of men hammering day and night—day in, day out. Not enough carpenters at the front, or in the battalions, they said. Quartermasters couldn't manage. Couldn't keep up with... the need for them. So they transport them in now, with the food and all else. Hundreds upon hundreds of them—like that.'

Rob looked at McRae. His etched and pockmarked face told the truth of it. 'I figure we'll all see our fair share of it, one way or another,' the Perth man announced. 'Once we reach Passchendaele and the front. Fight's already been going on there for over a month.'

Neither Rob nor Victor replied. On the muddy road beside them, the carts rattled on through the endless rain.

'Aye, our fair share and more, I figure,' McRae added finally, before picking up his rifle and moving deeper into the field behind them. Rob watched the man go,

saw him reach into his jacket and pull out a piece of paper—likely a photograph—shielding it from the rain. The man bent his head low. Rob looked away.

For King and Country, he thought to himself, his mind's eye filling with the mustachioed face of Lord Kitchener and his pointing right hand. 'Your Country Needs You.' The posters and statement had been plastered all over Glasgow at the start of the war. The sentiment was everywhere: in the newspapers, in song. He could just remember the chorus of 'Your King and Country Want You.'

'Oh! We don't want to lose you,' Rob intoned mirthlessly, 'but we think you ought to go... For your King and Country, both need you so.'

Across the field behind them, another streak of lightning cut through the grey cloud. A moment later, the resounding boom of thunder clapped overhead.

'I hate that bloody song,' Victor said testily. 'I got damned sick of hearing it.'

Rob laughed hollowly. 'Aye.'

'We want you in your thousands,' Victor sang tunelessly, a line from the second verse. 'From Falmouth to the Forth.'

Rob looked at him, surprised. Victor smirked and pulled his greatcoat close around him, shaking the rain from it. A moment later, Rob did the same, for what it was worth.

'Falmouth to the Forth—for this!' Victor exclaimed suddenly, making sure to keep his voice quiet. 'For them. To protect their interests.' Rob glanced at Victor, unsure of who he was referring to. The engineer shook his head and then nodded in the direction of the passing carts. 'Wolves and sheep. It's always been the same. And all of us, like lambs led to slaughter.'

Confused, Rob didn't reply.

Victor shook his head again and stared out at the supply train as it snaked slowly past them. His face grew dark. Rivulets of rain ran down from his hair, coursing across his face. 'Never mind,' he said at last.

Looking back to the road, Rob could see that the contents of the carts passing them now were obviously foodstuffs. Victor stared blankly ahead, regardless.

'I'll be honest... I don't know what to think, sometimes,' Rob offered after a moment. 'Sometimes I feel all right with it, you know? We all have to die sometime.'

Could have died on the way here, on the boat, crossing the Channel. Could die crossing the street in Glasgow.' He paused. 'But then... at other times—'

'—I know, pal,' Victor replied in a whisper, turning and clapping a hand on Rob's shoulder. 'I do. I know.' A long silence passed between them filled with the steady drumming of rain.

'Well, as Fate would have it, we're here,' Rob piped up, 'and I got stuck with you. And you with me. So, I figure, we've only really got one choice: you watch out for me and I watch out for you. No matter what it takes.'

Victor smiled half-heartedly. 'Simple as that?'

'Things don't have to be complicated.'

Victor fixed Rob with a curious look. 'No, I suppose not. Let's just hope this bloody war ends before you learn that I'm more trouble than I'm worth.'

'That sounds like a promise,' he said, extending his hand.

Victor clasped Rob's hand and gripped it. 'To the bitter end, Rob Grant.'

Chapter 5: Panem Et Circenses

The green-white glow of the streetlamp ahead gleamed like a guiding star in the night. Ignoring the dull ache in his hip, Rob strode purposefully toward the light, orienting himself to it. Outside the bright pools of gaslight, the streets of Dennistoun were hidden in shadow. The air around him was close and fragrant with the smells of the heavy summer rain. Overhead, he could occasionally hear the flutter of bats' wings, while in the gutter at his feet, a glinting ribbon of rainwater twisted and curved in the ghost-light. It was long past midnight and both pavements on either side of the street were empty. The Crossley was parked behind him across from Golfhill Primary School, a few hundred yards back. The tenements and detached houses to his left and right were quiet and black as pitch. But up ahead, near the top of the rise, he could just make out the wrought-iron fence at the corner of Broompark Circus and see amber light emanating from the tall, narrow windows of Highfield's Gothic tower.

Rob had no idea how he would get in. He had only been to two private parties at the exclusive mansion before—the last months ago now—each time as Victor's guest. He had been terribly nervous and drank far too much on both occasions. His overriding memory of the first party was of vomiting on the grass in the steep back garden as the world spun round him and Victor ushering him through the house to make a quick escape. His memory of the second party was similarly hazy, but more complete. He recalled immediately the pungent odor of rich tobacco and spiced cologne, the sharp tang of alcohol, and the noise that had pervaded every room on the ground floor. Room after room was filled with men—most much older than himself—chatting, carousing, hunting. He remembered how smartly dressed they all were, how obviously and fabulously wealthy—and how small and poor he felt by comparison. He remembered the drinking, the gambling, and the rooms upstairs. Especially the room that Victor had pulled him into—the one with the heavy, red velvet curtains. He remembered watching and being watched, touching and being touched. He had awoken the next morning in a terrible panic and had anxiously sought Victor's assurance that he had done nothing wrong, nothing too inappropriate. How Victor had laughed then, how delighted he had seemed. As though he relished

Rob's unease. Rob had never forgotten that and had vowed never to return. So Victor went without him the next time. And the next.

It was at that second party that the photographs were taken—the photographs still secured deep inside his jacket pocket. One of the rooms upstairs had been converted into a photographic suite at Mr Ingram's request. It was the only time that Rob had seen Mr Ingram—the owner of Highfield and one of the most influential and richest men in Glasgow—an unattractive toad of a man, obese and perspiring, with great, beady black eyes. Ingram himself had taken the picture of Rob and Victor, greedily pushing the young photographer out of his way. Rob could still remember how the man's penetrating gaze had followed them as they rose from the chaise longue, his tongue sliding between his thick red lips. Like a lizard eyeing its next meal.

Rob shook himself free of the memory and walked round the fenced green at the centre of Broompark Circus. Ahead of him, Highfield rose up black against the night sky. The mansion was as big as a kirk: two floors extending well back from the road, tall windows on every side, and a tower with Gothic roof peaking high above the ground-floor, arched entranceway. Like all the properties around Broompark Circus, Highfield sat on a large plot with the front of the house at the crest of the hill and the rear sloping steeply down. The grounds around the mansion were immaculate with a few mature trees nestled amongst rose bushes and other flowering shrubs. To either side of the entrance, Rob could make out the silhouettes of two men, the spark of their cigarettes occasionally lighting the curves of their faces in an orange-red glow. Out front, meanwhile, leaning back against one of two stone pillars to either side of the Highfield's closed gate was the Irishman.

Rob knew nothing about the Irishman apart from his moniker. How he had come into the employ of Mr Ingram was a complete unknown, as was his opinion of Ingram's more particular pursuits. Rob had only seen Ingram's personal guard in action once, during his last visit, when the Irishman had stormed into the mansion and brutally removed a drunken gentleman who had become a nuisance. Ruthlessly efficient were the words that came to Rob's mind. Walking up to the Irishman now, Rob had no idea how the guard would react to his request to enter Highfield, but he knew better than to attempt to force his way in.

‘Good evening,’ Rob said, a little more than five feet away.

The Irishman pushed himself up from the gate pillar and pulled his calloused hands out of the pockets of his knee-length leather coat. His hair was a bushy brown mess, his skin was coarse and weather-beaten, and a thick moustache hid his upper lip. His movements seemed slow, even sluggish, but his grey eyes were as bright and alert as those of a hawk. He took a moment to size Rob up before responding: ‘Invitation?’

‘Uh, no... unfortunately, I haven’t got one.’

The Irishman sank back against the column behind him and replaced his hands in his pockets before Rob had finished the sentence. ‘Invitation only, pal,’ he said gruffly.

‘I’m looking for a friend of mine,’ Rob said.

The Irishman turned his head away, sighing heavily.

‘I came along with him last time. And the time before. It was a couple months ago... but you might remember him? Blonde, my height, but thinner. His name is Campbell, Victor Campbell. I’m just trying to track him down.’

‘Aye, of course you are.’

‘Can you tell me if you have you seen him tonight?’ Rob pressed. ‘I only want to know if he’s all right. That’s all. I’m a bit concerned that he’s gone missing.’

‘Trouble, Irish?’ one of the guards called from the front entrance.

The Irishman held up a hand and shook his shaggy head. A moment later, he reached into the front of his coat and retrieved a cigarette case and lighter. ‘I can tell you,’ he began, pausing to light a cigarette, ‘that he’s not in there.’

‘You’re sure?’

The Irishman took a long drag off his cigarette. ‘Aye, I’m sure. I remember your Mr Campbell, all right. Blonde, your height. Troublemaker and smartarse. Loud mouth on him too. I tossed him out with his older pal weeks back. He’s lucky he didn’t get worse.’ The guard motioned to the mansion behind him. ‘Big man said to keep him out after...so, he’s not in there, to be sure.’ The Irishman took another drag from his cigarette, his grey eyes narrowing. ‘Go home, pal.’

‘Tossed out... for what?’ Rob asked.

‘Not paid t’ ask questions, am I.’

‘But do you know what he did?’

‘I don’t care,’ the Irishman replied definitively.

‘Could I just ask Mr Ingram?’

‘Could you just.’

‘It’s important,’ Rob emphasised.

The Irishman spat and proceeded to dig a piece of tobacco from his teeth.

‘Missing, you said. For how long?’ he asked suddenly.

‘I’m not even sure—two, maybe three weeks,’ Rob responded.

The man nodded and his brow furrowed. After a moment, he turned and signalled back to the mansion entrance. A compact, but muscular guard with rounded features ran up the path to the gate. The Irishman leaned back in towards the recessed gate and whispered something to the guard inside. Turning back to Rob suddenly, he asked: ‘What’s your name, pal?’

‘Rob. Robert Grant.’

‘Get word to the big man,’ the Irishman said and dismissed the guard inside the gate. Leaning back against the gate pillar, he glanced at Rob once more. ‘He’ll make you wait, pal—if he’ll see you at all. Best make yourself comfortable.’

Rob nodded and stepped back off the pavement. Crossing the narrow lane behind, he approached the fenced green at the centre of Broompark Circus. There, he turned and carefully lowered himself down to the wet grass, leaning his back against the round spikes of the wrought-iron fence. High above him, the amber light in the tower windows flickered gently. Rob focused on the light, letting the dark world around him recede and grow unfocused, seeking the stillness that he had learned to achieve in the cramped trenches and muddy dugouts at the front—the welcome retreat into memory. Conscious of the transition only for a split second, he was simultaneously amazed and terrified at how quickly the silent canopy of night above him was replaced by a flapping, grey tarp.

Bell slumped down unceremoniously beside him, causing the wooden bench to crack ominously. The front of the NCO’s greatcoat was caked in dried mud, bits of which split and flaked off onto the wooden dugout bench and the dirt floor beneath them. More mud was stuck to the side of the man’s bald head and to his

round, silver spectacles. Rob watched bemused as the old man produced a flattened matchbox and the stub of a half-smoked cigarette from inside his bunched coat.

‘You’re Grant,’ Bell muttered suddenly, inserting the cigarette between his lips. ‘Right?’ The lenses of his spectacles reflected the bright line of grey sky between the earthen dugout wall and the fluttering tarp above them.

‘Aye, sir,’ Rob answered.

‘Cigarette?’

‘No, sir. I don’t smoke.’

The NCO coughed. ‘You will,’ he said, striking a match and lighting the pinched tip of the cigarette. ‘And ye don’t have to ‘sir’ me.’

Rob looked at the man. If the rumours were true, John Bell was the oldest man stationed with them at the front. The next oldest man, even amongst the officers, that Rob could think of was probably only in his mid-twenties. Bell, meanwhile, was probably old enough to be his father. Having only just arrived at the front, Rob had no real experience of the man and, from what he had heard, he would want to keep it that way. He was uniformly known for being cantankerous and overbearing, and for being tough on the men—often far tougher than was necessary. That hostility had earned the NCO a host of less-than-favorable nicknames: Bellboy and Bell-End were just two that sprang to mind.

‘You’re one of the new Glasgow boys, aren’t you?’ the NCO asked, his cigarette bobbing between his chapped lips. ‘Working the tunnels.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Rob replied.

‘Who’d they stick you with?’

‘Campbell. Victor Campbell.’

‘And where is he?’

‘The latrine. I think.’

‘Campbell... Campbell—isn’t he the one that refused officer training? That the one? Son of some lord—sorry, laird for you, isn’t it—away in the Highlands. That’s what Fisher said.’ Bell leaned back into the dugout wall, sighing loudly. ‘Suppose it doesn’t matter now, does it? He’s here. Still, good on him, I say.’

A couple of soldiers passed by the dugout, heading down towards the support trench, momentarily blocking what little sunlight made it into the hovel. Bell reached

into his greatcoat again and this time pulled out a folded wad of newspaper. Rob observed as Bell unfolded it carefully and soon had a few smudged sheets of the Daily Mirror in his hands. The NCO glanced over, noting Rob's interest.

'The wife sends it through,' he offered. 'It's mostly the sports that I get. The front pages never make it past the censors. You're welcome to a look once I'm through.'

'I'd appreciate that,' Rob nodded and shifted on the bench, trying to get more comfortable. The tarp above them buckled and flapped in the breeze, cascading dust into the narrow dugout.

'I thought they only censored letters going out,' Rob said after a moment. 'To protect troop movements and the like.'

Bell looked up, his narrowing eyes squinting through his spectacles. 'Goes both ways, don't it? They wouldn't want us soldiers on the line reading stuff they're printing at home. Or what the foreign presses are reporting. For morale, see... our morale.' He paused, drawing on his cigarette. 'The way the brass sees it, there are things we're better off not knowing—or thinking. Got to keep us all in line, after all. Keep us where we are, yeah? Keep us doing what they need doing. For King and Country.' The NCO smirked and shook his head. 'Can't have mass desertion or revolt. Can't have the little man thinking for himself. Better to keep him distracted. Panem et circenses, my boy. Panem et circenses. Bread and games.'

Confused, Rob nodded dumbly.

Bell bent the newspaper in the direction of the trench beyond. 'But you hear things, though, don't you?' he said, smoke trailing from his mouth and nostrils. 'Back from the line, from the supply trains, word gets around. That they are talking about this being the bloodiest war in history—the worst ever—with hundreds of thousands dead on all sides. And no end in sight. A proper bloodbath. And you hear that they are blaming it on the gas, on the heavy artillery, or on the tanks. Metal and gears. Science and machines giving us new weapons, they say, a new breed of war.' The NCO shook his head slowly. 'Damned shortsighted, that. Blaming the engine, not the driver.'

Rob could see a change taking shape in Bell's face. The old man's jaw went rigid and his pale eyes darkened. He suddenly looked so tired. It was as if his vitality

was draining away from him, right in front of Rob. It was being drawn down and absorbed into the packed earth under their feet.

‘Machines aren’t why we’re out here dying,’ Bell continued. ‘The real truth—God’s honest truth—is that men die because of what’s in here and in here.’ The NCO pointed to his heart and to his head respectively. ‘It’s in every one of us—every blessed one. The truth is that men are the engines of war. Engineer and engine in one: you and I—all of us—we’re the machines doing the killing. Doing our damndest to destroy one another. That’s the bloody truth of it. The real truth down inside.’

Bell flicked his cigarette to the dugout floor. The fag end bounced, sending up sparks that flared and flashed bright orange and gold in Rob’s vision, before fading to black on the cold wet road. Disoriented, Rob sat up. A few feet from him, the Irishman advanced on the rolling cigarette, finally crushing it under his boot. Rob shivered in the cool night air, realising that he had lost himself once more. How many times was that in the past twenty-four hours? The muscles in his back had grown stiff and his shoulders ached. The rest of his body felt numb, his skin was cold. Cold as death. Nearby, the Irishman drew his leather coat around him, his predatory eyes fixed on Rob.

‘This works one way,’ the Irishman stated coolly. ‘We go up together and we come down together. No dilly-dallying, just in and out. Anything else, I’ll be forced to do something unpleasant. Understand?’

Rob stood up painfully, struggling to overcome the chill in his limbs. ‘Fair enough, aye.’

‘Then follow me and stay close.’ With that, the Irishman turned and made his way back toward Highfield gate. Behind him, Rob stumbled, fighting to keep up. A moment later, he was through the gate and hurrying up the path towards the mansion’s entranceway. The two guards to either side of the doorway eyed him warily as he followed the Irishman into the noise and the smoky haze within. Rob followed his guide up the first set of stairs, averting his eyes from the throngs of gentlemen around him. The climb left him winded and he had to stop, clutching at his wounded hip. The Irishman noticed this and, unexpectedly, reduced his speed up

the second set of stairs. Reaching a small landing, the stern guard stopped and waited for Rob before knocking on an ornate oak door.

‘Come in, come in,’ said a reedy voice within.

The Irishman opened the door and ushered Rob inside, where a further L-shaped stairwell took him up into Highfield’s elegant tower sitting room. Rob mounted the steps slowly, wincing at the pain in his hip. High above him, the ceiling rose up inside the tower’s Gothic peak. Three tall, narrow windows figured on each side of the square room, facing the points of the compass. Beneath the windows, a series of baroque tables and low bookcases ran round the room. Atop each of these were clusters of white candles of varying size and shape. Together the candle flames bathed the white-painted interior in a bright amber glow. Facing the centre of the room, Rob spied three high-backed, leather armchairs surrounding an octagonal coffee table decorated with a web of inlaid metal that shone in the candlelight. Two crystal decanters stood at the centre of the low table, further refracting the amber light. The room smelled strongly of paraffin and wine.

‘I must admit,’ Mr Ingram began, ‘I was unsure whether I would recognise you.’ The man leaned forward in the chair opposite Rob, his round face emerging like a bloated disc from the shadows. ‘But now that I see you—come closer—I have some vague recollection. Do come closer. My eyes are not what they used to be.’

Rob took the final step up into the tower sitting room, stopping momentarily to look out the windows nearest him. Through them he could see twinkling city lights extending well beyond Glasgow’s city centre into the West End. To the southwest he could just make out the dark, winding Clyde snaking between quiet shipyards and tall factory stacks. A loud click from the stairwell brought Rob back to the tower interior. The Irishman had closed the tower door, leaving Rob alone with his master.

‘Sit, Mr Grant, my time is precious,’ Ingram demanded, resting back into the shadow of his armchair. ‘Your request intrigued me. As did your statement regarding Victor Campbell’s whereabouts. Or the question thereof.’

‘I was hoping you might be able to help,’ Rob replied, slipping down into the nearest chair.

‘And why is that? Precisely, if you please.’

As Rob's eyes adjusted, he could make out the obese form of Mr Ingram across from him. The man was robed in a rich, silk dressing gown, beneath which Rob could see no other garments. The robe was split in wide 'V' to Ingram's waist, exposing his sagging chest and the curve of his distended belly. The belt of the dressing gown was entirely lost to view. Sprawled in the armchair, the robe split again just above his knees revealing the round pink flesh of the man's inner thighs. His chin resting on his chest, Ingram followed Rob's gaze with evident amusement. His thick lips curled up into a smile, baring white teeth, as his black eyes sparkled in the amber light.

Reaching into his jacket, Rob unbuttoned his inside pocket and removed the four small photographs that he'd removed earlier from Victor's room. 'I went to Victor's flat earlier tonight to try to find him. He wasn't there, but these were,' Rob said, leaning forward to place the pile of photographs on the octagonal table before Ingram. 'A number of men where there before me. It looked like there might have been a struggle. And Victor was gone. As I said, I think he might be missing.'

'Ah, my photographs,' Ingram cooed. 'My lost little darlings.' He leaned forward and stretched out his right hand, extending his index finger to push the photographs apart. Ingram pulled the photograph of Victor and Rob towards him, skating it along the top of the inlaid table. 'I do remember that evening,' he said, his tone changing. A moment later, he slumped back into his leather armchair. 'But I fail to see the relevance of this to me.'

'I thought perhaps that you had given the photographs to Victor,' Rob chanced.

'I did not,' Ingram denied flatly. 'Nor would I have. These were stolen. I have not seen them since that night and their disappearance caused some concern, as you might imagine.'

'I can, of course,' Rob answered. 'I am very glad then to have been some measure of help in returning them to you.'

Ingram's eyes narrowed. 'And in return, you wish some help of mine. Is that what I am to understand?'

‘As I said, I worry for Victor. Genuinely. I have not seen him for some time. I only hoped—I thought that you, or someone you know, might have seen him more recently. And that you might be able to help me find him.’

Rob watched nervously as Ingram’s beady black eyes surveyed him.

‘That being the case, I must disappoint you, Mr Grant. You see, Victor is no longer invited to my ‘parties,’ as you put it. Neither he nor his accomplice.’

‘Can you tell me why?’ Rob asked.

Ingram paused, raising an eyebrow. ‘I suppose you have done me the kindness of returning my photographs and solving one mystery. If I can, by way of exchange, help solve another mystery, then... so be it. But I must insist that what is said in this room remains in this room and is held in strictest confidence forthwith. Additionally, if you choose to remain an associate of Mr Campbell’s, then I will further insist that you never return to Highfield nor seek my company again. The reason for this will become evident once you have heard what I have to say. If you can agree to these terms, I will tell you what I can. If you do not, then let us split now amicably.’

‘Aye, I agree,’ Rob muttered. ‘You have my word.’

‘Very well. A little over a month ago, it came to my attention that Victor was soliciting my guests. Not the usual solicitations, mind, but petitions made to a number of wealthy patrons for monies to fund some... venture of his. This—as you well know—is not a house of business, nor will it ever be. I have few rules, but this is a cardinal one. Having heard the reports, I approached Victor and made my displeasure clear, plainly asking him to leave. Victor refused and flew into a rage, branding me self-serving and a hypocrite. His behaviour surprised me, unbecoming—as it was—of a son of a noble Scottish family. Subsequent inquiries have made it clear to me that Victor is, at this point, a Campbell only in name.’

Ingram took a deep breath and glanced down at the photograph on the table before him. ‘At that point, I would still have forgiven him. I have been challenged more times than I care to remember and called considerably worse. But Victor went on, incandescent with rage, and threatened to blackmail me and a great many of my guests. It wasn’t a mere threat either. He explained in detail the measures he would go to, the plans he might put in motion, to ‘tarnish’—shall we say—my good name.

It was premeditated and vile. I had my guards throw him out and then let them—and my guests—know that Victor Campbell was no longer welcome at Highfield. I am a man who can open doors, Mr Grant, and, if need be, I can shut them as well. It is Victor who has made himself unwelcome here and, I imagine, he will find himself unwelcome in a great many other houses. You might think this vindictive but I stand by my actions.'

'I understand,' Rob spoke slowly. 'What you have told me... it shocks me, genuinely. I could never imagine him doing that, being like that. To anyone.'

'You are still young,' Ingram replied. 'Innocent and, I suspect, in love. But I have no more to tell you. I have not seen Victor since, nor heard news of him until now. Were you to interrogate any of my guests, I suspect you would find the same. If his manner is unchanged, you will not find him in polite society, but in the muck and mire of Glasgow. A word of advice, Robert: take care. People are not always what they seem.'

Rob stood up from the armchair. 'Thank you for agreeing to see me. Can I ask one last thing?'

'One,' Ingram emphasised. 'And it must be the last.'

'You said Victor wasn't alone. You mentioned an... accomplice?'

'Yes, he was an older man. Rough around the edges, silver hair and a terrible, scraggly goatee. Not a businessman—I believe he said he was an academic, a professor of something or other. His accent was Cornish or from elsewhere in the West Country. I have no idea why Victor brought him. He certainly added nothing to the festivities.' Ingram paused. 'But that's really all I can say. It's late. Fergus will show you out.'

'But did he have a scar?'

Ingram cocked an eyebrow. 'I really couldn't say. Now, if you don't mind...'

Rob nodded and walked to the top of the stairwell, grasping the handrail and slowly descending the tower steps. Below him, the Irishman opened the door and made room for him on the small landing. His mind in a daze, Rob followed the dark figure of the guard down one flight of steps and then the next, down past the light, the noise, and the heat, down finally into the cool night air outside Highfield. He

followed the Irishman through the yard and then through the gate, until at last he stumbled forward alone.

Chapter 6: Beehive Boys

Rob wandered out of Broompark Circus, lost in thought, and shuffled down the hill toward the Primary School and the parked Crossley. Ingram's description of the man who had come to Highfield with Victor stuck in his mind. Was he the same man whom he and Anna had seen leaving the Campbell villa? Sleeman? It seemed to Rob that it must be the case, but it still provided no answer as to Victor's location or safety. The cream canopy of the Crossley was just up the road from him, maybe a hundred yards away, when he heard a sound behind him. A rustling and footsteps quickly approaching.

Something struck the back of his head. He heard the muted ring of metal and fell to his knees as pain exploded behind his eyes.

'Eh! Ah dinnae say batter 'im,' a panting voice reprimanded, coming up on his left. Rob lifted his arms instinctively to protect his head. Another brutal hit caught him in the back of his left shoulder. Groaning, Rob rolled onto his right side on the cold pavement.

'Stop it, ye feckin' eejits! We need 'im tae talk—no bloody well die on us. Shite... gies a hand.'

Rough hands grabbed Rob, twisting and shifting him upward, and then dragged him backward until he contacted a low wooden fence. Squinting upward, he saw three men, each maybe four or five years younger than himself, standing over him. Not one was old enough to have gone to war. The central figure wore a tight-fitting, brown leather coat over a white shirt and wore no hat, while the two to either side of him wore denim jackets and sported checked, flat caps—they both carried short sections of lead piping.

'Youse skedaddle aff the noo,' the middle one said, addressing the denim-clad hooligans. 'Me an oor wee gent'lman here'll have a wee blether.' With that, the trio split up. Still gripping their lead pipes, the pair of villains walked away across the street, chuckling to themselves.

'Now, now, now,' the remaining fellow said, slowly crouching down before him. He was clean-shaven and had a boyish face. He might be attractive but for the

cruelty in his eyes. ‘Let’s make this easy fae e’eryone, aye? You no waste my time, an I’ll no waste yours. Tha’ way we all profit, see, an’ none loses.’

‘What is it you want?’ Rob croaked.

‘What ‘we’ want,’ the young man corrected. ‘What we want is oor men, oor lorries, and the second half of the cash tha’ your Mr Campbell owes us.’

Rob lifted his hands to rub at the pain in his shoulder and cradle his head. ‘I don’t know anything about that,’ he replied. ‘None of it.’

‘Oh, aye? Ah’m supposed tae believe that?’

‘It’s the truth,’ Rob spat.

The young man shifted on his feet. ‘The truth—the truth, pal, is this: your man owes us. He’s made a deal with Mr MacAlpine, see? An’ the big man, he wants what’s owed: his men, his lorries, and his cash. An’ he doesnae gie a fanny about all else. Says tae me, ‘Midge, you get it done. Take two o’ the boys and you get it done. No matter what it takes.’ His words, right enough. ‘No matter what it takes.’ See that tells me what I can and cannae do. An’ there’s no a lot that I cannae or wouldnae do. Ask any of the Beehive Boys an’ they’ll tell you straight: God’s truth, I don’t fail—’

‘—I’m telling the truth,’ Rob interrupted. ‘I don’t know where Victor is and I know nothing about you, or the Beehive Boys, or Victor’s deal with your boss.’

Midge cocked his head to one side. His piercing blue eyes studied Rob’s face. ‘You were at his place th’ night. An’ broke in... so you’re no polis. An’ you were in the big hoose up the way. But you’re no posh enough for them—are you. So, Campbell and you are?’

‘Mates. Pals from the war. I’m looking for him. I found out he was missing.’

‘Missing, aye,’ Midge smiled. ‘Hiding more like. But no for long, because you’re going tae find him. Aren’t you? ‘Course you are. You’re going tae convince Campbell tae square up with the Beehive Boys. An’ in return, you an’ your pretty nurse at the Western Infirmary won’t ha’ anythin’ to fear fae the Boys. After all, you wouldnae want tae see the lassie suffer, would you?’ Midge stood up slowly, his eyes never leaving Rob’s. ‘Of course, you wouldnae. So you’ll bring us Campbell and nothing needs tae change. No’ with your lassie, no’ at the Merchant Club, no’ at the Infirmary.’

Rob didn’t respond, but kept his eyes locked on Midge’s.

‘What do you say, pal?’

‘What can I say?’

Midge’s smile grew wider. ‘Nothing, Rab, nothing at all.’

Chapter 7: The Necropolis

Rob took his foot off the accelerator and let the Crossley roll down Wishart Street. The sky above was thick with heavy, swollen clouds that hid any sign of the approaching dawn. He gripped the steering wheel, struggling to keep the motorcar travelling in a straight line. His left shoulder ached terrifically with every movement. But it was the blow to the back of his skull that worried Rob most. His head felt as though it had been split open, burning white-hot and leaving him dizzy and nauseous. He shouldn't be driving, he knew, but it was all he could think to do. To put some distance between him and the Beehive Boys.

Ahead the wide arch of the Bridge of Sighs stretched high over the street connecting Glasgow Cathedral on his right with the Necropolis on his left. As another wave of nausea washed over him, Rob pulled off the road, steering the motorcar into the deep shadow beneath the bridge. He turned off the ignition and sank back into the leather seat, taking momentary comfort in the cloaking darkness. He just needed to rest, he told himself, then he could work out what to do next.

Reaching up and running his fingers over the tender lump at the back of his head, Rob winced. Below the bump, his hair was heavily matted and sticky with drying blood. This is madness, he thought to himself. Every instinct told him to run: to quit the search for Victor and escape, to leave everything behind. A part of him wanted to start up the Crossley and drive—just drive—until the tank was empty. Maybe he would go south to England or west to a ferry and Ireland. He could find another job, another life. Somehow. Maybe the Beehive Boys wouldn't follow through on their threat to Anna. Maybe Victor would settle things and eventually Rob might return.

'Where are you, Victor?' Rob asked aloud, his voice filling the empty cab of the motorcar.

At least Rob knew now what was behind Victor's disappearance: the Beehive Boys. Victor had clearly got into trouble over some shady business deal and was now in hiding. Just as Midge had said. It would be like Victor to pick a fight with one of the most powerful and notorious gangs in Glasgow. It also potentially provided an answer for why Victor had acted so strange and distant when Rob had encountered

him on Glasgow Green. Perhaps Victor had been trying to protect him. Protect them, Rob corrected himself. Victor had got Anna mixed up in this as well. What he couldn't fathom was why Victor had got involved with the Beehive Boys in the first place? And how was Sleeman connected?

Rob squeezed the steering wheel in frustration. It was pointless to even consider such questions—questions that only Victor could answer. He needed to focus on what mattered: discovering Victor's location, learning the truth behind this mess with the Beehive Boys, and then finding some way out of it. For his sake, for Victor's, and for Anna's. He had to do something and do it soon. Before someone got really hurt, Rob thought, flinching again at the pain in his skull.

Through the motorcar windscreen, his attention was drawn to a man cautiously slipping out through the Necropolis gates a few hundred yards ahead. At this time of night there was only one reason why the man would have been in the cemetery—the same reason that Rob sometimes found himself drifting between the tombstones on nights like this: to connect with another human being, to lose himself in a moment of rapture. And then steal away in the night, he thought, watching the figure disappear into the gloom. If he had one distinct advantage over the Beehive Boys in finding Victor, this might be it, Rob realised. He had intimate knowledge of a secretive and select part of Glasgow's underworld. More than that, he had access to a network of acquaintances that Midge and his boys would likely never dream of approaching. A network that met in dark and lonely places—like the Necropolis or Glasgow Green—and one that Victor might have called upon for help. Perhaps even finding someone who could offer him a place to hide.

Rob retrieved his pocket watch and held it up to reflect the light coming in through the Crossley's windscreen. He still had nearly two hours before he would be needed back at the Merchant Club. It wasn't a vast amount of time, but long enough to see if the Necropolis could offer some small breadcrumb to follow. Exiting the motorcar, Rob quickly crossed over Wishart Street and made his way toward the iron gates of the Necropolis, his eyes scanning the steep hillside of the cemetery. There was no sign of movement between the monuments and headstones nestled in the shadows on the cemetery hillside, but Rob didn't expect to see anyone lurking this close to the road. He would need to climb higher and deeper into the Necropolis to

the grand mausoleums, the ornate statues, and the gilt sarcophagi that crested the cemetery mound. There he would find them, seeking one another, slipping from shadow to shadow, or briefly clutching in some dark recess.

Reaching the entrance, Rob carefully slid through the gap between the chained gates. The steep slope of the vast cemetery hill rose up ahead of him, the Bridge of Sighs visible to his left. He wasted no time in moving up the curving grit path. To either side of him, headstones, monuments, and funerary ornaments of varying size and shape rose up from the wet grass like jagged, misshapen teeth. Before long, his head was pounding from the exertion. The scarred skin at his hip began to burn as he ascended the steep path. He did his best to ignore the pain, slowing only when he must.

Finally Rob was rewarded with a view of the crowning glories of the Necropolis. Ranging up and over Fir Park hill, the Necropolis was not laid out like other cemeteries he had visited. It had few formal lines. Instead, it meandered chaotically. Twisting and turning paths linked great clusters of funerary monuments, but occasionally there were open spaces as well with few headstones and no paths at all. Groves of trees and shrubs further broke up the landscape, growing particularly thick on the Necropolis' steep hillsides. All of this made finding individual graves no easy matter, as Rob knew well, having once spent an afternoon finding the lair of John Johnson, a sapper he had known in France. But that same labyrinthine layout provided numerous secluded areas—usable areas. Quiet cul-de-sacs and leafy grottos where men might come together and from which voyeurs might secretly watch and pleasure themselves.

Rob had no intention of searching all the dark corners of the Necropolis, however. It was information he wanted and for that he sought one individual in particular. Stepping off the grit path and onto the grass, he paused at the throbbing pain in the back of his skull but continued nonetheless toward the peak of the Necropolis and the towering monument to John Knox. The cemetery's grandest mausoleums and family crypts fanned out in the shadows around the soaring memorial. And it was here, amongst Glasgow's celebrated dead, that he hoped to find her.

Rob slowed for a moment, briefly rubbing away the pain in his hip and taking a deep breath. The heavy, rich smell of fermenting hops from the nearby Tennant's brewery filled his nostrils. To his left, he could see the Bridge of Sighs, now far below him, with the Glasgow Cathedral and the Royal Infirmary beyond it taking pride of place on the eastern edge of the city's centre. A thick blanket of dense cloud still hung over the city, dimly illuminated by ghostly gaslight. Turning back to the Necropolis, Rob was surprised when his gaze fell immediately upon a solitary figure sitting on the lowest plinth of the Knox monument, her knees pulled up to her chest and her arms wrapped round her.

He was sure it must be Petal. Finally, it seemed his luck was beginning to change.

Mustering his strength, Rob began up the last incline to the base of the monument. Glancing ahead, he saw that she too had noticed him. Unfurling her arms, she stood up slowly and turned in Rob's direction. Walking to the edge of the plinth, she extended her arms and leapt nimbly down to the grass. A paisley silk shawl fluttered and fell about her shoulders, like butterfly wings.

'This night is full of surprises,' she announced, stopping a few yards from him. She was smaller and thinner than he remembered, but then he couldn't recall the last time he had dared come this close to her. Her voice, however, he did remember: a rasping but musical alto. Her dark hair was pulled back into a short ponytail and her eyes were rimmed with thick charcoal. Like an Egyptian queen, Rob thought, a dark Cleopatra born of the shadows. 'It's Robert, isn't it?' she asked, inclining her head to the left. 'Or is it Rob? Rab?'

'It's Rob. Aye,' he stammered. 'I wasn't sure—I worried that you might've already left... given the time. But I hoped. Or rather, I was hoping to find you.'

'I'm always here at this time of night. Helping lost souls,' Petal responded. 'But this is the first time that I can remember seeing you here this late.'

'That's true. I wouldn't normally be, but—I had some business. Nearby.'

'And now you are looking to relax?' Petal remarked, closing the distance between them.

As she came near, Rob could see why other men found her intriguing and desirable. No other man he knew came close to Petal. She was extraordinary, almost

as feminine as she was masculine, and undeniably beautiful. But it was the force of her will and personality that gave her real allure. She exuded an inner strength and possessed a strident individuality that Rob saw in few others, that he himself lacked. He could never be with her, he knew. It was impossible. He was monstrous and she was so handsome. His jealousy wouldn't allow it. He couldn't be with her precisely because he wanted to be her: confident, powerful, and beautiful.

'No, ah, forgive me, but no... that's not why I'm here,' he muttered. 'I'm hoping you can help me.'

She stopped little more than a foot from him. 'Oh? Help you how?'

'I need information,' Rob began. 'I need information about Victor.'

Her eyes grew wide. 'Victor? Victor Campbell?'

'Yes, I was hoping that you might have seen him. Recently.'

'I have. Maybe four or five nights ago,' she replied coolly, taking several steps back. 'Why do you ask?'

'Four or five,' Rob returned excitedly. 'Was he all right? Did he say anything? Do you know where he went?'

'What do you want?' she asked, her hands clenching into fists. She took another step back and quickly scanned her surroundings. She was frightened, Rob realised, mortally afraid. But why?

'I thought—I think he might be missing. I'm looking for him. That's all, Petal, honest,' he said, raising up his hands. 'Are you—is everything all right?'

'You're alone? You came alone?'

'Yes, I—' Rob didn't finish the sentence.

A wave of nausea hit him, tossing his equilibrium aside and causing him to stumble painfully. He bent his head, thinking he might be sick and reached out for something to steady himself. He was surprised to find Petal there, suddenly beside him, holding him, her strong hands gripping his shoulder and waist.

'You're hurt,' she said. 'Your collar... you're bleeding.'

'I don't feel—oh, my head.'

Rob felt Petal reach up and carefully run a hand round the back of his head. He flinched as her fingers found the clot of matted hair and the tender wound

beneath. She pulled her hand away immediately. Stars filled Rob's vision and he retched drily.

'Who did this to you?' Petal asked.

Rob didn't reply—he couldn't. He began to sink down to the grass, but Petal stopped him, holding him fast. 'No, not here,' she said. 'Come with me.' And she lifted Rob to his feet with a strength that belied her small frame.

Rob followed her in a daze, the back of his head stinging and throbbing incessantly. Petal guided him along, her hands cradling him at his shoulder and waist. 'Almost there,' she said and Rob could make out the octagonal shape of the Monteath monument ahead of them. Then she was fumbling for something, her hand momentarily disappearing from and then returning to his waist. Rob thought he heard the sound of keys and suddenly they were in the shadow of the tall sandstone crypt. He felt as though he might black out. He was losing his grip on consciousness.

Sensation came and went. The sound of chains. The smell of hops. A key turning noisily. Petal's warm, muscular chest against his. A gate opening. Her arms around him. Blackness. Cold stone. A candle in the dark.

'Rob... Rob, can you hear me?'

Petal. A butterfly.

'Rob, I'm going to get help. I won't be gone a moment. Try not to move.'

Footsteps speeding away. Darkness.

But there was something in the darkness. It had got Victor. It had burrowed up from beneath them. It had grabbed Victor and pulled him down. Then the mine floor beneath Rob had cracked and he had fallen. Down into the abyss. And it was there in the dark. With him. Inside him.

'No!' he gasped, crying out as pain enveloped him, blinding and hot.

Rob opened his eyes, but his vision was blurred, indistinct. He could hear the roar of the engine, however, and feel his body rolling and rocking in response to every pothole and rut in the French road. Every bump sent pain streaking up his left side. His nostrils filled with the earthy odours of rubber, wet mud, and dust. He could make out the floor of the field ambulance to his right. He was in the lowest berth. Other smells slowly became distinct: first the acrid, medicinal scents of antiseptics

and alcohol, and then the visceral reek of blood, piss, and ruptured flesh. None of it mattered, however. Only the pain did—the pain was everything.

‘Just a minute,’ a voice said, gruff and matter-of-fact. ‘I’ve got something for you right here.’

Rob tried to move, but he couldn’t. The skin and muscle all across his left side and at the side of his skull seared wet and hot.

‘Try not to move,’ the voice returned, closer.

Rob couldn’t respond. His throat was dry as a desert, his tongue stuck fast to his teeth and gums. A stretcher-bearer knelt down beside him, the bottom half of his uniform caked in mud and earth, a morphine syrette in his hand, his upper half hidden by the berth above. He pulled Rob’s shirt up roughly from his waist and pinched the skin at Rob’s stomach. ‘One quick jab and you’ll be able to get some rest,’ the man assured him. As promised, the pain began to recede almost instantly, replaced by warm nothingness. He watched dumbly as the stretcher-bearer pinned the empty tube of morphine to Rob’s collar before standing up to attend to others. The field ambulance bounced along, but it no longer set his nerves afire. The warm nothingness continued to spread, soon swallowing him whole and sucking him down into the black.

Time passed. How much, he could not say. The bumping and swaying of the field ambulance came and went. He slipped in and out of consciousness as the berths above him and across from him filled. There was moaning and crying—others’ and sometimes his own.

More time passed, after which the interior of the field ambulance was replaced by cold air and brilliant sunlight—so bright it stung his eyes. With it came a curious new experience: being carried on a stretcher, tipping this way and that. Then he was in a tent, hands carefully rolling him onto his side, other hands quickly and methodically examining him. Triage at one of the forward hospitals, he guessed. A stern man with a Welsh accent asked him his name. He tried to answer, but could not. They gave him some water. He tried again. ‘Robert Grant, sir,’ he muttered. ‘Attachment?’ the Welshman queried. ‘Royal Engineers, sir. Sapper.’ ‘Good, good,’ the man responded. ‘My pal, sir,’ Rob continued. ‘Victor—who was with me—’

‘Yes, yes,’ he interrupted. ‘Don’t worry. He’s here too. We’re going to have a look at you, Robert, and patch you up, understand? Just you rest for now.’

When Rob awoke later, it was dark and he was lying on a cot in a makeshift ward inside a barn or perhaps a stables. It was cold: thick, heavy blankets lay atop him, weighing him down. He felt stiff, but he was able to move a little and without too much pain. He carefully moved his right hand, and then his left, down to the side of his legs. They were both there. ‘Thank God,’ he whispered quietly. ‘Oh, thank God.’ Pulling his arms back, he found his left hip wadded with bandages and numb to the touch. He found more thick bandages behind his left ear and ranging up the side of his skull. Satisfied that he was in one piece, Rob finally relaxed his arms and sighed audibly.

As if in response, something moved in the shadows a short distance away. He turned his head toward the single lantern that lit the open space with a dull yellow light. Cots had been set up on either side of the room, eight to a side, sixteen in all. Each one held a sleeping soldier. A nurse appeared from the gloom, her white and blue uniform standing out against the darkness. ‘Would you like some water?’ she whispered. He recognised the lilt of a Scottish accent.

Rob stared up at her and nodded. ‘Yes, please,’ he croaked. She turned back into the darkness and returned a moment later with a shawl wrapped round her shoulders and a tin cup in her hand. She moved quietly to his side and bent down to offer him the cup, lifting his shoulders ever so slightly to help him drink. ‘Careful now and not too fast,’ she warned, her hazel eyes fixed on him.

Rob sipped at the cool water, only now realising how parched he was. Her hand at the back of his neck was cool. Her long black hair was tied up in a bun. Rob drank more deeply. His eyes moved down, noting the dried blood on her uniform, the muddy hem of her dress, her worn boots. He gulped another mouthful of water, his eyes finally settling on the soldier in the cot to his right. The soldier’s face and most of his upper torso were covered in overlapping bandages and surgical tape. Large areas of the bandages were stained yellow and brown. Fluids and blood had soaked through. This was particularly true around the man’s face where a crisscrossed network of soaked bandages ranged up from his chin to the top of his shaved head.

Rob pushed back from the offered cup and the nurse lowered him back down, slipping her hand from his back and shoulder. His eyes remained fixed on the soldier beside him. Was it Victor?

‘I have a little food, if you are hungry,’ the nurse whispered.

‘No. No, thank you,’ Rob rasped, clearing his throat. ‘But could you tell me, miss... I was brought in with my mate, Victor. Victor Campbell. Could you tell me... is that him?’

The nurse stood up and looked over to the bandaged soldier. ‘No, he’s not a Campbell. He’s a Fleming—Corporal Fleming. But... Victor Campbell, did you say? There was a Campbell newly arrived in one of the other wards. A blonde man about your age, I would say.’

‘Is he all right? Victor, I mean. Is he going to be all right?’

‘He is fine, if it is the same man. You fared the worse, I’m afraid,’ she replied. ‘He was in C Tent. So I imagine he’ll be transferred back to the coast in a few days. And then by ship back to Britain.’ She turned the tin cup in her hand. ‘You’ll be heading home too, before long. You won’t be far behind him.’

‘Was there... anything odd? About him?’

‘Odd?’ the nurse asked. ‘Odd how?’

‘What had happened to him? Or his injuries?’

She shook her head. ‘Not that I am aware of. Is there something the doctors should know? Did you see something? Something in particular?’

Rob took a breath. ‘No, miss,’ he paused. ‘It’s just—I worry for him.’

‘I tell you what: if he’s well enough, and if the doctors will allow it, I’ll see if I can bring your Victor over to you for a visit tomorrow. But for now, you should really sleep. Try and get some rest.’ She turned back towards the lantern, preparing to leave. ‘If you need anything, I’ll just be over in that chair.’

‘Can I ask your name, miss?’

‘Anna. Sister Anna, if you like.’

‘Thank you, Anna,’ Rob replied, closing his eyes and resting his head on the flat pillow beneath him. He listened to her footsteps recede and tried to calm himself. Victor was here, he thought to himself. He was here. They had survived. It seemed a miracle. Rob tried not to think about the thing they had encountered in the mine, but

his memory dredged it up nonetheless. In his mind's eye, he saw Victor's body being dragged limp and doll-like into the abyss by that monstrosity. How could the doctors not find some trace, some inescapable evidence of its attack on Victor? It made no sense. Rob was about to give up on sleep altogether and call the nurse over, when exhaustion finally caught up with him and dragged him into dreamless slumber.

It was near lunch the next day when he awoke. A great many of the soldiers in the stables were propped up and chatting to one another. Rob could hear a smattering of French stand out from a wide chorus of British accents—English, Welsh, and a few Scots. The nurse from the night before was nowhere to be seen, but two other nurses were walking around the stables handing out bowls of hot soup with some bread. Rob tried to lift himself up, but stopped when the pain in his hip flared angrily. He leaned back again and waited for the agonising prickling and burning to die away.

In the bed across from him, the body of Corporal Fleming remained motionless apart from the slow rise and fall of his chest. The corporal's bandages had been changed at some point, but deep red and bright yellow patches were already spreading. Over the top of Fleming's legs, Rob could see the nurses moving their little cart round to his side of the stables. His stomach growled eagerly. He could do with a bowl of soup and a slice of bread.

'I have a surprise for you,' a female voice said behind him.

Rob turned and saw the nurse from the night before—Anna—walking up to the edge of his cot. Sunlight streamed in from the open stable doors behind her, surrounding her in a bright halo. She looked flushed, as though she had been running. Her cheeks were a shade of bright pink.

'A surprise?' he asked. Just then a shadow appeared in the open doors and a figure with bright blonde hair hobbled into the stables on crutches. Rob's heart leapt.

'He can't stay for long,' Anna stated. 'He needs his rest as much as anyone. But the doctors let me have him for ten minutes.'

Rob barely heard a word. His attention was focused entirely on Victor as he made his way clumsily to the end of Rob's cot. He had a thin housecoat around him and, underneath it, the same striped bedclothes that all the patients wore. Great oversized Wellingtons obscured the bottom of his trousers. As he came nearer, Rob could

see that his short hair was a tousled mess, he hadn't shaved, and he looked as though he had just woken up himself.

'Hello, Rob,' Victor greeted him warmly. 'Still in the land of the living, I see. How are you feeling?'

'Well enough, I guess. All things considered. Are you all right?'

Victor nodded. 'A little worse for wear, but I can't complain. They've been taking good care of me. Anna, here, and the others. Even the doctors.'

'I'll get you some soup, Rob,' Anna interrupted. 'Give you two a chance to talk.' She walked around Victor who manoeuvred himself closer to the head of Rob's cot. Victor glanced at Corporal Fleming and raised an eyebrow.

'I can't get over it,' Rob exclaimed. 'You don't even look hurt—apart from the crutches. I thought you'd be in bad shape?'

'Not too bad. Bruised ribs mostly. My back is black and blue, I'm told. But it's my spine that's the problem,' Victor replied seriously. 'Something's gone funny somewhere. Doctors can't figure it. I've only got patchy sensation in my arms and legs. They still work, mind, but it makes everything I do... feel strange. Could have been a hell of a lot worse.'

'I thought you were dead. When that thing got you,' Rob whispered. 'What did you tell the doctors? I've been too afraid to say anything. I wanted to talk to you first.'

Victor frowned. 'What thing?'

'The thing in the mine, Victor. Jesus!' Rob exclaimed. 'That God-awful thing that grabbed you and pulled you down. Whatever it was!'

Victor stared at him, a confused look crossing his face. 'What thing in the mine?'

'I don't know what it was.'

'Do you mean the cave-in?'

'What? No, I don't mean a cave-in. I mean... the thing that came up out of the pit. You can't tell me you don't remember.'

'I remember the cave-in,' Victor responded. 'I remember seeing the supports give way, the roof collapse. Right on top of you. I thought you were dead for sure. A great ruddy boulder cracked you on the head and... then it was all dust and earth. I

lost you. I rushed in, but I couldn't find you. You were buried in an instant. Then the whole bloody gallery caved in. Everything went dark and... I thought that was it. End of the show.'

'You are joking.'

Victor looked surprised and more than a little offended. 'No, I'm not joking. I saw it happen, Rob. We couldn't have seen it coming. As far as I know, nothing grabbed me. Not until McFadden, Murray, and the others dug us out. Lucky to be alive, pal. If we'd been any further from the shaft, or another gallery down, they would never even have heard. And you and I wouldn't be here talking about any of this.'

'But—' Rob faltered, his thoughts muddled. 'That's not what happened.'

'It is, Rob,' Victor assured him. 'I saw you go down. Then we were both down. The boys dug us out. You were bleeding terribly—behind your head and all down your leg—far worse than me. You were unconscious. No one was sure you were going to make it. I made a proper fool of myself, greeting and crying like a baby. Then they put us both in the field ambulance.'

'I don't remember you in the field ambulance,' Rob mumbled.

'I'm here, aren't I?'

Rob didn't respond. He felt strangely faint. He could hear the rush of his blood in his ears. The drumming of his heart in his chest. The wound behind his left ear was beginning to sting and burn. Rob grimaced. 'I—don't understand,' he said, trailing off.

'I don't know what to tell you, Rob,' Victor responded more calmly. 'You took a terrible knock to the head. Maybe you saw something when you got hit—I don't know. We're lucky to be here—that much I know. The medics at the camp thought you might bleed to death. They said you would likely be in a coma, that you might never wake up. Maybe that's why things seem topsy-turvy. But honestly, Rob, you and I were the only ones down there. Trust me. We were alone. And I'm not sure it is going to do you any good telling anyone anything different—especially the doctors. You take my meaning? You understand, Rob?'

Anna arrived with Rob's soup and bread. The pressure building in the back of his skull was excruciating. He grimaced and lowered his head back down to his

pillow. Anna's smile vanished instantly and she edged Victor out of the way, placing the bowl and bread on the small table beside him. Her face looked apprehensive as she sought out Rob's pulse. 'Is the pain back?' she asked.

'Getting worse,' Rob managed.

Anna stood up and quickly walked to a table at the centre of the stables. Rob closed his eyes. The last image he saw was Victor staring down at him, his face like stone. Rob felt the prick of the needle and heard Anna's voice. 'It's going to be all right, Rob. You're fine.'

Adrenaline and morphine coursed through his veins and Rob gasped. He expected oblivion, but it did not come. Instead, he felt cold and stiff. The pressure in his skull altered strangely.

'Is he going to be all right?' It wasn't Victor's voice. It was higher, sweeter. Rob's mind scrambled for recognition, then suddenly he had it: it was Petal. He was in the Necropolis.

'He'll be fine,' another male voice replied, sounding confident and assured. 'Let him rest like this until he can sit up. As soon as he can stand and walk, take him to the Royal Infirmary. Take it slow. Don't exert him. Keep pressure on the wound like you are doing now, for as long as you can manage. There's not much more you can do. He'll need a few stitches. And more rest after that.' There was a great shuffling noise next to Rob. 'I have to get back now.'

'Of course,' Petal replied. 'Thank you, John. If you stop by later, I'm sure I can arrange one of your special favours'.

'I will look forward to that,' the man replied and Rob heard him go.

A moment later, Petal shifted and Rob realised that his head was lying in her lap. He was on his side, lying in a foetal ball, a rough blanket laid over his arms and torso. One of Petal's hands was on his forehead, while the other applied gentle but firm pressure to the back of his skull. Rob could smell something like rubbing alcohol and paraffin. In the distance, birds were singing brightly. The sound echoed oddly around him.

Opening his eyes, Rob slowly appreciated that he was inside the Monteath mausoleum at its very centre. The flickering glow from three candles nearby lit the bases of four eroding columns across from him. The sandstone walls of the octagonal

monument were just visible in the shadows behind. At the edge of his vision, Rob could just make out the edge of the rusting gate. The sky outside the mausoleum was a bright pinkish orange.

‘You’re awake,’ Petal said. ‘Don’t move for now. I’ve got you.’

‘Was that a doctor?’ Rob asked groggily.

‘It was.’

‘You brought him here?’

‘I did,’ she replied.

‘I don’t know how to thank you.’

‘When you are feeling a bit better, we’ll go down to the Royal together.

You’re going to need stitches. As for thanking me, you could start by telling me why you were looking for me tonight. Tell me the truth.’

Rob was surprised by the tone of the statement, but he resisted the temptation to turn his head to face her. ‘The truth is that I’m looking for Victor—just as I said. He’s gone missing or taken to hiding from a gang. I’m betting on one gang in particular: the same one who jumped me.’

‘What gang? The Norman Conks? The Billy Boys?’

‘The Beehive Boys.’

‘On this side of the river?’ Petal asked, clearly surprised, and then added:

‘That’s unusually bold.’

‘You know about them?’ Rob inquired.

‘A little,’ Petal replied. ‘It pays to know, if you are living on the streets. The Beehive Boys are based in Govan. They are quite new or young, as a gang. From what I’ve heard, they don’t go in for territory struggles. Keep their noses out of street clashes. They are more business-minded. But ruthless all the same. Brutal.’

‘I believe that. Do you know what kind of business?’

‘Not really, no. I suspect I wouldn’t want to know.’

‘I think Victor’s got messed up in some of it,’ Rob said. ‘That’s why I’ve got this great bloody bump on my head. They were looking for Victor. They found me.’

Petal made no reply. The sound of birdsong outside the cold mausoleum filled the silence.

‘You said you had seen Victor four or five days ago,’ Rob continued a moment later.

‘Yes.’

‘Did something happen, Petal? With Victor?’

‘Something did. He threatened to kill me,’ she said bluntly. ‘He said he would send someone to murder me.’

‘What? Victor said that?’

Petal didn’t respond. Her hand trembled on his forehead. Rob suddenly realised why she had looked frightened when he had mentioned Victor earlier.

‘God, you thought it might be me, didn’t you?’ he asked in disbelief. ‘Me come to murder you. Just then. That’s why you were so scared.’

‘I guess I did,’ she responded. ‘I was frightened. He made it very clear what he would have done to me. It’s why I got the keys to this place from the groundskeeper. It’s why I’ve not left the Necropolis since that night. Except to run for the doctor now.’

Rob paused. ‘I don’t understand what would make him do it? Why threaten you?’

‘I told a few people to stay away from Victor. To steer clear of him.’

‘That’s all?’

Petal laughed hollowly. The sound echoed around the mausoleum. ‘Not quite. I told people he was dangerous.’

Rob paused again, trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together in his mind. ‘What made you say that?’ he asked.

Petal took a deep breath and exhaled. ‘A week or two before Victor came to me, before he threatened me, I started noticing him coming to the Necropolis much, much more often. Several times per day and at all times—in the day, at night. At first, I thought nothing of it. He kept to himself. I left him to his business. But curiosity got the better of me and I started taking note of whom he left with. And, after a while, I realised that those who went with him—a few of my regulars included—didn’t come back. Not the next evening, or the night after that, not the next week. They didn’t come back at all. And the longer that Victor was at it, the fewer of us there were in the Necropolis. So I said something to those I did see. I just

asked them to be careful around Victor. I told them that I was worried that he might be dangerous.'

Petal took another deep breath. 'Finally he came for me. I made a joke about being the last to be invited to a party, but he just looked at me queerly. He was mumbling something, but I couldn't hear. It was so strange—he just stood there, staring. I got annoyed and, foolishly, I confronted him about the men he'd been with. How I hadn't seen any of them since. He kept staring at me, still muttering under his breath. By then I'd had enough, so I told him that he couldn't intimidate me and that he should go bother someone else. That's when he suddenly turned on me. Threatened to kill me if I talked to another soul about him. He said he would know and that he would send someone to kill me.'

'You should have seen the look in his eyes. I thought he would kill me then and there. His face was blood-red and covered in sweat, as though he had exerted himself terribly. He looked wild. He took a step at me and I ran. I ran clear to the other side of the Necropolis. He didn't follow me. But I swear I'll never forget the look in his eyes—never! He meant to kill me.' She paused. 'I've been locking myself in here ever since. And trying to take greater care of myself.'

'I can see why,' Rob replied. 'I don't know what is going on, but something is very, very wrong.'

First Ingram's story, Rob thought to himself, and now Petal's. He didn't know what to think, but he believed that Petal was telling the truth. Her hand was clammy on his forehead and he could feel her pulse racing. Ingram had been honest as well, he was sure of it. But how could Victor have done these things? Rob couldn't reconcile their stories with the man that he knew, that he loved.

'I need to get moving,' he announced suddenly. 'Help me up?'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure.'

Together they moved until Rob could sit up and then, when the throbbing pain in his skull subsided, Petal helped him to his feet. Outside the Monteath monument, the Necropolis was ablaze with sunlight and Rob had to close his eyes to the blinding brightness. Even the grass at his feet seemed to burn overly bright. Petal

locked the monument gate behind them and came round to help him again. Together, they started for the grit path and the Necropolis gates far below.

‘You said you made note of who went with Victor,’ Rob said as they fell in step. ‘Do you remember who you saw him with last? Before he came to you.’

Petal gazed down a moment, as if struggling to recall, then lifted her head. Her brown eyes looked into Rob’s eyes and she smiled faintly. ‘It was the photographer McTavish. George Finlay McTavish. He goes by Finlay though. Do you know him?’

‘No, but you are sure? He was the last man you saw with Victor,’ Rob asked.

‘Yes,’ Petal confirmed. ‘It was McTavish in the end.’

Chapter 8: The Fourth Floor

Rob and Anna took shelter beneath a store awning as thunder rumbled high over Buchanan Street. Driving sheets of rain blew down the street beside them. The entrances to the Wylie Hill's department store and Stuart Cranston's Tea Rooms just up the road were jammed with ladies seeking to escape the downpour, brushing rain from their long coats and cloche hats. A few braver souls rushed about on the pavement, shielding themselves with their umbrellas or simply tilting their caps into the pelting rain. One man who had spectacularly misjudged the weather sprinted down the opposite side of the street in sporting gear, a wet newspaper held over his head, his Plus Fours and his high Argyle socks soaked with rain.

'This weather is wild,' Anna announced, lowering her umbrella and giving it a shake. The lapels of her navy raincoat lifted and fell as wind whipped round her. 'I had better give you this before I forget,' she said, reaching inside her coat. 'I hope it helps.' She produced a small white envelope and handed it to Rob. 'If you are really stuck, I could always approach my father. After all, it's partly my fault—'

'—No, Anna, it's not. The fault is mine.' Rob said. 'I shouldn't have taken the Crossley out in the first place. And not for that long. Besides, there was more than a missing motorcar behind my getting the sack. I was never meant to be a custodian. I've been playing a role that doesn't suit me—for far too long.' Rob placed the small envelope securely inside his jacket pocket. 'Thank you for this. I'll pay you back as soon as I can.'

'Take as long as you need.' Anna replied, holding her hair back from her face. 'Do you really think this photographer McTavish might know where Victor is?'

'He's our best bet at the moment. Apart from Sleeman.'

Anna looked over at Rob. 'We still have the True Providence flyer from the music hall. The Britannia Panopticon.'

Rob shook his head. 'I took a walk down to the Pots and Pans early to chase it up. They couldn't—or wouldn't—tell me anything. Except that Sleeman paid in full up front. A model customer. Nothing suspicious.'

Wet wind battered them as they stood momentarily in silence. Buchanan Street was fast becoming a river as the iron sky over Glasgow continued its assault.

‘I don’t think this is going to blow over,’ Anna declared, raising up her umbrella again. ‘Let’s push on.’

‘It’s not far,’ Rob stated. ‘McTavish’s studio is just down that alley there beside Wylie Hill. There’s a courtyard, an entrance between Buchanan and Queen Street. He’s on the fourth floor.’

Anna stepped out from under the awning and Rob followed. Together they dashed to the narrow alley entrance. In a matter of moments, they came to the small cobbled courtyard that Rob had visited a couple of hours earlier. A horse was tied up on the opposite side of the square near the Queen Street exit. It looked at Rob blankly and then dropped its head to nuzzle through a pile of sodden hay at its feet. Two double-doors led into the tall buildings to either side of them. Small signs and placards advertised a myriad of offices and businesses within. After a moment, Rob drew Anna’s attention to a decorative white sign with black lettering beside the arched doorway on their right, advertising ‘Mr George Finlay McTavish, Plate and Film Photography & Photographic Studio For Hire.’

Stepping into the building, Rob removed his cap, tapped it free of rain, and replaced it gently on his head. Anna moved ahead of him, quickly walking down to the stairwell at the centre of the building. Rob followed more slowly, his hip paining him. Anna was at the first floor landing by the time he reached the first stair. Rob hobbled up the staircase after her, finally reaching the fourth floor as Anna approached McTavish’s door.

At the top of the stairs, Rob paused. He looked down the four flights to the ground floor below. There was no movement, nothing to be seen. No sound either, apart from the hammering of rain, an occasional voice, and the sounds of work being carried out behind closed doors. If the Beehive Boys were following him, he felt confident that they had not entered into the building. Satisfied, Rob stepped away from the stairwell.

Anna was standing beside the studio door, her head inclined, listening.

‘Anything?’ Rob queried, coming up next to her.

‘Nothing,’ she replied.

Rob observed as Anna turned the brass knob and pushed the door inward. It opened the slightest crack but would not budge any further. Anna leaned into the

door for a moment and then stepped back in surprise. The door slammed shut. 'There's something behind there,' she declared. 'Something barring the door.'

'Here, let me try,' Rob said and moved round her to grip the doorknob himself. It turned with ease, but he could instantly feel what Anna described. Something heavy was pushing against the inside of the door. Moving closer, Rob pressed his shoulder against the door and shoved with greater force. For a moment, he was able to see inside a darkened foyer. Something glinted and sparkled on the floor just inside the door. He shoved harder still.

All of a sudden, there was a great crash from within and Rob half-fell as the door opened. His shoes slipped and crunched on something. He struggled to keep himself upright. Putting weight through his left side, the scarred skin and knotted muscle in his hip pulled, burned. Hissing, he finally regained his balance. The floor beneath him was covered in jagged shards.

'Jesus Christ,' he growled, balancing himself. 'It's glass.'

'Are you all right?' Anna asked.

'Aye,' Rob grimaced. 'I'm fine. There must be a light switch.'

'I have it,' she replied, flipping the switch to the right of the door.

The foyer was bathed in electric light from a cluster of five bulbs near the ceiling. The square room was made all the brighter for the reflections from a sea of shattered glass at his feet. The floor was littered with it and light reflecting off the broken glass dappled the walls around him. Photographic portraits hung everywhere. Every one hung crooked or askew and there was dried blood on more than a few of them.

'Mr McTavish?' Rob called out. 'Are you there, McTavish?'

Rob scanned the assembled portraits. Each had been defaced. A knife or some other sharp object had been used to cut a jagged square from every head. Temple to temple, jowl to jowl. Not a single portrait was left intact. Perplexed, Rob glanced back to the open door. A heavy wooden filing cabinet lay on its side nearby. He could see that it had been lugged from a bank of cabinets on his right and forced up against the inside of the door. Four large cabinets remained upright, their drawers ajar.

Behind him, Anna stepped into the room. ‘Mr McTavish? Is there anyone there? Victor? Anyone?’

Mindful of his footing, Rob moved deeper into the room, walking to his left to inspect some of the photographs more closely. Each of the men, women, and children represented was faceless, standing or sitting before a stylised background. Their identities had literally been cut from them. It seemed a monstrous thing to him: how the victims had been rendered featureless and mute. There was something uncanny about it. ‘We aren’t much without our faces, are we?’ he remarked.

Anna looked up from the floor. ‘I saw some pretty nasty cases come into the field hospital. A lot of burns and shrapnel. Some blown half apart from artillery fire. Soldiers with skin torn right off, faces mangled. Muscle and bone crushed or missing. Noses gone. A few of them unable to speak or see. It was horrible really. You felt for them. You really felt for them. What would they do after? Without eyes, ears, mouths.’

Rob didn’t respond.

A moment later, looking around him, he commented: ‘It occurs to me—the glass on the floor—it reminds me of all the tins thrown into No Man’s Land. Before the officers cracked down on it, we used to throw everything up out of the trenches. Beef tins, mash tins, tuna fish tins—everything came in bloody tins. No one knew what to do with them all—apart from bury them—so we started hurling them into No Man’s Land. That way if Jerry came knocking, you bloody well knew about it.’

‘A warning system,’ Anna surmised.

‘Aye, a last line of defence.’

‘Why did the officers stop it?’

‘Rats. After a time, we were drowning in rats. All night long, all you’d hear was thump-thump-thump. Trench shovels hammering down on them.’

Anna squirmed. ‘Then, you think these plates on the floor...?’

‘Could be similar, aye,’ Rob declared. ‘And that filing cabinet being propped up against the inside of the door... suggests someone trying to protect themselves as well. Or at least keep others out.’

Anna blanched. ‘But why not just lock the door?’

‘Maybe the key was lost. I don’t know.’

Anna moved up to Rob's side. Together, they manoeuvred through the sea of shards, making their way toward the only other exit from the room: a set of white doors opposite the hall entrance.

Rob reached for the closest doorknob and turned it. The door swung easily and noiselessly outward on its hinges.

'Dear God,' Anna breathed.

Across the threshold, a vast studio stretched between the three sides of the building. It was largely empty except for a series of painted backdrops, like those Rob had seen in the portraits, hanging at intervals from the exposed ceiling. Between and behind the backdrops, a series of high windows were evenly spaced on the exterior walls. Rain and wind battered the panes. A mottled grey light filtered in from the storm outside, refracted through the rain streaking down the leaded glass. But it was the floor, not the storm or the hanging backdrops, that drew their attention.

A huge circle, more than twelve feet in diameter, had been painted in black on the wooden floor. Outside the circle, extending a foot or more around the circumference, were strange symbols drawn with apparent care. These did not conform to any alphabet or system of signs that Rob knew. They were altogether alien to him, bearing weird curves and intersecting at odd angles. Lastly, a rough square or diamond painted solid black was drawn inside the circle so that its four corners touched the interior curvature at irregular points.

When Rob had first seen the weird sign drawn in Victor's notebook, it had unsettled him for reasons he could not identify. Seeing it now, reproduced so exactly on such a grand scale, filled him with dread. It meant something, he knew, though he could not describe what. It bore a significance that triggered a physical reaction, an instinctual response. His gut tensed. His heart raced and adrenaline coursed through his veins. Looking over at Anna, he could see that it activated something within her too.

'That sign,' she said, her eyes wide. 'Victor was here.'

Rob nodded, but made no response. He walked into the room. The smell of paint was overpowering. He could taste it, as though it were coating the back of his throat.

Suddenly there was a loud crash. Rob crouched instinctively. Sound boomed around the studio. A loping, galloping noise reached his ears. A white shape emerged in his peripheral vision. Then something careened into him. Sent him sprawling.

Rob was on his back. Wind knocked out of him. Gasping. Hands were clawing for him. For his neck. He fought back. A bald skull loomed above. Black eyes. Red mouth. White teeth. Fingernails raking across his shoulder. One hand closed around the side of his neck. Nails digging into his skin.

Rob rolled and kicked. Anna screamed. The sound of rain spun from one ear to another. It had him still. Crushing his windpipe. He grabbed the other seeking arm. Gripped naked flesh. The thing struggled atop him. Straddling his abdomen. Rob cried out.

Anna was there. Fighting it. It struggled back. Hissing, spitting. Rob jerked his right knee up. Hard. He found purchase on its elbow. Pinched down. It howled. Spittle landed on his cheek. Rob brought up his knee again. Suddenly it faltered, its grip on his neck lessening. It thrashed. Anna was knocked back. She slipped, fell.

The fiend renewed its efforts. Rob wrestled with it. It fought back. Forcing its weight down upon his arms. Rob tore at the sinews in its elbow. It bayed. The hand at his neck clamped down. Rob writhed. The hand slipped, snapped free.

Rob lurched to his side. Pulling with one arm, pushing with the other. Toppling the thing. He rolled. Scrabbled to his knees. Pressing its naked flesh to the floor. Roaring in pain, Rob lifted his left knee. And planted it deep into its diaphragm. Searing pain tore across his side. Rob yowled. Gripping its naked forearms, he tore into them with his fingers. Pushed his knee down harder.

The villain's mouth opened. Its black eyes widened. Rob waited until those eyes became unfocused and glassy. To his right, Anna was getting up. The thing wheezed, fighting for breath. Rob pulled its arms together. Gripping both wrists in his left hand. Roaring in anger, he brought his right arm back. He tightened his fingers into a fist. And hurled that fist into the beast's face.

Rob heard the crack. Blood shot over its lips and chin. Those black eyes watered. It looked dazed, faint.

Rob brought his arm back up. 'Rob, wait,' Anna implored. He ignored her, slamming his fist down on its pale jaw. The mouth gaped open, issuing more blood. Panting, Rob lifted his bloody fist up.

'Rob, no!' Anna grabbed his arm. 'Rob, stop!'

'Get off me!' he barked, shaking free of her.

Anna stumbled back. 'He's unconscious!'

The form beneath him had gone limp. Beneath Rob's fist, the inhuman shape resolved itself into a naked man. Blood was pooling on the floor. The man didn't appear to be breathing.

'You're going to kill him!'

Rob looked down at the stinking flesh beneath him. He could do it, he realised. He had never killed a man with his bare hands. But he could do it. It wouldn't even take much. He just had to—

'Rob. Please.'

He turned, dazed and breathless. Anna's face was flushed with colour. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

The fire left him in an instant. He unclenched his fist, relinquished his hold on the naked man, and slowly stood up to face her. She was shaking, furious. He saw Anna's eyes focus down on his bloody hand.

'Are you hurt?' she said, her tone suddenly professional. Cold and indifferent.

'No, I—'

'—Then see if you can get some water and find a clean cloth.'

'Anna—'

She glared at him. 'Just go, Rob.'

He closed his mouth and nodded dumbly. Scanning the shadows, he could see photographic equipment along the back wall amidst boxes that were piled waist high. He could see a faucet above a wide metal basin and further down bundled white cloth on the floor. The sort that painters at the Merchant Club had used to cover the parlour chairs and tables. Rob set about collecting some smaller pieces of cloth and found a collection of props, including a number of ornate decanters, glasses, and teacups, in a box nearby. Selecting a single tall glass from the lot, Rob ran it under

the faucet and gave it a quick clean before filling it with water. He then turned and made his way back to Anna.

‘Here,’ he said, coming to a halt beside the nurse.

Anna turned her head. Her stern look let Rob know that he was not forgiven. She took the cloth and the glass of water without thanking him. Her hands were covered in dried blood and red droplets stained her ivory blouse. Rob looked over to her patient and started.

The man leaning against the wall looked up at Rob, his bright blue eyes streaming. His jaw was swollen and puffy, his broken nose was still bleeding. Dark blood saturated his trim auburn moustache and beard. His thick, curly red hair stood up off his head, tousled and unkempt. His arms lay limp to either side of his naked chest and stomach. Rob could see the red mark where he’d dug into the man’s elbow.

‘What? No,’ Rob exclaimed, stepping back and looking around the studio. There was no one else. Just the three of them.

‘What is it?’ Anna said, irate.

‘That’s not—where is the other one?’ he asked.

Anna scowled at him. ‘The other what?’

‘The other—thing. The one I...’ he trailed off.

Anna continued to glower at Rob, speechless, shaking her head.

‘You can see them... can’t you?’ the man said suddenly, his voice dry and hoarse. ‘You saw me as something else, didn’t you?’

Rob and Anna turned to the man.

‘Something?’ Anna asked.

‘Someone,’ Rob said. ‘Someone else... aye. Bald, black eyes, thin. Too thin. All teeth and red mouth.’

Anna looked at Rob, thoroughly confused.

‘It looked like a man? The thing that attacked me... did not.’ He paused momentarily. ‘The red mouth, though, I remember that. I—I don’t know how you freed me from it. I thought the demon would possess me forever.’

‘Who are you?’ Rob asked.

‘Finlay McTavish. I’m a photographer. This is—was my studio. I don’t know what to make of it now.’ He looked at the glass in Anna’s hand. ‘Could I have some of that?’

‘Of course,’ she said, handing it to him. ‘You’ve had a bad knock, Mr McTavish. Just relax now.’

Rob stood stunned.

‘Can you tell me what you last remember?’ Anna asked.

‘I can try,’ the photographer said, downing half of the offered water. ‘The last thing.’ He coughed and cleared his throat. ‘The last thing I remember. I—I’m afraid I cannot be sure. You see I have had moments of consciousness over what I think may be several days. I was trapped in a sleep I could not properly wake from. I tried, I remember trying, but each time I lost control. Or, to be more accurate, I could feel control being wrested from me. Time and again. Like Mr Hyde overcoming Dr Jekyll... in Stevenson’s tale. As a result, I only recall flashes, some moments. Memories of what occurred after...’ He paused and raised the glass to his lips again, emptying it.

Anna looked concerned. ‘How about before that?’

‘I remember most everything from before. Much of which I would rather not.’

‘The thing that attacked you?’ Rob queried.

‘That for one, aye. And a great deal more. Details that I fear would make me sound mad. Or at least, madder than my current state suggests.’

‘Don’t worry, Mr—’ Anna began.

‘—Finlay please,’ McTavish interrupted. ‘There’s little point in standing on formality, I think.’

Anna smiled weakly. ‘I’m Anna. This is Rob. When you are ready, Finlay, tell us what you can.’

‘From the beginning?’

‘From the beginning,’ Rob requested.

‘I—I had gone out to dinner and returned late,’ the photographer began.

‘Returned here, to the studio, with a gentleman. To... conclude some business. Or so I thought. But when we got here, after a short look around the premises, he attacked

me with no provocation. Knocking me to the floor—just there. He pinned me down and he tied my hands behind my back and my ankles together with some rough rope. He must have brought it with him. He said very little. But he threatened to hurt me if I called out. When I pleaded with him and assured him I wouldn't, he called me a 'good boy' and sought the studio keys from my pocket. He took my wallet, my rings, and my pocket watch. And then he left me. Tied up on the floor there. I heard him leave. He closed the front door. And I heard him lock it. I thought that was it. I assumed the misadventure was over and that he—this man—was only interested in robbing me. It wouldn't be the first time.'

McTavish paused, looking from Anna to Rob. 'I didn't give much thought to the loss of my keys at the time,' he continued. 'I assumed he had locked me in to give himself time to escape—not that I was going anywhere. I rolled about on the floor like a fool, trying to escape my bonds, for... perhaps twenty minutes or more. I was struggling about with a box of photographic plates—hoping to use the glass to cut through my bonds—when I heard the key turn in the lock again. The man who had attacked me— Victor was his name—had returned.'

Rob and Anna glanced at one another.

'He strode in the studio carrying two great paint tins. And I remember him laughing at me, asking me what I was doing over there. Then he addressed someone back in the foyer. He told whoever it was to come see 'his little flea.' Meaning me, of course. I told him to go to hell, but he just laughed all the harder. Then another man came into the studio. He was slightly taller than Victor and probably twice his age. His hair and his goatee were silver. He was dressed rather shabbily and wore spectacles. Like Victor, he carried two paint tins with him. Black paint, I would discover. They left me in the corner, ignoring me almost completely, and carried out much of the painting you see on the floor there. They bickered incessantly. I gathered that they were under some pressure in preparing for some... event. They talked about needing more people. About a last call and providence. And something to do with assemblers and a machine.'

'It took what seemed like an age for them to finish. Victor finished the finer points around the edge—those strange glyphs. He muttered to himself as he did it, banishing the older man over by that window. I got the sense that there was some

resentment between them. All the while I was quietly trying to cut through my bonds, but I had neither the strength nor the dexterity to do much beyond slice a few strands. I was bound too tight and the rope was too strong. When Victor finished, he stood up and bowed his head over his creation. I'll admit I didn't know what to make of all this and, from where I was, I could not see all that had been painted on the floor. Victor called the other one over. That was the first time I heard his name: Sinclair. Although I thought I heard him also call him Simon, Solomon, or... something like that.'

'Together they stood at different points around the painted circle, pausing to say something or do something, and then moving to a new point. When they were finished, I could see that their faces were lit by a curious blue glow. The ceiling above the painted symbol shone with it as well, but the floor and all about it was dark. I thought it was some kind of trickery. Some peculiar parlour magic. But I was utterly wrong. What I saw—what I experienced—was closer to some occult ritual. I've never been a Christian man, but I believe I saw demons that night. Devils or fiends, black as night. Things capable of possessing a man's soul.'

McTavish paused again. 'I don't think I have ever been so frightened in my life as when those two men grabbed me and placed me kneeling at the edge of that... that strange icon. I froze. I could feel some evil within it. I don't think I even struggled. I was in awe of it. The two of them moved to either side of the symbol and... at first, I thought I heard them humming. But it was kind of buzzing in my ears. Not from any external sound but from within my own mind. I remember that time seemed to slow. I could see specks of dust hovering blue above the black circle. Like the sparks above a wood fire as though caught in a moment of time, hanging in the air. I marvelled at it, quite outside myself.'

Rob took a deep breath. The motes of dust, the slowing of time, the buzzing: it was almost precisely what he had experienced on Winton Drive. In his mind's eye, he could see himself standing beside Anna, Sleeman's eyes upon him, the two strange men behind him, humming—their forms rippling. The sensations that McTavish was now describing were very nearly the same. Everything except for the horrific transformations that Rob had seen in the two men.

‘I don’t know how long I knelt there,’ McTavish went on. ‘But at some point I started to see things. Queer things. Within the dark square at the centre. I saw something—I can’t quite describe it. But I could feel it. A presence. I panicked, thinking it a demon. Imagining myself being dragged off to hell. But after a time, what I felt was a curiosity. A probing, questioning curiosity. Perhaps I dreamt it. Perhaps I had gone mad. But I saw a shape—some terrible form—rise up from the square within the circle. A form that shifted and changed. Protean, impossible—utterly impossible. A form that made no sense. And Victor and Sinclair were like statues during those moments. I didn’t hear them. I couldn’t see them move, or even breathe. I was alone with the thing. And it... did something to me.’

McTavish stopped, tears welling in his eyes. ‘Forgive me,’ he coughed, bowing his head. ‘You must think I’m mad.’

Rob looked to Anna. She glanced at him in turn. Her pupils were dilated. Her breathing was shallow.

She turned back to McTavish. ‘Did it... hurt you?’

‘Not at the time, not as such,’ he replied, looking up. ‘I don’t know what it did. But I do know that it grew frustrated. I could feel it. I somehow knew, somehow I could sense that it was frustrated—that I frustrated it. I wasn’t... right, somehow. Not what it wanted, perhaps. A second later, it left me. The form in the square evaporated and the buzzing in my mind cleared. Time seemed to pass normally. And suddenly Sinclair and Victor stopped. Almost instantly, Victor became enraged. He cursed and bellowed about running out of time. He came up to me and kicked me over. He said I was ‘yet another failure.’ Then he stormed over to Sinclair. He told him to go get the drivers. Sinclair protested that they needed them. Victor cursed at him, telling the man to get to the ‘damn lorries’ and bring both the drivers. When Sinclair left the room, I pleaded with Victor to let me go. He stood over me then, looked down at me. His eyes seemed to glow. And he told me that he wasn’t done with me yet.’

‘Time passed. When Sinclair returned, he had two men with him. They were dressed plainly, like workmen. Something about them bothered me instantly. They didn’t speak. Neither did they move normally. Their movements seemed oddly precise, mechanical.’

‘Like machines,’ Rob offered.

‘Yes, almost,’ McTavish agreed. ‘Victor had them stand side by side at roughly the same spot that I had been kneeling. I was on my side a few feet away. Then he and Sinclair resumed their positions and began that eerie humming again. The buzzing returned in my ears, in my head. But it was different now. I don’t know how to describe it. It had a new quality to it like a poem or a song. It carried meaning. A tiny portion of which I could apprehend. For example, I understood that the sign painted on the floor had power—it has, even now. I knew that Victor and Sinclair were connecting to it, working with it. I sensed that it was a conduit. I knew that there was a power on the other side. I remember that feeling filled me with awe and dread. It was terrifying but exhilarating. A power beyond imagining.’

‘The two men?’ Anna asked. ‘What happened to them?’

‘They became... hosts. That demonic force—that thing that had examined me, and found me wanting—flowed into them. I perceived it, somehow. I didn’t see anything this time, but I could feel it wending through the air. It reached out to one of them and then the next. And it happened so fast. The power, it—they—possessed them. It was over in an instant. The buzzing stopped. Everything stopped. I remember, in the dim light, I could see the drivers’ outlines shimmering, as though a visible aura surrounded them. I even thought I could see the shape of something else struggling within their human forms. I pray I imagined it. Because I was next.’

‘Victor told me so as he walked behind me. He said that I would make myself useful one way or another. And he heaved me up by my neck and forced my head between his hands. He pressed me in towards the circle. Pushed me forward until my knees came into contact with the edge of it. And I could feel what he was doing. I could very nearly make sense of it. I understood that I would become an instrument. Like the two drivers, I would become a receptacle. I also understood that I had no choice. Victor took that from me. Like before, it came so fast. But when it came, this time, it came like sleep. My mind drifted from me. I lost everything. That’s the last thing I remember. Before waking to the pain. Now.’

Rob clenched his fist. The dried blood between his knuckles cracked and flaked. He turned and walked to the edge of the painted sign on the floor.

‘We’re going to get you to a doctor,’ Anna declared behind him, addressing McTavish.

Rob focused down on the wooden floor, the black paint. ‘How can a sign have power?’ he asked, thinking aloud.

‘On its own, it doesn’t,’ McTavish answered. ‘Sinclair said something like that. That it has no power. It is meaningless without us.’

‘Without us?’

‘We give it meaning, he said,’ McTavish responded. ‘We give it power, purpose.’

‘Rob, help me with Finlay,’ Anna ordered. ‘We need something to cover him up and we’ll have to carry him over the plate glass.’

Rob took one last look at the vast painted symbol on the studio floor and turned to leave. He made no mention to the others of the persistent whine in his ears or the shimmering motes of dust that hung glowing in the air before him.

Chapter 9: Prophecy

Rob walked in through the open studio door. Outside the windows opposite him, the spires and rooftops over Buchanan Street glowed pink and orange with dawn's first light. Inside the studio itself, nothing had changed. It was exactly as he had left it some twelve hours ago. The smearing of McTavish's blood on the floor, the stained painters' cloth, and the discarded water glass brought to life the events of the night before. But it was the painted symbol on the studio floor that commanded Rob's attention.

The black circle seemed to draw the early morning light down from the glass windowpanes. The curves of the weird, alien characters outside its circumference grasped at the light—greedily heaving and sucking it downward, inward—causing shadows to dance and twist round the circle's edge. At its very centre, the curiously angled square devoured all light that reached it, drowning the studio space around it in a muted gloom.

Twelve hours had elapsed since he had left this place with Anna and McTavish. Twelve hours without sleep or rest of any kind. All those hours spent wondering, his mind agitated with questions—with potential. His connection to the sign on the floor had never left him. The bright buzzing in his mind, the tingling in his spine, the simultaneous sense of awe and dread that had made his heart quicken—all of it had persisted. Like some drug, some opiate that refused to leave his system. Now, standing so near the strange symbol, his heart began to pound anew as adrenaline coursed through his veins once more.

Would the feeling—the connection—remain the same or would it become stronger? Would it become something else? As he sensed it must.

Rob took a step nearer, determined to proceed with his experiment. Something within the circle responded immediately. A kind of pressure wave from behind flowed over him, around him, and through him. It was astonishingly like the ebb of an ocean wave. It tugged at him, pulled him bodily toward the circle. Rob raised his arms instinctively and gasped. His eyes grew wide.

He took another step forward. He was only a foot or so from the circle's edge. Two carefully illustrated symbols spread out to either side of him. Though

naïve to their purpose, Rob could feel their power. He knew intuitively that the characters possessed some deep and terrible significance. Standing between them now, he experienced fear comingled with curiosity. But it was quickly overtaken by excitement as he saw the air above the black circle shimmer. Just as it had happened the night before. Rob felt time slowing. He could see his breath disturb the dust in the air before him. Another pressure wave rolled through him. He could feel the pulse and the rhythm of it. And then, suddenly, he could sense a presence.

It awoke from the centre of the sign, from within the black square. A sentience, an intelligence: invisible and intangible, but real. Rob could sense it growing, becoming more potent with every passing moment. The painted square began to ripple as though it were made of water. Whether it was a trick of the light or a hallucination, he could not fathom. But he found he could not look away from it.

The interior of the circle began to vibrate faster like the skin of a drum. The floor shook and pulsed with a rhythm too fast for him to follow, charging and exciting the air above it. And within that volume of air, shapes began to form. Rob saw them as shimmering outlines and hazy silhouettes. So many—so many that he could not tell them apart. They swarmed in the air before him. Huge and ethereal, their impossible shapes flowed and broke over one another, and then fluidly reformed and reattached in the next instant.

‘What are you?’ he asked. His voice sounded distant and muffled, as though he was underwater.

There was no answer. But the question provoked a reaction from the things within the circle. They moved to scrutinise him. Rob could feel the growing weight of their examination in his mind. It grew until it silenced him. It threatened to crush him. His thoughts were constricted, his senses becoming clouded. He felt himself being reduced, flattened. As though a great lens was pressing down upon his skull, heavy enough to crack it open and render its contents—and him—lifeless. He slumped to his knees, only vaguely aware of the motion and of his body.

They were forcing their way in, Rob intuited and panic gripped him. They wanted inside him—inside his mind. Every moment that he resisted, the pressure grew stronger, more insistent. He floundered like a fly caught in a web, but it was pointless. Soon the burden would drive him mad, leave him a screaming lunatic.

What choice did he have? Having gone down this path, he could now perceive only one true way forward: opening himself to the unknown. The only other options seemed madness or death.

Without even knowing he had made the choice, it was done.

The pain was gone. He was weightless, lost, in an inky void. He couldn't feel his body: he couldn't feel anything. He appreciated suddenly that he had no senses whatsoever. And yet, he was aware.

Aware of himself. And aware of others in the void.

Where am I? Rob asked momentarily. Without lips, without breath. Without ears to hear the words spoken.

Again, there was no response.

But there was a growing violet glow around him in the darkness. Forking lines of dim purple light radiated outward creating a lattice or network all around him, like roots intersecting and branching, all giving off a strange luminosity that gave shape to the space around him. The violet tendrils enclosed him and he found himself in a rough cavern forged from the empty void. In the glow, Rob became aware of other things as well, other shapes, other figures.

Victor, Rob recognised suddenly. The smaller figure was Victor. His short blonde hair glowed eerily in the dim violet light. His khaki shirt and trousers were torn and covered in clay and mud. But it was definitely him.

The titanic silhouette beside Victor was something that Rob could barely contemplate. In the shadowy violet light, it seemed not to have a single body but to be formed from several intersected bodies. Various limbs extended off each of these bodies, oddly clumped and at peculiar angles, showing none of the symmetry that persists in nature. Instead these limbs varied in size, shape, and apparent utility: from bloated trunks to thin, whip-like tentacles or feelers, from bulbous stalks to fan- or scythe-like blades. These anomalous members ranged all over the thing's twisting form. Its skin—if it could be called such—shook and bubbled constantly. Clusters of hissing pores, stomas, and sphincters covered it, secreting and spitting an oily substance that smelled strangely of honey. Overall, it was as large as three automobiles end-to-end connected through narrow snaking waists.

Victor stood beside this monstrosity, calm and unafraid, only a few feet from its nearest writhing appendages. His lips were moving. Rob realised that the thing was somehow communicating with him. Though the enormous creature had no recognisable face or features, Victor's motions and nodding head gave every impression that an energetic conversation was taking place.

They were talking about him. Somehow, Rob knew it to be true. It was as though some new avenue or conduit of awareness was accessible to him. He focused on Victor's lips. He desperately wanted to hear what the two were sharing. He wanted to hear Victor's voice. He would hear it, he demanded.

Suddenly sound echoed around him in the subterranean chamber. Rob's point of view shifted vertiginously. He was near the floor. Though his form remained invisible to him, he perceived his unconscious self to be lying there, crumpled on the cavern floor.

'You cannot kill him. You must help him,' Victor demanded. 'I can't leave him here—I can't! There will be... questions. I will not be able to do as you ask. You must understand. You must do this! Take his memory away—do what you must—but I cannot leave here without him. He must live.'

Take his memory away. The phrase echoed in Rob's mind. That last day at the front, the events in the mine, the horror that rose up from the pit: his confusion, his neurasthenia, his lost memories—did they all stem from this moment?

Beside Victor, the monstrosity wavered. A moment passed and Rob observed one of its limbs lower and extend toward him. The base of blunt stump, like an elephant's foot, split open to reveal a wet maw teeming with thrashing tentacles. Rob jerked back instinctively as the tentacles shot outward and darted over a space on the floor. Over his unconscious body.

The cavern began to fade. Victor and the thing vanished into the void. Rob was left floating, his mind reeling.

A moment later, the dim violet glow returned. The web of light enfolded him again. A different space appeared. Shapes moved quickly in and out of the space, but one remained constant: Victor lying naked on some kind of stone slab. Rob was distantly aware that other people inhabited the same space—a great many people—but his focus was fixed on Victor alone.

Rob's point of view shifted suddenly to a spot above Victor's naked body. Victor's flesh pulsed and shimmered with a strange golden light. Rob could not make sense of it. Nor did he have time to as his focus dropped to the level of the stone slab. A device or apparatus lay near its lip. It was made up of complex curves and sharp angles and looked like something carved from bone or bleached seashell. It was a surgical tool, Rob discerned, without knowing how he knew. He reached out for it and an elongated tongue slipped out of the fleshy knuckle at the end of his arm.

Stunned, Rob watched the muscular tongue whip and curl in the air before him. And suddenly he understood: he was one of them, he was seeing or sensing through one of the creatures now. He extended his tongue out fully, waving it subtly. He could sense subtle changes of air pressure, feel the heat coming from Victor's flesh, and taste the anticipation of his kin. Finally, he rolled his tongue round the surgical tool, grasping it tightly, and slipped the tip of his tongue deep into the manipulation case. Pulling it up to Victor's shoulder, he swapped his point of view for the previous, higher angle.

The tool activated. Rob could feel the power of it surge through the manipulation case. He drew it neatly over Victor's shoulder, then he did the same for the other shoulder, before finally drawing the tool over his waist. Rob leaned forward and inspected the smooth lines. Satisfied, he pulled back and replaced the bone-like tool on the stone slab. He retracted his tongue and shifted his weight so that he might reach up with more of his arms. Flexible tendrils and tentacles wrapped round Victor's shoulders while rough mandibles and claws gripped his legs.

At once, he pulled Victor's arms and legs outward away from his trunk. Once they were fully extended, he let the pointless, fleshy limbs fall away into the darkness at the sides of the slab. He lowered his mandibles and claws, and retracted his tentacles and tendrils, as he bent low to examine the smooth cauterised cuts. Pleased with his work, Rob loomed back up over Victor. The human seemed oblivious to the amputation, looking calm and resolved.

You are meant for this. A voice said. This and only this.

For the briefest moment, Rob thought that he spied tears forming at the corners of Victor's eyes, but then the scene was fading again, shifting. He transitioned to a new, monumental environment: an enormous cavern lit dimly by the

same strange, violet luminescence as before. A colossal structure dominated the space. It was unlike anything that Rob had ever seen. A crystalline shape like an inverted triangle or cone hundreds of feet high. Small niches were carved into its every face—their geometry strange and disturbing. He marveled at the scale of the thing. Like a mountain or waterfall, cyclopean and majestic.

His point of view shifted again and he was brought down to the base or tip of the structure. A series of huge crystal faces extended out more than twenty feet to his right and left. Cut into the crystal at irregular intervals, Rob could make out hexagonal slots or alcoves. Victor's trunk—what was left of the man—was being inserted into one such niche. Rob found he was able to view this procession from multiple angles. He could move, he found, from one viewpoint to another. His focus was not confined to a single entity; instead, he could perceive the space around him through a great host.

With each jump, each new point of view, Rob could feel increasing jubilation. It was a kind of ceremony, he realised, a celebration. The culmination of so much work and effort. The work of ages, of eons. The exultation grew into euphoric rapture. It was the purest joy he had ever felt.

The great journey, Rob murmured. Without knowing why or what it meant.

He lost himself in the rejoicing, in the ecstasy of the moment. He felt like a child again, as happy as he had ever been. A curious warmth spread over him—a warmth he never wanted to leave, to forget. He let it wash over him, flow through him. He was part of something, he realised, part of something truly wonderful.

Fully inserted into the niche, Victor's head fell back, hanging limply from his arched neck. His mouth fell open. His eyes were glassy. Tears slipped from the corner of his eyes and down into his blonde hair.

'See what I could not,' Victor rasped. 'It's a lie. All of it.'

Rob's mind went numb. The warmth left him. In an instant, the joy, the exultation, the rapture were gone.

His attention was drawn to an empty niche beside Victor's. It was for him, he understood suddenly. It was meant for him. To be part of it: the great journey.

You are meant for this, he heard again. This and only this.

Rob looked up at the great crystal assembly. There were hundreds of niches. Men, women and children trapped within each, their faces hanging back in horror. An icy chill ran through his core. He imagined himself being dragged up onto a stone slab, having his arms and legs cut away, seeing them fall away into darkness. He imagined his amputated body being inserted into a crystal niche, his neck falling back. And he realised that the warmth he had felt, the exultation, was theirs. The wonder, the rapture was theirs. Not his, but that of these grotesque and monstrous creatures. The Assemblers.

Instantly, he was banished. Rob found himself floating free in the black alien void again. The crystal structure, Victor—all of it had vanished. Confusion and frustration radiated at him from all angles. Brief seconds passed. Rob could sense growing annoyance among his captors. There seemed some doubt as to what to do with him.

Seeing a chance, Rob struggled to break free of them, of the void. Though he did not know how to break the connection.

They sought to hold him then. The pressure in his skull returned, the devastating weight of their combined force coming to bear upon him. Rob fought it, fought them. They could kill him, he knew, and perhaps they would. They might crush his mind and leave him a madman. But he railed against them still. The pressure continued to mount until, in a blinding flash, the blackness left him.

He was on his knees in the photographic studio. The world was coming back to him: the sounds of Glasgow ringing up from the streets below. The black sign on the floor before him was now nothing more than paint on wood—cold and inert. Rob coughed. He could taste blood in his mouth. He lifted a hand to his face and found his top lip and chin slick with blood.

And he realised that he was not alone.

‘Well done, Mr Grant,’ a familiar voice said. ‘Yes, well done indeed. You are a strong one.’

Rob turned to his right and looked up. The studio walls and ceiling swam in his vision. In the bright morning light, he could see Sleeman standing over him, the old man’s beaming face looking down at him.

‘And just so,’ the old man sneered. ‘The prophecy is fulfilled, yes?’

Rob felt faint. He tried to move, but his vision narrowed to a pinhole.

‘Bring him,’ Sleeman said distantly. ‘It has finally begun.’

Hands grasped Rob from behind, lifting him violently. He wanted to struggle, but found he could not. The pinhole was closing. His gaze fell upon the painted circle once more as the blackness took him.

Chapter 10: The Shore

Rob woke to the sound of water lapping against a wooden hull. More distantly, he could hear the muted roar of wind and waves. Opening his eyes, he found himself in darkness with only one source of light: a thin blade of moonlight cutting through a dark interior. Cool sea air flowed in through the narrow gap smelling strongly of salt and rotting seaweed, while the close space around him stank of damp and marine varnish. He squinted into the inky shadows around him, tracing the curving lines of the hull to his left. He could make out small wooden crates and rusty cans, bundles of rope and netting, and rigging equipment stowed here and there.

On the sloping floor, a bulk lay beneath a grey wool blanket, unmoving. He could make out the crest of a shoulder and a hip, the slopes of legs and arms. Shuffling through the darkness, Rob moved closer to the blanket. Reaching out apprehensively, he gripped a frayed corner between his fingers and pulled back the top edge. In the dim light, he saw Anna's black hair drawn over her brow and cheek. Her eyes were closed. She was perfectly still. Releasing the blanket, Rob arched his back to bring his ear down next to her mouth and nose.

'Oh, thank God,' he whispered, straightening up. Reaching out for her shoulder, he gently rocked her back and forth. 'Anna... Anna, wake up.'

She didn't respond. Her eyes remained tightly shut. Rob rocked her more forcefully. Still nothing. He started to fret: had she been drugged? Had Sleeman done something to her? He was beginning to worry in earnest when she groggily opened her eyes. 'Rob?' she asked, pulling the grey blanket around her. 'Oh, it's freezing. Where are we?'

'I'm not sure,' he replied. 'We're in the hold of a boat.'

Rob took a deep breath and watched as Anna sat up stiffly, lifting the thick blanket up with her. 'Sleeman,' she groaned. 'It's Sleeman's doing. Is he here?'

'I—actually I don't know. I haven't heard a thing. Now that you mention it.'

Rob rose to his knees. The arched ceiling of the hold was only a foot above his head: it was too shallow to stand. Crawling forward on his hands and knees, he soon discovered just how stiff his muscles were. It felt as though he hadn't moved in

days. He approached the hold doors and, to his surprise, they swung outward with only a little resistance. Brilliant moonlight flooded into the cramped hold. Outside, Rob could see the slanted aft section of the small fishing vessel and the night sky above. It must be near midnight, he thought. The moon was high overhead surrounded by constellations and wisps of white cloud. Propping himself up against the small doorframe, he stood and stepped out onto the uneven deck.

‘Anna,’ Rob called behind him. ‘You have to see this.’

He moved a few feet down towards the stern of the boat and marveled at what he saw about him. A moment later, Anna stood next to him, her eyes wide with surprise, the grey blanket still wrapped round her shoulders.

They stood on the pitched deck of a small fishing boat, which was beached at an awkward angle in the middle of a wide, glistening crescent of wet sand. The tide had gone out and the waves that roared up from the dark sea barely reached the rear of the craft. A long expanse of glittering sand punctuated by driftwood and smooth, weathered rock extended off to the left and right. Rob trained his eyes on the horizon, which was little more than a thin black line. He could see no lights, no cities, no ships on the water. There was nothing but black water and midnight sky.

Turning around, he saw that the beach was situated on a narrow promontory. Beyond the beach, rocky cliffs and steep hills rose up to a pointed headland. At the top of that headland, Rob could see a single, small dwelling. Its slate roof shone in the moonlight and a dim light shone in one tiny window.

‘There,’ he said, directing Anna’s attention to the top of the cliffs. ‘There’s someone there. We can ask for help, for directions.’

Rob didn’t mention the strange buzzing inside his head—the intoxicating electricity and excitement of it. The connection was still open. The channel or conduit that the Assemblers used—that he had used—somehow he still had access to it. It was stronger here and, he sensed, stronger still in the direction of the cliffs. He could feel it, feel himself drawn to it like a compass needle to a magnet. The Assemblers were close by now, he was sure of it, and Victor was with them. The thought filled him with hope and with terror.

‘There must be a way up the side,’ he declared.

‘There is—look,’ Anna pointed towards a trail of footprints in the sand leading off toward the nearby cliffs. ‘The tracks of our kidnappers. I have to say that I am not eager to follow in those footsteps.’

‘Neither am I, but at least we have a choice. Victor and Sleeman’s other victims didn’t.’

‘Victor,’ Anna growled. ‘This all started with Victor Campbell. If I had known that finding him would involve my being kidnapped, shipwrecked, and left goodness knows where, I would have thought twice!’

‘Would you though?’

Anna looked at him and took a deep breath. ‘Don’t be smart.’ A moment later, she added: ‘Victor had better be safe. We need to find him.’

‘We will.’

Together, they moved down the slanted deck to the side of the boat. There, Rob helped Anna down to the beach, before lowering himself to the sand. He landed with a jolt and hissed as pain shot through his hip. Anna came up next to him and put her hand on his shoulder, stabilising him so that he might shift his weight off his left leg. ‘Thank you,’ he grimaced.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked. ‘Did Sleeman hurt you back there? Before?’

‘No,’ Rob replied. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘You had a bloody nose earlier.’

‘Earlier?’

‘They already had you when they came for me,’ Anna related. ‘I had finished my shift at the Western Infirmary and was halfway to the Mitchell Library to read the evening papers, when a police lorry pulled over beside me. It was Sleeman and one of his cronies. I almost ran away, but he told me that he had you in the back and that you were hurt. I didn’t have much of a choice after that. I climbed inside, they let me have a look at you, and then they—well, I don’t know. I must have fainted. The next thing I remember is you rousing me here, in the boat.’

‘Do you remember anything else?’ Rob probed. ‘Did you see anything? When you were awake or...?’

Anna shook her head. ‘No, like I said, I fainted. I was unconscious.’

Rob nodded, putting his weight back through his leg.

‘When did they grab you?’ she asked, moving her hand from his shoulder.

‘In the morning. Downtown.’

Rob took a step forward, testing his hip. After a moment, the pain grew manageable, reduced to the familiar ache of his wounded muscles and the tight pull of scar tissue. He nodded at Anna and limped towards the cliffs, following the track of footprints in the sand. Toward Victor and the Assemblers.

‘Rob, did Sleeman say anything to you earlier? About all this?’ Anna inquired, falling into step beside him.

‘No, not this... but, before I blacked out, he mentioned a prophecy. That and he said that ‘it’ had finally begun.’

‘It?’ Anna asked, glancing over at him. ‘I don’t like the sound of that... whatever it means.’

Rob scanned the beach around them, but there was little to see, apart from the rolling waves. The sand beneath their shoes was dark, rippled and damp, while further ahead, past a line of black seaweed, it was smooth and dry. The line of footprints marked the passage of at least half a dozen men, from what he could gather. The thunder of the surf and the roaring wind drowned out all sound.

Nearer the cliff face, low dunes gave way to rocky soil and patches of long grass that swayed in the wind. Here the track at their feet became less consistent and harder to follow, but it led to an obvious footpath up the steep hills along the side of the cliffs. Glancing up to the top of the jagged bluffs, Rob could no longer see the side or roof of the dwelling he had spied from the boat, only thickets of blooming gorse running along the cliff’s edge. Behind him, Anna trudged along in silence, her gaze trained on the path at her feet.

Leaving the sandy dunes behind, Rob began up the first rise, gritting his teeth against the pain in his hip. The route was well trodden. Footholds in the hillside had been crafted with flat stones or were sometimes cut or carved out from the dark earth itself. Anna stayed close behind him and, after a few minutes, they reached the dense gorse bushes, coming level with the ground atop the crags.

Warm, fragrant scents of gorse and primrose enveloped him as Rob caught his breath and surveyed the scene around them. The island—for it did seem an island now—rose up from the grassy headland to become more forested and mountainous at

its centre. A long, curving track wound in front of the dwelling he had seen from below—a two-storey house a few hundred yards to their left. The road was little more than a dirt path full of potholes and twisting ruts: it led down into the distance on their right and upward past the house into the mountainous interior on their left.

Rob looked at Anna and inclined his head towards the whitewashed house. Anna brushed her hair from her eyes and glanced past him, finally nodding her head in silent agreement. The wind whipped around them as they left the shelter of the gorse.

Rob led the way toward the outer dry stone wall that surrounded the small property. The house lay a hundred yards or more inside the waist-high wall. On the side of the house nearest him, a small window on the first floor was lit, its four panes glowing brightly. Overhead, clouds were beginning to gather, bunching beneath the moon, casting great shadows over the island landscape.

Rob took some effort to open the field gate as quietly as he could. As Anna slipped by him and through the gate, Rob searched the property for signs of life. He could find none. His eyes were drawn up to the lighted panes once more, but he could see no silhouettes or shadows moving within.

‘Desolate, isn’t it,’ Anna offered quietly.

‘Mmm,’ Rob agreed, pulling the field gate closed behind him.

Stepping around to the front side of the small house, he could see that the front door was ajar and that the two ground-floor windows to either side were unlatched and wide open. There were no lights on inside whatsoever. White pleated drapery swung limply in and out of the house’s dark interior. Rob’s vision narrowed on the swaying strips of cloth. He thought he could detect a faint, sour smell. He slackened his pace as the odor became more pronounced. Finally, he lifted his hand to his nose, stopping altogether and holding his breath.

A shadow passed by him—a shadow that walked. Rob watched curiously as the dark silhouette of a man formed and walked out toward the jagged stump of a tree twenty feet to Rob’s right. A collection of trench tools and a few spades rested against the stump’s base. A service tunic hung from the splintered wood above, the khaki fabric swinging to and fro in the warm breeze. Rob watched as the soldier

collected the tunic and swung it over his shoulders. He then turned back towards the edge of the camp, his fingers at work on the buttons.

Rob coughed, keeping his hand clenched over his mouth, fighting back the urge to retch. His attention returned to the field to the left of the soldier and the broken stump. To the freshly excavated earth six feet high on either side of a huge rectangular hole dug into the ground. Bloated and broken bodies—some whole, many more in pieces—filled the entirety of the pit, layered one upon another, forming a mass grave. Rob had heard of such things, of course, but to see—and to smell—one firsthand was a shock. A single wooden cross stood at the head of the grave, dwarfed by the enormity of the massive pit. Beneath the pale moonlight, the cross seemed insignificant and utterly insufficient, but it was not alone. A further seven small crosses dotted the field at the head of seven other mass graves. The scene filled him with horror and disgust.

‘A sicht you’ll no forget, pal. No as lang as ye live,’ the soldier said, coming up on Rob’s right side. He was sweating profusely and had left his tunic open mid-breast. His brown hair was slicked back and his eyes looked weary, rimmed in red. ‘Saw ye earlier. You’re one a’ the new kickers, aren’t ye?’

‘Aye,’ Rob replied. ‘Royal Engineers.’

‘We heard youse wis comin’. Sappers, miners, an’ the like. Here ta blaw Jerry’s baws off.’

Rob nodded. ‘Summat like that.’

‘Bout goddamn time, mate,’ the soldier huffed. ‘Bout goddamn time. A man gets sick a’ birrie’n his own. Bout time Jerry got his own back.’ He extended his hand. ‘Name’s MacDonell.’

Rob gripped the offered hand and shook it. ‘Grant.’

‘Grant? Up Loch Ness way, by chance? I wis born in Invergarry. We might be related.’

‘No. Cambuslang, Glasgow.’

‘Ach, weel, I’ll no haud it against ye,’ MacDonell replied with a wink.

Rob smiled. Cupping his hand over his mouth, he nodded in the direction of the open grave. ‘How many?’

MacDonell looked over and shook his head. 'Faur too many. Pulled frae No Man's Land yestreen.'

'All of them?'

'E'ery bodie ye see, aye. Death's no faur frae any of us here.'

Rob shook his head. 'I dinnae ken how ye manage.'

'Has to be dane, dinna it—nae wale. Has to be. I grew up on a fairm. Ye see death. Unnerstaund it to be pairt o' life. The end, sure, but still a pairt, like. I ken folk forgit that. They hide frae it, scouk frae it. But how can ye hide frae life, frae the trowth. Always mind: whit's fur ye'll no go by ye.'

'Whit's fur ye'll no go by ye,' Rob repeated, trying to match the soldier's inflection.

'Ma guiddame used ta say that e'ery day—Sawbath to Sawbath,' MacDonell said, wiping his brow. 'It's a choice, she'd say, a wale. Ta accept death oor forsay it. Some men ken the trowth in that, an' they can live with it. Others cannae. They'll rin frae it thair hale life.'

Rob looked over to the open grave once more, to the collection of lifeless bodies. So much heaped flesh where men once were. 'An the road... an the way here,' he began. 'I saw cart after cart full o' crosses—seemed like thoosans o' them—bein' brought oot frae the coast. Me and my pals watched them carts roll by, feart to think that so many were needed. Then I see this.'

'Only aicht crosses fur where hunders lie deid,' MacDonell declared. 'Aye, an' there's fields like this, graves like this, all ower France. Nae man'll ken how many died until efter the war. When the deid are dug up again an' birrie'd proper. Here or sent aff hame.'

Rob nodded silently, giving no further voice to the fear in his heart.

MacDonell's red-rimmed eyes met his again. 'It's a massacre, by all accounts. An' some say this war'll make ghosts o' us all. But thair's nae point in fearin' it. Men are fey to die. Comes to us all.'

'Aye, what's fated is fated,' Rob intoned earnestly.

He watched the soldier turn, a knowing half-smile on his face. 'Aye,' MacDonell said, clapping Rob on the shoulder as he passed him by. 'Aye.'

The hand on his shoulder shook him gently. The wind gusted around him. The smell of death diminished, but not entirely. It was still there: a sour rot on the wind. To his left, Rob could hear the distant crashing of waves. Confused, he looked around him. The field of mass graves was gone, replaced by bald, grassy headland. He stood in the shadow of the whitewashed house to his left.

‘Rob... Rob?’

He turned as Anna gripped his shoulder harder. He could see the worry, the fear written on her face. The wind gusted again.

‘Do you smell it?’ she said.

Rob struggled for words, the memory of the moonlit field in France still fresh in his mind. ‘Aye,’ he said at last. ‘Death.’

Chapter 11: Casualties of War

The smell transported him instantly to the muddy fields in France. Not only to the mass graves where he had met MacDonell and others, but also to the faces and rent bodies of the first corpses he had encountered there. Bodies blown apart, bright white bones shining amidst bloody masses. Swollen, ripe forms with vaguely gelatinous skin whose stomachs had exploded in the summer heat. The sunken, leathery faces of young men lying frozen in No Man's Land. Death in all its horrific forms.

It had taken him ages to grow accustomed to the stench of death. Victor never seemed particularly troubled by it. Most got used to it relatively quickly. Not Rob. For the longest time, he couldn't sleep, couldn't eat because of it. But death was everywhere, unavoidable, and finally he had learned—like everyone had—to accept it, to come to grips with the sickening, physical reality of a world filled with decomposing corpses.

Smelling it now, however, outside the farmhouse, was a shock. Rob was caught off-guard. The sickly sweetness made his pulse quicken. His instincts told him to avoid it, to run. Beside him, Anna looked confused and apprehensive, glancing about her, trying to find the source of the smell. It was coming from the open farmhouse door. Rob was sure of it.

A moment later, the wind gusted around them again, bringing with it the renewed stench of death and confirming his suspicion. He caught Anna's attention and gestured to the farmhouse door. As one, they moved towards the entrance. Nearing the door, Rob gripped the worn iron handle and lowered his head, listening for a moment. There was no discernable sound from within.

A moment passed. Rob looked up and met Anna's eyes. Her short black hair whipped round her face. She looked tense as she crouched next to the door across from him. He waited as she let the grey blanket slip from her shoulders and grabbed hold of a rusty trowel perched atop a small wooden bench beside her.

'Ready?' Rob whispered, clenching his fists.

Anna shivered and nodded.

He slowly pushed the heavy door open. It creaked and rattled noisily on its rusty hinges. Through the opened door, Rob caught a glimpse of a broad stone fireplace with a Highland targe and broadsword hanging above and a flash of tartan to either side. Four wooden chairs sat round the fireplace. A small table stood between them with a single clay mug atop it. He could make out a narrow stairwell leading to the first floor dimly illuminated from above and two darkened doorways—one likely leading to a kitchen.

Rob stepped into the dark cavity and Anna followed him inside. Rob could distinguish another, larger table at the far end of the room. Moonlight reflected brightly off the facets of a cut-crystal bowl atop the plain wood surface. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he could make out more chairs and some paintings on the wall.

‘Rob. Torches,’ Anna whispered. ‘Here by the door.’

He heard a click and was dazzled as a circle of yellow light flashed on the floor beside him. Anna brought the torch up, unintentionally blinding him in the process. ‘Sorry,’ she said, lowering the beam. She lay the rusty trowel down and handed him the second torch. Rob grasped it, surprised by the weight of it, and fumbled for the switch. Anna brought her torch up again and together they scanned round the room.

The combined light shone off the curved glass of a number of oil lamps ensconced high on the walls about the room. Arcing the light down toward the floor, their search stopped as the two beams concentrated on the body of a man slumped against the wall between the two farmhouse windows. The white drapery on either side of him swung back and forth in the wind.

Beside him, Anna inhaled sharply and took a step back, the light of her torch dancing on the wall above the body.

Rob brought a hand back up to his mouth, but kept his torch firmly fixed on the corpse. A moment later, Anna stepped forward, composing herself, and moved her torchlight slowly over the scene, surveying it. Rob watched as she paused at the man’s rolled-up sleeves, the deep cuts running from wrists to elbows, his swollen and bloodied hands, and the oblong pools of dried blood that had formed below them to either side of the body. A darkly stained hunting knife rested between his thighs.

‘Suicide,’ she whispered under her breath, adding: ‘Christ have mercy on his soul.’ With her free hand, she made the sign of the cross.

Rob took a step forward and shone his torch on the farmer’s face. It had gone a horrible, stony grey colour. His eyeballs had recessed into gelid puddles and his distended tongue lolled grotesquely from his pale-lipped mouth. Rob guessed the man would have been thirty-five, forty at the oldest. Anna moved off to the left and Rob brought his torch down to focus on the hunting knife. It had a short pointed blade and appeared handmade, the hilt being carved from bone or horn and wrapped in tanned leather.

‘Rob,’ Anna said, standing near the fireplace. She reached up to the mantle beneath the Highland targe and held up a child’s painting done on rough paper. Simple brushstrokes portrayed a family of four: mother and father in the centre, sister and brother to either side.

‘Oh, God no,’ he exclaimed, his heart sinking. He glanced up at the ceiling, his stomach turning at the thought of what they might find and the significance of the child’s painting. He saw Anna’s eyes darting to the two narrow doors leading off from the front room and then to a stairwell leading up to the first floor.

Without saying a word, she ran across to the first door and threw it open. Rob stood up and backed away from the body. ‘Kitchen,’ Anna announced, releasing the handle and rushing to the next door as Rob walked over toward the lighted staircase. Anna gripped the handle of the second door and pushed it open. ‘Pantry, storage, coatroom—nothing. Nothing. It’s empty,’ she related.

Rob alighted the first step of the staircase and took a deep breath. The stench of death was stronger here. He watched as Anna moved into position behind him. Her face was flushed, her pupils were great black pools.

‘Are you sure, Anna? I can check. Alone. You don’t have to,’ he said.

Anna stared at him and shook her head. ‘I need to know.’

Rob turned back to the stairwell. Dull yellow light from the upper hall reflected off the polished wooden railing next to him. Rob switched off his torch and grasped the railing, quickly moving up the worn steps. At the top of the stairs, he nearly choked from the smell and automatically covered his nose and mouth with his left hand. He stood in a short narrow hall that extended the length of the house. He

could barely stand erect and the sides of the hall brushed against his shoulders. The stench was significantly worse here: it threatened to turn Rob's stomach.

He swallowed hard and turned round. 'You take this room,' he said, his voice muffled. 'And I'll take the far one.'

Anna nodded, holding a handkerchief to her nose.

A collection of children's charcoal drawings hung low along the length of the corridor's walls. The floor creaked loudly as Rob headed down the hall to the far room. The door ahead was ajar. Through the open crack, Rob could see the foot of a double bed. White bedding with a floral motif draped down to the waxed wooden floor and he could see the hem of what looked to be a woman's lilac dress. Taking the last few steps down the corridor, Rob pushed the door open.

The ceiling lamp above bathed the bedroom in a soft, bright light. Beneath thick quilted blankets, a woman lay dead, her face so swollen that it looked like she was wearing a grey, pallid mask, her bulging eyelids sealed tight. Her long, wavy hair framed her face: it was blonde, almost the same gold-yellow as in the child's painting. Rob turned away, leaning on the dressing table at his right and exhaling loudly. 'Jesus Christ,' he muttered under his breath, bile rising up in his throat.

The bedside table beside the farmer's wife held few books and a well-thumbed, leather-bound bible. The books were neatly stacked beside a simple wooden bowl that held some jewelry, a thimble, a few buttons, and some odds and ends. A woven basket beneath the table held a pair of crochet needles, a few spools of brightly coloured yarn, and an intricately woven square of a project just begun.

All of it a fabrication, Rob realised. The whole scene had been staged, carefully manufactured. The blankets on the double bed had been smoothed down, the woman's hair had been brushed and laid out on the pillow, even the ornamental hairbrush had been placed just-so on the dressing table beside him. 'Christ,' Rob whispered. It had to be the husband, he thought to himself, who else would have gone to all this trouble?

Across the room, Rob caught a glimpse of himself in a small oval mirror nailed to the wall. He looked ghastly: his face drawn and his eyes bloodshot. Taking a moment to slow his thoughts, Rob suddenly realised that he could hear nothing from Anna, from the room at the other end of the hall. He glanced to the open door,

listening intently. Just then a thought occurred to him: the room down the hall—it would be the children’s bedroom.

‘Anna?’ Rob whispered, pushing away from the dressing table. He took a step towards the hall door, awaiting some kind of response, but none came. No sound at all.

He rushed out of the parents’ bedroom and shuffled quickly and painfully down the short hall toward the room opposite. ‘Anna?’ he called louder.

As he reached the second room, Rob could see that it was very nearly a perfect duplicate to the one he had just left. Anna was sitting on one side of the bed, unmoving. Looking to the left of her, Rob exhaled and slumped hard against the lintel of the door. It was exactly as he had feared.

The bodies of a young girl and a small boy lay perfectly still, almost doll-like, side-by-side in the double bed. They too had been placed with deliberate care. The girl was perhaps two or three years older than the boy. Neither had reached ten years of age. A small wooden boat had been tucked beneath the boy’s hand and a raggedy doll lay under the girl’s elbow. A light blue, crocheted bedspread complete with sun and clouds covered their legs and torsos.

Anna was holding the girl’s small hand in hers. Rob couldn’t see her face, but he could hear Anna’s breathing, slow and measured. She lifted one hand away to wipe her face. Rob looked down to the faces of the children. He noted the identical grey pallor and the same swelling of their skin, just like their mother. A particularly sour reek pervaded the room.

Anna remained still a moment longer. Then, straightening up on the bed, she carefully laid the girl’s hand back down on the mattress. She turned to Rob. Her eyes were red-rimmed, her face rigid as stone. ‘Poison,’ she stated bluntly. ‘Both of them poisoned... and then laid here... like this. Like they were... just sleeping.’ Her eyes began to well up; she looked away from him. ‘What did you find?’

‘The mother,’ Rob replied. ‘The same. Almost exactly.’

Anna nodded. ‘That explains the suicide. He must have poisoned them all, arranged them, and then took his own life.’ Keeping her eyes low, she focused on the doorway behind him. ‘I just don’t know—what makes a man do that?’

Rob shook his head, pausing. 'Fear,' he answered a moment later. 'Fear of what's to come. Perhaps fear of other men.'

'Like Sleeman.'

'Or some other threat, aye.'

Anna glanced up to him. 'What other threat?'

Rob looked down to the worn floorboards, avoiding her gaze and the question. 'We need to go,' he said finally. 'There's nothing more we can do here.'

Chapter 12: False Shepherds

Rob plodded along the road in silence. He could no longer hear the roar of the surf, only the howling wind that gusted over the jagged foothills to the left and right of him. High overhead, the moon cast a spectral glow over the island, lighting everything in an eerie, luminous grey. The road ahead continued to curve, slowly curling into the mountainous interior. On either side of the dirt track, low grasses bowed and bent as the wind swept up the hillside before him. Thick scrub, mosses, and heather dotted the nearby hills. The sky above was clear apart from a cluster of small, wispy clouds that raced from one horizon to the next.

Anna marched mutely beside Rob as they made their way up to the crest of the hill. She had said nothing since leaving the whitewashed house behind—nothing at all. Rob couldn't imagine what she must be thinking, what ghosts might be haunting her. He didn't know what to make of the horrific discoveries they had made inside the tiny house. But he suspected that it was only the beginning, the precursor to some greater horror—something unknowable as yet. The thought filled him with dread. And yet, with every step, he was taking them closer toward the source of that dread, that terror. As he knew he must.

Trudging up the hill now, the visions that he had seen in the void, those the Assemblers had shown him, returned to him. One scene in particular tortured him: that of the impossible, titanic crystalline structure that Victor and so many countless others had been slotted into. Like puzzle pieces, Rob thought to himself, or parts in a machine. It was a repulsive thought made all the more repugnant by the significance of the empty, oddly hexagonal slot beside Victor: the space that was prepared for him, that was meant to house his own amputated body.

Rob started at the thought of it. He mustn't let it happen, he knew—he couldn't. Instead, he had to turn their prophetic vision against them somehow. A physical confrontation was out of the question, but in the void... within the conduit, he had resisted them for a time. Was that the key? If he could find some means of disrupting the Assemblers' plan, perhaps an opening would appear, an opportunity.

And he and Anna might rescue Victor and as many others as they could. But there was no dark circle now: would it even be possible to connect with them?

Walking steadily forward, Rob reached out with his senses, feeling for the connection, seeking out the Assemblers. They were there instantly, in his mind, in the uncanny buzzing at the back of his skull. But more than that, he could feel them. As present as the heat from a candle flame or a breeze at his back: he sensed them. They were ahead of him, so close now and so powerful. Would they not sense him as well? He tried to steel himself against their influence, should they suddenly notice him and seek to compel him. But he felt no awareness or attempt to apprehend him. Instead, he perceived an intense concentration, an application to one all-important task. Rob struggled to discern what it was, but could find no frame of reference for it. A function? A calculation? All their efforts were focused on achieving this singular operation. Try as he might, he could not fathom its significance or purpose. Nor could he sense Victor's participation in it.

Not wishing to draw attention to himself or entangle himself further, Rob pulled back and began to disengage, to suppress the connection. He retrained his awareness on the real world, on the wind on his face, the smell of heather, the taste of salt air, and the weight of the torch in his hand. He found his experience managing his neurasthenia strangely useful here: the process of disconnection was little different. A moment later, the Assemblers' influence faded and he was back on the moonlit road, marching silently forward.

Taking a deep breath, Rob glanced over to Anna, but her head was turned away. Her black hair reflected the silver moonlight. She was looking out toward the ocean. He noted the fingers of her right hand were curled into a fist around the metal casing of the electric torch she carried. After another few feet, Anna turned her attention back to the road. She kept her head down, her eyes focused on the deep, twisting ruts at their feet. He thought better than to try to engage her in conversation. Victor was the conversationalist, not he. He would just say something clumsy or stupid. Instead, he accelerated his pace, marching up the hill. Anna matched his pace automatically, stepping in time beside him.

Ahead of them, a wide hilltop revealed itself. The broad crest formed a loamy meadow covered in shrubs and widespread patches of heather. The dirt track

continued to curve lazily inland to the right. On his left, Rob could see the distant crags and steep hills that plummeted down to the sand and sea below. As they reached the very top of the summit, the wind buffeted them fiercely. Rob signaled Anna to stop and he examined the long stretch of coastline to their left. The moon was beginning to descend, but its baleful light still reflected brightly off the wet beaches and rolling ocean waves. There was no habitation to be seen along the whole of the ragged coast. Rob felt a sudden longing for the electric glare, the jammed streets, and the perpetual clamour of Glasgow. By comparison, this cold, windswept, and utterly silent landscape felt alien and dead.

‘Rob, look,’ Anna whispered, drawing his attention. She hurried ahead of him, sprinting down the side of the road.

Peering past her, Rob saw what had sparked her interest. At the far edge of the peak, he spied a perfectly flat rectangle of dull light reflecting off the top of something. Rob rushed after Anna painfully, loping across the intervening distance as best he could. Perhaps a hundred yards ahead of him, she came to a sudden stop and fumbled with her torch. Rob stumbled beside her as Anna shone a beam of yellow light down the gradual incline of the hillside before them.

A long line of lorries stretched off into the distance, descending into shadow. The reflection had come off the top of the black roof of the nearest vehicle. The lorries closest to them were small—the sort that were common on the streets of Glasgow—while the most distant ones were huge industrial affairs. The hulking vehicles reminded Rob of the larger military transports that had been introduced towards the end of the war. Taken together, at least a dozen lorries were lined up, snaking down the road. Each was parked a short way after the one before it. They blocked the road entirely, making it impassable.

‘What the hell,’ Rob muttered as Anna shone her torchlight over the back of the nearest lorry. It was a squat black Albion, the sort used by the Strathclyde Police. Its rear doors were opened wide and the reinforced wooden hold was empty.

‘That’s the sort of thing Sleeman was driving when they pulled up beside me on Great Western Road,’ Anna announced.

‘Aye,’ Rob replied, then added in a whisper: ‘Anna, best switch off the torches. Just in case.’

A moment later, they were surrounded by deep shadow lit only by the pale light of the moon. Rob searched the distance ahead, paying particular attention to the areas near the most distant lorries and beyond. Beside him, he saw Anna turn her head in a slow arc, surveying the landscape around them.

Rob could detect no movement in the shadows between or alongside the winding line of vehicles. But a number of low mounds beside the most distant lorries caught his eye. He couldn't make out what they were: the distance was too great and the shadows too dark to make out any detail. Looking out past the farthest of the vehicles, Rob could make out nothing. The foremost lorry seemed to be parked at the lip of some kind of deep depression. There was nothing but empty darkness ahead of them. Looking across this black abyss to the hillside beyond, he instantly recognised what it was.

'It's a mine,' he said, a tingling sensation running over his spine and shoulders. 'An open-pit mine. That explains the road.'

'Open-pit?'

'A surface mine. Look, see there, the tiers cut into the hillside, well past the lorries, like great stone steps—there and there. And that dirt and rock heaped high around all the sides? That's overburden. It's removed to access whatever minerals they are mining. Probably copper or tin.'

'It looks awfully dark. No lights,' Anna noted.

Rob shook his head. 'I don't see the sense: none of these vehicles are suited to mining work or transporting raw minerals.'

The Beehive Boys, he thought to himself suddenly, could these be the lorries the Beehive Boys were looking for? Rob had assumed that the deal Victor and Sleeman had made was for two or perhaps three lorries—not a dozen or more. Still, he realised, it was possible. And if these were the vehicles, then Sleeman and Victor might be close.

Rob watched as Anna took a few steps towards the rear of the nearest Albion.

'Anna, we need to be on our guard,' he said. 'As long as we have the moonlight with us, let's keep the torches down and switched off. At least until we see what's what. Go in as quiet as we can.'

She nodded without turning and continued ahead, keeping her torch low by her side.

Moving cautiously down the dirt track, Rob followed Anna into the shadows behind the black Albion. He watched her slip into the deep gloom at the side of the lorry, losing her momentarily as she became a part of the darkness itself. Moving to join her, Rob recognised the insignia of the Strathclyde Police force emblazoned on the side of the vehicle. He marvelled that someone had had the cheek to steal it.

Moving past the first Albion, they stepped quietly into the narrow gap between it and the second. Something scuttled away into the dark shadows beneath the lorry ahead. Anna seemed not to notice. It must be a rat or some other creature, he determined, slowly approaching the rear of the vehicle.

The hold of the second Albion was empty like the first, but the dirt track behind it was broken up and uneven. The road must have been muddy when the lorry had arrived. Bending down, Rob could see footsteps—some deep, some shallow—where people had stepped or leapt down from the now unoccupied hold. The trail of footprints led off to the left of the vehicle and along its side in single-file. Straining to focus in the gloom, Rob could identify prints that belonged to both men and women.

Rob pointed the trail out to Anna over as he stepped round the corner of the second Albion and made his way to the next lorry. The wind whipped around them as they crossed the open road between the police vehicle and a sizeable butcher's lorry. A sign on one of the rear doors revealed that it belonged to an abattoir in Glasgow's Gallowgate. Through an open door, Rob could see great hooks hung from the stinking ceiling. The interior was buzzing with flies, but it was otherwise vacant. Rob moved down the side of the butcher's vehicle and peered into the shadows. Two more abattoir lorries stood abandoned ahead of this first one. Rob paused for Anna and then made his way across to the next vehicle.

The holds of the other abattoir lorries were equally nauseating and bare. Rob wasted no time with them, shuddering at the thought that people might have been transported in them. He waved Anna on past the final abattoir lorry and together they crossed the intervening space to the first of the larger vehicles. At the back of the

huge transport, Rob squinted ahead into the darkness as Anna made her way to the cargo hold.

He could see a total of eight massive lorries leading down to the edge of the open-pit mine. From here, down to the mine, the road descended into a narrow glen between two hillocks to Rob's left and right. The steep hillsides soon hemmed them in, leaving them only one viable means of escape.

Rob looked over to Anna. 'It's more or less a straight shot from here down to the mine,' he said.

She nodded and indicated that he should examine the hold beside her.

Rob manoeuvred nearer and glanced inside the long hold. There was nothing to see, nothing but shadows. His wrinkling nose, however, suggested it had not always been so. 'Is that...?'

'Urine,' Anna reported.

Rob coughed. 'Jesus, that's rank.'

'How many people do you think you could fit in there?'

Rob looked over to Anna. 'Sitting down—I don't know—maybe fifteen to twenty. Standing up... easily double that. Forty? Forty-five?'

Anna's brow furrowed. 'They must have been jammed in like sheep for hours. So long that they wet themselves.'

Rob stepped back from the lorry gate and took a deep breath.

'If all of these lorries were used to transport people,' she continued, 'then how many might have been brought here?'

'Potentially?' Rob paused. 'Hundreds.'

Anna's eyes grew wide. 'Hundreds. Taken to a mine? What could Sleeman possibly want with all those people?'

The image of the Assemblers' crystalline structure rose up in Rob's mind. 'What do all men seek from all other men: power and profit.'

Anna narrowed her eyes. 'Those are Victor's words. Not yours.'

'Nevertheless.'

Rob could almost hear Victor's voice shouting those words next to him. Shouting over the chanting of thousands of men collected in George Square. The shadows behind Anna began to coalesce into thousands of bodies, their fists pumping

up into the air, pickets and placards held high. Their cries for justice rang in his ears. More jobs! Fewer hours! Fairer wages! High above the crowd a great red flag swung back and forth, back and forth. The flag of the Red Clydeside.

‘Victor, I don’t want to get mixed up in that. I can barely walk with this bloody thing,’ Rob protested, indicating the cane at his side. Men and women flooded down Hanover Street to either side of them, occasionally jostling and bumping into him. At any moment one of them might send him tumbling to the ground. ‘I got leave from the hospital to go to the cinema, not a Bolshevik rally!’

‘They are not Bolsheviks and it’s not a rally,’ Victor grinned, his blue eyes sparkling. ‘It’s a strike and most of them are Tommies, labourers, workers—men like you, Rob. They’ve been at it for near four days now. Last night’s newspapers suggested twenty or thirty thousand would show today. Looks like they were right! More importantly, Gallacher, Kirkwood, and Shinwell are meant to be here. I want to see them. The leaders of these men.’

‘Willie Gallacher? He is a bloody Bolshevik,’ Rob persisted. ‘They all are—according to the papers.’

Victor’s smile faded. ‘He is just a man, Rob. A man with power and influence. It doesn’t matter what his political motivation is. I couldn’t care less. What interests me is whether or not he will, or can, be any different from all the other leaders we’ve seen? Whether he will break the cycle. Don’t you wonder?’

‘Wonder what?’ Rob asked, confused.

Victor raised one eyebrow. ‘Whether he will be anything but another false shepherd! A man who promises to protect and nurture, but whose only true desire is to use other men, to consume them. A shepherd who does not feed his flock, but feeds off it. For power and profit. The rhetoric of the Red Clydeside—even the October Revolution—promises something different, but I wonder... are Gallacher and these others truly motivated by something new?’

Rob could barely think for the din coming from George Square. New voices were constantly being added to the chanting, drumming choir. Men streamed into the square from every surrounding street. It was mayhem. Rob couldn’t help but feel that a dangerous momentum was building.

Agitated, he turned to Victor. 'I can't see how these men are being consumed.'

Victor laughed out loud. 'And I can't see anything but,' he shouted. 'Look how they are being pushed and pulled, manipulated and manoeuvred... offering themselves up to the will of their leaders.'

'And here we go again!' Rob cried. 'You said the same bloody thing about the war. That we'd all been manipulated, that none of us were left any choice but to sign up and go off to war. To give our lives up to protect the interests of the powerful, the elite.'

'And I wasn't wrong. '

'I fought for freedom, Victor, not for some rich toffs' profit.'

'No,' Victor stated defiantly. 'No, you didn't.'

'Jesus Christ,' Rob cursed. 'So now you are a Communist?'

Victor sighed as a wide grin crossed his face. 'No, you mistake me. My point is that humanity is stuck. The wheel goes round and round, but we go nowhere. We don't progress. Nothing gets better. These men are fighting for the same thing that men were probably fighting for during the time of the Pharaohs. And for what? Nothing changes, because human nature doesn't change. What do all men seek from all other men: power and profit. Our leaders—and I'll wager these men's leaders—are all the same: shortsighted and brutal, users and consumers. The world needs something different. Something new.'

Rob winced as he shifted more of his weight onto his cane. 'I see. And you're the one, I suppose, who will give the world this something new, something different?'

He watched as Victor's demeanour changed entirely. His smile vanished. His face fell and his eyes narrowed. His look grew serious, dark, and his eyes locked onto Rob's. 'Not alone,' he said emphatically, 'and not without sacrifice.'

'What sacrifice?' Anna said.

Rob stood stunned. The chanting in George Square faded, replaced by the roar and whistling of the wind. Victor's face darkened until it was lost in the deep shadows that hung all around him. Glasgow receded into nothingness. He struggled

for a moment, longing to hold onto the vision, to remain in the memory, but it was gone. The present came flooding back to him, cold and stark.

‘You said ‘Not without sacrifice.’ What sacrifice?’ Anna repeated.

Rob shook his head. ‘It was something that Victor said,’ he replied dully. ‘When we were outside George Square on Black Friday.’

‘You were there?’

‘Aye, for a time,’ Rob said, moving round rear quarter of the vehicle. He could still hear Victor’s words ringing in his ears. The words, his manner, had meant nothing at the time. Rob remembered having made a joke about it. Now that the circumstances had changed, those same words seemed to possess a much greater significance.

Anna followed behind Rob as he travelled down the long side of the lorry. Halfway down, he slowed to point upward at a stylised figure of Atlas painted in white on the exterior of the hold.

‘Atlas Conveyance company,’ he whispered. ‘Glasgow-based. I knew a bloke before the war who drove for them, running goods and cargo between Glasgow and Edinburgh mostly. Sometimes to Stirling, or away up to Aberdeen. They had a fleet of lorries like this—twenty or more.’ He took a breath. These eight Atlas lorries would be the ones that the Beehive Boys wanted back, along with their drivers, he thought to himself. Sleeman would definitely have needed drivers for these. Not for the others. He or one of his cronies could have stolen the rest.

Motioning for Anna to follow him, Rob stole down to the front of the long lorry and huddled in the shadows beside it. Lying on the ground some five or six yards ahead of them, to the left of the vehicles, was the first of the low mounds that he had spied from the hilltop. Each was situated roughly between two of the larger lorries. The one nearest him looked as though it might be a pile of rubbish haphazardly thrown down beside the road. This mound was relatively small and low to the ground, but a few in the distance looked larger and stood as much as a yard high at their peak. What drew Rob’s interest now were the rectangular shapes clearly visible in the nearest heap.

Pushing out from the side of the Atlas, he made his way carefully toward the pile. Behind him, he could hear Anna follow at a distance. Through the shadowy

gloom, he could see that the mound was over fifteen feet wide. He thought at first that it must be made up of unwanted boxes or crates, perhaps holding some of the original goods that had been left in the lorries. As he neared the edge of the pile, however, Rob recognised it for what it was.

A great collection of weather-beaten suitcases, handbags, satchels, and other assorted luggage lay in the low grass and mud. Most were open and had been rifled through. The rumpled clothing and personal effects within were covered with dust and had repeatedly been soaked with rain. The rumpled shirts, dresses, trousers, and other articles looked as though they had all been here for some time. While the bulk of it was everyday or rather cheaply made, there were a number of expensive articles too. Looking up past the next Atlas lorry, Rob could make out the next dark mound. It was obvious to him now that it was another heap of discarded luggage. Beyond that, he could see another and another, all the way down to the lip of the mine pit.

‘Luggage,’ Anna mumbled absentmindedly.

‘Mmm,’ Rob hummed, lost for words.

The two of them stood surveying the discarded personal effects. After a moment, Rob moved forward and inspected one of the nearest cases. Beneath the top layer of clothing, the remainder was sodden. A pool of stagnant water sat at the bottom of the swollen leather case. A women’s handbag had been turned out atop another piece of luggage to his right. He noted a half empty bottle of rosewater perfume and a monogrammed lace handkerchief.

‘Was it left behind willingly or taken from them, do you suppose?’ Anna asked.

‘Does it matter?’

Anna paused. ‘Yes. And no.’

‘I doubt it was by choice,’ Rob said. ‘Just look—every piece of luggage, every bag here has been gone through. Probably everything worth pawning has been taken. And the rest—left here to rot.’

Anne shook her head. ‘This isn’t right.’

Rob stepped back and looked down toward the mine. ‘No, it isn’t,’ Rob agreed. ‘But we need to keep on.’

Moving as silently as he could, Rob circled round the cast-off belongings. He trod carefully, respectfully, going out of his way to avoid touching or disturbing any of the weathered possessions. Something about the mound of luggage made him recall the Necropolis and the solemnity he felt when walking alone between its monuments and headstones. As though the souls of the dead were present, mourning and observing, clinging to what remained of their lost lives. The possibility that the personal effects heaped here might be the last vestiges of so many lives alarmed him and caused him to shudder. Anna was right: this was wrong.

Reaching the rear of the second Atlas, Rob cast a glance inside its dark hold. Like all the others, it was empty. He waited for Anna to move beside him before passing down to the next lorry. The same scene played out again at the back of the next Atlas and the next. Rob no longer stopped to investigate the shadowy mounds in the low grass. They passed the sixth, the seventh, and then the eighth Atlas in silence. At the front of this last vehicle, they found more bags, satchels, and luggage of all sizes strewn about in the road before it. More lives discarded: thrown aside and slowly sinking into the mud.

As they approached the entrance of the open-pit mine, the wind returned in force, blustering and whistling around them. The arena-like space was even larger than Rob had guessed it might be. The wide tiers of the mine stretched off into the distance on either side of him, each easily ten yards high. Long, sloping ramps connected one tier to the next. He could see nine tiers cut into the rocky hillside across the open pit. To his left the widest of the ramps curled down the pit floor. Great pools of dark and muddy water covered the rough pit floor, reflecting the stars in the moonlit sky above.

There was no sign of Sleeman. There were no signs of life at all.

‘It’s massive,’ Anna exclaimed in a hushed voice, taking a few steps closer towards the edge of the pit. ‘Like a coliseum built for giants.’

Rob made no response. He stood well back from the lip of the tier, overtaken by frustration and confusion. They should be here, he thought to himself. Sleeman, the Assemblers, Victor—they should all be here. He could barely contain the buzzing electricity in his skull. His whole body seemed to resonate with the connection: he

felt the rhythm of it in every breath. They must be here—and yet, there was nothing but empty space in front of him. Nothing at all.

‘Rob,’ Anna said, taking another step forward. She was perilously close to the edge now.

‘Not so close, Anna,’ Rob barked, barely in control of himself. ‘The edge—it could give way.’

‘Rob, you’ll want to see this,’ she replied enigmatically.

Gritting his teeth, he walked up behind Anna and moved round to stand beside her. She was only a foot from the precipitous edge of the mine tier. As he came to a stop next to her, he put his hand on her shoulder. He felt the sharp pinch of adrenaline in his gut.

Anna pointed down. Down to the mine floor below them, almost directly beneath them.

Rob leaned forward and saw where the rock face of the tier fifty feet below him had split or cracked open. Huge slabs of stone and rocky boulders lay about the entrance to the fissure. From the arrangement of the debris, it looked as though something had exploded from within, or broken through, the stone wall.

Baffled, he looked out from the tier wall. His gaze fixed on three shadowy forms lying on the mine floor. Bodies, he realised. The bodies of two men and one woman lay naked and face-down in the mire, lifeless and unmoving. The man and woman nearest him were half submerged in muddy slurry, while the body of the man further out was strangely mangled. From this distance, Rob couldn’t make out what had happened to the man, but his arms and legs were bent at odd angles and Rob could barely distinguish his head. Mud-covered clothing and other effects were strewn about the whole area around the bodies.

Looking away from the carnage below, Rob scanned the lowest tier wall all the way round the open pit. There were no other signs of blasting. No more rocky debris, bodies or clothing. It all seemed to be isolated to the spot immediately beneath them.

Rob looked back at Anna. Her face was ashen.

‘Perhaps they had broken free of Sleeman and resisted,’ she suggested.

‘Come on,’ Rob said, pulling her away from the mine edge and moving in the direction of the stony ramp.

Chapter 13: The Pit

Following the curve of the rock wall, they carefully descended down to the mine floor. The ground at their feet was a combination of mud, loose stone, and bedrock. A huge host of people seemed to have gone this way. A churned path in the mud formed a wide arc toward the rocky debris. Rob could see what looked like a cave mouth hidden behind the great slabs and boulders at the base of the tier. Leaving the path, he made for the rock wall. Behind him, he noted that Anna did not follow. He turned to see her bend down near the first body.

Rob cursed as his right foot slipped deep into a patch of mud. Cold water rushed into his shoe. He pushed on without stopping, circling around the field of clothing to his left and moving toward the dark opening. At some distance, he passed by the body of the woman lying face down. The skin across her back and legs looked silvery grey in the moonlight. Her blonde hair was matted thickly across the back of her skull. Her face was entirely submerged beneath the murky, still water. Rob pulled his focus away from the grisly scene and stumbled forward toward the tier wall.

A moment later, he passed round the largest of the rocky boulders and set his eyes upon a dark tunnel leading deep into the rock face. It was not the mine entrance that he had hoped to find. It was a rough, jagged corridor. He estimated that it was fifteen feet high at its highest point and nearly the same across. Large enough for five or six men to walk in abreast, except that the floor of the tunnel had not been cleared or levelled. It was a mixture of sharp outcroppings, broken stone, and smaller rubble. He looked for a route or channel through the rubble, but could find none. How had Sleeman managed it, Rob wondered, how had his victims managed across the coarse, uneven rock? And where were they now?

Rob peered into the darkness. The moon—now low in the sky—did little to illuminate the interior beyond a few yards. He was about to switch on his torch when he heard Anna call for him. He turned to see her standing near the body of the second man. The mangled form was almost unrecognisable from his vantage point. He spun round to look into the mouth of the tunnel once more, dithering about whether or not to switch on the torch. Behind him, Anna called more forcefully.

Lowering his torch, Rob turned and made his way over to Anna. Men's jackets and vests, women's blouses and shawls, torn trousers and ripped dresses, and other articles of clothing were scattered all around him. There was jewelry as well glinting in the mire at his feet: rings, chains, brooches, and cufflinks in gold and silver, some socketed with gemstones. Rob stepped over a pair of trouser braces and nearly fell as his foot slid on a woman's walking boot that lay hidden beneath the slurry.

'What the hell happened here?' he pondered aloud.

Ahead of him, Anna switched on her torch, keeping it low to the ground and moving the cone of yellow light over a narrow area. Rob stopped and scanned the deep shadows around him anxiously. But his anxiety was misplaced: there was nothing in the dark. Nothing but wind and water, stone and mud. Looking down at his feet, he discovered that the tip of his shoe had turned up a man's leather wallet in the muck. He stepped back and picked it up between two fingers, giving it a shake. He carefully flipped open the wallet, tilting it into the moonlight.

'There are wallets and jewelry... everywhere,' Rob called out. 'Mixed in with the clothes. This one belongs to... Mr Douglas Herbert McDonald. Of Belmont Street, Glasgow.'

Anna didn't respond. Her torchlight remained tightly focused on one area on the ground before her.

Rob closed the wallet and prepared to replace it in the mud, but stopped. Should he hold onto it in hopes of returning it or leave it where he found it? He looked around at the ruined, sodden clothing scattered all about him. In the distance, pieces of jewelry sparkled beneath the moonlight or reflected Anna's torchlight. Like so much lost treasure.

Silently, Rob replaced the wallet in the mud. Straightening up, he considered what was required to separate a man from his wallet or a woman from her purse. On the street of Glasgow, he often imagined what he might do if someone tried to mug him. What would he have done here? What had they done? If, for one moment, they had been free of Sleeman's thugs and the Assemblers' influence, surely they would have put up a fight. Judging by the three dead bodies and the torn and ripped clothing about him, they had done just that.

Rob looked back to the black tunnel opening. But they weren't fighting for their money or their possessions, he realised. They were fighting for their lives.

'Rob, come here,' Anna urged.

She was bent down a little more than twenty feet away, her form outlined in torchlight. Beneath her, Rob could just make out the silhouette of the mangled body he had seen from the edge of the tier.

'What is it?' he called out warily, walking forward. 'Or... who is it?'

Anna shook her head. As Rob neared the body, she announced disturbingly: 'It's not Sleeman, if that's what you mean, but it's also not pretty. I've never seen anything of the like.'

The naked man's legs were both broken; white bone shone brightly from three different points. Overall, his form was slight and thin. Strange bruising and fine, curiously arced cuts were visible in a wide line from his right hip to his left shoulder. What grabbed Rob's attention, however, was the man's pulverised skull.

'Christ,' he muttered, cupping his hand up over his mouth.

Some tremendous force had crushed the skull completely. Rob had seen firsthand what a bullet could do to the human skull, but this was something else entirely. Tiny white chips of curved and angular bone, what was left of the man's teeth, and more finely powdered bone sat within a thin, gelatinous cake of brain tissue and congealed fluids, suffused with blood and some dark hair. The man's head had been pulped.

'Not pretty... Jesus, that's a bit of an understatement, Anna,' Rob groaned.

'Just listen: see here and here—most of the cranial bones and plates, and the mandible and maxilla are shattered beyond recognition,' Anna said, her tone cool and professional. 'Only a few of the teeth remain intact, see?'

Rob couldn't help but look down at the area that Anna highlighted with her torchlight.

'Teeth are tough,' she continued. 'But given the state of the rest of this, I'm surprised any of them survived. Just look at the rest—bone, cartilage, skin...' She circled the area with her torch. Wet patches in the bloody mess reflected brightly in the torchlight. 'Well,' she concluded, 'you can see for yourself.'

Rob's eyes focused on the tiny white chips reflecting in the yellow beam. 'Like a china tea cup,' he muttered. 'Crushed.'

Beside him, Anna straightened up and looked Rob in the eye. 'He wouldn't have felt a thing, God willing,' she said, her tone more contemplative. 'Maybe a moment's fear or confusion and then... just nothing.' She switched off her torch.

'Any idea at all what could have done that to him?'

Anna shook her head. 'No. None. And that's the unusual bit.'

'Unusual,' Rob asked. 'Unusual how?'

Anna stowed her torch in the crook of her arm and brought her hands up slowly and pushed them together. 'It's the force, the power of it—that just doesn't make sense. What could do that? Out here? I just don't know... I've never seen anything like it—not in the field hospital, not at the infirmary.'

'Some kind of explosive?' Rob hazarded.

'Too localised. There are no attendant wounds, no burn marks, and no sign of the stresses you see with an explosion. It's all just focused on the head, solely on the skull. To be honest, I have no idea what could do that.'

Rob nodded. 'If there were tracks—maybe one of the big lorries or some sort of mining machine might have done this. But there's nothing here. No tracks at all.'

Anna shrugged.

'When did it happen?' Rob asked. 'Can you tell?'

'How recently, you mean?' she returned.

'Recent, aye.'

'I can't be sure, but I would guess within the last twenty-four hours.'

Rob nodded. 'I need to show you something,' he said. 'I think I know where they've gone.'

He led Anna carefully back to the rubble at the bottom of the tier wall and the black maw that led into the rock face.

'A cave?' she suggested.

'A tunnel,' he corrected.

'Leading?'

Rob shook his head.

'You are sure about this?' Anna asked.

‘I am, aye. They are in there,’ he replied. ‘All of them. Victor, Sleeman and the others—everyone that is left, all that survived this far.’

‘And the Assemblers?’

Rob paused. ‘Aye.’

‘I don’t like caves to begin with,’ Anna grumbled. ‘But Rob, how can you be sure?’

‘Do you remember what McTavish said to me in the studio,’ Rob began. ‘After he attacked me? That I could see them.’

Anna squinted. ‘Vaguely. But he was ranting like a lunatic.’

‘I know it sounded crazy—it did. But he was right, Anna. I did see something. Like seeing Mr Hyde inside of Dr Jekyll. I didn’t see McTavish: I saw the monster inside, the thing that was controlling him.’

Anna looked at him, incredulous and skeptical.

‘And I’ve been able to sense things since then,’ Rob continued. ‘I can feel and even see things.’

‘But Rob, your neurasthenia... you’ve suffered from sensory hallucinations since the mine collapse, ever since I met you.’

‘This isn’t the same,’ Rob said defensively. ‘Or maybe it is, but the neurasthenia is working for me in some way.’

‘It doesn’t work like that, Rob, you know that,’ Anna stated coolly.

‘All I can tell you is that this is different—utterly different. Do you trust me?’ Rob probed.

‘You’re my friend, so... of course, I do, but—’

‘—Then believe me when I tell you: they are in there. I can sense them.’

Anna opened her lips, as if she was going to say something, and then froze. ‘You know how this sounds. You do, don’t you?’

‘I do, but all the same. I know it’s true.’

Rob watched her scan the darkness around them. ‘They can’t have all just vanished... and those lorries are all parked up there for a reason. I presume we’ve been kidnapped for a reason as well—though that reason escapes me. So the evidence points—there. If you say Victor is in there and that all the people they’ve taken are in there, then I suppose I have to believe you. But what next?’

‘We go in, we find Victor and the others, and we get out,’ Rob replied.

‘Nothing is ever that simple, Rob.’

‘No, it isn’t. You’re right. But that’s our mission from here. Everything else we encounter, we will have to deal with one step at a time. That’s the choice we make. For me it’s simple: I cannot just let Victor die and if I can help all those people, I have to. So, my path leads in there.’

Anna scrutinised him. ‘You’ve changed, Robert Grant. You might be mad, but I’m with you. I am also not going to lie however: I am terrified of tunnels.’

Rob smiled weakly. ‘I’ve spent the bulk of my life underground in mines. I promise I won’t wrong-foot you. Just follow me and I’ll make sure you are safe. I promise.’

‘I do trust you, Rob. I hope you know that.’

Rob nodded and switched on his torch. Beside him, Anna did the same.

‘Follow me,’ he said.

Chapter 14: Descent

Rob hurried as best he could over the uneven rubble at his feet. The light of his torch swung back and forth between the jagged rock walls as he led them further down the dark tunnel. Anna was almost invisible behind him, reduced to a shadow behind the pale yellow glare of her torch. They were a little over four hundred yards into the tunnel, he guessed. There was no vestige of moonlight or breath of wind here. The air around them was thick with the smell of earth, mold, and decay—so thick that he could taste it. Rob had set a demanding pace from the start and maintained it still, despite rough terrain and the blistering pain in his hip. Every step seared the nerves along his side and made him shudder, but he soldiered on. They were getting closer to Victor by the minute.

Clambering through this subterranean world made him recall his first experiences as a miner in Glasgow, working in the shallow coal pits near the city's edge. In those early days, he was keenly aware of the weight of the stone above him, of the closeness of the air and the utter darkness. Every descent into the black came with crushing anxiety and inescapable visions of being smothered and buried alive. Some days it had taken every ounce of his resolve to suppress the panic that had bubbling up inside him. Years later, when he arrived in France, his panic was reserved for the surface. He preferred the darkness, the underworld beneath No Man's Land, to the light and the awful truth of war.

Though she made no complaint and followed resolutely behind him, Rob knew that Anna must be terrified. She would have fared better in the tunnels in France. There she could have at least taken some comfort in the patchwork of supporting beams and the candles or strings of bare bulbs overhead. Even in the deepest galleries, he and Victor had never been that far from familiar sounds or smells. Rob remembered how the deep throb of artillery bombardment made those black arteries feel alive—sometimes horribly so. The tunnel here, by comparison, seemed dead.

His torch highlighted a cluster of large, sharp boulders ahead. Rob slowed to ascertain the best way around or across. Behind him, he could hear Anna panting

faintly. Shining his torch into the darkness beyond, he could see no sign of a cavern, no sign of Sleeman or any of his victims. In fact, there were no signs of life at all apart from the occasional white worm or the shiny carapaces of beetles reflected in the torchlight. The rough corridor continued to descend steadily. Searching the tunnel floor near the boulders, Rob's eyes settled on an irregular indentation in the packed earth. Ever since they had entered into the passageway, he had detected an increasing number of these strange, uneven shapes gouged into the ground. This one was almost star-shaped and more than five inches across. Somehow he knew it was a sign that the Assemblers had passed this way.

Anna came up next to him, winded. Dust hung suspended in the light of their torches. Outside the yellow beams of light there was nothing but the singularity of earth and stone and the preternatural darkness. Rob looked at Anna and smiled. 'Take a moment, catch your breath,' he told her. 'I'll scout on ahead.'

Anna nodded and leaned carefully against the tunnel wall. 'Not too far,' she said weakly.

'No, not too far,' he echoed.

Moving ahead, Rob kept his torch trained on the rocky tunnel floor. He skirted around one boulder and heaved himself up painfully over another. Then, judging each step, he sped deeper into the tunnel.

To his left and his right he saw more strange, angular depressions. What he didn't see, he appreciated, were human footprints. Behind him, he could see his own prints sunk into the softer earth between the jagged rocks and rough boulders. But where were Sleeman's footprints, he wondered, and those of the others? There should be hundreds of them. Rob sidled around a blocky outcropping of granite, behind which the tunnel turned sharply to the right, and pushed on. More and more Assembler prints ranged ahead.

Minutes passed until he suddenly detected a drop in temperature. The air around him grew less stale and more humid. The sound of burbling and rushing water came to his ears. Shining his torch into the darkness ahead, Rob saw bright flashes of copper and rust. Ahead the tunnel he travelled down broke into an older, naturally carved channel. Rows of white stalactites and stalagmites rimmed this new tunnel mouth, while within, its walls were a dripping patchwork of earthy reds and

whites, ochres and pinks. Rob rushed forward to the lip of the new shaft, where his torch illuminated a narrower but much taller passage sloping steeply down. A torrent of clear water a little over six inches deep rushed down the gorge into the black.

Not wanting to risk calling her, Rob turned back to retrieve Anna. A while later, they both stood at the brink of the brightly coloured, sloping passage.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Anna huffed breathlessly.

‘Aye,’ Rob agreed. ‘This is older. Much, much older. The water probably carved all this away.’

Anna took a deep breath. ‘I feel like I can breathe again.’

Rob shone his torch up the steep incline to their left. ‘It might lead all the way up to the surface like this, end up in the bottom of a crag or gorge.’

‘Should we go up then?’ Anna said hopefully.

‘Not yet,’ he replied, pointing his torch down to slope to their right. ‘They are down there.’

‘You are sure?’

Rob nodded. ‘Aye. We’re getting closer.’

Another hour passed as they navigated the tunnel downward. They frequently had to use stalagmites or natural hand holds in the walls to slow themselves or keep from losing their footing in the fast-flowing water. Curiously, every stalagmite they encountered that was over four feet in height had been broken off or cropped at the top. As though some great bulk had passed down the narrow trench, knocking everything out of its way. More evidence of the Assemblers’ passage? Rob wondered.

Eventually, the corridor began to descend more gradually. The water at their feet wound down the passage, varying only a little from a straight course. The water was freezing, however, and they had to stop frequently to regain feeling in their lower limbs. It was during one such stop that Rob’s torch failed. Over the roar of the water, he downplayed the significance of the torch. They were growing closer with each step, he explained: Victor was within reach. In the end, they agreed to press on, with Rob promising to return them safely to the surface, even in the dark if need be. With that, he handed Anna his torch and, together, they cautiously continued down the watery slope.

A short while later, Rob detected a change in the pitch of the roaring water ahead. It was lower, more of a deep rumble. Following the curve of the passage, the sound grew ever louder. As the tunnel straightened out again, Anna came to a dead stop. Following the line of her torchlight into the darkness ahead, Rob could see why she stopped. The walls and the ceiling of the tunnel ended abruptly some twenty feet ahead of them. So did the floor.

Anna's torchlight reflected brightly off the billowing mist that roiled up from what appeared to be an underground waterfall. Droplets of water clung to every surface around the gap. The low rumble of the falls reverberated all around them. Without saying a word, Rob ventured forward carefully. Behind him, Anna remained rooted to the floor.

By the time he reached the edge of the chasm, the fine spray from the falls had coated his skin. Lit from behind, his shadow was cast onto the churning mist, which hung over a black abyss. Peering down through the vapour, Rob couldn't judge just how far the water dropped, but it was clear that it was not a smooth drop. The torrent from the tunnel impacted the other side of the narrow chasm and spilled away into the darkness. Other sources seemed to join it below. It sounded like the ocean itself was pouring down to the centre of the earth.

Looking up through the haze, Rob searched the opposite chasm wall. Directly across from him, there appeared to be an opening of some kind. It was easily as large as the channel he was standing in, but he could not determine whether or not it was a tunnel or just a niche that had been carved into the chasm's side. Frustrated, Rob glanced back to Anna. The bright glare of her torch shone like the sun, hanging in an empty black void. It would be the end of their journey, he realised, if he couldn't find some way past this.

Turning round again, Rob squinted into the mist. Blinking the spray from his eyes, he struggled to make out more detail. The chasm itself wasn't that wide. It was perhaps four or five feet across. Not an insurmountable distance, but the fact that he could not plainly see what lay on the other side made the idea of jumping across terrifying. For the Assemblers, such a gap would be nothing, he recognised, like stepping over a wide crack in the pavement. But for him, for Anna...

He looked to his left and right. The sides of the chasm in both directions were smooth and dripping with moisture. There was no way a man might safely climb in any direction. So if Sleeman and the others had gone forward from here, Rob thought to himself, then they must have had a bridge of some kind or—or the Assemblers had carried them across. No, he corrected himself, it was more likely that they had carried the humans from the start, the whole way down. The signs were there: the broken stalagmites, the tracks in the jagged tunnel, even the crushed head of the naked man in the slurry at the base of the mine. The Assemblers must have gone to retrieve their prey. Their appearances were no doubt what had caused the panic and revolt in the open-pit mine above.

Stilling his mind, Rob reached out once more for the connection, opening himself to the buzzing in the back of his mind. Time seemed to slow. He could identify individual droplets in the misty void before him. And beyond, through the roiling vapour, he thought he could perceive a portal of some kind, a threshold. More importantly, he could feel the Assemblers. They were there in the dark. He pushed forward and, for the briefest moment, his mind touched theirs.

He was drawn back into the titanic cavern that held the great crystalline structure. The Assemblers were crawling over it, somehow clinging to its smooth, shining surface. There must have been twenty of them at least. Each one was feeding the amputated torso of a human being into a waiting hexagonal niche. The monstrous things did this with great care, almost tenderly. And as they did so, they repeated a mantra of some kind. Or, no, Rob recognised, it was more like a song. It bore the same mathematical rhythm and precision that he had heard before when he had encountered them plotting some solution. But this—this was different. They were not calculating or formulating some arithmetic solution. They were singing to the humans. Softly, like a lullaby.

Revolted, Rob recoiled and broke the connection, but the vision remained in his mind like an appalling afterimage. He could not doubt the significance of what he had felt in the sharing. ‘Christ, it’s happening,’ he said to himself. ‘It’s happening right now.’

The Assemblers were nearing their goal.

Rob turned on his heel and made his way back to Anna. 'I need you to come a little closer,' he said. 'I need the light. I—I have to check something on the other side.'

'What do you mean 'on the other side'?' Anna asked incredulous.

'The other side of the chasm. There's another tunnel.'

'You can cross it?'

'Aye, just a bit of a leap.'

Anna took a step forward. Her teeth were chattering. She looked as though she was freezing. 'A leap.'

'Four or five feet,' Rob clarified. 'Should be easy with a running start.'

'Are you sure, Rob? Are you absolutely sure? All I see is mist.'

'Aye, I'm sure, but I need to see what's on the other side. I saw... something. Come closer, you'll see. And we need to hurry. I fear we're running out of time. For Victor... for all of them.'

'Where do you need me?' Anna inquired.

'I'll show you,' he replied.

Rob walked quickly down to a point five feet before the chasm and stood at the left side of the narrow tunnel. 'Stand just here and shine your torch ahead into the spray. There.'

Anna moved down and assumed the spot where Rob had just been. She aimed her torch up into the churning mist. 'Like this?'

'Just so,' he said moving back up the passage. He stopped roughly ten feet behind Anna and turned. He was surrounded by shadow. Ahead, he could see Anna silhouetted against the light and the circle of her torchlight dancing in the spray.

'I think I can see something,' Anna declared, her voice echoing in the passage over the roar of the waterfall.

Rob didn't respond. His hand unconsciously went to the wound at his hip. He hadn't tried to run since the war, he realised. He had fifteen feet to gather speed and then—and then he had to leap blindly over an underground chasm. He took a deep breath, pushing the fear away. The Assemblers are there, Rob told himself. Victor, Sleeman, and the others were all just there.

He saw Anna turn her head and he pushed off. The best he could manage in the first ten feet was an awkward lope. The pain in his side exploded, surprising him in its intensity, and the water at his feet threatened to trip him up. As he reached Anna, he considered stopping: he could try again, begin further back and give himself a better chance to build up speed. He could reconsider altogether. Find another way.

Gritting his teeth, he banished the thoughts from his mind. Forcing his muscles to comply, he raced up to the black abyss. His concentration narrowed on the circle of light ahead. He must break through it. He must. Now.

Rob leapt into the illuminated spray. For a moment everything was bright. Then the light was replaced by shadow. Finally, beyond the mist, there was nothing. Only complete darkness ahead.

His feet contacted something unexpected, slippery. His knees buckled beneath him. He threw his arms up ahead of him, his eyes shut tight, and tumbled down. Pain blinded him as he came to a crashing halt and roared aloud. He had landed on something like fine sand or silt.

‘Rob! Are you all right?’ Anna shouted from the other side of the chasm.

Rob rolled onto his right side, fighting to manage the pain that wracked him.

‘Rob?’

‘I’m all right,’ he called back finally, his voice betraying his agony.

After a moment, he managed to sit up. He could see Anna’s torchlight sweeping around the entrance to this new tunnel. No doubt looking for some sign of him, he realised. He stood up, growling, and made his way back to the chasm ledge. He waved and Anna’s beam trained on him.

‘Oh thank God,’ she yelled over the roar of the waterfall. ‘What can you see?’

Rob glanced behind him. ‘Nothing much yet, but it’s definitely a tunnel continuing on.’ He turned back to Anna. ‘Your turn now.’

She did not respond immediately. ‘Rob, I am absolutely terrified. You do know that, don’t you? I—’

‘—I was too,’ he shouted back across the chasm. ‘Only a fool wouldn’t be. But you are going to be fine. You can do this.’

She paused. 'Right, I need to back up,' she replied and the torchlight vanished, plunging Rob into darkness.

A moment later, the light returned, weaker and more distant. 'I guess—I guess I am ready.'

Rob took two steps back. 'Go!' he shouted.

He watched as the light of the torch jerked this way and that, up and down. It came closer, closer by the second. He took another step back when suddenly Rob heard Anna shriek in terror. He saw the torchlight falter. And spin into the abyss.

'Anna!' he cried.

He heard a loud thump and a scrabbling at the ledge. Dropping to his knees, he reached out desperately. Her arm found his, her hand clawed into his flesh. Rob grabbed one hand, then the other, and pulled her back, wrenching her up from the precipice. He kept pulling until they were both several feet inside the passage. Then he dropped down to the ground beside her. He heard Anna struggling to catch her breath.

'I—I slipped,' she gasped. 'At the... last moment... I slipped.'

'God, you scared me,' he sighed.

Anna groaned.

'Are you all right?'

'Landed,' she huffed, struggling for breath. 'On my stomach. On the edge.'

'Anything broken?' Rob asked.

'My knees... got a good bashing, And my elbows. But no. Oh, Rob... I've never been... so scared... in all my life.'

'Nor I, I think,' he replied. 'But you made it. You're safe. We'll rest here a bit. Not long, just a little time to recover.'

'I lost the torch,' Anna said. 'When I slipped.'

'It doesn't matter. We'll find our way,' he reassured her.

'But the torch.'

'All that matters is that you are safe now.'

'You saved me,' she said. Rob felt her hand touch his elbow and gently squeeze it.

Rob cupped his hand over hers and squeezed back. 'You saved me first.'

‘Oh, it hurts,’ she whispered faintly in the dark.

The scar tissue at Rob’s side throbbed angrily. He closed his eyes and fought to suppress the pain. As he did so, weariness settled over him like a heavy blanket. Rob rolled his head slowly from side to side, trying to alleviate the tension in his neck and shoulders. Finally the pain began to slip away. He felt his heartbeat slow, his muscles relaxing. He leaned his head back against the stone.

The railcar lurched, waking him suddenly. He lifted his head from his chest and opened his eyes. On the bench opposite, Anna rocked back and forth with the motion of the car. Through the window beside them, beneath a mottled grey sky, the four long, green cars travelling behind them inclined towards the rolling fields to the west. Farmers and horses dotted the landscape, plowing the dark soil, while farmhands followed, seeding upturned rows.

As the locomotive engine pulled them round the corner at speed, Rob gripped the newspaper that had slid from his lap and the wooden crutches beside him. Beneath him, the rhythmic clacking of the car’s steel wheels gave way to a squeal of metal on metal.

Across from him, Anna put down her book and covered her ears.

A few seconds later, the railway car shuddered upright once more and the screeching faded. Anna lowered her arms and retrieved her book, smiling at Rob momentarily. Rob placed the newspaper on the bench beside him and was surprised to find that they were alone in the railcar.

The four lads who had shared the space with them from London were nowhere to be seen. Their bags and packs were still present, cluttering the floor and shoved onto the racks above their heads. One man’s unlaced boots sat empty on the floor as though he had stepped right out of them. A couple of jackets—one army, the other navy—had been abandoned atop the cushioned bench along with a few packages from London shops. Presents for home possibly, Rob thought to himself, for family and loved ones.

‘Starting to look like home,’ Anna said, gazing outside the window.

Rob turned to look out the window once more. The scene outside seemed surreal: lush green fields, tree-topped hills, well-kept hedgerows and gravel roads—all of it intact. Not burnt or broken, ripped up or torn down, or pounded to mud and

ash. No flashing muzzles or artillery bursts, no trenches, no screaming bloodied men. Instead, a landscape that looked drawn from a painter's imagination. Too clean, too perfect. It looked unreal to him, unfamiliar. It shouldn't, he knew, but it did.

'Where are we?' Rob ventured.

'Somewhere north of Newcastle,' she replied. 'We'll be in Scotland soon.'

She didn't look at him directly, but met his gaze reflected in the window. Her hazel eyes and long black hair shone in the grey afternoon light. Rob still found it hard to reconcile the woman sitting across from him with the nurse he had befriended in France. She was a different person outside the uniform. Then again, he thought, so was he.

Behind them, the noisy railcar corridor suddenly burst into song:

*When I come back to England, And times of peace come round
I'll surely have a shilling, And maybe have a pound.*

'Aye, right!' a voice called out and the majority of the men broke out into peals of laughter, but a surprisingly good baritone continued on:

*I'll walk the whole town over, And who shall say me nay,
For I'm a British soldier, With a British soldier's pay.*

*I only joined for fun, Never joined for profit,
The Army pay is good, But, God! There's little of it.*

As the singer belted out the punch line, the men roared and shouted, drumming on the walls of the railcar. The vibration rattled the glass window in the car door. The sound drew Anna's attention and she looked as though she was going to say something, but thought again. Instead, she put her book down on her lap, and reached down into her handbag, retrieving a small brown paper bag.

Anna unfolded the top of the bag and held it up toward Rob. 'Something sweet?' The cuff of her lavender jacket pulled back, revealing a narrow gold bracelet around her wrist. It was the first piece of jewelry he had ever seen her wear.

‘Thank you, but no,’ Rob answered.

Anna pulled the offered bag back and took out a cherry wine gum. She looked away out the window and popped the sweet into her mouth. A moment later, she began to fold the top of the bag closed. As Rob watched, she stopped. Anna tilted the bag in his direction and raised her eyebrows, as if to extend the offer one more time.

‘No, really,’ Rob reiterated. ‘Thank you.’

Anna nodded and stowed the sweets in her handbag. ‘I missed sweets,’ she announced as she picked up her book again. ‘Maybe too much.’

Rob didn’t reply. He let his gaze wander over the interior of the cabin and finally up through the window into the corridor outside. Two men were leaning against the edges of the door, talking animatedly. Both the men occasionally looked inside the cabin. Rob noted that they were not looking at him or the landscape passing by.

Across from him, Anna’s attention was elsewhere. Her fingers silently drummed on the cover of her book as she rocked with the motion of the car, taking in the view outside. Rob couldn’t make out the title of the book. The gold lettering on the red spine and worn cover had all but faded. He had seen her reading it in the hospital in France, but never bothered to ask its subject. It seemed foolish to ask it now.

Rob shifted painfully in his seat. He tried to pull the fabric of his trousers away from the wound on his hip. The gentle rocking of the train irritated the scar tissue, which was raw and beginning to burn and itch. He sighed as he settled back onto the seat.

Anna glanced at him. ‘It won’t be long now. I’m guessing the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow will be a lot quieter.’

‘It’s fine,’ Rob said quietly. ‘I’m fine.’

Anna nodded, then pulled an errant strand of hair over her right ear. ‘I’ll bet you are looking forward to being home,’ she said.

Rob paused. ‘You would think,’ he replied.

‘Meaning you are not?’

‘I’m not sure.’

‘It will be strange to live in Glasgow for once,’ Anna began. ‘Until now, Glasgow was always someplace to visit, not to stay. My parents would take me up on the train from Ayr a few times a year. Almost always on my birthday and later around Hogmanay. Then, when I was old enough, my friends and I would travel in to go to the cinema, do some shopping, or go dancing. Going to Glasgow was something to look forward to.’

Rob didn’t reply.

‘What about you?’ Anna prodded.

Rob looked out the window, focusing on the tracks receding behind them and following them out until they vanished near the grey horizon. ‘I’ll be in and out of hospital for months yet,’ he grimaced. ‘After that... I don’t know.’ His eyes flicked across the open landscape, settling briefly on hollows and hillocks—defensible positions.

‘You said your parents were gone, didn’t you? But you didn’t say if there was anyone else?’

‘No, no one.’ Rob thought of Victor. He was in Glasgow already. Had been for months, with no letters from him—not that he would expect Victor to write. When would he see him next, Rob wondered, and would things be the same between them?

‘Well, then, you’ll have plenty of time to show me around, won’t you?’ Anna declared. ‘Once you are feeling up to it.’

‘Aye,’ Rob returned. ‘Whenever that will be.’

‘It won’t be that long, Rob,’ Anna affirmed. ‘I thought you told me that Dr Menzies said six months to a year.’

‘He did.’

‘Well, that’s not long,’ Anna declared. ‘You just need the right motivation. Then the time will fly by. Start with little walks outside the hospital and go from there. In time, you’ll be getting around just fine.’

‘It just seems... impossible,’ Rob replied. ‘Sometimes.’

‘Daunting, but not impossible. You’ll see. Have a little faith that things will get better.’ Anna smiled. ‘I’ll be there to help, to make sure that your life doesn’t get too boring.’

Despite himself, Rob laughed. 'My guardian angel.'

'And Victor too. We mustn't forget Victor—as if we could! He'll be dragging you all over Glasgow, no doubt.'

'I can hope.'

'See, that's the spirit. In all things, it's better to hope than to despair,' she pronounced the last phrase distinctly.

'Who said that?'

'A German: Von Goethe.'

Out in the corridor, someone rapped on the cabin door. Rob and Anna both turned and found the two servicemen outside looking in at them. The one on the right, the elder, opened the cabin door, while his young companion doffed his cap. 'Apologies, folks—' the young man began.

'—We thought you might like to join us for a drink,' said the elder. 'You're more than welcome. Last chance for a nip before the barracks. For us at least.'

'Just a small one,' the young private said, his attention clearly on Anna.

Anna looked over to Rob, who returned her gaze. 'Restaurant car is just one down. It's not far.'

Rob inclined his head to the crutches at his side. 'It's far,' he said. 'You could go.'

Anna laid her book on the bench beside her and shifted forward towards Rob. 'I'll help. Together, we'll make it.'

Rob sighed. He looked Anna in the eyes. 'If history is anything to go on, you won't take no for answer. Will you?'

Anna narrowed her eyes. 'What do you think?'

'I think I'm going for a drink.'

Anna laughed out loud and looked over to the two men. 'Just a small one,' she repeated to the younger of the two. The young serviceman nodded, then straightened up and pulled his hat over his head.

Rob watched her stand carefully, balancing herself against the sway of the railway car. She grabbed the rail of the luggage rack above him and held out her hand for Rob.

‘Take my hand,’ Anna said, her voice nearly drowned out in the roar of the nearby waterfall.

Dazed, Rob pulled his head back from the tunnel wall. The sights and sounds of the railcar faded back into memory. He groaned. His muscles were stiff and his clothing clung to him damply. The spray from the waterfall had all but drenched him. How long had he been asleep, he wondered, moments or—?

He didn’t finish the thought as his eyes focused on the offered hand, then on Anna’s shadowy silhouette. The darkness that before had been so complete, so absolute, was gone. Rob’s gaze settled on the source of the illumination: a web of fine strands zigzagged across the tunnel ceiling casting a deep purple glow. It was the same snaking, root-like network that he had seen in the Assemblers’ void, in the scenes that they had shown him. The rich violet colour that radiated from it was the same that he had seen in the pit in France.

‘Can you see it?’ Anna asked.

Rob reached out to grasp her hand. ‘Your hand, aye, I can—just. I can see you as well, although just a silhouette.’

‘I noticed the light when I woke,’ she began. ‘I thought I was seeing things at first. But I could distinguish my fingers, my hand, the slope of the floor. Everything was cast in this dark shade of violet, like black iris or purple lisianthus.’

‘I’ve seen it before,’ he grunted, lifting himself up to his feet. ‘In the visions I’ve had of the Assemblers. I didn’t know—I didn’t think it was real.’

Rob saw Anna look down the dimly lit tunnel, turning her head away from the roar of the waterfall. ‘Perhaps everything you have seen is true in the end. Perhaps there is a reason for your visions,’ she said distantly. ‘But I find myself out of my depth here. Nothing I have experienced, nothing I have learned—none of it seems to matter here.’

‘What do you mean?’

Anna took a step back. ‘Take a look for yourself,’ she said cryptically, pointing down the tunnel.

Rob took a step forward, his feet sliding awkwardly on the tunnel floor. The ground wasn’t simply wet, he realised after he took another few steps. There was a

kind of slippery powder everywhere at their feet. It shone like black silicate, but it was as light as ground talc. Every step he took sent up clouds of the stuff.

As he progressed, the presence of the glowing web above him became more pronounced. Individual strands or roots became thicker and the light that they cast grew brighter. He glanced back. Anna followed closely behind him.

‘Keep going,’ she coaxed. ‘Just around the corner.’

Rob looked up to the bend she mentioned, where the tunnel curved sharply to the left. The deep violet glow was particularly strong there. He took a few tentative steps forward and saw that the tunnel widened out ahead until it was roughly twenty feet wide and fifteen feet high. The luminous webbing was everywhere, appearing as a fine mesh of interconnecting hairy filaments down near the floor and growing thicker as it rose up the walls, ending in great intertwining tendrils at the ceiling’s apex. Every surface in the massive tunnel was illuminated in deep purple. Ahead, the wide corridor stretched on for a hundred yards before curving again and descending out of sight.

Walking beneath the glowing lattice of entwined strands, Rob felt as though he was walking into another world. His senses picked up a number of changes, some subtle, some less so. It was immediately several degrees warmer, like walking into a room that had been warmed by a fireplace. The air was drier, heavier, and Rob found himself having to work harder to catch his breath. And the air, or perhaps the webbing itself, smelled sweet. The scent made him recall lemon meringue and honey.

As he moved into the passageway, the atmosphere itself grew thicker, denser. He could feel the increased tension on his skin, the need for more power in his muscles to push his way through it. He noted too a sparkling in the air. The strange iridescent powder that lined the tunnel floor hung suspended like coal dust in the air. It tumbled and bounced against his skin as he moved through the tunnel. The sensation made Rob’s skin crawl. Like a hundred tiny spiders running along his face and hands.

He stopped to brush the stuff from his face. All around him, he could feel the increased pressure on his body. It was like being underwater, he thought to himself as he struggled to fill his lungs. With every breath he drew the fine black dust in and

expelled it out—in out, out in. Finally, he turned to Anna and shook his head. ‘I’m not hallucinating, am I,’ he declared, his voice sounding alien in his own ears.

‘No. All of this is beyond me,’ she replied. Her voice sounded deeper, huskier, and wavered unnaturally. She looked anxious, lost. ‘I—I don’t know what to make of it. Any of it.’

Rob looked up to the sea of purple strands fanning out overhead. The largest threads in the web above him were the thickness of his fingers. Smaller tendrils branching off the larger were perhaps the width of a pencil. From there, the tubular roots reduced further and further until they were only a hair’s width. But ahead, as the colossal tunnel began to descend, Rob could see huge veins, like great tentacles, that were easily the width of his arms and legs.

‘Come on,’ Rob said, stepping forward into the tunnel. Iridescent dust spun about him as he pushed through the thick atmosphere. His feet kicked up more clouds of the shiny black powder. Anna followed closely behind him, holding a handkerchief over her mouth.

When he came at last to the downward slope, Rob slowed again. The tunnel dropped precipitously and the presence of the slippery powder at their feet meant that they had to tread with considerable care. In the end, Rob moved to the right wall of the tunnel and braced himself against it as he descended. Behind him, Anna stepped in his footsteps, supporting herself just as he had done.

Tense moments passed as they descended more than fifty feet. Moving cautiously downward, Rob could not keep his eyes from wandering up to the tunnel ceiling. The largest of the rope-like tentacles in the violet web above them was nearly the thickness of his thigh. Smaller, twisting strands knotted and intertwined all about it, spreading off randomly in every which direction. There was no symmetry to it, Rob noted, there was nothing natural about it at all.

Finally the tunnel levelled out and, as it did so, opened up into a much larger space. The ceiling curved up and away to a height of nearly forty feet while the sides of the tunnel fell away into shadow. Beneath the dim purple glow, Rob could see a number of uniform rock formations stretching off into darkness. These were not natural formations: they had been designed and moulded from the rock floor with

deep trenches cut around them. There were at least forty of them that he could make out and each was cut to the same apparent specification.

They were the rock slabs that Rob had seen in the void. The one nearest him matched perfectly the vision that he had had. Each slab was roughly seven feet in length and three feet wide, perfectly smooth and capable of accommodating virtually any human body. On the ceiling above, the violet web grew more knotted and denser over the slabs. Directly above each slab, the thick tendrils fed into a single, oddly shaped sac. As he watched in disgust, the sac undulated rhythmically. The motion inspired some instinctual fear within him. It reminded him simultaneously of a beating human heart and the bobbing abdomen of a spider or an ant.

‘What the devil?’ Rob hissed, his voice echoing in the vast chamber.

A moment later, a voice replied from the shadows. ‘Over here.’

Chapter 15: Disintegration

‘Who’s there?’ Rob called, his pulse quickening.

Studying the shadowy reaches of the cavern, he looked for movement, for any sign of life. His voice echoed back at him, heavy and distorted in the alien atmosphere. At the edge of his vision, he could see Anna take a step backward.

A long moment passed before the same hoarse voice resounded from a dark corner. ‘Over here.’

Rob squinted in the direction of the sound. In the distance, where the violet light darkened very nearly to black, he could see a strange shape lying atop a darkened plinth. adrenaline coursed through him. Was it Victor?

He quickly calculated a route through the vast chamber. There was no level path across, he realised, no way to skirt around the configuration of plinths. The swiftest way—perhaps the only way—was through the system of deep trenches that ran between them.

‘Come on,’ Rob said to Anna hopefully.

He began forward, pushing through the dense atmosphere. His shoes plowed through the mounds of shiny, black silicate. With Anna close on his heels, Rob reached the edge of the nearest trench. It was a five-foot drop to the wide trench floor. Careful of the slippery powder, he lowered himself down to the ledge and then pushed off into the trench. He managed to land with only the barest pain and helped Anna down before setting off through the trench.

Walking between the plinths, Rob discerned that a clear glaze, like a thin gelatin, covered each of them. The plinths rose up from the trench floor to a level just below his shoulders. They all bore the exact same dimensions and the top of each was a perfect plane. A sharp metallic tang pervaded the air: it filled his nostrils with each breath.

‘Just here,’ the man rasped, his voice echoing between the carved trench walls.

Rob moved as quickly as he could, loping between the huge stone plinths, kicking up great clouds of black dust. Then, ahead, he caught sight of the odd form he had seen earlier: as though the head and torso of a department store mannequin had been discarded upon a plinth. Its silhouette was not smooth or stylised, however, but organic, irregular and flawed—what was left of a human body. He flashed back to the vision that he had had of Victor's limbs being severed and pulled away. Was this it? Had he found Victor at last?

Rob sped down the final bit of trench, his hip in increasing agony, and came to a stop. His mouth opened in shock. It was not Victor upon the stone plinth: it was Sleeman.

The man's unkempt silver hair and goatee shone dimly in the deep purple light. His eyes reflected the glow of the cavern ceiling and the bulbous, angular sac that hung over him. His limbs had been amputated and what was left of him lay naked on the stone surface. Like a sacrifice upon an altar, Rob thought.

The wound at his shoulder was covered by a thin, translucent crust and glistened with mucus. Beneath it, Rob could make out muscle, sinew and bone. The shoulder had been severed perfectly; the cut was flat and clean. Looking down, Rob saw that it was not just Sleeman's legs that had been amputated: everything below the man's ribcage had been removed. Worse still, some kind of apparatus had been attached below his ribs. It was bone-white and bore a design that was wholly unnatural. The strange assembly moved regularly, if unnaturally, pumping and pinching at different points along its breadth. Rob watched it pulse and shift in the violet gloom. He had the impression that it was keeping Sleeman alive.

'Not quite the man I was—or ever will be,' the man said. 'As you can see, yes?' His voice sounded husky and coarse, lower and different from when Rob had encountered him last.

'Sleeman,' Rob spat.

Anna came up beside Rob, her hand over her mouth. She examined Sleeman's trunk, her eyes wide with terror.

'Is that Mr Grant and Miss MacGillivray? It is, yes, isn't it. How remarkable. Yes, how extraordinary. I wonder what purpose—'

'—Where is Victor?' Rob demanded.

‘What have they done to you?’ Anna asked. ‘What is this place?’

‘This is the preparation chamber, yes,’ Sleeman answered. ‘And, as you can see, yes, I have been prepared.’

‘Prepared for what?’ Rob questioned.

‘Something wonderful,’ the man replied, his voice betraying some reservation. Then, enigmatically, he added: ‘Something terrible.’

‘And the others?’

Sleeman did not respond. He turned his head upward to the ceiling. The device beneath his ribs pinched and pulsed again and again. ‘All parts in a process, yes?’ he replied finally. ‘Gears in a machine. We are all, each of us, transformed.’

‘What?’ Rob started. ‘All of them?’

‘Of course.’

‘How could you?’ Anna proclaimed.

‘How could I?’ Sleeman returned, looking back at them. ‘How could I not? Given the promise of salvation, would you not have done the same? What sacrifices would you not make? Had you the choice, yes, to sacrifice a few to save millions—what would you have done? To safeguard the future of humanity.’

‘They were innocent,’ Rob charged.

‘No one is innocent. Not in this world, Mr Grant. All who came—each and every one who was recruited—came willingly. Shown the dangers of what was to come and the promise of what could be, they gave themselves freely, submitted themselves, yes, without question. Every soul knew that a sacrifice would be needed. The choice was theirs: they were aware of the cost and they came in droves. Answered the call, yes, to be part of something bigger than themselves, to work for hope and peace for all mankind. Here. Now.’

‘You kidnapped them,’ Rob said, disgusted.

Sleeman turned his head up toward the ceiling again, breaking contact.

‘You brought them here,’ he continued on. ‘Transported them out here, to be sacrificed—to be killed—by the Assemblers. You offered them up—your own people. You did this!’

‘You would like me to be the enemy, yes?’ Sleeman replied distantly. ‘It would suit your purpose, I imagine, to set me apart. How satisfying to see me as different—truly different, yes—as the villain. And for you to be—what? The hero?’

‘What is that supposed to mean?’ Rob asked angrily.

Sleeman turned to face him once more. ‘I serve, Mr Grant. Just as you do. As you have done... in your war. Or you, Miss MacGillivray, in your infirmary, yes? And those who followed me—who were recruited and guided by me—serve as well. Willingly, by choice. I did not force them. I marched alongside them, with them, to my fate. To this—this end—knowing the cost and accepting the cost. For our deliverance.’

‘Deliverance? Deliverance from what?’ Rob pressed.

‘From death and misery,’ Sleeman replied. ‘From the brutal and squalid labyrinth that humanity finds itself trapped in.’

‘You are insane,’ Anna exclaimed.

‘No more than you, I would wager,’ Sleeman spat back. ‘Is it insane to struggle against the darkness that lies in men’s hearts? To fight, yes, to sacrifice one’s self, for a better world? So that others may live in peace? Have you both not done the same? What great victory did your war win you? What does the mountain of dead afford you? Or your so-called enemies? You—you fought solely to protect the interests of your masters, yes, to keep yourselves enslaved. And yet, you call me insane.’

Sleeman focused on Rob, licking spittle from his lips. ‘I pity you. I do. Whether you choose not to, or cannot, see the truth, yes, I pity you. But some are not ready to see the light, to receive the light. Victor said as much.’

‘Victor!’ Rob started. ‘Where is he?’

‘But you know where he is, yes?’

Rob paused. ‘The crystal...’

‘Yes, so you do see. Just as Victor said you would,’ Sleeman smiled.

‘Where is it?’ Rob asked. ‘What is it?’

‘It is the Assemblers’ great machine, yes. It lies deeper still. At the very heart of the underworld. I am told it is a spectacle beyond imagining. But I will see it for myself. And very soon.’

‘Who told you?’ Anna probed.

‘Victor, of course.’

Rob’s ears pricked up. In the distance, down some unfathomable tunnel, he could hear movement, an uncanny staccato drumming. Then an alien sound as deep as a foghorn, as resonant as a cathedral organ, reached him: *tuo-roap-tauk*.

‘Ah,’ Sleeman purred. ‘I am to be delivered at last.’

‘What is that?’ Rob asked.

‘One of them, yes.’

‘An Assembler.’ Rob glanced around him. The sound was drawing closer by the second. ‘We need to get away from here, away from him,’ he said, grabbing Anna’s arm. Together they ran into the shadows, past one plinth and then another.

‘That’s it, yes, run and scurry,’ Sleeman laughed, his voice echoing off the stone plinths. ‘While you can,’ he added.

Above the edge of the trench, Rob spied an exit from the monstrous cavern to his left. A high and broad tunnel led off into the distance illuminated by more of the violet webbing. In the depths of the tunnel, he could hear pounding and drumming as the Assembler came storming towards them. It was deafening, as loud as a cavalry charge. Anna shrank away from it as Rob tried to move them further down from the tunnel mouth.

A moment later, they fell against the trench wall as the Assembler emerged from the passage, thundering into the trench only a few feet from them. The weight of it shook the chamber and great billowing clouds of black dust rose into the air. The curious honey-like scent that Rob had detected before surrounded him again.

The Assembler was the length of two city trams, a colossal horrific thing whose form twisted into four distinct sections. At the head was a bulbous sphere that bristled with insect-like feelers, curling tendrils and fleshy polyps. These variously shook, whipped, and darted about in accordance with some unknown purpose. Behind this globular mass was a wider, smooth carapace under which segmented limbs and trunks bent and curved as it navigated through the trench. The third section was longer, narrower, and altogether more muscular with clusters of translucent stalks and a number of raised ridges. These ridges—some several feet long—slowly split open and closed, hissing and spraying forth vapours thick with the iridescent,

black dust that lined the trench floor. The final section, by far the largest, was a twisted shape like a cigar pinched at both ends. Long jagged limbs—some thick like crabs' legs, others spindly like spiders' legs—wound and unwound around its bulk. Those beneath it were clearly used for locomotion, while the function of the others that curled and uncurled continuously remained a mystery.

A sound rose in Anna's throat. Rob quickly pulled her to his chest and gently put his hand over her mouth. As the Assembler climbed over Sleeman's plinth, she shook and stifled a scream. Long tendrils from the Assembler's mid-section swung down and curled beneath Sleeman's form. Rob heard the man laugh nervously, but as the Assembler drew him up toward its writhing flesh, Sleeman began to scream.

The sound was shrill and terrifying. Only one unhinged by fear could make such a piteous noise. Not even in the war had Rob ever heard a sound so horrifying and distressing. He watched as the Assembler cradled Sleeman against its body. Having secured the man, it spun round with alarming speed. A second later, it began thundering down the long trench.

It was headed directly for them.

Rob released Anna and scrambled for purchase in the black powder. He bolted to the shadows to his right. Anna was close behind him, screaming at the top of her lungs. As the Assembler reached them, it arched up and flew into the tunnel overhead.

A wash of iridescent silicate clouded Rob's vision. He stumbled and slipped on a sudden incline, losing his balance. Tumbling forward, he reached his arms out ahead of him, hoping to slow his fall. But his hands found no purchase, nothing beneath him—nothing but empty space. Bellowing in fear, he pitched downward headlong into darkness.

A split second later, his left arm contacted something, not hard but spongy. It didn't slow him, but sent him spinning sideways. Something else wet and slippery slid beneath his shoulder. Inertia propelled him downward.

The side of his face slapped into something cold and sticky. Rob toppled head over heels. His breath left him. Momentum carried his legs and torso over him. He curled up instinctively, sliding over and between clammy and rubbery shapes.

He rolled over, coming into contact with a variety of hard and soft forms, before finally coming to a stop. His pulse drummed in his ears. Rob inhaled sharply. The putrid reek of decaying flesh choked his lungs. He remained curled up for a moment longer, his eyes shut tight. Not wanting to believe what he knew to be true: he was lying atop a mound of amputated limbs.

‘Rob? Are you ok?’ Anna called down from high above him.

Rob reached out beside him, but everything he came into contact with was damp, slick, and horridly gelatinous. He opened his eyes and looked up. Overhead, he could see Anna silhouetted against the deep purple webbing.

‘Are you all right?’ she asked.

‘Aye, I’m all right. Just... winded. Don’t you slip—be careful.’ Rob grunted, pushing himself up. ‘I’ll—I’ll try to find a way out of this hole.’

‘The Assembler... it’s gone. Rob, that must have been what crushed the man’s head in the mine. Those things must have come out and grabbed all the people. I can’t stay here. It might come back. I will try to find a way down to you.’

‘Fine, but keep hidden! And don’t go too far.’

Anna’s silhouette vanished. Looking around him, Rob saw that the darkness was nearly absolute. He sat in a circle of deep violet light that barely illuminated his surroundings. What little it revealed filled him with disgust. His gaze settled first on the splayed fingers of a cold hand, then on the stump of an amputated leg, on a gelid thigh, and a crooked, bald knee. His skin crawled. All around him were the severed limbs of the Assemblers’ victims.

‘Bloody hell,’ he whispered, gagging.

The flesh around him yielded as he shifted and moved. He thought he would be sick. Having no choice, he slid himself down the slope of swollen appendages. When he finally contacted solid rock, wet slurry sloshed inside his shoe, cold and oily. He took a moment to gather his wits. But in the dark, something skittered next to him, emitting a series of sharp, surprised clicks.

Rob shuddered and jumped away, stumbling to the edge of the mound of gore. The thing—whatever it was—scuttled away. Rob’s ears pricked up, catching the sound of more strange clicks around him. These, however, were sufficiently

distant to allow him some measure of peace. He took a few deep breaths, fighting back the urge to retch with every lungful of fetid air.

Slow, he told himself, slow it down. He needed to get control of himself, to calm down. Just breathe, he continued, you're fine—relax and breathe. Nearby, Rob could hear a trickle of water. But then he noticed something else. A sound, weak and indistinct, mingling with the water's faint gurgling. He thought it might be an echo at first, but no: his was not the only breathing he could hear.

There was no response, nothing but the trickling of water and the distant clicking and scuttling in the darkness around him. Rob began to doubt his senses. But then, suddenly, he heard what sounded like breathing again.

'Who's there?'

'It's me,' a voice said, both familiar and strangely distorted.

'Victor?'

'Rob? Rob, is that you?'

It was Victor. His voice sounded weak and fluttered oddly, but it was unmistakably Victor.

Rob's heart leapt and he threw himself forward, clambering over intervening stumps and severed limbs. He needed to reach Victor. He had to confirm that it truly was him and not some cruel, ghoulisn nightmare.

He slipped repeatedly as decomposing legs and arms slid or spun out from under him. Twice he fell, sinking into the mire of decaying flesh. Ignoring the pain in his hip, he rose back up to his feet and waded through the gore.

'Victor?' Rob called, trying to ascertain his position.

'Here,' Victor called weakly. 'I'm here. Wait, I think I can see you.'

'It's me, Victor. I'm here.'

'I can't believe it. Is that really you, Rob? I thought I was still in the void at first. Then I heard your voice. I—I'm not dreaming, am I?'

'You're not dreaming, Victor,' Rob replied, finally lowering himself next to Victor's body. Tears streamed from his eyes. 'See, I'm here.'

In the dimmest violet light, Rob could see that Victor, like Sleeman, had been mutilated by the Assemblers. And, like the old man, he had an alien device grafted to his body, just beneath his ribcage. But unlike the bone-white apparatus attached to

Sleeman, the thing that hung beneath Victor's ribs looked bruised and oddly discoloured. It moved similarly, but its rhythm was slow and irregular.

'I can't believe it's really you, Rob,' Victor managed a smile.

'What have they done to you, Victor?' Rob croaked. 'Look what they've done.'

'That doesn't matter now.'

'Sleeman did this,' Rob raged. 'He'll rot in Hell for this.'

'Sleeman didn't do this, Rob.'

'I know—I saw. The Assemblers. But Sleeman—he's behind it all. You wouldn't be here—'

'—Rob, no. You must realise by now... that I caused it. I allowed it to happen. No, allowed isn't the right word: I made it happen. It wasn't Sleeman. I recruited Sleeman. Everything you have seen... all of this: I am the cause of it all. The nightmare that is about to occur.'

'I don't believe that,' Rob objected.

'You must, because it's the truth. I've had days now to think about what a fool I've been. Since they pulled me from their machine and tossed me aside. I've had nothing but time to consider my choices, my actions. Even now, I don't quite know how I became so deluded. I dreamt of being the architect of something so wonderful, but I've only been a fool, Rob. I was a pawn, all along.'

'You were manipulated, Victor. Forced.'

'Not forced, Rob. Manipulated, yes. But I let myself be. The Assemblers showed me what I wanted to see. They showed me a world without war, without suffering, where men prospered together as brothers. They showed me how, with their help, that world was within reach. I had only to grasp it! It would require sacrifice, but it was there, Rob—real and achievable. A new providence for mankind—one I so desperately desired.'

Victor paused. 'Except... all of it was a lie. The visions they showed me—that they showed each of us in turn—they were designed to control us. I was only the first to be blinded by them. And so blinded, I became their willing tool. I can't begin to tell you, Rob, how much I regret... everything, all of it. In the end, I fell to my own hubris. I held myself up as a prophet, embodied with divine purpose. I couldn't

see the real truth—I didn't want to believe it: that everything they have done—and they have been here from the very beginning—has been done to achieve this end, their end.

‘Discarded at last and left to rot, I finally saw the truth of it,’ Victor said. ‘I saw how I had brought doom down upon myself, how I doomed us all.’

‘They were controlling you,’ Rob suggested. ‘It’s not your fault.’

Victor laughed hollowly. ‘Lying here in the dark, awaiting the end, do you know what I realised?’

Rob swallowed. ‘What?’

‘Robbed of our empathy, we are all monsters.’

The statement echoed throughout the still chamber.

‘It’s true. Those who deny their humanity, destroy themselves and those around them,’ Victor continued. ‘As I have done. Driven by pride and avarice, I put my own needs and desires above those of others. In that moment, I became a sort of fiend. I ceased to be human. I had no empathy or care for my fellow man. I acted selfishly, wilfully, like a predator. And a predator of the worst kind: feeding off my own kind. All my grousing about the war and our leaders, about abuses of power, and look what I’ve done. In the end, I was no better. And I have done worse, so very much worse. I became a monster, Rob, a worthy accomplice of the Assemblers.’

Rob shook his head. ‘I can’t see it. You’re not a monster. That’s not you.’

‘It is. But not just me, Rob. It is potentially all of us. And that’s why you must leave this place. You must not let them get to you.’

‘The Assemblers?’

‘You are here precisely because the Assemblers want you here,’ Victor stated. ‘Because they want you still. They must have manipulated Sleeman into bringing you here now and that can mean only one thing: they intend to force your submission, finally. You will submit or you will die.’

‘What do they want from me?’ Rob asked.

‘What they want from us all: to be part of their machine, to work for them, to be their subjects, their slaves. To wallow in darkness and ignorance, in the cages they assemble for us. But, Rob, you must escape this place. You must not succumb to them now. You would lose yourself. You would be nothing but an empty shell, a

vessel and a tool. Do not fall as I did—I could not bear that. You must resist them. Find a way—you hear me? Live, Rob, for me. For all of us.’

Rob sat back. Behind him, in the dark, he could hear rocks falling and a muffled scratching sound. A moment later, a hushed voice called his name. It was Anna. Somehow she had found him.

‘Victor, that’s Anna,’ Rob said urgently. ‘All that matters now is that we get you out of here. The Assemblers can go hang. We can get you out. We came to get you out.’

‘No, you can’t, Rob,’ Victor replied. ‘There’s no time. You need to get yourself out. Get Anna out. You must find a way.’

Rob leaned forward and looked deep into Victor’s eyes. ‘I haven’t come all this way just to leave you behind. You’re the reason I’m here. You were always the reason...’

‘I know, Rob. I do. But you have to go and you have to go now.’

‘I’ll not leave you behind,’ Rob declared.

‘But you will. You have to. The device below my ribs—you see it—it’s failing. It has been for a while. And when it goes, I go. It has grown so weak that I slip in and out of consciousness. Moving me would probably kill me.’

‘No,’ Rob protested. ‘There has to be something—perhaps Anna—’

‘—There’s nothing that she could do, Rob. Look at it. There is nothing that any of you could do. And, please, I don’t want her to see me like this. I wish you hadn’t. I don’t want you to remember me like this. Remember me as I was. Please. Please, Rob. Now, you must stand up.’

‘Rob?’ Anna called anxiously down the channel behind him.

‘Answer her, Rob,’ Victor said calmly, ‘and leave me. You must.’

‘How can I?’

‘You have to,’ Victor asserted. ‘Find a way to free yourself. Do what I could not, what I cannot, and leave this place. Don’t let the Assemblers destroy you as they have the others and me. Free yourself, Rob. Go, now!’

‘Rob, can you hear me?’ Anna shouted frantically.

Rob rose painfully to his feet, keeping his eyes fixed on Victor.

‘I’m here, Anna,’ he replied at last. ‘I’m coming.’

Chapter 16: The Machine

Panting from exhaustion, Rob pulled the last of the large stones away from the narrow opening. In the wide tunnel beyond, Anna stepped back to make way for him. Violet light surrounded her and flooded over the rubble at Rob's feet. He turned to look back into the darkness, to where Victor lay dying. He could see nothing but shadow now: Victor was already lost to him. Numbness settled into Rob's limbs. Standing at the threshold, he didn't know what to do, how to proceed. He felt paralysed.

'Is everything all right?' Anna inquired.

Rob didn't respond. He could hear the trickling of water and a distant scuttling in the dark cave, but he could no longer make out Victor's breathing. His words, however, still echoed in Rob's mind: 'You have to go and you have to go now... leave this place.'

'Rob?'

'Sorry, I... thought I heard something,' he mumbled distractedly. A moment later, he turned round to face Anna, taking a step toward the threshold. She looked both frightened and concerned. She shouldn't be here, Rob thought to himself, neither of them should. Victor was right: he had to get them out.

Rob turned his body sideways and edged close to the fissure. Steadying himself against the rock wall, he eased himself into the jagged gap. A moment later, he was through the narrow crevice. He moved to stand beside Anna in the dim violet light.

'The sound you heard—is that it? Coming from up there,' she asked, nodding to the left. 'The voices?'

'Voices?' Rob straightened up and turned his head in the direction Anna indicated. He had no idea if it was north or south, east or west. But he could make out a faint sound issuing down the tunnel. A low murmur, as though a great host of people were whispering and mumbling all at once. 'The others,' he said, surprised.

Anna nodded. 'We must be close, Rob. Perhaps there is still a chance.'

Rob looked back through the narrow crack in the wall. The darkness inside was absolute. He wavered for a moment and then turned back to Anna. 'We need to be careful, more careful than we have been, but... let's see,' he said. 'And we must be prepared for more like Sleeman.'

'Was it as bad as I imagined in there?' Anna probed. 'The smell alone...'

'Aye,' Rob replied, not quite sure what to say. 'Best left in the past. For now, let's focus on getting ourselves, and anyone else we can rescue, out of here.'

'Agreed,' Anna replied.

The tunnel ahead inclined steeply upward. It was broad enough that two Assemblers of the size Rob and Anna had seen earlier might pass side by side. The ceiling above was covered in the same, dimly luminescent webbing and the sloped floor was awash with wavy ridges of dark powder. Taking care not to slip, Rob began up the passageway with Anna following close behind him. As he ascended, the droning and echoing whispers grew louder and more coherent. Rob could hear some sounds and tones repeat. It sounded eerily like a recited mantra or prayer. But it was not static: it altered rhythmically, consistently with subtle variations.

A few hundred yards ahead in the deep purple gloom, Rob could see that the wide passage they travelled in turned sharply and rose even more steeply. As he neared the curve, the droning chorus became loud enough that he could occasionally distinguish individual voices. He focused on a female voice that stood out from the rest. Her voice echoed and distorted in the alien atmosphere and he struggled to make sense of what was being said. Rob was about to give up entirely when he realised that she was not uttering words, but numbers. They all were.

This sudden apprehension brought him to a standstill. He could hear it clearly now: a cascade of numbers rising and falling in waves all around him, variously repeating and altering. One wave followed another as numbers tumbled through space, overlapping, ebbing and flowing. They formed patterns, lilting phrases, murmured and sung softly like lullabies.

'Numbers?' Anna whispered beside him.

'Aye.'

'Did you notice?' Anna asked. 'The light? Ahead?'

Rob had been so focused on the chorus of sounds and maintaining his balance that he had not noticed, but Anna was right. The dim violet light changed further ahead, becoming brighter and shifting toward a lighter shade of purple. Rob glanced up to the ceiling, but the twisting webbing overhead was no different as it ran along the length of the tunnel. Instead, this new light seemed to be coming from a different source.

‘Come on,’ he said, beginning his way forward again.

He shuffled upward quickly, painfully, seeking to close the distance between himself and this new light. Fully around the curve in the tunnel, he could see a white glare reflecting off a wall of granite flecked with quartz. It was so bright that it made his eyes water. The opposite wall of the tunnel fell away and Rob slowed, realising that they were nearing an entrance into some new space.

All around him, the rough walls of the tunnel snapped into sharp definition. He found himself studying the peaks and shadows, fascinated by the detail that had been hidden from him in the dim light. Squinting ahead, he could see the edge of the opening. His eyes stung as he tried to make out what lay beyond. But the white light was too brilliant and too diffuse. He blinked as his eyes watered, a trail of tears streaking his cheeks.

‘So bright,’ Anna whispered.

‘Aye,’ Rob replied. ‘Keep close to the wall.’

It was not only light that emanated from the hollow, but a great heat as well. He could feel it now on his hands, his face. He took a few steps closer, wiping tears from his streaming eyes. Finally, the pain grew too great and he had to turn aside, shutting his eyes tightly for a moment. The light shone through his eyelids, glowing pink and highlighting individual blood vessels.

‘It’s like the bloody sun,’ he muttered, stumbling forward blindly toward the edge of the gap. Finally his fingers found the lip of the tunnel mouth.

‘Careful, Rob,’ Anna whispered urgently, her voice tinged with fear.

Rob opened his eyes, peering into the dazzling light. The brilliance was still too much for him and he had to divert his gaze towards stone ledge below him. He blinked away more tears as his eyes slowly began to adjust. He took a breath and

focused on the smooth rock below him dusted with iridescent silicate. Finally, as the pain behind his eyes subsided, he looked up once more.

Nothing could have prepared him for what he saw.

Diffuse white light filled a great chamber hundreds of feet high and equally as wide. The ledge upon which Rob stood was a sheer precipice. The drop below him made him think of the cliffs of Dover. To try to climb down would be suicide. He could not properly tell how high up he was, however, as the cavern floor was hidden beneath a dense churning fog. Above him, the titanic chamber extended an equivalent distance—well over a hundred feet—to a jagged ceiling bearing long stalactites that hung in rows like sharp, white teeth.

The centre of the great chamber was dominated by the monolithic crystalline structure he had seen in the Assemblers' vision: a vast crystal form ranged down from the cavern ceiling and ultimately vanished beneath the white fog below him. It did not conform to any earthly shape he knew. Apart from its impossible size, it bent and fractured in angles that made no sense, unlike any natural crystal formation. It bunched and twisted in oddly snaking forms. All together, the crystal monstrosity formed an otherworldly shape that was most like a steep, inverted pyramid or cone with discrete crystals jutting outward at odd angles. It descended from the roof of the cavern and narrowed as it spun down through space.

Its crystalline surface was glassy like ice and a strange and inexplicable ghost light shone within it. That light was not static but moved as though it were alive. Dazzling, twisting white light wound throughout its bulk like bright veins, writhing and coursing. It swelled seemingly randomly across the entire colossal shape, occasionally flaring and pulsing. The light that radiated from it flooded the entire space and threw off a heat that suggested a terrible power.

'Oh, Christ. Jesus Christ,' Rob exhaled. In his visions, the crystal had been inert. Not like this.

More terrifying still were the bodies—the hundreds of human bodies—that had been transformed and inserted into a honeycomb of niches and indentations all around the crystal structure. Each individual was inserted up to the neck within confined, quartz-like cells. A haze of light obscured each torso, but hanging free of the honeycomb, the necks of each man and woman hung back limply, unnaturally,

their faces upside-down and turned out toward the cavern walls. Their mouths moved incessantly, numbers spilling from their lips.

The crystal was not a prison, as he had previously thought. He suddenly appreciated that it was a machine—the Assemblers’ machine. The humans placed within it, like so many wheels, cogs, and gears, were a necessary part of that machine. They were connected to it, inseparable, forever altered. More than that, he understood, they were vital to its operation. They were powering it. And that power was growing. Rising towards some kind of terrible peak.

Rob turned away from the horror and came face-to-face with Anna. Her eyes were unblinking and streaming with tears. Her face was contorted in terror.

‘There’s no way we could reach even one of them,’ Rob said, raising his voice over the murmuring chorus. ‘The distance—it’s impossible.’

‘Something is coming,’ Anna said mysteriously.

Rob didn’t have time to reply. A massive pressure wave rolled up from the well of the cavern, knocking him and Anna back from the ledge and off their feet. A deep sonorous boom followed immediately on its heels. Rob felt the sound as much as he heard it, an impossibly deep thump like the heartbeat of a mountain. The rock floor beneath him seemed to groan.

And then there was only the void.

The connection was forced upon him. He had little choice given the collective power of the Assemblers. His mind was pulled free of his body and he was left to float bodiless in the shadow, stunned and waiting. They too were present, he acknowledged after a moment, lurking invisible in the dark. But unlike before, no vision was offered him. There was no sharing. Only the black.

So this was it, Rob thought to himself. This was the attack that Victor had warned him of. Alone and separated from all he knew, it was here that they would try to force his submission. Would they try persuasion again, he wondered, or simply use brute force?

Anger swelled up inside of him. They were scrutinising him, observing him, testing him. No doubt looking for weakness. The thought of it made Rob furious. A fire began to burn in his mind.

What are you waiting for? he called out.

There was no response.

Rob writhed in the dark, his anger growing hotter still, brighter.

What do you really want? Show me the truth!

Something in the darkness changed. Rob could feel a questioning, an indecision. It was followed by a debate of some kind that lasted but a moment. Then suddenly the void began to fill with images, shapes. Scenes formed and unformed before him dizzily. He identified places and cities that he had seen only in newsreels or in books that he had flipped through as a child. Far-flung places that had once stirred his imagination, many in Asia, Africa, or North and South America. He watched as the Eiffel Tower appeared and melted away in an instant, followed by other scenes he could not place. He saw Easter Island, the Great Wall of China, Machu Picchu, and London Bridge interspersed between so many other scenes he didn't recognise.

Suddenly the flow of images came to a stop, showing a final scene that Rob knew so well: George Square in Glasgow. The Assemblers let the image linger. Rob saw the moon high above the great edifice of the City Chambers. The square was lit starkly: its many statues cast long shadows and reflected the moon's silvery light. All around the square, he could make out the bodies of people lying prone on the pavement. Men and women, some face up, some face down—none of them moving. He focused on the figure of a gentleman in a tailored grey suit whose hat had tumbled to the right of him. His round spectacles shone in the moonlight, but Rob's gaze was drawn to the man's mouth.

Let me hear him, he demanded. All of them.

The sudden rush of the wind in his ears took Rob by surprise. Then, between the gusts, he heard what he feared most: a chorus of numbers echoing from every corner of the square.

No! he shouted into the dark.

The scene before him rippled and fractured, only to be carefully, perfectly reformed. The image of George Square solidified again before his eyes. The lips of the man in the grey suit continued to mouth an endless string of numbers. They all did.

This is what you were meant for, a voice said inside his head—his own voice. This and only this.

No! Rob railed violently. George Square shuddered and then shattered, fading finally into darkness.

The terrible pressure that he knew would come began to build in the back of his mind. Pain blinded him and he bellowed like a wounded beast. The combined strength of the Assemblers coiled around him, squeezing and crushing.

Rob groaned. They would kill him this time if he did not submit. They would not release him. They would never stop. He knew this to be true, but he resisted nonetheless.

He thought of Victor, of the countless people encased in crystal tombs, of the dreadful purpose of the Assemblers' machine. And a rage ignited within him, burning white hot. If he had to die, he realised, he must, but he would not succumb. Not now. He had to at least try to escape. To warn everyone, anyone who would listen.

No! he roared for the third time, shutting his eyes to the darkness and the void. He focused on the fire within him, mustering his willpower and pushing back the crushing dark. He gritted his teeth, fighting the mounting pressure in his mind, then suddenly something changed. The pressure was lessening, the darkness receding. The shadows around him fading, replaced by a brilliant white.

'It's going to be all right,' Anna said, cradling him. 'You're going to be all right.'

He was back inside the tunnel, lying on the floor. A short distance from him, inside the great chamber, the chorus of numbers continued unabated. Momentarily there was a new sound as well. It echoed around the vast cavern, reverberating like the bass notes of a pipe organ mixed with the sharp crackling of fireworks. Rob saw Anna's eyes grow wide. He sat up and rose painfully to his feet, edging toward the precipice once more.

'Rob, don't,' Anna called weakly from behind him.

Standing on the edge, Rob looked down toward the source of the new sound. 'Dear God,' he uttered involuntarily.

They were moving—all of them. In the thinning mist below, Rob could see the Assemblers moving. The floor of the entire cavern seemed to shift, to dance and undulate. Shapes and structures that bore no earthly comparison broke through the top of the mist and vanished just as quickly beneath. Strange appendages extended, flailing and lashing, from even stranger bodies. Beneath the mist, impossible bone-white shapes gambolled around the base of the unearthly crystalline structure. Taken all together, the sight was too bewildering to comprehend. It rattled him and unnerved him in a way he would never be able to explain.

So many, Rob thought to himself. He could never have imagined there could be so many. What could he do against such an army? Against such power?

Paralysed by fear, he watched the swaying and thrusting forms dance round the crystal, his gaze drawn to the contours of long spikes and sharp talons, jagged pincers and whipping tentacles. He knew he would not—could not—ever speak of what he saw. A kind of madness would be required to give it voice.

Then, all at once, it stopped. The white dance stopped and the Assemblers sank as one beneath the mist.

TUO-ROAP-TAUK

Rob shuddered and stepped back from the ledge. Anna was there behind him, steadying him. The sound boomed up from the cavern floor.

TUO-ROAP-TAUK

Rob turned to Anna, panicked and breathless. ‘We’re getting out of here.’

Chapter 17: Pursuit

Rob ran up from the light, up into the sloping passage, away from the precipitous ledge. Away from the Assemblers and their terrible machine! He stumbled time after time, slipping on the black silicate, but always, somehow, he managed to keep himself upright. He lost track of the twists and turns he took. Behind him, he was barely aware of Anna scrabbling in his wake. All his efforts were bent on attaining the surface, on escaping the hive-like complex.

Sweat poured down his brow and slipped between his shoulder blades. He ignored it as he ignored the pain in his side. The only thing that mattered was putting distance between him and that crystalline monstrosity. His lungs burned as he powered himself up the rocky incline.

Tuo-roap-tauk

Rob shuddered at the distant sound, stumbling into the wall on his right. Sharp rocks cut into his shoulder. He pushed himself away, unflinching. Ahead the purple webbing on the ceiling was beginning to thin. It afforded him less light, but it also suggested that they were reaching the borders of the Assemblers' domain.

Encouraged by this, Rob pushed himself even harder. His heart pounded in his chest and he felt light-headed, but he did not slow or stop. He knew he must not.

A moment later, the air in the tunnel changed. It grew drier and cooler, and was thick with an earthiness that made Rob think of upturned soil and rotting leaves. Then, suddenly, the deep purple webbing vanished altogether, forcing Rob to slow finally and hold up his hands out in front of him. Anna fell into step behind him, her hands on his shoulders.

Ahead, he spied a thin, crooked line of light piercing the darkness. He rushed forward to inspect it. A crevice between two great shelves of stone had been cleared of earth, likely by rain. It was narrow, no more than a finger-width, but through it Rob could see light—natural light. More than that, he could feel a gentle breeze rustling through the space, bringing with it the smell of gorse and heather. Rob and Anna stood momentarily beneath the crevice, filling their lungs with the fresh air.

'We must be close,' Rob announced. 'There must be another exit.'

Tuo-roap-tauk

The call of the Assembler rolled up the dark passage behind him, causing Rob to start. Behind him, Anna grabbed his shoulders hard.

‘That sounded closer,’ she stated nervously.

‘Too close,’ Rob agreed and rushed into the darkness.

Using his hands to guide them along the right-hand side of the tunnel, he made what speed he could along the dark passage. Beneath him, he could feel the slope of the tunnel changing. Soon they were no longer climbing but proceeding on level ground. His haggard breathing echoed more closely around him, as did his hurried footsteps. The channel they were in was constricting, growing smaller as they went.

Tuo-roap-tauk

The call of the Assembler echoed up the tunnel behind him, booming like a foghorn.

A second later, Rob came crashing into a rock wall.

‘Ah, Jesus,’ he cursed, raising his hand up to a stinging wound on his forehead. His hand came away wet. ‘Son of a bitch,’ he muttered.

‘What is it?’ Anna asked.

Rob ran his hand over the wall ahead of him and the walls of the tunnel beside him. He was able to map a rough curve from wall to wall. His heart sank. They had come to a dead end.

Tuo-roap-TAUK

The Assembler was getting closer. Rob could hear it rumbling up the passage. He began to feverishly examine the stone around him in the dark. ‘There has to be a way,’ he muttered, reaching out to his left and right.

‘Rob, what is it?’ Anna repeated urgently.

‘A dead end,’ he replied.

Anna’s hands went limp on his shoulders. Rob reached up above him, hoping for a ledge, for anything.

A loud rustling sound echoed up the tunnel behind them.

TUO-ROAP-TAUK

How long would they have, he wondered, before the Assembler reached them? Would it grab them as it had Sleeman or just kill them outright? Crushing them and mangling them like the body they had found at the base of the mine.

Rob's hands were shaking as he leaned down to scan the lower reaches of the tunnel. To his left, at just about knee-height, he found a hole. It was rough and small, but it was deep enough to accommodate one of them, possibly both.

'Anna, there's a hole or alcove here,' he declared. 'It's going to be tight.'

He lowered himself down to his knees, grunting in pain. The crackling, rustling sound in the tunnel behind was growing closer and closer. Anna dropped down behind him, her hands moving to his waist. Rob quickly felt his way round the small opening and crawled inside.

TUO-ROAP-TAUK

The air around them became electric. Rob could feel his skin react, his hair extend and quiver. Behind him, Anna slumped to the ground.

'Anna?' Rob called.

There was no response.

TUO-ROAP-TAUK

The Assembler thundered up the incline. It must be less than a hundred yards away.

Rob spun round in the small space and pulled Anna into the small tunnel beside him. She did not resist. Her arms flopped at her sides. 'Anna?' he whispered, drawing her up beside him.

A loud, intermittent hissing sound like sandpaper scraping on bone rushed up from the darkness behind him—only a few yards away. Rob heaved Anna ahead of him and sidled further into the black hole.

A split second later, the small tunnel shook and reverberated with impact as the Assembler slammed into the dead end outside. Rob jerked forward, rolling his body over Anna protectively. The walls around them shook again as the Assembler threw itself against the rock again. Dust and pebbles showered down over him.

'Jesus Christ!' Rob shouted involuntarily.

A sharp crack sounded above him. He felt a scattering of heavy earth fall on the back of his neck. He shook it off. If the Assembler's assault continued and the

rock and earth were loose enough, he realised, it would come down, crushing them both.

TUO-ROAP-TAUK!

The thing outside backed up. Rob could suddenly hear strange clacking and scraping sounds emanating from just outside the hole, then some feeler or claw slipped into the small passage. The thing just managed to reach the bottom of Rob's right foot and grasped at his shoe. It pinched down and Rob kicked hard, trying to push it away. He might as well have kicked stone. A strange electrical shock ran through his leather sole, numbing his foot and shin.

Pulling his leg up, Rob urgently edged himself and Anna deeper into the crevice. A burning sensation flared below his knee. He winced, realising how lucky he was that the Assembler had not managed to clutch him.

Rob scrambled and pushed himself another foot further deeper into the hole, pulling Anna along him, when suddenly his head came up against hard stone. At virtually the same time, the Assembler crashed into the dead end outside once more, slamming into the rock wall, causing the stone to shudder. Dust and earth filled the air within the small tunnel, making it almost impossible to breathe.

A great weight, like a sandbag or a sack of potatoes, fell against his waist, flattening him down beside Anna. A split second later, an even heavier weight blanketed his legs and Anna's lower half. Rob realised with horror that it was dirt, great clumps of dirt. The air around him was clogged with the heavy smell of earth.

TUU-ROAP-TAUK!

The stone around Rob shook with another impact. The Assembler would bring down the tunnel around them, he thought to himself. They were trapped. It would bury them, if it could not get to them.

Rob could barely breathe. His face was streaming with tears. He screamed in frustration, pounding his fists against the tunnel wall. The packed earth broke up, falling on his chest, filling the air with more dirt and dust.

The tunnel shook again. *TUU-ROAP-TAUK!*

A new blanket of earth and broken rock crashed down upon Rob. Panicking and frenzied, Rob clawed the dirt away from his face and made sure that Anna's

mouth and nose were clear. He pulled her closer to him. She remained unconscious but she was still breathing, although very weakly.

The ground around them shook and another great mass of earth fell on top of him. Nearly out of his mind with terror, Rob punched and scraped at the wall of earth like an animal fighting for its life. Suddenly, unexpectedly, his fist went through a clump of dried earth. He punched again. He saw a blaze of light through his streaming eyes. A sudden flash of blue.

The stone beneath him shuddered. So much dirt and stone now lay between him and the Assembler that he could barely hear its demonic call.

Rob blinked and coughed. He punched at the opening again and again. Brilliant sunlight poured in through the small hole. Through stinging tears, he could see blue sky.

The earth shook once more. The Assembler was not giving up. Rob rocked his body until he could get his knees beneath him again. He did his best to protect Anna, then began pushing and kicking at the dirt and stone at his waist, forcing it down in the direction of the Assembler. Next, he began packing dirt to his left and right with his elbows and forearms, making enough space to move himself and Anna closer to the surface, to freedom.

Bringing his head up near the surface, he gulped in great mouthfuls of air. Frantically, he began pushing dark earth out through the hole, piling it up to either side. He clawed and pushed at the opening until it looked large enough to fit his shoulders through. As the ground around him shook, Rob packed more earth all around him to ensure that the hole would not collapse as they moved through it.

Finally, pulling himself up toward the light, his hands emerged into the sunlight, his fingers found grass and dry earth. They would escape, he reassured himself, there was nothing the Assemblers could do about it now.

As if in response, the earth reverberated around him again. Loose earth tumbled down onto his head.

Rob ignored it, continuing to pack earth to either side of him until he was able to draw himself out onto the surface. Reaching back into the small hole, he carefully pulled Anna's limp body up into the sunlight. He rolled her down to the grass and checked again to make sure that she was breathing.

‘Thank God,’ he said, reclining beside her.

Rob let himself catch his breath. He glanced around the hillside meadow. Gorse, heather, and lilac bushes were everywhere. A warm breeze wafted their sweet scents over him. Distantly, he could hear the sound of waves. Fresh tears welled up in his eyes. He turned back to Anna and shook her gently.

‘Anna,’ he whispered. ‘Anna, wake up!’

After a moment, she raised her hand up to shield her eyes and opened them groggily. Then, realising what had been achieved, she spun towards Rob and stared at him speechless.

Beneath him, in the dark, Rob could feel the Assembler continue its attack. It occurred to him that if the Assemblers had broken through the wall of the open-pit mine, they could do the same here. It was perhaps only a matter of time.

Rob lifted himself painfully to his feet, grunting with effort. His muscles shook with exhaustion. Anna stood up warily beside him.

‘We have to go,’ he said, stumbling forward as the ground shook beneath his feet.

Chapter 18: Revelations

The door of the police lorry fell open beside him. A rush of cool air swept through the stuffy cab of the vehicle. Rob lifted his head from his chest, blinking. Outside the Albion's dusty windscreen, he could see nothing but a wall of concrete lit by a diffuse, blood-orange glow.

'How long was I out?' he asked.

'Long enough for a good rest,' Anna said. 'But it's time to get up now.'

Rob leaned forward. Every muscle in his back ached. He swallowed drily and coughed. 'Where are we?'

'Glasgow, of course,' she replied, stepping up beside him. 'Were you dreaming of France again?'

'No,' he frowned. 'I don't dream at all these days.'

'Come along, let me help you,' Anna said, reaching into the cab and gripping his elbow and shoulder.

Rob stepped out of the Albion, surprised at how unsteady he was on his feet. His legs felt numb. 'They've gone to sleep,' he muttered, clinging to Anna's shoulder.

'Mmm,' she intoned, closing the passenger door behind him. 'Time to wake up then. This way now.'

Rob looked around him. Anna had parked the Albion in a narrow passage between two high buildings. He didn't recognise either of them. Smooth grey walls rose up to the darkening sky above. A ridge of storm clouds reflected the last rays of sunset. In the shadows between the two buildings, Anna led Rob toward a door on their left.

'What is this place?' he asked.

'You don't recognise it?' Anna queried.

'No, I—maybe vaguely.'

'It's the Royal Infirmary.'

Rob started, but Anna kept them moving steadily forward.

'Why the Infirmary? We need to get to the police... to the papers, or the City Chambers. We need to warn them!'

‘You know why,’ Anna replied calmly. ‘We talked about this.’

Rob focused on the glass-panelled door. Confusion and anxiety flooded through him and he felt his stomach knot.

‘I don’t want to go in there,’ he stammered. ‘Anna, we need to go to the police. We need to go now.’ He tried to resist, but found that he could not. His feet could find no purchase on the concrete floor. They moved ever closer toward the glass doors.

‘It’s time again,’ Anna replied perplexingly. ‘You knew this was coming.’

‘Anna, please,’ Rob pleaded, suddenly frightened. ‘Don’t make me go in there. Please! I don’t want to.’

‘It will be fine, Robert,’ she said, turning to face the doors. ‘Just try to relax. It will all be like last time. There is nothing to worry about.’

Reflected in the glass, Rob saw Anna’s bright face above his. She smiled reassuringly at him, her left hand on the grip of the wheelchair, her right pulling open the door before them.

In the dark reflection, he saw himself sat in the wheelchair dressed in hospital robes. His face looked haggard: dark circles rimmed his eyes and a patchy beard clung to his jaw and chin. His cheeks were sunken and his arms were little more than bone. As the reflection swung away from him, his eyes trained on the two safety pins that fastened his folded-up trouser legs.

His legs were gone.

Anna wheeled him into the darkness. Rob felt a chill settle into his spine. A moment later, another door opened and she rolled him into a doctor’s office, bringing the chair to a standstill beside a high window. Outside long shadows stretched across Wishart Street and the Necropolis beyond. The cemetery mound rose up to meet the deepening sky. Rob spied movement in his peripheral vision, but kept his eyes trained on the scene outside.

‘Well, better late than never, Mr... Grant, yes?’ the doctor said, rising up from behind his desk and coming around to stand before it. ‘Close the door, if you will, Nurse.’

The old man sat back against the edge of the desk, pausing until Anna had secured the door. ‘Now, Robert,’ he began anew. ‘I want you to tell me how you are feeling? Are things any clearer for you?’

Rob didn’t respond. Outside in the Necropolis, his gaze settled on the dark shadows behind the funerary monuments. As he watched, they took on the shape of bodies, transformed human bodies.

‘This isn’t real,’ he muttered to himself.

‘What was that?’ the doctor asked.

Rob ignored him.

The doctor waited a moment and then turned to Anna. ‘Any progress at all in the last month, Nurse MacGillivray?’

Anna paused then slowly shook her head. ‘No, Doctor. I am afraid not.’

The man retrieved a file from beneath a crystal paperweight on his desk. He flipped it open. ‘Robert Ewan Grant,’ he said, glancing up at his patient, ‘formerly of the Corps of Royal Engineers in His Majesty’s Army. Brought to us after a tunnel collapse in France. Yes, nearly two years ago now. It’s been a long struggle, hasn’t it, Mr Grant. Has he any better recognition of his whereabouts or his situation?’

‘No, Doctor,’ Anna replied. ‘I have tried—we all have tried—but any mention of his being in the infirmary agitates him greatly. Very greatly.’

‘The same persistent denial then,’ the doctor said, making a note in the file. ‘And what of his... friend? The other chap in the accident, the one who wasn’t so lucky... what was his name?’

‘Victor,’ Anna stated.

‘Yes, that’s right. Victor.’

‘Robert looks for him, searches for him, Doctor, every day.’

The doctor lowered the file to the desk. ‘Searches for him? Where?’

‘Not literally, sir. Not in the hospital. But in his stories, he ranges all over. It is often rather difficult to tell where.’

Outside the window, the shadows in the Necropolis grew thicker and intertwined. Rob could hear the chanting chorus coming from the dark. Numbers. A never-ending sequence of numbers.

‘We have to go, Anna,’ Rob implored. ‘We need to get out of here—now!’

The doctor raised an eyebrow. ‘Anna? Not Nurse MacGillivray?’

‘He began using my Christian name about two weeks ago. He has spoken yours as well. Your surname, that is, intermittently. He sometimes speaks as though we are characters in his story.’

‘Or phantoms in his nightmare,’ the doctor suggested. ‘I see.’

Rob could feel a tugging in the back of his mind, something drawing him back into the darkness.

‘Well, I’m afraid there is little more that we can do for him here,’ the doctor breathed.

‘Doctor?’

‘There is a group of patients being transferred to the Gartnavel Royal Asylum tomorrow morning. I want you to see to it that Mr Grant is packed and ready to move, yes? I have ordered that he be confined there,’ he paused. ‘For his own safety.’

‘Anna, please!’ Rob shouted suddenly, jerking violently in the wheelchair. ‘They’re coming!’ He struggled pointlessly against his bonds.

The doctor rose up. ‘Now, now, there’s no reason to get upset, Mr Grant,’ he said, picking up a small vial and a syringe from his desk. ‘We’re here to take care of you, to watch over you, yes? Everything is going to be fine. Just as it should be.’

The man loomed over him and Rob felt a prick in his right arm. A moment later, the doctor’s shadow wavered and began to slowly undulate and pinch impossibly. Rob’s eyes began to close, his head sinking to his chest.

‘See that the patient is kept sedated, Nurse,’ the doctor said, his voice suddenly deeper and strangely distorted.

The scene spun from him and Rob felt sick. The office door swung open like a giant maw, groaning loudly on its hinges. As she wheeled him toward the threshold, Anna’s footsteps fell like thunder, rumbling like distant artillery fire. He could see nothing ahead but darkness. Nothing but the void. A moment later the door squelched closed and latched behind him.

Rob made no sound. He drew a deep breath into his lungs as quietly as he could. Beside him, he heard Victor do the same.

Part Two: Exegesis

Introduction

The following exegesis provides a critical commentary and exploration of the Creative Writing PhD dissertation, 'This Dying Machine,' presented above. The commentary below is broken down into three parts. In the first part, I focus on the development of the novel from the completed full draft to this final submitted dissertation and articulate how challenges that presented themselves in the penultimate draft were carefully considered and overcome in the final work. In this initial section, the most significant of these challenges are explored in detail with discussion given to the impact of each problem, the rationale for change, and the means by which the underlying issue has been creatively resolved. The overarching goal here is to reflect on the creative process, as it manifests itself in small details as well as larger structural decisions. The second section of the exegesis investigates this novel's relation to the literary canon and its intertextuality in relation to that literary tradition. An examination of its influences, its borrowings, and its context is undertaken to frame the novel and further explore its poetics. The third and final section focuses on how 'This Dying Machine' is innovative, how it uses the interplay of literary elements, genres, and movements to create something original, and how, in doing so, it contributes to the field of creative writing.

Interwoven through this discussion, I will illuminate the hybridising principle that informed the final novel. Hybridity is important to 'This Dying Machine': the practice of merging or blending of forms, styles, and techniques to create something new. The submitted novel stands as a hybrid in both form and content: a mixture of historical and weird fiction, adopting and combining features from each genre, it presents a narrative that intentionally mixes the past and present, the real and unreal, and the horrors of war and cosmic horrors born from Rob's neurasthenia. A further level of hybridity results from the novel's melding of techniques and devices drawn from both literary fiction and genre fiction. This merger provided me with opportunity and potential, which I have sought to exploit to the best of my ability in the submitted dissertation, but also came with significant challenges, as discussed below.

Part 1: The Development of the Novel

From its earliest genesis, ‘This Dying Machine’ has undergone significant change. Looking back to the first synopsis, the intent for the novel was to produce a character-driven story heavily influenced by the works of Howard Philips Lovecraft blending historical and horror fiction set against the backdrop of 1920s Glasgow. My goal was to craft a work of political cosmic horror, conflating the all-too-real horrors of the First World War with the fantastic cosmic horrors generated by the protagonist’s psychosis. My intent was always to write a human story—prioritising character over horror and thus differing from the majority of inhuman or abhuman (that is, part-human and part-monstrous or supernatural) stories common to Lovecraft and Weird fiction, but nonetheless adopting the emphasis on atmosphere and mood stressed in those works. Furthermore, drawing on my experience in writing for the games industry, I was keen on incorporating game-like elements into the story, staging branching narratives, for example, and seeding mysteries into the plot for the characters—and readers as well—to puzzle through. The novel, as first envisioned, would follow a troupe of young soldiers—principal among them Robert Grant and his younger brother Ewan—recently returned from the war in France. The action in the novel was initiated by the disappearance of Ewan amidst strange circumstances in Glasgow and the subsequent action followed the group’s search for the missing brother. Over the course of that search, Rob and his friends encountered an otherworldly threat that drew them out of the city and into an alien, subterranean world. A succession of trials and increasingly horrific encounters there fractured the group, ultimately leaving Rob alone to search for Ewan. A large part of the novel was given over to the protagonist’s exploration of this uncanny space and to his growing appreciation of the threat not only to him and his brother but also to humanity itself. Following Lovecraftian tradition, the novel would end with Rob and Ewan finally apprehending the true cosmic horror and succumbing to madness and death.

While some elements from this first synopsis have carried over into the final draft, many more have been dropped, replaced, or altered considerably. In the case of ‘This Dying Machine,’ the novel’s late development was most directly informed and shaped by the need to overcome a number of significant challenges that presented

themselves when the full draft was compiled. Discovering and creatively incorporating solutions to these problems proved me with both a meaningful learning opportunity and a means by which the novel was greatly improved. The most noteworthy of these challenges are presented below. The choices I made in responding to each challenge go some way to highlight the developmental journey of the novel and myself as a writer. In the following paragraphs, individual challenges are examined, the different methods considered to overcome the issue are discussed, and the rationale for, and benefits of, the chosen method are explicated.

Plot, Story, and Pace

The most significant challenges I had to overcome in editing and redrafting ‘This Dying Machine’ for submission related to plot, story, and pace. With the thirty-five chapters compiled together, the penultimate draft of novel was much too long for a Creative Writing PhD thesis and had to be cut by half. Previous drafts had included substantial subplots involving a cast of ancillary characters in Glasgow both before and after the war. Chapters were devoted to exploring each of the five protagonists’ struggles to reintegrate with their former lives—to reconnect with family and friends, with lovers, and their own selves—or followed their disintegration as they failed to find place and meaning in the city they once called home. In hindsight, the novel as originally plotted tried to include and achieve too much. When cut back, the penultimate draft, by contrast, achieved too little. Having lost virtually all of the character-driven subplots and flashbacks, the story lacked drama (bereft of reveals, surprises, and reversals of fortune), it emphasised linear plotting over storytelling, and it suffered from a slow and uniform pace. Characters now appeared to move through the narrative mechanically, step-by-step, never deviating or diverting from a predetermined course, transported from one scene to another.

The much-reduced plot—essentially a chain of events leading to Rob finding his missing brother, Ewan, and to encountering the otherworldly Assemblers—presented two significant problems: first, it was flat and progressed too linearly with much of the story being told in ‘real time’ and, second, it was unbalanced with the

majority of the action almost exclusively concerning events from the second half of the plot. A further challenge rested with the novel's even pacing: sentence structure, paragraph structure, and even chapter length varied little throughout the resulting draft. Consequently, narrative voice and rhythm changed little from scene to scene or chapter to chapter. In another circumstance, such pacing might have been used for dramatic effect, but in this case it only served to highlight the problem. Taken in concert, the issues in plot, story, and pace highlighted the need for substantial work, but work that provided opportunities to dramatically improve the narrative.

Revisiting the penultimate draft, it was evident that the plot of 'This Dying Machine' would need to be wholly revised. Interrogating the text, I could see how the novel had almost been painstakingly over-plotted. Every scene, every moment had been carefully drawn out. I knew precisely how and when the characters would progress: their paths were set. I had gone so far as to literally map the Assembler's caves down to the foot. In writing for games, the game author's primary occupation is presenting an interesting, often challenging, plot and devising colourful, meticulous worlds for the characters to inhabit, complete with itemised affordances for them to interact with. Story, by contrast, is largely created by the game's players. The game author creates a backstory (containing the initial call to adventure), a series of tests or challenges to be overcome, and a conclusion, containing conditions for success and alternate endings, but the narrative is driven and sustained by players. The players mutually create and drive the story through the actions, choices, and decisions of their player characters (PCs) or avatars. In contrast, in literary fiction, the author supplies both plot and story, and my overreliance on the game model saw the literary practice suffer.

Seeking to overcome this imbalance, I returned to the books that had inspired me. I revisited James, Stevenson, Conrad, and the Brontës; I reexamined Woolf, Rhys, Faulkner, and Hemingway; and I reconsidered Barnes, Thomas, and Eco. I delved back into the Great War narratives and memoirs of Barker, Graves, Manning, and Sassoon, and mind-bending horrors of Lovecraft, Blackwood, Cooper, and Hodgson. I took time with each to understand how their plots provided a foundation for their stories, how each bit of track—whether twisting or straight—supported the engine driving over it. In Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* (1899), for example, I

found this supportive principle alive and manifest in the winding Congo River, which sustains (and at times hinders) Marlowe's progress through the dark jungle to Kurtz's Inner Station. In each of the novels revisited, I sought to learn how the authors worked plot and story to carefully construct the reader's journey.

Convoluted and varied though they might be, all the plots I examined served to engage readers from start to finish: initially captivating them with the protagonists' story, involving them in their conflicts and struggles (in both the rising and falling action), carrying them to the novel's climax, and delivering a rewarding (or challenging) denouement that brought each novel to a close. While a few of the novels—Blackwood's *The Willows* (1907), for example, and Greenwood's *Miss Phryne Fisher Investigates* (2005)—proved formulaic, following the five-act structure of Aristotle's *Poetics* (335 BC) and, centuries later, Freytag's *Technique of the Drama* (1863) too prescriptively, they all succeed in serving the story at hand. In the penultimate draft of 'This Dying Machine,' on the other hand, the plot had been reduced to the point that it could not effectively support its story. The resulting plot would serve for a game narrative, but not a literary one; plot has different affordances in the different genres.

In seeking to creatively resolve this issue, I chose to focus on three primary, but significant, changes: first, I would greatly expand the first third of the novel while greatly reducing the final third, hoping to bring the structure of the novel into balance. Taking particular inspiration from Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy* (1995), I decided to use a five-act structure as a narrative frame, incorporating exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and dénouement, with some compression in the final two stages, hoping to achieve a more arresting ending. I further chose to divide the plot between action set in the past (the Great War) and the present (1920s Glasgow) through the use of flashbacks (discussed in greater detail below). The rationale for this interleaved, hybrid narrative came from a growing realisation of the dramatic potential I might achieve in telling the story from the point of view of a single focaliser, particularly one who was suffering from a profound mental disorder. Scenes belonging to the past and to the present were thus designed to intertwine throughout the novel, forming and

informing each stage of the novel's development, variably offering moments of action and exposition, of story and character development.

In this plot redesign, I carefully considered how to maintain dramatic balance so that the beginning of the novel, the middle and the end, were given equal weight, ensuring that the reader remained fully engaged at each point. Surveying a wide gamut of novels, I found myself drawn to plots dating from the mid- to late-19th Century. There I found clear and strong plots that resonated with me, the sort that I aspired to in my game fiction, and hoped to instill in 'This Dying Machine.' Rereading Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and returning to James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), and Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), I probed how encounters with supplementary characters, moments of revelation, action elements, and reversals of fortune were carefully plotted throughout the novels to provide readers with diverse and dynamic stories that offered a rich mix of intriguing drama and conflict from beginning to end. *Jane Eyre*, for example, is a balanced tale with structured plot points in both the rising and falling action (e.g. the arrival of Miss Ingram and the later reveal that Rochester is, in fact, married) bookended by our introduction to Jane in Lowood School and her return to Thornfield Hall and reunion with Rochester. The lessons learned in *Jane Eyre* and others greatly informed my restructuring of the plot of 'This Dying Machine' with an aim to not only balance the novel, but also to more effectively support, shape, and drive Rob's story (more on this below).

The second substantive change to the plot of 'This Dying Machine' was undertaken to achieve a clearer and simpler narrative, moving away from complex plot that incorporated the histories and stories of five veterans of the First World War to one that focused on the unfortunate circumstance of a single soldier, Robert Grant. Reflecting on my initial choice to have a large cast of primary characters, I could see how I drew that from my experience as a writer of game fiction, where the stories are created from the interactions of multiple player characters. But in the editing of the penultimate draft I determined that my aim of writing a character-driven novel could be more effectively achieved by focalising through a single protagonist. Again, returning to the novels that inspired me, I found plentiful examples of the rich and

compelling characterisation I was hoping to achieve in the focused plots of Manning's *Her Privates We* (1930), Rhys's *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939), Copper's *The Great White Space* (1974), and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). The protagonists of each—Bourne, Jansen, Plowright, and Barnes, respectively—are fully realised through focalised narratives that allow the reader access to the character's interior and exterior worlds. Reading these novels, the accounts given are personal, even intimate—and it was this sense of connection, of intimacy, that I very much wanted to achieve. Thus, in the submitted dissertation, the story told is now Rob's alone, focalised through his experience and told from his point of view, both in the past and present. With Rob as the focaliser, I could make the story more subjective, which also allowed me to reintroduce him as an unreliable narrator—an aspect that had been cut after proving too difficult to realise effectively in the earlier multi-character draft. The move to a more focused plot allowed for Rob's neurasthenia or shellshock to dominate the novel in a way that is only truly realised at the novel's ending. This change to a more focused plot gave me the potential to tell Rob's story more creatively and expansively. In redrafting 'This Dying Machine,' I was able to present a mix of seemingly authentic experience with dream-like, fantastic, and horrific sequences intended to simultaneously captivate and unsettle my readers.

The third change shifted the plot of 'This Dying Machine' away from its former linear structure. None of the novels I read exhibited the kind of persistent linearity that resulted in the penultimate draft of the novel, the clear result of following familiar game structures. While some, such as Lovecraft's *At The Mountains of Madness* (1936), Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* (1908), Palahnuik's *Fight Club* (1996) use linear passages and progression in real time to dramatic effect, they do so sparingly. More consistently, they avoid linear progression altogether, constructing plots that actively incorporate the principles that Ursula K. Le Guin calls 'crowding' and 'leaping' in *Steering the Craft: A 21st-Century Guide to Sailing the Sea of Story* (2015):

'Crowding is what Keats meant when he told poets to 'load every rift with ore' ... keeping the story full, always full of what's happening in it; keeping

it moving, not slacking and wandering into irrelevancies; keeping it interconnected with itself, rich with echoes forward and backward... But leaping is just as important. What you leap over is what you leave out. And what you leave out is infinitely more than what you leave in... Only the relevant belongs.’ (pp. 117-8)

The two principles are closely linked, both articulating the focus of the story and its narrative arc or trajectory:

‘Everything that is crowded in to enrich the story sensually, intellectually, emotionally, should be in *focus*—part of the central focus of the story. And every leap should be *along the trajectory*, following the shape and movement of the whole.’ (p. 124)

In other words, all of the aspects of the novel should be connected, aligned, and constructed so as to achieve a cohesive whole. Extraneous plot, like extraneous description, should be weeded out until the focus and the narrative arc are perfectly clear and only story remains. I found evidence of effective crowding and leaping in every novel I examined.

Applying these principles to the plot of ‘This Dying Machine’ involved a complete rethinking of how the novel should progress. In conjunction with the changes required to balance the novel and focus its narrative to a single focaliser/protagonist, the final dissertation had to move away from its current linear progression. This was partly achieved by splitting the plot between past and present—as mentioned above—and partly by concentrating the plot even further, reducing extraneous material, and allowing the plot to ‘leap’ forward to, and ‘crowd’ around, the signature moments in the novel. In my reading, I found a number of exemplars that helped to inform this restructure, most particularly in Barker’s *The Regeneration Trilogy*, Manning’s *Her Privates We*, Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Bulgakov’s *The Master and Marguerita* (1967), and Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. In each of these novels, the plot progressed dynamically, variably leaping and crowding so as to highlight moments, decisions, and actions loaded with

relevance and meaning. Bulgakov, Barker, and Woolf use alternating timelines and/or characters' reliving the past, leaping backward and forward through time, to create multi-layered plots and narratives; while Manning and Conrad use crowding to establish tightly focused narratives, highlighting the key events that propel their stories forward and give them meaning. Taking inspiration from what I had read, I chose to redesign the plot of 'This Dying Machine,' focusing on attaining a more focused and cohesive story split over two timelines. Adopting Le Guin's principles of crowding and leaping, the novel now moves forward from scene to scene—from significance to significance—not in a predetermined, linear fashion, but jumping ahead in both time and space. The protagonist's journey—and, therefore, that of the reader—is now more varied, meaningful, and engaging. The end result that I have striven for is a novel that moves dynamically, and I hope unexpectedly, taking the reader on an intriguing and absorbing story of discovery.

Ultimately each of the changes to the plot of 'This Dying Machine' was made in service to the changing story. As mentioned above, I made a conscious decision upon revisiting the penultimate draft to move away from the original, multi-character story and its overtly Lovecraftian themes. Too much of the resultant story had focused on the Assemblers, their veiled purpose and horrific machinations, and too little had focused on the characters, their journeys, and their development. This focus on cosmic horror, and particularly the mood and atmosphere it evokes, is precisely what Lovecraft's 'Weird' fiction seeks to achieve, however. In his criticism, Lovecraft wastes no time in distinguishing the Weird from both traditional and modern literature, championing mood and atmosphere over the need for realised characters, believable action, or a well-orchestrated plot:

"Atmosphere, not action, is the great desideratum of weird fiction" ('Notes on Writing Weird Fiction', 2004, p. 177).

While mood and atmosphere are significant to 'This Dying Machine,' it was always intended primarily as a character-driven novel. My intentions being increasingly at odds with my initial synopsis, I realised that I would need to move the narrative away from a story dominated by cosmic horror. In the submitted draft of the novel I

sought to balance the human and the monstrous, to create a hybrid blend that both drove story and emphasised character development in reaction to horror—using horror to draw out character and motivate change and action. Through blending historical fiction and horror fiction, I discovered I could creatively incorporate the awe and dread of the Lovecraftian Weird into the context of the First World War, having Rob’s encounters with the Assemblers mirror, or act as a foil to, his experiences in the trenches or the tunnels beneath No Man’s Land, for example. Rather than dominate, in this way the Weird elements worked for the story, acting as a catalyst for narrative and character development. This constructive interplay of genre is found not just in the mixing of elements from historical and horror fiction, but from game fiction, detective fiction, and other genres as well, which I will discuss in detail in Part 3.

Having adopted these changes in plot, I next turned my attention to potential beneficial changes in the story itself. Seeking new ways to reimagine or rework the novel, I revisited the number of novels that had enthralled and inspired me. To begin with, I knew I wanted a renewed focus on my protagonist, Rob, and that I wanted to reintroduce him as an unreliable narrator. With respect to unreliable narration, I returned to Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), Nabakov’s *Lolita* (1955), Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, and Barnes’ *Nightwood* (1936), each of which showed how unreliability could be achieved through focalisation and character. Benjy Compson, Humbert Humbert, Septimus Warren Smith, and the marvelous Dr Matthew O’Connor, respectively, present us with enigmatically skewed, first-person views of their worlds, which force the reader to interpret and question the information relayed by them. In ‘This Dying Machine’ there was no question that Rob would become this point of focus and narrative possibilities rose up from there. In particular, I wanted the novel to represent a literary game of sorts that involved and captivated its readers but also required them to interpret and puzzle out events. Returning to a third-person limited point of view in the final drafting offered me the opportunity of reincorporating unreliable narration into the novel in a more demonstrable and significant way than I had considered before. It was, in fact, a defining moment in reimagining the story: it allowed me to play with perception—to blend possibility with impossibility, to operate at the fringes and boundaries of the ‘real’—and gave

me a creative freedom and potential that I had not possessed or discovered elsewhere.

Meanwhile, shifting the focus to Rob, limiting the story to his point of view alone, allowed for the reintegration of flashbacks that had been cut and, indeed, for additional flashbacks to be introduced. This helped to balance the story and to achieve an interwoven narrative that told Rob's story through the warp and weft of two timelines. I found effective examples of this operation in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and Pat Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy*. In each novel, the fluid intercutting between the past and present enables the story to be more vibrant and engaging; the effective—and often innovative—use of flashbacks enables its author to tell a deeper and richer story. In 'This Dying Machine,' the combination of an unreliable narrator and two interwoven narratives allowed me to use Rob's neurasthenia to blur the lines between past and present, between real and unreal, and between truth and fiction. Rob's fragmented consciousness became the lens through which readers' experience the story, the formal disruption of the narrative reflecting his disordered and disrupted reality. This fragmentation or disarray of narrative order and structure is a hallmark of Modernism (MacCabe 1979, Barth 1984, Gandal 2010, etc.) and the novel intentionally calls back to the Modernist period, being set in 1922—the year that began with Joyce's *Ulysses* and finished with Eliot's *The Wasteland*. In *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word* (1979), MacCabe notes that 'disruption is not merely a formal matter but also determines Joyce's concerns at the level of content.' Seeing fragmentation and disruption not simply as a matter of form, but of story—of 'content'—greatly influenced the redrafting of the novel's story: it inspired me to consider a narrative that was more challenging, unsettling, and disruptive, not a straightforward quest, but more a tragic puzzle to be unraveled. In the final draft, I took the opportunity to shape the story more towards tragedy, wherein Rob—as a result of his traumatic experience in the war—is finally revealed as both author and prisoner of his own horror story, unable to come to terms with either his past or his present, and trapped within an endlessly repeating, self-generated nightmare. The story now unfolds across both timelines and through flashbacks as fragments, like puzzle pieces, come

together to reveal the larger picture and explore themes relating to war, politics, madness, and the human condition.

With changes to plot and story in place, I next turned to the issue of pace in the novel. Looking at a range of classics from Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and James's *The Turn of the Screw* to more modern offerings such as Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1951), Herbert's *Dune* (1965), and Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994), I paid particular attention to how these authors gave their novels a pace and rhythm all their own. In this interrogation, I could see how rhythm and pace were established in sentence, paragraph, and chapter structure, in clipped dialogue and long passages of exposition, and in the pauses and breaks between—in the rhythm of the text. Take, for example, these two passages from *The Turn of the Screw* and *How Late It Was, How Late*, respectively:

‘What it was least possible to get rid of was the cruel idea that, whatever I had seen, Miles and Flora saw *more* – things terrible and unguessable and that sprang from dreadful passages of intercourse in the past. Such things naturally left on the surface, for the time, a chill that we vociferously denied we felt; and we had all three, with repetition, got into such splendid training that we went, each time, to mark the close of the incident, almost automatically through the very same movement.’ (1898, p. 213)

and:

‘Jesus Christ. She would be really worried now. He aye had to blab. How come he aye had to blab! Just stupid. Stupid. She would be worrying. Does nay matter the situation, how it was, that was past tense, she would worry. Cause he had nay place to go and she knew it. Ye’re talking from whenever it was the now back to last Friday morning man that’s how long it was; four maybe five days, including Saturday. Fucking Saturday! Saturday was a blank. A blank. Jesus Christ, fucking terrible. So for all she knew something bad might have happened. Aye something bad has happened hen! yer man, yer

boyfriend, he's being held for assault, drunk and disorderly. And at that moment in time he's lying in the fucking poky, blind as a fucking bat.' (1994, p. 21).

The key here is variation: the authors achieve their own unique rhythm and pace by varying sentence length and structure—and beyond that paragraph and chapter length and structure. There is, however, no rubric for achieving successful pace. There are no optimum lengths for paragraphs, or chapters or sentences, as Le Guin points out:

'The optimum is *variety*. The length of a sentence in good prose is established by contrast and interplay with the sentences around it—and by what it says and does.' (2015, p. 24)

Variation and repetition produce rhythm and pace in the novel, as they do in music, and must be used with considerable care. Too little variation and over-use of repetition—even in fast-paced dialogue or action sequences—threatens to lull or bore readers, while moving too quickly, as Stephen King notes in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (2000) risks: '...leaving the reader behind, either by confusing or wearing him/her out' (p. 264).

In the redrafting of 'This Dying Machine,' I paid close attention to varying length and structure throughout the narrative, seeking to achieve a pace and rhythm that was both engaging and dynamic, shifting and changing when necessary to better supported and drive the story. As a result, in the final draft, the pace and rhythm of the text changes in relation to the actions or emotions of the protagonist: when Rob is tense or engaged in action, the pace accelerates and the rhythm becomes quick, even discordant; whereas when he is thoughtful, reflective, or allowed a moment's peace, the pace slows and the rhythm becomes more languid, wistful, or brooding. Sentence and paragraph length and structure alter accordingly. A good example of this variation can be seen in the differing pace and rhythm encountered when Rob first 'shares' with the Assemblers versus when he and Anna flee from their unseen pursuer in the Assemblers' caves: in the first instance, the pace is slow and tentative; in the second, it is quick and frantic, highlighting Rob's heightened emotional

response. In this respect, pace and rhythm help to carry or enhance the story, revealing or emphasising aspects of Rob's character, for instance. With dialogue, further attention was given to varying pace and rhythm to differentiate character's speech. Consider, for example, how different pace and rhythm distinguishes Rob's and Sleeman's speech when they finally meet in the Assemblers' caves:

'You kidnapped them,' Rob said, disgusted.

Sleeman turned his head up toward the ceiling again, breaking contact.

'You brought them here,' he continued on. 'Transported them out here, to be sacrificed—to be killed—by the Assemblers. You offered them up—your own people. You did this!'

'You would like me to be the enemy, yes?' Sleeman replied distantly. 'It would suit your purpose, I imagine, to set me apart. How satisfying, yes, to see me as different, as the villain. And for you to be—what? The hero?'

'What is that supposed to mean?' Rob asked angrily.

Sleeman turned to face him once more. 'I serve, Mr Grant. Just as you do, yes. As you have done... in your war. Or you, Miss MacGillivray, in your infirmary, yes? And those who followed me—who were guided by me—serve as well. Willingly, by choice, yes. I did not force them. I marched alongside them, with them, to my fate. To this—this end—knowing the cost and accepting the cost, yes. For our deliverance.' (p. 135)

Again, with larger structures, variation in the length of individual scenes and flashbacks was used to alter pace and story according to the needs of the narrative. The third chapter of 'This Dying Machine,' for example, comprises five scenes—Rob's arrival at Highfield, his encounter with the Irishman, his flashback to sharing the dugout with Bell, his exchange with Mr Ingram, and his attack by Midge and the Beehive Boys—all which vary in length and/or pace. Out of the five scenes, Rob's meeting with Mr Ingram is both the longest and has the most relaxed paced, marking the significance of the exchange. The next longest are Rob's flashback to the trenches and his encounter with the Beehive Boys, but the pace of each is markedly

different: the former slow and thoughtful, the latter quick and hurried. Of the remaining two shorter scenes, Rob's arrival has the slowest pace, taking time to establish the setting and reveal important backstory, while the encounter with the Irishman seeks to introduce tension. Throughout the final novel, I have used pace and rhythm to continuously enhance the story, to give the narrative a dynamic flow and to make it more engaging.

In total, the challenges presented by plot, story, and pace were easily the most significant in redrafting 'This Dying Machine' for submission. Together they necessitated a full re-write of the novel to incorporate a more focused, balanced, and dynamic plot, a more coherent and vibrant character-driven story, and a more varied and exciting pace. Looking back at the penultimate draft, it marks an important stepping-stone in the development of the 'This Dying Machine.' The work and the consideration given to improving the novel's pace, story, and plot represented a turning point in the novel's genesis.

Flashback Integration and Character Differentiation

Having carefully examined plot, story, and pace, and identified creative solutions for improving each, a number of related challenges in the penultimate draft of 'This Dying Machine' could be approached. The first two considered were flashback integration and character differentiation. As noted previously, editing the fully compiled draft down to submission length required the majority of flashbacks to be removed; the few that remained were unseated from their original positions in the novel and, as a result, were not integrated enough into the whole. Flashbacks appearing in the text were intrusive and proved jarring, and their function was often unclear or painfully obvious. As they stood, the flashbacks were highly problematic and needed to be re-examined and reworked.

The changes that I had chosen to adopt in relation to plot and story, however, offered me new opportunities for the inclusion, integration, and expansion of flashbacks in the final narrative. In searching for creative means to incorporate and make meaningful use of flashbacks, I carefully scrutinised the texts I had reread for examples that might inform how flashbacks could be better used in 'This Dying

Machine.’ Given that the significance and number of flashbacks was due to increase dramatically in the final draft, special care was taken to examining how flashbacks were interwoven into the narrative. The most immediately relevant examples came from Barker’s *The Regeneration Trilogy*, wherein Burns, Rivers, and other prominent characters flashback into their experiences of the Great War. Other useful and inspirational examples came via Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Faulkner’s *The Sound And The Fury*, and Woolf’s *To The Lighthouse*. The sustained, dual timelines in *Wuthering Heights* separated by a span of three decades, the inability of Benjy Compson to break free of the trauma of his past in *The Sound and the Fury*, and Lily Briscoe’s blurring of past and present in her memory and art in *To The Lighthouse*, respectively, each provided me with exemplary samples of how flashback could be used to tell stories, to enrich them. In this reading, I found myself particularly interested in how flashbacks were integrated into the narrative: each was different, unique, and I began to consider how I might use flashbacks differently myself. That said, Benjy’s seemingly uncontrollable shifts between past and present in *The Sound and the Fury* would turn out to be especially influential in my approach to Rob’s neurasthenia.

In the penultimate draft of ‘This Dying Machine,’ flashbacks had been used both consciously and unconsciously: Ewan, Simon, and others consciously relived moments from the First World War, while Rob frequently, distressingly, transitioned into flashback without conscious effort. Looking ahead to the final draft, with Rob as the sole focaliser, I wanted to make more of these flashback transitions. Specifically, I wanted to introduce flashback triggers that would provide a means of creatively and smoothly transitioning from present to past and past to present again. I saw an opportunity for using Rob’s neurasthenia as a means of highlighting his lack of control or agency over his world. In the text, Rob is rarely in control of his neurasthenia: memories of the war, gruesome visions, and hallucinations actively and frequently intrude into his ‘waking’ reality. In rewriting ‘This Dying Machine,’ I actively sought to use triggers, and the flashbacks themselves, in a way that would allow for the reader to imaginatively experience the effect of Rob’s neurasthenia. To this end, in the final submission, flashbacks throughout the text are now triggered by specific circumstances and the transition between present and past—and later past

and present—is achieved more imaginatively. I intend that the readers, like Rob, be drawn from one timeline to the next, variously eased or thrust into the past or present, sometimes tumbling like Alice down a rabbit-hole. No transition or trigger is the same throughout the novel and Rob’s lack of agency manifests in his inability to control this temporal shifting. In this way, the former problem of flashbacks being too marked or too intrusive is overcome and, instead, becomes an intended feature of the narrative. In the final draft, flashbacks now more effectively complement the present-day story, providing a secondary track for narrative development and providing the novel with a wider scope: individually, they offer a glimpse of important events and encounters in the protagonist’s past which have impacted—or will impact—the present narrative.

Another challenge encountered in the penultimate edit was the novel’s cast of characters. With most of the characters’ backstories removed, as discussed above, the five primary characters were left with little to define and differentiate them. This constituted a major issue for the novel. The original, four male characters—all veterans from the same company—were too similar to one another and the single female character, Anna, was herself overly ‘boyish.’ Each of the characters, if maintained, would require greater differentiation. Reflecting on the rich protagonists found in Manning’s *Her Privates We* (1930), Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (1930), and Graves’ *Goodbye to All That* (1929), it was clear that—out of all the characters—Rob had to first be developed, strengthened, and brought to the fore. As discussed previously, changes in the plot and story would see Rob as the novel’s focaliser, but in addition to that shift of point of view, he needed to be more richly and dynamically realised. Prioritising Rob’s story revealed that there was little point in having three ‘like’ characters beside him. The number and kind of characters would need changing.

To tackle this problem, a complete re-working of all characters was undertaken. Virtually every character in the final draft has undergone significant change and their relationships to one another have been altered. The number of primary characters was reduced to four—a protagonist, a dramatic foil, and two antagonists, one of whom is largely restricted to flashbacks—with focalisation occurring solely through the protagonist. In seeking to differentiate my main

characters, I chose to map their characteristics and relationships to one another with all relevant aspects of their representation delineated and differentiated. This constituted creating a detailed breakdown that incorporated internal and external qualities, mannerisms and other notable elements for each character. I further explored the characters' relationships to one another, mapping how each character approached and felt about the others, at the beginning of the narrative, during the course of the action, and at the end of the novel. Finally, I considered each character's arc: what motivated them, what they struggled against, and how their actions were resolved in the novel. This descriptive mapping was then used to inform the writing of the new content and re-working of the old content to ensure that the characters were effectively and engagingly distinguished from one another, that their own themes and qualities shone through.

In addition, to the main characters I introduced a great number of new secondary characters and worked to ensure that they were likewise differentiated. Though the differences at times might be subtle, it was my intention that each individual in the final draft had her or his own discrete visualisation, voice, and mannerism. To achieve this, I often turned to metaphor to suggest details and attributes, letting the reader's imagination provide additional colour. With respect to recreating authentic dialogue and determining character voice, audio/video and textual resources from Historic Environment Scotland (particularly their cultural heritage database), Glasgow's Mitchell Library and Archives, and the University of Strathclyde's Scottish Oral History unit were consulted—in addition to relevant novels and media—to situate the characters in 1920s Glasgow. Further reading and audio recordings from Am Baile: Highland History & Culture, the Scots Language Centre (especially the resources on dialect), and the archives of the National Library of Scotland were invaluable in helping me to bring the speech of 1920s Glasgow to life. To inform the atmosphere, mood, and dialogue in the many flashbacks to World War One, I read a number of useful nonfiction texts, including: Doyle's *The British Soldier of the First World War* (2008), Mayhew's *Wounded: The Long Journey Home from the Great War* (2014), Oliver's *Not Forgotten: The Great War and our Modern Memory* (2005), and Hart's *Voices from the Front: An Oral History of the Great War* (2015). Not only was this an interesting exercise for me, it also proved

especially helpful in imaginatively situating myself—and, therefore, the novel—in the period. As a result, character differentiation in the final draft of ‘This Dying Machine’ is remarkably different and richer from that of the penultimate draft. The effect of this change has been dramatic in bringing the characters to life in the novel and having them stand out against one another. This combined mapping, researching, and reading has—perhaps more than any effort—helped me to realise the character-driven novel that I was hoping to achieve.

Atmosphere and Setting

The final challenges to be overcome in the penultimate draft of ‘This Dying Machine’ related to atmosphere and setting. The edits required to bring the novel down to submission length resulted in a story that unintentionally prioritised the characters’ encounter with the alien Assemblers and took place almost exclusively in the setting of the Assemblers’ caves. As a result, action in Glasgow, and in the First World War trenches in France, was severely limited and the atmosphere of both settings suffered greatly. While changes to the novel’s plot and story, addressed above, helped to overcome the issue of balance, much of the novel’s setting and atmosphere still had to be reconstructed and/or redeveloped. This proved to be a positive, rather than a negative, outcome of the edit. In line with the story-driven changes that I planned to incorporate in the final draft, I could now appreciate an opportunity to build greater variation and colour into the settings of 1920s Glasgow and the Great War. Rather than focusing on the shared, and therefore limited, experiences of the four soldiers—in both Glasgow and France—with Rob as the focaliser, I could leap from one setting to another, from one memory to another, crowding round richer and more meaningful experiences. The result was a greater number of, and more diverse, scenes to support and stage the narrative. Rob’s neurasthenia and unreliable narration provided me with greater freedom to construct scenes drawn from either setting, sometimes blurring elements or shifting from one setting to the other. As a result, setting itself became a more purposeful tool in the novel. Additionally, with Rob as the sole focaliser, I could mediate mood and atmosphere through him, drawing a dark and tainted atmosphere out of his

disordered perceptions of the world around him. Through Rob, I could also more closely match the atmosphere of Weird fiction, with its focus on the apprehension of dread and awe, particularly in relation to the Assemblers. In brief, with respect to both setting and atmosphere, I had the prospect of greatly improving on what had come before.

Looking for exemplars of strong setting, I revisited Paris and Pamplona in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, gritty Edinburgh in Rankin's *The Falls* (2001), and sun-dappled Coulibri in Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). Each very different in its own way, these settings are very nearly characters in their own right in their respective novels. Hemingway, Rankin, and Rhys lavish detail on every aspect of their worlds, bringing them to life through rich descriptions that constantly draw the reader in. The characters and stories of each novel *belong* in their realised settings: one cannot imagine taking Inspector Rebus out of Edinburgh or relocating Antionette's childhood from Jamaica to Canada or Scotland. As such, these novels were wonderful examples of how setting can effectively support story. But in taking lessons from these exemplars, I encountered a dilemma in my own thinking about setting in 'This Dying Machine.' The root of that dilemma lay in the fact that the world as it exists in the novel is the construction of an unreliable narrator suffering from a profound mental disorder. Rob's Glasgow is drawn from memory, infused with horrors, muddled and confused by hallucinations: it is part reality and part impressionistic fantasy—something the reader does not realise until the novel's end. The same is true—or truer still—of Rob's flashbacks to the First World War. Throughout the novel, his is a hybrid vision, an unstable mixture of truth and fiction. The detailed and truthful settings constructed by Rhys, Hemingway, and Rank—or, for that matter, Woolf, Conrad, or the Brontës—would not do for 'This Dying Machine.' The rigorous world building common to most literary fiction, and even more heavily emphasised in game fiction, did not offer me the ambiguity I was seeking. What I sought to create were, in fact, slight aberrations of 1920s Glasgow and the Great War, realised through Rob's confused senses: constructions of reality that occasionally blurred or bent, mixing the real and unreal, but remained true enough to effectively situate my characters and the story, and not draw undue attention by the reader.

Hoping to find something akin to this, I returned to Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* and Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness* wherein I found more relevant examples of settings realised in part through confusion and/or madness. However in both there remained a sharp, often quite dramatic, demarcation between realistic settings and more fantastic ones. For example, flashbacks to the war or vivid hallucinations stood out against the carefully drawn, authentic settings of the Craiglockhart Hospital in Edinburgh in *Regeneration* or the streets of London in *The Eye in the Door*. Likewise the colourful, bewildering description given to the alien City of the Elder Things contrasted sharply with the exacting, almost scientific detail employed to describe the expedition camp in Antarctica in *At the Mountains of Madness*. Both Barker's and Lovecraft's settings are alternatively canny or uncanny, but never both. Blackwood's *The Willows* came closer to the effect that I wanted to achieve in creating a setting that appears mundane and natural but harbours aspects that are ambiguous and unnatural. In the novel, the narrator's river journey—in which we might see shades of Marlow's journey in *The Heart of Darkness*—takes him and his Swedish companion perilously close to the boundary between the known and unknown. The pair never, however, strays wholly into the unknown, but merely apprehends its existence and flees from such knowledge. Hodgson's *The House on the Borderland* similarly describes this apprehension and much of the action in the novel is based on the narrator's intention to push back the pig-like invaders from the beyond.

In 'This Dying Machine' I intentionally wanted to blend the real and unreal, to have Rob exist in a world that expressed, to some degree, his broken and liminal state: a world described and brought to life from the threshold between reality and fantasy, narrated by a man who had one foot in the known and one in the unknown—a hybrid landscape. My challenge was to do this subtly so that the 'game' was not given up immediately or early on in the novel, but only revealed at the novel's end. Thus, I pursued visions of 1920s Glasgow and the Great War that were believable and engaging, but not overly rich in detail: settings that were simultaneously realistic and impressionistic. Herbert's *Dune* proved useful in this respect, presenting the desert wasteland of Arrakis as a tapestry of interwoven realism and fantasy—an example I could learn from. A few modern Weird fiction collections and works, such

as Ligotti's *Songs of a Dead Dreamer and Grimscribe* (2016) and VanderMeer's *Annihilation* (2014) respectively, also provided useful examples of confused or hybrid realities. Taking what I could from these, I tried to create settings that carefully blurred truth and fiction, and which also allowed me to show Rob's mental degeneration as he and Anna move into and through increasingly fictive landscapes.

Changes to atmosphere followed a similar route, as I investigated how I could use mood and atmosphere to express Rob's tortured state of mind throughout the novel. Weird fiction was more demonstrably helpful here, specifically as the sub-genre's central focus on creating atmosphere that inspires an apprehension of awe and dread was something I wanted to utilise. In the final dissertation, I have sought to instil an atmosphere of growing disquiet—mirroring Rob's internal experience—that builds towards the novel's climax. In this I took primary inspiration from the stories and novellas of Lovecraft, notably 'The Call of Cthulhu' (2014) and *At the Mountains of Madness*. The drive of the Weird, Lovecraft tells us in his essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature' (2004b) is to create a mood or atmosphere at once capable of inspiring dread and awe. In this desired outcome, the Weird echoes the Romantic sublime (Day 2012, Hancock 2005, Weiskel 1977, etc.), but where the sublime reflects the natural world, the Weird—like Carroll's Alice—seeks to step through the looking glass to approach the unnatural and the unknown:

'The true weird tale has something more than secret murder, bloody bones, or a sheeted form clanking chains according to rule. A certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces must be present; and there must be a hint, expressed with seriousness and portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space' (p. 84).

In 'This Dying Machine,' those 'unknown forces' and 'daemons of unplumbed space' are most overtly represented by the alien Assemblers, who in their horrific forms and actions inspire both awe and dread. But in the novel I also wanted to show

war as an important source of awe and dread, and so I returned to Manning's *Her Privates We*, to the memoirs of Sassoon and Graves, and the true accounts of soldiers' experiences collected in Hart and Mayhew. Drawing on these experiences, I sought to create flashbacks that accurately reflected the horrors of war, generating atmosphere through voice, detail, setting, and action. In the novel, I have tried to generate atmosphere that builds and changes in response to Rob's interactions in the present and past: as he moves forward to facing the uncanny Assemblers and concomitantly experiences flashbacks to the war, the atmosphere of the narrative grows more tense and oppressive. When he and Anna finally enter the Assemblers' caves, the novel's atmosphere—like the atmosphere of the caverns themselves—is claustrophobic and suffocating. Rob's final escape from the Assemblers' caves offers a literal and figurative breath of fresh air. However, a final shock of awe and dread is intended in the last chapter, wherein the reader discovers that Rob's struggle against the Assemblers is fictitious and that he is trapped helpless within a regenerating nightmare of his own creation.

Aligned to changes in plot, story, and pace, and in the use of flashbacks and character differentiation, the changes made in the atmosphere and the setting of 'This Dying Machine' have substantially improved the novel. What has become manifestly clear in the process is that novels are ultimately made in their redrafting. New creative opportunities were realised in every challenge I encountered in the penultimate draft of 'This Dying Machine.' While it has required significant effort to rework the novel and implement each of the changes, the amount of learning that has coincided with this process has made each exercise extremely valuable.

Part 2: Intertextuality and Relation to Literary Canon

In this second part, I will endeavor to illuminate the intertextuality at play in the novel and the relationship of 'This Dying Machine' to the established literary canon. Here I will consider how the hybridising principle informs the discussions below on intertextuality and relation to canon. As mentioned in that introduction, I see the final draft of the 'This Dying Machine' as a hybrid. In terms of its subject matter and content, the novel is a hybrid of historical fiction and horror fiction—

specifically the sub-genre of cosmic horror known more widely as Weird fiction—which adopts and combines features from both genres (and indeed others), presenting a narrative that intentionally mixes the horrific and the mundane, the past and present, and the real and unreal. In terms of structure and intent, ‘This Dying Machine’ is also a hybrid, a mix of elements from both literary and game fiction, meant to entertain and engage, but also to unsettle and challenge its readership. This hybridity has done much to inform the text, its intertextuality, and its context in literary tradition, as I hope to show below.

Intertextuality

Hybridity and intertextuality are complementary concepts—particularly in their generative mixing of elements, meanings and representations, often requiring reinterpretation or reconceptualisation (Mäntynen & Shore 2014, Östman & Simon-Vandenberg 2004, etc.)—and I can easily see the interplay of one and the other in the final draft of ‘This Dying Machine.’ That said, hybridity has always been in the foreground for me as a writer: I designed the novel as a hybrid creation, not as an explicitly intertextual one. I did not follow the allusive path taken by Joyce in *Ulysses* or Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, for example, to creatively parallel or refer to the work of another—Homer’s 8th Century epic *Odyssey* (2003) and Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, respectively. Similarly, it was never my intention to write a pastiche of Lovecraft, although one would be hard-pressed to mistake the influence of the Lovecraftian Weird in the submitted novel. Regardless, intertextuality looms large over the text, as it has over every text since Barthes declared the death of the author in ‘La mort de l’auteur’ (1967) and Kristeva birthed the term intertextuality in ‘Bahktine, le mot, le dialogues et le roman’ (1967). In our postmodern, post-structuralist age, Haberer (2007) notes: ‘no text exists on its own, it is always connected to another text.’ If anything, the hybridity—the mixing of formal and generic conventions, themes and meanings, etc.—of the novel cast the net of intertextuality even wider, allowing for an even richer catch of allusions, borrowings, and influences.

In Part One, I discussed the texts that I sought inspiration from and which helped me overcome challenges that presented themselves in the penultimate draft. Each of these texts has acted in some way to inform the final draft of ‘This Dying Machine’ and therefore can be seen as intertextual influences on my novel. While some of these influences and borrowings operate invisibly on the text, others can be seen to function more demonstrably (as we will see below), suggesting layers of potential reference or allusion. Interrogating the final draft, I find the most marked intertextuality in relation to form and theme. It is here that Barthes’s assertion that ‘the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.’ seems to me most evident (p. 146).

Looking at the narrative structure of ‘This Dying Machine,’ for example, one can read it as a journey into darkness or into the unknown. The influence of both Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness* and Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* can be seen quite clearly in Rob’s journey to find Victor in the subterranean caves of the Assemblers. Both Rob’s and Marlow’s journeys, for instance, take them into dark, uncanny ‘interiors’—the figurative ‘heart of Africa’ in *The Heart of Darkness* and a strange nightmare-realm born from Rob’s unconscious in ‘This Dying Machine.’ The Miskatonic University expedition to Antarctica in *At the Mountains of Madness* similarly is a journey into the unknown that culminates with an encounter with a cosmic horror, an alien unknown, just as Rob’s journey closes after his confrontation with the Assemblers. Indeed, a particular parallel might be seen in Dyer’s and Danforth’s descent beneath the alien City of the Elder Things, their encounter with the horrific shoggoth, and their subsequent flight from the City. The final chapters of ‘This Dying Machine’ follow a strikingly similar narrative route, which readers of Lovecraft may consciously or unconsciously note.

Further structural intertextuality arises not from literature but from game fiction and, in particular, the scenarios and campaigns written for the Lovecraft-inspired *Call of Cthulhu Roleplaying Game* (Petersen, 2015). Given that I have published a number of books and scenarios for *Call of Cthulhu* and related games, it is perhaps no surprise to find the influence of the quest or adventure structure common to these games in ‘This Dying Machine.’ Typically, quests begin with a call to adventure (substantiated in Anna’s arrival and Victor’s disappearance in the

novel), involve a series of tests and challenges to overcome (encountered throughout Rob's search for Victor), and end with a confrontation with an uncanny Other (exemplified by the Assemblers). This structure itself, of course, recalls the stages of the 'monomyth' or hero's journey outlined by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), a study of the intertextuality of myths and legends belonging to all cultures:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won.' (p. 23)

In this interconnectedness, we might see the depth and breadth of the intertextual web that exists within 'This Dying Machine'—and indeed in all texts, even those that are not explicitly intertextual. For my purposes, the most meaningful intertextual relationships with respect to narrative structure are those with *The Heart of Darkness* and *At the Mountains of Madness*, both of which offer a rich allusive power to the novel.

At the structural level, the use of flashbacks and unreliable narration in 'This Dying Machine,' particularly in relation to mental disorder, can be seen as contributing to, and benefiting from, a strong intertextual relationship with Barker's *The Regeneration Trilogy*, James's *The Turn of the Screw*, and Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. The more obvious connection here is, no doubt, with *The Regeneration Trilogy*, where my own use of flashbacks mirrors to some extent Barker's usage. Both the intrusiveness of the flashbacks and their function in revealing backstory and highlighting thematic content in Barker's trilogy were highly influential and inspired my use of flashbacks in 'This Dying Machine.' The intertextual link to *The Regeneration Trilogy* is made all the stronger for the shared focus on the Great War and on veteran's suffering from shellshock or neurasthenia. The use of flashbacks resulting from mental disorder or fragmentation further links my novel to Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. In Faulkner's novel, Benjy Compson's world is presented to readers in a disruptive, temporally shifting stream of consciousness, jumping frenetically from past to present, present to past. Benjy himself seems to have little or

no control of this process. A similar lack of agency or control is central to Rob's focalisation in 'This Dying Machine': his neurasthenia commandeers his consciousness repeatedly throughout the novel. The function of the flashbacks in both novels is, thus, similar, but a more significant intertextual correlation exists in the effect the flashbacks have upon the reader. Reading *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader effectively experiences Benjy's mental disorder first-hand, dragged from one disjointed memory or experience to the next, bewildered and discombobulated, struggling to find meaning. Benjy's jumbled flashbacks turn the narrative into a puzzle or riddle, for the reader to work through. The same effect is achieved in 'This Dying Machine' through Rob's focalisation and flashbacks: readers experience Rob's world as he does, as a hybrid of the real and unreal, of the present and past. As a result, a kind of intellectual game arises in the narrative, a puzzle for readers to solve, to reconcile the more enigmatic elements of the story. The truth—which Rob himself is unable to apprehend—is revealed only in the final pages of the novel.

The conundrum posed in 'This Dying Machine' is partly manifested through unreliable narration. Through Rob's point of view, readers encounter ambiguity in both representation and interpretation. Through his eyes and experience, the world of the novel is presented as a hybrid of the mundane/known and the fantastic/unknown, a disquieting aberration of the 'real'. His perception of this hybrid world, how he interprets it and navigates it, is equally unsettling. Rob rarely reacts in a rational manner to the dangers and horrors he perceives or encounters; instead, he seems drawn to them, ever seeking to apprehend the truth behind them, even to the point of imperiling himself and Anna. Is this because, on some level, Rob is aware that the horrors are unreal? That they are products of his imagination? That the Assemblers are, in fact, 'assembled' in his own unconscious? These questions reveal a strong intertextual connection to James's *The Turn of the Screw*. For each question, we might exchange Rob for the governess and Assemblers for ghosts and find them equally valid. James's obsessive governess is an almost perfect exemplar of unreliable narration (Lodge 1987, Hansen 2007). Throughout the novel, her narration invites interpretation but refuses explication, and ultimately provides no answers; James seems content to leave his readers wondering. In 'This Dying Machine,' Rob's perceptions and actions are similarly enigmatic and open to interpretation. Neither he

in my novel nor the governess in *The Turn of the Screw* seems aware of the terrible potential that haunts them: that they might be both hero and villain in their own tales. Their lack of regard for this potential—in Rob’s case until the final chapter—provides a strong intertextual connection between the two narratives.

To a lesser extent, the same intertextuality can be seen functioning between ‘This Dying Machine’ and *The Sound and the Fury*, but with a different focus. Namely, the unreliable narration in both novels can be seen as resulting from disability. In Faulkner’s novel, for example, Benjy is severely developmentally delayed and largely unable to understand or correlate his experiences; while in the submitted draft, Rob likewise cannot come to terms with the world around him, unhinged from reality by the mental trauma he suffered in the First World War. Both men are innocents, to some extent, and certainly tragic figures. As narrators, they are made unreliable by their disabilities—perhaps better thought of as reliable narrators with unreliable minds. They are not consciously or willfully unreliable—a statement that may or may not apply to James’s governess, depending on the reading—but trapped in circumstances that they cannot fully comprehend. This poignant, shared circumstance works as an intertext between the two novels.

Looking next for instances of thematic intertextuality, the most striking examples are found in relation to horror, specifically the horror of war and cosmic horror (sometimes termed existential horror or cosmic nihilism, see Houellebecq 2008, Ligotti 2010, and Miéville 2009). This is to be expected as ‘This Dying Machine’ was designed to use the horror of war and cosmic horror in parallel, as an intertext itself, evoking and strengthening the apprehension of awe and dread. In the novel, the two horrific themes are expressed through the actions of monstrous inhuman forces—the Great War and the alien Assemblers, respectively—which simultaneously threaten to destroy humanity and destabilise mankind’s place in, and understanding of, the universe. With respect to the horror of war, its presentation in ‘This Dying Machine,’ particularly via flashbacks, intertextually references both fiction and non-fiction. I found numerous influential representations of the horror of the First World War in the firsthand accounts collected by Mayhew and Hart, for instance; in the memoirs of soldiers, such as Graves’ *Goodbye to All That* and Sassoon’s *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*; in the historical novels of Manning and

Barker; and in the Modernist fiction of Woolf, Hemingway, and others—most post-war fiction made reference, in some fashion, to the horror of war—as Tate argues in *Modernism, History and the First World War* (1998). It might well be impossible to presently write of the Great War without calling upon the vivid tapestry of intertext that is now interwoven with it.

In its own way, ‘This Dying Machine’ both contributes to and is supported by this intertextuality. The incidents recounted in Rob’s flashbacks, for example, intentionally similar the authentic experience of soldiers in recorded histories—the instances written into the text often being inspired by real events; the descriptions of the trenches and soldiers’ daily lives are drawn from the portrayals found in Manning, Sassoon, and Graves; the effects of Rob’s neurasthenia mirror the shellshock suffered by Prior, Owen, and others in *The Regeneration Trilogy*; and the profound mental impact of the soldiers’ horrific experiences is reflected in Rob’s mental disorder as it is, for instance, in Septimus’s degeneration and suicide in *Mrs Dalloway*. In short, every aspect of the Great War presented in the novel bears some relationship—weak or strong—to the fiction and non-fiction I read on the First World War and, indeed, to the intertexts that run between them. The horror of war in ‘This Dying Machine’ is ultimately realised through Rob’s experience, trauma, and neurasthenia but it is made manifestly stronger and more meaningful through the intertextual connections to these earlier histories and narratives. Of those, I would suggest the richest connections are those with Barker’s trilogy and Manning’s *Her Privates We*: in these I see the strongest link and greatest influence upon my work.

Functioning as a thematic foil to the horror of war, the influence and importance of cosmic horror as a theme in ‘This Dying Machine’ is announced with the arrival of the Assemblers in Chapter One. The monstrous and uncanny thing that first erupts from the mine floor—and from Rob’s unconscious—bears little relation to the ghosts that haunt James’s *The Turn of the Screw* or the ghoulish figure of Mr Hyde in Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Manifestly alien and Other, the Assemblers are agents of cosmic horror in the novel, symbolising that which is unknown and unknowable, and signifying mankind’s impotence and insignificance in the larger universe. The incorporation of cosmic horror as a theme provides an intended intertextual link to the Weird fiction of Lovecraft, Ligotti,

Copper, Blackwood, and others. Virtually all Weird fiction shares the same Lovecraftian impulse: to achieve an apprehension of awe and dread in the face of the cosmic void (Houellebecq 2008, Lovecraft 2004b, Peak 2014, etc.). In ‘This Dying Machine’ this apprehension is achieved through Rob’s escalating encounters with the Assemblers. The height of Rob’s cosmic horror arises when he finally reaches the Assemblers and their machine, and realises his own insignificance and powerlessness in relation to them:

They were moving—all of them. In the thinning mist below, Rob could see the Assemblers moving. The floor of the entire cavern seemed to shift, to dance and undulate. Shapes and structures that bore no earthly comparison broke through the top of the mist and vanished just as quick beneath. Strange appendages extended, flailing and lashing, from even stranger bodies. Beneath the mist, impossible bone-white shapes gamboled around the base of the unearthly crystalline structure. Taken all together, the sight was too bewildering to comprehend. It rattled him and unnerved him in a way he would never be able to explain.

So many, Rob thought to himself. He could never have imagined there could be so many. What could he do against such an army? Against such power?

Paralysed by fear, he watched the swaying and thrusting forms dance round the crystal, his gaze drawn to the contours of long spikes and sharp talons, jagged pincers and whipping tentacles. He knew he would not—could not—ever speak of what he saw. A kind of madness would be required to give it voice. (p. 150)

Similar revelations of cosmic irrelevance and impotence are experienced by Dyer and Danforth in the City of the Elder Things in Lovecraft’s *At the Mountains of Madness* and by Plowright in achieving Copper’s *The Great White Space*. Indeed, the same moment of terrible epiphany can be found in Blackwood’s *The Willows* and Hodgson’s *The House on the Borderland*. An intertextual current runs through them all, as it does in ‘This Dying Machine,’ compounding and underscoring the theme of

cosmic horror. This rich intertext amplifies the power of the cosmic horror, its repetition even providing a measure of validation. However, while Weird fiction satisfies itself in providing readers with an apprehension of the cosmic unknown, and the horror therein, in the submitted draft I have intentionally taken a step further and used cosmic horror to reinforce the horror of war and express the scale of Rob's tragedy.

Like Weird fiction, game fiction belonging to the horror genre concerns itself primarily with the theme of cosmic horror. Scenarios and campaigns written for the Call of Cthulhu roleplaying game, for example, pit players against Lovecraftian horrors with little hope of survival, but then survival is not the aim: the goal of the cosmic horror gaming, like that of Weird fiction, is to briefly apprehend the awe and dread of cosmic horror, to achieve the threshold and glimpse the void. The pursuit of this thematic goal intertextually links it to Weird fiction and thus to 'This Dying Machine.' It stands as another example of how intertextuality weaves throughout the final draft and evidences a lineage of allusions and borrowings, of shared themes, structures, and ideas. Momentarily taking on the role of critic, it is remarkable to see the breadth and depth of intertextuality exhibited in the final draft, extending well beyond the few examples presented here. More impressive still is what it adds to the novel, how it connects to, and draws upon, conscious and unconscious significance and meaning to enhance and enliven the text. As presented above, 'This Dying Machine' is undeniably richer for these connections.

Relation to the Literary Canon

Given its subject matter, its intertextuality, and its genre hybridity, the question of the submitted novel's relation to the literary canon is a complicated one. This complexity is, however, by design. As a mix of historical fiction and horror fiction, the novel was never intended to fit neatly into either genre, but to function from, or on, the borders of both. Its subject matter and its intertextuality reflect this: Rob's story is presented through an intertwined narrative that jumps from Glasgow in 1922 to the tunnels and trenches of the First World War—from Rob's present into

the historical past—and back again, and incorporates elements both historical and horrific in both timelines. The intertextuality of the novel, as shown in the previous section, highlights strong connections to, and borrowings from, previous works of horror and historical fiction, particularly in relation to theme. The submitted novel voices themes common to both genres, namely the horror of war and cosmic horror, but unusually uses the latter to amplify the former—a point I will return to in Part Three. In text, intertext, and context then, ‘This Dying Machine’ is a hybrid entity.

While this hybridity effectively makes it impossible to situate the novel in one single genre, my hope is that it highlights the creative potential achieved in mixing and combining generic conventions. In the same way that no text can stand free of intertextuality, Derrida, in ‘The Law of Genre’ (1980), articulates that ‘every text participates in one or several genres’ (p. 56). In the case of ‘This Dying Machine,’ the final draft participates most dominantly in the genres of historical fiction and horror fiction. That intention has remained unchanged since the novel’s original conception. However, it may now be possible to further interrogate this generic relationship, to determine whether or not this pre-determined generic mix is substantiated in the final draft.

Looking first at the novel’s relationship to historical fiction, from its most basic definition as ‘fiction set in the past’ (Johnson 2005, p. 5), ‘This Dying Machine’ can be read as historical fiction. The focus of the novel being the Great War 1914-1918 and its protagonist being a veteran of the war, within the broader category of historical fiction, the novel might be related to the sub-genre of military fiction or war fiction. At its heart, however, the novel is more about one man’s suffering—about the tragic cost of conflict, rather than about the machinations of war itself. In this respect, I think ‘This Dying Machine’ mirrors Barker’s *The Regeneration Trilogy*, which, to my mind, is more a story about honor and heroism rather than war. Both my novel and Barker’s, I would argue, are concerned with exploring aspects of the human condition. For this reason, despite having a strong anti-war theme, I would hesitate to say that ‘This Dying Machine’ is an anti-war book per se or fits neatly into the sub-genre of war or military fiction—although I can see arguments for it. My intention in the submitted draft was to highlight the psychic damage and mental fragmentation that arises from witnessing and

experiencing the horrors that humans can inflict upon one another—whether in war or any other kind of conflict. The same theme might have been explored from the perspective of a traumatised child in a modern conflict or a Centurion suffering dementia in Ancient Rome—the one and the other from, respectively. The sheer scale of the Great War, its effect on British society, particularly on the peoples’ consciousness, and the facility to use neurasthenia as a lens for distorting and disrupting Rob’s story ultimately proved the most appealing setting for the novel. Given its themes and its wider scope, I would argue that the generic classification of ‘This Dying Machine’ as a historical novel (or at least part-historical) is more fitting than specifically a military, war, or anti-war novel.

A stronger correlation might be seen in the novel’s relationship to the horror genre. Building off earlier definitions by Carroll (1990) and others, Nickel (2010) suggests works of horror must possess two elements: first, ‘an appearance of the evil supernatural or of the monstrous’ and, second, ‘the intentional elicitation of dread, visceral disgust, fear, or startlement in the spectator or reader’ (p. 15). The submitted novel evidences both in the appearance of the Assemblers and in the intentional use of cosmic horror to arrive at the apprehension of dread and awe, respectively. Further sub-categorisation is also possible as the novel clearly incorporates themes and conventions belonging to Weird fiction, a sub-genre within horror fiction, particularly in adopting the theme of cosmic horror and in its use of atmosphere. In his highly influential essay, ‘Supernatural Horror in Literature’ (2004b), Lovecraft provides us with a vision, if not a blueprint, of the Weird, elucidating three essential components: atmosphere or mood, realism, and cosmicism. This trio of elements is, Lovecraft instructs, instrumental to every Weird tale: the drive of the Weird—itself a ‘type of fear-literature’ (p. 84)—is to create a mood or atmosphere at once capable of inspiring dread and awe, a glimpse into a veiled beyond. Lovecraft seeks the right combination of effects—atmosphere, realism, and cosmicism—that will allow his readers to momentarily view an entirely abhuman space, imaginatively breaking free of the natural world, the anthropocene, and the anthropocentric. This aim or intention, and the methods by which it is achieved, differentiates Weird fiction from other horror fiction.

While Lovecraft may not be the originator of the Weird tale—we must look to Sheridan Le Fanu and other 19th Century Gothics for that—our modern conception of the Weird as a genre is attributed to him (Fisher 2016, Joshi 1990, Ligotti 2011, etc.). A post-modern construction, the Weird is noted for its generic slipperiness, frequently incorporating elements from other genres and sub-genres—supernatural fiction, fantasy, detective fiction, and science fiction, most notably. Interestingly, the Weird is often described through contradiction: that is, by not being, or belonging to, some other genre. Luckhurst (2014) suggests the Weird is, in fact, defined by this ‘dis/orientation’ or ‘lack’ of place (p. 1057). Far from being seen as a negative, however, many critics argue that this ambiguity is one of the Weird’s greatest strengths (see Ligotti 2011, Luckhurst 2014, Moore 2014, etc.). Jarvis (2017) proposes that the Weird offers opportunities for ‘radical and progressive’ exploration and ‘ideological critique’ precisely because its position is ambiguous (p. 1134). The progressive and, specifically, transgressive potential of the Weird figures largely in ‘This Dying Machine,’ in the mixing of conventions and in the principle of hybridity that runs throughout it. As mentioned previously, the creative intermixing of Weird elements and historical elements, offered me the opportunity to express the scale of Rob’s loss in a way that would otherwise be difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. The capacity of the Weird to unsettle and challenge, to disorient and contest, was essential to my redrafting of the novel. Many aspects common to Weird novels can be seen in the final draft: for example, protagonists drawn towards the unknown and the ‘unknowable’; the presence of uncanny, alien, and Other antagonists; and narrative conclusions that offer no answers, only riddles—and dark ones at that.

It is precisely in the intention to unsettle and challenge, to bring what we know into question, that I see the strongest connection between ‘This Dying Machine’ and the Weird fiction of Lovecraft, Copper, and others. The final draft, certainly more than any previous draft, was designed to present readers with a puzzle that was simultaneously engaging and disquieting. Although not strictly analogous, the intended outcome has correspondences in Viktor Shklovsky’s defamiliarization (‘Art as Device’ 1917), Derrida’s *différance* (‘Différance’ 1963), and Freud’s uncanny or *Unheimliche* (‘Das Unheimliche’ 1919): each incorporates a distancing or ‘making weird’ (Fisher 2016) of the real. My own use of this ‘weird-making’

diverges from Lovecraft's and other Weird authors'—as I will discuss further in Part Three—but this shared intent evidences a strong connection with the Weird sub-genre. Based on the strength of this relationship, I feel confident in stating that 'This Dying Machine' is, at least in part, a work of Weird fiction.

Few other generic categorisations demonstrate such a strong connection to the finished novel—again, this is by design. I might, however, briefly mention speculative fiction as a super-category into which horror fiction and Weird fiction are often placed, and even historical fiction is occasionally subsumed—although usually in reference to alternate histories (Oziewicz 2015, Thomas 2013, etc.). Speculative fiction's willingness to incorporate hybrids (Oziewicz 2017) does suggest that 'This Dying Machine' might safely inhabit this larger generic landscape. We might see a further connection in the fledgling sub-genre the 'New Weird.' VanderMeer (2008) defines the New Weird as 'a type of urban, secondary-world fiction that subverts the romanticised ideas about place found in traditional fantasy, largely by choosing realistic, complex real-world models as the jumping-off point for creation of settings that may combine elements of both science fiction and fantasy' (p. xvi). Reid (2008) further delineates the New Weird as comprising works that 'subvert clichés of the fantastic in order to put them to discomfiting, rather than consoling ends' (p. 234). This emphasis on generic subversion and hybridity, and the potential for unsettling the reader is, as noted above, core to 'This Dying Machine.' It may be, therefore, that the novel shows ties to the New Weird as well. Finally, the novel's focus on the horrors of the First World War, its narrative disruption, and its self-conscious desire for novelty and dismissal of generic standards suggest a strong connection with Modernism (Gay 2009, Levinson 2011, etc.). This is perhaps not surprising given the number of intertextual links with Modernist texts (identified in Part Two above) and their admitted influence upon my writing. It is possible, therefore, to see 'This Dying Machine' as a neo-Modernist work as well.

Again, this hybridity and concomitant difficulty in categorisation is by design. I did not set out to write a straightforward, genre novel. I was intrigued from the start with doing something different and original through mixing genres and embracing hybridity and ambiguity. If anything that ambiguity and hybridity grew stronger out of the challenges in the penultimate draft. As the novel stands, I see it

most strongly distinguished as neo-Modernist Weird fiction. Looking beyond genre, my hope is that, as a piece of fiction, 'This Dying Machine' intrigues readers and engages them in interpretation, in their own search for meaning. Lodge (1987) perhaps expressed this hope best in relation to James's later fiction, noting that it 'constantly aspired to the condition of ambiguity – that the impossibility of arriving at a single, simple version of the 'truth' about any human action or experience is, in the broadest sense, what fiction is all about' (p. 6).

Part 3: Contribution to Creative Writing

In this third and final section, I will discuss how 'This Dying Machine' innovates by using the interplay of genre conventions and literary and game elements to create an original hybrid narrative, and how, in doing so, it makes an original contribution to the field of creative writing. Below I will focus on four aspects or elements of the submitted draft which are innovative: first, how the novel combines historical fiction and Weird fiction to imaginatively portray the mental disorder of its protagonist; second, how a specific genre hybridity functions in the novel to disrupt readers' generic expectations, to unsettle and challenge, and to inspire original 'weird' readings of the text; third, how the novel subverts the inhuman or abhuman focus of cosmic horror in the Weird to instead illuminate aspects of the human condition; and, fourth, how the novel both incorporates game elements and functions as a literary game, thus as a hybrid mode of fiction. Through exploring these three elements, I hope to show how 'This Dying Machine' stands as an original work and a contribution to knowledge.

From the first chapter of the novel to the last, Robert Grant's mental disorder is fundamental to 'This Dying Machine.' As the novel's focaliser, Rob's point of view is the lens through which the narrative is conveyed to readers and, as an unreliable narrator, also skewed and problematised. Throughout the novel, Rob's fragmented and troubled mental state is presented through his neurasthenia and resulting flashbacks, and through his experiences and interactions with the fantastic Assemblers. This pattern is established in the first chapter of the novel: readers are introduced to Rob in the midst of a flashback, which is disrupted by the emergence

of an Assembler, and further disrupted by the cook knocking at the door to his garret apartment. Three different, potential realities are thus presented and conflated: the historical reality of the Great War, the Weird reality of the Assemblers, and the modern or present reality of 1922 Glasgow. Of course, none of these express the truth: Rob's tragic reality is revealed only in the novel's final chapter, in one last disruption and reorientation of the narrative.

Building to that moment, Rob's mental disorder is presented dually through a succession of historical flashbacks and Weird imaginings and events. Each intentionally disrupts the narrative and stands as further evidence of Rob's disintegrated experience. Significantly, the focalisation of the novel necessitates readers' involvement in that experience: immersion into the narrative results in immersion into Rob's fantastic and horrific world, an aberrant landscape constructed and populated by his disturbed unconscious. The portrayal of a disturbed mind through the use of flashbacks or hallucinations is not new—take Septimus's auditory hallucinations in Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* or Benjy's frenzied flashbacks in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, as two examples of many. The manifestation of mental disorder through apprehension of, and conflict against, a Weird antagonist, on the other hand, is innovative.

In 'This Dying Machine,' Rob's disordered mental state is most strongly expressed in the novel's final chapter, when Rob finds himself confused and disoriented back in Glasgow's Royal Infirmary and the reader appreciates (what s/he might already have guessed) that the Assemblers are, in fact, figments of Rob's damaged psyche—that Rob himself is the author or 'assembler' of his own horror story. Throughout the novel, Rob is trapped in a nightmare born of his troubled mind. The Assemblers and other Weird elements (e.g. Sleeman and True Providence) are agents of his tortured subconscious. Rob's journey and conflict against these agents are expressions of his desire and, ultimately, his inability to reconcile the horrors he has experienced or witnessed in the First World War. The novel innovatively blends historical fiction and Weird fiction to tell a story of profound personal loss and to dramatise mental disorder using Weird elements.

The combining or manipulating of generic elements or conventions for effect also informs a further innovation in the text. As mentioned in my introduction and

noted elsewhere above, hybridity is important to 'This Dying Machine.' From the outset, I wanted to write a novel that entertained but also unsettled and challenged readers, which required them to sit up and ask questions, to evaluate and interpret the text, and to reorient themselves to it. One means by which I sought to achieve this was through genre hybridity. Hybridisation of genre offered me the opportunity to establish generic uncertainty and disrupt reader's generic expectations. Generic categorisation is, of course, unavoidable, as Devitt (2004) notes: 'People interpret situations, select genres, and function culturally within a context of existing genres that brings the past perpetually into the present.' (p. 28-29). Thus, readers approach reading with preconceived ideals and expectations with respect to genre. In establishing generic hybridity and ambiguity, my goal was to cause readers to question those ideals and expectations, to experience genres—to some extent—afresh. Put another way, this generic hybridity aims to inspire 'weird' readings of the novel, going directly against the idea that genres normally 'serve to stabilize experience' (Giddens 1984, p. 4).

In the novel, hybridity instead serves to destabilise experience, to necessitate reorientation and/or interpretation. This is not a dismissal of genre, but a slight subversion to momentarily unseat readers from a position of privilege—again, to unsettle and challenge. In fact, the novel makes strong use of genre conventions at the same time that it is subverting them. This kind of transgressive or transformative potential is highlighted by Todorov (1990) in *Genres in Discourse*, achieved particularly 'by inversion, by displacement, by combination' (p. 92). Fishelov (1993) similarly suggest pushing against 'generic conventions might be viewed as a challenge, or a horizon' for authors intending to 'produce some unpredictable "match" between different existing conventions of existing literary genres' (p. 82). 'This Dying Machine' seeks to problematise the match between historical fiction and Weird fiction, and, thereby, disrupt readers' generic expectations and assumptions. In doing so, it is my hope that readers might discover or appreciate something weird or new in the experience. While much of Weird fiction, as Joshi (1990) observes, seeks to inspire a 'refashioning of the reader's view of the world' (p. 118), it is primarily concerned with achieving this through cosmic horror, and does not concern itself with the potential found in disrupting generic assumptions and expectations. The

intended use of genre hybridity in 'This Dying Machine' to invite weird readings is, thus, innovative and novel.

A further innovation can be found in the way in which the novel subverts the inhuman or abhuman focus of cosmic horror in the Weird to instead illuminate aspects of the human condition. The accepted function of cosmic horror, as noted previously, is to achieve an apprehension of awe and dread in glimpsing the cosmic void, to experience existential dread in appreciating mankind's cosmic insignificance. This singular function is core to virtually all works of Weird fiction (Houellebecq 2008, Joshi 1990, etc.). 'This Dying Machine' subverts this usage to serve instead as a means of expressing the protagonist's mental disorder, as presented above, but additionally, and importantly, to amplify the novel's core theme of the horror of war and its terrible costs. It is in this amplification of the core theme and divergence from its accepted function that the novel's use of cosmic horror can be seen as an example of innovation.

Throughout the novel, two themes of horror run in parallel: via flashbacks and, to a lesser extent, Rob's reminiscences, the horror of war is expressed, derived from his experiences during the First World War; while cosmic horror is substantiated in Rob's quest to find Victor and concomitant encounters with the alien Assemblers. These two strands do not meet or intertwine, but remain differentiated from one another until the very end of the novel. This differentiation is significant as it evidences Rob's incapacity to see a connection between the two: specifically, he cannot discern that the cosmic horror he experiences—represented by the Assemblers—manifests from the horror he experienced in the trenches and tunneling beneath No Man's Land. Even in the final chapter, when Anna makes the situation clear to the Rob's doctor, Rob himself cannot reconcile a connection between the two, nor appreciate the significance of that connection, and remains trapped within his self-generated nightmare.

In that moment of revelation, however, the reader can see that the cosmic horror Rob experiences is a further expression or embodiment of the horrors he has experienced in France. The presence of the cosmic horror figuratively doubles, and subsequently amplifies, his initial or primary horror. Within the text, then cosmic horror thematically serves to augment the theme of the horror of war and the tragic

costs of human conflict. Rather than focusing on the horror of the void and existential dread, cosmic horror is used in the novel to illuminate the terrible scale of Rob's psychic damage and his loss of self as a result of his war experience. In this way the 'lens' of cosmic horror is reversed, to focus on one man's tragic loss rather than mankind's insignificance in the cosmos. This reversal marks a subversion of the Weird and cosmic horror and establishes the novel's innovative use of cosmic horror.

Finally, 'This Dying Machine' functions innovatively as a hybrid of literary and game fiction, or as a literary game. The novel works as a game on a number of levels: for example, as shown above, the subversion of generic expectations creates a puzzle for readers. This intentional gaming of genre is designed to disrupt accepted or familiar responses to genre and require readers to reinterpret or reorient themselves to their genre expectations and, as stated above, to inspire weird readings of the novel. 'This Dying Machine' is also constructed and written to function as a narrative game, meant both to engage and challenge readers. Rob's story is not conveyed as a straightforward or conventional narrative, but instead is broken up with flashbacks, complicated by unreliable narration, and problematised by a hybridising of realistic, fantastic, and horrific elements. The narrative is thus intended as a 'weird' puzzle that readers must piece together, scene by scene, making sense of the larger picture—and its significance—for themselves. Both of these functions make a game 'of' the novel, while two further game functions result from the narrative itself and create a game 'in' the novel. These final two game functions are correlated and both result from the protagonist's profound mental disorder. Firstly, Rob himself is ultimately revealed as both the unconscious creator/designer and player of a nightmarish game, in which he is also tragically trapped. Second, through Rob's focalisation, the novel's readers become players—wittingly or unwittingly—of that same game, immersed within the game until the final, revealing chapter. In this way, the novel hybridises the mode of fiction, intending to create an innovative experience for its readers.

The appearance or use of games in literary fiction is not new, of course. Consider the presence of chess, for example, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (c. 1610-1611), in Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871), and Nabokov's *Lolita*. In *Literary Gaming*, Ensslin (2014) suggests games, in one

form or another, have always been present in literature—represented in dialogic challenges, in tests and trials, and in epic struggles. The entire genre of detective fiction, Suits (1985) argues, can be interpreted as game literature, in that ‘the reader of detective fiction is viewing a game... a game being played between the detective and the culprit; or, perhaps more plausibly, a game of solitaire played by the detective, where the clues and suspects are ‘cards’ he plays with’ (p. 210). In ‘This Dying Machine’ the nature of the game is purposely ambiguous until the novel’s final chapter: readers are (or likely will be) unaware of the unconscious game Rob is crafting and simultaneously playing against the Assemblers and himself. In this aspect, the game in the novel is analogous to what O’Neill (1991) calls ‘a game of incomplete information’ (p. 126), wherein both the protagonist and the reader are motivated by ambiguity, by the desire to solve or learn what lies behind a particular problem or challenge. Winning such a game involves acquiring the knowledge necessary to achieve complete information. In the submitted novel that achievement is obtained in the narrative’s final paragraphs, but for the reader alone: Rob’s situation remains unresolved and he remains trapped in the game, forced to re-craft it and replay it over and over. Through the achievement of complete information, readers’ effectively ‘win’ an appreciation of the full scope of Rob’s ‘loss.’

The final and sudden realisation that Rob is imprisoned within a horror story of his own unconscious creation is meant to shock—or, at the very least, surprise—readers. In this intention, the game in ‘This Dying Machine’ is very different from the ‘game’ that is generically expected from crime and detective fiction, for example. Readers are drawn to, and approach, those genres prepared for and expecting a surprise—a last-minute revelation that reveals a murderer or motive, for example (Suits 1985). Such expectations are not common to Weird fiction or historical fiction, however. The jarring inclusion of this game convention into ‘This Dying Machine’ is intended to further heighten the dramatic impact of the novel’s conclusion, to add weight and significance to Rob’s tragedy. The significance of the game, if apprehended, is discerned in retrospect, in the realisation that all that has occurred in the novel is—to one extent or another—a fiction or an aberration born of a damaged and tortured mind. Rob’s situation is all the more piteous for it, his tragedy all the greater. In conjunction with the subversive ‘reversal’ of the function of cosmic

horror and subsequent amplification of the horror of war, my hope is that the reveal of the game in the novel leaves readers with a particularly memorable ending.

In summary, 'This Dying Machine' functions innovatively in its use of hybridity and the interplay of genre conventions and literary and game elements to create an original narrative and to influence the reading of the novel. In combining historical fiction, Weird fiction, and game fiction elements, the novel achieves an imaginative portrayal of its protagonist's mental disorder, amplifies its core dramatic theme through subversion of cosmic horror, challenges readers' generic expectations so as to inspire new 'weird' readings of the text, and functions as a literary game. Through the imaginative incorporation of these innovative elements, 'This Dying Machine' stands as a contribution to knowledge and to the discipline of creative writing.

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