

PROLOGUE

SABAT HAD smelled evil in the air for the past hour; a cloying cold mustiness that was stronger than the scent of the pine trees and belied the balmy late spring atmosphere. The silence, too, was noticeable. The absence of birdsong and the sougning of the mountain breeze seemed to have lapsed into a calm where not even a leaf rustled. As though the world held its breath and waited.

The tall man in the dark, travel-stained and crumpled suit shrugged off the uneasiness he felt with a deliberate effort, paused on the long steep forest path to wipe the sweat from his high brow and aquiline features. A dry tongue flicked the fringes of his jet black moustache and his narrow, deep-sunken eyes stared ahead into the shadows of a gathering dusk. But nothing moved. A three inch scar down his left cheek, a ten-year-old disfigurement, was whiter than his own sallow complexion.

Tall and lithe, it was difficult to determine the age of this forest traveller; he might have been as old as fifty, on the other hand he could have been as young as thirty-five. Agile in every movement, yet those narrowed eyes reflected a maturity, even a hint of fear. Because for Mark Sabat this was the end of a long trail, one that had stretched across three continents where death had lurked in town and forest alike, but always his quarry had eluded him. Until now. This time there could be no escape for Quentin Sabat,

his elder brother.

Mark Sabat had followed this same trail earlier that morning, memorised every detail from aloft as his astral body glided and hovered in the shape of a kestrel, whilst his physical body slept inside the hastily chalked five pointed star within the sparsely furnished hotel bedroom in the village far below. A hawk that missed nothing, ignoring voles which would have been easy prey. Searching, mile after exhilarating mile until the currents of mountain air brought it high above that clearing in the trees. And it saw the dilapidated woodcutter's shack and knew that it had found the last hiding place of the most evil man creation had ever known, an entity reborn time and again in human form, Satan's ambassador spawned in hell to wreak his vengeance on Earth, truly the mythical anti-Christ.

The kestrel had soared silently down to that open space amid the trees, alighted on a slender fir bough, and watched. At first the hut had appeared to be deserted; no sound or movement from within, not a wisp of woodsmoke out of the rusted iron stove chimney protruding from the warped roof. Sabat blinked in the sunlight, considered changing his form to that of a hornet and alighting on the cracked and dirty pane of glass that served as a window. But there was no hurry; a few more minutes, possibly hours, were nothing when compared with the years of relentless pursuit.

A larch-fly honed in on a pile of kindling by the door, landed briefly, then took off again as though this was no place in which to linger. Somewhere doves were cooing contentedly but they were a long way away, almost out of earshot. It seemed that the birds and beasts of the forest avoided this place.

The sun rose high but there was no warmth in its rays. Sabat ruffled his brown feathers, felt the chill and knew it was unnatural in spite of the height above sea level. Tiny eyes that missed nothing picked out the three rectangles of newly-turned earth on the fringe of the surrounding trees. Graves \ In them would doubtless lie the remains of the man and woman and their young daughter who had ventured from the village up into these mountains before last winter and had not returned. The coming of the snows had hindered the search parties and the passing of time was a convenient excuse to forget. For nowadays, none went up into the mountains for it was a terrible place to be lost after dark. So the locals said, and Mark Sabat knew that they spoke the truth.

A movement, so sudden that the bird almost obeyed its natural instincts and took to the wing in sudden fright. It stiffened like some taxidermist's exhibit, saw the ill-fitting door being scraped back; a human form emerging.

An old man, so old that it was almost impossible to believe that he still lived, threadbare garments barely hiding the wasted frame beneath. Hairless, the skin like ancient parchment, eyes receding into deep black sockets, nostril cavities that bubbled thick mucus in time with the wheezing lungs. A slit of a toothless mouth from which came grunts brought about by the sheer effort of each movement from this revolting

Methuselah.

Mark Sabat in his hawk form experienced a fleeting pang of pity that his own brother, one conceived in the same womb as himself, should have rotted away to this! But he dispelled the feeling, replacing it immediately with one of hate. For Quentin Sabat was no more than ten years his senior, his physical state self-induced so that he might precipitate himself into his next life, the desire to spawn a new evil, and throw the hunter off his trail. A desperate measure, indeed, or was there a more insidious motive for this premature senility?

The old man picked up an axe with difficulty, swung it weakly at a block of wood and urinated down a skeletal leg with the effort. The log split, fell into two halves and he spat out a glob of pink-tinged spittle, rested on the shaft of his axe, cursing profanely in a mixture of German and French.

Then the kestrel was airborne, winging its way swiftly and silently over the treetops, a headlong flight that took it back to the slumbering human form within the pentagram stirring it into wakefulness, a naked form that stretched and yawned and knew that its search was over.

Now Mark Sabat was back, treading the track which he had committed to memory, knowing that this time he must come in his own form for his astral body was powerless to bring about the demise of the devil's henchman. He did not hurry, almost euphoric because the end was in sight, fearful because he might not be strong enough. Quentin would know he was coming but he would not flee this time. He, too, would relish the encounter now, the direct conflict of good and evil, opposing forces battling for greater ideals than their own personal hatred of each other, something that had gone on since life began.

Fleeting memories came to plague Mark Sabat like a drowning man experiencing flashbacks of his life. An upper-class upbringing, his future ensured by a legacy from wealthy parents, boyhood rebellion against this planned life and in a moment of weakness, a pleasurable teenage homosexual experience which had driven him into priesthood in the hope of cleansing his tortured mind. Then the discovery of his own powers, the realisation that night when he had exorcised the poltergeist, followed by the doubting of his own faith brought about by the hypocrisy of church leaders. Precipitated into yet another phase; army life that had found him in the SAS . . . and the sheer pleasure derived from killing an enemy \ Legitimate murder, not once but many times. A new Sabat, so ruthless and yet still in possession of those inexplicable powers; powers that had saved his life on many occasions until a dishonourable discharge had tumbled him back into civilian life. Embittered, all that mattered now was the destruction of Quentin, because no one such as he had any right to exist amid Mankind.

The clearing, swamped by shadow so that Mark Sabat could only just make out the silhouette of the hut and the towering pines. Cold and getting colder all the time. He checked his means of protection. The herbs, the garlic, the silver crucifix and the tiny prayer book which was almost a blasphemy in the pocket

of one who delighted in killing. And the revolver, a .38 which he carried at all times, useless in a situation such as this but a comfort in hostile places where earthly bodies might threaten him. Since those SAS days a gun had become a part of his personality, a means of instant death combined with his unerring marksmanship.

Then he saw Quentin on the far side of the clearing, a human shape gradually emerging as his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, crouched by the graves. Eyes that fixed him, seemed to glow brightly with their intensity of hate, a cornered wounded beast of the chase waiting to spring on the hunter.

'So you have come.' The voice was not old and cracked, but smooth and cultured, mockingly defiant. 'You are stubborn, Mark. So foolish, because we could each have gone our own separate ways and now it is too late.'

'No,' the newcomer stepped forward, gripped the tiny crucifix in the pocket of his jacket and wondered if it would be powerful enough. 'There is not room enough for the two of us in this world, Quentin ...'

His voice tailed off and he stared in disbelief; saw the graves, the soil thrown up in a heap, their contents dragged from the open cavities. Oh, Jesus God! *Culte des mortes*, as it was known in Creole, the native tongue of Haiti - the cult of the dead . . . necromancy! He found himself stepping back in sheer revulsion. Another tortured flash of memory, a visit some years ago to Port au Prince where he had experienced at first hand some of the voodoo rites, *houngans* digging up corpses in the graveyard at night for a number of revolting ceremonies; the dead walked and having seen it with his own eyes Mark Sabat did not dispute it. And Quentin had been there, too, learning his trade, pandering to these witch doctors who held the secret of the living dead.

Mark could see clearly now that his eyes had accustomed themselves to the dark. Three corpses; peasants, a man and a woman in middle-age, the hessian sacking in which they had been buried having rotted away to reveal their emaciated nakedness, putrid green flesh hanging in strips, the whiteness of the bones beneath almost luminous. And their faces had expressions on them even though they were virtually skeletal. Masks of terror fixed on he who had disturbed their final peace, arms entwined in a horrific embrace. And the child between them, that was the worst of all; a young girl, hairless as a babe, her flesh somehow having defied the damp cold earth and the nibbling worms and remained almost intact. Indeed, she might still have been alive ... a movement, she lurched against the woman as though seeking parental protection a limp hand swinging. Oh Jesus God, Sabat thought, she's still got her eyes! Orbs wide with terror seeing him, pleading with him to save them all from this monster of darkness.

'You'll join them.' Quentin held the axe easily now, no longer struggling to lift it. 'You'll soon be one of the walking dead, Mark. Or perhaps my Master will find other uses for your dismembered body while

your soul. . . '

'Stop Mark Sabat advanced into the clearing, the crucifix now clear of his pocket and held out at arms length. 'Enough of these vile practices, Quentin. These people must have eternal peace . . . and you as well!'

But Quentin stood his ground. He should have cowered before the power of the cross and the pungent smell of herbs which emanated from the intruder. Instead he gave a hollow faugh and that was when the younger Sabat knew . . . knew that his own loss of faith had failed him in his greatest hour of need; that he was but a mere mortal facing up to a devil incarnate. And Quentin was fully aware of this, too! No longer was the evil brother a helpless figure; age and decay still ravaged him hideously but his muscles powered him with the speed and strength of one in the prime of life. The cold air hissed as the axe went back and up, a whistling arc of instant death, its blade honed to razor sharpness. A cry left those toothless lips that was more animal than human, reverberating in the still atmosphere, the mountains all around starting to take up the echoes.

Sabat fought against shock and horror which were threatening to petrify him into an easy target. A sideways leap just as the blade came down, hearing it strike the rocky ground amid a shower of sparks. Whirling, flinging the crucifix with desperation, seeing it hit his adversary full in the chest. But Quentin only swivelled round, a horrific sneer on his aged features. 'The cross is powerless without you, Mark. Not even a symbol, just a lump of meaningless metal.'

Panicking now, a Christian in a roman lion pit, knowing that his agility can only postpone the inevitable mauling.

Mental torture added to bursting lungs and weakening muscles. Mark Sabat hurled garlic bulbs and saw them bounce off his brother and roll away. Quentin followed him, the axe poised effortlessly, awaiting the death blow. It was crazy that such a decrepit body could move so swiftly, the brain within the shrunken bald skull tuned perfectly to outwit its retreating foe.

Suddenly Mark Sabat was airborne and falling, a wave of vertigo sweeping through him, a sensation akin to having stepped off a block of high-rise flats into a black nothingness. Then a jerk checked him. He was lying on his back staring up at an oblong that was lighter than the darkness all around; twinkling pinpoints which he recognised as stars. It took him some seconds to realise what had happened and then it all came to him; the musty damp smell of soil which showered down on him from the narrow, sharp sides of the grave into which he had fallen, sharp slivers of rock gouging his back.

A familiar silhouette above him obliterated the starlight. Quentin. Old or young, it was the Quentin he had hunted from Haiti to Bavaria, axe poised for the final blow, savouring this moment of fratricide. And it was at that instant, even as he was preparing himself for death, that Mark's fingers closed over the cold metal of the .38 in his jacket pocket. His movements were instinctive, an act of hopelessness tinged with defiance, a condemned man spitting in the face of his executioner. A salvo of shots, so rapid that they sounded like a single peal of cannonfire coming up out of the ground, stabbing flame that burned its way through the material of the pocket in which the gun was fired, and gave off a stench that was a mixture of singed cloth and cordite. And bullets thudding into a human body with a noise like catapult slugs striking wet cardboard.

Quentin was thrown back up to his full height even as he started to bring the axe down, the hail of slugs ploughing up his body, churning a furrow that began in his groin and ended with a savage gash across his throat, as though a ferocious wild beast had savaged him. His scream of anger was drowned by the blood gushing from the severed jugular vein, the agony arching his back so that his bowed spine threatened to snap. One suspended second when he tottered on the narrow brink that divides the chasms of life and death, his own death-wish suddenly expedited yet instinctively clinging to the life he had known, reluctant to relinquish it. Tottering, swaying.

Mark's finger checked in the trigger. He heard the axe thud harmlessly on the ground, saw Quentin coming at him, airborne, arms flailing like some ungainly prehistoric bird attempting to take flight, spouting warm, thick blood.

Mark Sabat felt the rush of air, covered his head with his arms and braced himself. A sickening impact, smothered by the still kicking body of his brother, feeling and tasting warm blood on his face.

And the younger Sabat was fighting for his life again. Somehow he managed to push the other off him, struggled up so that they were wedged side-by-side in the deep, narrow grave. Only then did he open his eyes, and even the darkness failed to hide the awfulness of it all. Quentin's face was only inches from his own, a grotesque countenance that showered him with bloodied curses, feeble fingers clutching at him, broken filthy nails scraping his flesh. Mark heard the words clearly although it must have been impossible for the other to speak. 'You fool! Idle and yet I shall live again. It is you who will moulder in this grave, Mark!'

Somehow Mark Sabat managed to extricate himself from those death clutches, vomiting as he did so and trying not to breathe in the foul stench of putrefaction and death. Dimly he was aware that he still held the revolver and this time there was a deliberation in the way he brought the barrel to bear on his brother's forehead, almost a regret in the way he applied pressure to the hair trigger like a grieving jockey about to despatch his favourite but wounded mount. The report was deafening in the confined space, the stab of flame lighting up the scene vividly and implanting it indelibly on Sabat's brain.

In that terrible lingering second he saw the other man's skull split like a cracked egg, grey yolk showering up the earthy walls and stringing back in tentacles which adhered to his clothing. One last curse from that cavity of a mouth before it was swamped by a tidal wave of crimson fluid.

Sabat pulled the trigger again but the hammer fell on an empty shell. He scrambled up, felt his feet squelching on the soft body beneath him, somehow secured a grip on the top of the grave and pulled himself up amid an avalanche of soil and stones. Then he lay there on the ground, gulping in great lungfuls of freezing air and trying not to look at the three puppet-like corpses who sat closely by as though watching him, their expressions seeming to have changed to one of pleading; a mute request to be returned to their graves.

And Sabat knew that he would have to re-bury them.

Dawn was turning the eastern sky a pale grey by the time he had finished. Every muscle and nerve in his lean body raged its protest as he finally flung down the broken spade which he had found behind the hut and stared at the three fresh mounds of earth. The man and woman now occupied a single grave, the child a smaller one, and in the deep one lay Quentin. Six feet of earth and rock covered the most evil man the world had ever known. Yet Sabat was uneasy, now glancing about him. It seemed colder than ever in spite of his exertions. Almost as though night was coming back to cast its mantle over this bloodied clearing and hide the shame of a once noble family.

He turned away, tried to hurry, then pulled up, cringing, not daring to look back. A voice, a whisper on the early morning breeze, yet so familiar.

'Idle and yet I shall live again, it is you who will moulder in this grave, Mark'

Sabat's lips moved in a hoarse answering croak.

'No! You're dead. I killed you.'

A laugh answered him, a shrill peal that might have been the wind freshening and rustling through the leaves, howling down from the mountain passes above. But there was no wind.

•Running, his limbs now responding to the desperation that whipped him. Stumbling. Falling and picking himself up, clothing torn, grazed hands beginning to bleed. On down that narrow track, daylight coming quickly now. And behind him the laughter becoming fainter and fainter.

The hotel lobby was deserted as he entered, pulling himself up the narrow flight of stairs, exhaustion threatening to close in on him at any second. Somehow he made it to his room, slammed the door gratefully behind him and leaned against it. He saw the rolled up carpet, the pentagram chalked on the bare boards. Everything as he had left it... Oh, merciful God, no!

The silver chalice lay on its side, dented as though some heavy object had knocked it over and crushed it. A shaft of early morning sunlight streaming in through the small latticed window glinted on the buckled shiny metal, reflecting a dazzling print that had tarnished where it had struck - a cloven hoof mark \

Sabat's horrified gaze followed the damp trail left by the spilled water, a meandering dried-up watercourse on a parched landscape that crossed the chalk marks, broke the continuous lines that had formed a complete star. The ultimate bastion had been breached!

'I shall live on.'

Whirling, recognising Quentin's voice, for one awful moment expecting to see his brother there in the room; maybe as the aged woodcutter, more likely in another form. But there was no body. Just the voice.

It was then that the full, awful realisation hit Mark Sabat. He heard the maniacal laughter again and this time knew from whence it came ... from within himself!

He rushed to the cracked and dusty wall mirror, stared at his reflection. No outward change except exhaustion stamped on his aquiline features, dirt-grimed, clothing dishevelled.

'You fiend!' he hissed. 'You foul monster, Quentin. I have killed you, sought to destroy you for the good of Mankind. But instead your soul has possessed me. But not completely. D'you hear me, Quentin, not completely. For I still have my own soul. A man with two souls, like Petraux, the French sorcerer.'

'And what happened to Petraux?' A mocking question asked within his own mind, taunting.

'He died . . . and rose again in another life,' Sabat muttered as he recalled the legend, the story of how Petraux had fought a battle within himself and in the end took his own life so that when he was born again the evil which had triumphed over him lived on. 'But it shall not happen to me, Quentin. You and I have fought and hated for too long, in bygone lives, and still I live. I must take you with me where-ever I go, but it will not be easy for you because I shall fight you all the way. The black powers may have an enemy within my camp now, but I also have one within theirs. And maybe one day I shall destroy you totally.'

This time there was no answering jibe, just a silence that was disturbed by the rattle of crockery somewhere down below as the hotel kitchen prepared for the start of another day.

Shoulders slumped, eyes already beginning to close with fatigue, Sabat lurched towards the bed which stood in the centre of the pentagram. His dragging feet caught the chalice, and sent it rolling until it struck the skirting board with a metallic clang. Fully dressed he flung himself on to the bed, felt sleep swamping him like an incoming tide, the relentless rollers sweeping him along.

And he dreamed; a dream in which his astral body went forth with Quentin at his side. Not the Quentin he had fought in that clearing, a revolting specimen of senility, but a young and handsome man who bore his own looks. A desert landscape in which nothing grew except sparse cacti and even they were wilting in the terrible heat. Water that loomed up ahead and then vanished as they approached ,it. But Quentin seemed unperturbed striding along as though he felt no discomfort, Mark struggling along beside him and trying to hide the agony of his roasting flesh.

And in the hottest part of the day (did the temperature ever vary and was there such a thing as nightfall?) they came upon the battleground, mutilated bloody bodies lying in the sand, huge black vultures devouring the human carrion, seemingly undisturbed by the intrusion of living men.

Mark Sabat stared and felt the horror eating his stomach like a quick-growing cancer. Two races were intermingled with the carnage, light-skinned,-fair-haired warriors lying prone with the heavier-built, dark-skinned ones, the latter's faces brooding scowls even in death. No victors, no losers, just a stalemate deathlock in the eternal battle of Good versus Evil, Light versus Dark.

And only two remained alive in this desert hell; himself and Quentin. The last ambassadors. The armies were destroyed and now the outcome depended upon this final duel to the death between the two of them.

Sabat awoke, his clothes clinging damply to his skin, his face wet with sweat. Waning sunlight flooded the room and he was aware that it was late afternoon. Within minutes he was shivering as the perspiration began to cool on his body, his thoughts going back to that terrible parched desertland of death. He smiled faintly to himself; that had been the first test, his astral alone with Quentin's in that burning hell, but he had been strong enough to return to his own physical body even though his brother had come back with him. Neither could destroy the other in the final battle so both must share the same body.

But the real battle was only just beginning.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CEMETERY had long been untended. A quarter of a century ago it had been the pride of the small village. Neat rows of white, marbled tombstones, bedecked regularly with fresh flowers according to the season, the grass trimmed so that it resembled strips of lush green lawn. Now the worst side of nature had taken over. Brambles which had hitherto been kept in check relishing the freedom to stretch their thorny tentacles, moss and dandelions obtaining a stranglehold on the grass and stifling it so that it grew long and brown and went to seed. The elements whipped the gravestones mercilessly, obliterating the lettering so that names and dates were indecipherable, and the dead passed into oblivion.

The small church, too, standing amid the tall scots pines had fallen into a state of disrepair. Slates had blown from the roof, smashed on the weed-covered path from the lichgate and had not been replaced, guttering rusted and overflowed during heavy rainfall because starlings regularly nested and roosted there, the big double doors fast conceding to the depredations of woodworm.

One weekly service on Sunday mornings was a last reminder that religion still clung to this decaying edifice, conducted by an ageing curate who was long past retirement. And when his time came, it was rumoured in the village, the Church Commissioners would concede defeat and allow yet another of their remote outposts to fall. Because nobody wanted the church; that much was apparent by the dwindling congregation which had now fallen below half-a-dozen, while the ranks of the godless were swelling.

The bishop, writing in his diocesan magazine, had referred to the possible closure of this once beautiful church. A word had been sprayed on the entrance doors with aerosol paint (he conveniently abstained from quoting the word or even mentioning that it had four letters), and a couple of graves had been 'interfered with'. That worthy man chose to remonstrate liberally in print with anonymous vandals although he blamed the villagers for this apparent lack of pride in their church. He did not mention what had become of the proceeds of a long-established Church Restoration Fund, much of which had been on deposit account at the bank for many years. Nor was it clear whether the Diocese had totally financed a hideously modern place of worship which was in the last stages of construction in one of the city suburbs. Bishop Wentnor wasn't one to go into scrupulous detail where church finances were concerned.

Only on moonlit nights was any of the former elegance of St Adrian's Church restored. The ethereal silvery glow accentuated the architecture while obscuring the missing slates and crumbling stonework in shadow. Even the churchyard took on some degree of respectability. And it was during these periods of a full moon that worshippers came in numbers. But not as Bishop Wentnor would have wished.

It was well after midnight before the full group was assembled in the old cemetery. They had arrived mostly in twos or singly, creeping stealthily through the straggling hedgerow which bordered a wood at the rear, talking only in whispers, then falling into a humble respectful silence when the tall man in flowing black robes, his face concealed by the dark shadows of a cowl, had arrived. Now they stood about awkwardly, teenagers who still remembered school discipline, shuffling plimsolled feet and discreetly extinguishing cigarettes which they had shielded in cupped hands.

The tall man addressed them in commanding tones, a long arm extended to single out a grave only yards away. This one had no headstone, just a wooden marker. A recent burial, the flowers barely starting to wilt. The aura of sadness which it had engendered by day had turned to a sinister atmosphere by night.

Two youths produced a spade and a pickaxe which they had brought with them. They received an

approving nod from the man whose authority none disputed. There was no need for instructions and without further delay they began to dig.

The spadework was easy, fresh soil made soft by the recent grave digging so that the pick was not needed. The watchers moved in closer, eager as the mound of soft damp earth grew, spilling back in small showers until finally they heard stones thudding on the exposed coffin lid down below. Necks craned forward; two well-built youths in soiled denims stepped out of the group. Now the pick was needed, a cracking and splintering of seasoned wood. Two, standing in the open grave, others kneeling to assist in a cumbersome task, dragging the enshrouded corpse up from its last resting place. The tall man stood back with folded arms.

The full moon was almost at its zenith, its soft light showing up every detail as trembling hands tore at the shroud revealing dead white flesh.

Gasps, some of horror from those who had not experienced necromancy before. The corpse was naked now and there was no mistaking the beauty of the young girl. She could not have been more than eighteen, the mortician's make-up accentuating the darkness of her long hair, lips that were full and red even in death, breasts sagging but perfectly proportioned, the dark 'V' of lower hair tantalising the watchers so that some became aroused.

'A young, dead virgin is the most powerful instrument of all.' The cowl'd man's long, slender fingers were stroking the cold flesh almost lovingly, dwelling for a second or two on the wide surgeon's scar which disfigured the flat abdomen even in the moonlight.

"Ow d'yer know 'er's a virgin?" There was open insolence in the tone of the one who still held the pickaxe.

'Hold your tongue!' The cowl had fallen back exposing a broad, cruel face, eyes too close together, the mouth a thin slit, nostrils dilated with fury. 'How dare you question my judgement. Sylvia had a stomach cancer at the age of thirteen. For five years she fought a battle against it, mostly in hospital. She had no boyfriends. Does that answer your question, Julian?'

The other nodded.

'But tonight,' the coven leader's voice became high-pitched, rose almost to a crescendo, 'that virginity

will be lost!"

'Jesus!' a tall rangy youth backed away. 'You're not going to ... '

'Do not argue with me. Our Master has need of Sylvia and for this he will reward us richly. Lift her on to that tomb over there. Hurry, for we have work to do and the night is not without its dangers.'

Trembling hands lifted the dead girl and laid her face upwards on the flat, table-like tomb of a wealthy village family. She sagged, a leg fell and swung in grim lewdness causing several of the younger coven members to jump back in alarm.

'Now, Sheila, get undressed. Everybody get undressed for the Master abhors inhibitions.'

Clothes were shed, the tall man beginning a low incantation as he followed suit, revealing a middle-aged body that was already aroused. A slim, fair-haired girl was trembling violently, biting her lower lip as though trying to stem a flood of tears, folded arms shielding breasts which had yet to reach maturity. She'd never thought that they would go this far. Horace (maybe it wasn't even his real name) was some kind of sadist. Up until now it had all been a kind of sexy game and she hadn't minded the other guys having her. Horace had said that tonight was to be her 'initiation' and she'd thought that was just an excuse for another orgy. But digging up a dead girl who'd spent most of her life fighting against an incurable disease . . . ugh, it was horrible! She'd have no part in this.

'I... I want to go home,' her plea sounded pathetic and she knew she ought to have voiced her disapproval before she'd stripped off. They had dug up a grave on the last full moon but that had been a decrepit skeleton, a bit creepy but the guy had been dead for half a century and it wasn't doing him any harm. Anyway, they'd reburied him afterwards.

Horace paused, his intonation dying away. When he spoke again his voice was angry, his thin lips scarcely seeming to move. 'It's too late now I'm afraid, my dear. You've gone too far to back out. Now, go and lie alongside the lovely Sylvia and remember . . . it's the Master you're giving yourself to. Feel privileged, honoured, to share the sacrificial altar with a virgin \'

Sheila Dowson felt her senses reeling, thought for a moment that she was going to faint. Her instinct was to turn and run; maybe if she hadn't been naked she would have done just that. But somehow the thought of running nude through the village back to her home was an equally frightening thought.

'You can't make me do anything I don't want to do!' She had meant to sound firm and defiant but her voice trembled and suddenly the pent-up tears of terror came in a flood. Then she began to scream.

'Dear me, the girl's becoming hysterical.' Horace's tone was menacing, pitiless. 'John, Michael, carry her to the altar. And I think we'll also have to bind her and gag her!'

Sheila's struggles were futile in the grip of the two young men who hastened to obey their leader's orders. She was seized, gagged with her own underwear, her wrists bound fast with a pair of tights. Wide-eyed she edged as far as she could from the cold, stiff girl who lay beside her, those dead eyes having been prised open so that Sylvia stared sightlessly up at the moon directly above.

'Now we can begin.' Horace held his arms aloft, noting with no small degree of satisfaction the way in which his followers flung themselves prostrate. His naked body glowed with a fiery warmth in spite of the fact that the temperature seemed to have dropped considerably during the last few minutes. The moon was darkening, a fleeting bank of cloud possibly. His gaze rested on the beautiful corpse, now a pale silhouette, her details obscured and flicked on to Sheila who had ceased to struggle. His arousal was almost painful but he knew he must wait until the Master had claimed this sensual human offering before he took his own pleasure.

Dark now, so dark that it was impossible even to make out the outlines of those around him. Still muttering, incoherently because at times like these everybody was afraid. Closing his eyes because he did not want to see, feeling the atmosphere cold and alive with a sensation akin to that of an electric storm. Hearing the fearful babblings of his followers. Sheila struggling with her bonds, shuddering and gasping as though she was orgasming...

Then the smell, a putrid stench that had the bile rising up into Horace's throat; an odour that was familiar and all the more frightening because he recognised it.

Like the stench of a foul stable that had not been cleaned out for centuries, rancid with urine, excreta and animal sweat. Horace clasped his hands to his ears in an attempt to shut out the pounding of hooves and the terrified human screams.

Sabat had not liked Bishop Wentnor even in the days of his own priesthood when the bishop had been a mere canon. Overweight, florid-faced (there were rumours that he drank heavily), all combining to give a

supercilious attitude, a man who did not tolerate any disagreement with his own opinions. A rebel in his own way, Wentnor had gambled on some unconventional political views, hoping that if the right party won the next election he would receive the favours due to him for his loyalty. The gamble had paid off and he had become a bishop. In his own way he was as ruthless as Sabat was.

And Wentnor made no secret of his dislike for Sabat. One who has shown disloyalty to the Church should have been defrocked. Unfortunately it was a case of once a priest always a priest. The Dean and Chapter remembered Sabat's powers of exorcism and had advocated calling him in once the police had hinted that there was more to the 'desecration' of these graves in St Adrian's churchyard and the exhumation of corpses than just plain vandalism. Wentnor had refused adamantly but within a week he had received a directive from the Archbishop that Sabat was to be contacted. Wentnor fumed secretly but he had no choice.

Nevertheless, on principle, the bishop kept Sabat waiting almost an hour at the palace. Damn the feller, he'd got to be put in his place; he'd turned his back on God and such an act did not command the respect of those in holy office.

'Ah, Sabat,' Wentnor smiled facially as he seated himself behind his huge ornate desk in his plush study. No apologies, make the young upstart feel uncomfortable. 'I don't need to go into a lot of details on this business, do I? You've read the papers, doubtless.'

'I'd rather you did.' Sabat's dark eyes never flinched, gave nothing away. 'The press have a habit of exaggerating these things. I'd rather have the facts first hand. From you, Bishop.'

Bishop Wentnor felt his pulses starting to race. Sabat showed not the slightest trace of subservience. Nor respect.

'Very well then, Sabat.' Curt now, glancing at the dark-haired man sitting opposite him but finding himself dropping his gaze and staring up at the carved ceiling above, fingertips pressed together, a posture he adopted in the cathedral. It gave one a bearing of holiness, he thought, at least in the eyes of the average conventional congregation. 'At first it was the usual vandalism. A word sprayed on the church doors ...'

'What word?'

'I... really, Sabat, that is of no consequence. Suffice to say that it was an obscene one.'

'The word, Bishop. I must collate every minute detail, every fact known however irrelevant it may appear if I am to conduct a proper investigation prior to an exorcism.'

Wentnor's complexion reddened a deeper hue. He stole a glance at Sabat, but found himself looking quickly away again. Damn him, he just wants to make me say that. 'All right then, Sabat. It was F U C K.' Spell it out, it sounds better that way.

Sabat nodded but gave no hint of the inner satisfaction he felt. 'Then the graves started being opened?'

'That's right. One or two of the older ones were interfered with but fortunately there weren't any living relations to kick up a fuss. Until they dug up this young girl, Sylvia Adams. A tragic life cut off before it began, sweet innocence itself. . . and then to have that happen.'

'What did they do to her?'

'Indescribable and I absolutely refuse to go into details. The worst case of necromancy that it has been my lot to come into contact with. Her folks, understandably, are kicking up a terrible fuss. These vile people must have brought along an animal of some kind and mated it with the corpse. The police are under the impression that it was a goat but the only trace of its cloven hooves are on the dead girl herself \ Not a single print on the ground around the tomb.'

Sabat pursed his lips, ran his tongue along the fringe of his moustache. 'Celestina of Haiti was formally married to a goat for the purposes of voodoo. Voodoo is still as rife on the island now as it was then, Bishop. And it has spread across the world ... to places like England!'

'Surely you're not suggesting . . . '

'It is too early to suggest anything yet. I am merely stating a few facts. But please go on.'

'The police drew a blank. Certainly some of the villagers know something about what's been going on but door to door enquiries have come up with absolutely nothing. Then, within a month of this disgusting exhumation yet another grave was dug up. *

'Whose this time?'

'Not a recent burial, I'm glad to say. In fact, the grave was just over a hundred years old. A man by the name of William Gardiner.'

'And what did they do to the skeleton?'

'I've no idea. It has never been found since!'

'Christ alive!' Sabat sat bolt upright.

Bishop Wentnor glared, made as if to reprimand his visitor for blasphemy but changed his mind; he wanted to get this meeting over and be rid of Sabat. 'The police believe they may have dumped it somewhere, probably it will never be found. Terrible as the desecration of these graves is, it isn't like murder, is it?'

'In many cases it is far worse than murder.' 'In the case of the Adams girl I'll agree but... 'That was possibly only a taste of things to come, Bishop. Necromancy can take many forms. Possibly the Adams girl's body was merely used for vile participation in an obscene act. At least that was the original intention. Those cloven prints on her body could have been implanted there by the members of this particular cult. On the other hand . . . ' he paused, possibly debating whether or not to expound his theory further. 'On the other hand, Bishop, they could just have succeeded in calling up the ultimate in evil. It has been done, you know. A classic case was when the infamous Aleister Crowley raised up Pan in Paris. He did just that and as a result Crowley spent several months in a mental institution, virtually a gibbering idiot. His companion in the experiment was struck dead. It is a known fact that such powerful evil summoned from beyond never returns empty handed. So it would be feasible to assume that although Sylvia Adams' corpse was used for the purpose of powerful black magic, whatever was called up took another life. Thus, what became of the body? Are there any missing persons reported in the locality?'

'Not that I know of but you can check with the police on that.' Bishop Wentnor's ruddy complexion was now considerably paler and he drummed his fingers on the desk top nervously,

'My first task will be to try and locate the missing skeleton.' Sabat's eyes narrowed. Then we need to know just who these devil-worshippers are. They may not be locals; often a coven will travel many miles if they find a place suitable for their activities, and from what you tell me St Adrian's church and its grounds have all the right ingredients. However, I must look further afield if necessary, but to begin with I'll need accommodation in this village. Incognito. Full expenses and I'll let you have a scale of my charges.'

Bishop Wentnor blanched even further, conjured up a mental picture of a recent balance sheet of diocesan accounts. 'I ... well, yes, of course. But I was under the impression that exorcists did not.. '

'Charge for their services?'

'Yes. A sort of tradition, like bone-setters. A gift from God not to be exploited in monetary terms. Like water-diviners . . . '

'Perhaps you would like to use one of your own exorcists then, Bishop.' Sabat rose to his feet, buttoning his dark serge jacket.

'No, no,' Wentnor held up a hand. He would have liked nothing better than to have dispensed with the services of this man but the Archbishop would not have accepted his explanation lightly. 'Of course you'll be paid in full. Just submit your bills.'

'Thank you.' Sabat smiled, a kind of leer that a caged lion might have given its keeper at feeding time. 'I shall prepare to depart for my destination tomorrow.'

'The police are still conducting their investigations in the locality. You may care to make yourself known to Detective Inspector Plowden who is leading the enquiry.'

'I may,' Sabat paused in the doorway, and added, 'on the other hand I may not.'

Sabat returned to London and darkness had already fallen by the time he reached his exclusive West Hampstead home. Unlocking the front door he stepped inside, paused to savour that aroma which never ceased to afford him a great deal of personal satisfaction; the smell of French polish and that almost undefinable odour which comes from antiques and antiquarian books, the flavour of accumulated wealth. He smiled faintly to himself; life had been good to him in many ways. That terrorist armaments cache he had discovered during his SAS days. That, he decided, had been the turning point in his life, the bridge that divided a mediocre income from wealth. He could have reported it, possibly received a commendation and within a month everybody would have forgotten about it because there were bomb factories all over the country. Sabat had made a bargain with the anarchists - a hard one. In the weeks that followed his conscience had troubled him and he'd tried to console himself with the thought that he'd deprived the enemy of an awful lot of cash; they still had their high-powered rifles, machine guns and grenades but it had cost them dearly and would set them back a lot in monetary terms. But he got over it, told himself it didn't matter either way because the world was a jungle, every man for himself. After that he'd made one or two more bargains, blackmail if one really analysed it. He'd hit the enemy in his own way, reduced their capital resources. The sort of thing Quentin would have done. . . and Mark Sabat would still be doing it if it wasn't for that stupid bitch of a colonel's wife who had made her own bargain with her legs wide apart and as a result Sabat had found himself out of the SAS with a good kick up the arse to help him on his way. Jesus, he hated that bitch but he couldn't stop himself getting an erection every time he thought about her.

Suddenly he was aware of how cold it was inside the house. He shivered, had to forcibly remind himself that it was still late summer, that he'd been sweating on the tube across London. A sudden stab of fear had him reaching for the light switch, finding it, flicking it. Nothing! Nothing except cold, cloying darkness.

And then the voice, familiar tones. 'Do not interfere in what does not concern you.'

'Damn you, Quentin!'

A laugh. Sabat staggered back against a table, his head suddenly feeling as though it was about to burst, a fast escalating headache of migraine proportions as though he'd been struck a physical blow. Oh Christ, he'd been caught off his guard, lulled himself into thinking that Quentin had just disappeared, relaxed his constant fight against his inner self and his split soul. And his own adversary had chosen this moment, attacked with full force, a boxer being pummelled against the ropes.

'There's an easy way out for you, Mark. Take your own life, like Petraux did. So easy.'

Sabat gasped, found himself even considering the proposition. Let Quentin have his way and be damned to it all. But another thought jerked him back into the fight. To commit suicide would be to precipitate

himself into the black beyond, a willing slave to the rulers of darkness. He had to fight, every inch of the way, throw off Quentin in this continual struggle to remain master of his own body and soul.

'No!' he yelled aloud, almost felt the echo of his defiance rebounding back at him off the walls. 'I'll fight against you, all the way!'

It seemed as though strong hands had encircled his throat in a steely stranglehold grip determined to crush the life out of him. He couldn't breathe, felt his eyes beginning to bulge like air-bubbles about to burst; a pounding of heart and pulses, voodoo drums beating out a rapid tattoo of death. Senses swimming, clawing the air wildly, knocking over a small table as he fell to the ground, writhing like a serpent in its death throes.

The attack had come hard and fast, but not from Quentin alone for it was impossible for him to have summoned up such terrible psychic and physical force. The evil within Mark Sabat's own body had called for help from beyond in this attempt to take over one who sought to defy the forces which controlled St Adrian's churchyard and the coven there.

Suddenly Sabat allowed his body to relax. A physical struggle would not save him. He had to use something much more potent and even now his muzzy brain was clouding over just when he needed it most. Oh, God, he'd have to test his old powers in a last desperate throw, if only he could remember. Words littered his desperate attempts at recollection like a scattered jig-saw. He had to fit them together -fast!

'God ... the Son of God ... who by death ... destroyed death ... and overcame him who ... had the power of death ...' fading fast, nearly unconscious; one last supreme effort. 'Beat down Satan quickly.'

Just when it seemed that Mark Sabat was slipping down into a red-tinged black abyss he found himself floating back up, gasping for air and managing to draw great lungfuls in because the crushing grip on his windpipe had relaxed. His head still ached but not so violently as before and he found that he could move his limbs.

For some time he lay there on the hall floor, the darkness welcoming and no longer cold. Total relaxation, calling upon his knowledge of yoga to calm mind and body, knowing from experience that the attack would not be renewed ... yet! For the moment he had won, just another round in an eternal battle, but nevertheless he had overcome his attackers. Quentin certainly had instigated this because only Quentin would know of his intention to fight the supreme evil behind the necromancy at St Adrian's. Whatever his brother had called upon it was some low entity, a powerful yet ignorant poltergeist, a crude

beast from the dark jungles beyond the ken of Mankind.

But, most important of all, Mark Sabat was still in possession of his most powerful weapon, the ability to exorcise an evil spirit. That was some consolation, even though the enemy had been a low entity. Nevertheless, the real test would come when he went down to that remote village in the heart of leafy England, a countryside steeped in legend where once King Arthur's knights had sat at their mythical round table and where Guy of Warwick had fought and killed the terrible Dun Cow. A land soaked in blood and evil where the dark forces would be all-powerful. Sabat shuddered at the thought.

Some time later he rose to his feet, tried the light switch and flooded the hallway with bright fluorescent light that jarred his aching head. He felt physically and mentally drained as he mounted the wide, carpeted stairs and made his way to his bedroom on the landing above.

Every nerve in his body screamed for sleep but he must keep them waiting a while yet for there was important work to be done before he could relax. It was unlikely that the attack would be renewed this night but he was taking no chances.

His large bedroom was surprisingly sparsely furnished when compared with the others in the house. Bare floorboards, a double bed and a wardrobe. Nothing else.

Wearily Sabat set to work. First the floor was swept clean, every effort taken to ensure that no obvious particle of dirt remained. Then he produced chalk and string and painstakingly began to mark out a pentagram with the bed in the centre. After that followed an inner circle. Then the small silver chalice filled with water from the bathroom tap and charged. Sabat's voice low and meaningful, sincere in every sentence. It was almost as though he had thrown off the evil which flowed through him but he knew only too well that that was not so; he had only submerged it. He would not make the mistake of being caught unawares again.

He undressed, stripped naked and flung his clothes out of the pentacle for fear that some evil entity might have lodged in some dust on the cloth and would materialise later. He sighed, flung back the quilt and eased his nude body on to the under sheet. Sabat never wore night attire, likening it to going to bed in a suit. He liked to experience the freedom of his body as God had intended it to be, totally unclothed and..

It came as a shock to him to realise that his exhaustion had evaporated totally during the process of undressing. A glance down at his own body confirmed the reason, the rigid pulsing erection, the sensation spreading up from his lower regions. He groaned softly to himself - another trick of the Left-Hand Path

to undermine his resistance, or just the fact that sexually he had gone into overdrive again? His sexual appetite knew no bounds, was seldom fully satisfied. He shrugged as his fingers slid down his flat stomach and began to ruffle the bushy black pubic hair, drawn irresistibly to that part of his body like iron filings to a magnet.

His fantasies came like scudding clouds on a breezy day, beginning with that youthful indiscretion which had once caused him so much mental anguish; now he found it exhilarating and lived it over again. Racing in time with his finger movements, one encounter after another, all leading up to an explosive finale in which the colonel's unfaithful wife cast aside her vicious hunting crop, tugged off her black leather boots and crawled across to him with her mouth wide in expectation.

For the second time that night Sabat writhed and fought and by the time his exhaustion was beginning to creep back the first grey light of a new day was creeping in through the chinks in the curtains.

Relief at last because it was his own body that had done this to him, not some insidious sensual plot by Quentin and his evil ones to weaken him. One final pang of fear that followed Sabat into a troubled slumber - that one day they might send Erzulie, the Black Venus, to him as he convulsed powerless in one of his crazed masturbation fantasies, and that the beautiful black goddess of voodoo would succeed where others had failed.

CHAPTER TWO

THERE WAS nothing untoward about the village itself, Sabat decided as he drove his silver Daimler in on the winding north road. Once it had been a hamlet, renovated and extended agricultural cottages dating back to the fourteenth century. But the evil serpent of conurbation was not to be kept at bay as the housing estates on the outskirts sprawled untidily like floodwater from a swollen river, swamping all before it, leaving just one tiny island in the middle.

Sabat slowed on a rise that fell away to the old village, cast his gaze upon the unsightliness of it all. New houses, strangers moving into the area, the old evil being joined by new evil in an unholy alliance. The population had swelled and that was going to make it a thousand times more difficult to find those who indulged in necromancy.

The original village was much the same as it had always been, doors and windows opening directly on to pavements, a small general store valiantly trying to compete with the large supermarket in the new part. A blacksmith's shop; horseriding was very much a status symbol with the nouveaux riche. Then the church, a crumbling fortress which had been overrun by the godless invaders and condemned to dereliction. He made out the cemetery adjoining but the hedges and undergrowth were too wild and struggling to afford him much detail.

The 'Dun Cow' (there were several in the county named after the legendary monster) stood at the far end of the street beyond the rambling vicarage. While the main edifice still retained much of its originality, an extension twice the size of the old pub had been built on at the rear, cunningly screened from the road by architects who had fought for and finally won planning permission. A disco to lure the teenagers every Saturday night.

Sabat eased his car into the spacious car-park, noted the deep pot-holes and some broken bottles which had not been picked up. The 'Dun Cow' was making its profit, it had no time to consider the safety and convenience of its clients.

The sign over the door stated that Herbert Walley was licensed to sell beer, wines and spirits, and the gentleman himself behind the lounge bar was doing exactly that, pouring cloudy pints of ale while dressed in a collarless striped shirt with sleeves rolled up above the elbow. Once a powerful man his muscles were running to fat in middle-age and his expanding waistline was a fair sign that he drank large quantities of his own beer.

'Yes, sir' Walley looked round and Sabat was quick to notice an unmistakable southern accent. Another stranger.

'I'm looking for accommodation for a few nights.' Sabat pulled a yellowing meerschaum pipe from his pocket and began stuffing long-stranded tobacco into the bowl. An intermittent smoker he preferred a pipe, especially on those occasions when he indulged in cannabis, for so much of the expensive substance could be wasted in the rolling of a cigarette.

'I think we can arrange that, sir,' forced jocularity, 'dinner, bed and breakfast. The food's excellent; it has to be - my wife's the cook.'

Sabat nodded, his face hidden behind a cloud of blue smoke.

'If you'd like a drink I'll go and check that we've a room vacant. Bar meals at lunchtime, and they're good!'

Sabat winced at the sales talk and thought again about those wicked slivers of glass in the car-park. Evil came in varying degrees. Sipping a whisky and pep he glanced casually around the large room, noting its occupants and how far removed they were from traditional villagers. Some were obviously reps passing through, others businessmen who had probably driven in from the factories they ran on the nearby trading estate. Alcohol flowed freely and it was difficult to believe that the country was in the grip of an economic recession.

Then his gaze stopped and centred on a red-haired girl by the bar. She was seated on a high stool and Sabat got the feeling that her skirt had not ridden up accidentally so that it showed ample shapely thighs and just a glimpse of suspenders. Not bad looking, he thought, and guessed that the men on either side of her were able to see well down her low-cut blouse. A mole on her left cheek added to her sensuality and he guessed that she was in her mid-to-late twenties. It seemed that she was a regular customer here, and his sensitive hearing picked out her name across the hub-bub of the bar. Randa, the man standing directly behind her was calling her, his hand edging further and further around her waist. That would be short for Miranda, Sabat concluded, and wished that he didn't get erections so frequently.

He glanced at the girl again, felt that maybe he'd seen her somewhere before, or it could be that she was just a type - a type that turned him on. Then Herbert Walley was breaking into his reverie, smilingly advising him that there was a vacant single room to let, Sabat drained his drink, nodded, and followed the landlord through an interior door. A clock on the wall showed that it was 1.30pm. This afternoon Mark Sabat would begin his investigations.

'I'm pleased to meet you, Mr Sabat,' the ageing Reverend Maurice Storton dribbled down a long-stemmed pipe and made sucking noises in time with the bobbing of his oversized bald head. Last week had seen his seventy-fourth birthday as well as the ninth anniversary of his ordination in holy orders. He reflected that the Church was as good a part-time retirement job as most; a steady routine until somebody began digging up the graves in the cemetery. That was when life really became difficult.

'I'd like to examine the church archives back as far as they go.' Sabat did not feel his usual animosity towards the Cloth in Storton's case, rather pity, plus anger towards the Church hierarchy for the way in which they were exploiting this elderly man, giving him the same responsibility that a full-time curate had shouldered in the past. But instead of a salary, all Storton received was rent-free accommodation in this tumbledown vicarage.

'The police have taken them away,' Storton bubbled an apology into the gooey bowl of his pipe, then removed the stem from his mouth, still adhered to his lips by a string of spittle.

'I don't know when they'll bring them back but there's nothing much they'll learn from them; just dull records, like a register of churchwardens and authorised lay preachers. You could always contact Detective Inspector Plowden, I suppose, but he's very officious and rather rude, too.'

'I don't intend to work with the police unless I get really stuck.' Sabat decided to join the clergyman in a pipe of tobacco and pulled his meerschaum out of his pocket. 'All the same, it's a pity he's got those records.'

'But I didn't give him the Domesday Book.' Storton closed an eye and contorted his features in what was supposed to be a wink. 'Because he didn't ask for it, and after the way he spoke to me I wasn't going to offer any information. I don't suppose he even knows it exists. I expect the vicar's forgotten all about it, too.'

'The Domesday Book?'

'Yes, quite an interesting record of parish life, compiled by parishioners in the last half of the last century. You know, snippets from newspapers concerning the village, and a few handwritten articles. I suppose it gave them something to do on long winter evenings when there was no television or cinema.'

'And you've actually got this book?' Sabat leaned forward intently, his pipe forgotten.

'Oh, yes,' Storton beamed. 'It lay gathering dust in the vestry for years and one day I decided to bring it home and have a read at it. It's upstairs in my bedroom.'

'May I see it?'

'But of course. I'll go and fetch it for you.'

Sabat tensed, his whole body suddenly a car with the choke fully extended. He paced the old-fashioned drawing room listening to the clergyman's shuffling footsteps going upstairs and across the floor of the room directly above. It seemed an eternity before Maurice Storton returned, carrying a large, stained and faded leather-bound exercise book.

Sabat took it from him, his fingers trembling as he turned the pages, hope that flared and died and flared again. The pages were a crazy jumble of unrelated subjects, some pasted newspaper cuttings that had yellowed with age, articles in copper-plate handwriting that needed to be deciphered slowly and carefully.

'It'll take me hours to go through this,' he muttered at length.

'Then take it with you.' The other was struggling to get his pipe going again. 'Quite frankly, I haven't had much success with it^ my eyesight isn't what it used to be. But I'd be glad if you'd let me have it back because it's church property and just suppose the vicar suddenly remembered its existence.'

'Of course.' Sabat rose to his feet. 'If I can get an uninterrupted few hours alone in my hotel room I should be finished with it tomorrow and I'll drop it back to you.'

'A terrible business.' Storton shuffled to the door to see his visitor out. 'Let us hope that now the police are here these vile people will leave our churchyard alone.'

'Perhaps,' Sabat smiled and hoped that the coven would return to St Adrian's churchyard; it was his one chance of getting to grips with them. But for the moment they seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Perusing the Domesday Book proved to be a far bigger and more irksome task than even Sabat had anticipated. Dozens of cuttings and entries featured church fetes, the appointment of church wardens, vergers and vicars. He resorted to his pipe again, wondering if he was wasting his time. Then he saw the faded handwritten entry in purple ink, every letter carefully fashioned by the writer, and headed Heresy Trial.

A date had been inked in the margin - 1871.

Sabat's spine tingled and a tiny shiver ran up and down it when he picked out the name William Gardiner. Suddenly everything was clicking into place. It read:

The shame of this village is something which will not be lived down for many years to come following the Crown Court trial of William Gardiner, possibly the first heresy trial to be heard in England for two centuries. The charges were brought after the said man was seen to be holding blasphemous rites, totally unclothed, in our own sacred churchyard. Mr Gardiner had lived in the village since childhood and was known to be an atheist in spite of the efforts of the Reverend Longhorn to bring him into the fold. A bachelor who lived alone in Primrose Lane, Mr Gardiner was a loner and rarely mixed with the parishioners, although he was known to drink at the 'Dun Cow'. On witnessing the obscene participation in unholy rites, the Reverend Longhorn advised Bishop Lacey and charges were duly brought. The Magistrates Court committed Mr Gardiner to the Assizes but on April 30th a jury found him not guilty of heresy and Judge Wilkinson acquitted him, and in addition reprimanded the Church for wasting the court's time on an outdated although still viable charge. Mr Gardiner returned to live in the village in spite of the feeling against him.

Sabat was tense. The acquittal dated April 30th . . . Walpurgisnacht, the time when the evil forces were most powerful. It was too much of a coincidence! Had the powers to which Gardiner paid homage in the dark hours come to the rescue of their own kind in a court of law?

Sabat's pipe was dead and he chewed hard on the stem as he flicked over more pages of the Domesday Book. Church meetings ... the acquisition of a tract of land joining the existing cemetery had been consecrated . . . Oh, Christ, there had to be something else. There was!

This time it was a yellowed square cut from the local newspaper and dated November 7th 1880. It was headed Deaths. His eye followed down the list of names in alphabetical order. 'Gardiner, William. Died

October 31st aged 50, suddenly after a stroke. The funeral was held at St Adrian's Church, November 4th.' Nothing else.

Sabat closed the Domesday Book with a loud snap. His eyes were bright and there was a half smile on his face. This was it, the missing link in the recent necromancy in St Adrian's churchyard! William Gardiner had practised black magic and had been freed by a jury on Walpurgisnacht. He had died on Hallowe'en night. Evil bones had been buried and now, after over a century, they had been dug up. Why and by whom? The answer to the first question was only too obvious: Gardiner's remains were powerful magic and were being used to commune with the dark forces. But until Sabat found the answer to the second question there was no way of knowing what evil would be unleashed on this village.

He stood up, crossed the room to where his small suitcase stood and opening it took out a length of string, some chalk and a silver chalice. The pentagram was vital for his own safety for tonight his astral body must go forth and scour the countryside if these modern necromancers were to be found. And during every second that he was away from his earthly body, Mark Sabat would be in dire peril.

The early evening sunlight glinted on the sluggish waters of the winding, narrow river. The banks were sheer but the protruding roots of overhanging trees offered a precarious hold for anyone foolish enough to climb down to the water. Likewise, these same roots extended below the surface and often impeded the progress of debris floating downstream; items of cast-off clothing, a treadless tyre . . . or a drowned corpse!

Detective Inspector Plowden stood on the bank below a spreading willow tree and hoped that he wasn't going to have to clamber down there; he'd always had a secret fear of deep muddy rivers even though he was a comparatively good swimmer. A childhood terror he'd never shrugged off, a lurking thought at the back of his mind that the murky current might hold something slimy and dangerous. Like an alligator that had escaped from a reptile house. Logically there was almost five million to one against such a happening, but he didn't like these sort of rivers any the more for that reasoning. And when he set eyes on the dead body which the frogman had dragged up from the depths he decided that the alligator odds had been considerably reduced.

Plowden chewed on his lower lip, reached for a cigarette but thought that the taste of tobacco might make him throw up. His stomach churned and he tasted something sharp and acid in the back of his throat.

'It's a girl,' the matter-of-fact dapper Sergeant Hurst at his elbow felt that somebody had to say something and thought, at least I think it bloody well is.

A group of plainclothes detectives helped to lift the body up the bank, a white limp thing covered with algae and other water weed like some hideous evil mermaid. They laid it down on the grass and the head lolled to one side exposing an open gash where the throat had been, a cavity that teemed with some species of feeding beetles.

'Christ!' the frogman removed his mask, grimaced, 'I've found a few in my time but nowt to beat that. The fuckin' rats must've thought Christmas'd come early!'

'Shut up!' Plowden's tension crackled as he forced himself to kneel beside the corpse. God, to think he had to get close to a thing like this, touch it! He almost snatched his fingers away, it was like the feel of a dead reptile. The hair was matted into a mud ball, some of it torn out by the roots like an angry gardener who had gone berserk with a patch of squitch; you couldn't even tell the colour of the strands. Open eyes, Plowden resisted the urge to close them; they seemed to be staring at him. The frogman was right, rats had been feeding on the flesh, gnawing it right down to the bones in places and that hole in the stomach was where they had gone after the entrails. Raw tripe, Plowden nearly spewed at the thought.

It wasn't his job really. No sir! He was conducting an enquiry into black magic worship and the desecration of graves. This was a straight forward case of drowning that the boys in blue could look after; consult the missing persons file, just a matter of elimination and then identification. There shouldn't be any problems. The CID were looking for a missing skeleton, not a fresh corpse; they couldn't waste valuable time on this.

He leaned back on his haunches, decided he could manage a cigarette after all. He'd have to hang on here for a while until somebody came to relieve him, then he'd get back to the task of finding that skeleton. No need even to look at that revolting corpse anymore.

'What're those marks?' The frogman was kneeling down stabbing a finger at the dead girl's forehead.

'Rats, I expect. . . ' Detective Inspector Plowden's voice died away. He hadn't meant to look again but his policeman's training had directed his gaze automatically back to the corpse, picked out a couple of deep indentations that had gouged the flesh and penetrated the skull in an ugly twin fracture. Death-blows, all right. Nobody could have lived after those; a crude bludgeoning. Jesus, his eyes narrowed, this could just be murder I

Then his stomach was lurching again, and his late sandwich lunch almost came back. It wasn't the sight of death, nor the brutality of the blows that had him retching. Instead there was a familiarity about those

marks, the feeling one gets halfway through a second-rate TV film that you've seen it at the cinema years ago; a gradual dawning on the memory that you recognise it because you thought how bloody awful it was at the time but it still scared hell out of you.

'It don't look like rats to me.' The frogman was persistent, determined that his own observations should not be credited to somebody else. 'Looks like a fuckin' sheep's walked over 'er.'

'No,' Plowden straightened up, swayed, and supported himself against the willow trunk while a wave of dizziness passed, 'not a sheep. I'd say it was the goat those bastards mated that other corpse with that was responsible for this!'

And suddenly the evening wasn't so balmy after all. Three hardened police officers felt the perspiration starting to chill on their bodies.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS eleven o'clock when Sabat climbed naked into his bed within the pentagram. He was tense and uneasy but that would pass once he willed his mind and body to relax. Thankfully this time he experienced no erotic thoughts, no arousal.

Down below the customers were filing out of the pub, their conversation noisy. Car doors slammed on the carpark and engines were revved noisily; loud farewells accompanied by coarse laughter. Somebody was singing noisily, being told to 'shaddup'.

But within half-an-hour all was quiet except for the clinking of glasses being washed in the bar. Sabat took a deep breath, expelled it slowly and began to relax. Now he had the difficult task of attempting to project his astral body to a particular destination, a sort of directive to be issued to his subconscious. To have embarked upon a haphazard exploration of the first plane would have been both useless and dangerous.

There was nothing to be gained by conducting a vigil at the churchyard; the police were too active at present for the necromancers to risk returning there just yet.

Miranda! Sabat decided upon this course of action almost instantaneously. It surprised him and he wondered if perhaps his sexual desire was taking over again. A moment's reflection and he knew it wasn't. There was something about her that had attracted his attention earlier, almost an intuition which he couldn't explain. And in the past he had followed more slender hunches than this one and come up with the right answer; a kind of ultra-perception, a blind faith in his own holy powers.

Sleep came slowly but eventually he felt himself slipping away from his physical body, gazing down on it from aloft; experiencing the same fear he always felt when he left his earthly form, that the evil powers might somehow stop him returning. A lot of people had died that way, death attributed to natural causes. There had been a lot of nonsense talked and written in recent years about people dying and recalling how their astrals had been drawn back into their bodies; mostly it was just a kind of coma in which they became aware that they actually had an astral body. They had not really died at all.

Sabat was floating above the village, now wearing dark flowing robes. A naked man passed him, striking upwards, someone who had recently died and had not yet learned the art of clothing himself. Sabat wondered about changing his form; maybe an owl or a bat but it should not be necessary yet; the only person who knew him was Quentin and as Quentin was himself there was no point.

The village slept under a mantle of starlight, rooftops glinting faintly. The church looked almost a ruin from this angle, gaping holes in the roof where the slates had blown off and the weathercock on the steeple hanging precariously as though it might fall off at any moment. He paused, scanned the overgrown cemetery. A mass of dark shadow that could have hidden anything so he went down lower. But there was nothing there, not even a watching, hidden policeman.

Up again, a feeling of exhilaration which he checked with a reminder of the importance of vigilance. The dark powers surely knew by now that he was abroad. He left the old village behind, floated on to where the big housing estates began. The landlord at the 'Dun Cow*' had described earlier where Miranda lived with a knowing wink and a half-smile. 'You'll be unlikely to find her at home in the evenings, sir,' Herbert Walley had said. 'Unless of course she's reason to go back home. Most of the time she's here in the bar and if you want to see her ... '

'I don't,' Sabat had smiled. 'I was just curious, that's all.'

Walley had grinned but refrained from passing further comment. Obviously he was used to receiving enquiries about Miranda,

Every house looked the same; square or oblong boxes, detached or semi-detached, all with minute open-plan gardens, the planners determined to cram as many as possible into every square acre. Sabat glided over avenues and crescents, through a maze of red London brick, until finally he found the house he was seeking and passed inside.

It was a small, single-person type dwelling with a tiny entrance hall leading off into an L-shaped kitchen-cum-dining-room. Untidy, a smell of stale cooking and items of unwashed clothing draped over chairs. Sabat checked, his acute astral senses picking up a sound, a low moan that appeared to be rising to a crescendo. It was coming from upstairs, and it sounded as though somebody was in pain.

It had never occurred to him that Miranda might not be alone, the darkened house leading him to believe that she was either still out or else asleep in bed. He halted in the bedroom doorway and stared in amazement at the scene which greeted him by the light of a low-watt table lamp. Miranda was in bed all right, but she certainly wasn't alone and neither was she in pain. In fact she was in the throes of physical ecstasy, copulating wildly and apparently on the brink of a climax.

Her supple body gyrated as she straddled the man beneath her, her head hung forward so that her long auburn hair spilled down and screened her small breasts, two pink and firm nipples protruding through the strands. Loud gasps as she appeared to struggle for breath, arms wind-milling wildly.

Sabat's gaze switched to the man lying beneath her. He was big, only his height preventing him from being excessively fat. Even so, surplus flesh bulged and rippled as Miranda pressed down on him.

Perspiration glistened on his high brow and a receding hairline was thinning a path that would eventually result in a bald crown. Small, close-set eyes flickered open from time to time and the thin, bloodless lips were pursed as he, too, delighted in this encounter.

Strangely, Sabat felt no sense of arousal; he rarely did on the astral where one became a detached spectator to the actions of mortal bodies. Totally invisible, he had no fear of being detected as he stepped into the room.

Miranda and her lover were convulsing wildly, their united quivering bodies causing the frail modern bed to creak alarmingly and the lamp to vibrate on the bedside table. Those earlier groans and gasps had escalated to cries of delight and then Miranda was sinking down on to her partner, rubbing her breasts across his hairy torso so that the sharp nipples spiked him.

For some time after that they lay still and Sabat feared that they had fallen asleep and might remain so until morning, in which case his night would have been wasted for it was only safe to remain away from his physical body for a few hours each time.

However, after perhaps twenty minutes the man stirred, used his strength to extricate himself from the sensual embrace of his partner. 'I have to be going,' he muttered.

'Or your wife'll be getting suspicious,' there was a hint of jealousy in Miranda's reply.

'I have work to do.' The other groped for his shirt which was lying close by on the floor. The others are getting impatient. We haven't met for over a month now. It has been too dangerous and now that they've found Sheila Dowson's body there's going to be cops snooping round the village for weeks to come.'

'But we didn't kill her. She just. . . had a cerebral attack or something.'

'Cerebral attack!' he laughed mirthlessly, the shirt being pulled over his head hiding the expression bordering on terror in his eyes. 'No cerebral attack can pound the skull like . . . like an animal's kicked it in! You know yourself what happened that night and what it did to Horace.'

'I wasn't looking.' Her hitherto flushed features had gone deathly pale now. 'I kept my face buried in the

grass and my eyes shut tight and prayed it wouldn't happen to me. When d'you think Horace will be coming out of the nuthouse?'

'Not for a long time. If ever.' The big man was sitting on the side of the bed now, struggling to pull his trousers on. The last I heard he thought he was Prime Minister and was ordering the doctors to set him free, accusing them of having brought his government down by an armed coup. I guess I'll have to take over from now onwards.'

'Why... why don't we just forget about it all, Royston?' Miranda's voice quavered. 'We . . . don't have to meet again ... or anything ... do we?'

'Don't be a stupid little bitch!' His features contorted and she flinched as though he might hit her. 'We've gone too far to back out; there's no turning back once you've trodden the Left Hand Path, you should know that. We are the disciples of the Master and if we attempt to desert him he will strike us down in the same way the Dowson girl was struck down. But now we have the ultimate in power, the bones of Gardiner himself who was one of the most powerful, if the least known, of all black magicians, The Master will look after us if we serve him well, never fear.'

'Well, he didn't exactly look after Horace.' The girl was trembling violently. 'Or . . . or Sheila Dowson.'

'He works in his own mysterious way. Horace achieved what Crowley achieved many years ago except that Horace lost his courage at the crucial moment; he would have gone blabbing to the police. The Master knew this and silenced him. Possibly he would have struck him dead had Horace not had a record of devotion to the Left Hand Path. That was an example of the Master's forbearance towards a disciple. Now it is up to us to carry on his work. The most difficult part is accomplished.'

'We daren't use the churchyard again.' A pleading whine.

'Obviously not... at the moment. But do you think that I have not taken steps to find another place and now our new temple is ready. Within a few nights we shall be gathered there but until the time is nigh I shall not make our destination known. It is too dangerous.'

'You know I wouldn't tell anybody.'

'I trust you won't for should I even suspect that you have talked loosely then the river will receive its second corpse within a matter of weeks!'

Miranda swallowed, and was reminded again of Sheila Dowson's fate.

'But there is an enemy in our midst,' Royston's voice dropped to a whisper and the watching Sabat stiffened. 'I have seen him about the village and recognised him for what he is, a black vulture who avoids contact with the police yet is sniffing out our trail. But such is our power that I fear him not and he will be destroyed.'

Sabat flinched, debated whether or not to return immediately to his physical body in his bedroom at the 'Dun Cow' for that was his Achilles heel. He was totally helpless there should they discover him and he would have no defence against an attack. Even the pentagram would be unable to save him from a physical assault by the ungodly; it could only keep evil spirits at bay. But he must remain here a short while longer, try to find out where the coven were due to meet. Maybe he should follow this man Royston to his home.

'We are on the verge of great power,' Royston was fully dressed now, standing over the naked cowering Miranda, 'because we have done what many half-hearted covens throughout this country have not dared to do ... we gave the Master a dead virgin and a live female sacrifice. He accepted both and he will reward us richly. The police and the Church are powerless to stop us. We are his chosen ones, do not forget it.'

Sabat hesitated as the big man hurried downstairs. Another glance at Miranda who was now lying full-length on the bed and starting to sob, trying to remember where he had seen her before. On the astral, memories sometimes came more easily, unclouded by the distractions of mortal life. A dim recollection ... a past life ... hazy in the mists of endless time. Fleeting snatches. He heard the enraged cries and tauntings of a mob, smelled choking woodsmoke.

And at that moment Sabat knew that he was in deadly danger.

He abandoned his idea of following Royston and fled full speed from the house, a hunting hawk on the wing, homeward bound. And the fear within him was mounting for the stifling smell of acrid smoke was becoming stronger by the second!

As he approached the 'Dun Cow' he saw the flames; shooting tongues of red and yellow crackling above the roof, showering sparks high into the sky like some bizarre firework display. It seemed to draw him, a fiery whirlpool sucking him down into its blazing inferno, a bird with folded wings plummeting.

Dimly he was aware of waking, gasping for breath, almost choking as he rolled naked out of bed and caught the chalice with his foot, sending the holy water gushing across the bare boards. Somewhere somebody was screaming. Sabat crossed the room, unlocked the door but even as he flung it open the heat had him recoiling. The entire landing was ablaze, the stairway already disintegrating into crumbling fiery struts.

Sabat closed the door, leaned back against it and tried to recollect his thoughts. He wasn't going to panic; that was why household fires claimed so many victims. They were responsible, of course, the man called Royston and his devilish followers of the Left Hand Path. They had been one move ahead of him, spotted him from the outset and were determined to eliminate him as quickly as possible. Death that would be worse than death because Quentin would trap his soul in the dark void of Hades for eternity. The flames were just the beginning, physical death.

Sabat did not pray, neither did he curse. Just a vow of vengeance and a promise to himself that somehow he would come out of this alive. At least he had returned to his body in time . . . but only just!

The flames were already licking at the door, forcing him back into action. A few moments spent in dressing, not because he needed his clothes but because there were certain items which he could not leave behind. He stuffed the chalice into a jacket pocket along with the small crucifix and those vital herbs, felt the comforting weight of the .38. The latter might be handy if there was to be physical contact with the members of the coven. Given the opportunity he would put a bullet in Royston's brain.

He crossed the room and stared down from the window.

A crowd had gathered in the car-park, many with dressing gowns and coats thrown hastily over night attire; horror-stricken faces staring up at him. More people were arriving, villagers rushing to the scene determined not to miss this ghastly spectacle, a highlight in their sober conventional lives. A small minority hoped secretly to witness a horrible death, see a fellow human with the flesh on his body burning, melting the fat like beef dripping.

A fiery avalanche as some rafters collapsed and showered burning debris in front of the window. The watchers moved back. Then came a flashing blue light, eerie as it was reflected on the leaping yellow and

orange, a banshee-like wailing and a scarlet metallic monster was easing its way on to the car-park'. The fire brigade had arrived but Sabat knew they were too late to reach him. The verandah below his window was a mass of shooting flames and there was no way the firemen were going to put a ladder across it.

He turned back from the window and thought for a moment that this really was the end; there was a roaring in his ears and he thought he could hear Quentin laughing. There's no way out for you this time, Mark!

Suddenly Sabat had a brief sensation of sea-sickness, that fleeting moment which inexperienced sailors experience when a ship lurches with the current, a giddiness that has your stomach rolling as you grab the nearest obstacle because if you don't you fall.

Sabat grabbed the bed, felt it beginning to move, sliding away from him. But that was impossible ... a splintering of timber and then the bed was tipping up, one corner wedged firmly in a hole where the floorboards had collapsed. He rubbed his smarting eyes, saw a jagged gap about a foot square that went right down to the room below - the lounge bar! Ancient wooden beams and floorboards had cracked under the strain as the upper-storey contracted with the intense heat.

Sabat saw a chance, a slim one, but he had been handed a slender lifeline and did not hesitate. He got his back to the wall, both feet securely wedged on the tilted headboard of the old-fashioned bed, and exerted every ounce of his waning strength. Sweat ran down his face in rivulets, combining with the smoke to sting his eyes so that he could not see. For a few seconds nothing happened and then with a rending crash the front of the bed bulldozed its way through the woodworm-riddled fire-weakened boards. Sabat lost his footing, sprawled headlong and when he opened his eyes found himself staring down into the room below.

The fire was restricted at the moment to the upper-storey where it had obviously been started; already it was beginning to eat its way through the wall from the adjoining bedroom so that the heat was blistering his skin. Frantically he stamped with his feet at the edges of the hole made by the bed, sent slivers of snapped wood flying down below, widening the hole. And then he jumped.

Sabat hit the carpeted floor and roiled over. Blazing debris was cascading everywhere and a ten-foot beam above the door was threatening to collapse at any second. He leaped for the door, heard a bang like the report of a shotgun and even as he felt the welcoming rush of cool night air on his overheated body, a tremendous blow struck him. His leap became a stagger, he felt his senses starting to slip away.

And then the fiery night turned to unrelenting blackness. Total oblivion, so cool and refreshing after the heat.

Sabat struggled to come to terms with his own mind. Consciousness was as elusive as a marshland Jack-o-lantern, taunting him, slipping from his grasp just as he reached out for it. He could still smell the fire, wondered if he had actually got out and just when he had almost convinced himself that he had he fell back into that awful black abyss. Floating in a semi-comatose state, aware that around him was dazzling painful light. Maybe he was dead and his astral was condemned to wander the barren wilderness of the first plane forever; a low entity, a poltergeist likely to be summoned by its Master for menial hauntings at a moment's notice, but until then he must remain in this awful desert.

Some time later, it could have been hours, days or weeks, he came to the conclusion that he was in hospital. Although he still smelt occasional odours of acrid smoke, his senses were dominated by an odour of disinfectant and scrupulous cleanliness, the constant movement of blurred, white-clothed bodies and voices that spoke in low whispers.

It seemed an eternity before Sabat regained full consciousness, managed to squint painfully through half-open eyes and saw the bare, white-washed walls. He was lying in bed in a small room, the only item of furniture a table by the far wall. A private ward.

A few minutes later a tall, balding man in a long white coat entered, a smile that could only be interpreted as one of professional relief on his features. 'Ah, Mr Sabat, you've decided to return to the land of the living at last.'

'As close as that, was it?' Sabat barely recognised his own voice, a rasping croak that hurt his throat and made his jaw ache when he moved his mouth.

'Almost.' The doctor seated himself on the edge of the bed. 'You cheated the blaze at the pub but a falling beam clobbered you just when you were almost clear. Nothing too serious, though. It was the concussion that worried us. We were afraid you mightn't come out of the coma but I guess now you're going to be all right. You'll have to take it easy for a week or two though.'

'How long have I been unconscious?'

'Three days. You're in the East Birmingham accident hospital, by the way.'

"Thanks for telling me," Sabat grimaced. He lifted a hand and felt the bandages which swathed his head, noted the restricting pyjamas in which he was clothed. The sooner he was out of this place, the better. A favourite quip of his was that there were three places one should keep clear of - prisons, churches and hospitals. He felt a hypocrite right now.

'You'll be in here for a week at least,' the doctor's tone was stern, almost as though he could read his patient's thoughts.

Sabat tried to relax after the doctor had gone out but it was impossible. The enemy had failed to kill him but they had certainly removed him from the battleground. And the man called Royston would already have prepared his new black altar in their latest meeting place, and the mouldering bones of William Gardiner would be ready to call up unspeakable evil. Sabat was in the same situation as a racing driver who had crashed - for his own sake he had to get back into action as quickly as possible. And also he had a score to settle, a hatred that was festering inside him for the big man named Royston who was responsible for this. The SAS had taught him how to kill and he had learned well.

Sabat had not been expecting a visitor so soon. The man who was ushered into the room had the role of policeman stamped indelibly on his features; even civvies could not hide that. The nurse stood hesitantly in the doorway, wondering if she had done the right thing. The doctor had said definitely no visitors. But there was no way she could refuse that important-looking, awe-inspiring pass which had been flashed under her nose. One did not argue with the police.

'Plowden,' the newcomer's introduction was peremptory, no enquiry after the patient's health, adding 'Detective Inspector.'

Sabat regarded him stoically. His painstaking efforts to avoid contact with the police had proved futile. He nodded, for once feeling at a disadvantage wrapped in bandages. 'Pleased to meet you, Inspector.' That was a downright lie.

'I understand you've been making enquiries into this St Adrian's business,' Plowden's tone was hostile. 'I would have thought it only courteous for you to have contacted us.'

'Considering I'd only been in the village a few hours,' Sabat's tips tightened, 'I'd had no chance to, even if I'd wanted to, which I didn't because my enquiries were of a different nature to yours and I saw no

reason for us to collaborate. The Bishop

Plowden managed to refrain from saying 'fuck the Bishop' and snapped: 'We've found a body in the river. One bearing the same crushing hoofprints that were found on the corpse of the girl those bastards dug up. Her name's Sheila Dowson; has a record for soliciting in London's East End. Also served a term of imprisonment for involvement in drug pushing. It's a murder enquiry now!'

The other stiffened, conjured up a mental picture of a battered corpse, the skull crushed by flailing cloven hooves. He made it up on to one elbow, experienced a wave of dizziness that receded and left him feeling sick.

'You're going to come up with some preposterous theory about the devil having been called up,' the policeman's tone was heavy with sarcasm. 'I'd prefer to think in more realistic terms, like cudgels being fashioned with iron hooves so that they leave the marks we saw and half these bloody drug-crazed idiots believing that they've actually succeeded in summoning Old Nick. We'll get 'em, though. But I haven't come here to discuss the police's findings, Mr Sabat; you'll no doubt read all about it in the sensational dailies. I've come to warn you . . . don't start interfering or else I'll have you charged with obstructing police investigations!'

'You'd find that rather difficult, I think.' Sabat's head was throbbing and he was forced to close his eyes momentarily. 'Nevertheless, you have told me something that I already suspected.'

'And what's that?'

'That we are not dealing with some teenage sensation-seeking cult; we are up against one of the most dangerous covens that has ever existed, one which harnessed a dangerous and terrible power!'

'Bullshit!' Plowden snapped. 'They'll all be under arrest before long, that I promise you.'

'I wish you success,' Sabat's voice had a ring of sincerity as well as doubt, 'but I don't think you'll find it quite that easy, Inspector. Have you found the missing skeleton yet, the remains of William Gardiner?'

'No. But I don't regard it as being of any importance now except perhaps as evidence against those who

exhumed and stole it. Possibly it's been disposed of, burned in an incinerator and we'll never find it.'

'I see.' Sabat closed his eyes again, deliberately kept them shut and when he opened them the inspector had gone; it was the easiest way of concluding their brief discussion.

It was a sheer physical effort to get out of bed. Every nerve in his body screamed its protest and when he tried to stand he almost fainted. But he did not clutch at the bed for support, fighting the waves of nausea and the blackness that threatened to sweep him back into unconsciousness, with sheer willpower. Calling upon his hidden reserves of stamina to overcome physical weakness. He'd gone through worse in his SAS days and overcome it with the power of mind, the same force he had used to exorcise evil spirits. And now it stood him in good stead. He was physically weak but he knew he could make it. He had to.

'Mr Sabat!' He hadn't heard the young nurse enter, proof that his extraordinary senses were only firing on three cylinders. 'Get back into bed at once.'

'I'm leaving . . . now!' Pale and trembling but his determination lacked nothing. 'Get my clothes.'

She stared in shocked disbelief, slowly backed out of the door but he knew she had not gone to fetch his clothes; she had gone to summon the doctor.

Sure enough the latter appeared within a couple of minutes, angry at being disturbed and the fact that a patient had dared to disobey his orders. 'I thought I made it quite clear to you, Mr Sabat, that you won't be going home for at least a week.'

'And I'm making it clear to you that I'm leaving this minute.' Sabat's eyes blazed with an anger that had the white-coated man stepping back a pace. 'You know as well as I do that you cannot detain me here against my will. Now, do I have to phone my lawyer or do you get my clothes?'

There followed a few seconds of electrified silence.

'Well, I can't stop you.' The doctor adopted an attitude of indifference, shrugged his shoulders. 'On your head be it, but I warn you I'll accept no responsibility for the consequences of your foolish decision and

the chances of your being admitted back into this hospital, whatever your condition, are virtually non-existent. Nurse, fetch Mr Sabat's clothing and a form for him to discharge himself.'

As the two of them left the room Sabat seated himself on the edge of the bed. He was weak and dizzy but he permitted himself a smile. Another round against Quentin's efforts to immobilise and undermine his psychic powers had been won. But the real battle lay ahead.

'You really ought not to have come back.' The Reverend Storton dribbled down the stem of his pipe and shook his head in disapproval, the way he did during his sermons on the wickedness of the world. 'But if you won't go back to hospital, perhaps I can offer a bed here. Since my dear wife passed away I have ample sleeping accommodation in this huge rambling place.'

'I'd be pleased to accept your hospitality,' Sabat smiled, 'but not to convalesce. The "Dun Cow" will not be operating residentially for some time to come, I fear, and I shall need a headquarters. But, Reverend, I would appreciate my return here not being advertised. People will find out soon enough. Oh, and I'm dreadfully sorry about your Domesday Book. I'm afraid it has gone for good in the fire.'

'It is a small price to pay for your life.' Storton made gooey noises in his pipe in an attempt to clear some obstruction which was preventing it from drawing to his satisfaction, 'but did you manage to find anything out from its pages before it was destroyed?'

Briefly Sabat told him of his discovery concerning William Gardiner. Storton's eyes widened and he abandoned the task of blowing down his pipe. 'How awful,' he muttered when his visitor had finished, 'how perfectly awful. And you are convinced, Mr Sabat, that they ... they actually called up ...?'

'The most powerful evil entity which it is possible to summon.' Sabat nodded. 'One that does not return empty-handed. The man Horace, who is now in a mental hospital, knew this which was why he offered a prostitute, Sheila Dowson, along with the dead virgin. He realised that if he was successful his Master would demand a life and he wasn't going to take any chances on any of themselves being singled out. By the way, can you throw any light on a big man called Royston, I don't know his second name, who is now running the coven and appears far more knowledgeable, powerful and dangerous than ever friend Horace was?'

Maurice Storton shook his head, pursed his lips. 'No, I'm afraid I can't. Had you not better request the police to trace him?'

'No,' Sabat smiled wanly, 'I'm afraid Detective Inspector Plowden has already made clear his views on my investigations, so not wishing to be hindered by petty restrictions I shall work alone.'

'And what is your next step?'

'My ultimate aim,' Sabat replied, 'is to find the bones of William Gardiner and exorcise them, thereby destroying the evil which festers in them. But there are many things to do before then. I must find the man called Royston and his new temple of devil worship, but to do that I shall have to venture on to the astral plane again and to do that I must restore myself to full health; a matter of a few days, hopefully. In my present state of weakness I would be easy prey for the vultures of darkness. However, I think my initial task will be to cleanse your churchyard of the evil which exists there, to render it a place of peace and quietness again, somewhere which can never again be used by the followers of the Left Hand Path. I must exorcise it, Reverend!'

The other nodded. Once he'd attended an exorcism service; a few prayers, muttered incantations by the exorcist. The curate's personal opinion was that the whole affair was a lot of mumbo jumbo, nothing to get excited about even though it appeared to have done the trick.

But Sabat knew different, realised and accepted the dangers. And this time they were going to be increased a hundredfold. It was his big test, his first direct confrontation with the dark forces, apart from that psychic attack upon himself, since Quentin's soul had merged with his own. On that occasion in his own home he had fought and overcome a single evil entity; next time he would be challenging the evil powers in force, a single mortal outnumbered, relying on just his own faith and strength. It was suicidal, his soul at stake with Quentin ready to pounce and aid his own kind.

Sabat looked at his watch. 2.30pm. 'Now, Reverend, I'll take advantage of your kind offer and get some rest. I'd be obliged if you would see that I'm not disturbed for the next six hours. And then I shall ask you to pray for me while I go alone to St Adrian's churchyard in an attempt to drive out the evil that began with the interment of William Gardiner and has grown in power over the years. It is a battle I must win for a lot of reasons.'

CHAPTER FOUR

SABAT AWOKED just as the last rays of the setting sun were making weak patterns on the wall above his bed, squares and diamonds that faded even as he lay watching them. Then came dusk, darkening the room.

Something he was aware of the moment he sat up and swung his legs to the floor; a freedom of movement unhindered by pain, his head no longer throbbed and the earlier bouts of dizziness had not returned. He gave way to a momentary feeling of euphoria, the knowledge that his deep untroubled sleep, during which his astral had remained close to him, had healed him as effectively as that doctor at the hospital and all his modern drugs could have done over a period of weeks. Not miracle healing, just a matter of mind over body. And Sabat was ready for battle.

He dressed slowly with the ease of one preparing for a social evening, brushing flecks of dust from his somewhat crumpled and singed dark jacket, checking his .38 to ensure that it was fully loaded. The crucifix, the garlic cloves; he recalled how they had bounced harmlessly off Quentin that time but that had been his own fault, a wavering of his faith just when he needed it most. Had his faith been strong enough then his brother would have been destroyed forever. Grimly he recalled a childhood fable, a story his mother had once read him about Sinbad the Sailor, how Sinbad had been accursed, compelled to carry that vile Old Man of the Sea on his back wherever he went. Little did the God-fearing Mrs Sabat realise that one day that fate would befall her own two sons in a deadly battle of their souls.

As Sabat went downstairs the Reverend Maurice Storton opened the door of his study and shuffled out into the hall. The old clergyman looked tired and strained, a pathetic figure nearing the end of his days. Yet he still retained an expression of stubbornness and determination, the will to go down fighting. He was not going to surrender his pride easily.

'Mr Sabat,' he said, 'perhaps it would be best if we both went along tonight.'

'No,' Sabat gripped him by the hand, 'not tonight, Reverend. You can help me best by staying here and praying.'

'It is very dangerous, isn't it?' A sudden flicker of fear in those old grey eyes. 'More dangerous than even you have told me.'

'Yes,' there was nothing to be gained by trying to cover up the full extent of the perils of this night, 'the most dangerous task I have ever faced. 'Wait up for me if you will, but . . . but if I do not return . . . remember there is nothing more that can be done. Don't even attempt a second exorcism for they will have won. Leave the evil to spawn their evil.' And he muttered to himself: 'for I shall then be one of them out there!'

Maurice Storton watched his visitor step outside and close the door softly behind him. The curate's hand trembled as he crossed himself and only then did he appreciate the full extent of his fear. For years he had preached against evil but he had never realised just what evil was until this moment.

Sabat took full advantage of the shadows on the short walk to the church, a fugitive of the night hours. There was always the possibility of a policeman being posted to watch the churchyard and Plowden's threats concerning Sabat's return could waste valuable time and do untold damage. Delay at this stage would be fatal. He was taking no chances. The next gale would in all probability demolish the lichgate, Sabat decided as he passed through it. The weathercock and a few more slates would go, too. It was all part of a godless plot by the Left Hand Path, harnessing the forces of Nature for their own ends.

He unlocked the church door and stepped inside but did not put on the lights. Once his eyes became accustomed to the darkness he would be able to see enough to carry out what he had to do. And there was no time to be lost.

Even as he filled the chalice from the tap in the vestry and carried it towards the altar he sensed the evil in the atmosphere. Only his own extra-perceptive senses could have picked it up, a cold mustiness that could not be attributed solely to the old church which was kept unheated and shut up for most of the time; icy fingers that seemed to touch him and a whispering that might just have been the wind sighing in the trees outside unless one listened very carefully. And Sabat tried not to, told himself that it wasn't Quentin's laughter he heard from afar but his own imagination.

He worked fast, blessed the water, not in the traditional priestly way by placing his hands over the chalice but by lining both forefingers in the manner of twin guns being sighted on a target, conveying his whole personal force down into the colourless liquid. Quentin's laughter again but Mark Sabat ignored it.

He reached down the big cross that stood on the altar, held it like a crusader's sword, seemed to sense a faint vibration along it. The power was there but would it be enough? No longer did he doubt that this night there would be a terrible confrontation between opposing forces.

It had grown much colder, the temperature dropping by several degrees, seeming to numb his brain like that of an arctic explorer exposed in a barren freezing wasteland. They were beginning to work on him, the fight had already begun\

Totally unrelated thoughts began to flood his mind like the scrambling of a radio wavelength. Adolescence, the shame of what he'd done; but God, the mind-blowing sensuality of it all, the super-charged bodily feeling was such that he'd have done it again right now. Then the women were crowding him, one after another, faces and bodies he vaguely remembered but didn't have time to recognise. Except the last one when all the others had gone - Miranda* He could not get rid of her, almost dropped the heavy crucifix in his desire to get to himself. Almost... a supreme mental effort sent her stumbling back into oblivion and Sabat was fighting again with all the mental power he could muster. Maybe he should have brought Maurice Storton along after all; most exorcists were accompanied by at least one devoted Christian to help with the prayers. But no, this was his own fight, nobody could help him. This church was no place for a near-senile curate.

He made it up into the pulpit just as a gale sprung up, a freezing blast that wafted and fluttered the altar tapestries behind him, tore at his own clothes as though determined to strip him naked. The pages of an open bible were flicking over, some being shredded from their binding. And in the midst of it all he heard Quentin's maniacal laughter.

'Our Father,' he yelled at the top of his voice, the words being whipped away so that he did not hear them, might have been miming them/ ... hallowed be Thy Name ... as it is in Heaven . . . forgive us our trespasses ..." a pang of guilt like a knife being driven into his stomach. He writhed, clung to the mahogany railings, 'deliver us from evil.. . Oh God, deliver us from evil.. '

The wind seemed to check, then came back again, Sabat's long hair flowing wildly. Somehow he managed a confession and absolution, feeling himself growing weaker all the time, still clutching the chalice of charged water, its contents slopping from side to side, spilling. He dipped his free hand, wet the fingers and began to fling droplets in all directions, a spray that hissed like a kettle boiling over on a

hob. Spitting protests, angry cat-beasts temporarily thwarted as they surrounded their prey, the wind suddenly dropping. A deadly calm, a lull in a storm of evil as the enemy regrouped for a massive onslaught.

Now Sabat could hear his own voice, dry and rasping but determined. 'God, the Son of God, who by death destroyed death, and overcame him who had the power of death. Beat down Satan quickly.'

He hoisted the heavy crucifix aloft, swung it defiantly in all directions. The wind outside, a kind of agonised groan . . . but not in here! His brain began to function more easily again.

Shouting, screaming, hating these invisible entities with all the power he could muster. 'Deliver this church from all evil spirits; all vain imaginations, projections and phantasms; all deceits of the evil one; bid them harm no one but depart to the place appointed them, there to remain forever. God, Incarnate God who came to give peace, bring peace. *

Quentin's voice, a cry of 'hypocrite', but it faded and Sabat was moving back down the aisle, chalice in one hand, crucifix in the other. The shadows seemed to fall back, a kind of tranquility infiltrating this hallowed place. A desert fortress, in effect, a strong legionnaire's outpost where the hostile bedouins were kept at bay, safety within its battlements. But Sabat knew that he had to go outside and combat the foe again, he could not skulk in false safety.

Clouds scudded across the sky, the wind starting to get up again, bringing the darkness back with it. He caught his knee against the sharp edge of a tombstone concealed in a clump of long grass, cried out aloud in pain and spilled some of the water. Then they were back on the attack, screaming their hate as they closed in on him.

He scattered more water, heard it sizzling. But this time the forces around him were not retreating; they were becoming more angry than before, massing in the blackness of the shadows for a combined attack. And Sabat felt himself starting to weaken, his brain going muzzy again!

He had difficulty in praying, an incoherent mumbling. The laughter came again, a mocking cackle that might have been Quentin's and might not. Sabat dipped his fingers, felt only a moistness on the silver - the holy water was all gone! Peals of laughter, the wind starting to strengthen, a tearing freezing blast that had him staggering back.

Run! The church, it's your only hope, you'll be safe in there. Too late, the blackness had closed in, not so much as a twinkling star to silhouette the way to the church, blundering blindly on, all sense of direction gone.

Panic gripped him the same as it had up in that mountain forest when he had suddenly realised that Quentin was invincible. He threw the chalice, felt the gale whip it like a dead leaf, heard it strike something solid. Something sharp pierced the back of his neck, scraped the flesh. He knew what it was, tangled hawthorn, the straggling boundary hedge of the cemetery. He could go no further; he was trapped!

And then suddenly Sabat saw them, outlined in an ethereal glow that came neither from the moon nor stars. Dozens of them, an angry mob in filthy tattered garments, screaming for him. More light, now he could see their faces, grotesque inhuman features that had no right to exist on this earth. A frenzied mob of ... Oh God, what were they?

Their bodies stank, an acrid odour of sweat and urine . . . and death\ A thought crossed his mind, nearly froze his brain with terror; the old Haiti legends, the dead raised from their graves by the bocors and made to work in the fields, Zombies! No, it couldn't be, but surely these creatures in human shape were not living mortals.

He calmed his panic. These were the dark forces taking on terrifying forms, able to change them at will, deadly dangerous in whatever shape they chose to show themselves. Women with grimy scaled breasts, pubic hair that crawled with lice. Except one! Sabat recognised her, picked her out of the howling mass; the exquisite figure, so sensual at the height of her fury, long auburn hair that fell tantalisingly around her shoulders, a Beauty amid the Beasts - Miranda \

Her eyes met his, seemed to glow with a greenish hate, the full lips parting into a lusting smile. And even in the throes of this latest terror he felt himself getting an erection. He tried to look away but could not; a kind of hypnotism that was willing him to rush forward, fall at her naked feet and worship her the way he had once worshipped God. He'd let them do anything they wanted, just for the chance to copulate with her.

Come to me, Sabat!

He found himself stepping forward, then something jerked inside him, a spark kindled into flame, a determination to go down fighting. He grasped the crucifix and held it aloft like a sword. And that was when they fell back screaming!

A half-realisation within himself - the inverted cross, these evil ones' own blasphemous symbol from which they drew their dark power. And Sabat was turning evil on evil, using fire to fight fire!

A cry escaped his lips, more of a howl than anything the human vocal chords could issue. Discarding one power for another, he leaped into the fray, and as he did so he called upon one to help him for whom this place was sacred . . . Baron Cimeterre, Lord of the Cemetery, chief of the evil Petro gods of the West Indies. A prayer that was a blasphemy in itself, a black invocation.

The gale came again, colder and stronger than before, whipping into the faces of the cowering rabble, several of them stumbling and falling as they turned to flee. And Sabat was upon them, his crucifix a devastating sword, this latest disciple of Baron Cimeterre bent upon bloody carnage.

Sabat raised his eyes to the sky above, muttering words that only a Creole might have understood but there was no humility in the way he asked the ancient Lord of the Cemetery to help him in his hour of need; a mercenary fought for the highest bidder.

The sword came round in a sweeping arc, two of his attackers falling to the ground with screams of unearthly anguish. A squat hairy man shrieked as he clutched with one hand at the severed stump of his other arm - but there was no blood \ A cavalier fighting against overwhelming odds and driving back the enemy, rapid thrusts that were too quick for the eye to follow. Had the fallen been mortals then this wilderness of a graveyard would have run red with spilt blood; gaping wounds, entrails spilling from open stomachs, gashed throats and eyes that dangled from skewered sockets. And Sabat was relentless, now truly a demon possessed with unbelievable strength. A woman, a filthy hag of indeterminate age, standing her ground and screaming her venom at him, age-old curses that elsewhere would have brought assistance from her familiars but even her powers were useless when pitted against those of the Lord of the Undead, the chief of the Petro gods in a far off dark land. The godgame was the ultimate clash of power and there could only be one victor.

Sabat stared into her seemingly sightless orbs and read a defiant hatred, a toothless cavity of a mouth miming obscenities. Sagging revolting breasts scaled with the grime of a past age giving off a vile odour which in different circumstances would have had him retching. But not now; it was the heady smell of battle.

'You have defiled the temple of Baron Cimeterre,' he hissed, weapon drawn back. 'A sacrilege, performing your blasphemous rites in this place when they should have been his. Each and every one of you must be struck down in his name!'

The wind shrieked as though the Petro god himself roared his approval of Sabat's words. Then Sabat struck, a wide sweeping blow, felt his arm jarred for one brief second as the blade met with some obstruction then passed on and completed its arc.

Those few survivors who had huddled behind this witch for protection, confident in her powers, moaned their terror, stared aghast at what had happened. The crone reared upright, at full stretch, the severed skull screaming its agony even though it was parted from her almost skeletal naked body; a head that seemed to hang in the air as though some invisible thread suspended it there, dilated eyes watching the trunk as it sank to the ground. Then the cranium fell with a sickening thud, rolled towards the neck as if seeking to rejoin the body from which it had been parted.

Sabat laughed, kicking it to one side as he stepped across it. More of these . . . things remained and now he had no fear of them; they could neither flee nor fight, condemned souls awaiting execution. And he was going to enjoy every second of it!

This time the blow was low, knee-high, scything through a forest of legs, bone splintering, limbs cracking and spinning away. A writhing revolting mass of legless wounded, groaning their helplessness; at Sabat's mercy.

For a few seconds he savoured the situation, gloated. This is what they would have done to him but by calling upon Baron Cimeterre the tables were reversed. And if you traded your soul with the devil then you made the most of your side of the bargain!

'You fucking vermin!' Sabat's expression was an animal snarl, a growing fury taking hold of him. 'You're not going to be put out of your misery quickly. In the name of Baron Cimeterre you're going to suffer!'

Suddenly that escalating rage erupted inside him, turned him into a tornado of hate, the crucifix windmilling, hacking crudely, tearing and mutilating the bloodless vile flesh. Bodies writhed, tried to crawl away on amputated limbs, collapsed, wailing and sobbing. Sabat never once relented, another head rolling away, pulled up by the sinew which still attached it to the stump of a neck, gyrating, mouth moving in a soundless scream. A veritable abattoir of putrefied pulped meat and still the attack went on.

Finally Sabat let his weapon-arm fall, seemed to check his rage instantly as he raised his eyes and saw. A movement had attracted his attention, a patch of shadow that was too dark to be shadow. Oh God, he

thought he'd got them all but there was still one left.

'Come here.' His voice was a whiplash cutting through the darkness. 'You cannot escape Sabat by hiding.'

She came, so lithe and shapely that he found himself overlooking the grimy flesh and ragged garments, seeing only the beauty of an unblemished skin which had once lain beneath, the ringlets of auburn hair, nipples that could only be so swollen and hard because she was aroused; and even now she was arousing him. Miranda!

He didn't try to reason because primitive lust was blinding him to all else. Except his hatred of her for what she was; a dangerous combination.

'You have to answer to both Baron Cimeterre and myself,' his lips scarcely moved, his words barely audible, 'because you defiled this place, sacrificed to another god. You took a virgin from her grave, one who rightfully belonged to the Lord of the Cemetery, mated her, and another who still lived, to your own false lord of darkness. Then you committed the body of the one who died as a result of that to water, not to the earth where she would have become Baron Cimeterre's. The others have paid the price but yours will be even greater because my Lord Cimeterre demands that I take you as you took her, for I am his disciple on the Left Hand Path which leads to eternal life for those who serve faithfully!'

'No I' She screamed but did not try to flee because she knew it would be futile. Those dull orbs flickered with the ultimate in terror and then he was upon her.

Sabat experienced a fleeting sensation as though he was on the astral witnessing the actions of his physical body, but that was impossible. A kind of numbness flooded over him but it did not mar the urge which fired his veins, pumped the hot blood through his body. Neither was he aware of the coldness of her body as he flung her to the ground beneath him. He tossed away his sword; he did not need it for this!

She struggled but his strength was too much for her, pinioning her arms, ripping the final shreds of stinking clothing from her shuddering body. Her flesh was cold but he scarcely noticed it, grunting aloud like a stag on the rutting stand. No longer was he thinking of Sylvia Adams and Sheila Dowson, nor the terror which the latter must have experienced; only of himself, his conquest, and the fact that he was doing it for Baron Cimeterre, himself a servant of the Petrogods.

Finally he was finished with her, drawing back and fastening his clothing. His lust was spent and now his fury was returning. He groped for the fallen crucifix, reversed it and struck at the inert figure at his feet with terrible force, a blow which no human skull could have withstood. The head split almost equally into two halves, the tortured expression divided. Something oozed out which reminded him of frog-spawn but there was no blood. He had not expected any.

Again and again, chopping and hacking with a desperation as though he wished to destroy this ghastly being totally, erase from his mind what had happened. A psychopath, his brain blurred, telling himself that it had never taken place, that he would never have done anything like that. And finally, when there was nothing left that resembled a human being at his feet, he almost believed it. Almost.

Dawn came with its usual grey soberness. Sabat stirred, shivered and raised himself off the tomb where he had been sitting. He thought he might have fallen asleep but he knew he could not have done so for throughout the latter part of the night he had been conscious of just staring into the darkness, seeing nothing, not even thinking.

He glanced around, half expecting to see carnage and mutilation, widespread amputation and decapitation. But there was nothing, the undergrowth not even flattened. A psychic battle had been fought and ... won or lost?

His mouth was dry and he had a nagging headache; he always had a headache after an exorcism. Quentin's laughter came from somewhere then died away and left him to his own musings. This past night had been fought on two fronts; inside the church his exorcism had been powerful enough but not out here. Back to the wall, he had called upon the forces of darkness to destroy their own kind and they had conceded to his request. Because he was one of them\

He laughed, a dry mirthless sound. In a strange way his evil brother had done him a favour, turned him into the most ruthless psychic mercenary who had ever stalked the frontiers of darkness. So powerful, capable of summoning those who could serve his cause best. But it was frightening, a kind of schizophrenia, a man outside himself at times, barely knowing what had transpired.

But this business was far from over. St Adrian's and its grounds were exorcised, if one could call it that. A mere skirmish in terms of the fight that lay ahead. Somewhere the man named Royston had his new black temple and was already drawing upon the power that festered like a cancer within the bones of William Gardiner ... so powerful that they had sent that terrible force of unspeakable terrors last night in a desperate attempt to destroy the one man who stood in their way. They had failed but they wouldn't give up; they couldn't afford to.

Slowly, each step a determined effort that fought against sheer fatigue, Sabat began to make his way back to the vicarage. The day would be spent sleeping, safe now that daylight had come, recharging mind and body for whatever perils the coming night might hold.

He almost ignored the approaching car and probably would have done had it not slowed when it drew level with him. Even at their lowest ebb his extra-perceptive senses were not totally dulled, seeing everything in those split seconds before the silver Mercedes picked up speed and was lost to sight around the bend.

The driver, a big man with receding hair and the stamp of merciless cruelty on his features, eyes narrowing and hooded like a hunting hawk that has suddenly spotted its prey. But it was Royston's companion who succeeded in thrusting a stabbing pang of fear into Sabat's heart. Auburn hair and mocking green eyes, none other than Miranda, the hussy off the new estate who spread her favours in her constant search for power.

She had brought Royston here at this early hour to show him that he had failed in his attempt to destroy Sabat. And she hated the man who stood there on the pavement because she knew; knew that she had been raped and mutilated in a psychic encounter that went back to a dark age. And it had happened as surely as if Sabat had gone to her house in his physical body and carried out that unspeakable attack on her.

Now she demanded vengeance, urged her evil lover to use every vestige of his black power to help her achieve that. And Sabat's most dangerous enemy would be the resurrected evil that had once stalked this peaceful village in the form of William Gardiner!

CHAPTER FIVE

SABAT LET himself into the vicarage and closed the front door quietly behind him. In all probability the Reverend Maurice Storton would have retired to bed once dawn broke, exhausted by his all-night vigil. There was no point in waking the aged clergyman; neither was there anything to be gained by giving him a detailed account of everything that had happened last night. Suffice to say that an exorcism had been carried out and had been successful. The fact that Baron Cimeterre had claimed the adjoining cemetery as his own domain was something that Sabat did not propose to try and explain. One form of evil had replaced another, and there was nothing more anybody could do about it.

Sabat's acute senses were still working. The vibrations caused by somebody moving about on the floor above registered in his brain before he heard the slow, shuffling footsteps coming towards the head of the wide staircase. Somebody barefoot, but there was nothing strange in that; probably Storton had been on the point of retiring to his bed when he had spotted Sabat coming up the drive and was curious to learn how he had fared.

It was Maurice Storton all right. Sabat saw him on the top flight, checked his cry of amazement. Oh God, the fiends had been heret done this to a harmless old man!

The clergyman was naked, a pathetic enough sight even if one did not look up at his face. His features seemed to have slipped to one side in the manner of a seizure, a hideous caricature in which an angled mouth struggled to make incoherent speech. Babbling insanelly, a noise that was meant to be laughter. And Sabat's heart went cold.

Storton almost fell, indeed he would have done so had he not stumbled against the stair-rail. Balanced precariously, one eye that seemed sightless, the other reflecting an inner terror, wide and staring, inflated like a bubble that would burst at any moment.

Sabat stepped forward, knew that if he didn't reach the other quickly the old curate would almost certainly fall. Yet he must not appear to panic for Storton was already terrified; maybe he was not even aware of the exorcist's presence.

Too late! Sabat was within a half-a-dozen steps of Maurice Storton when the old man seemed to crumple, a sagging of every limb, folding ... falling ... sliding.

Sabat caught him, otherwise he would have somersaulted right down to the hall below, a weight that he could barely support, heaving the other back into a sitting position. The head drooped forward, a low moan came from the cracked blue lips, a body expelling air because its time was up. And it was at that moment that Sabat realised that the Reverend Maurice Storton was dead!

He propped the dead man back against the stair-rail, made sure that he would not fall. Then Sabat straightened up, trembling uncontrollably because it had all ended like this. His fault, just as surely as though he had murdered the clergyman with his own hands or pumped a full chamber of .38 shells into him.

Baron Cimeterre did not return empty-handed once he had been summoned. The bocors and the hougans knew that, always had a human sacrifice awaiting their dreaded lord. And it was just the same here, many miles from that dark land of mystic magic. Storton's death was needless. Oh God, if only Sabat had insisted that his aged companion remained within a pentagram throughout that night of prayer then he would have been safe. The Lord of the Cemetery had come and claimed a sacrifice and . . . sheer terror had Sabat's pallid features blanching to a deathly white. Storton's body, his soul, were at terrible risk now, for in accordance with the ways of the dark powers the dreaded Baron now had claim on the frail corpse - it could be the instrument in a number of vile, unspeakable happenings. A zombie if there was a houngan handy to raise it, or the bones used in powerful black magic after they had been exhumed; a permutation of horrors that could only be prevented in one way by somebody who knew what he was doing.

Sabat ticked his dry lips; he'd witnessed the ghastly ritual in Haiti in which a soul was granted everlasting freedom, the body given peace and put beyond the powers of the hougans. The bile came up into his throat at the thought but that would not stop him if necessary. There was only one snag . . . this was England, not the mystic West Indies where voodoo and its rites were accepted as part of life and death even by the police themselves. Here he might find himself facing a number of serious charges, not to rule out the possibility of being arrested for the murder of Maurice Storton.

He shook his head as he went downstairs slowly and picked up the phone. First he must report this death to the authorities, a seemingly normal case of a sudden stroke. Unless you looked carefully into that single eye! But as soon as possible Sabat knew that he must perform those ancient rites to ensure that Baron Cimeterre did not claim the body through some powerful witch doctor; somebody like the mysterious and elusive Royston who sought human carrion for his graveyard vultures!

'I thought I warned you.' Detective Inspector Plowden's features twisted into a mask of anger, an escalating rage because this stranger had dared to defy him and on his return to the village had brought death with him, albeit seemingly from natural causes, a kind of harbinger of doom. 'You'd no business coming back here obstructing police investigations.'

'One moment.' Sabat held up a hand, permitted himself a faint mirthless smile. 'First, I have in no way obstructed your enquiries. I have merely carried out an exorcism in St. Adrian's Church and its grounds in accordance with a request made by Bishop Wentnor. This is a free country, I can travel and stay anywhere I like. I would have returned to the 'Dun Cow' except that fire destroyed the residential quarters

'While you were staying there!' An innuendo that was only too obvious.

'You'll be accusing me of arson next, Inspector.' Sabat laughed. 'As I was saying, the Reverend Storton, with whom I had struck up a friendship before my untimely accident, offered to put me up for a few days while I completed the task which I came here for.'

'And you have completed it?' An uneasiness in the policeman's tone, neck craning forward in his eagerness to hear the answer to his question. A prayer to whatever deity he worshipped that Sabat would be leaving promptly.

'I think so. I have completed the exorcisms but, of course, I shall have to speak with Bishop Wentnor before I finally take my leave.'

Plowden caught his breath, his fists clenched so that his fingernails bit deep into the palms of both hands. 'You're like a bloody vulture,' he rasped. 'Death wherever you go. Well, with any luck we'll be making an arrest for the Dowson killing before long and I guess that will lead us to this vile cult!

You're bluffing, Sabat thought. You're no nearer a solution now than you were three weeks ago. 'I wish you luck.' He stood up. 'Now, if you've nothing more to question me about I'll go and see the Bishop.'

'We'll know where to find you if we want you.' Plowden's eyes narrowed. 'And we may just do that.'

Sabat glanced at his watch as he stepped outside the local police headquarters into the dazzling sunshine of a late August day. Midday. There was much to do before nightfall and time was running against him.

'There's your cheque.' There was an air of offhand reluctance in the way Bishop Wentnor slid the oblong piece of pink paper across the desk. 'The Church Commissioners, like myself, thought it was extortionate but thankfully the whole business has progressed beyond and away from St Adrian's.'

An attitude of selfishness that was not lost on Sabat as he checked the amount, folded the cheque carefully and placed it in an inside pocket, aware of the slim comforting bulk of his .38 as he did so.

'Yes, I'm afraid it's a more far-reaching business than even I imagined when I took the case. It has its evil roots farther a field.'

'But as far as you are concerned the case is closed,' Wentnor's chin jutted stubbornly. 'With hindsight I think even the Archbishop regrets your own involvement. And the police have protested most strongly about your interference. However, I must make it quite plain, Sabat, that the Church has now terminated its agreement with you. We will not condone any further meddling in this affair on your part.'

Words that echoed those spoken by Detective Inspector Plowden. Possibly even the Commissioner of Scotland Yard had been persuaded to contact the Archbishop. Sabat smiled to himself as he left the Bishop's Palace. From now on, he had to play a lone hand, every man against him, and no cheque to reward his efforts. His sole motive now was one of revenge; a score to be settled against those who had tried to cremate him alive and were even now still bent on his annihilation. It was the kind of fight he enjoyed best.

Sabat hoped that he had picked the right mortuary, a semi-rural place with its chapel of rest set amid a grove of towering pine trees, the kind of place where a deceased curate would be taken while funeral arrangements were pending. He had to take a chance on it. To have made enquiries might have led the shrewd and vindictive Plowden to charging Sabat for what he was about to do; neither did he dare to go on to the astral in search of the corpse.

He crouched beyond the outer fringe of trees waiting for dusk to turn to full darkness. A dangerous time but this was something that could not have been carried out in full daylight. At least, he consoled himself, there was no police guard mounted; with their practical stubborn theories on this case they would see no reason to guard an old man's body.

It was shortly after nine when Sabat made his move. No sound, hardly a slither of black plimsolled feet as he crept towards the chapel entrance. Of course the doors would be locked but with nothing more than a conventional Yale; a slight click as he used his bankers credit card to depress the lock, then he was just another shadow in the faint starlight.

It was all so ridiculously easy that he found himself glancing around half suspecting a trap. Six coffins, and Storton was in the second one he tried. Sabat's mouth was dry, his stomach muscles contracting as he gazed down on the familiar features. He had half hoped that the ultimate deed necessary to free the soul would not be required; that the aged face would still bear signs of the seizure, the slackness of dead muscles, mouth twisted at an angle.

But it was not so. The features were even again, much younger in appearance as they seemed to defy the effects of rigor mortis, eyes that had been closed by the undertakers were now wide open and staring up at him. The lips had contracted, showing a set of cheap dentures in an animal-like snarl. And Sabat knew there was no time to be lost. A metallic clink as he withdrew from his pocket a hammer and chisel, the head of the latter cushioned with a rubber cap. Noise had to be kept to a minimum at all costs. The third item, a hacksaw, he laid down on the nearest coffin lid. He took a deep breath, made a concerted effort to steady himself.

Even as he positioned the sharp point of the chisel on Storton's chest, Sabat felt the temperature dropping. Mortuaries were always cold but not to this extent. The darkness around him was vibrant and in his head a noise was growing like that of a distant multitude chanting angrily, coming closer all the time, a lynch mob on the rampage.

One blow was enough, a dull thud with a muffled ring of steel that jarred his arm right up to the elbow, a cracking and splintering of bone and a tearing noise as he forced the tool. free. Angry cries, so close that he almost turned but he could not afford to delay if all was not to be lost.

In one swift, perfectly co-ordinated movement, hammer and chisel were back inside his pocket and he had the hacksaw grasped firmly in his gloved hand. He felt Storton's neck with his free hand, positioned the blade, and began to saw feverishly. It was not easy working inside the coffin; he would have preferred to have removed the corpse on to a nearby marble slab for this grisly decapitation but there was no time. Even now cold clammy hands seemed to clutch at him in an attempt to drag him away. Tonight Baron Cimeterre would not be on his side as Sabat sought to deprive him of a slave of the dead, last night's sacrifice which was about to be snatched from the grasp of the evil Petro god!

The hacksaw blade was sharp, cutting efficiently through the neckbone but it would not be rushed. Continual rhythmic sawing was the only way and all the time Sabat felt his attackers closing in on him just as they had done in St Adrian's Church the previous night. He sweated cold salty droplets and by sheer willpower refrained from cursing aloud. Profanity at such times was a sure way to fall into the clutches of the enemy. He began to pray beneath his breath.

Maurice Storton seemed to be putting up a desperate resistance, the half-severed neck swivelling so that the saw was bumping against the side of the coffin, the bier threatening to run away under its own propulsion.

Sabat felt a tightening of his own chest as though steel bands encircled it and he was gulping for every breath. The pain began to spread into a crippling coronary agony threatening to throw him to the floor. The black powers were both very strong and very angry tonight; Sabat knew then just how dangerous the man known as Royston was, a deadly houngan who had come to Britain in modern guise to spread his vile voodoo magic. Tonight it was Royston's turn to ask Baron Cimeterre for help.

Just when Sabat thought that he could hang on no longer, that he must surely collapse to the floor and writhe in pain, he felt the blade bite into the wooden base of the coffin and with a dull thud the head rolled to one side.

Those clamouring voices turned to cries of frustration and in that same instant his own pain receded to a gnawing ache. He clutched the coffin, sprawled over it, somehow managed to check the rush of vomit before it reached his throat. And in that instant he knew he was safe, that he'd won against overwhelming odds, defeated the Lord of the Cemetery at the last hurdle and thwarted Royston yet again.

Yet Sabat could not remain here to bask in the glory of another round won against the powers of darkness. Even now Royston would be planning revenge, perhaps police already speeding to the scene of this ghastly mutilation, tipped off by an anonymous phone call. The hacksaw was put away and with tired, trembling hands Sabat placed the severed head against the neck stump. And as he closed the coffin lid he caught a glimpse of the corpse's expression. The facial muscles were perfectly relaxed, the lips sliding slowly back to cover those ill-fitting dentures, eyelids beginning to droop. For one second Maurice Storton seemed to see and recognise him; it could have been a trick of the ethereal starlight filtering in through the elevated windows or it could have been a half smile of gratitude, the heartfelt thanks of a tortured soul that suddenly found itself at peace.

Sabat left as silently as he had come, a flitting shadow on a starlit night until he came to his parked Daimler. The prospect of the long drive back to London was far from enthralling but he knew he had to leave the heart of England for a few days; he could not risk another clash with Plowden at the moment.

He needed time to think, to plan how he was going to seek out Royston. For it was vital that this crusading houngan be destroyed totally.

CHAPTER SIX

SABAT HAD scanned the newspapers daily for the past week but nowhere did he find so much as a mention of 'devil worshippers'. Surely Maurice Storton's funeral must have taken place by now, in which case it would appear that the undertakers were totally unaware that the corpse had been beheaded and had had a chisel gouged in its chest. Or else they did not want to incur publicity and have it known that their premises had been broken into. Sabat preferred the latter theory, for once the body was in its grave nobody was going to be any the wiser.

Locating Royston presented problems. Not knowing the man's surname he could not trace him by the usual methods. He contemplated going to the astral but without knowing where to search his chances of success were exceedingly slim. Which left him with his only and original link -Miranda! If he visited her in his astral body there was no guarantee that Royston would be with her at any given time and Sabat could spend weeks pursuing this fruitless line of enquiry night after night, wasting valuable time as well as putting himself at grave risk, for there was no doubt that this evil voodoo cult were still determined to destroy him. There was only one course open to Sabat, he must visit Miranda in his earthly body and take whatever steps were necessary to force the information he required out of her. He thought about it, suddenly found himself becoming aroused. Hell, it was a long time since he'd gone a fortnight without a woman. Nevertheless, he was determined that such pleasures would have to wait and attempted to satisfy his craving in the only way he knew how. But it did not stop him getting an erection again on the

drive back up to Warwickshire. Every man had his Achilles heel.

It was early morning when Sabat rang the doorbell of Miranda's small, semi-detached house. His car was parked at the other end of the road for in all probability he would be returning to London tonight; he hoped his arrival had gone unnoticed.

There was no answer to his ring but some inner sense told him that the house was not deserted; no noise or movement, just a feeling that Miranda was at home. Suppose Royston was here with her; his stomach tightened at the thought, for the big man could just slip through his fingers again and vanish back into obscurity. Sabat needed time alone with Miranda! Christ, he found himself being turned on yet again, a bulge in the front of his trousers that nobody could possibly miss. That was the bitch's weapon, being able to arouse a man, weaken them even when she wasn't around in person.

Then Sabat heard soft footsteps coming down the stairs and caught a glimpse of somebody through the frosted glass who could be none other than Miranda herself. The latch clicked, the door opened a foot, was pulled wide to reveal Miranda dressed in a black negligee which left virtually nothing to the imagination. The low neckline showed the soft shapely breasts, the firm nipples almost spiking their way through the material. The slender figure terminated in bare feet with mauve manicured toe nails. Sabat's eyes ran right the way back up her and focused on the soft red lips drawn back in a seductive smile, the hazel eyes which gave nothing away but seemed to penetrate his thoughts.

'Mr Sabat!' Faint surprise, her voice like the purring of a contented she-cat. This is a surprise. Won't you step inside?'

She held the door wide, closed it behind him. The place seemed to have been tidied up this time, no cast-off items of clothing littering the adjoining room, and instead of that smell of stale cooking his nostrils flared to the sharp aroma of some artificial aerosol cover-up. Almost as though she had been anticipating a caller.

'Do sit down. A drink?'

He followed her sweeping hand, noted an array of bottles on the sideboard, among them an unopened Black Label. 'Whisky,' he said. She couldn't have tampered with this one, he thought, watching her break the seal. She poured two glasses, handed him one, fixed him with those eyes again, twin laser beams boring into him.

'I had a feeling you might call around sometime.' Her tone had a faint hint of mockery in it.

'Why?' He held her gaze with difficulty.

'A lot of men who eye me up in the 'Dun Cow' end up calling on me.'

They were fencing now and Sabat was dimly aware that his erection was growing again but she gave no hint of having noticed it.

'And what makes you think that's my reason?'

For the first time her eyes dropped, fixed on the protrusion behind his zip, and her mouth widened into a smile. 'Certain signs that I'd have to be blind not to read.'

Suddenly Sabat felt himself at a disadvantage, the tables turned, a kind of helplessness creeping over him. Sex had always been his big weakness but he had not realised until now how much it dominated his make-up. Hell, he shouldn't have gone a whole fortnight without a woman!

He found himself nodding, a pleasant sensation spreading out from his lower regions into the rest of his body. He didn't care about anything any more except . . . God, it was as though he was a spectator from afar looking down upon his own actions. Pleasure first, business afterwards; there was no reason why he should not have his cake and eat it.

'Well?' she laughed. She had set her drink down on the cabinet, stood facing him, arms akimbo. Somehow that flimsy garment had come undone and he could see an elongated strip of nudity right the way down her. Jesus, her pubics were jet black; that meant her auburn hair was just a fake. Black suited her; he'd always had a preference for brunettes. 'I'm right aren't I, and if you stick it out any longer, Mr Sabat, you're likely to burst your zip. Say, don't you have a first name now that we're getting on intimate terms?'

'Mark.' Somehow his voice sounded different, muffled. He'd only once before got himself into a state like this and that was in a Soho sauna when the masseuse had begun to finger him. She'd been a brunette,

too. Miranda could do all that with her eyes. So subtle, you didn't realise you'd been seduced until it was too late.

Then, with one deft movement she shrugged herself out of that negligee, left it behind her on the floor, advancing on him naked like a cat stalking its prey.

'Don't tell me you're shy, Mark, brimful of inhibitions. You're not going to insist on keeping your clothes on all night, are you?'

Her perfume was strong and heady, had him inhaling for more as her long slim fingers flipped their way down his shirt buttons and undid his waistband. Surely she didn't really have the strength to hoist him up while she slid his lower garments down? Maybe he was co-operating all along without being aware of it, unable to shift his gaze from those saucer-like hazel eyes. Just a kid really but those auburn locks fooled you. Now he saw her as she really was, a jet black bombshell, willing him to go along with her. Like the Creoles said Erzulie, the Black Venus, did. A succubus, and when you woke up next morning you didn't really know whether it had happened or whether you'd dreamt it all.

Stark naked he lay there on the couch, a prize specimen at a canine show letting the judge give it the once over.

'Circumcised, I see.'

'Yes,' he had to struggle to find a plausible explanation, one that sounded logical, 'my . . . mother was half Jewish. She insisted.'

'Liar!' Those eyes flashed angrily but only for a moment and then they were laughing again. 'You've had it done in recent years. A lot of exorcists and those who dabble in occult matters get themselves circumcised in case they should carry some impurity underneath the foreskin into their protective pentagram. I'm right, aren't I?'

He nodded, bit his lower lip like an erring schoolboy caught out by a sharp-eyed headmaster. 'Yes. I had it done about a couple of years ago.'

Miranda was on her knees, toying with the scar, staring up into his pleasure-contorted face. 'And I'll also say you haven't had a woman for quite some time.'

'Right . . . again.' He'd confess to anything just to have her doing these kind of things to him. And more; a lot more! He lay watching her, a hypnotised rabbit letting a stoat play with it, body shuddering with emotion. Everything she did was perfection, the pouting lips that kissed and sucked, the tantalising flicking tongue, the way her sensuous fingertips came into it, too. At one stage he thought he was going to ejaculate and tried to will the orgasm, a few seconds of the ultimate in pleasure and then maybe the spell would be broken. Miranda seemed to read his thoughts and smilingly did something with her fingers which checked it immediately, held it intoxicatingly suspended and had his heart speeding up. God, it was wonderful, he didn't give a damn for anything else. Not even Royston, he didn't matter any more.

'Tell me, Mark,' a quizzically schoolgirlish expression on her freckled features, 'just suppose / wasn't around? I mean, suppose you'd woken up in the middle of the night dreaming that I was doing all this to you and you found that I wasn't really there at all. You'd have to do something, wouldn't you? Go on, show me what you'd do because I've never seen anything like that and I'm simply dying to.'

Oh Jesus Christ, you've just gotta be dreaming all this. In which case you'll have to do something or you'll go insane. Go on, do it and let her watch \ That sounded like Quentin's voice. To hell with him if it was, I'm going to do it, anyway, whether Miranda's really here or I'm dreaming it.

Sabat's fingers took over where Miranda's had been caressing him only a few seconds ago. The room seemed to have gone darker, he could barely see her, just the whiteness of sensuous flesh and that dark 'V' of a giveaway. And her eyes, of course, glowing greenish like a cat's, watching his every movement with obvious lust. He was shuddering, groaning his delight aloud, bucking and writhing. I'm going right over the top this time, sweetheart, and I don't care if I don't come back.

Totally helpless as he was, his sexual desire was dominant in every part of his being . . . except one! The built-in watchdog, his super-sensitive power that had saved his life on several occasions was still switched on, a human radar that picked up danger and transmitted it instantly to his brain, a mind-blowing electric shock that powered him out of this pleasurable sex haze. Fingers still clutching himself, still working furiously, he rolled to one side. Just in time!

The dimmed table lamp glinted on a sliver of steel; a rush of air and Sabat heard the wicked stiletto blade bury itself in the upholstery only inches from his neck, Miranda's hand catching his face as she struggled to tug the weapon free. But Sabat was too fast for her, his fingers circling her wrist, twisting it and bringing a shriek of agony from her snarling lips. She struck at him with her free hand, an enraged tigress determined to battle to the death.

Together they rolled off the couch on to the floor, Miranda uppermost, trying to bury her strong teeth in his throat. Sabat pushed and turned his strong lithe body, knew he had the strength to beat her . . . knew what he would do to her! His supersenses screamed another warning - don't look into her eyes!

Kneeling, facing each other, the girl's wrists now twisted behind her back, her spine arched as Sabat increased the pressure, determined not to gaze into those compelling orbs, staring at her firm breasts instead, noting how the nipples stood right out. Looking lower, checking that her pubic hair was really black.

'Succubus!' he hissed. 'Erzulie in a white skin! But this time you've lost.'

A snarl came from her throat and she spat in his face. 'Bastard! You won't get away with this.'

Sabat didn't reply. He glanced down at himself and knew he had to take Miranda in the way his body demanded before he got down to the real purpose of his visit. The lamp in the corner seemed to have gone brighter now as though the evil he had encountered here had already conceded defeat. Roughly he threw her back, sent her sprawling on the carpet, reminded himself once again that he must not look into those eyes during what was about to happen.

Like a wild beast he sprang, pinioning her arms at right angles, forcing her thighs apart with his knees. She struggled, kicking wildly and hammering her heels against his back but it only served to add impetus to his thrusts as he took her. She turned her head, closed her eyes, resigned herself to her fate. Miranda or Erzulie, she knew that she had met her match. After a few minutes her snarls turned to low moans, little cries that could almost have been interpreted as ecstasy.

Sabat had pushed everything else from his mind; Sheila Dowson, Sylvia Adams, and the Reverend Storton, even the attempts on his own life and soul. All that mattered now was that he satisfied himself to the full.

Finally he leaned back, his lean muscular body glistening with sweat. His head sagged momentarily as exhaustion flooded over him but it only lasted a few seconds. Then he was reaching for his clothes, ice-cool and in complete command of his every bodily and mental function. He had got that overpowering urge out of his system and now it was back to business.

'Well.' He looked into her eyes, saw that the earlier burning fire had been replaced by something else; fear! 'Now we've got that over I guess we'd better have a little chat about what I really came for.'

'I'll call the police.' It was an empty threat, unconvincing.

'Go ahead,' he laughed. 'But I guess the last person you want to see is a policeman. He might ask even more awkward questions than I'm going to.'

'You raped me. You could get five years for that.'

'You tried to kill me. You'd get ten, and if they knew about your involvement with this coven and your boyfriend, Royston, you might just end up getting life. You're no better than Manson and his followers. Right, we've ruled out the law so let's get down to business.'

She did not reply, half-heartedly picking up her negligee and slipping it over her body. Sabat noted how she trembled, knew that she was afraid of a lot of things; himself for one.

'Why don't you just go/ her voice was a low whine. 'Go now and forget that we've ever met.'

'I'll go when I've got the answers to the questions I'm going to ask. First, who is this guy Royston?'

'I... don't know.'

'That's a lie. You've had him in your bed and you've been out in his car checking whether or not I survived the psychic attack in the churchyard. He took over the coven after Horace went into a nuthouse. So don't give me that crap.'

'Honest.' Her hazel eyes were brimful of tears that threatened to deluge at any second. 'I don't know who he is or where he comes from. He was an associate of Horace's because I'd heard Horace mention him a time or two almost as though ... as though Horace was terrified of him! Then Royston turned up,

rented a house in the village that had been vacant for years and just sort of took over running the coven. He had a woman living with him; I only saw her once. A foreign looking girl, her skin was sort of light chocolate coloured, neither black nor white, kind of in-between if you know what I mean.'

'West Indian probably.' Sabat's eyes narrowed. 'It figures.'

'But I never saw her again. Then he began visiting me. At the start I enjoyed it ... then I began to get very frightened.'

'Why?'

'Well, I knew he'd got me lined up for something pretty awful. The coven meetings were no longer a lark like they were at the start, things had got ... well, out of control. That time they dug up the Adams girl and then ... it was revolting but I never thought those sort of things would happen. I kept telling myself that it was some sort of trick of Horace's, that he'd bludgeoned the Dowson girl to death while everybody else was scared to look. But soon after I realised that there was something to it, that they were actually calling up ... things out of the darkness, bestial things that you could hear and smell. . . but you daren't look. God, I wanted to get away from here and I would have done if it hadn't been for Royston. Jesus, you've only got to look into his eyes and you know that he isn't . . . ordinary!'

'But you could show me the house he rents.'

'I could . . . except that he doesn't live there any more. He's gone! He's been gone since the night after the ... whatever it was that went on in the churchyard. He called for me early that morning, said we'd got to go and look, see if you were still around. Then we saw you walking up the road. Oh Jesus, you should have heard him. He went berserk and I thought he was going to kill me. Said it was all my fault and if I didn't get rid of you for good then .. then the gods had a way of punishing followers who failed them'

'So he left the house and you haven't set eyes on him since.'

'No, but he phones. Just checking, telling me I've got to get rid of you. I get the feeling that he's got me lined up for some kind of sacrifice like Horace performed that night. And he seemed to know that one day you would visit me.'

Sabat poured two more whiskies; they both needed them. Miranda's nerves were stretched to the limit. He picked up the knife which had almost cut his throat out, dropped it into his pocket. The state his companion was in at present he couldn't take any chances but underneath his callous exterior he was beginning to pity her. It was an old story, a common one in Haiti, a beautiful girl lured into the clutches of the houngan, a white hen being fattened and pampered in readiness for the ultimate sacrifice.

'Royston's moved his pitch.' Sabat saw another flicker of terror in those hazel eyes, her awe of himself growing by the second. 'A temple somewhere. And he's got the skeleton of William Gardiner there. Have you any idea where it is?'

'No.' She shook her head and he did not doubt that she was telling the truth. 'After he got so angry with me it was as though he didn't trust me any more, kept warning me that if I went to the police I could find myself being charged with being an accessory to the Dowson murder and a lot of things besides. He said that until I'd proved myself I wouldn't be allowed to see the new temple.'

'And to prove yourself you had to kill me?'

This time she could not hold back the flood of tears. 'I didn't want to kill you,' she sobbed, 'but after you arrived it was just as though something ... took me over! I hated you as I've never hated anybody before in my life. I wanted to humiliate you first, make you masturbate into a frenzy and then kill you at the height of your orgasm. But I couldn't wait; suddenly killing you seemed to be the most important, the most erotic thing I'd ever contemplated. Now Royston will surely kill me for failing.' She sank back on the couch, her whole body convulsing with shudders, her wails escalating into hysteria.

That was when Sabat hit her, a back-handed blow that caught her full across the face, sprawling her headlong across the fake leather upholstery. She gave one final sob and then was silent, cringing as she felt him pulling her hands away from her face, anticipating another blow.

'Drink this up.' The remains of her tumbler of whisky were pushed against her lips. 'Then try to pull yourself together. The worst possible thing you can do is to give up. By doing that you're playing right into his hands.'

'He'll kill me.' She swallowed a mouthful of the amber liquid and spluttered as it burned her throat. 'Jesus, he will, Sabat. He's the most evil man in the world.'

'No.' Sabat shook his head and his lips were compressed into a tight bloodless line. 'Royston is not the most evil man in the world. I am! And there's nothing more I want than to kill him, to destroy him totally so that neither his body nor his soul is a threat to mankind ever again.'

Miranda fought back her tears and an expression of perplexity crept over her attractive freckled features. She nodded. 'Yes, I do believe you're evil, Sabat. When you raped me just now I thought that you'd probably kill me when you'd satisfied yourself. But you didn't. Was that because you only needed to keep me alive until you'd got the information you wanted out of me?'

'At the time, yes.' He permitted himself a faint smile. 'But don't worry, I'm not going to kill you now. Basically I don't think you're evil. They used you, worked a psychic hypnotism on you which I broke when I raped you . . . because in direct conflict my will is more powerful than Royston's\ That much is now plain. The balance is swayed by whatever evil forces intervene and whose side they take. That will determine the final outcome of our battle!'

'Oh God.' He thought she was going to dissolve back into hysteria. 'Whatever are we going to do, Sabat?'

'We have two choices open to us.' Sabat filled and lit his pipe; he hadn't smoked for over a week and suddenly found that he craved for tobacco. 'First, I can take you back to London with me but I doubt whether that will solve anything. Royston has perfected the use of his astral body and has only to visit my place in that form to discover your whereabouts. Secondly, we can force an encounter with Royston as soon as possible rather than prolonging the inevitable. I am inclined to think that that would be preferable.'

'But how?' Her eyes widened with horror at the prospect. 'Even I do not know how to contact him.'

'We shall do what Mohammed failed to do.' Sabat smiled, inhaled strong smoke and expelled it slowly. 'We cannot go to the mountain so the mountain must come to us. How often does Royston telephone you?'

'Too frequently.'

'Good. Then let us hope that he phones soon, and when he does you must tell him that you have been

successful in killing me. Any nervousness in your voice we must hope that he attributes to your first act of murder. Describe it as it might well have happened, how you lured me into a masturbation frenzy and then plunged your knife into my throat. You are frightened because you have a body in your house. In all probability he will come in person, particularly as he would be able to use my corpse to assist him in his vile rites. Then, having tricked him into coming here, I will see to the rest.'

'I don't like it.' Miranda drained the remainder of her whisky and put down the empty glass. 'What if he suspects a trick.'

'We are taking a desperate chance in any case,' Sabat replied. 'Even now his astral body might be in this very room observing us in which case our ruse will prove futile and Royston will turn the tables on us. We must just hope that he has been too preoccupied with his new temple of devil worship to worry about, forgive the term, a mere pawn in his dastardly game such as yourself. In which case he might just fall for it.'

'How . . . how will you kill him?' Miranda whispered. Suddenly death, even Royston's, was a terrible prospect.

'I could shoot him.' Sabat experienced a quickening of his pulses, the old familiar feeling he used to get in his SAS days when he'd been assigned to a legitimate murder. 'But that might be too noisy for a neighbourhood such as this and the last thing we want is to attract the attention of the law. In all probability I shall make use of this knife with which you nearly severed my jugular vein. First I must kill his earthly body and then act quickly before his astral body has time to leave it. There is always a short time when one life ends before the next reincarnation begins, the only time that one so powerful as Royston is truly vulnerable. And if that chance is lost then the evil will spawn again in a new life.'

For some time they sat there in silence, neither wishing to break into the other's thoughts. Sabat glanced at Miranda, knew that they could be spending a long time together. Next time he would have no need to force his lust upon her. In fact their relationship could turn out to be a very intriguing one.

Miranda thought about Sabat, how different he was from the dark-clothed human bloodhound who had suddenly turned up in the village to hunt them down. Ruthless to the extreme, but he was the kind of man you could get to like. A lot. Just one nagging worry; she hoped he was not going to ask too many questions about the fire at the 'Dun Cow'. She'd given up trying to lie to him, told herself it was almost an impossibility because those hawk-like eyes would search out the truth no matter where you tried to hide it. And when that cold rage erupted it turned him into a vicious killer, maybe the one man in the world who could destroy Royston.

The harsh jangling of the telephone in the hall brought them both out of their reverie. In an instant Sabat saw that it was 7am and that daylight was creeping in through the curtains. They had dozed, rested, and now it was time for action again.

Miranda glanced at him and he read the fear, the hopelessness in her eyes. 'That'll be him,' a hoarse, almost unrecognisable whisper. 'He often phones early in the morning.'

'Go get it then, girl.' He tried to take the tension out of the situation. The first positive step in the destruction of Royston is about to be taken.'

He noted how unsteadily she walked into the hall, the way she glanced at the front door as though she had a notion to flee through it and take her chance in the outside world. But instead she made it to the phone and with a shaking hand lifted the receiver. Sabat remained sitting on the couch in the living room, heard her speaking.

'Yes ... he came last night ... I killed him,' a lengthy pause before she added, 'with the knife you gave me. God it's awful Royston, the body's in the living room and I don't know what to ...' There was a long period of silence during which the caller was obviously giving instructions and then Miranda spoke again. 'All right, I'll wait until you come.'

When she came back into the room her face was deathly white, every freckle clearly visible. She swayed, had to hold on to the arm of a chair to steady herself.

'He's coming,' she whispered. 'Tonight!'

Sabat had to check his elation; quite obviously Miranda was terrified now at the prospect of Royston's return to her house. 'Good,' he smiled, 'and we've plenty of time to prepare for his arrival.'

'That's not the point.' She sat down because her legs were refusing to support the weight of her body any longer. 'He says. ...' she swallowed, began again, 'he says that... that it will be necessary to perform certain ... rites on your body to ensure that you no longer trouble us. I ... don't know what he has in mind but he's ordered me to have a hacksaw and a hammer and chisel available.'

Sabat felt his stomach churning, saw again his own handiwork in that tranquil chapel of rest a short time ago. And he had no doubt what Royston and his dark powers had in mind. An eye for an eye ... a head for a head! He did not think it time yet to tell Miranda that the very tools she had been instructed to procure were at this moment lying underneath the mats in the back of his own Daimler down the road. For truly Royston's body had to be put beyond the recall of another houngan or bocor, the evil that had been William Gardiner destroyed for all time. And there was but one way to ensure that.

'Let's not worry about Royston just yet,' he smiled and beckoned to her to sit beside him. 'It is important that for the next few hours we both relax, for tonight there must be no slipups!'

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALONE POSSIBLY Sabat could have managed to relax, maybe even sleep for an hour or two, but with Miranda at his side that was impossible. He could feel the tension mounting inside her, the tautness of her body against his own, nerves that were being stretched with each passing minute. He thought, Christ, she'll have a breakdown long before evening.

He wondered if perhaps an interlude in which their bodies dominated over all outside thoughts might be the answer but the moment his fingers started to stray inside her nylon garment she was pushing them away. 'No, Sabat, not that again. Please! I'm just... not in the mood.'

He sighed, let his hand fall away. It was going to be a very long day; why the hell weren't they the type who could play a nice boring conventional game of chess?

'What brought you to this part of the country?' Apart from trying to pass the time and distract Miranda's mind from the trials that lay ahead, Sabat was curious about her background.

'Circumstances beyond my control.' She managed a tremor of a smile. 'I was born in London but my mother and father split up when I was ten. I stopped with Mum and in order to make enough money for us to live she went on the game. She didn't make any secret about it; each night she'd go out and solicit and then she started plying her trade at home. She used to keep a rag doll in the window. If it was lying down it meant she was busy with a client but if it was sitting up she was open for business. Christ, there were some comings and goings in our house and I got the idea when I left school that it was the easiest way to make a living. She didn't try to stop me once I was seventeen but I can't blame her for encouraging me. Anyway, to cut a long story short, Mum went off to live with this client and after a time I decided that there was no future in being a city whore so I took off in search of better surroundings. The country always appealed to me so in due course I found my way up here. I managed to find enough business to keep me going, doing most of my soliciting in the 'Dun Cow'. Then I got in with this coven for kicks. At first it was fun but all I was actually doing was letting the guys screw me for free instead of coming up to my place and paying a tenner for it. The worst day's work I ever did was letting Horace get me in his clutches. After that it was too late to make the break; Horace was just a dirty old man in comparison with Royston. When Royston gets his talons into you, you've had it!'

'Then shall we say the best day's work you ever did was when you met me,' Sabat said and felt encouraged by her nervous laugh.

After that they settled down again with their own thoughts. And Sabat's mind wandered away from Miranda. He recalled that warm Sunday afternoon when a tousled-haired junior public school master had asked him to go for a walk across the fields. And in due course his train of thoughts led to that leather-booted colonel's wife. By midday he was fully aroused and frustrated which wasn't a good thing when he'd got to put himself in a killing mood before evening. He had to be alert, his brain razor sharp. Sexual distractions could prove to be his downfall.

He glanced down at Miranda; she had fallen into an uneasy sleep.

Sabat had slept during the day, mostly shallow dozes, but during the mid-afternoon he had fallen into a deep slumber in which he had dreamed. He was underground in a dank, stale place where moss grew on the walls and in places the roof threatened to collapse. A long flight of broken stone steps had led him down from the daylight and fresh air above, and he doubted the wisdom of entering this subterranean

chamber. Indeed, he would have turned back, given way to his rising terror, except that for some unknown compelling reason he had to go on. This was how it had been when the Pied Piper had lured away the rats and then the children of Hamlyn. It was the silence, the darkness which beckoned Sabat, a call he could not deny, a bloodthirsty weasel hunting the rabbit warrens.

After a time he was able to make out his surroundings. Stone pillars supported the sagging roof and the damp floor was made from blocks of roughly hewn stone, jagged and uneven. A crypt, so old that the lettering carved by some long-dead stonemason was now indecipherable.

As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness and he was able to make out these ancient features, Sabat was also aware of the presence of evil; a live force that seemed to mock him from every patch of shadow, the rats which stared at him with glowing red eyes, totally unafraid of this human intrusion.

The crypt was far larger than at first he had imagined, almost the size of a chapel, built below ground in secret to hide some nefarious activity by the worshippers who slunk in here during the nocturnal hours to mortgage their souls and to take part in unbelievable acts of obscenity.

And Sabat was not alone: With a start he saw the big man at the other end, busying himself before an altar draped with black tapestries. On the sinister flat surface lay something which gleamed starkly white in contrast to its background, a thing which was so old and broken that it was difficult at first to recognise it as a human skeleton. But that was what it was, a broken skull and rib cage, arms and legs, all polished until they shone almost luminously, hideously.

Sabat recognised them as surely as though he gazed upon the corpse of a close friend laid out on a mortician's slab; knew that these bones represented all that remained of William Gardiner!

The big man treated them with reverence, once bowing and kissing the feet. Sabat stared, realised suddenly that this was Royston, clad in flowing robes of mauve that were decorated with inverted crucifixes, a blasphemous black bishop performing rites that had come from hell itself, seeking life eternal out of evil death.

The ceremony was only just beginning, the living paying homage to the dead, and in return asking for power beyond mortal ken. Royston seemed oblivious of Sabat's presence, as did the naked throng which filed in through a hidden passage behind the altar, a vile assembly of old and young who believed that before long the ultimate in power would be theirs. In silence they performed the utmost in obscene acts, senile and adolescents mouthing insane laughter, groping one another with lusting fingers and turning unhealthy fantasies into reality, all the time looking towards those ancient bones as though seeking the

skeleton's approval.

Then everybody was still, glancing fearfully about them, the gloom gradually deepening until darkness hid everything from Sabat. Now he relied on his ears and those extraordinary senses which detected near-silent movements and translated them into positive actions. Somebody had been brought in via that same secret passage, one who was trussed and gagged so that only muscles could be flexed in futile frustration and terror. Man or woman, young or old? Oh God, Sabat could smell his own sweat, his own scent of fear because he had to know! But he could not move, could not see, forced to suffer the agony of being led here and then denied the knowledge he craved. For the rites of human sacrifice had already begun, the victim's tortured screams barely audible behind the heavy gag, blood vessels bursting as muscles strained beyond their limits. But who, in the name of Jesus Christ, who was it!

Then came the clamouring of maniacal voices, exultant shouts of blasphemy, orgasmic shrieks; all dying away as a pounding of hooves and a bestial snorting dominated. The stench was vile and suffocating, an odour of stables that would have defied even the efforts of Hercules to cleanse them. Then a squelching sound that could have been either the munching of freshly-killed human flesh or that of an unholy mating between . . . Sabat was suddenly fleeing, blindly stumbling back up those steps in total darkness, flinging himself headlong on an unknown landscape where night had conquered day in the time that he had been away, where the air was fresh and sweet and he only smelled that vile putrefaction because it lingered on his own body.

Sobbing openly, beating the stony ground with clenched fists. In the name of God who had been sacrificed in quest of the ultimate in evil, whose body had been mutilated while life still coursed through its veins so that William Gardiner could be granted eternal life in the body of Royston, the exiled houngan? For God's sake, whose!

Sabat awoke with a jerk, felt his heart pounding madly and saw that it was already dusk. His clothes clung damply to his body and for one awful moment he thought he could still smell that vile odour but it could have been his own sweat. Oh Jesus God, that had been close, the closest ever. The houngan's power was such that he could have killed him, claimed his soul had he wished to do so, but he had not because it suited some ulterior purpose. For some devilish reason it benefited Royston to let him remain alive, to toy with him like a cat that has caught a mouse and is sure of its prey.

Normally Sabat had enough control to keep his astral close to his body when he slept if he wished to do so, particularly during the daylight hours. But this time it had been lured away; lured into the future (near or distant?) for a ghastly preview of some forthcoming evil. He almost screamed out aloud 'for Jesus Christ's sake whose was that body on the black altar?' But he didn't because he knew it was futile, that the future was deliberately screened from mortals except on rare occasions on the astral plane when one was permitted a brief glimpse of some forthcoming happening.

He glanced at Miranda. She was sleeping soundly and it seemed a shame to wake her, to transport her back into this cruel world of evil and deadly peril. But he must, for now there had to be a change of plans. No longer could they await the coming of Royston and assassinate him like some third rate South American president. He was too powerful and he was aware of their plans!

Again two courses of action were open to Sabat. He could either flee with Miranda, drive from here while there was still time, or else they could hastily construct a pentagram, rely totally on its powers, and skulk behind locked doors until morning. The latter was safer. If they fled, Royston would pursue them and would have no difficulty in making a psychic attack wherever they were.

Here they stood a slim chance of survival. It was still not fully dark; there was time to go down the road to the car, fetch his various impedimenta necessary for the construction of the pentagram and by nightfall they would be comparatively safe. Royston's power was unbelievable. Obviously he was already drawing some of it from William Gardiner's remains; strong enough to lure Sabat's astral body away and give it a terrifying look into the future. Oh Christ, if only he'd been able to recognise that sacrificial victim!

Softly Sabat shook Miranda awake. Her eyes opened then clouded over as the terror filtered back, her whole body starting to tremble.

'It's . . . almost dark.' She glanced towards the window. 'He'll be here soon. We must

I've decided on a change of plan.' Sabat tried to sound casual, as though it was something he had been thinking over while she had been asleep. On no account must she even guess the terrible truth. 'It's too risky to kill Royston here; there could be all sorts of complications and we could both find ourselves in prison facing a murder charge. What I propose doing is drawing a pentagram in this very room, which should keep us safe until morning, and then I think we'll return to London where I can fight him on home territory.' It sounded plausible and there was even a look of relief on Miranda's face at the realisation that they were not going to seek a confrontation with Royston after all. 'So before it gets properly dark I'll just pop down to the car and get the things I need.'

'AH right,' she nodded, 'but be as quick as you can please, Mark, because it's already starting to get dark . . . and I'm frightened.'

She let him out of the front door, closing it behind him. It was darker than he had thought, the street lights already having come on, and on both sides of the road curtains were drawn across lighted windows. A bank of cloud had drifted in during the afternoon and it was even now beginning to drizzle.

Sabat shuddered, tried to shake off the foreboding which had plagued him since he had awoken, and quickened his step.

It was a relief to see the Daimler still there at the kerbside. It was further from Miranda's house than he had thought and he'd had one awful thought that it might have been stolen. Christ, he had to calm these needless fears, get himself under control if he was to come through this night unscathed. They had already begun to work on him.

His hand fumbled as he found the bunch of keys in his pocket. Panic that he fought down, told himself he had to stay calm; in all probability Royston would not show up for hours yet. He found the right key, it slipped down the ring just as he went to fit it in the lock, and he cursed beneath his breath. Got it this time; it went in a little way then stuck as though there was some obstruction in the keyhole.

'Sod it, what the hell's the matter? It's never played up like this before.' Sabat tugged, pushed, but the key would neither go right in nor come out, bending slightly under the strain.

He was sweating, trying not to lose his temper. Maybe there was a particle of dirt jammed in the lock. Careful manipulation was preferable to brute force for if the key snapped he was in trouble. It had to right itself soon. But it didn't.

Sabat stepped back, heard the bunch of keys jangling against the door, swinging to and fro like a taunting pendulum until finally the momentum ran out. Jesus Christ, this was all he needed! Maybe he should walk down the road to that telephone kiosk and call out the AA. 'Give us your precise location, sir. Thank you, that's fine, now go back and wait by your vehicle and hopefully our patrolman will be with you within the hour.' More like two fucking hours, by which time Royston would surely have shown up.

Or, Sabat decided, he could break a window, but that would bring half the inhabitants of the road outside, a gawping sea of faces. 'That chap's up to no good. Did you see where he went? Into her house.'

So many 'ifs' and 'buts'. He'd just have to carry on fiddling with the key; it was bound to give sooner or later. Maybe he should go back and tell Miranda that he'd run into trouble. She couldn't see the car from the house and she'd start worrying. No, it would take too long, waste valuable time. It was almost full darkness already.

The keys jangled again as he grasped them, began to wriggle the one in the lock. But whatever the obstruction was it was certainly jammed firmly.

Miranda experienced an air of acute loneliness the moment she closed the door after Sabat. It was something she had never known before except that one time when her father had left home for good. It was as though a part of her had just walked away as she watched Sabat disappear. Usually she felt relief when a client left. Never once had she felt anything for one of her lovers; just a physical relationship, nothing more. But this time it had been different, even when Sabat was raping her and she had fused with him, wanted to encircle him with her legs and hold him inside her forever, but some inexplicable force had prevented her from doing this.

She'd tried to kill him but she hadn't hated him. It was as though somebody else was inside her, controlling her every action. The blind fury had not been hers. Psychic hypnotism, Sabat had called it. If there was such a thing then that was what it had been. Thank God her knife thrust had missed!

Royston worried her, terrified her. She could not stop thinking about him. Whenever he made love to her she felt the revulsion building up in her like she was mating with some slimy reptile. But she dared not show it, even made advances to him because she knew it pleased his ego.

Thankfully she hadn't seen him lately but tonight he was coming here again in the fullness of his evil; a murderer and worse! He would not hesitate to kill her if it suited him. Only Sabat stood between her and some terrible fate now.

Oh God, would Sabat be strong enough, cunning enough? Evil enough? Sabat was evil, all right, but in a different way. Miranda felt safe with him; just having him out of the house for a few minutes induced an unfamiliar insecurity.

He was certainly taking his time. She looked at the small electric clock on the mantelshelf in the living room. 9.30. Outside it was fully dark, the glow of the streetlamps seeming eerie, sinister. She shuddered, tried to remember how long it was since Sabat had left. Certainly ten minutes; no, more. Twenty at least. She went to the window, tried to see down the road but it was deserted as far as the first bend. What on earth was keeping him? Maybe he'd lost something, or was fiddling with whatever equipment he'd gone to fetch. But that thought seemed unconvincing, left her with a sense of uneasiness, foreboding. Sabat himself had stressed the urgency, the need to get a pentagram drawn as quickly as possible and to barricade themselves in the house for the night. Something had gone wrong ...

Then she heard the front-door bell chime, a sound that brought instant relief, dispelled her fears even as

she hastened into the hall. As she rushed to the door she could see his outline clearly through the opaque glass, his dark-clad frame.

'Thank God!' she blurted as she let him in. 'I was getting frantic, thought something had gone wrong. Whatever kept you, you've been gone almost twenty minutes.'

'I didn't think it was that long,' his voice sounded somehow different as he followed her into the living room, flat and expressionless. 'Ten at the most, I'd say.'

Something made her turn, a premonition that everything was not as it should be. Then her eyes widened, her mouth opened in amazement and horror. The man who faced her was not Sabat! The features had expanded into a vulpine obesity, jowls of flesh and hooded eyes that blazed a terrible fury; black clothing, but the garments hung almost shapeless on the huge frame, white manicured hands reaching out for her. And as they closed over her throat, stifling the scream before it began, lifting her like an oversize rag doll, a red haze shimmered before her eyes, turning slowly to black. She did not try to reason as she felt consciousness slipping away from her, just knew that somehow Sabat had become Royston and that this time there was no escape for her!

Sabat let out a loud sigh of relief when suddenly the key slotted into the lock, turned so easily that it was difficult to believe that there had ever been any obstruction preventing it from doing so in the first place. He leaned over the seat, scrabbled frantically on the floor behind until his fingers located the small plastic hold-all bag hidden by the rubber mat. 'Thank God,' he muttered, 'and pray that there is still time.'

He slammed the door and this time the lock turned smoothly. Then he was walking fast back up the street, resisting the urge to break into a run for he did not want to attract unwanted attention. The distance from his Daimler to Miranda's house was further than he had thought and by the time he turned into the short flagged path beyond the flimsy gate his pulses were racing madly. A feeling that something was wrong but he attributed it to his nerves, his frustration over the untimely delay.

The front door was half open, the light from the hallway casting an orange oblong across the patch of uncut lawn. Sabat halted. There was no sign of Miranda; maybe she was in the other room, had opened the door in readiness for his return.

But no! Oh Jesus Christ, he wasn't going to find her in the house, he knew that even before he stepped over the threshold, didn't bother to call out her name. Royston had thwarted him, delayed him at the car while he snatched Miranda a way!

Sabat was trembling, hopelessness flooding over him as he checked every room just to confirm his worst fears. No signs of a struggle, but there wouldn't be, for a powerful black magician such as Royston did not have to resort to dragging a screaming woman from her house. He had gained access by some trick and vanished as completely as though he had taken to the wing.

Sabat leaned up against a doorpost, knew he had to bring himself under control. Blind rage came and went, he did not even profane; just accepted the situation, knew that somehow he had to do something about it. But how?

And then, suddenly, he smelled the evil, just a faint whiff that was gone almost immediately. Evil he had smelled and recognised many times in a variety of odours but this one was so familiar, so recent, that he had no trouble in placing it - the stench of putrefaction that had nauseated his astral body only a few hours previously. He clenched his fists, bit on his lower lip until he tasted blood, tried to tell himself that he was wrong but in the end he knew that he was only lying to himself.

For he had smelled again that vile underground crypt and the stink of a beast of filth, could almost hear it pawing with its cloven hooves and snorting its lust for the helpless human sacrifice. And now there was no doubt, whatsoever, concerning the identity of that sacrificial victim which had been denied his astral - Miranda was to be offered to the dreaded powers of darkness by Royston in an unholy pact with Satan himself!

Even now, this very minute, the mating and the carnage might have begun!

CHAPTER EIGHT

SABAT CLOSED the front door of Miranda's house and then forced himself to think logically. There was little to fear for himself this night for the dark powers would be too busy with the ultimate in obscenity to bother about Sabat. They would exact their revenge later.

Oh God, if only he knew where that disused crypt was. There had to be dozens scattered up and down the country, many lost to the records because they had collapsed and been filled in by Nature's own processes, flooding and silting, thick undergrowth springing up to hide the site.

But there was one man who might know, one in high office who had overruled Bishop Wentnor's decision and called in Sabat in the beginning ... the Archbishop himself, a man of unique sincerity, one who recognised that evil powers beyond man's knowledge existed.

Sabat went back into the hall and dialled directory enquiries. Even if the operator on duty was sceptical he would be compelled to give a caller some number connected with that division of the Church's hierarchy. It was going to be a step-by-step process but Sabat was determined to win through, using either charm or forcefulness according to which the situation demanded; somehow he was going to reach the Archbishop.

It took him quarter of an hour to get as far as the Archbishop's private secretary, one whose acid tones revealed both his annoyance and his amazement that somebody should even consider disturbing his holiness at this hour - it was after ten!

'If you would care to leave a message, sir, I will endeavour to pass it on to his holiness tomorrow.' A stone wall defence that had to be breached.

'Tomorrow will be too late,' Sabat snapped. *I don't care whether his holiness is in the bath or in bed but will you please tell him immediately that Sabat is on the line.'

'Sabat, sir ...?' a hesitancy, the other endeavouring to make a name once heard click somewhere.
'Sabat... ?'

'That's right, Sabat. It is vital that I speak to the Archbishop immediately. If this message is ignored somebody may die. It is literally a matter of life and death!'

The receiver on the other end bumped down on a wooden surface; not so much as a 'hold on' or 'I'll go and see what I can do'. But that didn't matter because at least the message was going to get through.

The line buzzed and ticked, went silent, and at one stage Sabat wondered if he had been cut off. Then, after several minutes he heard the phone being picked up, a deep cultured voice making the wires crackle. 'Sabat, really my good fellow, it is rather late you know. I hope this is really urgent.'

'Desperately urgent, sir.' Sabat used the 'sir' deliberately, knew that he had to create respect if the other was going to hear him out. 'I need your help. Following my exorcisms of St Adrian's Church and its graveyard, the cult concerned have kidnapped a woman from the village and I have good reason to believe that they intend to use her for human sacrifice.'

'My goodness. Have you told the police?'

'No, because for one thing there isn't time. Another, I've been ... warned off.'

'So I heard.' There was a note of sympathy in the Archbishop's voice. 'Can't see what they have to complain about; a bit of jealousy if you ask me.'

'Look, sir,' Sabat tried to control his impatience, 'this is a matter of great urgency and I think you know my reputation well enough to know that I don't make mountains out of molehills . . . also that I have ways of finding out things.'

Which was why you engaged me in the first place, I know that this particular coven are using a disused crypt for a temple and that they have the skeleton of William Gardiner there. They plan some unholy rites which I can assure you are not poppycock. But I must find this crypt without delay which is why I'm

ringing you.'

'Hmm,' the other lapsed into silence for a few moments, 'there must be lots of old crypts up and down the country, many fallen into disuse so that often the vicars of the various parishes are unaware of their existence. Tell you what, though, there is one man who just might be able to help you.'

'Anything's worth a chance.' Sabat felt his pulses start to race.

'The Reverend Spode,' the Archbishop continued, 'is a well-respected vicar who has made a study of archaeology, his main interest being pre-Norman churches. He's also made a study of pre-Christian religions. He may just be able to help you. I remember he gave a talk on television a couple of years ago and he'd drawn a detailed map of these church sites, many of which are long gone. I'm sure he'd have a list of these old crypts, too.'

'He's the man,' Sabat snapped, 'only where do I contact him?'

'Worcestershire, somewhere. If you'll hang on I'll go and get the address for you.'

As Sabat waited a little shiver ran up and down his spine; a feeling of elation suddenly overshadowed by one of foreboding. But he sensed that he had picked up the trail at last.

It was 10.45 when Sabat slid in behind the wheel of his Daimler, relieved when the engine fired first time. In spite of his frustrations and fears this past hour he felt physically and mentally refreshed. His long sleep during the daytime had refreshed him and, as was usually the case, the activities of his astral body had in no way tired him. A drive of a mere forty miles faced him, less than an hour on the road, and there was always the chance that the Reverend Spode, a bachelor, was not one who retired to bed early. But if the clergyman had done so then he would have to be disturbed. It was a matter more grave than life or death, the souls of many at dire risk, and now Sabat had the Archbishop's blessing to continue the case. He would have done so even without it but it made it easier.

The drizzle had gone and the night was clear and dry, the moon reflected on the river as Sabat passed through Evesham. Only twenty miles to go; he almost relaxed as he motored through leafy avenues that were the pride of England, his acute sense of smell picking up the odour of extensive orchards of ripening fruit.

Suddenly he was braking, the tyres squealing their protest as he hit an unexpected bank of thick fog. The nearside wheels mounted the verge, slewed back on to the road again, and the DaimJer skidded to a halt.

'Fuck it!' He stared in disbelief at the thick swirling white vapour, a cold clammy steam that was even now drifting in through the open window, his body chilling instantly. The opaqueness threw back the powerful headlight beams, dazzling him.

And in that instant he knew! Oh Jesus, the dark forces which had delayed him at the car while Miranda was snatched away were now bent on ensuring that he did not reach his destination, that he did not discover the whereabouts of Royston's temple of evil!

He stiffened, closed his eyes, and only opened them again when the searing blindness was gone.

Silence. Darkness. The engine was no longer running and the headlights appeared to have gone out. . . unless the fog was so thick that it hid them completely!

Sabat braced himself, waited for the mocking laughter which he knew would follow. 'You're beaten this time. At our mercy!' Quentin's voice without a doubt, coming like a hammer blow to the jaw of a boxer already reeling on the ropes.

But Sabat had been in tight corners before, had learned to control his rising panic. Around his neck was the protective crucifix, garlic bulbs in his pocket; a comparatively safe defence, but there was an enemy within the flesh and bones of his besieged fort - Quentin!

Maniacal laughter jarred his nerves, had him writhing as though in physical pain. Those cold fingers like the hands of Death himself were touching his face, icy sweat running down his face. Then amid the terror came an idea, loud and clear like the clarion call of a rescuing company of troops, a sliver of ingenuity impinging itself in his muzzy brain. He had exorcised many places, people - why not himself?

He shuddered at the implications; that boxer again, pinned back on the ropes, swinging one mightily knockout punch. If it landed, he won. If not, his defences were wide open. A last desperate throw!

Failure he dared not contemplate. Neither did he wish to dwell on his decision. Win or lose, it was made. Quentin's voice, an incomprehensible babble that was wearing him down, opening up the gate to let the enemy in.

Sabat was shouting, screaming, trying to pronounce each word clearly, frightened lest the mental confusion might close in before he was finished. 'I command you, evil spirit, in the Name of God the Father Almighty, in the Name of Jesus Christ his only Son, and in the name of the Holy Spirit . . . ' he had to gasp' for breath, a kind of asthma constricting his lungs, threatening to collapse them. That . . . harming no one . . . you depart from this . . . creature which is myself . . . and return to the place appointed you, there to remain forever.'

He exhaled deeply, had to draw again for life-giving breath, the pain in his chest crippling. Noises inside his head which threatened to dement him, clinging desperately to a cliff face beneath which a black chasm yawned, a voice that threatened to suck him down.

He heard Quentin again. This time there was no laughter, just an obscene blasphemy. 'Damn you, you won't rid yourself of me like that because I am you, Mark Sabat. You torture yourself.'

That much was true. Sabat felt the excruciating pain, screamed his agony but somehow held on to his sanity. A duel was taking place within him, the same as it had that last time between Quentin and himself. The chasm below was that grave, bigger, alive with evil. The .38 barked its hate, spewing his brother's brains out like stringy phlegm.

Winning and yet losing, a stalemate once the powdersmoke had drifted away.

Sabat sank sideways across the front seat, closed his eyes and experienced an overpowering exhaustion. He wanted to sleep . . . had to. Silence, the voice had gone, just a terrible stillness which left him trembling.

'But you haven't won the day, Sabat!' Quentin's voice, vibrant with fury, but dying away, to an unintelligible muttering.

And Sabat knew that he was alone at last. That last super-psychic effort had repelled the enemy, driven

them back into the darkness. He reared up on an elbow, glanced through the windscreen, saw that the fog had gone. Silvery moonlight reflected on the hedges and a warm summer breeze was breathing its fragrant breath in through the window.

Sabat made a supreme effort and struggled up into a sitting position. If he had not grasped the steering wheel he would have slumped back. God, his whole body ached, his brain was numb the way it often was after an exorcism when he had projected his entire mental strength at an opposing evil spirit.

The engine had stalled. He tried to start it, -barely had the strength to turn it over once. And that remaining strength was wilting like an autumn flower. Totally spent, exorcist and exorcised, a combined role that had sapped him.

Even as he felt for the starter again he sensed himself falling; that black chasm again but the evil had gone from it. Just cool and welcoming, a place in which to drift and sleep.. .

Miranda had sat silent, staring straight ahead of her but seeing nothing on the roads that led away from Warwickshire, a total lack of awareness so that when the big man behind the wheel took a sharp bend too fast she was thrown against the door. A bang on her head that would normally have brought a cry of pain from her lips did not so much as alter the glazed expression on her features. Yet she was aware of her predicament, her terror, in the 107

same way that a hospital patient stirring in a deep coma knows but is unable to communicate. An acceptance of her fate because she knew that she could not escape it. In a way she had already died.

At last the car slowed, the tyres crunching on thick gravel, crawling up a winding drive lined with rhododendrons, coming to a halt. Royston switched off the engine, turned to his companion.

'So easy/ he murmured, his eyes narrowing, once again the hawk which had swooped and taken off again with its helpless prey dangling in its talons, not even struggling. 'And in spite of Sabat's meddling we are in time.' He laughed, an unpleasant sound, got out and came round to unlatch the passenger door.

Miranda's movements were jerky, a robot in human shape, her only feeling that one spark of terror somewhere deep inside her. Her limp hand was clutched and she found herself stumbling along at the side of her tall companion, wicked briars reaching out to clutch at her ankles, low branches whipping her face as though the forces of Nature were eager for the torment to commence.

They skirted the large black and white timbered house, half moonlit, half in shadow, a place that seemed to brood, its windows eyes that scrutinised her. Down paths that twisted and wound back on themselves in places. Once Miranda would have fallen headlong had not Royston been gripping her wrist; he caught her, pulled her roughly upright in the same movement. There was no time to linger.

She saw the yawning black hole before her but did not understand; had her captor not steadied her she would have fallen head first down the flight of broken steps that led below. Royston went first, picking his way carefully, holding her close to him, gripping her as though he both hated and lusted for her, fingers squeezing with intent to hurt.

A narrow passage, its stone walls running with moisture, its roof bulging in places as though it might collapse at any second. The floor was uneven, water splashing Miranda's ankles where the seepage from above had formed puddles. She was breathing unevenly, her respiratory system rebelling at the pungent musty odour, her skin goosepimpling because it was so very cold down here. Yet she was not aware of any discomfort.

Light was coming from somewhere ahead, a soft yellow glow that grew brighter with every bend in the passage until at length they emerged into a large underground room. Again the walls were rough hewn and the ceiling was supported in places by wooden props in addition to the existing stone pillars. A row of black wax candles filled the area with an oily smoke that took its time filtering out into the passage down which the two newcomers had arrived. And people moved amid the smoke haze.

Heads were turned towards them, eyes glinting with the same carnal lust that was to be seen in Royston's, all focused on the girl. Even in her trance-like state she sensed their hostility, their evil a vibrant wave that hit her and set every nerve tingling, seemed to fan that tiny spark of terror within her to a flame.

Wide-eyed she took in the scene; a dozen naked men and women, the younger ones erotic in their arousement, the older ones wrinkled and revolting. Both were frightening. They had been doing something, some kind of group activity that inspired a feeling of guilt because their leader had arrived without warning and witnessed their perverted orgy. But their shame vanished as they gazed upon Miranda, willing her to be thrown naked into their midst so that they could vent their unsatisfied lust upon her shapely body, finish whatever they had been doing.

The shock had brought an awakening to Miranda, now seeing and beginning to understand. That altar with its dark tapestries, the gleaming white object that was stretched below the twin candles, the flickering flames showing the fractured bones, how some had been rejoined in an attempt to ... Oh God,

they'd repaired that broken human skeleton, made it into a complete frame again . . . resurrected William Gardiner for some awful purpose•!

The empty eye sockets seemed to single her out as though they saw her, the mouth cavity an evil welcoming grin. But that was impossible because this century-old skeleton was dead, no matter what Royston tried to make out. She shuddered, recalled what had happened to Sheila Dowson; what they'd done to Sylvia Adams' corpse. They'd do the same to her, desecrate her body before and after death. That was the thought that had the scream rising from deep inside her, a full-bodied yell of terror that was suddenly checked in her throat, bulging and painful like a block of trapped wind. Because Royston was standing directly in front of her, clad in black and mauve robes with a high cowl, the material embroidered all over with inverted crosses. Miranda wanted to laugh, to double up with mirth because he reminded her of a bishop and all church people looked comical in their various regalia. Yet she could neither laugh nor scream, finding her eyes focused on his own, seeing into those dark pools - and beyond them into eternal darkness.

That exchange of gazes seemed to last an eternity. Royston looked different but she knew that he was capable of changing his features at will, or rather when he looked at you like that you saw him how he wanted you to see him. Earlier he had been Sabat, more like Sabat than Sabat was himself. Now the big man seemed to have aged decades, a withered old man with straggling grey hair; similar features, yet lined and shrunken. Just a couple of broken yellowed teeth so that when he spoke he lisped and dribbled, and Miranda had difficulty in hearing the words. Gone were those splendid sinister robes and in their place a shabby grey morning coat and trousers that tapered into spats. And in that same instant realisation dawned on her waking brain that she was stark naked, her clothes somehow having been removed.

Miranda wanted to flee, to rush screaming from this awful place, but somehow Royston had frozen her body as surely as though he had induced some paralysing drug into her bloodstream. Even her eyeballs did not move. His whispered words hit her with the force of a driving hailstorm. 'Look at me, for I am William Gardiner, awaiting to be resurrected with your Help!'

Now her terror was at a peak. The man before her was Royston again, more sinister than that night of the Black Mass when a girl had died and Horace had been reduced to a babbling imbecile. No longer did he hypnotise her brain; just every bodily function as surely as though she was imprisoned inside a suit of armour, being able to see and hear but not able to flutter so much as an eyelash. And she knew that he had done this to her because he wanted to punish her, had passed worse than the death sentence on her because of the treachery she had planned with Sabat. It was impossible to turn back once the Left Hand Path had been trodden.

She was conscious of being led to the black altar, of being made to lie flat on her back on the covered stone slab, feeling something touching her arm ... knowing that she lay alongside that terrible skeleton and being powerless even to flinch! bile rose in her throat. She wanted to vomit but even the human reaction

to revulsion of throwing up was denied her, inwardly screaming until her brain vibrated. Yet it wasn't enough to shut out Royston's voice as he stood and faced his awed followers, arms aloft.

'Brethren, tonight we have the power to bring back he who was known as William Gardiner, to inject life into these bones which had mouldered for so long in the earth. Because before tonight none were capable, none dared to do it until now. The time is nigh.' His voice reached an hysterical pitch, brought murmurs from those who bowed their heads or looked up at him with reverence and fear, trying to dispel thoughts of reluctance in case this terrible man read them, for surely his powers were truly magical.

'Brethren, we have bones, human bones,' Royston's voice had sunk to a whisper yet it echoed loudly in this confined space. 'What do we need to give it life again, brethren?'

'Breath,' the reply in unison was like a hiss. The candles seeming to be caught by the rush of air, flickered, and when the tiny flames were still again they appeared to have dimmed. It could have been an illusion.

'Breath, indeed,' Royston shouted, saw the watchers cringe, a few in the background hiding their faces. 'The breath of a beautiful woman breathed into him, a mate to bring him life and joy.'

Miranda felt herself being lifted up, so easily that it was as if she was suddenly weightless. One of the altar candles flickered again causing the features directly below her to grin evilly. Oh God Almighty, no,' Not that I Whoever held her was lowering her slowly, her naked body being laid, face to face, directly upon that terrible thing that they had dug out of its last resting place, her thighs pulled apart so that those skeletal legs lay between them, the hard pubic bone scraping painfully against her own. Her breasts were trapped and squashed in the hideous ribcage. And her mouth was guided directly on to that black cavity in an unholy kiss that went beyond the grave.

'William Gardiner has a mate at last!' Royston's shout was close to hysteria. 'A woman who breathes life into him even now, cherishing his memory, one honoured to mate with him should he so desire!'

Miranda prayed that she might die there and then; a sudden heart attack brought on because she had passed the fear barrier. Or madness, her brain snapping and sparing her the awfulness of reality, turning this into some wild sexual fantasy. But neither happened. She could not even draw back; instead to her horror she felt her tongue protruding, pushing its way into what had once been Gardiner's mouth in a simulation of copulation. A vile taste and it was impossible even to retch, the sour flavour of damp earth on her palate blended with one of putrefying flesh. The altar candle dimmed still further and beneath the weight of her own body the skeleton appeared to move, a settling of ancient bones that dug into her with

a terrifying eagerness. 'He has breath,' Royston screeched. 'What else does he need, brethren?'

'Flesh,' the reply came back instantly.

'He has flesh now, pressing against his sacred bones. But what else, brethren? Flesh and breath, but his new arteries will need to be filled with that which will bring life to him, bring him back to us from beyond.'

'Blood!' A deafening chorus, a classroom prompted into the right answer by their teacher. 'Give him blood so that he will live again!' Echoes: 'blood . . . blood . . . blood.' Several of the smaller candles situated around the crypt were suddenly extinguished, the lurking shadows darting back, the stench of smoking candlewax sickening.

Miranda felt Royston moving close to her, knew what he was going to do, felt the coldness of the steel knife blade as it nicked her wrists; a tiny quarter-inch gash but gouged so expertly that she felt the blood spurting from her almost instantly. Now her other wrist, her hands placed back immediately in Gardiner's skeletal grip.

Her head was pulled back by her auburn hair. She braced herself mentally; physically it was impossible even to cringe. A sharp strangulating pain and she knew the knife had cut deep, her head lowered back into its original position, that ghastly kiss of life for the dead.

Wide-eyed she watched herself from an angled position. Silence, except for a noise like a tap squirting into a basin, white bones turning darkly crimson. And, oh Jesus, she was still pushing into that vile mouth with her tongue!

It was darker now; just one altar candle left burning. For Miranda the black shadows were tinged with red and her tongue-thrusts were becoming weaker by the second. And there was no pain as though her body and her brain were no longer in communication with each other.

She was convinced that she had died a couple of minutes before the end actually came, before the spouting blood slowed to a thick trickle and she sagged down on to the dripping skeleton. Her astral body was a yard or so above her corpse, seeing Royston jerk her head back, ignoring her as he stared into the blood-filled eye sockets of William Gardiner, seeking a movement, a sign of some sort; willing life where there was only death.

'Does he live?' Quavering voices, trembling whispers from beyond the circle of light cast by the remaining candle. Most of the coven secretly hoped that he did not.

Royston sucked in his breath, Miranda saw that his features had changed yet again, sunken and wasted, reminiscent in structure of that awful skull; the same narrow mouth into which she had been forced to thrust her tongue in a stinking french kiss.

'Life is there.' Royston lifted one of the fleshless hands as though testing its pulse. 'But our sacred benefactor is not to be reincarnated so easily. He has accepted our sacrifice but craves another!'

Gasps of awe, sheer selfish terror in each of the listeners came like a shrieking gale to flicker the single candle flame. Some of those present remembered how Sheila Dowson had been taken in the blackness of Satan's mass. Now it could be any one of them, summoned by this terrible high priest of darkness, a call which none could ignore. A life for a life.

'More blood.' Royston dipped his fingers in a thick warm pool beneath the bones, a flick of his wrist spraying those who cowered in terror, bringing stifled cries from their dry lips as they felt it splattering on their bowed heads. 'And I,' his voice rose to a pitch, 'have commanded that victim to come here to me, as surely he will before long; one whose blood is as evil as our revered one and with it William Gardiner will arise and lead us in whatever form he chooses to take!'

Mature men and women whimpered their fear for they knew enough of the one who addressed them to accept the truth of his words. They were as terrified of him as they were of the skeleton which had been exhumed from St Adrian's churchyard. There was no escape, nowhere to hide, for this priest of Satan would seek them out and exact a terrible revenge. Had he not punished Miranda in full for her infidelity?

'He will come,' Royston's tone was as vibrant as an electric current, reducing their naked bodies to trembling flesh. 'And that will be the ultimate sacrifice, one which even our great Master will not refuse. He will grant our request and bring back the one who has been lost to us for so long. And brethren, when that moment arrives, we shall all drink the blood of he who is our enemy and calls himself Sabat.

The remaining black candle flickered and finally extinguished itself, plunging the crypt into total darkness.

CHAPTER NINE

IT WAS full daylight when Sabat awoke, stirred slowly and stretched his cramped limbs. In spite of his discomfort he felt refreshed, sitting up with a start, groaning as the memory of those nocturnal hours came back to him in full, the full horror of all that had happened.

He had fought off the psychic attack, a conjuror playing a final trick when all that had gone before had been a flop; deceived Quentin in a manner in which his brother's soul would not be fooled again. But in the end the dark powers had won because exhaustion had claimed Sabat, thwarted his search for Miranda. He knew that without a doubt the prostitute would be dead by now.

One moment when his eyes misted over and then he had cast off the feeling of grief. The thought of vengeance replaced it, hardening his features, pumping a grim determination into the lithe body which gunned the engine of the Daimler and had the speedometer needle flickering on 70 mph within the first hundred yards.

There was no immediate hurry now, yet Sabat drove like one possessed (as he surely was), cornering with screeching tyres on the winding road, promising himself that this man called Royston would pay not only with his life but with his soul. And Sabat would not make the same mistake which he had made when he had confronted Quentin in that remote forest clearing. God or Satan, he would use either to exact the terrible revenge he sought. Suddenly he saw the motor-cyclist, a hurtling denim-clad rider

coming towards him, taking the left hand bend too wide and too fast, unhelmeted so that an expression of terror was visible even in that fraction of a second. Sabat's reactions were as sharp as ever, pulling the wheel over, mounting the grass verge, miraculously avoiding a head-on collision.

Now everything was slow motion, every detail hideously accentuated as though deliberately to torture the two men. The biker was alongside the Daimler, a stunt rider doing crazy aerobatics as his machine reared like a plunging rodeo mount. Sabat had two fields of vision; in his wing mirror he watched the riderless motorbike hit the ground and career on a diagonal course for the opposite ditch, while through the windscreen he saw the thrown rider reach his apex, arms and legs kicking like a sky-diver. Coming down. So slowly, head first, long blonde hair flowing, mouth wide to emit a terrible scream. For one awful split second the two men exchanged glances, the clear blue eyes of the doomed youth blazing terror and hate. 'You killed me, you bastard. Murderer \'

Sabat seemed to feel the impact of bone smashing on tarmac, a stomach-churning thud that vibrated through the car. Still it was slow motion, an action replay of a gymnast's head stand . . . except that the performer now had no head! Smashed bone and pulped flesh, a morass that was scarlet with stringy grey frogspawn, still tottering in a vertical position. Then slowly collapsing

It had seemed an eternity yet could have lasted no more than a few seconds. Sabat's pulses had started to race but he checked them, psychologically steadying every nerve as he had been trained to do during his SAS service. He opened the door, eased himself out, stood looking down on the bloody remains of what had once been a human being. Shredded clothing, a gash that opened up the stomach so that the entrails spilled out, yards of coiled human piping.

Sabat glanced up and down the road. There was nobody in sight. Probably this unfortunate victim of their brief encounter was a farm labourer speeding on his way to keep an appointment with a herd of cows whose udders were full to bursting. No sadness, no revulsion, seeing things as they were, as fate had ordained. Alive one second, dead the next; a gamble millions of people won or lost with every passing day.

Sabat turned away, got back into his car. There was nothing he could have done anyway. Had the other still been alive he would have put him out of his misery with the same impartiality with which a vet dispatches a suffering animal. He'd done it once before, a swift blow with a starting handle to the head of a young girl mutilated beyond recognition in the wreckage of a Mini. Instant death was preferable to prolonged suffering. God gave life and God took it away; and as Man was a part of God, Sabat had felt justified in his decision.

He drove away, the Daimler picking up speed. To have wasted time reporting the accident would have caused delays which Sabat could not afford. Lengthy statements would have taken hours; the next

motorist to pass along this road could shoulder that responsibility. And with a long expel-lation of breath, Sabat pushed the matter from his mind, cast it into the oblivion of human forgetfulness.

It was 8.00am when he spied his destination below him, a tiny village dominated by a church spire protruding above a line of tall poplars set in a small river valley. The incline was steep and winding, giving him a panoramic view of the countryside, sheep and cattle grazing the meadowland. Perfect peace, so far removed from Royston and his vile followers.

Sabat should have been able to relax but for some reason he could not. Every nerve in his body was tense, a tautness that gave him that feeling of foreboding again. But that was probably a reaction to his failure to find Miranda in time for there was no doubt in his mind that she was dead by now, having suffered horribly at the end.

One or two people were astir in the sleepy village street, an elderly woman pausing on the steps of a grocery shop to stare at the Daimler, squinting as she tried to identify the driver. Strangers here, Sabat decided, were not an everyday occurrence.

He slowed by the church, could just make out the gabled outline of the black and white timbered vicarage which stood in the adjoining grounds, an austere building partly screened from the road by tall shrubberies. He saw the entrance gates were open, eased the aristocratic nose of the Daimler into the drive.

Sabat swung the car round on the semi-circular forecourt in front of the house, switched off the engine and surveyed his surroundings. A typical churchman's abode, he smiled wryly, a gardener paid a pittance out of the offertory money, a facade to mask a hypocritical religion. Nevertheless, Sabat had to pander to the whims of the Reverend Spode. He left the car, mounted a flight of wide steps and rung the bell. Somewhere in the recesses of the vicarage he heard it clanging faintly, echoing.

It was fully five minutes before Sabat heard approaching footsteps, a light tread that was definitely female. He conjured up in his imagination an apron-clad, rosy cheeked middle-aged spinster or widow, a typical housekeeper who would usher him into a drab Victorian drawing room; a wait maybe of quarter-of-an-hour because it was 'the thing' where visitors were concerned, a die-hard tradition amongst this latter generation of clergy.

'Good morning. Can I help you?'

Sabat stared; for a few seconds his brain refused to relate the girl who peered out of the partly open door to an ageing vicar's housekeeper. Small and slim she could not have been more than thirty, her smooth skin very slightly darker than that of an average sun-tanned European. Wide brown eyes that almost matched her afro hairstyle and perfect features that radiated sheer beauty, all enhanced by the ankle-length, hand-woven dress of a dozen different colours.

'Er . . . yes.' Sabat overcame his surprise; a white West Indian without a doubt. 'I'd like to see the Reverend Spode.'

'Perhaps you'd care to step inside.' Her smile showed two rows of flashing white teeth. 'I'm afraid the vicar's not back yet from taking early communion but he shouldn't be long.'

'Thank you.' Sabat stepped into the gloomy hall, smelled strong lavender polish. 'I hope the vicar won't be too long.'

'I'm sure he won't.' The perfect hostess in the vicar's absence, ushering him into a drawing room, a feature which at least met with his expectations of a sombre vicarage. 'Would you like a cup of coffee while you wait?'

'That would be fine.' Sabat smiled, would have accepted an invitation to partake of a massive English breakfast there and then if it had been offered. He had not eaten for almost twenty-four hours and he was ravenous. But food could wait.

A few minutes later the girl returned carrying a small tray on which stood a cup of delicious-smelling coffee, a small jug of milk and a bowl of sugar. 'I'm sorry to have to keep you waiting, Mr . . . ?'

'Sabat.'

'Sa . . . bat,' she repeated the name slowly as though savouring every syllable. 'I'll tell the Reverend Spode that you're here the moment he returns.' With a sudden turn that swirled her dress like that of a ballerina, the girl took her leave. Sabat had one glimpse of the shapely legs beneath the home-woven material and then she was gone, her footsteps receding down the stone-flagged passage which led to the rear of this large house.

Sabat sipped his coffee, savouring its unique flavour and aroma. It was certainly no cheap mass-produced blend of mongrel beans, rather a delicate, subtle continental taste. At least he thought so. He couldn't quite place its origin.

He glanced at his watch. 8.30. He seemed to have been here hours. Suddenly, he felt tired, too; found himself yawning, a loud vulgar sound as though his body was fighting desperately to dispel a fatigue that was building up. His eyelids drooped and he had to keep them open with a conscious effort. Hell, Spode was taking his time, must've had a packed church for communion. Sabat supposed that in a small village such as this most of the population attended every service. Because their fathers and their fathers' fathers before them had done so, a foundation upon which the Church today relied. The present generation were free thinkers, made up their own minds whether or not they went to church. And most of them didn't.

He consulted his watch again, having to concentrate to work out which hand was which. 8.30. It must've stopped.

He tapped it, shook his wrist, held it up to his "ar. It was ticking all right. Probably it had stopped and started again. Then he heard the nearby church clock chime, two resonant clangs; the half-hour.

Only then did he begin to realise that something was wrong. He tried to get up but his limbs refused to move. Now he could not even lift his arms. His mouth was dry, a sharp bitter tang on his palate; even his tongue seemed leaden.

Oh, Jesus Christ what the hell was wrong with him? He'd never felt fitter, fresher than when he'd driven into the village a short time ago. It wasn't fatigue, more like some kind of tropical sleeping sickness where one kept on dozing off until finally one went to sleep and did not wake up anymore! He'd have to close his eyes for a few moments, cat-nap like he'd learned to do in the SAS, and when he woke up maybe he'd feel better.

Suddenly he heard footsteps in the passage outside. This time it was not the dainty tread of the West Indian girl but a much heavier, dragging male step. The doorknob rattled, turned, and Sabat felt a draught on his face. He fought to open his eyes but only managed a blurred squint, enough to make out a tall, heavily-built man framed in the doorway, a breeze from somewhere fluttering the long black robes which he wore. This had to be the Reverend Spode, Sabat decided, and could not prevent his eyes from closing again. He opened his mouth to speak but only succeeded in emitting another loud yawn.

'Ah, Mr Sabat,' a cultured forceful voice. 'And tired after your long journey here, I perceive.'

Something jogged Sabat's muzzy brain, a sharp recollection, recognising something but not knowing quite what; another of his inbuilt instinctive warning systems was suddenly operating at full blast, urging him to open his eyes! That voice, . . . so familiar . . .

With an almost superhuman effort Sabat forced his eyes open, stared hard until that cataract-like opaqueness dissolved and he could see clearly. And then every alarm, every nerve in his body was screaming at him!

In that terrible moment he saw and understood; saw the big clergyman standing before him, the receding hairline that traced a thinning path to a balding crown, the jellified jowls that wobbled their way to a leering grin and the hooked nose which resembled the outsize cruel beak of a bird of prey, oversized on those aquiline features. There could be no possible doubt concerning the true identity of the man who faced him!

'Allow me to introduce myself,' the newcomer laughed, a throaty chuckle, 'the Reverend Spode . . . Royston Spode!'

His words hit Sabat like a burst of .45 slugs. He found himself pressing back in his chair, his stomach knotting as though he suffered from a bout of colic. You fucking idiot, you walked right into the lion's den, didn't even look the place over first. Now you've found Royston and he's got you right where he wants you. It was the coffee, of course, some paralysing drug . . .

'I believe you've been wanting to meet me for some time, Sabat! the other was euphoric, pacing slowly to and fro, hands clasped behind his back, a vicar-like pose which he had perfected until it became a habit. 'I was expecting you, of course. I knew that you would find your way here. Consequently preparations have been made for your arrival.'

'The Archbishop knows I'm here.' Sabat found that speaking was not quite such a problem as moving. 'It won't be long before somebody comes looking for me.'

'Then let them come.' Spode laughed again, spread his large hands wide. 'Of course Mr Sabat came here, arrived about eight on Wednesday morning. He wanted a list of old crypts which might possibly be used for the purpose of Satanic worship. I gave him some, and he remarked that he was going to

commence his search up in the north of England. Yorkshire, if my memory serves me right. He drove off and I haven't seen him since. The disposal of your car, not to mention your corpse, presents no problem, I can assure you.'

'What've you done with the girl?' Sabat's tone was harsh, emery paper being rubbed on rough wood.

'You refer to Miranda, of course. A lovely body even if she was a common whore.'

'Was?'

'Come now, Sabat, you didn't expect to find her alive, did you? Of course you didn't. However, she wasn't just punished for the treachery she planned against me; I had her lined up for a spectacular role some weeks ago.'

'What role?'

'Have you ever been to Haiti, Sabat?' Spode answered with a question, eyes narrowing, voice sharper.

Sabat tried to nod but couldn't, so he just grunted in the affirmative.

'In which case you are well acquainted with bocors and houngans and various voodoo rites. Voodoo is the most powerful of all magic, its secrets known only to a handful of people living today. Few of the bocors in Haiti today really understand it, their knowledge merely having scratched its surface. Pardon a well-used cliché but a little knowledge is dangerous. I have probed deeper; perhaps one day I shall pay the full price for the bargains I have made. You too, Sabat, for nobody summons the Lord of the Cemetery lightly. However, our mutual concern is to live for the present - you, especially, for this coming night will be your last . . . certainly in human form!' Royston Spode laughed deeply, smacked the fist of one hand loudly into the palm of the other.

'For Christ's sake tell me what you've done with Miranda!'

'Be patient/ Spode's eyes narrowed cruelly, 'I am coming to that. As you have discovered in your meddling, I have in my possession the skeleton of William Gardiner, one of the most powerful black magicians of all time; more powerful than the great Crowley although Gardiner preferred to remain in virtual anonymity. He offended the Church so they tried to take their revenge by bringing an age-old charge of heresy against him. Even the courts ridiculed them. But Gardiner had the last laugh . . . oh, indeed he laughed loud and long. He took his powers to the grave with him, turned that consecrated graveyard of St Adrian's into desecrated soil so that his followers might worship there for centuries to come! Until you, Sabat, interfered and called upon Baron Cimeterre to reign supreme there. But I already thwarted you, removed those sacred bones to a place of safety, a Satanic temple where I beseeched the powers /serve to resurrect William Gardiner, to transfer his powers, his very soul, to my own being. And this they will do. They asked for blood, a human sacrifice, and I gave them Miranda but it was not enough. They asked for the blood of one whose evil was second only to Gardiner's . . . that of your brother Quentin which courses through your own veins. And tonight I shall give them just that. A bonus, in fact, for I shall also free the soul of Quentin Sabat from its incarceration!"

Sabat's brain reeled. A madman he could have combated but Royston Spode was not mad - he was diabolically clever, one who had pierced the dark secrets of voodoo and had harnessed them for his own ends. And now he was within hours of obtaining the ultimate in satanic power. Miranda's flesh and blood had only partially served his purpose; Sabat's would be the final piece in the jigsaw which Spode had been compiling over the years; a quest that had begun in Haiti and was to end in England.

'So you see, Sabat,' there was triumph in the big clergyman's voice, 'you have obliged me by coming here under your own volition. I shall now take you to the temple, the very crypt you once visited in your astral body, and there you will be left, quite helpless, to meditate on your fate. Incidentally, you may be interested to learn that my small but devoted congregation at the church where I have been vicar for the past five years, ever since I returned to this country from Haiti in fact, are also devout members of my coven. Our church services are always conducted behind locked doors for my initiated like to ... shall we say 'savour their unique position' in an otherwise mundane life. Evensong today will be an occasion for rejoicing in the knowledge that that which we have strived for has now come to pass, There will be communion, too. Desecrated wine to be drunk . . . well, not exactly wine . . . a claret liquid of a somewhat thicker texture! But come, I must assist you to your last resting place . . . '

Sabat was powerless to resist as Royston Spode's strong hand gripped his own, hauling him to his feet. Sabat stumbled, propelled along with ease by his captor, his eyelids threatening to close again as he was taken along the narrow winding path amid the fragrant rhododendron bushes, then down into the dank, stuffy catacombs where in centuries past the wealthy landowners had buried their dead.

Sabat could not fight off the urge to sleep any longer once his body was laid flat on that stone slab. One last mocking laugh and then Spode was gone, striding back up into the sunlit world above where he played the role of a holy man, a Jonathan Wild, the spider at the centre of the web of evil, ensnaring his followers, dominating their souls and compelling them to take part in a blasphemous communion service in this beautiful little church amid the poplar trees. And this evening they would do just that, calling upon the powers of darkness to reward them this coming night, that they, too, might partake of the evil which

existed within the bones of a long-dead black magician.

As Sabat drifted into an uneasy slumber he thought he heard a faint rattling sound close by, as though a skeleton had eased limbs that had been confined for years in a cramped coffin. Various odours mingled and smarted in the drugged man's nostrils, aromas which he vaguely recognised . . . decomposing flesh, the mustiness of this damp, almost airless place... and an iron smell - like blood that had been spilled recently!

And in his final conscious thoughts Sabat conceded defeat. Because he accepted that for the first time in his life he was powerless to fight. He might never awake from this drugged sleep into which he was drifting. The coven had their human sacrifice; it mattered not to them whether they killed him sleeping or awake. All they wanted was his blood -Quentin's blood!

CHAPTER TEN

SABAT'S ASTRAL body looked down upon his sleeping, pale physical form. He grimaced at what he saw. His drugged features had a pallid, corpse-like look about them, his chest scarcely rising and falling with his ultra-shallow breathing. And beside him lay the hideous skeleton of WilHam Gardi-ner, the skull and arms dark with congealed blood, turned towards him as though it laughed with that horrible cavity of a mouth, and sought to embrace him with its long arms.

And Miranda ... Oh Jesus, they'd pay in full for what they had done to her! Her body lay in a recess, cast-off garbage thrown to one side to rot. Her head lolled back exposing a huge gash the length of her neck, her previously unblemished flesh matted and streaked with her own dried blood. And as a final insult they had parted her thighs, a mockery in death of the way she had lived.

Sabat hesitated, hovering close to the bowing ceiling of the crypt. In some ways he doubted the wisdom of leaving his body. It still lived and the Reverend Spode had only to return and administer some unspeakable physical attack and Sabat would be prevented from returning to it. Yet if he lingered within himself then they could trap his astral in the short blackout following death when he was helpless, and give only Quentin his freedom. Surely Royston Spode realised that once Sabat slumbered his astral would be able to escape, or was there some ulterior motive behind it?

Certainly Sabat could not harm the living in his astral form; he could only attack Royston if the latter chose to join him on one of the planes and it was obvious that the evil vicar was going to be far too busy throughout the day-fight hours to do that. In which case Spode had allowed Sabat astral freedom knowing that in this form he was relatively harmless and when night fell he would instinctively rejoin his body in the hope of somehow being able to avert death.

There was nothing to be achieved by remaining in this place of death and mutilation any longer. He soared with a sense of relief down that wet cold passage, shot out into the open like a bat emerging at dusk from its daytime roost. Almost with reluctance he entered the vicarage, now sensing the atmosphere of latent evil which he had failed to notice earlier because he had been blinded to it by his faith in a country vicar.

The hall and drawing room were empty so he made for the stairway, knew only too well that Royston Spode was here somewhere. The landing was wide with several doors leading off from it. He hesitated, almost turned back because there was no time to waste in idle curiosity. But it would only take a few seconds and he had several hours left before nightfall when the coven would converge on their temple of worship to carry out the ultimate act of depravity.

The Reverend Royston Spode was in the third bedroom which Sabat entered, his spreading quivering body virtually hiding the girl who writhed beneath him. Sabat's first sensation was one of revulsion, those rolls of fat which had possibly once been solid muscle were obese, the wobbling bottom reminding him of his oft-quoted quip about clergymen who grew fat arses by sitting on other people's sofas and drinking scrounged cups of tea.

Sabat moved lower, intent on seeing who it was with whom the clergyman copulated. Of course, it was

the West Indian girl, radiantly beautiful in her nakedness. Her eyes were closed as she writhed and gasped and almost certainly Royston would not be venturing on to the astral plane in the near future. Sabat left them to it, pitied the girl in spite of the fact that she had given him doped coffee; she'd had her orders and it would be more than her life was worth to disobey her master's demands. Just as she could not refuse him now.

Sabat soared up into the summer sky, saw some diving swallows and envied them their freedom. Below him the village resembled a toy model, growing smaller as he gained height, and he found it hard to believe that dangerous evil could be spawned in such a tranquil setting. There was no sign of the Daimler where he had parked it; they had wasted no time in disposing of it. Sabat's trail was already obliterated.

In due course he came to that barren wasteland which was his intended destination; that arid expanse where the final battle between the dark and light-skinned races had been fought. Here he changed his form, a bearded, sweat-soaked warrior clad only in a tattered loincloth, experiencing the rigours of the merciless sun, scuffing blistered feet in the powdery silver sand.

Water holes beckoned and then mocked him by fading into the shimmering haze, palm trees that turned out to be stunted cacti when he approached them. Sabat knew it was self-torture, masochism, that he could have used the shape of a desert bird to traverse the distance so much quicker, but this was the way it had to be; a pilgrim on his way to worship at the shrine of the gods, humble and beseeching his gods to grant his request.

The sun was past its zenith when he spied the battle scene, bloated vultures waddling amongst the slain. Their cruel beaks speared dead eyes, their crops bulging with a glut of these delicacies. Tomorrow, when they had digested their optic banquet, they would return for the decomposing flesh. Days later they would be gleaning the whitening bones and then there would be no way of identifying the slain forces of good from the corpses of evil.

Slowly Sabat wound his way between the bodies. Eyeless sockets seemed to follow his every movement, the smell of death and flesh which was already beginning to putrefy hung heavy in the still atmosphere. The slain stretched as far as the eye could see, rigor mortis capturing the final throes of agony. Then a sudden movement halted him and he shielded his eyes, saw human forms, a hundred yards or so away. Four of them, huddled cloaked figures, bowed with grief as they surveyed the carnage around them.

Sabat experienced a sudden chill, a shiver running through him in spite of the intolerable heat. He turned, began to make his way towards them, a feeling of guilt causing him to avert his eyes. For he had no right to be here, a trespasser in the land of the gods, one who came only when the final conflict was over. But it was not over, an eternal struggle in which the forces of good struggled to repel the armies of evil; a

battle won today would be lost tomorrow, and so it would be for always.

He raised his head, saw that all four of them were watching him intently, yet their expressions were impassive. Three men and a woman, at least those were the forms in which they showed themselves to him, robed and cowed so that they might just have been desert wanderers who had happened upon the slaughter like himself.

'You came too late, Sabat.' The oldest of the men spoke with a heavy nasal accent, one that could not be likened to any race anywhere in the world. 'This day has been long although it is far from finished. Warriors have been slain by the thousand but there is neither conqueror nor conquered. And so it will always be, eternal strife and suffering.'

'That is why I come, my Lord Damballah,' Sabat spoke humbly. 'Greetings to you and your woman Aida Ouedo. Had I a white cock and hen I would sacrifice them to you but all I see around me are vultures.'

'So be it.' Damballah waved a hand in the direction of his three companions. 'Today is Wednesday which is my day, Damballah's day. Yet you may also address Papa Legba, the giver of opportunities, and Maitre Carrefour, the Lord of the Crossroads. See, they even pay homage to him in this land of death.'

Sabat's eyes followed the pointing finger, saw a crude wooden cross some seven or eight feet high on which had been draped a tattered tail-coat, above which hung the remnants of a top hat. The Lord of the Crossroads, indeed, was represented here but today it was Damballah, chief of the Rada gods, who commanded worship. Sabat was fortunate; any other time he might have happened upon the evil Petro gods and surely Baron Cimeterre would not have forgiven him for his treachery, first in the cemetery and later when he had put Maurice Storton's body beyond the reach of the Lord of the Cemetery.

'You risk your soul, Sabat,' Damballah warned. 'It is only the foolish and the brave who dare to tread this blood-soaked battlefield from which there is no escape except by the benevolence of the ruling god on that day.'

'I came because it is Wednesday,' Sabat kept his eyes on the ground, saw a scorpion scuttle beneath a dead body, 'otherwise I would not have done so. I come to ask your help.'

'Even Damballah is wary of your treachery now.'

'My treachery concerns only Baron Cimeterre. Surely you do not despise me for what I did to your sworn enemy, a Petro god.'

'No, but I cannot trust a mercenary in this eternal war between good and evil. Yours is a selfish request, a plea that you might be saved.'

'No!' Sabat raised himself proudly to his full height. 'I ask not to be saved myself but unless I am spared, the duppy of my brother Quentin will be released to join forces with the Petro gods. Only by saving me will you prevent this happening.'

'You are cunning, Sabat,' a faint smile flicked briefly across the parchment-like features of the Wednesday god, 'but as your soul is also Quentin's, how can I be certain that you will not reward me with evil, turn on me as you did on Baron Cimeterre.'

'I can make no such rash promise, nor would I attempt to do so,' Sabat replied, 'for at times, Quentin is strong within me. But I will make one vow here on this bloodsoaked land.'

'You are honest and for that I respect you. But what vow will you make, what bargain for your life. You cannot guarantee me your duppy because it is not wholly yours, and after death it may go into the dark unknown.'

'I promise this,' Sabat's voice was loud and clear, shouting because distant thunder was rumbling, an approaching desert storm coming to whip the sand and drive it so that this day's battle would be buried and forgotten, 'that I will kilt he who is known as Royston Spode in the name of Damballah, and that I will destroy his duppy before it can leave his body in the same manner in which I did one called Maurice Storton. And should it by chance elude me, then I will follow it into the black beyond and hunt it down like a savage beast.'

Damballah was silent for a few moments, glancing at Aida Ouedo and the other two in turn as though seeking their opinion. Heads were nodded, shaken, then Damballah turned back to Sabat. 'It is a terrible vow which you make. You will be held to it.'

'I vow!' Sabat spoke slowly, dropping his voice to a whisper, 'to destroy the line of evil that has been continued through William Gardiner into the person of Royston Spode. And if I fail then you may take me.'

'No,' Damballah hissed, 'I shall not take you, for the Rada gods will have no use of you then. The Petro gods will claim your duppy and doubtless Baron Cimeterre will exact a terrible revenge upon you for the manner in which you tricked him. That is the price of failure. Now go, return to your body and we, the Rada gods, will do our best. But even we cannot promise victory, for the evil in that temple is so strong that we may not be able to breach its battlements.'

Sabat bowed, turned away. The tension which had built up inside him now oozed its way out, droplets of sweat that evaporated at once and a trembling that had him shaking in every limb. Now that the ordeal was over he wanted to hasten back to his drugged body, to rest awhile in order to prepare himself for whatever lay ahead. For even Damballah, chief of the Rada gods, was not all-powerful; Baron Cimeterre and other lords of the dark would not concede their evil prize without a terrible struggle. And Sabat was to be the rope in their tug-o'-war!

With some alarm Sabat realised that the heat of the day had lessened, that the sun had slipped towards the western horizon. In a world where time stood still he had delayed too long; now he sped earthwards, a hurtling speck that could have been a hunting hawk, becoming a jinking, twisting bat as he flitted past the ivy-covered vicarage and honed towards that open square in the overgrown, disused adjoining graveyard.

It was the smell he noticed first, stronger than before, a sickening odour of rotting flesh and death, mingled with the acrid, unmistakable aroma of blood. Terror such as he had never experienced before in astral form; fear that he had been away too long, deserted his physical body and left it totally at the mercy of the evil Royston.

Even as he entered the crypt the scene which he feared most greeted him. His own body lay there before that black altar just as he had left it, but in the light cast by the twin candles he saw the blood . . . his features unrecognisable beneath the sticky scarlet fluid, his dark clothing saturated so that the material clung tightly to the body. Royston Spode had thwarted him, sacrificed him before night fell.

And now that he was dead, Sabat's astral body was trapped in the wilderness of no return.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ROYSTON SPODE gave a final orgasmic shudder and sank his full weight down on the West Indian girl who lay spread-eagled beneath him. He went limp, gave way to the wave of exhaustion which swept over him. It had been good. Very, very good. He'd needed it in order to prepare himself mentally for this coming night and the terrible risks which he must take to achieve the ultimate in power.

He lay thus for about twenty minutes before finally withdrawing and extricating himself from his partner's embrace. Alison, the bocor's servant girl whom he had snatched away from her master in Port au Prince, was perfect for his every purpose. Sexually she was either submissive or aggressive according to his whim at the time; domestically she obeyed his every order without question. A man could not ask for more than that.

He knelt there staring down at her. Her features gave nothing away, her eyes closed because after copulation it was forbidden for her to look upon the satisfied body of her master unless he commanded her to do so. Her ultimate desire was to please him because he was her houngan, the one who had the right to dominate her mind and body. If necessary she would die for him. Or so it should have been. He wondered ... if he asked for her love she would give it outwardly but even he was not powerful enough to explore her innermost thoughts. Just one little thing worried him; her expression earlier that morning when she had come to tell him that Sabat was in the drawing room. In her wide dark eyes he had read . . . something. Something that he had not seen there before and which disturbed him. She had taken the drugged coffee in as commanded, yet if one studied her closely, as Spode was wont to do, then there was a reluctance in her walk, her bearing, as though she would have preferred not to have administered the dope to their visitor. It could have been his imagination, Royston tried to console himself as he donned the cassock of this false religion. But, and it had always been a nagging worry since he had

brought Alison to England, her bocor in Haiti had been a disciple of Damballah, chief of the Rada gods; not a good god but certainly not an evil one. Did not other religions throughout the world indoctrinate their subjects from infancy? Was he, Royston Spode, powerful enough to change her allegiance from Rada to Retro?

'Get dressed.' His abrupt command had her scrambling up, grabbing for the long multi-coloured dress. It was ripped in places; when he lusted for Alison's brown body he liked to take her that way. And she had never once objected. 'It is later than I thought; we have mated too long and Evensong is but an hour away. Already some of our followers will be there in the church in their eagerness for this long dark night to begin.'

She nodded. He watched her carefully as she dressed, saw how her smooth flesh trembled and her fingers shook as she tied the sash around her waist. Again he might be seeing problems that did not exist, for any woman who had orgasmed four times was entitled to tremble a little afterwards.

As he left the room he was reminded of Miranda and her treachery. But on the most important eve of his creation he had other things to occupy his mind, and by the time he embarked upon the short walk from the vicarage to the church he had dispelled his doubts. Alison was his mistress, his slave, and it would never be any different. He could trust her implicitly.

Andy Drew's fears had been mounting throughout the day, and when he learned at lunchtime that his friend Jon Borth had been found dead on the road some miles beyond the village, he'd reported sick to the foreman at the small clothing factory where he worked and gone home. Jon's horrific accident was surely an omen. Some of those fucking ghouls on the shopfloor were discussing the details. Andy had rushed into the toilet, spewed until his guts couldn't throw up anymore. The foreman had taken one look at him and told him to piss off home before he spread whatever bug he'd got among the workforce.

At twenty-two, Andy's problems seemed to be closing in on him; he found members of his own sex far more attractive than those of the opposite one and it must have shown because some of those crude bastards he worked with had taken to referring to him as 'Pouf'. And that wasn't because he was physically frail and got out of breath easily.

He'd started going to church, much to his conventional parent's joy and amazement, but that had only led to worse things. That vicar wasn't a vicar at all; Andy had found that out after Spode had asked him to remain behind one Sunday after Matins and all sorts of shameful and pleasurable things had happened in the vestry. It had all been a fix by Spode to trap him, to get a hold on him so he couldn't desert the coven. And once he'd got his talons into him Spode didn't make life enjoyable anymore, and neither did he do those things he'd done in the beginning.

Last night had been a living nightmare. Playing about with some old skeleton was revolting enough, but Jesus, Andy had never thought they'd do things such as they did to that girl! But there was no turning back and now he was ordered to attend a special 'evensong communion' prior to . . . Royston Spode promised them that tonight would be the climax to their devotion and that in return, each and every one of them would receive power beyond their wildest dreams. Crap! It was scary, they were all accessories to murder, but there wasn't such a thing as magic; just an excuse to perform revolting rites. Yet inexplicable happenings had occurred. It was all clever trickery of some kind but nevertheless Andy was trapped. He'd have to go to the church at 7.30 and to the crypt afterwards.

'You look ill.' There was concern on his mother's face as she met him in the hall of their two-up, two-down cottage. 'You'd better go to bed and stop there for the rest of the day.'

'I'm not ill,' the last thing Andy wanted was to find himself a prisoner in his bedroom; he dared not disobey Spode's orders. 'I've been made redundant and it came as a bit of a shock.' Now that was a stupid lie, blurted out on the spur of the moment. How was he going to explain why he had to go to work in the morning? Let's get tonight over first.

'Well, you'd better go and lie down for a while just the same,' she said. 'Your father and I are going on the WI coach trip to Stratford this evening so you'll have to look after yourself while we're away.'

That was a relief, a clear coast and nobody to ask questions. He went up to his room, stretched out on his bed. He was trembling, scared to hell. Christ, if only he could think of something. In about thirty minutes he did just that, an idea that made his mouth dry up and flooded his armpits with sweat.

Everybody hated Spode even though they pretended to worship him with reverence down in that damp, dark, smelly hole of a Satanic temple. But nobody had the guts to do anything about it. Sure, they revelled in the orgies but once they'd satisfied themselves they were terrified of the rest of the night's proceedings. It was like a sumptuous first course with a revolting sweet to follow. And it all happened because of a nutcase of a vicar who had convinced everybody that he had supernatural powers. Without Royston Spode it would all come to an end.

Andy Drew thought some more, sweated profusely, and told himself it could be done. And he would have to do it because nobody else would. In a way it was like avenging Jon Borth - a life for a life!

He slid off the bed, found his old sheath knife in the dressing table drawer, the one he'd had when he

was a scout. He tested the blade with his thumb; it was sharp enough to do the trick.

He'd have to kill Spode in the church! Christ, it'd be like Thomas Beckett; he'd even played a minor part in the play of the Canterbury murder they'd put on at school, but this time it would all be for real. When he knelt to receive . . . human flesh and blood I God, it was cannibalism, chewing on a square of ... that wretch's flesh, tasting her thick, soup-like blood. Andy wouldn't let it get that far. He'd have the knife hidden up his sleeve ready to drop down, hilt first into the palm of his hand, and as Spode bent to serve him he'd plunge it deep into that fat belly. The others would be with him once Royston Spode was down; between them they'd drag the body through the graveyard, throw it into the old crypt and fill the entrance with rubble. And nobody would ever find it. Simple.

Andy Drew knew that he could go through with it; it was either that or take his own life and he lacked the courage to do the latter. He grinned to himself, suddenly aware that planning Spode's death had given him an erection. It was funny how matters irrelevant to sex sometimes turned him on; maybe he'd orgasm as he struck the death blow, the greatest thrill of his life.

The church clock struck 6.30 as Andy let himself out of the house. His parents had gone to meet the coach over an hour ago and with luck he'd be back home before they returned from their outing. Woodpigeons cooed softly in the foliage of the tall poplars that hid all but the church steeple. So tranquil, it couldn't be happening. But it was!

He entered the church, stood staring down the aisle. Three of the coven were already seated in the front pew, turning and seeing him but not acknowledging him. That made him angry but they'd soon change their views towards him. When the vicar was kicking his death throes with Andy's scout knife protruding from his belly they'd hail Andy Drew as their champion, their hero. It was a pity he'd never be able to tell his parents about it.

He took his place in the second pew, checked for the hundredth time that the knife rested comfortably in his sleeve, that it would fall easily when the time was right. He was sweating again, could smell his own B.O.

By ten minutes to seven the whole coven were seated in their places. Andy wondered idly what would happen if a stranger showed up but Spode was cunning enough to get out of that one. He'd probably turn on that hidden charm, explain that it was a 'special' service in aid of something-or-other and they couldn't stay, much as he would like them to, but if they'd care to attend matins on Sunday morning . . . the glib bastard!

The Reverend Royston Spode entered the church just as the clock was chiming seven, locked the doors behind him. Andy glanced at him out of the corner of his eye; the strain was telling on the bugger, those jowled features pale and lined. Perhaps he was turning chicken. But Andy would kill him just the same because suddenly there was nothing more he wanted to do than just that. And he'd got an erection again. It was going to be the most exciting act of his life.

Spode approached the altar, removed the cloth, replaced it with a black one which was folded nearby, changed the white candles for sinister black ones. Then with one deft movement he upturned the silver crucifix, wedged it firmly in an inverted position. A low murmur of approval came from the congregation. Andy Drew was sweating heavily again, his armpits giving off a- sour smell. He checked the knife; it wouldn't be long now. A terrible revulsion at these blasphemous preparations had him wanting to vomit. He'd had a church upbringing, never dreamed he'd stoop to such a level. He hadn't fully realised until now what it all meant. He hadn't intended to deny Christ, it made him feel sick.

The Reverend Spode's nasal tones vibrated low and clear in a sing-song recitation:

'Thou shalt covet thy neighbour's wife . . . thou shalt steal... thou shalt kill

Thou shalt kill. That was one Satanic commandment Andy Drew meant to obey to the very letter!

'This is her flesh, cut from her body whilst she still lived ... her blood . . . ' Spode's hands were pressed over a plate and chalice, his back to the watchers. The desecration, the absolute abomination. 'Come ... eat... drink ...'

The others were filing up to the altar rail, kneeling. Andy joined the queue, his legs so weak that it was a relief to fling himself down into a kneeling position, hold on to the wooden rail to support himself. For one awful moment he thought he was going to faint like he'd done at his first communion, here in this very church, but the dizziness passed. He checked the knife again. Thou shall kill!

Spode was administering his grisly offerings from the far end of the line; Andy would be the last to receive them. A brief silence, then he heard a slurping, munching sound, almost threw up. Raw human meat and thick blood. Nobody spewed as he thought they might. In fact they seemed to be relishing their First Supper.

Spode moved slowly, deliberately along his followers, his thick white fingers pressing chunks of meat

into their upturned open mouths, tipping the chalice so that they drank their fill. There was another vessel standing on the altar ready to replenish the one he was using, for this was intended as a banquet for the true believers in the Left Hand Path.

Andy Drew glanced sideways out of the corner of his eye. A girl with mousey-coloured hair next to him sucked a lump of meat into her mouth, then drank and chewed noisily at the same time, her slender fingers seeming reluctant to release the stem of the cup. Sheer depraved greed. Andy knew her; her family were newcomers to the village, city people who had attempted to live out their fantasy of 'getting away from it all' and hadn't made a very good job of it. Her husband, on the other side of her, was a layabout drawing social security. Now they had resorted to this in their search for a better life.

'Take eat... her flesh ... her blood . . . '

Andy felt the dizziness coming back, fought against it desperately, saw Spode's fingers with a chunk of meat approaching his mouth. Bile rose into the youth's throat, he compressed his lips tightly. Heaved. Then he remembered the knife, panicked. It started to slide down the inside of his sleeve, he grasped the hilt, positioned it.

'Take . . . eat' Annoyance, Spode trying to cram the flesh into Andy's mouth, forcing it between the resisting lips. 'Eat!'

Andy Drew had the knife how he wanted it, the blade concealed in his closed hand until the thrust had begun. His elbow went back, tensed like a bowstring, and at that very second the sensation of faintness flooded back over him, a red-black shimmering before his eyes. Spode seemed to be whirling, spinning away from him.

Desperately Andy lunged, anticipated the impact, the jarring of his own arm right up to his shoulder as the weapon sliced through corpulent flesh and grated on bone. But his wild swing met with no obstruction, just a rush of air and then he was sprawled over the rail, the threatened vomit spouting from his mouth, the murky haze closing in like black smog, shutting everything else out. He did not even hear the knife clatter on to the marble floor.

Royston Spode showed but the faintest surprise. There was neither fear nor fury in his expression as he kicked the fallen knife away and pushed the unconscious youth so that he slid down on to the carpeted floor.

'Our Master will have a double offering tonight,' his voice was flat. 'Let us deal with this traitor first, though, for fear that his unworthy blood should offend at our finest hour.'

Spode's strength was unbelievable except to those who had seen him exert it to the full before. His bulk was deceptive as he vaulted the rail, hoisted the inert form of Andy Drew up to a sitting position, then stalked down the aisle, the others following in single file, a bizarre procession that wound its way behind the church and through the thick undergrowth until it reached the entrance to the old crypt.

The Reverend Royston Spode paused once, glanced skywards, saw that the sun was now a deep red ball in the western sky, already slipping out of sight behind the tall poplars.

'We do not have much time,' he muttered to nobody in particular. 'We must hurry for we have to return to the church to finish our communion with the Master before we can attempt the sacred rites in our temple.'

Spode lit the candles in the crypt, gave a short inaudible sigh of relief when he saw that Sabat still lay motionless before the altar. If Sabat's astral was nearby watching then so much the better. He chuckled. But the astral was harmless. It would return shortly and be dealt with accordingly. It could not escape.

Andy Drew's unconscious body was propped alongside Sabat and the skeleton of William Gardiner. Spode reached up on to a shelf, found the sacrificial weapon, a curved knife with a jewelled hilt, the blade sharp yet stained a dark brown with a substance that could have been mistaken for rust at a cursory glance; closer inspection would confirm that it was dried blood.

Drew's head lolled sideways, eyes closed, blissfully unaware of the fate which awaited him. Spode did not trouble to remove any of the clothing; time was at a premium. The knife poised, he muttered a low incantation, then stabbed fiercely.

The blade went deep, almost up to the hilt just below Andy Drew's navel, slicing garments and flesh with the ease of a butcher's cleaver. It was not withdrawn, but jerked upwards with a tearing sound, ploughing a deep gash in one movement up to the throat. The jugular vein was spurting blood which splashed on the uneven floor like a burst mains, but Spode ignored it. The knife retraced its original course going lower this time, grinding the pubic bone; then sideways, first to the left, then to the right. Only then was it pulled clear, splattering crimson droplets as it was returned to the shelf above.

Royston Spode stepped back to survey his handiwork, a smile of satisfaction crinkling the corners of his cruel mouth. Perfection, the best he'd ever done - an inverted cross carved on a living human body! Perhaps he ought to have stripped the victim first so that his followers would have fully appreciated his bloody artistry. He heard their intakes of breath, gasps of awe.

'Let us return to the church,' he snapped, 'for it will soon be nightfall and then we have much to do!'

The vicar lingered for one last glimpse of his latest sacrifice. The blood was pouring thick and fast from the mutilated body, a leg twitching in a final reflex protest, the eyes still closed.

Then Spode's eyes returned to Sabat. Royston Spode felt the urge to laugh out loud, to mock and jeer; for Drew's blood had soaked the limp form of Sabat, saturated him with scarlet dripping fluid. A sacrifice bloodied in readiness, a taste to whet the dark gods' appetite so that they might grant Spode's request and transfer the ultimate in evil power from those ancient bones to his own body.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SABATS INITIAL horror turned to sheer relief as his astral sight picked out the youth's body propped

up between his own and Gardiner's remains. He saw Andy Drew's mutilated flesh, the way the wound had been fashioned into a blasphemous inverted cross, the pumping blood having slowed to a trickle and then begun to congeal. Another death, another sacrifice, but it could have been worse. One member of this terrible coven more or less was of no consequence. At least his own body still remained unscathed and it was a relief to slip into it once more, almost savouring the feel of warm blood which was not his own after all.

Very slowly consciousness returned to Sabat. His eyelids flickered half open and through them he took in the scene which surrounded him. The candles had been left burning and he could see clearly although his range of vision was restricted; the dead youth threatening to slide down on to him at the slightest vibration, a skeletal leg only inches from his own. He took a deep breath, smelled the overpowering rancid odour of Drew's blood, the cold cloying stench of stale air and . . . evil! For even now the dark forces were coming alive down here, the temperature having fallen rapidly so that Sabat's flesh goosepimpled and he shivered.

He was surprised to discover how mentally refreshed he felt, just as he always did after a trip on to the astral plane. He tried to flex his arm and leg muscles but they remained limp - the effects of that paralysing drug had not worn off yet. He sighed, his earlier despair returning. He was totally helpless, a sacrificial victim whenever Royston Spode chose to return. The Rada gods had been contacted, a bargain made, but whether or not they chose to keep it was debatable. Like himself they were fickle ... and ruthless!

He considered once more escaping on to the astral, leaving this empty shell of a body for them to do what they would with it, taking his chance on that eternal battlefield in the timeless wilderness, a mercenary who would join either Rada or Petro forces. But it was impossible, even if he chose to do so, for the necessary sleep-like trance which would project him into immortality would not easily be induced now that his mind was refreshed. And the evil which existed in this hellish dungeon would not allow him to desert his body, would deny him sleep.

Another thought struck him; he still had his gun, the loaded .38 weighted against his side. With it he could have blasted Spode, maybe taken a few of the others as well until their numbers bore him down. Only he was denied the use of his limbs, his forefinger incapable of taking the slightest trigger pressure.-Finally he accepted that there was only one course open to him - he must wait and place his faith in Damballah, chief of the Rada gods, whose day was Wednesday. He had until midnight!

Time was standing still again, even the wax on those black candles seeming to burn unconsumed. It was much, much colder too. Sabat tensed, listening for a sound which did not come, the tramp of approaching feet that would herald his death and worse. Instead he heard another noise, a faint creaking like the rusty hinge on a gate when the wind freshened, a movement such as rheumatic limbs might make. His spine tingled as the noise grated on his nerves ... so close!

A movement attracted his attention, something white against a black background, reflecting the flickering candlelight . . . Oh God, the skeleton's leg was bending . . . stretching... flexing!

Sabat tried to close his eyes, wanted to spare himself the sight of a blasphemous rebirth, was even more conscious of his own helplessness. Spode's magic, the sacrifice of human flesh and blood, the living evil in this crypt had resulted in the ultimate success, a living entity more unbelievable, more horrific than the fictional Frankenstein's monster. But Sabat could not induce his eyelids to close, just as hours before it had proved impossible to open them. He was condemned to watch, to listen to noises beyond the angle of his limited vision.

Jesus Christ, whatever it was it breathed, rattled a broken ribcage with stentorian intakes of air, stood and moved uncertainly on clicking feet. It was behind him, skulking in the shadows, wheezing so that he felt its cold breath. Now coming for him, a hunter from beyond mortal ken stalking its prey!

Mentally he braced himself, knew not what form the attack would take; a blasting of his reason, a stopping of his heartbeat by the sight of this terrible miscreation or the strangulating grip of skeletal fingers around his throat?

Something came at him out of the darkness, a grotesque bloody form that struck him with its full weight, knocking the breath from his body, causing him to scream his terror in his mind. Cold flesh against his face, a weighty thing that sagged and slid across his body, its grasp slipping away because those fingers were lifeless. And for the second time within the space of an hour the corpse of Andy Drew escalated crazed fear in Sabat!

Sabat wanted to laugh his relief aloud but all vocal functions were denied him. The corpse had finally slipped from its perch, moving the skeleton of William Gardiner as it did so. As one terror receded, another returned. Somebody was shuffling round into Sabat's line of vision!

He stared, tried to comprehend, but there was no explanation; neither the dead nor the black forces of evil gave up their secrets. Such things were best kept beyond the reach of mortal knowledge. For the being which had received life from some unearthly source was not in skeletal form - it was the shape of a man, flesh and blood, which looked down upon the inert form of Sabat with cold unblinking eyes, and it was all the more terrible for its human form!

A tramp-like appearance, the ragged clothing unable to hide the wasted body underneath, and at first

glance Sabat thought that it was Gardiner's skeleton clothed in rotting tail-coat with a battered top hat set at a rakish angle on the skull. But it wasn't. Flesh was stretched tightly over the bones, parchment thin, the face half in shadow, vaguely familiar.

The man moved forward a step and Sabat saw him more clearly. Changing features; at first he thought it might have indeed been William Gardiner clothed in a new skin that was too small for him, a countenance of evil that even now seemed uncertain of its own identity. Then it was like looking into a dirty-grimed mirror, seeing his own features reflected behind the grime, again the ruthless evil ... but not quite his own. Quentin's! But before Sabat could make up his mind, the nose had broadened, the dark eyes moved closer together, the thick lips parted in what was intended to be a smile, a settling of the shifting face into something more positive, one that he knew because he had seen it that same day half-hidden by a voluminous cowl, his companion then standing before the high wooden cross on which were draped the very clothes which he now wore.

'Maitre Carrefour!' Sabat got the name out, found that he could speak, that he could move his head in order to obtain a better view of the one who stood before him. 'Lord of the Crossroads!'

'Indeed.' The voice had that same nasal thickness, an accent which could not be attributed to any race throughout the modern world. 'It is, sent by Damballah, chief of the Rada gods.'

'Damballah is not coming?' A note of disappointment was in Sabat's voice as he managed to sit up, pushed the body of Andy Drew off him so that it rolled on to the floor with a sickening thud.

'No, too often are the chief gods summoned by mortals. But my presence will suffice. First, though, I must remind you of your vow.'

'I have not forgotten.' Sabat stretched his limbs, found that they moved easily; just a slight sensation of pins-and-needles in his legs where they had been trapped by the bloody corpse. He turned, saw that the blood-spattered skeleton still lay in its original position. 'That ... thing ... Gardiner ... it... moved'

'Perhaps and perhaps not.' Maitre Carrefour smiled. 'The bones are latent evil but they cannot walk at present. You must ensure that they never do, that the malignant entity within them is destroyed.'

'You have been sent to help me?'

'No, only to free you from that which paralysed your body. Damballah has kept his word, but even the Rada gods cannot do more, for in this place the Petro evil is strong. It is an ancient burial ground ruled over by Baron Cimeterre, and his power has been strengthened here by the remains of this man Gardiner. Already there has been bloodshed and death. We cannot infiltrate it, no more than we can win that war of everlasting strife which you have twice seen for yourself. You are a mercenary of the gods, Sabat, taking sides when it suits your cause. We have seen your treachery and we dare do no more than free you from that which held you and remind you of your vow. But you cannot leave this place until the man called Spode is destroyed along with the evil in him. The exit is sealed to you by Damballah until that has come about and only then will you be able to leave this tomb of the dead'

Sabat knew that the Lord of the Crossroads spoke the truth, that Damballah had trapped him here; cunningly enforcing his bargain, ensuring that a devastating blow was struck against the arch rivals of the Rada gods, suspicious that once released from his paralysis Sabat might flee in order to save himself.

'I cannot delay here.' The other stepped back into the shadows, a silhouette once more. 'It is up to you now, Sabat. The Rada gods wish you well.'

Then Sabat was alone, glancing around the evil crypt, his only companions two mutilated corpses and a malignant blood-stained skeleton. So cold, whispering voices that could have been in his own mind. He shivered, glanced in the direction of the passage with its slimy damp walls that led out of here up into the dusk of an open world. Yet he knew that escape was denied him, would not even have wasted time attempting it even had he wished to flee. He had to stay, not only because there was a battle to be fought but because there was a score to settle. Cold fury was beginning to dominate him again, that killing mood which he had first discovered in the SAS, an insatiable lust for blood and death.

'You won't win this time, Mark Sabat. This is the end for you!' Quentin's mocking tones coming at him out of the darkness.

But Sabat only laughed, low and mirthless. He had cast off the mantle of despair and once again had become the fighting machine of old, the nemesis of evil forces. There was no time to be lost.

He worked quickly, his brain on full throttle, seeing the situation as it was and knowing what he must do. The voices around him had sunk to almost inaudible whispers and he ignored them for they could not harm him at the moment; they too, must wait for Royston Spode's final act of depravity before they were powerful enough to attack. Sabat dropped to his knees, and began to strip Andy Drew's body of its ragged bloodsoaked clothing, tearing the denim off in congealed strips, baring the mutilated flesh. Christ, Spode's bestiality knew no bounds; the stomach spilled out of the base of the inverted cross wound and

Sabat was forced to cram it back with his fingers, human offal that was still warm to the touch. Revolting, but this corpse had a definite role to play in his plans.

Next, his own clothing; peeling off jacket and trousers, carefully removing the .38 from the pocket before he began the awkward task of transferring them to the naked corpse; several sizes too large but he overcame this by folding the surplus material beneath the body where it would not show. Then he laid it out carefully, with all the care that an under-takers's assistant in a morgue might take, positioning it in the same place where he himself had lain inert only a short time before. Andy Drew in death had taken the place of Sabat.

He stood back, surveying the result of his efforts with a critical eye. Congealed and smeared blood masked the features, rendered them unrecognisable except by a very close scrutiny, and Spode and his coven were unlikely to do that; they would be only too eager to begin their sacrifice.

Sabat shivered in his nakedness, picked up the .38 and glanced at it lovingly in the flickering candlelight. It was as though it was a part of himself, flooding him with fleeting memories, one in particular he liked to savour; a terrorist he'd cornered in a disused farmhouse. Sabat's orders had been to bring him in dead or alive but he had decided not to burden the taxpayer with maintaining this kind of scum for the next twenty years. The first shot had smashed the other's gun arm. The left one went up in a token of surrender but it was splintered at the elbow. Back against the wall, the killer had screamed for mercy, carried on screaming as he writhed on the ground with both kneecaps shattered, Sabat had taken a bead on the head, but just as his forefinger curled around the trigger he'd shifted his aim to a stomach shot. Just one bullet - the man had taken an hour to die and his final agonised cries had been sweet music to Sabat's ears, a symphony of justice the way it should be. He could hear him now, pleading, crying. And he wondered if the Reverend Royston Spode would beg for mercy at the end!

He looked around for a suitable hiding place, found a niche in the wall from which the altar was clearly visible and squeezed himself into it, sharp stones grazing his back as he did so. The dried blood on his body was camouflage enough; he was almost invisible in the shadows.

All he had to do now was to wait and for a man of action that was the worst part. He fondled the .38 again, felt the intense cold, wondered if it was all really happening or whether he was back in his astral looking down on his own bloodstained, dark-clad body lying before Satan's shrine.

The voices abated, came back again, Quentin snarling like a wild beast, a caged black soul frustrated by its imprisonment. And other noises; the steady drip of water somewhere as it trickled down the stone walls and formed a pool, tiny scurrying feet and pairs of red rodent eyes regarding this intruder into their domain with hostile glares. For even the rats in this place were malevolent. Satanic vermin sensing that soon there might be fresh bones to gnaw; Sabat could hear one masticating close by, remembered

Miranda's corpse in the corner and almost went to her defence. But it mattered not, the dead were dead, their bodies beyond recall. It was the living, and those who were to die this night, that concerned him.

Suddenly he stiffened, his ears picking up another sound, far off voices that were neither within himself nor the murmurings of the dark forces lurking in the shadows. A tuneless chorus, an intonation gathering in volume, the echoes picking it up. Animal-like snarlings that sounded vaguely human if one listened carefully enough.

His breathing was shallow, almost non-existent; the .38 was held loosely, its snub barrel pointing in the direction of the altar.

This was it; they were coming!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DARKNESS HAD fallen when Spode led his followers back out of the church. No longer were they the sullen, fearful congregation to whom he had served a cannibalistic communion. They cursed, jostled behind him in a straggling single file, their features devilish masks of lust, wild beasts roaring for the kill.

Royston Spode smiled wanly at the girl by his side. Only Alison seemed her usual stoic self. The rest of them were savages, as primitive as the wild tribes in the heart of darkest Africa where voodoo had first begun. He had made them this way, charged their personalities in a matter of minutes by giving them Satan's cup to drink from once their grisly First Supper was over; the symbolic antithesis of the holy grail, filled with an intoxicating Haitian punch that dulled their brains and fired their bodies with an overwhelming desire for the obscenities which this night promised. Perhaps he should not have brought the West Indian girl along but it would have been wrong to deny her the chance to participate in the ultimate rites. After tonight there would be no turning back for any of them. Even he was nervous, a high priest whose powers were far greater than any of the black hounngans or bocors, flinched at the prospect of summoning the Master himself. For only the Great One was able to sanction the transfer of power from the remains of William Gardiner to Royston Spode. Surely he would be pleased that there was one so able who was willing to carry on his work ... or was there another somewhere better suited ... such as Quentin Sabat who lived in Mark Sabat? But if Sabat was sacrificed, that black soul destroyed ... Quentin must not be set free to become a rival to Spode, perhaps to overthrow him. The sooner Sabat was dead the easier the vicar would feel. He began to hurry, some of those behind him breaking into a shambling run.

The moment he descended below ground Spode experienced that feeling of foreboding again. His senses tuned to the evil, detected an undercurrent of hostility ... towards himself. Once he glanced back, met Alison's expressionless gaze, felt uncomfortable. But she was a mere servant girl, she could not harm him. Perhaps it would have been better for her to have remained behind.

A sense of urgency, panic, almost gripped him, but there was no reason why it should. The candles still burned, Sabat was lying in a shaft of wan light, bloodsoaked and unrecognisable. Spode did not look for the body of Andy Drew which should have been propped up in the shadows only a foot or so away because the youth was of no consequence; he had served a purpose, paid in full for his treacherous act just as Miranda had. All they needed now was Sabat's blood gushing from a severed jugular.

The others were clustered in a semi-circle behind him, disrobing themselves with an eagerness which he must temper. First the sacrifice, afterwards they could do anything they liked. Many of them were already naked, lusting and groping for one another, as though they had forgotten the true purpose of this night.

'Stop' Spode yelled, his deafening tones powered by the acoustics of the crypt. 'First we must sacrifice Sabat and beseech the Ancient One to grant our request this night!'

The coven froze, stared at him with blank faces.

'On your bellies, hide your eyes fools, for you are not worthy to look upon the Master. He will strike dead any whose eyes rest on his sacred form!'

Now there was fear on their faces, their crazed brains seeming to understand, throwing themselves prostrate. Only Alison remained standing; staring straight ahead of her.

'You, too,' Spode hissed, 'do you dare to disobey me?'

She nodded, sank slowly to her knees but did not lower her head. It was as though she was held transfixed by the black altar, the sacrificial victim and the skeleton. Once her eyes moved, peered into the shadows which seemed to encroach as the candles flickered and dimmed. Perhaps she had noticed the absence of the mutilated corpse but if so she did not speak.

Spode turned angrily away from her. If she saw and was struck down by the Master then that was her own fault. He could not waste any more time on her. The hand, which reached down the jewelled sacrificial knife shook; that feeling of impending disaster was growing stronger by the second.

Sabat had his gun trained on Spode, a direct bead that would have ploughed a slug between those narrow eyes and churned a path of splintered bloody bone out through the balding crown. A professional stance, left hand gripping the wrist of his gun arm. He would not have missed, an error was out of the question. Yet he hesitated, not because of any twinge of conscience, that he was blasting a sitting target from ambush; he'd done that on innumerable occasions in the past and never lost a wink of sleep over it. Two reasons; first he was curious, intrigued to witness the sacrifice of his 'own body', anticipating his secret delight when Spode discovered the deception. Second, Alison was standing directly behind her master and there was a risk that the slug might take a deflection on its death-course and mow her down too. He didn't feel anything for her except ... her body was sensuous, inviting, and he would settle his score with her in a frenzied lust afterwards. Dead, she was no use to him. So he held his fire.

Royston Spode had the knife, the blood of its last victim barely dry on the blade. He was chanting again, words that Sabat recognised as Creole, changing to Latin. Not the Black Mass, something else that had come from a dark land in the days when it was very young, passed down by word of mouth to the few select sorcerers of the ultimate evil.

Those on the floor were whimpering, their fear escalating, penetrating their intoxication with a terrible realisation of what might happen. Alison, too, was visibly shaking, her features were pale. An icy wind howled and seemed to come in down the entrance tunnel. Spode was screeching, attempting to make himself heard, bringing the weapon down in a vicious arc that beheaded the corpse at a single blow. And

at that very moment every candle flame fluttered, extinguished in a smoke haze and plunged the crypt into blackness.

Sabat cursed, realised his mistake, almost fired blindly on his original alignment of the .38 but he had never been one to shoot rashly. Accuracy was uncertain, the stabbing flame gave away one's position to the enemy. He waited, his mouth dry, finger lightly on the trigger.

Everybody was screaming or was it a host of invisible evil spirits borne on the wind? A melee; perhaps the members of the coven had panicked and were fleeing blindly trying to find the exit. Cursing, bodies falling.

Even as Sabat deliberated upon a course of action he heard the pounding of hooves, the snorting of some huge demented beast, its putrid smell. Oh Jesus God, he'd left it too late, allowed Spode to summon the Evil One when one well-placed .38 slug would have stopped him!

Sabat found himself cowering back in the narrow cleft, his instinct to start firing wildly into the snarling cauldron of blackness but logically he knew it would be useless, a futile waste of ammunition that might bring the wrath of the attacking powers upon him, their vengeance terrible for this puny mortal insult.

Something smashed and rolled across the floor, probably one of those candlesticks. Hooves struck, flesh and bone was being pulped; wild bestial noises and human cries of terror. He felt the rush of air, the nearness of things beyond even his own knowledge and at any moment he expected to be dragged from his hiding place. Quentin's voice pounded against his brain but no mockery this time, sheer terror in the warning; 'Flee while there is still time.'

I cannot, for Damballah has trapped me and I am here to see this through!

And then, as suddenly as the malevolent maelstrom had begun, it ended, the blackness instantly becalmed; people were groaning, somebody laughing insanely. A rat scurried across the floor as though it had been caught out in the open and sought the protection of its hole before the next psychic storm.

Sabat waited, blinked as light came suddenly, a shimmering nervous black altar candle, ignited by some unknown hand, brightening as though it sought a missing mate. He braced himself, afraid of what he might see, closing his eyes momentarily at the awful sight which greeted him but opening them again because he knew he must look eventually. At least he was still alive and sane, unscathed, a shipwrecked mariner

adrift on the ocean savouring every precious second left to him.

The dead and dying littered the floor, a miniature replica of that aftermath of battle on the barren astral wasteland of Hopelessness, rats instead of vultures waiting to feed on the slain, knowing that the wounded would die. Faces smashed into bloody anonymity; crumpled, naked bodies that bore cloven hoofprints as though they were branded yearlings struck down by anthrax and still twitching; death-throes that grew weaker with every passing second.

Only Alison appeared to be unharmed, mentally and physically, kneeling there in that same torn dress of many colours with not a trace of fear in her wide dark eyes. She did not appear surprised to see Sabat, brief recognition flickering in her eyes. He straightened up, stepped out to go to her and in that instant a shadow fell across the single pool of candlelight.

Sabat recoiled, his first reaction being to try to squeeze back into that meagre place of refuge which had spared him. Aghast, he thought for one moment that the paralytic drug had begun to work again, draining his muscles but the .38 came up swiftly, instinctive snap-shooting that blitzed a hail of lead on whatever it was that came towards him. Oh God, not even Sabat could create anything like that!

The shape was human, a lumbering silhouette that resembled Royston Spode yet the features could only have come from the depths of Hades, a misshapen skull that had had flesh clumsily adhered to it as though in a blasphemous attempt to create Man. Bloated eyes too large for the narrow sockets, a hooked nose, the nostrils clogged with mucus, a mouth that was smeared redly as though it was a ghoul that had recently feasted on raw flesh. The bullets had chipped the head, cut grooves across the cheeks and jawbone before ricocheting harmlessly away. And now it was determined to vent its fury on Sabat!

Seconds that might have been an eternity, and in that time Sabat recognised his attacker, realised the full implications of what had happened during those nightmarish minutes of carnage. Spode's body it was, on which some horrific super-natural transplant had taken place, the resurrected features of William Gardiner festooned on to Royston's own obesity, a blending of body and soul that had somehow gone wrong because of the false sacrifice. And Spode knew; knew that partial success was indeed miserable failure and Sabat would pay the penalty for what had happened!

Spode was invincible to mortal attack; Sabat might just as well have wasted his shells on that skeleton that had lain there earlier. Slow measured steps, a wrestler closing in on an inferior opponent, knowing full well that he can crush the life out of him but preferring to savour the finale.

Sabat closed his eyes, tried to pray . . . struggled to find the right words; remembered just one line.

'Lord, beat down Satan quickly!'

Spode checked but only momentarily, as though another bullet had glanced off him, an annoyance but nothing serious. Sabat stepped back another pace, felt the roughness of the wall gouge his shoulder blades. He closed his eyes. This, then was the end. Finis. His senses swam, the paralysis seemed to be coming back, a dull creeping numbness preparing him for death. He didn't mind dying, it was what happened afterwards that worried him. Even Quentin was silent, his brother's soul succumbing to the presence of a terrible evil.

Sabat could smell this thing that might have been Spode, a lingering stench of uncleansed stables, rank foul breath coming in icy blasts. Something touched his arm, had him shuddering and turning his head, yelling 'Get it over. Kill me, finish me!'

Even as he awaited death in some horribly agonising manner, a thud jerked him out of his resignation to the end; a noise such as Spode had made when he hacked mercilessly at the body he believed to be Sabat's, a tearing, cutting sound like a knife blade being forced to the limit of its sharpness, then brute force taking over. A scream that no human vocal chords were capable of making, a screeching and cursing in a tongue which Sabat did not understand.

Sabat's eyes were open. This could not be happening, it was some cruel figment of fantasy, his astral torturing him during that brief period when life slipped into death, a taunting hope that would be dashed with the coming of oblivion.

Spode was tottering, floundering, a drowning man panicking. Those vile features were unrecognisable in an expression of unbelievable agony, lips moving soundlessly now, mute curses, falling. He hit the floor, heaving as he struggled for breath, a grotesque fish that found itself grounded, its death struggles growing weaker by the second; lying there, eyes that dimmed, staring hatefully up at Sabat, moving on to ... Alison!

The West Indian girl stood there, eyes closed as though she could not bring herself to look upon this creature who had once been her master, the bloody sacrificial knife slipping slowly from her fingers and clattering on the stones. Her lips were moving, Sabat had to strain his ears to catch the words uttered in Creole. 'Die, fiend of a false god for this is still Damballah's day and I am his disciple!'

Spode, or whatever it was that controlled that terrible body, was dead. Or rather, Sabat decided, the force which had motivated him had been vanquished, sent back whence it had come, a defeated entity returned to the Petro gods.

'I... you ...' Sabat could no more easily find the words to thank Alison than when he had sought for a prayer of exorcism, a defence against psychic attack, a few moments ago.

'I am a follower of Damballah.' She regarded him steadily and he noted a deep sadness in her eyes. 'For five years I have been enslaved by this fiend, forced to pay homage to the Petro gods but I kept faith for I knew that one day the Rada gods would free me. I knew the moment you arrived at the vicarage that you had been sent for this purpose even if you did not know it yourself. I had no choice other than to give you that drugged coffee. Had I refused or tried to trick him, my fate would have been that of Miranda's.'

Sabat glanced about him. A scene of carnage, not a single groan or twitching limb among the strewn bodies; staring eyes reflecting brains that had been blasted into nothingness, himself and Alison the only survivors. It was that war in the arid wastelands again, victory today, defeat tomorrow. That was how it would go on; he must live for the present.

Gardiner's skeleton was no more, a heap of crushed bones as though the foot of some mighty prehistoric monster had stamped on it. The Evil One had come and gone, and afterwards the Rada gods had destroyed the malignant force with a cunning psychic counter-attack.

'You cannot stay here,' Alison said. 'Damballah's day is drawing to a close. I shall be powerless then and possibly Baron Cimeterre will rule this place. Go now, while you still can!'

'Not without you.'

'I cannot come. Please do not try to make me.'

Sabat made as if to argue, shook his head sadly. Alas, she spoke the truth. Damballah, too, sometimes had to make a sacrifice in order to achieve his purpose. It was useless trying to dissuade Alison from staying; it would have been dangerous for both of them had he removed her by force. For surely then the Rada gods would have exacted their vengeance on himself just as they had on Royston Spode.

'Please go, Sabat.'

He nodded, thought he detected a mistiness in those eyes.

'All right.'

Yet still he hesitated, standing there scrutinising her but he felt no sense of arousal; only admiration for one so courageous, one so beautiful. He was already mentally adding her name to the list of heroines whom mankind had known, those who had willingly laid down their lives for others.

There isn't much time left, Sabat. Soon it will be midnight and Wednesday will have gone, and then everything I have strived for will have been in vain. And we will both die just the same.'

He nodded, did not trust himself to speak. There was nothing more to be said; they both knew that this was merely another phase of that unending battle. Tomorrow it would begin all over again. He turned, began to walk slowly away, and did not look back.

Sabat had barely got fifty yards, had almost left the old graveyard and its wilderness behind when he felt the ground beneath him start to shudder. A faint tremor at first like the passing of a heavy lorry along the road, escalating into a vibration that every nerve in his body picked up, an electric massager on full volume. The ground heaved; he clutched at a sapling to steady himself, felt its roots move, the slender trunk suddenly at an angle. He clung to it, still stark naked, holding the empty revolver in one hand, expecting the earth to open up at any second, to pitch him down into that cavernous dark void that had no bottom, drifting in the black beyond forever, the hell of the Petro gods where Quentin would be free to inflict everlasting torment upon him.

He closed his eyes, did not even pray. Somewhere below he felt rather than heard the rumbling of an avalanche, stone cascading and gathering stone, a tide of rubble that buried everything in its path. Screams; maybe it was his imagination, maybe not. And he smelled dust and decay, saw in his mind that battlefield where warriors writhed their final agonies, an impenetrable blackness which hid the waiting vultures, a landscape of death upon which a blistering sun would rise. And then the struggle would begin all over again.

Stillness. It was sometime before he realised it, aware that the ground upon which he stood had not caved in, a silence that in some ways was even more terrifying. He listened, could not even hear the sighing of the breeze through the foliage. And in the eastern sky he detected a grey streak, the first light of a new dawn.

He walked on, shivering, aware that time had passed unnoticed, seconds had become hours without him realising it. He thought about going back, just to see, to satisfy himself that that square black hole beneath with the broken stone steps leading down to hell were no more. But he didn't; because he knew there would be nothing to see, only soil and rubble, for the dead had buried their dead. Damballah's disciple had had her finest hour, had triumphed while there was still time. A bargain had been honoured and Sabat had lived to fight again, for the Petro gods would not forget this night when their black religion from a far-off island was destroyed before it had even spawned in a new country.

Daylight came quickly as though eager to destroy the night hours, roll them back into oblivion. Sabat saw the outline of the vicarage, a massive unfriendly structure, frowning its disapproval in the grey light as though it watched him emerging from the undergrowth beneath knitted gabled brows, hating him for what he'd done. Sabat felt an impulsive urge to scream; 'your fucking master's dead, you're just an ordinary bloody house now', but he kept silent.

Then he saw the Daimler, stared at it in disbelief as though it might be a mirage and suddenly disappear. He approached it catlike, fearing a trap, some last act of vengeance by the powers of darkness, circled it warily, then opened the driver's door and saw a fragment of cloth torn from a colourful dress caught on the seat.

He reached over to the back seat, found a sweater and a spare pair of trousers which he kept there for emergencies, and put them on. A long sigh escaped his lips as he slid in behind the wheel, pressed the starter and fired the engine. A feeling of dissatisfaction mingled with that lingering sadness and slowly simmered to a cold fury as he drove back down the winding drive. It was always the same, the Evil One once called never returned empty-handed. It could have been himself this time only it was Alison because that was the way she wanted it, the way Damballah had commanded her. A life for a life, a soul for a soul.

And somewhere inside him Quentin was cursing, a stream of profanity, the frustration of defeat, reminding Sabat that this was only the beginning. There would be other places, other evils, and the battle would rage mercilessly yet again before long.

Sabat's mood changed as the miles fell away behind him.

Alison slipped from his mind, was replaced by a shapely blonde in black boots with bra and suspenders to match; but she, too, was lost in the past. Then he remembered another woman, a brunette with unusually bright blue eyes who was equally as good with her select clientele and his foot increased its

pressure on the accelerator. That was another call that could not be denied, something older even than voodoo.