

# 1

At a table in Jerry's Pizzeria 2 in Oriolo Romano the Wilde Beasts of Abaddon were holding a meeting.

Their leader, Saverio Moneta, aka Mantos, was worried.

The situation was critical. If he didn't succeed in taking back command of his sect, this might very well be the last get-together of the Beasts.

They had been haemorrhaging for a while. The first one to leave had been little Paolo Scialdone, aka The Reaper. Without a word, he had dumped them and become part of the Children of the Apocalypse, a Satan-worshipping group from Pavia. A few weeks later Antonello Agnese, aka Molten, had bought a secondhand Harley-Davidson and joined the Hell's Angels from Subiaco. And to top it off Pietro Fauci, aka Nosferatu, Mantos' right-hand man and founder of the Beasts, had got married and opened a plumbing and heating supplies store on the Abetone.

They were down to four members.

It was time to give them a serious talking to, tell them to get their shit together and pull in some new recruits.

'Mantos, what are you having?' asked Silvietta, the group's Vestal. A scrawny redhead with bug-eyes sticking out beneath thin eyebrows that sat too high on her forehead. She wore a silver ring in one nostril and another in the middle of her lip.

Saverio took a quick look at the menu. 'I don't know . . . A *marinara pizza*? No, better not, it gives me heartburn . . . Pappardelle, yeah.'

'They do 'em greasy here, but they're delicious!' said Roberto Morsillo, aka Murder, approvingly. A chubby guy almost six foot six, with long dyed-black hair and glasses covered in oily fingerprints. He wore a stretched Slayer t-shirt. Originally from

Sutri, he was studying Law at Rome University and worked at the Brico DIY centre in Vetralla.

Saverio studied his disciples. Even though they were all over thirty, they still dressed like a mob of head-banging losers. He couldn't remember how many times he'd told them: 'You've got to look normal, get rid of these body-piercings, and the tattoos, and the bloody metal spikes . . .' But it didn't make any difference.

*Beggars can't be choosers*, he thought to himself, downhearted.

Mantos could see his image reflected in the Birra Moretti mirror hanging behind the pizzeria's counter. Skinny, five foot six, with metal-framed glasses, he wore his dark hair parted on the left. He was wearing a short-sleeved, light blue shirt buttoned right up to the throat, dark blue cords and a pair of slip-on moccasins.

*A normal-looking guy*. Just like all the great champions of Evil: Ted Bundy, Andrei Chikatilo and Jeffrey Dahmer, the Milwaukee Cannibal. The sort of people you would see on the street and you wouldn't even give the time of day. And yet they were the Demon's Chosen Ones.

*What would Charlie Manson have done if he'd had such hopeless disciples?*

'Master, we have to talk to you . . . We've been sort of thinking . . . about the sect . . .'

Mantos was caught off-guard by Edoardo Sambreddero, aka Zombie, the fourth member, a haggard-looking guy who suffered from congenital oesophagitis: couldn't swallow garlic, chocolate or fizzy drinks. He worked for his father assembling electrical systems in Manziana.

'Technically,' he said, 'we, as a sect, don't exist.'

Saverio had guessed what he was up to, but pretended not to understand.

‘What do you mean?’

‘How long’s it been since we took the bloody oath?’

Saverio shrugged his shoulders. ‘It’s been a few years.’

‘They never talk about us online. But they talk plenty about the Children of the Apocalypse,’ whispered Silvietta so softly that nobody heard her.

Zombie pointed a grissino at his chief. ‘In all this time, what have we ever accomplished?’

‘All those things that you promised . . . How many of them have we done?’ Murder chimed in. ‘You said we’d make loads of human sacrifices, but we haven’t seen hide nor hair of them. And what about the initiation ritual with the virgins? And the Satanic orgies?’

‘Well, for one thing, we did make a human sacrifice, we did indeed,’ Saverio pointed out, annoyed. ‘It might not have worked, but we made it. And the orgy, too.’

In November of the year before, on the train to Rome, Murder had met Silvia Butti, an off-campus student at the Faculty of Psychology at Tor Vergata University. They had a lot in common: their love for the Lazio football team, for horror films, for Slayer and Iron Maiden, basically for your good old 1980’s-heavy metal. They had started chatting on MSN and hanging out on Via del Corso on Saturday afternoons.

Saverio had been the one who came up with the idea of sacrificing Silvia Butti to Satan in the forest of Sutri.

There was just one problem. The victim needed to be a virgin.

Murder had sworn to it. ‘She and I have done everything, but when I tried to fuck her, she just wouldn’t cave in.’

Zombie had burst out laughing. ‘Did it ever occur to you that maybe she just doesn’t want to fuck a fatso like you?’

‘She’s taken a chastity vow, you idiot. She’s definitely a virgin,

no doubt about it. And anyway . . . I mean, if it turned out she wasn't one, what would happen?'

Saverio, the group's master and theoretician, looked worried.

'Well, it's pretty serious. The sacrifice would be worthless. Or even worse, it could turn against us. The powers of Hell wouldn't be satisfied, and they could attack and destroy us.'

After hours of arguing and online investigating, the Beasts had come to the conclusion that the purity of the victim was not a substantial problem. So they had set to work on a plan.

Murder had invited Silvia Butti out for pizza in Oriolo Romano. There, by the light of a candle, he had offered her *suppli* rice balls, salted cod fillets and a huge glass of beer in which he had dissolved three tablets of Rohipnol. By the end of the dinner the young woman could barely stand and was mumbling incomprehensibly. Murder had gotten her into the car and, using the excuse that they should go to see the sunrise over the lake of Bracciano, he'd carried her into the forest of Sutri. There the Wilde Beasts of Abaddon had used tuff bricks to build a sacrificial shrine. The girl, half-unconscious, was undressed and laid down on the altar. Saverio invoked the Evil One, chopped the head off a chicken and sprayed the blood over the naked body of the psychology student, and then they'd all done her. At that point they had dug a hole and buried her alive. The ritual had been performed and the sect had undertaken its journey down into Evil's tenebrous lands.

The problem had arisen three days later. The Beasts had just come out of the Flamingo cinema, where they had seen *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Beginning*, and ran straight into Silvia. The girl, sitting on a bench in the gardens, was eating a *piadina*. She couldn't remember much about that evening, but she had the feeling she'd had fun. She told them how, when she'd come to her senses underneath the dirt, she dug her way to the surface.

Saverio had then signed her up as the sect's official high priestess. A few weeks later she and Murder were an item.

'Yeah, that's right, you did have an orgy,' Silvietta giggled nervously. 'You've told me about it a hundred times.'

'Yeah, but you weren't a virgin. And so, technically, the ceremony didn't work,' Zombie commented.

'How on earth could you think that I was a virgin? My first time . . .'

Saverio interrupted her. 'It was still a Satanic ritual . . .'

Zombie cut in. 'All right, forget the sacrifice. What else have we done?'

'We've cut a few sheep's throats, if I remember rightly. Haven't we?'

'Then what?'

Mantos unwittingly raised his voice. "'Then what?! Then what?!" Then there's the graffiti on the viaducts in Anguillara Sabazia!'

'Sure. Did you know that Paolino and those guys from Pavia disembowelled a nun?'

The only thing that the leader of the Wilde Beasts of Abaddon had managed to do was neck a glass of water.

'Mantos? Did you hear me?' Murder put his hand to his mouth, like a loudhailer. 'They disembowelled a fifty-eight-year-old nun.'

Saverio shrugged his shoulders. 'That's bollocks. Paolo's just trying to make us jealous, he regrets leaving us.' But he had the feeling that it wasn't bollocks.

'You watch the news on TV, right?' Murder insisted, unmerciful. 'You remember that nun from Caianello that they found decapitated near Pavia?'

'Yeah, so?'

‘The Children of the Apocalypse did it. They picked her up at a bus stop and then Kurtz decapitated her with a double-headed axe.’

Saverio couldn’t stand Kurtz, the leader of the Children of the Apocalypse from Pavia. He always had to be top of the class. Always the one coming up with extravagant stuff. *Good on you, Kurtz! Congratulations! You’re the best!*

Saverio wiped his hand across his face.

‘Well, guys . . . Don’t forget how much of a hard time I’ve been having lately, what with the birth of the twins . . . the bloody bank loan for the new house . . .’

‘That reminds me, how are the little darlings?’ asked Silvieta.

‘They’re like drainpipes. They eat and shit. At night they don’t let us get any sleep. They’ve got the measles, too. On top of it all, Serena’s father had hip-replacement surgery, so the whole furniture shop is my responsibility. You tell me when I’m supposed to get something organised for the sect . . .’

‘Hey, have you got any special offers at the shop?’ Zombie asked. ‘I want to buy a three-seater sofa-bed. The cat’s ruined mine.’

The leader of the Beasts wasn’t listening. He was thinking about Kurtz Minetti. As tall as a dick on a tin can. Full-time pastry chef. He had already set fire to a Kirby Vacuum Cleaner salesman and now he had decapitated a nun.

‘Anyway, you’re all ungrateful.’ He pointed to them one by one. ‘I’ve worked my arse off for this sect. If it hadn’t been for me introducing you to the Worship of Hades, you’d all still be sitting around reading Harry Potter.’

‘We know, Saverio, but try to understand us, too. We do believe in the group, but we can’t keep going like this.’ Murder bit angrily into a *grissino*. ‘Let’s just give it up and stay friends.’

The leader of the Beasts slammed his hands down on the table in exasperation.

‘Or how about this? Give me a week. You can’t say no to an extra week.’

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Silvietta, nibbling on her lip ring.

‘I’ve been laying the groundwork for a mind-blowing piece of action. It’s a really dangerous mission . . .’ He paused. ‘But don’t think you can just cop out. We all know that talk is cheap. But when it’s time to act . . .’ He put on a whiney voice. *“I can’t, I’m sorry . . . I’ve got problems at home, my mother’s not well . . . I have to work.”* And he looked hard at Zombie, who lowered his head over his plate. ‘No. We all put our arses on the line in the same way.’

‘Can’t you give us a hint?’ Murder asked shyly.

‘No! All I can say is that it’s something that will send us right to number one on the list of Italy’s Satanic sects.’

Silvietta grabbed a hold of his wrist. ‘Mantos, come on. Please. Just a little hint. I’m so curious . . .’

Saverio shook himself free. ‘No! I said no! You’ll have to wait. If in a week’s time I haven’t brought you a serious plan, then thanks very much, we shake hands and disband the sect. All right?’

He stood up. His black eyes had turned red, reflecting the flames from the pizza oven.

‘Now, disciples, honour me!’

The members lowered their heads. The leader raised his eyes to the ceiling and stretched out his arms.

‘Who is your Charismatic Father?’

‘You!’ the Beasts said in unison.

‘Who wrote the Tables of Evil?’

‘You!’

‘Who taught you the Liturgy of Darkness?’

‘You!’

‘Who ordered the *pappardelle* in hare sauce?’ asked the waiter with steaming plates perched on his arm.

‘Me!’ Saverio stretched out his hand.

‘Don’t touch, they’re hot.’

The leader of the Wilde Beasts of Abaddon sat down and, without saying another word, began eating.

## 2

About fifty kilometres away from Jerry’s Pizzeria 2, in Rome, a little three-gear Vespa struggled up the slope of Monte Mario. Sitting astride the saddle was the well-known writer Fabrizio Ciba. The scooter stopped at a traffic light and when it changed to green turned into Via della Camilluccia. Two kilometres further on, it braked in front of a cast-iron gate on the side of which hung a brass plaque that read ‘Villa Malaparte’.

Ciba put the Vespa into first gear and was about to face the long climb up to the residence when a primate squeezed into a grey flannel suit stepped in front of him.

‘Excuse me! Excuse me! Where are you going? Have you got an invitation?’

The writer took off his bowl-shaped helmet and began searching the pockets of his creased jacket.

‘No . . . No, I don’t think I have . . . I must have forgotten it.’

The man stood with his legs wide apart. ‘Well, you can’t go in then.’

‘I’ve been invited to . . .’

The bouncer pulled out a sheet of paper and slipped on a



pair of small glasses with red frames. ‘What did you say your name was?’

‘I didn’t. Ciba. Fabrizio Ciba . . .’

The guy began running his index finger down the list of guests while shaking his head.

*He doesn’t recognise me.* Fabrizio wasn’t annoyed, though. It was obvious that the primate didn’t ‘do’ literature but, for Christ’s sake, didn’t he watch television? Ciba presented a show called *Crime & Punishment* every Wednesday evening on RAI Tre for this very purpose.

‘I’m sorry. Your name is not on the list.’

The writer was there to present the novel *A Life in the World* by the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Sarwar Sawhney, published by Martinelli, his own publishing house. At the age of seventy-three, and with two books as thick as a law dictionary behind him, Sawhney had at last received the coveted prize from the Swedish Academy. Ciba was to do the honours alongside Gino Tremagli, Professor of English–American Literature at the Sapienza University of Rome. That old gasbag had been asked to participate just to give an official tone to the event. It was, however, up to Fabrizio to unravel the ancient secrets hidden within the folds of Sawhney’s huge novel and offer them to a Roman audience notoriously thirsty for culture.

Ciba was getting fed up. He lost the polite tone.

‘Listen to me. If you can forget about that guest list for a minute and take a look at the invitation – that white, rectangular-shaped piece of card which I unfortunately don’t have with me – you will find my name on it, seeing as I am presenting this evening’s event. If you want me to, I’ll leave. But when they ask me why I didn’t come, I’ll tell them that . . . What’s your name again?’

Luckily an attendant, with a blonde pageboy haircut and wearing a blue suit, appeared. As soon as she recognised her favourite author, with his rebellious fringe and big green eyes sitting astride the old-style Vespa, she almost fell over.

‘Let him through! Let him through!’ she screeched in a thin, high-pitched voice. ‘Don’t you know who this is? It’s Fabrizio Ciba!’ Then, her legs stiff with excitement, she walked up to the writer. ‘I sincerely apologise. Oh God, this is so terribly embarrassing! I’m so sorry. I’d just gone off for a second and you arrived out of nowhere . . . I’m sorry, I’m so sorry . . . I . . .’

Fabrizio lavished the girl with a smug smile.

The attendant looked at her watch and rubbed her hand across her forehead. ‘It’s very late. Everybody will be expecting you. Please, go, go.’ She shoved the bouncer out of the way, and as Fabrizio passed by her she shouted: ‘Afterwards, would you mind signing a copy of your book for me?’

Ciba left the Vespa in the parking area and walked towards the villa, his footsteps as light as those of a middle-distance runner.

A photographer, camouflaged behind the laurel bushes, popped out onto the tree-lined avenue and ran towards him.

‘Fabrizio! Fabrizio, do you remember me?’ He began following the writer. ‘We had dinner together in Milano in that *Osteria . . . La compagnia dei naviganti?* I invited you to come to my *dammuso* on Pantelleria and you said that you might come . . .’

The writer raised an eyebrow and gave the scruffy hippie, covered in cameras, the once over.

‘Of course I remember . . .’ He didn’t have the faintest idea who the man was. ‘Sorry, but I’m late. Maybe some other time. They’re expecting me . . .’

The photographer didn’t relent. ‘Listen, Fabrizio, while I was brushing my teeth I had a brilliant idea: I want to take some photos of you in an illegal dumping ground . . .’

Standing in the doorway of Villa Malaparte the editor Leopoldo Malagò and the head of public relations for Martinelli, Maria Letizia Calligari, were gesturing to him to hurry.

The photographer was struggling to keep up, with fifteen kilos of equipment hanging around his neck, but he wouldn't be deterred.

'It's something out of the ordinary . . . striking . . . The garbage, the rats, the seagulls . . . Do you get it? The magazine, *Venerdì di Repubblica* . . .'

'Maybe some other time. Excuse me.'

And he threw himself in between Malagò and Calligari. The photographer, exhausted, bent over holding his side.

'Can I call you in the next couple of days?'

The writer didn't even bother to answer.

'Fabrizio, you never change . . . The Indian got here an hour ago. And that pain in the arse, Tremagli, wanted to start without you.'

Malagò was pushing him towards the conference hall while Calligari tucked his shirt into his trousers and mumbled, 'Look what you're wearing! You look like a tramp. The room is full. Even the Lord Mayor is here. Do your fly up.'

Fabrizio Ciba was forty-one years old, but everyone thought of him as the young writer. That adjective, frequently repeated by the newspapers and other media, had a psychosomatic effect on his body. Fabrizio didn't look any older than thirty-five. He was slim and toned without going to the gym. He got drunk every evening, but his stomach was still as flat as a table.

Leopoldo Malagò, nicknamed Leo, was thirty-five but looked ten years older, and that was being generous. He'd lost his hair at a tender age, and a thin layer of fluff stuck to his skull. His backbone had twisted into the shape of the Philippe Starck chair he spent ten hours a day sitting in. His cheeks sagged

like a merciful curtain over his triple chin, and he'd astutely grown a beard, albeit not one bushy enough to cover the mountainous region. His stomach was as bloated as if someone had inflated it with an air-compressor. Martinelli obviously spared no expense when it came to feeding its editors. Thanks to a special credit card, they were free to gorge themselves in the best and most expensive restaurants, inviting writers, paper-smearers, poets and journalists to feasts disguised as work. The outcome of this policy was that the editors at Martinelli were a mob of obese *bons vivants* with constellations of cholesterol molecules floating freely through their veins. In other words, Leo – despite his tortoiseshell glasses and his beard that made him look like a New York Sephardim and his soft, marsh-green-coloured suits – had to rely on his power, on his unscrupulousness and his obtuse insistence for his romantic conquests.

The same did not apply to the women who worked for Martinelli. They began working in the publishing house as frumpy secretaries, and in the aggressive years they improved consistently thanks to enormous investments in themselves. By the time they reached fifty, especially if they had a high-profile position, they became algid, ageless beauties. Maria Letizia Calligari was an emblematic example. Nobody knew how old she was. Some said she was a young-looking sixty-year-old, some an old-looking thirty-eight-year-old. She never carried any identification with her. The gossipmongers whispered that she didn't drive simply to avoid having to carry her driving licence in her purse. Before the Schengen treaty came into force, she would go to the Frankfurt Book Fair by herself so that she didn't have to show her passport in front of any colleagues. But she had slipped up once. At a dinner party at the Turin Book Fair she accidentally mentioned that she had met Cesare Pavese – dead since 1950.

‘Please, Fabrizio, don’t rush poor Tremagli as soon as you walk in the door,’ Maria Letizia urged.

‘Go on, show us your stuff. Kick his arse.’ Malagò pushed Fabrizio towards the conference hall.

Whenever Ciba walked into a venue, he used a secret ritual to get himself pumped. He thought about Muhammad Ali, the great boxer, about how he shouted and moved towards the ring encouraging himself: ‘I’m gonna kill him! I won’t even give him the chance to look at me before he’ll be down for the count.’ He did two little jumps on the spot. He cracked his neck. He tousled his hair. And, as charged as a battery, he walked into the grand affrescoed room.

### 3

The leader of the Wilde Beasts of Abaddon was at the wheel of his Ford Mondeo amidst traffic moving towards Capranica. The stretch of road was lined with shopping centres that stayed open late, and there were always delays. Usually, waiting in a traffic jam didn’t worry Saverio. It was the only moment of the day when he could think about his own business in peace and quiet. But now he was running very late. Serena expected him for dinner. And he had to stop by the chemist’s, too, and pick up some paracetamol for the twins.

He was thinking about the meeting. It would have been hard for it to go any worse than it did, and as per usual he had got himself into trouble all on his own. What made him think he should say that if he didn’t bring in a plan within a week the sect could disband? He didn’t have even a scrap of an idea, and it’s common knowledge that laying down the guidelines for a Satanic mission takes time. He had recently tried to come

up with some kind of plan, but nothing had occurred to him. Even the super-bargain month he'd organised at the furniture shop had been a washout, and he was still stuck there from morning till night, with the old man all over him as soon as he tried to take one step.

He had, though, stumbled on a bit of an idea a while ago: vandalise the Oriolo Romano Cemetery. On paper, it was a lovely plan. If carried out properly, it could work out really nicely. But when he'd taken it under closer consideration, he'd decided to abandon it. To begin with, opposite the cemetery there were always lots of cars coming and going, so it had to be done late into the night. The surrounding wall was also more than three metres high and scattered with pieces of broken bottles. Groups of teenagers hung out in front of the entrance gates and occasionally were even joined by the Porchetta sandwich van. Inside the graveyard lived the caretaker, an ex-soldier who was off his rocker. Absolute silence would be needed, but when uncovering graves, pulling up coffins, removing bones and piling them in heaps, a bit of commotion couldn't be avoided . . . although Saverio had even thought of crucifying the ex-soldier head-downwards over the mausoleum of the Mastrodomenicos, his wife's family.

Too complicated.

His mobile began ringing. On the display he read 'SERENA'.

Saverio Moneta had told her the usual story: a Dungeons & Dragons tournament. For two years now, to keep his Satanic activities under wraps, he had told her that he was a champion boardgame-player. But this wouldn't hold up much longer. Serena was suspicious. She kept asking him lots of questions, wanted to know who he played with, if he'd won . . . Once he had organised a fake match with the Beasts to reassure her. But when his wife had seen Zombie, Murder and Silvietta, rather

than feeling reassured she had become even more suspicious.

He took a breath and answered his phone.

‘Honey, I know, I’m running late, but I’m on my way. Traffic’s hell. There must be an accident up ahead.’

Serena answered with her usual gentleness.

‘Oi! Have you gone completely out of your mind?’

Saverio slumped in the front seat of the Mondeo. ‘Why? What did I do?’

‘There’s a guy here from DHL with a huge package. He’s asking for three hundred and fifty euro. He says it’s for you. So, do I pay him?’

*Oh God, it’s the Durendal.*

He’d bought the faithful reproduction of the sword of Roland, Charlemagne’s paladin, on eBay. As legend would have it, it first belonged to Hector of Troy. But that dimwit Mariano, his building’s caretaker, was supposed to intercept it. Serena wasn’t meant to know a thing about the sword.

‘Yeah, yeah, pay him. As soon as I get home, I’ll pay you back,’ said Saverio, feigning calm.

‘Are you mental? Three hundred and fifty euro?! What the hell did you buy?’ Then Serena turned to the DHL delivery man. ‘Would you mind telling me what’s in this box?’

While a spurt of peptic acids nibbled at his stomach wall, the grand master of the Wilde Beasts of Abaddon wondered why the fuck he had chosen such a mortifying life. He was a Satanist. A man who was attracted to the unknown, the dark side of things. But at that very moment there was no trace of anything dark and unknown except for the reason why he’d ended up in the arms of that harpy.

‘Excuse me, what’s in the box?’ Serena asked the DHL man.

He could hear the delivery man’s voice off in the distance. ‘Ma’am, it’s late. It’s written on the delivery slip.’

Meanwhile Saverio banged the nape of his neck against the head rest and mumbled: ‘What a mess . . . what a mess . . .’

‘It says that it’s from “The Art of War” from Caserta . . . A sword?’

Saverio raised his eyes to the sky and made an effort not to begin howling.

‘What do you want a sword for?’

Mantos began shaking his head. A huge billboard on the side of the road caught his eye.

THE HOUSE OF SILVER. WEDDING LISTS.  
UNIQUE AND EXCLUSIVE GIFTS IN PURE SILVER.

‘It’s a gift, Serena. It’s a surprise. Don’t you get it?’ His voice had risen a couple of octaves.

‘Who for? I reckon you’ve lost it.’

‘Who for? Who could it be for? Have a guess?’

‘What would I know . . .?’

‘For your father!’

There was a moment of silence. ‘My father? What would he do with this sword?’

‘What else could he do? He can hang it over the fireplace, can’t he?’

‘Over the fireplace? In the mountains, you mean? In the chalet up on Rocca Raso?’

‘Exactly.’

Serena’s voice softened instantly. ‘Oh . . . I didn’t expect you to be so sweet and thoughtful. Pussycat, sometimes you really know how to surprise me.’

‘I have to hang up now because I shouldn’t talk on the mobile while I’m driving.’

‘All right, pussycat. But come home quickly.’



Saverio hung up and threw the phone into the glove compartment.

## 4

In the conference hall of Villa Malaparte there were people everywhere. Many stood along the side corridors. Some university students were sitting cross-legged in front of the speakers' table. Others were perched on window sills. It was surprising that nobody was hanging from the Murano glass chandeliers.

As soon as the first photographer spotted the writer, the flashes started popping. Three hundred heads turned and there was a moment of silence. Then, slowly, a murmur rose. Ciba walked down the aisle while six hundred eyes watched him. He turned backwards for a second, lowered his head, touched his ear lobe and put on a fearful expression, trying to appear slightly awkward and embarrassed. The message his body language sent out was simple: *I am the greatest living writer on earth, and yet even I can run late because, despite everything, I am a normal person. Just like you all are.* He looked exactly the way he wanted. Young, troubled, with his head in the clouds. With his tweed jacket worn through at the elbow and his baggy trousers two sizes too big (he had them made in a kibbutz near the Dead Sea), with his waistcoat bought in a charity shop on Portobello Road, with his old Church shoes, which had been given to him the day he graduated from university, with his nose that was just a little too big for his face and that wild tuft of hair that fell over his green eyes. A star. An English actor who had been given the gift of writing like a god.

As he moved towards the table Fabrizio studied the

components of the crowd. He guessed that ten per cent were officials, fifteen were journalists and photographers, at least forty per cent were students (actually female students popping with hormones), and thirty-five per cent old bags on the verge of menopause. Then he added up the percentage of these wonderful people holding a copy of his book or the Indian's book to their chest. Easy done. His was a powder-blue colour with the title written in a bright blood red, while the Indian's was white with black writing. More than eighty per cent were powder blue! He managed to make his way through the last few bunches of people in the crowd. Some shook his hand, some gave him a brotherly slap on the back as if he had just returned from a stint on some celebrity reality TV show. Finally he reached the presenters' table. The Indian writer was seated in the middle. He looked like a turtle who had his shell slipped off and a white tunic and black-rimmed glasses put in its place. He had a peaceful face and two small, wide-set, watery eyes. A carpet of black hair combed back with hair oil helped him to not look like an Egyptian mummy. When he saw Fabrizio, the Indian bent his head forward slightly and welcomed him, pressing the palms of his hands one against the other. But Ciba's attention was immediately drawn to the female creature sitting next to Sawhney. About thirty years old. Mixed heritage. Half Indian and half Caucasian. She looked like a model, but those glasses perched on her petite nose gave her the air of a primary school teacher. A Chinese chopstick held her long hair together in a dishevelled manner. Loose locks, the colour of tar, fell around her delicate neck. A narrow yet voluptuous mouth, lazily open, stood out like a ripe plum above her pointed chin. She was wearing a white linen blouse, open just enough to show off her cleavage, which was neither too small nor too large.

*A C cup*, Fabrizio calculated.

Her bronze-coloured arms came to end in fine wrists covered in heavy copper bracelets. Her fingers were tipped with nails painted black. While Fabrizio took his seat, he peeked under the table to see if she was just as well-set down below. Elegant legs appeared from underneath a dark skirt. Her thin feet were wrapped in Greek-style sandals, and even her toenails were covered in the same black polish as her hands. Who was this goddess come down from Olympus?

Tremagli, seated on his left, looked up from his sheets of paper, a stern expression on his face. ‘Well, Mr Ciba has decided to honour us with his presence . . .’ He made a point of staring noticeably at his watch. ‘I believe, if you agree of course, that we may begin.’

‘I agree.’

For Fabrizio Ciba, the highly esteemed Professor Tremagli, without beating around the bush, was a huge pain in the arse. He had never attacked him with one of his poisonous reviews, but he had never praised him either. Quite simply, for Professor Tremagli, Ciba’s work did not exist. Whenever he talked about the current, regrettable, state of Italian Literature, he began to go into raptures over a series of little writers only he knew, and for whom the sale of one thousand five hundred copies would trigger a family party. Never a mention, never a comment about Fabrizio. Finally, one day, on *Corriere della Sera*, when asked directly ‘Professor, how can you explain the Ciba phenomenon?’, he had answered: ‘If we must talk of a phenomenon, it’s a passing phenomenon, one of those storms greatly feared by meteorologists but which pass by without causing any damage.’ And then he’d clarified: ‘However, I haven’t read his books thoroughly.’

Fabrizio had foamed at the mouth like a rabid dog and

thrown himself onto his computer to write a fiery reply to be published on the first page of *La Repubblica*. But when his ire had died down he had deleted the file.

The first rule for each true writer is: never, ever, not even on one's deathbed, not even under torture, reply to insults. Everyone expects you to fall into the trap and reply. No, you have to be as intangible as a noble gas and as distant as Alpha Centauri.

But he had felt like waiting for the old fogey on his front doorstep and ripping that fucking walking stick out of his hands and beating it down on his skull like it was an African drum. It would have been so enjoyable, and it would have strengthened his reputation as an accursed writer, one of those who answered literary insults with his fists, like real men, and not like fuckwit intellectuals using bitter comments in page three of the Culture section. Only thing was, that fogey was seventy years old and he would have ended four paws up in the middle of Via Somalia.

Tremagli, in a hypnotist's tone of voice, began a lesson on Indian Literature, starting with the first texts in Sanskrit dating back to 2000 BC found in the rock cave tombs of Jaipur. Fabrizio calculated that it would take him at least an hour before he made it to 2000 AD. The first ones to be anaesthetised would be the old biddies, then the officials, then everyone else, including Fabrizio and the Indian writer.

Ciba leant an elbow on the table and his forehead on his palm, in an attempt to do three manoeuvres at once:

1. Check out which officials were present at the event;
2. Work out who the goddess sitting next to him was;
3. Contemplate what he would say.

The first manoeuvre took a few seconds. The whole of the Martinelli senior staff was sitting in the second row: Federico Gianni, the managing director, Achille Pennacchini, the general manager, Giacomo Modica, the sales manager, and a rally of editors including Leo Malagò. Then the whole gynaeceum of the press office. If even Gianni had unnailed his arse from Genova, then that showed the Indian's book meant a lot to them. Who knows, maybe they hoped to sell a few copies.

In the first row he recognised the Councilman responsible for Culture, a television director, a couple of actors, a thread of journalists and some other faces he'd seen a thousand times but couldn't remember where or when.

There were little cardboard markers with the names of the participants on the table. The goddess's name was Alice Tyler. She was murmuring the translation of Tremagli's speech in the ear of Sarwar Sawhney. The old man, with his eyes closed, was nodding as regularly as a pendulum. Fabrizio opened the Indian's novel and realised that the translation was by Alice Tyler. So she wasn't just the translator for the evening. He began to seriously think that he had found his perfect woman. As beautiful as Naomi Campbell and as intelligent as Margherita Hack.

Fabrizio Ciba had been reflecting for some time on the idea of building a stable relationship with a woman. Perhaps this could help him to concentrate on his new novel, which had paused at chapter two for the past three years.

*Alice Tyler . . . Alice Tyler . . .* Where had he heard that name before?

He almost fell off his chair. It was the same Alice Tyler who had translated Roddy Elton, Irvin Parker, John Quinn and all the new breed of Scottish writers.

*She must know them all! She must have had dinner with Parker and then afterwards he fucked her in a London squat,*

*amidst fag-ends stubbed out on the carpet, used needles and empty beer cans.*

A frightful suspicion. *Has she read my books?* He needed to know now, straight away, immediately. It was a physiological need. *If she hasn't read my books and has never seen me on television, she might well think that I am just anybody, might mistake me for one of those mediocre writers who get by attending presentations and cultural events.* All of this was unbearable for his ego. Any balanced relationship, where he was not the star, caused unpleasant side effects: dry mouth, headspins, nausea, diarrhoea. If he were to seduce her, he'd have to rely solely on his charm, on his biting wit, on his unpredictable intelligence and not on his novels. And it was a good thing he didn't even take into consideration the hypothesis that Alice Tyler had read his works and hated them.

He came to the last point, the most prickly one: what would he talk about once the old gasbag finished his rambling speech? Over the past few weeks Ciba had tried to read the Indian's huge volume a handful of times, but after ten pages or so he had turned on the television and watched the athletics championships. He'd really made the effort, but it was such a deadly boring book that it had boiled his balls. He had called a friend of his . . . a fan of his, a writer from Catanzaro, one of those insipid, subservient beings who buzzed around him in an attempt, like cockroaches, to feed themselves on the crumbs of his friendship. This one, though, unlike the others, had a certain critical spirit, a certain, in some ways, bubbly creative ability. Someone whom he might, in an undefined future, get Martinelli to publish. But for now he assigned this friend from Catanzaro secondary tasks, such as writing articles for him for women's magazines, translating pieces from English into Italian, library research and, like now, reading the behemoth and composing a nice short critical

summary that he could make his own in quarter of an hour.

Trying not to be too obvious, Ciba slid the three pages jotted down by his friend out of his jacket.

Fabrizio, in public, never read. He spoke freely, he let himself be inspired by the moment. He was famous for this talent, for the magical sense of spontaneity that he bestowed upon his listeners. His mind was a forge open twenty-four hours a day. There was no filter, there was no depot, and when he started in on one of his monologues he captivated everyone: from the fisherman from Mazara del Vallo to the ski instructor from Cortina d'Ampezzo.

But that evening a bitter surprise was awaiting him. He read the first three lines of the summary and blanched. It spoke of a saga revolving around a family of musicians. All of them forced, thanks to an unfathomable destiny, to play the sitar for generations and generations.

He grabbed the Indian's book. The title was *The Conspiracy of the Virgins*. So why was the summary about *A Life in the World?*

A terrible realisation. The friend from Catanzaro had made a mistake! That dickhead had cocked it up and done the wrong book.

He devoured the blurb in desperation. There was no mention at all of sitar players, but of a family of women on the Andaman Islands.

And at that very moment, Tremagli terminated his monologue.

## 5

He was crushed that the Durendal which had cost him three hundred and fifty euro would end up above his father-in-law's

fireplace. Saverio Moneta had bought the sword with the idea of slaying the caretaker of the Oriolo Cemetery, or in any case with the idea of using it as a sacrificial weapon for the blood rites of the sect.

The traffic moved forward at a walking pace. A row of palm trees, burned by the winter, were covered in coloured lights that twinkled on the bonnets of the Mercedes and Jaguars sitting in dealerships' forecourts.

*There must have really been an accident.*

Saverio turned on the radio and began searching for the traffic station. A part of his brain was working ceaselessly in search of another plan of action to propose to Murder and the others.

*And what if, for example, we murdered Father Tonino, the priest from Capranica?*

His mobile began ringing again. *Please . . . Serena . . . Not again?* But the screen displayed the words 'PRIVATE NUMBER'. It had to be the old bastard hiding his number in an attempt to fuck him over.

Egisto Mastrodomenico, Serena's father, was seventy-seven years old and yet he tapped away on the mobile phone and the computer keyboard like a sixteen-year-old boy. In his office on the top floor of the Furniture Store of the Thyrolean Master of the Axe, he had a whole battery of computers connected to video cameras, the likes of which would have made a Las Vegas casino-owner jealous. The productivity of the fifteen salesmen was monitored throughout the whole day, worse than being inside a reality TV show. And Saverio, who was the department manager of the Thyrolean furniture shop, had four cameras pointed on him alone.

*No, I can't bear having to talk to him this evening.* He turned the volume of the car radio up, trying to silence the phone.



Mantos hated his father-in-law with such intensity that he had got irritable bowel syndrome. Old Mastrodomenico used every opportunity to humiliate him, to make him feel like a poor wimp, a freeloader who held his job at the furniture store simply because he was married to the old man's daughter. He would insult him not just in front of his colleagues, but even in front of customers. Once, during a spring sale, he had called him a moron, shouting it into the overhead speaker system. Mantos's only consolation was knowing that sooner or later the bastard would snuff it. Then everything would change. Serena was an only child, which meant he would become the manager of the entire furniture shop. And yet a part of him had even started to wonder if the old man would ever die. He'd gone through it all. They'd removed his spleen. They'd ablated a sebaceous cyst from his ear and he nearly went deaf. He had an eye ravaged by cataracts. At the age of seventy-four years he had slammed his Mercedes at two hundred kilometres an hour against a tip-up truck waiting at the Agip petrol pump. He was in a coma for three weeks and he had come-to even more pissed off than before. Then they diagnosed him with intestinal cancer, but seeing as he was elderly the tumour was unable to spread. And if that didn't suffice, during the twins' christening he had slipped on the steps in front of the church and broken his pelvic bone. Now he lived in a wheelchair and it was up to Saverio to take him to work in the morning and take him back home in the evening.

The phone kept ringing and throbbing in the tray next to the gearstick.

'Fuck you!' he growled, but that bloody sense of guilt written in his chromosomes forced him to answer. 'Papa?'

'Mantos.'

It wasn't the old man's voice. And there was no way that he knew about his Satanic identity.

‘Who’s this?’

‘Kurtz Minetti.’

Upon hearing the name of the high priest of the Children of the Apocalypse Saverio Moneta closed his eyes and reopened them. He squeezed the steering wheel with his left hand and with his right the mobile phone, but it slipped out of his hand like a wet bar of soap, ending up between his legs. He took his foot off the clutch to get to the phone and the engine began hiccuping and turned itself off.

Behind him horns were honking while Saverio shouted at Kurtz: ‘Hang on . . . I’m driving. Hang on while I pull over.’

A motorcyclist on a big three-wheeled scooter knocked on the passenger window: ‘You realise you’re a fuckwit?’

Saverio picked up the phone, started the engine again and managed to pull over.

What did Kurtz Minetti want from him?

## 6

As soon as Tremagli concluded his speech, the audience began pulling themselves up in their seats where they had cuddled up, stretching their numb legs, patting each other on the back out of solidarity at having survived such a gruelling test. For a second Fabrizio Ciba hoped that it would end there, that the professor had used up all the time available for the event.

Tremagli looked at Sawhney, convinced that he would comment, but the Indian smiled and, once again, lowered his head in a sign of recognition. At that point the poisoned chalice was passed to Fabrizio. ‘I believe it’s your turn.’

‘Thank you.’ The young writer rubbed his neck. ‘I will keep it short.’ Then he turned towards the audience. ‘You all look

a little worn out. And I know that, over there, a delicious buffet awaits.’ He cursed himself the moment the words came out of his mouth. He had offended Tremagli in public, but he recognised in the eyes of the audience a spark of approval that confirmed what he had said.

He looked for a way in, any nonsense to get him off to a start. ‘Ahhhh . . .’ He cleared his throat. He tapped the microphone. He poured himself a glass of water and wet his lips. Nothing. His mind was a blank screen. An emptied chest. A cold starless universe. A jar of caviar without the caviar. Those people had come here from all across the city, facing the traffic, struggling to find a parking space, taking half a day off because of him. And he had fuck-all to say. He looked at his audience. The audience that were waiting with bated breath. The audience that were wondering what he was waiting for.

*La guerre du feu.*

A fleeting vision of a French film, seen who knows when, came down into his mind like a divine spirit and tickled his cortex, which released swarms of neurotransmitters that rained down on the receptors ready to welcome them and to awaken other cells of the central nervous system.

‘Forgive me. I was distracted by a fascinating image.’ He tossed back his hair, adjusted the height of the microphone. ‘It’s dawn. A dirty and distant dawn of eight hundred thousand years ago. It’s cold, but it’s not windy. A canyon. Low-lying vegetation. Stones. Sand. Three small hairy creatures, a hundred and fifty centimetres tall, covered in gazelle skins, are in the middle of a river. The current is tempestuous, it’s a full-blown river. One of those water courses which, many years later, American families will travel down harnessed with inflatable life-jackets atop coloured rafts.’ Fabrizio took a technical pause. ‘The water is grey and it is shallow and freezing. It only comes

up to their knees, but the current is bloody strong. And they have to cross the river and they move forward, placing each foot carefully. One of the three of them, the biggest, whose hair braided with mud makes him look like a Jamaican Rastafarian, holds a sort of basket tightly in his hands, one of those things made with small woven branches. At the centre of the basket a weak flame flickers, a miniscule flame prey to the winds, a flame that risks going out, poor little thing, which needs to be fuelled continuously with kindling and dried cactus pads, which the other two hold tightly in their hands. At night they take turns to keep it alight, curled up inside a damp cave. They sleep with just one eye closed, taking care that the fire doesn't go out. To gather wood, they have to brave the wild beasts. Enormous and frightening. Tigers with teeth like sabres, hairy mammoths, monstrous armadillos with spiky tails. Our little ancestors are not at the top of the food chain. They don't see it from the top downwards. They are in a good position in the hit parade, but above them are a couple of creatures with hardly a friendly little attitude. They have teeth as sharp as razors, poisons capable of nailing a rhinoceros in thirty seconds. It is a world full of thorns, spikes, stingers, of colourful and toxic plants, of miniscule reptiles which spray liquids like Cif bathroom cleaner . . .' Ciba touches his jaw and glances encouragingly towards the affrescod vaulted ceiling of the hall.

The audience were no longer there; they were in prehistory. Waiting for him to continue.

Fabrizio wondered why the fuck he had carried them back into prehistory and where he was hoping to end up. No matter, he had to continue.

'The three of them are in the middle of this river. The biggest one, the fire-carrier, is at the head of the line. His arms are as stiff as pieces of marble. He holds the weak bonfire in front of

him. He can feel his muscles screaming in pain, but he moves forward, holding his breath. One thing he cannot do, fall over. If he falls over, they will no longer have the heat needed not to die of cold during those never-ending nights, the heat needed to roast the leathery warthog meat, the heat needed to keep the ferocious beasts away from the camping place.’ He took a peek at the Indian. Was he listening? He appeared to be. Alice was translating for him and he was smiling, keeping his head slightly cocked, like blind people sometimes do. ‘What’s the problem, you are probably all wondering? What does it take to light a fire? Do you remember the history book in middle school? Those illustrations of the famous primitive man, with a beard and a thong, who rubs two rocks together next to a nice little bonfire like a diligent boy scout? Where are those bloody flint stones? Have you ever found one on a walk through the mountains? I haven’t. You feel like lighting a cigarette while hiking, you’re out of breath but a Marlboro is just what you need, you haven’t got a lighter and so what can you do? Of course! Pick up two stones off the ground and – snap – a spark. No, my friends! That’s not how it works. And these very ancestors, unlucky for them, live one hundred years before that genius, a nameless genius, a genius no one has ever thought of dedicating a monument to, a genius as important as Leonardo da Vinci and Einstein, who will discover that certain stones, rich in sulphur, when rubbed together make sparks. These three men, to make a fire, must wait for lightning to fall from the sky and burn a forest. An occurrence that does happen occasionally, but not that often. “Sorry, I need to roast this brontosaurus, I don’t have any fire, darling. Go and look for a wildfire,” says the Hominid mum, and off her son goes. She will see him three years later.’

The audience laugh. There are even a couple of brief spurts of applause.

‘Now you understand why these three must keep the fire alive. The famous sacred fire . . .’ Ciba took a deep breath and lavished a big smile upon the audience. ‘Why I am telling you all of this, I have no idea . . .’ Chuckling. ‘On the contrary, I believe I do know why . . . And I think that you have all understood why, too. Sarwar Sawhney, this exceptional writer, is one of those beings who has taken on the difficult and terrible responsibility of keeping the fire alive and handing it over to us when the sky darkens and the cold settles in our souls. Culture is a fire that cannot be put out and re-lit with a match. It needs to be cared for, kept high, fuelled. And every writer – I consider myself to be one of them, too – has a duty to never, ever, forget about that fire.’ Ciba got up from his chair. ‘I would like everyone to stand. I am asking you, please. Stand up for just a moment. Here with us is a great writer who must be honoured for what he does.’

Everyone stood up amidst the din of chairs and broke into a wild applause for the old Indian man, who began bobbing his head, looking rather embarrassed. ‘Bravo! Well done! Bravo! Thanks for being you!’ someone, who had probably heard Sawhney’s name for the first time tonight and certainly wouldn’t buy his book, called out. Even Tremagli, reluctantly, was forced to stand and applaud that farce. A girl in the second row pulled out a lighter. Everyone else quickly followed suit. Flames lit up everywhere. Someone turned the big chandeliers off and the long room was lit by a hundred little flames. It was like being at a Baglioni concert.

‘Why not?’ Ciba pulled out his lighter, too. He saw the managing director, the general manager and the whole Martinelli group follow suit.

The writer was satisfied.