

Cannibal Cult – Sabat 03

Guy N. Smith

CHAPTER ONE

THE GUILLLOTINE; brutal instantaneous bloody death, a hellish instrument of execution. It dominated the white-tiled room, a metallic structure that gleamed evilly in the stark fluorescent light.

Louis Nevillon was calm as his guards allowed him a few seconds to savour his fate. They were gloating, he could read it in their smug, supposedly impassive, expressions. Even the priest. Tete-de-chien! The executioner was masked, a custom that went back centuries, but there was a gleam in the pale blue eyes that stared out of the cloth slits that was unmistakable. It was Gallon, of course. Who else? Nobody had ever seen his face, at least none of his victims. Just those cold orbs, enjoying every second; not hurrying because it was all over in a second and what were an extra few minutes to a doomed man?

Nevillon returned his stare. His heart missed a beat; for one second he thought the other flinched but it could have been a trick of the light. But why should it be? These cochons were all frightened of Nevillon,

even though they had him shackled, his head as good as on the block. Even now they feared that he might strike them dead with his inexplicable, terrible magic. The fifteenth century or the twentieth, it made no difference. Each and every person has a lurking fear of the unknown. Except Nevillon, of course.

They had been scared of him throughout the ten-day trial, armed warders and police surrounding the dock, a company of special Surete ringing the building. The press claimed it was to keep the angry crowds back, to stop them from breaking in with their own brand of justice.

Nevillon had sensed clammy hands tightening over revolver butts each time he had shifted position, eyes averted every time he had looked around the crowded court room. Even the judge flinched, licking his dry lips continually, snapped irritably at the witness for the prosecution for not speaking up. The little plump man had blanched, swallowed, continued his evidence in a loud hoarse whisper, his gaze averted so that his eyes did not meet Nevillon's.

Nevillon had never doubted that they would find him guilty. He had considered a plea, spurned the advice of his counsel. Fourteen charges of murder, nine of mutilation. They could only guillotine you once.

By the fifth day of the trial he was refusing to answer questions, silent contempt that was making the jury uneasy. Even now they had reached their decision, but when the time came it would need courage to voice it. Because Louis Nevillon was no ordinary murderer. Had he not already told them that he was a descendant of Silvain Nevillon who was burned for witchcraft at Orleans in 1614. Descendant? He was more than that. A reincarnation! Silvain himself reborn, a line of evil that even the guillotine could not destroy. But these fools would not understand that.

Each charge brought a racing of Nevillon's pulses, a quickening of his heartbeat. The mention of Yvette de Coulon gave him an erection as though even now she lay naked before him, wide-eyed with terror, yielding.

'Louis Nevillon, did you not on the night of 30 April kidnap one Yvette de Coulon from her home and take her to a place of devil worship at Nemours where you committed vile and unspeakable acts upon her body both in life and in death?' 30 April - Walpurgisnacht!

By not so much as the flicker of an eyelid did Nevillon betray his emotions. Perhaps they noticed his arousal pushing at the zip of his dark serge trousers. Half-hearted staccato barks from the judge demanding an answer, but Louis Nevillon remained silent and impassive. He wanted to hear it all from their lips, relive it in his own mind in the telling. His senses were sharp; he had a good memory. He smelled again the freshness of that young body, tasted it again on his palate.

'... and in company with others unknown to this court you, Louis Nevillon, attempted to commune with Satan. After you had raped the said girl you then proceeded to drain the blood from her body, drinking it with your followers. And then ... and then ..."

A sharp intake of breaths in unison, a sea of faces that paled; shying away, not wanting to hear the truth.

'And then ... what?' the judge's tongue was flicking like a hungry lizard in search of insects. 'This court must know exactly what happened!'

'And then ... Louis Nevillon, you proceeded to mutilate the corpse still further, hacking it limb from limb ... distributing joints of human flesh to your followers, joining with them in cannibalism. In the space of a few hours the entire body of Yvette de Coulon was devoured, after which you perpetrated acts that defy the belief of sane people with the remaining bones!'

A piercing scream from somewhere up in the public gallery, the thud of a falling body. People rushing; somebody being stretchered out. Madame de Coulon, the dead girl's mother. Nevillon permitted himself the faintest of smiles. He had many ways of taking his revenge on people; every one of them in here and those chanting out in the street would pay for their arrogance in a variety of ways.

The lesser killings; some not proven. He heard the drone of words but his mind was elsewhere. He could, had he chosen, have transported his astral body on to the astral plane, left behind a useless body impervious to pain - but that would not have served his purpose. The Nevillon evil must live on and he had to see it through to the end. The guillotine; degradation but painless. The sooner it was over the better.

He was suddenly aware that the death sentence had been passed amidst an eager murmur throughout the crowded courtroom. Time had slipped by, the jury had been out for three hours and he had not noticed their absence. Now he was back in the dock, a condemned man being led down a flight of stone steps, his guards losing no opportunity to hustle him. A kick from behind almost sent him sprawling. They would all pay for this!

The journey from the court to the prison would have been a nightmare for any man other than Nevillon. It was all the police could do to restrain the crowds, a blur of hate-filled faces screaming abuse, a fusillade of rotten fruit and eggs continually splatting against the vehicle, rivulets of thick red tomato juice

trickling down the two small barred windows, reminding Louis Nevillon of Yvette de Coulon again and giving him another erection. It had all been worth it.

The guards inside the prison van had their pistols drawn even though he was handcuffed. Like everybody else, they were frightened of the tall grey-haired man with the aristocratic features. History was repeating itself, another nobleman on his way to M. Guillotine, the mob roaring for his head and the sight of blood. He laughed aloud and his two companions started, blanching, their pistol barrels jerking up and training on his chest.

'You will not laugh when your head is on the block, Monsieur Nevillon' one of them spat. 'I have witnessed an execution. Once. Shall I tell you all about it?'

'I, too, have been present at an execution,' Nevillon replied softly, 'so perhaps you would like to hear about mine first. The condemned girl's name was Yvette ...'

'Cochonr a clenched fist caught the prisoner across the mouth, jerked his head back. 'Filthy swine!'

The second man drove forward with a booted foot, took Louis Nevillon full in the groin, knocked him from his seat More blows. He threw up his manacled hands but it was impossible to ward them off.

'If I had my way,' the guard who had delivered the first blow restrained his colleague, 'I would not put his head on the block. A little at a time, eh, Marcel? One leg, two... one arm, two ... maybe something else after that!' He winked and they both roared with malicious mirth.

Now the end was in sight. The priest wanted to see him dead because it was all part of the fight against evil. The guards, the executioner, this was their revenge for Yvette de Coulon. Fools, Satan's own could not be destroyed by the guillotine; he was not as other men.

The priest was mumbling something, reciting from a prayer book. None of them tried to look pious; they were deliberately prolonging the finale, thinking that he would suffer untold mental agonies these last few minutes. They should have drugged him but they had deliberately overlooked this act of legal mercy. Who was to know? This chamber was soundproofed; nobody would hear his final screams for mercy.

Yet Louis Nevillon heard the huge gathering beyond the high prison walls, a slow countdown to the accompaniment of slow handclapping and the stamping of feet. They were shouting Yvette de Coulon's name.

Two of the warders led Nevillon forward, viciously kicked his legs from under him so that he fell hard, was dragged into a kneeling position, the steel neckbands almost choking him as his head was strapped on to the block. His eyes should have been covered but this, like the sedatives, was ignored.

He could see everything that was happening. A detailed reflection on the polished stainless steel base on which the guillotine stood, spared him nothing. It wasn't meant to; a conspiracy between these four had determined his final agony.

They were taking their time, the masked man checking and double-checking. So rarely was the death penalty used in France that he needed to savour each occasion. Particularly in the case of Louis Nevillon. It was Gallon's finest hour, the peak of a distinguished career in death.

'Have you anything to say?' The priest was standing back as though suddenly he felt guilty about this mental torture, sought to make amends for the sake of his own conscience.

'Ottif Nevillon laughed softly. 'You are a man of God.' A faint sneer. 'So doubtless you are well acquainted with the happenings of the third day following the crucifixion of the man purporting to be the Son of God.'

'I am' a haughtiness. 'Why?'

'Because, my friend,' Nevillon had stopped laughing, his voice a hoarse whisper that all four of them heard clearly, their flesh prickling even before he had got the words out, 'on the third day I shall live and you will fear my coming!'

'This is blasphemy!' the padre paled, almost dropped his prayer book. 'Monsieur Gallon, delay no longer in the name of Our Lord!'

'I shall rise again!' Nevillon repeated and saw the reflection of the executioner's hand on the switch; he

heard a faint click but had no time to anticipate the falling heavy blade.

The priest turned his head away, heard the first thud as the knife struck, followed by a lighter one as the severed head rolled into the basket. A spurting gurgling sound, the main artery jetting, the drain below the basket taking the flow of blood. Somewhere below, water was flowing to wash the scarlet fluid into the city's sewers.

Gallon paused to survey his handiwork. Perfect. So quick, and that was always a pity where a man like Louis Nevillon was concerned. The two warders just stared; if they came upon a gory road accident tomorrow they would stop and look. Blood fascinated them, so long as it was not their own.

'Thank you, gentlemen,' Gallon was the formal national executioner once more. 'Your presence has been a great help to me. The condemned man died quickly and painlessly.' Unfortunately!

Outside, the crowd had fallen silent. Obscene chanting had died to low muttered conversation and then petered out altogether. Yvette de Coulon had been avenged. There was nothing more to stay here for.

Slowly the gathering broke up, began to file away in an orderly fashion. The watching police bolstered their pistols and breathed an audible sigh of relief.

The Beast of France was no more. In time the bitter and gruesome memories would fade. It was all over.

'I say it is impossible!' The prison governor trembled and banged his desk with a clenched fist, causing an open ink-well to overturn and spill its blue-black contents. 'It is absolutely impossible. This is some kind of joke and the perpetrator will be punished!'

'It is no joke, monsieur,' the deputy governor licked his lips nervously. 'I have been and seen for myself, for, like yourself, I did not believe it at first. But there is no possible doubt - the corpse of Louis Nevillon has disappeared from the execution chamber, both head and trunk. All that remains are a few bloodstains that failed to wash away!'

'But how? And why?'

'I wish I knew, monsieur, but I think this is a matter for the Surete.'

An uneasy frightened silence.

'*I will come and look.' The governor stood up, a man in his mid-forties who had suddenly aged considerably. 'Perhaps ... perhaps there is some mistake.'

There wasn't; there could not be because there was nowhere in the execution chamber where the decapitated body of Louis Nevillon could be lying hidden. Ashen-faced and trembling visibly, the governor checked the 'basket', a stainless steel container below the block with a wide drain fitted at the bottom. Just some blood which was rapidly congealing, nothing else. The blade rested where it had fallen, a crimson-splattered chunk of honed steel that glinted in the harsh electric light, seemed to gloat as though it guarded some sinister secret. The rest of the room was bare.

'But how?' the governor wrung his hands helplessly. 'Somebody has stolen it. The guards ...'

'Nobody can escape from here, dead or alive,' the small deputy stated, as though he had rehearsed the sentence word for word schoolboy-fashion.

'Then there is a conspiracy afoot,' the other was desperately trying to force himself to believe some logical explanation. Nevillon had been evil, had communed with the devil and eaten human flesh. Yet dead, he was as other corpses; he could not be otherwise. His magic had died with him.

'We shall have to inform the Surete and conduct an inquiry.' The governor walked quickly back towards the door. He shivered, it was icy cold in here and the strip-lighting seemed to have dimmed. Perhaps it was his imagination. 'Until then nobody must enter this chamber.' He locked the door behind them.

The inquiry into the disappearance of Louis Nevillon's corpse was conducted jointly by the prison authorities and the Surete. Everybody was interrogated from the governor down to the most junior warder, but in the end no conclusion was reached - except by four men who kept their opinions to themselves. Monsieur Gallon, the infamous French executioner, the padre, and the two warders who had been in attendance at Nevillon's death. They remembered the murderer's final words as his head lay on

the block.

'On the third day I shall rise again. I shall live and you will fear my comingr

The body of the Beast of France had vanished into thin air, Louis Nevillon had spoken the truth.

He would live again.

CHAPTER TWO

SABAT'S BROW furrowed into a worried frown. He shook his head slowly, stroked a finger down the long scar on his left cheek, a memento from his SAS days that still seemed to smart on odd occasions. His dark eyes narrowed, his lips compressed into a thin bloodless line. Tall yet muscular beneath his dark suit, he gave the impression of a coiled spring, latent power that was not to be trifled with.

He read through the short, almost insignificant, passage at the foot of an inside page of the Telegraph a second time. EXECUTED MAN'S BODY DISAPPEARS

The corpse of Louis Nevillon, guillotined in Paris last week for mass murder, is reported to have disappeared from the execution chamber. A Surete spokesman declined to comment on it.

Which meant that the French authorities were baffled; they rarely commented on failures. The newspaper fell from Sabat's fingers and he stared vacantly out of the window, did not see the dense shrubberies which gave his WestHampstead house its seclusion; saw only in his mind a grey-haired man with aristocratic features, a hint of nobility that failed to hide the evil in those close-set eyes and narrow mouth. Sabat recalled every detail, indelibly imprinted on his brain from the one occasion when he had met Nevillon. Maybe the intervening years had changed the Frenchman physically, a few lines here and there, the grey slowly turning to white, but the man himself would not alter. A Grand Master of the Left Hand Path. The Beast of France.

Sabat sighed. Such powerful evil could not be wiped out by the guillotine. In the same way that bullets had been unable to destroy Sabat's own brother, Quentin, that day when Mark Sabat had attempted to blast him into oblivion during their final encounter down in that mountain grave.* The dead man's soul had found another body- his own! And Sabat had harboured Quentin's evil ever since, struggled to overcome it but it had only been subdued, his own strength and faith keeping it under control. One momentary flash of weakness on his own part and it rose up again like a deadly snake, spread its poison through him, dominated his every thought and action. Quentin still lived. Even now, he could hear that nasal, mocking laughter in the recesses of his own brain, whispered taunting words: 'They didn't kill Louis Nevillon, He lives again'

He cleared his throat, tried to get rid of the rasping soreness that began in his tonsils and seemed to travel right down to his lungs. He shivered, felt suddenly cold, his flesh goosepimpling. Damn it, he'd got a chill. Even the fittest of men, and Sabat had looked after his body since his ignominious discharge from the SAS, picked up the odd infection. Maybe he would be better off in bed. It was like giving in, surrendering. Quentin's laughter again, sensing any weakness, mental or physical, a lurking inner deadly enemy.

Sabat's head was aching. It had been feeling muzzy ever since he had got up and now his temples were throbbing as though an invisible goblin was pounding away at them with a tiny hammer. His eyes smarted and there was a dry, sour taste in his mouth. Bed was definitely the best place.

It was an effort to climb the stairs, dragging himself up a step at a time, his sweaty hands slipping on the polished oak rail. A stiff whisky and a couple of aspirins; he would be OK in the morning.

He shivered uncontrollably as his naked flesh came into contact with the sheets, cooling his body temperature fast and making him curl himself up into a ball in an attempt to generate heat. The whisky had burned his throat, he'd had difficulty getting those aspirin tablets down. He felt as though he might vomit and wondered if he was capable of making it across to the bathroom.

He closed his eyes, saw Louis Nevillon's face again, smirking. A voice somewhere; he couldn't make out the words but he knew it was Quentin's. Nobody was bothering much about the murderer's missing decapitated body except a few red-faced prison officials whose security system was being criticised. They didn't realise; they couldn't be expected to. Somebody had to ...

What the hell's it got to do with you, Sabat? Nothing. It's none of my business. Trying to find a reason not to do anything about it. I'm not well enough to go to Paris. I don't have the time anyway. Jumbled thoughts which emanated from that open clearing in the wooded mountains and travelled incoherently. A beautiful SAS colonel's wife who liked to whip men until they cringed and pleaded for mercy. Lilith, Goddess of Darkness, reborn, using that same colonel to do her bidding; indoctrinating him into believing that he was a reincarnation of Adolf Hitler and that, between them, the world was theirs for the taking with their pseudo vampire army. And a clergyman who also thought he could bring the world to its knees, a takeover by the dark forces.

And so it would have been were it not for your meddling, Sabat!

Vicious female tones, a cry of hate and anguish from beyond the grave. Laughter. Sabat wasn't sure whether it was his brother's soul or the insane cacklings of Royston Spode, from the depths of that crumbling crypt where the evil churchman's dreams had finally been buried. They were all trying to get at him from beyond the final barrier.

Sabat's body burned. With every ounce of strength he could muster he threw the bedclothes back, kicked them clear of his overheated flesh, basked in the cooling sensations brought on by a chill night atmosphere, one that was falling rapidly.

It was dark. He tried to work out how long he had been in bed. It had been fully daylight when he had come upstairs and that seemed only a matter of minutes ago. He attempted to identify the computerised illuminated digits on the radio alarm clock, but the fingers swam and merged into meaningless hieroglyphics. He raised himself up on to an elbow but fell back on to the pillow, heard the wheezings of his own breaths. Christ, he'd never been so weak before!

You're weak now, Sabat. Helpless. You can't fight anymore!

He tensed, recognised the husky dominant tones of Catriona Lealan. But that was impossible; he had destroyed her utterly, body and soul! Somebody was mimicking her, but it had the same effect. Just thinking about her as she used to be in those far-off days was doing things to him ...

Sabat tried to check the feeling, tried to think of other things, but it was futile. His pulses raced and his fevered body demanded satisfaction, ordered him to pay homage to the memory of one who had once loved him with a sadistic viciousness.

Somehow his sweaty fingers found the strength to do what his erection was screaming out for. He tensed, shuddered, cast off the feeling of guilt and felt it replaced by one of unbelievable euphoria. To hell with everybody! Watch me if you want to, you bastards, because I like you watching me.

His nakedness was bathed in sweat, every nerve alive and responding. He wasn't ill after all; just experiencing pent-up frustration because he hadn't had a woman for a long time now. And in the darkened room they were willing him to do the next best thing, urging him to confess his past secret pleasures.

Sabat's voice seemed to echo in the darkness to the accompaniment of hollow whispered laughter which might have been Catriona's. Or Vince Lealan's. Or Royston Spode's.

Or Quentin's!

Sabat told them everything they wanted to hear. They knew it already, so it didn't matter. They just wanted to listen to it coming from his own lips. He told them of that occasion in his adolescence when he had let another of his own sex do what he'd wanted to do. How he had enjoyed it. He'd felt guilty afterwards because convention had dominated, driven him in a fit of cowardice to seek refuge in priesthood. Sabat cringed at the memory, blasphemed. The SAS had been his salvation, taught him the real pleasures of life ... taught him how to kill amongst other things.

Have you ever taken human life, Sabat?

You know fucking well I have. That terrorist... Sabat winced, heard the deafening reports of his own

pistol in the confined space, the screams of his victim as he writhed like a helpless landed fish, arms and legs shattered, pleading for death and being denied it. Laughter again ... Sabat's.

Women. Jealous naked bodies materialising out of the past, fighting amongst themselves, clamouring for him, displaying themselves lewdly. Fuck me, Sabat, the way you used to. Fingers that were not his own taking over, speeding up, a million sensations blending into one mind-blowing explosion of mind and body.

Sabat was convulsing, floating in a void, but they wouldn't let up on him, a forest of frenzied arms and legs that grabbed and pulled and squeezed him until he was crying out for them to stop. The laughter was louder now, hurting his throbbing head. He tore his hands free, pressed them to his ears but he could not shut out the noise. You're too weak to resist, Sabat.

He was back on the bed in a splayed heap, shivering uncontrollably, groping blindly for the bedclothes but they were gone. So cold, so frightening Cringing. There's nothing to be afraid of. You're not Mark Sabat - you're Quentin. One of us!

The dreaded reversal, one soul overcoming another after weeks and months of awaiting its opportunity. Sabat was still trying to fight, an autumnal leaf attempting to resist a gale, being swept away. Sobbing, something he had not done since ... since when! He couldn't remember crying, not even in childhood; his frustrations had always built up into something more vicious, revenge at any cost. Oh God, he'd have his revenge on them, make them pay dearly for this. He had to fight!

Crawling, slumping down, fingers that trembled with cold and terror searching the darkness, touching something that toppled and fell; the handset of the bedside trimphone. He groped for it again. It was like a wriggling serpent trying to escape him, but in the end he caught it, dragged it back. Invisible fingers tried to tear it from his grasp but he managed to hold on.

Trying to dial, the spring so strong that he could hardly move the digits. Any number, it didn't matter. Got to tell them... warn them..., about Louis Nevillon!

Sabat almost fainted, felt his chilled slippery fingers losing their hold on the handset. It fell, swung to and fro below the bed like some taunting pendulum, evil to good and back to evil. He couldn't muster the strength to try and catch it again. He moaned aloud.

A pause, then a sound apart from the rasping of his laboured lungs. Metallic, so divorced from this atmosphere of enshrouding evil. It took Sabat some seconds to work out what it was; and then he knew. The phone was ringing out at the other end, some anonymous number.

A voice. It wasn't Quentin's nor any of the others; a jumble of meaningless words that did not register in his numbed brain, becoming angry, impatient. Shouting.

Sabat tried to speak, tried to warn them about Louis Nevillon but all he managed were animal-like gasps and grunts. They were trying to shout him down, a whispering noise like the hissing of angry demons. Weakening still further, feeling his senses slipping from him, knowing that they had beaten him in the end.

The phone went silent at approximately the same time as Sabat lost consciousness and rolled off the bed on to the floor.

CHAPTER THREE

LIGHTS so bright that they seared Sabat's eyeballs even though his eyes were still closed; a sickly sour-sweat smell that almost had him vomiting.

He lay motionless, tried to work out where he was, what had happened. The darkness that had hidden so many evil entities was gone and in its place was harsh blinding light. He knew that he was in a bed but it did not seem as comfortable as his own, like wooden boards beneath him.

After a lengthy mental struggle he came to the conclusion that he was in a hospital. Somehow he had been saved, his SOS call had got through in spite of their efforts.

He opened his eyes a fraction, squinted. It was a hospital ward all right and there were screens around his bed, people beyond them talking in low muttered tones. He tried to make out what they were saying but it was impossible; a harsh nasal voice that reminded him of Quentin. He closed his eyes, tried to work out what had happened.

He'd been ill. Or had he? It was as though his body had been taken over by ... something; an inner force dominating, making him subservient to the dark powers. He'd lost all track of time. It could have been hours or weeks ago.

A movement, somebody coming inside the screens. Sabat squinted again, saw a tall angular man wearing a long white coat and spectacles that seemed to enlarge his frog-like eyes; approaching the bed, bending over to scrutinise the patient. Sabat had no reason to keep his eyes shut any longer. The brightness hurt but he decided it was time he found out what was going on.

'Ah, Mr Sabat!' a note of relief in the doctor's voice. 'You have decided to join us at last.'

'How long have I been here?' Sabat grunted, suddenly realised how weak he felt, even his own voice was barely recognisable.

'Ten days.' The other consulted a chart, pursed his lips pensively.

'Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what's been the matter.'

'You've had pneumonia' the eyes flicked back on to Sabat, an expression that almost reprimanded.

'Touch and go for a week, I'm afraid. We moved you out of intensive care the day before yesterday. It was lucky you managed to telephone for help, otherwise I'm afraid you would not have made it through the night. Fortunately the person who got your call had enough commonsense to realise that there was something wrong and the police were able to trace the number.'

Sabat tried to struggle up but his muscles were not strong enough. With a curse he fell back, grimaced. 'How much longer before ...'

'Now don't you get any ideas about going anywhere,' the doctor wagged a finger. 'You're lucky to be alive and you've got to regain your strength. It will take weeks, and even after you leave here you've got to go away somewhere for a nice long convalescence.'

Sabat groaned inwardly, let his eyes remain closed. Laughter, leering, taunting. Quentin had won his battle of the dark hours, had a weakened Mark Sabat at his mercy. By the time Sabat was strong again it would be too late - he would be Quentin reborn!

He felt sleep closing in on him again and vaguely wondered what had happened to Louis Nevillon's corpse.

Sabat had made his way across the Bernese Oberland in easy stages, resting for days sometimes because he barely had the strength to carry on. Once he had tried to smoke his meerschaum pipe, but his lungs had rebelled and he had collapsed in a fit of coughing. Drifting, the night hours haunted by strange dreams that were either forgotten on waking or else had no meaning, a string puppet controlled by the unknown.

Eventually he came to Interlaken, that small township between Lake Thun and Lake Brienz, a tourist attraction since the early nineteenth century, standing on a lush strip of flat land amidst the towering snow-capped mountains. The air was keen, seemed to scour his lungs, the sunshine warm even for late April. A land of beauty. He stared up at the dark green forests that clothed the mountains and shuddered. So familiar, right across the Oberland, into Austria and Germany, the kind of terrain across which he had hunted down Quentin. And now Quentin lived again.

He booked in at the Jungfrau Hotel, experienced an acute embarrassment at having to seek out a porter to carry his suitcases up to his room, an old man who wheezed harder than himself and muttered his complaints in a form of bastard German.

Sabat sank into an armchair after the old man had left, stared out of the wide French windows across the balcony, and watched the evening shadows beginning to creep across the mountains. Maybe he should not have come here after all; instead travelled to the south of France, maybe further. But it made no difference. Wherever he went he could not escape, for he carried his brother with him. If the dark forces which controlled his destiny commanded him then he would obey. The sooner he got used to being Quentin, the better. He wasn't interested in Louis Nevillon; why should he be? He had no plans, he had all the money he needed. When he felt stronger he would enjoy himself. Until then he must bide his time.

It was more than two decades since Sabat had last been up the Jungfrau. His previous visit had been an excursion during a school skiing holiday but nothing seemed to have changed. The same route because there was none other, a virgin mountain conquered by a railway that climbed up towards the heavens through a mountain wilderness of ice and snow. On from Wengen, through Wengernalp and up to Kleine Scheidegg where you changed trains for the last lap of the breathtaking heady trip. A smaller train now, a tunnel through the Eiger and the Monch, and at Eigerwand you looked down on Lake Thun as a pagan god might survey his domain and felt slightly dizzy.

Finally, the Jungfraujoch terminus, an underground station where you first began to feel the odd wave or two of dizziness and it was difficult to believe that you were almost 10,000 feet up in the mountains. Sabat passed a hand across his eyes, held on to a seat to support himself. And that was when he first saw Madeleine Gaufridi!

She could not have been more than eighteen, he decided. Long dark hair, eyes that met his and held his gaze. She might have been a prefect helping to organise a school holiday trip; except that she was on her own. A tight-fitting sweater beneath an unbuttoned duffle-coat displayed curves that had not yet reached maturity and were all the more sensuous for that suggestion of virginity.

Sabat dispelled his dizziness, smiled.

'You are going up to the Ice Palace, monsieur?' her voice was lilting, seductive, a trace of a French accent.

Sabat nodded. 'It is one of the most spectacular views in the world. I came here once ... a few years ago.'

He knew she was going to accompany him into the elevator for the final trip to the summit. He felt heady

again, but it was not because they were ascending in excess of 11,000 feet. He was also aware of the beginnings of an erection.

Scenic views that made you want to hang back, clutch at some immovable object, for this very hotel was surely defying all the laws of gravity, suspended atop a frozen glacier, a kind of plateau on the one side where teams of husky dogs pulled sleds through the powdery snow.

'Let's go out on to the terrace.' She took his hand and he found himself being led through sets of double glass doors that acted as a kind of airlock, kept the freezing atmosphere at bay for the benefit of those who preferred to stay indoors. The cold scoured Sabat's tender lungs, had him clutching at the girl in a bout of coughing.

'You've been ill, haven't you?' There was genuine concern in her tone, and those large dark eyes were fixed on him again. 'What's been the matter with you?'

'Pneumonia,' he smiled. 'But don't worry, the fresh air's supposed to do me good. The doc said it'll either cure or kill.'

'That would be a terrible pity,' she squeezed his hand. 'By the way, my name's Madeleine Gaufridi.' She smiled, hesitated, mutely asking 'what's yours?'

'Sabat,' he breathed in deeply and did not cough this time. 'Mark Sabat. I've come to Switzerland to convalesce.' A voice inside him whispered 'Liar, you're Quentin'. He tried to ignore it. 'I'm staying at the Jungfrau Hotel in Interlaken.' 'I haven't,.. got fixed up yet,' a sudden note of loneliness, her eyes dropping. 'I only just arrived in Interlaken.'

For some reason he held back on the questions he wanted to ask. Like: where'd you get twenty quid to squander on a tourist excursion like this when you don't look like you've got ten francs in your pocket? and how come you're running around on your own when there's wolves like me on the prowl? His erection was suddenly at full stretch, uncomfortable, unfamiliar after the weeks of frailty and limpness. 'Well, seeing as we're both on our own maybe we'd better stick together.'

'I'd like that,' she held on to his hand and he noted that she was apparently admiring the panoramic scenery. He stole a sideways glance at her. Maybe she was older than she seemed, a virgin facade deliberately put on to blend in with a virgin land.

'Let's go inside,' her teeth chattered as she spoke. 'It's very cold out here.' Perfect English, just that same faint trace of a French accent. Possibly she was fresh from some finishing school. He'd find out in due course; there was no rush.

The warmth of the Ice Palace was welcoming, had Sabat realising that he still had a long way to go to full fitness. A few weeks ago he would have found it unbearably stuffy in here.

'I'll get some wine.' He escorted her to a table, wished that his hardness would subside for a while. She hadn't given any sign that she had noticed it. Probably she was too innocent. One minute she gave that impression, the next she seemed advanced for her young years.

He felt her eyes following him as he made his way to the counter, joined a short queue; his flesh tingling, his heart pounding wildly. He thought of her naked. No, she was probably a virgin, so innocent, so naive and yet...

'Thanks,' she accepted the tall-stemmed glass which he handed her, sipped it delicately. A furtive glance around her, taking in the throng of tourists, a brief narrowing of her eyes followed by an expression of... relief! A little shiver ran up Sabat's spine and again those questions were screaming out to be asked.

'I've heard of you, Sabat,' a half-smile twitching her pert lips.

'Oh,' he watched her steadily. 'My infamy has spread across the continent.'

'Tame is hard to hide,' she laughed, a sound that was musical, disarming. 'Your photograph was in the French papers some months ago. You're the detective who cracked some awful political conspiracy, people pretending to be vampires and all those horrible kind of things.* I am right, aren't I?'

'Yes and no,' he dropped his gaze for a moment. 'I'm not a detective, I just got caught up in that business. A guy who thought he was Hitler reborn, somebody I knew a long time ago. I'm in Switzerland to convalesce, though. No other reason.' As though he had to reassure her, destroy a lingering suspicion in her mind.

'I believe you.' She stared down into her wine, suddenly serious as though she had something to tell him, a confession of some kind maybe.

He waited patiently. If she decided to confide in him she would; if not she would remain silent. She was that kind of girl.

'I'm running,' she put it as simply as that, sighed as though she had got a weight off her mind.

'From whom?' he spoke softly, showed no surprise.

'A lot of people,' her lower lip trembled slightly. 'My family. My religion. The Surete.' The dark eyes regarding him had misted over and he thought that she was close to breaking down.

'You can tell me about it if you want to,' he took a liberal drink of his wine. 'But if you don't then it won't make any difference.' He knew she would.

'I'd like to,' she tried to smile, 'and possibly you will understand. You see, I was sent to a convent at Aix-en-Provence when I was eight and I suppose for the next ten years I was reasonably happy. My parents own a vineyard and they seem to be obsessed with a desire to protect me from the rest of the world. They had made up their minds that I should become a nun and I was conditioned not to think otherwise. It is easy to brainwash a child. I was brainwashed all right and then... then something happened...'

She looked away, glanced all round the spacious room before bringing her eyes back to meet Sabat's. 'I can't really explain it, Sabat, but I got this sudden feeling that I was being duped and that... that I did not believe in God. My vows, my prayers, they were all meaningless recitations that I went through in the same way that one recites a poem in class without any thought to the words. I knew I had to get out but it was no good trying to explain to the Mother Superior. I would have been reprimanded, possibly even punished. So I left a letter the night I... escaped. I renounced my vows and ... and fled!'

'But France is a free country,' Sabat's forehead crinkled. 'Nobody could stop you, take you back. It is certainly no concern of the Surete.'

'Well you may think so,' she shook her head slowly. 'But my father is a very powerful man, one of the richest men in France. If he wants me found and brought back then the Surete and any private detective he employs will hunt me down mercilessly and it will be made worth their while.'

'Why did you come to Switzerland?'

'I have friends here,' she replied. 'At least, I know some people in Lucerne whom I think might help me but there is some doubt where their loyalty lies. Doubtless my father is offering a big reward and money can change people.'

'So you paused for a breather in Interlaken.' Sabat cast his eyes around the room but nobody seemed to be paying any attention to them. They had no reason to.

'And fortunately I met you. I recognised you on the train from Wengen and I thought that you might be the one to help me.'

Sabat nodded slowly. His erection was beginning to ache; it was a long time since he had last had a woman. Too long. Manna from heaven, or rather, Madeleine Gaufridi from Aix-en-Provence.

'I'll help you,' he smiled. 'I have a room at the Hotel Jungfrau in Interlaken. I guess we'd better spend the night there and see what tomorrow brings.'

'I'd like that,' she laughed softly, and Sabat wondered just how naive she was. Tonight he would find out.

Sabat stared out of the bedroom window, saw the lights of Interlaken reflected in the still waters of Lake Brienz. Behind him he heard the faint rustle of clothing as Madeleine undressed. He restrained his eagerness to turn around. There was only one bed and they had the whole night ahead of them. There was no hurry.

He tried to appear casual when finally he turned back to the room and saw Madeleine. He had expected to find her wearing some form of night attire but instead she was stark naked. She lay there on the bed,

eyes closed as though she might be asleep, legs stretched straight out so that he had only a partial view of the inside of her thighs. Tantalising. No, not Madeleine. Just innocence; maybe she didn't realise.

Sabat had already started to undo his shirt buttons when her eyes flickered open. No hint of embarrassment, just an expression that was a lot older than that of an eighteen year old girl fresh out of a convent. His gaze fixed on her small shapely breasts, pink nipples that stood erect and firm as though they had already been fondled and aroused, slid slowly down her smooth flat stomach, came to rest on that mysterious V of dark fluffy hair that seemed to be trying deliberately to hide that which lay beneath it. A faint movement of those legs, opening a fraction but not enough to enable him to see any further between them. Teasing. No, it was coincidental, Madeleine had been the victim of a totally sheltered upbringing so that she did not understand. His fingers trembled as they hastened to undo the remaining buttons, tugging his shirt off and exposing a muscular torso that had somehow withstood the ravages of his illness.

For one brief moment he experienced a twinge of self-consciousness as he slid his trousers down, thought that maybe he ought to turn away; not because of any inhibitions on his own part, but because this simple young girl had almost certainly never seen a ...

He started, saw her hand reaching out for his, clasped it and felt himself being pulled gently but firmly towards the bed. Her head was upturned to meet his on the pillow, her lips soft and moist as they pouted at him playfully. A kiss that said more than any kiss could have done, her tongue pushing forcibly into his mouth then withdrawing and urging his own to push into her, an embrace that had certainly not been learned at the convent in Aix-en-Provence.

'Tell me, Sabat,' she drew back, a sudden thoughtful expression on her features, 'is it true what the papers said, that you perform exorcisms?'

He stiffened, a sudden hammer blow when he was at his weakest, a lie impossible without being detected. 'It is true,' he nodded. 'Or at least, it was.'

'Why not now?'

'Shall we say it is because of my illness. I'm not er... not myself.'

'Oh!' a blank expression. 'Will you... will you ever be able to do them again?'

'I... don't know,' his eyes narrowed. 'Why?'

'Nothing really. Just curious, I suppose. You fascinate me.'

He stiffened as he felt her hand smoothing down his body, sensuous fingertips that had one destination in mind, making him shudder and groan softly when they got there. In that moment he realised that her innocence was a facade, the way she pushed and pulled, then wriggled down so that she had an unrestricted view of the lower regions of his body.

'Why ... why are you like ... this, Sabat?' her fingers squeezed and brought a sharp gasp from his lips.

'Because I've been circumcised,' he grunted and in those few seconds destroyed his myth concerning her virginity.

'Why?'

'Because ...' he could have said, 'because I'm Jewish' or 'because my parents thought it was the thing to do' but instead he said, 'it's an extra precaution when you're carrying out a service of exorcism to ensure that no particle of dirt which might harbour an evil entity hides beneath the foreskin.'

'Oh, I see.'

He felt her tongue starting to flick and jab, her fingers still stroking sensuously. Damn it, it was one long interrogation but he didn't give a sod so long as...

The light was out, just the glow of the street-lamps from outside, her naked body silhouetted against the wide window, a cavorting nymph astride a bucking stallion.

Just one fleeting memory as he tried to hold back an orgasm; that fevered night when (hey had screeched with lust for his sweating body, how he had sacrificed his pride and self-respect, done things because they had wanted him to.

Suddenly he was exploding violently, with such force as though his very soul was trying to get out of his body. Quentin's soul.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIFE SHOULD have been idyllic, Sabat decided. In some ways it was, yet this strange girl seemed to have a hold over him. It was more than just the promise of her young body, something which he could not explain. In a way it was akin to the threat which Quentin had wielded before Sabat had become Quentin reborn, invisible bonds that chained him, forced him into a thrilling obedience. A kind of bondage without all the necessary impedimenta.

After that first night they had checked out of the Hotel Jungfrau and taken this small wooden chalet in a secluded position overlooking Lake Brienz, a three-sided clearing amidst the tall pines, the air sweet with the smell of resin.

'Soon we must go to Lucerne.' Madeleine had followed him out on to the verandah, slipping her hand into his. 'We must contact my friends.'

Sabat nodded, knew that he would accompany her wherever she went.

'I am worried though,' she sighed.

'Why?'

'I get an uneasy feeling that... that those who follow me know where I am, that already they are planning to attack this place.'

*So you really do come from Aix-en-Provence and there is somebody following you,' there was a note of scepticism in Sabat's tone.

'Of course,' Madeleine spoke sharply. 'You don't think I would lie to you, do you?'

'No.' After all she had never claimed to have been a virgin, just a young nun on the run.' It's just that... well, things have not turned out as I thought they would.'

'They rarely do.' She gave a little laugh. 'Nevertheless I have brought shame upon my family, in their eyes anyway, and now they desire vengeance with the hatred of ancient spurned nobility. Sabat I have a feeling that tonight someone will come'

Icy shivers scaled Sabat's spine and spread into his scalp. The words of a young girl should not be affecting him like this, but he sensed her fear and his own as well. 'I'll keep a watch out tonight if it makes you feel any easier, Madeleine.'

'Thank you, Sabat. But tonight we must not share a bed, for whoever hunts me will come through the forest. It is there that you must be waiting for him.'

'All right,' he sighed and thought about the .38 revolver which he often carried in a holster in the lining of his inside pocket, but which now was lying hidden wrapped in a shirt in his suitcase. 'I'll stand watch if it means that much to you.'

'It does. And take care because they are dangerous.'

Sabat was clad in a heavy rolled-neck sweater and dark trousers, thick-soled sneaker shoes enabling him to move quietly amidst the trees, testing each footstep carefully before lowering his weight in case he trod on a dead twig. The cold night air had him wanting to cough, wheezed in his tender lungs, but his self-control dominated. The SAS had taught him to disregard personal discomfort when engaged on duty, turn himself into a highly efficient human robot.

In places the faint starlight infiltrated the trees, patches of ghostly grey amidst the undergrowth, enough to show up a moving object. Sabat settled himself down at the base of a giant pine, a huge protruding root offering him a seat that was also a good vantage point. If anybody came down the track towards the chalet he would see them illuminated for a few seconds in one of those patches of starlight; time enough to draw and shoot, to kill!

The prospect of killing excited him, gave him an arousal in the same way that Madeleine had done that day up in the Ice Palace. Anticipation, something to savour so long as it did not mar one's reflexes at a time when they were needed most. If there was an intruder then Sabat would kill him, there was no question about that; gun him down from ambush because that was the primitive law of survival. It was not a duel; fair-play did not enter into it. A job to be completed and forgotten, the way the SAS taught.

His thoughts kept coming back to Madeleine. In his mind he could see her lying naked on the bed, provocative in every movement of those slight limbs. He did not doubt that she had spent ten years in a convent, just marvelled at how she had controlled her sexual desires during that time. With no man available she'd had two alternatives to satisfy her craving; a female lover or masturbation. In Madeleine's case, Sabat decided, it would be the latter. She was no lesbian, although you could never be sure. He tried to envisage her lying there in the darkness of a convent dormitory, those small slender fingers working furiously on herself, a sin in the eyes of those around her so she was not permitted so much as one faint orgasmic gasp. 'Defilement' that was only natural if the body was to remain healthy.

Sabat was aware that he had an erection. Hell, that was something you tried to avoid in situations such as this; erotic thoughts led to negligence that could cost you your life.

He was struggling to throw off thoughts of a naked young nun furiously masturbating when his acute sense of hearing picked up a faint noise some way back in the forest. A snapping of a twig. It might have been a prowling fox. On the other hand it might not.

The •38 rested in his hand, so naturally that it could have been only yesterday when he was engaged on an SAS hunt for fugitive terrorists. The feeling was the same, the eagerness, the thrill of pursuit, the kill to be savoured. Listening intently, breathing so shallow that it was inaudible.

There was definitely somebody in the wood, no more than ten or fifteen yards away. No actual sound, but a trained man hunter could sense a presence. You just hoped that the enemy did not do likewise, for both could not emerge alive from this pending encounter.

Sabat shrank back until he became part of the old pine tree, a human trunk watching intently, poised to kill. Nearer. Sabat heard the other now, a slithering of rubber soles as they explored the ground for dead twigs, gently moved a tiny fallen branch. Then he saw him!

A patch of darker shadow that obscured the faint shaft of starlight, devoid of detail, shapeless. The •38 slid up into instant alignment, a double-handed grip on the butt, forefinger brushing the trigger. And in that same instant Sabat checked.

His reasons were instinctive, lightning sub-conscious thinking. It would be easy to kill and he had no compunction about the taking of human life. Just that guns made a noise and the man he saw might not be alone. The flash of his own revolver might draw the fire of another intruder close by; death rewarded by death.

He dropped the gun back into his pocket and the steel spring which was his powerful body coiled ready for action. One split second in which a plan was formed then he sprang, a human cannonball powering through the darkness.

Airborne, Sabat's body was hunching up into a ball, then elongating, both legs drawn back, shooting forward hard in a double kick, human pistons that struck with unerring aim.

Sabat felt and heard his contact with the unknown man, knew that he was on target, both feet finding their goal. A sharp crack, the resistance gone as the other took the full force of the blow in his face, head

jerked back at an unnatural angle. Falling. Rolling.

Sabat sprang back, came in at a low crouch. But there was no need to deliver the blow for which he was poised because the huddled shape at his feet lay motionless.

It took Sabat a mere cursory examination to verify that the man who lay sprawled at his feet was dead. He knelt there, listening, heard faint sounds on the night air; small creatures whose habits were nocturnal going about their ceaseless quest for food, maybe even searching out a mate. Nothing else. Whoever was on Madeleine Gaufridi's trail had sent just one man.

Sabat flicked on the slim pencil torch which he always carried with him at night. A couple of seconds and he saw all that he needed to see; a tall hatchet-faced man dressed in black clothing staring sightlessly out of dead eyes, the head twisted at a grotesque angle. Sabat searched the other's pockets. Nothing. He hadn't expected to find anything but everything he did was thorough. Probably some cheap private-eye - he couldn't be sure.

Sabat had to exert all his strength to drag the corpse a few yards into the undergrowth and was breathing heavily when his task was completed. His strength was taking its tune coming back and he felt physically and mentally drained. Christ, would he ever be the same again?

Then, with a 'suddenness that was almost frightening, he heard himself laughing; a thick nasal sound that was only too familiar seemed to be coming from somewhere inside him, building up to a pitch and forcing its way out through his lips against his will. For a second he panicked, clapped his hands to his mouth, but he could not stop that awful spine-tingling animal-like noise.

Quentin Sabat had killed and now he was gloating. And he wanted to kill again.

CHAPTER FIVE

'WE MUST leave at once,' there was an expression of fear on Madeleine Gaufridi's strained features. 'We must flee to Lucerne.'

'We'll have to wait until morning.* Sabat stood in the bedroom doorway and surveyed her naked body with something akin to contempt, an arrogance which he had not displayed previously. He had killed and enjoyed it. Now there was another craving to be satisfied. 'There won't be any trains leaving Interlaken until daylight. We don't have any transport of our own so we've no option but to stay put. And enjoy the night!'

She licked her lips nervously. Her companion had killed in cold blood, had laughed about it. He was far more dangerous than she had thought. With an effort she smiled nervously and her voice quavered when she spoke. 'Did you really have to kill him?'

'I thought that was the idea of spending the night hours out in a cold damp wood.'

'Yes .. , but it seems so horrible.*

'He'd've done the same to me. It was kill or be killed. I guess he was the unlucky one.' Sabat kicked the door closed behind him, began to undress. His eyes never left her, savouring her body, forcing himself not to rush.

'It was right what the French newspapers said about you,' her voice trembled. 'They said you were more dangerous than all those fake vampires.'

'I'm dangerous,' he laughed as he advanced naked towards her, 'but it just depends which side of the fence you're on.*

She cried out as he grabbed her, pinioned her to the bed. She wanted to yell that there was no need to take her this way because she would let him anyway, but she kept silent because she was afraid. This was how the man they called Sabat wanted it; last night she had been his lover, tonight she was his plaything, an inanimate sex object for his own selfish pleasure.

He was rough and strong, hurting her, oblivious to her feelings. She tried not to look into those eyes but they were irresistible. Hypnotic. A feeling of sheer helplessness assailed her; he could and would do what he wanted to her. She was in the grip of a mighty tidal wave, being swept aloft, dashed on the rocks and thrown back. Crying. Orgasming. But there was no way it was going to stop until Sabat was fully spent.

Finally it was over and with a low groan his sweat-soaked body sank down on top of her. He was trembling violently, gasping for breath. Their eyes met and for a fleeting second she thought she read an apology in them; but she must have been wrong because he wasn't the type. He'd taken what he wanted and he'd take it again when the need arose.

'I thought maybe you were a virgin when we first met up the Jungfrau.' He was staring intently up at the ceiling. 'You didn't learn to screw like that at the convent.'

'No,' she replied. 'But I've been on the run for some time, you know. A girl has to have food and a roof over her head. There are times when principles have to go overboard.'

'And sometimes you end up with enough francs left over to treat yourself to a tourist trip up into the mountains,' he laughed softly. 'And why not?'

'We must leave for Lucerne at daybreak.' She changed the subject.

'And after Lucerne?'

'Who knows, Sabat. At the moment we are living from day to day.'

'They'll find that body in the wood in a day or two,' he mused, 'and it won't be long before they tie it up with the couple who rented this chalet. Yes, you're right, Madeleine, we're living from day to day.'

Sabat had attempted to look like any one of the hundreds of tourists who thronged the streets of Lucerne as he tried to make his third cup of tepid coffee last. He couldn't drink any more and Madeleine had already been gone over an hour. From the verandah of the small café he watched the crowded Haldenstrasse intently, trying to pick out a dark-haired girl whom one took for eighteen at first glance but was a good seven years older, a facade of innocence which she used to her advantage.

Just thinking about her began to arouse Sabat again. She was like a drug; one became addicted. Maybe he should take her back to England to his own place. She was as good a means of convalescing as any other he could think of.

Then he saw her coming, a lithe fast walk, glancing neither to the right nor the left, the breeze ruffling her dark hair. She mounted the steps, slid gracefully into the vacant seat beside him.

'Well?' he regarded her quizzically.

'It is all right,' she smiled. 'I talked with Andre Schmid and he has agreed for us to stay at his place.'

'But can we trust him?'

'Yes, I am sure we can. My father contacted him last week and Andre said that if I showed up he would let him know. But he won't.'

Sabat thought, to hell with all this I could leave the girl now. There's nothing to keep me here. But his growing erection told him he would stay. He rose to his feet, smiled, and said, 'Let's go meet your friend, Andre.'

The house stood back in its own overgrown garden off the Basel-Strasse. Possibly the casual passer-by would be unaware of its existence, for the boundary hedge had grown tall and thick, unpruned shrubs concealing the short drive.

Sabat viewed the large building with a feeling of sadness that such an impressive structure had been allowed to fall into decay over the years. Possibly at the turn of the century it had been a holiday home for some wealthy Frenchman, a carved balcony on the upper-floor affording a magnificent view of the Chateau Gutsch and within walking distance of Lake Lucerne itself. Slates had fallen from the roof and had not been replaced, paintwork had peeled and much of the woodwork was rotten; grimed window panes, a broken one reinforced with brown paper. Utter dereliction everywhere.

Madeleine banged the wrought-iron door knocker and they heard the noise reverberating throughout the interior, an eerie hollow sound as though the house was empty and nobody was coming back. Echoing desolation that died away to silence. Then they heard approaching footsteps, somebody struggling with a rusted bolt.

Andre Schmid was certainly not what Sabat had expected. Short, somewhat overweight, no more than thirty years of age, Schmid looked almost comical in faded dirty jeans with the waistband rolled over, a T-shirt untidily tucked into it. Heavy features that pouched under the eyes, surplus flesh jowled beneath the chin; small eyes that shot furtive, suspicious glances alternately from Madeleine to Sabat as he habitually brushed strands of long brown hair back from his forehead.

'This is Mr Sabat,' Madeleine Gaufridi motioned towards her companion, 'the friend I was telling you about, Andre.'

'Of course,' the other seemed to jerk himself forcibly out of a daze. 'You are both welcome here. Come inside.' He dragged the door wider across warped floorboards.

The interior smelled musty and Sabat noted that the large hallway, empty except for a hat stand with broken pegs and a small table, had not been cleaned in recent weeks.

'I will show you to your room.' Schmid began to mount the stairs, following a well-worn path through an accumulation of dust. 'The others will be back shortly. We eat at seven-thirty. Prompt.'

The bedroom would have overlooked the Bruch-Strasse had not the trees formed an impenetrable barrier and the windows been clean. A double bed had recently been made up with clean linen and there was ample drawer space in the two oak chests. Sabat shivered slightly; some form of heating and a carpet would have helped to destroy the spartan atmosphere.

Andre Schmid went out, closing the door behind him.

'This is a commune,' Sabat's voice was low. 'These people are hippies.'

'Yes.' Madeleine blushed slightly as though she had deliberately deceived him. 'Andre once worked in my father's vineyard until he opted for his freedom. Here, these people are free to come and go as they please. They are idealists, like myself.'

'So you're going to spend the rest of your days skulking here and smoking pot.' There was a note of contempt in Sabat's voice. 'You'll be just as much a prisoner here as you were in the convent.'

'No,' Madeleine regarded him steadily. 'I shall be free. Perhaps I can even persuade you to remain here, Sabat.'

'I doubt it,' he laughed. 'But I'm in no hurry for the moment. Let's make ourselves comfortable and then we'll see what the food is like here.'

The resonant tones of a heavy gong somewhere in the lower recesses of the house brought Sabat out of his reverie. God, it was almost dark, or was it because the windows were so filthy that they did not let any light in. He must have fallen asleep.

'Dinner, apparently, is served,' he swung his legs off the bed, noted that whilst he had been dozing Madeleine had donned a long dark dress. In the half-light her features seemed unnaturally pale; she appeared to have aged a decade. So different again; a girl of many parts.

'Let's go down and meet Andre's friends.' She slipped a hand into his and it felt cold. 'I understand Andre's cuisine is par excellence. He worked as a chef in Paris for some months after he left my father. I trust your appetite is back to normal, Sabat.'

'It's improving daily,' Sabat laughed, inhaled a highly spiced cooking aroma which drifted up the stairs to greet them, a kind of subtle appetiser especially wafted up for the benefit of new guests. 'In fact, right now I could eat a horse, as the English saying goes.'

'I doubt very much whether horse flesh will be on the menu tonight,' she smiled faintly in the darkness and squeezed his hand. Her fingers were icy cold.

The dining-room was much as Sabat had anticipated; a low-ceiling room which was dominated by a long scrubbed pine table at which a dozen or so people were already seated. Sabat scrutinised them in one glance, his trained mind mentally photographing every detail which he would be able to recall later if necessary. Hippies, men and girls, an odd assortment of cosmopolitan drop-outs who scarcely looked up at the new arrivals. They were probably used to frequent comings and goings; they lived their own lives and didn't bother about anybody else.

Through a hatch which led off into an adjacent kitchen, Sabat caught a glimpse of Andre clad in grubby white overalls, ladling some kind of thick dark soup into bowls.

These must be our places,' Sabat motioned towards the head of the table. They were obviously intended to sit on either side of Andre Schmid when he came through to join them.

'Welcome, my friends.' Andre appeared, so agile in comparison to his earlier slothful shuffle, balancing bowls of soup on a tray, setting it down without spilling so much as a drop. 'The food here is the best in Lucerne, nay in Switzerland. Whatever our other short-comings, Sabat, we pride ourselves that we eat well. Pray start, don't let your soup go cold. Like coffee, it is insipid unless it is piping hot.'

Sabat felt strangely uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. No way did he fit in here amidst this strange assembly. Yet they didn't seem to notice, glancing neither at himself nor Madeleine, a buzz of low muttered conversation passing amongst themselves, drinking their soup noisily.

Schmid finished his soup, clanged his spoon down noisily in the bowl and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

'The trouble with you English, Sabat,' there was a faint smirk on his thick lips, 'is that you're too conventional as far as food is concerned. Unadventurous. I holidayed in England once. Mon Dieu, the food was terrible, plain and badly cooked at that. But perhaps you are different. Tell me, did you recognise any particular flavour in the soup which you have just drunk?'

'Indeed I did,' Sabat smiled but his eyes were as hard as chips of Welsh slate. 'Garlic predominated. Some comfrey and fennel and pearl barley as well.'

'Excellent!' Andre Schmid clapped his fat hands together making a noise like a fillet of wet plaice falling on a stone floor. 'But... nothing else ... the main ingredient?'

'Meat of some kind,' Sabat's stare was searching the other out, finding nothing. 'It would be impossible to tell, though, because the garlic was designed, I am almost certain, to disguise the taste of the meat.'

Andre Schmid's small eyes narrowed balefully. Then he laughed, a strange guttural sound that reminded Sabat instantly of his brother Quentin. Himself! Then perhaps when you have sampled the main course you will be able to identify the particular meat. Again it is garnished with herbs, but not so heavily as the soup. Tell me, Sabat, what is your favourite meat?'

'I don't have any favourite.' The reply was staccato, a duel with words that was developing into vicious rapier thrusts. 'Most of the time I am a vegetarian.'

'A vegetarian!' Schmid laughed loud, a booming sound that was mirthless, had heads suddenly turning in his direction then looking away again as though embarrassed that they had been eavesdropping on the commune leader's conversation. 'Man Dieu! How absolutely abominable. No wonder you have been seriously ill. Lack of protein, waning physical strength. Man was designed to eat meat. Unfortunately through the process of evolution we have lost curability, or should we say our stomachs, for raw flesh. Not all of us, though, I hasten to assure you. These people you see here have all sampled uncooked meat and are all the healthier for it. However, tonight, in deference to our guests, I have cooked the joint personally. It is rare meat, juicy with blood, yet it has been cooked.'

'It's a fallacy that we need to eat meat.' Twin red spots appeared on Sabat's cheeks, a sign that the other was beginning to anger him. 'As a species we are not carnivores. I myself eat meat occasionally because convention demands it and I am loath to offend a host. But my own recipe for health and fitness is an abstention wherever possible from white flour, white sugar, all fats and red meat.'

'You're mad!' Andre Schmid leaped to his feet, sending his chair toppling over. 'Meat is the source of life and under this roof everyone shall eat it. Including you, Sabat'

'As I have already said,' Sabat was outwardly unmoved, 'I am loath to offend a host. Serve up your meat and I shall eat it.'

'And so you shall!' Once again the other moved with surprising spriteliness, rushing through the door into the kitchen. Dishes were banged angrily, an oven door slammed.

'There was no need to be so rude,' Madeleine spoke in sharp whispered tones. 'We are guests here, Sabat, and my whole future depends upon Andre's hospitality towards us.'

'Possibly,' Sabat replied, 'but the more I see of this set-up here, the less I like it. These people are like mindless morons.' He refrained from adding 'zombies*.'

'Nevertheless, we must tolerate them,' she said.

They lapsed into silence as Andre Schmid returned carrying a tray loaded with steaming plates. He proceeded to serve the others, then went back into the kitchen and fetched three more meals which he laid before his guests and himself. Sabat stared at his food intently: sliced meat of some kind, a heavy texture that oozed blood. He likened it to pork sparingly cooked; vegetables mixed with green pasta. His nostrils wrinkled at the pungent odour which came from it. An acquired taste, definitely, but he could eat most foods when forced to do so rather than offend a host, but that gnawing hunger was gone from his stomach.

'I think you will agree, Sabat,' Schmid was smiling, his recent outburst seemingly forgotten, 'that this dish is good enough to convert the most devout vegetarian to eating the occasional meat dish.'

Madeleine Gaufridi was eating ravenously, her whole attention centred on the food before her. Sabat cut a piece of meat with his knife, speared it with his fork and lifted it slowly towards his mouth, fought off a momentary wave of revulsion. There was something dreadfully wrong.

He chewed on a mouthful; it was exceptionally tender, easily swallowed, left a faint tang on his palate. Garlic ... and something else which he could not identify.

He ate steadily. In some ways the flesh was reminiscent of pork, heavier though, a texture more like roast beef. Not wholly unpleasant, but not in keeping with his customary vegetarian diet. He transferred his thoughts to other matters, eating mechanically; SAS training for times when food was not readily available and it was necessary to eat something not normally acceptable to the human digestive system.

Andre Schmid wiped his plate clean with a piece of bread, belched loudly and patted his stomach. "Well, Sabat, and what did you think of our main course, eh?"

Sabat laid down his knife and fork, pursed his lips. 'Unusual,' he muttered, 'and I must confess I am still unable to identify the meat although it was the same as that in the broth.'

'You are right.' The other's eyes narrowed and his gaze switched to the girl seated on his right, 'But I am sure Madeleine is familiar with our meat. She has eaten it before and will eat it many times in the future now that she has rejoined us.'

'Rejoined you!' Sabat glanced at Madeleine Gaufridi, noted the supercilious smile which twitched her deep red lips. Now she looked so much older, so much more confident, no longer the innocent convent girl on the run from the wrath of her parents.

'Of course,' Schmid laughed harshly, 'she has stayed with us before, haven't you Madeleine, my dear?'

'Certainly I have,' dark eyes fixed on Sabat, mocking him.

'Then you lied to me, misled me!' Sabat hissed angrily, gripping the edge of the table. 'That story about the convent at Aix-en-Provence was a lie.'

'No, it wasn't,' she laughed. 'That was true, just as my father is the richest vineyard owner in France. But I didn't leave the convent because I wanted to I ran because they hounded me out, put the Surete on my trail. I'm surprised you haven't heard of me, Sabat, the man who destroyed the vampire organisation that was sucking the life's blood out of France. Madeleine Gaufridi alias ... Madeleine de De-mandolx de la

Palud?

'My God!' Sabat stiffened, felt the shock of this sudden awful revelation strike him like a hammer blow, his pulses racing. Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud, a victim of demonic possession in Aix-en-Provence in 1609. She had fallen under the evil influence of Father Louis Gaufridi. Under interrogation the girl had admitted sexual relationships with the priest and revealed that several other girls were also involved, including one Sister Louise Capeau. Satan's nest indeed and the evil had not died when Father Gaufridi was submitted to the strappado, an instrument of torture whereby the victim was hoisted to the ceiling by means of a pulley with lead weights tied to his feet. Gaufridi's body had crashed to the floor, almost every bone broken, his limbs pulled from their sockets. Then, screaming with agony, he had been taken to a place of execution when he was hanged and afterwards his corpse was incinerated on a huge fire. That had happened on the night of 30 April 1611. Walpurgisnacht! And Satan had claimed his own; the evil had not died. Now it was reborn in the form of this girl Madeleine who arrogantly took the name of her lecherous lover as an alias.

Sabat's mouth was dry, he felt the urge to vomit. Under normal circumstances he would probably have detected the deception in time. But his brain had been dulled and Quentin had aided his Master.

'You obviously do know who I am,' Madeleine laughed. 'Yes, that same convent at Aix-en-Provence is once again in the grip of the Left Hand Path. My work there is done and the fact that I had to flee to escape arrest is of no consequence because I have sown the seeds of iniquity. And my thanks to you, Sabat, for helping me on the final stage of my journey here when surely the police would have arrested me. But that is not the only reason that you were brought here!'

Sabat's hand slid towards the •38 in his concealed shoulder holster, felt the comforting hardness of the serrated butt

'Don't be foolish, Sabat!' Schmid was smiling again, an expression that had Sabat's hand checking, sensing a futility, a hopelessness. 'Your gun will do you no good. The police have already launched a massive hunt for the murderer of one of their detectives whose body was discovered near Interlaken this morning. You would be well advised to listen to the proposition which we are about to make to you. You may yet live and grow rich and powerful within this community.'

'And who the hell are you?' Sabat whispered.

'Perhaps Madeleine can explain that,' Andre Schmid leered, 'Madeleine Gaufridi as she now calls herself. Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud, the lover of Louis Nevillon who was indeed Silvain

Nevillon reborn and who will rise again from the dead!"

Sabat's vision seemed to swim. His hand fell away from the hidden shoulder holster, clutched at the table for support. His breathing had gone very shallow and his heart was pounding. He glanced at Madeleine, had to force himself to meet her gaze, dark eyes that burned into his own, a willpower that was suddenly stronger than his.

*We haven't yet settled the debate regarding the meat which we have just eaten' she was mocking him maliciously now. 'As you are apparently unable to identify it, Sabat, then let me tell you. Tonight we have dined sumptuously on human meat, the tender flesh of a young child who only three days ago was tragically killed in a road accident!'

Sabat's dizziness came back, a wave of nausea that blurred his vision with a darkening scarlet haze. He felt his stomach heave, bile scorching his throat. He fought to hold on to consciousness, was once again reminded of the illness which had ravaged him and how Quentin had become a conqueror of his soul during that time.

'We eat human flesh frequently,' Madeleine's voice was suave, knowing that she had him at a disadvantage. 'Have you not come across the Cochon Gris in your travels, Sabat? Undoubtedly you have, and for your information their rites and their magic are not confined solely to the West Indies. It has spread across the world, their beliefs kept alive by small bands of followers like ourselves. Our power was growing and then our Grand Master, who is second only to Satan himself, was snatched from us by ignorant fools who thought they could destroy him. A setback, but only a temporary one, for he is ready to live again. That is why we need you, Quentin Sabat!'

Sabat nodded dumbly, swallowed and felt his throat burning. God, he'd never get the taste of that vile carrion out of his mouth! He was trembling violently, sweating. He wanted to yell, 'you fucking dirty bastards, you're not getting Sabat to work for you'.

But he wasn't Mark Sabat. He was Quentin! He had eaten the flesh of his own kind; he was a cannibal, one of them!

'All right,' his voice was a croak when he finally managed to speak. Tell me what you want me to do.'

CHAPTER SIX

'I KNEW you would help us, Sabat,' Andre Schmid rested his elbows on the table. 'We have followed your progress across France and into Switzerland with great interest, awaiting our opportunity. Your habitual weakness for a pretty woman was your undoing and with Madeleine fleeing from Aix-en-Provence it was an opportunity to bring you both safely here. You are now a hunted murderer and if you were caught by the police then undoubtedly the guillotine would be your fate. But if you cooperate with us, then we shall see that that does not happen to you.'

Sabat sighed audibly. Inwardly he was protesting but his resilience had weakened beyond the point of no return. He licked his lips, nodded dumbly.

'As you may have read in the newspapers,' Schmid pouted his lips, reminded Sabat of a drawing of a pig dressed in human clothes which he had once seen, a ruthless animal dictator that thrived on cruelty to others, 'the beheaded corpse of our loved one, Louis Nevillon, disappeared from the execution chamber in Paris. The French authorities refused to comment publicly because they had no answer. Only we know. I will not bore you with the details, but suffice it to say that a combination of our power and some warders who were susceptible to handsome bribes was enough to get the body out of the prison. Yet without Nevillon even we are limited in what we are able to bring about. Nevertheless, he must be given life again and the only way that that can be achieved is for his revered flesh to be eaten by his devoted ones, so that he may live on in their flesh?'

Sabat almost threw up, tasted that flavour again in his mouth which even the spices could not mask.

'We know where the body is hidden,' Andre Schmid's voice rose, reminded Sabat of the fanaticism of an ex-SAS colonel who had once addressed gatherings of mindless teenage thugs. 'It must be transported secretly and safely from that place to another that is right for our purpose. We have less than a week left, for Walpurgisnacht is approaching and on that night the powers will be with us, just as they were when they snatched the soul of Father Gaufridi at the moment of his execution and enabled him to live on. They gave us Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud, just as they will give us Louis Nevillon, who was once the great Silvain Nevillon. You, Sabat, will transport the remains of our Grand Master to that place in company with she whom you know as Madeleine Gaufridir

Sabat experienced a sudden sense of euphoria, a tingling of his flesh and his waning strength seemed to return. The taste in his mouth was not so revolting, almost pleasant. Momentary fear as he realised just how strong Quentin had become and that he would obey the orders of Andre Schmid.

'When do we start?' Sabat asked.

'Tomorrow.' There was an expression of gloating on the plump man's features. 'Go to your bed now and spend the night hours with she who was once the "Queen of the Sabbath", whose hallowed womb took our Grand Master's seed yet failed to conceive. Had she borne his child then there would have been no problem and Louis Nevillon would have lived on. She failed us. This time we must not fail, the last remains must be saved from decay and oblivion!'

Sabat dozed in the passenger seat of the old VW van; his eyelids were heavy in spite of a good night's sleep. Beside him, Madeleine drove relentlessly, a female robot who handled the vehicle as efficiently as she did everything else, not even glancing in his direction. He wondered where her thoughts were leading her.

At the start of the journey he had kept his eyes on the road, memorised every signpost, every bend, their route indelibly imprinted in his brain so that he could have found it again with ease, retraced it if he had to. Then drowsiness had begun to thwart his plans. It was the warmth of the sun through the glass that was doing it; he wound the window down a few inches and the cool air streaming in onto his pallid features revived him. But only temporarily. He felt weak, as though he could sleep the sleep of the exhausted. They were making sure their tracks were covered.

Occasionally he wakened, sometimes on a sharp bend that threw him against the door, or when Madeleine braked hard and pulled onto the verge to allow an oncoming vehicle to pass. Each time the

sun was lower in the western sky. But always he slept again.

Time passed. Sabat stirred, tried to make himself comfortable but it was impossible. His neck ached where it had cricked and then a painful bout of pins and needles had him opening his eyes. It was dark now.

Madeleine Gaufridi gave no sign that she was aware that her passenger was awake, staring straight ahead of her where the powerful headlights lit up a narrow road lined on both sides by tall fir trees. A straight stretch and she accelerated amidst a rattle of loose bodywork, the floorboards vibrating noisily. A steep incline, rising all the time, they were somewhere up in the mountains but Sabat had no idea where. Neither did he care.

She was forced to change down into second gear, operating the level with a casualness that came from experience. Sabat smiled his admiration for this strange girl. It seemed that everything she did was done to perfection. He could not have driven better himself.

'I trust you are fully refreshed after your long sleep.' She turned her head, a half-smile on her lips.

'Refreshed but hellishly stiff,' he answered, shifting his position yet again. 'Christ, we must have been driving for hours. Where are we?'

'In the mountains,' non-committal, watching the road again. 'We shall reach our destination shortly.' She was a silhouette once again, apprehensive by the way she now gripped the steering wheel with both hands.

They came upon the village unexpectedly, chalets built at the foot of a hillside, the peak of which was enshrouded by darkness. Silent dwelling places, no lights showing. Eerie. Sabat supposed that this was a mountain holiday resort and it was too early in the year for the annual visitors to have taken up residence; or a skiing centre where everybody had left because the snows had melted. So stark and modern, all the more sinister because it was empty. A place of the dead!

Madeleine was slowing, glancing from one side of the road to the other as though she was unfamiliar with her surroundings. More chalets now, a whole street of them, windows like dark orbs that saw the newcomers, the VW's headlights reflected, flashing angrily. The buildings were petering out now, just a few scattered houses, older ones constructed of stone.

Madeleine Gaufridi was sucking in her breath, frustration and uncertainty suddenly terminating in an audible sigh of relief.

'This is the place,* she spoke as though to herself. 'I feared that we had missed it or else it did not exist.'

Sabat saw a long stone-built place which he thought at first was a farm building, possibly a haystore or a cattle shed. His eyes narrowed as he saw a shaft of light coming from beneath the large ill-fitting door. At least there was somebody in this unknown mountain village. But what was this place? Madeleine was swinging the van across the road which had virtually petered out into a rutted cart-track. She grated the reverse gear, leaned out of the window as she backed across the soft grass, only braked when she was a matter of two or three feet from the lighted doorway.

The silence seemed to rush at Sabat as she killed the engine and switched off the lights. The heater fan groaned to a halt and for a moment Madeleine sat there as though she was reluctant to disembark, perhaps wishing she had not come here in the first place. Then she moved with a sudden decisiveness, swung open the door and leapt down. 'Come on, Sabat, we have work to do. We must hurry for we have to be back in Lucerne before daylight.'

Sabat climbed down, slammed the door with a metallic clang which the mountain night air echoed, a noise that had a ring of finality about it. His scalp tingled; instinctively he checked and found that he still carried his •38. That was strange, for surely Schmid and his followers would disarm a dangerous enemy. But Sabat was no enemy for was he not one of them now, working for them, a fellow cannibal sent to guard the beautiful 'Queen of the Sabbath' on her nocturnal mission? They had let him keep his gun because they knew as well as he did that Quentin Sabat would not use it against them.

The heavy door was swinging open noiselessly on well-oiled hinges as though their arrival had been anticipated. Possibly the vehicle had been seen or heard.

Sabat checked, felt Madeleine's fingers clutching at his arm. She, too, was drawing back, afraid to enter this mysterious lighted place. They had an unrestricted view of the interior. At some time it had obviously been a small chapel, a raised floor at the rear on which an altar had once stood, high windows that might, many years ago, have been of stained glass but were now crudely boarded up. Where the pews had stood on either side of the narrow aisle there were now long slabs of white marble supported by heavy oak trestles. Two or three shrouded immobile shapes lay on them which could only be corpses awaiting burial!

'It's a morgue!' Sabat hissed.

'Yes,' Madeleine's voice trembled with a nervousness that reminded Sabat of their first meeting in the Ice Palace on the topmost slopes of the Jungfrau, an encounter that now seemed unreal and almost lost in the mists of time; the beginning of a deception. 'This is the chapel of the mountain dead, the place where the goatherds are brought when they die, for their families are too poor to pay for transport and a funeral in the lower regions.'

'Somebody's coming!' Sabat stiffened, noted a small door at the rear of the interior, perhaps once the entrance to a vestry, opening slowly.

'This will be Monsieur Grien,' Madeleine shuddered. 'He is the keeper of the dead, the mortician of the mountains!'

Sabat's first impression of Monsieur Grien was one of utter revulsion; no twisted hunchbacked grotesque dwarf so commonplace in B-rated horror movies could have compared with the figure which shuffled into view. The other was clad in some kind of homespun overalls of a dirty grey colour that were splashed and stained with dark crimson, filth and dried blood ingrained in the coarse material. The head was bald, reflected the light from the single oil-lamp which hung in the aisle, features that had wizened with age, the skin shrunken so that the head was virtually skeletal. Hollowed eyes that stared out into the night, a toothless mouth moving with muttered curses at this interruption. A bony hand gestured impatiently for them to enter.

'That is the one,' Grien pointed towards the furthestmost shrouded figure. 'Take it and begone, for I do not like this business.'

'You are being well paid for it,' Madeleine regained her confidence with a sudden anger and moved forward with Sabat at her heels. 'Do not forget that, Monsieur Grien. In fact, consider yourself fortunate that we have given you any money at all for we can prove, if necessary, that on occasions empty coffins have been lowered into their graves because the corpses have been taken elsewhere!'

The bald-headed man shrank back, his black cavity of a mouth wide in a mute cry of terror and when he spoke again it was a cringing whine. 'I meant no harm, it is only that I am busy. A goatherd slipped on the crags today and the sharp rocks below dissected the corpse. I have to sew it back together before his family come to view him tomorrow. I meant no harm, I assure you. I am pleased to be of assistance.'

'Then you must help my companion here to carry this body to our vehicle.' Madeleine moved forward, slender fingers that trembled only slightly gripping a corner of the shroud. 'But first we must check that it is the right one.'

The cloth was cast aside and in that first awful moment in which Sabat was afforded a view of the corpse on the slab he was fighting to stop himself from uttering a cry of revulsion and turning his head away. Merciful God, to think that they could transport a hideous cargo like that across the continent, that strong men could sleep in their beds whilst it remained unburied or uncremated! He almost threw up, tasted the tang that still lingered on his palate from last night's meal, smelled it again here as it drifted up from that month-old corpse.

It was Louis Nevillon all right. The head so neatly severed from the shoulders rested on the belly, as though the navel had engorged and developed features. Eyes that should have been closed were wide and staring: seeing! The nostrils were clogged with mucus that had bubbled and dried, the lips open as though rigor mortis had frozen that final curse. White flesh bloated as though it was ready to live again.

Madeleine's fear was gone, replaced by an expression of sadness that was slowly transforming into one of breathless joy. She smiled, her dark eyes sparkled, and she was leaning over the mutilated remains of the Beast of France.

'My dearest,' a whisper that was intended only for dead ears. 'You have not left me after all. You knew that I would come to you, that soon we shall be together again.'

Her lips pouted, descended slowly on to Louis Nevillon's bloodcaked rigid mouth in a long succulent kiss between the living and the dead, her tongue thrusting into that icy cavern as though simulating copulation in preparation for his resurrection.

Sabat tensed, clenched his fists in an inexplicable feeling of jealousy, hatred for this lifeless body that was even now an instrument of seduction. He wanted to tear her from it, take his own revenge upon Louis Nevillon whilst it was still possible. After that he would take Madeleine ...

But by the time Madeleine Gaufridi straightened up and looked at him Sabat was smiling, only his eyes betraying what had gone on in his mind.

'Carry him out to the van,!. Madeleine snapped. 'Monsieur Grien will help you. Take care that you do not drop him, for even in death my dearest one has feelings!'

CHAPTER SEVEN

SABAT'S HANDS burned as though with frostbite as he clambered back into the passenger seat alongside Madeleine, a coldness that was spreading to the rest of his body - the chill of death from handling Louis Nevillon.

The VW whined then fired and the headlights threw the darkness back. Sabat glanced out of the side window; the mortuary door was closed now and no light shone from within. Perhaps Monsieur Grien preferred to work in the dark.

Back down that mountain road, Madeleine using her brakes, their squeal jarring Sabat's nerves like a cry of anguish from beyond the grave. He had to stop himself from turning round and peering over into the back of the van, cringing in horror at the grisly thing which lay there wrapped in an old blanket. A sharp bend, something rolled. A dull thud. Sabat was reminded of that unholy kiss in the morgue, found himself staring intently at the girl by his side. Her moods came and went, a young girl who grew to maturity and worse, and then became almost childlike again in her innocence. She was relaxed now, a half-smile on

her pert features.

'I don't suppose I'm to be told where we're headed?' Sabat murmured, 'even though I do happen to be your bodyguard/

'It wouldn't mean anything to you if I told you,' she replied. 'Just an old chapel that nobody uses these days except ourselves. We'll have to lie up there during the daytime. Andre and the others will be joining us after dark.'

He thought he detected a faint greyness in the eastern sky. The speedometer needle hovered between sixty and seventy, a vibration that made conversation impossible. Madeleine Gaufridi was driving flat out, desperate to reach this unknown chapel before dawn broke fully.

Skirting Lucerne, the lake a shimmering sheet of cold blackness on their right, starting to climb again. Daylight was coming fast, the pine forests no longer patches of dark shadow beyond the range of the headlights.

A screeching of brakes and Sabat was thrown forward. Madeleine cursed fluently in French, grated the reverse gear and shot backwards, slammed it back into bottom.

'Almost missed it.' She nodded towards a gap in the trees where a muddy track led away from the road. 'I must be very tired, I have been here often enough before.'

The VW bumped over uneven ground, the wheels spinning in a patch of thick mud but coming free again. The track was so narrow now that the overhanging branches scraped the sides of the van. Climbing, levelling out, going down a steep slope until they emerged into a wide clearing in the centre of which was a building that had undoubtedly been a chapel at some time. Sabat stared with tired eyes, made out a square stone structure roughly the size of the chalet in which they had stayed at Interlaken, similar to that mountain morgue, only much smaller.

'It's very small,' he commented.

'Most of these remote chapels are,' she answered, leaning her head on the steering wheel. 'Just a few

peasants on Sundays. It was ample then and it is now. God, I'm shattered. You will have to get Louis out of the back on your own!'

Sabat opened the door, got out slowly. That thing; he had to handle it, hold it close to his own body, feel its deathly cold chilling his blood. The smell of death that would cling to him like the tang of human meat. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes. He didn't have any choice.

Madeleine was already opening the chapel door, waiting for him. He stretched his hands into the back of the van, wished that there was a wheelbarrow or some other conveyance handy. Even if there had been she would not have allowed him to use it 'Carry my loved one carefully for he is not really dead; only sleeping, ready to awaken on Walpurgisnacht?'

The body had partially slipped out of the blanket, the head now separate and turned away from him. He could not carry them both. He would have to make two journeys.

He wrapped the blanket tightly around the corpse, dragged it towards him and then lifted it, staggered back and almost fell under the weight. Two hundred pounds, maybe more,

The ground was slippery and he had to pick each step deliberately. Fortunately it was light enough now for him to see where he was going. So heavy, he wondered if he could make it inside, suddenly afraid of the wrath of his companion if he did not.

He stumbled on the step, almost fell, but somehow his weakened muscles did not fail him. A blurred first glimpse of the interior of this place; similar to that morgue in some respects except that the altar had not been removed. Instead it had been draped with black cloths and two funereal candles in holders of the same colour stood at either end.

He came to a halt, wheezed as he asked, 'Where... where do I... ?'

'In there.' Madeleine was at his side, pointing towards an open lead coffin which lay before the altar in the shadows. 'Careful. Mind how you lay him down,'

Sabat grunted his relief aloud as he was suddenly relieved of the weight, dropped to his knees panting

for breath. The darkness of the coffin's interior had swallowed up Nevillon. He didn't have to look.

'Now fetch ... the rest. Quickly!'

He found himself hastening to obey, almost running, feeling her eyes boring into him as he went back to the van.

Now he was having to force himself to do everything. Not just because he was physically weakened but because the bile was burning in his throat and nausea was threatening to make him vomit. The body had been nothing compared with ... with that awful thing which he must now carry like a child clutching a football to itself. Maybe if he closed his eyes. No, he'd fall. Don't look at it. You have to because those sightless staring eyes won't let you look anywhere else.

Sabat's fingers were stiff and inflexible, seemed unable to secure a firm grip as he lifted the head out of the back of the van. It slipped, spun, and for one terrible second he thought that he had dropped it. Looking down, almost crying out aloud at what he saw. The features were upturned towards him, those dull orbs staring into his, the lips open and mocking him. He heard the laughter in his ears, a sound so familiar that he recognised it instantly. Quentin's. His own. Louis Nevillon's. There was no difference.

Mud squelched over his shoes and impeded his progress like some quagmire trying to prevent the rejoining of that body with its head. An icy wind seemed to buffet him. Madeleine was screaming something, cursing him, yelling at him to hurry.

Steps that were like a slow-motion replay of something he had done before. Like the first night of his illness when he had been a spectator to his own actions.

Into the chapel, Madeleine behind him, still shouting - but her words were drowned by the roaring in his ears and that same taunting laughter. Beside the coffin, forced to kneel because otherwise he would have had to drop the guillotined skull. On his knees, total subservience to the dark powers.

'Join the head and body together!' Madeleine's voice finally made it through the maelstrom which raged inside him. 'Lay my beloved down with the reverence he deserves!'

Slumped over the side of the lead coffin, Sabat fumbled to unravel the blanket shroud from around the corpse's shoulders. He closed his eyes, didn't want to see; felt soft dead flesh, the sponginess of the severed neck. He retched. Any moment he would throw up.

His hands were numb with the cold but even so he felt the faint movement of that thing on which his fingers rested, like some organism that breathed faintly. Cold fetid breath that was a stale reminder of the taste in his own mouth. And then with an effort he was snatching his hands away, falling backwards; lying there on a cold stone floor gasping for breath.

'You did well.' Madeleine Gaufridi glanced inside the coffin, turned back to him with a smile. 'You have earned a rest. Over there in the corner is a mattress and some blankets. We must rest, sleep away the daytime hours and be refreshed for when the others arrive tonight.'

Sabat staggered across to where she indicated, saw that a rough double-bed had been made up in readiness for them.

'Just a few nights and it will be Walpurgisnacht* she breathed softly, as she slipped out of her jeans and blouse, leaving on only her bra and pants. 'We shall remain here until then, Sabat, to guard the most precious of all bodies that has ever lain in state. Just you and me. Nobody else.' A little laugh that would have sent icy shivers down Sabat's spine had not his body already been frozen. With numbed fingers he fumbled with buttons, wondered why the hell they couldn't keep their clothes on.

Her flesh rubbed against his as they slid between the blankets. So cold, or was it himself? He couldn't stop thinking about Nevillon and how she had thrust her tongue into that dead mouth, the same tongue that was starting to trace a frozen path up his own neck, her fingers going where once he had willed them. Now he was stiffening with revulsion.

'Your lover. ..' he snatched at the first excuse that came into his head, 'he might be angry if... if you are unfaithful.'

'No,' she whispered and began to rub him softly. 'He won't because until Walpurgisnacht I am free. Louis will only live again when his sacred flesh has been devoured. He will be reborn into another male body and, who knows, Sabat, it could be you! Then we shall be together, you and I: Louis Nevillon and Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud reborn to live forever!'

Sabat shuddered silently and wondered how he managed to become aroused. He knew only too well - because Madeleine and Louis Nevillon had him totally in their power. Mark Sabat, priest and exorcist, was dead, finished, Quentin Sabat was in his place, the same body but the soul was as evil as that of the guillotined corpse which lay in that coffin, only a few yards away from where Sabat and Madeleine were joined in a union that was more than just a physical copulation.

Sabat stirred restlessly, tried to tell himself that he had been in a fevered nightmare, that he was back in his own London home; it was all a dream and now it would evaporate with waking.

But Madeleine Gaufridi was there, wearing that long black dress which she had worn the evening of that vile feast. She appeared to have been up for some time for the dark candles on the altar were burning steadily, giving off a pungent aroma of sickly perfumed wax. The lid of the coffin was closed.

She saw that he was awake, fixed him with a stare that was almost hostile. 'Get dressed, Sabat. The others will be here shortly.'

He nodded, hastened to obey because he was cold and maybe his clothing would help to warm his flesh. As he shrugged himself into his jacket he felt the weight of the .38 in its holster bumping against him. He still had his gun but it was no more use to him than a child's water pistol.

A trestle table near the door had been laid as though in preparation for some kind of buffet. He stiffened when he noted the crockery and cutlery. A pile of plates that appeared to be made out of some kind of black ivory, knives and forks that had been blackened. There was no sign of any food. That was what worried and nauseated him most.

'Tonight we celebrate the advent of Walpurgisnacht and ask the Master to give life to Louis Nevillon again.' Her tone was in the form of a recitation, her features impassive. 'It is very important that everything is done right.'

Sabat licked his dry cracked lips. A feeling akin to embarrassment bordering on fear. Fear had always been something virtually unknown to him. Until now. Now he knew that he was powerless to fight and it was a terrifying prospect.

'Listen!' She held up a finger.

Somewhere he heard the sound of approaching vehicles, engines that revved when the wheels stuck in the squelching mud. Coming closer. Louder. Dying away.

A moment's silence then low muttered voices and the slamming of car doors.

'They are here,' Madeleine Gaufridi added, smiling, 'Now we shall...'

She was interrupted by a scream from outside, a piercing yell of terror that was magnified and rendered more terrible because of the stillness of this remote wooded clearing.

And Sabat recognised it as the scream of a child that was suddenly cut off, as though a hand had been clapped over its mouth! He found himself glancing back towards that table and noting again that there was no food on display!

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE DOOR opened and people began to file in. Andre Schmid was in the lead, but was no longer clad in those worn, tight-fitting jeans which rolled over at the waistband. Scarcely recognisable from a distance, he was dressed in black flowing robes that gave him a monastic appearance, a cowl that was flung back so that his jowls were still visible.

However, it was the limp form which he carried in his arms which attracted Sabat's attention, hypnotised him with a feeling of horror. A child, doubtlessly the one who had screamed a few moments ago, now head down, with blood dripping steadily from a gash across his forehead.

Schmid paused before the closed coffin, gave a slight bow, and laid his burden stretched out on the lid. Now Sabat could see the unfortunate child clearly in the circle of light cast by the flickering black candles. It was a boy, no more than seven at a guess, a squat limp figure clad in brown shorts and a rainbow-striped shirt. The blood was still flowing from his head, forming a pool on the lead surface. But there was... something not quite right!

Sabat stiffened as he suddenly caught a glimpse of the boy's face. Oh merciful God! A Grotesque; almost flat features, hideously misshapen. A mongol! Anger and pity mingled inside Sabat. These bastards needed a human being for their vile cannibalistic rites so they had procured some subnormal harmless child. So easy to lure away.

Sabat clenched his fists, almost rushed forward but something held him back. A voice. 'It's kindness really. The boy is better dead than alive. In any case he probably wouldn't live more than a few years. Better that he serves some useful purpose.' Quentin's voice, condescending.

Sabat sighed. It was true. There was nothing he could do anyway.

He had expected the usual form of human sacrifice common to such places as Haiti where the throat was slit, the spurting blood caught in vessels and drunk by the worshippers of evil, and had steeled himself to witness it. But it didn't happen that way. Suddenly everybody was moving away from the inert form on that awful coffin.

Sabat couldn't work out whether Madeleine or Andre Schmid was directing operations. The others, with slow jerky movements that reminded him of the living dead in Haiti, were removing the altar cloths, carefully setting those candles down on an adjacent shelf, the material wafting and flickering the tiny flames, threatening to extinguish them.

It took several seconds for the awful truth to dawn on Sabat. He had expected to see some form of wooden table as the basis for the altar - instead he saw a huge old-fashioned cast-iron oven of the Rayburn type, a filthy uncleaned monster, its front daubed with spilled fat and what appeared to be congealed gravy; except that he knew it wasn't because already his acute sense of smell had picked up a faint stale aroma and recognised it. The acrid tang of burned human flesh!

He felt himself starting to retch, almost threw up. He wanted to turn away, flee from this place, leave these people to their vile atrocities. But he knew he could not; he was Quentin and he had to go along with whatever they were planning to do this night in their build-up to the climax of Walpurgisnacht! He sensed the evil, was part of it himself.

A thin youth was struggling to carry an aluminium bucket containing coal and some chunks of wood. Another was busy crumpling up sheets of newspaper, stuffing them in through the small door of the firebox. Now there was a sudden sense of urgency, a rattling of a matchbox, a scraping and a smell of sulphur.

Sabat heard the roar of flames, the crackling of kindling wood; the leaden door was slammed shut. Now the group were turning round, those faces no longer expressionless; eyes that burned with a hidden lust staring at the boy who was beginning to stir. Nobody took any notice of Sabat. He was a spectator, nothing else.

The mongol raised his head, wheezed as a gust of smoke from the old cooker engulfed him. Eyes wide with a terror which he did not understand, cringing. Thick lips moved and gave off inarticulate sounds. Thank God, Sabat thought, he doesn't understand. He knows they're going to do something unpleasant to him but mercifully they will kill him quickly. It will be all over any second.

The candles were burning steadily, casting an eerie circle of yellow light fringed by shadows and moving shapes. The flames inside the stove were roaring, hungrily devouring the dry wood, splitting the lumps of coal. But it would take time for the oven temperature to rise. Sabat was mentally yelling; 'Kill him! For fuck's sake kill him and put him out of his misery!'

Schmid stepped forward, a sinister black priest in full regalia. He stretched out a flabby white hand, grabbed a tussock of unruly red hair and jerked the mongol's head back. A strangled cry. That cut was still bleeding. Then silence.

Even Sabat could feel the full impact of that hypnotism, the child an easy victim, mouth wide, nodding his agreement to something he did not understand. And when Andre Schmid released him the boy smiled, a stretching of gargantuan lips exposing wide, misplaced teeth.

An order which Sabat did not catch. The mongol nodded, grunted, began clumsily to unfasten buttons, exposing a roll of surplus flesh around his waist, a body that was so badly proportioned that you only realised the full extent of its deformity when it was unclothed. Giggling, inhibited even under hypnotism, hands splayed across the lower regions in a protective shield.

The company retreated into the shadows, left Schmid alone in the circle of candlelight, a cloaked figure murmuring some whispered incantation.

Sabat wanted to cross himself but his hands refused to obey his brain, had him wincing with a feeling of guilt. The Left Hand Path had no mercy on traitors! Instead he found himself offering up an apology to the powers of darkness. He would renounce his vows, his faith. He would partake in this ceremony because he was one of the followers of darkness.

Time became meaningless. Schmid's tone was an incessant drone, alternating between humility and arrogance. Minutes, hours, it was impossible to tell.

Then Andre Schmid was moving forward, fumbling with the latch on the oven door, throwing it wide so that a blast of heat like the breath from some fiery dragon cut across the chapel, had the others reeling. Except the boy; he was standing now, a pathetic ungainly figure. He grinned, grunted something.

Schmid was towering above him, a giant by comparison, pointing towards the oven with a stubby forefinger. 'Get in there, child?'

There was no hesitation from the mongol. A step forward, then another, almost an eagerness about his movements now. Lurching, bending to peer into the dark cubicle, screwing up his features in puzzlement.

'Get in there, child!'

Sabat caught his breath, his own fingers seeming to shrivel with the heat as he watched the bizarre scene

by the 'altar*. No cry of pain from the mongol, just a hissing of scorched skin. Clambering awkwardly, falling back because he was not agile enough to get into the confined space, hauling himself up and trying again.

This time he made it, hunching himself, squashing his frame against the red hot side of the oven, looking out with an imbecilic grin on his face as though seeking approval - and getting it. 'Good!' Schmid grunted. 'You serve a worthy cause, child!'

The demonic priest's foot went up and back, drove down catching the open door with the flat of his shoe, slamming it back. It bounced off the latch; he kicked it again and this time it closed and held.

Silence. Sabat was sweating, revolted but in a way approving because he was one of them. Looking around, seeing a dozen or more expressionless faces staring at the closed oven door. Not a sign of revulsion on any of them; he wondered what his own expression was. They were either junkies or the victims of Schmid's hypnotism. Sabat was different - he was possessed!

'The Master will be well pleased,' Andre Schmid's tones were hollow, echoing in the tiny chapel. 'Now, let us do what he would wish us to do whilst we wait. Brothers and sisters, tonight we shall feast sumptuously, I promise you!'

The group seemed to come to life, puppets which had lain idle suddenly finding their strings being operated, moving jerkily; feverishly tearing off their clothes. The ugly and the beautiful, all naked together, grasping for one another with lusting, searching fingers.

'Don't say you're not going to join us, Sabat.' Mocking female tones that came out of the shadows and, even as he looked, Sabat saw the naked form of Madeleine Gaufridi materialising, a sensuous female cat-beast stalking its prey.

His flesh began to prickle as her slender fingers flipped buttons, her pouted lips brushing his and jerking back like a marshland will-o'-the-wisp as he tried to engage them. He knew that he was already fully aroused, that he would do anything she asked of him and enjoy every second of it. His clothing fell away, every nerve in his body trembling with the thought of what lay ahead.

'You will obey my every command tonight, Sabat!' A hiss that came from a face that was half in shadow, a she-devil spitting her venom, laughing. He thrilled to her domination, half-cringed, and even as he

reached for her she sank limply to the ground, rolling over on to her back and splaying her legs wide. 'Kiss me, Sabat!'

He crawled after her on hands and knees, fumbled to find her soft, warm moistness with his eager jabbing tongue, thrilled to her shrill squeal of delight, a sound that was taken up all around as though the half-dozen cavorting couples had been awaiting her signal. Men were grunting, whispering their profanities. And throughout, Sabat was hunched down obeying her commands; he was powerless to do otherwise. He was the slave of Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud and her lust had blinded him to all else; he smelled only the sweetness of her natural odours and not the acrid stench of burning flesh. He heard a muffled cry of agony, screams, and a beating of fists somewhere, but they meant nothing to him.

She reached her pitch, closed over him in a suffocating, writhing grip, but still he kissed her furiously because she had ordered him to do so, buried in a dark pit where nothing else mattered.

He fell on to her when she went limp and trembling, did not even cry out when her knee crashed into his face and sent him sprawling; rising to his knees, whispering his willingness to obey.

'You want me tonight don't you, Sabat?' Her lips curled in a sneer and he nodded his mute pleading. 'Well, you shall not have me. Show me, show us all, what you do when you are denied a woman!'

Coarse laughter but he had no pride left. 'Show us, Sabat!'

Jibes that only urged him on, a strong man weakened by a lust that was not his own, kneeling in a circle of candlelight, his body trembling as he began to obey. Screams somewhere that were getting weaker and weaker and finally dying out; a nauseating stench that he breathed in without knowing it.

Exploding, trying to make out Madeleine Gaufridi's face amongst the pressing throng as he writhed on the floor. Laughing with them now, exhilarated by the humiliation.

'On your feet, Sabat!' A booted foot caught him in the ribs, expelled the air from his body in one lung-searing rush, had him crying out with pain. 'On your feet, cochon, for tonight you serve not only us but the Grand Master of the Left Hand Path. Our food is cooked. You will carve the meat?'

Euphoria was replaced by revulsion but still Sabat was eager to serve. He managed to stand, swayed dizzily and waited for his vision to adjust, saw a blur of movement in the light from the candles and felt that blast of heat scorching and drying his sweating flesh again. They were pushing him, hustling him to where an almost unrecognisable object sizzled and smoked on a large black dish on the trestle table. Unrecognisable unless you knew what it was!

A carving knife and a skewer were pushed into Sabat's hands; one of the candles had been set on the table so that he could see. The shape on the gigantic dish was charred and smoking, deformed limbs trussed.

'Carve the Master's sacred meat, Sabat.' A chant, an order.

The blade in Sabat's hand glinted; he noticed a dull patch on the sharp steel where it appeared to have rusted.

'Hurry, Sabat.' Madeleine had pushed close to him. 'It has been a long, strenuous evening and we are hungry!'

He reacted automatically, tried not to look as the skewer pierced the blackened flesh. A hiss of air, a faint echo of a cry of torment. Fat sizzled, juices ran. Hotter than Hades itself.

Slicing with the blade, swaying on his feet and trying to will himself to pass out, but cruelly consciousness failed to desert him.

'We are hungry, Sabat. Hurry!' Voices, male and female, deep and shrill, eager to fill their bellies.

Again he was the robot slave, a mechanism that obeyed with the finesse and skill of a qualified chef. Cutting, flipping the slices on to those black plates which were snapped up with eager hands. Hacking at stubborn bones, milling gourmets hustling him.

So unreal, a black buffet of human carnage, the coarse munching of a coven of revolting greed as they harassed him with empty plates, some even tearing their own food from the mutilated carcass. Sabat had not intended to eat but he found his mouth full, the chewed meat slipping easily down his throat, his

stomach accepting it.

Only Andre Schmid remained clothed, a cowed faceless silhouette standing by the coffin watching them. Sabat felt the other's power, the sheer force of it dominating his every action, controlling the movement of his fork from plate to lips and back again.

So cold, the candles spluttering and dimming, figures lying on the floor too spent to copulate again, their stomachs bloated with the unholy meat. A voice, it had to be Andre Schmid's, a whisper that vibrated and had them cringing. 'Accept our offering, O Great One, for tonight we have feasted as you would have us feast and we ask you to be with us on Walpurgisnacht when the body of Silvain Nevillon shall be given life again. Let him emerge as one of us, to guide us.'

One candle was already out, the other flickering its last, casting weird shapes that were icy cold when their black fingers brushed against human flesh. Sabat fought to close his eyes but the lids would not move. He saw faces that came and went and were replaced by others; human shapes that dropped on to all fours and became snarling beasts, heard cries of the damned. Eyes that glowed like burning coals and died amidst a chorus of torment. Things that were unrecognisable except one frail shadowed shape, a hideous misshapen child that writhed and smoked and cursed unintelligibly. A fury that went beyond the realms of mortal anger, trying to get at them but being pulled back by invisible hands. Screaming, crying in its helplessness, being dragged away into the darkness; but even as it was disappearing it managed to free one hand, pointed it accusingly at Sabat. And then it was gone as though it had never been.

Sabat felt the tears of grief and shame welling up inside him, but before they could burst forth he had pitched forward into that dark unfathomable pit, so cooling after the heat of that oven.

CHAPTER NINE

IT WAS full daylight when Sabat stirred, moved his stiff limbs with some difficulty. He was naked and shivering uncontrollably, trying to tell himself that the fever had come back and given him ghoulish inexplicable nightmares.

But it was all so horribly real, Madeleine lying there by the altar, which was draped again in black tapestries, her shapely legs lewdly spread as though she had been waiting for him to awake so that she could command him to kiss her again. Her eyes were closed but he got the feeling that she wasn't asleep. Maybe a trap of some kind? There was no sign of the others; perhaps they were hiding outside in the wood, waiting in ambush. Tempting him to escape so that they could strike him down.

No, they didn't need to do that because he would not flee. He was a prisoner here as surely as though his limbs were chained and manacled; a bodyguard to the dead. If they wished to kill him they would have done so by now.

'You are hungering for breakfast, Sabat?' Madeleine Gaufridi's eyes opened; there was a mocking expression on her pale features.

'No,' he grunted, felt his stomach churn. *I could not eat anything.'

'Human flesh is so filling, so satisfying,' she laughed. 'It is good for the figure, too.'

'Where are the others?'

'Gone back with Andre. We shall not see them again until Walpurgisnacht.'

'And in the meantime?'

'You stay here and guard the desecrated body of my beloved. You guard him with your soul, for if he suffers harm Andre will take that. Perhaps your body also.'

'What about you?'

'I shall be leaving you shortly.' She sat up, groped for her clothes. 'There is work for me to do, which is why you must stay here alone.'

Sabat fell silent. Strangely he did not think of escape, only of a job that had to be done. Quentin was conditioned to serving the powers of darkness; it had never been any other way. He still had the •38; he would fight to the last shell to defend the Left Hand Path and its followers.

Some time later he watched her go, the VW bumping and skidding down the muddy track through the trees. He stood in the doorway listening to the sound of its engine dying away. Then silence, not even a bird singing in this dense patch of mountain forest where all noise was blanketed; a stronghold of escalating evil cut off from the rest of the world.

Sabat felt drained, physically and mentally, could not get the previous night's revulsion out of his mind. God, there was that awful taste cloying his palate, wouldn't let him forget it. If only he had some toothpaste or an antiseptic mouthwash. Even so he doubted whether it would rid him of the flavour.

He didn't want to go back inside. Not with that hideous unholy body in the coffin, a thing that was almost alive. You got the feeling that Nevillon was only sleeping, that he might wake up at any moment.

Sabat tried to collect his thoughts. Somehow it was easier without Madeleine around. These people had learned from the rites of the Cochon Gris, which apparently had spread across the world from the West Indies, the ultimate in voodoo magic, cannibals who were determined not to let their primitive customs die. Nevillon was some kind of grand houngan, a disciple of Satan who was determined that the Left Hand Path should triumph on the continent. Doubtless he was a reincarnation of the infamous Silvain Nevillon just as Madeleine Gaufridi, as she called herself, was Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud reborn. Together their evil was very powerful, almost invincible. It was little wonder that they sought an alliance with the notorious Quentin Sabat, knew that if they overcame Mark Sabat then Quentin would live again; a kind of 'hit man' to do their dirty work. They would find their followers amongst the black

magic cults of the world; kids who did it for kicks then suddenly found they'd got a tiger by the tail. It would spread like a fast-growing malignant cancer.

Sabat pursed his lips. If it hadn't been for that bout of pneumonia he wouldn't be here now, at least not in his present predicament. They'd made a pretty good all round job of ensnaring him. Not only was he possessed by Quentin, but the law was also looking for the killer of that detective in Interlaken. Schmid and his friend would lose no time in producing the necessary incriminating evidence if Sabat went to the police. And after Walpurgisnacht there would be no hope. Once he had eaten of that terrible flesh there would be no way back for Sabat. It could be that he would find himself possessed by Louis Nevillon then - Sabat, the Beast of France! He shuddered.

Then, amidst the despair, a sudden idea glimmered like a distant light to one lost in a nocturnal wilderness. The astral plane! He had the ability to transport himself there. Madeleine was gone, she wouldn't be back for a few days and it was unlikely that anybody else would come here. He could draw the pentagram inside the chapel. He sighed. A defence against evil was no good when he was evil himself. In which case why bother with a defence? One did not have to be pure to venture on to the plane!

He pursed his lips; at least it was better than remaining here. It was no means of physical escape, but in the past he had benefited from the wisdom of those who were not shackled by mortal bonds.

Sabat went back inside, retched at the stench of stale cooking, the acrid odour of roasted human flesh. There was no point in chalking out a pentagram on the floor. Indeed, he was probably safer without its confinement. He glanced towards the oblong shape of that coffin in the altar shadows, half-expected to see the lid starting to rise. No, nothing would happen until Walpurgisnacht.

He stretched himself out on the blanket where he had spent the night. Every muscle in his body ached, every nerve taut. It wasn't going to be easy. He didn't even know if he would be able to relax, let alone sleep the slumber necessary for his soul to depart his earthly body and go in search of the astral plane.

Mark or Quentin Sabat, he had not forgotten the technique. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. Usually relaxation came easily but not this time, as though some inner obstruction was determined to prevent him. Quentin's soul was reluctant to let him be transported to the astral. Why? There was nothing to fear, good or evil. The risks were the same for both, the danger of being trapped there and leaving an empty shell of a body at the mercy of mortal men - death due to natural causes.

Sabat had to relax before it was possible to concentrate. He tried to reflect upon his past life, a means

he often used. A turmoil. The shame of adolescence, fleeing to the protection of the Church. Another disturbing phase, the sheer hypocrisy of the Church's hierarchy. Was not Royston Spode an example of that? The SAS. Brutal efficiency. Learning to kill and having no conscience. Catriona Lealan ... hell, he was getting an erection now. Madeleine ... Sabat sweated, became angry with himself. They all had some sort of hold on him, had found a chink in his seemingly invincible armour.

OK he was weak, had succumbed to numerous temptations and he'd do it again. He'd join them in their Walpurgisnacht unholy feast, resign himself to being one of them because there was nothing he could do about it. He would not fight against it.

He felt himself starting to relax. Evil had found its own level; he wasn't fighting it anymore. He was becoming drowsy, eyes closing. His mind was calmer, his breathing slower. He might just have been going to sleep. Everything seemed so tranquil, such a natural state of affairs.

Subconsciously he knew he was on the brink. A void where there was impenetrable darkness, utter silence. Then a light, far off, becoming brighter. Dazzling, blinding, making him cringe. His relaxation came back in a soothing wave and he was listening intently, waiting for something, a signal of some kind maybe.

He had no recollection of having received that signal, only that he was moving. Airborne, hovering up against the chapel ceiling looking down on his own sleeping body, noting the peacefulness of his own expression. He had done it, he could travel where he fancied with no chains to fetter him!

He was naked but instantly clothed himself, a drab office-type suit; it would do for now. One last look down at that coffin and its hideous contents. For the moment Louis Nevillon was dead; he could not follow.

Sabat was outside, now in the form of a hovering kestrel poised above the tiny chapel, so insignificant amidst the giant pines. He delayed, almost decided to try and find Madeleine and Andre Schmid. The latter would be at the commune only a mile or two away; the former could be anywhere. It was not worth wasting the limited time at his disposal to try and find her. No purpose would be served if he did. He knew only too well where he had to go.

Soaring. Alternately thick cloud and bright spring sunlight, the land below him becoming so distant that it was almost indistinguishable. He hastened on his way, a peregrine falcon travelling with the speed of an archer's bolt, a new urgency to his journey.

Once he passed another soul, a middle-aged woman with a sagging wrinkled body. A recent death, perhaps only minutes ago, and she was totally unaware of her nudity. Eventually she would learn how to clothe herself. She had received a summons and she was answering it to the exclusion of all else.

After a time Sabat saw nobody at all, just endless blue skies. Eternity that began somewhere and ended nowhere. You just accepted it and kept going, didn't think about it.

Just one moment of apprehension. Could he find the place he sought? Circumstances were different, he was different. Then relief as ahead of him he spied the burning wasteland of a desert that was akin to eternity itself, a parched landscape that went on and on. A place he recognised!

Sabat alighted, changing back to human form, a warrior clad only in a tattered loincloth. Indeed he would have been as well naked. His bare feet scuffed the hot sand and as he looked down he found himself tensing, drawing back, wanting to flee. His skin was a dark hue, almost negroid black. A strangled cry escaped his lips, a tremor ran through him, left him shaking. But, of course, it had to be this way. In this land there were only two races, the fair-skinned warriors of Good, the dark ones of Evil. In the astral he had no choice. He now belonged to the scattered forces of Iniquity who were fighting a ceaseless battle; victors one day, vanquished the next. The eternal struggle of Armageddon where souls suffered and died but rose again to fight the following day.

Sabat was weary, walking with bowed head. The sweat on his body evaporated as soon as it was formed, his throat was parched, constantly tortured by mirages of lakes and streams. This was hell itself, its fires that huge ball of scorching flames in the sky above.

He came to the scene of this day's battle, scarcely gave it a glance as he picked his way between the strewn bodies. Dark-and light-skinned lay entwined after their bitter hand-to-hand struggle, deathlocked, the only movement bloated vultures gorging themselves on human carrion, watching this newcomer, willing him to stumble and fall so that their razor beaks could gouge and tear the flesh from his bones.

Sabat continued on his way, no longer trying to measure distances as he had once done when he first started coming here. For this was a timeless place on the borders of eternity and only the Day of Judgement would bring it all to a halt.

The corpses were fewer now, just those that had fled and collapsed with the heat and the agony of their wounds. On into the desert, the sun past its zenith, scrub trees beginning to cast the first of the evening shadows.

Those shadows were lengthening when Sabat came upon the ruined city, crumbling edifices towering above a wall that had long collapsed in places. He clambered over the rubble, more wary now because this was a place he had not visited previously, a sacked city where the inhabitants had either been slain or fled. Dereliction all around him, sun-whitened bones littering the streets, no sign of life because even the vultures had deserted this place when the flesh was all gone.

Sabat did not know why he had come this far. He had just wandered on searching for something. Often in past visits he had come upon groups of survivors from both sides, or loners crawling away to die. Today it seemed that nobody was left. Armageddon had destroyed itself!

He lingered, would have returned to his physical body had it not lain in that deserted chapel along with that terrible guillotined corpse. He had his freedom; even in a burned-up land that was something to be savoured. He didn't want to go back.

Suddenly he heard a sound, a faint noise that seemed loud in a land of eternal silence, a whisper that hung in the still atmosphere, a rasping cry of despair. Sabat wheeled, saw a gaping black void in the ground that might have been the entrance to eternal damnation itself, a jagged hole down which a flight of broken steps disappeared in the darkness.

He stepped forward, experienced a fleeting sensation of terror but shrugged it off. It might be a trap but it was unlikely. He peered down into those black depths, heard rasping breaths and the rattling of phlegm in tortured lungs. Slowly, he began to descend.

At first the darkness was impenetrable but as he progressed it became lighter, a murky greyness akin to that of a foggy November morning. He knew not whence the light came, but had long since learned to accept everything in this hellish land. Down and down, the steps twisting and treacherous, until at length he arrived in an elongated dungeon that also seemed to have no end. The contrast in temperature had him shivering and he had almost decided to reclothe himself in warmer garments when he spied the man slumped against the wall. And even as he stared in amazement Sabat saw the head move, raising up, wide eyes that mirrored pain and hopelessness.

The other's skin was of a pallid texture and even a warrior of darkness chained down here for long periods could not have had so sickly a complexion. Long fair hair or was it grey? It was difficult to be sure in this half-light. Wasted flesh had rendered the frame virtually skeletal.

'I knew somebody would come one day.' The voice was strained yet mellow. 'I heard your footsteps above, stranger, yet even you cannot help me for I cannot return to my own people. I see you are one of the dark ones.'

'Why are you here?' Sabat was curious, noted that this man was not chained to the wall like the long-dead skeletons he could see on the other side. 'Surely you could have escaped. Even frail as you are, you could have crawled up those steps into the open!'

'No, I cannot, I dare not leave here.' A pathetic whine.

'Can you not return to the white-skinned forces who live and die daily?' Sabat's eyes narrowed and again he suspected a trick of some kind. This man was neither senile nor so weak that he could not flee, and the way was clear to him if he so wished.

'I can neither seek help from dark nor light.' A constricted sob. 'You see, my friend, I am a traitor. I have served both sides in turn.'

'Oh?' Sabat experienced an unexpected twinge of guilt. Mark or Quentin Sabat, there was a parallel. It might have been himself, weakened and pallid on the floor before him.

'It is true enough.' Breath expelled in anguish. 'I fought on the plains alongside my own kind. Then one day I was captured. I expected to be put to the sword but instead I was offered my life in exchange for my services. At the time I could not see what harm there was in it, for the warriors of both sides are countless, but soon it was too late and I realised my mistake, my unforgivable treachery. I became an outcast, a beggar of the streets, kicked and spat upon by both races in their contempt. Now I serve nobody, not even myself. If I could die then I would do so gladly but there is no death here, only eternal strife and struggle. I shall always be a traitor and here I must hide forever from the eyes of all. Learn from my fate, stranger. A warrior can only serve one faction else he destroys himself.'

Sabat nodded, turned away, knew why he had sought out this nameless sufferer. As he emerged into the weakening sunlight above he wished that he had asked the other's name. It might have been Mark. Or Quentin. But there was no time to return now and perhaps it was better not to know.

A sudden sense of urgency. He had experienced it on occasions before, a realisation that he had to

hurry, that a return to his mortal body was imperative. A kind of instinct.

The loincloth was exchanged for the feathers of a peregrine falcon once more, a fierce bird of prey that hurtled through thick cloud and clear skies, scattering smaller birds with shrill cries of fear as it neared the earth. A flock of homing pigeons parted to allow him passage, their uncanny radar disturbed so that they flew round aimlessly in circles before bunching up again.

Sabat saw the lake first, a shimmering sheet of water sparkling in bright sunlight, reflecting the wooded mountains which towered above it. Veered, rising steeply, swooping when he spotted the tiny insignificant chapel buried amidst the dark forest. Something else too, a moving shiny orange shape that wound its way up the muddy cart-track. For some reason Madeleine Gaufridi was returning in the VW! His inexplicable astral warning system had not failed him!

With only seconds to spare he entered his slumbering body, jerked it back to a state of wake fullness. A few bemused seconds and then he remembered everything, was sitting up when Madeleine burst in through the door.

'Slothful cochon!' her eyes blazed with anger. 'A guard, and yet you sleep the day away. And with danger imminent, too!'

She turned, stalked towards the lead coffin. 'Here, give me a hand. We must be sure that everything is all right.'

Sabat gripped the edge of the heavy lid, felt an icy coldness spreading from his fingertips to the rest of his body. He grunted, exerted his muscles and the lid came up slowly.

'Ah, it is ... Look? Madeleine Gaufridi almost fainted, her features blanching, pointing down at the body which lay now only partially wrapped in its blanket shroud. 'Look, Sabat, don't you see what's happened? My Louis lives even in death. His powers have not deserted him!'

Sabat saw. And what he saw nearly had him slamming the coffin lid shut. The head and body, separated by the heavy sharp blade of the guillotine, had joined themselves together again! Just a wide bloody scar ringing the neckline and even that appeared to be healing!

CHAPTER TEN

'It is not possible.' Madeleine's features were trembling with a shaky frightened smile. 'And yet with my beloved all things have been possible, always. He is preparing to rise on Walpurgisnacht of his own accord. It is not the flesh which we must eat but that of another human being. And Louis will join us at the feast!'

Sabat dropped the lid the last few inches and it thudded shut, vibrating the candlesticks which stood on the ghastly stove that served as an altar. He, too, was trembling.

'But that is not why I returned so soon, I she snapped. 'Sabat, there is danger and we must change our plans. Once again there is a detective on our trail, but not an ordinary one this time. His name is Pieter Daunay and even now he is heading this way. Centuries ago he would have been feared as the Witchfinder, for he specialises in harassing satanic cults. I have spoken with Andre and then hurried back here. You must see to it that Pieter Daunay does not leave these mountains aliver

Sabat hoped his expression did not give him away. With an effort he controlled his facial muscles, even raised his eyebrows in amazement. 'Surely one man cannot instil such fear into a following as powerful as Andre Schmid's!'

'He is cunning, this man. Some say he has supernatural powers but I have an open mind on that. Anyway, he must be annihilated without delay, Sabat!'

Sabat nodded, his face still impassive. In his mind he saw Daunay again, a slim fellow in his mid-thirties whose exceedingly handsome looks were spoiled by an unfortunate hump-back. Devilishly shrewd, with a nose for things that other detectives overlooked. Once he got on a scent he never gave up, hunting down his prey like a bloodthirsty stoat on the trail of a rabbit. Sabat had met him, worked with him once, and Daunay had claimed the credit. That was fine by Sabat, but now it seemed there was a direct confrontation looming. It was not a pleasant prospect.

'All right,' Sabat nodded slowly. 'I'll get him but I'll have to do it my own way. Any idea where he's hanging out?'

'He's booked in at the Hotel de la Paix on Museggstrasse by the Alpenstrasse. He checked in yesterday afternoon, and according to the information I received he has gone walking in the mountains. Which means he knows we are hereabouts and has already begun to look for us.'

'I'll start right away.' Sabat tapped the comforting weight of the •38 in his shoulder holster. 'I'll need to take the van though.'

'Of course.' A faint smile twitched the corners of Madeleine's mouth. 'Report to Andre at the commune when you have been successful, but it is imperative that Daunay is removed by Walpurgisnacht. Good luck... Quentin!'

Sabat flinched as though she had delivered him a physical blow. Then he was walking out towards the van, feeling her eyes boring into his back, following the erratic course of the VW until it was lost to her view amongst the tall pines. Only then did he relax slightly.

Sabat did not bother checking out the Hotel de la Paix. It would not have served any purpose, because had Daunay been there it would only have served to warn him, and if he was gone, as appeared to be the case, then there was no point. It was unlikely that an investigator of Daunay's calibre would leave his itinerary with a receptionist.

In all probability the detective had already linked the mongol's disappearance with the cannibal cult; he might even have knowledge of the small disused chapel in the mountains.

Sabat parked the van just off the Zurich-Strasse. Christ, the vehicle still stank of death like an undertakers' wagon. He locked it up, breathed in the sweet fresh mountain air and sauntered across into the Glacier Garden. He had no plans and at the moment he wasn't making any. He just needed time away from the atmosphere of Louis Nevillon. A chance to relax, to gather his thoughts.

His hand strayed to his pocket, located the yellowed-blackened meerschaum pipe and a pouch that still had some of his sweet-scented mixture left in it. The tobacco had gone dry, crackled and burned hot when he lit it. He drew some of the smoke down into his lungs, let it out slowly in twin streams through his nostrils. He did not cough, it did not taste rancid, instead it gave him a faint feeling of exhilaration. He had got the effects of the pneumonia out of his lungs. He was getting stronger; almost ready to fight back. Three days and it would be Walpurgisnacht. Time was running out.

In spite of the urgency, Sabat experienced a feeling of lethargy. Tiredness but not exhaustion. The sun was warm and he strolled over to an ornamental seat, lowered himself down on to it. It would have been so easy to have slept, his eyelids starting to droop.

You must find Daunay and kill him!

He jerked, heard Quentin's rasping whisper. God, he could just walk away from here now but he'd never be free of his brother's soul, a devilish possession that would follow him to the ends of the earth. OK, he'd kill Pieter Daunay, but not right now. This was not a matter to be rushed.

Drowsy, idly trying to formulate some kind of plan. It would be futile to go looking for the investigator; in which case the investigator must come to him. Which meant a vigil in the region of the other's hotel. Sabat could not safely kill him there, so he must lure him away. It would not be easy because Daunay was no ordinary man. Nerves of steel, ruthless. The Sabat calibre; it was like hunting himself.

OK, that was settled then. He'd tell him he'd discovered the Swiss hideout of the cannibal cult. Which was true. Sabat smiled to himself, felt his eyelids droop another millimetre. Lead him up into the mountains. One shot, or even a karate blow; so easy if his victim was unaware.

He'd be asleep in a moment. A hazy view of tourists wandering to and fro like contented cattle over rich

meadow-land. Browsing, tired like himself.

'Sabat.'

His own name hit him like a deluge of cold water, instantly fully awake, reflexes that remembered SAS days almost throwing him flat in anticipation of raking terrorist machine-gun fire. Tautening, seeing the man who stood before him with a faint smile on his handsome tanned face. Springy hair that blew in the warm breeze, odd flecks of grey in it that hadn't been there the last time Sabat had seen him. And that hump seemed to have grown bigger, spoiling the overall picture of a masculinity that most men envied.

'Daunay.' Mark Sabat expelled his breath slowly. 'Pieter Daunay! And who the hell would have expected to find you idling the day away in the tranquillity of the Glacier Garden?'

'And the same could be said of you, my friend.' Daunay eased his body across and lowered himself down on the seat alongside Sabat, that unfortunate deformity making the movement seem ungainly. 'I knew we'd be meeting up before very long.'

'I had the same uncanny feeling myself.' Sabat stared into pale blue eyes that missed nothing; not even the faintest reaction escaped the Frenchman who was dubbed 'The Witchfinder'. 'Doubtless you are hot on the trail of this organisation the newspapers refer to as the Cannibal Cult'

'Like yourself, Sabat,' a short laugh. 'And unless I am badly mistaken you have already encountered them.'

'I have.' Sabat's expression was impassive, again waiting for the other to make the first move.

'In Interlaken where a man named Etoine was killed by a karate kick which had all the hallmarks of a British SAS attack?' Daunay laughed faintly. 'Tell me, Sabat, is this your investigation or theirs? Are the SAS in on this?'

'D'you think I'd tell you if it was theirs?' Sabat countered. 'Nevertheless, Pieter, our trails have merged. Teamwork would be easier than two separate attacking prongs. We might get in each other's way.'

'True. Tell me about Etoine. Was it really necessary to kill him?' Eyebrows raised in a mock reprimand. 'Not that your name has been linked with it. That was purely my own conclusion. The fool took the bit between his teeth, as you English say, and blundered in where such as you or I, Sabat, 'would have moved more cautiously. All the same, I did not think it was necessary for him to have died for his foolishness.'

'I did not know who he was.' Sabat held the gaze of those cold blue eyes unwaveringly. 'This may sound a weak excuse, Pieter, but I have been ill and ..'

'Pneumonia,' the other interrupted. 'I have checked you out. But forgive me, I interrupt.'

'Pneumonia it was,' Sabat replied. 'My real reason for coming to the continent is to recuperate. But then I met this girl who spun me this story about...'

'The convent at Aix-en-Provence,' Daunay laughed harshly. 'Madeleine Gaufridi, or Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud. Or, to give her her real name Marie Boulle. Certainly part of what she told you was true. She introduced lesbianism to the convent to undermine the authority of the Mother Superior and to destroy the faith of the young nuns. She was rapidly spreading her own beliefs and had she not been forced to flee from there I am certain that the ultimate depravity

would have ensued. She is no ordinary girl, Sabat, take it from me. If Satan ever had a daughter that girl is his own offspring.'

'It figures.' Sabat began refilling his meerschaum, felt the sudden craving for tobacco after weeks of abstinence growing stronger. 'I killed the one known as Etoine because I assumed him to be some devilish enemy of the girl. Take it from me, Pieter, in a mountain forest at night one does not trifle with an attacker.'

'True. But how did the girl manage to dupe you?'

'My awareness and intuitions were dulled by my illness,' Sabat went on, 'and by the time I realised what was going on I decided I'd stick along and take the opportunity to sort this cult out. Which is exactly what I am doing now and two of us working together will make that task very much easier.'

'You know where they are hiding out?' A wolfish eagerness showed on Daunay's features.

'Yes. And they have the body of Louis Nevillon there.'

'Mon Dieu!' Pieter Daunay smacked his hands together. 'I guessed it, I guessed it. And most surely they will be feasting on that corpse three nights from now!'

'That is exactly what they plan to do.' Sabat's admiration for the other's astuteness snowed in his smile. 'But tell me, Pieter, are things as serious as I think they are?'

'Worse.' The Frenchman's voice dropped to a whisper, glancing furtively about him to ensure that no tourist was within earshot. A line of cannibalism that goes back to the days of Silvain Nevillon, reincarnation brought about by the eating of the dead so that they lived again.'

'One up on the Cochon Gris!' Sabat's lips were a thin bloodless line. 'I am learning all the time.'

'You know where they are hiding. Tell me!'

'No,' Sabat shook his head slowly. 'I have a score to settle, Pieter, believe me. You are the one man in the world whom I would trust to accompany me back there tonight.'

'I see.' There was a flicker of suspicion for a second in Daunay's piercing eyes. 'I remember your brother Quentin, Sabat!'

Sabat felt his stomach constricting, the blood draining from his face, rasping laughter somewhere inside him. 'I killed him. He was as evil as Nevillon.'

'Quite so. I, too, was on his trail. I found the body in that grave in the mountains. There was evidence of necromantic rites in the clearing, some peasant corpses that had been interred in unconsecrated ground and then exhumed by your brother. Quentin's body was unrecognisable, his head blown apart by

revolver bullets. I wasn't sure which of the Sabats it was. It might have been you, my friend, murdered by your brother Quentin still free. You killed him, however, and did the world a favour. But, Sabat, do you realise exactly what your devilish brother was doing with those bodies?"

'Attempting to raise the dead in much the same way that in Haiti the bocors and houngans have zombies to trade as cheap labour.'

'No, my friend, nothing quite so simple. Quentin Sabat was an associate of Louis Nevillon. Together they were addicted to human meat and had already conspired to spread cannibalism throughout the world. Your brother had buried those peasants whom he had murdered in the same way that a hunter buries his venison, in order to bring out the flavour in the flesh. Those graves were his larderr

Sabat almost threw up, clutching at the seat with hands that trembled. He knew that Daunay spoke the truth; the detective had no reason to lie. Suddenly it all fitted together, a jigsaw that had been scattered for years and was now being slotted into place. Quentin had been a friend of Louis Nevillon's, who in turn had Marie Boule as his mistress. A nest of cannibals. Now Quentin lived again in the body of Sabat, who had also feasted on human flesh. He was as bad as the others. But once you kill Pieter Daunay your secret will be safe!

'I will take you to their hideout tonight.' Sabat spoke slowly, tried to harness his shocked and reeling senses.

'Good,' Daunay smiled. 'By the way, a mongol child was kidnapped in Zurich yesterday afternoon. I have reason to believe that the cult was responsible for this. If I am correct then the boy is already dead.'

'They ate him!' Not just a statement; a confession.

'Andrew!' Accusing eyes that would detect the slightest lie.

'Myself, too. I had no choice, Pieter, believe me.'

'I believe you.'

'This man Andre Schmid,' Sabat said. 'A hippy commune leader but so powerful. Almost as powerful as... as Louis Nevillon.'

'Not quite, but he will be.' The Witchfinder's eyes narrowed, his tanned complexion seemed to pale. 'But if the Nevillon legend is true, then of those who devour his flesh one of them will become the Beast of France. Apart from the sheer revulsion of it I, for one, would not care to be partaking of that unholy banquet on Walpurgisnacht. As for Schmid... well, he also has much to answer for. A left-wing terrorist, he has diversified from car-bombs and such things to an alliance with the dark powers and they appear to have accepted him as a disciple. Pray God, Sabat, that we shall be in time to prevent this Walpurgisnacht feast, for if it comes about the ultimate in evil will result, a coalition of malevolence in hell and on earth. A n unstoppable power will be unleashed on the world and cannibalism will spread with the rapidity of a contagious plague?

Sabat was waiting on the Schweizeshof beside Lake Lucerne as the sinking evening sun turned the waters a rich golden colour. So peaceful, it was impossible to believe that the coming night held such perils. He sauntered casually, watching every blue Peugeot that came along. Every other car on the road tonight seemed to be a Peugeot. Eventually one of them would draw into the kerb and Pieter Daunay would be behind the wheel.

And the Witchfinder must be killed! Not just because Andre Schmid and Madeleine Gaufridi (Sabat still preferred to think of her by her first name, remember their meeting up on the Jungfrau when she displayed all the innocence of a young nun fleeing from her own conscience) demanded it. But because that was the only way Quentin Sabai's unholy secret could be protected ...

His anger mounted, a seething fury that had his whole body trembling, his vision a distorted red haze so that he was scarcely aware of the blue Peugeot gliding into the kerb, the hunchbacked driver reaching behind to open the rear door.

Just another driver offering a pedestrian a lift, something that happened a hundred times a day in Lucerne and elsewhere. The car pulled away, edged into the steady stream of traffic.

Sabat's fury simmered, his eyes riveted on the humped figure behind the wheel. An enemy, a dangerous one; one who had already meddled in the affairs of his family. He had to be eliminated; but not right now.

Sabat got his anger under control, a time-bomb ticking away inside him. He could easily have made an

excuse and got Daunay to stop the car, shot him and dragged him into the forest which bordered the road. For a number of reasons he bided his time. A slight hesitancy, but he would expel that before they reached the mountains; he did not even understand why he was uncertain. He had no conscience where killing was concerned. Secondly, he wanted to present Madeleine and Andre Schmid with undoubted proof that he had carried out his assignment. A kind of personal pride in his own ruthless efficiency.

Sabat stroked the butt of his revolver in its holster beneath his coat, gave a sigh of satisfaction and nestled himself comfortably in a corner of the back seat

Pieter Daunay changed down to second gear and the Peugeot began the ascent of the steep mountain road, entering a land of darkness where unspeakable evil lurked.

Sabat smiled to himself. Soon it would be time to kill.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE ROAD was rising very steeply now, a 1:4 gradient. The Peugeot's engine stuttered, picked up again. Pieter Daunay's hand rested on the gear lever, ready to change down to bottom.

'How much further?' he grunted, the first time either of them had spoken since the suburbs of Lucerne had fallen away behind them, its lights shielded by the dark mountain forests, just a faint orange glow in the night sky behind.

'Not far.' There was a sudden eagerness about Sabat's voice.' Somewhere on the left after this next bend. Slow down or you'll miss it. It's only a gap in the trees but there's a track leading up from it. We'd better pull off the road there and go the rest of the way on foot, otherwise they'll hear the engine and see the lights.'

The only sign that Daunay had heard was that he braked, slowed down to 20 k.p.h., head turned to the left, searching for the concealed track amidst the trees.

'There it is.'

The Frenchman swung the wheel over, the tyres sinking into the soft grass, starting to spin. The Peugeot slewed, nearly struck a tree. Reversing, almost getting stuck; a narrow angle but eventually the car finished up pointing back the way it had come. Engine and lights died, plunging everywhere into a sudden eerie black silence.

'It is best to cater for all eventualities,' PieterDaunay said, easing open the door. 'Just in case we have to make a quick getaway, Sabat.'

Sabat hesitated, let his eyesight become accustomed to the darkness of the forest. A half moon and scudding clouds cast patches of faint silvery light, the shadows impenetrable as though they hid a thousand evils. The silence hung heavy, not so much as a rustling of a tiny nocturnal creature. Tonight everything was afraid to venture forth,

'Lead the way,' Daunay's whisper was terse. 'I am right behind you.*'

Sabat moved, his SAS training taking over, a shadow that glided and merged with the other shadows. The flesh on the back of his neck prickled for a multitude of reasons. Daunay was as dangerous as he was himself and he would have preferred to have his companion where he could see him. However, to have suggested that the Frenchman lead the way would have been ridiculous and aroused suspicion. This

was truly a game of cat and mouse.

Daunay must be eliminated! Quentin's reminder of his mission had Sabat's stomach tightening like it was being crushed in a bout of colic. He would kill Daunay- but what then? Just him and Madeleine and that awful corpse which had already begun to repair its guillotine mutilation. Madeleine claimed Louis Nevillon would rise on Walpurgisnacht, that his body would not be eaten, that he would join them in an unholy, obscene, nauseating banquet. Whose body would they eat then?

'How far?' Pieter Daunay was impatient. Their feet had to be forcibly dragged from the treacly mud. 'Could we not walk through the forest?'

'I only know this way,' Sabat replied. 'We cannot risk becoming lost It should not be far now.'

They seemed to have been walking for hours but in reality it had probably been no more than twenty minutes; progress that was slow, pausing every few yards to listen - but there was only an unbroken silence. As though these whole mountains were waiting for something to happen.

A bend in the track where a large pool of muddy rainwater had formed. They skirted it, clutching at some overhanging prickly larch branches as they trod a precarious route along the grassy sides of the path. Sabat's breathing was shallow; the clearing in which the old chapel stood was only a matter of twenty yards ahead of them. He pulled up abruptly and Daunay bumped into him, almost slipped into the mud, cursed beneath his breath. 'What have you stopped for, Sabat?' 'We are almost there. Another few yards and we shall see the chapel.' Sabat turned but Daunay was just an outline against the trees, his face bathed in shadow that hid his expression.

'Move on then. Let us get it over and done with!' 'Pieter, we have not planned this far. They may well know of our coming for their powers are extraordinary. We could be walking into a trap.'

'A trap set by you, Sabat? An evil associate sent to lure me to their den of evil?' Daunay laughed grimly.

Sabat tensed, the accusation piercing him like a sword thrust. He was at a disadvantage, his enemy behind him and alerted. 'No, of course not. I...'

Sabat caught his breath as something hard and round dug painfully into the small of his back. He recognised it instantly, knew that he had left it too late. The hunted had become the hunter. A faint metallic click as the safety catch on Pieter Daunay's automatic was pushed forward.

'I would not hesitate to shoot you, Sabat, and I think you know that. A game of scheme and counter-scheme but I think I have outwitted you. Now that you have brought me to this place I have no further use for you. However, if there is a trap prepared inside that chapel, then it is you who will walk into it. Walk slowly and keep your hands where I can see them!' Sabat took a step forward. He thought about the •38 in its holster but knew he had no chance of drawing it; not against a man like Pieter Daunay, this Witchfinder who might have stepped out of the middle ages was not blurring.

The pressure of the gun on Sabat's spine was pushing him forward, moving him like some electronically controlled automaton. He forced his brain to work, trying desperately to formulate some kind of plan - but there wasn't any. He was a puppet being controlled.

He stared ahead, saw the dim shape of the tiny chapel. Faint streaks of light shafted out of the cracks in the ill-fitting door. The black candles still burned. Obviously Madeleine was still in there; Sabat had taken the van and unless Schmid and his followers had been and fetched her away she still had to be there. Alone with the ghastly remains of the Beast of France.

Sabat's mind was reeling. He wondered if anything had transpired during his absence. The way the severed head appeared to have knitted back on to the shoulders was something that defied explanation, did not bear thinking about. Instinctively he pulled up, found himself wanting to flee this place, but Daunay's gun ground into him maliciously. 'Keep going or I'll shoot you down here!'

Ten yards from the door. Five. Listening. There was no sound to be heard. The automatic prodded him again. Daunay was wasting no time on a reconnaissance; he was going straight in there!

Sabat's fingers found the latch, lifted it silently. Then in one movement he flung the door wide open.

He did not know what he had been expecting, had tried not to think about it. Madeleine Gaufridi certainly. Possibly naked, the coffin lid wide open, the girl raising herself up in shocked surprise from where she had been engaged in an awful kiss with the dead. Or else she might have been fully clothed, reclining on the blankets.

Instead the interior of the chapel was empty, no sign of Madeleine. An anticlimax that had Sabat's brain numbed, not understanding. The girl should have been there but she wasn't. Perhaps she was hiding; there were only two possible places. The oven which served as an altar, and that lead coffin.

'Where are they?' there was anger in Daunay's hiss, the gun still jabbed hard into Sabat. 'Is this some kind of trick, Sabat?'

'No.' Sabat glanced about him, had that unnerving feeling that they were being watched from ... somewhere. 'The girl should be around. She couldn't have gone far.'

'Then we must look.' Daunay moved lithely, walking sideways around Sabat so that not for one second was the automatic veered from its target. 'We will start with this!'

Daunay worked with his left hand, transferring the candles to a shelf then tugging the black tapestries free, flinging them into a heap on the floor. He jerked open the door of the cooker, wrinkled his nose in disgust. 'Ugh, the ultimate in revulsion. Doubtless this spilled fat is all that remains of the mongol boy now that his bones have been cast out for the foxes and rats. Nothing here, so that leaves only one place to look!'

Sabat wanted to scream 'For God's sake, no' as he saw Pieter Daunay attempting to lift the coffin lid one-handed, beads of perspiration standing out on the Frenchman's forehead.

Sabat closed his eyes. He didn't want to see, never again wanted to gaze upon those terrible features. He heard the lid go back on its hinges, vibrate. A cry came from Daunay's lips that was probably the nearest the investigator ever got to terror. 'Mother of God! It cannot be but it is. The head is rejoined to the body as though it had never been parted!'

Pieter Daunay's attention was now focused on Sabat again, stepping nearer as though he wanted to be away from that hideous corpse.

'Well, the girl is not here. Nobody is here. In which case, Sabat, we shall have to be patient and await their return.'

Neither you nor I are leaving here.'

Sabat nodded dumbly and, at the other's gesture, lowered himself slowly down into one of the straight-backed chairs by the trestle table. Daunay hitched himself on to the table, one leg swinging, his features harsh and unrelenting. Suddenly he smiled, an expression that seemed to be forced, motivating himself, having to fight off a deep inner fear.

'The end of the road for the Cannibal Cult, Sabat!' he laughed, a hollow sound. 'And for you?

They waited in silence, eyes that met and burned hatred, both of them listening but hearing nothing.

The night hours passed slowly. Sabat watched the candles burning lower, spluttering in their own spilled wax. Daybreak could not be far off. What would Daunay do when nobody came? But somebody had to come sometime because they would not leave Nevillon's body unguarded for long. Walpurgisnacht was now just over forty-eight hours away. The cult would not risk their ultimate triumph.

He saw Daunay shiver, shuddered himself. It had gone very cold. Those candles were now down to a mere stub, flickering as though caught in a sudden draught And in that instant Sabat realised!

'Look out!' his shout had the Frenchman jerking to his feet, finger curling around the trigger of his pistol. 'Daunay for God's sake run! Run before it's too late. Get outsider

'Stay where you are!' Pieter Daunay jumped to bar the other's way to the door. 'Don't try it, Sabat!'

A waft of icy wind from somewhere extinguished both candles and at the height of his terror Sabat flung himself sideways and down. A vivid stab of flame momentarily lit up the room as Daunay fired, and that split second was enough for Sabat to see and understand.

A thing so grotesque that it defied mortal logic was outlined in the flash. Human in shape, its features mercifully bathed in shadow otherwise Sabat's brain would have snapped. Animal-like grunts and a stench that was a mixture of putrefaction and excreta. And death!

Sabat rolled over, tried to pray but that was something that Quentin could not do. Utter blackness in a freezing atmosphere. He covered his face, resigned himself to some unthinkable fate; heard Daunay screaming. Yells of terror that died away to an imbecilic babble.

Then total silence. Sabat did not try to hold on to consciousness. He wanted neither to see nor hear.

He wanted to die. Quickly.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SABAT COULD not believe that he was still alive. Neither could he accept that he still had the use of his brain, that he was able to recognise his surroundings in the harsh light of a new day.

He didn't want to look but he had to; a fearful glance that took in the whole of the interior of the chapel. Those burned-out candles lying on the floor. The lead coffin, its lid now shut!

And Pieter Daunay also still lived! The French investigator was sitting in the furthest corner of the room, a bowed, broken figure staring vacantly around him. Glazed eyes that saw but did not understand, a slack mouth that vainly tried to speak, while the only sounds it managed to utter were incomprehensible child-like babblings.

'Pieter!' Sabat rose to his knees, felt dizzy. 'Pieter, are you all right? Can you hear me, man?'

The other gave no sign that he had heard, just continued to stare blankly, still muttering to himself. Cringing, pressing himself back against the wall as though he was trying to hide from some invisible horror.

Sabat sank back down to the floor. God, he should have realised, Madeleine was gone but the cult had not left Nevillon's corpse unguarded; dark forces more powerful than they had kept watch. Daunay's mind was gone; physically he was no better than a spastic. But why Daunay and not himself? Why had they chosen to spare Sabat, to let him emerge unscathed from ... from what?

Of course! Sabat groaned his helplessness, his utter futility as he understood. They had spared him because he was Quentin, one of them, an associate of Louis Nevillon. Evil had protected evil because they still needed him. And he was as much a prisoner here as if he had been manacled to the wall!

The dizziness passed. A faint buzzing that seemed to be inside his head, but suddenly he realised it was not. It was the engine of some vehicle; louder, coming closer. Wherever Madeleine had been she had returned. The slamming of a door, soft footsteps approaching the chapel. The click of the latch...

It was Madeleine all right, tight-lipped, white-faced, seething with anger. Her glance took in everything, Sabat uncertain of himself, strangely nervous; Daunay sitting on the floor playing with his fingers, an idiotic grin on his face. His hump seemed to have grown still more, a deformed child who reminded Sabat of the mongol boy.

'Fool!' she hissed. 'Cochon! Traitor! You sought to betray us and for that you shall pay dearly!'

Sabat found himself licking his lips, trying to think of excuses. That momentary fight-back had deserted him. He was Quentin again. 'I... I brought him here ... didn't I?'

'Your orders were to exterminate him. Instead you thought to use him to overthrow us. Andre feared that you might, that was why I was removed from here and a greater power left to guard my beloved.'

'This man is both dangerous and clever,' Sabat was regaining some of his composure. 'He forced me here at gunpoint.'

'Lies!' she spat, a blob of spittle hitting him on the cheek. 'Nevertheless, all is not lost. Now you must annihilate him in the way that is known best to our followers!'

'I... I...' Sabat blanched.

'Do as I order you. Start fuelling the fire.' With a deft movement she flicked the black tapestries from the altar, sent the empty candlesticks spinning. 'Do you dare to disobey me... Quentin?'

Sabat recoiled as though she had struck him, almost cringed as he picked up the empty galvanised bucket by the door and went outside in search of kindling. His footsteps dragged, as he slouched his way round the side of the building where some logs were heaped up against the wall. Idly he wondered who had sawn and split them; the hippy followers of the cult, probably. Each one of them had a part to play.

Five journeys from the log pile to the stove, each one followed by Madeleine's burning gaze, whipping and demoralising her serf into submission. Sabat glanced over to where Pieter Daunay still sat in the corner, chuckling to himself because he had just discovered how to entwine the fingers of both hands, an achievement that occupied his entire attention. He was totally oblivious to both the man and the girl, had no idea what fate was in store for him. He was fortunate.

Sabat was breathing heavily; the revitalisation which he had sensed earlier had waned. His hands trembled as he laid the fire, an instrument of horrible death, an inferno which would roast living human flesh.

Something rattled, struck him hard in the face; a box of matches hurled by the angry girl. 'Get a move on, Sabat!'

The flames licked and crackled. He slammed the firebox door with a clang. Sweat trickled down his face as though the fever had come back, bringing with it a light headedness. Kneeling, praying subconsciously to a voodoo altar.

'It won't take long to heat up,' Madeleine laughed, sitting cross-legged on the straight-backed chair. 'The oven may be antiquated but it's big and efficient. Start and get the sacrificial victim ready, Sabat!'

Sabat turned slowly, Daunay was looking at him, grinning.

Oh, Jesus Christ it was awful, the poor bastard had no idea! Those same eyes, only different; shrewdness gone, not even suspicious. Laughing, dribbling, strings of spittle reaching almost to the floor. Trusting!

'Go on, Sabat. Get his clothes off, ready!'

Sabat's brain reeled but his body was responding to those hissed commands. Reaching out for Daunay, hauling him upright... but the other's legs did not appear capable of supporting his weight Sabat grunted under the strain, one arm around the Frenchman's sagging body, the other tearing at buttons. There was no point in undoing them, the clothing would only be destroyed afterwards anyway.

Pieter Daunay was stripped to the waist, that mountainous hump grotesque in its nakedness, a white thing like a lump of solid muscle. Hurtful to the eye when compared with that splendid torso, but it was a focal point, the beast overruling beauty.

Sabat lowered the detective to the ground, rolled him over like a baby on a changing-mat. Daunay kicked his legs in the air, giggled when he felt his trousers being dragged from him; clutched at them, but there was no strength in his fingers. His expression changed, those once-handsome features screwing up into a pig-like expression, an angry babble that was the beginning of a pitiful tantrum.

Daunay was fighting to keep the last of his clothing, cries that were harsh and strange to the ear: a man possessed! Like Sabat! Naked, drawing his knees up as instinctive inhibitions clouded his brain. He struck out, caught Sabat on the chest, but the blow was soft and spongy like a child's foam-rubber ball.

Sabat stared down into those eyes, read an anger that only stemmed from childish temper. He wanted to say something, to apologise maybe, but Daunay would not have understood. A stroke of some kind inflicted by the powers of evil.

PieterDaunay sat up again, hands clasped across his groin in a kind of screen, smiling again. Not even aware of his nudity, burbling happily, making incoherent speech that speared deep into Sabat's conscience. Even Quentin would have had no part in this. He would, though!

'Roast him and eat of human flesh!'

Sabat's vision blurred momentarily, a haze of blackness spottled with crimson, a cauldron of fury that came to the boil. Reacting automatically, but this time not on the commands of the girl who called herself Madeleine Gaufridi. Mark Sabat and Quentin were locked in a death-hold, an inner struggle. It was as though a whirlwind seized him. A voice was screaming at him; a woman's, Madeleine's possibly, but it was drowned by Quentin's roars of rage. 'Stop it. This is madness!'

Sabat fought physically and mentally. His hand went inside his jacket, closed over the butt of the •38 revolver in its holster. Cold steel to his fevered touch, it seemed to give him the impetus he needed. He felt the weapon come loose, nestle into the palm of his hand as he drew it free of his clothing.

Point-blank range; he did not even use his left hand to steady his aim. Pieter Daunay's face, still laughing, but those eyes mirrored a brief sanity. Pleading for death like a stricken beast.

Sabat closed his eyes as he took a trigger pressure. Death had never bothered him before and it only did so now because it was Daunay, who might have been a friend and a colleague under different circumstances. Then blinding pain!

He felt the blow on the back of his skull a split second before the gun bucked and spat flame in his hand, a searing flash like lightning in the darkness of a thunderstorm. He heard the bullet whine, an angry lead hornet that met with some solid object and splintered it.

Then Sabat was slipping into that now familiar bottomless chasm. Floating, not trying to fight, the pain in his head receding until he felt nothing. Sublime oblivion. * * * 101

Sabat was vaguely aware of dragging himself out of that terrible void, clawing at the brink, threatening to slip back. For some inexplicable reason he fought, heard Quentin's leering tones, but the words were indecipherable amidst a medley of strange noises. God, he'd been ill again. Pneumonia. He'd wake up in that hospital ward, a helpless victim of white-coated men who did inexplicable things to you without your consent. Torture.

Then a sharp pain in his ribs, a blow which squeezed the breath from his body and had him gasping back to consciousness.

'You stupid bastard, Sabat!' Madeleine was standing over him, her foot drawn back in another threatening kick. 'You can't be trusted and I'll see you don't get the chance to try and cheat us again!'

He winced, saw that she held his own revolver in her right hand, its snub barrel trained on his head, her forefinger lightly curled around the trigger. He stared, knew that his lips moved in a mute apology; excuses that he could not voice. Cringing. Quentin in command again!

'But you failed,' her full red lips curled in a sneer. 'Another split second and you would have blown Daunay's head off except that I hit you with the chair first. Now you'll do as you're told otherwise the next bullet will be in your skull. Now hurry, the oven is hot. Get him into it!'

Pieter Daunay still lived; still a mindless chuckling imbecile who no longer tried to cover his lower regions with his hands. Oh Merciful God, Sabat's attempted euthanasia had failed!

Sabat was helpless to do anything other than obey. He crawled, lifted himself up on to his feet, his whole body crying out for rest and sleep. Grasping that naked malformed body, cursing because it started to struggle again, but somehow pulling it across to the oven.

You could feel the heat even with the big iron door closed, a blast furnace that dried your flesh, made you hurry to get your task over and done with so that you could retreat to a cooler place. Sabat grabbed Daunay's hair, heard the screech of pain as he dragged him up to a sitting position.

The door was open, a black cubicle that was surely the entrance to hell itself, scorching his eyes closed. He lifted the naked dead weight with some reserve of superhuman strength spring boarded by desperation. One last effort, throwing the Frenchman into that gaping cubicle, kicking at protruding limbs,

using the door to push the screaming form back. Sabat almost passed out, heard the final clang, screams that came from the victim's very soul. Staggering back, collapsing, crying out as another kick drove into his unprotected ribs.

He groped for unconsciousness, but it eluded him. He wanted to shut his eyes, but they refused to close. Muffled cries of agony as the heat inside that monstrous replica of hell began to cook the living flesh. He could smell it; nauseating, making him retch.

Madeleine was standing in front of him. She still had the gun but she knew she wouldn't have to use it; or even threaten with it. Sabat had rebelled but he was well and truly beaten now. Grovelling. A smile that held contempt for the man she had plucked off the Jungfrau mountain to be her slave, to help her resurrect her age-old lover.

'You are sweating with the heat, Sabat,' her tones were soft and lilting. Take off your clothes. You will be cooler then.'

Sabat stiffened, his shaking fingers already starting to obey, his shirt following his jacket on to the floor in an untidy heap, unfastening his belt; aware of a growing pleasant sensation in the lower regions of his body. Madeleine noticed it also, and her smile broadened.

'Two whole days together,' she laughed, 'just you and me, Sabat. We have everything we need; each other. And the dinner will be some time yet. Let us make love and then when we are well satisfied we will eat our fill! Let us forget Andre and the rabble from the commune. I think they have already served their purpose, for they will be as nothing when my beloved awakens from his long sleep!'

Sabat managed to close his eyes, felt her soft warm breath on his face and her fingers beginning to caress him. Suddenly he didn't give a damn for Pieter Daunay, whose screams of agony were growing fainter inside the oven.

Madeleine had commanded and he would obey her to the bitter end.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SABAT WAS lying on the floor, spent and sweating. It was abominably hot inside the small chapel and he wondered if he had fallen asleep. But no-Madeleine had swept him along on a dizzy wave of passion and he had obeyed like a robot again, scrambling on all-fours in his attempts to appease, her husky silky tones issuing orders that could not be disobeyed.

'Kiss me here, Sabat!'

He had kissed her there.

'Rub me here, ever so gently!'

His fingers had smoothed over the soft warm flesh where she had indicated, so delicately. Murmurs of approval and pleasure came from her lips.

And so it had gone on, his own arousal a throbbing ache. She had kept him waiting until the very end and only then had she gone to him. Her lips were supple, her teeth sharp as they scraped his rigid flesh. His circumcision scar seemed to burn him, a mocking reminder of another sacrifice he had once made and which had since proved to be useless. Sabat, cast-out of devils, was himself possessed and more than willing to participate in the coming abomination.

He exploded, writhed, beat the stone floor with his fists. It was as though this witch was sucking his very soul from him, swallowing it and claiming it for her own.

Limp and spent he looked up at her, watched her licking her lips, smiling. She had dominated him utterly, made him her slave in this as she did in everything else. Her lithe form came off him, slid gracefully back on to the nearby chair.

Sabat's nostrils wrinkled. That only too familiar acrid stench was filling the room again; cooking human flesh. It was burning slightly, probably where the body touched the sides of the oven. It should have been nauseating, making him want to rush outside and vomit. It didn't. Because he was Quentin again, a hardened cannibal. In fact the smell was appetising.

'I'm starving,' Madeleine announced. 'In fact I haven't eaten since the last time we cooked here. Go check the meat, Sabat.'

He got up, crossed to the oven, picked up a long skewer which lay on the shelf nearby. Smoke billowed out as he opened the door, making him cough, and his eyes smarted so at first he was unable to see what lay within. Then he saw it, a rounded thing that might have been an untrussed goose or turkey, brown fat running from it in thick rivulets and sizzling on the floor of the oven; a couple of blackened limbs. He poked them with the skewer, bent them away from the sides, then plunged the sharp instrument deep into the flesh. It went in easily for a couple of inches before grating on a bone.

'Almost,' he turned back to Madeleine, smiling. 'Another ten minutes or so at a guess.'

'Good.' She fixed him with a penetrating stare. 'Don't let it overdo. Sabat, why did you try to betray us?'

His gaze dropped to the floor and he shifted his bare feet awkwardly. 'I don't know... really, I don't. But it won't happen again.'

'I'll tell you why,' she smiled unexpectedly. 'Because the old Sabat was not truly dead. I think he is now, though. Quentin has been reborn at last!'

The other nodded. 'You're right. All the time I was going to kill this man but Pieter Daunay was no easy prey. In the end it just became too difficult and I gave in to him.'

'One last chance then,' a laugh that was mirthless sent an icy shiver up Sabat's spine and tingled across his scalp, 'First we eat, though. Prepare to serve the meat and carve, Sabat. Then I will tell you what I have in mind.'

Still stark naked Sabat moved automatically, somehow rolled the steaming human corpse out on to that same black carving dish, got it up on to the trestle table. His strength seemed to have returned, the fatigue and weakness evaporating as though he had just emerged from an invigorating sauna bath. He was ravenously hungry.

The carver was honed to a razor sharpness, slicing the meat into thin tender slices, flipping them on to the plates with the expertise of a practised chef. Then he carried the plates back across the room, handed one to the eager girl and seated himself cross-legged at her feet. They did not bother with knives and forks, greedily stuffing the juicy flesh into their mouths with their fingers, munching ravenously. It was just like any other conventional meat, Sabat decided. It might have been beef or lamb, slightly overcooked, but that had added an extra flavour. Meat was meat, it was all a question of what one was used to. There had been cannibals on this earth since time immemorial. Then Man had embarked upon an idea of 'civilisation', dictated laws that prohibited a natural way of life. It was up to such as himself and Madeleine Gaufridi to defy those laws and appease the ancient gods who had ruled in the first place. A kind of resistance movement; he smiled to himself. It wasn't a question of good or evil, just power.

'That was excellent,' Madeleine lowered her empty plate to the floor. 'Now, Sabat, I have a proposition to put to you and I hope for your sake that you will not try to betray me again.'

He masticated a last mouthful, licked his lips. 'I shall not fail you this time.'

'Good.' She looked at him steadily. 'But there is not much time. Now that Daunay is no more our task is easier. Sabat, you know what Andre and his friends intend to do on Walpurgisnacht, don't you?'

'Of course. In accordance with tradition since the days of Silvain Nevillon, Louis Nevillon's body must be eaten so that he can be reborn.'

'Precisely. But, as I told you and you have seen for yourself, Louis' body has already begun to heal in readiness for his coming again. To eat him might destroy him, but even if it did not, then there is no guarantee in whose body he might live again. The thought of my beloved becoming Andre Schmid is unthinkable. Therefore, Sabat, we must stop them from carrying out their Walpurgisnacht rites!'

Sabat went cold as the implication of her words dawned on him. Madeleine had used this cannibal cult to rescue her lover's body from the execution chamber and transport it here. Indeed, he himself had been one of her pawns. Now she was ready to dispense with them, a task which would be far from easy, for secretly every one of those followers of the ancient rites hoped that Nevillon would choose their own body for his purpose. Each had his own dreams of power which would not be relinquished easily, the ultimate in degradation and obscenity.

'What do you want me to do?' Sabat spoke quietly, gave no hint of his inner fear.

'Destroy them, of course!' she snarled venomously, an angry she-wolf who had tired of playing with her cubs. 'And make a better job of it than you did of Daunay. None of them must enter this sacred place again.'

'All right,' Sabat pursed his lips, 'but maybe you have some suggestions how I might go about it.'

'No,' she was laughing now. 'But when they have been removed you must return here, Sabat, for I need you. Louis Nevillon's rebirth will not be easy. Indeed, I cannot see it through alone so you must return safely to me. Now,' she leaned back in her chair, stretched, her thighs opening invitingly as she did so. 'We have feasted well and I need to make love again. Come to me, Sabat, and prepare me for the return of my dearest Louis.'

Sabat went to her, a man bodily replenished after his feast, pulled her across to where the crumpled blankets lay, bore her down on to them. She clutched at him, gouged his pulsing flesh with her sharp fingernails; this was how she wanted it this time, to be dominated in preparation for the coming of Louis Nevillon!

He remembered their first night in the hotel bedroom together. It might have been a decade ago, a different girl. There was no accounting for Madeleine's moods. Now she lay crushed beneath him, groaning her agonised pleasure, crying out aloud as her orgasm mounted, sobbing uncontrollably as it faded. Then it began again and she was clawing her way up to domination like a mating she-cat determined to vent her fury on a lusting torn.

Sabat tried to keep up with her, but it was impossible. She rode him relentlessly, her skin shiny with sweat, her small well-formed breasts swinging like growing fruit in a tearing gale. He was spent but she did not let up, seemingly oblivious to her partner's non-participation. At last, however, she began to wilt, her pace slowing, body hunching forward until her dangling bosom was brushing against Sabat's chest. But he made no move towards her breasts, his eyes closed as fatigue claimed him.

Finally she sank down on to him, slowly slid off him, exhaustion claiming her too.

They both slept soundly, the only noise a faint rustling that seemed to come from inside that lead coffin. But they did not hear it.

Sabat was aware that he was dreaming and that his spiritual body had not ventured forth on to the astral plane. Subconsciously he realised the difference, accepted the happenings around him for what they were, figments of a brain that was active whilst the body slept. Even so he was aware of his surroundings - the French Basque coast; people who moved furtively in the shadows, an occasional glimpse of fearful features as though they expected something to materialise out of the darkness at any second. A place of sheer mounting terror.

Sabat did not know why he knew or saw these things, only that he did. Another age, possibly the sixteenth or seventeenth century by the way these people dressed and spoke in a French tongue that was barely recognisable.

They were heading towards a large stone-built house that stood on a cliff top overlooking the moonlit sea, a mansion heavily gabled, its latticed windows lit up by yellow candlelight. Every few minutes the door opened to admit a visitor, hats pulled low over their faces, coat collars turned up. There had to be some twenty or thirty men and women inside by now.

Sabat moved closer, pressed himself up against the trunk of a gnarled oak, the only cover available. His movements were controlled by some unseen force, a robot being manipulated for some strange purpose which was at the moment denied to him. He did not know why or how he came to be here, only that he must watch and wait.

Something tugged at the sleeve of his coat and he stiffened. He was not alone!

'Be patient, Sabat,' a hoarse voice whispered in his ear in French that he could understand, fetid breath laced with garlic fanned his face. 'Let them all gather inside before we make a move. We must get them all, every one of them, for the people of Labourd demand that this unholy curse of witchcraft be removed for good.'

Sabat half-turned, saw the face of his companion clearly in a shaft of moonlight. Ageing features, cruelty stamped indelibly on the hooked nose, the close-set small eyes and the thin bloodless lips. So familiar that Sabat recognised him instantly - Pierre de Lancre, the most feared witchfinder in Francel A gaunt figure (the humped back reminded Sabat of Pieter Daunay), untidy straggling grey hair falling from beneath the huge black hat and spreading itself on the cloaked rounded shoulders.

'Tonight is Walpurgisnacht? de Lancre muttered, 'and they will all come. See, even now they are commencing their blasphemies and obscenities.'

Sabat nodded, watched the naked bodies cavorting in the lighted room. Obviously they were preparing for a black mass. A wizened deformed hag busied herself in front of a black-clothed altar, above which hung an inverted crucifix. She was stirring something in a bowl, an ointment of some kind, men and women queuing up to have it smeared on their sexual parts. Some were already copulating openly on the stone floor. The orgy had begun.

'The ointment of iniquity,' Pierre de Lancre whispered, 'a concoction forbidden by law according to King Henry IV, made from toads' blood and the hearts of sacrificed babies. The use of it alone is enough to earn them all the death sentence.'

Sabat watched, his contempt openly displayed on his aquiline features as he saw a handsome adolescent having the 'ointment of iniquity' smeared on his arousal, the hag taking her time, her toothless mouth twisted into a lusting grin as she slowly massaged the cream into the pulsing flesh. The youth was tensing; her fingers were moving faster and faster. Then he was doubled up, writhing as though in pain. Everybody was laughing, even the copulating couples stopping and turning to watch.

'They are all in there,' the witchfinder hissed. 'Let us mete out the fate they deserve!'

Sabat was at the heels of his running, stooping companion as de Lancre covered the space between the low oak and the dark shadows cast by the house. But nobody inside was likely to look out of the window anyway; they were too engrossed in their own activities.

Sabat was reminded of how he and Daunay had crept up on the chapel, experienced a momentary pang of fear in case de Lancre should suddenly thrust a pistol into his back.

'Give me a hand with this brushwood.' A whispered command and Sabat found himself helping to pile dead fir branches up against the door, a pile that grew in seconds as they both worked feverishly.

'Good,' the witchfinder's lips stretched clown-like in what was supposed to be a smile of satisfaction. 'Now the back door. Quickly.'

Two heaps of dry branches ready to be fired. Pierre de Lancre had a tinder-box in one hand, a pistol in the other. Sabat's mouth went dry at the sight of the weapon but, as though to reassure him, the other passed it over, butt first, then produced another from the folds of his cloak.

'We light the fires,' de Lancre gave a throaty laugh that embodied all the anticipation and pleasure of an eager boy at the start of a 5 November firework display. 'They will not realise what is happening until it is too late. But if any should run the gauntlet of fire, Sabat...' He left the sentence unfinished, cocked his pistol meaningfully.

The fires were lit. Sabat coughed in the pungent smoke, tried to keep his smarting eyes fixed on door and windows. De Lancre was somewhere at the rear of the house doing likewise.

The occupants were still unaware of what was happening outside. The big room was only dimly lit now, just those black wax candles on the altar giving an eerie glow, the repulsive hag a naked wizened silhouette with a bent back and drooping breasts, gesticulating fiercely. The whole company had thrown themselves prostrate, fearing whatever devilish monstrosity she might call up.

By now the flames had got a hold on the front of the house, the woodwork dry and rotten and burning quickly. Sparks showered up; the thatched roof caught.

Screams. Too late, the trapped coven realised the danger! A stampede of naked bodies, some being knocked down and trodden in the rush. The heat from the burning door threw them back. There was no sign of the witch. Probably she was one of the trampled, her followers losing faith in her now that they

faced a death akin to the fiery halls of hell itself.

No, she had not been crushed; Sabat spotted her at an upstairs window, a grotesque oil-painting in a blazing frame, perched precariously as she summoned the courage to jump and called upon the evil powers to protect her.

A shot rang out, a resonant report from an antiquated flintlock pistol that belched fire and clouds of sulphurous smoke. Sabat jumped, had not heard de Lancre's approach. The latter laughed, a kind of killing snarl, those lips drawn back over broken and blackened teeth, pointed with the smoking pistol.

'So much for Marie Gaufridi, the witch of Labour!' he shouted.

The hag would have fallen back into the room had not her scrawny fingers secured a hold on the burning window frame, a hand that seemed impervious to fire. Swaying, a hideous monkey-thing at treetop height, gibbering unintelligible curses, sunken eyes that singled out the two men standing below.

The bullet had ploughed into a breast, severed a nipple, and appeared to have gone on into the body. Surely it had pierced her heart but she still lived, screaming and cursing.

'Go on, Sabat,' the witchfinder's killing cry. 'Finish her. What are you waiting for? Her magic is such that she must not live. Even now I wonder if it is possible to kill her!'

Sabat's pistol came up, his hand shaking and having to be supported by the other. Trying to draw a bead; but it wasn't easy... not without looking into those hate filled orbs! 'You could feel their intensity, their power.

Sabat tried to close his eyes but the lids refused to drop. A harsh voice was screaming at him 'kill me and you will be cursed for eternity. Spare me and my power shall be yours,'

Those horrendous features seemed to undergo a change, blurring like a reflection in a pool then clearing. Younger, so much younger; and beautiful. Sabat felt his stomach tightening into a ball, the vomit rising in his throat. Oh God, it wasn't possible! Marie Gaufridi, the witch of Labour, had become Madeleine Gaufridi alias Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud alias Marie Boule!

'Kill her, Sabat, before it is too late. We dare not trust the fire to consume one such as her!'

Still Sabat held his fire, gazing into those eyes but no longer did they transmit blazing hatred. Instead they pleaded, became misty with tears of sorrow. Promises replaced curses and threats. 'Spare me, Sabat, and I will be yours forever. I am not evil, only accursed, a victim of Louis Nevillon who controls me in life and in death so that I shall always be reborn to be his, I cannot die except by your hand, you who are Quentin, a friend of Louis Nevillon and as powerful as he. But I do not want to die because I shall be parted from your

'What are you waiting for Sabat? Shoot her, or else give me the pisto!!'

Sabat's finger tightened on the trigger and in the same instant he moved the barrel an inch to the left, sighted against one of the blazing wooden frames, squeezed. Again that thunderous roar and leaping flame, everything obscured by the villainous black powdersmoke, a curtain that was slow to shift in the windless atmosphere.

It seemed to take an indeterminable time to disperse and when it was gone there was nothing to see except a gaping blazing hole in the upper storey where that window had been. Of Marie Gaufridi there was no sign.

'Well done, my friend,' Pierre de Lancre clasped a hand on Sabat's shoulder. 'You got her and not just the people of Labourd but the whole of France, nay the world, is well rid of her. Let us stand here and listen to the screams of the dying, witches burned in a mass demonstration of justice such as is the law of this land according to our beloved king,'

Sabat stood and watched as commanded, seeming to be detached from himself just as he had on that fevered night when pneumonia and Quentin had claimed him. There was no way out, no escape for anybody trapped in that inferno. Screams of agony were proof that some still lived, the unfortunate ones. The smoke was eddying, a stench of burning wood and thatch and ... roasting human flesh! Sabat turned away, threw up, but Pierre de Lancre did not appear to notice. He was too engrossed in watching the finale of this latest hunt. Tomorrow he would embark upon another.

Now there was only the sound of crackling flames and crashing timbers, the night sky lit up by this huge funeral pyre, the execution chamber of the damned.

'They are all dead,' de Lancre wiped the barrels of his pistols on his cloak, pushed them into his belt 'That is another job well done, Sabat. A satisfactory conclusion and all due to you for leading me here to them. My friend, I am in your debt. If you ever have need of me do not hesitate to call upon me. Do that and Pierre de Lancre will come, that I promise.'

And then the witchfinder was gone, a fleeting shadow that merged into other shadows and left Sabat standing there alone; bemused, wondering about Madeleine and if she still lived. His one consolation was that he had heeded her plea and put his bullet wide. If she still lived and kept her promise then she was his.

It was an exciting thought; one that caused him to awake with an erection and do things to himself as he looked at the still slumbering form of Madeleine Gaufridi beside him in the cold grey early morning light.

'You must destroy them all, Sabat' Madeleine followed him to the door after they had both breakfasted on the cold meat from the previous night's 'roast'. 'It will not be easy but the future of you and I and Louis depend upon it. Take the Renault. It is stolen so take care in case the police spot it. When your work is done return here and you will be well rewarded, that I promise you.'

Sabat walked across the clearing to the parked Renault, got the feeling that it was a kind of repeat performance, a re-run of the time he'd been sent to get Daunay. Misgivings clouded his brain, bringing on a depression that had not really left him since that dream about the witch of Labourd.

Pierre de Lancre's words hammered until his temples throbbed. 'If you ever have need of me do not hesitate to call me. Do that and Pierre de Lancre will come, that I promise*'

And Sabat knew that he needed help; for once in his life he could not go it alone.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SABAT HAD left the Renault on the outskirts of Lucerne. He dared not risk the possibility of being stopped by police on the lookout for the stolen car. He boarded a bus, then walked the rest of the way to the commune, not hurrying because there was plenty of time.

From across the road it was barely visible through the trees and bushes, just a glimpse of a roof and a chimney that had a faint wisp of smoke curling up from it. The cannibal cult were at home. He walked on, found a recreation park, and spent an hour or two relaxing on a bench by the side of a pond.

Already it was evening, houses on the opposite side of the street beginning to cast their shadows. There was not much time left and he still had not formulated a definite plan. The weight of the •38 back in its holster was comforting. Maybe that was the only way, to go in there shooting, take as many of them with him as possible before the sheer weight of numbers bore him down. No, it had to be more subtle than that.

His dream of the previous night had never really left him. He thought of Pierre de Lancre. At a time such as this there was no better man to have on one's side. But it had only been a dream and there was no chance of the witchfinder coming. Had Sabat met him on the astral plane then there would have been a faint prospect of help.

A similar situation: that place in his dreams, the coven trapped inside by fire. But it would not work here. This was a thriving city... an army of fire-engines would be screaming to the scene before the first smoke pall had a chance to settle, the flames doused within minutes.

And then he knew, a solution that came to him with shattering suddenness. A blinding inspiration and so damnably simple. The rope triangle oft used by the powers of evil to imprison their victims in a particular place, a device that was more secure than any lock or key! The accursed could not break it, only an exorcist could gain entrance unharmed and free those trapped inside.

Euphoria that dispelled his mounting depression instantly, so that he had to fight to control his emotions. He had not thought of it because he was (had been!) Mark Sabat, exorcist. He had remembered it because he was Quentin Sabat, one of the ungodly who knew it as a device of the evil forces! Furthermore, he would use it. There was still a little time left. In all probability Schmid and his followers would not leave before nightfall.

Sabat walked away quickly, having to restrain himself from breaking into a run. Some suburban shops. He noted their signs: a newsagent, a grocer... an electrician. Cursing beneath his breath, again almost running. The end of the street, a T-junction. Right or left?

He chose the left because that was what he believed in. They had given him a sign. Surely it was an omen. He turned to his left, a fast walk that ate up the yards.

More shops, closer together in the form of a precinct. A confectioner's, a tobacconist... a sports shop.

His one fear was that it might be closed, that he would have to take the risk of breaking and entering to get what he wanted. As he approached the glass door he saw a young man dressed in a fawn sweater with trousers to match in the act of turning the key.

This time Sabat ran, a sprint of several yards, pushing at the door, mouthing to the one on the other side. A look of surprise and annoyance on the shopkeeper's face but he unlocked the door, kept a foot behind it.

'I am sorry, monsieur, but we have been closed a quarter of an hour. I was stock-taking, had forgotten to lock the door.'

'Please... please, I will not take up more than a few moments of your time. I need two skipping ropes.'

'Skipping ropes!' Incredulity, raised eyebrows. 'Monsieur, there is no urgency, surely. Tomorrow...'

'But there "' Sabat was trying not to appear petulant. 'My twin sons. It is their birthday tomorrow and I had promised them skipping ropes but with the pressures of business I forgot. Please, monsieur.'

The other sighed, flung back the door. 'Come inside. But please be quick. I have a meal to go home to and my wife is not a patient woman.'

Sabat stepped inside, saw the ropes he needed so badly folded on a shelf behind the counter. He snatched a couple up, fumbled with some franc notes; dropped three on the glass-topped counter.

'Your change, monsieur!'

But Sabat was not interested in change. Out of the shop, retracing his steps across the precinct, fumbling to unfasten the folded nylon rope. His fingers moved deftly, knotted ends which would suffice when hung in triangular formation.

Another thought, a frightening one because he had almost forgotten. The newsagent was still open, selling late evening papers. Sabat sighed with relief, purchased a packet of drawing pins. He had almost overlooked them.

The shadows had nearly reached the other side of the road. The streetlights were already on, seeming to make the gathering dusk deepen. Sabat walked further down from the commune entrance, knew that he would have to bide his time until full darkness fell, when he could move unseen to affix the ropes on both the front and back doors. It would only take a matter of a minute or two. Beyond that he had no plans. He would leave the rest to Andre Schmid!

Dusk seemed to take an eternity blending into darkness. Sabat thought about risking his furtive mission but patience was essential. One mistake and he would not get a second chance.

Finally he moved, walking cat-like on tip-toe, crouching, the shadows of the overhanging trees swallowing him up. He paused in the drive; several of the upstairs windows were lighted but the ground

floor was in darkness. Again he was reminded of that house at Labourd. A figure passed briefly across the window, just a naked male torso, rolls of fat that resembled a woman's breasts. Andre Schmid!

Sabat crept to the door, three drawing pins in his left hand, the rope in his right. The wood was soft and rotten, the sharp points going in easily. Fifteen seconds, maybe less, and the front entrance was barred to all who sought to leave or enter. He smiled faintly in the darkness, then moved on, following the wall to his left.

The rear door was dealt with just as swiftly and then Sabat was standing back in the shadows admiring his handiwork, remembering how he himself had once been the victim of an almost identical psychic attack. It hadn't worked, simply because he had the gift of exorcism, had been able to break the barrier. This coven would not have that advantage; their evil magic would be no match for the power of Quentin!

He stepped back into the shrubs lining the short drive and waited. He had to stay and see what happened. If by any chance they managed to break out... he fingered the butt of his •38 inside his jacket. There would be only one course left open to him if that happened.

He listened intently, tried to determine what was happening in that upper storey. Muffled conversation, a girl was squealing, others were laughing. Apparently the cannibal cult could not wait until they got to the old chapel for the orgies to begin.

Shouting. Sabat recognised Schmid's angry tones. Things were getting out of control and the commune leader was anxious that everybody prepared themselves for Walpurgisnacht and whatever it held for them.

Sabat tensed, heard them coming downstairs, a shambling rabble high on drugs and alcohol, their appetites whetted for a feast of human flesh! He pressed himself back into the bushes, drew his '38, waited.

Andre Schmid, clutching a portmanteau containing his robes and various impedimenta needed for the coming black mass, turned back to survey his followers. Rabble, the scum of the continent. They didn't understand, just did it for kicks, but they had their uses. A fair-haired girl dressed in filthy worn jeans was mopping at a damp patch on her thigh with a tissue. Schmid smiled briefly. Jeanette, too, had her uses!

'Come on,' he growled. 'It is already dark and we must hurry. We have to find vehicles first.'

His hand closed over the doorknob and that was when he knew that something was dreadfully wrong. A sensation like a faint electric shock to begin with, spreading down through his fingers and up his arm, growing in strength, travelling upwards like an angina pain. Something struck him in the chest, an invisible physical blow hurling him back so that he cannoned into some of the others, sprawling them with him on the floor. Somebody screamed; it sounded like Jeanette.

'Andre! What is it?'

He lay there dazed for a moment, the pain subsiding as quickly as it had come, leaving in its wake a flesh-creeping pins-and-needles. He grunted, began to struggle up. Something was wrong with that door; somebody had connected up an electric current to it. He wasn't going to touch it again.

'Keep away from that door,' he grunted. 'Somebody's ... done something to it.'

'Whatever do you mean, Andre?*' Jeanette's eyes were wide, her voice shrill. 'Whatever would anybody want to do anything to the door for?'

'I don't know,' he backed away another step. 'Let's go out of the back door.'

Andre's arm and chest still hurt; he was both angry and frightened. Afraid that they would not make it up to the chapel in the mountains in time. Desperation, almost running, clawing at the flimsy handle.

A scream; it was Jeanette again, her shriek taken up by the others after a second's pause whilst their brains accepted what their eyes saw. It was as though an invisible boot had been implanted with full force in Andre's groin, doubling him up, throwing him to the floor. He writhed, clutching at his groin, his features deathly white.

The group pushed back, formed into a cowering semicircle, watching his agonised convulsion in shocked horror. His features were twisted with pain, he was trying to speak but was having difficulty getting the words out. 'Don't... don't go near... doors.'

'Why?' Jeanette asked the question that everybody in that filthy kitchen wanted to ask.

'I've heard of... of what's happening,' Schmid was pale and trembling, lurching to his feet and holding on to the fair-haired girl for support. 'Somebody's making a... a psychic attack on us!'

Shocked silence. Nobody really understood but they had seen enough of their leader's witchcraft over the past few months to realise that there were terrible things beyond their ken which were better kept that way.

Schmid stared round at them, his small eyes flicking from one to the other; glazing as though his mind was absent. As though something inexplicable was happening to it! They backed away, wanted to flee but there was nowhere to run. They were all trapped inside the house!

'You scum!' Andre Schmid's veins stood out, his pallid complexion beginning to suffuse with blood. The film over his eyes had cleared and they blazed with something that went far deeper than just anger. 'You're nothing but scum, the lot of you. This is all your doing. The Master, and he whom we were going to raise from the dead tonight, have refused to have the likes of you present at such an occasion. So they have attacked, imprisoned us here. And me!' He tapped his chest, could still feel the force of that inexplicable blow. 'Because of you / am fated to be denied the right to become Louis Nevillon reborn! Me, a high priest, relegated to the status of a drop-out.'

They glanced at one another, their fear merging into a growing anger. Fury united. They had submitted to the commands and whims of this man for too long. They had given themselves to him, become his slaves. Pandered to his obsessions and whims, traded their self-respect for his pleasures. They had been used!

Drugs and alcohol began to merge into a spluttering seething fuse that burned towards the ultimate explosion. There were pleasures that were fading from their lives. Without Schmid those unholy feasts and orgies would be no more. Or would they?

'It's his doing!' a big red-haired youth pointed an accusing finger at the man who now stood alone. 'He's been using us. We're trapped here when we should be feasting on what we were promised. It's all a trick. He's done something to the doors to trap us in here. So why should we be denied our Walpurgisnacht ./"*\$/?'

'Michel is right.' It was Jeanette who echoed their thoughts. She could still feel the dampness of that patch on her jeans clinging wetly to her thigh, despised herself for what she had let Andre do to her. Now, suddenly, revenge and a chance to redeem her pride were there for the taking. 'If we cannot go up into the mountains why should we be denied our Walpurgisnacht/ecs/??'

A chorus of angry agreement that had Andre Schmid stepping back. Then he was sent sprawling again by a blow that threatened to snap his spine, bringing a scream from his lips. He had inadvertently made contact with that cursed door again!

As he convulsed and shrieked on the floor they were upon him, courage and strength in numbers, a force that even the high priest of the cannibal cult was powerless against. His clothing was ripped, torn from his corpulent body in shreds; a booted foot slammed into his ribs, fists thudded down on him.

'Stop it. Stop it in the name of...'

It was never discovered whose name he swore by as Jeanette's elbow took him in the mouth, throwing his head back, his lower lip splitting and oozing crimson. He fought back blindly, kicking and punching, but within seconds his arms and legs were seized and he was hauled aloft.

'Stoke the fire somebody!' Now it was Michel's fury that dominated, a new driving force that had the hippies scurrying for coal and logs in the bunker by the stove. 'And he promised us meat tonight and meat we shall have!'

Schmid screamed but a hand was clapped over his bleeding mouth. Grubby female fingers, which might have been sensuous otherwise, slid through the throng of bodies that supported him, closed over soft and tender flesh and squeezed viciously. Andre Schmid writhed in pain and the hand was withdrawn. Jeanette felt that that made up for what he had done to her earlier. She wished she had a knife handy.

The oven door was thrown open to reveal a much larger cubicle than the one at the chapel; which was fortunate because Andre, in spite of his shortness, had a huge girth. He was resisting madly now, biting at the fingers which attempted to silence his screams, shrieking as his flesh came into contact with the hot iron.

Somehow, using brute force, booted feet as levers, they got him into the oven, slammed the door and muffled his shrieks. Coal and slack clinked and showered into the firebox, roared into flame as the

draught was admitted. The temperature gauge on the door read 200. Already the needle was beginning to move upwards.

They stood back, a grim silent assembly, listening to the thudding of scorching bare fists and feet vibrating the oven door, cursings that were becoming more incoherent by the second.

'How long?' Michel was the first to speak, turning to Jeanette. 'How long will he take to die and to cook?'

'He'll be dead in a few minutes,' she smiled and added, 'unfortunately. But it will be several hours before he is edible.'

Michel's eyes gleamed as he began to unfasten the buttons on his shirt, sliding his denims down so that his arousal sprang into view, an actor with an audience, urging their participation.

Suddenly their early lethargy was forgotten. Andre Schmid's thumpings were growing weaker and fainter and now the coven was theirs. They could enjoy themselves whilst their Walpurgisnacht banquet roasted to perfection.

Jeanette peeled off those damp jeans, flung them into a corner of the room. Others followed them; faces alight with a lust that was no longer controlled by the man who at this very moment was beginning to give off an odour of singeing, appetising meat.

The night was theirs to enjoy in the way they knew best.

Sabat slipped his revolver back into its holster and smiled smugly to himself in the darkness. It took a determined conscious effort to drag his thoughts away from what was happening inside the commune kitchen. He was fully aroused, envied those people their unrestricted pleasures. But there was work to be done this night and time was running out.

He walked quickly down the road and turned into an adjoining street at the bottom. Parked cars lined each kerb; he had a choice of vehicles.

He picked a majestic silent Daimler because it was only fitting that Sabat should drive to his ultimate triumph in the car he loved best. Also, he was familiar with that make of vehicle and had no trouble in opening the door and starting the powerful engine without the use of keys.

He slid behind the wheel, listened to the smooth, scarcely audible tick-over and was surprised how relaxed he felt. And somewhere he heard those final words of Pierre de Lancre again. "If you ever have need of me do not hesitate to call me. Do that and Pierre de Lancre will come, that I promise."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MADELEINE GAUFRIDI was glad when Sabat had gone. For some reason she experienced a sense of guilt in his presence, an inexplicable sense of infidelity towards the man who lay in the lead coffin beneath the altar. Louis would not have objected to her copulating with Sabat, she felt sure of that. Had he not openly confessed to obtaining erotic delight from the thought of her giving herself to other men? Had he not on one occasion lured a handsome adolescent to their garret in Paris for that sole purpose? The memory of that night, shortly before he had sent her to the convent at Aix-en-Provence to spread his word, had her flesh tingling.

Louis had been hiding in the curtained alcove watching throughout. The boy was eager but nervous, and

when they were both naked it had needed a considerable effort on Madeleine's part to arouse him. Then he had had a premature ejaculation whilst she was playing with him and she had had to start all over again. Inexperienced youth did not excite Madeleine, but she knew it aroused her beloved and the thought of what he would undoubtedly be doing to himself in his role as voyeur had resulted in an unprecedented performance on her own part. And only when her young partner's limpness was finally beyond recall had she let him get dressed and leave.

Louis liked to be made jealous, but that same jealousy could also be very dangerous. Some days later she had read in a newspaper that the youth had been found along the left bank of the Seine with his throat cut. She had not mentioned it to Louis and he had never referred to the incident, but there was no possible doubt in her mind. Sabat might suffer a similar fate in due course when her lover came back from the dead. She had mixed feelings about the whole business.

She rested for most of the day, lying naked on those same blankets which were still damp with Sabat's seed, occasionally raising her head and glancing towards the coffin. Louis would not come yet, though, not for several hours. But he would rise, there was no doubt about that. It was a pity that Sabat had to return but that could not be helped. She dared not face this Walpurgisnacht, the most important of all her lives, alone. And if Louis Nevillon's wrath had been incurred by her unfaithfulness then Sabat would be here to answer for herself.

Towards evening she arose and began her preparations. Those black cloths had to be draped back on the altar, new candles fitted into their holders in readiness. Her long black dress, the one she always wore for sabbaths, was draped over one of the chairs. She would put the garment on shortly but in the meantime she was enjoying her nudity. As though Louis could see her.

The thought brought exciting sensations back to her body, ones that had never really left her since the previous night. Subconsciously her fingers smoothed sensuously down her thighs, trespassed in between. Her breathing quickened.

A faint rustling. Perhaps it was a draught wafting one of the tapestries. Yet... she stiffened, the noise seemed to come from within that coffin. Her eyes flickered, mingled hope and fear, her breathing heavier so that her breasts rose and fell; noticing things which previously she had taken for granted. The stale smell of cooked meat and a sickly cloying stench that reminded her of iron. The aroma of death but blending with putrefaction. No, the coffin was airtight and anyway, Louis Nevillon's flesh was perfectly preserved.

She trembled, found some matches and lit the candles. The wicks were stubborn, took time to ignite, the flames caught in those penetrating draughts and casting inexplicable shadows on the walls, things that had no definite shape and yet were all the more fearsome for that.

Madeleine was uneasy. But her dearest one would not harm her even if he arose now. She stared at the coffin, an oblong black inanimate object, half expected to see the lid beginning to rise up. It didn't

She wondered how long Sabat would be away. Possibly he was waiting for nightfall before dealing with Andre and the hippies. A glance at the windows showed her that it was nearly dark now. Sabat might be gone for several hours yet She did not need him though; she had hours. It was silly of her to be nervous in the first place.

Her body was goose pimpling. The atmosphere seemed to have become a lot colder. Perhaps she ought to put on her dress.

Even as she was moving towards it she changed her mind. No, she would remain naked because that was how Louis would like to see her when he first set eyes on her again. She would make him want her, give herself to him right away if that was his wish. Everything would be as it always had been.

A sudden whim, one that frightened her. Suppose she just lifted the coffin lid, had a quick peep in at her beloved. He wouldn't mind. She wondered what was happening to him; his head had already rejoined itself to his body so surely some form of life was beginning in the flesh and bones. Like a tree graft, a steady progress.

She stepped up to the coffin, grasped the edges of the lid with her fingers. God, it was cold, as though it was constructed of sheets of black ice. She was shivering. Perhaps she ought not to look; it was an imposition on the privacy of his rebirth.

Yet her curiosity was aroused, combined with an insatiable desire to gaze once more upon those fine features, maybe to press her own lips briefly against his. Wake soon, my darling, for I need you! Fear gripped her again, had her wanting to back away and wait until Sabat arrived. But she didn't; even now her muscles were bulging as though they had a will of their own, her small veins showing blue against the whiteness of her wrists as she took the strain. Perhaps she would not be strong enough?

The lid moved an inch or so, hinges creaking their protest at this disturbance. Then, without warning, the lead top came up easily as though on powerful springs, banging right back against the altar with a metallic clang that echoed in the confined space.

Madeleine Gaufridi bent forward; peered inside. And screamed!

Mother of God, it had happened! Perhaps deep down she had not really convinced herself that it would; a childish fantasy that she was determined to live out until the very end; self-indoctrination, believing what she wanted to believe. Building up hopes. Now they had all come true!

There was no movement from the body in the coffin and to all outward appearances it was still a corpse, pallid flesh that gave off that familiar death odour. Yet those eyes saw and understood, held their own expression of bewilderment, an awakening brain trying to come to terms with its surroundings. Louis Nevillon was alive!

Madeleine staggered back, almost pulled the lid down to shut it in, imprison it inside four lead walls. But she didn't, found herself cowering on the floor, watching in horrified anticipation of her lover's rebirth, expecting him to sit up at any moment, clamber out, come to claim her for his own again.

Nothing happened. The candlelight did not seem so bright as before but she could not be sure. Her skin pimpled with cold and fear, but she did not want to get dressed for this was how Louis would want to see her. Perhaps the sight would arouse him. She shuddered at the thought, tried to fight off the idea that she really did not want him to live again. She did! She did!

How long she cowered there she had no idea. It might have been minutes or hours for suddenly this tiny chapel had become a timeless void of terror. Gradually her reasoning returned. Maybe she had been mistaken, a trick of the candlelight in those dead eyes. Yet body and head had joined themselves together so anything was possible. She was becoming too conditioned to the thinking of conventional people. Was not she Madeleine de Demandolx de la Palud who had corrupted the young nuns in the convent at Aix-en-Provence? She had spread the word of Louis Nevillon, the Anti-Christ, and now his ways were racing across the continent like an unchecked forest fire. Sabat, too; Quentin reborn so that his association with the Beast of France could resume. And her own role? That was the most frightening prospect of all because she did not know.

She sank down, lay full length on the stone floor, but it no longer seemed cold and hard. Just a bed with clean linen, herself waiting. For what? Waiting for Louis Nevillon to come and take her!

Her whole body trembled but not because of the sudden drop in atmospheric temperature; a quivering that was warm and exciting. And dominating! Her hands seemed to move as though with a will of their

own, obeying a deep instinct, her fingers smoothing downwards, their touch so sensuous that her breathing quickened. She knew where they were going, that area of soft moist flesh that was crying out for relief.

One brief second of guilt; that time at the convent when she had gone up to the dormitory after mass because this same feeling had got the better of her and she had to appease it. She had been so engrossed in the sensations which her manipulations brought her that she had not heard the door open. One of the older nuns had entered, stared in shocked surprise at the sight of Madeleine's convulsing body. Even then she hadn't been able to stop, had to finish and satisfy herself whatever the consequences. She had resigned herself to expulsion from the convent, for surely Sister Camille would report her to the Mother Superior for defiling her own body.

Instead Sister Camille had slipped out of her own robes, revealed a shapely body that had been hidden for far too long beneath those capacious robes, and came to join her on the bed. Madeleine was at her weakest, could not have resisted the other's advances even if she had wanted to. Camille's touch was out of this world, kisses that burned like liquid fire, a flicking tongue that knew the places that brought the ultimate delight. Two bodies entwining, inseparable limbs flaying the air, then shuddering to a trembling standstill, clutching at each other, kissing gently, sobbing their spent passion. That was when Louis Nevillon's seed of corruption was sown. It had germinated, blossomed, and in the end Madeleine had had to run. And Sister Camille had continued spreading the word.

Madeleine's feelings were akin to that now, only more so; a mind-blowing maelstrom. The candle flames seemed to have shrunk until they were no more than tiny twin glow-worms in the darkness but Madeleine did not care. Sister Camille's stabbing tongue was taking her up to yet another orgasm. She exploded, clutched wildly at the air, was spinning, then floating in space. Falling, hands reaching out for her.

But they were not the soft hands of Sister Camille. Instead they were rough and strong and so deathly cold, fingers that felt and probed at her body, icy breath fanning her face.

She went rigid, wanted to hold back but did not dare. The touch, although abrasive and ungentle, was all too familiar. A scream rose into her throat but it never made it as her vocal chords constricted. She wanted to shrink away but her body was held there as though by invisible bonds. It was impossible to disobey Louis Nevillon!

The candles had gone out. Nothing but pitch darkness everywhere. Perhaps it was best that way, for the sight of the one who was roughly fondling her could have snapped her mind. She had waited longingly for this reunion and now that it had arrived it was the most terrible moment of her present life. She wondered if he sensed it, prayed that he did not, for the Beast of France took a terrible revenge on any who rejected him. She tried to tell herself that she loved him, that it was just the shock of the culmination of all

those months of waiting. But she knew that she lied.

She heard his heavy breathing, a rasping of air in stale lungs that had to learn how to inhale and expel again. Limbs that were stiff and wooden after weeks of idleness in death. Love-making had become an unfamiliar exercise for Louis Nevillon and she must bear with him.

Madeleine tried to relax but it was impossible; terror rendered her tense and unyielding so that he had to force her legs wide. His closeness was like an iceberg. Yet if he lived then surely his heart must pump warm blood. Or in this, his latest coming again, had he chosen to become one of the living dead?

He took her forcefully, an animal-like mating, dragging her up and forcing her to kneel facing away from him, having to hold her upright by her hair or else she would have fallen to the floor. Her strength had deserted her in this terrible hour and she was no more than a rag-doll to be manipulated by that body out of the coffin, to do his bidding in everything he chose.

A hardness deep in her, a freezing cold that numbed her very womb and destroyed all sensitivity; she was even rendered insensible to pain, for surely he was hurting her. Her hair felt as though it was being torn from her head by the roots, sharp fingernails gouged unmercifully at her breasts. She was aware of the slamming of his powerful thighs against her, pile-driving blows that vibrated every bone in her frame.

How much longer could it go on? Madeleine didn't know and she didn't care. Her brain was numbed, a kind of sedation that left her with a dim awareness of the awfulness of it all, but checked her rising terror. Her beloved would not hurt her. Only because she had been rendered insensitive to pain! He was a monster, fully aroused, a lustful thing that had survived the guillotine and escaped the grave; not Louis who had come back to her before when he had defied death.

Would he never be spent? Even as the thought crossed her mind she experienced a shooting coldness inside her. Her head was jerked right back, threatening to dislocate her neck, and those icy fingers were squeezing mercilessly at her breasts. She heard him now, a beast of the wild roaring at the peak of its lust, an unholy orgasm that blinded it to all else. This, surely, was the rutting-stand of the undead.

She was thrown forward, pulled back again, cold kisses like iced suction pads on her neck and back, that frozen penetration seeming to swell inside her. She tried to cry out but only succeeded in gasping hoarsely, a noise that might have been mistaken for an orgasmic grunt. There was to be no let-up in this frenzied copulation that had begun over three centuries before and was destined to continue for eternity. If he killed her then she would live again and he would be waiting for her. If she fled then there was no hiding place in this world, or the one beyond the shadows.

She had a sensation of flying through the air and in that instant all feeling was restored to her body. Covering her head with her arms, knowing that she must fall sometime. Then she hit the floor with a bone-jarring force, lay there bruised and winded as the terror finally seeped back. Her brain could not cope, sought a logical explanation. It wasn't him; you were masturbating, got carried away. Liar!

Madeleine could not see him but she knew he was there, a silent thing that stood in the darkness; one who needed no light to see, an omni-powerful creature who had satisfied himself on her and had spurned her undying love for him.

This was not Louis, not he whom she had served so faithfully for so long. Something had gone wrong...

She could hear him moving about, purposeful footsteps as he busied himself with some task. She heard the clank of the firebox, heavy logs being deposited inside; a crackling of flames. Oh God, he was stoking the oven, preparing to satisfy his hunger after a long abstinence.

Madeleine wanted to cry out, 'No, Louis. There is no need. I have cooked meat in readiness for your coming. It is there on the table.' But her voice had gone, just lips moving but no sound coming forth. Sheer terror had claimed her, turned her into a mute slave. She was praying, not to the God of the convent at Aix-en-Provence but to one much older, one she had once witnessed in the darkness of a black mass when Louis Nevillon had presided, for only he could have called up such a powerful entity; a beast-like thing that snorted in the shadows, only its glowing red eyes visible. An overpowering stench of putrefaction, a thundering of powerful hooves. You dared not look any closer.

Now she prayed that it might come again and save her from one who had once loved her. Or that it might send Sabat and that he would be in time.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

SABAT PULLED the Daimler off the road and killed the engine. A silent monster, it sat sedately amidst the trees, out of its own environment of hard roads and city lights. It would have been sacrilege to take it up that rutted track.

Sabat stretched in the seat, relaxed. He should have been hurrying with a sense of urgency up that muddy slope but instead he felt lethargic. Not tired, more of a basking in his own satisfaction. Schmid and his coven were finished, there would be nothing to fear from them.

A strange feeling which he found difficulty in coming to terms with. A muzziness that fogged his thinking, voices screaming at him but he neither understood nor recognised them. It might have been Quentin, his own soul in conflict, but he ignored it.

He sat there staring through the windscreen at the dark mass of indistinguishable trees, shapes that might have been demons out there on a night when the ultimate in evil was about to be reborn. Possibly the event had already happened. In which case Sabat was too late. His reasoning faltered again, a man with amnesia whose memory came back to taunt him in brief flashes and, like a will-o'-the-wisp, vanished before he could claim them for his own.

It was like a kind of dream going on all around you and yet you played a vital role in it, being swept along by events which in themselves controlled you. A sense of helplessness, too, but you didn't try to fight it.

He flicked on the interior light of the car, experiencing a burning desire to see his own face in the mirror. He had almost forgotten what he looked like, needed to re-acquaint himself with himself. He stared, saw his own reflection in the small oblong and a faint cry of surprise and fear escaped his lips. For the face

that stared back at him was not wholly his own! Nor Quentin's, as his brother had once been!

There was certainly a resemblance, but the features had undergone a drastic change! Harsh, vicious; the eyes seemed to have moved in closer, narrowed to an expression of sheer maliciousness. The nose decidedly more hooked, like the beak of a fierce bird of prey. The mouth a grim bloodless slit. The long hair appeared to have taken on a different texture, coarser, falling about the collar, now streaked with silver grey. Sabat stared in disbelief at an overall barely recognisable reflection. Ancient! It was Sabat and yet not Sabat. Something familiar about the facial change, a countenance upon which he had gazed recently. And then he knew!

Merciful God, only Sabat could accept this as possible! That dream, his companion of that night of evil whom he had helped put those witches to the torch. Pierre de Lancre lived again in the body of Sabat! 'If you ever have need of me do not hesitate to call me. Do that and Pierre de Lancre will come, that I promise.'

And the witchfinder had come, true to his word!

Sabat stared at his hands, talon-like with long ragged dirty fingernails, the skin dry and cracked; held them up to his face in revulsion, watched them tremble. Yet Pierre de Lancre, the witchfinder, had come when he needed him most and this was no time to spurn his help.

Sabat switched off the light, opened the door of the Daimler and slid silently out. He stood there in the pitch blackness breathing in the fragrant smell of damp pine woods, suddenly felt stronger, fitter. It was as though the remaining effects of his illness had evaporated and he bit on those thin lips until he tasted blood as he remembered everything that had happened to him since that fateful trip up the Jungfrau. No longer did he feel pity for Madeleine. She was a witch who had so far escaped the fiery stake, just as Louis Nevillon had cheated the guillotine. Now they must both pay in full for their evil which spanned three centuries!

He moved off, treading silently through the tall pines, a flitting shadow in the faint starlight. He checked that he still had his •38, reminding himself at the same time that this night he would need more than mortal weapons to overcome his dangerous adversaries. They could not guess; surprise was his trump card.

It took him twenty minutes to reach the clearing in which the small chapel stood. His pulses were racing with the eagerness of a hunting beast of the wild closing in for the kill. The same cunning, waiting and listening, nostrils flaring as he sniffed the night air and smelled an aroma that had him tautening, those broken fingernails digging into the palms of his hands. For he smelled the rancid odour of roasting human

flesh!

Nauseating. He recalled its taste, almost vomited. But he was strong now, stronger than them. And was not his very name feared throughout the continent and all the other countries of the world? Pierre de Lancre, merciless hunter of witches. He smiled grimly to himself and moved stealthily forward a few steps then stopped to listen again. Light came from within the building, slitting out through the ill-fitting door, but there was no sound to be heard. Sabat was wary; Nevillon and his young mistress were no ordinary witches. They might sense his presence.

He hesitated at the door. That smell of burning meat was much stronger now; perhaps he was already too late. He braced himself, drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, his own way of steadying those racing pulses. Whatever the outcome he had to go in there, confront his deadliest foes face to face. His fingers strayed to the butt of his revolver then fell away. This would be no time for bullets; it would be a duel with much deadlier, far more dangerous weapons.

His knee went up, shot forward with tremendous force, a blow that devastated the rotting woodwork, splintered the matchwood panels of the door as it flung it back, pulling a rusted hinge out by the screws. Sabat leapt forward, an SAS-type entrance, low and fast, a difficult moving target. Then he pulled up, almost felt foolish. The room was much as he had last seen it; twin black candles burning on the shelf adjacent to the old cast-iron stove which was no longer draped in black, that lead coffin with its lid closed, stark and horrific. Nothing else; there was no sign of Madeleine Gaufridi!

Sabat tensed, suspected a trap of some kind. Two long strides took him to the coffin, his strong fingers gripping the lid. This time his muscles responded like smooth well-oiled machinery, flexing and taking the strain of the heavy weight. The lid shot back, hit the wall with a dull clang and showered lime plaster and dust out of the crumbling bricks.

He coughed, peered through the grey cloud ... saw the shrouded corpse of the Beast of France lying there, staring up with sightless eyes! Dead pallid flesh gave off its own unpleasant stench but Sabat scarcely noticed it.

'He is still dead!' the witchfinder spoke his surprised relief aloud. 'He has not risen again. Maybe I am still in time even though Walpurgisnacht is well advanced ...'

His words tailed off to a hoarse whisper as his nostrils flared again at the stench of roasting human meat. His eyes widened; he wheeled and saw the temperature gauge on the front of the old cooker, 300.

'My God!' Sabat glanced back at that coffin. * The meat for this unholy night's banquet is already cooking! Nevillon has arisen and claimed his victim and his astral body has already fled, leaving behind it a useless shell. But who cooks in the oven?'

There was only one way to find out. Those long fingers which had somehow gnarled and cracked this last hour closed over the door handle, yanked it back. Thick choking steam billowed out, scalding fog that hid the horrors of that dark recess. Something moved, a bulky blistering roasting shape that had been resting against the door, a monster emerging from its hell-hot lair!

Sabat recoiled, saw smoking hands clawing through the steam, groping for him. A head, the shape was right but where there should have been features there were only blackened lumps and orifices, eyes that stared pain and malevolence out of charred sockets. Unrecognisable, a half-cooked thing that wheezed whispered screams of agony amidst clouds of nauseating vapour. And still lived!

Sabat's brain reeled, he felt terror clutching at his heart, revulsion but not pity because Pierre de Lancre was beyond pity. The steaming fat on that still-living form thinned, he saw it more clearly. Breasts that had once been shapely were shrivelled by the heat, nipples scorched but still hard and firm like glowing cinders. Hairless, a head that bobbed up and down, the mouth twisted into mute shrieks of pain. A hand found his jacket, clutched at it with roasted fingers that were no longer slender and shapely, tried to drag itself up on him. He felt the dry hot breath on his face like a gust of wind across an arid desert; even the wounded of Armageddon never suffered a fate such as this! He lip-read his own name on those moving lips. 'Sabat... Sabat... help me!'

Revulsion powered the short left jab, his bunched knuckles striking that face, throwing it back. The girl, for it was undoubtedly female, hit the floor, lay there looking up at him, hurt in those eyes, a dog that had been struck by its master when all it sought was affection. 'Sabat... help me!'

Recognition now; physically the girl could have been anybody, any age, that blackened bald head belonging to a horrific hag from an age-old fable graphically illustrated by a twisted artist. Yet that body, charred but still alive, seductive even in the ultimate agony and degradation, could have belonged to only one person.

'Madeleine Gaufridir Sabat's whisper was loud, a hoarse shout of shocked horror that never made it to full volume.

'Sabat... help me... Sabat!'

'I am not Sabat. Nor Quentin. I am Pierre de Lancre, witchfinder. Would I rescue you from the burning stake?'

She flinched as though he was about to strike her again, fell back. She knew, oh God, how she knew now! She saw his features as they once had been in another place, another life. Her festered lips closed tightly to choke back yet another plea for mercy because she knew the futility of pleading with this terrible man, one who was more malevolent in his own way than even her beloved Louis.

He looked into her eyes, read her silent plea. 'Kill me, Sabat. Please! I ask nothing else but that you end this agony for me, if only for what has been between us.'

Sabat stepped back, slid the •38 out of its holster, its cold steel soothing to his hot hand. He held it loosely at hip level in the manner of a western gunfighter; his decision was made, all he had to do was to go through with it. His fingers curled over the trigger; the first pressure.

'So Louis betrayed you in the end.* Sabat wondered if he spoke or whether he just heard his own thoughts, his utter contempt for one who had come back from the guillotine and rejected the only one who was loyal to him. 'You must die, Madeleine, and this time you will not return. But take this one comforting thought to the black beyond with you. Louis Nevillon has fled to the astral, to skulk there until he chooses to be reborn. But I shall seek him out there, for only I can follow him to such a place, and then my vengeance will be more terrible than had I found him here. Goodbye, Madeleine!'

The •38 crashed once, bucked in his hand. He saw that burned face disintegrate into a crimson mulch, the squatting body holding upright for a second or two as though it was unwilling to capitulate. Then, slowly, it fell back, hit the stone floor almost sedately. In death, as in life, Madeleine of the many aliases bowed out with dignity.

Sabat turned away, holstered his smoking weapon. Already the tragedy of a young girl possessed was pushed from his mind, his computer-like brain devouring data for the next move. He looked down into the coffin again. There was no doubt that only a dead physical body reposed there, flesh which would begin to decompose now that its evil soul had departed for another world. He could have destroyed it but there was no point because when Nevillon returned he would use a different body; just as Quentin had until Pierre de Lancre had proved his superiority.

There was no time to be wasted. Sabat groped in his small breast pocket, plucked out a half-length of white chalk which always reposed there and which he had only remembered now. It had had its uses before just as it would again someday.

He would have liked more time to prepare the room but time was never a plentiful commodity on Walpurgisnacht. The floor should have been swept clean to remove any particle of dirt which might have hid an evil entity; he had neither silver chalices nor charged water. Everything in this place was evil.

He must rely solely on the crudely chalked pentagram to protect his mortal body. Symmetry was overlooked, the huge five-pointed star within the circle merely symbolic. It might not be enough but that was a chance he had to take. There was no point in undressing, no means to seal the nine openings of his body. He had to place his total reliance upon himself, his faith, and Pierre de Lancre.

He lay on that pile of blankets where he had copulated with Madeleine. They were still damp; he prayed that the wetness was from his own spilled seed and not the cold semen of the risen dead, the veritable spawn of evil. So much was against him that he had to disregard it all. Never before had he ignored so many precautions, taken such a multitude of risks when departing for the astral plane. A universe of hiding places lay ahead of him, a billion secret refuges for one who sought to escape him. His task was an impossibility, but he still had to try and he had no guarantee of returning.

He tried to relax. It wasn't easy. The darkness outside the pentagram was alive, forces that gathered like swarming bees scenting honey in a closed hive; they just had to find the way in. Shouting, screaming, Quentin's voice loudest amongst them; but Sabat ignored them, for if they broke through his defences there was no way he could stop them.

His breathing became rhythmical. He told himself that he was not Mark. Nor Quentin. He had become Pierre de Lancre the witchfinder called from the dark past to inhabit a willing body and to live again. He felt tired, a pleasant drifting sensation that left those screaming demons from the dark beyond behind.

Floating in a night sky; a million stars and he could have gone to any he chose. Time came and went but Sabat had to go back, retrace the centuries.

Floating through a dark starless void and he knew he was on the right trail. Somewhere ahead he made out a faint grey light. Dawn... not a new day but an old one. Very old.

He could even smell the rotting vegetation of a place where decay had its own stranglehold and time had stood still. Waiting for those who dared to return.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SABAT GOT the feeling that he had been to this place before and accepted it unquestioningly, for he was Pierre de Lancre and he must follow where the witchfinder led. As Sabat he could have hunted in vain for eternity; as de Lancre he stood a chance of finding that which he sought reasonably quickly.

A land that was old and would remain so until the end of time. Again it was vaguely recognisable. Labourd perhaps. It did not really matter for this was the second astral plane.

He changed form, a small bat flitting insignificantly through the night sky, a creature that was commonplace enough, weaving and jinking against a silvery moon. Below him was a wooded landscape, interspersed with muddy cart-tracks. The whole countryside slept, peasant hovels with no lights showing. Rural desolation.

He flew on, mile after mile, letting his instinct take over, complete faith in Pierre de Lancre, not knowing

what he was searching for but trusting in the witchfinder. And then at last he saw the chateau on the hillside and found himself homing in on it.

Once it had housed aristocracy, now it was a shambling shell of its former edifice. Creeping ivy had taken over to the detriment of the stonework, three of the four turrets already having crumbled. The extensive grounds stretched up to the surrounding forest, a mass of thick vegetation that had spread with neglect, a pond of some kind, thick with algae. The casual observer might have sensed an atmosphere of dereliction and emptiness but not Sabat. As he alighted on an upper windowsill he sensed the presence of others, a feeling of hopelessness that wafted from within on the smell of decay.

He passed inside, changed his form to that of a hornet, buzzed his way down a long panelled corridor thick with dust but noted the trails of footprints to and fro on the floor, a regular thoroughfare. He followed the footmarks down a flight of stone steps that were only too familiar. The dungeons of Armageddon where he had spoken to that traitor only a short time ago! But this was not Armageddon; this was but a parody that existed in the past, in a world where time was unknown.

Now he could hear voices, a weeping and wailing like the sound of the wind in a far off tunnel, but there was no wind because the torches which lit this passageway burned evenly without so much as a flicker of a flame. So cold, and damp too, condensation trickling down the stone walls.

The noise was louder now and as he rounded a bend he saw the huge dungeon, too big for the torches on the walls to illuminate fully, merely keeping the shadows at bay. A stench of putrefaction greeted him as he flew up and settled on a sagging overhead beam; the smell of rotting bodies!

His first feeling was one of revulsion. Amongst the living prisoners chained to the walls he saw corpses in varying degrees of decomposition; skeletons that had not been removed, bodies only recently dead with rats gnawing at the flesh with a horrible squelching, grinding sound. Sabat winced, transferred his attention to the living prisoners.

Men and women of all ages; children too. All in threadbare clothing that the dampness of this underground place was rotting on their bodies. They had long given up shouting and screaming at the rats, accepted the presence of vermin, only crying out when sharp rodent teeth bore at living flesh.

These people cried their hopelessness openly, their pain-twisted faces shiny with tears. They prayed for death but it did not come, for this was their fate, their hell. But who were the gaolers in these halls of degradation? Sabat took to the wing again, an erratic course that eventually brought him to the furthestmost wall, a distance of at least fifty yards, and even then there was yet another dungeon where

humanity was at its lowest ebb. The dead were the only fortunate ones. A child was screaming frantically to join its mother on the opposite wall, a pathetic naked figure who sagged in her manacles, her head fallen on to her breasts. Yesterday she had whispered hoarse words of encouragement to her offspring but today she was silent. Because she was dead and the rats had already begun to eat her.

Bowls of stinking food that was rotten before it was prepared were stacked by the entrance. Sabat wondered who came to feed these wretches, what kind of gaoler could tolerate these conditions. Even the vermin preferred the corpses to the morass of putrid nourishment. The stench was strong, hanging in this airless underground tomb that housed the living and the dead, and even as Sabat was contemplating going back upstairs the sound of approaching footsteps reached his ears.

Back at his vantage point on that central beam he had an unrestricted view of the approaching men. The one in the lead was obviously the gaoler, a squat, grimed figure clad in crude garments cut from the skin of some animal, either a goat or a sheep. Eyes that glinted insanely, gleaming with lust and sadism as he viewed his manacled charges on either wall. In his hand he carried a homemade whip, a length of rope to which innumerable rusty nails had been attached. Sabat winced; those discolorations might not have been solely rust! A shambling arrogant gait that only faltered when a well-directed blob of phlegm splattered on his cheek and ran down on to his thick lips.

The prisoner who had spat gave a hollow laugh, then pursed his lips and vainly searched his dry mouth for more saliva. 'We shall die and cheat you,' he shouted, 'and then you and your master will be forced to eat the flesh of corpses!' The guard wheeled, his arm going back, that cruel lash snaking forward into an arc, the nails ripping across the emaciated features of the helpless man on the wall, crude fishhooks that embedded in the mouth and the cheek, ripped out chunks of bloody flesh, spraying crimson as they came free, distorting and elongating the mouth that had dared to spit its defiance.

The wounded man screamed, began dribbling blood, writhing with the agony of his terrible wound, setting off more screams down the line. That distraught child was shrieking her infantile terror, a woman shaking with sobs.

'Cochon' the guard wound his lash back in, plucked off a chunk of bloody flesh and hurled it contemptuously in the direction of the feeding rats. 'You shall not die before your time. Not here. Perhaps tomorrow the master will have need of you. Or the day after. Who knows?'

Sabat's eyes were riveted on 'the master'. Oh God, there could be no possible mistake. Pierre de Lancre had been true to his word; his unerring hunting instinct had led Sabat to Louis Nevillon. Three centuries of dying and rebirth had not changed him, the same handsome bestial features, eyes that glowed with malevolence and lusted for the flesh which hung from the walls of this human abattoir, tongue licking those cruel lips in anticipation of the meat which was his for the taking, his very own farmyard of human

victims.

'Tonight, Hugo,' strong teeth showed in a merciless smile, 'I will have that woman.' A bony forefinger singled out a comely wench, a recent acquisition because her body had not yet begun to waste away. 'Take her and prepare her/

Hugo slouched forward to do his master's bidding. The girl was screaming, trying to struggle as she was freed, but the squat man was too strong for her, tucking her under his odorous arm, ignoring her flaying limbs.

'Good,' Nevillon turned away. 'Let us leave this stinking place, Hugo. Too many are dying here for my liking. It is such a waste. Keep them better fed, it improves the quality of the meat. The Chateau of the Damned is renowned across the whole of France for its banquets?

Sabat watched them go, alone again with the damned and the dying. The rats were continuing with their feed, unhindered, the injured man was spitting blood and groaning. The child had fallen into wide-eyed mute terror. Tomorrow the Beast would come again, following at the heels of his depraved henchman, singling out yet another unfortunate to grace his unholy table.

Sabat changed back to human form, a materialisation which grew silently in the shadows, and only when he stepped out into the wan torchlight did screams echo again in the dungeons of doom. Cries of fear and hate rang out.

'He is back. The Beast has returned.'

'No, it is not he. It is...'

'It is the witchfinder! Mon Dieu, Pierre de Lancre has at last discovered the Beast's lair! We are saved!'

Sabat smiled, held up a hand to silence their cries of astonishment. Thank you, my friends, but I beseech you to be silent whilst I go in search of this prince of purgatory. To warn him with your cries might prove fatal to us all.'

They fell silent and Sabat noted the smiles of relief upon faces which hitherto had shown only utter despair. Even the one whose mouth had been torn up into his cheek was laughing in between spitting out blood. Pierre de Lancre, the hoped-for saviour had arrived! Their messiah was here.

Sabat moved swiftly, mounting those stone steps silently, pausing to survey the extent of the massive hall above, but there was nobody in sight. And even as he hesitated a fearful scream echoed throughout the building, a cry of terror that was abruptly cut off before it reached its peak, vibrating in the still, cold atmosphere.

Sabat moved fast, having singled out the door from behind which the cry had come. Guilt escalated into cold fury; the man called Hugo had wasted no time in killing the girl. Sabat hoped that he might have been in time to save her life, but he had been too cautious and it had cost her her life. Now all that was left to him was revenge.

He flung the heavy door wide, saw a huge kitchen beyond. A fire roared in an open grate and above this the freshly killed naked body of the peasant wench turned slowly on a spit. With an oath Hugo whirled, his massive hand closing over a meat cleaver which lay on the table nearby. But in his eyes there was a flicker of recognition and fear.

'So Pierre de Lancre has come to join the legions of the damned! I fear though, monsieur, that your flesh will not be tender enough for the master. Nevertheless, we are plagued with hungry rats so ...'

But Sabat had already anticipated that wild swing. Hugo was as strong as an ox and just as clumsy, a sweeping arc of honed steel that would have beheaded the intruder had it connected with its intended target.

Sabat ducked, caught the arm as it swung over his head, pulled it downwards then sharply upwards in almost the same movement, heard the loud crack as bone splintered, the thud of the falling cleaver. Hugo was bellowing his rage and fear and had to be silenced!

Another blow with the flat of the same hand, a sideways chop that had solid muscle sinking into a fleshy throat, cutting off that bestial roar instantly. Hugo jerked, tottered, his wide eyes glazing over, anger and fury evaporating with the advent of unconsciousness.

Sabat let him fall; a follow-up blow would merely have been a waste of energy. The body hit the floor, splayed itself out, and then Sabat was picking up the fallen weapon, its blade dulled by the chopping of heavy bones. But it would be sharp enough for this last time... He raised it above his head, felt his fury pumping the adrenalin into his body. This one was for all the unfortunates who had found their way into the dungeons of the Chateau of the Damned; the dead and the dying and those who might even now be freed.

The blade had enough weight, powered by Sabat's strength, to sever that grotesque head at one blow, a manual guillotine that jarred on the stone floor and then was cast aside. Blood spurted from the neck, gushed on to the fire as though Hugo was making one last attempt to atone for his part in Nevillon's cannibalistic existence and spare the girl's body from the flames.

Sabat reached across, unhooked the spit and lowered it to the floor, mentally apologised to the singed naked corpse that he had not been in time. Then he was turning away, going in search of the beast whose lair this place was, one who was already gathering about him his followers and whetting their appetite for the flesh of their own species.

Sabat flitted from room to room but there was no sign of the man he sought on the ground floor. Each room was musty and empty, icy cold as though invisible evil lurked there.

He made for the stairs, knew that the Beast had to be somewhere up there. Sabat's pulses were racing, a sudden fear that perhaps Hugo's scream had been loud enough to warn his master and that Nevillon had fled out into the dark night. But no! Even as he reached the landing Sabat heard sounds that came from behind a heavy ornate door on the right of the wide, uncarpeted landing. He paused to listen; heavy breathing as though whoever it was exerted himself to the point of exhaustion, a creaking as though old and rusted springs were subjected to an unbelievable strain.

Sabat hit the door on the run with his shoulder, flung it back, grunted his surprise at the scene which greeted his narrowed eyes. Of course, Nevillon had other uses for young women besides eating them!

With the snarl of an animal at bay Louis Nevillon came off the girl who had been lying spread beneath him on the old four-poster bed with its rotting hanging curtains, the sweat on his body glistening in the light cast by the single oil-lamp. His lips drew back but in those eyes Sabat noted abject terror. The hunted had been run to ground at last by the hunter he feared most, either on earth or in this hell of his own creation.

'Pierre de Lancre!' Nevillon backed off, started to slide a hand beneath the blankets where he kept a knife concealed, a habit which had not died in three hundred years.

Sabat leapt, his booted feet spring boarding him into the air, and in the same movement powering a vicious scissors-kick. Fast, too fast for the man on the bed who tried to dodge but the blow took him in the face, crashed his head back against the stone wall behind him. His eyes filmed just as Hugo's had done and he slumped down inert beside the dark-haired girl.

That was the moment when she turned her head, and in spite of the disfigurement, an ugly gash across her forehead as though at some time her skull had split and then joined together again, Sabat had no difficulty in recognising her. It was incredible, impossible, but the evidence was there before him, an expression of pleading on her frightened, beautiful features.

'Madeleine!' he grunted. 'Madeleine Gaufridi, or de Demandolx de la Palud, or Marie Boule, or whatever you are currently calling yourself! But you cannot be here; even on the astral it is impossible. I destroyed you with a bullet after Louis Nevillon had tried to ...'

'You gave me a bullet,' there was sadness in her expression as she fingered the scar. 'But it did not destroy me as I had hoped. Nothing can destroy me whilst he lives. He knew that; that was why he subjected me to the degradation of what he did, because he knew that afterwards he could summon me back here where we could be together in a terrible eternity, Oh, if only I could die and be at peace?

'So you shall before long, that I promise,' Sabat smiled.

'For there are those below like yourself who have suffered untold agonies and it is their right that they be given this monster to pass their own judgement upon!'

He stooped down, dragged the unconscious man up, some how got him across his shoulder. Even the combined steel strength of Sabat and Pierre de Lancre was put to the test now, but somehow he made it down the stairs and across the hall to those dungeon steps. Far below he heard them, shouts that were a mixture of euphoria and anger, demanding both freedom and revenge,

'Give us the Beast! Give us the Beast of France?

Cheers in the shadowy light as they saw and hailed the return of Pierre de Lancre bearing his burden, their hungry mouths already watering for the flesh of Louis Nevillon. For once they, also, would eat human meat and its rancid flavour would be sweet on their starved palates. They recognised a sacrificial victim, strained at their iron bonds in a frenzied attempt to get at it.

Sabat dumped the unconscious Nevillon unceremoniously in the centre of the floor, turned to face his audience.

'You shall have your Beast, your tyrant,' he bowed mockingly, 'with the compliments of Pierre de Lancre!'

Then he moved swiftly down the lines of straining prisoners, unshackling them one after another, listening to their animal-like cries as they rushed and fell on their prey. Only when skeletons and corpses remained in the manacles did Sabat turn to watch, a wry smile creasing his features as he permitted himself a few moments of sadistic delight.

The ultimate in barbarism - men and women had thrown themselves on to the inert form of Louis Nevillon, a milling mass as they clawed the flesh from the body with broken fingernails or sunk their teeth deep into any part that they could reach. Just one scream of agonised fear came from the victim as he regained consciousness; but that was cut off as his throat was torn out and jetting crimson fluid sprayed the frenzied throng. Now they were fighting, a tug-of-war that ended with a number of them sprawling in a heap when an arm was torn from its socket.

Somehow they had severed a leg, a group of human dogs fighting over a gigantic bone. Raw flesh, but they were starving, a maddened mob that sent even the rats scurrying away into the shadows...

Sabat smiled his satisfaction and knew that upstairs Madeleine was finally at peace. His job was done; it was time to go, for Walpurgisnacht had not yet ended and his own body lay in that remote chapel protected only by a frail pentagram. And if that defence failed then he would remain here forever!

One last look. A partly screened view of a bloody morass that was still being ravenously pulled apart and devoured and then he was a bat once more, winging an erratic course back across that deserted moonlit countryside in a world where time stood still for eternity.

Sabat stirred, then jerked into wakefulness as he remembered. Fear had him sitting up, then relief came as he saw the grey light of a May morning shafting in through the broken door of the chapel. He sighed, strangely refreshed as he always was after a trip on to the astral plane.

It was all over. Well, almost.

He felt the need to hurry, to erase the final scars that remained now that Louis Nevillon was no more. Working feverishly he smashed chairs, built up a pile of kindling wood to hide that pathetic charred body; dragged the corpse from the coffin and hoisted it on to the top of his proposed incineration like some macabre Guy Fawkes.

Just one match, that was all that was needed, Then he hurried out, did not look back for his work was done and he wished to see no more.

Back in the Daimler he glanced again in the mirror, breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that his hair was jet black again, the lines had smoothed away from his features and the ruthlessness in his expression was his own. Pierre de Lancre had answered his call and now the witchfinder had returned whence he had come.

Sabat eased the car on to the road, permitting himself one last look back, saw a huge column of black smoke rising above the pines, mushrooming out and hanging in the windless sky. It was truly over now.

He accelerated, heard a voice somewhere, nasal angry tones that he recognised instantly. Pierre de Lancre was gone but Quentin was back. That was only to be expected; with the devilish cannibal cult wiped out he must now get back to the business of fighting his brother's soul, a battle which, like Armageddon, would never be resolved.