

THE DEVIL IN
GREEN

Also by Mark Chadbourn

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Jack of Ravens

The Dark Age:

The Devil in Green

The Queen of Sinister

The Hounds of Avalon

The Age of Misrule:

World's End

Darkest Hour

Always Forever

Underground

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Scissorsman

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THE
DARK AGE
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THE DEVIL IN
GREEN
MARK CHADBOURN



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For Elizabeth, Betsy, and Joe

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CHRONICLES OF THE FALLEN WORLD

One night, the world we knew slipped quietly away. Humanity awoke to find itself in a place mysteriously changed. Fabulous Beasts soared over the cities, their fiery breath reddening the clouds. Supernatural creatures stalked the countryside—imps and shape-shifters, blood-sucking revenants, men who became wolves, or wolves who became men, strange beasts whose roars filled the night with ice; and more, too many to comprehend. Magic was alive and in everything.

No one had any idea why it happened—by order of some Higher Power, or a random, meaningless result of the shifting seasons of Existence—but the shock was too great for society. All faith was lost in the things people had counted on to keep them safe—the politicians, the law, the old religions. None of it mattered in a world where things beyond reason could sweep out of the night to destroy lives in the blink of an eye.

Above all were the gods—miraculous beings emerging from hazy race memories and the depths of ancient mythologies, so far beyond us that we were reduced to the level of beasts, frightened and powerless. They had been here before, long, long ago, responsible for our wildest dreams and darkest nightmares, but now that they were back they were determined to stay forever. In the days after their arrival, as the world became a land of myth, these gods battled for supremacy in a terrible conflict that shattered civilisation. Death and destruction lay everywhere.

Blinking and cowed, the survivors emerged from the chaos of this Age of Misrule into a world substantially changed, the familiar patterns of life gone: communications devastated, anarchy ranging across the land, society thrown into a new Dark Age where superstition held sway. Existence itself had been transformed: magic and technology now worked side by side. There were new rules to observe, new boundaries to obey, and mankind was no longer at the top of the evolutionary tree.

A time of wonder and terror, miracles and torment, in which man's survival was no longer guaranteed.

chapter one IN THESE TIMES

“It is not bad luck, but right and just that you have found yourselves travelling this road, far from the beaten track followed by others. It is right that you should learn all things and develop the unshakeable heart of well-rounded truth, unlike the opinions of men that contain no truth at all. You shall learn how mere appearances seem as though they actually exist.”

Parmenides

The weight of a man’s soul is greatest in the dark hours before dawn. On a night when even the moon and stars were obscured, Mallory carried the burden of his own intangible more heavily than ever. He was in the thrall of an image, a burst of fire in the night like the purifying flame of some Fabulous Beast. It was clear when he closed his eyes, floating ghostly across his consciousness when he opened them, both mysterious and haunting. Yet a deeply buried part of him knew exactly what it meant, and that same part would never allow it to be examined.

He had briefly been distracted by the passage of a man in his midtwenties who looked unusually frail, as if gripped by some wasting illness. He was hunched over the neck of his horse, buffeted by a harsh wind hurling the first cold stones of rain. Autumn was drawing in. Mallory was protected from the elements in his Porsche, which he had reversed behind a hedgerow so that it couldn’t be seen from the road; he’d felt the need to clear his head before continuing on to his destination.

Briefly, he caught his reflection in the rearview mirror: shoulder-length brown hair framing a good-looking face that took its note from an ironic disposition. It sent a shiver through him, and he looked quickly away.

Obliquely, Mallory wondered if Salisbury was no longer there, like the rumours he had heard of Newcastle and some of the villages in the Scottish borders. The night had been so impenetrable as he drove south that the whole world could have been wiped away.

If he’d had a choice in the matter, he would have travelled in daylight. The countryside was filled with gangs armed with shotguns and knives, raiding villages and the outskirts of towns for food; life had become infinitely more brutal since everything had turned sour. But it was the other things that cast more dis-

turbing shadows across life. The silhouettes of little men moving slowly across the open fields under the stars. The thing he'd glimpsed up close once, emerging from an abandoned pig farm: eyes like saucers, scales that glinted in the moonlight and fingers that were too, too long. It only confirmed the stories that kept everyone confined to their homes once the sun set: the night didn't belong to man anymore.

Mallory watched the traveller's slow progress and wondered obliquely what was on his mind.

The rider bowed his head into the rising storm, pulling his waterproof cloak tighter around him as the gusts of wind threatened to unseat him. Seeking shelter was undoubtedly the wise thing to do, but the hard weight of his fear wouldn't let him. To rest in a place where he could be cornered was more than he could bear to consider; at least on the road he had the *chance* to flee. Single-minded determination was the only thing that kept him going. He didn't even glance behind him, because he knew his imagination would conjure faces in the trees and hedgerows, the rustling noises of pursuit, the presence of something coming up hard to drag him from his horse.

Nothing there, he told himself.

He'd planned his journey to skirt Salisbury Plain—it was a no-man's-land and anyone who was stupid enough to venture in never came out again—yet even the surrounding countryside felt unbearably dangerous. But if he made it to Salisbury, it would all be worth it. Finally: salvation, redemption, hope.

The thunder made him start so sharply that he almost jumped from the saddle. It was the roar of a giant beast bearing down on him. The lightning came a few seconds later, turning the inky fields and clustering trees to stark white.

Nothing there, he confirmed with relief.

To his right, the stern mount of Old Sarum rose up in silhouette. Soon he might see a few flickering lights—candles, probably, to light loved ones home. Perhaps someone had even got a store of oil to keep a generator running. He was surprised at how much that simple thought gave him a thrill.

More thunder, another flash of light. His thighs were numb beneath sodden denim; he couldn't feel his fingers. He wished it were still high summer.

The wind deadened his ears and started to play tricks on him. A gust eddying around the cochlea became a song performed by a string quartet; a breeze penetrating deeper was the whisper of an old friend. The blood banging around inside his head only added to the dislocation that made him ignore his most vital night sense. When the high-pitched whistle came, it was nothing more than the protest of the trees' uppermost branches.

The second time the whistle rose, he clung on to the desensitised state pro-

tecting him from the night fears; but the third blast gave him little space to hide: it was closer, and had an insistence that suggested purpose. Even then he couldn't bring himself to look around. He gave a futile spur to the horse, but its weariness made it immune. Even his illusion of having the freedom to escape had been taken from him.

A whistle is nothing to be scared of, he told himself, while at the same time picturing the bands of skinhead men with blue tattoos and dead eyes, signalling to each other that it was time for the attack. He was armed for defence, but he wasn't ready; he never had been a violent man, but he could learn to change. The kitchen knife was in a makeshift scabbard of insulating tape against his thick hiking socks and the cricket bat with the nails hammered through it was slung over his back in a loop of washing line. Which would be the best for use on horseback?

The whistle became insistent and continual, the high-pitched screech somehow unnatural, not the product of men or musical instrument. Suddenly it was *all* he could hear, and it was like nothing he had ever heard before. It was growing louder, the unfortunate pitch making him feel sick and disoriented; he wanted to plug his ears or sing loudly to drown it out.

Instead, he forged on. So near to Salisbury, with its medieval cathedral rising up to proclaim the majesty of God, with its ordered streets, its gentility, its cafés and pubs, intelligence and history. Salisbury, the New Jerusalem in the West.

Whistling is nothing compared to what I've been through, he thought, but the notion only made him feel worse.

As the road drove down steeply, the trees drew in to create a funnel channelling the blasting wind. He felt like ice, and not just because of the weather. To add to his discomfort, the rain started, quickly becoming a downpour.

Shortly before he passed the first stretch of abandoned houses, he allowed his gaze—stupidly—to wander away to the field on his right. A flash of lightning brought it up like snow: across it dark shapes bounded; not men.

He raced through the possibilities of what he might have seen, but nothing matched the reality and the impossibilities were infinitely more terrifying. Salisbury grew distant.

The whistling pierced deep into his brain, no longer a single sound but a chorus of alien voices. Now he wanted to claw at his ears until they bled. It was a hunting call.

He urged himself not to look around, but the magnetism was irresistible. Tears blurred his eyes as he turned, and he had to blink them away before he could see what was closing in on him. Another flash of lightning. Across the countryside, the shapes fluttered eerily like paper blown in the wind, drawing in on the road; some were already amongst the nearby trees, dancing around the

boles or swinging from the branches. Their whistling grew louder as they neared, scores of them, perhaps even more than a hundred. They had his scent.

He dug his heels hard into the weary horse's flanks, but all he could get out of it was a burst of steaming breath and a shake of sweat. A cry caught in his throat. He wanted to wish himself somewhere else, he wanted his parents, but the shakes that swept through him drove everything away.

Though the blasting wind made his eyes sting, he kept his gaze fixed on the wet road ahead, but soon his peripheral vision was picking up motion. He was caught in a pincer movement. Some of them could have had him then, but they were waiting for the others to catch up. Briefly, the hellish whistling faded, but that was only because it was drowned beneath the constant low shriek that rolled out of his own mouth. Dignity no longer mattered, only his poor, pathetic life.

And then the things were at the side of the road, tracking the horse with wild bounds. With rolling eyes and flaring nostrils, his mount found some reservoir of energy.

In a brief instant of lucidity, he remembered the cricket bat. His panic made him yank at it so wildly that the clothesline caught around his neck. Frantically, he tried to rip it free, but it was plastic and wouldn't break. His actions became even more lunatic until, miraculously, the makeshift weapon came loose. He whirled, ready to beat off the first of the wave.

One of the things was already at his side. It moved with the easy grace and awkwardness of a monkey, long arms flipping it forward as fast as the horse could gallop. It had orange-red fur like an orangutan and it reeked of rotting fish. Then it turned its head toward him and it had the face of a child.

It said, in its infant voice, "Your mother has cancer. You will never see her again."

He almost fell from the horse in shock. A thought . . . a secret fear . . . plucked from the depths of his mind. The creature bared its teeth—a horrifying image in the innocent face—and then launched itself at him. He brought the bat down sharply, but as the creature caught on to the saddle its long arm snaked up, snatched the bat from his grip, and snapped it in two with the force of one hand.

His shrieks rose above the wind as he attempted to slap the thing away with the hand that wasn't clutching the reins. It was an emasculated gesture, filled with hopelessness; the creature didn't even attempt to defend itself. It brought its young-boy face up closer and the big eyes blinked. As he stared into their depths, he was sickened by the incongruous sight of something hideously old and filled with ancient fury. The beast bared its teeth again, ready to attack.

He threw back his head and cried out to God. In a burst of blind luck, his flailing arms caught the creature under the chin just as it jumped and it flipped head over tail behind him. It did him little good; the other beasts were already preparing to rush in.

Above the wind and the whistling came the throaty rumble of a car engine. At first he barely recognised it, so lost to his terror was he; and it had been an age since he had heard that sound. But as it roared closer and bright light splayed all around him, he looked back in disbelief. Twin beams cut a swathe through the creatures as they scrambled to avoid the light. Whoever was driving floored the pedal, swerving across the road to hit the beasts slowest at getting out of the way. He winced: their screams actually sounded like those of small children.

A body slammed across the hood, leaving a deep dent. Another turned part of the windshield to frost. Others were flattened, midscream, beneath the wheels.

The headlights burned toward him as the car accelerated. He wasn't going to be torn apart by a pack of supernatural creatures, he was going to be run down in a world where you rarely saw a car anymore. The irony didn't really have much time to register.

At the last moment, the car swerved until it was running alongside him. The black Porsche was still bright with showroom gleam. His mount jumped and shied in terror, almost throwing him under the wheels.

The passenger window slid down electronically and Mallory leaned across the seat while steering blindly; the rider squinted to make out his face. "Are you doing this for sport?" Mallory called out.

The rider gave a comical goldfish gulp, his comprehension flowing treacle-thick.

Mallory shook his head dismissively, then readjusted the wheel as the car drifted dangerously close to the horse. "You'd better get off that and get in here," he called again.

His words broke through the rider's fug. Along the weed-clogged pavement the creatures were jumping up and down, their whistling unbearably shrill and threatening. The horse didn't want to be reined in, but the rider slowed it enough to dismount, wincing as he landed awkwardly on his left ankle. Mallory brought the Porsche to a screeching halt and flung the passenger door open. The rider gazed worriedly after his departing mount until Mallory yelled, "It'll be fine. It's not horse meat they're after. You've got about two seconds to get in—"

The rider dived in and slammed the door. The creatures bounded closer in fury; it seemed as if they might even risk the light. As the car jolted off with a spin of wheels, the rider threw his head forward into his hands, sobbing, "Thank God."

"Don't thank Him yet. I've been running on empty for the last mile or so. We'll never make it to Salisbury." The rider noted Mallory's expensive black overcoat that looked as new as the car and couldn't mask his discomfort that both had plainly been looted.

Mallory checked over his shoulder before reversing the Porsche at high speed, eventually swinging it around sharply through a hundred and eighty

degrees. The rider clutched his stomach and groaned. “Now, let’s see if we can get some of those bastards.” Indecent pleasure crackled through Mallory’s voice.

He hit the accelerator, popped the clutch, and at the same time launched the car toward the edge of the road. Golden sparks showered all around as the undercarriage raked up the curb. The rider squealed as the expensive car tore through long grass and bushes, then squealed more as the creatures failed to get out of the way. They slammed against the already fractured windshield, their bodies bursting to coat the glass with blood so black it resembled ink.

The beasts were too intelligent to be victims for long. One of them dropped from an overhanging branch, clutching on to the windshield with its phenomenally long arms. It fumbled for the spot where the glass was most frosted and hammered sharply. Tiny cubes showered over the rider, who threw up his hands to protect himself. The creature drove its arm through the hole it had created and clawed toward his face. The rider squealed again like a teenage girl and attempted to scramble into the back of the car. His eyes fixed on a shotgun lying across the rear seat just as Mallory shouted, “Use the gun!”

The creature tore chunks out of the windshield and thrust its head partway into the car. The black eyes ranged wildly in the freckled, pink-cheeked face, the teeth snapping furiously.

“I can’t use a gun!” the rider shrieked.

“Give it here!” Mallory said with irritation. “It’s already loaded.”

The rider snatched up the shotgun and threw it at the driver as if it were red hot. Mallory cursed before grabbing it, and then in one simple movement he shouldered it, aimed, and pulled the trigger. The thunderous blast in the confines of the car made their ears ring. The creature’s faceless body flapped at the windshield like a piece of cloth before the air currents dragged it away behind.

The cold night air rushing through the hole cleared the rider’s senses. “Where can we go?” he whimpered.

Mallory accelerated from the trees along the road out of Salisbury. He pointed to the silhouette of Old Sarum towering over the landscape.

The car died on them on the steep slope to the parking lot between the high banks of prehistoric ramparts constructed for defence more than 2,500 years earlier. Jumping into the driving rain, Mallory and the rider headed along the road, which ran straight for around four hundred and fifty feet to a wooden bridge across a deep inner ditch. Beyond were the ruins of the Norman castle built in the heart of the Iron Age hill-fort. Although the car hadn’t taken them far, they’d earned themselves enough breathing space to cover the remaining distance on foot.

“Shouldn’t be long till dawn,” Mallory said as they ran, head down against the deluge. “They’ll leave us alone at first light.”

The rider was finding it hard to keep up with his twisted ankle. “How do you know?”

“I don’t.”

“Are you sure we’ll find somewhere to hide out up there?”

“No, but we haven’t got much choice, have we? Unless you want to stand and fight?”

The rider didn’t answer.

They came to the wooden bridge barred by a gate with signs warning of the dangers of crumbling ancient monuments. Mallory laughed, then hauled himself over, yanking the rider behind him.

The whistling assailed them as they ran through the broken remains of the gatehouse; the wild shapes were already loping along the road past the parking lot. Lightning revealed the bleak interior of the inner bailey: a flimsy wooden ticket office and shop to their right, and then a wide expanse of sodden grass and ruins that were barely more than four feet high in most places.

“Shit, fuck and bastard,” Mallory said.

The rider whimpered. “What do we do now?”

“Firstly, you stop getting on my nerves by whining. Secondly . . .” Mallory scanned the site as best he could in the storm, then with a resigned sigh broke into a run. The rider jumped and followed, looking over his shoulder so much that he slipped and fell several times.

Mallory picked out the shattered block of the keep on the far side of the inner bailey. It was useless for any kind of serious defence, but it was the best place to make a stand until the shotgun shells ran out. They found an area protected on three sides by the only remaining high walls on the site, which also served to shelter them from the worst of the storm.

“We’re going to die,” the rider moaned.

“Yep.” Mallory began to count out the remaining cartridges; there weren’t as many as he had thought.

“You don’t seem bothered!”

Through an iron grille, Mallory could just make out frantic activity near the gateway. He positioned the shotgun to pick off one or two as they advanced across the open space, then waited. After five minutes it was clear the things weren’t coming in.

“They’ve stayed at the gate.” Even as Mallory spoke, the wind picked up the insistent whistling, now moving around the ramparts as if searching for access. It became increasingly sharp, frustrated. Mallory sank back down into the lee of the wall.

“Why aren’t they coming in?” The rider looked at Mallory accusingly, as if he were lying.

“I don’t know,” Mallory snapped. “Maybe they don’t like the décor.”

It was so dark in their defensive position that they could only see the pale glow of their faces and hands. Above and around them, the wind howled mercilessly, drowning out their ragged breathing but not the whistling, which, though muted, still set their teeth on edge.

After a while, they'd calmed down enough to entertain conversation.

"I'm Jez Miller." The rider appeared keen for some kind of connection, comfort, someone to tell him things weren't as bad as he feared, though he realised instinctively he was talking to the wrong person.

"Mallory."

"It's lucky you came along when you did."

"That's one way of looking at it." Mallory examined Miller surreptitiously. Though in his midtwenties, he had the face of a man twenty years older, lined through screwing up his features in despair, hollow-cheeked from lack of sustenance, made worse by scruffy shoulder-length hair already turning grey.

"Where did you get the car?" Miller asked, plucking at his sodden trousers.

"Stole it. In Marlborough."

Miller thought for a second until the realisation hit him. "You drove across Salisbury Plain!" An uninterested silence hung in the dark. "You don't see many cars these days. Everyone's trying to save petrol, for emergencies."

"It was an emergency. I had to get out of Marlborough. Dull as ditchwater, that place."

Miller couldn't read Mallory at all and that plainly made him uncomfortable. "So you were going to Salisbury?"

"I heard they were hiring down at the cathedral. At least, that's the word going around. Thought I'd take a look."

Miller started in surprise. "Me too!" Excitedly, he scabbled around to face Mallory. "You're going to be a knight?"

"If the pay's right. These days food, drink, and shelter would probably swing it."

"I couldn't believe it when I heard! I thought the Church had gone the same way as everything else. You know, with all that's been happening . . ." He struggled for a second. "With the gods . . . what they call gods . . . all that happening every day . . . all the time . . . people said there wasn't any need for a Church. Why should you believe in a God who never shows up when all that's going on around you? That's what they said."

"You a Christian, then?"

"I wasn't particularly. I mean, I was christened, but I never went to church. I'm a Christian now. God's the only one who can save us." Miller slipped his fingers around the crucifix he'd picked up from the broken window of the jeweller's.

"Well, it's not as if we can save ourselves."

Miller wrinkled his brow at the odd tone in Mallory's voice. "You don't believe."

"I don't believe in anything."

"How can you say that?"

Mallory gave a low laugh. "Everyone else is doing a good job believing. You said it yourself—miracles all over the place. I'm the only unbeliever in a born-again world." He laughed louder, amused at the concept.

"But how can you work for the Church . . . how can you be a knight?"

"They're paying men to do a job—to protect their clerics. The new Knights Templar. That sounds like a good deal. A bit of strong-arm stuff here and there, nothing too taxing. These days, it's all scratching in the fields to feed the masses, or making things, or sewing—all the rubbish people think's necessary to get us back on our feet. If I had a list of ways to spend my remaining days, planting potatoes would not be on it."

"They won't have you."

"I'm betting they will. They'll have anybody they can get, these days."

"That's cynical."

Mallory grunted. "We'll see."

Miller scratched on the floor, listening to the rise and fall of the whistling as it moved around the ramparts. "What are they?" he asked eventually.

"No idea."

"Where did all these things come from?"

"No idea."

"One of my mates saw a dragon." When Mallory didn't respond, Miller pressed on, "Why are we being made to suffer like this?"

"You say *made* as if there's some intelligence behind it. The sooner you accept there isn't, the easier your life will be. Things happen, you deal with them and move on to the next. That's the way it goes. You're not being victimised. You don't have to lead some deviantly perfect lifestyle just to get a reward in some next life. You make the most of what you've got here. It's about survival."

"If that's all there is, what's the point?"

Mallory's laugh suggested that the answer was ridiculously obvious.

Miller became depressed by Mallory's attitude. Everything about Miller said he wanted to be uplifted, to be told there was some meaning to all the suffering everyone was going through. "Is Marlborough your home?"

"No." Mallory considered leaving it there, but then took pity on Miller. "London. I wasn't born there, but that's where I spent most of my life."

"Is it true the whole place has been destroyed? That's what people say."

"I got out before the shit hit the fan. Went north. Birmingham for a while." His voice trailed away.

“No family?” Mallory’s silence told Miller this was a question too far. “I’m from Swindon,” Miller continued, to fill the gap. “My mum and dad are still there, and my sister. I suppose I could have stuck it out, too. Life isn’t *so* bad. People are pulling together, setting up systems. They’ve just about got the food distribution sorted out. I reckon they should get through this winter OK.” He paused as the harsh memories returned. “Not like last winter.”

The thoughts stilled him for a while, but he found it hard to deal with the pauses that magnified the dim whistling outside. “I had to get out in the end. My girlfriend, Sue . . . we were going to get married, been in love for ages . . . couldn’t imagine being with anyone else.” His voice took on a bleak tone. “Then one day she dumped me, just like that. Said she was moving in with this complete moron . . . a thug . . . God knows what sort of things he was involved in. And she’d always hated him, that was the mad thing! But she said he made her feel safe.”

“These are dangerous times. People do what they have to, to survive.”

“But I didn’t make her feel safe, you know?” Miller made no attempt to hide his devastation; he reminded Mallory of a child, emotional, almost innocent.

“That’s what made you decide to come down here, to sign up?”

Mallory obviously wasn’t really interested; it was a friendly gesture, but after the rigours of the night it felt to Miller as if Mallory had clapped his arms around him. “Partly. I mean, I’d been thinking about it for a long time. I knew I wanted to do something. To give something back. So many people were making sacrifices for the greater good and I didn’t feel as if I was doing anything at all. I know you don’t believe, but it felt as if God had put us through all this suffering and spared some of us for a reason.”

Mallory made a faint derisive noise.

“No, really. Sometimes when you sit back and think about it, you can see patterns.”

“There aren’t any patterns, just illusions of patterns. It’s the human condition to join the dots into something cohesive when all there is . . . is a big mass of dots.”

“I can’t believe that, Mallory. When you see some of the goodness that has come out of all this . . . the goodness people have exhibited to others. They could have wallowed in self-preservation.” His voice became harder as he went on, “Just done things to survive, like you said.”

“Well, I’m not going to try to change your mind.”

Miller’s shoulders sagged so that the rainwater ran from his crown to drip into his lap. He suddenly looked burdened by some awful weight. “It’s hard to be scared all the time, do you know what I mean? Life was difficult enough before everything changed, but now there’s just . . . threat . . . everywhere, all the time. It wears you down.” He trembled with a deep, juddering sigh. “Why isn’t the government doing something? Where’s the army, the police?”

"I don't think they exist anymore."

"But if it's left to people like us, what's going to become of us all?"

Mallory couldn't answer that.

They sat in silence for a while until Mallory said, "Well, it's not all bad."

"What do you mean?" Miller mumbled.

"No more *Stars in Their Eyes*."

Miller brightened. "Or Euro-disco."

"Or public-school boys getting drunk at Henley, or . . ." He made an expansive gesture, just caught in a flash of lightning. The depressive mood evaporated with their laughter.

It was echoed by another laugh away in the dark, only this one was an old man's, low and throaty. Miller yelped in shock, pushing himself back until he felt the stones hard against him. The shotgun clattered as Mallory scraped it up and swung it in an arc, waiting for another sound to pinpoint the target.

"I've got a gun," he said.

The laugh sounded again, slow and eerie, though with a faint muffled echo as if it were coming through the wall.

"Who's there?" Miller whined. He shivered at the haunting, otherworldly quality of the laughter.

"My names are legion," the old man said.

Miller started to whimper the Lord's Prayer.

"He's playing with you," Mallory said. "Aren't you?"

The old man laughed again. "No fooling you, Son of Adam."

"No!" Miller said. "He's lying! It *is* the Devil! And he always lies!"

"There are devils and there are devils," the old man snorted. "You must know the Devil by the deed."

Miller hugged his knees to his chest. "What are you?"

"Not of the Sons of Adam." The statement was simple, but edged with an unaccountable menace.

Not wishing to antagonise whatever was nearby, Mallory's tone became slightly less offensive. "What do you want?"

"The question, more likely, is what do *you* want? My home has looked out over this place since before your kind rose up."

"We didn't realise," Miller protested. "We don't want to trespass—"

"We're sheltering," Mallory said. "We'll be gone at first light, if that's all right with you."

"Perhaps it isn't and perhaps it is. I would have to say, in this day and age I'm not wholly sure where the boundaries lie. You may be trespassing, and then again you may not."

"We'll pay you," Miller said. "Anything!"

“No.” Mallory’s voice was sharp, cutting Miller dead.

“You’re very cautious,” the old man said slyly, “but are you as wise as you seem, I wonder?”

Mallory replaced the shotgun on the floor, instinctively knowing it was useless. “You like questions—”

“I like questions and games and riddles because that’s what everything is about, is it not? One big riddle, and you trying to find out what the answer is.” He chuckled. “Trying to find out what the question is.”

“And you have all the answers, I suppose,” Mallory said.

“Many, many, many. Not all, no. But more than you, Son of Adam.”

The wind dropped a little, the crashing rain becoming a mere patter. Mallory remained tense. “Do you want something of us?”

A long silence was eventually ended by words that were heavily measured. “Curiosity was my motivation. Few venture up this hill in these times. I had a desire to witness the extent of the bravery in our latest visitors.” A smack of mockery.

Tension filled the air, driving Mallory into silence. It felt as if they were in the jungle with some wild animal padding slowly around them, content in the knowledge that it could attack at any time. Mallory decided it was better to engage the old man in conversation rather than allow any lulls where other ideas might surface.

“Perhaps you’d like to provide us with some answers, as we’re so sadly lacking,” he said.

The old man mused on this for a time, then said, “Answers I can give, and questions too. But if you seek my advice, it’s this: keep your head down doing honest work and give offence to none. Avoid drawing unwanted attention at all costs.”

“What kind of attention?”

“Ah, you should know by now,” the old man said with a cunning tone, “that when the mouse gets noticed by the cat, it won’t leave him alone . . . until he’s long gone.”

“What’s going to happen?” Miller was whimpering again.

“Many things,” the old man said, pretending it was a question for him, purely for the sake of malice. With another chuckle, he added, “The wormfood will come up for air, and the quick will go down for a way out, but find none. There’ll be a man with three hands, and one with one eye. Some will be bereft in more profound areas. Friends will be found in unlikely places, but where friends should really be, there will at times be none. And consider this: a religion isn’t as good as its god, only as good as its followers.”

“Is that supposed to help?” Mallory said.

“The joy of a riddle is twofold: in the solving, or in the enlightenment that

comes from hindsight. Riddles are lights to be shone in the darkest corners, where all secrets hide.”

“Secrets?”

“Everybody has secrets,” the old man said pointedly.

“Thank you for your guidance,” Mallory said with irony. “We’ll take it with us when we leave.”

“Oh, you will be back, Son of Adam. Back here, and back there. Sylvie doesn’t love you anymore. It’s a hopeless case.” Then, “Your sins will always find you out.”

The tension in the air dropped slowly until they realised they were alone, which was an odd way of considering it because they had no idea where the presence had been. Slowly, Miller’s body folded until his face was in his hands. “What did he mean?” he said bleakly. When Mallory didn’t answer, he asked, “What was that?”

“Probably best not to talk about it right now.” Mallory illuminated his watch. The green glow painted his face a ghastly shade, the shadows defining the skull beneath.

“He can still hear us?”

“I think he . . . and what he represents . . . can always hear us.” He stood up, shaking the kinks from his limbs. “It should be dawn any minute.” The whistling no longer floated around the building; instead they could just make out birdsong dimly coming over the ramparts. “Want to risk it?”

“I guess.”

“*I tell you this. No eternal reward will forgive us for wasting the dawn.*” Mallory cracked his knuckles.

“What’s that?”

“Words from an old singer.”

“You like music?”

“That’s a funny question. Doesn’t everyone?”

“No, not really,” Miller said.

They walked out into the inner bailey, the ruins and windswept trees now grey ghosts. The rain had blown away and there was an optimistic bloom to the edge of the sky. The monkey-creatures were nowhere to be seen.

The morning had the fresh smell of wet vegetation. Mallory took a deep breath, still surprised at how sweet the air tasted now that it was pollution-free. They made their way back along the track and prepared to walk the short distance into Salisbury. As they breached the crest of the hill and headed down into the city, the mother sky turned golden, framing the majestic spire of the cathedral protruding through the treetops ahead. Miller was overcome with a rush of Glory and turned to Mallory, beaming; Mallory shook his head and looked away.

The corpses of the monkey-creatures ploughed up by the car had vanished. A little further on they came across Miller's horse, grazing at the side of the road. Miller patted its flank affectionately.

"We can take it in turns to ride," Miller said brightly.

"It's all yours. I like a good walk of a morning, gets the blood flowing."

They took the empty road slowly and within the hour the outskirts of Salisbury drew around them. It was still odd for both of them to see the empty houses and factories, the abandoned petrol stations and corner shops without any of the trappings of the modern world. No vehicles moved, no electric lights burned, no fast-food wrappers blew up and down the streets. Instead there was the smell of woodsmoke hanging in the air and some homes were illuminated by candlelight. The air of the makeshift lay across the city: handmade signs pointing to the farmers' market or the council offices, piles of wood obviously prepared for nighttime beacons, repairs carried out to broken windows with plastic sheets. Wild dogs roamed the streets and furtive rats skulked out of front gardens.

They came upon a sentry box roughly constructed out of crates and perspex. A grey-faced man in an adapted police uniform was boiling some water on a small fire. As they approached, he rose suspiciously, holding a handmade truncheon close to his thigh.

"What's your business?" His eyes were hard on their faces.

"We're going to the cathedral," Miller said with bright innocence, "to become knights."

The guard didn't attempt to hide his disdain. "Good luck," he sneered, rolling his eyes.

"The police are still going?" Mallory asked.

The guard glanced down at the uniform, which had SPM sewn on to the left breast. "I used to be with the force," he said. "Still got my warrant card. These days it's the Salisbury People's Militia." He waved them through, nodding toward the spire. "I don't think you'll get lost."

"Have many people come to join up?" Miller asked as he rode by.

The guard laughed indecently loudly. "I shouldn't worry about having to queue."

"It's early days yet," Miller said when they were out of the guard's earshot.

"Look on the bright side," Mallory replied wryly. "At least the standards will be low."

At that same time of day, the outskirts of the city were deserted. In the bright dawn light, it could have been any time before everything changed; the fabric was, in the main, intact, although a few shops had been burned out in looting, and others had been adapted to fill more immediate needs. An electrical goods

store had been converted into a cobblers and leatherworkers. A video shop now housed carpenters and builders.

They made their way down Castle Street and before they had got to the end of it they could hear loud voices, jocularity, cursing, life going on. The farmers' market was in the process of being set up, with red-faced workers loading piles of cabbages and bags of potatoes on creaking stalls. Many places appeared to have quickly established a local economy and regular food supply, but everyone was still fearing the winter, Miller noted. Mallory pointed out that nothing would have worked if the population hadn't been decimated.

Their attention was caught by an area of brightly coloured tents and tepees on a park on the other side of a river bridge. They clustered tightly together like a nomadic enclave within the wider city. A flag bearing red and white intertwined dragons flew over the largest tent.

They followed the High Street past the shells of Woolworth's and Waterstone's. The horse's hooves echoed dully on the flagstones; the atmosphere in that area was strangely melancholic.

But as they came up to High Street Gate, the historic entrance to the Cathedral Close, they were confronted by ten-foot-high gates of welded metal sheets, the ancient stone surround topped with lethal spikes and rolls of barbed wire. Beyond it, the cathedral looked like a fortress under siege.