

CHAPTER ONE

THE YOUNG curate shivered in the cold and felt uneasy. Something was wrong but it was difficult to work out exactly what. The atmosphere for a start; when he had set out on the quarter-mile walk from his home to the church, a warm spring breeze had fanned his cherubic features and the setting sun had almost blinded him. Now, and it could not be more than twenty minutes later, it was almost dark and very cold. Getting colder by the second.

The Reverend Philip Owen felt slightly dizzy as he stood by the lychgate and tried to recollect his senses. The last twenty minutes seemed to have slipped away without him noticing. He wiped his forehead with the back of a flabby hand; his fingers came away wet and cold. His throat was raw and dry as though he had an infection of some kind. He was ill, he decided; sickening for something. He was trembling slightly and little shivers ran up and down his spine. A chill perhaps, or the flu. He had always been susceptible to viruses. At 31, and still a bachelor, he felt the years closing in on him . . . just like those deepening shadows all around him were doing right now, obliterating familiar surroundings and creating a previously unknown hostile world.

He tried to swallow and realised just how painful his throat was. He should return home and go straight to bed. No, it was better that he prepared the church for early communion now rather than face a mad scramble in the morning. Indecision, apprehension mounting into . . . fear!

It was ridiculous, Philip Owen told himself. There was nothing to be frightened of here, not in the grounds of God's house. That meeting at the church hall was to blame for all this, the way a crowd of irate parishioners had vented their wrath upon him. The vicar had conveniently found an excuse to be absent and left Owen to face the anger of those whom he had always thought to be his friends. And, inevitably, the bishop was unavailable for comment.

You couldn't blame the people though. The Church had deceived them, held them in contempt over this latest issue. Philip Owen felt the guilt welling up inside him because he was a party to this deception. It was dishonest but he hadn't the courage to tell the vicar so. It was all so glib, like the confidence trick it was.

The whole thing had begun just after the war when Sir Henry Grayne, a resident of the village, had bought ten acres of land adjoining the cemetery and then willed it to St Monica's church in trust. Church land forever, a last bastion to repel the spread of greedy jerry-builders, or maybe one day it would become an extension to the graveyard. And this might be needed before the decade was out, the way the village was growing, almost into a sprawling suburb of the town itself. Sir Henry Grayne had been a regular worshipper at St Monica's. He was a multimillionaire even in those days, his own grave a monument to his life. Philip Owen felt a pang of guilt as he remembered the huge marble headstone, now green with moss and spotted with bird droppings. Sir Henry had

invested a moderate sum of money for the stone to be cleaned and maintained regularly but nobody had touched it for the past five years. Why? Vicar Mannering had been reticent when Philip had introduced the subject a few weeks back; murmured some excuse about the cost of labour these days. The curate had been going to ask about the church roof too, but his courage had failed him. Sir Henry had set up a trust for that too, so why had Vicar Mannering launched a restoration fund to try and save its sagging timbers?

Oh, the reason was obvious. One didn't really have to ask. The Henry Grayne Trust money had been used to support Mannering's own church, St Peter's, the 'mother' church. The trustees were as much to blame as the vicar but there was no doubt that the money had all gone. The Reverend Mannering would supply an explanation if anybody had the courage to ask outright: 'The Church of God is all one and the funds were needed to support the mother church because without a mother church St Monica's would have to be closed down.' Bishop Boyce would back him up and, in the end, lesser mortals would be shouted down.

Owen felt the blood coursing through his veins, anger that started his temples throbbing and an ache to begin behind his eyes. Perhaps he wasn't well after all. But the clerical leeches weren't satisfied with just the misappropriation of Grayne's grave and roof money, Now they saw an opportunity to grab the lot. What use was that land to anybody? A pittance from the grazing rights and they weren't yet ready to consecrate it. So why not sell it while there was a boom in building land?

Owen clenched his hands until his fingernails gouged his palms. There had to be some corruption somewhere otherwise Bishop Boyce would never have obtained outline planning permission for a hundred houses on that tract. It wasn't until they were ready to put the land up for sale to the highest bidder that the villagers became aware of what was going on.

The young curate gulped, felt his stomach muscles contracting. Suddenly he was the meat in the sandwich, the buffer between Boyce, Mannering and the residents of the village. The villagers had rallied in their united protest, directed their venom at Owen, and he couldn't come up with the answers. At one stage he thought they were going to physically attack him as their fury reached its pitch. He wanted to blame the bishop and the vicar but his own courage had failed him and his stammerings had been drowned by their abuse, their threats.

Now he was back here in the darkness, almost relishing the task of preparing for communion because he wanted to be alone with . . . Oh God, no, he didn't want to be alone here any longer!

So dark, so cold; the whispering of the breeze through the tall yew trees a venomous hiss; clammy fingers seeming to reach out of the blackness and touch his sweating flesh. He cowered, flung up his hands to cover his eyes and prayed that when he took them away he would see the spring sunlight, feel the gentle warmth of an April evening and find that it had all been a fevered hallucination.

It was as though some powerful invisible force grabbed his wrists, dragged his hands away from his eyes, screamed with an icy gush of arctic wind 'Look!' Oh, merciful God it could not be. This was all a sick nightmare inspired by the illness which had come upon him with the speed of a ravaging plague.

Philip Owen could see but it was not fully light. There was a kind of greyness as though the night had given way to dawn and a malodorous mist swirled across the cemetery turning the tombstone into hideous, unrecognisable shapes - that moved!

He wanted to run but his feet were firmly fixed to the ground as though he stood on steel plating wearing magnetic boots. He tried to close his eyes to shut everything out but his lids refused to lower. A scream was in his mind but his vocal chords were paralysed like the rest of his body.

They were people, at least they had a vague semblance of human shape, came at him out of the fog, reached for him with fingers that were deathly cold as they stroked his flesh in the same way they had done under the cover of darkness. A dozen of them at least, possibly more beyond his range of vision. A motley crowd who wore capacious caps made from some kind of loose furry hide, the reddish brown fur congealed in places as though the unfortunate animal had been carelessly flayed and the spilled blood had not been wiped off. Faces that were still hidden in shadow above long belted gowns falling to filthy sandalled feet, each one of the company carrying a staff cut from a growing tree, foliage still adhering to the wood. Even in his fear Owen recognised the oak leaves, green and strong as though they still flourished out of the severed branches.

'Traitor, you gaze upon the Oke Priests whose faces shall remain hidden.'

Philip Owen wished that he could faint, even death would have been welcome to spare him from this unholy gathering. They were touching him, fingering him with a malevolence that had his blood pounding in his ears; the touch of death upon his trembling flesh!

He tried to pray but familiar, oft-recited lines eluded his crazed brain. The mist eddied and cleared slightly, enough to give him an even more terrible view. The lychgate, the cemetery . . . even the church was gone! Just open heathland with this grove of twisted oaks, their trunks and boughs entwined with mistletoe. And beyond this, barren heath stretched as far as the eye could see. No houses, no untidy conurbation that swamped the village!

The curate moaned in terror, a wheeze that died in his throat. The throng were falling back, making way for a tall, imposing figure that strode through the oakgrove. Now there was a murmur of fear from the watchers, humbling themselves and falling to their knees.

'Praise be to Alda whose power is only surpassed by the gods themselves!'

The tall figure halted only a yard or so from Philip Owen. The curate wanted to shrink away but movement was still denied him. His eyes met the other's, orbs that blazed hate from sunken sockets, yellowed skin stretched tightly over the skull, translucent so that it might have been a skeletal head, hairless beneath the oak wreath which was worn instead of a crude fur cap. The nostrils were flared into twin black cavities, the mouth a slobbering slit from which protruded blackened stumps of teeth. The robe was white, a soiled crumpled garment that threatened to become entangled in the bare feet, catching and snagging on the filthy broken toenails. Around the neck was a Bronze Age Irish gold gorget which seemed out of place in this primitive setting, yet so sinister.

'Behold, Alda!'

The Arch Druid stared into the curate's eyes, a length of saliva stringing from the leering mouth. 'False priest, you are a traitor to the new religion and to the one whom you call God. But your treachery reaches afar, and the old ones are angered. I, Alda, high priest among the Oke Priests, have been summoned to pass judgement. And there can be only one sentence for sacrilege such as yours - death!'

A cry went up, the throng were on their feet, wild beasts scenting blood, looking to their leader for the order to kill. Alda turned slowly, his narrow mouth widening into what was supposedly a smile.

'The penalty for sacrilege and treachery against the gods, as written in the Book of Edda, is death. Death by fire so that the offender's body may be destroyed completely and not offend the Holy Ones!'

'Ayee . . . ' A ragged creature leaped towards the petrified prisoner, seized hold of him. 'To the Wicker Man and may the gods receive our offering favourably!'

It was a dream, a nightmare. It had to be. The curate felt himself being dragged along the uneven ground, sharp rocks grazing his feet and shins. Head downward he saw the heather beneath him, gorse spiking him as though even the plant life in this weird place was determined to torture his body. Neither light nor darkness, the mist creeping back so that its cold dampness chilled his body. He knew now that this was no dream, even if it defied logical explanation. Somehow he had stepped back in time to a land of primitive death where he was to be the victim of a barbaric human sacrifice: death by fire. Cremation in the bowels of a wicker man, a burning living hell that had originated in old Scandinavia, embers that had not gone cold.

Beyond the grove the mist cleared again, swirled away to allow the trembling curate his first view of the Wicker Man. It was a crude effigy standing some eight feet high on a patch of open heath, a towering monstrosity that reminded Philip Owen of a hastily stuffed rag doll. Cumbersome, it would have keeled over had it not been supported by two stout stakes from the rear. He gazed in awe, his bulging eyes travelling slowly upwards from the pile of brushwood which surrounded its feet. Grotesque, the body constructed of woven straw, arms held aloft as though it paid homage to some unknown deity. Then the face . . . Oh, Jesus, those awful features, eyes that saw and understood . . . and gloated!

The curate wilted beneath its baleful stare, the cavity of a mouth seeming to grin down at him. 'Hurry, for the Wicker Man is hungry and the gods must be appeased before they wreak their vengeance upon those who serve them.'

The Oke Priests dragged him with a new haste, pulling him so close to the effigy that he could no longer meet those terrible eyes. He almost fell but was pulled upright. He tried to scream, an incoherent sound that brought jeers from his captors like nightmarish echoes of his own voice. He wanted to faint, prayed for unconsciousness that would merge painlessly into death so that when he awoke he would find himself in the heaven about which he had preached so emphatically to his congregations. Instead he remained in this living hell which only needed the fires to be lit.

The straw man had no rear, a kind of half silhouette so that the interior could be reached by means of a short, crude ladder made from stout branches tied together. An empty shell, an Adam waiting to be given life. Somehow Owen's feet found the rungs, the druids' hands moving him like a robot, supporting him so that he did not fall. Now he was inside the thing, his paralysed arms being thrust into the Wicker Man's sleeves, a tight fit that held him upright even though his legs sagged and refused to bear his weight.

Oh God, the stench; it was the foul, nauseating odour of uncleaned stables, the acrid smell of excreta and urine. He tried to hold his breath but could not, retched and vomited so that the spew ran down his cassock. Choking, gasping for breath and drawing in putrefaction; the stink of sheer evil!

He had resigned himself to death, praying not for deliverance but that he might be spared pain. 'Oh Lord, I am weak and frail ... let me pass over into Thy . . . '

For the first time he realised that he could see out of this

claustrophobic, suffocating prison, that his head fitted snugly into that of the straw man as though these ancient Oke Priests had decided upon their victim beforehand and made it to measure. Through the nostrils he could breathe the cold damp air of a bygone morning; through the eyeslits he could see the gathering of cloaked figures standing a few yards away, that tall Arch Druid gazing up at him, the death-like features twisted into a mask of sheer hatred.

'Blasphemer, traitor,' the other's words hung in the still atmosphere. 'May your death appease the wrath of the old ones. And may those who join you in this sacrilege and treachery be warned by your own fate.'

One of the priests stepped forward and handed a burning crackling branch to their leader. A hiss of eagerness came from the watchers. 'Burn the false one, O Aida!'

That was when Philip Owen discovered that his vocal chords were working again. A sharp intake of breath and he realised that his speech had returned. He did not scream. Indeed, he was beyond the terror barrier. Instead he spoke with a voice that had no more than a slight quaver in it as though he was addressing the congregation at Matins. Slightly condescending, avoiding the temptation to blaspheme and ask God to forgive them for they knew not what they did. They knew all right and nothing on earth was going to stop them from burning him alive!

Tell me, O priests of an old religion, why you do this to me. Kill me if you will but at least explain to me why I am to die. Surely you would not spill innocent blood.'

'Innocence?' The one called Aldastared up with shocked disbelief, holding the flaming brand at arms' length so that the billowing, pungent smoke did not envelop him. 'You are not innocent, blasphemer. You have been tried and found guilty by the Oke Priests and there can be no reversal of their findings.'

'But what have I done? In the name of God, tell me!'

'In the name of the old ones, at the risk of trying their patience, I will tell you.' Alda moved nearer, an expression of annoyance at this unnecessary delay on his stretched countenance. 'Your new religion replaced our ancient one, which we accepted because the new race demanded it. But we, the Oke Priests, were not dead. We lived on in this place, tolerated your Church because your God was merely a symbol of our gods. But now . . . now greed has prevailed and this sacred land is to be used for worship no more, desecrated and made into a place for those who walk with sin to live upon! Deny that if though wilt, O false priest.'

The Reverend Philip Owen swallowed, experienced a sudden rush of guilt. The old man, whoever he was, spoke the truth. To deny it would be to lie in the eyes of his own God as well as their gods.

The Bishop . . . the vicar,' the curate found himself blustering like a guilty schoolboy discovered in an empty common room with a cigarette smouldering in an ashtray. Protests only confirmed his guilt in the eyes of his captors.

'You plead for mercy but your pleas are in vain,' Alda snarled and in one movement tossed the blazing branch amongst the brushwood around the Wicker Man's feet. 'The guilt of your fellows is also your guilt. Now you die and so will they if they do not heed this warning!'

Philip Owen closed his eyes, heard the crackling and spitting of dry kindling, smelled the woody smoke drifting up from beneath him. He coughed, retched, tasted bile; looked out again through those eyeholes and saw the gathering half hidden by the swirling smoke. A noise reached his ears, a monotonous chanting sound like some kind of tuneless psalm.

One last determined effort at self-survival, but his muscles refused to respond. It was as though his whole body had been drugged, leaving only his mind free to suffer the tortures of fire. A brief moment of sheer panic and after that he did not fight against the inevitable again. It was becoming unbearably hot in here and no longer could he see outside. His eyes streamed and smarted but he was unable to close them.

'Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil ... * He wondered if he spoke

aloud but it was impossible to tell because that chanting outside had risen to a deafening crescendo. A shout, a word or a name that was recognisable: 'Edda . . . Edda . . . Edda

Now he was clinging to a frail thread of life, fighting to stay conscious even though he yearned for the peace of death. Screaming because his feet were beginning to smoulder, smelling his own roasting flesh and being unable to vomit.

Then leaping flames and indescribable agony, the smoky orange blackness enveloping him as his cassock caught fire and inferno roared its wrath like an enraged dragon.

And somewhere, far away, the Oke Priests were still chanting.

'Edda . . . Edda . . . Edda , . , '

CHAPTER TWO

BISHOP BOYCE wanted to vomit at the first opportunity. Vicar Mannering had done so openly in St Monica's churchyard and the gathering of police officers had not even seemed to notice. Yet, Boyce told himself, it might be all right for a mere vicar to spew in public, his complexion a greenish hue, but it was not becoming for a bishop, the head of the diocese. He gulped, tasted the sharp acrid tang of bile in his throat, and determined not to look again at that charred, virtually unrecognisable thing that lay in an area of scorched grass between two tombstones. The one on the right, that once-impressive

monument to Sir Henry Grayne, looked as though somebody had attempted to remove the lush growth of moss from the marble with a blowtorch. They had only succeeded in rendering it to a blackened stump like a giant decayed tooth.

'You're sure this is . . . ' the Detective Inspector almost said, '"was" ... the Reverend Owen?'

'It's the curate, all right/ Boyce turned away, took a deep breath and hoped that he wouldn't throw up. 'I recognise the skull formation . . . also that ring he's wearing.' The former was a lie; no, more of a guess. The latter was true. At least, Owen always wore a signet ring.

'Well, we'll have to leave the CID chaps to scour this churchyard.' The police officer stroked a neat pencil moustache and was only too willing to retire to the local station and commence his written report. Anything to get away from that!

'I suppose . . . * Boyce drew a deep breath and was well aware how his heart was pounding inside his fleshy chest, 'I suppose you've no idea . . . I mean, how could a body just become incinerated like that?'

'I've no idea,' Detective Inspector Groome spoke abruptly. 'There does not appear to have been any fire except that which consumed the body. Although the undergrowth and that adjoining tomb are scorched, they aren't burned.^

'Perhaps he was struck by lightning,' Boyce offered, habitually extending his tongue and licking a small wart which grew on his thick lower lip.

'There was no storm last night.'

'A thunderbolt then.'

'Or the Hammer of Thor,' the policeman said sarcastically as he turned away. 'These boys will come up with the answer in due course, Bishop. In the meantime I've got work to do. I'll be in touch with you.'

Bishop Boyce stood there in the lychgate and waited for his composure to return. He was badly shaken but he hoped the others had not noticed it. Certainly Mannering hadn't. If there had been foul play then it was beyond his own ken. And that was what really worried him.

Bishop Boyce stood six feet, four-and-a-half inches in his stockinged feet. He'd gained a Blue at Oxford for rugby and had boxed well in those far off days when his huge body had been rippling muscle. Now, at fifty, that muscle had turned to fat, and the small eyes which were almost buried in the fleshy sockets demanded that glasses be worn; rimless ones that gave him a sort of owl-like appearance. His dark hair had silvered and was thinning outwards from the crown. During his appearances at cathedral services his capacious robes hid the full extent of his expanding stomach, and rarely was he to be seen publicly except on diocesan business. He liked to think that people described him as 'a big man'. Size was imposing, authoritative; it dominated lesser men.

Once back in his limousine, his chauffeur having been instructed to return to the palace, Boyce pulled a cigar out of his leather case, expertly bit off the end and spat it through the partly open window with no small degree of accuracy. He drew the rich havana smoke down into his lungs and expelled it slowly. He wouldn't throw up now. Owen was dispensable, as was any mediocre curate. Young men were queuing up to join the Church, professing to having received a 'calling' because jobs were scarce. So they kidded the Church to let them kid the people. Bloody fools, it was a career just like industry or

banking. If you were clever enough you got to the top and then other opportunities opened up to you . . . like that tract of Sand adjoining St Monica's churchyard. That fool Owen might have had the courtesy to get himself burned up somewhere else. The last thing the bishop wanted was for the police to start nosing around too much just there.

Back at the palace he moved swiftly in spite of his bulk, strode down the long carpeted corridor to his study with an ease reminiscent of his athletic days at university. By the time he reached his desk, lifted the telephone receiver off its cradle and began to dial, his body was damp with sweat but that had nothing to do with his recent exertions.

The call was answered almost immediately at the other end, a girl's voice informing him that he was connected to the offices of the county council.

'Get me the Planning Officer' he barked, and waited again, drumming his fingers nervously on the desktop.

'Stone speaking.' Clipped tones that reminded him of that inspector in the cemetery. Damn it, the police were getting on his nerves.

'Boyce here.' Impatient, chewing on the soggy butt of that cigar which had gone out on the journey back here.

'Bishop, why . . . '

'Look, I'll have to be-brief. We've run into a bit of bother and at the moment I don't know what it's all about, but suffice to say that the police are swarming all over our patch of land.'

'Oh, my God!'

'Don't panic. They can't possibly suspect that we set up this deal with Darren Hurst but there's no knowing how far they will pry into it. Just be warned, don't have any documents accessible which could turn their attention to us. Get me?'

'Sure, sure. But why the hell are the police at St Monica's?'

'A curate's somehow got himself roasted to a cinder.'

'Jesus Christ! How?'

'I don't know but doubtless tomorrow's editions of the more sensational papers will come up with a few theories. But we don't have to let that bother us. Completion date for the sale is only seven weeks away. It looks as though there might be an appeal by these damned villagers but I'm looking to you to squash that. This curate, Owen, the one who got himself all frizzled up, chaired a meeting at the village hall last night. Mannering should have gone but he chickened out. I'm just wondering if this is some crazy way of getting revenge on us, some nutcase gunning for us.'

'Jesus!' Stone caught his breath. 'Then none of us are safe.'

'I've another idea but I won't go into that now,' Boyce finally crushed out the remains of his cigar in the heavy glass ashtray, 'but I just want you to play it carefully. Seven weeks time and you and I'll be splitting Hurst's backhand. In hard cash. So play it cool and nothing can go wrong.'

The bishop replaced the receiver and stared up at the ornate ceiling, allowed

his gaze to wander idly round the walls until his eyes rested on a faded oil painting of a flabby-faced man with long silver hair. The features weren't unlike his own but it had to be coincidence because there was no direct bloodline. Just another bishop. The small plaque beneath the frame read 'BISHOP AVENSON 1720-42'.

Boyce wondered how many people had read the history of Bishop Avenson. Look closely and you saw the portrait of a man who was far from benign and godly; eyes that tried to avoid your gaze even on the canvas. Thin lips that bespoke cruelty. The artist, whose indecipherable signature had almost faded out of the bottom right-hand corner, had been honest at any rate. He hadn't tried to cover anything up.

Boyce broke out into a sweat again, rivulets of perspiration trickling down his broad forehead. Avenson, too, had died in the cemetery of St Monica's church in the eighteenth century! The ancient records spoke of his charred body being discovered one morning amongst 'the tombstones where he is reputed to have supped with the devile.'

There were conflicting accounts of how a burned corpse had been found in 'a charred place with no evidence of fire about'. Like Philip Owen.

The bishop crossed to his cocktail cabinet and poured himself a stiff whisky with a shaking hand. He did not like this business one little bit. The police would not find out much about the curate's death, of that he was certain. He was more worried that they might find motives for investigating how a tract of green-belt had been passed for building land. There was no limit to their thoroughness.

Nevertheless, he could not risk another inexplicable death, apart from the fact that there was no way of knowing who the unfortunate victim might be next time. Almost two-and-a-half centuries had lapsed since Bishop Avenson's untimely death and the evil force apparently lived on.

Boyce's hand was still trembling as he dialled another number. This was one job in which he would approve of Vicar Cleehopes' intervention. The police investigations would come to nothing, of that he was certain. The spirit, or whatever it was, that lurked in St Monica's churchyard must be dealt with as soon as possible. By an exorcist!

Vicar Cleehopes would certainly not have been identified as an exorcist except by those who knew him. Small and stocky, approaching sixty, he wore a black homburg hat to hide his completely bald head, stressing that the headgear was purely to protect his shiny cranium from the elements. Shy and retiring, it was almost with an air of embarrassment that he shuffled up the path from the lychgate to St Monica's church that blustery spring evening. He carried a small briefcase, the contents of which seemed to weigh him down, slowing his pace, causing him to pause for breath every few yards or so, his piercing blue eyes scanning the area around him.

He was uneasy, tense. He always was before conducting an exorcism; not because he feared any spiritual adversary but because the sheer effort needed to banish an evil spirit sapped him mentally and physically and at his age he feared for his health. Each exorcism seemed to require more and more effort. In fact, he had made up his mind to retire from his calling, leaving it to a younger man . . . if one could be found. Exorcists were like water diviners; either you could carry it out or you couldn't. A gift bestowed upon one by God and it was not the place of a humble clergyman to spurn that gift, as Bishop Boyce had pointed out to Vicar Cleehopes.

Cleehopes had travelled down from the north of England that same day and had arrived at St Monica's somewhat travel-worn. Perhaps he should have rested, postponed the exorcism until the next evening but the bishop had been in an unusual haste.

'There is something there, Cleehopes,' he had stressed vehemently over the phone upon the ageing vicar's arrival at the residence of the late Philip Owen. 'Whatever it is, it is dangerous and must be banished as soon as possible. I know that you are the one man capable of doing this so I urge you to go to the churchyard straight away and banish this evil entity from God's hallowed ground.'

It was not the place of a mere vicar to refuse a request by one so powerful as Bishop Boyce, With a sigh, Cleehopes set his bag down on the weed-covered pathway leading up to the church and looked around him.

The wind had strengthened during the last few minutes and he jammed his homburg even more firmly down on his bald head. It was bitterly cold, too, demonstrating the treachery of the elements in spring; last week had been exceedingly mild and sunny, now rain threatened. It might even sleet or snow.

Boyce had stressed that the police were carrying out extensive investigations into the death of the curate. They might be in or around the churchyard but he had spoken to Detective Inspector Groome and they would not interfere with the exorcist. The law was sceptical of evil spirits but the vicar would be allowed to carry out his banishment of the evil force without hindrance. Cleehopes shivered. There was certainly evil in the air. He could sense it in the way the biting wind whipped at him as though it was trying to drive him back down to the lychgate by sheer force. Go away, old man, this is no place for you. Go now whilst you are still able to leave unharmed!

The Reverend Cleehopes smelled the smoke before he saw the fire in the gathering darkness, a pungent aroma of burning vegetation, a stinking garden bonfire the likes of which residents of suburban housing estates complained bitterly and instigated petitions against the offender.

He coughed and stared into the gloom. Then he saw the smoke billowing up from the farthest corner of the cemetery, villainous thick clouds that the wind whipped towards the church.

Somebody was moving over there, a shape that came and went amidst the swirling smoke, outlined briefly by the intermittent orange glow from the dancing tongues of flame. Cleehopes muttered his annoyance. This could be detrimental to his plans, filling the interior of the church with vile stifling odours that would only serve to aid whatever evil lurked here. It wouldn't be the police, they had no need of huge bonfires. A verger, doubtless, engaged upon a spring tidying up of the graveyard. Well, he would be asked to put out his fire, ordered to if he refused. Dash the fellow!

Leaving his briefcase on the ground, the vicar proceeded to shuffle towards the offending bonfire, turning his head to escape the full force of the smoke which streamed towards him. Twice he had to stop, turn his back, and give way to a fit of coughing. Finally he was within a few yards of the villainous heap of smouldering rubbish. He retched, almost vomited. A stench so acrid that its vile fumes permeated his lungs, seared his intestines. What the deuce was the fellow burning?

Seconds later he saw the man, a figure that seemed to materialise out of the eddying smoke, a shape that had him stepping back in alarm, his heart seeming to flip, miss a beat, then accelerate so that his pulses pounded.

'You be a-lookin' for me, sur?'

A harsh nasal accent, a hint of arrogance in the deep tones.

Cleehopes stared through streaming, smarting eyes. A verger, definitely. An old man clinging resolutely to the traditions of a past generation. A frayed bowler hat was jammed firmly down on the oval, elongated head. A frock coat, torn and tattered, unbuttoned and flapping in the wind. Scratched knee-length leather gaiters terminating in scuffed working boots. Then the face; compelling, forcing you to look at it again and keep on looking. Flesh that was aged yet stretched too tightly over forehead and cheekbones to allow it to crinkle. A bushy moustache that drooped untrimmed and hid the mouth beneath it so that you didn't see the lips move. But the eyes were the most awful part of the whole scarecrow appearance; orbs that glowed redly as they reflected the dancing firelight.

'You want me, sur?' Impatience escalating into anger, a verger who resented this trespasser in his domain.

'Yes . . . yes, I do,' Cleehopes stammered, his weak trembling tones seeming to be whipped away by the wind as though the elements resented his intrusion also.

'And what for? Cannot you see what I be doin'?'

'You're making a foul, stinking bonfire,' the vicar did his utmost to protest angrily, with an authority that seemed to be fast slipping away from him. 'The smoke is filling the church.'

'And be that a bad thing, sur? Is anybody complaining?'

'Yes. Yes, they are. I am. I am about to conduct a service in there.'

'No, sur,' the other shook his head slowly, emphatically, 'you cannot hold a service in the church.'

'And why not?'

'Because it is past Evensong time, sur. Also, you are not the vicar here.'

'I have been instructed by the bishop personally to carry out a service in this church,' Cleehopes snapped, 'and I am ordering you to douse that fire this minute. Otherwise . . . otherwise I'll have you sacked, my man!'

'You'll 'ave me sacked, sur, will you?' the other laughed, a mirthless sound that sent a chill down Cleehopes' spine. 'Nobody can sack me, sur. Not even the bishop.'

The vicar opened his mouth to reply but some instinct made him check the angry retort, a sensation of awe mingling with fear, the feeling that he always had on those infrequent occasions when he came face to face with Bishop Boyce. Only this time the feeling escalated beyond the barriers of awe into a much more frightening realm. Terror!

'And what is this service you were goin' to conduct in the church, sur?'

Cleehopes swallowed and found himself looking into those eyes again. They were glowing redly with an anger that was fast being fanned into unbelievable wrath, a fire about to blaze into a raging inferno like that bonfire a few

yards away. God, the stench was awful!

'I was going to . . . to . . . ' the vicar swallowed, 'conduct a service of... of exorcism.' Guilt and embarrassment flooded over him as he got the words out.

'A service of exorcism, sur!' Those eyes seemed to suffuse with red like glowing coals, move closer together. There was no mistaking the anger, the contempt. And behind the man the bonfire suddenly burst into flames and died down again to a steady smoulder.

'Have you no respect for the dead, sur?'

'Of ... of course I have.' The vicar shivered. It had suddenly become very much colder even though he was standing in close proximity to the fire.

'Then instead of annoyin' the dead, sur, why don't you help me to lay them to rest?'

Cleehopes' stomach seemed to churn. This fellow was a madman, a senile grass-cutter and grave-digger who was convinced that this churchyard was the domain over which he ruled supreme.

'You mean you want me to assist you in the digging of a grave?' The man had to be humoured; he could be dangerous. The vicar prayed that any moment some of those CID officers who were supposed to be carrying out enquiries in this place might show up. Surely they were keeping a nocturnal vigil. Or had the bishop successfully lured them away so that the exorcism could continue unhindered?

'Not burials, sur? We do not commit a corpse to the earth so that the worms and slugs can feed on its decaying flesh.'

'What then?' A sinking feeling had the clergyman's stomach contracting, bringing with it a sensation of dizziness so that everything around him seemed like a dream. Terrible unreality like a fevered nightmare from which there was no escape.

'Why, cremation, sur. What thinks you I have this fire burning for, to incinerate weeds and the like? Come look, sur, and witness the only true way to transport the dead into the kingdom of the old ones.'

Cleehopes didn't want to look but suddenly his actions, every movement of his limbs, seemed no longer to be controlled by his own brain. He shuffled forward, moved alongside this ragged old man, stared fearfully at the pile of burning refuse.

The flames leaped up as though obeying some sudden command and in that instant the Reverend Cleehopes saw the splayed thing at which they licked hungrily, the limp spread eagled form at the top of the pile, blackened yet still recognisable as the charred flesh smouldered, fat running in small yellow rivulets and hissing in the fire. This awful self-styled guardian of the dead was in the process of cremating the tiny body of a dead child!

Cleehopes vomited, at least his stomach seemed to throw up and everything before him swam. He thought he was going to faint but cruelly he was spared oblivion. The infant seemed to move, a shifting of the funeral pyre, doubtless, because no life could possibly remain in that inert form. The vicar opened his mouth, tried to protest, but the words would not come, just an unintelligible babbling. And behind him the man was laughing softly.

'You see what I mean, sur? It is more important that you help the dead pass over into the realms of the old gods than disturb those that are already there.'

The vicar was aware of his head nodding, bobbing up and down so that his black homburg became loosened and was whipped away by the wind. He did not even notice the cold now, staring fixedly at the half-cremated object, wondering how long it would take this fire to consume it, render it to an indistinguishable nothingness. Ashes to ashes. . . .

'I have other duties to see to, sur, and I am grateful to them for sending you to help me. Now, perhaps you would kindly look after this fire, keep it burning until it is all gone, if you understand me. . . . '

Cleehopes understood and suddenly no longer experienced revulsion. The man was quite right; cremation was a true and proper method of disposing of a corpse with dignity. He felt something pushed into his hands, took it and saw that it was a large-pronged garden fork.

'Now you keep this fire goin', sur, and don't let it die down. I'll maybe see you again, who knows?'

And the Reverend Cleehopes was aware that he was alone. No longer was he afraid; he couldn't understand why he had been frightened in the first place. He was sweating now, grunting with the sheer physical effort of prodding that smouldering pyre, ventilating it so that the dead vegetation burst into orange tongues of flame that licked greedily at the now virtually unrecognisable form that lay on top of it. Every so often the small corpse shifted, settled, as though it, too, was readily co-operating on the first stage of its journey into the unknown.

The fumes were no longer acrid and putrefying to the sweating bald-headed stoker. Indeed, he inhaled them as he might have done the aroma from a roasting joint of Sunday sirloin. A state of timelessness prevailed yet he worked with a zest, for this innocent babe's passage into the beyond must not be delayed.

Finally the dawn came, a grey cold light that crept almost apologetically across the churchyard of St Monica's and revealed a weary old man dressed in torn and smoke-grimed clerical attire scraping the remaining embers of his bonfire into a small heap, inhaling the last wisps of smoke with relish.

And when the fire was finally burned out the Reverend Cleehopes stuck his fork into the soft ground and laughed aloud his satisfaction at a job well done. There was no sign of the man in the bowler hat but doubtless he would be back to inspect, to see that his orders had been carried out- He would be well pleased.

The vicar wandered away - that slow shuffle again - on an aimless circular tour of the tombstones, seeing a briefcase standing in the middle of the path leading to the church steps but not recognising it. It was none of his business.

The sun was rising now, its rays bringing a faint spring warmth to the countryside, playing on that shiny bald head.

Cleehopes was unaware of the stranger's approach until a hand rested on his shoulder and halted his ramblings. He spun round, thought for one moment that it was his companion of the nocturnal hours returned, but instead gazed into

unfamiliar features, steely grey eyes and a neat pencil moustache.

'Are you all right, Vicar?' the eyebrows raised slightly.

'But of course,' the clergyman chuckled, then burst into a torrent of laughter. 'I have just completed a cremation, sir. Would you care to come and see for yourself?'

Detective Inspector Groome's spine tingled and he nodded.

'OK, Vicar, lead on. I'd be interested to see what you've been up to all night. The bishop was getting very worried when he realised you hadn't returned. . . '

CHAPTER THREE

'THAT is all I can tell you, Sabat.' Bishop Boyce fingered the wart on his lower lip nervously and decided he didn't like the man seated opposite him one little bit. Self-confident to the point of arrogance and no vestige of respect. He hadn't requested permission to light that rank-smelling Meerschaum pipe, either. The fact that the bishop was smoking a cigar was no excuse for visitors to this study to partake of the pleasures of tobacco. Nevertheless, this man's presence was a necessity now that Vicar Cleehopes had failed in his exorcism and was at this moment babbling incoherently about the importance of cremation in a mental hospital.

Sabat didn't like clergy; his obvious contempt ranged from bishops down to curates. Nevertheless there were times when he was forced to co-operate with them in order to fight against his enemy, the principle of evil made flesh.

Had he not satisfactorily concluded that business of those who sought to resurrect the bones of one who ranked as the devil's henchmen in the years when he walked in human form? Now yet another form of evil was abroad; one which consumed corpses in unholy cremation and rendered a competent exorcist to a mindless being. And Sabat had known Cleehopes during his own days in the ministry before Mark Sabat had cast off his holy orders and joined the ranks of the SAS.

'Certainly I'll look into this business, Bishop,' Sabat permitted himself a rare smile that seemed to accentuate the three-inch scar down his left cheek, a white blaze in a sallow complexion. 'I'll need to work unhindered, though, and in my own way. Perhaps you would be good enough to inform this Detective Inspector Groome accordingly.'

Bishop Boyce nodded, drew heavily on his cigar, and studied the other with reluctant admiration. This man was as hard as they came, one hundred and eighty pounds of sheer solid muscle. Aquiline features made all the more fierce by that vivid cheek scar and sallow complexion. His height was deceptive when he was seated but when standing he was well over six feet.

Black hair falling to the collar of his dark corduroy suit. It wasn't a suit if you looked more closely; the jacket was a shade or two lighter than the trousers. In some ways he reminded Boyce of a western gunfighter, only a thousand times more dangerous. By repute Sabat was not a man to be trifled with; when you met him you realised that the stories you'd heard weren't just wild rumours.

Sabat had once been in the priesthood; the very thought had Bishop Boyce biting hard on his cigar. There was nothing Christian about this guy. Rumour, again, had it that Sabat had undergone a youthful homosexual experience which had driven him to the Church to seek repentance. Instead he'd found a burning hatred and had cast off the cloth in favour of an SAS uniform; a potential killer seeking a means by which to commit legalised murder.

There'll be a fee,' Sabat's eyes hardened like chips of dark granite. An oblique jibe that he savoured.

'I rather thought there would be,' the bishop regarded him coldly. 'I've never had to pay an exorcist before.'

'It might not be a straightforward exorcism.'

'What d'you mean?'

'You haven't told me about Bishop Avenson,' Sabat inclined his head towards the oil-painting which hung to his left. 'Whatever's going on it goes back as far as 1742, maybe a lot further. Avenson was found all burned up, just like Owen. And your last exorcist was discovered with an obsession for bonfires. We're not up against just an ordinary spirit. Whatever it is, it's dangerous and I don't risk my life, maybe worse, for nothing.'

Boyce started visibly. Damn this Sabat fellow, he'd been researching the history of St Monica's. The prying type.

'I didn't think Avenson's fate could possibly have anything to do with what happened in 1982, nearly two hundred and fifty years later.'

'Nothing can be overlooked. I'd say there's a direct link. Tell me, Bishop, this guy Cleehopes, what had he been burning on the bonfire?'

'Just grass and weeds. We had a mowing contractor in to tidy up the churchyard about a fortnight ago and he'd left a pile of cuttings. Cleehopes apparently set fire to them.'

'Nothing else?'

'Not as far as I know. The police sifted through the ashes but they never told me they'd found anything.'

'Well, I'll check with Groome anyway. Now, the fee, Bishop. I work for five hundred a week plus expenses.'

'Daylight robbery,' Boyce's thick lips tightened, the end of his cigar glowing red.

'Not when you take the risks I take. However, if you think I'm too expensive . . .'

The bishop pulled a drawer open, took out the diocesan expenses cheque book. His orders had come from a higher authority, from Westminster itself where he

had been informed that Sabat had worked for the Church before. It was neither Bishop Boyce's own money nor his place to argue. Hastily he scribbled out a cheque, tore the perforation and slid the oblong of yellow paper across the desk. 'I just hope you get it all settled up in a week, Sabat.'

'So do I,' Sabat smiled humourlessly beneath his heavy moustache. 'I'll need accommodation, too.'

'You can have the use of the curate's house,' the bishop's eyes hooded. 'And I'll be glad if you'll be as unobtrusive as possible. The newspapers have gone to town on this business and this kind of publicity doesn't do the Church any good.'

'You won't even know I'm around,' Sabat smiled again and turned on his heel.

After the door had closed behind his visitor, Bishop Boyce drew heavily on his cigar. Sabat made him uneasy; the tall dark man wasn't like other men, more like a hunting beast of prey and you just hoped it wasn't you he was after. Because if he was he'd run you down for sure.

There was a frown on Sabat's face as he made his way through the palace to where his silver Daimler stood sedately. He didn't like Boyce and that wasn't just because the man was a hypocritical bishop. He had the kind of intuition that Sabat had learned not to ignore in the past, inbuilt alarm systems in his own body sounding a warning. He would not ignore them.

It was that painting hanging in Boyce's study that he could not get off his mind. Bishop Avenson - a portrait of evil. God, the likeness was uncanny, enough to have every nerve in Mark Sabat's body tensing like steel cables at full stretch. The features, the expression, so reminiscent of his own brother Quentin, the most evil man this century!

Sabat slid behind the wheel of the Daimler and sat there staring across the palace gardens, unseeing except in his own mind. Even now he thought he could hear Quentin's voice somewhere in the recesses of his own brain. 'I'm not dead, Mark Sabat. Still I live on, for I am you!'

Mark Sabat felt the clamminess of cold sweat, his shirt clinging to his body, and in his mind he saw a wooded mountainside, a wide clearing which even the birds and beasts of the wild shunned. For it was here that his own brother Quentin had chosen his final refuge, a bastion of evil in the mountains. He had been known throughout the continents of the world as 'Satan's henchman'; pursued by the combined forces of the law who secretly hoped that they would not catch up with him, relentlessly hunted by Mark Sabat. And it was in this very clearing that the final confrontation had taken place.

Sabat shuddered, recalled how his own extraordinary powers of exorcism had been overshadowed by those of the most evil man known to mankind. Exhumed corpses lay beside the three open graves, further proof of what Quentin was about to do, a master of voodoo, a houngan in exile attempting to raise his own followers from the dead, an invincible army of zombies to do his bidding.

Sabat smelled again the cloying putrefaction of open graves, experienced once more his own utter despair when he had fallen into one, looked up and seen his brother preparing to pulverise him with a woodcutter's axe; the stench of burned cordite, the .38 which Sabat always carried bucking in his hand, Quentin falling, writhing his death throes on top of him, the final shot blasting that awful skull, stringing blood and brains on the damp walls of the grave like an old man's mucus.

It should have ended there and then with Sabat clambering out of that oblong hole, walking dazedly back down the mountainside, his mission accomplished. But it hadn't. Somehow Quentin's own soul had merged with his own, good and evil in continual conflict inside a living entity, a man possessed fighting within himself for survival. And still fighting.

And that was how it remained. Sabat, one-time priest, latterly an SAS agent, until his indiscretion with a Colonel's blonde wife who wore black boots and liked to watch her lovers cringe before her, had resulted in his recent return to civilian life and now found himself the victim of a dual role. At certain times the evil in him was too strong to resist and Quentin Sabat lived again. On other occasions the forces of evil were thwarted by Mark Sabat's own ruthlessness, his own desire for revenge for what they had done to him.

The pendulum swung and Sabat could never be sure of himself, an exorcist with unbelievable psychic powers which might one day prove to be his own undoing. Quentin had been silent for too long and now it seemed that he had been stirred by the sight of a face from the past, the cruel features of Bishop Avenson!

Sabat eased the car into the flow of traffic, could still hear Quentin's laughter somewhere far away. Then he straightened up, gripped the wheel, and his jaw tightened. Hell, if it was a fight the powers of evil wanted then it was a fight they'd get. He felt the comforting weight of the .38 in its holster beneath his right armpit, a boost to his confidence although its effectiveness was often limited against the foes he came up against. Any weapon was better than none.

He drove steadily once he was clear of the city traffic, the tinted windscreen shielding his eyes from the rays of the dying sun in the west. He checked the time: six-twenty. There was no hurry. Tonight he would install himself in his new headquarters and tomorrow he would begin his investigations. To have rushed straightaway to the church without having first ascertained the full strength of the enemy would have been foolhardy indeed. Time was on his side and the Church were footing the bill. Sabat reckoned they owed him that.

An hour later he eased the Daimler into the drive of the small modern detached house on the outskirts of the village. Once, only a decade ago, this village had had a resident parson but the Church hierarchy had decreed that the upkeep of a parsonage with dwindling congregations was superfluous. So the impressive black and white building had been sold for an extortionate sum and a succession of curates had taken up residence in this modest new abode. They had moved on to other places but it was anybody's guess where the Reverend Philip Owen had gone, Sabat reflected. Something from out of the shadows had claimed his soul and Sabat must be on his guard to make sure that his own did not follow. Quentin's influence was a dangerous weakness, the chink in his armour.

He let himself into the house and inspected it from top to bottom. Neat and economically furnished, a typical bachelor abode. Sabat laughed to himself; after all, he was a bachelor and in those few moments he was aware of a familiar sensation beginning to dominate the lower regions of his body, monopolising his thoughts. Damn it, whenever Quentin reminded him of his presence Sabat experienced erotic thoughts, a kind of weakening of his resources. Sex was his Achilles' heel, a driving obsession once he was in the mood. And it was a long time since he had had a woman.

His thoughts flipped, rested briefly on the sensuous body of Catriona Lealan to whose sadistic pleasures he had submitted on memorable occasions until finally he had flogged her viciously in the castle dungeons of Armageddon

because a mightier power had commanded him to do so.' And Madeleine Gaufridi whom he had met in the Ice Palace on the Jungfrau. And many others. . . .

In those few minutes everything else was forgotten; Bishop Boyce and Bishop Avenson, and the reason he was here. An obsession like a forest fire, smouldering at first, bursting into flame, leaping, roaring, devouring everything before it. Sabat was, indeed, a man possessed, Quentin's jeering laughter Urging him on, his body demanding a mate when there was none available. A crazed lust that had him tearing his clothes from his body, tossing them across the small bedroom, hating them because they deprived him of the nakedness which he desired. Flushed and trembling he regarded his reflection in the full-length wardrobe mirror, that circumcision scar starkly white against the suffusion of blood in his erection, a stag at the rutting stand with no hind in sight.

'Damn you, Quentin,' Sabat cursed his own reflection aloud, his features twisted into a mask of fate, 'you play upon my only weakness.'

'You are weak, a mere mortal,' Quentin's words seemed to form on Mark's own lips, or perhaps it was a distortion of the mirror. 'Now you will obey the desires of your body. You cannot disobey.'

Sabat flung himself on to the coverlet of the single bed, the springs groaning beneath his weight, then beginning to creak loudly, rhythmically. His breath came in short gasps, his muscular body trembling with the strain, frustration and pleasure torturing him with unbelievable ferocity; a sprinter seeing the finishing tape ahead of him, exerting every muscle, total mental and physical commitment yet it eluded him like some marshland jack-o'-lantern. No longer could he contain the cries, the shouted obscenities, Catriona Lealan returning to torture him, mocking him. They all came and went, jeering him because he could not reach them, his body writhing and convulsing but still he was not satisfied. Faster and faster, his quivering flesh shiny with sweat. Falling, thudding on to the carpeted floor and scarcely noticing, verging on hysteria. Now he could see himself in the mirror again, Sabat a slave unto himself, a blurred pathetic thing with Quentin's cries ringing in his ears. Faster, faster. And still faster.

At last he made it, a volcanic eruption within himself, molten lava shooting forth; his writhings growing weaker and weaker. And weaker. Finally he was lying still, Quentin's voice no longer to be heard, just the roaring of his own pounding blood, the wheezing of his lungs as he gulped for air, physically and mentally shattered.

God, the bastard had hit him hard this time; so unexpected, awaiting the opportunity after months of absence from his thoughts. The room was dark except for the glow of a distant streetlamp, an ethereal light that enabled him to see again the outline of his own reflection in that mirror. A man, broken mentally and physically, easy prey for those from beyond the shadows should they come to take him.

Sabat closed his eyes, began the fight back. First he had to control his breathing, try and bring it back to normal. Fighting to reason; this had been no ordinary session of masturbation. Torture as opposed to pleasure, vile fantasies mocking him, highlighting that teenage homosexual experience which had driven him to seek refuge in the Church. The ultimate in degradation. Vigorously he had defiled himself, done what they had wanted him to do. They knew why he was here and had sent Quentin. A warning?

Sabat fought against panic. Gradually his breathing returned to normal and he sat up. Christ, he was weak, and so cold, the sweat having chilled on his

body. He shivered, managed to stand and fought off the dizziness. Somehow he made it across the room and found the light switch, shielding his eyes from the blinding glare.

His condition was temporarily akin to the after-effects of pneumonia, reminding him how they had got to him the last time, how he had joined forces with those eaters of human flesh.* It was happening all over again.

He staggered out across the landing and into the bathroom, vomiting violently into the bowl. His head began to ache, a spreading pain behind the eyes which could be the forerunner of a blinding migraine. Quentin had taken him unawares, given him no time to fight back. They might come for him at any moment. . . .

He began to run the bath, closing his eyes in an attempt to shut out the light, the billowing steam warming his shivering body. He needed sleep, badly, but it would be dangerous, and he did not have the strength to set up the necessary precautions. Holding on to the sides of the bath, wondering if he was going to faint. If he did, then tomorrow his dead body would be found lying on the floor of this bathroom, for surely the powers of darkness would not spurn an opportunity to take their revenge on a totally defenceless enemy of Sabat's calibre.

Gratefully he slid into the warm water, lying full length, still trying to fight. Quentin was silent and that was what worried him most. Was there no further need for taunting? Was he so defenceless that they could come for him any time they chose?

He fought against the desire to sleep. The warm water would refresh him, revitalise him, help him to prepare himself mentally for the night which lay ahead. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Every second was vital to him; every minute he grew stronger. Why had they not come for him when they had the chance?

Suddenly a shrill noise had his brain reverberating, had him jerking his eyes open and gasping aloud his despair. His worst fears were realised. Somebody was ringing the front doorbell!

CHAPTER FOUR

FOR ONCE in his life Mark Sabat was overcome with indecisiveness. And fear! This was the way they would come; not demons in the night but in the guise of a mortal caller, a ploy to deceive him yet again.

He lay there in the bath, suddenly realising how the water had cooled, how the atmospheric temperature itself had dropped. He could hear the beating of his own heart, the pounding of his pulses in the silence. He closed his eyes briefly, suddenly realised that his headache had subsided. The breathing exercise again, ten in, ten out, an athlete bringing mind and body under

control, an SAS commando preparing for action.

Still silence. Perhaps it was a casual caller thinking that the Reverend Owen still lived here, and would go away. Then the bell rang again; louder, more shrill, more persistent!

Sabat got up out of the bath with the speed and ease of a surfacing sealion, suddenly lithe and strong again, scarcely slopping a drop of water as he stepped out on to the mat and in the same supple movement reached for a towel off the rail and began to dry himself. Ten seconds later he was padding back to the bedroom, dressing with speed, checking that the .38 still rested in the pocket holster in his corduroy jacket. Only when he was fully clad did he pause, reflecting for a moment as he allowed his gaze to rest on the black crocodile-skin briefcase at the foot of the bed. Inside it lay the weapons to repel an attack such as might be expected from the forces of darkness. But there was no time to set them up, to use them now.

The bell rang again; the caller was becoming impatient. Well, Sabat wouldn't keep him waiting much longer!

He slid the .38 out of its holster, held it easily in his hand, well aware of his own speed and accuracy when it came to marksmanship. He would be in his element in a gunfight but it would not be anything as simple as that. He did not know what he was up against, what enemy they had sent in Quentin's wake.

Moving as silently as a wraith, Sabat descended the stairs with scarcely a creaking board. The hallway was in darkness but by the glow of that same single streetlamp which had lit his bedroom he saw a figure silhouetted against the opaque glass panel of the front door. A man, his features indistinguishable, short and stocky, a hand going up to the bellpush yet again.

Ringling frantically now, determined that his call should be answered. Sabat flattened himself against the wall, began to move towards the door, the barrel of his revolver trained unwaveringly on that silhouette outside. Now he was only a yard from the other, a mere pane of glass separating them, the caller outside totally unaware of his presence. Yet he knew that Sabat was in the house otherwise he would have gone away before now.

Sabat made up his mind and moved with the speed of a swooping sparrowhawk, his free hand darting out, turning the yale catch and pulling the door inwards in one perfectly co-ordinated movement. Face to face, two men with their features bathed in shadow, the stranger recoiling with surprise, then letting out a faint grunt of alarm when the dim light glinted on the unmistakable barrel of a revolver.

'Just don't make a move,' Sabat's voice was low and menacing, 'otherwise you'll never live to make another!'

'Sabat!' a voice that was vaguely familiar to the ex-SAS man but which counted for nothing because the dark powers could imitate any sound or form they chose with ease. 'Take it easy, Sabat.'

'Don't risk it,' Sabat breathed, 'I'm not in the mood for mercy tonight. Anyway, who the hell are you?'

'It's me ... Kent,' the other was taken aback yet he showed no fear. 'Jesus Christ Almighty, do you always greet your visitors by shoving a .38 in their faces?'

'Usually,' Sabat drawled and laughed faintly, but still he was not going to be lulled into apathy. His left hand found the lightswitch and flooded the hall and steps with brilliant white light. And as he saw his caller for the first time Sabat knew that it was indeed the man who called himself Kent, or at least it was his form and features.

'Come inside,' Sabat stepped back, held the door wide and Kent entered. Then Sabat moved, his hand dipping into his pocket and coming out again, holding something out towards the other. 'Just hold this a minute, Kent.'

Kent took the object, held it in the palm of his hand and regarded it with bewilderment. 'Hey, what's going on, Sabat? You gone religious or are you some kind of a screwball?'

'Neither,' Sabat laughed, retrieved the object which he had passed over, a small silver crucifix no more than an inch and a half long. 'Just checking that you really are Kent and not something using his form to get me. Because if you were you'd've been burned to hell by this.'

'I don't follow.'

'No, I don't expect you do but let me tell you this, Kent. There are some very dastardly goings-on in this village at present, beyond mortal ken, and I've just had my first encounter with one of the evil entities involved. Anyway, I'm satisfied it is you and I'm more than grateful to see you. You'd better come through to the lounge and we'll see if the Reverend Owen by any chance kept a drop of something in his sideboard and then we'll both find out what the other is up to.'

Sabat found a half-bottle of Claymore, poured a generous measure into two tumblers, searched in vain for a bottle of peppermint cordial, and finding none, decided to take his whisky neat. He passed the other glass to Kent, let his gaze run over the man whom he had not seen for the past five years, indeed, not since that time they had been colleagues in an SAS nocturnal exercise. He'd noted Kent's by-line on columns of one of the most sensational daily papers though. The journalist was doing all right for himself and was at the top of his profession.

There was a kind of agelessness about Kent stemming from the short-cropped fair hair that rendered any flecks of grey invisible and a reddish-bronze complexion that buried any lines that might otherwise have shown. If you got to know him well enough he would tell you that he was born on the twenty-eighth of July, nineteen-thirty-eight. That could have been a lie, told just for the hell of it. A square jaw that bespoke determination, a stockiness that was unlikely to turn to fat. At five feet eight inches he seemed short but he was not a man to be underestimated. Sabat recalled that night they had gone in on a couple of terrorists who had been holding a family hostage for five days. Sabat had got one of the gunmen, Kent the other. Both criminals had appeared in the dock on crutches!

Kent had a hidden sex appeal which wasn't apparent until a woman came to know him well. But that didn't often happen because the journalist was a loner; a good friend if he took a liking to you, a bastard if he didn't. Nobody, not even his closest associates in Fleet Street, used his first name even if they knew it. He was just 'Kent'.

'No doubt you're looking for the scoop of the decade,' Sabat regarded his visitor whimsically, 'and your paper doesn't give a shit if you get sued for libel.'

'That's rather overstating it,' the other replied. 'I don't deny I'm on the trail of a story but when I knew the church had pulled you in on it I knew it had to be something a bit out of the ordinary, not just a charred body because a curate got hit by a stray thunderbolt and a vicar went bananas and started setting fire to the churchyard. Look, Sabat, suppose we put our cards on the table; we know each other well enough. What the fuck's going on here?'

'I'm not altogether sure, but whatever it is it goes back to seventeen forty-two when a certain Bishop Avenson was also roasted in the churchyard,' Sabat smiled. 'I've got one or two ideas, though. I've discovered that a similar churchyard incineration took place in eighteen eighty-four. One Doctor William Price cremated his five-year-old son who was called Iesu Grist and nine years later this man himself was also cremated in a similar fashion by colleagues unknown.'

'Jesus Christ!'

'Or Iesu Grist,' Sabat grinned. 'Cremation isn't such a recent phenomenon as the average person is inclined to think. As a means of disposing of the dead it goes back a long way. The Romanies always burned their dead. As did the druids'

'The druids! That's going a bit far back.'

'I'm just making a point. This man Price was involved in druidism. A slender link but you can't afford to overlook anything remotely connected with death by fire. Now tell me, Kent, have you got any ideas?'

'Nothing concrete,' the journalist shrugged. 'I only got here this afternoon but in the pub where I'm staying word has obviously got round that the Church has called in Sabat and you'd better be warned, there isn't exactly a welcoming committee out to greet you! You remember that case you were on a short time back when that cult was exhuming bodies and a guy called the Reverend Spode disappeared and has never been heard of since?'

'I did hear the gentleman in question had vanished into thin air,' Sabat smiled faintly, 'but I can't for the life of me think where he could have gone.'

'That's as it may be,' Kent didn't pursue the question, knowing only too well that if Sabat had made up his mind to keep it to himself then that was where it would stay. These villagers are a superstitious lot, as they mostly are in remote country places, and they're saying that as you spirited away this fellow Spode then like as not you're responsible for what happened to the curate and the vicar; in which case, who's going up in smoke next?'

'So I don't have the co-operation of the locals, to say the least,' Sabat murmured. 'And if these people have had advance warning of my coming then the glad tidings can only have come from one source - Bishop Boyce!'

There's more going on here than just cremation and madness,' Kent lowered his voice.

Sabat raised an eyebrow, waited for the other to continue.

'I listened in to all this gossip in the White Horse,' the journalist continued. 'Now these folks have really got their wind up because apparently the land adjoining the cemetery was willed to St Monica's Church in Trust, but by some means the Church and the trustees have managed to extricate themselves from the conditions and purpose of the Trust. Not only that, they've sold this

piece of land for a housing site!'

'Jesus wept, what a dirty stinking trick. I've come across a few crooked churchmen in my time but this one takes the prize.'

'Precisely. Now the land in question was Green Belt anyway, so somewhere along the line somebody's been pulling a few fast ones. According to what I heard in the pub these villagers are appealing against the planning permission but they don't hold out much hope. I'd like to unearth the facts, I can tell you.'

'A village of iniquity,' Sabat sighed, and proceeded to tell Kent what had happened to him recently, a totally uninhibited version of the facts leading up to Kent's arrival, that wild sexual psychic attack.

'So what's the next move?' Kent drained the last of his whisky and set the glass down on the sideboard.

'First I have to find out exactly what kind of evil spirit is operating within the church and its grounds,' Sabat's features were grim. 'And there's only one way I'm going to do that: by spending a night in there.'

'I'll come with you,' Kent spoke unhesitatingly.

'No,' Sabat snapped. This is one place I must go alone, for in this realm of evil, Kent, only I can stand a chance of survival. I do not know their strength and my own powers may not be enough. But it is a chance I must take. Nevertheless I am sure there are other ways in which you can help. In the meantime, however, we must pass this night unharmed and now that you are here I suggest you stay rather than return to your room at the pub. I shall rig up the necessary defences to give us both protection in the event of another psychic attack such as I underwent earlier.'

'I know your reputation too well to argue,' Kent stood up. 'Just tell me what I have to do and . . . '

The piercing noise came at them out of the night. A wail that escalated, reached its peak and hung reverberating in the still atmosphere. Even before the echoes had a chance to die away, it began again.

A scream of sheer mortal terror that came from the direction of St Monica's churchyard!

CHAPTER FIVE

SABAT AND Kent moved simultaneously towards the door and hit the darkness outside fast and low, trained commandos precipitated into battle at a moment's notice, knowing that every shadow might conceal an enemy; a foe more deadly than any they had faced during their SAS days.

The night air still vibrated from the scream. Slowly it died away. They paused alongside the privet hedge, waited, but it did not come again.

'We'd better check the churchyard,' Sabat whispered. His mouth was dry and he was not sufficiently prepared to go forth into battle at this stage against an unknown enemy. But somewhere somebody was in deadly peril. It might already be too late. Sabat and Kent had no choice.

Sabat sensed the coldness again, the cloying presence of evil as though frozen fingers were trying to grab him and pull him back. He tried to ignore it, determined not to be overwhelmed by another psychic attack. It was Kent he worried about most, though. A cold ruthless fighter but the journalist was not familiar with the forces of darkness. It was him they would try to pull down first.

'Kent,' Sabat whispered hoarsely. 'Keep close to me, don't let me out of your sight. And . . . and take this.'

Kent stared at the small silver object which was thrust into his hand. That tiny crucifix again, the one Sabat had tried to test him with earlier. Oh Christ, was Mark Sabat becoming some sort of religious nut?

'Don't be stupid,' the Fleet Street man's tones were harsh with contempt and annoyance. 'There's maybe somebody out there just got murdered. We're not going to start preaching to the killer or anything like that are we, Sabat?'

'Be warned,' Sabat thrust his face close to his companion's. 'We are not up against mortal enemies tonight. Whoever our adversaries are they will first try to destroy our minds, render us babbling imbeciles just as they did Vicar Cleehopes who was a very powerful exorcist himself. We must fight them with such weapons as this, have faith in ourselves.'

'Now you are fucking preaching,' Kent sneered, tossing the crucifix up and down in his hand. 'Still, I suppose it's only to be expected from one who's worn a bleeding dog-collar himself. Okay, if you want it that way, Sabat, then that's okay by me but don't get any ideas about converting me. You know damned well I'm an atheist.'

Sabat stiffened. Had the dark powers already begun to work on Kent, alienating him against Sabat?

'I know,' Sabat smiled. 'You're an atheist, Kent. You don't believe in God so therefore how can you believe in them.'

The journalist checked an angry retort and an expression of bewilderment flooded his rugged features in the faint moonlight. 'You're right, Sabat,' he said, as though he had to force the words out. 'I don't believe in them. They're a load of crap, superstition put about by these ignorant villagers to scare the life out of everybody.'

Sabat stretched out his hand, took the crucifix back and dropped it into his pocket. The wind appeared to strengthen suddenly from a gentle breeze to a tearing gale, buffeted them, then died down as quickly as it had begun. A show of anger by the evil around them, a temporary setback for the lurking powers because Sabat had produced an unexpected ace out of his occult pack. It had worked this time but it might not again.

'Let's move,' Sabat took the lead, knew that the other followed him. He tried not to think what they might come up against beyond the lychgate which stood silhouetted against the night sky some twenty yards ahead of them. The awful

possibilities were innumerable.

'I can smell smoke,' Kent breathed. 'Christ, what a bloody awful stink!'

Sabat wrinkled his nostrils. There was certainly a pungent aroma being wafted on the night breeze, like a smouldering garden bonfire, only more cloying. He sniffed the air in the manner of a hunting beast but failed to recognise the smell other than that of burning. His thoughts flipped briefly to the incinerated body of the Reverend Philip Owen and further back in time to one Dr William Price. They were not pleasant thoughts.

The churchyard was in total silence as they eased through the lychgate. Even that gentle breeze seemed to have dropped and a patch of cloud scudded across the face of the moon as though the heavens feared to look down upon this place. Kent was close to Sabat as they awaited the re-emergence of the moon.

Slowly, reluctantly, the pale silvery light flooded the scene again, showed rows of untended graves, the grass roughly mown between them in a maze of pathways. A forgotten place where people feared to tread.

The smoke was thicker, more pungent now, making their eyes smart. Sabat coughed, pointed across to the far corner of the cemetery, a section that was hidden in the shadows cast by a clump of towering yew trees. 'That's where the smoke's coming from,' he whispered. 'Let's make our way across there.'

The grass beneath their feet was springy, their progress silent. Moving slowly, trying to scan every patch of shadow around them through eyes streaming from the smoke, making it impossible to see anything. Which was why they were within three or four yards of the figure beneath the foremost yew tree before they saw it!

'Jesus wept!' Kent clutched Sabat's arm, instinctively trying to tug him back. 'What the fuck is it?'

Sabat felt his body tense, go cold as an icy trickle ran up his spine and spread out into his scalp. He strained his smarting eyes, made out the shape of a woman in long tattered robes. At least he thought it was a woman. . . .

Small and frail, almost childlike, barely five feet tall. Long matted hair that straggled down over revolting bulb like breasts, cancerous growths protruding from vents in the soiled garments. Barefoot, toenails broken and curling over like the talons of some horrific bird of prey. Skeletal waste arms, shaking finger pointed accusingly at the intruders in this place of silence and death. An eddy of smoke hid her for a few seconds as though it sought to spare these two humans from a sane world the sight of this revolting creature.

And when the smoke had cleared, Sabat and Kent saw that she had stepped forward out of the shadows into a patch of moonlight where every detail of her grotesque face was displayed.

'Jesus God, it isn't possible!' Kent stepped back instinctively, dragging Sabat with him.

A noise, a cackle of manic laughter broke the stillness. This creature from the shadows in human form was commanding them to look upon her, to feast their eyes upon the rotting flesh on her body, to breathe in the stench of putrefaction which even the billowing smoke could not mask. Eye sockets, nothing more, but she seemed to see out of the sunken cavities, tiny black pits of hate directed at the two men. Twin nostrils that bubbled mucus, a

toothless mouth-slit widening into a grimace. A thing that had come from beyond the grave!

Sabat sensed the power emanating from this macabre living entity, a force that hit him with sheer psychic power like that icy wind getting up again and bringing with it stifling acrid smoke that had him instinctively throwing up his hands to ward it off.

'Sabat, you came here at your own peril and those who trespass in the domain of the Oke Priests must pay the penalty. You shall not leave here! I come to take you with me to the Lupercal Cave!'

Rasping tones that scraped on Mark Sabat's bemused brain with a stupefying effect. A muzziness that was beginning to cloud his thinking, numbing his fear. A surrendering of his willpower that was only saved by his companion, Kent the journalist, the atheist.

'It's some kind of trick!' Kent's scream was bordering on hysteria. 'That old bag's dressed up to scare the hell out of us. Get her, Sabat! Teach the bitch a lesson!'

The grotesque apparition checked, recoiled as though she had been struck a physical blow, the mouth widening into an expression of shock and terror. And in that same instant Sabat felt his inner mechanism click back into gear like a car that has faltered and then picked up to full speed. One moment he was on the defensive, now he was on the offensive.

Even as he leaped forward that acrid smoke billowed and came to the aid of the unknown wretched figure, taking him full in the face, forcing him to turn aside and gasp for fresh air. Kent ducked, came up beneath the putrid fumes, pushed his way forward.

The Grotesque screamed as she turned to flee, a yell that was scarcely human, but even as he leaped in pursuit the thought crossed Sabat's mind that it was not the despairing fear-stricken cry that they had heard a few minutes earlier. Was there another monstrosity within the bounds of this awful cemetery?

The chase was on, an eerie flitting figure dodging between the headstones, whirling and leaping with unbelievable agility for one so ancient. Their instinctive SAS training had caused the two men to split up, a two-pronged pursuit which would surely corner this smoke witch before long. She ran, hesitated by a gap in the hedge, then burst through it into the adjoining rough field. And as if the moon had already decreed that she should not escape, it came out from the clouds yet again and shone down with all the brightness it could muster, illuminating the scene, creating weird shadows.

On she ran, skipping with a lightness that kept her ten yards ahead of the two men, a direct line to where there was yet another gap in the straggling hawthorn hedge. Freedom beckoned her, a footpath that would have taken her to the safety of the woods. Then she screamed again, a cry of physical and mental agony, staggering back as though some invisible barrier had not only barred her progress but burned her flesh.

'She can't leave this place!' Sabat called out to Kent. 'She can only survive within its boundaries. Keep after her, we'll run her down.'

Like a woodland nymph she was fleeing again, this time following the course of the perimeter hedge but keeping a yard or so from it as though she feared its powers. Kent was following on her heels, Sabat embarking upon a diagonal

course, trying to cut her off. Surely they must corner her before long.

Then came the smoke again, thicker and more acrid than ever, a dense suffocating fog that shut out the moonlight, reducing everything to a grey gloom, a place of silhouettes and unearthly shapes. Sabat coughed, ducked and drew in fresh air, held his breath. The fire must be in this field and not in the cemetery, a pile of dead vegetation left to smoulder by some agricultural worker. The fugitive might escape beneath its cover and . . .

He pulled up, found himself wondering where Kent had got to. It was as though Sabat had stepped into a strange land in no way connected with a rural village. A fringe of trees formed a space that might have been a forest clearing except that it was impossible to discern one's surroundings clearly because the smoke was gushing forth from a huge rectangular pile of what appeared to be lumps of turf or maybe peat. And on top of this, defiant, arms and face raised to the heavens beyond the smoke clouds, stood the one whom they had been pursuing.

Sabat stood and stared, was suddenly aware of being joined by Kent, heard the latter's intake of breath and a muttered 'Jesus Christ!' They saw the old woman clearly as the silvery-grey beams of smoke-filtered moonlight shone on her. A pathetic, sorry figure, Sabat reflected. Wasted, as though a skeleton had been exhumed with strips of decaying flesh still clinging to the dead bones. The rotting clothing appeared to have torn and shredded still further in the chase so that the figure beneath was displayed in its full obscenity, a nauseating nakedness that made the two men wish that they did not have to look.

Her voice was a low moan, a prayer or plea to some unknown deity as she stood atop the burning heap, calling for help in her hour of desperate need. The atmosphere seemed to come alive as though pending an electric storm. Sabat was aware of the static, the way his flesh goose pimped, clammy fingers touching him again. He reacted instantly, saw the situation for what it was, a threat to their lives and their souls. His hand delved into the pocket of his corduroy jacket, fingers closing over that tiny silver crucifix. It snagged on a thread, got caught. Oh God, the forces of darkness were working on him already, obstructing him. Even Kent was holding on to him. With a determined effort, calling upon every last physical and mental reserve, Sabat pushed his companion away and at the same time dragged the small cross clear of his pocket. It seemed to have grown heavy these last few seconds, several pounds in weight that required a deliberate effort to raise above his head. Even as he managed it the smoke came at him with full force, a blinding, suffocating mass that almost had him staggering back. No longer could he see that fearsome creature on the smouldering peat. He didn't even know if she was still there.

Sabat's arm went back, shot forward with full force. Many times had he lobbed dummy grenades in SAS training exercises under similar conditions, running the gauntlet of smoke bombs and tear gas. Now, that training was repaying him. He sensed that he was on target even before the unearthly scream rang out, threw himself flat as the sky above zig-zagged with forked lightning. Self-preservation; he did not even think about Kent, for the other had undergone the same training and it was up to him to act likewise. You threw yourself to the ground and kept down, and if you were religious you prayed to God. If not, you trusted to luck.

The smoke thickened, a rancid smell and cloying taste which reminded Sabat of that oven which had once cooked living human flesh.* Finally it thinned and only then did he raise his head, squinting through half-closed eyes.

The moon was shining again and displaying a three-foot high rectangle of

blackened squares of turf, charred and smelling evilly. But there was no sign of she who had made her last stand on its summit.

'What happened?' A dishevelled Kent was on his knees a few yards away, staring in bewilderment.

'My power was greater than hers,' Sabat smiled wanly, 'or theirs, at this given time. What you see there is a sacrificial turf altar of the ancient Oke Priests. Doubtless we shall learn in due course that a supply of turf had been delivered for replacing part of the church lawns but take it from me, Kent, it was brought here for a very different reason. You heard what she said about the Lupercal Cave? Well, that was a temple used by the druids not far from Rome where dogs and goats, and sometimes humans, were sacrificed. That woman intended to do that to us. Without her altar, her power was limited. She had to get back to it before we caught her. We almost left it too late. Fortunately I was on target when I threw the crucifix, otherwise I guess that would have been the end for us.'

'You're convincing me fast,' Kent was visibly shaken. 'But . . . that scream we heard, the one which brought us here. . . . '

'My God, yes,' Sabat tensed and stared about him. 'I'd almost forgotten. That certainly wasn't our druid witch, unless of course she was deliberately luring us here. There must be somebody else here who has already paid the supreme penalty. . . . '

'Listen!' Kent caught Sabat's arm.

From somewhere nearby they heard a low moaning sound as though somebody was in terrible pain, a noise that died away and then came back again.

Sabat paused, drew a deep breath, an instant preparation for yet another joust with the powers of evil. They weren't letting up tonight! He glanced at Kent, two strong men making a mutual pledge, a loyalty that was unquestioned. Then, without speaking, they set off back in the direction of the churchyard.

CHAPTER, SIX

THEY RE-ENTERED the churchyard by that gap in the hedge and stood listening. Sabat wiped the ashes from his crucifix, almost felt its latent power. Silence. Another trick?

Then they heard the noise again, a low intermittent groaning that came from somewhere close at hand.

'Over there,' Kent whispered, 'behind that huge headstone.'

They approached stealthily, Sabat in the lead. He caught a glimpse of the name on the huge tombstone - SIR HENRY GRAYNE. And as he lowered his gaze he saw a

pair of bare feet protruding from behind the marble, twitching feebly.

'It's a young girl/ Kent knew he was stating the obvious but somebody had to say something.

They stared, saw the young girl lying there on the gravel which had been spread and raked across the grave. She was clad in a sackcloth-type shift which was pulled up to reveal that she was naked underneath. Her slim fingers clutched the material, crumpling it with such ferocity that her knuckles were white. A slim figure, no more than twenty at the most, dark haired with perfectly proportioned features that were screwed up into a mask of sheer terror. Her dark eyes widened with fear when she saw them, tried to edge away but her strength failed her and she flopped back down again, moaning.

Sabat dropped to his knees, reached for her hand and caught it as it was snatched away. She tensed, her whole body trembled and she managed a scream, a weak effort, a faint echo of the cry they had heard earlier. Sabat dropped the crucifix back into his pocket. He could have used it to devastate her but there was no point. She was at his mercy anyway, a nymph of the graveyard run to earth by the hunters.

'I do not mean you any harm,' he spoke softly, smiled.

'I am ... finished,' she whispered, closed her eyes, a resignation to death, maybe even worse.

'What is your name?'

A pause, then 'Sheenah'.

'You're safe now. She's dead, whoever she was.'

'Alena . . . has been dead for a very longtime.'

'I know, but she is finished now. Destroyed by the cross.'

Sheenah shuddered, continued to tremble. Then . . . why don't you finish me, Sabat?'

'You know my name?'

'Everybody in this village knows your name. A devil in human form sent to make a pact with the Oke Priests.'

'My, my,' Sabat glanced briefly at Kent, then turned back to the shivering girl. 'Look, Sheenah, if you stop here much longer you're likely to catch pneumonia, like we shall as well. Let us take you back to our place where we can talk in comfort.'

Terrible things would happen to me if I was seen talking to you, Sabat.'

'From the villagers ... or the Oke Priests?'

'I . . . I do not . . . know.'

'Come on,' Sabat stood up, pulled her to her feet, let her dress fall back into place. 'It's a question of Hobson's Choice, my girl. It appears that whatever you do somebody is likely to have unpleasant things in mind for you, in which case I think you'd be a lot better off with Kent and myself.'

It was on the way back to their headquarters, as they moved slowly, keeping to the shadows, that Sabat experienced that faint but pleasant sensation beginning again in the lower regions of his body. With a supreme effort he managed to transfer his thoughts to other matters, even succeeded in shutting out Quentin's whispered mocking laughter.

Sabat was strong again now. The ungodly would know they had been in a fight whatever the eventual outcome.

'I'm a witch, you know. A white witch, of course.'

Sabat was taken aback by the frank confession, admired the way Sheenah had recovered her composure as she reclined in the armchair with a glass of Bacardi in her hand, almost arrogant now.

'I rather gathered you were,' Sabat took a sip of his whisky, smiled disarmingly. 'It was just a question of which side you were on out there in the dark tonight. We couldn't take chances.'

'Of course. I understand. I'm grateful to you, Sabat, because without you and your friend I would surely have died on the sacrificial altar. Alena, mistress of Alda, is terrible when her anger is aroused. The old ones are not wholly evil, though, but at the present time they crave revenge against those who seek to destroy an ancient place of worship.'

'Which is what I suspected it was all about,' Sabat said, stuffing long-stranded coarse tobacco into the bowl of his meerschaum pipe. 'It's the old religion versus the new, but where do you come in?'

'I am both a medium and a clairvoyant, amongst other things,' the girl smiled, and added, 'My mother, too, was a witch. Hounded from place to place until finally she sought refuge in this remote village. Then her past, blameless as it was, caught up with her. A couple of centuries ago she would have been burned at the stake on the village green with me alongside her. Instead they harassed us, did all kinds of stupid things. The local yobbos stoned our windows on more than one occasion and once they tried to set fire to our house. Then mother died - cancer - but the whole village was laughing, waiting for her to die because they claimed God was removing a curse from their midst. D'you know, Sabat,' she twirled the stem of the glass between her slim fingers and stared at it intently, 'in all the years, I never knew mother wish anybody evil . . . that is, not until her final hour. She was fading fast when suddenly she seemed to revive for a minute or two and she was mad with pain. I tried to distract her but she would not have it. "The evil lies with the villagers and their hypocritical church," she screamed. "Not content with driving out the old religion they are now trying to destroy it completely. The temple of the Oke Priests is to be ravaged by bulldozers so that houses for the unbelievers can be built on its site. May the old gods return and send forth their Oke Priests. May the sacred soil run red with blood, and the skies stink with the smoke of funeral pyres. Let there be death and destruction, and terror struck into the hearts of these hypocritical churchmen and villagers." Then my mother died. I alone realised her power, how she was able to contact the old ones, and I knew only too well that they would answer her cry for help to save the sacred place. It sounds ridiculous, Sabat. but I know it's true . . . just the same as I knew you would come here once the killings and the madness began.'

'I believe you,' Sabat paused to get his pipe going. 'As you are obviously a very genuine clairvoyant and have also inherited your mother's powers, I suppose you know how and why this tract of ancient land has come to be put on the market.'

'I can only hazard a guess. Somehow Bishop Boyce and the local planning officer worked it out between them. This builder who plans to build a housing estate on the land must be in on it, too.'

'A three-way corruption. But it'll take some proving.'

'There's a weak link. The builder, Darren Hurst, has a mistress. Actually she's a high-class call-girl named Lola, but that would be the way to get at them, through her. You're the kind of guy who could do that, Sabat.'

'And how d'you figure in all this, Sheenah? You're hardly a churchgoer and I wouldn't've thought that it worried you one toss.'

'Don't forget, I believe in the old religion,' Sheenah smiled. 'It was my mother who evoked the spirits of the old Oke Priests. Maybe they would have intervened anyway, but the fact remains that my mother called them up and now there's bloodshed on my conscience.'

'But why were you attacked, Sheenah?' Sabat's eyes narrowed. 'Surely you are one of them!'

'I have betrayed them,' the slender fingers holding the glass trembled and slopped some of the liquid. 'I am a traitor to my own religion because I do not want them here. In their eyes I have betrayed them because I contacted them and beseeched them not to continue with these sacrifices, these killings. That was why I incurred the wrath of Alena, mistress of Alda, the Arch-Druid. Tonight she would have sacrificed me, spilled my blood across the tomb of Sir Henry Grayne who was himself a latter-day druid.'

'Sir Henry was a druid.' Sabat was incredulous.

'In the modern sense. As you know, there are still druid lodges scattered about the country today, another branch of freemasonry, men who do good work, support charities. However, Sir Henry died before I was born and I have not been able to find out much about him. Possibly he was a follower of the old religion in its truest sense which was why he left this land in Trust. He wanted it preserved so that the spirits of the Oke Priests could continue to worship in peace for evermore.'

Things are becoming clearer,' Sabat knocked his pipe out in an ashtray and furrowed his brow. 'I suspected corruption between the bishop and other parties but I was unaware of the feud between the old religion and the new. Obviously I was an enemy when I arrived here, to such an extent that I was immediately the victim of a psychic attack.'

'I am terrified,' Sheenah was deathly white again, beginning to tremble. The three of us have now invoked a wrath too terrible to contemplate, Sabat. You have come here in the pay of the new religion and within a matter of hours of your arrival you have destroyed Alena. Alda will seek revenge, not only on yourself but on me, and your companion here. Alda's anger will only be appeased when we three have been wiped out and the followers of the new religion annihilated in a blood bath!'

'So we're the meat in the sandwich,' Sabat's mouth tightened into a grim, bloodless line. 'I take on a job to exorcise evil and find that the evil has justice on its side - a battle against a corrupt church hierarchy. Jesus Christ, where the hell do we go from here?'

Kent was silent. He had the makings of a lead feature article but nobody would

believe him if he wrote it. He, too, was caught up in all this, whether he liked it or not. He had no choice but to go along with the others and see how it all panned out. And he didn't like what he'd witnessed so far.

'I was hoping maybe I could bargain with the Oke Priests,' Sheenah muttered, 'but now that you've destroyed Alena there will be no chance of that.'

'I could exorcise the church and its grounds, as I intended to do, anyway,' Sabat answered.

'No,' Sheenah snapped. 'You would be siding with the corrupt forces. And, anyway, they are too strong for one man to take on; even you, Sabat. Maybe it would have been better if I had died on Alena's sacrificial altar. I'll probably die, anyway. Oh God, we don't have a chance, any of us!'

'We'll fight,' Sabat's expression was one of determination, a hardening of his features which Kent remembered from their SAS days - his killing expression. 'But first we've got to survive this night. If you'll both give me a hand we'll move the furniture out, roll the carpet back, and set up some kind of protection. It's our only chance.'

Under normal circumstances Kent would have been sceptical; but these were no ordinary circumstances. He worked alongside Sabat and Sheenah, moved everything out into the small hall, then watched fascinated as Sabat brought in his black crocodile-skin briefcase and began to unpack items which were foreign to the journalist.

The pentagram, carefully drawn by Sabat with a piece of chalk attached to a length of string, Sheenah the focal point, everything had to be so precise. The way they worked, so meticulously, attention to every detail. Five chalices of charged water, Sabat consecrating the fluid by lining up the forefingers of both hands, squinting down the digits as though he was opening fire with twin guns. Kent's mouth went dry and he licked his lips nervously when he saw the water in the chalices bubbling as though by some invisible method of aeration.

'So far, so good,' Sabat was tense, looking drained. 'Now we must hurry. No clothing must be worn within the circle tonight.'

Kent checked an immediate protest. This was all going a bit too far, yet he had witnessed the happenings in the churchyard and its adjoining land only a short time ago, and they defied logical explanation. The Fleet Street man was filled with embarrassment as he stepped naked into the pentagram, all his lifelong inhibitions screaming at him to protest as Sabat approached him and 'closed' the nine openings of his body with charged water. It made his skin crawl with revulsion.

Kent closed his eyes, thought maybe he was blushing but if he was, perhaps his complexion would disguise the fact. Sheenah seemed totally unmoved by it all, helped Sabat with his own protections as efficiently and as unmoved as though she was administering some form of medicinal dressing. In a way, that was what it was, Kent reflected as he stretched himself out on the blankets which Sabat had brought into the circle. The fellow was too pernickety, insisted that all blankets and cushions were vacuumed first. It was going a bit far! Another thing, it was going to be bloody cold sleeping in the nude, he told himself. Sabat had once confessed that he always slept naked, boasted that one might as well go to bed in a suit as wear pyjamas. Well, even if it was okay by him, Kent felt a resentment towards this pandering to Sabat's whims. He turned over, stared at the far wall, found himself counting the flowery patterns on the paper; an obsession like counting sheep, only he'd never felt less like sleep in his life before. Before this night was over he was liable to become

very angry.

Sabat stretched out, found himself gazing at Sheenah. The girl was lying on top of her pile of rugs, apparently perfectly relaxed, her eyes closed. Damn it, why didn't the wench roll herself up in the blankets like Kent had done? Was she deliberately trying to seduce him? Sabat sensed a faint stirring in his loins. That was something he could do without. Christ, he hoped they didn't play on his major weakness again. Any arousal, though, would be of his own making. Inside this pentagram he was safe from the forces of darkness. They could not influence him unless something went radically wrong and their defences were breached.

Sabat had rarely been so thorough as he had been tonight, simply because he could not take any chances. They were hellishly powerful and he had aroused their wrath by the destruction of Alena, which meant they would not relent their efforts. Either he destroyed them or they destroyed this trio; it was as simple as that.

Sabat was reminded once again of his voluntary circumcision only a few years ago. A similar defence to this one had almost been catastrophic even though he had been particular in cleaning the room and discarding his clothes before entering the circle. Yet a tiny evil entity had infiltrated his careful defences, a minute particle of dirt, almost invisible to the naked eye, lodged beneath his foreskin. He had survived, but the importance of circumcision to any exorcist was made apparent to him. Even now he could feel that scar throbbing as his arousal continued. Slowly, almost guiltily, he slid a hand beneath the blanket, decided that there was only one way to satisfy his bodily craving. Sheenah appeared to have fallen asleep. Kent was lying staring the other way. It would not take long.

Sabat's sexual desires began to escalate. Every instinct urged him to throw off his rug, crawl across towards where Sheenah lay, take her. He closed his eyes. Oh God, the feeling was getting too much for him, a mounting burning lust that was fast getting out of control.

And then, loud and clear, vibrant in the nocturnal stillness of the house, the front doorbell shrilled! Sabat hesitated, muttered a curse at this unexpected intrusion upon his bodily pleasures, and then the sweat of his naked trembling body chilled.

No way, at this late hour, could it be an ordinary caller!

CHAPTER SEVEN

'OPENUP, Sabat'

Sabat almost sprang to his feet, rushed blindly to obey. Then he remembered, recognised the voice. Quentin's! Oh Christ, they'd nearly caught him napping, blurred his reasoning with sexual desire. But how? How had they got to him through the defences of the pentagram?

'What the hell . . . ' Kent was sitting up, clutching his blanket to his body with an almost schoolboyish inhibition. 'There's somebody at the door, Sabat.'

'A brilliant deduction,' Sabat's voice was loaded with sarcasm, possibly to disguise his own apprehension. A general must never display fear in front of his troops. 'You could be right, Kent. On the other hand you could be bloody wrong.'

'You're talking nonsense. Of course there's somebody at the door. They rang the bell.'

And as if to support the journalist's words the bell rang again.

'Well, aren't we going to answer it?' Kent was becoming angry. 'Go and see who it is, Sabat, for Christ's sake.'

'No,' Sabat stood up, aware that both Kent and Sheenah were staring at the nakedness of his lower body, 'I shall not. Not under any circumstances!'

'I call that bloody unsociable,' Kent's whisper was loaded with rising fury. 'Not to mention just plain bloody rude and stupid. Suppose it's something urgent. The police, for instance.'

Then they'll get tired eventually and go away,' Sabat's eyes narrowed. The warning systems in his body were screaming out at him. Something was wrong with Kent! Apart from the other's reluctance to spend the night here, there was something else - a growing rebellion, a determination to disobey orders. And Sabat remembered again that somebody or something had penetrated the protections he had built up, found his Achilles' heel for the second time in one night, infiltrated the pentagram.

'We don't answer it and that's final,' his voice was a hoarse whisper that echoed in the bare room. He dropped his gaze, saw his half-erection and knew that they were both looking at it, knew only too well what he had been doing when that damned bell rang.

This is getting beyond a joke,' Kent was struggling to his feet, still trying to clutch the blanket to his lower body. In fact, it's obscene. You've set this up deliberately, Sabat, for your own perverted pleasure. You ought to be locked away! Well, I'm not standing for it. I'm getting my clothes and going back to the White Horse this very moment. If you want to talk to me in the morning I'll be . . . '

Kent didn't see the blow coming, never even suspected that Sabat might take such drastic action; a fist that seemed faster than light itself, an indistinguishable blur that began somewhere around Mark Sabat's hip-level and ended with a crack like a child's cap pistol on the point of the journalist's jaw.

Kent never even grunted. His head went back, his stocky body straightened up and began to totter. Sabat caught him by the arm with that same superlative speed, pulled him forward and then, one-handed, lowered him back on to his blanket. Kent's eyes were closed; just a trickle of blood from the corner of his lower lip and a bruise that was already beginning to spread across his jaw.

'Did you really have to hit him?' there was a note of reprimand in Sheenah's voice.

'There was no alternative. He would have broken the circle. Already there is a

weak link somewhere here, something I have overlooked.'

'That's nonsense,' she laughed, a sound that was shrill and eerie, 'we were very careful. He just fell for an old ruse.'

The bell rang again, long and loud. A brief pause then three short bursts. Laughter somewhere; it could have come from outside. It could have been Quentin.

'We just sit them out,' Sabat squatted down again but made no attempt to cover himself up. 'They'll try all kinds of tricks but we just have to ignore them and tell ourselves that everything's okay. That way we'll make it through to morning.'

The light flickered, almost went out, came back on again. It was very cold in spite of the fact that Sabat had purposely checked earlier that the central heating would remain on all night.

'You discovered one way of keeping yourself warm,' Sheenah laughed, smirked, her gaze focused on Sabat's erection which had swelled again. 'You do that often or just when you're cold? Or do you indulge solely when the Oke Priests are doing their damndest to get you?'

'I do it pretty regularly,' Sabat's voice was even, his gaze meeting hers and holding it without flinching. 'But I'd give a grand to know just who turned me on this time.'

'Whatever do you mean?' her dark eyes widened.

'Just that somebody's worked on me. Like they worked on Kent, tried to make him break the circle. If it came from without then as I've already said, we've overlooked something. If not, then . . . well it wasn't Kent, and I know it's not me, which only leaves . . . '

He was cut off by the bell ringing again, accompanied this time by the pounding of a fist on the door. A gruff unrecognisable voice was shouting, words that eventually became recognisable as they progressed from an unintelligible shouting to an 'Open up. This is the police!'

'You'll have to open up if it's the police,' Sheenah looked suddenly frightened, tensing as though she might make a sudden dash for the door to the hall.

'Don't try it, Sheenah or whatever your real name is,' Sabat changed position, balancing on his haunches, an athlete about to compete for a record. 'You'll never make it and I promise you that if you so much as try I'll kill you just as I killed Alena -but not with a crucifix. Oh no, I'll mangle you with my bare hands so that when they find your body they'll never recognise it!'

Sheenah paled, shuddered. She knew Sabat was not bluffing. There were a lot of stories about him and most of them were true. She wasn't going to put him to the test; he was terrible to behold in this dark hour.

'You're mistaken about me,' she said. It sounded feeble. 'I've already told you how I came to be involved in this.'

'You're a bitch and a liar,' Sabat's eyes narrowed, 'and I might just have fallen for your little game.'

She turned, would have sprung away, cleared the pentagram and rushed for the

door but he caught her, grabbed a handful of long dark hair and pulled her back. She screamed, began to struggle, beating and clawing at his naked body with her long fingernails. 'Let me go. I'll have the police on you for this!'

'The police!' He laughed loud and mirthlessly. 'Nobody can save you, Sheenah. You're trapped in this pentagram with me. We might just as well be on another planet for all the help you can expect!'

Even as he bore her to the floor, pinned her beneath him with his knees, Sabat heard the crashing sounds out in the hallway; woodwork cracked and splintered, glass showered and tinkled on the tiled floor. Whoever had been ringing the bell these last few minutes had burst their way into the house!

Sabat tensed, kept his grip on the girl, ignored her shriek of triumph, turned his head as the living-room door was flung wide. He gasped aloud his astonishment at the scene which greeted him.

A blue uniformed man stood framed in the doorway; a tall imposing figure, the features beneath the helmet harsh and angry, eyes riveted on the naked couple in the centre of the circle.

'Sabat!' the voice was a hiss, like an angry cobra that has finally broken through to corner its prey. 'You are under arrest. I must ask you to accompany me to the police station.'

Sabat's expression was one of mingled surprise and suspicion. Something was wrong; this was no ordinary police procedure, more like an amateur actor reciting badly-learned lines. 'No,' he replied, 'I will not leave this pentagram for you or anybody else. You can either stay and watch or else go away.'

The other advanced a few steps, halted. Indecision.

'If you want me, come and get me!'

'You are under arrest for murder!'

'Whose?'

'A woman you killed a short time ago.'

'You have the body to prove it? You can't charge me with murder without a corpse.'

The officer's swarthy face clouded. He took another step forward, reeled back as though he had hit some invisible barrier and let out a cry of pain.

'You see,' Sabat laughed, 'you cannot reach me. Furthermore, you are no policeman. Certainly no mortal^'

The light dimmed, a sudden rush of darkness and an icy coldness as though a gust of wind had swept directly in from the Arctic. Sabat felt its force tearing at him, a miniature cyclone threatening to send him spinning across the room. He clutched at Sheenah, felt her beginning to struggle again, twisting and trying to bite the arms which encircled her. One of the chalices rocked, spilled some of the holy water, but miraculously it did not topple over. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the wind died down and the light came back to full strength.

Sabat's vision swam; he had to adjust his eyesight back to the blinding glare,

thought for one moment that what he saw was an hallucination. The policeman was gone and in his place stood a tall robed figure, barefoot, a Bronze Age Irish gold gorget around his neck. On his head he wore a thick fur cap, the features beneath skeletal in appearance, the skin stretched across the forehead and cheekbones, translucent and torn in places. Awesome indeed but most terrible of all was the expression of sheer malevolence which was centred on Sabat.

'Alda!' Sheenah screeched. 'My father, you have come to save me.'

'Shyaena, my beloved daughter,' rich whispered tones answered her. 'This man who holds you has destroyed my dearest Alena in whose womb you were conceived. And for that he must pay the supreme penalty - death in this world, his soul condemned to wander forever in purgatory in the land beyond the shadows.'

And then Sabat laughed, a hollow sound that echoed in the confined space of the bare room. Across the pentagram the two men stared hatefully at each other, one from the world of mortals, the other from the land of the old gods, a confrontation separated by an impenetrable barrier.

'You cannot harm me, Alda,' Sabat snarled, 'for my magic is more powerful than yours. You are powerless, as is the one you call Shyaena whom I know as Sheenah. Purgatory will be yours, for you must stand and witness her fate!'

Alda lapsed into silence, and in his sunken eyes there was a faint glimmer of fear. He stepped back a pace as though he feared lest that psychic force that lived within the pentagram might strike him again. Sheer terror, the awful realisation that in no way could he influence whatever Sabat had in mind.

Sabat turned back to Sheenah, read the same fear mirrored in her eyes that he'd seen in Alda's. The dark forces had sought to destroy him but now the tables were turned. Alda, the cruel Arch-Druid, slayer of a thousand victims on his turf altar, high-priest of the Lupercal Cave, was being forced to watch his own daughter's fate, a reincarnation in the flesh about to experience the agonies of a mere mortal.

'I ought to kill you, Sheenah,' Sabat hissed, 'but I want you to live on and remember this night, not just in this life but in all your lives hereafter. You will never forget Sabat, that I promise you!'

A mere token resistance at first from the girl as he pushed her flat on the floor, pulled her legs apart. Fierce and yet gentle, his fingers smoothed over her flesh, caressed the pink nipples so that they stood up firm and straight; stroked her softness until it became damp with desire, her breathing faster, her cheeks flushed in anticipation of bodily pleasures. Her head was turned aside, her eyes meeting with Alda's, asking his forgiveness for now she did not want to be saved from this man.

Sabat grunted his satisfaction as the full weight of his body pressed down on hers, his lips seeking and finding her warm moist ones, his tongue thrusting, simulating the union of their lower regions. Her arms came up and around him, pulling him close to her, her legs entwining around his body, clamping him to her, her rhythm matching his own.

Sabat glanced once in the direction of Alda. The old druid seemed to have wilted, pathetic in his resignation to this union between spirit and mortal. And after that Sabat forgot all about him.

Two people who cared for nothing else apart from the closeness of each other. Their emotions merged, escalated, a fever that consumed them, lathering their

convulsing bodies in sweat, muffled cries of delight escaping those crushed lips. Until finally the volcano of lust erupted, limbs flaying wildly as they convulsed together. But for Sabat there was no respite, truly a man possessed, a bucking robot which could not be checked, nor fully satisfied, it seemed.

Sheenah lay limply, submitting, a spent force. She moaned softly, every nerve and muscle trembling. The man on top of her was certainly no ordinary being, his strength and power far surpassing her own as he continued to thrust into her without a pause.

It was a long time before Sabat finally came off her and knelt there watching her intently, his long dark hair straggling and matted with perspiration, his body glistening in the artificial light. Perhaps his breathing was slightly faster than normal; it was difficult to tell.

He turned, regarded Alda who had retreated to a far corner of the room, the tali druid bowed and broken, those old eyes misty with tears.

'You cannot harm me now, Alda,' there was a faint note of gloating in Sabat's voice, 'for I have mated with your offspring and perchance she will bear another in your line, who knows? The son of Sabat, spawn of the Oke Priests. . . .'

'You are cunning, Sabat,' grudging admiration, moving slowly forward again. 'A dangerous foe, one who understands more than other men. But I cannot forgive you for destroying Alena.'

'I had no choice. She destroyed herself, for I mean the old religion no harm. You were too hasty, attacking me before I had fully understood what was happening here.'

They shall not have our sacred ground, Sabat. They are corrupt and, in reality, worship no deity . . . like your companion there.' Alda pointed to where Kent was just beginning to stir.

'You speak the truth,' Sabat replied. 'They are the corrupt ones, this bishop and his underlings, the one who negotiated the sale when the land should have been preserved for posterity, and he who plans to become rich by building homes on it for the godless. These people are my enemies as well as yours, Alda.'

'And yet you fight for them?'

'No. I took their money because they deserved to lose it. Had you not attacked me so soon then Alena would still be with you. You killed her, Alda. But you will not achieve your goal by slaughtering people. Like weeds by the wayside others will come to take the place of the slain.'

'We shall not give up.'

'No, but the carnage will be purposeless because in the end you will lose and homes will be built on your land.'

Destroy them and others will be erected, and so it will go on. There will be no everlasting peace.'

Alda sighed audibly, accepting that Sabat told the truth. Revenge would eventually be the only thing left to the last of the Oke Priests.

'What the fuck's going on?' Kent sat up, rubbed his bruised jaw and slowly it

all came back to him. 'Hey, Sabat, you hit me! Are you crazy, everybody sitting in a bloody circle in the nude and . . . hey, who's this guy and what's he doing here?'

'This is Alda, Arch-Druid of an ancient order.' Sabat made the introduction sound like it was a perfectly ordinary meeting and the old man was expected to be present. 'We've all cooled down and are trying to talk things over.'

You're all mad, Kent thought, but declined to voice his opinion. It was bloody cold sitting here but he wasn't going to risk breaking up the party again. He smoothed his jaw with his fingers, felt the swelling, but bore Sabat no resentment. Strange how he had hated him in those last few seconds just before he had passed out; as though his mind had not been his own. . . .

'Well, it's up to you, Alda,' Sabat spoke abruptly, a matter-of-fact tone that he might have used at any meeting that had gone on too long. 'Call your Oke Priests off and I'll take up the fight against the corrupt ones. But I don't want you harbouring any ideas about getting even with me over what's happened so far because you started all this; I only fought back.'

'I cannot call off the old ones who demand revenge and sacrifice in mortal blood!' Alda's voice was a whine, his tone an apology to Sabat. 'Oh that I could, but it is not possible.'

'Why not?'

'Because I am not high priest of all the Oke Priests, for there have been many since my time. Centuries have passed and Alda has been but a legend to those who came after him. I was not strong enough; others who were more cruel than I followed and pandered to the cries of the rabble for blood and more blood. This land is soaked in blood but that is as nothing compared with that which will be spilled now!'

There is no way of avoiding it?' Sabat's face was grim. Kent had paled also.

'Only by giving back the land to the Oke Priests.'

'And if I do that?'

'Then the killings and the madness will cease. But I cannot safeguard you Sabat for that is beyond my power. Give the spirits back that which is rightfully theirs and this carnage will cease. Shyaena will help you. But we must be revenged . . . do you hear me, Sabat? The Oke Priests must be revenged'

The light dimmed again, then went out. Only then did Sabat notice a faint greyness creeping into the room through the chinks in the curtains. Dawn was nigh and Alda could remain no longer. He was gone as though he had never been.

'Well, I guess we don't need the pentagram any longer,' Sabat strode across and switched on the light, began retrieving his clothes. 'Everybody can get dressed now.'

None of them spoke until they were all fully clad. The central heating seemed to be working again, Sabat decided as he checked the nearest radiator.

'I'll make some coffee,' Sheenah avoided Sabat's gaze, went through into the kitchen and began searching the cupboards.

'I guess you hate me like hell after last night,' Sabat followed her in and closed the door behind him. It was the nearest he was ever likely to get to an

apology.

'I thought maybe it was the other way round,' she managed a faint smile, her lower lip trembling. 'After all, I tried to kill you. I lied to you, set up a trap for you.'

'Simply because you are Shyaena, offspring of Alda reborn,' Sabat slipped an arm around her. 'I have a similar problem. I am possessed by my brother Quentin's soul which sometimes makes me do things I wouldn't do under normal circumstances. However, I need to know how you and I stand now.'

'I will not try to kill you again,' she looked him full in the face, 'and neither will Alda because he has promised. Only Alda has control over me. But it is right what he says, the spirits of the old Oke Priests are powerful. It is a tidal wave of wrath and blood which can only be stemmed by giving them back their sacred land. But we also have to stay alive, for surely their anger will be directed towards me as well now that I have joined forces with you.'

'It's teamwork then; you, me and Kent?'

'All right.'

'Then we have to decide on our next move.'

'Destroy those who corrupt, Sabat, and the bloodshed will stop. Take my word for it.'

A dull bang out in the hall, a vibration that caused more of the broken glass to shower into the house.

'What's that?' Sheenah was close behind Sabat as he opened the kitchen door, saw the empty hall and the room which they had just vacated. There was no sign of Kent.

'Now where the hell's he gone to?' Sabat opened the outer door but the drive was empty. 'Perhaps he's just gone out to get a paper or something.* It sounded feeble.

'We must not let him out of our sight,' Sheenah clutched at Sabat's arm. 'Whether your friend likes it or not he is in this with us, marked down for death by the spirits of the Oke Priests. Once night comes again his life and his soul will be in danger, wherever he goes. We must find him, Sabat!'

And Sabat's flesh was goosepimpling again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

KENT HAD to get away from the house otherwise he'd go mad; maybe he already was. Jesus Christ, what the hell had happened last night?

The silent village looked sinister in the half-light of dawn. My God, he'd had enough of Sabat. Mark had been crazy during their SAS days together, a devil in action, one who killed mercilessly and enjoyed it. But this was going too far. All the same there had been something weird about the nocturnal hours; Kent had seen it with his own eyes if he did not understand it.

It was with no small amount of relief that he arrived back at the White Horse. The side door was unlocked; maybe it was always left that way for residents who kept late hours.

The journalist crept up the flight of narrow winding stairs, winced every time a board creaked. God, his head ached, a stabbing pain as if somebody was boring into his skull with a skewer. A wave of dizziness had him swaying on the landing, clutching the carved oak rail in case he should fall. A few seconds and the sensation passed and with a sigh of relief he made it into his room.

The sight of that single bed made him aware just how exhausted he was; less than an hour's sleep in the last twenty-four and that brief rest was only due to an uppercut by Sabat, goddamn the fellow!

Kent pushed the bolt home on the door and flung himself, still fully dressed, on to the bed. Right now he didn't give a damn for Sabat, nor Sheenah, nor anybody else. He wasn't budging from this bed for any of them. They could all go to hell as far as he was concerned.

The room was dark when Kent awoke, a slow process, gathering his thoughts gradually, trying to piece the events of the past day together. Disorientated, glancing at the luminous dial of his wristwatch, seeing that it was nine o'clock and trying to decide whether it was a.m. or p.m.

His headache was gone; he felt refreshed. It had to be nighttime. That meant he had slept for about fifteen hours, a deep sleep interspersed with nightmarish dreams. It was difficult to determine the borderline between dreams and reality after the night before, sanity or madness.

Kent swung his feet off the bed and switched on a table lamp. Methodically he began to plan what he was going to do. For a start, Sabat and that girl were crazy and no way was the Fleet Street man going to get involved in any more of that hocus-pocus. It was all some kind of trickery, he decided, both sides trying to deceive the other by creating optical illusions, together with some kind of sleight of hand; like conjurers did. The real story he was seeking didn't lie there. Beneath it all lay the big scoop, corruption involving bishops and vicars and trustees and crooked builders. That was the feature article he needed, not a lot of mumbo-jumbo that half his paper's readership would just skim through and forget all about ten minutes later. Something sensational that would rock the nation, scandal that would shock church coffee mornings to the core.

To hell with Sabat; this was where their trails parted. Kent let himself out of his room and went downstairs.

The lounge bar was packed to capacity, a hubbub of conversation all around him as he pushed his way to the bar. Kent leaned against an upright beam, sensed a wave of dizziness, then steadied. Kent seemed to feel heady, experienced a kind of unreality as though he was a spectator to his own actions. During those brief seconds of mental aberration he had presumably functioned quite normally, found himself with a glass of whisky in his hand, its sharp flavour on his palate, and apparently engaged in conversation with a tall,

silver-haired man.

'... this bishop fellow's an out-and-out rogue,' the other had a soft lilting voice, yet commanding so that Kent found himself listening. 'He's getting a fat pay-off from this builder, Hurst, for the sale of the land. And nobody can damned well prove a thing. Stone, the planning officer, is in it too; another pay-out to get the green-belt clause made null and void.'

Kent stared, wondered who the hell this guy was, telling him all this and risking a slander action. Of course, everybody in the village was saying exactly the same thing so he probably considered himself to be on safe ground. The man had an air of affluence about him, more in his manner than his mode of dress: a well-worn tweed sports jacket and flannels, long out of fashion; the kind you found elderly gentlemen on bowling greens wearing, topped off with a wide-brimmed panama hat liberally sprinkled with gnat repellent.

But this fellow couldn't be more than fifty. There was definitely something odd about him, his movements jerky, his thin lips moving mechanically like those of a puppet, lisping as though he had some slight impediment of speech.

'Vicar Mannering's a crook, too,' the stranger went on. 'I'll give you an instance. It was always the custom for the curate to have the Easter Sunday offering and the vicar of the mother church to have the Whit Sunday one. Oh yes, it'd been a custom for years, but Mannering suddenly realised that the Easter congregation was almost double the Whit one. So the greedy blighter got the bishop to swap the offertories over so that the vicar got the golden egg. That's what we're up against in the Church today, believe me, sir.'

Kent found himself nodding. The buzz of conversation around him seemed to have receded so that this man was the focal point, the principal actor in an amateur theatrical production. But nobody was looking at them; they might have been the only two people in that room against a background of taped sound effects.

'We've had another meeting tonight. I guess if these villagers had their way they'd make a huge bonfire and burn the bishop, Hurst, and Stone on it. Probably chuck Vicar Mannering on as well for good measure. Incinerate the damned lot of them and start again from scratch.' That stilted mouth moved, stretched into a laugh, a sound that had shivers running up and down Kent's spine.

'You're a stranger here, sir,' eyes that seemed to bore into Kent. 'But you can't divorce yourself from this situation because the cancer within the Church is spreading so that eventually it'll rot us all like some right-wing dictatorship that has got a stranglehold on the nation. They've misappropriated funds and trusts to suit themselves. Come, sir, let me show you the state of the church roof. There's enough moonlight to see it by. It'll collapse before long, the roof I mean,' another forced laugh. 'I'd like you to see for yourself so that you can go back to wherever you've come from and tell your friends what's happening in the Church today. "Spread the word", eh!'

Kent didn't want to go. The last thing he wanted to do was to go back to that cemetery and its adjacent ground. He even tried to think of a good excuse why he should not accompany this volatile eccentric on a moonlit tour of consecrated ground but he failed to come up with one. Gulping down the remainder of his whisky he found himself nodding his agreement, a schoolboy unwilling to concede to a forceful master's whims.

The tall man smiled, put his glass back on the bar. Kent saw that it was still

full, some kind of wine. He wondered why the other didn't drink it up; perhaps they would be returning here after their short excursion into the night.

A full moon cast its light across the countryside, illuminated St Monica's Church with its sagging roof. Somewhere a night bird was calling vehemently, almost as though it was screeching some kind of warning. Kent found himself hurrying, almost breaking into a run to keep up with his companion's gangling gait. What the hell was the hurry?

'Look at that, it's a disgrace!' the tall man's voice escalated to a shriek of rage, frustration, a long arm pointing up to the church roof. 'They had the money to repair it but they've squandered it so now they're scrounging off the parishioners.'

God, it was cold. Kent wished he had gone back up to his room to get a coat. But he could not even voice a protest, just as though his brain had been stupefied by some kind of drug; forced to follow in the steps of the other, nod his agreement to every statement. Maybe he was ill; he hadn't left his room at all and was dreaming all this, the beginnings of a nightmarish fever, shivering in his bed. Soon he'd start to sweat.

Somewhere in the distance thunder was rumbling. At least the noise sounded vaguely reminiscent of an electric storm, but that was impossible because the night was still and clear with a spring frost in the air. Like a series of explosions that went on and on, some louder than others. Vivid flashes lit up the sky against a spreading glow as though there was a huge fire burning a few miles away.

Kent tensed. That noise, a buzz that was growing louder and louder, a vibration coming closer all the time, had him clutching his hands to his ears in a futile attempt to shut it out. He wanted to scream his terror aloud.

'What the hells happening?' The journalist did not know whether he managed to get the words out or whether he just heard them in his own brain.

Shapes filled the moonlit sky, huge, lumbering bird-like objects flying in formation. Planes! Antiquated bombers that he recognised from illustrations in picture books, aircraft that were outdated long before the advent of the jet. And there was not a light to be seen amongst the entire squadron that stretched as far as the eye could see!

'You mean you don't know' incredulity on that pallid face, the silver hair glinting in the moonlight. 'Those are the Jerries, the Luftwaffe! They've bombed Coventry tonight, razed it to the ground. The cathedral, too. That'll teach those church hypocrites a thing or two!'

You're mad, Kent decided, his brain reeling, his limbs seeming to be paralysed so that he could not obey the powerful basic human instinct of self-survival and throw himself behind that huge headstone in an attempt to save himself. And so, obviously, am I!

'But there's no war on!'

'Of course there is,' the other stared at him, those grey eyes penetrating, beginning to smoulder with anger. 'We are at war with Germany!'

Kent nodded his head slowly, accepting what he heard, knowing that he must believe it because it was true; the proof was there for him to see. The night sky lit up by a blazing city twenty or so miles away, bombs still exploding, the stutter of retaliatory anti-aircraft fire. The raiders passing over, their

mission completed.

The noise receded until finally it was only a distant hum, the glow dying away. A city had been bombed and burned, only the embers remained. Kent thought that he could smell the acrid stench of burning bodies, roasting human flesh that made him want to throw up.

'Come now,' the tall man beckoned and Kent moved forward, swaying. 'I have other things to show you!'

Kent found himself staring at the huge tombstone, the one he had wanted to crouch down behind; the one where he and Sabat had discovered the naked Sheenah lying only . . . oh Jesus God, how long ago had that been? Now it seemed to shine with the newness of polished marble which the elements had not had time to spoil!

'Read it,' his companion's face was close to his own, the features screwed up with anger, shouting. 'Read it, and tell me what it says!'

'Sir . . . Henry . . . Grayne . . . ' Kent had to spell out each word in the manner of an infant learning to read, stumbling over pronunciations. 'Passed away . . . November . . . 1942.'

'My time is short,' the tall man sighed. 'Too short, and as such I must engage one to do that which otherwise I should have done myself.'

'Your time?' Kent's mouth was dry.

'Yes, my time. For I am none other than Sir Henry Grayne, he who gave money in trust for the maintenance of the roof of St Monica's. For the upkeep of this tombstone. And also gave the land in keeping to the new religion so that the old one could remain undisturbed, our spirits continuing to worship unmolested. And now that New Religion has performed an act of unprecedented treachery in an attempt to destroy those who worshipped here when this land was young! And you, too, who are known as Kent have joined forces with the man called Sabat so that we may be destroyed forever r

A denial was impossible; Kent found himself muttering some incomprehensible words of agreement; experienced a wave of guilt and shame, a criminal standing in the dock awaiting sentence.

'You could and should die this very minute,' the man who called himself Sir Henry Grayne snapped. 'Oh, that we the latter-day druids could sacrifice you to the old gods, but you are of great use to us. Our way was not to sacrifice human life as did our predecessors, but now that is forced upon us. We have no choice . . . have we, brethren!'

'Nay, we have no choice.'

Kent felt sheer terror grip him, all the worse because movement was denied him. He hadn't seen the others approaching; they had arrived silently, now ringing the two men standing by the large headstone. Robed and barefooted, men whose expressions bore the hatred forced upon them by avarice of those who came after. A sect determined to fight, to shed blood on behalf of their ancestors to whom the taking of life was a common ritual.

The journalist felt his legs go weak; it was a miracle how they still continued to support his weight. These friends, these madmen, were going to kill him . . . sacrifice him to their gods!

One of the group stepped forward, handed something to Sir Henry Grayne, an object that glinted in the moonbeams - a long-bladed sword with a jewelled hilt, the stones flashing blood red as though they anticipated crimson death.

Sir Henry raised the weapon, pursed his lips and kissed the flat of the blade. 'O sacred sword of Alda, high priest of the Oke Priests, too long hast thou lain idle, thy keen edge deprived of flesh and blood. Well, thou hast not long to wait now!'

'Kill the unbeliever! He has no god, not even one of his own!'

'Be patient!' Grayne turned to face them, held his weapon aloft. 'Oh, it would be easy to slay this one, but I have a far more cunning idea.'

'Speak then or else the moon will begin to wane and we shall be recalled to the shadows to await the Summer Solstice.'

'I will be brief,' Sir Henry drew himself up, his voice now powerful with no trace of a lisp. 'The hypocrites who seek to destroy our sacred ground have brought the man known as Sabat here to aid them in their determination to drive us from here, banish us forever to wander in the dark places. Sabat is strong; strong enough to destroy Alena, the witch, and to deprive Alda of his powers. This one whom they call Kent works with Sabat and the traitress, Shyaena. For us to attempt to kill them would not only be dangerous but would aid their cause if we failed. So this Kent must kill them for us!'

A gasp came from the onlookers, followed by a hiss of approval.

'So be it,' Grayne turned to face Kent, those lips parted in a smile, his silvery hair awry as though the wind had ruffled and misplaced it. 'You hear us, Kent? You hear the decision of the Council of Druids?'

'I hear it,' Kent was aware that his mouth moved, that somehow he managed to speak, that the words he uttered were his own intentions. 'I will kill Sabat, and the girl you call Shyaena, if it be your wish.'

'It is our wish. Our command. Sabat and Shyaena will come to this place in search of you, Kent. They will not be suspicious. Wait here by this tomb, my own last resting place, and when they approach you strike quickly and give no warning. Sabat first, a thrust deep into his black heart, and then the girl. Let this gravel which covers my earthly body run red with their blood.'

'It shall be so.'

'But that is not all. You, too, must die, Kent! When these two are slain, fall upon your blade and remember as you writhe in your death throes that you have served an order more powerful and holy than the religions of your own time. And for this service your soul will be spared eternal torment. Whilst Sabat and Shyaena wander for eternity in purgatory, the old gods will take you to their appointed place.'

'Sabat and Shyaena shall be slain and then I will die also,' Kent spoke unemotionally, felt the steel of the sword cold to his touch; watched Sir Henry Grayne and the druids melting into the shadows as the moon, as if commanded to do so, passed behind a dark cloud.

Now he was all alone, found that he could move freely again. But those moments of shock and terror were gone and in their place he felt a calmness, a new sense of purpose; an understanding and an eagerness to obey.

These druids were the true believers, a sect harassed by conventional hypocritical religions. Sabat was a threat to them and as such the ex-SAS man must be killed. And then, and only then, Kent would know true peace of mind. Death was but a phase of life, a stepping stone to the promised land hidden beyond the shadows.

Sabat and Shyaena must die! Kent seated himself on the grave of Sir Henry Grayne and prepared to wait. No longer was the night cold and hostile for he was part of it, an initiate awaiting a greater truth and understanding.

CHAPTER NINE

'WELL?' SHEENAH glanced up as Sabat came back into the house. 'Did you find him?'

'Yes,' Sabat looked mentally and physically drained. 'He's back in his room at the White Horse. I guess during the daytime hours he's as safe there as anywhere. Last night has shattered him just the same as it's shattered us. Sleep is what we all need, then tonight the battle begins again!'

'I've made some coffee,' Sheenah slid a mug of steaming dark fluid across the unit towards her companion. 'I guess we're all fighting on the same side now, Sabat. By the way, I told you the truth about my mother being a white witch. And I didn't intend to kill you and Kent of my own free will. I was psychically attacked just as you were and there was nothing I could do about it.'

'I believe you,' he smiled, closed his eyes momentarily. 'But we're not fighting the ancient druids now, Sheenah. We're fighting corruption and hypocrisy; Bishop Boyce, this builder, Hurst, and the planning officer who made the deal possible in the first place. But there's no way the old ones are going to relinquish their hunt for us. We've got to move fast.'

'Couldn't we go after these men right away, maybe get it all settled by the time darkness comes again?'

'It won't be quite as easy as that,' he gave a hollow laugh. 'We'll need darkness to cover us in our fight against these men also. I may have to kill and make sure that I leave no trace for the police to follow!' 'Oh, my God!'

There is no alternative. The old ones will accept nothing less than settlement in blood. Far better that these evil men die, for whilst they live and the deal goes on, more innocent lives will be lost. Take it from me, Sheenah, the Oke Priests will kill and kill again until their sacred land is safer

'You're right,' she sipped her coffee. 'And I'll help you, Sabat, because my father, Alda, wants it that way and my mother, Alena, would have wished it so even though you destroyed her.'

'Sleep first,' Sabat drained his mug and stood up. 'We shall need all our strength for this coming night. There are three bedrooms. You can choose whether you sleep on your own or with me.'

For a moment their eyes met; both remembered what had happened between them the previous night, a mating witnessed by the high priest of the old ones; a rape that had finally been acceptable to the one whom Alda called Shyaena. 'I'd prefer to sleep with you,' she murmured, and together they made their way upstairs.

Sheenah stepped out of her dress, threw it across a chair, then slid between the sheets, watching Sabat undress through slitted eyes that were heavy with weariness. She hadn't dreamed it all last night; his body was lithe and muscular and so sensual, the kind of man who could seduce any woman he wished. Just the sight of him brought a quiver to her flesh, a faint moistness between her thighs. So pleasurable just to think about even when you were too exhausted to make it anyway. But you promised yourself that before much longer. . . .

Sabat and Sheenah slept the sleep of the exhausted that even erotic dreams were incapable of disturbing.

Sabat experienced one awful, frightening thought that he was again the victim of a psychic attack. Even as he fought his way out of the depths of slumber he felt the familiar tightness on his chest, the weighty sensation that invariably heralded the beginning of an attack.

As his eyes opened the first thing he saw was Sheenah; dark and beautiful. And naked. Astride him, a smile playing about her pert mouth. He was aware also that outside the sky was turning saffron with the coming of dusk.

'Hey, we should be making a move,' he grunted. 'It'll be dark in half an hour. We've slept the day through.'

'And as a result we're both refreshed,' Sheenah laughed. 'What better time to make love than on waking?'

Sabat tensed; an inward struggle was taking place. Push this girl away, get dressed and go in search of Kent. Or make love and look for Kent afterwards. By the time they finished it would be fully dark. Would an hour or so make that much difference? It might. On the other hand it probably wouldn't. And he was already becoming aroused.

Sheenah was not waiting. Bent over him her lips were brushing his own, then her tongue was flicking at the lobe of an ear, her slim fingers stroking his chest, going lower . . . and lower.

Long before she transferred her attentions to the lower half of his body, Sabat's mind was made up. Or rather, he accepted that there was no way he was going to be able to break off and go in search of Kent. His whole body vibrated, his hands going up to her breasts, teasing those nipples so that they stood out hard and red.

Yet it was all so different from the last time; Sheenah was the dominant partner and not just because he wanted it that way. Everything she did was done to perfection, the perfect combination of tenderness and sensuousness.

'I simply adore circumcised men,' her tongue travelled the course of his scar. 'Did you know, Sabat,' her dark eyes were mocking him, 'that often the ancient Oke Priests circumcised their male sacrificial victims?'

'You read that somewhere?'

'Maybe,' she dropped her gaze, 'or maybe I just know it. A lot of the time they didn't take human life, just the foreskin as a token.'

'Which lets me out,' he grunted. 'I guess I'll be for the chop if they catch up with me then.'

She took him with a breathtaking unexpectedness, lifting herself up and straddling him in one perfectly co-ordinated movement as though she was mounting a horse. In that one marvellous second they were joined, a rhythm that began instantly, gently . . . speeding up.

Two people shuddering simultaneously; not so much as a pause as they writhed in unison, the slow build-up beginning again. Now Sabat was the rider, a black-maned warrior glistening with sweat, urging his mount to even greater efforts, a headlong gallop into ecstasy. A sense of timelessness pervaded so that they cared not for anything outside this room which was their own private world.

Finally mount and rider slowed to a canter, then a trot. Until at last they pulled apart and Sabat glanced over his shoulder at the window.

'It's already dark,' he grunted. 'We'd best dry ourselves and get dressed. The sooner we find Kent the easier I'll rest.'

A towelling-down that was a continuation of the union between them except that now there was haste in their movements, an eagerness to don their clothes. It was ten-fifteen by the time they left the house, travelling on foot because the White Horse was only a few minutes' walk away.

Sheenah waited in the shadows until Sabat emerged from the entrance marked 'lounge bar'.

'Kent left about an hour ago,' Sabat's voice was grim, the tension in his tone seeming to crackle like an electric current. 'The barman saw him with another guy. They left together. I don't like it one little bit. Let's try the churchyard!'

She wanted to ask 'why the churchyard', but in her heart she knew, because right now the focal point of this whole village was St Monica's cemetery.

'Why do you think Kent's gone back to the churchyard?' Sheenah breathed as they approached the lychgate. 'And who is the guy he's gone with?'

'I could hazard a dozen guesses,' Sabat whispered, 'but I don't believe in wasting brainpower on wild possibilities. We'll find out soon enough.'

The full moon was high in a cloudless sky, the ethereal light illuminating the jagged rows of untended graves with their moss-covered headstones. Silent and eerie, fringed by a wall of shadow that could have hidden a thousand evils.

Then they saw Kent! There was something sinister about the fact that they found him so easily, the way he sat almost nonchalantly on the edge of the big grave.

There he is!' Sabat drew back, his warning systems beginning to vibrate, goose pimples on the nape of his neck. 'But whoever he came with has gone ... or else they're hiding somewhere!'

'I don't like it,' Sheenah sensed her companion's foreboding, clutched at his arm. 'He's just sitting there like it was a warm sunny afternoon and he needed a rest!' 'Kent,' Sabat called softly, saw the other turn and stare in their direction. 'What the hell are you doing here? You'll catch pneumonia.'

'Hello,' the Fleet Street man remained seated. 'I was just reading the inscription on this tomb. Come and see for yourself, Sabat. It could throw some light on recent happenings.'

Sabat almost broke into a run but checked himself. There was something decidedly queer about all this. They had read the lettering on that gravestone the previous night when they had come upon Sheenah lying there . . . and that had been a trap, too! He walked slowly forward, a hunting cat suspecting that he might just be the hunted.

Three yards separated them from the journalist . . . two . . . and suddenly Sheenah was pulling at Sabat's arm, trying to drag him back, screaming hysterically, 'Sabat. . . he's got a swordr

Kent leaped to his feet, whirled towards them, something in his hand that sparkled and glittered as it was swung aloft, scintillating moonbeams turned to ruby red, a flashing weapon that swung viciously towards the newcomers, a thrust and blow from the hand of a master swordsman.

Sheenah screamed her terror even as she flung herself forward, disengaging herself from Sabat, spreading herself across his body, an instant human shield. The blade struck true with a juddering force that almost wrenched it from Kent's hand, the point going in deep just below the girl's left breast, tearing and shredding material and flesh, jarring on bone. And even as Sheenah sagged forward it was wrenched free; wielded again.

Sabat's brain worked with the speed of a computer, processing data in a split second, collaborating with his inbuilt alarm system, warning him, giving him the full facts, spurring him into instant action. Sheenah was dead, nothing could save her now. Kent was turned into a homicidal madman and Sabat was his next victim. Defence was out of the question so all that was left was - attack!

It took but a fraction of a second before Sabat had launched into action, his whole body flung forward in a rugby-style tackle before Sheenah's corpse had even hit the ground.

The sword blade cut viciously downwards, would have severed his head had he been where he was that split second earlier. He felt a rush of air, something snagging at his jacket. Then he hit Kent, his shoulder taking the Fleet Street man in the groin, the two of them hurtling backwards into the solid marble headstone, falling in a heap.

There was no pause, no respite to regain their breath. The shuddering impact was merely the beginning of a hand-to-hand struggle; and Kent still had the sword! Sabat gripped the other's wrist, tried to wrest the weapon from his hold but suddenly, it seemed, the journalist was imbued with tremendous strength and cunning! Kent seemed to go limp, and even as his muscles relaxed, they taughtened into a double-action retaliation. A knee shot up, found its mark in Sabat's groin, doubling him up while in the same movement the cropped head came down and butted him in the face.

Sabat saw flashing lights that had nothing at all to do with moonbeams glinting on rubies, and a blackness hovered and threatened as though the

surrounding shadows encroached to come to the aid of their own. He tasted blood, rode a wave of nausea, and came back fighting.

He clung grimly to the sword arm so that it could not be raised again, keeping the keen edge at a distance. And in that close encounter he was aware of both Kent's superb strength and the evil force which drove him to unbelievable efforts. Sabat realised, as he hung on for his life, that physically he could not match the other.

Sabat snorted and cleared the blood from his nostrils, tasted its iron flavour in his mouth as he gulped for air. Still alive, but no way could he match the strength of this powerful evil in the form of Kent, the journalist.

A roaring filled Sabat's ears like the pounding of a mighty waterfall and the blackness closed in again. Despair threatened to engulf him, hopelessness because his strength was waning, but he threw it off with a colossal effort. Now he heard laughter, mocking tones which he recognised as Quentin's. Damn it, he wasn't giving up, he'd fight them all the way.

Kent was trying to knee him again; powerful blows that took Sabat on the thigh, jarring him. Suddenly Sabat loosened his grip, jerked his hand free and plunged it into his pocket. The -38 was a temptation. One bullet would have blasted Kent into eternity and then he could have destroyed the evil which had taken over the flesh of his friend. No, there was another way. . . .

Sabat held the small crucifix between his fingers when Kent dealt him a powerful jab, a shuddering body punch that sent him spinning, tore his grip from the sword-arm and sprawled him full-length.

'Now, Sabat!' Kent's voice was a rasp, almost unrecognisable from the familiar soft tones. 'You have tried to destroy us, the ancient Oke Priests, but instead we shall destroy your

Sabat saw the upraised sword, knew there was no way he would be able to twist himself out of its path. Certain instant death glinted redly and Quentin was laughing again. His arm went back, shot forward.

One last effort, enough faith to know that it would work, that the hurtling crucifix would be faster than the descending sword blade, that it would find its mark.

Kent screamed, a cry that embodied physical pain and mortal terror. The sword seemed to check, then was suddenly wrested from his grasp like a twig being snapped from a bough in the teeth of a gale; whipped away, clattering against that marble headstone, its glittering hilt dulled.

The journalist straightened up, clutched at his face as though it had suddenly been scalded by boiling water. The scream died to a moan and he began to sob, floundering and clutching at the tombstone for support.

Sabat called upon his last resources, remnants of a shattered physical strength that responded to his demands. This time Kent's struggles were feeble as he was borne back, flung to the ground with Sabat on top of him.

Sabat stared down into the features he knew so well, now barely recognisable, twisted with hate and evil . . . and fear! Mouthing obscenities, calling upon the forces of darkness to come to his aid, physically spent.

Sabat wet his forefinger, made the sign of the cross on the forehead of the man he pinned to the ground. Kent screamed again, struggled, but that

unbelievable strength was now reduced to mortal proportions.

'I am sorry, my friend,' Sabat murmured, 'but it is the only way, apart from killing you. It will hurt, scorch your soul, but once the evil has been driven out you will be all right.'

Kent's eyes blazed momentary hate, then gave way to terror, fighting blindly as he panicked, but even a weakened and injured Sabat was too much for him.

'I command you, evil spirit,' Sabat's voice was rich and powerful, vibrating in the still night air, "in the Name of God the Father Almighty, in the Name of Jesus Christ his only Son, and in the Name of the Holy Spirit, that harming no one, you depart from this creature of God, Kent, and return to the place appointed you, there to remain forever.'

Sabat prayed that his efforts would be enough, that his faith would triumph for he had no holy water to sprinkle upon the unfortunate possessed. Even as he watched, Kent's expression changed, escalating terror that reached its peak, brought with it violent convulsions. It seemed that the Fleet Street man was undergoing a fit, eyes rolling until only the whites showed like some upturned puppet, spittle frothing from the lips, every muscle straining as he tried in vain to throw off his attacker. Then, suddenly, he went limp, eyes closed, his breathing barely audible.

Sabat straightened up, expelled his breath slowly, aware how every nerve in his body trembled. He glanced around him, saw the sword lying there and picked it up. Even as he handled it he detected faint vibrations as though a minute electric current ran from hilt to blade and back again.

'Incredible,' he muttered. 'Almost too incredible to be true!'

He found his fallen crucifix and returned it to his pocket; he might have need of it again before this night was through. As he turned back, Kent was stirring, sitting up.

'What the hell's going on? How did I ... get here?'

'What is the last thing you remember?' Sabat rested his back on the big headstone, watched the other carefully.

'I was in the pub ... a drink . . . talking to some guy . . . Christ, he must've slipped me a Mickey Finn!'

'Similar,' Sabat replied, 'only a thousand times stronger. You were possessed by a spirit, Kent. A very evil one. Don't worry, I've exorcised you. It won't come back.'

'That's . . . that's a sword . . . ' Kent was on his feet, swaying. 'And, oh My God, that's . . . that's Sheenah . . . she's not . . . she isn't, is she?'

'I'm afraid she is,' Sabat's voice quavered and only by a supreme effort did he stop himself from breaking down. 'I'm afraid even I can't bring her back to life, Kent. They killed her, the ancient order of Oke Priests.' It was best that way, Kent would never know otherwise. Furthermore, it was true!

'The bloody swines!'

'That's putting it mildly. This sword, Kent, it's unbelievable. It could just be King Arthur's, the one he lost, according to mythology, hidden away by the Oke Priests for centuries. Who knows? Certainly it is very powerful, rendering

its user almost invincible. For the time being we'll have to hang on to it. Now, the problem is we've got a body on our hands. ..."

They both tried not to look at the pathetic crumpled form of Sheenah again. Only twenty-four hours earlier the woman claiming to be her mother had died in this very place. Then they had no problem because it was merely an astral body. This one was mortal and the last thing they wanted was the police questioning them.

'I'm afraid we've no choice,' Sabat stooped down beside Sheenah, remembered everything that had been between them.

Kent moved alongside him, an unspoken request being carried out the way it used to be back in their SAS days together. Together they lifted the body, carried it, a silent funeral procession winding its way amidst the gravestones.

The Oke Priests, the forces of evil, had struck a bitter blow against Sabat and Kent. Now, for the two men, it was more than just a fight against the dark powers, a battle against corruption.

They seethed with a desire for vengeance on those who had brought about the death of the one whom Alda called Shyaena, she who had sacrificed her own life to save Sabat from certain death . . . and worse!

CHAPTER TEN

MARION HURST glanced sideways at her husband, an expression of both contempt and hate in her eyes for the man behind the wheel of the Jaguar. Well built with long fair hair, she had once likened him to a Greek god. Now at 42 that physique was running to fat; affluence was to blame, she told herself. Too little exercise, too much to drink - and that bitch, Lola, of course. Attractive, just having passed her fortieth birthday, Marion resented a younger woman having designs on her husband. Oh sure, all executives had their fancy women and Darren had had them before. But now things were building up to a climax and when the whole thing exploded she was going to make sure that the little hussy got the full force of the blast. This is the place,' Darren Hurst swung the wheel over, eased the car down a cinder track that was just wide enough to take it. A hundred yards or so further on the line of fir trees ended and gave way to an expanse of field, rough tussocks of grass that had not been grazed recently, a general look of abandonment about it. On their left, partly shielded by a line of yew trees and a massive oak, they saw an overgrown cemetery and a church, the roof of which was sagging dangerously, a number of slates missing.

'Beautiful' Marion Hurst muttered. 'What a crime that it is going to be turned into a housing estate.'

'Don't put it that way,' her husband's voice was soft, cultured to the point

of suaveness, 'Executive-style residences, my dear. Houses which will enhance the locality, hide all this dereliction.'

'Crap!' her eyes blazed. 'It's all one big fiddle, Darren, and you know it. If the truth comes out then you and Stone, and that toad of a bishop will all go down for years. It'd make the headlines of every newspaper in the country.'

'And you would be joining us in prison,' Darren Hurst's eyes narrowed. 'Don't forget, you're part of it, Marion. You were responsible for swaying Stone. I couldn't have done it alone. My five grand wouldn't've meant a thing to a guy on twenty a year. He wouldn't take the risk. But when I just happened to come home and caught the pair of you upstairs, his trousers and your knickers hanging on the bedside chair. . . . '

'Shut up' her fists clenched and for a moment he thought she was going to strike him. 'My God, what a fool I was to go along with your ideas. I must've been blind and mad!'

'But he shagged you and came out five thousand quid the better for it,' he laughed. 'Most guys would've ended up with nothing except a broken nose and a black eye. But that's all over and done with.'

'Is it? It's blackmail!'

'Don't be so hasty, my dear. Nobody was ever threatened. I just happened to mention an idea and a sum of money to Stone and he willingly went along with it. Nobody made any threats about what might happen if he refused. Now, did they?'

'It was blackmail, all the same,' she turned her head, stared out of the window. 'You tricked me just like you tricked Stone.'

'I did? I never suggested that you let him knock you off. All I said was we need to get on the right side of the planning officer and an attractive woman stood more chance of doing that than a man. In fact, darling, I was quite hurt to find out that you could be unfaithful to me!'

'You bloody hypocrite!' she whirled on him, a stinging slap that caught him across the face and banged his head back on the headrest. 'Like I said, I was a bloody fool. But you've been screwing other women for years. Away for days at a time "on business", and you've had dirty little whores in your bed. Now this Lola. She's nothing but a slut tarted up by you in an attempt to make her look presentable. But her pedigree is all too clear beneath those layers of make-up. What's she getting out of this deal?'

'She happens to be my private secretary,' Hurst wiped his lips with a tissue, dabbed at a trickle of blood. 'She has her salary, nothing else.'

'A hooker's wages!' Marion was on the verge of hysteria. 'I wish you'd set her up for Stone. That way I could've walked out and left you to your hussies. Don't you ever touch me again, Darren. I don't want a dose!'

'You're being ridiculous,' he eased the car door open. 'Let's take a waik and survey our new kingdom. Within two months the diggers will be here getting the footings out for the first few houses.'

'You hope!' she got out, slammed the door shut behind her. 'There'll be an appeal. I've heard that nearly everybody in the village has signed a petition.'

'A mere formality and a waste of everybody's time. Our planning permission will stand. Enjoy what you see, my dear, for you were instrumental in bringing this about. Without your help it would probably have remained in trust to the church forever because nobody else would have dared to even think of building on it. What a waste that would have been.'

Marion Hurst's torment of guilt had escalated these last few hours. Ever since they had left St Monica's church she had been unable to get the whole thing out of her mind. Oh God, she wished she had never gone there, set foot on that tract of land which up until today had meant no more to her than an area shaded in on an Ordnance Survey map and a few lines on a sheet of planning permission. It was akin to a surgeon entering the theatre to carry out an operation and discovering that the patient was a close friend of his; or a vet being asked to put an animal to sleep and developing a relationship with it while he prepared his syringe. No longer was it impersonal.

Darren had gone out shortly after they returned home; she had not expected him to stay in. She didn't even go to the trouble of making him invent an excuse. Lies were meaningless now. Far better had he said 'I'm taking Lola for a meal and afterwards I'm going to screw her on the back seat of the car!'

No, it wouldn't be on the back seat of the car; nothing so lowly and basic as that for Darren Hurst, recently admitted to the elite ranks of the nouveau riche. There were rumours that he'd taken a flat somewhere in town. Lola probably lived there; his own private whore-house!

Bitterness welled up inside Marion Hurst. She was a whore, too! Oh yes, she'd gone only too willingly with Walter Stone that time. Seduced him. He had tried to back down at the start but Marion had ways of getting men to do what she wanted even if she was past forty. Surprisingly, the guy had been quite good and she'd enjoyed it. They had just been wiping themselves off with tissues when Darren had walked into the bedroom - as she knew he would, of course. Damn it, that had spoiled it all for her. She wished she'd seduced Stone some place where Darren didn't have to show up, didn't even have to know about it. Then it would've been her own little secret and nobody would've got hurt. As it was, hundreds of villagers were going to have their locality desecrated and Stone and Darren might end up going to gaol . . . herself with them!

God, she hated that bastard of a husband of hers! She meant what she'd said earlier; he wasn't going to have her again. Every time he lay on top of her, or did whatever took his fancy, he degraded her. Now she was his pawn, just like the others. If you looked at it logically, she was the focal point of all this corruption. Without her opening her legs for Walter Stone none of this could have come about.

She helped herself to another malt whisky; her third. Darren was going to bloody well pay for all this. She'd shop him to the police! No, that would involve herself; not only that, there was some legal point about a wife not being able to give evidence against her husband, she'd read about it somewhere a long time ago. Anyway, what evidence? She didn't have any proof. Doubtless the others had covered their tracks well enough. And in the end she would be made to look a fool and a liar, a woman scorned, trying to gain revenge on her husband and his mistress.

She'd leave the bugger then! No, that would be just what he'd want, conveniently get her out of the way so that Lola could move in. Oh, Jesus Christ she was trapped as surely as a fly caught in a spider's web!

Anger and guilt mingled with alcohol. She contemplated killing Darren; she could poison him or even stick a knife in his guts whilst he slept. Temporary

revenge because before long they'd put her away and she'd suffer a lot longer than he had. And the deal with the bishop would still go through; it just meant that without Darren Hurst the others would get a bigger share. And the loser would be Marion Hurst.

She felt slightly dizzy, swayed, and had to hold on to the cocktail cabinet as she poured herself a fourth drink. It was the folk in the village who would be the real losers. Her eyes misted up and she pictured them going into the church, devout honest people who believed in God. And she had betrayed them!

Somehow she had to cleanse her conscience. Funny how things dropped into perspective when you really thought about them, how little things like people's feelings were overlooked where money was concerned. Not just the villagers - God! She was a female Judas. She had sold her Maker, committed adultery to bring about her crime.

Marion Hurst could not hold back her tears, sobs which shook her, had her lying on the Chesterfield begging for forgiveness, not bothering to put on the light when dusk turned to deep darkness.

Sometime later she heard a voice, more of a whisper on the night air, that might have been inside or outside the house, but she knew only too well that it was addressing her.

'You have sinned and now you seek repentance. But to do so you must come and confess your sins on the sacred ground which by your own efforts will soon be sacred no longer. Your tears must dampen the hallowed soil if your soul is to be cleansed.'

She raised her head but it was too dark to see if anybody stood outside the window. She trembled, listened, but the voice did not come again. Shame and fear, for her Maker knew she had sinned and he had summoned her to go on a pilgrimage of repentance.

She went through into the hall and put on her coat. Funny, the light was out and she always left it on when Barren was out. But she didn't need it. She opened the door, saw the welcoming glow of streetlamps beyond the rhododendron shrubbery which lined the garden, made out the silhouette of her Cavalier parked in the drive.

From then onwards her actions were jerky, robot-like. She stalled the engine, then over-revved it and sent gravel flying up on to the patio. Braking too hard, shooting out on to the deserted road, no co-ordination with the gears, like a learner-driver. She had only been to St Monica's once, with Darren, and she had not made a mental note of the route but somehow now it all seemed so familiar. Two miles of dual-carriageway before taking the first junction off on to a narrow B-road. Driving flat-out, tyres screeching on unexpected bends. Hardly any traffic, just an occasional pair of headlights coming in the opposite direction. Usually oncoming lights blinded her, had her slowing right down, but tonight she scarcely noticed them, drove flat out all the way with no thought for her own safety.

That cinder track seemed so much wider than it had earlier in the Jag. Parking in exactly the same place as Darren had parked. Getting out, closing the door quietly in case she disturbed . . . someone.

It was dark; the moon was not due to rise for another hour. Marion Hurst stood there undecided, not knowing exactly what to do. Her guilt was a thousand times worse now as though she had brooded on it during the five-mile drive

down here. She experienced an urge to shout to the elements 'I'm the one who did this to your land. Just me, nobody else.'

And then she heard voices, a kind of low, rhythmical chant coming across from where the yew trees and that big oak were just faintly visible against the night sky. Her feet began to move, unsteady steps across the uneven grassy surface. On more than one occasion she caught her foot against a tuft, stumbled, but did not fall.

It was lighter now, a kind of ethereal glow, not bright enough for the moon but maybe the stars - she did not really give it much thought. She could make out moving shapes that materialised into human forms as she got closer.

They were certainly dressed strangely; long knee-length gowns with capacious sleeves and frilly necks, girded with sashes. Sandalled feet, and they each carried a small branch of some kind, twigs recently snapped off a living tree because the leaves were still fresh and had not wilted. Hats of some kind, like caps made from animal skins, the tails left on when the beasts were flayed. Foxes, probably; there were no wolves left in England. Or were there? She tried to make out the faces of those around her but it was impossible because their features were bathed in shadow. They were obviously expecting her, hands reaching out for her, gripping her wrists with icy fingers, leading her forward. She tried to put into words the questions her confused brain was asking. Why am I here? Who are you and what do you want of me? But somehow her brain and vocal chords refused to co-ordinate.

These people were talking in whispers just like the voice she had heard in her own home. She managed to make out some of the words. 'This is she. . . the one we summoned . . . she has come to be judged by Alda . . .'

Marion found herself being helped up on to some kind of raised platform, a soft spongy surface as though it was constructed of turf like that pile the landscape gardeners had delivered when she and Darren first bought their house, peaty blocks which they had stacked in the drive until they were ready to lay them. Marion's feet sank in and only then was she aware that she was barefoot.

The light was getting stronger. She could make out various features of the landscape, and her fear began to mount. Trees and thorn bushes, but where were the distant lights of the town, the orange glow that lit the night sky for miles around? The church should have been visible, too, its steeple reaching skywards. And everywhere so silent, not even the hum of a distant car on the main road which could not be more than a mile away.

Now the moon was up, its silvery light bathing the whole scene around Marion Hurst, bringing a scream to her lips but no further. This was madness; she was dreaming, having a nightmare! Just barren heathland stretched before her, a still silent world where the only inhabitants were these robed figures whose faces she now saw clearly; beings so old that the stretched skin rotted on their near-skeletal bodies. The air was filled with the stench of that same putrefying flesh. Sheer malevolence marked their decaying expressions as they stood in a circle and pointed accusingly up at her, whispering feverishly to the tall man who appeared to be their leader.

Marion tried to tell herself that it was a nightmare because it could not be anything else; that at any second she would wake up and find herself back in her own bed. These repulsive creatures could not exist!

'Your name is Marion Hurst and you are charged with treachery, a betrayal, not only of the Oke Priests, but of the gods whom we serve!'

The tall man's words impinged on Marion Hurst's brain. She tried to reply but speech failed her. Instead she nodded meekly, bowed her head.

The trial of Marion Hurst by the Oke Priests had begun.

'You are an adulteress, a whore.'

Again she mutely agreed. She stood there dazed, hearing and understanding, the terror within her seething like a sealed cauldron unable to burst out. Guilty, wanting them to know she was guilty - demanding to be punished to cleanse her soul!

The verdict, an angry hiss, gnarled bony fingers pointing at her, accusing. The tall druid nodding his agreement, pronouncing her sentence in deep tones like echoes coming up from a labyrinth of underground caverns.

' . . . , guilty of sacrilege and treachery. The penalty is death, your unworthy body consumed by fire in an offering to the gods that they may not vent their wrath on us, the Oke Priests. . . but others will die, too. You are the first. Let us beseech the old ones to bring he who is known as Sabat before us that he, too, may die for his treachery and that I may be revenged upon him for the killing of Alena!'

Cold hands grabbed Marion, dragged her down from the turf altar, pulled her across the rough ground. She did not resist. It would have been impossible anyway, a dead weight that scraped and bumped over stones, her flesh spiked and torn by gorse and trailing briars.

She tried to close her eyes to shut out the scene which greeted her; the huge misshapen straw creature crudely fashioned into human shape. A face that grinned its sadistic inanimate delight, eyes that seemed to glow in anticipation of the fire which would be lighted at its feet. Strapped into its stinking belly, damp straw from some foul stable sticking to her lips so that she tasted dung, able to scream at last but the sound muffled by the stifling smoke and the crackling of flames.

A name lodged in her crazed brain, kept repeating itself like a record with a scratched groove - 'Sabat. . . Sabat. . . Sabat. . . he, too, must die for his treachery.'

Marion Hurst found that she had a partial view from the eyes of this effigy, that it was also possible to breathe in some air through the nostrils, otherwise by now the smoke would surely have overcome her. Trying desperately to work it all out although it didn't really matter because soon she would be dead, cremated by these awful creatures in human form who had tried her and found her guilty. This, then, was the hell that had been used to scare her when she was a child. It existed!

So hot now that the soles of her bare feet were burning. Pain at first but then she felt no more; still living but her nerves were mercifully snapped. Out there the one who called himself Alda was standing on a hump of raised ground, arms aloft, offering this latest sacrifice to his gods, beseeching them to have mercy. For there were others who had yet to die for this sacrilege: Bishop Boyce, Walter Stone and Darren, of course; may the gods burn his body and soul, roast him for his corruption.

And Sabat, too. That name again, unable to get it off her mind in her final hour, like a chant that went on and on, driving her to madness.

Sabat. . . Sabat. . . Sabat must die, too.

She experienced a falling sensation, sparks and flames leaping to claim her, her dress burning away so that her charred nakedness was revealed for the gods to feast their hungry eyes upon. Seeing faces in the fire, some she recognised, others she didn't, and as she slipped towards that cool black bottomless abyss her burned and blistered lips were mouthing one word over and over again, an indoctrination by the ancient priests which she would take down into the Pit with her as though calling an unknown man to follow her there. 'Sabat . . . Sabat . . . Sabat.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THERE'S BEEN another killing on the ground adjoining the cemetery,' Detective-Inspector Groome made the announcement as casually as if he had been repeating some event which he had read in a newspaper and which might possibly be of some interest to those around him. Yet his small eyes missed nothing, constantly searching out the two men who faced him, watching for a sign; anything.

Sabat's expression was negative, registering neither surprise nor guilt. His stomach churned, his heart flipped once, but there was no outward sign of emotion. And he did not have to glance at Kent to know that his companion's expression would be equally as stoic. They had both been well trained by the SAS,

'A killing, Inspector?' Sabat found it impossible to believe that the detectives could have found Sheenah's body 'buried' in that century-old tomb with the cracked headstone which it had taken their combined strength to raise. All evidence of her death had been removed and in due course she would be listed as yet another missing person. Only the two ex-SAS men would know the truth, and, of course, that skeleton whose lasting resting place they had disturbed, but possibly he would be glad of female company after so many years alone.

'Identical to the curate, Sabat,' Groome's eyes never left the other's. 'Burned to a cinder as surely as if a thunderbolt had come out of the blue and incinerated her.'

'Her?'

'Yes. A woman by the name of Marion Hurst, wife of one Darren Hurst. . . . '

Now Sabat did show surprise, eyes widening, his cheek scar seemed to stand out starkly, throbbing.

'The name is obviously familiar to you," the officer smiled mirthlessly.

'Her husband's is,' Sabat replied. 'He's the guy who is . . . buying that tract

of land to build houses on.'

'Which can have no possible bearing on the killing,' Groome said. 'Not at this stage, anyway. She drove herself there. Alone. Maybe she had a rendezvous. If she did, then we want to know with whom because that person could be the murderer. Also we'd like to know how he manages to cremate his victims without leaving traces of a fire other than on the corpse itself.'

I could explain but you'd have me certified as a nutter, Sabat thought.

'I understand the Church has employed you in the capacity of an exorcist,' there was a slight sneer in the policeman's tone. 'That, of course, is their business . . . and yours. I cannot prevent you conducting your own type of enquiries but I'll be grateful if you will keep out of the church and its grounds until the CID have finished their investigations. We shall be maintaining a twenty-four-hour vigil on the premises until further notice.'

'In other words we've got to mind our own fucking business,' Sabat came back into the room after seeing the detective out. 'Well, Kent, it'll be interesting to see how the police fare against a powerful psychic enemy!'

'And what do we do in the meantime?'

'In the meantime we shall devote our time to tracking down mortal foes,' Sabat smiled. 'Whatever we try to do at the church we shall not be achieving anything. The evil is aroused there because of what mortals are attempting to do. Therefore we must remove the cause, which means we must attempt to kill the cancer, the corruption which is at the root of it all.'

'In other words we're going to pay this bishop a visit?'

'Not at the moment. Assuming that we have our facts right, the bishop is the main bloodsucking leech but without a crooked planning officer and a builder willing to come in on the deal he couldn't have got the scheme off the ground in the first place. Doubtless all evidence has been removed from the planning offices so we'd just be wasting our time searching them. Cash will change hands in due course without a trace but maybe there's some document somewhere which could convict the guilty if it fell into the wrong hands. Stone is the most likely. I'm thinking that if maybe there was some kind of agreement drawn up, and you can't trust bishops or builders to give a backhander just on the strength of a handshake, then Waiter Stone will have it at his house.'

'I've always fancied having a crack at burglary,' Kent smiled wryly.

'I don't need to tell you the basic risks,' Sabat pulled out his meerschaum and began stuffing tobacco into the bowl. 'If Groome and his men pick us up then we'll do a spell in gaol. But there's a greater danger - we have to wait for nightfall and we can only hazard a guess at the forces which will be abroad after dark. You and I could sit it out in a pentagram and be reasonably safe. Out there, I can only use limited protective methods. They may not be enough.'

'I guess I'm in this too deep to back out,' Kent stretched and yawned. 'And I'm damned if I'm stopping in on my own, worrying myself about what the hell you're up to, Sabat, and that maybe the next time I set eyes on you you'll resemble a piece of steak that got left too long under the grill.'

'Thank you,' Sabat regarded the other through a haze of tobacco smoke and knew that he had not misjudged his man. 'Stone's place is our target tonight, then. There's just one thing that worries me, though. You can't remember anything

about what happened from the time this guy engaged you in conversation in the pub until I drove that evil entity out of you. But you do remember what this fellow looked like and before we set out tonight I think we should try and see if there's any way in which we can find out who he was. The dark powers can use any form they choose but just suppose this wasn't one of the ancient druids in human form but a more recent astral projection. We'll snatch a few hours sleep and then I think it may well be worth making a few enquiries before we pay Mr Stone a visit.'

Kent closed his eyes, stretched himself out in the armchair. Sabat was talking in riddles but he had enough faith in his companion just to tag along. And as a confirmed atheist he wasn't going to think too much about the dangers that lay beyond the realms of his mortal existence. That was Sabat's worry.

Walter Stone had been a very uneasy man for the past three months. Now with the news of Marion Hurst's death he was almost frantic with fear.

At fifty-one he had resigned himself to remaining a bachelor for the rest of his days. He was too set in his ways, anyway, to have his routine disrupted by the intrusion of a female upon his household. He had a prominent position in the town, commanded respect, even fear at times, because he had the power to sway the planning committee at their monthly sessions. He received frequent subversive presents; they weren't bribes, he made that quite clear, but always said that he would do his best when certain plans came up before him. He usually managed something, if only a compromise.

He'd told both Bishop Boyce and Darren Hurst that in the beginning when a case of whisky had been dropped off at his house one night by the palace chauffeur. He didn't hold out much hope, though, he explained to Boyce the next day, because green-belt was sacrosanct.

Then Hurst had invited him round that evening, but when Stone arrived he discovered that the builder had had to go off on an urgent call. And there was no harm in enjoying a drink with the latter's wife in the meantime.

Just thinking about how it had all turned out never failed to give Walter Stone an erection. It had been the most mind-blowing experience of his almost virginal existence. More exciting even than his first time when he'd picked up a prostitute in town late one Saturday night. The unexpectedness of it all left him breathless even now. What could an attractive woman ten years younger than himself have seen in him? Nothing, except that it had served the Hurst's purpose to lure him upstairs. He tried to tell himself that she couldn't have gone that far if she didn't feel something for him.

Hurst hadn't even been angry when he'd walked into the bedroom. In fact, he'd apologised and made a discreet withdrawal, even had a drink poured out for the two of them when they came downstairs. If only the builder had ranted and raved, threatened violence or maybe hinted at making a complaint to the Planning Committee, but he hadn't even mentioned the compromising situation. The only thing he'd said on Stone's departure that evening was 'doubtless, that proposal of ours will go through now, Walter'. And, of course, it had. Because Walter had had no choice.

Now Marion was dead, burned up like that curate they'd found the other week. Stone hadn't gone into the office that day. He'd phoned and said he was ill, which was partly true. He was beginning to panic. Boyce had said that there was some kind of 'haunting' at St Monica's but it was nothing that an exorcist could not deal with. Christ, look what had happened to Cleehopes, still a mindless vegetable liable to spend the remainder of his days babbling nonsensically to himself in a padded cell!

All this had started since Stone had swayed the committee. He'd convinced them that the ten acres was an eyesore, would become an unsightly wilderness as the years went by. 'Go and look at the state the churchyard's in if you don't believe me.' In the end the planning officer had got his way.

He'd spent the day indoors, tried to phone the bishop twice but on each occasion Boyce was not available. Jesus Christ, what had Marion gone there alone at night for? The only thing he could think of was that she'd had a date with some guy and it had all turned sour. He'd killed her, poured paraffin over her and set her alight. If he hadn't known there was something inexplicable going on at St Monica's he would have believed that and felt a damned sight easier.

Boyce was getting windy too. And this fellow, Sabat, had a reputation for poking his nose into things that were none of his concern. The bishop must have been crazy to call him in. It was like hiring a man-eating tiger from the zoo to kill the rats in your garden; after the vermin had been accounted for it might just turn on you.

Walter Stone spent a restless day, constantly glancing out of the window across his small neat garden. The weather was warm and spring-like but he wasn't going outside. No sir, he was going to stay safely locked indoors. And maybe he'd phone the office and tell them he was taking tomorrow off, too; and the day after that if the police didn't come up with something in the meantime.

His fears were magnified with the approach of evening. The shadows lengthened as he sat there in the lounge, mentally and physically drained. Soon it would be time to put the lights on, draw the curtains, shut himself away in his own little world.

It was eight twenty-five by the clock on the mantleshelf when Walter Stone's real terror began. With an effort he dragged himself out of the armchair, almost made a rush for the light switch. God, it was dark already. The clock must have stopped; lighting-up time wasn't until eight forty-five but. . . .

He clicked the switch, stared at the white plastic casing in amazement, disbelief. The room was still dark, the light hadn't come on. He clicked it again. And again, frantically working it up and down until the spring weakened. Something gave; the switch moved loosely, disconnected somewhere. And it was getting even darker in the room; cold, too.

Stone's mouth went dry, his stomach churned as he tried to come up with a reason why the light wasn't working. A power failure? A fuse blown? That damned clock had stopped after all. It was bound to have because it was electric, too.

He blundered into the hall, caught his knee on a heavy oak chair and cried out in pain. A sensation of disorientation, not knowing exactly where the hall switch was, scrabbling along the wall with his fingers until he found it, clicking it feverishly. It didn't work either!

Panicking now, stampeding from one room to another, crashing into furniture, oblivious to the pain because his escalating terror dominated. Up the stairs, falling, dragging himself up on all fours, whimpering when each switch he tried was dead. Finally, the bedroom, kneeling against the bed like he used to do in his childhood when his mother insisted that he said his prayers every night.

It had to be a power failure of some kind. If it was a blown fuse then he had no idea how to repair it because he had never been of a practical nature. It was a matter of cutting a length of fuse wire and ... he knew the fuse box was somewhere in the larder but he had no idea how to go about it.

Suddenly a glow of white hope came out of the darkened room, a shimmering silent ivory saviour in his hour of terror - the telephone extension by the bedside! Almost luminous, it offered hope when he had almost given up, a lifeline to an outside world of reality.

He scrambled across to it, still on his knees, grabbed the receiver off its cradle with a hand that shook uncontrollably; dropped it so that it hit the floor, bounced away from him and would have rolled under the bed had the flex not pulled it up short. He reached for it again, almost afraid that it might jump away.

Walter Stone expelled his breath in a rush of sheer relief as he pressed the receiver to his ear, stretched out a shaking finger to dial. In that instant a new wave of frustration and hopelessness flooded his crazed mind. God, he didn't know the electricity board's number, The directory was downstairs in the hall and he wasn't going back down there again!

Trying to think. Nine-nine-nine? Give me the police, fire brigade . . . anybody. My lights have failed and I'm all alone in the dark!

A brainwave amidst this latest panic - try the operator, dial 100.

Three digits and it took him three attempts, his finger slipping off the dial so that he had to replace the receiver and try again. Finally he made it. And that was when his fear finally erupted. Silence. The line was dead!

He had no idea how long he'd crouched there on the floor beside the bed. The small bedside alarm clock ticked away loudly and unconcernedly, a tinny, irritating noise, its luminous hands stating that the time was eleven forty-five. It, too, could have been lying even if it wasn't electric.

He shivered with cold, half considered getting into bed fully dressed. Somehow, though, one was at a disadvantage when in bed - you couldn't flee at a moment's notice! Not that there was anywhere to run, except downstairs and . . . and outside!

He experienced a drowsiness that stemmed from fatigue, a state in which you thought you might doze off but you made every effort not to because something might creep up on you while you slept. So cold, the temperature must have dropped below freezing.

Noises that got on your nerves. Every house has its creaking, nocturnal, inexplicable groans but suddenly they became terrifying as though somebody (or something) was creeping up the stairs. The alarm clock - tick-lock, tick-lock, tick-lock, unceasing. It reminded him of a pantomime he'd seen when he was five. Peter Pan. The crocodile had swallowed an alarm clock, a cheap thing very similar to this one.

Tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock; it was coming to get him. . . . Something moved, rolled. He screamed, then realised what it was. Momentary relief; he'd kicked the telephone receiver which lay on the floor.

His teeth were chattering, at least he thought at first that it was his own teeth. Like the embarrassment of a rumbling stomach in company, nobody can be quite sure whose it is, even the offender, so everybody looks round and . . .

Oh, Merciful God! A head, a face!

Walter Stone croaked his terror, a strangled scream, tried to tell himself that it was some kind of hallucination or even an optical illusion. That alarm clock's luminous dial, it was about the right size. . . .

But it wasn't the alarm clock! It was a skull, a tiny shrunken thing the size of a tennis ball, features so malign, eyes that glowed redly and illuminated the peeling flesh on the bone, mouth screwed up to spit out volatile hatred, slobbering mucus which strung down, moving in time with the pendulum-like motions of the head. Suspended several feet in the air, its cold breath stinking like a rotting carcass, it watched the cowering man, gloating. Waiting.

Somehow Walter Stone's shaking legs precipitated the rest of his body into action, lurching him upright, making him stagger towards the open door leading out on to the landing. He half expected this awful abomination to bar his way, drive him back into a corner from which there was no escape, but it made no move to hinder his progress.

Out on to the landing; groping for the stair-rail but airborne before he realised it. Falling, bouncing, bone-shattering blows to back and shoulders, lying prone on a polished block floor, scarcely daring to look behind him.

But he had to, compelled to turn his head, oblivious to the pain. Nothing else mattered except . . .

It was still there! It swung gently like a ball suspended by an invisible thread at a fairground, defying the efforts of bean-bag throwers. Smiling its malevolence, its fetid breath clouding it like vile marshland vapours rising to hide a patch of bog.

Stone got to his feet, his fear overcoming the agony of a twisted ankle, maybe even a broken bone. Lurching away, struggling at the door-catch with useless trembling fingers. He sensed it coming again, tore himself away, broke into a hobbling run. The kitchen, or it might have been the lounge, he did not know, did not care in the awful blackness. He banged into furniture, fell, picked himself up again. One way, then another, fleeing, turning back. But always it followed him.

He wanted to look away but it was impossible; those hypnotic orbs commanded his attention, forced him to glance back as he stumbled from one room to another.

Then, suddenly, he didn't care anymore. His legs buckled beneath him and he sank down to the floor, lay there just staring up at his inexplicable tormentor. He wanted to die, wondered vaguely why it did not move in and take him. But always it kept its distance, a yard, maybe two, expelling that putrid breath, that stench of evil.

The head was still smiling. It wasn't going to harm him after all so why had he been frightened? He gave a laugh, a strange throaty sound that echoed in the confined space.

Now they were both laughing, babbling incoherently and trying to build up some kind of a rapport. It was silly to have fled from it like that, Walter Stone thought. When you got to know it, it was really quite a friendly sort of a thing. Bigger than he'd thought at first, or else it had grown these last few minutes, stretched the translucent skin so that in places the tissues had

snapped and peeled away, hanging down in strips. The flesh seemed alive, crawling as though hundreds of tiny beings moved within it, white worm-like things that crawled and wriggled. And stank. . . .

CHAPTER TWELVE

SABAT HAD parked the Daimler on the outskirts of the town shortly after midnight. It had taken Kent and himself less than a quarter of an hour to walk to Walter Stone's home. Now they stood in the shadow cast by a council-planted weeping willow and studied the detached house opposite, a professional scrutiny of a building that had to be broken into.

Built of red brick, the upper half faced with snowcem, it bespoke affluence yet lacked character. The next house down, a mere twenty-five yards away, was built to exactly the same design. A cul-de-sac of wealthy town-dwellers, their hallmarks of status rising above the ordinary square boxes in the adjoining street, an extra few yards of neatly mown lawn. It made all the difference in today's rat-race.

'Shouldn't present us with too many problems,' Sabat muttered. 'You never know, though. My God, I can't get over the way the dark forces have called upon the spirit of Sir Henry Grayne. You're absolutely certain that the photo we saw in that 1942 issue of the local rag this afternoon was the guy you met in the pub, Kent?'

'No doubt about it,' Kent felt his skin prickle.

'According to that article in the paper, Grayne was a druid. There are still druid orders today but mostly they're like masonic lodges. I guess the old ones were so incensed at being robbed of their sacred ground that they called up the one who had endeavoured to make it safe for all time for them. And if I were Sir Henry Grayne I guess I'd be pretty mad about it too. What I'm wondering, though, is if Grayne's order was an ordinary one or had he and his followers reverted to the ancient ways - human sacrifices and suchlike! In which case Grayne could be a far more evil and dangerous entity than the likes of Alda. Anyhow, we'd better concentrate on getting inside Stone's place. There are no lights showing so we could be in luck. If he hasn't retired for the night, perhaps he's out.'

They moved cat-like across the road, became part of the shadows; through the front gate, keeping to the lawn verge so that their footsteps made no sound.

This'll do.' Sabat produced a small chisel from his pocket and in less than half a minute was easing a downstairs window open. 'Easy now, Kent. Follow me, and keep close.'

They dropped into the room, straightened up and stood listening. And in that instant Sabat sensed the evil, smelted the stench like an exhumed grave, felt the iciness of an atmosphere which should have been warm and stuffy!

His reflexes acted instantaneously, a tautening of every nerve even before his flesh had started to creep.

'What is . . . ' Kent began, but Sabat silenced him with a warning touch in the darkness; still listening. . . .

They heard the noise like one hears the sound of a far-off train, barely distinguishable at first but becoming louder . . . and louder. Laughter, but it held no mirth. A chilling babble that made them want to clasp their hands over their ears and flee the place while they still had their lives and their sanity.

It came and went, came again. So close that they stared into the stygian blackness as though expecting to find some nameless horror within feet of where they stood.

The laughter rose to a crescendo. A name was shrieked, over and over, as though whoever it was was pleading desperately for help. 'Boyce . . . Boyce . . . Boyce. . . . ' Sabat moved swiftly, flashing on a pencil torch with a tiny penetrating beam, holding it out to the side of his body at full arm's stretch, an SAS trick to fool an enemy in the dark. An open door led from the kitchen, into the hall, another opposite. A large lounge, the furniture in disarray as though some heavy animal had charged to and fro, wreaking havoc; a creature that smelted of the ultimate in abomination!

'Jesus!' Sabat focused his beam on the cringing thing in the corner, barely recognised it as a human being. 'Unless I miss my guess, this is Mr Walter Stone and they have got to him first!'

A man it was. Slackened mouth as though he had suffered a massive stroke, still shouting that name over and over again, eyes that rolled with a redness from burst blood vessels, clothes torn so that the material hung in shreds. Cringing, arms thrown up to ward off an attack, giving off a nauseating stench because his bowels had emptied themselves at the height of his terror.

'Well, we can't do much for him!' Kent breathed.

'No, but the question is . . . is whatever attacked him still here or has it left?'

In that instant, almost before Sabat's words had died away, they knew. Another noise, like an express train coming at them from out of a deep tunnel, a hissing, screaming abomination that breathed foul and icy fumes, gusts like a miniature tornado that whipped at them and almost flung them on top of the gibbering Stone.

'Oh, my God! Look! Whatever it is?' Kent yelled, clutched at Sabat only to be pushed away as the other dived instinctively for the .38 bolstered inside his jacket.

The floating, bobbing skull, the same entity that had blown the Planning Officer's mind was suddenly suspended in the doorway, hissing so that it's clouded fetid breath came in luminous clouds. 'Sa . . . ba . . . t!'

'For God's sake, what is it?' Kent had stepped back, felt the clutching fingers of the mindless man on the floor trying to unbalance him.

'The Cult of the Severed Head! Sabat breathed, aware that his torch had gone out. 'The Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal!'

'You are right, Sa . . . ba . . . t.' I have come to destroy you!'

Kent did not understand. His brain spun, seemed to fuse as though it had been connected up to an electric current, his vision blurring. It was growing larger, swelling before his eyes, a massive skeletal head that burst the skin tissues so that they fell away, strips of rotting meat that crawled with maggots. The journalist's mind was no longer his own. Revolted as he was, he experienced a desire to rush forward and embrace this thing, to press his lips to its foul cavernous mouth, to kneel in subservience to his new master.

Flame! Stabbing jets of white fire that belched deafening reports, an acrid smell, a whining like enraged hornets, plaster chipping from the walls in clouds of dust, glass breaking. Sabat's gunfire was more of a gesture of defiance against this monstrosity which the powers of darkness had called up from the second century, maybe even earlier. The .38 slugs found their mark, passed through it and left it unmoved, still hissing vaporous venom.

'Fool! You cannot harm me, Sa . . . ba . . . t.'

The firing pin was clicking on an empty shell and in one deft movement the weapon was back in its holster to be replaced by yet another lightning draw. A flash of silver as the tiny crucifix was held aloft in Sabat's hand with the authority of a police officer on point duty commanding an oncoming flow of traffic to halt.

'That cannot stop me, Sa . . . ba . . . t. I am too powerful.'

Sabat's features were grim, the veins in his forehead knotting as though he strained under some supreme effort.

'Are you more powerful than I, O Hirschlanden Warrior of the Cult of the Severed Head? For I am evil, too, being part of my brother Quentin who was once the Master's henchman. Evil to evil, and I have come here to destroy any who stand in my path whether they be spirit or mortal. Speak, or I destroy you as though you never were!'

The skull checked with a hiss akin to a puncture in an inflated ball, seemed to deflate. Those orbs had lost their brightness, the mouth wide in silent protest. Breath clouds spreading as though it sought to hide behind them.

'You would not enter into psychic contest with me willingly, surely, O Warrior,' Sabat shouted, 'for you would not escape unharmed even if you overcame me. Remember what happened to you and your kind in ancient Rome, how you were. . . '

'Stop!'

'No, you will hear me out! In the oppidum of the Saluvii at Entremont you were sealed in pillars and left to an eternal fate. And again that fate shall be yours if you cross me for I will incarcerate you for another two thousand years, wall up the evil. . . . '

'Nor a pitiful whine, the bobbing head vibrating as though it trembled.

'Do you challenge me then, O Warrior?'

'I do not challenge you, Sa , . . ba . . . t. Yet the forces are angry because . . . '

'They are angry with just cause but are too hasty. So intent are they upon my destruction that they still do not realise that I fight for what is theirs by right. I am here tonight not just to destroy this imbecilic enemy but to find evidence of the corruption in which these men are united. Would I be here otherwise, entering in the true manner of a thief in the night?'

'It is so. And yet I do not trust you, Sabat. Others have trusted you before and been deceived. This is no time to discover which of us is the stronger, yet I say this to you. The man called Stone, the one who cheated so that druid land could be destroyed, is mindless beyond the point of return. Your companion there . . . it is still possible to save him, but only I can do that!'

Sabat whirled, stared aghast at Kent. The Fleet Street man was on hands and knees, grinning, talking unintelligibly to anyone who might be listening. Laughing; a manic sound almost identical to that which came from the man who had once been Walter Stone.

'What have you done to him?' Sabat's voice was low and menacing.

'I have taken his powers of reasoning,' another hiss, almost a sneer. 'But they can be returned to him. It depends on you, Sa . . . ba . . . t. Bring the two men, the bishop and he who seeks to build homes for unbelievers on druid soil, before the Council of Justice of the Oke Priests at the place which you call Stonehenge by sunset on the first day of May. Return also the sacred sword of Alda. Do this and not only will your own soul be spared but the mind of the man you call Kent will be given back to him. That is the bargain which!, the Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal, make. There can be no alternatives. These evil men must be tried by a druid council of justice, not by the weakness of mortal judges?

Sabat was silent. His brain searched for avenues of escape, means by which Kent might be saved, and failed. There was no alternative, as the Hirschlanden Warrior had said.

'All right,' he nodded, tight-lipped. 'I will do as you say and keep my word. Three days and I shall deliver these two men to the Council of Justice at Stonehenge. With them I shall bring my colleague, also the sacred sword. But if you trick me, O Warrior, then my vengeance will be terrible. You may take my life and my soul but you shall not escape unscarred. That I promise.'

Suddenly the floating skull was gone, leaving the ex-SAS man and his two babbling companions in total darkness. And in that same instant the small torch came back on and the atmosphere was several degrees warmer.

Sabat felt weak, as though he had undergone a serious illness yet survived. Two opposing forces had fused in deadly conflict, settled for an uneasy peace formula. He shone the torch on the other two, grimaced at what he saw.

Walter Stone would be an imbecile for the rest of his days, one who had suffered some kind of major stroke, a human shell that would babble in inane oblivion. Possibly even death would not release him for if his soul had been claimed by the Cult of the Severed Head, then his skull would float in everlasting torment. For the Planning Officer, Sabat had no pity. The bastard had got what he deserved - true justice. No mortal jury could punish him so effectively.

For Kent there was hope, a slender lifeline back to sanity and only Sabat could give him that. A bargain had been made; Sabat would keep his side. It was up to the ancient Oke Priests to keep theirs.

Somehow Sabat got Kent to his feet, a chuckling child that might throw a tantrum at any second. The journalist needed to be humoured, persuaded. Vacant eyes that stared straight ahead, the body trembling with inexplicable mirth.

Somehow Sabat got him through the door, closed it behind them to shut out Stone's incessant ramblings. Walking slowly, unsteadily, a drunk being helped home by an understanding friend.

It took them almost an hour to reach the parked Daimler.

Walter Stone sat there on the floor for a long time after the others had gone. He did not remember their presence, nor that of the entity in the shape of a tiny skull which had driven him to the brink of madness then thrust him into the yawning chasm beyond.

A sense of euphoria now, an aimless meandering through the house, searching for something; he did not know what.

Picking up objects in the darkness, examining them by feel, casting them aside. A porcelain statuette shattered into a thousand fragments on the floor, obviously crunched to powder beneath his feet. A milk bottle rolled off the sink, bounced and scuttled across the kitchen floor but did not break. Emptying drawers and cupboards, scattering their contents, turning on a tap in the bath, entranced by the sound of running, splashing water, neither wishing nor knowing how to stop the gushing liquid.

Downstairs again, tugging at a hanging picture until its cord snapped, precipitating him backwards so that he lost his balance and fell. A sharp corner of the table gouged his spine, made him angry. Now his hunt for the unknown was more persistent; throwing objects to one side without investigating them, kicking so that fragile things smashed. He was bleeding from a cut on his hand, a steady drip-drip of sticky crimson fluid that left a spotted trail in his wake.

Still searching. A box that rattled, fascinated him so that he tried to open it, became angry when he could find no hinged lid. A grunt of surprise as the interior slid out, a kind of drawer filled with lots of little sticks. Something flashed across his memory, a reminder that had him scraping a match head on emery paper. The sudden burst of flame had him backing away with a cry of anguish, the match falling from his fingers and extinguishing itself in a puff of sulphurous smoke.

Walter Stone gurgled his amazement, scrabbled in the box again, spilling some of its contents on to the floor treading on them, igniting them. He jumped back in alarm then began to laugh again, dropped to his knees and blew at the flames like a child attempting to extinguish burning candles on a birthday cake.

Some of the matches went out. Two or three were stubborn, their flames wafting, one hungrily attempting to reach a pile of scattered newspapers which had spilled out of the kitchen cupboard. A comer caught, began to spread. . .

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Stone watched in silence, amazed, an awareness that he had achieved this; his own work, all his own doing. Now striking matches with gay abandon, flinging them into the air, a private firework display, the bonfire starting to blaze, crackling as some smashed furniture yielded to the persistence of the fire. The smoke made his his eyes smart and he pawed at them annoyance. Jubilation as man's primitive instincts were awakened. Fire was pretty; it was

warm.

Too warm. Hot. He retreated into a corner, coughed. The doorway was on the opposite side of the room but it never occurred to him to make a dash for it. Within seconds that single avenue of escape was cut off.

Now the room was ablaze, wooden units a fiery wall. Still he stood and watched through smarting eyes, laughing loudly, talking to himself. It was nice, very nice; he hoped that the fire didn't suddenly go out.

Noises. A shrill blaring, faces beyond the flames but he ignored them. A crashing of glass, shards splintering like that ornament he had dropped earlier. Voices shouting; a hissing watery sound like the bath taps upstairs made only much more powerful.

Walter Stone gave a cry of defiance. Whoever these intruders were they could not get at him because he had built an impenetrable barrier of fire. He stumbled, fell . . . and then he saw the face in the fire, features that were impervious to the heat, ancient immortality that had surely risen from Dante's hell, features so malign that a cry of incomprehensible terror came from the Planning Officer's cracked and blistered lips. He heard the words, somehow understood them in spite of the fact that his brain was past reasoning.

'The sentence of death has been passed on you by the Council of Oke Priests, traitor who sought to desecrate sacred (and. Your body will be burned by fire but your soul will suffer eternal purgatory!'

A strange feeling engulfed the man whose clothing was already burning on his body, a kind of dizziness in which everything was blurred, even the heat lessening for a few seconds. An awful sucking sensation as though a vacuum pipe attached to his head was forcibly drawing his brains out. Everything went black, then he was conscious again, but it was all different. Somehow he was airborne, still in that fiery room, looking down on his own incinerated body! He did not understand, did not attempt to reason even though his mind was no longer fogged. This was the way it was meant to be, freed from the encumbrance of a bulky shell, able to float wherever he wished. Yet he felt compelled to remain and watch.

Outside the firemen had been forced to retreat across the road, playing their hoses on the burning building from a distance. The flames leaped higher, throwing up columns of sparks, debris falling in a series of avalanches. A crowd had gathered, a fever of excitement. People secretly enjoyed a spectacular fire, peering through the eddying smoke, trying to see . . . a man was trapped in there, being burned alive. They craved a glimpse of a frantic blackened figure, strained their ears for screams of agony; reluctantly moved back a few yards when the uniformed policemen remonstrated with them. A child was pointing skywards, feverishly yelling at a parent that he had seen a face, a head without a body, rising up out of the inferno; being told to shut up.

Walter Stone's euphoria was brief, his newly-found freedom short-lived. Even as he attempted to soar to freedom he was checked as though some invisible cord attached to him had stopped him short with a sudden jerk.

He let out a cry of anger and frustration as he felt himself being led away, pulled into the murky blackness of the shadows beyond the firelight, experienced again that terror when he had fled blindly from the pursuing skull.

The awful realisation that now he had no body, just a head that floated in the darkness, hastening to obey a call that could not be denied, for his masters

were terrible to behold when they were angered. He must keep them waiting no longer.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DARKEN HURST'S initial reaction upon learning of Marion's death was one of new-found freedom. But within hours of that terrible visit to the mortuary, attempting to identify his wife's charred remains, he had become a victim of blind terror. Flight was uppermost in his mind. He could not remain in the house on his own. Which was why he had gone back to Lola, where he would probably have gone anyway.

'Pull yourself together, Darren,' her attractive features hardened, pale blue eyes flashing contempt for the man whose image had suddenly crumbled. 'Only last weekend you were considering ways of getting Marion out of the way and now somebody's gone and done it for you. So what the hell are you complaining about?'

'You don't bloody well understand,' he downed the whisky she had handed him in one gulp, set the glass down with a shaking hand. There's something happening, forces we can't fight against. Even Bishop Boyce is shit-scared. Inexplicable, horrible deaths, madness, a girl missing, and now Walter Stone burnt to a cinder in his own house. Who next? For God's sake, who's going to be next?'

'Somebody's deliberately out to scare you,' Lola's mouth was dry, she couldn't stand much more of this. 'Ever thought that maybe some rival building company has designs on the land now that it's been taken out of the Green Belt? Tolson Contractors, for instance.'

'No. Even they couldn't do all these things. I tell you we've got to get the hell out of here, Lola, while we're still in one piece.'

'And kiss goodbye to a cool million.'

'Better to be sane and alive.'

'You're panicking.' Her pulses were racing. With Marion dead, Lola stood to gain a share in that million, maybe more. They didn't even have to get rid of Hurst's wife now. It was plain sailing, all a matter of time. 'Somebody wants you to throw in the towel.'

'Sure they do . . . spooks who can either burn you up or else drive you mad. I remember reading once that there's a curse on anybody who interferes with church land.'

'It's only an untidy bit of a field and nobody'll be harmed by it being built on. A few snobbish villagers are getting uptight but what the hell. Look, I'll move back to the house with you.'

'No. I'm not spending another night there.'

'What about this guy, Sabat? I thought you said Boyce was paying him to exorcise the place. What the hell's he playing at?'

'He's a bloody fake, a con-man. We can count him out. There's something there which nobody can get the better of and I'm going to make sure I'm not the next on its hit-list.'

'You're not running away,' Lola appeared to relax, smiled. 'I'll stick by you, Darren.'

He swallowed, nodded. Lola refilled his glass, sensed that she was winning. Okay, there was something funny going on but the prize money was too big to drop out of the race just like that. She turned away, stared out of the window down into the busy shopping street below. Here, amidst this awful seething mass of humanity they had to be safe. Safety in numbers. 'If you won't go back home then you'd better move into the flat here with me, at least until completion date.'

'No,' he stared fixedly at the wall in front of him. 'I'm getting right away from here. I'll withdraw my tender, that way it'll let me out. Let Tolson Contractors put in an offer. Boyce won't get a backhander off them. It'll fuck him up properly, the hypocritical bastard!'

'You won't be withdrawing your tender, Darren,' there was a menace in her tone which had him jerking round to look at her. 'No way.'

'Why not? It's my business whether I . . . '

'Ours, Darren,' she laughed harshly. 'Don't forget, I'm in on this, too. Marion's dead, so is the Planning Officer. There are only three people who know about the deal which was set up; you, Boyce . . . and me. You just got yourself a new partner, Darren, and I'm not having anybody run out on me. We'll see it through together. I thought that was how it was going to be, anyway. I guess you could be in a lot of trouble if you cut and run and word got around that all this had been one big crooked fix. I can just see the headlines in the papers now - "Crooked Builder and Bishop Sent Down on Corruption Charge". Ten years at the very least!'

'You blackmailing bitch!' he snapped.

'Don't put it like that, Darren,' she laughed softly. 'You're no good without a woman behind you and you need me even more now that Marion's gone.'

He sighed, saw that his entwined fingers trembled. 'Okay, what's the next move since you've obviously had all this worked out for some time?'

'We sit it out,' she lit a cigarette, studied him through a cloud of tobacco smoke. 'I don't believe in this hocus-pocus, quite frankly. I think it's someone trying to scare us off and we're damned well not going to be scared. We move back to your place, Darren. Okay?'

'Okay,' he stood up. 'But don't forget I've got that Federation meeting in London tomorrow. Maybe you'd be better off staying here until I get back.'

'I move in,' she drew hard on her cigarette, fixed him with a determined stare. Today. And just make sure you come right back from London.'

'I'll be back,' Darren Hurst tried to shake off his misgivings. He was a very

frightened man.

Lola appreciated the opportunity to savour her new home while Darren was away. This luxurious town house was a good step up from the flat her lover had bought her. Really spacious, it gave one the opportunity to relax. After Darren had left for London she spent most of the evening arranging things how she wanted them. There were a lot of Marion's things that would have to be thrown out before she could finally think of the place as her own. Lola smiled her satisfaction into the hall mirror; she wasn't going to become any Second hand Rose!

She was thirty-seven. Darren still believed she was thirty-four; what did three years matter except to herself? Her long blonde hair would disguise any premature flecks of grey for a few years yet. She was fortunate in that she'd always had a good figure without having to go on any of those stupid diets which most women seemed to be obsessed with. She ate and drank what she liked and as much as she liked. And men still fawned around her. She certainly got all she wanted out of life!

Her pale blue eyes narrowed; maybe she was getting tired of Darren. Certainly he was becoming neurotic lately. One could argue that he had just cause, but on the other hand they had seriously discussed removing Marion from the scene. Lola recalled their conversation of only a few nights ago when they had lain naked and satisfied in the bed at the flat. Darren had had a 'foolproof idea for getting rid of his wife. He would take her out one evening to a local beauty spot, a lake where picnickers and lovers ran their cars down to the water's edge. There was a slight incline and no barrier; the council seemed oblivious to the danger. It would take an accident, a drowning, to get any kind of action out of them. Well, they were due to have their first one soon! Darren would ensure that all the car doors were locked except the driver's. He'd get the car rolling, jump out at the last second before they hit the water. It was deep just there and Marion couldn't swim, anyway, even if she managed to escape from the vehicle. He'd make sure he got a ducking himself before he went for help. It couldn't go wrong.

Lola laughed aloud. Christ, he didn't appreciate how lucky he was. Somebody had done the job for him and he didn't even run the risk of a murder rap. And if he had a conscience, which she doubted, there would be nothing to plague him for the rest of his life and he could tell himself that he had not intended to go through with it anyway. So why was the idiot getting all worked up? Okay, there had to be a killer at large but Marion had apparently gone to the churchyard voluntarily so one could only conclude that she'd had a date with him. It looked as if it was the same guy who had burned that curate up. As for Stone, he'd been cooked in a fire at his own house; a pure accident that would in no way be connected. And again it was an ill wind . . . Darren wouldn't have to pay Stone out for fixing the planning permission now. Just the bishop, but they needed Boyce to remain alive until contracts were exchanged, otherwise some of the other church hierarchy might go and concede to public opinion and call the whole thing off.

Lola concluded that she had a lot to look forward to. In a way it would be nice to be without Darren and his vivid, frightened imagination tonight. There was nothing to be scared of.

All the same, she jumped when the front door knocker sent its deep, vibrant tones throughout the house. She tensed, wondered who the hell it could be. It might be the police. Surely they didn't think Darren had murdered Marion; Lola had already told them that he had been with her the whole of that night. Maybe they had come round to give her a grilling, hoping that she might change her story. You couldn't trust the cops, they'd been real bastards back in her

hooker days.

It might be Bishop Boyce, crapping himself with fright. . . .

The knocker banged again, insistently, louder than before, and with her stomach muscles tightening into a ball, and her shapely legs suddenly feeling decidedly rubbery, Lola went to answer it.

For some seconds she just stood and stared at the man on the threshold. A little quiver ran up her spine. There was something so goddamned rugged about his features, that vivid cheek scar, the moustache, his eyes, his powerful build and a score of other things besides. You got the feeling that if you didn't know him already then you damned well should as soon as possible.

'Good evening,' his smile, those eyes had her catching her breath because she knew he was mentally undressing her. Tin looking for Mr Hurst.'

'I ... I'm afraid he's not in.' For Christ's sake don't tell a stranger that you'll be all alone in the house tonight.

'Perhaps I could come inside and wait.'

She wanted to say 'no, you bloody well can't' but somehow the words wouldn't come. God, this was a real hunk of a man and she was curious to find out more.

'I don't even know your name, Mr. . . . ' the words came out with a slight tremble in her tone.

'Sabat!'

The name hit her like a rush of hot air bringing an immediate flush to her cheeks. Those legs felt even weaker and her heart was starting to pound. So this was the guy in question! She'd imagined him to be some kind of white-haired fifteenth century witchfinder. Instead. . . .

'Come in, Sabat.' Somehow 'mister' seemed out of place.

Suddenly it was as though she had lost control of the situation. She was holding the door wide for him to step into the hall, closing it after him, when she should have slammed it in his face at the outset.

'I'm Lola,' it sounded trite, a meaningless introduction.

'I know.' He smiled again. 'I knew I'd find you here but all the same I wanted to have a word with Darren.'

'He won't be back until tomorrow.'

'Oh, I see.' Sabat concealed his annoyance; time was running out. April 29; two nights until the deadline set by the Cult of the Severed Head. Maybe he should have gone for the bishop first. 'I realise it isn't an opportune time to call, in view of recent happenings. . . . '

'Oh, Darren's okay,' she laughed. 'Would you like a drink?'

'I could use a whisky and pep,' he followed her into the lounge, noting the way her buttocks wiggled. It was natural, not put on for his benefit. The kind of woman who was a natural turn-on.

'Darren's gone to London,' she handed him his drink. 'A Federation meeting or

something boring like that.'

'I would've thought he'd've had more fun staying at home.' Sabat drew her gaze again and her eyes told him everything he wanted to know. Marion Hurst wasn't a bitter bereavement by any means. The Oke Priests had got the builder over one hurdle but there were even bigger ones looming up ahead.

Those eyes, Lola decided, were like dark mysterious pools that you had to keep gazing into. 'Did you want to see him about anything? Anything in particular?'

'As a matter of fact, I did,' Sabat spoke slowly, his words seeming to vibrate on Lola's brain, soothing like soft background music after a few gins. 'I wanted him to accompany me down to Wiltshire. It's very important, in fact his deal with the Church over this proposed tract of building land hinges on it!'

She nodded slowly. His voice; she could have sat there and listened to it all night. Perhaps she would; she hoped he wasn't in a hurry to leave. If only she could think of some way of detaining him, only her brain did not seem to be functioning very well. She smiled vacantly, aware that the top two buttons of her blouse were undone and his eyes were fixed on her cleavage. Then they came back up to meet her own.

'I'm sure we could all go down to Wiltshire tomorrow night,' soothing tones, commanding. 'You could come down with Darren, couldn't you?'

'Yes,' she was eager, her heartbeat speeding up, but her voice sounded so lazy. 'Do we really have to take Darren, though? Couldn't just you and I go, Sabat?'

'No, I'm afraid not,' he shook his head slowly, never for one moment allowing his penetrating gaze to waver from hers. 'Darren must come. I'm relying on you to see that he does. Do you understand, Darren must come?'

'I . . . understand,' she wanted to yawn, his words repeating themselves inside her brain. 'Darren must come . . . Darren must come . . . must come'.

'Good,' he said. 'I knew I could rely on you. I will give you more detailed instructions before I leave and you will impress upon Darren that it is vital he accompanies you because Bishop Boyce will be there also, and if the two of them do not meet then there is every chance that the St Monica's deal will fall through. Do . . . you . . . understand?'

'Yes.' Somehow she would get Darren down to Wiltshire, not because of the deal but because Sabat had commanded her to do so. And because Sabat would be there too.

'Good,' he had taken a small silver crucifix from the pocket of his corduroy jacket, was dangling the frail chain between his fingers, allowing it to swing from side to side under its own momentum, the light flashing on it, scintillating. Backwards . . . forwards . . . backwards . . . forwards. . . .

Lola felt the desire for sleep but her eyes would not close. She found her gaze following every movement of that tiny cross.

'You haven't shown me the upstairs yet,' Sabat was smiling. 'Perhaps you would like to take me on a conducted tour.'

She stood up immediately. Her legs still felt shaky but she knew that she must do as this man had commanded. She turned, could still feel his eyes boring into her, and in her mind she again saw that crucifix going to and fro. . .to

and fro ... to and fro. . . .

Sabat was aware of the compelling urge inside him as he followed Lola up the stairs. Her tightly fitting clothes showed off her shapely body, those buttocks still wiggled alluringly. This was one time he expected to hear Quentin, a deep throaty lusty laugh, but his brother's soul was silent. For once Mark Sabat was in complete control. Quentin would not interfere against the Oke Priests. Also, had not Sabat challenged the might of the Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal, an evil arch-druid from ancient Rome who had once ruled by terror with his Cult of the Severed Head? And Sabat had survived. His stars, his guardians, were on his side. Tonight he was very powerful. And they knew it!

Lola did as she had been commanded, taking her visitor on a tour of every room. The bathroom and shower-room, spare bedrooms, finally the nuptial chamber itself, Lola's

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new domain now that Marion was no more.

'Excellent,' Sabat fixed her with his gaze again. 'Now I think that you and I might indulge in some pleasure.'

Eagerly her trembling fingers were beginning to unbutton her clothing, a sudden haste as she bared her body for him, a stripper determined to show herself off to her best advantage; turning one way, then the other, lifting her breasts, balancing them in cupped hands. One leg raised, then the other. Smiling at his nod of approval, throwing herself back on the bed, splaying her legs then drawing them up, almost feeling the burning heat of his dark eyes sizzling on the soft moistness between her thighs.

Sabat undressed slowly, never for one moment taking his eyes off her, then advanced towards her like a hunting beast that has finally cornered its prey; one hundred and eighty pounds of sheer muscle, quivering at the prospect of the pleasures that awaited him.

For Lola it was an experience akin to drowning, albeit a pleasant feeling, swamped by this dark-haired man who fell on her ravenously yet was so sensuous in everything he did. His kisses, wherever they were planted, seemed to burn her, his caressing fingertips icy to her hot, fevered flesh. Mute commands; she knew what was expected of her, that she was subservient to him even when she was astride him, her eyes constantly going back to his, afraid that she might not be pleasing him.

Sabat was powerful and never relented his efforts, one orgasm being the springboard for the next. Now she was kneeling, head bowed so that her long hair fell over the side of the bed almost brushing the carpet, his thrusts from behind so powerful that once she almost fell forward and would have sprawled on the floor had his arms not encircled her waist and held her.

Still eager to please even when she could climax no more, her spirit willing, her flesh spent. Even so it was a disappointment when finally Sabat came off her and lay back with a loud sigh of satisfaction. Exhausted as she was she would happily have lain there and taken what he had to offer all night.

'You are very good, Lola,' rich tones of praise that brought an excited gleam to her blue eyes. 'Very, very good. I only wish that it was possible for me to stay here with you all night.'

Disappointment which she was unable to voice because Sabat's decisions were final, not to be queried. Her expression changed; sadness, loneliness.

'However, we shall meet again soon,' he leaned across her, began retrieving his cast-off clothing. 'Now, you have not forgotten what you must do, have you?'

'I have not forgotten,' she stared directly up at the ceiling, a recitation as though she had learned the words off by heart in order to repeat when requested to do so. 'I must come down to Wiltshire tomorrow night and bring Darren with me. It is vital because Bishop Boyce will be there and unless Darren comes the deal might fall through. Darren must come. You will give me details.'

'Indeed I shall, and you must listen carefully. There is a place on Salisbury Plain known as Stonehenge, and it is to be there where you must proceed, parking your car some distance away and going on foot the rest of the way. In all probability I shall already be there with Bishop Boyce. You must arrive by midnight, no later. Allow yourself plenty of time in case of mishaps for it is vital that you are prompt. Do not fail me, Lola. Now repeat what I have told you.'

Almost word for word she repeated his instructions, blushing with pride when he nodded his satisfaction and murmured: 'You are very good, Lola. You will not fail me.'

'I shall not fail you,' she echoed, and added, 'and when I have carried out your commands, my body will be yours again for the taking. Do as you will with it, Sabat.'

'I shall, I promise,' he smiled, removed a fleck of dust from the sleeve of his jacket and felt the comforting weight of the .38 in its pocket holster. 'Now I must leave you for I have an urgent appointment. Do not fail me Lola, for more depends on this than you can possibly imagine!'

He left the house, stepped outside into the balmy spring night, saw the reflection of his silver Daimler in the starlight, a silent monster standing there in the drive. So serene, it was difficult to believe that evil forces were abroad, for even Quentin was silent.

Sabat slid behind the wheel and the engine purred into life. Even before he moved off the car had become an extension of his own personality; streamlined, powerful. He glanced back at the house just in time to see the bedroom light go out. Lola was well satisfied in her hypnotic trance. There were a number of factors that would bring her and Darren to Stonehenge tomorrow night. They would come all right, there was no doubt about that.

He eased the sleek nose of the car out of the drive gateway, turned on to the deserted main road. The Daimler picked up speed, obeying its master's commands just as Lola had done. Neither of them would fail him.

His brow furrowed momentarily, and he pictured that pentagram back in the curate's house; a few chalk lines and some chalices filled with charged water. They were all that stood between the imbecilic Kent, the stolen jewelled sword of Alda and the wrath of the dark forces. The journalist was drugged. He would sleep soundly until Sabat returned. There was nothing else that could have been done to protect him. The Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal had given his word, but would it be enough? How many other druids were there who might be blinded by the desire for vengeance on the mortals who had destroyed Alena that they ignored the bargain?

Sabat pushed it all from his mind and accelerated, had the Daimler's speedometer flickering on 80. At this moment he was powerless to protect his colleague. All his efforts must be concentrated on a dangerous nocturnal mission which was already in progress. He had an unscheduled appointment with Bishop Boyce before dawn broke!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE BISHOP'S palace was in total darkness, just as Sabat had hoped and expected it would be. He wondered whether it might not have been easier to have tricked Boyce into accompanying him to Stonehenge on the morrow. It was too risky, though. The bishop might have somehow collaborated with Hurst in the meantime and then Lola would not have been able to get them both there. There was only one way to be sure - to transport Bishop Boyce there physically!

Sabat parked the Daimler, went the remaining three hundred yards on foot. In his dark clothing he became just another flickering shadow, moving through the night as silently as a prowling cougar.

The Close. A tranquil backwater in a busy city, the impressive cathedral dominating, its extensive lawns neatly mown and fringed with towering chestnuts, the same trees which might have sheltered Bishop Avenson on his way to communion on a rainy morning two and a half centuries ago.

Sabat paused, breathed in the atmosphere. It was difficult to believe that in this place lived the spider that had spun its web of evil and corruption. His lips tightened and he remembered briefly his own days in holy orders, a certain dean who had terrorised not only the residents of the close but many of the townspeople with his dominant, cantankerous personality, made life for the choirboys intolerable. So Sabat had left, joined the SAS, learned to kill in unarmed combat; and often in his own imagination his foe had been that same dean. The dean had died a couple of years or so ago from old ago but Sabat's hatred for him had lived on.

Sabat forced himself back to the present, slid inside the palace gates. It seemed incredible that only twenty-four hours ago he had been breaking into Stone's house, like a re-run of an old film. It could get boring, make you careless, and then you slipped up. There must be no mistakes for too many lives depended upon this night's work.

Alert again, listening to every sound. Somewhere an owl hooted mournfully and his scalp tingled. It reminded him of that time when the blood hunters were gathering in the concrete jungle, massing for all-out carnage led by Lilith, Goddess of Darkness.* This time the danger was even greater.

The palace window, if anything, afforded easier access than the more modern one in Walter Stone's house had done. Sabat swung himself over the sill,

dropped into a wide hallway. He crouched there, deliberately regulating his breathing and allowing his eyesight time to adjust to the semi-gloom of a building which was never fully dark because of the streetlamps in the Close outside.

The hall was oak-panelled with a high ornate ceiling, and decorated with innumerable oil paintings of men with smug faces and long white hair. Bishops dating back to the beginning of the fifteenth century. Surely the infamous Avenson was here, Sabat smiled to himself, but he had no time to examine the name-plates on each frame. A wide oak staircase stood at the far end. Doubtless even bishops went upstairs to bed, Sabat concluded as he began to mount them.

There was a huge landing directly above the hall, a polished floor graced with a single strip of frayed carpet which ran the whole length. At least ten doors led off from each side.

Sabat paused, wondered idly how you recognised a bishop's bedroom by its door. You didn't; to find it was a matter of elimination.

He took his time, listened carefully at each door before slowly turning the knob, easing the door open a fraction, peering through the crack into the darkened room beyond. Six unused bedrooms, one linen and store-room, and a long leather book-lined reference library which had three doors. Sabat checked his impatience, began the return journey on the opposite side of the landing.

Three doors along he found the room for which he was searching; Bishop Boyce's sleeping quarters!

Sabat listened, heard the heavy rhythmic breathing and then eased himself into the room, closed the door softly behind him. His keen eyesight made out the huge outline of an ornate four-poster bed, the curtains partly drawn. He smiled. The conceited bastard believed in carrying on in the tradition of his predecessors. Maybe he wore a nightcap and nightshirt just to add to his fantasy!

The ex-SAS man knew that he had to make Boyce walk out of here on his own two feet. He could easily and silently have rendered the other unconscious but there was no way he could carry a man that size and weight out of here without being spotted.

Sabat tip-toed towards the bed, tried to see in through the partly-open curtains. It was too dark to make out anything other than a huge bulk that rose and fell steadily with a bronchial wheezing sound, snuffling like a nocturnal fox searching dustbins for edible refuse.

A light-pull touched Sabat's face like some huge spider dangling from the ceiling on its web. His fingers gripped the cord whilst his other hand eased the -38 out of its pocket holster. The gun was loaded and he would use it if he had to, praying that the Hirschlanden Warrior would understand.

Then in one blinding instant the closeted bedquarters were flooded with light. Sabat saw the heavily jowled face, mouth wide like some huge, red sandstone cavern, the wart on the thick lower lip sprouting wisps of hair.

'Wha . . . wha . . . what ... is ... it?' Bishop Boyce struggled to surface from a deep slumber and Sabat winced as he caught the full force of stale whisky fumes. 'Who . . . what's going on?'

'Shh! It's me, Bishop. Sabat!'

'Sabot? Boyce heaved himself up on to his elbows, his huge eyes flickering open in bewilderment. 'What the ... deuce are you doing in my bedroom, Sabat? And what d'you mean by coming here at this time of night and . . . '

'You and I are going for a nice long ride in my car,' Sabat held the pistol up, let the barrel waver vaguely in the direction of the other's chest. 'Now, don't make a sound and get dressed as quickly as you can.'

That . . . that's a . . . gun!' the bishop swallowed.

'Sure it is. A •38 could blow half your head off from this range, Bishop!'

'I'll call the police. I'll have you locked up!' Blustering, his voice a croak, the lower lip trembling so that the hairy wart bobbed up and down. And, to Sabat's disappointment, he noticed that the other wore pyjamas; lime green ones that were almost transparent, showing the rolls of fat that lay beneath.

'Maybe you wouldn't really like to call the police, because if you did I might give them some very interesting information. I had a chat to Walter Stone before he ... died,' Sabat lied. 'And right now I've just come from Darren Hurst's house.'

'What's . . . what's your game?' Bishop Boyce's complexion had gained a sickly pallor in the yellow electric light. 'I suppose it's money you're after, Sabat.'

'Not exactly, although cash is always welcome,' Sabat laughed softly. 'Really, you've only got yourself to blame for this, Bishop, because it was you who called me in on the case, paid me to find out what was going on. Which I did. And that's why I'm here now.'

'You're behind all this!' the other's gaze was fixed on the barrel of the pistol, edging away as far as the confines of the four-poster would allow. 'It was you all along, Sabat. You committed those murders and . . . '

'No,' Sabat replied. 'I didn't kill anybody, at least not in the way you mean, Boyce. In fact, there are certain, er, people, for want of a better explanation, who would like me dead right now. But you're missing the point. I'm here because. I found out what was behind it all, what had caused the psychic disturbance at St Monica's. You're the biggest fucking hypocrite I've met in many a year and I'd be doing your Church a big favour if I blasted your brains all over the wall behind you. Which I might just do if you cause me any trouble. Anyway, I haven't time to stand here all night telling you what a bastard you are. We've got a long journey ahead of us.'

'Where to?'

'Wiltshire. Darren Hurst will be driving down to meet us there tomorrow night, I guess your luck has run out, Boyce. Your corrupt deal might fall through and you might also get a -38 slug in the back of your head if you try to run out on me. Now, get dressed and let's get moving. It can't be far off dawn and the fewer people who see us, the better!'

Bishop Boyce was trembling violently as he attempted to dress; fingers fumbling with buttons, having great difficulty getting his legs into a pair of wide grey flannel trousers. Sabat made no attempt to help him, watching hawk-like, the barrel of the •38 steady. In some ways he would have welcomed the easy way out but he had to account to the Oke Priests if Kent was to have his sanity restored to him.

Dawn was just beginning to streak the eastern sky as they emerged from the palace. Sabat kept close behind the bishop, the pistol gripped in his pocket. All the same, Boyce would neither run for it nor try to attract attention. He was a very frightened man and he was puzzled about why they were-going to Wiltshire. He was unlikely to give any trouble.

It was fully light by the time they arrived back at the curate's house. Sabat pulled the Daimler to a halt, killed the engine. His features were etched with lines, almost pallid with tiredness; he had to call upon his last reserves of energy to keep going.

'Don't try anything,' he warned the bishop. 'Now, let's go inside.'

Apprehension that brought a tightness to Sabat's chest as he opened the door, a build-up of tension inside him like a boiler that was overheating and might explode at any second; scared at what he might find inside.

The moment he stepped into the hall he knew that everything was all right, the atmosphere almost tranquil. He let out his pent-up breath slowly, motioned to Boyce to follow him.

Kent greeted them with a vacant expression from the centre of the pentagram; nasal, meaningless vocal sounds, 'glug-glug . . . uh-ah-uh-uh. . . , . ' The jewelled sword lay by his side, untouched, seemingly a lifeless object in the cold light of day, as harmless as a cast-off garden spade.

'What's . . . what's the matter with him' Boyce's expression was one of horror and revulsion.

'He's temporarily lost his mind,' Sabat answered. 'Which is the main reason for my trip down to Wiltshire. Yours is to meet Hurst. Now, we don't need to start until early afternoon and I think we all need some sleep. I'll show you the spare bedroom. The bed's already made up.'

Boyce followed him unprotesting, dazed by recent events. Sabat closed the door behind the bishop, then went downstairs and rummaged through the late Philip Owen's desk. He found what he was looking for; three drawing pins and a length of string.

Upstairs again he could hear Bishop Boyce moving about inside the room. Sabat wasted no time, stuck the pins into the soft cheap wood of the bedroom door and pulled the string around them into a triangular shape. A few muttered Latin words and he knew that his prisoner would not be going anywhere until he was released.

Sabat went back downstairs, stretched himself out on the couch in the hall. Above him he heard footsteps, the door handle rattling, then footsteps again and the utility bed creaking beneath the bishop's weight. Boyce wouldn't be going anywhere, that much was certain.

Sabat had learned the art of relaxing, inducing sleep in the most uncompromising situations. He also knew that he would wake to within a minute or two of midday. SAS training again, his own system more reliable than any alarm clock, perfect co-ordination of mind and body even when sleeping.

So far, so good. His plans were working out and now he needed to rest, to re-charge his mind and body for the terrible ordeal which lay ahead. For tonight he would take on the ancient druids in their own kingdom: Stonehenge, the most powerful temple of the old religion where the spirits of the long

dead priests lived on.

Lola woke sometime during the late morning, eased herself off the bed and began to dress. Last night seemed like a dream yet she knew it had been reality. She still felt the touch of the man called Sabat; his kisses, everything he had done to her. Tingling with anticipation, for tonight they would meet again. She heard his voice, like one of those catchy tunes which you can't get out of your head, driving you crazy; only she didn't want to get Sabat's voice out of her head. She thrilled to his soft yet commanding tones, knew that she would obey his instructions implicitly.

She went downstairs, restlessly began to wander about the house, pacing up and down in the hall. How long before Darren got back? Oh God, suppose he didn't come, stopped over in London another night. . . . Her stomach churned. The thought was too terrible to contemplate. If that happened, then she would have let Sabat down and that was unthinkable.

Her fears mounted; kneeling up on a chair at the window, biting her fingernails like an anxious schoolgirl, listening for every car that turned into the road, hopes raised and dashed. Until finally Darren Hurst's Jaguar swung into the drive.

Lola had the front door open, awaiting him. He looked tired, dishevelled as he climbed out of the car, a very worn and weary Greek god for whom the sands of time were running out.

'You okay?' He eyed her up, noticed a vacant expression in those usually searching pale blue eyes. 'Nothing happened while I've been away? I tried to phone you last night but I couldn't get anything except the unobtainable tone.'

'We have to go down to Wiltshire,' words like carefully learned lines coming from her soft red lips. To Stonehenge. Both of us.'

'What!' Darren Hurst stared in disbelief. 'Are you feeling all right, Lola? We're not going anywhere.'

'Yes, we are,' her tone was suddenly like a whiplash, a spoiled child defying a parent. 'Bishop Boyce telephoned. He is going also. Unless you meet him there tonight, and he insists that you take me along with you, then the whole deal is likely to fall through. We have to be there by midnight.'

'This is sheer lunacy!* Darren strode towards the phone on the carved dolphin hall table. 'I've never heard anything like it in my life. We've no time to play silly games,' he said, dialling frantically. Til soon put a stop to this. I'll bloody well find out what the bugger's up to!'

Lola watched him expressionlessly, knew that this was what he would do. She heard him talking; no, the bishop wasn't available. He had left early this morning without saying where he was going. He frequently went away without advising his staff of his whereabouts. Yes, they would be pleased to leave a message for him on his return.

Darren Hurst dropped the receiver back, turned to Lola with a look of incredulity on his face. 'The bishop's not there. They don't know where he's gone.'

'Of course they don't,' her expression was one of I-could-have-told-you-that, 'he's already left for Stonehenge. We need to start within the hour.'

'Jesus Christ Almighty!' the builder raised his eyes skywards, clenched his fists in a show of frustration. 'Is everybody going stark raving bloody mad? We're in the middle of some inexplicable crisis and all Boyce can come up with is a trip to Stonehenge.'

'But we have to go just the same, whether you like it or not,' she watched him closely, anxiously. 'And he insisted that I came along with you.'

'I shall certainly have something to say to him about this,' Hurst muttered, 'unless there's a very good reason for it. I suppose we don't have any choice. Make some coffee and a few sandwiches and then we'll have to make a start if we're going to get there by midnight. I bloody ask you, this is like some crazy game we used to play when we were kids: secret rendezvous and all that kind of crap.'

Lola turned away, smiled to herself. She had not failed Sabat; he would be well pleased, and he would reward her the way she wanted him to.

Sabat awoke, stirred, and glanced at his watch. It was time to make a start, checking first to make sure that Kent was okay. The Fleet Street man grinned inanely at him but made no move to rise to his feet. Next Sabat removed the string triangle, found a scowling Bishop Boyce sitting on the edge of the bed in the spare room.

'You locked me in!'

'No,' Sabat smiled. 'There's neither lock nor bolt on these cheap modern doors. Suffice to say I secured the door by a means which I won't go into because you probably wouldn't believe me and, anyway, I haven't time to explain. I shall have to ask you to assist me with getting Kent into the car.'

'It seems I have no choice.'

'Quite honestly, you don't.'

Boyce followed Sabat into the room where the pentagram was, watched as he gathered up the chalices, picked up the sword. 'Now, if we both take an arm I think Kent will accompany us out to the car quite amicably.'

A strange threesome which to a casual observer might have been two men giving a sick friend a lift to hospital. Kent flopped on the back seat, almost rolled off, laughed and began to chatter unintelligibly again.

'I suppose we've got to put up with that all the way,' the bishop was sullen, hoisting his huge bulk into the front passenger seat.

'Which isn't exactly a Christian outlook,' Sabat pressed the starter, adjusted his seat-belt. Tonight the lame shall walk, Bishop, believe you me. Though God only knows how the rest of us will finish up!'

SABAT FELT fresh in spite of the long drive. Soon after they had passed through Oxford, Boyce's head lolled forward, his bulk slumped against the door. Sleeping heavily, so that even when the Daimler took a sharp right-hand bend too fast and jerked him back, he did not wake. He was physically and mentally spent.

Kent was silent, too, but a glance behind him told Sabat that the journalist was not asleep, just staring vacantly up at the roof as though he was totally unaware that they had embarked upon a lengthy journey.

Swindon. Marlborough. Amesbury. Signs for Stonehenge now, a deserted road that a few hours earlier would have been packed with tourist cars. The irony of it all, Sabat reflected, was that few of those visiting the ancient druid site realised how 'alive' it still was. That was a sign of the twentieth century, everybody so unresponsive, wrapped up in themselves.

He pulled the Daimler off the road, edged it between a grove of birch trees. As he switched off the engine and lights the silence seemed to come at him like a cold black wave, enveloping him with one brief moment of terror. He tensed, almost threw up his arms to ward off an attack of some kind, then relaxed. Just a warning, just to let him know they were here.

'Where's Stonehenge?' Bishop Boyce stirred, unclipped his seatbelt. 'Or is this more trickery?'

'About half a mile up the road,' Sabat found himself whispering as though he was afraid of being overheard. 'But we're going across country. About three quarters of a mile, I'd say.'

'Why can't we go all the way in the car?' the big man was always reluctant to walk where it was possible to drive. 'It's nonsense walking the long way round.'

'I think it's best we leave the car here,' Sabat's tone was abrupt. 'Now I'll have to ask you to give me a hand with Kent again.'

It was amazing how bright the starlight was, sparkling in the cold night air as though the late spring was determined to inflict one last frost upon the countryside before surrendering to summer warmth. With some difficulty they got Kent out of the car, supporting him on either side, walking him along with them.

'D'you really need to cart that sword everywhere you go, Sabat?' the Bishop grunted. This is getting more foolish by the hour. I warn you, if this is some kind of trick. . . . '

'It isn't,' Sabat snapped. 'Come on, it's twenty minutes to midnight. We don't have any time to waste.'

A shambling silent procession across uneven grassland, even Kent appearing to sense the urgency of this mission, moving his feet in an ungainly style as he tried to walk; but without the others he would never have made it.

Silhouettes. Skeletal upright structures, towering pillars of ancient strength that competed with modern architecture, silent giants on the starlit skyline. Even from this distance Sabat could feel their vibrant power, a force that transcended centuries, the immortality of the old ones.

Kent was trying to hold back, shying away, struggling with them so that they had to drag him forcibly the last fifty yards or so.

'What's the matter with him?' Boyce grunted.

'He knows,' Sabat replied. 'It will not be long now.'

'There's . . . somebody over there!' the bishop halted, peered into the shadows cast by the huge structures, drew back.

Sabat caught his breath, gripped the hilt of the sword tightly, brought the blade up. Boyce was right, two figures hung back in a patch of darkness as though they were afraid to show themselves. It could only be . . . 'Hurst,' he called out softly, 'is that you?'

Relief as he recognised Lola's long blonde hair, the rest of her almost invisible because she was clad in a dark denim suit. Her companion towered above her as he strode forward, perplexed and angry.

'Would somebody mind explaining what all this tomfoolery is about?' he demanded, but in spite of his arrogance there was a tremor in his voice. 'What's going on, Bishop?'

'I think only Sabat can answer that.' Boyce released his hold on Kent so that the journalist would have fallen had not Sabat caught him. 'He's up to something, Hurst. And why have you brought this girl?'

The two men whirled angrily on Sabat but even as they did so they fell back in alarm, their cries of anger dying away to whimpers of fear. For the whole area seemed to move, a sea of shapes materialising from out of the shadows, figures garbed in long flowing cloaks, either sandalled or barefoot, their faces hidden by the shadows cast by cowls or crude fox-skin caps. A circle of nameless beings that stood and regarded them in malevolent silence.

'Who . . . who are . . . they' Bishop Boyce made a shaky sign of the cross with a trembling finger.

'They are the ancient Oke Priests,' Sabat spoke in a whisper. 'And you two have been summoned before their Council of Justice. I have fulfilled my promise and now I shall ask them to keep theirs, to restore my friend to sanity, and hopefully to have mercy upon Lola for in truth she did not bring about the corruption that has resulted in madness and death.'

They felt the coldness, the sheer evil of these silent ones and in that instant Lola screamed loudly for her hypnotic spell was broken. High above the gathering they saw the cause of her terror: that same floating head that had destroyed Walter Stone and unbalanced Kent's reasoning - The Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal had arrived!

Even the ring of watchers moved back in awe at this terrible apparition, the fearsome skull with no body that hovered several feet in the air, its glowing orbs centred on the five mortals.

'I have kept my word,' Sabat's voice broke the silence, staccato tones that held no fear. 'Now it is up to you to keep yours, O Hirschlanden Warrior!'

'Indeed I shall, Sa . . . ba . . . t,' the lipless mouth moved slightly.

'Then give this man Kent his sanity back and let us go.'

'Be patient, for we, the old ones, have need of you yet.'

'What trickery is this!' Sabat held the sword aloft, its jewels glittering in the faint starlight as though it had a life of its own. 'I have the sword of Alda. I can destroy many of you with this sacred weapon.'

'Perhaps. Yet would you not rather serve the old ones?'

'I already have. I have saved your sacred ground for without these men the sale will not go through.'

'The woman is one of them.'

'No. She was tricked by the man, Hurst. You have already meted out your justice to the guilty woman, his wife.'

*Sa . . . ba . . . t . . . ' an impatient hiss, 'we cannot spend the night bargaining. You have done well in bringing the guilty ones to our Council of Justice in the highest temple of them all. That is why we bestow upon you the greatest honour of all. Tonight you shall be High Priest, to hear this case, to pass judgement. . . and carry out the punishment on those found guilty!'

Sabat's brain reeled. The Warrior's words were almost beyond mortal belief. These Oke Priests had bestowed upon him the role of Judge and Executioner. To refuse would incur their wrath.

The wind was soughing in the branches of an oak tree, seeming to pick up the whispers of the waiting throng, their awe, their anger at what these mortals had attempted to do. There would be only one outcome to such a trial, one finding- guilty! And the punishment would be death!

Sabat let his gaze rove around the circle of druids. One he recognised, the tall Alda, eyes ablaze with hatred and jealousy for the mortal who had stolen not only his rightful status but also his soul. And the power was Sabat's, power supreme except for the Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal who ruled over these ancients.

'I am honoured, O Warrior,' Sabat lifted his sword, implanted a kiss upon its blade. 'But what of my colleague, Kent?'

'He shall be restored to his former self after the trial.'

'And the woman, Lola?'

'She must face trial, Sa . . . ba . . . t, along with the others, for evil spawns evil and we cannot be sure of her innocence. The Council will decide and you must abide by their decision.'

Sabat sighed but he knew he had no choice. His only chance lay in agreeing to carry out the wishes of the Oke Priests. 'All right, I accept your offer, O Warrior.'

'Good.' The head might just have smiled; the mouth stretched wide. 'Then let us begin. You have the sword of Alda, Sa . . . ba . . . t. Take his robes and don them, and take your place upon the Seat of Judgement!'

So unreal, as though he was on the astral looking down on his physical body. Alda meekly disrobing himself, handing over the voluminous cloak and the gold gorget, a wreath of oak leaves. The cap, smelly fur that had dried hard.

Bowing, his features a mask of anger but compelled to obey the command of the Warrior.

Sabat - Arch Druid! He sensed a new power, a cruelty that transcended his own ruthlessness, the priests from the shadows bowing as they escorted him up a flight of steps to the Seat of Judgement - looking down on the throng below and knowing how they feared him.

The prisoners were pushed forward, two big men and a very frightened girl, forced to kneel, their guards having produced long-bladed knives from the folds of their garments.

"Begin the trial!" The Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal was now upon a large central stone, presiding over the gathering. These three are charged with the conspiracy to corrupt and desecrate druid ground. Let them speak; the holy one who is thought to be unholy, first.'

Bishop Boyce was on his feet, a figure that swayed, his florid features suddenly deathly pale. 'I am a bishop, a man of the Church. Would I do anything that was not in the interests of the Church? The money from the sale would have gone into church funds. I did not know the land was sacred. I ask pardon and forgiveness.'

'You did not know it was druid land,' Sabat spoke with a haughtiness foreign to his character, leaning forward and resting on the hilt of his sword. 'Yet your sole motive was personal greed. Money would have gone to your Church but a sum would have come secretly to you as a result of bribery and corruption that enabled the land to be released for sale. Is that not so?'

'It is a lie!' An almost hysterical shout.

'It is the truth. What say the Council?'

'Guilty':

Whispers of anger, growing, like a gathering sandstorm in the desert as Boyce was dragged back into the shadows.

'Let the tall fair one state his case.'

Silence again as Darren Hurst was pushed forward, glancing wildly about him as though he sought some avenue of escape. But the ranks had closed; death awaiting anyone foolish enough to try and run the gauntlet of sacrificial knives.

Sabat's eyes narrowed; he sensed his own hatred, the power bestowed upon him pounding like liquid fire in his veins. Suddenly he was God, the giver and the taker away of life. Almost; he was but a pawn where the Council of Justice were concerned. The final decision was theirs so why did they need him? The awful realisation came suddenly. The guilty had to die, there had to be an executioner and what could be more fitting than that a mortal should take mortal life! This was their ultimate revenge!

Darren Hurst could barely stand. Trembling violently he looked about him and finally raised his eyes to Sabat.

'For God's sake, Sabat, I didn't know it was druid land. I swear it. For God's sake, I didn't know!'

Ignorance of the law is no excuse for a breach of the law; the law then as it

is now. Sabat's features were impassive. He was one of the ancient ones now, loathing this avarice and greed. He raised his hand, received an answering hiss from the multitudinous jury. There could be only one verdict-guilty!

Hurst screamed, a shrill yell of terror, seemed to crumble but hands stretched out and caught him before he fell, dragged him away.

Only one left now - Lola!

The Warrior moved in as though he did not trust Sabat, suspended only a few feet from where the robed high priest sat. Sabat felt a tingling in the hand which held the sword as though the blade was conducting a small current, forming a link between Master and servant that stretched across thousands of years.

'And what of the woman, Sabat? Hear what she has to say in frail defence'

'I had no part in this!' Lola shrieked. 'I did not know. I was but Hurst's mistress.'

'It is true,' Sabat's voice was powerful, seemed to bounce back off the ring of mighty stone pillars. 'I know that for a fact. Hurst deceived her, she only found out when it was too late. Listen to me, all of you, without this woman I could not have brought her lover here before the Council tonight. She helped me, tricked him.'

'Treachery is her nature,' The Hirschlanden Warrior hissed. 'A harlot who has a price. Doubtless you paid a higher price than these others, Sabat, or else she would not have aided you in this treachery. By druid law she is guilty. Her part in helping you is no defence.'

'I did not put a price on her help,' Sabat answered angrily.

'You put her under your power. First, for your own ends, secondly because she would not have helped you otherwise. What say the Council?' The skull was brighter now, a luminous shape in the night sky, eyes glowing with fury as it sought to overrule Sabat.

'Guilty the answer was spontaneous, a throaty cry like baying wolves scenting blood and eager to move in for the kill.

'No!' Sabat was on his feet, an angry cloaked figure brandishing a glittering sword. 'You brought me here as judge and you have heard my ruling. Innocent! She is innocent!'

'Which is overruled by the Cult of the Severed Head!' the Warrior was hissing foul-smelling vapour, fetid mist gathering in the windless atmosphere.

Then I will have no further part in this!' Sabat tore his white robe from him, cast it aside. 'I have kept my bargain. I owe you nothing. Your part is still to be fulfilled. So far you have wasted my time!'

'No, your part is not yet fulfilled,' the skull swung dose so that only a foot or so separated it from Sabat. The prisoners have been found guilty but sentence has not yet been passed. That is your duty, according to druid law, and there is only one penalty for these offenders. Death!

Mortals have been tried by a mortal and they must die at the hand of a mortal if our vengeance is to be complete. You have no choice, Sabat. Otherwise your friend will join them!'

Sabat lowered his sword. He had almost plunged the blade at the vile thing that was the Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal, trusted in his own power to destroy it. Had his own life and soul alone been at risk he would have done so but Kent was somewhere out there in the shadows.

'You promised our lives in return,' he snarled. 'How do I know that you will not trick me at the end?'

'No! Sabat, please don't let them kill me!' Lola was screaming, struggling, but the old ones overpowered her, stifled her cries. And Sabat winced at the prospect of his own treachery, had to make one last try.

'I will pronounce and carry out the sentence on the two men,' he spoke firmly, 'but I must ask that you spare the woman. She means much to me for I have mated with her!'

A hiss from the watchers, astonishment and fury. Sabat had been installed as High Priest for this one night and this woman, proven guilty, now turned out to be his mistress; just as Alda had once taken Alena into his bed and made her one of the higher ones by sexual union, saving her from a terrible fate.

'On your oath, do you speak the truth? For perjury is punishable by death!'

'I speak the truth. Turn the one called Lola over to me!'

That we cannot do, for she has become one of us through you, and we shall keep her, but the fate of the others will not be shared by her, that I promise. Now, pass sentence on the other two for much time has been wasted and we must be ready 'ere the first rays of the rising sun strike the sacrificial stone!'

Sabat faced the shadowy circle whose numbers appeared to have swelled even further, a dark moving mass that filled this ancient temple to capacity, a crowd that was waiting to hear him speak.

The men, Boyce and Hurst, have been found guilty and there is only one penalty,' he raised the sword high in the air, closed his eyes momentarily for its flashing brightness blinded him. 'Death!' It might be carried out in a number of ways; a Wicker Man, the turf sacrificial altar, throats cut as the sun rose. . . .

Cries of jubilation came at him like a rush of autumn wind, the stench of rotting vegetation.

'The woman, Sabat; pronounce sentence on the woman'

'She is guilty and must be punished according to druid law . . . but not by death, for I have that promise from the tips of the Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal himself.' Sabat sank back on to his seat, exhausted but knowing that there was more to do before this night was done.

He heard the screams of the prisoners, knew that the Oke Priests were preparing them for death; knew also that it was by his own hand that Bishop Boyce and Darren Hurst would die!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

OF COURSE, Sabat stared aghast, he should have realised how the two men were to be executed, for was not this Council of Justice presided over by one who from time immemorial had ruled the Cult of the Severed Head! Boyce and Hurst were to be beheaded!

The two men knelt, side by side, unfettered but not moving, heads downward on a long flat stone. They trembled violently but did not protest for surely they had resigned themselves to their fate; and they knew that the end would be swift. They would welcome death.

Beside the execution block stood Alda, expressionless, his gaze fixed on Sabat. Behind him in the darkest shadows the Hirschlanden Warrior floated silently. Sabat glanced behind him, thought he heard the sobs of Lola amidst the waiting throng. Kent would be there somewhere too.

Sabat fingered his sword blade, gingerly tested its sharpness, for without doubt this was to be the weapon of execution. He sighed. He had killed often and brutally in the past, emotionlessly, yet this was different. His enemies had no chance, like blasting a sitting rabbit with a shotgun. It would have been far better to have engaged in some kind of combat to the death with Boyce and Hurst. Certainly he would have killed them, but at least he would have obtained some kind of satisfaction from their deaths. Now there was no challenge - except to kill them cleanly when they deserved to suffer.

A faint greyness in the eastern sky; the hours of the psychic Oke Priests were drawing to a close. Sabat wondered if they would exist once the daylight came. Another day, another time-change, a brief surrender to the twentieth century. The final hour was nigh.

Waiting.

An orange ball tipped the distant skyline, one penetrating ray, so sudden and precise, striking the stone, bathing" the bared necks of the sacrificial victims in a blood red aura. Sabat's sword went up, a glittering arc of death powered by every ounce of strength in his tired body. He heard the cries of the watchers, steeled himself for the impact.

The blade came down with tremendous force; his arm shuddered. Hurst first, a cut as clean as that of a guillotine, blood spouting as the head toppled forward, rolled a few feet and came to rest facing him. Eyes that still saw, a mouth twisted into a mute cry of agony and hatred.

He swung the sword again, aware that the throng had moved in closer, lusting for the sight of spilled human blood, jostling one another for a better view.

Bishop Boyce's neck was thick and strong, bull-like. Sabat powered the blow, double-handed this time, felt the blade cut, then jam. Blood spurting, a writhing body with a half-severed head, twisting to try and free itself. Sabat exerted all his strength, used his foot as a lever on the stone; pulled, extricated the execution instrument.

Clumsy, sickening. He felt the bile in his throat, drove again with all his

might, grunted his satisfaction as the steel cut true, grated on stone, sent the head spinning.

Oh Jesus God, Boyce was on his feet, a tottering monstrosity that jetted blood high in the air from a mangled stump, arms flaying, seeming to point accusingly at Sabat. You did this to me; look at what you've done!

Even the Oke Priests fell back, cries that could have been fear because never before had they known a victim rise from the sacrificial stone. Then, like a headless Christmas cockerel, exhausted by a last burst of defiance, the bishop sank to the ground, twitching in a pool of his own blood.

A faint sickening thud like a rolling wood that had lost its impetus on a bowling green but having just enough momentum left to nudge the jack had Sabat jerking round. Boyce's head had hit Hurst's, both of them coming to rest in a slight indentation in the ground, a bizarre last reunion in blood, dead eyes blazing their hate for the man who had done this to them.

And suddenly it was dark again, an inexplicable phenomena that obliterated the rising sun, whipping up an icy wind that tore at Sabat's clothing. Screams. He recognised them as Lola's, turned to look for her in the blackness only to find his way barred by the floating apparition that was The Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal.

'You have done well, Sa . . . ba . . . t.'

'I have fulfilled that which was demanded of me,' Sabat clutched the sacred sword to him, now prepared to use it if there was no other alternative. 'Where is Kent? What have you done to the woman called Lola?'

'Your colleague is safe and will join you in that grove of trees where you left your vehicle. As for the woman, she will live but will go back with us into the night before the sun comes again.'

'You're tricking me!' Sabat's features were grim as he dropped into a half crouch. 'Show them to me.'

'Alas, I cannot for the Oke Priests have already left, and taken her with them. Only Alda remains, waiting for his sword to be returned. Lay it on the ground, Sa . . . ba . . . t, and return whence you came whilst there is still time.'

Sabat's brain whirled, trying to reason where logic was impossible. Should he trust the Cult of the Severed Head one last time? If they betrayed him at the last, then there was no way he could return to exact his revenge. Kent would be lost forever.

'There is one ready to escort you from this temple, to guard you on your way, for the night is full of dangers still. The ancient ones are angry because you and your friend are being allowed to return to the mortal world. But I have promised and I will keep my word. Leave your sword and hurry, for one awaits you who has not much time. I urge you not to delay, Sa . . . ba . . . t!'

Sabat let the sword fall from his fingers, heard it clang on the stony ground; this time there was no sparkle from the jewelled hilt, a lifeless thing. Just an ordinary sword.

'I will go,' he said. 'If you have lied to me, O Warrior, then I shall return and hunt you in the realms of darkness, a place where I have ventured before on several occasions. This I swear.'

Sabat moved forward, heading towards that huge archway that led away from this temple of latent evil. He did not look back, did not want to see again the carnage which had been brought about by his own hand. A whisper; it might have been borne on the faint breeze or even in his own mind. He did not know which. 'Goodbye Sabat.' Lola's soft, husky voice, loaded with sadness.

His eyes misted over. He had done all he could. Perhaps it would have been better had she been put to the sword than condemned to a life beyond the realms of mortal knowledge.

A warm breeze fanned his face and he smelled the freshness of a spring countryside. He looked towards the east, saw a faint greyness. The dawn was coming again!

Suddenly Sabat was aware that he was not alone. The hairs on his neck prickled, he sensed another presence, peered into the gloom. A man barred his path. No ancient one this time for Sabat could make out the outline of a suit; a tall figure with silver hair. Faint recognition, but it eluded his tired brain like some will-o'-the-wisp.

'Mr Kent is back at your car, Sabat.' Rich, cultured tones, the features hidden in shadow. 'I will walk back with you part of the way to ensure your safety.'

The stranger fell into step, a silent companion in the gloom of a false dawn.

'You know what . . . what has transpired back there tonight?' Sabat asked after a while.

'Yes. I was not there but I know. The guilty ones have been executed by your own hand. Their skulls will be taken by the Cult of the Severed Head; their bodies will disappear without trace, not so much as a bloodstain remaining when mortals return in the daylight.'

'Which solves a lot of problems. It's the girl I'm worried about.'

'Do not worry, she will be well looked after. In fact,' the other gave a faint laugh, 'she will be given a status higher than any she could expect on earth. Immortality. Mayhap Alda will take her for his own. If so, she will be happy. I trust you returned the sword?'

'I did,' Sabat laughed as recognition suddenly dawned on him. 'Your land will be safe now, Sir Henry. Those involved in this corruption are dead. It is unlikely that a new deal will be set up without Bishop Boyce and Hurst.'

'Good,' Sir Henry Grayne stopped, seemed to melt back into the half-light, a grey mist obscuring his features, even his outline uncertain. 'I think I can safely leave you now, Sabat. You will find your friend safe and I can return to my own kind. Farewell.'

Sabat walked on, did not look back. The light was coming fast now, a faint orange tint beginning to infiltrate the grey of the eastern sky. He could see the shape of the Daimler beyond the grove of trees. He resisted the urge to break into a run but his pulses were racing.

'Would somebody mind telling me what the fuck's going on?' Kent swung the door open at Sabat's approach, his expression one of bewilderment and anger. 'How the hell did I get here?'

Sabat experienced relief and sudden elation. The same old Kent, slightly more dishevelled than usual but there was no trace of his recent experiences. He was all right.

'You went to sleep,' Sabat grinned as he eased himself in behind the wheel. 'But you've woken up now and you're okay and that's all that matters.'

'the last thing I remember was us breaking into Stone's house. I guess I must've blacked out.'

'You did. But you've come round now and you're all right. I guess we'd better drive back to my place in London and catch up on some sleep. Our task here is completed.'

'And what about my story? Come on, Sabat, let's have some details. As yet I've got nothing I can print except a string of unsubstantiated happenings which nobody would believe. I'm not sure I believe them myself.'

'And you certainly wouldn't believe the rest,' Sabat began to reverse the car out on to the road. A ray of early morning sunlight glinted on the bonnet and he was reminded once again of the past night when the sun had risen and set again at the command of the ancient Oke Priests.

'So it's all been a bloody waste of time,' the journalist grunted.

'Far from it,' Sabat felt the power of the Daimler as it picked up speed, the welcome warmth of the heater. There will be no more deaths or madness at St Monica's. We have given the ancient ones their sacred land back. Furthermore, Kent, you and I have been places we had no right to go, at least not to return sane and alive. The Hirschlanden Warrior of L'Impernal kept his word.'

The who?'

But Sabat did not reply. Somewhere he heard a voice, angry familiar tones. Quentin's soul was alive and active again, a dark force that sought freedom from the body which held it earthbound. The old struggle would go on for Mark Sabat, another battlefield elsewhere, powerful followers of the Left Hand Path bent on his destruction.

But right now he needed a long sleep. Quentin could wait.