The Reapers

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Prologue

All things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods.

Heraclitus (c.535–475 BC)

Sometimes, Louis dreams of the Burning Man. He comes when the night is at its deepest, when even the sounds of the city have faded, descending from symphonic crescendo to muted nocturne. Louis is not even sure if he is truly asleep when the Burning Man makes his presence felt, for it seems to him that he wakes to the sound of his partner's slow breathing in the bed beside him, a smell in his nostrils that is both familiar yet alien: it is the stink of charred meats allowed to rot, of human fats sizzling in an open flame. If it is a dream, then it is a waking dream, one that occurs in the netherworld between consciousness and absence.

The Burning Man had a name once, but Louis can no longer utter it. His name is not enough to encompass his identity; it is too narrow, too restrictive for what he has become to Louis. He does not think of him as 'Errol', or 'Mr Rich' or even 'Mr Errol', which is how he had always addressed him when he was alive. He is now more than a name, much more.

Still, once he was Mr Errol: all brawn and muscle, his skin the color of damp, fertile earth recently turned by the plow; gentle and patient for the most part, but with something simmering beneath his seemingly placid nature, so that if you caught him unawares it was possible to glimpse it in his eyes before it slipped away, like some rare beast that has learned the importance of staying beyond the range of the hunters' guns, of the white men in the white suits.

For the hunters were always white.

There was a fire burning in Errol Rich, a rage at the world and its ways. He tried to keep it under control, for he understood that, if it emerged unchecked, there was the danger that it would consume all in its path, himself included. Perhaps it was an anger that would not have been alien to many of his brothers and sisters at that time: he was a black man trapped in the rhythms and rituals of a white man's world, in a town where he and those like him were not permitted to roam once dusk fell. Things were changing elsewhere, but not in this county, and not in this town. Change would come more slowly to this place. Maybe, in truth, it would never come at all, not entirely, but that would be for others to deal with, not Errol Rich. By the time certain people started talking aloud about rights without fear of reprisal, Errol Rich no longer existed, not in any form that those who once knew him could have recognized. His life had been extinguished years before, and in the moment of his dying he was transformed. Errol Rich passed from this earth, and in his place came the Burning Man, as though the fire inside had finally found a way to bloom forth in bright red and yellow, exploding from within to devour his flesh and consume his former consciousness, so that what was once a hidden part of him became all that he was. Others might have held the torch to him, or sprayed the gasoline that soaked and blinded him in his final moments as he was hanged from a tree, but Errol Rich was already burning, even then, even as he asked them to spare him from the agonies that were to come. He had always burned, and in that way, at least, he defeated the men who took his life.

And from the moment that he died, the Burning Man stalked Louis's dreams.

Louis remembers how it came to pass: an argument with whites. Somehow, that was often how it started. The whites made the rules, but the rules kept changing. They were fluid,

defined by circumstance and necessity, not by words on paper. Later, Louis would reflect that what was strangest of all was the fact that the white men and women who ran the town would always deny that they were racist. *We don't hate the coloreds*, they would say, *we just all get along better when they keep themselves to themselves*. Or: *They're welcome in the town during the day, but we just don't think they should spend the night. It's for their own safety as much as ours*. Curious. It was as hard then as it was now to find anybody who would admit to being a racist. Even most racists, it seemed, were ashamed of their intolerance.

But there were those who wore such an epithet as a badge of honor, and the town had its share of such people as well. It was said that the trouble started when a group of local men threw a heavy pitcher filled with urine through the cracked old windshield of Errol's truck, and Errol responded in kind. That temper of his, that fury that he kept bottled inside of him, had erupted, and he had tossed a length of two-by-four through the window of Little Tom's bar in reprisal. That had been enough for them to act against him, that and their fear of what he represented. He was a black man who spoke better than most of the white people in the town. He owned his own truck. He could fix things with his hands – radios, TVs, air conditioners, anything that had a current flowing through it – and he could fix them better and cheaper than anyone else, so that even those who wouldn't allow him to walk the town's streets at night were happy to let him into their homes to fix their appliances during the day, even if some of them didn't feel quite as comfortable in their living rooms afterward, although they weren't racists either. They just didn't like strangers in their home, particularly colored strangers. If they offered him water to slake his thirst, they were careful to present it to him in the cheap tin cup set aside for just such an eventuality, the cup from which no one else would drink, the cup kept with the cleaning

products and the brushes, so that the water always had a faint chemical burn to it. There was talk that maybe he might soon be in a position to employ others like him, to train them and pass on his skills. And he was a good-looking man too, a 'nigger buck' as Little Tom had once described him, except that, when he said it, Little Tom had been cradling the hunting rifle that used to hang above his bar, and it was clear what being a buck implied in Little Tom's world.

So they hadn't needed much of an excuse to move against Errol Rich, but he had given them one nonetheless, and before the week was out, they had doused him in gasoline, hanged him from a tree, and set him alight.

And that was how Errol Rich became the Burning Man.

Errol Rich had a wife in a city a hundred miles to the north. He'd fathered a child with her, and once each month he would drive up to see them and make sure that they had what they needed. Errol Rich's wife had a job in a big hotel. Errol used to work in that hotel too, as a handyman, but something had happened – that temper again, it was whispered – and he had to leave his wife and child and find work elsewhere. On those other weekend nights when he was not seeing to his family, Errol could be found drinking quietly in the little lean-to out in the swamps that served as a bar and social hub for the coloreds, tolerated by the local law as long as there was no trouble and no whoring, or none that was too obvious. Louis's mama would sometimes go there with her friends, even though Grandma Lucy didn't approve. There was music, and often Louis's mama and Errol Rich would dance together, but there was a sadness and a regret to their rhythms, as though this was now all that they had, and all that they would ever have. While others drank rot gut, or 'jitter juice' as Grandma Lucy still called it, Louis's mama sipped on a soda and Errol stuck to beer. Just one or two, though. He never was much for drinking, he used to say, and he didn't like to smell it on others first thing in the morning,

especially not on a working man, although he wasn't about to police another's pleasures, no sir.

On warm summer nights, when the air was filled with the burr of katydids, and mosquitoes, drawn by the heady mix of sweat and sugar, fed upon the men and women in the club, and the music was loud enough to shake dust from the ceiling, and the crowd was distracted by noise and scent and movement, Errol Rich and Louis's mama would perform their slow dance, unheeding of the rhythms that surrounded them, alive only to the beating of their own hearts, their bodies pressed so close that, in time, those beats came in unison and they were one together, their fingers intertwined, their palms moving damply, one upon the other.

And sometimes that was enough for them, and sometimes it was not.

Mr Errol would always give Louis a quarter when their paths crossed. He would comment upon how tall Louis had grown, how well he looked, how proud his mama must be of him.

And Louis thought, although he could not say why, that Mr Errol was proud of him too.

On the night that Errol Rich died, Louis's Grandma Lucy, the matriarch of the house of women in which Louis grew up, fed Louis's mama bourbon and a dose of morphine to help her sleep. Louis's mama had been weeping all week, ever since she heard of what had passed between Errol and Little Tom. Later, Louis was told that she had gone over to Errol's place at noon that day, her sister in tow, and had pleaded with him to leave, but Errol wasn't going to run, not again. He told her that it would all work out. He said that he had gone to see Little Tom and had apologized for what he had done. He had paid over forty dollars that he could ill afford to cover the damage, and as compensation for Little Tom's trouble, and Little Tom had accepted the money gruffly and

told Errol that what was done was done, and he forgave him his moment of ill temper. It had pained Errol to pay the money, but he wanted to stay where he was, to live and work with people whom he liked and respected. And loved. That was what he told Louis's mama, and that was what Louis's aunt told him, many years later. She described how Errol and Louis's mama had held hands as they spoke, and how she had walked outside for a breath of air to give them their privacy.

When Louis's mama eventually emerged from Errol's cabin, her face was very pale and her mouth was trembling. She knew what was coming, and Errol Rich knew it too, no matter what Little Tom might say. She went home and cried so much that she lost her breath and blacked out on the kitchen table, and it was then that Grandma Lucy took it upon herself to give her a little something to ease her suffering, and so Louis's mama had slept while the man she loved burned.

That night, the lean-to was closed, and the blacks who worked in the town left long before dusk came. They stayed in their houses and their shacks, their families close by, and nobody spoke. Mothers sat and kept vigil over their children as they slept, or held the hands of their menfolk over bare tables or seated by empty grates and cold stoves. They had felt it coming, like the heat before a storm, and they had fled, angry and ashamed at their powerlessness to intervene.

And so they had waited for the news of Errol Rich's leaving of this world.

On the night that Errol Rich died, Louis can remember waking to the sound of a woman's footsteps outside the little box room in which he slept. He can recall climbing from his bed, the boards warm beneath his bare feet, and walking to the open door of their cabin. He sees his grandmother on the porch, staring out into the darkness. He calls to her,

but she does not answer. There is music playing, the voice of Bessie Smith. His grandmother always loved Bessie Smith.

Grandma Lucy, a shawl draped around her shoulders over her nightdress, steps down into the yard in her bare feet. Louis follows her. Now all is no longer dark. There is a light in the forest, a slow burning. It is shaped like a man, a man writhing in agony as the flames consume him. He walks through the forest, the leaves turning to black in his wake. Louis can smell the gasoline and the roasted flesh, can see the skin charring, can hear the hissing and popping of body fats. His grandmother reaches out a hand behind her, never taking her eyes from the Burning Man, and Louis places his palm against her palm, his fingers against her fingers, and as she tightens her grip upon him, his fear fades and he feels only grief for what this man is enduring. There is no anger. That will come later. For now, there is only an overwhelming sadness that falls upon him like a dark cloak. His grandmother whispers, and begins to weep. Louis weeps too, and together they drown the flames, even as the Burning Man's mouth forms words that Louis cannot quite hear, as the fire dies and the image fades, until all that is left is the smell of him and an image seared upon Louis's retina like the aftermath of a photographic flash.

And now, as Louis lies in a bed far from the place in which he grew up, the one he loves sleeping soundly beside him, he smells gasoline and roasted meat, and sees again the Burning Man's lips move, and thinks that he understands part of what was said on that night so many years before.

Sorry. Tell her I am sorry.

Most of what follows is lost to him, wreathed in fire. Only two words stand out, and even now Louis is not certain if he interprets them correctly, if the movement of that lipless gap truly corresponds to what he believes was uttered, or to what he wants to believe.

Son.

My son.

There was a fire inside Errol Rich, and something of that fire transferred itself to the boy at the moment of Errol's death. It burns within him now, but where Errol Rich found a way to deny it, to temper its flames until at last, perhaps inevitably, it rose up and destroyed him, Louis has embraced it. He fuels it, and it, in turn, fuels him, but it is a delicate balance that he maintains. The fire needs to be fed if it is not to feed upon him instead, and the men he kills are the sacrifices that he offers to it. Errol Rich's fire was a deep, scorching red, but the flames inside Louis burn white and cold.

Son.

My son.

At night, Louis dreams of the Burning Man.

And, somewhere, the Burning Man dreams of him.

I

He will now be felled with my arrow, as I am enraged at him, and gone are his lives now, and indeed the earth shall drink his blood.

(from the *Srimad Valmiki Ramayana*, c.500–100 BC)

1

There are so many killings, so many victims, so many lives lost and ruined every day, that it can be hard to keep track of them all, hard to make the connections that might bring cases to a close. Some are obvious: the man who kills his girlfriend, then takes his own life, either out of remorse or because of his own inability to face the consequences of his actions; or the tit-for-tat murders of hoodlums, gangsters, drug dealers, each killing leading inexorably to another as the violence escalates. One death invites the next, extending a pale hand in greeting, grinning as the ax falls, the blade cuts. There is a chain of events that can easily be reconstructed, a clear trail for the law to follow.

But there are other killings that are harder to connect, the links between them obscured by great distances, by the passage of years, by the layering of this honeycomb world as time folds softly upon itself.

The honeycomb world does not hide secrets: it stores them. It is a repository of buried memories, of half-forgotten acts.

In the honeycomb world, everything is connected.

The St Daniil sat on Brightwater Court, not far from the cavernous dinner clubs on Brighton Beach Avenue and Coney Island Avenue where couples of all ages danced to music in Russian, Spanish, and English, ate Russian food, shared vodka and wine, and watched stage shows that would not have been out of place in some of the more modest Reno hotels, or on a cruise ship, yet the St Daniil was far enough away

from them to render itself distinct in any number of ways. The building that it occupied overlooked the ocean, and the boardwalk with its principal trio of restaurants, the Volna, the Tatiana, and the Winter Garden, now screened to protect their patrons from the cool sea breeze and the stinging sands. Nearby was the Brighton playground, where, during the day, old men sat at stone tables playing cards while children cavorted nearby, the young and the not-so-young united together in the same space. New condos had sprung up to the east and west, part of the transformation that Brighton Beach had undergone in recent years.

But the St Daniil belonged to an older dispensation, a different Brighton Beach, one occupied by the kind of businesses that made their money from those who were on nodding terms with poverty: check cashing services that took twenty-five percent of every check cashed, then offered loans at a similar monthly rate to cover the shortfall; discount stores that sold cheap crockery with cracked glaze, and firetrap Christmas decorations all year round; former mom-and-pop grocery stores that were now run by the kind of men who looked like they might have the remains of mom and pop rotting in their cellars; laundromats frequented by men who smelled of the streets and who would routinely strip down to filthy shorts and sit, nearly naked, waiting for their clothes to wash before giving them a single desultory spin in the dryer (for every quarter counted) and then dress in the still-damp clothes, folding the rest into plastic garbage bags and venturing back onto the streets, their garments steaming slightly in the air; pawnshops that did a steady trade in redeemed and unredeemed items, for there was always someone willing to benefit from the misfortune of another; and storefronts with no name above the window and only a battered counter inside, the shadowy business conducted within of no interest to those who needed to be told its nature. Most of those places were gone now, relegated to side streets,

to less desirable neighborhoods, pushed further and further back from the Avenue and the sea, although those who needed their services would always know where to find them.

The St Daniil remained, though. It endured. The St Daniil was a club, although it was strictly private and had little in common with its glitzier counterparts on the Avenue. Accessed through a steel caged door, it occupied the basement of an old brownstone building surrounded by other brownstones of similar vintage although, while its neighbors had been cleaned up, the edifice occupied by the St Daniil had not. It had once formed the main entrance to a larger complex, but changes to the internal structure of the buildings had isolated the St Daniil between two significantly more attractive apartment blocks. The club's home now squatted in the middle of them like some poor relation that had muscled in on a family photo, unashamed of its ignominy.

Above the St Daniil was a warren of small apartments, some big enough to be occupied by entire families, others small enough to accommodate only an individual, and one, at that, for whom space mattered less than privacy and anonymity. Nobody lived in those apartments now, not willingly. Some were used for storage: booze, cigarettes, electrical goods, assorted contraband. The rest acted as temporary quarters for young – sometimes very young – prostitutes and, when required, their clients. One or two of the rooms were marginally better furnished and maintained than others, and contained video cameras and recording equipment for the making of pornographic films.

Although it was known as the St Daniil, the club did not have an official name. A plate beside the door read 'Private Members Social Club' in English and Cyrillic, but it was not the kind of place where anyone went to be sociable. There was a bar there, but few lingered at it, and those who did stuck mostly to coffee and killed time while waiting for errands to run, vig to collect, bones to break. A TV above

the bar showed pirated DVDs, old hockey games, sometimes porn or, late at night, when all business had been conducted, film of Russian troops in Chechnya engaging in reprisals against their enemies, real or perceived. Worn hemispherical vinyl booths lined the walls, with scuffed tables at their center, relics of a time when this really was a social club, a place where men could talk of the old country and share the newspapers that had arrived in the mail or in the suitcases of visitors and immigrants. The decor consisted mainly of framed copies of Soviet posters from the 1940s, bought for five bucks at RBC Video on Brighton Beach Avenue.

For a time, the police had kept watch on the club, but they had been unable to access it in order to plant a bug, and a wiretap on the phones had expired without anything useful being learned. Any business of consequence was, they suspected, now conducted on throwaway cell phones, the phones replaced religiously at the end of every week. Two raids by vice on the building through the doorway above the club had scored only a couple of johns and a handful of weary whores, few of whom had English and fewer of whom had papers. No pimps were ever apprehended, and the women, the cops knew, were easily replaced.

On those nights, the door to the St Daniil had remained firmly closed, and when the cops finally gained entry to it they had found only a bored bartender and a pair of ancient, toothless Russians playing poker for matchsticks.

It was a mid-October evening. The light outside had long faded and only a single booth in the club was occupied. The man seated there was a Ukrainian known as the Priest. He had studied in an Orthodox seminary for three years before discovering his true vocation, which lay primarily in providing the kinds of services for which priests were usually required to offer forgiveness. The club's unofficial name was a testament to the Priest's brief flirtation with the religious

life. The St Daniil monastery was Moscow's oldest cloister, a stronghold of the Orthodox faith even during the worst excesses of the Communist era, when many of its priests had become martyrs and the remains of St Daniil himself had been smuggled to America in order to save them from harm.

Unlike many of those who worked for him, the Priest spoke English with hardly a trace of an accent. He had been part of the first influx of immigrants from the Soviet Union, working hard to learn the ways of this new world, and he could still recall a time when Brighton Beach had been nothing but old people living in rent-controlled apartments surrounded by little vacant houses falling into decay, a far cry from the days when this area was a beacon for immigrants and New Yorkers alike anxious to leave the crowded neighborhoods of Brownsville, East New York, and Manhattan's Lower East Side for space in which to live and the feel of sea air in their lungs. He prided himself on his sophistication. He read the *Times*, not the *Post*. He went to the theater. When he was in his realm, there was no porn on the TV, no poorly copied DVDs. Instead, it was tuned to BBC World, or sometimes CNN. He did not like Fox News. It looked inward, and he was a man who was always looking at the greater world outside. He drank tea during the day, and only compote, a fruit punch that tasted of plums, at night. He was an ambitious man, a prince who wished to become a king. He paid obeisance to the old men, the ones who had been imprisoned under Stalin, the ones whose fathers had created the criminal enterprise that had now reached its zenith in a land far from their own. But even as he bowed before them, the Priest looked for ways in which they might be undermined. He calculated the strength of potential rivals among his own generation, and prepared his people for the inevitable bloodshed, sanctioned or unsanctioned, that would come. Recently, there had been some reversals. The mistakes might have been avoided, but he was not entirely to blame for them.

Unfortunately, there were others who did not see it that way. Perhaps, he thought, the bloodshed would have to begin sooner than expected.

Today had been a bad day, another in a succession of bad days. There had been a problem with the restrooms that morning and the place still stank, even though the difficulty had apparently been solved once the drain people, from a firm trusted by the organization, got on the case. On another day, the Priest might well have left the club and gone elsewhere, but there was business to be conducted and loose ends to be tied, so he was prepared to put up with the lingering bad odor for as long as was necessary.

He flicked through some photographs on the table before him: undercover policemen, some of them probably Russian speakers. They were determined, if nothing else. He would have them identified to see if there was some way of putting pressure on them through their families. The police were drawing ever closer. After years of ineffectual moves against him, they had been given a break. Two of his men had died in Maine the previous winter, along with two intermediaries. Their deaths had exposed a small but lucrative part of the Priest's Boston operation: pornography and prostitution involving minors. He had been forced to cease providing both services, and the result had affected, in turn, the smuggling of women and children into the country, which meant that the inevitable attrition of his stable of whores, and the stables of others, could not be arrested. He was hemorrhaging money, and he did not like it. Others were suffering too, and he knew that they blamed him. Now his club stank of excrement and it would only be a matter of time before the dead men were finally connected to him.

But word had reached him that there might be a solution to at least one of his problems. All of this had started because a private detective in Maine could not mind his own business. Killing him would not get rid of the police – it might

even increase the pressure upon him for a time – but it would at least serve as a warning to his persecutors and to those who might be tempted to testify against him, as well as giving the Priest a little personal satisfaction along the way.

There was a shout from the doorway in Russian: 'Boss, they are here.'

One week earlier, a man had arrived at the offices of Big Earl's Cleaning & Drain Services, Inc., on Nostrand Avenue. He had not entered through the brightly carpeted, fragrant-smelling lobby. Instead, he had walked around the side of the building to the maintenance yard and waste treatment area.

This area did not smell at all fragrant.

He entered the garage and climbed a flight of steps to a glass booth. Inside was a desk, a range of mismatched filing cabinets, and two cork boards covered with invoices, letters, and a pair of out-of-date calendars featuring women in a state of undress. Seated behind the desk was a tall, thin man in a white shirt offset by a green and yellow polyester tie. His hair was Grecian-formula brown, and he was fiddling compulsively with his pen, the sure sign of a smoker deprived, however temporarily, of his drug. He looked up as the door opened and the visitor entered. The new arrival was of below average height, and dressed in a navy peacoat buttoned to the neck, a pair of torn, faded jeans, and bright red sneakers. He had a three-day growth of beard, but wore it in a manner that suggested he *always* had a three-day growth of beard. It looked almost cultivated, in an untidy way. 'Shabby' was the word that came to mind.

'You trying to quit?' asked the visitor.

'Huh?'

'You trying to give up cigarettes?'

The man looked at the pen in his right hand as if almost surprised that there wasn't a cigarette there.

'Yeah, that's right. Wife's been at me to do it for years. The doc too. Thought I'd give it a try.'

'You should use those nicotine patches.'

'Can't get them to light. What can I do for you?'

'Earl around?'

'Earl's dead.'

The visitor looked shocked. 'No way. When did he die?'

'Two months ago. Cancer of the lung.' He coughed embarrassedly. 'Kind of why I decided to give up. My name's Jerry Marley, Earl's brother. I came on board to help out when Earl got sick, and I'm still here. Earl a friend of yours?'

'An acquaintance.'

'Well, guess he's gone to a better place now.'

The visitor looked around the little office. Beyond the glass, two men in masks and coveralls were cleaning pipes and tools. He wrinkled his nose as the stink reached him.

'Hard to believe,' said the visitor.

'Ain't it though. So, what can I do for you?'

'You unclog drains?'

'That's right.'

'So if you know how to unclog them, then you must know how to clog them as well.'

Jerry Marley looked momentarily puzzled, and then anger replaced puzzlement. He stood up. 'You get the hell out of here before I call the cops. This is a business, dammit. I got no time for people trying to cause other people trouble.'

'I hear your brother wasn't so particular about who he worked with.'

'Hey, you keep your mouth shut about my brother.'

'I don't mean that in a bad way. It was one of the things I liked about him. It made him useful.'

'I don't give a shit. Get out of here, you –'

'Maybe I should introduce myself,' said the visitor. 'My name is Angel.'

'I don't give a good goddamn what –' Marley stopped talking as he realized that he did, in fact, give a good goddamn. He sat down again.

'I guess Earl might have mentioned me.'

Marley nodded. He looked a little paler than before. 'You, and another fella.'

'Oh, he's around somewhere. He's –' Angel searched for the right word. '– cleaner than I am. No offense meant, but his clothes cost more than mine. The smell, y'know, it gets in the fabric.'

'I know,' said Marley. He began to babble, but couldn't stop himself. 'I don't notice it so much no more. My wife, she makes me take my clothes off in the garage before I come in the house. Have to shower straight away. Even then, she says she can still smell it on me.'

'Women,' said Angel. 'They're sensitive like that.'

There was a brief silence. It was almost companionable, except that Jerry Marley's desire for a cigarette had suddenly increased beyond the capacity of any mortal man to resist.

'So,' said Angel. 'About those drains . . .'

Marley raised a hand to stop him. 'Mind if I smoke?' he asked.

'I thought you were giving up,' said Angel.

'So did I.'

Angel shrugged. 'I guess it must be a stressful job.'

'Sometimes,' said Marley.

'Well, I don't want to add to it.'

'God forbid.'

'But I do need a favor, and I'll do you a favor in return.'

'Right. And what would that be?'

'Well, if you do me my favor, I won't come back again.'

Jerry Marley thought about it for less than half a second.

'That seems fair,' he said.

For a moment, Angel looked a little sad. He was hurt that everyone seemed to leap at that deal when it was offered.

Marley seemed to guess what he was thinking. 'Nothing personal,' he added, apologetically.

'No,' said Angel, and Marley got the sense that the visitor was thinking of something else entirely. 'It never is.'

The two men who entered the Priest's den a week later were not what he had expected, but then the Priest had learned that nothing was ever quite as he might have expected it to be. The first was a black man dressed in a gray suit that looked as if it was being worn for the first time. His black patent leather shoes shone brightly, and a black silk tie was knotted perfectly at the collar of his spotlessly white shirt. He was clean shaven and exuded a faint scent of cloves and incense that was particularly appealing to the Priest under his current, excrementally tainted, circumstances.

Behind him was a smaller man, possibly of Hispanic origin, wearing an amiable smile that briefly distracted from the fact that his clothes had seen better days: no-name denims, last year's sneakers, and a padded jacket that was obviously of good quality but was more suited to someone two decades younger and two sizes larger.

'They're clean,' said Vassily, once the two men had submitted, with apparent good grace, to a frisking. Vassily was deceptively compact and his features were gentle and delicate. He moved with speed and grace, and was one of the Priest's most trusted acolytes, another Ukrainian with brains and ambition, although not so much ambition that it might pose a threat to his employer.

The Priest gestured at a pair of chairs facing him across the table. The two men sat.

'Would you like a drink?' he asked them.

'Nothing for me,' said the black man.

'I'll have a soda,' said the other. 'Coke. Make sure the glass isn't dirty.'

The smile never left his face. He looked over his shoulder at the bartender and winked. The bartender merely scowled.

'Now, what can I do for you?' asked the Priest.

'It's more a matter of what we can do for you,' said the small man.

The Priest shrugged. 'Cleaning, maybe? Selling door-to-door?'

There was an appreciative laugh from his soldiers. There were three of them in all, plus the bartender. Two were seated at the bar, the ubiquitous coffee cups before them. Vassily was behind the men and to their right. The Priest thought that he looked uneasy. But then, Vassily always looked uneasy. He was a pessimist, or perhaps a realist; the Priest was never entirely sure which. He supposed that it was all a matter of perspective.

The small man's grin faded slightly.

'We're here about the paper.'

'Paper? Are you looking for a route?'

There was more laughter.

'The paper on the detective, Parker. We hear you want him taken out. We'd prefer it if that wasn't the case.'

The laughter stopped. The Priest had been informed that two men wanted to discuss the detective with him, so this opening gambit was not unexpected. Usually, the Priest would have left such discussions to Vassily, but this was not the usual situation, and these, he knew, were not the usual men. He had been told that they merited a degree of respect, but this was the Priest's place, and he enjoyed goading them. He respected those who respected him, and the mere fact of the men's presence in his club irritated him. They were not pleading for the detective's life; they were trying to tell him how to run his business.

The bartender placed a Coke in front of the small man. He sipped it and scowled.

'It's warm,' he said.

'Give him some ice,' said the Priest.