

The Blood Merchants – Sabat 02

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CHAPTER ONE

THE GIRL glanced behind her, saw only the darkness that hid twin rows of half demolished terraced houses, strained her eyes until they hurt; certain now that she was being followed. She listened, heard only the pounding of her own heart, a roaring in her ears.

The footsteps behind her had stopped, like they had the last time, and the time before; delicate tip-tapping that might have been the echoes of her own hurrying feet, but she knew they weren't. She was breathing heavily, didn't think she had the strength to run any further, wanted to scream out: 'For God's sake, who are you? What do you want with me?'

She guessed who it was, knew only too well what he wanted. The sallow faced punk with the corpse

like appearance who had singled her out, bopped with her at the disco, the flashing coloured lights reflecting his expression of lust, eyes that bored into her, undressed her so expertly that at one stage she had almost believed herself to be naked. I wanna fuck yah baby, I'm gonna fuck yah baby! Bloodless lips seemed to mime the words and when the lights went up for a few seconds she'd seen the bulge of an erection pulsing inside his tight fitting trousers as though it was trying to fight its way out to get at her. Once he'd come close, moved in on her, and touched her arm with fingers so cold that she'd cringed. And that face had creased into a humourless, lecherous smile.

Shanda had tried to get away from him, attempted to lose herself amid the forest of cavorting bodies on the dance floor. But he was always there, a hunter stalking his prey, moving cat-like with an eerie rhythm of his own that defied the beat.

Shanda had glanced about, mutely seeking help from the other dancers, but they didn't even notice her presence. 'Girls didn't ought to go to them discos alone!' Her mother's words echoed their warning, had Shanda mentally apologising, wanting to run from this dingy hall without stopping until she burst into the tiny hall of her parents' council semi. 'Girls 'adn't oughta walk 'ome in the dark, not in places like this. Wot wiv all these muggers and sex maniacs on the loose, it ain't safe.'

Shut up, mother. For Christ's sake, shut up! He was there again, body arched, swaying, increasing an imaginary tempo, an act of copulation that was escalating into a frenzy, never once taking his eyes off her. I'm gonna fuck yah, baby!

Shanda felt hysteria building up inside her, looked towards the dim neon exit sign. One moment of indecision, saw him coming closer, stabbing his thighs in a manner that could not be misinterpreted. And then she ran!

Out into the deserted street, brightly lit for the first hundred yards but then petering out because the inhabitants of those derelict houses on either side were long dead and didn't need to see any more. She crossed the junction into the opposite street, her heels clattering on the broken paving stones, stumbled once and twisted her ankle but she ignored the pain. He was coming after her, a black wraith flitting in her wake. You only heard him because he wanted you to ... because he was sure of his prey.

Shanda couldn't go any further. Her breath was like scalding water in her lungs, her injured ankle making her drag her foot, threatening to throw her to the ground at any second. Standing there waiting, suddenly wanting to get it over and done with, to let him have his way and then perhaps he would let her go.

Suddenly she saw him, a smirking white face that appeared to hover in the air, bodyless; a floating,

grinning skull. She tried to tell herself that it was because he was dressed all in black and you couldn't see the rest of his body. But she didn't believe it. He was some sort of evil entity, a spook like the ones she'd scorned in the late night horror movies, but this time she wasn't laughing. She wanted to scream but no sound came from her stricken throat.

Those eyes, oh Jesus God, those eyes! Bloodshot orbs in deep sockets, boring into you so that he even got inside your mind and knew what you were thinking. I don't hate you, really I don't. . . and if you just want to do that with me then that's fine by me. I don't mind, really I don't! Crying now.

He laughed, and this time she heard him; a sound that was hollow and mocking, seeming to hang in the air. She shuddered, closed her eyes briefly but some strange force jerked them back open and she saw that now he was closer, barely a foot away from her. She could smell his stale breath, and was somehow unable to withdraw her gaze from those searching eyes.

'Honey, you gotta beautiful body.'

She found herself nodding dumbly. Echoes of Mick, her last boyfriend's words, but these had a sinister undercurrent. Then he was coming at her, seeming to be airborne in slow motion, cold hands reaching out, pawing at her. She shrank away, cringed, thought she was screaming but she could not be sure because he had her by the throat in a suffocating, choking grip. She was falling, so slowly, landing so gently, only aware of his weight on top of her but all she could see was a shimmering white face through a blurred haze. She smelled his breath, wanted to vomit, but she couldn't because her throat was squashed. Oh God, do what you want and get it over, but don't kill me! Please don't kill me!

Trying not to anger him, spreading her legs wide, doing everything to show willing; but he didn't appear to notice. The kiss was vile, an open mouth that stank of sewage and worse, a tongue that thrust like a cold slimy reptile.

Then the pain, her whole body shuddering, her limbs flaying in agony. It was as though a huge needle had been injected into her neck, going deeper and deeper; her throat and mouth were filling up with thick warm liquid, stifling her screams, drowning her! And suddenly her attacker wasn't there anymore!

She struggled into a kneeling position, looking wildly about her but seeing only darkness that could have hidden anything and everything. No lusting, bodyless white face. Only herself, cramming fingers over a wound that went right into her jugular vein, trying to stem the spouting blood.

Crawling, her sheer terror a red haze before her eyes, blood splattering on the pavement and leaving a dark stream in her wake; weakening so that now she was dragging herself along, knowing that nobody was going to find her before she died. Amid her fear she kept asking herself one question over and over again - why hadn't he raped her, taken advantage of her helpless body! He'd been lusting for her in the disco and instead he'd just killed her.

Who was he! Barely human, a horrific face in the darkness, his body invisible.

Shanda collapsed, lay there in a spreading pool of blood, choking and crying, two fingers wedged in the neat round hole in her neck. She'd seen it before on those awful late night movies, the vampire making its kill, leaving a bloodless corpse behind when its craving had been satisfied.

One last attempt at screaming as the full horror of what had happened dawned on her, but she managed only a final death gurgle as she slumped down, shuddered once and lay still. Somewhere far away an owl was hooting.

Less than half a mile from where Shanda lay dead in a pool

of her own blood, Stella Lowe had just begun her night's soliciting. Tall and slim, in her early thirties, with long peroxide hair falling well below her shoulders, she stood in the doorway of a boarded-up shop. Here there was intermittent street lighting, lamps that had failed and not been repaired because nobody complained, nobody cared. Within a couple of years all these streets would have been demolished to make way for a new council estate; a modern slum would replace the old one.

Stella lit a cigarette, tossed the empty packet out into the street. She felt lethargic, didn't care if nobody came along. Mostly her customers were drunks from the 'Tavern', guys who couldn't manage what they thought their bodies cried out for, and then they got angry and blamed her for it. Christ, what did they expect for three quid in an empty house, a fiver if she took them back to her own room, but lately she was wary of taking men home. She'd been done twice for soliciting and she didn't want the law watching her place.

'Jesus Christ, you made me jump!' She almost dropped the cigarette, caught it just in time and stared at the big man who had approached unheard, his plimsolled feet bringing him within a yard of her before she was aware of his presence. She drew hard on her cigarette, tried to recognise the face that was half bathed in shadow. It wasn't one of her regulars, that was a sure fact. Dark haired, the features running to fat as they passed the mid-forties, hands that twitched nervously as though for their owner this was a first

time pick up.

'I'm sorry,' the voice was cultured, no trace of an accent. 'I didn't mean to startle you,'

'S'all right.' Stella was suspicious; gone were the days when you could recognise a policeman whether or not he was wearing a uniform. Nowadays they came in all shapes and sizes, even frequented brothels just for pleasure. But one couldn't be too careful. 'Guess I was dreaming.'

'So was I,' he laughed, 'about finding someone like you in a hole like this. How much?'

His directness took her aback. If she said three quid and he was a copper it was an admission of guilt.

'I was just waiting for someone,' she tried to see into his eyes but they gave nothing away.

'Somebody like . . . me!' He moved closer, felt for her hand.

'Could be.'

'Where do we go, then?'

Stella Lowe was trembling slightly. It wasn't like the usual pick up, a customer trying to smother her with beery kisses and get his hands up her skirt at the same time. So ... impersonal, calculated in the way one might bargain over a fare with a late night taxi driver.

'There's a house just down the road,' there was a tremor in her voice. 'Last one to be vacated. Even got a bed left in one of the upstairs rooms. No sheets, though.' A joke which neither of them laughed at.

'It'll do.' The stranger had a firm grip on her wrist, started to pull her out of the doorway. The price wasn't asked again; maybe he had no intention of paying. Stella experienced a terrible foreboding and if

she could have freed herself from his hold she would have run as fast as she could in the direction of the 'Tavern', given herself free to any of her regulars. Anything to get away from this sinister automaton. She could not imagine his type even wanting sex. But there was no escape; she was forced almost to run as he dragged her along.

'Which house?' he grunted after a few minutes.

'That one . . . over there on the other side,' there was no point in telling lies because he could have dragged her into any one of a dozen empty tumbledown dwellings.

In silence they crossed the road and he pushed open the door of the house she had indicated, scraping the warped wood back across the floor with one hand, closing it with his shoulder after them. 'We don't want to be interrupted, do we?'

She was trembling violently as they mounted the rickety flight of stairs. He had her arm in a half nelson so that it hurt. 'Look, there's no need to twist my arm. I'm not going to run off!' A token resistance that was meant to sound angry but came out as more of a whine. She couldn't hide her fear any longer.

'Aren't you?' He flung her roughly back so that she sprawled on the bare bedsprings, felt her dress snag on a loose wire and start to tear.

'Who are you?' She could see his face clearly for the first time, caught by a shaft of street lighting that slanted in through a broken window; features that were hard and cruel, sadistic. An expression that had her swallowing and cringing.

'That doesn't matter. Suffice to say that you have been chosen to serve a purpose, a cause of which you know nothing.'

'What. . . whatever do you mean?' Stella thought about screaming but it would be futile. Nobody came along this street at night except the odd drunk who would certainly not investigate female shrieks.

'Behold,' there was a maniacal gleam in his eyes, 'you gaze upon one of the honoured disciples of Lilith, goddess of darkness.'

You're crazy, she thought. A sudden desperate idea had her unfastening her dress, baring her white flesh. 'This is what you wanted, isn't it?'

'Yes . . . and no,' a whispered laugh, 'but not in the way you mean.'

'Then what the hell are you after?'

'Tonight,' his voice was so low that she had to strain her ears to catch the words, 'the disciples of Lilith have gone abroad to seek the likes of you. You should be honoured that you have been chosen.'

His sudden attack caught her unawares, a leap that brought him on top of her, the springs groaning their protest. He seemed to be pinioning her with one hand,

getting something out of one of his pockets with the other. She thought, oh God, he's got a knife! The orange light infiltrating the room glinted briefly on something but she had no time to see what it was; did not want to, turning her head away and praying that the end would be quick.

Sudden agony that began in the flesh of her neck, burned right up into her throat, cutting off the piercing scream. Her throat filling up, blood being sucked out, filling again. Kicking wildly, her assailant seemingly impervious to her puny feet hammering against his body; laughing. She felt her strength waning, consciousness slipping from her. She thought she was screaming, at least she was trying to.

'I am a disciple of Lilith' His words hit her like physical blows as she weakened fast, gargling her own blood, suddenly aware that he was no longer on top of her. She couldn't see, her sight was gone, just a crimson darkening haze over her eyes. It sounded as though a tap nearby had been turned on and with a stab of horror she realised that it was her own blood spouting up and splashing on the floor.

Oh Jesus, the bastard had cut her throat I Instinctively, just as Shanda had done, Stella Lowe attempted to plug the neat little hole with her fingers, but nothing could stop her life spurting away. Her body heaved as she tried to rise, swaying gently under the momentum of the rusty springs; a bizarre twitching of every limb, blood dripping everywhere.

Her ears picked up one final sound, the door scraping open and shut, padding footsteps receding into the dark night.

The disciple of Lilith was returning from whence he came. And somewhere an owl was hooting.

CHAPTER TWO

SABAT WAS in bed when the telephone on the wall table close by began bleeping. He cursed fluently, raised his naked body to a sitting position and reached for the receiver with his left hand, his right hand continuing to do what it had been doing for the last twenty minutes.

'Sabat.' He spoke abruptly, reluctantly trying to shake off a mental picture of a blonde girl who wore black boots, with bra and suspenders to match, and had an inexhaustible repertoire of pleasurable painful things to do to a man, one of the few women who had ever dominated his own strong personality.

'McKay speaking. Sorry to disturb you.'

Not half as sorry as I am, you bastard. He grinned in the darkness, suddenly tense and alert. The police were always a matter for concern, particularly in the early hours of the morning. Detective Sergeant McKay of the CID, late of the SAS, would not be phoning him unless it was something desperately urgent.

Tire away,' Sabat murmured, and added beneath his breath, 'what I was doing can wait.'

'Sabat,' the other spoke hesitantly, a tone of embarrassment creeping into his commanding voice, 'do you believe in... vampires'

'Now I know you've gone crazy.' Sabat brushed slender fingers through his long dark hair, habitually stroked a long wide scar, a souvenir of his own SAS service. 'You've been hitting the bottle again, Clive.'

'No, I haven't. I'm perfectly sober, overworked and over tired but I'm sane and sober. Look, this is no leg pull, you know me better than that. It's desperately urgent and the Chief himself said that you're maybe the one man who can help us. Can we talk somewhere?'

'You'd better come round.' Sabat finally abandoned all his erotic thoughts and swung his legs off the bed. McKay was genuine. Al. He might be barking up the wrong tree but he was realistic. Sabat had known him too long to doubt him.

'I'll be round in quarter of an hour then.'

Sabat hooked the receiver back on its cradle and switched on the light. Slowly he began to dress, pulling on dark serge trousers, and instinctively checking the pocket of his jacket to ensure that the small .38 revolver which he always carried was still there. These last few months he hadn't gone anywhere without a gun. He was a target for vengeance that might come in a number of different ways and he was learning to live with it.

He sat on the edge of the bed staring fixedly at the white wall, saw in his mind a wooded mountainside, a wide clearing which even the birds and beasts of the wild shunned. For it was there that his own brother, Quentin, had sought refuge, a man so imbued with evil that he was known throughout half the countries of the world as 'Satan's henchman'; pursued by the forces of the law who secretly hoped that they would not catch up with him, relentlessly hunted by Mark Sabat. And it was in this clearing that the Final confrontation had taken place. Sabat shuddered, recalled how his own extraordinary powers of exorcism

had" been overshadowed by those of the most evil man known to mankind; the exhumed corpses lying beside the three open graves, further proof of what Quentin was about to do, a master of voodoo, a houngan in exile attempting to raise his own followers from the dead, an invincible army to do his bidding.

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

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

And that was how it was now. Sabat, one time priest, latterly an SAS agent, until his indiscretion with that blonde Colonel's wife who wore black boots and liked to see her lovers cringe before her, had resulted in his recent return to civilian life, now found himself the victim of a dual role. At times the evil in him was too strong to resist and Quentin Sabat lived again; on other occasions the forces of evil were thwarted by his ruthlessness, his own desire for revenge on them. The pendulum swung and Mark Sabat could never be sure of himself, an exorcist, one with unbelievable psychic powers which might one day prove to be his own undoing. And now something was happening again!

Sabat heard a car draw up outside in the deserted north London mews, anticipated the ringing of the front door bell, opened the door to admit a tall, dark skinned, cleanshaven man with an angular face that rarely smiled. Right now Detective Sergeant Give McKay had little to smile about.

'Thanks,' he accepted the whisky which Sabat handed him, an expression that could have been embarrassment on his suntanned features as he said, 'this is absolutely confidential, of course.'

'Everything with me is confidential,' Sabat replied. 'It works both ways.'

'Which is why I can ask you if you can throw any light on the disappearance of the Reverend Spode?'

'Is that what you've come to interrogate me about?' Sabat's tone was sharp, his dark eyes blazing like

chips of flint. 'If so, I would have thought it would've kept for a more sociable hour.'

'No, no,' McKay sipped his drink, knowing better than to sit down in Sabat's house without being invited to do so. 'I just asked, that was all. Personal curiosity.'

'Which killed the proverbial cat.' Sabat's features relaxed, the eyes softened. 'But, for your personal information, the Reverend Spode, who wasn't very reverend at all, brought the wrath of his secret gods down on his own head. Shall we say they spirited him away to a hell that is worse than hell?'

'Enough said,' the other seated himself at Sabat's gesture, 'but I think this latest business is going to push Spode's disappearance into the oblivion files. Jesus, I've come straight from the police mortuary. Even the Chief nearly spewed his guts up. Four corpses, three hardened pros and a teenage girl.'

There'll always be a ripper at large.' 'This is no ripper, Sabat. Just one wound in each body, a neat round hole going through the neck into the jugular ... through which their blood has been sucked out!'

Sabat stared, refrained from saying anything so idiotic as 'you must be joking'. Instead he grunted 'all their blood?'

'No. Maybe a pint or so, it's hard to tell because three of them crawled along the pavement leaving a ghastly crimson trail in their wake. The fourth had been killed in a deserted house and the room resembled an abattoir, blood all over the walls and ceiling.'

'Definitely not a vampire then, even if such things existed. They don't spill blood around, just leave an anaemic corpse behind. Interesting, though.'

'You can say that again. The Chief's got to make a statement to the Press shortly and he's in a right stew. Another ripper would be bad enough but this could spread hysteria throughout London, maybe even further.'

'This doesn't sound my line.' Sabat produced a meershaum pipe from his pocket. An intermittent smoker, he often mixed cannabis with his short stranded tobacco; tonight, however, he stuffed the bowl with an aromatic commercial brand. It was not wise to divulge too many of his secrets to the law.

'Perhaps and perhaps not. But it's going to cause us a lot of embarrassment. There'll be a public outcry when the real facts are known and the Chief hopes it can be cleared up quickly. And that means you, Sabat!'

'I was under the impression,' Sabat blew smoke rings up towards the ceiling, 'that the police force resented my investigations. Only a short time-ago I was being warned off, threatened with dire proceedings for obstructing police investigations.'

'That was because of Plowden. He didn't want anybody to steal his thunder and as a result the Spode case has remained unsolved . . . officially.'

'So all is forgiven,' Sabat laughed. 'Well, fill me in on the details, Clive. Where were the murders?'

'Every one within a quarter of a mile of each other. An area in the process of demolition in the East End.' McKay moved to a wall map. Sabat's room resembled a wartime commanding officer's H.Q.; various coloured drawing pins, the meaning of which was known only to the man himself and McKay knew better than to ask. 'Dockland. Maybe it's a Triad job.'

'Doubtful,' Sabat replied. 'However, we mustn't rule out any possibility. I'd like to see the bodies, though.'

'That can be arranged right away,' McKay drained his glass.

'One thing,' Sabat hesitated. 'I'll need a free hand. Working incognito, no publicity and no questions.'

'That's why we're calling you in.'

'Good. Let's get moving then.'

Tell me,' Sabat had the appearance of being totally relaxed in the passenger seat as McKay sped south-eastwards across deserted London suburbs. 'Is Colonel Vince Lealan still in the Service?'

'I ought not to tell you.'

'But you will because we were once both SAS agents and we've shared confidences before.'

'True enough.' McKay brought the car to a halt at a set of traffic lights and there was a brief awkward silence whilst he waited for them to change to green. 'They kicked him out less than a year after he got you booted out. If they'd court-martialled him he'd've been sent down for a spell but conclusive evidence was lacking and they couldn't afford the publicity anyway. You asking about him or Catriona?'

'Both.' Sabat saw the blonde in sparse black garments again, remembered how it had been between them and felt a slight stirring in the lower regions of his body. Catriona had hurt him in a lot of ways, but he was still hungry for punishment - her kind of punishment.

'The Colonel was a Liberation Front sympathiser. The Home Secretary had banned a demonstration but old Vince really stuck his neck out. Maybe he did it deliberately, fancied that under his leadership a fascist group might even come to power. He let them hold the demonstration in his own grounds at his place in Sussex. He was a bloody fool to show his hand like that although we'd suspected where his sympathies lay for some time. The Front were getting dangerous and had to be stamped on but you know yourself how tricky the law is in any democratic society, everybody entitled to their own views no matter how dangerous those views might be to democracy itself. The Front was watched closely and about a week after the demonstration at Lealan's place we got a tip-off about an armaments cache. It should really have been a police job but the Home Secretary decided to send the SAS in; it was a golden opportunity to destroy this cancer once and for all. But the bastards had been tipped off and there was only one source from which that tip off could have come. That was the end for Lealan as far as the Service was concerned.'

'And the Liberation Front?'

'They just seemed to evaporate into thin air, taking their armaments with them. Lealan's still active, we think, but since I came out of the Service and into the CID I haven't heard anything and I'm not likely to.'

'And Catriona?'

'Christ, Sabat, you'd still have been in the Service if you'd left her alone. She's still with old Vince but I doubt if he'll ever cure her of her sadistic delights. Maybe he's the whipping boy these days, although he never seemed the masochistic type.'

They drove on in silence. Just thinking about Catriona had given Sabat an erection and he promised himself that one day he'd look her up. He also had a score to settle with the Colonel himself which he'd never got round to. But they'd both keep. One day... .

The small police mortuary was crowded; white-coated pathologists and a huddle of Special Branch officers crowded round the slabs. A path opened up for Sabat and he recognised the Assistant Commissioner, his normally ruddy complexion a pasty grey, his eyes red rimmed as though he had not slept in forty-eight hours. He nodded to Sabat, a kind of 'see-for-yourself' gesture.

Sabat saw and grimaced. As McKay had said there was just a single wound in each of the naked corpses as though a .22 slug had drilled its way through the flesh. But one glance was enough to show Sabat that it was something much more sophisticated than gunplay. He leaned over the body of Shanda, fingered the circular incision gently; a needle of some kind, going in deep, drawing off a quantity of blood and leaving the rest to spout in a crimson fountain. But for God's sake why!

Sabat knew better than to voice any theories he might have had in official company. That was their job but he didn't have any, anyway. Not yet. Was it just a senseless maniacal attack by some psychopath seeking gruesome publicity or was there a more insidious motive? He had to find that out.

'Thanks,' he inspected the other corpses, turned back to Detective Sergeant McKay. 'Now if you'd like to take me home I 'll get to work on it.'

Sabat was glad to be back in the car again, not because bloodshed and mutilation revolted him (he enjoyed it for the right reasons under the right circumstances), but because he resented official company. The police worked within a framework; Sabat was a free agent, neither laws nor boundaries hindering him. Judge, jury and executioner amalgamated into one.

Back outside the Hampstead house, McKay sat with the engine running, possibly wondering what he should say. His companion was not one with whom to engage in idle chatter.

'OK, I'll see what I can do.' Sabat flicked the door catch.

'You know where to contact me.'

'I do, but don't rely on hearing from me. But I'll sort something out.'

And then Sabat was gone, the pre-dawn darkness swallowing him up. McKay sighed as he let the clutch in. He knew his man only too well; Sabat had his own brand of justice and this case's conclusion might never reach the official files. Perhaps the AC preferred it that way, the end justifying the means.

Sabat returned to the interrupted pleasures of his bed, recaptured the mood that only the thought of Catriona Lealan could fire him with, and then slept the deep sleep of exhaustion. He awoke an hour before dark as surely as though some alarm clock was incorporated into his system.

He felt refreshed, invigorated as he stretched his naked body, flexed his muscles. He never slept in pyjamas, likening them to going to bed in a suit, a hindrance to a lot of enjoyable bedtime pursuits.

For some minutes he lay and mulled the recent events over in his mind. Certainly the killings were not the work of mythical vampires although the victims bore marked similarities to the work of these living dead creatures. He wondered if that was the impression the killer or killers were trying to create. Again, if so, why! That was something he had to find out and he wasn't going to discover the answer by lying in bed.

Fully dressed in his dark attire he went downstairs to the kitchen and helped himself to a plate full of coleslaw from the fridge. Although not strictly a vegetarian he attributed his physical fitness to a diet of natural foods, nothing stodgy to create surplus flesh on his lean body, fat to slow his reactions, dull his thinking. For tonight he must venture into the playground of blood and death, a redlight area where hideous danger lurked in the shadows.

It was dark as he left the house, drove his Daimler in a south-easterly direction, not hurrying because the night was young and he had plenty of time. The evening traffic thinned, the street lighting became more sparse as he left the city behind him and entered the suburbs that had changed little except for decay over the past half century. Yet Sabat's itinerary was by no means haphazard; this was no casual foray in the

hope of happening upon a clue which would lead him to the perpetrators of these vile murders. He had a destination in mind and after an hour or so he pulled the car to a halt in a street where the terraced houses were three storeys tall, an area that had withstood change and progress, brothels which paid for their own upkeep.

Locking the Daimler he mounted a short flight of steps and rang the bell of a house which bore the number 66 on its door, an air of familiarity about the way he listened for approaching footsteps down the hallway beyond.

'Mr Sabat!' there was both surprise and pleasure on the features of the lanky red-haired woman who opened the door, framed in a shaft of light so that he saw every detail. Approaching fifty, like the house she lived in she had resisted the passing of time, wrinkles creamed so that they were virtually invisible, her makeup so perfect that a stranger might have mistaken her for forty. Attractive, sensuous in a long flowing dress, her movements graceful as she stood back for him to enter.

'Good to see you, Ilona,' he smiled as she closed the door behind him, ushering him down the passage and into an exquisitely furnished lounge where she indicated an open cocktail cabinet whose contents would have graced any West End residence.

'Whisky?'

'Please. With a dash of pep.'

'There's nobody I'm more delighted to see.' Her slender manicured fingers shook slightly as she poured liberal shots of amber liquid into two tumblers. 'In fact, I'd even considered contacting you. My girls are scared to go out at night now. In fact, they're terrified of callers here also. It's really going to clobber the business.'

'The murdered girls, were they yours?' Sabat watched her closely, saw the fear in her green eyes.

She nodded. 'Two of them, Joyce and Elaine. The third one was one of Rick's. Much as I hate that fat pimp I wouldn't wish that on any of his girls. And that poor innocent kid, too. What the hell's going on, Sabat? There's a rumour going around that . . . that their throats had a mark on them ... as though they'd been attacked by ... a vampire!'

Sabat pursed his lips. He'd read the midday editions of the papers and whatever the official police statement, the press had drawn their own conclusions, obtained accurate information from some source. It was always the case.

'I think the press are overreacting,' he said, 'but, nevertheless, there have been some ghastly killings, four in one night and the killer or killers are still at large, which is why I'm here.'

'Thank God,' Ilona managed a smile. 'What are you going to do, Sabat?'

'Well, I'm not going to find whoever is responsible just by sitting here,' he replied. 'There again, if I go out and wander the streets it's unlikely that whoever is lying in wait for women will attack me. Therefore . . .'

'Therefore you need a decoy,' she was tight lipped, pale faced. 'Christ, Sabat, suppose

'I know the risks. Whoever goes as decoy might be killed before I can rescue them. But it's the only way; we have to risk one life to save maybe dozens. I'm afraid the police patrols will prove ineffective.'

'Who?' her voice was tense. 'Who d'you want, Sabat?' 'It's not for me to say. It'll have to be a volunteer, somebody who is willing to risk their life.' 'Then it'll have to be me!'

He regarded her steadily, admiration in his expression. Ilona was not just an ordinary brothel keeper. Her girls were her 'family', each and every one of them virtually worshipping this tall attractive redhead who paid them well and gave them freedom. They were free to come and go as they chose, no threats or blackmail chaining them to the beds upstairs. And above all they provided a very necessary service to society, maybe saving scores of innocent women from predatory, sexually frustrated men, which was just another reason why Sabat had to save these prostitutes from the terrible fate which awaited any who walked the ill-lit streets after dark.

'All right,' he nodded. 'There's nobody I'd sooner work with than you Ilona. I suggest we start as soon as possible.'

'I'll go and change.' She opened the door leading out into the hall and Sabat heard female laughter from somewhere up above. The evening's pleasures were already under way.

The night was warm, almost thundery as Sabat and Ilona moved away from the lighted streets, the prostitute's stiletto heels beating a tattoo on the pavement, Sabat's footsteps virtually soundless as he glided along in sneakers which matched the rest of his black attire, rendering him almost invisible in the darkness. A lot of thoughts crossed his mind; the pleasure this woman had given him in the past, the warmth of her bed which was not as other prostitute's during those times when fits of loneliness had assailed him, the physical pleasure which she was capable of giving him, according to his moods. In some ways there was a similarity between her and Catriona Lealan.

Sabat knew and understood whores, a better understanding of which he had acquired during those years he had been in priesthood when he did not really understand himself. He had weathered the storm, come through unscathed, that much richer for the psychic power which he had discovered. One exorcism followed another . . . and then Quentin! He tensed, seemed to hear laughter that could have been in his own mind. Or possibly his brother's spirit was stirring within him, once again determined to champion the cause of malevolence, hoisting the black flag of evil in support of these devilish nocturnal killers.

'Stop here,' Sabat grasped Ilona's arm, pulled her into a structure which had once been a bus shelter, now a partially collapsed ruin, rubble on the floor, aerosol graffiti on the remaining concrete walls. 'Just stand here and smoke a cigarette or two. I'll be in one of those doorways across the road. Any trouble and I'll be with you in a couple of seconds.'

'Thanks,' her voice was husky and her fingers squeezed his. There was no more to be said. She was dreadfully afraid but her choice was made.

Sabat squeezed himself into a narrow doorway. Once this building had been a shop of some kind, now it was boarded up and from within came the stale odour of disuse, a phase of life which had rotted away and awaited the coming of the bulldozers to erase it forever. Across the street he could see the tiny glow that was Ilona's cigarette, a safety light.

He was suddenly tense now. Angry, too. Innocent girls had died and for that there was only one penalty. Death! For in Sabat's law the death penalty had never been repealed. Fury burned inside him like smouldering coals, a white hot furnace. Tonight he knew no mercy; he was as ruthless as those he sought.

You're a fool, Sabat. Go now and leave what is to be alone.

Quentin's voice, louder, clearer, mocking. The evil serpent was stirring, its venomous fangs ready to strike. Sabat cursed beneath his breath, knew the fight had already begun. Whatever evil lurked in the enshrouding darkness his brother's soul was rising to greet it, attempting to weaken Sabat's own iron resilience. I'll fight it Quentin. I'll fight it until it's destroyed and one day Til destroy you too!

Mocking laughter that could have been the gentle spring breeze through the derelict house except that Sabat knew it wasn't. But he had learned to ignore the presence of Quentin, to steel himself so that he shut out the voices and the laughter but at the same time did not lose his awareness of the latest evil.

Another sound that had Sabat stiffening until he recognised it; the hooting of an owl. Owls were not unknown in these areas, roosting by day in the darkness of partially demolished houses, by night hunting the rats and mice which abounded in the ruins. This truly was a night when hunter and hunted were abroad.

Total silence. Tranquility that could lull one into a false sense of security, the blackness around complete, the houses shutting out the glow from neighbouring lighted areas. Sabat settled back on his haunches, back resting against the door behind him, a coiled human spring ready for instant action. Occasionally he checked his watch; perfectly synchronised with a clock that struck some distance away. 1.30 a.m. It was going to be a long night. Tomorrow too, the night after, and the one after that. Weeks could be wasted on a futile vigil but patience and perseverance were the only way. Sabat was an SAS agent once again, a loner engaged upon a seemingly impossible assignment but you just stuck it out and hoped that the break would come your way.

The owl again, much nearer this time, a low 'whoo-whoo' as though it, too, was afraid to disturb the nocturnal silence. Sabat checked, saw Ilona's cigarette in the blackness opposite, tuned his acute hearing to pick up any sound and heard the scurrying of small vermin from inside the shop. And . . . something else: something which at first he failed to identify positively. A slithering noise as though a snake squirmed across dry dusty ground. He pinpointed it, across the street . . . , and even as that spring prepared to uncoil Ilona's cigarette bounced on the pavement in a shower of sparks. A scream that was stifled before it was born, the thud of a falling body.

Sabat leaped, ran, a black avenging wraith in the darkness yet moving cautiously in spite of his speed. Only his eyesight could have picked out the silhouetted scene, shadows against a black background. Ilona fought and struggled as somebody knelt over her, pinioning her to the ground with a throat hold, the other arm raised, fingers clenched over something long and thin . . . some kind of weapon!

Sabat did not curse aloud until he had a firm grasp on that wrist and whatever weapon it wielded; bent it back until there was a sharp snap of breaking bone followed by a guttural cry of pain.

'You fucking bastard!' Sabat snarled, took a backward thrust of a bullet like head on his shoulder and sank his teeth hard into the other's ear. The attacker howled like a wounded timber wolf but the cry was cut off as Sabat found a neck hold. A red haze of fury shimmered before his eyes. Somebody was screaming; it might even have been Quentin's thwarted evil soul inside himself. Sabat tightened his grip, somehow managed to check himself. The SAS had taught him to kill quickly and silently but he needed this man alive. He felt him sag as consciousness ebbed away and only then did Sabat stare into the dark, let out a low sigh of relief as he saw Ilona struggling up dusting herself down.

'You OK?' There was genuine concern in his voice.

'Just about,' she was breathing heavily, trembling. 'My God, I never heard him until he jumped me.'

'Well, I don't think he'll be jumping on anybody else for a while... if ever!' Sabat added grimly.

'He. . . he isn't

'No, he isn't dead. Only because I need to ask him a few questions before he departs this life for the next!'

Ilona caught her breath, shuddered at the way her companion dragged the unconscious man into a sitting position against the wall of the shelter, then groped around on his hands and knees, searching for something.

'Ah!' Sabat had found what he was looking for. He could not see it in the darkness so traced its shape by feel; a long cylindrical tube that appeared to be attached to a container of some kind. 'Carry this for me, will you,' he held it out to Ilona, 'and be careful because the end of that tube is sharper than a razor blade.'

She took it, held it nervously away from her body, trembling so that she feared that she might drop it. But even at the height of her fear and revulsion she could not refrain from a gasp of amazement at the

ease with which Sabat picked up the inert body of the unknown man and hoisted it on his shoulder, walking on ahead as easily as though he was unburdened. Yet she was familiar with the lithe muscles which rippled beneath the dark clothing, having experienced his physical fitness in more pleasurable circumstances.

And as they moved off back the way they had come an owl was hooting repeatedly, urgently, as though it had become separated from its mate.

CHAPTER THREE

'IDEAL,' SABAT smiled as he surveyed the room to which Ilona had taken him.

Once it had been a cellar but renovations had turned it into an underground room that was dry and warm, two electric storage heaters giving off a gentle heat, strip lighting starkly showing the bare whitewashed walls; unfurnished except for several pairs of manacles and leg irons riveted to the brickwork, and in the far corner stood an assortment of whips and canes. Truly a torture chamber, but one to which the victims came willingly, paid handsomely for their bondage and chastisement.

Sabat lowered his burden, propped the sagging body against the wall with a knee implanted securely in

its stomach while he deftly enclosed the limp wrists in manacles and snapped leg irons around the ankles. Held upright in this manner, the shaven head lolled forward and a low moan escaped the lips.

Sabat stood back and surveyed his captive. A youth, barely past his mid teens, cropped skinhead style hair, features that bespoke ignorance and cruelty, typical of the breed which mugged old people in darkened subways and knifed their victims on a crowded football ground terrace.

'A kid!' Sabat's voice was loaded with contempt, the hatred inside him coming to the boil again. 'The scum of an overcrowded country.' He lifted one of the eyelids and let it drop again. 'High on grass, too. Now, let's have a closer look at that weapon he was carrying.'

Ilona passed it over with relief, glad to be rid of the foul instrument which in all probability was responsible for the previous night's killings. Sabat held it aloft, saw a contraption which at first sight resembled a small garden syringe; instead of a spray-nozzle there was a tubular needle-shaped cylinder about 6 inches long, the muzzle tapering to a cone, the outer edges honed to razor sharpness. At the other end was a plastic bottle, of one litre capacity, incorporating a trigger.

'Diabolically ingenious,' he murmured, squeezed the trigger and Ilona winced at the sucking noise, the intake of air in the attached bottle. 'An oversize syringe, except that it works in reverse. The needle goes in, and out comes a litre of blood faster than even Dracula could suck it from one of his victims.'

'Ugh!' Ilona felt her legs go suddenly weak, had to clutch at one of the hanging manacles to support herself. 'And he was going to . . .'

'Yes,' Sabat laid the weapon down, turned back to his prisoner who was beginning to show signs of regaining consciousness, 'your fate would have been exactly the same as that of those four girls last night, Ilona. We were lucky, though, to come across one of them so quickly. In all probability very few prostitutes ventured out tonight which made it all easier for us. Now, we'll have this bastard stripped off in readiness for a little gentle persuasion if he isn't prepared to volunteer the information I want!'

There was a sound of tearing cloth as Sabat's slender but immensely strong fingers ripped the denim jacket and trousers to ribbons, the underwear receiving the same treatment until the material hung from the naked flesh like a plant that had flowered and withered. Glazed, hate filled eyes flickered open, stared into Sabat's which blazed mute defiance.

'Shit pig!' the youth mouthed. They'll make you pay for this, you fucker!

'Who?' Sabat smiled but there was no humour in his expression, only a reciprocation of the other's hate. That's what I want to know. Who?

'The Disciples of Lilith!'

Sabat caught his breath. Lilith, that was one name he had not expected to hear uttered from those twisted lips. Chief of the demonesses, Lilith was a sexually insatiable goddess who spent the night hours seeking out her mortal lovers; similar in some respects to Erzulie, the Black Venus, except that Lilith never veered from the Left Hand Path. She seduced her partners in their sleep then sucked the blood from their exhausted bodies. Supposedly Adam's first mate before the coming of Eve, God had created her sensuous form out of filth and sent her forth as the ultimate evil. A vampire, mostly she preyed on young babies but was not averse to taking revenge on a female rival. Now her name, her very mode of killing, was evident in these latest terrible happenings of the dark hours!

'Where did you get this? Who gave it to you?' Sabat waved the deadly syringe before the skinhead's eyes.

Sullen silence. The prisoner tried to tug himself free, winced at the pain in his broken arm. The eyes clouded over, cleared again, but his lips remained tightly closed.

Sabat almost said 'I have ways of making you talk' but it sounded corny. Then he noticed a mark on the forearm of the youth's left arm, the unbroken one, peered at it closely. It was a tattoo; a swastika embedded in a red circle. On the top was a date, November 9, and below it the letters LF. November 9th - the date Hitler survived an assassination attempt. LF - Liberation Front.

'Nazi scum, eh!' Sabat's lips curled in a contemptuous sneer. 'And like Hitler you're trying to employ dark forces. My friend, you and your kind are walking blindfold through a minefield!'

'Seig Heil!' A fanatical screech, the leg irons rattling.

'Two things I want to know,' Sabat's voice was a low hiss, a deadly reptile preparing to strike. 'Where

are your headquarters? Who is your leader?' He glanced at his watch, turned away. 'You have three minutes in which to make up your mind whether or not you are going to cooperate with me. I do not promise you freedom if you choose to answer my questions, only that your death will be swift and painless. If you decide to remain silent then I can promise you that you will die slowly and ... painfully!'

Ilona wished that she could leave; surely Sabat would not wish her to witness inhuman tortures such as he was capable of inflicting upon this young Nazi skinhead. At the moment he seemed totally oblivious of her presence, an executioner in black who had a job to do. A teenage killer who had a choice, two ways in which to die. She had seen the look in Sabat's eyes a few seconds earlier and knew that he would carry out this threat - that he wanted to kill!

'You have thirty seconds left.'

No answer.

'Fifteen.'

Still no answer.

After what seemed an eternity Sabat swivelled on his heel to face the one who hung on the wall like a butterfly in a collection and there was a terrible expression on the dark man's features. Ilona looked away, wanted to flee, she tried to remind herself of what this youth had done to four girls the night before, what he would have done to her tonight. Now he was about to experience Sabat's justice, Sabat's wrath!

'If you wish to change your mind,' Sabat picked up the syringe-like instrument, tested its trigger action, heard a sucking sound like a drowning man gulping down a mixture of air and water, 'you have a few bonus seconds in which to do so.'

'Sabat...' Ilona swayed on her feet.

'Ilona . . . I'm sorry,' Sabat turned, so obsessed with what he was about to do that he appeared to have forgotten her presence. 'Please go ... this is no place for you.'

He watched as she ran for the steps, stumbling up them, heard the door closing behind her. Then he turned back to his captive, saw that same expressionless stare. The youth had abandoned hope, knew he was going to die, that pleading would not help him. He had just one crumb of revenge left; silence! Sabat knew also that a promise of freedom might give him the answers to the questions he had asked but when the killing urge was prevalent nothing would deter him. Roughly he slammed the cropped head back against the wall, held it firmly there, brought the 'gun' up until the pointed tube was barely an inch away from the other's throat.

'You're going to die, boy!' he muttered. 'And nobody will miss you.'

A thought crossed his mind; possibly some systematic torture might have extracted the required information but it was exceedingly doubtful. This guy had not only been on drugs, he'd been indoctrinated by whoever was using him for this mysterious purpose. Probably he didn't know enough, anyway - he'd been instructed to go out and kill by another minion of whoever was running this set-up. But the night had not been wasted, he'd found the weapon that was being used, knew what they were up against, human vampires on the rampage, merchants of blood preying on innocent victims.

Sabat stared hard into those eyes, saw again the hate and defiance reflected there. The lips pursed, a snake spitting its venom, a blob of phlegm splatting on his cheek.

'Die, bastard!' Sabat plunged the needle into the neck, felt it cutting its way through the soft flesh; pressed the trigger. Crimson fluid spurted thickly into the container.

The victim was squirming now as much as Sabat and his manacles would allow, gurgling incomprehensibly; possibly he'd changed his mind, would have told the little he knew. But it was too late! Nothing could save him now.

Sabat smiled grimly, watching the level in the plastic canister rising. He raised his head, looked into those eyes again. This time the terror was there; the bravado and defiance were gone. The killer was suffering the agonies of the hell he served, knew he was destined for the black beyond, shuddering violently as his blood was sucked from his body.

Sabat released his hold on the cropped head, worked swiftly with his free hand, unshackling the clamped limbs, took the weight of the dying youth as it sagged forward. Then Sabat moved with incredible speed; the blood sucking tube still deep in the other's throat, the level of the liquid in the

container almost at the top, three bounds took him to a wash basin in the corner. Holding his prisoner around the waist he thrust the face and neck into the bowl, withdrew the weapon with a glugging sound like a blocked plug-hole. Thick crimson blood spurted with force, half filled the bowl, sluggishly began seeping away down the outlet pipe.

Sabat sniffed the iron smelling odour, laughed softly to himself, still supporting his burden with ease, holding it in place until the spurts died to a trickle, then to a steady drip. The trembling body became still and flaccid, and finally the open jugular vein was empty.

He turned on the tap, flushed away the last of the sticky crimson stain, wiped the surface clean with his fingers. Only then did he lower the corpse to the floor and plug the wound with a paper tissue. He glanced around, made sure that no tell-tale droplets of blood were on the floor. Then he went back upstairs.

Ilona was in the lounge, a tumbler of whisky in her hand, the fingers encircling it trembling. 'Oh God,' she muttered, 'it was awful. I'm sorry, Sabat, but I couldn't remain down there. I.. '

'Console yourself with the thought that what happened to him could have happened to you.' Sabat slipped an arm around her, kissed her lightly. 'As it happens, all's well that ends well, as they say.'

'Did you . . . find out anything?'

'No,' his lips were compressed into a tight bloodless line.

'I don't think he knew very much anyway. He was just a hired killer, a drug addict acting like a zombie. But at least we know what we're up against now.'

'What's your next move?' Secretly Ilona hoped that she wasn't going to have to act as a decoy again.

'Quite honestly I don't know,' Sabat shook his head slowly. 'If I went out every night of the week and knocked off one of the killers I'd not be achieving anything worthwhile. It's a fascist movement, certainly, a Liberation Front organisation calling themselves the Disciples of Lilith. They're obviously recruiting from the worst possible hooligan element of our society; dropouts, drug addicts, kids with a grudge against

society. I need to get to the guys behind it if I'm going to do anything positive.' 'You killed him.' A statement not a question. 'And no regrets,' he smiled. 'Nobody will miss the likes of him. Don't worry, I shall remove the bloodless body from your premises. Perhaps the Disciples of Lilith will be surprised to find that they are not invincible after all.'

Ilona tried to smile but her lips quivered. Whatever Sabat had achieved tonight the threat, the fear that lurked in the ill-lit streets all around, was still there. Nobody was safe and surely these devils with their filthy blood sucking devices would not let this night go unavenged.

Thirty minutes later Sabat was back at the scene of Ilona's attack, carefully propping up the naked corpse in the same ruined bus shelter. Even in death the eyes appeared to stare balefully up at him, mouth clamped tightly shut in defiance from beyond the grave.

And as he walked swiftly and silently back to where his Daimler was parked, Sabat heard that owl hooting again; this time the sound had a note of urgency in it, eerily echoing and re-echoing through the empty houses.

CHAPTER FOUR

MANDY WICKHAM was proud of her seven-week-old son. The fact that he was illegitimate, his features and colouring depicting without doubt that Asian blood coursed through his veins, and the fact that her parents had virtually turned her out into the street, was more than compensated for by the happiness of her single parent council flat.

Mandy smiled as she pushed the second-hand pram down the High Street, the hood lowered so that passers-by might be given a full view of her offspring. She called him Davey because she thought there was a possibility that Big Dave might be the father. It was a toss up between him and Mike. She wondered about Johnny Ross, too, but he was Jamaican and little Davey's skin would have been much darker in that case, his features thicker. Dave it was then and maybe one day he'd call round to see his little son and there was always the possibility that he might do something about it. That was unlikely, though, because rumour had it that Sarah Milkenic had a baby by him also. But it didn't really matter, Mandy decided, and when the welfare lady had tried to question her about whom she had had sexual relationships with she'd told her to mind her own bloody business. Big Dave was the type who would get nasty if anybody shopped him, and on reflection she owed him a lot.

Mandy Wickham had a forlorn look about her as she parked the pram outside the general store and post office and wrestled with the brake. A good wash would have improved that straggling matted hair which even the slight breeze couldn't ruffle. Soap would have freshened her skin, and might even have removed that smell of BO which came from beneath the oversize coat which she had picked up at the jumble sale in the hall last Saturday. The coat itself had a faint lingering odour about it, she thought, but you couldn't complain at 15p.

It was no good trying to lose weight, she told herself, because once you started having kids you were bound to get fat. Her mother had constantly reminded the whole family of that and she should know because she'd had ten; eleven if you counted the miscarriage. Rolls of flab had nothing at all to do with a regular diet of chip butties.

Underneath the grime and the fat, Mandy Wickham had a vestige of prettiness that might have been accentuated by drastic action. But since Davey had been born she didn't care much about herself; that was the maternal instinct coming out in her, making her feel happy all over.

Everybody seemed to be looking at her baby today. Mandy was both proud and self-conscious, blushing as she made sure the blankets were tucked around the tiny form. A red Cortina was reversing into a recently vacated parking space, its tyres scuffing against the kerb, the female passenger seeming more intent on staring at little Davey than in assisting her companion to negotiate the gap between the other cars. Mandy glanced up, met her gaze for a second or two. Blonde haired, attractive, maybe a year or two older.

'Your mam won't be - long, my darling,' Mandy straightened up, addressed the sleeping form swathed in blue blankets and an oversized pink bonnet which she had picked up at the hall for 5p. 'Now just you wait there and be good.'

She paused in the doorway for one last look. Yes, everybody was admiring Davey. That woman had got out of the car; she was a lot taller than one would have thought, dressed in black from her head to the toes of her knee length boots as though she was just on her way to a funeral. The sort that Mandy didn't like, a real snob, but the stranger was temporarily excused her upper class status because of the way she stared and smiled with those striking clear blue eyes at little Davey.

Mandy pushed her way inside the shop, fumbled in the capacious pockets of her coat for her dog-eared and crumpled allowance book. Heads turned, glanced in her direction, turned away again, scornful looks that made her angry. She stared back but they weren't looking any more. Real catty bitches, jealous because their babies were pasty coloured, all looked the same like the rows of canned foodstuffs on the shelves. Did yer know Mandy Wickham's 'ad a baby out of wedlock? She 'as you know, and even 'er mum says they don't know who the father is? She's been askin' for it, though, ever since she left school, the dirty little sleeparound. You mark my words, afore long you'll see 'er 'angin' around the streets after dark. They reckon 'er sister's gone on the game.

Sod 'em, they daren't say it until she'd gone back outside. But it didn't matter, not a damn. Mandy pushed her allowance book under the bandit screen, didn't look at Mr Barnwell, the sub-postmaster, because he was as bad as the rest of them. Anybody would have thought he had to pay for her and Davey's upkeep out of his own pocket; he probably tried to make out he did, in a roundabout sort of way via the taxman.

Clumsily, Mandy picked up the book and the equally scruffy notes with her stubby fingers; she had never got out of the habit of biting her nails. Nerves, that was the trouble; she hated Tuesday mornings, it was like running the gauntlet coming in here. Well, she wasn't bloody well going to do her shopping in here any more. Sod Barnwell and his rows of 'special offers'. They were all several pence cheaper up at the big Tesco even if it was twenty minutes walk there and back. But it was a nice morning and Davey would enjoy the fresh air.

Head held high, looking neither right nor left, Mandy Wickham stamped her slippered feet towards the exit. She breathed a sigh of relief as she stepped out into the sunlit street which for some reason this morning didn't look drab.

Mandy wondered why an isolated suburb like this was always so busy; shoppers hurrying along as though they hadn't a minute to live, a constant stream of traffic in both directions. That red Cortina was having difficulty nosing its way back out into the road, finally made it when a van slowed and flashed its

lights, squealed its tyres when the driver let in the clutch too fast and shot across the first set of traffic lights just as they were changing from amber to red. She could just make out the outline of the blonde woman in the passenger seat.

But Mandy Wickham wasn't in any hurry. Her anger had subsided, she felt pleasantly relaxed, anticipated the leisurely walk ahead of her, pushing her pram, a stream of benign smiles at her baby from strangers who neither knew nor cared about her background.

'Your mum's back, my lovely.. And we're going for a nice

She froze into shocked immobility, leaning over the battered old pram, her podgy nail-bitten fingers poking at the empty ruffled blankets; then scattering them feverishly. Lifting the pillow, seeing only a chewed multi-coloured rattle beneath it that had also come from the hall at the meagre cost of one penny. Disbelief, looking around with a shocked expression on her plump pimply features.

Davey Wickham was nowhere to be seen. The pram was empty and the stream of passers-by did not so much as glance in Mandy's direction!

Her shrill scream was drowned by the roar of surging, accelerating traffic. And further down the High Street the red Cortina was rapidly disappearing beyond the second set of traffic lights.

To the casual observer it might have been a motley gathering of decadent youths preparing for some outdoor rock festival. Or a gathering of Hell's Angels, except that there were no bikes to be seen. Denim clad figures littered the shallow hollow amid the sparse woodland, clothing that bore a uniform similarity in spite of varying degrees of colour; trouser bottoms were rolled up to display heavy, oversize boots that had a Mickey Mouse appearance if one did not notice the vicious steel toecaps. Hair was worn either shoulder length and matted with neglect or else cropped down to the skull. Mostly youths, a few barely adolescent, trying to disguise their tender age by smoking cigarettes that gave off an acrid aroma. Two or three dozen in all, a few girls sticking close to their boyfriends as though they were scared to be there.

Secretly every one of them was scared but the gathering dusk hid their expressions of fear as they squatted or lay in huddled groups. The common denominator amongst them was the hand-sewn emblem stitched to every denim jacket; some wore it on the arm, others on the back, it made no difference so long as it was visible. A red circle around a black swastika, above it 'Nov 9', below it 'LF'.

The Disciples of Lilith had gathered together, summoned as though by some unknown Pied Piper. There were two reasons why they were here - fear of staying away, and it was the only place they knew where cannabis was free. Sometimes they were given money, too, depending upon what they did and how well they did it.

The groups converged as darkness closed in. This was not their environment and the absence of buildings and people frightened them. There were no subways to sleep in, only hedges and woods where unknown creatures scurried to and fro during the nocturnal hours which they hoped wouldn't hear them breathing or shaking with terror. They prayed that in the morning they would be ordered back to the metropolis.

They waited in silence. Listening. Somewhere on the rolling downs a nesting curlew warbled, a symphony of loneliness. Far away a vixen screeched and one of the girls gave a low gasp of terror. Every sound brought its own degree of terror.

And then an owl hooted and they knew that the time was nigh, that this night of terror and evil was about to begin. As one, they flung themselves prostrate, raising their faces to look upon the malevolent beauty of the woman who called herself Lilith, one to whom even the Fuhrer paid homage. Only once before had she appeared to them, cradling an infant swathed in blankets against her naked bosom. The night had been filled with pitiful wails and when dawn had come all that remained were those flimsy cot blankets soaked in human blood. And the Fuhrer had warned that tonight she would come again.

The listeners shuddered as they heard twigs cracking beneath the trees, heavy booted rhythmic footfalls. Cringing, their drug crazed brains screaming at them to flee, but there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide, for Lilith would come on the night wind and seek them out, and her vengeance would be too terrible to contemplate,

'Arise and behold!' The powerful military voice jerked their bodies into action, had them scrambling to their feet, arms raised in the direction of the tall figure standing silhouetted against the starry sky on a hillock some twenty yards in front of them.

'Seig Heiil' a throaty cry in unison, arms uplifted in a nazi-style greeting.

The one to whom they paid homage acknowledged their salute, clicked the heels of his leather jackboots sharply together. His face was in shadow but they knew it well enough; angular with a small moustache designed to emulate Hitler. An immaculate uniform with a row of medals glinting on the breast, impressive even if you did not know the honours which they represented. The New Fuhrer, he repeatedly told them,

a reincarnation who would carry on the work of the old one, destined for supreme power because Lilith, the Goddess of Darkness, had chosen him to be her mouthpiece. But tonight she would appear in person so that they would all be imbued with her supernatural powers.

He kept them waiting, held their salute until their arms ached, his eyes seeming to glow in the darkness as his gaze flicked from one to the other of them; contemptuous, demoralising, conditioning.

They trembled, knew that all this had something to do with Frank's (known as Franz) death. They'd found his body totally drained of blood and not a drop spilled on the ground around him, the 'death mark' on his neck, his 'gun' gone. And the Fuhrer was blaming them for it. He did not tolerate failure; they would be punished.

Time passed. The full moon heralded its approach, lit up the eastern sky with a deep orange glow, slid eerily into sight above the surrounding treetops. And only then did the Fuhrer order them to relinquish their statue-like salutes, to fall to their knees.

An owl hooting close by. One of the girls began to whimper and somebody snarled at her in guttural tones to shut up. Then came a silence that was pregnant with approaching evil, a chill breeze fanning the sweating bodies of the watchers. They wanted to close their eyes, shut out the sight which they knew would be erotically awful but it was as though their eyelids were glued back. Yet they did not see the naked figure of Lilith, the moonlight turning her skin silvery, until she was standing directly above them on that raised ground. Even the Fuhrer knelt, head bowed, before her. The owl hooted once more and then fell silent, the silence that was broken with terrible suddenness by the crying of a baby and to their horror the audience saw that, as on the previous occasion, Lilith cradled a moving bundle against her firm breasts. And she who had an insatiable desire for infant blood would feed again before the moon set\

They found themselves forced to gaze upon her, their eyes drawn irresistibly up to her own flashing orbs, held there.

Lips moved in mute subservience, a prayer of some kind but they knew not whence it came.

'Look at me,' her voice was rich and vibrant, a naked nymph filling their minds with a lust which they knew could never be fulfilled, 'for I am Lilith. Was I not Adam's first mate before Eve? Was I not? Her voice rose to a shrill screech, demanding an answer in the affirmative.

--'Aye,' the reply was a dull intonation, a chant in unison. 'You were Adam's first mate.'

'And you are my disciples.'

'Aye, we are your disciples.'

'And you will do my bidding because I shall make you all-powerful, invincible to the mortals who seek to thwart me.'

The fear in their eyes was gone, replaced by one of fanaticism; bodies trembled, but now with an eagerness, a devotion to do the bidding of she who addressed them, she whose gaze burned their minds with a cold fire.

1 Lilith... Lilith... Lilith... ' the cry went up.

She held the bundle high and they saw tiny arms and legs kicking, heard a cry of terror like that of a wounded hare; made as if to surge forward but her flashing eyes stayed on them. 'Be patient, my disciples, for this night you shall all drink from the cup of Lilith and become imbued with my power.'

The Fuhrer was on his feet beside Lilith, something in his upraised hand glinted in the moonlight. She held the screaming baby towards him; one final agonised cry and then it was silent. Something was spurting, splashing . . .

'Behold the cup of Lilith . . . drink from it and pledge your souls to her. . . ' The tall man stood there, a chalice in his hands, a shaft of moonlight encircling him so that his naked companion was merely a silhouette behind him.

The gathering came forward, a surprisingly orderly queue, taking the cup one at a time, drinking, making way for those behind them, seemingly oblivious of the thick crimson rivulets that ran down their chins and dripped on to their clothing; returning to their places in the hollow, staring fixedly at the shape that was Lilith, muttering their obedience to her over and over again.

The moonlight was dimmed by a passing cloud, brightened again, and this time it was Lilith who stood in its light; empty handed, the baby's corpse nowhere to be seen, her face a mask of exquisite beauty even in demonic fury.

'You belong to me,' she hissed, 'each and every one of you, in this world and the one beyond, -whence I come. Serve me and your rewards will be rich; disobey me and you writhe in the agonies of a hell beyond mortal belief.'

The watchers recoiled, whispered their pledge with lips that were still bloody.

'Good,' her lips curled, her voice rose, 'then go out and serve me. Kill in the name of Lilith, and remain silent under torture if you are caught, for you know the fate that awaits those who betray me. One of our disciples has been killed by those whom we seek to destroy and my revenge will be terrible. This enemy is dangerous to our cause and no time must be lost. Also the woman who helped him must die. The Fuhrer will guide you to them, for before this full moon wanes I want the head of the man who calls himself Sabat brought to me, hacked from the shoulders, his headless body left behind as a warning to those who would seek to thwart Lilith, Goddess of Darkness!'

Then, as though commanded by Lilith, a bank of dark cloud scudded across the face of the moon and when, some minutes later, the ethereal light flooded back, only the uniformed man remained on that hummock.

'You heard,' he turned on the gathering, 'you heard her words. Go out and kill until the whole world trembles at the very mention of the Disciples of Lilith. But two people in particular must die before many nights have passed. A brothel keeper for her treachery - that should be easy enough. But Sabat will be more difficult, for he too is reputed to have powers above that of ordinary humans. But now that you have drunk from the cup of Lilith you will be strong enough. I who have served her for many years know that her promises are fulfilled; while she does not tolerate failure she rewards success. The one who brings her Sabat's head will be privileged to lie with her, as Adam once lay with her!

A pack of human wolves howled their lust at these words, baying into the night sky, growling their allegiance to her who had given them infant blood to drink.

CHAPTER FIVE

ILONA COULD not get Sabat out of her mind; few women who had ever known him intimately could. In some ways he was frightening, so primitive in both love and hate.

She lay there on her bed with mid-morning sunlight streaming in through the partly open curtains. The night before last had been like a nightmare but she knew that it had happened; Sabat's cold fury in her own basement room as he had taken a life for a life, more ruthless than that killer he had caught. And when night came again he would be back in London's jungle hunting down the others. Sabat lived by his own creed.

Ilona shuddered. Most of her girls had left and she couldn't blame them, wouldn't have attempted to persuade them to remain there against their wilt. Just Jackie and Emma had stayed, principally because they had nowhere to go. No street was safe after dark. Oh God, she wished Sabat had stayed, prayed that he would come back again soon.

She probably knew more than most about Sabat, what made him tick, but there was an awful lot she would never know. She wondered how many other people he'd confided in. Not many because basically he was a loner. He screwed many women but there were very few that he became emotionally involved with.

She remembered the first time he had visited her house, a young priest with a conscience that had totally

destroyed his arousal. It had been an emotional encounter, a man who had literally cried on her naked shoulder. That was when their understanding had begun, when Sabat had opened up to her, told her about that adolescent homosexual experience which had driven him to seek, penitence beneath the umbrella of the Church. And he had failed. An ultra-perceptive man, he had unveiled the hypocrisy which others were too blind to see, suddenly realising that his own faith was shattered. He had once talked of taking his own life and possibly might even have attempted suicide if Ilona had not persuaded him that there were other things to live for apart from ideals.

After that he had visited her regularly, and in the early stages they had just sat and talked the night away. Gradually she noticed his self-confidence returning, Sabat beginning to mould his own character. Ilona had taught him love, shaped his fine physique to her own liking, had thrilled to the weight of his own body lying on top of her, his powerful thrusts that seemed to precipitate her on to another plane, a place where she whirled dizzily, floated ecstatically, and hated coming back to reality.

Then one day Sabat came to see her no more. It was as though part of her life had been snatched from her and in due course she learned that he had left the Church. A year went by and she had given up all hope of ever seeing him again until one night he walked in as nonchalantly as if he had never been away. But he was changed, that personality had matured, hardened. They made love, and once again she wilted to the sheer power of the man, basked in his dominance. And afterwards as they lay limply, exhausted by the physical and mental maelstrom of a primitive yet supremely satisfying coupling of their bodies, he had underlined his faith in her by confiding to her his closest secret. He had sought to erase the theological indoctrination in a total contrast of commitment, a service so demanding that only a handful made the grade. The SAS. And Sabat had learned to kill, excellent in a new art, a new challenge. It frightened her and that fear was still with her now, not of the man himself but of the dangers which had become the very essence of life to him, those in this world and another who sought to destroy him.

She had guessed his powers long ago, as only a woman who is very close to a man is able to; not the hocus-pocus rigmarole which is often referred to as 'exorcism' but something much more powerful, one who sought to do battle with the powers of evil, one besotted with an obsession COY revenge against them. Sabat now had a new zest for life, so meticulous in his own form of warfare that not only had he made an intensive study of the black arts but his own methods of self-protection had been so thorough that he had even been circumcised so that on those occasions when it was necessary for him to seek refuge within a chalked pentagram there was no possibility of him carrying an evil entity in the form of a speck of dirt beneath his foreskin.

Ilona knew also of his possession by Quentin's soul, the periods of mental anguish, the way he fought through and won because he was Sabat. And there was only one Sabat.

Her train of thought went round in a circle and came back to killings. Was this a senseless campaign of terror or was there a more insidious motive? Only Sabat would find that out and all she could do was to wait. A prisoner in her own brothel, all except two of her girls gone, afraid to go outside her own door

after dark until it was all over.

Suddenly the telephone rang, a harsh sound that jangled her nerves and as she reached for the receiver she was praying that it might be Sabat. But her female intuition told her it wasn't; he would not be back just yet.

'Ilona speaking.' The deep cultured voice on the other end of the line put her on her guard; clients sometimes recommended her to friends but there was always the possibility of a police trap. It was a chance one had to take with an expanding business.

'My name is Lassiter,' the other went on; it could have been been a pseudonym; someone who thought that Jones or Smith was becoming a little hackneyed. 'I heard of you from one of your clients, Richard Baynham.'

Ilona relaxed a little; Richard Baynham was a wealthy businessman who called on her once or twice a month and doubtless he had many contacts. She could always check with him. 'Yes, I know Richard well.'

'I was wondering if you were free later this evening.'

'Yes.' At least it would be nice to have a man in the house for an hour or two. I'll be free around ten.'

'Excellent. Shall we make that a firm date then?'

She answered again in the affirmative, and immediately upon replacing the receiver she dialled the number of Baynham's office. Like Sabat, she was learning to be thorough.

'I'm sorry, Mr Baynham won't be in for the rest of this week, the secretary's voice was almost hostile, maybe her intuition sensed the caller was a whore; or else she was having an affair with her boss and resented the possibility of a rival. 'He's in Belgium and won't be back in the office until Monday. Would you care to leave your name?'

Ilona dropped the phone back on its cradle, sighed. That was that, there was no way of checking out on Lassiter, and the caller had not left a number in case of a cancellation. Her nerves were getting the better of her, and if she conceded to them she'd lose her business within six months. Customers were customers and there was always an element of risk; Ilona would just have to keep on taking risks. Probably a stranger would do her good, put her mind at rest. All the same, she felt uneasy.

Her fears increased as dusk came, seeped into the darkness of another night. She considered going upstairs and calling on either Jackie or Emma but decided against it; it would be an invasion of their privacy. They had their own bedsits, their homes, and if they wanted her company they would have invited her. In all probability they just wanted to be alone and she respected their wishes as she did with all the girls who worked for her. She glanced at the blank television screen; the news would be on now but she didn't want to watch it, didn't want to be reminded of these horrific events. In all probability this man Lassiter would be a genuine client and his company would erase her fears. She didn't feel in the mood for much more than talking to somebody, but as a hardened professional she knew that she had to disguise her own feelings, create a facade of vivaciousness.

At nine-fifteen she began putting on her make-up, a portrayal of what a client expected. Sophisticated, sexy but not cheap, the model mistress. She had no idea what he had in mind and it was pointless trying to guess. Black bra and French knickers to match beneath a thin, long green dress that just showed the outline of her underwear, a prelude to a slow strip.

She was finished by ten minutes to ten, sensed her unease returning now that she was idle again, lighting a cigarette and drawing quickly on it, flicking the ash into the empty fireplace. If only Sabat could be here. But he wasn't, nor was he likely to come because he would be preparing for yet another night of battle with these devilish murderers.

The grandmother clock in the hall was just striking ten when the front door bell shrilled, tautening every nerve in Ilona's body, her stomach muscles contracting into a tight ball. So prompt ... so clinical. She shivered. Her legs trembled, wanted to buckle under her as she walked down the hall. The lock was stiff, unyielding, and she had to force it - another omen, a warning not to admit her caller? She ignored it.

'Good evening.' The man on the threshold was tall, with sleek dark hair that looked and smelled oily, a short clipped moustache that bore evidence of once having adorned the whole upper lip by a line of shaved stubble. It was the eyes that had Ilona's heart thumping faster, so cold and . . . penetrating. She didn't want to look at them but felt she had to. She stepped back, holding the door wide although her instinct was to slam it in this stranger's face.

As she closed the door she had a feeling that she had succumbed to her fate, that she had been deprived

of shutting her visitor out in the street by some strange inner force which was dominating her will. With automaton-like movements she led the way into the lounge, heard her own voice somewhere asking 'would you like a drink?'

'Brandy, please.' His voice had a hollow ring to it, seemed to echo repetitively in her brain as though ensuring that she did not forget his words.

Somehow she poured a measure of brandy into a glass, handed it to him, noted the almost skeletal long fingers which grasped it. Then she was looking into his eyes again.

'You are alone in the house?' His tone conveyed that he knew she wasn't, a subtle means of interrogation.

'No. Jackie and Emma are in their rooms upstairs.'

'I see.' He smiled, but there was no humour in the parting of his lips which displayed twin rows of even white teeth. 'I understand that you have an ... er, shall we say, a delectable chamber of delight for those who appreciate the pleasures of corporal punishment.'

'Yes,' she nodded like a puppet on a string. 'Down below. It used to be a cellar. I had it converted.'

'Shall we take a look at it then, I an order that it was impossible to refuse, the man known as Lassiter already on his feet but there was no hint of an amusement inside his tight fitting trousers; so unemotional that she shivered.

Ilona turned to lead the way. A sensation of dizziness assailed her so that she had to support herself with a hand on the wall of the corridor. She hadn't been down there since Sabat had ... oh God, she didn't ever want to go down there again! But some force was compelling her, driving her as though the man behind her was pushing her, but he hadn't touched her; at least she didn't think he had,

She swayed on the narrow steps that led down to her underground chamber, blinking in the stark fluorescent light. Lassiter was pushing her now, urging her to descend to this place where men writhed with pleasure, cried aloud for pain and more pain. And where a youth had died horribly less than

forty-eight hours ago. Guiltily her eyes scanned the walls and floors but nowhere was there so much as a smear of blood. As in everything else he did, Sabat was a perfectionist.

'Would . . . would you like me to ... to change into something . . . suitable?' She motioned towards a curtained alcove in the corner which hid a variety of bizarre clothing. Maybe once her visitor was a helpless prisoner in some form of bondage she would feel easier.

'No, my dear,' he laughed softly, 'just take off all your clothes. That will be quite sufficient.'

Ilona found herself obeying, not a demure strip for the delight of some lusting voyeur, but disrobing herself because she had not the willpower to disobey. Naked, she cringed, her mouth dry, her flesh pimpling with the cold shiver of fear that slowly crept up her spine.

Lassiter did not speak, merely leading her to the nearest wall, expertly securing her wrists and ankles in the steel manacles, and throughout there was still no hint of arouse-ment. So callous, so efficient, the stoic features a hideous mask.

'Good,' he grunted and stepped back to survey his handiwork. 'Is this the place where Sabat drained one of the Disciples of Lilith of his life's bloodT

She shuddered, his words coming like an electric shock, her whole body trembling. She wanted to lie, to yell 'no, it isn't. Nobody has been killed here.' But instead she nodded, a mute confession because it was impossible to do otherwise.

'A foolish thing to do.' Lassiter delved inside his jacket, his hand coming out holding something which was only too familiar to Ilona - a syringe gun identical to the one which Sabat had taken from her attacker last night \

Now she wanted to scream, attempted to, but only succeeded in making a hoarse sound which was scarcely louder than a whisper; a croak that died in her throat.

'Your escape last night was only temporary,' he moved close to her, 'perhaps it would have been better for you had you died then. Now you will suffer a thousand times worse!'

'Who are you?' she whispered.

'I am the Fuhrer!' Those eyes took on a maniacal, fanatical gleam. LA reincarnation of he who died before his work was finished, Adolf Hitler I And I have my enemies just as he had them then, in a past life. And those enemies must be destroyed if the Disciples of Lilith are to rule supreme!

Ilona wanted to close her eyes, shut that malevolent face out, but the lids were paralysed. She wilted before the power of his gaze, felt herself mentally apologising to him for her part in Sabat's plans.

'Already people are learning to fear the name of the Goddess of Darkness.' Lassiter's face was only inches from her own and Ilona smelted his breath, mint flavoured as though he had been chewing gum recently. 'But we have only just begun! The streets will be littered with bloodless corpses and our minions will resort to open anarchy as they realise the extent of our power.'

She wanted to shout 'you're crazy' but had difficulty even in thinking it. Her mind was no longer her own; if this man who believed himself to be a reincarnation of the mad Austrian-born painter had asked her to join forces with him she would have obeyed meekly.

'You must pay for your crimes,' he laughed softly. 'But, as I said, your death will not be as swift as others we have slain, and as you die you will know why the sentence of death has been passed on you and you will beg humbly for forgiveness which will not be granted!'

He stooped and almost instantly Ilona experienced an excruciating pain on the inside of her left thigh, felt that razor-sharp needle plunging into her soft flesh where in the past many men had kissed her tenderly. Almost immediately the instrument was withdrawn and as she writhed in her manacles she saw her tormentor cross quickly to the wash-basin. He held the 'gun' over the bowl, released a catch, and thick crimson fluid spurted sluggishly into the bowl.

Ilona almost fainted, but unconsciousness was denied her, saw him coming back, stooping in front of her again. This time she managed a scream as she felt the agonising penetration in the opposite thigh and again he retracted the needle and shot its contents over the waste pipe. Something was oozing down the inside of her legs, forming into a sticky pool around her feet. And she knew without any doubt that it was her own blood!

Now she was screaming hysterically, but her bondage did not allow her more than a flexing of agonised muscles. His fingers touched her arm this time and she braced herself for the inevitable 'injection', tried to turn her head away in case she caught a glimpse of the sadistic mutilation. The wound was somewhere on the inside of her right forearm, again a small quantity of blood taken and ejected; then the left arm. Bleeding to death, hearing the mocking voice of her murderer, tiny rivulets of blood running at all angles down her body, becoming thicker, wider rivers all converging in the sickly sea beneath her.

Oh Jesus God, kill me and get it over with! She made unintelligible sounds which only brought another smile to the face of this unknown sadist. As he had said, she was pleading, asking forgiveness, having it rejected. Dimly she wondered how long it took the human body to bleed to death; she'd read somewhere once that an open artery emptied the blood supply in under ten minutes. But this devil had extracted maybe half-a-pint from the veins, leaving the rest to ebb from the wounds.

Then she caught a glimpse of the bloody nozzle of his weapon, saw it coming at her, knew that this time the target was her weakened, pulsing jugular. She felt the steel tube sinking into her throat but there was hardly any pain because she was beyond that barrier, a numbed dying naked body, her beauty gone and only a vestige of life remaining.

He leaped clear this time, dodging the jetting scarlet fluid and through a darkening haze she saw him emptying his vile instrument of vampire death, washing it out under the tap as casually as he might have cleaned his toothbrush.

Bleeding profusely she hung there, death still taking its time. The man who had called himself Lassiter was still talking, his voice a dull faraway vibration like jungle drums but she heard and understood.

'It was thoughtful of you to have this room soundproofed. Two other girls, you say. I have some eager young men outside lusting for their bodies and afterwards your colleagues' fate will be the same as yours. And then Sabat, truly a good night's work which will please Lilith!'

Neither dead nor alive, her bleeding body sagging from the wall, Ilona had one last glimpse of the departing Lassiter, his long legs taking two steps at a time, not once looking back because he knew she was finished and he had more work to attend to. He did not close the door and even when her vision was a crimson haze she could still hear.

The front door opened and closed, padded footfalls, whispered voices. The Disciples of Lilith had

arrived, the Merchants of Blood were about to feast again!

As Ilona weakened still more she heard the screams coming from above, two girls in the throes of indescribable agonies and the man who called himself the Fuhrer laughing at the sight of their blood. And her last living thought was in the form of a prayer, that Sabat would be equal to the challenge and that his revenge would be terrible.

Mandy Wickham wandered the darkened streets, a stupefied expression on her pimply features, her slippered feet scuffing along the pavement, peering into every patch of shadow, straining eyes that were sore with crying. Her earlier panic had numbed her, she had wept until there were no more tears to fill her smarting ducts.

Those policemen hadn't helped, hadn't shown the slightest trace of emotion. Because they didn't bloody well care, it wasn't their baby. All they had to do was write down all the details, file them away, and hope that the infant turned up somewhere. And if it didn't, then it was no skin off their noses because they'd worked according to the book of rules.

'This car, madam, the one the woman who was looking at your baby got out of, have you got the registration number?'

'No. Of course I bloody well 'aven't.'

'What make of car was it?'

'I dunno, one o' them big ones, you know, like you see on telly sometimes in them cop chases.'

The constable sighed, glanced heavenwards, tried again. 'What colour was it?'

'Red.'

'Well, that's the first fact we've established today. The man who was driving it, did you get a look at

him?"

Mandy was totally confused by the time the policeman left. That was when the crying started, escalating into a tantrum of frustration in which she threw cushions and shoes at the wall, finally collapsing in an exhausted heap on the floor where she remained for several hours. It was already getting dark when she made up her mind that she had to do something positive; like going out and trying to find Davey.

She felt calmer now that she actually had something to do instead of sitting around and waiting for calls that would never come. Those coppers wouldn't be returning to tell her they'd found her baby; more likely they'd forgotten all about it, had gone off duty and were in the pub right now. She contemplated going and seeking the help of her parents but that would be futile. They'd be glad she'd lost the baby, felt that a smear had been removed from the family. Or Big Dave ... no, he wouldn't be interested, might even get nasty if she hinted that it was his baby. Which left only herself.

Mandy put on her coat and went outside. She didn't know where to look. Couldn't think what that woman could possibly want little Davey for . . . unless the cow couldn't have kids of her own and had decided to pinch somebody else's. Mandy had seen a programme on TV once about women who stole babies, nutters who got round to convincing even themselves that they had actually had the child. On the other hand ... a ray of mingled hope and fear . . . sometimes they got scared, realised just what they'd done and dumped the babies in all sorts of places; on doorsteps, in bus shelters, even in litter bins. Oh God! The thought of Davey upended amid a pile of refuse had her searching with desperation, scrabbling through the contents of council waste baskets, caring not for filth or scratches from sharp objects.

She began her search back outside the post office where her baby had been snatched from its pram. The car had gone off down the High Street, certainly past the first set of traffic lights so it was no good looking anywhere before then. Just keep on walking, follow the main road; it could be they'd dumped it anywhere along there as far as ... no, God, not the Thames!

Mandy was tiring, unaccustomed to walking further than the nearest shops, forcibly dragging herself along. She'd have to rest, try to think something out. Oh please, whoever you are, give me back my baby. There's thousands of others, unwanted ones, give me Davey back and take one of them I

The shops had petered out now into an area of dereliction. Homes of families which had been rehoused, corner shops which had succumbed to the chains of giant supermarkets. Depressing.

Mandy almost fell over a protruding front door step, cursed beneath her breath, then decided that it was as good a place as any to rest her weary limbs. She lowered herself down on to it, sat staring into the

enshrouding darkness, seeing the headlights of passing cars beyond the junction at the e*hd of the road. Nobody came here any more . . . except perhaps Davey's kidnappers! He could be anywhere, just dumped on a piece of waste ground ... dead from exposure by morning!

She was starting to tremble again, but the maternal instinct forced her to be logical within her own capabilities. If Davey was anywhere around he would be crying, screeching like he did at home because he didn't like the dark. He would be terrified without his night light.

Her ears picked up a faint sound, a sort of rustling like clothes make ... she sat upright, heard it again. Mandy was back on her feet, about to run in the direction from where the noise came when she was suddenly aware that somebody was approaching.

'Who's . . . that?' Mandy hadn't expected to meet anybody around here.

'Hello. Fancy seeing a pretty little thing like you out on her own at this time of night. No boyfriend tonight, sweetheart?' A half-mocking voice.

Mandy caught her breath, tried to make out the other's appearance. He sounded young, a teenager, small; either he was bald or else his hair had been cut very short.

'I ... I've lost my baby.' It was difficult putting the trauma of the last twelve hours into words. 'He ... was stolen. I was 'oping . . . somebody 'ad dumped 'im . . . that I'd find'im.'

'So it's your baby, is it!'

The words took her aback, had her speechless. 'Wot. . . wot did you say?' She managed to get the question out at last, hardly daring to hope that she had heard correctly.

'I said it's your baby, is it?'

'You . . . you've found Davey?'

That's right. All wrapped up and sleepin' like a babe.' A guffaw. The other was dressed in dark clothing, rendering him almost invisible except for the outline of his face.

Take me to him. Oh, please take me to my baby.'

'Sure,' the youth leaned up against the wall, crossed one foot over the other. 'All in due course but don't rush me. We got all night, sweetheart.'

'I want my baby. Look, I'll do just anything to ... '

'Now that's interesting, darling. You'll do just anything to get your baby back, will you?'

Cold fear clutched at Mandy's heart as the implication of the other's words filtered through to her bemused brain. It was as though she had swallowed some hard object, some of which had lodged in her throat, the rest a ball that was expanding in her stomach.

'Well, baby, will yer or won't yer? 'Cause if yer won't I'll be sayin 'ta-ta.'

'No, please!' A desperate urgency, that maternal instinct stronger than ever now. 'What ... ' swallowing so that she could barely speak, 'what d'you want me... to do?'

'Yer not very bright are you, sweetheart? OK, I'll spell it out for yer; it's nothin' very terrible. What say we find someplace a bit more comfortable than this, and fuck?'

Mandy Wickham clenched her hands until her fingernails dug deep into her palms. That was how Big Dave used to put it sometimes, especially when he was in one of those animal-like moods of his. But when it came to a question of your offspring's life it didn't matter a damn whether you called it fucking or making love, what you did or whom you did it with.

'All right,' she licked her lips. I'll do it.'

'Good,' he chuckled. 'C'mon, I know one of these houses that's dry and there's an old mattress we can use.'

The youth took her arm, a grip that was just too tight for comfort and gave Mandy the impression that he wasn't going to let her go even if she'd changed her mind and said it didn't matter about Davey. But she wasn't going to do that.

Suddenly her companion stopped, pulled her into a doorway, the door swinging open surprisingly easily; dragged her inside, kicked it closed after them. She moved, caught her leg against something sharp and cried out with pain, but he did not appear to notice.

'Hey, it's dark in here,' she spoke instinctively to break the silence, his stentorian breathing was beginning to frighten her.

'Darkness is where we live,' his tone of voice had changed to one of recitation, 'for (his is the world of Lilith, Goddess of Darkness.'

'Look,' her voice was a whine now, 'I said I'd let yer so let's get on with it and then yer can show me where my baby is.'

Silence again, except for a fumbling swishing sound; Mandy presumed that he was taking off some clothing. She was debating whether or not to remove certain of her own garments when suddenly he seized her with a terrifying ferociousness; she would have screamed had his fingers not closed over her windpipe. Her brain reeled. He had no need to attack her because she had promised to ...

'Filthy whore!' he snarled, something in his hand brushing against her side. She flung up a protective hand fearing a cudgel or possibly a knife. 'I have not set eyes upon your baby unless it was the one that Lilith devoured and shared its blood among her disciples to make them strong. You and your kind are leeches in a declining society. The people of this country await a new Messiah, one who is already amongst us, himself a chosen one of the great goddess. He is risen again, this time to build a master race, but first he must exterminate the likes of you, the vermin of the streets. That is why you must die!'

Mandy Wickham managed a choking gurgle which was cut off as something sharp cut into her neck; sheer blinding pain that had her flailing her limbs wildly, trying to claw the wicked blade from her throat. Oh God, he was a homicidal maniac, had brought her here with the sole purpose of murdering her.

She sagged, felt the sticky warmth of her own blood running down and saturating her second hand clothing; the smell vile and cloying, involuntarily gargling, drowning because her throat was being flooded. A sucking sensation in her neck as though some giant leech was feeding on her. And somewhere a bird of some kind was hooting, a sound that grated on her dying nerves.

But her final thoughts were not for herself. She saw Davey, his dark skin soft and tender to the touch, reaching out for her with his puny arms, crying. And it was as though mother and baby were somehow reunited in a place where there was no pain, the small circular wounds in their respective throats unnoticed; looking down from aloft on derelict slum streets where black clothed figures stalked the shadows, harbingers of doom, disciples of a black religion. And she was glad that she and her baby were removed from it all.

CHAPTER SIX

'WELL,' DETECTIVE Sergeant McKay regarded Sabat steadily through a haze of tobacco smoke, 'we

can't keep it from the public any longer. Doubtless you've seen this morning's papers.'

'Yes.' Sabat who had once again been disturbed from his bed by the CID man had a dressing gown draped over his naked body. ' "The Legions of Dracula Come To Town" or some such nonsensical crap if my memory serves me right. What's the current death-toll?'

'Eighteen up to last night. Doubtless our patrols will discover some more bodies before the morning's out. And judging by the fact I've caught you sleeping by day, Sabat, I reckon you were out last night too.'

'Yes.' Not by so much as a flicker of a facial muscle did Sabat even hint at his discoveries so far; the police had called him in on this, but he could not afford to have them sticking close to him if they so much as guessed that he had already encountered the enemy. 'I spent a fruitless and rather chilly night without hearing or seeing anything.'

'Well, the Chief's chasing his own arse right now. As if these killings aren't enough there's trouble brewing that could make that Netting Hill Carnival business look like a pensioners' outing. Eight demonstrations by fascist groups in the next fortnight, all under different guises. The Home Secretary can't ban the lot without good reason. All police leave has been cancelled and some of the lads are working shifts round the clock. The pressure's really on and there's an undercurrent of latent hysteria throughout the city.'

'Ever thought there might be a link between the two?'

'You mean the killings and the fascists?'

'It's an idea.'

'Sure, but with eight or ten different right wing splinter groups who are constantly decrying one another it's hardly the makings of a future coalition nazi regime.'

'Unless that's a load of bullshit, propaganda put about to blind everybody to the real truth until it's too late,' Sabat smiled whimsically. 'Hitler's new army on the march.'

'You found something out?' McKay's neck craned forward, his eyes searching for the faintest sign that Sabat could be holding back on something.

'Just a hunch, a gamble that's paid off more than once. But, as I was saying, Clive, don't let me mislead you; I could be entirely wrong.'

The CID man stood up. Til bear that in mind. Thanks for the tip.' Then he was gone, knowing full well that Sabat was on to something, that he'd reveal his findings when it suited him and not before. And right now Scotland Yard could use any information.

Once he was alone Sabat attempted to phone Ilona, listened to the telephone ringing at the other end, hung on for several minutes before he replaced his receiver, a puzzled expression on his face. Ilona had not said she was going away and in any case the other two girls, Jackie and Emma were there. An old familiar feeling began to creep over him, certainty that something was wrong, a premonition that spread a rash of goose pimples.

And somewhere inside him Quentin was laughing; a sound that sent a chill up Sabat's spine because his brother was seldom wrong over such matters.

Sabat went out to his car, eased the Daimler out of the quiet backwater and into the How of London traffic. Only with a supreme effort did he control his frustration,, the urge to blare his horn, to shout and curse the lines of lumbering traffic which came to a halt every few yards.

Maybe he was wrong after all, and Ilona and her girls had gone into town on a shopping spree. According to Quentin they hadn't and that was enough to twist Sabat's stomach muscles into knots. Quentin's soul was his own in-built warning system.

A longer delay this time; the road was up and the automatic traffic controls appeared to have jammed in favour of the oncoming flow. Two men in orange jackets were fiddling with the lights but in the end they had to resort to manual direction of the build-up of cars, vans and several articulated lorries. It was twenty minutes before Sabat was clear of the obstruction.

The Daimler seemed to pick up its driver's mood of frustration; the usually smooth engine sluggish and

missing on more than one occasion. It was because Sabat was an excellent and sensitive driver, becoming part of the car once he was behind the wheel.

The last stretch of the journey was the worst. Lorries that did not seem to want to move, another hold-up because somebody had broken down and nobody bothered with traffic controls. And Quentin still laughed.

Finally Sabat swung into the street where Ilona lived, the shock of what he saw causing him to swerve and almost hit a parked van. Two police cars and a black van which could only be here for one purpose, all parked outside number sixty-six. A uniformed constable was on duty by the door of Ilona's house.

Sabat double-parked, tried to shut out Quentin's mocking laughter as he got out of the car. He didn't need telling what had happened; already he was blaming himself. He should never have left her alone, moved her and the other girls to some place of safety, for these ghouls who murdered under the cover of darkness had undoubtedly discovered the house where one of their brethren had died. In all probability a roaming 'vampire' had seen Sabat leave with the corpse; whatever, it was too late now.

'Well, well, Sabat, we meet again so soon.'

Sabat whirled round. In those moments of awful realisation he had not heard the black Granada pull up behind him. Detective Sergeant Clive McKay and another plain clothes officer were getting out of the car.

'What's going on here? What the hell happened?' Sabat's face was grim, deathly white.

'You should know,' McKay's expression was one of scepticism, 'you got here before I did.'

'That hunch I told you about,' Sabat's irony was humourless. 'I just played it and I hoped to God I was wrong but as I told you my hunches seldom let me down. Unfortunately,' he added.

'I got the call on the way back to the Yard.' McKay began to cross the road, beckoned Sabat to follow him. 'Now that you're here I guess you may as well take a look.'

Other vehicles were beginning to arrive, a small crowd gathering on the pavement outside number sixty-six.

'The fucking Press,' McKay muttered as the constable opened the door to admit the three newcomers, 'one gets the impression sometimes that their noses are trained to smell blood in the air.'

Or else they've had a tip-off by somebody wanting to make sure that this gets into the early editions, Sabat thought; killers who are relying on publicity. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

There were some half a dozen detectives already inside, the interior of Ilona's house resembling a beehive, comings and goings, a buzz of low conversation. Sabat stuck close to McKay, followed him down those familiar steps to the converted cellar.

'Jesus Christ!' McKay pursed his lips at the scene which greeted them.

Sabat took a deep breath, held it. Every sensation torturous to the human nervous system came at him in a combined rush. Revulsion, grief, but it was cold fury that had him trembling. He had once seen a private showing of a documentary film, a visual factual anthology of the true horrors of the Nazi torture camps, Man's inhumanity to Man. But even the Nazis' sadistic ingenuity had not stooped to this level. Until now.

Ilona's corpse hung from the wall, a sagging pathetic thing that was barely recognisable, streaked with dried rivers of blood, the head lolling to one side to expose the gaping circular wound in the throat, a crust of crimson-brown encircling it. Blood everywhere, some still sticky; you could smell it, feel it cloying your nostrils and lungs. Sabat stared, saw those same marks on the thighs and arms, read what had happened in the same way that others read a book. This had been a revenge killing, the victim condemned to a slow death, her life oozing away before the final death plunge by that hideous needle into her jugular vein.

Sabat's rage simmered as he followed the detectives up to the top storey, saw another scene of death and torture in a blood splashed bedroom, the sheets beneath the two bodies saturated through to the mattress. Jackie and Emma, two attractive girls in their mid-twenties, just the one all too familiar puncture on their necks. Nothing else, an apparently senseless killing unless you knew what was behind it.

And this will be your fate, too, Mark Sabat!

Sabat flinched at Quentin's words, for his brother's evil would be set free by death. But amid the grief and anger Sabat plucked out the warning. If the Disciples of Lilith knew where to find Ilona, knew of her part in the fight against them, then they were also aware that Sabat was on their trail. Doubtless his name, too, was on the fascists' death list. And they were unlikely to delay an attempt on his life if he

'I guess it's no good quizzing you about your hunches,' McKay muttered as Sabat made to leave.

The other shook his head. 'All the hunches I've got at the moment would have every officer in the force running round in circles for the next month and probably getting nowhere while these 'vampires', for want of a better term, have a field day.'

'Uh-huh,' the detective's lips tightened; when Sabat was ready to talk he would do so, and not until. 'We're going to step up night patrols, get a few WPCs out as decoys with a concealed escort.'

Sabat bit back his retort that it was a waste of time, just risking the lives of female police officers; there was something uncanny, so deadly in the way these youths hunted and killed ... as though they had received some kind of training superior to anything which a fascist organisation had to offer. Either that... or they had successfully called upon the dark powers to assist them! It was a possibility he did not rule out.

'No doubt you won't be in touch but I will,' there was resentment in McKay's tone as Sabat walked away from the house of death.

Sabat's mind was elsewhere on the journey back to his house, a robot that drove with deadly efficiency but recorded none of the mundane details in a computerised brain that had no space for trivialities. On entering his front door, Sabat knew that his first task was to kindle the flames of fury, bring them to a raging furnace and burn them back to a simmering anger for in his present state it was likely to cloud his reasoning, his judgement. And that gave these Disciples of Lilith a distinct advantage over him.

He descended a flight of steps which led to the basement area below, a square room which incorporated the foundations of the house and which he had fitted out as a gymnasium. In some ways it bore a resemblance to Ilona's cellar yet the fixtures and fittings were not designed for such masochistic pleasures; a vaulting horse, climbing ropes, a punchbag, various trapeze bars, and at the far end a

miniature shooting range against the background of a sandpit.

Sabat stripped naked, his muscles quivering with both anticipation of the exertion they faced and the fury which seethed inside the powerful body like a cauldron coming to the boil. The scar on his cheek stood out starkly as though it glowed white hot, his eyes burned hot and dry.

The punchbag first, a rain of blows that powered every ounce of his hundred and eighty pounds, fast and furious, every one on target, straining the ropes that secured the leather bag to its moorings. He saw it through a red haze, an unknown face that belonged to the self-styled Fuhrer of this fascist movement, determined to pound it beyond recognition. Sabat saw Ilona again, the tragic waste of life, and knew that only total revenge would ease his own conscience. Faster, faster, the thudding of bare knuckles on leather like distant machine-gun fire, his body lathered in sweat, his eyes misted so that he could barely see yet every blow found its mark; non-stop until finally the fury inside him began to die down and only then did he move on to the vaulting horse, a perfect leap that carried him well beyond it. Again and again. Up on to the trapeze with the strength and agility of a baboon, swinging from there on to the ropes, traversing them so that his biceps bulged and responded to efforts far beyond his normal training sessions.

Finally he was still, his breathing barely quicker than when he had begun, going to his discarded clothing and finding the .38 revolver. Both hands were rock steady, the one holding the weapon, the other clasping his gun hand. Six targets, slivers of kindling wood embedded in the sand, barely a quarter of an inch in width.

The shots were almost as rapid as those blows on the punchbag, deafening reports in the soundproofed enclosure, the atmosphere thick with acrid gunsmoke. And when Sabat lowered the gun there were only splinters of smashed wood scattered on the red sand, not a single stick remaining intact.

As he returned the .38 to its pocket holster in his jacket there was a much slower, calmer movement from his limbs; not tiredness, a mixture of relaxation and satisfaction. A man who has walked through hellfire and emerged unscathed.

He stepped into the curtained shower, sighed beneath the cold invigorating spray. His expression, too, had changed, a sadness that was hidden by the gushing water and if there were tears, then they were washed away immediately. For, even with Sabat, there was a time for crying.

Sabat towelled himself dry, took his time dressing. Slowly, deliberately, he ejected the spent shells from the revolver and reloaded it. His nostrils flared above his black moustache as he controlled his breathing,

regulated his anger and hatred towards the Liberation Front so that once again he was the perfect fighting machine, as deadly, perhaps deadlier, than he had been in his SAS days.

For he knew that soon the Fuhrer would send his killers. And Sabat was ready for them!

The three youths huddled in the dusk of a deserted building site, uncertain of themselves, afraid. None of them spoke for conversation was forbidden to them and it never entered their minds to speak. They had their instructions indelibly imprinted on their brains, seared by the burning eyes of the Fuhrer. No thought of failure, success was taken for granted. They had killed before and tonight they would kill again. Already the memory of those atrocities two nights ago when their leader had accompanied them had been erased. He had made them forget in the same way that he made them remember. They were soldiers in his army of living zombies.

A definite assignment; a name and address. Already they had located the house, surveyed it from a distance in gathering dusk, made sure that they were not seen. Now all they had to do was wait. No nervousness now, just another job for one they were proud to serve. That name, they each repeated it mutely over and over again - Sabat. . . Sabat. . Sabat... the man they had to kill!

Darkness came and cast its mantle over acres of half finished houses, obliterating details, even the stars seemed reluctant to show themselves on this night of evil. The group waited patiently, not fidgeting, just staring sightlessly into the blackness.

They knew when it was time to move, heard the faint hooting of an owl. When their task was completed they would return to this very place and give an answering call. In due course they would be collected, lie for hours in the back of a juddering van hidden by a pile of blankets until they reached their destination, that place where there were no buildings, just trees and rolling meadowland, where tiny creatures scurried to and fro in the dead of night. And only then would they be afraid.

They moved silently in single file, the heavy rubber soles of their boots masking every footfall. Stopping to listen, moving on again. When they reached the lighted streets they made full use of the shadows, but there was nobody about because it was well past midnight.

They saw the shape of the house, its small shrubbery offering ample concealment, and here they waited again. For there was no hurry.

Sabat knew that they would come tonight. In some ways he welcomed the presence of Quentin's soul for evil detected evil, gave him more warning than if he had to rely solely upon his own acute senses of perception and intuition. Now Quentin was silent as though he, too, had received his orders from some unknown source. The time was nigh.

Shortly before dark, Sabat locked the doors and made sure that the windows were secure. The intruders would find a way in because of that extraordinary training which the Disciples of Lilith appeared to have received but he did not wish to arouse their suspicions. Only one thing worried him - did they have any supernatural powers or did they rely simply on commando-like tactics? If the former, then his preparations were incomplete and he should have taken refuge within a pentagram to repel the powers of darkness. If the latter, then the element of surprise was in his favour, and with no small degree of satisfaction he checked the .38, slipped it back into his pocket holster. His features hardened as he remembered Ilona, Jackie, and Emma again. His creed, a life for a life, meant that he must kill three of them. And afterwards he would set about Finding the blood gorged spider which spun this crimson web of evil.

He switched off the lights one by one, his bedroom last after an interval of a quarter of an hour or so. Then he went back downstairs.

And now for Sabat it was a time of waiting.

Briefly, the three youths were illuminated by the glare of an orange street lamp as they crossed the short gravelled drive. Identical clothing and hairstyles; shabby denims with the swastika displayed prominently on the left arm, trousers turned up to a ridiculous level revealing heavy, oversize boots. Even their features bore a marked similarity. Eyes that had a glazed appearance, lips tight and bloodless, the unmistakable stamp of cruelty overall, and a total stranger may have been forgiven for believing them to be brothers.

A rear window offered little obstruction to their purpose, the pointed tip of a syringe gun cutting through the glass as efficiently as a diamond cutter, a hole just large enough for the sash to be reached.

All three of them were inside, the window closed again. Waiting. Listening. Total silence. Then they moved like wraiths gliding through the house, searching each room with scarcely a sound; the study, kitchen, cloakroom, going on upstairs. Here they were more wary, fingers resting on the butts of their deadly weapons for surely they must find the man they sought on this floor. But no, even the bedrooms were empty, no evidence of any of the beds having been used that night.

Five minutes later they gathered at the head of the stairs again, a huddled, puzzled trio, not knowing what to do. Eventually they went back downstairs, beginning the search all over again for the training inbred by their fanatical leader told them they had been careless and overlooked something.

After another five minutes they found the door which they had missed, set alongside the stair cupboard as though it formed part of a double entrance to that place where brooms and other cleaning equipment were kept. They pulled it open, saw by the faint light of the street lamp shafting in through the hall window that steps led down to some kind of basement.

Cautiously they descended, the last one through clicking the door shut behind him. Pitch blackness, not a glimmer of light. They stopped, realised the futility of blundering about in this tomb-like place where they might knock something over and give their presence away.

An outstretched hand brushed against a lightswitch. The youth hesitated, remembered the rule of 'darkness at all times', then decided to risk it; just enough to get their bearings.

All three blinked in the brightness of a flickering fluorescent tube, gasped at their surroundings; a kind of gymnasium with a shooting range; so neat and orderly, a well-used look about every item of equipment.

They saw the vaulting horse with its polished leather top, the large rush mats, the climbing ropes, the sandpit with its splintered pegs and crushed bullets. And then they saw Sabat!

He was sitting astride a trapeze bar directly above them, some eight feet from the ground, as casually as if they had come upon him relaxing after a strenuous workout. But his expression had them stepping back, his pallid face like some death's head emblem on the black skull and crossbones, the muscles beneath the dark clothing, steel springs coiled ready to unleash him upon them, eyes that burned as fiercely as the Fuhrer's and Lilith's.

'You filthy verminous bastards!' the hiss of a deadly snake about to strike, swinging gently, cradle-like.

Then without warning Sabat was airborne, a flying black angel of death coming at them, a Hawk diving on its unsuspecting prey!

His feet struck two of them crushing blows in the face, mule kicks that splintered bone and tore flesh, hurling them to the floor. And with the agility of a jungle monkey Sabat landed upright in a crouching stance, a fighter moving in on an opponent. The third skinhead showed surprise but not the slightest trace of fear, squashed ugly features creasing into a snarl of hate. The killer barely glanced at his two companions writhing on either side of him with bloody faces for none could withstand the weapon which he was already tugging free of the holster sewn on to the inside of his denim jacket. Not even Sabat!

The skinhead had practised that draw a thousand times, competed with an army of Disciples for split second superiority, and none had bettered him. Now suddenly his movements seemed leaden, stilted, a jerky tug that had the nozzle snagging on the holster. Yet it was swift but that swiftness was overshadowed by the bunched fist which came up at him from somewhere in the region of Sabat's waist and blasted his jawbone with unbelievable force. A crack like that of Sabat's .38, a metallic clang as the blood gun hit the quarry tiles and skidded across the highly polished surface.

The youth had the impression that he was a spinning top whirling crazily, faster . . . faster . . . losing his balance, crashing to the floor in a shower of multi-coloured sparks. Lying there, the room tilting like the deck of a channel ferry that had run into choppy waters, heaving one way then the other. About to throw up at any second . . .

Sabat had perfected two phases of unarmed combat taught by the SAS; the downward scissor kick, and the uppercut springboarded by flexed muscles on landing, a trick employed when it was necessary to attack an enemy from a higher level. It was all over in a matter of three seconds, instant victory which would have satisfied most men, but not Sabat!

He stared down at the three fallen youths, saw everything in them which was despicable to a civilised society; the swastika emblems, steel capped boots, and the cruelty of those features which he had pulped to a bloody morass. And he remembered what their kind had done to Ilona and a score of other girls, the atrocities which their comrades might be committing, even at this very moment. The fury which had simmered inside him for the past few hours was coming to the boil again; that punchbag had been a trial run just to limber up, now he had live targets and oh God, how they were going to pay for what they had intended to do to him!

He moved across to the first two, snatched their 'guns' from their jackets, sent them skating after the first one. The odds were three to one and he didn't give a damn for their chances.

'On your feet, you fucking scum!' The scar on Sabat's face was more vivid than ever. 'I'm giving you the chance to fight for your lives.'

Fear showed on their faces; not just fear of Sabat but sheer terror because they realised they had failed . . . and they knew the price of failure! Possibly otherwise they would have cringed and pleaded, surrendered. But they recalled Lilith and what she did to those who displeased her, and somehow it gave them the strength to come off their knees in a surging rush, a battered bloody threesome still bent on murder.

Sabat was taken momentarily by surprise, not anticipating a concerted retaliation by those whose wounds were terrible to behold. Hands clawed for him, punched, steel capped boots driving viciously. A blow caught him on the shoulder, sent him spinning. He hit the vaulting horse, rolled on to one of the thick mats, and then they were on him, biting, punching, tearing, the blood from their wounds splattering on his face.

There were no rules, you fought any way you knew how and the loser's prize was death, physically torn apart, battered beyond recognition. And amid the animal grunts and snarls of his attackers, Sabat heard Quentin laughing loud and clear, and that was the added impetus he needed to come out of this alive.

Sabat grasped a thigh, slid his Fingers up it, felt the warmth and softness of a crotch. Then he squeezed, hard and long, hung on as the other jerked upright screaming. Something squelched in Sabat's hand like the collapse of a rotten apple and he loosened his hold, knowing that the odds had been shortened to two to one.

The other two jumped him, one from behind, pinioning his arms, the second preparing to deliver a devastating kick to his groin. Sabat tensed, felt the sheer unbelievable strength of the youth holding him; and there was only one way to break that steel grip ... he drove backwards with his head, a short jab, bone against bone; the encircling arms slackened and Sabat was just in time to twist aside, taking that steel tipped boot on his thigh. Painful but not serious, and he was still fighting.

A quick glance behind him. He saw the bloody face, nose and mouth seeming to have been crushed into a crimson mulch. The third attacker was still convulsing on the floor, hands pressed to his damaged testicles.

The one who had kicked him swayed, almost lost his balance, muttered something beneath his breath and dropped back a pace. But he, was far from finished, a wounded enraged bull determined to fight on until the bitter end. He saw the guns in the corner, began to back slowly towards them, Sabat following him step for step.

This time it was Sabat who made the first move, a rapid feint to the left which decoyed his opponent's guard, followed in almost the same movement by a right uppercut identical to the one which he had thrown a few seconds earlier and with even more devastating accuracy.

The other straightened up; it might have been an optical illusion but his feet seemed momentarily clear of the ground. The point of the chin split like an over ripe tomato, skin parting, blood gushing out. And then Sabat hit him again. And again. A rain of short blows, too quick for the eye to follow, powerful jabs. The youth dropped to his knees, head slumping forward, but only for a second; a plimsolled foot took him in the throat, threw him almost on to his feet again. Something cracked loudly, his eyes glazed over, and slowly he slid to the floor.

Sabat was already back with the other two, not giving them a moment's respite. Once the enemy was down you kept him down. He reached out, grabbed the shuddering doubled up figure with hands still embedded in its crotch, swung him up high above his head. Too late the hands came away, tried to break the force of impact as the body hurtled at the wall. A brittle snapping sound like treading on dead twigs, the beginnings of a scream that never made it. He hit the floor, rolled over once and did not move again.

Two down, one to go; now the odds were in Sabat's favour. The memory of Ilona's dead body came back to him as he closed in, saw her wounds again, the rivulets of encrusted blood; she had suffered, hadn't stood a chance, and that was how it was going to be with these three.

The third youth could not stand, his legs appeared to be lifeless things that splayed in all directions. Sabat gripped him by the collar of his denim jacket, held him upright with one hand, the other bunching into a death-dealing ball of bone; a missile about to be launched.

For one second Sabat stared into that face; the features had been erased, the cruelty crushed like pulped cider apples. The eyes were swelling, blackening, but Sabat saw and understood. Drugs, certainly, but more than that, a fixed stare that said it all. Hypnotism!

In the same way that a newspaper that has been read and its contents digested, is cast aside, so it was with the third disciple. A battering ram caught the point of the jaw, Sabat releasing his hold at that instant, the body catapulting backwards; hit the wall and slid to the floor. Not even an agonised groan escaped the split lips.

Sabat filled his lungs, regulated his breathing once again. He looked around him, surveyed the battlefield. The taller of the three, by the way his head lay at an unnatural angle, had a broken neck. The second one undoubtedly had a cracked skull; the third in all probability only suffered from a fractured jaw and

possibly a couple of cracked ribs. It was difficult to tell without a thorough examination and Sabat had no intention of going to that trouble. One was dead, another would undoubtedly die, and the most fortunate of the trio would recover in due course, disfigured for the remainder of his life.

Sabat retrieved the fallen, syringe-guns, remembered again what he had done to his prisoner in Ilona's cellar. For her sake he ought to complete the job he had started but it had its complications. Three corpses were more difficult to dispose of than one. Involving the law would be time-wasting although he still had bodies on his hands. Maybe McKay could sort it all out with a minimum of trouble; he was possibly the one policeman who could.

But not right now. Suddenly Sabat felt very tired, his body aching as he mounted the steps, cast one look back at the three inert bodies on the floor and locked the door behind him. Tomorrow would be soon enough. Right now he needed to sleep, mind and body crying out for rest.

As he mounted the wide staircase he reflected on how Quentin's incessant jibes had died away. A temporary defeat but enough to quieten his brother's black soul for the time being.

Sabat paused on the landing, basking in the silence of a late night London mews. Now that the violence was over everything was so peaceful.

Just the hooting of an owl, but that didn't disturb anybody.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SABAT SLIPPED into a deep slumber the moment his head rested on the pillow. A few jumbled thoughts as he prepared himself for the tranquility of the next few hours - his astral body was suddenly eager to leave him, to venture forth on the first plane. Sometimes he projected it consciously, particularly if there was some place he wished to visit, other times he gave it its freedom. Lately it had remained close to him during those hours of sleep but he sensed its restlessness now. Perhaps he should have sought the protection of the pentagram chalked beneath his bedroom carpet, swept the floor and filled the holy chalices with charged water. No, it would not be necessary because his adversaries on this occasion were physical enough, pseudo-vampires and skinhead fascists. For tonight the violence was over and tomorrow he would ring Clive McKay, fill him in on the details, let him take the case over for truly it had proved not to be Sabat's field. Straightforward thuggery, a hoodlum army controlled by hypnotism and drugs, the name of Lilith as false as that of Adolf Hitler.

With these thoughts in mind Sabat drifted off to sleep and wondered why, just as he crossed the barrier into oblivion, a mental picture of Catriona Lealan appeared to him.

Within seconds Sabat was airborne, floating upwards, ceilings and roofs forming no obstruction to his astral body. He looked back, saw the Mews, the intersecting streets and tiny herbaceous gardens. Deserted except for a small van pulling away from the kerb, but in London there was traffic to be seen at all hours and he did not give it a second glance.

Now it was daylight, the scene shifting to one in which there were neither houses nor cars, just an arid wasteland where sparse cacti struggled to survive. Becoming hotter as the sun climbed towards its zenith.

Sabat alighted and from long experience changed his form to that of a bronzed desert traveller, clad only in a loincloth, the heat blistering his skin. Walking now, his bare toes scuffing the powdery sand, not hurrying when he saw water because he knew that it was only a mirage and would evaporate into a shimmering nothingness when he approached it.

He saw many mirages before he reached the Battlefield; possibly this was one, too, but it was always the same, the landscape strewn with the slain, mangled corpses, some with skins of a light colour such as his own, others of a much darker hue. The forces of good and evil had clashed again in their battle for everlasting supremacy but there was neither victor nor conquered, a pointless struggle that would go on

until the end of time unless some unexpected deciding factor came about, a possibility which was a constant nagging fear.

Sabat stopped, stared at some of the upturned faces of the slain dark warriors; their likeness to his brother Quentin was uncanny, almost a family resemblance. He shivered in spite of the intense heat.

Feeding vultures looked up from their grisly feast of human carnage but did not move away. They feared no one, but in any case were so bloated that their powers of flight were temporarily denied them. Watching him with unblinking eyes; waiting for him to die too.

A movement attracted his attention and he veered to the left, stepping across corpses; here they lay thicker, their wounds a mass of mutilation caused by slashing swords and hacking knives. A tall figure, clad in white robes and a hood to protect his head from the sun's rays, watched Sabat's approach, bearded face and bushy eyebrows, eyes blue and eager. Yet he was old, stooped shoulders and gnarled hands.

'I knew you would come, Sabat,' the stranger's tone was flat with no trace of an accent. Emotionless.

'Quentin heralded my approach.' Sabat glanced again at the features of the dead around him. 'I cannot move in this place without my brother warning of my coming.'

'All dead,' the other answered, 'but tonight they will rise and tomorrow they will fight again, and so it will go on. Eternal strife because the dark powers wish it so.'

Sabat studied the other carefully, but had learned from experience that the gods of this wilderness appeared in any guise they chose and sometimes it was impossible to differentiate between good and evil until it was too late. It was a dangerous and treacherous place this land that stank of evil and putrid death. For some moments there was silence, Sabat sensing his own frailty here where the gods ruled supreme. Then the stranger's eyes hooded, his bearded lips moved showing blackened and broken teeth in an expression of anguish. 'Lilith has gone from here,' he muttered, 'into the world of mortals.'

'Her name is being used,' Sabat replied. 'A false goddess.'

'It is she, none other, possessing the soul and body of a mortal woman, spreading her evil as never before. Here where time does not exist she fled from Adam, and even the angels sent by God could not bring her back. Oft times she visits the mortal world, a demonic succubus seducing men in their dreams, capturing their souls and preying on the blood of the newly born. Sanvi, Sansanvi and Semangelaf, the three angels sent by God, are powerless to thwart her latest evil. That is why I am glad to see you, Sabat, for only a mortal with such powers as yours can combat her.'

'Where can I find her?' Sabat's pulses were racing. 'In the name of God, tell me, whoever you are.'

'Alas I cannot,' the other sighed, 'unless perchance you happen on her and recognise her, for I am forbidden to go amongst mortals. This carnage you see here is as nothing to what will happen in your world if Lilith is not destroyed. For, as you know, she has already begun.'

'*I have witnessed the foul deeds of her disciples.' Sabat was trembling. 'A supposed reincarnation of one who was more evil than my brother Quentin, one who has the blood of countless millions on his hands.'

'It may or may not be him, but certainly Lilith is spreading her wickedness, a plague of blood that will destroy civilisation and then she will rule supreme over your world, a Hades undreamed of. You did not come here of your own free will, Sabat; you were summoned by a higher authority. Prevent such bloodshed on earth which you see around you here, and which will go on for time immemorial* from destroying mortal man. Let your astral body find Lilith before it is too late. Mayhap she is already known to you!'

Sabat stiffened, saw a glint in those clear blue eyes and knew that the old man had given him a clue. Forbidden to intervene in the battle between Good and Evil on mortal soil the other had not betrayed the trust of the gods, yet at the same time had given Sabat subtle guidance. 'Mayhap she is already known to you!'

Then Sabat was turning away, retracing his steps, sensing the other's eyes following his departure from this blood-soaked wasteland. The vultures raised their heads to watch him pass, eyed his bronzed flesh lustfully.

Soon he was airborne again and away from this dreadful land, taking on the shape of a harrier, small birds scattering at his approach. Slowing, drifting on air currents, an astral body searching aimlessly, a hunting hawk, unsure of the nature of its prey.

Sunshine but not burning heat, a pleasant warmth that gave him a feeling of tranquility overshadowed only by the enormity of his seemingly hopeless task. Below him the land was green and fresh, a meandering river where cows sought the shade of an overhanging willow. Again the landscape was deserted, just isolated farms, a labourer's cottage here and there. And a big house set back half a mile from the moorland road in its own extensive grounds, high yew hedges to protect it from the winter winds and blizzards ... or the casual interest of travellers.

Sabat would have glided on but surprised himself at the instinctive checking of his wings, a half turn that brought him back towards the yew boundary of that big house. Again he changed, this time to a diving swallow, for harriers were rare and excited unwanted interest. Flying lower he was able to distinguish the house more clearly; black and white timbers in need of renovation, windows grimy as though to keep out prying eyes. The garden, at least an acre, was an overgrown wilderness, untended for years, only the extensive shrubberies surviving. And beyond still more land, an enclosed ungrazed pasture sloping down to a fir wood by the winding river. Beauty that was spoiled by an unsightly array of shabby caravans and tents, the ground all around a mass of litter. Hidden from view by the contours of the landscape, a massive caravan and campsite that had defied the interference of the planning authorities because they had never discovered its existence.

He returned to the house, settled on an upper window-sill, attempted to see inside. An extensive bedroom with a facsimile four-poster dominating. A woman lay resting on it; long blonde hair groomed to perfection, the features sheer beauty except that the eyes and mouth had a harshness stamped on them, an outward expression of innermost thoughts. Firm breasts half hidden in the cups of a shallow half bra, the stomach below flat and smooth, the wide thighs accentuated by the jet black suspender belt, partly open legs encased in black mesh stockings. She might have been thirty-five or twenty-five. Relaxed, idly flipping the pages of a fashion magazine, scowling as though she hated the contents but had nothing else to do.

For Sabat the shock was greater than if he had suddenly been confronted by a hunting cat on that narrow window-ledge. Body and brain fused into immobility and had his bird form been physical he would surely have toppled into space.

He recognised the girl on the bed, remembered this place now although he had only been here once before and that some three years ago. For this was Langdon Manor, home of Colonel Vince Lealan, late of the SAS, and the woman stretched on the four-poster was none other than the delectable Catriona Lealan, a Madame of expertise with whips and canes, whose hobby was humbling strong handsome men\

Yet Sabat could not delay here any longer. He had no idea how long it was since he had left his physical body for he had traversed a land where time did not exist. It was dangerous to be away too long for

should his enemies strike then he would be totally helpless; too well he remembered that occasion when the evil forces had sought to destroy him by fire at the Dun Cow Inn* while his astral body was absent.

Bewildered, shocked, he took to the wing, changing once more to a hawk for greater speed. But he knew he would be returning to Langdon Manor before long, such was Catriona's hold over his sexual desires.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SABAT WAS aware that he had an erection as his eyelids flickered open; a pleasurable sense of arousal that came with a host of memories from his astral exploration. His hand strayed downwards but he checked it; there were other matters crowding his mind besides the urge to masturbate, troubled waking thoughts.

The Disciple of Lilith herself. That woman who was calling herself Lilith, Goddess of Darkness, was in fact Lilith herself, or at least a woman who was possessed by the succubus. Using drugs and hypnotism she had recruited an army of dropouts, skinheads, the scum of society, and was sending them forth to commit vampire-like killings. The intention was to spread mass hysteria which in turn would lead to anarchy, a fascist rule, and Lilith would then have achieved her aim. Suddenly it was again Sabat's fight, no longer just a police matter to control the threatened nazi takeover. Once more he must pit his wits against the dark forces of evil, his inner struggle with Quentin coming to the boil again. And revenge, oh

God, how he wanted to wreak his vengeance on those who had murdered Ilona!

He relaxed again now that he had it all clear in his mind. Find and destroy Lilith and the cancer would die. Mayhap she is already known to you!

His earlier waking urge came back to him. Catriona Lealan, the woman who had once dominated his body, had become foremost in his wild sexual fantasies once their physical relationship had ended, and was again prominently featuring in his life. He saw her as his astral body had seen her, sensuous, vicious. . . irresistible! And as his fingers slid back down to the lower regions of his body he knew that he had to see her again . . . soon! Even now her influence was working on him, his whole body stiffening and jerking. He seemed to hear her voice, soft and husky yet demanding. 'Come to me, Sabat, and I will give you everything that you desire.'

He showered, dressed hurriedly, and wondered why he had not phoned Catriona before. Even now it took courage and his hands shook slightly as he consulted a telephone directory. 'Lealan. V. Col.' The bastard still used his army title and nobody could do a damned thing about it because everything concerning the SAS was secret. The authorities wouldn't want a scandal so it was preferable to let an ex-colonel remain a colonel; a little bit of snobbery wasn't going to do anybody any harm.

Sabat began to dial, did not overlook the possibility that Vince Lealan himself might answer the call. In which case Sabat would replace the receiver and try again later. One way or another he'd contact Catriona because he'd never rest until he did. When he needed a woman as badly as he did now everything else had to wait, including Lilith and her army of hypnotics. And Catriona was no ordinary woman. He cursed himself that it had all happened now, and that was the fault of his astral body. He'd* had three years in which to try and resume his relationship with her but it was something he'd been content to leave to his fantasies. Now it had to become reality.

The phone was ringing at the other end, a steady 'brr-brr', tantalising. Jesus, she was going to get a surprise.

Then his whole body went rigid as he heard her voice, the same silky, almost sleepy, tones. Bored. Maybe she'd come straight down from that four-poster, still clad only in bra and suspender belt.

'Hi, Catriona,' he hoped his nervousness, his relief that it wasn't Vince on the other end after all, didn't show."

'Sabat!' He could just picture her expression, blue eyes suddenly wide, that old familiar smile, maybe a slight tingling in the places that mattered. 'Why how strange! I had a dream about you last night, that you came and peeped in at me through my bedroom window.'

'Maybe I did.' Sabat felt a tiny shiver run up and down his spine. 'How's things?'

'What things?' He thought he detected a note of uneasiness, a sharpness in her answer.

'The usual things, Vince for a start.'

'Oh, Vince,' a little tinkle of laughter. 'He's still around, of course. As bad tempered as ever. Actually, he's away for a few days, up in London ... on business.'

'I see.' Sabat visualised Catriona bored and alone, a nymphomaniac with sadistic tendencies needing a man who liked to have done to him all the things she liked to do, and afterwards . . . 'So time's hanging heavy for you,' and he added under his breath, 'with nothing to do but lie in late and look at boring fashion magazines.'

'Long time no see.' She paused. Was it a cue?

'My fault,' he murmured. 'Didn't know if I'd still be welcome.'

'But of course you are,' another laugh. 'You always have been. Just because Vince got a bit bad tempered and jealous doesn't mean I don't still have . . . feelings for you. Say, why don't you drive down and spend a few hours with me this evening?'

Her words hammered into Sabat's brain with stupefying force. A wave of relief swept over him, goosepimpled into another sensation which had his erection pulsing again.

'I might just do that,' he tried to keep his voice even.

'I'd like it.'

'OK then. Expect me around eight.'

'And don't worry, Sabat, Vince won't be coming back until Saturday at the earliest.'

Sabat replaced the receiver, wished to God it was eight o'clock. Christ it was going to be a long day; the hours would drag by but he'd never be able to put his mind to anything to make them pass quicker. Catriona did that to a man; he'd have crawled from here to Langdon Manor if she had requested it. Even Quentin couldn't get through to him when he was like this; his body, his brain were obsessed with Catriona, old memories coming back strong, merging with new fantasies. Tonight was going to be one helluva night!

Somehow he passed the time but he had little recollection of anything. The phone rang three times but it went unanswered; a lurking fear that it might have been Catriona Lealan ringing because she'd changed her mind, in which case she was too late because he was going anyway. Or if it was McKay then to hell with him. Sex had always been the generator which drove Sabat and now he was getting into top gear. Even Ilona had never matched up to Catriona. Sabat felt like a man whose three year prison sentence had suddenly terminated; fantasies and masturbation had palled and suddenly the real thing awaited him.

His instinct was to thrash the Daimler mercilessly on the drive down to Surrey but logically that would have achieved nothing. When Catriona said eight o'clock she meant eight o'clock. Temperamental in most things she did, an early arrival might have had disastrous results. So Sabat kept his speed down to Fifty.

No longer was he apprehensive of this return to Langdon Manor. A sex drive that motored faster, more powerfully, than the sleek Daimler made him oblivious to all else; every ambition, obsession, was channelled directly on Catriona Lealan and the rest of the world was forgotten. Even Quentin. Sabat's greatest weakness had escalated these last few hours and now he was his own victim, a slave to his own emotions.

He turned off the heathland road on to an unsurfaced cart track, the car leaving a dust trail in its wake, riding the bumps with all the superiority of a transatlantic liner on a choppy ocean, crunching on gravel as it passed through the gateway amid the tall yew hedge. Sabat's foot came off the accelerator, slowed to a

halt outside the front door of the big house.

In spite of his eagerness Sabat did not get out at once. He sat there looking up at the ivy-covered walls, the high wide latticed windows; remembered them not from his past clandestine visits here, but from that one recent occasion when he had perched on a windowsill, and seen ...

He saw her now, standing framed in the half open front door, a silent nymph watching him intently, a half-smile on her finely cut features, the epitome of elegance, a scant negligee almost apologising for hiding her voluptuous body. She beckoned him with those clear blue eyes, a slight toss of her head that rippled the golden hair like a summer breeze across a ripe cornfield. Come to me, Sabat, for I have been without you too long.

Sabat climbed out of the car, hauled tight on the reins which held his self-respect in check; for otherwise he would have run to her like a schoolboy eager to be seduced by a teacher whom he has had a crush on for years.

'As punctual as ever, Sabat,' she laughed and somewhere in the recesses of the house he heard a grandfather clock chiming. 'It has been a long time. Too long.'

Again Sabat sensed his own inferiority, all the uncertainty of an adolescent's first date when one is not sure whether to offer a handshake or a kiss. But, nymph-like, she had moved away from his reach, closed the door on the golden evening sunlight and now they were alone in the gloom of an empty mansion.

He followed her through to the extensive lounge, eyes riveted on her curvy body that seemed to have increased in beauty over the last three years, sensuous flesh that had melted the willpower of strong men, had them grovelling to do her bidding. For Catriona was mistress of all, and Sabat relished the prospect of becoming once more her obedient servant.

She crossed to the cocktail cabinet, poured him a liberal whisky and added a dash of peppermint cordial; her memory long where Sabat was concerned. He noted that she still drank only fruit juice; Catriona's sexual appetite did not need boosting with alcohol.

'You waited a long time to get in touch,' her eyes were searching him out, making him strangely uncomfortable; she seemed even more dominant than before, something which sent a little tingle up his

spine.

'I didn't know how things stood between us.' Put into words, it seemed a lame excuse.

'Really, you should know me better than that,' mocking admonishment. 'Vince has never stood between me and what I wanted to do. That bit of bother, it was all an SAS internal scandal.'

'But Vince brought it to a head.'

'Sometimes dear old Vince gets a fit of ... possessive-ness' she laughed, 'and then I have to punish him for it. But he isn't in the Service any more, and if he came back right now there's not a thing he could do. If he got stroppy I'd send him straight off to bed like a naughty boy and smack his bottom if he complained.'

Catriona had put down her drink, she seemed to glide across the carpet towards Sabat. So elegant, the way she seated herself beside him on the couch, a whiff of musky perfume making him feel slightly heady. He knew when he was at a disadvantage, that schoolboy again waiting for his senior mistress to make the first move.

'I've missed you, Sabat.' Her tongue flicked at his ear, her soft cheek came into contact with his, made that old scar start to throb again. 'We've a lot to catch upon.'

Her slim fingers took his drink from him, placed it on a nearby coffee table, her hand coming back to rest on his thigh; he knew only too well where it was going from there, willed it to hasten. Her lips were against his, soft and red, brushing tantalisingly at first, then crushing fiercely and her tongue pushing its way into his mouth.

Catriona Lealan was on top of him, her slight weight pushing him back until he was lying full length on the couch; he closed his eyes, surrendering himself, trembling violently, scarcely able to believe that three years of fantasies and memories were materialising into stark erotic reality.

Somehow she undid his clothing and when he opened his eyes that negligee was no longer draped over her body; he saw her exactly as his astral body had done, scant black bra, matching suspender belt and

mesh stockings, and groaned his approval. Yet her expression was no longer soft and smiling, her features hardening as lust took over, her lips going down to him as she hungered for what he had to offer.

For Sabat it was like being caught up in a hurricane, buffeted one way, then another, a tongue that slid over pulsing flesh, scraping, biting. He shuddered, a kind of countdown beginning inside him which would terminate in a mind blowing explosion of every trembling nerve. His vision was blurred, saw a mass of blonde hair that fell over her crouching form, screening her features from him as she continued to devour him voraciously.

That explosion when it came was like a tornado unleashed upon him, limbs flaying, body convulsing as though it sought to shake off the human limpet clinging to it. He scaled the peak of that ecstatic mountain, found himself falling down the other side, floating gently, a sensation similar to that of his astral body gliding in the form of a bird. A soft landing that left him weak and quivering, wishing that he had the strength to go back up there.

It was some time before Catriona raised herself up, smiling again, licking her lips as though her appetite were merely whetted. Then those eyes narrowed, had him feeling uncomfortable again. Totally helpless, her willpower a more dominant force than ever it had been before.

'But the night is only just beginning,' she whispered as she began removing his unbuttoned garments, savouring everything that they revealed. 'Let us go upstairs and sample those delights we enjoyed so long ago.'

God, he'd never felt so weak before, Sabat thought as he mounted the stairs in her wake, each step a conscious physical effort. Catriona, like vintage wine, had matured over the years. The prospect of what lay ahead was almost frightening; he wondered if he had the strength.

The contents of that room reminded him briefly of Ilona's basement, only the equipment was much more extensive, for such things were Catriona's paradise. In this place a man surrendered everything he had, grovelled and pleaded to be her slave. Even Sabat, and mentally he was doing that right now, a naked yielding of mind and body to this woman, willing her to chastise him.

And she had changed still further. Gone was that seductive approach she had used downstairs, replaced by a viciousness, a hunting crop held loosely between her fingers as she pivoted on the balls of her feet to confront him.

'You did not think you could ever forget me, did you Sabat?' she snarled and he felt himself recoiling, one fleeting wish that he had not returned but he dispelled it. For Catriona was once again the living figment of his wild fantasies. Tell me of your thoughts of me since we last met and what you did during the thinking of them!

Humbly, unashamedly, he related in detail what she asked, his arousal returning as he did so. His breathing was heavy, invigorated yet weak, a side of him that only two women had ever seen - Ilona and Catriona.

'On your knees and beg for forgiveness for your absence from here!' She struck him hard across the face with her crop, a blow that jerked his head back, brought instant pain but no resentment; only humility. And Sabat fell to his knees, head bowed, mumbling his apologies and begging for the forgiveness she demanded. Secretly knowing it was all part of a vicious game and playing along.

His senses swam, his body responding in a way appreciated only by those who thrill to erotic chastisement. Hit me again, Catriona, hit me hard! She seemed to read his thoughts, a rain of stinging blows that had him falling prostrate, begging for more. A pause, she was moving away. The temptation was to open his eyes but he willed himself to keep them closed as though she had already blindfolded him. For to be surprised was to be delighted in this place.

A clink of metal; he trembled, did not resist as she pulled his hands behind his back, felt the cold steel of handcuffs on his wrists. Then his ankles. A leather boot drove into his ribs and he cried out loud, rolled, was kicked again.

Lying on his back, shackled hand and foot, he opened his eyes, gasped aloud at what he saw. Catriona Lealan was naked except for a pair of thigh length black leather boots; an enraged tigress, mouthing curses, eyes flashing a terrible hate. He couldn't hold her gaze, the first time it had ever happened. But it was only a game, a sadistic one, but he had to pretend it wasn't.

'You bastard, Sabat!' her words cut as viciously as her riding crop had done. 'You bastard, I'm going to hurt you like you've never been hurt before!'

Sabat's arousal was at full stretch, so many things he wanted all at the same time. But nothing happened. Catriona stood there regarding him balefully, her shapely body now quivering visibly . . . with undisguised fury \

'You did not come here of your own volition,' when she spoke her voice was little louder than a whisper. 'Oh no, Sabat, it was no lustful whim of yours that brought you here, /summoned you!'

He stared at her, her words like a rapier thrust into his brain, the sweat glistening on his naked body suddenly chilling, a stark realisation of how cold it was in here. Of all the discomforts Catriona administered to her lovers she almost invariably ensured that this room was warm. Something was wrong, he couldn't quite place it. But when Sabat looked into her eyes again he knew what it was - the expression of hate was not just another phase of her acting; it was real!

'You fool, Sabat,' a laugh that resembled a hag's cackle, 'oh you poor over sexed fool, for all your powers how blind you are! You succumbed to my powers, your astral body lured here to view me, to rekindle that insatiable lust of yours. A bird came and saw, returned to tell its master, and hey presto, you are here in person, manacled and helpless, a victim of your own bondage obsession.'

Sabat strained at the handcuffs, the leg manacles, but the steel chains were immovable. He thought maybe he was dreaming again, tried every avenue of escape but in the end had to face up to the reality of his position. And that was when he ceased to cringe, his face became impassive and his tone was like a whiplash. 'Suppose you tell me, Catriona.'

'But, of course.' She stood with arms akimbo, legs slightly apart and just within her prisoner's range of vision; wanting him to view that part of her body which was suddenly not to be his. 'We should have met again sooner or later, a destiny that was to be fulfilled from the moment you started interfering in the affairs of ... shall we call them for the moment the Liberation Front. Vince, as you know, has a grudge against the Service which brought him dishonour and has always favoured a fascist regime for Britain. And there was an army waiting to be recruited, decadent youth rotting in the ranks of the unemployed, violent dispositions that were being stifled and needed only to be trained. Hundreds, thousands of them; we have only just begun! A new wave of terror, one that will keep people indoors at night, and anarchy will grow day by day until nothing can prevent it. All these young nazis needed was a leader, one with the cunning of a wolf, to bring some kind of order to their ranks, and who better suited to that task than Colonel Vince Lealan who had learned his trade in the toughest service in the world. But even Vince needed a leader, someone to rationalise his hatred towards Britain, to utilise it productively . . . someone with powers beyond mortal knowledge, Sabat!'

Sabat caught his breath, detected some unnerving element of truth in her words.

'And that person was me!' she went on. 'For Catriona Lealan has realised for some time now that she had extraordinary powers and one night in a vision all was revealed to me. Yes, Sabat, I am none other

than Lilith, the succubus, Goddess of Darkness, walking this earth in human form with a mission to fulfil - to overthrow the world so that the forces of darkness may rule supreme over Man!"

Sabat felt the cold now, the sudden drop in temperature, and knew without doubt that she spoke the truth. Catriona was possessed, in the same way that he was possessed by the soul of Quentin Sabat. The full implications of his own helpless position were only too clear; Sabat had stood in the way of the Disciples of Lilith, her army of pseudo-vampires, the one man who might discover the real truth behind the gory fabrication Catriona had created. Now he was her prisoner, she could destroy him at her leisure and the forces of law and order would be powerless to combat her threat to society.

'I could kill you,' she spoke slowly, savouring the words, searching his eyes for a flicker of terror but finding none. 'I could enjoy doing things to you that I've fantasised about, Sabat. Perhaps eventually all that will come to pass, but in the meantime I need you. Oh yes, I can use you, Sabat, as surely as a tiny unarmed nation can use a nuclear weapon if it finds itself suddenly in possession of one. Vince has his failings, a blind obsession, a belief that he is a reincarnation of Adolf Hitler, a seed which / implanted in his brain and which has germinated and blossomed. Useful, but only up to a point. Now I need somebody who can lead these eager young revolutionaries into battle, one who has the trust and confidence of the enemy. Shall we say I need, to coin a much used modern phrase, a 'mole' in the opposition camp!'

'No chance,' Sabat laughed, returned her hate with an expression of contempt. 'You can do what you like to me but I'll never work for you, Catriona. Neither you nor Lilith!'

'So naive for one who possesses such outstanding qualities as well as supernatural powers,' her eyes narrowed, the pupils seeming to dilate and becoming stationary, a blaze of sheer power that had the man on the floor unable to break her gaze. 'For you will work for me, Sabat. Your powers will become mine. You came here tonight to become my slave and your wish shall be granted. Indeed it shall!'

Sabat had a retort on his lips but it seemed to die, words melting into nothingness; almost an apology for having thought them. His simmering hate for the woman calling herself Lilith cooled, his eyes mirroring a new sensation, one that he scarcely recognised - devotion! Just watching those eyes, bright blue orbs that now grew large like an owl's, held him transfixed, projected a force that he could not resist.

He had the sensation of slipping into a deep sleep yet his eyes remained wide open; he saw Catriona, the smile coming back to her lips, tried to nod his head in a gesture of obedience. No longer did he want to fight her, only to fight for her, to do her bidding; a mercenary changing his allegiance.

And when at last he was able to speak it was as though his voice was that of Quentin Sabat's, the tones rich and suave. 'Yes, Lilith, I will do your bidding. Speak and I shall obey.'

'Good.' She reached behind her, produced some keys and stooping unlocked handcuffs and manacles so that Sabat's limbs sagged free once more. 'There, I don't think we shall need these any more. And as a reward for your cooperation, Sabat, tonight you shall lie in my bed.'

And as Sabat was meekly led from the room it seemed to him that it had always been this way.

CHAPTER NINE

Rows OF uniformed police lined the streets on both sides attempting to keep the crowds back. Chanting, pushing, the mobs on the pavements demonstrating open contempt for law and order, their fury and hatred mounting.

Just a small fascist demonstration; the police had played it down as far as the general public were concerned. They had to, otherwise it could escalate into mass hysteria and hatred on an unprecedented scale. In a way it was like D-Day; keep the peace and a battle was won.

Trouble had been brewing since mid morning. Groups of skinheads had been drifting into the ultra modern shopping centre long before the shops opened. The skeletal police patrol watched them apprehensively, more so when bunches of young Asians began congregating at strategic points. Noisy, but no real trouble as yet. The biggest problem was differentiating between nazis and anti-nazis, for there were few swastikas on show at the moment and when the fracas erupted it could be just a mass battle, black versus white. But everybody hoped it wouldn't come to that. There had been demonstrations in the past that had just fizzled out like a damp firework.

Marie Ingleton wasn't taking any chances with ten month old Emily; not after what she had read in last night's paper about that girl who had her baby snatched and then ended up herself as a victim of these 'vampires'. So her husband, Bob, had been dragged along on this Saturday morning shopping expedition. He had offered a number of reasons (excuses) why they should not shop today; three of the big London soccer clubs were playing at home and there was always friction over end of season games that affected promotion and relegation. The hooligans would be on the rampage hours before kick-off time and with the police being foolish enough to allow these demonstrations to go ahead there could be all kinds of trouble. Demonstrations, he repeatedly said, were for Sundays and should be confined to places where the public would not even notice they were going on; and in addition to that the organisers should be made to pay for the police who had to be called out, all of which would result in demonstrations becoming a thing of the past. Sure, this was a democratic country but matters alien to democracy should be made illegal. And, of course, it was the fault of these nazis and anti-nazis and their followers that he was having to escort Marie on something which could equally as well have been achieved at their local shops; the few pence saved here were outweighed by the cost of the petrol used to reach the big shopping centre. Lastly, but most important of all, Bob Ingleton was forfeiting his Saturday morning lie-in.

An expression of boredom on his freckled face, Bob leaned up against the wall in the porch of the big superstore, one hand in the pocket of his corduroy trousers, the other resting lightly on the handle of Emily's pram. She was the lucky one, sleeping through all this hubbub, totally innocent, the foul language of some nearby skinheads meaningless to her even if she had heard them.

All the same it was a bloody waste of time. Two hours of continual pram-minding and at the end of it all Marie would say wouldn't it be a good idea to have lunch in town. That meant a crowded self-service cafeteria somewhere, queuing with aching legs for commercially hashed up grills that would be cold and unpalatable by the time he got back to the table with them. Then Marie would announce that Emily either wanted changing or feeding and that meant a move somewhere else and another long wait. You never knew what you were letting yourself in for when you agreed to accompany the wife shopping. Well, he hoped Chelsea lost today and missed out on promotion; that would quieten these rampaging idiots. And when he got home, he scowled, he'd damned well write a letter to his MP pointing out that not only did these lunatic nazis waste the ratepayers' money but it all served to inconvenience law-abiding citizens like himself. Furthermore . . .

Bob Ingleton's train of thought came to an abrupt halt, his one hand coming out of his pocket, the other

on Emily's pram tightening its grip. That group of skins which had been back and forth along the precinct arcade for the past quarter of an hour had suddenly all congregated in this porch. A dozen, maybe fifteen of them, jostling into a menacing half circle. One of them, a tall youth but no more than sixteen at the most, stepped forward and stared into the pram.

'Just look at this, you guys,' there was a leer on his pockmarked features, 'this bugger 'ere's a daddy, 'ad a bit o'dick and got 'isself a babby into the bargain. Or else a real man's bin fuckin' 'is missus for 'im.'

Guffaws greeted this crude humour, the others moving in closer, cutting off Bob's retreat either back into the store or out into the public thoroughfare. He glanced at them, wanted to let his anger, his hate for this scum of society erupt into a physical encounter in spite of the odds against himself. But he had to shelve his pride, his self respect, because of Emily. So he just attempted to smile weakly, and hated himself for it.

'Show us the baby, mister. Lift 'er out o' the pram and let's'ave a look at 'er.'

Cold prickles ran up and down Bob Ingleton's back. He tried to see beyond the youths, looking for the welcoming sight of a patrolling policeman, but they were hemming him in and he could not see beyond them. And somewhere not far away a fight had started, shouting and yelling; someone was screaming.

'The baby's asleep/ his voice trembled and he did not even know if they heard him above the noise. 'I don't want to ... wake her up.'

'Then we'll fuckin' wake 'erup!'

Aghast, Bob saw the pram begin to move and tip upwards as three or four of the hooligans grabbed the huge rear wheels and lifted them clear of the ground. Baby and blankets were sliding, an infantile scream of terror and that was the moment when Bob lunged forward to catch Emily, an instinctive paternal move of protection for his offspring that never made it.

An agonising pain in his lower abdomen had Bob Ingleton doubling up and clutching desperately at the hand which twisted the knife blade deep into his intestines. In one terrifying second he saw blood spurting from him, splashing on to the concrete and also from Emily; he struck the ground head first with a sickening thud. Helpless, still struggling, trying to get to his baby, heedless of his own safety as steel-capped booted feet drove in viciously at him. He felt his face smash, the crunching of bone, his

mouth full of broken teeth, choking as he swallowed some of them. Everything before him was a black and red haze, wildly fighting against the pain that threatened to drag him into oblivion, crushed and useless fingers attempting to secure a grip on Emily's shawl, its detergent whiteness spotting with a bizarre crimson pattern.

Bob Ingleton felt his skull crack before he passed out, almost saw the skin split and the bone open up a wide crevice so that something that looked like grey frogspawn oozed out. Lying there, blind and helpless, trying to curse those who still kicked and hacked at his body, knowing in his heart that his baby daughter was dead and for that reason he didn't care whether he lived or died.

But by the time the three constables fought their way to him, struggling to hold back an hysterical Marie who was cradling her dead baby to her bosom and screaming at everybody that it still had to be alive, Bob Ingleton was beyond assistance. One of the officers had radioed for an ambulance but already it was too late.

P.C. Glyn Stewart had already given a week's notice to quit the police force. At twenty-one, and already having passed some of his examinations with considerable ease, his parents were aghast at his foolhardiness; with his future assured he had, they moaned, thrown up everything. But, as Glyn retorted, it was preferable to be alive in the dole queue than booking an early passage to whatever lay beyond the grave. And his one regret was that he had not filed his notice a week earlier and thereby avoided this, his last day of terror in uniform. It hadn't been like this when he was a recruit.

Somehow he had hidden his fear. He glanced at his watch, saw that it was barely 11 a.m. The outburst of violence in the shopping precinct had died down, just a few skinheads still shouting insults at the police as a few of their comrades were loaded into the waiting black maria on the car park at the rear. Glyn Stewart was wishing that he had been assigned to accompany the van back to the station. At least that way he would have had a brief respite, given his nerves a chance to settle after that stabbing.

Jesus, to think that any human being could do that to another. But these fascist bastards weren't human, they were worse than wild animals; you only had to look at their faces to see that! Blank expressions that failed to hide their malevolence, like dead kids that had somehow been made to walk again, given the strength to wreak a brutal vengeance on the living.

He felt queasy just thinking about that business in the entrance to the big store. The skins had virtually gutted that guy, his innards spilling out of the open wound, his skull cracked open as he fought to save his baby. Horrific senselessness - the bastards had run off with the child which was surely dead, or at the very least badly injured, others closing in to thwart a rescue attempt after the kid had been snatched from its mother with the same desperation as though they'd nicked half-a-million from the bank. There had been another baby-snatching the day before, only a mile or two from here, but there couldn't be any

connection; the police were looking for a man and a woman driving a red Cortina in that instance.

Glyn Stewart was white and shaken. That girl had gone off her rocker; she'd probably spend the rest of her life in a mental hospital. And what woman wouldn't after her husband had been disembowelled, kicked to a bloody pulp and her kid stolen by skinhead nazis.

Stewart had to meet the sergeant in an hour. Then they'd both go down to the demonstration, join the thin blue line which would attempt to keep the warring factions apart and hope that the coloured population didn't decide to show up in numbers as well. You couldn't blame them if they did after the provocation of the past few hours but the Chief had appealed to them in a radio broadcast to stay away. Democracy was going haywire because nobody could legally cut out the cancer. The death-penalty and floggings were the only sure remedy, Glyn decided. Roll on tomorrow; he'd sleep Sunday away and hope that eventually he'd be able to put this day right out of his mind.

At 12.15 he was standing on the kerbside, arms linked with officers on either side of him, trying to hold back a pushing shoving mob. These aggressors didn't look any different from the hundreds of 'skins' who had, according to the police radio, started their march a mile or so back. One faction was as bad as the other, and in the end ail they wanted was violence and killing. Racist bastards who tried to put the blame on somebody else, a society they wanted to take over and corrupt. Stewart sweated under the strain. Christ, why the hell didn't the police do like the continentals and get stuck in with their batons? No self-respecting copper was going to take abuse and violence forever without turning like the proverbial worm. But once that happened anarchy had already begun. Even the angry, frightened PC Stewart accepted that. All he wanted was to be well away from here.

'Pigs! Nazi bastards!'

The shouting rose to a crescendo, all heads turned in the direction from which the marches were expected. Now, if you were tall enough to see over the tops of the police helmets and cropped heads, you could see the approaching column, hand painted banners carried aloft with their swastikas bearing the date Nov 9. Ten deep and still coming, a wriggling snake that stretched several streets in length, seething with hate and violence. For all its propaganda the Liberation Front was putting on a deliberate show of war, whilst at its head strode one whom at a distance might have been mistaken for the long-dead Adolf Hitler. Colonel Vince Lealan was making his first bow in public! However, there was one similarity between the dead Fuhrer and the live one - those high stepping booted feet, the grim expression, eyes that blazed something far more insidious than a mere hatred for those lining the streets - fanaticism \

The motley crowd of skinheads behind Lealan had long given up trying to keep in step, an untidy rabble of banner-waving, chanting hooligans, moving with the jerkiness of automatons, eyes seeing but not

comprehending . . . a hypnotised army on the march!

Glyn Stewart saw them, caught his breath. He recognised the type, knew them for what they were, had battled with them on many of London's football grounds when he was unlucky enough to be assigned to Saturday afternoon crowd control. That was bad enough, but now it was a hundred times worse, soccer thugs enlisted into an organised fighting force. His heartbeat speeded up, he felt his breathing go shallow. Something was going to happen, a nasty premonition crawled into his frightened brain.

Those on the pavements behind the police seemed to have relaxed their efforts to break through the blue cordon, even the shouting had died down. A lull that deceived the peace-keeping force, had them relaxing for a few seconds. And in those few moments it all happened!

The uniformed living caricature of Hitler was no more than twenty yards from the young policeman. Glyn Stewart saw those high-stepping legs slow down, lose their momentum, come to a halt. Behind, the skinheads milled, bunched, looking towards the watchers. A forest of upraised arms, a cry that was like the noise of cannon-fire, hanging in the air, being taken up by those behind the police lines.

'Seig Heil! Seig Heil!'

Bewildered, the massed police were caught off guard. They had anticipated a concerted rush by the 'antis' at some time during the demonstration but not a sudden converging of a united enemy. In front and behind them the police saw hundreds of skinheads coming at them, wielding an assortment of weapons, the blue army caught between two fires!

'Seig Heil Police pigs. Kill the pigs!'

Stewart wanted to run, to scream, to do everything that a policeman in uniform should not do; he saw the seething hatred of an organisation that had simmered too long in the shadows of a civilised society, the vermin of a metropolis united. He didn't run, neither did he scream, just stood petrified, his truncheon forgotten. He'd left it too late, one bloody day too late, the difference between life and death.

The police were outnumbered by ten to one, given no chance to close their ranks. Officers went down, helmets bouncing across the road, rolling themselves into blue balls that were battered and kicked, a ruthless assault that was more than a token of protest, Banners were lowered, the poles crude jousting weapons, the points sharpened into spear heads. Knives, chains, the attacking mob indiscriminate in their

assaults so that even skinheads were falling with terrible wounds on their bodies.

But the police were making a fight of it, truncheons answering viciousness with viciousness, no quarter given nor asked. Stewart rolled on the ground, a small but stocky attacker pinning him down, punching and biting. That was when the young PC's blind terror began, the atrocities that were being committed on the fallen; knives that stabbed and hacked, blood spurting up like a burst street main as a policeman's artery was severed. And Glyn made up his mind that he wasn't going to end it all here, he hated these yobbos for not having waited until tomorrow. He got his truncheon clear of its pocket, powered it upwards between his assailant's legs. The other jerked, screamed, came off his intended victim and rolled over doubled up with pain.

Somehow Stewart got to his knees, then to his feet. Oh Jesus God, the bastards were going to pay for this! Blind rage welled up in him, rage such as he had never known before, did not even guess existed within him; he struck savagely at an unprotected cropped head and even in the midst of the din of battle heard the skull split open, the youth dead before he sprawled across the body of a man wearing sergeant's stripes. A life for a life.

Glyn didn't care now, knew he'd never get out of here alive, but he had to take a few of them with him. Bodies everywhere, some still, some moving. Sirens of approaching patrol cars but they'd never cope, nothing except guns would stop this new tide of spreading fascism. Anarchy had arrived, and only the army could stop it now.

A few yards away from him Stewart saw the uniformed leader of this skinhead army, ringed by what seemed to be a private bodyguard, seven or eight youths with stoic expressions and armed with an assortment of weapons to protect their Fuhrer. Hypnotic devotion.

But the odds did not matter any more to Glyn Stewart. Suddenly his whole hatred was directed on to that one figure, recognising the fanatical being that was responsible for all this; just as forty years ago a mere painter had succeeded in inciting a nation, had them doing his bidding, an evil that had spread worldwide, its cost added up in millions of lives. It was happening again. A London suburb to begin with . . . soon the city itself, the provinces, evil borne on the wind to all the points of the compass, from country to country, continent to continent.

Glyn Stewart made his rush, head down, his helmet gone, one puny truncheon against an armament of pickhandles and chains. He wanted to kill, to annihilate the cancer that was responsible for all this street carnage even at the expense of his own life.

And in those few moments a hero died unnoticed, not a single eye-witness to earn him a posthumous award for bravery beyond the call of duty. A whirling chain caught him across the face, tearing skin and chipping bone, dragging out both eyes with its flicking tail almost as an afterthought. Stewart jerked, dislocated his spine, a bizarre tottering sightless figure that was easy prey for the pick-handles. Battered and broken before he hit the ground, Glyn Stewart rolled over and lay still, staring up at the spring sky with sightless empty sockets where once his eyes had been, a bloodied cavity of a mouth frozen into one last crimson curse.

Had the two sides been separated then the police would have been able to organise a hasty retreat. As it was, there was nowhere to retreat to, each skirmish its own battle, organisation non-existent. Relief forces were trying to get through, finding themselves having to join the fury; more skirmishes in a battle that could have only one outcome.

Nobody, not even the surviving policemen, had any recollection of a signal which had the young nazis retreating, slipping away into side streets, blending perfectly into a background of other skinheads who might or might not have been involved. For the hooting of an owl, in broad daylight when men are groaning and screaming, is likely to go unnoticed.

Just the dead and the injured remained, a battered army in defeat picking up the pieces. There would be lengthy reports, hours of paperwork. Maybe some arrests. But it was tomorrow and the days ahead that the police feared. Especially the nights.

A few streets away from the battle scene a red Cortina 2000 was parked at the kerbside, its engine running. The man behind the wheel, awaiting each instruction from the slim blonde-haired woman at his side, stared impassively ahead of him. Dark clothing that was creased, jet-black hair that was ruffled, untidy. A stamp of neglect about him, a man who had abandoned all personal pride and ambition in stark contrast to his immaculate companion.

'Give me a cigarette, Sabat.' Her tone was sharp, almost reprimanding him for not having anticipated her need for tobacco.

His hand reached across to the glove box, located a packet of kingsize; yet Sabat's movements still reflected that perfect co-ordination of mind and body as he shook out a cigarette, conveyed it to his lips at the same time that his other hand was igniting the automatic lighter on the fascia. Within seconds he had it drawing evenly and passed it to her.

'The Disciples of Lilith have struck a major blow today,' there was an exultant note in Catriona Lealan's

voice. 'By tomorrow the Liberation Front will reveal its true identity for the fear has already begun. We shall fight in the shadows, every night filled with terror for those who skulk behind locked doors, for truly none will dare to venture forth. The army has dispersed, each and every one of its soldiers obsessed with my ideals. Just as you and I will disperse, Sabat. You back to your home, your instructions clear, which you will obey implicitly and await my further orders. Liiith has sown her seeds and now we must wait for them to germinate.' She looked in the mirror, smiled to herself at the reflection of the approaching Colonel Vince Lealan, his eagerness reflected in the quickness of his step, a bland expression on his features. 'Here comes Vince now. You will drive us to the airport and then return to where your own car is parked, abandoning this one.'

Sabat gave no indication other than a faint nod that he had heard, but Catriona knew that he would obey for he could not do otherwise. The moment the Colonel had thrown himself breathlessly on the back seat and begun to peel off his uniform Sabat had let in the clutch and pulled away, following a maze of deserted side streets that would skirt the scene of today's bloody battle.

'My God, you should have seen it!' Lealan had somehow struggled into a light blue suit, habitually brushing flecks of dust from the jacket with his fingers. 'That was how it all began in the thirties. I can almost remember it, the people rallying to the call, hearing and obeying

But Sabat heard only one sound, the soft chuckle that was undoubtedly Quentin's weakening that tiny spark of helpless resistance that still burned inside him. For now truly Sabat was Quentin reborn to a new life after the unholy mating with Lilith, Goddess of Darkness; a uniting of terrible evils that were even now spawning the holocaust which would destroy not just Britain but the whole of the civilised world. And Sabat was now a part of that awful alliance, powerless to fight back; not even his own death would release him from the role of treachery which was now his!

CHAPTER TEN

SABAT WAS back in his own home by early evening. Outwardly nothing had changed. He parked the Daimler in the garage, let himself into the house, stood in the hall trying to collect his thoughts. A mixture of familiarity and strangeness, a feeling that he ought not to be here, that he was an intruder in his own domain; remembering events as though he had been a mere spectator to them, that they had happened to somebody else. And Quentin no longer troubled him because he was Quentin.

Sabat unlocked the door of the gymnasium, went down the steps and switched the lights on. Emotionlessly he surveyed the scene, the three huddled denim-clad bodies. All dead. After dark he would dispose of them; three more dead skinheads were not going to arouse a lot of police interest.

Back upstairs he opened the cocktail cabinet, not so much as glancing at the whisky or the bottle of peppermint cordial. He poured himself a generous measure of gin, a drink which previously he had always found distasteful, a fiery acid in his throat. Now he tossed it back with relish, refilled his glass. Quentin had always preferred gin, he had been an alcoholic at one stage of his black career.

Suddenly Sabat was aware of his own tiredness, a drowsiness which had been creeping up on him ever since he had deposited the Lealans at Heathrow. Now that he was alone he experienced an overwhelming desire to sleep; he began to drag himself wearily up the stairs still clutching the tumbler of gin in his hand.

He pushed open the bedroom door and recoiled, the glass falling from his hand and bouncing on the carpet, a bestial snarl of fear coming from his lips. His skin prickled with a sensation akin to pins and needles, droplets of sweat oozing on to his forehead. Crouching there, he stared into the room, and knew instantly why he could not enter. Because of the pentagram chalked on the floorboards beneath the carpet, a five-pointed star designed to repel all evil entities. And now Sabat was one of those same dark forces which he had fought in the past!

He cursed, but knew that there was no way he could go inside there. Backing away to the stairs, his terror subsiding with each yard he retreated, shaking a fist in futile frustration.

Back downstairs he stretched himself out on the couch in the lounge, closed his eyes, prepared to submit to the weariness which engulfed him; exhausted, yet he was unable to relax. Tension, an unevenness in the way he breathed, his muscles taut, and as he slid into an uneasy slumber he knew only too well what was happening to him. His astral body was disturbed, restless, eager to wander far a field again. Normally he would not have worried, only this time it was Quentin's astral body which would be projected into unknown spheres, a spirit of evil over which Sabat had no control. And there was no way he could prevent it from leaving him!

It left him in an almost desperate rush, a sudden dash for freedom, soaring high into the darkening sky, a child's kite that had broken free of its mooring and now had a will of its own. Sabat glanced down, saw the brightly lit city streets, cinema and theatre goers bent on enjoying themselves, heedless of the awful street battle which had taken place only a few miles away. U did not concern them.

Going on up until he could no longer make out what lay below, hurtling through a black night sky as though some unknown force was summoning him to an appointed place. Then the darkness gave way to light, sunlight that scorched and burned and Sabat knew only too well the landscape upon which he alighted . . . that same arid wasteland where there was everlasting carnage, where men died horribly and the vultures fed hungrily. The war where the Powers of Light battled against the Powers of Darkness, where the Left Hand Path terminated because until Evil conquered it could not cross this blood-soaked desert. Only this time for Sabat it was different; he was a skulking dark-skinned warrior and very much afraid!

The heat was worse than he had ever known it, seeming to shrivel his dusky skin, sapping his strength. For surely this was hell, a land burned up by the sun's fire with the smell of death heavy in the air. Soon he would come upon the battlefield, himself an outcast in this place should any still live.

He had not expected to come upon the girl. She lay there naked in the shallow hollow and at first he thought she was dead. There was something familiar about her, the fair skin, matted with dried blood so that it was difficult to make out the extent of her wounds, the straggling auburn hair; and even as he stood looking down upon her she began to move, dragging herself up on to her side, staring up at him her face racked with agony. He started, recoiled; her lips moved, and somehow she got the words out. 'Help me, Sabat!'

For a split second her own pain flooded over Sabat, a knife turning in his stomach, the bile rising into his throat. But with a harsh mocking laugh he dispelled both pity and guilt. 'Ilona, so you also have found your way here. But how is it that a whore is of the fair-skinned race in this land?'

Her hand went to her mouth in shock and horror, a pet dog going to its master for affection and suddenly finding itself unmercifully kicked. Tears in Ilona's eyes; Sabat could also see the deep circular

wounds on her arms and legs, the huge jugular puncture. And the fear; fear of himself!

'Whore bitch!' He found enough saliva in his mouth to spit on the sand. 'A traitor to those who shall rule on earth as well as in hell. May you writhe with the agony of your tortures in eternity.'

Ilona fell back, buried her face in the sand again, the sobs shaking her whole body. And Sabat laughed, a croaking sound in the still desert air, and wished that his body was physical so that he could have taken her as she deserved to be taken and afterwards beaten her until she begged for forgiveness and mercy.

'So shall suffer all who betray Lilith, Goddess of Darkness,' he called over his shoulder as he left her. He wished that he could have hated himself for what he had done, but Quentin was too strong within him.

It was the battlefield he dreaded most, the stench of decomposing corpses in the heat, the bloated waddling vultures. Mentally he tried to count the slain but there were too many, and this time there seemed to be more light-skinned than dark amongst the dead. Perhaps the tide was turning, the day of reckoning close at hand, victory not far off.

Sabat wandered around aimlessly, not knowing what he was searching for, summoned here by powers far greater than his own. Heat and thirst, hunger and weakness, he experienced every mortal discomfort and when the five pale-skinned warriors came at him from out of a clump of stunted cacti he offered only a token defence.

They handled him roughly, ripped away his loincloth and exposed his full nakedness, their faces cruel as they surveyed his fine physique.

'Sabat the mercenary, Sabat the traitor,' a tall fair-haired man who reminded Sabat of an ancient Greek spat in the prisoner's face. 'Only a short time ago you came here seeking Lilith so that you might destroy her but instead you have become one of her followers!'

Sabat returned the stare impassively. Just one twang of guilt that had him wanting to try and explain but it was gone as swiftly as it had come. Tight-lipped and silent he was not going to weaken.

'But we can kill you, Sabat.' The handsome face was thrust forward, an expression of fury that had to be

alien to such noble features. 'For we shall imprison your astral body in this place so that it cannot return to your physical form and in that way Sabat will die, will be destroyed forever as though he had never been.'

There was no way Sabat could stop them. Seized by wrists and ankles he was laid spread-eagled on the hot sand, bound securely to four stakes which appeared to have been driven into the ground in anticipation of his arrival. He closed his eyes to shut out the glare of the sun and when he opened them again he was alone. Except, that is, for the dead and the vultures.

The big birds approached, flocked into a circle, watching him with unblinking eyes, vomit dripping from their beaks; they were gorged but they would continue to eat. One braver than the rest waddled forward as though to bite the living flesh of its latest victim but a hoarse croak from Sabat sent it scurrying back to the others, feathers ruffled.

Sabat realised his peril only too well. He was impervious to pain and the vultures could do him no harm. Yet if he did not return to his physical body on the couch in his lounge on waking that body would die. Following death there is always a 'blank' space of time before the astral body is freed from the corpse and if Sabat's astral form was still staked out on these burning sands then it would remain here, committed to hell by those who sought revenge on him.

The sun's heat cooled as it began to sink beyond Sabat's range of vision, slipping slowly from the western sky. So quickly, as though it was hastening to burn up another land elsewhere. Dusk, and then darkness.

. In complete contrast to the daytime temperature this arid land became bitterly cold, the stars overhead twinkling brightly in their thousands, seeming to mock Sabat. You'll never leave here. Day after day you'll roast and by night you'll freeze. And here there is no death because everybody is dead!

Somewhere an animal howled. It could have been some sort of wolf. But Sabat had no fear of wolves, only of himself. And if he was still here when the sun rose again then he would remain eternally on this astral plane.

His terror mounted. Instinctively he strained at his bonds, but he knew they would not burst. The irony of his predicament brought a faint smile to his blistered lips; so much of his life had revolved around the pleasures of bondage and now it was apparently destined to be his fate. If only he could have mustered an arousement maybe things would not have seemed so odd. But there was no way that was going to happen to an astral body. Sexual pleasures were only to be found in the mind; the body was frustratingly

denied the means to satisfy that urge.

Sounds and smells invariably tantalised the astral body, and Sabat had long ago learned to ignore them. That howling animal was no more physical than himself; nor the owl which hooted persistently not far off. A scuffling noise like bare feet ploughing a path through the drifted sand . . . Only when he saw the woman did Sabat believe that it was not a trick of the ears or the mind!

He could only see her in silhouette, her face hidden in shadow. She was tall and stark naked, her skin shining white and silvery in the ethereal starlight. Legs slightly apart she stood looking down at him and he experienced a sense of uneasiness for she did not speak. Seldom was Sabat in awe of anybody, but for once he felt humbled. Had they sent her to mock him, a nymph to watch over him until the time came when his body on earth died? To tantalise him with erotic thoughts?

Then she was stooping down, something glinting in her hand. He almost laughed aloud, shouted 'you can't kill me and you know it' but just when it seemed that she was about to plunge the blade of her knife into his heart it altered course. He heard it sawing on the ropes which bound his wrists, a faint vibration, and then the tension was gone; his hands were free and for once there would be no agonising pain when his circulation returned. Deftly she cut through his ankle bonds. He was free but what was the price of freedom?

'You see, Sabat,' her tones were silvery, girlish although she was no adolescent, 'serve the Left Hand Path well and we will protect you. The followers of the Right are your enemies and will destroy you if they can. There is not much time left - return to your earthly body now before it is too late!'

Sabat sat up, tried to make out his rescuer's features but she had stepped back into the shadows.

'To whom am I indebted?' he asked.

'The one whom you serve,' she gave a laugh, turned, and was gone into the darkness.

Sabat shivered and his fear surged back. And he knew without any doubt that the woman who had walked out of the desert and returned there when she had freed him was none other than Lilith. For by night, when the noise of battle was no longer heard, she reigned supreme over this land of death. Sabat had taken the pledge to the powers of darkness; if he betrayed them then their vengeance would be terrible!

Sabat stirred, stretched himself on the couch. His limbs were cramped and aching, his head throbbed. He opened his eyes and winced at the daylight coming in through the window. Jesus, it hurt, stabbing through his eyes and into his brain like a migraine pain. He closed them again, and wished that he could go back to sleep. Usually after a trip on to the astral plane he felt refreshed, no matter how much energy he had used there. This time he felt drained, mentally and physically. Lilith had tested him, and he must have come through all right otherwise he wouldn't be alive now; he would still be staked out in that hell which scorched and froze alternately.

Suddenly he heard the telephone in the hall ringing, a harsh sound that vibrated through him, and made him come to his feet if for no other reason than he had to shut the noise off.

'McKay here.!

Sabat winced; the last people he wanted to hear from at this moment were the police. He managed an 'uh-huh' and added, 'I'm feeling a big groggy this morning.'

'Sorry to hear that but I'd like to come round and see you if you're up to it.' It was obvious that the Detective Sergeant was going to come anyway.

'All right,' Sabat sighed, 'but don't expect to find me motoring in top gear. And you'll have to keep your voice down otherwise my head'll split open.'

Sabat was just in time to catch a laugh from McKay as he dropped the receiver back on its cradle. God, he hated the fucking police. But they would crumble along with the rest of the System; the rot had already begun, woodworm deep in the timbers of its tottering edifice. However, Sabat could not play his cards yet. Catriona's words hammered back at him, silvery tones like those of the desert woman's; '7 need a mole in the opposition camp.' And Sabat was that mole, with a key role in thwarting police activities. McKay was going to prove himself an indispensable ally from now onwards.

McKay's expression said 'you've been on the piss' when Sabat opened the door to admit him. But the policeman himself looked tired, drained down to his last reserves. He accepted a whisky, raised his eyebrows in mild surprise when he saw that Sabat was drinking gin but did not comment.

'You've heard about the battle?' McKay asked.

'Sure. What are the final casualty figures?'

'Eleven policemen dead. Forty-six injured, ten critically. Nine skinheads but, unfortunately, only one fatality in the Nazi ranks. But, as the Chief told a delegation yesterday afternoon, we've seen nothing yet. Three more "vampire" killings last night just to round the day off. I suppose you know Vince LeaJan played a big part in yesterday's riot?'

'Yes,' Sabat nodded, dropping his gaze into his drink, he swirled the colourless liquid round the glass as though it was an all-important part of gin drinking. 'He really showed his true colours this time, didn't he?'

'We raided Langdon Manor last night. Hell, the birds had flown and from information received about two hours ago it seems that Vince and Catriona were on the 7.10 flight from Heathrow to Paris last night. They've skipped the country but there isn't a lot we could have done the Colonel for anyway. Incitement maybe, but he'd get off because he'd claim he couldn't control them, that the whole situation escalated out of what he intended as a peaceful demonstration. Fuck it, the Nazis were beaten in 1945 and it ought, to be illegal to wear a swastika. But this bloody country's as soft as shit and now we're paying for our so-called "liberated" attitude.'

'Well, the police routed 'em, didn't they?' Sabat was still staring into his drink.

'Like fuck! The bastards could have overrun our survivors as well as our relief forces but instead they just took off, lost themselves in side streets, mingled with the football crowds. Nothing you could prove against any of 'em once they'd left the scene of battle. All of which has me thinking, Sabat, that there could be something in what you said to me about there being a link between these "skins" and the "vampires".'

'Just a wild theory I had,' Sabat smiled sheepishly. 'I guess I've got to learn to be more realistic.'

McKay stared. 'You sound like you want to chuck the sponge in, that you've gone chicken.'

'Exhaustion. All work, no sleep and nothing to show for my efforts. But I guess I'll have to keep plugging away at it. By the law of averages I should come up with something soon.'

'Our patrols are having no better luck,' Clive McKay groaned. 'These killers are as wary as wild-cats; a detective watching one street, they kill in the next. And it's as though they can smell a decoy.'

'D'you have street plans of the patrol movements?' Sabat tried to make the question sound casual.

'Sure, we've got it all systemised,' the CID man looked surprised. 'Why?'

'I'd like to see 'em,' Sabat said. 'Because maybe that way I'd be able to work better if I knew the police movements. And I might even have a bit of luck.'

'OK,' McKay nodded. 'I'll drop a copy round to you. We've just drawn 'em up for the coming week.'

'And Lealan?'

'They'd been housing the skinheads at Langdon Manor, probably fifty or so a week to ... train 'em. The place was ideally suited to it, secluded, a remote part of the country. It might have been going on for two or three years. Hell, Sabat, these yobbos are a big enough problem when they're in numbers but imagine 'em even with a smattering of SAS training. Christ, we saw what they could do yesterday, virtually a military, manoeuvre that knocked the stuffing out of two hundred trained police; anti-nazis who were nazis all along, stabbing the cordon in the back, literally. And they've still got that training, skulking, waiting and we don't know where or when they'll strike next. But surely they will!'

'Yes, let me have a plan of your street patrols, Clive,' Sabat was on his feet, a sign that the meeting was over.

'Sure,' McKay got the message, stood up also. 'Til see you get it. And, Sabat, I wish you'd put us in the picture a bit more.'

'Perhaps I will,' Sabat laughed and escorted his visitor to the door.

Fatigue had Sabat virtually sagging as he returned to the lounge. His headache was worse (gin had never suited him ... or had it?), and the last thing he wanted was to lie down again. Sleep had lately become a frightening prospect, like a child with recurring nightmares, his astral body a dominant force of its own. But he had to rest.

The moment he lay down he felt his eyelids drooping, more relaxed now than he had been last night. And his headache seemed to have subsided a little.

He sensed subconsciously that he was dreaming, that it wasn't a projection of his astral body. All the same it was bad enough. A forest clearing on a steep mountainside, so familiar that even in his dream he was shying away from it, but there was no escape. The inevitable encounter. Oh God, it should have been Quentin he was facing but it wasn't. It was himself. And he was Quentin, forcing Mark Sabat back, lunging with the axe. Missing. His opponent stepped back, tripped over one of those exhumed corpses and fell into the open grave. Looking down into a black abyss. Shots, the smell of burned cordite. Falling. Fighting, clawing, biting.

Only one man clambered out of that grave. Quentin. Himself. He saw it all as clearly as though his astral body hovered above, Quentin Sabat the victor!

Struggling to wake, making a determined effort, but something dragged him back into that awful nightmare. He could swear his eyes were open, that he was fully awake, yet the room was dark apart from the glow of a street lamp outside . . . shedding enough light for him to see the woman standing just inside the door, a silhouette that had him cringing, wanting to cover his eyes with his hands to shut out the awful scene. For there could be no possible doubt that his naked visitor was none other than she who had cut him free in the desert of hell, she who commanded his every move, his every thought. Lilith, the succubus, Goddess of Darkness \

'And still I have to convince you that you are indeed Quentin,' there was a note of reprimand in her voice, a slight toss of her head that might have been anger. 'But I think now that you are convinced, Sabat. However, you have done well and before many hours have passed you will know every police movement after dark in this city, a great help to my disciples.'

Sabat nodded, a sense of pleasure at praise from Lilith. It was not won easily.

'Nevertheless,' her eyes seemed to glow in the darkness, 'your greatest test is yet to come, one that possibly only you are capable of succeeding in. -

Sabat caught his breath, felt cold fingers clutching at his heart.

'My disciples are ready and waiting,' Lilith went on, 'but even victory in our most recent battle is not enough. We have to show the world how powerful we are, that we are invincible, strike fear into the heart of every mortal so that none sleep comfortably in their beds at night. The so-called forces of law and order must be disrupted, and to do this it is vital that one of their leading officers is assassinated. They will then be proved fallible, lose any respect which the people may have for them. Sabat, it is your duty to kill this man, the one who holds the title of Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard!'

Sabat's subconscious was screaming 'no, it's impossible. He is too well guarded.' Words that he was afraid to speak but Lilith read his thoughts.

'Coward!' Those eyes glowed in the dark, two fiery orbs fanned by a mounting fury. 'You can, and you will, kill this man. You will use one of the guns which you took from those disciples which you killed so that the world shall know that he died because Lilith ordained it so. Fail me and you will be transported back to that desert, to a terrible immortality where you burn by day and freeze by night with only vultures for company.'

'I will do as you say,' Sabat's voice was scarcely a whisper. He was trembling violently.

'Good. Kill this man tomorrow night, and afterwards I will come to you and reward you as she who is possessed by me has already rewarded you.'

Then she was gone and Sabat drifted back into a dreamless sleep, a void of oblivion where he floated gently whilst his body and mind were refreshed.

It was 5.30 p.m. and broad daylight when he awoke, his dream coming back to him in every vivid detail. Yet he did not dismiss it as a figment of his subconscious for he knew only too well the powers of Lilith, Goddess of Darkness. She had commanded and he must obey.

The Assistant Commissioner of Scotland Yard had to die within forty-eight hours, a victim of the Blood Merchants as their quest for world supremacy entered yet another phase.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SABAT'S FEAR had ebbed slowly away with the coming of darkness. In its place came a kind of numbness, a willingness to carry out Lilith's commands and with it a new awareness that shut out the horror of it all. Almost a zombie, except that he could think and his reflexes were sharper than ever. A killing machine created by a goddess of old, eager for blood.

He had spent most of the day working out his plan of action, coldly calculating his every move, frequently consulting the plan of nocturnal police patrols throughout the city which McKay had sent round by messenger earlier that morning. It made it that much easier to reach his destination unhindered and if the Daimler was seen parked anywhere then McKay would not be suspicious for Sabat had a free hand with the blessing of Scotland Yard.

No hesitation now: instead an eagerness, a lust to kill. Methodically he checked his weapons, the .38 fully loaded and resting snugly in the leather holster pocket of his dark jacket, the syringe-gun hanging easily by a tab which he had sewn below the left armpit of his jacket on the opposite side to the revolver. His third weapon was his SAS training, the means to kill swiftly and silently with his bare hands, the

method he enjoyed most.

The traffic was heavy around the city centre, pleasure seekers oblivious to the mounting terror. Sabat laughed silently to himself. Soon the gutters would run red with blood on a scale that made the French Revolution seem like a mere skirmish. The Disciples of Lilith were totally merciless.

Beyond the Blackwall Tunnel there was a noticeable air of desertion, empty streets where only a couple of weeks previously there were always pub and kerb crawlers to be seen. Three miles and he did not see a single prostitute soliciting; the sex trade had hit an unprecedented recession.

Sabat had visited the Assistant Commissioner's residence only once before but every detail of the house and its grounds was firmly implanted in his brain, a human computer that stored data until such time as it might be needed. Now that time was approaching.

It was another hour before he was clear of London, the sprawling tentacles of the city eventually petering out into a countryside where conurbation still lurked menacingly on the threshold. Villages that were villages no more, new housing estates destroying the old-world atmosphere, their inhabitants trying unsuccessfully to enjoy the best of both worlds.

Several times in his wing mirror he had glimpsed the single headlamp of a motor-cycle some distance behind him. Once he had slowed down, given the rider the chance to overtake him, but the offer had not been accepted. Sabat wondered if by any chance he had picked up a police shadow but a few miles further on the machine was to be seen no more. In all probability it had turned off and he would never see it again.

Finally Sabat brought the car to a standstill, parked it in a tree-lined avenue where it would be inconspicuous amidst a row of Daimlers, Jaguars and a Rolls Royce which he instantly recognised as a five-year-old model that had been re-registered. Here everything was a status symbol from the clothes you wore to the vehicle you drove. And Sabat hated these people for it, laughed to himself because soon it would all change. The New Society would alter everything.

He walked casually down the road, walking in the shadows cast by the tall poplars. A hunting beast he was keyed up, his reactions perfectly tuned to meet any eventuality, his whole system building up towards a climax.

The Assistant Commissioner's house was at the very end of the road, set back in its own compact grounds, an extensive garden laid out with shrubberies and lawns, a wide area of gravel in front of the converted Georgian residence on which it would be virtually impossible to tread softly. And somewhere there would be a detective hidden, a man whose sole duty was the protection of the police chief; one who in all probability had also served in the SAS and was skilled in unarmed combat. There would be alarms too, invisible rays which set off a warning the moment you walked into them. Sabat was probably the only man capable of getting in there. And getting out again!

Sabat came to the end of the road, the tarmac that was lined by a hawthorn hedge ended abruptly; beyond it were a couple of grass fields and then the next 'village' began. He dropped on to all fours, found a gap in the hedge that had been widened by dogs and children and slid through with the ease of a hunting black mamba, not rising to his feet but still crawling along the thorny boundary for some thirty or forty yards. Only then did he raise his head, peer through the early spring foliage and take note of his surroundings.

He was now level with the rear of the AC's house, the starlight and the distant glow of streetlamps showing him everything he wanted to see. This part of the field was not, as he had presumed, just an area of rough grass but at intervals he could make out weathered tombstones jutting out of the undergrowth, moss-covered so that it would be impossible to read the inscriptions without first scraping them clean, waves that were just overgrown mounds, their markers gone altogether. A jungle of ancient death, a cemetery that had been abandoned many years ago when possibly new or more convenient ground became available for consecration- He scanned the darkness but could not make out the silhouette of a church. Maybe that, too, was somewhere else.

Sabat sensed the loneliness of a small island amidst the conurbation. Beneath him lay the bodies of those who were not only dead but long forgotten. Possibly one day the remaining tombstones would be cleared away, the ground levelled and new houses built on the site. The Disciples of Lilith would destroy all reminders of a previous society when total power was theirs.

But he had more important things to do this night than to dwell on possibilities that were none of his business. Even as he studied the outline of the big gabled house that old familiar feeling of foreboding came creeping back, a tingling of his flesh that had him glancing behind him. A patch of blackness that was a disused cemetery and a field, and then a few hundred yards beyond the street lighting began again. He told himself that there was nothing to worry about here, it was once he got inside the AC's grounds that his troubles began.

And as if to unnerve him still further an owl began hooting somewhere nearby.

Sabat stiffened, eased himself slowly down into the long grass again, sensed that he wasn't alone. His

rate of breathing dropped, his pulses quickened. In all probability there was a perfectly logical explanation, a courting couple enjoying a session of clandestine copulation in this the only secluded tract of land for miles around. Owls, too, were plentiful out here beyond the city limits. All the same he had to be sure ...

His first intimation that there was somebody only a couple of yards away from where he crouched came when a dark shape reared up, blotting out distant lighting, a silhouette that was a good six feet tall and running fat, a head grotesquely shaven like that of a Mohican indian. And when the breeze rustled the nearby leaves it brought with it a stale smell of sweat and urine . . . and evil!

'Sabat!' The stranger's tone was a coarse whisper loaded with malevolence. 'So far you have escaped but now you die!'

Sabat froze. He could just make out the other's features; a broken nose that had never been set, lips that were puffed out and split, tiny eyes staring out of swollen sockets. A drppout, one of London's forgotten people, all the hatred and resentment concentrated in that malevolent expression. A hand moved, came up level with the spreading waistline, and Sabat's lips tightened as he recognised the ail-too familiar outline of one of Lilith's blood guns.

'Be quiet, you fool,' Sabat hissed. 'I order you to be silent in the name of Lilith.'

'You take her name in vain,' the reply was expressionless, words learned in the process of indoctrination, the flat tones of one under the influence of hypnotism. 'For she ordered your death, Sabat. Three of those sent to kill you have not emerged from your house. I have watched and waited ever since, followed you until the time was right. Now I have you alone and you shall not leave this place alive!'

'Fool!' Sabat was scared their voices might carry on the wind to where the AC's detective conducted his nocturnal vigil. 'Those orders are countermanded. I am now one of you, a Disciple of Lilith assigned to a killing which your blundering could already have ruined. If that is so then Lilith's wrath will be terrible and you will pay the price for your foolishness with your own blood. Be quiet, and return from where you came.'

'You lie!1 The hiss heralded a menacing step forward, a raising of the gun. 'Lilith has commanded me and there is no higher authority. She will reward me for your death, Sabat!1

Sabat realised the futility of attempting to convince one of these hypnotic robot murderers; Lilith had ordered him to kill and only the goddess herself could countermand that order.

Sabat crouched, his leg muscles tightening, springs coiling in readiness to unleash his one hundred and eighty pounds of solid muscle. The other must be killed quickly and silently and then perhaps this night's work might not be wasted after all.

He leaped but he had underestimated the agility of the other man, that huge body moving to one side with a swiftness that deceived him, a lunge with the syringe-gun from which only Sabat's instinctive reactions saved him. He ducked, felt the steel point brush his face, nicking the original scar as it did so. Something warm and sticky trickled down his cheek; the first blood of the night was spilled.

Sabat came to his feet, leapt back in the same movement for his adversary was coming at him again with a throaty snarl of animal fury, his mind conditioned so that nothing could control the basic urge to kill. And Sabat was well primed for killing.

Feinting one way, then the other, blows that fell short as two vicious killers faced each other, their movements taking them back into the adjoining cemetery of yesteryear, seeking footholds on the rough uneven ground.

'You will die!' the youth snarled, now using his weapon clasped like a dagger, the muzzle a vicious tapering blade that was capable of cutting through flesh and bone with ease.

Again Sabat dodged, stumbled as he momentarily lost his footing, and before he could recover his assailant was upon him, bearing him to the ground. Sabat's left hand caught the other's right wrist, tried to wrest the weapon from those sweaty grimed fingers, grunting with exertion as strength matched strength. Physically the two combatants were equal, possibly the younger man having a slight advantage because of his weight and the fact that he had landed uppermost when they fell. That 12-inch spear of death lost an inch, gained two, forcing its way slowly down to Sabat's neck. One lunge into the open throat would be sufficient and for the ex-SAS man it would all be over.

Sabat was only too well aware that the tide was turning against him. The killer's strength stemmed from that fanatical devotion to Lilith, each and every one of her followers indoctrinated hypnotically by the Kamakazi creed. Himself included. The point gained another inch and he knew he could not hold it off much longer. God, if only the bastard hadn't got hold of his other hand as well he could have reached the .38. But he couldn't move.

A moment of certain death, that period in which a drowning person's life is supposed to flash before them, decades crammed into one split second, a lightning replay as a last reminder before they plunge into the unknown. And something came back to Sabat . . . that last encounter with Quentin ... no, with himself because he was Quentin; the way each had anticipated death, knowing that there could only be one survivor. A sensation of falling, the ground seeming to swallow him up ... Oh Jesus, it was real, the earth seemed to have given way, pitching the two struggling men down into some awful chasm!

A blackness in which there was neither street lighting nor stars, the air stale and musty as though it had been trapped in here for hundreds of years, the pregnant feel of damp cold evil suddenly released.

Sabat told himself it wasn't happening, it was a flashback to that time when Quentin (himself) had died and had been reborn; the same stench of grave soil, and once again it could only have one possible outcome.

A shattering impact that jarred every bone, every nerve in his body told him it was no figment of his tortured memory. The earth had opened up, and he and this disciple of death had been pitched into some foul place. The youth was still on top of him, giving a loud grunt as the breath was knocked from his body and in that one instant Sabat proved his superiority. The grip relaxed for a split second and he grabbed the barrel of the syringe-gun, pushed it away from his throat and felt it bury itself in the soft soil. His other hand came free even as the other man recovered; Sabat found the butt of the .38 and dragged it free of its holster.

'Die, pig!' Huge hands encircled Sabat's throat, instantly beginning to throttle him, the Stygian darkness starting to turn a dull red.

A flash of crimson, the report paralysing his tortured brain. Sabat felt the body on top of him jerk upwards then fall back so that the .38 barrel was buried in soft flesh. Firing again, the recoil jarring his wrist, numbing arm and shoulder, almost smothered by the limp weight of his heavy adversary.

Still firing, the reports now like muffled depth charges in deep water, rippling vibrations. The grip on Sabat's neck relaxed; he fought for air, gulping in the thick gunpowder-smoke.

Disorientated, a desert traveller bewildered and frightened in a sudden blinding sandstorm that obliterated everything, trying to decide whether it was an hallucination, a recollection of some past macabre event or whether it was actually happening. Sabat didn't know, didn't care. All he wanted to do

was to come out of this alive. Innumerable fears, the one uppermost being that he was the victim of some kind of cerebral attack. His skull felt as though it was swelling, bursting; his nerves screamed with some indescribable torture.

He struggled desperately to heave the other man's body clear of his own, and succeeded in tipping it to one side so that they were both wedged securely at the bottom of some kind of narrow deep pit. Sabat's clothing was saturated; he felt the warmth of thick fluid that was pouring on to him, knew what it was even at the height of the terrible mental torture which he was undergoing. Blood\ His first fear was that it was his own, but when he discovered that he was still holding the .38 he knew where it came from. The one who lay alongside him was bleeding profusely, still alive, gurgling and bubbling away the crimson fluid of life.

Sabat fought blindly to extricate himself from the other. The groping fingers of his free hand found a cavity, one that was soft and warm like a bath sponge. He snatched his fingers away, a length of slippery offal coming out with them.

Somehow Sabat had squeezed free, was standing on the other man's body, groping about him. Walls barely three feet apart, rough stone and soil that crumbled as he clawed at them. Animal instinct had replaced logical thinking, a trapped creature whose one thought was of escape, a badger blindly digging its way out of a blocked sett before the terriers reached it.

He looked up, saw a jagged square above him, tiny twinkling distant lights that could only be stars. Leaping, falling back on bloody flesh and bone that grunted its protest as the last of the air in those blood-filled lungs was expelled. Sabat leapt again, this time got a hold on a piece of rock that held him firm, pulled himself up with another instinctive movement, which had been born from hours spent climbing ropes and trapeze bars in his gymnasium.

Hauling himself out into the open, scrambling free, impervious to sharp slivers of stone that tore his clothing and cut his body, shambling away on all-fours, spurred on by the terrible fear that the ground below him might cave in again and reclaim him for its own.

He covered no more than a dozen yards before he collapsed, lying full-length, still clutching that .38, its chamber full of spent shells. Unconsciousness threatened like approaching storm clouds but thinned and dispersed, leaving him looking up at the starry sky, knowing that he had escaped when the jaws of death had already closed over him; trying to reason but giving it up in the end. And somewhere someone was cursing but Sabat took no notice, and eventually the voice which was somehow vaguely familiar died away.

Whether he had slept or whether he had just lain there staring uncomprehendingly up at the night sky, Sabat had no idea. Hours that were a void, irretrievable, had passed away. For only when the faint greyness of a false dawn was in the eastern sky did Sabat's brain begin to function again. His head was aching, he retched and would have vomited had there been food in his stomach, but he knew he had returned from that terrible mental wasteland. Unscathed.

Slowly he rose to his feet and cautiously, testing each step before he put his full weight on the ground, returned to that gaping hole in the ground. Doubtless it was an old family tomb, an underground chamber of the dead which had eroded away beneath the thick grass, finally collapsing when two men had fought to the death above its fragile entrance.

Sabat turned, walked away. He shuddered; it was like a video recording of his final encounter with Quentin that time when they had both fallen into that open grave ...

And then the realisation hit him, a bolt of euphoria borne on the wind of disbelief, and only when the wind had blown itself out was the truth left for him to see, to feel. A sense of freedom extricating itself from hypnotic bondage, his brain working with the ease of a well-oiled engine. Frightening because he knew what had happened, had known all along but had been powerless to alter the course of events. He turned, saw the outline of that huge gabled house against the eastern sky. The Assistant Commissioner slept peacefully in his bed, totally unaware how close he had been to death. And Sabat shuddered as he realised how close he himself had been to committing a terrible cold-blooded murder to promote the cause of a new regime of atrocity by the powers of evil.

He recognised the voice, the cursing, this time Quentin's. For just as Sabat was now free again, his brother's black soul was once more imprisoned. The pendulum had swung back, the fight would go on in just the same way that that eternal battle between the forces of Good and the forces of Evil was being fought on the arid desertland of the astral plane.

Eventually Quentin simmered into an uneasy silence. Sabat glanced down at himself; his blood-soaked clothes were drying stiff, a warrior walking from the plane of carnage unscathed except for a few minor scratches, and that cut on his cheek which had stopped bleeding. That shaven disciple of evil bent on blind revenge had been his saviour, the fall into the tomb and the bloody killing had reversed the roles within Sabat himself, the evil soul being overthrown and subsequently Lilith's hypnotic spell broken. Inexplicable except to the gods of darkness themselves and even the man they had attempted to make their servant only partly understood.

Sabat smiled to himself as he slid behind the wheel of his Daimler, breathed a sigh of relief as the engine fired first time. In spite of her army of blood-lusting hypnotised 'vampires' this past night had boded ill for

Lilith, Goddess of Darkness. Now for Sabat it had become a personal issue and already the fires of vengeance were burning inside him, a turmoil of fury building up against those who had done this to him, his hate directed at the woman who had fled the country to plot her final coup of evil. Catriona Lealan! Once he had thrilled to her sadism but now his feelings were far from masochistic. Fantasy in reverse as he sped along the deserted dawn roads; Catriona bound and helpless, the vicious leather whip in Sabat's own hand! He gripped the steering wheel with grim intensity at the thought, an arousal that went unnoticed as his anger mounted.

He saw the red weals on her tender flesh, the skin breaking open, heard the lashes like .38 shots amidst her screaming, her futile pleading with him to stop. Blood-streaked, writhing, the thong cutting deep. Cries that came from Lilith herself, but went unheeded as did the cursings of Quentin.

Finally a corpse, its former beauty unrecognisable, only the eyes still blazing with the fury of a spirit that did not belong to the body, a soul that had to be destroyed before it possessed again, a leech crushed on dead flesh before it crawled onto another living creature. And (here was only one way!

Oh God, Sabat was enjoying every second of the unholy mutilation, a preview in his mind of things to come, remembering Ilona and how she had suffered. The headless body of Catriona Lealan, her breasts burst asunder by the steel stake driven between them, volcanoes erupting their crimson molten lava; the soul of Lilith demented and snarling in defeat.

Only then would it all be over, the nazi army mindless again because their hypnotic controlling forces were gone, anarchy receding now that there was no organisation.

Only Catriona's death would bring all this about. She had assigned Sabat to kill and now the hunter was turning on her.

But first he had to find her.

CHAPTER TWELVE

OF ALL the cities in the world Sabat liked Paris best, an atmosphere of bygone days, a quaintness that even the Nazis had been unable to destroy during the war years. And he was determined that their skinhead imitators were not going to despoil it, for somewhere amidst the teeming millions in this setting of spring gaiety Catriona Lealan lay hidden, weaving her plans; a twentieth-century hag, a reincarnation of one who had knitted and watched the heads roll from the guillotine, a gruesome parody who would once again turn the streets red with blood.

But Sabat's was no aimless search. The day before his departure for France he had spent in his extensive library, a room lined with books from floor to ceiling, the result of many years devoted to collecting literature on the occult for even in his priesthood days Sabat had been intensely fascinated by this subject. And eventually he had found what he was looking for; the ancient evil which had dominated the French capital three hundred years before the Revolution, a time when the country was steeped in witchcraft, when surely Lilith, the vampire, the succubus, was abroad. For in 1438 one who bore the name of Pierre Vallin had given his own baby daughter to Satan, and rumour had it that the evil one had changed his form to that of a woman of exquisite beauty and had copulated with Vallin as a reward for the human offering.

Sabat's lips had tightened, his eyes narrowed as he turned the pages of this history of ancient demonic rites. Had the Evil One himself actually changed shape or had he sent one of his most trusted disciples? For surely the whole foul business had the unmistakable touch of Lilith, Goddess of Darkness! In which case Catriona, possessed by Lilith, had returned to the scene of her five-hundred-year-old infanticide in search of the supreme power necessary for her final coup - the overthrow of society.

Sabat found another brief reference to the fact that Pierre Vallin had lived in the vicinity of Sacre Coeur, and thus within twenty-four hours the ex-SAS man had booked in at a small hotel only a few hundred yards from the picturesque Square of Montmartre. Again he was acting on a hunch. • Evil and witchcraft had been rife in this country and there were doubtless hundreds of other places which would

have suited Catriona's purpose. Yet he had to start somewhere; time was running out. And in order to find the place he was looking for he would have to go on to the astral plane once more, put his soul and body at risk as he searched for the most evil woman in the history of mankind. But that was only the beginning. Once he had found her he had to destroy her!

He retired to his hotel room immediately after dinner and started the ritual so vital to his safety and success. The bedroom was small, a third floor window overlooking an untidy conglomeration of back yards and overflowing garbage bins. Yet its mediocrity in terms of accommodation suited his purpose. He was unlikely to be disturbed.

He tipped up the bed, leaned it against the wall, then having rolled up the carpet he began sweeping the floor. This was a meticulous process for it was important that every particle of dirt was removed from the room. Going to his suitcase he took out chalk and string, and painstakingly drew a large five-pointed star on the bare floorboards, finally enclosing it in a complete circle. The hand holding the chalk trembled slightly; he could almost feel the atmosphere in the room changing, a drop in temperature as though the forces of evil were already planning their assault on him. For surely by now Lilith knew of his escape from her hypnotic influence and his pursuit of Catriona to the Continent.

Almost finished. The words, neat capitals, the ultimate in protection as far as protection was possible. INRI . . . ADAM . . . TE . . . DAGERAM . . . Cabalistic signs borrowed from the Sephirotic Tree . . . Kether . . . Binah . . . Hod . . . Malkulth . . . others of Egyptian origin, the Eye of Horus, and finally some in Aryan script. Only now did Sabat relax slightly, breathe more easily as he lowered the bed back into the circle.

Again he delved in the suitcase. Five small silver chalices, each of which he carried to the small washbasin in the corner and filled with water; charged them, not as one in holy orders might have done but by lining the forefinger of each hand in the manner of twin pistols trained directly on the colourless fluid, breathed a low incantation. He repeated the process five times, once for each silver cup until the water in them bubbled and only then did he carry them and place them individually on each point of the pentagram.

It was very cold in the room now and outside night had cast its mantle over the ancient city, the sky lit by artificial lighting from many sources, for Paris was never dark. If one listened intently there was a distant background hubbub of voices, laughter and singing, strains of music.

The French capital was only just coming to life as Sabat stripped naked, sealed the five orifices of his body by smearing them with holy water and lay on the bed.

Now his ordeal was about to begin.

Sabat's body appeared to relax but inwardly it was taking the strain, his nervous system instinctively resisting for it sensed what he had in mind this night. It was not just a haphazard foray on to the first astral plane but something which required a greater degree of concentration if he was to rediscover that place in a bygone age where vile inhuman deeds had been perpetrated. And already the atmosphere in the room seemed alive with invisible evil forces kept at bay only by the pentagram.

Sabat lay still, eyes closed, tiny beads of sweat oozing out of his pores; he tried to ignore the psychic distractions that were attempting to disturb his relaxation. With an effort he turned his thoughts to Lilith, felt an arousal beginning. That was only to be expected for to think of the beautiful evil goddess was to become emotionally charged. No male human could escape her devilish charms and his one hope was that his erotic thoughts would draw him to her as they had done Pierre Vallin five centuries ago.

He sensed himself slipping into a sleep that was not like his nightly slumbers, drifting into a darkness where winds howled and tore at him, a thousand voices whispering. Sabat is here. Sabat has come.

Floating, so dark that he could see nothing, aware of things around him, invisible entities that stroked his nakedness with cold clammy fingers, seizing him, dragging him through this frightening total blackness.

And then he saw the city below him, a Paris which he recognised, a Montmartre where artists still sketched with charcoal in the square, surrounded by an audience of gaudily-clad figures in strange fashions. Going down, closer, no detail denied him. An air of poverty was reflected in both the people and the quaint buildings. And something else which you would only notice if you were exceptionally perceptive - fear! The way the men and women glanced sideways, peering into the dark intersecting alleyways as though they expected to see some nameless horror lurking there, huddling together.

Sabat alighted and joined the throng, clothing himself in a suit of scarlet silk, his trousers were plus-tuos that tapered into white socks and slippers. Wine flowed but an astral body was unable to partake of such pleasures. Women, their features made up to appear almost grotesque, mingled with the crowd, their wares on offer for those seeking the delights of the flesh.

Sabat tried to ignore these distractions, his keen eyes searching the faces of those around him. And when he saw the man standing beyond the cobbles on the opposite side he knew his search was over, that he had not followed his hunch in vain. For there could be no mistaking the likeness, the tall lean figure dressed in green velvet with black trims, shaven except for a tiny moustache, eyes set closely together.

Sabat recognised the likeness of Colonel Vince Lealan and knew that without a doubt he was gazing upon the one for whom he searched - Pierre Vallin!

Vallin did not seem to be in any hurry, rather he had time on his hands and this was as good a place as any in which to pass it. Sabat moved closer, determined now not to let his quarry out of his sight, for when Vallin returned to his house Sabat would follow him. And after that he would know without any doubt where to find the woman he knew as Catriona Lealan when he returned to his physical body.

Sabat began to feel impatient, but he dispelled it with the reminder that here time was not as it was in the twentieth century. He had joined a phase of life long gone, where he might witness a decade in a matter of minutes. All the same it seemed hours before Pierre Vallin finally turned and shuffled away from the crowded Square.

Narrow streets, upper storeys of the houses on either side almost touching in places, shrieks of laughter coming from some of them as whores delighted their customers, dark because no lights illuminated this gloomy place.

Sabat's fear was that he might lose the man he followed and then everything would have been in vain. Vallin might turn off into any one of these houses without warning. So Sabat changed his form, this time into a black rat, a procedure that was instantaneous and had him scurrying along the filthy gutter, closing in on Vallin because even if the other saw him there were numerous rats feeding here brazenly on the stinking garbage. In human form his quarry's suspicions might be aroused for they were both in their astral bodies whereas on those occasions when Sabat visited the living in this dimension there was no chance of being spotted for he was invisible at all times.

Suddenly Pierre Vallin stopped and for a moment was framed in the lighted doorway of a timbered house. He stepped inside and the door was closed again.

Sabat saw and memorised the exterior of the building, knew that he would be able to find it again. He could have returned straightaway to his physical body but his curiosity was getting the better of him. He had found the man he was looking for, the house where surely Catriona was hiding, yet now he had the opportunity to witness that evil deed of which he had read, an obscure myth that was rapidly becoming a truth on the astral plane. Before this night was done Pierre Vallin would give his baby daughter to the devil in female form, one who could be none other than Lilith, the vampire; Lilith the succubus.

And even as Sabat hesitated on that garbage strewn step his rodent eyes picked up the shrill sound of a baby crying. He knew then that there was no going back until he had seen this whole business through.

Once more he changed his shape, the huge rat shrinking in size, sprouting ragged wings that fluttered and had him airborne, a tiny body flitting from window to window and then the night moth passed through into the house.

The interior was stuffy, dominated by a pungent smell of rotting food, vegetables heaped in a corner of the downstairs room, the floor thick with filth. A cockroach on the table eyed Sabat quizzically as he bobbed erratically against the ceiling and then passed through to the upper storey.

As below, the upstairs consisted of just a single room. And even as Sabat went into it he experienced a sensation of retching, wanting to vomit at the vile stench of putrefaction, the grimy-heap of crumpled blankets that served as Vallin's bed, rank with sweat and urine; the wooden box with infant bedclothing that was no more savoury, a makeshift cradle in the midst of which lay a baby girl only a few months old.

Crying because her wasting body demanded food, the skin a mass of rashes where she had laid in her own excreta. Sabat fluttered across her, stared down at the tiny features, harsh for one so young and innocent, a miniature replica of Vallin, yet another link in the evil line which stretched across centuries until it materialised into the living shape of Vince Lealan \

Sabat saw that and much more, a macabre setting that had him longing for the sanity of his physical body. For there was no doubt whatsoever that Pierre Vallin was an accomplished magician, one who dived into the lowest depths of the black arts. The evidence was there in abundance; an altar draped with black cloth, an inverted crucifix, the upside down crudely carved figure of Christ violated to the extremities of blasphemy, daubed with dried blood which Sabat had no doubt was human! Bones and decomposing animal and bird corpses piled on a tray, a rat that still wriggled, suspended by a thread whilst its blood dripped steadily into a black goblet; the drink of the damned. Sabat overcame' his revulsion with the calculated realism of one who accepted such things, had seen them many times before in the dark corners of the globe.

Yet he tensed and thrilled to the knowledge that he had found this place, a wizard's hovel to which surely Lilith would come, for the jar of pickled foreskins on the crude table denoted that this follower of the Left Hand Path was a familiar with succubi, tasty morsels in readiness to offer these vampire seductresses when they visited him.

Finally he turned his attention to the man he had followed here, Pierre Vallin. Vallin had exchanged his gaudy street clothing for long flowing black robes, his eyes bright with fanatical anticipation. Stooping because the ceiling was low, his face seeming to have aged decades with the change of garments;

wizened and old, diabolical in its expression.

'Offspring of a whore!' He kicked the cradle, almost toppled it, and the baby screeched even louder. 'Scream your last, bastard, for tonight the succubus will be your mother. She will cradle you to her bosom whilst she feeds and satisfies her need for infant blood!'

Sabat settled on a beam, a silent spectator to the unholy preparations which were already beginning, the black candles smoking and flickering, their fumes oily and choking. Vallin picked up the infant, held it at arm's length by one leg as though it were a cockerel, his lips creasing into a low cackle. 'Oh, how the succubus will be pleased this night. Scream, little one, let her hear your cries and come quickly, for Pierre Vallin will be rewarded handsomely for this offering.'

The sorcerer lapsed into a toneless chant, bastard French and Latin that Sabat would have had difficulty in following had he not known the general build-up to human sacrifice practised by Satanists throughout the ages. Vallin's voice rose to a pitch; one of the candles flickered and went out, the remaining flame almost horizontal as an icy gust of wind buffeted the room, flapping the altar cloths. Sabat had to cling on to his precarious perch, as he was almost dislodged. Then, as he had expected, the remaining candle was extinguished and the room plunged into darkness. Pierre Vallin's incantations had sunk to a cringing whine, a babble of terror because he feared the manifestation which was imminent!

Suddenly there was light, an ethereal glow emanating from some unknown source, a glimmer by which it was possible to discern shapes and outlines but not details. Vallin was on his knees, arms thrown up to protect his body from a nameless horror, the infant on the altar suddenly still and silent as though it too sensed the presence of a terrible evil. Something had been summoned from beyond mortal ken and now it had arrived]

Sabat watched, sensed his own fear mounting, as an indiscernible shadow beside the vile altar began to take shape ... a woman, naked, provocatively stretching out one leg then the other, breasts that swung gently with nipples engorged and firm, a figure that would arouse any man, have him grovelling before that sensuous body. And then you saw the face as the shadows fell back, radiantly beautiful, eyes that seemed to glow like hot coals, nostrils flared as though she delighted in the vile stench of this unholy room, full red lips parted in a smile that was akin to a hungry lioness that scents fresh meat. Sabat saw the contempt in those flashing orbs as they fixed on Vallin, then switched to the tiny form which had begun to wriggle and cry again.

'Look at me, Pierre Vallin,' her voice crackled with the force of an electric storm. 'Feast your eyes upon Lilith and put your thoughts into words!'

Vallin mouthed his desires in hushed whispers, spittle forming on his lips, bubbles that burst and dripped, an old man grasping at youthful fantasies. The baby was crying softly now almost as though it realised its fate and had resigned itself to death.

'But that is not all, is it?' Lilith's scorn cut into the cringing cowed figure like whiplashes. 'Above all, you desire power. Power over other mortals, do you not? The power to make their will yours, have them do your bidding, just as you do mine!'

'Oui. . . oui, . . . oui ...' Pierre Vallin's voice died away, a wavering finger pointing to the small trembling sacrifice.

'Too!' she snapped. 'Do you not realise that I could have taken that child any time I wanted it? You offer me what is mine by right.'

He was huddled on the floor now, realising the truth of her words.

'Nevertheless,' Lilith smiled, her features softening slightly, 'you have been a faithful servant over the years, Pierre. You have done my bidding without question and for that alone you will be rewarded.'

Sabat saw the monkey-like face uplifted, relief kindled in those sunken eyes, an old man suddenly realising that all was not lost, muttering unintelligible thanksgivings, pledging his continued devotion to evil powers.

But the naked goddess now had eyes only for the wriggling infant, reaching across the altar, picking it up and cradling it to her breasts. It had stopped crying, its toothless mouth open and going in search of those inviting nipples. She bent lower, let it suckle her.

Even Sabat had no inkling of what was about to happen next, the full shock and horror of it almost causing him to lose hold on the overhead beam and come fluttering down, Lilith's head bent forward, the action of a loving mother about to kiss her baby as it fed from her. But those lips had neither love nor affection as they pouted, fastened on the tiny neck like a bloodsucking leech. The child cried out just once, a flailing of arms and legs that became limp and drooped; a gurgling squelching sound that came from within the unholy embrace, a noisy drinker sipping hot tea loudly from the rim of a cup. A steady drip drip, a splattering and splashing of dark fluid on the floor. And when finally Lilith raised her head her

lips were smeared crimson, her eyes a dull glow as though her terrible lust was satiated.

The baby sagged, a bundle of bloodsoaked clothing, unrecognisable for what it had been, still dripping steadily. Lilith held it out at full stretch, impatient for Pierre Vallin to take it from her, a drinker handing back an empty cup.

'Take . . . drink ...' her words the ultimate in blasphemy, 'for this is my body, my blood, and power will be yours, Pierre Vallin!'

The pathetic wretch on the floor grabbed at it eagerly, so weak after his ordeal that he almost dropped it. Clumsily he pulled it to him, his lips searching frantically for the open wound in the tiny neck, finding it; sucking even more loudly than Lilith had done, drinking the dregs which she had left for him, until finally the last of his strength waned and the bloody bundle thudded to the floor, rolled over and lay still, that strange ethereal light seeming to focus on the gashed neck.

'Power is yours, Pierre Vallin,' Lilith glided back until she was in the shadows again, a silhouette, her features indiscernible. 'You are imbued with my own powers for all time, in this life and the next, and each successive one thereafter. You will die and live again and perchance sometime we shall meet again. Who knows, for such matters are withheld even from me. But you will continue to serve me and when at last I rule supreme over mortals you shall sit by my throne in a position of honour. Do not fear death for we shall both live again.'

And suddenly she was gone, the room dark again but no longer cold, Pierre Vallin grovelling on the filthy floor, pulling that dead pitiful bundle towards him, trying to drink again the elixir of life, vile sucking sounds because the vessel was empty. Laughing insanely to himself the whole time.

Sabat had decided to leave, wished that he had done so earlier although what had transpired between Vallin and Lilith had confirmed his suspicions of these past few weeks; Vince Lealan and Catriona born again to serve the dark powers, an allegiance which even now threatened the whole world. Sabat lingered there in his moth form, dwelling on the awfulness of it all and as he did so he heard noises outside in the street. Angry voices, the tramping of many feet, a thudding on the door below, the window lit up by a flickering yellow light which could only have come from burning torches.

'Come out, Pierre Vallin!' a deafening shout that seemed to vibrate the whole house. 'Your magic cannot save you this time!'

Pierre Vallin was on his feet, whimpering, dragging that bloodsoaked bundle around the room as though he was seeking a place to hide it, whimpering to himself. Down below woodwork cracked and splintered, the stairway creaked under the weight of many bodies, the smoky fumes of their torches preceding them and filling that upstairs room. And as one the crowd burst in, the foremost awestruck and horrified at what they saw by the light of their flickering braziers; alone each of them would have fled screaming from this place of bloody sacrifice but united they found the courage to remain.

'See,' a young man with staring bulging eyes pointed, 'did I not tell you? Pierre Vallin has sacrificed his own child to Satan! And there . . . ' all eyes were riveted on that jar with its grisly contents of severed flesh. 'Vallin the physician who circumcised men so that he could feed their foreskins to his evil spirits!'

"Burn him! Destroy him now before Satan comes to save him. Let him feel the flames on his body, a foretaste of the hell in which he will find himself before morning!"

Hands seized Pierre Vallin, ripping the satanic robes from his body, shedding them to expose the lean and filth-grimed frame beneath. Broken fingernails clawed at his face, gouging the withered flesh, streaking it with blood. Fists pummelled him, feet drove into him, shattering frail bones, and screaming for mercy the wizard of Montmartre was dragged from his stinking home by the fear-crazed angry mob.

Sabat followed them, flitting through the night air, saw the familiar cobbled square, brushwood and items of unwanted furniture piled high in readiness, a chanting crowd already gathered, shrieking their wrath when they saw the advancing column.

'Vallin the physician who stole our babies to give to Satan; bum him!'

A forest of eager hands hoisted Pierre Vallin aloft, roped him to the sapling which was to serve as a stake, his screams of protest drowned by the thunderous cries of a mob that had found courage at last in numbers. Flames began to lick at the dry wood, spreading and sending up showers of sparks. Crackling and hissing.

But Sabat was speeding away, a bat now that flitted over rooftops and across tracts of open countryside, an astral hastening to rejoin its physical body.

Soon he came to the new Montmartre, that cobbled square again where the crowd was made up of

late-night revellers and artists who used the benches for beds on warm nights. Yet it had changed little, and if you were perceptive enough to notice, you would sense the growing evil in the atmosphere, a stench like that of the charred wood of a long-dead witch fire. For Pierre Vallin had died and lived again many times; Lilith was true to her word for she knew that she would have need of him at the final hour. Lives that had spanned centuries and continents were finally rejoined in that place where it had first begun.

As Sabat slipped back into his body he heard the faint sounds of Quentin's laughter.

And outside the pentagram angry whispered voices like that of the frenzied mob that had taken Vallin, frustrated because they could not get at Sabat, an invisible barrier of protection keeping them at bay.

Finally, towards dawn, they gave up, melted back into the darkness and Sabat knew that the night belonged to him.

But the real fight was only just beginning.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE WAVE of terror had already begun by the time Sabat left his hotel the next morning. Only a hundred yards away a narrow side street was cordoned off, gendarmes were everywhere, a body wrapped in blankets was being loaded into a van.

Sabat watched, mingling with a crowd which had gathered as close as the police would allow. He could not make out any details but it was all too clear. And the midday editions of the papers carried the story . . . and seven others as well!

He wandered away. Still he had not decided upon his next course of action. There were a number of alternatives open to him; he could call in the Surete, have the Lealans arrested but, like England, witchcraft counted for little in France these days. There would only be a paltry charge and Scotland Yard was unlikely to effect an extradition order on the part Vince Lealan had played in Bloody Saturday. Above all it would take time and time was a commodity that was not available. Already Lilith's 'vampires' were on a rampage of blood. Sabat considered confronting the Lealans in broad daylight, challenging these latest reincarnations of evil but again his efforts might prove futile. He sighed; his only chance was to wait for nightfall, fight them when the evil had started . . . and then the odds would be in their favour. One man against the might of the powers of darkness!

He strolled the narrow streets around Montmartre, saw the very house which he had visited in his astral form, felt his pulses speed up. There could be no possible doubt that this was the place. The timbers had weathered and split in places, door and windows had been replaced possibly several times over the past five centuries, but apart from that it looked exactly the same as it had on that fiery night when the frenzied witch-hunters had dragged out Pierre Vallin and burned him in the cobbled square.

Sabat had a brief respite, a few hours of daylight in which to formulate a plan with which to wipe out the evil that was even now spawning in a satanic dwelling. And right now he could not think of a single worthwhile idea.

It was midday before he experienced the faintest glimmerings of a plan, one that germinated and came to fruition with remarkable rapidity. So breathtakingly simple that he wondered why he had not thought of it before.

He returned to his hotel bedroom, locked the door behind him, and once again the bed was tilted up against the wall, the carpet rolled back to expose the pentagram. A miniature altar was constructed out of the bedside table and the suitcase, a white sheet used to drape it, a crucifix and the chalices placed upon it. And then he prayed, not in the conventional kneeling posture but standing upright, arms outstretched, for Sabat's philosophy was that Man was part of God and humility was hypocrisy. Again he was the

psychic mercenary seeking the help of a more powerful force; just as in the past he had summoned the old gods to assist him, he now sought the aid of three who had pursued Lilith in the days when the earth was young and the mud and filth out of which her Maker had moulded her was scarcely set.

Tranquility; the temperature of the room did not change, neither did the atmosphere seem charged with an inexplicable power. And when he had finished, dismantled the altar trappings and restored the room to its former state, Sabat had no idea whether or not his plea had been heard. He would not know for several hours, not until darkness had fallen. And by then it might be too late!

For the remainder of the day he fasted and rested, conditioned his mind and body to the terrible ordeal which lay ahead. His psychic training enabled him to shut out all thoughts of the coming battle with evil and even Quentin had lapsed into silence. Sabat was a soldier preparing for war.

It was nine o'clock when finally he left the hotel, dressed in his usual black attire, a tiny silver crucifix in each pocket of his jacket, the .38 a comforting weight in its holster although he recognised its shortcomings in this type of encounter. In addition he carried two lengths of rope, approximately a foot long, still damp from being immersed in holy water. And suddenly he had a feeling that perhaps the odds were not weighed so heavily against him.

The streets and the cobbled square were crowded, and from the shadows Sabat surveyed the throng. A casual observer might have been forgiven for presuming that this bustle of activity was a result of the fine mild evening, the crowds typical of Montmartre, artists and would-be artists, dropouts and drug-addicts emerging from their dens of despair to congregate here. But when you studied their faces, their eyes, you saw the expressions of resentment against the society which tolerated their existence, the hate which made them restless and eager to rebel, to begin a new French Revolution.

For this was the army of Lilith, the disciples of the Goddess of Darkness, the Blood Merchants, gathering in force to go forth and obey the will which was no longer their own!

Sabat skirted them, knew that beneath those ragged garments they carried the terrible blood guns, their targets Parisian citizens, on a night of carnage. He found the alleyway parallel to the street where Catriona Lealan skulked in her house of filth, a rear doorway that looked as though it had not been used for years but he could take no chances. In a matter of seconds he had fixed one of those short lengths of rope to its woodwork, securing it in three places with a dab of plastic putty, a triangular shaped hempen emblem that was so vital to this night's success. And as he stepped back he murmured a few words that had an affinity with the Sephirotic Tree.

A few minutes later he was standing at the front door of the house, glancing about him but seeing only darkness and a faint distant light that penetrated from the square. This time his fingers shook as he affixed the second piece of rope, his lips trembling as he uttered those words. For truly now the dice was cast and the outcome of this night rested with powers other than his own.

Even as he stepped back to survey his handiwork with eyes that had been trained to operate in the darkness some sense warned him that he was not alone and this saved him from instant death; a lunge that missed him fractionally, a sharp intake of breath and Sabat was grappling with an unknown assailant, fighting for his life and soul.

Sabat secured a grip on the arm which had delivered the blow, jerked it up and then downwards with a sudden deft movement, heard bone crack and a metallic sound as something struck the cobbles. A cry of pain but Sabat's other hand was already closing on that windpipe and stifling it. He felt and smelted rather than saw a youth in ragged stinking denims, the eyes blazing a hateful fanaticism that transcended pain, a Kamakazi pilot obsessed with carrying out his orders . . . the guardian of the Gateway to Evil!

Sabat's fingers loosened their hold on that neck but only for a split second, going up, extending, flexing. The blow was short and sharp, expertise over force, a karate neck-chop that found its mark with a dull thud. The other had no time to muster that cry again scarcely a grunt as his body sagged forward, the head lolling at a grotesque angle. Dead!

Sabat lowered the corpse down, dragged it into the darkest shadows, picked up the fallen blood gun and then returned to the door. He was not even breathing quickly, tense not because of what had happened but because of what lay ahead.

He tried the dilapidated knob gently, the sliver of steel in his other hand, an instrument which would open almost any lock. But he did not need to use it. With a faint creak the door of Catriona Lealan's abode swung gently open!

Sabat eased himself inside, closed the door behind him, stood there in the darkness waiting for his eyes to adjust to a blackness that was denser than the night-time shadows * outside. Listening, his ears tuned to pick up the slightest i sound, his every sense at full stretch. Nothing but silence. And that silence was far more terrible than the howling of evil spirits from beyond the grave.

His first thought was that perhaps the Lealans had flown, that Catriona with the guile of Lilith sensed his coming. But no, he knew they were here . . . somewhere! Because he felt the coldness, the presence of evil, a sensation that had him taking one of those tiny crucifixes out of his pocket, holding it up. And there

were words that he must utter, fearlessly, calling upon his faith not to desert him in this desperate hour. He must speak them now whilst he was still able.

'Deliver this house,' a cracked whisper that seemed to vibrate as though suddenly Quentin was trying to distract him, a radio operator attempting to scramble a message, 'from all evil spirits; all vain imaginations, projections, and phantasms; and all deceits of the evil one; and 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.'

Sabat was sweating profusely with the effort, a sudden feeling that all his strength was being drained from him. He filled his lungs, a desperate shout that echoed back at him off the walls. 'God, the Son of God, who by death destroyed death, and overcame him who had the power of death. Beat down Satan quickly!'

One moment of pregnant silence, followed by a loud crack, a vibration as though the whole building had suddenly lurched, its foundations caught by the tremors of some distant earthquake.

And in that instant lights came on, a dusty bulb suspended from the ceiling above him by a length of flex, another at the head of the stairs. Dim light that blinded by its suddenness, had Sabat covering his eyes to shut it out, crying out with the pain in his tortured eyes.

Then he could see again, blurred vision fighting to adjust itself, but sufficient to make out the tall slim figure of Catriona Lealan staring down at him from the landing above \

She was naked except for a black shawl draped loosely about her shoulders, her flesh so pale that she might have been a corpse except that her lips were full red, a liquid crimson that smeared down on to her chin, eyes glowing with a hatred that went far beyond mortal fury.

'Sabat!' She was trembling with the rage that had a hold on her. 'Still you try to thwart me with your puny power. But it is useless, for now I am Lilith and this night shall see my rise to power, this city and many others throughout the world shall run red with blood for already my armies are on the march.'

Sabat felt himself wilting, the arm holding the crucifix sinking down as though the weight of the silver was too heavy for it, the fingers opening up, the tiny cross falling and bouncing on the wooden boards. Those eyes, oh God, he could feel their power just as he had that night at Langdon Manor, burning into his own.

Fighting against it, his faith slipping from him, trying to clutch at it. Failing.

'Come,' a staccato command that had Sabat moving forward, mounting the stairs. 'For you shall see the extent of my power before you die, before your soul is destroyed so that Quentin may rise again. Once I offered you a part in my plans but you spurned me and I dare not risk your treachery again.'

She was gliding on ahead of him, her back contemptuously turned on him, scorning his ability to attack her, pushing open the door of the upper room, standing back so that he could see inside.

Oh God, it was identical to the room where Pierre Vallin had made his unholy vows, the same altar and box cradle in the corner; a whimpering infant in the soiled and bloodstained blankets, another lying before the inverted crucifix, its throat gashed open. And Vallin, too, just as he had been then, five centuries ago, a senile wizened filthy excuse for humanity grovelling on the floor, muttering unintelligibly!

'It is now as it was then,' Catriona cackled. 'Pierre, or Vince as you know him, has come to this, for his power was but mortal fanatical desire, as was the one whose life he lived before. So he must cringe and serve, in the same way that I hoped you might, Sabat, but alas you are too dangerous and only the total destruction of your body and soul remains. Already I can hear the screams on the streets, smell the blood in which the world will be bathed before dawn \'

Lealan reared himself up, fixed his sunken eyes on Sabat, babbled his hate for one he recognised, clawed at the air as though attempting to retrieve his shattered dreams.

'Kneel, Sabat,' there was a note of hysteria in Catriona Lealan's voice. 'Kneel before the altar of the Great One, alongside one who also had dreams of grandeur.'

Sabat fought feebly, felt his feet move forward, his knees bending and hitting the floor so that he almost pitched on to his face. A sense of failure like a terminal disease that has been fought valiantly throughout but prevails in the end. Prayers that had been his last hope had gone unheard.

Catriona moved to the altar, picked up one of the blood guns, the sadistic invention of an SAS Colonel whose days of glory were already over. She laughed loudly. 'The blood of Sabat, truly wine to be savoured by the Master, the Evil One himself V'

Even as she advanced on him Sabat had a premonition, a feeling beyond comprehension that something was happening. A faint vibrating of woodworm-riddled floorboards as though that quake was returning.

The syringe-gun poised, Catriona hesitated. The altar seemed to shudder, that infant body moving, rolling as though life had suddenly been restored to it. The light bulb swung, flickered, almost extinguished . . . picking up a dazzling, blinding reflection like a silver bolt flashing to its mark! The upturned crucifix lost its point of balance, fell. Turning, swivelling, righting itself, its base embedding in the rotting floorboards, quivering in an upright position!

And with it Sabat felt a sudden release from the hypnotic bonds that bound him, a return to freedom for mind and body, flinging himself back so that the javelin point of the weapon intended for his jugular vein completed its thrust then thudded to the floor. Catriona screamed, a cry that embodied hopelessness and fear, a vocal bugle call of defeat.

The bulb went out but did not plunge the room into total darkness; instead a glow prevailed, a kind of soft blue aura by which Sabat could discern every detail, the panic of a beautiful woman, gathering herself for flight now that her ultimate plans were smouldering in the ashes of defeat.

Sabat was on his feet, his whole being responding to a faith which had not deserted him, merely tested him. Somebody was groaning. It might have been Colonel Vince Lealan as he scrabbled with useless limbs to drag himself up; or it could have been Quentin bemoaning yet another lost cause.

'I charge you, Lilith, Goddess of the night hours,' Sabat's voice was firm and clear, a victory cry, 'in the names of Sanvi, Sansanvi and Semangelaf, angels of God, that you shall return to that place whence you came, to . . . !'

Catriona's scream was terrible, the agony of a mortally wounded female cat, three names that burned her like branding irons on a yearling, had her leaping for the stairs, slipping, falling. A creature physically and mentally injured, dragging herself to the door, staggering up to grasp the handle, tugging at it wildly.

Sabat had moved to the top of the stairs, watched her with eyes that held no pity for this suddenly demented thing.

For all her efforts, her curses, the door refused to move, as secure as though the lock had been turned.

Catriona beat at it with her fists, spat crimson spittle, then dragged herself the length of, the hall, her frenzied efforts beginning again as she attacked the rear door. But it, too, remained secure, until eventually she sank down exhausted, her rage gone, only utter despair remaining.

Sabat smiled, began to descend the stairs slowly.

None would pass through either door, neither front nor back, except by his behest. For the hempen barricades so favoured by the followers of the Left Hand Path had been charged by the three angels, Sanvi, Sansanvi and Semangelaf who had hunted Lilith since the beginning of Mankind. And soon they would come for her. White magic had prevailed over black.

He went back into that room, surveyed the wreckage. It was as though a hurricane had passed through, the frail wooden altar having collapsed, smashed on impact, the big crucifix standing proudly amidst the debris, a conqueror's banner.

Vince Lealan was still muttering incomprehensible vile obscenities, mucus rattling in his throat and lungs. Yet Sabat had no pity for him as he stood over him, no mercy in those flashing dark eyes.

'You bastard!' Sabat hissed and drove a plimsolled foot into the face, the head jerking back, bone cracking beneath the impact. 'Maybe you were her tool but that doesn't let you out in my book!'

A sudden rain of blows as Sabat unleashed his fury, an onslaught that would undoubtedly have ended in the other's death had he not checked himself. For that would truly have been a reprieve for the man who had called himself the new Fuhrer.

Colonel Vince Lealan, late of the SAS, stared up with fear in his eyes, pleading for death that he knew would be denied him. Still hating, a man who had aged decades in weeks because Lilith had demanded that time be rerun and that Pierre Vallin return to do her bidding in her final hour.

Sabat's fingers rested on the butt of his .38 in its holster; he remembered a terrorist he'd captured once in a remote farmhouse. Five shots he'd fired that night, shattering the limbs with four, the fifth a stomach shot that had virtually disembowelled his prisoner. Death had been slow, and Sabat had enjoyed his role

as spectator because he remembered the atrocities the other had committed. A life for a life, it was the only way.

It could have been that way now but hours of agony would be too quick for Lealan. Far better that he rotted the rest of his life away in some hell of a French gaol . . . and remembered over and over again, relived this night a thousand times.

Sabat turned away, "went back downstairs. Catriona was propped up against the wall, one of her shapely legs twisted at an unnatural angle. This time she did not fix him with her eyes, her gaze riveted on the floor. Broken in mind and spirit. Defeated.

Sabat sighed, regretted that he could not do those things to her which at the time had seemed so necessary to destroy the soul of Lilith; lash the tender flesh from her evil body until her agonies were relieved by death, then drive a steel shaft between those voluptuous breasts, hack the head from the body and trap her astral body before it accepted its freedom. But these things were not his to do now because he had summoned a higher authority.

The queen of flagellation herself!' biting scorn as he toed her legs apart, trod on the soft flesh so that she cried out in pain, delighting in being a spectator to possibly the only genuine tears that Catriona Lealan had ever shed. 'Beaten at the last. Jesus, I wish it hadn't turned out this way, that I hadn't bargained with . . . them; that I'd had you to myself this last hour!'

'Sabat,' she had to make a determined effort to speak. 'It . . . doesn't have to be this way. We could go some place, you and I, start again . . . '

'I don't rightly know where you'll be going,' he answered, 'but one thing's for sure, /won't be there. Your army's finished. Even now they're mooching the streets wondering what the hell they're carrying oversize pistols for, and being picked up by the police in lorry-loads. The Disciples of Lilith are finished and the Liberation Front will become just the Liberation Front once more, and nobody will take much notice of them.'

She gave a sob, hung her head and when she looked up again Sabat was gone out through the door which by his strong magic he had kept closed to her. Now she was trembling violently, knowing that the three she feared most, those she had fled from throughout her many evil lives, would come for her before darkness was melted by the dawn.

Sabat closed the door behind him, crossed the narrow street and stood in the shadows opposite. Watching and waiting because he had to be sure.

All around he could hear the sound of police sirens, excited shouting, cursing. But no gunfire from the gendarmes because the ragged army offered no resistance. It would be like this in many other major cities; he wondered briefly how McKay was faring.

And then Sabat saw them coming, three uniformed gendarmes with bolstered pistols, flitting like wraiths put of the shadows, going into that house of terror. It seemed that only seconds had elapsed before they came out, two of them supporting a broken Catriona the third one bringing up the rear. Her head hung forward so that her features were hidden behind a mass of blonde hair and not a sound came from her. Then the darkness swallowed them up and Sabat 'knew that they had gone and would not be returning.

And he wondered about those three gendarmes, a trio for whom a long hunt was over and whose names were undoubtedly Sanvi, Sansanvi, and Semangelaf.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'JESUS CHRIST Almighty, Sabat!' Detective Sergeant Clive McKay of the CID sipped his whisky and regarded Sabat steadily. 'I don't know what the fuck you did in Paris but from all accounts it was just like it was here, hundreds of skinheads and dropouts, the scum of the Continent, just wandering aimlessly about the streets carrying these diabolical guns that they hadn't a clue how to use, and handing 'em to the cops as though they were offering cigarettes. Didn't know where they'd got 'em or who gave 'em the fucking things. Bloody crazy.'

'And the Lealans?' Sabat's expression gave nothing away.

'As if you didn't bloody well know!' McKay grinned but knew an explanation was expected of him all the same. 'Vince was discovered off his rocker in a house in Montmartre, along with a dead baby and another one whose mother can't believe she's got it back alive. No sign of Catriona but perhaps you know more about that than us. And old Vince couldn't tell if he knew, because at present he's banging on the door of his cell and yelling that they've got to let him out because he's Stalin and the people need him. And we've got reports of kids with these gun things as far afield as Sydney, Tokyo, New York. I guess there must be a few in the Soviet, too, but they'll be dealt with and we'll never hear of it!'

'Shall we just say that it was yet another clash of the forces of Good and Evil?' Sabat stretched, didn't attempt to hide his yawn. 'A battle that will go on long after you and I aren't here, Clive. We'll win some and lose some, but I doubt whether there will ever be a conclusive end to it all.'

But McKay's biggest problem was the report he would have to type out for the AC. In some ways he both envied and resented the police chief's role in such matters. Just another office job, delegation and arses to kick when things went wrong. So safe, no danger at all...

Sabat knew that his astral body was going to wander off somewhere that night. He sensed it as he climbed into bed, a kind of restless fatigue in which the average man would toss and turn and kick hell out of the bedclothes all night. But Sabat was past caring; even Quentin had lapsed into what might, hopefully, be a long period of silence.

Sabat felt exhilarated by the speed of his precipitation from the world below, a night creature on the wing, going where he was led by some inexplicable instinct, a homing-pigeon that could not disobey. Going faster and faster, out of darkness into light, a sun that scorched the land below it. Recognisable, Sabat smelling the putrefaction of bodies that had laid in the heat throughout the day, but this time he was not going to visit that arid battleground, drawn on elsewhere.

Now it was cooler, the landscape beneath him rugged with odd patches of greenery here and there;

mountains so high that some of the peaks were obscured by cloud, a country as dark and frightening as that where the vultures gorged themselves on the slain. Yet there was a similarity between the two.

Sabat did not see the castle until he was almost upon it, a turreted shape materialising out of the mist, its stonework weather beaten and crumbling. Curious, he alighted before the portals, saw the massive weed-covered courtyard open to him and changed his form to that of a peasant, a humble man clad in goatskins who entered with trepidation.

At first he thought that no one lived here for the place had a desolate look about it, but even as he stood there peering about him he heard the slow shuffling footsteps of somebody approaching, a shambling figure that came into view through one of the archways.

'We were expecting you, Sabat,' the newcomer was clad in a suit of hides that had seen many winters in a land where summer was unknown, the material appeared to cling to his flesh as though it formed an exterior layer of skin; a squat frame, the head seeming too large and heavy for the shoulders, the legs short and bowed. The features were barely visible beneath a matted growth of jet black hair and beard, the eyes small and bright and missing nothing, flicking over Sabat. 'Come, follow me for your time here is short, unlike mine.'

Sabat followed the keeper of the castle inside, saw bare walls that ran with moisture, the furniture fashioned out of felled timber. A dismal edifice in which there was no comfort, footsteps echoing eerily, and if you listened hard enough you could hear a constant moaning; either it was the wind howling through the battlements or else the souls of the damned crying in torment from the dungeons below.

The guide plucked a lighted torch from a bracket in the wall and began to descend a flight of uneven stone steps, Sabat was aware of the damp cold, an aroma like rotting flesh coming up to meet them. Down and still down, then along passages with earth floors that intersected, an underground maze where the stench was stronger, the screams louder.

Finally they came to a heavy wooden door and the bearded man lifted the latch, swung it back on rope hinges.

'See, Sabat, (he dungeon of the damned where the sentences are for eternity!'

Sabat recoiled at the scene which the flickering flame revealed. A dungeon prison that seemed to go on

and on into the black shadows, naked emaciated bodies that hung by their arms from staples embedded in the walls, the faces depicting eternal torment, mouths shaped into perpetual cries of terror. Old and young, a motley assortment, rats scurrying away from the light, disturbed at their feast of living flesh; bloated like the vultures in the desert, those in the foreground shadows masticating as they watched, impatient to return and feed again.

'Follow me.'

Sabat obeyed because he had no choice, close on the heels of his companion along a line of squirming bodies, their breath cold and fetid. A chorus of curses that vibrated on the brain as Quentin did when he sensed an evil ally.

'That is the one!'

The gaoler had picked up a whip from somewhere, a wooden handled instrument of chastisement, its lashes knotted at the ends, and held it out to Sabat. 'This is why you have been summoned here!'

Sabat stared, recognised the bloodstained, tear-streaked features of a woman who had once been beautiful although it was difficult to imagine her so. Blonde hair that had turned to white, breasts that were no longer full, and sagged like empty pouches. A leg that was twisted and useless, the ankle bone rattling against its iron. Only the eyes were the same, an unmistakable blue and still trying to dominate with a power that was long spent. Catriona Lealan! Lilith! It was she, rotting in a hell where there was no fire to warm, a Hades whose inmates were condemned forever to the Stygian blackness and the rats.

'You expressed a wish to lash her,' the gaoler's tones were emotionless, 'and for that reason you were summoned.'

Sabat winced and wished that somehow he could rekindle that hatred for Catriona Lealan that had once burned fiercely within him. But he could not. Nor compassion. It was just a job that had to be done and he had been chosen. And that was why he would do it.

He nodded, raised the whip, tried not to look into those eyes. Then the dungeons resounded with the tearing of flesh and the screams of a soul in agony. For Lilith who was fashioned out of mud and filth had been returned to that place of darkness where even the evil powers themselves feared to venture. Filth to filth for eternity.

