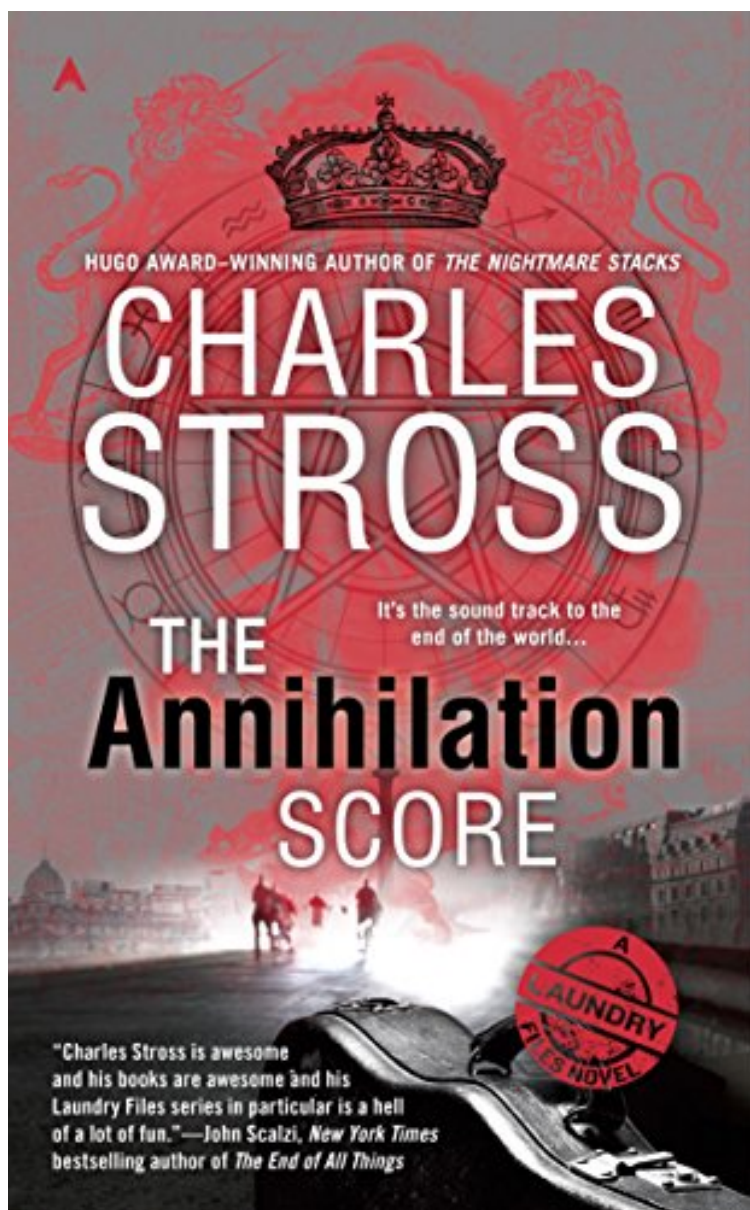


(Free) File size: 68.Mb

The Annihilation Score



Par Charles Stross
*DOC | *audiobook | ebooks |*
Download PDF | ePub

Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #120410 dans eBooksPubli le: 2015-07-07Sorti le: 2015-07-07Format: Ebook Kindle

(Free) The Annihilation Score

Par Charles Stross : The Annihilation Score before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Annihilation Score:

Download

Read Online

Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurHugo Award-winning author Charles Stross presents the next case in The Laundry Files, a weirdly alluring blend of super-spy thriller, deadpan comic fantasy, and Lovecraftian horror (Kirkus s).Dominique OBrienher friends call her Molives a curious double life with her husband, Bob Howard. To the average civilian, theyre boring middle-aged civil servants. But within the labyrinthian secret circles of Her Majestys government, theyre operatives working for the nations occult security service known as the Laundry, charged with defending Britain against dark supernatural forces threatening humanity.Mos latest assignment is assisting the police in containing an unusual outbreak: ordinary citizens suddenly imbued with

extraordinary abilities of the super-powered kind. Unfortunately these people prefer playing super-pranks instead of super-heroics. The Mayor of London being levitated by a dumpy man in Trafalgar Square would normally be a source of shared amusement for Mo and Bob, but they're currently separated because somethings come between them something evil. An antique violin, an Erich Zann original, made of human white bone, was designed to produce music capable of slaughtering demons. Mo is the custodian of this unholy instrument. It invades her dreams and yearns for the blood of her colleagues and her husband. And despite Mo's proficiency as a world class violinist, it cannot be controlled.

EXTRAIT ACKNOWLEDGMENT SPART 1 ORIGIN STORY 1. PROLOGUE: THE INCORRIGIBLES

Please allow me to introduce myself... No. Strike that. Period stop backspace backspace bloody computer no stop that stop listening stop dictating end end oh I give up. Will you stop doing that? Starting all over again (typing this time: it's slower, but damn speech recognition and auto-defect to Heckmondwike): ***My husband is sometimes a bit slow on the uptake; you'd think that after ten years together he'd have realized that our relationship consisted of him, me, and a bone-white violin made for a Mad Scientist by a luthier-turned-necromancer. But no: the third party in our ménage trois turns out to be a surprise to him after all these years, and he needs more time to think about it. Bending over backwards to give him the benefit of the doubt, this has only become an issue since my husband acquired the ability to see. Lecter that's what I call my violin when I argue with him* for what he is. (He. She. It. Whatever.) Bob is very unusual in having lately developed this ability: it marks him as a member of a privileged elite, the select club of occult practitioners who can recognize what they're in the presence of and stand fast against it rather than fleeing screaming into the night. Like the Vampire Bitch from Human Resources, and what was she doing in the living room at five o'clock in the morning? Issues. Vampires, violins, and marital miscommunications. I'm going off-topic again, aren't I? Time out for tea! ***Take three. Hello. My name is Mo; that's short for Dominique O'Brien. I'm forty-three years old, married to a man who calls himself Bob Howard, aged thirty-eight and a quarter. We are currently separated while we try to sort things out things including, but not limited to: my relationship with my violin, his relationship with the Vampire Bitch from Human Resources, and the End Of The World As We Know It (which is an ongoing work-related headache). This is my introduction to my work journal during OPERATION INCORRIGIBLE, and the period immediately before and after it. We're supposed to keep these journals in order to facilitate institutional knowledge retention in event of our death in the line of duty. And if you are reading it, you are probably a new Laundry recruit and I am probably not on hand to brief you in person because I'm dead. Now, you might be wondering why this journal is so large. I could soft-soap you and claim that I just wanted to leave you with a full and balanced perspective on the events surrounding OPERATION INCORRIGIBLE it's certainly a valid half-truth but the real reason is that I've been under a lot of stress lately. Nervous breakdowns are a luxury item that we don't have time for right now, and anyway, all our security-cleared therapists are booked up eight months in advance: so the only psychotherapy I'm getting is the DIY kind, and pouring it all out into a private diary that's going to be classified up to its armpits and buried in a TOP SECRET vault guarded by security zombies until I'm too dead to be embarrassed by it seemed like a good compromise. So I wrote it this way, and I don't have the time (or inclination, frankly) to go back and take all the personal stuff out: duty calls, etcetera, and you'll just have to suck it up. If I were Bob, this journal would probably claim to be written by Sabine Braveheart or some such nonsense, but after OPERATION INCORRIGIBLE my patience with silly pseudonyms is at an all-time low. So I'll use pseudonyms where necessary to protect high-clearance covert assets, and for people who insist on hiding under rocks yes, Bob, if you're reading this I'm talking about you but the rest of the time I'll call a spade a bloody shovel, not EARTHMOVER CRIMSON VORTEX. Anyway, you got this far so let me finish the prelude to the intro by adding that if you can get past all the Bridget Jones meets The Apocalypse stuff you might pick up some useful workplace tips. (To say nothing of the juicy office gossip.) ***Now, to the subject matter at hand (feel free to skip the rest of this foreword if you already know it all): *Bob and I are operatives working for an obscure department of the British civil service, known to its inmates of whom you are now one as the Laundry. We're based in London. To family and friends, we're civil servants; Bob works in IT, while I have a part-time consultancy post and also teach theory and philosophy of music at Birkbeck College. In actual fact, Bob is a computational demonologist turned necromancer, and I am a combat epistemologist. (It's my job to study hostile philosophies, and disrupt them. Don't ask; it'll all become clear later.) I also play the violin. A brief recap: magic is the name given to the practice of manipulating the ultrastructure of reality by carrying out mathematical operations. We live in a multiverse, and certain operators trigger echoes in the Platonic realm

of mathematical truth, echoes which can be amplified and fed back into our (and other) realities. Computers, being machines for executing mathematical operations at very high speed, are useful to us as occult engines.

Likewise, some of us have the ability to carry out magical operations in our own heads, albeit at terrible cost. Magic used to be rare and difficult and unsystematized. It became rather more common and easy and formal after Alan Turing put it on a sound theoretical footing at Bletchley Park during the war: for which sin, our predecessors had him bumped off during the 1950s. It was an act of epic stupidity; these days people who rediscover the core theorems are recruited and put to use by the organization. Unfortunately, computers are everywhere these days and so are hackers, to such an extent that we have a serious human resources problem, as in: too many people to keep track of. Worse: there are not only too many computers, but too many brains. The effect of all this thinking on the structure of spacetime is damaging the more magic there is, the easier magic becomes, and the risk we run is that the increasing rate of thaum flux over time tends to infinity and we hit the magical singularity and ordinary people acquire godlike powers as spacetime breaks down, and then the ancient nightmares known as the Elder Gods come out to play. We in the Laundry refer to this apocalyptic situation as CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN, and it is the most immediate of the CASE NIGHTMARE RAINBOW scenarioes existential threats to the future survival of the human species. The bad news is, due to the population crisis we've been in the early stages of CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN for the past few years, and we are unlikely to be safe again before the middle of the 22nd century. And so it is that Bob and I live a curious double life as boring middle-aged civil servants on the one hand, and as the nations occult security service on the other. Which brings me to the subject of OPERATION INCORRIGIBLE. I'm supposed to give you a full and frank account of OPERATION INCORRIGIBLE. The trouble is, my experience of it was colored by certain events of a personal nature, and although I recognize that it's highly unprofessional to bring one's private life into the office, not to mention potentially offensive and a violation of HR guidelines on respect for diversity and sexual misconduct, I can't let it pass. Bluntly: Bob started it, and I really can't see any way to explain what went wrong with OPERATION INCORRIGIBLE without reference to the Vampire Bitch from HR, not to mention Her With The Gills. Or the Mayor, the nude sculpture on the Fourth Plinth, and how I blew my cover. Also: the plague of superheroes, what it's like to have to set up a government agency from scratch during a crisis, and the truth about what it was like to be a member of the official Home Office superhero team. And finally, the truth about my relationship with Officer Friendly. So, BobBob? I know you're reading this you'd better tell HR to get on the phone to RELATE and find us a marriage guidance counselor with a security clearance. Because this is what happened, really and truly.

2. MORNING AFTER Business trips: I hate them. Actually, hatred is too mild an emotion to encapsulate how I feel about my usual run-of-the-mill off-site work-related travel. Fear and loathing comes closer; I only ever get sent places when things have gotten so out of control that they need a troubleshooter. Or trouble-violinist. My typical business trips are traumatic and horrible, and leave me with nightmares and a tendency to startle at loud noises for weeks afterwards, not to mention an aversion to newspapers and TV reports on horrible incidents in far-off places. Bob is used to this. He does a wonderful job of keeping the home fires burning, providing warm cocoa and iced Scotch on demand, and over the years he's even learned to pretend to listen. (He's not very good at it, mind, but the gesture counts. And, to be fair, he has his own demons to wrestle with.) But anyway: not long ago, for the first time in at least two years, I got sent on a job that didn't require me to confront oh God, please make them stop eating the babies faces but instead required me to attend committee meetings in nice offices, and even a couple of diplomatic receptions. So I went shopping for a little black dress and matching shoes and accessories. Then I splashed out on a new suit I could also use for work after I got back. And then I got to do the whole cocktail-hour-at-the-embassy thing for real. Cocktail hour at the embassy consisted of lots of charming men and women in suits and LBDs drinking Bucks Fizz and being friendly to one another, and so what if half of them had gill slits and dorsal fins under the tailoring, and the embassy smelled of seaweed because it was on an officially derelict oil rig in the middle of the North Sea, and the Other Side has the technical capability to exterminate every human being within two hundred kilometers of a coastline if they think we've violated the Benthic Treaty? It was fun. It was an officially sanctioned party. I was not there because my employers thought someone or something vile might need killing: I was there to add a discreet hint of muscle under the satin frock at a diplomatic reception in honor of the renewal of the non-aggression treaty between Her Majesty's Government and Our Friends The Deep Ones (also known as BLUE HADES). The accommodation deck was a little utilitarian of course, even though they'd refitted it to make the Foreign Office Xenobiology staffers feel a bit more at home. And there was a baby grand piano in the hospitality suite, although nobody was

playing it (which was a good thing because it meant nobody asked me if I'd like to accompany the pianist on violin, so I didn't have to explain that Lecter was indisposed because he was sleeping off a heavy blood meal in the locker under my bed). In fact, now that I think about it, the entire week on the rig was almost entirely news-free and music-free. And I didn't have any nightmares. I'm still a bit worried about just why I got this plum of a job at such short notice, mind you. Gerry said he needed me to stand in for Julie Warren, who has somehow contracted pneumonia and is hors de combat thereby. But with 20/20 hindsight, my nasty suspicious mind suggests that maybe Strings Were Pulled. The charitable interpretation is that someone in HR noticed that I was a little overwrought. Bob left them in no doubt about that after the Iranian business, bless his little drama-bunny socks but the uncharitable interpretation... well, I'll get to that in a bit. Let's just say that if I'd known I was going to run into Ramona, I might have had second thoughts about coming. So, let's zoom in on the action, shall we? It was Wednesday evening. We flew out to the embassy on Tuesday, and spent the following day sitting around tables in breakout groups discussing fisheries quotas, responsibility for mitigating leaks from deep-sea oil drilling sites, leasing terms for right-of-way for suboceanic cables, and liaison protocols for resolving disputes over inadvertent territorial incursions by ignorant TV production crews in midget submarines. I'm not making that bit up, you wouldn't believe how close James Cameron came to provoking World War Three. We were due to spend Thursday in more sessions and present our consensus reports on ongoing future negotiations to the ambassadors on Friday morning, before the ministers flew in to shake flippers and sign steles on the current renewal round. But on Wednesday we wrapped up at five. Our schedule gave us a couple hours to decompress and freshen up, and then there was to be a cocktail reception hosted by His Scaliness, the Ambassador to the United Kingdom from BLUE HADES. *These negotiations weren't just a UK/BH affair; the UK was leading an EU delegation, so we had a sprinkling of diplomats from just about everywhere west of the Urals. (Except Switzerland, of course.) It was really a professional mixer, a meet-and-greet for the two sides. And that's what I was there for. I'm not really a diplomat, except in the sense of the term understood by General von Clausewitz. I don't really know anything about fisheries quotas or liaison protocols. What I was there to do was show off my pretty face in a nice frock under the nose of the BLUE HADES cultural attaché, who would then recognize me and understand the significance of External Assets detaching me from my regular circuit of fuck. I didn't know they exploded like water balloons. Is that green stuff blood to attend a polite soiree. But drinking dilute bubbly and partying, for middle-aged values of partying (as Bob would put it), is a pleasant change of pace: I could get used to it. So picture me standing by the piano with a tall drink, listening to a really rather charming Chief Superintendent (on detached duty with the fisheries folks, out of uniform) spin sardonic stories about the problems he's having telling honest trawlermen from Russian smugglers and Portuguese fisheries pirates, when I suddenly realize I'm enjoying myself, if you ignore the spot on the back of my right ankle where my shoe is rubbing. picture me totally relaxed, in the moment right before reality sandbags me. Mo? I hear, in a musical, almost liquid mezzo-soprano, rising on a note of excitement: Is that really you? I begin to turn because something about the voice is tantalizingly familiar if unwelcome, and I manage to fix my face in a welcoming smile just in time because the speaker is familiar. Ramona? It's been seven years. I keep smiling. Long time no see! At this moment I'd be happier if it was fourteen years. Or twenty-one. Mo, it is you! You look wonderful, she enthuses. Hey, you're looking good yourself, I respond on autopilot while I try to get my pulse back under control. And it's true, because she is looking splendid. She's wearing a backless, gold lamé fishtail number that clings in all the right places to emphasize her supermodel-grade bone structure and make me feel underdressed and dowdy. That she's got ten years on me doesn't hurt either. Eyes of blue, lips with just the right amount of femme fatale gloss, hair in an elaborate chignon: she's trying for the mermaid look, I see. How appropriate. There's just a hint of gray to her skin, and of course the sharklike gill slits betwixt collar bones and throat, to give away the fact that it's not just a fashion statement. That, and the sky-high thaum field she's giving off: she's working a class four glamour, or I'll eat my corsage. * I heard you were transitioning? She waves it off with a swish of a white kidskin opera glove. We have ways of arresting or delaying the change. I can still function up here for a while. But within another two years I'll need a walker or a wheelchair all the time, and I can't pass in public anymore. Her eyebrows furrow minutely, telegraphing irritation. I peer at her. (Are those tiny translucent scales?) So I decided to take this opportunity for a last visit. She takes a tiny step, swaying side-to-side as if she's wearing seven-inch stilettos: but of course she isn't, and where the train of her dress pools on the floor it conceals something other than feet. How have you been? I haven't heard anything from you or Bob for ages. For a brief moment she looks wistful, fey, and just very slightly vulnerable. I remind myself that I've got nothing against her:

really, my instinctive aversion is just a side effect of the overwhelming intimidatory power of her glamour, which in turn is a cosmetic rendered necessary by her unfortunate medical condition. To find yourself trapped in a body with the wrong gender must be hard to bear: How much harsher to discover, at age thirty, that you're the wrong species? Life goes on, I say, with a light shrug. I glance at Mr. Fisheries Policeman to invite him to stick around, but he nods affably and slithers away in search of canaps and a refill for his glass of bubbly. In the past month Bob has acquired a cat, a promotion, and a committee. (A committee where he's being run ragged by the Vampire Bitch from Human Resources, a long-ago girlfriend-from-hell who has returned from the dead seemingly for the sole purpose of making his life miserable.) As for me, I'm enjoying myself here. Slumming it among the upper classes. I catch myself babbling and throw on the brakes. Taking life easy. I hear things, Ramona says sympathetically. The joint defense coordination committee passes stuff on. I have a what passes for a desk. It'd all be very familiar to you, I think, once you got used to my people. They're very She pauses. I was going to say human, but that's not exactly the right word, is it? They're very personable. Cold-blooded and benthic, but they metabolize oxygen and generate memoranda all the same, just like any other bureaucratic life form. After a while you stop noticing the scales and tentacles and just relate to them as folks. But anyway: we hear things. About the Sleeper in the Pyramid and the Ancient of Days and the game of nightmares in Highgate Cemetery. And you have my deepest sympathy, for what it's worth. Prosit. She raises her champagne flute in salute. Cheers. I take a sip of Bucks Fizz and focus on not displaying my ignorance. I am aware of the Sleeper and the Ancient, but... Highgate Cemetery? Oops. Fingers pressed to lips, her perfectly penciled eyebrows describe an arch: Pretend you didn't hear that? Your people have it in hand, I'm sure you'll be briefed on it in due course. Well, perhaps I will be: but my skin is crawling. Ramona knows too much for my peace of mind, and she's too professional for this to be an accidental disclosure: she's letting it all hang out on purpose. Why? Listen, you really ought to come and visit some time. My people are open to proposals for collaboration, you know. The time is right, so to speak. For collaboration. With humans, or at least their agencies. The thing about Ramona is, she's a professional in the same line of work as me and thee. She's an old hand: formerly an OCCINT asset enchained by the Black Chamber, now cut loose and reunited with the distaff side of her family tree—the inhuman one. She is proven by her presence here this evening to be a player in the game of spies, squishy-versus-scaly subplot, sufficiently trusted by BLUE HADES that they're willing to parade her around in public. She must have given them extraordinarily good reasons to trust her, such excellent reasons that I am now beginning to think that uninviting her to my wedding all those years ago was a strategic mistake. Time to rebuild damaged bridges, I think. Yes, we really ought to do lunch some time soon, I say. We could talk about, oh, joint fisheries policy or something. Yes, that. Or maybe cabbages and kings, and why there are so many superheroes in the news this week? Movies? My turn to raise an eyebrow: I know they were all the rage in Hollywood. She frowns, and I suddenly realize I've missed an important cue. Don't be obtuse, Mo. She takes another carefully measured sip of champagne: I have to admire her control, even if I don't much like being around her because of what her presence reminds me of. Three new outbreaks last week: one in London, one in Manchester, and one in Merthyr Tydfil. That last one would be Cap'n Coal, who, let me see, wears a hard hat and tunnels underground to pop up under the feet of dog-walkers who let their pooches foul the pavement. She smacks her lips with fishy amusement. And then there was the bonded warehouse robbery at Heathrow that was stopped by Officer Friendly. I blink, taken aback. I haven't been following the news, I admit. I spent the past few weeks getting over jet lag. Jet lag is a euphemism, like an actor's resting between theatrical engagements. Was that your business trip to Vakilabad? Her eyes widen as I grab her wrist. Stop. Right now. Her pupils are not circular; they're vertical figure eights, an infinity symbol stood on end. I feel as if I'm falling into them, and the ward on my discreet silver necklace flares hot. My grip tightens. I'm sorry, Mo, she says, quite sincerely, the ward cooling. She looks shaken. Maybe she got a bit of a soul-gaze in before my firewall kicked her out of my head. Where did you hear about Vakilabad? I need to know: there's talking shop at a reception, and then there's this, this brazen Weekly briefing report from Callista Soames in External Liaison, she says quietly. I'm the equivalent, um, desk officer, for Downstairs. We share, too. Sharing. I lick my suddenly dry lips and raise my glass: Here's to sharing. I do not, you will note, propose a toast to over-sharing. Or choose to share with her the details of the Vakilabad job, requested by the Iranian occult intelligence people, or the week-long sleeping-pills-and-whisky aftermath it hit me with because bodies floating in the air, nooses dangling limply between their necks and the beam of the gallows, glowing eyes casting emerald shadows as dead throats chanted paeans of praise to an unborn nightmare. I shudder and accidentally knock back half my glass in a single gulp. Are you all right? she asks, allowing her perfect

forehead to wrinkle very slightly in a show of concern. Of course I'm not all right, I grump. There's no point denying what she can see for herself. Having a bit of a low-grade crisis, actually, hence someone penciling me in for the cocktail circuit by way of a change of pace. Trouble at home? She gives me her best sympathetic look, and I stifle the urge to swear and dump the dregs of my glass over her perfect décolletage. None. Of. Your. Business, I say through gritted teeth. I'm sorry. She looks genuinely chastened. Worse, my ward tells me that she is genuinely sorry. It can detect intentional lies as well as actual threats, and it's been inert throughout our conversation. I feel as if I've just kicked a puppy. All right: an extremely fishy benthic puppy who did not have sex with my husband seven years ago when they were destiny-entangled and sent on an insane mission to the Caribbean to smoke out a mad billionaire who was trying to take over the world on behalf of his fluffy white cat. Its just, he was so happy to be with you, you know? We are so not going to fail the Bechdel test in public at a diplomatic reception, dear, I tell her. That would be embarrassing. I take her elbow: I think both our glasses are defective. Must be leaking, or their contents are evaporating or something. She lets me steer her towards one of the ubiquitous silent waiters, who tops us off. Her gait is unsteady, mincing. Almost as if she's hobbled or her legs are partially fused all the way down to her ankles. She's transitioning, slowly, into the obligate aquatic stage of her kind's life cycle. I feel a pang of misplaced pity for her: needing an ever-increasingly powerful glamour to pass for human, losing the ability to walk, internal organs rearranging themselves into new and unfamiliar structures. Why did I feel threatened by her? Oh yes, that. Spending a week destiny-entangled with someone in and out of their head telepathically, among other things is supposed to be like spending a year married to them. And Ramona was thoroughly entangled with Bob for a while. But that was most of a decade ago, and people change, and it's all water that flowed under the bridge before I married him, and I don't like to think of myself as an obsessive/intransigent bitch, and Mermaid Ramona probably isn't even anatomically stop thinking about that compatible anymore. Let's go and find a tub you can curl up in while we swap war stories. Yes, let's, she agrees, and leans on my arm for balance. You can tell me all about the bright lights in the big city I haven't been further inland than Aberdeen harbor in years and I can fill you in on what the fishwraps have been pushing. The vigilantes would be funny if they weren't so sad...***The accommodation on this former oil rig has, as I've mentioned, been heavily tailored towards its new function. Ramona and I make our way out through a couple of utilitarian-looking steel bulkhead doors, onto the walkway that surrounds the upper level of the reception area like a horseshoe-shaped verandah. The ubiquitous they have drilled holes in the deck and installed generously proportioned whirlpool spa tubs, with adjacent dry seating and poolside tables for those of us with an aversion to horrifying dry cleaning bills. And there's a transparent perspex screen to protect us from the worst of the wind. I help Ramona into one of the tubs her dress is, unsurprisingly, water-resistant then collapse upon a strategically positioned chaise alongside. It's a near-cloudless spring evening on the North Sea and we're fifty meters above the wave crests: the view of the sunset is amazing, astonishing, adjectivally exhausting. I run out of superlatives halfway through my second glass. Ramona, it turns out, is a well-informed meteorology nerd. She points out cloud structures to me and explains about the North Atlantic thermohaline circulation and frontal weather systems. We get quietly, pleasantly drunk together, and by the end of the third drink a number of hatchets have been picked up, collaboratively discussed, and permanently re-interred in lead-lined coffins. It's easy to forget that I've harbored an unacknowledged grudge against her for years: hard to remember how long it's been since I last had any kind of heart-to-heart with a girlfriend who understands what it is that I do. Unfortunately I now need to curtail this account of our discussion because, drunk or not, diplomatic or not, some of the subjects we touched on are so far above your pay grade that it isn't funny. However, I think it is safe to say that BLUE HADES are concerned about CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN and are positioning their human-compatible assets including Ramona to keep a closer eye on our activities. They are (whisper this) actively cooperating, and you may see more joint liaison committees meeting in the next year than in the previous six decades combined. So it would behoove you to pay attention to whatever you're told in diversity awareness training courses about dealing with folks with gray, scaly skin and an affinity for outfits featuring high, opaque necklines. Beyond that, however, my lips are sealed.***I'm in my narrow oil riggers bunk bed by midnight, lights out and head spinning pleasantly from the fizz and the craic. For the first time in weeks I am relaxed. There is congenial company, a job to do which involves nothing more onerous than staying awake during committee meetings, sedate middle-aged partying in the evenings, and zero possibility whatsoever that I will be hauled out of bed by a dead-of-night phone call in order to go and fight nightmares. What more can a girl ask for? (Well, the bed could be wider for one thing, and half-occupied by a sleeping husband for another. That would be an improvement, as long

as he isnt stressing out about committee meetings and co-workers and things that go bump in the night. (We both do it, and sometimes we actually make each other worse.) But anyway: thats a trade-offblessed peace and anxiety-free quiet against the security blanket effect of being able to reach out in the night and connect.

And right now, peace and quiet is winning by a hairs breadth.)Lecter is tucked away in his case, which in turn is locked inside the not-insubstantial gun cabinet that I found in my room when I arrived. I can feel his dreams, tickling at the back of my head: disturbing but muted echoes of Vakilabad. I feel slightly guilty that

I havent taken him out for practice inis it really two days? Two days without tuning up? It seems like an eternity. But hes quiescent right now, even gluttoned, as if in a food coma. Thats good. It means I can ignore his hunger for a while.So I doze off to sleep. And I dream.Did you know that keeping a work journal like thisonly to be read after ones demise can be therapeutic?Let me tell you about my fucking dreams.Lecter talks to me in my dreams. Like this one:Im dancing and its black and white and its a waltz, the last waltz at the Vienna Opera Ballspot the stack of clichés, my internal critic snarks. My partner and I have the floor to ourselves, and we are lit by a lighting rig infinitely high above us that casts a spot as pitiless and harsh as the supernova glare of a dying star. My partner is a full head taller than me, so Im eye-to-eye with the ivory knot of his tieeyes, white tie and tails, very 1890s. Im wearing an elaborate gown that probably came out of a glass cabinet at the VA, fit for a long-dead Archdukes mistress. I cant see his face and hes clearly not Bob (Bob has two left feet) for he leads me in graceful loops, holding me in a grip as strong as spring steel. I let him lead, feeling passive, head whirling (or is that the Bucks Fizz I put away earlier?), positively recumbent as he glides around the floor. Its a two-step in 3/4 time, rather old-fashioned and easy enough to keep up with, but I cant place the composition: it reminds me of von Weber, only... not. As we twirl briefly close to the edge of the stage, I glance into the umbral shadows of the orchestra pit, past my partners occlusive shoulder.

There are gaps in the orchestra, like teeth missing from a skull. A faint aroma of musty compost, overlaid with a graveyard tang. The musicians are dead and largely decomposed, swaying in the grip of their instruments, retaining only such body parts as the performance requires. The lead violins seat gapes empty.***We havent played today,*** Lecter whispers inside my head.I know. I lean my chin against his shoulder as he holds me tight, spinning before the empty eye sockets of the bone orchestra. Its easy to melt into his grip: hes a wonderful dancer and his iron embrace locks me in like my antique gowns stays.***You shall join the orchestra eventually. Its your destiny.*** He means the orchestra of his victims, the musicians he has twisted and killed over the decades since his grisly genesis in Erich Zahns workshop in 1931. He was created at the behest of one Professor Doktor Mabuse. Mabuse the Gambler was a monster, and Zahn his enablerbut Lecter has outlasted and surpassed both of them.Not this time. I spare another glance for the shades beyond the stage. We have, it seems, an audience consisting only of the dead and drained. I squint: I have a feeling I should recognize some of them.***No, my dear. This is not your destination; this is merely the vestibule.***My dance partner pulls me into a slightly tighter embrace. I lean against him and he breaks

with the dance, lowering his grip to my waist, lifting me from the floor to whirl around in helpless orbit.What are you doing? I cling to him for dear life. Hes overpowering and gorgeous, and despite the charnel horrors around us I find him exciting and exhilarating. Blood is pounding in my ears, and I flush, wanting himthis is sillyas if hes a human lover. Which is crazy talk and unimaginably dangerous and anyway Im married, but faceless strong stranger whirling me away in a romantic whirlwind race to nowhere is an incredibly strong cultural trope to deconstruct when youre so turned-on youre desperately trying not to hump his leg and get a grip on yourself Mo, this is not goodGet the fuck out of my head, I snarl, and awaken to find myself lying stone-cold sober in a tangle of sheets saturated with ice-cold sweat, my crotch hot and throbbing, while the cobwebby echoes of Lecters dream lover giggle and chitter and bounce around the corners of my skull like so many Halloween bat toys.***Bitch,*** Lecter mocks. ***You know you want me.***Fuck you.***Touch me, sex me, feed me.***Fuck you.Im on my feet, fumbling with the key to the gun locker. It contains no guns: just a scuffed white violin case that sports a dog-eared sticker reading THIS MACHINE KILLS DEMONS. Other, more subtle wards engraved between the laminated layers of the case bind the contents in an approximation of safety, much like the sarcophagus around the Number Two reactor at Chernobyl; the instrument itself is considerably deadlier than an assault rifle. I lean against the wall as I

lift the case out and lay it on the damp bedsheets, then flick the clasps and lift the coffin-like lid.Lecter gleams within, old bone in the moonlight shining through the cabins porthole. I touch his neck and draw my fingers slowly down it, across his body towards the saddle. (Is it my imagination, or does his fingerboard shudder in anticipation?) I reach into the lid with my other hand and pick up the bow. A brief measure from the Diabelli Variations, perhaps? What could be the harm (other than the risk of disturbing my neighbors,

who in any case are sleeping in the accommodation deck of a former oil rig, which was presumably designed with soundproofing in mind)? I wrap my hand around his bridge and lift him gently, then raise his rigid body to my shoulder and rest my cheek against his rest. For an instant I have a disturbing hallucination, that I'm holding something that doesn't resemble a violin so much as an unearthly bone-scaled lizard, f-hole shaped fistulae in its shell flashing me a glimpse of pulsing coils of blood-engorged viscera within but it passes, and he is once again my instrument, almost an extension of my fingertips. I purse my lips and focus, lower the bow to touch his strings as delicately as don't think of that, begin to draw it back, and feel for his pitch. Then my phone rings. ***Play me!*** Lecter snarls, but the moment has passed. My phone shrills again as I lower bow and body to the bed and rummage under my discarded dress for the evening clutch. I get to the phone by the fourth ring and answer it. It's a blocked number, but that doesn't mean anything. Mo speaking. Who is it? Duty Officer, Agent Candid. Please confirm your ID? He gives me a password and I respond. Then: We have a Code Red, repeat, a Code Red, Code Red at Dansey House. The Major Incident Contingency Plan has been activated. You are on the B-list; a Coast Guard helicopter is on its way out from Stornoway and will transport you directly to London. Your fallback coordinator is Vikram Choudhury, secondary supervisor is Colonel Lockhart. Report to them upon your arrival. Over and out. I drop the phone and stare at Lecter. You knew about this, didn't you? But the violin remains stubbornly silent. And when I re-enter him in his velvet-lined coffin, he seems to throb with sullen, frustrated desire. ***I don't like helicopters. They are incredibly noisy, vibrate like a badly balanced tumble drier, and smell faintly of cat piss. (Actually, that latter is probably a function of my sense of smell being a little off; jet fuel smells odd to me but even so, knowing what it is doesn't help when you're locked in one for the best part of four hours.) The worst thing about them, though, is that they don't make sense. They hang from the sky by invisible hooks, and as if that's not bad enough, when you look at a diagram of how they're supposed to work, it turns out that the food processor up top is connected to the people shaker underneath using a component called the Jesus Nut. It's called that because, if it breaks, that's your last word. Bob rabbits on about single points of failure and coffin corners and whatnot, but for me the most undesirable aspect of helicopters can be encapsulated by their dependence on messiah testicles. This particular chopper is bright yellow, the size of a double-decker bus, and its older than I am. (And I'm old enough that if I'd given it the old school try in my late teens, I could be a grandmother by now.) I gather it's an ancient RAF war horse, long since pensioned off to a life of rescuing lost yachtsmen and annoying trawler captains. It's held together by layers of paint and about sixty thousand rivets, and it rattles the fillings loose from my teeth as it roars and claws its way southwest towards the coast somewhere north of Newcastle. I get about ten minutes respite when we land at a heliport, but there's barely time to get my sense of balance back before they finish pouring eau de tomcat into the fuel tanks and its time to go juddering up and onwards towards the M25 and the skyscrapers beyond. By the time the Sea King bounces to a wheezing halt on a police helipad near Hendon, I'm vibrating with exhaustion and stress. Violin case in one hand and suitcase in the other, I clamber down from the chopper and duck-walk under its swinging blades to the Police Armed Response car at the edge of the pad. There are a pair of uniforms waiting beside it, big solid constables who loom over me with the curiously condescending deference police display towards those they've been assured are On Their Side but who nevertheless suffer the existential handicap of not being sworn officers of the law. Ms. O'Brien? Dr. O'Brien, I correct him automatically. I've been out of the loop for two hours. Any developments? Were to take you to the incident site, Doctor. Um. He glances at the violin case. Medical? The other type, I tell him as I slide into the back seat. I need to make a call. They drive while my phone rings. On about the sixth attempt I get through to the switchboard. Duty Officer. Identify yourself, please. We do the challenge/response tap dance. Where are you? I'm in the back of a police car, on my way through... I look for road signs. I've been out of touch since pickup at zero one twenty hours. I'll be with you in approximately forty minutes. What do I need to know? Already I can feel my guts clenching in anticipation, the awful bowel-watering apprehension that I'm on another of those jobs that will end with a solo virtuoso performance, blood leaking from my fingertips to lubricate Lecter's fretboard and summon his peculiar power. The Code Red has been resolved. The DO sounds tired and emotional, and I suddenly realize that he's not the same DO that I spoke to earlier. We have casualties but the situation has come under control and the alert status is cancelled. You should go. Casualties? I interrupt. A sense of dread wraps itself around my shoulders. Is Agent Howard involved? I'm sorry, I can't. The DO pauses. Excuse me, handing you over now. There's a crackle as someone else takes the line, and for a second or so the sense of dread becomes a choking certainty, then: Dr. O'Brien, I presume? Your husband is safe. It's the Senior Auditor, and I feel a stab of guilt about having diverted his attention, even momentarily, from whatever he's

dealing with. I sent him home half an hour ago. Hes physically unharmed but has had a very bad time, Im afraid, so Id be grateful if youd follow him and report back to this line if there are any problems. Im mopping up and will be handing over to Gerry Lockhart in an hour; you can report to him and join the clean-up crew tomorrow. Thank you, I say, adding I think under my breath before I hang up. Change of destination, I announce to the driver, then give him my home address. Thats a He pauses. Is that one of your departments offices? he asks. Ive been told to check up on one of our people, I tell him, then shut my trap. Is it an emergency? It could be. I cross my arms and stare at the back of his neck until he hits a button and I see the blue and red reflections in the windows to either side. Its probably almost certainly a misuse of authority, but theyve already blown the annual budget by getting the Coast Guard to haul me five hundred miles by helicopter, and if the Senior Auditor thinks that Bob needs checking up on, well... I close my eyes and try to compose myself for whatever Im going to find at the other end as we screech through the rainy predawn London streetscape, lurching and bouncing across road pillows and swaying through traffic-calming chicanes. The past twelve hours have rattled me, taking me very far from my stable center: hopefully Bob will be all right and we can use each other for support. He tends to bounce back, bless him, almost as if hes too dim to see the horrors clearly. (I used to think hes one of lifes innocents, although there have been times recently, especially since the business in Brookwood Cemetery a year ago, when Ive been pretty sure hes hiding nightmares from me. Certainly Gerry and Angleton have begun to take a keen interest in his professional development, and hes started running high-level errands for External Assets. This latest business with the PHANGs Photogolic Hemophagic Anagathic Neurotropic Guys, thats bureaucratise for vampire to me or thee has certainly demonstrated a growing talent for shit-stirring on his part. Almost as if hes finally showing signs of growing up.) I keep my eyes closed, and systematically dismiss the worries, counting them off my list one by one and consigning them to my mental rubbish bin. Its a little ritual I use from time to time when things are piling up and threatening to overwhelm me: usually it works brilliantly. The car slows, turns, slows further, and comes to a halt. I open my eyes to see a familiar street in the predawn gloom. Miss? Its the driver. Would you mind signing here, here, and here? A clipboard is thrust under my nose. The London Met are probably the most expensive taxi firm in the city; theyre definitely the most rule-bound and paperwork-ridden. I sign off on the ride, then find the door handle doesnt work. Let me out, please? I ask. Certainly, miss. Theres a click as the door springs open. Have a good day! You, too, I say, then park my violin and suitcase on the front doorstep while I fumble with my keys. Bob and I live in an inter-war London semi which, frankly, we couldnt afford to rent or buy but its owned by the Crown Estates, and we qualify as essential personnel and get it for a peppercorn rent in return for providing periodic out-of-hours cover. Because its an official safe house, its also kitted out with various security systems and occult wards protective circuits configured to repel most magical manifestations. Im exhausted from a sleepless night, the alarms and wards are all showing green for safety, the Code Red has been cancelled, and Im not expecting trouble. Thats the only excuse I can offer for what happens next. The key turns in the lock, and I pick up my violin case with my left hand as I push the door open with my right. The door swings ajar, opening onto the darkness of our front hall. The living room door opens to my right, which is likewise open and dark. Hi, honey, Im home! I call as I pull the key out of the lock, hold the door open with my left foot, and swing my suitcase over the threshold with my right hand. I set my right foot forward as Bob calls from upstairs: Hi? Im up here. Then something pale moves in the living room doorway. I drop my suitcase and keys and raise my right hand. My left index finger clenches on a protruding button on the inside of the handle of my violin case a motion Ive practiced until its pure autonomic reflex. I do not normally open Lecters case using the quick-release button, because its held in place with powerful springs and reassembling it after I push the button is a fiddly nuisance: but if I need it, I need it badly. When I squeeze the button, the front and back of the case eject, leaving me holding a handle at one end of a frame that grips the violin by the c-ribs. The frame is hinged, and the other end holds the bow by a clip. With my right hand, I grasp the scroll and raise the violin to my shoulder, then I let go of the handle, reach around, and take the fiddle. The violin is ready and eager, and I feel a thrill of power rush through my fingertips as I bring the instrument to bear on the doorway to the living room and draw back a quavering, screeching, utterly non-euphonious note of challenge. All of which takes a lot longer to write or to read than to do; I can release and raise my instrument in the time it takes you to draw and aim a pistol. And Im trained for this. No, seriously. My instrument kills demons. And theres one in my sights right now, sprawled halfway through the living room doorway, bone-thin arms raised towards me and fangs bared. ***Yesss!!!*** Lecter snarls triumphantly as I draw back the bow and channel my attention into the sigil carved on the osseous scrollwork at the top of his

neck. My fingertips burn as if Ive rubbed chili oil into them, and the strings fluoresce, glowing first green, then shining blue as I strike up a note, and another note, and begin to search for the right chord to draw the soul out through the ears and eyes of the half-dressed blonde bitch baring her oversized canines at me. Shes young and sharp-featured and hungry for blood, filled with an appetite that suggests a natural chord in the key of Lecteroh yes, he knows what to do with her with Mhari, thats her name, isnt it? Bobs bunny-boiler ex from hell, long since banished, latterly returned triumphant to the organization with an MBA and a little coterie of blood-sucking merchant banker IT minions. I put it all together in a single instant, and its enough to make my skull pop with rage even as my heart freezes over. Code Red, Bob damaged, and I get home to find this manipulative bitch in my home, half-dressed bare feet, black mini-dress, disheveled as if shes just dont go there I adjust my grip, tense my fingers, summoning up the killing rage as I prepare to let Lecter off his leash. Stand down! Its Bob. As I stare at Mhari I experience a strange shift in perspective, as if Im staring at a Rubin vase: the meaning of what Im seeing inverts. She crouches before me on her knees, looking up at me like a puppy thats just shit its owners bed and doesnt know what to do. Her face is a snarl no, a smile of terror. Im older than she is, and since becoming a PHANG she looks younger than her years, barely out of her teens: shes baring her teeth ingratiatingly, the way pretty girls are trained to. As if you can talk your way out of any situation, however bad, with a pretty smile and a simper. The wards are intact. Bob must have invited her in. I am so stricken by the implicit betrayal that I stand frozen, pointing Lecter at her like a dummy until Bob throws himself across my line of fire. Hes wearing his threadbare dressing gown and his hair is tousled. He gasps out nonsense phrases that dont signify anything: We had an internal threat! I told her she could stay here! The threat situation was resolved about three hours ago at the New Annex! Shes about to leave. Its true, she whines, panic driving her words at me: there was an elder inside the Laundry he was sending a vampire hunter to murder all the PHANGs Bob said he must have access to the personnel records this would be the last place a vampire hunter would look for me Ive been sleeping in the living room Ill just get my stuff and be going Shes contemptible. But theres someone else here, isnt there? I make eye contact with Bob. Is. This. True? Did you really bring her back here? Is this really what it looks like? Bob seems to make his mind up about something. Yes, he says crisply. I stare at him, trying to understand whats happened. The bitch scrambles backwards, into the living room and out of sight: I ignore her. Shes a vampire and she could be gearing up to re-plumb my jugular for all I know, but I find that I simply dont give a fuck. The enormity of Bobs betrayal is a Berlin Wall between us, standing like a vast slab of irrefragible concrete, impossible to bridge. You didnt email, I tell him. Why didnt you email? I thought you were on a His eyes track towards the living room door. Every momentary saccade is like a coil of barbed wire tightening around my heart. Out of contact. Thats not the point, I say. You invited that thing into our house. I gesture, carelessly swinging Lecter to bear on the living room doorway. The vampire whimpers quietly. Good. Shes a member of non-operational staff who has contracted an unfortunate but controllable medical condition, Mo. We have a duty to look after our own. His hypocrisy is breathtaking. Yes well, I can see exactly how important that is to you. The thing in the living room is moving around, doing something. I lean around the doorway. You, I call. ***It cant hear you,*** Lecter tells me. ***You can only get her attention in one way. Allow me?*** I rest the bow lightly across the bridge and tweak gently, between two fingers. Lecter obliges, singing a soul into torment. Keep away from him, you bitch, I call through the doorway. The vampire moans. Stop hurting her, someone is saying. I keep moving the bow. Its not something I can control: the notes want to flow. Stop! Bob sounds upset. I cant The bow drags my fingers along behind it, burning them. Im bleeding. The strings are glowing and the vampire is screaming in pain. I try to lock my wrist in place but the bow is fighting me. I try to open my fingers, to drop the bow. It wont let me! ***You want me to do this,*** Lecter assures me. His voice is an echo of my father (dead for many years), kindly, avuncular, controlling. ***This is simply what you want.*** Stop, says Bob, in a tongue and a voice I have never felt from him before. He grabs my right elbow and pinches hard: pain stabs up my arm. Theres a rattling crash from the living room as the Vampire Bitch from Human Resources legs it through the bay window and runs screaming into the predawn light. ***Mistress, you will obey,*** hisses Lecter, and theres a cramp in my side as he forces me to turn, raising his body and bringing it to bear on my husband in a moment of horror Stop, Bob repeats. Hes speaking Old Enochian; not a language I thought he was fluent in. Theres something very weird and unpleasantly familiar about his accent. I shake my head. Youre hurting me. Im sorry. He loosens his grip on my elbow but doesnt let go. Something inside me feels broken. Did you have sex with her? I have to ask, God help me. No. I drop the bow. My fingers tingle and throb and dont want to work properly. They feel wet. Im bleeding. I finally manage to unkink my elbow and put down the violin.

Blood is trickling along its neck, threatening to stain the scrimshaw. You're bleeding. Bob sounds shocked. Let me get you a towel. He vanishes up the hall corridor and I manage to bend down and lay the violin on top of its case. I don't trust myself to think or to speak or to feel. I'm numb. Is he telling the truth? He denies it. But is he? Isn't he? My ward should tell me, but right now it's mute. A sharp realization hits me: regardless of what Bob may or may not have been up to, Lecter wants me to think the worst of him. Bob hands me a roll of kitchen towels, and I tear a bunch off and wrap them around my hand. Kitchen, I say faintly. I don't trust myself to speak in any sentence longer than a single word. We get to the kitchen. I sit down quietly, holding the bloody wedge of tissue to my fingertips. I look around. It seems so normal, doesn't it? Not like a disaster scene. Bob just hangs around with a stupid, stunned expression on his face. She's a vampire, I say numbly. So is that. He nods in the direction of the hall door, pointing at Lecter and his quick-release carapace. That's... different. I don't know why I should feel defensive. Lecter wanted to kill Bob, didn't he? First he wanted to kill Mhari, then... Bob. The difference is, now it wants me dead. Bob looks at me. He's tired and careworn, and there's something else. You know that, don't you? When it turned on you, it was horrible. I shudder. I can't seem to stop shaking. The paranoia, the suspicion: they say there's no smoke without fire, but what if an enemy is laying a smoke screen to justify terrible acts? Oh God, that was awful. You should be dead, Bob, something whispers at the back of my mind. Lecter is too powerful. Bob, how did you stop it? You shouldn't have been able to... Angleton's dead. What? The Code Red last night. The intruder was a, an ancient PHANG. He killed Angleton. Oh my God. Oh my God. I lose the plot completely for a few seconds. Stupid me. I reach for him across the infinite gulf of the kitchen table and he's still there, only different. He takes my hand. You're him now. Angleton is another of our ancient monsters, the mortal vessel of the Eater of Souls. One of the night haunts upon whose shoulders the Laundry rests. For years he's used Bob as a footstool, dropping tidbits of lore in front of him, sharing abilities, but over these past two years, Bob's become something more: the ritual at Brookwood, where the Brotherhood of the Black Pharaoh tried to sacrifice him, changed something in him. Now he's different. The way he managed to break through Lecter's siren song... Not really, he demurs. I feel a flicker of sullen resentment: his talent for self-deprecation borders on willful blindness. But I have access to a lot of, of He falls silent. Stuff. Unpalatable facts: Bob and I have come this far together by treating life as a three-legged race, relying on one another to keep us sane when we simply can't face up to what we're doing anymore. I've come to count on our relationship working like this, but in the space of a couple of hours the rug has been pulled from under my feet. This is a new and unfamiliar Bob. Whether he's lying or not, whether he was hosting an innocent sleepover in a safe house or carrying on an affair in my own bed while I was away, pales into insignificance compared to the unwelcome realization that he isn't just Bob anymore, but Bob with eldritch necromantic strings attached. He's finally stepped across a threshold I passed long ago, realized that he has responsibilities larger than his own life. And it means we're into terra incognita. What are you going to do? I ask him. I should destroy that thing. His expression as he looks at the hall doorway is venomous, but I can tell from the set of his shoulders that he knows how futile the suggestion is. I feel a pang of mild resentment. I'd like to be rid of the violin, too; what does he think carrying it does to me? They won't let you. The organization needs it. It's all I can do to keep squashing the proposals to make more of them. Yes, but if I don't it's going to try and kill me again, he points out. I try to plot a way out of the cleft stick we find ourselves in. Of course, there isn't one. I can't let go of it. I chew my lip. If I let go of it return it to Supplies, convince them I can't carry it anymore they'll just give it to someone else. Someone inexperienced. It was inactive for years before they gave it to me. Starving and in hibernation. It's awake now. And the stars are right. This is why I have to keep calm and carry Lecter. Until someone better qualified comes along, I'm where the buck stops. And the chances of someone coming along who is more able than Ian agent with eight years experience of holding my course and not being swayed by the blandishments of the bone violin are slim. I hope Bob can understand this. It's not really any different from the Eater of Souls thing: now that Angleton's gone, Bob's next in the firing line. What are we going to do? It wants me dead, he says dolefully. I talk myself through to the bitter end, as much for my own benefit as for his. If I let go of it a lot of other people will die, Bob. I'm the only thing holding it back. Do you want that? Do you really want to take responsibility for letting it off the leash with an inexperienced handler? I meet his gaze. My heart breaks as he says the inevitable words. I'm going to have to move out. 3. THE FOURTH WALL I reassemble the violin case on the kitchen table while Bob moves around upstairs, assembling his go-bag and adding an extra supply of necessities. His footsteps are heavy and drag as if he's drunk. My hands are shaking and I have to sortie to the bathroom for sticking plasters a couple of times, but I finally succeed in fitting the case back together again. I retrieve the bow and violin, then fetch the cleaning kit: then I focus

on the fingerboard so intently that the sound of the front door closing takes me by surprise. I realize with a start that my husband has left me without saying good-bye. I shut the case and leave it on the kitchen table. To my mild surprise, I feel numb and distant. It feels wrong: I should be angry, bitter and burning and full of rage and resentment. I ought to be furious with the violin, which is sleeping smug and satiated in its bone-white coffin-case, having finally gotten its way. I should be pissed off at Mhari for having injected herself back into Bobs life like some kind of vile parasitic worm. (At least Ramona has the decency to stay away and lead a life of her own.) I should be having a screaming jealousy fit at my husband for fucking that bitch, or worse, for not fucking her and for being so oblivious to the possibility and to what it might mean to me that he didnt realize offering her crash space in our living room while I was away without telling me might be open to misinterpretation. I should be mourning Angleton, the scary old coffin-dodger. I should be having a screaming breakdown fit right now, shouting imprecations at the setting moon and throwing toiletries out of the window. But Im not; Im just icily over-controlled, methodically going through the motions. How very grown-up of me. Around six oclock I realize Im yawning uncontrollably. My emotional state is freewheeling downhill with burned-out brakes: Ill be unable to put up a fight if Lecter tries to romance me in my dreams. Also, my mobile phone is down to about 30 percent of battery charge which is bad, if Im even potentially on-call. So I take precautions. I lock and bolt the front door, arm the burglar alarm, check and then power up the protective grids on all the windows, and prepare for a siege. (The living room window, it turns out, is both intact and closed: Bob must have seen to it on his way out. Damn him for his consideration.) I pick up the violin case and carry it upstairs. We have a big old wardrobe in the bedroom, and theres a lock on its door. I bed Lecter down between Bobs mothballed funeral suit and a random selection of dresses left over from the last decade of wedding invitations, lock the wardrobe, carefully draw a basic containment ward around the lock using my conductive Sharpie, then take the key downstairs and put it inside the ceramic jar of pre-ground coffee. Bob carefully left an old crowbar under the bed some years ago, just in case, so in event of a real emergency I can get to the violin without going downstairs... but Id rather not make it too easy. Im not a sleepwalker, but theres always a first time. Finally, I use the bathroom, then lock myself in the bedroom, plug in my phone, and set an alarm for noon. And so to bed, perchance to sleep like a log. And, by some miracle, Lecter leaves me alone.***Unfortunately I do not get my full lie-in. I vaguely register confused sensations of a furry face pushing against my head, but I grew up in a house with cats and I can ignore Spooky ruthlessly, even in my sleep. But an hour before my alarm call at about ten to eleven my ears register the distant ringing of the work telephone in the kitchen. Im asleep when it rings the first time, but by the second I am on my feet, and by the third I walk straight into the closed-and-locked bedroom door. Swearing ensues. It takes me eleven rings six more than usual to get to the phone, and I pick it up bleary-eyed and panting. Yes? I gasp, certain that something is wrong then I realize what it is: Bob would normally have answered the phone because he sleeps on the side of the bed nearest the door. Ops desk. Is that Agent Candid? Two calls in twelve hours. Yes, I admit, and authenticate myself. What is it? Sorry to bother you after last night, but we have a the DO sounds reticent, which is just plain wrong peculiar situation emerging.

How soon can you get to Trafalgar Square? With your instrument? What for? We want you to busk. Flummoxed is my middle name. You want me to busk why, precisely? In Trafalgar Square? Dont you need a license to The police will cover for you. Um, it would be best if you dressed casual a mature student out having fun, something like that. My mouth flaps uselessly as I try to process this vexing not to say patronizing instruction. I dont know how to explain to the DO that most music students arent in their early forties: Maybe I just look young for my age? I sigh. Ill give it a try. Whats the plan? Theres a developing situation on the Fourth Plinth, and we need someone to keep an eye on it who isnt going to draw attention and who is equipped to intervene if it escalates. All our reserves are committed after last night, so, um, I know this sounds bad, but when I say were scraping the barrel I mean were totally overcommitted and running on 120 percent and we didnt want to disturb you but were entirely out of unobtrusive assets... Suddenly it clicks. You want me because Im socially invisible. You could put it like that: personally Id rather not, but Colonel Lockhart said youd understand? He ends on a whimper blue-shifting into a whine, and so he should. The landline phone is a 1940s-era Bakelite-and-steel assembly. If it was made of flimsy modern plastics my death-grip would be crumbling it to splinters at this point. Ill be there in an hour, I snarl, then slam the receiver down so hard that it bounces. The Laundry is, regrettably, top-heavy with men of a certain age. Institutional culture propagates down the decades, and however much we may want change, change takes time. As it happens, the Laundry is a lot better today than it was when I was sucked into the machinery a decade ago. Were part of the civil service, and were required to follow anti-discrimination law

to the letter: and for the most part we do an okay job. But as with all organizations, shit trickles down from the top, and if the assholes at the top hold antediluvian attitudes formed in previous decades, youre going to have to keep practicing your shit-eating grin until they retire. In this particular case I am forced to admit that Lockhart has a valid point. Women over a certain age become socially invisible: people just ignore us. Im close enough to the tipping point that if I dont take care of my appearance, I can fall foul of it. Its a very strange experience, being the invisible middle-aged woman. You can walk into a shop or restaurant or a bar and eyeballs just seem to slide past you as if you arent there. When youre trying to get served, its infuriating, sometimes to the point of being humiliating as well, but in our line of work..... Sometimes having a passive cloak of invisibility that doesnt set off every thaum detector within a kilometer comes in handy. Okay, Mo, you can do this. One step at a time. Treat it as an exercise in street theater, you can do that, cant you? I grumble to myself as I refill the cats bowl, retrieve my instrument, run a brush through my hair (which is lank from the seaside air and subsequent helicopter ride: slept in sufficiently that its probably on the edge of becoming a des res for upwardly mobile dormice), and hunt out casualwear Id ordinarily have relegated to housework-only use. I pick out: jeans, a chunky cable-knit sweater, what used to be a nice flying jacket of Bobs, a comfy but worn pair of DMs, and by way of accessories a Liberty scarf and a black beret that have both seen better days. Yeah, thats my boho mature student persona, baby. For a moment I contemplate going hipster instead, but that might stand out. A smear of lipstick and a battered leather handbag and Im ready to serenade the one-legged pigeons of London. I collect my instrument, head for the end of the street, and flag down a cab, trying not to spook at odd-looking low-slung black cars or random passers-by. Taxis are expensive, but Im going to take a how soon can you call by the DO as carte blanche to run up a tab. I need to get to Charing Cross, I tell the driver. She nods, drops the apocryphal fifth wheel that allows the black cab to pivot in place, then floors the accelerator. London traffic is its normal self, which is to say composed entirely of nose-to-tail black cabs, red buses, and confused delivery drivers. Bike couriers weave in and out of the intermittently stationary vehicles without once demonstrating their possession of a survival instinct; I cringe at a couple of near misses and hunker down in the back, wishing the windows were tinted. I feel way too exposed out here: exposed and trapped simultaneously. A killer on a stolen motorbike could come up behind us while were stopped at traffic lights and put two bullets in the back of my head and I wouldnt even see them approaching... try not to think about it. There are commuters on bicycles, and numerous tourists pedaling along gamely on bright blue Boris Bikes. Maybe I should have rented one instead of paying the cabbie? Tried to blend in with the anonymous hordes? It might even have been faster. She drops me precisely outside the nearest entrance to Charing Cross tube station. I thank her and head towards the confused mass of pedestrian crossings on the Strand. It takes me a minute or two to make it to the edge of the Square, where I pause beneath the supercilious gaze of the one-eyed admiral, mentally tug my middle-aged invisibility cloak tight around my shoulders, and take stock of my surroundings. In the middle of the square: the fountains, fronted by Nelsons Column. At each corner: the four plinths, three of them surmounted by pompous Victorian triumphalist statues General Sir Henry Havelock, General Sir Charles James Napier, and His Nobby Nob-ness, King George the Fourth. (Who was not even remotely as pompous as his statue suggests.) Over to the left at the back, theres the infamously empty Fourth Plinth, subject of the Duty Officers scrutiny. And the instant I clap eyes on it, I realize that we have a problem. No, make that a problem. The Fourth Plinth is one of those British affectations which we love to parade around in public as a sign of our broad-minded tolerance and love of eccentricity. Its actually just another classical stone plinth, originally intended to support an equestrian statue. Its been empty for about a hundred and fifty years because nobody could agree who to put on it. Then around the turn of the millennium, the Royal Society of Arts said, Oi, can we borrow the spare plinth? Its an Art thing. And since then its been occupied by an ever-changing succession of arts projects: sometimes a statue, sometimes an abstract sculpture, sometimes a random member of the public reciting poetry or narrating Shakespeare in semaphore. Today there appears to be a human pyramid on the plinth. Or maybe its a rugby scrum? Or a public orgy, or a sponsored die-in? Im not sure, because Im at the other side of the square and there are a lot of people between me and the plinth. But in any case, theres what looks like a pile of naked human bodies up there. Here and there, a leg or arm flops limply over the side. Hmm. I sit on one of the steps and open the violin case. Pigeons rattle and flap their way across the flagstones; I force myself not to let them distract me, even though they remind me too damn much of the seagulls swirling around the oil rig. At the far side of the square I spot a van with a satellite uplink dish on its roof and an open door, a journalist with cameraman in tow. They seem to be looking up at the plinth. I lift Lecter and his bow out, latch the case closed, and sling it across my shoulder.

Standing, violin in hand, I scan for police. There's always a car or two, or a van, drawn up around the edge.

Today I spot three vans and four cars, one with the distinctive markings of an Armed Response vehicle. They're all parked along the west side of the square. A handful of bobbies in stabbies are dispersed among the crowd, which is no thinner or thicker than I'd expect for a weekday in one of the nation's most prominent tourist attractions. No sign of anything particularly unusual, though, except Whoa! I'm so startled by what I see that I speak aloud. Nobody pays me any attention, though, because everyone else who sees it responds the same way. A woman floats into the air in front of the plinth. She's a yummy-mummy type, modishly dressed, with a matchingly accessorized baby in a buggy the size of a Range Rover. She's waving her arms and legs like an upside-down beetle, clinging on to the pushchair which is also airborne for grim death. I can just about hear her desperate screams for help above the traffic noise and the hum of the crowd as she levitates alongside the four-meter-tall slab of marble. The push-chair tilts sideways and sheds its load: a rain of baby bottles and nappies splatter to the ground. The woman screams again and loses her grip on the buggy. It drops for a moment, then swoops, and kisses the ground in a controlled landing. Its securely strapped-in passenger laughs and claps appreciatively. She, however, is not so lucky: whatever force holds her airborne raises her higher, then slides her over the pile of bodies on the plinth. Then invisible hands start to undress her in mid-air. I look around. Police are dotted around the plinth, but they seem reluctant to approach it. I look closer, and see they're putting down cones and unrolling incident tape. Shit. The woman is naked now. Suddenly she stops thrashing, as if paralyzed or stunned. Her invisible assailant floats her slowly over the plinth, then lowers her atop the mound of bodies. Oh shit. I hope she's not dead. I stand up and start to walk towards the middle of the square. This isn't a gumshoe job anymore. Sorry, miss, you can't go there. Turn around and go back. Stop right there! I stop, because there's not much point trying to walk right through the two-meter-tall slab of London's finest who has just stepped in front of me. Looking past his shoulder I spot another couple of vans pulling up, cops in riot gear climbing out and forming a line facing outwards around the plinth, like a kettling in reverse. I pull out my warrant card and hold it where he can't ignore it: Take me to your incident controller. You can't He goes cross-eyed as the warrant card grabs his undivided attention and digs in. * Er. You want Detective Chief Inspector Sullivan, boss, she's over there. He gestures. Follow me. *** A big navy blue mobile command center is busily shoe-horning itself into a parking spot just round the corner in Pall Mall, and my guide leads me straight towards it. I've got my hands full with my instrument right now, which is a problem: I think I need to call in my own mobile support team. We approach the bus just as a knot of police officers converge on it. A short woman with a no-nonsense attitude is giving them marching orders. I'm about to raise my warrant card when she turns and stares at me and I recognize her. Oh good, says Josephine, is this your mess? I don't know, I only just got here. I shrug, bow and fiddle in either hand. I feel calmer now that I've got a professional to work with. Got a call an hour ago. When did it kick off? Wait. She turns to her posse. Peeps, this is Dr. O'Brien. She works with us: give her what she asks for. Any questions, bring them to me. Now get moving. If I were the praying kind, I'd think my wishes were answered. Jo Sullivan is one of our direct contacts within the Met; she's worked with us, on and off, for longer than I've been doing field work. In fact, last time I saw her she was working for our Internal Affairs people. I suppose it was inevitable she'd rotate back into the regular force, given the number of paranormal events they must be handling these days. Anyway, if I'd been asked to name the cop I wanted to see in charge of this, she'd be at the top of my list. She turns back to me. Seventy-eight minutes ago, body number one goes flying up to situationist art-show heaven. Male Australian backpacker, mid-twenties, best we can tell. Infrared camera on the chopper says they're still warm and breathing but they're not moving and whatever's doing it likes its bananas peeled. She glances at her tablet: Were up to a count of twelve bodies now, but nobody has any idea who or what is responsible. We sent up the bat-signal for Officer Friendly, but he's not answering. Officer Friendly? She raises an eyebrow: Haven't met him yet? He's one of ours: nominally he's with ACPO, but they're stretched too thin. Probably still tangled up in paperwork and witness statements from his last big call-out. Her frustration is palpable: I don't want to have to cordon off Trafalgar Square, but if we can't find the perp Well. Let me put my kit down and I'll see if the office knows anything. We're standing next to a van with open doors: I put Lecter and his bow on the front seat while I pull out my phone and dial. Duty desk? O'Brien here. Can you put me through to whoever thought it was a good idea to send me over to Trafalgar Square without a plan? Yes, Dr. O'Brien. Transferring you now... Good morning, Mo. I recognize Gerry Lockhart's gravelly voice. What's going on? I resist the urge to roll my eyes. We have a major incident going on in Trafalgar Square and you're asking me? Something is stripping tourists naked and building a pile of bodies on the Fourth Plinth. Paralyzing them, too. The police have no idea and they're on the edge of

Sudden shouting distracts me: I hunch my head over to hold my phone against my shoulder and turn to see what's going on. Oh fuck it just escalated. Got to go, I'll call you back. Another body is floating upwards. He's hanging on to his trademark bicycle by the handlebars, legs pedaling furiously in mid-air. Portly, his suit rumpled and his mass of unkempt hair flopping across his forehead, he is instantly recognizable as the Mayor of London. Oh dear fucking Christ on a crutch, mouths Josephine, her eyes round with horror. I wince and nod in sympathy. Get him! she shouts. Revue de presse Praise for the Laundry Files Novels A bizarre yet effective yoking of the spy and horror genres. The Washington Post Book World A bravura display of intelligent action and real human characters amid eldritch menaces. S. M. Stirling, New York Times bestselling author of The Desert and the Blade A terrific pull-no-punches paranormal espionage thriller. Alternative Worlds