

THE DARKNESS OF THE VIGIL

Part 1 of the Vigil series.

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- TIME OUT

CHAPTER ONE

They Eat Humans, Don't They?

The security on the staff's back door lifted the badge across Ian's chest and scanned its barcode while he waited by his cart. He tried, unsuccessfully, to slow his pounding heart. It was natural to be nervous. And not just because this pair of brutes looked like ex-Marines squeezed into black suits. Matching bald heads, ear mikes and hulking muscles as large as sides of beef fattened on the free steroid diet. *In retrospect, that should be a bit of a giveaway*, thought Ian. After all, why should an exclusive art installation in a semi-abandoned factory ten miles away from the nearest highway need these lethal-looking bouncers? Nobody uninvited was likely to be turning up here . . . mistaking the crumbling, weed-overrun industrial buildings for an illegal dance party. No, Ian had reasons for having to hide his nerves while projecting the image of bored, minimum-wage staff. Good reasons. Deadly reasons. Ian glanced back towards his large catering van. It lay on the far side of the makeshift car park, a lot packed with expensive Mercedes, BMW and Range Rover vehicles. The cars were another clue that this factory wasn't quite what it seemed. Artists and starving went together. Artists and Porsche four-wheel-drives, not so much.

Ian admired a bright purple Ferrari resting on the lot like a coiled panther. 'That's a hell of a car.'

'Yeah, that's a *Hell* of a car.' Guy Drew halted his plastic food cart directly behind Ian's, its four wheels resting on the mouldering, broken tarmac.

Like Ian, Guy wore a double-breasted white chef's jacket with a pair of stiff black trousers. He was old and grizzled, almost three times Ian's age, a disappointed flat bulldog face that spoke – falsely, as it happened – of being a serf-to-the super-rich for far too long. It was a face born to have a half-smoked cigarette naturally bobbing in the corner of his curled lips. He didn't currently. Nobody here wanted to smell Guy's second-hand cancer-stick smoke. His hair was short-cropped, silver, and as bristly as the old man's manners.

To the rear of Guy, Diane O'Hara trundled up with the third cart, her neck bright and blotchy above the chef's jacket, skin almost approaching the colour of her short bob of ginger hair. That neck was like a map if you knew how to read it. Today, the destination was a nervous *Please let me survive this*. Luckily for Ian – for all three of them, really – the bouncers were relying on more traditional detection equipment. Ian wheeled his cart under a wide metal detection arch, as if someone had set up an airport on the far side of the gate. The old man and Diane went through next. Not a beep or a bleep from the scanning equipment. Neither of the two bouncers paid Diane

a second glance. She was pretty in quirky, winsome, young girl-next-door way. A lot more so if she ever came to realise it. But compared to the people inside, all the beautiful people, the three visitors might as well have landed from Planet Ugly. And, of course, Ian, Diane and Guy also wore glasses. None of the people inside needed spectacles. Not unless it was for vanity . . . designer pairs with plain glass rather than prescription lenses, for that extra-intellectual hipster look.

The third bouncer on duty on the opposite side of the gate gazed suspiciously at Guy, as though he could scent a bad odour. ‘He with you?’ asked the bouncer, addressing Ian.

‘No. *He’s with me,*’ said Guy.

Ain’t that the truth of it. Natural enough for the rent-a-thugs to believe that Ian was the leader of this little group as opposed to Guy. Ian walked confidently rather than slouching, his white polycotton jacket stretched taut over a muscular frame. Perhaps a college student in his first year, looking to earn a little extra money to supplement a sports scholarship? Ian wouldn’t have appeared out of place in a bouncer’s suit, except for his face. A little trusting, soft, a smooth and untroubled demeanour. A well-fed Afghan Hound to this guard unit’s hungry Dobermans.

‘You’re late,’ said the third bouncer. ‘The others have already arrived and are setting up.’

Ian grunted non-committedly when what he wanted to say was: *Of course we’re late. We had to intercept the real catering van. We had to take out the people inside. We had to hack your stupid staff list ID system.* At least they had remembered to spray the catering company livery and logo across their van the day before. Give it time to dry. Nothing would have given them away faster than wet paint.

‘We’ll work fast,’ said Guy Drew, in a tone that suggested he really didn’t give a fig.

All three of them passed into the factory. It had been a vehicle assembly plant once, all the large machinery long since stripped out. Ian found himself inside a sizable chamber with exposed brick walls where a mobile kitchen had been set up. A long line of stainless steel gas-fired hobs and ovens in the chamber’s centre, like some extreme barbecue cooking contest had started. The chamber had been a two storey structure once, but the upper storey had disintegrated, only a few jutting metal supports to indicate there had been another level above.

A backroom event coordinator jogged over. He looked flustered. ‘You’re late.’

‘Getting here was simply murder,’ said Guy.

‘Just get the plates and cutlery out and onto the buffet tables. Now! Hurry up!’

Diane watched the coordinator jog off to hassle the staff cooking at the oven unit. ‘Smells like roast chicken. Is that a good thing or not?’

‘Depends on whether this food is intended for the people already arrived or for the latecomers,’ said Ian.

‘Wasn’t so long ago you two were newbies,’ said Guy, sliding the side of his cart open and removing piles of white plates. ‘Same as the saps turning up here later for the Reds.’

The crockery was expensive, durable white catering issues. The cutlery was made of the same substance air stewards gave out on passenger jets. Resembled metal, but

in reality an ingenious plastic designed to snap and break if anyone tried to use it to hijack a plane. Its use here wasn't an accident. The guests inside didn't want to get stabbed.

The three of them piled the plates on top of their carts, removed stacked boxes of cutlery, and then pushed the carts through the doors into the main event. Another ex-factory hall, even larger than the first. This one's floor was scattered with metal sculptures – abstract, for the most part, with just a hint of form – lit by multi-coloured uplighters, lights shifting and highlighting different angles and sides along the works, making them seem to move and sway. A crowd of wealthy-looking patrons moved through the exhibits, all wearing dark dinner jackets and discrete ball gowns, the standard uniform of the rich, the chatter of their observations and small-talk swelled by classical music playing from expensive sound-stand speakers. Catering staff passed among the patrons carrying trays of finger food and fluted champagne glasses, allowing the guests to graze. Ian and his two companions pushed their carts to buffet tables lining the back wall of the installation. Piles of hot food on metal trays. Heavy cream tablecloths. Most of the food looked Asian and Japanese-inspired. Coin-sized pieces of chicken in soy sauce; duck dumplings; peppered twists of squid, octopus balls; pale squares of hot vinegared rice. It smelled good too and Ian had to resist the urge to pick at the buffet himself as he started to toss out piles of plates, dropping cutlery upright into heavy porcelain dispensers. *Wouldn't do to get tossed out of here for raiding the table.* Guy and Diane worked by his side. Quickly, efficiently. But then, they were a team, even in such mundane tasks.

There was slight tickling by Ian's ear as his spectacle's hidden microphone fired into life. Using silent bone vibration-induction rather than actual sound, so nobody without specs could overhear Alasdair's words. Alasdair was the other member of this night's team, warming himself out in the surveillance van on the lot. *Lucky lad.* 'Coach is just parking up now. Supper is served.'

'Special order menu,' muttered Ian.

Diane and Guy had heard the message too in their frame mikes. Ian traded what he hoped was a reassuring glance with Diane. In reality, he probably just looked worried.

It wasn't long before the bus's passengers had been ushered through the front-of-door security check. There were maybe thirty of them, an even mixture of boys and girls, none of them older than seventeen, the youngest maybe ten. They were underdressed for the occasion, jeans and t-shirts and inexpensive dresses. But then, this group had arrived from an orphanage. They were wearing charity cast-offs. *And frankly,* Ian mused, *they are the lucky ones.* Their families were already dead or dysfunctionally distant, not murdered to order to supply a spare meal. The orphanage thing was old, but the Reds never seemed to get tired of using this ploy. *Sometimes I think institutional care is just one big factory farm.* Easier to arrange than hijacking a plane and faking an air crash, when it came to snacking on passengers, though.

A tall distinguished-looking man in a dinner jacket took to the stage near the main entrance. After he welcomed the visiting party of orphans to the gallery he made a speech about how glad he was that the proceeds from tonight's viewing was going to benefit a family shelter in New Jersey. Then the compere made way for the gallery owner to give a talk about the healing benefits of conceptual art for underprivileged

children. It was all hot-air with just one purpose. Getting as much food as possible down the necks of the visitors from the home. The youngsters duly obliged. Whoever the inside contacts in the home were, they had intentionally kept the kids hungry before getting here. No meal before they left. No snacks on the bus in.

Same old same old. The Reds preferred their prey with a full stomach and the prey's muscles stressed by the flight-or-fight response. Gave the food an exquisite flavour, or so Ian had been told, and when you only needed to feed once every six months, it was all about the flavour. *Maybe that is why the Reds favour veal over mutton.*

'It is time,' called the gallery owner on the platform, raising his hands.

'Stay frosty,' growled Guy, for Ian and Diane's benefit. 'Hold your lead.'

Here we go. At least the jawing about the joys of modern art has stopped.

'Let the feast begin!'

By the buffet table, most of the orphanage party had turned around in surprise, obviously wondering what the triumphant-sounding clown in the dinner jacket was going on about now. Even the ones still stuffing their faces paused and gasped when the crowd of supposed wealthy benefactors began to move towards the children almost as one, a steady stalking gait. Hungry expressions distorted the patrons' faces, pairs of pronounced razored fangs extending from their teeth. None of the unfortunate young victims knew what was going on, but they understood this was crazy freaky. They knew that having a crowd of internet billionaires and trust fund types suddenly encircling and advancing on you as though you were mice and they were cats was in no way normal behaviour.

A single orphan hadn't joined the group of wary children pulling back, though. One of the older visitors. Standing alone, her legs spread and ready to kick ass. She wielded a useless airline knife that would crumple on the first thrust. Ian admired the attitude, but the young lady didn't have a snowflake in hell's chance against this many half-turned. Even if the attackers had been human, they could easily beat the brave girl down with these numbers. Ian felt guilty. Allowing this massacre to happen. Human bait for the wider war. *Come on girl; give them a fight worthy of the name.*

Plates dropped, cries of fear and surprise, the children retreated back around the table in a reflexive herd defence. The rest of the catering staff drew away and waited calmly by the wall. As uncaring as if they were watching dogs chase birds around a park. Ian loathed the human groupies. In it for the money or the sick thrill of watching. Paid to look the other way. Eager for their chance to earn a place in the pack. And right now, Ian hated himself, too. *We have to wait. We have to watch too.* Only some of the beautiful people were vampires or the half-turned wretches known as demi-gogs. The remainder were groupies, as mortal as the average Joe on the street. There was always an insanely long waiting list just for the chance of becoming a Red. *It's amazing what the super-rich will do for immortality.* It had taken a year for Ian to unlearn everything he thought he knew about vampires from the movies and fiction. Apart from their lust for human blood . . . that part was all-too-true. Garlic, useless. Holy water, useless. The old daylight test, useless. Aversion to crosses, forget about it. Vampires were perfect chameleons. When Reds wanted to play human, their DNA was indistinguishable from human. When they fed, after they had converted, it

was like flipping a kill switch. *I guess their DNA is a lot different, then. Faster, stronger, quicker to heal. Able to suck the life out of a human quicker than sucking juice out of an orange.* Of course, by that point in proceedings, taking a vampire in a feeding cycle alive, sticking a needle in its arm and drawing a blood sample in the name of medical research, that would prove kind of suicidal. *Better Dead than Red.* Always.

‘Switching to heat,’ announced Al’s voice at the back of Ian’s ear.

The view across Ian’s spectacles altered to infrared, a complete head-up display with the heat signatures of those inside the party room tactically marked with coloured arrow graphics. Green for human-level metabolisms – blue for demi-gogs. None of the arrows blinked red yet. And that would signal the prize. That was why Ian and his two companions were inside here. They had to give it time. When a vampire’s body was warming up, it was indistinguishable from a demi-gog. Took a minute or more for it to convert to the full Dracula. Of course, that was a minute these poor benighted orphans didn’t have. There wasn’t exactly an overpopulation of Reds in the world. They were territorial and didn’t care to manufacture too many rivals. Demi-gogs might share the same terrible hunger as the Reds, but at best the half-turned wretches were only a fraction as powerful as a full Red. House cats compared to lions. But such kitties could still scratch for their owners.

Over by the buffet tables’ side the demi-gogs seized a couple of the children and now the screaming really began. Out in front, the dark-haired girl sliced out at the four attackers who surrounded her – three dinner-jacketed men and one woman in a luxury trouser suit. The nearest monster swung back out of the way. Ian had him pegged as recently half-turned. Should have known that knife wouldn’t harm him too badly, even if it had been stamped out of pure steel. Or maybe the newbie had mistaken it for silver. The remaining three demi-gogs weren’t put off, though. They went in like a coordinated pack. Had the girl’s flailing body locked down tight on the floor within seconds.

The infrared reading on one of the figures in the crowd flared sun-bright, a blinking red graphic across Ian’s display bouncing madly just in case he was either asleep on the job or completely colour blind.

‘And we have a winner!’ spat Guy. The tough old dude didn’t waste a single second. He reached for his cart’s handle, twisted it to the side, and slid out the concealed ceramic-bladed sword. From short-order chef to twenty-first-century samurai vampire slayer in one easy move.

‘Oh, cheez’n crackers,’ swore Diane. She pulled out her sword from her cart as Ian hit the hidden latch on his. Spring loaded, the reassuring heft of the blade thumped into his right hand.

They had what they had come for. *Maybe a bit too much. A metabolism running that overclocked. Big trouble.* Ian’s specs targeted a woman wearing a one-piece velvet blue gown, crazy tall, immaculately beautiful – of course – with sandy-coloured hair that had a Roman style to it, piled on top and running to elaborate curls by the time her strands ran out. Ian hoped she wasn’t actually old enough to have developed a taste for that hairstyle during the reign of the Caesars. The ancient Reds were always the most powerful. Fully in control of the more peculiar range of powers

that developed with long age. She moved towards the orphan girl. Her four half-turned servants held the girl out for the Red. Shoving dinner forward. An offering for the dark goddess. One of the strange twisted iron statues stood behind the vista; reinforcing the awful feeling Ian was witness to some prehistoric human sacrifice.

‘Crash team inbound,’ announced the disembodied voice by Ian’s ear. Naturally, Al’s wireless feed from the glasses had immediately picked up the Red’s presence. ‘I’m prepping medical out here.’

Guy Drew was already fighting through the crowd, cutting down the half-turned as he ran. With each killing blow, struck bodies trembled and converted to a dark ash-like residue, splintering apart like dry barbecue remains. The old man was trying to cut a path to the Red, but the furious numbers of half-turned were slowing him.

All the goodness has already gone, said Diane’s voice, directly in Ian’s mind. It didn’t matter Diane was using what the team laughingly called brain-mail now. Signora Roma wouldn’t be able to eavesdrop on our telepathy, but she’d hear it like a buzzing. The Red knew her party had been crashed. And she was a fool if she couldn’t guess by whom.

Protect the children from the half-turned, Ian projected back at Diane as he sprinted forward. *I’m with Guy. We’ll take down Signora Roma-hair together.*

‘Forced entry!’ warned Alasdair, the disembodied voice shaking inside Ian’s ear. The crack of ceiling-opening charges from above was followed by a shower of masonry. Egress allowed the whup-whup-whup of Blackhawk helicopter rotors on stealth-mode to intrude into the factory, along with the tumbling whips of rappel lines, then the slicing noise of dozens of troopers abseiling down. These days the cavalry wore black body armour rather than blue jackets. Modern tactical helmets with far more advanced HUDS than Ian’s covert spy spectacles concealed. The days of silver-jacketed bullets secretly blessed by priests were long over, too. Depleted uranium micro-rounds seemed to disrupt whatever Hell-sent mojo the Reds and their demi-gog servants had going on. *Effective against zombies and werewolves, too. Ghosts, not-so-much.* The guns made little tyre-puncture noises as the troops descended, silencers rotating on muzzles, suppressing intense flashes of fire.

Guy was swamped by demi-gogs, dozens of them trying to break past his whip-fast blade. Doing what they had to, to protect their Red. Didn’t have much of a choice in the matter, is how Ian understood it. Like soldier ants instinctively sacrificing themselves for their nest’s queen. Quite literally in the blood. *A little help!* Guy projected.

Ian growled, hacking away at the sea of crazed fanged faces. *Coming. Hang on. Not me, damn you.* Guy sent. *The Red. Go for the Red before she vanishes.*

Ian altered direction back towards the strange iron statue standing like a twisted metal tree among the melee. He groaned as he continued to fight his way through the inhuman mob. The destroyed ceiling admitted the distinctive roaring sound of a Ferrari trying to race away from the car lot outside. One of the vamp-lovers had decided discretion was the better part of valour. The attempted escape didn’t seem to make the AH-64F Apaches riding shotgun for the Blackhawks happy. One made its displeasure fully felt with a burst from the 30mm chain-gun hanging under its cockpit. That aerial cannon sounded like a chainsaw in action. Probably had much the same

effect on the escaping car. It seemed a shame to Ian to waste the Ferrari. But then the half-turned could afford it. Damn demi-gogs weren't immortal like the Reds, but after being turned from human they could still survive two hundred years. A couple of centuries of compound interest would make you rich even if you weren't when you started out.

Ian's heart sank as he passed the metal artwork. The half-turned holding the young woman from the home had booked, leaving their victim shaking on the floor, caught in a fit. Tossed aside like fast-food packaging. *I know what this means.* Ian knelt by the girl, keeping his sword raised in the air to ward off the mob.

'What did she do to me?' moaned the young woman.

Ian felt the two bleeding puncture wounds on her neck. Of course Signora Roma had fed on her. And, intentionally, not to the bitter end. Showing as much pluck as the young girl had, she had been judged perfect demi-gog material. 'What's your name?'

'Eleanor Lythe. My body's itching. Feels like my muscles are on fire.'

They are. 'Don't worry. We're getting you out of here.' *Damn it to Hell. Literally!* 'We've got one on the flip. Female, Caucasian, seventeen. Blue jeans and a yellow *Girlpool* t-shirt.' He said it out loud for Al's benefit.

Al's voice sounded over the mike. 'Crash team confirmed to extract to me.'

Eleanor started wheezing. She was having difficulty breathing. 'Please. I can't move.'

'Temporary paralysis,' said Ian, kindly, trying to sound more confident than he felt. He knew her actual odds of surviving. *I'll never make a doctor.* 'It won't last more than a few minutes.'

The Red! Eyes on the prize. That from Guy Drew, desperate, almost frying Ian's brain like a sneeze on a Winter's morning.

Ian leapt to his feet and spotted Signora Roma shoving her way through the crowd of dinner jackets and Dior dresses. A nearby soldier aimed his Vector CRB Carbine at her, but she casually swept forward and grabbed the trooper by the throat before he got a burst off. Tossed him over the crowd like she was throwing away a crushed beer can. *It's chaos inside here.* Guy held back an inhuman wave of half-turned; Diane's blade sketched intricate patterns of cuts by the buffet table, every demi-gog who tried to pull a kid to feast on meeting that sword and collapsing, frequently in multiple pieces; Cav special-forces types blasting in every direction, warding off snarling monsters in human form. Ian prayed his specs were still broadcasting a friendly combatant ID out to their crash team. His heat-signature looked a lot like a Red when he got moving. *I'm on her.* Ian's legs pumped, the melee inside the hall seeming to slow as he skipped a twisting path through the fight, ignoring the distorted twisted faces of the half-turned, his own reflection caught in the Cav troops' helmet visors. Only a single focus on his mind. Signora Roma. Her little blinking red icon shimmering tantalisingly nearer and nearer on his head-up display. She knew he was coming. Her senses literally supernatural. One super-predator scenting another. But Signora Roma didn't quite know everything. *Soon you will, Drac.*

Signora Roma turned, snarling, as Ian drew close enough to strike her spine with his sword. Facing off close to the entrance. No sign of bouncers. Hopefully, snipers sitting on the Blackhawks' hatch positions had taken the security out as they swept in

low over the woodland.

‘You are from the Vigil!’

‘I’m from Hell,’ snarled Ian. *And you sent me there.* ‘Your turn!’

The Signora surged forward and seized Ian’s weapon arm, forcing the sword back. She was expecting to break his arm. To catch the blade with her spare hand and shove it through Ian’s chest. Instead, Ian matched the Red strength for strength. Not as strong as her, but strong enough. Ian had a world of burning hate to make up the shortfall. All the memories of his murdered family to draw upon. Her eyes narrowed as she realised just what Ian was. ‘You’re a filthy Debasement!’

‘Maybe. But damned if I’m the one eating kiddie-snacks in the middle of nowhere while admiring modern art.’

Signora Roma hissed at the young man as they struggled back and forth, like this was some insane arm-wrestling match gone wrong. ‘You have perverted the blessing.’ She howled a fresh curse at Ian in what sounded like Latin.

‘I’ve got a blessing for you, Drac.’ Ian head-butted the Red. She stumbled back, confused and urgently trying to re-evaluate the situation. *If there is one of us here there could be more.* And she was quite right to be worried. *Al, Guy, Diane. We are all Debasements. Happy to be so.*

The Red seemed to blur. Moving to both sides at once. This was her version of the old Jedi mind-trick. Reaching inside Ian’s head and clouding his vision. A useful deception for a predator to possess when out shopping for human sandwiches. Sadly for her, the trick didn’t work half so well on the computer drive integrated inside Ian’s spectacles. He followed the rolling targeting graphic on the head-up display, flowing left, with his sword, felt the blade slam into something satisfyingly hard and fleshy. This was a moly-blade . . . five molecules thick diamond-carbon edged. *Ultimate paper-cut.* Even super-healing couldn’t recover from that. Ian’s glasses went dark for a second as he rolled and ducked, a fierce blast of ashes and dust flying out in all directions. *Older the Red, bigger the bang.* A fiercer, more spectacular version of what happened to half-turned corpses. The scientists back at the Vigil called that an entropy wave – something supernatural that really shouldn’t exist in the universe restoring to a more normalised state of matter distribution. Ian personally preferred the term used by Scutum Dei, the Pope’s secret army of old-time European vampire-slayers. *Devil Wind.*

Ian felt the dark wave of failed supernatural energy unfolding behind him, whipping around the hall and spreading misery and fear among the demi-gogs. The half-turned had lost their queen. This pack was down their Alpha-dog and they felt as though a vital part of them had been amputated. They were still gripped by an unholy hunger, though. The demi-gogs had come to devour prey and they needed to feed now. No choice in the matter. The Vigil, as always, was happy to oblige. *The depleted-uranium diet, .45 hollow-points, extra crunchy.*

A nearby demi-gog rushed Ian, a red bow-tie with orange foxes repeated in a subtle pattern tied around his expensive white dress shirt’s collar. Ian’s sword thrust out on raw instinct, a fast Mugai-ryu style thrust that would have left his fencing tutor Ikeda Hanzo back at the Vigil with a grin on his face. *And that’s your desert.*

‘Scratch the Red,’ Ian shouted out loud, racing through the residual cloud of ashes.

Then, for the benefit of the crash team on his mike, ‘Confirmed kill.’

‘Non-combatants extracted,’ called Diane over the mike. ‘We’re safe out in the green zone.’

‘Crash team fall back immediately,’ ordered Guy Drew. ‘GPS-I.D. everyone is out of the factory and alive before we sterilise.’

Ian was nearest the main door. He fought off the demi-gods desperate to leave, his blade a blur, allowing the soldiers past as they retreated backwards, folding stocks of their submachine guns tight against their chests while their weapons fire targeted the raging mass of half-turned, blasted supernatural bodies apart in black cinder explosions.

The circling Apache gunships barely waited for Ian and Guy to exit the warehouse door, the two of them the last to retreat, darting past the blinding headlights of a tight perimeter circle of ground forces – soldiers with heat and night vision goggles scattered between M132 armoured flamethrowers, Stingray light tanks and M3 Bradley vehicles - before the gruff squadron leader’s voice broke across the encrypted circuit. ‘Green Angel to host. GPS-free on all friendlies. Weapons clear. Light it up.’

Quite frankly, the mass volley of 30 mm automatic M230 chain guns were a little unnecessary, given the simultaneous flight of hundreds of Hydra 70 rockets emptying from the gunships’ weapon pylons. The entire factory complex rose on a bright column of fire, broken blocks of concrete coming down like leaves in Fall. There was surprisingly little smoke for such wicked devastation. The warheads were implosion-type ordinance, sucking in the air and the heat and the fire. Ian had kept his promise to Signora Roma. A tiny little corner of the world turned into Hell, but a Hell where demons weren’t going to come crawling back out anytime soon.

‘Ashes to ashes,’ spat Guy.

‘Dust to dust,’ added Ian.

The two of them swept past one of the Vigil’s best cleaners, a public relations wiz called Shawna Steele. She was on her mobile, dressed in a grey business suit a little too light for the chill night air, honeyed words flowing out with the phone pressed close to her ear. ‘Yes, the scheduled demolition of the old pickup truck works is going ahead tonight as planned. Purely coincidental that a flight of the 87th Air Wing is returning to McGuire Air Force Base on the same night. Weapons fire? Of course not. That’s the rattle of demolition charges. And there is also an extremely well-attended fireworks display being held over in Pemberton tonight.’

‘Got to love Shawna,’ said Guy. ‘She could have sold D-Day to the Nazis as an accidental landing by a couple of lost fishing boats.’

He should know. Rumours were that Guy was one of the first G.I.s on the beach at Juno. But Ian had other things on his worried and guilty mind. *Eleanor Lythe*.

‘This is on us,’ said Ian, heading quickly for the van on the lot’s far side. A white medical tent had been extended over its open hatch. Alasdair stood outside by a stretcher-topped gurney.

‘Don’t beat yourself up, kid,’ advised Guy.

‘We could have stopped the people from the home going in there.’

‘And the Red and her pack would have been out of here as soon as they realised dinner wasn’t turning up. Supper would be rearranged, and maybe next time we don’t

get the intel and the drop on their feast. You know how this works. We need to confirm our kills by sight. Otherwise, the war just becomes a bad re-run of Vietnam. Napalm bombing. Inspecting the hills and finding nobody and nothing. Never knowing if Charlie bought the farm or ducked down a tunnel laughing at you.'

'Is this really war?' asked Ian. *No parades. No medals. Zero news coverage. The rest of the world carrying on in blissful cluelessness because the terrible truth would incite mass paranoia, cause societal breakdown and lead to more deaths than mere ignorance.*

Guy lit up a foul smelling victory cigar. He really was a product of the 1940s. A true throwback. 'If it isn't, pal, it'll have to do until the real deal comes along. You shouldn't have stopped to check on that bitten dame. The damned Red nearly got away. Give her another minute and she would have been wearing one of our faces and trying to bluff her way through the perimeter guards.'

Give her two and she would have turned into a wolf or something. Ian didn't reply. He wasn't sure he wanted to end up like Guy. Still fighting after all these years. So much a soldier he had forgotten almost everything else about himself. The old man started to head for the coach from the home. The children were there, being talked to by one of the film crew, being thanked for their participation in this pilot for an exciting new live TV prank show. The rest of the camera team filmed the burning ruin behind them. Laying down footage for the faked demolition clips that would be uploaded on YouTube tomorrow.

'Don't you want to visit Eleanor, the bitten girl?'

Guy shook his head, a melancholy look in his eyes. 'She'll live. Or she'll die. That's the way it goes.'

Ian saw Guy stalk away. He knew the old soldier's cold exterior was as faked as their demolition footage. Guy Drew couldn't bear to watch the human bait for this operation perish in front of his eyes, not without breaking down, and he didn't want anyone else in the team to realise he still had a heart. Was capable of feeling something more than glacial fury.

Ian came up to the van. Diane was already by the vehicle, Alasdair Colburn's tall, lanky form bent over the patient as he wiped the sweat away from her forehead.

'How is she doing?' asked Ian.

'Crash team carried her here fast,' said Alasdair. Al still held a stainless steel hypo injector gun in his right hand, like a totem. 'Didn't even have time to come out of paralysis. I injected her less than five minutes after she was bitten. That will help.'

Ian gazed at the violently thrashing young girl on the stretcher. Eleanor was secured tightly into it with arm and leg clamps, her body wired into a medical monitor on one side of the gurney and an intravenous drip on the other. Eleanor's body desperately battled the serum; or rather the evil alien corruption brewing inside her blood fought the antidote. Fought the attempt to tame the vampiric curse. To render it inert and as relatively harmless as mere mortal biochemistry could accommodate. Eleanor was semi-conscious but wracked in a fever-dream. Not really her, yet. Possessed. Residual memories passed from the Red eating away at her like acid, she spat, choked and frothed at the mouth, swearing and begging in ancient languages that no human had spoken for millennia.

Over seventy per cent of us die from taking the serum. Ian sure hoped that Eleanor Lythe wasn't going to be one of them. Perhaps not just from guilt and the responsibility he felt in this mess.

'Fight the evil,' urged Diane. 'Find your soul instead. Embrace the soul inside you and focus on it.' Diane started to pray.

Alasdair Colburn checked the blinking heart rate on the medical monitor. 'It's only the serum which will save her.'

Diane shot him an evil look. 'You're a heathen.'

'I'm a scientist.'

Ian didn't give voice to what he thought. *I don't think computer science from MIT counts.* 'Come on you two, save it for later.'

Eleanor lashed against her restraints, screaming in tongues now. Ian didn't understand a word. Her body was actually steaming, exposed out in the cold night air. The stretcher's straps were made from the same composite material as the soldiers' body armour. No way were they breaking anytime soon. Eleanor was drawing close to the moment when she was going to be healed or the vampiric curse would fatally reject the serum, burning her up like a hateful petrol suicide.

Stay with us, Ian begged. *We've lost so many. And not just to the serum.*

Eleanor hissed in agony, her blue eyes wide and clear as something like black smoke hissed out of her mouth, curling into the air and spearing up towards the cloudy night sky. Some believed that was a fragment of a Red's soul, passed across in the vampiric feeding and now on a long overdue express-ride to heaven for judgement.

Ian gazed down at the girl as she croaked, weak and delirious before she gratefully tumbled into unconsciousness. Alasdair quickly administered a second injection. A sedative that would help keep her under for a couple of days. Allow her to heal properly. Before she awoke to the shocking realisation of her strange new powers. *Less than human. More than human.* 'Welcome to the Vigil, Eleanor Lythe.'

CHAPTER TWO

Don't flush the probie

Eleanor woke up alone and for the fifth day running she seriously wondered if she had gone insane? Madness would certainly explain the all-too-vivid visions she had been suffering inside this sealed, claustrophobic room. Visions that could have been come from some home-camera reel shot from history. Roman centurions running at her with swords, Eleanor tearing them apart. Leaping across rooftops of Vienna in the 18th century, curling smoke from a thousand chimneys irritating her eyes, before she converted into some sort of leathery-winged flying creature, soaring and sweeping across the cold sky, past candle-lit windows where pale faces sometimes pressed their faces against the panes, trying to peer out into the darkness. Juicy, hot, blood-filled *food*. The hunger, that was what she remembered. The hunger. Eleanor scratched and slapped at her legs. Her blood quite literally boiling inside her. Like an overclocked engine. She sprinted at the metal walls enclosing her, smashing into them. She needed to run, lift weights, work this horrific burning sensation out of her system.

Eleanor ran at the door and slammed into it, but the heavy steel portal didn't budge a millimetre. *No pain*, she realised. She had hit the door hard enough to knock it off its hinges, by rights. It held. But she had felt no pain. 'Let me out of here!'

An answer vibrated from a grey plate in the ceiling: it was a speaker, but not the kind you could rip off from the walls. That, she suspected, was rather the point of its design. 'You are in medical quarantine. You have been exposed to a rare strain of avian flu which is causing your brain to overheat, inducing extreme hallucinations. We understand this is unsettling for you. You are perfectly safe and will be released after a limited period of medical isolation.'

'Stop playing that stupid recording! This isn't a hospital. Where are the drips and monitors and doctors? Why haven't I seen anyone since you locked me inside this place? You can't hold me here forever. I have rights!'

'You are in medical quarantine. You have been exposed to a rare strain of avian flu which is causing your brain to overheat, inducing extreme hallucinations. We understand this is unsettling for you. You are perfectly safe and will be released after a limited period of medical isolation.'

Eleanor fought down the fury. She had never been so angry before. What she felt now was raw, pure rage. You couldn't catch that from a cold, either. 'Enough, already! I don't believe you! What I saw back at that party was real. I was attacked by monsters. You can't just tell me I caught a cold from some guest and imagined that massacre.'

The message looped again. ‘You are in medical quarantine . . .’

‘Go to hell!’ She tugged at the loose-fitting one-piece white medical robe covering her modesty. ‘Putting me in this toga doesn’t make this a hospital. You better keep me locked up in here for the rest of my life, because when I get out I’m going to run to the TV stations and newspapers and tell everyone what freaky crap you’re pulling inside here. I’m going to tell everyone about the monsters that attacked us!’

Actually, I hope they don’t keep me in solitary confinement for the rest of my life. Eleanor stopped panting long enough to glance around the room. This wouldn’t be any kind of existence. No people to talk with. No TV, Internet or radio. No books or magazines. Her quarters were 180 square feet with a doorless entrance to a wet room a quarter that size - no towels: just a circle of holes in the ceiling which sprayed water followed by warm air. She had a small bed to sit on - built into the wall - no other furniture, and the bed didn’t come with a mattress or sheets, only a white rubbery surface that moulded itself around her spine if she lay still there long enough. Below a wall-mounted drinking water spigot was a small security bin hatch, where Eleanor could shove rubbish, close the hatch, then hear it slide down into an incinerator. She only knew it was an incinerator because she smelt the burning after the hatch closed. Her sense of smell seemed oddly enhanced. Eleanor currently had to shower three times a day just to be able to stand her own sweaty stench.

A single locked metal door gave onto Eleanor’s room, but it hadn’t opened since she first woke up, panicked and screaming, to discover her confinement. One of the wall’s surface seemed to have a slightly different feel to the touch, like ceramic rather than metal. It felt cold and glossy. The ceiling came with a chequerboard effect and Eleanor wondered if cameras were hidden behind some of the squares. *Being watched, or being abandoned inside here, not much of a choice.*

Eleanor raised her voice again. ‘Who are you? Why are you keeping me here?’

Another canned recording began to play. Eleanor recognised this message all too well.

‘One of the side-effects of avian flu is a greatly increased appetite as a result of your elevated temperature and quickened metabolism. This is part of your body’s natural healing mechanism. Please feel free to eat far more than you normally would.’ As familiar as the other recordings by now. *Chow time.*

A section of wall low down by the floor rotated like a revolving door, a slight whir, bringing a long paper platter filled with food into her isolation ward. How much food had they given her to eat this time? Eleanor’s desperate eyes counted six double stacked hamburgers inside seeded buns, a cardboard bowl filled with pasta fusilli and sausage chunks, chopped onion and crushed garlic that could have fed a table of ten, and a similarly super-sized bowl of egg-fried rice. There was also a paper-like cup for the water spigot, which was good, as the cup’s material seemed to degrade after a day if she didn’t incinerate it.

Eleanor fell upon the food as though she hadn’t eaten for days - although in truth she was getting four squares a day. She managed to suppress her wild, unnatural hunger long enough to use the supplied fork and spoon, even though every inch of her ached to grab the food and stuff it into her mouth. They didn’t bother giving her a knife, but if it was made out of the same weird biodegradable cardboard material as

the fork it wouldn't have been any good to her for slicing. They obviously weren't planning to feed her steak anytime soon.

What's happened to me? Feeding like a greedy stray dog, ripping into lunch. Her dignity fled with her freedom. She was almost glad she was in solitary confinement, so she didn't have to fight anyone else for a share of the hot food. So good, the intense smell of the meat making her mouth water, pasta sliding down her throat like it hardly existed. Five hamburgers went within minutes. There wasn't a speed-eating contest Eleanor couldn't win at the moment. She finished the meal gasping and briefly sated, then stumbled to the wall and shoved the ruin of plates and cutlery inside the bin hatch, removing the stench and glad there wasn't a mirror in the room for her to see how much of a mess she must look.

What's is this? I'm sick alright, but it isn't any flu. She sunk onto her bed and tried not to weep. *I won't give them the satisfaction of seeing them get to me.*

A couple of Cav guards stood by either edge of the one-way ceramic viewing window. Ian hated to see Eleanor like this. Caged up as though she were a lab rat. But many of them on his side of the window had gone through decompression. And the observation cell - nicknamed *The Hunger Room* by those who worked for the Vigil - also served a second purpose. Many of the powers a vampire possessed were unique to each Red. Eleanor had been infected by a distinct strain, and the Hunger Room gave the Vigil the chance to monitor what might have been passed onto the survivors they studied.

'Anything worth noting, Doc?' asked Guy.

Doctor Vargas glanced up from her computer tablet, nodding towards the dents left in the reinforced steel wall. 'Nightmares during REM-sleep exit seem a little on the high side. I'd recommend monitoring her for post-traumatic stress. Her level of post-bite aggression, mental dissociative states and inherited memory flashbacks all fall within normal limits, though.'

Ian grunted. *Isn't much normal about this.* 'What about pass-on powers?'

Doctor Vargas tapped the tablet and brought up the results from the room's concealed monitoring equipment. 'Only the usual on the register so far. Enhanced strength and speed, a slowed ageing cycle. It'll take time for anything much more esoteric to manifest. The acuity of her senses appears fairly toppy. I think she can actually detect when we run the room's ultrasound scans. It seems to trigger bouts of extreme hyperactivity in her routine.'

Guy raised an eyebrow. 'More extreme than *that*? She's practically climbing the walls as it is.'

'Actually, her metabolism is well into her normalisation dive,' said Vargas. 'We've got a lot better at doing this since your day, you know.'

'Yeah,' said Guy, tapping the side of his head, 'that much the old man does remember. Back in the day it was hypo needles, ice baths and straightjackets.'

'The original Cure was developed by Leonardo da Vinci for the pope,' said the doctor. 'Its chemical structure has been considerably refined since then.'

Guy snorted. 'There was a cure long before that . . . a sharp blade swung through the neck. Works every time.'

'We need to watch this one closely,' said Vargas. 'The records we pulled from her home indicate that she was borderline disturbed before she was bitten. The patient has a history of minor arson attempts.'

'We'll make sure to hide the matches, doc,' said Guy.

Diane O'Hara entered the monitoring room. Everyone was curious about the new girl. Willing her to survive and join their ranks. 'I wish I could go in there and be with her. Wouldn't it help if we could pray together?'

'You could try that, but you better pray she doesn't beat you to death for the last chicken drumstick on her plate,' said Guy.

'We're in the realm of the surgical rather than the spiritual here,' said the doctor. 'But I'm sure praying for her couldn't hurt. At least, as long as it's done safely on this side of the glass.'

'Can't we help her with sedatives?' asked Ian.

'I wouldn't recommend sedation at this stage,' said Doctor Vargas. 'Chemicals won't react well with the changes in her body. Mentally - physically - she needs to adjust to what she is becoming. Same reason we don't have a TV in there for the patients. No distractions.'

'Don't get too close to the probie,' warned Guy. 'Not until we're confident we won't have to flush her.'

Flush her. That was a euphemism if ever there was one.

'You need to give her a chance,' said Ian. Diane nodded intently by his side. It hadn't been so long ago that Ian and Diana had both been survivors quivering behind that viewing wall. They remembered exactly how scared and lonely and confused Eleanor felt right now.

'Probie's been snacking inside the Hunger Room for a week,' said Guy. 'Long enough. Stick her with the priest tomorrow morning. Let's see if she survives induction.'

'That thing's not a priest,' protested Diane. 'And it hasn't been for a very long while.'

'Well, he prays. *It* prays. Damned if I know for what, though.'

Ian winced at how cold Guy's tone sounded. How casually indifferent. 'And if she does survive induction?'

'Then I do believe Miss Lythe will have earned herself that chance you mentioned.'

Eleanor tried not glance at the wall. The wall that felt oddly glossy to the touch. Eleanor didn't want to let on she had belatedly realised there were people behind it. Some kind of one-way glass, but far better camouflaged than the mirrors you found in police interview rooms. Since Eleanor had woken up this morning she could hear them talking behind it. Not well enough to pick up the words, but good enough to overhear a low murmur of conversation. *Watching me like an animal in a zoo.* Eleanor had visited the Gorilla Zone of a zoo once, the latest of animal-friendly designs. A

family of gorillas resting on a bank of grass beside an artificial stream, supposedly oblivious to the crowd of human gawkers milling beyond their cage. But someone had used a camera flash, which they weren't meant to, and a furious alpha male came running up to the mirrored glass and smashed at it in a wild rage, like a miniature King Kong trying to shatter his way to freedom. Everyone had screamed and fled away from the glass, fearing it would break. The viewing wall hadn't, of course. *And now I know just how King Kong felt.*

As if overhearing Eleanor's thoughts, a recording triggered from the ceiling plate which she hadn't heard before.

'Thermal temperature monitoring of your body indicates that you are now fully recovered from your illness. Congratulations on your successful recovery. Please report to post-quarantine evaluation prior to release.'

Her heart skipped a beat. *Release?* Eleanor didn't miss the recording's use of the more-truthful-than-she-was-used-to-word *illness*, rather than that bare-faced lie about avian flu. Eleanor knew that whatever the heck she was now, 'cured' wasn't even close to it. Her body thrummed with unlimited reserves of nervous energy, as though she needed to spend it on running a marathon with a bonus mountain to scale at the finishing line. As though she just had to do something.

Evaluation, though, what is that all about? Was some idiot about to try to convince her that everything was now normal? That she was normal? Write off her insane nightmares and monstrous memories of that so-called charity art gala as a fever dream. *Good luck with that.*

The room's armoured vault-like door unlocked by itself, a clacking like a dead robot being dragged away. There was nobody waiting outside. *How do I even know that?* Suddenly Eleanor realised there was only a single scent in the vicinity. Hers. Nobody else's. Eleanor tentatively poked her head outside. A bare concrete corridor, electric lights up top and metal pipes with water and electricity and cabling down the sides of the wall. It resembled the behind-the-scenes service passages of a mall where she had once worked a Saturday job for a few months. Until the manager had hit on her and made it clear that there were other duties which came with the minimum wage retail position. She had been fired for punching him out . . . and the real culprit had, as was so often the case, sailed away Scott free.

If this is a hospital, then I'm a fully trained midwife. Eleanor sensed that they were deep underground. The oppressive weight of soil above her, everything deathly silent and muffled. *Which way, left or right?* She sniffed the air. There was the slight trace of a scent emanating down the left-hand stretch of corridor, so she followed that. As she drew nearer, she began to have second thoughts about her decision. The smell was wrong. There was no other way to describe it. Not dead or rotting, exactly, but cold and still - like a slab of meat pulled out of a deep freeze. Alive, yet lifeless. A terrible thought occurred to Eleanor. What if she hadn't escaped the monster's ball? *What if those monsters captured me. Maybe five days trapped in that funhouse back there is their version of fattening me up for supper? What if the strange hunger was from drugs in the water to make me famished and eat like a horse?* A second realisation occurred to her. *Those things wouldn't need to pretend I was in a hospital. That mob of horrors were stronger and faster than me. If I was their prisoner, they'd kick me*

around like a chicken in a factory farm, and I'd have about as much say in my treatment as a chicken nugget.

Eleanor drew closer, detecting a second set of scents, too, bestial and dirty.

Then Eleanor came across the source of the animal scents at the end of the corridor, in front of an open door. A series of cages filled with pigs. Behind the cage mesh, the swines grunted and pushed agitated at the metal barriers. They didn't seem happy inside their new home. She sympathised with that feeling. *Are they doing medical experiments down here? Is this a lab?* But something told her that whatever this place's secrets were, live animal experimentation wasn't on the list. Eleanor didn't discover a laboratory through the open doorway. Instead, a small room with a table in the centre with two chairs, a priest in the far chair, his back framed against a second open doorway. His face was as dark as his cassock, a pattern of thin scars on both cheeks that might have been some indication of rank. The priest looked about sixty, hair greying at the temples on either side of his intent, serious face. He was the source of the terrible scent.

'You're one of those things that attacked me!'

'Indeed, Eleanor Lythe, I am one of their kind.'

Eleanor recoiled at the sound of her name from his cold, corrupt lips. *Closer, closer.* Near enough to bring him down.

'I have gone hungry for so long that I can no longer even camouflage myself as a mortal. I must sit here with my sins fully revealed. Sit as a vampire, a monstrosity, a Red. Of course, vampires call themselves none of these things. Among ourselves, vampires refer to our kind as the Blessed . . . recipients of the Gift. But I was not one of those who personally attacked you. Not yet.'

Eleanor didn't wait to hear anymore. Acting on pure instinct, she formed her right hand into a fist and drove it forward towards the creature's nose, aiming to smash the bone and render him unconscious, dead - or at least, deader than the priest might already be. He swayed to the side, still sitting, caught Eleanor's hand and dragged her over the table. She struggled with all her unnatural energy but he just shook his head sadly, as if she had disappointed him. Eleanor was almost beginning to lose consciousness as he lifted her body into the air as easily as the priest might lift food off the plate with a fork.

'Yes, you are fast and strong. Not nearly as fast and strong as me.'

Eleanor spluttered, unable to escape his vice-like grip. 'Why don't you just kill me?'

'I may yet.' He suddenly dropped her to the floor. She fell, choking. The priest pushed Eleanor not unkindly down into one of the chairs. 'Sit, my child. And try not to fidget. The temptation to feed upon you is very strong. Even the Lord our Saviour did not have to undergo trials such as this.'

Seeing little other choice, Eleanor reluctantly accepted the chair as the priest moved opposite, occupying the other seat again. 'Trials?'

'Yours and mine. My name is Father Kamara Okoro and it is my job to judge you.'

'Judge - just what have I done?'

'Why,' he laughed, 'you are a monstrosity, too. Not such a large one as I am. A little monster, shall we say. That is why I must judge you. Not for what evil you have

done, but what evil you may yet do.'

'I don't understand.'

'Of course you do not understand. That is what this cell is, my child . . . a classroom. Sometimes it takes a criminal to catch a criminal. Sometimes it takes a monster to catch a monster. This is your trial, but it is my penance.'

'What does something like you have to teach me?'

'How the world is. What you are. It is always more believable coming from me. If I was a mortal sitting here, a bureaucrat with a clipboard and a white coat, you would doubt what I have to say. But nobody doubts Father Okoro. That is why I am kept here. Why the people who built this complex suffer my presence. A half-tame wolf to scare the sheep with his terrible wolf stories.'

'Dear God! I was bitten, wasn't I? Am I a vampire too - am I one of you?'

'Surely not. I was told you were bitten by a female vampire, is that correct? You were set upon by a single assailant?'

Eleanor bit her lip, hardly daring to hear what this thing had to say about her future. 'Yes.'

'Then your averted destiny was to have become what is called a demi-gog. A half-vampire. A servant of the same monster who bit you. To turn into a full vampire, you must be bitten by both a female and a male during the same feeding. You might say it is how vampires procreate. They are physically sterile, so their pattern is passed on by converting others into their foul kind. Into versions of themselves. But vanity is the least of their sins . . . *our* sins.'

'So you were bitten like . . . ?'

'Yes, that is how I am here. I was once a priest in the Congo. I built up quite a following among my ministry, enough followers to encourage the return of peace to my country instead of civil war. Peace rarely suits the Reds. So they turned me. I am sure I am quite a disappointment to both of my inhuman "parents".'

'So I am a . . . what do you call them, demi-gog, now?'

'No, our hosts injected you with an antidote. Your process of conversion into a demi-gog was broken. You are still fully human, but you have been left with some of the powers of the female that bit you. The Reds call your kind debasements. Human reflections of their kind, outside of their control.'

Eleanor rocked on her chair with shock. *My kind? Just what is my kind now?*

'Powers? What the hell have you made me into?'

'Mortal. But far stronger, faster, more resilient. Maybe other things. You will see. If you survive to enjoy your new life, you could have about two centuries of life to see. Not much compared to me. My trial will go on for longer than yours, or until our hosts grow tired of my presence.'

'Our hosts aren't vampires?'

'Surely not. They are an organisation called the Vigil, formed as a clandestine arm of the U.S. Secret Service after the Reds arranged for Abraham Lincoln's assassination.'

Relief at this strange news washed over Eleanor like a cold shower, before the implication of how twisted the situation she found herself in truly sunk in. 'Vampires were behind Lincoln's assassination? You're joking?'

‘Not at all. The Reds hoped to provoke Great Britain into joining the U.S. Civil War on the side of the South, starting what would have become a global conflict, but a branch of the Catholic Church’s Inquisition managed to derail their plot. The Red’s murder of Lincoln was the Red’s revenge. You will learn more of the Historia Arcana, the secret history, from other lips.’

Eleanor’s mind spun. ‘What you’re saying is . . . madness.’

‘Quite. Imagine if you weren’t hearing it from a vampire. But you are still only scratching the surface of the world’s hidden truths. The Reds are just one of the Sidhe Antiqua, the ancient races. Most of the Sidhe Antiqua prefer to hide among your people, holding to a fake humanity to ensure their survival. But the Reds are night hunters - alpha predators - and humanity are their preferred sustenance. Their kind will not bend. For a long time the Reds as good as ruled humanity. They resent their fall from that position of high greatness.’

‘Ruled? Like some kind of Count Dracula deal?’

‘Reds are shadow-clinging chameleons and stalkers . . . imagine a Trapdoor Spider given humanoid form. Deeply territorial and long-lived. They ruthlessly control their own population and used to manage humanity’s herds - but always as the power *behind* the throne. They were the advisers, the secret councils, the hushed whisper in the ear, but never the actual kings or emperors. Immortal blood-drinking queens quickly meet human mobs armed with pitchforks smashing down the palace gates. Subterfuge is the Reds’ natural inclination. It was the age of science that totally surprised their kind, which blindsided them. The Renaissance, the industrial revolution, then information technology. Mass communication and mass prosperity and democracy. Every year more changes, ever-faster with additional complexities flowering along the exponential curve of Moore’s Law. When society was a simple feudal pyramid, the Reds dominated the rulers at the top of the pyramid and they controlled the kingdoms. They started wars on whims and fed well among your chaos. But how do you rule the Internet and three billion consumers voting by the microsecond with their wallets? How do you control a corporation with a hundred thousand shareholders? How do you fog the mind of an algorithm inside the Cloud? You can’t feed on a self-driving car. The Reds wrote off science as a mere casket of conjurer’s tricks, yet now humanity’s tricks are pushing them to the brink of extinction.’

‘If you’re a vampire and the people keeping me here are human and your enemies, then why . . .?’

‘Why do they let me live? Why do I allow myself to be kept? A good question. I gaze upon the evil in the hearts of mortals,’ gasped the priest, striking across the table and seizing Eleanor’s wrists. ‘I see the evil inside my own. That is both my greatest gift and my greatest curse.’ Father Okoro’s mouth grew inhumanly wide, as though he was about to attempt to swallow a rabbit, his teeth extending outward - becoming long, elongated and razored.

Eleanor tried to break away from the priest’s grip, but his fingers were too strong. ‘Leave me alone!’

‘Yes, you can feel the power coursing through your veins. So much power, so much energy. You can do almost anything with it, now. Murder the people who hurt

you and wounded you in your past. I can feel your soul's wounds, flayed and raw. You can track all those evil people down. Take anything you want. Money from banks, lives from the unworthy. Don't you want to rip into the world and punish it for this? For what you have been made to become?'

'No! No! Leave me alone.'

A voice echoed from the ceiling. Another speaker plate; but this voice wasn't a recording. 'Well - verdict?'

Father Okoro's face glanced up, contorted and sweating. 'She passes. There is still a kernel of goodness here. I cannot willingly feed upon innocence.'

Eleanor stood up as his grip faltered, overturning her chair as she back-peddled away from the table.

Okoro left the table and slowly advanced towards the girl. 'But my will is weak. I am weak. She has so much goodness in her sweet blood, sweet veins running with it.'

A terrified squeal sounded. One of the hogs had been released from the cage outside and galloped towards the far door, trying to out-pace the killing zone of the enclosed room. Father Okoro swivelled and leapt onto the table, before springing off its surface, attracted by the movement and moving faster than anything had a right to, seizing the pig and rolling across the bare concrete floor with the animal writhing in his grasp. 'Beautiful, warm. Yes. I need my reward for resisting my sins.' The monster in human form glanced greedily across at Eleanor, desperate and ravening, his eyes yellowed and pupils changed into something close to a lion's. She was rooted to the spot, paralysed, the way prey should be. Eleanor literally couldn't move.

This strange moment of paralysis was broken as the priest ripped into the still living animal with his fangs, and as he tore apart the pig a number of figures appeared enclosed in orange hazmat suits, dark boots thudding across the floor as they dashed into the room. They were slower than they should have been with heavy battery packs strapped to their backs, each pack connected by coiling cables to a lance-long electrical prod. Faces hidden behind flat misted glass visors, the figures raised their lances with dark gloves, sparks of orange light flaring as they drove the monster back long enough for Eleanor to make her escape. The door slammed shut and one of the suited men turned a wheel on the entrance, sealing it like an airlock. In their cages outside, the surviving pigs squealed in panicked unison, protesting the cruel sacrifice of one of their companions.

Eleanor turned in outrage on her so-called rescuers. 'He nearly killed me in there!'

A figure pulled off his suit's hood and visor, revealing a grizzled old face, an almost smoked cigar stump hanging from the man's lips. There was something familiar about him. Had he been one of the people present at the insane charity night? 'You passed, kid. If you ever meet Okoro again, you'll be able to take the priest down.'

'How the hell would I do that?'

'You're a blade, girl-chick, even if you don't realise it yet. Right now, you're a blunt dinner knife, but with the right honing, you're going to buff up just as shiny and razor sharp as a commando dagger.'

Eleanor gazed suspiciously at the old man. She knew enough about daggers to know that they only got sharpened by constantly grinding them against rough stone.

Horribly painful for a dinner knife that never asked to leave the cutlery drawer.

‘You are not concentrating!’ accused Ikeda Hanzo, landing a painful slap of his wooden sword blade against the side of Eleanor’s neck.

Hanzo might look like some short-arse Japanese fusion of Mr Miyagi and Yoda, but Eleanor had learned over the weeks never to underestimate this manically sprightly pensioner. His wrinkled face and permanently amused eyes always at odds with the look of distaste he reserved for his lazy, soft students. And as far as Hanzo was concerned, they were *all* soft and lazy.

‘You draw your bokken like a fishmonger pulling out an eel to sell. Where is your heart? You shame Hanzo’s teachings. Again!’ barked the combat instructor. ‘Faster!’

Eleanor slid her bokken daitō, a wooden katana-sized sword, back into the scabbard by her side. Ready to take it out again. The art of drawing a sword elegantly was as important to the instructor as the blade’s actual use in combat, which seemed as much a waste on her part learning the technique as this old devil trying to teach it to her.

She lunged out, drawing the wooden practice sword in a smooth blur, aiming to cut the teacher in half if it had been a real blade. Hanzo’s bokken rapped off hers, as loud as two baseball bats smashed into each other.

‘Too slow. Hanzo will show you how it is done. Keep your bokken out. Defensive stance.’

‘Alright.’

‘Alright, master,’ barked Hanzo. ‘In here, I am the master and you are to learn. That is why you have two ears but only one mouth. So you may listen to Hanzo’s words twice as much as you complain.’

‘Alright, *master*,’ echoed Eleanor, the last word pulled like one of her teeth,

She heard a whispering from the side of the hall. Meant to be private, but Eleanor was effectively a human microphone now. ‘Not bad. She’s learning.’

Not bad, but no cigar at this freaks’ funfair. There were two other students presently in training alongside Eleanor, watching her and passing comment from the practice hall’s sidelines. Both male and in their early twenties. Both wearing - like Eleanor - a white *keikogi* shirt above with a black *hakama* below, a garment that resembled a skirt from a distance but was actually separated in the centre to form two baggy trouser legs. The first trainee was called Christopher Bischoff, the second, Samuel Chickering. Eleanor wasn’t sure if they were their real names or not. Christopher was a Canadian if his accent was anything to go by. Sam had mentioned in passing that he came from Baltimore. None of the trainees were meant to discuss their past lives while a probie: one of the many seemingly pointless rules they needed to adhere to, along with a punishingly strict schedule. Both pupils were dark-haired and just under six foot tall with similar lean physiques, but she could tell them apart easily enough. Chris was as pale as a sandwich filling while Sam was African-American with a thick hipster’s beard. They usually hung together, and Eleanor knew their nickname was the *Brothers Grin*, after the pair’s easy smiles. Both young men had been in what passed for the Vigil’s induction programme for months longer than Eleanor, but already she was faster and superior in combat to them. She knew she

shouldn't feel too much pride at that fact - often it came down to how ancient and powerful the Red had been who had turned the new blood. But she felt a measure of self-satisfaction all the same.

Eleanor took up the defensive position, sword clutched in front of her, quivering and held tight with both hands. She prepared herself for the instructor's first strike. There would be no tells from the short old man before he drew. At least, no creasing around the eyes or twitching of the fingers. Hanzo would move from still to kill almost instantly, driving home the first-strike-is-the-fatal-blow message along with his sword. Matters went down exactly as she'd predicted. One moment the man was just standing there, his fingers resting easily around the hilt of his sheathed blade, the next the sword was out of the scabbard and darting towards her neck again - only, this time she managed to throw her bokken in the way, a sharp clack of wood on wood as she deflected the blow.

'Better,' said Ikeda Hanzo. 'Your senses are acute. You are predicting my strikes, now.'

Eleanor never explained she was using the little pheromone bursts leaked by the instructor to get ahead of his sword while they trained. It wasn't even a conscious process anymore. The power had become a sixth sense she relied on without worrying where her preternatural warnings sprung from. These strange changes in Eleanor's body seemed very private to her, even if the Vigil's doctors obviously wanted to track her progress as though she was a lab rat. Their constant presence behind the scenes felt like having lurkers outside the toilet, trying to overhear her bowel movements. There were other powers bubbling inside Eleanor. Powers which terrified her. A terrible energy thrumming inside Eleanor, pent-up and burning, making her flesh feel like a battery close to being overloaded with power; bursting into fire. This could only be something murderous and dark, inherited from the monster who fed upon her. It was hard to hold onto, sometimes, especially when fighting inside the practice hall. But suppress it, Eleanor must. If the people here realised how dangerous she truly was, they would lock her up just as deep and tight as that half-tame vampire priest. This was her sin to bear. Her secret.

Eleanor spoke, if only to distract herself from her hidden anxieties. 'So, when do we get to practice with real blades, *master*?'

Hanzo grunted. 'Never. When you draw a moly-blade, it is only to kill an enemy. To draw a sword is to doom a foe or to doom yourself. Hanzo has given you instruction in Shinkendo, Bōjutsu, Shorinji Kempo, Aikibujutsu, Shurikenjutsu, Wadō-ryū and Toyama-Ryū Battōdō. A wooden sword is no different to a moly-blade . . . it is a matter of applied skill.'

Eleanor didn't take her eyes off Hanzo. He dished out humility with that wooden blade of his like a party clown dishing out balloons. 'Swords are all very well, but when do we begin training with guns?'

Hanzo pointed towards the instruction dummies on the far side of the hall, made to resemble Reds and demi-gogs, areas such as the neck marked out with bullseyes as high-value strike points. 'Guns are metal hammers for barbarians. A full vampire moves faster than most soldiers shoot. A few Reds may turn to mist to allow bullets to pass through their bodies. Even a lowly demi-gog can absorb a small calibre

revolver's chamber and recover in a week using their quickened healing.'

'The Cav have rifles that can—'

'And will you walk down the city street's with such a brutish cannon in your hand? Is your name John Wayne? An extendable moly-blade may be concealed inside a lipstick, ceramic-edged to be undetectable to sensors. You can walk through airport security and board a plane with it. Brutes like Guy Drew will teach you how to point the Cav's clumsy metal toys.' Hanzo raised a finger and made a little trigger squeezing motion. 'That is not skill. And rifles and moly-blades are not weapons. *You* are the weapon. That is what Hanzo teaches here. Guns, daggers, throwing stars, moly-blades, they are all tools. You are the only weapon inside Hanzo's fighting hall. Educate the mind but make quick the body.'

'I'm getting a little bored of this routine,' said Eleanor. 'Every day the same with this wax on, wax off stuff. When will our training end?'

'Poor impatient flower, you mistake this for your training?' laughed Hanzo. 'This is merely your dance practice. Training at the Vigil is done on the job. There is no *Dummies Guide to Slaying Creatures of the Sidhe Antiqua* for sale on the Internet. There is no fine graduation ceremony where you parade for your family and throw your hats in the air. You learn by putting your life on the line and surviving to do it again. In between, you practice.'

'So, when does our practice end?'

'Never. But it may lessen slightly if you succeed.'

'Succeed in what?'

Hanzo laughed. 'Beating your teacher!' He bowed to the three students and made a show of creeping around the floor using his wooden sword as a cane. 'Poor old Ikeda. He is an old man. Trained to be a samurai two centuries ago, coming to the end of his sad long life. Surely one of the three young, strong blades I see in this hall can beat him? Perhaps all three, striking as a team?'

'Let's do it,' said Chris, always the more eager of the other two.

Sam made a sucking noise to indicate how badly he suspected this was going to end.

'We can do it,' said Eleanor. 'If we fight as a team.'

'Yeah, and you know all about that,' said Sam. 'That cowboy style you've got.'

Eleanor ignored the jibe about how she liked to keep to herself. 'It's *cowgirl*, horse. And we can do this.'

Hanzo seemed amused by their hesitation and made a second show of hobbling around the hall, baiting his pupils. 'Yes, poor old Ikeda, bones creaking, most of his teeth fallen out, only able to eat soft fish and rice.'

'Sod it,' said Chris, patting the hilt of his bokken. 'I'm in.'

'You have bored Hanzo with your indecision. He must rest a little now.' Their instructor knelt down on the floor, bowed his neck, rested a hand on either knee and closed his eyes.

Chris and Sam circled around the instructor, right hands resting on their sheathed swords, ready to draw. Sam took position behind Hanzo to the old man's left while Chris stood rear right. Eleanor crept to stand before the kneeling, seemingly dozing instructor; making herself the point of the team's triangle. The walls of the hall might

be white-painted concrete, but the floor was oak, as though someone had stripped an old school gymnasium to outfit this training centre. With Eleanor's enhanced hearing, she knew the creaking wood hadn't shifted an iota. All three of them had been trained too well in Ninjitsu to make sounds while they padded on bare feet. Hanzo shouldn't have a clue where any of his three students were standing. *Unless his sense of smell is as hyped as mine*, warned Eleanor's subconscious mind. Sam raised his left hand into the air, keeping his right firmly on the bokken hilt. Three fingers. Two fingers. One finger. They struck as one, drawing their swords and flinging blades towards Hanzo. Except he wasn't kneeling anymore. Hanzo had started rolling to the left even as Eleanor's fingers tightened on her sword's hilt. Eleanor's sword was out and thrusting through empty space, colliding with Sam's bokken, his cry of confusion joining Chris's, except Chris's was louder, tumbling backwards as Hanzo swept-kicked him over. Eleanor just managed to deflect a spinning kick the old man sent in her direction, about the same time she yelled in agony as she realised Hanzo's blade had danced up under both her and Sam's swords, smacking their wrists in turn as the bokken passed. He'd struck at their central nerve clusters and two bokkens fell from paralysed fingers, leaving Eleanor and Sam disarmed. Eleanor's mind was reeling, and she was just about to convert her stance into a leaping kick at Hanzo when the old man caught one of the falling swords. Both blades windmilled in his hands and when the swords came to a halt, there was a wooden sword edge pressed under Eleanor's neck, a second under Sam's, while Chris struggled on the floor, completely pinned by one of Hanzo's bare feet.

Hanzo shook his head sadly. 'Loud, clumsy and full of false confidence.'

'Jesus,' moaned Chris from the floor. 'How do you move so fast?'

'Beginner's mind,' said Hanzo. 'Every day Hanzo learns and practise. Two centuries of practice. One percent better every week. Suck skill compounds.' He sighed. 'You will not beat Hanzo today. Perhaps you shall try to beat Bex Crawford?'

Eleanor lowered her head as Hanzo withdrew his sword. *What trickery are you up to now, you old lizard?* 'Who's Bex Crawford?'

'Trainee in upper class,' said Hanzo. 'Miss Crawford's practice is close to lessening. Yes, you shall see what you may become after Hanzo has taught you to master the beginner's mind.'

'If she's about to graduate from this underground circus,' said Eleanor, 'how come she's still got a beginner's mind?'

Hanzo raised a finger on his hand and slowly, deliberately prodded Eleanor on the nose with it. 'Because the finger that points at the moon is not the moon.'

'Just a finger, man,' said Sam.

The instructor made a weary throat-clearing sound. 'Hanzo might as well attempt to teach rocks to think. Miss Crawford shall finish practice with you.' He walked up to the intercom by the hall's entrance and made a call. Ten minutes later, a young blonde woman showed up, tying her belt around the bottom of a white *keikogi* shirt as she entered the hall. Eleanor eyed the opposition up. Bex must have gotten turned early because she looked about the same age as Eleanor; short hair tied at the back, blue eyes, a calm serious face which belayed her obvious Barbie Girl beauty. Eleanor wasn't sure why this girl was being held up as some exemplar of what they needed to

aim towards? Average height, a slightly curvy figure - not slim, but not Junoesque - Bex Crawford would look more in place studying first-year law in college, everything paid for by daddy's expensive trust fund. Eleanor had to resist wrinkling her nose in distaste. *How much Chanel can one woman wear?*

'You think she looked like that when she was bit?' whispered Sam.

It was a natural enough question. Face-changing was another common Red power that frequently got passed on. Most people who took the Cure couldn't face-change instantly, but if you pinned a photograph of someone to your bathroom mirror and stared at it real hard every morning, willing your flesh to flow, you could morph into a cross between yourself and the target photo over time. Many of the Vigil's staff who came into the service with a family left behind had to change their face as well as their name. Too dangerous for the people you left behind if you stayed as the same old you. Of course, Eleanor hadn't left anybody behind. At least, nobody she wouldn't mind getting popped, at any rate.

Chris grinned. 'Who cares.'

'Man, I got to get myself in her class,' said Sam.

Chris nodded in agreement. 'I hear that.'

'Boys,' announced the girl, bowing towards Hanzo as she halted, 'I can pretty much guarantee that none of you are in *my* class.' Bex fixed Eleanor with a slightly mocking gaze that instantly made Eleanor's hackles raise. 'How about you, dimples? You with Beavis and Butthead here?'

Eleanor tapped the handle of her practice sword. 'No, I'm here with Bob the Bokken. And the two of us are going to open a can of whoop-ass on your butt.'

'Let's see how that works out for you.' Bex eyed Hanzo. 'I was in the refectory finishing dinner, master.'

'Poor flower. You have Hanzo's apologies,' said the instructor. He pointed towards Eleanor. 'Perhaps now would be time for your dessert?'

'If you say so, master.'

Eleanor flashed the girl the bird. 'If teacher's pet is still hungry, she can eat this.'

'Positions,' ordered Hanzo.

Eleanor faced off against the young woman as Sam and Chris walked to the wall and waited under a series of banners sown with Japanese calligraphy. She suspected that given how used the two men had gotten to receiving beatings from her bokken, they might not be adverse to seeing her humbled by another student. Eleanor exchanged bows with the other girl, then spread her feet in a T-position, leaning slightly forward, right hand on hilt. She cleared her mind, ready to receive the subtle signals of scent that would precede her enemy's muscles engaging for combat. Eleanor almost squawked like a bird as Bex's blade cleared its scabbard and came rocketing towards her face, only just managing to swivel enough for the blade to flash past without scoring a strike. *There was no warning!*

Eleanor backpedaled, trying to suppress her confusion. Bex came at her again, and this time she deflected the sword's thrust with a parry. This bout wasn't going down anything like Eleanor had foreseen. Bex Crawford was slow compared to Eleanor, slow compared to Sam and Chris, but she was relentless and incredibly skilled with the bokken. And compared to Eleanor's usual sparring, this was like fighting

someone's detached shadow. No warnings, no third sense feeding her where her enemy was going to be before he even knew himself. It was like Eleanor was a heavy frigate and Bex a hunter-killer submarine . . . moving unseen below the water, deadly, striking fast and then withdrawing. *Is she doing something to my mind?* That had to be it. Hanzo had warned the three of them that some of the most powerful vampires could cloud a human's mind, a form of telepathic hypnotism used to paralyse prey before the feast. Is this what Crawfield had inherited from her biter? Some kind of stealth fog to make Eleanor easy meat before Bex's sword?

If Barbie Girl was slower, then Eleanor needed to rely on her superior speed. She fainted to the left, then attacked to the right with every ounce of velocity her unnaturally humming body could muster, driving her sword twice into the opponent's gut, right at the base of the solar plexus, just as Hanzo had taught. Eleanor almost stumbled when Bex didn't fall moaning to the ground, didn't even falter, just thrust again out with her bokken, nearly rapping Eleanor's skull with the skillfully wielded blade. *What the hell's going on here? I tried that move on Sam yesterday and knocked him out of the bout for half an hour. But she took that blow like I just tickled her with a twig.* It was no good, Eleanor realised she couldn't get a reliable read off her opponent. She had the speed, but not the mastery of the bokken to make her speed count. After ten minutes of desperate back and forth, Eleanor fell exhausted to a series of blows against her arms and spine, sent tumbling to the oak floor. She thought about trying to rise but decided to call it a day and just lie there, listening humiliated to Bex's still relatively shallow breathing. Crawfield hadn't even broken a sweat beating Eleanor. *And I thought getting my ass handed to me by a Japanese pensioner was disgrace enough.* Eleanor had been wrong about that.

'Miss Crawfield has the match,' announced Hanzo.

'That is so much hogwash,' complained Eleanor, groaning as she got to her feet. 'I struck her twice with my bokken, first. Everything after that is history. If I had been using a real blade, I would have impaled Barbie Girl here like King Prawn on a barbecue spit.'

'A fighter seeks victory from their high ground,' said Hanzo. 'As you should have noticed, Miss Crawfield has superior ability to receive punishment. This is her natural high ground.'

'That's fine because in real life, I'd be pulling my blade out of her gut and wiping it on her trousers.'

'Actually,' said Bex, 'I'd use my chest as a sandbag to trap your blade, then I'd pull your blade out and turn it against you.'

'Yeah,' laughed Sam, doubtfully, still leaning against the wall. 'And who was it that put the bite on you, girl . . . Wolverine or the Terminator?'

'Unusually perceptive of you, Mister Chickering,' said Hanzo. 'Miss Crawfield was never given the Cure to save her from a vampire's bite.'

'Then what . . . ?' asked Eleanor, shocked at the unexpected revelation.

Bex smiled smugly. 'I was bitten by a *zombie*. You want to take me down, dimples, you better drag yourself a guillotine to the fight next time.'

Hanzo bid his nearly trained student out of the hall and then turned back to the three others. 'You think you understand what you fight? No. Hold onto the beginner's

mind. There are hundreds of races recorded in the Bestiaries of the Sidhe Antique and we have not recorded them all. Some races have only two or three members left in hiding. Secretive. We know nothing.’ Hanzo prodded the tip of Eleanor’s nose again. ‘You rely on this too much. False confidence. Something both dead and alive at the same time carries no scent.’

Damn. Eleanor suddenly realised why Crawfield stank like someone’s grandmother. The girl was using perfume to mask what she had been turned by.

Hanzo raised a finger to tap Eleanor’s forehead. ‘When you fight a zombie, this is your target. Strike high. Strike fast. Strike first.’ He leant forward and whispered in her ear, these words meant for her alone. ‘Everyone feels fear. It can never be banished, only channelled like energy. Master it. Use it.’

Eleanor felt both her body and mood slump as she realised how badly and easily she had been beaten. This hadn’t really been a lesson for Sam or Chris. *This one was all mine.*

* * *

An hour later, Eleanor was inside the refectory on Sub-level Seven, sitting at one of the metal tables and demolishing a plate of Mexican food - rice, refried beans and chicken strips so spicy they might have been dipped in acid. She could just about control her voracious appetite now, but she was still eating twice her normal portion size every day. Her body was running as overclocked as a gaming PC, and this junk was her fuel. Eleanor fiddled with a little silver Zippo lighter, a bright Eagle painted on its side. Apart from the clothes she had been wearing when she was bitten, this was the only thing that had made it across from her old life. She glanced up as she saw Christopher Bischoff and Samuel Chickering approaching her table. They were out of their practice robes and, same as Eleanor, had switched into the olive green one-piece suits issued to base staff. It made them look a little like fighter jocks from Top Gun, even if the closest they had got to the cockpit of a warplane was the window of a browser’s flight sim.

Chris reached her table. ‘We’re going to be watching *Bram Stoker's Dracula* in the TV room up on seven, later.’

‘The movie with Gary Oldman? The cross-species passion that can survive a thousand years? Love never dies. What, is that meant to be ironic? I’m pretty sure the only thing a Red ever loved about a human is our taste.’

‘Hey, at least they got that crawling around the ceiling trick right,’ said Chris.

‘Only because their palms excrete an endo-bonding substance.’

‘You see, I knew you were paying attention in those Sci-tech Division lectures.’

‘I’m guessing that she’s not up for TV night,’ said Sam, trying to move his friend past Eleanor’s chair.

‘What I am, is nearly done eating here,’ said Eleanor, shooting the pair an annoyed glance.

‘Come on. Move along, brother, nothing to see here,’ said Sam. The two of them walked across to sit at another table further inside the refectory. Silently, Eleanor reproached herself. She knew she should make more of an effort. It’s just that effort

was tiring, and these days it was more than she could muster. Even on a good day when she hadn't been slammed around in the practice hall. *You know that's just an excuse. You weren't exactly Miss Congeniality back at the home, either.*

Thinking about making friends and influencing people. Bex Crawford approached Eleanor's table. Eleanor was almost tempted to shout over at the Brothers Grin to get them back to sit at her table, but then she saw that Zombie Girl wasn't carrying a lunch tray to sit down. Oddly, the woman came bearing a bundle of black clothes.

'You having a yard sale to raise money for a new bottle of Chanel No. 5, Miss Crawford?'

Crawford dropped the neatly folded pile of dark clothes on the table's steel surface. It appeared to be a trouser suit. 'These are in your size.'

'What's this, have I got a job interview?'

'Orders. Put them on,' said Crawford. 'Then report to sub-level five.'

'What's going on here?'

Bex Crawford flashed a slightly superior smile. 'Do what I say and you'll find out, won't you?'

Bex swivelled and stalked away, leaving a niggling trace of perfume behind her. *This is it, Eleanor realised. They put me to the test in the practice hall and I flunked it. Not a team player, not even able to beat that slow-moving mutant-zombie-human California Girl. These are my marching orders. Just the same as being back in the home.* The home which couldn't wait for Eleanor and her trash-talking smart aleck attitude to cross the threshold into legal adulthood so they could chuck her out into the street. *Why should the Vigil be any different?* Of course, there was another possibility. Perhaps one of the medical team had reported what they suspected about Eleanor. That the powers she had inherited from the monster who bit her were too dangerous to risk containing. That Eleanor was a danger and a disaster waiting to erupt on the world.

Eleanor walked up the stairs to sub-level five, not wanting to take a lift and risk meeting anyone she knew. She arrived at an open space filled with comfy chairs and tables and sofas. It looked like the rec area of some venture capital-backed software firm. All it was lacking was the foosball table. And soon enough, her presence too. It was nearly empty, all except one familiar-looking face who came over smiling when he saw her.

'You remember me? My name's Ian Holderness.'

Eleanor remembered. It was Vigil tradition for the team who rescued a probie and gave them the Cure to hold a welcoming party after the survivor left Hunger Room quarantine. She hadn't acted particularly welcoming back towards the people at that party, and now she felt a little guilty that this was one of the same people entrusted with kicking her out. 'Yeah, from my greet-and-meet wake. Goodbye old me, hello new me. You gave the probies a talk on resisting Vampire Mind Judo on my first day in training, too.'

'TCA,' corrected Ian. 'Telepathic Confusion Assault. We always understand something better after we label it with an acronym.' He indicated one of the large elevators which needed a passcard swipe to enter. Ian pulled his badge out of a pocket in the dark suit he wore, then ushered her inside once it arrived.

They're doing it, then. Order of the boot. All on my own again. Had it ever really been any other way? At least this lonely fate was better than being thrown in a cell next door to that half-tame vampire priest. Caged up for the rest of Eleanor's unnaturally prolonged life.

The elevator rose slowly upward, gaining speed until it slowed and the doors slid open with a little digital ding. Eleanor stepped out, almost shaking with uncertainty. Light, natural light streaming through glass. *Sunlight.* She had grown so used to the strip-lighting of the underworld that this bright natural glow was now a novelty.

'Where are we?'

'Foyer of the Empire State Building,' said Ian. 'You want to access New York V-Command, you enter any staff-only maintenance elevator, tap 105 on the panel while keeping the Restricted Basement button held down. There's no 105th floor - and then the lift goes down rather than up. You can exit command to arrive up here from any of our top five sub-levels, but entering always takes you to the same screening point at security control on sub-level ten.'

Eleanor glanced around. Hundreds of tourists and office workers passing through. The constantly shifting crowd acted as the perfect cover for the Vigil's agents and staff coming and going. 'Where do I head now?'

Ian looked confused. 'What do you mean?'

'You're kicking me out, right? That was Hanzo's recommendation after I was handed my ass on a plate.'

Ian grinned. 'Everyone gets handed their ass on a plate by Hanzo. He's been getting meaner and sharper every day of his grumpy old life. But you're right, this is Hanzo's recommendation. He passed word up the line that you're ready for your first ride-along.'

'This is a mission?' asked Eleanor, stunned by how quickly things might have turned around.

He tapped his chest. 'Put your hand in your jacket pocket.'

Eleanor dipped her hand inside the suit and removed a little leather wallet. She opened it to find a little silver badge sitting above a Homeland Security ID-card bearing her photo along with a bar-code and biometric data chip. 'This is real?'

'It swipes through airports real enough. Not sure about the rest. Hanzo must have given you that speech about learning on the job by now? He's right on the button about that. Breaking bokken in the practice hall can't prepare you for what we have to do out here. Only surviving the job does that. But don't worry, the thing we need to do today is usually low mortality rate unless you catch some bad luck.'

Usually. Somehow, Eleanor suspected there was a lot more to whatever she had been pulled out of the Vigil's warren for. 'And what happens if I get unlucky today?'

'Brain embolisms, first-degree burns, that kind of stuff.'

'How long you been doing *that kind of stuff*, Ian? You only look a few years older than me, but that doesn't mean much inside the Vigil, does it?'

Ian nodded with a slightly sad look of agreement settling across his features. 'True enough. I was bitten back in the eighties. That's last century, not the American Civil War or anything.'

'By a Red, right, not something weird?'

Ian snorted with laughter at that, attracting curious glances from a party of passing tourists following a female guide holding an umbrella up high for them to track her through the crowd.

‘I say something to amuse you?’

‘I guess I forgot how easy it is to sink into this life. The idea of being bitten by a vampire isn’t weird any longer, but being turned by a Cannibal Forest Bigfoot or whatever, that is odd.’

‘What’s odd, my man, is your dress sense. I should have guessed you were an eighties throwback. Downstairs, you usually dress like you’re attending a Miami Vice fan-boy con.’

‘I try and keep current,’ protested Ian.

‘So what’s with the dark suits,’ said Eleanor, indicating Ian’s as well as her own. ‘We keeping current by looking like accountants, today?’

‘Roll with it. We need to blend in. I still feel twenty, you know, as well as looking it. The years moves slower for you after you stop ageing normally. Mentally as well as physically.’

‘I wonder how the Reds feel about it,’ said Eleanor. ‘Some of my nightmares - I mean, I’m seeing some crazy history that looks like it was pulled from an episode of Spartacus.’

‘I think I know exactly how the Reds feel about it; their bodies regenerating across the millennia unless they meet with a little unexpected brute force trauma. They see humanity as insects, annoying grubs that live for a few days compared to a vampire’s extended lifespan. Very tasty grubs.’

‘This grub doesn’t want to get eaten.’

‘Won’t happen,’ said Ian. ‘Not after taking the Cure. Your blood’s poison to pretty much any race of the Sidhe Antiqua that tries to feed on you now. That’s another reason the Reds and their demi-gog stooges loathe our kind. We steal their powers, get to remain human, and we’re removed from the dinner menu at the same time.’

‘Reassuring.’

‘Don’t get captured alive,’ said Ian. ‘They can’t feast on us, but the ripping us apart piece by piece is something they’ll usually run with.’

‘Not so reassuring.’

‘Your dreams will start to fade after sixth months,’ said Ian, helpfully. ‘Although you’ll often get the occasional faint false memory flashback, triggered by smells or sights. The Red who turned me became a vampire during the French Revolution, an aristocrat who only just escaped to the New World. Madame Guillotine was pretty much designed for slaying Reds. I used to see Notre Dame in my visions, cobbled streets along the Seine, peasants wearing rags. I nearly had a psychotic episode when I sat through a matinee showing of *Les Misérables* at the Imperial Theatre.’

‘I knew there was a reason I don’t want to watch *Ben Hur* again.’

They left the foyer of the building, passing through a set of revolving glass doors, and walked out into the street. Eleanor had forgotten how busy New York was, buried down inside the Vigil’s concealed concrete warren. She sucked in the smell of the city and nearly gagged as she was assailed by the assault of hundreds of strangers busy, moving, car exhausts vomiting pollution, the smell of food wafting from burger vans

and restaurants. People, throngs of frenetic people living unconcerned lives, everyone oblivious to the fact they were a herd of live meat for predators higher up the food-chain.

Ian looked concerned and steadied her. 'Are you alright?'

'Just finding my street legs,' said Eleanor. 'Hanzo should try scheduling a little free-time into the students' schedule. I'd forgotten what the world was like.'

'It's the same world,' said Ian. 'It's us who are different.'

Eleanor had never really understood that, before. Seeing all this, though, it was like being hit by a tidal wave. A whole busy world of normal. And she was walking around it like she was an alien visitor from another planet.

'Sorry,' said Ian. 'You want to go back inside the centre, take a moment?'

'Dude, whatever I got passed by the Red's bite, I'm fairly sure it wasn't agoraphobia.'

'I forgot how hard it was to exit decompression for the first time.'

A black van pulled up in the street beside her and Ian, another familiar face from Eleanor's welcome wake . . . Guy Drew behind the wheel. 'You ready for a road trip, kids?'

Eleanor was no longer sure about this. 'How far do you need to drive to hunt vampires?'

'Vampires, they're easy. Today we're out hunting Big Game.'

'What's bigger than - ?'

'You remember when I pulled you out of Father Okoro's cell after the rascal developed the munchies?'

'Yeah, thanks, those are the nightmares I get when my head's not being forced into watching gladiator re-runs from the Roman Arena.'

'You're welcome. This is the same deal . . . it's a you-got-to-see-it-to-believe-it thing.'

Eleanor forced herself through the open door, following Ian, and sat groggily in the back seat, willing herself to adjust to being back in the world. Trying to beat down the terror and adjust her mind to just how real things were going to get. The kind of real able to shatter her sanity. *Everyone feels fear. It can never be banished, only channelled like energy. Master it. Use it.*

CHAPTER THREE

Burning Angels

Attica Correctional Facility didn't appear much like Eleanor had expected a maximum security prison to look. From the outside, its walls seemed more like a citadel - white concrete walls thirty feet high, the long length dotted by keep-like gatehouses, each keep mounted with a spire that belonged on a fake castle inside an amusement park. *Disneyland for the deranged*. A wide open stretch of tarmac served as a car park outside - broken only by tall flagpoles with fluttering state standards - further added to the feeling Eleanor had driven into an austere funfair. The guards who greeted them had obviously been expecting visitors. Guy, Ian and Eleanor flashed their mostly fake Homeland Security badges and were ushered through a series of stark corridors, doors like submarine airlocks, cameras everywhere. The three of them passed through multiple checkpoints, pressing badges against scanners, cage doors sliding open in response. Every guard wore a blue riot helmet with mirrored visor, padded jacket and a snub-nosed submachine gun strapped to their waist. Faceless security for prisoners intended to be locked away and forgotten for the rest of their miserable lives.

Eventually, the three guests from the Vigil were led down a narrow corridor where a single ominous cell door blocked the end. It was made of metal with a crack of a viewing slit that could be flipped open to check inside before entering. Above the portal was a sign that read 'Security Max-A', split lower down into two sections containing the words 'occupied' and 'unoccupied'. The portion of the sign that read 'occupied' glowed green, indicating someone was inside.

'There needs to be three of us inside the cell at all times,' said Guy, rubbing the stubble on his chin. 'Nobody leaves until all three of us are finished.'

Eleanor tried to peek through the narrow slit; catch an advance glimpse of who was on the other side of the steel door. All she saw was a flickering light, as though someone was watching television inside. Guy's warning piqued her curiosity. 'Why do we need to stay together?'

'In the Vigil, this is what we call a walk-in,' said Guy.

Eleanor suppressed her irritation. 'We're the only ones who've walked in here. This is a supermax prison, right, not a supermarket? Just who's inside that cell?'

Ian answered for the old man. 'The *body* in there belongs to Dravin Braxtell.'

Body? She didn't like the way Ian had emphasised that single word. Dravin Braxtell . . . Eleanor had heard the name. *But where?* How was this the Big Game that Guy had mentioned? Then the name and horrific story attached to it suddenly slid into

her mind and she wished it hadn't. Dravin Braxtell was a serial killer sitting on Death Row. In fact, Eleanor thought the monster had already been executed. Braxtell had been a minor league global TV presenter, touring the world's war zones and producing reports for the rolling news channels. In the chaos of the world's nastiest civil wars and famine-driven conflicts, the notorious TV presenter had secretly been murdering refugees. War proved the perfect cover and ideal environment to practice his sick addiction. Leaving victims under rubble beside thousands of corpses murdered in vicious conflicts, with many more swelling the death count after Braxtell departed on his way to his next assignment. An agent of chaos whose job carried him daily through the heart of darkness. A shadow hiding in the centre of the night. Eventually, a camerawoman on Braxtell's crew grew suspicious enough to plant a hidden cam in his hotel room while they were filming inside of the largest Middle Eastern refugee camps. After the camerawoman retrieved the spy-cam, she discovered grisly footage of Braxtell drugging and murdering refugees during their brief stay. Those victims' bodies had never been found, but under police questioning, Braxtell copped to racking up a death count close to a small war himself.

'You said *body*, is Braxtell dead?'

'Not yet,' said Guy.

Guy nodded towards the two faceless prison guards as they unlocked the heavy door for the visitors. 'Come on. This is one of those things you need to see for yourself.'

Eleanor hung hesitantly back for a second. The Blood War's recounting had been entrusted to a vampire priest scuttling around the ceiling like a spider, but *this*, whatever *this* was, she needed to see for herself? What could be so horrific it needed three of them to enter at the same time, like a gang of small children huddling terrified together in a Ghost House's dark corridors?

Eleanor stepped through, Guy walking in front and Ian taking the rear. She found herself inside a small room, no windows, just like the rest of the prison. Everything lit by harsh neon illumination-strip lighting, painting every surface a chilly blue hue. In the cell's centre rested a bare steel table, three green plastic chairs waiting on her side of it. The prisoner sat opposite her . . . his metal chair riveted into the floor, legs manacled to it and hands restricted by chains joined to the table. It might have been Dravin Braxtell on the other side of the table, but Eleanor found it impossible to tell. Where the man's mouth and eyes should have been, were blurs of light, fierce white fire as though the figure was vomiting napalm.

'What-!' Eleanor realised her legs were carrying her back towards the cell's shutting door; trying to escape without any conscious command from her brain to her feet.

[Stop] The word boomed from the figure, that fiery white slit of the mouth convulsing. Rather than sound, the whole room seemed to vibrate from that single curt instruction.

'She's new,' said Guy. 'Cut her some slack. Probation year and all. Probie's never seen an angel before.'

Angel? What kind of insanity is this?

Ian leant across and whispered to her. 'All three of us have to stay in the cell. It

can possess two of us at once if it wants to. But angels have problem controlling more than two mortals at the same time.'

Fresh words echoed from the gruesome figure. [This vessel burns]

'That much I know,' said Guy. He sat down on one of the chairs, and Eleanor uneasily followed the man's lead. 'We're on the clock. This ain't my first time on this fairground ride, pal. Who are you? Who are we talking with?'

[Zadkiellllllllllll.]

'My first time with you,' said Guy, as casually as if he was commenting on a new waiter's employment at his favourite restaurant. 'What, Gabriel too busy to talk to his favourite lost soul?'

[Time is many-foldeddddd.]

'Not down here in this little corner of creation it ain't.'

Eleanor noticed Ian had quietly been consulting his mobile phone. 'Zadkiel. You're one of the angels of mercy - a servant of the Archangel Michael.'

[We all but servveeeee.]

'Very humble of you,' said Guy. 'Let's cut to the chase here, Zad. What's on your infinitely infallible mind?'

White flames lashed out of the thing's mouth like a frog's tongue and Eleanor had to suppress the urge to flee again. *This is real. You're not insane, Eleanor. This is actually happening.*

[The enemy is on the trail of the Judas Purse: we judge their success to be likely: they must be opposeddddd].

'The *what* purse?' asked Eleanor, a touch of confusion to mix into her fear, sitting opposite this horrific burning vision.

Guy shot her a dark look.

'Later,' whispered Ian. 'The angel doesn't have long on our plane of existence.'

Eleanor was about to ask why but bit her tongue instead.

'It's been a while,' said Guy. 'This scheme to recover the purse . . . it's backed by the Reds?'

[Yessssssss].

'Any clan sucker in particular?'

[The vessel named Martin Bormannnnnn].

That name sounded vaguely familiar to Eleanor, too, but she wasn't sure from where, precisely. *Not another serial killer.* Eleanor tried to stare at the flaming figure, but the blaze burnt her retina. She averted her gaze and felt like a coward while doing so.

Guy seemed to recognise the name, though. He groaned. 'Oh joy. How do we get to the Judas Purse before the Reds do?'

The fiery figure shook its head, a strangely human gesture from this burning man. [Balance: light gives way to darkness: night to dayyyyyyyyyy.]

'You ever get splinters from sitting on that fence, Zad? Throw me a bone, here!'

[The floating vesselllllllll.] As soon as those words had been uttered the fire seemed to dwindle, a furnace dimming. As the prisoner stopped speaking his body slumped back in the steel chair and began to turn to ash, disintegrating before Eleanor's shocked eyes, embers falling and scattering about the cell floor, little wisps

of orange boiler suit caught by the interrogation cell's air conditioning and left drifting through the air.

Eleanor raised a fist to her cover her mouth, fighting her gag reflex. 'Dear God, where's Braxtell?'

'Ridden out,' said Guy. 'As in good riddance.'

'He's dead? Not just—'

'What, teleported away? Out on good behaviour? Day release? Nah, I reckon Braxtell is somewhere a lot hotter now.' Guy looked across at the powder of soot falling off the chair. 'You never hear of someone finding God in prison? I guess it cuts both ways. No loss in this particular case.'

Eleanor was horrified how casually the old man treated Braxtell's death. Was that a byproduct of surviving as long as the old man had lived? Fighting in this horrible, secret war? Had Guy's humanity gone up in smoke as easily as the prisoner? 'How can you be so cavalier? Braxtell was a prisoner. He had rights.'

'What about all the children left in shallow graves under the rubble of Syria and Somalia like discarded cola cans? They have rights, too? Or you taking that old Stalin line here - the execution of one man is a tragedy, the murder of a thousand is only a statistic?'

Eleanor still felt sick. 'Who - *what* am I fighting for?'

'I can't tell you that, kid. Even the infinitely infallible Zad can't tell you that. On the plus side, you're going to live a couple of centuries to make your mind up. Unless you mess up badly enough and buy the farm first.'

'Braxtell was as good as gone when he arrived on Death Row,' said Ian, trying to excuse what they had just witnessed. 'He was extradited to the USA on the basis that he would be tried for a capital crime.'

Eleanor shook her head at his rationalisation. It sounded weak to her. 'Was that *thing* really an angel?'

'Best as we can tell,' said Guy, standing up from the chair and stretching. He was as untroubled as if he had just finished lunch in a burger joint. 'The angels take a different view of things. I reckon for them, time happens all at once - the past, present and future. If angels are playing competition chess, then humanity is just a stadium full of deaf, dumb and blind spectators.'

'Closer to bacteria clinging to the bottom of the chess board,' said Ian.

Their quips did little to quieten Eleanor's deeply disturbed mood. Ian rapped on the cell door and the two guards opened it. She noticed there was an orderly outside with bucket and mop and felt a pang of guilt for what this interview had cost. *I thought the Vigil saved me from becoming a monster. But maybe this is how I lose the rest of my humanity. A little piece chipped away every day.*

'Portents and omens,' growled Guy as they put the cell behind them. 'Angels never show up with good news and an invite to a pot roast, that much I know.'

'Tell me about this Judas Purse!' demanded Eleanor, anger flaring within her. She knew the rage she felt now was the natural kind, not a byproduct of her being bitten by a vampire. 'Tell me exactly what was worth a man's life back there.'

'You never read the Bible, kid? Or maybe you've only seen the movies? Judas Iscariot betrayed Jesus to the Sanhedrin for thirty silver coins. That's your Judas Purse

right there. After Christ's crucifixion and Iscariot's suicide, the thirty coins were cursed with the darkest form of power there is. When you possess that purse, you attract riches and power, the world-changing kind, but the coins also corrupt you and drive you insane. The Judas Purse is a planet-sized can of whoop-ass waiting to be opened. Archives back at the ranch should have more details on where it could be located. One thing I do know, we need to either ensure the purse stays lost or get to it before the Reds.'

'So we can trust Zadkiel's warning about the Judas Purse,' said Ian.

Guy sighed. 'I'm afraid so, kid. Zad's intel is gold.'

'Why so certain?'

'I'm carrying history with this gig.'

'You are?' said Ian, sounding surprised. Eleanor suspected it was more because Guy was willing to discuss his past. They exited the castle-like keep built into the high walls, walking out into the windy, cold prison car park and headed for the nondescript black van they had used to drive here.

'You need to travel back to the forties to get a handle on this,' explained Guy as he opened the van door and got into the driver's seat. Ian slipped into the back seat next to Eleanor. Guy started the van and continued explaining while he pulled away. 'The Judas Purse has been lost to history for centuries, but wherever the purse is now, it only consists of twenty-nine silver coins, not the full thirty. The thirtieth piece of silver was discovered inside a burial barrow in Ireland by Nazi spies in 1939 . . . that piece is called the Myrddin Coin. Legend says the coin was mounted to the sword Excalibur's hilt by the sorcerer Myrddin for the Dark Age King Arthur. Made Arthur as good as invincible until his court fell apart in civil war. You might say owning Excalibur proved to be a double-edged sword.' He snorted in amusement at his own joke.

Eleanor could hardly believe what she was hearing. 'You're telling me Adolf Hitler ended up with Judas's thirtieth coin?'

'Gave Hitler the power to nearly win the Second World War in an early knock-out blow,' said Guy. 'Made the Nazi war machine as good as unstoppable.'

'But they were stopped,' said Ian, stating the obvious.

'Thanks to a few good men. You know when I was bitten by a Red, don't you . . . ?'

Ian nodded. 'You mentioned it once . . . during the second world war. D-day?'

'I hit the beaches, sure, but I got the bite earlier than that.' Guy's eyes narrowed. It was clearly an unpleasant memory for him. 'Yeah, I got turned during the Battle of Monte Cassino in Italy. I was a sergeant in the U.S. 36th Division, a G.I grunt, a humble ground-pounder. Dumb as dirt and just another cog in the lean, mean, killing machine. One of the units we battled against up in those mountains was the Iron Guard, a group of fascist volunteers from Transylvania and Romania fighting for the Nazis. What I didn't know was that their colonel was a Red and half his soldiers were demi-gogs. Fanatical peasants who believed their officer was a god rather than a devil. They chewed us up pretty good in that battle, in my unit's case, quite literally.'

Eleanor realised she had something in common with this grizzled old dog, now. *We're not that different, there's a scary thought. Please don't end up like him.* 'You

were bitten and got the serum in time, like I did.’

‘Sure, the Vigil were in the war fighting inside Europe as a covert arm of the Office of Strategic Services, the OSS. Same outfit who went on to become the CIA after the war.’

‘What does all that have to do with the Judas Purse?’ asked Eleanor.

‘A hell of a lot, kid. Listen and learn. The Battle of Monte Cassino centred around an abbey on top of the Rapido Valley. It became the bloodiest battle of the Italian campaign. Both the allies and Axis powers took incredible casualties attempting to seize that ground. And the real reason for the fighting’s ferocity was an ancient text uncovered in Italy by Gestapo treasure hunters. An old book which suggested that the abbey’s founder, Benedict of Nursia, was once guardian of the Judas Purse and had hidden the coins in a secret vault below his abbey. Hitler already had one coin. You could say he wanted to collect the set.’

‘Both sides were fighting over the Judas Purse?’ said Ian.

Guy snorted in derision. ‘We were fighting for possession of the vault, baby. The Allies lost more than 55,000 fine men seizing two valleys, and all we got for our troubles was an empty crypt hidden below the abbey. After we won the battle, we excavated the vault. All we found were dust and cobwebs inside. The purse had been there once.’

‘Maybe the Nazis got there before you, stole the purse and carried it away?’ speculated Eleanor.

Guy shook his head. ‘I know for sure that didn’t happen. If the Nazis had gotten their filthy mitts on the Judas Purse, we would have lost the war within a year. Just the power of a single coin allowed Hitler to sweep through Europe and conquer everything up to the English Channel. Given enough time, the Nazis would have crushed the rest of the world too. They were developing V3 Rockets, jet fighters, castle-sized tanks and the A-bomb. But Hitler never got the chance. The Vigil seized the Myrddin coin from the Nazis in the guttiest raid of the war.’

‘Hitler must have had the artifact well-defended?’

‘Oh, he had the coin well-defended alright,’ said Guy. ‘Hitler was paranoid about members of his own circle stealing the coin and using it to seize control of the party from him. Ernst Röhm tried to filch the coin and paid with his life for betraying Hitler. To keep the coin secure, Hitler ordered the construction of a massive u-boat base and atomic research centre hidden under Antarctica. What the Nazis called the Neuschwabenland Citadel. That was where the Myrddin coin was guarded by the SS and the Reds. I was part of the combined OSS and Vigil commando force which infiltrated the citadel and stole it away from them, as well as destroying as much of the Axis nuclear programme as we could blow up and get out alive. We used Churchill’s crazy plan to convert an iceberg into a covert floating aircraft carrier and sneak up on the citadel. Our team escaped through the snow back to the carrier. Carried the coin back to America and after that, the winds of fortune began to favour the Allies. The Soviets started to turn the tide against Hitler in Russia. The Allies mounted D-Day and recaptured Europe. Without the coin’s power, Hitler began to get sick and shrivel up, his mind half-destroyed. Owning that foul piece of silver takes its toll.’

Ian's eyes flashed. 'Do we still hold the Myrddin Coin?'

Guy shook his head. 'After the war definitively turned in the Allies' favour, President Franklin Roosevelt gave orders for the coin to be destroyed. It was just too dangerous to be locked away and kept on ice forever. Sooner or later some politician would have been tempted to use the coin to influence world events in America's favour. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Roosevelt knew keeping the coin meant that the USA would eventually end up as a dark all-powerful world empire every bit as evil as the Third Reich. On FDR's orders, the coin was taken from the Bullion Depository at Fort Knox and welded inside the Little Boy atomic bomb. The Myrddin Coin was vapourised in nuclear fire at Hiroshima and good riddance to it.'

'The President must have been sorely tempted to keep the coin,' said Ian.

'More than you know. Roosevelt was seriously ill at the time. The coin's power was the only thing keeping the President alive. After he signed the order for its destruction the coin took its revenge . . . Roosevelt passed away days later.'

Eleanor wondered if she would have had the strength to give such a power up, knowing that forsaking it would be as good as a death sentence. *I hope so*. But then, she also prayed she would never be put in a position where she'd need to find out how strong her will-power proved.

Guy shook his head sadly. 'Lost a lot of friends in that war. Lost a lot since, too.'

'Back in the cell,' said Eleanor, 'it sounded like you know the vampire hunting the Judas Purse.'

'You don't know who Martin Bormann is? I guess you skipped history, kid.'

'I guess you lived through it,' retorted Eleanor.

Guy grunted. 'Got me there. Martin Bormann was the power behind the throne inside the Third Reich - Adolf Hitler's private secretary. Also a Red - a senior level vamp. He disappeared during the Soviet Army's great siege around Berlin. Turned up in Argentina. Faked his death twice since. Not the first time he pulled that trick, either. The Vigil believes he was originally turned in 1582 when he was a Middle-European warlord butcher called Gebhard Truchsess von Waldburg.'

'So we're going to be fighting someone who thought that World War Two was a mighty fine idea,' said Eleanor.

'Fine, as in von Waldburg helped start the war. Maggots love corpses to feed on,' said Guy. 'Ian, get on the phone back to V-com. Tell Diane and Alasdair to head down to archives and begin researching this mess. We need to shake some solid leads out of the tree to follow.'

'It won't be easy,' said Ian.

'Tell me something I don't know. If it was easy, we would have already done it.'

'We can't allow the Reds to recover the Judas Purse,' said Ian, sliding his phone from his suit. 'If they do, it won't be a matter of counting corpses - we'll be counting how many people are left alive after the Reds abuse such power.'

Guy's hand gripped the steering wheel a little too tight. 'The chaos of the Second World War amplified to the power of twenty-nine wicked pieces of silver. There's a party I don't want an invite to.'

Eleanor agreed with his sentiment, but she kept quiet, staring out of the window at

cars zipping past on the freeway. She tried to ignore the disturbing feeling that an invite to that party was exactly what had been extended by a possessed, burning corpse inside Attica Correctional Facility.

Eleanor had been down to the Vigil's archives level before to research subjects set during training. The New York Public Library it wasn't. One of the deepest levels of the underground complex, Archives Division was a maze of corridors filled with metal shelves on rollers crushed tight together. Often, to reach a specific book or filing box, you needed to roll a dozen other shelves forward and back to reach what you were looking for. And you had to remember to lock the shelves in place, or risk a fellow browser in another room move shelves, setting off a domino reaction that would crush you while you were trying to extract your book. Once Eleanor retrieved a tome, she had her choice of hundreds of leather-topped desks lit by brass lamps, their surfaces cluttered filled with antique-looking microfiche readers and old computers. The computers possessed no Internet connection, but instead acted as dumb terminals for server rooms filled with large chattering tape machines as well as more esoteric equipment, such as banks of computer chips held suspended in cooled tanks of bubbling green liquid. The staff who worked down here were closer to priests or wizards than the agents you ran across the upper levels - cliquish, they kept to themselves and seemed to resent the intrusion of upsiders into their domain. Visitors - supplicants - who despoiled their perfect realm of dusty knowledge. When Eleanor arrived in the archives with Guy and Ian, the other two members of Guy's team - Diane O'Hara and Alasdair Colburn - had already been ferreting about the level for hours. Aided by the Archives Division staff, the two agents had, it seemed made an important discovery.

'What you found?' asked Guy, reading their faces and realising they had something to show for their time.

Diane spoke for the pair. She indicated a book trolley loaded with green tomes bearing the coat of arms of the Black Pope - the shadowy leader of the church's secret supernatural combat arm. 'In here . . . the monks recorded a rumour that the Judas Purse was relocated from the vaults below the monastery during the siege of Vienna. The purse was sent north out of Italy when the church became convinced Southern Europe would be totally overrun by the Turks. Later records speculated the coins were returned to the Benedictine Order at Monte Cassino after the Turkish threat was beaten off. But if for some reason the purse wasn't sent back to Monte Cassino, then the purse could still be held in its backup location!'

'How do we find out where the backup location is?'

Diane smiled. She was good at this work and seemed to want to draw the moment out. 'The secret monastery records of Saint Benedict of Nursia will have recorded where the coins were sent for safekeeping.' Diane offered out one of the church ledgers to Eleanor and she accepted it, brushing the dust off the coat of arms stamped into the leather - a pair of crossed axes below the keys of Peter. Eleanor opened the pages to peruse what Diane had discovered, but stopped when she realised that the text was written in Latin.

Ian could barely contain his excitement. 'So, where are Saint Benedict's records?'

Diane's grin faded. 'That's where it gets tricky. They were looted from the monastery in the 18th century during the wars of unification. We contacted Rome. The Inquisition believes Saint Benedict's records have ended up in the hands of the Keeper ... inside the Old Paradise Shop.'

Guy sucked in a deep, heavy breath. 'Oh, *great*. Well, at least that explains why nobody has been able to chase down the Judas Purse.'

'A shop?' said Eleanor. 'What's the biggie? We can just visit the place and buy the monastery records back.'

'The shop moves,' explained Ian. 'It never stays in the same place for long.'

Eleanor didn't understand what the young agent was talking about. 'Moves, as in, what - this dude's a mobile trader selling out of the back of a van?'

Ian shook his head. 'No, the shop's a physical building. It's just the building never stays in the same location for long.'

'*Right*. I'll have the rest of the bottle of what you've been drinking.'

'He's telling the truth. But finding the store isn't the real issue,' said Diane, 'our main problem is the price we have to pay to shop there once we find it.'

Eleanor looked quizzically at the woman, waiting for her to elaborate.

'Souls,' said Diane. 'The Keeper sets his price in mortal souls.'

Eleanor was still trying to wrap her mind around the nature of a shopkeeper who priced in souls when Guy reappeared from the depths of Archives Division. He had left Alasdair and Diane hunting for any other clues they could dig up in the files, and now carried a steel suitcase that bore the Latin motto of Archives. *An Veritas, An Nihil*. The Truth, or Nothing. Guy lifted up the case. 'On loan from Archives. We need to get some face-time with Moonbeam and let her do her thing with it.'

'What kind of stupid name is Moonbeam?' asked Eleanor, wondering what was inside the metal case.

Guy led them towards a lift. 'The hippie kind. Moonbeam's real name is Alice Montovich, bitten in 1963. She's non-operational: we never put her in the field. Too valuable. Plus, she's kind of whacked. Wouldn't last a month out in the wild hunting Reds.'

Eleanor made a show of fake enthusiasm. 'Wow! She sounds like a barrel of laughs.'

'Highly-strung,' said Ian. 'Her quarters are down on seventeen. Decorated to resemble the period when she was bitten. Alice never leaves. She believes it's still the sixties, so don't say anything to upset her delusions.'

The lift arrived and Eleanor stepped in alongside the two men. 'What, like pull out my phone and ask her if she wants to join my clan and help me level up.'

Ian shrugged. The lift descended. 'Yeah, exactly that kind of stuff.'

'What makes this dippy chick so valuable?'

'She sees things.'

Eleanor was confused. The lift doors opened and she hesitated before stepping out. 'What, ghosts - the dead?'

Guy answered for the younger agent. ‘Visions. Catching glimpses of the future . . . the talent is called precognition. About as rare an ability as exists on the register. Hardly any Reds possess it, so we don’t usually see it develop in agents post-Cure.’

They were in another corridor. Rather than painted concrete, this one had been done up in panelled wood and green patterned carpet. It looked like they had arrived at a hotel. From down the corridor a door opened, a tall distinguished man who looked in his mid-sixties stepping out of the room. Eleanor guessed he wasn’t room service. He wore a grey three-piece suit, the kind of thing Bond wore when he was played by Sean Connery.

The man approached them, nodding as he passed and slowed. ‘Agents. Sergeant Drew.’

‘Chief,’ said Guy. ‘How’s Alice today?’

‘More focused than usual,’ said the stranger. He spoke with a slight Boston accent. He pointed at the steel briefcase Guy was carrying. ‘Is that what I think it is?’

‘Reckon so.’

The man grimaced. ‘Go easy on Alice if you can.’

‘Easy, that’s my middle name, chief.’

‘Indeed? You must have changed it from Mayhem,’ said the man. He squeezed Guy on the shoulder and set off down the corridor.

‘Who’s he?’ asked Eleanor. ‘Looks kind of familiar.’

‘That’s John, the Vigil’s current Director. Our big cheese. You might say he’s from the period, too. He’s changed his face a lot since the sixties . . . we had to fake his murder in 1963. John’s one of the few people that Moonbeam will open up to.’

‘Was he well-known?’

‘Not anymore with that face. You’re probably triggering off the men John based his new features on - a morph-mix of Joey Bishop and Dean Martin.’

‘Who?’

Guy sighed. ‘I’m working with the heathen, here.’

‘So, shouldn’t we get boss-man back in here for this interview if he’s tight with her?’ asked Eleanor.

‘Nah. Me and Moonbeam are good. I was on the team that gave Alice the Cure when she was bitten.’

There was a doorbell outside, and Guy pressed it. Hearing no answer, he opened the unlocked door and ushered the three of them inside. They rustled through a curtain of hanging beads to enter. ‘Moonbeam? It’s Guy the guy. You around, hon?’

Eleanor waited on a thick shag pile carpet and glanced around the apartment’s living room. A lava lamp bubbled on the windowsill, and the window had to be some kind of ultra-high-resolution screen, because it looked pretty convincingly like they were high up inside a city apartment building, a block opposite with an advertising hoarding scaffold on the roof for Macy’s Christmas 1965 Sale. The projection showed the kind of cars you could only see in Cuba moving along the street below, a honk and thrum of traffic, the occasional old-style siren of a police car echoing off the brownstones.

The psychedelic pattern of the tangerine orange wallpaper was making Eleanor’s temple start to throb. ‘Looks like we’re on the set of Mad Men.’

Ian hissed her to be quiet before Guy heard - or worse, the woman walking out from the kitchen to greet them, padding as lightly as a cat in light brown moccasins. Moonbeam wore a bright red Indian sari, her wavy light blonde hair set with a fringe braid and tied back with a bandana. Frankly, Eleanor thought the woman looked like someone's mother attending a sixties-themed fancy dress party.

'Guy-baby, the man with the plan. Just had John in here. Like, I'm Miss Popular today. What's happening?' The woman sat in a white pod-shaped chair and swung herself around on it.

'Same-old same-old, Moonbeam.' Guy indicated Ian and Eleanor. 'Brought a couple of the tribe along. You mind? Ian, here, he was with me last time I visited. Eleanor's fresh.'

'Fresh as a flower,' said Moonbeam. 'Looks kind of sad, though. You been putting downers on the new chick?'

Guy rubbed his stubble, mournfully. He sat down on a sofa opposite a glass coffee table and the woman. 'With this face? I'm all about the light, Moonbeam. You remember that.'

'I'm in the nest, man,' said the woman. 'It's warm and cosy and I'm never coming out.'

'And we're fixing to keep you safe up here,' said Guy. 'But I'm going to need you to visit the Spirit World. Find your Goddess and help us locate something that's missing.' He placed the steel briefcase on her coffee table, opened it, and removed a leather book wrapped in brown parcel paper. 'This belongs to the man we need to find.'

Moonbeam seemed to recognise the book, shying away from the table. 'I've done that trip before - and it's a bad one. Full of pain and regrets.'

'I know you have.'

'You bagged this book from the *monster's* library.'

'And we lost someone bringing the book back to to us,' said Guy. 'Three went into the shop and only two came out. I'm not asking you to open the book. Just touch the binding and work out where his shop is. He'll never come here for you, you know that. But it's only because we're out in the big bad, doing that voodoo that we do, that it's so warm and safe for you up here.'

'It's twitchin'. I dig this apartment, Guy-baby. Rent-controlled in the Big Apple. That's rare.'

'Don't you know it.' Guy tapped the uncovered tome. 'You might say *this* is the rent collection book.'

The old soldier slid it across the coffee table towards her.

Moonbeam looked unhappy, but she did as she was bid, leaning forward and placing her long pale fingers on the book. She sucked in her breath as she made contact, as though the leather was freezing steel, the kind that could rip your skin off with contact in Alaska. Moaning, her eyes rolled to white in her sockets, and she began rocking violently in the plastic seat, almost falling out of it. 'I can see, see it.'

'The shop?'

'It's a living thing, soul and bones and blood twisted and refolded as something . . . evil.'

‘Where is it?’ Guy gently insisted. He was like a dog with a bone and he wasn’t going to give it up.

‘Creeping. Always creeping. Sliding across the world. Nowhere wants it. Nowhere can hold it for long, not without vomiting it up.’

‘I just need to know where the shop is now.’

Moonbeam cried out, the book shaking under her fingers.

‘It’s in - Batavia City.’

‘How long before it bounces?’

‘Twelve hours,’ moaned Moonbeam. ‘The shop is in the city for the next twelve hours.’

‘That’s it. We can make it,’ said Guy. He lifted Moonbeam’s hands off the book and she jolted like he’d just freed her from gripping an electrified fence. For a moment, Eleanor thought Moonbeam was going to be the one vomiting, but she held it down, wiping her sweating forehead with the back of her hand.

‘You did fine,’ said Guy.

‘There’s nothing fine about that vile thing,’ said Moonbeam. ‘Take it out of here, Guy-baby. Take it out and burn, that’s what the Goddess wants.’

Guy ignored her suggestion. ‘Grab a chopper and we can just make it to Batavia in time.’

The woman looked happy all of a sudden. ‘Chopper? Guy-baby, you got yourself a Harley?’

‘Not that kind of chopper. This one’s like a Huey, Moonbeam.’

She shivered. ‘They’re still killing the kids in Danang. They’re so full of kill out there.’

‘Moonbeam, let me tell you, it’s pretty full of kill everywhere.’

Moonbeam stared intensely across at Eleanor. ‘Don’t go with them, sister. You stay frosty here with Moonbeam.’

‘What else did you see in your vision?’ asked Ian, suspiciously.

‘There something we should know?’ added Guy.

Moonbeam turned away and wouldn’t meet any of her three visitors’ gaze. ‘It’s been laid on me, Guy-baby. I’m never laying it on anyone else. What happens has got to happen. That’s the will of the Goddess, and you never stand against her.’

Guy looked like he was going to argue, but stopped and thought better of it.

‘Okay. You’ve done good. Thanks for doing right by the tribe.’

‘We can’t just leave it there,’ said Ian.

‘This is the Keeper, here . . . and we’re on the clock,’ said Guy, indicating that was an end to the matter.

Ian didn’t look happy about the situation, but that was nothing to how she was feeling. Eleanor wanted to stay and shake out just what the hippie-chick was insinuating here about her future, but Guy was eager to be about the chase now he had the city they needed to visit, ushering Eleanor out before she said something to pop Moonbeam’s mystical soap bubble.

Moonbeam watched the three of them stand and leave her fake apartment, calling out as Guy shut the door. ‘Happy trails with the freaks. I’m staying here. I’m in the nest for good.’

Eleanor stared at the closed door and knew how the hippie woman felt. ‘She saw something about me, specifically, didn’t she?’

‘Maybe she did,’ said Guy.

‘Maybe? We’re going with that, are we?’

‘The thing to remember is that we exist in a quantum universe,’ said Ian, trying to reassure Eleanor. ‘The future isn’t set in stone. It’s shaped by our decisions. What Alice sees are just possible futures, the manifold paths we can take.’

Yeah, and she seemed fairly sure that I shouldn’t take this one. But then, visiting a shop where the price was set in souls, Eleanor has twigged onto that fact without the intervention of Moonbeam and her dippy Goddess-sent telegram service.

‘Tell me what we’re going to be facing,’ said Eleanor. The team had left the big double-rotor Chinook helicopter behind them, driving off its rear cargo ramp as smoothly as departing a ferry. Now she was in a compact black RV with smoked mirrors; no beds or kitchenettes inside, but everything else the mobile Vigil agent might need on the move. From a full armoury in a cloakroom-sized gun-safe, to the medical centre with a dozen vials of the Cure stored inside its refrigerated vault. Eleanor wouldn’t be long on the road, though. Batavia City was only half an hour’s drive away from the small private airfield where they had landed the Chinook.

Guy sat behind the wheel. Eleanor suspected the man had control issues, which meant he’d sooner lose a hand than relinquish control of the RV to one of the younger agents. ‘We’re not entirely sure what we’re going to be facing. The Keeper’s an EBE: an energy-based entity. Some of the Sci-Tech geeks believe he’s a rare form of Sidhe Antiqua. Possibly the last of his race. Others have him pegged as an ancient human sorcerer who managed to free himself from human form; gaining a form of immortality. One thing we do know, he only stays alive by feeding on his customers.’

‘With this many of us,’ said Eleanor, ‘can’t we just take him out?’

‘Plenty of people have tried. Us, the Reds. Nobody has ever succeeded. Inside the shop, the Keeper is the master of his realm - the store’s closer to a dream he’s dreaming, a dream he controls. As far as we know, he never leaves the shop.’

‘He’s a demon,’ said Diane, her voice dripping with loathing. ‘A devil exiled from hell.’

‘Exactly what the Keeper *is* doesn’t matter, right now,’ said Guy. ‘Keep your focus on what he can *do*. He’ll appear before us as a mortal, but bullets and blades have as much impact on him as opening fire on a lightning bolt. Bravo Team, Fourth SAD, tried to cap the Keeper back in the eighties. Half of them died trying to terminate that sucker. That’s how we know.’

Eleanor processed the old soldier’s worrying intelligence. The Vigil operated twenty Special Activities Division groups, or SADs, out of their New York base; each group with an alpha, bravo and charlie team containing anything up to eight agents, if you included the sergeant in charge. Guy Drew’s unit was Alpha Team, Seventh SAD group. Anybody - *anything* - that could take out four enhanced humans finely honed by a swordmaster like Ikeda Hanzo wasn’t just dangerous. It was fatal. Eleanor felt her jacket pocket, the little knuckle-duster-sized hilt of an extendable moly-blade tucked inside. ‘If the Keeper’s all that, how come we’re carrying swords?’

Diane answered. ‘The demon’s keeps hired help around the Old Paradise Shop. Sometimes human, sometimes Reds or other races of the Sidhe Antiqua. The swords are for his minions.’

‘This just keeps on getting better and better.’

‘We have something on our side that the Keeper does not,’ said Diane.

‘Yeah, what’s that?’

Diane opened her jacket and revealed a little pocket-sized bible tucked inside. ‘Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle.’

Eleanor didn’t reply. All things considered, she was kind of glad her hand had been trained by the psycho samurai. *But hey, if the Lord’s got my back on this one, I’ll take all the help I can get.*

Alasdair opened his jacket and revealed a boxy little device the size of a small iPad. ‘This is SciTech Division’s latest mobile sensor unit. I said I’d field test it for them - grab some readings from inside the shop.’

‘Faith is a stronger shield,’ insisted Diane.

‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic,’ said Alasdair. ‘Science is what the Sidhe Antiqua really fear. Science is what’s going to beat the Keeper, the Reds and all the rest of them in the end.’

Diane obviously didn’t agree. ‘For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God.’

Alasdair shook his head in frustration. ‘It’s just a book . . . why not quote from the Lord of the Rings? You might as well emigrate to Europe and sign up with *Scutum Dei*, Diane. The Black Pope always has room for another Ninja Nun in his old school.’

‘And you should—’

‘Enough,’ growled Guy. ‘Both of you stay frosty and save it for the Keeper.’

They drove in wintry silence and reached Batavia City seven minutes ahead of their sat-nav’s estimated arrival time, Guy flooring the vehicle and driving fast and focused. The old soldier had tersely reminded them that every minute would count once they were inside the store. But what they gained on the trip in, they wasted driving around the streets trying to find the Keeper’s store. Eleanor was wondering just how reliable Alice’s visions were, but then they finally came across the Old Paradise Shop on a road called Fabyan Parkway. They parked the RV in a bay opposite and dismounted. Eleanor noted Guy Drew had removed a steel briefcase from the RV, carrying it with him. She sure hoped it was some kind of experimental weapon the Vigil had issued to the team. The Keeper’s curiously mobile residence appeared as a narrow, rickety two-storey storefront. It looked out of place in the town’s modern upmarket shopping district, like a long neglected antique shop in the middle of its closing-down sale. The words ‘Old Paradise Shop’ were painted in gold leaf script on dark green wood, its windows dirty, dusty and covered in a framework of iron bars. The half-timbered second storey was painted white and possessed two narrow window slits, a slate tile roof squatting above, half-covered in moss which matched the weeds fringing the green door entrance below.

There’s something desperately wrong about this place. When Eleanor stared at the

store, her eyes seemed to slide off it. And it wasn't a pleasant sliding experience - a greasy and cold feeling, like discovering the slippery rancid corpse of a dead dog decaying at the back of your yard. Despite her misgivings, she crossed the road and approached it. Eleanor attempted to read the sign inside the shop's window, but the text seemed to be set in illegible one-point size.

'Don't dawdle,' said Guy, tapping his watch. 'We're only going to have twenty-five minutes inside before the shop vanishes and reappears in a new location.'

Eleanor's head was beginning to ache. She remembered the seer woman's pleas towards Eleanor. To stay safe with the hippie chick and refuse to travel here. *Too late now.* 'What if we're still inside when it jumps?'

'Then we're his,' said Guy. 'Extra stock. So stay frosty in there and watch the clock. Understood?'

A murmur of affirmation sounded from the team.

'Let's get this done. Everyone goes in, everyone comes out.'

Guy pushed open the door and an old-style bell tinkled, signalling his entrance. The old soldier held the door open for the rest of his team to enter.

Eleanor wrinkled her nose in distaste at the musty smell which assailed her. She stood on creaking floorboards, the start of a large sale room that looked like something from the 19th century - dozens of open and glass-fronted bookcases with a wooden shop counter at the far end, a shadowy open corridor leading further into the Old Paradise Shop. Hundreds of leather-jacketed volumes filled the shelves, pushed in tight together at all angles, ancient busts and dead animals floating inside preserved specimen jars acting as bookstops. Timber beams crossed the ceiling, splintered black oak hung with a strange variety of artifacts - bronze shields with hideous gargoyle faces, coils of rope and rusted daggers. The sales counter had heavy framed oil paintings leaning against it, a selection of wooden caskets piled on a faded Persian rug. As Eleanor looked again, she started as she realised that two staff stood behind the sales counter - a tall man in his fifties with a shiny shaved head and a pretty younger auburn-haired woman in her early twenties. *They weren't there a second ago.* The male staff wore a single-breasted tweed suit in muted brown, flecked with red, part of the pattern, but it could have been speckled with dried blood. He sported a Rasputin-style bushy black beard and intense, staring blue eyes that seemed to bore into her brain. Eleanor hoped beardie was the Keeper. *If there's anyone more scary-looking in this shop, I don't want to meet them.*

'Ah, Mr. Drew,' said the man. 'Back again. Every day I wake up and I feel the pulse of a few less Reds in the world. And I think to myself . . . yes, my old friend Mr. Drew has been about his business again. Keeping busy. I, also, have been keeping busy.' He indicated the young woman standing behind the counter. 'Another one seeking adventure. Travelling across reality is so immensely bracing. It's no wonder there's an oversupply of waifs and strays who can't wait to embrace the exciting position of becoming my shop assistant. When young Emma-Jo came through my door, she knew this store was going to be her special place.'

Guy nodded sadly towards the girl. 'We've come here to trade, Keeper.' Guy walked forward and placed his steel briefcase on the counter, opening it to withdraw a transparent airtight ceramic box. Eleanor couldn't help but be disappointed. *Not a*

weapon. An ancient-looking book rested, protected, inside the clear box. ‘This is a Gutenberg Bible. One of only sixteen complete copies in the world.’

The Keeper leaned across the counter and lifted the box before his face, twisting the case in the dim light of the sales room, examining the contents inside. ‘Ah yes. Fascinating, the starting shot of the information revolution. From these drab, faded pages, have sprung all the gaudy, meaningless trinkets of the 21st century.’

‘The rarest, most expensive book in the world,’ said Guy.

‘Don’t patronise me. This is the Old Paradise Shop, not a branch of Christies.’

‘I was trying to tempt you, not patronise you,’ said Guy.

The Keeper leered. ‘Oh, but I am tempted. Just not by this early printing press run-off.’ His eyes drifted over the rest of the Vigil team as he hungrily licked his lips.

‘You know what the trouble with the Bible is? It’s never been finished. And I simply can’t stand to have the first book in a series sitting on my shelves without the final work resting by its side. The Reds are aiming to write the final chapter. But you must already know that, or you wouldn’t be here.’

‘This Bible,’ said Guy, ‘for the monastery records of Benedict of Nursia.’

‘Records? We’re not a record shop. Although I do enjoy music of a sort. I have to make it myself, of course.’

‘Don’t play games with me,’ growled Guy.

‘Don’t? You’ve rather missed the point of my premises. It’s no wonder I keep on moving. My never-ending journey trying to locate worthy patrons rather than ill-educated savages such as yourselves.’ The Keeper noticed the sensor unit inside Alasdair’s fingers and tutted, irritated. ‘That’s just rude. You need to remember what curiosity killed . . .’ He waved his hand and the device changed into a cobra. Alasdair yelled in shock and dropped the wriggling snake, watching it hiss at the Vigil agents before slithering on the floorboards, moving behind the shop counter.

Guy clicked his fingers, returning the Keeper’s attention back on him. ‘You’re a shark, Keeper . . . you keep on moving so a pitchfork mob doesn’t come hunting for your missing customers. Stop stalling. I know we’re on the clock, here. We’re not planning to be with you when you jump the store.’

‘Perish the thought. Do we hold Benedict of Nursia’s records in the shop?’ The Keeper glanced towards his shop assistant and she stepped back, as though startled she was being addressed, then nodded. ‘Such a good memory. How long have we been having our little adventures, my dear?’

‘Thirteen months, Keeper.’ Her voice had the trace of a foreign accent. *British?*

‘That long, Emma-Jo? No wonder I’m growing bored of your steel-trap memory.’

‘Please!’

The Keeper raised a chiding finger. ‘Everyone gets shelved in the end. Novelty in *all* things, you must know that about me by now.’

‘Don’t do that. I promise I’ll please you, I - ’

The Keeper lunged forward and squeezed his palm over her mouth. When the Keeper withdrew his hand, her mouth has been erased. Instead of lips, there was just unbroken skin, as though she had been born a mouthless mutant. ‘I believe I have had enough of your moaning. Your silence pleases me. Now, back to the storeroom and retrieve the item which this gentleman is seeking.’ He pointed at Eleanor. ‘Take this

one with you.'

'I decide where my team go,' barked Guy.

'Then decide if you wish to check the provenance of the item you seek. Either your girl goes with mine to retrieve the book or you are all welcome to depart my premises. Let the Reds have their way and look on the bright side. At least your tedious religious scribblings will appreciate in value after the final chapter is inserted in your deity's dreary text.'

Eleanor glanced over at the terrified voiceless shop assistant. 'I'll go.'

'Let me do it,' said Ian.

'I'm sorry,' laughed the Keeper. 'Are you my new manager? I must have missed the memo from headquarters. No, in these premises, there is only one person's whims that are indulged. Gallantry bores me. Ladies first, that is the rule in the Old Paradise Shop. Off with you two now.' He wagged a finger at the pair of girls. 'You may pass.' Then he flicked his fingers at the others. 'You may not.'

Eleanor watched in horror as the rest of the team's words were cut off, an invisible wall had dropped between her and the Vigil's agents. The team tried to advance towards her, but a fierce sparking in the air halted them, trapped behind a transparent electric fence. Now Eleanor understood what Guy had meant about this shop being a dream inside the Keeper's mind. This was his realm, entirely. The rest of them were merely thoughts crawling around his insane brain.

'Quickly now,' instructed the Keeper. 'Tick tock. You only have seven minutes left before the shop relocates. I don't want Mr. Drew leaving empty-handed and complaining I cheated him. Reputation is everything in my business.'

Eleanor stepped through the gap in the sales counter and followed the young girl down the corridor. It was beyond dim, and Eleanor found herself tracing the outline of the walls with her hand to follow the course. She might not be able to see the walls clearly, but she could feel the shapes carved in the wood. Except the wood felt like bones and the shapes were runes that seemed to glow as she brushed them. By the time she emerged out of the narrow corridor, the glowing sigils had destroyed her night vision.

The storeroom proved to be an almost warehouse-sized space packed with hundreds of narrow shelves - some of them holding books, others artifacts collected through the long ages by the Keeper. It seemed impossible that the small shop could lead onto this amount of square footage, but Eleanor suspected that if this madness was the worst of what she would find here, she would have come off easy. Emma-Jo turned to make sure that Eleanor was following, then continued into the labyrinth of shelves. To Eleanor's shame, she could hardly bare to look at the shop assistant, her unnatural smooth face where her lips should have been. There were no labels on the shelves or signs to indicate the logic of the layout, but Emma-Jo led them deeper into the storeroom without hesitation. Finally, she stopped at a junction between shelves. There were a small round reading table and a rickety old chair standing there. As Emma-Jo turned around, Eleanor saw there was an ancient-looking book in her hand. She must have pulled it off the shelves on their way here. Like the volume she had seen back in Archives Division, this one carried the coat of arms of the Black Pope. Eleanor realised this must be the missing secret record book from the monastery. The

store assistant rested the prize on the reading table, then went across to another bookcase. Emma-Jo picked up the pencil from the dusty shelf, withdrew another one of the leather-bound books and opened the book to a blank page near the front. She scribbled something down and passed the tome to Eleanor to read her message. There was something distracting about the book. The binding looked like ancient leather, but it felt wet and slimy, like a bloodied cut of meat.

Don't leave me here. Kill me.

Eleanor digested the message in shock. 'We, we can help you escape!'

The mouthless assistant grabbed the book back and dashed out a second message, before returning the damp pages back to Eleanor.

No escape. My body can't leave the shop. Bound here by unbreakable wards. Part of it. Please help me die!!!!

Maybe it was the surprise of reading the girl's plea for an end to her life, but the pages of the tome fell open and Eleanor almost dropped the book. A terrible discordant humming emerged from the volume. And on each opened page was a distorted female face, quivering slightly, trapped in a state of eternal torture and unable to escape the tome's trap.

Eleanor shrieked in surprise as the book lifted out of her hand. It was the Keeper. He'd crept up on the pair of women as silently as a spectre.

'Now, that's almost shoplifting. You're browsing my private collection. These are not for sale at any price. Did you know bookbinding is becoming a lost art? I believe the leather for this edition came from a Vigil agent I skinned seventy years ago.' The Keeper opened the book and hissed in fury as he saw the messages scribbled in pencil there. 'Defacing my property! Oh, Emma-Jo. Such ingratitude.'

Eleanor reached for the knuckle duster-sized hilt of her moly-blade, springing the extending sword into its full length. 'Leave the girl alone!'

The Keeper sighed, jabbing an irritated finger towards Eleanor, her sword transmuting into a child's windmill toy atop a wooden stick. He blew towards her weapon and the little red foil windmill head rotated in a lazy circle. 'Live as long as I have, my dear, and you will realise that the Vigil is full of hot air. Damaging stock? Emma-Jo, you know your chastisement is set out in your employment contract.'

Eleanor dropped the windmill and formed her fist into a needle punch, but the Keeper just smiled as a transparent wall formed sparking between her and Emma-Jo. 'So feisty. It'll make taming you all the sweeter.'

The Keeper's store assistant used the second's distraction to swivel and turn to run, but the monster was too fast. He lunged at Emma-Jo and seized her wrist with his right hand, scrubbing her face with his left hand. Emma-Jo's mouth returned and the narrow space between the shelves echoed with her frantic screams. The Keeper pushed her down to her knees on the floor, choking the girl around the neck. Emma-Jo's frenzied yelling dissipated as her body seemed to flatten in front of Eleanor's eyes, converting into a human-sized cardboard cutout, her body folding like origami. The Keeper held the book out open, pushing Emma-Jo's folded form into an empty, dangling page. Eleanor's fists flailed against the barrier, but the store assistant had vanished from the narrow gaps between the shelves. The Keeper's horrific work done, he turned to show Eleanor the open volume. The last note of Emma-Jo's final scream

had been converted into a continual low drone, the page with her twisted face pushed into it seeming to flicker as her features shifted frantically left and right, the only movement allowed to her, trapped inside the tome for eternity. ‘You and I will peruse my private collection after the store is closed. Flick through the pages and listen to the music of the souls. If you like, I will describe the beautiful moments I and my dearest shared together.’

Eleanor tried to master her terror, banging desperately against the invisible cage.

‘There’s nowhere to run inside the Old Paradise Shop,’ laughed the Keeper. ‘Nowhere that isn’t me. You’re inside me and I’m inside you. Now we just have to settle on your rate of pay. Of course, in my store, my assistants pay me, rather than the other way around.’

Eleanor continued to smash against her unseen walls. *No way out of this. Not until he drops the field.*

‘Here we are,’ smiled the Keeper, running his fingers over the monastery records left on the reading table. ‘Mr. Drew will be so pleased to hear we have what he desires in stock. There’s a deal to be done after all. The book for . . . you.’ The Keeper waved his hand and there was a slight fizzing as the invisible enclosure trapping her vanished.

Eleanor back-peddled. ‘Get away from me.’

‘Why do you think your decrepit Nazi-killing colleague brought so many of his team into my shop? I need to have my pick. I think the two of us are going to get on famously.’

Eleanor was running out of space to retreat. ‘I’ll never agree to be your shop assistant!’

‘You agreed by stepping over my threshold - didn’t your Vigil colleagues tell you that? You should have read the terms and conditions, they’re clearly on display.’

Eleanor indicated the ancient monastery records as she back-peddled. ‘So, you think this is a done deal? Those records belong to the Vigil, now?’

‘Naturally. And in time you’ll come around to your part in the trade. That’s always the fun part - breaking new staff into their duties. Well, fun for me. And in the Old Paradise Shop, it’s all about *me*.’

‘You think you’re original? I’ve done this Rodeo before. You know what happened to the last lecherous pig of a floor manager who thought I was part of his remuneration package . . . ?’

The Keeper kept on coming, raising his hands ready to seize her face. ‘That’s a potty mouth. Let’s scrub it away for a while. Yes, we’re going to need to start your training programme immediately.’

‘You’ve already shown me your monster,’ said Eleanor ducking his grasping hands. ‘Let me show you mine.’ This wasn’t the practice hall. Eleanor didn’t hold back. She formed her hand for a knife-hand strike and threw it towards his neck, aiming to break his windpipe. The Keeper seemed to flicker, vanishing like a cloud of black ash and reappearing a foot to the right - her blow passed through empty air. The soul-filled book didn’t make the transit with the monster. It tumbled down onto the floor between the shelves. Eleanor fought to regain her balance, but the Keeper didn’t push his advantage. She cursed her stupidity. If she had been facing Hanzo, she would

be out for the count right now.

The Keeper hooted with derision. ‘You’re like a moth mistaking the light for the torch.’

Eleanor pivoted and put all her power into a short range one-inch punch, hoping to catch the Keeper by surprise, but the entity flashed with black light and rematerialised down the narrow corridor between the shelves. Her body, her blood burnt with the fight and the transformation. Like a battery being overcharged. ‘And a moth always flies into the flame in the end. It is the creature’s destiny.’

Eleanor tried not to let despair get the better of her. *How can I beat this thing?* ‘I know you want to touch me,’ spat Eleanor. ‘And you have to be solid enough to wound for that.’ She ignored the itching pain building inside her.

The Keeper chuckled. ‘Oh my dear, I can be anything I like.’ His form flickered again, but rather than disappearing and reappearing, the human form shimmered to be replaced by a humanoid creature from a nightmare - a squid-like head whose face was bearded by a writhing mass of worms below locust eyes, a slimy bloated corpse-like body, shambling forward on clawed scorpion feet while narrow insectile wings fluttered limply behind it. The Keeper raised a nest of decaying tentacle arms. ‘So many long limbs to caress you with.’

Eleanor twisted to scoop up the moly-sword turned windmill toy, snapping the head off and flicking the sharp broken wooden shaft as a dart towards the Keeper’s locust eyes. Rather than jumping, this time the monster turned as transparent as a phantom, the dart passing harmlessly through the head and embedding itself in the books behind.

‘My realm. My beautiful realm. We’ll be moving on in a minute. Then you’re mine for eternity! Don’t tire yourself out too early. Leave us a little for later.’

Eleanor gasped for breath and warily retreated, the Keeper advancing, his clawed feet clicking across the discarded ledger of souls. The drone of the assistant’s final screams seemed to doppler-shift like a siren as the monster trampled across the tome. That awful drone merged with the agony of her burning body, making a vibration that was almost too painful to stand. And in that instant she knew how to beat the Keeper.

‘I know what you eat,’ coughed Eleanor.

The Keeper’s monstrous form converted back to its more human-looking form, leering at her. ‘I am transcendent, foolish little girl. I have no mortal need for flesh of fruit or beast. I never even drink water.’

Eleanor ran her fingers along the leather-spined books, fighting down the generator whine building up inside her. ‘These aren’t books and this isn’t a library. This is an energy farm and these are solar panels for a demonic sadist.’

‘They’re paper and skin, as you will find out when I tire of you.’

‘Yeah, really ancient paper. You may not drink water, but you better pray you’ve got a sink around here!’

Her hands pulsed with the power that had been building with her and she gave it physical form, the light from her hand momentarily blinding her, like a Molotov Cocktail going off. The shelf her hand had been resting on burst apart, a hundred flaming books showering out, and everywhere they cannonballed, the inferno was shared. Eleanor had given the storeroom its match, as brittle and dry as a tinder box.

With the collection of souls burning, the Keeper mirrored his food-source - remade into a banshee-screaming torch, stumbling blindly, his burning hands reaching out and only spreading the fire. His wicked pain no longer sounded human - more like a fox screeching into the night. As loud as the Keeper howled, Eleanor struggled hard to hear him. The books went off like frying bullets, a death rattle of escaping souls so ear-splitting it shook the cavernous store room by the foundations.

Eleanor thrust past the human-shaped inferno, booting the Keeper back into the shelves where his conflagration exploded with the dry ancient tomes racked there. 'You thought you were the monster, here? It was always me.'

Eleanor realised she had underestimated just how deadly dry this firetrap had been. She was only going to have seconds to get out of here before this room became her tomb. Eleanor slowed her desperate escape just enough to scoop up the tome on the floor where Emma-Jo had been imprisoned, adding the private monastery records of Benedict of Nursia to the loot she clutched. Flames leaped from shelf to shelf as she fled outside, ancient, dry, hidden and airless, flames licking along as fast as a fuse. Then she was following the twisting, dark corridors, and the walls throbbed and pulsed like the walls of a cramped stomach, an eerie moaning noise as the substance stretched. This dark lair was starting to fall about. The Keeper was the shop and the shop was the Keeper. *Let them both burn.*

Eleanor followed the tricky, deceptive passages, chased by the Keeper's hideous screams, and sprinted into the shop's sales room. As she arrived, the barrier sealing off the Vigil team vanished. *I guess it's kind of hard to maintain a shield when you're on fire.*

Ian ran forward, his eyes flicking down the corridor, searching for the Keeper. 'What the hell happened back there?'

'We played doctors and nurses,' called Eleanor, hardly slowing. 'I showed the Keeper mine and now he's sorely in need of the Demon Doctor. Got the records, let's rabbit before the shop jumps.'

Ian didn't need further urging. None of the team did. Ian flung open the door and the agents began to pile out into the street. Eleanor noticed that Guy hadn't said anything about her reappearance before retreating. *Tell me you're surprised I survived, old man. Tell me something!*

Eleanor followed through the open doorway, yelling as the book of souls clutched in her fingers bounced out of her hand. It was as if the book had been torn out of her fingers by an invisible wall. The volume fell open on the floor, exposing a flattened, twisted, distorted female face and the flat drone of the assistant's final scream. Eleanor lunged down and retrieved the book.

'They can't leave,' shouted Ian, still holding the door open, coughing in the choking smoke beginning to fill the sales room. 'It's not possible . . . they're part of the shop, now.'

Eleanor cursed and swung the book fluttering into the inferno licking across the counter. *I'm sorry.* 'Well, so is that fire.'

The tome began to pop as though Eleanor had thrown a chain of firecrackers into a bonfire. Every bursting sound, the bubble of a soul being released. *Best I can do.* At last, Emma-Jo had the final freedom she'd begged for. Eleanor turned and fled,

chased out by the intense heat, putting the Keeper's evil realm behind her.

Alasdair was last out of the store. His sensor unit had reverted back to reality, a cobra no longer, so the young agent had grabbed it up from the floor. The walls and windows of the Old Paradise Shop trembled like the skin of a living creature, an animal doused in petrol and set on fire. And beyond it all there was something else. The Keeper's silhouette stumbled trapped behind the narrow windows of the second storey, a creature of fire joined with the inferno, an entity of raw malevolent energy, roaring and screaming as his storefront began to fade like a bad dream. The store was relocating, its timer triggered. But this time, there might not be a whole lot arriving at the new destination.

'Wherever you're jumping,' yelled Eleanor, 'you better hope they've got a crack-hot fire brigade on standby.'

The last shadows of the Old Paradise shop vanished like the grin of Alice's cat. The Keeper's premises replaced by an empty lot between two stores, overgrown with weeds and filled with discarded rubbish. Some of the garbage smoked slightly, the blaze's residual heat still lingering.

Guy Drew stood there, gazing into space, shocked by the sudden turn of events. 'What did you do?'

Threw your plan for me, perhaps? Eleanor lifted up the monastery records. 'Went into a bookstore. Lifted a book. You alright with that.'

'But how . . .?'

Eleanor wasn't going to give the old man the truth. Not until she knew whether her main purpose on this trip had been bait. Lady goat to be staked out for the lion. Eleanor slipped her Zippo lighter out from her jacket. 'Your people tried bullets and blades. I tried this. Old manuscripts burn pretty good.'

'Nothing about that fire looked natural to me.'

'Yeah, I'm willing to bet that's because the whole store was some kind of Inter-dimensional Hell Portal deal. Enough of that stock was real enough, though.'

Drew looked uncertain about the truth of Eleanor's tale, but the senior agent had the monastery records as well as bigger fish to fry than pursuing his suspicions. 'Well, give a girl a hammer and every problem looks like a nail. Give a pyromaniac a lighter and maybe every problem looks like arson.'

Eleanor swayed on her feet. Ian tried to steady her, but she shrugged his hands away. She felt emptied, the thrum of energy inside her body spent. But Eleanor sensed it would come back. If this was a curse, at least it was a curse that could be shared. 'Hey, if it works, it works. Right?'

The Keeper had wanted Eleanor. To be fair, she had given the creature pretty much everything she had.