

Preface

1942.

IT WAS COLD. The room was cold. His body was cold. Schröder buried his icy fingers into his armpit. It was no use, his entire being shivered. He sat, staring into nothing, into the cold dark pit of a fireplace. The coals had longed burned out. Pillars of white grey smoke slithered up into the chute. *Where am I?* he wondered, but could not yet recall. The room was familiar. And so was the armchair he was sitting in. His mind teetered on a sea of confusion. He felt nauseated. Getting up on numb legs, Schröder peered out the adjacent window and down into an open courtyard.

There was a single road made up of loose dirt and pebbles that lead somewhere, he could not be for certain. The path was swallowed by the same pitiful darkness that seemed to consume everything around him. The moon above was fat, perched upon hazy grey clouds. Its color was an eerie shade of emerald green, casting strange slender shadows on the pine trees that lined the perimeter of the grounds below. The unnatural green light came in through the window, painting the flower print wallpaper, the floor, the door, the fireplace, and the armchair.

This is all wrong...

Schröder looked back over at the armchair, thinking he'd heard a soft moan. It was a terrible yawn, both sad and haunting. He turned and saw something odd, a shape in the emerald green, peeking just over the edge of the tall backrest of the chair. *Is someone sitting there? Why didn't I see them before?*

"Hello?" he called.

No answer.

Whispers came from the armchair, a thousand mumbling and hissing voices talking all at once. The whispers crawled over everything. It penetrated the walls, along the floor boards, slithering up his cold numb body, scratching, clawing into his ears. The voices became screams, louder and louder. Schröder winced, but crept closer to the shape.

"Excuse me?" he called again, sounding weak. His teeth clenched. *This isn't right...wasn't I just sitting there? Who is this? Who is this? How did I miss them?*

Still no answer.

Schröder began to gag. He smelled the putrid and nauseating stink of rot of some dead thing, bacteria, perhaps, blooming in hideous black and purple-green flowers, evaporating into the air in sulfuric fumes. His eyes watered. He could not breathe. Yet, despite this sudden lurching in his gut, he was compelled toward the decomposing muck, compelled to discover who it was, what it was, and why it was sitting in the armchair.

Do I know you? he meant to say out loud, but could not find his voice.

Schröder approached the armchair. He gazed down at the body of a man. He was young, slim, and not unattractive. He wore a black uniform and a red armband with a swastika at the center. His boots were polished to a high shine. His hair was blond and unkempt. He was not shaven. Blond fuzz grew on his chin. The man's eyes were wide and opaque as milk. His skin white as bone.

"I know you..." Schröder started, but trailed off in a whimper. He was dumbstruck by those blank lifeless eyes glaring into some unknown place and time. *My God!* Slowly, the face came into focus from the emerald-green shadow. The corpse was petrified in a horrifying scream, contorted beyond imagination. Once red lips, now chalky white, pulled back and stretched beyond human capacity. Schröder stumbled back, knocking over an empty bottle of schnapps onto the floor. It rolled and clinked against the stone hearth of the fireplace. With wide eyes, Schröder examined the man's face. *What madness is this?* On the dead man's forehead was a gapping black hole of mangled flesh and tissue and splintered bone. *Who are you?* he wondered. *What happened to you?*

Schröder moved away from the armchair, unable to look at the dead man and the blood spattered against the tall backrest of the armchair, and those awful, awful cloudy eyes. A growing feeling of

unease began to take over. The whispers that seemed to be coming from every crevasse of the armchair continued their pursuit, erupting into a deafening moan, scratching, clawing at the center of his brain. Schröder jerked wildly. He felt a trickle of warmth flow slowly down his face. With a trembling hand, he reached up and touched his head and then pulled back. His fingers were black and simmering green from the moon. With soiled fingers, Schröder traced the path and felt parts of his skull were missing. He pushed his fingers deeper to see how far the damage went. At the center, he touched something grotesque, wet, and malleable.

Schröder snatched his hand back. He screamed. He tasted smoke and ash. There was a dry itch at the back of his throat. He was shivering harder now, struggling to deny something too horrible to be true, but the truth came all the same.

"It can't be," he whispered, turning back to the dead man in the armchair. *It's not me! It can't be me. This is impossible. I am not dead. That is not me.*

Silence.

The screeching whispering ceased. The room grew as still as a tomb. Cold. Dark. The bedroom door began to vibrate in a chorus of sorrow, pain, agony, and despair. The sounds grew and grew, emanating from the hallway. It was the shrill of women and men calling out, and other softer voices, frightening sounds of infants wailing, and children crying, and the infirm pleading they all bellowed in despair and in thrashing fits of anger. The oak door began to quake violently. The wood exploded in a deafening boom. Schröder fell, shielding himself in a protective cradle. He inched back between the armchair and the fireplace.

Silence.

He peered over the top of the armchair. He watched in horror as dozens, hundreds, thousands of shambling dead things came in through the ruined door. The cream of their eyes locked with his. The dead quickened their pace. The bodies shimmered in the emerald green of the moon, which seemed closer now, just outside the window, as if it were peaking in and laughing at his misfortune. The dead bore no clothing, except for the mud and moss of earth that clung to rotting flesh. The worst were the mothers – carrying bruised blue and purple babies still suckling at shriveled breasts. The dead reached with bone

chewed fingers, grasping for some bit of flesh to call their own. Schröder could not move. He stood petrified as these things, people (*perhaps once*) came for him. The corpses pulled and heaved him up into the air. Schröder looked down into the armchair. The dead body, his dead body, was smiling up at him. He screamed and was carried through the door. Schröder desperately wanted to kick and throw himself off, but his legs and arms would no longer work to his will. He was silenced. His muscles congealed in the sack of his skin.

Outside, Schröder watched as the building he was carried from ignited in a brilliant blaze. The red of the fire pooled together with the emerald-green in a queer sundry. He watched from on top the dead mob as the fire quickly spread. Glass shattered. Flames licked from the windows. He could hear men screaming from inside. *Are people in there?* he wondered. *I cannot recall seeing anyone...* Schröder was hauled down the dark pebble path and then the scene faded and dissolved and he found himself in a dark forest, lush with spruce and pine. The dead things with dirt caked nails scratched and bit his flesh. Voices howled in a low terrifying rumble from below.

"Why..."

"Please..."

"Spare our children, please..."

"Spare us, have mercy..."

"Have mercy...mercy...mercy..."

"No....!"

Schröder wanted to scream, but his tongue was as dry as bone. His heart felt burdened. His body shivered against the frigid grasp of the desolate things hauling him along the way. The macabre parade continued down this strangely familiar path, this maze of cold damp mist that hovered waist deep from the ground. Some of the fog dissolved into something oddly more familiar. *I know this place*, he thought. *I've been here before.* Schröder clutched his clothing from a cold gust of distant memory, feeling as if a ghost had walked over his grave.

The marching corpses halted. Schröder peered down and saw a large wide mound of earth, swollen over the foliage. The shambling things tossed him upon the ground. The dead stared in terrible silence. Thousands of soupy eyes watching him, judging him. *Why are they judging me?* he wondered. Schröder lay there, unable to move. And

then the mound began to quake, shifting, shuddering. Dirt peeled and rolled off the makeshift hill. Blue-grey rotting hands came up from beneath. Reaching, they took hold of Schröder before he could crawl away. Rotting hands pinched his wrists and ankles, grabbing at his uniform. One tore off his swastika armband while other ridged boney fingers began to pull him under.

“What is going on!” he screamed. “Why are you doing this to me? What have I done? What have I done? Answer me, I demand you answer.”

Schröder watched in terror as the dead hands became arms, and then torsos, and finally heads with white hideous eyes bursting like grapes. Puss oozing down chewed cheek bones. Their teeth were broken, their bodies naked and covered in decomposition, grabbing onto him, taking him farther beneath the earth and mound. The dead smelled of yellow filth, of some oceanic crustacean. He wanted to scream. But his voice was lost in his dry throat. Schröder watched powerlessly as the dead pulled him into the grave. His legs sunk under. Then his hips. Then his soft white belly and arms, until only his head remained above the surface. In a shrill, muffled cry that echoed across the cold misty forest Schröder disappeared with the dead into the *pit*.