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Written by Paul Hoffman

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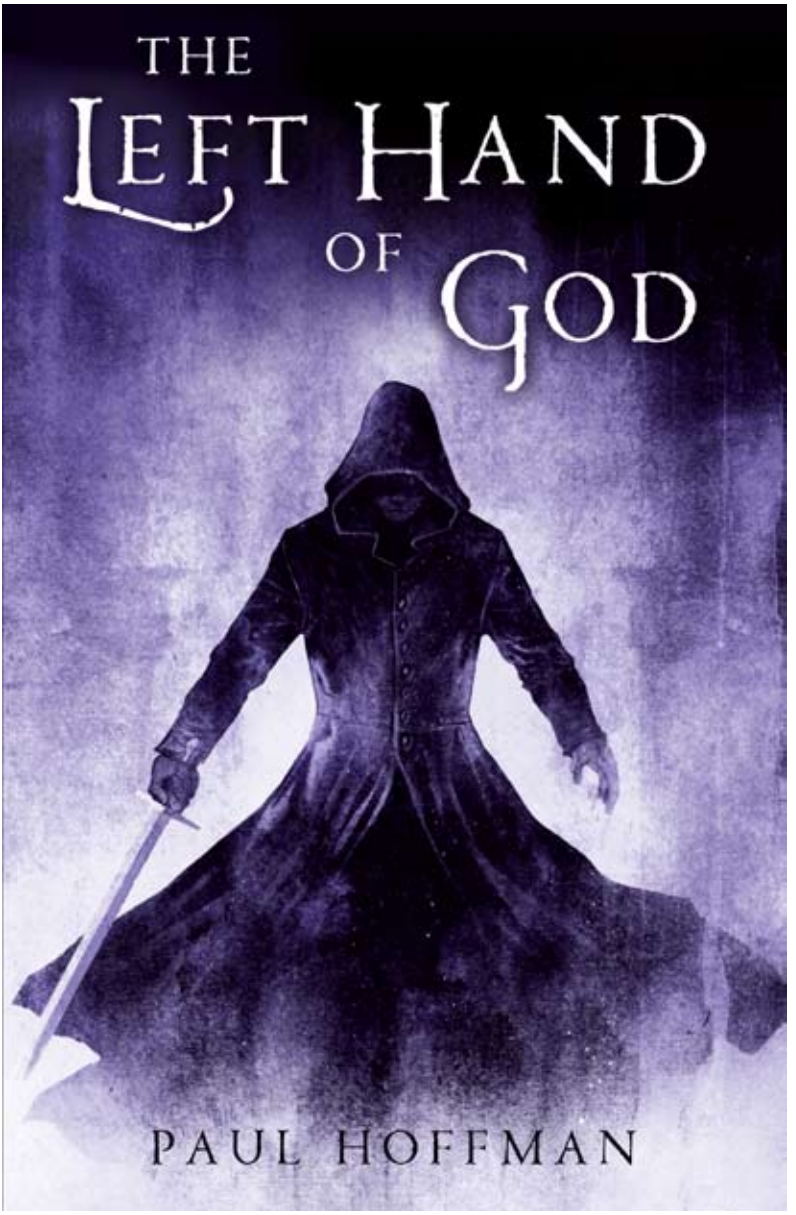

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by
Paul Hoffman

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I

Listen. The Sanctuary of the Redeemers on Shotover Scarp is named after a damned lie, for there is little redemption that goes on there and less sanctuary. The country around it is full of scrub and spindly weeds and you can barely tell the difference between summer and winter – which is to say that it is always bloody freezing no matter what the time of year. The Sanctuary itself is visible for miles when there is no filthy smog obscuring it, which is rare, and is made of flint, concrete and rice flour. The flour makes the concrete harder than rock and this is one of the reasons that the prison, for this is what it truly is, has resisted the many attempts to take it by siege, attempts now considered so futile that no one has tried to take Shotover Sanctuary for hundreds of years.

It is a stinking, foul place and no one except the Lord Redeemers go there willingly. Who are their prisoners, then? This is the wrong word for those who are taken to Shotover, because prisoners suggest a crime and they, none of them, have offended any law made by man or God. Nor do they look like any prisoner you will ever have seen: those who are brought here are all boys under the age of ten. Depending on their age when they enter, it may be more than fifteen years before they leave and then only half will do so. The other half will have left in a shroud of blue sacking and been buried in Ginky's Field, a graveyard which begins under the walls. This graveyard

is vast, spreading as far as you can see, so you will have some idea of the size of Shotover and how very hard it is even to stay alive there. No one knows their way round all of it and it is as easy to get lost within its endless corridors that twist and turn, high and low, as in any wilderness. This is not least because there is no change in the way it looks – every part of it looks much the same as every other part: brown, dark, grim and smelling of something old and rancid.

Standing in one of these corridors is a boy looking out of a window holding a large, dark blue sack. He is perhaps fourteen or fifteen years old. He is not sure and neither is anyone else. He has forgotten his real name because everyone who comes here is rebaptized with the name of one of the martyrs of the Lord Redeemers – and there are many of them on account of the fact that, time out of mind, everyone they have failed to convert has hated their guts. The boy staring out of the window is called Thomas Cale, although no one ever uses his first name, and he is committing a most grievous sin by doing so.

What drew him to the window was the sound of the North West Gate groaning as it always did on one of its rare openings, like some giant with appallingly painful knees. He watched as two Lords in their black cassocks stepped over the threshold and ushered in a small boy of about eight, followed by another slightly younger and then another. Cale counted twenty in all before another brace of Redeemers brought up the rear and slowly and arthritically the gate began to close.

Cale's expression changed as he leant forward to see out of the closing gate and into the Scablands beyond. He had been outside the walls on only six occasions since he had

come here more than a decade before – it was said, the youngest child ever brought to the Sanctuary. On these six occasions he was watched as if the life of his guards depended on it (which it did). Had he failed any of these six tests, for that was what they were, he would have been killed on the spot. Of his former life he could remember nothing.

As the gate shut he turned his attention to the boys again. None of them were plump but they had the round faces of young children. All were wide-eyed at the sight of the keep, its immense size, its huge walls, but, though bewildered and scared simply by the strangeness of their surroundings, they were not afraid. Cale's chest filled with deep and strange emotions that he could not have given a name to. But, lost in them as he was, his talent for keeping one ear alive to whatever was going on around him saved him, as it had so many times in the past.

He moved away from the window and walked on down the corridor.

'You! Wait!'

Cale stopped and turned round. One of the Redeemers, hugely fat with folds of skin hanging over the edge of his collar, was standing in one of the doorways off the passage, steam and odd sounds emerging from the room behind him. Cale looked at him, his expression unchanged.

'Come here and let me see you.'

The boy walked towards him.

'Oh, it's you,' said the fat Redeemer. 'What are you doing here?'

'The Lord of Discipline sent me to take this to the drum.' He held up the blue sack he was carrying.

'What did you say? Speak up!'

Cale knew, of course, that the fat Redeemer was deaf in one ear and had deliberately spoken quietly.

Cale repeated himself, this time shouting loudly.

'Are you trying to be funny, boy?'

'No, Redeemer.'

'What were you doing by the window?'

'The window?'

'Don't play me for a fool. What were you doing?'

'I heard the North West Gate being opened.'

'Did you, by God?'

This seemed to distract him.

'They're early.' He grunted with annoyance and then turned and looked back into the kitchen, for that was who the fat man was: the Lord of Vittles, overseer of the kitchen from which the Redeemers were well fed and the boys hardly at all. 'Twenty extra for dinner,' he shouted into the evil-smelling steam behind him. He turned back to Cale.

'Were you thinking when you were by that window?'

'No, Redeemer.'

'Were you daydreaming?'

'No, Redeemer.'

'If I catch you loitering again, Cale, I'll have the hide off you. Hear me?'

'Yes, Redeemer.'

The Lord of Vittles turned back into the room and began to close the door. As he did so, Cale spoke softly but quite distinctly so that anyone not hard of hearing would have picked it up.

'I hope you choke on it, you lardy dritsek.'

The door slammed shut and Cale headed off down the corridor dragging the large sack behind him. It took nearly fifteen minutes, running most of the way, before he came to

the drum located at the end of its own short passageway. It was called the drum because that was what it looked like, as long as you disregarded the fact that it was six feet tall and embedded in a brick wall. On the other side of the drum was a place sealed off from the rest of the sanctuary where, it was rumoured, there lived twelve nuns who cooked for the Redeemers only and washed their clothes. Cale did not know what a nun was and had never seen one, although from time to time he did talk to one of them through the drum. He did not know what made nuns different from other women, who were spoken of rarely and only then with distaste. There were two exceptions: the Hanged Redeemer's Holy Sister and the Blessed Imelda Lambertini, who at the age of eleven had died of ecstasy during her first communion. The Redeemers had not explained what ecstasy was and no one was foolish enough to ask. Cale gave the drum a spin and then it turned on its axis, revealing a large opening. He dumped the blue sack inside and gave it another spin, then he banged on the side, causing it to emit a loud boom. He waited for thirty seconds and then a muffled voice spoke from the other side of the drum wall:

'What is it?'

Cale put his head next to the drum so he could be heard, his lips almost touching the surface.

'Redeemer Bosco wants this back by tomorrow morning,' he shouted.

'Why didn't it come with all the others?'

'How the hell would I know?'

There was a high-pitched cry of muffled rage from the other side of the drum.

'What's your name, you impious pup?'

'Dominic Savio,' lied Cale.

'Well, Dominic Savio, I'll report you to the Lord of Discipline and he'll have the hide off you.'

'I could care less.'

Twenty minutes later Cale arrived back at the Lord Militant's training buroo. It was empty except for the Lord himself, who did not look up or give any sign that he had seen Cale. He continued to write in his ledger for another five minutes before speaking, still without looking up.

'What took you so long?'

'The Lord of Vittles stopped me in the corridor of the outer banks.'

'Why?'

'He heard a noise outside, I think.'

'What noise?' Finally, the Lord Militant looked at Cale. His eyes were a pale, almost watery blue, but sharp. They did not miss much. Or anything.

'They were opening the North West Gate to let in the freshboys. He wasn't expecting them today. I'd say his nose was out of joint.'

'Hold your tongue,' said the Lord Militant, but mildly by his unforgiving standards. Cale knew that he despised the Lord of Vittles and hence why he felt it less dangerous to speak in such a way of a Redeemer.

'I asked your friend about the rumour they'd arrived,' said the Redeemer.

'I have no friends, Redeemer,' replied Cale. 'They're forbidden.'

The Lord Militant laughed softly, not a pleasant sound.

'I have no worries about you on that score, Cale. But if we must plod – the scrawny blond-haired one. What do you call him?'

'Henri.'

'I know his given name. You have a moniker for him.'

'We call him Vague Henri.'

The Lord Militant laughed, but this time there was the echo of some ordinary good humour.

'Very good,' he said appreciatively. 'I asked him what time the freshboys had arrived and he said he wasn't sure, sometime between eight bells and nine. I then asked him how many there were and he said fifteen or so, but it might have been more.' He looked Cale straight in the eyes. 'I thrashed him to teach him to be more specific in future. What do you think of that?'

'It's all the same to me, Redeemer,' replied Cale flatly. 'He deserved whatever punishment you gave him.'

'Really? How very gratifying you should think so. What time did they arrive?'

'Just before five.'

'How many were there?'

'Twenty.'

'What ages?'

'None younger than seven. None older than nine.'

'Of what kind?'

'Four Mezos, four Uitlanders, three Folders, five half-castes, three Miamis and one I didn't know.'

The Lord Militant grunted as if only barely satisfied that all his questions had been answered so precisely. 'Go over to the board. I've set a puzzle for you. Ten minutes.'

Cale walked over to a large table, twenty feet by twenty, on which the Lord Militant had rolled out a map that fell slightly over the edges. It was easy to recognize some of the things drawn there – hills, rivers, woods – but on the remainder there were numerous small blocks of wood on which

were written numbers and hieroglyphs, some of the blocks in order, some apparently chaotic. Cale stared at the map for his allotted time and then looked up.

'Well?' said the Lord Militant.

Cale began to set out his solution.

Twenty minutes later he finished, his hands still held out in front of him.

'Very ingenious. Impressive, even,' said the Lord Militant. Something in Cale's eyes changed. Then with extraordinary speed the Lord Militant lashed the boy's left hand with a leather belt studded with tiny but thick tacks.

Cale winced and his teeth ground together in pain. But quickly his face returned to the watchful coldness that was all these days that the Redeemer ever saw from him. The Lord Militant sat down and considered the boy as if he were an object both interesting and yet unsatisfactory.

'When will you learn that to do the clever thing, the original thing, is merely your pride controlling you? This solution may work but it's unreasonably risky. You know very well the tried solution to this problem. In war a dull success is always better than a brilliant one. You had better learn to understand why.'

He banged the table furiously.

'Have you forgotten that a Redeemer has the right to kill instantly any boy who does something unexpected?'

There was another crash as he hit the table again, stood up and glared at Cale. Blood, not a great amount, dripped from the four holes in Cale's still-outstretched left hand. 'No one else would have indulged you the way I have. The Lord of Discipline has his eye on you. Every few years he likes to set an example. Do you want to end up as an Act of Faith?'

Cale stared ahead and said nothing.

'Answer me!'

'No, Lord.'

'Do you think you are needful, you useless Zed?'

'No, Lord.'

'This is my fault, my fault, my most grievous fault,' said the Lord Militant, striking his breast with his hand three times. 'You have twenty-four hours to consider your sins and then you will debase yourself before the Lord of Discipline.'

'Yes, Redeemer.'

'Now, get out.'

Dropping his hands to his side, Cale turned and walked to the door.

'Don't bleed on the mat,' called out the Lord Militant.

Cale opened the door with his good hand and left.

Alone in his cell the Lord Militant watched the door close. As it clicked shut his expression changed from that of barely constrained rage to one of thoughtful curiosity.

Outside in the corridor Cale stood for a moment in the horrible brown light that infected everywhere in the Sanctuary and examined his left hand. The wounds were not deep because the studs in the belt had been designed to cause intense pain without taking long to heal. He made a fist and squeezed, his head shaking as if a small tremor were taking place deep inside his skull as the blood from his hand dripped heavily onto the floor. Then he relaxed his hand and in the grim light a look of horrible despair crept over his face. In a moment it was gone and Cale walked on down the corridor and out of sight.

None of the boys in the Sanctuary knew how many of them there were. Some claimed there were as many as ten thousand

and growing more with every month. It was the increase that occupied the conversations most. Even amongst those nearing twenty years old there was agreement that, until the last five years, the number, whatever it was, had remained steady. But since then there had been a rise. The Redeemers were doing things differently, itself an ominous and strange thing: habit and conformity to the past was to them like air to those who breathe. Every day should be like the next day, every month like the next month. No year should be different from another year. But now the great increase in numbers had required change. The dormitories had been altered with bunks of two and even three tiers to accommodate new arrivals. Divine service was held in staggered rosters so that all might pray and store up every day the tokens against damnation. And now meals were taken in relays. But as for the reasons behind this change, the boys knew nothing.

Cale, his left hand wrapped in a dirty piece of linen previously thrown away by the washerserfs, walked through the huge refectory for the second sitting carrying a wooden tray. Late to arrive, though not too late – for this he would have been beaten and excluded – he walked towards the large table at the end of the room where he always ate. He stopped behind another boy, about the same age and height but so intent on eating that he did not notice Cale standing behind him. It was the others at the table whose raised heads alerted him. He looked up.

'Sorry, Cale,' he said, shoving the remains of his food into his mouth at the same time as he stepped out from behind the bench and hurried off carrying his tray.

Cale sat down and looked at his supper: there was something that looked like a sausage, but was not, covered in a watery gravy with some indeterminate root vegetable

bleached by endless boiling into a yellowy pale mush. In a bowl beside it was porridge, gelatinous and cold and grey as week-old slush. For a moment, starving as he was, he couldn't bring himself to start eating. Then someone pushed his way onto the bench beside him. Cale didn't look at him but started to eat. Only the slight twitch at the edge of his mouth revealed what filthy stuff it was.

The boy who had pushed in next to him started to speak, but so low was his voice that only Cale could hear. It was unwise to be caught speaking to another boy at mealtimes.

'I found something,' said the boy, the excitement clear even though he was barely audible.

'Good for you,' replied Cale without emotion.

'Something wonderful.'

This time Cale did not react at all, instead concentrating on getting the porridge down without gagging. There was a pause from the boy.

'There's food. Food you can eat.' Cale barely raised his head, but the boy next to him knew that he had won.

'Why should I believe you?'

'Vague Henri was with me. Meet us at seven behind the Hanged Redeemer.'

With that the boy stood up and was gone. Cale raised his head and a strange look of longing came over his face, so different from the cold mask he usually showed the world that the boy opposite stared at him.

'Don't you want that?' said the boy, eyes bright with hope as if the rancid sausage and waxy-grey porridge offered more joy than he could easily comprehend.

Cale did not reply or look at the boy but began eating again, forcing himself to swallow and trying not to be sick.

When he had finished, Cale took his wooden tray to the

cleanorium, scrubbed it in the bowl with sand and put it back in its rack. On his way out, watched by a Redeemer sitting in a huge high chair from which he could survey the Refectory, Cale knelt in front of the statue of the Hanged Redeemer, beat his breast three times and muttered, 'I am Sin, I am Sin, I am Sin,' without the slightest regard for what the words meant.

Outside it was dark and the evening fog had descended. This was good; it would make it easier for Cale to slip unnoticed from the ambo into the bushes that grew behind the great statue.

By the time he arrived Cale was unable to see more than fifteen feet in front of him. He stepped down from the ambo and onto the gravel in front of the statue.

This was the largest of all the holy gibbets in the sanctuary and there must have been hundreds of them, some of them no larger than a few inches, nailed to walls, set in niches, decorating the tubs of holy ashes at the end of every corridor and on the spaces above every door. They were so common, so frequently referred to, that the image itself had long ago lost any meaning. Nobody, except the freshboys, really noticed them for what they were: models of a man hanging from a gallows with a rope around his neck, his body hatched with scars from the torture before his execution, his broken legs dangling at a strange angle beneath him. Holy gibbets of the Hanged Redeemer made during the Sanctuary's founding a thousand years before were crude and tended to a straightforward realism: a terror in the eyes and face for all the lack of carving skill, the body twisted and wracked, the tongue protruding from the mouth. This, said the carvers, was a horrible way to die. Over the years the statues had become more skilled but also

milk-and-water. The great statue, with its huge gallows, its thick rope and twenty-foot tall saviour dangling from it, was only thirty years old: the weals on his back were pronounced but neat and bloodless. Rather than being agonizingly smashed, his legs were held in a pose as if he were suffering more from cramp. But it was the expression on his face that was oddest of all – instead of the pain of strangulation he had a look of inconvenienced holiness, as if a small bone was stuck in his throat and he was clearing it with a demure cough.

Nevertheless, on this night in the fog and the dark the only thing that Cale could see of the Redeemer were his huge feet dangling out of the white mist. The oddness of this made him uneasy. Careful not to make any noise, Cale eased himself into the bushes that obscured him from anyone walking past.

'Cale?'

'Yes.'

The boy from the refectory, Kleist, and Vague Henri emerged from the bushes in front of Cale.

'This better be worth the risk, Henri,' whispered Cale.

'It is, Cale. I promise.'

Kleist gestured Cale to follow into the bushes against the wall. It was even darker here and Cale had to wait for his eyes to adjust. The two others waited. There was a door.

This was astonishing – while there were plenty of doorways in the Sanctuary there were few doors. During the Great Reformation two hundred years before, more than half the Redeemers had been burnt at the stake for heresy. Fearing that these apostates might have contaminated their boys, the victorious sect of Redeemers had cut their throats just to be on the safe side. After the restocking of freshboys,

the Redeemers had made many changes and one of them had been to remove all the doors wherever there were boys.

What, after all, could be the purpose of a door where there were sinners? Doors hid things. Doors were about many devil-type things, they decided, about secrecy, about being alone or with others and up-to-something. The very concept of a door, now that they thought of it, began to make the Redeemers shake with rage and fear. The devil himself was no longer just depicted as a horned beast but almost as often as a rectangle with a lock. Of course this antipathy towards doors did not apply to the Redeemers themselves: the very sign of their own redemption was the possession of a door to their place of work and their sleeping cells. Holiness for the Redeemers was measured by the numbers of keys they were allowed to hold on the chain round their waists. To jangle as you walked was to show that you were already being tolled to heaven.

This was why the discovery of an unknown door was something amazing.

Now that his eyes were becoming accustomed to the dark, Cale could see a pile of broken plaster and crumbling bricks piled next to the door.

'I was hiding from Chetnick,' said Vague Henri. 'That's how I found this place. The plaster on the corner there was falling away so while I waited I picked at it. It was all crumbling – water had got in. It only took half a mo.'

Cale reached out towards the edge of the door and pushed carefully. Then again, and again.

'It's locked.'

Kleist and Vague Henri smiled. Kleist reached into his pocket and took out something Cale had never seen in a

boy's possession – a key. It was long and thick and pitted with rust. All their eyes were shining with excitement now. Kleist put the key in the lock and turned, grunting with the effort. Then, with a *clunk!* it shifted.

'It took us three days of shovelling in grease and stuff to get it to open,' said Vague Henri, his voice thick with pride.

'Where did you get the key?' asked Cale. Kleist and Vague Henri were delighted that Cale was talking to them as if they had raised the dead or walked on water.

'I'll tell you when we get in. Come on.' Kleist put his shoulder to the door and the others did the same. 'Don't push too hard, the hinges might be in bad shape. We don't want to make any noise. I'll count to three.' He paused. 'Ready? One, two, three.'

They pushed. Nothing. It wouldn't budge. They stopped, took a deep breath. 'One, two, three.'

They heaved and then with a screech the door shifted. They stepped back, alarmed. To be heard was to be caught, to be caught was to be subject to God knows what.

'We could be hanged for this,' said Cale. The others looked at him.

'They wouldn't. Not a hanging.'

'The Militant told me that the Lord of Discipline was looking for an excuse to set an example. It's been five years since the last hanging.'

'They wouldn't,' repeated Vague Henri, shocked.

'Yes, they would. This is a *door*, for God's sake. You have a *key*.' Cale turned to Kleist. 'You lied to me. You've got no idea what's in there. It's probably a dead end, nothing worth stealing, nothing worth knowing.' He looked back at the other boy. 'It isn't worth the risk, Henri, but it's your neck. I'm out.'

As he started to turn a voice called from the ambo, angry and impatient.

'Who's there? What was that noise?'

Then they heard the sound of a man stepping onto the gravel in front of the Hanged Redeemer.

2

Sheer terror would be mild compared to what Kleist and Henri felt as they heard that sound, the knowledge of the cruelty coming to them for their stupidity – the vast and silent crowd waiting in the grey light, their screams as they are dragged to the gallows, the terrible hour-long wait as Mass was sung and then the rope and being hauled into the air, choking and kicking.

But Cale had already moved over to the door and with one silent surge of effort lifted the door up from its collapsing hinges and pushed. It swung open almost silently. He reached for the shoulders of the two motionless boys and pushed them into the gap. Once they were in he squeezed himself in after them and with another huge effort shut the door behind him, again almost silently.

'Come out! At once!' The sound of the man's voice was muffled, but still clear.

'Give me the key,' said Cale. Kleist handed it over. Cale turned to the door and felt for the lock. Then he paused. He did not know how to use a key. 'Kleist! You!' he whispered. Kleist felt for the lock and then slipped in the heavy key.

'Quietly,' said Cale.

With a trembling hand that knew that what it was doing was death or life, Kleist twisted the key.

It turned with what seemed to them the clang of a hammer on an iron pot.

'Come here now!' demanded the muffled voice. But Cale

could hear that there was uncertainty in it. Whoever was out there in the fog was unsure of what he had heard.

They waited. In the silence only the light rasp of the breathing of the fearful. Then they could just make out the muffled crunch of gravel as the man turned away, the sound quickly swallowed up.

'He's gone for the Gougers.'

'Perhaps not,' said Cale. 'I think it was the Lord Vittles. He's an idle fat bastard and he wasn't sure what he heard. He could have searched the bushes but he wouldn't make the effort. He'll be wary of getting the Gougers out with the dogs when he wasn't even ready to check behind a few bushes because of the strain on his lardy carcass.'

'If he comes back tomorrow when it's light he'll find the door,' said Vague Henri. 'Even if we escape now, they'll come after us.'

'They'll come after *someone* and they'll make sure they find them, whether they're guilty or not. There's nothing to connect us with this place. Someone will take it in the neck but there's no reason it should be us.'

'What if he has gone for help?' said Kleist.

'Unlock the door and let's get out.'

Kleist felt for the door and patted his way down to the key sticking out of the lock. He tried to turn it but it wouldn't budge. Then he tried again. Nothing. Then he twisted as hard as he could. There was a loud *snap!*

'What was that?' demanded Vague Henri.

'The key,' said Kleist. 'It's broken off in the lock.'

'What?' said Cale.

'It's broken. We can't get out. Not this way.'

'God!' swore Cale. 'You half-wit. If I could see you, I'd wring your neck.'

'There might be another way out.'

'And how are we going to find it in the pitch black?' said Cale bitterly.

'I have a light,' said Kleist. 'I thought we'd need one.'

There was a pause, with only the ruffling of Kleist searching his cassock, dropping something, finding it again and then some more ruffling. Then there were sparks as he struck a flint onto some dry moss. Quickly it began to flame and in its light they could see Kleist touching it to the wick of a carrying candle. In a moment he had inserted it into its glass cap and they could look around for the first time.

It's true that there was not much to be seen in the light of the carrying candle, only a poor illumination is to be had from the yellow rendered fat of animal meat, but it was clear to the boys as soon as they looked around that this was not a room, but a blocked-off corridor.

Cale took the light from Kleist and examined the door.

'This plaster isn't that old – a few years at most.'

In the corner something scuttled and the three of them had the same thought: rats.

The eating of rats was forbidden to the boys on religious grounds but this was at least one taboo with a good reason behind it – they were disease on four legs. Nevertheless, the meat of a rat was considered a great treat by the boys. Of course, not everyone could be a rat butcher. The skill was much prized and was passed from butcher to trainee in exchange only for expensive swag and mutual favours. The rat butchers were a secretive lot and charged half the rat for their services – a price so high that from time to time some catchers had decided to dispense with them and try butchering for themselves, often with results that encouraged the

others to pay up and be grateful. Kleist was a trained butcher.

'We don't have time,' said Cale, realizing what was on his mind. 'And the light isn't good enough to prepare one.'

'I can skin a rat in the pitch black,' replied Kleist. 'Who knows how long we'll be stuck?' He pulled up his cassock and removed a large pebble from a pocket hidden in the hem. He took careful aim and then lashed it into the semi-dark. In the corner there was a squeal and a horrible scuttling. Kleist took the candle from Cale and walked towards the sound. He reached into his pocket and with great care unfolded a small piece of cloth and used it to get hold of the creature. With a flick of his wrist he snapped its neck and then put it in the same pocket.

'I'll finish later.'

'This is a corridor,' said Cale. 'It must've led somewhere once, maybe it still does.' As the one with the candle, Kleist took the lead.

After less than a minute Cale began to revise his opinions. The corridor soon narrowed so that soon they could continue only by bending. No doorways, bricked up or otherwise, appeared as Cale had hoped.

'This isn't a corridor,' said Cale at last, still keeping his voice low. 'It's more like a tunnel.'

For more than half an hour they walked on and moved quickly, despite the dark, because the floor was almost completely smooth and clear of rubbish.

Eventually it was Cale who spoke.

'Why did you tell me there was food when you'd never even been here?'

'Obvious,' said Vague Henri. 'You wouldn't have come otherwise, would you?'

'And how stupid that would have been. You promised me food, Kleist, and I was idiot enough to trust you.'

'I thought you were famous, you know, for not trusting people,' said Kleist. 'Besides, we have a rat. I didn't lie. Anyway, there is food.'

'How do you know?' said Henri, his voice betraying his hunger.

'There are lots more rats. Rats need to eat. They have to get it from somewhere.'

Kleist stopped suddenly.

'What's the matter?' asked Henri.

Kleist held out the candle. In front of them was a wall. There was no door.

'Maybe it's behind the plaster,' said Kleist.

Cale felt the wall with the palm of his hand and then tapped it with his knuckle. 'It's not plaster, it's rice flour and concrete. Same as the outer walls.' There would be no breaking through this.

'We'll have to go back. Maybe we missed a door in the side of the tunnel. We weren't looking for that.'

'I don't think so,' said Cale. 'And besides . . . how long will the candle burn for?'

Kleist looked at the tallow he was holding. 'Twenty minutes.'

'What'll we do?' said Vague Henri.

'Put the candle out and let's have a think,' said Cale.

'Good idea,' said Kleist.

'Happy you think so,' muttered Cale and sat down on the floor.

Having sat down himself, Kleist opened the glass and extinguished the flame between thumb and forefinger.

They sat in the dark, all three of them distracted by the

smell of the animal fat from the candle. For them the stench of burnt rancid tallow was a reminder of one thing: food.

After five minutes, Vague Henri spoke.

'I was just . . .' His sentence tailed off. The other two waited. 'This is one end of a tunnel . . .' Again he paused. 'But there has to be more than one way to get into a tunnel . . .' His voice trailed off. 'Just a thought.'

'A *thought*?' said Kleist. 'Don't flatter yourself.'

Henri did not reply but Cale got to his feet.

'Light the candle.'

It took a minute for Kleist with his moss and flint but soon they were able to see again. Cale sank onto his haunches.

'Give it to Henri and get on my shoulders.'

Kleist handed the candle over and then clambered onto Cale's back and settled his legs around his neck. With a grunt Cale pushed him into the air.

'Take the light.'

Kleist did as he was told. 'Now look up by the roof.'

Kleist raised the candle, looking for something without any idea what it was.

'Yes!' he shouted.

'Be quiet, damn you!'

'It's a hatch,' he whispered, overjoyed.

'Can you reach it?'

'Yes. I don't even have to stretch hardly.'

'Be careful – just a gentle push. There might be someone around.'

Kleist placed his palm at the nearest edge of the hatch and pushed.

'It moved.'

'Try and push it away. Try and see something.'

There was a scraping sound.

'Nothing. It's dark. I'll put the candle up there.' There was a pause. 'I still can't see much.'

'Can you get up?'

'If you push my feet. When I grab the edge. Now!'

Cale grabbed his feet and heaved upwards. Kleist slowly moved and then pulled away to the sound of the hatch clattering above them.

'Keep it quiet!' hissed Cale.

Then he was gone.

Cale and Henri waited in the dark, illuminated by the faint glow from the hatch above. Even this grew dim as Kleist searched his surroundings. Then it went dark.

'Do you think we can trust him not to clear off?'

'Well,' said Vague Henri. 'I think.' He paused. 'Probably.'

But he didn't finish. The light appeared in the hatch again, followed by Kleist's head.

'It's some sort of room,' he whispered. 'But I can see light through another hatch.'

'Get on my shoulders,' said Cale to Vague Henri.

'What about you?'

'I'll be fine – just both of you wait up there to pull me up.'

Vague Henri was much lighter than Kleist and it was easy enough to lift him up to the hatch where Kleist could haul him through.

'Hang the candle as far down as you can.'

Kleist lowered himself while Vague Henri held on to his feet.

Cale went to the wall of the tunnel, reached up to a crack in the wall and pulled himself up. Then he found another and another until he was able to reach towards Kleist's hand.

They clasped each other's wrists.

'You all right for this?'

'Worry about yourself, Cale. I'm going to give Henri the candle.'

He turned his hand back to Vague Henri, half his body length dangling out of the hatch, and the light disappeared back up into the darkness.

'On my count of three.' He paused. 'One, two, three.'

Cale let go and swung out into mid-air – a hefty grunt from Kleist as he took his weight. He hung for a moment, waiting for the swinging to stop. Then with his free arm he reached up and pulled on Kleist's shoulder as Henri heaved on his legs. They shifted only six inches but it was enough for Cale to grab the edge of the hatch and ease the weight on Kleist and Henri. He held for a moment and then was pulled through the hatch and onto the wooden floor.

The three of them lay there panting with the effort. Then Cale stood up.

'Show me the other hatch.'

Getting to his feet, Kleist picked up the now nearly vanished candle and went over to the other side of a room that looked to Cale be about twenty feet by fifteen.

Kleist bent down next to a hatch followed by the other two. There was, as he'd said, a crack to one side of the hatch. Cale put his eye as close as he could but, beyond the fact that there was light, he was able to see nothing in detail. Then he put his ear to the crack.

'What do you . . . ?'

'Be quiet!' hissed Cale.

He kept his ear to the floor for a good two minutes. Then he sat up and went to the hatch. There was no obvious way to lift it so he felt around the edges until he found enough

of a gap to pull the hatch itself towards the fixed lip. It gave slightly, making a grating noise. Cale winced with irritation. There wasn't room enough for even a finger so he had to push his fingernails into the wood to get any kind of purchase. It hurt as he pulled at the edge but then he eased it upwards enough to get his hand underneath. He lifted the hatch away from its frame and then all three of them looked down.

About fifteen feet below them was a sight unlike anything they had ever experienced; indeed, more than they had ever dreamt of.

3

Absolutely still, absolutely silent, the three boys continued to stare down into the kitchen, for that was what it was. Every surface was covered in plates of food: there was roast chicken with its crispy skin rubbed in salt and ground pepper, beef in thick slices, pork with crackling so crisp to bite it would make the sound of a dry stick being broken. There was bread, thick sliced with the crust so dark it was almost black in places, there were plates piled high with onions tinged with purple, and rice with fruits, fat raisins and apples. And there were puddings: meringues like mountains, custards of a deep yellow and bowls of clotted cream.

The boys had no words for most of what they saw: why have a word for custard when you had never even imagined the existence of such a thing, or to think that the slabs of beef and breasts of sliced chicken bore any relation to the scraps of giblets and feet and brain boiled together and minced into offal tubes that was their only taste of meat. Think of how strange the colours and sights of the world would be for a blind man abruptly made to see, or a man deaf from birth hearing the playing of a hundred flutes.

But confused and amazed as they were, hunger drove them out of the hatch like monkeys, swinging away from the table and into in the middle of the kitchen. All three stood astonished at the abundance around them. Even Cale almost forgot that the hatch had to be closed. In a daze of smells and sweet colours he took some of the plates off the

table and stood up. With his hands stretched to their furthest limit he was just able to push the hatch across so that it fell into place.

By the time he was back on the floor the other two were already plundering the food with the skill of long-practised scavengers. They took only one thing from each place and rearranged the gap so it appeared that nothing was gone. They couldn't resist a few bits of chicken or bread but most of what they took went into the forbidden pockets that they had stitched into their cassocks to hide any contraband they came across that could be easily stolen and hidden.

Cale felt sick with the rich smells that seemed to surge in his brain and make him want to faint, as if they were baited with strange vapours.

'Don't eat. Just take what you can hide.' He was instructing himself as much as the others. He took his share and hid what he filched but there were few pockets to hide them in. They had no need of many hiding places, the pickings in their ordinary life being so thin and scanty.

'We have to get out. Now.' Cale walked towards the door. As if they had been woken from a deep sleep, Kleist and Vague Henri began to realize how much danger they were in. Cale listened at the door for a moment and then eased it open. It was a corridor.

'God knows where we are,' he said. 'But we have to find cover.' With that he pulled the door open and walked out, the others warily following.

They moved quickly, keeping close to the walls. Within a few yards they came across a staircase leading upwards. Cale shook his head as Vague Henri made his way over to it. 'We need to find a window or get outside and see if we can find out where we are. We have to get back to the sleepshed

before candle out or they'll know we're gone.' They moved on, but as they approached a door on the left it began to open.

In an instant they turned and fled back to the stairs and ran to the top. All three flattened themselves on the landing as they heard voices pass beneath them along the corridor. They heard the sound of another door being opened and Cale raised his head only to see a figure heading into the kitchen from which they had just come. Vague Henri moved beside him. He looked confused and afraid.

'Those voices,' he whispered. 'What was wrong with them?'

Cale shook his head, but he too had noticed how strange they were and felt a peculiar movement in his stomach. He stood up scanning the place where they were hiding. There was nowhere to go except through a door behind them. Quickly he turned the handle and eased into the room behind it. Except that it wasn't a room. It was a balcony of some kind with a low wall ten feet or so from the door. Cale crawled towards it with the others doing the same until they were all crouched behind the wall.

From the space overlooked by the balcony there was a burst of laughter and applause.

It was not just the laughter that spooked the three boys – for all that laughter was something rarely heard in that place and never in such volume and easy joy – it was much more the pitch and sound of it. Like the voices they had heard in the corridor a few moments before, it set off an alien thrill deep inside them.

'Look and see,' whispered Vague Henri.

'No,' mouthed Cale.

'You must, or I will.'

Cale grabbed his wrist and squeezed.

'If we're caught, we're dead.'

Vague Henri, reluctant, eased back against the balcony wall. There was another burst of laughter but this time Cale kept his eye on Vague Henri. Then he noticed that Kleist had moved onto his knees and was looking down, fascinated at the source of so much careless joy. Laughter for an acolyte was something droll, laconic, bitter. He tried to pull him back but Kleist was much stronger than Vague Henri and it was impossible to budge him without using so much force that they would have revealed themselves instantly.

Cale slowly raised his head over the balcony wall and looked down on something far more shocking and disturbing than the sight of the food in the kitchen. It was as if everything inside him was being battered with a hundred of the Redeemers' nail sticks.

Below in a large hall were about a dozen tables, all covered in the same food they'd seen in the kitchen. The tables were arranged in a circle so that everyone seated could see each other, and it seemed obvious that two girls dressed in pure white were the cause of this celebration. One of these girls in particular was striking, with long dark hair and deep green eyes. She was beautiful but also as plump as a cushion. In the middle of the circle of tables was a large pool full of hot water, mists of steam clinging to its surface. It was the half-dozen or so girls in the pool who froze the wide-eyed expression on Cale's and Kleist's faces, a look as shocked and bewildered as if they had come upon a sight of heaven itself.

The girls in the pool were naked. They were pink or brown according to their origin, but all were curved and voluptuous. But it was not their nakedness that so amazed

the boys as the fact that they had they never seen a woman before.

Who could capture what they felt? The poet does not exist who could put it into words, the terrible joy, the shock and awe.

There was a gasp, this time from Vague Henri, who now was beside the two others.

The noise brought Cale back to his right mind. He slipped down and rested against the wall. In a few seconds the others, pale and distraught, did the same.

'Wonderful,' Whispered Vague Henri to himself 'Wonderful, wonderful, most wonderful.'

'We have to go or we're dead.'

Cale slipped onto his hands and knees and crawled to the door, the others following. They slipped out and crept to the edge of the landing and listened. Nothing. Then they made their way down the stairs and began to walk down the corridor. Luck was with them because there was nothing left of the skilled and cautious boys who had made their way to the balcony and the shocking scenes beneath. But in this shaken and enraptured state they made it to a doorway that led to another corridor. They turned to the left because they had no better reason to go to the right.

Now the three of them, with just half an hour to get back to the sleepshed, broke into a run, but in less than a minute they came to a sharp turn. It was twenty feet long and at the end was a thick door. Their faces fell in despair.

'Dear God!' whispered Vague Henri.

'In forty minutes they'll have the Gougers out looking for us.'

'Well, it won't take them long, will it, stuck in here.'

'And then what? They won't let us tell what we've seen here,' said Kleist.

'Then we have to leave,' said Cale.

'Leave?'

'As in go away and never come back.'

'We can't even get out of here,' said Kleist, 'And you're talking about escaping from the Sanctuary altogether.'

'What choice do we –' But Cale's reply was cut short by the sound of the key turning in the lock of the door in front of them. It was a huge door and at least six inches thick so there were a few seconds for them to find a hiding place. Except that there wasn't one.

Cale signalled the other two to flatten themselves against the wall where the opening door would hide them, if only until it was shut. But they had no choice: to run back was to be stuck where they were until their absence was discovered, followed by quick capture and a slow death.

The door swung open, the result of some effort if the swearing and groan of irritation were anything to go by. Accompanied by more bad-tempered muttering, the door moved towards them and then stopped. Then a small wedge of wood was forced under the door to keep it open. More cursing and groaning followed, and then there was the sound of a small cart being pushed down the corridor. Cale, who was on the edge side of the door, looked out and saw a familiar figure in a black cassock limping away as he pushed the cart and then disappear round the corner. He signalled the others out and moved quickly through the door.

They were outside in the cold fog. There was another cart filled with coal waiting to be taken in. That was why Under Redeemer Smith, lazy bastard as always, had jammed the

door open rather than lock it as he must have been instructed to do.

Normally they would have stolen as much coal as they could carry but their pockets were full of food and they were too afraid in any case.

'Where are we?' asked Vague Henri.

'No idea,' replied Cale. He moved down the ambo trying to get used to the fog and the dark in order to find a landmark. But now the relief at their deliverance was fading. They'd walked a long way in the tunnel. They could be anywhere in the Sanctuary and its maze of buildings and ambos and corridors.

Then a huge pair of feet loomed out of the fog. It was the great statue of the Hanged Redeemer they had left behind more than an hour ago.

Within less than five minutes they, separately, joined the queue for the sleepshed, more formally known as the Dormitory of the Lady of Perpetual Succour. What any of this meant they knew not and cared less. They began chanting along with the others: 'What if I should die tonight? What if I should die tonight? What if I should die tonight?' The answer to this dismal question had been made pretty clear to the acolytes all their lives by the Redeemers: most of them would go to hell because of the disgusting black state of their souls and be burnt for all eternity. For years when the subject of their dying in the middle of the night came up, and it came up often, Cale was frequently hauled to the front of the group and the Redeemer in charge would raise his cassock up to reveal his naked back and show the bruises that covered it from nape to sacroiliac. The bruises were of many sizes, and while going through the various states of healing his back was sometimes beautiful to behold with so

many variations of blue and grey and greens, vermilioned reds and almost golden purple yellows. 'Look at these colours!' the Redeemer would say. 'Your souls which should be as white as a turtle's wing are worse than the blacks and purples on this boy's back. This is what all of you look like to God: purple and black. And if any one of you dies tonight you don't need me to tell you what line you'll be forming. As for what's waiting at the end of that line – there are beasts to eat you and shit you out and eat you yet again. There are metal ovens waiting, heated red, and you'll be baked to cinders for an hour, then rendered down to fat, then kneaded by a devil, ash and lard together like an ugly dough, and then be born again and then be burnt again and born and burnt for all eternity.'

Once a visiting dignitary, one Redeemer Compton who was opposed to Bosco, had witnessed this demonstration and also seen the one of the beatings that had caused the bruises. 'These boys,' said Redeemer Compton, 'are being shaped to fight the blasphemy of the Antagonists. Violence so extreme against a child no matter how much he's become the devil's playground will break his spirit long before it will make it tough enough to help us wipe their sacrilege from the sight of God.'

'He is not unruly and he is very far from being the playground of the devil.' Bosco, always so very guarded when it came to discussing Cale, was instantly angry with himself at being provoked even to so enigmatic an explanation.

'Then why do you allow this?'

'Do not ask the reason. Be satisfied.'

'Tell me, Redeemer.'

'I say I will not.'

And at this Redeemer Compton, wiser for once than

Bosco, held his tongue but later instructed two of his paid squealers at the Sanctuary to pick up whatever they could about the purple-backed boy.

'What if I should die tonight? What if I should die tonight? What if I should die tonight?' As Cale and the others muttered their way to bed the chant that years of repetition had rendered almost empty of meaning renewed the dreadful power it had over them as young children, when they would lie awake all night convinced that merely the closing of their eyes would see them feeling the hot mouth of the beast or hearing the charred clash of the metal oven doors.

Within ten minutes the huge shed was full and the door locked as five hundred boys in absolute silence prepared to sleep in the vast, freezing and dimly lit barn. Then the candles were put out and the boys began to prepare for a sleep that came quickly, for they had been awake since five o'clock that morning. The dormitory settled into a noisy mixture of snores, weeping, yelps and grunts as the boys fled into whatever comfort or horror waited for them in their dreams.

Three boys, of course, did not fall asleep quickly, nor did they do so for many hours.