

Forward: A Word About Wicca

A few years ago, when asked to do a book-reading at a shop specializing in Gothic paraphernalia, I was a bit uneasy to note how many Goths and women dressed like witches were sitting in the front row. I was gratified, however, when they asked me to read from a particular chapter of *Immortal Samurai*. They weren't the curious; they were actual fans. *Okay, I thought, this is who makes up some of your fan base. Get over it and go with the flow.* I soon found out what fascinating people they were, especially the professed Wicca. One insisted there were a host of Wiccan traits Michael was already exhibiting. As I researched, I found she was right, and set about to discover how that could be.

But, first, let's kick to the curb one piece of right-wing Christian dogma. Wicca are NOT Devil-worshippers. They don't believe in the Devil. You can't be in league with something you don't believe in.

Wicca, like their Druid ancestors, are supporters of nature and the environment. Bury the dead unembalmed in a shroud. (We are from the Earth and should give ourselves back to the Earth by decomposing quickly.)

What about all those evil spells and incantations? Wicca live by the Rule of Three. Whatever power or influence or magick I send out, let it come back to me three-fold — three times as good, three-times as bad. There is also often the added admonition, "Let no harm come from this."

As far back as I can recall I've always had a

fascination with then ancient Celts and Druids. Hey, my family is from Aberdeen, Scotland; it's in my blood.

One of the first things I noticed is how many of our Christmas traditions stem from Celtic rituals and traditions. When the Roman Church set the date of Christmas, it coincided with Yule, the Celtic festival of light, when light triumphs over darkness. (On December 20th/21st, the Winter Solstice, the nights begin to shorten and daylight lengthens.) We still sing about making the Yuletide gay.

Ironically, while the Roman priests were incorporating Celtic Yule traditions into Christmas and Easter (*Oestre* was the Celtic Goddess of fertility, hence the association of bunnies, baby chicks, and eggs with Easter), they were adamant about stamping out competitive faiths and beliefs. If it wasn't Christian, it had to be evil. (Even the Harry Potter novels caught the brunt of this in for a few years.)

Pagan practices were linked to the Devil. Even the term 'pagan', (from the Latin *paganus*, meaning country dweller or rustic), which started out referring to anyone Rome considered uncivilized, has acquired an evil connotation.

Midwives and folk-healers were denounced as witches. (How dare they demonstrate healing skills; their gifts must come from the Devil. Male doctors were happy to be rid of the competition.)

Lest anyone think that, as an author of vampire novels, I've been lured to the dark side and fallen under the sway of the Evil One, I will just point out that, as I write this, I am still Secretary of Council for my Church and, last night performed in the annual Christmas Concert as a member of the bass section of the Chancel Choir, and as the only male soloist in the Church. I'm also on the Discernment Committee helping a good friend and prospect for the ministry in

her process of finding her place in the grand scheme of things.

I particularly enjoyed the chance in this work to dispel some misconceptions, taking delight in describing as authentically as possible, a Wiccan funeral ritual. I also love the chance for Michael to discover new powers, and the opportunity to add some of the occult powers attributed to vampires in some of the classic Dracula movies, in an explainable/believable context.

By the way, all Wicca are witches, even the men. Warlock is a derogatory term, from the Gaelic language (those Celts again), meaning traitor or oath breaker, presumably a reference to breaking some sort of agreement with the Christian faith. They prefer to spell magick with a *k*, to distinguish it from the slight-of-hand used by performing magicians.

The first title for this work, *Chovexani: Sorcerer Vampire*, came to while writing *Daimyo: Lord Samurai*, but it created a few problems. I needed a Japanese word for sorcerer, but *Maha-tsukai* is too much of a mouthful. Since first becoming immersed in the martial-arts, I'd heard the term karate-ka, then a cousin referred to manga-ka, the celebrated manga artists. So, I had a precedent for replacing *-tsukai* with *-ka*, giving me something more pronounceable for those unfamiliar with Japanese.



D.C. Rhind
Dec. 19, 2011

Prologue

*Demont Road, Chester Basin, NS
November 1, 2010*

Mike Cameron stood in the late fading late-afternoon light, looking with anticipation at the partly-cleared lot. The driveway into the property, with its culvert across the intervening ditch, had just been completed and approved.

“They’ll start the foundation in the spring,” Mike commented to Carrie.

She nestled against him, both arms about his waist, his arm about her shoulders. “It’ll be perfect,” she said, a hint of excitement in her voice.

Mike nodded. “A house in the woods, half-a-kilometer from the boat on the dock,” he commented with a grin.

The house in Dartmouth had lost its magic — too many bad memories. Then, the previous summer, they’d found this lot, not yet on the market, and snatched it up. Finally, they sold the house, then moved everything into storage in Chester, and moved aboard the boat.

In the spring, the basement foundation would be created, from the ground up, then filled around to increase the elevation of the property, before the 1400-square-foot modular home was delivered in two pieces, to be lowered onto the foundation in two stages by a crane.

Now, with the boat sitting *on the hard* at the

marina, and no longer conducive to living aboard, it was time to fulfill the promise to return to Scotland, and the *Scholomance*, where their new friend, Olga, awaited their return to Wiccan studies.

*The Scholomance, Anstruther, Scotland
December, 2010*

Mike Cameron eased his head back, looking at the hewn beams of the ceiling instead of the screen of his new iMac computer. It had been almost two years since he'd devoted any serious time to writing. Since providing his publisher with the manuscript for the fifth and final novel of his fantasy series, he'd gone into a sort of hiatus, occasionally developing an idea for a new series, but mostly fulfilling his duty to his country.

Mike had been all but drafted by the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service or CSIS, as it was known, and, while his special agent status was supposed to reserve him for only the most unique cases, usually involving vampires, and giving him right of refusal, the director often forgot about the right of refusal, hounding him into anything that required his unique skills. Being able to move almost unseen, hypnotize people or read their minds, or being able to take on impossible odds in combat, either with his favoured Muramasa katana, or with bare hands and feet, with vampire strength and speed, as well as his incredible healing powers, were, without a doubt, a unique skill combination. Then there was his vampire strength and unbelievable speed. Bullets — at least the lead, non-wooden variety — barely slowed him down.

Mike had once been a sought-after instructor of Kung Fu and Samurai swordsmanship, a combination he no longer thought of as diverse. His involvement

with CSIS had changed all that. His having become a vampire had changed it even more.

Then, to top off the improbability of it all, he learned that many of his witchy traits — having occasional premonitions, being able to make friends with almost any animal, drawing body energy from heat — really were witch traits. His great-great-great-great-grandmother had been a healer-witch from the Scottish Highlands, settling eventually in Aberdeen. His great-great-great-great-grandfather had been a British lord and cohort of the famous Scarlet Pimpernel. This progenitor had also been a newly-made vampire. Lord Anthony Dewhurst then added to the vampire genes bequeathed to his descendant by saving his life with a generous dose of vampire blood. That and more infusions from both Tony and his friend Dr Jonathan MacGreggor, a more ancient vampire, had accelerated Mike's transition toward being a full vampire. The stopping of his heart by assassin's bullet had done the rest.

Mike had kept a promise to Madam Olga to spent time studying at the new Scholomance in Scotland, giving his wife Carrie a chance to explore her newly-discovered Wiccan talents, as well. Living in a tower of the ancient castle along the outer reaches of the Firth of Forth gave Mike time to dabble in writing when he wasn't immersed in occult studies, and he was finally bringing together scattered bits of writing into a coherent manuscript, one he hoped might be the first in a new series — a far-fetched fantasy about a spy for CSIS, who was destined to become a vampire. He smiled at the irony of it. His director would hit the roof; his publisher would stop hounding him for something new.

For now, though, he was weary. Carrie was with her new friend Teila Morgana, watching over a litter of Bluepoint Siamese kittens her female had delivered

weeks before.

Rising from his desk, he opened a door and stepped out onto a small parapet or balcony and looked up at the moon. It had a reddish hue to it. In Mike's mind's eye, the face of the man in the moon took on vampire features, the eyes brimming with blood, the mouth opening as if hissing at him, fangs displayed. The first time he'd seen this, several missions ago, he'd thought it a hallucination. He now knew it for what it was: a Wiccan premonition of violence to come.

Going back inside, he spotted the package that had come by post — he'd been too busy to look at it earlier, assuming it to be a Christmas gift. He spotted the return address on the package, and it triggered memories. It was from the Tekaga Yoshi, Yagyu Shinkage Ryu in Kyoto, Japan. It reminded him of something Master Tekaga had said. The self-professed *maha-tsukai* or sorcerer, had told him that the fates were preparing him for a special path in life. His precise words had been, 'It is said that when the gods give so much to one person, much is asked of them in return. I see a difficult path before you, and much change in your life.' The Tulku Anil had echoed the prediction with almost the same words.

Did you see me becoming an assassin for CSIS? he wondered. *Did you see me becoming a vampire?*

Tulku Anil had insisted that there was something inside Mike that was the basis of his extraordinary abilities — something that had dark origins. *Tony's vampire gene*, Mike now realized, *bequeathed to me by my great-great-great-great grandfather, then reinforced through infusions of his own blood to save my life on at two occasions.*

Mike opened the box from Tekaga to find, nestled amid layers of bubble wrap — thank God it wasn't those retched styrofoam peanuts that packers so loved — a mahogany box, about 9 x 8 x 11 inches. He

frowned, perplexed, as he extracted the beautifully varnished container. There was a brass plate imbedded in the top, engraved with two names:

Michael David Cameron

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Tomomatsu Yakura

He undid the simple snap-catch, and opened the box, then removed a molded figurine, fashioned from a moderately hard material, possibly epoxy, and painted in intricate detail. It was a *Bushi*, a Japanese warrior of the feudal period — what was now referred to as a Samurai. From the rich crimson lacquer of the armour and the elaborate helm with its crescent moon mounted on the front, the horns of the crescent pointing skyward, it was a Daimyo — no, the son of a Daimyo. The helm and face mask of a Daimyo would have been more ornate.

The note read: *Dearest Michael-san — I came across this in a small shop, and hoped it might reach you in time to be a Christmas gift. I see my vision of you has come to pass: you are studying the way of the maha-tsukai, or perhaps, as the vernacular of the youth is terming masters of any skill, I might call you a maha-ka. There is power in illusion, Michael-san, but there is also darkness. Beware the darkness.*

*Fondest regards,
Tekaga Yoshi*

Mike smiled. Then a strange feeling filled him. It was the crimson lacquer of the armour — the colour of Tomomatsu Yakura's armour — the armour Mike had worn in another life, more than three centuries before.

That life had been a source of mystery for most of Mike's life — just glimpses here and there. It had all started with an attack by a mugger, when Mike was

seventeen. It caused him to flash back on that event, then memories from that previous life.

Kato yowling brought him back to reality. As Mike's attention snapped back to the present, his spirit jolted to the core. He waited a moment for the searing pain in his gut to subside — he hadn't felt that in a long time — not since he'd become truly aware of his past life as Tomomatsu Yakura.

"Michael? Are you alright?" It was Carrie, just entering his study. She rushed to him, and tried helping him to his feet. He grasped at the edge of his desk, and pulled himself up.

She looked anxiously into his face and frowned.

"You've been crying?" It was part statement of the obvious, part question. It took Mike a moment for everything to come into perspective. He could feel the tears in his eyes, and knew it was a carry-over reaction from his/Yakura's last memories of Akiko. He held Carrie close, then kissed her.

"You must promise me to always be careful," he insisted. "We've both been through a lot of danger, and there's more coming. Be extra vigilant, please. I couldn't bear to lose you."

She cast a glance to the figuring on his desk, then he felt her presence in his mind. He allowed her a brief glimpse of his memories, then gently closed her out before she could see the horror of his last moments as Yakura. She nodded in understanding, then kissed him again. He tightened his arms about her and kissed her back fiercely, then released her, touching her face with the backs of his fingers.

From down the stairwell, a young woman's voice was calling Carrie's name.

Mike smiled. "That's Taila looking for you," he said.

Carrie smiled. "I'd better go. She doesn't leave her cat and the kittens very often. Will you be okay?"

Mike nodded. When she'd left, he went over to the window and glanced out at the sky.

The fading memory of pain triggered something: a sense of someone else's pain. He could feel the visions coming.

God, he thought; something more to deal with. Is this Wicca thing — this whole Maha-ka business — a blessing or a curse?

He shook his head, then shrugged. *Do your duty, Samurai*, he chided himself.

He leaned his head back, letting his eyes go out of focus, the centuries-old beams becoming a blur as his mind drifted. He was surrounded by candle stands, the heat of each individual flame clear in his awareness, even now that his eyes were closed. He could sense each individual heat source with the same awareness that his eyes might have had looking at stars in the sky.

He felt a gradual drifting of his consciousness into a sort of drowsy fog. *Drifting off?* he joked to himself. Vampires didn't drift off unless they were in dire need of blood. Perhaps his mind was weary.

Running. Head turning to cast a fearful glance behind.

He seemed to be either having a vision or seeing through someone else's eyes.

Shadowy shape looming up from behind. Hard, cold hands taking a powerful grip, spinning her about. She wanted to scream, but the sound froze in her throat as demonic eyes filled her vision. There was no one to hear her scream, anyway.

Pain. Sharp teeth tore into her throat, ripping, tearing, practically inhaling her blood as fast as it tried to spill forth. He felt consciousness fade, then similar pain on the other side of her neck brought her back, but only for a moment. It was as if this blood demon, this deamhan fola couldn't get her blood fast enough. Then darkness.

Mike's eyes snapped open. It had happened again, and not very far away. He'd had a similar vision the previous night.

Then he glimpsed something new — a man on the phone, the detective inspector for the village, calling Scotland Yard for advice. He instinctively knew that this was something that hadn't yet happened. The London Metropolitan Police, Special Branch (Scotland Yard) referred him to someone in MI5, who transferred him to MI6. Bruce Mason, head of the non-existent vampire desk and also head of the 00-training section — the buck would stop with him.

And so it begins, he thought. The inspector would be calling upon him.

1: *Plots*

A Castle in the Mountains of Uzbekistan
December, 2010

Vincent d'Angelo studied the vampire before him. Burton Storch seemed to emulate the look of a modern-day magician — silk shirt with frilly front over black dress pants, with a knee-length cape over the top. His hair, short on the sides and longer on the top, looked as if he's had it carefully coiffed, then messed it up deliberately. But, then, they were all given to certain eccentricities in their appearance. All looked to be less than thirty, yet the youngest had been a vampire for at least a century; and their choice in fashion ranged, with few exceptions, from Victorian all the way back to Georgian.

"I tell you, we can't stay here; it's too dangerous," Storch insisted. "Just because the dust has settled on what Prince Mihilache was engaged in here, it doesn't mean we can live here with impunity."

Vincent remained silent. Storch was an alarmist. He did everything extravagantly. Vincent tried not to smile — they were all extravagant in their own way. He himself wore a tuxedo shirt and vest, both of tailored silk. His consort, Carmen, wore a vermilion pixie dress with a frilly short skirt, the top of the bodice scalloped to hint at bat wings. A black and crimson collar was held in place by a black choker. The ensemble was completed by black boots that went past her knees.

Carmen la Trice leaned in and whispered in his ear,

“Burt is starting to jump at shadows. Perhaps we should move his bed out into the sunlight just after dawn.”

Vincent ignored her; violence was her response to everything.

A firm hand touched Vincent’s shoulder.

There may be something to his fears, his brother, Armand, said in his mind. Armand wore a collarless tux shirt with a crimson vest and a black cape, lined with scarlet. In any other setting it might have looked ridiculous, but he seemed to carry it off with great dignity.

“You counsel prudence, brother?” Vincent asked aloud.

Armand nodded. “Since the fall of Prince Stanislaus, the Uzbek Government has had its eye on this place. Colonel Karmonov has even had his sergeant, Sergei Valenkov, sniffing about from a distance. I caught sight of him in the mountains late yesterday afternoon — him and that Zora woman who works with him. They were watching the castle with powerful binoculars.”

Vincent nodded. As always, Armand had more facts than most, like even the name of the sergeant’s associate, and he never referred to notes. His memory, like his eye for details, was infallible.

“Very well,” Vincent conceded with a nod.

“Why not eliminate the sergeant and his woman,” Carmen la Trice hissed. “It could be fun.”

Vincent sighed. “And, when your fun was concluded, the colonel would bring the army down on us during daylight.”

“Then we take out the colonel, too. We eliminate them all.”

“When word spread of that, the CIA would step in; and we all know who Larkin would contact.” Morgan Price’s clipped British accent sounded bored, laced

with sarcasm. The lean vampire dressed all in black; long, lank hair fell about his shoulders, its oiliness, combined with the whiteness of his face and the black lacquer on his nails, giving him a sinister, almost repelling appearance.

“I’m already working on a scenario to eliminate Mike Cameron,” Takolo Valenko reminded them, stepping forward. “CSIS has no records of an agent by his name. Count Torok, however, learned from Cedric Monahan, that Cameron’s files are all under the codename of Samurai.” Of the lot, he was the least extravagant in his attire, wearing a long black coat over a black shirt, vest, and pants. Only the laced-up front of the vest bespoke a by-gone age.

“And how is that coming, Tak?” Vincent asked. “This Cameron has proved himself to be no one to trifle with.”

“He’s distracted,” Takolo replied. “He and his wife are at the *Scholomance* in Scotland — have been for weeks. Right now everyone is preparing for a traditional Celtic Christmas. I’m sure his thoughts are on those preparations, when they aren’t immersed in his studies. According to reputation, he takes this holiday very seriously — used to decorate his entire house in Canada. As for his devotion to studies, he has a reputation for that, as well. In his youth, as a human he did an honours degree in science in three years, instead of four. He has focus and a commitment to learning. He will feel safe there in that ancient castle.”

“Like cute little student witches at Hogwarts,” Carmen giggled. “We can cut them down like dry wheat in late autumn.”

“Take nothing for granted,” Armand cautioned, “especially where Michael Cameron is concerned.”

“And you’re sure he’s a witch?” Vincent turned to glance up at his brother, standing near his right shoulder.

Armand nodded. "Everything we heard from Romania points to it. He and his wife put fire into Count Torok to kill him. His wife, Carrie, used her powers to set wolves and vampire fledglings afire when the Count sent them against a Szgany encampment. I have confirmed a Druid witch in Cameron's ancestry; with his wife, since she's of almost pure Celtic blood, we can infer Wiccan ancestry."

Morgan Price added, "And as a vampire, Cameron's bloodline is equally impressive."

"Really?" Vincent asked.

Before Morgan could continue, an auburn-haired vampire stepped to his side. "After all, dear brother, it was I who uncovered his lineage." Tina Price gave her brother a smile that hinted of resentment, then continued. "Since Lord Dewhurst's blood was in Cameron's system the longest, he's considered to be Cameron's maker. Dewhurst's maker was Isobelle, la Marquissa de Lillers, from the Province of Artois. I doubt if Dr. MacGregor ever acquainted Dewhurst with the fact, but he was Isobelle's maker, back in 1520. It's an interesting lineage. It was well-known in vampire circles how proud the Marquissa was of her protégé. No doubt this is why Jonathan MacGregor sought Dewhurst out, to meet him, possibly curious to see if he was as heroic and noble as Isobelle portrayed."

"This is all very interesting, but I fail to see the relevance," Vincent commented.

"Know your enemy," Armand said in his ear.

Vincent nodded. He fixed his gaze on Takolo Valenko. "So, Tak, you will be proceeding with your plan?"

"Christmas Eve," Takolo replied. "Most of the force will be human assault specialists, trained in Spetsnaz techniques. I supervised their training. They will be assisted by specialists provided by the

Scholomance at Sibiu, friends of Morgan's." He gave a nod to Morgan Price.

"And the mission will be carried out with your usual military precision?"

Takolo nodded. "The principal targets are Cameron and his wife, but it will be made to look like a random attack on the school. Of course, the original *Scholomance* would like nothing more than to eradicate its more recent challenger."

"Carry on, and keep me apprised. In the meantime, it might be the prudent for us to relocate. Any suggestions?"

"Our castle near Blauspitze, in Austria, is fortified and remote," Pierre deMontrechet spoke up.

Vincent smiled. He ignored Pierre, turning instead to Chance de Montrachet, Pierre's older brother. "Exuberance has caused your brother to over-step his place," d'Angelo observed. "You are not obligated by his impetuosity."

Chance, like his brother, wore clothing from the early 1800s. Unlike his short-haired brother, he wore his long hair in a ponytail, and, though young of face, allowed his hair to grey at the temples. He looked as if he was thinking carefully before responding.

"In this case, Prince Vincent, the offer, while impetuous on Pierre's part, is a sensible one. We are isolated in the mountains, and the outer walls are well fortified. I believe we will be safe there, especially if we devote extra discretion to our departure."

Vincent nodded. "We must prepare immediately and travel by different routes and modes of transportation."

He turned abruptly to a dark-featured man. This one also affected Victorian dress: a crimson velvet waistcoat over a Parisian silk shirt with ruffled front and cuffs, and a black cape lined with crimson satin over all. The man wore a deep frown, though he had

remained silent through the entire affair.

“Something troubles you Karl?” Vincent asked. He smiled and kept his tone light, but he knew the icy look in his eyes would carry sufficient warning. He would not tolerate anything but enthusiastic support in this.

“Cameron has made no move against us,” Karl deBatts replied. “For all we know, he knows nothing of our existence. If we move against him and do not succeed, we will surely bring him against us in full force, in retaliation for our attack. Why not wait and see if he becomes a threat?”

“Because he taxes me,” Vincent d’Angelo hissed back. “His very existence offends me. Cesare Borgia, Dragomir Torok, Stanislaus Mihilache, and Stefan Sutu were great men, princes among our kind. They were destroyed by this enemy and his cohorts. Now *they* must be destroyed. The world must learn that we are not to be trifled with.”

“I think the less the world learns of us, the better,” Claire Marchand said. “The world cannot learn about trifling with us unless they learn who they are trifling with — who we are. I’m not opposing you, Prince d’Angelo, nor am I necessarily siding with Baron deBatts. I merely advise caution.”

“Caution!” Vincent spat. “Caution is for the weak. We will prove our strength by eradicating this thorn in my side.”

2: Scholomance

*Anstruther, Scotland
Dec. 22nd, 2010, 5:30 PM*

Inspector MacGraw felt a tightening in his gut as he approached the ancient castle at the end of the narrow, tree-lined walkway. He could see the sea beyond the ancient edifice, where the outer reaches of the Firth of Forth joined with the North Sea, but it gave him no comfort. Most of the town held those who dwelled here in great respect, awe even. It was said that magic held the castle together, keeping it from falling into ruin. The man he was coming to see was, himself, the source of much talk in the village. Both he and his wife had only ever been seen at night or during the failing light of the late afternoon. Both were pale, paler even than most Scots, and it was now being whispered that they might even be *deamhan fola* — literally blood demons — vampires.

The Police Inspector, the detective for the village tried to force all this nonsense out of his mind. Of course it was foolishness. Yet rumours about this man said he was the most powerful sorcerer to appear at the Scholomance in many generations. MacGraw swallowed hard, trying to focus on his phone call with the man from Special Branch, with whom he'd consulted about this alarming new case. Word had come down from a man high in MI6 to someone in MI5 to Scotland Yard. The nature of the two horrendous murders, on two consecutive nights, called

for an expertise that rested with only two men. And, since Lord Dewhurst of Interpol was busy in London, and his colleague was right here in Anstruther, staying at the Scholomance, the centuries-old school for witches, he was coming to see Cameron.

Is this Cameron some kind of nut, hanging out here with people who think they're sorcerers? He quelled the thought. His own grandmother had been believed to have been a witch, claiming to have *the sight*. Aspects of Wiccan beliefs were deep in the Scottish soul, as old as the legends of the druids. Cameron was an agent for the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service. He was not the seventh son of the seventh son, but gossip said he was the seventh generation after a great healer-witch from Aberdeen.

Once more MacGraw shook his head, as if to rattle such thoughts loose and drive them away. He reached up to the over-sized knocker, a great ring which expanded into a ball at the bottom, and banged the tarnished brass knocker against the door, eliciting a resounding *boom* that he was sure echoed through the fortress.

He waited patiently until he heard approaching footsteps. The door opened on silent hinges — he had expected a haunting creak like in horror films — and an elderly man dressed as a butler appeared. MacGraw recognized him as someone he had seen about town, doing errands for the castle.

“I’m Inspector MacGraw of the Police,” he said, showing his badge. “I’m here to see Mr. Michael Cameron.”

The man gave a formal nod, then said, “If you’ll excuse me a moment, I’ll see if Mr. Cameron is available. He went to a phone, pressed two buttons, spoke into the receiver, then nodded. Turning back to the inspector, he simply said, “Mr. Cameron will be with you directly. Perhaps you’d like to take a seat

while waiting.” He gestured toward several Victorian-looking armchairs about the entry hall.

MacGraw didn't have to wait long; in fact, he was startled when a middle-aged man of medium height almost seemed to appear in front of him. There's been no sound of approach, no sight of him on the stairs; he'd simply appeared. MacGraw found it most unsettling.

The man had a friendly, though serious look about him. He had the look of someone who was always thinking, yet he also gave the impression of being a man of action. The navy-blue cotton-knit sweater, a bit thicker than a long-sleeved T-shirt, did little to hide the hard-bodied torso — a muscular chest above a lean waist. MacGraw could picture, with a twinge of envy, what the Yanks called six-pack abs.

The man smiled and there was a twinkling flash of light from the deep blue eyes. “Inspector MacGraw? I'm Mike Cameron. How can I help you?”

MacGraw took a deep breath. Something about the man gave him both a chill and a feeling of confidence. At the same time, he sensed that the man was both extremely dangerous, yet a good person who got results. His imagination flashed back to the Arthurian tales that had captivated him as a lad. This man, dressed in armour, might have fit how he'd imagined Lancelot or Galahad. He suddenly felt silly, forcing the thought from his mind, trying to concentrate on why he was here.

He continued to take in details. Cameron just stood there, as if giving him time to do so. He looked like an aging athlete who'd never gone out of shape. There was nothing pretentious about him — no James Bond Rolex — the watch looked like a Wenger Swiss Army watch. He wore a gold wedding band with a Celtic eternity knot woven around its circumference in gold wire. On the other hand were two rings: a heavy gold

setting with a crimson stone that MacGraw guessed might be a blood-ruby, and, next to it, on the ring finger, what might be a college ring. About his neck was a braided necklace from which hung another Celtic knot, this in pewter, standing out against the dark navy of Cameron's form-fitting sweater.

The man might have been five-foot-eight, one-hundred-eighty pounds, but something about him seemed larger than life. There was an air of coldness about him, in spite of the almost mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Cameron smiled. It unsettled MacGraw. It was as if Cameron had read his thoughts and found them amusing.

MacGraw got to his feet, fumbling with his badge. "Have you heard anything of the murders of the past two nights?" he asked, hearing a shakiness in his own voice. *Come on, man, pull it together*; he chided himself. *This man's a government agent; don't make a fool of yourself.*

The pale face took on a sober expression, then the man nodded. "I heard only rumours — two women missing, presumed dead. The fact is, they both died violently: one last night, to the west of the castle, near the seawall, the other the night before, to the east of here, also near the seawall. Apparently your people are keeping the details out of the papers."

MacGraw nodded. "How could you know that, Mr. Cameron?" MacGraw demanded. "Their bodies were found, throats torn out rather viciously. At first we thought it might have been a dog, run amuck — we've no rabies in the UK, as you may be aware. However, the forensic pathologist insists that their throats were torn by a human, probably male, but one with canine fangs, possible prosthetic."

Cameron never even raised an eyebrow. "So, thinking *vampire*, word went up the chain and someone

told you to talk to me.”

“You’ve seen cases like this?” MacGraw stammered.

Cameron frowned, then sighed. “I’ll need to see the crime scenes, assuming you know where the women were attacked, and I’ll want to see the bodies.”

He entered a room off the entry hall, reappearing seconds later in what looked like almost like a Victorian-style greatcoat, with almost a western influence. He gestured for the inspector to precede him to the door, then was suddenly at the door himself, opening it for the inspector. MacGraw found it all disconcerting. The man moved too fast for the eye to follow. *No wonder the locals think he’s a vampire!* he thought, then tried to banish the notion as absurd.

If MacGraw found Mike a source of astonishment at Scholomance Castle, it was nothing compared to when they reached the first crime scene.

This guy’s like Sherlock Bloody Holmes! he thought. Mike was studying the area and making pronouncements about the attacker’s behaviour as if he’d been a witness. Everything he said fit what the pathologist had learned from the bodies, but it was amazing to watch this man study blood trace on the ground and draw such accurate conclusions.

“He tore her throat, exsanguinating her as thoroughly as possible — he tears in deep enough to get both the exterior and interior carotid arteries. Then he did the same on the other side. Look here on the ground; you can see separate areas of blood drip where he went from one side to the other.”

“You mean this villain actually imbibed her blood?” MacGraw found it incredulous. “But how do you know he tore at her on each side? Couldn’t he have just moved with her while doing it?”

Cameron shook his head. “Had he released his grip on her neck, there would have been more spray than

there is. As the flow from one side lessened, he tore into the other side, hoping for better flow. He then went to the femoral arteries in her thighs. Did you speak to MI5 or MI6? If so, what did they tell you?"

MacGraw hesitated. "Only that I might not be ready for the truth; that you had dealt with these types of cases and could be trusted." He took a deep breath, blew it out, then resumed with reluctance. "The word from the top, from some guy named Mason, pretty high up in MI6, is that, if it seems too far-fetched, I should just let you take over the case, that, apparently, you're also with Interpol."

Cameron shrugged. "A friend and colleague is with Interpol; I have a sort of liaison status. Do you want me to take over, or do you want to front the investigation, even if it means taking you down the rabbit hole?"

MacGraw thought a moment. *Down the rabbit hole* was a common enough euphemism, referring to Alice stumbling into Wonderland by following the white rabbit. "And just how deep and dark is this rabbit hole?" he asked.

Cameron frowned. "Deep enough and dark enough to challenge your beliefs in just how safe your world is."

"Is this guy really a vampire?" MacGraw heard the words leaving his mouth, amazed that he was actually asking the question.

Cameron sighed. "He's worse than that; he's what is referred to as a *ripper*. His bloodlust is so great that it creates a kind of temporary insanity in him. He has to drain his victims as thoroughly and as quickly as possible, making him very destructive and messy. Most vampires don't even feed on humans; they sustain themselves with bottled blood. The few that occasionally feel forced to rely on humans take very little at one go, being as non-intrusive as possible and

making sure the victim remembers nothing.”

MacGraw tried to bite his tongue, but the words came out anyway.

“What about you? Are you a vampire?”

Cameron’s response was a fleeting smile, as if amused by the question. He pulled a folder out of his pocket and opened it, displaying CSIS and Interpol credentials. “I usually work with Lord Anthony Dewhurst of Interpol — he’s their most senior profiler. I’ve also worked with Sam Larkin, now Assistant Deputy Director for Operations, CIA, and Bruce Mason, former 00-agent, now the senior training supervisor at MI6.”

“Is that the only answer I get?” MacGraw asked.

Again Cameron flashed a hint of a smile. “It’s the one you’d prefer.”

There was a sudden presence of warmth in his mind, creating something bordering on euphoria. *Relax*, a voice said. It was the voice of Mike Cameron, though his lips never moved.

A man in an overcoat came around the corner. McGraw was distracted by him. He’d glimpsed the man a couple of times, and wondered if he’d been following them.

“You,, there!” MacGraw accosted. “What are you...?”

“It’s just the local priest,” Cameron said in a soothing tone. “Relax.”

The man opened the top of his dark overcoat to display a priest’s collar. “I’m Father Guthrie,” he said. He hesitated, then took a step toward them. “I guess you’re not Catholic, Inspector, since you don’t recognize me.”

“Sorry, Father; I’m Presbyterian. Agent Cameron here might be, but I’m not.” He glanced at Cameron, who was shaking his head.

The priest’s eyes fixed on Cameron, his expression

looking puzzled. "Agent Michael Cameron?" he asked.

Cameron frowned. "You know of me?" he asked.

The priest seemed flustered, then recovered. "It's a small town, Mr. Cameron; people speak of strangers, even if they seem to be frequent visitors." Then, turning back to the inspector, he said, "I was avoiding interfering with your crime scene, Inspector, but I was hoping to do a blessing. If evil has been done here, perhaps it can be contained, the villagers protected from its presence."

"Not the usual approach of the Catholic Church, it it, Father?" Cameron asked.

Once more the priest showed evidence of nervousness. "In certain locales, Agent Cameron, exorcism is still practiced. The Devil has not been entirely banished from the doctrines. And we do have that Devil's school in our midst."

"Just see to it that you don't cross the tape," the inspector warned, then turned his back on the priest.

MacGraw watched as Cameron dropped over the low-lying sea wall and walked along the beach. Further along the shore, looking ominous, its lit windows glowing through the darkness, was Scholomance Castle.

"What is it?" the inspector asked.

"The Scholomance," Cameron replied. "The first victim was taken almost within sight of the castle."

A blur of movement, followed by an agile leap took him to the top of the wall, where he perched, eyes closed, as if trying to sense something. When he opened his eyes he was frowning.

"Our ripper perched here a long time, studying the castle." He cocked his head, almost as if trying to listen for something, then dropped back to the beach and walked closer to the castle. "The tide washed his footprints away, but the tide can't carry away other traces he left."

“What traces?” MacGraw asked.

“Psychic energy, spiritual energy, chi,” Cameron offered. “This guy is pretty dark, though that’s obviously expected in a ripper.”

“So, what are you saying? Do you mean to imply that he came to keep the castle under surveillance, as well as to viciously ravage those two poor women?”

Cameron didn’t answer. Instead, he dropped back to the beach and walked along at an angle down the gradual slope until he reached wet sand, then carried along the packed sand and pebbles below the high water mark until they were past the castle. He then went back to the pebbles and continued away from the castle, then stopped abruptly. Once more he seemed to be taking something in as if listening or using some sense that MacGraw didn’t have. When he resumed his pace, it was at an angle that led away from the castle, toward the seawall, leading them to the second crime scene.

He paused at the seawall, perched again on its top, staring at the castle, then closing his eyes as if listening or feeling for something.

“He was here to study the approaches to the castle,” Cameron agreed. “Unfortunately for the women, aside from falling victim to his ripper tendencies, they were little more than a convenient meal to him.”

Leaving the beach, Cameron led MacGraw on a course that circled the castle from a distance of barely a hundred meters.

“He was here,” Cameron announced, “but he was more interested in the approach from the sea. Now, if I may, I’d like to see the bodies of his victims.”

The town was small enough that the walk to the morgue covered only half a dozen blocks. Once there, MacGraw didn’t need to show credentials to be admitted to the storage area; he was well-known. An

attendant opened the two drawers, leaving it for Cameron to draw back the sheets.

What came next puzzled the inspector even more than Cameron's prior behaviour. Instead of focusing on the wounds, he all but ignored them. Closing his eyes, he sniffed about the area around the wounds, then closed his eyes and placed his hands where the attacker might have grabbed the women when assaulting them. Once again, he had the look of someone reaching out and feeling with some unknown sense.

"What made that hole in her chest?" MacGraw asked the attendant.

The latter shrugged. "The Medical Examiner doesn't even know. He says it's almost as if someone drove a finger through her chest wall and into the heart, but that's impossible."

MacGraw caught the barest hint of a smile on Cameron's face.

"What? Do you think it's possible?" the inspector asked him.

"It's been done," Cameron replied in a quiet tone. "Our perp could have done it."

"Can you do it?" MacGraw found himself asking, wondering where the impulse came from.

Cameron's only response was a slight shrug and a frown, as if recalling a distasteful memory.

Drawing the sheets back over both bodies, Cameron gave MacGraw a serious glance. "You look like you could use a drink. How about we discuss this at the local pub, my treat?"

MacGraw was surprised. While he hated to consider the possibility, he felt increasingly certain that Cameron was a vampire himself. There was just too much about him that seemed to go beyond the bounds of human behaviour. He pictured Cameron buying him a drink and abstaining from joining him. When they reached the pub, his companion shocked him.

“Do you like whiskey?” he asked. When MacGraw nodded, Cameron turned to the barkeep and said, “Two Glenmorangies, please. One neat.” He glanced at MacGraw.

Astounded, the inspector replied, “With two ounces of water.”

He watched Cameron closely as they took a table near a window. His companion seemed to savour the aroma of the Highland single-malt before taking a slow sip. He held it in his mouth a while, swallowing in increments, as if prolonging his appreciation of the flavour.

So much for existing on blood, he thought. MacGraw, you're making an arse of yourself. Vampires? In this day and age?

“Yes, MacGraw,” Cameron said, leaning in close, catching his eye in the most unnerving manner, “vampires, in this day and age. The day and age have nothing to do with it. It's not like they went out of fashion with the death of Abraham Stoker. They hide beyond a mist of disbelief. They spent centuries weaving a mire of myths about themselves — the more far-fetched, the better. They don't cast reflections, they turn into bats, they are repelled by garlic, they are in a coma while the sun is up, their hearts don't beat — all that nonsense, most of which is physically impossible, serves two purposes: First, if one casts a reflection, has a beating heart, and is seen between sunrise and sunset, then he can't possibly be a vampire. Second, the list is so far-fetched that it makes most people refuse to consider that they might exist at all. Of course, the third advantage is that, in the shock of realizing that the perp attacking you might actually be a vampire, the victim just might waste his time pulling out a crucifix or garlic.”

He drained his Scotch and sat back.

“What did you learn from the bodies?” MacGraw

asked, swallowing half of his drink, letting it wash through him with its warmth.

Cameron seemed to study him before responding. “I caught a residue of the fear he instilled in them, I felt traces of his own residual energy — I’ll know him from that if we ever meet — and I got a glimpse of him from the minds of his victims. They were good girls. One was home on vacation from the University of Edinburgh, the other a shop attendant — a wool shop along the seaside. Both were single, though the lass from the university was in love with another student there. The perp who did this is a monster — rippers are; they can’t help it. He wasn’t satisfied with draining them through the throat; he punctured the second one through the heart, hoping to get more. Canvas the area of the first body. There may be a witness. I think he was interrupted before he could finish. The witness may not be sure of what he saw. As for the perp, I think he’s gone, but I think he’ll be back. He came here for a reason, and the Scholomance is at the heart of it.”

“Why the castle?” MacGraw asked.

Cameron shrugged. “There is another Scholomance, somewhere in Romania. It’s older, with a darker history. It’s reputation is probably why the good father calls this one *that Devil’s school*.”

MacGraw nodded. “Dracula studied there, according to Bram Stoker’s novel.” Seeing Cameron raise an eyebrow, he added, “I’ve probably read it twenty times since I was a lad.”

“Were you born in England or just educated there?”

The question took MacGraw by surprise. “I was born here, well, just down the road a few kilometers. My parents sent me to college in London, then I joined the London Metropolitan Police, becoming a detective — my degree was in criminology, criminal behaviour, and criminal investigations. I also studied some

forensic science. When I had the chance to transfer back here as the principle detective inspector, I took it. What about you? I gather you're Canadian."

Cameron nodded. "My people were originally from Loch Eil, then Aberdeen. I grew up in Nova Scotia — New Scotland. Working with CSIS was almost an accident. Fate determined I'd end up working with Tony — Lord Anthony Dewhurst. He's an old family friend and a distant relative. My father was Detective Inspector for Halifax — that's the chief of detectives over there. When CSIS heard I was working with Tony on cases they considered matters of national security, they sort of conscripted me."

MacGraw found himself liking Cameron more and more. The conversation seemed to show more of a friendly side, less of the darkly serious, almost dangerous side, that MacGraw assumed was persona of the spy.

"So, as a city boy, Anstruther must a quiet change for you."

Cameron smiled. "I'm less of a city boy than you might think; I grew up mostly in smaller cities — Dartmouth, while now municipally part of Halifax, feels more like a town than a city. We're also in the process of getting out of the city. The last time I was home, we bought land in the country, near where we keep our sailboat. We sold our house in the city. Next spring, we'll start building a new place, surrounded by trees."

"And what about our murderer?" It was a standard police tactic: Get the subject talking comfortably about something else, then hit him with the question. It was the best shot at getting a straight answer by catching the subject off guard.

Cameron never batted an eye.

"He's not here. He came to scope out the castle and its approaches from the sea. The women were

incidental — unfortunate for them, nothing to him. You don't want any part of him. Leave him to me. If I find him, I'll do what I do, and the world will be none-the-wiser."

"Just like James Bond?" MacGraw asked.

Cameron's smile had no warmth, and there was a coldness in his eyes. "I even carry a Walther PPK."

"Let me guess:" MacGraw joked, "it shoots little holly stakes."

The cold smile faded. "Holly bullets with a Osmium core, heavy enough to maintain ballistic properties."

MacGraw frowned. "You're serious."

"About as serious as our nervous clerical friend today," he commented.

"The Father? I think he was a bit of a nutter, if you ask me. Does he think Satan is loose in Anstruther? I was sure he was about to start splashing the crime scene with holy water and crumpled crumbs of the Host."

Cameron didn't smile. "Perhaps, from a certain perspective, he's not far from the truth," he suggested. "He's just too inexperienced to realize that holy water and the Host won't work any better than garlic or silver crucifixes. Make no mistake, Inspector MacGraw; a devil of sorts has been in your town, and he came to do evil. I think he was paving the way for something bigger — something directed at the school or me or both."

Mike Cameron walked back to the castle alone, deep in thought. He'd reached out with his mind, encompassing the town and even villages beyond. The vampire was no longer in the area. He could see the man in his mind, images taken from the minds of his dead victims. Some memories lingered in the brain for

days after death, stored in RNA until the molecules finally broke down. He'd know the perp if he ever saw him: tall and lean, wearing a long coat over dress shirt and trousers, with a vest, all black in colour. The hair was brown, as were the eyes. He looked Slavic, possibly Russian, and moved with the graceful motions of a dancer or someone trained in a fluid style of martial arts.

Pulling his iPhone, he called Lord Anthony Dewhurst, activating FaceTime. Like Mike's, Tony's phone was encrypted, provided by their friend Sam Larkin of the CIA.

"Tony," he began, "I've got a situation here."

"So I gather, old man," the Brit replied. "The Yard called me for a reference on you before deciding to have the local inspector call on you."

"We've got a ripper, and not just any psycho vampire. He was only here to study the sea approaches to the castle and its defenses from that direction. The victims were just his supper while in town. He made no effort to hide the bodies; just dumped them where he killed them."

"So he had no intention of lingering in the area; he was just passing through," Tony mused.

"Precisely," Mike agreed.

"And you think the castle is in danger?"

Looking at Tony's face on the screen, he nodded. "I do. No idea what, when, or why, but it'll come from the sea or from the air over the sea."

"Possibly from the air over the sea," Tony offered. "Perhaps some of Borgia and Torok's cronies have located you and want to exact some measure of vengeance."

Mike considered this. "It's possible, though I wish there was a way to leave the school out of it. I'd leave, but that might just mean I'd be elsewhere and safe when the castle is attacked, instead of here to defend

the school and the people here.

“There’s another possibility, though. Olga MacDougall has told me a lot of the history of the school. The original Scholomance, which apparently still exists, is in Romania, near a lake in Transylvania. Stoker mentions it in *Dracula*, insisting that *Dracula* had studied the dark arts there over the centuries. According to legend, every tenth student is the property of the Devil, his price for imparting dark powers to the Scholomance students. It’s assumed that the majority of the teachings there are dark, and for an evil purpose. This Scholomance in Scotland came into being to combat the actions of the other, to watch its members, which eventually led to watching certain more nasty vampires like *Torok*.”

“And you think the original Scholomance might be mounting an attack?”

Mike shrugged. “It’s possible. It’s even possible that some of *Borgia*’s followers have enlisted their aid, exploiting a desire to eradicate this castle in order to bolster their attack on me, possibly even creating a distraction.”

Tony frowned, seeming to stare at Mike from the screen. “What do you feel? What do your Wiccan senses tell you?”

Mike felt a knot in his gut. “That’s it’s all a ploy to get at me; that they’ll attack the students and teachers, wreaking great havoc, then mount a concerted attack on me while I’m defending the place.”

“And when do you think it’ll come?”

Mike shook his head. “If they’re planning with any sense of military precision, it could be in a week or two. Who knows, Tony? They might have everything in place, and this was just one last look before mounting their attack. I have no idea.”

“Trust your instincts, dear boy. You’ve been showing signs of *Heather*’s gift of sight. Be sensitive to

that. I think you'll get a glimpse of what they're going to do before they do it. Do you want me to call Mason? He can have an SAS team on sight in a day."

"And let them sit around for a week or two, getting bored until they decide to go back home just days before the attack finally comes?" Mike argued. "Let's wait 'til I have something more concrete."

Tony looked like he disagreed, but said, "It's your call, Michael. I'm tied up here on a case until after the holidays. If I can wrap it up and break free, I'll join you before New Years. I haven't partaken of a Scottish New Year in decades — can't wait to see you in a kilt."

Mike had just rung off when a dark figure stepped out of the shadows. Mike sensed the presence just before its appearance and wheeled quickly to face the man, smiling at the nervous face.

"Father Guthrie," he greeted. "I wasn't expecting to see you this close to the castle."

"The Devil's work goes on there," the priest declared in a harsh whisper.

"Oh, quite the contrary," Mike assured him. "Druidism stems from a deep love of the earth — a love of nature. It doesn't run contrary to Christianity or any other religion. There are Wiccans who gravitated to it from loss of faith in the Church, but there are also those who see it more as a philosophy, rather like environmentalism. It is the Church, with its initial desire to be the only belief system in Medieval times, that labeled Wiccan practices as linked with the Devil. They simply wanted to stamp out the competition. Your current Pope has a more tolerant view than what you're espousing.

"As we speak, some of the students are decorating for Christmas. Most of the candles burning throughout the castle are red, green, and white. I, myself, was, until recently, a member of the Chancel Choir at my church back home. I still appear as a soloist, when my

schedule permits.”

The priest’s eyes narrowed; he continued to stare at Mike, as if struggling with some dilemma.

“Come in and see for yourself,” Mike invited.

The priest hesitated. “Not today;” he said, “perhaps tomorrow. What would be the earliest convenient time in the afternoon.”

“Any time after 2:30,” Mike said. “How about 3:00 PM?”

Father Guthrie smiled. “Perhaps you can tell people at the castle to expect me.”

“I will,” Mike replied, resisting the urge to laugh. “I doubt if anyone will be shocked or disturbed; I’m sure you’ll be most welcome.”

3: *The Priest*

Dec. 23rd, 2010, 2:00 PM

Father Guthrie swallowed hard as he approached the castle. He was early, but that was his intent. He'd been told about Agent Michael Cameron, but not by the villagers alone. He was sure an angel had spoken to him in a dream about a dark emissary of the Evil One.

"Yes, Mr. Cameron is expecting you," the man who opened the door said — some sort of butler, he supposed — "but you're early. Mr. Cameron never sees anyone until after 2:30."

The priest shook his head. "He was quite specific about 2:00 PM," he lied. "He said to come straight up to his chambers. He said you'd direct me."

The castle caretaker gave a polite smile. "If you'll be so kind as to have a seat here," he gestured to some plush chairs in the entry hall, "I'll have someone check. His chambers are up those stairs, then down the hall to the southeast tower, and up to the top, but you can't go up until I've acquainted Mr. Cameron with your presence, Father. And I'm certain you're mistaken about the time. Mr. Cameron is never available between 11:00 and 2:30."

The man went off, pausing to speak to a servant, then disappeared, presumably to other business.

The moment he was out of sight, Father Guthrie took off up the stairs at a run. Partway up the winding tower stairs, he had to pause, his heart pounding, his lungs gasping for air. He was unused to such exertions.

He had no idea why he was doing this; he simply knew he must. He'd been chosen, the hand of God for this terrible task.

He continued on up, reaching the top chamber. The door was open, but the room — clearly an office — was empty. He turned and retreated one floor to stop at a polished door. Easing it open, he found a small living room or parlour, with an arched door leading to another room, no doubt the bedroom.

He crossed to this door, opening the latch with great caution, eased the door open a crack, and peaked in. He wasn't sure what to expect, perhaps twin coffins in a dark corner. What he found was a normal-looking man, perhaps more pale than the average Scot, lying under the covers, asleep on his back. A woman with medium brown hair, long and wavy, lay on her side, her head pillowed on his chest.

On the man's pillow, paws draped possessively on the man's left shoulder, was a large Siamese cat, glaring at the priest with baleful eyes. As Guthrie approached, the cat emitted a low growl — a deep, guttural sound that made the priest hesitate. The animal seemed about to attack.

It's only a cat, he told himself.

"Shh," he soothed, and, reaching into the inside of his coat, pulled out a sharpened steel spike, imbedded with white wood, the way jewels might be imbedded into an ornamental weapon. When he'd aroused from his vision of epiphany, in which the Lord's messenger had spoken to him, the weapon had been in his hands.

"Shoo," he insisted, trying to backhand the cat away.

He raised the weapon to drive it downward into Cameron's heart. He was certain the heart would not be beating — it would be the still, silent heart of the undead — the demon servant of the Devil.

The snarling cat would not be dismissed. As he

plunged the spike at Cameron's chest, the beast leaped on his back, clawing and biting at his neck, all the while giving voice to the most ferocious snarls.

Just do it! he insisted to himself, trying again to plunge the spike into the chest of his intended victim, but it was as if something was clouding his thought, making him sluggish.

The eyes snapped open — not the human blue eyes he'd seen outside the castle, but impossible vertically-slitted eyes, the eyes of a cat! The shock of those eyes had barely registered when the right hand shot up, imprisoning the priest's wrist in a crushing grip.

The creature sat up, keeping the grip on Guthrie's hand.

"It's okay, Kato," he said in a soothing tone. There was a glimpse of frightening vampire fangs as the monster spoke, but they seemed to recede to normal length, though they still looked sharp.

The cat fell away from the priest, returning to the head of the bed, as if to protect the woman.

The man was on his feet now, bare chest displaying the musculature of an Olympic swimmer, his lower extremities covered by a pair of black pajama bottoms. He thought of him as a man, now, not a monster. He had no choice; the thought seemed forced into his head.

The man asked no questions; there was no need. Like a wind tearing through trees, the mind seemed to invade his, taking whatever he wanted to know. His vision of rapture was replayed. This time, however, the glowing white form of God's messenger was replaced by a dark figure with a cruel smile. Long, almost unruly hair, parted slightly to the left of center, framed a thin, cruel face. The figure wore a long, dark coat over a black vest and black shirt and trousers.

"You will find a way to enter Agent Michael Cameron's lair at the castle and drive this spike into his

heart,” the apparition had said. “You will be doing God’s work. Cameron is a servant of the Dark One.”

He then saw a flood of action: evil creatures, vampires, terrorizing people, desecrating a church, killing and torturing the innocent. Amid all these scenes was Michael Cameron, tracking down and destroying these evil monsters, though a monster himself.

“There are humans who are mass-murderers,” Cameron’s voice said in his head. “Does that make you a monster? So it is with vampires. It is a virus that changes us. We have no choice about the change — we change or we die in the process, unable to change. What choice we do have is how we live out the rest of our existence. The virus makes us more: more strong, more fast, more good, more evil, more talented. Whatever we were as humans, we become more. I was one who always sought to help others. I still am. That’s why I work for my country’s government, doing what mortal humans cannot.”

Cameron smiled. *Wait in the living room; I’ll be with you directly.* It wasn’t an invitation; it was a command. The priest obeyed.

Mike pulled on clothes, slipped the harness for his Walther PPK over his shoulders, and went out to the sitting room, where the priest awaited. Taking a chair opposite the man, he took a moment to study the spike before speaking. Someone knew what they were doing. The spike had been honed needle-sharp on the end, and was embedded with chips of holly. It would have entered his chest with effort from even a thin man like Father Guthrie, the holly paralyzing his entire body once it made contact with his heart.

There was no need to question the priest; his rifling of the priest’s thoughts had told him everything. He’d

encountered the ripper. The vampire had hypnotized him, planting the ‘vision’ of seeing a messenger from God, instructing the priest to kill Michael with this deadly implement.

So it’s me this vampire seeks to attack, not the school, he thought, yet the notion that the school was in danger persisted.

“Have you always regarded this *Scholomance* as a school for Satanists?” he asked.

Guthrie gave a slow shake of his head. “No; I think that’s recent. Most of the students I’ve ever encountered have been polite. A few have attended mass.”

“So this compulsive conviction stems from your vision of this ‘messenger’?”

“I think so,” Father Guthrie said. His tone was dull, evincing Mike’s control over him.

“What did he say about the school?”

“That the judgement of God would be visited upon the school.”

Mike frowned. *So, it’s not just me; the school will come under attack.* “When.”

“Soon. He didn’t say when.”

Mike sighed. “Come with me.”

He tossed the spike on a table and led the priest downstairs and into the great hall, where younger students — late teens through to late twenties — were busy decorating the walls and setting up a huge Christmas tree.

“Michael!” a dark-haired woman in her late thirties called out. “You’re down early. Is Carrie still resting?”

Mike nodded to Petra. “I’m sure she’ll be down later. How is Tiela?”

The Romanian shook her head. “The kittens are fine, but the mother is failing. The vet thinks she has a heart defect. Tiela is heart-broken and von’t leave them.”

Mike sighed. A little girl, Petra's daughter, ran over to him.

"Hello, Michael," she greeted. "We are decorating for Christmas. I am putting together manger scene over by tree."

Mike caught the priest's eye, then said, "What manger scene is that?"

"Baby Jesus, silly," the little girl chided. "Christmas is his birthday."

Mike nodded. "Is anyone helping you?"

"Several wanted to, but I want to do it myself — I'm big enough."

Mike smiled and touched her cheek. "You most certainly are."

He looked back at Father Guthrie. "Any black candles? Any inverted crosses or Satanic symbols?" he asked.

The Father shook his head. "Perhaps I needed to see a new perspective."

"You know, Father," Mike continued. "historians think Jesus was born in the spring — all those lambs and baby animals in the manger would have been older by the onset of winter. If Jesus were a Pisces, it would make his use of the fish symbol make even more sense. The Romans set Christmas during Yule because Yule celebrated the triumph of light over dark — good over evil. The use of evergreens was to pay tribute to the survival of life — green life — at a time when nature was dormant for the winter. They were celebrating the optimism of spring returning.

"As for witchcraft, why is it when Jesus healed a leper, it was a miracle, but, when a witch heals someone, it's the work of the Devil? The Devil seemed to be helping a lot of women (and men) do good deeds during the middle ages. I would have expected bad things from him. Maybe that was just the Church's need to discredit and vilify anyone who could do

something they couldn't — anyone who competed with them."

Mike extended a hand toward a nearby candle, relaxed, and pulled the flame across the intervening space into his hand. The wick smoked a moment, then went still. The flame flickered on his palm.

He watched with amusement as Father Guthrie took a step back, eyes wide, then crossed himself.

"I don't worship the Devil, Father; I usually seek to do good in the world, to rid it of those who would do evil. If God didn't want me to do this, I'm sure he'd find a way to stop me. So, perhaps this skill comes from Him." With a gesture, he shot the flame back at the candle, relighting it.

"Look around you. What you see are happy faces looking forward to a festive day with friends, whom most regard as family.

"The vampire you thought was God's messenger is the very ripper who killed those two innocent women. I hunt his kind. That's why he tried to set you against me, to get me out of his way. I'm a threat to him. If he returns, do your best to avoid him."

He walked the priest to the door, then grabbed his coat and walking staff, and went outside himself. He needed to walk off his tension. In spite of how things had worked out with Father Guthrie, the man had tried to impale Mike with a stake. Carrie could have been next. He found it unsettling, to say the least.