

THERE'S NO TOUGHER BEAT THAN HELL....

THE
DEVIL'S
DETECTIVE



SIMON KURT
UNSWORTH

Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Title Page

Dedication

Part One: Information

Prologue

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Part Two: Trails

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Part Three: Elevations

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Epilogue

Acknowledgements

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About the Book

In hell, skinless demons patrol the lakes and the waves of Limbo wash against the outer walls, while the souls of the Damned float on their surface, waiting to be collected.

When an unidentified, brutalised body is discovered, the case is assigned to Thomas Fool, one of Hell's detectives, known as 'Information Men'. But how do you investigate a murder where death is commonplace and everyone is guilty of something?

A stunningly original blend of crime, horror and suspense, *The Devil's Detective* is a bold new thriller that will shock and amaze.

About the Author

Simon Unsworth was born in Manchester and has achieved great success in the art of short story writing, having been published widely and nominated for both the World Fantasy Award and Edge Hill Short Story Collection prize.

THE
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DETECTIVE

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DEL REY

To Rosie, the owner of my heart now and for ever, who gave this novel its title and who holds my hand as we walk through the world and makes every day a thing of joy and wonder.

To Ben, my boy of boys, just because I love him.

To Mily, stepdaughter the elder, my diving partner and all-round cool girl.

To Lottie, stepdaughter the younger, who lives in Lottie La-La-Land and who sometimes lets us visit her there.

The four of you are the corners of my universe, the dizzying light above me and the great spaces to the side of me and steadying floor below me, and this book is yours if you want it with all my love.



PART ONE
INFORMATION

PROLOGUE

From his vantage point, here up high, the lights were scattered out below Fool in an uneven swathe. They lay in tangled clusters, forming a map of the city and its outlying geographies; most were gathered around the Houska, pale firefly glimmers emerging from its bars and clubs and brothels. The smaller rashes were further out, the estates where the heavier industries worked through the night, the walled glints of Crow Heights, the various ghettos and fiefdoms, flotsam circling that central brightness. The tiniest and palest shimmer of lights, farthest out from the centre of the city, was Eve's Harbour, where most of the working humans lived. As he watched, new lights came into being and others vanished, shifting the bellies of the clusters but never their overall shape. It was like watching the respiration of some enormous creature, he thought, as life and death pulsed through each area. Beyond them all, the Flame Garden glowed, dirty and guttering, the colour of burning, diseased wood.

To Fool's back, the vast stone Wall that separated the city from what was outside was cold, its chill breath wafting around his shoulders and head. At the edge of his hearing, he could just make out the wails of the things that drifted and span on its far side, lost and hoarse. He turned, shivering, and pulled his coat tighter, hitching the weapon on his hip so that it didn't dig into him.

The cold coming off the stone smelled clean and wet, the only place Fool knew that did. At times like this, when the air shifted and brought with it heat from the Flame Garden, he was able to stand facing the stone so that his front was

cold and his rear warm, and it was like being in two places at once. Escort duty was boring, but at least it brought him out here, where Hell became nothing but an array of light and dark that he could choose to turn his back on, if only for a few hours.

Fool turned again; if he stood still too long, his feet began to ache. The ground on The Mount was hard and rough, and sharp edges dug through the soles of his boots and into his feet like teeth. Time was, a constant stream of sinners had walked this road and back, barefoot and bloody, but those days were long gone. He stepped a few yards back along the path, but went no further. Partly, it was duty; he had no idea when the delegates were expected and couldn't risk not being there for their arrival, but also, it was caution. Out here at the edges, even a few feet from the Wall, things lived that were wild even by the city's troubled standards. The gate itself and the area around it were safe, but away from the pale blue light that came from the tunnel, the shadows had claws and appetites.

Even now, Fool was being watched.

It was not simple instinct that told him this; twice, patches in the darkness had thickened, shifted, moved around him as he waited, and once a voice had called out 'Man' in an elongated whisper that sounded as though the speaker's mouth was too full to form the sound correctly. Too full of what, Fool didn't like to think about. He turned again, thinking humourlessly, *Little spinning Fool*, and saw something moving in the tunnel.

How long the tunnel was, or what was at its end, Fool did not know. He was forbidden to enter, as was everyone except the delegates and the successful Sorrowful (who by that point were no longer the Sorrowful, Fool supposed, but more likely the *Gleeful* or the *Joyous*). It was long, though, he knew that, its illuminated length stretching as far as he could make out into the rock in a wide, arched corridor. There were no lamps in it that he could see but it was

bathed in light nonetheless, a cold gleam that seemed to come from the walls themselves and which cast no shadows. He went to the entrance, knowing that it would be some time yet before the delegates arrived but also knowing that this was the point of it, this was the Duty. He had to be there, honour guard and escort, from the moment they entered the tunnel, standing as an obedient servant, faithful as a dog. *Little dog*, he thought, *little Fool dog*. Looking up, he watched the clouds. Even at night they glowed, the gleaming whiteblue of promise and hope. They were never still, the clouds, scudding and swirling, occasionally breaking to allow him glimpses of the other city beyond them.

The shapes in the tunnel approached slowly, coalescing from the light as they came towards him. He watched them emerge, forming, imagining that cold blue light making itself into perfect, flawless, hard flesh, and flexed his toes in his thin boots. He was cold, the air settling into the folds of his clothes, puckering his skin and raising hairs across it. Fool waited, and watched, and made out details.

Four of them, as ever, one in front carving the air like the prow of a boat, and the others behind. One of the following, the one at the rear, was framed by arced patches of brightness that reached high above its head, moving, flexing wide to fill the tunnel. He sighed; they were almost here, their skin shining, bright and flawless. He had time for one last look up at the clouds, breaking again to reveal the city beyond and its white walls and myriad windows, showing the pillared glories of Heaven.

At the edges of his vision, lower than Heaven, he saw the frayed and dirty light of Hell, and then the angels reached the end of the tunnel and were with him.

The first looked older than Fool, its skin lined with perfect wrinkles that folded up into themselves as it smiled at him and said, 'Hello. You are our escort, I take it? I am Adam.' Adam was shorter than Fool and bearded, and his

eyes were a startling, brilliant blue, like the air around the spires of distant Heaven. As he emerged from the tunnel's mouth, he opened his arms widely as though to hug Fool, and his black robe swung around him in a way that reminded Fool of flowing water. His skin was so pale it was almost translucent, unmarked by the traceries of veins or the fleck of hair or pore. Fool stepped aside, looking down; looking at Adam was like trying to stare at a candle flame without blinking, but even the ground glinted as though reflecting Adam's light. It made his eyes ache.

'Welcome to Hell, sir,' he said, feeling foolish. No matter how often he carried out escort duty, he never got used to the feelings of clumsiness and gracelessness that being next to these creatures raised in him. They were so beautiful, so graceful, a note of elegance in Hell's lumpen flesh, and he never knew how to act, despite his official status, or what to say. Were these things even male? Was 'sir' correct, or was there some other form of address he should know? He felt clumsy and uncoordinated in front of the angel, stolid and slow and heavy.

'Welcome?' asked Adam lightly. 'No. There is no welcome here, I would hope, but only the opposite, the knowledge of pain and suffering and the distant chance of redemption.'

'Perhaps it means to insult us,' said a second voice, and one of the figures behind Adam stepped forwards, came out from the blue and into the darkness, bringing with it a light that didn't so much gleam as *dazzle*, as though it were lit from within by an inferno. Glancing up, Fool could make out little through the light, except that it was naked and that great arcs hung behind it in the air, shifting and flexing. *Wings*, thought Fool, looking back down to where the dirt was awash with reflected light. *Angel wings*.

'Welcoming the Lord's emissaries to Hell hardly seems appropriate, does it? It should be prostrate before us, begging our mercy and deliverance, praying that we allow God's mercy to burn it away to nothing, but instead it

stands and extends welcome as if we were common visitors. No wonder it remains damned.'

'Hush, Balthazar,' said Adam softly. 'He means no offence.'

Balthazar, noted Fool. The arm and guard to Adam's brain and command; the other two would be mere archive and scribe, and would not be introduced. He sometimes wondered if they even had names, if they were not things defined solely by their roles and without personality.

'Perhaps it does not understand respect, or who it is and who we are,' said Balthazar. His glow had faded, dropping and thickening so that now it was almost red, and Fool risked looking at him. He was taller than Adam and younger (*no*, he told himself, *not younger but appearing younger. They have no age except that which they choose to show, wasn't that what Elderflower had said once?*), and now there was something in his hand, held up, wavering in front of Fool. He thought at first that it was a sword, aflame, but it was not; it was simply a column of fire that danced and writhed around itself and threw its furnace gleam across his face.

'Balthazar,' said Adam, his voice still soft. 'Do not find battles where none exist, my friend. He is Hell's chosen representative and meant no offence, I am sure. Did you?'

'No,' said Fool, looking into Balthazar's beardless, handsome face. The angel was smiling, revealing teeth like polished marble. The fire wavered in front of Fool's eyes for a moment longer and then was gone, not lowered but disappeared. Balthazar clasped one hand in the other in front of his flat stomach and stepped back, his wings flapping slowly in the air above him, alabaster-white and silent. He nodded, although whether to himself, to Adam, or to Fool, Fool couldn't be sure.

Fool turned and began to walk back down the path, glancing over his shoulder to make sure the angels were following. Adam was close to him, smiling, and his head

bobbed slightly when he saw Fool looking at him. Balthazar came after and then the other two. They were smaller, their shoulders folded forward and their heads down so that their faces were invisible. Balthazar still held his wings aloft, angled forward so that they looked like scythe blades now, sickles against Hell's night-time sky. As they walked, Adam and Balthazar's light pressed the darkness back from the path, revealing thin, twisting plants and scrubby earth, and something that capered just beyond the edge of Fool's vision. It followed them all the way down to the carriage, making slopping noises and lipsmacking sounds and, once, calling, 'Man! Man and friends! Nice friends,' in that too-full voice, stretching the last word out as though it were tasting it, sucking something sweet. At the sound of it, Adam cast his gaze into the darkness and said, 'Be quiet, creature.'

'Brave man, brave friends,' said the creature.

'Be silent,' said Adam, his voice not changing, 'and bite your tongue.' He glowed briefly, the blue flash revealing something large in the scrub that wheeled around and darted away, and they heard nothing more from it.

'Is this how we are to travel? Is this what they send for Heaven's delegation?' asked Balthazar when they reached the bottom of the slope. They were standing by the carriage, Balthazar in front of the rear door, blocking it, and Adam watching him. Fool was standing between the two angels, the scribe and archive at his side, faces still downcast. Balthazar was beginning to glow again, the light rippling out from his skin like sweat, his arms opened wide and his wings shivering as they slowly expanded, stretched out behind him.

'Balthazar,' said Adam.

Fool stayed silent, knowing that there was nothing he could do. The carriage was small and had seats for only four in the rear, meaning that the angels would be cramped for the duration of the journey, but this was what the

Bureaucracy had given him. There were bigger vehicles, but not many, and none that he could drive. Most of the inhabitants of Hell walked or used the massive trains that shunted slowly back and forth between the farms and the industries, jumping on and off whenever they could. Fool and his colleagues, Hell's two other Information Men, were usually among them.

'We should fly,' said Balthazar, stepping away from the carriage and beating his wings downwards, fiercely, sending billows of dust and grit into the air around Fool. One of the nameless ones, looking at Balthazar, began to unfurl its wings and Fool watched, fascinated, as they unfolded from its back and stretched out. They were smaller than Balthazar's, less grand, reminding Fool more of the scrawny things that he had seen on the birds in Hell's flocks, flocks preyed on by the larger flying things that sometimes filled the sullen sky. Delicate feathers bristled at the wings' edges, and then Adam made a gesture with his hand and the scribe, or archive, immediately folded its wings back in. Pressed close against its back, they became almost invisible, fading and vanishing into its robe.

Balthazar looked angrily at Adam and beat his wings again, creating a savage gust of air that rocked Fool back on his heels and made the carriage shake. Adam watched patiently as Balthazar tried again, furiously hooking his wings around his body in brutal downthrusts. Another, much smaller, pair of wings unfurled from around the angel's feet and these too began to beat furiously. Fool closed his eyes as the grit rose into them and as Balthazar's light flared, fiery and intense.

'Balthazar,' said Adam. 'This is Hell, the place of no freedoms. You cannot fly here, my friend, because flight is a joy and no true joy is allowed. Only the chalkis and their ilk can take to the air, Balthazar, because they take no pleasure in it; you know this. It was explained to you before

our arrival. We are here by invitation, yes, but we have to obey the rules like everyone and everything here. Be calm, my friend.'

The beating, shifting air settled and Fool opened his eyes again. Balthazar was staring at Fool, his face curling and distorting into something that was impossible to look at, something beyond human or demon, beyond beauty. Something terrible, a thing not of rage but of absolute belief in itself, of justice without question. He took a step towards Fool, one arm rising, and the shimmering tongue of fire coruscated in the air, stretching out from his hand, and then Adam spoke again, saying only, 'Balthazar.'

The angel whirled away and wordlessly lashed his wings outwards, banging both into the carriage. The vehicle bounced violently, lifting and then settling back onto its wheels with a metallic groan and a splintering of glass. There were new dents in its doors, and one of the windows wore a starred crack.

'I apologise for my companion,' said Adam, walking over to Balthazar, who was finally pulling his wings down, gathering them against his back and wrapping the smaller pair around his ankles where they melted into his skin. The fire vanished again, leaving behind it an after-image of red embers, the memory of burning imprinted on the air. He did not turn as Adam came close to him, and did not flinch as a feather was pulled from one wing. Adam turned, bringing the feather to Fool and holding it out.

'Balthazar is, perhaps, overwhelmed to be here for the first time in the territory of the Great Enemy, and he forgets himself. Or rather, he remembers himself too much, remembers his role in the Above and forgets that an angel of Michael in Hell cannot act as he would in Heaven. He will learn, though, because whether he likes it or not, he and I and the rest of our delegation are your guests and must act accordingly,' he said, holding out the feather

further so that it danced, like the flame before it, in Fool's face.

'A symbol of our regret. Please, take it as a sign of your forgiveness,' Adam said.

Even detached from the wing, from its host, the feather glimmered with some internal glow. Flakes of light drifted away from the shaft, span lazily and then fell and landed on Adam's outstretched hand. Fool reached out, then hesitated. It was an angel's feather and although he could feel no heat coming from it, he had the impression that it would burn him if he touched it, that its wonder was a raging, pure thing that would be too much for his Hell-born flesh to cope with.

'Please,' repeated Adam. His smile widened, and in his face Fool saw a kindness that would accept no denial, a compassion that had no end. The thought of standing against it was more terrifying than the thought of taking the feather, even if its touch caused his flesh to burst into flames. Helpless, he reached out and grasped it.

It still shone, even after Adam let it go, but it did not burn; Fool looked at it wonderingly, waving it gently in front of his face. It left trails in the air, little constellations of light like the birthing of distant stars, and he couldn't help but smile. It was almost weightless, despite its size, and felt soft against his fingers. *To have these as a part of you, he thought, to know that these things are you, must be the most glorious sensation imaginable.* He waved the feather again, his eyes following the arc of glittering sparkles that it left behind. He felt he could look at it for ever, be lost in its twinkling distances. *Little mesmerised Fool,* he thought, and then Adam said, 'It is beautiful, is it not? Keep it, and may it bring you Heaven's truth. And now, please, we must go. There is work to be done. We have Elevations to decide upon.'

Carrying a feather from an angel's wing, Fool took the four angels into Hell.

ONE

The day began with Gordie, who knocked on Fool's door and entered the room without waiting. He bustled over to Fool, waving a blue-ribboned canister in front of him like a torch that had lost its light as Fool pulled himself up onto an elbow, rubbing one hand across eyes that were thick with sleep. He was pleased to see that in Gordie's other hand was a mug, steam curling out from it and bringing with it the smell of weak, thin coffee. Gordie set the mug down on the table by Fool's bed, and said, 'One came through. It's blue. I've never seen a blue before.'

Fool picked up the mug and sipped, glad of the heat of the coffee on his tongue, even if the taste was buried beneath its scald. He twisted, careful not to spill his drink, and looked up at the high, small window, trying to work out from the light coming in around the grimy linen blind what time of day it was. Beams of grey, sickly illumination crawled across the wall at low angles, throwing shadows from right to left, meaning it was still morning. Escort duty hadn't finished until ... when? Sometime between the bars starting to close and the factories starting to open, he thought. He had returned in darkness, that he remembered, although his eyes had populated the nighttime shadows with after-images of light, shifting and dancing at the corners of his vision. If it was still morning, he had only had a few hours' sleep. He groaned, and sipped more of his coffee.

'It's blue,' said Gordie again, helpfully, holding out the canister, its tangle of blue ribbon hanging down in loops. 'It's a blue, it's just arrived. I saw it was a blue; we never

get them so I thought I'd better bring it to you. I wouldn't have woken you otherwise, you know. It might be a Fallen.' As he spoke, Gordie was doing the thing he thought Information Men should do, darting his eyes around the room and looking for things. For *clues*, although what they might be, Fool had no idea. His room was tiny, as all of theirs were, and usually contained little other than his bed, a table, a small set of open-faced drawers, a rail for his smock shirts and trousers and a tiny bookcase that held no books except for his *Information Man's Guide to the Rules and Offices of Hell*.

Today, however, it also contained the feather.

Gordie saw it as Fool sat up fully and took the canister from his colleague's hand. The younger man's mouth fell open and his hands dropped to his sides, and Fool smiled despite himself, despite the early morning and the lack of sleep, because Gordie looked, for the shortest moment, like a child, a thing of innocence and joy. There was awe on his face, and his skin looked clean and smooth, youthful, his eyes opening wide.

The feather was lying on the top shelf of the bookcase, alongside the *Guide* and Fool's gun, and it was beautiful. Curved, the shaft and barbs gleaming, it was perhaps a foot long and whiter than bone and it shivered lightly as Gordie walked towards it and reached out.

'Where...?' he started, and then stopped loosely.

'Where...' he started again and then, again, stopped.

Fool didn't reply immediately. He looked at the feather and his eyes watered mildly, as though the brightness of the previous day had returned to the room for a moment.

'It was a gift,' said Fool at last, 'from one of the angels.' Even saying it made him feel foolish, *little silly Fool*, because in Hell no one received gifts.

'Can I?' asked Gordie, and Fool nodded.

His colleague lifted the feather, gasped slightly, and turned to Fool. 'It's beautiful, like Summer,' he said, and

then started, glancing down at the feather with a look on his face that Fool thought was almost suspicion.

‘Yes,’ Fool replied. What else was there to say? Gordie was still holding the feather and suddenly, sharply, he wanted him to put it down, to let it alone, so that he could pick it back up himself. He took another sip of his coffee, and nodded at the tube.

‘A blue?’

‘A blue!’ said Gordie, the excitement coming back to his voice. He placed the feather back on the bookcase and twisted the cap off the tube, emptying out the roll of paper from within.

‘Let’s see what we’ve got,’ said Fool. ‘Let’s see what Hell wants to show us today.’



The body bobbed face down in the water about six feet out from the shore, snagged on a clump of branches and leaves. It span as it bobbed, caught in eddies that sent the water at the lake’s edge into choppy arrhythmia. Despite the dark oiliness of Solomon Water, it was obvious that the naked corpse was human; its skin was pale and torn, hanging in loose ribbons that exposed the darker meat of muscles and flesh.

‘I saw it on my way to work,’ the man by Fool was saying. ‘I mean, I saw the flash as I passed the lake, but I didn’t see the body until a few minutes later.’

‘The flash?’ asked Fool.

‘There was a blue flash. I was up on the road and I saw a flash from down here, but I couldn’t see what it was because of the trees. It was a blue flash, and then lots of blue light went up into the sky. I came down here to see what it was.’

‘Do you normally check out the things you see on your way to work?’ asked Fool.

‘If there’s a chance that it might be a Fallen,’ replied the man. ‘It was a blue flash, I’ve told you. I thought it might have been a Fallen and I could claim it as mine. But it was only a body.’

Ah yes, thought Fool. *This is only a body, so it’s not important, just a dead human, but it could have been a Fallen.* Finding a Fallen was rumoured to be a way of guaranteeing an Elevation, of escaping Hell’s grip. ‘You must have been disappointed,’ said Fool.

The man, whose name Fool had already lost but which would be in Gordie’s notebook, tensed, hearing Fool’s irritation. ‘Look, I’m sorry he’s dead, but people die all the time, every day, don’t they? We’re never safe, are we? It’s not unusual, is it? And I’ve missed work waiting for you, and I’ll lose food for missing a day. At least I waited.’

‘True,’ said Fool, unable to disagree with anything the man had said. There were murders every day and every night in Hell, too many to count, more than they could ever hope to investigate. Most went unreported except for the details in the canisters that fell from the pneumatic pipes, wrapped in red ribbon or thread, which Fool normally read and then marked with a ‘DNI’ stamp for *Did Not Investigate* before putting them back into a canister and firing them up the pipe, sending them on to Elderflower. The only reason he was here now was that the Bureaucracy had registered the blue flash and had also wondered about the possibility of it being a Fallen. The canister had been blue-ribbon-wrapped, and they had standing orders to investigate any of those that came through as a priority; it was in his *Guide*. Blue canisters arrived irregularly, and in all Fool’s time in Hell, over six years now, there had never been a Fallen, and he suspected there never would be. The rebel angels were already here, and the only ones left in Heaven were surely the followers and the trusted now, the arms of fury like Balthazar and of mercy like Adam; none of them would Fall.

‘We need the body,’ said Fool to Gordie, turning away from the man at his side, dismissing him, ‘before the things in there take him.’ Already, the body had jerked several times, and Fool suspected it was being eaten from below. Solomon Water was vast and full, its inky depths home to things that Fool hoped never to see. Not long ago, one had come ashore; it had eaten hundreds before being driven back into the water by a crowd of demons and humans in one of the rare moments when the two groups had worked together, brandishing flame and hurling rocks against it. This close to shore, and with only one body, it was unlikely that anything bigger than scavengers would approach, but there was always a chance. It was a chance that Fool did not want to take.

Gordie went to the water’s edge and stepped gingerly in, the liquid lapping over his shoes as he moved out from the shore. As Fool waited, he turned back to the man. ‘Did you see anything when you got here?’ he asked. He knew Gordie had already asked this, but the man might remember something new, describe it differently or reveal something extra.

‘No, just the body,’ the man replied. What was his name? ‘There were clothes near the water, but that was it.’

The clothes were in a bag by Fool’s feet; he would look them over later. They were torn and bloody, that much he had seen already, and smeared with mud. Just up the slope, in amongst the trees, he had found a patch of churned and damaged ground, the earth freshly torn. Blood was puddled in the newly created hollows and had started to coagulate into a thick, brittle mess. Four teeth had been scattered around the saturated ground like frozen tears; Fool had picked them up and placed them in his pocket, wrapped in a handkerchief. One still had a piece of gum attached to it, dangling pinkly from the root, bloody and wormlike.

A crowd had gathered further up the slope, perhaps ten or fifteen people massed beyond the trees and standing in

loose clumps. They had also come in case it was a Fallen, he suspected, had seen the blue flash but hadn't been as close as the nameless man, or had heard about it afterwards and come anyway. They looked lost, aimlessly staring down the slope, their features impossible to make out at this distance. They were all human, though, that Fool could tell; there were no demons among them, although if the crowd remained long enough, those others would come, attracted by the crumpling hope and the disappointment and the smell of sweat and despair. They would come to feed.

'Sir,' said Gordie from behind Fool. He had the body at the edge of the water but was struggling to pull it onto the land, and Fool went to help him, taking a grip on the corpse's legs and lifting as Gordie clambered onto the lakeside and dragged it by the shoulders. Fool didn't like the way the flesh felt, cold and clammy and loose, shifting under his fingers, and he was glad to be able to drop it on the ground once Gordie had made his way out from the water. It landed bonelessly on its back, and Fool winced at the state of it.

'Oh fuck,' the man breathed from behind Fool.

Fool had forgotten he was there, and now he went to the man (*West*, he thought, suddenly remembering the man's name, *West*), ushering him back and pointing at the others near the trees. West had gone pale, paler than before, and was gulping helplessly, staring at the battered body.

'Please, go up there and wait for me,' Fool said.

'Who could have done that?' asked West, and then doubled over and was sick, vomiting explosively onto the ground by Fool's feet. The smell of it was sharp and sour, the vomit itself watery and grey. West hadn't eaten much recently; no one had.

'I don't know,' said Fool, but suspected he did.

The dead person was, had been, male. There were bite marks around the base of the flaccid penis, scabbed and

angry red gashes that covered the scrotum and the lower belly; more lined the stomach and chest. One nipple was gone, the breast topped by an open wound. There were one or two smaller, circular marks on the dead man's skin and he thought that these were probably the marks from Solomon's inhabitants, small questing bites from the things at the bottom of the water's food chain, taken before the larger creatures came to feed. The other bites, Fool recognised. They came from demons, were marked by a puckering of the flesh around the wound where the skin had scorched from the demon's heat. There were crescent marks across the dead man's face and neck from where his attacker had punched and hit him, these marks fresher, still not budded into full bruises. One cheek was torn open and flapping, revealing a lacerated gum and bloody holes for the missing teeth that currently sat in Fool's pocket. He crouched, peering at the ruined face.

The water had already started to bloat and wrinkle the corpse's skin, the eyelids pulling away from the eyeballs slightly. More of the small circular bites were dotted around the eyes, almost lost in the angry marks from the beating. The sclera of the left eye was blood-filled and the eye itself turned out, as though the force of the blows had snapped it from its moorings. Tears that were tinged with blood wept from the eyes in slow trickles.

'Do we take him to the Garden?' asked Gordie.

'No,' said Fool. Something about the body bothered him. It wasn't the violence inflicted upon it, exactly; he saw similarly damaged bodies most days. No, it was the eyes, he thought; not their bloodiness or the fact that one had been so savagely abused that it had turned away from its companion, but the expression they contained. They were helpless, the helplessness of someone who saw their own death, or something worse, approaching and could do nothing about it. 'I want Morgan to see him. I want him Questioned.'

‘Questioned? Why?’

Fool’s hand went to the feather that was safely tucked into his inner pocket, the feel of it reassuring him, for some reason. ‘Because I want to know who did this to him,’ he said, and did not add, *and catch them and punish them*, because he knew that, hope for it though he might, it was unlikely to happen. This was Hell, and sins here went often unnoticed and almost always unpunished. The best he could hope for was knowledge, something to put in a report to Elderflower so that he could pass it on to his masters, for *information*. He put his hand in his pocket, not one of those containing the teeth or the feather, and fingered his badge of office, feeling the indentations that formed the words ‘Information Man’, and grinned humourlessly. ‘I want to know,’ he said again.

‘I’ll arrange transport,’ said Gordie.

‘No,’ said a new voice, ‘he is mine.’

Trouble, little Fool, Fool had time to think, and then something hit him and sent him sprawling into the mud beside the body.

TWO

It was a demon, a tall, scrawny thing without a skin. Fool slithered away, trying to put space between it and him so that he could draw his gun, but it stepped with him, keeping close. The exposed flesh of its face and hands glistened wetly, a rich and startling red. Its skinlessness, Fool saw, was entire, and the musculature that crossed its head and chest flexed as it came towards him. Its fingers ended in curved and yellowing claws, smeared blisters of white-boned knuckles emerging from the rawness behind them, the strips of muscle that formed its lips drawing back from teeth the size and shape of river-rolled stones.

‘It comes from the lake,’ the demon said, gesturing at the body. The words were distorted, warped into new shapes by its lack of lips, and it spat flecks of blood as it tried to form the sounds. ‘It is mine.’

‘No,’ said Fool, still trying to back away from the thing but prevented from going any further by the body, ‘he belongs to Hell, to the Bureaucracy. As representative of the Bureaucracy, he is mine.’ His head throbbed where the demon had hit him and he could feel something warm trickling around his ear. He managed to get a hand to his weapon but the demon dropped suddenly, its knees digging into the mud either side of Fool, leaning forwards so that it trapped Fool’s arm across his stomach. Its leering face came close to Fool’s, the smell of it rich and dense and sour. Dribbles fell from its mouth, from its weeping skin, dotting across Fool’s face.

‘It is mine,’ it said again. ‘Things in the lake are mine.’

Fool tried to twist his gun free but his arm was pinned. The demon felt his movements and reached down, gripping Fool's wrist with a hand that was fevered and greasy, as though it wasn't just blood that flowed through its veins (*assuming it has veins*, he thought randomly), but blood and oil. His wrist slipped in the thing's grip as he tried to writhe away, but the hold did not loosen enough to free him. Behind the demon, just visible over its shoulder, Gordie appeared, his gun held out and trembling. Fool shook his head slightly, and the demon saw it.

It was fast despite its spindle limbs, whirling and slashing out at Gordie in a scuttle of spattering droplets and broomstick arms. Gordie, staggered by the thing's thrust, went back down the slope and overbalanced, falling into the water. The demon shrieked, wheeled back, moving on all fours like some terrible insect, scuttling past Fool until it was perched over the body. Fool rolled over, trying to move and rise at the same time and achieving neither successfully. His skin burned where the thing's blood had splattered down on him and where it had grasped him, and he wanted to wipe it, to scald himself clean, but instead he tugged his gun from its holster and pointed it at the demon, shouting, 'No!'

It gave him a contemptuous look and then its face flexed as its jaws glided open on hinges that moved sideways. It turned, lowering itself down over the dead man, its mouth yawning wide, the glistening flesh stretching back and clamping around the dead man's head. Fool pressed the barrel of the gun to the back of the demon's skull, not liking the way its flesh slithered away from the muzzle, and said, as firmly as his pain and fear and adrenaline would allow him, 'Stop that.' To his astonishment, the demon jerked back from the body, knocking into Fool and banging his arm up. His finger tightened automatically and he loosed a shot, the bullet passing over the demon and entering Solomon Water with a sizzle.

‘Empty,’ said the demon in its warping, breathy voice. ‘Empty. What did he do? What? What?’ It was looking at Fool, creeping back from him and shaking its head without taking its eyes from his face.

‘Empty,’ the demon repeated, its clawed hands gouging at the earth as it slithered back. Fool pointed his gun at the retreating figure, a pointless gesture; his weapon would not reload for several more seconds yet. He had asked Elderflower if the delay could be lessened and had been told that a request would be put in. That had been almost a year ago.

The demon spat, or at least tried to. A mass of bloody phlegm dripped over its teeth as it made a sound like the pneumatic pipes when they sucked away a canister, and then it turned and ran, following the curve of the lakeshore. Fool watched it until it was a distant blur and then, finally, nothing. For a moment, he did not move, and then he let his gun drop and slumped to the damp earth, waiting for the shakes of old, unspent adrenaline to make their way through him.

A hand fell on Fool’s shoulder, startling him, and he twisted, thinking that the thing had come back or that it had companions, but it was only Gordie.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

‘I think so,’ Fool replied. He raised his head, feeling something that had to be blood roll down the side of his face. He lifted a hand to it, finding a short tear just below his hairline, another wound that would scar to a keloid ridge and add to the story of his time here, a story written across his skin in the language of Hell.



Gordie and Fool watched as the corpse was wrapped in heavy sheets that had once been white but were now a weary grey. Mud from Solomon Water’s bank smeared the

material as the handlers rolled the body over and black water spilled from the dead man's ruined mouth. The two attendants, their uniforms the same grey as the sheets, lifted the body and waited for it to drain before carrying it up the slope, threading through the trees and finally disappearing from sight. Fool rubbed at the bandage they had also taped to his head; it itched.

'Are you sure you won't go back to the office? Get some rest?' said Gordie, looking worriedly at Fool.

'No,' said Fool, nodding in the direction of the departing corpse. 'I'll follow it to the House for the Questioning.'

The two men began to move up the slope, following the attendants and their cargo. As they came close, Fool saw with surprise that there were people in the trees, that the man who had found the body was still there with some of the others that had formed the scrappy crowd. They were almost hiding, half-lost in the shadows of the stunted trunks and twisting, bowed branches. The man, the witness, came forward as they approached, hunched and scuttling.

'Yes, Mr West?' said Gordie. *Even after all this, thought Fool, he knows, without having to think about it.*

'You scared off that demon. You scared it, you shot it, and it left you alone,' said West, his voice not much more than a whisper. He sounded reverential, had a look in his eyes that Fool couldn't easily identify. Awe? Respect? Surely not. 'I've never seen that before. None of us have.' He gestured behind him, taking in the other figures.

'Well, no,' said Fool. 'It wasn't me, not really. It was—'

'It was. We all saw,' said West. He stepped closer to Fool and reached out, taking Fool's hand. Fool saw his own hand in West's clean white one, saw that there was dried blood on his fingers and mud scurfed under the nails, and was suddenly ashamed. He tried to pull his hand back but West held tight, as though Fool were a lifeline and he was drowning. 'You scared it,' he said again, 'and it ran. I just