NEXT

edited by

Keith Gray

ANDERSEN PRESS

GREEN FIELDS

Jonathan Stroud

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Before he entered the room, Frank Fisher checked the contents of his satchel. Yes, everything was still in place: the rows of firecrackers and phosphorus pens; the lighters, water flasks and tape-player; the legal documents in their heat-proof plastic sleeve. All nice and neat and ready, just as they had been the last three times he looked. Even so, he took out a lighter and flicked it on briefly, testing the strength of the flame.

Swinging the satchel under his arm, he tried the Velcro fastening that fixed his rapier to his belt. Good and tight – but not so tight he couldn't instantly pull it free if an attack came. All was as it should be. He had everything he needed to survive.

Frank Fisher opened the door.

*

The layout of the room was typical: it could have been a Standard-Class Room of Passing belonging to any of a dozen sects. The floor was smooth, pale wood, the walls matt white. A vase of lilies sat on a reproduction-marble plinth. Several plastic chairs had been arranged beneath the window.

The bed stood alone in the middle of the floor. Until recently it had evidently been surrounded by all the usual medical and devotional aids; the saline drips and heart monitors, the prayer-poles and little bureaux piled with route maps of the Other Side. Now, however, in preparation for the final moments, most of these had been wheeled away to cluster like grieving relatives a short distance from the bed.

Beyond the window, in the high air, seagulls soared. Pale winter light glinted on the cranes and dockyards across the river. The curtains had not been drawn.

Two men stood facing the window, looking up towards the sky. As Frank closed the door, they turned to meet him.

Frank said briskly: 'Frank Fisher, Thirteenth Hour Insurance Company. I guess you'll want to see my accreditation.'

The shorter of the two men nodded to his companion – a thin, pale-faced youth with sparse blond hair. 'Take a look, Benny.'

Benny came forward and unsmilingly examined

the laminate card that Frank held out. Like all employees of the House, he wore a bright-green jacket; in his case, it was just a little too large. The House logo was emblazoned on the lapels, and repeated in a decorative pattern on his tie. His skin was very white. Frank smelled incense hanging round him like a cloud.

The youth's gaze lifted from the card and slid accusingly across Frank's face without meeting his eyes. It dropped away again. 'All seems OK.'

'All right,' the short man said heartily. 'Thanks, Benny. And thank you for coming, Mr Fisher. You've made good time.'

With a roll of his shoulders he stepped forward to shake Frank's hand. Physically he reminded Frank of a cartoon dog from the old shows that ran on the secular entertainment channel – squat and top-heavy, with a broad, powerful torso and spindly legs that tapered fast to tiny patent-leather shoes. His emerald jacket was even brighter than Benny's, and decorated with gold brocade. His voice, his movements, his fine-cut clothes all exuded the same robust, almost brutal, confidence. He said, 'I'm Jeremiah Venal, Manager of the Green Fields House of Passing. As you know, this House is affiliated to the Sacred Brethren whose One Way Forward is the only true path.'

'Amen,' Benny said.

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