

prologue



24 April 1963

Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire, England

Warlocks do not age gracefully.

Viktor Sokolov had drawn this conclusion after meeting several warlocks. Now he watched a fourth man from afar, and what he saw supported his conclusion. Age and ruin lay heavy over the figure who emerged from the dilapidated cottage in the distant clearing. The old man hobbled toward a hand pump, an empty pail hanging from the crook of his shriveled arm. Viktor adjusted the focus on his binoculars.

No. Not gracefully at all. Viktor had met one fellow whose skin was riddled by pockmarks; yet another had burn scars across half his face. The least disfigured had lost an ear, and the eye on that side was a sunken, rheumy marble. These men had paid a steep price for the wicked knowledge they carried. Paid it willingly.

This new fellow fit the pattern. But Viktor wouldn't know for certain if he had found the right person until he could get a closer look at the

old man's hands. Better to do that in private. He slid the binoculars back into the leather case at his waist, careful not to rustle the mound of bluebells that concealed him.

The clearing was quiet except for the squeaking of rusted metal as the old man labored at the pump, a narrow pipe caked in flaking blue paint. But that noise felt muted somehow, as though suffocated by a thick silence. Viktor hadn't heard or seen a single bird in the hours he'd lain here; even sunrise had come and gone without a peep of birdsong. A breeze drifted across his hiding spot in the underbrush, carrying with it the earthy scents of the forest and the latrine stink of the old man's privy. But the breeze dissipated, as though reluctant to linger among the gnarled oaks.

The old man hobbled back to the cottage. His palsied gait sent water slopping over the brim of the pail. It muddied the path between the cottage and the well.

Wooden shingles rattled when the man slammed the door. Viktor didn't need binoculars to see how the roof sagged. This had likely thrown the doorframe out of true; the single window had probably been stuck closed for years. Sprigs of purple wildflowers poked out of gaps in the shingles here and there, alongside bunches of green and yellow moss.

Raindrops pattered through the trees. Just a sprinkle at first, but it swelled into a persistent drizzle. The cold English rain didn't bother Viktor. He was a patient man.

Another hour passed while Viktor, unconcerned by inclement weather, convinced himself that he and the old man were alone. Satisfied their meeting would be undisturbed; he decided it was time to introduce himself. A dull ache throbbed through his arms and neck; the joints in his knees cracked as he unlimbered himself from his blind.

He strode to the cottage with rainwater trickling through his hair and down his collar. The cottage rattled again when Viktor knocked on the door, three quick raps with his fist. The man inside responded with a startled oath. Like the others, he guarded his solitude jealously, and discouraged visitors.



the coldest war

The creak of a wooden chair and shambling footsteps sounded from within. The door groaned open a moment later.

“Sod off,” said the old man. His voice carried an unpleasant rasp, as though the soft tissues of his throat had been damaged by years of abuse. He made to slam the door again, but Viktor caught it and held it open.

“Mr. Shapley?” he said in his best Midlands accent. He offered his free hand, but the old man ignored the gesture.

“This is private property. Go away.”

“I will in a moment. But first, are you Mr. Shapley?”

“Yes. Now piss off.” Shapley tried the door again.

Viktor said, “Not yet,” then forced his way in.

Shapley backed away, bumping against an aluminum washbasin. “Who are you?”

Viktor shut the door behind him. It was dark inside the cottage, with mustard-colored light leaking through the dingy window. He crossed the room and grabbed the old man’s arm. He towered over Shapley, inspecting first his good hand, followed by the crippled hand.

“What are you doing? Let me go.” The old man struggled feebly.

A network of fine white scars crisscrossed the palm of the crippled hand. That clinched it: This man *was* a warlock. Viktor’s informant, whoever he or she was, had been right again.

“Excellent,” said Viktor. He relinquished his hold on the other man.

“Look,” said Shapley. “If you’ve come from Whitehall, I’m not—”

“Shhh,” said Viktor, with a finger to his lips. “Stand still, please.”

And then he opened that locked compartment in his mind, and called upon the battery at his waist. A subtle alteration to the voltages in his brain pulled a trickle of current along the subcutaneous electrical pathways embedded along his back, neck, and skull. It energized that potential the Nazis had called the *Willenskräfte*: sheer, undiluted human willpower. A supreme ability with which the Third Reich could have conquered the world.

And they would have, too, if not for the warlocks.

Viktor dematerialized. He reached into Shapley’s chest. Shapley



screamed. But by then Viktor had his fingers wrapped around the old man's heart. He massaged it gently, confounding the muscle's natural rhythm until Shapley's nervous system panicked itself into fibrillation. The wide-eyed warlock flailed at Viktor, trying to push him away, but his blows passed harmlessly through Viktor's ghost body. Only Viktor's fingertips, locked around the old man's failing heart, had any substance.

They stood in that awkward posture until Viktor felt the final spasms of cardiac arrest. Then he released the warlock, rematerialized, and cleaned his hand on the kerchief in his jacket pocket. The floorboards gave a hollow thump when Shapley collapsed at Viktor's feet.

It would have been much simpler just to shoot the man from a distance. But that would have left evidence. Viktor would take care to ensure there was enough left of Shapley's remains on which to perform a proper autopsy; in the unlikely event that somebody took an interest in the old man's death, they would find that the poor fellow had died of natural causes.

Viktor stepped over the dead man and inspected the cottage. The single room had been crudely divided into two spaces via a wool blanket hung on a clothesline. Pulling the blanket aside revealed a cot and bed stand strewn with a handful of personal items. A watch, a comb, a few coins. A kerosene lamp hung from a nail in the far wall. A squat, cast-iron wood-burning stove occupied one corner of the cottage, alongside the washbasin. The only other pieces of furniture were the chair and table in the center of the room, and the rough-hewn bookcase propped against one wall.

The dead man had owned few books, but he had used them extensively: a dog-eared natural history of the Lake District; a few heavily annotated treatises on Old and Middle English; and Shirer's *Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*. Most of that was pristine, though the sections covering 1940 to 1942 were scribbled with extensive marginalia.

A lacquered mahogany case not much larger than a deck of playing cards caught his attention. Even under a thick layer of dust, it was still the finest thing in this sad little hovel. Viktor opened it. Inside the case, a six-pointed bronze star rested on a bed of crimson velvet. The 1939–1942 Star. An inscription inside the lid stated,



the coldest war

FOR EXEMPLARY SERVICE AND VALOR IN THE DEFENCE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND.

Which was probably true as far as it went, Viktor mused, if a bit misleading. Most of these medals had gone to the few handfuls of pilots who had weathered the disastrous Battle of Britain, or the minuscule number of soldiers who had survived the tragedy at Dunkirk. . . . Britain had indulged in a bit of historical revisionism in the decades since the war. It had distorted the narrative, adopted a fiction that assuaged its wounded national pride and gave meaning to its incomprehensible—and improbable—survival.

Shapley had been no soldier, no sailor, no pilot. He'd probably never handled a gun in his life. He and his colleagues had wielded something much more potent. Much more dangerous.

Any evidence of which was conspicuously absent from Shapley's belongings. Viktor glanced around the room again, then turned his attention to where the old man had fallen. One of the gaps between the floorboards was slightly wider than the rest, perhaps just wide enough for a finger. He dragged the dead warlock aside, then opened the hatch.

The compartment under the floor contained several leather-bound journals along with one yellowed, wire-bound sheaf of paper. These were the warlock's personal notebooks, and his lexicon: the record of that chthonic language with which warlocks could summon demons and subvert the natural order of things.

Viktor set the journals and the lexicon on the table. Next, he took the kerosene lamp and arranged Shapley's body as though the old man had suffered a heart attack while lighting it. The key thing was that the death looked natural. Then he embraced his *сила воли*, his "willpower," again. But he invoked a different manifestation this time, choosing heat rather than insubstantiality. Tongues of fire erupted from the floor next to the lamp, near Shapley's body. Viktor shaped the flames with his mind, sculpting the inevitable conclusion that any investigators would draw.

The cold English rain sizzled and steamed on Viktor Sokolov as he began the long walk back to his car.



Ian Tregillis

24 April 1963

East Ham, London, England

Children called him Junkman. But he had been a god once.

They called him Junkman because of his tatty clothing, his shabby auto, his scruffy beard. But most of all, they called him Junkman because of his cart, piled high with odds and ends, broken radios and other electronic bric-a-brac. He hoarded junk. And that was the definition of a Junkman.

He never spoke. Not that any of the children had ever heard, not even the oldest ones. He couldn't, they said. His throat had been cut by Hitler himself, or Mussolini, or Stalin, or de Gaulle, they said. This they knew with great certainty, the kind of certainty that can be found only on the playground, sworn upon with crossed hearts and spit and the threat of dire retribution. But common wisdom held that if Junkman could speak, it would be with a French accent, like many of the refugees who had crossed the Channel to escape the Red Army in the closing days of the war.

They were wrong. His English was excellent. Flawless, without a hint of accent. He had been proud of this, once.

He spent most of his time secluded in his tiny flat. None of the children knew what he did in there, though one boy had found the courage—on a solemn dare—to follow him all the way across the council estate to his building and his floor. He caught a glimpse of Junkman's home as the man slipped inside with his clattering cart. The flat was filled, said the intrepid scout, with junk. Piles and piles of it, some almost reaching to the ceiling.

Sometimes their parents paid Junkman to repair their radios and televisions. He was good at it. Their appliances would disappear into his lightless den for a day or three, and emerge working not quite good as new. Repairing things was how he paid for food and his tatty clothing and his dingy flat.

Sometimes Junkman ventured out with a newspaper tucked under his arm. Sometimes he'd be gone all day, returning in the evening—or sometimes even the next day—the boot of his auto filled with more



the coldest war

scrap. When this happened, the children followed him down the long service road from the car park as he wheeled his new prizes back to his flat. The *skreep-skreep-skreep* of his cart called to them like the Pied Piper's flute.

"Junk man!" they jeered. "Garbage man!" they called. "Junk man, garbage man, rubbish bin man!"

For the most part, they threw only taunts and jeers at him. But the children remembered the winter a few years earlier, an especially cold season when snow had lasted on the ground for weeks at a time. (But not nearly so cold as the hellish winter that had broken the Nazis, said their parents.) That winter somebody had taken the idea of punctuating their insults with snowballs. And so, on this particular day, they armed themselves with clods of earth made muddy by intermittent spring rains.

Junkman struggled to direct his cart across the slippery pavement. And still he never spoke, not even when the mud splattered against his cart and knocked down a spool of wire. This emboldened the children. They aimed for Junkman, whooping with glee as they unleashed mud and scorn.

Until one boy hit Junkman square in the forehead. It knocked him down, shook off his trilby hat and tousled his wig. A *wig!* Peals of laughter.

Junkman scrambled to regain his hat. He ran his fingers over his head and his ridiculous hairpiece, again and again, delicately, as though worried his skull had been cracked. And then, after apparently reassuring himself that his head was still attached, he stomped over to the boy who'd made that throw.

The children fell silent. They'd never taken a close look at Junkman before. They had never seen his eyes: the palest blue, colder than icicles. Junkman had always kept them downcast.

Junkman lifted the boy by the collar of his coat, lifted him clear off the ground. First, he shook the boy, and that was frightening enough. Junkman was sure to kill them all, they thought. But then he pulled the boy close and whispered in his ear. Nobody heard what he said, but the boy lost the flush on his cheeks, and trembled when Junkman set him down again.



Ian Tregillis

Nobody followed Junkman back to his flat that day. The others crowded around the crying boy. He was, after all, the only child in the entire council estate ever to hear Junkman's voice. "What did he say?" they demanded. "What did he tell you?"

"'You'll burn,'" he sobbed. "He said, 'You'll all burn.'"

But worse than what Junkman said was how he said it.

He called himself Richard, a self-taught electrician from Woking. But he had been Reinhardt, the Aryan salamander, once.

He lived in a vast, soulless council estate. One of countless housing projects that had sprung up throughout London in the years after the war, when much of the city still lay flattened by the Luftwaffe.

Reinhardt wiped the mud from his face as best he could, though it was wet and sloppy. It stung his eyes. He manhandled his cart into the lift, one eye clenched shut and the other barely slitted open. He breathed a sigh of relief when he made it to his flat and bolted the door behind him.

He tossed his coat on a crate of electrical valves, stepped on a cockroach before kicking his galoshes into a corner behind the soldering equipment, flung his hat across the room to where it landed on the flat's only empty chair, and then carefully peeled off his sodden hairpiece. He never ventured outside without one, and after living secretly for so many years, the thought of leaving his wires exposed to the world gave him a frisson of anxiety. As did the possibility those miserable whelps outside had caused damage.

The wires had frayed over the years. The cloth insulation wasn't suited to decades in the field. But of course, that had never been the intent; if things had gone the way they were meant to, Reinhardt and the others would have had ample access to replacements and upgrades. He inspected the wires daily, wrapping them with new electrical tape as needed. But he would never be able to fix damage to the sockets where the wires entered his skull. It was hard enough to *see* the sockets, sifting through his hair while holding a mirror in the bathroom. If the children had damaged those, Reinhardt's dream of recovering his godhood would be permanently extinguished.



the coldest war

To think he might have endured so many humiliations, countless degradations, only to have his goal rendered unreachable by a single child . . . Another unwelcome reminder of how far he had fallen. Of how vulnerable he had become. How *mundane*. But the wires and sockets were undamaged.

Reinhardt breathed a deeper sigh of relief; it ended with a shudder and a sob. He struggled to compose himself, to draw upon an emotional Willenskräfte, while secretly glad Doctor von Westarp wasn't there to observe his weakness.

There had been a time when he could have—*would* have—torched the little monsters outside with a single thought. Back when he had been the pinnacle of German science and technology, something more than a man. Terrible miracles had been his specialty.

Dinner was a bowl of white rice with tomato and, as a treat to himself, the rest of a bockwurst he'd been saving in the icebox. It lifted his spirits, reminded him of home. In the earliest years of his exile, when London still carried fresh scars from the Blitz, German food couldn't be found for any price. That was changing, but slowly.

After dinner, he sorted through the odds and ends he'd brought home. He'd been gone for two days, and assaulted by the little bastards who infested this place when he returned, but it was worth it. The Royal Air Force had decommissioned an outpost down near Newchurch, one of the original Chain Home stations dating from the war. It was one of the last to be replaced with a more modern and sophisticated radar post that could peer deeper into Socialist Europe. Such posts would provide a futile first warning if a wave of Ilyushin bombers and their MiG escorts started heading for Britain.

The decommissioned radar station had meant a wealth of electronic equipment practically free for the taking, pence on the pound. The sensitive equipment had been carted away long before any civilians set foot on the premises. But Reinhardt didn't care about any of that—it would have been the high-frequency circuitry, microwave generators, and other esoteric things. What Reinhardt sought was also esoteric, but wouldn't be found in a newspaper advertisement.

He'd snatched up condensers, valves, inductors, relays, and more.



An excellent haul, even better than the estate sale of the deceased ham radio enthusiast. He'd even found a few gauges, which would serve him well when he re-created the Reichsbehörde battery-circuit design.

When. Not if.

Reverse engineering the damn thing was a painful process. He had learned, through trial and error, how to induce hallucinations, indigestion, convulsions. . . .

He mused to himself, bitterly, that he had collected nearly enough equipment to build his own radar outpost. How ironic. Radar was touted as one of the great technological innovations of the last war, but Reinhardt himself was the greatest of all. Yet in all the years since the war had ended, he had failed to recapture the Götterelektron.

Then again, Herr Doktor von Westarp had enjoyed the resources of the Third Reich at his disposal. The IG Farben conglomerate had assigned teams of chemists, metallurgists, and engineers to the devices that had fueled Reinhardt's feats of superhuman willpower.

But Reinhardt did not have IG Farben at his disposal. It didn't even exist any longer.

They had always called them "batteries," but that was misleading. They held a charge, yes, but Reinhardt had deduced over the years that they also contained specialized circuitry tailored to deliver the Götterelektron in precisely the correct manner.

The accumulated detritus of his quest had transformed his flat into a cave. Most of it he had purchased or scavenged, but some came from the work he did repairing televisions and radios. It was demeaning work, but even gods had to eat. Sometimes he lied, claiming the device was beyond repair, and then kept the parts.

Reinhardt stored his journals in a hollow behind the gurgling radiator. When he had first come to England, he'd had no training in electronics, nor in the scientific method, for that matter. He'd been raised by one of the greatest minds of the century, but he'd never bothered to pay any attention to how Doctor von Westarp worked. And for that, he cursed himself frequently.

The journals contained hundreds of circuit diagrams accompanied by lengthy annotations describing Reinhardt's experiences with each.



the coldest war

But none of those circuits had elicited anything like the tingle of the Götterelektron. Reinhardt retrieved the latest journal, opened it to a new page, then settled down at his workbench (a discarded wooden door laid across two sawhorses).

Hours passed.

It was some time after midnight when Reinhardt, bleary-eyed and exhausted, abandoned his efforts for the evening. He brushed his teeth. Then he brushed them a second time, and his tongue, too, trying vainly to scrub the odd taste from his mouth.

A metallic tang.

Reinhardt had all but forgotten it: the copper taste, that harmless but annoying side effect of godhood.

He tossed his toothbrush in the sink and rushed back to the bench, where the evening's final experiment still stood. He worked backwards through everything he had done, searching for the combination that had coated his tongue with the taste of metal. Beads of sweat ran down his forehead, stung his eyes with salt as he trembled with the exertion of calling up his Willenskräfte. Nothing happened.

But then—

—a blue corona engulfed his outstretched hand, just for an instant—
—and died.

Strive as he might, he couldn't call it back. But it had *happened*. He had *felt* the Götterelektron coursing into his mind, fueling his willpower. He tasted copper, and smelled smoke.

Smoke?

Reinhardt thought at first he had inadvertently started his flat on fire owing to rustiness and a lack of finesse. But no. A faulty condenser had shorted out. Reinhardt realized that as it had died, its electrical characteristics had changed in some random, unpredictable way. Changed in a way that had, just for a moment, returned his power to him.

Children called him Junkman. But he had been a god, once.

And would be again.

