

## CHAPTER 1

*“Three of them can consume a dead horse with the speed of a lion.”*

Savage Nature was not the subject of Linnaeus’s dissertation.

The common house fly was.

And that morning I spotted another corpse in the garden. Half-hidden beneath the rose-bush, it was swarming with flies. The lawn and flower-beds had become a cemetery in recent weeks. I had buried a rat, two field-mice and a squirrel, intending to hide them from the eyes of Helena, and the children.

I knelt to examine the creature more closely.

A fair-sized stoat in what remained of its red-brown summer coat.

It had not been there yesterday evening when I returned from my office in town. Yet overnight, it had been reduced to a skeleton, more or less. Four or five bluebottles were fighting over the last shreds of flesh, darting in, teasing at the fat where the ears had been, pulling at the gristle as they flew away, never going very far. The naked, pointed teeth made no impression on the ravenous insects. It was as if they had no notion of fear. Armageddon had arrived for the stoat in some form or other; the flies had done the rest in no time.

It seemed to verify Linnaeus's frightening claim.

In the past few days I had been reading everything that I could lay my hands on regarding flies and filth. Count Dittersdorf's library had yielded up Linnaeus, and other useful things as well. But this particular essay was a revelation. Where they came from, what they ate, the cycle of their existence, how fast they could reproduce. They came in all shapes and sizes, and he divided them into a regular army of species and sub-species. The familiar *musca domestica*, the yellow-striped *scathophaga stercoria*, the larger *caliphora vomitoria*, and a hundred others. The Latin names spoke volumes about their filth, their habits, and the danger that they posed.

Lotingen was infested with them.

My home was invested with them.

They filled the air, settled on every surface, seemed to multiply like the locusts in the plague that was visited on the ancient Egyptians. They crawled around the eyes and mouths of my children, and there was nothing I could do about it. I had taken refuge in books, hoping to find some news which would tranquillise my own misgivings, and end my wife's terror.

So far, I had found nothing of the sort.

On the contrary, what I read called forth questions that I had never previously considered. How many days would it take, for example, for three flies to consume the corpse of a man, a woman, or a child?

Each day was hotter than the day before. As I walked along the dusty road to town each morning, going to my office, waving my hand and covering my nose to try and keep the flies away, I began to notice a host of other creatures that I had never noticed before. Strange winged ants with metallic shells the colour of brass, which attacked and ate the smaller flies and midges. Large beetles with hard green carapaces lurked in holes they

had dug in the rock-hard banks of the lane, darting out to catch the ants which ate the flies.

It was as if Nature had declared universal war between its constituent parts.

And here was the evidence in my own garden. The half-eaten stoat. It was hard to imagine such destructive ferocity in any creature, let alone one that was so small. Those bluebottles showed no intention of leaving that corpse alone while anything edible was left on the bones.

Had the flies consumed the fur, as well, I wondered.

Linnaeus had said nothing at all of the horse's hair coat.

I feigned to examine the roses, in case Helena were looking out of the window.

The blooms were dry, opaque, brittle. At the merest touch, the petals would fall to the ground like autumn leaves. Strands of a cobweb glinted like harp-strings in the sunlight, and, as I looked more closely, something else that Linnaeus had written returned to my thoughts.

He spoke of Nature's "*inevitable revenge*."

Trapped in the silken threads, twisting this way and that, a large fly was trying desperately to free itself from the mesh. Rainbow-colours flashed off its shining black armour. One wing was beating in a blur, its tiny legs pushed frantically against the silk restraints.

Like a tightrope walker, a spider ran out to watch.

With a sudden dart, it leapt forward. The beating wing disappeared inside its maw, and the victim bounced more furiously on its thread. In trying to break loose, it seemed to tie itself up even more securely.

A rose-petal fell to the ground, the spider pulled back, watching.

The fly made one last effort to escape.

With a sudden jerk, it appeared to take flight.

Just as suddenly, it twirled and twisted, spinning round and round the vibrating thread, and all the fire went out of it. I saw the devastating effect that the spider's attack had had. The part of the body that had been caught for an instant in the spider's mouth was flaccid and flat, all the colour gone, as if it had been sucked dry.

One rapid final dart, and the fly was gone.

For an instant, I was tempted to return to the house, call Helena, lead her into the garden and show her what I had just seen. Would she believe me if I told her that it was the self-same fly that had made her scream? Would she be pleased that it had fallen prey to a more terrible spider? I dismissed the idea. The sight of the victorious spider would frighten her all the more.

And she was frightened enough.

The baby was due in a month, or so. The last six months had not been easy. Since the invasion of the flies three weeks before, each day had seemed more troubled than the last. Helena roamed the house with a leather fly-swatter in her hand, Lotte confided, leading me aside and whispering the news. The windows were now kept constantly shut, and Helena would let out a scream of terror if she saw a door or window left ajar. The air inside the house was stale and putrid, as if something organic had been pushed beneath the sofa and left to rot. The children were frightened, they were kept at home, not allowed to go out to play.

Helena was afraid for them, she confessed.

I was afraid for her, but I confessed to nobody.

One day, while reading an article in French – the writer claimed that every fly could hatch a million eggs – I realised that Helena was standing close behind my chair, and that she was reading silently over my shoulder.