For David Emilian Armstrong
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are a lot of people to thank for helping me bring this one home. It was a devil of a book to write, for a host of reasons. For one thing, I began writing it the week before my father passed away, and inevitably the long shadow of that event dimmed the joy of writing, at least for the first six months or so, slowing it to a crawl. Paradoxically, even as my production of usable text diminished, I could feel the scale of the story I wanted to tell getting bigger. What had originally begun life as an idea for a short, satiric stab at Hollywood began to blossom into something larger, lusher and stranger: a fantasies on Hollywood both in its not-so-innocent youth and in its present, wholly commercialized phase, linked by a sizeable cast and a mythography which I would need to create and explain in very considerable detail. I don't doubt that this second incarnation of the book will be much more satisfying a read than the first - which I had written almost in its entirety before changing direction - but Lord, it was a son of a bitch to get down onto the page. Forgive me, then, if the list of people I'm thanking is longer than usual. And believe me when I tell you every one of them deserves this nod of recognition, because each has helped get Coldheart Canyon out of my head and into print.

Let me begin with the dedicatee of this book, David Emilian Armstrong, my husband and in every sense of the word my partner: the one who was with me when one of our five dogs, Charlie, passed away (Charlie's loving presence, and the sadness and frustration of losing him, is recorded in this novel). David always has faith in my capacity to go one step further: to make the tale I'm telling a little richer, the picture I'm painting a little brighter, the photograph I'm taking a little sexier. My thanks to Craig Green and Don MacKay, to whom I first gave the handwritten pages to be typed; and most especially to David John Dodds, my oldest and dearest friend, who worked through much of the Christmas period (with the Seraphim offices deserted around us) polishing the text, then polishing the polishes, so that the immense manuscript would be ready to be dispatched to my publishers before I went to recuperate in Kauai. To Bob Pescovitz, my researcher, and Angela Calin, my translator, my thanks. To Michael Hadley, Joe Daley and Renee Rosen, who run all the various aspects of my creative life outside writing and painting (films, television, theme park mazes and toy-lines, web-sites, photographs and the endless business of promoting the above), my gratitude. In the last year and a half, I have often been an absentee boss, because I've been in the wilds of Coldheart Canyon. During that period, they have worked together to make our businesses prosper. Let me not forget Ana Osgood and Denny McLain, to whom fall the very considerable responsibilities of organizing and archiving my visual work, especially the many enormous paintings for my next books, The Abarat Quartet. Then there are the two people, Toya Castillo and Alex Rosas, who make the homes in which we work run smoothly. Who feed David and myself, and wash our clothes; who make sure there's shampoo in our shower and our dogs smell sweet. Again, I have been something of a phantom of myself for much of the last year, passing through the house on my way to write or paint with a distracted look. They kindly indulge my craziness, and my endless calls for cups of hot sweet tea. I also owe a great debt of gratitude to Dr Alex del Rosario, and his assistant Judy Azar. I recently described Alex as the perfect 'artist's doctor'. He has guided me through some lengthy periods of sickness in the last couple of years, understanding as no other physician in my history has the fierce and sometimes self-wounding passion that makes artists attempt to do the impossible: to paint another world into being, while writing a two hundred thousand word novel while producing a couple of movies, for instance. For me, this is my natural, albeit obsessive, behavior. But my body isn't that of a thirty-year-old any longer (or even that of a forty-year-old!). It complains now when I drive it hard; as I do daily. It has taken a massive contribution of sympathetic counsel, medication and alternative therapies to keep body and spirit together since my father's death and I owe Alex a huge debt of thanks for my present good health. Finally, the powers that be. First, my love and thanks to Ben Smith, my Hollywood agent, who has been a true visionary in a job that is often maligned (in this book, for instance) as being for cold, artistically disinterested men and women. My thanks and great admiration go to the lawyer who has helped shape my business life in the last two years, David Golden. The Abarat deal with the Disney Company was the largest literary deal made in Hollywood last year, and it covers every possible shape and permutation that my invented world might take, in the hands of Disney's imagineers. To give you a taste of what kind of wordage David Golden has minutely analyzed on my behalf: the Disney contract had three pages alone devoted to listing its contents! On the literary side, my dear Anne Sibbald, who has surely the tenderest heart of any agent who ever represented an unreformed maker of monsters like myself, has been a constant source of encouragement, and a fearless champion when on occasion the machinations of the corporate world proved painful and incomprehensible. And last but oh, you both know, never least my editors. In New York, Robert Jones (who's had his own wars to fight of late, and has still always been there with a witty word of support; or some wonderfully dry remark at the expense of the many idiocies of the publishing world.) And finally we come to Jane Johnson. My Jane, I insist, the Editor of Editors, who
is never far from my mind when I set pen to paper. Increasingly, Jane, I think I write to entertain you, to please you. We have survived for many years together on a raft of shared beliefs about the necessity of dreams, tossed around in the tumultuous seas of modern publishing. In that time, Jane has lost countless colleagues to exhaustion, frustration and despair, and yet she manages to be a mistress of beautiful prose as well as an editor of a stable of authors, who, like me, could not imagine their literary lives continuing without her. I would have given up the increasingly problematic ambition of having a broad audience for my work, and fled into the minor, the hermetic and the oblique, without her tireless encouragement. My love to you, my Jane; and, as always, my heartfelt thanks. Here’s another tale for you, saved from the flood. CB
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PROLOGUE THE CANYON

It is night in Coldheart Canyon, and the wind comes off the desert. The Santa Anas, they call these winds. They blow off the Mojave, bringing malaise, and the threat of fire. Some say they are named after Saint Anne, the mother of Mary, others that they are named after General Santa Ana, of the Mexican cavalry, a great creator of dusts; others still that the name is derived from santanta, which means Devil Wind. Whatever the truth of the matter, this much is certain: the Santa Anas are always baking hot, and often so heavily laden with perfume that it's as though they've picked up the scent of every blossom they've shaken on their way here. Every wild lilac and wild rose, every white sage and rank jimsonweed, every heliotrope and creosote bush: gathered them all up in their hot embrace and borne them into the hidden channel of Coldheart Canyon. There's no lack of blossoms here, of course. Indeed, the Canyon is almost uncannily verdant. Some of the plants here were brought in from the world outside by these same burning winds, these Santa Anas; others were dropped in the feces of the wild animals who wander through the deer and coyote and raccoon; some spread from the gardens of the great dream palace that lays solitary claim to this corner of Hollywood. Alien blooms, this last kind nurtured by gardeners who have long since left off their pruning and their watering, and departed, allowing the bowers which they once treasured to run riot. But for some reason there is always a certain bitterness in the blooms here. Even the hungry deer, driven from their traditional trails these days by the presence of sightseers who have come to see Tinseltown, do not linger in the Canyon for very long. Though the deer venture along the ridge and down the steep slopes of the Canyon, and curiosity, especially amongst the younger animals, often leads them over the rooted fences and toppled walls into the secret enclaves of the gardens, they seldom choose to stay there for very long. Perhaps it isn't just that the leaves and petals are bitter. Perhaps there are too many whisperings in the air around the ruined gazebos, and the animals are unnerved by what they hear. Perhaps there are too many presences brushing against their trembling flanks as they explore the clotted pathways. Perhaps, as they graze the overgrown lawns, they lookup and mistake a statue for a pale fragment of life, and are startled by their error, and take flight. Perhaps, sometimes, they are not mistaken.

Perhaps. The Canyon is familiar with perhaps; with what may or may not be. And never more so than on such a night as this, when the winds come sighing off the desert, heavy with their perfume, and such souls as the Canyon hosts express their longing for something they dreamed they had, or dreamed that they dreamed, their voices so tenuous tonight that they're inaudible to the human ear, even if there were someone to hear them, which there never is. That's not entirely true. On occasion somebody will be tenacious enough to find their way into this vale of luxury and tears; a tourist, perhaps even a family of tourists, foolishly determined to discover what lies off the prescribed route; looking for some famous heart-throb's love-nest, or a glimpse of the idol himself, caught unaware as he walks with his dog. There are even a few trespassers over the years who have found their way here intentionally, guided to this place by hints dropped in obscure accounts of Old Hollywood. They venture cautiously, these few. Indeed there is often something close to reverence in the way they enter Coldheart Canyon. But however these visitors arrive, they always leave the same way: hurriedly, with many a nervous backward glance. Even the crassest of them even the ones who'd claim they don't have a psychic bone in their bodies are discomfited by something they sniff here. Their sixth sense, they have discovered, is far more acute than they had thought. Only when they have outrun the all-too-eager shadows of the Canyon and they are back in the glare of the billboards on Sunset Boulevard, do they wipe their clammy palms, and wonder to themselves how it was that in such a harmless spot they could have been so very afraid.

PART ONE THE PRICE OF THE HUNT

ONE "Your wife did not want to look around the Fortress any further, Mister Zeffer?" Father Sandru said, seeing that on the second day the middle-aged man with the handsome, sad face had come alone. "The lady is not my wife," Zeffer explained. "Ah..." the monk replied, the tone of commiseration in his voice indicating that he was far from indifferent to Katya's charms. "A pity for you, yes?" "Yes," Zeffer admitted, with some discomfort. "She's a very beautiful woman." The monk studied Zeffer's face as he spoke, but having said what he'd said, Zeffer was unwilling to play the confessee any further. "I'm her manager," he explained. "That's all there is between us." Father Sandru, however, was not willing to let the issue go just yet. After the two of you departed yesterday," he said, his English colored by his native Romanian, "one of the brothers remarked that she was the most lovely women he had ever seen..." he hesitated before committing to the rest of the sentence "...in the flesh." "Her name is Katya, by the way," Zeffer said. "Yes, yes, I know," said the Father, his fingers combing the knotted gray-white of his beard as he stood assessing Zeffer. The two men were a study in contrasts. Sandru ruddy-faced and rotund in his dusty brown habit,
Zeffer slimly elegant in his pale linen suit. "She is a movie-star, yes?" "You saw one of her films?" Sandru grimaced, displaying a poorly-kept array of teeth. "No, no," he said. "I do not see these things. At least not often. But there is a little cinema in Ravbac, and some of the younger brothers go down there quite regularly. They are great fans of Chaplin, of course. And there's a...vamp...is that the word?" "Yes," Zeffer replied, somewhat amused by this conversation. "Vamp's the word." "Called Theda Bara." "Oh, yes. We know Theda." In that year, which was 1920, everybody knew Theda Bara. She had one of the most famous faces in the world. As, of course, did Katya. Both were famous; their fame tinged with a delicious hint of decadence. "I must go with one of the brothers when they next go to see her," Father Sandru said. "I wonder if you entirely understand what kind of woman Theda Bara portrays?" Zeffer replied. Sandru raised a thicketed eyebrow. "I am not born yesterday, Mister Zeffer. The Bible has its share of these women, these vamps. They're whores, yes; women of Babylon? Men are drawn to them only to be destroyed by them?" Sandru laughed at the directness of Sandru's description. "I suppose that's about right," he said. "And in real life?" Sandru said. "In real life Theda Bara's name is Theodesia Goodman. She was born in Ohio." "But is she a destroyer of men?" "In real life? No, I doubt it. I'm sure she harms a few egos now and again, but that's about the worst of it." Father Sandru looked mildly disappointed. "I shall tell the brothers what you told me," he said. "They'll be very interested. Well then...shall I take you inside?"

Matthias Zeffer was a cultured man. He had lived in Paris, Rome, London and briefly in Cairo in his forty-three years; and had promised himself that he would leave Los Angeles where there was neither art nor the ambition to make art as soon as the public tired of lionizing Katya, and she tired of rejecting his offer of marriage. They would wed, and come back to Europe; find a house with some real history on its bones, instead of the fake Spanish mansion her fortune had allowed her to have built in one of the Hollywood canyons. Until then, he would have to find aesthetic comfort in the objets d'art he purchased on their trips abroad: the furniture, the tapestries, the statuary. They would suffice, until they could find a chateau in the Loire, or perhaps a Georgian house in London; somewhere the cheap theatrics of Hollywood wouldn't curdle his blood. "You like Romania?" the Father asked as he unlocked the great oak door that lay at the bottom of the stairs. "Yes, of course," Zeffer replied. "Please do not feel you have to sin on my account," Sandru said, with a sideways glance. "Sin?" "Lying is a sin, Mister Zeffer. Perhaps it's just a little one, but it's a sin nevertheless." Oh Lord, Zeffer thought; how far I've slipped from the simple proprieties! Back in Los Angeles he sinned as a matter of course; every day, every hour. The life he and Katya lived was built on a thousand stupid little lies. But he wasn't in Hollywood now. So why lie? "You're right. I don't like this country very much at all. I'm here because Katya wanted to come. Her mother and father are you in a buying mood?" Zeffer replied. Sandru tilted his head. "I'm sorry, her stepfather live in the village." "Yes. This I know. The mother is not a good woman." "You're her priest?" "No. We brothers do not minister to the people. The Order of St. Teodor exists only to keep its eyes on the Fortress." He pushed the door open. A dank smell exuded from the darkness ahead of them. "Excuse me for asking," Zeffer said. "But it was my understanding from yesterday that apart from you and your brothers, there's nobody here." "Yes, this is true. Nobody here, except the brothers." "So what are you keeping your eyes on?" Sandru smiled thinly. "I will show you," he said. "As much as you wish to see." He switched on a light, which illuminated ten yards of corridor. A large tapestry hung along the wall, the image upon it so grey with age and dust as to be virtually beyond interpretation. The Father proceeded down the corridor, turning on another light as he did so. "I was hoping I might be able to persuade you to make a purchase," he said. "Of what?" Zeffer said. "You wasn't encouraged by what he'd seen so far. A few of the pieces of furniture he'd spotted yesterday had a measure of rustic charm, but nothing he could imagine buying. "I didn't realize you were selling the contents of the Fortress." Sandru made a little groan. "Ah...I'm afraid to say we must sell in order to eat. And that being the case, I would prefer that the finer things went to someone who will take care of them, such as yourself." Sandru walked on ahead a little way, turning on a third light and then a fourth. This level of the Fortress, Zeffer was beginning to think, was bigger than the floor above. Corridors ran of in all directions. "But before I begin to show you," Sandru said, "you must tell me are you in a buying mood?" Zeffer smiled. "Father, I'm an American. I'm always in a buying mood." Sandru had given Katya and Zeffer a history of the Fortress the previous day; though as Zeffer remembered it there was much in the account that had sounded bogus. The Order of St. Teodor, Zeffer had decided, had something to hide. Sandru had talked about the Fortress as a place steeped in secrets; but nothing particularly bloody. There had been no battles fought there, he claimed, nor had its keep ever held prisoners, nor its courtyard witnessed atrocity or execution. Katya, in her usual forthright manner, had said that she didn't believe this to be true. "When I was a little girl there were all kinds of stories about this place," she said. "I heard horrible things were done here. That it was human blood in the mortar between the stones. The blood of children." "I'm sure you must have been mistaken," the Father had said. Absolutely not. The Devil's wife lived in this fortress. Lilith, they called her. And she sent the Duke away on a hunt. And he never came back." Sandru laughed; and if it was a performance, then it was an
something special in the face and bearing of this creature. He had influential friends on the West Coast of the cinema (few people did; the year was 1916, and film was a fledgling), his instincts told him there was notion that he should bring her back with him to America. Though he'd had at that time no experience in the world of admirers who were gathered around to watch this child-enchantress. It hadn't taken him long to conceive of the astonishment to all who witnessed it. For three nights he'd come to the square where she sang, there to join the group do for her family's sake she had no choice but to do for herself. By the age of fifteen (when Zeffer had met her, town to town to dance in the streets, and

In fact, Katya's mother had put such beauty to profitful work at the age of twelve, when the girl had been taken from this perfect rosebud child whose dark eyes and bright smile set her utterly apart from any other child in the village. as a child; meeting the mother who must have viewed her appearance in their midst as something close to a miracle:

that he'd spent time here with her. Seeing the house where she'd been born and brought up, the streets she'd trudged movement for it. The grief that was represented by these hundreds of graves had moved him deeply: the pain of mothers, the unshed tears of fathers and grandfathers. It was nothing he had remotely expected, and it was what made her so strong; and it was her strength business of the heart. It was what made her so strong;

Was there something here in the Fortress that deserved a closer look? And if so, how did he get the Father to admit to it? The best route, he'd already decided, was fiscal. If Sandru was to be persuaded to reveal his true treasures, it would be through the scent of hard cash in his nostrils. The fact that Sandru had raised the subject of buying and selling made the matter easier to broach. "I do know Katya would love to have something from her homeland to take back to Hollywood," he said. "She's built a huge house, so we have plenty of room." "Oh, yes?" 'And of course, she has the money." This was nacked, he knew, but in his experience of such things subtlety seldom played well. Which point was instantly proved. "How much are we talking about?" the Father asked mildly. "Katya Lupi is one of the best-paid actresses in Hollywood. And I am authorized to buy whatever I think might please her." "Then let me ask you: what pleases her!" "Things that nobody else would be likely no, could possibly possess, please her," Zeffer replied. "She likes to show off her collection, and she wants everything in it to be unique." Sandru spread his arms and his smile. "Everything here is unique." "Father, you sound as though you're ready to sell the foundations if the price is right." Sandru waxed metaphysical. "All these things are just objects in the end. Yes? Just stone and wood and thread and paint. Other things will be made in time, to replace them." "But surely there's some sacred value in the objects here?" The Father gave a little shrug. "In the Chapel, upstairs, yes. I would not want to sell you, let us say, the altar." He made a smile, as though to say that under the right circumstances even that would have its price. "But everything else in the Fortress was made for a secular purpose. For the pleasure of dukes and their ladies. And as nobody sees it now... except a few travelers such as yourselves, passing through... I don't see why the Order shouldn't be rid of it all. If there's sufficient profit to be made it can be distributed amongst the poor." "There are certainly plenty of people in need of help," Zeffer said. He had been appalled at the primitive conditions in which many of the people in the locality lived. The villages were little more than gatherings of shacks, the rocky earth the farmers tilled all but fruitless. And on all sides, the mountains the Bucegi range to the east, to the west the Fagaras Mountains their bare lower slopes as gray as the earth, their heights dusted with snow. God knew what the winters were like in this place: when even the dirt turned hard as stone, and the little river froze, and the walls of the shacks could not keep out the wind whistling down from the mountain heights. The day they'd arrived, Katya had taken Willem to the cemetery, so that she could show him where her grandparents were buried. There he'd had proof aplenty of the conditions in which her relatives lived and died. It was not the resting places of the old that had moved Willem; it was the endless rows of tiny crosses that marked the graves of infants: babies lost to pneumonia, malnutrition and simple frailty. The grief that was represented by these hundreds of graves had moved him deeply: the pain of mothers, the unshed tears of fathers and grandfathers. It was nothing he had remotely expected, and it had made him sick with sorrow. For her part, Katya had seemed untouched by the sight, talking only of her memories of her grandparents and their eccentricities. But then this was the world in which she'd been raised; it wasn't so surprising, perhaps, that she took all this suffering for granted. Hadn't she once told him she'd had fourteen brothers and sisters, and only six of them were left living? Perhaps the other eight had been lain to rest in the very cemetery where they'd walked together. And certainly it would not be uncommon for Katya to look coldly on the

What would he say, the altar." He made a smile, as though to say that under the right circumstances even that would have its price. "But everything else in the Fortress was made for a secular purpose. For the pleasure of dukes and their ladies. And as nobody sees it now... except a few travelers such as yourselves, passing through... I don't see why the Order shouldn't be rid of it all. If there's sufficient profit to be made it can be distributed amongst the poor." "There are certainly plenty of people in need of help," Zeffer said. He had been appalled at the primitive conditions in which many of the people in the locality lived. The villages were little more than gatherings of shacks, the rocky earth the farmers tilled all but fruitless. And on all sides, the mountains the Bucegi range to the east, to the west the Fagaras Mountains their bare lower slopes as gray as the earth, their heights dusted with snow. God knew what the winters were like in this place: when even the dirt turned hard as stone, and the little river froze, and the walls of the shacks could not keep out the wind whistling down from the mountain heights. The day they'd arrived, Katya had taken Willem to the cemetery, so that she could show him where her grandparents were buried. There he'd had proof aplenty of the conditions in which her relatives lived and died. It was not the resting places of the old that had moved Willem; it was the endless rows of tiny crosses that marked the graves of infants: babies lost to pneumonia, malnutrition and simple frailty. The grief that was represented by these hundreds of graves had moved him deeply: the pain of mothers, the unshed tears of fathers and grandfathers. It was nothing he had remotely expected, and it had made him sick with sorrow. For her part, Katya had seemed untouched by the sight, talking only of her memories of her grandparents and their eccentricities. But then this was the world in which she'd been raised; it wasn't so surprising, perhaps, that she took all this suffering for granted. Hadn't she once told him she'd had fourteen brothers and sisters, and only six of them were left living? Perhaps the other eight had been lain to rest in the very cemetery where they'd walked together. And certainly it would not be uncommon for Katya to look coldly on the
who'd grown tired of Broadway's petty disloyalties and piddling profits, and were looking for a new place to put their talents and their investments—

"Does anything catch your eye?" Sandru asked him eventually. "Not really, Father," Zeffer replied, quite honestly. "I can get carpets as fine as these in America. I don't need to come out into the wilds of Romania to find work like this." Sandru nodded. "Yes, of course," he said. He looked a little defeated. Zeffer took the opportunity to glance at his watch. "Perhaps I should be getting back to Katya," he said. In fact, the prospect of returning to the village and sitting in the little house where Katya had been born, there to be plied with thick coffee and sickeningly sweet cake, while Katya's relatives came by to stare at (and touch, as if in disbelief) their American visitors, did not enthrall him. Interestingly, Katya had shown none of this quality to Father Sandru the previous day. In fact, it was almost as though she'd been playing a part: the role of a rather bland God-fearing girl in the presence of a beloved priest. Her gaze had been respectfully downcast much of the time, her voice softer than usual, her vocabulary which often tended to the salty sweet and compliant. Zeffer had found the performance almost comical, it was so exaggerated; but the Father had apparently been completely taken in by it. At one point he'd put his hand under Katya's chin to raise her face, telling her there was no reason to be shy. Shy! Zeffer had thought. If only Sandru knew what this so-called shy woman was capable of! The parties she'd master-minded up in her Canyon the place gossip-columnists had dubbed Coldheart Canyon; the excesses she'd choreographed behind the walls of her compound; the sheer filth she was capable of inventing when the mood took her. If the mask she'd been wearing had slipped for a heartbeat, and the poor, deluded Father Sandru had glimpsed the facts of the matter, he would have locked himself in a cell and sealed the door with prayers and holy water to keep her out. But Katya was too good an actress to let him see the truth. Perhaps in one sense, Katya Lupi's whole life had now become a performance. When she appeared on screen she played the role of simpering, abused orphans half her age, and large portions of the audience seemed to believe that this was reality. Meanwhile, every weekend or so, out of sight of the people who thought she was moral perfection, she threw the sort of parties for the other idols of Hollywood the vamps and the clowns and the adventurers which would have horrified her fans had they known what was going on. Which Katya Lupi was the real one? The weeping child who was the idol of millions, or the Scarlet Woman who was the Mistress of Coldheart Canyon? The orphan of the storm or the dope-fiend in her lair? Neither? Both? Zeffer turned these thoughts over as Sandru took him from room to room, showing him tables and chairs, carpets and paintings; even mantelpieces. "While Katya's relatives came by to stare at (and touch, as if in disbelief) their American visitors, did not enthrall him."

"It's mysterious," the priest said. "It is sad, I think, and human. You see, Duke Goga the man who built this

"What, the camera fell, could the public be far behind? He'd inquired as to the girl's name. She was one Katya Lubescu from the village of Ravbac. He approached her; spoke to her; told her, over a meal of cabbage rolls and cheese, what he was thinking. She was curiously sanguine about his whole proposal; practically indifferent. Yes, she conceded, it sounded interesting, but she wasn't sure if she would ever want to leave Romania. If she went too far from home, she would miss her family. A year or two later, when her career had begun to take off in America she no longer Katya Lubescu by then but Katya Lupi, and Willem her manager they'd revisited this very conversation, and Zeffer had reminded her how uninterested she'd seemed in his grand plan. Her coolness had all been an illusion, she'd confessed; a way in part to keep herself from seeming too gauche in his eyes, and in part a way to prevent her hopes getting too high. But that was only part of the answer. There was also a sense in which the indifference she'd demonstrated that first day they'd met (and more recently in the cemetery) was a real part of her nature; bred into her, perhaps, by a bloodline that had suffered so much loss and anguish over the generations that nothing was allowed to impress itself too severely: neither great happiness nor great sadness. She was, by her own design, a creature who held her extremes in reserve, providing glimpses only for public consumption. It was these glimpses that the audience in the square had come to witness night after night. And it was this same power she would unleash when she appeared before the cinematographic camera.

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I think there's more comfort to be had from seeing beautiful women on the cinema screen than in any prayer I will sometimes stop them crying. But for the rest of us? Are there really any words that help? I don't know of any.

children can be comforted, sometimes, if it's dark and they're afraid. You can tell them you're with them; and that Zeffer was intrigued now. "Tell me then," he said to Sandru. "I want to know what went on in this place." "Believe me please when I tell you I would not know where to begin," the good man replied. "I do not have the words." "Truly?" "Truly." Zeffer studied him with new eyes; with a kind of envy. Surely it was a blessed state, to be unable to find words for the terribleness of certain deeds. To be mute when it came to atrocity, instead of gabbily familiar with it. He found his curiosity similarly muted. It seemed distasteful to press the man to say more than he expressed himself capable of saying. "Let's change the subject. Show me something utterly out of the ordinary," Zeffer said. "Then I'll be satisfied." Sandru put on a smile, but it wasn't convincing. "It isn't much," he said. "Oh sometimes you find beauty in the strangest places," Zeffer said, and as he spoke the little face of Katya Lupescu came into his mind's eye; pale in a blue twilight.

TWO Sandru led the way down the passageway to another door, this one rather smaller than the oak door they'd come through to get to this level. Out came his keys. He unlocked the door, and to Zeffer's surprise he and the priest were presented with another flight of steps, taking them yet deeper into the Fortress. "Are you ready?" the Father asked. "Absolutely," Zeffer said. Down they went. The stairs were steep, the air becoming noticeably more frigid as they descended. Father Sandru said nothing as they went; he glanced back over his shoulder two or three times, to be sure that he still had Zeffer on his heels, but the expression on his face was far from happy, as though he rather regretted making the decision to bring Zeffer here, and would have turned on his heel and headed back up to the relative comfort of the floor above at the least invitation. At the bottom of the stairs he stopped, and rubbed his hands together vigorously. "I think before we proceed any further we should take a glass of something to warm us," he said. "What do you say?" "I wouldn't say no," Zeffer said. The Father went to a small cubby-hole in the wall a few yards from the bottom of the stairs, from which he brought a bottle of spirits and two glasses. Zeffer didn't remark on the liquor's proximity; nor could he blame the brothers for needing a glass of brandy to fortify them when they came down here. Though the lower level was supplied with electricity (there were 19 lengths of electric lamps looped along the walls of the corridor) the light did nothing to warm the air nor comfort the spirit. Father Sandru handed Zeffer a glass, and took the cork out of the bottle. The pop echoed off the naked stone of walls and floor. He poured Zeffer a healthy measure of the liquor, and then an even healthier measure for himself, which he had downed before Zeffer had got his own glass to his lips. "When I first came here," the Father said, refilling his glass, "we used to brew our own brandy, from plums we grew on our own trees. "But not now?" "No," the Father said, plainly saddened at the fact that they were no longer producers of liquor. "The earth is not good any longer, so the plums never ripen properly. They remain small and sour. The brandy made from such fruit is bitter, and nobody wants to drink it. Even I will not drink it, so you can judge for yourself how bad it must be!" He laughed at his self-deprecation, and used the laughter as a cue to fill his glass up again. "Drink," he said to Zeffer, tapping his glass. The liquor's proximity; nor could he blame the brothers for needing a glass of brandy to fortify them when they came down here. Though the lower level was supplied with electricity (there were 19 lengths of electric lamps looped along the walls of the corridor) the light did nothing to warm the air nor comfort the spirit. 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The Father's mood was noticeably better now, and his tone chattering. He put the glasses and the bottle back in the hole in the wall, and then led the way down the narrow corridor, talking as he went. "When the Order came through to get to this level. Out came his keys. He unlocked the door, and to Zeffer's surprise he and the priest were presented with another flight of steps, taking them yet deeper into the Fortress. "Are you ready?" the Father asked. "Absolutely," Zeffer said. Down they went. The stairs were steep, the air becoming noticeably more frigid as they descended. Father Sandru said nothing as they went; he glanced back over his shoulder two or three times, to be sure that he still had Zeffer on his heels, but the expression on his face was far from happy, as though he rather regretted making the decision to bring Zeffer here, and would have turned on his heel and headed back up to the relative comfort of the floor above at the least invitation. 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He put the glasses and the bottle back in the hole in the wall, and then led the way down the narrow corridor, talking as he went. "When the Order first came to the Fortress, there were plans to found a hospital here. You see, there are no hospitals within a hundred and twenty miles of here. It would be very practical. But this is not a place for the sick. And certainly not the dying." "So, no hospital?" "Well, we made preparations. You saw yesterday one of the wards. You should have another before we go on." And he filled Zeffer's glass without waiting for a reply. "We're a long way below ground here, and it gets hellishly cold..." Glasses were filled, and emptied. The Father's mood was noticeably better now, and his tone chattering. He put the glasses and the bottle back in the hole in the wall, and then led the way down the narrow corridor, talking as he went. "When the Order first came to the Fortress, there were plans to found a hospital here. 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You saw yesterday one of the wards." Zeffer remembered. He'd glanced through an open door and there'd been two rows of iron beds, with bare mattresses. "I thought it was a dormitory for the brothers." "No. We each have our own cells. There are only eleven of us, so we can each have a place in which to meditate and pray..." He offered Zeffer a glance, accompanied by a small smile. "And drink." "I can't imagine it's a very satisfying life," Zeffer said. "Satisfying?" The idea was obviously a little confounding to Sandru. "Meaning what?" "Oh, just that you don't get to work in the community. You can't help people." They had come to the end of the passageway, and Sandru sorted through his collection of keys in order to open the third and final door. "Who can truly be helped?" he said, his face turned down to the labor of sorting. "I suppose perhaps children can be comforted, sometimes, if it's dark and they're afraid. You can tell them you're with them; and that will sometimes stop them crying. But for the rest of us? Are there really any words that help? I don't know of any." He had found the right key, and now slipped it noisily into the antiquated lock. As he did so, he glanced up at Zeffer. "I think there's more comfort to be had from seeing beautiful women on the cinema screen than in any prayer I
Sandru pushed the door open. The room was in darkness, but despite that fact there was a warmth in the air; at least in contrast to the chilly air of the passageway. Perhaps the difference was no more than two or three degrees, but it felt significant. "Will you wait here a moment?" Sandru said. "I'll just bring a light." Zeffer stayed where he was, staring into the darkness, enjoying the slight rise in temperature. There was enough illumination spilling from the passageway behind him to light the threshold. There, carved into stone beneath his feet, was a curious inscription: Quamquam in fundis inferiorum sumus, oculos angelorum tenebimus. He didn't linger to puzzle over this for more than a few seconds, but instead let his eyes drift up and into the room itself. The chamber before him was large, it seemed; and unlike the rest of the rooms and corridors, which were simply constructed, far more elaborate. Could he make out pillars, supporting several small vaults? He thought so. There were chairs and tables within a few yards of where he stood, and what appeared to be lamps or the like heaped on top of them. The confusion inside was explained a moment later, when the Father returned with one of the bare bulbs, attached to a length of electric cord. "We use this as a storeroom," he said. "Many of the items we found in the Fortress when we arrived we put down here, just to get them out of the way." He lifted the light to give Zeffer a better view. Zeffer's estimate of the size of the place, and of the complexity of its construction, had been conservative, it now turned out. The chamber was fully thirty-five feet long; and almost as broad, the ceiling (which was indeed divided into eight elaborately-vaulted sections, divided by pillars) higher than the passageway by six feet or more. The floor was littered with furniture and crates; the place plainly filled by hands that had little or no respect for the objects they were moving; wishing only to put them quickly out of sight. It occurred to Zeffer that if indeed there were treasures here the chances of finding them or indeed of their being in reasonable condition when discovered were remote. Still, the Father had brought him this far at no little inconvenience to himself; it would be discourteous to now show no interest in what the chamber contained. "Did you have a part in moving all of this?" he asked Sandru, more out of a need to fill the silence between them than because he was genuinely curious. "Yes, I did," the Father replied. "Thirty-two years ago. I was a much younger man. But it was still a back-breaking labor. They built things big here. I remember thinking that maybe the stories were right..." "Stories about what?" "Oh...nonsense. About this furniture having been built for the retinue of the Devil's wife." "The Devil's wife." "Lilith, or Lilitu. Sometimes called Queen of Zemargad. Don't ask me why." "This is the same woman Katya spoke about?" Sandru nodded. "That's why the locals don't have much hope for the sick if they stay here. They think Lilith's curse is on the place. As I say: nonsense." Whether it was nonsense or not, the story lent some flavor to this banal adventure. "May I look more closely?" Zeffer asked. "That's what we're here for," Father Sandru replied. "I hope there's something that catches your eye, for your sake. All these stairs and doors. I'd forgotten how far down it was..." "I'm sorry to have made this so burdensome," Zeffer said, quite sincerely. "If I'd known you were going to go to so much trouble I wouldn't have..." "No, no," Sandru said. "It's not a trouble to me. I only thought there might be an item here that pleased you. But now I'm down here I doubt it. To be truthful I didn't have to take all this trash up the mountain and thrown it in the deepest gorge we could find." "Why didn't you do just that?" "It wasn't my choice. I was just a young priest at the time. I did as I was told. I moved tables and chairs and tapestries, and I kept my counsel. Our leader then was Father Nicholas, who was very clear on the best thing to be done—the safest thing for our souls—and would not be moved on the subject. So we did as we were told. Father Nicholas, by the way, had the foulest temper of any man I ever knew. We all lived in fear of him." Zeffer moved into the room, talking as he went: "May I say something that I hope won't offend you?" "I'm not easily offended, don't worry." "Well...it's just that the more I hear about your Order, the less like priests you seem to be. Father Nicholas's temper and the brothers all familiar with Theda Bara. And then the brandy." "Ah, the sins of the flesh," Father Sandru said. "We do seem to have more than our share, don't we?" "I have offended you." "No. You've simply seen the truth. And how can a man of God be justly offended by that? What you've observed is no coincidence. We are all...how shall I put this?...men who have more than our share of flaws. Some of us were never trusted with a flock. Others, like Father Nicholas, were. But the arrangement was never deemed satisfactory." "His temper?" "I believe he threw a Bible at one of the parishioners who was sleeping through the good Father's sermon." Zeffer chuckled; but his laughter was silenced a moment later. "It killed the man." "Killed who?" "His temper?" "I believe he threw a Bible. Surely not." "Well, that's how the rumor went. Father Nicholas has been dead twenty years, so there's no way to prove it or disprove it. Let's hope it isn't true, and if it is, hope he's at peace with it now. The fact is, I'm glad I was never trusted with a parish. With a flock to tend. I couldn't have done much for them." "Why not?" Zeffer asked, a little impatient with Sandru's melancholy now. "Do you have difficulty finding God in a place like this?" "To be honest Mr. Zeffer, with every week that passes I almost want to say with every hour I find it harder to see a sign of God anywhere. It would not be unreasonable, I think, to ask Him to show himself in beauty. In the face of your lady-companion, perhaps...?" Katya's face as proof of God's presence? It was
an unlikely piece of metaphysics, Zeffer thought. "I apologize," Sandru said. "You didn't come here to hear me talk about my lack of faith." "I don't mind." "The brandy makes me maudlin." "Shall I take a look then?" Zeffer suggested. "At whatever's in here?" "Yes, why don't we?" Sandru replied. "I wish I could give you some kind of guidance, but..." He shrugged; his favorite gesture. "Why don't you start looking, and I'll go back and get us something more to drink?" "Nothing more for me," Zeffer replied. "Well, then for me," Sandru said. "I'll only be a moment. If you need me, just call. I'll hear you."

Zeffer took a moment, when the man was gone, to close his eyes and let his thoughts grow a little more orderly. Though Sandru spoke slowly enough, there was something mildly chaotic about his thought processes. One minute he was talking about furniture, the next about the mad Duke and his hunter's habits, the next about the fact that they couldn't make a hospital here because the Devil's wife had cursed the place. When he opened his eyes his gaze moved back and forth over the furniture and the boxes without lingering on anything in particular. The bare bulbs were stark, of course, and their lights far from flattering, but even taking that fact into account there was nothing in the room that caught Zeffer's eye. There were some finely-wrought things, no question; but nothing extraordinary. And then, as he stood there, waiting for Sandru to return, his gaze moved beyond the objects that filled the chamber, and came to rest instead on the walls beyond. The chamber was not, he saw, made of bare stone. It was covered with tile. In every sense, this was an understatement, for these were no ordinary tiles. Even by so ungenerous a light as the bare bulbs threw upon them, and viewed by Zeffer's weary eyes, it was clear they were of incredible sophistication and beauty. He didn't wait for Father Sandru to return; rather, he began to push through the piles of furniture towards the designs that covered the walls. They covered the floor, too, saw, and ceiling. In fact, the chamber was a single masterpiece of tile; every single inch of it decorated. In all his years of traveling and collecting he'd never seen anything quite like this. Careless of the dirt and dust laden webs which covered every surface, he pushed on through until he reached the nearest wall. It was filthy, of course, but he pulled a large silk handkerchief out of his pocket, and used it to scrub away some of the filth on the tile. It had been plain even from a distance that the tiles were elaborately designed, but now, as he cleared a swathe across four or five, he realized that this was not an abstract pattern but a representation. There was part of a tree there, on one of the tiles, and on another, adjacent to it, a man on a white horse. The detail was astonishing. The horse was so finely painted, it looked about ready to prance off around the room. "It's a hunt." Sandru's voice startled him; Willem jerked back from the wall, so suddenly that it was as though he'd had his face in a vacuum, and was pulling it free. He felt a drop of moisture plucked from the rim of his eye; saw it flying towards the cleaned tile, defying gravity as it broke on the flank of the painted horse. It was a strange moment; an illusion surely. It took him a little time to shake off the oddness of it. When he looked round at Sandru, the man was slightly out of focus. He stared at the Father's shape until his eyes corrected the problem. When they did he saw that Sandru had the brandy bottle back in his hand. Apparently its contents had been more potent than Zeffer had thought. The alcohol, along with the intensity of his stare, had left him feeling strangely dislocated; as though the world he'd been looking at the painted man on his painted horse, riding past a painted tree was more real than the old priest standing there in the doorway. "A hunt?" he asked at last. "What kind of hunt?" "Oh, every kind," Sandru replied. "Pigs, dragons, women." "Women?" Sandru laughed. "Yes, women," he said, pointing towards a piece of the wall some yards deeper into the chamber. "Go look," he said. "You'll find the whole thing is filled with obscenities. The men who painted this place must have had some strange dreams, let me tell you, if this is what they saw." Zeffer pushed aside a small table, and then pressed himself between the wall and a much larger piece of furniture, which looked like a wooden catafalque, too large to move. Obliged to slide along the wall, his jacket did the job his handkerchief had done moments before. Dust rose up in his face. "Where now?" he asked the Father when he'd got to the other side of the catafalque. "A little further," Sandru replied, uncorking the brandy and shamelessly taking a swig from the bottle. "I need some more light back here," Zeffer said. Reluctantly, Sandru went to pick up the lamp. It was hot now. He rummaged in one of the nearby boxes to find something to protect his palm, found a length of cloth and wrapped it around the base of the lamp. Then he tugged on the light-cord, to give himself some more play, and made his way through the confusion of stuff in the room, to where Zeffer was standing. The closer Sandru came with the light the more Zeffer could make out of the painting on the tiles. There was a vast panorama spread to left and right of him; and up above his head; and down to the ground, spreading beneath his feet. Though the walls were so filthy that in places the design was entirely obliterated, and in other places there were large cracks in the tiles, the image had an extraordinary reality all of its own. "Closer," Zeffer said to Sandru, sacrificing the arm of his fur coat to clean a great portion of tiled wall in front of him. Each tile was about six inches square, perhaps a little smaller, and set close to one another with a minimum of grouting, so as to preserve the continuity of the picture. Despite the sickly right off the bulb, its luminescence still showed that the color of the image had not been diminished by time. The beauty of the renderings was perfectly evident. There were a dozen kinds of green in the trees, and more, sweeter hues in the growth between them. Beneath the canopy
there were burnt umbers and siennas and sepias in the trunks and branches, skillfully highlighted to lend the impression that light was falling through the foliage and catching the bark. Not all the tiles were rendered with the same expertise, he saw. Some of the tiles were the work of highly sophisticated artists; some the work of journeyman; some especially those that were devoted to areas of pure foliage the handiwork of apprentices, working on their craft by filling in areas that their masters neither had the time nor perhaps the interest to address. But none of this spoiled the power of the overall vision. In fact the discontinuity of styles created a splendid energy in the piece. Portions of the world were in focus, other parts were barely coherent; the abstract and the representational sitting side by side on the wall, all part of one enormous story. And what was that story? Plainly, given the kind of quarry Sandru had listed, this was more than simply a hunt: it smacked of something far more ambitious. But what? He peered at the tiles, his nose a few inches from the wall, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. "I looked at the whole room, before we put all the furniture in here," Sandru said. "It's a view, from the Fortress Tower." "But not realistic?" "It depends what you mean by realistic," Sandru said. "If you look over the other side" he pointed across the room "you can see the delta of the Danube." Zeffer could just make out the body of water, glittering in the gloom: and closer by a mass of swampy land, with dozens of inlets winding through it, on their way to the sea. "And there!" Sandru went on, "to the left" again, Zeffer followed Sandru's finger "at the corner of the room, that rock" "I see it." The rock was tall, rising out of the ocean of trees like a tower, shrubs springing from its flank. "That's called the May Rock," Sandru said. "The villagers dance there, on the first six nights of May. Couples would stay there overnight, and try to make children. It's said the women always became pregnant if they stayed with their men on May Rock." "So it exists? In the world, I mean. Out there." "Yes, it's right outside the Fortress." "And so all those other details? The delta" "Is nine miles away, in that direction." Sandru pointed at the wall upon which the Danube's delta was painted. Zeffer smiled as he grasped what the artists had achieved here. Down in the depths of the Fortress, at its lowest point, they had recreated in tile and paint what could be seen from its pinnacle. And with that realization came sense of the inscription he'd read on the threshold. Though we are in the bowels of Hell, we shall have the eyes of Angels. This room was the bowels of Hell. But the tile-masters and their artist masters, wherever they'd been, had created an experience that gave the occupants of this dungeon the eyes of angels. A paradoxical ambition, when all you had to do was climb the stairs and see all this from the top of the tower. But artists were often driven by such ambition; a need perhaps, to prove that it could even be done. "Somebody worked very hard to create all this," Zeffer said. "Oh indeed. It's an impressive achievement." "But you hide it away," Zeffer said, not comprehending the way the room had been treated. "You fill the place with old furniture and let it get filthy." "Who could we show it to?" the Father replied. "It's too disgusting." "I see nothing" he was about to say disgusting, when his eye alighted on a part of tile-work that he'd cleaned with his arm but had not closely studied. In a large grove a round stadium had been set up, with seating made of wood. The perspective was off (and the solution to the perspective changed subtly from tile to tile, as various hands had contributed their piece of the puzzle. There were perhaps twenty tiles that had some portion of the stadium represented upon them; the work of perhaps five artists). The steep benches were filled with people, their bustle evoked with quick, contentious strokes. Some people seemed to be standing; some sitting. Two more groups of spectators were approaching the stadium from the outside, though there was no room for them inside. But what drew Zeffer's eye, and made him realize that the Father had been right to wonder aloud who he might show this masterpiece to, was the event these spectators had assembled to witness. It was an arena of sexual sport. Several performances were going on at the same time, all unapologetically obscene. In one section of the arena a naked woman was being held down while a creature twice her size, his body bestial, his erection monstrous, was being raped back by four men who appeared to be controlling his approach to the woman. In another quarter, a man had been stripped of his skin by three naked women. A fourth straddled him as he lay on the ground in his own blood. The other three wore pieces of his skin. One had on his whole face and shoulders, her breasts sticking out from beneath the ragged hood. Another sat on the ground, wearing his arms and pulling on the skin of his legs like waders. The third, the queen of this quartet, was wearing what was presumably the piece de resistance, the flesh which the unhappy owner had worn from mid breast-bone to mid-thigh. She was cavorting in this garish costume like a dancer and, by some magic known only to the maker of the mystery, the usurped skin still boasted a full erection. "Good God..." Zeffer said. "I told you," Sandru said, just a little smugly. "And that's the least of it, believe me." "The least of it?" "The more you look, the more you see." "Anywhere in particular?" "Go over to the Wild Wood. Look amongst the trees." Zeffer moved along the wall, studying the tiles as he went. At first he couldn't make out anything controversial, but Sandru had some useful advice. "Step away a foot or so." In his fascination with the details of the stadium, Zeffer had come too close to the wall to see the wood for the trees. Now he stepped back and to his astonishment saw that the thicket around the arena was alive with figures, all of which were in some form or other monstrous; and all unequivocally sexual. Erections were thrust between the trees like plum-headed branches, women dangled from overhead with their legs spread (a flock of birds, thirty or more, swooped out of the sex of one;
another was menstruating light, which was splashing on the ground below the tree. Snakes came out of the scarlet pool, in bright profusion. "Is it like this all over?" Zeffer said, his astonishment unfeigned. All over. There are thirty-three thousand, two hundred and sixty-eight tiles, and there is obscene matter on two thousand, seven hundred and ninety-eight of them. "You've obviously made a study," Zeffer observed. "Not I. An Englishman who worked with Father Nicholas did the counting. For some reason the numbers remained in my head. I think it's old age. Things you want to remember, you can't. And things that don't mean anything stick in your head like a knife. "That's not a pretty image, with respect." "With respect, there's nothing pretty about the way I feel," Sandru replied. "I feel old to my marrow. On a good day I can barely get up in the morning. On a bad day, I just wish I were dead." "Lord." Sandru shrugged. "That's what living in this place does to you after a while. Everything drains out of you somehow." Zeffer was only half-listening. He was exhilarated by what he saw, and he had no patience with Sandru's melancholy; his thoughts were with the walls, and the pictures on the walls. Are there records documenting how this was created? It is a masterpiece, in its way. "One of a kind," Sandru said. "Absolutely one of a kind." "To answer your question, no, there are no records. It's assumed that it was funded by Duke Goga, who had lately returned from the Crusades with a large amount of booty, claimed from the infidel in the name of Christ." "But to build a room like this with money you'd made on the Crusades!" Zeffer said incredulously. "I agree. It seems like an unlikely thing to do in the name of God. Of course none of this is proved. There are some people who will tell you that Goga went missing on one of his hunts, and it wasn't him who built this place at all." "Who then?" "Lilith, the Devil's wife," the Father said, dropping his voice to a whisper. "Which would make this the Devil's Country, no?" "Has anybody tried to analyze the work?" "Oh yes. The Englishman I spoke of, George Soames, claimed he had discovered evidence of twenty-two different styles amongst the designs. But that was just the painters. Then there were the men who actually made the tiles. Fired them. Sorted out the good from the bad. Prepared the paint. Cleaned the brushes. And there must have been some system to align everything." "The rows of tiles?" "I was thinking more of the alignment of interior with the exterior." "Perhaps they built the room first." "No. The Fortress is two-and-a-half centuries older than this room. "My God, so to get the alignment so perfect?" "Is quite miraculous. Soames found fifty-nine geographical markers certain stones, trees, the spire of the old abbey in Darscus which are visible from the tower and are also painted on the wall. He calculated that all fifty-nine were correctly aligned, within half a degree of accuracy." "Somebody was obsessive." "Or else, divinely inspired." "You believe that?" "Why not?" Zeffer glanced back at the arena on the wall behind him, with all its libidinous excesses. "Does that look like the kind of work that somebody would do in the name of God?" As I said, "Sandru replied, "I no longer know where God is and where He isn't." There was a long silence, during which Zeffer continued to survey the walls. Finally he said: "How much do you want for it?" "How much do I want for what?" "For the room?" Sandru barked out a laugh. "I mean it," Zeffer said. "How much do you want for it?" "It's a room, Mr. Zeffer," Sandru said. "You can't buy a room." "Then it's not for sale?" "That's not my point. Just tell me: is it for sale or not?" Again, laughter. But this time there was less humor; more bemusement. "I don't see that it's worth talking about," Sandru said, putting the brandy bottle to his lips and drinking. "Let's say a hundred thousand dollars. What would that be in lei? What's the lei worth right now? A hundred and thirty-two-and-a-half to the dollar?" If you say so. "So that's what? Thirteen million, two hundred and fifty thousand lei." "You jest." "No." "Where would you find such money?" A pause followed. "If I may ask?" "Over the years, I've made some very lucrative investments on behalf of Katya. We own large parts of Los Angeles. Half a mile of Sunset Boulevard is in her name. Another half mile in mine." And you would sell all that to own this? A little piece of Sunset Boulevard for your glorious Hunt? Why not? "Because it's just a room covered with filthy tile." "So I have more money than sense. What does it matter to you? A hundred thousand dollars is a great deal of money." "Yes, it is." "So, do we have a deal or not?" "Mr. Zeffer, this is all too sudden. We're not talking about a chair here. This is part of the fabric of the Fortress. It has great historical significance. A minute ago it was just a room covered with filthy tile. "Filthy tile of great historical significance," Sandru said, allowing himself a little smile. Are you saying we can't find some terms that are mutually satisfying? Because if you are No, no, no. I'm not saying that. Perhaps we could eventually agree on a price, if we talked about it for a while. But how would you ever get it back to California? "That would be my problem. This is the twenties, Father. Anything's possible." And then what? Suppose you could get everything back to Hollywood? Another room, the same proportions. You have such a room? No. I'd build one. We have a house in the Hollywood Hills. I'd put it in as a surprise for Katya. "Without telling her?" "Well if I told her it wouldn't be a surprise." "I'm just astonished that she would allow you to do such a thing. A woman like that." "Like what?" The question caught Sandru off-balance. "Well...so..."Beautiful?" Yes. "I think our conversation's come full-circle, Father." Sandru conceded the point with a little nod, lifting the brandy bottle as he did so. So she's not as perfect as her face would suggest? he asked at last. "Not remotely. Thank God." "This place, with all its obscenities, would please her?" "Yes, I think it would. Why? Does that make you more open to the idea of selling it to me?" I don't know, "Sandru replied, frowning. "This whole conversation hasn't turned out the way I thought it
would. I expected you to come down here and maybe buy a table, or a tapestry. Instead you want to buy the walls!"
He shook his head again. "I was warned about you Americans," he added, his tone no longer amused. "What were you warned about?" "Oh, that you thought nothing was beyond your grasp. Or beyond your pocket." "So the money isn't enough." "The money, the money." He made an ugly sound in the back of his throat. "What does the money matter? You want to pay a hundred thousand dollars for it? Pay it. I'll never see a lei so why should I care what it costs you? You can steal it as far as I am concerned." "Let me understand you clearly. Are you agreeing to the sale?"
"Yes," Father Sandru said, his tone weary now, as though the whole subject had suddenly lost all trace of pleasure for him. "I'm agreeing." "Good. I'm delighted." Zeffer returned through the maze of furniture to the door, where the priest stood. He extended his hand. "It's been wonderful dealing with you, Father Sandru." Sandru looked down on the proffered hand, and then after a moment of study took it. His fingers were cold, his palm clammy. "Do you want to stay and look at what you've bought?" "No. I don't think so. I think we both need a little sun on our faces." Sandru said nothing to this; he just turned and led the way out along the corridor to the stairs. But the expression on his face, as he turned, was perfectly clear: there was no more pleasure to be found above as there was down here in the cold; nor prospect of any.

THREE There were ten thousand things Zeffer had not witnessed, or even glimpsed, in his brief visit to the vast, mysterious chambers in the Fortress's bowels; images haunting the tiles which he would not discern until the heroic labor of removing the masterwork from the walls and shipping it to California was complete. He was a literate man; better educated than most of his peers in the burgeoning city of Los Angeles, thanks to parents who had filled the house with books, even though there was often precious little food on the table. He knew his classics, and the mythologies from which the great books and plays of the ancients had been derived. In time he would discover dozens of images inspired by those same myths on the tiles. In one place women were depicted like the Maenads immortalized by Euripides; maddened souls in service of the god of ecstasies, Dionysus. They raced through the trees with bloody hands, leaving pieces of male flesh scattered in the grass. In another place, single-breasted Amazons strode, drawing their mighty bows back and letting fly storms of arrows. There were other images many, many others-that were not rooted in any recognizable mythology. In one spot, not far from the delta, huge fishes, which had sprouted legs covered with golden scales, came through the trees in solemn shoals, spitting fire. The trees ahead of them were aflame; burning birds rose up from the canopy. In the swamp, a small town stood on long limbs, its presence appearing to mark the position of some place that had existed there once but had been taken by time, or a prophecy of some settlement to come. The artists had taken liberties with the rendering, foreshortening the scene so that the occupants of the city were almost as big as their houses, and could be plainly seen. There were excesses here, too; perversities just as profound as anything the Wild Wood was hosting. Through one of the windows a man could be seen spread-eagled on a table, around which sat a number of guests, all watching a large worm enter him analy and then erupt from his open mouth. Another was the scene of a strange summoning, in which a host of black birds with human heads rose up from the ground, circling a girl-child who was either their invoker or their victim. In a third house a woman was squatting and shedding menstrual blood through a hole in the floor. Several men, smaller than the woman above by half, were swimming in the water below and undergoing some calamitous transformation, presumably brought on by the menses. Their heads had flowered into dark, monstrous shapes; demonic tails had sprouted from their backsides. As Father Sandru had warned (or was it boasted?) to Zeffer, there was no part of the landscape depicted there on the walls that was not haunted by some bizarre sight or other. Even the clouds (innocent enough, surely) shot rains of fire in one place, and evacuated skulls in another. Demons cavorted unchallenged over the open sky, like dancers possessed by some celestial music, while stars fell between them; others rose over the horizon, leering like emaciated fools. And in that same sky, as though to suggest that this was a world of perpetual twilight, teetering always on the edge of darkness and extinction, was a sun that was three-quarters eclipsed by an exquisitely rendered moon, the latter painted so cunningly it seemed to have real mass, real roundness, as it slid over the face of the day-star. In one place there was painted a line of crowned figures the kings and queens of Romania, back to ancient times painted marching into the ground. The noble line rotted as it proceeded into the earth, carrion birds alighting on the descending lineage, plucking out regal eyes and law-giving tongues. In another place a circle of witches rose in a spiral from a spot marked by standing-stones; their innocent victims, babies whose fat had been used to make the flying ointment in which they had slathered themselves, lay scattered between the stones like neglected dolls. And all through this world of monstrous hurts and occasional miracles, the Hunt. Many of the scenes were simply documents of the vigorous beauty of the chase; they looked as though they could have been painted from life. There was a pack of dogs, white and black and pie-bald (one bitch charmingly attending to her suckling pups); some being muzzled by peasants, others straining on their leashes as they were led away to join the great assembly of hunters. Elsewhere, the dogs could be seen accompanying the hunters. Where the Duke had chosen to kneel and pray, a white dog knelt beside him, his noble head bowed by the weight of shared devotion. In
another, the dogs were splashing in a river, attempting to catch the huge salmon outlined in the stylized blue waters. And in a third place, for no apparent reason but the playfulness of the artists, the role of dogs and men had been reversed. A long, beautiful decorated table had been set up in a clearing amongst the trees, and at it sat a number of finely-bred dogs, while at their booted feet naked men fought over scraps and bones. Closer examination showed the arrangement of figures to be even more anarchic than it first appeared, for there were thirteen dogs at the table, and in their center sat one dog with a halo perched between his pricked ears: a canine Last Supper. An informed observer, knowing the traditional positions of the Apostles, could have named them all. The writers of the Gospels were there in their accustomed seats; John sitting closest to his master, Judas sitting at the perimeter of the company, while Peter (a Saint Bernard) brooded at the other end, his furrowed brow suggesting he already knew he would betray his master three times before the long night was over. Elsewhere in the landscape, the dogs were painted at far crueler work. Tearing rabbits apart in one place, and ripping the flesh from a cornered stag in another. In a third place where the dogs had driven a number of naked men and women up a gorge, where they had encountered a group of hunters armed with spears and nets. The terrified couples clung to one another, but the netters and the spearmen knew their business. Men were separated from women and the men were run through with spears, the women all bundled up in the nets, heaped on carts, and carried away. The sexual servitude that awaited them was of a very particular kind. Reading the walls from left to right the viewer's eye found that in one valley the women were freed from the nets and strapped beneath the bodies of massive centaurs, their legs stretched around the flanks of the animals. The women's response to this terrible violation was something the artists had taken some trouble to detail. One was screaming in agony, her head thrown back, as blood ran from the place where she was being divided. Others appeared to be in ecstasy at this forced marriage, pressing their faces joyously to the necks of their deflowerers. But this part of the story did not finish there. If the ‘reader’, scanning these walls, had continued his enquiry, he would have found that some of the men had survived the massacre in the gorge, and returned, on a later sequence of tiles, to hunt the creatures that had their wives in sexual thrall. These were some of the most brilliantly painted sequences on the walls: the surviving lovers returning on horseback, so as to match their speed to that of the centaurs. Lassos circling in the air over their heads, they closed on the centaurs, who were slowed down by the very women they carried around to pleasure them. Several were brought down by ropes around the neck, others were speared in the throat or flank. The women they carried were not always lucky in these encounters. Though no doubt their rescuers intended to free them, it was often the case that they perished beneath the weight of their violators, as the dying centaurs rolled over, crushing them. Perhaps there was some moral here; some lesson about the vulnerability of the innocent women when two tribes of males were set against one another; but the artists seemed to take too much grisly pleasure in their depictions for this to be the case. Rather, it appeared to be done for the pleasure of the doing; of the imagining, and of the rendering. There was no moral from one end of this world to the other.

It would be possible to go on listing at great length the horrors and the spectacles of the scenes laid out on the tile: the fields of dancing demons, the fairy races, the succubi squatting on roofs, the holy fools draped in coats of cow-dung, the satyrs, the spirits of graveside, roadside and hearth-side; the weasel-kings and the bloated toads; and so on, and so on, behind every tree and on every cloud, sliding down every waterfall and lingering beneath every rock: a world haunted by the shapes of lust and animal lust and all that humanity called to its bosom in the long nights of its despair. Though Hollywood was presenting itself to the world as the very soul of the imagination, there was nothing going on before the cameras there (nor would there be, ever) that could compete with what the master tile-painters and their apprentices had created. It was, as Sandru has said, the Devil's Country.

Zeffer went to Brasov to hire men, at prices five or six times what he would have paid locally, because he wanted hands that could do the job with some finesse, and minds that could count to a higher number than their fingers. He devised the means by which the masterpiece could be removed himself. The tiles were meticulously numbered on the reverse sides and a huge legend made of the room by three cartographers he had also hired in the city, so that there would be a meticulous record of the way the design had been laid out; and an obsessive accounting of how the tiles were numbered, stacked and packed away; including a detailed description of which tiles were cracked or damaged before they were packed, which had been mislaid by the original tiler (there were a hundred and sixteen such tiles; most turned ninety or a hundred and eighty degrees by an artisan too tired, too bewildered or perhaps too
drunk to realize his error); all so that when the tiles were unpacked at the house in Coldheart Canyon there would be no difficulty reordering them into the original design. It was a long process; a total of eleven weeks were to pass before the crated tiles were finally transported from the Fortress. All the work had drawn much attention of course; from the brothers themselves, who knew what was going on because Father Sandru had told them, and from the villagers, who had only the vaguest of ideas of what all this was about. There were rumors flying around that the removal was being undertaken because the tiles had put the souls of the Fathers in spiritual jeopardy, but precise details of this jeopardy changed from account to account. The vast sum of money that was now in the possession of the Order did very little to transform the lives of the priests, apart from inspiring some of the most embittered exchanges in the history of the brotherhood. Several of the priests were of the opinion that the tiles should not have been sold (not because of their merit, but because it was not wise to loose such unholy images on the secular world). To this, Father Sandru—who was more often, and more publicly, drunk by the day—offered only a sneering dismissal. What does it matter?, he said to the complainers: they are only tiles, for God's sake. There were a good number of shaken heads by the way of response, and a very eloquent riposte from one of the older Fathers, who said that God had put the tiles into their protection, and it was cynical and careless of him to let them go. What damage might they not do, out there in the world, he said; what hurt to innocent souls? Sandru was unmoved by all this. There were no innocent souls in Hollywood, he had learned; nor was there any sin or excess painted in the tiles that the people of that city were not intimately familiar with. He spoke with an authority which he didn't in truth possess, but it sufficiently impressed the brothers—or at least a greater number of them—so that the nay-sayers were finally silenced. There was much debate about what should happen to the money. One faction, led by the older men, believed it had been acquired by dubious means, and the only uncorrupted way to dispose of it was to distribute it amongst the poor. Surprisingly, very few voices supported this solution; some part of the money might be given to the needy in the village, the priests agreed, but there were other causes that should be attended to. There was some lobbying for a complete removal of the Order to some other place than the Fortress; a more comfortable place, where they could find their way to God without the Devil's shadow falling across their path. It was Sandru who was the most eloquent advocate of their staying in the Fortress. His tongue well lubricated with wine, he explained that he felt no sense of regret that he'd sold the tiles; it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and he was glad he'd taken it. Now, he said, they should use the money to rejuvenate the place. Get the hospital up and running, as had always been the plan; see what they could do about refertilizing the land, so that the vineyard would prosper as they had in the old days. "Our path is perfectly dear!" he said to the brothers. "Whether our faith in the Lord is secure or not, we can heal here, and we can grow the grape, and pass our lives with purpose." He smiled as he spoke. That word—purpose—had not been on his lips for many years, and it gave him pleasure to speak it. But even as he spoke the smile started to die away, and the color shrank from his ruddy face. "I beg you to excuse me," he said, putting his hand to his belly, "I am sickened by too much brandy." With that he pulled out of his robes the bottle from which he had been drinking since early morning, and set it clumsily down on the table in front of him. Then he turned and stumbled out to get a breath of fresh air. Nobody went after him; he had no friends left in the Fortress. His old allies were too embarrassed by his excesses to publicly share his opinions; fearful that his behavior might reflect poorly on them, and keep them from advancement. So he was alone as he wandered giddily through the ruins of the dead vines. It was evening, and now that the summer was past, the air was beginning to get chilly. But the sky overhead was a perfect blue, and there was a new moon, its pallid crescent just clearing the mountains. Sandru tried to let the sight of the sky and moon calm him; have them placate the pain of his heart, give life back to his numbed fingers. But the trick was beyond them. He realized suddenly that this was not a spasm brought on by too much brandy. He was dying. The Brothers had medicines for weakness of the heart, he knew; it would not be the end of him if he got back to them quickly enough. He turned on his heel, attempting to voice a shout of alarm. But his panicked chest would provide no breath for him to cry for help. His legs began to fail him, and down he went, face first, into the dirt. He tasted the soil in his mouth, bitter and unappetizing. He spat it out; and with the last of his strength he pushed himself up out of the filth and let gravity roll him over. He could not move, but it didn't matter. The darkening sky overhead was spectacle enough. He lay there for six or seven shortening gasps, while a star, lonely in its solitude, brightened at his zenith. Then he let life go.

The Brothers did not find him until the middle of the night, by which time a frost had settled on the old vineyard, the first frost of that autumn. It glittered on the bulk of the dead Father; on his bulbous nose and in the knots of his beard. It had even inscribed its filigrees on his unblinking eyes.

FOUR There was no hospital established at the Fortress; then or ever. Nor was there any attempt to replant the vineyard, or make the grounds around the Fortress in any way flourish. With Father Sandru's passing (at the relatively tender age of sixty-two), what little enthusiasm there had been for change withered. The younger men
decided to leave the Fortress; three of them left the Order entirely and became members of the secular community. Of the three, one a young man by the name of Jan Valek took his own life less than a year later, leaving a long suicide note, a kind of epistle to his sometime brothers, in which he wrote of how he'd had a dream after the death of Father Sandru, in which "I met the Father in the vineyards, which were all burning. It was a terrible place to be. Black smoke was filling the sky, blotting out the sun. He said to me that this was Hell, this world, and there was only one way to escape it, and that was to die. His face was bright, even in the darkness. He said he wished he'd died earlier, instead of going on suffering in the world." I asked him if they allowed him to drink brandy wherever he was now. He said he had no need of brandy; his existence was happy; there was no need to conceal the pain with drinking. "Then I told him I still had a life to live in the world, whereas he had been an old man, with a weak heart. I was strong, I said, and there was a good chance I'd be alive for another thirty, maybe forty years, which was an agony to me, but what could I do? "So take your own life," he said to me. He made it sound so simple. 'Cut your throat. God understands.' I told him what I saw. "Fire, smoke, block earth." See? he said, 'Hell.' "I told him, though of course I was still dreaming. I was going to take his advice. I was going to go back to my room, find a sharp knife, and kill myself. But for some reason, as often happens in dreams, I didn't go home. I went into Bucharest. To the cinema where Brother Stefan used to bring me sometimes, to see films. We went inside. It was very dark. We found seats and Stefan had me sit down. Then the film began. And it was a film about some earthly paradise. It made me weep, it was so perfect, this place. The music, the way the people looked. Beautiful men and women, all so lovely it took my breath away to look at them. There was one young man in particular and it makes me ashamed to write this, but if I don't do it here, in my last confession, where will I do it? a young man with dark hair and light-filled eyes, who opened his arms to me. He was naked, on the screen, with open arms, inviting me into his embrace. I turned to Father Stefan in the darkness, and he said the very thing that was going through my mind. 'He wants to take you into his arms.' I started to deny it. But Stefan interrupted me and said: 'Look at him. Look at his face. It's flawless. Look at his body. It's perfect. And there between his legs I covered my face in shame, but Stefan pulled my hands from my face and told me not to be ashamed, just to look, and enjoy looking, 'God made all of this for our pleasure,' he said. 'Why would he give us such a hunger to look at nakedness unless he wanted us to take pleasure in it?' I asked Stefan how he knew it was God's work. Perhaps the Devil had made nakedness, I said, to tempt us and ensnare us. He laughed, and put his arm around me, and kissed me on the cheek as though I was just a little child. 'This isn't the Devil's work,' he said. 'This is your invitation to paradise.' Then he kissed me again, and I felt a warm wind blowing, as though it was spring in whatever country they had created on the screen. And the wind made me want to die with pleasure, because it smelled of a time I remembered from long ago. So now I have come back to my room. I have a knife. When I have finished writing this I will leave what I have written on the table, and I will go out into the field, and cut my wrists. I know we are taught that self-slaughter is a sin, and that the Lord does not wish us to harm ourselves, but if He does not wish me to end my life, why is this knife within reach of my hand, and why is my heart so much at peace?' His body was found about a hundred yards from the place where Sandru's frost-covered body had been discovered. Coming so soon upon the death of the old priest, the death of Jan Valek undid the Brotherhood completely. Orders came from Bucharest, and the Brotherhood was disbanded. There was no need to guard the Fortress any longer, the Archbishop said. The brothers would be more useful to the Church if they worked with the sick and the dying, to offer the Lord's comfort where it was most needed. Within a week, the Order of St. Teodor had left the Fortress Goga.

There were those among the villagers who felt that the Fortress had invited its abandonment, and began its own process of self-slaughter. Superstition, no doubt; but it was certainly strange that after five centuries of life, during which span it had remained strong, a quick process of disintegration should begin as soon as the community of caretakers departed. True, the winter immediately following was particularly severe. But there had been heavier snows on the roofs and they had not bowed beneath the weight; there had been stronger winds through the casements and they'd not broken open and smashed, there had been more persistent floodings of the lower floors, and the doors had not been carried off on their rotted hinges. By the time the spring came round which was late April that year the Fortress had effectively become uninhabitable. It was as though its soul had gone out of it, and now all it wanted was to allow the seasons to take their steady toll. They were guileless collaborators. The summer was as violently hot as the winter had been bitter, and it bred all manner of destroyers in the fabric of the building. Worm and fly and wasp contributed to the baking heat of the sun with their burrowings and layings and nestings. Beams that had taken ten men to lift them became dusty, hollow things, as delicate as the bones of immense birds. Unable to support their own weight, they collapsed upon themselves, bringing down entire floors as they fell. By the time September arrived, the Fortress was open to the elements. The ward where the brothers had optimistically laid out rows of beds now had a ceiling of cloud. When the first rains of autumn came the mattresses were soaked;
fungus and mildew sprouted where the sick would have lain. The place stank of rot from end to end. And finally, somewhere in the middle of the second winter in its empty state, the floorboards cracked and opened up, and the lowest level of the Fortress, the level where Father Sandru had brought Zeffer to show him the tiled chamber, became available to sky and storm. If anyone had ventured into the Fortress that winter they would have witnessed the most delicate of spectacles. Through the eight vaults above the once-tiled room, which were now all cracked like eggs, snow came spiraling down. It fell into a room denuded. The workmen Zeffer had hired to do the work of removing the tiles had first been obliged to empty the room of all the monks had left in there. Some of the furniture had subsequently been stolen, some broken up for firewood, and the rest, perhaps a quarter of the bounty, simply left to decay where it had been piled up. The snow, spiraling down, settled in little patches on the floor; patches which would not melt for the next four months, but only get wider and deeper as the winter's storms got worse, the snow heavier. Just before the thaw, in the middle of the following April, the weight of snow and ice finally brought the vaults down, in one calamitous descent. There was nobody there to witness it, nor anyone within earshot to hear it. The room which had contained the Hunt was buried in the debris of all the vaults, plaster and wood and stone filling the chamber to the middle of the walls. Nobody who visited the Fortress in subsequent years, and there were a few explorers who came there every summer, usually imagining they'd stumbled on something darkly marvelous, a Fortress, perhaps, belonging to Vlad the Impaler, whose legendary territories lay only a few hundred miles off to the west, in Transylvania; none of these visitors dug through the overgrown ruins with any great enthusiasm; certainly none ever asked themselves what function the half-buried room might have once served. Nor, should it be said, would they have been able to guess, even the cleverest of them. The mystery of the ruined chamber had been removed to another continent, where it was presently unfolding its dubious raptures for the delectation of a new and vulnerable audience. Men and women who, like the tiles, had in many cases lately left their homelands; and in their haste to be famous left behind them such talismans as hearth and altar might have offered by way of protection against the guileful Hunt.
PART TWO THE HEART-THROB

ONE There's a premiere in Los Angeles tonight, at Grauman's Chinese Theatre. The Chinese has been housing such events since 1923, but of course the crowds were much larger back then, tens of thousands of people, sometimes even hundreds of thousands, would block Hollywood Boulevard in their hunger to see the star of the moment. Tonight's event is nowhere near that scale. Though the studio publicists' will massage the numbers for tomorrow's Variety and Hollywood Reporter, claiming that a crowd of four thousand people waited in the chilly evening air for the appearance of the star of tonight's movie, Todd Pickett, the true numbers are in fact less than half that. Still, a third of the Boulevard is barricaded off, and there are a few cop cars in evidence, just to give the whole event more drama. As the limos approach the red carpet, and the ushers, who are dressed in the black leather costumes of the villains in the movie, step forward to open the doors a few 'screamers', paid and planted in the crowd by the studio publicity people to get a little excitement going, start to do their job, yelling even before the face of the limo's passenger has been seen. There's a large contingent of A-list names on tonight's guest-list, and plenty of faces that elicit screams as they appear. Cruise isn't here, but Nicole Kidman is; so is Schwarzenegger, who has a small role in the picture as the retiring Gallows, a vengeful, mythological character whom our hero, played by Todd Pickett, must either choose to embody when his time comes round, or choose to embody when his time comes round, or should he refuse to be pursued by the ghosts of several generations of former incarnations of the character, to persuade him otherwise. Sigourney Weaver plays the woman who has broken the curse of Gallows once before, to whom Pickett's character must go when the phantom pursuers are almost upon him. Her arrival at Grauman's is greeted by a genuine roar of approval from the fans, who are devoted to her. She waves, smiles, allows a barrage of photographs to be taken, but she doesn't go near the crowd. She's had experiences with overly-possessive fans before: she walks straight down the middle of the red carpet, where she's out of reach of their fingers. Still they shout, 'We love you Ripley!', which is the character she plays in the Alien movies, and with which she will be identified until the day she dies. She waves, even when they call the name Ripley, but her eyes never focus on anybody in the crowd for more than a moment. The next limo in the line contains the bright new star of Gallows, Suzie Hensell, named by this month's Vanity Fair one of the Ten Hottest Names in Hollywood. She is petite (though you'd never know it on the screen), blonde and giggly; she's shared a little marijuana with her boyfriend in the limo, and it was a bad move. She stumbles a little as she steps onto the red carpet, but the crowd has been prepped, thanks to several months of puff pieces and photo-spreads and in-depth interviews, to think of this woman as a full-blown star, even though they have yet to see more than a few frames of her acting ability from the trailer for Gallows. So what do they care if she looks a little out of it? Unlike Ms. Weaver, who wisely chooses to be elusive, allowing the photographers just a minute or two to catch her, the new girl is still hungry for adulation. She goes straight to the barricades, where a number of young women with souvenir programs for Gallows are waving them around. She signs a few, giving her boyfriend, who is a six-foot Calvin Klein model hunk, a goofy 'gee-I-must-be-famous!' look. The model looks back vacantly, which is the only look in his repertoire. He can give it to you vacantly with a semi hard-on in his jeans, or vacantly with his ass hanging out of his Y-fronts. Either way, it is heart-achingly beautiful; almost troublingly so. The wind comes in gusts along Hollywood Boulevard, and the security men start to look a little worried. It was some bright publicist's idea to build two gallows, as a kind of gateway through which the audience for the premiere will need to come. Not, it now seems, a clever notion. The gallows are made to be trashed tomorrow morning, so they're made of light timber and foam-core. The wind is threatening to topple them; or worse, pick them up entirely and deposit them on top of the crowd. Light though they are, they could do some serious damage if they fell. Four of the ushers from inside the theatre are summoned from their duties and told to go and stand beside the gallows, two on either side, holding on to them as casually as possible. Security is told that the publicity people only need five more minutes. As soon as Suzie Henslett can be persuaded to move on up the carpet and into the building (which at present she is showing no desire to do), the director's, Rob Neiderman's, limo can be brought to the carpet, followed by the last and most important of the bunch, Todd Pickett. The wind is getting worse; the gallows sway giddily. An executive decision is made to bring Neiderman's limo in, and if Suzie's screaming fans are visible waving like lunatics behind Neiderman in his press pictures, so be it. This isn't a perfect world. It's already 8:13pm. At this rate the picture won't be able to begin until half past the hour, which wouldn't be a problem if the damn thing weren't so long, but Neiderman's cut came in at two hours and forty-three minutes, and though the studio appealed to Pickett to get him to shave the thing down to a tight two hours, Todd came back saying he liked the picture pretty much as it was, so only four minutes were going out of it. That means it'll be past eleven before the picture's finished, and almost midnight by the time everybody's assembled at the party venue. It's going to be a long night. Neiderman has persuaded the easily-distracted Miss Henslett away from her fans and down the carpet to the door. The big moment is at hand. The ushers
clinging to the gallows, their jobs depending on the perpendicularity of their charges. The largest of the limos comes up to the curb. Even before the door has opened, the fans, especially the women, are in a state of ecstasy, shrieking at the top of their voices. "Todd! Todd! Oh God! Todd!" The cameras start to flash, as though the incomprehensible semaphore of their flashes is going to summon the man in the limo. And out comes Todd Pickett, the star of Gallows, the reason why ninety-five percent of its audience will be there when it opens next Friday (it is now Monday); Todd Pickett, one of the three biggest male action-movie-stars in the history of cinema. Todd Pickett, the boy from Cincinnati who failed in all his grades but ended up the King of Hollywood. He raises his hands like a presidential candidate, to acknowledge the shouts of the crowd. Then he reaches back into the limo to catch hold of the hand of his date for the night, Wilhemina Bosch, a waitress-turned-model-turned-actress-turned-model again, with whom he has been seen at parties and premieres for the past four months, though neither will say anything about the relationship than that they're good friends. He gathers Wilhemina to him, so that the photographers can get pictures of them together. Then arm in arm, through the blizzard of rights and the barrage of We love you, Todd coming at them from every side, the pair make their way to the cinema doors, which having gathered their most important guests into the fold, then close rather defiantly, as if to divide the important from the unimportant, the stable and the solid from those who are simply objects of the night's wind.

Gallows is an irredeemable piece of shit, of course, and everyone involved with it, from the executives who green-lit it (at a cost of some ninety-million dollars, before prints and advertising costs add another thirty-seven to the bill) to the humblest publicist, knows. It is, in the words of Corliss's review in Time, 'an old fashioned, action-horror picture which lacks the full-bone theatrics of grand guignol, and the savvy, John Woo-style action piece audiences have come to expect. One minute Schwarzenegger is camping it up, the next Todd Pickett, as his unwilling successor, is playing his scenes as though he's Hamlet on a particularly dreary night in Denmark. From beginning to end, Gallows is bad noose: Everybody going up the red carpet that Monday night already knows what Time is going to say; Corliss had made his contempt for the picture very plain in a piece about the state of action movies he wrote two weeks before. Nor does it take an oracle to predict that there will be others who will not like the picture. But the extent of vitriol will prove astonishing, even to those who expected the worst. In the next forty-eight hours, Gallows will garner some of the most negative reviews of the last twelve months, the vehemence of the early news reviewers empowering minor names to pull out the stops. Besides the incomprehensible script, everyone agrees, there is a lackluster quality to the picture that betrays the cast's indifference to the entire project. Performances aren't simply uneven, they seemed designed for entirely different movies: a hopeless mismatch of styles. The worst culprit in this regard? There is no question about that. All the reviewers will agree that the most inadequate performance comes from its star, Todd Pickett. People writes that: "Mr. Pickett is plenty old enough to know better. Thirty-something-year-olds don't act the way Mr. Pickett acts here: his trademark 'young man with a chip on his shoulder and a thousand-watt smile,' which was looking stale the second (all right, the third) time he did it, seems particularly out-of-place here. Though it seems incredible that time has passed so fast since America first swooned to the charms of Mr. Pickett, he's now simply too old to play the twenty-something Vincent. Only Wilhemina Bosch, as Vincent's Prozac-chewing face, and she can turn a line with the snappy, East-coast smarts of a young Katherine Hepburn. She's wasted here. Or, more correctly, our time would be wasted here were she not in the movie."

The premiere audience didn't seem to mind it. On occasion there were audible gasps and loud laughter (perhaps in truth a little over-loud, a little fake) for the jokes, but there were several long stretches in the Second Act, when the movie seemed to lose their interest. Even in the Third Act, when the action relocates to the orbiting space station, and the special effects budget soared, there was very little real enthusiasm. A few scattered whoops of nihilistic delight when the villain's planet-destroying weapon actually went off, against expectation, and Washington DC is fried to a crisp. But then, as the smoke cleared and Todd, as the new Gallows, proceeded to finish off the bad guys, the audience became restless again. About fifteen minutes before the end credits rolled a member of the audience got up from his seat on the aisle and went to the bathroom. A few people caught a look at the man's face as he looked back at the screen. It was Todd Pickett, lit by the light of his own face. Nobody got up to ask for his autograph. Pickett stared at the screen for a moment only, then he turned his back on it and trudged up and out of the cinema. He didn't go to the restroom. Instead he asked one of the ushers if he could be allowed out of the back of the building. The usher explained that the area around the back had no security. "I just want a quiet smoke with nobody watching me," Todd explained. The usher said, sure, why not, and led Todd down a passageway that ran behind the screen. Todd looked up at his reversed image on the screen. All he could remember about the scene that was playing was how damn uncomfortable his costume had been. "Here you go," the usher said, unlocking the doors at the end of the corridor, and letting Todd out into an area lit only by the ambient light from the Boulevard. "Thanks," Todd
said, giving him a twenty-buck bill. "I'll be back out front by the time the credits roll." The usher thanked him for the twenty-note and left him to himself. Todd took out a cigarette, but it never got to his lips. A wave of nausea overtook him, so powerful and so sudden that it was all he could do not to puke down his own tuxedo. Up came the scotches he'd had in the limo as he drove on down to the premiere, and the pepperoni pizza, with three cheeses and extra anchovies, he'd had to add ballast. With the first heave over (something told him there were more to come) he had the presence of mind to look around, and confirm that this nasty little scene was not being spied on, or worse, photographed. Luckily, he was alone. All he had for company back here was the detritus of premières past; piles of standees and gaudy scenery pieces designed to advertise movies gone by: Mel Gibson against an eruption of lurid flame; Godzilla's eye; the bottom half of a girl in a very short dress. He got to his feet and stumbled away from the stench of his vomit, making his way through this graveyard of old glories, heading for the darkest place he could find in which to hide his giddy head. Behind him, through the still-open door, he could hear the sound of gunfire, and the muted sound of his own voice: "Come on out, you sonofabitch," he was yelling to somebody. By now, if the movie had been working, the audience would have been yelling and screaming, wild with blood-lust. But despite the over-amped soundtrack, nobody was yelling, because nobody gave a damn. The movie was dying on its feet. Another wave of nausea rose up in him. He reached out to catch hold of something so that he didn't fall down and his outstretched hand knocked over a cardboard cut-out of Tom Cruise, which toppled backwards and hit a cardboard Titanic, which in turn crashed against a cardboard Mighty Joe Young, and so on and so forth, like a row of candy-colored dominoes, stars falling against ships falling against monsters, all toppling back into a darkness so deep they were an indistinguishable heap. Luckily, the noise of his vomiting was covered by the din of his own movie. He puked again, twice, until his stomach had nothing left to give up. Then he turned his back on the vomit and the toppled idols, and stepped away to find a lungful of dean air to inhale. The worst was over. He lit his cigarette, which helped settle his stomach, and rather than returning inside, where the picture was two minutes from finishing, he walked along side of the building until he found a patch of street-light where he could assess himself. He was lucky. His suit was unspattered. There was a spot of vomit on his shoes, but he cleaned it off with his handkerchief (which he tossed away) and then sprayed his tongue and throat with wintergreen breath-cleanser. His hair was cropped short (that was the way it was in the movie, and he'd kept the style for public appearances), so he had no fear that it was out of place. He probably looked a little pale, but what the hell? Pale was in. There was a gate close to the front of the building, guarded by a security officer. She recognized Todd immediately, and unlocked the gate. "Getting out before it gets too crazy?" she said to him. He smiled and nodded. "You want an escort to your car?" "Yeah, thanks." One of the executive producers, an over-eager Englishman called George Dipper, with whom Todd had never worked before, was standing on the red carpet, his presence ignored by the press, who were standing around chatting to one another, or checking their cameras before the luminaries reappeared. George caught Todd's eye, and hurried over, dragging on his own cigarette as though his life depended on its nicotine content. There was scattered applause from inside, which quickly died away. The picture was over. "I think it played brilliantly," George said, his eyes begging for a syllable of agreement. "They were with us all the way. Don't you think so?" "It was fine," Todd said, without commitment. "Forty million, the first weekend." "Don't get your hopes up." "You don't think we'll do forty?" "I think it'll do fine." George's face lit up. Todd Pickett, the man he'd paid twenty million dollars to (plus a sizable portion of the back-end) was declaring it fine. God was in His Heaven. For a terrible moment Todd thought the man was going to weep with relief. "At least there's nothing big opening against it," Todd said, "So we've got one weekend clear." And your fans are loyal," George said. Again, the desperation in the eyes. Todd couldn't bear to look at him any longer. "I'm just goin' to make a quick getaway," Todd said, glancing towards the theater doors. The first of the crowd were emerging. If the expressions on the first five faces he scanned were an omen, his instincts were right: they did not have a hit. He turned his back on the crowd, telling George he'd see him later. "You are coming to the party?" George said, hanging on to him as he headed down the carpet. Where was Marco? Todd thought. Trusty Marco, who was always there when he was needed. "Yes, I'll pop in later," he said, glancing back over his shoulder at George to reassure him. In the seconds since he'd turned away the audience spilling from the theatre door had jumped from five to a hundred. Half of them saw him. In just a few seconds they'd be surrounding him, yelling his name, telling him they loved this and they hated that, touching him, pulling on him. "Here, boss!" Marco called to him from the curb. The limo door was open. God bless him! Todd raced down the carpet as people behind him started to call his name; cameras started to flash. Into the limo. Marco slammed the door. Todd locked it. Then Marco dashed around to the driver's seat with a remarkable turn of speed given his poundage, and got in. "Where to?" "Mulholland." Mulholland Drive winds through the city like a lazy serpent for many miles; but Marco didn't need to know where along its length his boss wanted to be taken. There was a spot close to Coldwater Canyon, where the undulating drive offers a picture-perfect view of the San Fernando Valley, as far as the mountains. By day it can be a smog-
befouled spectacle, brown and gray. By night, especially in the summer, it is a place of particular enchantment: the cities of Burbank, North Hollywood and Pasadena laid out in a matrix of amber lights, receding to the dark wall of the mountains. And moving against the darkness, the lights of planes circling as they await their instruction to land at Burbank Airport, or the police helicopters passing over the city, spitting a beam of white light. Often there were sightseers parked at the spot, enjoying the scene. But tonight, thank God, there were none. Marco parked the car and Todd got out, wandering to the cliff-edge to look at the scene before him. Marco got out too, and occupied his time with wiping the windshield of the limo. He was a big man with the bearded face of a bear recently woken from hibernation, and he possessed a curious mixture of talents: a sometime wrestler and ju-jitsu black belt, he was also a trained Cordon Bleu cook (not that Todd's taste called for any great culinary sophistication) and a twice-divorced father of three with an encyclopedic knowledge of the works of Wagner. More importantly, he was Todd's right-hand man; loyal to a fault. There was no part of Todd's existence Marco Caputo did not have some part of. He took care of the hiring and firing of domestic staff and gardeners, the buying and the driving of cars, and of course all the security duties. "The movie's shit, huh?" he said matter-of-factly. "Worse than." "Sorry 'bout that." "Not your fault. I should never have done it. Shit script. Shit movie." "You want to give the party a miss?" "Nah. I gotta go. I promised Wilhemina. And George." "You got something going with her?" "Wilhemina? Yeah. I got something. I just don't know whether I want to. Plus she's got an English boyfriend." "The English are all fags." "Yeah." "You want me to swing by the party and bring her back up to the house for you?" "Suppose she says no?" "Oh come on. When did any girl say no to you?" Todd said nothing. He just stared out over the vista of lights. The wind came up out of the valley, smelling of gas fumes and Chinese food. The Santa Anas, hot off the Mojave, gusted against his face. He closed his eyes to enjoy the moment, but what came into his head was an image of himself: a still from the movie he'd fled from tonight. He studied the face in his mind's eye for a moment. Then he said: "I look tired."

TWO Todd Pickett had made two of his three most successful pictures under the aegis of a producer by the name of Keever Smotherman. The first of them was called Gunner; the kind of high concept, testosterone-marinated picture Smotherman had been renowned for making. It had made Todd a bona-fide movie-star, if not overnight then certainly within a matter of weeks. He hadn't been required to turn in a performance. Smotherman didn't make movies that required actors, only breath-taking physical specimens. And Todd was certainly that. Every time he stepped before the cameras, whether he was sharing the scene with a girl or a fighter-plane, he was all the eye wanted to watch. The camera worked some kind of alchemy upon him; and he worked the same magic on celluloid. In life, he was good-looking, but flawed. He was a little on the short side, with broad hips; he was also conspicuously bandy. But on the screen, all these flaws disappeared. He became gleaming, studly perfection, his jaw-line heroic, his gaze crystalline, his mouth an uncommon mingling of the sensual and the severe. His particular beauty had suited the taste of the times, and by the end of that first, extraordinary summer of coming-to-fame his image, dressed in an immaculate white uniform which made poetry of his buttocks, had become an indelible piece of cinema iconography. Over the years, other stars had risen just as high, of course, and many just as quickly. But few were quite as ready for their ascent as Todd Pickett. This was what he'd been polishing himself for since the moment his mother, Patricia Donna Pickett, had first taken him into a cinema in downtown Cincinnati. Looking up at the screen, watching the parade of faces pass before him, he'd known instinctively (at least so he later claimed) that he belonged up there with those stars, and that if he willed it hard enough, willed and worked for it, then it was merely a matter of time before he joined the parade. After the success of Gunner, he fell effortlessly into the labs of being a movie star. In interviews he was courteous, funny and self-effacing, playing the interviewers so easily that all but the most cynical swooned. He was confident about his charms, but he wasn't cocky; loyal to his Mid-Western roots and boyishly devoted to his mother. Most attractive of all, he was honest about his shortcomings as an actor. There was a refreshing lack of pretension about the Pickett persona. The year after Gunner, he made two pictures back to back. Another action blockbuster for Smotherman, called Lightning Rod, which was released on Independence Day and blew all former box-office records to smithereens, and then, for the Christmas market, Life Lessons. The latter was a sweetly sentimental slip of a story, in which Todd played opposite Sharon Campbell, a Playboy model turned actress who had been tabloid fodder at the time thanks to her recent divorce from an alcoholic and abusive husband. The pairing of Pickett and Campbell had worked like a charm, and the reviews for Todd's performance were especially kind. While he was still relying on his physical gifts, the critics observed, there were definitely signs that he was taking on the full responsibilities of an actor, digging deeper into himself to engage his audience. Nor was he afraid to show weakness; twice in Life Lessons he was required to sob like a baby, and he did so very convincingly. The picture was a huge hit, meaning that both of the big money-makers of the year had Todd's name above the title. He was officially box-office gold. For most of the following decade he could do no wrong. Inevitably, some of his pictures performed better than others, but even the disappointments were triumphs by comparison with the fumbling labors of most of his contemporaries. Of course, he wasn't making the choice of
material on his own. From the beginning he'd had a close relationship with his manager, Maxine Frizelle, a short, sharp bitch of a woman in her mid-forties who'd once been voted the Most Despised Person in Hollywood, and had asked, when the news had reached her, if the awards ceremony was full evening dress. Though she'd been representing other agents when she first took Todd on, she'd let them all go once his career began to demand her complete attention. Thereafter she lived and breathed the Pickett business, control-ring every element of his life, private and professional. The price she asked studios for his services rapidly rose to unheard of heights, and she drove the deal home every single time. She had an opinion about everything: rewrites, casting, the hiring of directors, art-directors, costume designers and directors of photographers. Her only concern were the best interests of her wonder-boy. In the language of an older but similarly feudal system, she was the power behind the throne; and everyone who worked with Todd, from the heads of studios to humble hair-stylists, had some encounter with her to relate, some scar to show.

Needless to say, the Pickett magic couldn't remain unchallenged forever. There were always new stars in the ascendance, new faces with the new smiles appearing on the screen every season, and after ten years of devotion the audience that had doted on Todd in the mid-to-late eighties began to look elsewhere for its heroes. It wasn't that his pictures performed less well, but that others performed even better. A new definition of a blockbuster had appeared; money-machines like Independence Day and Titanic, which earned so much so quickly that pictures which would once have been called major hits were now in contrast simply modest successes. Anxious to regain the ground he was losing, Todd decided to go back into business with Smotherman, who was just as eager to return to their glory days together. The project they'd elected to do together was a movie called Warrior, a piece of high concept junk about a street-fighter from Brooklyn who is brought through time to champion a future earth in a battle against marauding aliens. The script was a ludicrous concoction of cliché pulled from every cheesy science-fiction B-movies of the fifties, and an early budget had put the picture somewhere in the region of a hundred million dollars simply to get it on screen, but Smotherman was confident that he could persuade either Fox or Paramount to green-light it. The show had everything, he said: an easily-grasped idea (primitive fighting man outwits hyper-intelligent intergalactic empire, using cunning and brute force); a dozen action sequences which called for state-of-the-art effects, and the kind of hero Todd could perform in his sleep: an ordinary man put in an extraordinary situation. It was a no-brainer, all round. The studios would be fools not to green-light it; it had all the marks of a massive hit. He was nothing if not persuasive. In person, Smotherman was almost a parody of a high-voltage salesman: fast-talking, short-tempered and over-sexed. There was never an absence of 'babes', as he still called them, in his immediate vicinity; all were promised leading roles when they'd performed adequately for Smotherman in private, and all, of course, were discarded the instant he tired of them. Preparations for Warrior were proceeding nicely. Then the unthinkable happened. A week shy of his forty-fourth birthday, Smotherman died. He'd always been a man of legendary excess, a bottom-feeder happiest in the gamier part of any city. The circumstances of his death were perfectly consistent with this reputation: he'd died sitting at a table in a private club in New York, watching a lesbian sex show, the coronary that had felled him so massive and so sudden he had apparently been overtaken by it before he could even cry out for help. He was face down in a pile of cocaine when he was found, a drug he'd continued to consume in heroic quantities long after his contemporaries had cleaned up their acts and had their sinuses surgically reconstructed. It was one of the thirty-five illegal substances found in his system at the autopsy. He was buried in Las Vegas, according to the instructions in his will. He's been happiest there, he'd always said, with everything to win and everything to lose. This remark was twice quoted at the memorial service, and hearing it, Todd felt a cold trickle of apprehension pass down his spine. What Smotherman had known, and been at peace with, was the fact that all of Tinseltown was a game and it could be lost in a heartbeat. Smotherman had been a gambling man. He'd taken pleasure in the possibility of failure and it had sweetened his success. Todd, on the other hand, had never even played the slots, much less a game of poker or roulette. Sitting there listening to the hypocrites most of whom had despised Smotherman stand up and extol the dead man, he realized that Keever's passing cast a pall over his future. The golden days were over. His place in the sun would very soon belong to others; if it didn't already. The day after the memorial service he poured his fears out to Maxine. She was all reassurance. "Smotherman was a dinosaur," she said as she sipped her vodka. "The only reason people put up with his bullshit all those years was because he made everybody a lot of money. But let's be honest: he was a low-life. You're a class act. You've got nothing to worry about." "I don't know," Todd said, his head throbbing from one too many drinks. "I look at myself sometimes..." "And what?" "I'm not the guy I was when I made Gunner." "Damn right you're not. You were nobody then. Now you're one of the most successful actors in history." "There's others coming up." "So what?" Maxine said, waving his concerns away. "Don't do that!" Todd said, slamming his palm down on the table. "Don't try and placate me! Okay? We have a problem. Smotherman was going to put me back on top, and now the son of a bitch is dead!" "All right. Calm down. All I'm saying is that we don't need Smotherman. We'll hire somebody to rework the script, if that's
what you want. Then we'll find somebody hip to direct it. Somebody with a contemporary style. Smotherman was an old-fashioned guy. Everything had to be big. Big explosion. Big tits. Big guns. Audiences don't care about any of that any more. You need to be part of what's coming up, not what happened yesterday. You know, I hate to say it, but perhaps Keever's dying is the best thing that could have happened. We need a new look for you. A new Todd Pickett. "You think it's as simple as that?" Todd said. He wanted so much to believed that Maxine had the problem solved. "How difficult can it be?" Maxine said. "You're a great star. We just need to get people focused on you again." She pondered for a moment. "You know what? We should set up a lunch with Gary Eppstadt." "Oh Jesus, why? You know how I hate that ugly little fuck" An ugly little fuck he may be. But he is going to pay for Warrior. And if he's going put twenty million and a slice of the back-end on the table for your services to art, you can make nice with the son of a bitch for an hour."

THREE It wasn't simply personal antipathy that had made Todd refer to Eppstadt so unflatteringly. It was the unvarnished truth. Eppstadt was the ugliest man in Los Angeles. Charitably, his eyes might have been called reptilian, his lips un kissable. His mother, in a fit of blind affection, might have noted that he was disproportioned. All this said, the man was still a narcissist of the first rank. He hung only the most expensive suits on his unfortunate carcass: his fingernails were manicured with obsessive precision; his personal barber trimmed his dyed hair every morning, having shaved him first with a straight razor. There had been countless prayers offered up to that razor over the years, entreating it to skip! But Eppstadt seemed to live a charmed life. He'd gone from strength to strength as he moved around the studios, claiming the paternity of every success, and blaming the failures on those who stood immediately behind him on the ladder, whom he promptly fired. It was the oldest trick in the book, but it had worked flawlessly. In an age in which corporations increasingly had the power, and studios were run by committees of business-school graduates and lawyers with an itch to have their fingers in the creative pie, Eppstadt was one of the old school. A powermonger, happiest in the company of somebody who needed his patronage, whom he could then abuse in a hundred subtle ways. That was his pleasure, and his revenge. What did he need beauty for, when he could make it tremble with a smiling maybe!

He was in a fine mood when he and Todd, with Maxine in attendance, met for lunch on Monday. Paramount had carried the weekend with a brutal revenge picture that Eppstadt had taken a hand in making, firing the director off the project after two unpromising preview screenings, and hiring somebody else to shoot a rape scene and a new ending, in which the violated woman terrorized and eventually dispatched her attacker with a hedge-cutter. "Thirty-two point six million dollars in three days," he preened. "In January. That's a hit. And you know what? There's nobody in the picture. Just a couple no-name TV stars. It was all marketing." "Is the picture any good?" Todd asked. "Yeah, it's fucking Hamlet," Eppstadt said, without missing a beat. "You're looking weary, my friend," he went on. "You need a vacation. I've been taking time at this monastery." "Monastery?" "Sounds crazy, right? But you feel the peace. You feel the tranquility. And they take Jews. Actually, I've seen more Jews there than at my nephew's Bar Mitzvah. You should try it. Take a rest." "I don't want to rest. I want to work. We need to set a start-date for Warrior." Eppstadt's enthusiastic expression dimmed. "Oh, Christ. Is that what this little lunch is all about, Maxine? Are you making it or not?" Todd pressed. "Because there's plenty of other people who will if you won't." "So maybe you should take it to one of them," Eppstadt said, his gaze hooded. "You can have it in turnaround, if that's what you want. I'll get business affairs on it this afternoon." "So you're really ready to let it go?" Maxine said, putting on an air of indifference. "Perfectly ready, if that's what Todd wants. I'm not going to stand in the way of you getting the picture made. You look surprised, Maxine." "I'm surprised. A package like that...it's a huge summer movie for Paramount." "Frankly I'm not sure this is the right time for the company to be making that kind of picture, Maxine. It's a very hard market to read right now. And these expensive pictures. I mean, this is going to come in at well north of a hundred thirty million by the time we've paid for prints and advertising. I'm not sure that makes solid fiscal sense." He tried a smile; it was lupine. "Look, Todd: I want to be in business with you. Paramount wants to be in business with you. Christ, you've been a gold-mine for us over the years. But there's a generation coming up and you know the demographics as well as I do these kids filling up the multiplexes, they don't have any loyalty to the past." Eppstadt knew what effect his words were having, and he was savoring every last drop of it. "You see, in the good old days, the studios were able to carry stars through a weak patch. You had a star on a seven-year contract. He carried the weekend with a brutal revenge picture that Eppstadt had taken a hand in making, firing the director off the project after two unpromising preview screenings, and hiring somebody else to shoot a rape scene and a new ending, in which the violated woman terrorized and eventually dispatched her attacker with a hedge-cutter. "Thirty-two point six million dollars in three days," he preened. "In January. That's a hit. And you know what? There's nobody in the picture. Just a couple no-name TV stars. It was all marketing." "Is the picture any good?" Todd asked. "Yeah, it's fucking Hamlet," Eppstadt said, without missing a beat. "You're looking weary, my friend," he went on. "You need a vacation. I've been taking time at this monastery. "Monastery?" "Sounds crazy, right? But you feel the peace. You feel the tranquility. And they take Jews. Actually, I've seen more Jews there than at my nephew's Bar Mitzvah. You should try it. Take a rest." "I don't want to rest. I want to work. 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I mean, this is going to come in at well north of a hundred thirty million by the time we've paid for prints and advertising. I'm not sure that makes solid fiscal sense." He tried a smile; it was lupine. "Look, Todd: I want to be in business with you. Paramount wants to be in business with you. Christ, you've been a gold-mine for us over the years. But there's a generation coming up and you know the demographics as well as I do these kids filling up the multiplexes, they don't have any loyalty to the past." Eppstadt knew what effect his words were having, and he was savoring every last drop of it. "You see, in the good old days, the studios were able to carry stars through a weak patch. You had a star on a seven-year contract. 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I'm not sure they'd want to see me pay you twenty million dollars for a picture that might only gross...what did your last picture do? Forty-one domestic? And change?" Maxine sighed, a little theatrically. "I'm sorry to hear that, Gary." "Look, Maxine, I'm sorry to be having to say it. Really I am. But numbers are numbers. If I don't believe I can make a profit, what am I doing making the movie? You see where I'm coming from? That simply doesn't make sense." Maxine got up from the
table. "Will you excuse me a minute? I've got to make a call." Eppstadt caught the fire in Maxine's voice. "No lawyers, Maxine. Please? We can do this in a civilized manner." Maxine didn't reply. She simply stalked off between tables, snarling at a waiter who got in her way. Eppstadt ate a couple of mouthfuls of rare tuna, then put down his fork. "It's times like this I wish I still smoked." He sat back in his chair and looked hard at Todd. "Don't let her start a pissing competition, Todd, because if I'm cornered I'm going to have to stand up and tell it like it is. And then we'll all have a mess on our hands." "Meaning what?" "Meaning..." Eppstadt looked pained; as though his proctologist was at work on him under the chair. "You can't keep massaging numbers so your price looks justified when we all know it isn't." "You were saying I'd been a gold-mine for Paramount. Just two minutes ago you said that." "That was then. This is now. That was Keever Smotherman, this is post-Keever Smotherman. He was the last of his breed." "So what are you saying?" "Well...let me tell you what I'm not saying," Eppstadt replied, his tone silky. "I'm not saying you don't have a career." "Well that's nice to hear." Todd said sharply. "I want to find something we can do together." "But..." "But?" Eppstadt seemed to be genuinely considering his reply before he spoke. Finally, he said: "You've got talent, Todd. And you've obviously built a loyal fan-base over the years. What you don't have is the drawing power you had back in the old days. It's the same with all of you really expensive boys. Cruise. Costner. Stallone." He took a moment, then leaned closer to Todd, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "You want the truth? You look weary. I mean, deep down weary." Todd said nothing. Eppstadt's observation was like being doused in ice-cold water. "Sorry to be blunt. It's not like I'm telling you something you don't already know." Todd was staring at his hand, wondering what it would feel like to make a fist and beat it against Eppstadt's face; over and over and over. "Of course, you can have these things fixed," Gary went on chattily. "I know a couple of guys older than you who went to see Bruce Burrows and looked ten years younger when he was finished working on them." Still idly contemplating his hand, Todd said: "Who's Bruce Burrows?" "Well, in many people's opinion he's the best cosmetic surgeon in the country. He's got an office on Wilshire. Very private. Very expensive. But you can afford it. He does it all. Collagen replacements, lifts, peels, lipo-sculpture..." "Who went to see him?" "Oh, just about everybody. There's nothing to be ashamed of: it's a fact of life. At a certain age it's harder to get the lovehandles to melt. You get laugh-lines, you get frown lines,
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