



Listen. The Sanctuary of the Redeemers on Shotover Scarp is named after a damned lie, for there is no 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” suggests 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 that 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 his 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. 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 and 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 Northwest 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 leaned 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 lives of his guards depended on it (which they 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 was 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 toward 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 he 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 Northwest 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 rumored, 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 couldn’t 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 Northwest 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 he felt it less dangerous to speak in such a way of a Redeemer.

“I asked your friend about the rumor 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 humor.

“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, which 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 these days all 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 among 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 con-

formity to the past were 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 toward 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 gray 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 gray 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 strange angles 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 savior 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 things 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 burned 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 toward 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 around 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 toward 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 shoveling 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.