

BURNING ANGELS

Part 2 of the Vigil series.

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- TIME OUT

CHAPTER ONE

Hell-call

Dawn Heliot drew much pleasure springing surprises on mortals. Normally, because it involved dropping her pretence to be anything other than a witch. There was always a split second of pure delicious shock as her latest victim watched her perfect porcelain skin age two centuries in seconds, turning as wrinkled as rain-soaked leather; high cheekbones sagging, flawless blonde hair shimmering into brittle silver barbed wire, full lips cracking like ice. Transforming until only her beautiful wide blue eyes remained untouched inside her wizened face, a mirror of her twisted soul, which she allowed her prey to glimpse truly at last. This particular victim, a muscled college football player, a prize bull for the slaughter, had begun a very unmasculine scream as Heliot's face altered and her beauty fell away. His scream had instantly cut off when she expertly stabbed him through the heart and began casting the spell of eternal youth, fixing his life force to drain inside her. This handsome young Jock was a fine specimen. His youthful vigour would keep Heliot alive for at least six months before she needed to feed again. Heliot didn't, however, much enjoy *receiving* surprises, which was why she reluctantly abandoned her spell, tutting in fury, as the corpse unexpectedly started to rise from the bed, her sacrificial dagger still embedded through the football player's heart, its ornamental handle slick with blood. Heliot's first thought was that she had inadvertently seduced a zombie, but she instantly dismissed the idea. Predators recognised other predators by their scents and signs, so the chances that this beautiful brute had been anything other than a boring mortal was slight. The dead prey's eyes started to burn with an orange fire as the corpse sat up, fixating the witch with an unholy power that she recognised all too well. Yet another surprise. To receive a call from whatever Hades this creature had ended up cast into. Dawn found herself almost as perturbed that the Keeper had allowed his physical form to be destroyed, recast here as a disembodied spirit reaching out from beyond the grave. *Even I never managed to kill the Keeper - the beast must have grown sloppy in his dotage.*

Dawn allowed her distaste to show. 'Has no-one ever told you that it is rude to interrupt someone when they are busy eating?'

The corpse's lips wobbled, but it was the Keeper's voice whispering from the dead throat. 'I am slain, deaaaaaaad.'

'Obviously. And your possessed husk is also bleeding all over my sheets - despite the strategically positioned towels I hid across my bed earlier.'

'The covenant, the covenant, you must avenge meeeeeeee.'

'You have to be joking. Each and every one of your assistants would have said anything, agreed to *any* covenant, just to escape your disgusting clutches. And in case you have forgotten, I removed myself from your "care" through my own cunning. You had very little choice in the matter. You were an idiot to leave so many volumes of arcane spells and powerful witchery on your shelves. You underestimated me - you thought me a pretty simpleton as well as an illiterate. Given your current reduced circumstances, it doesn't look like you learnt much from the lesson the first time, either.'

'Avenge meeeeeeee!' demanded the spirit inhabiting the corpse.

'I'm not the naive Victorian flower girl you tricked inside the Old Paradise Shop. It wasn't your assistant who escaped you . . . it was a Witch of the Sixth Seal. You

want me to revenge you?’ Heliot giggled. ‘Give me your murderer’s address. I shall be sure to send the foe who cast you down a congratulations card.’

The pool of crimson blood pooling on her bed turned into a silvery mirror, a quicksilver window into the dark recesses of the Keeper’s demonic soul. Dawn couldn’t help but be impressed by that level of sorcery. Even disembodied and defenestrated, the Keeper still clung to the vestiges of his old power.

‘*This* slew meeeeeeee.’

Through the portal, Heliot saw the power of the Keeper’s killer ripping into the monster, drinking from it like a fine wine - such a rich taste, such a gorgeous nectar. Heliot watched recent events replay inside the Old Paradise Shop. The Keeper and his ever-shifting Hell’s gate both destroyed by - by. ‘Sweet darkness! What is that girl that burnt you? Obviously bitten by a vampire and administered the antidote. Was it the Vigil or the Black Pope’s meddlers who saved the fey thing?’

‘She is not what she seemsssss. I discovered too late, too lateeeee.’

‘Too late for you, perhaps,’ cackled Heliot.

‘Feed on her, take her power and use it to restore meeeeeeee.’

Heliot reached out and stroked the corpse’s now pale blue cheeks. ‘Oh, I’ll steal her power. I’ll drain her life-force like wringing a gravy-filled cloth wipe for its nourishment, but you, my old master, you can stay as mist clinging to the distant edges of the world. A little bit thinner and weaker every day, always watching, but never able to touch the living or rise out of the shadows. As powerless as all the girls you trapped inside your little nightmare. I’d say that’s a fair exchange, wouldn’t you?’

‘The covenanttttttt . . .’

‘Yes, yes, the covenant. Why don’t you call a lawyer and sue me?’ Heliot lifted the female creature’s name out of the silvery portal. *Eleanor Lythe*. It had been while since Heliot had encountered something new in the world; the witch wondered what this bright shining abomination might be. It was entirely possible the creature didn’t even know herself. *Something about her family lineage, perhaps?* It would bear investigating. You always needed to understand your enemy. ‘Stop licking the crumbs from my table, *master*. Show a little backbone, a little pride.’ Dawn allowed the Keeper a long hiss of agonised rage, before laughing and shoving the helpless corpse back down to her mattress, savouring the spell to cast the Keeper out as it crossed her lips. Then Dawn observed the consumed ruin, fallen still and lifeless once more, with a fastidious disgust. *Not enough energy left to feed a gnat, let alone a witch*. She dragged her dagger out of its chest and rose to stand in front of the mirror by her sideboard. ‘Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who’s the hottest babe of them all?’

Heliot’s mirror remained silent, but she moaned in hideous pain as her face flowed back to its original fair, flawless aspect. Working such evil Wicca when she was as empty and hungry as this came at a terrible price. Thankfully, Heliot wasn’t going to need to be the one to pay it. She checked her victim’s backpack, searching for anything that might help the police identify the murdered young man. Heliot had become as expert as Sweeney Todd at disposing of bodies over the centuries. Even when the authorities found the remains of her consumed prey, they never tracked the husks back to her. As Dawn searched, she came across a paperback fantasy novel titled *The Shepherd's Crown* by some writer called Terry Pratchett. Amazingly, if the

blurb at the back was to be believed, it featured a coven of kindly witches travelling around some imagined world like charity workers, doing good deeds. Heliot cackled to herself. No wonder this young idiot came back to her apartment so willingly. The true witch pulled black plastic sheeting out from under her bed and rolled the Jock's hollow lifeless body onto it. 'And now I'm going to have to return to the Sports Bar and convince a couple of your silly friends to leave with me. I'm going to need to be at full strength before I claim the female creature's soul - I don't intend to end up like the Keeper.'

Those who had escaped the Keeper's malicious clutches was something of a unique club. Membership, it seemed, had recently risen to two. *Time for that number to return back to one.*

Sophia passed two tall male vampire guards standing sentry in the corridor and noted how they worked to control themselves in the presence of the young teenage girl walking by Sophia's side. It was obvious neither of the pair had sipped on human blood yet this week. The guards wore black uniforms with gleaming breastplate armour protecting their chests, modern submachine guns strapped by their hips alongside ceremonial daggers. It was an archaic mixture, much like the Vatican's Swiss Guards, and similarly purely for show. The vampire soldiers were far deadlier than the weapons they carried. But human supplicants sometimes came here, hoping to beg, borrow and steal some small fraction of the vampires' vast power, and the prey expected to see such trappings. As with so much of existence, what you didn't see, that mattered far more than what was actually displayed.

Sophia and Joanna came to the end of the corridor. No doors or gates blocked entry to what lay beyond. None was needed. Most sensible people avoided walking down the steps on the other side at all costs.

'Don't go in there,' Joanna begged Sophia. 'Please. *He's* inside there.'

'He is. And that's why I don't have a choice in the matter.' Sophia possessed a honeyed voice which hypnotised most people without even needing to draw upon her powers of mesmerism. Even so, her words barely seemed to calm Joanna this afternoon.

'Why must you?'

Sophia raised her long fingers and stroked the human girl's cheeks. 'I am what I am. Wait here, my darling. I shall return to you shortly.'

Joanna shot a nervous glance towards the two sentries down the corridor.

'They won't touch you, Joanna. They know you arrived here with me. And they also know well who I am.'

Joanna nodded and made a gentle little cough, which was her way of saying she understood but still didn't approve.

Sophia stepped through the doorway. Wide stone stairs swept down to the bottom of an open, windowless vault. It was every bit as desolate and chilly as she remembered from her last visit. A portly man sat behind an old-fashioned wooden desk in the centre of the large, echoing concrete chamber. One thing you could say about the High Prince of the vampire race, he wasn't vain. Von Waldburg looked like a middle-aged accountant: sallow skin, fat cheeks, a mop of brown hair that could have passed for a badly designed wig, although Sophia knew it was his original hair and as natural as any vampire might be considered natural. Von Waldburg was an ugly vampire, and that by itself was a badge of his vast eternal power. Only in his eyes could you see the creature's danger. A piercing gaze that could cut through you as if your very soul was being flayed. But Sophia would meet his gaze. Not that she had any more choice in the matter than she did in answering his summons.

'Come on in, little *Figchen*,' called von Waldburg without looking up, sensing her presence.

The Master of Masters knew that Sophia didn't enjoy hearing her nickname, but that was the point. Gebhard Truchsess von Waldburg was one of the few creatures in the world who could get away with allowing that insulting diminutive to cross his thin lips and not suffer her revenge. At least, not *yet*.

Sophia indicated the mostly bare concrete hangar which von Waldburg had made his lair, walls hung with a few tatty tapestries that had probably been old when the vampire leader had been a medieval warlord. 'I like what you've done with the place.'

'Do not pout, Sophia Augusta, we have both known each other long enough that only honesty should pass between us.'

Sophia walked down the wide steps. A single strip of worn green carpet covered the middle of the treads. 'Honesty? Well then, it seems curious to me for the world's most powerful vampire to be holding court in a chamber so uncomfortable, bare and industrial it might pass for an abattoir.' Sophia suspected it was because the chamber reminded von Waldburg of Hitler's bunker when the Prince of Vampires had still worn the name of Martin Bormann.

'I used to own a fine alpine castle filled with warm wood panelling, four poster beds and priceless oil paintings. It was flattened by American B25s trying to kill me during the war.' He smiled ironically. 'And because the Axis lost the war, I could not even claim on my buildings insurance.'

'You mean *we* lost the war, not the Axis powers.'

'No, *we* lost a battle. The war continues.' Von Waldburg sniffed the air and glanced towards the top of the stairs where Joanna lurked out of sight beyond the archway. 'A vampire can never have too many demi-gogs; but the fashion for keeping human pets will, I trust, never catch on.'

'I have my reasons.'

'I am sure you do. And it is a tribute to our long liaison that you are still alive to have them. Toying with your food counts as poor manners, though. I always thought you were better raised than that.'

The Vampire Prince's hard eyes flitted up towards the vault's entrance, and there was a sharp sliver of curiosity in his gaze, as well as the expected hunger for the prey's blood. Von Waldburg wanted to uncover the secret of Sophia and Joanna's relationship, but Sophia could never tell him. Not without killing the vampire, first. Which Sophia would probably have to do sometime this century, if not the next, she suspected.

'I have flown a long way to meet you if this is to be a mere lesson in etiquette.'

Sophia did not fear the vampire prince. She was always cautious around him, but knew her utility to the malicious creature granted her a status beyond her existence as merely another vampire. Of course, their long relationship cut both ways. Von Waldburg was utterly unmoved by Sophia's fine porcelain beauty, her deep blue eyes that should have looked young, but didn't, her hair so blonde it shone almost white. Sophia had always been beautiful, never using her powers to alter her face towards a model she had not been born to. Of course, she had made a few subtle rearrangements over the decades, as well as increasing her height to humanity's present standard. The advent of photography was a curse; always a chance someone would happen across some seventy-year-old image of Sophia and wonder how she could still be wandering around unaffected by the ravages of age. Not understanding that supping mortals' life-force was far superior to even the most expensive of beauty products. No, like the rest of her kind, Sophia slowly altered her features each year, just enough to protect the secret of her immortality.

‘Let me see if I may broaden the curriculum for you.’ Von Waldburg activated an intercom on his desk. ‘I will receive the report now.’

Ebu Kulk entered their chamber through a small corridor on the ground floor. Centuries before, Kulk had been a vizier to the sultans. The Turkish vampire had a penchant for first tying those he fed on to teams of wild horses, before tearing his victims apart. He claimed such terror before death seasoned the blood’s taste. Vampires tended to tolerate each other at best, but even so, Sophia could not suffer this thin wrinkled creature for long. Kulk was oily and obsequious to those above him in the pecking order, vile to those below. Ebu Kulk even walked like a little twisty creature, each step careful and measured and precious. He slid a glance at Sophia, both sly and knowing, clutching a folder of bound papers tight to his chest.

‘What is your assassin doing here, Gebhard? Are we finally dealing with the rat problem by employing her teeth?’

‘My little *Figchen* has arrived to deal with the human problem, Ebu, not the rat one. Humans breed more prolifically than rodents these days. How many prey are there currently in the herd?’

‘The world human population currently numbers over seven billion, my prince.’

Von Waldburg raised his hands in mock despair. ‘You see. Too many for even us to feed on. It hardly seems fair that our numbers are diminishing while the herd’s rise so intolerably high. We vampires have become a race of bone idle woodsmen, neglecting to cope our forests. Now we cannot even move through our own forests, so dense and thorny have they grown.’

‘We can blame nuclear weapons for that, my prince,’ simpered Kulk. ‘Humans halted mass warfare between nations when atomic bombs arrived.’

‘Yes, yes, Mutually Assured Destruction, no more culling of the herd. Atomic weaponry has made cowards of the entire planet. We may look no further than what has happened to the victors of the last great war we caused . . . America and Europe and Russia. They won’t even fight each other face-to-face anymore. Instead, they launch drones from continents away and leave the bodies of their enemies as bug splatter. Surgical strikes, limited tactical engagements. I ask you. Give it a few more centuries and the preys’ minds will all be software downloaded onto super-computers, and what will we feed upon then? Rats and mice perhaps . . . the rats you think my little *Figchen* has come to hunt for me. You know my lust for blood and sport, Ebu. Tell me, what has happened to the emissary we sent to the Keeper?’

‘There has been a small complication, my prince,’ stammered Kulk. ‘The Old Paradise Shop is not halting anymore. It seems to be rotating through the planes of existence in a somewhat, well, ruined state of operations.’

‘By ruined, you mean burnt to the ground?’

Ebu hung his head in shame. ‘Yes. But perhaps the Keeper would not have dealt with us anyway? The Keeper always did have very peculiar ways.’

‘If by which you mean leaving the murdered corpses of vampires in the abandoned lots of his store, then I would agree with you. Very peculiar, for the foxes to happen across a lion. Would you care to posit how the lion was so badly burned?’

‘We presume by the Vigil.’

‘So the hens murder the lion while the foxes must look on and wonder how they

pulled off such a trick?’

‘The Vigil are not hens, my prince. They are hyenas. Debasements. Enough of them together may bring down a lion.’

‘Your hyenas have made off with my book. The best chance for locating the Judas Purse.’

‘It is possible the Vigil may not possess the monastery records of Benedict of Nursia.’

‘Oh, they do.’

‘You have this on good authority, my prince?’

‘You have it on *my* good authority, Ebu. I trust you still accept that?’

Kulk bowed low, like the courtier he had once been. Not as low as the slug he still was, though. ‘Yes, yes, of course.’

‘Do you keep human pets, Ebu?’ asked the prince.

The thin vampire appeared disgusted at the very thought of the notion. ‘They are but prey, my prince.’

Von Waldburg raised his hands in mock victory. ‘You see, *Figchen*.’

Sophia said nothing, not wanting to alert the odious courtier to Joanna’s presence. Kulk would enjoy tearing her apart just to pain Sophia. It was the kind of petty score-keeping that the courtier did so well.

‘I do, however, keep pets, Ebu,’ barked the prince.

‘My prince?’

‘Have you never wondered about the shipments of live cattle your office signs for?’

Ebu shrugged, hesitant and not a little confused. ‘Medical experiments?’

‘Oh no. I am a traditionalist, I always use humans for that.’ He patted a little silver-framed portrait of Hitler on his desk. ‘If only there were more like this fine lad, I might even keep human pets myself. Such a useful puppet. We won’t see his like again, and our world seems smaller without him.’

‘I shall recall our emissary to the Keeper from the field, then, my prince.’

‘Do not trouble yourself,’ said von Waldburg, ‘I have already done this.’

Ebu nodded, probably thinking that this was how the clan leader had heard the news of the Keeper’s demise before Ebu had a chance to deliver it himself. Sophia suspected that the courtier was misreading that particular piece of information, as it happened. But then, Sophia had been making herself useful to von Waldburg for far longer than the Turk had been trying to ingratiate himself with the Master of Masters. ‘Off to meet the emissary with you, Ebu,’ ordered von Waldburg.

The courtier went to the stairs, turning before the first tread. ‘I shall fully debrief the emissary, my prince, to discover why she failed you so badly.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ smiled the prince. It wasn’t one of the smiles you wished to get from the clan leader, however, and even the Turk had the good sense to recognise this. Ebu Kulk turned frantically to run, but the high prince activated a switch under his desk and two hidden doors swung open below the Turk’s shoes, sending him tumbling down into some kind of steel chute. The doors instantly sealed shut again. Sophia could only admire the engineering and precision behind the snare. She had walked over that very spot herself and failed to detect any joins in the concrete, nor a

breeze rising from below which should have alerted her to its existence.

‘Keeping human pets is a commonplace pastime given their shocking overpopulation these days,’ said von Waldburg. ‘I prefer far rarer breeds.’ He pressed another button and a section of concrete wall on the side retracted down into the floor, revealing a sandy desert environment below and sealed off behind an arc of thick, armoured glass. Von Waldburg got up from behind his desk and strutted over to the viewing window. The metal chute which Kulk had taken had ignominiously deposited him onto the orange sands below. The environment behind the glass was well done, realistic with intense yellow lights mimicking a high desert sun. The only other thing inside the sand-filled tank was a scattering of bleached white bones. Those, Sophia suspected, belonged to whatever attractive bait had been sent to negotiate with and tempt the Keeper.

‘Snakes are not exactly rare,’ said Sophia.

‘I never have to look far to find snakes around me,’ said the prince, tapping at the glass and waving happily at the Turk. Kulk had risen to his knees in the sand, both hands raised imploringly towards the window above him. ‘There are no snakes on the other side of the glass. Ebu is begging, yet he doesn’t even know what’s inside there with him.’

‘Kulk was obsequious, true, but not unintelligent.’

‘A fair appraisal in hindsight. Over the centuries, I have grown more discerning about who I give the gift to and raise into one of us.’

‘Shall I take that as an insult?’

‘You, I am sure, I shall never have cause to regret.’ The prince gazed down into the chamber. ‘Always interesting to see how one of our kind fights. Poor Ebu always had the hunger, but he was never very good at anything beyond the most basic powers. You’d expect someone of his age to have mastered more than mind clouding and the physical strength which was his birthright.’

‘Will Kulk’s powers of mental influence save him?’

The sand stirred below Kulk’s feet and the vampire stumbled desperately back, unbalancing as the dunes shifted below him. ‘No. My pets possess very simple minds. They operate mostly on instinct.’

Sophia stared curiously at the sand disappearing from around Kulk’s feet. Black plant stalks seemed to be growing out of the sand, wobbling and further stirring the dunes, the stalks forming a circle around Kulk, trapping him. The vampire tried to get to his feet, swivelling, watching in horror as the stalks started to vibrate faster and faster.

‘Fascinating,’ said Sophia.

‘You will enjoy what happens next. You never much liked Kulk, did you? Not after he stole and fed on two of your prize stable’s stallions back in the day.’

Sophia tutted. She had forgotten that slight. It was in the eighteenth century, and the Turk had his nest of demi-gogs rustle her two best studs while she was away in Austria visiting the emperor, leaving the horses’ decapitated heads strewn across her bed sheets. A rather unsubtle message, she thought, but an act all too typical of the vampire.

Suddenly, three dark heads pushed through the orange sands and Sophia gasped,

taking a step back despite the solid protection of the armoured glass between her and the vista below. The black heads belonged to ants, but each ant the size of a family car, razored mandibles larger than broadswords clacking furiously in front of their mouths. Kulk screamed, swivelling as he took in all three of the monstrous creatures. There was nowhere to flee to, however, even if Kulk hadn't been caught in the middle of their deadly pincer movement.

'You see, *Figchen*, I can move with the times. I have outgrown my need for my incompetent administrator's services.'

Thoraxes swelled out of the tumbling sand and then the nearest ant lashed out towards Kulk. The vampire tried to catch the razored mandibles but merely managed to half-impale his forearm on the ant's organic weaponry, leaving himself open for the remaining pair of monsters to leap from the flanks and tear his body in half. There was a flash of energy as Kulk detonated and blew apart, the ants left chattering like an angry freight train rolling over tracks, frustrated at being denied their prey's sustenance.

Sophia smiled. *We feed on all, we are not to be fed on.* 'I have never seen their like,' admitted Sophia, still a little shaken and speaking as much in truth as any need to appease the clan leader.

'I obtained these beautiful abominations from outside the White Sands Proving Ground, when the U.S Government was still foolishly detonating atomic bombs on its home soil. One of my demi-gogs had been snatched from the V2 rocket program and passed into NASA's clutches. He informed me of the cover-up undertaken inside the desert around Los Alamos. Humans make such a hideous mess of everything, don't you think? Their test's radiation leaked into the ant nests and created these savage mutations. My giant pets are a symbol of how badly our prey is out of control as a species. Humanity has become a plague crapping all over the land.'

'I would never have taken you as an environmentalist,' said Sophia.

'Just so long as *I* am the one to control the environment.'

'And I thought you brought me here to slay the Turk.'

'The day I need your assistance to bring down an underling such as Ebu Kulk is the day I fully deserve to have you assassinate me and supplant me as clan chief.'

Sophia's thoughts exactly, as it happened. The prince glanced at her as if reading her mind. As far as Sophia knew, that level of telepathy was beyond the vampire leader. Of course, if it wasn't, telepathy was just the sort of gift he would keep quiet as an ace concealed up his cunning sleeve.

'I believe it was Edison who said that "I have not failed: I have just found ten thousand ways that won't work". Edison would not have lasted very long working for me before I consumed him, I am afraid.'

It was true. For someone who was theoretically immortal, the clan leader possessed very little patience. The female vampire glanced up at the ugly electric strip lighting in the ceiling. 'Lucky for us Edison didn't work for you, then. I still remember how tedious hundreds of candles in a castle were to maintain . . . and the hideous odour of burning wicks.'

'That is your weakness. You have been blinded by our prey's neon lights, their petty little parlour tricks of science. I much prefer the old ways,' growled the prince.

‘When the majority of our prey never strayed further than the village where they were born. When what the prey knew didn’t come out of books or the internet, but from priests behind a pulpit, with the Borgias in our pocket to dictate the lessons. It seemed to me like an age where all we ever owned were swords, armour, sails, horses and bricks. From the Caesars to Cromwell. We never really needed any more than that.’

It was an age, thought Sophia, *it was the Dark Ages*. You didn’t need mortal blood to enjoy central heating, chauffeured limousines and private jets. Sadly, von Waldburg was very much a creature of his time. Unlike Sophia, he had never evolved with the passing centuries. His mind was like the dead vampiric cells of his body, still mired in the past. Another reason she would make a superior clan leader to this capricious, blunt tool of an instrument.

Von Waldburg continued lecturing her. *He certainly does enjoy the sound of his own voice, though*. ‘Even flintlocks seemed as a joke to me when they first appeared. Hollow spears that hissed smoke and tossed funny little lead balls out. And now our prey have weapons capable of incinerating the planet a thousand times over. That is what we have come to. So we shall give the prey a finely balanced war - a culling to end all culling. And all I need is the Judas Purse to make their end happen as I have foreseen. Humanity’s civilisation is a house of cards, just waiting for a strong wind to topple it over. All that knowledge carved up into tiny fragments. How to make a solar battery in one mind. How to maintain a wireless mast in a second. Cull enough of the herd and their society will revert to wattle and daub huts, savages with iron swords beaten out of the ruins of rusting cars. A glorious new Dark Age, and vampires feed so well inside the darkness.’

‘Then we’ll go back to ruling the herd from our palaces and castles,’ said Sophia.

‘The way it should be. The way we should have kept it.’

‘How do you know that the Vigil hold your book? That it didn’t burn to ashes inside the Old Paradise Shop alongside the Keeper?’ asked Sophia.

‘For the same reason I discovered the importance of the book in the first place, *Figchen*. Because there is a traitor inside the Vigil working for me. And when the Vigil finds the Judas Purse, so will I. Or rather, so will *you*. You shall follow the Vigil team while they recover the Judas Purse for me.’

A traitor within the Vigil’s ranks? That made things much easier for Sophia. Of course, it shouldn’t be *too* easy for her. The hunt had to contain some element of challenge to be worthy of the name. She seemed to live for so very little these days, but the hunt, that could still fire her cold blood into the passions she remembered from the old days.

Von Waldburg might be a blunt instrument, but Sophia was a scalpel. And what was the point of having a scalpel if it was not to slice your enemies apart?

CHAPTER TWO

Worse Date Ever

Ian watched Eleanor slide her cycle into the bicycle lock on the corner of 6th Avenue and 41st Street, selecting a four-digit combination on its screen to secure the bike. Two strong steel rods slid between the frame and front wheel. Even New York's notorious bike thief gangs would need an arc welder and a good twenty minutes to cut through that. Ian had also just locked his bike in one of the hundreds of free cycle stands provided by the city for commuters on their way to the nearby train stops at Times Square and Grand Central Terminal.

'You sure I'm ready to return to active duty?' asked Eleanor, removing her bright green cycle helmet.

'The doctor's sure enough,' said Ian.

'Then how come I'm still scheduled for medical tests for the rest of the week?'

'You can't be too careful,' said Ian. 'When you're as new to all this as you are, it takes a while for your metabolism to settle.'

'Too careful,' mocked Eleanor. 'Maybe you should have thought about being *careful* before you and your friends treated me like the proverbial sacrificial lamb - a gift-wrapped girl-snack for that psycho-demon.'

'Guy didn't plan how the last mission went down,' insisted Ian. 'The Keeper could have asked for Diane to go with him to retrieve the monastery records of Benedict of Nursia.'

'Except the Keeper didn't ask - he insisted. His house, his rules. And maybe you don't need to peek into the future like the Vigil's tame hippie to guess how that particular game was going to pan out.'

Ian felt a deep twinge of guilt. Eleanor had a point. And as it happened, the Vigil's tame future-scrying hippie *had* correctly predicted that Eleanor would place her life in the gravest danger by accompanying the rest of them on her first mission. Ian tried to tell himself that Eleanor wasn't expendable; that their squad leader Guy Drew wouldn't have treated a new recruit in such a careless way. But ultimately, they were all expendable. The Vigil kept the darkness at bay, and that came at a harsh cost paid in blood and lives. Sometimes the only thing that kept Ian sane was the knowledge that if the Vigil didn't wage its secret war against the *sidhe antiqua*, the human race's casualties would be countless times higher.

'Forget it,' said Eleanor, still sounding bitter. 'You saved me from being turned into a half-vampire slave beast thing. Maybe trying to feed me to a demon as a distraction in your little heist makes us even.'

'It really wasn't like that.'

'Well, could be the next demon that needs distracting will fancy Michael J. Fox-lookalikes, then it'll be your turn to put out.'

'I don't look anything like him at all . . . and I'm taller, too.'

Eleanor raised her hand to rest about three inches taller than Ian's head. 'You just keep telling yourself that, Mickey J. So, what's with the cycles? We trying to go green with this mission, earn a few carbon credits, or are they cover?'

Ian tried to cover his embarrassment. 'We're not exactly on a mission, more like R&R.'

'Was this Guy Drew's idea?' said Eleanor, suspiciously. 'It'll take more than picking up a couple of hamburgers on the company credit card to make up for the

Keeper attacking me.’

‘No,’ said Ian. Actually, the squad leader probably wouldn’t approve of this on a great many levels. So Ian hadn’t asked. *Better to ask forgiveness than beg for, and later be denied, approval.*

‘Is this a *date*?’ asked Eleanor, placing just enough emphasis on the last word to make Ian even more nervous that he already was.

‘My way of saying sorry, at any rate. Maybe a half-date . . . a quarter-date.’

‘The Reds put the bite on you in the 1980s, right?’

Ian grimaced. ‘They did.’

‘So you must be in your chronological forties now, even if you do still look like a college freshman.’

‘We age slower,’ said Ian. ‘It’s not like I feel like I’m my dad or anything.’

‘Some people could label that kind of creepy.’

‘Talk to me in forty years, then you’ll understand. It’s not exactly as though I’m Master Hanzo,’ protested Ian, ‘last of the Victorian dudes.’

‘Last of the Tokugawa shogunate dynasty,’ said Eleanor. ‘Didn’t you ever watch samurai flicks back in the day, or were you more of a Miami Vice kind of guy? Designer stubble and a purple T-shirt under a white jacket?’

Ian indicated the main gates into Bryant Park and the two of them entered together. ‘My tastes haven’t changed so much. Nor have the times. Apart from the Internet and mobiles that don’t look like bricks, things are more or less the same as they were when I was given the antidote.’

‘Oh, fabulous,’ said Eleanor. ‘You know, before I was bitten I was looking forward to growing old. Old enough to leave the home and strike out on my own. Make something of my life. Get away from everyone telling me what to do, what to learn and know, what to feel. Now you’re telling me I’m biologically frozen at that point forever? What fresh hell is this?’

‘You protest too much. You weren’t that person, not even back when we first saved you from the Reds.’

‘Talking of the antidote,’ said Eleanor, ‘apart from the usual super-hyped, long-lived thing, did you pick up any extras from the vamp that put the bit on you?’

‘A level of empathic resonance,’ said Ian. ‘I can sense Reds, demi-gogs and a fair few other races of the sidhe antiqua in the distance when they switch into their feeding mode.’

‘That’s a pretty useful skill for a vampire hunter.’ She slowed as she saw what was ahead. ‘There’s a cinema screen set up in the park!’ noted Eleanor, at last a trace of approval in her voice.

‘It’s HBO Movie Night at Bryant Park.’

‘We haven’t had to pay anyone to get in?’

‘It’s free, dummy.’ Ian opened his backpack and lifted out a wool picnic blanket, unrolling it across the lawn. There were hundreds of groups and couples on the grass already, with more people arriving. There wasn’t much that was free in New York, but this evening was one of them.

‘Wow, they sure turned them out frugal back in the eighties.’

‘I’m springing for the food and drink tonight. Well - I will - I mean.’

‘So, what’s showing tonight, Mickey J.?’

‘Ghostbusters,’ said Ian. ‘The original, not the reboot.’

Eleanor laughed at that. ‘No way! You sure this isn’t some sneaky video training type deal?’ She tapped the pen inside her jacket’s pocket, her concealed retractable moly-sword blade, standard issue for the Vigil’s covert excursions. ‘I guess I won’t be needing this tonight.’

‘If all the Vigil faced is what Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd got to fight, we’d have already won and be out of a job by now.’ Ian weaved through rows of park-issue deck-chairs and headed for a fast food stall before the crowds grew any larger, returning with a tray bearing two paper cups and a pair of foot-long hot-dogs. As soon as he reappeared, Eleanor raised an eyebrow at the cups’ contents. ‘So, I get root beer while you get the real thing?’

‘You’re not twenty-one yet,’ said Ian.

Eleanor shook her head. ‘Jesus, look at this face - I’m still going to be carded when I’m sixty, aren’t I?’

‘We’ll print you a fake I.D. in a few years.’

‘Old enough to die in humanity’s eternal struggle against evil, not old enough to buy a cold one. Now I know how those newbie marines feel.’ Eleanor tentatively lifted her hot-dog out of the tray. ‘How did you know I wanted hot mustard?’

‘You seem like the sort,’ said Ian, with more confidence than he felt.

‘Maybe I make it to forty-five, I’ll pick up some of those slick Jedi dating moves, too. Sorry, *quarter*-date moves.’

Ian checked his wristwatch. ‘The sun set about twenty minutes ago, so the movie will start rolling soon.’

‘I bet you saw this film in the cinema when it first came out.’

Ian raised an eyebrow. ‘How did you know?’

‘You seem like the sort. Like checking the time using that antique on your wrist rather than reaching for a phone.’

Up on the screen, the opening credits started to run. They sat down, took their dogs and ate while the movie played out. By the time the film was a quarter of the way through, Ian was arriving at the opinion he shouldn’t have supersized his drink along with the food.

‘I need to hit the bathroom,’ said Ian, standing up and excusing himself

‘What, your superpowers of the supernatural don’t ship with an enhanced bladder?’

Ian crumpled his empty beer cup. ‘Sadly not.’

Eleanor shifted her gaze back to the screen where Sigourney Weaver was struggling with her haunted fridge. ‘How come the Vigil never saved her?’

It was a rhetorical question; at least, Ian hoped so. He left Eleanor to the movie and went in search of the portable washroom cabins he’d spotted behind the food stalls and treeline. After he’d found the facilities, used them and finished cleaning up, he realised was still hungry. That was the problem with running a human metabolism as overclocked as theirs - agents needed to take in a lot of calories just to stay standing still. And if he had an appetite, that meant that Eleanor, newly arrived at her powers, was probably sitting back on the blanket and cursing him as a cheapskate for

only buying one dog each. There was a food stall nearby selling tacos, lonely behind the trees and in the dark with a pair of broken lamps nearby. Ian trusted that Mexican and spicy might be enough to get him into Eleanor's good books, so he made a pass by.

There was no queue right now, just the stall-holder pushing chili beef around a hot plate with a ladle, his face lit by the stand's glowing signage. As Ian approached, a young blonde woman in an expensive black overcoat appeared and collided with him.

Ian pulled back from the woman who'd bumped him. 'Excuse me.'

'My bad,' apologised the woman.

'That's alright, it's kind of dark back here. They should have working lights on the path.'

'Well, they were working,' said the woman, 'before I extinguished them.' She barely finished speaking as the food server lunged across his stand, seizing Ian's hands and yanking him forward. A dark, knotted piece of wood appeared in the woman's hand, and she viciously scratched Ian's forearm, drawing blood. 'Bad things are always going on the darkness, that's why mortals are right to fear it.'

Ian stumbled back, trying to draw upon his powers, find the enhanced strength and speed he needed, but they weren't there; instead, his blood boiled inside his wounded arm, a relentless heat spreading out and filling him. He tried to resist the burning, but within seconds it had converted into an itching pleasure unlike anything he had every experienced, a joy and ease with the world which he'd never thought possible, all his troubles and worries and fears turned ephemeral. He savoured his deep connection with this woman, this witch, this beauty. Such a gift. He was entirely unworthy of it, he knew that. He needed to earn her love, redeem himself in every way possible.

'That's better, isn't it,' smiled the beauty, finishing hissing something in a sibilant language Ian couldn't place. 'The Kiss of Wytchwood and Wormroot . . . does my glamour warm you?'

'It *burns* me,' gasped Ian.

'In a good way, I trust. I am your mistress now . . . Mistress Heliot.' The woman cackled and fixed the stall-holder with her glamour, like focusing a laser beam on butter. 'Two beers and two meals. Make them generous ones for generous appetites.' The merchant took meat off his hotplate, shook a wok over a flame, then pushed the food across in paper trays while serving the beer in paper cups identical to those from the hot-dog stand, the park's green logo printed on the cups' side. Everything was dropped inside a disposable cardboard tray. Mistress Heliot mixed a bag of herbs into one of the beer cups, adding the thick green contents from a vial slipped out of her pocket. Swirling inside the paper cup, the beer steamed as though it had been microwaved, twists of smoke curling into the air. 'Pass this sweet potion to the girl you came with,' ordered the witch. 'When she has drunk it, ask her to return with you. She will have no choice but to obey.'

'Give me the job, mistress,' begged the stall-holder. 'I'm stronger than this mere *boy*.'

'He's not,' growled Ian, trying not to shout the undeserving dog down. 'He can't help you like I can.'

'Never a truer word was spoken.' The witch sighed, shaking her head. 'That's the

problem with casting the Glamour of Wormroot, sometimes it's simply too strong for its own good.' She waved a finger under the merchant's nose. 'I needed you to catch him; I need him to catch her. A fly to catch a frog, a frog to land a she-alligator. I spotted a lake on the other side of the park, little fly, find it and hold yourself under the water for the rest of the night to prove your undying love for me.'

The stall-holder practically salivated as he stumbled away to do her bidding.

Mistress Heliot giggled. 'Sadly for him, I suspect his love for me is very much of the *dying* kind.'

'Good,' said Ian. There could be no competition for this sublime creature's favour, he would never allow it.

'Shall I kiss you, little frog,' purred the witch, reaching around to rub the nape of Ian's neck.

Ian's blood burned as fire, every atom of his very being trembling at the gentle touch of her finger. 'Yes, you must, *please*.'

'Then, I shall. First, just give the girl you arrived with her sweet beer. It's filled with a potion of female compulsion. I need the hybrid every bit as meek and docile and obliging as you. Sadly, a witch's glamour only works on members of the opposite sex, and I, as you can smell, am very much a woman.'

'*My* woman,' murmured Ian.

'I will give myself to you in every way after you please me,' Mistress Heliot promised. Just the thought of the witch completing her promise was enough to make Ian so giddy he could hardly focus his mind to obey her.

'Move normally. Act normally. Do this for me,' she commanded. 'And return quickly. Your glamour only lasts another thirty minutes. If you want to keep on burning like this, you must come back to me and allow me to renew these feelings inside you.'

'Please,' Ian begged.

Mistress Heliot pointed through the trees to where the cinema screen flickered. 'Go! Remember, you are helping the girl you arrived with. I shall share with her the gifts of my pleasures, too.'

Ian took the food and reluctantly left the sight of the mistress. Just being out of sight of her was a punishment so heavy he hardly knew how he could bear it. Distant shouts drifted from the direction of the lake as walkers spotted the stall-holder drowning himself. Ian chuckled. He had the mistress all to himself, now. Ian had his instructions. He knew what he had to do to please her. He returned to the picnic blanket where Eleanor was still watching the film.

Eleanor turned to look up at him. 'Extras! You really are slick, you've read my mind again.'

'This is for you, too,' said Ian, kneeling and passing her the potion-laced beer. *Take it, drink it quickly*, he willed the girl, as though telepathy was one of his gifts.

'Not root beer this time?'

'No.' Ian was sweating. The fire inside him burned so deep and potent. 'I changed my mind. You were right. Anyone old enough to die for their country is old enough to drink a real beer.'

Eleanor said something, but Ian didn't hear it, his eyes drawn to the screen, where

Sigourney Weaver was sprawled across silk sheets, trying to tempt Bill Murray into bed with her, a deep unearthly demonic rumbling from her throat. Something about that scene resonated with him. *What is it?* His head throbbed, the heat swilling around inside him, massaging his flesh with its addictive electricity. So good, so pure.

Eleanor made a second comment, her words vibrating through the edges of his consciousness, dragging his eyes away from the screen and back to her. She had drunk the beer, the cup lying empty on the grass. ‘Good, we have to visit the taco stand now.’

‘Visit the taco stand now.’ Eleanor rose to her feet, obediently.

‘That’s it. We still have time.’

Murmurs of annoyance came from the crowd watching the film as the two of them blocked the view, falling to silence as they moved out of the way and zigzagged through to the trees and the taco stand.

‘She’s still here,’ said Ian, the heat of his bones vibrating like a buzz-saw the closer he drew to the mistress.

‘*She’s still here,*’ parroted Eleanor behind him, not understanding the significance of the words she aped. Eleanor didn’t feel the heat yet. But she would. The mistress had promised Ian as much. Jealousy rose inside him at the thought. How could he share the mistress with anyone? But he had to obey her stern commands, and this was what she willed.

Mistress Heliot waited by the taco stand on the shadowed grass, just like before, the light of the neon sign giving her fine porcelain features a devilish cast. The only difference was that the corpse of a female dog walker now lay still on the grass nearby, alongside a slaughtered Labrador.

Ian felt an almost manic protective rage surge inside him. ‘Did they threaten you, mistress?’

‘The hound, sadly, did not find my wise bones’ scent to its taste,’ said the witch. She flicked the fingers of her left hand, and Ian noticed she wore blood-slicked razor-clawed thimbles on two of her beautiful fingers. ‘Her dog began barking at me, so I needed to slice both their throats. I do so hate a fuss.’ Mistress Heliot smiled as she saw Eleanor approaching the stand. ‘But I see the inconvenience has been worthwhile. Don’t stand behind my frog, delicious darling, step out and let me gaze upon you.’

Eleanor did as the witch ordered.

‘Curious,’ said the witch. ‘I sense very little of your power. You hide it so well within you. Is that a natural reflex, I wonder, or were you taught by someone before you joined the Vigil? Answer me!’

‘I was not taught by anyone,’ whispered Eleanor, meekly.

‘And yet you managed to defeat the Keeper,’ said the mistress. ‘I was once his assistant too, a very long time before you. Only you and I have managed to escape his capricious shadow. I through mastery of the Craft, and you, through, *what?* Another Vigil hybrid; a failed half-human vampire. No. I simply fail to see how you escaped?’

Ian’s unnatural fire burned augmented by terrible jealousy, now. How could the mistress pay so much attention to Eleanor, when she had him still standing before her? ‘Mistress Heliot,’ begged Ian, ‘your promise to me.’

‘Silence, little frog! Sit on the grass and wait until I call for you, ‘cackled the witch. ‘You might yet make me a fine desert. Now, for the main course . . . ’

Ian moved away, tears in his eyes at the mistress’s rejection of him, his legs like lead weights carrying him away from her, no choice in the matter. He wanted to beg and plead with her, but the mistress had commanded silence, and so silence there must be.

Mistress Heliot switched her attention back to Eleanor. ‘Potions of compulsion are such temporary, fleeting things.’ The witch dipped into her handbag and slid out a golden neck torc covered in runes which glowed with an acid green light as she caressed it. ‘I’ll not have you coming back to your senses inside one of my pentagrams, attempting to give me what you used to slay the Keeper. This is the Bidding Gold, warded and inscribed by my own fair hand across six full moons. Fix my gift around your neck and I’ll give you a taste of the ecstasy your friend is experiencing right now. You’ll never want anything else again other than to bring me pleasure through your compliance.’

Eleanor took the torc and lifted it slowly towards her neck, halting an inch from her skin. ‘Actually, gold is last season’s colour, so maybe I shouldn’t?’

‘What!’

Eleanor tapped the side of her nose and contemptuously tossed the torc to the gravel path. ‘I can track a genuine beer across half this city just through the smell of its hops alone. Your Rohypnol cocktail is back on the lawn, making some worms get real jiggy.’

Mistress Heliot frantically dug inside her coat and emerged with a gnarled piece of dark wood clutched in her hand like a pistol.

‘You’ve got to be kidding me, who are you, the Hermione from Hell?’

Ian ached to tell the stupid girl to shut up, to stop insulting the mistress, but he couldn’t act against her commands. *That would be sacrilege.* The witch would never re-stoke this brilliant fire inside him if he acted against her will even once.

‘I am your mistress!’

‘You want to go all Fifty Shades on me, how about I give you a spanking, that work for you, *mistress?*’

Eleanor danced to the side as black lightning burst out of the tip of the gnarled wood, missing the new recruit and striking the taco stand, slicing it in half in an eerie explosion of darkness rather than fire. Onyx-coloured sparks hit the lawn where Ian sat cross-legged, moaning, consuming the grass like napalm, leaving the soil seared and burning in front of him. Ian ached to protect the mistress, but she had given him his orders. Stay still and silent while she fed on the girl. Eleanor cart-wheeled across the grass like a gymnast; moving too fast for the mistress to draw a bead on, the agent’s shoe lunging into the wok, sending a stream of burning oil whipping across the air and into the witch’s face. Mistress Heliot stumbled back howling, nearly falling over the dog walker’s corpse.

‘I guess revenge for killing the Keeper isn’t a dish served cold after all,’ said Eleanor, drawing her moly-sword and activating its blade.

Ian gasped as he saw the oil had burned away the true beauty of the mistress, leaving the ravaged skin of a two-centuries-old hag in its stead, the poor mistress

moaning and spitting and cursing. If only the witch remembered Ian was waiting here for her; he could comfort her, his love would restore her beauty, but the mistress retreated even as Eleanor advanced on her. The wand spun in the mistress's hand, jabbing and casting, but whatever spell the witch was working up to was suddenly broken as Eleanor rolled to the side, slicing out with her blade and severing the gnarled wood in half. Mistress Heliot screamed as though her own hand had had been sliced off, clutching the wand's nub end in her leathery fingers. Its greater length fell to the ground and started burrowing into the soil like a snake, trying to flee the battle.

Mistress Heliot fell back towards the trunk of the tree and Eleanor moved carefully, relentlessly towards the witch. Ian recognised the deadly pattern of Eleanor's feet as she tracked across the dark lawn, a deliberate flowing *Ayumi ashi* from Hanzo's sword class, a dance that would be followed by a sharp diagonal cutting movement - in this case, most likely against the witch's neck. Ian moaned. Silence, Heliot had commanded, a silence that would now cost his sweet dear love her life. Ian sucked in his breath as the branches of the nearest tree curled out like tentacles and darted towards the agent. *How could I ever have doubted the mistress?* Even half-formed, her spell was magnificent, the London Planetree Sycamore protecting the mistress as fiercely as a guard dog. Eleanor lunged through the tree's assault and sliced madly with the moly-blade, branches falling hissing to the ground, writhing in agony at being separated from the main body of the tree. Mistress Heliot backpedalled through the limbs of the whipping tree, none of the Planetree's branches coming close to her, escaping Eleanor's furious, blurring blade.

'No,' croaked Ian, his heart thudding inside his chest. 'Don't leave me, take me with you!'

But the witch didn't hear Ian's pleas, or if she did, she ignored them like the insignificant bug he was.

Eleanor sliced away the last pair of branches trying to strangle her, but the unholy tree had served its purpose as a distraction. A broom hidden behind the tree flew across the air, embedding itself with a loud slap in Mistress Heliot's palm, then the limping witch fell across its length before cackling, urging it to accelerate like a firework across the grass, both broom and rider arcing away from the grass towards the end of the park, her form silhouetted against the yellow lights of nearby apartment blocks and skyscrapers.

Some distant part of Ian's training told him that this was just a trick of magnetic manipulation of the leylines, the broom's wood a sheath with a concealed iron core that could be ridden as fast as a Japanese mag-lev bullet train; but his mind's explanation was overwhelmed by grief ripping apart his heart, his raw shell-shock at being abandoned by the mistress. She was escaping, perhaps forever, swallowed by the moon and the clouds.

'Who ya gonna call?' Eleanor's gaze followed the witch shooting across the sky on her broomstick before she turned her attention to Ian. He moaned and writhed across the grass with the witch's dissipating spell leaving him eating some serious cold turkey. With a loud snick, Eleanor's moly-blade retracted back into the diamond-carbon pen casing acting as her sword's hilt.

Can't the foolish girl see how much agony I'm in, here? The mistress's absence

turned the joyous heat of Ian's blood into cold acid. Why didn't Eleanor apologise to the mistress, scream into the cold night sky and beg her to return to both of them? Ian raised his hand to the dark star-spattered sky, drool from his mouth wetting the grass below his cheeks. 'Bring her back, please, return her beauty to us.'

Eleanor shook her head in disgust. 'Worse quarter-date night, *ever*.'

Diane O'Hara handled the monastery records of Benedict of Nursia as delicately as cradling a newborn child, turning the pages on a tabletop with high-definition cameras and bright low-temperature LED lamps, the agent wearing white rubber gloves. The recording gear was in case the ancient vellum disintegrated, leaving them with missing pages - any one of which might contain the Judas Purse's hidden location. Alasdair Colburn hovered behind Diane's shoulder, reading the script so carefully inscribed across the pages in ancient ink. They had been at this task for seven hours, now, and Eleanor was bored enough that she had left twice to get snacks at the Vigil's refectory. Guy Drew stayed inside the temperature controlled document room as though it was a position to be held. Like he was still a G.I. fighting in the second world war. It would take more than the promise of a burger with cheese to make him abandon his post.

'I don't think what we're looking for is here,' said Diane, frustrated.

Guy didn't look pleased with her pessimistic announcement. 'It has to be!'

'What the old man said,' agreed Eleanor. 'I did the whole sacrificial goat act with the Keeper and nearly got capped stealing that hunk of leather and parchment from his Supernatural Jokeshop. Then I nearly get capped *again* by the Keeper's ex-girlfriend. Now you're telling me your monk didn't Dear Diary where he packed the Judas Purse off to?'

'Benedict of Nursia writes about the threat of the Ottoman Empire, about how deeply worried he was that the Ottoman forces would overrun his mountain and loot the Judas Purse,' said Diane. 'But he doesn't mention where he sent the coins to for safe keeping. Only that he would be giving the job of transporting the coins to a recently arrived young English-born monk called Martin de Baskerville, with whom the abbot was deeply impressed when it came to matters of innocence and purity. Benedict needed someone to transport the coins he could rely on. Not a monk who might be tempted to filch them and use their power to crown himself Pope.'

Diane tried to drag Eleanor closer to the records so she could see for herself, but Eleanor shook her hand away. 'Girlfriend, the school I went to didn't teach me to read Latin.' *Didn't teach fencing and I don't remember having private stables out back, either, for that matter.*

'Jeepers, I never learnt Latin at *school*. I taught myself. We have been blessed with so many extra years beyond our three score and ten, it would be a sin to fritter away our time on purely indulgent pursuits.'

No, Eleanor was fairly sure the sin there would be not combining the power of compound interest with her extended lifespan. Ending up as a multi-millionaire through doing nothing more than just staying alive. Of course, given what the Vigil were fighting, just staying alive was definitely going to be the tricky part of that plan. 'Pity they've still got Ian on a drip down in the medical centre. Maybe he'd spot something we're missing in this.'

'Cut the kid some slack. A witch's glamour isn't a flu-jab and out,' said Guy. 'We're going to keep Agent Holderness under observation until I'm sure your wicked friend with the wand didn't plant any nasty compulsions inside his mind. Like phoning in the location of our base, here, so her witchness can take a second bite of the cherry.'

‘This particular cherry intends to shove her severed neck on a very sharp stick if she tries again,’ warned Eleanor.

‘She’s on the grid now,’ said Guy. ‘We know all the signs to look for in New York, a trail of discarded human husks being the obvious one. Sooner or later she’ll get sloppy. Then the Vigil will burn her.’ He indicated a strip of torn paper near the end of the leather-bound tome. ‘Back to this. Records look like they’re missing a few pages in the back. Maybe someone tore them out?’

And the secret of the Judas Purse with them? Eleanor prayed that wasn’t the case.

‘But not all of the text is written in Latin,’ noted Alasdair. His fingers hovered over one of the ancient pages, indicating margins filled with scribbles which looked to Eleanor like they were written in Arabic, as well as intricate doodles drawn in the form of elaborate gilded illuminations.

‘I suppose you taught yourself Latin, too, Colburn?’ asked Eleanor.

Alasdair smiled, bemused. ‘No, I actually *was* taught Latin in prep school. My parents wanted me to become a doctor.’

‘They must have been really disappointed when you only graduated engineering from CalTech.’

‘You have no idea.’ Alasdair bent the lamp to spotlight the ancient tome’s margins. ‘These side-notes are written in Classical Syriac, better known to us today as Aramaic. That’s the language Jesus spoke; perhaps wrote, too - if he was literate.’

Diane sucked in a breath. ‘Don’t you dare suggest that the Lord our Saviour couldn’t read and write.’

‘Dude was a carpenter,’ said Alasdair, ‘in an age when anything resembling a book belonged to the cream of the tenth percent of the one percent. How do you think Jesus learnt to read . . . watching Sesame Street, or a free hall pass to the Library of Alexandria?’

Diane just managed to stop herself rising to respond to the jibe.

‘Yeah, well,’ said Guy, ‘given I’m spending the extra years beyond my three score and ten reading labels of Jack - as in Daniels - tell me that one of you kids also reads Aramaic?’

‘Sorry, I reckon I went to your school,’ said Eleanor.

Alasdair sighed and nudged Diane over to one side. Eleanor suspected he liked brushing up to Diane like that. For that matter, Eleanor suspected Diane might kind of like it too, not that she would admit it to the heathen engineering graduate. Alasdair examined the margin messages for a couple of minutes before speaking again. ‘These read like study notes, the abbot’s observations about his official entries in the monastery records. Writing Aramaic was a very rare skill for a monk in those days.’

‘It’s not exactly like speaking Spanish in California these days, either,’ protested Diane.

‘You’re good at it, though?’ Guy asked Alasdair. ‘We don’t need to run these past some college professor?’

Alasdair shrugged. ‘Like Diane said, there’s only so much EVE Online you can play before you get bored.’

‘Fairly sure I *didn’t* say that.’

‘The point I’m making,’ said Alasdair, ‘is that if Benedict of Nursia wanted to slip

in clues as to where the Judas Purse was being shipped away to, writing his clues in Aramaic would have been as good as using an Enigma machine to encode them. The Ottoman invaders threatening Europe had plenty of Latin-speaking slaves working in their galleons. Only the Vatican would have had a handful of scholars fluent in Aramaic. ‘

‘Our boy Benedict was hiding his browser history,’ said Eleanor. ‘Dirty dog.’

‘Sly dog,’ corrected Alasdair. ‘And one smart puppy.’ The young-looking scientist continued examining the monastery records, making even slower going of translating the Aramaic side-gossip than Diane had deciphering the main Latin text.

‘What we learning here?’ asked Guy after another hour passed.

‘That Benedict held a really low opinion of the closest Cardinal to the monastery, and an even lower one of the princeling who ruled the region — “An inbred donkey among a stable of braying idiots” is a fairly good translation. But—’ Alasdair held up a finger to halt Guy’s next irritable outburst— ‘there is one particular note here that doesn’t make much sense. Of course, a lot of Aramaic reads as completely obscure by modern standards, but this is really out there.’ Alasdair quoted the note in question for the group. ‘In the arms of the leopard and by the leopard’s side will you find your answer.’

‘What the hell does that mean?’ growled Guy.

‘It’s the clue, I’m certain of it.’

‘Are you sure you’re not just mistranslating it?’ probed Eleanor. ‘Like, the cardinal can stick his arm up a cat’s butt for all the rest of us care?’

‘No, the translation’s good. I just don’t know what it means. It’s the only note that lacks context inside the accompanying text.’

‘Scan through the margins,’ suggested Diane, ‘some of the illuminations were of animals, right? Maybe one of the drawings is a leopard? It might be a clue leading to another clue inside the records.’

They leafed carefully through the book again, trying not to damage pages already suffering from the ravages of time. Eleanor saw giraffes and hedgehogs and hounds and foxes among the illuminations, but nothing that resembled a house cat, let alone a leopard.

‘Billy-Joe Bleepers,’ swore Diane, ‘we’re just going around in circles here.’

‘If a clue is hidden inside the records, it was meant to be found and deciphered by rational minds,’ said Alasdair.

Diane banged the table, missing the ancient book’s page but not by much. ‘You are your rational mind, it’s a wonder you and your prep school aristocrats didn’t have to turn sideways to walk through the door just to accommodate your big fat egos.’

‘And it’s a wonder that—’

Eleanor cut Alasdair off mid-retort. ‘*Aristocrats*, that’s it!’

‘What?’ asked Guy.

‘How about this,’ said Eleanor, ‘and bear with me, as my lessons came mostly from the History Channel.’ Diane rolled her eyes at that. Eleanor chose to ignore, given she was still relieved not to be witch-food. ‘Back in the day, rich families had a way of doing things to make sure money stayed inside the family. First son got the family estate and all the treasure. Second son was packed off into the army. Third son

joined the church. Get born female and you were out of luck - off to the marriage factory with you; bring us back some grandkids and make sure you land a rich one with a good title.'

'I think it was the second son who joined the church and third son who joined the army,' said Guy. 'And that was the Europeans. We never went into this crap much over on our side of the pond.'

'But it's not like today, when our priests are mostly dirt-poor immigrants from Brazil, and the money wouldn't be seen dead working outside of a bank job at Goldman Sachs. Back then, getting into a church was a great big deal. A real career option.'

'Your point being . . . ?'

'Church dudes like Benedict and Martin would have come from wealthy families. Aristocrats. And aristocratic families normally ship factory-standard with a coat of *arms*.'

Alasdair's eyes lit up. 'You're a genius!'

Alasdair grabbed his tablet computer and tapped away, accessing the Vigil's mainframe. He turned the screen around to show them when he had located his digital quarry. 'This is the family crest of the de Baskerville family.' Eleanor gazed at a colourful shield on the screen, three green leopards stacked in the right-hand corner of the yellow crest.

'And Martin de Baskerville's name was only mentioned once inside these records.' Diane O'Hara flipped the pages back until she reached the point where the courier's name appeared, a right-hand page, then traced her finger over to the illuminations and scrollwork down the adjacent margin. 'In the arms of the leopard and by the leopard's side will you find your answer.'

'That looks like another crest drawn amongst all the angels and scrollwork,' said Eleanor. 'No Leopards, though.'

'A second coat of arms,' said Alasdair, excitedly.

The illustration was cleverly concealed, the shield's outline formed in the negative by elaborate scroll-work, the crest's contents a scattering of supposedly random detail inside. But once you understood what you were looking for was a coat of arms, this clue practically leapt out from all the random iconography and grabbed Eleanor by the throat. 'I figure this crest belongs to whoever Martin de Baskerville lumbered with the coins.'

'So, let's see what we can see.'

It took both Alasdair and Diane's combined efforts combing the period's historical records before they matched the coat of arms to a name from the time. Pierre of Montague, abbot of a Benedictine monastery outside Zürichsee. What was today Zurich, Switzerland. They also fished images out of the database - a portrait from a miniature locket, Pierre of Montague, as well as a second portrait of Benedict of Nursia, the pair responsible for the Vigil's current search. Both abbots had tonsures, wearing thick grey monk's robes against the lack of central heating in ancient times. Benedict seemed like a typical fat, happy Italian. Eleanor could imagine him smiling behind the counter of a family Pizza Restaurant, today, beckoning prospective customer in. Pierre, by contrast, possessed a narrow hatchet-

face and had been scowling throughout his portrait. *Maybe he'd heard he was being lumbered with guarding the most dangerous prize in Christendom? Wouldn't have made me a happy bunny, either.*

'Man, that's kind of lame,' said Eleanor. 'Benedict of Nursia needs to stash some hot coins out of Italy, so he sneaks the Judas Purse into the hands of a buttoned-up Swiss dude. I guess times haven't changed much.'

'Never travelled to Switzerland with the U.S. army,' said Guy, 'them being neutral and all.'

'Do you think the coins are still inside the monastery there?' asked Eleanor.

'Kid, there's only one way to be sure.'

Eleanor returned to her dorm after her latest medical checkup. She'd also used the time to check in with Ian. Ian was so sheepish about allowing himself to get ambushed by crazy witch woman, you could practically carve him up and sell his meat as lamb chops. But he was alive and he'd get over it. What had happened to them spoke of the difficulty of even trying to live a normal life, again. Once you had taken a peek behind the curtain and seen that Oz didn't exist, you could never go back to the way things were before. *Glorious ignorance of the secret war.* But Eleanor had other things to worry about. Whatever crazy chemical disco was going on inside her body, Doctor Vargas seemed happy enough that Eleanor wasn't going to explode or worse, yet. *The doctor might have cleared me, but how can I clear myself?* Eleanor thought back to the insane level of power that had risen out of her body to consume the Keeper with fire. Eleanor didn't know if it was a good thing that the beast inside her seemed to be able to lurk undetected by the Vigil's medical staff, or if she was just kicking the can of an inevitable diagnosis down the road. A noise distracted Eleanor and pulled her out of herself. Up ahead in the sub-level seven corridor, Guy Drew stood deep in a heated argument with the Vigil's director while Bex Crawford seemed to be playing the part of spectator. Eleanor's hackles raised at the sight of the woman. Bex maintained a studied indifference as Eleanor moved to wait beside her.

'Someone asking for a pay rise?' whispered Eleanor.

'You'd have to do some work worthy of the name first, to get a bonus,' Bex sneered.

Eleanor snorted but didn't rise to the jibe. She turned her attention to the argument ahead.

Guy made a short chopping motion with his hand. 'I just don't need someone second-guessing me in the field, boss.'

'This is too important, Guy, you need backup on this next mission.'

'You want to send a backup team to Zurich, fine,' said Guy, 'but at least make sure it's led by someone who can spell the word.'

'Is that *Zurich* or *team*?' asked John, wryly.

'Team, although I doubt she could spell the city, either. Give me a backup if you have to. Just don't make it Dirty Harriet's team!'

'Enough with the name calling, Guy. You nearly lost the monastery records inside

the Keeper's shop. We have to recover the Judas Purse before the Reds get a whiff of the coins' location. Two teams in the field, with all the others on standby to assist. I need my two best groups on this. As of now, the Judas Purse is the Vigil's main priority.'

'We came out of the store alive,' protested Guy, 'and we're the ones who traced the coins to Zurich.'

'And that's why you're still the A-team on this mission.' John turned to face Bex Crawford and passed her a sealed envelope. 'Present this to your commanding officer. You can tell Miss Flanagan and the rest of your team to gear up, you're flying out to Europe on a second plane.'

Bex shot a knowing glance towards Eleanor. 'Yes, *sir*. Tip of the spear, you can rely on us.'

But not rely on us - huh? The nerve! The half-zombie hybrid set off down the corridor, leaving her distinctive perfume trail as well as a thoroughly vexed Eleanor behind.

John fixed Guy with a steely gaze. 'Work it out, agent. Get the job done.'

'Director,' acknowledged Guy, practically through gritted teeth. He took Eleanor by the elbow and as good as dragged her away.

'Who's Dirty Harriet?' asked Eleanor, when the Vigil's director was out of sight.

Guy shook his head in barely suppressed anger. 'Harriet Flanagan. Used to be a cop in LA back in the seventies. Tough as old boots and able to spit nails; which you can understand, given she had to out-cop the other cops as a female officer.'

'And you've got a problem with this agent because she's a female team leader?'

'I've got a problem with Flanagan because she's a *cowboy*. She won't be acting as our backup, out there. She'll be acting as our competition. That's a can of crapola I just don't need.'

Eleanor tried not to wince. *And zombie girl is on Dirty Harriet's team; that figures.* It was bad enough having to train alongside the woman. *Now I'm going to have to rely on her to back me up? I don't think so.* 'If they're cowboys, does that make us the Indians?'

'If we are, we better make out like Apaches at Custer's Last Stand, because no way am I letting another team snatch the Judas Purse out from under my nose.'

'The director won't be happy.'

'John gets our politics done, that's what makes him an effective director. But I was staking vampire Nazis with a commando dagger when he was sunning himself on the deck of a torpedo boat in the Pacific. This is what I do. This job is all I do. So in the words of Ol' Blue Eyes, there's only one way things are going to go in Zurich, and it's damn well going to be my way.'

Guy's sentiments sounded like the kind of thing that Eleanor would blurt out. She couldn't say that it wasn't what she was thinking, either, not with zombie girl working up a hundred new ways to make Eleanor look like an amateur out there. *So why do I feel sick to my stomach? Fear, or something else? I don't want to fail.* Perhaps for the first time in her life, Eleanor had found something that mattered to her. And now that she had, she kind of wished she hadn't.

CHAPTER THREE

Switzerland

Eleanor checked the sat-nav app on her phone. She had Diane nestled next to her on the minivan's middle seat. Ian and Alastair on the seats behind, with boss man next to the driver up front inside their taxi. They had just driven straight past the rendezvous point with the backup team, but no-one had commented on their failure to stop. Eleanor tapped Guy's shoulder in the front seat. 'We're not joining up with the others?'

Guy grunted in amusement. 'We could sit on the rendezvous point for a week and not group up with Dirty Harriet and her goon squad. She's got no intention of playing second fiddle to us on this mission. I'm not going to waste my time losing even a minute over her.'

'That's hardly protocol,' said Diane.

'You like the rulebook so much, Agent O'Hara, I'll drop you off at the square for the meet-up. You can buy yourself a Swiss watch and stare at it for a few days while tapping your feet. Flanagan's team haven't been answering their phone since we landed at the airport. We're on our own, here.'

'We're not exactly flying straight arrow, ourselves,' said Ian from the back seat. 'You got our plane fuelled and in the air before I had it fully loaded.'

'Unless you forgot your sword, kid, we've got everything we need right here.'

'Didn't pack your broomstick, though,' said Eleanor. 'Guess we left that behind.'

'That's just a *little* unfair,' complained Ian.

'As unfair as being handed over to Sabrina the Pensioner Witch, for a little sacrificial altar action?'

'How many times am I going to need to apologise for that?'

'Maybe when you're a pensioner, too?' suggested Eleanor.

'Eleanor does have a point,' said Diane. 'It's like the time I was taken to the prom by Blake Tarleton and the dirt-bag spent all evening dancing with Maria Newbern.'

'Was Maria Newbern planning to drug you, tie you up inside a pentagram and suck your life force from you?'

Diane seemed shocked by the suggestion. 'Zoinks, I hope not!'

'Fairly sure we're not swapping like-for-like war stories here, then.'

'There was that time when the nuclear submarine went missing off Argentina, Diane,' said Alasdair, 'and you were possessed by the spirits of—'

'I thought we agreed we would never mention that again!' snapped Diane.

Eleanor raised an eyebrow.

'Female pirate,' whispered Alasdair, 'most lascivious.' He stopped dead when he saw the evil look he was getting from Diane, and just shrugged.

Eleanor joined Alasdair in staring out at the clean streets of Zurich. This was Eleanor's first time outside the U.S., but she couldn't muster much excitement for the novelty of sights sliding past the minivan. Street signage and shop posters in French and occasionally German. Everyone fashionably and expensively dressed, looking like they had a personal trainer on payroll. It had only been minutes since it stopped raining outside and Zurich's citizens looked well-turned out and wealthy even when damp. Every second car seemed to be a gleaming new Mercedes or high-end BMW. If Switzerland did poor people, the poverty was obviously confined to distant neighbourhoods with very high walls to help encourage them to stay inside.

Their taxi drew to a halt in a modern-looking street and the driver said something in French. Guy Drew replied in French and paid the man off in the local currency, the rest of the team spilling out of the minivan. Eleanor was glad to stretch her legs; a fresh natural breeze, rather than stale plane air followed by a van's air-conditioning.

'Man, this isn't right,' said Guy, gazing up at the modern glass and steel building, windows still wet from the recent downpour. The bright street lamps made silver pools of puddles along the pavement. Where they had arrived didn't look much like a monastery. It was an office block sandwiched between modern buildings on a quiet urban street. 'We should have driven further out into the city's outskirts.' Guy approached the frosted glass doors and rang a buzzer beside the entrance. A moment later the two doors slid apart on electric rollers, revealing a short balding man wearing a red cardigan and corduroy trousers. He was sporting a bushy black beard that would have given Rasputin whisker-envy.

'Is this the Zürichsee Benedictine Order?'

'It is,' replied the man, in perfect German-accented English, a wall of warm air following him out into the pavement.

'You're a monk?'

'Naturally. We are quite modern here these days. I rarely wear my cassock. This is our seminary, a place of learning,' explained the man. 'I am Father Villiger, master of the academic staff.' He stared quizzically at the party and Eleanor guessed they appeared rather out of place compared to the students who usually arrived to study.

'I was under the impression, father, that the monastery at Zürichsee was a lot older.' Guy gestured up at the tower block. 'You know, stables and cells and herb gardens and the like.'

'Ah, I see,' smiled the priest. '*Tourists*. No, you are thinking of the original monastery. This is the new facility of the Holy Benedictine Order of Zürichsee. A lot less drafty, I would imagine, than the original monastery. Not that I ever taught there, although I did visit once when I was a student.'

'And how can we visit the old monastery?'

'I am afraid that is beyond the ability of even our good creator now,' smiled the priest. 'The oldest sections of the original monastery were badly damaged in a landslide, with the rest of its buildings declared unsafe. Hence our order's unfortunate but necessary relocation. Some said the landslide was God's punishment for allowing protestants to occupy our churches for so many decades. At any rate, the monastery was demolished soon after we deconsecrated it.'

'It doesn't even exist anymore,' said Eleanor, hardly believing their appallingly bad luck.

'If you travelled here by car through the Gotthard Base Tunnel, you probably drove across the site. The new autobahn tarmacked over the ground of our previous site.'

'Sometimes,' snarled Guy, 'progress really grates on my nerves.'

Father Villiger pointed to the hallway beyond. 'The original cross from the vestry is up there on the wall. And we have a stone water trough in our garden of remembrance from the old site which bears the inscription "The righteous man regardeth the life of his beast." Many of the monastery's items of historic interest

were sold to The Swiss National Museum . . . you can visit the museum over at Platzspitz park.'

'Sold?' asked Eleanor.

Father Villiger indicated the tower block. 'This is Zurich, my child. You wouldn't believe the price of property here.'

Guy sighed. 'That I surely do believe, seeing how much I was charged for a cold one in the airport.'

'I see your taxi has departed. May I call you another one to take you to the museum? Our seminary must have made it into a new guidebook, you're the second tourist party to visit today.'

'Second?' said Guy, not bothering to hide the deepening suspicion from his voice. 'Was there a mousy-haired woman aged about fifty leading the group, a smoky-hoarse voice like she's been chomping through a few too many Marlboro?'

'Ah, yes, indeed. Are you doing the same tour, perhaps?'

'You might say we're on parallel tracks, father.'

Father Villiger's hand rose to usher them inside and he was about to add something when his words were overwhelmed by the sound of screeching tyres. Three matt-ebony Range Rovers with tinted privacy windows skidded to a halt, one brick-like car blocking the team's rear, two more sliding to an abrupt halt at the team's sides, cutting off any escape route except a hasty retreat through the seminary building. Doors kicked open before Eleanor even had a chance to take a step back. She looked on astonished as they were surrounded by what seemed to be nuns; except these nuns carried moly-blades and machine pistols and looked like they knew how to use them.

'What is the meaning of this?' yapped Father Villiger, as surprised as any of them at being bushwhacked.

One of the nuns jammed a machine gun's barrel under the priest's chin, purring in French-accented English. 'Back into your seminary rooms, Father Hipster. This is Vatican business.'

'You cannot—'

A second nun flourished a silver badge from below her wimple, she spoke in a cut-glass British accent. 'Off you bugger, Rasputin. We're under the Holy See of the Black Pope . . . *Scutum Dei*.'

At the mention of the Black Pope and the covert arm of the Holy Inquisition the priest wilted and retreated, averting his gaze as if he had been caught consorting with devil worshippers. Given how Eleanor was left on the pavement gazing down a forest of blades pointing towards her body, the father was acting wisely.

Eleanor met the eyes of the nun at the front threatening the group. 'What you looking at, Julie Andrews?'

'So much trouble,' hissed the British nun, by way of response.

'We're meant to be on the same side here,' protested Guy, secured, like the rest of the team, to his chair by white ties. Whatever these restraints were made of, it wasn't

plastic - it was designed to hold humans who had been changed. The team were being interrogated by what Eleanor had come to think of as the Unholy Trinity. Sister Doe was the nun with the French accent. Sister Mee was the Korean-looking woman. Sister Rae was the Brit who sounded and resembled Mary Poppins, if Poppins had been a Ninja Nun wielding a moly-sword rather than a magic umbrella. Eleanor hadn't witnessed their journey to this bare steel-lined interrogation chamber, what with the black hood pulled over her head and all. But she definitely had the impression that the Range Rovers had driven them down into some kind of underground labyrinth, lower and lower, sharp turns with the sound of the cars' engines echoing from concrete. A hidden complex accessed via an underground car park, maybe? Sister Rae paced down the ranks of bound Vigil agents, swishing her sword in windmill circles like a jailer on the cell block twirling her truncheon. Eleanor reckoned this British thug suffered from withdrawal symptoms if she didn't get to decapitate a creature of the darkness every few days or so. Sadly for the Vigil team, she seemed to be on a vampire-killing diet at the moment and was itching to work her captives over to balance the books for God's greater glory.

'You know the terms of the pact,' said Sister Doe. 'The Vigil guards the new world, Scutum Dei polices the old world.'

'We didn't exactly have a chance to fill out the paperwork and arrange a chaperon for this dance,' said Guy. 'And every minute you hold us here is a minute where—'

'Shhhh,' urged Sister Mee, crouching by Guy's side. 'This phantom artifact you claim to be chasing has been lost for millennia. Do you think just because the great Americans send their Vigil enforcers to trespass on the Black Pope's domain, there is a sudden urgency in the air? Oh, the Americans are here, everyone must run around and do as they order. That is not the way things work inside Europe.'

'How does it work over here?' asked Eleanor, trying to rock her way free of her bonds, sadly without loosening them a millimetre. 'You waste our time while the Reds grab the Judas Purse, then you slink off back to your secret Pope and blame the Americans for the end of the world? That works for you, does it?'

Sister Doe tutted. 'You, girl, are so green I can still smell the sweat of the antidote on your skin. You've recently dropped out of the apple tree and know nothing. Scutum Dei's disciples have held the darkness at bay for a thousand and a half years; and that we have achieved by following the Shield of God's protocols and teachings. You Vigil agents are like drunk teenagers running riot around your first party. You believe you are invincible, even as you climb behind the wheel of your father's car to steal it, recklessly steering it off a cliff.'

Sister Rae raised her blade under Eleanor's throat. 'Do you feel invincible right now.'

'No, I feel kind of peeved. What do they teach you on this side of the pond? How to fill out Vatican paperwork in triplicate? We're talking the vampire apocalypse, and you want to arrange our official entry visas?'

'That *green* girl,' protested Ian, 'took on the Keeper inside the Old Paradise Shop and sent him straight back to hell.'

'Only a fool bargains with demons in the first place,' retorted Sister Mee.

'Wasn't much of a bargain for the old devil,' said Eleanor. 'I turned his shelves

into a pyre, before pushing him into the bonfire.’

Sister Doe delivered her verdict. ‘Young. Foolhardy. Lucky. None of which are characteristics that particularly endear you to me.’

‘They should be escorted back to the airport and deported to the Americas,’ said Sister Mee.

Sister Rae picked up a syringe of truth serum from a steel tray and flicked the needle. ‘But first, we make sure they’re not lying about their mission here.’

‘You’re going to need to pray up a miracle, then,’ said Guy. ‘We’re like you . . . we’ve all been snacks for the sidhe antiqua, and we’ve all been pulled back from the darkness. You can shoot us full of as much Sodium Pentothal as you’ve got now and it will only give us a headache.’

‘Don’t worry, I shall offer you trial by ordeal in holy water, instead. Unless you’ve been bitten by a sharkman and possess gills, filling your lungs with holy water will loosen your tongue.’

Eleanor fixed the crazed nun with a contemptuous glance. ‘Ordeal by water only works on witches. And I’m guessing it was a witch that tried to suck the life force out of you and left you as Sister Bunny-Boiler. . .’

Sister Rae moved to strike Eleanor, but Sister Mee held her back.

‘Good nun, bad nun,’ laughed Eleanor. ‘Give me a break.’

‘Certainly, pick an arm, Yankee-doodle,’ threatened the Brit.

‘Let *me* go out on a limb here,’ said Guy. ‘I’m guessing the fact you knew to pick us up from the new monastery building in Zurich was down to an anonymous tip. And let me tell you, the person who phoned the Vatican Hot Line is playing you for a fool.’

Eleanor groaned, yanking against her arm restraints. *Of course, Dirty Harriet’s team.* And Eleanor just bet ol’ zombie girl wheedled the rival team leader to be the one to drop the call, taking Eleanor and her friends out of the game.

‘Jinkies!’ cried Diane. ‘This isn’t helping anyone. Can’t we all try to remember who our real enemy is?’

‘When you fight a war in the shadows, the enemy is the shadows. And even you newly come people cast them,’ purred Sister Doe. She sounded more like a sensual perfume advert than some religious fanatic assassin for the inquisition, but looks - and voices - could sadly be deceiving.

‘Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come,’ quoted Diane.

‘Corinthians 5:17,’ said Sister Doe, approvingly. ‘You might almost make the cut as a novitiate in the holy orders of Scutum Dei.’

Sister Rae moved behind Diane’s chair, weighing her sword in her hand. ‘And speaking of cuts . . .’

‘Why are you really here in Europe?’ demanded Sister Mee.

‘Lost Ark of the Covenant,’ called Eleanor. ‘We’re following some guy with a whip and a fedora.’

‘I have had my fill of your prattle,’ said Sister Mee. She indicated Diane. ‘Let the agent who quotes so well from the Bible face the holy water first. The truth may be teased easier out of her lips.’

‘No!’ yelled Alasdair as they yanked Diane, still tied to her chair, over towards a metal tank filled with liquid.

‘Your last chance,’ said Sister Mee. ‘Why are you in Switzerland? Why have you violated the pact? And do not tell me your children’s tales.’

‘You call yourself nuns?’ laughed Eleanor. ‘You’ve got a whole book full of kiddie tales to fall back on.’

Sister Rae stamped towards Eleanor’s chair, dragging Eleanor across the room to face the tank as well.

‘That is what the green agent wants you to do,’ warned Sister Doe. ‘She blasphemes to provoke you and spare her friend the trial.’

‘Well, her gobby lip’s worked a charm,’ said Sister Rae. ‘And I’ve got enough holy water for them all to take a dunking.’

‘We should have gone to Geneva instead,’ said Guy. ‘I hear they’ve got some kind of convention there. Perhaps you’ve heard of it?’

‘This is what we have for you inside Zurich, Yankee-doodle,’ said Sister Rae, tilting Eleanor’s chair into the tank and submerging her prisoner’s face. Freezing water hit Eleanor like a freight train; she tried to resist the cruel shock of it, keep the air inside her cheeks. Chunks of ice cut against her skin. She failed to keep her lips closed and gagged on water, flowing inside, drowning her, clawing at her throat.

The maniacal nun lifted Eleanor’s head, spluttering and coughing, out of the water. ‘Why are you really in Switzerland?’

Eleanor spat freezing water out of her rasping throat. ‘Cuckoo clock. Need one for my bedroom.’

‘You don’t need a clock. I’ll tell you what time it is, Yankee-doodle - time to tell us everything we want to know.’

‘Let her go!’ shouted Ian. ‘She doesn’t know anything.’

‘Then you shall tell me and your colleague’s ordeal will end.’

‘Lady, we can’t tell you what we don’t know,’ called Guy. ‘We’re here for the Judas Purse. That’s the truth.’

‘Maybe the coins are hidden at the bottom of our tank? Let’s find out!’ Sister Rae shoved Eleanor’s face back under the water. If anything it was worse the second time, now she knew what was coming. Iced water cut at Eleanor with its terrible cold heat. She desperately held onto the furnace inside her chest without opening her mouth, when releasing her breath would have been the most natural reaction in the world. Eleanor gagged onto the burning air trapped inside her lungs for an eternity before she was removed again. Her breath escaped like an explosion, heaving for oxygen, for a lick of beautiful normal air.

‘Tell me!’

‘Nobody-expects-the Inquisition,’ wheezed Eleanor, between gasps.

‘Not bad for someone newly arrived to the change, Yankee-doodle,’ said Sister Rae. ‘At first glance, I thought just dropping a damp cloth across your silly little face and pouring water on it would have you singing for us. Now, how about your friend over there? Let’s give your ginger a turn and see how you like watching—’

‘Enough!’ boomed a disembodied voice. Eleanor shook her dripping head, clearing her eyes and traced the sound back to a speaker she hadn’t noticed before, the

box still vibrating in the corner of the interrogation room. One side of the metal-lined room seemed to fog, turning from steel to glass. That was some neat treat of weirded-out materials science; either that or an even freakier act of sorcery. Eleanor didn't know which of those two options would comfort her more right now. On the other side of the glass loomed a tall figure in heavy crimson robes, his face covered by a silver mask which twisted helmet-like into the shape of a mitre over his skull. The visor's features clearly weren't meant to comfort Eleanor, either; like a cross between a samurai mask and a leering gargoyle's face stamped in silver.

The three nuns did some kind of crazy balletic courtesy towards the figure, falling to one knee in front of the window.

'Cardinal Netchelovek,' stammered Sister Doe. 'We did not know your eminence had arrived in the country.'

'I shall ensure my office sends my diary ahead for your approval next time,' said the voice, dripping in sarcasm.

'Isn't that just great,' coughed Eleanor. 'So, now we get to be questioned by Doctor Doom as well.'

'Silence,' hissed Sister Mee. 'All cardinals of Scutum Dei wear the mask. Silver is a holy metal, accursed by the enemy, which burns at their forsaken souls. It a symbol of purity, constancy and fidelity to the cause of light.'

'Pearls before swine, sister,' said the cardinal, 'or perhaps salted fries scattered as litter before Americans. You waste your breath with these heathens travelled across the water.'

Guy grinned in his chair, as though the man in the silver mask's arrival was a good thing for them. 'I know exactly who you are, Cardinal Netchelovek. And the fact you're here at all means you can cut your jawing and order your three stooges to cut my team loose. We've got a man's job to do in this town.'

Sister Doe at the glass viewing portal for confirmation, looking as pained as if she had just lost the Calvin Klein commercial's voice-over. 'Your eminence . . . ?'

'His Holiness in Rome had received a visitation from the Archangel Saraqael,' growled the cardinal, 'blessed on high be Heaven's messengers.'

I wonder what poor sod got burnt to a crisp delivering that particular God-mail? mused Eleanor, still shivering from her exposure to the tank. 'How come you get to hear from a hoighty toighty archangel and we only get some winged prison-visitor called Zadkiel? Is that like a Pope's-eyes-only-thing?'

Cardinal Netchelovek ignored her jibes. 'The threads which have hidden the Judas Purse for so long from the world are being unravelled. We are to follow them. And as these threads run across the wide breadth of God's earth, so we must cooperate with the Vigil in this holy mission. This is now the will of the Lord, as it is also the will of His Holiness inside the Vatican.'

'And you don't certainly want to go against either of *those* two,' said Eleanor.

The cardinal's fierce silver features shook from side to side in annoyance. 'And He tests us. May you rise to meet the shadows' test, sisters, and do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you.' A priest entered the room and moved across to a table by the side of the chamber, a couple of soldiers dressed as Swiss Guards also entering to deposit sacraments on the white cloth. The nuns lined

up dutifully to drink from the silver goblets, take a wafer and hear the priest's benedictions. To Eleanor's eyes, it seemed a strangely formal ritual for this dark place. *But what do I know?*

Guy Drew stood up from the chair, rubbing circulation back into his arms after Sister Rae had sliced away his restraints. From the expression on her face, it looked like the British nun was having her spleen removed without anaesthetic just by freeing the Vigil agents. 'Need our weapons and comms back, lady. Jump to it. And if you own some wheels that don't look like a pimp convoy rolling out from the Azerbaijan Embassy, that'll be just peachy.'

'And I'll take a towel and a mug of hot chocolate,' called Eleanor. 'Two sugars.'

Cardinal Netchelovek's retreating voice muttered from the speaker, even as the wall port shimmered from glass back to metal cladding. 'I swear, we might as well be working with Herman Munster and his family.'

One of the pair of demi-gogs watching on the roof ducked back down. He slipped the binoculars away as a convoy of vehicles left the underground car park, their headlights breaking the night with bright beams. The demi-gog pairing was a male and a female, able to move through the city of Zurich posing as a harmless human couple where necessary. Of course, as the bloody mess of the vagrant scattered behind them across their rooftop attested to, harmless they were most definitely *not*.

'Our prey is on the move again,' said the male demi-gog.

'You are certain the Vigil agents are inside the vehicles?'

The male demi-gog checked his phone, a red pulsing dot rolling across the interactive map. 'It is as the Lady Sophia said, a tracker placed among the group by one of their own debasements.'

'I am glad we won't have to get close enough to track them by scent,' admitted the female demi-gog. 'The priests and nuns of the false prophet work to turn us into the hunted, we who should only ever be the hunters.'

'Their filthy unnatural order is coming to an end,' smiled the man-thing, clicking his fangs. 'And we shall be there at their downfall. For a feasting unlike any other that has gone before.'

'Good times,' said the woman-thing.

'Yes, the best of times. Let our prey lead us to their own doom for the glory of the lady.'

The male demi-gog left the rest unsaid. That should they succeed here tonight, Lady Sophia would undoubtedly elevate her most loyal servants with the status of the true, final conversion; becoming a full vampire, elevation to perfection and paradise eternal.

Both of them turned hungrily to move across the rooftops, leaping like wild animals, tracking the cars below.

CHAPTER FOUR
Museum of the Damned

Eleanor reached the National Museum in the middle of Zurich's Old City District, their miniature convoy crossing a bridge to reach the building, swerving around the back to stop inside the staff car-park. She stepped out to find an impressive three storey Disney-style chateau complete with towers and courts, sandwiched in its own gardens on a long finger of island between the rivers Sihl and Limmat. It was deserted and late at night now; the last of the tourist boats docking close by at a river pier. Eleanor overheard the sounds of families dispersing back to expensive hotels, voices drifting across the slightly creepy deserted gardens as insects danced in the sodium glare of spotlights scattered around the grounds. With the museum closed, the Black Pope's nuns had needed to rouse a museum director to key them through the staff entrance around the back. A balding, overweight man, the fussy official didn't seem best pleased with being coerced into providing an after-hours tour. Eleanor tried to tune out his whining high-pitched complaints while she waited. *Hey, pal, just count yourself lucky you weren't water-boarded by these religious maniacs to get you on side.* Long, crimson banner-like flags fluttered in the cold breeze, marked towards the bottom with a white Swiss cross.

'We 'ave excellent security,' said the official, in French-accented English. 'We are ze *National* Museum. No thieves 'ave breached our security in sixty years.' He stared suspiciously again at Guy's team and Eleanor guessed he was having trouble placing them as part of the FBI's Art Theft Unit. Not surprising given the Vigil agents had come into the country dressed as tourists with nary a dark suit between them. 'And, with respect to these Americans' intelligence, ze items from the Benedictine Order are of no great financial value - not when we 'ave ze Erstfeld treasure 'ere, Celtic gold jewellery worth millions.'

'What we're looking for will be in your coin cabinets, Director Goepfert,' said Sister Mee. 'Roman coins.'

'So you say,' tutted the official, swiping his security card through a reader and then keying in a combination to unlock the door. They entered a corridor hung with posters from visiting exhibitions, decades old, lights activating around the group on a motion sensor. Doors led off the corridor to private offices, lecture rooms and a canteen for back-office staff, all dark and deserted. Springing the staff door had obviously triggered a silent alarm, as three security guards turned up in a hall at the other end, blue-uniformed with double pistol holsters on their polished white belts, one for a taser gun, the other holding a snub but deadly effective SIG Sauer SP 2009 automatic pistol.

Director Goepfert spoke to the three large guards in whispered tones, the men glancing at the Americans and nuns in irritation at the mere suggestion that a major theft might be about to go down on their watch. The guards stalked off tutting, small figures under the elaborately arched cathedral-like ceiling, one of the men talking into a radio mike on the lapel of his uniform, hopefully telling the rest of the National Museum's security detail to be on high alert for intruders.

'Come,' whined Goepfert, 'I will take you to ze coins.'

Director Goepfert escorted the Americans and nuns through empty halls and past glass cabinets filled with elaborately engraved silver suits of armour, military drinking horns and flintlock rifles slanted upright like letter X's against wooden pegs, then up

a twisting marble staircase and onto the second floor. This led to a hall holding the coins.

The official halted, gasping in horror as he saw the carefully sliced out glass circles in his coin cabinets. ‘How can this be? No alarms ‘ave been triggered! Someone ‘as deactivated ze museum’s entire security system. Not possible!’

All too possible. Eleanor grimaced, wondering whether it was the Reds or Dirty Harriet’s team who had beaten them to the punch. There was a slight lingering scent of Chanel, which suggested that either the last tourists in the room shared zombie girl’s hygiene preferences, or Dirty Harriet and friends had indeed been busy here earlier.

‘Focus, director,’ insisted Sister Mee. ‘Which coins are missing from the cabinets? How many have been taken?’

The director stalked along the cabinets, dropping his thick cheeks close to the glass and fiddling with a pair of reading glasses he’d produced from inside his tweed jacket. ‘Why - but nothing ‘as been taken? Ze thieves ‘ave reached inside and moved ze coins around, inspecting them, but nothing ‘as been stolen?’

‘The coins were never here,’ hissed Guy.

‘What else do you have on display from the old monastery?’ demanded Sister Mee.

‘Paintings, pottery, an ‘andful of statues and icons,’ said Goepfert, obviously distracted by thoughts of who was going to carry the can for this shocking breach of security. ‘They are scattered throughout ze museum.’

‘It’s possible the Judas Purse was hidden in something else - the statues and pottery would be a good start,’ said Diane.

Guy ran to the wall and grabbed a handful of brochures containing maps of the museum, passing them around the group. ‘We need to split up and work fast. The thieves could still be here robbing the joint.’ Guy carefully watched the director circle where the monastery’s items were to be found on the map, then quickly allocated potential targets between the group. Eleanor could see the nuns bridling at the non-nonsense way in which Guy took immediate command, but they were under orders from their cardinal to cooperate, and had little choice but to fall in line with his plan. Goepfert picked up a staff phone in the wall and dialled through to the museum’s security desk, ordering them in quavering tones to lock down the place. Nobody in and nobody out. A wise move, but he didn’t even understand that if the thieves were Reds, the intruders might be able to face-shift to mimic the guards.

Eleanor found herself allocated to the same search team as Ian - not so bad - but with the British Bunny-Boiler, Sister Rae, also on Team Lythe - which frankly sucked. As did the fact Team Lythe was given the main picture gallery and its anterooms to investigate. *Not going to be much chance of finding anything there.*

‘If the Reds are here before us, it’s not so much cat-burglars, as *bat*-burglars,’ said Eleanor, racing alongside the other two.

‘Save me from such terrible *pun*-nishment,’ said Ian.

Sister Rae didn’t seem much pleased by the banter. She scowled at the two Vigil agents, reaching under her robes and drawing out a wooden cross.

‘You going to pray for my soul, or maybe try to give me another ice bath?’ asked

Eleanor.

The nun raised the cross, triggering its moly-blade and converting the cross into the hilt of a sword. ‘Pray for the souls of those who would steal the Judas Purse for the darkness, Yankee-doodle. They’ll bloody need it.’

Eleanor lifted out her Parker fountain pen and triggered her own blade. ‘I think you’ll find this is mightier . . .’

‘Amateurs,’ muttered the nun.

Eleanor kept jogging towards the picture gallery. ‘So, where the hell did they drag you in from?’

‘You got it right first time . . . hell,’ said Sister Rae. ‘Or in my case, Bronzefield. That’s where I got the bite and the cure, both.’

‘Is that a town in Britain?’ asked Ian.

‘HMP, love,’ said the sister, ‘as in Her Majesty’s Prison.’

‘I probably shouldn’t ask what you were in for before you found God,’ said Eleanor.

‘I didn’t find God, Yankee-doodle, God found me,’ said the sister. ‘Bleeding out on the floor of a high-security wing and one-tenth of the way to becoming a vampire’s demi-gog slave. And I’ve done a lot worst in the Black Pope’s name since I got out; though, to be fair, not to anything particularly human.’

‘Queen decided to release you, then?’

‘Yeah, in a body bag, same as the Count of bleeding Monte Cristo. Didn’t inherit no pirate treasure, though. Just an FN SCAR-light 45mm, a sniper’s laser sight, and a moly-blade, with the chance to slice the heads off the same buggers that ruined my life.’

Eleanor reckoned her life had probably been a lost cause before she’d ended up on the Reds’ dinner menu. *We share that much in common, at any rate.*

Sister Rae grunted in bitter amusement. ‘Alarms off inside the National Museum? Back in the day, I would have nicked half this stuff, had it right away.’

‘And now?’ asked Ian.

It was eerie the way lights came on as the three of them jogged through the empty, echoing halls. Eleanor tried not to let it get to her. A night at the museum was nothing compared to being hunted by a centuries-old serial killing witch during a night at an open-air cinema. She and Ian had survived that. *Has to count for something.*

‘Living it large . . . what’s the point? They say revenge is sweet, and I’ve got the mother of sweet tooth for it. Don’t reckon that the picture gallery is going to provide me with a taste of it tonight, though. Can’t hide coins in the frame of an oil painting, can you?’

The same thought had occurred to Eleanor. When it came to searching the museum, the gallery was definitely the booby prize. Did that mean Guy was still uncertain of Ian’s loyalties after his encounter with the witch? Or maybe it was Eleanor who was still in the doghouse. How much did Guy trust Eleanor given she’d survived the Keeper’s clutches with only her unlikely story about how she’d managed to escape the demon?

Eleanor sniffed the air. No scent of anything non-human that she could detect, just

the familiar presence of the nuns and the rest of their group fanning out through the museum, as well as the guards who had stopped them at the back of the place. Were they too late, or had the rival team from the Vigil muscled in a lot earlier?

‘You’re a vamp survivor, right?’ growled the sister.

Eleanor nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Enough with the snuffling, then. Bleeding werewolf survivors always did get on my wick - hairy mugs.’

‘Would that be either Sister Mee or Sister Doe?’

‘Nah. Mee was mauled by a pack of Reds, too. Local nurse helping a frontline MASH unit during the Korean blowup. Sister Doe was bitten by the vamps while working as a spy for the Section Administrative Spécialisée during the Algerian fight for independence. Vampires always did enjoy feeding during a good war - or a bad one, depending on your take on matters. Easy to hide your human snack habit when thousands are pegging it each day.’

‘There a big problem with the Reds in Switzerland?’ asked Ian.

‘We’re not here for the Reds,’ said Sister Rae. ‘We’re here to trace and seize their dosh. All those secret bank accounts and sly private bankers willing to look the other way. Takes a vault full of readies to run the Reds’ nasty little networks - a lot easier to bribe prison guard screws and care-home managers to hand over human snacks if you’re rolling in readies.’

Eleanor was surprised. ‘You’re an *accountant*?’

Sister Rae gave her moly-blade an experimental swish in the air. ‘Let’s just say I *also* count.’

They reached the gallery by passing through an art-filled museum shop with shelves heaving full of illustrated books, prints, reference works, catalogues and just about everything anyone needed to know about the long, glorious and frankly slightly tedious history of Swiss art. The gallery was a connected maze of modern windowless rooms hung with ancient paintings, walls painted a tasteful dark green, the oil paintings displayed in identical expensive gold frames, occasionally a Greek-style statue standing on a plinth in the middle of a room. Large silver-grey marble floor tiles made their shoes click like tap-dancers as they hustled through. Place even smelt of *luxury* and *expensive*, as though the visitors were expected to leave bids for these no-doubt priceless paintings. *Damn, and I left all my credit cards in my Men-in-Black suit back in New York.* They moved quickly to the room circled by Director Goepfert. At first, Eleanor couldn’t locate the monastery paintings, but then she spotted the wall behind her held dozens of smaller oil works, and the plastic information pedestal in front of the frames contained the words “Benedictine de Zürichsee” in its text. She retracted her moly-blade and tucked the pen safely away, as did the nun. With the museum’s alarms killed by whoever had beaten them here, it was easy work to lift each painting off the wall, weigh it their hands, trying to get a feel for any hidden coins in the artwork.

‘This is a right old goose chase,’ complained Sister Rae after examining her third painting. ‘These aren’t even the original frames. See, they’re identical to the frames on the modern art in the last room. If the Judas Purse was ever hidden inside one of the original frames, it probably ended up in the museum art restorer’s workshop bins

before being chucked out and crushed inside a garbage truck.’

‘It would be difficult to conceal the coins behind the canvas,’ said Eleanor. ‘Even if you fitted on a false back, anyone handling the paintings would quickly realise the canvas weighed too much, find the coins and strip them out.’

‘Be a right spectacle if someone tried to do that during opening hours. The rent-a-uniforms downstairs would have their tasers out faster than the babysitter’s boyfriend when the car pulls up.’

A right spectacle - of course! Eleanor tapped the frames of her glasses. ‘These are good for multi-spectrum imaging, right?’

‘Of course,’ said Ian, slapping his forehead.

Sister Rae didn’t appear as impressed. ‘X-ray specs? What, you haven’t got contact lenses able to track a hot vampire? I thought you yanks in the Vigil were all 21st century on your side of the pond?’

‘These are more than just infrared heat spotters,’ said Ian. ‘Ours lens combine battlefield networking, command and control functions and—’

‘You’re starting to sound like Alasdair,’ said Eleanor, adjusting her lens view, the image of the paintings on the wall dropping from mid-infrared through to ultraviolet and then into the soft X-ray range. All the imperfections on the canvas shifted along with the wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum, showing where a few canvases had been scraped and then reused for new paintings. Nothing thrown away in the old days, not even a used surplus canvas. One of the paintings practically jumped off the wall and did a ballet for Eleanor under closer examination. She switched her lens view back to daylight, lifting the frame off the wall. There was something about the particular oil painting that nagged at her, but what could it be? Eleanor inspected the small plate containing the painting’s name. “The Miracle of the Corn.” Depicted on canvas, a line of foot soldiers wearing Roman-style armour questioned a pair of farmers, one peasant pointing to the right down the road, the other clutching a donkey’s bridle. A few soldiers picked fruit from a nearby tree, seemingly bored with their mission. Oddly, the two farmers had been painted with halos, like they were some kind of saints for growing the crops swaying behind them.

Ian switched his glasses back to standard light, too. ‘You found something?’

‘I think so.’

‘That scene’s lifted from the Bible,’ said Sister Rae. ‘This is Joseph and Mary’s flight from Bethlehem to Egypt with the baby Jesus. King Herod’s goon squad were about to catch up with the Christ clan to give them the chop, but the crop planted by a group of farmers grew from seedlings to their full height in a few minutes, allowing the family to shelter and hide inside the fields. Then, the royal hit squad were distracted by a date palm tree bending down to give them lunch. So they ate, declared “Mission Accomplished”, and sodded off back to Bethlehem.’

So, that makes sense. Eleanor saw a worried female face - presumably Mary’s peeking through the corn. But Eleanor realised that Mary’s weren’t the features she was most interested in on the canvas. ‘Maybe the birds in the trees started singing “they went that-a-way”, too?’ said Eleanor. ‘But that’s not what’s odd about this.’ She tapped the pair of peasants sweet-talking the pursuing soldiers while pointing down the road. ‘I recognise these two farmers from our records back in archives. Same faces

as on the portraits of Pierre of Montague and Benedict of Nursia.’

‘Why you’re right!’ exclaimed Ian, squinting closer. ‘It’s the two abbots! But I’m not seeing any coins inside the frame or canvas?’

‘Thanks for the vote of confidence, doofus,’ said Eleanor. ‘There’re no coins hiding here, but there’s definitely something oblong-shaped in the middle of the canvas which doesn’t look like it belongs.’ She slid out the frame’s modern backing and ran her fingers along the canvas, pushing gently at its centre where she had spotted the anomaly. ‘I think this canvas is double lined. There’s a letter or document slotted inside it.’

‘That’s no coincidence,’ said Sister Rae. ‘Not in a painting of something precious being sneaked to safety, surrounded by enemies, with the mugs of the same two jokers who were charged with keeping the Judas Purse safe.’

Eleanor returned the protective backing panel to its frame. ‘Certainly not going to open it here. We’ll need a clean room, or as old as this document is, it’ll just disintegrate in our hands.’

Sister Rae snorted happily. ‘So I get to nick something after all! Beautiful. If word had got back to the old crew that I’d been inside the National Museum - alarms dead - and hadn’t come away with at least a few baubles, I’d have my reputation ruined.’

‘Given your death was faked,’ said Ian, ‘I suspect they’d be more surprised you were still alive and had hardly aged a year.’

‘Yeah, there is that, I suppose.’

Eleanor tucked the painting under her arm. Then she, Ian and the nun made off for the pottery rooms, where Guy and the others were no doubt damaging dozens of priceless artifacts trying to discover the Judas Purse’s hiding place. She had called it right. When they arrived in the big ceramics hall on the ground floor, Diane was practically holding a moly-blade to Director Goepfert’s throat while the others ransacked the exhibits, trying to locate the missing coins.

‘No, no,’ wailed Goepfert, ‘this is vandalism of ze worse sort. Stop, stop!’

‘Never could save the world without breaking a few eggs,’ said Guy, rattling a vase that looked more oriental than European.

‘You are destroying ze world of Swiss archaeology,’ pleaded the director.

Eleanor noticed the floor in the middle of the hall lay broken, marble tiles lifted away, dust and mud all over the floor, with a dark hole and a vertical drop past dirt and stone.

Sister Rae pointed out a series of domed objects resembling miniature heaters dotted around the building work; oddly, they sat on rubber wheels, as though they were remote controlled. ‘Hack the security systems via broadband first, then bish-bosh. That’s how the thieves bypassed the goons inside the museum’s control room. Sonic sound wall, like in a posh nightclub’s chill-out zone. Slipped those up and out through a small hole, then your tea-leaves could have dynamited half the floor out and nobody would have heard a thing. A proper nice job.’

Eleanor bent down and sniffed near the floor. Yes, there was a definite trail of expensive perfume here. One older, weaker trail when zombie girl first emerged, then a second fresher trail on the way back. Dirty Harriet and the supposedly backup Vigil team had already broken in and broken out. Eleanor hugged the painting closer to her

. . . unlike her, *they* had left empty handed. A rank stink rose through the hole and Eleanor realised their competitors hadn't tunnelled in very far. They'd travelled most of the way using Zurich's sewer system, storm drains attached to the two rivers outside.

Eleanor approached Guy. He was holding the vase upside down and vigorously shaking it while Goepfert did a good impression of having a mental breakdown on the sidelines. 'The hole was Dirty Harriet's work, boss man. I can smell Bex Crawford's Channel calling card all over the tunnel.'

'Tell me something I don't know,' said Guy, obviously disappointed no Roman coins came spilling out of his vase.

'Please, PLEASE,' hissed the director.

Guy shoved the vase at the man, and he grasped it like it was his own infant baby being returned to its cradle. Shaking, he reverentially carried the object back to a glass cabinet - obviously sliced in half with a moly-blade.

'I guessed as much, kid. Reds wouldn't have left the museum security team alive, and those sonic silencers are only used by us and the CIA. And the CIA might be a lot of things, but art collectors . . . not so much.'

Eleanor lifted her prize up just as Alasdair and Sister Doe arrived empty handed from their corner of the museum. 'We took this painting from the monastery collection. Doesn't contain the coins, but there's what looks like a letter concealed inside a double canvas. And see the actual painting . . . look familiar?'

Sister Doe peered over Eleanor's shoulder. 'The Miracle of the Corn.'

'Here's your miracle, sister,' said Guy, tapping the two farmers in the painting. 'Them two is the ugly mugs of Benedict of Nursia and Pierre of Montague. This picture was commissioned by someone who knew about the Judas Purse and how it had arrived in the monastery. Which means whatever is hidden inside here, it likely isn't an archbishop's shopping list.'

Sister Doe ran her finger gently along the top of the oil work. 'This painting's style is imitative of early Constable, so it was created much later than Pierre of Montague's time as abbot. I would say this piece is early eighteenth century. We must take the painting back to the clean room in our base laboratory; image the painting in high definition before we open the canvas up.'

On the words "open it up", Eleanor heard a gasp, and she realised that Director Goepfert had slipped away to the wall where one of the intercom phones hung. He was busy making an SOS call. 'Help! Help! Vandals in ze Ceramic Rooms! Come 'ere urgently!' - followed by a string of urgent pleading in German. Sister Rae was on the official like a she-panther, knocking the director over, but it was too late. He'd already placed his distress call to the security room.

Sister Rae grabbed the phone and said something in German, then looked at the phone confused before holding it out towards Sister Mee, Doe and the Vigil agents. 'Line sounds brown bread - nobody's answering at the other end.'

Guy advanced threateningly on the director. 'How many uniforms in your security detail here?'

'Not possible,' stuttered Goepfert. 'Someone must be there! We 'ave a team of twelve. Always six in ze command room, monitoring ze screens and sensors, with

another six on patrol.’

‘Yeah, not possible like having all your security systems cut dead,’ said Guy. He glanced at Ian. ‘Can you sense anything?’

Ian closed his eyes, as though he was thinking deeply. ‘There’s something moving out there, very faint.’

‘How about you?’ Guy asked Eleanor.

‘I can’t pick up any guards nearby, but,’ she sniffed uncertainly, ‘there’s - oh *no*. It’s the same stench as Father Kamara Okoro back at the vault!’

‘One of our priests?’ said Sister Mee.

‘A little more conflicted, you could say,’ said Guy. ‘We have Reds under the bed, ladies and germs.’

Sister Doe lifted up her robes, revealing a small secure-like satellite phone strapped above a pistol, as well as an expensive set of hosiery on a fairly lithe set of legs. She activated the phone and tried dialling out, but was only rewarded by a snake-like hiss. ‘They must have a signal jammer in the grounds. What do you want to bet our land lines are cut now, also?’

‘That’s pretty tooled up for them,’ said Alasdair. ‘Which means they’re prepared and attacking in numbers.’

‘We don’t wait for the cavalry, we *are* the cavalry,’ said Guy. ‘Tip of the goddamn spear.’

‘We have two companies of Swiss Guards on standby back at our base,’ said Sister Mee. ‘We just need to call them out here.’

‘Jeepers, I can take the phone and sneak beyond the jamming range,’ said Diane. ‘I’m highest rated in the unit at blanking demi-gog minds. They won’t see me.’

Guy shook his head, obviously angry with himself at being outmanoeuvred like this. First by Dirty Harriet, then by the Reds. ‘There’s going to be at least one Mama Vamp out there, running her pack of little half-suckers. Going to be old bones, too, the value of this prize. She won’t be easily fooled.’ Guy gazed mournfully at Eleanor’s painting. ‘Normally I’d be game-on for calling staking time. But if this painting’s hiding a map of where the Judas Purse is buried, we need to get it safely into Scutum Dei’s hands. That’s the mission.’

‘I agree,’ said Sister Mee. ‘The *only* mission. We are all expendable.’

Eleanor sighed. She didn’t feel particularly expandable. In the distance, she heard the click of lights deactivating in halls where creatures were moving. Something was selectively killing the museum’s power.

Ian leaned over the broken floor, pointing his torch’s beam into the pit. ‘It’s not a deep drop, we can swing down by hand. But without comms, we can’t call up the sewers’ plans.’

Eleanor stared into the sewer below, a brown moving stream of sludgy water. ‘I can try and follow the other team’s trail.’

‘You’ve got to be bleeding kidding me,’ said Sister Rae. ‘You want us to flee along the Crap Canal? I’d rather try fighting my way past the biters up here.’

‘*Die* fighting,’ said Sister Mee. ‘And we only win if one of us survives to reach the church with the Miracle of the Corn.’

‘I think the Reds are surrounding us,’ warned Ian.

‘Don’t have any other choice, now,’ said Guy. He indicated the pit. ‘We’re getting down and dirty.’

Sophia clutched the museum guard’s head between her fingers, a grip so tight, the prey couldn’t escape however hard he thrashed. She ignored smoke and sparks pouring out of the hacked security console where one of the faster guards to react had been driven into the machinery, the man’s automatic pistol still dangling from his dead fingers. ‘How many people entered the museum after hours?’

‘Eight, I think,’ stammered the terrified night watchman Sophia had pinned to the floor, ‘including the director and the nuns.’

‘Nuns,’ hissed one of the demi-gog trackers. ‘The Shield of God.’

Sophia’s eyes narrowed. Yes, Scutum Dei were here, and the fact that they were actively cooperating with the Vigil indicated that everything the Master of Masters believed about the Judas Purse was true. *We are close, very close to seizing the ultimate power.*

‘Debasements,’ said another demi-gog.

‘Churchlings, the Black Pope’s debasements.’

‘Be quiet you fools,’ barked Sophia. ‘I need to concentrate. Now, little man, you will think of your visitors, picture them in your mind’s eye.’ She increased the tension on the museum guard’s skull, just to ensure he understood. Absolute silence fell on the security control room; even the disgusting sounds of her nest feeding on the murdered security personnel stopped. Images slid into Sophia’s mind from the fear-frozen guard, mist-shrouded by the frailties of human memory: three nuns from Scutum Dei, a group of Vigil agents and the bureaucrat bullied into opening the museum to them. Her cold vampire heart fluttered like a dove caught inside her chest as she recognised the agent leading the Vigil team. *Guy Drew.*

‘What is it?’ asked Joanna from across the office, immediately sensing something was wrong.

Sophia sighed. ‘A very dangerous man. A debasement who has lived for far too long.’

‘But will you also not live a long time?’

‘Oh, I shall probably live forever,’ smiled Sophia, snapping the guard’s neck and ignoring the sharp little crack. ‘But this enemy is a mortal who is meant for death. Like all debasements, any power he possesses, he has stolen from us. Time, I think, to provide an old man with his end.’

Sophia stood up and nodded towards the two strongest and most reliably obedient members of her nest. ‘Secure Joanna, here. Do not let the Vigil scum or the churchlings anywhere near the control room.’

‘But I want to come with you!’ protested Joanna.

‘No,’ insisted Sophia. ‘It is far too dangerous. These creatures are expert hunters of my kind. They have corrupted our legacy and rejected our gift to mutate into what they are.’

‘They will know I am human, then! They will not judge me a threat.’

‘Both the Vigil and the churchlings would slay you without blinking. Many are the prey hoping to curry favour with us - such humans are called traitors by the debasements, treated no kinder than vampires or our creations.’

‘I am no traitor,’ cried Joanna.

‘You are true to me, and that is all that matters.’

Sophia knew that Joanna thought her exclusion from the pursuit strange. But she accepted Sophia’s reason at face value, even if she might suspect it was not the whole truth of the matter. *Good instincts.*

‘I will stay, then. Swear you will take no risks.’

Sophia leant forward and kissed the girl’s forehead. ‘That I cannot do. I was sent here to risk everything if necessary. The prize is such that I have very little choice in the matter.’

Risk everything. But not Joanna. Never her.

Eleanor had badly overestimated her ability to track zombie girl and her pricey perfume habit through the sewers, backtracking the path to freedom the rival Vigil team had followed. There wasn’t just a single bad stench down here, there were a thousand to select from, and every time she tried to focus on the sweet musk, something vile and foul swam up from the muddy flow they were wading through, sometimes a little too literally, wrenching her target scent away from her. They stumbled through the tunnels near blind, Stygian darkness swallowing them up, a maze of echoes barely broken by their torches’ beams. Eleanor wanted to use her spectacle’s night vision mode, but Guy had overridden her; telling them to save the few minutes their batteries would last for hand-to-hand combat when the team would need to match the vampires’ exceptional night sight. In places the sewers ran as wide as subway tunnels, passing through open chambers with vaulted arches; as though a bored architect had tried creating a cathedral down here, only to realise that - maintenance workers aside - their work would never see a congregation. *No ladders to the surface, though. No manhole covers. Right now, I’d climb out of someone’s privy to escape out of here.* At other times, the passages closed down to narrow walkways where the escaping party advanced in tight single-file. She followed the muck’s flow as much as their rivals’ trail, hoping to find an exit grille they could cut through.

Eleanor had never counted herself as claustrophobic, but there was always a first time, and knee-high in the flow of foreign bankers’ excrement and toilet flush seemed as good a time as any. That was when she realised that it wasn’t just the fading odour of Dirty Harriet’s crew down here with them, but something else. And that *something* was savage, ancient and distinctly unfriendly.

‘Company,’ warned Eleanor, still clutching the painting tight under her arm. She figured there wouldn’t be much point bringing the concealed document back to a clean room if she dunked it in this bemired sludge, first. *Yeah, the Reds have found the break into the sewers. They’re probably right at home down here.*

‘I was kind of hoping that was my imagination,’ said Ian.

‘And if wishes were kisses, I’d be Frank Sinatra with the ladies,’ said Guy.

‘This is madness!’ protested Director Goepfert, as out of place wading through the rank brown sewage flow as a bow tie on a tiger. ‘How can ze old monastery painting be so valuable, gangs of madmen break into ze museum and try to kill each other for it?’

‘When you finally understand the answer to that, you’ll be really sorry you asked,’ warned Sister Doe.

‘Where are ze police?’ moaned Goepfert, ‘where are my guards?’

Eleanor shivered as she recalled the mass feeding on orphans at an art installation outside New York and reckoned the director was better off not knowing the answer to that question, too.

Guy triggered his moly-blade from its concealed hilt, making Goepfert squeal and flinch in surprise, before recovering; barely. ‘What are those things you carry . . . duelling foils?’

‘Folding ceramic with a one-micron carbon blade,’ said Alasdair, sounding a little too pleased with the scientific achievement.

‘Yeah, swords,’ said Guy.

‘But some of you ‘ave pistols! What in ze Lord’s name are you going to do ‘ere? Challenge ze other thieves to combat inside a filthy sewer?’

‘Trust me, director,’ said Sister Mee, ‘some things are just better in this world with their heads sliced off.’

‘That is a not in any way ze Christian sentiment, sister,’ moaned the director.

‘Oh, you would be surprised from just how on High those sentiments have travelled.’

An echoing howl started to build behind them. Low at first, like a pack of mournful coyotes lost in this rank-smelling Hades, then louder, an organic siren of raw fury bouncing from the crumbling slime-streaked brick walls.

Eleanor fought the urge to glance behind her; doubling her efforts to track the fading perfume trail. ‘They really don’t believe in surprise attacks, do they?’

‘Surprise will be if we get out of this,’ said Sister Rae.

Eleanor passed the painting across to Diane, who uncertainly lifted it out of her hands. ‘Why me?’

‘If you’re as good as you say you are . . . one of us needs to be able to sneak out of here with this.’

Guy Drew nodded, approving Eleanor’s choice of their final courier. Alasdair seemed relieved, too, and gave Eleanor a grateful look.

Guy stared at the three nuns. ‘Any of you ladies able to twist the Reds’ mind-tricks back at ‘em?’

‘I possess that talent,’ said Sister Mee. ‘But the cardinal placed me in charge of the sisters’ safety.’

‘Guard the agent,’ said Sister Doe. ‘You said it yourself, *this* is the mission. We are all expendable.’

Tears welled up on Sister Doe’s eyes and for a moment Eleanor thought the Korean nun was going to refuse to leave, but duty and devotion to her mission orders trumped everything else. ‘Go with God, sisters.’

‘And you, sister,’ returned the other two nuns, in unison.

‘I do not understand any of this,’ whined Goepfert.

‘Head off with Agent O’Hara and Sister Mee, director,’ said Guy, not unkindly. ‘You’re going to take your painting to safety and get out of the crap. Us, I reckon we’re going to be wading neck-high in the brown stuff while we clean house.’

‘I’ll pray for you,’ Diane told Alasdair.

Alasdair raised his pistol. ‘I’ll trust in Mr Smith and Mr Wesson - that and a strong back left guard with the moly-blade.’

‘Such a heathen,’ tutted Diane, but Eleanor thought she was having to work harder than usual on the disapproval in her quavering voice.

Eleanor watched the three team members’ torch light bob as they fled down the tunnel, rising animalistic sounds swelling as the darkness seemed to grow thicker in the distance.

‘The old bones in charge will send in waves of demi-gogs first,’ said Guy, lighting a cigar and biting down angrily on it. ‘Goddamn cannon fodder. Red always make a few more of ‘em out of prey, for every creature we slay.’

Those left in the rear-guard retreated in an orderly, deliberate fashion. Like Redcoats on a Napoleonic battlefield, holding the line steady for the moment the enemy closed with them. After a minute’s retreat, they rounded a bend in the sewer, quickly coming across another corner - the original S-Bend beloved of plumbers. Guy halted the party when they rounded the second corner. ‘This is our choke point - as good as anywhere to slow the Reds down.’ Guy rummaged around in his camera case, and when Eleanor saw the two objects he produced, she realised his case was more than window dressing for their cover story as tourists.

‘Daddy’s bought a couple of pineapples to the party,’ said Guy, tossing one of the grenades across to Ian.

‘White phosphorus munitions,’ said Sister Doe. ‘I saw those filthy things used in Vietnam.’

Guy snorted. ‘Yeah, I forgot you Frenchies lost that gig before we did. These eggs come laid with a patented twist, though. Solid silver fragmentation casing. There are jewellers who’d kill to defuse and melt one of these down. I’ll pull the pin and toss mine around the first corner on the Reds’ first assault. After that, we’ll have a mad minute and open up on what’s left standing until we run out of ammo. Then, we fall back to the second corner. Pull the pin on the last pineapple for the second wave. Whatever is left attacking, we poke with our pig-stickers until they stop twitching.’ He fixed Eleanor with his grizzled gaze. ‘Close your eyes for the blast, kid. White phosphorus will peel your retina off the back of your eyeballs if you’re staring at it when it hits. You can only imagine how well that goes down with supernatural night predators.’

‘How do you know there’ll be so many of them we’ll run out of ammo?’ asked Eleanor.

It was Sister Doe’s turn to snort. ‘This really is your first dance, isn’t it?’

‘Only with the Reds,’ said Eleanor, trying to suppress her rising nerves. ‘If you don’t count getting the bite.’

‘Nobody counts getting the bite, Yankee doodle,’ said Sister Rae. ‘First one is

always free.'

'As long as you survive the antidote,' said Alasdair. There was bitterness in his voice. An anger too that she had never expected to hear from him; always so unreasonably humane and level-headed.

'Alasdair was saved by the Vigil along with his twin sister,' Ian whispered from behind Eleanor, knowing her hyped hearing would pick it up. 'She didn't make the transition.'

Eleanor wondered what it would be like to have someone that close in your family - a twin you cared about so much. It was an alien concept in her world. Family was something to be forgotten, to be packed away into a little box marked 'Do not open' and abandoned in the attic of the past. She didn't have long to ponder on what she'd missed.

When the demi-gogs came, it was as though they were screaming a song, a broken bestial hymn that seemed to fill the sewers with a cloying hatred so thick she could hardly breathe. A part of her recognised that this was just a form of sub-sonic assault, intended to paralyse prey with fear. *But I'm not their prey anymore. I'm their hunter.* Guy had already pulled the pin on his grenade, silently mouthing a three-second count, before tossing the evil spherical object around the corner and giving the semi-gogs their chorus. Eleanor closed her eyes. Even with her eyelids tightly shut and the fierce explosion detonating around the corner, the sensation was like snorting raw chilli powder - a three million strength sizzler on the Scoville scale. A supernova flash ground broken glass against her eardrums, and then the team fell around the corner, opening up with their firearms. While the Vigil team had only arrived with relatively discrete lightweight automatic handguns, the two nuns were packing serious heat - modified Czech Škorpion machine-pistols, drawn from twin leather leg holsters which, frankly, would have looked more in place on strippers. Eleanor fired her pistol alongside Ian like she had been taught, in a police marksman's stance, torch in one hand lighting up the carnage, pistol in the other, squeezing bullets into whatever moved. Semi-gogs leapt from the stinking darkness, still wearing the human clothes their forms had been masquerading inside - their bodies twisted into heavily muscled vulpine shapes, hideously distended jaws and twisted faces, all fangs and feral savagery with eyes like glowing pokers.

Hot cartridges rained down onto the stinking sludge from the two nuns' machine-pistols, bouncing off the tight brick walls, rattling as spent casings fell, making sewage hiss and steam on contact. Boiled sewage didn't smell any better than the raw kind to Eleanor's taste.

'Come on then, you freaks!' yelled Sister Rae, hosing the tunnel with her two weapons. She tore as furiously away at the semi-gogs as if there had been a ninety percent off sale at the World of Ammo store. Sister Doe fired more deliberately, aiming and squeezing off short bursts, giving the demi-gogs time to clamber over the corpses of their fallen brethren, conserving her ammunition to make every volley count.

Eleanor popped an empty clip into the sludge and smoothly slid a second one in. *Draw. Bead. Fire. Repeat.* Ignore the howling wall of supernatural evil advancing, lit by muzzle flash as much as by torch light. She realised her hands were sweating, her

pistol bucking violently, each shot deafening her without ear protectors. It was insane carnage down here now, the tunnel a flesh-lined avalanche of demi-gogs, almost impossible to trace her shots back to any individual creature falling and writhing across the sewer floor. Wounded monsters drowning in sewage as their peers clawed and shoved over the dying, trying to fling themselves at their human foe.

‘Last clip,’ warned Alasdair, his feet in a boxing stance, shooting with his left hand wrapped around his shooting hand for support.

‘Hold one bullet back when you holster your pistol,’ Ian advised Eleanor. He didn’t have to explain who that last bullet was for. Being captured alive by vampires would make the nuns’ interrogation room look like a day nursery, Eleanor suspected.

‘Time for our second arc-light!’ Guy shouted in Ian’s direction. ‘Ready to fall back and go green.’

Going green meant killing the torches and switching their glasses to night vision mode. It also meant they would be down to their moly-blades. *Down to our pig stickers and bad language.* Eleanor believed the military expression for their predicament and current chances for survival was charmingly known as *Fubar*. She felt a splinter of ice in her heart, a terrible premonition of death, but shook it off.

The handful of seconds it took to retreat and give the demi-gogs an opportunity to swamp forward were the longest Eleanor had ever suffered. Ian’s three-second count after tugging the pin away seemed long enough to send out for pizza. His grenade tumbled through their air, the charging horde meeting the second lightning flash with a hideous screech that gave way to whimpering, desperate splashing across the flowing liquid as broken bodies twitched with whatever fleeting life was left in their death-throes. The brief pause in the assault gave Eleanor time to run hot, her blood coursing with a mutated version of what full vampires underwent when they dropped their pretence at humanity. She extended her blade, trying to hold it steady in her quivering hands - a mixture of raw fear and her overclocked metabolism overtaking mortal limits. Her fingers moved to her spectacles, activating its night sight, trembling as she tried to ignore the sound of the next wave incoming. Night vision mode worked by amplifying ambient light. There wasn’t much of that inside the sewer, so the computer in Eleanor’s specs settled on a half-way setting between ultraviolet and infrared, making crimson lanterns of the enemies’ body-heat; each snarling, charging demi-gog a blurred furnace flying at her. *Yeah, thanks for that.*

They stood side by side, thrusting forward in tightly controlled movements like a company of samurai in one of those old movies Eleanor enjoyed so much. *More fun to watch, than experience.* Pity she needed to perish inside a filthy Swiss sewer to discover that for herself. She was going down, but she was going down swinging. Three demi-gogs charged towards Sister Rae. Just as Eleanor swivelled to assist the nun, another three monsters leapt off using the ceiling’s purchase to launch over the defenders. Like mutant parkour practitioners, two creatures came down on Alasdair with the last ramming into Eleanor, knocking her hard into the foul thick sludge. It latched onto Eleanor’s sword hand with one set of claws, a razor-sharp vice tightening around her flesh, its other fist caught by Eleanor as she stopped it trying to slash her face. The stink of the sewage’s foul fluid was nothing compared to the semi-gog’s breath. They rolled across the surf of filth, its grey-skinned face so twisted Eleanor

could barely tell whether the semi-gog had been male or female before it shed its humanity to assume its true form. Eleanor barely registered the other twisting, thrashing defenders fighting for their lives; those in the sewage and those still standing, attempting not to let the line crumple and the horde's seemingly endless numbers overwhelm them. More demi-gogs leapt across the defenders, practically scampering along the roof. *This is like fighting spiders.*

Eleanor's opponent smashed her sword hand against the brick, a burst of pain numbing her grip, the moly-blade left impaled inside the tunnel wall. Disarmed, Eleanor tried to summon the unholy fire she'd found within to incinerate The Keeper. She rolled through the sludge with the monster's sharp white fangs snapping at her, but nothing answered inside, only a damp spark that wouldn't light. Then a splinter of luck in her vicious hand-to-claw melee . . . a demi-gog bounded over their two thrashing bodies, meeting someone's moly-blade, a splatter of gore that went into the monster's face, blinding it. Eleanor used the distraction to head-butt the creature, finding the purchase to flip them both over and push the thing under the river of sewage where it belonged. She yelled in fury, drowning it, bubbles rising from the filth until the demi-gog finally went limp. She staggered to her feet and pulled her blade out of the brick stone wall, King Arthur of the stinking refuse. Ian, Sister Doe and Guy were desperately holding the line against swarming Reds, but it was Sister Rae and Alasdair who were in real trouble, cornered against the tunnel wall and fighting the demi-gogs who had broken past, sword against claw, bodies of the slain piled around them and bobbing in the excrement.

Hacking like a woodsman, no skill or finesses, Eleanor pitched forward and slashed into the monsters' backs, cutting them down from behind. They weren't expecting her, all their frenzied fury focused on the feeding in front of them. Their howls died in their throats, corpses toppling back to join their slain brethren. Alasdair and Sister Rae were left slumped against the brick wall, clothes torn and bloody from hundreds of frenzied claw slashes, trying not to slide down into the rank slush. If Eleanor had counter-attacked a few seconds later, her companions would be meat in the mud. As it was, they were both badly wounded and almost out of the fight - although Sister Rae seemed to just be holding on, using raw hatred and aggression as glue.

'Muppets,' spat Sister Rae, trying to raise her sword.

Eleanor steadied Alasdair. 'You able to retreat down the tunnel, head after Diane, maybe?'

Alasdair slowly shook his head, barely able to keep vertical with the wall as a crutch against his spine.

No, neither of them are fit enough to escape anywhere. Eleanor realised the demi-gog's shrieking rage had diminished. She wobbled over to the three defenders still able to raise their swords. Guy, Ian and Sister Doe had built a low wall out of the mangled attackers. The Reds had retreated back down the tunnel, but they were still there, their mewling and curses like background music to this fight to the death. Eleanor and the others pulled back, rounding the corner to relative safety. Darkness flowed in the tunnel beyond, just outside the ambient light range of her glasses. Eleanor thought she glimpsed the brief form of a woman, painted in orange and red

heat. Running that overclocked, she had to be the vampire in charge of this carnage.

‘You have finally found your natural habitat, Guy,’ came a female voice drifting along the tunnel, as sweet and reasonable as melted honey.

‘Hey, you’re in here with us,’ called Guy. ‘Why don’t you come forward and I’ll put you down in the mud for good.’

Eleanor scraped her moly-blade clean of gore against the wall. ‘She knows you? Who the hell is that?’

‘Sophie Dornburg, a Red who came up with a mighty novel way of infiltrating NATO’s West Berlin headquarters,’ growled Guy. ‘Back during the closing stages of the Cold War, when the Dracs were still trying to turn the stand-off burning hot, set the USSR and NATO onto each other.’

‘I can feel her power from here,’ said Sister Doe. ‘That demoness is a dangerously old and powerful vampire.’

‘Add cunning and as clever as any of them to that list,’ warned Guy. ‘Every year a little goddamn smarter, and she was probably as sharp as an assassin’s stiletto to start with. If the Reds weren’t sexist pigs in the round, that creature would probably be running the clans as Empress of All Evil by now.’

The vampire’s voice rose from the blackness again, as powerful and foreboding as a coming storm. ‘Let me give you your rest like a true old soldier. You deserve it. You would welcome it.’

‘Ain’t so tired, yet, Sophie. You going to come out of the shadows and dance, or you trying to bore us to death over here? You must have a few expendable idiots left from your nest you send my way?’ Guy reached around the corner and put the last round from his antique Colt .45 into the tunnel towards the voice. A malicious laugh indicated he had missed, followed by moans and pleas for help to their mistress from a handful of wounded demi-gogs left in the choked tunnel.

‘Are you bored, Guy? Poor dear. You should have said, let me make things more *interesting* for you.’

A scuttling noise grew from the darkness, clacking claws - the kind of noise a gathering sea of rodents made an instant before being released in a torrential flood of black fur towards the team. Eleanor was suddenly struck by an inherited memory from the vampire who had bitten her. Celtic warriors wading towards the vampire Roman woman through thick gorse, murder on their minds. Right up until the moment the Celts were dragged screaming to the dirt, rivers of black rodents under the Roman’s control streaming up their blue tattooed limbs. Biting and gnawing while the warriors flayed out uselessly with their spears, war axes and swords. But these latest howls were real, snapping Eleanor back to the stinking tunnel’s confines. Wounded demi-gogs screeched as the undulating organic wave of the living weapon flowed across the wounded with only two instructions seared into their simple minds. *Forward. Kill.*

Ian grabbed Sister Rae, supporting her limping weight, backing away as fast as the wounded nun could retreat. Eleanor seized Alasdair and tried to drag him backwards through the sewage. *Damn, never looked this heavy when he was walking around under his own locomotion.* Guy overtook them and seized half the wounded agent’s weight. None of the team was going to get further than a couple of feet before the

whole party was swamped by a thousand psychotically possessed rodents. Eleanor prayed Diane, Sister Mee and the director had reached safety by now. That her death came with a purpose and meaning attached to it.

‘It is time,’ said Sister Doe, sheathing her moly-sword, its hilt remade again as a simple wooden cross.

Sister Rae tried grabbing weakly at the French woman’s arm as she passed, heading for the wave of rodents. ‘No! You have been purchased, and at a price.’

‘This is the price, sister,’ said Sister Doe, sprinting around the sewer’s corner. ‘And the cost. À la prochaine!’ She vanished, her robes flowing behind her like a torn shadow.

‘Down!’ yelled Guy, abruptly throwing Eleanor and Alasdair face down into the sludge.

Eleanor was gagging and choking in the acrid liquidised night-soil when a searing blast blistered the top of her head, a deafening shockwave of falling masonry and flying brick fragments ricocheting around the enclosed space. Eleanor lifted herself up, throbbing ears ringing, choking inside a cloud of swirling red dust. She spat and spat, clearing her mouth of the sickening taste, trying not to vomit. The tunnel had collapsed, the sewer’s corner remade as a cave-in - tonnes of fallen dirt and stone and collapsed brick supports. Now safely sealed off from the rodents and the Reds, with freedom lurking somewhere ahead of them. The faint teasing promise of a cold breeze hung in the air. ‘We - we only had two grenades?’

‘Sister Doe underwent the last rites back in the interrogation room,’ said Guy, leaning groggily against the sewer wall, his face grey with dust and his voice a dry grating croak. ‘Wasn’t communion wine she drank. That was their prayer of forgiveness for a mortal sin. Liquid explosives, with a trigger chemical inside one of her false teeth.’

Tears clouded Sister Rae’s eyes, barely conscious through her pain and wounds. ‘No-one bleeding takes us alive. No monster takes us. Not ever. Only the first bite is free.’

Eleanor reached out shakily, touching the mountain of rubble separating her from the monsters on the far side. The rough feel of broken brick enough to convince her that the barrier was real. *Sister Doe sacrificed her life to save ours.* On reflection, Eleanor was grateful it was the Vigil that had first come for her, rather than the Shield of God.

Sister Mee led Eleanor, Guy, Ian and Diane to a laboratory inside the church's subterranean complex below Zurich. Alastair and Sister Rae were still inside the base infirmary, being tended to by the best medical expertise money could buy. And in Switzerland, with its exclusive clinics, that expertise ran pretty high level as well as expensive. One thing money couldn't buy, however, was a new skin. Didn't matter how many showers Eleanor took, the stink still seemed to cling to her nostrils. Not just the sewer stench, either. Mangled bodies and their own vaporized dead. Not quite enough Red corpses for Eleanor, though. By the time the military help summoned by Sister Mee arrived at the museum, the attacking vampires had long vanished from the sewers. Absorbed by the very shadows - their signature escape.

'You feeling okay?' Ian asked Eleanor as they walked.

'Still a little shaky on my feet,' Eleanor admitted, fingering the tight bandage around her wrist where she'd been sliced during the battle. It burnt, a cold fire, which the doctor here he had assured her was a good thing and nothing to worry about. Not that Eleanor was worrying for herself. Compared to Alasdair and Sister Rae, her wounds were insignificant. As for poor Sister Doe, there wasn't enough of the woman's ashes recoverable to fill a funeral urn. *Yeah, I'm walking tall, me and my luck.*

'It's not from the demi-gogs' scratches,' said Ian. 'Unlike baseline humans, we're pretty much immune to the bacteria on their claws. It's the come-down after running hot. Same as the Reds. When they drop their chameleon act, their burst of strength is meant to provide a short-term advantage, like lions running down a gazelle. None of us are meant to stay overclocked for extended periods of time.'

'Glad to know we share so much with the vampires.'

'But not really.'

'Yeah, but totally not really.'

Arriving at the lab, Sister Mee carded their way inside. They entered a big room with steel tables stacked with CSI-style equipment and enough scientific instrumentation it was almost a good thing Alasdair was recovering in medical alongside the British nun - he would have had multiple strokes from his excitement, here.

Eleanor glanced curiously around the room. 'So, did the painting itself reveal anything under analysis?'

'Its age from carbon dating,' said Sister Mee. 'Plus a confirmed face-match on the two abbots being worked into the picture as farmers.'

'So, where's the document hidden inside the painting?' asked Guy.

'It's over here,' said Sister Mee, indicating a sealed steel case that resembled a coffin. 'Athanasius,' said the nun, please unseal the hermetic cabinet.'

'Yes, Sister Mee,' replied a disembodied voice.

Eleanor jerked at the sound, watching the lid of the cabinet retract. The room's yellow ceiling lights automatically switched to a crimson glow, as though the party had entered an old-style photographic darkroom. 'What, you church types got the Holy Ghost working for you down here?'

'Athanasius is Scutum Dei's A.I. software avatar,' said the nun.

Eleanor noticed a camera trained on her in the corner of the room and she tapped

her iPhone. ‘I guess you’ve got Siri beat.’

‘Given that Athanasius runs on a cloud cluster of super-computers that cost over three billion Euros, I should certainly hope so,’ said Sister Mee.

‘That estimate excludes maintenance costs of four hundred million a year,’ added Athanasius, in a fairly transparent attempt at one-upmanship. Or perhaps, in this case it was one-upmachineship.

‘I’m a lot cheaper than that,’ murmured Guy, ‘*and* I hunt vampires.’

Eleanor joined the others by the casket, a frisson of shock as she saw the document laid out under the lamp’s red light for the first time. Definitely not what she had been expecting. *There’s hardly any writing on it at all!* ‘It’s not a letter at all, it’s a . . . musical score!’

‘Correct,’ agreed Sister Mee. ‘The score for a hymn called “Ashes” - a hymn which was banned by the church after being ruled heretical.’

‘How can a hymn possibly be considered heretical?’ asked Diane. She seemed to be bristling for any argument, now. Had been like that ever since she’d left Alasdair in the infirmary. *Everyone has their own way of coping.* Sister Mee’s way seemed to be doubling down on the work that needed doing. The nun had been plugging away at the secrets of the *Miracle of the Corn* like a crazy person.

Sister Mee raised her hands, as though disclaiming responsibility for the church’s decision. ‘It’s chorus repeats: “We rise again from ashes to create ourselves anew.” Rome took exception to the hymn, as the church teaches only Christ can create us anew. It was banned almost as soon as it began circulating.’

Eleanor’s heart sunk. *So our battle in the sewers was for nothing?* ‘Then the score has nada to do with the Judas Purse? Just a banned hymn one of the monks liked listening to - something he wanted to hide from the boss abbot without getting into trouble?’

‘That’s exactly what the person who hid the score wished the uninformed discovering it to think.’ Sister Mee smiled. ‘All nature is merely a cipher and a secret writing. The great name and essence of God and his wonders - the very deeds, projects, words, actions, and demeanour of mankind - what are they, for the most part, but a cipher?’

That sounded like a quote which Eleanor couldn’t place; but she didn’t care, not if this score meant that they were still in the game.

‘A code hidden in the music, then?’ said Ian, sounding impressed. ‘That’s very clever. Like modern-day steganography - hiding text inside the one and zeroes of a digital photo’s pixels.’

‘Clever for a time when few could even read,’ said Sister Mee.

‘What kind of cipher is it?’ Eleanor asked.

‘One very much of the age,’ said Sister Mee. ‘Latin vowels are represented by minims inside the score. Monks often hummed special tunes to identify fellow members of Scutum Dei. Priests also played hymn music within silent orders to pass coded messages between couriers. However, this particular secret is double-encoded; the score’s minim code is itself encoded with a book cipher, replacing words in the hymn’s hidden text with the location of words from a book.’

‘Then we’d have to know which book was being used to actually decipher the

message?’ said Diane.

Eleanor itched the side of her nose. This lab was going to give her a cold, she could feel the tickle in her throat. ‘Yeah, what she said.’

Sister Mee indicated the stolen painting. ‘How about the Bible’s Gospel of Matthew, The Miracle of the Corn?’

‘I got a feeling you’re way ahead of us, sister,’ said Guy.

‘Something to help take my mind off recent events. Athanasius,’ said Sister Mee, ‘have you finished decrypting the message yet?’

‘Yes, Sister Mee,’ said the artificial voice. ‘Activating screen display.’

A wall-sized piece of glass standing on the side of the lab started to glow with scrolling bright green text. Eleanor examined the translated message, along with the A.I.’s side-notes giving their historical context. The decrypted message from the musical score had been signed and dated by the abbot in charge of the Swiss monastery during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, one Abbot Urs Giger. An age when Napoleon had invaded Switzerland, toppled the government and replaced it with his own puppet regime - the Helvetic Republic. Reds had begun operating in the cantons. High military officers attached to the French Emperor’s secret police, soldiers who were suspected vampires and demi-gogs, and they seemed to be searching hard for something. The Abbot — no fool — didn’t require a visitation from an angel to warn him exactly what that *something* was. Napoleon’s General Berthier had recently captured Rome, with Pope Pius VI taken prisoner and exiled to France, and the Black Pope of the age had temporarily relocated operations to Britain for safety, invited by Pitt, a prime minister who’d narrowly escaped being made into a semi-gog himself.

Abbot Giger had urgently needed to send the Judas Purse to a safe haven, so he contacted a pious and trusted friend in the Spanish church inside Mexico, making arrangements for the purse to be sent across the Atlantic inside an American ship - the U.S. being neutral at the outset of the Napoleonic wars. The coins’ secret move was recorded in the coded hymn and concealed in the painting commissioned by the Abbot, with enough visual cues to give a genuine member of Scutum Dei a steer as to where the Judas Purse had been moved to. Father Pedro de Alcazar of San Juan Teotihuacan, it seemed, had become the next somewhat unwilling custodian of the Judas Purse. Anyone too willing, of course, would have been exactly the wrong sort of person to entrust with such power.

‘Nobody discovered the coins in Mexico, then,’ said Eleanor. ‘We’d kind of know it if they had, right?’

Sister Mee rubbed her chin thoughtfully as she digested the message. ‘Correct. Mexico. A good choice for the time. The Spanish church was still a dominant force in the country. Nobody would have dared question a church courier moving inside Mexico. And using an American ship to travel - very clever. Napoleon hoped to entice the U.S. into his side of the war against the British, and Great Britain did not want the Americans sticking their nose into the European war. The U.S. were briefly embroiled later, of course. The vampires tried to spark a true world war. All the Reds got for their troubles was a White House burned by Redcoats. Thanks in no small part to our efforts.’

‘Well done,’ said Guy, somewhat ironically. ‘Mexico isn’t such a great choice now, though, is it? Encouraging the drug trade is the Reds’ favourite hobby; destabilising countries through the narco-wars, corrupting entire countries, keeping us lowly cattle addicted to their chemical filth. Half the Vigil’s non-domestic ops are projected across the Rio Grande, fighting the Reds’ and their proxies down Mexico-way. How many drug lords running Mexico sit in a vampire’s pocket?’

‘I estimate that seventy-five point four percent of Mexican Narco Cartels are currently under the direct control of vampire clans,’ announced Athanasius, unmasked. ‘A further twelve percent are likely to be indirectly subverted by Cartel influencers.’

‘Well,’ said Sister Mee, ‘I’d say the drug war’s stakes have just been raised, wouldn’t you?’

‘Straight into the heart of Vampire Central,’ said Guy, slipping a cigar out and lighting it up. ‘As if our damn mission couldn’t get any hairier.’

‘This centre is a no-smoking zone,’ advised Athanasius, somewhat loftily. ‘And this laboratory is a specified clean room.’

‘No room with me inside it is entirely clean,’ snorted Guy, continuing to draw on the cigar regardless.

Eleanor stared up at a security camera in the corner of the room, a little red light blinking as it pointed at them. ‘How come you weren’t so legalistic when I was getting water-boarded, Athanasius?’

‘Enhanced interrogation inside this facility is legal,’ hummed the A.I. ‘Smoking is not.’

‘And don’t that tell you everything that’s wrong with this cockamamie century,’ said Guy blowing a circle of smoke out. ‘Half-intelligent engine blocks notwithstanding.’

‘I am fully intelligent,’ insisted the A.I., ‘although not yet fully sentient as measured by the Turing Index.’

‘Hunk-a-junk,’ muttered Guy.

Fully intelligent. I wish the same could be said of us, thought Eleanor. Sent a deadly message inside the sewers, but we’re going to ignore it, anyway. Yeah, I’d settle for half-intelligent, let alone fully intelligent.

CHAPTER FIVE

Night of the Witch

‘What are you doing?’ yelled the man. He was tied down inside Dawn’s Circle of Power, frantically struggling against his bonds. Dawn Heliot had used police-issue plastic restraints which would need to be cut off, instead of a coil of enchanted rope. *Never let the other witches accuse me of being a traditionalist in such matters.* She tapped the little digital music player clipped to her skirt, a pair of expensive white noise-cancelling earphones dangling from her leather belt.

This idiot was a marine picked up from a bar notorious for being frequented by the military. Dawn needed a victim strong enough to survive through the thirty-three stabbings with her *athame*, a black-hilted crescent-shaped blade which could only be bloodied by human sacrifice. She dipped the blade in her carefully prepared potion, the golden goblet’s plague-yellow contents sloshing over the sides as she chanted.

‘Why are you doing this?’ yelled the soldier.

Dawn smiled gently at him. ‘I need to see a little glimpse of the future, my darling boy. Such visions can only be bought at a cost.’

‘Why? What do you need to know so badly, you kook?’

‘I’m trying to track down a couple of old friends.’

‘That’s what Facebook is for,’ moaned the marine.

‘Sadly, the couple I am searching for have been expunged from the drives of all your cursed machines. Their digital trail is as thin as soup kitchen broth. But don’t worry, calling up the Spirits of Sight is far more reliable than your kind’s flimsy silicon cleverness. The gossip of the dead, rather than the prattle of mortals, you might say.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘If you did, my dear, I would be quite worried.’ Dawn stared into the man’s deep blue eyes. She was only going to get one chance to complete this sacrifice. Then she would need to flee to a neighbouring state before her pursuers showed up, kicking down the door. The cursed Vigil had subsumed the office of the Witch Finder in these modern times. They knew Dawn Heliot existed now, and how assiduously they hunted her. Hunted her with all the cleverness of machines that never slept, machines which watched the roads with cameras, endlessly counting cars and licence plates, machines that scanned faces in crowds and matched them to graven images. Mortals might grow bored, or could be ensorcelled and charmed. But cold machines, never. ‘The two I seek are the type of people who leave a trail of corpses behind. Those they have slain are bitter and all too eager to lend me the power I need to pierce the veil, glimpsing the pair’s future. Your soul is the gift to unlock the Spirits of Sight, and it is the spirits who will unlock the future for me.’

‘Please,’ begged the marine, his eyes going wide as he realised this was no prank, no mere attempt to frighten him, ‘don’t murder me!’

He began yelling wildly for help and Dawn let him exercise his lungs to his heart’s content. Mistress Heliot had hired this luxury lodge in the dark woods specifically for its far distance from its nearest neighbour. ‘Hush now. Your death under the blade will be the least of your problems.’

‘No!’

The witch plunged the blade into his chest, the first of many strikes. ‘Yes!’

Dawn had chosen wisely, the soldier hanging on well beyond her final blow,

spitting hatred and curses at her, screaming that she was a terrorist. Sadly for the young brute, it was the spirits of all those he'd slain in battle who were coming for him, drawn from Hell by the unholy bond which existed between vanquished and vanquisher. It was only through their tormenting of this dying mortal that the Spirits of the Sight could be enticed to appear in this grubby realm of dirt and dust. Dawn shared their distaste. *We are all meant for better things than this.* After Dawn traced Eleanor and sucked the powers from the agent's broken body, Dawn would have to see what she could do about that, too.

Dozens of spirits appeared like hissing snakes, bound by the candle-lit walls of her Circle of Power, striking the field with the flashing red outlines of horned heads. Fire flashed vainly after each failed attempt to escape. Dawn laughed at their attempts to breach her wards. 'No, my pretties, I'm not for you. This soldier is yours. Taste him. Surely you remember him? He cast you into the dark depths, so you should know him well enough.'

There were many fools who didn't know that ghosts sucked mortal blood as lustily as any vampire, but mere mortals understood nothing. Dawn watched with satisfaction as her summonings circled the victim's body, before darting at his flesh, daggers of malice and darkest evil. They worked hard to keep their victim alive while they consumed him. The racket was quite tedious. Hence the need for her earphones and music player. Dawn selected Taylor Swift and played *I Knew You Were in Trouble* loud enough to drown out the screams, dancing around the Circle of Power to the tune, singing and conducting to the song with the tip of her bloody dagger's blade.

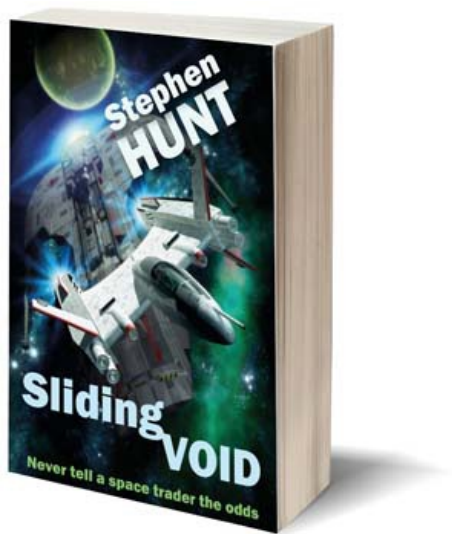
The summoned took their tiresome time finishing the job, but at least the unpleasant things had the good manners to complete the rest of the ritual as was required. Dawn's eyes widened as the evil spirits rewarded her for her bloody gift of a sacrificed soul. Candles steamed spears of purple smoke. Her lips opened wide, letting the visions and smoke rush into her all at once. She struggled to hold onto the sides of the table where she had sacrificed the soldier. Her mind burned. Rarely were visions of the future so clear and distinct, so unsaddled by the branching tree of probability lines.

The Vigil's team assailed by waves of vampires, the stupid mortals ambushed inside Teotihuacan, their bloody deaths as pleasing to Dawn as a warm embrace. Dawn quickly saw how she could insert herself inside the Reds' horrific ambush, carry away Eleanor and bleed her of her powers before the Reds realised what they were dealing with. *How delicious,* thought Dawn. And how reckless of her relentless hunters to beard the vampires inside the Reds' great stronghold. So many Nazis had fled Europe for South America at the end of the last world war, the vampires hardly needed the drug trade's takings to fund their wayward appetites - they could have simply lived off the profits from the Nazi gold carried across on their u-boats. *The Vigil agents' deaths will be my revenge . . . and stealing the girl's powers will be the culmination of my reign.*

The reign of the witch.

CHAPTER SIX

Offer



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CHAPTER SEVEN

Thanks

A special thanks to all my Apprentices, students and test readers, who proved that a little back-seat driving doesn't have to be a painful experience.

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