The Zealot's Bones

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D.M. MARK

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For my dad

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And I saw the woman drunken with the blood of the saints, and with the blood of the martyrs of Jesus: and when I saw her, I wondered with great admiration.

Revelation 17:6

From Hell, Hull and Halifax, may the Good Lord deliver us.

Medieval Prayer

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Prologue

Don't smile, Lily. Don't let it out. Don't look at yourself in the glass. One glimpse of your reflection and you'll piss your drawers . . .

'I can feel them. They draw near.'

The ladies shuffle in their chairs. They cast excited glances at one another and tuck their elbows tight against their corsets. Shiver, in the cold and the dark. Grow thinner, older, more cadaverous in the flickering candlelight.

Lily lets her eyes roll back in her head and coughs, like a cat bringing up fur. Her hands hang limp by her side, and the light of the solitary flame illuminates only half of her young, pale face. She gags. Swallows. Feels her gorge rise and hopes that the light is catching in her tears.

Time for the show, ladies . . .

She barks. Her mouth snaps open. The spider she had secreted beneath her tongue suddenly scuttles, multi-legged and primal, across the pale flesh of her neck, escaping the dark, wet cave beneath her tongue where it has squatted since before the ladies entered the room. The tendons in her neck stretch and she hears a popping in her jaw. She seems to go into spasm, face pointed at the high ceiling and hands forming into fists.

Lily opens an eye, carefully, and takes in the view before her. She can see well in the dark: she has spent the past couple of years growing accustomed to rooms like these, a brief visitor to stately homes and lavish castles, indulging bored and well-fed women in their fantasies as she pioneers a new religion that thrills the rich and allows girls like her to make a living somewhere other than on her back. She is used to cold like this. Better used to the chill of this snowy January night than any of her audience. She likes her ladies

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to suffer a little, to watch as their breath gathers, like summoned ghosts. Likes to watch them shudder and then grow red across their chests as she thrills them to their marrow, and robs them blind.

More money than sense.

Bored beyond reason.

Gullible old fools.

It's a cold house, this. The breeze feels like a whistle from dead lips. Lily has long since stopped believing in the superstitious nonsense that feeds and clothes her but she had experienced a sensation of eerie disquiet as she passed through the double doors and into the darkened hallway. She had expected servants, gaslight and bustle. But the door had been opened by an ogre, in near total silence. He'd said his name was Wynn. He'd looked like he was chiselled from rock, as if pagans should have danced naked around him as he stood, obelisk-like, beneath a solstice sun.

Lily recalls her mentor's words. Recalls the man who told her she could make better money in the parlours of the high-born than on the stage.

Don't feel sorry for them. They've got more than you, Lily. Even in their grief, they're winning . . .

She opens the other eye, sees the blackness rush in like a tide.

At the head of the long, rectangular table, the lady of the house is a blob of spilled ink. She is dressed from head to toe in black and only lifts her veil to sip from the glass of clear liquid that the big man had brought her as she slithered, boneless and broken, into her seat. The big man had held her arm as if she were about to float away, but Lily had seen small chance of that. She's as plump as a pregnant horse. Lily had to force herself not to burst out laughing when the thought occurred to her

She's watching, Lily. Eager. Ripe for the plucking . . .

Lily retches. Makes a strangled, angry noise, as though she has a boot on her throat. And then the spirit comes.

Around the table, the half-dozen ladies recoil. The high-ceilinged room is already cold, and the snow from their dainty shoes is melting all over the hard wooden floor. But their skin still rises as goose-flesh when the thing emerges from Lily's mouth.

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'Grace . . .'

The lady of the house sobs the word. She lifts her veil and flicks her head to the big man, who leans, uncomfortable and sullen, by the grand fireplace.

You poor credulous fool . . .

It took Lily a long time to learn this act. To swallow the muslin in a way that allowed her to breathe, and talk, and make the right sounds as she entered her trance. It took her an age to learn which muscles to employ to bring it back up. To make it dance in the half-light. How to writhe and buck and connect it to the gossamer twine she had hung from the rough ceiling beam during her preparations an hour before.

'Grace, is that you?'

Her ladyship is sitting forward now. Her face is like dough, shapeless and malleable in the gathering dark.

Lily wishes she could give the poor cow some real answers, that she could tell her that her dead daughter really is happy and well in the spirit world. She wishes she were more than an actress who has learned to puke up cloth. Instead, she twitches the twine bound to her wrist, and revels in the whispers and gasps that meet the movement of the muslin.

Lily marvels at herself. She fancies, for a moment, that she is looking at herself through their eyes. They see a spirit, a translucent pale shape, spinning and twirling in the air above the slumped girl. They hear a low moaning and feel the chill that sweeps down the chimney and scatters the ashes in the cold hearth.

'My baby. Please, tell me you are happy. Tell me you forgive me . . .'

Lily feels the familiar unease. A moment's guilt. She presses her toe against the coin in her shoe, feeling its weight: the certainty of food, of shelter, of handsome things and comfort. She gags, again, as she prepares to start the speech she has given a hundred times . . .

'Do not cry for me, dear mother,' she whispers, in a guttural, rasping voice. 'I am in a better place. A perfect place. There is no pain. There is no suffering. I do not hold you to account for what . . .'

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Lily barely notices the twine snapping overhead. There is a fraction of a second in which she wonders if she attached it to too rough a beam, and then the cloth has fallen upon her face. She starts. Jumps in her chair. Curses in a voice that is less reedy and ethereal than the one she has used during the performance. She's broken the spell. Betrayed herself.

Lily seethes. *Fucking cheap twine*. Going to cost her. They won't pay up now. She'll be lucky if the big man in the beard doesn't wring her neck. It'll cost her a slap or two more when she gets back to her lodgings and tells her employer that she dropped the bleeding ectoplasm in the middle of the damn séance . . .

She kicks out and connects with the table, knocking the candle onto its side. The lady of the house gives a shriek and lunges forward, glass in hand.

Cloth, flame and liquor meet in Lily's lap. For an instant, she fancies that she can save the evening. She can blow out the candle, stuff the cloth up her skirts and fall to the floor in the swoon that signals the end of her performance. But the fire catches. The noise that accompanies it sounds to the assembled ladies like somebody blowing across the top of a glass bottle. It is almost a whistle, the sound of air being transformed and reshaped. And then it is lost in Lily's screams.

At the head of the table, the lady digs grooves into the wood with her fingernails. She sees her daughter's spirit wrap itself in flame and twist, angry and purposeful, around the shrieking girl who has brought her forth from the afterlife.

She cries out as she watches the spiritualist burn.

Smoke rises from the girl, coiling upwards as the spirit had done just moments before. The lady of the house follows the smoke with her eyes. She does not see the other ladies scream and push back from the table. Does not see the drinks spill or the fresh fuel upon the fire. Does not see the big man run forward and throw a coat around the spitting, hissing shape of the woman in white as she cooks and smoulders in her chair.

Her ladyship stares through wet eyes and black lace, seeing the

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smoke take shape. She sees a face she recognises and a glimpse of Hell . . .

A man. Naked. Sweat-streaked and wide-eyed. Harlots. Teeth like gutter-rats. Long hair matted with sweat and spilled drink. She sees fornication. Perversion. Sees the man. Some skinny, mewling girl. Sees Grace, beating against the windows, trapped and fearful. Sees the smoke swarm and dance and curl above the wails below.

She falls forward, face landing in candle-wax, sticky and warm against her cheek, losing consciousness as she stares at the ceiling and watches, before the vision dies, the spirit of her dead daughter dwindle and perish, sucked into the midst of the ethereal forms that laugh and moan in the dark.

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PART ONE

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From Diligence Matheson, c/o The Vicarage, Limber Road,
Croxington, North Lincolnshire, England
27 August 1849

Dearest sister,

I had hoped to spout poetry upon my first viewing of the great river whose name so closely ties the communities where you reside and where I now halt my recent itinerant travails. Yet the Humber River of our blessed Ontarian childhood and the River Humber, which I glimpsed for the first time today, are as alike as fork and spoon.

I am temporarily residing in the village of Croxington, some seven miles south of the estuary, which cuts like an axe wound into the English coast. It does not bear comparison with the river which plays such a significant part in my recollections. It is a slash of mud. A soup of silt and shifting sands. A vapour rises off its surface like the stink from a corpse, and were one to wade into its shallows in an attempt to wash, the sloppy mud would have one within its grasp in three paces. I found this last to my cost.

Upon revising this last paragraph I realise I sound down-at-heart. Allow me to allay your fears. I am in fine spirits. My enthusiasm for this adventure knows no limits and I regret nothing about the circumstances of my departure. Father may wish me ill, but inheritance be damned. I am learning, sister. I am discovering. I am making my way in the world and absorbing its majesty and wonder. You would not recognise me. My many miles of dusty progress upon the holy pilgrim trails have left my skin brown as tree bark, while the soft cushion of my belly has deflated, like a punctured bladder. I would almost call myself handsome, were it not for the

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poor impression I make beside my admirable escort! I cannot thank your fine husband enough for his recommendation. I can say, with my right hand upon my heart, that without Mr Stone my expedition would have ended prematurely and in disaster. As I outlined in my last missive from Europe, he has proven an invaluable companion, though the portrait painted by your husband would not match the somewhat formidable aspect of the man I now call a friend.

Major Stone is somewhat piratical in appearance. His long years spent in the employ of the Bombay Artillery and in Her Majesty's Government have taken a considerable toll upon him: he has the scarred, beaten appearance of a man who has witnessed too many horrors. And yet there is handsomeness still. Women fairly swoon when he turns his dark eyes upon them. He has the brooding air that ladies who read a certain type of poetry seem unable to resist. Ha! Do I sound like some besotted maiden? But this is the Hero of Herat! He was celebrated in the periodicals for his single-handed defence of that damned Afghan city long before he survived an expedition that killed sixteen thousand of his fellows. He has advised chieftains and kings, and claimed more lives than ice! And yet, were it not for having read of his heroism, I would not believe it from the way he comports himself. Though thoughtful and introspective, he is also capable of extraordinary temper and sometimes does not seem entirely in control of his actions. Still, his loyalty is unquestionable. He reminds me of a dog, beaten beyond compassion, who will still bite anybody who touches his abuser. I only hope he thinks of me as a gentler, steadier hand than those that have held his collar in years past. He would not thank me for relaying this, sister, but beneath the silk rag that he wraps around his head, he has a completely hairless scalp that looks, upon examination, like an egg boiled in onion skins. He is unwilling to talk about the nature of this wound but, while in drink, revealed to me that on his travels in India, he underwent an ordeal known by base sorts as 'pitchcapping', in which molten pitch was poured on to his naked skull. The injuries sustained may perhaps explain his decision to abandon his previous career and to make a living as an escort for

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unworldly gentlemen such as I, though if truth be told, he had already walked away from soldiering and diplomacy following the atrocities he witnessed on the road from Kabul. I thank the good Lord for his decision, for I believe I would have been dead several times over without his poise and military prowess.

I do not wish to spew praise like some flighty debutante, but you would be right in believing me to be quite taken with my new fellow. He has proven himself friend, counsellor and protector, and continues to serve me without the need for admonishment or remonstration. I only wish he were able to find more pleasure in our mission and calling. I ask you to forgive my brief descent into the gutter, but in your last letter you requested information about Major Stone's impulses and asked not to be spared. His demons take the form of whisky, laudanum and women, and the latter of this deadly triumvirate respond to him as a glutton to the scent of roasting pork. I do not wish to sound like an expert in the human mind, but I know that my disapproving response to his nocturnal sins brings him as much pleasure as the physical couplings he undertakes so joylessly with every halt of horse. And still I cannot judge him. He has lost those dearest to him and has washed his hands far more in the blood of Her Majesty's enemies than he has in the Blood of the Lamb. His eyes are inkwells, sister, and I cannot begin to fathom the story they could write.

Hark at me! I must remember my place. I must remember the nature of my undertaking. We are here as envoys of God. We search for the last remains of an immortal. We are decorated in the scallop shells of St James and seek the last resting place of a miracle. Why then, sister, does he continue to rely so heavily on the intoxicants that have aged and withered him? Why does he still swim in his bottomless pool of black grief? I hope to energise him. I hope to help him find his way, as the good Lord has helped me find mine.

I will curtail my ramblings now, dear Constance, and vouchsafe to alert you to any developments in my search for the Zealot's bones. Tell Father I regret nothing, and please, in your next missive, include a leaf from home. Crush it in your palm to release the aroma of my beloved Ontario. Picture me holding it to my tanned,

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grimy face and smiling at the memory of a Humber River that is never far from my thoughts.

I include, for your pleasure, the leaves of a laurel tree from the garden of my temporary home, alongside a fine purple mulberry, hand-picked in the garden of the great liberator, William Wilberforce. How I recoil at imagining what he would think of the city that reveres him as a favoured son. I hope the fruit's divine scent survives the many miles between us.

Your loving brother,

Diligence Fraser Matheson

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I

This landscape is a quilted blanket, draped upon an unmade bed. It is a coverlet of greens, browns and golds, neat patches stitched together from squares of turned soil, of trampled grass and gently bending corn. The setting sun is clawing long pink scratches in a soft blue sky.

A man in a tall hat and soft leather coat draws upon a clay pipe. He is slumped, like a marionette with its strings cut, at the boundary fence behind the large, white-painted vicarage. The building, in turn, stands at the rear of a squat sandstone church, which forms the centre of the small village at the eastern edge of nowhere, sitting at the junction of five roads, like a stone in the palm of a soft hand.

The man is short and trim. He has the broken hands of a private soldier and his face has been suffused with a look of brooding malevolence by the disfiguration above and below his left eye. The swatch of silk around his skull gives him the appearance of a buccaneer, and a black constellation of gunpowder scars has dug deep into the fine lines of his tanned face.

His name is Meshach Stone.

Stone looks at a skyline of elderberry trees and angular privets, of creaking laurels and weeping willows. He imagines the cool shade beneath the branches, the cushion of dead grass and dried earth, then looks up and considers the two hawks that hover overhead, forming splinters in the blue sky. He wonders where his tears have gone. When that part of him died.

He finds his mind filling, once more, with pictures of his dying wife, his imagination overspilling with vile projections of her final moments.

They didn't believe her.

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That's the part he cannot put aside. She had told the truth, that she didn't know where he was, could give them no address. He'd seen to that. And they had treated her words as lies. So they had beaten her until her heart gave out, then left her body on the cold flags of the kitchen.

Stone sucks the smoke into his lungs. Holds it until it burns. Breathes out through his sleeve and raises the glass of brandy and laudanum to his lips. Toasts his dead wife's memory as his vision blurs and sleep smudges the edge of his consciousness. The fence is all that is keeping him upright. 'Claudia,' he mutters, and the name burns him like hot coal. 'I will say sorry for ever.'

It is more than a year since the news reached him. The letter had been forwarded countless times before it found him at that tavern on a dusty road in southern Spain. His wife was dead. The money he had sent her to settle his gambling debts had not covered the interest accrued during his absence. His house was now forfeit. His life would be, too, should he ever return to the small town in rural Germany where they had met and spent too short a marriage. He had failed her, had let her die in pain and terror because he had been too ashamed to face her and apologise for his hopelessness. He has managed to locate only one of the men who killed her. He forced him to recount her final moments, then snapped his neck as he prayed.

Meshach Stone. The man the newspapers called the Hero of Herat and one of only a handful of men who survived the Afghan road of death from Kabul.

Stone rubs a hand across his forehead. He closes his eyes and lifts a boot to the lowest rung of the wooden fence. He misses, scrapes his shin and curses, leaning, half drunk and floppy, upon the barn door to his rear.

Croxington. North Lincolnshire.

The back of beyond.

Home for the past few weeks, but not far enough away from the demons he is fleeing.

Slowly, he opens his eyes and drinks it all in. The warm evening air. The soft blue of the summer sky. He gazes out across fields of

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swaying barley, past the site of the large new property taking shape on the edge of the church land. He breathes in and smells the churned earth and freshly scythed grass, the ale and animal fat. He sniffs noisily, and catches her scent. Rosewater and fresh sweat. Feels her watching him.

'A fine evening, Mr Stone. Close. I shall require a servant from warmer climates this evening. Perhaps a large man to fan me with a leaf as I doze.'

Stone pinches the bridge of his nose. He'd known she would follow him outside. That she would spoil this intimate moment. It is the best part of his day. The part that sustains him. Here, in the open air. Drinking. Remembering. Brandy in his glass and a chunk of fine Turkish resin smouldering in the well of his clay pipe. He's enjoyed its effects for more than ten years, having first discovered its qualities while trying to find some kind of comfort amid the heat and dirt and disease of the Afghani campaign of 1840 that had made his name and then destroyed it. He was an instant convert to the drug's caress. Had liked the liquidity it brought to his thoughts. He mixes it with slugs of laudanum so he does not become too dependent on a substance he doubts his ability to purchase on these shores. He needs these times. The times he feels closest to his dead Claudia.

He turns and looks at his landlady. She must be able to smell the pungent, thick aroma of the medicine that helps him sleep. He wonders if she can catch the faint whiff of burning hair that adds a whisper of tragic elation to his evening's leisure pursuits, whether she would judge him for adding the solitary strand of his dead wife's blond curls to the base of the pipe. Whether she would think him damnably pagan for sucking his wife's burning hair deep into his lungs and imagining that she is climbing inside him and rubbing her pale cheek against his heart.

'Fewer flies than in Bombay,' says Stone, his words sluggish things upon a furred tongue. 'That's all you hear on a quiet night. The buzzing, and the slap of hands on skin.'

Mrs Verinder regards him from the open doorway. She is a plump, dark-haired woman, with skin the colour of milky tea. She

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is at least ten years older than her husband, the good reverend, who has allowed Stone and his companion to share their home these past weeks. The Reverend Mr John Verinder is a thin, nervous man, who seems constantly on the verge of tears. Stone finds it hard to imagine their courtship. She treats him as a naughty child treats a doll. She has been wed before. She has a worldliness in her eyes that Stone recognises. He had been in her home only two nights when she asked him about his past, the lives he had taken. She told him, with a ghoulish breathlessness, of the execution she had witnessed a year ago in London, then handed him a sculpture of a small red barn, and told him it commemorated a murder for which she had felt a peculiar fascination: the foul deed of a yeoman farmer who had shot his sweetheart through the eye when she dared ask him to marry her.

'They cut off his skin and bound his confession in it,' she had said, through wet lips. 'The back of his head is being studied by anatomists. Can you imagine the feel of it? Would the flesh smell, Mr Stone? If one were to eat it, would one absorb that viciousness? Would one become a killer too?'

Stone had found himself drawn to her. He had liked the vitality and honesty of her demeanour. He had wondered whether she thought of herself as a sinner to be consumed, or as one eager to partake of another's sinful flesh. Quite how she persuaded the young theologian to marry her has not been vouchsafed to Stone or his companion, but Stone fancies she almost certainly captured him with her body. She has the look of a woman who knows how to please a man, though from the noises that emanate from the master bedroom each night, it would seem that Mrs Verinder is more concerned with her own delight than with any notion of wifely duty. She emits the reckless, shameless noises of the whorehouses above the squeaking of wood and the frightened, ghostly mewing of her husband.

'Your Mr Matheson,' she says, without leaving the doorway, 'do his eyes still trouble him?'

Stone turns slowly, hoping she does not see the dilation in his own pupils. She is holding a glass of wine, a curve of smudged red

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liquid like the hoofprint of a pony upon her lips. 'He bathes them in salt-water,' says Stone, letting out the last of the smoke. 'I don't know if it helps. Perhaps the act of activity itself is beneficial.'

'The act of activity?' repeats Mrs Verinder, softly.

'Sometimes it is better to do something that has no value than do nothing at all.'

He sees her smile, and wonders what she may be reading into his words.

'That may be a reflection of his entire endeavour.'

'Yes,' says Stone, turning back to the view. 'It might.'

Stone has been in the employ of Diligence Matheson for more than six months. He is at once guide and bodyguard to the short, portly Canadian, who is spending his father's money freely in pursuit of adventure. Matheson's father seems to own most of Toronto. Diligence is his youngest son and named, in the Quaker tradition, after an ideal. He measures up to his name. He is hard-working, committed and enthusiastic. The problem is the direction of his enthusiasms. He cares nothing for his father's businesses. Instead he yearns for understanding of otherworldly, transcendental matters. He longs for excitement and experience. He fled university with enough money to fund a year of discovery, took ship to southern Spain and sent word to a man who had been of help to his brother-in-law during a similar journey some years before. He offered Stone enough money to buy his services for a full twelve months. He needed protection, assistance and comradeship. In his mind, he was Don Quixote and Stone his faithful Sancho Panza. He longed to seek out mysteries and excitement. Longed to find exhilaration on a continent far from home. So far he has found only saddle-sores, sweat rashes and a variety of allergies, but his eyes still shine with the zeal of a man having the time of his life.

'He seems happy,' says Mrs Verinder, crossing to his side. 'I heard him singing in there.'

A quick smile flashes across Stone's face before he can bite it back. He has grown fond of the young Canadian and finds him both agreeable company and a generous employer. Over the many

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miles of their bandit-littered pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, he came to think of Matheson as a man for whom life is a source of endless fascination. He found his joyfulness and zest contagious. In contrast to his own laconic demeanour, Matheson is a man who wakes excited at the prospect of what each day will bring. Stone saw enough horror in Afghanistan to keep his ambitions and hopes simple. He hopes for less pain and more brandy, that one day he will forget the things he has done and the horrors he has seen. In this last, he has been disappointed. His memories are now overlaid upon his new experiences, like a veil.

'How will he react when he finds nothing?' asks Mrs Verinder.

She leans towards him as she speaks. He gets another whiff of her and wonders, for a moment, whether there is sweat behind her knees. Whether the hair between her legs is streaked with the same line of grey that she tucks, so artfully, between ear and bonnet. He shakes the thought away. Wishes his glass were still full. Wishes she would leave him to his private communion. He watches as she leans forward and picks a long blade of grass. Enjoys watching her mouth opening, suckling, as she softly chews on the bone-coloured stalk.

Stone draws again on his pipe. He misses the cheroots he smoked in Afghanistan but has not been able to tolerate them since he saw a half-smoked stub poking from the dead lips of one of his officers on the second day of the march from Kabul. The man had frozen, along with so many others, on that hellish road, and his dying breath had formed icicles around his beard and the stub of the cigar. Stone, who had survived the night by blanketing himself with the body of a dead sepoy, had thrown away his own cigar at once.

'Mr Stone?'

He considers her question. In truth, he does not expect Matheson to be downhearted. Few things have dispirited him on their journeys. When riding in rain he is thankful for the refreshment. When robbed by vagabonds during their two-night stay in Dover, he gave thanks for the possessions he had kept upon his person and not left in their lodgings. Stone does not expect any

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significant lull in his spirits when his spade hits rock and the body within the casket turns out to be that of a mere mortal, not the mouldering remains of an apostle crucified two thousand years before.

'He may find him,' says Stone, with a twitch of his mouth. 'He may shock you all.'

Mrs Verinder gives a dry laugh and drains her wine. She licks her lips and, for a second, Stone's mind is a palette of mixed images and shapes. He sees his dead wife, pale and perfect, crying at his failure to be the man he promised. He sees Mrs Verinder, bare-footed and with dirty soles, pushing him back onto his straw-filled mattress and taking him in her hand. And he sees her, Laura, the girl who made him whole again, if only for a night.

'Simon the Zealot?' scoffs Mrs Verinder, and as she laughs she shows where teeth are missing at the rear of her mouth. 'In Croxington? The only zeal I see is Mr Matheson's. Though I do not judge him for his hopes. He has certainly brightened our lives these past weeks, as have you, Mr Stone. I know it does my husband good to have a man here. He is kind and generous, but it is reassuring to find oneself in the company of one who knows how to wield a sword as well as a crucifix. And, believe me, Croxington was a dull place before your arrival.'

Stone says nothing. He has no feelings either way about the tiny Lincolnshire village between the market towns of Caistor and Brigg, some few miles south of the Humber. He has never thought of England as his home. He was conceived on a Spanish battle-field amid the blood and pillage that followed the sacking of Badajoz in 1812. His mother was a servant in the house of a wealthy merchant. When the British breached the walls of the fortress, the soldiers of Wellington's army gave in to base desire. Some half-dozen men had already taken their turn with her before Major Arthur Stone put a bullet in the head of the man between her legs, and chased away those who had already enjoyed her favours. Major Stone was only twenty-four. His sword was bloody and his ears were ringing with the sound of shot, shell and screams. When the pretty, dark-haired girl scrambled to her feet and clung

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to him, he did not know how to shake her off. He felt her sob against him and his heart dissolved. She said her name was Adriana. She spoke no English. Within days he had resigned his commission and brought her home to his father's house in County Durham. The action threatened his inheritance. The major's father had no sympathy for her plight. He told his son to set the whore adrift and to deny ownership of the bastard in her belly. Arthur said no. His father cut him off from the family purse and left him to make his own way in the world, protector and patriarch of a family he had not sought.

Arthur chose love over wealth, did his duty and kept his promise. He lived for a time with his lover and her newborn infant in a tumbledown cottage on the outskirts of his father's estate. The perfect picture was ripped to shreds inside a year. Adriana died of influenza and Arthur was left with a child he had not fathered and no income. Arthur had named his baby Meshach, in honour of the Old Testament zealot who had refused to worship an image of King Nebuchadnezzar and been thrown into a fiery furnace for his pains. It was a curious name to give a child. Meshach has long felt it would have been more apt to be named in honour of the wealthy king instead. After all, Arthur Stone valued gold above all else. He proved it when Meshach was still a child; capitulating to the family's demands and marrying a simpering young girl his father had chosen for him and whose family had status and wealth. Then he had turned to drink.

Meshach was always introduced as the eldest child of the new union but, in truth, he looked so little like his so-called father that it became an embarrassment. He grew up wild and angry, aggressive and sly. He was attractive and exotic, unloved and hateful. The brothers and sisters who came after him were quick to ask about his physical difference, and Arthur's new wife was only too happy to tell them about the bastard cuckoo in the family nest. At fourteen he was disinherited. Lawyers drew up papers that ensured he would not receive a penny when his father succeeded to the estate. Instead, he was sent to a military seminary, given money for uniform and horse and learned how to be an officer,

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never a gentleman. At twenty, he was a lieutenant in the Bombay Artillery. His family had done him a favour. Had he stayed in England his temper would have ensured he was hanged for murder. In India, he discovered he was a good soldier, and could handle sword and rifle. He knew how to earn the respect of the men beneath him and how to stay out of sight of those above. He knew when to use violence and when a kind word. Stone had expected to live and die in the military. He never sought more than the respect of his fellows and the occasional good woman beneath him. He had never expected to be noticed by friends of his father and rewarded with a position as a diplomat. He trained as an adviser and spy, learned to cut throats and pour honey into the right ears. He could do more with a bag of coin than a general with a regiment. He advanced. He mattered. And in 1837 he found himself in a place called Herat, marshalling a handful of natives against forty thousand Persians in a war he did not truly understand.

Stone lets his thoughts drift. He remembers that cursed place, the stone wall of heat during the day and the cold each night that sank through skin and bone to chill the soul. For months he woke and fell asleep amid the stench of death, holding out in the face of devastating odds. He was given medals for gallantry and feted as a hero in the press. As brevet major, he was newly arrived in Kohistan when the uprising against British rule become a full revolt. But even that was nothing to what came later in the retreat from Kabul. Stone was one of the advisers who bartered a deal that allowed the British and their loyal followers to leave the city unmolested. The train of sixteen thousand men, women and children that left Kabul was annihilated. Stone saw his fellows freeze to death on mountain passes and be cut down by wave after wave of vengeful Afghans. He survived by good fortune alone, climbed from the grisly pile of death, began to walk and kept going until the landscape changed. It was only months later that the army heard of his survival. In his absence, he was court-martialled for desertion. He turned to drink, to women, to games of chance and tinctures of opium. He made his living keeping the rich safe on

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their grand tours of exotic locations. He fought and kicked, scrapped and whored. He lost what little capacity he had for love.

For a time, Claudia had healed him. Her father ran a tavern in a small Bavarian town. Stone was passing through, making his way south following a brief return to London that had almost ended with him in chains. The drink was sour in his belly and he wore the expression of a man seeking violence. But Claudia had smiled at him with an innocence and sweetness that had stripped the venom from his gaze. He had stared at her so hard that her hand shook as she handed him his ale. She blushed beneath the intensity of his glare. She was young. He had felt that to press his lips to hers would be to sully something pure.

He left the tavern without a word, the ale undrunk. He went two whole months without touching a drop and came back to her clean and pristine. He courted her with poetry and pictures, grew addicted to her laughter, became a friend to her father and kept trouble at bay in the tavern. When he kissed her for the first time he felt as though he were drinking pure water. He married her in a small black-timbered church in a forested valley, tears streaming down his cheeks. He had taken to her bed with good intentions, promising her sweetness and delight. He had been unable to provide either. For all that he had tried to fool himself, he knew what darkness ran in his blood. Within a month he had started to drink again and had beaten a customer half to death. Claudia began to fear him.

He left her without a goodbye. Before long he was in the debt of a tall, one-eyed former cavalryman, who ran the games of chance in the slums of Hamburg. His name was Axl, and he was not to be crossed. Stone was several days from Hamburg when he learned that Axl was pursuing him. He feared for Claudia's safety, sent a bag of coin and turned south. He was in Spain when news reached him that the money had arrived too late. Claudia had died because of him.

'Mr Stone?'

He drags himself from his reverie and turns to his landlady. Would she mind if he took her hair in his hand and crushed his mouth on hers?

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And then he hears it. Raised voices. Metal on stone. Temper and drink . . .

'Grant,' he says, and closes his eyes. 'Why now?'

Trouble has been simmering between Matheson and Grant ever since the Canadian arrived at the vicarage and word spread regarding his intentions. Grant is the leading farmhand at the manor house in Brocklesby, a thick-set, coarse and brutal man, who has fathered half the bastards in northern Lincolnshire and whose wife lies buried at the town crossroads with a stake through her chest. She was interred as a suicide, pinned to the dirt of the village so her spirit could not roam. She had known what would happen to her mortal remains even as she put the rope around her neck, but eternal damnation and a burial beneath the boots of her fellows was better than living with the savagery of her husband.

Grant had been displeased to lose of two of his labourers to Matheson's deep pockets. He claimed that digging up the floor of the Mosby family vault next to the parish church was the work of the devil. He made life difficult for the men Matheson had hired and threatened dire retribution if he did not cease work and leave the village.

Stone wishes the horse trough were nearer. He would like to douse his head in its water, to expunge the opiates and drink from his system. Instead he slaps his face and half smiles to Mrs Verinder. He lifts his hat and scratches at the scarf that covers his patchy skull. He winces as his fingernails pull at the old wounds. Then he feels a frisson of pleasure at the thought of violence to come.

There are at least twenty people at the edge of the graveyard. They form a loose semi-circle behind the broad-backed man who stands, shirtless and drunk, before the stone mausoleum built four centuries ago by the vicar of this quiet parish.

Diligence Matheson has mud upon his hands and blood upon his upper lip. He is dressed in a labourer's smock, though his riding boots and spectacles betray his wealth. He is leaning back against the stone, his face pale and his hair stuck to his forehead from his exertions and the fear of the moment.

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For hours, Matheson and his two labourers have been digging through the floor of the crypt. Matheson believes that the man who built this tomb did so to conceal the final resting place of a soul resurrected by Christ. Each swing of the spade has been done enthusiastically. Each mound of earth tipped on to the grass has been done with the glee of a man on a mission from God. He believes he is close to finding the bones of Lazarus. He seeks Christ's most mysterious disciple, Simon the Zealot, whom a handful of theologians believe to have been the man Jesus resurrected. He is certain that Simon is Lazarus. The research of many learned men suggests that Simon came to Britain two millennia ago, preaching with the impassioned zeal he had heard in Christ's company, and was ultimately crucified at the garrison town of Caistor for his beliefs. Matheson has already searched there – has sifted and dug and scratched at the mud and stones of the poor farming town, enduring disappointments and resentment. His faith had been restored by a chance conversation with a local scholar, who had told him of the vicar who moved to Croxington from Caistor and built himself a great mausoleum. He had told him, too, of the peculiar inscription it carried: 'Son of Bethany, brother to Mary and Martha'. The vicar had no such siblings. Lazarus, in the Gospel of John, was from the village of Bethany. His sisters were mentioned by name. Matheson had immediately made the connection and given thanks for the blessing of new direction and fresh hope.

Stone absorbs the entire scene as he vaults the fence that separates the grounds of the vicarage from the edge of the graveyard. He wonders if there could be a peaceful resolution. Whether he could offer a purse to Grant in exchange for a cessation of hostilities. But such thoughts make him feel like a diplomat and thus an assassin. Stone wants to feel neither.

He skips between the gravestones and pushes through the throng of spectators. He does not produce a weapon. His cavalry sword sits above the hearth in his bedroom. About his person he keeps a small curved dagger and an Indian axe with an ornamented handle. A flintlock pistol digs into the small of his back. Were he to produce any of his toys, he would cause a major

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disturbance. Instead he jostles his way to Grant's rear and stops. When he speaks, he realises that the crowd has fallen silent.

'You don't want to do that,' he says, and means it.

Slowly, Grant turns. He has red upon his dirty hands. He has already struck Matheson. The Canadian's spectacles are not in their usual position on his round, cheerful face.

'I don't?' asks Grant, grinning at the crowd. 'I do. You think I'm scared of you? I've seen you, smoking that filthy foreign muck and drinking like you're a drowning man. You're here to protect him? I could pull his breeches down and spank his fat arse and you couldn't do a damn thing to stop me.'

Stone looks at Matheson. He sees the fear and relief in the younger man's eyes. Matheson has witnessed all of this before on a dozen different occasions.

'I don't mean to be rude,' says Stone, 'but if you don't go away I shall have to break your arm.'

Grant tugs his beard. His chest glistens with sweat and the matted hair upon his gut seems to form into some indecipherable language as Stone stares at it. Grant has lived his whole life in this part of the world. He has formed his opinion of himself based upon his reputation as a merciless man of strength. He enjoys the humiliation and pain of smaller, weaker men. He has never suffered. Never smelt his own skin cooking . . .

'It will be expensive,' says Stone. 'You can't work with a broken arm. I can spare you that. Walk away now.'

Grant sneers. Clearly he's been looking forward to this fight. He took against Matheson the first he heard of him. He wants to show who matters most around here, to smash his fist into a chin he hasn't hit before.

Stone sighs. He shrugs, then raises his hands and beckons the big man towards him.

Grant takes no persuading. He turns from Matheson and lunges forward, throwing a boot and a fist at Stone.

Stone watches the fist whistle past him. He grabs the big man's greasy wrist, brings his other hand up, palm first, and hits Grant just below the elbow.

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The crack sounds like somebody snapping a log.

Grant turns pale.

Falls.

Pukes all over the grass and the headstone of a child taken by cholera twenty years before.

Stone turns to the crowd. He says nothing, simply nods in the direction of the gate.

Hands grab at Grant and drag him over the grass. The two workmen whose absence from his crew had caused such upset follow the crowd. Stone takes coins from his own purse and throws them after the disappearing men. They stoop to retrieve them, and give half-hearted, awkward nods as they scatter.

'I told you,' says Stone to Matheson. 'I said not to take his men.'

Matheson looks down, finds his spectacles on his brow and puts them on his nose.

'Are you hurt?' asks Stone, and examines the wound on his friend's lip. 'Any teeth loose?'

'Put a roast turkey in front of me and you'll see whether I'm impaired,' says Matheson, then grins bloodily. 'I was just about to break through, Meshach. That oaf had no sense of occasion.'

Stone smiles and wipes sweat from his face. He wishes the fight had lasted longer, that he'd been able to kick the man in the ribs until more bones snapped and his insides turned to jelly. 'Were you really?' he asks. 'You've been saying that . . .'

'Another day and night,' says Matheson, excited. 'We're nearly there.'

'And he's down there, yes? Simon the Apostle? Lazarus? Diligence, we don't even know they're the same man, let alone that they're buried in some English churchyard in the middle of nowhere . . .'

Matheson smiles warmly and rolls his eyes as he listens to Stone repeat himself. 'I thought you might use the flames on him,' says Matheson, with a note of regret. He nods at the bottle in Stone's hands and looks at him, like a child eager to see a trick.

Stone feels a sudden affection for him. He sighs, then treats him to an act that always makes him squeal with glee. He takes a sip of

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the liquid in his bottle and holds it in his mouth, lights his tinder box and sprays the liquid through the flame. Diligence's face splits into a grin at the sudden explosion of light. Stone winks.

Matheson seems about to demand a repeat performance when a voice brings him up short. The landlord of the village inn is striding towards them, a piece of paper in his hand, the familiar stink of beer and tobacco about his stout frame. 'Came to me,' he's saying, his hands raised. 'One of those new devices. All dots and drums. But it's for you, Mr Matheson, sir . . .'

Matheson takes the piece of paper, peers at it and turns to Stone, childlike in his excitement. 'A direction! A development. This is good news.'

Stone closes his eyes and wishes he were still smoking his wife's hair – that he had been any kind of husband . . . that they had never met.

'We must pack! We have business in Kingston-Upon-Hull.'

Something jolts inside Stone. The picture of his dead wife vanishes, as his mind fills with Laura, she who offered him something he did not think he was capable of feeling, and whom he abandoned before he was wooed by ill-deserved notions of redemption. He has so much to be sorry for. He has done so many terrible things. But walking away from the pretty whore who held him as he cried is the regret that eats through his heart.

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It is a little before midnight and this room, in a festering hovel at the far end of Pig Alley, has been transformed into a tapestry of charcoal hues and loose silver threads by the light from the expensive tinder box, which flickers on the rotten wooden boards.

She's still where he left her. She hasn't been claimed, hasn't been moved from the position in which she dropped and to which he returns in his every thought and fantasy.

He extinguishes the flame. Lets the smell of burning dissipate so he can appreciate her properly. Vile, and yet so beautiful he is unsure if he can stand it.

He takes a breath . . .

In another man's nostrils, such a stench would be unbearable. It is an invasive, thrusting reek that clambers down the throat, licks at the eyes and feels like the fingers of an abuser. It violates the senses and fills the room.

The man on his knees by the straw-filled mattress does not find the smell intolerable. He fills himself with it, feels it settle in his lungs and closes his eyes to concentrate. Stiffens in his breeches.

Thinks: *I shaped this*. This is my creation.

The girl drew up her knees as she died, curled inwards, like a foetus, in her final moments, though whether it was for comfort or to stop her guts spilling out, he couldn't say. He'd been too busy watching, too enthralled by the expressions that passed over her face, as if she were staring up at a sky of fast-moving clouds.

He should not have come back here. He simply couldn't help himself.

She has been dead for days. She stinks like the wagons that

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wind their way to the cemetery each hour of the day and night to dump another load of bloated corpses into the mass grave that grows with each sunrise.

He had expected her to be gone, had feared she would have been discovered and shovelled away. But her neighbours are too consumed with their own ruination to have entered a room that reeks of an even worse death than the one that climbs further inside them with each breath.

The city is decaying, turning to putrid flesh and brittle bones. Death has thrown a cloak over Hull, and beneath its folds, the people are gasping final breaths that taste of corruption and rotten skin.

'I missed you,' he says, looming over the bed. 'I needed to see you again. You've been my favourite, though your friend with the curls was sweet too. She did not fight as hard as you, seemed willing to accept what must be done, though I think she would rather I'd stuck my blade through her heart than taken my time. I saw the fear there. Real, genuine fear. With you it was rage. A sense of loss and injustice. It was beautiful, my girl. You were beautiful, though never more so than now.'

A shaft of yellow moonlight finds her. It spears down from the high, broken window, with the rag she had stuffed into the frame to keep out the cold, illuminating the half of her face not pressed into the straw. Her lips are pulled back in agony. Her eyes are still open, though the orbs within are little more than rotten acorns. He gasps at the beauty of her.

A noise behind him causes him to turn. Is somebody watching? Would anybody dare? He had slipped into the room like nightfall, having managed the stairs, the creaking floorboards and the screeching hinges of the door without a sound. He is good at this. He once cooked a whore on a roasting spit and dumped her body in the river unseen by anything but birds and the baleful glare of the moon.

He moves back from the bed silently, slips into a patch of absolute darkness and holds his breath. Hears rotten wood creak beneath a bare, dirty sole.

He grabs the girl by the hair as she hovers by the door, stares into wide eyes, sees freckles and pale, dirty skin.

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She does not have time to scream before his hand is across her mouth. He looks deep into her shining brown eyes and notes a flash of recognition. Had she seen? Did she know? He remembers the sensation of being watched as he went about his work. The prickling, crawling sense that he was being observed as he took his knife to the creature on the bed and began to split her skin in the sign of the cross. Had she watched him? And, if so, why had she not told? He looks deeper into her eyes. Is she a simpleton? Perhaps she had not been believed, or her family had decided it was none of their business and that the dead whore should be left to rot.

He slackens his grip. She babbles a few words in a language he recognises but does not comprehend.

The man smiles. He's safe. The girl is not much more than a child and a damned Irish one at that. Probably unable to read or write. A pauper. The lowest of beings.

'Better to be safe than sorry,' he says quietly, and pinches her cheeks between finger and thumb until her tongue slides out, like a slug. He grasps it in strong, thin fingers, enjoys the look of absolute terror as he takes the blade to her mouth.

He sets about his work, knowing, with certainty, that he is making something beautiful.

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