

THE JUDAS PURSE

Part 3 of the Vigil series.

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Teotihuacan, it transpired, was thirty miles from Mexico City, sprawling across a series of valleys. Another town slowly being overtaken by the nearby capital, like prey gradually being absorbed by a jellyfish. A serious tourist venue, given it held the ruins of a mighty Mesoamerican - and later, Aztec - city, complete with ancient angular pyramids and grand squares and avenues stretching for mile upon mile. The jungle always close by to remind you how quickly things turned wild here. There was plenty of history on display. The Pyramid of the Sun and the Pyramid of the Moon and aptly named Avenue of the Dead. The last was better named than even the local archaeologists knew. Columbus might have thought he discovered the Americas, but the vampires had known about the new world's existence from the time of Alexander the Great. The Aztec Empire's rites of human sacrifice came straight from the Reds' playbook; it had been like building their own zoo, feeding times thrown in along with free admittance - and the vampire lords had ensured their preys' civilisation never progressed far beyond obsidian blades. Which was to say, just far enough to carve out the live, beating heart of their next lunch. If Europe had never existed, if the Renaissance had never occurred, that is how South America would still exist today: nothing more than a humid farm for the Reds.

Eleanor took in the town from the air as the team arrived in a small chartered tourist flight. At least she wouldn't look out of place in Teotihuacan. Mexico might be, as Guy had described it, Vampire Central. But it was also Gringo Central, so Eleanor and the others would fit right in just by wearing bright shorts, loud t-shirt and making sure that expensive digital cameras dangled from their necks. After clearing the small local airport their group bundled into the first two cabs that became available. Their cases filled the boot space. For all their weight, there was very little in the way of clothing and clean underwear inside the luggage. Guy and Diane slid into the first cab. Eleanor sat in the next car with Ian and Sister Mee. None of them had enjoyed leaving Alasdair and Sister Rae back in the infirmary - not least the two wounded fighters themselves - but time was of the essence. They had to beat the vampires to the Judas Purse. Sister Mee spoke in Spanish, asking for the local cathedral, the Catedral del Divino Redentor, where the area's church records were stored.

Eleanor saw through the car window that the modern town hadn't had the same care lavished upon it as the elder civilisation's ruins. Dirty, cluttered pavements alive with stalls and street kids selling the usual tat - replica models of monuments, lurid t-shirts and snow-globes containing cheaply painted miniatures of pyramids. Their cab didn't have air conditioning - not unless you counter rolling with all its windows wound down. The spicy smell of local food frying in the open air, making the thick air reek with its scent. Rows of tourist coaches parked in back streets, unloading foreign passengers while idling their engines and keeping the air con running. It felt chaotic but alive. *And alive is how I'd like to keep on feeling, thank you very much.* The cabs stopped at the hotel the party had booked, but only for long enough for their luggage to be taken to their rooms. Then they were on the move again. Eleanor had the impression that every second counted, now, in the race to retrieve the coins.

Sister Mee still carried the little computer tablet she had been reading on the flight, resting it on her knees.

'Catching up on your Netflix subscription?' asked Eleanor.

'Research on the background of Father Pedro, the little that Rome possessed in the way of digitised records covering the man.'

Ian showed some interest. 'And?'

'Most of the material is on his family - an important clan in this neck of the woods. Not so much information on the father, though.'

'That speaks of a certain humility,' said Ian.

'Or that some of his predecessors knew the secret went to a lot of trouble to erase his existence from Rome's records.'

That thought didn't reassure Eleanor. 'You think someone in the cathedral still knows where it is hidden?'

'It is possible,' said Sister Mee. 'But if so, I wouldn't expect whoever holds the secret to tell me.'

Eleanor stared at the nun. 'Why not? You're the strong right hook of the church, aren't you?'

'If someone still knows where the Judas Purse is, then they have kept the secret against all temptations. A legacy passed down through the ages. Having a delegation visit with Papal authority will be as leaves blowing in the wind as far as the keeper is concerned.'

Their cab arrived behind Guy and Diane's car, the destination ahead of them. Eleanor noted she could just see the top of one of the distant pyramids peeking over the cathedral. The cathedral itself had high grey stone walls that weren't quite tall enough to hide the red brick of the Catedral del Divino Redentor's domed cupola rising on the other side, a Spanish-tiled clock tower with a three-storey-high bell tower on top acting as the fortress's sentry post. An ornamental white archway led them into the grounds and a minute later they were past the thick walls and inside the cool of the main building. Sister Mee flashing the papal shield of Scutum Dei was all the authority they needed to as good as commandeer the Catedral del Divino Redentor and start searching it for evidence of Father Pedro de Alcázar. They met the current bishop, an Irishman called Father Gerry McEyre, and the bishop passed them across to a senior member of his clergy, Monsignor Onyulo, and the monsignor passed them to a young priest called Father Gerardo who looked like he had only just learnt to start shaving. Duly fobbed off, the group started work in the cathedral's dusty records room. Luckily, the computer revolution was one revolution this corner of Mexico had yet to experience. All the local records were still on paper - or in the case of the cathedral logs from the late early nineteenth century, leather-bound parchment. They dived into the records, searching first for news of the father himself. The last known guardian of the Judas Purse.

'Here we are,' said Sister Mee, tapping the page. 'Father Pedro left San Juan Teotihuacan to join the cathedral's staff here ten years after he returned from Europe. He died in 1864.'

Guy raised an eyebrow. 'But did he bring the Judas Purse with him. Or hide it somewhere in his old church?'

'It seems Father Pedro ended up as bishop of Catedral del Divino Redentor,' said the sister. 'He lived long enough to see the start of the American Civil War and the Invasión estadounidense a México - when the USA invaded Mexico to grab its Northern territories. He should have kept a private diary at the very least.' She consulted the young local priest assigned to help them, and he opened a wooden

door to a back-room with even more shelves of church records. He returned with a large book with crumbling leather that had nearly ossified.

'It's written in a mixture of Latin and Spanish,' announced Sister Mee. 'Mostly Spanish towards the end.' There was a faded photograph in the front. An early example of photography. The father himself in his bishop's robes. He looked proud and tall even in old age, more like a matador than a churchman. Eleanor wondered how much of the man's rise to prominence in the cathedral was the Judas Purse's possession rubbing off on him. The coins trying to tempt him with the lure of unlimited power. She knew that the father had resisted the urge. Or he wouldn't just have finished his life as a bishop in some Mexican backwater. He would have ended up as a Napoleonic-like ruler of all of the Americas - south and north - at the very least. Enough of the innocence that the Swiss abbot had seen in the man remained to keep him true.

'He must have hidden the coins well,' said Eleanor.

'Well enough not to be found and abused,' said Sister Mee.

'Quite a man,' said Diane.

'He had faith,' said the nun. 'Faith can carry you very far.'

Diane nodded but Eleanor wasn't so sure. *I had faith in a lot of things that proved to be wrong. Starting with family and ending with the true nature of the world.* So far, she had been proved wrong in just about everything she had thought she could count on. Now it was coming back to bite her; maybe, quite literally.

'The de Alcazár family were powerful landowners in Mexico,' said Sister Mee. 'Father Pedro has already renounced the wealth and power of his inheritance to join the church. He had walked away from such things once. The Judas Purse held little to tempt him.'

The book Eleanor perused had a faded crest embossed into the leather, a bull above a cross. She tapped it. 'Is this the de Alcazár family crest?'

'No, that's the cathedral's crest. The de Alcazár family's crest was a red and yellow shield with two white lambs on it,' said the nun. 'Their family motto was *Aude Sapere*. Dare to know.'

'Kind of ironic for someone who was keeping history's greatest secret on the down-low.'

'Lucky the Borgias didn't get their hands on the coins,' said Ian.

Sister Mee shrugged. 'They didn't need it, they already had possession of the Holy Grail.'

'You're joking, right?' asked the agent.

'You'll never know.'

Guy winked at Ian. 'Don't worry, we've got the Holy Grail in a wooden crate right next to the Lost Ark of the Covenant.'

Ian could tell when he was being teased and gave up on trying to winkle out the truth.

The records room possessed a single narrow window looking out onto the rear of the cathedral. Eleanor saw there was a graveyard fighting a losing battle with the thick undergrowth outside. 'I'm going to see if I can find Father Pedro's grave.'

Guy looked up. 'You expecting to find the purse buried out there, kid?'

'Even if I don't, it's got to smell better than centuries old book.'

'Eyes open,' said Guy. 'The Reds have been one step behind us all the way

during this caper.'

'I'll go with,' said Ian.

'And I'll look up what a caper is on my phone when I get a signal outside,' said Eleanor.

Ian smiled. 'It's a little green thing you find on the topping of bad pizza, isn't it?'

'Get out of here,' said Guy. 'Before you make me feel even older than I already do.'

Bishop McEyre and Monsignor Onyulo stood cloaked by the shadows of the bell tower, watching from on high as two of their young visitors searched the graveyard's tombstones. It was a small plot, mostly the bodies of priests who had laboured long in the service of the cathedral. Now there was now more room for such burials. Priests were buried or cremated in the new cemetery far out of town - alongside glass tombs the size of villas dedicated to the memories of drug lords, many with CCTV cameras to ensure rival gangs didn't come and machine gun the flashy monuments to criminal excess.

'They will discover nothing in the graveyard,' said the monsignor. 'Better for them if they find nothing in the cathedral at all.'

'They're our people, aren't they?' said Bishop McEyre, his bleary eyes blinking in the gloom. He took a brass hip flask out from his pocket and downed a quick guilty shot before dropping the flask back. The monsignor did not ask what was in it. He knew it wasn't water, at any rate.

'Maybe they are and maybe they aren't,' said Monsignor Onyulo. 'Wearing a scapular and bearing a badge of Rome does not always a nun make. And as for the *Americans* . . .' He said the last word like it was an infectious disease. 'What in the name of our good Lord are they? A cadet field trip for the CIA? One thing is for certain, they have not served with us here for decades. I will trust those I do not know.'

'What if they find *it*?'

Monsignor Onyulo frowned. 'Then we will let nature take its course. The Yankees do not deserve such power. They are not worthy of it. They made a battlefield of Uganda during the Cold War and destroyed the Middle East with the same games. You know what North America would do with the coins. How much more powerful it would make the nation.'

The bishop waved a piece of paper - a sheet torn from a notepad beside the telephone. 'Are they not even to know they're the third blessed lot to come sniffing around here after Bishop de Alcazár's legacy this week.'

Monsignor Onyulo shook his head, snorting. 'That so-called academic woman, then those equally bogus archaeologists from the ministry? They are probably already dead if they weren't undead to start with.'

'Ah, it's a bad business.'

'It's a fatal business,' said the monsignor. 'For if the great evil was not properly protected, then it would be abroad in the world. And this I do know, there is enough evil in the world already. I will not willingly add to its weight. Not even

by a gramme.'

'Too bad, then,' whined the bishop. 'They'll die like all the others.'

Monsignor Onyulo stiffened his back as though stiffening his resolve. 'The world will live, though. That is quite enough for me.'

'A bad business,' repeated the bishop in a low mutter. 'I'm going out to the town to visit the Ramírezs in a while. Their baby is still sick with the fever. I don't think their insurance will pay out for the little angel's medical treatment.'

'You don't wish to hear the Yankees die screaming. When you sentence someone to death, you must have the fibre to see the sentence carried out.'

'I'm a soft fellow,' said the bishop. 'Famous for it.'

Monsignor Onyulo grunted disapprovingly. 'I will stay. I will mourn them and say the rites.'

'Over what, man? Ah, there will be nothing left to bury. There never is.'

Eleanor and Ian returned from the cathedral's graveyard, their search a bust. Centuries old in many cases, most of the tombstones had been scrubbed blank by the passage of years, only illegible indentations where chiselled writing had once been tapped out. If the purse really was hidden outside, the Vigil would need to excavate the entire rear of the cathedral to stand a chance of finding it.

'Why can't something be easy for once?' asked Eleanor.

Ian opened the door back into the cathedral. 'So you'll appreciate finding it more this way.'

'Oh no,' said Eleanor. 'I'd appreciate it just fine if I lifted up a flower pot on a grave and found a secret panel underneath filled with ancient coins.'

'I bet you're just saying that.'

'Hey!' said Eleanor, slowing to a stop. She halted by an archway with a small wooden door, indicating a small carving in the stone above. 'Does that look familiar to you?'

Ian peered up. 'Two lambs on a crest. The de Alcazár family shield!'

'It's the entrance to a crypt,' said Eleanor. 'The de Alcazárs were a wealthy local family back in the day, right? Bigwigs always get the best seats in the house, even after they're dead.'

'A *family* crypt? You think that the bishop was interred down there?'

'If Father Pedro had his way, he'd probably have been put to rest in the dirt all humble with the rest of the priests. But after he was dead . . .? I reckon his family would make a point of treating him like one of them, just to teach him a lesson for renouncing the gold-plated yacht.'

Ian nodded in agreement. 'Gold-plated saddle in those days. Only one way to be certain.'

'Come on then!'

Eleanor tried the door. It was locked. Ian reached into his back pocket and pulled out a little black ceramic credit card-sized oblong. Fiddling with it, a lockpick sprung out of the device. He pushed the pick into the lock and rotated it around until a loud click sounded from the old iron lock.

'Don't tell me you used to jack cars or indulge in house breaking when you

were back in the age of big shoulder pads and batwing sleeves?’

‘Just wait till you see who your instructor is for covert entry.’

‘Who, the Pink Panther?’

Ian simply smiled but didn’t elaborate. Even unlocked, the door took a little hard shoving to force open.

Eleanor glanced around nervously, seeing if anyone had noticed the noise. ‘We could have just asked for the door to be unlocked.’

Ian slipped away his lock pick. ‘Maybe. I’m not sure the locals are on the same page as us. Sister Mee told the bishop and that grim-looking monsignor dude that we’re researching Father Pedro. You don’t think the bishop should have mentioned he has the de Alcazár family crypt right inside the cathedral.’

‘Maybe the staff don’t know about the connection. It’s ancient history as far as they’re concerned. They probably have other things on their church plate to worry about. Repairing the leaky roof and looking after widows from the drug wars.’

‘Maybe,’ said Ian, but he didn’t sound certain. ‘That’s the thing about this gig. A few decades with the Vigil and you start to suspect the worst in everyone one.’

‘That’s kind of grim.’

‘Yeah, but you certainly stay alive longer that way.’

‘You ever think there’s more to living than just staying alive?’

‘Not until recently.’

Eleanor blushed as she followed the agent through the doorway, crouching from the low height of it - built for an age when people were a lot shorter on average. Steps led down a passage. The cathedral budget hadn’t stretched to electric lighting for the crypt; they needed to ignite candles set in the wall, flickering illumination casting long shadows against the brick walls. At the bottom of the passage, now deep underground, they arrived at the start of the crypt - candle light unable to illuminate the true scale of the large chamber, dozens of stone columns holding up a flying buttress high above them. The wall contained niches with resting urns. A series of block-like tombs rested across the flagstone floor, each with a prone granite figure lying on top, identifying the family member lying in the casket inside. Unlike the cathedral graveyard, these tombs were perfectly preserved. The couple inspected each block, reading out the names aloud, as well as epitaphs and inscriptions on each block. Towards the centre of the crypt, they found the tomb they were searching for. Pedro de Alcazár. Once bishop of the Catedral del Divino Redentor and more importantly, guardian of history’s deadliest secret. Eleanor circled the tomb. Like the other tombs, a granite block three feet high, with a stone figure of the bishop stretched out on top. This figure had been carved wearing the robes of a churchman, a bishop’s staff by his side. The same hawkish face she had seen in the crumbling photograph upstairs.

Eleanor traced her finger across the inscription below the man’s name. *Más vale ser cabeza de ratón que cola de león.* ‘Something about a mouse and a lion and how it’s better to be a mouse’s head than a lion’s tail.’

‘You speak Spanish?’ asked Ian.

‘Un poquito,’ said Eleanor. ‘It was the main lingo for a lot of people in the home - both for us *and* the staff.’

Ian rested his hands on the tomb’s lid. ‘Let’s see if we can lift this.’

Eleanor moved to the other side and gripped the top. She pushed against it, slowly at first, then with all her strength, grunting as the lid failed to budge. 'Maybe it's ossified in place over the centuries?'

'With our combined strength? Together, we should be able to lift the entire tomb, not just shift the lid. I think this top is false, not a lid at all. It's part of the block.'

Maybe not a tomb after all, then? Eleanor knelt to read the inscription again.

'What do you notice about the inscription and the father's name?'

'That you speak better Spanish than me?'

Eleanor ran her finger along the script chiselled into the block's side. 'Look, the epitaph here has all its accents correctly spelt, on the *á* and both *ó*'s.'

'So?'

'The father's name has been carved as Pedro de Alcazar, missing out the accent on the last *á*.'

'Maybe someone should have fired the stonemason, then?'

'The missing accent is at the head of his name, the mouse's head. The epitaph isn't about how Father Pedro lived a life rejecting his family's wealth, it has to be a clue.' Eleanor reached out and pressed the centre of the letter missing the accent. Nothing happened, but the stone where she touched did feel like an indentation - a concealed button, maybe? *Damn, I was so certain. Why isn't it working?*

Ian reached out to the *á* in the *Más*, resting his finger against it. 'Try again.'

Eleanor pushed down again, and as she did so, the tomb began to roll backwards on a squealing counterweight, revealing an entrance below to a concealed set of stairs. *I guess two á's are better than one - just like two heads.* 'Go Team Vigil.'

Ian stared down into the pitch-black. He picked up a piece of loose stone and tossed it down the hole like he was skimming pebbles across a lake. A tap-tap noise sounded as it tumbled down through the inky darkness. 'Time to fetch the others.'

'Yeah,' said Eleanor. 'The last dark tunnel we jumped into was under the museum and that didn't end too well for us, did it?'

'Just us here this time,' said Ian, somewhat more hopefully than his face looked, she thought.

Eleanor knelt by the hole, trying to pierce the darkness. She activated her spectacles' night vision mode, throwing the descending staircase into an eerie green light. There was something else. A distant scent drifting at the far end of her ability to detect. *That smell seems familiar, but why?* If only it was stronger, she might be able to identify it. And why did her stomach fill with dread and fear just peering down there?

Dawn Heliot sensed Bishop McEyre's presence long before he knocked on the door to the house. To a witch, he was like a nervous mouse given human form, reeking of anxiety as much as he reeked of Tequila. The fear was almost enough to overcome the glamour of desire she had cast over the churchman to ensure his compliance. Almost, but not quite, as his visit to her here attested. She opened the door to the house before he could ring the bell, being careful not to show herself to the pedestrians in the street. Some nosey neighbour might spot her inside and wonder what a stranger was doing inside the house. They wouldn't enjoy her answer much . . . that slaying everyone living in a home had two benefits. A brief vein of human sacrifices allowing her to advance her cause, closely followed by the benefit of free accommodation wherever she travelled . . . every dark witch's favourite version of Airbnb.

'Ah, my handsome bishop,' purred Dawn, stroking his fat ruddy cheeks as she led the man inside the house's living room. 'You have come with news, I trust?'

'For you, lass, anything,' wheezed the bishop. The bishop didn't comment on the bloody pile of bodies in the corner. Mexicans had such gloriously large extended families. If the witch was lucky, a few more relatives would come calling on the cheap house before she left, eager to pop in and share gossip or bring a pot of food. And in a way, they *were* bringing a gift of nourishment. Themselves!

'Tell me, then . . .'

'The Americans you said would come have arrived, and they've discovered the entrance Father Pedro had built down into the temple tunnels.'

'I told you they would come calling and discover the entrance,' smiled Dawn. And unlike her, they hadn't even needed to bewitch the plump bishop to discover the secret of Pedro de Alcazár's secret legacy. She wondered if the ghost of the old bishop would be twisting in his grave at the betrayal of the secret so easily by one of his distant successors.

'You did tell me, you did. But how do you know they were coming, lass?'

Dawn pointed to the table in the centre of the living room, still stained with blood from where she had cut out the hearts of the house's previous owners. A deck of tarot cards lay spread across the table, protected by green felt from the residue of her grisly work. 'The cards rarely lie. Not when they have been charged with the souls of innocents.'

'I have done all that you asked of me,' sighed the bishop. 'Will you not give me a kiss like you promised?'

'Of course I will, but first, tell me . . . have your visitors worked out exactly what is waiting for them in the temple yet?'

'The coins, lass, the coins. They must suspect. That's what they're searching for.'

'Naturally, but I mean have they worked out what is *guarding* the coins.'

'Ah, no. They're poking around with some twee remote-controlled tractor at the moment.'

'How very cautious of them. They do love their modern toys. Whereas, they'd actually be better off tossing in a lamb or two to tempt out what's inside the temple. But nobody ever listens to a witch's advice.'

'I do. Command me and I will do it for you.'

'That's very sweet. You shall help me read the future, my handsome bishop. I

have glimpsed so many visions these last few days. So many possible futures. Let the cards help show me which of the future paths will prove true.' She indicated the portion of her piled deck that had yet to be turned. 'Take the cards in your hand. Choose three at random. Lay the cards down on the table without looking at them, and I will reveal their secrets to you.'

Bishop McEyre eagerly did as she had bid. He picked up the deck and lifted out three cards at random, placing them face down on the table's green velvet mat.

Dawn reached out daintily, flipping the first card. Its nature surprised ever her - although, to be fair, the real surprise was coming for someone else. 'The Seven of Swords!'

'What does it mean?'

'It means deception and betrayal. There is a traitor inside the Vigil. A human who is working for those filthy vampires. I caught a glimpse of that when I fed on the people here, but I did not believe it was possible. So, not a false shadow after all? There is to be a terrible betrayal from within their own ranks. Hah. Perfect. Let me see the second card!' Dawn slowly turned over the next card. 'The Suit of Swords! Well, I hardly needed to see that one, to know it was coming.'

'What does it mean, mistress?' pleaded the bishop.

'This card speaks of terrible violence.'

'Inside the temple and the tunnels?' asked the bishop.

'Yes. A waste of good prophecy, though - most who enters the temple meet that fate.' It was why Dawn had waited for the Vigil to arrive and begin her work. She was perfectly willing for the agents to do the dying for her. Leaving her free to step over their corpses and claim the prize she lusted after. 'You may turn the final card, my handsome bishop. This last one is *your* card.'

Bishop McEyre reached out and flipped the card over, revealing a skeletal hand holding a golden chalice. 'What is it - what does this mean?'

'The Ace of Cups,' said Dawn. 'The stirring of a powerful passion.'

'The kiss you promised . . .' drawled the bishop, reaching to seize her around the waist and draw her in towards his portly body.

'Yes, it is time.' Dawn plunged the dagger carefully hidden up her sleeve into the bishop's chest, watching the man stumble back in shock as he regarded the hilt sunk into his body. 'The kiss of my blade.'

'Passion,' spluttered the dying bishop. 'Passion.'

'The stirrings of *my* passion,' laughed Dawn, sweeping the cards off the table and revealing the pentagram sketched out underneath. She pushed the swaying churchman down onto the table, locking him in place to the table legs with the same handcuffs she had used to murder the house's previous owners. 'The last feeding for the spell I will need to cast to move through the tunnels unhindered until it is time for me to claim what is rightfully mine.'

All the dark power of the world.

Diane had drawn the short straw to grab a cab back to the hotel and retrieve a few choice items from their luggage. For starters, a little drone designed to trundle through earthquake zones, dropping a breadcrumb trail of communications

repeaters to report back. So far, all the party had found hidden below the de Alcazár family crypt was an almost endless, empty maze of rock passages, five feet high and five feet wide. Stone plaques in the walls stood carved with a pantheon of Aztec gods' names lacking vowels - Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc and Chalchihuitlicu - coiled serpents and warriors and myths, all speaking of the tunnels' original origins. The current cathedral staff denied all knowledge of the hidden passages' existence, of course, but Eleanor possessed doubts about how much they really knew. The bishop and the monsignor had shown an odd lack of curiosity about the strange discovery and what it might mean. Guy obviously shared the same doubts as her but didn't care much one way or another, as long as the locals respected Sister Mee's Papal seal and stayed well out of the Vigil's hair while they worked.

Sister Mee fingered her rosary thoughtfully as she inspected the hidden entrance revealed below Father Pedro's tomb, the flickering screen illuminating her curious features. 'There have long been rumours of a significant tunnel complex below the pyramids, used by Aztec priests to move unseen around the city. Underground temples for conducting forbidden rites. Aztec priests were able to conjure unclean spirits by blood sacrifice to slay opponents among the nobility, whenever the state versus church arguments - and who kept the lion's share of the peasants' taxes - grew too heated. The spirits moved unseen and carried out their black work at night before disappearing.'

'Spirits don't need secret passages carved out of old lava tubes to creep into palaces,' said Guy. 'But assassins do.'

'There haven't been any Aztecs around here since the Conquistadors introduced them to the joy of rapid musket fire,' said Diane.

Ian wasn't in the mood for a history lesson. 'Yeah, but their tunnels are still here.'

'And what do you want to bet that there's a good reason why no archaeologist has ever uncovered the tunnel system and lived to report their find?' said Eleanor.

'There's a bet I wouldn't place good money against,' rumbled Guy.

'Pan the camera left,' said Sister Mee, 'I think there's a side-passage you just passed. It has something in it.'

Diane did as the nun asked, the drone's floodlights falling across a jumble of bones among the tattered remains of clothing. 'That's not an Aztec sacrifice. The state of decay of the fabric is too recent.'

Guy tapped the drone's remote control screen. 'And there's a battery-powered torch in the corner. Looks like seventies vintage.'

'An industrial-quality model,' said Ian. 'I'd say that's one of those missing archaeologists you were pondering, Eleanor.'

Eleanor felt queasy. 'Is it just me, or are half the skeleton's bones missing?'

'No, kid, it ain't just you,' said Guy. 'Take a gander at the state of the rubber grip on the torch. That's not decomposition from age. Something had a real good nibble on the handle before discarding it.'

'Not Reds, then?'

'Sure, they go crazy with hunger if they don't feed regularly. But trying to suck on battery acid? I don't think so,' said Guy. 'I'm going outside to establish an encrypted satellite connection back to John and fill him in on what we've

discovered. Dirty Harriet and her reserve team must be on the ground by now. If we fail here, we need to make sure that the Vigil has a second bite of the cherry, and damn soon.'

Bite. Suddenly it came to Eleanor. Why the scent she had caught from deep inside the tunnels smelled so familiar. 'I think I know what's protecting the Judas Purse down in that maze. But you're not going to like it.' Come to think of it, Eleanor didn't like it any better. And the quickest, dirtiest solution - *possible* solution - to the problem was even *less* palatable to her.

'We should call for reinforcements,' urged the demi-gog. 'These are the same agents we fought in Switzerland.'

There was a nervous shifting of bodies, indicating agreement among the rest of Sophia's nest. They were allowing their fear of what had happened to them before to cloud their judgement, taking the edge off their appetite. They were probably allowing their proximity to the ancient temple complex to spook them, too. Once Sophia knew the temple existed, it had been easy enough to find a hidden entrance in the tourist city, a portal concealed below one of the old pyramids. She had killed three site staff and seventeen tourists so far to break into the maze and keep their presence unnoticed above ground. Perhaps those killings had also contributed to taking the edge off her demi-gogs. You should never feed a nest too regularly. It dulled their appetite and made them lazy and unnaturally supine. Unnatural for a demi-gog, anyway.

Sophia considered how to proceed, then snorted in derision. 'And you had to be one of the ones who lived through the attack. Leave the thinking to me.'

'But, with greater numbers . . .'

'Would come other clans and all of their tedious clan politics,' said Sophia. Who was the chief vampire among the cartel clans now? Garcia Tovar, wasn't it? Von Waldburg was the master of masters, but there wasn't one of the other vampire warlords in Latin America who wouldn't betray him in a second if it meant even a slim chance of gaining possession of the Judas Purse. Fighting agents of the Vigil was one thing. Fighting off dozens of her own kind with their huge private armies, all desperate to seize the same prize, was quite another. And who knows, some might even hand it over to Von Waldburg and be content playing loyal underling as the nations of the world fell to *their* power, *their* will.

'I don't like this place,' said Joanna. 'It feels wrong.'

'We have the Aztecs, I fear, to blame for that,' said Sophia. 'They were rather miffed when the Europeans came and unleashed genocide against their empire. The churlish Aztec priesthood broke free of their bondage to our people. They embraced other solutions to their predicament. Desperate solutions.' The vampire felt contempt for the Aztecs' weakness. *What is the point of conjuring up a secret wonder weapon if it turns on you? If you can't control it?*

'That is what I sense inside the temple and the tunnels?'

'Possibly,' said Sophia. She had a huntress's scent for the jungle and other alpha predators. There was something else abroad in the dark tonight. *But what?*

'I wish you had helped the Aztecs drive away the Spanish conquerors, then.'

'War allows us to feed. It keeps the herd healthy. The weak must fall to the strong. That is the way of life.' *And the way of our kind, too.*

'The Vigil are not such cattle. They are dangerous.'

Sophia laughed. 'I certainly hope so. They need to lead us safely to the coins, after all.' Sophia recalled a time during the fighting on the Eastern Front when she had made a village full of frightened peasants walk ahead of her regiment through a mine field. Even cattle had their uses. The Vigil would serve a similar purpose for her today.

'Did your Vigil traitor tell you where this entrance into the maze was?'

'Only that the temple complex existed,' said Sophia. 'I did the rest. We have shunned this fallen city for centuries. Father Pedro was cunning to bury his prize among the Aztecs' black secrets. The priest hid it somewhere he knew we would avoid, even if we discovered the maze's existence.'

'Maybe we should shun it still.'

'Oh, on that much I agree. We should avoid this place. But it contains what Von Waldburg desires. And I cannot fail him too many times, however much the master of masters humours me for old time's sake. His tolerance only stretches so far.'

'I have listened to you many times speak of how his aims are backwards: old thinking. He'll take the Judas Purse and reduce the world to cinders with its power.'

'True, I would prefer a re-balancing to a wholesale act of arson,' said Sophia. 'But if push comes to shove, I can live with the slash-and-burn method of clearing productive harvest land. You will be safe, Joanna, whatever happens. That much I promise you. It will be the likes of myself and my allies who rebuild the world as a more hospitable place for our race. Von Waldburg likes to play with matches, but he has no patience for the boring work of reconstruction.'

'You could keep the Judas Purse for yourself. With the powers it would give you . . .'

'Hah! I recognise a simple truth that Von Waldburg refuses to face,' said Sophia. 'Using the coins to win your wars for you drives you mad and corrupts your flesh. Look at Hitler. A sallow walking skeleton at the end, dribbling inside the false protection of his bunker. Even if the Fuhrer had won the war, he'd have died a couple of years after victory. The coins bring you great power. Just not for very long, before they hollow your body out. A vampiric constitution will hold up better than any mere mortal's, but however slow such poison acts, using the coins is still poison.'

'The old monster must know that too, surely?'

'Of course,' said Sophia. 'Some part of him knows, even if he doesn't dwell on it. But he has tasted the ultimate honey, my dear. One coin that was briefly under his control before it was stolen and destroyed. Von Waldburg will do anything to ensure he grabs onto the rest of the honey pot.'

And Sophia intended to be the one to pass him that pot and let him gorge. Once Von Waldburg had broken the cattle's inexorable chain of progress and reduced humanity's survivors to savages huddled among their fragile civilisation shattered ruins, Sophia would stand back and watch the addict play with his needle until the drugs gave him the overdose he craved. And who would be left to rule, then? Time for a mistress of mistresses to ascend to the vacant throne.

Bex Crawford was looking awfully smug to Eleanor's eyes. Even Guy had noticed her self-satisfied aura. 'You happy about moving up to the first team, kid, or just pleased to swap Dirty Harriet's tender touch for mine?'

That last remark obviously needled Bex. 'She's a great squad commander.'

'I bet that's what all the cops on her beat used to say too, just before she tossed some poor pickpocket off a warehouse roof. You ever ask the old girl how she earned that nickname of hers in the Chicago police?'

'Same way you got yours.'

'I have a nickname?' Guy looked around at the others. 'What, and you didn't think to tell me?'

Ian shrugged. 'Beats me.'

'Tough Guy,' said Bex. 'That's what Harriet calls you. Like, not in the kind of way that suggests she actually thinks it's true. You know, like *Little John* in *Robin Hood*.'

'Aces,' said Guy. He glanced towards Eleanor. Even Sister Mee was smiling. 'That ain't anything I expect to hear repeated from any of you.'

'I'm fairly sure pride is still listed as a sin,' advised the nun.

'So is trash-talking me,' said Guy.

'Are you certain there are zombies down there?' Diane asked Eleanor.

'Sadly, no doubt about it.' If Eleanor had been even one percent unsure, she would never have suggested getting Bex Crawford on loan from the backup unit. *Not in a thousand years.*

'Your new girl isn't wrong,' said Bex. 'I can sense undead lurking below, too.'

'Then why haven't the zombies been attracted by the dead rabbits I bought at the market and tossed down there?' asked Ian.

'Because they're old,' said Bex, 'Aztec-vintage. Like, think of them as having their organic batteries run down. They need to see living flesh moving around before they reanimate and go into chase mode.'

Eleanor really didn't like the sound of that. 'So they need us to act as bait?'

'Hey, you're not as stupid as you look, new girl. You could always go back to Main Street Teotihuacan and hang out a sign offering free tourist tours of the Aztec temple below the cathedral. Let some dumb-ass day-trippers draw off the zombies while we make a run for the coins.'

'Dirty Harriet would be *so* proud of you,' said Guy.

'Such a wicked ploy would be counter productive as well as morally bankrupt,' warned Sister Mee. 'We would merely end up facing a horde of well-fed fully active zombies, rather than hunger-weakened creatures.'

'There is one positive to all this,' said Diane. 'If they bite us, we can't be turned. We've already had the antidote.'

Bex laughed. 'What, were you asleep during your zombie combat orientation week? They don't care about turning you. They're not Reds. They don't have demi-gogs. You're only three things to a zombie . . . breakfast, lunch and dinner.'

'Headshots and decapitation strikes with your moly blades,' said Guy. 'Does that pretty much cover *Zombie Refresher 101*, agent?'

'Just remember they're not mindless monsters from some Sam Raimi flick,' said Bex. 'Like, they're semi-sentient. Not clever enough to pass a physics exam, but cunning enough to lay traps, work in groups and use weapons. After they've fed

fully, they regenerate their skin well enough to pass for a sick-looking junkie. The better fed they are, the quicker and smarter they'll hunt you down.'

'These zombies will have been bound to the temple by the darkest magic,' said Sister Mee. 'They cannot move outside the limits of the wards that cast by the Aztecs.'

'How did Father Pedro hide the coins in the temple without becoming lunch?' asked Eleanor.

'He went in clutching the power of the coins, kid,' said Guy. 'The after-glow of holding that much bad ju-ju would have lasted just long enough for him to dump the coins and run for the exit.'

'Damn. And here I was hoping there was some sort of exorcism reading or holy water trick that would help keep us safe.'

'That'll be me, newbie,' said Bex. 'I'll take point. My scent should confuse the zombies long enough to get me close enough to remove a few heads. You people are just there to clean us after me.'

'Sure, and here's the mops we're going to use.' Guy opened a suitcase on the crypt floor. 'I'd have brought the case with the grenade launchers, but given the age of the tunnels, we'd be creating Cave-in City down there. So this is what we're taking down for Zombie Clearance Day: Russian KBP PP-2000 submachine guns and Kel-Tec double magazine KSG Tactical 12-gauge pump-action shotguns.'

'Spray and pray weapons,' said Bex.

'Compact size, ideal for your enclosed space and quick reaction-type engagement,' said Guy. 'Good enough for Russia's Spetsnaz special forces. Good enough for *this* Tough Guy.' The old man picked up a submachine gun and tossed it at Eleanor to catch. It looked like a modern version of an Uzi - that mainstay of bad eighties action movies: a retracted folding stock, short snub barrel and magazine below the grip, with an integrated trigger loop. 'Cheer up, kid. That's 800 rounds a minute of payback you're holding there.'

'What have zombies ever done to me?'

He winked at Eleanor. 'It's preventive payback, kid. We're going to get our retaliation in first.'

Great. And the day had started out so promisingly, too.

'So, where are all these damn zombies?' asked Eleanor, the weight of the weapon clutched in her fingers seemed to grow heavier with each minute they nervously crept through the underground maze without encountering the enemy.

Bex scouted ahead at the front. She glanced back at Eleanor as if she really shouldn't have asked that question. 'I told you, they're recharging. If you want to know what I think, I reckon they are deeper inside the maze, drawn to the coins' power. Evil feeds on evil, right?'

'You can do a lot of things with the coins,' said Guy, 'but biscuits, they ain't.'

'Your half-zombie friend might have a point,' said Sister Mee. 'The zombies might not absorb any sustenance from the coins, but the horde down here will still be attracted to the Judas Purse like bugs to a lamp.'

The answer to Eleanor's question suddenly arrived. There was just time to

register a strange noise drifting down the temple tunnel when the first of the zombies appeared. They wore the garb of Aztec priests, but so decayed by the centuries that all colour had fled from their costumes. They looked more like mummies than zombies, decaying paper dry skin clad in ribbons of cloth. From their throats, a natural howl escaped which was the most alive thing about them. Words were mixed into the howl. Like the chanting of a spell. Eleanor had thought that fighting Bex was bad enough when it came to combating the semi-alive - or was it half dead? - but she would have settled for taking a pasting from zombie girl any day of the week compared to this gang of monstrosities.

Bex stepped smartly to the side, giving them a clear field of fire.

'Not yet,' ordered Guy. 'Wait until thirty metres effective.'

Not blasting away and wasting ammo was one of the hardest things that Eleanor had been called to do. Every iota of her innate self-preservation mechanism itched to start shooting. Anything to stop the shambling horde approach any closer.

'What is that they're calling?' asked Ian, his voice shaking uncertainly.

'Not sure. I think it's in Nahuatl, the Aztecs' original tongue,' said Diane as she raised her submachine gun towards the advancing pack of shambling horrors.

'Thirty and dirty. Well, this is how I intend to chat with 'em,' said Guy squeezing the trigger of his weapon and sending a stream of bullets ripping down the tunnel at neck height. 'Reckon they'll understand just fine, though. Light 'em up!'

Zombies stumbled at the end of the tunnel, what was left of their decaying heads spread across those still advancing behind. Guy had highlighted the need to go for head shots, but when you were firing a machine pistol with such a ferocious rate of fire, you just needed to aim at the correct height and let rip. Eleanor realised she was frozen. She hadn't fired a single round. Eleanor willed her fingers to respond, to add to the weight of fire when she smelt the undead horrors to her rear; she swung around and saw a dozen Aztec zombies coming from a side corridor behind them, creeping up just as stealthily as shambling corpses could be expected to. Her combat spec's A.I. system flashed targeting warnings about the zombies' dangerously close combat range, target flashes indicating which creatures she needed to eliminate first. She squeezed down on the KBP PP-2000's trigger, producing a thunderous response from her weapon, chatter angrily echoing off the passage. Ian stood beside her, eyeballing the threat and opening up with his automatic shotgun, sending clouds of deadly pellets blasting down the narrow space with each shot. Eleanor was just glad that these creatures were probably ten years off their last meal. *I certainly don't intend to be their next one.*

Bex drew her blade as the party's magazines clicked on empty, wading forward, swinging the deadly molecule thin-edged sword and cutting apart what was left of the ancient assassins. As quickly as they had appeared, the first wave of attackers was left twitching on the floor, both front and rear. Where limbs have been separated from the bodies they seem to move with a will of their own like snakes, the last vestiges of energy drained away in a few last-minute twitches and spasms.

Eleanor surveyed the carnage, feeling sick.

'There'll be more of them soon,' warned Bex. 'They hunt in packs and communicate by scent. Every zombie in this maze knows that we're here now. We need to find the coins and flee before they overwhelm us with sheer numbers.'

'And before we run out of ammunition,' added Eleanor. She palmed a spare magazine from her belt, ejecting the spent clip from her weapon and slapped a fresh clip into the gun's grip.

Diane examined her drone's remote control unit and cut loose with a whoop of relief. 'I set the crawler to auto-explore and I think it's found what we are looking for.' Diane set the tablet to wireless broadcast and a little image appeared in the corner of Eleanor's combat specs - showing the feed from the drone's cameras. A large chamber supported by dozens of columns caught in the drone's crimson floodlights, and in the temple's centre, a slab with chains at each corner that had once been used for human sacrifice. On its surface sat a little wooden chest with a carved cross and Christ, acting as a locking mechanism for a rusty old padlock. 'Father Peter must have left that there. The Judas Purse!' Diane tapped the screen and the temple's image was replaced on Eleanor's glasses by a glowing map of the route the drone had taken to reach its current location. 'That's only five minutes from this tunnel.'

Five minutes too long when it came to clambering through Zombie Central, Eleanor mused, but beggars can't be choosers. They set off at a fast trot, nervously scanning the darkness with their torches, waiting for the next attack. Eleanor could barely stop herself shaking. They were so close to the prize they had risked their necks for. A chance to grab the purse and deny its contents to every wicked creature who would seize it and use its power for evil.

'Can't your undead cousins harness the coins' power?' Eleanor asked Bex.

'They would need to feed like crazy to reach that level of sentience,' said Bex.

'And then they would have to overcome the sorcery the priests used to seal them down here as guardians of the tunnels,' said Sister Mee.

'So what you're saying,' murmured Eleanor, 'is that if we fail and they feast on us, then we might be swapping the vampire apocalypse for a zombie invasion.'

Bex frowned. 'Yeah, I guess that's exactly what I'm saying.'

'Well, that's just beautiful,' said Eleanor.

Ian swung his torch behind them thinking he had heard something, but it was only one of the strange distant echoes filtering in from the maze. 'Don't worry, we are not going to let that happen.'

'You're wasted on this team you know,' said Bex. 'When we get out of this you should consider transferring to Harriet's squad.'

Ah, now Eleanor caught a glimpse of the origin of California girl's hostility towards her. Bex liked Ian. But unless Ian had a taste for a tad too much scent on his female company, he'd be better off avoiding the blonde and staying on Guy's team. On my team. Team Eleanor. It's the only team in town that counts.

Guy slowed the party, pointing down the passage with his submachinegun barrel. 'Dream on, kid. We're not a soccer league. We don't do transfer season inside the Vigil. Eyes front. Does anything about that seem a little hinky to you?'

Eleanor instantly saw what the squad commander meant. Ahead of them, someone - or something - had lit torches along the wall. An acrid smell of ancient burning pitch as smoke drifted through the air - most of the maze's concealed air ducts long since overgrown and blocked aboveground. 'Do zombies need light?'

Bex shook her head. 'No, they're tracking us by the smell of our flesh. I doubt they lit the torches.'

So who had put a match to them? Eleanor wondered? She wasn't allowed long to ponder that mystery. A second heaving surge of zombie bodies emerged behind the party, attracted by the first wave's massacre.

'Save your bullets,' growled Guy, turning. 'It's light enough we can out-pace them.'

All of them sprinted down the corridor, using the unexpected illumination to reach a decent gallop. Eleanor glanced towards the undead filling the corridor behind them, gaunt chanting figures emerging from dozens of passages inside the maze, additional Aztec zombies strengthening the horde's numbers every second. *Please don't let me die down here. I want to kick the bucket in the sunlight, not torn apart like a rabbit in a warren.* 'What about when we stop and they catch us up?'

'Hell, then you can pop caps like you've got a discount card at Gun Mart.'

They had covered half the distance to the purse's chamber when Eleanor yelped and nearly fell, stumbling against the cold damp walls of the passage. Her body itched, her mind spun. It took a serious effort for her not to vomit.

'What is it?' asked Ian, reaching out towards Eleanor, a look of concern creasing his forehead. 'Were you scratched by a zombie?'

'No,' said Eleanor. 'It's the . . . coins, the Judas Purse. I can *feel* their weight.'

'Feel them how?' asked Guy, suspiciously.

Eleanor's head pulsed with a painful migraine. 'Like they're pushing against me, a magnet with an opposing polarity.'

'Your powers aren't fully recorded on the index yet,' said Sister Mee. 'It is possible you can sense their energy.'

'I've never heard of any power like that,' said Diane.

'There's a whole lot of unrecorded when it comes to the crap the Vigil have to deal with,' sighed Guy. He helped Eleanor stumble forward again, getting the party back on the move.

'If the coins call to evil, maybe it also repels the light, repels goodness,' said Diane as they jogged down a set of crumbling stone stairs.

Eleanor wasn't convinced. 'If you think that's me, you're really looking in the wrong place.'

'As far as we're aware, none of the previous guardians of the Judas Purse reported such a side effect,' said Sister Mee.

'I'll be okay,' said Eleanor, 'but if you're looking for someone to carry the damn coins, I think you better look for another pair of hands.'

'Or perhaps yours are just the pair of hands that are needed,' argued Sister Mee. 'Anyone eager to bear the weight of the Judas Purse would be the wrong person to entrust the coins to.'

'It wouldn't be for long,' reassured Diane. 'We've got the reactor at the Knolls Atomic Power Laboratory on standby to receive the coins and melt them down.'

'Forget it,' said Eleanor. 'I don't think I can even go near the damn coins, let alone dump them in my backpack.'

The group had just cleared an intersection of six narrow passages when dozens more zombies appeared shambling to their rear, reciting who-knows-what in their eerie dead language as if they were trying to remember their lost humanity. This wave of monsters had help, however; a pair of demi-gogs at the back of the horde, the arc flash of electric cattle prods forcing the zombies forward like a stampede of

undead cattle.

'Bad company!' shouted Eleanor. 'Reds.'

'I see them,' growled Guy. He fired a short burst from his weapon, cutting down the lead zombies. The demi-gogs vanished back down an intersection, only their mocking laughter remaining, leaving the fruits of their labour moaning and hissing and chanting as the zombies nosily scuffled towards the party. 'Trying to slow us down.'

Eleanor didn't have to ask slow them down from what. The race to reclaim the Judas Purse below ground suddenly had a deadly extra competitor.

They retreated, firing, moving as fast as they could without being overrun, running and twisting in every direction with Eleanor's head throbbing even worse. Eleanor was just glad they were following the drone's three-dimensional schematic. It was little wonder the previous explorers had left their bones scattered across every tunnel and passage. This hellhole was a haunted house ride with a legion of real monsters stuffed inside it. The group came to a set of stairs leading down into an ante-room that gave onto three slightly larger tunnels. The roof was held up by columns engraved with snake-like Aztec carvings, a single stone block in the centre of the chamber, rusting chains to hold down the victims that had been sacrificed here. It wasn't the chamber the drone had found, though, this space was far smaller and didn't hold the drone parked inside it. One thing it did have, however, was a set of stone doors on sliding rollers by the stairs' archway. Guy and Ian placed their backs behind the door. With a final-sounding grinding rumble, the pair sealed them inside the anteroom. Eleanor prayed that the bulk of the undead horde was behind them, or they could have just trapped themselves on the wrong side of Zombie Central Station.

'Where do these three tunnels lead?' asked Sister Mee.

Diane consulted the drone's telemetry. She pointed to the left-hand tunnel. 'That one runs back deeper into the maze.' Then the central passage. 'Higher than normal air flow, vegetative matter in the sensors' atmospheric fingerprint, so probably up to one of the pyramids in Teotihuacan. If we take that, we'll hopefully reach another concealed entrance inside the ruins.' Diane indicated the tunnel on the far right. And that's the route the drone took to reach the temple room with the coins.'

'Lucky number three,' said Guy. Their squad commander started to move towards the third tunnel, then yelled as he was suddenly struck by an invisible force, thrown violently across the chamber. Guy landed moaning, his hands fumbling for his dropped weapon. As he did, a second unseen hammer blow materialised from thin air to slam the wind out of him and launch him rolling across the floor.

Eleanor raised her submachine gun and cast about. *There's nothing there? Are we facing an invisible tripwire left by the Aztecs?* 'What the hell is it?'

'There's something inside here with us!' called Sister Mee. She had drawn her moly-blade, circling around and testing the air with it.

'Don't shoot yet,' said Ian, 'too much risk of crossfire. Stand back-to-back. Shield positions.'

Eleanor drew her sword while keeping the submachine gun balanced in her other hand, bolting for Ian's position across the anteroom. So, this is what they had

been reduced to. Trying to form a human shield wall like some Roman manipule faced with barbarians lurking inside a dark forest. She sniffed the air as she ran. No scents here that apart from their own that she could detect. *Not zombie or demi-gog or vampire.* But there was something else. She sensed a presence. And not a friendly one.

Diane sprinted for their makeshift defensive formation too, but cried as she seemed to flip in the air, a blaze of energy slamming her up into the ceiling before dropping her like a stone towards the chamber's flagstones. The agent smashed into the floor with a groan, her tablet cracked into pieces from the force of the impact. *Is she unconscious or worse? No way to tell from here.* Eleanor cycled through her spectacles combat settings - movement sensing, heat tracking on infrared, but whatever monster was in here with them was coming up empty as far as Silicon Valley's little gift to the agency was concerned. *Beyond science, that's comforting.* Bex Crawford ignored Ian's warning about the risk of a crossfire and opened up at random with her gun, fumbling for her sword with the other hand. That was until her blade seemed to take on a life of its own, yanked out of the young woman's grip, flailing around in the air, then windmilling back towards the agent. It sunk deep into Bex's chest, its deadly sharp tip emerging from her back. The agent screamed as she tumbled over like a felled oak.

No! As much as Eleanor had disliked the other agent, she'd never wish that fate on her.

Only Sister Mee, Ian and Eleanor were left to finish the protective triangular formation, standing back-to-back and facing the seemingly empty anteroom.

Ian slashed the air in front of him with his blade. 'How can we fight what we can't see?'

'The torches,' said Sister Mee. 'Whatever is in here must have lit them. It needs light to see us!'

Eleanor and Ian didn't need to be told twice. They raised their guns and started shooting torches out of the stone wall mounts. *Let's put us on an equal footing and see how whatever this is enjoys playing with the sharp end of a moly-blade.* Eleanor had blasted away her second torch when she felt something mosquito-sharp bite into her neck. Eleanor just had time to pull out the poisoned dart from her skin before a landslide of darkness kicked her feet out from under her.

Breaking Professor Ruben Baez out of his cheap Mexican mental hospital hadn't been much of a problem for Sophia. Mexico was so gloriously corrupt. With the amount of Dollars American that Sophia had brought along for bribery purposes, she probably could have bought the archeologist's freedom and had one of the institution staff's grandmothers thrown into the deal as a sweetener. This was excellent luck for Sophia because Baez wasn't really insane - what he was, was completely deranged by being one of the few people to blunder into the subterranean ruins below Teotihuacan and survive. He hadn't actually murdered two of his assistants and eaten them. The zombies had done that. But because zombies obviously don't exist, the Mexican court system had come to an entirely rational decision and sentenced the professor to indefinite respite care at what

passed for a maximum security hospital hereabouts. She knew the professor was completely off his rocker, because convincing him to lead her through the maze of passages towards the main chamber where he claimed to have seen the 'shining treasure' hadn't taken any fatal threats of violence. And given Baez was only a mortal human, reentering the zombie-infested maze really, *really* should have needed a threat or two.

A couple of Sophia's nest came trotting back towards her, having to stoop in the low corridors designed for ancient Mesoamericans, a look of triumph flushing their faces foretelling their mission's status. She was impressed despite herself. *They should have died doing their job. That's why we call it a suicide mission.*

'Our attack on the zombies drew most of the undead scum after us,' said the male demi-gog.

'And onto the Vigil debasements,' added the second demi-gog, like she expected to be petted for the job.

'Well done. I'm sure the zombies will be suitably grateful once they're recovered their minds enough to be able to think.' *Brains require brains to feed the intellect. The Vigil's stooges will do nicely in that regard.* 'Human flesh tastes so much better than that of our kind. We are created to be predators, not prey.'

Joanna peered nervously through the darkness. She had agitated for so long to play an active part of Sophia's plans, now she was actually here, she seemed stunned to silence by the enormity of the threat they faced. Not all the remains down here were human detritus. A few vampires had been drawn into the spider's web, too, faring little better against the cursed legacy of the bitter last Aztec priests. *Ah, Joanna, if only I could tell you why I truly need you down here today. But that would spoil the surprise.*

'Over to you, now, professor,' indicated Sophia.

'Oh yes,' gurgled the man. 'Left and right, then we fight. Right and left, then we—'

Sophia flashed her fangs at the lunatic and the threat had the desired effect. He quietened down. 'Spare me your poetic ramblings, professor. I once drove Byron to distraction. Compared to him, your doggerel is every bit as inferior as what's left of your tenuous grasp on sanity. Lead us the rest of the way to my shining treasure, if you please.'

'Shiny, shiny, so full of spiny,' Baez muttered. The man headed off, sniffing the foul dry air down here as though he was a bloodhound. Had Baez researched zombie mythology while in the institution? Learnt about their Morse Code of scent? Stranger things had happened.

'Is this the best way to find the purse?' asked Joanna. 'Shouldn't we search in different directions?'

'I won't have much of a nest left if I split up my demi-gogs and send them trotting off down a dozen different passages to locate the coins,' said Sophia. 'To survive a zombie horde you need strength in numbers or concentration of force. Down here, splitting up for too long is the same as dying.' She kicked a pile of bones lying in the ruined shell of a conquistador breastplate. 'Just ask him.'

Vampires were good at stealth, moving near silently like any nocturnal hunter. The force only came across a dozen or so zombies in the passages the professor led them through, the lunatic greeting them with cheery cries as if they were old

students of his. Not so difficult in dribs and drabs to rip apart in and leave decorating the maze's tight walls.

'Soon, soon,' chirped the deranged academic.

Sophia felt a rapture growing inside even her cold heart. *After all this time.* The master of masters would have his desires sated. And shortly after, a blink of an eye in the timescales of a near-immortal, so would she. Sophia was still contemplating how her destiny would change for the better when she slammed into something - a something composed of nothing. It was as if there was invisible reinforced glass armour between her and the rest of the corridor. She hammered into the strange barrier with all her strength. She might as well have been trying to kick down a mountain for all the effect her supernatural violence had on progressing forward.

'This can't be?' cried Sophia in fury. She beat her talons against the transparent barrier, but it filled the corridor as effectively as if the passage had been sealed with concrete. Sophia swivelled to face the professor's flinching form. 'You said nothing about this!'

'New, new, a wall seen by few,' wailed the archaeologist, tears filling his eyes at failing Sophia. At least the vampire's snake-like trance over the man still held.

'What is this wall?' asked Joanna, curiously running her hands across the transparent field as though practising a mime.

'Sorcery, very ancient and very powerful,' said Sophia. *How many souls died to conjure up this dark art, I wonder?*

'The Aztecs' magic?'

Sophia glanced towards the professor. 'Our rhyming idiot thinks it's new. And I'm inclined to agree. Something of this ilk certainly could have been conjured up by the Aztec priests, but the barrier would have faded after a day or two. Keeping it functioning for centuries? There's not enough blood in a thousand worlds to pay the soul-price to maintain such magic for so long.' *I knew there was something else down here with us. My senses weren't playing me false.*

'Not the zombies' sorcery or the Vigil's work, then?'

'When it comes to the former, the zombies are prisoners of this maze's magic wards, not masters of them. And the Vigil and their papal friends? Too soft to slice out the hearts needed to fuel this.' She grabbed the professor by the white fabric of his hospital robe. 'Take us another way!'

'Only route, now,' moaned the man, pointing down the blocked corridor, 'just three minutes to the shiny.'

Three minutes? Sophia howled in frustration. So come so close to claiming the prize only to be halted here. It was intolerable. *It is inconceivable!*

Eleanor moaned as she regained consciousness. A fluttering bird where her heart should be, as she tried to recall where she was and why her body ached so damn much. Then the fear hit her as she remembered. *The Aztec maze!* The memory would have flattened her anew if she hadn't already been lying on the anteroom chamber's cold flagstones, her wrists bound behind her back with her ankles tied together so tightly she couldn't be sure the numbness she felt wasn't entirely a result of whatever drug still sloshed around her system. A strangely inappropriate giggle

dragged Eleanor's attention towards the centre of the chamber. *Dawn Heliot!* The witch, at least, seemed exceptionally pleased with their reunion. *She's the only one.* Ian twisted at the end of a pair of wrist ties, suspended from the ceiling a way inside the tunnel on the far left. Strung up like a haunch of kebab meat waiting to be carved. Bex's body had been left slumped against the wall of the anteroom, her bloody sword still plunged through her chest while blood pooled across the floor. Of the others, Guy, Diane and Sister Mee were all as hog-tied on the floor as Eleanor. The fact the witch had bothered to secure the agents must mean that they still lived - at least - for the moment.

Eleanor called out in their direction. 'Are you okay?'

'We're-' their answers were stymied by the witch. Heliot walked along the line of prisoners, kicking them to silence and threatening them with her wand. If Eleanor hadn't seen what that wicked gnarled piece of wood was capable of, she would have laughed. Heliot looked like a spoiled child at a birthday party, threatening the other guests with her magic stick.

Staring closer, Eleanor noted that Heliot appeared pasty and unwell. 'You allergic to zombies, or just still annoyed that kid with ruby slippers dropped a house on your sister?'

Heliot stopped by Eleanor and grinned like a piranha about to feed. 'The Spell of Glass I used to enter the ruins unseen and fight you takes its toll on a girl's flesh, my darling. But don't you worry, after I make the time to sacrifice a few of your friends, I'll be back to my former glory. I do believe I will sacrifice the girl and the nun first. Seasoned meat like the old man deserves to be kept as a snack to distract the zombies. They'll enjoy eating him.'

So, that at least explains why she drugged us, rather than darting us with a fatal poison. 'Why have you done this to us?'

'It is quite simple. Three tunnels. The middle one lead back to the surface, but the other two? They both contain bombs with timers on them. Tick-tock, tick-tock.'

'What the hell are you up to?' asked Eleanor.

'You have a choice to make,' cackled the witch. 'You can save the boy, or you can recover the Judas Purse. Pick one, because your other choice won't apply.'

'How can I save anybody trussed up like this?'

'You must release your powers. Don't be coy, I have seen what you can do. This is no time to hide your light under a bushel. Show me what you are capable of my darling! Let's uncage the real you.'

'What is she talking about?' called Guy. 'Is this about what happened inside the demon's store?'

'You really don't know what you have caught and tamed here, do you?' laughed Heliot. 'What a waste . . . for *you*. The clock is ticking, my darling. Release the beast within you. Let me glimpse her beautiful form.'

'Don't listen to the false creature!' warned Sister Mee. 'If a witch is daring you to do such a thing, she will have ...'

Dawn Heliot aimed her wand at the nun and a dark crackling fork of energy leapt the space between them, blasting the nun into unconsciousness. 'You know the price of everything and the value of nothing, sister. Time for a little quiet from you.'

Eleanor twisted frantically inside her wrist and ankle ties. *Damn it.* She had used the Vigil's own restraints. Cunning wonders of material science, designed to

restrain something with a vampire's strength. Or an agent's. 'You're bluffing, Maleficent. I get that you're pissed about Ian overcoming your charms, but why put a bomb in the other tunnel? You would never risk the Judas Purse being lost.'

'Oh my precious darling, the coins won't be lost. The bomb in that tunnel will merely seal that section of the temple off from you. But not from the vampires. They are heading towards the purse from the opposite end of the maze. The pesky bloodsuckers needed you to draw off the army of the Aztec undead down here, which you so obligingly arranged for them. However, their progress is currently somewhat stymied by wards I have cast. Magical barriers that even vampires and their demi-gog slaves may not cross. Sadly for you, my shield wards are on a timer, too. Those barriers will drop soon and the vampires will finally be allowed to claim their prize.'

'What have the Reds promised you?'

'Nothing, silly girl. Deal with the bloodsuckers? I'd sooner trust the Keeper.'

'You destroy the tunnel, you'll lose your chance to take the coins.'

'I plan to live forever, not die twisting in agony as Empress of the World after a single season. Evil knows evil when she sees it. Those ancient coins have been cursed by the blood of the God-child. What is that old expression, a *poisoned chalice*? The coins glitter so brightly, yet still they are poisoned.'

'You ain't the sharpest tool in the shed, are you?' growled Guy. 'Allow the Reds to claim those coins and they'll bring destruction to everyone, including you.'

'Oh, I don't have anything against a little chaos released abroad in the world,' laughed Heliot. 'It was bad enough I had to flee Europe back in the thirties with the Pope's sanctimonious assassins hot on my trail. Your friends in the Vigil have grown far too adept at tracking me, now. When the global village is one big failed state resembling the sands of a post-apocalyptic movie, little old me will be back in my element. No more CCTV cameras, no facial recognition computers, no chipped ID cards or air-force drones scanning the sky for me anymore, never sleeping, never stopping. I was born in the Georgian era, remember. Do I look like I love FaceBook? Do I look like I really need driverless cars? That's the glorious thing about the Reds' upcoming Dark Age - the darkness shall rule supreme. A millennia-long feast for all the races of the Sidhe Antiqua.'

'With you as its queen?' spat Diane.

'Mistress of my little corner of it. Unlike the bloodsuckers, I don't require the ego-boos of having millions of human slaves in thrall to me. A girl can only feed on one soul at a time, after all. Far more fun to hunt than to farm. If only the vampires could loosen up and embrace that philosophy, the world would be a far better place.'

Diane twisted in her chains. 'For *you*, you twisted servant of Satan.'

'Is there anyone else here who actually counts?' grinned the witch. Heliot checked her watch. 'Only a few minutes left. You really need to start freeing yourself soon, Eleanor. Do nothing . . . you will see the boy die as well as lose your precious coins to those horrible bloodsuckers. So, are you to save the Judas Purse and condemn Mr Hunky Pants to death? Or will you save lover boy and allow the vampires their reign of blood? Poor Ian, but then there are those terribly important coins to consider? Choices, choices.'

'Save the coins,' pleaded Ian. 'One life is nothing compared to everyone else

who will die.'

'Guy?'

'I can't help you here, kid. There're some choices you have to make for yourself. This one is down to you.'

Dawn Heliot capered about, savouring the agony of Eleanor's choice. 'Come on, girlfriend! Ian's about to die in a few seconds. The only tunnel from this room to the Judas Purse is nearly about to blow. Think of all the vampires licking their fangs and praying you go with your heart rather than your head. But then ... oh, poor, poor Ian.'

Eleanor felt the heat building inside her, just as it had back at the strange demon's travelling store. Her wrist and ankle ties started to glow from the fierce white heat of energy.

Sister Mee had recovered from the wand's violence enough to scream a warning. 'No, Eleanor, don't! She's prepared a spell to suck your powers from you, to steal them for herself. That's why the creature's set this choice up, she requires a heightened emotional response from you. Hold it in.'

Diane added her clamour to the nun's shouts and the witch's features twisted in loathing. 'Enough from you two darlings!' Twin bolts leapt from her gnarled wand, blasting Diane silent and smashing the nun back into unconsciousness. 'I need to feed on you or use you as snacks to draw the zombies away from me, but nobody said I have to listen to your insolence.'

Hold it in. 'I can't—' Eleanor desperately tried to pull back the power, contain it inside her flesh, but she couldn't stop. Not now. Such vast energy being channelled and she was its sole conduit, a single figure struggling on the slopes trying to hold back an avalanche which she had started.

'Too late for second thoughts, my dear,' cackled the witch, she raised her wand, a conductor about to instruct her orchestra. A web of shimmering green lines appeared in the air of the chamber, joining Eleanor to the woman like a web fixing a fly to a spider. The lines began to pulse as the life-force and the power Eleanor had conjured started to drain out from her towards the witch.

Dawn Heliot swayed bathed in golden light. 'Yes. YES! MINE.'

Heliot hollered in shock as Bex got to her feet and rushed the witch, the blade still impaled inside the agent's bleeding chest. The witch went flying, her wand spinning in the air as if she had been tackled by a quarterback. Eleanor gasped, the life-draining connection between her and the witch suddenly broken. *I guess I know what zombie girl's primary power is, now. Taking punishment. Turned into a human pin-cushion, but still able to dish it out.*

Eleanor felt her summoned energy flowing back again, burning her, charging her. She passed it through her wrists and ankles, the energy writhing like a beast crawling inside her body, and as she did so the plastic hissed and melted into a foul-smelling vapour, droplets congealing on the flagstones. *Free!* She seized her moly-sword from the ground where it lay discarded.

'Head for the Judas Purse!' urged Guy, writhing on the floor next to her.

Eleanor bent down and sliced his wrist and leg ties. 'You do it, I'll be right behind you.' Guy cursed but got to his feet not bothering to argue, snatched up his fallen submachine gun and hurled himself down the main passage. Heliot screamed abuse at Bex as the two women wrestled desperately across the chamber. *The bomb.*

Eleanor didn't have time to think, she rushed towards the tunnel where Ian dangled thrashing from the ceiling.

'No!' begged Ian, twisting in the air in his restraints as Eleanor arrived. 'Go with Guy, he can disarm the mechanism while you run for the coins.'

Eleanor ignored Ian's exhortations and bent down, examining the package of explosives on the ground. Nothing fancy. Industrial mining explosives with a digital timer wired into the blasting cap. She yanked the timer out of the arrangement and tossed the deactivated unit down the corridor.

'I'm not the mission!' protested Ian as Eleanor cut him down from the ceiling. He collapsed on the flagstones with a heavy thump.

'You are to me.' Eleanor swivelled to see Heliot shove Bex away from her, zombie girl still weakened from being skewered, the witch rolling to the side to seize her wand. In another second she would fry Bex.

'You want my power?' shouted Eleanor. 'Take it!' She dropped to her knees and held out both her hands, focusing on what needed to be done. Releasing the surge of energy was as easy as vomiting from food poisoning and as much of a relief, too - at least for Eleanor. For Heliot, not so much. The stream of raw energy struck the witch in the centre of her body, flinging her back with a thunder-clap as if she had leapt in front of a two-hundred-ton locomotive. Heliot spun through the air like a rag doll, striking one of the temples pillars and smashing it in half, enough to break her momentum - and body - a shower of masonry and rock from the roof raining down on top of her twitching body. Then the entire temple jolted to the side, throwing Eleanor off her feet. For a second, Eleanor was terrified that Heliot snapping the column was bringing the whole chamber crashing down around them, but the blow-back of smoke and debris from the second tunnel revealed what had actually happened. *The second bomb! It's detonated!* Booby-trapped, or . . . she noticed the half-melted submachine gun thrown across the floor. Guy Drew's weapon. Eleanor stumbled to the passage snaking towards the main temple. The tunnel wasn't there anymore. An avalanche of smoking dirt, rock and broken stone completely blocked that passage; the explosion had collapsed the entire structure in on the maze. Guy had been caught in the blast, murdered trying to defuse the explosives. Eleanor's escape hadn't left the squad commander enough time. *Too slow. I was too slow.* No way the old man could have survived the fury of the blast. Vapourised, with even the ionised gas from the man's corpse, lost and entombed under a hundred feet of Mexican rock.

'He's gone,' whispered Eleanor. *And I killed him.*

Ian stumbled across to stand by her side, staring dumbly at the debris. 'No, he can't be -'

Eleanor turned as she heard the hoarse cackle of laughter. *Heliot.* Eleanor crossed to the body, to make sure the witch was finished. Furious enough to snap the woman's neck in revenge if she hadn't already received fatal injuries. But no, the woman was dying. Not even a dark witch's art was enough to put Humpty Dumpty's shattered shell back together again. Still the witch found the life to giggle as she expired.

Eleanor knelt beside the creature. 'There's a special place in Hell reserved for you. It took meeting a burning angel to make me believe. But now? I reckon you'll be meeting every last man, woman and child you ever fed on. They'll be lining up

around the fires of perdition to stick pins in you.'

'Silly girl,' rasped Heliot. 'Did you — never wonder how — the bloodsuckers — were always one step behind you? Your precious Vigil — harbours a traitor. That's my — final gift to you. You have failed — because of one of — your own! You chose to — allow the bloodsuckers to win. My death here means nothing. You haven't — won a — single thing by slaying me. Nothing!'

Eleanor watched the final croak squeeze out of the witch, the woman's body convulsing. As Heliot died, all traces of her youth vanished. Slowly at first, then rapidly. Twenty years old. Thirty years old. Seventy. One hundred. Two hundred years. It was like watching a corpse caught on time-lapse video ageing across centuries. Within seconds, there was only a mound of dust filling an empty set of clothes. *Was Heliot lying? Trying to sow doubt in me with her dying words? As in life, so in death?* Eleanor stared towards the others in the chamber. Diane looked like she might be coming back around. Sister Mee still lay unconscious. How well did Eleanor know the nun, or for that matter, Bex Crawford? *How did the vampires know exactly where to find us again?* Eleanor reached for the side of her combat spectacles and erased the last minute's worth of recording. She was going to keep this to herself until she knew who to trust.

'What did that old crone whisper to you?' asked Bex, grimacing as she yanked the moly-sword free of her body. The agent's hybridised zombie metabolism had already healed what should have been a fatal wound. For her, it was like pulling out a wood splinter.

'Nothing,' lied Eleanor. 'A dying curse with no actual power to make it happen.'

'We don't need her bloody curse to work,' accused Bex. 'You messed up by choosing to save Agent Holderness instead of the mission. By the time we dig our way through that tunnel the Judas Purse will be long gone. You allowed the Reds to steal the coins out from under our noses!' Zombie girl jabbed a finger towards Ian. 'You think you saved him? You've actually killed him . . . just really, really slowly! You've murdered us all, you idiot!'

As if reacting to the violence of the woman's voice the temple started to tremble; softly at first, then with increasing ferocity, dust and large sections of rubble falling from the ceiling. The walls began to buckle in spouts of ancient masonry as they caved in, a couple of centuries of zero maintenance finally taking their toll on the forgotten temple.

Ian lurched across to them through the collapsing clouds of dust. 'That explosion's done for the complex. We need to escape!'

Eleanor exchanged an angry glance with Bex, as though this was something else going to be blamed on her. 'Yeah, that sounds like a stand-up plan. I'll help Diane out of here. You two geniuses grab the sister.'

Diane was dazed when Eleanor ran across to her, groggy as though drunk. But look on the bright side, if she'd been baseline human, she'd still be unconscious from the lashing power of the witch's wand, if not far worse. Eleanor took the agent's weight under her shoulder and they hobbled up the middle passage like they were tied together in some insane egg and spoon race. Bex and Ian already had the nun held between them in front, the stone steps of the passage reeling underfoot as they all pushed forward, desperately hoping the guess that this route led above

ground prove true. Escaping with their collective wounds wasn't made any easier with tonnes of soil and rock coming down around their ears.

'Wait, we've left Guy behind!' mumbled Diane.

'He didn't make it,' said Eleanor, coughing with ancient dust itching her eyes; trying to keep her gaze on the route ahead. Torches lit by the dead witch were being extinguished as sections of the staircase slid away, taking the light with them.

'Blown to pieces.'

'But the Judas Purse . . . ?'

'Nabbed by the Reds,' swore Eleanor, stepping aside as a slab of rock the size of a menhir crashed down from the ceiling. Her heart hammered inside her, how close that jagged rock had come to impaling her through the skull. 'The coins' theft by the vampires was Wicked Wanda's end-run, anyway.' Eleanor could feel the evil weight of the coins rolling away from her. The Judas Purse had been claimed, just not by the Vigil.

'He can't,' cried Diane, 'no, please, that can't have happened. Guy's rescued the coins. He's alive. He must be.'

It shouldn't have been Guy who went after the coins. I'm younger, faster. I could have ripped the fuse out of the bomb and grabbed the purse before the Reds showed up. They both reached the top of the stairs, a narrow tunnel, level and straight but filling in by waves of dirt as rotted timber ceiling supports burst above them. There was a shout through the dust, its meaning lost through waves of rubble, but she prayed the call signified they were close to the exit. Eleanor took another step forward but was slugged into the wall as an avalanche of rock and dirt slide-slammed her, sending her spinning, her hands grasping out for Diane, but the woman seemed to be dropping away. A rent in the floor had opened up behind them, dropping Diane through a gallows trapdoor. Eleanor frantically pushed rocks away, the pile of rubble swelling as additional debris fell from the ceiling. She caught a glimpse of Diane's position inside the cavern. The agent clinging onto an outcrop of rock with her left hand, dangling seven foot below the crumbling floor of Eleanor's passage, the other arm windmilling around for a second handhold. The rent that had opened up in the tunnel revealed another five levels of the labyrinth, all exposed to a rain of rock and soil, the very deepest level filled with Aztec undead frothing and rolling like a sea of slugs, their arms raised towards the signs of life above them. Like looking down into an exposed anthill, if the ants were zombies. Rocks the size of cars plummeted around the mass, crushing many of the creatures, but their chanting madness was still loud enough to reach up to Eleanor through the roar of collapsing temple.

'Hang on, I'm coming for you!' Eleanor reached for her backpack, going for the climbing lines and grappling hook inside.

'I believe,' yelled Diane, her body swaying below the outcrop.

In what? Eleanor never got a chance to ask. The entire side of the maze where Diane clung onto broke apart, crumbling into a shower of fragments, the agent just another piece of debris with her body spinning down towards the zombie horde, quickly followed by five levels of labyrinth folding in on itself. Eleanor stared incredulously into the disintegrating pit. A few seconds ago Diane had been alive. They were going to escape together. Now the woman was gone, her corpse entombed by a hundred tonnes of collapsing sediment. First Guy, then Diane. This

mission was degenerating into a bloody massacre. The tunnel continued to buckle, piles of rubble falling away into the expanding hole. Eleanor's self-preservation mechanism, tinged with raw fear, suddenly kicked in as Ian emerged through the rolling clouds of dust and grabbed her, his eyes casting around for Diane.

'She's dead. Alive and then dead. How did that happen?'

'Out,' commanded Ian, dragging her back through the collapsing passage.

'Just gone.'

'Out before we die, too!'

They blundered through curtains of falling masonry, choking on debris, the crashing rubble thundering around them. When Eleanor finally saw the jungle in front of her, the stepped Aztec pyramid towering behind her, it took at least half a minute for her to realise that she could stop running, now. *Safe. Safe. Safe.* The combined strength of Bex and Ian needed to prevent her from crashing wordlessly forward through the undergrowth. She should flee. Run all the way home to New York. The two agents shouted something at Eleanor, but she didn't understand their words. They might as well have been chanting in the Aztec's dead language. Post-traumatic stress disorder had flipped a switch inside her and head she might just have officially lost it. A small part of Eleanor was actually grateful for her weakness. Far better than facing up to what she had just lost. Someone seemed to be screaming in front of the jungle. It might even have been her.

Professor Baez raised his hands to greet the warm air of the Mexican evening. 'Yes! Fresh, fresh as —'

'Your death!' said Sophia snapping the man's neck.

'You killed him,' cried Joanna, watching the professor slump into the pyramid's moonlight shadows. There was a sudden moment of stillness across the landscape, only the distant lantern lights from a few night tours strolling through the massive archaeological site.

'Frankly, if I had to listen to this fool kill any more poetry, he would have murdered me,' said Sophia. She stepped aside and indicated the corpse to her demi-gogs. They didn't need to be asked twice, the creatures fell upon the body, feasting with an eagerness that could only have come from surviving the maze.

Sophia tilted back the lid of the little chest she had grabbed up, recoiling a little at the touch of the crucifix carved in the case. *Just superstition.* She didn't need the crucifix burning her, not with the casket's contents inside. Sophia's skin seemed to pulse as if filled with shivering maggots when touching the chest. Inside: a heap of Roman coins on white lace, ancient money every bit as shiny as the dead lunatic had promised. 'Judas, you bad, bad boy.' It wasn't every day you saw a pile of coins cursed by the betrayal of the Son of God. Coins that had once tempted Judas Iscariot to a treason that had changed the world forever. 'No, you foul little beauties. You're not for me. I have someone else for you to corrupt. An old friend who is *dying* to be reunited with your powers.' She closed the casket and dropped the case into her lead-lined knapsack.

'You did well,' Sophia told Joanna.

'I did?'

'Oh yes. Better than I could have hoped.'

More demi-gogs emerged from the pyramid behind them, brushing dust and rubble off of their clothes.

Even if someone took their wicked fun with me down in the maze. The unsettling memory of invisible barriers, the thump of explosives collapsing the temple to remind Sophia how very narrowly she had triumphed. Sophia would be sure to kill that interfering *someone* if she ever encountered them again. They would be very, very sorry to have tarried with her kind. *We are cats, not mice. Soon enough the whole world will have reason to be reminded of that fundamental truth.*

Eleanor had lost all sense of time when the woman finally arrived in Eleanor's cell. Buried somewhere deep in the Vault's lowest levels. An armoured cell with a single cot, just like the chamber she had originally woken up inside below New York. No natural light but plenty of questions over the speakers, unseen interrogators relentlessly debriefing her, time and time again, springing on any inconsistencies in her recollections. By the time she had told the same story for the five hundredth time, she kind of doubted her veracity herself.

'You know who I am?' asked the woman. She stood tall just shy of six feet, her blonde hair cut in a fashionably short bob, maybe in her late forties or early fifties. The newcomer wasn't unattractive, but the natural beauty she possessed was marred by a black eye-patch over the left side of her face. The remaining eye was

sea-blue, cool and knowing. There was an aura of raw toughness about the woman; coiled steel under the folds of her clothes, a night-stick ready to lash out if provoked.

'Dirty Harriet,' said Eleanor. It wasn't even a question in her mind.

The woman raised her hand and make a pistol-cocking gesture to indicate the cell's single occupant had nailed it in one. 'Never did like that nickname. We're all dirty here. Ain't none of us clean.'

'Where's my team? I want to see them.'

Dirty Harriet grunted in tired amusement. 'Your team? That's cute. Yesterday's news. Disbanded, with all the chumps who survived reassigned.'

Gone? Eleanor could hardly process the words. Was that her fault, too? *The cost of failure?* 'Nobody has more experience tracking the Judas Purse than we do.'

'Not to mention watching the coins walk from under your noses. We'll struggle on without the benefit of your indispensable skills.'

'You need to get me out of here,' demanded Eleanor, trying to keep any note of pleading out of her quivering voice.

Harriet merely shrugged. 'I don't need to do anything. In fact, girl-chick, I'd say you're exactly where you need to be right now.'

'What are you talking about? Didn't you pick up on anything I've been telling the debriefing team? I can sense the coins. Since I came close to them, they've been like a migraine gnawing away at the back of my skull.'

'Yeah, you and your nutty powers. The same powers you didn't bother warning us about in advance, and now we're just meant to trust you? The kindest view I can come up with here is that you weren't even close to field-ready when you were released into the world. Your arse-hat moves cost us the Judas Purse, the mission and the lives of two agents, one of them your illustrious squad leader.'

'Bet you're real upset about that ...'

'You don't know me, girl-chick. You don't know a damn thing about me. Tough Guy was a pain in the butt, but he was a closer. He took down plenty of Reds and other freaks over the decades. You think I'm happy about losing an effective combatant in this war? You really don't understand word one: but *that* I knew already.'

'You know squat!'

'I know this much, sweetie. We're going to ship you to the Island. First class, Air Vigil. You'll enjoy it out there. A chance for you to relax and think about your life. It's like Club Med, but with orange boiler suits and a nice deep cell filled with the very latest in medical monitoring gear. We might not understand what you are, now, but we will. You're going to get your shit straight. Then we'll come to a decision about what the hell to do with you.'

'I'm not your damn lab rat, I'm an agent.'

'Not anymore, girl-chick. Papa's gone. I'm your Mama and Mama says you're grounded.'

'But for the love of god, I can help you find the coins!'

'You think we need your help for that? Eye of the storm, sweetie. We already know that the Judas Purse is somewhere inside the Yellow Sea region. If you were allowed a TV inside your little padded cell you'd know that the Reds have been plenty busy. There's a war brewing between Japan and China over ownership of the Senkaku islands. America and Australia have weighed in on the Japanese side.'

Fleets are busy mobilising. The Yellow Sea resembles one big naval regatta right now. The PLA is playing aircraft carrier tag with our Seventh Fleet. It's only going to take one false step or itchy trigger finger with some fighter jock, and cruise missiles are going to be flying in every direction.'

'I can help you fight the Reds,' pleaded Eleanor. *Please let me help make this right.*

'Your help might already have started the Third World War. We'll all be a hell of a lot safer when you're in a reinforced concrete hole in the Caribbean and we pull the hole up after you, don't ya think?'

Eleanor sagged down into her cot-bed, glaring up at Harriet. The woman was right about one thing. Eleanor really didn't know the first thing about the rival squad commander. *Dirty Harriet was back-stepping us all the way. Maybe she's the traitor inside the Vigil? Ambitious enough to want Guy and his team out of the way. Dropping hints back to the Reds about where we were all the time. Ready to lead a new assault team to seize the Judas Purse after she traces its exact location. Medals, kudos and glory all around.*

'Why are you in here with me? You came to gloat?'

'Your polygraph results on your debriefing,' said Harriet. 'There's something you're not telling us about the mission.'

Ah, so that was it. And if Dirty Harriet was the Vigil's traitor, then she'd be real worried about someone on the disbanded lead team having added two and two together and come up with, "snitch". 'It's just the questions about my powers triggering glitches in your tests,' lied Eleanor. 'I don't know what the hell they are, so I can't answer your people's questions. I was bitten. I turned and the cure brought me back. Whatever I am didn't ship with a user's manual.'

'That even sounds plausible. But I still suffer from a cop's itchy palms when someone is BS'ing me. That's one power I didn't pick up with the cure - surviving the streets of San Francisco did that. And right now, girl-chick, you're pure poison ivy on my mitts. So how about you tell Mama what you're not telling Mama. Why is it your spec's recording files are shy a few minutes of footage when you were in the temple?'

'The blast-wave from the tunnel explosion must have broken the device.'

'What, I just fell out of the tree, all green and shiny? Tell me the truth.'

'Bend in close,' said Eleanor, glancing up at the camera dome in the centre of the cell's ceiling. 'I don't want the CCTV to pick this up.'

Dirty Harriet humoured her request.

'Your little half-zombie friend claims she wears Chanel No. 5, but while she was still in shock from being skewered she admitted it's really a cheap Mexican knock-off bulk-purchased over the web. I reckon Bex monkeyed with the footage.'

Harriet wearily shook her head. 'You come back to me in a couple of years on the Island and we'll see how well you're doing in the cracking wise business.'

'With you and your arse-hats on the tail of that cursed purse, a concrete hole in the middle of nowhere is probably the safest place to be.'

'Hah! Out of the mouth of babes,' sighed Harriet. She raised a finger towards the camera and spun her digit around. The armoured door opened with the clack of multiple deadbolts pulling back. 'You just blew the only chance I was carrying for you. Guess you messed up *again*.'

Eleanor watched the woman leave, her heart thumping with anger. For a

moment, Eleanor considered throwing caution to the wind and rushing the rival squad leader. But the glint in the woman's eyes told Eleanor that the ex-cop was fully aware of what her prisoner was thinking. *She'd probably welcome the chance to beat me inside the cell.* A busman's holiday for her.

Eleanor's leather hood was finally pulled away from her head. The young woman had arrived at an airfield somewhere. No place she recognised, but she could smell the ocean's salt. *We're close to the coast.* An open hanger towered ahead, a large transport plane sitting outside with four swivel-mounted vertical take-off jets connected to each wing. The craft possessed the weird angular airframe of a modern stealth bomber. Aerodynamically unstable, requiring fly-by-wire to keep it in the air. So, this was the Vigil's answer to Con-Air. Sadly, this was likely to be the last glimpse of home Eleanor was going to get for a long time. A hatch had been left open towards the tail, a stair-ramp pushed up to the entrance. Her escort stood faceless in black ski-masks, armoured jackets and bulky Cav helmets with built-in tactical displays. As the guards shoved her closer, the plane's fuselage seemed to fade and turn transparent, revealing the other side of the airfield, building lights twinkling brightly in the cool evening air. Eleanor realised that was the advanced optical camouflage's electronic ink flowing across the airframe, erasing the plane from eyesight and complementing the plane's stealth profile. *Yeah, erasing the plane. Just like they're going to erase me from the world. What was it Dirty Harriet told me inside the cell? The Vigil would drop me in a hole and pull the hole up after me.*

The soldiers led her up the steps and into the aircraft. Inside the plane, there was little to give away its stealth capabilities - only the fact the wings weren't visible through the video-screen windows. Given the craft's interior resembled a high-end corporate jet rather than an aerial jail, Eleanor guessed the aircraft usually served as an airborne command centre, rather than prison transport. Her guards chained her into one of the seats and took the seats by her side. Given takeoff priority, the aircraft started taxiing around the airfield until it approached the main runway, then there was a thrum from outside as the main engines rotated into lift position.

One of the guards banged on the hatch they had used to enter the plane. A warning light blinked orange above the door. The soldier spoke in an unusually gruff, scratchy voice, as though he had a fifty-a-day cigarette addiction. 'This isn't shutting. Help me pull it shut before we lift.'

Grumbling, a couple of Eleanor's sentries left the seats next to her and went to add their weight to the task.

'Come on, throw your backs into it. We don't want this opening on us at a thousand feet.'

Outside, the engines' buildup continued as fan jets rotated faster.

Suddenly the door swung open and the guard who had called for help booted the two soldiers in the back, sending the escort tumbling, yelling, out of the door. Then the guard slammed the exit shut. He tossed his helmet onto a nearby chart table and banged on the cockpit's sealed anti-hijack door. When the door opened, Eleanor saw Sister Mee in the pilot's position, Sister Rae sitting in the copilot's and – even more shockingly – Bex Crawfield filling the navigator's position. The guard who had booted out the pair of soldiers onto the airstrip below pulled away his balaclava, revealing Alasdair's flushed features below. The soldier still sitting sentry next door to her peeled his black balaclava away. *Ian!*

Eleanor could hardly believe what she saw. *Of all the stupid . . .* 'What, was that your big-boy voice, Al?'

'No, it's my "We're getting out of here" voice.'

'Why?' shouted Eleanor, dazed by the sudden turn of events. 'It wasn't

enough that I get myself exiled to the Vigil's private Guantanamo Bay beach resort? You're all going to find yourself fitted with orange straightjackets for busting me free now, too.'

'Shut up and listen for once,' called Bex, their aircraft rising on four jets of flames, shuddering as two engines swivelled to forward thrust, before powering the transport away into the sky.

'This is your why,' said Alasdair. He waited for Ian to unlock Eleanor's chains. Then he pulled a tablet out of his backpack and turned the screen towards her. 'I cleaned this imagery up from your spectacles' cam footage.' Eleanor stared at the playback from her own glasses. It was the Aztec temple during the final cave-in, Diane clinging on for dear life as her handhold on the rock disintegrated, the cavern folding in on itself. Diane fell. The footage slowed to frame-by-frame analysis. Diane was struck by tumbling rocks, the limpness of her body indicated she was mercifully unconscious for her entombment. That was when Eleanor saw it. A shadow flashing through the air, emerging from one of the lower level tunnels exposed by the rupture, a silhouette leaping straight through the avalanche of soil and rock. The shadow collided with Diane mid-air, seized her, hit the exposed tunnel on the other side and rolled away clutching her comatose body.

Alasdair tapped the rolling silhouette, visible for a mere millisecond before the sea of falling soil filled in the rupture and blocked the view. 'Motion analysis pegs that as a demi-gog.'

Eleanor rubbed life back into her wrists where the chains had secured her. 'Why on earth would one of those monsters bother saving Diane?'

'We're high-value assets to the Reds,' said Alasdair. 'Same as the vampires are to us. They work hard to capture us, torture us, roll up our networks. Try to extract the locations of Vigil bases and safehouses, the identities of our staff. Whether agents have family members who can be kidnapped and used as leverage, so those fighting on our side can be turned.'

'The same nest who stole the coins captured Diane,' said Ian. 'That means wherever the Judas Purse is, it's also where Diane is being held and interrogated.'

Eleanor didn't know if the relief she was feeling was for her insane rescue, or for the fact she hadn't got Diane killed back inside the temple. *Yet*, a dark voice reminded her. *You haven't got her killed, yet.* 'And *this* is your plan? You're crazy. You have to show this video to the Vigil, beg them to deploy a heavy rescue force.'

Ian flashed Eleanor a grim look. 'We did. John told me that Diane's capture is regrettable, but the chances are she's already broken under interrogation, told the Reds everything and been thrown to the nest as supper. The director said he's too focused on saving humanity from the second Cuban Missile Crisis to devote resources to side-missions.'

'Old timers can get like that,' said Bex. 'So busy reliving their glory days they can't see the future clearly.'

Eleanor flashed the woman a distrustful stare. 'And how come you're here, California?'

'Harriet wasn't happy with us cutting and running on Agent O'Hara. We never leave a soldier behind - that's not an official rule, but like, it really should be. The boss told me to tell you that you need to decide if you're in the cracking heads business or the cracking wise business, and not to mess up this time.'

It's the trust business I'm having problems with. How very convenient Dirty Harriet sends you to help me out. Just like back in the Aztec's zombie Disneyland . . . and look how well that ended for us. 'So we're it? Just the six of us to save Diane?'

Sister Mee turned around in her pilot's seat. Eleanor caught a glimpse beyond the cockpit windows - they were skimming low over the sea now, well below radar tracking. 'Saving your friend's life is your job. My mission remains unchanged . . . dealing with the Judas Purse. Those blood-cursed coins cannot be allowed to remain in the Sidhe Antiqua's possession.'

'And I'm your best chance of finding the Judas Purse in time.'

'Precisely. We're flying towards the Yellow Sea region. As we approach closer, are your senses recovered enough to home in on where the coins are guarded?'

'If you're asking me if I'm mission-fit here, the answer is yes. I'll find your damn coins for you.'

'Good. The Black Pope has dispatched emissaries to the Moscow Patriarchate. Certain resources are being tasked to us from a military base inside Yakutsk.'

Certain resources? Eleanor wasn't certain she liked the ominous sound of that. Whatever was on its way, she doubted it was squirt guns filled with holy water blessed by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Sister Rae snorted with delight. 'Kind of military base that doesn't officially show up on any bleeding map.'

'Yeah, well, at least *you're* fully recovered, sister,' said Eleanor. 'I can see that. We going to be relying on Russian Special Forces for this gig?'

Sister Mee shook her head. 'You mean the Spetsnaz? No. Scutum Dei is deploying it's own elite force to the area . . . the Knights Solomon. Their presence will be more than adequate for our needs.'

Eleanor snorted. 'The *what?* Sounds like something out of a Monty Python movie.'

'You think?' said Sister Rae. 'Look, girlfriend, I don't know if the Knights Solomon give the bloodsuckers the willies, but I can tell you one thing, those troops bloody well scare the black bonnet right off of my noggin.'

Given that the ninja nun was basically a human chemical explosive perfectly willing to go Kamikaze should things go sideways for her and her fanatic friends, Eleanor wasn't sure if she should be glad the Black Pope's pet killers were on their side, or anxious that they could be counted as allies.

Sister Mee, it transpired, had found and disabled the plane's tracking beacon prior to takeoff. So as long as their aircraft remained in stealth mode, they could land in front the White House without the Secret Service shooting them down. Eleanor moved into Sister Rae's seat up in the cockpit, the better to play her part as a compass to hunt the coins. After the plane put the US East Coast's Urban Radar Zone behind them, their craft started climbing for height until they reached 50,000 feet. With all four engines manoeuvred into forward thrust configuration, their wings reconfigured for supersonic flight. The explosions of breaking the sound barrier sounded like yanked soda can tabs inside their insulated cabin. They accelerated north over Alaska and the polar ice cap, before navigating south-east, heading towards Northern China, drawn to the Judas Purse by Eleanor's instinct - even if it every iota of Eleanor's instinct screaming to head in the opposite direction and never stop flying. But the world was too small for them to escape what was

coming. There was no hidey-hole deep enough, no bolt hole distant enough. Eleanor's mind knew this, but the hammering heart clutched in a vice inside her chest told her to heed her fears. To heed her terror. All in all, an excellent way to be too distracted to admire the pole's impressive white wastes, the icebergs and snow sheets and a seemingly endless sea, followed by barren mountains where Genghis Khan's hordes had once swept aside the most advanced civilisation of their age. She stretched her legs for a few minutes, examining the Arctic survival gear and weapons Ian had packed into the plane's hold. Then Eleanor ate from a microwaved ration pack – lasagna with tomato that tasted too sweet to be natural – before settling into the cockpit again. The plane kept to its course, using stealth mode to carefully keep a healthy distance from the naval fleets patrolling the Asian coastline, dozens of air patrols roaming the skies from their carrier groups, both sides patiently waiting for the enemy to pull the trigger on the end of the world.

After a while, Eleanor began to feel the tug of sleep pulling at her eyelids. She tried to resist it and her head suddenly jerked up in response to find . . . *What?* Eleanor no longer sat inside the jet's cockpit. She stood in the centre of a sandy road, a handful of men and women tramping along the route in open leather sandals - travellers wearing simple robe-like clothes that ended above the knees, dyed orange, white and brown and held in place by rope-style belts. Eleanor blinked in astonishment. This was no dream - too vivid. *But it's daylight and we were flying into the night? Hot here, too. It should be the depths of winter in Asia.* Yet on this road, Eleanor could smell the juniper trees' pungent odour, taste the dust from the road, hear a braying from pack animals further down the road. The road wound its way across a rocky slope, cavities further up the rock lending the hillside the appearance of leering skull faces. Cries sounded from around the bend, wailing from a good few people. *Where am I?* Eleanor cautiously approached the sounds of human misery. *That isn't a healthy sound.* Nothing pleasant was dragging such a noise out of a crowd's collective throat. Her fellow travellers on the road didn't look Asian if she was any judge. *Am I on one of the mountains outside Teotihuacan? But how could I end up back in Mexico?*

A woman in a pale green robe came walking towards Eleanor, bearing a wooden pole with two pottery-like amphorae balanced on either end.

Eleanor tried to stop the woman in the dirt track. 'Where is this place? Where am I?

The peasant replied in a language Eleanor didn't recognise. Not Spanish, but a few seconds after the words were spoken, their meaning arrived with her. Eleanor touched her spectacles. No, it wasn't the computer inside the frames translating.

'Golgotha, lady. You are walking to Golgotha. This is no place for a fine woman to tarry.'

'You understand English? Wait, I don't know where Golgotha is? Are we in Mexico?'

But the traveller was striding away in the opposite direction.

Eleanor's glasses suddenly sprung to life, a warning scrolling across the lens. *Unidentified energy emission. Unidentified energy emission. Maximum scale superseded.*

'No kidding.' Eleanor muttered to herself. 'What the hell is going on here? Where's everyone else from the plane? How did I end up here?' She walked around the crest of the hill, gasping as she came across the source of the wailing. A small

crowd of people held their hands up beseechingly towards the air on the slopes below her. They were humming, praying, lamenting. And in front of them, a line of wooden crosses bearing the nailed bodies of human victims. 'Dear God - that's barbaric!' *What is this, a brutal punishment dished out by the drug cartels to informers?*

That was when Eleanor saw them. Soldiers behind the wooden crosses, standing straight and watchful, clutching spears. *It can't be!* They wore a uniform she recognised - but only from watching too many TV episodes of *Spartacus: Blood and Sand*. The Roman Legion. *This ain't Mexico. This ain't even Kansas or Oz!*

Someone shoved his way through the crowd of mourners, scrambling up the slope and stopping, swaying in front of Eleanor as he surveyed the light traffic along the track. He might have been a handsome man once, bearded with tanned sharp aquiline features. But now he appeared pale and ill, his face's features swollen as though he was running a fever,

The man glanced desperately at Eleanor. 'He should have fought them. Fought back. He was meant to destroy the Romans! I was promised!'

Eleanor glanced down at the bulging cloth money bag clutched in the man's fingers, waves of pain emanating from it making her recoil. *The purse, the coins!*

'You have to forgive me. I was promised!' The man shouted before sprinting off down the road.

Judas Iscariot. No. This can't be real. And why should he ask me to forgive him? This can't be happening.

And if that was Judas, then one of the crucified over there was . . . 'No. No, this can't possibly be real!' One of the crosses stood higher than the others, the figure hanging there familiar to her from a hundred altars.

Two old men followed Judas out of the crowd to watch him flee the execution. 'Those coins are cursed. Blood money for a fool.'

'Perhaps the blood is on us all, Luke.'

Eleanor looked up at the sky. It was darkening. A solar eclipse appeared to be under way. 'Can I see him?'

'You do not belong here. He doesn't want you to see him like this. Go home, daughter.'

'It is finished,' said Luke.

Eleanor grabbed the front of the man's white robe. 'I want to *help*.'

'It is good to help, daughter. But for you, it must be another time.'

The pain inside Eleanor's head swelled and the two men clutched her as she stumbled and fell. *Those damn coins.* She touched her nostrils with her fingers, drawing them back stained crimson. *A nosebleed.* The combat glasses flashed an alert status again. *Unidentified energy emission. Unidentified energy emission. Maximum scale superseded.* She shut her eyes. This pain was like ice daggers stabbed into her mind. Eleanor opened her eyes. She was back on the floor of the cockpit, Sister Mee and Ian kneeling by her side. The senior nun wiped blood away from Eleanor's nose with a white cloth. A first aid kit sat open on the deck behind her.

Unidentified energy reading nullified, the words scrolled across Eleanor's specs. *Safe limits restored.*

'What - happened?' coughed Eleanor.

'You tell me,' said Ian. 'You collapsed out of your chair. Then all our flight deck instruments started going nuts like we were flying over the Bermuda Triangle

or something.'

'I was concerned we had flown into an EMP blast,' said Sister Mee. 'That nuclear missiles had begun detonating across the globe.'

'But—'

Ian shook his head. 'No, the U.S. fleet is still at high alert, but there're no nukes flying yet.'

'I think it's because we're following the coins,' said Eleanor. 'The Judas Purse is trying to stop me.' *And maybe there's another power intervening to make sure we still have a fighting chance.*

'You're well enough to track the coins down?' asked Sister Mee.

'Do we have a choice?'

Sister Mee squeezed Eleanor's shoulder and helped her back into the co-pilot's position. Eleanor's head still throbbed, but she ignored it. Their aircraft powered ahead, Eleanor doing her damndest impression of a homing pigeon; even if she was heading for a home her gut told her to avoid at all costs. They flew until the aching blackness of the Judas Purse grew all-consuming.

'The coins are close,' said Eleanor, finally. 'Can't you feel them pulsing below us? Is it really just me?'

'Yeah,' it's all about you,' said Bex, glancing out of the cockpit window. She switched the view on the navigation screen, a GPS marker flashing their position on the map's scrolling landscape. 'That's North Korea down there. We're not far inland from the coast. This region is called *Kilchu*.'

'North Korea. Why am I not surprised?' said Sister Mee. 'The Reds have subverted the entire benighted land for two centuries. A corrupt ruling family with all the mafia politics that accompany a hereditary dynasty. A closed society. Peasants disappeared at the click of any official's fingers, never to be seen again. The entire nation is practically a country-sized canteen for the vampires and their foul servants.'

Bex stared out of the cockpit. 'The landscape's dark below. Like, no lights. No towns.'

'The North Koreans don't generate enough electricity to keep their street lamps and buildings lit after nightfall. Most cities run black after sundown,' said Ian. He called Alasdair over. 'Find out exactly what's down there. Use every database we have taps for, even if we have to burn our feeds tunnelling in - NSA, the Pentagon, the MSS.'

'Been a while since I hacked into the Ministry of State Security,' mused Alasdair. 'I wonder if the Chinese ever dug my last worm out from their mainframe?' Alasdair sounded as if he was joking, but Eleanor could hear the stained weight behind his words. How little time Diane had left before she finally broke and was tossed to the monsters as an afterthought... as an after-dinner snack. No, it didn't take long for Alasdair to uncover what they needed, even with the relative lag in the aircraft's satellite connectivity. He completed his hack, then skim-read the fruits of the raid. 'There's an irony for you. Most of what the Chinese hold on Kilchu came from breaking into U.S. government servers. The Pentagon keeps a set of Ultra-level classified files on this zone. Seems the North Koreans constructed their version of the NORAD Cheyenne Mountain Complex below Kilchu back in the nineties. A secret underground city purpose-built to keep safe the regime's highest-

ranking members. The North Koreans think we don't know about the place, but the Pentagon's off-the-books stealth station tracked its construction from orbit.'

'What, we have a secret space station up there and nobody thought to send me the memo?' asked Eleanor.

'A hardened subterranean city? Kilchu sounds like the perfect place to survive the Third World War,' observed Ian.

Eleanor tapped the GPS screen. 'Sure it is. You maybe know someone looking to start a major nuclear conflict? I'm willing to bet this Party Palace contains electricity, hot water and every other mod-con for the ruling elite.'

'I believe we have successfully located their nest,' agreed Sister Mee. 'I'll place us in a holding pattern. Give the Knights Solomon time to drop into position.'

'How near are they?' asked Alasdair, clearly trying to suppress his panic over any delay to their rescue.

Sister Mee pointed out of the cockpit. Eleanor just caught the shimmer of electronic ink across a fuselage, masking the giant jump jet pulling ahead of their plane. 'Agent, they've been ghosting above us for the last two hours.'

The nun settled their stolen transport down outside a forested area, every treetop streaked with snow. Eleanor caught no glimpse of the city on the way down; but then, that was probably the point of building a secret bunker complex in the first place. They dressed in warm winter clothing for the environment outside, selected weapons, made sure their specs held the download for the Korean language, then exited via a ramp at the back of the aircraft. The group dispersed in a tight military pattern, checking for any sign their uninvited arrival had been spotted by the locals. There were none. All was silent. Eleanor noted their plane's fuselage had turned white, snowflakes drifting from the sky spattering the camouflage as its digital skin compensated for the snowfall. She noted the accompanying troop transporter was larger than their jet, before its active matrix camouflage also slowly adjusted to blend in with the winter landscape. Landing first, its troops had disembarked before them. Eleanor carefully picked her way up a low rocky slope and before they reached its top, spotting where the Knights Solomon had taken up position. Figures knelt in a line spread out along the incline. They wore white cloaks with a small red cross marked on the spine, crouching silently as though meditating or praying. Sentinels guarding this cold landscape. As she drew closer, she noticed that their capes concealed camouflage jackets in Arctic warfare pattern and a veritable armoury of heavy machine guns, rifles, pistols and grenades. A mixture of male and female soldiers among the company. Despite the difference in their faces — obviously a mixture of nationalities — the soldiers all shared a common cast; big, heavy-set and grim, like a hard-faced weight-lifting team arrived visiting for the North Korean Olympics.

Eleanor walked up to the nearest group of the Black Pope's elite troops. 'We're heading in that direction. You coming with?'

None of them bothered to reply to her question; as silent as menhirs inside an ancient standing stone circle.

Well, that's just plain rude. Eleanor turned to Sister Mee. 'They don't say much, do they?'

'Their order has taken a vow of silence,' explained Sister Mee. One of the force turned and his fingers flickered using sign language. Sister Mee replied with a few

quick gestures.

'What did he say?' asked Eleanor.

'Nothing you want to hear,' said Sister Mee.

Not a compliment, then. They must watch us blundering around in the snow and think it's amateur hour here.

Ian, Bex, Alasdair and Sister Rae joined the rest of the group at the top of the slope.

The lens of Eleanor's combat specs misted up. She removed the pair and rubbed them clear. 'Why aren't these goons moving forward, sister?'

'The Knights Solomon are not here to help us fight our way into the Kilchu complex,' said Sister Mee, regretfully. 'They're here to make sure nobody gets out of the city.'

There's a big "but" left unsaid somewhere in there. 'And why the heck would they do that?'

'The knights are waiting for the GOAB,' said Sister Mee. 'There's a modified Antonov An-225 in the stratosphere and that's what the plane is flying down here.'

'The GOAB? I thought that was an urban legend,' said Alasdair, kneeling in the snow, examining the landscape with a pair of night-vision binoculars.

'No, it exists. They only built the one, but it certainly exists.'

'What the hell are you two talking about?' asked Eleanor.

Alasdair pointed up to the clouds, speaking in hushed tones as though he was discussing the big guy himself. 'GOAB - it stands for *Giga-scale Ordnance Air Blast* bomb. Nicknamed the "Grandmother of All Bombs" inside the Kremlin. Five hundred tonnes of death, the largest non-nuclear conventional explosive ever constructed.'

'Oh, we'd gladly nuke this whole region,' said Sister Mee. 'Nuke Kilchu five times over. But with most the world's atomic-tipped cruise missiles currently sailing up-and-down the coast with safeties off, we can't risk an unannounced radiation flash triggering the Red's war for them.'

'And this big-ass Russian bomb will do the job?' asked Ian. 'Destroy the Judas Purse, even inside their hidden bunker city?'

'The trick won't be the Judas Purse surviving, it will *us* surviving,' sighed Sister Mee.

Alasdair slipped his binoculars away. 'It's a thermobaric weapon. The bomb will generate a two-mile blast radius of total destruction, causing a 9.7 earthquake on the moment magnitude scale. It won't just smash the bunker complex, it will liquefy the very bedrock. I presume that's the cover story, here? You're going to cause the world's largest earthquake and blame the devastation on the Amurian tectonic plates slipping.'

'Quite so. You have less than two hours to locate Diane, free her and escape the blast radius,' said Sister Mee. 'The bomb is en route and its detonation cannot be called off or cancelled. Not if his Holiness the Black Pope himself was inside Kilchu sipping tea with the President of Russia and the leaders of the G8 serving sandwiches. Come what may, the coins and this region of North Korea will be blown all the way back to hell.'

'So glad we brought you along,' muttered Eleanor.

'Biggest bomb ever,' laughed Sister Rae. 'Knights Solomon on the ground to

make sure nothing escapes alive. You mug. It's like Christmas come early out here.'

'Your speechless killers will let us pass back through their execution zone, though?' asked Bex.

'You're half-dead already, ain't you? What you care?' said the British nun.

'Like, I heal fast, but not *that* fast,' muttered Bex.

'She's half alive and I'm hundred percent kicking,' said Eleanor. 'Not to mention Diane O'Hara trapped in Redsville across there.'

'Let's have a pop at the Reds, then,' said Sister Rae. 'Better than standing out here in the cold, waiting for Jing-Jong-Merrily-on-High and his wicked vampire overlords to try to scarper away with the coins.'

Yeah, better than that, thought Eleanor. *But not by much.*

'Our orders are to remain on post here,' pointed out Sister Mee, 'and ensure the Knights Solomon maintain the perimeter's integrity.'

Sister Rae indicated the AX50 long guns carefully being set up in the snow on snipers' tripod mounts by the hulking soldiers. 'Doesn't need two of us for babysitting. And I never was very good at blindly taking orders.'

Sister Mee shook her head, sadly. 'No, you never were. Go with God, sister.'

The other nun clicked back the safety on her machine pistol. 'Going with God, but dispatching a few filthy rascals back to Hell where they belong.'

Sister Mee tapped her watch. 'Time is not your friend. Move quickly.'

They needed no further urging. Alasdair used a ground penetrating radar device to lead them down the slopes and through the forest in the valley below until they came to the top of a concealed air-vent. It looked like a natural outcrop of rock rising between a stand of trees. On closer inspection, the icy outcrop transpired to be a cylinder of moss-covered moulded concrete, camouflaged brown and green to blend into the landscape. When Eleanor placed her head over the grille protecting the top she felt a flow of warm air from below, heard the distant hum of fans carrying away stale air.

'This is our best bet to break inside unopposed,' said Alasdair. 'There's a phony village beyond this forest called Musudan-ri. Most of its farms and barns are fake - they're actually storage buildings, garages and security checkpoints leading down into the complex.'

Eleanor inspected the metal grille. 'Did your hacked Chinese spy files give any indication of how large their bunker city is?'

Alasdair raised out his hand and gave it an uncertain flutter. 'Big enough, I reckon.'

'So what's the grand strategy here, then, girls?' asked Sister Rae. 'We grab any randoms we chance across in the corridors, put a bullet in their heads one-by-one until someone blabs the location of Agent O'Hara's interrogation facility?'

'That's a lousy plan,' said Eleanor.

'It's bloody simple, though. Simple works. Let's not over-complicate things, eh?'

'I like the sound of it,' said Bex, approvingly. 'It's gnarly.'

'Well, you can take a lot more damage than the rest of us,' said Ian.

'Damn straight,' agreed Eleanor.

'You make it sound like a bad thing,' Bex sounded proud. She did a little pirouette in the snow. 'With the Bexster, almost everything is a flesh wound!'

Eleanor winced to herself. *The Bexster, give me a break.*

'We don't need to shoot the staff,' said Alasdair. He worked a counter-measures unit through the grille to deactivate the alarms protecting the vent. 'I copied Diane's RFID code from the Vault's security systems.'

'Her *what* code?' asked Eleanor.

'There's a 0.05mm-sized short range encrypted radio-frequency identification chip injected into the calf muscles of Diane's left leg. It's passive, no energy source, but the Vault's sensors can ping it and get a reply. It's how we know you're *you* inside New York Central, and not some shape-changing Red or one of the other Sidhe Antiqua races trying to infiltrate the Vigil.'

'What, you mean you chipped me *too* like I was no better than a stray dog?'

'You. Her. Me. Your RFID chip is no larger than a speck of dust,' said Alasdair. 'Undetectable even under a full body examination. What did you think all that prodding and poking was about back in medical?'

'I don't know. Maybe keeping me healthy and alive after surviving the bite? Maybe not violating most of my constitutional rights?'

'I'm sure you were given flu jabs, too. But the point is, Diane will be *real* glad she got a chip. We can't get a read on her location from up here with the bedrock blocking the signal. But once we're inside the city proper, we'll be able to ping Diane's RFID and home in on her location.'

Ian yanked the ventilation grille away from the concrete with Eleanor's help. They both peered down the shaft.

'It's narrow,' said Ian. 'We can climb down, but we'll need to stow our rifles up here to squeeze through.'

'Oh, that's just bleeding super,' said Sister Rae, in a voice that indicated it was anything but.

'You'll have your moly-sword,' said Ian. 'And subterfuge will serve us better than a full-on commando assault. Once we're in the city, just act like you belong there.'

'I really don't,' said Sister Rae, but she broke out the grappling gear from her backpack all the same.

It's going to be a long climb, Eleanor sighed to herself.

It seemed to take an age to descend through the ventilation shaft into the North Korean bunker. Every second lost deactivating sensors and alarms, halting fans and using their grappling equipment, time they didn't have to spare. But eventually, the party touched bottom. Ian kicked out a grille and the group crawled out into an antiseptically clean white corridor with coloured markings along the wall that could have belonged to a slightly dated hospital. Thankfully, there was no sign of any of the bunker's staff, here. Eleanor examined a sign painted in Korean script along the wall, her glasses translating the message into English. *Level Five. Route 34B. Security Clearance Eight+*. It left her none the wiser.

Shortly after Eleanor emerged in the bunker, her spectacles displayed a red icon next to the letters GM in the corner of her field of view. 'Anyone else getting this? What, there's an army of genetically modified mutants down here?'

Alasdair chipped in. I have it too. GM means Geiger-Müller reading, as in Geiger counter. It's an abnormal rads warning. Abnormal, but not dangerous at this level. Must be how the North Koreans are powering their city: a small-scale nuclear reactor. Makes sense. They could survive off-grid for seventy years down without needing to truck in extra fuel.'

'Won't blasting their reactor to pieces release a mushroom cloud and trigger a shooting war off the coast?'

'That's not how nuclear piles work,' said Alasdair. 'When the GOAB detonates, what isn't disintegrated or liquefied will be left buried in a very deep but only mildly radioactive grave.'

'That's got to be worth seeing,' said Sister Rae, 'but not up close, eh?'

'Which way?' asked Ian.

Alasdair consulted his scanner. 'The signal is faint bordering on non-existent; that's an issue with short range transmitters.'

'So, which way . . .?'

Alasdair pointed down one of the corridors. 'That direction I think.'

Eleanor sniffed the air, trying to pick up any trace of Diane's scent. She winced as a bolt of agony struck her between the ears and attempted to run her brain through a mangle.

Ian steadied her. 'Are you alright? Suffering from increased radiation?'

'No, it's the Judas Purse again. Those antique Roman coins are playing some really bad Disco inside my skull every time I reach out to try to track Diane.'

Eleanor closed her eyes for a second. She was being battered by pulses; far worse now than when she had stood inside the Aztec temple. Attempting to locate Diane was like standing in the middle of a hurricane trying to pick up the sound of a distant radio. She stopped trying and they pushed on, passing through an area filled with steel tanks and pipes that were probably part of the air recycling system. They didn't encounter anyone, but occasionally they heard voices drifting down the corridors. In one section of the complex they passed, a chamber sealed off by a transparent wall. On the other side of the glass lay ranks of tables, hundreds of human bodies wearing white gowns stretched out across cots, caught in a web of drips, feeds and beeping life support monitors. Sedated, but alive. Just.

'Well, at least we're in the right place,' said Alasdair, indicating the comatose bodies on the other side of the glass. 'This is one of the Reds' food supplies stores.'

'It's horrible,' said Eleanor, disgusted. 'Can we help them escape?'

Ian shook his head sadly. 'This is the standard set-up inside every nest we've rolled up. Even if we tore those prisoners off their drips, they'll be in no condition to escape for days. Most of them have been kept in medical comas for months, maybe years. Half of those healthy enough to survive the reawakening process will be left psychotic from their time in captivity.'

'Casualties of war, either way,' snarled Sister Rae. 'Poor flipping bleeders.'

Eleanor stared through the glass. *A warehouse of the dead.* 'I wish—'

'Me too,' said Ian. 'But not here, not today.'

Yeah, not today. So, how many other innocents will die down here, today? Cleaners and maintenance staff, locals forced to work inside the bunker city with not an iota of choice in the matter. Accept the job, rather than the one-way ride to a concentration camp if they refused. And all Eleanor could do was make sure Diane wasn't added to the butcher's bill.

They rounded a corner and Alasdair slowed, tapping the side of his tracking unit. 'That's weird . . . ?'

'What is?' asked Eleanor.

Alasdair sounded worried. 'Now we're getting nearer to Diane, I'm picking up a Doppler effect from her chip.'

'Like the kind of effect you might get if said chip was shifting around in the gut of a demi-gog?' asked Bex.

Eleanor felt a flare of anger at the woman's lack of tact. 'Oh, that's nice.'

'Only saying what everyone here must be thinking.'

'Actually, I don't know what this is,' said Alasdair, confused.

'Let's just track Diane's signal to source,' said Ian. 'We'll worry about what we do or don't find after we arrive where Diane is being held.'

Eleanor checked her watch. Time was draining away from them. Only a little over an hour left to break Diane free and escape the deadly blast radius. Crossing the corridors they passed a door containing a small porthole-sized window. Eleanor peered through. On the other side was what looked to be a cloakroom, dozens of silver suits hanging from hooks with transparent box-like hoods resting on the shelves above.

'We must have broken in close to the reactor,' said Alasdair, glancing inside. 'Those are power plant workers' radiation suits.'

'We can use the uniforms,' said Ian. 'They'll make us look a lot less like tourists.'

Bex appeared uncertain. 'Silver is the new black?'

'To hell with fashion sense. Staff worried about rad leaks won't be too keen to stop us for a chat,' said Alasdair.

'I guess that's totally rad,' said Bex.

'And you never exactly had much fashion sense back in the world, anyway,' teased Eleanor.

Ian shrugged. 'Thanks for pointing that out, but you're the one wearing an orange boiler suit under your parka.'

'You got me there, Mickey J.'

They tried the door and finding it unlocked, entered, then donned the silver suits, pulling them on over their clothes. Bex was, at least, right about one thing . . . they weren't going to win any fashion awards inside the garb. They resembled

extras from a cheap sixties sci-fi movie. Each chest bore a black bar-code strip rather than a fashion house's logo. Eleanor felt hot and uncomfortable, her vision restricted by the hood-like helmet - albeit suitably camouflaged for a bunker city designed to survive World War Three. *Of course, if our next problem is surviving a full-scale nuclear conflict, then we'll have failed in more than just rescuing Diane.* Alasdair lifted a spare suit off the rack for Diane to use when they freed her.

After leaving the suiting area they arrived at a busier section of the bunker city, a two-lane tunnel with pedestrian walkways on either side, electric carts humming along its roadway in a variety of configurations - vehicles with plastic bucket seats holding passengers, others resembling the kind of specialist works vehicles you might find rumbling down mine passages or crossing airfields. To access the tunnel they had to pass a checkpoint with a cluster of bored guards seated behind a security station. The soldiers chain-smoked cigarettes while a laptop sat open on their worktop, a bootleg DVD in its drive playing a Chinese fantasy movie. A colourful pair of warriors were literally running over treetops, exchanging fierce flurries of sword cuts between each other.

One of the guards grunted, halted the group and picked up a bar-code scanner. He ran it across the line on Ian's chest, then scanned the others in the group, leaving Bex and Eleanor until last. The soldier scrutinised the results on his screen, then barked again in Korean. Everything these people said sounded angry and hostile.

Eleanor's specs translated. 'Where are you going, engineer?' Her spectacle's whispered a reply in Korean into her ear-buds while displaying the English meaning across her lens. *A potential leak. We need to inspect the cooling pipes.*

Ian had obviously received the same phrase. "Jamjaejeog in nuchul. Ulineun paipeu leul geomsa haeya," he squawked, trying to inject the same level of distemper into his words.

'Hah.' The guard made a dismissive gurgle which needed little translation, adjusted his loose-fitting khaki uniform and waved them away, his eyes already drifting back to the medieval swordsmen dancing above the forest. Eleanor hoped the soldier had a decent collection of films. Should war break out, he was going to be stuck underground for a very long time - unless the Reds ran out of their supply of unwilling blood donors first.

Out on the tunnel system's walkway, the party chanced across a motor pool recessed in a cavernous garage. Dozens of transports to choose from. After investigating, it transpired the vehicles ran with electric engines and button-start ignitions. No hot-wiring required. So they borrowed something that resembled a stretch golf cart with five seats on either side, Ian driving it whining and jouncing through the subterranean two-lane roadway while Alasdair called out directions, following the pulses - ever stronger - towards Diane's location.

'We need to step it up,' called Eleanor, checking the time. 'This city won't exist in an hour.'

'I've seen faster bloody milk floats,' agreed the nun.

'We'll get her out in time,' insisted Ian, as if just saying it would make it true.

Alasdair's portable scanner led them down a side-tunnel and a long corridor which terminated in a steel door. Red Korean characters stencilled on the door translated as "Political Reeducation Holding Centre Five". If that meant what Eleanor thought it did, then they had arrived at the right place inside the complex.

Eleanor blinked as they pushed open the vault-like door, entering the centre. It looked less like a prison and more like an animal rescue centre; cages constructed of toughened transparent glass and racked on multiple storeys inside a warehouse-sized cavern. Less like prisoners, more like zoo exhibits.

'That's a lot of reeducating,' said Eleanor, her eyes running across hundreds of transparent cells.

'Yeah,' said Bex. 'Like semaphore year for battery hens.'

Angry shouts drew Eleanor's gaze to a guard post where three heavy-set warders emerged, arms furiously waving at the "engineers". *Visiting rights obviously aren't a priority, here.* Sister Rae strode towards the guards, raising both gloved hands placatingly. As she got closer she pulled her box-like hood off her head and tossed it at the nearest man. The guard caught the helmet and stared in surprise at the sister as she triggered her moly-sword, stepped forward and gutted the soldier, swinging the blade around her head in a high arc to slice out the throats of the other two thugs. All three tumbled dead to the floor. Her intricate swordwork had been near perfect. Less than a second to strike down three lives.

'Well, those muppets weren't going to let us just walk out with your chum, were they?' said the nun, cutting Ian's protests short. She patted down the corpses, searching for key cards to open the cells. Sister Rae found what she was looking for and tossed the key-chain to Ian. 'Move it, Yankee-doodle!'

Ian and Alasdair clambered up the stairs, heading towards the first level of cells. Ian turned to the rest of the team. 'Bex, cover the entrance into the prison. Anyone enters, you chop them into pieces. The rest of you spread out and check the cells for Diane.'

Luckily, there weren't many prisoners held inside the complex - this place was obviously intended for use under full occupancy when the entire regime and their entourage of countless thousands were sheltering out the worst of a nuclear winter. They found Diane stretched limp on a cot inside a glass cell on the second level. The team clustered on the gantry until they unlocked the door. It's transparent door slid open with a touch of the key-card on the lock plate. Alasdair practically fell inside, rolling the agent's body over on her plastic mattress, desperately searching for signs of life.

'Diane?'

'I had faith,' spluttered Diane, bruised eyelids flickering open. The young agent looked lucky to still be alive, her eyelids heavy, weariness etched across every line of her face as though she had aged a decade in captivity. Eleanor suspected that few of the woman's injuries had been sustained escaping entombment in the Aztec temple. Only sleep deprivation mixed with truth drugs, beatings and physical torture could do that to a body; even a form as resilient as someone who had survived the Cure.

Alasdair held Diane as tight as he dared. 'You were never lacking in that department.'

'No,' said Diane. 'I had faith *you* would come for me. That you would never give up on me.'

'Of course, I would never give up on you,' said Alasdair, 'not if I lived to be a thousand. We need to leave fast. Do you think you can walk a little? We've parked an electric cart outside the prison.'

'I can't even feel my legs.' Diane gestured towards an intravenous drip in the corner, rubber pipes coiling out through a tiny hole in the clear ceiling. 'They've had me wired up to that filth for my stay here.'

Alasdair scooped the woman up in his arms. 'We'll get you into a radiation suit. If anyone stops us on the way out, I'll tell them you were injured in a reactor accident and we're driving you to decontamination.'

Bex coughed from just outside the cell. 'You're so going to have a problem with that!'

Eleanor turned. Bex held her hands high in the air, the moly-blade still clutched in her right hand. The steel gantry outside the cell stood crowded on either side by a small legion of demi-gogs clutching rifles and machine guns, weapons raised and pointed towards the cell and the agents inside.

Eleanor's fingers twitched, reading her moly-sword to decapitate Bex. *I can slay you before the demi-gogs gun us down.* 'Bitch! You called these monsters down on us.'

'I wouldn't try gutting Agent Crawfield,' growled a familiar voice. The demi-gogs moved aside and a figure stepped out from the Reds' ranks. *No, that's impossible!* Guy Drew flourished an RFID scanner. 'You'd be slicing up the wrong woman. You weren't the only ones to copy the team's chip codes from New York Central. Lordy, but you have to love the Vault's security system!'

Ian swayed on his feet in shock. 'Guy — but you — you were blown to bits trying to defuse the bomb?'

The old man shrugged. 'Heck, I didn't have enough time to start slicing wires and praying for the best. Just long enough to sprint out of the tunnel and grab the Judas Purse, though. After that, I had the Reds to help me avoid the temple cave-in, same as Agent O'Hara here. Although the Reds had slightly different motives for saving my ass.'

Eleanor couldn't believe her own eyes. This was the cause of Alasdair's Doppler signals while tracking down Diane. Another chip faintly answering the pulses, a chip they had never counted on broadcasting inside the city. 'You? *You* were the traitor all along?'

'Only doing what I needed to do to survive, kid. Retract your blades and throw your swords down to the floor.'

Eleanor stared at the ranks of demi-gogs, weapons aimed at the team, the creatures converted and hungry, itching for a chance to feed on them. The team could go down swinging, but they'd go down all the same. Bex angrily tossed her blade to the floor, followed by the rest of the group. Eleanor reluctantly relinquished her sword too. Sister Rae yelped as one of the demi-gogs stepped back from her, withdrawing a syringe it had used to inject the nun's neck.

'A little something to ensure you don't go Kamikaze on us,' said Guy. 'The chemical trigger for those nasty liquid explosives inside you is just urine now.'

The nun glared with hatred towards Guy. 'I don't need my explosives to murder you. I'll bloody snap your neck for this, you turncoat.'

'Sure you will, sis. Just waiting for a chance to meet the nest's Top Cat, intending to blow yourself and the big boss to bits, right? Well, you'll get your chance to meet the Master of Masters. He's curious to see who it is stupid enough to think they can break into his city and steal the Judas Purse out from under his nose. He's grown pretty attached to the coins. Some might say a little too attached.'

Eleanor felt a brief shock of realisation. The Reds hadn't cottoned on yet to the Grandmother of all Bombs about to be dropped on their ass. Guy believed Diane was a sideshow to the team's real mission: stealing back the coins from the damn vampires. She glanced at Ian and he met her eyes. *No, we're not saying anything about the bomb, are we?* No chance for the Reds to escape from the city. This might be the team's tomb, Eleanor's tomb, but it would also mean the end of the Judas Purse and the Reds' ability to super-charge their scheme to halt human civilisation's ascendance.

'How did you jokers even track the coins here?' Guy swung his pistol at Eleanor. 'Let me guess, your migraines, right? I always knew there was something hinky about you and your powers. That cock-and-bull story you fed us about what really went down in the back of the Keeper's store.'

'Go to hell,' spat Eleanor.

'Yeah, well your headaches are going to get a lot worse. You've piqued the curiosity of the Master of Masters. That's not a healthy place to find yourself.'

'Why?' cried Ian. 'Why - what made you go over to the Reds?'

'You live long enough and a little of the Reds' immortal worldview begins to rub off on you,' said Guy. 'People stop looking like people and start resembling mayflies. Here today, gone tomorrow. You see the same mistakes being made over and over again and can't do anything to stop 'em. Boom, bust, then boom again. War after futile war, all the violent monkeys tearing each apart for a little extra territory and the bragging rights of calling themselves head ape. The Reds want a return to the feudal system? We're practically handing that to the vampires on a plate anyway. A fraction of one percent of the population grabbing ninety-nine percent of the world's wealth. Computers and robots stealing the last remaining work and making the rich even richer, while everyone else is left to fester and fight over the scraps of the world's dwindling resources like a plague of locusts. Our population swelling beyond all sane limits, just waiting for a random strain of swine flu to mutate strong enough to make us extinct. You know the only real difference between the Reds and the humans feeding off our people? Under the vampires' rule, they'll still be an Earth left in a couple of centuries' time. Not a greenhouse hellhole like Venus or a dead planet like Mars. Because that's the only legacy our grandchildren were getting from us.'

Eleanor could hardly believe what she was hearing. Guy wasn't telling them the true reason for his betrayal, he couldn't be - she could feel the lie in her bones. *He's lying, he has to be. What we're doing in the Vigil has to mean something. Because if it doesn't, then they might as well all be better off dead.*

'Like, you've lost it,' said Bex, 'You're totally psyched, old man.'

Guy indicated the ranks of armed demi-gogs surrounding them. 'Nope, Agent Crawfield. Right now, I reckon *you're* the ones who have lost it.' He waved his pistol barrel down the corridor. 'Let's find out by how much, shall we, kids.'

Eleanor and the others were marched through the bunker city, ending up in a massive factory hall stripped of its production line and given faux-homeliness by scattering expensive carpets, rugs, tapestries, flags and even an intricate wooden

throne, although the latter was no medieval antique, not if the German eagles and swastikas carved into the oak were any indication. They team were dragged into the chamber down a sweeping set of stairs, a small legion of vampires and demi-gogs at their rear, all hissing how much they would enjoy feasting on the agents. It wasn't much consolation to Eleanor to know she would probably be incinerated long before it came to that. Eleanor couldn't see the Judas Purse, but she guessed from the hammering inside her skull that the cursed coins were somewhere here. And in the centre of the chamber, waiting behind a large desk, the creature who no doubt sat on that throne, trying it out for size every now and then. Portly, pale-faced and pallid. He looked like a cop close to retirement who had gone to seed on the job.

'What is this, a garage sale of Nazi regalia?' quipped Eleanor. 'I'm not buying.'

The vampire rose up from behind his desk. 'How fortunate, then, that I am not selling. You stand in the presence of Gebhard Truchsess von Waldburg, although I have worn so many other names throughout history. I was private secretary to the Fuhrer, once, hence my sentimental attachment to our glorious past.'

Yeah, you strike me as the sentimental type. 'How about asshole?' said Eleanor. 'You wore that name?'

'Ah, the freshness of youth,' sneered von Waldburg. 'Young, stupid and naive. Stupid enough to think you can break inside *my* realm and steal *my* coins.'

'Well, when you're passing through Mordor . . .' said Sister Rae. 'Nicking the Precious and poking you in your evil sodding eye seemed like a stand-up plan at the time.'

'On your knees!' yelled one of their demi-gog guards. 'You befoul the presence of the Master of Masters!' A flurry of blows pistol-whipped the team down onto the chamber's hard concrete floor.

'That's better. So those who are last now will be first, eh, sister? The whole world shall soon kneel before me - at least, the few among the herd I permit to survive their long overdue culling.' The Master of Masters pressed a button on his desk and a section of the wall retracted, revealing a glass-walled chamber with a desert vista on the other side. But it wasn't the desert that grabbed Eleanor's attention. It was the truck-sized ants straining up towards the viewing gallery, antennae twitching as their huge razor-sharp mandibles attempted to crack the armoured glass. 'Let us see if you still think yours is such a fine plan after you have been properly introduced to my pets. Poor beasts. They haven't fed for the longest time. My fault, alas, so preoccupied have I become prodding and poking China and America towards a final conflict.'

'You won't spark another world war,' cried Diane. 'We're better than that, now.'

'Ah, the other little God-botherer speaks. Well, I suppose if we had cut out your tongue, Agent O'Hara, your interrogation would have proved more work for us. Always placing your faith in all the wrong things. Your pathetic race will never outgrow war, poverty and pestilence. The last man to break inside the Nazi base at Antarctica and steal one of the Judas coins is here now working for me. What does that tell you about human nature?'

'That you'd be better off hiding your skanky ass under the polar ice?' said Eleanor.

‘Hollow threats. Even your own agency doesn’t wish you alive anymore,’ smiled von Waldburg without a trace of warmth. ‘Mister Drew has been kind enough to keep on monitoring the Vigil’s communications for us. You idiots have lethal-force arrest warrants issued against you by your organisation - a wise move when dealing with rogue abominations. Your last ditch presence here isn’t even an officially sanctioned Vigil mission, is it?’

‘Yeah, I’d say you’re all well and truly off the reservation,’ noted Guy.

‘Spoken like a true cowboy.’ Von Waldburg paced behind his desk. ‘What little power you abominations possess has been stolen from the Sidhe Antiqua, from my kin. Your cure, your high science and your filthy half-breed kind are about to be erased from history. Left as an unsung and unmissed footnote. All that will remain will be the hunters, our prey and the herd’s terror. Back to business as normal.’ A section of the steel desk slid open and the Reds’ ruler lifted out a casket. The same wooden chest Eleanor had glimpsed inside the Aztec temple. ‘This is as close as you fools will get to fulfilling your goal.’

As the chest emerged, Eleanor fell screaming to her knees, pain inside her skull dialled up to a synapse-shattering agony.

‘Fascinating,’ laughed the Master of Masters. ‘I have never heard of such a poisonous reaction to the coins.’ He glanced to the top of the stairs as another Red appeared. It was the female vampire who had fought them at the Swiss museum, a young woman walking by her side. ‘Figchen. Just in time, as always. Your sly double agent has served me up another little gift. A team of Vigil outcasts arrogant enough to think that they could steal my exquisite prize away from me.’ He tapped the chest containing the Judas Purse. ‘Spend a few hours torturing these young abominations. Use that fine set of skinning blades I gave you for your three-hundredth birthday. Do attempt to keep the pups breathing until their interrogation is completed. My ants are fussy eaters - they prefer hunting live food, rather than having haunches of dead meat tossed to them.’

The female vampire arrived at the bottom of the stairs. ‘And we wouldn’t wish to disappoint your murderous mutants, would we?’

‘Ah, Sophia Augusta, you so rarely disappoint your master. You brought me a new Judas from the Vigil, an agent willing to sell out the original Judas’s gift to the world. You have made your master happy beyond words.’

Sophia bowed somewhat warily towards the prince of her kind.

‘No, you would never betray me, would you, Figchen? Through the ages, I have always been able to rely on you.’

‘Always, master,’ said Sophia.

‘Of course. Our young guests will benefit from having their imaginations stimulated before they are tortured,’ said von Waldburg. ‘A demonstration of both the coins’ power and my pets’ appetites will serve to loosen their tongues.’

‘Ever the sadist,’ said Sophia.

‘Sadist? No, figchen. Merely the thrill of the chase,’ said von Waldburg. ‘I still feel its rush. As fresh as though I was newly turned.’ He clicked his fingers at his demi-gogs. ‘That last batch we received from the prison camp . . . they appeared healthy enough to make for a little sport.’

His guards unlocked a door in the wall and the Master of Masters walked through and disappeared from view. After a minute, two portals opened on the far

side of the desert vista. Von Waldburg appeared nonchalantly through the first doorway. The giant ants swivelled and stampeded towards the prince. For a moment it looked as though they might devour the vampire, rushing him, but the giants skittered to a stop, sand from the dunes splattering the man's body. His mutant pets bowed head, thorax and abdomen towards him, like tank-sized cats presenting themselves for stroking. Von Waldburg triumphantly reached out and rubbed each black armoured skull in turn, his voice amplified by speakers inside the enclosure and carried into the throne chamber. The monstrous creatures' antennae quivered in delight at their master's close attention.

'You see? The power of possessing the coins makes me unstoppable. Foolish outcasts, how did you possibly think you could stop me? Before I took the Judas Purse, these ungrateful little beauties here would have torn me in half. Now they worship me. But don't let their subservience fool you. Let me demonstrate their true nature to you, red in both mandible and claw. . .'

A howl of fear sounded from beyond the other entrance, the sight of demi-gogs with electric prods driving a group of prisoners out into the open. As soon as the rag-wearing North Korean peasants were shoved through, the door sealed shut and the prisoners stumbled through the orange sands, yelling in terror when they saw the ranks of giant ants bowing low before von Waldburg.

The vampire raised his hands under the enclosure's hot artificial lamp light. 'Take your supper, my malevolent lovelies, you deserve it! Your new queen feeds you well!'

Doubled over in agony, Eleanor held onto her terrible pain to distract her from the horrific sight that played out before them, the ants breaking position around the vampire and loping after the human sacrifices; their latest meal. Heads lashed forward, mandibles snapping, and human bodies splattered across the sands, the giant ants dragging their prey below ground and disappearing as each bloody victim was chased down. With each desperate twist and turn of his prisoners, the vampire yelled advice to his killer beasts as though they might actually heed him. Von Waldburg watched the last few prisoners pursued across his artificial arena, giggling as happily as if he was watching puppies capering around him.

The vampire prince slapped his thighs happily as the last fingers disappeared flailing below the blood-stained sands. 'Such a brief diversion from my duties' burden. Almost as enjoyable as forcing cattle to fight each other to the death with the promise of life for the last animal standing.'

'I prefer more active participation in a hunt, myself,' said Sophia, watching the Master of Masters stride out of the enclosure. 'Spectator sports never were to my taste.'

Ian struggled to reach Eleanor, but the demi-gog guards held him back. 'You toss me back my moly-sword and we'll make it an even fight,' snapped the agent.

Sophia shrugged in amusement. 'I said I enjoyed the hunt. Nobody said anything about making it a *fair* hunt.'

As Eleanor writhed on the floor she felt something happening to her, a force slowly intruding from outside her body. Filling her with something unnameable and inexplicable. A growing warmth which seemed to shield her from the pain, bringing her a faint reprieve from the agony, before converting into a series of shivering palpitations, like glugging freezing cola on a burning hot afternoon.

What's happening to me? Why me? Then Von Waldburg reappeared back inside the throne chamber. He crossed to the chest containing his prize and locked the coins securely inside his desk again. Eleanor moaned in relief as her misery dwindled. *The safe has to be heavily armoured.* Her torment diminished to manageable proportions.

'Better, girl? You should spend a little longer playing with this curiosity, Figchen. Agent Drew believes the girl managed to murder the Keeper. A feat even my people couldn't achieve. If you find anything of interest to us, you may keep the girl alive as a second human pet for a while.'

Sophia's companion glanced coldly towards Eleanor. The young woman obviously didn't relish being supplanted as the mistress's house cat.

'Best not to feed the ants too much at once,' continued the vampire prince, 'it makes them torpid and lazy. And who knows, these young abominations should yet make a most excellent desert.'

'I'm a little crunchy,' glowered Eleanor.

'We will discover exactly what you are,' said Von Waldburg. 'I do not tolerate mysteries. Time to peel yours away, one layer of skin at a time.'

Dismissed, the prisoners were shoved roughly back up the stairs in the company of Sophia, the young girl, Guy and a large escort of demi-gogs.

'After you skin them,' asked the young girl, 'will you make me a handbag out of their hide?'

'Of course,' smiled Sophia, indulgently. 'But you should retire to my quarters for a while. This will be blunt, boring work and I wouldn't wish to splatter these abominations' innards over your clothes. I am certain it will prove annoyingly difficult to secure fresh Alexander McQueen dresses after war breaks out.'

Eleanor sagged, dispirited on the top of the steps, her legs turning to jelly as the realisation of their fate finally sunk in. *This is the end. There's no chance of escape for me.* The best Eleanor could hope for was a sudden end to her torture when the Russian's monstrously large bomb detonated above her head.

Eleanor watched the vampire woman run her fingers across a range of razor sharp scalpels and other evil-looking surgical equipment spread across a steel tray. Sophia reached out and patted Ian's trouser leg encouragingly, the agent secured like Eleanor to an operating table under the interrogation chamber surgical bright light. The vampire glanced towards Guy standing sentry over the exit. 'Who do you think should go first? The boy or the girl?'

'You can't do this to us,' Eleanor appealed towards Guy. 'Allow this to be done to us.'

'You wanted to die a clean death, you should have stayed in the States and waited for the nukes to start flying,' shrugged Guy. 'I'd put a bullet in your heads as a mercy, but that crazy old coot of a blood-sucker back in the throne chamber would add me to his giant leaf-cutter ants' diet if I dared cross him.'

Sophia lifted the spectacles off Eleanor's face while she struggled on the operating table. 'No need to record this for posterity. The Vigil knows what befalls all abominations we capture.' Rather than selecting one of the terrifying devices from the tray, the female vampire seized Eleanor's forehead tight with both her hands. For a moment, Eleanor thought the monster would try to crush her skull, but that misapprehension vanished as she felt the vampire pushing, forcing her mind inside Eleanor's. Against Eleanor's will, she felt memories start to surface, bubbling out from within her. The Red was unpicking her mind! Eleanor lashed out with the force of her will, driving the vampire back, neurons ablaze as she burnt the invading freak with every iota of her fibre. Sophia stumbled back, a brief look of rage distorting her face before being replaced by astonishment.

'Very impressive,' said Sophia. 'Nobody has ever resisted me like that before.'

Eleanor wished she could take a shower, wash this ancient devil woman's stench off her. 'First time for everything.'

'I wonder if your curious abilities include the ability to grow back key parts of your anatomy?'

Eleanor spat at the vampire. 'I guess your abilities never included growing a sense of humour.'

'There's a reason why I prefer to question subjects in pairs,' continued Sophia. 'I am saving your friends in the theatre next door for my later amusement. Alasdair and Diane appear quite close if I am any judge of character. I can exploit their weakness. A pity the nun doesn't have anyone she values inside the city. Not even herself. The zealot will just have to watch me carve up your half-zombie comrade. Dissecting Bex Crawfield will take a tediously long time, so I need to shake a tail questioning you.' Sophia lifted a device off the steel trolley that resembled a blowtorch. 'There's also a good reason my tool of choice is a short-range laser cutter taken from an automobile production line robot. It possesses the advantage of cauterising wounds as it cuts. Which means my subjects rarely die of blood loss without answering my questions. You see, not all of us have an aversion to the fruits of your people's perverted science.'

And one of those fruits is about to turn this underground city into molten lava.

Eleanor had lost all sense of time, now; but she was fairly sure they had run out of enough of it that there was zero chance of escaping from the hellish bunker.

Sophia activated her cutter's laser blade.

'Leave her alone!' yelled Ian, struggling against his table's restraints.

'You misunderstand my intentions towards the girl. *This* is the reason I interrogate subjects in pairs,' smiled Sophia. She swung the device towards Ian's operating table and the agent screamed as she neatly severed Ian's left hand, his severed limb falling to the cell's floor with a sickening slap. 'There, I've left you your right hand. Consider that a small professional courtesy.' Sophia swivelled back towards Eleanor. 'You want to make it two-for-two? Or perhaps I should continue a little slower with the boy . . . say, one finger at a time?'

'What do you want from me?' screamed Eleanor, trying to drag her eyes away from Ian's smoking stump, bound to the table, the agent writhing in agony at his sudden slicing.

'Allow me inside your mind,' said Sophia.

'Be careful what you wish for,' hissed Eleanor.

Guy bent down, picked up Ian's severed hand before dropped it in a metal bin, tutting. 'You want my advice, I'd cooperate a little more, here.'

'Don't let her probe you if you can resist,' moaned Ian. 'She can go to hell.'

'I'm sure I'll get there on my own, one day. But long after you are both dust. One of *my* abilities,' said Sophia, 'the talent to penetrate the minds of animals and poke around. A talent you would share if you had sprung from my lineage, rather than that of Countessa Calogera.'

Eleanor's eyes narrowed. 'That was the Red who bit me?'

'A conceited old hag who usually overestimated her abilities as well as her usefulness to the Master of Masters,' said Sophia. 'Calogera wouldn't have lasted five minutes against the Keeper. Which rather begs the question, how did you?'

'Beginner's luck.'

'Luck is a lie told by fools to excuse their failures. Allow me access to your mind.' Sophia moved the laser cutter close and Eleanor's eyes were drawn to her hand. Eleanor prayed the vampire believed she was mesmerised by the deadly hissing white blade of focused light, rather than the creature's expensive gold Breitling Ladies wristwatch. Eleanor caught a glimpse of the time on the dial and tried not to show relief on her face. *It doesn't matter what this monster takes from my memories. We're all dead in a few more minutes. The largest bomb on the planet is about to run our atoms through a whisk with the world's molten mantle.*

'Time to make your mind up, young lady,' said Sophia. 'You can keep your oath to the Vigil, or you can allow me inside your mind and I'll leave your companion with five fine fingers and ten toes.' Sophia seized Ian's strapped-down arm with his remaining hand and started working his fingers like she was playing Five Little Piggies. 'Do you really need that last thumb? Let's see . . .'

'You never got around to your counter-interrogation training, kid,' Guy said to Eleanor, 'so I'll tell you the most important thing you would have learnt. Everyone talks in the end. How this ends is up to you.'

Eleanor's resolve finally cracked. 'Don't hurt Ian anymore. Please. I'll let you inside.'

'No,' pleaded Ian. 'NO!'

'Excellent,' said Sophia. 'I knew you would see sense.' She rested the laser cutter on the tray next to the steel scalpels, then seized Eleanor's forehead again tight with both hands. The creature's palms felt like ice, but the pain growing in

Eleanor's skull wasn't from the cold. Eleanor tried not to resist the vampire, as hard as her passivity proved, the Red's unholy power grinding into her mind like a dentist's drill. The creature's presence was disgusting, intrusive, like allowing a bucket of slugs to slide wriggling through Eleanor's mind.

'Good, don't fight it,' commanded Sophia, 'let me pass inside.'

Unbidden, the vision of what Eleanor had glimpsed at the Crucifixion rose out of her, the vampire's violation of her prisoner faltering, confused by the ancient scene replaying. *How can this be?* projected the vampire. *This is not possible. You could not have been there.*

You ever work it out, drop me a postcard, thought Eleanor.

More, ordered Sophia, burrowing deeper inside Eleanor. *Show me everything.* Sophia battered past Eleanor's defences, Eleanor suppressing her natural reaction to vomit this entity out of her soul. The vampire reached to caress Eleanor's powers, trying to gauge what her prisoner was capable of, the range of the abomination's gifts. *There is something within you,* growled Sophia, *that is not of us. But if not us, then what?* As Sophia probed, fresh visions came tumbling out from Eleanor – spilled like blood from a dagger wound – impossible and unknowable things, a jumbled storm of phantasms, futures and pasts and possibilities branching out. Both of them tumbled, lost among a multiverse both so complex and simple that to confront its fundamental paradoxes burnt like a horizon of exploding suns. Yet, the fieriest star of all was Eleanor. Her mind burning and roiling as what couldn't be contained splintered free of her weak mortal human shell. *My turn.* Eleanor lashed out at the vampire, giving the monster a little of what she had received; rejoicing as she slapped aside Sophia's mental defences like damp tissue paper. *Let's see what you're made of.* The Red flailed in outrage, but couldn't stop Eleanor sweeping through the halls of her monstrous mind like a barbarian horde sacking a city. *Yeah, what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.* A stream of memories from the creature's long existence swirled around Eleanor, as unwanted and foul as Eleanor's fever-tossed glimpses of the Countessa's foul history. A burning high sun above the pyramids, the crunch of snow in icy forests, human prey running and falling, blood and feeding. And somewhere amidst it all, a tiny baby crying. Eleanor lost sight of that hideous second life, what had been released inside her swelling too strong to control. Eleanor tried to master her wild outpouring, but instead found herself riding the energy uncontrollably, surfing a sea of raw immensity. Out of that roaring gale emerged one coalescing vision that the two of them tried to latch onto, vampire and human both, like drowning shipwreck survivors flailing for a single life raft.

Von Waldburg's twisted ant farm habitat, Joanna shoved forward, lurching across bronze-coloured sands, screaming in raw terror as giant mutants rose out of the dunes, eager to rip apart this trespasser intruding across their territory. Punishment, the girl's punishment for the ultimate transgression of the vampires' racial laws.

'No!' yelled Sophia, releasing all contact with Eleanor's mind, the vampire stumbling back and almost falling across Ian's table. Guy rushed up to the vampire woman. 'What is it? What did you find inside the kid's brain?'

Eleanor could hardly hear their words, mere vibrations of air now as her mind tumbled out of infinity, buffeted by what the vampire had released within her, power and energy without limits, a universe of dancing futures and particles closing, narrowing back to the lumpen present. To... *here.* The present.

Sophia shoved Guy towards the interrogation room's exit. 'Joanna's life is in danger . . . the throne room, *now*.'

Both interrogators sprinted out, leaving their two victims still strapped and shocked at the speed of their tormentors' exit; Eleanor tried to gain control of the splintered present, reorient on just this raw reality.

'Did the Red catch a glimpse of the super-bomb?' groaned Ian, the arm containing his severed stump trembling uncontrollably in shock. 'Is that why she and Guy sprinted away so fast? She was shouting something about Joanna?'

Eleanor tried not to throw up while she yanked desperately against her restraints. *Too strong. Designed to contain us.* 'Nope. That Russian bomb is going to come as a really unpleasant shock to her on a couple of levels. Joanna is Sophia's so-called human pet . . . she's not anyone's house cat, though. The girl's really the Red's daughter - not to mention Guy's child.'

Ian almost choked. 'That — just can't be possible,' gasped Ian, his face a definition of bewilderment. 'Reds are totally sterile. They pass on genetic material by converting humans into their kind, a virus quickening through the generations. If a vampire already has human offspring when they're turned, they're expected to hunt their children down and murder them. Loyalty to their nest and race has to be utter and complete.'

'Yeah, I saw that. Their vampire mind-suck-shtick is a two-way street,' said Eleanor. The agent felt her powers swelling within her, their unholy resonance magnifying in an almost infinite loop, fed by her desperate fear of their fast approaching destruction. Eleanor's powers fully unleashed by the vampire's violation of her very soul. 'I poked around in the ice-lady's noggin while she raided my head. Sophia dug up an ancient Egyptian amulet which allows Reds to suppress their vampirism and fake as a full human for a year. Naughty old Sophia was meant to use the ability to infiltrate NATO and kick off a war against the USSR. Instead, she fell for Guy and got knocked up. Joanna was the result. They both thought that they had kept the Master of Masters in the dark, but the old monster became suspicious and confirmed Joanna's parentage after testing pet-girl's DNA. Now the King of the Fangsters believes he's about to leave humanity huddled as pushovers inside the radioactive ruins, he intends to punish Sophia for her transgression. The whole human kid thing is a biggie in their culture, isn't it? That was my vision - what Sophia saw. Joanna getting served by the big boss as an appetiser inside the mutant ant farm!'

'Good riddance and bon appétit,' grunted Ian.

'Vampire lady cut and ran too early,' said Eleanor, shaping the power burning through her veins, barely restraining it from incinerating every cell inside her body. 'If Sophia hung around a few seconds longer, she would have glimpsed what I saw at the end. *A future, at least, a slim shot at a possible one.* 'Close your eyes.'

'Why?' croaked Ian.

'Because this is probably going to kill us both,' said Eleanor, 'so it's kind of traditional.'

Sophia skidded to a stop, banging her fists in frustration against the armoured glass

of the ant farm. *Too late.* Below, Von Waldburg had emerged inside the artificial desert vista, dragging Joanna screaming and flailing behind him. The vampire prince had a pair of demi-gog soldiers following him, one carrying a large professional-grade video camera and the other a telescopic sound mic.

The Master of Masters sensed her presence, looked up and made a cheery wave up towards the viewing gallery. 'Figchen! Now you have spoiled my surprise for you. What a pity. I was going to force you to watch the recording of your little abomination's death each and every day until I tired of your treacherous presence.'

Guy arrived beside Sophia, panting from the exertion of sprinting after her. 'Please, don't do this! I passed you the Judas Purse . . .'

'Should the mule master express undying gratitude towards a beast merely for bearing his load? No, agent. The coins were always my true destiny. One way or another, I would have taken possession of the Judas Purse. But what you chose, Sophia Augusta, what you chose is beyond the pale. Casting away your perfection, copulating and giving birth like a grunting animal. I made you! You should have passed on our lineage through bite and blood. Instead, you betrayed your master and your species and for what—' he yanked Joanna around and forced her to her knees—'for *this*? This squealing pathetic little prey animal. I would feed on her, but your taste flowing through her veins sickens me to my very core.'

The leader's heavily armed guards flooded into the chamber behind Sophia and Guy. Sophia sensed her own demi-gogs responding to her urgent summons, but they were massively outnumbered by Von Waldburg's loyalists and the ranks of North Korean serfs subservient to him.

'Save Joanna,' Guy begged Sophia, listening to their daughter's pleas for mercy in desperation.

No more time. Orange sands stirred in front of the Master of Masters, ebony-armoured mutants ants emerging from their deep subterranean tunnel system.

'You cuckolded me for a filthy sub-human!' yelled Von Waldburg. 'An abomination who once hunted our kind for the Vigil. You treated me like a mortal fool, Sophia Augusta, and for that sin, you will relive my vengeance a thousand times. I shall replay this foul little creature's death every day for you; every day until you beg for the mercy of a clean beheading.'

Behind Sophia the leader's forces closed in, readying firearms and blades. Sophia hardly cared if they took her alive now, her gaze fixed on Joanna's terrified attempts to break free of the old monster's iron grip. Guy attempted to reach the passage down to the sands, but the master's demi-gogs seized him, holding him struggling and cursing in their claws.

'For you, agent, I have other plans,' sneered Von Waldburg. 'My little Figchen shall be starved of all human sustenance. How long, do you think, before she grows hungry enough to turn on you and rip you to pieces? She is in possession of an iron will, my fine blood-child. She could last two months before she is hungry enough to lose self-control and devour you.'

'I would have given Joanna the gift,' begged Sophia, knowing her pleas were useless even as she gave voice to them. 'When she was of age. Joanna could have been as a granddaughter for you . . . a guardian of your legacy.'

'You wanted to give birth to the same abomination *twice*? You pollute my presence with your filthy perverted longings. Now witness your reward for your

betrayal of me . . . ’

Sophia reached out with her power, trying to engage the emerging beasts; three giants. Sophia tried to force her way into their consciousness, but the mutants were too primitive to reason with, let alone control without the unnatural power of the Judas Purse behind her. *Hate and hunger and the chemical twitching of base hardwired instincts.* They skittered forward, massive mandibles clacking like chainsaws. Von Waldburg raised his hands to the air in the manner of a jubilant prophet. ‘Cut her head off, my giant lovelies, rip her limbs away one by one. Then drag her bloody carcass beneath to feed your larvae.’

Sophia looked on in horror, fear turning to confusion as the monstrous ants swarmed past Joanna’s quivering form. They ignored the girl, heading towards Von Waldburg and the two camera crew filming behind him.

‘What is this?’ yelled the vampire prince. ‘Consume the little abomination. I control the Judas Purse. You are mine to command. Sever this abomination’s head from her filthy shoulders. Scatter her bones to line your nest!’

Guy watched the vampire prince back uneasily away as his pets menaced him. ‘What is—?’

‘It’s not me,’ said Sophia, shocked. The female vampire felt the ants’ waves of raw hate towards this false queen, this usurper who had captured the mutants and imprisoned them and regularly tormented them here. They were no longer obeying the Master of Masters. It was as though the Judas Purse had lost all of its power? *But that can only happen if the curse is lifted. And only one family, the descendants of one foul lineage has the ability to erase it ... the blood whose execution cursed the coins in the first place.*

Von Waldburg swivelled and raced towards the exit, shoving the camera crew back before the pursing mutants. His act of cowardice was almost enough to reach the tunnel’s open doorway, but the ants possessed six long legs to the vampire’s two, and one overtook him from behind, mandibles snapping shut around his torso even as his palms clasped the exit’s edges. There was an explosion of blood as the Master of Masters was sliced in half, followed by a far greater detonation as his long stored energies erupted, an immortal made mortal after an unnatural age. The sandstorm of orange dust cleared to reveal Joanna limping away down the corridor.

Sophia’s remembered the impossible vision she had glimpsed inside Eleanor’s mind. Two the false saviour’s disciples greeting the girl on the mountain. ‘You do not belong here, daughter.’ *Daughter.* Not just any customary greeting, perhaps, but a resemblance the pair had spotted and mistaken for some other child’s? Eleanor, rolling in agony in the throne chamber in front of the artifact as though it was pure poison. *The girl was the damn poison! She’s bled our prize of all of its power, as surely as attaching jump-leads to a battery.* Burning angels, still slowly shifting their best pieces across the board, the game of ages played exactly as intended.

‘Clever,’ Sophia whispered in admiration, as she turned and punched her fist through the nearest demi-gog’s windpipe. Most of the nest had folded in agony to the floor, all connection to their master severed by his disintegration. Guy seized a machine pistol from the nearest demi-gog, opening fire on the loyalists, shell-cases clattering to the ground as he emptied the magazine. Sophia side-stepped a North Korean soldier’s bayonet, breaking his neck as she danced. ‘Oh, you clever, clever

ethereal bastards.'

That was when the bunker's air-raid sirens activated, shaking the throne chamber with their shrill warning.

Damn. It appeared it wasn't just the angels who had outmanoeuvred the vampires today.

Eleanor ignored Ian's yells. She wasn't sure if he was screaming out of concern for her, or pain from the growing heat inside the interrogation chamber. Maybe it was his shock from seeing her naked now all her clothes had burnt to ash against her skin? It was hard to hear him over the screech of the air raid warning sirens. The city had been designed to survive a nuclear attack, but not what was about to slam down from the heavens. *I can't halt now. If I slow down, we'll all be melted when the Russian's Big Boy's Toy hits this place.* Instead, it was her torture table that was melting - quite literally - the agonising overload of energy coursing like napalm through her veins.

'You have to stop,' shouted Ian, 'you'll burn yourself to a crisp if you don't stop this!'

Eleanor couldn't reply properly - her throat filling with super-heated steam from the accelerated particles spinning around her flesh. *Concentrate, girl. Focus. Just you and the table. The steel softening like butter, the carbon-reinforced manacles turning to gas. Your flesh acting as a conduit for this hell-storm of yours, holding it in check.*

'Please,' begged Ian, 'I can't live if you-'

His voice grew dim as the table began to bubble around her head, spitting molten metal across the floor. *Just a little bit longer.* Eleanor's flesh took the power, shaping it, leeching energy to regenerate her body even as it disintegrated around her, a sudden fizzing as the nearly indestructible polymer yarn of reduced graphene nanotubes composing her restraints hit their limit at the surface temperature of the sun. She rolled off what was left of the deformed table and hit the bare concrete floor, her feet leaving scorch marks as she faltered for a second. Her body glowed as she pulled the mist of gaseous steel floating inside the torture room towards her, covering her modesty with a jump-suit of silk-thin metal, protecting Ian from second-degree burns at the same time.

'How? What are you?' stammered the agent.

'Unlocked.' Eleanor slapped the prisoner release button under Ian's table, the black restraints retracting at speed like a seat belt. 'And now so are you.'

Ian half-slid, half fell, off the table, banging into the abandoned cart full of surgical nasties and torture implements. 'You look like a superhero in that silver suit.'

'Yeah, Hot Girl: The Molten Mistress. We got to cut and run, or we're all going to be molten and not in a good way.' She shut her eyes for a second, feeling the Russian super-bomber with its super-sized payload seconds from release above them. *Too late.* She pushed Ian aside. 'Stand back!'

'But-?'

'This is the cut...' Eleanor raised both hands and poured what was spinning around inside her against the wall. Basic reinforced concrete, but it might as well

have been soggy cardboard as the material near instantly vapourised in the pounding, a smoking round hole leading to the interrogation chamber next door. She slipped through and caught the demi-gog guard running towards her, tossing him against the wall hard enough to leave another hole. Somewhere in the stratosphere, a bombardier was caught mesmerised by the target release icon sliding across his head-up display, the bomber's targeting computer loading the final wind-speed and live weather readings into the GOAB's targeting packet. But the world's biggest bomb was so massive it hardly needed guiding - it was like dropping a building from the sky. Hell, it was like dropping the Death Star. Eleanor felt the aircrewman's satisfaction, saw the cramped confines of the bomber through his helmet's visor, tasted the recycled oxygen in his rubber mask. This beast was the only weapon of its kind and he had been trusted to drop it on this vital secret mission. Target match. Releases snapped back and raw gravity took its course.

Ian rushed through the hole after Eleanor, his eyes casting madly around the torture tables containing Sister Rae, Alastair, Diane and Bex. Even Bex couldn't survive what was dropping whistling towards them.

'Release them,' barked Eleanor. 'World's biggest hammer is about to hit us.' She stuck Diane's release button first, leaving her struggling free for a second, sprinting across to Alastair's table. Ian did the same for Sister Rae and Bex, the nun rushing to the door, checking through its porthole-like window and yelling back towards them. 'Soldiers incoming, too. A company's worth. Local mugs, not Reds.'

Ian sprinted to a steel cabinet against the wall, his remaining hand skimming over the scalpels and blades, looking for the sharpest, meanest stick he could find to wave at a platoon or two of vampire-corrupted North Korean fanatics.

Eleanor tracked the spinning bomb's descent through the bombardier's sights. *Twenty seconds to air-blast.*

'Bar the door,' ordered Eleanor, then had second thoughts. 'Actually, sister, stand back.' She raised her fists and poured energy into the two doors - not enough to blast them off their hinges, but as an emergency spot-weld, it'd pass.

'Bleeding heck!' shouted the sister, moving cautiously back from this hissing hot doors. 'A little warning.'

Fifteen seconds to air-blast.

'We're sealed inside,' warned Ian sounding distraught, adrenalin kicking in, giving him a pharmaceutical grade blast of cornered animal terror.

'Nearly sealed,' said Eleanor, swivelling towards the hole in the wall she had entered by, giving the ceiling enough of a blast to bring an avalanche of rubble down across it. Outside the chamber, the guards had grown bored of trying to open the torture room doors the normal way, a burst of heavy machine-gun fire as they tried to shoot their way inside, steel buckling under the onslaught. 'Now we are.'

Ten seconds to air-blast.

Eleanor assisted Alastair in levering Diane off the operating table.

'Nice suit,' said Bex, grabbing a handful of scalpels.

'This season's look - melted torture table.'

Sister Rae, still by the doors, sounded resigned rather than panicked. 'Shit, they're bringing up an RPG. What kind of paranoid nutters keep a rocket launcher for use inside an enclosed bunker?'

Five seconds to air-blast.

‘To me!’ shouted Eleanor. ‘Everyone in close: group hug-close.’

Three seconds to air-blast.

‘You picked up teleporting as a power?’ asked Ian, halting before her, the others sprinting over near enough to touch her as the door’s viewport shattered under machinegun fire.

‘I wish.’ As powers go, she truly wished she possessed that ability, rather than a bucket full of crazy. *I need perfect timing, here.* Anything left would be instant death. She moved her hands, began dividing her energy in two, shaping the first half into a sphere around them. A perfect ball of energy. A shield. It didn’t have to last long. Just long enough for the second part of what she was summoning, here. Eleanor tried not to be distracted by the reinforced glass of the door port shot out under heavy machine gun fire, the whoosh of a rocket propelled warhead exiting its launcher, tiny, tiny, compared to –

Detonation.

Five hundred tonnes of explosive death airburst above a fake village in North Korea. One second the village was there, then it wasn’t, as any ground in Kilchu that hadn’t turned to gas liquefied, a shockwave force that hadn’t been felt on Earth since a rogue asteroid murdered its dinosaurs spreading down and out. Liftshafts which could carry small regiments instantly vapourised, huge artificial tunnels and underground facilities filled in by half a mile of bedrock flowing sideways at hypersonic velocities. And somewhere inside that hell of subterranean destruction, a tiny bubble of energy, almost crumpling under the impossible onslaught despite an eerie power desperately renewing the sphere’s surface integrity. Hardly enough of Eleanor left over to send a blistering lance of energy piercing downward towards the Earth’s core. If there was one benefit of suffering inside the middle of a live GOAB explosion, it was that the bedrock was already so utterly shattered by the shockwave that it couldn’t resist a volcanic sinkhole suddenly being drilled into it. If the Amurian tectonic plate could have voiced a sentient thought right then, it would have been, ‘Sure, why the hell not?’ as it splintered and released a thousand bar of magma pressure through a very focused hole driven down by Eleanor. Then her bubble of close to collapsing protective energy wasn’t static anymore. It became a cannonball surfing a volcanic eruption through the world’s biggest earthquake, courtesy of the planet’s largest bomb.

Eleanor allowed herself a high-pitched groan, barely vocalised, the feedback loop stealing energy from outside and reinforcing her sphere holding her – clutching them all – as tight as amber-sealed insects. Up. Out. That was the second advantage of liquefying the landscape – once solid ground parted like an ocean vomiting out a surfacing submarine, then a fast flying sub blown into the sky, giving Eleanor an interesting new problem – how to reinforce her sparkling sphere strong enough to survive the impact of landing. Sharp cold air, filled with debris from the smoking, burning crater below. They struck the forest they had passed through earlier with the velocity of an artillery shell. Half the forest - the closest half facing Kilchu - had already collapsed from the bomb blast and ensuing quake, but then they collided with the half that still endured. Eleanor used the thunder of splintering trees as an air-brake to slow them to non-lethal speeds; trunks cracked, trees that had stood for centuries turned into matchwood. No more feedback loop to suck away the explosion’s own power, though. Holding the sphere together under the

shocking force of this punishment was all on Eleanor. Carving out their own passage through the icy green cathedral for mile after mile. They rolled and screamed inside the ball, all stabilising forces shed in her agony, the sphere fast losing coherence, the forest striking her now as much as the shield. Smashing. Cracking bones. Bruises. Pain. Then they were free of the trees, ploughing through snow-drifts beyond, the ball of energy melted away back to wherever it had emerged from inside her soul. Cold. Fierce cold. Eleanor steel suit creaking around her as she rediscovered her mortality. Bodies lay scattered in the winter wilderness around her. Moaning, so still alive. Eleanor tried to crawl forward but found she could hardly lift her broken, shivering fingers. Her body possessed no more energy, no more strength. She was spent, an empty vessel barely conscious enough to feel the waves of pain spreading across her now feeble body.

There was a soft crunching of snow as a line of cloaked giants crossed the valley towards her. One of the Knights Solomon glanced over Eleanor and across what was left standing of the forest, observing fountains of volcanic fire lighting up the night sky orange. Rocks the size of cars - once reinforced concrete bunker material - hurled skyward, popping and exploding at this distance like mortar volleys. The soldier's military order had observed their vow of silence for half a millennia, but now, at last, the vow was broken.

'Well, *shi* -'

Monica Morton hadn't expected to flee terrified for her life during a supposed afternoon educational visit. But then, she hadn't exactly been expecting to see her classmates fall flailing and screaming when the staff showing them around the remote Flaming Gorge Dam turned into a pack of monstrous fanged beasts. The hideous creatures had set upon the children like hungry wolves, the memory of flashes of blood, yells and horror unable to leave Monica's mind as she stumbled away, near catatonic in shock. Some of the creatures were tracking her down the access tunnel, the passage she prayed led to the top of the dam and a slim chance of surviving this nightmare. The penknife Monica clutched in her sweaty right hand was sharp enough to peel the orange in her backpack, but as far as monster-slaying went, she knew it was going to prove entirely inadequate to the task of killing what was chasing her. She would have fled faster, but her body was burning, her head dizzy. Her unnatural hunters' unholy howling grew louder and louder, pursuing her, panicked, around the corner. That was when she ran into three more of them in the shape of two young women and a boy.

'Like, I got this,' said the blonde with a Californian accent. She stepped in front of Monica just as her penknife plunged into the young woman's gut. It had thrust into her stomach right up to the hilt, but the woman glanced casually down at the blade as though it was merely an unexpected splinter of table wood. 'Really? That sweater's a Fendi. You paying for its repair?'

'You're bleeding,' said the boy, pointing at the wound on Monica's neck.

It took a moment for Monica to realise he was talking about her, not the blonde she had just tried to gut with her pen-knife. Another second and she realised that none of these people possessed the oddly distended faces of the things attempting to consume her. So these freaks weren't with the pursuing monsters? 'One of the dam's staff tried to ... to eat me.'

The second young woman drew out a pen-sized steel hilt and a long silver blade seemed to fold out of it. She sliced the air and the cut of its edge sounded like a hissing snake. 'Yeah, that do happen. Al, one survivor to extract here, stat. Diane, prep for cure.'

Down the corridor, the eerie howling was swelling. Monica felt sick, and not just because they were all about to die. Something awful was happening to her body, eating her out from the inside. Nothing should feel as sick as this. 'They're coming to kill us!'

'Balls to the wall, kid. Business as usual.' The young woman touched the side of the spectacles she was wearing and Monica head a faint buzz coming from the frames - an earphone set into its side. 'One-mile exclusion zone set. Okay, Harriet. We're nearly in close contact, give us a few seconds and these Reds are Alpha Mike Foxtrot. Anything tries to blow this joint that isn't Vigil, that's what the warm sticky goo inside the Cav's flamethrowers are for.'

'They're monsters!' cried Monica as the howls echoed louder, almost on top of them.

'And we're what keeps monsters awake at night,' grinned the woman. 'But only the ones lucky enough not to bump into us down a dark passage.'

The blonde yanked Monica's penknife out of her body and dropped it to the floor with a disgusted expression on her face. 'It's totally time for the Bexster Bash.'

'We *really* got to work on a new catchphrase for you,' sighed the second

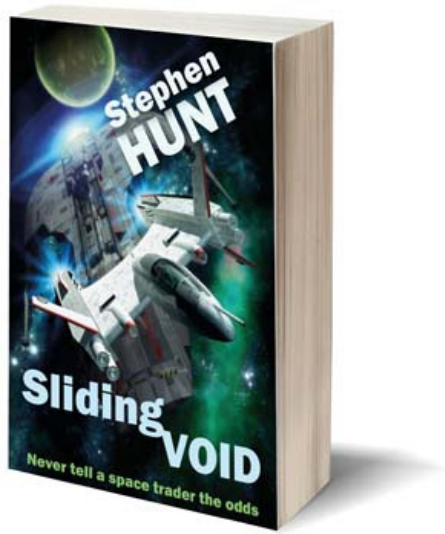
woman.

'I kind of like it,' said the young man.

'That's because your taste never matured from thinking Ultravox was the height of musical expression.'

All three of them ran around the corner as Monica clutched onto the wall, swaying from the unnatural fever burning through her. The howling grew louder, followed by the hissing of blades, and then there was quiet. The silence might have come from Monica falling to the floor, half-passing out.

But it wasn't.



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