

the house of rumour

Also by Jake Arnott

The Long Firm

He Kills Coppers

truecrime

Johnny Come Home

The Devil's Paintbrush

the house of rumour
jake arnott



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At the middle of the world, between earth, sea and sky, a point where all three regions of the universe join, there is a place from which all that exists can be seen, no matter how distant, and every voice heard by listening ears. Here Rumour lives, in a high tower she has chosen for herself, with innumerable avenues and thousands of entrances that are never closed. Open night and day, her house is built of sounding bronze that hums and echoes, repeating all it hears. There is no rest within, no silence in any room, but no clamour neither, only the murmur of voices, like the sea's waves heard from afar, or the last tremors of thunder after Jupiter has clashed storm-dark clouds together.

Crowds occupy the hallways, a fickle throng that come and go with myriad rumours, circulating confused words, fiction mixed with truth. Some fill idle ears with gossip, others pass on stories, each consecutive narrator adding some new detail to the telling. This is the haunt of Credulity, rash Error, empty Joy and unreasoning Fear, impulsive Sedition and Whisperings of Doubtful Origin. Rumour herself spies everything that passes through the heavens, every occurrence on earth and at sea, her scrutiny ranges the universe.

OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*, BOOK XII: 39–63



○

the fool

I still look up to the stars for some sort of meaning. As a kid I thought I was seeing the future. Space, this was where we were headed, I was sure of it. Now I know that it was always the distant past I gazed at. With the light pollution over LA at night it's sometimes hard even to trace a constellation.

As a science fiction writer I dreamt of other worlds and other possibilities. We saw such changes it seemed that fantasy itself had conjured them into being. Now the space shuttle has just been cancelled and for the first time in fifty years America no longer has a working manned space programme. It's become old-fashioned, that foolish optimism we had about reaching faraway stars and planets.

Yet I look up at the heavens with some sort of hope. I think of the Voyager probe, still travelling over thirty years into its mission, still responding to its ground control and sending data back from the far reaches of our solar system. It's on its way out into the galaxy. So we did launch a starship, after all. Unmanned, of course, but maybe hope is unmanned.

As above, so below.

The past becomes more uncertain than the future. I am of the generation that filled pulp magazines with cheap prophesy. Now the events in my own lifetime seem more fantastic still.

For example, an obituary has just appeared in a British newspaper:

'The Times, Tuesday, 24 September 2011. Sir Marius Trevelyan GCB, CMG, diplomat and intelligence officer, died on 30 December, aged 91. He was born on 12 February, 1920. Marius Trevelyan's long and distinguished career in the art of deception was characterised by his taciturn nature and an essential modesty. An acknowledged genius in counter-intelligence and disinformation, he was one of the last of the cold warriors for whom discretion was not merely the better part of valour but the very name of the game. A testament to this

is his brief entry in *Who's Who*, in which his career is simply given as "HM Diplomatic Service" long after MI6 and its departmental chiefs had been officially identified.'

Five paragraphs giving discreet details of his career in the Intelligence Service follow, then an intriguing conclusion:

'In November 1987, Trevelyan was questioned by Scotland Yard detectives over a brief sexual encounter he had had with a male transvestite prostitute who was later found dead in suspicious circumstances. Official concern over this affair stemmed from a series of allegations by the prostitute, known as Vita Lampada, including a claim that he had acquired a document containing official secrets from Trevelyan. In the event, Ministry of Defence officials satisfied themselves that this episode had constituted no threat to national security.'

What does this curious fragment of history have to do with me? Well, the 'document' mentioned is almost certainly the one in my possession. A manuscript that carries a fascinating narrative; an artefact with a provenance that is quite a story in its own right. Passed and palmed like a marked card in a shuffled deck, it somehow ended up in my hands. I became the custodian of a mystery, even though mystery was never really my genre. I'll leave it to others to give you the whole story, but here are the facts surrounding the matter.

Marius Trevelyan first worked for British Intelligence during the Second World War, serving with the Political Warfare Executive, an organisation specialising in counter-intelligence and disinformation. He was part of black propaganda operations around the time of the curious episode involving Rudolf Hess: the Deputy Führer who flew to Scotland in the spring of 1941, a crucial point in the war. In 1987, Trevelyan was brought out of retirement by the Service to compile a report on the suicide of Hess in Spandau prison that year.

Enter Vita Lampada, a transsexual hustler who picked up the retired spy in Mayfair. They went back to Trevelyan's flat. There's a good reason why prostitutes call it 'turning a trick'. Vita was

something of an unstable element; he or she was a wild card, a joker in the pack. Vita stole Trevelyan's briefcase with the aforementioned document. Now this wasn't the official report on Hess, but some sort of personal account of the case.

Vita had convictions for fraud, had fed stories to the gossip columns and was even known to have indulged in blackmail on occasion, but she was way out of her depth here. She played a game with the press as she had done in the past and for a while they were interested, until they realised how much trouble it might bring them. When she was found dead from a drug overdose in her flat a few weeks later some people suspected foul play, though most figured it was suicide. Vita, whose real name was David Fenwick, had a history of mental illness and had been seeing a psychiatrist as part of her gender reassignment process. An inquest delivered an open verdict.

What she stole from Sir Marius Trevelyan was never recovered by the authorities. Vita had given it to a friend of hers, a performance artist who went by the name of Pirate Jenny. Jenny herself went missing soon afterwards and is still officially a missing person. Whatever happened to her is the real mystery. But I know that the document was passed on to Danny Osiris, a British singer living in LA, because ten years later he gave it to me.

Those are the facts, but even here we're dealing with uncertainties, improbabilities. Looking back, I find all kinds of other obscure data that connect me with Marius Trevelyan's story: no clear linear narrative, merely quanta of information, free particles that fire off each other. Wonderful stuff, with cults and charismatic rocket scientists, and an unlikely conspiracy known as Operation Mistletoe. It's like something out of *Amazing Stories* magazine, with tales that split and converge. A whole arcana of speculation, playing cards that can be used for games of chance or sleight of hand, even for divination.

Yes, those of a psychic inclination are liable to look for what they call a 'reading', but you have to be careful when you look for meanings. I've tried to keep a clear head when it comes to theories and

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conspiracies, because I saw my first wife go crazy with them. I've tried to accept that my life, like any other, has no special face value, that it could be played high or low. And that I was less of a joker, more of a fool, stepping out into the abyss. Come to think of it this is a useful image to start with. This is what the world was like when all this began in 1941. As I've said, it was a crucial point in the war and perhaps this moment in history is the one thing that connects everything. Time and space, seventy years ago, when the whole world was on the edge.

Yet when I think of southern California back in the early spring of that year, I see it as a kind of paradise. The land around the coast was so empty then. We would drive out to the point at Palo Verdes, park above the cliffs and climb down to deserted beaches. An uninhabited planet we could colonise with our dreams. I remember the thump and hiss of the breaking surf, the sun going down over the Pacific, as we gathered driftwood to build huge bonfires that would snap and crackle and spit great sparks up into the night.

I tend to idealise this part of my life and think of it as a time when I was still innocent. But innocent is such a big solemn word. Dumb would be more to the point. I knew nothing about the world. In fact for most of the time I was looking away from it, gazing out into the universe with a naive sense of wonder. I was a shy and awkward young man who still lived with his mother, struggling to become some sort of writer. A self-confessed fantasist. Oh, I was a fool all right. And my memories of that time become fractured, unstable. Yes, it was a time of uncertainty. Nuclear fission had just been discovered. But there was also a cataclysmic split in the unsteady matter of my self. It was, after all, the year I first had my heart broken.

I'd had a bad case of mumps as a child and all through my teenage years I'd had trouble with my sense of balance. At first I was diagnosed with labyrinthitis, an inflammation of the inner ear. It seemed that there was a dysfunction in the vestibular system, the bony maze of passages that regulate and guide our sense of motion. But when no physical evidence of this could be detected, it was

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suggested that my problem might be psychological. In extreme stress I could experience panic attacks and heart palpitations. These could be symptoms of labyrinthitis, or perhaps the manifestation of an emotional trauma that was the true cause of my sense of imbalance. So I had been seeing an analyst called Dr Furedi who had a practice in Beverly Hills.

It was a golden age of sorts. It's now generally thought of as the start of the 'Golden Age of Science Fiction'. And I had just sold my first full-length story, a twenty-eight-thousand-word novelette. *Lords of the Black Sun* was set in 2150 with the Third Reich of the future, having conquered earth, embarking on an interstellar *blitzkrieg*. *Fabulous Tales* ran it as a three-issue serial and it was featured on the cover for the first part with a four-colour illustration of a fearsome-looking spaceship with swastika markings. *Fabulous* paid a cent a word, which was the going rate back then. I was nineteen years old and \$280 seemed a king's ransom.

I'd had some early success with a short piece called 'The Tower' that had run in *Amazing Stories*, but for a long time I had felt blocked. It was my analyst's suggestion that I write something based on my long-absent father and I think that gave me some sort of breakthrough. So Graaf Thule, the intergalactic Nazi warlord, was born.

The Los Angeles Science Fiction Society met at Clifton's Cafeteria in downtown LA. The place served free limeade, which suited a good deal of our membership who had scarcely a nickel or dime to spend. And yet I felt a bit gauche when I first attended the Thursday-night meetings, more nervous fan than serious writer. The decor of Clifton's was absurdly kitsch. A waterfall cascaded through an artificial glade with plastic foliage and plaster rocks. A forest mural covered one wall. A gallery above held a tiny chapel with piped organ music and a neon cross. I always felt unduly sickened by this bizarre interior, which seemed to exacerbate my labyrinthitis. Dr Furedi explained this feeling as an 'externalisation of inner anxiety' and suggested that I obviously feared not being good enough to be part of this group. But once I had really achieved something, I felt a bit more confident.

The only person I really wanted to impress, though, was Mary-Lou Gunderson. She had sold as few stories as I had but she had a fierce presence. She seemed as self-possessed and outspoken as any who attended the weekly meetings of LASFS. Tall, blonde and athletic, she always made me feel ludicrously tongue-tied whenever she was near. I liked her stuff too. *Thrilling Wonder* ran her story 'Atom Priestess' in the summer of 1940. Set in a future that had descended into barbarism, it was about a religious sect that unknowingly worships long-lost theories of particle physics. And she had just started to write the series 'Zodiac Empire' for *Superlative Stories*. Mary-Lou was proud but she never bragged about her work; in fact she was meticulously self-deprecating. I think it allowed her to feel a little aloof about the strange trade that we had found ourselves in. She wanted to go beyond the ray guns and bug-eyed monsters. And secretly I did too.

'Well, if it isn't Larry Zagorski,' she called across the table at Clifton's. 'The man who put the goddamn Nazis in space. What did you want to go and do that for?'

'Er, um, well, Mary-Lou,' I stuttered. '*Lords of the Black Sun* is, you know, speculative.'

'Well, of course it's *speculative*,' she boomed. 'But what, you want them to win?'

'Of course not, no. It's like, you know, a warning.'

'A warning?'

'Yeah,' I said with a sudden certainty. 'A warning from the future.'

'Hmm,' she pondered. 'A warning from the future. I like that.'

Many years later a 'serious' science-fiction critic cited *Lords of the Black Sun* as an influence on Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle*, Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream* and countless other novels that dwelt on what might have happened if the Axis powers had gained world domination. But I certainly wasn't the first to come up with what has now become almost a sub-genre of literature. I got the idea from a strange English novel titled *Swastika Night* by Murray Constantine, though I did have something like an original twist to the idea and I wanted to share that with Mary-Lou.

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'I got this idea from Jack Parsons. You remember, that rocket scientist at Caltech who sometimes comes to the meetings?'

'I'll say,' she drawled. 'He's cute.'

I gave an embarrassed cough.

'That's as may be,' I went on. 'What I remember was that he said German rocketry is already far in advance of anyone else's. And that got me thinking. What if the Nazis conquer space?'

'Yeah, terrifying thought,' she muttered. 'They say he's into black magic, you know.'

'What?'

'Jack Parsons.'

Parsons was something of a legend even then: tall, dark, strikingly handsome, a brilliant scientist who dabbled in the occult, like some fully formed figure from fantasy fiction. I was hardly surprised that he intrigued Mary-Lou, but I had no idea then that her flippant comments were my own warning from the future.

And looking back now I can see something else I didn't know at the time: Parsons was an acolyte of a notorious English occultist who became linked with the Hess case.

I felt just about bold enough to offer Mary-Lou a lift home to her boarding house in West Hollywood. She invited me up to her room for a nightcap where she produced the remains of a bottle of kosher slivovitz. As we sipped plum brandy she asked me about quantum mechanics.

'Cause and effect start to get weird on an atomic level,' I tried to explain, wrestling with ideas I didn't really understand. 'You know, with Newtonian physics it's like pool. The cue ball hits a colour, that hits the eight-ball and so on. In quantum theory one particle can influence another without the need for intermediate agents joining the two objects in space.'

She frowned and I struggled on, speaking of wave and particle duality, geodesics and the Uncertainty Principle.

'It hardly makes any sense to me,' she complained.

'Well, that's okay, Mary-Lou. They say that anyone who isn't confused by quantum mechanics doesn't understand it.'

'Oh, Zagorski, I just knew you'd come out with something like that!'

'Why?'

She smiled and poured me another slug of liquor.

'Because it's just the sort of dumb thing you would say.'

'Gee, Mary-Lou, I really don't understand it. Most of what I learnt about it I got from Jack Williamson's *The Legion of Time*. That was the first time I'd heard that time and space can be warped. You remember the story? *Astounding* ran it a couple of years ago. There are two possible futures: one like an ideal society, the other a horrific dictatorship. The hero is contacted by each of them because his actions will determine which one comes to pass.'

'Oh yeah, I read it. He's visited by a winsome girl from utopia, and an evil vamp from dystopia.'

'That's right.'

'Hmm, that figures. Don't they choose him because his actions will determine whether some kid becomes a scientist or not?'

'John Barr, yes; his ideas will go to create the perfect city of Jonbar. But only if he picks up the right object one day when he's a child. If he chooses a magnet, he becomes interested in science and goes on to discover new theories that make this bright future possible. If he picks up the stone next to it for his slingshot, we're headed for this totalitarian nightmare.'

'What's this got to do with quantum mechanics?'

'Well, it's as much to do with the Uncertainty Principle. By observing something you can change it, so the measurement of the position of a particle alters its trajectory.'

'But it's a political conundrum too, isn't it?'

'Is it?'

'Of course it is. Like you said, a warning from the future. That's what we should be writing, don't you think?'

'Er, yeah.'

Along with everything else, I was politically naive at that point in my life. I had worked out that Mary-Lou was left wing and that somehow this did not necessarily mean she was pro-Soviet Russia,

but beyond that I was liable to get confused. I wanted to show willing because of the way I felt about her but I was never sure I was doing the right thing. *Lords of the Black Sun* was meant to be anti-fascist but the illustrator had made the Nazi spaceship look so impressive that the cover issue became a favourite with the German–American Bund.

‘We’ve got to fight for the future, Mary-Lou!’ I declared, emboldened by the second glass of slivovitz.

‘That’s right, Larry. And it’s finely balanced. Just like in *The Legion of Time*, it could go either way. In Europe, in Africa, in Asia. In the whole world!’

We were staring into each other’s eyes and it seemed to me like a portentous moment of epiphany, as though we shared the destiny of planet earth and the vast dominions of space beyond. I made a silent promise that I would learn more about politics and philosophy, that I would try to understand science properly so that I could share this precious wisdom with Mary-Lou Gunderson. Her eyes appeared to blaze with all the hope of some great utopian future. Then she yawned.

‘Sorry, Zagorski,’ she sighed. ‘I’m beat. And I need to sleep. Got to work tomorrow.’

She had a part-time job reading scripts for one of the studios. She saw me to the door.

‘Thanks for trying to explain all that long-hair stuff,’ she murmured.

‘I’ll see if I can’t find out some more,’ I offered.

‘Thing is, Larry, I’m just too impatient. I want to know it all. And right now.’

‘Yeah, well—’

‘I do,’ she cut in, as if the idea had come to her at that moment. ‘I want to know everything! Goodnight, Larry.’

She quickly kissed me on the cheek and hustled me out of the door. I staggered into the clear cold LA night. I was light-headed but, for once, steady on my feet. My mind fuzzed with ideologies, theoretical physics and plum brandy. My soul reeled in speculative fantasy. I was in love.

I was also a virgin. Perhaps my attraction to writing about the future was that it was only there that I had any worldly experience. I was as keen to rid myself of my childlike imagination and wonder as I was to use them to generate stories. Dr Furedi had encouraged my writing as a cathartic process, though he was concerned that my obsession with fantasy and science fiction reflected my neurotic condition. He pointed out that many of the problems I'd had with it were symptomatic of an unconscious resistance within myself. Now I'd had a small breakthrough with my fiction and, I felt, had made real progress towards the possibility of a relationship.

I was finding it hard to get on with my next story, though. 'Lightship 7 from Andromeda' now seemed a banal space adventure. I obsessed about my feelings for Mary-Lou and easily lost concentration when I sat down at my typewriter or would wander about in an unco-ordinated daze. At bookstores or news-stands it had long been my habit to scan the racks of the pulp magazines, for inspiration as well as just to see what was out there. The gaudy covers would often carry a female form: amazon warrior in sleek and curvaceous armour, or bound and barely clothed captives. But what had once been cheap titillation had now become a nagging reminder of an infatuation I had no idea what to do with.

We went to the cinema together: *Dr Cyclops* was playing in a double feature with *The Monster and the Girl*. Afterwards, over a soda, we agreed that both films were absolute trash and the sort of thing that gave science fiction a bad name, but it was hardly a romantic evening. We did meet to talk about work, though. Mary-Lou had none of the problems I was encountering with output. She seemed unsatisfied with 'Zodiac Empire' but she could produce copy at a phenomenal rate. She dismissed it as her 'space-opera' (some fanzine had just come up with the term) but she did have a strong idea that she wanted to pursue: that the different planets of the solar system had specific characteristics and influences – an astrology for the future, she called it.

Meanwhile I was trying to give myself a political education. Fascism was evil: that seemed clear enough. Capitalism was wrong,

not just because it was unfair but also because it was unscientific. But Soviet communism wasn't the answer. What was needed was some kind of socialism that wasn't totalitarian. The pact the Russians had made with the Nazis had done a lot to discredit the USSR, but America wasn't in the war either. Haunted by distant cataclysm, we all felt a peculiar sense of detached speculation. The world seemed as awkwardly balanced as I was.

One afternoon on passing a news-stand Mary-Lou pointed to all the catastrophic headlines – LONDON BLITZED, THE ATLANTIC WAR CONTINUES, TANK BATTLES IN NORTH AFRICA – then to a little man who had picked up a magazine.

'After all that,' she remarked darkly, 'he still wants *Action Stories*. What are we *doing*, writing for the pulps?'

'Maybe we're finding a solution. You see the news? What's real now? Submarines, flying machines: that was the science fiction of a hundred years ago. What we are imagining now: that might be next century's news.'

'Jesus, Zagorski, think of the horrors we might come up with then.'

'That's why it's important how we use our imaginations,' I said, instinctively reaching for the latest issue of *Astounding*.

'In dreams begins responsibility,' said Mary-Lou.

'Huh?' I grunted, already absorbed by the glossy binding.

'Don't worry, Larry. Just quoting W.B. Yeats at you.'

'Magic City' was the cover story with a ruined Statue of Liberty rising out of a post-apocalyptic wilderness, a lithe huntress in furs standing in the foreground and a long-haired caveman crouching before her.

'At least *Astounding* runs interesting stuff,' I said, holding it up.

'Yeah,' Mary-Lou agreed. 'That's who we should be writing for.'

It was clear to both of us that *Astounding Science Fiction* was by far the best and most ground-breaking of any of the pulp magazines of the time. Its new editor, John W. Campbell, had completely transformed the field, nurturing a group of exciting new writers: Isaac Asimov, A.E. van Vogt, Theodore Sturgeon and especially Robert

Heinlein, who lived in LA and was said to run some kind of literary circle. This was the world that we wanted to be part of.

Mary-Lou had grown tired of the LASFS Thursday meetings and would sometimes disparagingly refer to that crowd as the 'limeade brigade'. I still attended. I had sold 'Lightship 7 from Andromeda' to *Fantastic Tales* and it looked as if I was becoming something of a regular writer for them, so I now was shown quite a lot of respect at Clifton's Cafeteria. Mary-Lou never said as much but I got the feeling she thought it was playing safe, mixing with them, that we should really be taking more risks with our writing rather than churning out the usual stuff. And maybe thinking of her made me bold because when Robert Heinlein walked in one night I wasted little time in making a beeline for him.

Heinlein had a presence that was more than a little intimidating. Gaunt and saturnine, with swept-back hair and a pencil moustache, he looked very much like a gloomy Douglas Fairbanks Jr. And he had seemed to come from nowhere. Having published his first story only a couple of years before, he was by then one of the brightest stars in the genre. There were all sorts of rumours about him: that he was a radical, that he had made his fortune silver prospecting, that he was into free love. I praised his latest story, '— And He Built a Crooked House —' that had been in the issue of *Astounding* I'd picked up at the news-stand with Mary-Lou. It was about an architect who designs a four-dimensional house, a hypercube in the form of a tesseract that collapses in on itself after an earthquake into what appears to be a single cube. Those trapped inside can still pass through the original eight rooms, all of which appear to occupy the same space, with the stairs now forming a closed loop so that on reaching what they think is the top storey, the people find themselves back on the ground floor. At one point they look down a hallway to observe their own backs. I seem to remember that I said it was like a prose version of an M.C. Escher woodcut and that Heinlein smiled and nodded. What I am certain of is that, as his attention began to drift and he started to turn away, I boldly thrust out my hand and announced:

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'I'm Larry Zagorski, sir. I wrote *Lords of the Black Sun*.'

Heinlein laughed and clasped my palm in a firm grip. He frowned at me.

'Yeah?' He shook my hand the way a dog shakes a rabbit. 'I saw the story. In *Fabulous*, wasn't it? Made the fascists seem a bit glamorous, didn't you?'

'That was the illustrator's fault,' I protested.

He laughed again.

'Only kidding with you. I liked it. But we got to be careful sometimes, haven't we? You know, being of the devil's party without knowing it.'

He tapped his nose. I nodded sagely but I had no idea what he meant.

'Look, kid,' he went on. 'We have a little soiree every now and then at my place. Call it the Mañana Literary Society. Why don't you come along?'

'Can I bring someone?'

'Your girl?'

'Yes,' I blurted, then thought better of it. 'I mean, no, I mean, well . . . she's another writer. A good one.'

Heinlein laughed once more and wrote out his address for me. He lived with his wife Leslyn in Laurel Canyon, on Lookout Mountain Avenue, a side road that twists up into the Hollywood Hills. And when I took Mary-Lou with me to our first meeting with the Mañana Literary Society, I felt that a whole new bright world was opening up for the both of us. It was the closest thing to a salon that science fiction had at that time and we were a part of it. Most of all I hoped it would mean that Mary-Lou would take me seriously and that I would be able to find the courage finally to say how I really felt about her. Oh yes, I felt really pleased with myself at the start of that evening. I thought I was so clever. But I was a fool, a complete fool.



I
the magician



1 / CASINO ESTORIL

Fleming watched Popov walk through the lobby of the Hotel Palacio with a sense of possession, that odd feeling of intimacy he derived from having seen a man's file. It was a curiously inert experience, presenting an advantage while revealing a weakness of his own. Each person is a dossier, he mused. A bundle of half-known facts, misleading reports, document extracts, fragments. Dossier, from the old French for back, a loose binding, bracing the chaos of information into some sort of recognisable posture. Like the book with its spine holding up an unlikely story. Fleming had concluded long ago that real lives exist only in secret. But it had become his job to form impressions, to summarise. He had acquired a talent for the brief appraisal.

So he noted the awkward line on the buttoned front of Popov's dinner jacket and took a moment to consider what might explain the square bulge below the breast pocket. The outline of an automatic pistol, perhaps? Fleming smiled, aware that he had become known for the brash style of his memoranda. But no, he decided, it wasn't a gun that gave the extra weight to this man's left-hand side. No, he thought, his smile becoming a grin. It was a big, fat slab of money, the eighty thousand dollars that rightly belonged to British Intelligence.

The ornamental gardens that surrounded the Palacio were veined with narrow gravel pathways that forked here and there, making a discreet pursuit almost impossible. Fleming was acting not so much on initiative as on compulsion, since shadowing Popov had nothing to do with his mission in Portugal. That had already been completed earlier that day with the meeting at the Café Chiado in Lisbon. Operation Mistletoe: an audacious operation to catch a top Nazi. This hastily improvised tail-job was a mere sideshow, but he found the prospect of it just as exciting as the astonishing

information he had received that afternoon. For some it was the game, but for Fleming it was always the story. And here was a good one, he felt sure of it. Inspiration, yes, that's what drove him to follow this man. Something he might use one day.

The archives of Room 39 had furnished the sparse details of the individual he now studied at close hand: Dusko Popov, Yugoslav émigré, code-named 'Tricycle', posing as a spy for the Nazi Abwehr while working for the British. A lethal double act. The man was a light-footed adventurer; the one who watched him was forever weighed down by ideas. Popov was all that Fleming aspired to and sometimes pretended to be: handsome, charming, something of a playboy, whose designation Tricycle was said to refer to his fondness for the *ménage à trois*. Fleming stalked him in jealous fascination.

He knew that the eighty thousand dollars were funds from the Abwehr to pay for an entirely fake spy network that Popov was running in London. He was due to hand it over to an MI6 agent the following day and had obviously decided it was better kept on his person than in the hotel safe. Unless Popov had had a better idea, such as a taxi into Lisbon and then a flight somewhere the next day. The Pan American flying boat was departing for Rio de Janeiro from Cabo Ruiva dock tomorrow morning. Popov would have enough money to disappear and live his cherished high life without any of the risks. Was that the story? A capricious choice that could change a whole lifetime. The dry tracks in the grounds of the Palacio fanned out, each path a possibility.

Popov made a play of doubling back at a corner junction, passing by Fleming without looking at him but with a half-smile on his lips. Fleming stopped. He could hardly change direction now without giving the game away. Yes, it was definitely the game for Popov. And Fleming would be hard pressed to beat him at it. Paperwork, not fieldcraft, was his forte, he concluded gloomily. But cold analysis had its uses. He might have lost his quarry for now, but he had a very good notion of where he was headed.

Where else but the House of Games? The Estoril Casino, its grey, melancholy walls skulking amid more serene surroundings, looking

like an office building or a workshop. Which indeed it was: the bureaucracy of bad luck, the sweatshop of short odds. The perfect setting, thought Fleming, as he passed through the *vestiaire* into the gaming rooms. He entered a theatre of calm excitement, filled with the repetition of muted sounds and stifled gestures. A static impersonal space, where anxiety and relaxation could be enjoyed in equal measure. A collective trance: where all are actors, all are audience to both shared and private dramas.

The Estoril Casino was the very hub of an enclave of neutrality where all sides in the war rubbed shoulders. It was peopled by many exotic species, which Fleming divided into flora and fauna. The flora were the refugees, various types from many nations. Some were wealthy beyond measure and squandered their money as if there was no tomorrow (as, indeed, there might not be). Others were so poor that they would gamble what little they had and sell anything, which usually meant themselves. The rest came to move unnoticed among them. What the flora had in common was that they were all waiting. Waiting for transport elsewhere, anywhere away from occupied Europe, and where better to wait than in the Casino.

Then there were the fauna: those who preyed on the flora. Businessmen, international officials, racketeers. And spies, of course. Agents and informers of all hues and natures. This was Popov's world, where he so often operated. Fleming looked for him at the roulette table, knowing that it was here that Popov would go to get directions for a meeting with his German handlers. A female Abwehr agent would, at a prearranged moment, play the table three times, the numbers indicating consecutively the date, hour and minute of the rendezvous. She would then bet on either zero or thirty-six, the former directing him to a safe-house in Estoril, the latter to one in Lisbon. An expensive code, one that appealed to Fleming's imagination. But Popov was not there. The *chef de partie* of the roulette table kept a tally of the numbers that had come up since the start of play that afternoon. Fleming studied it for a moment, wondering if any sense could be made of this list of

arbitrary figures. Luck is a code without a key. As he looked up from it he spotted the Yugoslav making his way to the baccarat table.

Fleming had always preferred the familiarity of playing cards to the impersonal turn of the wheel. They offered some sort of meaning beyond mere chance. A sense of order: the Devil's Bible with fifty-two pages (fifty-four if you included the jokers). He approached the crescent of players and spectators that surrounded the dealer. Bloch, a short, pug-faced Lithuanian, held the bank, which gave him the power to determine the stakes for the next play. Obscenely wealthy and arrogant, Bloch liked to dominate the card tables and was known haughtily to declare, '*Banque ouverte*,' indicating that there was no upper limit and that the players could bet whatever they wished. It was suspected that the Lithuanian was a Nazi sympathiser who channelled illicit funds to bankroll Abwehr operations. Popov had taken a vacant seat at the table. Fleming stood behind him at his left shoulder.

'*Banque ouverte*,' Bloch announced.

'*Les messieurs debout peuvent jouer*,' called the croupier.

Popov reached into his jacket pocket and as he did so turned his head so that Fleming could see his sharp profile. It was as if he was acknowledging his shadow. The Yugoslav then swiftly pulled out his thick sheaf of banknotes.

'Fifty thousand dollars,' he said calmly and began to count out a pile of notes on the table.

The baccarat table at once became the focus of the whole casino, a hush sucking in sound from all corners of the room. Soon there was silence but for the clatter of the roulette ball and the whispered oaths of countless languages. Everyone watched as Popov slowly laid out his stake in one-thousand- and five-hundred-dollar notes. Fleming felt a slight swoon in his stomach, a brief euphoria at this dramatic moment, this *coup de théâtre*. Then nausea at the prospect of reporting how Agent Tricycle had lost a small fortune of government money at a gaming table. Bloch squirmed in his seat, clearly outbid and humiliated. Popov turned to the croupier.

'I suppose that the Casino will back this man's bet, since you didn't object to his "*banque ouverte*".'

‘The Casino never backs any player’s stake, sir.’

Popov huffed audibly and with a show of irritation swept his money off the table and stuffed it back into his inside jacket pocket. Fleming sighed. It was a joke. A game. Popov scraped back his chair and stood up.

‘I trust you’ll call this to the attention of the management,’ he said, addressing the croupier while all the time glaring down at Bloch. ‘And that in future such irresponsible play will be prohibited. It’s an insult to serious players.’

As he turned to leave he looked at Fleming briefly and smiled. Then he was gone. Bloch scraped together his stake money and scurried away in disgrace. Fleming found himself slipping into the vacant chair left by Popov, bemused that the Yugoslav’s outrageous performance had been partly for his benefit. He reached into his own pocket. He had fifty pounds sterling. It was all he had brought with him on this brief mission to Portugal. But the stakes on the table had now reverted to a reasonable rate, and were within his scope, at least for a while. Only a couple of players remained seated. The crowd of onlookers was drifting away, eager for some new spectacle now that the climax of the baccarat seemed over. The croupier looked bored as he snapped out the cards from the shoe, but Fleming’s mind buzzed with details and atmosphere, with ideas. All at once a germ of a story came to him. He became his other self, the empty hero who sleepwalked through his daydreams. A British agent pitted against the paymaster of a foreign power in a game of cards. Imagine if one could bankrupt the entire Abwehr in Portugal in one night? He gazed across at his opponents – mediocre men in creased dinner jackets – and imagined them as the enemy in a greater game. He felt an absurd thrill as he fingered his meagre winnings.

He ordered a whisky and lit a cigarette. He found that smoking incessantly seemed to enhance his prowess. He held the bank for a while and built up a sizeable stake. Then he lost it all when he should have passed. Bridge was more his game, where there was at least some sort of narrative. Baccarat was simply harsh

numerology: Fleming tended to read the cards when he should be counting them. And it disturbed him that the court cards, the only discernible characters in the deck, had no face value in this game. He attempted a resigned grin at his fellow players when he once more lost a round. It was not acknowledged. He realised that the dull men who concentrated on an essentially banal strategy with such sombre diligence would consider him an amateur. It took him some time to lose all his money, but the point soon came where the tension lay merely in how long he might delay his annihilation. It was almost three in the morning when he was finally cleaned out. Yes, he thought, as he rose from the table, this was part of it too. Part of the story. The anxiety and nervous exhaustion, the tension of fear and greed, the very smell of failure.

2 / A MEETING WITH M

M was standing by his office window when his private secretary entered, and seemed to be sternly surveying the grey Thames below. To the west a dismal mist crept around the bend in the river at Chelsea Reach. She could tell by his imperious frown that he had spotted something human. He gave her a brief nod of acknowledgement as she approached, then pointed the stem of his pipe at his quarry below.

‘See?’ he demanded.

She followed the trajectory of his gaze. A young man in a cheap raincoat was walking slowly along the Embankment with little attempt to conceal the apparent aimlessness of his movements. M sighed and shook his head.

‘It’s the utter lack of discretion that galls one,’ the spymaster commented bitterly to his assistant.

She said nothing, knowing that it was best not to provoke him when he was in this kind of mood.

'Well, what is it?' he asked her finally.

'It's 17F here to see you, sir.'

M broke from his gloomy reverie and turned to her with a smile.

'Excellent. Send him in.'

When she went through into the adjoining reception room she found 17F sitting on the edge of her desk. The handsome commander attached to Naval Intelligence stood up and smiled as he saw her. They had met twice before and had developed a sort of competitive flirtatiousness. He was pleasingly tall and slim, if a little too narcissistic for her taste. A broken nose softened his aquiline features. He flicked at the stray comma of hair above his right eyebrow.

'Miss Miller,' he murmured playfully.

'Commander Fleming,' she replied, with an edge to her voice.

She felt determined to see him as her equal, her sense of self-regard reflecting his. She was proud of her good looks, charisma and ambition. Besides, they held similar positions. They were both personal assistants: Fleming to the head of Naval Intelligence and herself to Maxwell Knight, known to everyone in the Service as M, the boss of B5(b), a clandestine subsection of Counter-Espionage. But his being a man meant that he held a military rank while she remained a drab civilian.

'You can come through now, Commander,' she told him.

'I was just asking Bill,' Fleming nodded towards M's Chief of Staff, whose desk was opposite hers, 'if this is really a good moment to catch the old man.'

Only the merest of smiles played upon her lips as her bright eyes held him in cold appraisal.

'Oh, he'll be pleased enough to see you,' she said, perhaps a little too knowingly.

M was sitting at his desk, refilling his pipe, when Fleming entered.

'May I, sir?' Fleming asked, taking out his cigarette case.

'Certainly. How was Lisbon?'

'Very busy, sir.'

'Quite. I'm led to believe by your report that we may have hooked ourselves a bigger fish.'

Fleming tapped a cigarette out on the flat silver lid. A letter had been intercepted from an academic working for German Foreign Intelligence addressed to a British aristocrat, suggesting some sort of clandestine peace meeting. A reply had been forged in the manner of a lure. Now it seemed a member of the Nazi inner circle was ready to put his head in the noose.

‘Perhaps.’ Fleming lit his cigarette. ‘A couple of factors need to be in place before Operation Mistletoe can proceed.’

‘A couple of factors?’

‘Well, yes. The first involves persuading the other side to believe that the Link is still active.’

‘Surely it’s not hard to give the enemy the impression that there remains a strong pro-peace element in the country? Good Lord, the way the war’s been going half the Cabinet seem ready to make terms.’

‘Yes, sir, but to convince them there is still this Link organisation, that’s pro-German, even pro-Nazi – there needs to be some evidence.’

‘Well, the idea was that we put it out that it had gone to ground since the round-ups last year. Can’t someone from the Double-Cross Committee file a bogus report or something?’

‘I’m afraid it has to be something stronger than that, sir.’

‘What then?’ M demanded impatiently.

‘Something, well, demonstrative, sir.’

‘Demonstrative?’

‘Yes, sir. Some significant act that would make it seem that there is an effective Fifth Column in operation in the country.’

‘Hmm, well, I could put my assistant on to it.’

‘Miss Miller?’

‘Oh yes. A very effective field officer. She uncovered a whole nest of them last year.’

‘Of course. I read the Special Branch report. But won’t she be vulnerable if there are any real quislings left?’

‘Hmm, well, let me deal with that. What was the other thing?’

‘I’m sorry, sir?’

‘The other factor you mentioned.’

Fleming shrugged as if slightly embarrassed.

‘The, er, paranormal aspect of the operation, sir.’

M laughed out loud.

‘Goodness me, Fleming, there’s no need to be sheepish about it. It might all seem a bit far-fetched but isn’t that the whole point of counter-intelligence?’

‘The whole point, sir?’

‘A story should sound improbable. If it is too logical it’s liable to appear contrived. And, of course, there are powers that we do not completely understand. Greater forms of disinformation, if you like.’

‘You mean, you give credence to some of this stuff, sir?’

It was known that M held some obscure beliefs and Fleming himself had begun to notice strange coincidences ever since he had been involved in Operation Mistletoe.

‘That’s neither here nor there,’ M replied. ‘We have to understand what the enemy is using. Goebbels had some of the prophecies of Nostradamus printed in a leaflet and dropped during the invasion of France. There are all sorts of rumours that Hitler takes astrological advice. The important thing now is that the subject of Operation Mistletoe actually believes in it. I like to keep an open mind. Haven’t you ever experienced an event that has been foretold?’

Yes, he had, Fleming thought. He just didn’t know how he might explain it to M.

‘Well, something has been bothering me about the whole plan, sir. Something I read in a book.’

‘Not that silly comedy your brother wrote.’

A Flying Visit by Peter Fleming had been published the previous spring, before the fall of France. It was an imagined story of Hitler flying to England, a playful satire with cartoons by Low, that now in the heat of the Blitz seemed woefully outdated, even in poor taste.

‘No, not that,’ Fleming replied. ‘Something else, sir.’

‘What?’

Fleming was about to speak then stopped. He would have to think it through first.

‘Oh, it’s nothing, sir.’

‘Look, Fleming, you’re right about the paranormal stuff. What we need is a real expert. You know, the man I told you about. The Magician. He’s ideal for our purposes. Have a look at his file when you get back to Naval Intelligence. He worked for your bunch in the last show. Did a lot of what the Political Warfare Executive are calling “black propaganda”. Go and see him and I’ll sort out that other business with the Link.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And remember, this is a cross-departmental operation, but it goes without saying that the fewer people who know about it the better. I’m briefing someone from Political to run liaison. It’s far-fetched, yes, but it could be our biggest coup of the war. Read up on the Magician and make contact with him.’

‘Yes, sir.’

As Fleming got up to leave, Joan Miller was called back into the office. M stood up and went to the window, once more turning his back to her.

‘He’s still there,’ M muttered. ‘Dirty little creep.’

He beckoned her over. She hesitated. It was as if he was trying to provoke her in some way.

‘Did you want something else, sir?’

‘The Political Warfare Executive are going to reactivate the Link. They need you to go back out into the field for a spell.’

‘But, sir, I can hardly do that.’

‘Come here! Look. He’s got one.’

She joined M at his vantage point and saw another figure approach the man in the shabby raincoat.

‘I mean,’ Miller went on, ‘I’ve been compromised with the Link and the Right Club, sir. I gave evidence in court for goodness’ sake.’

‘Wait.’

M held up his hand for her to be quiet and they both watched the little vignette below. As the two men drew close, the one in the

raincoat produced a cigarette and placed it in his mouth with a flourish, allowing his other hand to rest on one hip with a slight twist of his torso. The other produced a match and cupped the sulphur flame. With the briefest exchange of words, the smoker passed on, then his companion, flicking away the match and glancing furtively around for a moment, followed.

‘Yes,’ M hissed. ‘The dirty buggers.’

M had pointed out this little dance between men to Joan Miller before. She had been his assistant for nearly a year now and had spent weekends with him at the safe-house he had set up Camberley. He had declared his love for her and she had supposed that he had wanted her as his mistress. Except nothing had happened beyond the diligent choreography of romance. They would always sleep in separate rooms. At first she had thought that this was somehow her fault. But the war had brought an end to all innocence. He turned to her.

‘Political are being rather insistent on this one, I’m afraid,’ he told her.

‘I see.’

‘But I wouldn’t want to order you on a job like this, Joan,’ he said.

There was an odd expression on his face. She couldn’t tell if he was smiling or baring his teeth.

‘M—’

‘You will volunteer, won’t you?’

There seemed a soft threat in his words, as if he was implicating her in something unknown. She had come to know all his little prejudices. He had toned down his anti-semitism, at least for the duration, but he often voiced his vehement dislike of homosexuals. It seemed part of his brutal and ruthless side, which included a strange insistence that she conspire in his own self-loathing. He seemed to be goading her, testing her to discover whether she knew the truth or not. He stared at her.

‘Well?’ he demanded.

She knew now that he feared blackmail, disgrace. It would be unendurable for such an arrogant man to be in another’s power. He would do anything to protect himself.

‘Of course, M,’ she said. ‘Just concerned about security, that’s all.’
‘Good,’ he rejoined, with a cold smile.

There had been the odd business with the chauffeur who had been hastily dismissed. That time she had spotted him hanging around a cinema tea room. And, of course, the young bus driver from Leicester who had come up to Camberley to help fix M’s motorbike. He had once pointed out with disdain the particular demeanour of male prostitutes in Piccadilly, yet as Joan had been shocked to observe when she spied M from the bedroom window, he had walked towards the garage, and the bus driver, in precisely the same manner. From then on many things about her boss had become clear to her.

3 / ROOM 39

Room 39 was a vast office on the ground floor of the Admiralty, crammed with desks and filing cabinets, resounding with telephone bells and the constant clatter of typewriters. Fleming sat at the far end of it, next to the glass door that led to the inner sanctum of Naval Intelligence. He had called up NID’s file on the Magician and was shuffling through the pile of papers in front of him. He glanced at an old memorandum of his that had finally been returned to him. ‘Operation Ruthless’ had been a plan of his to seize one of the new high-speed German launches that patrolled the Channel, to overpower its crew and steal its code devices.

I suggest we obtain the loot by the following means:

- 1 Obtain from Air Ministry an airworthy German bomber.
- 2 Pick a tough crew of five, including a pilot, W/T operator and word-perfect German speaker. Dress them in German air force uniforms, add blood and bandages to suit.
- 3 Crash plane in the Channel after making SOS to rescue service in plain language.

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- 4 Once aboard rescue boat, shoot German crew, dump overboard, bring boat back to English port.

He had even volunteered to lead the operation personally. Anything to get out of Room 39, to prove himself more than a mere staff officer. And there was, after all, a desperate need to crack the enemy's codes. The Government Code and Cypher School was building a mechanical brain somewhere in the Home Counties. His project had eventually been rejected.

Fleming had begun to see himself as merely a component in a vast thinking machine. So much of intelligence seemed to be about generating obscure ideas and intellectual exercises. Departmental subsections and research units were springing up everywhere. Operation Mistletoe had emerged from this arcane world of speculation and second-guessing.

The Magician's file made for fascinating reading. The subject had worked for Naval Intelligence in New York during the last war, posing as an Irish Nationalist and a German sympathiser, disseminating scurrilous and extreme propaganda that was aimed at discrediting both these professed causes. This was, as M said, what was now being called 'black propaganda'. The Magician also had significant contacts with German occult organisations and individuals. He was just what they needed at this point in the operation. Fleming had heard of him, of course, from bohemian gossip circles and newspaper exposés. Intrigued, he arranged to visit him the next day at his rooms in Jermyn Street.

The mournful wail of the air-raid siren was giving its nightly call to prayers as he got back to his own house in Ebury Street, a converted chapel with a book-lined gallery – a special library containing his dearest possessions, which, despite all his years in the City, were also his wisest investment. He had started his collection over five years before but instead of merely buying first editions of literary novels, he sought out works of social and scientific significance that the rare-book dealers often overlooked. He had one of the few remaining copies of Madame Curie's doctoral thesis of 1903; Koch's paper on the tubercle bacillus;

first editions of Freud's *On the Interpretation of Dreams* and Nils Bohr's *Quantum Theory*. But the strangest volume he possessed was splayed out on the dining table where he had left it the night before.

The book's red dust jacket was stamped with the provocative motto: LEFT BOOK CLUB EDITION. NOT FOR SALE TO THE PUBLIC. Not an imprint he would usually subscribe to; indeed, he was outspokenly conservative (though in private far more liberal than he seemed). It was titled *Swastika Night* by Murray Constantine and it contained a premonition of the plan that he was forming, shaped by the meetings he had had with M, the rumours that had come to light from a German anti-fascist underground organisation known as the Red Orchestra, and his rendezvous at the Café Chiado in Lisbon. It was a faint glimpse of the scheme that had been unfolding over the past few weeks, which might turn the course of the entire war.

The setting of the book was peculiar enough: a dystopian tale, though quite unlike the playful satire of Huxley, it presented a dark, horrible vision of what might lie ahead. A stark warning from a possible future, in which the Nazis had won, the Jews had been exterminated and the Christians were then being rounded up. Women were considered subhuman and kept in camps for the purposes of breeding. But amid this scenario of doom was a storyline far more disturbing to Fleming, involving a high-ranking Nazi called Hess who leaves the inner circle and travels far to the north, to Scotland. Somehow the author seemed to have predicted Operation Mistletoe. He would have to find out who this Murray Constantine was. Someone in the Political Warfare Executive might know. They had more contact with left-wing circles than any other department.

4 / THE RUSSIAN TEA ROOMS

They had met in the Russian Tea Rooms in Kensington. Joan Miller had got there first and was glad to find the place crowded. With

its polished wooden furniture, panelled walls and open fireplace, it was the sort of café a woman could visit unescorted without drawing attention, or raising questions about her reputation. But Joan had felt awkward and uncomfortable as she waited for her contact from Political. Shifting in her seat, she pondered what seemed a foolish plan: to revisit the haunts of the fascist network she had helped to expose last summer.

It had been easy to spot Marius Trevelyan when he arrived. A bookish type in a tweed jacket, with a mop of straw-coloured hair and heavy horn-rimmed spectacles. In his early twenties, Joan had estimated, though he could almost pass as a schoolboy. There was something not quite fully formed about him.

He had ordered vodka and potato piroshki in flawless Russian. He had studied modern languages at Cambridge, he explained.

When the bill arrived he turned it over and discreetly showed her the address that had been scribbled on the back. The Tea Rooms were run by White Russian émigrés, known to have connections with fascist sympathisers.

‘That’s where the party’s being held,’ he said with an awkward wink.

He paid up and they left together, making their way along Harrington Gardens.

‘Look, Trevelyan.’ Joan came to the point now that they could talk openly. ‘I’m not quite sure what I’m supposed to be doing here.’

‘Didn’t M brief you?’

‘He just said that Political wanted me along.’

‘Oh no. It was his idea that you become part of this operation.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. He was quite insistent.’

‘But—’

She thought better of what she had been about to say.

‘Did he tell you why?’ she asked instead.

‘Not really. You know M. Likes to play things his own way. Said you made a plausible fascist.’ Trevelyan laughed. ‘Think he meant that as a compliment.’

'But you know I was at the trial last year. Someone might recognise me.'

'Don't worry. We've got them under control.'

'Control?'

'Oh yes. Political's been running a little group. Saving them up for a rainy day. Look, we're nearly there. We should get into character.'

He told her that they would be pretending to be a Mr and Mrs Fairburn from Tufnell Park, with Blackshirt connections, who had been members of the Anglo-German Fellowship in 1938.

'I expect you can remember the patter you learnt last June,' he added. 'Oh, and you'd better take one of these.'

He took two silver buttons from his jacket pocket and handed her one.

'Got them from Special Branch evidence store.'

It was a badge depicting an eagle swooping on a viper, with the letters PJ embossed below.

'Under the lapel, I suppose,' said Trevelyan. 'By the way, what does the PJ stand for?'

'It means "Perish Judah",' she replied.

'Oh, I say.'

The meeting was in the basement of a terraced house in Earl's Court. Twelve people, Joan counted, crowded into a candlelit room. A short man in a three-piece suit and watch-chain stood before them. He raised his hand and began to speak.

'I want to talk to you tonight about peace,' he announced.

The flickering light gave a mesmeric ambience to the assembly. The speaker's voice began in a soft drone like an incantation. Peace was coming, he assured them solemnly. He had heard it from the highest authorities. So many well-placed people in the Establishment were now determined that this futile and unnecessary war must end. If it continues we will lose the Empire, we will lose everything. We will become a pauper nation forever in debt to the Americans. The people do not want this war. They know in their hearts that as Anglo-Saxons we share so much with our German brothers. Soon it will come, he went on. The white races

will unite against the true barbarism that inhabits this earth. We will rise up against the traitors in our midst. Soon it will come, he promised. Peace.

For a moment the word sounded soothing and plausible. Joan suddenly realised how tired she felt. How exhausted everybody was by the endless bombings and privations. Then the man's voice began to rise to a higher pitch.

Churchill will be deposed. Yes, he insisted, this is certain. People that I know of in government are ready and waiting. People like us who share our feelings are waiting in the wings. Germany is willing to make terms, we know that. An honourable peace that will leave us our Empire while they bring order to the Continent. Only one group of people want this war, and we know who they are, don't we?

There were murmurs of agreement and a shiver of agitation in the room. She felt someone prod her in the back and she shuffled forward. The speaker started an extended harangue against the Jews. They will be made to pay for all of this, he promised. The audience gleefully hissed its agreement. A woman called out: hang them from the lamp-posts! Joan felt a quickening within her as the anger began to rise in the basement. The suburban voices that found such relish in hatred and horror were familiar and English.

Later, as she and Trevelyan walked back from the meeting, she still felt shocked that these ordinary-seeming people could be so virulent. She remembered that this was what had disturbed her so much when she had spied on the Right Club for M the previous summer.

'Recognise anyone?' Trevelyan asked her.

'No,' she replied.

'And what did you think of our speaker tonight?'

'A thoroughly ghastly little man.'

'Convincing, wasn't he?'

'You mean—'

'Yes. One of ours.'

'Good God.'

'Yes. It's been quite a project for Political. I trust you'll give a glowing report to M. Come to think of it, I'm having a drink with Commander Fleming at the Dorchester later. Maybe you should come along. I sure he'd be interested in your impressions of our little nest of vipers. Would it be terribly churlish to leave you here? If I'm lucky I can get a bus back to my digs from around the corner.'

'Don't worry about me. I can walk to my flat.'

They shook hands clumsily and Trevelyan wandered off. Joan started to walk home through the blackout. The streets looked empty but she had the uneasy feeling that she was being watched. Everything seemed confused in her mind. All the double games that were being played. The evil little rabble-rouser was an agent provocateur, on their side. Yet he had talked so persuasively of peace. The word now appeared as a taunt to her. Soon the sirens would come, and a sleepless night lay ahead. M had given her some pills but they didn't do much good.

All at once, the only certainty she felt was that someone was indeed following her. Even from her cursory training in fieldcraft she knew that it wasn't a very professional tail-job. Perhaps it was someone trying to pick her up. If nothing else the blackout had increased the sense of sexual opportunism, as M had pointed out with those two men the other day. She had once been pursued by a man who, it turned out, she vaguely knew from the War Office, who had told her: 'When I saw you in the street I told myself that if you were a tart I'd take you to bed, and if you were a lady I'd take you to dinner. Will you come?' he had added with a playful chuckle. 'I mean to dinner, of course.' It was a remark that would have been almost unthinkable from someone of her class before the war. The constant danger of the Blitz had made people more relaxed: as death became casual, so did life. Tonight, though, Joan was in no mood for fun and games. She stopped and turned, waiting for her follower to catch up so that she could confront him.

She peered along the pavement. The footsteps behind had ceased but she could not make anybody out through the gloom. She started walking again, at first determined to go slowly. But she found her pace picking up. She tried to stay calm but she could not. By the

time she had reached her doorstep she was quite out of breath. As she went to close the door behind her, she took a moment to look out into the night. No one was there, she decided. She had imagined it. But as she hung up her coat she noticed that someone had marked a cross in chalk on her back.

5 / THE MAGICIAN

An old man with a childlike gait, thought Fleming, as the Magician shuffled through the hallway to greet him. Two tufts of hair sprouted on either side of an otherwise bald head like impish horns, and a mischievous smile lit up haggard features. The eyes were sharp and vigilant, though. The whites showed all around the irises, giving him an alert and forceful gaze.

Shown through to the study, Fleming found himself drawn to a picture resting on an easel at the far end of the room. A brightly painted panel of about ten by twelve inches depicted an androgynous figure in a green robe decorated with bees and serpents, flanked by a white lion and a red eagle. Encircling this tableau was an inscription in red on a golden arc.

‘Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem.’ Fleming read the words out loud. The Magician smiled.

‘How’s your cryptology?’ he asked.

‘Well, my Latin’s a bit shaky. Let me see.’ He studied the motto once more. ‘Visit the interior of the earth, rectifying or by rectification . . . um . . . you find, no, you *will* find. You will find *occultum lapidem*. The hidden stone. Is that the philosopher’s stone?’

‘Yes!’ replied the Magician with a delighted clap. Fleming noted that his hands were quite yellow and curiously small.

‘An alchemical formula?’

‘It is indeed. But I’m afraid you haven’t quite cracked it.’

‘I’m afraid code-breaking’s not my department, Mr Crowley.’

‘My dear boy,’ his host retorted, ‘I can assure you that this one is not beyond your obvious talents. Go on, have another go.’

For a second Fleming bristled at being so obviously teased. Then he smiled. He looked across the room at this extraordinary man whose playful eyes danced in a wizened skull. He had not known what to expect from the Magician after all the incredible stories that had been told about him, the strange details in his dossier. He had expected to find him disagreeable, yet he found that he liked the man almost at once. He was not quite sure why. Perhaps it was the perverse candour that he displayed, in his speech, in his very appearance. Crowley was in his sixties, his lined and jaundiced flesh bearing witness to the countless sufferings of pleasure. But there was a corporeal honesty about him. His own body had been his greatest luxury, Fleming thought with an odd sense of admiration. The Magician had not squandered his life by trying to conserve it. He had used up his time. Fleming turned back to the picture and swiftly considered the simplest cypher that came to mind.

‘V,’ he began, counting off the first letter of each word. ‘V, I, T, R, I, O, L. Vitriol. That’s sulphuric acid, isn’t it?’

‘Yes indeed. The solution, if you like. The universal solvent. Vitriol here actually refers to the principal alchemical elements of sulphur, salt and mercury. A magical interpretation that only initiates of the ninth degree can comprehend. Anyway,’ he pointed at the picture, ‘it’s the fourteenth trump card of the Tarot. I’m re-designing the whole pack. It’s the Book of Thoth, you know.’

‘Thoth?’

‘The Egyptian god of language. Lady Frieda Harris is doing the artwork for this new set and I am writing the commentary. Her husband is Liberal Member of Parliament for Market Harborough. Rather a dull politician, I’m afraid. Known as the “Housemaid” due to his ability to empty the Chamber whenever he makes a speech. His wife has quite a talent, though, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Well, this one’s been causing her a lot of bother. It’s commonly known as Temperance. “Temperance is a kettle of fish,” she told me

in a note. I've decided to rename it. I'm calling it Art. What do you think?

'I wouldn't know. Haven't had much luck with cards myself recently.'

Crowley laughed.

'My dear boy, the Major Arcana is not some game of chance. The twenty-two trump cards compose a complete system of hieroglyphics representing the total energies of the universe.'

'Quite,' Fleming rejoined with an arch smile.

'Now I see that I'm boring you. That will never do. Come.' He indicated two armchairs by a table in the middle of the study. 'Let's sit down. I've been waiting for Naval Intelligence to make contact. I take it you've seen my file?'

Fleming nodded as he walked over. The Magician sighed and lowered himself slowly into his seat. A chessboard was set out on the table between them.

'Yes,' Crowley went on. 'I've done the state some service. You know that there's a long tradition of those with occult powers being employed in espionage. Doctor Dee, Queen Elizabeth's court magician, was also one of her best spies, you know. She called them her "eyes", with two circles indicating this and then a number. Dee was the seventh of her "eyes", so his code sign was double-O-seven.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes. I suppose I'm secret agent 666.'

'Actually your code name in the department is the Magician.'

'Quite,' said Crowley, slightly out of breath. He began to wheeze and pulled out a Bensedrine inhaler from his pocket, taking a sharp snort in each nostril. A tear lingered in the corner of one eye. 'Sorry, it's my wretched asthma,' he explained. 'Now look, my dear boy, since you've had a good look at my file you know that what I did for your department in the last war cost me dearly. Disinformation and all that, I know. Disseminating absurd German propaganda to discredit the enemy. Worked a treat. But rather cast me as the villain. Don't think I can go through all that again.'

'Don't worry on that account. We've other plans for you.'

‘Good. All the scandal, my great notoriety, it’s ruined me. It’s not easy being the wickedest man in the world, you know.’

‘I don’t suppose it is.’

‘I’m an undischarged bankrupt. Like our own great realm, I’m now dependent on American support for my survival. Oh yes, my own Land-Lease scheme. The Agape Lodge in California is providing some funds. Just had a charming letter from a new member in Pasadena. A very promising young rocket scientist, would you believe. Rather dashing, too, it seems. You see, my Order is already grooming my successor. I don’t have much time, I know that. The mind’s still sharp but the body, well.’ He made a plaintive gesture to the picture on the easel. ‘I want to finish this. Sorry if I sound pompous about it but it really could be my magnum opus.’

‘A pack of cards?’

‘Yes. A fitting epitaph some would say. To my sinful life.’

He bared his discoloured teeth in a rueful grin. There was sadness in his expression, but little remorse. Holding Fleming’s gaze with an unfocused stare, he started to address him in a direct and intimate manner, his voice soft and hypnotic.

‘You know, of course, that there was an eighth deadly sin, don’t you? Oh yes, the worst of the lot. The early Christians called it *accidie*, the sorrow of the world, a deadly lethargy and torpor of the spirit that was known to engulf whole villages in the Middle Ages. The most frightful devil of all is this noonday demon of melancholy. Boredom, my dear boy, a terrible vice, and the only one I have been truly determined to resist.’

Fleming suddenly felt as if the Magician was peering into his own soul, that he saw how disappointed he felt in life. All of its empty pleasures and futile plans of action had left him cold. He might be flippant and withdraw into a pose of detached superiority but he was endlessly taunted by the noonday demon, a sinful weariness of the heart. It was this that forced him to seek refuge in a solitary world where he plotted out his secret stories. That other life of obscure substance: the autobiography of his daydreams.

As he began to outline Crowley's designated role in Operation Mistletoe, he found himself becoming far more expansive in his briefing than was usual. He had hitherto developed a method in the handling of agents where they would be carefully kept in the dark as to the overall nature of their assignment and fed information only when it was strictly required. But with the Magician he felt that he could tell him everything. All the details of this fantastical project that had been conjured out of unofficial and increasingly bewildering interdepartmental strategies of disinformation, counter-intelligence and black propaganda. It struck him that this supremely arcane intellect alone could truly comprehend the complex absurdity of such a scheme. And no one would believe him if he ever told the tale. Crowley was himself a cypher, a hidden stone, a key to all the foolish mysteries and rumours in the world.

As Fleming spoke he watched Crowley closely, instinctively gathering intelligence for his own internal memorandum. Another brief appraisal: a version of the man's character that he could use. Crowley no longer wanted to be cast as the villain in real life, but in fiction, yes, he would make the perfect malefactor. An extravagant counterpoint to the empty hero of Fleming's private narrative.

'My dear boy,' the Magician announced when the briefing had finished. 'This is marvellous stuff! Preposterous!' He broke into a laugh that soon turned into a gasping huff. He took another double hit of his inhaler and caught his breath. 'It's . . .' he panted. 'It's completely implausible. That's the genius of it.'

'Yes,' agreed Fleming, knowing then that he was right to tell Crowley all of it. 'But you will be able to make contact with certain elements within enemy territory? Your, um, Order, it began as a German mystical society, didn't it?'

'The Ordo Templi Orientis, yes, a banned organisation in the Reich, I'm afraid. As you might know, the Nazis have been clumsily imposing their own monopoly on the dark arts. But I still have something of a network out there. Heh heh, my own Secret Service if you like.'

'And might you be able to get a man close to our subject?'

‘A man, yes.’ Crowley pondered. ‘Or maybe a woman.’

‘A woman?’

‘Yes.’ Crowley looked up wistfully. ‘Astrid. It’s been a long time but she might be just the person for this job.’

‘One of your many protégées?’ asked Fleming.

‘Oh no,’ Crowley replied with a smile. ‘*She initiated me.*’

6 / THE BOMBPROOF HOTEL

The downstairs Grill Room at the Dorchester was already crowded when Joan Miller arrived. Cabinet ministers escorting nervously respectable wives or casually disreputable mistresses, steel-grey brigadiers with hatchet-jawed adjutants, off-duty airmen and on-duty tarts, cinema producers and motor-car salesmen, American war correspondents, playboys, actresses, writers: all the high and the low who could afford it seemed to have found sanctuary from the Blitz in the supposed safety of the hotel’s modernist steel and reinforced-concrete womb.

Miller struggled to assume a calm air, to attune herself to the forced gaiety that surrounded her. She had come straight from her flat to this fashionable ‘bombproof’ hotel with a sickening sense of anxiety and fear. Someone must have recognised her at the meeting and had marked her out as a target. An intangible danger waited for her in the blackout beyond and she was no longer quite sure whom she could trust. She spotted Fleming in conversation with Cyril Connolly and an elderly colonel, and staggered over to join them.

‘Now look,’ Fleming was declaiming loudly at the old soldier while gesticulating dismissively towards the short and tubby Connolly. ‘This is Connolly, who publishes a perfectly ghastly magazine full of subversive nonsense by a lot of long-haired drivelling conchies who will all be put away for their own good for seven years under Section 18b. So perhaps you’d better subscribe to the thing, now

you've got the chance, just to see what sort of outrageous stuff they can get away with in a country like this during wartime.'

'I see.' The colonel nodded with a vacant sagacity. 'Very interesting.'

'Got you another subscription there, Connolly,' Fleming whispered, patting the stout man on the back.

'Don't take any notice of Fleming, Colonel,' Connolly countered. 'He's become all high and mighty since he's been at the Admiralty but you know what they call him there? The Chocolate Sailor.'

Miller noticed Fleming wince slightly at this sting, then steel himself with a very deliberate grin.

'*Touché*, Cyril,' he muttered, then looked up and saw Joan. 'Must go. Oh, by the way, you don't happen to know a writer by the name of Murray Constantine, do you?'

'Constantine? Hmm, doesn't ring a bell. What's he written?'

'A queer novel called *Swastika Night*. Published by the Left Book Club.'

'Hardly your sort of thing, Ian.'

'I know, but I want to meet the author.'

'Well, I could have a word with Victor Gollancz if you like.'

'Could you?'

Connolly nodded and began to scuttle away. Fleming turned to face Joan.

'Ah, Miller,' he said. 'Glad you could make it.'

'Fleming, I need to talk to you,' she blurted out.

'Of course.' He frowned at her. 'But we'd better find Trevelyan.'

'Yes, of course,' she rejoined breathlessly.

'Is everything all right?'

'I'm fine,' she replied. 'Where's Trevelyan?'

Fleming turned and craned his neck, his jagged profile scanning the room like some massive wading bird.

'There.' He cocked his head, his broken nose pointing obliquely. 'He's with Teddy Thursby. Tory Member for Hartwell-juxta-Mare. Was a junior minister in the Department of Health until he had to resign. A Select Committee is investigating some matter of

undisclosed Czech assets. He's not a very happy man. Trevelyan thinks he might have his uses.'

Miller followed Fleming's gaze to the bar where she saw Marius Trevelyan listening intently to a middle-aged man in a bow tie and double-breasted suit, with a drink-maddened face. As they shuffled their way through the throng, Fleming touched her gently on the arm and stooped slightly to whisper in her ear.

'You said you needed to talk.'

'Yes.'

'To me? Or to me and Trevelyan?'

'Well, if we could have a word in private later.'

'Certainly.'

As they came close to Trevelyan and Thursby, it seemed clear to Miller that the younger man was drawing out his drinking companion in some way. There was an unctuous passivity in the way that he indulged Thursby's hurt indignation, quietly urging him on in his anger. They caught the end of the politician's tirade.

'Winston's been a complete shit over the whole wretched business!'

'Steady on, Teddy!' Fleming announced his presence.

'Ah, Fleming.' Thursby looked up with a slightly chided expression. 'Well, I was just explaining to this young man here, you know, loyalty, it goes both ways. I stuck by the old bastard for all those years, and now?'

'I know,' Fleming replied in a consoling tone. 'Terrible show, I'm sure.'

'It's not as if I've had my hand caught in the till or anything. Just a speech here or there, a couple of questions in the House. Not declaring an interest, they call it. It's a bloody disgrace!'

'Quite,' Trevelyan interjected softly.

'You know what the worst thing there is to be these days? One of Winston's old friends. He's stabbing us all in the back now he's in power. All in the name of National Government.'

'Stabbing you in the front, it seems,' Fleming retorted.

'Exactly. Yes.' He puffed through his lips as if he had run out of steam. There was something comical in his deflated anger. Miller

suddenly thought how apt his first name was. Thursby looked like a furious teddy bear. 'Well,' he went on with a sigh, 'I need another bloody drink.'

'Fleming, Miller.' Trevelyan hailed them as Thursby wandered off to the bar. 'Shall we find somewhere quiet to debrief?'

'Not yet. That.' Fleming pointed at Thursby's back and waited for the MP to get out of earshot. 'You need to keep working on that. Persuade him to say something – no, even better, *write* something just a little bit indiscreet. Maybe place an article somewhere, you know, subtly critical and full of hints about an alternative. We need to keep this anti-Churchill thing alive. Especially now.'

'Yes, good, but what shall I tell him?'

'I don't know. It's supposed to be your speciality at Political. Keep him drunk, that's the main thing. Meanwhile Miller can tell me all about this evening's lecture. I'm keen to hear an objective assessment.'

Trevelyan glanced at them both with a slight frown. He nodded and went to join Thursby at the bar. Fleming and Miller found a quiet table in the corner.

'Looks like you could do with a drink,' he said.

'Yes.' She sighed.

'I know just the thing. A martini.' He beckoned to a passing waiter.

As he ordered for them, it seemed to Miller that he was going through some sort of rehearsed performance, a precise litany of pleasure.

'Two martinis, very dry, with vodka if you have it.' He turned to her briefly. 'Gin has the taste of melancholy, I always find,' then back to the waiter: 'Three measures of spirit to one of vermouth, shake them well so that they're ice-cold. And a long thin slice of lemon peel in each. Got it?'

He watched the man nod and then tapped out a cigarette. He offered her one. She shook her head. He sparked up an elegant Ronson lighter and drew in a lungful of smoke with a satisfied hiss.

'Now then, tell me all about this witches' Sabbath,' he entreated.

‘Tell me what you know first,’ she countered.

He grinned but his grey-blue eyes remained impassive.

‘Not my part of the operation, I’m afraid. Some barmy group of Fifth Columnists that Political is running, that’s all I know. M told me you had some experience in this area. Said you’re an excellent field officer too. But it’s all under control, isn’t it? I mean, otherwise . . .’ Fleming frowned.

‘Otherwise, what?’

‘Otherwise M wouldn’t have sent you in, would he?’

Miller couldn’t be sure of Fleming but she decided that she would trust him enough to tell him what had happened. His was a cold charm but it carried some sense of integrity. Their drinks arrived. She took a sip of the chilled spirit and felt her senses relax and sharpen at the same time. She quickly recounted the events of the early evening in the manner of a succinct report, giving all the details swiftly and precisely, so as not to dwell upon the embarrassing fear she had felt at the time. He had drained his martini by the time she was finished.

‘Good Lord,’ he murmured, casually gesturing to the waiter once more. ‘So it’s not safe.’

‘No,’ she agreed. ‘No, it isn’t.’

‘Right then. We’ll have another drink and I’ll tell you what we’re going to do.’

7 / VITRIOL

It was still dark at the all-clear and they were lucky to find a taxi in the gloom of Park Lane. Fleming ordered the driver to take them to his house in Ebury Street first. There was something that he had to pick up, he told her.

She waited in the cab as he went inside. In his bedroom he took off his jacket, opened a drawer of his dresser and removed a light

chamois-leather holster. He pulled its straps over his left shoulder so that it rested a hand's width below his armpit. He then reached into the drawer once more and carefully took hold of the small, flat Baby Browning .25 automatic that had been given to him when he had joined Naval Intelligence. This weapon had not been issued so much for his own use but rather for the protection of his boss, Admiral Godfrey, on such occasions that might be deemed necessary.

He slid out the clip, removed the single round in the chamber and then worked the action a couple of times. He squeezed the trigger and it made an empty click. As he began to reload the deadly little machine, he caught sight of his reflection in the looking-glass. A saturnine smile curled on the lips of his other psyche, the hollow man of his imagination. This was the persona of a dream, not one of slumber but of half-sleep, the other self that he would dwell upon at night as he waited for oblivion. He slipped the pistol into the slim purse of the shoulder-holster, giving it a gentle, reassuring pat. He put his jacket back on and went downstairs to the waiting taxi.

As he got in the car he wondered for a moment if Miller would detect any change in his demeanour. With a glance he noticed that she too wore the dull mask of those who anticipate danger or action. They made the taxi stop a street away from her flat. Fleming let Miller lead the way and show him exactly how she had gone home that evening. He followed closely, noting every detail of the route. There was a red glow in the sky from fires far to the east of the city. They stalked along the street to where she lived but there was no one about, nor could they find a clear vantage point from which her premises could be kept under surveillance.

'We'd better go in,' he said.

Her flat was on the first floor of a Georgian terrace. Fleming took the key from her and turned it slowly in the lock. He let the door swing open and took out his gun. They crept through into the living room. Miller switched on the light to reveal the figure of a man slumped in an armchair who rose swiftly to his feet, grabbing at something in his jacket pocket. Fleming raised the pistol and clicked off its safety catch.

'Now look here,' Fleming snapped in a patrician tone. 'Don't . . . Just don't do anything clever. I'm licensed to use this thing, you know.'

He winced inwardly. Not only was his statement incorrect, it was an appallingly crass line. The man faced him in a simian squat, one hand still holding something hidden in his jacket. Fleming had to stop himself from laughing at this absurd tableau. He should shoot, he mused, and the other self would have done so. The other self would have killed by now. But he hesitated, realising that the prospect of actual violence repelled him. It was not so much that he lacked courage, but that he just had far too much imagination. He made a clumsy show of pointing the gun once more.

'Come on,' he went on, struggling to find something to say that didn't sound like an awful cliché. 'Put your hands . . . um, let me see what you've got there.'

His opponent's face was contorted in a peculiar smile. A rictus of hate or fear, maybe both. The man remained still but for the hand he slowly drew from his jacket pocket. It was holding a little bottle.

'Drop it on the floor,' Fleming ordered.

As the man did so, Miller went to pick it up. It was ridged on one side and on the other was a white label. OIL OF VITRIOL, it read. She gasped and nearly dropped the thing.

'What is it?' asked Fleming.

'Acid,' she replied.

'You bastard,' Fleming spat.

'I was only going to scare her, mister. That was the plan. Just scare her.'

'Dirty little Nazi. I ought to shoot you.'

'I ain't a Nazi,' the man protested.

Fleming told him to sit down and watched him as Joan went to the bedroom to phone Special Branch. Luckily the duty officer was someone she knew and he agreed to send a couple of officers straight away. As she put the phone down she noticed a tremor in her right hand. Fleming was attempting to interrogate the intruder as she came back into the living room.

‘Our little friend here actually denies he’s a fascist,’ Fleming told her. ‘But then he would, wouldn’t he?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ replied Joan. ‘They’re usually terribly proud of it, you know, triumphant. Calling out that the invasion’s coming and we’ll all be on the list the Gestapo’s drawn up.’

‘So,’ Fleming turned to the seated man. ‘If you’re not a quisling, what were you doing at the meeting yesterday?’

‘Meeting?’ The man scowled. ‘What meeting?’

‘Oh well,’ Fleming sighed. ‘Better let Special Branch give him the third degree.’

Miller frowned, trying to remember if she had actually seen the man in the basement the day before.

It was dawn by the time two plainclothes policemen came to take him away. With just the two of them in Joan’s flat, all at once the mood became strangely formal. While they had kept vigil over the intruder or dealt with the official rituals of Special Branch, the atmosphere of external tension had somehow allowed for a covert intimacy. A shared smile or a reassuring glance, a fleeting moment of intense eye contact that needed no explanation. But now they were alone together, they were possessed by a peculiar awkwardness, a kind of static charge.

‘I really should stay for a bit, you know,’ Fleming offered hesitantly. ‘You’ve had quite a shock.’

‘Oh, I’ll be all right.’

‘I’d like to,’ he said softly.

‘What?’

‘Stay.’

An attempt at a nonchalant grin smarted on his face. As she held his gaze he noted that her eyes were deep blue. Cool, direct, quizzical.

‘Stay then,’ she said with a shrug.

He frowned. Women are such difficult characters, he reasoned. His inner text demanded that they should be an illusion, nothing more than a thorough but simple physical description. Miller’s appearance certainly fitted his ideal. She was undeniably attractive.

Wide-set eyes and high cheekbones; an elegant curve to the jaw framed by a mane of raven hair cut square to the nape of her neck; a bow-lipped mouth, full and sensual. Fleming found it easy to draw up an account with the banal symmetries of detail. But now there was too much depth to his impression of her, and he felt that he already knew her far too well. And it annoyed him that she seemed more at ease than he was.

Miller laughed.

'What is it?' he demanded.

'You look like a lost little boy.'

He suddenly felt horribly inert. He tried to empty his mind, to assume a seductive charm, but it eluded him. He was full of desire but knew that if he was unable to focus on the possibility of simple animal pleasure this urge would quickly vanish.

'Come here,' she said.

He went to her but the moment was already lost. Now she had the initiative, and this would never do. She kissed him lightly on the mouth. His lips were cold and he couldn't help but flinch slightly as she gently stroked his face with her fingers. They pulled away from each other.

'Look,' he began, not knowing what to say.

'I suppose we're both a bit on edge,' she offered. 'Aren't we?'

'Yes. I suppose.'

He offered her a cigarette and for a while they stood smoking in her living room. All at once they reverted to the casual tone of procedure, going over their report of the night's events and their implications.

'Marius Trevelyan's cover is now blown too, of course,' Fleming remarked. 'Though maybe this incident could be used to provide what Political wants. You know, a demonstration that the Link is still active.'

'Yes, but—' Miller stubbed out her cigarette, grinding it into the ashtray as an odd thought throbbed. 'What if—' She shook her head, at once unsure where her thoughts were leading, and broke into a yawn.

'I'd better let you get some sleep,' said Fleming.

'There's hardly much time for that,' Miller murmured.

For a moment there was something strikingly vague in her expression, a marvellous vacancy in her eyes. But no, Fleming realised bitterly, she was thinking about something. He suddenly felt the strong urge to be on his own.

'I'd better be off,' he told her.

'Very well then.'

She walked with him to the door.

'Thank you,' she said.

'What for?'

'For tonight. For dealing with that awful man.'

Fleming walked home through streets strewn with rubble and debris. Piles of bricks here and there, heaps of broken glass swept into the gutters. Scraps of paper fluttered through the smoke-scented air; the morning birdsong trilled harsh and neurotic. He passed a ruined house that was not much more than a scorched shell, yet it revealed part of one wall still intact, with wallpaper, fireplace and a framed print still tacked above the mantelpiece. The city turned upside down, all of its secrets rudely shaken out.

Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem.
The rhythm of his stride tapped out its maddening aubade. His mind was hungry for dreams. Reality was always far too complicated. He felt a quiet fury at how action had once more been frustrated by doubts of conscience and official procedure. The hesitation when he'd pointed the gun, all the bother of waiting for the Special Branch to turn up, the banal chatter with Miller. Why couldn't he have just killed the man and made love to the woman? Already he was returning to his mental refuge, the simple narrative of fantasy. Soon he would be trapped in the martial bureaucracy of Room 39, or sulking in his study where his rare books would taunt him from their shelves. But for now he had a storehouse of ideas, of characters and settings, and he would save them up. For the day when he came to write it all down.

* * *

Miller washed her face and walked into the bedroom. As she pulled back the heavy blackout curtain, a column of light slowly stretched across the floor. Her eyes watered slightly as she blinked against the brightness. She looked at herself in the mirror, a trace of a smile on her pale lips. Fleming's diffidence had made her bold. She had enjoyed playing with him. She might even have slept with him if he'd been brave enough to stay. She picked up a lipstick and held it to her mouth. Her hand trembled. What had she been thinking earlier? About the Political Warfare Executive, that was it, the strange notion she had had that maybe they had set up the whole incident. An outlandish idea but there were some things that just didn't seem to make sense. She finished applying the deep red to her lips and then pouted at her image in the looking-glass. As she put the lipstick down she noticed a trace of white on the dresser. At first she thought that she must have spilt some powder there. As she looked again she saw that it was the letter M lightly chalked on the polished woodwork.

8 / DEBRIEFING

M made a show of casually filling his pipe when she entered but he was looking up at her all the time. She knew that he would be carefully gauging her expression, noting her reactions to any comment or gesture. He had often said that he could read her mind. It had been something of an endearing joke between them. He certainly believed in the faculty of extrasensory perception. It had now become the instinct of a bitter intimacy. And yet the most shocking thing about the whole affair was that she still felt a lingering affection for him. His very duplicity gifted him with an indestructible charm. Perhaps it was this quality that had attracted her to him in the first place. It had certainly made him a formidable spymaster. He intrigued and exasperated her and yet she felt a protective

anxiety about him. She knew that deep down he was more scared than she could ever be.

'I've had a good look through the Special Branch report,' M declared, tapping the cardboard dossier on his desk. 'Anything you'd like to add?'

She had prepared herself thoroughly for this strangest of debriefings. She knew that it would be a coded match, that to say anything explicit would be dangerous. She tried to judge what signals to give.

'Well, I did voice my concerns about my suitability for field work in this area, M.'

'And you were absolutely right, Joan. I mean, you could find yourself in danger again, couldn't you?'

She tried to react as calmly as possible to this tacit threat. She knew now that he had set the whole thing up as a message to her. A warning shot. Despite the implied brutality, she felt sure that he did not mean her any real harm. It was merely a petulant reminder of his power over her. Now they were caught up in a self-generating algebra of distrust. A farcical algorithm: that she knew that he knew that she knew that he knew and so on. She had to find a way out of that, to let him know that she could keep a secret.

'There's been a security risk,' she offered. 'And we'll have to proceed with extreme caution.'

'My thoughts exactly,' M rejoined.

'The important thing is that proper cover is maintained, for everyone in the department. For this operation and any other.'

'Yes,' M agreed with a thoughtful nod. 'Proper cover must be maintained.'

Of course she had been his cover for that long double game of his life. She loathed the deception that he had practised on her but could not help but respect the way that he had carried it out. This capacity for deceit and utter ruthlessness had become necessary for the times they lived in.

'It's been a wretched business, Joan,' M said with a thin smile. 'But you've acted with initiative and, might I say, with extreme

discretion. I'd like to put you out of harm's way for a while. You're due a bit of leave. Take a couple of days off.'

'That's hardly necessary, M.'

'Please,' he insisted. 'It'll be for the best.'

'Very well then. Thank you.'

It would give her time to think, she reasoned. She could not go on being his cover for much longer but to ask for a transfer now would never do. She would have to find someone to replace her first. She took a good look at Maxwell Knight. The epitome of the English gentleman of a certain class, the finest dissembler on the face of the earth. He could lie from the depths of his soul. His flair for espionage was at one with his odd occult beliefs and clandestine sexuality. But it suddenly struck her that this perfidious world could one day be tricked by its own guile. That this theatre of treachery, of disinformation and counter-intelligence would inevitably deceive itself. M put his pipe to his mouth, clenched his teeth around it and lit a match.

'Now,' he puffed, drawing in the flame, his gaunt visage wreathed in smoke, '17F should be here by now. Can you show him in?'

Joan stood up and walked to the door. She was light-headed from lack of sleep. Her nerves were shot but she knew that she had to keep calm and carry on. Like everybody else. A minor character in the drama, playing out the simple surface rituals. Going out into the ante-room to engage in a silly flirtation with the handsome commander from Naval Intelligence.