

# The House on Saint Julian

by

Francis Clark

(Under the direction of Professor Reginald McKnight)

## Abstract:

The House on Saint Julian is a gothic-horror novel set in Savannah, Georgia in 1874. In the opening chapter Saul Richardson is killed by a demon while in Saint Joseph's Hospital. The death is witnessed by a nun, Sister Brigid, who was born to a family of wise women in Ireland. The church summons its magicians to deal with the demon, but the demon is too powerful. Brigid must rely on her few pagan connections remaining in Ireland to find a magician who can destroy the demon. In the course of the novel she recovers her pagan heritage and faith, led to her true path by another hereditary witch, Sister Angela, and the Voudon *mambo*, Esmerelda. At the conclusion of the novel, the two nuns leave the church and leave together for Sicily.

## Index Words:

Graduate School of English, Francis Clark, Masters Degree (MA), The University of Georgia, Horror, Gothic, Fantasy, Novel, *Strega*, Witch, Paganism

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by

Francis Clark

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my wife, Amy, whose patience and support made its creation possible. I would also like to dedicate this book to the members of my graduate committee, Reg McKnight, Terry Hummer, and James Nagel, as well as to Anne Williams, Miranda Yaggi, and my agent Nat Sobel.

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*Chapter One*  
*Savannah, Georgia*  
*Friday, October 9th, 1874*

The dream always began the same, and, though he recoiled in terror even inside the dream, he could never escape the outcome. He was walking toward the hospital tent. Around it were men broken in battle, arms and legs smashed by rifle balls, sword cuts already infected with the filth of the battlefield. Cannons rumbled in the distance. Couriers rattled back and forth on the muddy trails of the camp. Beside the tent was the inevitable harbinger of his trade—a stack of arms and limbs sawn from men as they screamed. The Confederate doctors rarely had laudanum or whiskey to dull the patient’s pain while the saw rasped its way through the flesh and bone. Cutting the bone was always the most agonizing part. Some cried out. Some just cried. The ones who screamed seemed to do the best, though the screams haunted him as they did every doctor. In his dream he would enter a tent, a vague concoction of the tents at Shiloh, Antietam, and a half dozen lesser battles where the men of the South died for “the Cause.” Someone he thought he knew handed him a saw and a scalpel. Somnolent, deadened, he walked to a table where a patient lay, his pants crudely ripped back, revealing a shattered right leg.

“Hold him,” he muttered to the two Negro orderlies who stood at the head of the table, like waiters in a crude feast. As they moved to hold him down, the boy raised his head, and Gaston saw that he was young, maybe sixteen.

“You’re not gonna take my laig,” he cried through the pain.

“No choice, son.” He repeated the litany, “It’s your leg or your life.”

“You’re not gonna take my laig.” Stubbornly repeated.

“Hold him.” The orderlies tightened their grip, yet the boy struggled to raise his head.

“Butcher.” He said it calmly, pronouncing judgment on the doctor.

The screaming began when he cut into the flesh with his scalpel. So much like cutting up a cow or a pig, only this flesh lived, this flesh could scream with a human voice.

Until then the dream had been true to reality, so close to what he had seen and done a thousand times, even down to his feeling of cold detachment as he sliced away a part of a man who might never feel like a man again. But then the insanity started, the tent began to drum as things fell against the canvas. The poles swayed; the oil lamps rocked with the impact. Where the objects struck, each left an imprint of blood. The tent began to sag under the strain. The blood leaked through the canvas. A seam over his head split, and shattered arms and legs fell on him. Some were mangled stumps, some putrid with gangrene, some freshly removed. Some limbs were tattered, some cleanly cut. The tattered ones betrayed the work of a soldier. The cleanly cut were the work of doctors. All the limbs fell straight at him. A putrid thigh slapped him in the face, blinding him in one eye with its trail of gore. As the limbs cascaded through the rent canvas and beat him to the floor, he saw a fervid look of victory in the face of the boy.

“Ain’t gonna get me. Ain’t gonna get mine.”

Then he was swamped in the onrush of limbs, buried in a mound of bone and blood and torn meat. He clawed madly for the surface, but it was out of reach, the tide was endless. He tried to breathe, but his mouth and nose were blocked by a putrefying gore that made him retch.

He would wake up gasping for air. The sour mash whiskey he kept by his bedside was the only thing strong enough to wash the taste out of his mouth.

It had been almost ten years since Appomattox, and Savannah once again grew rich on the cotton trade. But Gaston’s dream and his memories never let him enjoy the peace and the new prosperity. He always remembered that one half of the budget of the state of Mississippi was spent to pay for artificial limbs in 1866. That fact reminded him



that for three years he had not been a doctor, just a meat cutter and an expert at the final game of triage.

He heard his boy running up the stairs.

“Doc Gaston, Doc Gaston, you needed.”

Ezekiel began knocking loudly at the door, he knew the doctor was normally a heavy sleeper.

“Come on in. I’m awake.”

Ezekiel’s dark eyes took in the bedroom quickly. “Been havin’ that dream?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you needed. Mistah Richardson took real bad.”

“I’ll get dressed.”

“I be downstairs.” He turned to his small room to get dressed.

Their relationship went back five years. Ezekiel knew well enough that he had to get dressed and go with the doctor to the hospital, even though Zeke was nowhere near fond of the Saint James’ Ward. Saint James’ was the “lockup ward” at Saint Joseph’s Hospital. In the ward were those too crazy to be left on their own. What made Ezekiel ‘specially afraid was that Saul Richardson had gone from being a respected man to someone screaming about the Devil overnight. And now it was near the black of the moon again.

“White people too smart to believe in the Devil,” Ezekiel muttered as he pulled his clothes on. “They willin’ to talk about him, but don’t believe. He sets his traps just the same, and Mistah Richardson fall into his snare.” He finished dressing quickly. Doc Gaston usually got ready too soon for him anyway.

In a few minutes they were on their way. Gaston walked steadily, though not quickly. The war years had aged him prematurely, though at sixty-two he was hardly a young man anymore. He didn’t carry a bag. Saint Jo’s would have everything he needed,

not that they had anything to help Saul Richardson, except enough laudanum to knock him senseless. They walked the few blocks to the hospital in silence. The fog that often rose in the city at night enveloped them, so that the light of the gas lamps was unusually diffused, leaving much of the street in darkness. The fog swallowed the sounds of conversation and even dulled the sounds made by the few horses and carriages abroad at this hour. The sharp tap of hooves on stone was transmuted into a dull clopping sound. As they walked through the shroud of fog, Ezekiel was concerned with his fears. Gaston was concerned with his patient.

David Gaston was one of Saul Richardson's circle of friends, not merely his doctor. They had known each other for many years. Richardson's family was part of Savannah society, and, as such, was one that Gaston frequently saw at the various gatherings. They had become close friends since the war, which had left too many empty seats for them not to have. Yet Gaston had not really been part of Richardson's daily life, any more than Richardson had been part of his. They saw each other socially, and they might play cards together on occasion. The business world of cotton factors and the medical world of doctors did not overlap to any great extent.

Richardson had begun screaming almost a month ago, on the night before the new moon. He'd been taken to the Saint James' Ward and given enough laudanum to quiet him. It had taken a large dose, three times more than Gaston used for an amputation. The next day Gaston had gone to see Mrs. Richardson. Her elegant home looked out over one of Savannah's many squares.

His wife had let it slip to Gaston that it was odd for Richardson to be at home on the night it started. He had been going out to his gentlemen's club on the first or second night before the new moon since before their marriage. He had failed to attend only when pressing business had called him from Savannah. Since he had not gone two nights before the new moon, she had expected him to have gone the evening before the new moon. In-

stead, he had locked himself in the study shortly after dinner. His screams had brought her downstairs. When she was unable to persuade him to unbolt the door, she had sent the cook's son for the police. From that point, Gaston knew the story. The police had summoned him almost as soon as they arrived. Mrs. Richardson could not, or would not, add anything more of substance to the story. She had not known where her husband went or for what purpose on those evenings, merely that he arrived home long after she had retired.

Gaston's reverie was broken by their arrival at the front entrance of the hospital. It was brightly lit as usual. He turned up the stairs of the hospital. The flicker of the many gaslights made the brick front seem to waver in the darkness. Ezekiel hung back.

"I wait for you heah."

"Come on in and go down to the kitchen, Zeke. They'll have hot coffee down there."

Ezekiel hesitated, fear gleaming in his eyes.

"Suit yourself, Zeke, but I might be a while. Besides, there's a lot more bright light in the kitchen than you're likely to see out here." Faced with such a persuasive argument, Ezekiel followed the doctor into the hospital and immediately turned down the stairs to the kitchen.

Sister Mary Francis was waiting for the doctor at the front desk, her stocky hips balanced, as always, by a rosary, a crucifix, and a heavy ring of keys. Her hands fluttered more than usual, and a strand of gray hair had escaped the confines of her wimple, a certain sign that she had been roused from sleep for the emergency. Yet none of her disarray served to lessen the stern devotion to her patients that gleamed like frozen candle flames in her green eyes.

She gave an almost imperceptible nod of her head to the doctor and led the way to the Saint James' Ward. As they walked down the long corridor to the ward, Gaston no-

ticed an unusual number of nuns about for the hour. Whispering like black doves, they stayed in the shadows at the sides of the corridor, out of the way of the aged nun and the physician in tow. For them, what resided in the confines of the Saint James' was terrifying. It was damnation itself, the devil come to roost. They had heard the screams in the night, and they knew that no secular potions could safeguard Richardson from that which stalked him.

"Damn you." Richardson's screeching cry echoed down the hallway the moment the heavy door to the Saint James was opened. "Kill me and be done with it."

Gaston barely recognized Richardson's voice. It was hoarse with screaming. He looked at the nun beside him. She was crossing herself. He took refuge in clinical thought.

"How long?"

"Since just before ten."

"Have you given him any laudanum?"

Her face creased a bit more deeply. "He's too dangerous at times for many of the sisters. But he is rational much of the time. The orderlies won't go near him, even after I put the fear of God in them." She sighed. "But we did give him his dose at nine." As if on cue, the screaming from Richardson's room suddenly ceased. The sudden silence startled both of them.

The nun looked at the doctor. "As I said, he is rational much of the time."

The doctor shook his head. This case troubled him more than he wanted to admit. "So at nine you gave him the full dose I prescribed."

"The full dose."

Gaston frowned. With that much laudanum in him a man could have his leg sawn off and not have his drug dream interrupted. "Are you certain he drank it all?"

A moment's irritation at Gaston's questioned flickered through her eyes. She let it pass before replying in a neutral tone, "I saw him drink it. I took the bottle back from him. He . . ." she stopped.

"Yes."

"He said, 'Thank you, Sister. Better have a priest at hand. This could be my last night as your guest.' He smiled at me with a look I've seen before." She turned to the doctor. "They know when they're about to die. I know he's not really sick, but it was that look of death."

Gaston knew the look she referred to too well to question her judgment.

When they reached the door to Richardson's room, Gaston rapped on it. "Saul? It's David."

The hoarse voice came through the iron door. "I am sorry I cannot receive you any better, David. But please come inside. It's safe enough now. Regardless of what those nuns and half-witted darkies tell you, I have not become the devil."

Gaston opened the small view hole cut in the door and looked through the grille. Richardson's face blocked the view into the room. Gaston was aghast at the changes in the two days since he'd last seen him. Richardson had the drained look of a man who was only hours from death by internal bleeding.

"But David," Richardson said, "you have to promise one thing. You have to leave when I tell you. It will come for me, and I will know when it's coming. But it may get you if you're with me." A slight flash of humor passed through his eyes. "I know quite well that you think me insane. I assure you I am not, but if you fail to swear that you will leave when I tell you, I will knock you senseless the moment you set foot in this room. Then the boys can drag you out of the way of harm."

"Saul, it's me."

"David, I don't have time for politeness. Do you swear?"

He nodded. "I swear."

Richardson turned away, and Gaston reached for the door handle. "Stay here, Sister. Be ready to let me out."

She bowed her head and clutched her rosary. A shadow darkened the view hole.

"And David," Richardson whispered, "wear a cross."

Gaston stepped back from the door, only to find a crucifix pressed into his hand. It was Sister Francis's. It was her only valuable possession. The heavy silver crucifix had been on her waist from the first day that Gaston had met her in the better days of the 1840s. He resisted taking it from her.

She pressed it into his hand and smiled. "If the Lord doesn't recognize me as one of his own without it by now, he never will."

He started to put it back into her hand.

She stopped him. "If praying over a thing can make it holy, then that's as holy as you'll find. It might serve to protect you. Please, wear it."

He drew the chain up over his head until the heavy silver cross dropped down on his chest. Then he did something he had not done for years. He crossed himself.

The door opened into a room that was totally vacant except for a bed, a chamber pot, and a chair. Richardson sat on the bed. A complete view of his patient did little to reassure Gaston. Dark circles of exhaustion marred Saul's patrician face. Saul had always been thin, but now he was emaciated. His skin had the sickly white tone of the seriously ill. He was sweating feverishly. A poorly healed cut on his cheek hinted at something more, as did the cuts on his hands and abrasions on his wrists. "I'm glad you came. Sorry I can't offer you a drink, but the staff here seems somewhat lax."

Gaston grimaced at the forced humor. "Hello, Saul. How are you?"

"Uh, a little dry now. Could I have some water?"

"Sister," Gaston called over his shoulder, "might you bring us some water?"

“Of course, doctor.” Her response was muffled by the thick door.

“It’s all right, David,” Richardson said. “It really is. I intend you no harm. The sisters are less confused than they act. Every one of them knows what’s happening here. They know it as well as I.”

The sound of the door opening behind him caused Gaston to turn and see a nun with a carafe of water and two glasses on a tray. She set the tray down just inside the door and scurried out. The latch clicked as the door shut. It couldn’t be opened from the inside.

Gaston’s nervousness was not lost on Richardson. “You’re not in any danger really. I can tell when I’m about to lose control. They’ll have time to get you out of here.”

“Lose control?”

Richardson got up from the bed and walked to the barred window that looked out over nothing more interesting than another wall of the hospital. “They don’t let the people on the street see in here,” he grimaced, “probably some sense of delicacy. My keepers are made uncomfortable by the situation. One minute I am a Richardson, someone to be reckoned with. A few minutes later I’m the most violent patient on the floor, like an animal—biting, clawing, defecating.”

He moved back to the bed and sat down, grimacing as a bruise or cut took his weight. “It’s all done to shame me, to shame one who would break faith with them.”

Gaston waited.

“When I first came here, when you first admitted me, I was too afraid to say much. But in the past few days, I’ve become certain that they are going to kill me. So I don’t have much more to fear. And I want to tell someone.”

He stared across the room at the iron door. “You won’t believe me, but I’ll tell you anyway. I don’t have much time for the story.” He looked at Gaston. “But it will be a story without names. If you knew the names, you might say something. Then your life would be at risk as well.”

Gaston remained silent and let Saul continue. "Before the war, I joined a club, a very exclusive club. It seemed something grand, like a Hellfire Club. We donned robes and chanted, engaged in all manner of perversity, bowed to a statue of Satan, reveled in our superiority.

"Some seven years after I came home from the War, I was invited into the inner circle. Much hurrah, blood poured on burning sulfur. Even greater fun. I advanced to the special meetings, held after the new members departed. There I began to see things that made no sense to me. Some of the women who were brought in for our little rituals were of the lowest class. They always arrived in a drugged haze, but still screamed most convincingly. I thought it was part of an act, that they were prostitutes, hired for the evening of fun. Probably made a month's pay for a night of debauchery." He took a sip of water. The glass was unsteady in his hand. "Until we killed one of them." He looked at Gaston. "One of our more prominent citizens did the actual killing, though the job wasn't very hard. The poor girl had been used and used. Half out of her mind. Two men held her up and he slit her throat from behind." A look of distaste passed across his face. "He seemed skilled at the task. The blood shot out of her neck and one of the women in the group came up with a bowl and caught it. The blood splashed into the bowl and down her arms. Like beasts, others came to rub their hands in it, dunking them into the bowl, painting their faces with the hot blood while the woman died.

"I was horrified. Drunk or not, I backed away into the corner of the room and crouched there. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Then they passed the bowl, leaving the draining corpse in the middle of the floor. Like a perverted acolyte, the woman brought the bowl to each of them, each of them tasted the blood. The last person that she took the bowl to was our leader, our high priest. I watched him drink from the bowl, then paint his face with the blood. He took the bowl from her and turned to pour it over the small fire they had built near the center of the room.



“That’s when one of the others stopped the priest. He said, ‘One has not partaken.’ He pointed to me. I was vomiting.” He looked at Gaston. “You can’t imagine the smell, so choking, so overwhelming...”

“I can.”

“That’s right, you were at Antietam. I forgot. You’d know.” He ran his hands over his head, pushing his dirty hair out of his face. “The priest stood over me, all drenched in blood and held the bowl over my head. He said, ‘You’ve sworn. You are one of us. You cannot deny the sacrament.’ Then he poured some of the blood onto my head. The rest they gave to the fire.”

Gaston was too shocked to respond immediately. He knew that among the prostitutes of Savannah, some would go missing from time to time. But no one paid it much mind, thinking the girls had perhaps moved on to where they could make more money. Or maybe they had gotten drunk and fallen into the river. In a few hours they would be well into the Atlantic. But those that went missing were never the courtesans who serviced the upper class. The missing ones were the girls who met the cotton ships, who lived in the worst brothels of Indian Street, or who seemed to live nowhere at all. There was always a ready supply, both colored and white. The white girls came from the ruined farms of South Georgia, daughters of sharecroppers. Many had been orphaned by the war. The black girls were former slaves or the children of slaves who had found themselves free in 1865. They had no knowledge of how to cope with their new world, even if they did have their freedom and a small piece of land. Both groups lived a precarious existence. On a whim or a failed crop, the entire family of a sharecropper might be turned out. If the man of the family were dead or if he had some accident while farming and the women couldn’t make up for his work among themselves, they had to find a way for the family to survive. These girls, without education, breeding, or family ties, had but one thing to sell. Once they did, their families would have no more to do with them, even if most of the money

they made was sent back to help the family. The girls were condemned by the ruthless Baptist morality that ruled the red clay Piedmont.

Richardson continued his story. "I was trapped. I had sworn myself into the club, done all manner of things that would place me in the grip of the law or earn me social ostracism. So I could not betray them. But I had to get out. I'd seen too much death already."

Gaston interrupted. "Saul, I can't believe . . ."

Richardson ignored the interruption. "They warned me that I would die if I left the group." He paused, then continued, "Now I know it's true. Over the past month, the visions have become worse. I see the face of a demon, some creature, over and over again. It comes in the night. Sometimes I lose consciousness. That's when the sisters say I go insane." He shook his head with exhaustion and shame. "You see, tonight may be my last night."

"Why?"

"It's the night before the new moon. The time they do their rituals."

A silence fell between the two men. Gaston noticed the stale smell of the bed sheets, the faint reek from the chamber pot.

"So why did you call me here?"

"A priest seemed unlikely to hear my confession, but a doctor could hardly refuse to come."

"But you've told me nothing I can use."

"Nor will I. But you have brought something I can use." His hand reached out to grab the crucifix that hung around Gaston's neck. "A nun's crucifix, worn smooth with prayer . . ."

"It's not mine, I can't."

“I need it.” His hand clasped the crucifix like a soldier in his first battle grasps his rifle.

Gaston reluctantly slipped the chain over his head.

“Thank you, David. The sister won’t mind. No nun would mind having her crucifix in the hands of a sinner when he meets the devil.” A sardonic grin crossed his face. He raised his voice. “Would you, Sister? I know you’re listening.”

She responded, her voice muffled by the door. “I hope it serves to burn his hands if he comes for you.”

“He will come,” Richardson answered with certainty. Suddenly he turned his head to the side and seemed to peer through the wall. He cocked his head, as if listening.

Richardson’s face grew more somber. “Get out, David, get out now.” He withdrew into the far corner of the room and folded himself around the crucifix. “Get out,” he screamed. “Get out.”

Gaston stood, but did not move. He wanted to help, yet he was confused. The room became cold, and the light from the oil lamp near the ceiling seemed to dim. Then the door crashed open, and the formidable strength of Sister Francis dragged him out into the corridor. One of the other nuns, Sister Brigid, emerged from the shadows to pull the door shut. Sister Francis threw the latches on the door and tried to look through the small viewing hole in the door. The lamps were already extinguished, and a dull, red glow suffused the room. The last thing she saw was Richardson, cowering in the far corner. The air turned chill, gelid, as if all of the warmth had been sucked from the night.

She turned for help, then stopped. A low, animal growl emerged from the room, mated with Richardson’s first scream. She turned back to the door. The slide that covered the small viewport in the door slid shut, driven by an unseen hand. Then the door shuddered as something, perhaps the bed, slammed against it from the inside.

Richardson's incoherent screaming reverberated down the hall. The orderlies ran toward them. They stopped when something like an animal's roar erupted inside the room. It did not sound like Richardson. Sister Francis desperately tried to open the slide in the door, but could not budge it. Regardless of the chill that suffused the air, the door was hot to the touch. The chamber pot shattered against the wall in the room. Dark laughter came through the door, though it was hard to distinguish beneath Richardson's screams. Then the laughter stopped, to be replaced by an unmistakable bellow of rage. Richardson screamed once more, then there was the sound of a heavy object striking the wall.

They heard the sound of shattering glass, and it was over. The silence was so sudden that they almost fell into it. The chill that had clung to the air vanished, to be replaced by the warm and humid air of a normal October night.

Gaston and Sister Francis crossed themselves. The orderlies became unfrozen. Some made the sign of the cross. Others made signs from different religions, but they were all signs of warding off evil.

Gaston looked at them. "Boys, get this door open." They reluctantly came down the hall.

The larger of the first two orderlies, the one they called Elijah, reached for the latch, slid it open, and pushed the door. Nothing happened. Elijah was a big man, well over six feet. He threw his shoulder into the door. Nothing. Then he motioned to the other orderly, Sam, who came and lent his shoulder to it as well. Both were big men, heavily muscled. Together they weighed well over five hundred pounds. Yet they had to hit the door five times with their combined weight to open it far enough for a man to enter. Then they backed away from it.

"Sister, fetch me . . ." Gaston stopped. Sister Brigid had two oil lamps in her hands, both already lit. She handed one to Gaston. As he took it, he glanced into her eyes.

He had never seen eyes that dark a shade of blue, nor could he read the expression on her face. Unexpectedly, she seemed calm and self possessed. He turned to enter the door, and was not surprised that Sister Brigid, not the redoubtable Sister Francis, was the one to follow him.

The room had been destroyed. The chamber pot had been smashed against the left wall. The twisted frame of the bed had been blocking the door. The glass in the windows on the far wall had shattered outward, leaving few shards within the room. Parts of the one chair were still recognizable. But it was the right wall that drew their attention. Richardson lay on the floor, one arm twisted behind him at a grotesque angle. He appeared to have been slung against the wall. He had struck with enough force to shatter his skull. On the right side of his skull, blood, brains, shattered bone, and hair were intertwined. Gaston looked at the corpse almost dispassionately. He had seen many.

Thinking of the nun, he turned, expecting her to be upset by the condition of the corpse. Instead, he saw her standing near the opposite wall, her head bent down.

“Sister Brigid, are you all right?”

“Yes,” she said, almost distractedly, “Come look at this.”

He walked over to where she stood, realizing that she was not cringing from the sights in the room and wondering at her self control. She pointed to something on the floor. It was Sister Francis’s crucifix. He bent down and reached toward it.

“No.” She stopped him with that cool voice of hers. “It’s too hot. See, look around the edges, it’s partially molten.”

He peered at the object on the floor. She was right. Part of the cross had indeed been melted. He looked up at her. The expression on her face was pensive. Then he stood, looking from the crucifix to the twisted body on the opposite side of the room.

Gaston said, “I would never have thought that he would let go of that cross.”

“I think it unlikely he had much choice.” With that Brigid turned and left the room, walking in unhurried steps through the twisted furniture.

## *Chapter Two*

### *Ireland, the 1840s*

Brigid Rourke was the second daughter of Tom and Nessa Rourke. Born in January of 1840 and preceded by two brothers and a sister, she was their fourth child. There would be only one more, her younger brother Roy. The Rourkes were tenant farmers on land that their family had been farming for generations. Yet their land was no longer owned by them or by any other Irishman. It was now part of a large estate owned by an absentee English lord. He visited once every two or three years. His only concerns were that the rents were paid and that the crops paid him a good profit.

As Tom was a competent farmer, the family had little to fear from year to year. Yet they lived in a state of poverty that most Englishmen would never see. Their home, a two-room cottage, was better than what many Irish had. Parents, children, and the occasional pig slept together. They lived in County Mayo, near the sea on the western coast of Ireland. Good fortune at fishing, and the luck of the sea god, Lir, afforded the families who lived near the sea a better diet than many of the Irish. But the mainstay of their diet, like so many Irish, was the potato.

On the day of Brigid's birth, her great aunt Emer, the village midwife and much more, had named her after one of the brightest and fairest of the old goddesses. The name was well chosen, for the infant was beautiful. Her eyes would become dark blue, and there was a porcelain clarity to her skin, even as an infant. By the time she was four, her eyes had turned the promised blue, and her hair was as black and shiny as a raven. When neighbors visited the Rourkes, they often left Brigid small presents—carved toys or a bit of sweet bread. Many of the presents were given because she was favored by Emer. Emer was regarded with respect by those who lived nearby. She was called “the old mother” by almost everyone, except a few of the strictest Catholics who called her “the witch” behind her back and in the privacy of their homes. None did so in public, as Emer was the only

one with the true hand of a midwife for many miles. The babies she brought from their mothers were more often straight and true than those delivered by the doctors. She knew the potions to ease the pain of labor. And she knew the herbs that would keep a woman from conceiving. No one wanted too large a family when the food supply was so limited.

Brigid loved to visit with her great aunt Emer, who, like her, had deep blue eyes. Emer told the little girl the stories of the old gods and the warrior kings, of Cúchulainn, and of the cattle raids. Sometimes Emer would take Brigid with her to listen to the men play the boisterous music that was interwoven with the daily life of Ireland. The little girl was entranced by the music and the dancing. Regardless of the material poverty of her life, the little girl had another kind of wealth that few others had in 19th century Western Europe. She had the music and the stories of centuries of Irish history and legends to fill her heart. One or other of the *seanchaide*, the singers, would visit once or even twice a month. Then the entire village would gather and listen as he wove his stories. His words built castles of gold, painting pictures of times before the English came and stole Ireland away from them. He sang of the ancient heroes and the elder gods, of kings in their castles and battles against the Fir Bolg.

Everything began to change in 1845. That year, some of the potato crop failed. Belts were tightened, the community grew closer, and those that had enough food shared what they had so that none would starve. The men made more trips into the Western Sea, and there were more fish on the table, though they had been bought with a few more lives than were normally given to the storms. Father Ferguson, the priest at the Catholic parish, tried to convince the villagers that it was their remaining pagan ways that had brought them this punishment from God. But the people of Western Ireland remembered that the *Tuatha Dé Danaan* had been their gods for many years before the English and the potato made its way to Ireland. In the old days, before Catholicism came to Ireland, there had



never been a time of starvation as there had been in 1831, when almost half the potato crop had failed.

In 1846 the crop began well. It looked better than that of the previous year. Then, in the last week of July, the blight struck again, only this time with greater force, withering crops in a few days. Where before a farmer might count on his field bringing in a ton or more of potatoes, now he had to do with less than fifty pounds. No amount of fishing could make up for the almost total loss of their main food supply. Other food could be bought, but not by people who had no money, who bartered for the few things that they needed. The Great Famine had begun.

Some help came from the Church. Some, unexpectedly, even came from the English lord who owned the land. But it was not enough. As the winter came and the winds that blew from the Western Sea seemed colder than ever, disease began to take its toll on a population weakened by hunger. Even all of the medicinal skill of Emer could not keep the children and the old of the village alive. What use was medicine to one who was already starving to death? Brigid's younger brother, Roy, was barely two when he caught a cold that became pneumonia. He was buried in the first week of 1847. Across Ireland this story was repeated over and over in the years of the famine. By the time the famine was over in 1851, one in every eight would have died. Over a million and a half Irish would have emigrated to another country out of desperation.

Father Ferguson surely thought he was doing a good thing when he came to the cottage of Tom and Nessa. He offered to send the seven-year-old Brigid to the convent school in Dublin. There she would be educated and fed. True, he could send only one child, and the reasons that Brigid was singled out were obvious to everyone. To be charitable, perhaps the priest was not fully aware of these reasons. Brigid was Emer's chosen one. Though Emer had another village girl to whom she had taught her skills, Brigid was different. Even Brigid's older sister, Siobhan, did not have her gifts. Brigid had the blood.

Some said she was even showing signs of “the Sight,” a highly respected gift. One with the Sight could see health or illness, would know if a baby was turned, and could occasionally glimpse the Old Ones.

The Sight was a matter of blood. You were born with it or you were not. For centuries the priestesses had tried to teach the skill, but those who were taught never had much fortune with it unless they had been born in the female line of someone else with the Sight. Emer had the Sight, but Nessa, the daughter of her sister, did not. It was Nessa’s daughter, Brigid, who had been blessed with the gift. Brigid was the descendant of a line of women with the Sight that went back further than any could remember. The signs of the Sight had begun to show earlier in Brigid than they had in Emer. Even as a child, Brigid seemed to have a special way with animals. At times, she seemed to glimpse things where others saw only empty air. Father Ferguson knew that she could easily grow into a formidable adversary for him or his successors. So the offer to send her to convent school was less than an act of kindness. It was, at least partially, a maneuver to increase the Church’s hold over the local population.

Ferguson had grown to accept that Ireland was a country that was both Christian and pagan. For hundreds of years, the old ways and Catholicism had lived in a state of uneasy truce. At times the Church and the belief in the *Tuatha Dé Danaan* coexisted peacefully. Such dual beliefs did not trouble the Irish Celts. Like all Celtic peoples, the Irish have never had much difficulty believing in two incompatible truths at the same time. The priestess, or the “Old Woman,” had always had her place in the community. The church could never totally dislodge the beliefs in the old ways. Part of the endurance of the old beliefs was based on the special skill with herbs that the woman in the priestess role possessed. But a greater part was based on her “special” abilities—her ability to glimpse the future, to know which disease caused a sickness, and to midwife with a skill that defied the doctors. A priest would not dare touch a pregnant woman’s belly. The Old

Woman would, and then tell if the birth would be easy or hard, if the child was sound, and if it were boy or girl.

After the priest's visit, Nessa went to Emer to discuss Brigid's future with her. Nessa said little when she entered the cottage of her aunt. Her gaunt figure spoke for her. Emer was aware of the family's suffering and the loss of Roy a few weeks before. Nessa sat down within the cottage. Unlike countless visits before, this time she had no gift of food with her, and that made her uneasy, though food was more precious than gold.

Emer breathed heavily in the hazy peat smoke that curled up from the small fire. "Don't worry, Nessa, you know you are always welcome." She managed a small smile. Then her voice became more distant. "I have been the village woman for almost forty years now. It has been hard. The English and the Catholics rule this world."

Nessa had nothing to say. She had come to ask a question, but she knew that Emer would get around to that question in her own way and time.

"This famine will become much worse before things are better. Many of our people will die. Ireland will change, too." Her gaze wandered, as though she were seeing scenes from her dreams. "We have held on to the old ways for many years. We still hold the stories of the *Tuatha* in our minds and hearts. But, for a while, it may be necessary that we forget them."

Nessa was shocked by what she was hearing, though she had often made the argument that the old ways were dying. To hear Emer say it was a different matter.

"It is cloudy in the future. There are too many decisions before us all. And now the Hunger looms stronger than anything in our hearts. Perhaps the Old Ones will return. Perhaps they will sink into the sea. But that is not for an old woman to decide."

She refocused on her niece. "Send Brigid to the convent school. At least it will assure that she will live. I have taught her enough that a spark of the old ways will survive. Perhaps she will find her way, perhaps she will not."

Nessa thought that Emer was through and began to get up.

“Wait.” The deep blue eyes of Emer held her. “I will die within the year.” She held up her hand to stop Nessa’s response. “Do not be sad. It is simply my time. I tell you so we can prepare. Do not let Brigid know until you must.” She drew a deep breath. “But you must always be certain that she has a way to find one of us, or someone who is taught by us. She may have need.”

Nessa nodded. She had been taught in the old ways. Death held little fear for her. It was only a change to a different realm. In time, you would return and breathe the air once again. Maybe it would be a time when there was joy and not a time when everyone was starving.

“Emer, should I make preparations?”

The old woman smiled. “No, dear, it’s not that soon. But when I pass, I want no gifts of food buried with me. Give food to the children. Flowers would be nice, but make them foxglove or hemlock. Nothing you might eat.”

The two women, both starving, chuckled a bit.

### *Chapter Three*

#### *October 10th, 1874*

Sister Brigid should have had recourse to the simple comforts that were available to the other nuns—prayer and the quiet telling of the rosary beads. But she did not. What she had seen and heard had shaken her far too deeply and awakened memories from the earliest years of her life. She did not feel the need to reach for her missal and crucifix to assuage the horror of Richardson's death. Instead, she found herself seeing Emer's face through the smoke of a peat fire. The image came into focus in her mind. Brigid was six years old, hearing stories of the spirits that haunted their land, but knowing she was perfectly safe with Emer. Here was a place of peace, a peace rooted in the land itself. Around her swirled the smoke of the fire, and, within it, there seemed to be shapes just on the edge of her vision, small faces that wished her well. She pulled back from her memory. There was no sense in taking refuge in the past. There was a problem to be dealt with now. Yet the memories served to remind her of things that she thought she had forgotten. The Church was her home now, but the Church was a place of ritual. It was not a place of magic, and magic was what was needed to deal with whatever spirit had been summoned from some darker quarter of the universe.

Only two of Brigid's siblings had survived the famine. Her parents were long dead. She had lost touch with her elder brother, but she still wrote to Siobhan on a regular basis. Siobhan had taught herself to read and write so that they could communicate more freely than others might. From the things that she had said, Brigid knew that Siobhan still maintained contact with some few who held to the old ways.

The old faith had been decimated by the deadly harvest of the famine. The deaths and mass emigration had changed the intricate network of Irish families. No longer were there long chains of cousins and aunts and uncles who passed information and stories from person to person. The delicate and informal communications network between

families and branches of families had sustained the old religion for centuries. With these ties weakened by the famine, the formal communications network of the Church took its place. So the old faith was far weaker than it had been.

The famine had also changed the way the land was held and farmed. There were so many fewer people spread about the land, especially in the poor regions to the west. Many had gone to work in the factories in the big cities, finding a much more secure life, even with the low wages the English industrialists paid. For those left behind, there was more land. The English landlords, not wishing to spend much of their time on their estates in Ireland, left the day-to-day management of their properties to others. Siobhan's husband, Timothy, was such a man.

He oversaw a large estate. His family had been one of the rare, almost prosperous, farmers in the area before the famine. After the calamity, Sir Richard DuBose needed a manager to replace the one who had died from one of the many diseases that had run through Ireland during the years of hunger. Timothy was of a respected family and a capable farmer. So Sir Richard had left the management of the estate to him. Because of the drastically reduced work force, the Irish had more say in their daily lives than before, labor being a more precious commodity. With fewer mouths to feed, less land was given to the potato and more to the reliable and profitable crops of wheat and barley. In simple terms, everyone lived better. Sir Richard was even happier, as there were more profits from the land, since the price of grain stayed good in most years.

As English landlords went, he was not one of the bad ones. He had even given some help during the famine. On Sir Richard's infrequent visits, Timothy made certain the manor house was well stocked with whiskey. The English had little taste for most things Irish, but most of them loved the "water of life" that was brewed by their tenants.

In such fortunate circumstances, Siobhan lived in a four-room house with her children. She was approaching forty, four years Brigid's senior. Her three children ranged in

age from sixteen to twenty-one. Their eldest, Roy, was named after the brother who had been the first to fall to the famine. But it was the nineteen-year-old daughter who was both her pride and a bit of a problem.

Nessa had been named after her grandmother, but she was far more like her great aunt Emer. Like her Aunt Brigid, whom she had never met, she had the talents that seemed to run in the women of their clan. If a cow were lost, she would be the one to find it. If any animal were sick, she could tend to it. Siobhan had given her all of the knowledge of herbs and healing that her mother and Emer had taught her. But the herbs always seemed to work better in Nessa's hands than in Siobhan's. Like her great aunt, Nessa had the skill of childbirthing. By the time she had reached fifteen, she was one of the finest midwives in the county. The old people who remembered Emer nodded sagely to one another whenever she walked by. Father Ferguson, now approaching sixty, shook his head in dismay. He had not seen Nessa in church since her confirmation, a ceremony to which she'd worn a green dress, to the dismay of the mothers and the delight of the sons. For Nessa had another deadly weapon in her arsenal. She was beautiful in a wild and free way that only the Irish can seem to manage. She had red hair that glowed with a muted fire, skin the color of cream, and gray eyes that seemed to pierce to your soul. Her figure was slender, yet lovely. Many had commented on it, for many had seen it. She had not a trace of shyness. In the summer, she would swim in the nude. And she was rumored to have already lost her virginity.

One day Father Ferguson had taken it upon himself to upbraid her for her behavior. He had told her it was time she settled down with a husband.

"And disappoint all the others?" she had asked in a voice that seemed to run up and down the scales whenever she spoke.

Father Ferguson had blushed deeply.

“Ah,” she went on to say, “I see I misunderstood ya. You’re tryin’ to increase yer business. For sure, if I married anytime soon, there’d be much fightin’ among the young men to find I was taken. You’d ha’ more funerals to perform.”

She smiled so brilliantly that she removed the barb from her comment. Father Ferguson was embarrassed that he himself found her charming and delightful. He had since avoided her and stopped pressing her relatives to bring her to confession.

It was to this family of witches and inherited powers that Sister Brigid would write. Though she had been part of the Catholic Church for decades and ministered to many in the name of Christ, Brigid feared that destroying the evil that had disrupted their lives in Savannah would require powers more ancient and subtle than the Church could bring to bear.



## *Chapter Four*

### *October 10th, 1874*

Monsignor Robert Henry was the highest ranking official of the Catholic Church in Savannah outside of the bishop himself. He was often referred to as the “eyes and ears” of the bishop. As such, he had been told of the strange happenings in the asylum ward of the hospital even before the bishop himself knew. Or perhaps he had been the first to learn of the events because the mother superior of the convent preferred to disturb his sleep rather than that of the bishop. Whatever the reason, he had carefully questioned the mother superior about the events and had not been able to sleep afterwards.

As the pink light of dawn appeared, he had dressed and gone to the refectory, more for coffee than for breakfast. As soon as the hour became acceptable, he made his way to the home of David Gaston. The walk was not a long one, as the monsignor’s lodgings in the cathedral compound were not far from the home of his old friend. He walked quickly, his long legs gliding over the irregular sidewalks of the awakening city. It was a Saturday morning, so the number of people on the street was significantly less than normal, though many businesses would be open in a few hours.

Gaston had been the monsignor’s doctor since before the start of the war. The years had been far more kind to the priest than they had been to the doctor. Robert had been shocked at the change that had come over Gaston in the years he had been away. When David had left the city to tend to the army in the field in 1861, he had been in his late forties, contented and well-married. When he returned, only four years later, he looked as though a decade had passed. The death of his wife while he was away had been a harsh blow, but it was more his duties in the field than the death of his wife that had affected his physical health. He was stooped from the hours of surgery, often fruitlessly trying to save a young man’s life. Even more importantly, his spirit seemed broken by the

constant company of death and the brutalities of medical necessity. In the months after his return, Robert Henry had been his primary companion, part confessor and part friend.

At first, the monsignor did not really understand what Gaston had experienced during the war. Robert had seen the war from the relative quiet of Savannah. The city had been deeply affected by the war, with shortages and rationing almost constant. Although there had been no combat in its graceful streets, the city had seen its share of death, often in the form of wounded soldiers who had come home to die. In the later months of 1864, the wounded fleeing from Sherman's advancing army had found their only chance for medical care in Savannah. For many weeks the streets around the hospitals had become unsheltered wards, where women ministered to the sick and wounded with no more than water, whiskey, and fresh bandages.

Robert's conversations with Gaston had awakened him to the horrors that had occurred on the battlefields to the north. Gaston had sat in his strangely quiet house, drinking heavily, and, after much prompting, had told Robert of the things that he had seen as a field doctor for the Confederate Army. Robert came to realize that what he had seen in the streets of Savannah was nothing more than purgatory. Hell had lain farther to the north.

As Robert made the last turn onto the street where Gaston lived, he knew that he would find out the truth of what had happened to Saul Richardson, free of any spiritual overtones. David Gaston no longer had faith in anything.

Robert turned up the short flight of stairs that led to Gaston's home and office. One of the two front rooms was a consulting room. The other was David's sitting room, where he could almost always be found during the day. Robert knocked and was soon rewarded with the sound of feet coming slowly down the stairs. Ezekiel opened the door and smiled out at the monsignor.

“Mistah Henry. Good to see you. Come on in.” Ezekiel meant what he said. The monsignor was one of the few people who came to visit. As gruff as Gaston usually was, a visit from the monsignor usually meant that the doctor would be in a better mood for the rest of the day.

Robert entered the dimly lit hallway. He noticed that the door to the sitting room was shut. Ezekiel, as usual, missed nothing. He was acutely observant and had seen the monsignor’s eyes glance toward the sitting room door.

Ezekiel was a freed slave, who had spent the first forty-five years of his life as someone’s property. He had been a servant on one of the inland plantations. When he was emancipated, he had not the slightest idea of what he should do with his freedom. Fortunately, the widowed mistress of the deceased plantation owner had sent Zeke to Robert Henry. Henry realized that Ezekiel would be the perfect servant for his friend, the doctor. Ezekiel was still rather astonished to be paid money for doing an easier job than the one he had done on the plantation, but he was hardly fool enough to turn down free food and lodging, along with a small paycheck each week.

Ezekiel said, “He’s been in there since we got back from Saint Jo’s. He mighta moved around while I slept. But not much.” He thought for a moment. “Fresh bottle of sour mash is missin’ from the pantry.”

“Guess I better go in,” Robert said.

“Better you than me,” Ezekiel replied. “Like some coffee, Mistah Henry?”

“For me and the doctor.”

Ezekiel nodded with a slight grin and turned toward the kitchen.

Robert grasped the handle to the sitting room door and slid it open. He saw David asleep in a chair, one foot propped on an ottoman.

David stirred at the noise. “Dammit, Ezekiel, I don’t want to be bothered,” he said without opening his eyes.

“Ezekiel is too smart to bother you when you’re like this. I’m not.”

David’s eyes snapped open, and he struggled upright in his chair. He was fully awake almost instantly.

“I still am amazed when I see you do that,” Robert said.

“Try being a doctor for forty years. You’ll learn it, too.” He gestured to a chair. “Have a seat. Don’t wait for me to get up. Might take a while. Damn leg’s asleep.”

Robert smiled at his friend and took the chair nearest him. In a few moments, Ezekiel came in with a tray with coffee, sugar, and cups. He hadn’t bothered with cream, since he knew neither of the men took it. “Want me to fix up some breakfast?”

David looked at his guest. Robert said, “Not me, I’ve already eaten.”

“Nothing for me, Zeke.”

“Yassuh,” he said. Though as he turned back to the kitchen he mumbled, “Probably wouldn’t set well on that sour mash.”

Gaston watched him leave. “Sometimes I wonder if you got me the best servant or the rudest.”

As he poured coffee for them both, Robert replied, “Not certain there is a difference.”

Gaston chuckled. “Probably right.”

They sipped their coffee together in the quiet for a bit. Robert knew that David couldn’t be rushed, but finally he spoke up. “Guess you came to ask about what happened last night.”

Robert nodded. David sat back in his chair and wove his fingers together. His fingers were short and thick, a workman’s hands. Robert’s hands were long-fingered and expressive. They seemed made for the finest of work. But it was Gaston who was the surgeon.

“I’ve been Saul Richardson’s doctor for years. When all of this started, I just thought he’d gone crazy. A lot of men did who saw what we saw. One day it just catches up to them, and they blow their brains out or lock themselves in a room. Saul was different. He said the devil was coming for him.”

“And was he?”

“I don’t know. All I can tell you is that Saul said I had to get out of his room. He pulled Sister Francis’s crucifix off of my neck and screamed for me to get out of the room. Sister Francis came in and dragged me out. One of the other nuns slammed the door shut behind me. Then we tried to get back in, but the door was jammed. So was the viewing port.

“I tell you, Robert, it sounded like an animal was in there with him. The air had gotten incredibly cold. Not Savannah winter cold, but a bad Virginia winter cold. We heard the sounds of a struggle, we heard Saul scream, then there was a thump and everything got quiet. Glass shattered and the cold left us.

“It took us a while to get the door open, but, when we did, Richardson was alone and dead, slumped below a bloody spot on the wall.”

“Had he killed himself?”

“Couldn’t have. A man can’t inflict that kind of injury on himself. His head had been smashed against the wall. Parts of his brain were there. Even if he could injure himself like that, he couldn’t do it and then crash open the window and return to the spot on the wall where his head hit. Not possible.”

“Then what killed him?”

“I don’t know. But I’ll tell you what he told me. Saul said he’d belonged to a group that met each month on the new moon.” David reached for the sour mash to “sweeten” his coffee. He poured a healthy slug into the cup and offered it to Robert, who, unusually,

put some whiskey in his coffee. “He also told me not to tell this story to anyone. It would put my life in danger.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see. His companions in this group prayed to a statue of Satan, and apparently took it pretty seriously. When Saul got invited into the inner circle he found out they were having debauched rituals, bringing in prostitutes for their ceremonies, but it sounded like an orgy to me.” David took a healthy slug of his coffee. “He got frightened when they killed one of the girls. They slit her throat, drained her blood, and drank it.

“Saul refused to drink. He’d seen too much blood on the battlefield. So he told them he had to leave the group. They reminded him that leaving wasn’t permitted, but he left anyway. They said that they’d kill him. The next new moon, his nightmares about a demon coming for him started.”

“So you think he was killed by a demon?”

David sighed and leaned back in his chair. “I don’t know what to believe. I just know what he said and what I saw. But whatever happened in that room when the door was shut is something I don’t want to know. Likely it’s more your department than mine.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Bishop Francis Marion Shea had been the head of the Catholic Church for both Georgia and Florida for almost twenty years. From his cathedral in Savannah, he administered the Church throughout both states. Most of the Catholics within his large diocese were the Irish Catholics of Georgia, but there were also many Catholics spread throughout the formerly Spanish territory of Florida. Since Florida had become part of the United States in 1821, the administration of the faith had fallen to Shea, the most southerly of the Catholic bishops. Bishop Shea certainly did not look like any of the bishops that the

Floridians were accustomed to. His ruddy complexion and red hair, just beginning to turn gray, marked him as an Irishman, even though he had been born in the United States. Annually he would tour the major parishes of Florida. He visited the northern part of his diocese even less frequently. His duties usually kept him within the confines of his compound in Savannah. His Spanish-speaking staff members administered to the daily needs of his Florida parishioners.

Mother Superior Mary Margaret of the Sisters of Mercy ran Saint Joseph's hospital near the cathedral. She was one of the bishop's most trusted advisors. That morning he had granted her request for an immediate audience. He felt certain he knew what it would be about. The monsignor had already told him of the strange events in the hospital the previous night.

The mother superior met with him just before lunch. As they exchanged their formal greetings, she bent to kiss his ring. Then he motioned to her to sit on the long sofa that ran along one side of his office. As she sat, she arranged the skirts of her habit around her. The bishop moved to join her on the sofa. As was customary, a few strands of her brown hair had escaped from the confines of her wimple. She never quite looked disheveled, merely busy, more concerned with her duties than her appearance.

As the bishop sat, he said, "Mother Superior, I don't think I have ever received a request from you that contained the words 'earliest possible opportunity,' even during the War."

"Your Grace, nothing like this has ever happened to us before." She took a deep breath. "The events of last night have shaken much of the sisterly community. Had the events not been attested to by no fewer than five of the sisters, including Sister Francis, I would not have troubled you. But I have no doubt that the situation is as serious as it seems."

"Go on."

She composed herself before she began her explanation. “Last night Saul Richardson died. That, in itself, is not a matter that I would have brought to your attention. It is the manner of his death that troubles my community.”

He nodded for her to continue.

“Saul Richardson was admitted by his family about a month ago due to insanity. He entered without resistance and seemed perfectly normal. Then, as we questioned him, he revealed the substance of his dreams. He said that he was having horrible visions in his sleep, that a demonic presence was invading his dreams.

“The doctors met to discuss the case, and I was with them. They felt that this was all fairly standard fare, and that Richardson would gradually come out of the nightmares, provided he was able to sleep through the use of a sleeping draught. Laudanum was prescribed.

“But the laudanum didn’t work. The dosage was doubled, then tripled. At that level we were finally able to get him some rest, but it was fitful and short. I don’t think we were able to provide him with more than a few hour’s rest per day. As he slept, it was horrible to watch. He would scream in his sleep, cry out in terror, then fall back into a drugged sleep.”

“The dreams and visions became worse. At times they would come in the day. Sometimes he would act like an animal, clawing and kicking. He would scream the most blasphemous insults to anyone who attempted to enter the room. Then it would be over, and he was himself again, terribly ashamed when he found out the things that he had done. He had no memory of them himself.

“Last night he claimed that ‘they’ would soon come for him, it being almost the new moon. I thought it odd that someone who had been going through such bursts of insanity would be able to keep track of the calendar, but I have learned that the human mind is something far too deep for any of us to understand.



“Last night he asked if Doctor Gaston could be summoned. He became insistent. We decided to call the doctor. He came immediately, as he was both Mr. Richardson’s friend and his doctor.

“By this time we were all concerned about the possibility that he might be speaking the truth, that there was some Satanic influence at work. Sister Francis, Sister Brigid, and three of the other sisters were outside the room when the doctor arrived. Sister Francis loaned the doctor her crucifix. He entered the room and spoke with Mr. Richardson for a short while.

“Suddenly Mr. Richardson began shouting and nearly threw Doctor Gaston from the room. Sister Francis pulled him to safety, and Sister Brigid closed the door and threw the latch. But, even as she pulled it shut, they saw that all of the lights in the room had been extinguished, even the oil lamp in the ceiling. Through the view hole in the door, they saw a reddish glow building in the room before someone inside slid the cover shut, and they saw no more. Sister Francis tried to open the viewport in the door, but it was jammed shut, just as the door itself was.

“They heard Richardson’s screams and the sounds of furniture being thrown in the room. Each of the nuns present heard growling sounds from the room that Richardson could not have made. The chaos and screaming went on for a few minutes. Then there was a loud thump, followed by the sound of shattering glass. Everything became silent, except the other patients. Those who were awake were gibbering and shouting.

“When the doctor and nuns entered the room, it was a wreck. Richardson was dead. He had smashed into the wall. We found blood and bits of his brain on the wall where his head had struck it.”

The bishop started to speak, to tell her that her story confirmed what the monsignor had already told him. Before he could, the sister held up her hand.

“I know that it must all sound so . . .” she struggled for a word, “medieval. Believe me, Your Grace, had the nuns that brought me this story been any less reliable, I would have doubted it. But they all told the same story, even under careful questioning. And we have what I saw myself.

“I have been a nurse to the sick, the insane, and the dying for nearly thirty years. In all that time, I never saw a case where a man could throw himself into a wall with enough force to kill himself. There is also the matter of the laudanum. I have never seen that quantity have so little effect.

“But those were not the things that convinced me. What convinced me was the physical evidence. The viewport slide can be moved from the inside or the outside of the room. It had been slammed shut from the inside with so much force that it had warped. Even our strongest orderly can’t slide it open. And the lamp in the ceiling was extinguished. How? Richardson could not reach it. And everyone who was present felt a chill in air while all of this was happening. They were all convinced that it was some spirit presence that came.”

She paused and reached into her habit. He could not see what she was grasping in her pocket. “And there is one final thing.” She withdrew the damaged crucifix of Sister Francis and handed it to him. As he took it, she went on. “See how the edges of it are slightly molten?”

He looked down at the heavy crucifix. When he saw the molten areas, he dropped it. Then he quickly picked it up from the floor, embarrassed by his own reaction.

“Doctor Gaston carried Sister Francis’s crucifix, that crucifix, into the room with him. It was undamaged. But he left it behind with Richardson. There is no way that I am aware of that this crucifix could have been melted in the short space of time in which these events occurred. No matches or fuel were in the room. It simply could not have happened. But it did.”

The bishop handed the crucifix back to Sister Margaret. He did not want to hold it any longer. Perhaps her faith was strong enough to believe that the crucifix could not be desecrated by anything. He was not certain of his. After she took the cross, he stared at the far wall in the room, looking for a way to deny that any of this had happened in the face of the testimony of his two closest advisors. None came easily. None came at all. The nun interrupted his thoughts.

“Your Grace?”

He looked back to her. “Yes, Sister.”

“Do you believe me?”

“I do not wish to believe. But I do.” the Bishop stood and walked slowly to his window that looked over a garden. “Perhaps it was wrong of me, but I let you tell your story uninterrupted. About an hour ago, the monsignor came to tell me Doctor Gaston’s perspective on the events of last night. Combining his story with yours, I cannot deny that there is a demonic influence at work.”

“Then, Your Grace, what are we to do? We don’t have the means to drive this away. But if we let it go on, what damage might it do?”

“First things first. All those involved are to talk to no one about it. There will be enough rumors without our assistance,” he paused. “As for dealing with this presence, the Church has its means.”

“You mean an exorcism.”

“Yes, an exorcism. I must call for a priest capable of performing the rite,” he said. “There is a Benedictine monk, Father Benito, in Saint Augustine. He has performed such rites before. I will send for him, as he is far more expert in these matters than I.”

“Do you think that Father Benito can help?”

The bishop looked at her sadly. “That is a question he will have to answer. I will send for him. In the meantime, I would suggest that everyone who was present that eve-

ning be encouraged to write a description of the events while they are still fresh in their minds. Father Benito will need all of the information that he can obtain. As for the room . . .”

“I have already had it sealed.”

“Good. We must discuss this further. Tonight, after vespers, bring the two nuns you mentioned here. Before you arrive, I will have sent for our exorcist.”

Mother Superior Mary Margaret nodded, stood, and left the bishop’s chamber. The bishop stayed seated on the sofa, absorbed in his thoughts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sister Brigid had wasted no time in drafting her letter. By mid afternoon, she had mailed it. The reason for her haste was obvious. The mail took two weeks to reach Ireland. But her reason to send it in secret was that she did not want to explain why it was important that her sister be informed of a matter that Brigid should consider to be strictly the Church’s provenance. She did not even want to explain her actions to herself. Since Richardson’s death she was determined to send the letter and had written and posted it before even considering what she was doing. She was convinced that there were others who must know of what had occurred here.

The letter would be on its way soon. Almost two thousand ships a year left Savannah. Most were destined for Liverpool or Belfast, delivering the precious cotton to the looms of an industrialized Great Britain. With typical English thoroughness, the postal service between Great Britain and the important overseas ports, like Savannah, was excellent. Even the post within Ireland traveled rapidly, since the English lords liked to keep in close touch with their Irish holdings, particularly in the harvest season when the price of corn varied by the day.

Brigid knew that Siobhan would take the matter seriously. But the question was whether or not she could do anything about the situation. This demon was not a matter for the local village priestess. Though Emer had seemed immensely powerful to Brigid as a child, she knew, with more perspective, that this matter would have been beyond her aunt's capabilities.

With her letter mailed, she walked slowly back to the convent. She had no further duties until late in the evening when she would work in the hospital. Even with the events of the evening before, she had already taught her two classes for the day that morning. She had needed no preparation for the lesson she had given the children in either hour. Her lesson was on the Virgin Mary, a topic very dear to her fellow Sisters of Mercy. Today the twenty-seven girls of the second and third grades had received their first formal initiation into the beauty and mystery of the Blessed Mother. It was a class which Brigid had asked to be allowed to instruct. Over the years, she had become the preferred instructor.

Brigid had probably chosen to concentrate her studies on Mary when she found that her name was often considered to be the Irish cognate for the Mother of God. But the goddess Brigid had belonged to a more complex pantheon than the Christian one. Brigid was one of the old gods and, among them, one of the most revered. The old Celtic gods who occupied that ancient pantheon often feuded with one another. They drank, they fought, and they sometimes killed for the love of a mortal. They had so much laughter, so much life. She stopped. She could not believe she had thought that and nervously crossed herself.

"Blessed Mother," she thought, "what am I thinking?" But all she saw was Emer's eyes, glittering through the peat smoke.

Several people passed by the nun as she walked. The men doffed their hats, and the ladies smiled. The occasional colored servant passed by, stepping aside to allow the white woman pass. The seriousness of Brigid's visage told everyone that she was deep in

thought, and no one was rude enough to disturb her. The streets she was traversing were quiet ones, away from the business districts of Broughton and the waterfront. A few carriages rolled by, their horses' hooves tapping on the cobblestones. Yet even those sharp sounds were absorbed by the moss-hung oaks that shaded the streets and squares.

Brigid turned down another street that she knew would take her further from the convent, not closer. She didn't even pause to wonder why she needed to be away from the convent to think clearly. All that she knew was that she could not imagine that the suffering Christ could come down from his cross to fight the demon that had come last night. But one of the great heroes, perhaps *Manannán mac Lir*, son of the god of the sea, seemed a more likely champion. In the old legends, his lance, once thrown, never rested until it tasted blood.

She was dazed by the sudden pagan current in her thoughts. She knew that it all sprang from the events of the previous night. In a few moments, her safe, Christian world had been shattered. Since she had been a small child and first introduced to the convent, she had lived in a world of spiritual order. There was good, and there was evil, though neither reared its head too strongly. There was no passion, except the passion of prayer. In fact, the spiritual life was not one of revelations and visions, but one of dogma, liturgy, and meditation. She did not expect to see any denizen of another world. She did not expect to see Christ appear before her or a statue of Mary weep blood.

How different were the Catholic beliefs from the old ways in Ireland, where every bush might hide a spirit, where one left offerings at the springs out of respect for the Old Ones who might dwell there. To the pagan Irish, the world was alive with the presence of the gods and the thousands of smaller spirits who crowded one another on that great island. Laughter and dancing, mischief and sorrow, all cascaded around their lives in a way that only one raised to it could comprehend. It was chaotic, sometimes a bit frightening,

but then, was that not the nature of life? The gods could surely see the sense of it. Meanwhile, it was the business of mortals to get on with life itself.

Brigid's sane Christian world had been disrupted. A demon had come from somewhere, perhaps from Hell itself. In the middle of a circle of nuns, it had taken a soul, taken a life. And the crucifix that had been given to the victim had done nothing to protect him. Forty years of Sister Francis's prayers had not made that cross holy enough to slow the demon that had swept from who-knows-where to crush Richardson. The demon had melted the edges of the crucifix. Had he done that because his power was too limited to really destroy the sacred symbol, or because he had wanted it left intact, but damaged, to show that it meant nothing, that it was only a piece of silver to him?

The night of Richardson's death had brought other havoc to Brigid's sane world view. She was, after all, born with the Sight. So she saw things in a more dynamic perspective. The others had felt the cold. She had seen the vague, dark cloud sweep by. Through the small viewing port in the door, she had seen a shape beginning to form from the dark tendrils of a red mist before the viewing window had been shut. And, after the terrible events, she had confidently walked into the room that had terrified far older and more devout nuns than she.

In that moment, though she did not recognize it, she had started awakening memories. She was becoming Emer's great niece again. She had walked into a room where others dared not, simply because she knew the creature had gone. The melted crucifix was only a piece of metal. And in her thoughts, dredged from her childhood memories, was a protective chant in Gaelic that would surely bring forces to protect her. Emer had taught her that there was no Devil, no Lord of Evil. Beings bent on causing harm would flee from the presence of the least of the gods.

Brigid sat heavily on a bench in one of the squares. She raised her eyes upward and found that the overhanging oaks, draped with moss, obscured most of the sky. To Brigid,

the squares that dotted the area of Savannah near the river were among the city's finest features. Shaded in oaks, they were a natural place to rest and think. They contributed to the city's slow pace.

A movement in one of the trees drew her attention. She thought she had seen, from the corner of her eye, a small human shape ducking behind one of the massive branches. She looked at the branch more closely and focused her vision on the space just above the branch. Her Sight, long lying half dormant within her, was reawakening. Soon, a small, slightly triangular face appeared above and behind the branch. Judging by the size of its head, the creature would stand perhaps two and a half feet tall. It was human-like, though its skin and hair were uniformly tinged a greenish brown.

Shy, and a bit afraid, it smiled at her. It was beautiful and childlike, though a bit mischievous. Brigid opened her mind to it, as Emer had taught her. A sound like a young girl's laughter floated through her. The little one was like a child in many ways, eager to please, but also in search of fun. And she was far, far older than Brigid. No one really knew if the little ones were mortal or not. The little creature in the tree was entranced that a human had taken notice of her. So few did. Then another came up beside her. They giggled together for a moment, then vanished behind the thick branch.

Brigid was thirty-four years old. Although she was no longer as beautiful as she once had been, she knew that beneath the habit was still the slender shape of a dancer. Yet she had never known the touch of a man.

"Mother of God." She thought to herself, "is one night all it takes to awaken the pagan in me? I have not thought of having given up the pleasures of a man for over a decade."

She shook her head, as if trying to dislodge the thoughts that had found home there. She decided to take the time to walk in the afternoon, as the day was one of those exquisite October days that made Savannah such a pleasant city.



By six that day, Brigid's letter was in the postal pouch aboard the *John J. Stevenson*, a steamship bound for Belfast. The ship headed out to sea with the early evening tide, her engines propelling her rapidly down the channel, against the wind. The *John J. Stevenson* was one of the newest ships on the Atlantic routes. She carried less than a full complement of sail, as sail was, for her, only rarely the primary propulsion. When the wind was strong, she might sail to save fuel. But the sails were mainly there to provide emergency propulsion should the steam engines fail. Even in 1874, few ship builders were willing to trust steam as the only source of propulsion, but the advances in engine power and reliability since the crossing of the first steamship in 1819 were remarkable. In that year, Fulton's grand gamble, the steamship *City of Savannah*, had been the first steamship to cross the ocean, though it had made most of the crossing under sail rather than steam. Nonetheless, it was no accident that the first "transatlantic steamship" sailed from one of the great cotton ports. That crossing to Liverpool had taken 28 days. The *John J. Stevenson* would make the crossing to Belfast in nine or ten days. From there, the letter would reach Siobhan in a few more days.

Sister Brigid watched the ship depart down the Savannah River. She did not know her letter was on board that particular ship, though she did know it was likely that the letter had begun its crossing that day. She was sitting above the river on the bluffs as the slow twilight began to descend. Normally a woman would not be in this place alone. But nuns rarely had to fear what most women might. As a nun, she was unlikely to be harassed. Nor was it normal that she was outside of the convent or the hospital by herself at this hour, but the mother superior had granted her permission to take time to reflect upon the recent events. Mary Margaret was well aware of the stress placed upon the nuns who had been present when Richardson had died, especially Sisters Francis and Brigid. They had been closest to the events.

Sister Brigid held her rosary, more to have something to do with her hands than to pray. Her problem was that she did not know to whom she should pray. And the more she thought of the Christian God to whom she had been devoted, the more she saw his face turn into that of one of the *Tuatha Dé Danaan*. She felt alone and surrounded, all at once. As the darkness began its final descent and the gas lights along Bay Street were lit, she realized that she would need many more hours to come to terms with all that surrounded Richardson's death. She thought of Emer and her niece, Nessa, whom she had never met. She wondered what her life would have been like if she had stayed with her family. Would she have been one of the ones who fell to the famine, or would she have been a survivor, now married and raising a family?

She stood and began a circuitous walk back to the hospital where she could avoid these thoughts by absorbing herself in her work. It was good work, helping the sick, regardless of what god's name it was done in. She came to Washington Square. Not in the mood for the many people who would be out on Broughton Street, she turned right onto Saint Julian Street. The street was quiet and residential, with both modest homes and some of the grander homes of the wealthy planters and factors. Some of the homes were already shuttered, others were open to the night, with conversation drifting onto the quiet, beautiful street. The foot and carriage traffic had almost come to a halt at this hour, leaving the street almost deserted.

She was aware of the eyes that had been following her since she had entered the square. The little ones were watching her, finding her more interesting and more confusing than most of the humans who passed by them. As Brigid passed by them, one of them looked to another, a question in her glittering eyes. The other one shook his head. "No."

Deep in thought, she was not paying attention to the blocks that she was passing when a chill swept through her body. She stopped in the middle of Warren Square. She

had walked though this square many times before with nothing unusual happening, but then, she had never before walked it at night with her Sight reawakened.

Lying like a pall across the section of Saint Julian in front of her and covering almost the entire block was a dark mist, something that could not be seen by normal sight, but was there nonetheless. It was not alive, it did not respond to her, but it was there. Like smoke after a fire, the darkness swirled, a manifest residue of evil. She wanted to scream. But she held herself still, careful not to draw attention to herself. Then she turned left and walked as quickly as she could toward the noise of Broughton Street, toward the people thronging the thoroughfare. She would take a much more brightly lit route back to the hospital, where the welcoming figure of St. Joseph would greet her at the door. She would return to the safety of the routine—the bedpans, the coughing, and the illness.

## *Chapter Five*

### *Monday, October 12th*

Father Benito was a Benedictine monk, living in a small monastery near the old city of Saint Augustine, Florida. Like many in his abbey, his native language was Spanish. Florida had been a part of the dwindling Spanish Empire, except for a brief period of British rule, for hundreds of years. In 1821 it was formally ceded to the United States. In the year of his birth, 1829, Spanish was still the first language of many Floridians, even though the official language of this former part of New Spain had become English. Now the native Floridians were increasingly becoming fluent in the new language, having found themselves at a disadvantage in matters of business and government to the Anglos who were moving to their state. Father Benito had learned the new language as a child, though he still preferred the more graceful cadences of Spanish to the harsher tones of English. Truth be told, he preferred Latin to either of them.

In his calling he had learned other languages. Knowing Greek was a tremendous advantage in studying the old texts that dealt with magic. He even had a passing knowledge of Aramaic, French, and German, though he considered it a blessing that he had never actually had to converse in German. It was, to his ear, a decidedly ugly tongue.

The monastery where he now lived was only a few miles from where he had been born. He was glad to be living in the rural quiet of Florida. In his years with the Church he had seen much of the world. When he was twenty-one, the Church had sent him to the Vatican to study. He had remained there for almost a decade before being posted to Spain where his order had a monastery that served the bishop of Toledo. The immense gothic cathedral of Toledo loomed over the city, which, under Arab rule, had been one of the primary intellectual centers of Europe. When the Arabs were driven from Spain in the fifteenth century, the city had retained its scholarly excellence, in large part because of its

powerful Jewish community. But the Jews had eventually been driven from the city by the Inquisition.

Benito had found Toledo to be a city that lay under a pall, filled with ancient pains. After a few years, he had requested to return to his native Florida. The Church was gracious enough to grant his request. For over a decade now he had been living quietly in the small monastery. It was his home. He had first begun his life in the Church at this very monastery. His family had deep roots in Saint Augustine.

His great-grandfather had come to Florida almost a century before, bringing with him his trade as a saddle maker. His grandfather had expanded the business. The horse-loving Spaniards always needed saddles, especially the superbly-crafted ones made by Benito and Sons. Their trade had assured that the family had weathered the strange turns of fate that haunted the old city.

Since its founding in 1565, Saint Augustine had survived attacks by the English, pirates, and Indians. Benito's great-grandfather had come to Saint Augustine shortly after the city's return to Spanish rule in 1783. His son, Benito's namesake, had married a Seminole Indian woman, a frequent occurrence in the Spanish community, which had always formed closer ties with native peoples than the English did. Benito was therefore one-quarter Seminole, and his family was large, with relations extending into both the European and Indian community. The yellow fever epidemic of 1821 had struck down many in the city, though the Benito family had suffered less than some. Luis Benito retained extensive ties throughout his extended family.

Benito's garden was his pride. He had studied medicinal herbs since his childhood. His mother had taught him the knowledge that her mother had brought from Spain. So he knew of foxglove and its use to calm the heart, that comfrey speeded healing. But he had added additional herbs to the list of those known in Europe. Some of his Seminole relatives had avoided the removal of their tribe to west of the Mississippi. Those that re-

mained freely shared their medical knowledge with him. While the Europeans knew of tobacco only as something to smoke, the Seminoles used it to reduce bleeding and infection. Father Benito knew that the native herbs of Florida grew much better in the hot and damp climate than some of his European transplants.

He was in his garden, removing some of the native weeds that seemed partial to the carefully tilled soil of his herbarium, when the letter from the bishop arrived. It was carried to the garden by Prior Richard. The prior was somewhat irritated that a letter had been specifically sent from the bishop in Savannah to Father Benito. It had been hand-carried by the bishop's emissary, Monsignor Henry, who was now waiting with the abbot. What made the letter all the more infuriating to the prior was that it had been delivered with the instruction that it could be opened only by Father Benito and that its contents could be discussed with the abbot, Monsignor Henry, and no one else.

Father Benito rose from his garden and wiped his hands on his cassock, partially to see the expression of distaste that would pass over the prior's face. The prior did not care for tilling the soil. Benito folded his hands before him and made a slight bow.

"What brings you to my garden, Prior?"

"A letter, Father Benito. From the bishop himself."

He extended his hand. "Well, let us see what he has to say."

The prior did not move to hand the letter to him. Instead he said, "Its contents must be discussed only with the abbot."

"Well, Prior, I will find it a great difficulty to discuss it with anyone until I have had a chance to read it."

Acting as if he were astonished to still find the letter in his hands, the prior gave it to Father Benito.

"Thank you." Benito began to open the wax seal on the letter, only to find the prior still standing over him.

The prior looked at him with great seriousness. "I am to take you to the abbot as soon as you have digested the contents."

"You may have to wait a bit, Brother Prior. Digestion can take time, especially when the words come from such an important personage."

The prior stiffened. "I will wait." He doubted the day could possibly bring a more interesting event than a letter from the bishop.

Father Benito nodded and finished opening the letter. When he saw it was written in Greek, which the prior could not read, he turned away from the prior and was rewarded with a peek over his shoulder and a sudden drawing back when the prior realized he could learn nothing, even if the letter were in his hands.

All of the amusement faded from Father Benito's face when he read the letter. It was a summons. The bishop said that he was to come to Savannah to meet with himself and the mother superior of the convent of the Sisters of Mercy. The purpose of the trip was to deal with what appeared to be a serious matter of possession. His abbot was to make arrangements for him to travel to Savannah with all possible speed. Monsignor Henry was waiting to escort him.

Father Benito was troubled by the letter. The bishop was a steady man, yet the tone of the letter implied that this situation was critical. That the bishop had written in classical Greek meant even more, as it implied that he did not want the letter to be read if it fell from the messenger's hands. The more conventional Latin or English would not have protected the letter from being read by any number of people. But to write it in Greek meant that the bishop was concerned with keeping the contents very private. And it also meant that the bishop had sent someone to do research about Benito. How else could he have known that Father Benito could read his letter? Few enough knew biblical, *koine*, Greek, much less the classical Greek the bishop had used to write to him.

Benito looked at the prior. "If you would, Prior, please take me to the abbot."

The prior was surprised to hear the formal tone in Benito's voice. Usually the monk teased the prior. The formality of the tone made the prior realize that this was a matter of some concern. Now he was even more irritated that he had not been able to read what was in the letter. Nodding, he led Benito to the abbot.

The interview with the abbot was brief and to the point. He, too, had received a letter from the bishop. It contained few of the normal formalities, but did impress upon him that Father Benito's presence was needed most expeditiously. The bishop did not need to explain that it was for an exorcism. Why else would the bishop require Benito so urgently as to send an escort?

Within an hour Father Benito was on his way to the train station in the company of Monsignor Robert Henry. The northbound train would pass through St. Augustine at 4:17. The two priests boarded the train for Savannah. Though the trip was only about 200 miles, they would not be at their destination until dawn. This last run of the day had many stops on its route. The journey gave Father Benito time to make the acquaintance of Monsignor Henry and to understand the gravity of the situation. It also impressed Benito with the bishop's thoroughness. Monsignor Henry spoke Latin as well as he spoke English, and he was also quite knowledgeable in classical Greek. As a result, they could discuss the matter in public without fear of being understood. The passenger cars had few riders for the trip, which made their conversation even more private.

The first few miles passed without conversation. Benito was allowing the monsignor to approach the topic at his own pace. Benito was well aware of the discomfort the topic of exorcism aroused in a modern priest. Robert spent the same time looking out the window at the beauty of this section of northern Florida. Finally, he turned to Benito.

"Father Benito, do you feel a part of the modern Church?"



Benito smiled at the direct but graceful inquiry. “Monsignor, what I and the others like me do certainly seems like something left over from a different time. But I can assure you it is real.”

“How much of this have you seen?”

“I was present at four exorcisms before I was allowed to lead one. There were those times, of course, when we were called in to perform an exorcism and nothing was present. But I do not count those instances. I myself have been the primary priest at seven exorcisms.”

“You’ve seen eleven?” Robert could not keep the surprise from his voice.

Benito had learned that his unusual occupation was rarely accepted by the priestly community. “Monsignor, I have become accustomed to the reaction. Today, even priests no longer find the presence of the supernatural to be as normal, or perhaps I should say natural, as we once did.”

“I don’t want to seem that I disbelieve you, but did you actually see the creatures that were exorcized?”

“Not always. But on three occasions, I definitely did.”

“Did they have a physical reality?”

“Again, not always. But at two of these three exorcisms, the spirit attacked me as soon as he left the body of his intended victim. The spirit attempted to possess me in turn. In both of these cases, my struggle with the spirit became physical. I wrestled with the demon, ‘casting it out’ in a most literal sense.”

“You touched and felt it?”

“Yes. It was not a strong physical presence. It could cause me no harm physically, but it was tangible.”

The monsignor was shaken by the conversation. “Father Benito, this is a realm that I fear I do not know much about. Even this small amount of knowledge frightens me.”

Benito smiled calmly to assuage the fears of the monsignor. “Your reaction is a common one, and one that I have seen before.” As the monsignor absorbed the answer Benito reflected that the Church had separated itself from its own spiritual heritage. The things that had been accepted for thousands of years as part of the human experience now seemed like fairy tales, told only to children, but not to be believed in by adults.

Having given the monsignor time to reflect on what he had said, Benito asked, “So, Monsignor, what can you tell me about the events in Savannah?”

The monsignor’s explanation made it clear that the situation was worse than Benito had imagined. When Henry finished his tale, Benito focused on the details of the death.

“So Richardson was killed by impact with the wall?”

“That is the opinion of those present, including the doctor,” The monsignor said.

“And Mr. Richardson said that the presence came and went?”

The monsignor nodded.

“And the glass was shattered outward after the impact?”

“Yes.”

“Then, Monsignor, this situation is likely more serious than you have imagined.”

“How so?”

“When a person is possessed by a spirit, normally the spirit does not come and go. He stays with the body, as it is his link to this world. Nor will it kill its host, except very rarely. And the creature should not be able to perform so potent a physical act as smashing a window outward without the aid of a host’s body. Based upon what you have said, we are dealing with a powerful demon. It was able to affect the physical world without

the need of a human medium. This situation is more serious than an exorcism. In fact, it is beyond the ability of an exorcist to deal with such a demon.”

“Are you saying you can’t help?”

“No. Only that an exorcism may not be not enough.”

“There are other options?”

“Yes, but, I regret to say, answering your question will have to wait until we are in a more private place than a rail car.” Benito did not trust the screen of foreign languages to protect them from a casual listener when discussing a matter of this gravity.

He saw the concern in the monsignor’s face. Fortunately, Monsignor Henry had been sufficiently alarmed by the conversation regarding exorcism to be inclined not to press the Benedictine for more information. The two were already becoming friends. Robert Henry had reacted better than many might when faced with such a new view of reality. Benito did not reveal how ill-equipped he himself was to deal with such a creature alone. He would need a great deal of help.

They spent the rest of the trip discussing other matters, sleeping, or each thinking about what they had discussed earlier. The monsignor’s world view had been disrupted. Benito’s concern with the battle ahead grew as they moved to the north. The next morning, as the train pulled into the station in Savannah, Father Benito was awakened from his few hours of sleep by Monsignor Henry.

“Father, do you need to rest before seeing the bishop?”

“No, Monsignor, I can see the bishop at his convenience. However,” he smiled, “if he desires me to wait, I may perhaps doze off.”

Monsignor Henry returned the smile. He liked this Benedictine. Laughter on the outside, and a profound devotion to his faith and to his calling on the inside.

The two priests exited the station onto West Broad Street. The staging yard for the station was below them. It was a scene of only slightly controlled chaos. Heavy wagons

jostled for position as they sought to deliver their cargoes to the loading docks. Whips snapped as the teamsters drove the wagons toward the docks. Wheels sometimes slammed against each other as the wagons moved, and the air was punctuated by the calls of the drivers, shouting and cursing at one another while others laughed at the shows of anger, none of which could be taken seriously.

The two priests made their way to the archdiocese through streets that were awakening to the calling of the fishmongers. Small carts darted back and forth, loaded with the early catch. The vendors sang rhymes to the freshness of their grouper or the color of their snapper. Live crabs tried to climb out of the carts. Shrimp were fresh enough that they still snapped in miniature anger at their captivity. Benito smiled at the very profligacy of the life displayed. He had missed the rhythms of a city.

As they walked, Benito considered the situation. He realized that he could be more thorough in his briefing of the bishop if he could examine the room where the death occurred before they met.

“Monsignor, will we pass near the hospital on the way to the cathedral?”

“Within a few blocks.”

“Then perhaps I should see this place where the patient died before I meet with the bishop.”

“I don’t know that you can learn much there that I have not already told you.”

Benito smiled. “I will be viewing it in a different manner than you might.”

“I understand,” the monsignor replied, not really certain that he did. “If we continue on this street, we will pass the hospital shortly.”

Benito began to expand his senses even as they walked, performing the mental exercises that were needed to engage his Sight. As he did so, he unavoidably felt the city around him. He had never been to this city before, so all that he knew of it was its reputation for beauty and its prominence as a port. The reputation as a beautiful city was not

undeserved. Benito had seen many of the great cities of Europe, and few rivaled Savannah. The wide streets were complimented by graciously-proportioned buildings. The oak trees stood over the city streets like sentinels, cloaked in their gray robes of Spanish moss, which was as profligate here as in his beloved Saint Augustine. However, what he apprehended with his Sight was almost shocking. The city seemed to be on the verge of consciousness, reaching out, just below awareness, to embrace him. This place had been occupied for thousands of years, and the Indians had left a strong trace of their lives in the ground. The air was misted with arcane memory and the sunlight was slightly dimmed by the thoughts and magic that had slid through the air over the centuries. Unfortunately, beneath that benign beauty was a dark thread of evil that he could not trace. Underneath the warmth of the welcome the city offered was a darker current of danger, strong enough to put Benito on his guard. He could almost taste blood on his tongue.

The monsignor slowed, and Benito, absorbed in his perceptions, bumped into him.

“Is something wrong, Father Benito?”

“No, Monsignor. It is simply that this is a very magical city.”

The monsignor smiled. “You do not need special powers to know that.”

“I can imagine,” Benito said.

The monsignor waved at the red brick building a block front of them. “That is the hospital. Are you ready to see the room?”

“Yes.”

The monsignor led him up the stairs to the lobby of the hospital. He did not bother to stop at the front desk, as no one would think of questioning his reasons for being there. Then he immediately took the stairs to the second floor, leading the monk down the hall to a very solid iron door. Over the entrance was a sign, “Saint James’ Ward.” The monsignor rapped on the door.

Sister Mary Francis had not taken advantage of the time off the mother superior had offered, and she was the one who peered out of the viewport and opened the door for them.

“Monsignor, welcome,” the nun said.

“Sister Mary Francis, let me introduce our visitor from Florida, Father Benito.”

She nodded her head in greeting. “Ah, yes, the exorcist. A pleasure to meet you.” She turned immediately to lead them down the hall.

The monsignor leaned to Benito as they followed her down the hall. “You will find that there are no secrets within a cathedral compound.”

Benito smiled in return. “Yes, I remember now.”

Sister Francis stopped near the end of the hall. She withdrew her keys and opened the door to what had been Richardson’s room. “This is where he died.” Distaste crossed her stern face.

“Thank you, Sister.”

“Please call me when you are ready to leave, the mother superior has been quite firm that no one should enter the room without her permission or yours.”

“A wise course of action,” Benito said.

The nun turned and left the two men in front of the open door.

“Should I go in with you?” the monsignor asked.

“No. It is best that I do this alone. Please let no one disturb me.”

“Of course.”

Benito had felt the first touch of evil before they had reached the door. Before entering the room, he carefully constrained his Sight, leaving his senses heightened, but not as greatly as they might have been. He knew that what lay in the room might be strong enough to overwhelm him if he did not. Every magical act leaves behind impressions in the physical objects around it. For those with the Sight, these remnants were like a book

that could be read, though dimly, telling the story of what had happened. He steeled himself and entered the room.

Boards covered the shattered window. Otherwise, the room was the same as it had been the night that Richardson died. Benito took inventory of the few items in the room in a glance. What immediately caught his eye was the dried blood on the wall. He walked over to it, noting the paucity of broken glass on the floor. Clearly the window had been shattered from the inside. He reached the blood-stained wall and reached out to touch the plaster. Immediately a flood of sensation ran through his heightened senses. First he sensed the impact, then the sudden darkness, then the void as the man's spirit had flown from his body. Benito, now attuned to the events of the night, faced back into the room. Facing him was a shadow of what had been there, a leering blood-red face with pointed teeth, surmounting the immense figure of a demon. He knew he was not seeing something that was there, merely something that had been. Nonetheless, he was afraid. Quickly he shut down his Sight, not wishing to see any more.

He inhaled deeply, waiting for his pulse to slow. He crossed his arms across his chest, curled his fingers, than slowly moved his arms downward in one of the oldest warding gestures. As he did so, he exhaled in a rush. When he opened his eyes, he saw the monsignor staring at him.

Benito looked at him grimly. "It's worse than I thought."

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While Benito and the monsignor visited the hospital, Jakob Streng was about to enjoy his breakfast. His house, four fifty-four Saint Julian Street, did not stand out from the other houses around it. Although the house had seemed the center of a morass of darkness and evil to Brigid, for those without the Sight it was a Savannah row house

much like the others that occupied the block. The richness of its window hangings and the detailing of its wrought iron made it clear that the occupant of the house was wealthy, even by the standards of this old and genteel neighborhood. The first floor of the house was elevated perhaps five feet above the street level and was accessed by a short flight of steps from the street. The ground floor, sunk a few feet into the soil, served as a basement, though the windows were completely masked. Many other basement windows on the street had also been covered, but the ones on this house were thoroughly blocked from prying eyes by heavy black drapes.

Inside the house, Essie, a Negro servant, was serving breakfast to George Long and Jakob Streng at a table in the dining room on the first floor. George Long was young, about twenty-five, and somewhat in awe of his mentor. Streng was over sixty, with close-cropped, iron gray hair. Most men of his girth gave the appearance of being “soft.” Streng gave no such appearance.

George Long often acted as Streng’s eyes and ears about the city. He brought information back to Streng and their group about what was being said that might impact their activities. Streng would occasionally send him on specific information-gathering missions. In the two years that Long had performed this service, he had become adept at ferreting out information. George had arrived just as Streng was sitting down to breakfast, and the older man had invited George to join him. While George nervously waited for Essie to finish bringing the food from the sideboard, he looked about the room. The signs of wealth were all about them—the velvet drapes, the inlaid mahogany furniture, even the heavy silver that sat on the table. Yet the furnishings were far less intimidating to Long than what he had seen Streng do. The man possessed a power that Long could not begin to fathom. Once he had seen him practically twist a woman’s neck off without ever raising his hands to her. Long was as frightened by that power as he was drawn to it.



As soon as Essie left the room, Streng began eating his rather large breakfast platter of eggs, sausage, grits, and biscuits. Long pecked at his breakfast, obviously troubled by something.

Gathering up his resolve, he began the conversation. “Jakob, I have important information.”

“Well it must be to interrupt a meal as important as breakfast.” Jakob smiled coolly at his young disciple.

Delivering his news with a solemnity often reserved for the news of war, George said, “The bishop has summoned an exorcist.”

“Um,” Streng grunted around a strip of bacon. He swallowed. “I expected that.”

George was startled by the response. “If you expected that, then why did you have us proceed with killing Richardson?”

“As an example. We have a few other weak members. They need to know that once they have joined in the rituals, there is no leaving. Membership is a lifetime affair.”

“But an exorcist?”

“He presents no danger to us. Our brother groups in other cities have dealt with them before.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t. You didn’t have any reason to know until now.” He reached for a biscuit and split it open. “However, the Church can present a danger to us.” He paused as he buttered the biscuit and added preserves, enjoying the discomfort on Long’s face. “But the danger is temporal, not magical, which is why I want you to be alert to events about the cathedral, particularly new arrivals. Their exorcist does not have the arcane power to deal with a minion as powerful as Belial, nor even with our own magics. But the Church’s secular power is of greater concern, which is why we must be careful that our identities remain secret. Powerful magicians have been trapped before by the

temporal forces that the Church can command. That was why we had to silence Richardson. His death places a permanent seal on his lips.”

Long’s face showed relief. “So what we must do is simply be silent. That shouldn’t be too hard to manage.”

“Especially with the shining example of Richardson’s grisly death to inspire those of faint heart.”

Streng smiled grimly. Long was visibly more relaxed. “So we have nothing to fear magically.”

“No. Not any more.”

George was confused. “You mean the Church once had the power to threaten us?”

“Long ago there were potent ceremonial magicians in the Church. We defeated them. But magic was not a long-term concern for the Church. Their temporal power had grown to be too great. That is when the Church started its great campaign, the Inquisition. Where the Inquisition thrived, many of our members died. So we learned to be rigidly circumspect. After all, we were their most obvious target. But most of the people that the Church killed had nothing to do with us. They weren’t followers of Satan. They were pagans whose practices the Church wanted to end or rival factions within the Church itself.”

A strange smile played at the corners of his mouth. “The Church has never been overly fond of competition for the souls of men.” He stepped to the sideboard and poured himself another cup of coffee. “Unintentionally, they did us a great favor.”

“A favor?”

“They killed our greatest enemy. According to our older records, there was once an order of pagan magicians in Europe that battled with us. They were apparently effective. But the Church, in their pursuit of one faith, destroyed them by early in the 18th century.

At least, that is the last time we heard of them. The Church's campaigns also destroyed over half of our circles, but many of us survived."

"Because of our power?"

"Yes, and also because we have always been largely hidden from the eyes of men. What the Church cannot find, it cannot destroy."

"Who were these other magicians?"

Streng pushed back from the table and went to sit in an overstuffed leather chair. "You ask many questions, George."

George feared that he had overstepped his bounds with his host.

Streng saw the fear cross his face. He did not want George to be afraid, at least not now. "It is all right. You need to ask questions. But what I'm about to say is at least half legend. I don't know how much is true."

Streng steepled his hands as he began his tale. "Our real magical enemies, if they ever existed, left few survivors behind them. They served the old gods." He saw the expression on Long's face. "No, I'm not talking about the local village witches. They still have a few of those in Ireland and other rural places. They are good for casting out the small possessions, for a little medicine, for the local festival fire. These others were different, though they served the same gods. Also, it might well be that they were only a story that our forebears made up to explain their relative lack of success in penetrating the pagan communities."

Streng's eyes focused on his student. George was so young, a firebrand, filled with his own importance and the excitement of the "evil power" he would someday attain. George had no knowledge of the tests ahead. He would find that their pleasures had a price.

"These other magicians were called 'walkers.' The name came from the reputation they had for traveling on foot. They rarely identified themselves, except to the local witch.

But they were one of the reasons that lone travelers in Celtic lands, at least those on foot and decently dressed, were rarely bothered. Everyone had heard of the walkers, but no one knew precisely who they were. Just the legend of their power was great enough to protect travelers.

“They remained anonymous. But they always seemed near at hand. We know almost nothing about them, except that they were once here and now seem to be gone. At least, none has troubled us for over a hundred and fifty years.”

Long looked thoughtfully at Streng. “But they could not threaten a spirit as powerful as Belial?”

“We don’t know. I would assume not, but their power is legendary. Like most legends, it apparently grows with the telling.”

“And what do the legends say?”

“Frankly, I can’t believe they had the power they are reputed to have had. I’m not certain that they even existed. But you asked about the legends.” He paused. “The last incident with one of them is said to have happened in the 1720s. One of our groups was meeting near Manchester, England. This group customarily met in an abandoned farmhouse. One day the group dropped from communication with the other groups, and others in our organization read in the newspaper of a terrible tragedy. A rural farmhouse, the farmhouse they met in, had been burned to the ground. Fourteen men and three women died. No one escaped.”

“Couldn’t it have been an accident?”

“Of course. But for a fire to sweep through a house so quickly that not even one would escape? Unlikely. Besides, the first of our order to arrive there found a strange mark on the ground, a mark associated with the walkers.”

“So you believe that these magicians existed?”

“I’m not certain that I do. But there is always some truth in legends.”

Long nodded. The silence drew out in the room.

Streng rose. "Time to be about our business in this world instead of discussing history."

Long rose, almost in unison. "Well, thank you for your time, I feel much less worried than I did when I came this morning."

"Think nothing further about it, George. Just remain observant." Streng paused. "But repeat nothing of what we've said, even to another member. I must decide who knows these things."

"Of course."

Streng nodded and showed Long out. He watched the young man merge with the traffic on the sidewalk. Then he returned to the dining room.

"Essie," he called.

The black servant appeared at the door from the kitchen almost instantly.

"Lock it," he said.

She did as she was told. As she returned to the main part of the room, a metamorphosis began. Her gait changed from that of a servant, and she became light on her feet. Her spine straightened as she went to the sideboard and got a fresh cup and filled it with coffee. She went to one of the leather chairs and sat down. Streng still stood by the window, gazing out at the street.

"So," he said. "Did you hear it all?"

She nodded.

"What do you think?"

Her voice had changed. Her customary accent, which was almost indistinguishable from the accent of any other Negro in Savannah, adopted some of the gentler sounds of a Haitian-French accent. "I don' think the boy will be a problem. Probably nevah would have been."

“We need to find out about this exorcist.”

“I have some folk I can trust. What about you?”

“You know I have someone in the diocese. They had already told me the exorcist was coming. I’m sure they will tell me more.”

“You sure?”

“I am,” Streng said.

“What about that story you told the boy?”

He looked at her questioningly.

“The one about these ‘walkers’.”

“Oh, that is an old tale we use from time to time. I’m sure there were walkers or some other order of magicians once, but they are long dead, and they were never that powerful.”

She nodded.

He noticed her mild response. “Do you doubt that?”

“I doubt everythin’,” she said. “I had too many surprises in my life not to expect one more. There’s too many magics around to think there might not be one more.”

“So you fear the walker?” Streng asked.

“No. But if there is one, I’d be careful ‘round him.”

“If he comes for us, he will come for you. This is a time we should work together.”

“Like I said before, Voudon magic is different from yours. Don’t mix well.”

Streng was disappointed and irritated by her customary rebuff. But he didn’t show it. He had too much respect for voodoo. Besides he needed her for the information she could bring. Black people could go and listen where a white man would raise questions, or where a white man might cause others to be more cautious. All he said was, “Then let me know if you hear anything.”

“You know I will.” She went to the table and set down her cup. Assuming the demeanor of a Negro servant, she disappeared down the hallway to the kitchen. Her mind was moving far faster than her feet. What she had heard this morning was important. She now knew that there might be magicians whom Streng really feared. If so, then perhaps the city could get rid of Streng and his kind. And high time, too. Regardless of the power she and the others of her faith shared, she could not directly confront the spirit that Streng and his group summoned. And her people looked to her for an answer. She was the *mambo*, the high priestess. Though her religion was hidden from the eyes of the white men, many turned to her for leadership and counsel. She was able to protect those who came to her, to make certain they were not out on the nights that Streng and his people hunted, but she wanted to do more. To be able to remove Streng and his kind? She smiled, just slightly, as she moved to the kitchen. Now that would be an accomplishment.

Streng’s thoughts remained focused on Esmerelda after she left the room. He knew she was a powerful voodoo priestess. Over the years, she had provided him with much useful information. But he did not understand why she did not aid him magically. He grunted. That question was one he wouldn’t answer today. But he had at least managed to deal with one problem by assuring himself that Long could be trusted. Next he would head to the factoring house and check on the activities of his firm. Then he would busy himself in learning if this purported Catholic exorcist was as weak as he supposed.

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Later that morning Father Benito was ushered into the bishop’s office by the monsignor.

“Your Grace,” Benito said as he bent to kiss the bishop’s ring.

“Welcome, Father. We have need of your expertise.” He gestured the monk and Monsignor Henry to the sofa in his office. He sat in a chair facing them. “I assume that the monsignor has acquainted you with the details?”

“Sadly, Your Grace, he has.”

“Go on.”

Father Benito began his explanation. “Monsignor Henry was kind enough to take me to Richardson’s room before bringing me here. So I am better prepared to speak of this than I might have been. As you’d suspected, what is needed here is not an exorcism. There was no spirit possessing the victim. I have performed seven exorcisms in my life, and, though I cannot say all were easy, all could be done with proper preparation. Based on what the monsignor has told me and what I myself perceived in the room, this situation is quite dangerous.

“We are confronting a creature, or perhaps I should say ‘demon,’ who can act without a physical host. He killed his victim without possessing him. We have few records of such events, of spirits of such power. This creature is far more powerful than a possessing spirit and much harder to deal with.”

“But you can deal with it?” the bishop asked.

“Yes, I believe we can. But the situation is complicated. Creatures like this demon do not just appear. They are not resident in this realm. They must come through a portal created into their world. So someone, probably some group, is summoning him. I would estimate that we not only have a potent demon to deal with, but also several powerful black magicians. These magicians are most probably some form of Satanist. Even though they worship Lucifer, they could be strong enough to strike at the priests as they attempt to deal with the demon.”

“It is really that dangerous?”



The Benedictine paused as he considered his next words. “In all of the instances of which I am aware, several priests were gathered for the ritual. As I said, it can be dangerous. In one case, one priest was killed. In another, two died.” Benito paused before going on. “Your Grace, while I have confronted possessing demons who were able to assume physical form once forced from the victim’s body, this creature is far more powerful than those were. Getting rid of it, and the men who called it, is not something that I can do alone. I will need help, and a special kind of help. It will not be enough for priests of pure heart to read the appropriate ritual. I will need other mages, priests acquainted with the magical arts.”

The bishop was shaken by what the exorcist had said. When the concept of a demon had first occurred to him, it had seemed like a Bible story. He had never truly believed that such creatures existed. Now he was hearing someone of serious demeanor confirming its existence. His fears were made real. He looked at the Benedictine.

“Priests might die in dealing with such a creature?”

The Benedictine nodded.

The bishop now realized that they would have to combat both a demon and human magicians here in his own city. In Savannah, near the seat of his diocese, were people who would do such things, and they would kill to protect their secrets. Yet that was not the only sobering thought. The other information that the exorcist had communicated, though somewhat obliquely, stunned him. The Church, apparently, harbored its own magicians, or, as Benito called them, “mates.” Certainly such things were whispered of, but Bishop Shea had never given much credence to the whisperings.

“Father, I assume you know how to find such men within the Church?”

“Actually they are not all men. But, to answer your question, Your Grace, yes, I do. The Church has a small group of men, like me, who are trained in the arts needed to

fight such creatures. We are drawn from many different orders and rarely come together unless needed.”

The bishop paused. “We are in your hands. What must we do?”

“I will talk to those who witnessed the events. I would also like to find if your library contains certain texts that may be of help. Then I must write a certain individual and let him know what I think we are facing.”

“Who?”

“He is the head of the Church’s mages within North America. Your Grace, with all respect, the man that I will contact is within the Church, but his ‘other talents’ are not well known. I must ask that you keep his name secret. Many would not understand the need for such men in our modern Church.”

“Of course.”

Benito looked to the monsignor, who nodded as guarantee for his silence on the matter. The priest continued, “You will meet him in the course of affairs. His name is Father Rimaldi. He resides in Maryland. He is the one who will contact the others.”

The monsignor interrupted. “Is this Rimaldi a Jesuit?”

The monk smiled. “Yes, the Father Provincial of Maryland, to be precise.”

Monsignor Henry sat back in his chair. This development was interesting. He had long wanted to meet Rimaldi, but these were hardly the circumstances in which he had imagined the meeting might occur.

The bishop asked, “How many others?”

“Unless I discover something that implies a weakness, I would estimate that we will need six or more to deal with this creature.”

“That many?”

“Father Rimaldi will make the final decision, but it is better to have more than we need than less.”

The bishop rose, and the others came to their feet as well. “Father, you have my full support in what is needed.” He looked to the monsignor. “Please, Monsignor, place the resources of the archdiocese at his disposal. And, Father, please keep me informed as you deem appropriate. These are matters in which I confess my ignorance. As I said earlier, we are all in your hands.”

“Your Grace, I shall do everything in my power to assure you are not disappointed in the trust you have placed in me.” He bowed his head. “*Pax vobiscum.*”

“And to you, Father.”

The monk and the monsignor left together. The bishop remained in his office. He walked to the large window that overlooked the garden where he had spent many hours contemplating what he had thought to be important issues. Against the evil that they now faced, those other issues were reduced to trivial administrative details. His mind drifted to the only quote that he remembered from the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the infamous *Hammer Against Witches*. “*The belief that there are such beings as Witches is so essential a part of the catholic faith that obstinacy to maintain the opposite opinion manifestly savors of heresy.*”

## *Chapter Six*

### *Wednesday, October 14th*

Father Benito began the day with prayer, as always. Then he went to the refectory for breakfast, which was a treat for him. At the monastery in St. Augustine, breakfast was a simple affair of bread and cheese. Perhaps as a vestige of English influence, breakfast in Savannah could be called nothing less than sumptuous. Eggs, ham, bacon, muffins, breads, tarts, fresh fruit, hominy, and often some delightful kind of seafood were arrayed around the tables. This meal was the most complex of the day.

While he ate, he looked about the large room. One side of the refectory was filled with the customary long tables, each of which sat about fifteen. These were the tables that the nuns used. On the other side were scattered smaller, four-person tables. The few that were occupied were used only by the priests and staff. When Benito glanced toward the nuns' tables, he was often surprised to see that someone had been staring at him. She would quickly turn her eyes away and rejoin the conversation at her table. He received a similar reaction from the smaller tables as well. He was the stranger, the outsider, and a natural object of curiosity. But he recognized something more in their eyes, something he had seen before. They were all afraid of him. He had long ago stopped being upset by such reactions. He had come to understand that the presence of an exorcist always garnered the twin reactions of curiosity and fear. Often others did not want to be reminded of his work. He finished his breakfast in silence, endeavoring not to look too closely at any of the other tables.

Shortly after he had finished his morning prayers and breakfast, Father Benito was in the library of the archdiocese. The day before had been a tiring one for him, and one that had offered him little of value, other than what he had perceived during his visit to Richardson's room. He had interviewed the doctor and the orderlies who had been present on the night of Richardson's death. Dr. Gaston had been as uncommunicative as the

monsignor had warned he might be. The orderlies had been too frightened by the events to provide any useful information. However, his visit to the scene of the death had, in itself, been enough to justify the sending of his telegram to Rimaldi. He hoped that help would be coming from that quarter soon.

A few minutes after Benito arrived in the library, Monsignor Henry joined him. The monsignor probably knew the library as well as anyone in the archdiocese. He led the monk to the rear of the library and opened a door into another room. In the back was a locked case.

“This case contains all that we have that relates to exorcism, magic, and other areas that you might find of interest.” He unlocked the case.

“Thank you, Monsignor.”

“I think we might share our knowledge better with less formality. My name is Robert.”

“Thank you. And I am Luis.”

“Good, Luis it is then. But before you begin your research, I have something else you might find of greater importance.” He stepped to the right of the case and drew a second key from his cassock. Unlocking a small cabinet set into the wall, he withdrew a leather-bound volume. It was old and well worn. He handed the book to Father Benito. “The books in the other case are all ones that you are likely familiar with. This book is another matter. You see, this city is a strange one, and there have been events going on here as far back as anyone can remember. These events are . . .” he searched for the right word, “I guess you would have to call them puzzling.”

Father Benito opened the slender volume and saw the first entry. “Sixteen October, 1766. Prostitute murdered in alley off State Street. Throat slit, no blood was found at site.” He read on. “Fourteen February, 1768. Statue of goat-footed Satan found in abandoned home. Family left area suddenly. Rumored to have moved north into Cherokee

lands. Cannot contact.” The next entry. “Twenty-six May, 1772. Discovered cleared circle south of town. Area had standing pillar, some traces of voodoo drawing on ground. Will observe as time permits.”

Luis looked up at the monsignor. “What exactly is this?”

“It is an incomplete record, made by my predecessors. Some of the descriptions are as brief as the ones you’ve seen. Others are quite detailed. Some are cryptic. For many years there are no entries at all, which I think reflects that no record was kept. But this journal is the efforts of different priests in Savannah to keep some record of the unusual events that have occurred here. I don’t know if it is of value, but I thought it could be.”

Benito smiled. “Robert, you have given me a great gift. The books in that other case will probably serve no greater purpose than to jog a faulty memory. This book may give us a real opportunity to discover something about our opponent.”

“I thought it might. Over the past century, this record has been kept by a senior member of the bishop’s staff. We have passed it on to each other, and it has grown in detail over time. It has become something of a legacy. This city has both its good and bad sides, as most places do, but a series of unexplained events that have taken place over the years indicates that something unusual has been happening. We have more than just the normal number of killings that might occur in any seaport town.”

Luis looked at him questioningly.

Robert indicated that they should sit. He scratched the side of his nose as he thought of how he might best summarize the events. “As you will find in reading through the record, numerous corpses of women have been found in alleyways and propped against walls, mainly in the eastern part of the city. I don’t know what incited the suspicion of the first priest to record a killing in 1766, but since then each succeeding priest has been fairly diligent in recording unusual events and similar killings. In each case, a

woman's throat has been slit. The corpse had been drained of blood. Saul Richardson said that a woman was killed in the same manner in the August ritual."

Benito could not hide the shock on his face. "So the first killing might have been over a hundred years ago?"

The monsignor nodded.

Benito was somber. "Then this might be a very old evil."

"Four things made these killings unusual and worth recording in the journal. First, the bodies were carried to their final location after they had been murdered. We know that because little blood was found near the body, even though the bodies had been almost empty of blood. Second is the location of the bodies. If a sailor killed a girl, he would not likely carry her up from the river to deposit her above the bluff. So this is not one of those random killings one finds, all too often, in a seaport. Third, the women have almost all been murdered in a similar manner, by having their throats cut with near surgical precision. Bodies of others, ones found nearer the port, have the usual assortment of wounds you would expect, a knife wound in the stomach, a blow to the head, ragged cuts inflicted by a variety of knives. The killings we are concerned with speak of someone carrying on his work with precision and of a pattern repeated over a long span of time, at least a century."

"And the police have shown no interest?" Benito interrupted.

"This is not a town where the police become concerned with the deaths of prostitutes or the occasional sailor. Seaports are violent places. If no one of substance raises questions, the investigation will be perfunctory at best."

"Sad."

"Yes, but that is how it is."

"And the newspaper?"

“The press here is good at covering society weddings and the price of cotton,” the monsignor replied with an edge to his voice. “I think they consider news of unsolved crimes to be ‘distasteful.’ Anything they might have to say about such events will be buried in the interior pages, but Savannah is a small city, and murders, even those not reported in the press, will be the subject of gossip. Within the Church we have our own informal sources of information.”

Benito digested the statement before continuing. “You said there were four distinguishing features.”

“The fourth is the pattern. All of these killings occur at about even intervals. If one is killed on the fifteenth of a given month, then the next one will be found a few months later on the eleventh, or thereabouts. If the interval stretches out longer, to say six months, then the killing would be near the eighth of the month.”

The monk looked carefully at the monsignor. “So the intervals are based on the lunar month, not the calendar month.”

“Yes. So I surmise they are slain the night of a ritual.”

“Perhaps if we had a lunar calendar?”

“I’ve already looked at one. These events are occurring just before or on the new moon.”

“Are you certain?”

“Richardson was killed on the ninth. The moon was dark that night and the night of the tenth. So he was killed on the last night of the waning moon. I assume the astronomical new moon was some time in the day on the tenth. He had been admitted to the ward almost exactly one month before, at the preceding new moon. An unidentified corpse was found in mid August. Since the lunar month is about twenty-nine days, that would make her death just before the new moon as well. It would also make that killing the one that Richardson described to Doctor Gaston.”



Benito unconsciously crossed himself. He also performed another gesture with his hands that the monsignor was unfamiliar with. The monsignor didn't ask what the gesture was. He assumed it was some kind of protective spell and hoped it included him.

Henry went on with his narrative. "But there is another disturbing factor. Even though they are all found around the time of the new moon, the time interval between the killings has become shorter. Forty years ago, we would find one of the women killed every year or so. Over the past ten years, the interval has shortened. Now we find one every few months. Whoever is doing this has become more bold."

"And more certain of his power," Luis added.

Robert nodded, then stood. "I will leave you to your studies, Luis." The monsignor turned toward the door. As he left, he shut the door behind him.

Father Benito looked at the book in his hands. He already knew that the task before him was beyond his capabilities. He hoped it would not be beyond those of Father Rimaldi.

\* \* \* \* \*

Father Rimaldi was the leader of the Church's mages in the United States and the Canadian provinces. But this job occupied very little of his time. He also headed the Jesuits who formed the main academic staff at a university near Baltimore in addition to his duties as the Father Provincial of the Maryland Province. Under his purview were some of the finest scholars of the Catholic Church to be found outside of the Vatican. Rimaldi was approaching sixty, though it could hardly be told from his appearance. His black hair was barely peppered with gray, his walk was that of a much younger man, and his penetrating glance still caused the most brilliant of his scholars to doubt their conclusions.

He had come far in life, all thanks to the Church. Born in an Italian slum in Chicago, tall and gangly as a youngster, he had matured into a powerfully built man, someone seen as a likely candidate for the boxing ring or the varied groups of toughs that roamed the Italian neighborhoods. But Rimaldi had taken a different turn, deciding to become a priest. His intelligence drew the attention of others at the seminary, where he proved himself to be a highly capable scholar. The Jesuits found Rimaldi before his ordination and quickly claimed him for their own. Rimaldi was discovering his voracious intellectual appetite at the same time. Through the Jesuits, he had entered college and now possessed two doctoral degrees, one in linguistics and the other in history. His rise through the Jesuit ranks had been quick.

At the age of thirty, he had been transferred to Rome. In his decade and a half in Europe, all of the remnants of the boy from the Chicago slums had been overlain by an increasing European sophistication. It was in Rome that he had discovered the “secret order” of magicians in the Church. His dogged research skills had lead him to uncover what was supposed to be securely hidden. However, the mages of the Church had found him to be no threat but, rather, a willing recruit. He had been transferred to their school, which was located in an isolated castle in the Italian Alps.

The students there were drawn from many different orders of priests and nuns. Benedictines and Jesuits studied alongside Dominicans. At the school, Rimaldi had undergone instruction in the ancient art of ceremonial magic, emerging a few years later as a particularly adept member of this hidden group. He resumed his duties as a Jesuit, though, of course, maintaining his contact with others trained in magic, both by mail and occasional meetings. After his return to the United States and a succession of posts in the varied Jesuit provinces, he was appointed to the position of Father Provincial of the powerful Maryland province, which had been founded in 1634.

The years had not dimmed Rimaldi's formidable intellect. He was supremely confident in his abilities, too confident some of his students thought. They often joked about his air of absolute certainty. The joking was always done as a veiled compliment, but some were not comfortable with a priest who had too much of the taint of pride about him. Yet none would question him. His razor-sharp mind and the breadth of his reading had earned him their respect.

Rimaldi was alone in his study when the knock came on his door.

"Enter." He spoke over his book.

Father Phillipe de Montferrat, Rimaldi's secretary, entered silently and came to stand beside his superior. Phillipe was the scion of an old family of French aristocrats. His composure was rarely ruffled, a characteristic that made him the perfect secretary for the sometimes volcanic Rimaldi. Over the years the bond between them had become strong. Rimaldi trusted him absolutely. As a result, Phillipe was privy to many of the private aspects of the province's business.

After finishing the paragraph he was reading, Rimaldi looked up at the hovering priest, who held a telegram.

"Father," Phillipe said, "I thought I should bring this to you immediately. It is from one of the people whom you said warranted special attention, a Father Benito."

Rimaldi marked his place and reached up for the telegram. He noticed that it had been sent from the office of the bishop in Savannah rather than the abbey in Saint Augustine. He placed his book to the side and sat more upright as he began opening the envelope with anticipation. Father Benito was one of his favorites within the magicians' circle.

Father Phillipe turned to go. He did not expect any word from Rimaldi, as they spent little time on pleasantries. He was surprised when Rimaldi's voice came from the chair.

“Wait, Father Phillipe, I may have need of you. Please have a seat.”

Phillipe turned and sat in the second chair in the room, facing the other priest. He did not think he had ever seen his superior so focused, and he patiently waited as Rimaldi translated the telegram, not once, but twice.

The telegram would have looked unintelligible to almost anyone else. It was written primarily in classical Greek and contained one of the special words that the mages of the Church used between themselves. He put the letter down and stared off into the distance for a minute. He then turned to the younger priest. “Father Phillipe, do you believe in Satan?”

Phillipe might have been amazed had he not been aware that Rimaldi never asked spurious questions. Rimaldi often began a conversation in a lateral direction, only later leading back to the main point. “Of course, Father.”

“And would you like to meet him?”

“Of course not, Father, I have met several Protestants, and that is quite close enough for me.”

Rimaldi smiled thinly at the joke, even though it betrayed a weakness in his Church that he would rather forget.

“This time, Phillipe, it is a more serious matter than that.” He handed the telegram to the young priest.

Phillipe read it quickly. “What does the word ‘gorgon’ mean in this context?”

“It means a very powerful demon.”

“It can’t be true,” Phillipe said, handing it back.

“But I take it you would not like to convince a bishop, three nuns, and a Benedictine of that fact?”

Phillipe looked at Rimaldi blankly. He had no idea of what to say.

“You think as most would think, Phillipe. Our Church has become too certain of its place in the world. We are too much a part of these modern times to still believe in evil. Yet, without our estimable consent, evil continues to exist.” Rimaldi held up the telegram. “I know Father Benito well. He would not raise a false alarm. This creature that he is dealing with is a dangerous one, and one that must be eliminated with all haste.”

“What do you need of me, Father?” The young priest did not interrupt with the obvious question, as he knew that the Father Provincial would tell no more than he wished to in any event.

“First, I must speak with Father Ryan. He will be in charge in my absence. I do not think it will be for long, only a few weeks. He can also take over my classes on the works of St. Augustine. Father Brogan can take my ethics classes. But there are other matters that must remain confidential. So I have special instructions for you. This type of work is dangerous, especially when dealing with a demon such as this one. In the event that I do not return, Father Ryan will know what to do with regard to the Jesuit order. But there are others who must know.

“There is a certain cardinal in Rome, Cardinal Termignoni, who must be informed if I do not return. I will give you a letter for him. It will be sent only if you are informed of my death. You will send Benito’s telegram with my letter, if it comes to that. I will also have several letters and a few telegrams for you to send before my departure. I will be leaving for Savannah as soon as possible.

“Do you have any questions, Phillipe?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. But before you go to find Father Ryan, I must speak more openly with you. You have become knowledgeable of something that few in the Church will ever know about, or believe. I know that I can count on your discretion, your obedience is un-

questioned. But you are also a Jesuit, and I am not equally certain that I can restrain your eventual curiosity.”

The young priest did not respond. He merely waited.

“That was the response that I hoped for. You know yourself well for one so young.” Rimaldi smiled. “But this you must remember—speak to no one about this matter. Discussion of these topics is generally not welcome within the Church.” He paused before continuing, “Now, do you have any immediate questions?”

“Honestly, Father, I do not know where the questions that you have raised would begin or end.” The younger priest looked dazed. “It is all rather much to understand.”

“Yes, it is. But it is true,” Rimaldi said. “We keep these secrets, not from any desire to stay hidden, but because we *must* stay hidden. Though most people would ridicule us if they ever knew we believed such things, some would panic. But the true problem is more subtle. If some of the general population knew that the realm of spirit and magic was real, they would begin a study of magic. They would do it haphazardly, with incomplete references, and generally be trained by charlatans.

“But real knowledge can be found if you look deeply enough. A few might learn some of the secrets, though they would be more likely to do harm than good. In all likelihood, the powers that they summon would not be under their control. What they might unleash could terrify or injure many.”

“But are these powers so readily accessible?”

“No, Phillipe, they are not ‘readily accessible.’ Summoning these forces and creatures is a complex task, but it can be done accidentally. Fortunately, the veil between this realm and the spirit realm where these creatures dwell is dense and difficult to penetrate. The forces on the other side cannot reach through to us without help from this side, but when someone calls from here in a certain manner, he will find a respondent there who is more than willing to pretend to be whatever the summoner wishes him to be. Then, once

the creature has crossed the veil, few here have the ability to contain it and force it back to the place from which it came. That is what my order does. We destroy the thing summoned or send it back to its own realm.”

“Why would God allow such creatures to continue to exist?”

Rimaldi gave a theatrical sigh. “When you explain such things to a Jesuit, he always will respond with the metaphysical question.” The humorous tone dropped from his voice. “I can answer that question no more than I can really answer why God allows suffering to exist.”

Phillipe nodded.

“For now, let us leave this as a beginning to a future discussion. I have work to do, and they are waiting for me in Savannah. We can discuss this matter further on my return.”

Phillipe rose. “I look forward to your return. May God bless your endeavors.”

“Thank you, Father Phillipe.”

The young priest rose to seek Father Ryan.

\* \* \* \* \*

A sliver of the waxing moon dimly illuminated the salt marsh that lay between Savannah and the ocean. A small boat with a single passenger ground against the mix of shells and soil that bordered a tree-covered island. Esmerelda was late. Streng had insisted on a late supper. But she had no worry that the ceremony would start without her. She was the *mambo*, the priestess.

Tonight was one of the early nights of the growing moon, a night for prophecy, for hearing what the *loa*, the gods of Voudon, had to say to them. Only the initiated of the followers of Voudon met on the island for this ritual. The other ceremonies, those on the

night of the full moon, were open to any interested in Voudon. But tonight was for finding guidance from the gods. She hoped they would speak clearly. She needed direction.

The path to their ceremonial site twisted through the vegetation to the center of the small island. The growth was thick. Though the site was as close as fifty feet to the edge of the island, no one could see it from the creeks that wove through the marsh. Besides, it was unlikely that anyone would be out on so dark a night.

She came to the edge of the clearing. In it was their ceremonial circle, their *hounfour*. The *houngan*, the priest, was already in the circle. It would be rude for her to enter the circle without being recognized by him. She stopped, just as he would have stopped if she had arrived first.

He looked up and a smile came to his face. "Welcome, sistah. Welcome, Mambo."

She entered the *hounfour* and embraced the *houngan*. His name was Riley. She had high respect for this man. He had been a slave and yet had kept to their faith. Such loyalty gave him great credit in the eyes of the *loa*. For her, it had been different. She had come from Haiti after the Americans had outlawed slaving.

She raised her voice and addressed the others waiting there. "Move to the east end of the circle, the *houngan* and I mus' talk."

Riley looked at her questioningly. This was strange, but he followed her. They sat near where the west fire would be lit, perhaps thirty feet from the others who grouped on the opposite side of the circle. The others talked together so as not to hear what the *mambo* and the *houngan* said to each other.

"What the problem, Esmerelda?"

"Streng's gone crazy with his power. He drunk. Too much fire, no earth."

"He gonna kill some more?"



“He’s always gonna kill more. This priest they call from Saint Augustine, he’s here to throw out the demon, but I doubt he got the power to deal with Streng. If Streng kills him, he gets even more drunk. Nobody be safe, not even our folk.”

The *houngan* nodded. “So you want to ask the *loa* if we should do somethin’?”

She nodded.

“Streng scares me,” Riley said.

“Me, too. But he’s killin’. Maybe the *loa* want him stopped.”

They looked at each other. Fear and determination were shared in their eyes. Then he looked back over to their assembled worshipers. He called out to the others in a deep voice, “Light the fires.”

A student of Voudon, a *hounsis*, picked a flaming stick up from the small fire they had built near the east edge of the clearing. He walked around to each of the other points of the compass and lit the pile of kindling and wood that they had built earlier. Each fire was fifteen feet from the *poteau-mitan*, the post in the center of the circle.

Esmerelda stood. “Circle ‘round.”

The worshipers spread themselves evenly around the *hounfour*, forming a rough circle.

“Sarah,” she called. One of the young women, also a *hounsis*, stepped forward. “Draw the *veve* for Ogun Balanjo.”

Sarah picked up a stick from the ground and stood next to the center post. She began drawing on the ground. The *veve* were doorways through which the *loa* might enter into this world. First she drew the *veve* for Legba, the *Loa* of the Crossroads, who opens the way for the other *loa*. Once she finished the first *veve*, she would draw the *veve* for Ogun Balanjo, the spirit of healing.

As she began drawing, the *houngan* nodded to three other of the *hounsis*. One picked up the cooling pitcher and went into the woods. He would fetch water to cool the *poteau-mitan*. The other sat before the drums and began a slow and heavy beat. The third picked up a bound blackbird. He carried the flapping bird to the center post and tied it to a rope that was wrapped around the post. The *houngan* and the *mambo* went to stand near the center post, staying clear of Sarah, who was now drawing the second *veve*.

Daniel, the student with the cooling pitcher, emerged from the woods. He bowed to the priest and priestess, then took the cooling pitcher to the east fire, where he held it up in salute. He did the same at the south, the west, and the north. Then he came to the center post, poured a little water on it, and waited for Sarah to finish.

The drums kept up their incessant beat, but the tempo slowly increased. The fifteen or so other worshipers began to sway with the beat.

Sarah stood, indicating she had finished both *veve*. Esmerelda looked at them. They were perfect. “Good job, girl.”

Sarah gave a quick smile and retreated back to the circle of worshipers.

The priest spoke, “Daniel, wash ‘round the *veve*.”

Daniel walked carefully around the *veve*, pouring a thin stream of water to the ground. He was not to wash away any of the *veve*, just circle it with water to show respect. When he finished, he stood by the center post, the *poteau-mitan*.

Esmerelda stamped her feet on the ground three times. Then she walked to the entrance of the circle, spun around and walked slowly, carefully back to the center post, holding the *veve* of Legba in her mind. When she touched the post, the drums increased in rhythm. They all then followed the lead of the *houngan* and began to chant in time to the beat. The sounds were low and guttural, an old chant in Fon, the language of Dahomey, the western African kingdom that had been the seat of the slave trade.

Now the dancing began in earnest, and all of the worshipers, except Daniel and the drummer, started to slowly circle the center post. Each time the *houngan* passed in front of the drummer, the rhythm would speed up and the chant would grow louder.

Esmerelda's face glistened with sweat. She knew a *loa* would come tonight. As she danced with the others, she could feel the power building. She nodded to Daniel, who poured more water on the *poteau-mitan*. She could feel the heat coming from it. Their chant was working. Through the doorway she felt more than saw the arrival of Legba. He "mounted" Daniel, taking possession of his body. Legba-Daniel began dancing, still holding the cooling pitcher. Now he poured the water on himself as much as on the center post. Esmerelda started to go to Daniel, who was now Legba, but the *loa* waved her away. Legba set down the cooling pitcher and went to stand before the drums. He widened his stance an almost impossible amount. Then he began to lift his feet one after the other, goading the drummer to a faster rhythm. He, too, joined the dance, whirling inside the circle of worshipers. Then Legba-Daniel went to the doorway. In the air he scribed part of the *veve* for Ogun Balanjo, then reared back as if struck by a wind. Sarah fell from the circle of dancers and began to writhe on the ground, thrusting her hips upward as if making love to an invisible man, trying to draw him deeper inside of her. Legba-Daniel went to her and began speaking in a tongue that Esmerelda could not understand. The drumming went on as Legba whispered to Sarah, soothing her and the *loa* that was mounting her body.

Riley motioned to the third *hounsis*, John, who went to the center post and sliced the head from the blackbird. Then he cut its legs free from the post and carried the twitching body to where Ogun Balanjo-Sarah lay on the ground. Legba-Daniel still whispered to her. John let the blood spout out over the two *loa*, then handed the bird to Esmerelda, who had left the dance to come before the *loa*. The *houngan* joined her and they bowed together, then knelt over the twitching body of Sarah. Daniel fell backward into

the sand. Legba had left him. Sarah's eyes grew wide and she sat up, then pulled her feet under her and sat on her heels, facing the *mambo* and *houngan*. She placed her hand over her mouth. The *houngan*'s voice ripped over the drumming and chanting. "Stop. The *loa* will speak."

In the sudden quiet, Sarah trembled. The blood of the bird ran down her arms. She reached out for the blackbird and took it from Esmerelda. She pressed her lips to the severed neck, then tossed the corpse away and laughed. "Mambo, you have given me a beautiful mount." Sarah's hands rose and pressed over her breasts. "This one made for pleasure." The worshipers murmured to each other. This was a high blessing for Sarah, coming from a *loa*.

Ogun-Sarah looked at Esmerelda. "But tonight not for pleasure. You want to know about the white man with the devil." He made it a statement. "Sistah, you stay away from his magic. You and *houngan*, don't do nothin'. Talk's fine. Watchin's fine. But work no magic. Let 'em fix it themselves." Sarah swayed, and they thought the *loa* was about to leave. Suddenly she stiffened upright. "You talk to the last one standin'. You hear? Last one standin'." Sarah collapsed as the *loa* left her.

None but Esmerelda had ever seen a mount like this. None but her had heard a *loa* speak like this. The *houngan* stood and spoke to the amazed worshipers, startling them into movement. "Fetch water for Sarah and Daniel. Run like the Baron behind ya."

They picked up the cooling pitcher and several other pots that lay about to go and fill them with cool water for the two who had been mounted.

Riley leaned close to Esmerelda. "Sistah, I nevah heard such, nevah hear a *loa* speak so plain."

"I hear it once before, " she said. "When I was a little girl, I heard the *loa* speak this plain." Though the night was warm, she shivered. "Lotsa men died."

## *Chapter Seven*

### *Thursday, October 15th*

As Father Benito ate his breakfast, he considered what he had learned. He was disappointed that the discoveries he had made with the monsignor yesterday morning had been the only significant ones of the day. In the afternoon he had interviewed four of the five nuns present on the night of Richardson's death. He had learned little. After breakfast, he would talk to the final nun, Sister Brigid.

As he finished his breakfast, the monsignor entered the dining hall. He motioned for Benito to join him at a somewhat isolated table at the back of the room. It was the monsignor's "reserved" table, and it allowed him to conduct business over breakfast at some separation from the ebb and flow of the traffic in the refectory.

"Well, Father, what did you discover?"

"The most important thing is what I have been able to deduce." Benito said.

"Which is?"

"If we assume that the ones who are killing these girls do not want to be discovered carrying a dead body, then they would not carry the bodies far. But they also would space them so they would give no precise clue as to where the killings were done. And it appears that is what they did. For a while the bodies appear in one area. For a while in another. If it were not for your historical record, we would not be able to come up with even a rough location for the murders."

"But with our 'historical record'?" The monsignor smiled.

"We cannot be precise, but they appear to be in the eastern area of the city, a few blocks south of Bay Street and perhaps four blocks east of Bull Street."

The monsignor frowned. "That would imply that we are dealing with men of means. There are few poor families in that area."

"Would you expect them to be otherwise?"

“No, but it will make them difficult to deal with. We cannot go to the police with this story, they would never believe that a prominent family would be involved in a thing such as this. In fact, they would be more likely to believe that we are seeing things where none exist.”

“I know, Monsignor. It is always that way. The police are like other men. They go to church. They don’t really believe in the devil. When he shows up at their door, they invite him in for a glass of wine.”

Monsignor Henry nodded, then went on, “Would we be able to do something ourselves to catch them? Perhaps if priests were to roam the area on the appropriate nights?”

The monk shook his head. “Most priests would not notice anything out of the ordinary. These men we are working against are cautious. If they saw a priest in their area, they would cancel their ceremony for that evening. Also, I would suspect the room where the killing is done has thick enough walls that little sound would escape. The only ones who could know that they were at work would be those of us who have the skill to sense the use of magic. I am presently the only one here who could sense such things. And if I ‘saw’ them, they would likely ‘see’ me. Then my death might not be long in coming.”

“So there is nothing we can do?”

“We need to assemble enough priests with magical talents to be certain that we can overwhelm them. I have already begun that task. But you should not be dismayed. That we have an approximate idea of where they are and the nights on which they do their magic will be of tremendous value. Your little book may be the key to defeating them.”

“I am glad it will be of service,” the monsignor replied, grateful that he had made a contribution. He began to rise from his chair.

“If you would stay a moment longer, there is something else that I would like to ask.”

The monsignor resettled in his chair.

The monk continued. "I have spoken to all but one of those who were present that night. There were five nuns, two orderlies, and the doctor. We talked about the orderlies and the doctor yesterday, and I must thank you for passing on Gaston's perceptions."

The monsignor inclined his head in a slight nod.

Benito continued. "Three of the nuns apparently stayed as far away from the door as they could and tried to block out the sights and sounds. They had little to tell me. Sister Mary Francis could tell me a few things of substance; she mainly confirmed what I already knew. I must say, though, that she is quite courageous. She showed little fear in relating the events of the night."

"I am not surprised."

"Really?"

"Father, I think that if the Devil himself appeared in her cell late one night, Sister Mary Francis would attempt to put his eyes out with a candlestick. Her faith is deep. She is one who truly does 'Trust in the Lord.' I have seen her dealing with battle casualties so badly wounded that their screaming could be heard throughout the hospital. Her expression and compassion never wavered. If there is anything she would fear, I don't know what it would be."

The monk sat back and thought for a moment, remembering his interview with Sister Francis. He doubted neither her faith nor her courage. "Then that makes it all the more odd."

"What is so odd?"

"I have interviewed everyone but Sister Mary Brigid. I left her to the last because she was the first to enter the room, other than the doctor."

"She entered before Sister Francis?"

"Yes."

“That is unusual.” The monsignor rubbed his brow. “I mean, I have no reason to doubt her, but she is far younger than Sister Francis. Sister Francis has always appeared to be made of sterner stuff than Sister Brigid. Brigid is Irish, and the Irish nuns are the first to give credence to otherworldly forces. So it would not seem likely that she would be the first to enter the room.”

“Yet she was.”

“That is interesting, Father.” He paused. “But does it mean anything?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps I will find out when I meet with her.”

“When will that be?”

“She’s probably waiting for me.”

The monsignor rose. “Then I think it’s time you interviewed our courageous young nun. Please let me know if anything comes of it.”

“Certainly, Monsignor.” He rose and bowed slightly to the monsignor before turning to go to his meeting with Sister Mary Brigid. Something in Benito quickened as he walked to the meeting; he was unusually alert.

Sister Brigid was waiting for Father Benito in what the nuns referred to as the “contemplation room.” Sister Brigid had always loved this small, sandstone-walled chapel which jutted into the convent garden. Three stained glass windows adorned the north, south, and east walls. However, the room remained dim, even on the brightest of days. A simple stone altar, adorned with a brass cross, was before the largest of the windows, which faced to the east. Four small pews were in front of the altar. Each could hold four people. The austerity and beauty of the room made it a favored place both for prayer and for meditation. Sister Brigid was sitting in the first of the pews, awaiting Father Benito. As she waited, she began to probe what lay beneath her thoughts and feelings of the past few



days. She knew that the answer to the riddles in her mind lay in her past. She called to mind the image of her aunt in her simple home. As she tried to bring the image into clarity, she unconsciously engaged both the Sight and a bit of her inherited abilities.

Father Benito was approaching the room along the corridor from the convent. He was enjoying the texture of the stone and the beauty of the view from the windows. The morning sun, having crested the eastern wall of the convent, slanted in through the windows. The carefully tended garden of the nuns lay between the corridor and the east wall. He stopped before one of the windows, the next to the last before the door to the small chapel, and looked out at the roses that grew in profusion across the face of the pane. He admired the skill of whatever unknown gardener had trained the roses to arc across the window opening. The red and white roses, each part of separate bushes, intertwined. The morning sun illuminated them brilliantly. The entire effect was one of having created stained glass from living materials. He drank in their beauty, reflecting that no human craftsman could have created the delicate beauty of these flowers. No stained glass could mimic the exquisite colors that the flowers displayed so flagrantly. If he had needed proof of the existence and love of God, there would have been no better evidence than what he saw with his eyes. Father Benito always saw the hand of God around him. But it was most often revealed in nature's casual displays of her awesome beauty. Here in Savannah, as in St. Augustine, he could see the pure profligacy of nature.

As he turned his attention from the window, something passed across that part of his consciousness that had been awakened by his magical training. Magic was in use somewhere close at hand. After a moment of fear, he understood that this magic was not directed toward him, nor was it directed at all. It was merely someone using his ability to look more deeply into something. It could be the efforts of a trained magician, or it could be the efforts of one of those few who were born with the Sight, the talent to see more deeply, as well as other inherited abilities. Those born to it always made the best magi-

cians. Even the most rigorous training could not give someone the potency of vision that those born with the Sight possessed naturally.

He made use of a simple spell that rendered him difficult to perceive by magical means. Now he could move securely, as his own presence would not intrude into the consciousness of the one using the Sight. Then he moved toward the source of the magic. He was not overly surprised that he was moving closer to the room where he was to meet Sister Brigid. Raising his own Sight to its most acute level, he silently opened the door to the room, so as not to disturb the nun who was sitting in the first pew, her head rigid in concentration. Floating in the air between her and the altar, he saw the face of an old woman before an indefinite background. Undoubtedly, Brigid could see more.

The image vanished. Brigid sat upright in the pew and turned to see the monk framed in the door. She had sensed his presence, regardless of his spell. She was embarrassed to have been lost in thoughts of her aunt when Church business was at hand.

The Benedictine was amazed that an untutored magician could have sensed him, even though he had made an effort to remain invisible to the Sight. She had also projected an image, a different skill than the Sight. Her gifts must be quite strong.

She stood up rapidly, covering her expression, and said, "Father Benito, I am Sister Mary Brigid."

Father Benito replied, "It is nice to meet you, Sister. Could you tell me who the old woman was?"

"You could see her?"

"Yes."

She stuttered. "Then . . . then, you have the Sight?"

"Yes."

She was at a complete loss for words. She had never expected to meet a priest with the Sight. His sudden appearance had only served to confuse her further.

Sensing her roiling emotions, he smiled to her before turning to close the door behind him. Then, without approaching her, he gently asked again, “Who was the woman?”

“My great aunt.”

He walked down the left side of the room, finally seating himself on the opposite end of the small pew upon which she had been sitting. “Please,” he said, “sit down.”

She sat back down in the pew, facing him. She remained silent, unsure of what, if anything, she should say.

“Would you tell me about your aunt?”

A silence drew out between them in the room. He was waiting for an answer, his curiosity raised by what he had seen, wondering if she might be of assistance in dealing with this demon. He was not concerned with the traditional Church concerns of heresy.

She was afraid. If he could see an image that she had accidentally projected while thinking of her aunt, what else could he discover? Would he find out about her crisis of faith? Could he, a priest, possibly understand her background?

He smiled to calm her. Her reaction was more intense than he had expected, but it was understandable. “As you should know, sister, I cannot see into your mind.” He smiled again. “Perhaps I should tell you about your aunt?”

She nodded dumbly.

“She was a village wise woman, what some might call a witch. She followed in the old religion of your people. You admired her, looked up to her. But, as a young child, you were sent to Catholic school. Perhaps in a place distant from your home?”

She nodded again.

“You have nothing to fear from me. I, unlike many others in the Church, recognize that God has many faces. Perhaps your family was one that chose to see many faces of God instead of one God. What concerns me isn’t what might concern many priests. I am not concerned with what you believe as much as I care about whom you serve. Do you

serve good, or evil? Since you are a nun and minister to the sick, what you do is good. Therefore you are good. What you may believe in to sustain you is of less concern to me than who you are.” He smiled again before continuing in his gentle voice, “Are you more reassured?”

She found that she was, even though his words had unintentionally speeded her along the road to a new faith.

“So, was I right about your aunt?”

“Yes. She was the wise woman. She worshipped the old gods that had been worshipped in Ireland before Christianity came. As a child, I was to be trained to walk in her footsteps. But I didn’t.”

“What happened?”

“The famine,” she replied. “When the village priest came to my family and asked if they would like to send me to Catholic school in Dublin, my parents had no choice. It wasn’t even a question of one less mouth to feed. At that time, we did not know if any would survive. It was the right choice. Of my parent’s five children, only three survived the famine.”

Benito nodded. He knew more than he wanted to know about the famine, about the Church’s inaction when so many of the faithful were dying for want of the simplest need of all, food. And he understood, with some distaste, why the village priest had chosen this particular girl.

“So, Sister, you were the one that your aunt had chosen to train?”

“Yes, Father.”

“Because?”

“Of all of the children in the family, I was the one with the strongest gifts.”

“Did you go far in your training?”

“No, not at all, or perhaps I should say, not since I was seven. My aunt had just begun my training when I was sent to Dublin. We had barely started.”

“What a waste.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have almost no training, certainly no encouragement, yet you have a magical ability that many strive for years to attain. You are an hereditary. Your gift came to you at birth. Just a few lessons from your aunt began its development. Though left without nurturing for years, it is still strong enough that another magician can sense its workings. How powerful you could have become,” he mused.

She interrupted. “Another magician?”

“Yes, Sister, the Church has its own magicians, though we prefer the term ‘mage.’ I am one of them.”

“But I have never heard of them.”

“Of course not, our existence is kept in secret, except from those who must know. In your case, you will find out about us whether I tell you or not. Other mages from within the Church will gather here very soon. They are coming to quell the demon whose workings you saw. In order to achieve that, the working that we do must be very powerful. With your gift, you could no more ignore our efforts than you could ignore an artillery shell falling on the convent.”

“Where does the Church get these magicians?”

“We find people like me, who have an aptitude for being trained in the arcane arts. Then we begin the process of training. If the training is successful, then they become one of those who are called in special situations. It is rare that we can find one who is an hereditary like you. Hereditaries have the ability to quickly gain abilities that others take years to master. Which brings me to another question, does this gift run strong in your family?”

“Yes, at least I think it does. My ancestors have been the wise ones of the village, sometimes the district, for longer than the *seanchaide*, the singers, can remember.”

Benito knew the abilities of the Irish storytellers. Some of their stories have been unchanged for hundreds of years. Their memories are legendary. So it was quite likely that for centuries this nun’s ancestors had been the pagan priestesses of their village. It was a pity that he had not found her before. Now they were facing a deadly enemy, and a potentially powerful, hereditary magician was with them. But, as she was untrained, she was probably useless.

In the silence she had found her own question. “Why does the Church have magicians?”

“It has been necessary, from time to time, to deal with things that cannot be handled by an exorcism.”

“So the rite does not always work?” She was surprised.

“The official position is that it does. But the power of the rite is partially controlled by ability as well as faith. Enacting a ceremony, speaking the words, and invoking the powers are all done far better by a magician than a priest untrained in the arts. If the priest has been trained as I have, there is more power at hand, since the priest is the conduit for the powers he invokes. Without magical aptitude and training, there is a limit to what can be brought down. There are also additional rituals that are much more powerful than an exorcism. They are used when an exorcism is not enough, no matter who is performing it.”

She nodded. Her easy acceptance of the complex explanation that he had offered surprised him. She must have gained some understanding of how these things worked, either from her aunt, or from the culture of her girlhood.

She interrupted his thoughts with another question. “What about these things that cannot be dealt with by exorcism?”

“That is what we are facing now. The demon that came for Richardson did not possess him. It simply killed him. A traditional exorcism would have no effect on this creature, since this demon can leave at will. It is not tethered to the body. Exorcism is for the removal of a spirit that inhabits a human body. Because of the way that Mr. Richardson died, the demon must have been independent of the body. In all likelihood, the creature had been summoned by other magicians. We can assume that they are evil. Quite probably they are actually worshipers of Satan.”

Again she listened quietly, not questioning the explanation, seeming to file it away in the recesses of her mind for later examination.

He thought for a moment, then went on, “Now I understand why you were the first nun to enter the room. You had no fear that the demon would attack you because you knew that it was gone.”

“I did. I knew it was safe to go into the room.”

“And the fact that it had been there at all did not surprise you?”

“I never thought about it that way.”

“Sister, most people would have been terrified just to know that such a thing might exist. They would hide from the fear by telling themselves that it was not real. But you knew it was real.”

“I felt it.”

“That, too, is from your upbringing. I have been to parts of the world where the comings and goings of spirits is considered normal, part of everyday happenings. You were raised in such a place. To a Christian all of these spirits are assumed to be evil; they are to be feared. To you they are the evil ones in a realm that you accept exists, a realm in which most of the spirits are believed to be benign.”

She looked at him questioningly.

“The Ireland that you grew up in accepted the presence of the unseen, the manifold nature of the spirit realm. In most places in the Christian world, all that is unseen is suspected of being evil.”

“That seems so,” she paused to consider, “odd.”

“To you it is. But much of Ireland is still only thinly Christianized. Sometimes I think that it is a veil that hides a pagan heart.” He asked, “And who is your namesake, Brigid?”

“A saint, one of the patron saints of Ireland.”

“I know that. I mean, who was Brigid?”

“The goddess of mothering, of help and of the hearth.” She smiled shyly. “And some say of love.”

“Precisely. And because we could not remove her from the Irish, we made her a saint, so her worship could continue within the sanctions of the Church.”

Sister Brigid was becoming more and more unsure of this conversation. There were things that she did not want to share with this priest. No matter how open-minded he might seem, he was still a priest.

“But, Father, what about the thing that killed Mr. Richardson?”

“That is what I have come to talk to you about. Because you were there, you may be able to contribute some understanding that we do not have. I know the creature is very powerful, I know what he seems capable of, but I was not there.”

“Father, I think you know most of what I know already. I felt him come and go. I felt a chill when he was there. He was powerful and did not mind entering a place of nuns and priests to do his will. The sanctity of our hospital seemed to pose no barrier to him.”

“Why do you say that?”



“It happened so quickly. There was no sense of struggle. The only delay in killing Richardson seemed to be for his own amusement. I could feel his terrible laughter running through the corridor. He had no fear.”

It was now time for the priest to think. This information was what he could not have hoped to gain except by speaking with someone with the Sight who had been present on that night. But the information was frightening. This demon was very strong if he could end a human life with no more effort than a human would need to kill an insect.

“Are you certain?” he asked.

She thought for a moment before replying, “Yes, I am sure.”

“Then I and my brothers face a formidable challenge. We do not know where this thing comes from, what its name is . . .” He drifted into silence.

She was momentarily concerned with her own thoughts, with the friendly little spirits that she had seen in the trees. Then she remembered. “I think I know where it comes from.”

He jerked upright as if cold water had been thrown on him. “You do?”

“I’m not certain, but there is something I saw.”

“Please, go on.”

“Since the events of that night, the mother superior has graciously allowed those of us who were close to the incident to take some time to ourselves to absorb what happened, to recover from what occurred. The evening after the murder, I was walking in the city around twilight. As I returned to the hospital for my work that evening, night had fallen. I happened to walk by a certain street. I almost turned down it. But I sensed something there, something evil and dark. With the Sight, I could see a dark mist hanging over the street, like a cloud of black smoke.”

“Where?”

“It was in front of a house on Saint Julian Street. I saw the cloud while I was standing in Warren Square.”

The name of the square was within the area he had laboriously defined by going through the monsignor’s journal. “Sister,” he said, a smile filling his face, “you have given us a great gift. Such knowledge can help us a great deal.”

“I am glad I could be of service.”

Another thought struck him. “Were you observed?”

“I don’t think so. At least, there was no reaction to my presence.”

“Sister, I would like you to consider something, though you are under no obligation to pursue it. I would like to ask you to join with us. You have a potent talent. Perhaps you could put it to use in our work?”

She looked at the priest levelly. Her eyes seemed to pierce him. For several seconds, they held their positions until her gaze softened.

“Father, that is not something that I can decide now. Could I have some time to think about it, perhaps offer a prayer?”

He realized that she was offering the traditional homily. In reality, she needed time to think. “Certainly. But please, do not mention anything of our conversation other than that I asked you about the events of the evening. I may have need to discuss your special gift with the mother superior so that she can understand why I need you to take me to that place where you saw the darkness. Other than that small exception, what we said about magic, your aunt, and what you saw needs to remain between us and God.”

“You can count on my silence, Father. And, as for the other, thank you.”

“And Sister, you may be in some danger. If there are potent magicians abroad, they will not take kindly to someone who has the ability to perceive them.”

“What should I do?”

“If you perceive anything of the same nature about you, come to me immediately, day or night.”

She nodded. “Yes, Father.”

“Go with God,” he replied.

She rose and left the chapel. As the door shut behind her, Benito’s thoughts momentarily stayed with the surprising woman he had just met. The most remarkable part of the conversation was the part that had never occurred. He had identified the ones who had summoned the demon as worshipers of Satan. He was relatively sure that is what they were, but only in the sense that they themselves thought they were summoning Lucifer. When he had called them satanists, the nun had been concerned with the other points that he had made, not with the implied presence of the Lord of Evil. Why not? Was it because she did not believe in Satan?

Though it was contrary to Church doctrine, he knew that many within the Church, himself included, did not believe in one encompassing lord of evil. He used the term “satan” in the old sense of the word, meaning “adversary.” It was a convenient shorthand that conformed to doctrine. Luis thought it likely that Brigid shared his perspective.

He was now convinced that the creature that they were dealing with was frighteningly strong. The working that they must do, even with the information gleaned from the nun, could be a dangerous one. He would be glad when Rimaldi and the others arrived. He did not feel safe in this city, no matter how pleasant its outward aspects might be.

After lunch, Benito went to see the mother superior. Her office was near the front of the convent, as would be expected. She would have visitors who should not pass through to the places where the nuns worked and slept. He stopped before her iron-bound oak door and rapped lightly.

“Come in,” she called from inside.

Father Benito entered the office. It was pleasingly austere.

She stood as he entered. “So you must be the mysterious Father Benito.”

“I am, Mother Superior.”

“Please, please, come in and sit down. I’m Mary Margaret. Or, for simplicity, Margaret will do.”

“And I am Luis.”

“A pleasure to meet you.” She smiled as she regained her chair. “I must tell you that I’ve been looking forward to your visit.”

“Thank you.” He took the offered chair. “But I must first apologize. In my hurry to interview the nuns who were there the night of the events, I failed to first pay a call on you. It was impolite of me.”

“No matter, Father. Everything has been at sixes and sevens since that night. I have spent an unusual amount of time dealing with my own charges. It seems that many of the sisters have been rather astonished to find that being a nun might one day cause them to come face to face with an occupant of the nether regions. I’ve just been fortunate that Sister Francis was there that night. She is as steady as a rock, and she has helped calm the others.”

“And Sister Brigid?”

The mother superior smiled. “So you have already found the most exceptional of the nun’s reactions. She is an unusual case. She seems untroubled by the events, except that she is more inwardly turned than she normally is. I wonder what might be going on inside her mind?”

“I can assure you a great deal.”

“Please, go on.”

“I have had the opportunity to speak with her. She is Irish, native born in one of the more pagan regions of the island. She has had less to adjust to than many others might. She was born believing the spirit realm was just around the next hill, so she seems more ready to accept that it is real.” He carefully avoided much of the content of the conversation. “But she is still frightened by the events, even if she has little trouble accepting that they occurred.”

The mother superior nodded. “For myself, the problem was to accept that it was real. Perhaps it is some weakness in my faith, but I had not expected such a manifestation. It seems to belong in another century.”

“A normal reaction,” he said. “We talk of God and we talk of Satan, but we never expect to find either of them in the next room. We say God is omnipresent, but we never expect that the place that He will reveal His presence is in front of us. Much the same, how can we expect that a minion of Hell might also be in the same place that we are?”

“You say that so easily.”

“Yes. Sadly, I have more than enough reason to accept it as a simple fact of existence.”

“You speak as if this is a common occurrence.”

“No, thankfully, it is not. Especially with instances such as this.”

“The bishop said as much. He said it might not be a case of possession.”

“Quite true. I have been present for several exorcisms. At the first one, the fact that I was there for an exorcism seemed beyond belief. But I saw the exorcism. I saw the dark spirit that had inhabited the man when it was cast out. I saw it for just a moment, but that one vision changed me. For weeks afterward, I withdrew. Mainly out of simple fear. At that exorcism, I did not perform the rite, I only watched. It was part of my training. What haunted me was that I doubted that I could perform the rite. Was my faith strong enough? Could I keep a spirit from possessing me?”

“What changed your mind?”

“The exorcists, Father Reynaldo and Father Armand. They assured me that there was nothing that could touch me as long as I kept to the ritual and did not allow myself to be diverted by anything. Protection lies both in the word of God and in the simple act of faith that God protects his own.”

The nun sat back in her chair and looked at the far corner of the room. “And that is what protects Sister Francis.” She smiled to herself ruefully and assumed an almost confessional tone. “I do not have her abiding faith. I have tried, but the world is too much with me. I might have once had that kind of faith, but the years have worn it down.” She stopped for a moment. “The war played a large part in that.”

“How so?” the priest asked.

“It is difficult to believe in God’s goodness and might when you see so many men maimed and killed. There were times when the casualties were so high that every bed in the hospital was filled and we had to leave men on the floor. At the worst times, we had patients lying in makeshift beds in the street. There were many soldiers that we could do nothing for.” She spoke slowly as she revisited that time. “All we could do was watch them die. Some died very slowly. The Minie ball is a terrible adversary. It shatters bone and seems to leave a path for infection. There were times, as long as a month, that the hospital was never silent. There was always a man screaming or moaning in pain.”

The priest bowed his head. She had seen a vision of Hell far worse than he had, and her vision was one that could shatter faith, not reinforce it. “That is much to endure, Sister.”

“Yes, it is.” She focused on the present. “It is hard to believe with the same naive force that you once did when you have seen such horror. At least, it was for me. Sister Francis could manage it. I could not. Yet I was the mother superior and always had the force of duty and obligation to drive me. That I was thankful for.”

Benito could say nothing in response. He realized that this nun had opened her heart to him, and he had no ready words of comfort.

“Forgive me,” she said, her voice rough. “I think the recent events have all drawn us to remember our own visions of evil. It may be that remembering the horrors of the past helps us avoid the horrors of the present.” She paused, and her tone became more personal. “I mean, I understand war. It is horrible, but it is a thing that men do to themselves, to each other. A demon is a thing I do not understand. How can God let such things loose? Richardson’s head was shattered when he was thrown against the wall.”

“God did not let it loose. Men did.”

“What men?”

“We don’t know yet. I do not mean to frighten you with what I say, but you must know the facts as I do. You have to be aware. You are, after all, the mother superior, and things may come to your attention that others need to know. This creature was summoned by men in Savannah who are performing their own evil magic. It did not slip from the nether world; it was called. They summoned this spirit in their rituals to do evil. Their objective is not to have it possess someone, but to use it to terrify and kill. They worship it. They kill in its name.”

“Kill?”

“Yes. Their rituals often involve human sacrifice.”

“Here, human sacrifice? How?”

“Their victims are the ones whom no one would miss. Over the past several years a prostitute has been found dead about once every four months in the same general area of the city. The condition of the bodies indicates that most of them were murdered in the same way. And they are found around the time of the new moon, a time that satanists might consider auspicious for their meetings.”

The nun stopped and reflected on what Benito had said. The priest did not interrupt her; it was apparent that she needed some time to digest what he had said. When she spoke it was a simple remark. "It is hard to believe, but I do."

"Harder still to accept that no one noticed."

"How did you find out?"

"Monsignor Henry let me see a journal of sorts that has been kept, somewhat erratically, by a senior member of the bishop's staff for about a hundred years. Every unusual event that might have a spiritual or mystical interpretation has been recorded. Some of the occupants of the office were very dedicated to keeping a record, a few were not. But the pattern of these killings is unmistakable."

"Poor girls." She crossed herself. "I will pray for their souls." Her eyes hardened. "When you have been a nun as long as I have, you know that some of the girls who take orders do so because it is a last resort. A broken marriage, an illicit affair, there are many reasons. Some come because it is the only option other than the brothel. Some of these girls who were killed by these men might have just as easily been nuns. I know it is odd to think of the choice to take orders in that way—the nunnery or the brothel. Perhaps that is why we sisters do not condemn the sisters of that other order as vociferously as our society does." She looked directly at Benito. "But how did Richardson come to be a victim?"

"He may have been one of their members who tried to leave."

"It seems they could have found a way to kill him that would have drawn less attention."

"I'm certain they could have, but they chose to do it this way to make an example. Or they may have done it just to prove that they could."

"So the Church awakens its own magicians to deal with them." She smiled at his reaction. "Father, your secret is safe, but I have been in the Church too long not to know



some of its secrets. Though, until you sent your telegram, I was not sure that your informal order of magicians existed.”

“I can say nothing about that.”

“I know. Nor will I press for more information. Even though I do confess to the sin of curiosity.” She smiled. “But none of this is what brought you to me. You have need of something I can provide? Sister Brigid, I would assume.”

He smiled. “One day I will learn not to underestimate the insight of a mother superior.”

“Thank you for the compliment, but it was easy to see. She has a gift that we are all aware of. Even the doctors have come to rely on it more than they would care to admit.”

The question was obvious on his face even before he spoke. “You mean her abilities have been used?”

“Not in a formal way, but we found out early in the war that she seemed to know about a person’s health, about his chances for survival.” She continued, “Often the most difficult choice that a doctor has to make in treating gangrene is where he should cut. Can he save the knee? Must the knee go to protect the patient’s life?”

“She always seemed to know if the doctor had cut enough. It was as though she could *see* the infection in the body.” She thought for a moment. “Some of the other nuns were frightened by this peculiar skill. But we were in a war, and there were many men coming to us for help. Her special sense was simply too useful to ignore.”

“Her sense of these things might make her valuable in our work.”

“If she can help to defeat whatever this thing might be, she is yours. There may be too few nuns now as at any time, but I want to keep my charges very busy. Their minds should not be idle. Giving Sister Brigid’s duties to others will serve my purposes, as well as yours.”

“Thank you, Mother Superior.”

“I will send her to you once I have made the arrangements. She will be assigned to you until her abilities are no longer required.”

The priest rose and bowed to the nun. “I appreciate your understanding.”

“And you’re certain,” she said, “that you cannot tell me more about your work?”

“I am sure you will find out more than you wish to know before this is over.”

The mother superior’s voice took on a lower, even more serious tone. “You said that faith and the rite would protect you in an exorcism. Can it protect you from this thing that has been unleashed here?”

He paused before responding. “No, it cannot. Only a mage is safe from this thing, and only a potent one at that.”

She nodded. “That is the answer that I expected.”

“I am sorry to leave such unwanted information behind me, but it is the truth as I see it.”

“I always prefer the truth, even when it is unpleasant,” she said.

Benito turned and left. He closed the door behind himself and walked down the hall. Regardless of the dangers they faced and the warning he had left with the mother superior, he felt his confidence increase, now that he knew that Sister Brigid would be with them.

He forgot to remind himself of the old adage: “*Confidence is a sword that often wounds its possessor.*”

## *Chapter Eight*

### *Friday, October 16th*

The next morning, Benito was waiting for Brigid in the room the Bishop had assigned to him. It had been well-chosen, isolated from the normal traffic within the compound and large enough to hold the others who would soon arrive. The heavy oak table in the middle of the room had the patina of age. It had been cared for lovingly, and glowed as only well-rubbed wood can. Around it were placed about a dozen chairs.

He watched as Brigid entered the room cautiously. "Welcome, Sister."

She shut the door behind her. "Good day, Father." She spoke formally. She was obviously ill at ease.

He rose from where he had been sitting and indicated the chair opposite him. "Please join me."

She sat with her hands clasped tightly in her lap.

"You are worried," he observed.

She looked at him levelly.

"Sister, you have nothing to fear. I am not the Inquisition, come to trick your pagan secrets from you. As I told you before, I know your nature. Though I am not an hereditary, I understand some of your gift, since I have studied it."

"But then why did the mother superior send me to you?"

"Because I need your help. But I need that help only if you are willing to give it."

Her face cleared. "Then I am in no trouble, no danger?"

"Trouble, no, you are in no trouble. With your permission, I will mention something of your gifts to a few others in my order, but they have no more prejudice against these abilities than I do."

"Do as you think best."

“As far as being in danger, there is a chance of that. As I mentioned in our last meeting, your ability to sense others might make our opponents take note of you. You *sensed* the demon. You *saw* the cloud on Saint Julian. Perhaps you have been *seen* as well.” He paused to let his words have their effect. He did not want her to underestimate her vulnerability. Even though she was a potent hereditary, she had no training in magical defense. “I am almost certain that one of our mages will be a woman. If so, I would like you to stay with her. That would offer you better protection. But the best protection is for me to teach you the rituals you need. They will probably be very potent in your hands.”

“You would teach me magic?” she said, astonished.

“Yes, otherwise, you could be in danger. The men who summoned this demon are part of a cult that has been in this city for well over a century. We do not know what power they might have accumulated. Members of my order are traveling here right now from all over the country, but, even when assembled, we may not prove to be up to the task.”

“But, Father, I was taught that the Church is on the side of God. With His help, you are not supposed to be able to fail.”

“True, but we must be worthy vessels, capable of calling down power that can combat this danger. If we fail, it is because *we* fail, not because God has failed.”

“And what would happen if you were to fail?”

“It is likely that we would die.”

“I don’t understand. I never thought that this type of thing could exist, a creature that could fight a priest, much less many priests, and defeat them.”

Benito began to speak to her in a low, but clear and urgent voice. “When you take it upon yourself to fight such a creature, you expose yourself to his magic. If we were simply to try and defend ourselves from the creature, we could in all probability do so.

Once we are assembled, the creature presents little threat to us unless we strike against it. But that is precisely what we must do.

“And there is the matter of those who summoned it. They can strike against us, and they are likely powerful in their own right. We don’t know exactly how powerful, and they can send the creature against us when we are unprepared. They make the task before us much more difficult.”

Brigid stopped her next question. She realized that she was learning things that seemed to be in opposition to all of what the Church had taught her about the power of Christ, about the power of faith. These new thoughts meshed with the current of thought that had been awakened from her past.

The priest understood the play of emotions across her face. “I know this is not what you expected to hear. We do not know why some of these things are so, only that good men have fallen before in dealing with such creatures.”

She changed, not in any obvious way, but some of the obsequiousness of a nun fell from her. Something within her had turned in the current. She placed both hands on the edge of the table. “Then there is something wrong with your magic.”

Benito was not prepared for the transformation that had occurred, for her contradicting him. “No, you do not understand how this is, we . . .”

She interrupted, “No, Father Benito, I cannot accept your vulnerability. True, I was only seven when I left my home, but I had already seen things that were more than the product of a child’s imagination. My aunt could summon small sprites and spirits that would dance in the smoke. I have seen the spirit creatures by the streams when I went to gather herbs. The veil between the worlds is not as dense as you suppose. You are a good man, an honest man. I know that from looking at you. If you fail in fighting this creature, the fault lies in your ritual, in your understanding, not in your inability to be a ‘good vessel’.”

He had not expected the conversation to take this course. But he rose to the defense. "These rituals have been developed over hundreds of years. They have been used to defend the Church for fifteen centuries."

She shook her head slowly. "Then why did I never hear of such things in my childhood? In all the tales of the old gods there is no creature that the hero cannot overcome, no demon too powerful for the gods."

"Those are only legends, this is reality. We are not gods, we are only men."

A silence fell between them. She wondered if she should go on. She felt something rise inside her, some vestige of the things that she had learned from her family. He could see the change, and he wondered what he had awakened in her.

She trusted her feelings and broke the silence. "My aunt told me a tale when I was six, a tale about a creature like this one. I thought then that she was merely trying to frighten me. But I later came to find it was true. Even though I did not remember the tale until now, it is the reason why I feared the Church could not fight this thing."

Father Benito kept silent, for she had struck a place that contained his doubts as well as hers. He sat down across from her to listen to what she had to say.

"About ten years before I was born, a man sought to do magic against the English. He did his magic at a place close to a village that lay ten miles from my own. He managed to release something that was half-man, half beast. He could not control it and was the first to die at its hands. Then it roamed free every night near the place where it had been summoned. It was seen by hundreds in the twilight and the dawn, in torch light and lamplight. For four nights it took sheep, children, even fully grown adults and killed them. It was said to laugh when it killed, just as this demon laughed when it killed Richardson.

"The people huddled around the old woman of the village. They hoped that her wisdom could protect them. True, she could offer some protection. But they could not

spend every night with the old woman. There were flocks that they had to protect from prowling dogs and wolves, horses to soothe when the storms came. My aunt went to that village to help, but she could only help the local woman hold the thing at bay. The local Catholic priests were as fearful as everyone else.

“On the fifth day, an old man came to the village. He looked frail and old to my aunt. She said that he seemed a creature of gray cloth and gauze. Without his walking staff, it seemed he could hardly hold himself erect. He was tired from the road, but would only rest long enough to take refreshment. Then he went to the place where the magic had been done.

“As twilight began to settle, he climbed up onto the small rock outcropping where the one who had summoned the beast had died. My aunt and one of the men of the village had to help the old man with the climb. But once on the rock, he sent them down, away from what he knew would happen.

“As full darkness descended, they heard the beast shuffling closer. My aunt, who was near the base of the outcropping, was only thirty feet from the old man. She could tell that the beast was approaching. She was more afraid for the old man than for herself, since he seemed like some kind of sacrifice offered up for the beast.

“As the beast came closer, she heard the horses and sheep in the village pens become restive. The air became still. Then the beast began to ascend the rocks, going for the old man.

“A light suddenly flared, illuminating the old man. My aunt ran back from the rock and looked up. The old man was standing erect. A dim light the color of moonlight surrounded him and revealed the beast standing opposite him. The creature was roaring to frighten him, but the old man fearlessly held up his hand, and the roaring stopped. The beast twisted, trying to approach the old man, but his feet had been frozen to the rock. Then the old man spread his arms and pounded his staff against the rock. Bright, swirling

colors came from the base of his staff. He moved his hands, and the colors wrapped themselves around the beast. The mute creature swatted at them, obviously in fear. The old man pounded his staff again and the colors condensed onto the beast. For a moment there was complete stillness. Then the creature burst into flame. His voice was released and his screams could be heard as they echoed off the rocks and rolled down the hills to the sea. When the screaming stopped, the creature was gone. The light dimmed and went out. All that was left was a frail old man at the top of the rock. He was leaning on his staff.

“My aunt went up to him and helped him down. She took him to the village, where they gave him poteen and a bed. He did not say a word until my aunt began to cover him for the night. All he said was, “I fear I’m too old to do that many more times.” He smiled and fell asleep.

“The next morning, he was gone. No one ever saw him again.”

She pinned Benito with her gaze. “Can you bring us a magician like him?”

Benito had no response. The story challenged what he had been taught to believe. “It can’t be true.”

“Father, it is true.”

They sat together, waiting in the silence. She was certain all that she had said was true, all the more so because she had not remembered that story until she had begun to tell it. As for Benito, he was lost in remembering things that he had discovered years ago, during his training. For part of that time, he had access to the greatest magical library in the world, the one deep beneath the Vatican. No one went there but the members of his order.

“Sister, we cannot bring you a mage like him.” He paused and took a deep breath, for the things he was about to reveal would be hard for him to say. He even feared to say them, for by their nature they were almost blasphemous. “Did such men ever exist? Yes, if



the legends of many cultures are to be believed. There are records of actions performed by these magicians from the Caucasus to the British Isles, everywhere the Celtic peoples have lived. They have different names in different places. The stories, when looked at individually, are unbelievable. Even within my order they are usually dismissed as embellishments, folk tales, but when looked at together, there are too many similarities to be disregarded. These magicians seemed to appear in times of need and disappear just as soon afterwards.

“We’re not even certain what to call them. They were solitary men of power, who must have had some communication with one other, but were never part of organized rituals or rites.

“The stories about them began to become less and less frequent starting in the ninth century. The position the Church takes, if it takes one at all, is that people became less superstitious as the Christian faith assumed ascendancy. These old tales of powerful magicians and dragons and things that walked the night were relics of a dark time before the coming of the faith.”

Benito looked away. He did not want to see the reaction in her eyes as he went on. “But there is a more insidious possibility. As the Church’s power grew, believing in these things and telling these tales was deemed heretical. These magicians, whoever they were, would have to work more and more away from public view. Exposed, they would be branded as witches and persecuted. For all of their power against those things that can haunt us, they would not have been able to withstand the temporal power of the Church.

“And perhaps they were needed less. As the magical knowledge was leached out of the general population, there would have been fewer and fewer fools to summon things they could not control. But, to our shame, it is more likely that many of these solitary magicians were apprehended and converted or killed by one of the innumerable campaigns waged from the eleventh until the seventeenth centuries as we sought to abolish all competing forms of religion.”

“The Inquisition,” she said.

“Yes, the Inquisition, among others.” He fell silent, and she respected his privacy. Then he continued, “Whatever their knowledge was, it was never written down. For a tradition such as theirs to continue, it must be passed on. That passing on of knowledge would have become more and more difficult in the Christian world. I had believed that it was all lost, that there would be no more of these men, since the last stories we had of them were from the fifteenth century, before the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum*. That is,” he said, “until I heard your story.”

There was an edge to her voice when she spoke. “So now the Church will seek out the old man and others like him, now that you know.”

He shook his head. “No, the Church will not do that again. And they cannot do it in this case because they will never know. I shall not repeat the story.”

Brigid regarded the priest with greater respect.

Benito continued. “You see, Sister, if their magic exists at all, it must be allowed to survive. I, we, all of us, have an obligation to keep it alive. If even part of the legends are true, they could do things that we cannot imagine. We must summon many priests and perform complex rituals to raise the power needed to try and fight against creatures such as this one. They did not.”

She avoided the obvious question and asked another. “So why hasn’t the thing that killed Richardson attacked anyone else since that night?”

“Because the ones that summoned it have sent it back. But they will call it again.”

“Does that mean your opponents are more powerful than you?”

“No, I do not believe that they are more powerful. But this creature may be stronger than us. You see, it is easier to control a thing that you have summoned than to fight against a thing that has been summoned by another. And they may not even control

it. Perhaps all that they do is open the door for it. Their power could be less than ours and yet be strong enough to summon a creature that we cannot destroy.”

She nodded and sat quietly for a moment. “You said you were uncertain of a name for the magicians like the one I described.”

“Many have been proposed. But the one that is used most frequently is ‘walker.’ They were called that because they seemed to be constantly on the move, generally on foot. They are mentioned in numerous texts, though little is said about them in any one place. The information is so vague that it is difficult to piece anything together. And, until you’ve read many texts, it would be easy to dismiss the information about them as folk tales with little substance. But there is a pattern.”

“And what gods did they worship?” She understood the implication of her question. She had said “gods,” not “God.”

“The gods,” he replied.

“No, I mean which of the old gods?”

“I know what you meant. But the answer is the same. Does it matter if a goddess was called Athena in Greece and Minerva in Rome? It was still the same goddess. Does it matter if the god of the underworld was Hades, Bran, or Pluto? They were all the same gods throughout Europe, just with different names. So they were ‘the gods’.”

“But if Christ surpassed all of the old gods,” she asked, half in innocence, “then why is your power not greater?”

There was sadness in his voice when he answered. “I don’t know. I have never known. From the first time I suspected that the walkers were real, that there were powers we could not attain, that their magic dwarfed our own, I have wondered.” He looked at the nun. “But what choice do we have? We are here, we are part of the Church. And the remnants of the old religion are just strands, single threads out of a vast pattern that we glimpse but whose heart we cannot know. Can you call one of the immortal Celtic god-

heroes, like Nuada of the Silver Hand? Can you ask him to dispatch this demon? And if you could, would he laugh in your face for the millions who no longer know him? Did the old gods leave us, or did we leave them?"

"I think they are still there. That is why we can still see the little ones."

"The little ones?"

"The spirits that are all around us, they hide in the trees and whisper in words we cannot understand. They know the old ones."

He looked at her with astonishment. "You can see them?"

She looked at him with confusion, stunned. "You can't?"

"So you can see them?"

"Of course. I mean, I had not for a long time, since I was a little girl, but I can now."

He laughed ruefully, then said quietly. "And I am supposed to teach you."

She did not understand.

"You have such remarkable abilities. The creatures you call the 'little ones' show themselves to you. They recognize you as one of their own. We almost never see them. Perhaps they are afraid. Maybe they are angry."

"I do not know if they can get angry. They always seem the same. Mischievous, but kind."

"Then you live in a world that is better than the one I inhabit."

They both let the sadness of that statement hang in the air. She stood and walked to the window that looked down on the garden. She could see the small nun's chapel where they had previously met on the opposite side of the walled garden. Her bravado that had been so strong a few minutes ago had faded.

"Father Benito, all that we have said today . . ." she trailed off. "I am afraid of what we have said. I am confused. I'm no longer sure of what I believe."

“I know that,” he replied.

“I have told you about my doubts.” Fear played across her face. “You won’t tell anyone else?”

“No, I wouldn’t do that. I am too close to apostasy to reveal anyone else’s secrets.” He shifted in his chair uncomfortably. “But I ask again, what can I possibly teach you? You do not need the rituals.”

“I have no control over what I do and see. It comes and goes as it pleases.”

“Control.” He nodded. “Yes, that I can teach you, and protection.”

She turned away from the window and faced him. “Good. Then teach.” She walked back to her chair and sat down facing him.

He fell easily into the rhythms of the lesson. “First you have to know your own body. Your body is a reflection of your spirit. In order to know the spirit, you must know the body. In order to harness the power of the spirit, the body must not intrude in the flow of energies. But do not be deceived into thinking that the body is unimportant. It is part of the magic as well. It aids in the flow of energy. Do you understand?”

“I think I do.”

“Good, the principle will become more clear as time goes on.”

So he began the lessons that would enable her to control her own abilities, that would allow her to summon what energies she could and direct them. The lessons were simple, but they opened pathways in the body that would let the energies of magic move freely, unimpeded. He was not surprised that she was an apt pupil.

## *Chapter Nine*

### *Friday Evening, October 16th*

Jakob Streng sat lazily in the armchair of his private study. He had spent significant time during the day learning what he could of Father Benito and his plans. His mind was not eased by what he had discovered. He had learned that the priest from Florida had dispatched a telegram, and that he was spending time in the private library of the archdiocese, often accompanied by the bishop's private secretary, Monsignor Henry.

This far, Benito had taken no action against Streng's group. In fact, Streng could detect no magical workings whatsoever from within the diocese, even though he himself, as well as three other of his most competent magicians, had been carefully observing the compound where Benito resided. Essie's reports from her own people had only served to confirm what he had discovered. For once, her ubiquitous sources of information had come up with few new facts for Jakob. He could not even find where the telegram had been sent, though he had little doubt that it was a request for help. Jakob was worried. The Church's arms were long. Had the Church learned better ways to train their magicians? Would there be real danger to his group?

But now he was not interested in sifting through the scraps of information that he possessed. He had come to his private study for relaxation. He picked up the opium pipe from the side table and noticed that the ball had gone dead in the pipe. He scratched a match against the side of its box and brought the flame to the bowl of the pipe. Drawing gently, he lit the opium mud and inhaled a steady stream of the sweet smoke into his lungs. As the drug penetrated into his system, his anxiety and his pain faded.

Jakob lived with pain many days of his life. It was part of the price he paid for his pleasures and for the power that Belial brought. Jakob's joints ached. And there were other pains that seemed to cluster around his heart and deep within his bowels. He knew he was deteriorating physically. He had a growing sense of sickness within him.

The pain was always more severe after a summoning ritual, and, in other ways, the day after a ritual was no longer a normal day for him. He spent much of it asleep, drained of energy. On those days, he could not seem to focus his mind on the decisions at work. To be mentally slow was a potentially fatal flaw in his business. The price of cotton fluctuated on the world markets, in response to changes in the quality and quantity of the supply available. The price of the prime Sea Island cotton that was Streng's primary business was particularly volatile. In previous years, Streng's ability to predict the price of cotton had made him a wealthy man. Now he seemed to have lost much of that skill.

Fortunately, his nephew, Frederick Kuck, was there to take care of business. A bright lad, he had moved from his sister's home in Macon to join Jakob in Savannah. Frederick knew nothing of his uncle's rituals or personal habits. The young man only knew that on some days his uncle suffered too severely to spend much time at the offices of his successful factoring house. On those days, Frederick, as the heir apparent, took control of the office. He had learned the cotton market quickly, especially the critical skill of making good guesses on future prices. Over the years Frederick had learned his job well enough so that Jakob's presence was hardly needed. But Jakob was not fool enough to trust that Frederick would always make the right decisions. His nephew was still young. Nor did he trust that the boy might not find a way to divert more than his generous salary into his personal account.

Jakob looked at the two doors led out from the study. One gave entrance onto the hallway. The other did not go through the hall, but led directly to a bedroom. Customarily the room was occupied by a young girl, whom most were led to believe was his maid. In reality, she was his whore. But Sally was not there now, he had lent her to Jarred Cawthorne for the week. Jarred was Streng's closest friend and an avid participant in their monthly rituals.

Obtaining Sally had been ridiculously easy. He had sent an agent into the countryside to find a young girl. She had been fourteen and was showing the first signs of beauty. Sally had been the best of his agent's finds. She was hired as a "serving girl" and brought to Savannah. The parents had been willing to let her go with few questions, especially after they were given the massive sum of a hundred dollars as their part of her "first year's pay." Jakob chuckled in his opium haze. They had known damn well that she would be no "serving girl," but, in their poverty, had no compunction about selling their little girl into white slavery.

Controlling her was simple. Jakob had treated her kindly. The girl was mystified that she was given such a fine room to sleep in and such fine clothes. Her meals were even brought to her. But Jakob had assured that each meal was laced with laudanum. Soon she was addicted. It was then that Jakob and Cawthorne had taken her to a small house deep within Cawthorne's plantation. The two men held her there and waited for the drug withdrawal to begin making her skin crawl. They explained to her that she was addicted to laudanum and had two choices. She could become their plaything and have all the laudanum she wished for, as well as money, clothes, and an eventual chance for freedom. Or they would let her go and she could fend for herself.

She had resisted for a while, but it took less than twelve hours without the drug to change her opinion. Then they had dosed her with the laudanum she craved and explored the pleasures she could offer. Sally had turned out to be very different from the other girls they had obtained. She was more intelligent and more sensual. Soon, practices that the other girls had always been reluctant to perform became commonplace, even desirable, to her. Her appetites grew. When the two-year mark had come, the time when they would have normally replaced her with another, neither of the two men was tired of her. So she was not sent to a certain brothel madam to become one of her "girls." Now approaching seventeen, she was an accomplished slattern with no desire to change the opulent lifestyle



she purchased by giving the two men and their friends free access to her body. She even seemed to desire it.

Thinking about Sally, Jakob felt the accustomed hardening in his pants and regretted that Sally was not here to serve him. Instead he relit his pipe and dove a little deeper into the opium-scented waters that encased him. His mind drifted from Sally to other topics. He began imaging what they might do with that irritating exorcist from Florida. Streng was certain that the information he needed would eventually come to him. Until then, Jakob felt there was little sense in worrying about him. He presented no danger.

## *Chapter Ten*

### *Saturday, October 17th*

Benito recognized that he would have several days to wait before a significant number of his order arrived. Rimaldi would be the first. He should be here soon, of that Benito was certain. But, even together, they would have to be careful of any actions that might draw the notice of those who had summoned the demon. Until Rimaldi's arrival Benito would have to be very discrete. He was well aware of the fact that he could not stand against them on his own. Yet, he could not just wait. He decided to occupy himself in finding out what he could.

He spent part of the day examining the remaining contents of the library at the Archdiocese. But, other than the diary that had been given him by the monsignor, he found nothing that would be of any assistance. The ones who had called the demon had only recently increased the frequency of their activities to the point where they would draw notice, and then only if one were looking for similarities in crimes. As the afternoon drew to a close, Benito walked to the main police station for the city. He hoped the police might have information that would be of value, and he could think of no better time to go than on a quiet Saturday. The police were more than happy to chat with a priest, but could offer him no help and were apparently surprised that there had been any increase in the deaths of prostitutes. They paid little attention to such crimes.

Disappointed, he left the police station. As he walked through the gathering twilight, he reflected on the day. It was sad that human life had so little value that a series of similar deaths would not be noticed. But it was to be expected. The poor were always disenfranchised, and the poor who lived in the shadow of society's morals would be even more routinely ignored. Prostitution was nominally illegal in Georgia, but Savannah was a seaport, and sailors expected prostitutes for their relaxation. In a city such as Savannah,

prostitutes were a valuable asset. Without them, the sailors would find other ways to “enjoy” their shore leave, and those other ways would probably be more destructive.

He sat in the square in front of the cathedral. The soft breeze that blew up from the marshes and the river rustled the leaves in the oaks that overshadowed the square. Spanish moss hung gracefully over many of the branches, swinging almost hypnotically in the soft wind. In the air was a faint, indefinable scent, both sweet and alive. Benito doubted that he had been in any city that possessed such dreamlike beauty. No wonder the city was a destination for so many travelers and few of the residents showed much tendency to leave. The city’s profligate beauty was seductive, even soporific, perhaps luring residence into a false feeling of confidence. Benito again felt the almost sentient nature of the city, tainted with the dark undercurrent which he could now name. The satanist cult had been in the city for many years, operating in anonymity. The very loveliness of the city allowed even great darkness to go unnoticed.

His thoughts turned to the monsignor’s diary again. Had he perhaps overlooked something? As he thought through each of the entries, he realized that he had. The entries often spoke of locating a Voudon ritual site. Apparently a very active Voudon cult existed in Savannah. Benito had previously had little contact with the religion that the slaves had brought with them from Africa.

Few former slaves lived in Benito’s home state of Florida. As a result, the African religion did not usually have a large enough concentration of Africans to remain active. Here in Savannah, where there had been a large population of slaves concentrated in the cities and on the plantations, the underground worship of the African gods still flourished. Though many of the gods had been given Christian names in the ceremonies of Voudon, they retained many of the same characteristics as they had possessed in Africa.

Though much of the supposed magic of Voudon was little more than showmanship, Benito knew that nearly all religions with strong magical traditions involve some

real magic in their practices. So the priests and priestesses might well have enough magical knowledge to detect the activities of other magicians. The local Voudon community might even have knowledge of the satanists. The difficulty for Benito would be in finding a way to contact the practitioners of Voudon. Any white man would have enough trouble making contact with the leaders of the cult. For a white priest it would be even more difficult. He would have to convince them he was not trying to trouble them in any way, only find out if they had any information that would be of use. The best place to start, he reasoned, would be close at hand, with the colored staff who worked in the diocese itself. They would be more kindly disposed to talk to a priest than many others would. He also realized that he had a ready ally in the search. Sister Brigid had been working at the hospital here for years. It was quite likely that she had formed some kind of connection with a few of the colored people who worked alongside her. He also had another job for Brigid. He had asked her to take him to the place where she had seen the darkness lying across Saint Julian Street.

He did not really need her as a guide. But he did want her company. Even in the light of day, he did not want to face alone any of a cult that had enough power to summon such a demon. The nun would not be of any help if they found them, but having a second person with him might give them pause. She was also sensitive enough to add to his perceptions, and that fact alone gave him more than enough reason to take her with him.

That evening the cathedral choir would be rehearsing in the nave, and Father Benito was looking forward to hearing the songs of praise and adoration. The clear sounds of their voices would take away some of the discomfort he felt in his heart. The powerful sounds of the organ would serve to grant him a greater feeling of security. Though his abbey was a fine home for one as given to contemplation as he was, he did miss the music

that was performed at the cathedrals. Resolved in his thoughts, he turned toward the refectory with his plan for the next day firmly in mind.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### *Sunday, October 18th*

Sister Brigid awoke to the sounds of the convent's dormitory. Relieved of her duties, she was able to stay in her cot and listen to the quiet whispers as the nuns prepared to go about their work. These morning sounds had always been a comfort to her. She kept her eyes closed as she listened. She knew the other sisters by their whispering voices as well as their spoken ones. They did not know why they whispered, but Sunday morning had always been a time for quiet, perhaps because of the later start to the day.

This morning she noticed that the sisters were quieter than usual. Even the whispered morning conversations were absent. And there was no laughter. On most mornings some humorous observation would bring amusement and a soft laugh. But not this day. She knew the reason for the change was her assignment to her new duties. The muted whispers were about her. She wanted to break the near silence, but did not want to draw attention to herself. She rolled onto her back and stretched. Then she opened her eyes and almost screamed.

The fear vanished quickly. A little one had been sitting on the rail at the end of her bed. He'd jumped down from his perch on her bed rail when she had reacted. Now he was on the floor, looking around the edge of the bed.

"Good morning," she said, *sotto voce*. She was so quiet the sound was barely audible, even to her ears.

The little one smiled and climbed back to his perch. He studied her carefully, tilting his small head to one side. He nodded in seeming approval, though she had no idea what he was actually thinking. Then he leapt into the air, landing on the ledge of the small window that was high on her cell wall. Bouncing once on the ledge, he was gone.

She wondered if he had been sent to watch over her, to warn her if there had been danger in the night. The little ones were rumored to do such things. The thought both

worried and pleased her. If he had been sent to watch over her, she was privileged, but, at the same time worried. If they thought she might be in danger, she should take Father Benito's warnings more seriously.

She sat up in her bed. How rapidly the world had changed about her in the days since Richardson had died. Now she greeted little ones at dawn, spoke to magicians who were priests, and learned things about her body. She stretched again, luxuriating in a feeling that might be akin to freedom.

Then she remembered. She still had responsibilities. She was to meet Father Benito at breakfast. Hurrying now, she dressed quickly.

As she entered the refectory for breakfast, she saw Father Benito and the mother superior in conversation with the monsignor. They were sitting at one of the smaller tables, well apart from the others. She went to the far end of the room and loaded a small tray with a light breakfast. Then she turned back into the room.

She paused. Her long training in the Catholic hierarchy demanded that she not interrupt the monsignor and mother superior at their table. However, her new status as a magician-in-training urged her to join them. The old training as a nun won out over her new-found status, and she turned to join some of the other nuns, planning to sit where she might be able to see when Benito's conversation ended. She had begun to move in that direction when the mother superior called to her. "Sister Brigid, please join us." She turned to join them, only barely conscious of the nuns behind her who had begun whispering to each other about this new event.

Father Benito and Monsignor Henry stood as she approached the table, and Benito indicated the chair on his right. "Please." She nervously sat down facing the monsignor. As the bishop's secretary and principle assistant, he would generally have little to do with

one of the nuns except through the intermediary of the mother superior. Brigid's sense of daring seemed to slip before the gaze of the monsignor, but he smiled as she sat, welcoming her to the little conclave that they had formed. Father Benito brought her into the conversation. "Sister, I suspect you know that there is an active Voudon, or voodoo, cult here in Savannah?"

She nodded.

"They might have some information to offer us on the events of that night, perhaps might even know who our opponents are. I asked Monsignor Henry what he thought might be the best way to try and contact them. After all, we're not often seen as allies by the Voudon community."

The monsignor added, "A priest is unlikely to be successful in the attempt. The mother superior thinks you might be the person for the task."

The mother superior said, "You seem to have friends among the staff, at least more so than I do."

Benito said, "You have direct knowledge of the events of that night and have an understanding of what we are planning to do here, and you are a woman, which may prove to be the most important factor. You will be less threatening to them."

"So," the monsignor asked, "will you help us?"

The conversation had gone better than what she had anticipated. Apparently, Benito had not told the monsignor anything about her personal situation that caused him concern. Relieved, she answered, "Of course, Monsignor, I will talk to some of the staff. There are even a few who owe me favors."

"Good," the monsignor said and rose. "I have to see the bishop, so I must leave. But I want to thank you for your willingness to help."

"You're welcome," she said automatically, though she was not accustomed to having a monsignor *ask* if she would do something.



As Monsignor Henry left the table, his thoughts stayed with what had just occurred. It was odd to him that Sister Brigid was so unaffected by the events of that night, and she seemed to be quite comfortable with the assignment to find out more about the voodoo practitioners in Savannah. There was obviously more depth to her than he had thought. But depth alone was not the answer to this riddle. She was simply comfortable with things that frightened both himself and the bishop. Somewhere in the past, she had been exposed to something similar. Still absorbed in his thoughts, he turned down the corridor that led to the bishop's offices.

In the refectory, Benito watched the odd play of expressions move across Brigid's face as she finished her breakfast. She was reacting as if she were two people. One was the nun who would always obey the requests of a monsignor. The other was only beginning to show, but it was the face of a woman who was pleased that what she had really wanted had been granted without her asking for it.

Finishing her breakfast, Brigid asked the priest, "Are you certain about the Voudon cult?"

"I'm certain that they exist, but I am not certain that they will know anything. Still, they may prove to be useful."

"Helpful?"

"Yes. They may have perceived something that night."

"They have real power?"

"In general, no. But the Voudon religion has real practitioners of magic in it. So there is a chance that they have perceived something, just as you did."

Brigid found herself in territory that made her uncomfortable in the presence of the mother superior. The world that was opening to her through the intermediary of the Benedictine priest was not the one she had been taught to believe in for the last twenty-five years of her life.

Sensing Brigid's discomfort, the mother superior rose and excused herself, easing Brigid's concern by saying, "Don't be concerned with your other duties for now, Brigid. Your primary task is to help Father Benito."

Brigid was left with Father Benito, who said, "If you're done with your breakfast, we have work to do."

Brigid nodded. He rose, and Sister Brigid followed him out of the refectory. They turned down a corridor and went to the conference room that had been set aside for Benito and his work. They would continue with Brigid's training.

## *Chapter Twelve*

### *Monday, October 19th*

When they entered the meeting room on Monday, a telegram was waiting for them on the table. It had arrived early that morning. Benito opened it and read through it quickly.

“It appears that our Jesuit has completed his arrangements. Father Rimaldi should be here by Wednesday. He is the head of our special order in North America.”

“He must be very capable.”

“He is. He has no superior outside of the Vatican, either in power or authority in our magical order. He is also the Father Provincial for the Jesuits in Maryland.”

Brigid was intimidated by the authority of this priest she had not yet met. The Jesuits were respected by all and feared by not a few. So this priest would be not only a magician of significant potency, but he was also a Jesuit, an order that she knew little of, except by their reputation. “And what will he make of me?”

“I don’t know, Brigid. He makes his own judgments. I doubt he will want you to participate in the ritual we perform.”

“Why?”

“You are untested in this type of situation. If it were an exorcism, you would be there for the value of what you might see. But this is a different matter. It may be very dangerous.”

“I see,” she said. “And what we do this morning is not?”

“Not really. Even if they perceive us, which is doubtful, they would not dare do anything in daylight.”

“But I perceived you when you were attempting to conceal yourself. Couldn’t they?”

“That is a different matter. You are an hereditary. The perceptual ability you were born with is probably greater than their learned one. Those who serve evil are only rarely hereditaries.”

“Could there not be a first time?”

He smiled. “There could be, at that. But most who have your level of power are not able to serve the dark for long. They overreach themselves when young and end badly.”

“Their power is taken?”

“After a fashion,” he said. “They die young or become insane.”

With those somber thoughts, they left the building, emerging on the side of the cathedral. Sister Brigid had automatically been following the priest. When he stopped, so did she. Benito turned to her. “You are the guide here. I need to follow you.”

A little embarrassed by her new status, she led the priest toward the square. She talked, partially to cover her nervousness. “It is more direct to go right to Saint Julian Street, but I would like to approach it from another direction, the one I came from originally.”

“I agree,” he said.

They walked toward the river on Habersham Street. Colonial Park Cemetery lay to their left. Habersham, like most of the streets in Savannah, was hard-packed dirt. A few of the streets in this area had been covered with cobbles. Savannah had a surfeit of cobble stones. The empty ships arrived with the stones for ballast. They were removed in Savannah, their weight more than replaced by a load of cotton, timber, and naval stores. Benito and Brigid walked down the long block of the cemetery and then covered the short block of Habersham that brought them to Columbia Square. Its august precincts were overlooked by Mr. Davenport’s house. She stopped.

The priest looked up from his musings. “Are we near?”

She nodded. "From here it is a couple of blocks to Warren Square, which is where I saw the darkness." She turned, but did not proceed.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked.

"I'm afraid."

"A reasonable reaction. These people are not ones to be trifled with. But we should be safe. I can protect us both and probably keep us hidden as well. Just make no effort to engage that Sight of yours. That would probably shine like a beacon, assuming any of them are looking. Let me do the examination."

"Then I shall be quiet as a fox."

"A fox. I thought the saying was 'quiet as a mouse'?"

"Not when you're looking in on the chickens," she smiled.

"Then quiet as a fox it shall be."

She led him down State Street. While they were endeavoring to be quiet, State Street certainly was not. The morning traffic on the street was almost constant as wagons rumbled up and down the narrow street. The sidewalks were not yet crowded, and the men seemed quite prepared to step to the side for the nun and priest. The two turned onto Houston and walked to Washington Square. Here the streets were less well traveled, as they were outside the commercial hub of the city. In fact, the streets in the residential area were almost deserted at this hour. Brigid stopped near the middle of the square and faced left. "This is how I came upon the place. We're facing Saint Julian Street. The next square ahead of us is Warren Square. The block of Saint Julian after the square is the one that I saw darkened."

They waited for a moment as Sister Brigid gathered her courage and quieted her mind. Then they set off together down Saint Julian Street. Saint Julian was the patron saint of hotel keepers, travelers, and boatmen. As they walked down the street that bore

his name, Benito lifted a little prayer to him for protection. After all, magicians are travelers, even though much of their travel occurs in unseen realms.

Benito carefully avoided engaging his second sight until they had reached Warren Square. Then he engaged his Sight to look down the street. He pulled back immediately in an automatic reaction of self defense. There was no mistaking the darkness that hung across the street. The evil was palpable. A dark mist roiled the air.

“Brigid,” he said, controlling his voice, “come with me.” He led them away from the dark block of Saint Julian Street to the opposite side of the square. They stood so one of the large oaks lay between themselves and the block of Saint Julian. “I saw what you saw. The house is on the right side of the street, about halfway down the block.”

“It seems so.”

“I have been present at exorcisms, where spirits were driven from people’s bodies, but never have I seen a residue of evil to match this. *Madre de Dios*.” Lapsing into the language of his birth, he crossed himself.

Then a frown crossed his face. “We need to learn more. I want to know the exact address. I should wait for Father Rimaldi, but, once he arrives, they will be more on their guard.”

“Then we should go now.”

“I’m afraid so, but this I will do alone, you have no experience in these matters.”

“Would you not be safer if I could join my power with yours?”

“Brigid, I honor your courage, but joining power is difficult, even for those with far more training than you have.”

Brigid silently thought about what he had said. A movement caught her eye. She knelt down to be closer to the ground and the small creature that stood to her left.

“What are you doing?” Benito asked. At the sound of his voice the little one scurried behind a bush.

“Shssh,” she said. “Use your Sight.”

He engaged it, but saw nothing.

She coaxed the little one into view again. “He won’t harm you. He is with me.”

The tiny face came out from behind the bush. She felt as much as heard the priest’s sudden intake of breath.

“Little one,” she said, “do you have something to tell me?”

The head nodded.

“I should go?”

The head nodded again.

“Can you tell me why?”

Eyeing the priest with caution, he came a bit closer and held his small hand up to his ear. Not really certain she was doing the right thing, she became very still, shut her eyes, and listened carefully. Then something like a thought brushed across her mind. The thought was a picture, not words, of a man in a gray robe, walking across a landscape.

She opened her eyes and the little fellow was gone. She stood up and began talking to Benito. “He left me a picture, not words. I’m not certain that I understand.” Turning to the priest, she was shocked to see tears in his eyes.

“All of my years of study, and I have never seen a little one before. I wasn’t even certain that they existed.”

“They are frightened by priests. I’ve seen them vanish before when a priest came near.”

“They’re afraid of us?”

“Perhaps, perhaps not. No one really knows what they think.”

“Now I understand why there has been such strong allegiance to the old gods in many places. You do not have to await a miracle. They simply happen as a matter of course.”

She shrugged, "To us, it's not a miracle."

"There's something else that surprised me. How did you know that it was safe to engage your Sight once you were behind this oak tree?"

She frowned. "I didn't think about it. I'm sorry, should I have avoided it?"

"No. No one can see through living oak. I just wondered how you knew. Did someone teach you?"

"I don't know if they did or not. I just knew. The oak was the most sacred tree of the gods."

He let her sentence rest in the air. It had many implications. But he did need to know what the little one had said. "I take it the little fellow thinks you should go?"

"Yes, he was definite."

"And his reason?"

"It was a picture. A man walking across a landscape much like the part of Ireland that I am from. He was wearing a dark gray robe. I don't understand."

Benito understood. "He is telling you that a walker might need your information."

"I should have thought of that. But are you certain?"

"No. But I think that is what it means."

"How," she asked, "can he even know a walker might be coming?"

"I have no idea how he could know, but I feel certain that is what he meant."

She nodded, looking toward the dark block of Saint Julian. "I guess we had best get it over with."

"We should," he said.

Turning, they walked out into the open area of the square and crossed it, bound for the darkness that lay across the street before them.

To anyone seeing the street with normal sight, it was a pretty vista. Saint Julian was paved with cobblestones, and the brick sidewalks made it an easy walk. As was typi-



cal for late October, the day was sunny and warm, devoid of the brutal heat of August. Most of the houses were two story, and many had some sort of greenery bordering the street. Small fruit trees were planted along the curb. The houses were mainly brick or stucco, with a few wooden street fronts. The effect, though eclectic, was very pleasing architecturally. It could easily be considered one of the more beautiful streets in a city with a surfeit of beautiful streets.

Seen through the eyes of someone with the Sight, the view was very different. The nearby houses held all of the promise of beauty. But the eye was immediately drawn to what lay across the middle of the street. It was not merely a dimming or a grayness, but a swirling mass of black on gray, with only a few dim streaks of red defining the darker areas. It looked alive, though it was not. It was like the residue of a windstorm, though not a cleansing one, one that trapped the dirt and filth of the thoughts that had been experienced on this street. Dark emotions had given their illness to the miasma. Terror and fear played the greater part, though lurid pleasures had meshed with the other feelings. Here was pleasure without joy, laughter without happiness. Here was a pall that hung more firmly than a funeral shroud. Its appearance was as frightening as the wind wall of a hurricane's eye.

The priest and the nun could both see what was before them. Unthinkingly, they locked their arms together for support. They did not think what someone seeing them might surmise about a priest and a nun walking arm in arm. The reality of what their Sight revealed to them was so overwhelming that it seemed impossible to them that others could not also see. Other than the powerful impressions of the Sight, they could see little. Their normal vision was largely obscured.

But another did see. In the center of the maelstrom was a house not so unlike the others near it. The exterior was tabby, an extremely durable mixture of oyster shells, sand, and lime. The door was fashionably dark. The small front porch was railed with

wrought iron, and a short flight of steps led down to the street. The basement level had an iron gate that blocked entrance from the street. Two small steps led down from the gate. Under the porch was a second door that opened into the basement itself. As was normal for Savannah, the basement floor was only a few feet below street level. Much of the basement was above the ground, with the floor of the first story perhaps six feet above ground level. Small windows looked out onto the street from the basement, or they would have, had they not been covered with heavy, black hangings.

Unnoticed by Brigid and Benito, dark eyes peered out through the lace curtains of a first floor window. These eyes knew something of the turbulence in the street and the reasons for it. As they approached, she sensed from the way their bodies moved that they had an understanding of what they traversed. "So this," she thought to herself, "is what they sendin' to fight Streng. They gonna need help."

The two on the street stopped in front of the house, looked at it long enough to see the street number, then hurried away. Esmerelda watched them go, seeing some of the tension drain from them and their hands unclasp as they moved beyond the storm. She backed away from the curtain, glad that Streng was not at home. That the priest knew where he lived would have bothered him, perhaps even enough so that he might try to hurt these good people. The faint light they cast through the gloom of the street told her that they were good, but now she had to decide if she should try to help them or not. The *loa* had said she must do no magic, but she could talk to them, perhaps serve as their eyes and ears. If they failed, however, and Streng discovered her help, the result would be her death. Still, if she withheld her aid, how many more would die at Streng's hands? She shook her head. She did not like such decisions.

Shivering, Luis and Brigid emerged from the dark cloud just before they reached Lincoln Street. They remained silent as they crossed Lincoln and continued on to Rey-

nolds Square, where they both sat heavily on a bench. They sat silently as their breathing slowed.

Brigid was the first to speak. "Four fifty-four."

"Yes," he said. "I wonder if it is an accident that the numbers add up to thirteen?"

The quiet drew out between them.

"Father, I do not think I shall willingly walk down that street again."

"Nor I."

Resuming their walk, they came to another of the squares. Here it was peaceful, even beautiful. They sat on one of the benches. The gentle cooing of the pigeons, permanent residents of the squares, was a soothing sound, one that helped to quiet their thoughts. They had both seen the same things. They were not things that either wished to discuss until necessary. For a while they sat and simply drank in the loveliness of the square.

Luis stood and offered his hand to Brigid. She took it and rose. They turned toward the Cathedral, both thinking of the cool dimness and sanctity of that sacred space. Perhaps it would serve to clean them of the dirt that had fallen on them like unseen coal dust as they had walked past the house on Saint Julian. As they returned to the cathedral, they were a priest walking in his customary reserved manner and a nun with her arms crossed over her chest, guarded and serious. No one would take note of them or begin to guess their unusual mission. Jakob Streng certainly didn't, even though he passed within a few feet of them as he walked north on Abercorn Street. Automatically, he touched the brim of his hat in deference to the nun, his manners as carefully groomed as his beard.

They were back in the church conference room by eleven o'clock. Luis was grim. Brigid was both frightened and exhilarated.

He looked across the table to her. “Did you find that exciting?”

“Yes. Exciting and frightening.”

“I felt only fear.”

“Father, to you all of this is part of your life. For me it is new. I know it is childish to feel excited, but I feel as if I have just dodged death.”

“Perhaps it is jaded of me not to feel the same.”

Her expression became thoughtful. “Father, do you know what it is like to be a nun?”

“I think I have an idea. But tell me what you mean.”

“Each day you arise at the same time. The routine never varies for six days a week. The only exception is Sunday, which has its own routine. So even every Sunday is the same. For those of us who work the wards in the hospital, there is some change week to week, but not much.

“I can tell you where I will be months in advance.” She shrugged. “Life was not meant to be so planned and predictable. During the War, things were disordered. I found pleasure in the fact that I never knew when I might be needed. I might have to work for twenty-four hours or longer. The diversion was such a novelty that, God forgive me, I almost wished the war would go on.

“It was a sign of desperation that I felt that way. Until the war came, every day was the same—the schedule of daily prayers that went on ceaselessly from year to year, the long hours of ‘contemplation’ shut away from the world. In the war I felt useful. I was saving lives.”

“But your vocation?”

“Vocation? I never had a ‘calling’ to the work of the Church. I was sent to the Church to keep from starving. I remained with the Church because it was all I knew, or maybe because I was too frightened to leave. Though other nuns have also chosen orders

as a place of last resort, many do feel the calling, or they come to feel it over time. For them, this is the perfect life—work, prayer, meditation. No challenges to face in an outside world that is filled with chances and dangers.”

“And that is not what you want.” He made it a statement and not a question.

“No.” She sighed. “But I probably would have stayed here forever, being useful, taking care of the sick, were it not for the events that night.”

He waited for her to continue.

“I knew that something evil had come, even before I heard Richardson’s screaming. I felt its going. When the door to Richardson’s room opened, I wanted to know what had happened. The other nuns held back. They did not know the creature was gone, but I did. The doctor entered because he has no belief, he did not think that there were powers that could threaten him. When I entered that room a part of me that had been asleep had begun to awaken.” She paused, “Now thoughts drift into my brain. I know things. But it’s not like the knowing I have when I see that someone is sick. That is my talent. What emerges within me is more subtle, like a gentle push or a thought to guide me down a path.”

Father Benito was both troubled and inspired by what she had said. Troubled, because he realized that currents were rising in her that could lead her away from the Church. Inspired, to think that such desire for life dwelt inside her. “When we began our conversations, I should have admonished you for your change in beliefs away from the doctrine of the Church, but I knew, even then, that such an action would be a waste of time. Now I find that you test my faith.”

“I don’t intend to.”

“I know that,” he said. Benito took a deep breath. There was so much more to explore with this remarkable young woman, but they had more pressing matters at hand.

He changed subjects. “We need to find a contact in the Voudon community. Do you have an idea of anyone with whom you should talk?”

“I think so. There is an old colored man, Isaiah, one of the maintenance men in the hospital. He’s been here a long time and seems to know everything about what goes on in the colored community. He’s a freeman.”

“I thought all of the slaves were freed?”

“They are, but that’s not how we think of it here. Isaiah was free before the war. His master, Isaac Meyer, died in the 1850’s. Many of Meyer’s slaves simply passed with his estate to his children, but Isaiah and his wife were freed by Meyer’s will. So we call him a ‘freeman.’ It just means he was freed by his master, not by Mr. Lincoln.”

“Does that make a difference?”

“In Savannah, it does. Isaiah gets special respect from the whites, since he was freed. Everyone knows that any colored man freed by his master must have done a special service.”

“What was it?”

“No one knows. Mr. Meyer didn’t say, and Isaiah doesn’t talk about it. I can tell you, though, that he is wise, and the other members of the colored community look up to him.”

Luis smiled. “Then it sounds like he’s the man you should talk to.”

That afternoon, Brigid found Isaiah in the basement. He was half inside the firebox of the boiler for the heating system. She stopped so she would not surprise him and called out, “Isaiah, it’s Sister Brigid.”

He stopped whatever he was doing inside the firebox and pulled his upper body out of the door.

“Sister,” he said, “you shouldn’t be down heah.”

“And why’s that?”

“Rats.” He could not quite hide the grin on his face.

“Isaiah, I’ve been in this basement many times and there have always been rats here. I wouldn’t expect today to be much different.”

He shook his head with the sense of both exasperation and wonder that he felt toward the nuns. “Yes ma’am.”

“So what are you doing down here?”

“Almost time to get the heat goin’. Tryin’ to make sure this old furnace got some life in her.”

“Is there doubt?”

“Always some, but it looks pretty good. I’ll know better when I start a fire.” He pronounce “fire” with two definite syllables. “Then there’s gonna be some rats. When I light this off, I like to have me some cats around. Then the rats be too busy runnin’ to have time to take any meat off my ol’ bones.”

She smiled, enjoying his perspective. “Better you than me.”

“So what brings you to Isaiah?”

“Let’s talk for a minute.” She walked over to the airy corner of the basement where an old table and two creaky ladder-back chairs stood waiting for the fireman and shoveler who would be here in the coldest weather. Isaiah and Brigid sat opposite each another. He busied himself with wiping the coal dust and soot from his face and hands. Actually, he was waiting for her to start, giving her time to collect her thoughts. He knew this talk would be serious, otherwise she would not have gone to the effort of finding him.

“Isaiah, do you know anything about the followers of Voudon in Savannah?”

“Voodoo? What you be messin’ with that for?”

“Isaiah, I know that we aren’t supposed to talk about Voudon, and I know it’s not supposed to exist. The Church position is that it is evil. My position is that it’s not. But I need to talk to someone inside the Voudon community here in Savannah.”

“Miss Brigid, I got no way . . .”

She interrupted. “Just please hear me out. Maybe then you might know someone who might know someone?”

He sat silently and waited. She was giving him every chance to give her information without saying who knew what.

“A few days ago a man was murdered. Saul Richardson. Some very evil men did it, and we are looking to fight them. But we don’t know enough about what might have happened before. Voudon is the natural enemy of these evil men as much as the Church is. Maybe the local Voudon people might have some information that would help us.”

Isaiah sat and thought for a minute. Of course he knew about voodoo. He had talked to Esmerelda long ago. Though he was a Christian and did not practice voodoo, he wasn’t about to betray those who did. At the same time, he also knew enough of what was happening in Streng’s secret meetings to know that he had to be stopped.

“Sistah, I ain’t saying I know anything, but I can talk to some might know.”

“Thank you, Isaiah.”

“Too early for thanking. But I need a promise.”

She nodded.

“Whatever you find out, you ain’t going to use it to hurt any of my people. Don’t want no priests botherin’ the voodoo people.”

“All we want is to find out if they know about the men who called the demon that killed Mr. Richardson. And there is something terribly evil on Saint Julian Street. We think the two things are linked. We will keep our silence. What we find out about Voudon will be forgotten. Father Benito wants to meet with them just to know what they know.”



“How fast you need to know this?”

“Right now would be good.”

“Ain’t got nothing for you right now. But maybe I can find out somethin’ by tomorrow. Or it might take some time. But no promises.”

Isaiah left the church at his normal lunch time. He found Esmerelda just after lunch, having seen her enough in the city market to know when she did the shopping for Streng’s household. The busy midday crowd also gave them a chance to slip away unnoticed by others.

“So they want to meet with me?” Esmerelda asked.

“Didn’t say you, just want to know what voodoo folks might know about the ‘evil men’ that called the demon that killed Richardson.”

“Streng.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Yeah, they saw the evil in the air ‘round his house.”

“I saw this nun when they come by the house,” she replied.

“Then why you waitin’? We all want him gone.”

“Not that easy. If they go after him and fail, things will just get worse.”

“Yeah, but it ain’t just Brigid and the priest from Florida.”

“What do you know?”

“Thought you knew, too. They got a bunch of priests comin’ from all over.”

“Where you hear that?” she asked.

“From what one boy hears and passes on to another.”

They looked at each other and smiled conspiratorially.

“Isaiah, I can’t work magic, the *loa* warned me, but they say I could talk. I ain’t gonna talk to no priest. You bring this nun to me, tomorrow night, ‘bout nine.”

“You gonna let me take her to your place?”

“No, I’m gonna meet you on Jenkins Street, near Billie’s. We go somewhere else to talk. You meet her in front of the big church and bring her to me. And don’ leave before eight-thirty. I’m gonna have some of the boys followin’.”

“Why?”

“I don’ want nobody to mess with you on the way. We got two ships in port, and lots of sailors are comin’ to the colored part of town.”

Isaiah nodded and rose to go.

“Isaiah,” she called.

He turned, and she tossed him an apple.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Don’ thank me, Streng paid for it.”

They both laughed as he turned to go home.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

### *Tuesday, October 20th*

Tuesday morning, Sister Brigid arrived in the basement before Isaiah came to work. She was glad for the brief time alone. She had many things to consider. She knew that she was being driven to a decision that she did not want to make. She was beginning to see the world in a different way than the Church did. Yet the faith that she had practiced much of her life still held her powerfully. Besides, there were practical matters to consider. Leaving the convent would not be a simple task. She was ill-prepared for such a change. Where would she go? What would she do to make a living? These were all worldly matters that she had never dealt with before. She could teach school or be a nurse. Maybe she would return to Ireland. Perhaps Siobhan could help her return.

As she turned these thoughts over in her mind, she realized how sheltered she had been from the “real” world, the one beyond the walls of the convent. She did not even know how to approach the world as a woman, since she had never really been a woman, only a nun. Others did not see her as a woman, but as some other kind of being, sexless and selfless.

But it was not only the practical issues of dealing with the real world that held her in her orders. The issue before her was greater. She was considering leaving the Church itself. The decision for her was not whether or not she should be a nun, but whether or not she should remain a Christian, and that choice was a difficult one for her to consider. From the time she was seven, she had attended a routine of Christian services. When she was a little older, she began visiting the great Catholic churches in Dublin. The magnificent buildings were, in themselves, like the creations of a god to a child raised in the poverty of Western Ireland. Over time, the teachings and daily practice increased her belief in the Christian faith and the damnation that lay outside of it. Regardless of her pagan

roots, her years within the Church had imbued her with some faith in the Christian God. The thought of leaving that faith was frightening.

When Isaiah entered the boiler room, he found the nun deep in thought. She was slightly startled by his arrival, but brightened when she recognized him.

Isaiah grinned. "Sistah, you up early."

"Well, I wanted to know if you'd found out anything. Besides, the early morning quiet gives me a chance to think."

"Seems like you nuns get lots of time to think."

"Not alone, not like this."

"I understan'. For me, I get my best thinkin' done when I can go down by the marsh at sunset. Twilight's the best time."

Brigid wondered what thoughts filled his mind then. Most white people never cared what filled the minds of colored people. Whites would probably be surprised by how similar their thoughts might be. In Isaiah's case, they would probably be surprised at how subtle they were.

"So, Isaiah, do you have news for us?"

"Well, not exactly for 'us'. The mambo, the priestess, say she talk with you, but not to no priest."

"Why?"

He smiled. "She gonna trust a woman before she trust a man, 'specially if that man be a priest."

"She wouldn't trust a priest?" Though Brigid had expected this response, she was still surprised to hear it spoken so bluntly.

"Priests done lots of bad things to her people. Voodoo people got no love for priests."

Brigid nodded. "So what do I do?"

“I be meetin’ you tonight, just after 8:30, in front of the cathedral.”

“Is the time so important?”

He nodded. “The mambo gonna have some boys follow us.”

“She doesn’t trust me?”

“No, Sistah, she havin’ us followed to protect you.”

“What do I have to be afraid of?” After the events of the past few days, she did not know what to expect.

“White sailors. No colored man dare touch you, but white sailors, they be tricky when they drunk.”

She laughed. “Then I’ll be glad for the escort.”

Isaiah said, “Well, I got work to be doin’.”

Sister Brigid stood. “Then I’ll see you just after 8:30.”

Father Benito was not happy with the arrangement, even though he had expected that none of the practitioners of Voudon would meet with him. One thing particularly drew his attention.

“The mambo is meeting with you?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Then they must consider this important. The identity of the mambo is usually a closely guarded secret, especially from the Church.”

“She’s that important?”

“Here she would be. A city has only one mambo, which makes her the head of their local ‘church’.”

Sister Brigid nodded and thought for a few moments, then smiled sweetly. Assuming a serious demeanor, she asked, “Do you think she’ll want me to kiss her ring?”

Father Benito looked at her disapprovingly for a moment, then burst out laughing. "I can see you're the right one for this task."

When the clock over City Hall chimed the half hour after eight, Sister Brigid left the convent to go to the front of the cathedral. A minute or two later, she seated herself on the broad steps. She had hardly gotten herself settled when Isaiah emerged from the darkness across the street. She stood to greet him, brushing off the back of her habit.

"Evenin', Sistah."

"Evening, Isaiah."

He shook his head. "Ain't this somethin'."

"What?"

"I ain't nevah seen a nun outside after dark. It's kind of spooky. When you was coming up the street, all I could see was your face and that white thing 'round it. Everythin' else just blended in with the night. Then when you turned to go up the stairs, it was like you just blinked out."

"I never thought of that."

"Yeah, but I'm guessin' somebody did."

He didn't say anymore about it. But she understood what he meant and appreciated the keenness of the observation. At night a nun would be hard to see from behind in her black habit. If she faced you, all that you would see is her face surmounted by a band of white. So her turning around gave the impression of appearing from nowhere. She had never thought about that aspect of a nun's habit before. She wondered if it was an intentional effect. Isaiah seemed to think so. She refocused on the present. "So, brother Isaiah, where to now?"

“Follow me.” He turned into the darkness and headed toward the eastern end of town. They walked for several blocks before crossing East Broad Street. Here the streets sloped away from the bluff on which the town of Savannah was built. This part of the east side of the city was “colored town.” It was the place where the maids and servants, the orderlies and janitors, lived. It was also the location of several taverns and brothels. Several other colored neighborhoods lay to the south of town, but the people who lived there rarely came into the city.

Just as they started down the slope, a drunken voice hailed them from between two of the ramshackle buildings. “So what we got here?”

An English sailor came lurching out of the darkness. “A nigger and a nun? Where you going to? Maybe the whore house? They’d pay plenty for somethin’ like you.”

Isaiah stepped between Brigid and the sailor. “Boss, we got no business with you.” Brigid was immobilized by her fear. No one had ever talked to her like that. She did not, could not, know what to do.

The sailor stood up erect. “Out of my way, nigger.” A knife suddenly appeared in his hand. “Always wanted to find out what a nun looked like under that rug they wear. Looks like this might be my best chance.”

Isaiah slowly backed away. He stood no chance against a man thirty years younger than him who had a knife. The sailor parroted his motions, stepping closer to Brigid with each step.

Then an arm reached out of the darkness and wrapped around his neck. A dark face appeared over the sailor’s shoulder. “Mistah, I got my arm on your neck and a knife on your back. Drop that knife you got.”

The sailor’s face, which had been flushed with drunken confidence, turned to a mask of fear. The knife fell from his hand.

The large figure of a black man could be seen stepping away from the sailor. If he had a knife it could not be seen. “Now git out of heah.”

The sailor reached to recover his knife.

“No suh, you leave that knife. Just git.”

The sailor rushed at the larger man. He was met by a fist that smashed into his face, knocking him unconscious. The black man reached down and picked up the sailor’s knife and slipped it into his belt. “Might come in handy.” He looked at Isaiah and Brigid. “Now you two get goin’, the mambo is waitin’, and she don’t like to wait.”

Isaiah turned the speechless nun away from the scene of the fight and led her on. She pulled away from him after a few steps and turned around to thank the man who had saved her.

“Sir,” Sister Brigid said. For a moment the big man didn’t know she was talking to him. Then he turned to face her. She continued, “Thank you for saving me. I don’t think that sailor would have been satisfied with my honor, I think he would have taken my life as well. If I have any power to bless, I give all my blessings to you.”

A smile split his face. “Thank you, Sistah.”

Isaiah tugged at her arm and pulled her away down the street. The figure behind them vanished in the gloom.

“Who was that, Isaiah?”

“Don’ know him by name, but he’s one of the boys that I see with the mambo. Likely she sent him to watch out for us.”

“So she really did send someone to protect us?”

“Likely more than one.”

“But why?”

“The mambo say you gonna be safe, you safe. The mambo always keeps her word.”



They walked the next few blocks in silence, Brigid pondering what she had just heard and looking about her at a part of town she had never before entered. A light fog had rolled onto the low-lying streets. Since there were no street lights here, the only light was offered by the occasional candle or lamp flame that could be seen through some of the windows. The moon was not yet up. But Isaiah knew his way, guiding Brigid around the cracked stones and bottles that lay on the sides of the dirt streets. He took a few more turns as they walked the final blocks, enough so that Brigid would have had a hard time finding her way back to the place they were going.

Isaiah finally spoke. "She's just ahead."

Esmerelda was sitting on an old packing crate in the middle of the narrow street. She stood as they approached. "Welcome, Sistah. Now, Isaiah, you wait here. We going a little bit from here to talk. I already hear about the trouble you run into on the way here. But don't you worry. One of my boys gonna escort that white sailor outta here, soon as he wakes up." She grinned. "But the ones James puts down usually stay down for a while."

Brigid walked up to the woman. The Haitian-French accent had not been lost on her, nor was the glittering intelligence in the woman's eyes. She extended both hands to the mambo. "An honor to meet you."

Esmerelda was surprised, but took both her hands in hers. "And I am just as happy to meet you." A glint of recognition passed between them. Esmerelda added, "I think we gonna get along fine."

"I'm sure of it."

"Then let's get away from men with big ears."

Esmerelda led her to a small, deserted house nearby. A kerosene lamp burned on a small table. "Ain't my place, but it will do for what we got to say." She motioned to one of the two chairs that stood on either side of the table. "So what you need the mambo for?"

As they sat down, Brigid began, "There's an evil in this town."

Esmerelda laughed with grim amusement. "There's been bad evil in this place for a long time, but why you church folks suddenly get interested?"

"It's been here a long time?"

"Child, we known about the evil for years. There just ain't nothin' we can do about it."

"Couldn't you have asked for help?"

"If I go to the police with some story about the devil and demons, first thing they think about doin' is locking my black self up. Then if I tell them who the evil is, they gonna throw the key in the river."

"You know who it is?" She could not keep the excitement from her voice.

"Sure. There's a coven of devil worshipers been here as long as anyone can remember. Probably got its start in the early days, right after the white folk arrive. Devil worshipers like places where things ain't too regular. Lets 'em get away with more."

"But who is it?"

"Be patient with me. I need to know why you got so much interest."

Brigid realized she would have to give some information to get it. "At the last new moon, a man was killed in the asylum ward at Saint Jo's."

"Mistah Richardson."

Brigid nodded. "He had been locked up because he'd started acting insane, claiming that the Devil was after him. What happened on the new moon made what he had said not seem so crazy any more. A spirit came and killed him. Before then, we had no real knowledge of there being someone summoning spirits to do their bidding."

Essie shook her head. "All the power and money you got in your church and you couldn't see this? Don't you have nobody with the eye?"

“No, not here. Or at least the only one with the eye wasn’t using it,” she said guiltily. “Our Church doesn’t deal with such things, at least not routinely. Publicly, we don’t admit that they exist.”

“How you be a religion and not deal with the spirits? It never have made no sense to me. But, seein’ what I have, I have to believe it.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Then Essie went on. “How come you so sure that a spirit come for him? Maybe he was just barking at the moon.”

“No, something cold and evil came, killed him, and left.”

Essie eyed her guest. “And you the one that felt it.”

Brigid nodded.

“And with all these priests around, how come you be the one to feel it?”

Brigid did not want to discuss that, but, at the same time, she did want to talk. The mambo could probably understand her better than Father Benito. “I am from Ireland. My great aunt was the village wise woman, I guess you could call her a witch. I was to take her place, my training had just started, but then the famine came and I had to leave. They sent me to Catholic school in Dublin when I was seven. I guess I became a nun because I didn’t have a choice.”

Essie nodded, digesting the story. “Well, you got the power. I look hard at you, and I see it. You got the gift.”

“Thank you, I think.”

“Good answer, child. The gift bring a lot with it. Some of it’s not so good. You got a responsibility to help out others. Otherwise the gods, they get angry that you don’ use what they give you.”

“I’m learning that.”

“That’s why you’re not sure you should be grateful for the gift.”

Brigid nodded.

The mambo composed her thoughts. “The evil ones are run by a man name of Jakob Streng. He’s a powerful man in this town, but he even more powerful when he does his magic. He got followers, about two dozen. They meet once a month jus’ before the new moon, most often at his house.”

“You know where this house is?”

“On Saint Julian Street.” Esmerelda smiled slowly. “But you and that priest they send up from Florida already know.”

“How’d you know that?”

“I’m Streng’s housemaid. I see you and that monk from Florida stop in front of the house. I also see that both of you saw a lot more on that street than sunshine.”

Brigid could not hide her apprehension.

“Don’ worry, child. I got reasons for bein’ in Streng’s house. I got the job so I could keep an eye on him. Maybe I can help my own folks better if I know what he’s about. But I ain’t able to stop him. He keeps right on killin’ in the name of his devil. He doin’ more of it now than ever before.”

“Doesn’t he know who you are?”

“He figured out that I was in Voudon, but he’s like most white people. He thinks Voudon is on the side of evil, so he thinks I’m on his side. He don’t know that good got as many faces as evil do.”

“Then you’ll help us?”

“Much as I can. But I can’t do no magic against Streng. He’s too powerful. And that spirit they call is way too strong for me to mess with.”

“So even you are afraid?”

“Anybody not afraid don’t have good sense. And I can’t do magic with you. If it goes wrong, my people will be in danger. But anything I know, I’ll tell you.”

“Thank you. I know more than I did before.”

“So now you tell me somethin’.”

“Anything.”

“I hear you got others comin’ to fight Streng. That’s good. I known about the church’s magicians a long time. But they better be stronger than your priest. He got no chance against Streng.”

“They are much stronger, and they will work together.”

“Good. You gonna be part of this?”

“I don’t know yet, but I don’t think they will let me be a part of it.”

“Now that’s plain stupid. You got more magic than the priest you walked down Saint Julian with.”

“I do?”

“You must have guessed at it by now. You born to it. He learned most of what he know. Oh, he got talent, but not like you.”

“You can see all that?”

“And a lot more.” She reached out to Brigid and took her hand. “Can I read you?”

Brigid was surprised by the question and almost afraid. But she needed to know more, especially about herself. “Yes. Tell me what you see.”

Essie reached for Brigid’s hand, turned it palm up, and stared at it in the light of the two candles that lit the room, tracing the folds of skin with her fingertips, always moving surely, gently.

Brigid relaxed and closed her eyes, feeling perfectly safe with this woman, though she wasn’t sure why. Perhaps it was because she didn’t need to have any secrets from her. Even what she said to Benito had to be monitored more carefully than what she might say to this Voudon priestess. As the fingertips slid over her skin, she felt a ripple of excitement, a quickening of her pulse, and a slight, delicious chill. When the mambo took her

hands away, Brigid was sad they had gone. Brigid opened her eyes and saw the last of the luminous mist around the mambo fade into the darkness.

Essie missed nothing. “What you jus’ see?”

“I saw a glowing mist around you. I’ve seen it before, around my great aunt when she was looking into the future.”

“So how long is your line of witches?”

“I know of at least seven generations. The storytellers say much longer. In almost every one of those generations, at least one, sometimes two had the Sight. Usually a woman, but sometimes a man.”

“Figured so. Power like you got don’t come from nowhere.”

“Mambo, can I ask your name? You haven’t told me.”

“I usually don’ say, but time is past for secrets. I’m Esmerelda. Most people call me that, or Essie, or, in ceremony, just mambo.”

“Thank you. Brigid is my birth name and my name as a nun, so it’s the only one I have. I left my studies early, so I don’t have another name.”

“It’s time you found one. You will need to have somethin’ to be called by in your workin’. Don’t want too many to know the name Brigid.”

“But you don’t have another, do you?”

“Folks just call me mambo, and that’s good enough. Even most people in my circles don’t know me as anythin’ else.”

Brigid realized that Esmerelda was right. She would have to choose another name.

Essie had one more thing to talk about. “Brigid, what’s a ‘walker’?”

Brigid’s attention became very focused. “What do you know about walkers?”

Essie smiled. “The main thing I know is that Streng is scared of ‘em.”

Brigid relaxed, but a sadness tinged her voice. “I’ve never even seen one. I don’t know if there are any left. But they are, or were, very powerful magicians. My great aunt

saw one about fifty years ago. The story is that a demon, one who was much like this one that we are to fight, was killing people and animals in the section of Ireland we are from. A walker was sent for, and he killed the demon, but that was a long time ago, and I have not been with people of the old faith in a long time. Even the Catholic Church's magicians have almost no knowledge of them, outside of legend. Most of the Catholics just treat the stories of the walkers as tales that have grown in the telling. So, if there are any walkers left, there must be very few."

"They had that big a power in them?"

"It was in them, or they could call it to them."

Essie nodded. "I believe they were real. Maybe some are still about. It only makes sense. The gods always make sure there be good to fight the bad, but the white man can be stupid, fighting against good men for the wrong reason. Then he's left to live with the evil he lets loose."

"Esmerelda, I hope that I have some time to get to know you after all of this is over. I could learn much from you."

"Thank you. That would be good. But it may not be."

"Why?"

"What I saw in your hand. It was clear. I know it's true. You standin' on the edge right now. Two paths in front of you, and you not sure which you gonna take. But you be making the choice soon. One way and you become a priestess of your gods. That's the hard way, but it's your true way. Second path, you stay where you are. You be different from what you was, but a nun anyway."

"But won't I take what you called my 'true path'?"

"All of us are born with a place to go, a 'true way.' But we all got the chance to mess up as well as do right. Sometimes I read a hand and know the heart gonna make the right choice. For you, I can't see. That don't mean you ain't gonna get it right, it don't

even mean you ain't already made the right choice. It could just mean they ain't gonna let me see."

"But why?"

"Maybe 'cause you got to learn it without any help."

Brigid felt chilled. She knew that what Essie said was right. Her heart could not be read because her heart had not decided. Some part of her longed for the old gods and the old ways, but she was afraid. How would she make her way in a world she knew nothing about? How would she eat? Where would she live? All of the certainty that she had felt when she talked to Benito seemed like posturing when faced with the common problems of survival.

She heard Essie's calm voice. "You best be gettin' back now. Isaiah ain't used to stayin' up this late."

"Thank you for what you told me."

"Thanks ain't needed." She held her with her eyes. "I be watchin' what happens around us. But I don't see everythin'. If I see somethin', I tell Isaiah. He'll see you for me. And if you hear anythin' I need to know, you can tell Isaiah you need to see me. You always welcome."



## *Chapter Fourteen*

### *Wednesday, October 21st*

Rimaldi looked out of the window of the train as it rumbled toward Savannah in the strengthening light of the morning. The early train from Atlanta to Savannah had few occupants, and the majority of those few were dozing. The “passengers” who were the real reason for this train’s schedule were silent, lying in the freight cars behind the two passenger cars that nestled against the engine.

He regretted that it had taken so long for him to begin the trip to Savannah, but he had spent the time well. His students would be taken care of, and he had carefully reviewed the records of the members of his order. The ones he had summoned to join him in Savannah were the best he had at his disposal, but his best was not what it might once have been. A hundred years ago the secretive order of mages had possessed much more power.

Rimaldi knew the situation was a sign of the times. The magical order had never been exactly public in its recruitment. But since 1700 it had become almost covert in its efforts, as fewer and fewer priests actually believed in the spirit realm any more. The average parishioner, especially in Europe and the Americas, had become increasingly “enlightened,” which, in this case, meant they were no longer as likely to believe what they might now call the “old, superstitious way.”

He had summoned five other members of the magical order to join him in Savannah. Provided that health did not prevent any from traveling, he could depend upon seven mages for the rite that they must perform, counting himself and Benito. Six magicians were needed for the complex rituals, and he did not want to risk confronting the ones that they must face with less than the full complement. Benito had used the word “gorgon” in his telegram. If one of the less senior members of his order had included that word in his

description, Rimaldi would have needed further confirmation, but Benito was not an alarmist.

To Rimaldi's knowledge, neither he nor any other member in North America had ever faced the kind of demon for which they used the name "gorgon." This demon had the capability of acting independently without possessing a human body. It could exercise physical power in this realm in its own right. This battle would be an immense challenge, a test of his abilities.

He had sent telegrams before he left to two other members of his order, who would be needed almost instantly to assure that he and Benito would be safe in Savannah until the arrival of the remaining members. While he traveled in his cassock, he had asked those two members to travel in mufti rather than in clerical garb. He thought that the arrival of one priest would not alert the suspicions of anyone, but the arrival of three might cause a reaction from their opponents, a reaction he did not want to face until he had at least four of his order in Savannah.

Father Kirk would be coming from Duluth, Minnesota. He was the priest of a small congregation on the outskirts of the city. One of the larger parishes near him could easily provide someone to minister to his flock in his absence. Though Kirk was relatively new to the order and inexperienced, he had a tremendous natural talent for the magical arts. Rimaldi had chosen Kirk more for his innate abilities than his knowledge or discipline.

The second one he had called, Sister Angela, had been a part of the order for some time, but had spent most of those years in Europe. Five years ago, the Church had sent her to join the Sisters of Mercy at their convent in Philadelphia. Though in her middle thirties, she was a formidable scholar, fluent in Italian, Greek, and German, as well as the expected Latin and English. Sister Angela came by her power by the most traditional of means. She was an hereditary, a descendant of Italian witches. Her great-grandmother had

converted to Catholicism. Regardless of their conversion, her family had not let her enter the convent until her eldest sister had given birth to a daughter and until her other sister had reached childbearing age. In this way, her family felt assured that there would be a female descendant. Daughters were very important in her family. They would carry on the legend of the Delamorte clan.

In the tradition of some the oldest Sicilian families, her family flaunted Italian convention. Her father's name was Benelli, but her last name was interchangeably Benelli or Delamorte. Outside of Sicily, she was a Benelli, but her wealthy father's name, that of an esteemed family that had grown fruit in southern Italy and on the island for centuries, took second place on the island of Sicily to the Delamorte name. The Sicilians, always a little provincial about their island, claimed that the Delamortes were descended from the Greeks who had built Syracuse. On one visit to Sicily an old man, after making the traditional sign against the evil eye, had "confided" to Rimaldi that the Delamorte family was descended from Circe.

Rimaldi had almost failed to discover the depth of her power. Her unassuming manner was not the only misleading factor about the nun. She was also disturbingly beautiful. The wimple could do nothing to detract from her perfectly formed face, nor hide the deep eyes and full lips. There was a hint of Greek about her visage. Though he had long ago steeled himself against the charms of a woman, he was glad that he had no idea of the body beneath the shapeless habit.

With Father Kirk and Sister Angela joining him and Benito in Savannah, he did not feel that they would be in any danger from their opponents before the others met again. Their opponents next meeting should not happen until the seventh or eighth of November, as the new moon would not occur until 12:30 am, just barely into the ninth. He felt fairly certain that his opponents would choose the eighth to meet, as they could conduct

their ritual at night and still finish before the moon would turn to waxing shortly after midnight.

He had summoned three more of his order by mail. Father Pascal was very old and was the one whose health concerned Rimaldi the most. Father Benedetto, one of Rimaldi's oldest friends, would travel from Chicago, Rimaldi's home. Five years Rimaldi's junior, Benedetto had grown from protege to friend over the course of more than thirty years. His competence and his good humor would be needed. Father Francisco was from the New Mexico Territory and was fluent in English, Spanish, and Latin. Rimaldi had never met Francisco, but Father Benedetto spoke very highly of him.

The coastal Georgia landscape outside the train window looked hostile to Rimaldi. Every kind of vegetation seemed to line the tracks. Some of the plants were still in bloom, even this late in the year. He knew that summer in the far south simply faded into a warm fall that could extend into the new year, but knowing about it was a different matter from seeing it. A little more than an hour ago the train had started the gradual descent from the Piedmont plateau to the coastal plain. Now, as they neared Savannah, they were enmeshed in the lush tropical vegetation that thrived in the sodden, hot climate. Spanish moss draped the massive oaks. Resisting the strong sunlight, the thick oaken arms of the trees with their gray cloaks created a dark gloom within the forests. The occasional field of a poor farm was a welcome respite from the wall of forest that lined either side of the track, but the farms were small and the shacks of the workers pitiable. Even the walls had chinks that would allow the wind to blow through on cold nights. Rimaldi thought that these workers could have easily taken wood from the surrounding forest and built better walls. Perhaps they were too lazy? Or perhaps, he chided himself for his judgmental opinion, the effort was not justified by the few nights when the weather turned cold. It was almost November, and he realized that the temperature would probably reach eighty degrees by afternoon. The roofs of the shacks all looked sound. Protection from rain was

clearly more important than protection from the cold. He had heard that this area of the coastal plain received twice the annual rainfall as the great rain forest of the Amazon.

Suddenly the sunlight dimmed, and, looking out the other side of the train, Rimaldi saw that dark thunderclouds had swept over them. Their bellies seemed to scrape the trees, and the gray clouds were almost black where they were thickest, so black as to be fitting portents of God's judgment.

For a priest, he worried about God's judgment more than would be expected. He knew that his sin of pride would weigh heavily against him. An arrogant man, assured of his brilliance, he had fought against the sin, but it was all too easy to embrace its heady pleasures. He had become a Jesuit partially in the hope of finding humility in that order. There were, after all, many brilliant Jesuits, but even that elite coterie of scholars had not produced many to match him. He had found that many of his compatriots in the order were as tainted by arrogance as he was. Rimaldi was wise enough to know that this self-assuredness was dangerous. It led one into mistakes of overconfidence. Being wise enough to know that pride was dangerous, that it "goeth before the fall," did not necessarily grant him the ability to overcome the problem. In his lectures he often responded quickly and crushingly to questions of his viewpoints, only to discover belatedly that there was more validity in the question than he had at first seen.

He felt the train begin to slow as it approached the freight yards on the outskirts of the city. There the train would drop off some of the freight cars, and the engine would push the remaining freight and passenger cars into the station inside the city. He would be meeting with Benito, and then the bishop, within the hour.

Rimaldi's impending arrival had finally resulted in enough conversation within the archdiocese that Streng's sources were able to have news to pass on to him. Rimaldi's

name drew Streng's attention. His reputation as a scholar was well known, and Streng realized that Rimaldi must be the one who had been summoned by Benito's telegram.

Streng had been serious when he had told Long that one exorcist did not concern him. Two were unlikely to be a problem. But the arrival of such a prominent scholar, a Jesuit Father Provincial no less, from some distance away bore the stamp of something more serious. He sent word to the other two senior members of his coven to meet with him.

Rimaldi descended from his car to the platform in Savannah. The station itself was to his left, and he faced the street where coaches and carriages were ranked to accept passengers. The station was smaller than he had expected, but then the main business of Savannah was not the passengers who visited the city, but the cotton that passed through the city on the way to the harbor. Behind him, on the other side of the train, were more tracks and the immensely busy staging yard. Rimaldi quickly recognized the short figure of Father Benito between himself and the station. He assumed the tall, distinguished looking man with him to be someone on the bishop's staff.

Benito immediately moved to greet him. "Father Provincial, I am happy to see you again."

"Father Benito, while I may have wished for better circumstances, it is good to see you as well."

"Thank you, and may I introduce the bishop's secretary, Monsignor Henry."

Rimaldi was pleased that the bishop was apparently taking this matter seriously. "A pleasure, Monsignor."

"We, and I speak for the bishop as well, are glad to see you arrive."

"I look forward to our discussions."

While the greetings were passed, Benito noticed that there was a well-dressed young man who seemed to be paying a great deal of attention to the cluster of priests. He filed that fact away for another time and turned to the matter at hand.

Benito looked back to Rimaldi. "Then let us retrieve your baggage and be off."

A young porter appeared at Benito's side. "I get it for you."

"Thank you, Daniel," the monsignor said.

Rimaldi turned to the porter. "Two black cases and a steamer trunk. Each marked with my name, Rimaldi."

The porter turned to fetch the baggage.

Rimaldi looked to the monsignor. "He knows where to take them? He'll get the right ones?"

The monsignor replied, "We briefed him on your name before your arrival. We have a fair amount of travel to and from the archdiocese, and Daniel is often in our employ as the bishop's coach driver. He is quite reliable and reads well."

"That is good to know."

"Shall we go?" the monsignor said.

The three men turned toward Boundary Street, where the bishop's coach awaited them. Once the baggage had been loaded on the coach, Daniel reassumed the coachman's seat, and they drove off.

Monsignor Henry was the first to speak. "I assume that you will first need some time to speak with Father Benito. We have set aside a room for your use. The bishop is anxious to see you, after you have met with Father Benito. He would look forward to your taking lunch with him at 12:30."

The Jesuit nodded. "Please tell His Grace that it would be my privilege to join him."

“Good. Father Benito can take you to your meeting room as well as to your lodging. We are unsure how many of your order will be joining us, but we may need to make arrangements for some of them outside of the compound. We own a large house near the cathedral and thought of setting up something of a dormitory there. It is private and has the advantage of having little traffic near it at night. Initially you will be near Father Benito inside the main compound.”

“That seems excellent. I have asked for an additional five of my order to be here. So, with Father Benito and myself, the total should come to seven, but I am not certain that all will be able to join us.” He looked pointedly at Benito.

“All have sent me telegrams and will be attending our conference. Two, Father Kirk and Sister Angela, are already in transit,” the monk replied.

“There is one thing we need to know to confirm the lodging,” Monsignor Henry added. “We need to know how many nuns will be in your party. We have ready lodging for at least four in the guest quarters of the convent, which is immediately adjacent to the cathedral.”

“That is sufficient. We will have only one.”

“Good.”

The three men spent the remaining few minutes of their trip in silence. The other matters that needed discussion seemed far too weighty to broach after the trivialities of housekeeping.

Daniel took Rimaldi’s bags to his quarters. The trunk would be delivered to the workroom set aside for them. Its weight made it clear that it contained books. After assuring Father Henry that Rimaldi would join the bishop for lunch, the other two priests went to their meeting room. As they entered, Rimaldi looked around.

“You have done well, Benito.”

“Thank you, Father, but it was really the work of the bishop.”



“Based on your requirements.”

Benito nodded.

“So our first need is met, we have a place where we can all gather and talk openly about the decisions that we need to make.” He sat, automatically assuming his place at the head of the table. Benito sat in the chair to his right. “So, Father Benito, what is your evidence for an independent demon?”

Rimaldi had quickly moved to the key point. The brief telegram had told him that someone had died at a demon’s hands, and his first concern was the nature of the demon. Benito was not surprised by the scholar’s directness. He was prepared to present the evidence rapidly. Rimaldi listened intently to the details of Richardson’s death and the condition of the room.

When Benito finished, he commented, “Taken together, the evidence makes it a virtual certainty that the demon had independent physical existence. Well stated, Benito. Is there anything else?”

Benito reached into his cassock and withdrew the molten crucifix and laid it on the table. Even the Jesuit was nonplussed. “As you see, Father, whatever was in that room had the power to melt metal. This crucifix was, or perhaps still is, the property of one of the nuns in the convent. The last man to talk to Richardson directly was a Doctor Gaston. He carried this crucifix into the room. It was intact. It was also intact when Richardson forced him from the room. Yet a few minutes later, it was partially melted.”

The priest steeled himself to touch a thing that had been so defiled. But he did. He picked it up and turned it over. On the back, still partially readable, was the name of an esteemed silversmith in New York City. He wondered what the nun might have done to have earned such a valuable gift. He turned the crucifix over slowly in his hands, sensing the corruption the demon had imprinted upon it. Then he laid it back upon the table.

“Our opponent is formidable.”

“Yes, Father Provincial. That crucifix was Sister Francis’s only valued possession. She has had it constantly at her side for some twenty years. If any object can be considered to be sanctified by prayer, this one can. It is almost as if the demon wanted to make certain that we knew it had the power to destroy sanctified objects.”

Rimaldi shook his head, not in disagreement, but in wonder. “I agree with your conclusions. He has considerable power and, apparently, viciousness. You did the right thing in using ‘gorgon’ in the telegram. I am glad I heeded your warning and summoned our compatriots.”

“Thank you, Father. When I first sent the telegram, I feared that I had over reacted, but, as the evidence mounted, I realized that it was as serious as I had feared it to be. And there is more.”

“Then go on.”

“One of the two nuns present that night has the gift of the Sight. She is Irish, from a long line of local priestesses. She felt the demon come and go, and sensed some of its power. But, even more importantly, she has located where the satanists meet.” Benito went on to explain what Brigid had seen and then what they had both seen when she took him to Saint Julian.

The priest listened to the story without comment, then asked, “In the light of day this dark miasma was visible to her Sight?”

“And to mine, in the full light of day.”

“Then how long has this been rooted here?”

“The monsignor that you met is in possession of a diary that has been kept with some regularity for well over a century. There is a record of similar killings of prostitutes and young girls that goes back to the inception of the diary. I suspect that this group has been in existence for at least that time. But the killings have increased in frequency over the past few years. They have become more bold in their actions.”

“Or perhaps the demon has grown more extreme in his demands.”

That thought had not occurred to Benito. But it was more than plausible. As the group that summoned the demon was repeatedly exposed to its presence, the demon would begin to work his way inside of them. Though they might still believe themselves to be in control of the creature, in actuality, the demon was increasingly in control of them.

“So, Father, what do you know of the man who hosts this group?”

“He is a very prominent citizen here. His name is Jakob Streng. He is a cotton factor, an occupation near the top of the social structure in a city so devoted to the trading of this commodity. He is wealthy and has considerable influence in the city. So I think that we cannot hope for help from outside the Church. I had thought that the local Voudon community might be able to help, but they are too frightened to offer us anything more than information.”

Rimaldi spoke sharply, “You contacted the local Voudon cult?”

“Yes. They are the ones who told us Streng’s name.”

Rimaldi frowned in disapprobation. “Father, you are too open in your discussions. Our magical order is a secret one, and now I find that you have brought the local voodoo cult into your confidence.”

“My apologies, Father, but I thought that they might have some information for us.”

“Information may come with too high a price. I have no doubt that your motivations were right, but you should be more careful.” Rimaldi softened his tone. “Nonetheless, your achievements have been remarkable. To know the name of the leader of the group and where they meet may prove to be of immense value to us.” He paused. “What of this nun?”

“Sister Mary Brigid has been here for almost fifteen years and is a nurse and teacher. From what she has told me, I am certain that her gifts are hereditary. She was

born in the western part of Ireland. When the famine came to Ireland, she was about seven years old. She was sent to a convent to assure her survival. So she was never trained. Apparently, much of her family died in the famine. I think she has one sister remaining, though I am not certain. Her abilities are strong enough that I think she could be of use in our ritual.”

“The ritual I have planned is one that requires immense discipline to maintain. I do not think it wise to incorporate the untrained, regardless of the strength of their gifts. But her inherited Sight seems quite strong.”

For a moment, Benito considered offering additional proofs of Brigid’s abilities, but he refrained. He was guided by his promise not to share too much detail of what had passed between himself and Brigid. So he simply replied, “As you wish, Father.” Benito bowed his head, also knowing that the Jesuit would not be receptive to further argument.

Rimaldi asked, “Do you think there is any value to be gained in my questioning the girl?”

“I believe I have all of the information that we will find of use, though it may still be of value for her to be available to us. I have made arrangements for her to be relieved of her duties and assigned to me.”

“Then we shall let that stand for now. I may have Sister Angela speak with her. Sometimes a woman can find out more from a woman than a man.” Rimaldi did not notice that his comment could be taken to be a veiled insult. “When is Sister Angela expected?”

“She is to arrive tomorrow morning.”

“Excellent. You will meet her?”

“I have already arranged it,” Benito replied.

“She will not be in her habit. I am concerned that our opponents may gain knowledge of what we are doing. Until I have both her and Father Kirk to bolster us, we are

vulnerable. So I have asked both of them to wear conventional clothing for their journey.”

He stood. “Unless there is something else, Father, I think it is time to see the bishop.”

Benito hurriedly stood. “I will take you to the monsignor’s office.” As he guided Rimaldi from the room, he was glad that he had not told his superior that it was Brigid who had visited the mambo.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### *Thursday, October 22nd*

The next morning, Benito stood on the platform awaiting the 9:10 train. He was irritated, not with his current task, but with Rimaldi's singular focus on the task, a focus that seemed to make it difficult to reach him with any manner of counsel. The Jesuit had decided what was to be done, and it seemed that Rimaldi would follow that course, even though his decision had been made without any significant knowledge of the threat that faced them. Benito paced up and down the platform, absorbed in his thoughts. However, he was not so absorbed that he failed to notice the same young man who had been at the station the day of Rimaldi's arrival was again present at the station, attempting to observe Benito without being observed himself. Benito realized that this man's presence on two different days was an unlikely coincidence.

Daniel, as usual, was there to handle the luggage. Like many in his community, he served two masters. His other was the mambo, for he was a Voudon *houngfis*, a student. He was trained well enough to be able to detect that Father Rimaldi had been what Daniel would call "stormy." Daniel didn't like him, but this Benito fellow was all right. Tonight the mambo would hear all he knew.

The rear car of the train was approaching the station. It was slowing as the flag man signaled the engineer where he should stop to allow the train to come to rest with the back car nestled against the final track guard. Benito and Daniel awaited the train near the back cars, unsure from which car the nun would descend. At last the train came to rest with a sigh of steam. The doors were opened, and the passengers began descending to the platform. As one of the main passenger runs from the north, this train was occupied by all manner of businessmen and other travelers.

Three cars forward, a woman descended to the platform. She was hardly to be missed. The green silk traveling dress and matching hat that she wore spoke of wealth and

sophistication. Her lustrous black hair surrounded a truly remarkable face, filled equally with humor, intelligence, and beauty. After directing the train porter where to stack her luggage, she set off down the platform toward the station. When her eyes fell on Benito, she smiled and approached him.

“Father Benito?”

“Ah,” he stammered, “yes?”

“Wonderful. I was hoping they would have you meet me.”

“And you are?”

“Sister Angela, of course.” She beamed. “Oh, and you’ve been kind enough to bring a porter. How gracious.” She beckoned to Daniel. “Come, young man. I have brought a few things with me and your help would be appreciated.”

With that, she turned and headed back to where her bags were stacked, with a smiling Daniel in tow. Benito could only shake his head and follow this rather unusual nun.

Sister Angela pointed out her bags to Daniel, who was more than ready to carry them anywhere the nun wished. Daniel didn’t think that he had ever seen a woman quite as beautiful as Sister Angela. Yet it was more than her physical appearance and the natural dignity with which she moved that set her apart. There was a sense of completeness, of containment, that somehow reminded Daniel of Esmerelda.

Benito led the way to the bishop’s carriage. As Daniel loaded the bags onto the carriage, Angela watched him closely. Daniel took every opportunity offered to look into her darkly luminous eyes. When he finished loading the carriage, she placed a silver dollar in his hand, but before his face split into the grin required by such an unusually large gratuity, something passed between their eyes, a glance of recognition. Daniel realized that he had let his guard down a little too much with Sister Angela. He had looked into her eyes too often, using skills of looking he had learned from the mambo, and Angela had discov-

ered that he was studying magic. Strangely, he also knew that she was not troubled by it, because she herself was a magician. He would have to tell Esmerelda about what he'd seen. This nun had power.

Benito saw the look that had flashed between them, but said nothing as he helped Angela into the carriage. They sat opposite each other as Daniel cracked the whip over the horses and they moved off toward the archdiocese.

"Sister," Benito said, "that was quite an entrance."

She looked at him for a moment and then burst out laughing. When she saw the embarrassment on his face, she laughed harder. Recovering, she spoke. "First, when we are away from the formality of the Church, please call me Angela."

"As you should call me Luis."

"Wonderful. But you see, Luis," and she leaned over to whisper conspiratorially, "when our superior says to travel in conventional clothes, it gives me an opportunity to indulge a bit by wearing something a little better than a habit."

"I would say that your dress is far beyond a 'little better than a habit'." He had caught a whiff of her perfume as she had leaned close to him. The herbalist in him recorded the scents that he could identify, but there were smells there that were beyond his knowledge.

Angela smoothed the folds in her dress. "Well, this attire is normal for me. After all, I'm traveling under my father's name, as Angela Benelli. On my mother's side I am a Delamorte." She sat back onto the cushions, pleased that the name had created a flash of recognition in Luis.

He, enjoying the banter, exhaled loudly, fell back on the cushions of the carriage, and theatrically exclaimed, "*Madre de Dios*, I am surrounded."

She looked at him questioningly.



It was his turn to smile. “Here I am in a carriage with a daughter of the first family of *Strega*, while back at the archdiocese, I have assigned to me another nun who is a seventh generation Irish witch.”

“Now that is fascinating. You must tell me more.”

He looked toward the driver sitting in the front of the open carriage pointedly and said, “We have much to say once we get to the archdiocese.”

She understood his warning and changed the topic. “This is certainly a beautiful city, with much kinder weather for this time of year than I have endured in Pennsylvania.”

“Ah, yes, you are from Sicily. I am a native of Florida, so the weather here is similar to my own weather.”

“So you were there before the Americans took over?”

“No. I was born after the departure of the Spanish, but I did experience some of the changes. My native tongue is Spanish, but it has become necessary for us all to learn English.”

“The unification of Italy is causing changes in my homeland, but not as severe as the ones in Florida. At least we will not have to learn another language.”

Keeping a carefully feigned expression on his face he said, “But won’t you have to learn Italian?”

She laughed out loud. “Well said, Father.” She appreciated his delicate skewering of the Sicilian dialect of Italian, which northern Italians often considered unintelligible.

With her laughter still floating in the air, she saw the cathedral towering over them and assumed a more demure air. “Ah well, back to black and white.”

“Yes, I think we should get you changed before your meeting with Father Rimaldi. I doubt your dress would cause even an eyebrow to be raised by Mary Margaret, the mother superior, so we can pay our call in our present attire, but I fear our Jesuit might not take your rather liberal interpretation of ‘secular attire’ with the same equanimity.”

Daniel slowed the horses to a stop at the front entrance to the convent. Helping her down from the carriage, Benito said, “Now let us see if we can astonish the mother superior.”

Sister Angela’s unconventional attire had little effect on the mother superior, though it set quite a few tongues wagging in the confines of the convent. After a brief meeting, the mother superior and Benito escorted her to the large, four bed guest room of the convent, which was separated from the main dormitory. The guest room was used for visiting nuns, and, on occasion, for the reverend mother of the order.

After changing into her habit, Sister Angela met with Benito for over an hour. When she emerged, she realized the gravity of the situation and was glad that others would be with them soon. Before seeing Rimaldi, she returned to the mother superior’s office, mindful as she was to the niceties of convent etiquette. She also needed to ask the mother superior to move Brigid, as Benito was concerned for her safety. Brigid would be safer with Angela in the guest room than she would be in the convent dormitory.

Mary Margaret looked up at the light tap on the door. “Enter.”

Angela lifted the latch and entered the office.

“Ah, Sister Angela, welcome,” Mary Margaret said, eyeing her visitor. “You do look a bit more like a nun after changing.”

Sister Angela smiled. “Well, it will be easier to move around the cloister without causing a disturbance. Besides, women’s fashions are decorative, but they are far less comfortable than a habit. They are designed to attract men, so they are rather constricting.”

The mother superior’s mouth turned up in a grin. “I see you have some humor about you.”

“A necessary thing in the different worlds in which I move.”

“Ah yes, the ‘secret order’.” She held up her hand. “Don’t be concerned. Father Benito has assured me that I will find out all I need to know when I need to know it. Honestly, I fear that I already know more than I wish to .”

“Thank you, Mother Superior.”

“Please have a seat. And, as for names, ‘Margaret’ is more to my liking for those not under my jurisdiction.”

“I appreciate that,” Angela said, taking the offered chair. “For me, Angela or Angie will do fine.”

“Angie?”

“Well, we’re a little less formal in my convent. It started as ‘Sister Angie’ then was shortened.”

“So, what can I do for you?”

“If you don’t mind, I would like to know more about Sister Brigid.”

“Our resident witch.”

“I’m not certain I would have put it that way.”

“Don’t mind, Angela. I am not one of the more traditional nuns. I serve God, but I don’t feel His presence in as direct a way as our Irish nuns do. I feel that service comes in what you do, not what you pray.”

“Sensible.”

“I think so. Besides, I doubt that Hell can be much worse than what we saw in the war, which brings me to my point. During the war, we found that Brigid seemed to know who would survive and would not. Maybe she would have been burned at Salem, but in a wartime hospital, with too few drugs and doctors and too many patients, she was a god-send. As her talent became known, she became part of the normal party that performed triage.”

Sister Angela shivered. “That is a job I would never want—deciding who will live and who will die.”

“That’s not really what triage is. It’s deciding who can benefit from medical care and who is too injured to be helped. In war, wasting time on those who will not survive will result in the deaths of other men, those who might have been saved. It doesn’t make the task any less brutal, but it does make it a task that is done to serve life.”

“So she has a talent?”

“Actually more than one. But the others are harder to pin down. She seems to appear just when she is needed. Sometimes she will enter a room, and it is as if no one saw her enter. It isn’t that she tries to conceal herself, it’s just that she moves with uncommon lightness of step and doesn’t draw attention to herself. In general, there’s an air about her that causes gossip among the other nuns, especially the Irish ones.”

“Why is that?”

“You have to understand that the Irish are notoriously superstitious.”

“That I already know, but I am not certain they are any more superstitious than Sicilians.”

“It’s her eyes,” the mother superior said. “When she is listening to you, watching you, she seems to be totally involved in what she’s doing. That focused attention is unnerving for those who feel that they have secrets to hide.”

After Margaret finished her description, Angela commented, “I can see that little escapes your notice.”

“Thank you, but I’m not so certain. I notice more things than most people, but there is so much to take note of and so little time to see it.”

Angela paused before asking her next question. “Mother Superior, there is one thing that I would like to ask of you.”

“What’s that?”

“Father Benito believes that Sister Brigid may be in some danger. She might be safer if she were to stay with me in the convent’s guest room.”

“Why would she be in danger?”

“She apparently sensed the demon. If she sensed him, then he might have sensed her. He may try to come for her. I can provide her additional protection.”

“I understand. I will have her move.” The mother superior paused, obviously wanting to add something more. “I’m glad that you and the others are here. The killing of Mr. Richardson has been disturbing. It makes certain things real that I am reluctant to accept or to believe.”

“How so?”

The mother superior went to stand by the window in her office. The light slanted across her face. “Most lay people have their religious faith in a convenient place. They take it out on Sunday and burnish it, perhaps get a little emotional at Christmas and Easter, but, by and large, it is a matter of social custom. For us in the Church it is different. For some of us, like Sister Francis, belief is a tangible thing. They have a deep abiding faith that there is a God and there is a Satan, and that the Church is the only protection against the darkness that threatens to swallow us. But for most of us, myself included, our faith is less immediate. We believe that there must be a designer behind the world we see and that we should show devotion to our creator. For us, much of what we do is duty. We attend mass because it is called for. The same is true for Matins, Compline, or any of the orders of the day. We do it because it is right. We are soldiers, following our orders into battle. We believe, we say the prayers, we offer advice, but we do not live with the sense of presence, with the idea that without Jesus, Mary, and the saints, we would fall into a darkness that would bring Hell onto earth.”

Margaret faced the Sicilian nun. “So for the ones like me, this entire affair, the arrival of a potent and evil demon, is frightening and shakes our view of the world.” A

slight edge of fear appeared on her usually calm face. “What really *is* lurking out there in the darkness? What can come and kill us? How can we defend ourselves against what we cannot see?”

“I understand what you mean.”

“Do you really?”

“Yes.” Angela paused for a moment to gather her thoughts. “My group of magicians stays silent because most people would laugh if they knew we existed. But when we come to do the work that we do, there is no laughter, because people have seen something that has terrified them. They have been touched by a dark presence. For me, I have seen the creatures of the darkness. I know they are there. They have taken form before me and come for me. And God and my skills have protected me. For me, the psalm rings especially true, ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me.’”

Angela looked at the mother superior with sadness in her eyes. “It is terrible to face even a hint of the demons that lurk out there without the knowledge that there is a power that can defeat them. In your case you have been exposed to the darkness. You now believe in it. But you have not yet had time to adjust your knowledge to also include a different idea of the divine, one that is not a cold statue in the chapel, but one that can wield a sword and cut down the darkness. I am more fortunate. I have seen evil destroyed. So I have a hope and a comfort that those, like you, who have never seen that power, do not have. The reassurance that I can offer is to tell you is that there is power to defeat the demons. That power can protect you.”

“So the old stories are right?”

“In many ways, yes.”

Margaret thought for a minute, as she returned to her chair behind her desk. “But what protects those that do not have the benefit of the Church?”

“You mean the Jew, the Hindu, the Buddhist?”

She nodded.

Angela smiled. “My answer may shock you, and it certainly does not accord with our doctrine. The divine has many names in many languages. We Christians are too quick to be certain that God only comes in the form approved by the Church. I have seen those of other faiths succeed in throwing out the dark.”

“So we’re wrong about God?”

“Only when we become convinced that God has only one name, one form, one faith.”

“Sister Angela, I’m afraid that I am learning a little too much for one day.”

“I can understand that,” she smiled. “I’ve also taken enough of your time.” She stood to go.

Margaret also stood. “Thank you. You have given me some comfort, though also some confusion.”

“It always seems to work out that way. As Socrates said, ‘Confusion is the beginning of wisdom.’ And if there is more you wish to discuss, I am certain we can find the time to do it.”

“I look forward to it.”

Angela bowed and let herself out of the office.

Margaret stood for a while, thinking that her faith might well become stronger from all that she had seen and all that she would see. Angela was right. The real terror was not the evil that lies in the darkness, but believing in that evil without believing in the good.

Angela was looking forward to her meeting with Brigid. She had often heard about the hereditary witches of Ireland, but had never had a chance to meet one herself. However, her first duty was to her superior. Rimaldi greeted her warmly when she entered his the work room. He asked if she had settled in from her trip.

“Quite well, Father. The convent has placed me in the guest quarters.”

“Good. We will be taking a walk after Father Kirk arrives. I don’t intend to walk past the house on Saint Julian at night, just observe it in the day. Still I think it prudent to wait for Father Kirk.”

“Father Benito told me about the house and his visit to it. Should we go at all? I am wary of our opponents.”

“Yes, but I think we can escape their notice.”

She reluctantly nodded.

“So, Sister, is there anything else that you need?”

“One thing, Father, I was wondering if I could meet with Sister Brigid?”

“I very much want you to. You may be able to find out some more from her. It’s a pity that she is untrained, and it is likely too late to begin her training, but I thought you might offer your opinion on the matter.”

“As you wish. And, Father, I have asked the mother superior to move her to the guest room with me. Both Father Benito and myself feel that she may be in some danger. I hope you don’t object.”

“Not at all,” he replied.

“Thank you. Then I can speak with her this evening.”

“And one other thing, Sister, you should review the Ritual of Solomon.”

“The Ritual of Solomon?” She could not keep the edge of disbelief from her voice.

“Yes. Do you have a problem with the ritual?”

“No, Father. It’s just that it is rarely used.”



“I know, but it is needed in this case.”

“As you will.” She nodded.

“Good. We can speak further tomorrow.”

“Certainly, Father.” She bowed and left the room, still looking forward to her meeting with Brigid, but concerned about the ritual Rimaldi was planning.

Jakob Streng arrived home before three in the afternoon, the critical decisions for his factoring house having been made for the day. He barely had time to pour a drink before Jarred Cawthorne arrived. Essie showed him directly to the parlor, asking no questions. Streng appreciated her discretion.

As soon as she had shut the door, Cawthorne turned to Streng. “So what is the problem, Jakob?”

“The Church has summoned their principal exorcist.”

Jarred grunted his disapproval. “Mind if I get a drink?”

“Not at all, I should have offered.”

“I didn’t really give you time.”

Cawthorne moved to the sideboard. Nearing fifty, he was ten years younger than Streng, but the difference was far greater than mere years implied. Streng was a heavily built man. In his youth, his broad shoulders had been much admired by young women, but, as he grew older, his girth had grown. He was not fat, at least not by the standards of the time, but he was what might be graciously called “prosperous.” Jarred Cawthorne was one of those men who run to height, not weight. Well over six feet, he towered over most men in the town. But he remained thin, partially because he would rather drink than eat. In addition, his favorite pastimes, riding and hunting, were ones he engaged in

strenuously. His public eccentricity was a penchant for slitting the throat of the game he shot rather than allowing one of his boys do it, as would be more seemly.

“So that fool Richardson has managed to create trouble, after all,” Cawthorne commented dryly.

“It seems so.”

Before they could continue the conversation, they heard another knock at the door. They waited as Essie brought in the third member of the party, Micah Breeding. He was a little younger than Cawthorne, and his skin was dark enough that there was rumor that he was part Creek Indian. He moved with uncommon grace for a man and spoke little. Though of normal height, he was heavily muscled and, as more than one person had said, “just looked dangerous.”

Before Essie could leave, Streng stopped her.

“Essie, lay out a cold supper for three in the kitchen. Then send the staff home. You can also leave as soon as you like.”

“Thank you, Mistah Streng.” Essie knew that Streng meant that he wanted the house empty of the servants, including herself, as quickly as possible. She closed the door behind her, curious, but knowing it would be too risky to linger long with all three of them in the house.

Streng looked at his new guest. “Something to drink, Micah?”

“Yes.” He moved to the sideboard as Cawthorne sat in one of the empty chairs. Streng was surprised. Micah rarely drank. His pleasure usually ran to cocaine or laudanum.

“Something serious, Micah?” Cawthorne asked.

“Not certain. You probably have more information. I’ll listen for a while.”

Streng knew it was senseless to press him. Micah would add what he knew, quickly and efficiently, but only when he was ready. He became loquacious only after sex or drugs had thoroughly relaxed him.

“The Catholic Church has summoned their principal exorcist here,” began Streng. He is Father Rimaldi, a Jesuit from Baltimore. One of our brother groups told me some time ago that he heads an order of magicians within the Church. I have no doubt that Father Benito is also one of this order and another may have already arrived.”

“Another is here,” Micah interjected. “She arrived on the nine o’clock train. I happened to be at the station, and saw Benito meeting a woman, a very beautiful woman. If she is a nun, she neither dressed nor acted the part, but the fact that Benito met her with the bishop’s carriage implies that she was a visitor of some note, so I would think that she may be part of their group.”

“Long has already told me of her arrival,” Streng said. “With your confirmation, I think we can assume that she is part of their group. I am surprised at their sophistication. They apparently have female members in this order.”

“Are they a threat to us?” Cawthorne asked.

“A hindrance, a nuisance, little more,” Streng said. “Two of our groups have drawn their attention over recent years. Our groups were unable to avoid the unwanted magical attention. Neither of those chapters had a spirit as potent as Belial at their disposal. Nonetheless, the problem was dispensed with quickly. In the trading of magic, none of our members was hurt, and two of the priests died. Then our groups simply remained quiet for a while and nothing more occurred. Apparently, the Church didn’t have the stomach for more. Their magic presents no threat. As usual, it is the temporal power of the Church that is the real threat. By our remaining quiet, that temporal power can be stymied.”

The other two men nodded in agreement.

“I think we should follow a similar course of action,” Streng said, “but we can also inflict greater magical damage on them with Belial here. If we were able to kill some of the members of their group, perhaps even before they assemble for their ritual, then we would see little more interference from them. After the magical battle is over, we will remain quiet for a while.”

“Is it worth the risk if we can remain unexposed?” Micah asked.

“They are not impotent. They have considerable ability. I feel that they will find out something that will lead them to us. Beyond that, Richardson might have talked.”

“He had seemed ripe for us,” Cawthorne added. “We will need to be more careful in the future.”

“Agreed,” Streng said. “As for our current course of action, I think that we need to wait and gather information. We should meet again soon. It may be wise to strike before their full number is assembled. I think we should summon Belial on the first night of the waning moon.”

“That would be the 26th?” Cawthorne asked.

Streng nodded. “Monday night.”

“What do you think we should do that night?” Micah asked.

“It might be appropriate to attack one of the members of the group, but I think we should consult with Belial. He may have a different idea.”

Cawthorne and Breeding nodded in reply. They would meet again in a few days and summon their creature.

After dinner Angela waited in the convent’s guest quarters for Brigid’s arrival. She had raised the intensity of her Sight to prepare herself for the other nun’s arrival, hoping

to learn as much as she could in advance of talking with her. With her “other sense” awakened, she was aware of Brigid’s approach long before she could hear her steps.

Brigid entered, carrying a small valise with the few things that she needed. She saw another nun sitting on one of the cots, her mouth open in astonishment. Brigid thought she had startled the nun, whom she assumed to be Sister Angela.

“I’m sorry, Sister Angela, I did not mean to surprise you.”

Angela regarded her levelly, coolly, though her heart was racing. Then she reassured her guest. “Please, Sister Brigid, come in.”

Brigid selected the nearest cot and set down her valise. Angela’s eyes never left her.

“Forgive me for not introducing myself, Brigid. I am Angela.” She stood and walked to Brigid. “My manners are getting terrible,” she said more conversationally.

“And were you using some secret magical technique to peer into my soul?” Brigid said, only half joking.

“As a matter of fact, yes. For all the good it did.”

Brigid looked at her questioningly.

“I must apologize. I had intended to do that without your knowing. Normally, I would not have used my abilities without your permission, but these are unusual times.”

“I have noticed,” Brigid commented dryly.

“You have a great talent. Regardless of training, that talent can be seen by someone with the skill to do it. In looking as I did, I customarily learn something. In your case I was unable to see anything, since I was looking too hard.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Do you know what happens when a photograph is over exposed?”

“Yes, you can’t see much of anything except white.”

“It’s much the same. If you are prepared to look closely at someone with the Sight, as I was, and she turns out to have significant hereditary power, you are unable to see any detail, only light.”

“Please, Sister Angela, I am nervous enough already.”

Angela moved to sit on the cot next to Brigid. “This must all seem rather strange to you.”

“Yes and no. Yes, it is strange because everything around me is moving very quickly. A month ago I was a nun with some odd gifts. Now I seem to be increasingly told that I am a person with powers. On the other hand, no, it’s not very strange. I have seen some things in the past, and they have prepared me in some way for what is occurring now.”

“Your family is like mine,” Angela said. No overtone of a question diluted her statement.

“What do you mean?” Brigid was startled, but intrigued as well.

Angela composed herself. “I am also an hereditary. I come from a very old family of Sicilian witches. They have been practicing magic, *magia*, for as long as anyone can remember, which in Sicily is a very long time. At the least, about two thousand years. We have family records that go back that far. My family name is Delamorte. It probably means nothing to you, but it is a name that carries a great deal of power in Sicily, in fact in all of southern Italy. My great-grandmother’s conversion to Catholicism was an important event in Sicily.”

“Your family remained pagan until then?”

“Yes, though the priests were not very pleased. Sicily was far removed from the main currents of power, even though it lies so close to the Vatican. Until recently, Naples and Sicily formed an independent kingdom. My family remained non-Christian because they were both feared and respected, but the triumph of the Church was only a matter of

time. My grandmother realized that fact and took the practical course of publicly becoming a Catholic, though she continued to train her daughters in the old ways.”

“My great aunt never converted,” Brigid said. “Though she compromised with the Church, she remained a worshiper of the old gods.”

“I have heard that was true in the remote parts of Ireland.”

“Yes.”

“And I have heard that you became a daughter of the Church to save your life.”

“The famine was killing hundreds of thousands of my people. My family sent me to the Church so I would have the opportunity to eat.”

“And you did not stay in touch with your family?”

A hint of anger came into Brigid’s voice. It was an old anger, one that she had endeavored to forget. “My family was destroyed by the famine. Both the English and the Church sent little help, probably because they blamed the famine on the ‘lazy Irish’.” She cooled her temper and relaxed her voice. “Perhaps the Church did not really understand how dire the situation was. In any event, staying in contact with anyone during the years of the famine was difficult. So many died, so many left. Mail was always unlikely to get through.

“One of my brothers, Benedict, survived the famine, but we lost touch with him in the year after the famine. I don’t even know if he is still alive, though I would doubt it. In that kind of chaos, it is easy to lose people. He has never tried to find us that we know of, and my sister lives very near where we were born. My other two brothers died, and my great aunt, mother, father, and many other members of the family died as well. In the area of Ireland that I was from, one in two died from the famine or the diseases that followed in its wake. For our family it was worse than that. Only my older sister, Siobhan, and I definitely survived into 1850. We have stayed in touch by the occasional letter, but the distance is great. We are not that close. I was so little when I left.”

“Mother of God, I didn’t know how bad it was.”

“Few did. You were also a little girl at the time, and Ireland has always been on the fringes of Europe. Few visit.”

They sat in silence for a moment. The reaction was common when others heard how devastating the famine had been in Ireland. The percentage of the Irish population that had died from the famine was similar to the devastation wreaked by the Black Plague centuries before. But most Europeans were unaware of the scope of the tragedy. Knowledge of the famine was more common in America than in Europe, as many Irish had fled their homeland to come to America.

“So, Angela, why did you take holy orders? For me it was survival. Then the Church became home.”

“It is easier if I start with telling you about my family. The Delamortes have been witches for far longer than anyone can remember. Both the men and the women in my family carried the power, but now only the women are trained. It is far too dangerous for the men in these times.

“About 1500 years ago, when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, we realized that continuing our pagan beliefs in a public way would be increasingly dangerous, so we began keeping our beliefs to ourselves, only letting the local people know that the power of our family was there in the service of their health or to protect them. Over time, that power was occasionally used, mainly to help with illness, but we drew back from even that task over the centuries as the danger from the Church increased. Finally, in the time of my great-grandmother, we made our compromise with the Church public. We became Catholic to all intents and purposes. But that is not our true faith. I believe in the old gods, just as my family does. The principle goddess I worship is Diana, the Roman goddess of the hunt and moon and the protector of the young.



“I was chosen from our family to enter the Church and find if it still presented a danger to us. The answer is that, in general, it does not. There are, however, other things that threaten all of us, all of humanity; there are dark spirits and people foolish enough to unleash them. From within the Church’s secret order of magicians, I can lend my skills to the destruction of these things. That is why I have remained.”

“So you’re telling me that the power of this order is great enough to deal with this thing that has come here?”

“I don’t know. The demon we are facing here is very powerful. It has strength in the physical world. It was able to throw a man against a wall with enough force to kill him. Rimaldi seems confident that it can be dealt with, but I am less certain. Still, this group of magicians is the most potent that I am aware of. If there is any chance of defeating this creature, it lies with Rimaldi.”

“Does Rimaldi know that you are not really a nun, I mean in the sense of what you believe?”

“No. Do not forget that Rimaldi is thoroughly a Christian. If he suspects the truth about me, he is ignoring it because he needs my strength for what we do. Rimaldi, or any honest magician for that matter, understands that magic is not limited to one faith or another. It is a skill, a *craft* in the truest sense.”

“I don’t understand.”

Angela shook her head slowly. “Luis was right. You know so little, yet you have such potential. It is a terrible waste.” She paused. “I’ll try to explain. There are three types of magical power. The first is personal ability or simple magic. Almost everyone seems to have the ability to do some of the things that fall into the realm of the supernatural, though there is a tremendous difference between individuals in the strength and type of ability. Some have the perceptual ability to sense a major occurrence, such as when a loved one dies. Some seem to sense nothing at all. Others, such as yourself, have re-

markable skills. They can communicate with creatures others cannot see. They can sense the health of an individual or the presence of spirits. Without training, however, their personal abilities are limited. We call those born with a high level of skills “hereditaries,” since they almost always come from a family of recognized abilities, like yours or mine.

“The second type of magic is ritual or ceremonial magic, which is what Rimaldi has. In order to be a potent ritual magician, you do not need great personal power, only an aptitude that has been magnified by years of education, training, and discipline. In ceremonial magic, there are ritual settings so that magicians can increase their power by joining their abilities together. The more magicians present, the stronger the magic.

“All ritual magic is based on formulae and incantations. In that way it is almost mechanical. Provided with the right words, almost anyone who has an aptitude for it and who has been trained can work this magic. It is like operating a steam engine. You have to study to learn to do it right, but you do not need to be able to build the engine in order to operate it. The difference in power between ritual magicians is primarily in their ability to focus the will and maintain exact concentration. Will and focus can be developed in training.”

“I thought that you had to invoke powers.”

“You do. The Rite of Exorcism is an example of ritual magic. All that is needed is a priest with the force of will and the courage to keep to the words of the ritual. He will be successful, unless the opponent is too strong, and then he will fail. If the one performing the rite is a trained magician, he will almost always succeed. So Benito or Rimaldi can exorcise when the local priest might fail.”

Angela paused. “Then there is the magic that no one really understands, or, at least, we don’t anymore.”

Brigid felt a chill up her spine, though she was not afraid. She knew that this was related to the talent passed down through her family.

“The third type of magic is what we call high magic. It requires no altar, no sacred space, merely an individual who is a sacred space unto himself. Much of it is something the magician simply ‘knows’ how to do. We don’t know where high magic comes from, and we don’t know how to awaken it. What we do know is that there are apparently no true high magicians left. We know of their existence only from legend.

“Many people, including me, have limited high magical abilities, mostly the ability to protect myself. You likely have it as well. But a *trained* high magician is a different matter entirely. He would have some rituals or chants that are particular to him, and he would have spent years developing his natural talents. He would work alone, since the powers that he could summon would not be magnified by more than one magician calling them. What he or she would be capable of would be like the old legends of the magicians who could destroy demons or lift tons of stone. He would be able to summon powers that a ceremonial magician would not dare to call. Unfortunately, we no longer have the knowledge of how to train someone with high magical abilities.

“We would think that all of this talk about high magic was just nonsense, except that there have been too many instances of someone being able to perform the kind of magic that only a highly trained group of ceremonial magicians could normally accomplish. One of those instances happened to me.”

Angela stood and began pacing. “Years ago, when I was a girl of fourteen, I was wandering in the hills near my home in Sicily. My parents were not concerned that I was alone. No one would hurt a Delamorte, at least not intentionally, but there are some in Sicily who do call upon dark forces, using *magia nera*, black magic, and I stumbled upon one such ritual.

“A shepherd and two women were sacrificing a lamb. I came across a hill as night was descending and saw them below me. A full moon had just risen, and I could see them as clearly as if it were daytime. They had scribed a circle on the ground and were casting

herbs into a fire. The lamb was tethered near the fire and was bleating in fear. I knew I should not watch, but I did anyway. I could not make out their chant, but it did not sound like Italian or Latin. It was building in intensity, and when it reached its zenith, the man seized the lamb and one of the women slit its throat and let the blood pour onto the fire. Out of the bloody smoke a dark form began to rise.

“I became frightened and screamed. All three turned to me and the dark shape swept up the hill and wrapped itself around me. I felt that I was being crushed by oily smoke. I couldn’t breathe. I was terrified.

“Then, from some knowledge I didn’t know that I had, I reached down inside of me. I felt a sudden rush of power from within. As the power rushed out of my body, it passed through the dark form and shattered it. Some fragments of the dark being still remained. They coalesced, and it fled from me, rushing down the hill like a wind, back to the doorway the three had opened for it. One of the women stood between it and the fire, and she backed away from its approach, stumbling backwards into the fire. She screamed as the hot coals ignited her clothes. The creature vanished into the fire and returned to its own realm.

“I was dizzy and fell to my knees. I may have even blacked out for a few moments. When I looked up again, the woman was still screaming, but her two companions had dragged her out of the fire and were trying to put out the fire in her clothes. When they succeeded, they lifted her up between them and stumbled away from me as rapidly as they could.

“My sister heard later that the woman who fell into the fire died that night. We never did find out who the others were.

“The incident added to the legend of the Delamortes. Yet I didn’t even know how I’d done what I’d done. The entire event had been an accident. A few days later an old

man came from a village near our home. He was also a shepherd. He brought us a lamb as a gift.

“It happened that my mother was the one who met him at the door. He insisted on giving her the lamb and thanking us for saving his granddaughter. Apparently, the young man who had taken part in the ritual had enlisted the aid of two of the darker sisters of *strega* to place a curse on the man’s granddaughter, who had refused the man’s proposal of marriage. By accident, I had saved her from the curse. So the old man came with a gift, and he swore allegiance to the Delamortes.

“It was all by accident, but I felt good about what I had done, though I had no intent to kill the witch. Very little dark magic was done for some time in the surrounding area, since the Delamortes had again proven that the villagers were under their protection.”

Angela sat down again opposite Brigid. “So that is what high magic is like. It is a natural extension of personal power, but with unimaginably greater force. And learning how to harness that magic is the ‘holy grail’ of our order. In order to be a true high magician, one who can control the power at will, we surmise that you must be an hereditary, and you must know certain keys, certain mental disciplines. But we are guessing. It may be that all there is to high magic is some special ability that appears unpredictably. It may be that the legendary high magicians never really existed.

“If anyone once possessed the knowledge of the rules of high magic, no one knows them now. Even those like me, who have had flashes of high magical power, do not really understand what to do in order for high magic it to be successful.

“I have searched all of my life to find the keys to the true power of high magic, but I cannot find them. My personal magical power is far greater than Rimaldi’s, but his overall power is greater than mine, because of his vast ritual knowledge. For now, ceremonial magic is the greatest power we know of.”

Angela looked sadly at the floor, then once again looked up at Brigid. “So we do the best with what we have.”

“Then you should come to Ireland.”

“What do you mean?”

Brigid told Angela the story of the old man who had come to the village to stop a marauding demon.

Angela sat in astonishment when Brigid finished her story. Then she said, “This was less than fifty years ago?”

“Yes.”

“Do such men still exist?”

“I don’t know. The man who came was very old. Perhaps he was the last of his kind.”

“With such a magician,” Angela said, “we could face any demon these people might summon.”

“Even Satan himself?”

“There is no Satan,” Angela said distractedly.

Brigid looked at her strangely. “You don’t believe in Satan either?”

“Any magician should know that, even though some evil magicians appear to have missed that simple fact. There are very evil and very powerful things out there that can do all manner of harm, but there is no lord of evil whose power is nearly as great as the gods’. If you could bring down only a fraction of the power of the divine, nothing that seeks to do ill could stand against you. The gods are not frivolous enough to allow such a creature to exist.”

“Why does Father Benito call them satanists?”

“It is convenient. They are people who worship evil, who do magic to satisfy their own greed and desires. They seek to destroy, control, and even kill. Since they think the

name of evil is ‘Satan,’ they call on Satan and evil responds. They, as any other magician, get what they desire.”

“Then where does evil come from?”

“The great question,” Angela said with a sad smile. “It has many answers, but the most common one is from mankind himself. Many of the dark demons were created by magicians who fashioned them to do their bidding. It’s rarely done, but over the thousands of years that mankind has been practicing magic, it has happened. Just because a magician develops power does not make him immune to his own greed or stupidity. And the demons also come from hate, fear, and ignorance. When a large number of people hold any thought for a length of time, be it good or bad, they have the ability to create something. And others of these dark creatures simply ‘are.’ They exist, and we have no idea of their origins. Perhaps they hid in some fold of creation, perhaps they were mistakes. Perhaps they are combinations of ghosts or spirits that were misbegotten.

“Look at the thing that we are facing here. Potent magicians are calling up evil forces to do their bidding. Why? To gratify their own desires for power or dominance. Are they foolish enough to think that they will not eventually pay a price? No, but they might not *believe* that they will pay.” Angela shrugged. “Personally, I cannot comprehend wishing to do evil. Ultimately, it is senseless.”

The two sat in silence for a few moments, absorbed in their own thoughts. Then Angela remembered the thread of the conversation. “Brigid, if such a magician as the one you speak of were to still exist, how would we contact him?”

“Father Benito and I spoke of this before. From what he told me, the Church is unlikely to be able to call a man such as this. He would have too much to fear from the Church. So he would remain hidden.”

“Unfortunately, I understand,” Angela said.

“But that doesn’t really matter,” Brigid said quietly. “I’ve done all that can be done to call him.”

“What?” Angela replied, the surprise apparent in her voice. “How?”

“As shattered as Ireland may have been after the famine, there are still those who follow in the ways of the old gods. My sister knows of them, and I have written her. She will pass the message on, and perhaps it will reach the right person. I don’t know if such a powerful magician still exists. And if there is one, I don’t know if he would come. He may not wish to risk exposure by being involved.” She frowned before continuing. “I have thought about this for a long time. It may be that he would come only if the Church fails. Then he would come in silence, destroy the dark one, and leave in the same silence.” She sighed, “I wish there weren’t so many ‘ifs’.”

“Brigid, you know what it means if we fail?”

“Not really.”

“Most of us would be killed in a failed attempt. The demon’s rage would be immense, and he would kill any who do not have the ability to resist him.”

“Even you?”

“Against the thing that we face, I might possibly die as well. This is no minor demon called by a local shepherd. It is far more powerful.

“The ritual that Rimaldi has chosen plays a part in this, as well. It is the most powerful that we know, but it has a weakness. If it fails, the defenses that are part of the ritual fail as well. Each of us would be left with only our own protection.”

With that somber thought they ended their conversation and went to bed, not knowing that Streng’s plans held unpleasant surprises.



## *Chapter Sixteen*

### *Friday, October 23rd*

Father Benito had just sat down to breakfast when the monsignor entered the refectory with a tall blonde man, well over six feet tall, dressed as a farmer. With an amused smile on his face, the monsignor led the man to Father Benito.

“It seems that another of your people has arrived, though a bit earlier than expected,” the monsignor said.

The big man extended his hand. “I’m Father Steven Kirk.”

Benito, recovering from his surprise, stood to take the offered hand. “Father Luis Benito. Pleased to meet you. We didn’t expect you would arrive this early today.”

“I was fortunate enough to catch an earlier train.”

“Then please join me for breakfast.”

“A fine idea,” Kirk said, smiling.

The monsignor, who seemed to be taking a great deal of pleasure from the situation, interceded. “I haven’t eaten yet today, so I can help Father Kirk get his breakfast. Then we’ll both join you.”

Benito could do little more than smile and nod. He watched as the monsignor led the other priest back to the serving tables at the back of the refectory. Her heard Father Kirk’s deep laughter as the two stopped in front of the large pot of grits that was one of the central features of a southern breakfast. The two men rapidly filled their platters and returned to the table.

They joined Benito, and each said a brief grace over their food. The cheerful Kirk looked to Benito and said, “The monsignor was kind enough to explain that the white substance was not cream of wheat, but grits.”

“You should enjoy them,” the monsignor said.

Kirk, moving with surprising delicacy for a man larger than many field hands, sampled the substance in question. He frowned slightly, "For some thing that is spoken of so often, these grits seem to taste mainly of butter and salt."

"That's what makes them the perfect breakfast food. They go just as easily with bacon and ham as they do with shrimp or crab," the monsignor said. "Here, sprinkle some crab meat on them."

Kirk tried the crab on the grits and was pleasantly surprised by the combination. "Now that is excellent. We don't get too much crab, or any other seafood, in the mid-west."

"I'd imagine not," Benito smiled, affected by Kirk's cheerful good humor. "I'm also beginning to appreciate the sense of humor of our order. Sister Angela arrived dressed as a grand lady, and you arrive dressed as a farmer."

"The apple never falls far from the tree," he remarked with a smile. "At least you have substantial breakfasts here. Some of the places I've visited with the church have a smaller interpretation of breakfast than we do in farm country."

"Not in Savannah," the monsignor said.

Benito continued, "You are younger than most of the members of our order. You are in your thirties?"

"Thirty-six, to be precise. At most gatherings, I feel like the child of the group."

"And you are a bit larger than the average scholar."

Steven laughed. It was a simple, uncomplicated sound. He was someone who took joy from life at every possible occasion. "I can see that Father Rimaldi did not warn you about me. Regardless of the Scottish name, I'm mostly Swedish by descent, and I grew up on a farm outside of Minneapolis. Tossing around hay bales when you're a youngster on a dairy farm does a bit to build you up, as does helping the occasional parishioner with a

barn raising. Helping with building serves to build a stronger bond with my parish,” he added. “My parish is quite rural, outside of Duluth, Minnesota.”

After their breakfast, Kirk and Benito went to the workroom. Benito had just finished giving Kirk a quick summary of the situation when Angela joined them. As she entered, Steven stood up from his chair and went to take her hand.

“I’m Father Steven Kirk,” he smiled his infectious grin.

Angela gave a muted smile, “And I am Sister Angela.”

“A pleasure to meet you. I am glad to be able to add my modest strength to that which is already gathered here.”

“Help is always appreciated. I pray that our strength will be enough,” Angela said.

“You doubt that?” Kirk asked.

“I am always careful to overestimate my opponent. It often avoids unpleasant surprises,” she answered.

Before anyone could frame a response, the door swung open to reveal Father Rimaldi and Monsignor Henry.

Father Kirk moved to shake his superior’s hand. “Father Provincial, it is good to see you again.”

“And I am glad to see you, as well. We are now armed well enough to begin some further explorations.” He turned to the monsignor. “Monsignor Henry, thank you for taking care of Father Kirk this morning.”

The monsignor smiled. “When we met, I was glad to find that he was a priest. When I first found he was asking for Father Rimaldi, I feared you might have imported a large Swedish farmer as a bodyguard.”

Steven, who had not yet changed his clothes, laughed loudly. “Good. A sense of humor. We shall all need one to strengthen us through this business.”

The five sat around the table in their working room.

Rimaldi began. “Has Father Benito brought you up to date on the problem we face?”

“Yes,” Steven replied. “This demon could prove to be a fearsome opponent.”

“It concerns me, as well, Steven,” he replied. “I have selected the Ritual of the Solomon to use against him, but we are all aware of the challenges of that ritual.”

“There cannot be any weak points in the triangles,” Angela said looking around the table. She, like the others, knew that the Ritual of Solomon used two groups of three mages to feed power to the central and seventh one. Each group formed an equilateral triangle, with the two overlapping to form a Star of David. The groups maintained their own shielding and protected the center mage, while feeding power to the one in the center. If either of the two groups failed, the other would continue the ritual, though with less power available to the primary magician. However, if one more person failed in the remaining triangle, that would bring down the entire triangle, leaving everyone vulnerable.

“It is my intent,” he went on, “to be at the center. Benito and Angela will be in different triangles, and the other mages will work with them.”

“Who else will join us?” Benito asked.

“Fathers Pascal, Benedetto, and Francisco. I know that you do not know Francisco, but he is quite potent.”

Angela raised a question. “Isn’t Pascal old for such a task? I know his health has been failing.”

The priest nodded. “Yes, but I saw him recently, and I think he is fit enough. Besides, there is no other who can do the job as well, considering the limited people that I have to choose from. Unless,” he added, “you have a suggestion?”

She paused for a moment. “No, I don’t. There is not really another on this side of the Atlantic whom I would select.”

Benito entered the conversation. “Could we wait for the Vatican to send us another?”

“I do not want this to continue for another month, and it would take time for the Vatican to send a magician to replace Pascal.”

They thought for a moment and realized that there would be more risk in moving quickly, but also knew that waiting would jeopardize more lives, perhaps even their own.

“Father?”

“Yes, Steven?”

“Are you certain that I am the best choice? After all, I am one of the newest members of the order, and my training is not complete. Perhaps another would be better?”

“I have considered that, as well as your strong talents. I don’t think that you have anything to worry about on that account. You can draw up a large amount of power to feed into the center. Besides, I will place our next most powerful people with you. As long as we can maintain the shielding and you can send strength to me, I feel that this ritual offers the best chance of success.”

Steven nodded in response.

“Father Benito,” Rimaldi said, “has been able to discover where the opponent’s rituals are held. We will have an advantage in that way. Also, we know the name of the leader of the group and his demonic creature.”

He looked around the table, “Then we are agreed on the Ritual of Solomon?”

There were no objections.

“There is one other topic that we must look into, and that is the matter of our ritual’s location. That is why I have asked the monsignor to join us. He will take us to the house that the diocese has available. There is a ballroom on the second floor for our ritual area. It is also large enough to serve as our lodging. I am of the opinion that we should move there as the time for our working approaches.”

“Why not work from a more sanctified space within the cathedral?” Benito asked.

“I am concerned about the damage that might be done to the cathedral, and I think that this house will offer us greater privacy.”

“Then let’s see this house,” Angela said. “We should have a chance to feel its suitability in advance.”

Rimaldi rose, bringing the others to their feet. Monsignor Henry led them from the room and into the bright morning sunshine.

The house lay on York Street, only a few blocks from the cathedral. It was not a mansion, but it was large and imposing. Monsignor Henry opened the door and led them in. “It was quite a significant legacy left to us by Mrs. Grayson.”

“Quite good fortune on your part,” said Steven.

“Yes, it was. But our good fortune came about by her lack of it. Her husband and both of her sons died in the war. Mrs. Grayson took the news of her husband’s death with grief, but with endurance. Many others had lost their spouses in the war. Yet, regardless of her dignity, she lost the will to live when her children died. She rarely left the house after her second son’s death. Her daughter-in-law tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy, even though she, too, had lost her husband, but this house became a silent one, not the place to raise a child.

“Mrs. Grayson realized that herself, and she was the first to recommend that her daughter-in-law leave. Although not old, Mrs. Grayson herself died shortly afterwards. She left the house to the church. Her land and money she left in trust for her granddaughter. The daughter-in-law had no objection. She wanted no more to do with this house. It must have been a constant reminder of a happier life before the war.”

“Sad,” Angela remarked. “It was a beautiful home.”

“Yes,” the monsignor said. “We have spent some time maintaining the house and adding furniture more suited to our purposes. The small ballroom is empty, but there are

five bedrooms, all fitted with beds for two, so it gives us a place to lodge visitors. It has been very useful over the past years.” He looked from the foyer into the drawing room with its leather chairs, book lined shelves, and large fireplace. “It can also be a good retreat from the business of the cathedral.”

He turned back to the group. “Come, let me show you around.”

The ground floor and first floor were much as would be expected. The staff quarters on the ground floor were simply empty rooms. There was also a large pantry, a wine cellar, and several storage areas on the same floor. The first floor held the drawing room, a formal dining room, a sitting room, a breakfast room, and the kitchen. The second floor of the house was divided by a hallway that ran perpendicular to the street. One side had two smaller hallways leading off of it. The front hallway gave access to the master bedroom, which looked out over York. It was twice as large as the other bedrooms. Off the rear hallway were four smaller bedrooms.

The entire other side of the house was occupied by the ballroom, which was approximately forty feet deep and thirty feet wide. One of the two shorter sides of the ballroom looked out over the street, and the other over the rear yard and coach house. The room was unobstructed by pillars. It seemed to be an excellent room for the planned ritual, the open space allowing them to position themselves to best advantage.

“So what do you think?” Monsignor Henry asked.

“It appears to be exactly what we need,” Rimaldi responded. “Give us a few moments, please.”

The four magicians all closed their eyes, searching with their skills for signs of disharmony in the building or the location. After a few minutes, they each emerged from their examination.

Sister Angela was the first to speak. “I sensed no real discord, though there is a pall of sadness and resignation over the house.”

Benito added, "I sense much the same. The widow apparently had made peace with her situation before she died. I regret I could not have met this woman."

Father Kirk simply nodded in agreement.

Rimaldi summed up the impressions. "You see, Monsignor Henry, sometimes a place can look excellent, but there might have been reasons that we might not want to use it. Fortunately, the atmosphere of this house is good. It will be quite suitable for conducting our rituals, so, assuming there are no objections, that is what we would like to do."

"The entire house is at your disposal. I will have the staff make up the bedrooms. Will you require any staff while your people are in residence here?"

"None whatsoever," the Jesuit quickly responded. "It would be better if only the members of our order are present for any length of time from now until we complete our business." He looked to the monsignor, "You, of course, are excepted from that, but I don't think you'll want to be here when we are actually working."

"That is a privilege I will happily forgo."

"Then, if you'll excuse us, I think the four of us would like to meet in the drawing room for a bit. Then we'll return to the refectory for lunch."

"Certainly. I will leave the key on the table in the foyer." Monsignor Henry left the four magicians to the contemplation of their work space. They followed him downstairs and turned into the drawing room as he continued to the front door. In the drawing room they arrayed themselves in the comfortable chairs, all facing the center of the room.

"There is one other task we need to discuss," Rimaldi said. "We need to view the house where our enemies meet."

"But should all of us go?" Sister Angela asked.

"I think so. That would give us the best impression of their abilities. Why do you think we should not all go?"



“For one thing, Father Benito has already been there. For another, we are likely to draw attention to ourselves.”

“Father Benito has much to gain from a second look. And, you, Sister, have not seen it at all. I think the risk of being noticed is well justified. Any other objections?”

No one else spoke.

“Good. Then we will meet in our workroom at the archdiocese tomorrow morning at ten.”

They all nodded.

He rose. “I will return to my studies for now.”

Father Kirk rose as well. “And I have some unpacking to do. I need to find my cassock and change into more appropriate attire.”

The two men left. Angela and Luis were alone in the drawing room. They heard the animated conversation of Kirk and Rimaldi disappear down the street.

“I am not happy,” Angela said.

“Our superior does seem a little,” he paused, “impervious.”

“Luis, I do not know you well, so perhaps I am speaking out of turn, but he seems resistant to any suggestions.”

“I have known him a long time, and it’s his Achilles’ heel.”

“In this case, it may prove deadly for all of us. The Ritual of Solomon is powerful, but it is dependent upon everyone doing his task without fail. What concerns me even more is his refusal to bring Brigid into the ritual.”

“So you have discussed that with him as well?”

“You mean to say that you made the same suggestion?” Angela asked.

“Yes.”

“Luis, she has tremendous abilities. Given two weeks to train her, which we apparently have, she would be able to add more power to our ritual than all but a few members of the order, especially that doddering Pascal.”

“Angela,” he said with a slight tone of rebuke, “Father Pascal is one of our most knowledgeable members.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Three or four years ago.”

“I saw him three months ago. He has slipped badly in the last few years. It took him some time to remember my name. I am worried that he cannot maintain concentration during the ritual.”

“Do you wish me to bring it up with Rimaldi?”

“Do you think it would do any good?” she said sharply.

He shook his head slowly.

She changed the subject. “You know we’re being watched.”

“Yes, I saw a young man at the train station when I was picking up both you and Father Rimaldi. I can only assume he is with the satanists.”

“I didn’t know about him. And that worries me even further. If they are as aware of us as we are of them, it could make us vulnerable.”

“So to whom were you referring?”

“The porter that you brought with you to the train station.”

“Daniel?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“You think he is working for this Streng as well?”

“No, not at all, but I do think he is working for someone. He has enough magical training to try and assess me.”

He shook his head with an expression akin to resignation. “I don’t believe it.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“No, no, Sister. That is not what I meant at all. I don’t know if Brigid told you, but I sent her on an errand to discover if there was an active Voudon cult in Savannah.”

“And there is one,” she stated with no surprise in her voice.

“Yes. Brigid met with their mambo, who turned out to be an unexpected ally. She is Streng’s housemaid, and she took the job with him to be able to have as much knowledge as possible about what he was doing. From what you’re telling me, she is also having her members keep a close watch on us. I can only assume that he is one of them.”

“Can they aid us in the working?”

“No. They are too afraid of Streng to be involved. Besides, Father Rimaldi does not want them involved.”

“Why?” she said sharply.

“He was angry that I had tried to contact the Voudon followers here. He felt that I had not observed proper discretion. But it was from them that I learned Streng’s name and the name of his demon.”

“Observing his niceties could prove dangerous.”

“Well, he knows only that I managed to contact them. He doesn’t know that Brigid spent some time with their mambo one night.”

“So our little nun met with a mambo.” She smiled. “I’m beginning to respect Brigid more and more.”

“She has unexpected depth.”

“That is certain. I wonder if she could gain me an audience with the mambo? I have always wanted to meet one.”

“I think she could arrange it. The Voudon followers here don’t like priests very much, but seem to be quite comfortable around nuns.” He paused. “But you’re not worried about meeting followers of voodoo?”

“Why? They serve the same gods, regardless of what they may call them.”

“Gods? Sister are you a nun or a witch?”

“Am I a Delamorte or a Benelli?”

He paused before hesitantly saying, “Both?”

“The right answer.”

Benito knew that the situation in Savannah was more complex than he had suspected. He was also finding that his secret order of magicians had secrets, even from each other. Angela had taken a risk to reveal so much to him. He had also withheld information from Rimaldi. He smiled, “I think I will avoid further complexities and go back to reviewing rituals and preparing myself for the coming contest.”

“Thank you, Father. For myself, I will be about seeing if I can meet this mambo. Come to think of it, our mysterious Daniel might be a more direct route than Brigid. Where does Daniel normally spend his afternoons?”

“In the stables.”

“Well I seem to have a sudden desire to visit them.” She rose and let herself out of the house, leaving Benito alone to think about the ritual Rimaldi had chosen. The interlocked triangles of the Ritual of Solomon were the distinguishing feature of the ancient ritual. Legend had it that the ritual had been created by Solomon himself. The legends also said that Solomon did not need anyone else to establish the points of the star. He had brought up both triangles from the center and then done his magic securely within the shielding. Each apex of his seal was guarded by a spirit whom he had summoned. Each was named for a point on the Tree of Life. Some speculated that his spirits were those that actually composed the Tree. If the old texts were to be believed, Solomon was an extraordinarily powerful magician. He safeguarded Israel with his magic as much as with his wisdom and his armies.

Benito had read many of the hidden Vatican manuscripts. The old texts indicated that the legend of Solomon's power was more than a tale that had grown over the millennia. The ancient king had been a consummate ceremonial magician. Much of what he had known, however, was lost. All that remained were fragmentary documents, written in Hebrew, and they did not describe complete rituals.

The powerful Ritual of Solomon was rarely used. It was difficult to control unless all of the participants could maintain absolute concentration on their task. Benito knew of at least one case when the ritual had disintegrated with unpleasant consequences. He knew that Rimaldi had chosen it because of its potency, but that potency came at a price. Benito didn't know if the aging Pascal and the novice Kirk could maintain their concentration well enough.

The smells of the stable as she entered, called to Angela's mind childhood memories of long rides through the Sicilian countryside. Though she had not been on horseback for a decade, she still knew how to handle a horse. She was an accomplished horsewoman, and she enjoyed the opportunity of being in the company of animals, beings who were neither good nor evil. Animals were simply what they were. From the rear of the stable she heard the sound of a brush as one of the stable hands groomed a horse. She hoped it would be Daniel.

She was not disappointed. Daniel's face rose over the back of the horse and brightened in recognition.

"Sister Angela, nice a you to visit."

She walked over to the horse and laid a hand on it, feeling the rough, yet silky, horsehair. "Daniel, I think that you should call me Angela."

“Not proper, ma’am. You might be fine with it, but some white folk might take it wrong.”

“Proper or not, I definitely am not a ma’am. How about Sister Angie?”

He smiled. “That’s somethin’ we can live with.”

“Daniel, I might as well get to the point. I’d like to meet the mambo.”

His face blanked. “What’s a mambo?”

“Well, Daniel, let’s put it this way. If you don’t know what a mambo is, then you don’t. If you do know what a mambo is, then I would greatly appreciate the chance of meeting with her. We have much more in common than it would appear.”

“Don’t know no mambo,” he repeated.

“I saw it in your eyes at the train station as clearly as you saw it in mine. We both have training in magic.” She smiled as she rubbed the horse’s neck and avoided looking him in the eyes. “But you do what you think is right.”

“Yessum.” He said it tentatively.

“This is a fine mare you have here.”

He was relieved to be able to talk about a safer subject. “She’s my pride. ‘Course she’s not really mine, but the bishop never rides her. I’m the only one who takes her out. She’s a high bred quarter, gentle as a lamb, but she needs to run from time to time.”

“All of us girls need to run from time to time,” she patted the horse fondly. “Don’t we sweetheart?”

The horse neighed in response.

As Angela left the stable, she could feel Daniel looking at her and evaluating. She knew the mambo would hear of her visit, but she did not know if her request would be granted.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### *Saturday, October 24th*

The four magicians met in the workroom the next morning at ten. Angela and Benito had arrived a few minutes earlier than the other two and sat in a somewhat uncomfortable silence. Each had things to say to the other, but neither wished to speak. There was a chance that they might be overheard, and they did not want to face Rimaldi with their questions, at least not yet.

The Jesuit entered with Father Kirk in tow. The younger priest obviously had total confidence in his superior. “Well,” Rimaldi said, taking his chair at the head of the table, “I think we should review the situation a little before we go. Father Benito?”

“When Brigid and I approached the house before, we came from Warren Square. I think that is a good direction to begin from, as it will give us the opportunity to look directly down the street that the house is on. Then we can walk down Saint Julian on either side and have a clear view. The last time, I was on the same of the street as the house.”

“And?”

“The residue of evil was easily visible to the Sight even in the light of day. It appears as a swirling black and gray mass which grows more dense as you approach the house. Within it, the air seems cold and penetrating. There is enough residual power there to test your shielding.”

“Do you think we need to work together, or do you think that the shielding each of us has would be enough?” Angela asked.

“For yourself and Father Rimaldi,” Benito said, “You can resist it on your own. I have experienced the place and feel confident that I can protect myself. As to Father Kirk, I am unfamiliar with your capabilities.”

“And I,” said Steven, “am unfamiliar with the abilities of these magicians.”

“As am I,” Rimaldi said. “So I think it would be prudent to assume that Father Benito and I need to be wary of your shielding, Steven, as well as each other’s. We may need to support you should there be a problem.”

“Isn’t Sister Angela going with us?” Steven asked.

Benito smiled. “Yes, she is, Steven, but she is a Delamorte. She is more than able to protect herself, but her power does not blend well without a special effort. It is better for the three of us to watch out for each other.”

“Hereditary?” Steven asked.

Angela nodded.

His curiosity was aroused. “How many generations?”

“We don’t know, exactly. At least a thousand years,” she replied.

“Impressive,” Steven said.

“She does not like to say it,” Rimaldi interjected, “but we suspect that her family has passed the gift down for more than two thousand years.”

Steven was more than surprised. He had heard that such people existed, but had never expected to meet one. He recovered well enough to say, “I am honored.”

Angela smiled graciously. She was accustomed to the reaction.

“Then,” Rimaldi said, “let us be on our way.”

Father Benito led the way through the streets. He doubted he would ever forget the way to this particular house. They all walked in silence, each keeping his own counsel. Several people on the street greeted them. Not a few stopped to stare at the huge man in their midst. He was almost a foot taller than Benito, and at least a head taller than Rimaldi. Angela looked like a porcelain doll next to him. Benito led them to the opposite side of Warren Square.



“Saint Julian Street would bisect the square if it ran straight. But the block we are concerned with is the one to the west, on the far side of the square.” He indicated the direction with a slight movement of his head.

“Then let us prepare ourselves,” Rimaldi said. The three calmed themselves and touched upon their magical centers. “Are we ready?”

Steven and Benito nodded.

Benito said, “Remember, Steven, we must all remain within a few feet of one another and move together, or we could lose touch.”

“See with the Sight,” the Jesuit added.

As Benito changed his perspective to see with the Sight, he noticed that Kirk’s shielding was relatively weak. Both Angela and Rimaldi appeared to be encased in a glowing mist, while there was just a hint of brightness around Kirk.

Steven reacted as his normal view of the street was overlaid with what the Sight could see. “Mother of God,” Steven said, “the evil is palpable. I have never seen its like.”

Rimaldi said. “Let us pass down the street as quickly as we can without drawing notice. We will walk down the side opposite the house.”

The three men began to move in unison. Benito remembered that he had told Brigid that he would not return to this street willingly, and he had not. Rimaldi moved forward with grim determination. Kirk was simply frightened. Angela followed in their wake, perhaps three paces behind. She saw with as much detail as the priests, and what she saw frightened her. This evil had needed many years to take root.

When they neared the midpoint of the square, Angela saw one of the little ones behind a low bush. He was motioning to her frantically. She turned aside to kneel beside the small creature, letting the others proceed without her. Fear was written on the little one’s normally smiling face. He pointed toward the others, now nearing the boundary of the

square. He shook his head quickly from side to side. Angela felt the word “no” appear in her mind.

She stood up quickly and called to the others, “Wait.”

The three stopped and Benito moved toward her. She looked down at the little one, who shook his head again, then ducked back behind the bush. She attempted to follow him, but he had vanished.

Benito arrived and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“I saw one of the little ones. He didn’t want us to go.”

Rimaldi and Kirk arrived. The Jesuit seemed irritated. “What is it?”

“Father Rimaldi,” Angela said, “I saw a little creature, a sprite. Brigid calls them little ones. He doesn’t want us to go.”

“Why?”

“They don’t communicate like that. All that I could tell was he didn’t want us to go down that street.”

Rimaldi thought for a moment. Then he calmly said, “I have never seen these little creatures that the Irish seem to be so fond of. And I don’t see anything particularly dangerous about looking at this house. We should go.”

Angela exchanged a quick glance with Benito, then rejoined the group. Once again they crossed the square, with Rimaldi in the lead, Kirk just behind him and Benito and Angela in the rear.

When they entered the block, Benito felt the hair on the back of his neck begin to stand up. In the full light of a warm day, he could feel the chill. It was a chill that only those with the Sight could fully experience, though it would give anyone a sense of disquiet. Though the gift was called the Sight because vision was the sense that was the most augmented by the capability, in practice, the Sight extended to all of the senses.

Overlaying the peaceful and sunny street he saw swirling black tendrils, whipping about like the arms of a many-tentacled octopus. Benito wondered what Rimaldi and Kirk saw, as he thought that their Sight was less strong than his. He could only imagine what Angela, with her much stronger senses, was seeing. Before Benito's eyes, the smoke and darkness folded in on itself, swirling back to the center of the storm. Tendrils extended out from the center of the dark mass. Some were tainted red. Each time one swept over him, he felt a chill. When the darkest tendrils swept over him, he felt an echo of fear mated with a joyless pursuit of carnality. Beneath the tentacles was a roiling gray mass that grew darker and more dense as they came closer to Streng's house. Finally the grayness almost blotted out the view of their normal vision.

Rimaldi stopped the group directly across the street from 454 Saint Julian. They turned to face the house.

"Useless bravado," Angela thought to herself. She did not need to concentrate on her shielding, even though she had felt slight impacts as the tendrils swept by. Inside the gray mass she felt a constant pressure against her defenses which increased when the darker tendrils swept over her. Her shielding was far too solid to be penetrated, though the dark gray cloud directly before the house made her short of breath. Her senses were expanded. She was the first to see the leering face of a man looking down on the priests from a second story window. She realized that the man must be Streng. He was enjoying the display of the darkness he had helped to create. More importantly, he was assessing his opponents. Streng's presence must have been what the little one had been trying to warn them about.

Benito also saw Streng. After a few moments, Rimaldi looked up to the same window. Benito noticed that Rimaldi had moved a little too far ahead of Steven. Before he could say anything, the tendrils began a different dance, now reaching out to draw the three men across the street. It was a minor show of power. Streng was merely playing with

them, letting them know how easily he could strike at them when they, unshielded by ritual, dared traverse his home ground. Horrified, Benito saw that Steven was being affected. He began to move toward the house. Rimaldi did not notice; his vision was locked onto Streng's face. Benito grabbed the young priest's cassock, pulling him back. His sudden action drew Rimaldi's attention away from Streng, and he again focused on Kirk, angry with himself that he had allowed his awareness of Steven to waver. Benito pushed Steven toward Rimaldi, squeezing the younger man between the two more experienced magicians.

Startled, Rimaldi began to move down the street away from the house. Streng moved his gaze from the priests to Angela and smiled at her. Then he let the curtain fall and vanished from view. Streng's arrogance almost caused Angela to strike out at him, but she realized it would not be wise. He had seen weakness. It was better if he saw no show of strength.

The three men moved toward the corner and turned left at the next street. Angela was just behind them. Rimaldi stopped to evaluate Steven, but Angela pushed into them.

"Not here," she said.

For a moment, Rimaldi was offended, but then turned and led the way back to the cathedral.

In the second floor study of his house, Streng heard a knock on the door.

"Come in."

Essie cautiously entered. "I felt somethin', Mistah Streng."

"Please come in Essie. I'm afraid you missed the excitement."

She closed the door behind her. "What did I miss?"

“Four of our priest-magicians came down Saint Julian. They were here to investigate my house. Unfortunately, they were not up to the task.”

Carefully keeping her face blank, Essie responded. “They weak?”

“Much more so than I thought. I did not even use a spell, I just called out to one of them, and he began to leave the others and come across the street to me.” Streng was very pleased with himself.

“I knew you didn’t need no help. We got nobody can do that.”

“I still wish you would join us, but you are right. We will not need anyone’s help.” He turned to face the window and said quietly to himself, “Soon, we will begin to pick them off, one by one.”

“Excuse me, Mistah Streng, I didn’t hear.”

“Not for you anyway, Essie.” He turned to face her. “Monday night, we will have dinner for six. Seven o’clock.”

“Yes, Mistah Streng,” Esmerelda turned to go, glad that he had not called her back and that she’d been able to conceal that she’d heard what he’d said.

Father Rimaldi had not looked behind himself on the way to the cathedral. Arriving at the door, he looked back and saw that the other three were behind him by almost a block. He entered the work room and paced back and forth. He was angry, not only at Angela’s peremptory tone, but at the fact that she had been right. He had been wrong to stop so near the house. He had also been wrong to focus so much of his attention on Streng that he had allowed himself to become too distant from Steven. Steven’s abilities had not been up to the task. Rimaldi knew he should not make that kind of error when dealing with opponents this powerful.

The door opened behind him and the other three entered. He moved to join them. “Steven, are you all right?”

Angela’s eyes flashed at him briefly. But he did not respond, instead focusing his attention on Steven.

“I am all right.” His voice was weak, and he seemed dazed. “I think I am more frightened than anything else.”

“You have a right to be,” Rimaldi said.

“I don’t know why. I stopped thinking and began walking toward his house. It seemed so,” he searched for a word, “natural.”

“A simple gathering spell, enhanced by the place we were in,” Benito said. “We should have guarded you better.”

“We should not have gone at all,” Angela said.

“It was necessary,” Rimaldi said strongly. “It is unfortunate that we made the error we did, but no lasting harm was done. We will not repeat that mistake.”

Angela said, “We should pay heed to a little one’s warning in the future,” and left the room.

“I will go after her,” Benito said.

“No, she is who she is, and bringing her back will only force an argument. Our time is better spent in assuring that Steven has sustained no damage.” The Jesuit looked down at the young priest, whose color was returning. Kirk looked less dazed, and he ventured a weak smile.

“I’m not certain that I am ready to face this strong an opponent,” Steven said. “He certainly frightened me enough today, and he had not called his demon.”

“We will see, Steven,” he said kindly. “Anyway, we have two weeks to get ready. They will not dare attempt anything of any consequence until the new moon. We can help you with the disciplines to strengthen your resistance to the magic of others.”

Benito had been silently examining Kirk with his Sight. He saw that the normal, faint aura around Steven was disrupted, but not damaged.

“You’re fine,” Benito said. “And by the time you have a little more training, you’ll be ready to shield yourself. Attacking is harder than defending.”

“I will work with him,” Rimaldi said.

“Of course,” Benito replied.

Steven stood up. “I’d like to start just after lunch. For now, I think I need a little time alone.”

“Certainly,” Rimaldi responded.

Steven left to go to his room. He still seemed shaken, but far more himself than he had just a few minutes ago.

Rimaldi looked questioningly at Benito. “Well?”

“He is undamaged. Thank goodness for the resilience of youth.”

The older priest shook his head. “We should have watched more carefully.”

Had he been expecting an objection, he did not receive it. Benito simply said, “Yes.”

Rimaldi took a long breath and exhaled slowly, calming himself. “We have no further reason to meet and discuss these events today. I think the conclusions are obvious. These people are not to be trifled with.” He paused as he changed subjects. “Father Benito, Fathers Benedetto and Francisco should arrive on Tuesday on the 9:10 train. We can discuss these events with them. Their arrival should also give us a greater level of security.”

“I will, of course, meet them at the station,” Benito responded automatically.

“Thank you,” he said perfunctorily. “I would like some time alone now.”

“Of course,” Benito bowed slightly and let himself out of the room. The Benedictine also needed some time alone. The events of the morning had left him shaken, but he

was concerned for the future. Steven would recover, but would they succeed when they all formed their ritual to combat the darkness? Benito was disturbed that Rimaldi did not seem inclined to meet until more members of the group arrived. Not only was that three days away, but also the presence of additional members of their order would make it harder to be critical of Rimaldi's actions.

Angela found the guest quarters unoccupied when she returned. Brigid had begun to assist the day shift in the hospital since Rimaldi had made it clear that she would play no part in the ritual. She would not return to her temporary quarters with Angela until after four in the afternoon.

Angela sat heavily on her cot. She wanted to scream in frustration. Angela was not afraid for herself, but for the others. If they could not hold shielding against such a minor intrusion, what chance would they have against a demon? If the dynamics of the ritual that Rimaldi had planned were disrupted, she might be the only one who could protect herself, and she wasn't even certain about that.

She thought back to what she had said to Brigid about high magic and about the gods. How sad that the world had come to a point where they might be left defenseless against the terrors that men like Streng could unleash. A few, such as herself, might be able to defend themselves, but she could not destroy the creature alone. For the coming ritual, all that she could do is strengthen her defenses and prepare to raise enough power to make the ritual a success. Other than that, prayer was the only solace, but, for the first time in her adult life, she felt her faith in Diana slipping from her. What good was prayer if no one was really able to bring the power of the gods to bear?

The rest of the day passed slowly for her. She ate and performed the necessary functions of life, but her mood was grim. The memory that haunted her was not the leer-



ing face of Streng, peering down from his second floor window, but the face of Rimaldi, locked in concentration on Streng and forgetful of Steven.

Benito came to talk to her, but she refused to do more than answer the door and send him away. He could offer her nothing in her present mood. She avoided Rimaldi, and he made no approach to her. At lunch she saw him sitting with his acolyte, Steven. The young priest, she thought of him as young, though he was almost the same age as she, had felt his world shaken that morning. Now he sought solace from Rimaldi. Angela wondered if Steven would even realize that their superior was the one most responsible for having put him in danger. Had it not been for Benito, Steven might well have walked in Streng's front door.

She felt very much alone. Brigid was the person she wanted to see, because of the kinship she felt with her, built on their common birthright. Angela longed to see the other nun's face and walk with her this night beneath the full moon. Perhaps the very act of seeing the moon, so sacred to her goddess, would give her some hope.

When Brigid returned from her shift in the hospital, it was just past four. She found Angela lying on her cot, thinking and waiting.

"Sister Angela, what's wrong?"

Angela looked up at her. "I think I would feel better if you simply called me Angela."

"Certainly, but what happened?"

Angela related the events of the morning. She told her everything that had happened and everything that she had thought. Anger clouded her voice. She finished by saying, "So that is why I don't want you to call me Sister Angela. This Church has failed me. My job here is done. These people, even Rimaldi himself, have too little power to threaten my family in Sicily. When all of this is over, I will renounce my vows, leave the Church, and return home."

Brigid sat silently for a while. She remembered what the mambo had said to her, but she had not made the decision to leave the Church. “I, too, have considered renouncing my orders and leaving the faith.”

Angela was surprised at this admission. “But you are not certain?”

“The problem is more difficult for me. I have no family that I can rely on, except in Ireland, and no money to pay for passage. I have to find some way to survive in the world.”

“That,” Angela said, “is at least something I can do to bring some good out of this sad trip. You don’t need to worry about what you will do or where you will go. As long as I am alive, you are welcome in my home. My family is wealthy, and they would welcome someone with gifts as strong as yours. We can provide you with additional magical training, and a nurse is always needed in the wilder parts of Sicily. You can return to Sicily with me.”

“I could not accept such a great gift.”

“Please, I want you to come. You *shall* come. You are the only one that I have ever met outside of my family who had a gift as strong as mine. I may not think of myself as Sister Angela any more, but I am your sister in a far more important way.” She smiled, “Besides, I was not joking about a nurse always being needed. You’ll find yourself quite busy.”

“Then I thank you. This is the greatest gift anyone could give me. Now I can make my decision with my heart and head, not with fear.”

“It is no more than you deserve. For myself, I hope you decide to join me.”

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. Brigid rose to answer it. It was Isaiah.

“Isaiah, I didn’t expect to see you,” Brigid said.

“We need to talk. In private.”

“Then come in.”

He came into the room hesitantly, not certain if it was right for him to be in a white woman’s bedroom, even if she was a nun. Then he saw Angela.

“You the one they call Angela?”

She rose. “Yes, I am.”

“Then you can stay. What I got to say is for both a you.”

“Please, Isaiah, have a seat,” Brigid pointed to one of the empty cots.

“Won’t be stayin’ that long. I jus’ come to tell you the mambo wants to see both a you tonight. We meet just like we did last time. In front of the church, jus’ past 8:30.”

“Of course,” Brigid said.

He looked at Angela.

“I’ll be there as well,” she responded.

“Good. I see you tonight.” With that he left. They heard his light footsteps vanish down the quiet corridor.

Angela brightened after the visit. “That’s encouraging. I asked to see the mambo yesterday, and today I receive an invitation.”

“I hope you are right.”

“Why do you say that?”

“The mambo is very private, at least that is what she told me. If she has called us to see her, then something has happened. I suspect she has information, and I don’t think it will be anything good.”

At eight thirty-five they were in front of the cathedral. As on the other night, Isaiah appeared out of the darkness.

“Just stay with me, ladies.” He led the way down the street.

Brigid talked quietly to Angela. “If you see any colored men following us, don’t be concerned. They’re our bodyguards.”

“We need guards to visit the mambo?”

“No, but we might need some protection against drunken white sailors.” She related the story of what had happened during her first visit.

“Well,” Angela said, “I feel safer knowing that. I had not thought of the problems of a seaport town, even though there are many of them in Sicily.”

“I would never have thought of it either. Convents are a little more secure than the real world.”

“There is a price for everything,” Angela responded.

Isaiah motioned for them to stop when they reached East Broad Street. He looked up and down the street, outlined in the light of the nearly full moon. He saw no one and led them across the street. When he reached the other side, he looked back to see if the street was still deserted. It seemed to be. Then he saw a dark shadow detach itself from one of the oaks and cross the street a block to their north. Isaiah led the two women away from East Broad and took them a few feet down a side street, then stopped. A few moments later, Daniel came up the same side street. Isaiah motioned him to join them.

Daniel quietly approached them. He nodded in greeting to the nuns. “Sistah Brigid, Sistah Angie.”

“Hello, Daniel,” Angela said.

Daniel smiled in response.

Isaiah spoke to Daniel. “Let James follow us down, but you stay here a bit. See if any white men cross East Broad that look like they followin’ us.”

Daniel nodded.

Isaiah led them further into the colored section of the city.

“Isaiah,” Brigid asked quietly, “why are we being so much more careful this time?”

“The mambo tell you. For now, we need to be goin’.”

Brigid glanced back and saw that the shadow that had crossed East Broad behind them was a friendly one. She could not mistake the comfortingly immense figure of James.

Isaiah led them down different streets, all with closely packed, ramshackle houses. There were more people on the street than there were in Savannah proper. The street life here was more complex than it had been on the other route Isaiah had taken. People chatted on the street, and groups of children played among them. The nuns gathered curious glances from the people on the street, but Isaiah’s presence let them know that these white people had reason to be in their part of town.

Isaiah was more relaxed. “You gettin’ to see what few white folks ever see. We got our own city here, and it’s a good one. The other part of our town you saw was the part that white folks visit when they need somethin’ from us. Either a colored gal for some fun or some bad business done.”

He turned down an even smaller side street, more an alley than a street. No carriage could enter this area. He stopped and knocked on a door. Even in the faint light, they could see that it was painted a bright color.

Esmerelda opened the door. Her quick smile of greeting could not hide the general seriousness of her expression. “Come in.”

They entered, and Isaiah quietly took a chair to the side of the room, leaving the center of the room to the women. Esmerelda seated the nuns at a table and joined them.

The room was lit by two kerosene lamps, the walls festooned with the varied items that could be used in Voudon and in magic. A bookshelf sat to the side of the room. Angela wondered what books a mambo might read. Angela focused on the mambo, who looked back at her. Angela’s Sight revealed that a strong aura surrounded the Voudon priestess.

“So you really is what they say,” Esmerelda said.

“And what’s that?” Angela responded quietly.

“A powerful witch, more powerful than me.”

“Mambo,” Angela smiled, “I don’t know if that’s true.”

“It’s true all right. Even in Haiti we hear of the Delamorte women.”

“Thank you,” Angela said. “I didn’t think we were known that widely. As for me, I am honored to meet a mambo for the first time. You are all I expected and more.”

“Thank you, Sistah. But my strength is greater here than anywhere. This is my home. I have built up my magic here. Here I am safe from the demon. But outside that door . . .” She didn’t need to finish the statement.

Regardless of the serious reminder of the demon’s power, Angela was impressed by what she saw. She felt very relaxed with this woman. Esmerelda was her sister, her sister in a craft and a belief system that reached back thousands of years.

Esmerelda moved to business. “If they got such as you here, why they send such a weak one to visit Streng? That boy you brought almost got himself in real trouble.”

“Rimaldi is our leader, and he insisted that we all go to Saint Julian Street,” Angela said.

“This Rimaldi your *abbe*?”

“He’s not really an abbot, but he is our leader.”

“He knows what he’s messing with?”

Brigid saw Angela hesitate before she replied. “He’s read about creatures such as this, but he, in fact none of us, has seen such a thing before. Our leader is proud. I, on the other hand, am careful.”

“That pride of his gonna get people killed. That’s one reason why you can’t ask us to help. Always some priest thinks he knows, when he don’t.” She smiled ruefully, “Not that we could do much good against Belial.”

“Is that its name?” Angela asked.

“Yeah, thought I’d told you before.”

“No. That name could be important information.”

“Maybe. But not from what I seen. I’m not sure you got the power to face him.”

The three were silent for a moment. Then Brigid said, “We have three more magicians arriving.”

Esmerelda looked at her steadily. “Then maybe you can do it. I know your priests have some powerful spells. If your *abbe* has time to set up, maybe he can.” She paused. “But that’s not why I asked you here.”

The two nuns waited.

“Streng is going to do somethin’ real soon. Gonna be before the moon goes dark. Maybe in a day or two. He is going to go after one of your people.”

“Are you certain?”

“No. He don’ tell his plans to me.” She smiled. “But I hear things around his house.”

“Good enough for me,” Angela said.

“Not if your *abbe* don’t listen.”

Angela did not have a response to that.

“I be havin’ some of my folk keep an eye on Streng’s house for you when we get closer to the new moon. Daniel will let you know about the comings and goings.”

“Thank you very much, that will be of immense help,” Angela said, “but won’t that put you at risk?”

The mambo smiled. “White folk don’t see us. We’re everywhere, and they don’ look. Besides, we’re hard to see in the dark.”

Angela was at first not certain it was joke, but, seeing the amusement in Esmerelda’s eyes, laughed in response.

“You two go on and get back. Don’t do for too many to see you down here.”

Angela looked directly into the mambo's eyes. "Whatever happens, I thank you for what you just told us. And I thank you in advance for the information from Daniel."

The mambo replied, "You two come visit if you live through this."

"We will," Brigid replied for both of them, even though she was frightened by what the mambo had said. She had never considered that she might not survive the next few weeks.



## *Chapter Eighteen*

### *Sunday, October 25th*

Father Benito sat sadly in the visiting nun's quarters. Angela angrily paced back and forth. "So he won't listen?"

"Listen? He was upset by my first contact with the Voudon community. To heed a warning from them was intolerable. He told me in very clear terms that Christians need pay no attention to the superstitions of tribal religions, even if they did supply us with the names of the creature and the man who summoned him."

"Idiot," Angela said.

Benito started to say something in Rimaldi's defense, but he realized there was nothing he could say that he could also believe. Rimaldi was certain that his ritual was the best choice.

"Then we shall all do our best in his ritual," Angela said, calming now that she had reacted to Rimaldi's response. "But there is one thing that we must do. I am almost certain my shielding can withstand that thing that Streng calls. Perhaps we can train Brigid so that she may also withstand it, but you, Luis, must do all you can to strengthen your personal defenses. If the mambo's warning is correct, it may come for you soon, and, if the ritual fails, it will certainly come for you then."

Heeding her warning, they spent much of Sunday in the workroom, teaching Brigid everything they could that might serve to protect her. They worked on the disciplines that could save their lives. Angela taught Brigid how to reach into herself and draw up the power. Benito taught her the stillness that must lie at the center of every magician when working. Brigid remembered the ancient names that Emer had taught her in the late nights of her childhood.

Benito shook his head in envy. "You are so fortunate. You are the fastest study I have ever taught."

Brigid half-smiled, half-blushed in reaction to the compliment.

“Luis,” Angela said, “in a few hundred years, you will be, too. You just haven’t lived enough lives yet to have the same adeptness.”

“Angela, you know I do not believe in reincarnation.”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Belief doesn’t matter?” he asked.

“No, Luis. Does a plant need to believe in photosynthesis to turn toward the sun? No, it simply turns. Reincarnation is the same. Natural law does not require belief in order to function.”

“Keep this up, and you two will turn me into a heretic.”

“Then you can be even better company for us.” The two women laughed together.

Benito grew more somber. “And what of our superior? He has not even entered the workroom today.”

Angela responded, “I think he is waiting. Or perhaps he is embarrassed. More likely, he is with Steven, helping him with his own protection.”

Brigid asked, “Why don’t we work together?”

“The training for someone like Steven is very different than it is for someone like you. The focus and concentration exercises are the same, but then the training becomes very different. His shielding is based more on ritual, on chants and spells, than his own strength. Yours is based almost solely on the hereditary strength inside of you.”

“And for Luis?”

He answered for Angela. “For me, it is both.”

Brigid nodded, surprised that she understood. This realm of magic, despite the fact that she had been born to it, was a strange one. But it did have rules and principles. She hoped that she would learn quickly enough to protect herself if the demon came for her. For now, she was glad that she slept in a room with Angela.

Benito stifled a yawn. “For myself, it is off to bed.”

“A good idea, Luis. Brigid and I will do the same.”

They went their ways to their quarters, with their questions about their leader unanswered. Each was aware that this night was the last night of the waxing moon.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

### *Monday, October 26th*

On Monday the three met early to continue Brigid's training. Brigid felt that she was racing against an unseen clock. The mambo had been clear in her warning, but the others, the formal members of the order, stood at greater risk than she. They were the ones sent to destroy the demon, and it was they who would first feel its wrath. Nonetheless, she felt compelled to learn all that she could as quickly as she could.

She spent the day with Angela and Luis, endeavoring to learn the lessons of calm and the skills of clarity that helped her bring her own power to the fore. They concentrated on her more than ever, as Luis was more confident in his shielding, and both he and Angela were worried that Brigid might lose her concentration. If she did lose focus, then her own power, which should give her greater shielding than Luis possessed, would be weakened.

The three sat together in the refectory for dinner. The other diners sat as far away from them as they could, as if their very presence was a reminder of the darkness that hovered over them. Then Father Kirk, at loose ends since Rimaldi was dining with the bishop, joined them. Monsignor Henry rounded out the five at the table, probably in an effort to establish some semblance of normalcy to the seating in the refectory. The two new people at the table brought a welcome respite to Brigid, who was exhausted from the lessons of the afternoon.

"So, Father Benito," asked the monsignor cheerfully, "any news?"

Father Kirk blanched at the question.

Benito glanced around himself and realized how isolated their table was before commenting truthfully, "Only that we must wait. The other members of our order begin arriving tomorrow. Until we are at greater strength, we are at risk."

“That is a disturbing thought,” the monsignor said, keeping his voice low. “Is what you face that deadly?”

Angela said, “None of us has ever faced anything of this power.”

The monsignor was startled. “Even Father Rimaldi?”

“No,” Benito said flatly, “such creatures as we face now are very rare. He has never faced a threat of this strength before. However, of all of us, he has certainly read the most about it. He spent time before leaving Maryland in reviewing all of the information on the subject that he had. What he knows is extensive. He has the greatest library of its kind on this side of the Atlantic.”

“That eases my mind somewhat,” the monsignor said.

“But reading, Monsignor Henry,” said Angela, “is not experience.”

Feeling that he was entering deeper water than he wished to traverse, the monsignor merely nodded. “True enough.”

“You need not be concerned,” Father Kirk added. “With the addition of the other members, we are certain to prevail.”

“Good,” the monsignor said, “you were beginning to worry me.”

Angela bit back her comment. She kept it to herself that confidence was necessary, but less so than skill.

“Sister Brigid,” Father Kirk asked, “is your training going well?”

“I believe so.”

“Are they planning to take you away from us?” the monsignor asked, partially in jest.

“If they are, Monsignor, they have not told me that.”

The monsignor was surprised by the considered tone of her response. He had unintentionally asked a question that, apparently, had greater implications. As the monsignor was determined to be a gracious host, he slipped away from dangerous ground to a safer

topic, hoping to keep the conversation from becoming too serious. He looked to Benito. “So, Father Benito,” the monsignor continued, “is she all that we told you she was?”

“All that and more, Monsignor.”

“Good.” He turned to Angela, who reflected neither the piety of Steven nor the sobriety of Benito, as a possible savior in the conversation. “And what do you think of our city?”

Angela sensed the monsignor’s need to lighten the conversation, and she also agreed with him that dinner should be a respite from business. “It is a beautiful place. I have been to all of the great capitals of Europe, except Berlin, and I do not think one of them can eclipse the beauty of this place. It is not only the beauty of the land, but the plan of the city that makes it so special. I love the open squares. Whoever planned the city must have been determined to keep part of the natural world in it.”

“You are a true romantic, Sister. That has been the outcome, but the squares were originally places where men from the neighborhoods could muster to defend the city.”

“From whom?”

The monsignor glanced at Benito.

“From Spain,” Benito answered for him.

“Was there an attempt to invade from Florida?” Angela asked.

“Right after the city was founded,” Benito answered, “the Spanish sent an expedition north, but they found that the English of Georgia were well prepared. It was a small battle, but it was important, nonetheless. It stopped the Spanish from reaching to the north, so Georgia fulfilled its purpose, which was to protect the more valuable colonies in the Carolinas.”

“And what was name of this small, but important battle?” Angela asked.

Benito smiled. “The Battle of Bloody Marsh.”

“That,” Angela said seriously, “is certainly a fearsome name. I think I’ll refrain from asking the details.”

“Indeed,” Benito said, “they are not appropriate for dinner.”

Talk of history gave the five a subject on which they could be more cheerful than they could be in a discussion of the menacing events that had brought them together. After dinner, they went to their rooms.

Father Kirk retired for the night to his bedroom in a quiet wing of the compound. When he entered his room, he again noted the advantage of a powerful and numerous congregation. This room was nicer than his own room at his church in Minnesota. He lit the oil lamp above his desk and picked up the notes he had taken in his meeting with Father Rimaldi. He reviewed the details of the planned ritual and the lessons on personal shielding. He would not fall prey to Streng again. It was merely a matter of concentration and focus, he had learned.

One of the ways that he could improve that concentration was memory exercises. He read over the words of the ritual, careful not to speak any of them aloud. Though there was little chance that they would have any effect outside of a ritual circle, he knew that speaking them could create unwanted results. He spent over an hour learning the words of the main section of the ritual. When he felt that he had committed them to memory, he laid the ritual aside and picked up a novel to relax his mind before bed. It was one of the novels of Dumas, a good yarn and thoroughly engaging.

Not very many blocks away, Streng and his inner circle were beginning their own ritual. The group was made up of Streng, Cawthorne, Breeding, and one woman, Lilith Claire. Lilith was in her late forties and had an air of sensuality about her, but few knew how much of a libertine she really was. She retained her beauty, long after it should have

faded. Her hair kept its dark luster and framed the olive skin of her face, which was dominated by a sharp, hawk-like nose.

The four stood at the cardinal points of the compass. Streng began the invocation by invoking air from his place in the east, just inside the ritual circle. Lilith picked up the chant in the north, invoking earth. In turn, Cawthorne added his own invocation for the west and water. Breeding completed the circle at the south, the point of fire. When each had achieved the desired response, they all began moving counterclockwise around their circle, bowing to each of the cardinal points.

When they had completed their circuit, Streng moved to the front of the altar. He lit the three black candles there and scattered sulfur on a smoldering brazier that sat in the middle of their altar. Then all four came to stand around the portal stone in the center of their circle. Made of dark granite, the flat slab was set into the floor. Roughly circular and almost five feet in diameter, the single slab had been polished so smoothly that the light of the candles was reflected in it. Streng muttered a spell and threw more of the sulfurous powder on the portal stone. The four then sat on the floor, forming a tight arc on the west side of the stone, facing the altar.

Streng began to mutter the chant that would summon their demon and the others joined in. They were quickly rewarded. The polished stone began to change. The pattern within the granite hazed over, and the slab became a dark, flat gray. As they continued the chant, the gray began to fade as it became a translucent window into another realm. Fading still further, the portal became nearly clear, and they could distinguish a few features on the other side, mainly rock outcroppings and a peculiarly colored sky. The chant changed again as they began calling Belial.

Inside the basement room, the temperature rose. The four magicians began to sweat profusely underneath their robes, and a bitter, almost fetid, odor flowed from the portal to suffuse the room. They continued their monotonous chant. Finally, the land-



scape on the other side of the portal was bathed in a ruddy glow, which grew in intensity to a fiery red. Belial was coming.

His nightmarish shape began to emerge from the portal. He did not climb out of the portal, rather he floated upwards through it. First came his small horns and hairless skull, colored blood red like the rest of him. Then the face emerged, naturally reposed into a leering grin. Though the expression was frightening enough, his vacant, lidless eyes were far more horrific. They had no pupils, so there was always a blank, reptilian stare regarding those in front of him. The cold eyes spoke of a total lack of concern and of a brutal coldness. The tips of his folded, leathern wings appeared just before his shoulders. Scales covered his body from his shoulders down to his feet. The bulging arms were crossed in front of his chest, the hands tipped with claws. The lower half of his body was shaped like that of a goat, though covered with scales, not hair. Oddly a single enormous claw curved from the front of each leg about a foot above his goat-like feet.

When he completed his emergence, the portal closed. He was over eight feet tall. This shape was a guise that Belial had assumed so many times across the centuries that it had become his “native” shape, even more natural to him than the shape that he had been originally. For creatures such as himself, shape was merely an aspect that could be chosen. Belial, once formed, was an immense physical presence. He was solid, not a mere wraith or a projection. Heat and a slight smell of burning sulfur rose from his body.

Streng and the others abased themselves on the floor in worship of this terrible power. Tonight they had a special request for their demonic ally, a task that he would enjoy completing.

The main wing of the cathedral dormitory was silent. A few oil lamps had been placed along the corridor, but the light was quickly swallowed by the rough stone walls.

In their separate rooms, Benito, Rimaldi, and Kirk slept deeply. The thick tabby walls around them imparted a sense of security.

In his room off the hall, Father Kirk was so involved in his reading that he did not see a space in the darkened corner of the room behind him become even darker. The space then began to glow with a faint red light. The light increased and began to solidify into a ruddy shape. Belial began to take form behind him.

Belial walked across the room to stand a few feet behind Kirk. The creature made no sound. The priest did not even look up from his book. Then Belial, knowing the ways of fear and surprise, gently chuckled. Kirk spun around at the noise, finding himself facing the scale-covered red belly of the beast. Kirk attempted to stand, but he was still partially entangled with the chair that now faced a little away from the desk, so he lost his balance and threw his arms out to the side in an attempt to steady himself. Just as he regained his balance, Belial reached out his arms and grabbed him by the throat. Being a physically strong man, Kirk made the critical mistake of reaching for the arms that held him and attempting to pull them away. Physical strength was useless against the demon. He was many times stronger than Kirk. Only magic could weaken the creature's physical power. Kirk's hands burned where they touched the beast, and the priest jerked his arms away.

The demon lifted him from the floor, where Kirk's legs flailed uselessly against the marble-hard body of Belial. The priest continued to struggle, though he did not make a sound. He could not speak or cry out with Belial's hands around his throat. Kirk belatedly realized that he could not fight the demon physically and attempted to concentrate upon a spell in his mind, closing his eyes against the face of the demon that now leered from only inches away from him. Belial was so close that Kirk could feel the heat radiating from the creature's skin.

Belial sensed the change in tactics and pulled the face of the priest toward his. Where they touched, Belial made the skin of his face glow with intense fire. The heat seared Kirk's skin, breaking his concentration. Then Belial loosened his grip around the priest's throat enough to let the screams of pain escape him. Belial was burning him with his fiery hands, and a louder scream was ripped from Kirk to reverberate down the empty stone hallways around his room. The scream and the fear was like manna to Belial. This was his food, the screams and struggles of the ones he would kill. He would have enjoyed letting it go on, but he was wary. He knew that the screams would bring the others, and he was not sure of what power they might bring. Knowing that Streng, like all humans, was stupid, Belial did not trust Streng's reassurance that these people had little power, even though he felt no stir of answering power, even as Kirk writhed and screamed in his hands, kicking his feet in the empty air. Blood was running down Kirk's face where Belial's fire had scorched through the skin. Kirk's nose was more a charred gash in his face than a physical feature. Blood began to run into the priest's mouth as his screams of pain contorted his face. Kirk was in blind terror and agonizing pain.

Belial heard doors being thrown open in the hallway. In response he tightened his grip on the priest, cutting off his screams. He shook Kirk like a doll. Then Belial tightened one hand on Kirk's neck, strangling him and snapping his spine in one motion. He lifted the dead priest with one hand then swiftly gutted the corpse with the immense claw on his leg. He threw Kirk's corpse at the door, where the body slumped, blocking entrance into the room.

Belial folded in upon himself. His shape became smaller and more indefinite. Then there was only a red mist, which faded to a darkened place in the air and vanished. Belial was gone, returning to the circle of magicians on Saint Julian who had summoned him.

Benito, then Rimaldi emerged from their rooms, looking to the source of the sound, Father Kirk's room. Benito immediately sensed the presence of another in Kirk's room. As they ran to the door, the screaming stopped. Benito was the first to arrive

Rimaldi shouted. "Steven, what's wrong?" He threw his shoulder into the door and it opened a few inches. Benito joined him. They pushed again, and the door yielded a few more inches.

Monsignor Henry arrived. The three men pushed together and drove the door open enough for them to enter. Rimaldi was the first inside the room, closely followed by the other priests. He slipped on the blood on the stone floor and fell, catching himself with his hands. Looking from his position on the floor, he was horrified at what he saw. He scrambled to his feet.

The room was still lit by a reading lamp. Father Kirk lay behind the partially open door. His head was at an odd angle. His face was blank, holding nothing more than the vacant stare of death. His nose was a charred ruin, and his forehead was creased with burn marks. Blood still leaked from the burns on his face and neck. The entire room stank of sulfur, burned flesh, and blood.

The Jesuit turned away and retched, vomiting the contents of his stomach out onto the bloody floor. Benito watched him as he bent over in another convulsion. The war had conditioned Benito and Henry to such sights, so they did not react as violently, even though they were as horrified as Rimaldi. Steven had been their friend, and they had heard his screams as he died. What frightened them the most was the thought of what had done this to their friend.

Monsignor Henry was the first to speak. "I'll send for Doctor Gaston."

"Why him?" Benito asked.

“Because I want someone who can examine the body without being too disturbed by its condition. Also, he knows something about what we are fighting here. I don’t think we want too many others to know.”

Benito nodded as the monsignor left and began examining the body.

“We need to cover him,” Rimaldi said.

“Not yet,” Benito said calmly. “This is our chance to examine what this demon does first hand. Monsignor Henry has sent for a doctor.”

Rimaldi started to object but, resigning himself, sat heavily on the cot in the room.

“Father Rimaldi, if you would like to help, I could use the assistance of Sisters Brigid and Angela.”

“Why Brigid?”

“Because she saw the first killing and because her Sight is stronger than any of ours, with the possible exception of Angela.”

The Jesuit nodded silently and, stepping carefully through the blood that now blocked the entire doorway, left to find the nuns.

The monsignor returned just as Rimaldi left. “I’ve sent for Doctor Gaston. He should be here soon.” He squatted next to Benito. “Are we safe?”

“I don’t know if this creature has to wait before he kills again, so I don’t know if we are safe. You are as safe here as anywhere. The creature is not interested in you. He wants those of our order dead. Besides, Angela and Brigid will be here soon. The three of us can give you more protection than you’re likely to find anywhere this side of Heaven.”

The monsignor nodded. “What can you tell from the body?”

“See here,” Benito touched the exposed portion of the neck, turning the head slightly. “If his killer faced him, which I think he did, then he has a very human-like hand, except that Steven’s skin is burned where the hand touched him. It is as if a mechanical

iron hand, red hot, grabbed him about the neck. Based on the size of the grip, this creature must be immense, perhaps eight feet tall.”

“Comforting to know,” the monsignor commented.

“Not much to be found in the way of comfort. It appears that the actual cause of death was the hand’s grip about the neck. The neck is thinner and elongated. The grip was powerful enough to actually elongate the neck while snapping it.”

“So death was by a broken neck and strangulation, both at once.”

“It appears so,” Benito continued. “Then he gutted him with a claw. The demon is trying to horrify us.”

“In my case,” the monsignor said, “he is achieving what he intended.”

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of light footsteps running down the hall. They slowed outside the door, and the two nuns entered the room, carefully avoiding slipping in the blood.

“Mother of God” Angela said.

Benito nodded. “Will you check the room?”

The energy of her magic rose about her, so potent that even the monsignor, who was not gifted with the Sight, could feel the change in the air.

Brigid stepped around her fellow nun and pointed to the dark corner of the room. “He came in there. He left there.”

Angela swept her eyes about the room. Then the light faded. “She is right. The demon took form within the room.”

Brigid looked penetratingly at Steven’s body. “His spirit is gone. May the gods stand ready to receive it.” Then, incongruously, she crossed herself. The other three in the room did the same.

The monsignor decided that commenting on Brigid’s unusual blessing could wait for another time.

Benito asked, "Where is Father Rimaldi?"

Angela replied. "Probably changing. We passed him in the hall. He stank of his own vomit. Besides, he was as white as a ghost. I don't think he'll be returning."

"Then we shall wait for the doctor." Benito stood from where he had squatted next to Steven and walked to the wash basin. He carefully washed his hands of the blood that had come from Steven's body.

Angela looked sadly at Steven. "He was so young."

"He was about your age, Angela," Luis said.

"Not really," she responded.

The four of them sat in the room with the corpse, awaiting the arrival of Doctor Gaston. They had little to say. Brigid looked at her companions. Angela was clearly as angry about what had happened as she was saddened by Kirk's death. Benito was folded into himself. Whatever thoughts he may have had did not show on his face. The monsignor was shaken, glancing nervously from time to time at Steven's body, then slowly shaking his head. He did not need to explain his thoughts, at least not to Brigid. She was as inured to the sight of corpses killed by brutal means as he was, but she felt what was plainly on his face. Neither of them had expected that such a murder could be done by a spirit. Even Richardson's body had not been so brutally handled.

Rimaldi rejoined them in a few minutes, to the surprise of Angela. She felt ashamed of her earlier comment. Rimaldi did have more steel and self control than she had thought. His arrival was punctuated by nods rather than questions.

After a few more minutes in silence, Doctor Gaston arrived, the smell of whiskey clinging to him. The monsignor rose to greet him.

"David, thank you for coming."

"Couldn't sleep anyway," he replied.

The monsignor indicated the corpse to him. Even Gaston felt a moment of shock. He had thought his days of mangled corpses were behind him. "I need some more light."

Brigid went to the bed table and brought a second lamp to the desk, where she lit it. Then she carried the lamp to stand over the body. She had too much experience as a nurse to need any further direction. Gaston began his examination around the neck area, where the worst wounds were. He turned the head to look at the wounds on either side. Then he felt the forehead where the lesser burn marks had been imposed. The nose received only a cursory glance, as it had been charred beyond recognition. The ripped stomach needed no explanation.

"Knees are gettin' old, sister. Mind giving me a hand?" Brigid reached down her free arm and helped the doctor to his feet.

David turned to the monsignor. "Robert, it's pretty plain that he was strangled by a very powerful hand. Only one was used, but it is much larger than a man's hand should be. The hand also left burn marks on his neck. Death was by strangulation, though the hand actually snapped the neck in the process. There are ragged pierce marks at the ends of the fingers. The hand was clawed."

"Are you certain?" Rimaldi asked.

Gaston nodded. "I've seen men killed by bears and other animals, and the signs of claws are unmistakable. But it's the marks on the forehead and the damage to his nose that trouble me. Don't see any reason for it. Unless the killer spent time playing with him before he killed him."

"So what killed him?" Benito asked.

"From what I see, a big, maybe eight foot tall animal with a clawed, red hot, iron glove and a taste for inflicting pain."

"Such a thing doesn't exist," Rimaldi blurted.

"Didn't think so."



*Chapter Twenty*  
*Western Ireland*  
*Tuesday, October 27th*

Siobhan was surprised to receive Brigid's letter in the post. It was unusual for Brigid to write to her so soon after her last letter. So it was with some sense of concern that Siobhan sat down at the kitchen table to read it. She always treasured hearing from Brigid. It was a dream to her that she might one day be able to see her sister again. She had learned to read and write in order to be able to communicate with Brigid, but writing could not take the place of seeing her. Brigid's letter was unusually short.

My dear sister:

I hope this letter finds you well. From your last letter, it seems that the Ireland you are enjoying is a different world from the one that we grew up in, but I still pray that some of the old Ireland remains. Last night, at the new moon, a thing of horror, a demonic spirit, one that I could sense passing, came to our hospital. It had been sent to kill a man who had tried to leave a wicked cult here. He had been worshiping the left hand, though he probably thought it was a game. He betrayed them by leaving, and they sent a spirit that killed him in a brutal fashion.

Please believe me when I say that it was a creature of immense power. I think it is so strong that the Church may not be able to cope with it. It can act in the physical realm without need of a human body to inhabit. If you have any contacts remaining with those who follow the old ways, please let them know that we need help here. I do not believe that this demon will be satisfied with one death.

Your Loving Sister,  
Brigid

Siobhan was not a person to flinch in the face of such thoughts. In the famine she had seen horrors that few could imagine—a house where a woman and three children had starved to death together, a village of nothing but corpses and a half-eaten horse. Having lived through the famine had changed her perspective on life. To her, each new day was a beautiful one. She had food to eat, a good husband, four beautiful children, and a warm house.

Her sister was in danger. She knew how she might help, though she could not be certain. She called upstairs. “Nessa. I have a task for ya.”

In a few moments the girl appeared in the kitchen, silent and composed. She waited for her mother to speak.

“Brigid has sent us a letter.” She handed it to the girl, who quickly read it.

A frown creased that perfect forehead.

“I’ve never asked about your lessons,” her mother said, “in all the years you’ve studied the old ways. But yer aunt needs help that only the old ways can give. Might ya know of someone who can get a message to them that might help?”

“Yes, mama.” Nessa slid the letter inside the pocket of her dress.

“Then you be about findin’ ‘em. Take Windmark and ride where you need to go. I’ll expect ya when I see ya again. Do ya need money?”

“I have enough. And I should be back on the morrow, at latest. Could be late to-night.”

“Then ride, darlin’, and remember this letter took a fortnight to get here. Only the gods know what’s happened since.”

Nessa went to change as Siobhan saddled Windmark. The horse seemed to sense the urgency of the mission. He impatiently stood still for the bridle and feather of a saddle that Nessa preferred. Nessa used no bit with Windmark. By the time Siobhan finished, Nessa was there to take the bridle and lead him from the barn. She had a bit of bread and

wrapped cheese in a small bag with her. She leapt lightly into the saddle, and the big stallion pawed the ground, anxious to be on its way. There was nothing Windmark loved more than a run with Nessa on his back, her light hand on his neck and her voice whispering in his ear.

Siobhan smiled to her daughter. “On yer way, darlin’.”

Nessa smiled and leaned over Windmark’s neck. “Fast, my love, fast.” Her hand came down on his flank in a light slap, but it was all that Windmark needed. He reared, just for the pure pleasure of it. Before his front hooves came down, he launched himself toward the main road. The closed gate of the farmyard was not even an annoyance. He and Nessa cleared it without a nick.

Siobhan could have sworn she felt the earth vibrate when the big stallion’s front hooves struck the ground after he cleared the gate. His rear hooves threw up clods of dirt with every stride. How that horse loved to run.

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Nessa slowed Windmark to a trot as she approached the village in the early twilight. Best not to make too much of a stir, though anyone who saw what house she went to would know that it was the business of the old ways that had brought her. The house was on the edge of the village, near a meadow. She dismounted on the verge of the meadow and dropped the bridle to the ground.

“Here ya go, love. Plenty of grass and even a stream nearby fer a drink. I won’t be long.”

Windmark whinnied as if he understood every word.

Nessa turned from the horse without a thought that her beautiful stallion might be stolen. Irishmen never stole horses, unless they belonged to the English. Besides, Nessa knew that Windmark would never allow strangers to get too close.

Her knock on the door was quickly answered. The old man regarded her calmly.  
“Nessa, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve never come before without your teacher.”

“No time for that.”

He nodded and gestured for her to come into the cottage.

*Chapter Twenty-One*  
*Savannah*  
*Tuesday, October 27th*

Rimaldi's chastened group met after breakfast. The monsignor joined the meeting, as he had been present for the aftermath of the fatal attack on Father Kirk and was also their liaison with the bishop. The monsignor had already reported the events of the previous evening to the bishop. Bishop Shea had been shocked by the report of Father Kirk's death and had asked that the monsignor convey his deepest condolences.

Brigid looked at the somber group that had gathered around the table. Without any formal declaration being made, she had become part of the group.

Rimaldi cleared his throat and began with the mundane. "We need to stay aware of the time. Fathers Benedetto and Francisco will be on the 9:10 this morning."

"I can meet them for you," the monsignor said.

"Thank you, Monsignor," Benito said, though gratitude could not quite dislodge the sadness on his face.

Father Rimaldi stood before he continued. He looked as if he carried the full weight of his years and more. "First, I would like to apologize for my reaction last night. I am not accustomed to death. Where I was, the Civil War did not affect me, so I was never exposed to what so many of you have seen. I have never seen death with such," he struggled for a word, "mutilation." He paused. "Steven was special to me. I brought him here because he had a powerful gift, a natural talent for magic. I also wanted to continue his training. It may have been an ill-considered decision, even though I am not certain that I could have made a better choice." Almost speaking to himself, he said, "Our numbers have become so diluted over time. And it has been so long since we were needed." Rimaldi regained his focus. "I must confess that I erred in not taking the warning of our friends in the Voudon community more seriously."

In the silent room, Benito nodded. His respect for this normally arrogant man had increased. Rimaldi could be humble and admit mistakes. The Jesuit's opinion of the followers of Voudon had obviously changed.

"But now, we must decide what to do. We are in great danger. We had thought that this creature was limited to being called at the dark of the moon. We were wrong. We have two more weeks of the waning moon before the new moon. Each day, more of our members will join us, but that increase in numbers will do us no good if we are killed before we strike at them."

"Can we act earlier?" Sister Angela asked.

"Any of the most potent rituals will need at least four of us. Six would be better. We have only three, with two more arriving today. Father Pascal should be here anytime."

"I would be willing to help," Brigid said.

"I know, and I have considered adding you. But, after what happened to Steven, I am unwilling to risk a new member against such an opponent. Does anyone think I am wrong in that judgment?"

Angela responded, "Father, she has significant inherited power. I think that she would be able to help us a great deal." Angela looked toward Brigid. "It may be too soon for you, but, if you are willing, you are needed."

Brigid nodded, frightened and honored at the same time.

Rimaldi responded to her nod. "Then you shall join us."

Benito entered the conversation. "Father Rimaldi, of all of us here, I probably have the greatest ritual knowledge except for you. I confess that I had my doubts about the Ritual of Solomon, but we may need a ritual that potent to succeed. With Brigid in our company, we can attempt that ritual once the others arrive. Without her, we are too few."

Rimaldi sat down heavily. "Angela, you have some sense of the creature's power. What do you think?"

“I do not know all of the rituals that you and Benito are aware of, so I cannot offer as expert an opinion on the choice of ritual, but the Ritual of Solomon, for all of its vulnerabilities, is the most potent one we can do with seven. I can have Brigid ready to work in one of the triads in a little over a week. ”

Benito nodded.

“But it places her at great risk,” Rimaldi objected, still unwilling to risk someone so new to their realm.

Brigid spoke up. “While I was listening to you, I realized that I am already at risk. The creature may have sensed me the night that Richardson died. Even if he did not, I have become too closely linked to you. If we do not defeat it together, then it will come for me. Part of your order or not, I am part of what you do here.”

Rimaldi nodded. “Even with Brigid’s aid, there is a second reason why we should wait for the creature to come to us. It would be unwise to reach out and attack him, or the ones who call him, at the house on Saint Julian. We have seen the power that they have accumulated there over time, and they could use that against us. So we must wait for them to attack. Then we gain the advantage of place. However, we are still left with the problem of our own defense until the others arrive. I think that we should all move to the ballroom in the house on York Street. We will simply stay together. The monsignor can take our new arrivals directly to the house.”

“Of course,” the monsignor replied.

“Are we all agreed?”

No one objected.

“Then let us move to York Street as soon as we can.”

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As Streng returned from the morning session at his factoring house, he did not imagine that things could be proceeding any better, regardless of the nagging headache and the piercing pain deep within his shoulders that had plagued him all morning. The pains were a common enough occurrence after a ritual. Each summoning of Belial drained his strength, sometimes for as long as a week.

While Rimaldi had been somber, Streng was elated with the events of the previous night. Belial had come when they called and immediately set about their bidding. Their instructions to the demon had been intentionally vague, as they had wanted him to seek out and kill the most vulnerable member of the group. The idea had occurred to Streng just as Belial had emerged. In the quiet time after Belial had returned through the portal to his realm, they had congratulated themselves on picking a good strategy, in testing the strength of the priests in a real situation. None of them considered how often a new “strategy” occurred to them just as Belial appeared.

Streng and the others had seen the priest through Belial’s eyes and shared in the demon’s emotions. The priest had been easy prey. Even someone with many times his strength would not have been a challenge to Belial. The image that remained with Streng and the others was that of the priest’s ruined body slipping down the door.

Streng was so closely attuned to Belial that they could wordlessly communicate. Immediately before returning through the portal, the demon had “spoken” to Streng. Belial wanted to return in two days. After giving it some thought, Streng realized the wisdom of the plan. It would give the priests a night to recover from the terror, and then the terror would return. They would whittle down their numbers. When they finally struck in full force at the priests on a night close to the new moon, the priests’ numbers would be less, and they would be totally demoralized. They would be fascinating prey. Streng, who would be backed by Belial and the full power of his group on that final night, looked forward to dismantling them.



As he completed his walk home, he began to wonder who might be their next victim. Perhaps that lovely Italian nun. Streng hugged his power to him like a bloody sword. No matter what price he had to pay, he was sure that it would not be enough to balance the elation that he felt. This power that he wielded over the Catholic priests was true command. It was the ability to decide life and death. No man could feel more godlike, at least not in Streng's definition of what being godlike entailed.

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Monsignor Henry went to his office after the meeting. He had a few minutes to himself before he would have to leave for the train station. Though he was calm to all outward appearances, his emotions were in turmoil. He had thought of Father Rimaldi as a tower of strength, one whom he could rely upon to withstand anything. But Rimaldi had been shaken by the events he had witnessed. What disturbed the monsignor the most was the doubts he harbored about the group itself. Rimaldi's group had been chosen by the Church to defend against the darkness. They were the ones who were supposed to wield the sword of God in retribution. Now one of them was dead, and the Jesuit did not appear to be a man who was in control of the situation. He seemed like a desperate man, one who knew he was in a battle that he might well lose.

As Henry walked to the side entrance of the cathedral where Daniel would meet him with the carriage, he realized that he was seeing a new view of the Church itself, a view at odds with the one he was accustomed to, that of the potent, all encompassing Catholic Church, whose outposts ringed the world. The Church he saw in the magicians was a few frightened people, clustered around a table, taking refuge from a terror they were not certain they could defeat. They waited for reinforcements, huddled in their sanc-

tuary on York Street. They were so unsure of their own safety that he, a noncombatant, was needed to bring reinforcements to the battle.

Once the monsignor boarded the carriage, Daniel snapped the reins and moved the carriage over the cobblestone street. The clean morning air was bracing, but the monsignor could not dispel the dark cloud in his thoughts. He kept a fixed smile on his face, waving to the many on the street who greeted him, sometimes giving an automatic reply. None suspected anything was wrong. In truth, the monsignor himself was only now beginning to comprehend the deadly nature of this unseen, arcane battle. When Richardson had been the only one who had died, Monsignor Henry had found it easy to accept that the menace was some strange form of insanity. Kirk's death had made the threat more real, more dangerous.

The monsignor could not even rely on his allies in the police department, men who were normally more than happy to oblige him. He could imagine the result of approaching them about Kirk's murder. If they even took him seriously, which he doubted, their investigation would focus on the wrong things. They would look for a perverse man who had tortured, then killed, the priest, but Henry already knew who the culprit was, and that culprit, the demon, could not be brought to trial or caged. Nor would the police move against Streng. There was no evidence linking him to the crime, at least none that could be seen by anyone without the strange perceptual skills held by people like Benito, Brigid, and Angela. No court would recognize the testimony of anyone, priest or not who claimed to see spirits. Streng's lawyers would embarrass the police and the Church publicly. So the Church was left to fight with scant resources left over from a different time, when men believed in evil.

He emerged from his reverie when Daniel began to rein in at the front of the station. Three, not two, priests were waiting for them.

The monsignor stepped down from the carriage and extended his hand to the new arrivals. "Hello, I'm Monsignor Robert Henry. Father Rimaldi sent me to meet you."

"Ah, good," the jovial priest to the right said. "I am Father Benedetto." He indicated the priest on the left. "This is Father Francisco, and between us we have Father Pascal. We met by chance in Atlanta yesterday and joined up for the remainder of the journey."

Father Pascal looked up at the mention of his name and stared into the monsignor's eyes. Regardless of the frail state of his body, his eyes were bright and penetrating. "A pleasure, Monsignor." He shook the younger man's hand. There was a slight palsy in his grip.

Father Benedetto said, "I thought that Father Benito would be meeting us."

The monsignor answered. "There was an incident last night."

"What incident?" Benedetto asked, as the cheerfulness dropped from his face.

"It's best we not discuss it here."

Benedetto nodded, frowning. He did not expect that the incident would be good news.

As Benedetto and Francisco loaded the bags for all three priests into the carriage, the monsignor looked at the new arrivals. Father Benedetto was about fifty and obviously fond of an extra meal or two. His olive skin was pale compared to that of the much younger Father Francisco, who looked as if he were a mix of Spanish and Indian parents. He was thin and moved both quickly and economically. The monsignor became aware that Father Pascal was muttering something.

"Excuse me, Father?" the monsignor asked.

The old man looked up into his eyes. The brightness had vanished, to be replaced by a vacant stare.

"What was it you said, Father Pascal? I'm afraid I missed it."

In a singsong chant, the old man repeated, “Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us now in our hour of need.”

The monsignor found that these few familiar words, spoken on a sidewalk in full daylight, frightened him more than anything else he had seen or heard in the past days.

The mages, including the new arrivals, met in the ballroom at the York Street house at a little past ten. They had no table to group around, but there was an abundance of chairs. They could hear the servants busily working downstairs, cleaning and moving in food. Both the monsignor and the mother superior had arrived to ensure that the group would have everything that they needed.

Rimaldi quickly explained the situation to the new arrivals. They were stunned to hear of Steven’s death. Benedetto was the first to speak. “One of our own. And he was killed?”

The Jesuit nodded.

Father Francisco shook his head. “I do not know that I have heard of any such thing in living memory—a demon that can materialize and attack a magician in the physical world. It is almost beyond belief.”

“Few of us have been misfortunate enough to feel the wrath of a demon that can take physical form,” Angela said. “I know of no one that has faced one of this power. Yes, Father, it is hard to believe, but he has killed at least twice now. He will kill again.”

A momentary silence fell after her pronouncement.

“I am sorry I did not have the opportunity of meeting Father Kirk.” Father Benedetto said. “I have heard many good things about him.”

“He is already missed,” Rimaldi said. “We will be burying him this afternoon. Needless to say, we will all go as a group.”

“How are we to proceed now?” Benedetto asked.

Rimaldi looked around the room. “If any have suggestions about what I propose, please feel free to make them.” He cleared his throat. “I think we must remain together at all times. We shall stay in this room to the greatest extent possible and avoid being alone. At night, one of us will always be awake and alert, ready to awaken the others in the event that anything out of the ordinary happens.

“In the meantime, we must sharpen our skills, work together to increase our abilities. Sister Angela will work with Sister Brigid to ready her for the ritual. We must remain as rested as possible, even at the close of the day. Undoubtedly, our greatest danger will be in the night.”

There were no other suggestions. Everyone knew that the most important task was to stay alive until they would have the opportunity to strike at the demon. For some, the first step of that task was to overcome the dread of what they faced.

Father Pascal was tired from his journey and lay down to rest in one of their other bedrooms, with Benedetto accompanying him as his guardian. Francisco did not know any of the others, except for Benedetto. His interaction with Rimaldi had been through letters. Father Francisco made it his first objective to get to know these others upon whom his life might depend. He was pleased to find that another of the group spoke Spanish as his first language.

The funeral was held in mid afternoon at Laurel Grove Cemetery. The Church owned most of the few vacant plots that remained in the old cemetery. When they returned to York Street after the funeral, Angela said that she was not ready to return to the ballroom yet. She turned into the drawing room. Luis and Brigid accompanied her. The three had become almost inseparable.

None of the three felt they had a need to discuss the events of the day, or of the previous evening. Instead, each selected a book that could help divert the sense of dread that seemed to follow them. An hour or so later they returned to the main room. The others were just beginning a discussion of dinner and what they would prepare. Planning dinner and helping in its preparation gave them all a respite from the study, contemplation, and prayer that had filled most of the hours of the day. By the time dinner was served, the mood had lightened. When dinner was over and the cleaning done, their leader drew them all together, made the watch assignments and bid them a good night. Father Pascal would not be called upon to watch, though he would be sleeping in the ballroom with them. Rimaldi was afraid that the demon might come during a time in which he was less than lucid.

Father Francisco was the first to watch, followed by Benito, Sister Angela, Benedetto, and Rimaldi. The night passed without incident. Rimaldi spent his time on his predawn watch wondering about the best course of action. He carefully reviewed the reasons for and against each ritual. The greatest question remained. Could they move against the demon before the last night of the waning moon? Was there a way that they could surprise their enemy?

Rimaldi looked up from his musings at the first, steel-gray light of dawn. He saw that one other was awaking. Brigid regarded him levelly, as if wondering what manner of odd creature he was. He looked into her eyes as they caught the strengthening light of dawn. In this light, they appeared to be an even deeper shade of blue than usual. It was an eerie, almost supernatural blue. He comprehended, as he had not before, that she was a sister to Angela, not as a nun, but as an hereditary witch from an ancient line. The rituals that he had been sifting through dropped from his mind. Within themselves, these women held a power that he could not match. It fit none of his rituals, none of his magic. They could lend much of their power to a ritual, but not all of it. Inside of them was a sacred

place, an untouchable sanctuary. He wondered if the demon, in all of his power, could really harm them. In that dawn light, he became even more certain that he must find a way to include Brigid's power in what they did.

Then another movement from a stirring sleeper caught his attention and the moment was broken. When he looked back to Sister Brigid, she was leaning close to the waking Angela, whispering to her.

*Chapter Twenty-Two*  
*Beddgelert, Wales*  
*Wednesday, October 28th*

The village of Beddgelert lies in the heart of Snowdonia, the most mountainous section of the county of Gwynedd in Wales. Beddgelert is set in what might be the most lovely valley in a country filled with lovely valleys, and its valley is surrounded by mountains that wall it off from the world, isolating it. The mountain fastness of Gwynedd has always remained out of the reach of any enemy. Even the Norman English, who conquered Wales, never penetrated the mountain strongholds of the Welsh. In the thirteenth century they surrounded these mountains with their great castles at Caernarvon, Beaumaris, Conwy, and Harlech, then burned the grain fields in the lowlands and on the Isle of Môn until the Welsh were starved from their aerie. In 1282, with the death of the last native Prince of Wales, Wales became a part of England, with the eldest son of the English monarch bearing the title “Prince of Wales.”

Centuries later, even after English tourists discovered the beauty of Beddgelert and its mountains, the village retained an “otherworldly” aspect. The tourists found that the terrain was not the only barrier that separated them from the locals. Though many of the natives could speak English, as doing so was a necessity in dealing with the government, the daily language of Beddgelert, in fact of all of central Gwynedd, was Welsh. The simple salutation, “*Sut mae’r*,” separated the Welsh from the tourists who came to visit. The retention of the language also signified their link to the history of Wales. The Welsh were Celts, and they had occupied Britain long before the coming of the Angles and the Saxons. Beddgelert itself was linked to the old myths of Wales. It lies close to *Dinas Emrys*, the place where Merlin was said to have given his first prophecy.

Beddgelert was also the only village in Scotland, Ireland, or Wales to have two walkers. In centuries past, many towns had had more than one walker, but those days



were long past, except in Beddgelert. So the town was their informal headquarters, if any organization as decentralized as theirs could be said to have a headquarters.

By late in October the tourists had left Beddgelert, and the village had returned to a more sedate pace. The farmers and herders were at work. Owain Llywelyn saw few customers in his apothecary shop, even though he also had a small bookstore and herb shop within the apothecary. Beddgelert was not large enough to support a shop that sold only medicines, and the shop suited him. His was a quiet life. He lived over his shop and certainly had enough to see to his needs. That quiet life had been disrupted by the message that had come from across the Irish Sea. The telegram had called him to his true work, to the job to which he had been born. That very morning, he and the other Beddgelert walker, Gwynfor Jones, had sent a telegram to a third walker, Dafydd Bevan.

Owain and Gwynfor had taken the message in the letter seriously enough. The Irish walker who had sent it knew of the Rourke family, but the Irish had no walkers in America. The Irish walkers had faced not only the depredations that had occurred over the centuries as their religion faded about them, but had also lost many to the famine. When the call for help had come from America, they had turned to their Welsh brothers. Though the two walkers in Beddgelert knew that there were some of their calling in America, they did not know how many, where they were, or how to reach them. Dafydd Bevan did. So Owain had to wait for his compatriot's arrival before he could take any action.

The walkers had always been independent of the pagan religious culture of the British Isles, even though they shared the same beliefs. They stayed to themselves, as had been their habit for many hundreds of years before the coming of Christianity. Their task was not a public one. It was to safeguard people against those things from the dark realms, like Belial, that could threaten the lives and sanity of others. Walkers worked silently and anonymously, drawing as little attention as possible. Yet even that caution had

not protected them from the fires of the Inquisition. Some had been caught and killed. Some had renounced their ancient duties, feeling that renunciation was the appropriate response to a society that no longer wanted their services.

Wales had more walkers than Ireland, even though it was much smaller and had no areas that were truly pagan, as Ireland did. In the western reaches of Ireland, pagan customs and even the practice of the old religion remained alive, though sorely weakened over the past few decades. Wales, on the other hand, was a thoroughly Christian country, but it had not seen the same cultural brutality as Ireland. A higher percentage of the Welsh still spoke their own language, and the written and oral literature of Wales extended further back than that of English. Much of that literature dealt with the tales of the old gods, of Bran and Branwen, Manawyddan and Llyr.

A special pride also existed among the Welsh of Gwynedd, stemming from the province's claim to be the birthplace of Merlin, though they had to argue that claim with every place between Cumbria and Land's End. As a result of their honoring their pagan past, men like Owain were left to their duties, and, if they were less than dutiful in their obligations to the church, nothing was said. Everything was done with a nod and a wink, for the Welsh were always looking for ways to be a little "different" from the English. Travelers in Wales soon learned that the Welsh could be referred to as "Welsh" or as "British," but referring to a Welshman as "English" would not gain the best of receptions.

The walkers of Wales were left to themselves for other, more subtle reasons. Wales was a mountainous land that distorted the sense of distance. Things seemed farther apart in Wales. Being alone in a valley at night between two Welsh villages was very lonely indeed. Everyone knew the old tales that had been written down over a millennium ago, the stories of lords of the underworld who would ride from the sides of mountains to carry mortals off to lands from which they might never return. They knew of Manawyddan's bargaining with one such lord to return the people of Dyfed to human form. A good way

for a traveler to ward off the fear in the night was with a memory of Merlin, who was said to still wander the land in human form, protecting his people. So, if a traveler glimpsed a solitary stranger walking a road in the night, the traveler greeted him with courtesy and very little curiosity.

For the walkers, the courtesy with which they were met was not a matter of superstition or of fear. Merlin might be gone, but he had been one of them all the same. The dragons with whom he had spoken still lay sleeping beneath the spines of the Welsh mountains.

*Chapter Twenty-Three*  
*Savannah*  
*Wednesday, October 28th*

That evening, the watch assignments were the same as for the previous night. Perhaps their evenings would be free of the terror. It could well be that the demon found it a different matter to attack a group rather than one inexperienced magician. Or he could be trying to lull them into a false sense of security.

Each two hour shift of watch passed in its turn. At two a.m. Benedetto relieved Angela, who immediately fell deeply asleep. Benedetto watched her breathing slow to a sleeping rhythm in a few minutes. Some of the others seemed to sleep shallowly, like soldiers in their trenches, aware that an attack could come at any time. As the clock progressed to three, he realized that he was having trouble staying awake, so he stood and began moving around the ballroom, walking barefooted so as not to awaken the others. He was growing nervous. He did not like the feel of the room. Was it just apprehension or was there really something to fear hovering outside in the darkness? He walked to one of the rear windows of the ballroom, away from the front windows where the sleepers were clustered. The window looked down onto a small back yard with a gazebo that needed repainting. “No,” he thought to himself, “nothing there.”

He heard a loud intake of breath and turned to see Angela sitting bolt upright. “He’s coming!” she cried from a sleep-clogged throat.

At the same moment, one of the front windows of the ballroom burst inward. Before their eyes, Belial emerged from the shattered frame, fire running down his arms. The eight foot tall figure went for the priest nearest to him, Father Pascal.

Muttering a spell, Father Benedetto raced across the floor toward Pascal. Sister Angela shouted to wake the others. Pascal was struggling, trying to get to his feet. Belial struck the still-waking Pascal, knocking him down. As Benedetto neared the demon, a

faint glow of his own magic grew about him. Belial turned from Pascal and with one arm, knocked Benedetto to the side. The priest slid across the floor and came to rest against the wall. Belial immediately turned his attention back to Pascal, but the old priest had been given time to awaken. As he struggled to his knees, a marginal glow of his own power began to build. A protective barrier formed in the air between him and Belial. The demon concentrated his strength. He had little time to work; the others were awakening. Belial pressed against the shielding that had been thrown up by the old priest. The protective shell began to buckle.

As they awakened and saw what was happening, the others called their own magic to them. Rimaldi was the first to launch his personal power against the demon, but it was more of an annoyance to Belial than a threat. Pascal was trying to stay within the protective orb of his collapsing shield. Then Angela was at Pascal's side, pulling Brigid along behind her. Though the other magicians were throwing their power against Belial, it was not a joined effort, and their individual thrusts could not divert the demon from his kill. Angela cast no spells, but her own shielding glowed as she insinuated herself between Belial and Pascal. Her shielding was not like Pascal's. Its greenish shell was powerful and could hold against the full brunt of the demon's power. Belial tried to go around her, but collided with Brigid. A dull red glowed about her. Her magical shielding looked like steaming blood against the fiery orange-red of Belial. The demon could not quickly break through the protective power of the two nuns, but he continued to hammer at it. While the demon battered at the nuns, Rimaldi, Benito, and Francisco were given the opportunity to start a coordinated spell. Finally, Belial uttered a bellow of rage and retreated through the broken window.

Brigid sat heavily on the floor, drenched with sweat and exhausted. Angela turned to help Father Pascal as the other priests moved to them. Benito went to examine the injured Benedetto.

Father Rimaldi pushed in close to Pascal. "Are you all right?"

The old priest looked dazed, but alert. He took several breaths before replying. "That was a close thing. Thank you, Sister," he said to Angela. "I appear to owe you my life."

"I could not have done it without Brigid. Our combined power was too strong for him to penetrate."

Brigid smiled sheepishly. "I doubt I could have held out much longer against him without Angela."

"You are all right?" Rimaldi asked Pascal again.

"I seem to be," Pascal replied. "What about Benedetto?"

Benito answered for the other priest. "Outside of a nasty bump on the head and a few cuts on his feet from running barefoot through broken glass, he seems to have survived."

Rimaldi sighed in relief. It was their first victory, small though it may have been. A victory in defense is far easier than destroying a demon, but it was nonetheless a victory. Father Francisco reached down to help Pascal to his feet.

"Ah, thank you. I didn't know this old man had that much left in him." He smiled, "But it is the sisters . . ." He broke off and grabbed at his chest. He cried out once in pain, then collapsed to the floor. Broken glass crunched beneath him.

"Benito, come here," Rimaldi cried.

Father Benito was beside them immediately and pressed his hand against Pascal's carotid artery. He held it there for several seconds, then slowly pulled his hand away. He leaned over, close to Pascal's face, hoping for some faint sign of breath. Then he looked up and said sadly, "I saw what happened. It was a heart attack. Undoubtedly brought on by the strain. There's nothing I can do."

"If we called a doctor?" Rimaldi said hopefully.

“There’s nothing he can do either,” Brigid replied for him.

*Chapter Twenty-Four*  
*Savannah*  
*Thursday, October 29th*

Thursday's dawn in Savannah was gray, filled with clouds and rain. The priests hurriedly boarded up the shattered window. The few people who passed by in the early dawn did not seem to want to inquire. Even the police were sent away with little trouble, knowing enough of the strange happenings at the cathedral to know that they did not want to know more. The priests and nuns ate breakfast in silence. There would be another funeral that afternoon.

Angela stood at one of the unbroken windows in the front of the house and looked down at the street. She saw Daniel looking up at her, sadness creasing his normally non-committal face. Then he turned away in the rain. She let her hands slide gently over the glass in the window. It was old glass. The pane had the gentle waviness of glass that has been in place for a very long time. The replacement windows would never match. She traced a drop as it slid down the pane.

Brigid came up behind her. "Father Pascal seemed like such a good man."

"He was, and we did manage to keep the creature from killing him. His heart just gave out on him."

"Whatever the reason, he is dead, and we have one less magician."

Neither the grayness of the mood nor the grayness of the day lifted. Father Benedetto was bruised and limping, but had no serious physical injury. However, Belial's blow had disturbed more than his body, and Rimaldi knew that Benedetto would not be as effective a magician as he could be until his psychic wounds had healed. Brigid would need to take his watch that night.

In the early afternoon, Benito, Angela, and Brigid buried Father Pascal. Rimaldi had wanted them all to stay together, but Benito dissuaded him, assuring him that Angela,



Brigid, and he would be in no danger. Rimaldi, Francisco, and Benedetto stayed behind at the house on York Street.

When they finished the service for Father Pascal, they each tossed a handful of dirt on the coffin and turned away from the wooden box lying a few feet deep in the dark and damp earth. The grave diggers came behind them to cover the coffin. Some moved with fear, looking over their shoulders as they rapidly shoveled dirt into the freshly-dug hole.

The day was a beautiful one, and the late afternoon sun was warm on their faces. None of them had any desire to return to the grim house on York, though they knew that they must. They simply sought to delay that return. When they reached the street, they approached the waiting coach.

“Daniel,” Benito called up to the driver.

The young man looked down at him. He did not speak. He was almost as affected by the deaths as they were.

“Go back to the stable without us,” Benito said. “We will walk.”

“It’s a good ways,” Daniel replied.

“We know. Thank you for your concern.”

Daniel nodded and snapped the reins. They watched the coach drive off and followed in the same direction, heading toward the main part of the city and the cathedral. For a while they walked without talking.

Brigid broke the silence. “Is there any other source of help?”

Angela was the first to respond. “I have sent a telegram to my family. There may be some help possible from there, but I do not know. Even we have little experience with such creatures.”

Benito continued the train of thought. “Father Rimaldi and I discussed the same thing after breakfast. We have sent a telegram to the Vatican, requesting help, but such help would take weeks to arrive, even assuming that it is available.”

“What do you mean by ‘assuming it is available’?”

“What he means, Brigid,” Angela answered, “is that there are few magicians in the Church more powerful than Rimaldi. The Church does ceremonial magic, which is based on knowledge of spells, and Rimaldi is among the most knowledgeable in the world. We have others here to feed power to him. Given that circumstance, our group is probably as potent as any that the Church could assemble anywhere. If we cannot defeat this thing under Rimaldi’s leadership, then it is quite possible that the Church cannot defeat it at all.”

Brigid said, “Then I guess that it was wise to try to send for a walker.”

Benito stopped in astonishment. “You did what?”

“I sent for a walker,” Brigid said, quietly.

“But I thought there weren’t any walkers left.”

“I don’t know if there are or if there aren’t, but I sent a message in hopes of finding one.”

“To whom?” Benito asked.

“To the few members of my family that are left. They may still have some contacts with those that follow the old ways.”

“Why didn’t you say something to me earlier?” Benito asked.

“I think I was afraid to say anything. I was confused. On the one hand, I wanted to see this thing killed. On the other, I didn’t want my family, or those involved in the old ways to be in any danger.” She paused. “And I’m not even sure there are any walkers left. If there are, would they come? Their relations with the Church have probably been less than pleasant.”

Angela said, “I should have said something to you, Luis. I just assumed you knew.”

“So I was the only one left out of this particular piece of news?” he said, feigning more offense than he felt.

“I really am sorry,” Brigid said. “but you weren’t the only one left out. Angela was the only one other than myself to know.”

“It’s all right, Brigid,” Benito said. “I think I was just disappointed that you didn’t trust me enough to tell me.

“Well, I wrote to them the day after Richardson’s death, before I had even met you.”

Benito was surprised. “So you thought this might be beyond the Church from the beginning?”

“I don’t know what I thought. I just felt that I should.”

Angela smiled and took her arm. “Then it was the right thing to do.”

“Thank you,” Brigid said.

“And I would assume,” Angela said. “that you would not want Father Rimaldi to know of this?”

Brigid nodded thankfully. “If you would be so kind, I would appreciate it.”

Benito added, “Then think no more of it. It will remain between the three of us.”

Brigid nodded her thanks.

“How long will it take the letter to get to Ireland?” Benito asked.

“About two weeks. It may already have arrived.”

“But we cannot count on a walker’s arrival,” Benito said. “Even if one exists and can help us, even if he will help us, we are a long way from Ireland. It is doubtful that one could reach us in time.”

They fell silent again. Each was left to his own thoughts, but they were all glad to be away from the oppressive atmosphere in the house on York Street, at least for a while. As they walked in the sunshine, the city itself worked its magic of beauty upon them, and they began to heal from the sadness of the events of the previous days. Angela and Benito recalled the story that Brigid had told of the walker that had come when her great aunt

had been young. It gave them hope that a savior might appear, as unlikely as his arrival, even his very existence, might be.

Rimaldi and Benito felt that conducting a summoning ritual two nights in a row would be too trying a task for their opponents, so it was not likely that Belial would strike them again that night. The priests and nuns went to sleep that evening comforted by the fact that it was unlikely that the events of the previous night would be repeated. They were cautious nonetheless.

Father Francisco's watch passed without incident. When he awakened Benito at ten, he considered talking to the priest for a few minutes, if only to share the pleasure of spoken Spanish. But neither of them really wished to talk. At midnight, Benito awakened Angela. The Sicilian took his place as the monk fell asleep. Benito knew that he would have little to worry about for the next two hours. Angela would not be caught, no matter how subtle Belial might be.

Brigid took Benedetto's watch from two to four in the morning. Brigid reflected on their situation. She had no way of knowing if Siobhan had been successful in her attempt to find a walker, nor was she likely to know soon, and the situation in Savannah was growing more grim. If Belial's intent had been to undermine the courage and confidence of the group of priests and nuns, he had succeeded. She realized that the shock of two deaths was almost more than some could bear. The Catholics were supposed to be the ones wielding the sword, carrying out the will of God, but now they felt more like prey.

That afternoon Rimaldi had once again explained that they had to wait until the new moon for their battle, since they had to be certain to catch both the creature and the ones who summoned him. He had also explained why they had to wait for the battle to come to them. Yet Brigid knew enough to realize that Belial's power would grow as the

new moon approached. Perhaps he would not be much stronger, but how much stronger did their enemy need to be? What would happen when the strength of the magicians who opened the portal for him added their power to the battle? Even more alarming, would Belial wait for the new moon? Would he strike before then? Would Streng call his coven together before the last night of the waning moon to destroy the disheartened magicians of the church? Realizing that the new two weeks would answer those questions, Brigid tried to resign herself to whatever might happen. At four she awakened Rimaldi and lay down to sleep until breakfast.

*Chapter Twenty-Five*  
*Beddgelert*  
*Friday, October 30th*

Doctor Dafydd Bevan stopped his carriage in front of Owain's apothecary as the sun penetrated to the floor of the valley. Thomas, Owain's apprentice, was just arriving at work, having first done his morning chores on his family's farm.

"*Bore da*," Thom Humphries greeted the doctor.

"Good morning to you as well, Thom."

Thom approached the doctor, whom he knew from his previous visits. "Looks like that horse could use a little water and a rubdown. Should I take care of him for you?"

"I would greatly appreciate it, Thom."

As the young man led the horse around to the small stable in the back of the shop, Dafydd entered the apothecary shop. At the sound of the door, Owain looked up.

"I thought that might be you."

"I'm sorry about the delay, but I had a set of twins to deliver. I really could not leave earlier."

"I understand, but we have a serious situation. As soon as Thom arrives we must go to meet with Gwynfor at his farm. We are less likely to be disturbed there than here."

"Well, I'd best get Thom for you. He's arrived and is taking care of my horse. From what you've said, it appears we'll have immediate need of my carriage."

"We can let your horse rest a bit while we have a cup of tea upstairs. I can tell you what we know so far. Go on up. I'll talk to Thom."

The doctor nodded and went up the stairs to Owain's living quarters. The room was, as he remembered, sparsely furnished. Owain had little attachment to things, other than books, and his walls were lined with them. Some were in English, others in Latin or Greek. The few precious Welsh texts were the most valuable parts of his collection. And

Dafydd knew that behind one of the bookcases was a small but even more valuable cache of books. Those texts were written in ancient Welsh and contained many of the methods for training a walker. Every walker had a copy of them, and every walker just as surely had four people, each of whom knew where the books were so that they could be removed after his death.

Dafydd looked out into the small village. Owain was below, talking to Thom. The young man was more than the apprentice to the town's apothecary. He had been found to have the necessary talents shortly after his birth. As a result, Thom was also an apprentice walker. He had already begun the time-consuming training to assume the arcane responsibilities of their ancient order. From what Owain had told him, Thom was progressing rapidly. Walker training was complete when it was complete. It was never merely a matter of time and never guaranteed, no matter how hard one might work. Completion of the training was decided by the student's having gained certain abilities. For some, the training was as short as five years. For others, it took decades.

Within a half hour, Dafydd and Owain were on their way to Gwynfor's farm. They would not be meeting at his house, but in a cave about a half mile distant from it. Owain told Dafydd what he knew about the problem in America as they made the short trip. They would not stop the carriage near their final destination. Instead they pulled into a copse of trees a good distance away from the cave, and Gwynfor met them there.

"Expected you'd stop here."

The other two men climbed down. They had already begun to assume the laconic manner of the walkers, quite different from their daily manner as typically talkative Welshmen. The three knew the way by heart. They could easily walk it in the dark, as they had on more than one occasion. A few hundred feet from where they had stopped the carriage, they crossed a brook and continued on through a small meadow and a grove of trees, which ended in what appeared to be a blank rock face. The face actually had a

diagonal crevice in it, though it was well-hidden by the trees. The crevice was wide enough for a man to slip through, provided that he leaned back against the rock and slid along his back. After a transit of about ten feet, the cleft turned. A few feet further on, it emerged into a small, protected glade.

The occasional person passing through the meadow on the other side of the rock face presented no danger to the security of the walkers' meeting place. It was magically protected in subtle ways. The first discouragement was a spell that tended to make others overlook the place, which was hard enough to find without additional obstacles. A second spell had been cast that would discourage anyone from entering the cleft in the rocks. If someone were daring enough to enter the cleft, a third spell assured that he would experience a feeling of claustrophobia that would drive him back out of the rocks. The third spell became stronger the deeper into the cleft one went.

The three men emerged from the cleft, then crossed the glade, which rose as it met the root of the mountain that loomed over them. They entered into a dense growth of shrubbery that clung to the face of the mountain. Behind that shrubbery was the entrance to the cave.

Not even they knew how long the cave had been used by the walkers, but it was certainly more than two thousand years. The back chambers of the cave held various artifacts that had been brought back as souvenirs by the walkers before them. In the chamber were Roman coins that dated from the reign of Claudius, who had died in 37 AD. Other items in the back of the cave were perhaps even older, but the walkers did not have the inclination to date them. They already knew that their order was immeasurably old.

Owain led the way into the cave. They stopped in the second chamber, which was an oval about fifteen by twelve feet. It was lit by two small, natural shafts in the rock that let in enough light to provide some illumination in the day. At night, they would build a small fire. The three sat and felt the security of the rock about them before speaking.



Gwynfor began, “So it appears that someone has been foolish enough to open a portal.”

Dafydd nodded. “We can’t be certain, but this incident seems very similar to the one that occurred in Scotland forty years ago.”

“I agree,” Owain said. “Quite possibly these are people from the same type of group.”

“They call themselves ‘satanists’.” Gwynfor added.

The others shook their heads at the foolishness of some.

Gwynfor continued. “Dafydd, Owain tells me that you know of one of us in America.”

“I know *of* him, I don’t *know* him. But he was trained by Cerridwyn, and she has vouched for him.”

The other two nodded. Anyone trained by Cerridwyn, the most formidable woman member of their group, would be very well versed in the skills.

“Should I alert him? The Catholics will undoubtedly send their own magicians, just as they did in Scotland.”

The three considered the dangers. As always, the first problem was the potency of the creature that the American walker would have to confront. Would he have the power to defeat it? The second problem was potentially revealing themselves to the Catholic Church.

“I do not know what you would recommend,” Owain said, “but we have always had to confront these creatures ourselves. The Christians have never proven themselves against one of them. They will likely fail, and, if they do, the creature will become more rapacious. Others might die.”

They mulled over what Owain had said.

“And,” Gwynfor said, “the situation is made more difficult by the presence of this nun, Brigid, who comes from a family that has long been devoted to the gods.”

“But she is a nun,” Dafydd objected.

“The famine forced poor choices on many Irish,” Owain reminded him.

“Regardless of all that,” Gwynfor said, “there are innocent people in danger. I think that outweighs other considerations.”

“I agree,” Owain said.

“Then we are in agreement,” Dafydd concluded. “I will send the telegram on Monday.”

*Chapter Twenty-Six*  
*Savannah*  
*Friday, October 30th*

In an attempt to brighten the mood at York Street, the monsignor made dinner on Friday, the traditional day for fish, into something special. He arranged for an afternoon delivery of fresh shrimp, crab, red snapper, and grouper. He had also insisted that the bishop's chef, Joseph, prepare dinner. Joseph and his staff arrived at four, bringing several bottles of wine from the bishop's cellar.

Father Rimaldi had asked that the monsignor and the mother superior join them. As a show of support, they had accepted the invitation. They gathered just after five. The atmosphere was quiet, but was nonetheless in marked contrast to the funereal affair that dinner the previous evening had been. Joseph was a remarkable chef, and a feast began appearing from the kitchen around six. The centerpiece was Joseph's specialty, red snapper covered with roasted sweet peppers. Other dishes—red rice, shrimp creole, baked grouper, and a bounty of local fresh vegetables—were delivered to the table, still steaming from the kitchen. As the wine disappeared, it was replaced by Chatham Artillery Punch. The punch was a Savannah tradition, a rum drink that hid its potency in the tastes of fruit juice and sugar. Knowing the seriousness of recent events and the danger that they shared, the monsignor was careful to warn all present that it was not a drink to be trifled with.

The conversation was light, as all of them gratefully grasped the opportunity to evade the dark thoughts that surrounded them. Still, those who had witnessed the deadly actions of Belial could not completely escape their memories. Rimaldi was the most affected. He felt a sense of personal failure, feeling that his arrogance had played a role in the loss of two of their members. As well, he was afraid. He felt overmatched. True, Angela and Brigid had been able to withstand Belial and protect Father Pascal, but their defense had only needed to last a few minutes. What might be the result if they had needed

to resist him any longer? What would be the results if Belial were directly aided by other ceremonial magicians? Streng's display when he had drawn Father Kirk across the street had shown that he was a potent magician in his own right.

Rimaldi could not hide the dark current of his thoughts. After they finished eating and were enjoying their coffee, he slipped away from the table and went to stand at one of the back windows that looked down on the dark yard behind the house. The light that spilled from the kitchen windows cast a feeble illumination against the darkness and was swallowed in the dense foliage that surrounded the patch of grass directly behind the kitchen.

As the Jesuit looked down at the yard, a red glow began to suffuse the air outside, and tendrils of glowing red fire swept by the window. Rimaldi was frozen by fear. In the heart of the red glow, just outside the window, the horrible, leering face of Belial began to take shape.

Finally he found his voice. "Benito," he cried.

The room fell quiet, and Benito rushed to his side. By the time he arrived, the illusion of Belial had vanished. Rimaldi himself almost doubted what he had seen.

"What is it, Father?" Luis asked.

"I saw, or I think I saw, Belial."

"Where?"

"Outside, hovering in the air. Just the red glow, but it began to move and grow stronger. There was the suggestion of a face."

Benito turned to face the others. "I think we should bring an end to dinner. Monsignor, we all appreciate the extraordinary hospitality you've shown, but we need for you, the mother superior, and the staff to leave for a safer place."

Rimaldi was shaken. "Perhaps I only imagined it. Perhaps it was nothing."

Angela joined the conversation. "I would doubt that, Father Provincial. I think Father Benito is right. We need to have everyone but the members of our order leave in the next few minutes. This could be a prelude to an attack, or only a move to frighten us. In any case, we need to be prepared."

The monsignor wiped his mouth with a napkin as he stood. The mother superior was already on her feet.

Benito could not wait for the distracted Jesuit to make the decisions that needed to be made. "Sister Angela, Sister Brigid, could you help them prepare? The rest of us should remain in the room, together. Monsignor, I apologize for the sudden interruption."

"Of course, Father Benito. We understand." He, the mother superior, and the two nuns made their way downstairs to speed the kitchen staff on its way. As Monsignor Henry walked down the stairs, his mind was haunted by the fear he had seen in Rimaldi's face. The monsignor was not seeing the Church triumphant.

In the ballroom, Rimaldi had regained most of his composure, but the others had been shaken by his reaction. Had it been Belial or an illusion of him cast by Streng's group? None of them had experienced an opponent of anything like Belial's power. They were like soldiers who had never faced a cannon in war. The first time a cannon is fired against them, they are afraid. Even more disturbing was their leader's reaction. Could he really lead them, or might he lose his nerve?

The next morning the ballroom of the house on York had taken on the appearance of a wartime barracks. Cots were lined up on the floor, and chairs stood randomly around the room. The boarded-up window seemed like a scar on the face of the beautiful home. Clothes and blankets were piled around the room. Rimaldi called them all together. Benito saw the strain on Rimaldi's face. Benito knew that the Jesuit needed his support, even

though he could tell that Rimaldi had become stronger because of the intrusion the previous evening. The fighter in him was awakening.

Rimaldi spoke slowly, but with decision. “We know what it is we face. I can assure you that what we confront here is the most powerful opponent I have ever encountered. I have done over twenty exorcisms, and not a single one of those possessing spirits had one tenth of the power of this Belial creature.”

He paused for a moment to let his words be considered.

“Two of our members have been killed. And we know from the information provided by the Voudon group that the full coven of satanists has not yet been called. The demon, Belial, is the greatest threat, but the other members of this group are magicians of significant power.

“So we must consider what to do now. We could attack and strike at the magicians who call him, but, as I have said before, I think that would be a poor strategy. We know the identity of only one of the opposing magicians, Streng. Others have joined him on the nights that he has summoned Belial, but we don’t know who they are. If we strike at Streng, the others might still be able to summon the demon, who is our main enemy. Most importantly, I do not wish to engage them at their ritual site. They will be stronger there. I would rather have them come to us.” He looked around the room. “Are we agreed?” He waited until each had nodded in assent.

“We must therefore concentrate on defense and be ready every night for an attack. I expect the main attack to come in a week, either next Saturday or Sunday, as those are the last two nights of the waning moon and their power to destroy will be strongest. But they might choose to surprise us. Between now and the final nights, we must always be prepared to defend. Two of us must be awake at all times. The others should rest during the time that they are not watching. The final two nights, we shall all be awake most of

the night. We will prepare to fight them when they come. Both this demon and the ones who call him must be destroyed.”

Benito supported him. “They have traditionally met on one of the last two nights of the waning moon. I think the plan is a good one.”

Rimaldi waited for objections. None came. He continued, “We have six magicians at our disposal if we include Sister Brigid. She is a potent addition to our group. She and Sister Angela were able to stop the attack on Father Pascal. Had his heart not failed him, he would still be with us.

“In the late afternoon, two of us should rest for a few hours to be ready to stand guard tonight. As for the final nights, we have several rituals we could use. But I recommend that we use the Pentagram. It is the most powerful for our current number.” He looked around the group and saw there was no objection. “Tonight is the Eve of All Saints, All Hallow’s Eve. The bishop will join us briefly after dinner to bless our endeavor, but will return to the archdiocese before nightfall.”

No one spoke against the plan. All could see the thought that had gone into the plan. It seemed the right course of action.

The day passed quietly. In the afternoon, Benito and Francisco slept to be ready for the first night’s watch. Later, the bishop made his visit to bestow his blessing. He was not used to giving his blessing for such dangerous efforts. Usually he was called on to bless nothing more serious than the beginning of the fishing season, a festive occasion, with gaily painted boats sailing by on the Wilmington River. This blessing was before an inevitable battle, and his good will was received thankfully by all, even Angela.

As evening began to fall, the priests and nuns heard festivities in some of the houses on the street. Halloween was becoming a major holiday in the South, just as it had been for decades in the North, and parties were becoming increasingly popular on this night. Partygoers moved down the street, some dressed in costume, some even made up as

demons and gargoyles. The celebrants were not aware of the irony of their imitation. They did not really believe in such creatures, though one such spirit had been active in this city for much longer than any of them had been alive.

Father Francisco stood at the window with Father Benito and looked down as small groups made their ways down the street, laughing. They were intent on fun and a little mischief.

*“El Dia de los Muertos,”* said Francisco.

Benito nodded. “The Day of the Dead.” He was acquainted with the Mexican holiday. In that country, it was one of the largest festivals of the year.

Brigid, who had been standing nearby, approached. “In my country, we call it Samhain. It is the night when the veil between this world and the others is thought to be the thinnest.”

“The same for us,” Francisco replied in his accented English.

Benito continued the thought. “It seems that many lands have a version of this holiday. The Aztecs, the Celts, the Romans, all had a night in this time of year when it was felt that the dead could speak to us. It was a time when spirits, both good and evil, were close at hand.”

“I hope no dark spirits find us tonight, Father,” Brigid said.

“And I, Sister,” Father Francisco replied for the two men. Of the new arrivals, Father Francisco had the least difficulty accepting the power and presence of Belial. Some in the Church thought that the Hispanic clerics were superstitious. The Hispanics thought that those who did not share their beliefs were naive.

Brigid peripherally saw a slight movement in the corner nearest her. Her first reaction was fear, until she realized that it was a little one. Knowing their shyness, she went to it immediately. She crouched down on the floor in front of it, hiding it from the view of



the others. It smiled to her and pointed out towards the square that began a few doors down. York Street formed one of the sides of the square.

She whispered, "You want me to come outside?"

It gave a quick nod, then stopped. As if there were something more.

"And bring Angela and Benito?"

It nodded again and smiled.

"Would Father Francisco, the one standing next to Benito, be all right to bring?"

The little one looked around her at the priest and cocked his head to the side as he regarded the priest. He considered for a moment, perhaps communicating to the others of his kind in their unspoken language. After a few seconds, he slowly nodded. Then he waved his little hand toward the square rapidly, urging her to come quickly.

"We'll hurry," she whispered.

The little one vanished.

Brigid made her way to Angela. "Can you come outside for a few minutes?"

Angela started to ask the reason for the request, then stopped and replied, "All right."

Brigid then went to the two priests near the window.

"Luis," Brigid said, "I have something special to show you outside."

"What is it?" He asked.

"Our little friends want us to come."

"Oh," he smiled, "then let's go."

"And you can bring Father Francisco," she said. "Just explain that these are our friends."

"He is being honored," Benito smiled, then turned to tell Father Francisco to come with them. With a question on his face, Francisco followed.

Benito stopped to assure Father Rimaldi that they would return shortly. Though puzzled, Rimaldi nodded his assent.

As they made their way downstairs, Benito whispered in Spanish, explaining to Francisco that they were going to see something that friendly spirits had arranged. The questioning look on Francisco's face turned to one of anticipation. Benito warned him that these spirits were shy and that he should not make any sudden moves or summon any power but the Sight.

Soon they were out into the fall air. Fall is perhaps the finest of Savannah's seasons, with mild days and cool nights, but the nights were never cool enough to be called cold. They walked quickly to the center of the nearby square and began to look around themselves to find out what the little ones had planned. Angela was the first to see a glimmer in the oaks that hung over the square.

"Look up," she whispered.

They peered into the trees and saw one glimmering faery light. It was joined by two, then ten, then more than they could count. The small lights were not a steady glow but wavered just slightly. Their light filled the lower branches of the trees. Beside each light was a smiling face, each lit by a light that nestled in a little one's hand. The little ones then began to move from branch to branch, concentrating themselves in the branches above the four humans.

The dark and luminous eyes of the little ones held secrets that humans could not comprehend. The four knew that they were being blessed. These little creatures were fragile. They hid from humans most of the time, but they needed the protection of humans from demons such as Belial and from dark magicians such as Streng. They had tried to help the humans when they could, sometimes watching the magicians as they slept. Now they sought to give them some of the beauty of their world.

The lights began to float together and the boundaries between the pools of illumination vanished. When the light had assembled into a single pool, the little ones turned their hands over. The flickering lights fell from the trees to rain down on the four humans. The lights began to fade as they floated down, but they held their illumination long enough to bathe the four below them in their radiance. The lights bounced from their shoulders and heads, each impact no more than a feather. Then the flickering orbs rolled down their bodies, some fading before they reached the ground, others staying lit for a moment after they landed. The lights left behind a quiet joy and a sense of peace.

There was a slight rustle in the branches. The little ones were leaving. One, perhaps the one that had called them here, peered around the trunk of an oak for a moment and waved goodbye. Then he, too, vanished into the darkness.

The four looked at each other. Father Francisco, who had never seen a little one before, was silently crying. Tears rolled down his cheeks. "I have never seen such beauty." He wanted to say more, but had no words to describe his feeling in any of the languages that he knew.

Angela smiled and said, "We fight for their safety as well as ours."

With more happiness and peace than any of them had felt for a long while, they made their way back to the house on York. Belial made no appearance that night or the next.

*Chapter Twenty-Seven*  
*New York City*  
*Monday, November 2nd*

Gereint Rhys was upstairs when he heard the small bell over the downstairs door ring. Someone was entering his shop. He listened as voices floated up the stairs. The shop manager, William Ahern, greeted the new arrival warmly. Gereint nodded in satisfaction. His New York City bookstore was small, but had a devoted clientele for his eclectic collection of popular books, first editions, and arcane texts that lined the walls of the shop. William had been a good choice as manager and took excellent care of the shop's customers.

Gereint enjoyed his work. His bookstore was the only one of its kind in Manhattan. Some of the unusual texts he carried even dealt with magic. Most of the books were ones that could present no danger to anyone, though a few had a potent ceremonial ritual or two. The purpose of the books was not to educate but to allow him to keep track of the magical community in the city.

He had come to America from Wales in 1866 and opened his bookstore in the city. The shop had grown over the years, and now, with employees who could see to the day-to-day operations, he had far more time for his own studies and for tracking down the elusive first editions that a few of his best customers sought. All in all, he found his life an enjoyable one. Then the telegram arrived.

Immediately after opening it, he had gone upstairs to digest its contents. Gereint had been waiting for what he referred to as "the summons" for quite some time. He had always known it would come. Something inside him had been certain that the years of training and discipline would be needed one day, but he was still surprised by the telegram from Wales. It told him that he was to meet his "cousin," a Sister Brigid Rourke, at a convent in Savannah. He knew by the way that the message was phrased that she had

encountered a most dangerous type of demon. Gereint's task would be to destroy the demon. He would be going alone to Savannah. Alan Humphries, the only other walker in America, was in Chicago. Gereint would warn him of the demon's existence, but Alan would go only if Gereint failed. Walkers always worked alone.

Gereint was concerned about the creature that he would be facing, but he was even more concerned about the timing. The demon would be most active on the nights immediately before the new moon. The new moon occurred on Sunday, so those in Savannah were already in the time when the demon's potency was on the rise. Each night closer to the new moon only increased the danger. Gereint did not know what might be occurring in Savannah. It had been nearly four weeks since the request for help had left Savannah to begin its journey to Wales.

Demons such as this rarely stopped at one death. How many more had died, or would die? Gereint needed to reach Savannah as rapidly as possible. He would take the first train going south. Unfortunately, he knew that the trip would be slow and difficult. The American rail system was far more frustrating than the British one. In Britain the entire country was on a single time zone. In America the idea of time zones had been discussed, but cities and towns often stubbornly set their own time. As a result, connections between trains were more difficult to make than in Britain. He would need to select trains at each major stop instead of being able to plan the entire trip from New York City to Savannah, a distance of nearly a thousand miles. He should have been able to make the trip in less than two days. Instead, he would probably not arrive until Thursday or Friday.

He hoped that he would not be too late.

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

### *Wednesday, November 4th*

By the time Wednesday dawned, the Catholic magicians had fallen into a repetitive task of waiting. Their schedule was taking a toll on them. Rimaldi realized that they were all tired. Holding concentration for an extended period in the night was wearing. The long nights were progressively more debilitating. Only a few more days of the schedule remained. Sunday night was the new moon. His group had to endure only two more nights of watch before they would all be awake for the final nights.

During the day, they generally remained in the ballroom, always staying together. This day, like the ones before it, dragged on. They had lunch together and spent some time in the early afternoon talking and sharing their knowledge. At about three, Rimaldi and Benedetto left for one of the bedrooms for a few hours sleep. They were awakened again for dinner. At nine o'clock, the others lay down on the cots in the ballroom to sleep.

Rimaldi and Father Benedetto moved to the center of the room. Maintaining magical awareness for hours on end is a difficult task, requiring constant focus. They were tired before they began. The long night they had spent on their last night on watch, Saturday, had drained them. But the more potent enemy that caused their guard to slip that night was simply time. Belial had not attacked for a week.

None of them had seen the observers who had carefully watched them in the last few days. None had noticed the nightly visits by Streng's projection which stayed carefully distant and observed their routines of watch stations and sleep. Streng was also becoming increasingly cautious. He had been sending Essie home early for the last few days. As a result, the Catholic magicians were robbed of her information, even though reports from Daniel had kept them informed of the comings and goings at Streng's house.

As midnight approached, Rimaldi heard a frantic knocking on the door. He went downstairs to answer it. Benedetto stayed at the top of the stairs, watching in the event that the knocking was some kind of ruse.

Rimaldi opened the door to the knocking. A breathless Daniel stood there. He had run from Streng's. "Six of Streng's people there," he said speaking between gasps

"When did they arrive?" Rimaldi asked.

"Three carriages come in the last few minutes. I wait a few more minutes, but no more came. So I run here. He got six people in there, plus his self."

"Thank you, Daniel," Rimaldi said quickly.

"I go back to see if any more come." Daniel turned to go.

Rimaldi quickly shut the door and ran up the stairs. In a matter of seconds he had everyone awake.

"Streng has assembled a total of seven magicians. They may be calling Belial."

The magicians awakened quickly and formed their group into a five pointed star in the open area of the room they had reserved for rituals. Rimaldi stood in the center of the star in front of the small altar that faced east. Benito was at the east point of the star, in front of Rimaldi. Brigid and Angela were at the northeast and southeast points. Benedetto and Francisco were at the northwest and southwest points.

At Streng's house, the triad of Streng, Jarred Cawthorne, and Micah Breeding was augmented by the three next most powerful of their group, Lilith Claire, Frank Ames, and Hans Rimmer. As the hour crept past midnight, they summoned Belial. The three new arrivals held the portal, leaving Streng, Cawthorne, and Breeding free. Belial flew free of the room, but did not approach the house on York. Instead, Streng, Cawthorne, and Breeding lay down on the floor of their ritual room. Muttering spells, they separated their spirits

from their bodies. These spirits carried all of their senses and left their bodies on the floor as living, but insensate, husks. At first their spirits looked like their physical bodies, but they changed their appearance to mimic Belial's. The three projections left the room and joined Belial. Once assembled, they went to the house on York.

Inside the ballroom, the six magicians had just begun the spells to link the five points of the pentagram and complete their shielding. They did not have time to finish and were only beginning to link their power when four "Belials" appeared inside the ballroom. Streng was to the north, with his back to the street. Cawthorne and Breeding were on the south and west, while the real Belial appeared in the east, in front of Benito and closest to the ritual circle of the priests. The priests and nuns were confused. They did not know which was the real Belial.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Streng launched himself at Benedetto. Cawthorne and Breeding threw themselves against Francisco. The two nuns both turned to the west to see if they could help. Then the real Belial, far more potent than the shades of the magicians that had accompanied him, attacked Benito. Benito reeled backwards from the force of the blow and dropped to his knees.

Rimaldi shouted to the nuns, "Behind you."

The two women had already sensed the presence of their powerful opponent at their backs. Turning east, they moved between Benito and Belial, just as the demon launched a tongue of fire at the monk. The fire was caught on the shielding of the two witches and went no further. Even though Rimaldi was no longer being fed power by the others, he launched his own spell at Belial. It had little effect.



Father Francisco screamed. He was caught between Cawthorne and Breeding, and his protection was failing. Their spells were licking about him like flames, searing his flesh. Rimaldi moved to help him.

At the same moment, Benedetto was falling to his knees from the potent spells being launched against him by Streng. The priest was no match for his powerful adversary alone, and the attention of the others was focused on the more potent dangers that Belial, Cawthorne, and Breeding presented. The magical force of Streng hammered against Benedetto. The priest was losing ground in his battle. Then his shielding gave way. He felt smothered, as if buried in hot wool. Collapsing onto the floor, he felt his life seeping out of him. He did not even have the ability to cry out for help.

Belial kept up his relentless pressure against the nuns, who were totally occupied in protecting Benito. He was sheltered behind them, dazed but still struggling to return to the fight. Brigid and Angela were having difficulty protecting themselves and preventing Belial from reaching the weakened Benito. Brigid felt that her strength was being tested beyond measure. Even though she was just able to withstand the onslaught from the demon, she felt the air around her grow hot. Without Angela beside her, she would never have been able to hold off the power that Belial was directing at them. Brigid saw that Angela was sweating as well, though she did not seem to be as near the end of her strength.

Sensing movement behind her, she saw Streng approaching. Unthinking, she threw up her arm, not using any spell, simply directing her own power at the shade of Streng. A lance of deep crimson flame spouted from her arm. It smashed against an overconfident and barely shielded Streng. His projection was thrown back almost ten feet. His spirit form wavered, then blinked out, as his spirit took flight back to the refuge of his body.

With Streng gone and Rimaldi joining the faltering Francisco, Cawthorne and Breeding departed. Belial, even without their support, was in no danger. The powerful

demon slashed again at Benito. His blow fell on Angela's shielding and dissipated, though enough power got around her to knock Benito to the ground. A sudden burst of fire erupted around Belial, but it was one of his own making. As the others instinctively drew back, the demon vanished from their sight. Brigid felt Belial fly from the room and disappear into the night, just as he had done the night that he had murdered Richardson.

The room was enveloped in darkness. All but one of the oil lamps that had lit the room had been snuffed out in the brief magical battle. Father Rimaldi went to another lamp and relit it. Then he lit two more. The scene revealed brought no comfort to anyone. The room was quiet, except for the pained gasps of Francisco, who was severely burned.

Benito struggled upright, aided by Sister Angela. Brigid went to Benedetto, who had not stirred. She sensed that he was dead even before she arrived to stand over his body. In her years as a nurse, she had honed the aspect of the Sight that had been her way of knowing who would live, who would die, and who had already left this world. Benedetto was dead.

Rimaldi hovered over Father Francisco, who was in severe pain. Brigid went to him as soon as she had assured herself that Benedetto was beyond help. Rimaldi was stunned. He realized that the wreckage was more than physical. This attack had struck at the thing that every magician must have, confidence. They were the ones confused, while their enemy played a game, a game that would lead to a denouement on a night of the enemy's choosing.

Sister Brigid's voice brought him back to the room, away from his thoughts. "I need some help, we must undress him."

"Undress him?"

"He is burned," Sister Brigid explained. "The great risk is infection. The only way to prevent it is to get his clothing away from the burned areas."

"But shouldn't we wait for the doctor?" Rimaldi asked.

“No, his blood is clotting now. The longer we wait, the worse it will be.”

“But, you’re a nun.”

Exasperated with his provincial tone, she barely managed to control the anger in her voice. “No, right now I am a nurse. And unless you have more medical knowledge than I do, you can help best by summoning a doctor. The monsignor will know whom to call.” She turned toward Angela. “Please get my bag.” Then she looked to Benito. “Father Benito, if you can, I need you here. We cannot wait to get the clothing off him. Time is precious.”

“Yes,” he said, “of course.” Benito moved to her assistance. Rimaldi left to go to the monsignor. Then he noticed Benedetto. He knelt on the floor next to his old friend. “Sister?” he cried out.

Brigid looked up at him briefly. She saw the anguish on his face, and, as gently as possible, said, “I’m sorry, Father Provincial. Father Benedetto is dead. There is nothing more that we can do for him. But we must help the living. I need a doctor for Francisco . . .”

“I’ll go,” Angela interrupted, setting Brigid’s medical bag by the nurse’s side.

Brigid nodded and turned her attention back to Francisco. Rimaldi remained crouched by the body of his friend. Angela left for the cathedral compound.

Brigid instructed Benito. “He will be going into shock. We need to get some laudanum in him for the pain, then elevate his feet. Someone should build a fire, it’s too cold in this room, and he needs to be warm to prevent shock. We should leave him uncovered until a doctor arrives.”

“Can a doctor save him?” Benito asked.

“I don’t know, but I hope they fetch Gaston,” she said. “He may be an irritable old drunk, but he knows more about saving an injured man’s life than anyone I know.”

Brigid soon had a strong dose of laudanum in the injured priest, who had been silently crying in pain. His burns were excruciatingly painful. As the drug stole through his veins, he began to relax. Benito lit the fire in the room. The fireplace had been carefully filled by him earlier in the day. The kindling began to catch quickly. Brigid began to remove Francisco's burned clothing. Much of his cassock had been burned.

Brigid talked to Benito as she worked over Francisco. "Father Benito, as soon as you get that fire going, please go to the kitchen and find some whiskey or strong spirits. We'll need it to clean the wounds."

Benito nodded. When he was satisfied that the fire would catch, he went to the kitchen. Brigid worked carefully over their patient. It was slow and laborious work, but she moved as quickly as she could. At times Francisco would gasp as the pain of removing some shard of clothing proved too severe for the laudanum to mask. She heard Rimaldi go to the fireplace. He tended the blaze and was rewarded with a burst of illumination that seemed to dispel some of the chill from the room. Then he brought one of the oil lamps over to Brigid so that she could see better as she endeavored to pick fabric from the burns that covered a large part of Francisco's body.

"Thank you, Father," she said

Benito reemerged from downstairs. "All I found was rum," he said.

"Good enough," Brigid replied. She sat back on her heels. Much of Francisco's burned skin was now exposed to the air. She washed her hands in the rum, then handed the bottle to Benito. "You should do the same."

Nodding, Benito washed his hands in the alcohol. They heard someone coming up the stairs. It was Angela, followed by the monsignor and Doctor Gaston.

Gaston quickly glanced around the room and decided that he did not want to know what had happened. He moved to Francisco.

"Are all of his burns exposed to the air?" he asked Brigid.

“I’m pretty certain most are, but we haven’t cleaned them yet. I gave him laudanum for the pain and had the others start a fire to keep him warm. I elevated his feet against shock.”

“Good work, girl,” he said as he lowered himself to the ground beside the patient. “I need more light,” he called to no one in particular. “And a disinfectant.”

Father Benito handed Gaston the rum. Gaston asked, “Your idea, Brigid?”

She nodded.

“Knew you’d make a fine nurse one day,” he smiled at her, then took a drink of the rum before washing his own hands. “Let’s get to work.” Benito fetched another lamp to add to the light. He stopped next to Rimaldi. Brigid stayed kneeling over Francisco.

“What about the other one?” Gaston asked.

“Dead,” Brigid replied flatly.

The doctor and Brigid set about finishing the laborious task of picking pieces of cloth and burned threads from the burns on Francisco’s body. As they finished each wound, he cleaned it with the rum. Sister Brigid covered the wounds with a salve from the doctor’s bag, sealing them from the air. Finally they bandaged him with light gauze. The cleaning had taken most of an hour, but it had been thorough.

Finally Gaston got to his feet.

Rimaldi asked, “Will he live?”

“Not my department any longer, padre,” said the doctor. “It’s yours. Up to God. But there’s nothing else that man can do, ‘cept make sure he’s got plenty of water to drink.”

“Did we do the right thing?” Rimaldi asked.

“About what?”

“Caring for the priest?”

“Couldn’t have done better myself.” He paused. “As for what else happened in this room, I don’t care to know. Probably wouldn’t believe it if I did.” Gaston looked at the monsignor. “You need to get him over to the hospital. I’ll look in on him in the morning.” The doctor picked up his bag. Then he knelt by Benedetto and checked on him. He shook his head. Benedetto’s body was already cooling. Gaston’s slow tread could be heard retreating down the stairs.

“Nothing seems to affect him,” said Father Rimaldi.

“He’s seen a lot of death,” the monsignor said, “more than most men could stand.”

## *Chapter Twenty-Nine*

### *Thursday, November 5th*

Thursday morning found Gereint at the breakfast counter in the Charlotte train station, impatiently waiting for the train to Charleston. The trip so far had proven to be as difficult as he had imagined it would be. He had struggled to make his connections in Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. In Washington, he had waited for three hours for his train to Richmond, having missed the earlier train by only seven minutes. Regardless of his skills, time remained immutable, even though “the time” changed with each city’s whim.

He was haunted by a sense of foreboding, fearing that the creature would strike earlier than expected. Upon his arrival in Richmond he had discovered that he could not make the connections necessary to reach Wilmington in time to follow the coastal route to Savannah. So he had turned inland toward Charlotte, a route that should get him to Savannah faster, though it was less direct. From Charleston, the train service to Savannah appeared to be frequent enough to bring him to his destination by Friday. He certainly hoped there would be no further delays.

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That same morning the sun rising over Savannah illuminated the ballroom on York, revealing the full extent of the destruction that Belial, Streng, and the others had left behind them. The magical battle had left burn marks on the walls. Father Francisco was not with them. He had been taken to the hospital the night before. The saddest reminder was the corpse of Father Benedetto, still lying where they had covered it the previous night.

Rimaldi had not slept, but spent the night in a solitary vigil over the body of his friend. He was exhausted by his efforts and by the loss of life. He was also frustrated by his seeming inability to find the correct strategy to oppose Streng's group. He raised his head to look at the group that had quietly assembled around him.

"I don't know what I can say. I did not choose the right way to defend ourselves. I have failed you all."

"No, Father, you have not." Angela's voice rose in the dulled quiet of the room. "You picked the best strategy you could have, but Belial is simply too strong. The only possible chance we have for defeating him is to meet him fully prepared, fully shielded. That we may still achieve."

Rimaldi looked hopeless. "There are only four of us left. How can we possibly succeed?"

Benito spoke thoughtfully. "I have taken an attack from the beast and survived, though only by the help of the sisters. In our training, we were taught that number is the secret to power in ceremonial magic. The more magicians, the more power. While undoubtedly true, there is more to it than that. The four that we have left are the strongest of those that were gathered here. That is no accident. Angela and Brigid have held off Belial on two occasions without assistance. If that power, added to mine could be channeled through you, then perhaps we could succeed in striking at Belial."

"Streng killed Father Benedetto by himself," Rimaldi reminded him.

"But Benedetto was not your equal," Angela said.

"Are you so certain?" Rimaldi asked.

"Father," Angela said, "my Sight is stronger than yours. I can see the power that you carry inside yourself. You have more than twice the power of Benedetto. Father Benito is almost as strong as you."

Rimaldi gained some confidence from her words. "And Brigid?"



“She is stronger than either of you,” Angela said. “She may be stronger than me.”

Benito added to what he had said before. “From the beginning we have been out of our depth against Belial, but the problem may be that we have concentrated on traditional ceremonial techniques. This situation is different. We have two hereditaries with us, one of whom has only begun her training. We may, in fact, be stronger with a smaller number, if we can find a way to join our power.”

Rimaldi looked at the priest. “Are you saying that now we will be able to defeat him?”

“It is still unlikely, but if we form a triad protecting you and channel our power to you, we stand a chance.” He looked to Brigid in explanation. “The Triad Ritual is the easiest way to join power.” He looked back to Rimaldi. “But we cannot be prepared in full every night,” Benito said. “We can manage that for two or three days at the most. The question we must answer is how do we protect ourselves until the crisis days?”

“Simple,” Angela stated. “We do not try to stay ready. We can sleep during the day.”

“And what,” asked Father Benito, “prevents us from being attacked?”

“I can sense Belial’s approach in my sleep. And I can wake Brigid swiftly. Together, we can hold off Belial for a few minutes. If Belial comes, we will wake you.”

Rimaldi considered. “It does seem like a good plan.”

Benito spoke. “I think it is the only possible plan.”

They looked to Rimaldi for a final decision. Called upon, he seemed to welcome the responsibility. His despondency lessened. “I have no better idea, and we do know that together the two sisters can hold off Belial for the length of time it would take us to awaken.”

“And what about the ritual for the final night?” Benito asked.

“The Triad is still the only choice,” Rimaldi said, “but I am uncertain if I should be the one in the center.”

“No,” Benito said, “it should be you. You are better at drawing power from others than I am, and I think it is something with which neither Angela nor Brigid is experienced.”

Benito looked at the other two to see if they disagreed. Neither did. “Then we are decided.”

Rimaldi nodded. “But first we must see to Benedetto’s burial.”

“I will find the monsignor,” Benito said.

## *Chapter Thirty*

### *Friday, November 6*

The morning train from Charleston arrived at 8:45. A scattering of passengers descended to the platform. Most were met by their families. One man walked from the platform into the station alone. Dressed in a simple black suit, he would not have drawn any attention, except that he carried a six-foot walking stick in addition to his valise. Walking sticks were rarely seen in the flat lands around Savannah. They were more common in the mountains to the north. Perhaps that is where he had procured it, as it was carved with symbols. Those who noticed it imagined that it was some sort of souvenir of a journey into the Indian territories.

He asked directions and then began walking toward the cathedral. The drivers who had come down to the station, hoping to catch a fare, were surprised to see a white man walking. They figured he must be poor, although his suit didn't say that. Even more unusual, he used the walking stick as if it was a part of his right hand. It was the valise that seemed out of place.

The monsignor came to speak with Rimaldi around nine in the morning. Yesterday, when he had come to arrange the removal of Benedetto's body, he knew that it was not a time for questions. Rimaldi was still too overcome with the death. Today the monsignor found a somber but determined Rimaldi.

"So, Father Provincial, you seem more ready for the battle."

Rimaldi said, "Yes, things are better today." Then he motioned for the monsignor to follow him. He led him out of the ballroom to the drawing room downstairs.

Benito watched them go, knowing what was really in the mind of the Jesuit. While Brigid and Angela knew little of Rimaldi, Benito had the advantage of years of associa-

tion. He surmised that Rimaldi was putting up a brave front, but was not certain that they could succeed. Benito worried about those doubts, because they undermined the confidence that was necessary for a magician to work at his best. Doubt would blunt his capabilities.

Once Rimaldi ushered the monsignor into the drawing room, he slid the door shut. The monsignor waited expectantly.

“Monsignor Henry?” Rimaldi began.

“Yes.” Robert was surprised by the formality.

“As you know, the situation here is a very unusual and dangerous one. We have devised a new strategy, one that stands a chance of succeeding, but it is only a chance. We may well be defeated and killed at the next attack of Streng’s group. If that occurs, the city will have no protection against this demon.” He handed the monsignor an envelope. “Inside that envelope is a draft of a telegram. If we fail, you must send the telegram immediately to Rome. The address is on the telegram, and it is important that it be sent to that specific address.”

The monsignor could only look at him with a stunned expression on his face.

“Do you understand?” Rimaldi asked.

“Yes. But do you think you will fail?”

“I think it is probable. I hope we do not, but I must prepare for the worst.”

“Is there anything that I can do?”

“Pray.”

Rimaldi left to rejoin the others in the ballroom. The monsignor left the house on York, slipping the telegram into his cassock. He must tell the bishop what had happened. The great battle was almost over, and the Church was the likely loser. The magicians who remained to carry on the battle did so more from pure obstinacy and a sense of duty than from the hope that they would succeed.

The monsignor walked slowly back toward the bishop's office. The gentle late fall sunshine cascaded down on him. Robert felt tears welling and went to sit in the square in front of the cathedral. He sat on one of the benches that faced the mighty building and looked up at the towering steeples above the nave. The bells were ringing, as they did every morning at 9:30, signaling the impending mass at 10:00.

He knew that the few parishioners who would come to a morning mass on a Friday would soon be approaching. It would not do for them to see their monsignor sitting on a park bench crying. He lowered his head, still listening to the bells. Perhaps the parishioners would think he was in prayer. He knew that the Church's magicians were determined, but they could not extinguish the horrors he had seen in the last weeks. Benedetto, Pascal, and Kirk were dead. Francisco was in the hospital, severely burned. Monsignor Henry needed some time to calm his mind before he went to report to the bishop.

He heard a man clear his throat in front of him and looked up. He realized that the man had been standing in front of him for some time.

"Yes?" the monsignor said blankly.

The stranger extended his hand. "I am a cousin of a Sister Brigid who is at the convent here. I've just come down from New York to see her, and I wondered if you could tell me where I might find her?"

With a blank expression on his face, the monsignor shook hands with the man. Robert knew that the stranger should not go to the house on York, but he was too shocked by the events to think clearly. All he could think of was that Brigid would soon be dead. Perhaps this relative of hers could talk some sense into her and prevent her from dying in a futile gesture of resistance. Like every Southerner, Robert had had his fill of futile gestures of resistance. He directed the stranger to the house.

As the man walked off, the monsignor realized that they had not even exchanged names. Odd. And that carved walking stick the man carried seemed unusual as well. Robert shrugged his shoulders. No matter.

He wondered how he would present the grim news to the bishop.

Father Rimaldi sat apart from the other three in the ballroom on York. As their leader, he felt their failure most keenly. There must have been a way that he could have used the lives in his care more wisely. He bore a terrible responsibility. Had he chosen the wrong ritual, failed to plan correctly, not listened when he should have? He did not know why he had failed. He was only certain that he had.

Rimaldi heard the street door open. The monsignor must have returned from the cathedral. He looked up when he heard the footsteps stop in the doorway to the ballroom and saw a stranger, a man in his mid-forties, dressed in a simple black suit. Rimaldi was too surprised and too disoriented by the events of the night before to respond as he should. No stranger should be in that room.

But the stranger did not seem shocked, only saddened. He gave a grim, but apologetic, smile to Rimaldi. "I am sorry I could not have been here sooner." Then he looked about the room, and his eyes landed on Sister Brigid. "If I'm not mistaken, you must be Brigid."

She nodded feeling a sudden shock of anticipation. "And you are?"

"Gereint. Siobhan sent me."

Angela's eyes locked onto the stranger. Benito turned at the name. Brigid began to smile and said, "I take it that you are a walker?"

He smiled gently. "Yes."

"Then you are welcome. May the blessings of all the gods rest upon you."

“And may we never forget them,” he replied.

“And I,” said Angela, approaching him, “am Angela Delamorte.”

He extended his hand. “I am honored to meet you. I did not expect to find a Delamorte here. Perhaps that is why there are some still left alive.”

Rimaldi walked over to the three. “What is going on?”

“May God be praised,” Benito said quietly from his chair.

“Who are you?” Rimaldi said to Gereint.

Gereint faced him. “I was sent to help Brigid.”

“Help her? How.”

“To protect her from the demon that endangers her.”

“And who are you to think that you can do that?”

Gereint paused for a moment to look about the room. He saw the burn marks on the walls and the shattered window. His senses felt the death that had occurred there. “Someone who might have prevented much of what has happened here.”

Rimaldi felt like he was in a game of riddles. “But we . . .” His voice trailed off.

Gereint glanced at the smudged ritual circle on the floor. “You are a ceremonial magician. From what I sense and see here, you are fighting a demon of great power. I am sure that you did all that you could, but such creatures are often beyond the reach of ceremonial magic.”

“I don’t understand,” Rimaldi said, confused. Then his expression changed as he realized what Gereint was implying. “There are no more high magicians, if there ever were any.”

“There are. Fortunately for you, the Church was not successful in finding all of us.”

Rimaldi’s brow furrowed. He had thought that high magicians were a legend. Now this man claimed to be one. He looked to Angela for an answer, but her eyes were locked

on the slim figure of the man in the black suit. Rimaldi could tell from her expression that she did not find any reason to doubt what this man said.

“I do not understand,” he said.

The quiet smile had returned to Gereint’s face. “Then I will explain what I can. First, though, I need to know about this creature you are fighting.”

“We will tell you all we know,” Angela responded.

Two hours later, Gereint had heard the entire story. They stopped for lunch.

“So,” Benito asked, “can you defeat it?”

“I am not certain,” Gereint answered calmly.

“Is there any way that we can help?” Angela asked.

“There is. From what you have said, he will come with three others, all potent human magicians. They will expect to find you weakened and are likely to be overconfident. If you can hold them for perhaps half a minute, I can dispense with the others and deal with this creature you call Belial without interference.”

“Why did you say, ‘You call Belial?’” Rimaldi asked.

“Because that is not his real name, though he answers to it. That is good enough for my purposes.”

“What is his real name?” Brigid asked.

“If we knew it,” he shrugged, “we probably could not pronounce it. Their languages are strange.”

“Stranger than Welsh?” Brigid asked.

“Ah,” Gereint said, “my accent betrays me.”

“Is that where your order is based?” Benito asked.



“That I cannot say. You must remember that our members suffered greatly at the hands of the Church. How many we are, where we are, how to find us, are all questions I will not answer.”

His response silenced the table for a few moments. Everyone knew of the Church’s past.

After a moment, Rimaldi spoke. “That was in the past. We are not like that any more.”

“Perhaps,” Gereint responded, “but I have no wish to risk my life or my compatriots’ lives on a chance. There is too much inclination, even here in America, to become extreme in religious matters.”

After a brief silence, Rimaldi said, “You have heard from us what we know and who we are, but we know very little of you.”

“There is really not much to tell. We are magicians who have been trained in high magic. No one really knows how long we have been doing this task, though it is certainly longer than men have been able to write their histories.”

“Are you all Celtic?”

“It seems that way. But I do not know every walker. I know only a handful. No one knows us all.”

“But doesn’t that make it more difficult to work together?”

“Each of us works alone. The number of magicians gathered has no effect on the potency of high magic. Besides, it would not be wise for any of us to know all of us. Our relationship to each other was once more formal, but it has not been so since the Inquisition.”

The uncomfortable silence fell again.

Benito continued the conversation. “From all that I have read, there is no mention in writing about you except in Western Europe.”

“Yes,” Gereint said, “it does seem that way. I myself have seen no mention of walkers in any records except those from Western Europe.”

“Then,” Brigid asked, “how do other people protect themselves?”

“Perhaps,” Benito said, “they have their own magicians whom we simply know nothing about.”

Brigid added, “A walker came in my great-aunt’s lifetime, when she was a young woman. There was a spirit who seemed much like Belial, who could take physical form and found pleasure in destruction. No one could stop him. Then an old man arrived. He was a walker, and he destroyed the demon.”

“Yes,” Gereint said. “I knew him. I met him before he died. A remarkable character.”

“But I have no definitive references to creatures like Belial in my library. Are they that rare?” Rimaldi asked.

“They are rare, and for that we can be thankful, but your order has met one before. Scotland, I think in 1831.”

“Father McKinna’s group,” Benito commented.

“We were told they died in a sacristy fire,” Rimaldi said with a confused expression.

“Your Church,” Gereint commented, “does not always record history faithfully. It was a demon that killed them. One of my associates put an end to it.”

Gereint held up his hand as the next question began to form in the priest’s mind. “Please, no more questions for now. History is not why we are here. We are here to destroy Belial. It is what I must do. We exist for such tasks. It is voluntary for you to help me, but, as I mentioned, I would appreciate your assistance. When they come will you serve to distract them?”

Rimaldi responded. “We, too, have our duty. Of course we will help. We had planned to try even without you.”

“Good,” Gereint answered. “I need to prepare. Is there somewhere that I could sleep for a few hours? The journey has been difficult, and I would like to be rested before meeting this creature. He may come on any of the next three nights. If I were planning an attack, I would do it tonight, as the following two nights are the more obvious choices. Also, you have just suffered two losses. They may think that they should strike while you are still recovering.”

“When should we awaken you?” Benito asked.

“At twilight.”

As Gereint slept, the others talked. Brigid again told the full story about the walker that her aunt had seen destroy a demon. Angela and Benito had heard it before, but they remained for the retelling. Father Rimaldi was astonished by the entire tale.

“But is he all that he claims?”

“Father,” Angela answered, “you know that I can sense the power in a magician?”

“Yes.”

“He is much more powerful than any other magician I have ever met.” Angela waited for a moment, then said, “There is one more thing. I usually have some sense of the approach of a magician, especially a potent one. In his case, I had none.”

Rimaldi furrowed his brow. “Nor did I.”

Benito drew the conclusion, “So it would appear that he is almost invisible, as well. Streng probably has no knowledge that he is here.”

“That could be a significant advantage,” Rimaldi said.

They awakened Gereint when dinner was almost ready. All were still somewhat uncomfortable in the presence of Gereint, but none more so than Rimaldi. The Jesuit felt that Gereint was not one of them. The Welshman was an oddity, an unknown.

When he appeared for dinner, he seemed to be a portrait of something from the past. He was wearing a gray robe and carried his walking stick, which they now realized was a magician's staff. He carefully placed the staff in the northwest corner of the room, well away from the light. While Benito and the two nuns brought dinner up from the kitchen, Gereint moved slowly around the ballroom, sensing the events that had left their impressions in the walls. He looked outside into the gathering gloom. Rimaldi watched him dispassionately, trying not to resent the intrusion of a stranger, even though Gereint was a stranger who might save their lives.

"Father Gereint," Brigid said. "Dinner is ready."

Gereint turned just as Brigid caught her unconscious slip. She blushed deeply. "I'm so very sorry, it's just that I am used . . ." She faltered.

Gereint approached the table, smiling as he came. "Actually, it's probably not me that you've offended."

Rimaldi attempted to defuse the possible tension. "An easy mistake to make, Sister Brigid."

They sat at the table, and there was another moment of discomfort. Rimaldi glanced at Gereint, who said, "I know that it is customary for you to say grace. Please proceed, I am not offended in the least. You have to remember that I live in a Christian world, so I am used to hearing the ways of your faith."

Rimaldi nodded, bowed his head, and offered grace. "Bless us, Oh Lord, and these Thy gifts which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ, Our Lord. Amen."

The others, including Gereint, echoed, "Amen."

As they set about their meal, Brigid was the first to speak, having recovered from her earlier embarrassment. “But what should we call you?”

“Gereint is fine. We have never been much for titles.”

Benito joined in. “But you are a priest?”

“Not really,” Gereint replied. “We have always been magicians. We will speak to others about our religion, but we have never proselytized or conducted services. Even in the old days we were not priests or priestesses. Others served that function.”

“How old is your order, if that’s the right term?” Angela asked.

“‘Order’ is one way to describe us. The real answer is I don’t know. The storytellers imply that we have always been around. I know we were there before the Romans came to Britain and that was two thousand years ago. Some tales imply that we were there before the Celts came. So we just usually answer ‘a very long time.’”

“That is ‘a very long time,’ indeed.” Benito said. The others laughed.

The tension around the table had eased.

“So, Father Rimaldi, I assume that you will be forming a triad tonight?”

“Yes, that was our plan.”

“And a good one. It allows you to blend the power of the other three and feed you in the center. A potent combination.”

“But,” Rimaldi confessed, “unlikely to be able to deal with their demon.”

“Unfortunately so,” Gereint agreed. “Still, I think it gives us a good advantage for you four to be in the center of the room while I remain hidden in the darkness. Then, when I strike, it will be that much more potent, being unexpected.”

“Are you worried that you may not be able to defeat our enemy?” Benito asked.

“There is always danger, but I am confident. I gain additional advantage from your presence.”

Rimaldi nodded, satisfied. As night fell, everyone seemed to be willing to eat and avoid the topics that were unpleasant or that Gereint was not willing to discuss. They cleared away dinner and remained in the ballroom, talking. Around eight, they heard a rapid knocking on the kitchen door. Brigid and Angela went down and opened the door. Daniel was on the front porch.

He did not enter, just said to them, "They all comin' tonight. Must be thirty of 'em." Then he turned and escaped back into the gloom.

The two nuns carried the message back to Rimaldi who said, "So the battle will be tonight. Let us prepare."

The triad had the advantage of being a very quick ritual to prepare for. The four went to the space in the room that they used for rituals. Benito stood in the east, and the two nuns stood behind him, in the northwest and southwest. Each was separated from the others by about ten feet. Rimaldi stood in the center of the triangle. No altar was used for this rite. Gereint moved into the darkness at the northwest corner of the room.

"Do not look toward me," he said. "It will weaken our advantage."

The four nodded. Then the three in the triangle began to bring up their own power, which quickly spanned the distance between them, casting a faint glow in the air. They settled in to wait, but they did not expect to have long to wait.

Streng was certain of victory. Though he had surprised the priests with the last attack and managed to kill one and disable another, they had not yet seen the extent of his power. Tonight he had the might of his full coven at his command, with all twenty-five members present. The most senior members of Streng's coven formed a circle around the portal. Streng stood alone in front of the altar, which had been formally prepared for this rite. On the altar was a goat-footed statue of Satan. Thirteen candles, each formed of

solid black wax, were lit on the altar. Held between the crossed legs of the statue was a large incense burner, which Streng fed with sulphur until the acrid fumes drifted to every corner of the basement ritual room. The windows on the sides of the basement were heavily masked with black drapes and sealed to prevent any odor or sound from escaping. Other than the candles on the altar, light was provided by sconces set about the walls of the room. More candles were set in them for additional light, which was dimmed by the sulfurous smoke.

The nineteen junior members formed a second circle outside the inner one. The sixth member of his governing group, Lilith Claire, stood between the two circles. She would call the rhythm of the dance. Streng began the ritual, tossing more sulphur onto the brazier and speaking a solitary incantation. The four around the portal began muttering a spell. Lilith directed the nineteen to begin a counterclockwise dance. They started a slow motion, keeping time to her clapping and chanting Belial's name.

As she clapped her hands slowly, she called, "Give power to the center. Give worship to Satan. Honor his servant, Belial." The nineteen on the outside began to repeat the phrases in a chant that was timed with their steps.

The inner group's incantation changed. They chanted, "We summon you, Belial, servant of Satan. We summon you to do as we bid, to rid the earth of those who oppose us. Come forth." They repeated the chant, growing louder with each repetition. The effect of the two different chants in the room was cacophony. The sounds rang confusingly in the air. Each person concentrated on his own chant, though the inner ring watched, as well as chanted.

The portal stone in the circle's center began to glow with a dull red fire. As the chant continued, the light grew in intensity. The inner ring stopped its chant when the stone became a portal into Belial's realm. The outer ring kept up its chant, funneling its power to the inner ring. Lilith sped up the chant to the outer ring, moving them to a faster

walk. She could feel the strength coming from the outer ring to fuel the power of the inner group.

As Belial slowly emerged from the portal, Lilith gave the signal to stop the dance, and those in the outer ring knelt in honor of the massively powerful creature. Belial looked about himself, seeming to thrive on the devotion of so many worshipers. He growled low in his throat in response. He directed his gaze to Streng and said in his low and threatening voice, “You and two others shall come with me. Tonight we kill our enemy.”

Streng responded, “Jarred and Micah will join us.”

The three chosen for the night’s work lay down on the earth before the altar. Rimmer and Ames remained beside the portal and were joined there by Lilith. They would guard the portal for Belial’s return.

The outer ring remained kneeling on the ground, though each gazed at the magnificently evil figure of Belial. They all felt invincible. Silver-hued, ghostly shapes arose from the bodies of Streng, Cawthorne, and Breeding. Each shape looked like the man it had risen from, for each was a projection of the man’s presence. Belial led them upward and out of the room. The dark spirits went toward the house on York.

Angela was the first to feel their approach. “They are coming.”

Each member of the four focused his concentration. Then, audaciously, the demon materialized in front of them on the eastern side of the ritual circle. Streng and his two companions manifested themselves, arrayed in an arc on the other side of the ritual space. For a moment everyone seemed to wait, to assess the other side. Then Belial threw himself against the shielding, aiming directly for Father Benito at the eastern point of the inner



circle. The impact threw Benito back almost a yard, but he was protected by the power channeled to him by the two nuns.

For a few moments, Benito was able to push back toward his original position. Then, regardless of all of the power given to his defense, he began to yield by inches. The sweat was pouring down his face. At this moment, Rimaldi launched their first spell at Belial. White fire poured from him and crashed against the demon, who cried out in rage. For a moment, Belial drew back, allowing Benito to regain his position. Quickly he renewed his assault on Benito with even greater power, this time throwing him back almost into Rimaldi.

Then the three satanists, who had been ignored by the nuns as they struggled against Belial, joined in. Streng launched his power toward Brigid. Her power was being drained by Benito's struggle against Belial, so she was more vulnerable than if she had been alone. Cawthorne and Breeding launched themselves at Angela, driving her back toward Rimaldi. Her power was also weakened by the need to support Benito.

The spells launched by the satanists were potent, since they were drawing on the power of the nineteen who were sending them strength from the ritual room on Saint Julian. The triad began to crumble. Then, as the three satanists were pressing their advantage, sure of their success, Gereint joined the battle.

Three searing lances of blue fire erupted from Gereint almost simultaneously. As each struck its mark, Streng, Breeding, and Cawthorne screamed. Belial stopped his relentless pressure on Benito when he heard the screams. The nuns and priests rocked forward as the strain upon their power fell to nothing. Gereint stood alone before the north windows. From his left hand and from the end of the staff in his right, rays of blinding blue light impaled the three satanists. They twisted in the air for a moment, then their projections shattered and vanished. Gereint turned to face Belial alone. For a fleeting moment, the Catholic magicians thought to refresh the strength of their Triad, but real-

ized they were too drained to rebuild. There was no point in making the attempt. If Gereint failed, they would all soon be dead.

Belial began to pulse with more intense fire. The red light increased in intensity until the walls in the room smoked from the heat. Rimaldi could feel the heat on his face and hands. Belial was enraged that this pathetic human had struck away those who had created his portal. The heat pouring from his body was immense and unearthly, and it was focused on Gereint. One of the curtains behind him burst into flame. Yet Gereint stood his ground, holding his staff in his left hand.

Belial threw himself at Gereint, abandoning his carefully-crafted demonic shape. His fire totally surrounded the slight figure of the man. Yet, even as the fire flowed around him, Gereint's face did not change. The four looked at the sight before them. Belial had become a blazing fire. His horrific face would appear and then vanish along the surface of the ball of fire encasing Gereint. The walker had disappeared in the orb of fire. The fire swirled around him. Angela tried to pierce the fire with her Sight, but she could see no sign of Gereint within the flaming orb. They heard the horrible laugh of Belial. Their hearts sank.

Suddenly the laughter stopped, and the flaming orb exploded, shattering into pieces. The red light dimmed, and the pieces of the orb glowed like dull embers as they floated in the air. Even the fire in the curtains was extinguished. As the pieces of floating fire began to reassemble themselves into a humanoid Belial, Gereint watched. He stood, unharmed, just as he had before.

Then Gereint's voice penetrated every corner of the room. "I shall not merely defeat you. I shall destroy you."

"I am immortal," the re-formed Belial roared.

"We shall see." Gereint pointed his staff at Belial and a bolt of pale blue emerged from the staff. It struck the demon in the chest, knocking him back. Belial reformed, but

this time, he was smaller. He launched himself at the eastern wall to escape, but Gereint's blue fire reached the wall before the demon could, flattening against the surface. Belial struck the pale blue barrier in front of the wall. It did not yield, and the demon fell back into the room. Belial turned toward Gereint. For the first time in many centuries, Belial was afraid.

"It is impossible," Belial hissed.

Gereint did not bother to answer. Belial looked about himself, trying to find a place to escape. There was none. The walls, the floor, and the ceiling were now impenetrable to him. He faced the walker and began to summon what power he could to attempt his escape.

Gereint raised his staff and brought it down, slamming it onto the floor. From it sprang a yellow beam that shot toward the demon. Belial tried to avoid it, but the yellow light caught him and encased the demon's form in glowing light. Gereint hit his staff against the floor again, and the yellow fire glowed even hotter. Belial screamed. The fire was eating away at him. He shrank smaller to try and escape it. The fire followed him, burning hotter as it condensed to a smaller size. The yellow-white orb about the demon shrank until it became a floating sun barely two feet across. Inside it a miniature of the demon writhed and pushed, trying to escape. The fire flared to a whitish-blue, and the figure of Belial disintegrated. The red of his body and being were absorbed by the fire. Once the last of the red was consumed, the burning sun flashed in intensity, then quickly faded from sight.

The room was dark, lit only by the oil lamps. Rimaldi's group was night blind, unable to see after the small white sun had vanished. They heard Gereint say, "You did well. Wait for my return."

As they regained their vision, they saw Gereint lying on the floor. A gray projection of himself was rising from his body. It flew into the night.

The gray projection reappeared in the ritual room at Streng's. Lilith was bending over Streng's unconscious body. The room was in chaos. Two other bodies lay next to Streng's. Both were barely breathing. A haze of blue fire still remained on their chests. None of the satanists had ever seen their leader unconscious, much less all three of the most senior members.

The gray figure of a man appeared. It glowed as it walked across the room to Lilith who was frantically chanting a spell to resummon Belial to the ritual room.

"Do not waste your time in calling for Belial," he said. "I have destroyed him, and you and those who brought his spirit into this world have offended the gods."

Lilith threw herself at the glowing figure. Gereint's projection brushed her aside. She fell, tangled in the unconscious bodies of Streng, Cawthorne, and Breeding. Gereint heard the muttered spell of the two remaining inner circle members. Ames and Rimmer had taken refuge behind the statue. Gereint ignored them. The nineteen members of the outer circle had drawn away from the altar and were making their way to the door.

Gereint faced them. "Flee and live. Or stay and die with the others." The nineteen began clawing over each other to reach the door. Gereint's warning echoed in their minds, "Do not walk this path again."

Gereint faced the six remaining. Lilith still lay with the three unconscious men. Ames and Rimmer were directing spells against Gereint. The red fire they sent toward him had no effect.

He struck his staff against the floor and tendrils of fire sprang from the heel. The fire raced to Lilith, penetrated through her and then burned its way through Cawthorne and Breeding. The three bodies tensed as if struck by lightning. Lilith screamed. Cawthorne sat upright. Breeding merely spasmed. Gereint's fire died. Three corpses fell to the floor.

He struck the staff one more time against the floor and a second ray of fire shot out to impale the two behind the altar. Again, the fire passed through them like a solid rod. It lifted them from the ground, and they twisted in the air, crying in pain as the fire burned them. The fire vanished, and their lifeless bodies dropped to the floor.

Streng was struggling back to consciousness. His awakening was a slow process as he began to recover from the spell that had flung him back into his body. Gereint patiently waited. The silence was broken only by Streng's labored breathing. He thrashed about, disoriented, by chance striking against Lilith. His eyes opened to see her corpse lying supine next to him. The hole that Gereint's fire had burned in her chest still smoldered. He reached out to touch it in disbelief, then snatched his hand away from the heat that seared his fingers.

He raised himself up onto an elbow and stared at the corpse. "How?" he muttered. Then he saw Cawthorne's corpse next to hers. A similar blackened hole marked it. Frightened, he looked about the room. The only other living occupant was Gereint.

"Who are you?" he rasped, his voice filled with phlegm.

"Who do you think?" Gereint calmly answered.

Streng looked at the projection of the magician. Then he looked about the room. His last view had been one of a room filled with his followers. They were gone. Or dead.

"Who are you?" he said again, more strongly. A touch of his old arrogance was in his voice. "Whoever you are, you had best leave before Belial returns. He will consume you. He will burn you with his fire. He will kill you."

"No. He will not. I have already destroyed him."

Streng almost laughed, but caught himself. Something was very wrong. Then he saw a nightmare taking shape before his eyes. The man began to transform. The air wavered around him. Streng realized that he had been talking to a projection, a spirit, but one that had seemed as solid as a physical man. Gereint reshaped himself. His head grew

taller and glistened with scales. Wings formed along his back, and his tail curled about him on the floor. His arms were covered with shining, dark green scales. Curved claws sprang from his fingertips. Within a few seconds the metamorphosis was complete. A dragon stood before Streng, and his glittering, unblinking eyes glared at the old magician lying on the floor beside the corpses of his followers.

Streng was shocked into speechlessness. His mind raced as swiftly as a rat trapped in a maze. Thoughts tumbled over themselves. "There are no high magicians." "There are no dragons." "This is not happening." "Lilith is alive."

Then the dragon lazily reached out one arm and touched Streng. Streng was instantly paralyzed, as rigid as stone. The dragon drew his claw down Streng's leg, cutting through robe and pants, through skin and muscle, leaving a deep gash. The dragon drew back his arm, and Streng could move again, but in the moment that he regained movement, the pain erupted from the gash and seared into his brain. Blood began gushing from the severed arteries. Streng tried to grasp the leg, to stem the blood that was soaking his clothes.

The dragon struck again, only this time there was no paralysis, no blessed relief from the pain as the claws raked down Streng's arm, shredding it. Tears ran down Streng's face as blood poured down his arm. He looked up at the dragon, "Why?"

The dragon seemed astonished by the question, but answered, "You have killed the innocent. You have brought creatures to this realm that do not belong here. You have murdered. You have offended the gods."

Streng screamed, "Who are you?"

The dragon said, "You already know." Then he exhaled fire onto the bleeding man. Streng's clothes caught on fire. Even when the dragon stopped belching fire, the flames raced on, consuming flesh. They crawled up Streng's body, paying no attention to his writhing or his screams. In a half a minute of terrifying agony, the fire spread over the

soft flesh of the dying magician. Then Streng slumped, unconscious, as the fire consumed the remainder of his body.

All six of the corpses would be marked by the fire that had killed them, Streng more than the others. Gereint reformed himself into the shape of a man and scribed the traditional sign of the walkers into the earth floor, then he vanished from the room. The members of Streng's outer circle, who had fled from him, were blocks away, racing for their homes. Their outlandish black robes caused the few who saw them to laugh at their frightened and soot-stained faces. They reeked of sulfur and the acrid sweat of fear.

Rimaldi and the three remaining members of his order waited for Gereint's return. They sat on the floor in a rough circle around Gereint's body. Not a word had passed between them. They were absorbed in their own thoughts. After all the struggle and death, the final battle with the demon had been quick. The magic that Gereint had used was drawn from a storybook. He was the magician who stood on the edge of two worlds. He cast no spells. He did not *do* magic, he *was* magic.

Rimaldi did not understand how Gereint could deploy such power, and he was fairly certain that Gereint would not explain, but two things were certain. He owed his life to Gereint. And he would do whatever he had to do to make certain that these magicians were not pursued by the Church again. Rimaldi would, of necessity, make a report about the destruction of the demon, but he would do it without mentioning Gereint. Yet he did not want to take any credit. It would not be right. He would say some unidentified force had aided them.

They heard Gereint's body take a deep breath. His eyes opened. For a moment he did not move at all.

"Are you all right?" Brigid asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It’s just that it takes a great deal out of you to fight something so powerful.”

“Well,” Benito said dryly, “at least you won. No one else has managed that.”

He sat up. “As I said, this kind of creature cannot be fought by ceremonial magic.”

Angela asked, “What did you do while you were gone?”

“They had twenty-five members. Six in their central group. They were the only ones with any real power. The others merely fed strength to them.”

“And what did you do to them?” Francisco asked.

“The nineteen, I warned and let go. The others, I killed.”

“Without offering them redemption?” The response from Rimaldi was automatic.

Gereint brushed off his robe. “Redemption is your business. The first principle of my gods is justice.”

Rimaldi asked, “But what will happen to their souls?”

“That, Father, is up to the gods, not to me.”

Gereint slowly pulled his feet under him and stood, leaning a little on his staff as he did so. Once standing erect, he stretched. “Now, if you would be kind enough, I need to sleep.”

“But there is so much we need to know,” Benito said.

Gereint smiled. “Yes, I know. But right now, sleep is more important.”

“I’ll take you to your bedroom,” Brigid said.

She led him out of the room. The others waited for her return. In less than a minute she reappeared. “I think he was asleep almost before he was lying down.”

“Then we will meet with him in the morning,” Benito said.



## *Chapter Thirty-One*

### *Saturday, November 7th*

The first light of dawn was erasing the darkness as Esmerelda covered the last blocks to Streng's house. Few were about at this hour. Most of the people on the street were servants, arriving to prepare breakfast. During the previous night, she had felt power in the air. It had been a new power, something she had never felt before. It had gone *toward* Streng's, and it had not been the Catholics, though it had a feel about it that reminded her of Brigid and Angela, but only if Brigid and Angela had become a lot stronger, a whole lot stronger.

She turned the corner onto Saint Julian and stopped, amazed. The dark cloud, the one that had been so dense that she had almost seen it without her Sight, was gone. She looked harder, engaging her Sight, and saw that only a few wisps of it remained. She slowly moved toward Streng's house. The basement gate that let out from under the front porch onto the sidewalk was standing wide open. That gate was never opened except to let Streng's followers into or out of the basement ritual room. Now it, and the door into the house behind it, were open.

Esmerelda extended her senses into the house. She smiled. The entire house had a different feel to it. Though some of the taint of evil remained, much of the house felt new and clean. She cautiously entered the gate and stepped under the porch. She then entered the basement through the open door. The stairs up to the first floor were in front of her. To the right was Streng's wine cellar and cool storage for vegetables and perishables. She had been in there many times. To the left was the door to the ritual room itself. She had never seen that door open, but it was open now.

Inside the ritual room was dim. It was illuminated only by the light filtering in from the street through the door behind her. No other light lit the room. The windows were still covered. On a small table at the foot of the stairs were two hurricane lamps that

she used when she went into the wine cellar. She picked up the matches and lit one. She carried it before her into the ritual room. Though her senses told her it was safe, habit made her cautious. Long ago Streng had told her never to enter that room.

As she entered she smelled the death and blood. On the floor were five corpses and a charred ruin that must be a sixth corpse. The three corpses next to the charred ruin were Lilith, Breeding, and Cawthorne. She bent over the sixth corpse and held her hands over it. Her senses could not pick up anything, not even a remnant of the person it had once been. Then she saw a piece of partially molten jewelry on one of the hands. The sixth corpse was Streng. She smiled and stood. Behind the altar she found two more corpses. She recognized them, but did not know their names.

Her eye was caught by the statue on the altar. It was a five foot high porcelain image of what Streng must have thought of as Satan. The goat legs and the horns on the head were as black as the rest of the statue. The smooth finish reflected the light from the kerosene lamps. A residue of the old evil still clung to it. In the right setting, the statue might have been frightening to some. It only annoyed the mambo.

A smile split her broad face. She turned and went to a cupboard under the stairs where Streng kept tools for workmen. Still grinning, she selected a five pound sledge and went back to the ritual room.

“Statue,” she said, “you got no reason to be.” With that she brought the hammer down onto the statue, shattering one shoulder and knocking off an arm. Then she knocked the head off of the statue and went to work on the rest of it. When she had reduced it to shards, she rested. She went back and replaced the hammer in the cupboard. Then she went out onto the street to find a policeman.

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Brigid awoke late. A strong morning sun slanted through the window that looked out over the yard. She could just hear the others preparing breakfast downstairs. The kitchen was directly below the nuns' room. Angela was in the other bed, still asleep. The bedroom across from them was Gereint's room. But Brigid did not expect he would be there. She wondered if the others had checked. Probably not.

"Angela," she whispered.

Angela's eyes fluttered open. Seeing that it was already full light, she woke up quickly.

"I rarely sleep this late. But I guess with the events of the past days . . ." she apologized.

"Well, there's no need to rush," Brigid said.

"But I want to talk to the walker."

Brigid smiled. "I expect he's already gone."

"I thought he said that he would be here."

"I'm sure he did. But that is not their way. Besides, would you want to be interrogated by Rimaldi if you were he?"

"No." Angela shook her head.

"Don't be too disappointed. Gereint said to tell you that he would be visiting you in Sicily."

"When did he tell you that?"

"When I brought him back to his room last night."

"So that's why you think he's gone."

Brigid nodded.

"I wonder how he knew that I was leaving?" Angela shook her head as she smiled.

"Who knows. After what I saw him do, he might read minds as well."

“Or maybe he can read people. Since you made your decision, your mannerisms toward Father Rimaldi are no longer what would be expected of a nun.”

“And what about you?”

“I would like to come with you, if that is all right.”

“You are more than welcome. In fact, I’d miss you if you didn’t. It’s time the pagans of Ireland and the pagans of Sicily got to know each other better.”

Brigid fell back on the bed. “Pagan. I guess that’s what I am now.”

“No, I think it’s what you’ve always been.” Angela swung off the bed and stretched. “But we’re going to have to see to your clothes. There’s no time to get something made. But we’re about the same height. You’re just more slimly built than I am. I have another traveling dress. I think with a little tailoring, it would look fine on you.”

The four gathered for breakfast one final time. Their mood reflected their confused emotions. None of them had really expected to survive the previous evening. They had each made peace with death, but now they found themselves alive. It was a strange feeling, part relief and part regret, that the final confrontation had not made life and death a simple matter. Some strangeness in the human character often prefers a glorious ending to a confused continuance.

The walker had caused all of them to rethink who and what they were. Before his arrival they had thought of themselves as the magicians who fought the enemies of man. Now they knew themselves as the ones who managed the lesser enemies, the ones within their scope, but their feeling of diminution was more than overwhelmed by their gratitude. Gereint had not only saved their lives but also removed the threat of the demon from the city. Then he had vanished in the night without a word. But they all understood

why. He had said all he wanted to say about walkers, and he did not want to endure more questions.

Benito spoke the thought that had haunted him in the hours since Belial's defeat. "I find it impossible to believe that a man could accumulate such power in a lifetime of study, yet the walker did. The power must have been granted to Gereint by God. But why was it not granted to one of us within the Church?"

Angela started to respond, but refrained.

"Why was it necessarily accumulated in a single lifetime?" Brigid asked. "Our legends say that such magicians are born as much as made. They say that you can see the beginnings of the power a few days after the birth of a child. The baby does not cry as much. He seems to observe the world and drink in knowledge from it. The storytellers say that such a baby is trying to fit this new world to the knowledge that he carries within himself, knowledge that he has learned in previous lives. When he begins to speak, he does so with fully-formed words, not with the sounds that babies make."

Rimaldi entered the conversation. "It is easy for us, in our flood of relief and in our guilt for what was done in the past, to turn away from our faith. But we must overcome doubt and remember that we live but one life, and that single life determines if we are saved or not."

"And you," Angela said, frowning, "believe that?"

"I try to."

"Then now is as good a time as any to say it," Angela announced. "I have decided to leave the Church and return to my family in Sicily. I will not be returning to the convent."

"You're renouncing your Holy Orders?" He was incredulous.

"Yes." Angela said.

"And I am as well," Brigid said. "I am going with her."

Rimaldi could not believe it. “So you are both leaving a lifetime of service over the events of one night?”

Brigid responded. “I cannot speak for Angela. But, for me, the decision to leave was really made the night that Richardson died. I don’t know how I knew, but from the beginning I suspected that this demon we were fighting was out of the reach of the Church. That is why I sent for the walker. His coming only emphasized what I already knew was true. I am not Catholic. I am not even Christian. I still believe in the Old Gods, and it is time that I devoted my life to them.”

Benito began to speak, but Rimaldi held up his hand. “We cannot argue faith or depth of faith. If they have lost their faith in the Church and in Christ, then they should follow the dictates of their new faith.” He smiled to take the edge off of his words. “And I wish you good fortune on whatever path you choose. The events of the past weeks have bound us all together in an experience that none of us would ever wish to repeat. We are friends. That will not change.”

Angela reached across the table to take the Jesuit’s hand. “Thank you, Father. I feel the same way.”

Rimaldi was embarrassed by such an open display of affection.

They heard the sound of someone coming up the stairs to the ballroom. The monsignor was expected, but it did not sound like him. They faced the door and were greeted by Esmerelda’s smiling face as she entered the room. The men were surprised by the manner of this woman. She showed none of the subservience that they normally saw in colored people. Esmerelda came over to the table and pulled up a chair next to Brigid. The two former nuns had risen in greeting. The priests followed suit.

“Welcome, mambo,” Angela said.

“Ah,” Benito said knowingly.

“Another surprise, Angela?” Rimaldi asked.

“Father Rimaldi, may I introduce Esmerelda, the high priestess, the mambo, of Voudon in Savannah.”

Esmerelda inclined her head. “Nice to meet you.”

“The same,” he said, astonished.

Brigid added, “Esmerelda, this is Father Benito.”

Smiles and nods were exchanged.

“Can I get you anything, mambo?” Brigid asked.

“No child, I been up for hours.” She grinned, taking her chair. “But it does look like I’m gonna need a new job.”

“So you’ve been to Streng’s,” Angela said, as the rest of them sat.

“I got there ‘bout two hours ago. Basement door was wide open. So I go in and find the door to the ritual room open. In there was six corpses. The bodies of the meanest men and women I ever knew.” She grinned. “Lord, it was a pretty sight, Streng’s body especially. Whoever did him in took special care. He was near turned into charcoal.

“You know, that’s the first time I been in that room. They even had a porcelain statue of Satan. I took a hammer to it ‘fore I called the police. It broke up right smart.”

Angela and Brigid laughed with Esmerelda. They could imagine the mambo setting about thoroughly destroying the statue in a no nonsense way. The men were not quite relaxed enough with her to join in the amusement.

Esmerelda looked at the two women. “And before you go worryin’, I’m gonna have some of my people collect every piece of that statue we can find. We’ll spread it out over fifty miles of salt marsh. Drownin’ it in salt water ought to leach the evil out of it.”

Angela nodded in agreement.

“And you done us a powerful favor. Evil men and the demons they call be as bad for my people as for you. If I’d thought I could have taken on Streng, I would have done it a long time back.”

Rimaldi said. “Nonetheless, your people were a great help to us.”

“Well, good. I told ‘em to watch out for you. But I got to admit, I didn’t think you had it in you to beat Streng and that demon.”

“We didn’t,” Angela said. “A walker arrived yesterday.”

Esmerelda gave a quick laugh. “I felt somethin’ special in the air last night. Him I got to meet. Streng was afraid a walker would come. I nevah met one, but I’d like to.”

“Sorry, mambo,” Brigid said. “He left in the night. We had questions for him as well, but when we awakened, he was gone.”

Esmerelda shook her head regretfully. “Too bad, but I understand. I’m just thankful Streng and his evil are gone.”

“You said you called the police?” Benito asked. “What do they think of all of this?”

“Well, they called for Doc Gaston. Guess they figured he was the only one who could make sense out of that mess.”

“Are they going to have an investigation?”

“Sure. But it’s not gonna be a real one. Probably end up sayin’ it was a bad house fire.”

“They aren’t going to question it any more deeply?” Rimaldi asked, relieved.

“Lots of strange things go on in this town. The police here know when to look and when to look away.” She paused. “But I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet this walker. Sounds like a fellow a body should know.”

“Mambo,” Rimaldi said, “we regret not knowing more about him as much as you do.”



At Saint Julian Street, Doctor Gaston knelt over the last of the six bodies. The first five he had examined had already been covered with sheets, as much out of respect for the dead as to hide the strange burn marks on their chests. Each had been impaled by a shaft of fire. It had not been a flaming piece of wood. There were no splinters and no burn marks about the hole. And the hole in the back was the same size as the one in the front. Whatever penetrated them was like a hot ray of light, pure energy. Even small cannon shot did not leave so clean a wound. As for the sixth, whom he supposed had been Streng, the corpse was completely charred.

In his long career, Gaston had seen about every way there was for a human to die, but what he saw this morning was new to him. This way of death was like the finger of God, burning down evil. Gaston had no doubt that these people were the ones responsible for Saul Richardson's death. At different times and places Gaston had seen Richardson with almost every one of the people whose bodies now lay strewn about the room. Often he had noted Richardson sharing a whispered conversation with one of them.

Gaston had once believed in God. He had been a devout Catholic, but he had seen too many ruined bodies at Shiloh, Antietam, and so many other battlefields. He had stopped believing, stopped thinking there could be a God if He allowed this to happen.

"But," he thought, "war is the work of man. Perhaps God does not choose to interfere. Maybe He becomes involved only when man's evil calls something into being that shouldn't be here. Then He sends His soldiers, and the evil dies." There was comfort in that thought.

Gaston stood, wiping his hands on a cloth, and spoke to the senior policeman in the room. "You can cover the last one, cap'n."

The police captain signaled to the officer who had a sheet ready to cover the last body.

“What killed them?” the captain asked. His eyes betrayed that he wanted a reason, not the truth.

“Must have been a hell of a fire,” Gaston said.

“That’s what we thought.” The policeman nodded with finality.

Gaston walked out onto Saint Julian Street. It was early November, but the day was warm. Graceful oaks shaded the squares. The azalea bushes were replete with their dark green leaves. In the spring, they would explode in color, producing so many flowers that the bush itself could barely be seen.

For the first time since before the war, Gaston noticed the beauty of the city. It was a fine morning

*Chapter Thirty-Two*  
*Apology to*  
*The House on Saint Julian*

by Francis Clark

Gothic is a discourse that shows the cracks in the system that constitutes consciousness, “reality.” . . . It is a language that signals a revolution within the established system. It reveals a kind of fault line within the imagination that may open up in prose or verse, in lyric or drama or narrative, in popular or “serious” art.<sup>1</sup>

I have begun with a quotation from Anne Williams for the simple reason that my novel, *The House on Saint Julian*, is a Gothic novel. In her work, *Art of Darkness*, Dr. Williams establishes a poetics of Gothic and presents the defining parameters of Gothic fiction. While *House* may be viewed as a detective or fantasy novel, since it employs conventions and techniques from these genres, ultimately it is a Gothic work, closely aligned with the defining parameters as laid out by Dr. Williams. I hope that the gravity of the topics dealt with in *House* make it difficult for it to be the object of the pejorative comments often leveled at Gothic or other “genre” fiction, though I must confess that I do not consider these criticisms to be accurate. (When dealing with the prejudices against “genre fiction,” I keep in mind the opinion of Reginald McKnight, which is that *all* fiction is genre fiction, since all fiction may be assigned to one or more genres.)

*House* deals with the conflict between good and evil and also with our society’s *definitions* of good and evil as they relate to religion, sex, and race. The book is designed to place the reader in the position of questioning what institutions and people actively represent good. It is also a story about a woman’s journey to reclaim her heritage. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Williams. *Art of Darkness*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 66.

process of her psychological journey, *House* must deal with the devaluation of the feminine that is a consistent hallmark of Western society.

As an example of adherence to one of the identifying principles that Dr. Williams establishes, *House* contains “the constant presence of what a particular society defines as ‘the other’.”<sup>2</sup> “Other” in this case is defined as other than the normative values and beliefs of modern Western civilization and religion. Elements that are normally considered as belonging to the “darker” side of the line between good and evil are prominent throughout the novel. These elements include Voudon (voodoo); magic; a mixed portrayal of the goodness and power of Christianity; and potent women, black, and pagan characters. The setting, Savannah, Georgia, places the events of the story in an atmosphere that is not quite as mysterious as *Otranto* nor as blasted as *Wuthering Heights*, but one that does possess the unusual nature of a typical Gothic setting in which the environs seem to possess an intruding intelligence and intent. The city is one in which magical occurrences can be “expected,” as is reflected in the highly successful book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*.

*House* also exists in an historical landscape that touches upon two significant tragedies, the American Civil War and the Irish Famine. The Civil War provides a bloody backdrop, allowing for characters that are inured to bloodshed, such as Dr. Gaston. The opening dream sequence allows the novel to springboard off of a brutal Civil War setting and into events that are less grisly, but more inhuman. The Irish Famine provides an historical reason for the breakdown of Irish families and for the presence of a person like Brigid within the Catholic Church. The Famine was, in fact, a mechanism that hastened the fall of the more feminine social order that had prevailed in Ireland for centuries after the remainder of Europe had effectively “forgotten” its pagan heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> *Art of Darkness*, 19.

*House* questions the patriarchal familial order that is a primary component of Western civilization. By questioning this order, *House* again places itself squarely in the Gothic tradition as defined by Dr. Williams. “. . . the mythos or structure informing this Gothic category of ‘otherness,’ is the patriarchal family.”<sup>3</sup> This patriarchal order extends well beyond the traditional family. The Catholic Church, regardless of its appellation as “the Holy Mother Church,” is a patriarchal family. Women do not possess positions of authority within the Church. All decisions within the church are made by men, and the head of this family is the “Holy Father,” the pope. Elections to the leadership of the Church are held in secret by a council of men, and, once elected, the Pope is considered to be incapable of error in matters of faith. This concept of papal infallibility is clearly a representation of the patriarchal social order. Within *House* the Catholic Church itself is questioned as it shows itself increasingly incapable of dealing with the demon Belail. The Catholic priests, even those represented sympathetically, such as Father Benito, see their scope of influence reduced as the novel progresses.

*House* mines the rich vein of the complex and contradictory historical relationship between Christianity and the pagan religions of Western Europe, especially in Ireland and Sicily. As well, as must be inevitable in any book that deals with the “reconstructed” South of the late 1870s, *House* delves into the relationship between races. At this time both black and white were being forced to reconsider their social positions. Each race had its own internal power structure, and the strong influence of native African religion that is displayed in *House* was more significant at that time than it is today. (However, I should note that a strong voodoo/Voudon presence remains in the modern black community in both New Orleans and on the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Currently, some see Voudon as a means of reclaiming black heritage, as Voudon is a direct

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<sup>3</sup> *Art of Darkness*, 22.

descendent of the religions of Africa. Voudon supplies could be bought in downtown Atlanta at least through the 1980s.)

The events in *House* are arranged within the limits posed by a lunar calendar, from one new moon to the next (or, to be technical, from one last-night-of-wane to the next.) This lunar governance is another aspect of “otherness,” since it occurs in a society that is regulated by a solar calendar and whose months do not accord to the cycles of the moon. The lunar focus of the novel is made necessary by the presence of magic, which is customarily considered to be tied to the lunar cycle.

Throughout *House* there is constant reference to the “awe-ful power of the ‘female.’”<sup>4</sup> The events in *House* are largely governed by a feminine triad, consisting of Sister Brigid, Sister Angela, and Esmerelda, the Voudon *mambo*. The fourth powerful figure, the walker, is male. He completes a three/one quartet as identified by Joseph Campbell. This structure is evident in classical myth and in modern works such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Star Wars*, though in *House* the quartet is three women and one man as opposed to the one female and three men, which is more frequently seen.

I should point out that the novel was actually written without any reference to critical material. In fact, it was written before I became aware of Dr. Williams’ work. The motifs that cause *House* to accord with the Gothic principles that she lays out were unconsciously chosen, which, to my perspective, only increases their validity. These choices also speak to the unconscious, perhaps even archetypal, structure that the Gothic genre represents. (I could offer a more comprehensive discussion about the presence and meaning of such archetypal patterns, but that argument would extend this defense beyond a sensible limit. I have written the argument before in my electronically-published non fiction work, *Monotheism and Madness*.)

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<sup>4</sup> *Art of Darkness*, xi.

The second group of information in my defense lies under the general rubric of writing techniques. These techniques were consciously chosen as part of the craft of writing and embedded in the text and themes as they are presented. The following paragraphs are a discussion of these techniques.

In creating fiction, the writer must be mindful of the techniques he will deploy to assure plausibility of the plot structure and the entertainment of the reader. These techniques are all the more necessary when writing about events that would be considered implausible by the standards of the society. Three primary techniques are employed in *The House on Saint Julian*. The first is as strict an adherence to historical accuracy as possible. The second is an internal consistency in how the arcane elements are deployed. The third is a constant use of counterpoint to surprise the reader through working against his preconceptions by reframing the “other” as different from what the reader might expect.

#### I. Adherence to historical accuracy

A novel that is reliant upon magical workings is, in and of itself, enough to strain the credibility of the reader. In order for the arcane elements to be accepted, the remainder of the setting should be as historically and physically accurate as possible.<sup>5</sup> The reader needs to recognize that there is a strong element of truth in the novel’s accord with historical events. Any inaccuracy in these areas will certainly lead to diminishing the reader’s ability to suspend disbelief in other areas. I did significant research to make certain that the events take place in a realistic setting. The following topics were researched specifically for this novel:

- Train travel in the U.S. in 1874, before consistent time zones were established.

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<sup>5</sup> In undertaking the effort to assure historical accuracy, I was influenced by George MacDonald Fraser’s use of extensive historical information in his *Flashman* series of books. However, I did not think it appropriate to use the footnotes that he used to maintain the conceit that his books were the memoirs of a “real” general.

- Voodoo (Voudon) rituals, including the names of spirits invoked and the language used in many of the rituals, Fon.<sup>6</sup>
- Street directions in Savannah, Georgia<sup>7</sup>
- Transatlantic ship transit times in 1874
- Catholic hierarchy and ceremonies
- The events of the Irish Famine
- Drugs in recreational use at the time
- The practice of ceremonial magic

Particular historical details deserve mention. The old cemetery of Savannah really was (or is) Laurel Grove. The architecture of Savannah is portrayed accurately, as it evolved from the need to elevate basements above the water table. The street directions are accurate, and some of the names used, such as Gaston, are taken from the street signs in Savannah. Many of the aspects that contribute to the accuracy of the novel itself came from my own earlier experiences, such as a visit to Andersonville prison, where I saw the “tools of the trade” of a Civil War doctor. I have also studied the general history of the War and am well aware of aspects of Catholicism as practiced in the Savannah archdiocese.

This adherence to historical accuracy also provides the opportunity to introduce historical facts of which the reader may not be aware. Surprisingly few modern Americans realize that Europe was pagan until the imposition of Christianity. Though our pre-Christian heritage lives on in the timing of religious holidays, which often occur on important dates of the Celtic calendar, the actual belief structure that reserved these specific days for ceremonies has been lost. As well, there is only a small amount of the population that has preserved any knowledge of the Irish Famine, an event that had an important impact upon American history as something on the order of a million Irish emigrated to

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<sup>6</sup> I have held an interest in Voudon and other alternative religions for years. I traveled to New Orleans some years ago and spoke with the high priestess (mambo) who ran the Voodoo Museum of New Orleans. She provided information to me on the methodology of Voudon possession as part of their ritual practice.

<sup>7</sup> I am a native of Savannah, so the nature of the city is well known to me, as are the interiors of the old Saint Joseph Hospital (now demolished) and the Saint James' Ward (which I have visited). I am guilty of a slight anachronism, as the hospital was not constructed until the 1880s. Information regarding the Battle of Bloody Marsh was gathered at Fort Frederica National Monument.



the United States as a direct result of the famine. There is also a similar lack of knowledge that the oldest European city in North America is Saint Augustine.

In one sense, the historical accuracy mirrors the way that science is dealt with in science fiction. In that genre, it is acceptable to deviate from established natural law, provided an explanation is given. Any time that a law of physics or chemistry is broken without these explanations, the work is considered to be “bad” science fiction. I have taken the same stance in my historical accuracy. The facts and figures about the Irish Famine are accurate. The existence of an active strega cult in Sicily into the late nineteenth century is verifiable.

## II. Consistency in the approach to magic

Fortunately, I approached the book with a rather thoroughly informed magical cosmology, which was modified to fit the circumstances and the plot of the novel. Information on the use of ceremonial magic was adapted from the information taken from W.E. Butler (see bibliography) and from information shared with me by those who claim to have the ability to perform magic. The developed magical cosmology used in *House* divides magic into three realms, simple, ceremonial, and “high” magic. Herb lore, which is mentioned in the novel, is not classified as a “magic” but rather as a branch of folk medicine.

Simple magic covers those odd talents that many people seem to possess, such as the ability to know when a loved one dies. Simple magic is generally considered to include sympathetic magic, which did not play any role in the novel. Sympathetic magic often involves the use of a person’s hair or nail clippings to create a “link” to a person in order to work magic upon that person. It can be unreliable, as was reflected in the second of the *Harry Potter* movies when Hermione accidentally assumed the aspect of a cat when she used the wrong hair in her spell. Sympathetic magic is the form of magic that is popularly affiliated with Voudon, even though that is one of the lesser magics of that religion.

Ceremonial magic is traditionally based upon the use of rituals, altars, candles, chanting, and so forth to summon and dispatch power. The primary form of magic in *House* is ceremonial, as that is the type of magic used by Streng's group to summon their demon and by the Catholic magicians to combat the demon. (Exorcism is ceremonial magic.) The Voudon summoning ritual reflects the type of ceremonial magic utilized in Voudon in which a spirit (loa) is summoned to possess a "mount" (worshiper) so that the loa can speak directly to the attendees of the ritual.

High magic, as delineated in *House*, is the direct ability to manipulate forces. Only those who have the inherited ability to use high magic can do so effectively. Training will allow high magical ability to manifest itself, though the knowledge of high magical training is assumed lost to all but the "walkers." (The concept of inherited magical abilities is commonly accepted among those who believe in magic, such as the modern Wiccans and other members of the neo-pagan community. This concept of inherited capability was also utilized in Katherine Kurtz's "Deryni" books.)

In most literary representations of magic, men are usually the magicians. This definition of the role has deep roots in Western literature, ranging as far back as the Merlin myth and the Welsh mythic tales contained in *The Mabinogion*.

### III. The use of counterpoint

This is the most complex of the techniques used in the book and also carries with it the strongest moral message. Many of the aspects in *House* play against the general assumptions of that time and the present, especially those regarding race. At times it is my intent to allow the reader to be misled by his own assumptions, similar to the way that Streng is misled in his assumptions about Voudon. Voudon itself is portrayed as being magically potent, a valid religion, and a force for moral good, though of a highly naturalistic nature. The *mambo*, Esmerelda, is compassionate, wise, and concerned with the well-being of her devotees. She, like several other of the black characters, are not what the

white society of Savannah would expect them to be, a point emphasized in the character Isaiah.

The Catholic Church, representing Christianity, was (and is) supposed to be the embodiment of both good and of divine power. The reader is likely to expect that the Church possesses the power to destroy any evil, as occurred in *The Exorcist*. It does not. The book takes a critical look at the Church's role in the Famine and the Inquisition and in its centuries-long campaign to stamp out pagan influences in Europe. As already pointed out, the "Holy Mother Church" is a patriarchal organization, one which worked very hard to minimize feminine influence in its early formative centuries.<sup>8</sup>

As the Christian god is generally assumed to be good, his adversary, Satan, is normally used to represent evil. In *House*, just as Christianity is shown to be less potent than generally assumed, satanism is intentionally undermined. While Streng is defined as a "satanist," this identification is shown to be nothing more than a convenient way to describe Streng's group. None of the principle characters, with the exception of the "satanists" themselves, profess to believe in Satan or any other "lord of evil." The most extensive theological discussion in the book centers around the fact that few of the Catholic magicians actually believe in the existence of Satan. The clear implication is that "satan" is an invention, designed to control people through fear. When faced with the power of real magic, the awesome demon, Belial, is literally reduced to a tiny figure before his death.

Through the actions of the Catholic magicians and their "satanic" opponents, the reader's expectations are often confounded. True power lies in the hands of the varied pagan practitioners, such as Brigid, Angela, the walker, and Esmerelda.

I also used other symbolic patterns, though to a lesser degree than those already discussed. A significant portion of the novel occurs at dawn and twilight, the liminal times

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<sup>8</sup> Extensive information on the formation of early church dogma is available in the work of Dr. Elaine Pagels. This brief paper does not grant space or time to discuss the relevance of her work to the formation of ideas in the novel, but, suffice it to say, she had a strong influence on my thoughts.

that are most often associated with magic. Fog is used as a consistent atmospheric element. The less sympathetic characters, such as Rimaldi, do not relate well to the natural world, which is consistently defined in Western literature as representing the feminine realm. The color most identified with nature, green, is associated with the positive characters, such as Nessa, Angela, and the Little Ones.

Structurally, the novel is circular. It begins and ends with Gaston. It moves from Gaston's Civil War nightmare to the nightmare of Richardson's death. It ends when the nightmares of Streng's group and his demon are destroyed.

*The House on Saint Julian* is, at surface level, a typical thriller, with the plot concerned with the uncovering and destruction of evil in both human and demonic form. However, underlying the plot are events that recognize that . . . “‘the law of the Father’ is a tyrannical *paterfamilias* and that we dwell in his ruins.”<sup>9</sup> The core of the novel is the re-empowerment of the feminine, as represented by Sister Brigid's progress from nun to pagan magician. She ultimately renounces her orders and leaves the church. The patriarchal order, represented by Father Rimaldi, is discredited, with the almost apostate Father Benito becoming the sympathetic Catholic character. The walker, Gereint, is not the protagonist, but the hero. Yet he is a hero that does not emerge from the patriarchal order, but from the pre-Christian religions of Europe, which did not devalue the feminine as does the more modern Christian *Weltanschauung*. Gothic fiction, as stated by Dr. Williams, “shows the cracks in the system.” *House* endeavors to show these cracks not only in the obvious matter of plot, but also in the consciousness of its characters, meeting the inherently seditious goals of Gothic on multiple levels.

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<sup>9</sup> *Art of Darkness*, p 24.

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