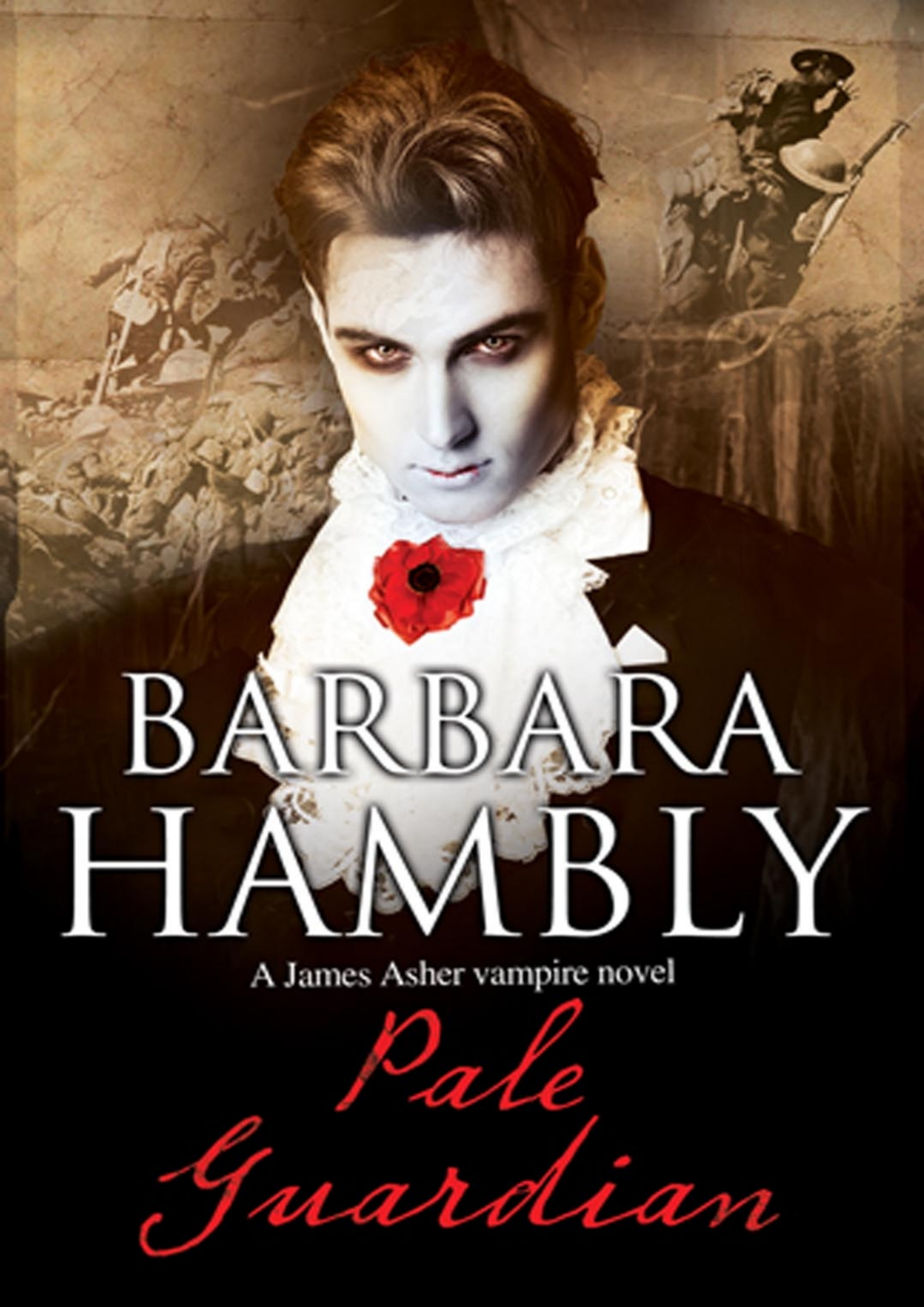
BARBARA
HAMBLY
A James Asher vampire novel
Pale
Guardian

Contents

Cover
A Selection of Recent Titles by Barbara Hambly
Title Page
Copyright
Dedication

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Chapter Sixteen
Chapter Seventeen
Chapter Eighteen
Chapter Nineteen
Chapter Twenty
Chapter Twenty-One
Chapter Twenty-Two
Chapter Twenty-Three
Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven

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PALE GUARDIAN

A James Asher vampire novel

Barbara Hambly

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Except where actual historical events and characters are being described for the storyline of this novel, all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely coincidental.

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For Robin

ONE

‘Don’t go out there—’

Dr Lydia Asher turned as a weak hand plucked at her skirt.

By the light of her lantern the young soldier’s face was drawn with pain and chalky with loss of blood. The single eye that had survived the shrapnel when a German shell had struck the forward trench blinked up at her with desperate intensity.

‘It’s all right,’ Lydia whispered. ‘You’re safe here, Brodie.’ It was astounding how many peoples’ names she managed to remember, now that she wore her spectacles full-time. Around them the long tent was silent, the wounded men sleeping. For the first time in nearly a week, the road eastward from the camp was quiet, the surgical tent, across the way, dark. Northward, in the direction of Ypres, she could still hear the guns. It was March of 1915. ‘We’re all—’

The young man shook his head. ‘She’s walkin’ tonight, M’am. I seen her look into the tent. The *bean sí* …’

‘Shhh.’ Lydia leaned over him, marveling that he was alive at all – she’d assisted Major Overstreet yesterday in removing nearly two pounds of wood and metal fragments from the boy’s chest – and gently straightened the blanket; the night was bitterly cold. ‘It isn’t a banshee.’

‘It is, M’am,’ insisted Brodie, his voice barely a breath, in his pain still mindful of others who slept nearby. ‘I seen her in the trenches, just before the Germans came on. The other men have seen her, too. She wears a nursin’ sister’s uniform but she’s none of them here at the station, her eyes is like a cat’s in the dark. Wait till she’s gone by, M’am. ’Tis the worst sort of bad luck to see her.’

‘I’ll be all right.’ She made a move to disengage her sleeve from the grasping fingers, but his eye pleaded with her.

‘You think I’m off me head but I’m not. I really have seen her, down the trenches, in the dead of the night. Me mates say they’ve seen her near the aid stations, an’ the clearin’ stations like this one—’

Quietly, Lydia said, ‘She doesn’t come into the wards like this one. You and your mates—’ her glance took in the other men, shapeless lumps beneath

the blankets in the frowsty darkness – ‘will go back to hospital tomorrow. It isn’t you she comes for.’ She pushed up the white cuff of her VAD uniform – the best the Medical Corps could come up with for her, as she was neither a nursing sister nor a surgeon – and showed him the four stout lines of silver chain around her wrist. ‘Silver keeps them away, you know. I’ll be perfectly all right.’

His eye was slipping closed and his head, in its swathe of bandages, sagged back onto the thin pillow. ‘Does she come for the dyin’, then? That’s a *bean sí,* isn’t it? And if I seen her walkin’ …’

‘Just because you saw her,’ murmured Lydia gently, ‘doesn’t mean she’s coming for you. You rest now, Mr Brodie. I promise. You’ll be all right, and I’ll be all right. You’ll be moved back to hospital in the morning.’ *If they have enough ambulances and enough petrol and enough drivers for the less desperate cases, and if the Germans don’t decide to shell the Calais road again …*

He slid into sleep even as she stepped away from his cot. When she reached the tent-flaps at the far end of the ward, she lowered the flame on her lantern as far as she could, and adjusted a sheet of tin around the glass chimney, such as the wire-cutting parties sometimes used, or the bearers out searching for the wounded. After eleven days in the gutted village of Pont-Sainte-Félicité Lydia was sure enough of her way around the casualty clearing station to at least not bump into walls or fall into either the gaping cellars of bombed houses or the shelled-out labyrinth of abandoned German trenches that surrounded the town.

She pushed up her spectacles to rub her eyes.

She had swabbed the last of the blood from the fluoroscope table that was her charge, checked to see that the machine itself was disconnected from the generator wires, and put back in their places the clumsy lead apron and gloves that she insisted on wearing (to the annoyance of the surgeons: ‘It’s not a bloomin’ death ray, M’am! We’ve got men dying in here!’). She’d sent her assistant, a slow-speaking Welshman named Dermott, to bed some hours before, when he’d started making mistakes owing to the fact that like herself he’d been awake since yesterday morning. Everything that was left to do, Lydia was reasonably certain, could wait until daylight.

Except this.

This had to be done while darkness yet covered the land.

The thing that Brodie had seen (*How DARE she come peeking into the tents!*) she didn’t worry much about, though nothing living stirred in the camp now except the ever-present rats.

As she had intimated to Brodie, in such proximity to the Moribund Ward, where nearly two hundred men lay irreclaimably dying – not to speak of the lines of trenches to the east – she, and he, and all the men in his ward, were almost certainly safe.

She touched the thick links of silver that protected her wrists, and the further chains that lay over the big blood vessels of her throat, and reflected with a kind of tired irony that she stood in the one place in all of Europe where she could be fairly sure that she was not going to be attacked by vampires.

The silence outside was like death, save for the not-very-far-off thunder of the guns.

With her lantern hooded, her eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness. Those who hunted the night in nearly every city of the world were well used to turning aside the eyes of the living. They would assume that she, too, believed the simple mental tricks that shielded them from human notice – that she was merely making some routine round – and would not slip away when they heard the damp scrunch of her footsteps.

But she was aware of what she sought, and so could sometimes see past their illusions. Over the past week and a half – at least before the mad avalanche of wounded had begun to pour in six days previously – or was it seven? – she had been able to catch glimpses of them, and had kept a list. *Tall dark woman, big nose. Stout man, sleek dark hair. Tall blonde man, square face. Small blonde woman, beautiful …*

Those were only the ones she'd seen. She knew there were others.

Hundreds, certainly. Thousands, perhaps.

Would Jamie, her husband back in Oxford with their three-year-old daughter, recognize some of them? *Probably*. He knew more of them by sight than she did, though she was certain that on her second night here she'd glimpsed Elysée de Montadour, the Master vampire of Paris.

At a guess, every vampire in Europe was here in Flanders, or further south along the line of trenches that stretched from the Channel to the Alps. Most of them would be lurking around the hospitals. With far less courage than the stretcher-bearers, they only ventured into no man's land itself in the dead hours of the night, if at all. Men and women who had chosen to murder others rather than face whatever lay on the far side of death weren't about to run the risk of encountering a raiding party, or being caught in a sudden barrage of shells, or becoming entangled in barbed wire that would hold them until the sun rose and ignited their pale and bloodless flesh.

Not when there was easier prey a few miles off.

The shattered walls of a ruined cottage provided her with concealment. Her lantern's hooded glimmer touched broken rafters, charred spills of bricks, gaping cellars. Most of the furniture – and many of the bricks – had been looted within hours of the clearing station's establishment in Pont-Sainte-Félicité (she herself had bagged a kitchen table for Dermott's makeshift developing station). She strained her ears as she moved from room to room, until she heard a flickering whisper and stepped close to one of the blown-out windows.

And there they were. Six feet from the window, themselves taking advantage of the walls of a ruined house to survey the hospital tents which glowed very faintly in the darkness, from the lanterns within. Their reflective eyes caught dim shreds of light that shone through the cracks of the hastily-erected wooden mess huts. The tall, dark woman with the big nose, and two men – the taller man strong-built, with fair, receding hair, the smaller, slender and dark. Both men wore British uniforms; the woman, a black dress that blended with the night. Their flesh was almost milk-white, and they stood so close to the window that she could see the woman's hands were armed with inch-long claws. Were it not for the stillness of the blighted town Lydia wouldn't have heard the wind-whisper voices. Flemish? Italian? Lydia knew that vampires had come to the Front from as far away as Sicily, Edinburgh, Athens.

She blinked – her eyes were aching, she had spent twenty hours out of the past twenty-four either taking x-ray photographs of bleeding men or helping out in the surgical tent – and when she looked back they were gone.

'Bother,' she muttered, and moved on.

Not what she was seeking.

Still her heart quickened with terrified dread.

What she sought, she had seen seven nights ago, the night before the big push at Neuve Chapelle. Every night, every day, in the surgical tent and the fluoroscope room and in her dreams when she'd collapse at odd hours to snatch some sleep, she'd fought recurring dread – *I have to find out what was happening. I have to see if it happens again …*

It took her about two hours to circle the collection of medical tents, wooden huts and mule-lines, meticulously careful to look about her as if she were simply checking the area for spies or deserters or for Quartermaster's Storeman Pratt out making deals for the Army rations he stole and sold to civilians on the side. She saw three more vampires: one in the ruined houses of the village – the slim woman with soft cascades of light-brown hair whom she'd seen last week, Lydia recalled – and two down in the caved-in horrors of the deserted German trenches, wearing dark civilian clothes and

whispering to one another in German. The language didn't trouble her. Plenty of Swiss spoke German, not to mention French Rhinelanders. In any case, she knew quite well that once a living man or woman crossed into the kingdom of the damned, they generally lost all interest in the affairs of the living.

To the vampire, the war – and the battle zone – meant one thing only.

The deserted trenches around the village were horrible. They swarmed with rats, reeked of the German soldiers buried when English shells had caved in their dugouts. Five months at the Front hadn't cured Lydia of her morbid horror of the vermin. Carrying her lantern low so that its light wouldn't be seen above, she had to hold up her skirts in the other hand as she picked her way down the side of a shell-crater, and into the zigzag pits. The water down there was almost knee-deep and freezing cold, and her feet groped to stay on the duckboards down under the surface. The mud beneath them would be like quicksand.

She didn't see the thing she'd seen the previous week. Stumbling with weariness – *I HAVE to find out … What if there's another push tomorrow and it's another five days before I can watch again?* – she scrambled up the broken trench ladder she'd scouted out the week before.

I HAVE to find out …

A rung of the ladder snapped soggily beneath her foot. She dropped the lantern, grabbed for support, and a hand came down from the darkness above and grasped hers, cold with the cold of a dead man's. The iron-strong fingers tipped with inch-long claws.

She was drawn up over the parapet of sandbags at the top with the effortless strength of the Undead.

'Mistress,' a voice murmured, 'when first you came to this place, for two nights did you walk thus, but I thought you had given the practice o'er. You shall come to grief at it.'

Lydia shook out her muddied skirts and propped her thick-lensed spectacles more firmly onto the bridge of her nose. 'I thought all the vampires were out making a feast of the wounded.' Her voice cracked a little, at the memory of poor Brodie, of all the men in the ward. She realized she was shaking with weariness. 'Either here or up in the front-line trenches—'

'What would you, Mistress?' returned the voice reasonably. 'When the shelling is done, and the dying lie in the mud of the battleground where the guns have left them, where none will reach them? When men die in their blood waiting for an ambulance that will never come? We feed upon blood, lady. We feed upon death. The whole of Flanders, the whole of the Rhineland, the whole of the Front glows with sustenance such as we are, in time of peace, are obliged to ration, sip by sip, lest our existence be suspected. Can you

blame those who exist by absorbing the life-force of the living, for being drawn to such a banquet?'

'Yes!' Lydia tried to pull her arm free of his steadying grip. She staggered in her exhaustion and would have fallen had cold arms not caught her, thin as whalebone and steel, and lifted her bodily. 'I can. I do. It's so unfair …'

'You are frozen,' said Don Simon Ysidro's soft voice. 'And spent. And I promised James that I would look after you here in Flanders.'

'He'd never have accepted such a promise—'

'Nevertheless I gave it.' To his near-soundless whisper still clung the accents of sixteenth-century Spain, whence he had journeyed, a living man, to the court of the queen whom the English called Bloody Mary. He had encountered the Master of London among the stones of an English churchyard one dark night, and never returned to his home. 'And you will come to grief not from the kindred of darkness,' he went on, as he bore her toward the tents, 'but from getting your feet wet in cold such as this, or from encountering that pestilent creature who peddles ammunition and food and heating-oil to the local peasants – to the poor Germans, too, belike.'

'Storeman Pratt.' She relaxed suddenly, and rested her head on the vampire's thin shoulder. 'You're perfectly right, Don Simon, he probably *would* kill a nurse who surprised him at it. Or at least make up some frightful crime and then blackmail me about it.'

Beneath her cheek she felt the sturdy wool of an epaulet, and guessed that he, too, had adopted the uniform of a British officer – *Procured from Mr Pratt himself, I daresay!* – which no observer, if they *did* spot him, would dare question. He probably had impeccable papers, too – *Very likely purchased from the same source!* She felt beaten, her anger denied and deflected, lost in the greater rage at the greater deaths about which she could do nothing. Her mind touched briefly on the young Yorkshireman who'd died on her x-ray table … *Was that this morning? Yesterday afternoon?* On poor Brodie, whose x-ray had showed her that he would almost certainly have his legs amputated once he reached the base hospital at Calais. On another boy – barely seventeen, he'd looked – she'd checked with Captain Calvert in the surgical tent, sobbing for his mother and so riddled with shrapnel that he'd been set gently aside, so that men whose lives *could* be saved could be operated on first.

You're dying anyway, we have no time to save you …

Shuttling desperately between her fluoroscope machine and the surgical tent where every trained hand was needed, she hadn't even had time to go back and see that youth before he died.

Tears that she hadn't been able to shed closed her throat. More than anything else, she wanted to be with Jamie at this moment. To be back in Oxford and out of this place of stink and death and cold. *I'm just tired,* she told herself firmly. *I'll feel better when I've had some sleep …*

Don Simon Ysidro was a vampire. There had been times, in the eight years of their acquaintance, when she had hated him – for what he was, for what she knew that he did and had done in the centuries since his non-death. There had been times when she'd felt herself falling in love with him – despite her unswerving love for the tall, leathery Lecturer in Philology at New College, Oxford whom she had adored with the whole of her heart since the age of fourteen.

But Jamie was back in Oxford, still recuperating, slowly, from the pneumonia that had nearly killed him in the first month of the war.

And she was here, in the darkness, feeling the thready pale spider-silk of Ysidro's long hair brush against her forehead, and hearing the guns.

She said, 'Someone else is out there looking for vampires.'

'Are they, indeed?'

The smell of latrines, of the hospital tents, of cook-tent smoke and makeshift stoves surrounded them like a fuggy embrace. Ysidro stooped and canvas brushed her face as they entered the nurses' tent, a barely-visible bulk in the darkness. One of the VAD's she shared with would be on the ward at this hour of the night; the other slept like an unwaking corpse. A tiny flicker of light as Ysidro kindled the lantern next to her bed showed her the vampire's face, thin, aquiline, pale as white silk, framed in a loose mane of colorless hair and illuminated by eyes that had, in life, probably been hazel. They'd bleached now to a cold sulfurous yellow, faintly pleated with gray – he'd told her once that this 'bleaching' occasionally happened to vampires, no one quite knew why. The mental illusion that kept her from noticing his fangs also kept Sister Violet Brickwood from waking, not that the poor woman *would* stir, after twenty hours on her feet …

Ysidro pulled Lydia's shoes and stockings off her, and wrapped her feet in the blanket of her cot. Then he dipped water from the jerrycan in the corner and poured it into the kettle, which he placed on the heating-stove.

'I saw her a week ago … no, longer …' Lydia shook her head. 'The second night we were here.'

'Ah.' She thought he did some mental calculation, placing the night in his mind.

'After I finished setting up the fluoroscope room I walked the perimeter of the camp. When we were back at Givenchy – before the clearing station was moved here – I knew there were vampires all around the camp, every night.

I'd glimpse them between the tents, and some of the men have seen them, too. They don't know what they are.'

'Did you look for me?'

'I couldn't imagine you'd let anyone see you.'

A smile touched a corner of his mouth, turned his face suddenly human, a living man's, and young. 'You had the right of it, Mistress. Yet you did not make a practice of such patrols at Givenchy.'

'Once I knew they were there, I didn't really see the point.' Lydia propped her spectacles again. 'I mean, I knew they wouldn't attack the nurses, or the surgeons, or really anyone but the dying. Why cause themselves problems when there are so many easier victims? That sounds horrible, but when I thought about it – and about how few of us there were to take care of the wounded and how terrible the casualties were – that was during the fighting at Ypres – I came to the conclusion that I could probably save more lives by getting a few hours more sleep, instead of chasing vampires whom I knew I'd never catch. I don't …' she stammered. 'I don't mean that, exactly, but …'

'You chose rightly, lady.' He held up a hand. 'And you did a hero's work at Givenchy, and here. I have watched you.'

She brushed his compliment aside with tears of shame in her eyes.

'There was no right choice,' his soft voice insisted. 'More men lie in the Moribund Ward, and in the trenches themselves, than would suffice to glut the greediest of the Undead, were there five times more of us here than there are. We have no need to trouble even those men who can be saved, ere you load them into the ambulance-wagons. Our business is with the dying. 'Tis not we, these days, who deal out death.'

'I know.' She took off her glasses to wipe her tears. 'It doesn't mean you aren't monsters.'

'The vileness of my condition is old news to me, lady.' He measured cocoa from its tin (*Where would a vampire learn to make cocoa?*) into her mug, and stirred the hot water in. 'I admit, 'tis not the future I envisioned for myself when I studied my catechism with the Christian Brothers in Toledo. Yet you have not told me how you came to resume your practice of walking the night?'

'I just … wanted to get some idea of the local vampire population.' The thick pottery was God's blessing against her chilled hands. 'Though I knew they'd followed the clearing station down here. But the second night, in the ruins of the village, I saw another woman, moving about like me with her lantern hooded. I thought she might have been a spy when first I saw her light – I suppose there are local women, who think the Germans ought to own this part of France, or even German women who've been slipped across the lines.

I closed my lantern entirely and followed her, and it became pretty clear to me that she was doing exactly what I did the first night: she circled the camp at a distance, and checked the bombed-out German trenches. She – we – glimpsed vampires twice, and she stood off at a distance, fingering something she wore at her neck, a silver cross or something of the kind, I assume. She kept watch around the ward tents of the men especially. A spy wouldn't do that.'

'No.' He settled himself on the foot of Nurse Danvers's empty bed, folded slim hands around his knee.

Lydia frowned across at him in the lantern-light. He was attired, as she'd surmised, in the trimly tailored uniform of a staff colonel in the British Expeditionary Force. 'Have you seen her?'

'I have,' returned Ysidro. 'At all events I have seen a young woman with a lantern, stealing about the ruins of the village, and down in the abandoned trenches. This was ere the battle started: brunette, and smaller of stature than yourself, though broader in shoulder and hip. Her clothes were dark, and she might well have worn a silver crucifix about her neck – something silver, at all events.'

Lydia touched the chains around her own throat again self-consciously: enough silver to burn a vampire's mouth or hands, to give her a split-second in which to wrench free, to scream, to run …

As if anyone could outrun the Undead.

And unless the crucifix was of nearly-pure silver, it would have no more effect on a vampire than would any other pendant of similar metal content.

'Did she speak to any of the vampires?'

'Not that I have observed. She has not your familiarity with those who hunt the night, Mistress. She seeks, but cannot find. At least, 'twas so ere the casualties started coming in such numbers. Since the fighting started on the tenth I have not seen her.'

'Have you any idea who she is?'

He shook his head, or came as near to doing so as she had ever seen him, a slight motion more of his eyes than his head, as if in the centuries since his death he had lost interest in communication with the living. 'Yet I saw none but yourself engaging in such behavior at Givenchy. And none of the vampires to whom I've spoken, either here or nearer the lines, have mentioned any like matter. I admit I have not joined the groups that go out into the trenches, or into no man's land in the dead of the night. Peasants.' The two smallest fingers of his right hand flicked in a gesture of concentrated scorn. 'Without manners or conversation, most of them. I shall enquire.'

'Thank you,' said Lydia. 'I appreciate it. I'd like very much to know if others – elsewhere along the Front, for instance – are also trying to … to

meet, and speak with, vampires, or if this is just something, someone, local. I don't expect, when the battle itself was going on, that the woman I saw could get away from wherever she was. Or possibly didn't dare.'

'Given the likelihood that one side or the other might break through the lines, or that shelling might commence anywhere at any time,' remarked the vampire, taking the empty mug from her hands, 'I myself would hesitate to venture far from shelter. I understand the Venetian nest foregathered in the chateau at present occupied by the Master of Prague and his fledglings, for a session of *écarté* which lasted through three nights.'

'What did they play for?' A dreadful question to ask an Undead multiple murderer, but she really did want to know. 'I mean, do you play for money? Do you *have* money? The Bank of France froze all withdrawals at the start of the fighting.'

Ysidro looked down his highbred nose. 'One of the first lessons one learns, Mistress, when one becomes vampire, is never to let oneself be caught without money.' He came back to her cot-side and drew the blankets up over her. 'The second lesson one learns is how to obtain it – anywhere, and under nearly any circumstances. Those who do not learn such lessons in general do not survive. Thus under ordinary conditions, money means very little to the Undead. The gamblers at the chateau played, I understand, for credit-vowels, much like the surgeons and the orderlies play here. Had I known you sought information regarding this enterprising vampire-seeker I would have arranged to attend: such gatherings are clearing houses for gossip, and do not take place often.'

He tucked the blankets in around her, for the tent, though stuffy-smelling, was deeply cold. 'Sleep now,' he ordered, took her spectacles from her hand and placed them on the up-ended packing crate at her side. 'Morn will come soon enough.'

I shouldn't take comfort in his presence, she thought. *He's going to leave here and go straight across to the Moribund Ward …*

I shouldn't feel glad to know that he's near.

She stopped herself from catching at his hand, and only asked, 'Where were you? I mean, why weren't you playing cards and trading gossip—? The Master of Prague has a *chateau*? *HERE*?'

'You would expect him perhaps to sleep in a dugout?' One eyebrow lifted, and through a haze of myopia she saw again – or imagined – that his face for a moment became the face of the man he had been, almost three hundred and sixty years ago. And then, more quietly, 'I was watching over you, Mistress.'

And where were YOU sleeping? During the shelling, and the confusion, and the constantly shifting dangers, any one of which could trap a vampire

aboveground when the first light of dawn would ignite his flesh and engulf him in flame …

Instead she asked, ‘Do you know what this woman wants?’

‘I expect—’ he turned down the lantern – ‘nothing good.’

TWO

Colonel Stewart shut the buff folder on his desk with a little hiss of annoyance, and scowled across at James Asher as if what he'd read there were all Asher's fault. 'Damn medicos won't clear you for service till you can run three times round Piccadilly Circus and shin up the Monument with a rope. Got no idea there's a war on and we need every man.'

Asher suspected that the damn medicos, up to their hairlines in shattered and dying men, were as cognizant of the war as Stewart was and were seeing it a damn sight closer. But he only returned, 'I can't say I'm surprised. Or entirely disappointed. Just coming down here knocked me out. I'd hoped to go back up to Oxford tonight and I'm staying in town instead.'

'You look perfectly fit to me,' grumbled the colonel, rising to show Asher from his office. 'Damnit, man, you'd only be sitting in a cell with a lot of Jerries listening to 'em talk! How hard can it be?'

Asher, who'd had three relapses of pneumonia since his return to Oxford in September – after nearly dying of it in Paris – reflected that the last thing his lungs needed was to be surrounded by forty German prisoners of war, all coughing themselves blue. He made noises of commiseration, shook hands and promised to notify the War Office the minute he was fully recovered, and descended the steps of the rambling labyrinth on Whitehall feeling as if he'd personally swum the Channel after battling half a regiment of Roman gladiators, single-handed and armed with a golf club.

Definitely in no shape to deal with Paddington station and two hours standing in the corridor of an overcrowded railway car, much less a trip to the Front.

A younger man – and on that cold March night, though not quite fifty Asher felt like a septuagenarian at least – would have leapt at the chance, if not for glory then because his beautiful young wife, Lydia, was also at the Front. But seventeen years on Her Majesty's Secret Service had cured Asher once and for all of any possible craving for glory, and of even a moment's belief that if such a thing as glory existed (something he had always very much doubted) it could be achieved in war. And though he would without hesitation – even at his age (or the age which he felt) – have re-swum the

Channel and fought those hypothetical Roman gladiators a second time with his seven iron in the hopes of even an hour in Lydia's astonishing company, he was sufficiently familiar with the workings of the War Office to know that were he to volunteer to gather information from captured German prisoners, he would undoubtedly be assigned to do so in Serbia, not Flanders. (Lydia's letters were censored but before her departure last November they had worked out a dot code, so he knew she was in Pont-Sainte-Félicité, near Neuve Chapelle.)

Whitehall was nearly dark. The pavement was thick with foot traffic from the government offices, though it was close to seven. Asher's years of sneaking in and out of foreign countries with information about naval emplacements, border fortifications and orders for new weaponry had given him a permanent watchfulness of all those around him, an awareness of faces and details of dress which, in Berlin or Vienna, could mean the difference between making it back to his hotel safely and being found dead in a storm drain. Thus, despite the swift-thickening twilight, he was very much aware that most of the men hastening to catch the 7:10 from Charing Cross had white or grizzled hair beneath their Homburg hats, and that the home-going crowd – thinner by half than it had been the year before – was at least a third female. Women and older men moved to take up the positions of men at the Front.

Or of the men who'd gone to the Front six months ago and were already dead.

Buildings loomed against the cinder sky like a black necropolis. Since January, when German Zeppelins had rained bombs on coastal towns, the government's orders to black out windows and streetlamps had assumed a new seriousness – Asher had read recently of a movement afoot to drain the Serpentine and the lake in St James's Park, lest the glitter of moonlight on their waters serve as a guide to the night raiders. Though the traffic – both motorcars and horse-drawn – was far lighter these days, Trafalgar Square was a nightmare of jostling dark shapes swimming through the gloom, and had Asher not known the place like the back of his hand he would not have been able to locate the Underground station. Below ground the lights were bright, but the crowds were such – reduced bus service and an almost total absence of cabs more than made up for the shortage of men in city offices – that Asher had a long wait for a train to Bloomsbury.

By the time he reached the small lodging house near Euston Station his head was swimming with fatigue. He had already telegraphed Mrs Grimes – the cook back at the Oxford house – that he wouldn't be home, and briefly toyed with the notion of sending a second wire to bid Miranda a special good-

night. At three, and with her mother now gone, his daughter set great store by good-night kisses, even by remote proxy. But the extreme likelihood that the Oxford Post Office wouldn't deliver the greeting until the following morning put the idea from his mind, and he ascended five flights of stairs to what had been the servants' quarters of the tall, narrow house – rooms of any kind were another thing extremely difficult to come by in London in the spring of 1915 – and dropped onto the cot in the penitential little chamber without undressing.

This turned out to be a fortunate circumstance, because twenty minutes later the landlady's daughter thumped loudly on the door with the news that a message had come from the War Office, and it looked to be important.

It was from Colonel Stewart, begging him to return. Sir Collin Hayward of Intelligence was on his way to Paris first thing in the morning, but having heard that Asher was in town, wanted very much to speak to him about assisting in the vetting and training of agents to be sent to the Continent.

Asher roundly cursed both Stewart and Sir Collin, but resumed his coat, tightened his tie (which he hadn't taken off – tired as he was, he assumed he'd have slept in it), and made his way downstairs and back to the Underground.

He spent the next three and a half hours in conference with Sir Collin, who, to do him justice, looked like he hadn't had more than a few hours' sleep in the past week.

Then because of a breakdown on the Northern line – it was past midnight, and the Underground nearly empty – Asher had to take the Piccadilly line and walk back to Grafton Place from King's Cross. And, owing to the completely unlighted condition of the streets, and a moderately thick fog which had settled over the city, he found himself, uncharacteristically, lost.

This was what he was doing, wandering among the nameless streets east of King's Cross Station, when he encountered the revenant.

The fog confused the way sounds carried from the railway yards. It was too dark, even, to see the street signs, many of which seemed to have been taken down or taped over (in an effort his landlady had told him to thwart German spies). Likewise it was difficult to determine in which direction Regent's Canal lay. In places the fog was thick enough – reeking with the smoke of the munitions factories across the river – that Asher had to feel his way along the house walls and area railings. He could only be glad that at this hour, nobody was operating a motorcar, not that anyone in this neighborhood (if he was where he thought he was) could afford such a luxury (or the petrol to put in it) …

Then he smelled it. Sudden, rank and horrible, like rotting fish and the urine of rats mixed with the peculiarly horrible stench that oozes from human

beings who have washed neither their bodies nor their clothing for months on end. Unmistakable.

He had smelled it in Peking, two years before. A thousand times stronger, for the things had been forty and sixty strong by the time their hive was destroyed. Don Simon Ysidro had told him that the only other place where such monsters were to be found was Prague, where they had spawned and multiplied for nearly three centuries in the old Roman sewers beneath that city. *The Others*, Ysidro had called them, though they were related, in some way, to vampires. Undead, mindless, nearly impossible to kill, they would devour anything they could catch, and presumably lived for much of the time upon rats, with whose minds they had a curious affinity.

Here.

In London …

Shock and horror smote him like a physical blow.

Damnit—

Horror chilled him.

In London …

Listening intently, he could hear it, a slow soft dragging as the stink grew stronger. *The canal can't be more than a hundred yards off*. The Others hid under the bridges in Prague, when night cloaked that city. Down in the bed of the rivers, and in half-flooded sewer vaults, for their flesh would slowly dissolve from exposure to sunlight.

Their minds – if they could be said to have such things – were joined by a sort of mental telepathy, something the older vampires were adept at, though no vampire, so far as he knew, could control the actions of the Others.

And their condition, like that of the vampires, was spread by 'corruption of the blood'.

The vampires, whose mental powers of illusion were lessened by the movement of running water, kept away from them. Lydia had written to him months ago of the vampires at the Front: *Are these things there as well?*

One could reason with vampires.

Not with the Others.

The Others, one could only flee from, and the thought of such things at large in London iced him to the marrow.

Asher felt his way along the wall – the brick gritty under his fingers – until he reached the corner he knew had to be nearby. The smell nearly made him gag. A faint *plish* of water, around the corner to his left. By the feel of the broken pavement underfoot he guessed this was an alley. A few feet further on he trod in something squishy that smelled of rotten vegetables. Ahead, the slight metallic rattle as the Other brushed a dustbin.

Then the furious squeal of a captured rat, followed by the sudden pong of blood. The rat shrieked again – being eaten alive, presumably – and there was a loud clang as either another rat, or a cat, fled the scene in panic. Yellow light bleared suddenly in the fog with a man's shape silhouetted against it:

''Ere, then, what's … *Bloody 'ell*!'

Pressed to the brick of the alley wall, Asher was shocked at how close he stood to the thing, close enough to see it clearly through the fog once the light from the open door streamed out. It was indeed such a creature as had bred in the mines west of Peking, the human face deformed and bruised where the jawbones had elongated and the sutures of the face opened. The mouth, human no longer, was raw where its new-grown teeth had gashed the lips. It held the dying rat in one hand – still thrashing – and blood ran down its arm and its chin. The creature's eyes, as it swung toward the open doorway's light, flashed like mirrors.

It dropped the rat and sprang.

The shirtsleeved and unshaven watchman who'd opened the door let out a yell and tried to slam it again between them, but the creature already had him by the arm. It yanked him through and into the wet murk of the alleyway. Asher caught the lid off a dustbin and struck with its edge at the revenant's face. With a grunting bleat the Other struck it aside, staggered back, still holding the shrieking watchman; Asher slammed at it with the lid again and, when it was knocked away, caught up the dustbin itself and rammed it at the monster like a clumsy battering ram.

The revenant hurled his quarry from him and Asher heard the man's skull crack against the brick of the wall. Then it lunged at Asher, who struck with another dustbin – *Do NOT let the thing's blood touch you, do NOT* … The creature made one more lunge at the watchman, who lay crumpled where he'd fallen at the foot of the wall, then doubled like a rat and darted into the blackness. Asher plunged after it, one hand to the wall to guide him, and thirty feet on collided with more dustbins, falling over them as the light of two other doors opened in the murky abyss and men's voices shouted about what the 'ell was goin' on 'ere … (Only one of them, the philologist in Asher noted automatically, used a Southern Indian's sharper terminal 'g' …)

By the time Asher was pulled to his feet the creature was gone.

'What the hell is that stink?' demanded the white-haired Indian. 'Are you all right, sir?'

'He attacked a man,' panted Asher, pointing back into the solid wall of fog. 'One of the watchmen—'

The men looked at each other – three of them, a sailor and two watchmen in this district of small shops and warehouses. 'That'll be 'Arry,' said the

other watchman, a silvered bulldog of a man, and as one they all ran back along the alley, Asher thinking, *What the hell will I do if the victim is alive but infected? What the hell can I say?*

The door still stood open. A fat man, balding, with a publican's apron around his waist was just moving to close it; the stouter watchman called, 'What 'appened 'ere, Tim? This gennelman says as 'ow 'Arry was attacked —'

Tim the publican's heavy-browed face creased in a frown. 'They took him away.' Sharp little blue eyes studied Asher and he added, 'You want to come on round the corner to my place, guv, an' have a sit-down. You look done up like a kipper.'

'Who took him?' Asher leaned suddenly against the wall, trembling in a wash of fatigue.

The publican's frown deepened and he put a steadying hand under Asher's arm. 'Dunno, sir. Looked like a plainclothes 'tec ter me. Skinny little feller. I'd just tied a towel round 'Arry's conk – bleedin' like a pig, 'e was – an' the feller says, "I'll take him. Cut along and get some water, 'fore we have every cat in the neighborhood lappin' at the blood." That's where I was off to now, and to get word to Weekes who owns the shop here.'

'He's right about the blood,' agreed the Indian. 'You take the gentleman inside, Tim, I'll get that water and send off to Weekes.'

Asher was led off down the alley to the back door of the Wolf and Child (which, he reflected, had no business still pouring out brandy at this hour of the night). He glanced back, his heart hammering, and he saw that, yes, the wet, black brick of the wall opposite the warehouse door glistened with a dark smear of blood. More blood was dribbled on the pavement where Harry the watchman had fallen.

I have to find him. Find where he was taken. If the creature too was wounded, and its blood found its way into Harry's open flesh, in a few days he'll begin to change …

The Indian guard emerged from Harry the watchman's door with a bucket of water, and doused the blood in a soapy torrent.

When Asher returned to the place on the following morning, slightly light-headed and shaky from the fatigue of the night before, and inquired of Mr Weekes – the owner of the silk warehouse Harry had watched – the shop owner had no idea to which hospital Harry had been taken. Nor had Tim the publican, just washing down the front steps of the Wolf and Child and readying to start the day's business, after seeing Asher back to his room in Grafton Place the previous night. 'No, he's got no family here in town.' The

fat man shook his balding head. ‘Lives in lodgin’s somewhere in Camden Town, I think … No, I never did hear the name of his landlady. Not that it sounds like she’d care tuppence if he was brought back home cut to pieces in a sack …’

‘If you do hear of where he might be found—’ Asher handed the man his card, containing his Oxford address – ‘please telegraph me here at once. I have reason to believe that the man who attacked Harry suffered from a contagious disease – spread through blood contact – and it’s imperative that I at least make sure Harry wasn’t infected.’

Which in its way was the truth. Neither Weekes nor Tim had been contacted yet by the police, and when Asher inquired at the Holborn Police Station later in the day he learned that the attack had not been reported. Though it was now four in the afternoon and he felt as if his bones had been ground down to the snapping point with weariness, Asher made his way to the Foreign Office.

Langham, to whom he’d reported in his days of mapmaking and rumor-sniffing in the Balkans in the 1880s, was delighted to see him. He clucked worriedly over his haggard appearance (‘They told me you’d dashed nearly gone to join the choir invisible in Paris, old fellow – Stewart’s an idiot for saying you should be passed as fit for a listening post …’), and poured out for him some indifferent sherry from a cache in the bottom of his office bookcase. He listened to Asher’s carefully-tailored account of the events of the previous evening: that there had been an attack in the service alley behind the Wolf and Child in Chalton Street, that Asher had heard repeated rumors of German plans to spread an infectious disease in London, that he had reasons to suspect that the man attacked – Henry Gower – had been so infected.

‘The men who work in the same street tell me that someone came, almost at once, and took Gower away, presumably to hospital.’ Asher sipped his sherry – it didn’t help in the least. The thought of trying to deal with the train back to Oxford that night filled him with sickened dismay. ‘But it turns out that as of this morning, neither Weekes – Gower’s employer – nor any of the witnesses were contacted by the police, and no report was filed. Yet we must find Gower, and more than anything else we must find the – man – who is potentially spreading the disease.’

‘And what are the symptoms of this disease?’ Langham spoke calmly, but his weak blue eyes were fixed on Asher’s face.

Asher felt himself go perfectly cold, with a chill that had nothing to do with the onset of fever.

‘High fever,’ he replied promptly. ‘Rash and virulent irritation, especially around the mouth. What appears to be bruising of the capillaries of the face.’

Keeping his face bland, he observed that his former boss was watching him closely, with an expression of studied nonchalance.

He knows about it already.

'Hm.' Langham folded his ladylike hands. 'I'll get a report out to the hospitals, of course … and thank you for reporting this, old man. I'm sure it's nothing – some men are being sent home from the Front with quite gruesome cases of shell shock lately – but would it be asking too much for you to write up a report when you get back home? You are going up to Oxford this evening, are you not? That's good,' he added, when Asher nodded as if the matter were a foregone conclusion. 'You look like the very devil, old man. By all means, go to bed and stay there … And don't worry.' He permitted himself a secret, and slightly patronizing, little smile. 'Think no more about it. The matter is in hand.'

Asher felt the hair prickle on the nape of his neck.

'I'm glad to hear it, sir.' He smiled, rose, donned his hat – it took all his remaining strength to do so – and got out of the office, and the building, as casually as he could.

And kept an eye out behind him, all the way to Paddington Station.

THREE

‘Well, thank God Jerry’s taking a breather anyway.’ Captain Niles Calvert dunked his hands in the tepid wash water and chivalrously handed Lydia the only dry towel in the wash corner behind the surgical tent. ‘We can get some of this lot mopped up … God, I hate doing surgery under lights.’

‘I keep wondering what we’d do if the generator went out.’ Lydia carefully removed her spectacles to wipe the bridge of her nose. Rice-powder was another thing she’d given up when she’d signed her contract with the Army, and without it she felt like a schoolgirl: a blinky-blind, goggle-eyed golliwog (as the other girls at Madame Chappedelaine’s had called her), a carrot-topped skinnybones with a nose like a parrot. On the other hand, it was very nice to see the faces of the men she worked with, to say nothing of not falling into shell-holes.

‘And what I keep wonderin’,’ put in Captain Horatio Burke, straightening his own glasses, ‘is how I can be sweatin’ when I’m freezin’ half to death.’ Like Lydia, prior to the war the lumbering, grizzle-haired surgeon had had far more experience with the academic side of medicine, and after a long day of work on men deemed critical – but not violently urgent as yesterday’s had been – his features sagged with fatigue.

‘Different set of glands,’ Lydia replied promptly. ‘It’s part of the fight or flight reaction.’

‘You mean it’s to do wi’ why I don’t run outen here screamin’? Aye?’ he added, as a tall figure appeared in the darkness of the tent doorway.

‘Message for Dr Asher.’ The young man carried a hooded lantern, and by its upside-down glow, and the reflected glare from the surgical tent where the orderlies were cleaning up, Lydia automatically noted the square-jawed earnestness of his features, the brilliantined sleekness of his dark hair and the freshness of his uniform. *From Headquarters …*

Her heart turned over in her chest.

Oh God, Jamie …

Or Miranda …

Her hand shook as she took the note.

It was Don Simon Ysidro's handwriting. *I have found those who have seen the woman*.

She raised her eyes in startled alarm to the face of the messenger – he was taller even than Jamie's six-foot height – and he merely said in the plumiest of aristocratic accents, 'If you'd come with me, please, Doctor Asher.'

Don Simon was sitting in a staff-car some twenty feet from the lights of the camp. The young officer – he wore a captain's uniform but God only knew if he was entitled to it – helped Lydia into the vehicle, saluted the vampire and retreated. Lydia could see his broad-shouldered, slim-hipped figure silhouetted between the car and the soft glow within the nearest tents.

It was a still night. The only shelling was miles away, around Vimy, Captain Calvert had said. Shadows moved within the tents as the nursing sisters saw to their charges. When the night wind stirred it brought the stink from the incinerators where the orderlies were burning amputated limbs.

'Is that young man actually in the Army at all?' Lydia asked, and there was a whisper of amusement in Ysidro's usually expressionless voice as he replied.

'*Dios*, no. John – Captain Palfrey – resigned his commission in the First Dragoons last November, under the impression he was being recruited by a branch of the Secret Service so secret that not even the rest of the Department was aware of it – a hoax which has been embarrassingly easy to maintain. Spare me any expression of indignation on his behalf, Mistress: I have certainly saved that young man's life thereby and most assuredly the lives of at least a quarter of the men who might have found themselves under his command. He is a deplorable soldier. Will you come with me, and speak to those who have had converse with this seeker of the Undead among the Dead?'

'Converse?'

'After a fashion.' The glimmer of lights from the camp had lit the cloud of Lydia's breath when she spoke; no such vapor proceeded from the vampire's lips. 'Seeing them, she called out to them, but any vampire in his senses is wary of overtures from the living. They seldom end well. Will you come?'

'It will take me about half an hour to finish with the fluoroscope room. And I'll need to find something to tell the matron—'

'John will deal with that. Get a stouter cloak. 'Tis cold where we're going, and wet.'

Lydia guessed what he meant, and shivered. Under Captain Palfrey's respectful escort, she swabbed and tidied the x-ray table and made sure the fluoroscope was disconnected and that her own protective garb was laid out where she could find it on the morrow. The lecturers at Oxford's Radcliffe

Infirmary had been fairly blithe when demonstrating this new miracle equipment, but Lydia's own researches – including at least one article in an American medical journal – had prompted her to encumber her machine with lead shielding (which made it difficult to maneuver and maddening to move) and herself with a lead apron and gloves. Major Overstreet – who handled the most serious cases – would snarl at her for taking too long, when a soldier's life was at risk on his table, but Lydia was convinced that the dangers of exposure to Röntgen rays were not imaginary.

It was nearly eight o'clock, and pitch-dark, when she finally returned to the staff-car. It made a lurching turn and set off eastward; a moment later the hooded headlamps splashed across the stones of the bridge that crossed the Lys River. After that Lydia could see nothing beyond the ruts of the road, water gleaming in potholes, and the occasional gleam in the eyes of a rat.

Most days, one could smell the trenches from the ruins of Pont-Sainte-Félicité, no mean feat, Lydia was aware, considering the olfactory competition from the camp itself. In time the car stopped, and Don Simon stepped down, helping Lydia after him with a gray-gloved hand. Through a break in the clouds the gibbous moon showed her a tortured landscape of what had been, up until last year, some of the most fertile farmland in Europe. Now it was a wasteland of mud, standing water and shell-holes, slashed across and across with trenches, deadly with tangles of barbed wire. Cold as it was, the stench was terrible. From the muffled sounds around them, Lydia guessed these former German trenches were in use now as Allied reserve trenches, with the front-line trenches and no man's land a few hundred yards further to the east. Ysidro steadied her down a ladder into the maze of communication trenches that connected the reserves with the firing trench: far safer, but hideous with icy water just beneath the half-submerged duckboards. The hands of corpses projected from the mud walls. Once she saw a skull face, flesh entirely eaten away by rats. The rats themselves were a constant scuttering movement, amid a broken debris of battered helmets (both German and British), rusting tins and broken entrenching tools that littered the shadows.

Her companion, with his courtly manners, was a vampire. A creature from horror tales.

This was nightmare.

'Ah.' A deep voice spoke from the darkness '*C'est la belle rousse qui patrouille dans le camp*.' A lantern-slide was cracked. Lydia made out, in the black angle of the communication trench, the two men she'd seen last night who'd been talking in the ruined village to the woman in black. The taller, fairer man bent and kissed her hand, and even through her glove his lips were

warm on her frozen fingers. *He's fed*. Lydia knew it had been on some poor soldier who was dying in any case – quite possibly a German, whom she knew she was supposed to *want* dead (*Or why else are you here?*).

I shouldn't have anything to do with these people. Any of them …

With the preternatural quickness of perception that many vampires possessed, the fair man must have read her thoughts in her face, because when she looked back up she saw understanding in his dark eyes, and pity for the dilemma in her heart.

'We have asked ourselves, my friends and I, what it is that you seek with your lantern each night.' His French lilted with an Italian intonation – *Jamie would tell me exactly what part of Italy he comes from*. 'It is this woman, then? This dark-haired nurse—'

'She's a nurse?'

His nose wrinkled in half-comic distaste. 'She smells of carbolic and vinegar, Madame. Her dark cloak covered her dress, but the greatcoat she had underneath it was brown.'

'She could have borrowed it,' put in the slim dark youth behind his shoulder, whose face reminded Lydia of the statue of the degenerate Roman Emperor Heliogabalus in the Capitoline Museum of Rome. 'Or stolen it. Or bought it from that slippery English clerk at Pont-Sainte-Félicité …'

'And in fact,' agreed Lydia, taking a deep breath to steady her nerves, 'I can't see what other woman *would* be wandering about so close to the front lines.'

'Ten thousand pardons.' Ysidro bowed. 'Madame Doctor Asher, may I beg the favor of presenting to you Antonio Pentangeli, of the Most Serene Republic of Venice? And this is Basilio Occhipinti.'

'*Madama*,' murmured the dark vampire, and Antonio bowed again.

'I kiss your hands and feet, beautiful lady. As for this dark-haired nurse, wherever she acquired her greatcoat, she called out to me in French, saying, *I would speak to you*. And when we said nothing – Basilio and I – she called again, *You have nothing to fear. But I need to speak with those who hunt the night. I have a proposition, a partnership, to offer you*.'

Lydia said, 'Drat it.'

'Do not distress yourself, dear lady. Neither Basilio nor I – nor, I think, any of us who hunt the night in this appalling place – are so foolish as to think that such an offer from the living means anything but their desire to lure us into imprisonment and servitude. Don Simon will have spoken to you of the game of fox and geese that children play – and at which he himself cheats like a Greek – and it is true that it resembles the relations between the Living and

the Dead. We – like the fox – have the power to easily kill any goose. But let the geese organize themselves to surround us, and it is we who die.'

'Not all of your brethren,' returned Lydia, 'have the wisdom to realize it.'

'What can the living offer us?' Antonio Pentangeli spread his hands. Like most vampires he extended his mental powers of illusion so that Lydia had to look very carefully in order to notice his claws and fangs, and the fact that he did not breathe. 'The moment the shooting began, both sides lost their power over us: the power to give us what we crave. They are like nursemaids trying to bribe a child with a peppermint, when that child stands knee-deep in a pile of sweets.'

'Was that all she said?' asked Lydia after a moment. 'Just that? A proposition – a partnership?'

''Twas all we lingered to hear.'

'Where was this? And what time?'

'Between midnight and morning. The moon was on the wane, and rose late – two nights before the battle started at Neuve Chapelle. This was south of here, near – what is the name of that village, Basilio? Haut-le-Bois?'

The slender vampire nodded, and after a moment, added, in a much thicker accent than his friend's, 'She spoke good French, nearly as good as your own, *Madama*. Yet with some accent.'

'Could you tell what sort?'

He shook his head. And indeed, reflected Lydia, one had to be very fluent indeed in a language to be able to tell whether a speaker had an accent, and where it might be from. (*Damn Jamie … HE could probably do it …*)

'Would you do this for me?' Lydia raised her eyes to Antonio Pentangeli's face. *A predator*, she thought, her heart pounding. *Who knows how many people he killed in Venice, since he himself was killed by its Master, and brought into the world of the Undead?* 'If you hear of this woman again – if you meet others who have been propositioned by her – might I beg it as a favor, that you tell Don Simon about it?'

By Basilio Occhipinti's grimace he found the idea of taking such trouble grotesque – like her Aunt Lavinnia would look, if one of the scullery maids asked her to pass along love notes to the butcher's boy. But Antonio nodded, his dark eyes grave. 'I will, *bella donna*.'

'*Antonio*!'

'Think, dear heart.' The taller vampire laid his palm to Basilio's cheek, but his eyes, Lydia observed in the lantern-light, were flat and cold, doll-like as a shark's. 'Whoever she is, the little nurse, she has some scheme in mind and we know not what it is. Whoever she finds to help her, it will be someone

who wants something that isn't blood. We don't know what sort of bargain will be made.'

He bent again over Lydia's hand. 'We shall keep our ears to the ground, Madame, like cowboys in an American dime novel, and will send you word of what we hear.'

Then they were gone.

They seemed to melt into the shadows, but Lydia was prosaically aware that in fact one or the other of them had simply used the same psychic aura that older vampires developed, to make her not notice them walking off down the communications trench, or scrambling inelegantly up its wall. Jamie practiced, diligently, keeping his mind focused when he was in the presence of the Undead, and could sometimes see them move. Lydia knew she should have done so also but had been simply too exhausted. In any case she knew Don Simon would not permit harm to befall her.

Nevertheless she trembled as the Spanish vampire led her back along the trench in the direction of the motorcar, her head aching and her heart beating fast. They were vampires. Charming and polite and well-dressed …

She recalled again the warmth of Antonio's lips on her hand. Stolen warmth. Stolen life.

Creatures of evil …

Yesterday she'd received a letter from her Uncle Richard, which had mentioned in passing (after lamentations about the difficulty in obtaining coffee and petrol) that two of the footmen who had enlisted last September – men whom Lydia had known since childhood – had been killed at Festubert. A third – Ned – had been returned, blind and crippled, to his family, who would have to support him for the remainder of his life.

So where lies the greater evil? She didn't know.

A thousand tales and warnings about supping with the Devil flooded to her tired mind, but she honestly couldn't think of any way of quickly tracking this other night-prowling nurse who had a *proposition*, a *partnership*, to offer the Undead …

And when she stumbled, there was Simon's hand – cold as marble through his glove and the sleeves of her coat and frock – supporting her arm.

Simon, whom Jamie had sworn he would kill, along with every other vampire who crossed his path …

He stopped, swung around. 'What's—'

A man flung himself down on them from the top of the trench. Lydia had an impression of uniform, but his head was bare. He was without rifle or pack, clutching a bayonet like a dagger. He slashed at her, seized her arm to

drag her into the blow. She saw the gleam of reflective eyes, gasped at the fishy stench of him as Simon yanked the man away from her, tried to twist the weapon from his hand. Instead the soldier pulled his arm free of the vampire's grip – the grip that Lydia had seen bend steel – and flung Simon against the wall of the trench as if he'd been a child.

Lydia ran, stumbling in icy water and broken duckboards – *There has to be a ladder somewhere …*

But the soldier was fast. Hands gripped her waist, the reek of him clogged her throat; as she tried to wrench free she glimpsed the slimy glister of a fanged, deformed mouth gaping to bite. Then the man jerked, head falling forward, and Lydia yanked free as the filthy stink of her attacker's flesh was drowned in the sharp stench of splattering blood. Ysidro raised the entrenching-tool with which he'd struck the soldier's neck for another blow.

She sprang clear as Simon chopped down again with the metal blade, but soldier was still trying to rise, still trying to come at her. The third blow severed the head.

The body continued to crawl.

Methodically, Simon chopped with the pointed end of the tool into the spine – with all the horrific force of a vampire's preternatural strength – severing it, Lydia estimated, just below the first thoracic, and again below the first lumbar, vertebrae. The arms and legs were still moving as Simon caught her hand and dragged her along the trench. He kept firm hold of the bloodied entrenching-tool.

There might be others.

She knew from experience that they hunted in packs.

FOUR

‘It was a *yao-kuei*, wasn’t it?’ Lydia whispered the name by which she’d first seen the revenants, three years previously in Peking. She pulled her tent-mate Nurse Danvers’s greatcoat more tightly around her nightdress and dressing gown. Despite the small oil-stove beside which she sat, the tent was freezing. ‘Jamie says *draugar* is the Icelandic word for creatures like that.’

‘James would know such matters.’ Don Simon brought her another cup of cocoa, as he had last night. There were times that Lydia felt the whole clearing station lived on cocoa.

Nurse Danvers had been coming off her rounds when Lydia returned, had helped her wash off all trace of her attacker’s blood and had reaffirmed that Lydia had no cuts or scratches through which that blood could possibly have entered her system. The moment she’d finished this chore she had inexplicably (to her, at least) sunk down, fully dressed, on her own cot and dropped into Sleeping-Beauty-like slumber. Lydia had just been tucking a blanket over her when Don Simon had appeared, silently, at her side.

‘I find it distressing,’ the vampire went on, ‘that the Scandinavians would *require* a word for, as you say, “creatures like that”. Yet neither Antonio nor Basilio – nor indeed, any of the Undead to whom I have spoken, on either side of No Man’s Land – have mentioned seeing these Others.’

Lydia set the cup on the tent’s wooden floor beside her cot, frowning. ‘You’re right.’ A moment before, her revulsion at the thing that had attacked her, had consumed her – the deeper terror that she might somehow have been infected by the revenant’s blood, that her own body might distort into a misshapen horror while her mind disappeared into the collective semi-consciousness of the brutes . Now that revulsion vanished before the puzzle of where this particular revenant had come from.

‘I haven’t heard the men in the wards speak of them, either,’ she added. ‘And they *do* speak of the vampires.’

She frowned, remembering poor Brodie (*He goes to hospital in Calais tomorrow, I’ll have to bid him good luck before he leaves* …). She glanced across at Don Simon, warming his thin hands before the stove. She assumed he’d also examined his own flesh for any possibility of transfer of blood, in

the three-quarters of an hour since he'd set her down outside the dim lights of the camp. *Did he make poor Captain Palfrey check his back? How did he explain matters to that well-meaning young man?*

She wondered if Palfrey could see, as she did, the glassy claws that the vampire state caused to grow in place of the fingernails. If Simon had used the psychic skill of the Undead to block from the young man's mind the huge scars that crossed the left side of his face and neck, where the talons of the Master vampire of Constantinople had raked him in a struggle, five years before, to save Lydia's life.

She herself couldn't always see them.

She went on, 'My assistant, Mr Dermott, tells me some of the men say they've seen a ghost ambulance-wagon, or ghost stretcher-bearers …'

'That's Antonio and Basilio.' Don Simon's slight gesture was a dismissal. 'They often hunt in an ambulance-wagon.'

Lydia turned her face away, for a moment too shaken to speak. Tears flooded her eyes in spite of the fact that she knew, as he had said, that they preyed only on those dying already …

I should hate them all. I should hate HIM.

Don Simon watched her face without expression, a pale shape in the dark of the tent.

How can he be both things to me? Both friend and monster?

She was well aware how meticulously careful he was, never to let her or Jamie see him kill. *And it works,* she thought despairingly. *If we don't SEE it, part of our minds can pretend it isn't happening.*

Good heavens, maybe we DID see something of the kind and he made us forget it. Can he DO that?

She wouldn't put it past him.

She tasted over on her tongue the words, trying them out. *I don't want your protection. I don't want you watching over me. I want you to go away.*

She guessed that he wouldn't. *I'll just never see him at it again … or maybe now and then, a glimpse from the corner of my eye …* 'We need to go back there.' She looked back at him once again in the dim glow of the stove. 'Now, before first light destroys its flesh. Jamie says sunlight doesn't burn them as quickly as it does vampires, but it will crumble their flesh and their bones to dust. Is that true?'

'It is, Mistress.'

'Then I need one to study. The blood on my frock is too mixed up with mud to examine clearly, even with Major Overstreet's microscope. And I should talk to men in that part of the trenches.' She opened her locker at the foot of her bunk and brought out her spare uniform (*I'll need to talk to*

Storeman Pratt tomorrow about another one – I am NOT putting the bloodied one on again no matter HOW many times it's boiled!). 'Someone else must have seen it. We can at least get some idea of what direction it was coming from. Or, if it was German … Even if there were others with it, they'll have moved on by this time …'

'It shall be as you command.'

He vanished – or seemed to vanish, momentarily blocking her perception of his movement. Shuddering in the cold, Lydia dressed herself again quickly (*And God bless the woman who invented the brassiere!*) and gathered up the bloodied, mud-slathered garments in an old pillowcase. Handling them gingerly, she took a few minutes to cut swatches from the least-contaminated bloodstains, which she stowed in a candy tin at the bottom of her locker. By the time she checked her watch and buttoned on Danvers's borrowed greatcoat, and slipped from the tent with the incinerator-bound pillowcase clutched at arms-length in one hand, it was quarter past two.

Lydia recognized – vaguely – the place where the staff-car lurched to a stop. The damp night, though windless, was very cold, the far-off crashing of the guns to the north like metallic thunder. The effects of the cocoa were wearing off and Lydia felt tired to death and chilled to the marrow of her bones. She leaned forward to the front seat to glimpse Captain Palfrey's wristwatch – her own was the old-fashioned kind, pinned to her breast under a layer of greatcoat – and saw that it was past three.

'Will you be all right?' she whispered to Don Simon. First light would be in two hours. She estimated it was nearly two muddy, slogging miles from where they halted – in a welter of shell-holes and barbed wire – to the communication trench where they had been attacked.

'John has orders to return you safely to the clearing station, should circumstances separate me from you.' He took her hand in his own gloved one and led her toward the remains of the reserve trench, the glow of the shuttered lantern he carried swinging again across the glisten of mud, shattered steel and the red spark of rat eyes in the dark. As they descended the ladder once again she hoped Simon's sense of smell was more discerning than her own in the quagmire of stench: rotting flesh, old blood, cordite, feces, smoke … *A whole pack of revenants could be just around the bend of the trench and I'd never smell them*.

The communications trenches were dug in a series of angles to protect against blast, resulting in the sense of being trapped in a wet, filthy labyrinth. On the walls of the trench boards had been roughly fastened, arrows drawn in chalk or paint with directions written above: *1st Scots*, *2nd Lancs*, or, simply

and more prosaically, *Rear*. *Bogs* … Without them, Lydia couldn't imagine how anyone could traverse this maze of head-high walls, zigzagged defiles and caved-in dugouts.

She found herself clinging to Don Simon's hand.

'Did you see his uniform?' she asked. 'Whether he was British or German? If these things are multiplying in the German trenches …'

'I would have heard,' returned the vampire. 'Many of us haunt both sides of the lines. In any event, what use would such creatures be? Unless their minds could be directed and controlled the danger would be too great. No general in his senses would take such risk.'

'But that may be why this woman – this dark-haired nurse – is seeking a vampire, don't you see?' Lydia glanced quickly across into her companion's face. 'You've said – many times – that a vampire can govern the actions of a living mind. Can summon at will those whose eyes he has looked into, can … can even sometimes put himself literally into another's mind, if his victim is drugged, or insane. They're seeking a vampire …'

'Then they are fools,' returned Don Simon calmly. 'An old vampire, whose strength has waxed with time and who has been taught to manipulate the minds of the living, perhaps. A master vampire, or someone like Antonio, whose master instructed him in these ancient skills … Not all masters trust their fledglings to that extent. And so old a vampire will have doubtless learned not to put faith in the living – leaving aside the fact that no vampire, of any age, cares the purchase of a button about the wars of the living. We do not care, Mistress. As Antonio told you earlier tonight: *we do not care*. Not about our homelands, not about our families, not about those whom we loved in life. Nothing exists for us but the hunt. We know any other ties to be dangerous, and ties to the living, most dangerous of all.'

He paused for an instant where the communications trench in which they now picked their way branched, then turned right (*Welches*, said the sign), his strength helping Lydia find her feet where the duckboards were broken and the icy, filthy water soaked through her shoes.

'The Master of Prague, where these things have long bred, and the Master of Peking, have both affirmed to me, that even the strongest master vampire has no dominion over the minds of these things. If this nurse you have seen—*Carajo*!' He flinched at the sudden, earth-shaking thunder of an explosion that sounded nearly on top of them. Orange glare filled the sky. Another roar followed, and the splattering of torn-up earth, followed by the shouting and cursing of men.

'We're almost there!' Lydia seized Don Simon's hand again, her heart in her throat but her mind still calculating: *That shell was at least a hundred*

yards away …

Around the corner ahead …

She snatched the lantern from his hand and slammed back the slide – no further need of precaution against snipers, not with what sounded like a full-on barrage starting – and ran, digging in her pocket for the rolled-up empty sandbags she'd brought to carry her prize. The ground jerked and the duckboards underfoot suddenly erupted with fleeing rats, swarming from their holes and pouring in a gray river up the side of the trench, as if the Pied Piper had blown his horn somewhere in the hellish cacophony of the darkness. *If there's a push on I'll lose this thing, or it'll be buried in a barrage …*

She heard Don Simon swear in Spanish behind her, and a shell went overhead with a noise like an oncoming train.

Am I being intrepid or stupid?

Her heart in her throat, not giving herself time to think, Lydia whipped around the angle of the trench and her lantern-light fell on the huddled black mass of the revenant, and a smaller form leant over it. A woman.

Lydia stumbled to a halt. A shuttered lantern stood near the revenant's severed head, and by its dim light Lydia saw the woman bend over the hacked and bloody body, doing something she couldn't see. As the figure raised its face, she had a momentary vision of a heart-shaped countenance framed in pulled-back dark hair, a rich mouth twisted in resolution and shock. The gleam of a silver cross, dangling around her neck.

Something else by the lantern, a satchel …

Another explosion shook the ground, closer this time, and the woman grabbed for something in her pocket. Don Simon's hand closed on Lydia's elbow and Lydia was dragged back around the protective angle of the trench. She saw the woman rise from beside the corpse – it was still aimlessly clawing around it with one hand – and flee down the trench, turning to throw something …

Don Simon yanked Lydia along the trench, and she realized what the other woman had flung instants before they ducked around the next angle and the massive shock wave of noise, oily heat and flying debris almost knocked her off her feet. *Grenade …*

Men surged, shouting, out of another communications trench, as the barrage intensified over their heads. Yells of 'Get out of it, boys!' mingled with the screaming whistles of officers and bellowed commands to re-form ranks. Don Simon's arm circled Lydia's waist and he dragged her along, slithering expertly through the struggling bodies. He froze as a shell howled overhead and pulled her back, judging the sound of it, Lydia thought … And sure enough, some dozen yards ahead of them the crash of its explosion made

her head reverberate, and dirt and mud splattered her as the trenches caved in under the blow.

The noise hurt her bones, and the mud splattered on her glasses made it nearly impossible to see. Men formed up around them again into ranks, which flowed through the communications trenches, Don Simon swimming against the tide. They came into a clear space of trench, the walls broken into craters by shells and the duckboards shattered underfoot. Men clattered past them, bearers carrying rolled-up blankets or the new-style litters, feet sinking – as Lydia's sank – into bottomless mud. Twice she stumbled, and glancing down saw she'd tripped over corpses. But every new explosion filled the air above the trenches with flying shrapnel and splattering bits of red-hot metal – *I hope Captain Palfrey has taken cover somewhere …*

He evidently had. His hands reached down from the trench-ladder as Lydia was helped up out of the darkness, and it was he who half-guided, half-carried her toward the road down which men were already rushing toward the trenches, to re-enforce the existing troops against the German 'push' that everybody knew was going to come the moment it was light.

I have to get back to the clearing station. The wounded are going to be pouring in any minute …

'I'm afraid the car was commandeered, M'am,' gasped Captain Palfrey, as they stumbled over the broken ground. 'I got their names, and units. The colonel's going to have words to say to their commanding officers—'

'The colonel?' Lydia stumbled, and sought in her pockets for some piece of cloth sufficiently un-soaked to make headway against the muck that smeared her glasses. The shell-fire was somewhat behind them now, except for the occasional strays, and men still raced past them, packs clattering, rifles in hand. Minds focused on what lay ahead.

Four miles back to camp …

'Colonel Simon.'

The first threads of daylight had not yet begun to dilute the darkness. Don Simon presumably knew how long it would take him to get to a secure shelter – *God knows where!* Reaction was setting in, and Lydia had to cling to Palfrey's arm to keep from falling as they plowed through the wilderness of mud and old shell-holes, her wet skirts slapping and tangling her feet. Rats still swarmed. Once the fighting stopped, the creatures would stream back, to feed on the dead.

Lydia thought she glimpsed, away in the darkness, the pale shape of an ambulance-wagon jolting, and wondered if it was really an ambulance-wagon or just Antonio and Basilio.

Passionately, cold and exasperation and despair overwhelming her, Lydia cried, ‘Don’t you know what he really is?’

Captain Palfrey took both her hands in his – warm and strong, like Jamie’s, the capable hands of a man who understands horses and guns and tools – and his blue eyes held a gentle understanding. From his pocket he produced a clean – *clean!* – handkerchief, and stood while she took off her glasses and wiped the lenses.

Then with a little smile he tapped the side of his nose and said, ‘Well, M’am, it’s all a deep dark secret, of course … And he’s warned me that all kinds of the most ridiculous stories are circulated about him. Nursery-tale stuff you’d hardly credit, like a combination of Count Dracula and Bluebeard. But I’ve guessed the truth.’ His eyes shone in the first whisper of the coming dawn. ‘He – and his Department – are probably England’s best hope of winning the war.’

FIVE

In his tidy back room on Grafton Place, James Asher sat on the end of the bed and looked down into the narrow yard, glistening under gray morning rain.

And thought about the Others.

Hideous memories, most of them. Shambling figures in the dark of ravines, in the hills west of Peking. Red eyes gleaming in the tunnels of abandoned mines.

Lydia sitting on the muddy shore of one of Peking's artificial lakes, red hair glinting with the fires that consumed the last of the Peking hive, weeping …

Miraculously unhurt.

He'd known she was walking back into danger, just a little over two years later – back in November, four months ago, now. He'd said goodbye to her, his first full day on his feet after recovery from pneumonia. He'd gone to the train station with her, the sixth of November, the gray mists that drifted over the station platform still smelling ominously of leftover gun-powder from Bonfire Night. Lydia in her VAD uniform: the single small trunk beside her wouldn't even have contained her cosmetics before the war. After the porter took it away she'd clung to him, gawky and thin and stork-like, her cheek pressed to his (she had carefully removed her spectacles, as she always did before they embraced). Wordless.

He knew she might never come back from the fighting. Seventeen years on Her Majesty's Secret Service – and another decade and a half of following newspapers and reports – had made him sickeningly aware of what waited at the Front: machine guns, artillery that could kill at a distance of miles. And the White Horseman, Pestilence, more terrible than either.

Danger from the revenants, whom they had last seen in Peking, had been the farthest thing from his mind.

Looking back at their parting he couldn't believe he'd been that naïve. *Of course some government was going to hear about them sooner or later*.

Of course they'll try to make them into a weapon of war.

His studies had unearthed almost as many examples of similar beings in folklore as the study of vampires did: *draugar*, *haugbui*, the Celtic *neamh mairbh*. African and Caribbean zombies. Greek *vrykolak*, Chinese hungry

ghosts, the barrow wights of ancient English legend. Things that came staggering out of their graves to feed – insatiably. The vampires of Prague, Don Simon Ysidro had told him, had been trying for centuries to get rid of them, to no avail.

And now one of them was in London.

Mrs Taylor – who rented out rooms in this tall, narrow house near Euston Station – had brought him up tea and bread and butter, rather to his surprise and unasked ('I seen yesterday as you was poorly, sir …'). He had spent nearly eighteen hours, since he had returned from his abortive visit to the Foreign Office yesterday afternoon, lying on the bed looking at the ceiling wondering if this was any of his business or not. He ate without much appetite, though he no longer felt feverish. Only deeply fatigued.

What he most wanted to do was pack up his slender belongings, take a cab (if he could find such a thing) to Paddington Station and be in Oxford tonight, playing hide-and-seek with Miranda and deciphering Lydia's latest letter from the Front.

What he would do instead, he already knew, was send another telegram to Mrs Grimes, and then go to the Wolf and Child on Chalton Street, to talk to publican Tim.

Think no more about it. Langham's confidential, between-you-and-me smile. *The matter is in hand*.

Asher moved his hand toward the now-cold teapot to see if there was another cup left in it, but instead lay down again. Two years previously, he had sworn enmity to the vampires of London and had destroyed most of the London nest … only to discover that those he had killed were the unreliable members whom the Master of London wanted to be rid of anyway.

Twelve years prior to that, at the end of the African war, he had tendered his resignation to the Foreign Office, being unable to put from his mind the young Boer boy he had killed – a good friend, so far as a spy living under cover is able to make actual friends – in the line of what the Department considered duty. Even then he had known that swearing enmity to the Department would be futile and absurd, though he knew what they were. When he'd left Langham's office on that occasion, his chief had shaken his hand and said – with that confidential little smile – '*Au revoir*.' The words had been deliberately chosen. Nothing about Langham was accidental. *Until we meet again.*

Think no more about it …

Go back to Oxford and shout '*A plague on both your houses*!' from the window of the departing train.

A revenant was hunting in London. It was only a matter of time before the infection began to spread uncontrollably.

A knock like a siege engine hammered the door. ‘Mr Asher, sir,’ trumpeted young Ginny Taylor’s adenoidal voice in the hall. ‘There’s a lady come t’ see you.’

Asher levered himself from the bed, astonished at how much energy this took, and slid into his jacket. ‘Thank you, Ginny,’ he said to the girl – fourteen, clean-scrubbed, with a face that reminded him of the roan cob that used to pull his father’s gig – as he stepped out into the corridor. ‘Please tell her I’ll be right down.’

‘Professor Asher!’ Josetta Beyerly sprang to her feet from the threadbare chair in the parlor window, strode across to grip both his hands. ‘I didn’t mean for them to drag you down here—’

‘This is a respectable house,’ replied Asher gravely. ‘As Mrs Taylor would no doubt have told you if you’d even thought about suggesting the possibility of coming up to a gentleman’s room. I take it Mrs Grimes telegraphed you with her conviction that I’d taken ill again?’

‘Why “good society” leaps to the automatic conclusion that every interaction between a woman and a man is of necessity immodest—’ began the young woman indignantly; then she caught herself, and shook her head. ‘It’s all of a piece,’ she sighed. ‘A way of making women their own jailers … And yes,’ she added, with her beautiful smile. ‘Mrs Grimes wired me last night. Please.’ She drew him back to the chairs by the window. ‘Sit down, Professor … *Are* you all right?’

Bright brown eyes looked across into his as he took the seat opposite. Even in the blue-and-white uniform of a volunteer at First London General Hospital, she wore a little rosette of purple, green and beige ribbons that marked her as a suffragette (*And I’ll bet she fights every day with the ward sister about it …*). He smiled a little, pleased by her stubborn adherence to a cause that many women had set aside at the start of the war because *we must all stick together …*

Strident though she was about her politics, Josetta had been Lydia’s close friend since 1898, the year his wife had spent at a select finishing school for girls in Switzerland, where Josetta, five years the elder, had been the English mistress. And Josetta had been the gawky, bookish young heiress’s only friend. Eighteen months later in England, it was Josetta who had secretly coached Lydia through the examination to get her accepted to Somerville College – an acceptance which had resulted in Lydia being disowned by her outraged father. A small legacy had enabled the one-time English mistress to

remain in England, where she took day pupils in French and music to make ends meet, and now, at thirty-seven, she was active in a dozen causes, from votes for women, Irish independence and settlement houses to ‘rational dress’, the elimination of the House of Lords, and vegetarianism.

‘I’m quite well,’ Asher reassured her, though her dark brows plunged over her delicate nose at this. Evidently, he reflected, it was obvious he was lying. ‘I was kept later than I’d planned by meetings, and in fact I was on my way to the post office to let Mrs Grimes know that I won’t be home today either, nor probably tomorrow.’

‘Is there anything I can do for you?’ she asked. ‘Do you have board at this place, or are you eating at one of the frightful cafés hereabouts? Come to dinner with me at my club, if you’d care to – the menu isn’t much, but at least it would be an improvement on fried chips and sausage.’ She smiled, reached across to pat his hand, still slim as a girl. ‘Lydia did tell me to look after you.’

‘Thank you.’ Asher returned her smile, though he suspected that, to earn even the utilitarian Josetta’s disapprobation, the food on offer at the Grosvenor Crescent Club must be mediocre indeed. ‘I should like that.’

‘Have you heard from her?’

‘Not since before I left Oxford. But I know the fighting in Flanders has been heavy, so she may not have had time to write.’

While the former English mistress spoke of her own experiences with the casualties of the spring’s first great ‘push’, and of her outrage against the propagandist posters which plastered the hospital (and indeed, two virulent examples of the genre glared from the wall of the parlor: *Women of Britain say ‘Go!’* and *Lend your Five Shillings to your Country and Crush the Germans*), his mind sifted her words automatically. ‘… And of course they don’t know any better. Most of those poor boys haven’t been outside their own neighborhoods in their lives. The women who’d come into the settlement houses could give you chapter and verse about each others’ grandfathers and great-aunts, but would regard Kensington as foreign soil …’

‘There is something you can do for me,’ said Asher, when Josetta finished her account of procuring books and magazines for the wounded men in London General. ‘If you would be so kind. Do you still have connections with the settlement house in Camden Town? I have heard—’ It was a bow drawn at a venture, but he guessed the query would at least bear some fruit – ‘that there’s been a … a mugger, or a slasher, working along the Regent’s Canal. A man who attacks at night, and who stinks of dirty clothes and fish. It would help me enormously if you could ask some of the people down at the settlement house, or people in that neighborhood, if they’ve heard of such a thug making the rounds.’

Josetta regarded him curiously – like himself, he realized with a smile, sifting what he said, tallying in her mind what his purpose might be. ‘And does this have something to do with these “meetings” that are keeping you in town?’

Though Lydia – Asher was fairly sure – never spoke to anyone of his former life as one of Her Majesty’s Secret Servants, he guessed also that his wife’s concerns for him, particularly in the years since he’d become drawn into the affairs of the vampires, had communicated themselves to her friend. Josetta may well have developed suspicions that he wasn’t the retiring Oxford don that he appeared, though God knew what interpretation she’d put on his comings and goings. Exactly as he would have, had he been recruiting a political semi-radical for the Department for one of his networks abroad, he replied, ‘It’s just a matter of personal interest.’ With a raised eyebrow and a look that said, *I know perfectly well you’re not fooled, Miss Beyerly*.

She returned his secret smile. ‘I’ll see what I can find. Dinner tonight at seven?’

‘Seven it is.’

The Wolf and Child stood at the corner of Chalton Street and Matilda Court, three doors from Weekes and Sons, Importers of Fine Silk, where the unfortunate Harry had been employed. A woman passed Asher in the doorway of the long, wood-paneled taproom: her electric-blue jacket faded and four years out of style, with the telltale mark pressed into her left sleeve by the frame of a sewing machine. The taproom was as quiet today as it had been the previous morning, with only a couple of neighborhood men consuming a pint and a laborer’s lunch of bread and cheese. But the lunchers avoided one another’s eye, and there was worry in the face of the old man behind the bar as he watched the woman depart. ‘Y’ maun excuse us, sir,’ he said as he fetched the pint of mild that Asher ordered. ‘We’re a bit moithered just now. Our man didn’t show up to open—’

Asher made a gesture of casual acceptance, though cold stabbed him behind the breastbone, and the shock worse because it was unattended by much surprise. ‘I’m in no lather.’ He kept his accent rural, Shropshire, as he had yesterday morning when speaking with Tim … ‘Hard lines on you, gaffer, him droppin’ his work on you, though. Must be a chore findin’ help with all these lads joinin’ up.’

‘Nay, Tim’s not one to scarper, think on. That was his missus just now—’ The old man nodded toward the door. ‘Never come ’ome las’ night, he didn’t, and poor Masie at her wits’ end over it. ’Tis not the same,’ he added worriedly, ‘since the start o’ this war.’

No, thought Asher, laying his three-penny bit on the counter and looking thoughtfully toward the street, at least in part to conceal the anger that he knew was in his eyes. *No, things are not the same*.

He dreamed that night of Pritchard Crowell, a man he hadn't even thought of in nearly a decade.

Crowell was something of a legend in the Department. Asher had worked with him only once. In Mesopotamia in the early nineties they'd scouted out opposition to Ottoman rule, and put together a network of sleeper agents in the Caucasus and in the desert country beyond Palmyra. The villagers often worked for German 'archaeologists' who coincidentally searched for their buried cities along proposed railway routes where troops might later be moved.

He recalled a wiry small man in his fifties, dark-eyed and dark-haired and absolutely unobtrusive. A wrinkle-threaded face, a hawk-bill nose and a touch with picklocks that half the professional burglars in London might have envied, and a chilly ruthlessness which, at that time, Asher had sought to make his own. The job, and the job only, existed, and everything else, including one's own survival, merely facilitated whatever one had been ordered to do.

'We are weapons …' Asher heard again that low voice – a middle-range tenor and like everything else about him, expressionless and unremarkable – against the Mixolydian wail of voices outside the inn at El Deir where they sat. Even through his dream he smelled the burnt languor of coffee, the stink of dust, camel dung, harsh tobacco and *ras el hanout*. 'If one is in a fight for one's life, one wouldn't thank a knife that turned round in your hand and asked questions. One does what one has to, my lad, and forgets about it afterwards … Clean as you go, and don't look back.'

This applied, Asher recalled, to the members of one's own network – one's friends among the Bedu or on the Turkish Army supply staffs in Constantinople. They were warned ('When feasible,' Crowell had qualified, casually) that Higher Purposes might require them to be cut adrift. Asher remembered the occasion on which Crowell had let the population of an Armenian village which had sheltered them be massacred by the sultan's tame bandits, rather than give them a warning which would have revealed that the Turkish Army codes had been broken.

One does what one has to …

The pragmatist in Asher's soul had admired Crowell's uncanny expertise in the sheer craft of spying – of getting into places, of winkling shards of information from men and women wholly committed to Britain's enemies. He

always had an astonishing plethora of information at his fingertips, and was eerily expert at slipping through shadows to escape and bring the ‘goods’, whatever they were upon any given occasion, back to Langham and the others at the Department. He was an uncannily brilliant guesser. The patriot in Asher had striven to emulate what he saw, both the cold virtuosity and the single-minded loyalty to his Queen. In his dream now, Asher saw him as he’d seen him in those days: clever, cold, unobtrusive and ruthless.

Forget about it afterwards. Clean as you go.

Someone paused for a moment in the doorway of the little *meyhane* where they sat: Asher caught the shadow out of the corner of his eye, and his glance went to the silver coffee pot on the low table between them to see who it was, so he would not be seen to turn. The man was gone before Asher made out the image in the round belly of the polished metal.

But he thought it was Langham.

And just as he woke he thought he smelled the fishy, greasy reek of the Others, that the visitor had left behind.

Over supper, earlier in the evening, at Miss Beyerly’s club – mutton every bit as bad as Asher had suspected it would be – Josetta had told him that yes, she had heard rumor among the laborers who worked nights along Regent’s Canal, that there was a bludger afoot, mostly in the hours between midnight and three. So far he’d killed a whore and a seven-year-old pickpocket who’d been sleeping in a doorway and had, so the story went, eaten some of their flesh. Hungry Tom, he was called in the neighborhoods, or Tom the Ogre, though nobody had seen him nor knew whether his name was actually Tom or something else. The police were claiming that no such person existed.

‘*The matter is in hand*,’ Langham had said, with his sly little secret smile.

Langham wants the thing ‘for King and country’. Asher knew it as he knew his own name. *He may not know precisely what it is. Only that it can be used*.

And that its use will redound to his credit.

Looking across the coffee table at Crowell in his dream – though Asher knew that in fact, after a lifetime of hair-breadth escapes and false rumors of demise Pritchard Crowell had succumbed to a lucky shot by a Bosnian merchant’s blunderbuss in 1899 – he thought, *Crowell would have put Tim the publican out of the way*.

‘Of course the police would rather that such a person doesn’t exist,’ had sniffed Josetta after dinner, stirring coffee like diesel oil in the old-fashioned gaslight of one of the club’s small parlors. ‘Both the victims are the sort of people the government has been pretending for years are criminals who deserve what they get, or who no longer live in the up-to-date London of the twentieth century … Certainly not worth avenging, with the cost of

slaughtering Germans to be thought of. And there are no reliable witnesses …'

Except Tim, thought Asher, in his dream of Mesopotamia. *Tim, who saw the body of the creature's most recent victim, in the fog of the alleyway behind the Wolf and Child*.

'It pays to be tidy,' Crowell was saying to him, emphasizing the point with one tiny forefinger: he had hands like an eleven-year-old boy. His wrinkled eyelids puckered. 'You never know who's going to talk to whom; what blithering postman is going to remark to his friend who works in Army Intelligence some day, "Ach, that man who's calling himself Martin and drawing pictures of ships in the harbor, I knew him in Strasbourg three years ago when he was named Schmidt …" And then it will be you for the high jump, my lad, and the whole show we've set up here blown to kingdom come. And nobody would ever associate the disappearance of the local postman with some traveling artist who'd scarcely even met the man …'

Clean as you go.

Crowell might be gone, reflected Asher, waking in the darkness of his rented lodging. But Langham remained.

He turned the dream over in his mind.

And there were a dozen or a hundred fledgling Crowells in the wings, waiting to take his shape, and continue his business.

After killing his young friend Jan van der Platz, Asher had quit the Department, when he'd realized that he was one of them.

Then he smelled blood, quite close to him, and knew suddenly he was in mortal danger.

His eyes flew open to darkness and a cold hand crushed down over his mouth, almost smothering him, while another had him by the wrist even as he snatched for the knife under his pillow.

The hand released its grip an instant later and Asher heard a curse of pain, and knew that his assailant had been burned by the chains of silver he wore.

Vampire …

SIX

Lydia didn't even stop at her tent, just went straight on to the fluoroscope chamber and was setting up the apparatus when Captain Calvert barged in looking for her. 'Good, you've heard, then— Good God, woman, where've you been?' was his only comment on her muddy and disheveled state, and he was out the door and into the surgical tent before she drew breath to reply. 'Brickwood, I'm devastated but I'm going to have to ask you to stay,' his voice went on as his steps retreated across the tent. 'Go in and wake up Danvers, would you? Matron, can you get me …?'

The tidal wave of wounded didn't slacken for another thirty-six hours. The Germans had hit the line hard, over a front of two miles: first came the men wounded in the preliminary shelling, then the thousands who'd been mowed down, like standing wheat before a reaper's scythe, as they'd scrambled up out of the trench to meet the onrushing line of the enemy. The situation was not helped when four German shells landed on the village of Pont-Sainte-Félicité itself, turning the marketplace to rubble and killing two orderlies. Colonel St-Vire wired furiously up and down the line for more surgeons, more nurses and more orderlies, and later Thursday morning Lydia found herself administering chloroform at the tables of surgeons she'd never seen before, Captain Glover from the First Lancashire and Captain Bryce-Bayington who looked young enough to be one of Jamie's students back in Oxford. Matron – Sister Flavia – came as close to cursing as Lydia had ever heard her do over the three extra nurses who arrived ('Nurses! I shouldn't hire a one of them to make tea for a proper nurse!'), and just before the Germans started shelling Pont-Sainte-Félicité a second time – as Lydia was on her way out of the fluoroscope tent – Lydia recognized one of the new nurses as the young woman she'd seen in the trenches last night, bending over the corpse of the revenant.

The young woman who had tossed a grenade at the corpse, either to destroy it or because she'd seen Lydia and Don Simon.

The young woman who was looking for a vampire with *a partnership to offer you …*

For a moment Lydia only stood in startled surprise. But there was no mistaking the wide forehead, the sturdy shape of the shoulders, the dark widow's peak and snub nose. And like her own, she noted, this younger girl's blue-and-white VAD uniform was blotched and splattered with mud – *She must have been bundled straight into a truck and ordered to come here just as she got back to … to wherever it is she's assigned, with …*

With what?

The revenant's blood? One of its still-flexing hands?

Then Burke bellowed from within the surgical tent 'Asher! Where t' bloody 'ell's them snaps?' and Lydia dashed to his side with the films that she had been taking between filling in as an assistant in the surgery. A few minutes later she glimpsed Captain Palfrey helping the orderlies carry men in from the pre-operative tent, working alongside the Indian motor-mechanics and the cook. Then German shells hit the village again, close enough that fragments of brick and wood clattered like rain on the canvas walls of the tent.

She sponged the other woman from her mind.

She worked on into the night, existing on hot tea and the biscuits Danvers's grandfather had sent her yesterday, which her tent-mate gamely divided among the surgical staff. It occurred to her that she ought to be terrified, when a shell struck particularly close, but she found that associating with vampires for the past eight years had had the salutary effect of making her less inclined to panic: *I can run away screaming anytime I want, which wasn't the case when I was dealing with that horrid Rumanian count or whatever he was in Scotland … and if I get killed here, nobody else is likely to suffer.*

James was safe, wherever he was.

Miranda was safe back in Oxford.

These men need help.

She stepped out once, around two in the morning of the nineteenth, and thought she glimpsed the pale shape of Don Simon, standing in the doorway of what was left of the town church across the green from the surgical tent, like the Angel of Death in his trim brown uniform. *To make sure he's on hand if I need rescuing, if one of those shells hits? Or just waiting for the next man to be moved into the Moribund Ward?*

How many others of them are around, where I can't see them?

Not many, she reflected, *with shells still striking the village …*

Bearers passed her, carrying a man from the drop-off point by the road into the pre-operative ward. *I'd better get back.*

When she looked again the vampire was gone, if indeed he ever had been there. She was sufficiently tired now that she wasn't certain of what she saw.

At least the surgeons got to sleep most of last night.

The next time she emerged, toward dawn (‘There’s tea in the mess tent,’ Captain Calvert had said, ‘and you *will* go and have a cup and sit down for ten minutes’), she passed the door of the clearing tent, the flap tied open so that bearers could carry men in. She saw the little dark-haired nurse kneeling beside one of the cots, her arms around the shoulders of a man who lay there, freckles starring like spattered ink in his waxen face and covered with mud and blood.

‘You’re alive!’ the young woman cried, covering the man’s hands with kisses as he raised them to touch her hair. ‘Dear God, I thought I’d never see you again—’

‘Tuathla,’ he murmured. ‘Well you know there’s no Jerry livin’ that’s yet forged the gun that’ll shoot the shell that’ll end my love for you, *mo chroí*, so don’t you be thinkin’ it.’

‘*Miss* Smith!’ Matron materialized like a ghost from the dense gloom of the lantern-lit ward. ‘If you will *kindly* come over here and lend us the assistance you presumably volunteered to give to your country—’

The dark-haired nurse scrambled to her feet. ‘Yes, M’am. Of course, M’am.’

Educated English. Little trace of the graceful Irish drawl that lilted her red-haired lover’s speech. Miss Smith … Tuathla Smith … or was *tuathla* some kind of County Liffey endearment? Lydia’s mind seemed to be turning things over very slowly, and she started as a firm hand took her elbow and Captain Calvert said, ‘I told you to get into the mess tent and *sit down* for ten minutes, Dr Asher. Bearers are still coming in and we’re in for a long morning of it.’

She and the captain were still in the mess tent – Captain Calvert turning to give orders to Trent, the head bearer, to marshal the walking wounded to help carry from the drop-off point – when a shattering explosion sounded from the direction of the river, and not only fragments of dirt and stone rained on the clearing station, but water, as if it had been flung from buckets. Instants later Storeman Pratt raced in, white-faced – the stores tent stood only a dozen feet from the stream – and cried, ‘Bugger it, Captain, Jerry’s blown the bloody bridge!’

Calvert said something worthy of neither an officer nor a gentleman and sprang to his feet. The surgeon at the other end of the table – a saturnine French Colonel pulled in from God knew where – cursed quietly in his native language and added, ‘What they’ve been after all along, *en effet*. To cut the medical help off from the lines.’

‘Finish your tea,’ ordered Calvert, as Lydia began to rise. ‘You, too, Colonel Lemoine, sir. Be back in the tent in fifteen minutes. The men can rig

a causeway out of the rubble … God knows we've got plenty of that,' and went tearing off in quest of Colonel St-Vire.

'At least now they've got it,' added Dr Lemoine – Lydia tried to remember what the collar insignia on his pale-blue greatcoat denoted – 'let us hope they leave off wasting shells on men already incapable of harming them, and let us get on with our business. Before last year,' he went on, holding aside the tent-flap for Lydia to pass through before him, 'I gave thirty years of my life to my country's army. But as I learned more and more about the monstrous "improvements" in weaponry I always wondered in my heart: how can we loose such horrors upon living men? Shells that can reduce men – men with wives and children – to blots of jam from five miles away. Airships to drop bombs on women and children minding their own business in their own homes. Battleships to bar food and medicines from our enemy's country, so that all will starve together – old men, women, children.'

In the dust-choked morning haze Lydia saw his jaw work with fury and pain.

'And yet I swear to you, Madame, when I see such things as they do – shelling the hospitals where the wounded lie, torpedoing passenger ships when they know full well that the innocent will perish – I think nothing is too savage to do to them in retaliation. No action of ours is too horrible, if it but makes them throw up their hands and cry, *I quit*!'

His dark brows pulled together, a handsome man of about Jamie's age, with gray flecks in his pencil mustache and the features of a sorrowing king.

Then he glanced across at her – he was taller than she by three or four inches – and made himself smile. 'And you, Madame? I had heard the British Army refused to accept female surgeons—'

'Well, they do. And even if they didn't, I'm not a surgeon, you know. My research was on glandular secretions, so I just signed on just as a regular volunteer. But when Colonel St-Vire heard I knew how to operate a fluoroscope apparatus he had me reassigned to the unit and put me in charge of the x-ray photo`graphy, and they pull me into the surgical tent whenever they need to. I couldn't remove a splinter on my own, but I do know how to administer anesthetic, and what all the equipment is for, and the sight of blood doesn't bother me. Here,' she added sadly, 'that's enough.'

Every spare orderly and bearer, along with the ambulance drivers and the walking wounded, were streaming down to the river. In the horse-lines, the animals squealed and milled in panic. Lydia heard a motorbike roar away into the iron-gray morning, to get the Engineers from Headquarters. Now that the profile of the town was considerably flattened she could see the line of ambulance-wagons – both motorized and horse-drawn – lined up waiting on

the far side of the river, while their drivers scrambled to pull free the men and horses from those who'd been hit on the bridge itself. The screams of dying mules mingled with the brutal roar of the guns.

I was in that. Lydia felt a sort of distant, tired wonder at the fact. *Simon and I. I tripped over a corpse, and the hands of other dead men were sticking through the walls where dugouts had collapsed …*

She thought she glimpsed Captain Palfrey in a group of mechanics, black with soot and mud and carrying beams from the ruins.

'And Monsieur Asher?' asked Lemoine gently.

'In England.' Lydia's throat closed at the recollection of the misty train platform: the strength of his arms, the warmth of his body against the gray of that bitter morning. At the thought of Miranda at the nursery breakfast table, solemn with a goodbye that she thought was only for a day or two. ('I'll see you when I come home, darling …') It was a moment before she could speak. 'With our daughter. I try not to think of them, at times like these.'

She turned, to go back into the charnel house of the tent.

'And for that—' Lemoine's quiet voice turned grim, 'the Boche deserve whatever we can do.'

By eleven in the morning, when the surgeons finished the last of the desperate cases, the Royal Engineers arrived with planks, beams and struts to repair the bridge. Captain Calvert ordered Lydia back to her tent and to bed. She could see at least a dozen motor trucks, and twice as many other vehicles – horse-drawn farm carts, milk floats, staff-cars – waiting on the far bank and all overflowing with wounded. The drivers, and many of the walking wounded, waded out into the Lys to fasten beams to the broken foundations of the stone bridge's arches. 'When they're done,' said Violet Brickwood, falling into step with her, 'they'll all come across at once and it will be all harry in the surgery again. I hope somebody's making the surgeons rest.'

Once in their tent, Lydia lay down in her clothes and passed out as if she'd had a pipe of opium.

And dreamed of the revenant. Dreamed of being tied to a pillar in that horrible lightless room in Peking, listening to the creatures – the *yao-kuei* – smashing through the doors and windows only feet away from her. Dreamed of whatever-his-name-was, that colleague of Jamie's who'd been infected with the creatures' blood, his eyes gleaming like a rat's in the dark and his grip brutally strong on her arm, gasping *Extraordinary. Never been here in my life but remember it …* as the last of his mind dissolved into the dim hive of the revenants' collective consciousness, as he touched her face with his bloody and reeking hand.

Simon, she thought. *Simon came and saved me …*

And through her dream she heard his voice, like silk chilled from winter midnight, *Mistress …*

In her dream she was back on her cot in the nurses' tent, Simon's hand gentle on her shoulder, shaking her. She sat up, and threw herself into his arms, weeping: wanting Jamie, wanting Miranda, wanting to be back in Oxford researching pituitary secretions and wanting the world to be the way the world had always been. No shell-fire. No terror. No watching young men die under her very hands, no cold calm x-ray pictures of shrapnel lodged in organs that couldn't be mended …

She whispered, 'I want Jamie …'

The tent was silent. No camp noises, no gunfire. Just afternoon sunlight, indescribably sweet, filtering through the dirty white canvas, and the smell of grass and roses, which told her this was a dream. Don Simon, perched on the side of her cot, wore his colonel's uniform, brass buttons winking in the light.

Does HE dream of afternoon sunlight and the smell of roses, lying in his coffin in the daytime hours?

His grip on her was strong and reassuring, the slender shoulder and steel-hard arm within the sleeve as real as anything she had ever felt. His face, in its frame of cobweb-pale hair, was the face of the living man he'd once been, save for the eyes.

His hand stroked her hair. 'Would you have me set him before you?'

She wiped her eyes. In her dream, though she wasn't wearing her glasses, she saw perfectly well. 'It wouldn't be the same,' she said. 'I mean, I should know it was just a picture … a very, very accurate one, since you can walk in his dreams, the way you walk in mine … The way you're walking in mine right this minute.'

''Tis the best I can give you, lady.' He moved to put his hand to her cheek and then, as if he had seen the horror of her nightmare, drew it back with the gesture unmade. 'I would fain do more, were it in my power.'

He is in my mind, thought Lydia. *Right at this moment. Asleep in his coffin, wherever it's hidden …*

This is how he convinced that poor imbecile Captain Palfrey of his bona fides. I'll bet Palfrey's positive he's seen Don Simon by daylight, positive that he showed him unimpeachable proofs of the genuineness of this Secret Department of his … Positive of God knows what else! All because at some point Simon looked into his eyes, and later walked in his dreams – as she knew the old and skillful among the vampires could do – *and convinced him that these things really happened. That those dreams were real memories.*

I really should hate him.

But he was an old, old friend, and there was infinite comfort in the strength of his arms.

'I just want things to be the way they used to be,' she said at length. 'Living in Oxford, I mean, with Jamie and Miranda, and the worst one would see in the newspapers would be bunfights about who actually reached the South Pole first. I know it can't be that way again.' She sat up a little, and Don Simon handed her a perfectly clean white linen handkerchief, to blow her nose. 'I just – this is so hard.'

'Did you not weep for the dying,' replied the vampire in his soft voice, 'and fear for your life, and curse the stupid uselessness of it all – did you not pray that the world will somehow heal before your daughter grows to be aware of its horrors – you would be no more human than the fools and monsters that let this war begin. I have had centuries of watching war and stupidity, Mistress, and they grow no better, I am sorry to say. Your courage is the wine of hope to the men you work with, as well as to those you save. To James as well, I think, and to your child. It keeps their hearts beating. I am sorry you are in pain.'

She wrapped her hand around his, pretending (*I shouldn't* …) for a time that he was the living man he had been …

Although goodness knows as a living man he was probably a bigoted Catholic and a friend of the Grand Inquisitor and an enemy of England and a firm believer in the humoral theory of medicine. He probably beat his valet, too.

'Thank you,' she said simply, and raised her head from his shoulder. 'I've seen the woman – the one who was hunting the vampires, and looking for the revenant last night. She's one of the extra VADs who came in last night, her name is Smith – Tuathla Smith, I think … Oh, bother,' she added, as the tent-flap opened and Matron came in, and suddenly the light changed and Don Simon was gone and the sound of shelling, though no longer close enough to shake the ground, pounded the air with a constant, terrible roar. She heard men shouting above the grinding roar of a fleet of motors …

Lydia sat up, and fumbled for her glasses, on the plank floor beside the cot. By the light it was about four in the afternoon. For one moment she recalled that she'd dreamed about roses … roses and sunlight … then she picked up her much-creased cap from beside the pillow, pinned it on, and said, 'How many of them are there? Should I go to surgery, or the fluoroscope room?'

'Fluoroscope.' Matron spoke over her shoulder as she leaned over Violet's cot. 'Come on, Miss Brickwood, they've got the bridge fixed and the ambulances are coming in. There's tea in the mess tent, and sandwiches,' she added, as Lydia ducked through the flap.

For the next fourteen hours Lydia alternated between working the fluoroscope and assisting whichever of the three surgeons needed help: dripping chloroform with a steady hand, retracting the edges of wounds so that shards of metal could be fished out, clamping off blood vessels and stitching shut flesh and organs so that Captain Calvert or Captain Burke or Colonel Lemoine could get on with the next man. Well after sunrise on the following day – the twentieth – the last of the urgent cases was finished, though the hammering of the German guns had eased many hours before. A dozen of the last group in the ambulances were German prisoners, muttering confusedly: *Haben wir gewonnen*?

Lemoine retorted, in the same tongue, 'You have lost – as you will lose all in the end.'

But Captain Burke only patted his patient's hand and said, 'Nowt t'worry reet now, lad,' as Lydia signed the orderlies to carry the shattered man into the fluoroscope room to see where the shrapnel was buried.

When they were finished at last Colonel St-Vire ordered the whole surgical staff, save for himself, to their tents: 'And I'd better not see one of your faces for the next eight hours, understand? I hear we held the line and pushed Jerry back. It'll be awhile before they try again.'

'Sir, can you tell the neighbors to keep it down?' Captain Calvert pointed east, in the direction of the Front and the thunder of the guns. 'I can't see *how* I'm to get my beauty rest with that *frightful* din going on …'

''Ud take more'n eight hours' kip, think on, to render – hrrm! – *some* people beautiful …'

Lydia returned to her tent without the slightest thought for Miss Smith, lay down again, and was asleep within moments, dreaming of arteries and kidneys, of pancreatic ducts and lobules, with a sensation of walking in some wonderful garden without anyone's life being at stake, only to view these wonders at her leisure.

When she woke up, and washed (*finally!*) and brushed her hair and had bacon and porridge and tea in the mess tent, and felt herself again ('Be ready to be on at six, Dr Asher …'), she went to the ward tent in quest of the little dark-haired volunteer with the heart-shaped face.

And found that she was gone. Nor was there any sign of the red-haired, freckled soldier she'd sat beside, though two men recalled seeing them ('She bust out weepin' like a babe, M'am, an' cried out his name … Danny? Davy? Harry? Su'thin' like that.') While Lydia had been sleeping, trucks and ambulances had been departing steadily, carrying the most stable of the men back to the base hospital at Calais. Hundreds had already gone.

Matron – unsurprisingly – had barely had time to scribble down the names of the men as they were brought in, and the nature of their wounds. She thought the extra volunteers had come in from the Friends' ambulance station at Neuve Chapelle, and possibly – she wasn't sure – from the base hospital.

There was no Nurse Smith listed anywhere.

SEVEN

‘Lay thy crest,’ growled a voice like chains stirred in a pot of blood. ‘An’ I wanted ye dead I’d have had the throat out o’ you ere this.’

Asher sat up in his narrow bed. He could see nothing in the darkness – the room’s shutters were fast – but he could smell where the vampire sat, and feel the weight of him on the side of the mattress. A stench of graveyard mold and dirty clothing.

Lionel Grippen.

The Master of London.

The weight shifted and a match scratched. As Grippen turned up the gas Asher saw the familiar form, tall and heavy-built, clothed in a frock coat ruinous with age and a waistcoat of Chinese silk spotted with old blood. Greasy black hair, thick as a horse’s tail, spilled from beneath the brim of a shallow-crowned beaver hat and framed a face fleshy and thick, a nightmare of centuries of uncaring murder.

The vampire flexed his hand a couple of times and dug a kerchief from his pocket, to wrap on over the burn the silver had left.

‘You’re seeking this revenant,’ said Grippen. ‘What’ve ye found?’

‘That someone’s screening his movements.’ If the master vampire’s aim was to hide the revenant himself, Asher was fairly certain Grippen would, indeed, have killed him – or had him killed by the living men in London whose debts he paid, whose affairs he protected, whose dreams he read and who followed his orders without asking who he was or why he wanted things done.

Two years ago, after Asher had killed most of the London nest, Grippen had broken up the ring of henchmen centered on the East End tavern called the Scythe. Asher guessed he’d put together another.

‘Germans, you think?’

‘There’s a nest of the things in Prague.’ Asher reached for the shawl he’d spread over his blankets and dragged it up around his shoulders, for the room, though stuffy, was bitterly cold. ‘It’s certainly a more effective way of destroying civilian morale even than Zeppelin raids. And it could be easily done, by infecting a man and bringing him across immediately, before he

starts to transform. In a way I hope it's that, rather than that the condition has developed spontaneously, for God only knows what reason—'

The vampire growled, with the first display Asher had ever seen from him, of uneasiness or fear. 'That can't happen, can it?'

'So far as I can find out, nobody knows how these things first started. They spread through contamination of the blood, but the original source has to have developed it somehow. Which means, it can develop again.'

Grippen whispered, 'God save us, then.'

'I've been saying that for a long time,' returned Asher. 'However the thing came here, the Foreign Office – or men in the Foreign Office – are hunting it, not to destroy it, but to capture it … to use it for their own purposes. If that hadn't been the case already I think my former chief, Langham, would have recruited me, instead of warning me off.'

'Faugh! There's the Quality for you.'

Asher couldn't quarrel with him there. 'When did you first see him? And where?'

'Limehouse. Candlemas, thereabouts.' His English had a flatness strongly reminiscent of American, even after three centuries; as a philologist Asher could not help his mind from marking it as Elizabethan. 'Killed a newsboy that was sleepin' rough. Tore him up somethin' savage. Later I smelled him in the fog, near the hospital in St James Road, and I think he killed a whore in the Canal Road near the Kingsland Basin. Leastwise that's what Gopsall tells me, that runs the Black Dog near there. I never actually seen the thing.'

'And it killed a man in an alleyway behind Chalton Street, between King's Cross and Euston, Monday night. The body disappeared. So did the only positive witness. If German agents were behind it, they'd publicize it. They'd see to it that its victims were found – and they might well see to it that its victims were more than prostitutes and homeless newsboys. The Department is covering its tracks.'

'Faugh,' said the vampire again. 'And you look down on *us*, for killin' a whore here and there. You're not sayin' they're lettin' the thing rove free?'

'I don't think so.' Asher shook his head. 'I think they're hunting it – or someone *in* the Department is using the Department's resources to hunt it, while keeping it quiet.'

'For Christ's sake, why?'

'To avoid panic. And, I suspect, to capture the thing to see if we can use it ourselves … And the man who captured it would, of course, get a fat promotion and maybe a knighthood if it turns out to be useful.'

The vampire grimaced in disgust – not, Asher was certain, from any moral objection, but at the unworkable stupidity of the idea. Though susceptible to

destruction by the light of the sun, the Others, Asher knew, moved about underground for a few hours longer than could vampires, who fell unwakeably asleep with the sun's rising. Like their cousins the vampires they were tremendously strong, and would devour vampires in their coffins if they found them.

'I've been warned off. Unless the condition *has* somehow developed spontaneously – which I pray to God isn't the case – this creature was brought to this country and somehow got loose, which tells me that whoever brought it here has no idea what they're dealing with.'

Grippen snarled again. 'So what do we do?'

Asher stifled the surge of anger at *we* from a walking corpse that had drunk the blood of the living, that had used their deaths to fuel its unholy powers, for over three hundred years. A creature that had kidnapped his child two years ago. Though he had recovered Miranda safe he had sworn to kill it, and all those like it …

I am no more part of WE with you than I am with Langham …

But, of course, he was.

That was why he was angry.

The revenants were a plague a thousand times worse than the vampire, for they multiplied without conscious volition. And they could not be negotiated with.

The contagion of their being had to be extirpated before it spread.

And whomever it was who had brought one to England – for whatever purpose – had to be found. And destroyed.

He was aware that Grippen was watching him with cynical amusement. In addition to smelling his blood, the vampire had felt that flush of heat that had gone through him and knew – from centuries of observing humankind – exactly what emotion had kindled it.

'How large a network do you command in London these days?' asked Asher after a moment. 'How many observers can you call on?'

'Pah.' The vampire scowled, a horrible sight. 'Damnéd war. Run by a damnéd crew of rabbit-sucking pimps. Half the men in London have turned their backs on their families and homes, to go slaughter cabbage-eaters in Flanders muck, and for why? Because of lies these pribbling whoresons have conjured about country and King, making a man ashamed to tell 'em he'd rather not go die so England can keep its grip on a passle of colonies oversea!'

'Instead of sending them dreams in their sleep about how worthy of trust *you* are? And how they owe *you* their lives …'

Grippen jabbed a clawed finger at him. ‘None o’ your backchat! You whored for ’em yourself, by what Simon tells me. And pimped others to give you what help you sought.’

‘I did,’ replied Asher quietly. ‘I did indeed. I apologize for my words.’

‘Hmph. What help d’you seek? ’Tis mostly women and street brats I command these days, and Papist Irish who refuse to sign up ’cause they’re too busy runnin’ guns from the Germans to the Irish Volunteers. Scum.’ The vampire shrugged, as if he spoke of roaches on the wall.

‘I’m surprised to see you here,’ remarked Asher, changing the subject, rubbing his wrist where the vampire’s grip, however fleeting, had driven the silver links hard into the flesh. ‘I thought all the vampires were at the Front.’

‘And so they be.’ Grippen seated himself again on the edge of the bed. Nearby in the darkness the bells of St Pancras chimed two, and even with the shutters and curtains tightly closed the night smelled of dank fog and the soot of trains. ‘The more fools they and bad cess to the lot of ’em, swillin’ like piggins at a trough. Those that’re masters of the cities they rule’ll find their error, when they come back to find some upstart’s moved in on Paris or Munich or Rome and set up housekeepin’ … I thought I’d stay here and watch my patch. And a damn good thing, with this clammy wight that should be in its grave prowlin’ about spreadin’ its contagion. Fine homecomin’ that’d be, to get back and find London eye-deep in the things. Has that sneaking Papist whoreson—’

Meaning, Asher knew, Don Simon Ysidro.

‘—got anythin’ to say of it?’

Asher shook his head, and the vampire’s eyes glinted, as if he guessed where Ysidro was and why.

But Grippen kept his peace, and after a moment Asher said, ‘Find out if you can where this thing has been sighted or smelled, where rumor has placed it. If it’s staying by the canal it can come and go through fog, and through the sewer outfalls. You say you learned of it first six weeks ago – find if there’s any word of sightings before that. And keep your ear cocked for word that anyone else is seeking it, or that any who’ve seen it have disappeared.’

‘There’s enough disappear in this city without help of revenants, or them as seeks ’em. Christ, you think vampires could dwell anyplace where the poor was kept track of? Where’ll I find you?’

‘I’m going up to Oxford in the morning.’ The thought of the train journey made his bones creak like an overladen bridge, but if he were to stay in London for any time there were things he wanted to fetch, to say nothing of seeing Miranda. ‘I should be back Sunday, I’ll be staying—’

He paused on the words, as Langham's jowly face and watery, penetrant eyes flashed across his thoughts and he remembered what his old master Pritchard Crowell had taught him, about making things look like accidents. *The wicked flee where none pursueth*, Holy Writ (and Asher's pious and long-deceased father) declared … and, frequently, Asher had found, the same could be said of the deranged. Yet it was a truism in the Department, particularly 'abroad', that in some circumstances it was better to flee and be thought deranged (or wicked) than to stop and be picked up by the opposition and shot as a spy.

In other circumstances, of course, flight could be just what the opposition was waiting for you to do.

'I'll put an advert in *The Times*,' he said. 'You still go by the name of Graves?'

The vampire's smile widened unpleasantly. 'That's me.'

'Mine'll be under the name of Scragger.'

'Dr Asher, M'am.' Eamon Dermott laid aside the film plate and turned to Lydia as she came into the fluoroscope tent, still puzzling over Matron's notes and the absence of Nurse Smith. The murmur of voices and clink of metal on china drifted faintly through the wall from the surgical tent, but held nothing of the frantic note of the 'big push' of yesterday and the day before. Down by the river, the Engineers were nearly finished clearing debris to start properly repairing the bridge. This evening, Lydia guessed, would be what Captain Calvert called 'cleanup'.

Men whose wounds could wait a little. Men who wouldn't die from not being seen to at once.

Outside, vehicles of all sorts were still leaving for the base hospital at Calais with wounded. Constant in the distance, the thunder of the guns continued.

'These orders you had from Captain Palfrey Thursday night …'

Oh, drat it! Lydia pushed her spectacles up more firmly onto the bridge of her nose and tried to look like Miranda did when questioned about the disappearance of sugar from the sugar bowl … *Oh, that? They merely wanted to consult me about training in the use of the fluoroscope …*

'Yes?'

'Did it have anythin' to do with taking German prisoners away?'

'German prisoners?'

Dermott nodded. He was a stocky young man a few years Lydia's junior, a Quaker who'd worked in his father's photography studio and assisted the local doctor in his North Wales village. 'Yes, M'am. I know 'tis not my place

to be askin' questions, but some of the prisoners— That is, I speak a bit of German. And one of the prisoners said this mornin' as how both here and at the Front when they was captured, there was an officer separatin' out some of the men, puttin' 'em in a truck and away they'd go. He said he was captured with his cousin, and looked to see him here, but instead it was this same thing. A half-dozen men separated out from the rest and took away, M'am. And he asked me, was this usual, and how would he get in touch with his cousin again? He was a lawyer, see, this German, and had spent some time in England. He said it wasn't anything the British would do.'

'It's certainly nothing I've ever heard about.' Lydia frowned. 'Not with the wounded, at any rate. Seriously wounded?'

'No, M'am. Mostly walking wounded, he said. I did ask Captain Calvert about it, M'am, and he said he'd never heard of it neither, not here nor anywhere else, but if the officer had papers for it – which he did – it must be pukka. But it didn't seem quite right to me still, and I thought about this Captain Palfrey that came the other night with papers for you, and you going off as you did … Well, there might be other things going on that even gentlemen like Captain Calvert aren't told about. But I was only asking, and I wouldn't wish to cause trouble.'

'No,' said Lydia thoughtfully. 'No, it's nothing I've heard of, Mr Dermott. Captain Palfrey was simply relaying a request for me to consult about training in the use of the fluoroscope.'

The vampires Antonio and Basilio, driving their ambulance-wagon all along the trench lines? A shiver went through her: anger, helplessness, frustration. Had some other enterprising ghouls, braver than the rest, started a delivery service for the convenience of those Undead who didn't want to risk getting that close to the Front?

How easy it was, to prey on the helpless. The wounded, and prisoners …

She closed her eyes for a moment, sickened. *Every vampire in Europe is here. Feeding at will. Killing at will.*

And nobody notices.

In the momentary silence, the crashing of the guns sounded very loud.

And why would they notice?

She looked at Dermott again. 'Could I speak with this man?'

EIGHT

‘Rhinehardt?’ Nurse Danvers checked the notebook she carried, close-scribbled with hundreds of names dashed off in a hurry between cleaning, bandaging and the endless ancillary chores of making beds and ironing sheets. Lydia was burningly aware that she herself should be in the fluoroscope tent at that moment, sorting through films of the men waiting for surgery, instead of snooping around the prisoners’ compound …

‘A fair-haired man.’ Lydia repeated the description Dermott had given her. ‘Broken nose and shrapnel wounds in the face.’

Across the small tent where the wounded prisoners had been kept under guard last night, Matron called, ‘Danvers—’

Danvers peered at her notes, turned the book sideways, pale brows crumpling together.

‘Danvers—’

‘Just coming, M’am! Oh, aye, he’s been taken on to Calais. A whole lot of them went this afternoon.’

BOTHER! ‘Thank you!’ As Lydia hurried from the prisoners’ tent – jammed with men last night, nearly vacant now save for a handful of the worst cases down at the far end – she cursed herself for not waking earlier. Yet she was aware she needed the sleep, and by what Dermott had said of this man Rhinehardt’s wounds, she doubted whether the man she sought would have been able to talk to her much earlier. A dozen finger-sized fragments of shell-casing and wood from the trench re-enforcements had been taken out of his face, throat and chest last night. That morning, Dermott had said, he’d still have been under morphia.

To her left, by the road that led westward to Calais, a line of soldiers caught her eye, rifles ready, and before them, men in gray-green uniforms, seated on the ground. A big wagon, drawn by two exhausted-looking farm horses, was being loaded under guard.

This afternoon, she said … but these things always take forever …

Lydia caught up her skirts and nearly ran. ‘Excuse me, Sergeant Waller, but is there any chance I might speak to one of the prisoners? There are some details about his injury I didn’t get last night before he was operated on …’

‘Well …’ The sergeant frowned. A friendly soul, he had several times traded encomia with Lydia about the perfections of their respective children. ‘We’re not supposed to, M’am. But if it’s in the way of medical information …’

Sure enough, Captain Rhinehardt lay on a stretcher, waiting for a place on the next wagon or (Lydia did a hasty calculation) probably the next but one …

Now if I can just remember enough German …

‘*Bitte …*’ she said hesitantly, and the young man turned his head, blinking up at her with his one undamaged eye.

‘*Gnädige Frau Doktor …*’ His voice sounded like dry mud being scraped off tin.

‘Do you speak English?’ *If he’s visited England …*

He was haggard with pain and still sleepy from the morphia, but answered her in that language. ‘Please forgive me for not rising, Madame …’

‘Good Heavens, Captain, it’s I who should be asking *your* forgiveness, for troubling you at such a time.’ She knelt at his side. ‘My assistant, Mr Dermott, said you were seeking your cousin, who had been … taken away from the other prisoners. Things were so confused for the last few days we’re still not certain what happened, but I will try to trace him. Was his name Rhinehardt also?’

An infinitesimal nod. ‘Oberleutnant Gleb Rhinehardt.’

‘And he was also wounded?’

‘Not so badly as I, Madame. How do you say it? Walking wounded. A bullet had broken his arm.’

Lydia flinched. Flanders soil, manured for croplands for centuries, was incredibly virulent in cuts. Even the smallest wounds went septic within hours.

‘And men were being taken away from the main group of the wounded?’ A glance along the line of the prisoners showed her at once that over a dozen of them were on their feet and able to help their comrades.

‘So they were, Madame. A French officer – a surgeon – with two British soldiers, and a nurse, or a nursing sister – dressed as you are, in light blue with a white apron. Gleb was sitting with me – he could have escaped, fled when the remainder of our unit did, but he was captured when he saw that I could not walk. I heard our officer calling to him to do so and he would not let go of my hand. At the dressing station he asked the sergeant in charge of guarding us, could he fetch me some water, and the sergeant permitted him to do so; there was a water butt nearby. Gleb walked over to it with his cup and this French officer saw him and pointed to him, the two soldiers stopped him and took him away with five others, in a big ambulance-wagon. A long

chassis Sunbeam, I think it was. Gleb was a motor mechanic in Dresden, Madame. There was no vehicle in our lines that he did not point out to me and tell me about, inch by inch.'

Something that might have been a smile twitched one corner of his mouth at the memory of his friend, then quickly faded.

'I saw Gleb trying to talk the soldiers into letting him come back to me but they put all six of those men into the ambulance truck. He got one of the regular guards to bring his cup to me with the water. I asked this man, where had they been taken, and he said he didn't know. No one I have spoken to knows anything about it. But one of the other prisoners here told me the same thing: that this French surgeon and his nurse took away ten men, only lightly wounded, from the dressing station where he, and they, had been held before coming here. The French surgeon looked at him – the man who told me this, a sergeant in the Uhlans – but said he was too badly injured and would not do.'

Lydia frowned. This didn't sound like anything Don Simon had told her, but of course considering the other vampires abroad along no man's land, there was no way of telling. However, if this young man had been able to identify the make of an ambulance …

'What time of day was this?'

Rhinehardt shook his head. 'The assault started just after sunrise. I was hit before we reached the English lines, and I was unconscious when Gleb found me. I know it was daylight when we were at the English dressing station – an hour, two hours, before dusk began to fall, perhaps? It is hard to judge, Madame …'

'Of course,' said Lydia quickly. *Not vampires, anyway. Unless they've got the living working for them – like poor Captain Palfrey – but why on earth would they want the walking wounded?* 'Thank you,' she added. 'I'll do everything I can to see if I can locate your friend …'

'*Danke,*' he whispered, and closed his eye.

'Is there anything I can get for you? Do you need more morphia? Or cigarettes?'

'*Danke*, Madame, but I am well for the moment.'

Lydia started to rise, then knelt again and asked, 'One more thing, if I may ask, sir. How did you know the French officer was a surgeon?'

The young captain blinked up at her, his brow tightening as if the pain were returning, and his voice was a little slurred with weariness. 'He was here,' he said. 'I saw him pass through the tent last night, before I was taken to surgery. I was afraid … He and his nurse were both there. I was afraid they had come to search for others.'

‘Was it Nurse Smith?’ asked Lydia. ‘Short and young, with black hair and a heart-shaped face, a …’ What was the German word for a widow’s peak? She sketched a downward-pointing arrowhead from her hairline, hoping he understood, and he nodded.

‘Yes, this was her,’ he murmured. ‘The one who loved the Irishman.’ His eye slipped closed again, and after a moment, he said, ‘If it would not be a trouble to you, *Frau Doktor*, yes, I think I would like some morphia, if I am to go in the ambulance.’

Lydia stopped at the ward tent, and made arrangements with Matron for a syrette of morphine to be sent to Rhinehardt, on her way to the fluoroscope room. Subsequent inquiry however, that night in the mess tent and at intervals the following day, yielded nothing out of the ordinary about Colonel Lemoine. As far as anyone knew, Captain Calvert told her, Lemoine was with the Second French Army somewhere near Nesle. He’d only happened to be at Haut-le-Bois down the line when word came of the German attack. Further queries over bully beef and stale biscuits the following evening elicited only the information that no Nurse Smith was assigned to the nearest clearing station south of Haut-le-Bois, at Orchies-le-Petit, at least as far as Captain Calvert knew.

Before bed that night Lydia took a jar of Aunt Lavinnia’s marmalade to the stores hut, and ascertained that Storeman Pratt had never heard of her there, either – and due to his wide-flung network of graft and trade, Pratt knew pretty much everyone on the Front.

‘Tell you what, though, Mrs A—’ The rangy, curiously angular-looking storeman unscrewed the jar lid, and without breaking the bleached white wax of the seal inhaled the faint scent of oranges and sugar with the half-shut eyes of a connoisseur – ‘I’ll hold onto this ’ere jar, and ask about a bit, y’know? Tiny Clinkers, what looks after the motors at Headquarters, got a list of just about every woman on the Front, how old they are and if they’re pretty and will they or won’t they, if you’ll excuse my French, M’am. Pretty, you say?’

‘I think so. Black hair, widow’s peak, short, retroussé nose. What my nephews call a pocket Venus. I heard that young Irishman with the freckles call her Tuathla …’

‘That’s just one of them Irish fairy-tale names.’ Pratt shook his head at the entire heritage of Celtic civilization. ‘Readin’ too much Yeats an’ seein’ leprechauns, an’ handloom weavin’ their own skirts. Last couple years, every coal-’eaver’s daughter in Holborn been changing ’er name from Nancy and Mary to Eibhlhin and Nuala. I’ve never heard of a nurse looks like that in this part of the Front, much less one that’d be at Headquarters t’other night when the balloon went up. Home-made, this is—’ He gestured with the jar –

‘There’s men at Headquarters – them as don’t have relatives that could afford to stock up on sugar before the war – would trade me any amount of petrol and cigarettes for this, and I’ll see you get the worth of it, M’am.’

‘Thank you.’ Lydia put as much warmth as she could into her voice, though she wanted to stamp her foot at him. The petrol and cigarettes were of course being stolen from motor pools that were to take the wounded to hospital, and the slender rations of comfort that were supposedly being sent to the men. But her mother, and the fearsome Nanna who had reigned over the nursery in her childhood, had drilled her in the art of sounding friendly no matter what she thought or actually felt, and this training served her in good stead now. As she was turning to leave a thought came to her, and she turned back. ‘And does Corporal Clinkers have a list of all motorcars on this portion of the Front?’

‘Lor’ bless you, M’am, we all of us got those. What might you be interested in?’

She had the impression that if she’d pulled thirty pounds from her pocket he’d have sold her Commander-in-Chief Sir John French’s personal vehicle.

‘A long-chassis Sunbeam lorry ambulance. Can you find who has them, and where?’

‘Nuthin’ simpler, M’am. Just gi’ me ’arf a day.’

The warmth in her voice was genuine when she said again, ‘Thank you.’ Technically she supposed that getting information from – and fraternizing willingly with – Storeman Pratt was probably less dreadful than getting information from vampires … Unless you counted Pratt as a vampire himself.

‘Am I on this Corporal Clinkers’ list?’

‘Oh, absolutely, Mrs A.’ Pratt saluted her. ‘Right up there with Matron and seventy-eight percent of the nuns at Calais. Under ‘D’, for *Don’t Waste Your Time On It, Boy-O*.’ He screwed the jar shut, and stashed it under the counter. ‘And if you should ’appen to be sent any other little thing you might want to spare – or if there’s anythin’ *you’ll* be wantin’ in the way of sweets or smokes or silk stockin’s …’

‘You are a disgrace.’ Lydia did her best to sound severe but couldn’t keep from laughing, and his own grin widened.

‘I do me best, M’am.’

‘No luck, Mistress?’

Without a sound, Don Simon Ysidro had materialized at her side.

The night was now pitch-dark, the tent-canvas once again dimly aglow with lanterns, though owing to a failed delivery (or perhaps, Lydia speculated darkly, theft by Storeman Pratt and his spiritual kin) there were fewer of these than there had been five nights ago. Someone had tried to rig barriers of twine

and fragments of bandage, to mark the new shell-holes, and the trees blown out of the ground by the German bombardment now lay strewn about the camp, half sawn-up to fuel the extra furnace that was being constructed (*In the bearers' abundant spare time!*) for the amputated limbs. The air was gritty with smoke, and reeked of spoiling meat.

The smell of someone's cigarette, momentary in the darkness. In one of the tents, someone with a beautiful Welsh tenor was singing 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', against a thready harmonica and a soft chorus of bass.

Jamie …

She pushed the thought of her husband aside.

Miranda …

'You heard all that?' She nodded back in the direction of the stores hut.

'I know you have been seeking word of this woman we saw in the trenches, as I have been, among those who hunt the night. So far as I have learned, these revenants do not wander at large in the German lines. Nor yet have any seen any such thing in the wasted lands between the lines, nor wandering in the abandoned trenches on either side.'

'They might have.' Lydia removed her spectacles, and polished them with her handkerchief. Her head ached, from an afternoon of concentration in both the x-ray room and the surgical tent. 'If a man had taken a head wound, and was wandering about in confusion; or a wounded man in no man's land trying to make his way back to the lines …'

'We are cowards at heart,' said Don Simon. 'Seldom do we actually venture into no man's land. Aside from the issue of shelling, too many men on both sides use cocaine to stay awake at their posts, and there is greater chance that we will be seen and shot at. If any saw such a man, either in the wasteland or in a bombed-out trench, we – my kindred and I – would take him, for such men seldom reach safety in any case. None that I know of have said to me – nor to any to whom I have spoken – "*I saw a man whom I thought merely wounded, and when I went to take him, found he was such a creature instead*." Personally,' he added, tilting his head in a gesture curiously mantis-like, 'I find this very odd.'

'That means there aren't a great many of the Others about—'

'Yet.'

'Yet.' Lydia resumed her spectacles and frowned. 'How are they created, Don Simon? I mean, the ones Jamie told me about, in Prague …'

'I know not, Mistress. Nor does the Master of Prague … Who is, I think, vexed and distressed at the news that one such creature has unquestionably appeared here. With all of no man's land a labyrinth of old trenches and buried dugouts and sapper's tunnels, 'twere too easy for these Others to move

about. They can cover themselves from the awareness of the Undead, and find us where we sleep, in the crypts and cellars of ruined churches and manors, devouring us in our coffins. And if, like the revenants of Prague and Peking, those breeding here can control rats, the situation is more dangerous still.'

Lydia flinched in disgust. In the mines northwest of Peking she had seen men swarmed by rats, when they'd attempted to invade the *yao-kuei* hive there.

'As I once told James – and as it is also written in the Book of the Kindred of Darkness – the Others first appeared in Prague just after the Great Plague, five and a half centuries ago. But whether it is a virus that transforms their flesh – or if such virus is a *mutation*, as de Vries calls such changes, of the virus that transforms the flesh of a man into that of a vampire – if *that* be a virus – I know no more than do the messenger dogs in their kennels.'

'Has any vampire ever … ever killed one? A revenant, I mean. And not just trying to get away from it.'

'Never that I have heard of. Would you drink the blood of such a thing, knowing that to mix its blood with your own might pass its condition along to yourself? How much less would one try to drink its life, the energies of its death? The mere thought appalls.' He put his hand beneath her elbow, and helped her across rough and squishy debris around a shell-crater. It had rained that day, and cloud still veiled the moon.

'But you drink the blood of syphilitics, and consumptives, and drug-takers,' pointed out Lydia, a little diffidently. 'The blood and … and the life …' She glanced across at him, wondering at the same time why on earth she felt she needed to be tactful: *He's certainly aware of what he is* …

''Tis not the same.'

Lydia stumbled on a flooded wagon-rut, and became aware that they were leaving the tents and huts behind them. 'Where are we going?'

'To meet Antonio and Basilio once more. They have seen this ambulance-truck with the walking wounded, and know now where it went.'

Antonio Pentangeli and Basilio Occhipinti were, as before, in a dugout in what had been a German reserve trench before the English had retaken Pont-Sainte-Félicité, playing picquet – an antique card-game much favored among the older vampires – at a broken-down table to the music of a gramophone with a cracked horn. A couple of candles burned on shelves – Lydia saw the lights flare up as she and Don Simon came around the last corner of the revetment – and, of all things, a small pot of tea sat keeping warm on the makeshift stove: ''Tis a cold night, *bella donna*.' Antonio poured some out for her into a teacup that had to have been looted from the village. 'You seek a

long-chassis Sunbeam ambulance with a French officer, who visits the dressing stations in search of the walking wounded?' He brought up a chair for her, cushioned with a folded blanket.

He was dressed, Lydia observed, in an officer's uniform as before; the beautiful Basilio was costumed as a driver, with the armband of the Red Cross. She tried not to think of Uncle Richard's footmen – Charles and William – bleeding in some shell-hole watching the approach of their ambulance-wagon with hope.

'Have you seen him?'

'Twice. Most recently the night before last, when all the German prisoners were brought from their attack. But again before that, three weeks ago, just after the fighting at Neuve Chapelle. This same officer, with the brow of Saturn and the little black mustache—'

'Colonel Lemoine,' said Lydia at once. 'That's what the German prisoners said, too.'

'I know not.' Antonio shook his head. 'But he had papers which he showed to the guards. He selected from among the prisoners, men not badly hurt. I am not, you understand, much concerned about such men, nor do I understand how prisoners are dealt with in this war. In my day the captains simply ransomed them back to one another, if they were gentlemen, or killed them if they were very angry, or hadn't enough food, or if the prisoners were Protestants.' He shrugged. 'And I thought perhaps this was an ordinary thing.'

'It may be.' Lydia propped her spectacles, and sipped the tea. Basilio offered her sugar in a Limoges dish, and, of all things, fresh milk. 'But I've never heard of such procedure. There are several very queer things happening hereabouts: between the revenant we saw, and this nurse whose name isn't Smith offering deals to the Undead … and people disappearing whom everyone is too busy and too tired to look for. You told me once—' she looked back at Don Simon, who had resumed his seat, hands folded, on a sort of earthen bench that had once been a bunk, his yellow eyes narrowed – 'that the Undead feed primarily on the poor: on people whom no one will trace and no one cares about. Like that song in *The Mikado*, about, "They'll none of them be missed". And that sounds like a description of those poor prisoners. As if someone wants the living – in reasonably good shape – rather than the dying.'

'Doing in fact with human beings,' remarked Don Simon, 'what the despicable Storeman Pratt does with petrol and cigarettes and morphia, I daresay. As war is waged now, things get mixed up and lost and mislaid all the time, and nobody thinks a thing of it. Where is this Lemoine posted, know you, lady?'

'Nesle, Captain Calvert says. But he's often in the camp at Haut-le-Bois.'

‘I think a journey thence might profit us all. I shall arrange for the proper papers to be made out to release you from your duties for a time, and the good Captain Palfrey will call for you in the morning.’

NINE

The casualty clearing station at Haut-le-Bois lay some twenty miles south of Pont-Sainte-Félicité, where an outcrop of the Artois Hills made a long promontory above the farm country around it. In Sussex it would have been considered ‘a bit of a rise’, but in Flanders it amounted to ‘heights.’ Rain began just before sunup, and ‘Colonel Simon’s’ staff-car jolted cautiously over roads deeply rutted by military traffic and cratered with shell-holes. ‘It reminds me of the fen country, when the floods are out,’ said Captain Palfrey, with affection rather than annoyance in his voice which made Lydia inquire, ‘Are you from there?’

Rain streamed off the brim of his hat as he looked up – he’d climbed from the car to mend their second puncture of the trip. His smile alone answered her query. ‘Can you tell?’

‘Well, my husband probably could spot you from the way you pronounce your words – he’s an expert at that. But my uncle always says that the only people who really love the fens are those who’re born there.’

The young man lifted one hand, ruefully owning his guilt. ‘Wisbach. Actually Deepmere, about ten miles from Wisbach; my grandfather’s place, really, but I was born there. My grandfather is Viscount Deepmere.’

Lydia said, ‘Good Heavens!’ having danced in her brief debutant days with several young men who had probably been Palfrey’s older brothers or cousins – ‘good society’ in England being actually rather small. (And the ‘good society’ admissible to parties in the home of her own grandfather, Viscount Halfdene, smaller yet.)

As they resumed their careful progress, Lydia learned from him, by degrees, the difficult but not surprising tale of the younger son of a younger son, raised on the fringes of ‘good society’ with no prospects and no greater ambition than to return to Norfolk and raise cattle, horses and sugar beets – a niche already solidly occupied by his elder cousins. ‘And Father was in the Twenty-Fourth Bengal Cavalry, so it was the Done Thing that I’d follow in his footsteps. Grandmother put up the money for me to get into the Guards rather than an India regiment. Father was her favorite. When he died Grandmother got it into her head that India’s a horribly unhealthy climate – he

and Mother both died of cholera – and wouldn't hear of me going there. It's where he met Colonel Simon,' he added, a little hesitantly, and a frown puckered his brow. 'At least I think …'

'Tell me about Colonel Simon.'

'Well, a great deal about him falls under the Official Secrets Act, you know,' Palfrey warned her. Shy pride glimmered in his blue eyes, and a trace of hero worship. 'But I think – I *know* – my father knew him in India. I remember his name in letters father wrote me …'

Or he's put it into one of your dreams that you remember …

'Father died when I was just six, but … I remember the name. Mother, too.' He sounded uncertain, as if sorting clear memories from things he felt he knew from somewhere without being able to quote specifics.

'Wouldn't he be a much older man,' probed Lydia, 'if he knew your father?'

'He is … older than he looks, he says. But he must have known Father, because he knew my name when he met me. And he spoke of Father like one who knew him.'

Or like one who has practiced the art of 'reading' people and telling them what they want to hear, for three hundred and fifty years …

'He introduced himself to me at the Guards' Club, and said he had a proposition for me, if I were willing to do it. A few nights later we met, very late, and I was interviewed by the chief of his Department—'

'And where was that?' asked Lydia. 'What Department?'

'The Foreign Office.' Palfrey frowned, concentrating on maneuvering the staff-car off the bombed-out road and around an enormous morass of shell-holes. This was an area which had been retaken, Lydia guessed, fairly recently – the whole length of the drive (it was now mid-morning) the booming of the guns sounded very close, and the crackle of rifle-fire. Two or three miles off, Lydia calculated. What had once been farmland lay all around them in a waste of shell-pitted mud, crisscrossed with abandoned trenches and entanglements of barbed wire still bright and sharp in the rain. Once the road had brought them close enough to the reserve trenches that Lydia could see the men piling sandbags along the lip of the cut, and the smoke that rose from the cooking-fires. Twice lines of men passed them, marching in from St-Omer. Stoic faces, empty and sunk into their own thoughts. Supply-wagons followed the men, mules slipping and straining against the sheer weight of the gray mud. Mostly the land was empty, desolate under the pattering rain.

'Somewhere in Whitehall,' the young captain continued, the uncertainty in his voice telling its own tale. 'It was hideously late at night, as I said – I'd dozed off in my digs waiting for Colonel Simon to call for me. When I got

back it was nearly morning and I fell straight to sleep when I came in, and woke up still dressed in my chair. And then, what with the black-out and Colonel Simon's caution about letting me see where we were, I'm not sure I could find the place by daylight anyway.' His eyes sparkled boyishly at being part of such a hush-hush operation. 'I know the officer I spoke to told me the official name of the Department, but I've forgotten it. Mostly we just call it the Department.'

As Jamie does …

Only Jamie's Department is REAL. Not something Don Simon caused this poor young man to dream about …

Palfrey chuckled. 'It's all rather like a blood-and-thunder novel, really. My pay just magically appears in my bank account, so I think they must deposit it in cash. But the officer told me, at Whitehall that night, that what Colonel Simon is doing in France is of vital importance to the War. Without his work – and of course I have not the slightest idea what it actually is – our armies here might very well be overrun and wiped out by summer. Colonel Simon has a network of agents in France, and some in Germany. Mostly what he needs – what he needs *me* for – is as a bodyguard, a driver, a man to make arrangements for things when he's called elsewhere. And I've tried to give satisfaction,' he added shyly. 'I realize I'm a complete fool about the brainy stuff – I was forever being caned at Harrow for not being able to learn Latin or history or how many x's you need to make a y – but I *can* get things done. That's done it,' he added, pleased with himself, and nudged the car back up onto the crazy road again. 'I'd feel a complete fool if we went through all that to avoid a puddle a few inches deep, but on the other hand, those craters could have been deeper than the top of this car and quicksand at the bottom, you know, and then where'd we be?'

'And your grandmother wasn't horrified that you quit the Guards?'

'Well, she was,' admitted Captain Palfrey. 'I told her a little about Colonel Simon – though he'd warned me not to speak of his having known Father. She's the only one I've told … she and Aemilia, of course.'

'Aemilia?'

'Aemilia Bellingham.' His fair-skinned face actually blushed. 'We hope – that is … I hope we're to be married when the war ends.'

Lydia closed her gloved hands, and looked out across the sodden wasteland toward the reserve trenches. Don Simon had come here, she thought, to watch over her; and because of the terrible fragility of vampire flesh, he had needed a living servant. Like a '*shabbas goy*', Jamie had once said: the Gentile servant whom pious Jews would hire to open windows or start kitchen fires on the Sabbath, so that their own piety would remain unblemished. She

wanted to shout at this young man, *Have you ever seen him by daylight? He's a vampire, Undead … he lives on the blood and the energies of the dying …*

Only he wouldn't believe her. *He's warned me that all kinds of the most ridiculous stories are circulated about him … a combination of Count Dracula and Bluebeard …*

Precisely the sort of thing, Jamie had told her, that he – Jamie – had done in his spying days, when he was setting up a network somewhere abroad: German shopkeepers or Syrian peasants or Russian factory workers, who would provide him with information about their country's roads or local rebellions or how many of what supplies were being ordered. Who would cheerfully do so under the impression that they were actually helping their country rather than giving that information to enemies.

If anything went wrong, it was the dupes who would be punished, not the spymaster.

'And here we are!' Captain Palfrey guided the long-nosed vehicle carefully off the main road again, and toward a cluster of tents. 'According to my map, that should be Haut-le-Bois.'

Lydia had been provided not only with papers requesting her presence ostensibly in Arras, several hours further down the Amiens road, but with a convincing story of why they were stopping in Haut-le-Bois (a faulty map and a can of petrol so badly watered that, once Palfrey had poured it into the gas tank, the staff-car barely ran at all). As this portion of the line was fairly quiet at the moment, while Palfrey and the dark-faced, cheerful Algerians of the motor pool drained the tank and replenished the jerrycans, Lydia had sufficient time to walk around the whole of the camp and ascertain that there were no German prisoners anywhere in it, walking wounded or otherwise.

Colonel Lemoine invited her to join him for lunch in the officer's mess, and entertained her – over appalling coffee – with accounts of his various postings in the farther corners of France's overseas empire: Indochina, Algeria, West Africa and the 'concessions' in Shanghai and Peking.

'We were there in October … three years ago?' said Lydia. 'Nineteen twelve …'

'I had left by then,' said the physician. 'I came up the previous year during the uprising, and left when peace was restored to the city. It must have been in August or September of '12.'

'What was your impression of the hospitals?' asked Lydia, to deflect the man's attention from any possibility that she herself might know that at that time the little hive of revenants had been festering in the coal mines in the arid hills west of the city. She longed to mention Dr Krista Bauer – the

German missionary whose account of finding the body of one such ‘hill demon’ had brought Jamie and herself (and Don Simon) to Peking – to see what Lemoine’s reaction would be.

But caution closed her lips.

Only when Lemoine had walked her out to the motor pool, where Palfrey waited for her with the car, did she glimpse, among the other vehicles, a long-bodied ambulance, clearly a converted truck, though even wearing her spectacles she couldn’t have told a Sunbeam from a governess cart. She let the colonel help her into the staff-car, and as he walked away turned casually to one of the several motor mechanics still loitering nearby and said, ‘Do you think Colonel Lemoine might be here when I come back this way? I had ever such a delightful time.’

‘Alas, Madame, that is very much the luck of the day,’ replied the man in his singsong French. Lydia had observed that the cook in the officer’s tent had been African, and recalled what Captain Calvert had commented some days ago: that the government of France was bringing in more and more men from its overseas empire, both in the Army and in the factories and farms, to free native Frenchmen to join the fight. ‘He comes and he goes, the colonel, and now that this section of the Front is quiet he is gone more than he is here. Myself—’ He tapped the side of his enormous nose and looked wise – ‘I think he is employed by the government on some other matter that he does not tell us. The other Big Ones—’ he nodded toward the officers’ tents – ‘make no comment when he disappears.’

Lydia turned the matter over in her mind as the staff-car made its slow, lurching return journey north to Pont-Sainte-Félicité, with the rain falling again, and the desultory spatter of machine-gun fire like the clatter of Death’s bones in the gathering darkness.

Everything innocuous and clear.

Reaching the clearing station, she had to help Dermott clean up the fluoroscope room and develop films for nearly two hours before she was finally able to return to her tent.

A letter lay on her pillow, addressed in James’s firm, jagged black writing. Three straggly hearts on the envelope were from Miranda. A fourth, more firmly drawn, could only have been from James.

Her eyes filled with tears so it was a moment before she could read the small news of familiar things – of the sweet stillness of Oxford during vacation, of rain pattering on the Isis, of her maid Ellen’s shy suitor, Mr Hurley, from down the King’s Arms.

She read these innocent tidings first, like a forbidden sweet, having seen immediately the dots beneath certain letters that told her of coded matters.

Only when she'd pretended to herself for a few moments that the price of sugar was all anyone had to worry about did she get out a pencil and decipher what couldn't be shown to the censors.

One revenant at least in London.

Asher took the train up to Oxford on Friday afternoon, the 19th of March. He ached in every joint when he woke, and by the time he reached Oxford his chest burned and his skull buzzed with fever. Ellen and Mrs Grimes put him to bed, and Mrs Grimes – in between making blancmange and gruel – told him in no uncertain terms that this was his own fault for gallivanting off to London when Dr Hoggett had told him to rest, and that if he came down with pneumonia again she was going to throw him out into the road to die and would tell Miss Lydia that he'd run off with a drover's widow from Dorset.

Dr Hoggett – one of Asher's very small circle of intimate friends – when he came to see him on Saturday, added to this that he himself would then marry Mrs Asher, and it would serve Asher right. Hoggett returned Sunday evening, by which time Asher was well enough to beat him in two games (out of four) of chess after dinner: 'But if I hear you speak again of going back up to London tomorrow I'm going to break out my grandfather's phlebotomy knives and bleed you to keep you in bed.'

So Asher remained in the old brick house on Holyrood Street, rereading *Bleak House* and Lydia's letters and reflecting upon how ridiculous it was for a man approaching fifty, with gray in his hair and mustache, to feel moved to sing silly songs ('*Tho' the road between us stretches/Many a weary mile/I forget that you're not with me yet/When I think I see you smile* …') at the sight of his wife's handwriting.

He checked the Personals column of *The Times* daily, but saw no message from Dr Graves. The revenant was lying low.

On Tuesday he was well enough to play hide-and-seek in the garden with Miranda – who was still of an age to believe that if she put her head in a cupboard in the potting shed that she was concealed – and to have tea with the Warden of his college. It was good to talk philosophy and ancient history with the old man, and to forget for a time what they both knew was happening in Europe: when Professor Spooner digressed indignantly on an undergraduate who had 'missed every one of my mystery lectures and was actually caught fighting a liar in the quad!'. Asher, long used to his conversation, merely inquired as to why the young man in question had chosen so public a place to light a fire.

Dr Spooner's kindly and erudite hospitality was a welcome contrast to dinner Wednesday evening with Lydia's Uncle Ambrose, the Dean of New

College, who spent the evening complaining about the price of bread (*Who does he think is growing crops, with twenty thousand men a day being slaughtered in Flanders?*) and the influx of female servants at the colleges – 'They've actually hired a woman as a cook in the college kitchens! A *woman*! And I must say the quality of the men they're getting in these days is nearly as bad …' remarks which immediately segued into a fussy diatribe about how more men – 'decent, skilled, intelligent men' – should be volunteering for the Army instead of staying home.

'Honestly, between you and me, Asher, I'm ashamed to see who they're getting into the Army these days! I don't mind the Canadians so much, but the Australians …! And as for the idea of bringing in a lot of Indian wogs and niggers from Africa … How on earth are we going to keep a proper attitude back in the colonies when this is all over, I ask you, when they've been encouraged to kill white men? And for God's sake, when I see them fraternizing with white women here …!' He shuddered. 'And as for the officers …'

What the hell did you think is going to happen? Where do you think those men are coming from? You spill them like sand into the wind – send them with rifles in their hands against German machine-gun nests – and you think there will always be more?

His one attempt to divert the conversation onto Lydia resulted only in an angry speech about how hospitals were no place for a woman and how Asher should never have permitted Lydia to become a doctor in the first place. 'What's a woman know about medicine, anyway? All that suffragist nonsense … God made them women, and they should be content to be so!'

He returned to the dining room after seeing Uncle Ambrose off, to find that Ellen – who took over a footman's job of serving when they had company, now that Mick had joined the Ox and Bucks Light Infantry – just setting a cup of cocoa at his place: 'I thought you might need it, sir. And this came for you this afternoon while you were resting.'

It was a letter from Lydia.

The letter was long, and merely glancing at it, he knew there was something greatly wrong. A moment's mental calculation told him it had been sent before his own letter could have reached her, telling her of the revenant – or revenants – in London. But there were three times the usual number of little code-dots sprinkled over and around the text: some in ink, some pricked with a pin, some looking like flecks of the mud in which the Flanders trenches were drowning.

He carried the letter and the cocoa into his study, put on his reading glasses, turned up the gas and began to decrypt with a cold weight on his heart.

P-S-F – A (The simplest of the code: *still at Pont-Sainte-Félicité, and well*. Sometimes the coded portions of her letters consisted only of that)

Other in N-M-L x volunteer nurse seeks vampires x says has proposition a partnership to offer x seen here CCS 16-3 x same nurse sought found body of Other, did ?? then destroyed it x alias Tuathla Smith no such person x German prisoner says Fr officer taking prisoners away not to HQ x Sunbeam ? ambulance no markings

DSY here

The following morning he took breakfast in the nursery. ('Grown-ups don't eat in the nursery, Papa!' objected Miranda, though delighted with his presence; she was at this time much invested in everything being in its proper place. 'It's my house, best beloved, and I can eat wherever I want.')

He had spent yesterday morning in the garden with her, listening to her explanations of where fairies hid when it rained (which it had, on and off, for several days), and now produced Lydia's letter, of which he read to her the plain text: expurgated of Lydia's weariness, her anger at the war, and some of her more ironic comments, even those she'd deemed mild enough to go through the censors. Miranda, a grave little copper-haired princess, was aware of such things as the war and that Mummy was away taking care of the men who were fighting it. She asked for clarification of things like x-rays and trenches, and made sure in her own mind that Mummy wasn't going to be hurt and would be back for Christmas.

After that he kissed her goodbye and returned to the railway station, stopping at Blackwell's for a large-scale Ordnance Survey map of London. He reached London shortly after noon, took rooms under the name of Edmund Hocking in Pembridge Place, Bayswater – he'd had papers made up for Hocking when last he'd been in Paris and the Department knew nothing of them – and put an advertisement in the papers asking for a meeting the following night with Mr Graves.

The advert was signed 'Scragger' – the old name for the public hangman.

Then he went to the British Museum, where at this time of day he was almost certain to find Osric Millward.

Osric Millward was a vampire-hunter.

Entering the vast, hushed space of the Reading Room's dome, Asher spotted him without trouble. He sat at his usual place at the end of one of the long desks, amid a welter of catalogs, manuscripts and ancient black-letter books on the occult: a tall, thin man whose raven hair was shot now with silver and whose dark eyes peered at the pages before him like those of an Inquisitor probing a heretic's lies.

When Asher had first met him, back in the eighties, Millward already had a reputation of being something of a crackpot, a profound believer in the beings

whom Asher at that time had regarded as mere creations of folklore, like broom-riding witches and Miranda's fairies at the bottom of the garden. By the time Asher had returned from his first excursion 'abroad' on the business of the Department, Millward's study and belief had turned to obsession. A respected scholar of proto-Judaic Middle Eastern religious texts, Millward had gradually ceased to publish, and his lectures at King's College were more and more frequently cancelled because he could not be found. He'd be off on unexplained trips to London or Cornwall or Edinburgh, following up clues about vampire nests or suspected vampire kills. Eventually he lost his stipend from King's. In despair, his wife had returned to the home of her parents.

Watching him from the Reading Room's doorway, Asher reflected that Millward was everything that he himself dreaded to become. '*To hunt us would be to hunt smoke,*' Don Simon Ysidro had said to him once. '*You could hunt us down eventually, were you willing to put the time into it, to give your soul to it, to become obsessed, as all vampire-hunters must be obsessed with their prey … Are you willing to give it years?*'

I should have been willing, Asher thought. *And I wasn't.*

In the eight years since that night in Harley Street, Ysidro, and Grippen, and those fledglings that Grippen had begotten, had killed who knew how many men and women, the poor whom no one would miss or avenge. Asher didn't know whether, in that eight years, if he'd given his heart and his time and all of his attention to hunting vampires – instead of the hours of his mortal happiness with Lydia and Miranda, with the students he guided and the research into languages that gave him such joy – whether he'd have been able to find and destroy them or not.

And if he had, he reflected despairingly, there would only have been more.

'*We have what you do not have,*' Ysidro had said. '*We have time.*'

Looking at that shabby, graying figure, with his threadbare jacket and his unshined shoes, Asher could not keep the thought from his mind: *At least he has tried to rid the world of evil. While I, like the vampires, have traded the lives of all those unavenged innocents in the London slums for the peace and the joy and the happiness of these past eight years. Knowing they existed, and turning my face away.*

So far as Asher knew, Millward had never destroyed a single vampire.

As Asher circled the space between the shelves and the desks a young man emerged from the shelves carrying a couple of very fat, yellowing volumes that Asher recognized as the 1867 reprints of a Georgian collection of Scots witchcraft lore: there was mention in them, he recalled, of the 'Cauld Lad' that used to walk Graykirk Close in Edinburgh, whom it was considered death to meet. The young man, though shabbily dressed, wore a blue-, brown-and-

red school tie from Winchester, much faded, and he bent over Millward with the same fanatic eagerness that the vampire-hunter himself had shown towards his books. His face glowed when Millward showed him something in the pages, and he dove away into the shelves again with the air of Sir Percival on the track of the Grail.

When he was out of earshot Asher approached the desk. ‘Millward?’

The scholar turned in his chair. At the sight of Asher his eyes widened for a moment – their most recent meeting had involved Millward breaking Asher’s ankle with a rifle butt and leaving him as bait for a vampire in the buried crypt of a Roman temple under Covent Garden – and then slitted in suspicion.

‘What do you want?’

‘Information.’ Beneath Millward’s frayed shirt-cuff Asher could see the other man also wore chains of silver around his wrists. ‘What do you know about the Regent’s Canal vampire?’

‘Have you seen it?’ Millward seized his sleeve, as if afraid that being questioned, Asher might run away.

‘I’ve smelt it. And I saw the man it killed in Chalton Street, on the night of the sixteenth. I’m trying to track its appearances, to find where it’s centered. And most specifically, who’s protecting it.’

TEN

Millward had a room in Bethnal Green, near the goods yard. The threadbare curtains on its single window were dingy with soot and even the dried ropes of star-like white garlic blossoms that festooned them couldn't counteract either the stink of the gasworks nearby, nor the smell of mildew that took Asher by the throat.

Cardboard boxes stacked every wall head-high, protruded from beneath the bed and ranged under the cheap deal table. A hob the size of a shoebox accommodated a kettle, and tins of crackers shared the shelf over the table with yet more, smaller, cardboard boxes; the table itself was stacked with newspapers, as was one of the room's two wooden chairs. Millward moved the papers aside onto the bed, poured water from the jar by the door into the kettle, and fetched a handful of newspaper from what was evidently the discard box to kindle beneath a couple of knobs of coal. 'My true work's in the library,' he said as he scratched a lucifer match on the box. 'This place is no more than a pied-à-terre, so to speak.'

His breezy tone made it sound as if he still had his oak-lined study back at King's College, and the comfortable little house on Star Street that he'd shared with his long-suffering wife. Asher said nothing. He'd inhabited far worse, for months at a time, in the course of what the Department called 'cover'. But it had always been with the knowledge that his own rooms at New College were his true home.

To hunt us is to hunt smoke … to become obsessed, as all vampire hunters must be obsessed …

Since the night he'd lain, half-freezing in the damp, in the crypt where Millward and his disciples had pinned him as bait for the vampire they were trying to trap, he had hated the man – a hatred revived every time his ankle hurt him in winter. Now the hatred washed away in a wave of pity, seeing what the scholar had made of himself. He'd heard – he'd forgotten from whom – that the parents of Millward's wife still made him a tiny allowance.

This was what it was, he thought, looking around him, to be obsessed.

For years he'd seen Millward as an ageing Don Quixote, tilting at windmills invisible to sane eyes. But now, strangely, the person that came to

his mind was his old teacher, the master-spy Crowell. The single-minded hunter in pursuit of his prey. A weapon in the hand of the Cause. Everything geared and tuned, like the engine of a motorcar, for one purpose and one purpose only.

And something else …

The box that Millward set on the table before him was fairly new, and labeled neatly – all the boxes were labeled – *Regent's Canal*. The clippings – Asher noted automatically the typefaces of *The Times*, the *Telegraph*, the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Illustrated London News* among others – were arranged chronologically; among the papers on the table at his elbow he identified *Le Figaro*, *l'Oeuvre*, *der Neuigkeits Welt-Blatt* and several German, Italian and American journals as well.

'It killed first on the thirtieth of January.' The vampire-hunter plucked a clipping from the envelopes within the box. 'A prostitute in Lampter Street near the Southgate Road. People said it was Jack the Ripper returning to his old haunts – if the Ripper's under sixty nowadays he must have been little more than a schoolboy his first time round! – but the details of the crime weren't the same. And the Ripper, whoever he was, never made the attempt to hide his victims. A frightful deed.' He laid the article on the table before Asher – barely two paragraphs, an afterthought to the German submarine attacks in the Irish Sea. Asher glanced over the specifics of the horrible remains and shivered.

'The body of a man was found – or what remained of one – on February eighth, on Dee Street near the gasworks. Police estimated that he hadn't been dead more than twenty-four hours. An elderly man was reported missing at about that time near Victoria Park—'

'By the Union Canal.' Asher mentally identified the place. 'And Dee Street is where Bow Creek joins the river. Water, both times.'

'I noticed that.' Millward laid out his clippings with a slow flourish, as if proving Asher wrong somehow or vindicating himself. Asher reflected that the man had fought so long to be believed – by his wife, by the police, by the King's College authorities when challenged about his disappearances – that the faint, arrogant look of defiance had become habitual, though Asher was one of the few men in England – or probably in the world – who understood that Millward was in fact telling the truth.

Those windmills really *were* giants.

'I thought it curious,' the vampire-hunter added. 'They usually avoid running water. And it is more savage than the other vampires. They kill, but do not molest the bodies afterwards, even when they conceal them. I can

show you—' He turned back toward the stacks of boxes, and Asher lifted his hand.

'You don't need to,' he said. 'I know this one is different.'

Wary contempt gleamed in the other man's dark eyes. *Aye, YOU would know, who consort with such beings …*

Asher sorted the little squares of newsprint, moving them around on the tabletop, as he had with the bits of information about the time and place of German so-called 'archaeological' expeditions in Mesopotamia back in the eighties, or where all those extra Legation 'clerks' had been seen, and at what times. Ysidro had surmised that Millward's brother, who had died young and unexpectedly, had been the victim of a vampire (*Carlotta?* Asher wondered. *The Lady Anthea Ernchester? Grippen himself?*) It was this, in the vampire's opinion, which had turned the scholar's already-extant belief in vampires to obsession … But sometimes Asher wondered whether it was Millward's belief in vampires that had caused him to probe into matters concerning the world of the Undead – possibly with his brother's help – and thus bring that young man into peril in the first place.

As he himself had brought Lydia. And their daughter.

Enough to drive a man a little mad.

But he was not wrong, to seek those silent killers …

He took one of his Ordnance Survey maps from his pocket, and with his pen marked the places where kills had occurred. He marked also neighborhoods where people had been reported missing, often vagrants who slept rough, little regarded by the police. 'Nothing further south than Dee Street,' he commented after a moment. 'Nor further north than Leyton Marsh. Nothing more than a dozen yards from navigable water: creeks, canals, basins.'

'It's where the fog gathers thickest.' Millward sank into the other chair, leaned to look over his shoulder. 'Legend has it that they can summon fog …'

'They actually can't.' Asher moved another two-line clipping, put another X on the map. 'But there's waste ground along the canal, and buildings that stand deserted for days at a time: gasworks, the India docks, Hackney Common. The goods yards and tracks of the Midlands Railway. The pattern of this thing's hunting is different. It's an animal we're tracking, not a man.'

'It's a man,' retorted Millward grimly. 'A woman in Canal Road glimpsed it in the fog. Or it was a man once. The Undead—'

'This isn't one of the Undead.' Asher tilted his head a little to one side, still intent on the map. 'The pattern is similar, as the thing itself is similar. It's a revenant, what the early English called a wight: nearly mindless, and hungry. The vampires call them the Others. Like the Undead, it can to some extent

fool the perceptions of the living. And like the Undead, it can transmit its condition through contamination of the blood, like a disease.'

'You're sure of this?' The scholar's silver-shot brows drew down. 'How do you—?'

'I'm sure. I have seen them cut to pieces, and the cut pieces continue to crawl about with what appears to be conscious volition. Sunlight destroys them; more slowly than their cousins, I'm told, but I've never seen it. But the thing is alive, and it can be killed. Vampires hunt all over the city – or they did,' he added with a grimace, 'until most of them left for the Front. This revenant – this Other—'

His finger traced the gray line of the Regent's Canal, with its myriad of auxiliary cuts and basins, curving through the East End like an old-time moat among a patchwork of industry and building yards. 'It hunts along here. And I intend to find it – or them. By this time there may be more than one.'

'You will have whatever help I – and those who help me, who believe in this war that we wage against the forces of Evil – can give.'

Asher thought about the young man in the Winchester tie in the Reading Room.

And about Crowell leaving his agents to die.

'But where did it come from?' Millward turned the map around, frowned over the neat X's. Then his sharp dark gaze cut back to Asher. 'And how did you learn of it? Did the Undead create it, then? Do they control it?'

'Not that I know of. I understand the vampires of Prague have tried for centuries to exert mental control over the Others that haunt the crypts beneath that city, without success.'

Millward's silence made Asher glance at him. He read in the dark eyes loathing and distress, tinged with admiration. Almost the same feelings, he reflected, that he himself had felt towards Pritchard Crowell.

'Prague …'

'The only city I've heard of so far,' said Asher, 'where these Others nest.'

'How did it come to England, then?'

'That,' said Asher, 'is one of the several things I intend to find out.'

Millward saw him down four flights to the door, through a front hallway whose dirty lino was cluttered with bicycles, coal scuttles and baby prams. The sun had just dipped behind the smoke-grayed line of brick houses opposite. It was a long walk to the nearest bus stop, and Asher guessed few cabs cruised these dismal streets. Dank fog was already rising from the river. On the way downstairs, Millward spoke of the young men who believed, as he did, in the Undead, who worked for him as secretaries and gatherers of

information – ‘Only Donnie’s left of them. The rest are at the Front.’ (Presumably Donnie was the young man in the Winchester tie.) ‘Donnie isn’t strong, but he and I will patrol the canal—’

But when Asher stepped across the threshold and the door shut behind him, he automatically cleared every thought from his mind, and scanned the street: wide flagways bustling with housewives, children running home from school, voices shrill in the air. A woman brought a birdcage and a wicker basket up from a nearby areaway, chirruping to her canary in alternation with some of the most hair-raising oaths Asher had ever heard – *Islands Scots, what’s she doing here?* An old man with an elaborate cart and equipment for the repair of umbrellas called ‘Brollies to mend!’ in a quavering voice. Asher’s eye touched the areaways of the houses nearby, the bleared windows across the road, as if he were in Berlin or St Petersburg, seeking anomalies or …

There.

He didn’t turn his head. His sidelong glance passed across the sunken kitchen entry where he thought he’d seen a man’s face, but there was nothing, and he turned away at once. One of the first rules was, *If you think you’re being followed, don’t let on. Maybe later you can see who it is, and take a guess at what they want.*

He thought he’d seen something, some anomalous shadow, outside the Reading Room.

And now here.

The Department? He trudged down Charlotte Street toward the Great Eastern goods yard where the omnibus would stop on its way to Charing Cross. *Or someone who, like Millward, has his own freelance disciples?*

Someone who thinks Millward may know something … About the Other? Someone who, like me, knows that Millward will at least have information about where the Other has been?

If it is the Department, he reflected, taking into account that he’d barely gotten a glimpse of Millward’s watcher, *shame on them. If Stewart wasn’t lying, and they need every man to gather information in the battle zones, why waste a good agent keeping an eye on a vampire-hunting crank who isn’t even aware that every vampire in London is now at the Front?*

Unless of course, Asher thought – without looking back – *I’m the one who’s being followed*.

Lydia saw the vampires outside her tent in a dream: Antonio and Basilio, Red Cross armbands pale against the dark rough coats of stretcher-bearers, Don Simon in his British Army khaki. In the gibbous moonlight, their eyes

gleamed like the eyes of the bloated trench rats, and Lydia was at once aware that the sporadic gunfire in the distance had stilled.

In her mind she heard Simon's voice whisper, 'Mistress …'

Waking, she knew they were there still.

Waking, the sound of the guns seemed very far away. The fretful cluck of the Lys over the remains of the broken bridge came startlingly clear.

In the next cot, Danvers slept like a dead woman. Brickwood's cot was empty. Lydia pulled on as much as she could of her clothing under her nightgown – brassiere, chemise and blouse – before getting out of bed in the freezing cold. Hastily pulling on skirt, boots, petticoat and coat, she put on her spectacles and stepped quietly to the tent's entry, and looked out into the night.

And there they were.

Simon touched his lips for silence, and took her hand. The other two vampires soundlessly following, he led her to his staff-car at the edge of the camp – no Palfrey this time, she noticed – and helped her inside; Antonio took the wheel and drove off in the direction of the Front. Just short of the reserve trenches they stopped, left Basilio with the car and, as they had before, went on afoot, descending first into an abandoned reserve trench and then following the half-flooded mazes of the communications trenches: icy water underfoot, scuttling rats, the stench of death and latrine holes. Sometimes Simon or Antonio would lift her bodily in their arms, with the preternatural strength of the Undead, and carry her swiftly, like being borne by angels in a dream.

The stillness around them was the hush of nightmare. Her arms around Antonio's neck, as Don Simon clambered like a colorless spider up the side of the trench to look over at the hideous wasteland above, Lydia thought, for the thousandth time, *I shouldn't be doing this* …

Yet she felt no fear.

And, after a very short time, she understood that it was the silence that lay on this portion of no man's land that had drawn their attention, which had sent them to fetch her. Such absolute tranquility wasn't natural. No crackle of rifle-fire. Not a murmur from the front-line trenches, though they lay within yards. Once they passed a dugout, where half a dozen Indian infantrymen slumped around a makeshift stove and a tin of still-steaming tea. Not dead – she could see them breathing – but dozing. This was often the case with men in the trenches, but she understood that someone had put that illusion of inattention, that haze of sleepiness, on the sentries of both sides, and on the men hereabouts, for a reason.

And that someone has to be a vampire.

Simon scrambled up onto the fire step, looked over the sandbags. Lifted his gloved hand. *Come. Carefully*.

When she cautiously put her head over the sandbags – something that could get one killed, even at night – Don Simon passed her binoculars. The moon was a few days yet from full, but gave enough light to let her see the nurse Tuathla Smith – or whatever her name really was – crouched on the lip of a shell-crater, less than thirty feet away.

Nurse Smith wore the khaki coat of a British soldier, and had, like Lydia, left off her cap. Dark curls twisted into a loose knot at the back of her head, and framed the pale blur of her face as she looked around her. Aboveground in no man's land was not the place to be, even on a quiet night … and perhaps she also was aware, thought Lydia, that the silence hereabouts wasn't natural.

That someone had laid this silence on this small portion of the lines for a purpose.

And that purpose was to meet her without either of them getting shot.

And if a vampire were coming to speak to this young woman, thought Lydia, that vampire would be listening, with the uncanny sharpness of Undead perceptions, for the smallest whisper of sound.

And thank goodness that even in the cold like this the whole place stinks so that a vampire can't smell living blood.

She felt rather than saw Don Simon glance sidelong at her, nodded very slightly: *Yes, it's she*. And squeezed his cold fingers: *Thank you*.

Movement in the moonlight. Walking, like the *bean sí* of poor Corporal Brodie's nightmares, as lightly as a ghost over the torn soil of this unspeakable hell.

As Corporal Brodie had said, she wore the uniform of a nursing sister under a dark cloak. Her hair, like Smith's was uncovered, the flaxen hue of raw silk in the moonlight and lying, like silk, loose over her shoulders. Her face was an exquisite oval.

'Meagher,' she said, as the young nurse stood up.

'I'm she.'

'You seek me?'

'If you truly are one of the Undead – one of the vampire kind – I do indeed.'

The vampire looked around her, scanning the ruined landscape with those darkness-piercing eyes. Lydia remained perfectly still, her own eyes cast down, praying Don Simon and Antonio were vampires of sufficient age and power to turn aside this woman's glance.

'I am called Francesca Gheric.' The vampire's voice was a soft contralto, with an accent to it that Lydia guessed would have told Jamie of some other

time, some other place. ‘By some called Francesca Brucioram, or Francesca the White. And I am what is called a vampire.’

‘Tuathla Meagher.’

The vampire merely looked at her extended hand, then back to her face, one butterfly-wing eyebrow atilt. ‘That isn’t the name your father calls you, when you dream.’

Meagher straightened her shoulders, chin lifted defiantly. ‘It’s the name I took for myself when I left his house and his chains forever.’

Francesca the White’s mouth flexed a little, like a birdwatcher identifying the whistle of some rare species. *Oh, one of those* …

‘It’s true, then,’ Meagher went on, ‘that you can touch the dreams of the living? Can weave spells in them to control their thoughts, and guide them where you will? That you can control the thoughts of certain beasts – the wolf, and the rat, and the bat – and command the actions of the mad?’

Through the binoculars, Lydia saw the vampire’s red lips curve … (*Red, she has fed, she has killed once, or several times, tonight* …) ‘You seek a demonstration, pretty child?’

What Francesca Gheric did then, Lydia didn’t see, but Nurse Meagher jerked as if at some startling sound, and threshed the air before her face with her hand. Then she fell back a step, staring at the vampire in shocked respect.

Francesca raised one eyebrow again: *Satisfied?*

‘Will you help us?’ said Meagher eagerly. ‘In return, we can—’

‘I know who you are,’ the White Lady cut her off. ‘And I know who you work for, and what you do in that compound of yours. Don’t think I haven’t watched you, walking about these deadly lands in the darkness, and speaking to my brothers and sisters of the night. This man Lemoine, this physician, this dabbler in chemicals and blood. I would speak to him.’

‘I’m here,’ said Meagher, barely able to contain her triumph, ‘to take you to him.’

And with a sudden move she raised her hand to her throat, tore loose the silver cross she wore, and cast it away into the mud.

ELEVEN

‘Francesca Gheric.’ Antonio Pentangeli gazed thoughtfully into the distance as Basilio guided the staff-car down the shell-holed road in the moonlight. ‘Well, well.’

He now shared the back seat with Lydia and Don Simon, and spoke barely to be heard over the growl of the engine. Basilio, Lydia guessed, had located Meagher’s motorcar while she, Don Simon, and Antonio had been in the trench, and was following it now by the sound of its motor, audible to his Undead senses over the rumble of the guns to the south. *Unless of course he’s just reasoned they can’t leave the road at this point.* The land on both sides was a pitted ruin, laced with the water that had leaked from demolished drainage canals and stitched across and across with barbed wire.

They were headed south on the Arras road.

It is Lemoine …

‘What about Francesca Gheric?’

‘She dwelt in Strasbourg.’ Antonio’s dark eyes narrowed as he cast his memory back. ‘For years and years, when Arioso was master of that city. Arioso had a network of living servants over the whole of the countryside between Strasbourg and Nancy. Very clever with illusion and dreams, but all said the White Lady was the stronger vampire. She was the elder in any case, and he never could control his fledglings and was forever having trouble with them. I always thought that with little effort she could have taken control of that whole district. But she didn’t.’

‘Is that so odd?’

‘You would think so had you ever encountered Arioso.’ Don Simon folded his narrow, gloved hands.

‘He demanded absolute control over those he made vampire,’ explained Antonio. ‘And unfortunately he was drawn to people who lived untidy and dramatic lives. A non-entity himself, he loved the excitement, but then had not the strength to bend them to his will. The Strasbourg nest has always been a snake pit of internal feuds. Francesca quarreled constantly with Arioso, and had she made even a few fledglings she could have driven him and his from the city. But in the end it was she who left. She dwelt for many years in

Prague. Later she had a palazzo in Venice, just across the Campo di San Silvestro from Basilio and myself.'

Lydia reflected that should she ever have the opportunity to vacation in that city – or any city in Europe, for that matter – she would consult Don Simon first about potential neighbors.

'Hieronymus – the Master of Venice – tolerated her but never trusted her. She wouldn't obey him, either, but killed as she pleased. I know he feared she would contest his mastery.

'She is not like Simon,' Antonio added, seeing Lydia's sidelong glance at the older vampire. 'Simon has chosen to live like a shadow on the wall. I'm told he dwelt in Rome for two years before the nest there even knew of his presence. Francesca disobeys the masters of the cities where she dwells, forms cliques among their fledglings and networks of servants among the living – Hieronymus was forever killing them. But she would never move to take genuine power.'

'Maybe she preferred just to be a troublemaker?' Lydia recalled girls she'd gone to school with, and debutantes who had come 'out' in the same year as she, who simply delighted in malicious gossip and the stirring-up of trouble between friends, while seeming to lack, it appeared to her, genuine friends of their own.

'She was made vampire by the Lady Chretienne,' remarked Don Simon after a time. 'A master who taught her fledglings the finer arts of the Undead state, and selected them with some care. At the time I encountered them during the Wars of Religion 'twas my impression Chretienne intended Francesca to succeed her as master of that whole region. Then later she made Philip Berengar vampire, who succeeded her, and he made Arioso his fledgling and master of Strasbourg in his turn. I thought it curious, that La Dame Blanche, as Francesca was called, was bypassed. Now she seeks the help of this Lemoine, this "dabbler in blood and chemicals". What know you of this Lemoine, lady?'

'Only what I mentioned before.' She shook her head. 'That he's with the French Sixth Army, and served in Algeria, Indochina, West Africa. He was in Peking in early 1912, where he might easily have heard of the revenants in the Western Hills.'

'More than that, I think.' A tiny line scratched itself between Simon's colorless brows. 'I have made a study of the vampire state over the years, and have read a good many articles on the composition and maladies of the blood.'

On Lydia's other side, Antonio Pentangeli shook his head, with an expression, attenuated as it was, that in a living man would have been an

eyeball-rolling wave of exasperation. ‘Were you this much of a pedant as a living man, Simon? I keep abreast of the world, but I swear this for the truth, *bella donna*, he writes sonnets about the composition of blood! Never would I bore a beautiful lady into a lethargy by—’

‘Oh!’ interrupted Lydia, and then, realizing that up ahead of them, Francesca might be listening for sounds of pursuit, she whispered, ‘You think Colonel Lemoine might be *Jules* Lemoine, who wrote that article the year before last about viral mutations of red corpuscles?’

‘I confess I did not completely understand his argument,’ murmured Don Simon. ‘Yet something of the way he spoke of blood made me wonder if he had ever had occasion to study the blood of the Undead.’

‘And he was in Peking in 1912,’ finished Lydia. ‘He might have actually encountered the revenants, or someone who had fallen victim to one. He did say when we lunched together on Monday, that he never passed up an opportunity to study the pathologies of the local people, wherever he was stationed.’

The staff-car picked up speed as the road improved and the hammering of the guns faded a little to the east. For long periods now, stands of trees bordered the road, unshattered by shell-fire, and in the darkness she smelled the green scents of early spring. When she opened her mouth to speak again Don Simon gestured her quiet: the drone of a pursuing engine could be lost in the noise of one’s own motor, but even the quietest of living voices might easily register to Undead ears. They had passed the turning to Haut-le-Bois some time ago, and in the weak moonlight the low swell of hills that sheltered that clearing station lifted a little against the western sky. Lydia had no idea how long it was until dawn, or if, and where, her three companions had a safe place to go to ground at first light.

Evil mingled with good, she thought, looking from Antonio’s craggy profile to Don Simon’s aloof, half-averted face. *But can’t that be said of all human beings? I should hate them for what they are, for what they do*.

But at least, she thought, they believed her, and would understand the significance of the fact that it was Lemoine who was kidnapping German prisoners of war.

Men who weren’t severely wounded, but who legitimately could be restrained. Men who had no power to protest, and no one to protest to. Whose disappearance would be greeted with a shrug: *They must have got the papers mixed up …*

Like petrol and cigarettes and morphia.

Basilio switched off the engine, and let the car glide to a stop. Silence lay on the land, save for the intermittent boom of the guns. *We must have swung*

east again, or the Front curved west …

Antonio climbed out over the door (*So there won't be the sound of it opening, in the stillness of the night?*) and held up his hands for her; Don Simon lifted her over, with the casualness of a man picking up a kitten. Basilio remained where he was, and Antonio touched his hand where it lay on the car door, lightly, as they walked away.

Distantly, Lydia heard an engine start up again. 'A gate,' Antonio murmured, leaning close. 'Guards. French.'

Leaving the road, they climbed a hill's shoulder that gave a view onto the next rise of ground. In ancient times a wide-spread cluster of gray buildings had covered that rise, half of them in ruins now and the whole area studded with French Army tents and a half-dozen rough-built huts. A deep ditch surrounded the whole, fenced on both sides with a hedge of barbed wire.

Old trench works, Lydia thought. The dark slots went right up the slope behind the buildings, and she could see where the woods that surrounded the place had been cut back to let the 'moat' completely encircle the place.

Those buildings that remained whole, though simply built of gray stone, had the look of profound age.

Don Simon's voice was barely louder than the rustle of the leaves. 'The nunnery of Cuvé Sainte-Bride.'

'You know it?'

'Only the name on maps. 'Twas naught to speak of, even when I was in France years ago.'

A few tents glowed from lantern-light within. A window in one of the huts brightened, then dimmed as a shadow crossed it. Breeze brought the smell of latrines and cooking-fires, stinks familiar from the clearing station. And another smell that lifted the hair on Lydia's neck.

Her hand closed hard on Don Simon's fingers.

'Best be gone.' His whisper brushed her ear. 'She'll come out soon, if she's any wits at all. Dawn's coming, and we're twenty miles from Pont-Sainte-Félicité. We shall convey you home, lady, unless you'd wish a few hours' sleep at the chateau of the Master of Prague. You'll be granted little enough rest at your camp.'

'Thank you,' said Lydia. 'I'll take my chances at the clearing station.' She already had a headache from lack of sleep, but the thought of calmly bedding down in a vampire nest – though she knew to the marrow of her bones that Don Simon's influence would keep her as safe – was more than she wished to contemplate.

Both vampires bowed, like courtiers of some bygone world, and guided her back toward the car.

When night was fully come after his encounter with Millward, Asher took a cab from his hotel in Pembridge Place to Paddington Station, purchased a return ticket for Bristol, packaged up his Burberry and hat in the gents' room and paid a porter there to quietly mail them back to Oxford for him. Then he donned the cap he'd had in his Burberry pocket, and slipped down the stairway to the Underground, watching the platform behind him as he stepped at the last minute onto the train for Hammersmith. At Shepherd's Bush Market he got out – again leaving it till the last moment, and still feeling somewhere in the back of his thoughts the prickling wariness that had touched him outside of Millward's – and took the omnibus for the East India Dock, switching to a cab in Oxford Street and backtracking along the Edgware Road until he came – at almost midnight – to Regent's Park.

His meeting with Grippen wasn't until tomorrow night, but he guessed the Master of London knew perfectly well where he was.

Freezing damp rose from the grass as he followed the graveled path toward the boating lake. At this hour the stillness was such that he could listen behind him for the telltale scrunch of a stealthy foot on gravel, the wet squish of someone treading last autumn's dying leaves.

He heard nothing, and didn't think he'd seen that whisper of shadow, that itchy hint of a half-recognized silhouette, since the Underground station.

But he heard nothing – not a thing – in the moments before a heavy hand closed on his shoulder and he smelled stale blood and foulness. 'Mr Scragger?'

'Mr Graves.'

Grippen seemed to form himself out of shadows, congealed darkness in an old-fashioned greatcoat. 'Who's your friend?'

'He still with me?'

'Narh.' Even as a scarce-heard whisper the vampire's voice was harsh as lava rock. 'I turned him aside in Commercial Road. He'll not be back.'

'You get a look at him?'

'Dark coat. Great nose. Winkers and spinach. He was across the street.'

Glasses and a beard, Asher knew, could also be easily wadded into a Burberry pocket. He'd done it himself, more times than he could count. 'Short? Small?'

'A rat in an overcoat. Know him?'

Asher hesitated, then shook his head. 'If you see him again, let me know. I want to know who put him on me.' Although he had a strong suspicion that he knew already.

The vampire made a sound like a dog snarling. 'Crafty cove. I'll swear he saw me, and not many as can do that. You figure him for a beak?'

‘Could be,’ said Asher. ‘He’s working for someone, and I think he’s looking for the same thing we are. So chances are good we’ll meet him again.’

They turned north, to where Regent’s Canal bordered the park’s wooded fringes in its West End guise.

‘Aye,’ rumbled Grippen. ‘I’ll have a word wi’ him then, and see what he’s got to say for himself.’

They followed the canal into the maze of locks and bridges among the railroad yards, surreal tangles of sidings, sheds, coal bunkers and basins. Moving slowly and without light, Grippen sniffed, probing the darkness with those dark gleaming eyes. Asher listened, and watched for movement within the blackout abysses around them. It was like picking one’s way through sightless and jagged Hell.

At one point, near the horrible old workhouse of St Pancras, when they stopped to let Asher rest, he passed along in a whisper what he’d gleaned from Millward’s obsessive collection of newspaper clippings: that the revenant seldom strayed far from the canal, and that in the two months it had been at large in London it had killed only half a dozen times. ‘It may be living on rats.’ Asher perched himself on the bollard of a half-sunk wharf across from the vast blackness of the Midland Railroad goods yard, and wished as he shivered that he hadn’t sent his Burberry away. ‘The Others have a collective mind – like a hive of bees – but how much mind a single one of them has, away from its nest, I’d be curious to know. Or how far away it can be, and still be under their influence. The nests of them that I encountered in China could summon and command rats to defend their hiding places, or to swarm an intruder … or presumably, to let themselves be caught and devoured.’

‘Don’t speak ill of it,’ rumbled Grippen. ‘We drink rat blood, at need. It’s hot and it’s red, and it’s living – aye, and there’s a little dark sparkle to it of fire, like the fire of a man’s death, or a woman’s. Many’s the vampire that’s lived on rats, if he found himself where the living were suspicious, or too few to kill without drawin’ down attention. Wolves we can call sometimes, too, and foxes, though precious few o’ them you’ll find about these days. Aye, and bats, like that silly caitiff Stoker wrote. Small use they are, though, save to flush a quarry from hidin’ with a good scare.

‘Ye’ve never thought of it yoursel’?’ he added after a moment, with a sidelong glance at Asher.

‘Thought of what?’

‘Livin’ forever.’

The silence lasted a long time after that. Asher found himself curiously unsurprised by the question.

And – he noted this with abstract interest – not in the least offended that the question had been put to him.

He supposed the proper reaction would be *How dare you think I would even for a moment entertain such a notion?* though he couldn't think of a single one of his former colleagues in the Department who would have made such a reply, either. Or who would have meant it, if they had spoken the words.

When at length Grippen spoke again his voice was soft, like a monster's purr. 'Never tell me you haven't wondered, what it'd be like not to get old? Rots you, don't it, that you've had to ask to stop and breathe a bit like a spavined horse after but a mile along the canal? That for all you know, you may never get back the strength you had five years ago? That you may always have that pain in your chest, that weakness in your legs? I need a fledgling, Asher. A good one, a strong one, that's got a brain in his skull; that knows this city and this land as I know 'em. That knows mankind as I know 'em.'

'If you need a fledgling,' Asher reminded him, 'it's because I killed yours.'

Grippen waved the objection aside. 'You was in a flame, and frighted for your brat. Think on it,' he urged softly. 'You get used to drinkin' blood, that's nuthin'. And what 'tis like to take a soul … Ahh, the heat of it, and the glory of it … And I know you miss it.'

Asher looked sharply sidelong at him.

'Huntin' as you used. The life in darkness, the life beyond the wall. You wouldn't have spied all those years for that cold little snirp of a queen, if it hadn't been in your blood, to see how you could move through the world whilst stayin' outside of it. Teachin' whey-faced rich-boys that Englishmen used to say "fall" when they meant "autumn", an' "ah" when they meant "ay" – tcha! An' havin' tea with them lack-wits at your college.' The dark eyes narrowed. ''Tis no life for a man and you know it.'

The big hand closed, thick black-furred fingers, tipped with inch-long claws pale and slick as glass. 'We could hold London, the two of us.'

'And you would hold me,' returned Asher quietly. 'Having given you my soul, to guide it through the body's death and transformation, you would keep a piece of it, always. If nothing else, I don't want you to have a piece of my soul. I've seen the Master of St Petersburg make one of his fledglings kiss my feet, and Don Simon Ysidro force a fledgling he'd made to remain outdoors as the sun came up. It's not a power I'd hand to anyone on this earth, let alone one who's lived by murder for three hundred and fifty years.'

'Well, that's the trick, i'n't it?' The vampire's grin was a horrible thing to see. 'You pay for what you get. And who knows but that I might run afoul of

your little friend Millward some night and wake up with a stake through my heart? Then you'd be Master of London. Why not?'

Why not?

Asher rose from the bollard, not refreshed but at least able to continue; knowing they had the whole of the night yet to walk.

'If I change my mind,' he said, 'you shall be the first to know.'

'We have to go back there, you know,' said Lydia, when Don Simon helped her back into the staff-car. 'I mean, I think we all know what's going on there, and what Colonel Lemoine wants Francesca's help with, though I can't see that he's going to get it. As far as I know, no vampire can control the minds of the Others unless he – or she – has actually been infected with their blood.' She shivered at the recollection of the thing she'd discovered in that hidden vault in Peking, lying like a gruesome worm, laughing insanely in the dark. 'And what could Lemoine offer her that would get her to take that kind of a risk?'

'Lemoine,' murmured Antonio, 'or whoever is behind him.' He shrugged, and glanced over his shoulder – he was in the front seat now beside Basilio – and by the sound of his voice Lydia could tell that the whole matter was to him no more than a means to while away the night. He'd probably taken two lives before he and Don Simon ever came to her tent, when in other times he'd have spent the whole of the night hunting.

Helping her was simply an entertainment, like the opera.

He went on, 'Though surely the French government—'

'The French government is desperate for soldiers,' returned Don Simon calmly. ''Tis now no mere matter of spies and secrets. They seek soldiers to throw at their enemy – men who will walk without question into machine-gun fire. Who better than the mindless, if they can be controlled from afar off? Men moreover who can be taken from the enemy himself and rendered to such a state without consequences and without questions being asked, not even by this Lemoine's own conscience, assuming that he has one. Who has not read a thousand posters on every street corner and hoarding in Paris, on the walls of every hospital and railway station and officer's mess from here to the sea? *Crush the Germans, Destroy This Mad Brute.* Pictures of German nurses pouring water on the ground rather than moisten the lips of wounded British prisoners.' His dismissive shrug was barely more than a movement of one finger. 'Of course they deserve it. Your king has said so, so it must be true.

'What think you then, Mistress? Walking into that place alone puts the White Lady at this Lemoine's mercy. He has but to hold her until sunrise –

not far off now, as I have said. Once she sleeps, he can take from her as much blood as he will, upon which to perform his experiments. Or he can inject her with the blood of these revenants, making her one of their communal mind, willy-nilly. For what would *you* put yourself in such peril?'

Antonio, looking over the back of the seat, raised his fair brows, his opinion of the ridiculousness of such a question clear on his face.

To any vampire, thought Lydia, the answer to that question would be, self-evidently, *Nothing* …

But she knew that to be not quite true.

Slowly, she said, 'If she is human – if she remained human, through her transformation to the vampire state – she might do such a thing for love. You say she has been a vampire for a long time …'

'She had become one not many years before I visited Strasbourg during the great Wars of Religion – 1610, perhaps?'

'So it isn't likely she would be protecting her child, for instance. I know … I have met …' Her voice faltered and she found she couldn't look at the thin pale figure beside her. 'Some vampires do retain the capacity to love …'

Not being able to look at Don Simon, she was gazing straight ahead of her, and saw, at her words, Antonio's gloved fingers tighten, very slightly, on Basilio's shoulder. The fair vampire agreed quietly, 'Some do, indeed. I know not if the Lady is one of them. For all our years of proximity I do not know her well. In Venice, she would carry on long courtships with living men, sometimes for years – alluring them, bedding them … For you are no doubt aware, *bella donna*, that while the organs of generation in the male vampire become nonfunctional, a woman can of course receive a living man, provided she feeds beforehand so that her flesh will be warm to his touch. And indeed, this was how these courtships ended, for her. Her favorite sport was to kill her lover in the act.'

'Unlikely, then,' remarked Don Simon, 'that she would put her mind, her life and her freedom into anyone's hand, for the sake of a man she loved.'

'And yet,' mused Antonio, 'the lady has proven herself indifferent to the sweet seductions of power—'

'And whatever her reason for going in there was,' added Lydia, with a frown, 'I expect she *could* get out, as long as it was dark. *Would* barbed wire stop a vampire?'

'We are flesh and bone, lady.' Don Simon spread his hands. 'And that is what barbed wire is designed to catch. A frightened vampire would be less likely to let the pain of the barbs stop him – or her – but they would be able to tear their flesh free only a little more quickly than a living man. And though we can survive the loss of blood better than the living, it renders us – as it

does you – weak, and in time unable to flee or seek shelter. Of a certainty barbed wire would hold them, until their captors could come up to them with stouter bonds … if capture is the aim of their enemies. Did you see what was in those trenches, which surround the whole of the camp and the convent?'

Lydia shook her head, though the recollection of the smell returned to her, horrible and with echoes more dreadful still.

'They are floored with barbed wire, as well as fenced with it on both sides. From which I can only deduce the presence, somewhere in that camp, of a hive of revenants sufficiently large to permit the formation among them of group-mind, group-thought. A group will be capable,' he concluded, tenting his thin fingers, 'of controlling the local population of rats for their own defense. And I should imagine this close to no man's land, there is no shortage of those.'

Lydia thought that one through, and said, 'Oh, dear.'

TWELVE

26-3
Jamie
Cuvé Sainte-Bride x Former nunnery x Nord x nr Haut-le-Bois x Dr Jules Lemoine infecting German POWs x Others x work w vampire Francesca Gheric of Strasbourg x How ?? x Tuathla (not real name) Meagher x heavily fortified x how get in? x any information x promise I will be careful x you be careful too
All my love

The letter was postmarked Paris, Friday 26 March, at the Gare St Lazare. The hand was undoubtedly Lydia's, though Asher guessed Ysidro had posted it. It was topped and tailed by addresses and names not Lydia's own, encoded as a rambling complaint about the difficulties in obtaining sugar and decent coffee in Paris, and the cipher it contained raised the hair on his scalp.

He was still working on an innocuous missive whose coded text read *Don't you DARE investigate ANYTHING until you hear from me* (knowing full well that this wouldn't reach her for three days at least) when a brisk rap sounded at his door, which he recognized as belonging to Josetta Beyerly.

Late-afternoon sunlight lay across the foot of his bed from the room's single window. He knew Lydia's friend had pupils, most mornings – French language, or piano – and on those she didn't, she drove an ambulance-wagon from the docks to First London General Hospital. This was just as well, for through the past three nights he had hunted with Lionel Grippen, following Regent's Canal and its ramifications into Hackney Marshes and Hampstead Heath. They sought as much for the places where a revenant might be hiding, as for sight of the thing itself, and so far had found little. Most of those evenings had been foggy, as well as pitch-dark from the blackout, and Asher could feel his energy seeping away from night to night, never returning, after sleep, to quite what it had been before. Hoggett would flay him alive if he knew.

Josetta wouldn't have come to Faraday's Private Hotel like this unless it was important.

'There's something very, very queer happening over in Brabazon Street.'

'His daughter won't call the police,' the teacher explained, when she and Asher stepped from the overcrowded bus at the junction of East and West

India Docks Roads. Men – women, too, now – crowded the flagways at this hour, and the bus had been jammed, for the docks, the chemical works and the gasworks all lay nearby. The raw air was rank with coal smoke and the sewery smell of outhouses. The flat-fronted brick rows of two-up two-downs were nearly black with years' accumulation of soot, and Asher had to stop beside a lamppost and cough for some minutes. Josetta took his arm worriedly, and he waved her off.

'I'll be fine.' This was a lie. 'Is there some reason he doesn't want the police searching the house?'

'The neighbors think he receives stolen goods,' she replied matter-of-factly. 'He may well – he owns a pawnshop in the Limehouse Road. But I think the main reason is that he's involved with buying guns for the Irish Volunteers.'

Asher's jaw tightened grimly. On the omnibus from Kensington he'd picked out, as was his habit, the different accents of his fellow-passengers, and ever since they'd crossed the Regent's Canal he'd been swimming in a sea of elongated vowels and dentalized t's. In the shabby jacket and down-at-heels shoes he'd changed into when Josetta had spoken of their destination, he guessed he wouldn't stand out, and the VAD uniform of his companion would pass pretty much anywhere in London. Depending on how deeply the Mayo family was involved with those willing to use violence to obtain independence for Ireland, this probably wasn't a neighborhood in which to be heard asking questions.

Josetta climbed two steps – washed two or three days ago, by the look of the grime accumulated since – and rapped at the door, her sharp one-and-two characteristic knock. The house smelled of cooked cabbage and poverty, the areaway below, of decaying vegetables and piss. *No alley behind.* Areaways usually meant back-to-backs. *In this neighborhood, probably a yard …*

The woman who opened the door a crack looked as if she hadn't slept in several nights.

'I've brought someone to see Bert,' said Josetta simply.

The woman closed the door a few inches, her eyes like shuttered windows. 'Nuttin' wrong with Da.'

'There is,' said Josetta. 'You know there is, Katie. This man can be trusted.'

Tears flooded the woman's eyes and she clamped her lips hard.

Grieved, thought Asher. *And scared for her life.*

'His mouth?' he asked softly, and hardened the final 'th' just slightly, a whisper of the accents of Katie's own land. *You can trust me … I'm one of your own …* If the danger hadn't been so desperate he'd have been ashamed of himself. 'His teeth? Bruisin' here—' His fingers traced on his own head where he knew the sutures of the skull would be deforming – 'an' here?'

Katie began to cry, and opened the door.

A younger woman, still dressed for factory work, put her head out of the kitchen door at the back (and yes, by the window behind her there was a yard). From the other door on the narrow hall two tow-headed boys peeked, in their early teens and also, Asher noted, still in the grimed overalls of dockhands. None of them looked like they'd slept.

Katie led them up the stair without a word.

Asher had seen before what greeted him in the tiny rear bedroom. The figure huddled in the room's darkest corner was a man in his sixties, balled together with his arms around his knees and his body leaned against the wall. Sheets and blankets had been stripped from the bed and draped over the single window, packed tight in every cranny in a desperate attempt to shut out all light. He winced and made a sound of protesting pain as Katie lit the old-fashioned gas: 'Da, there's a man come to see you. We'll be needin' a bit of light.'

He made a strangled sound, as if clearing something out of his throat. Then, 'Don't want to see nobody, Kate.'

'He knows what's wrong wit' you, Da.'

Looking at the bruises on the face where the skull was elongating, the bloody smears on the old man's hands and mouth where his teeth were starting to grow, Asher knew exactly what was wrong with him, and his heart turned sick inside him. Sick with pity and dread.

Damn it, he thought. *Damn it.*

And damn whoever brought the first of those things over here. Damn them to the bottommost smoking crevice of Hell.

Gently he took Katie's arm, led her back into the hall and shut the door.

'Does this door lock?' he asked softly. She shook her head. She looked to be in her forties, though hard work and childbearing had aged her face. She stood no higher than his shoulder, thin as a twig-doll. Her hair was streaked with gray and she'd lost several of her teeth.

'You need to get a bolt and lock it,' he said. 'I'll come back—' He calculated times, and of course there wouldn't be a shop in town open at this hour … 'I'll come back tomorrow, wit' your permission, and put it on, if you've no one else—'

'Terry'll do it.' Katie seemed to pull herself together a little. 'Kerr. Next door. He's a foreman at Lavender Wharf.'

'Do it tonight, if you can.' He kept his accent the one she'd unconsciously connect with home, South Ireland: those predominantly Catholic counties where resentment burned strong against the Empire which for centuries had shut the Irish themselves out of owning or ruling their own land. 'An' get

your boys – them two I saw downstairs? – out of the house, find somewheres else for 'em to sleep. Your da's ill,' he went on, seeing her shake her head, as if disbelieving that such a thing could be happening to them. 'And he's not gonna get better. I'm sorry to be the one tellin' you this, I'm so sorry, but there's nuttin' to be done. He's gonna go off his head soon, an' try to harm anyone he sees. Katie—' He tightened his grip, gently, on her shoulders as her face convulsed with tears, and he glanced quickly at Josetta.

'Reilley,' she mouthed back at him, knowing what he sought.

'Mrs Reilley … I'm sorry, but I need to know this. When did this happen, and where? Somethin' attacked him, didn't it? Tom the Ogre? Bit him? Tore him up?'

The woman nodded, clinging now to his arms and shaking with her effort to control her sobs. 'Comin' home. Last Tuesday night. He'd been at the Green King over in Tildey Street—'

On the other side of the Limehouse Cut. He'd have had to cross it, coming back, late and in the fog …

'Will he eat? Drink?'

'He ain't all day. He did, up to yesterday—'

'Do you have laudanum in the house? Good—'

'I'll ask Polly for it downstairs.' Josetta clattered off, to return a few moments later with a substantial square black bottle in one hand, a smaller green one in the other labeled 'Infants Quietness Elixir'.

Quietness indeed, reflected Asher grimly. *Will opiates work on one of Them?* They certainly didn't on vampires, not unless they were mixed with some of those ingredients inimical to vampire flesh: silver, aconite, tincture of Christmas rose. He'd seen nothing concerning the Others in the medieval text which seemed the most accurate, the notorious Book of the Kindred of Darkness. From what Don Simon Ysidro had told him, that volume had supposedly been written in Spain only a few years after the first of the Others had appeared in Bohemia. As little as anyone knew about vampires, the knowledge was vast compared with what anyone knew about these filthy cousins of theirs.

'We're goin' to try to sedate him.' He turned back to the terrified woman beside the shut bedroom door. 'Put him to sleep. He'll be a danger to you, Mrs Reilley, an' soon. I'm sorry, but that's what this is, this sickness that he caught from the thing that tore him up. It spreads by blood, so don't let him bite you or tear you, don't let one drop of his blood mix with yours. That's why I'm tellin' you, get your family outen this house. I wish I could make it different—'

She was weeping again, his hands strong on her arms.

‘—but I can’t. You got to be strong, M’am. There’s nuttin’ can be done for him now but keep him asleep if we can. You got to be strong.’

Shuddering, she wiped her nose and her eyes. ‘I’ll be strong.’

‘Good lass.’

He glanced at Josetta again.

‘I got the rest of the family out of the house.’

‘Wait for us—’ he turned back to Mrs Reilley – ‘down the foot of the stair. I swear to you we’ll do him no harm, but by the saints, there’s nuttin’ to be done for him. And I swear,’ he added, turning to Josetta as the little woman slowly descended the stair to the darkness which had now gathered thick in the house below, ‘I wouldn’t ask this of you, Miss Beyerly, if I had any choice in the world about it.’

‘That’s a pip of a brogue you’ve got there, Professor,’ she returned, unruffled. ‘Better than the halls.’ Then her expression darkened, and she said softly, ‘What’s happening to him? What you were asking about – looking for … How did you know?’

‘Don’t ask.’

For a moment the young woman stared at him in the dimness of the narrow hallway, as if she couldn’t believe what she saw in his eyes.

‘We have to get him to hospital. I can get an ambulance-wagon—’

‘Let’s get him sedated first.’ Asher’s mind was racing, Langham’s complicit smile returning to him: *The matter is in hand …*

You bastard. You know that thing is in London and you’re watching the hospitals, aren’t you? And if you get hold of this poor sod … What? ‘Infecting German POWs …’

Use them against the Germans? And then later against the Irish who demand rule of their own lands, or riot against the threat of conscription for England’s war?

Use them against Indians who want independence?

Sick cold went through him, like the onset of fever. (*And maybe it IS the onset of fever …*)

First things first.

He signed to Josetta to remain in the hall, stepped into the bedroom.

The gas was out. There was no smell of it in the room, so presumably Bert Mayo retained enough recollection of who and what he was to have turned the gas off rather than just dousing the minimal flame. A weak reflection of light from the hall picked up a red glint from the corner where the man had been huddled earlier, and, near him, the tiny, vicious sparks of the eyes of rats.

Four or five rats, all within a few feet of him.

Damn it …

Asher struck a match. Mayo hid his eyes. The rats fled.

So far, so good.

‘Get out of it,’ whispered the stricken man, the words dribbling from his lips like the mutter of delirium. ‘Put out the bloody light. Make ’em shut up. Katie …’

‘Make who shut up, Bert?’ Asher lit the gas and turned it down as far as he safely could.

Bert covered his face with his arms, then scrabbled to the bed and grabbed the pillow to further block the light from his eyes. The walls around him were smeared with blood where his mouth had touched; the mattress, and the bedclothes hung over the window, streaked with it.

DO NOT let that blood touch you …

‘Rats,’ whispered Bert Mayo hoarsely. ‘Chatterin’. Voices in me conk. Make ’em shut up!’ He lurched to his feet. Seen full-on for the first time his face was a horror, the flesh a mass of bruises where the mouth and jaw had lengthened out like an ape’s, blood from his bitten lips stringing into the gray stubble of his chin. Behind him in the doorway Asher heard Josetta gasp, and he reached back and took the laudanum bottle from her hand.

‘This’ll make the voices shut up, Bert,’ he said. ‘Then we’ll make the rats go away.’

‘Rats’ll never go away.’ Slowly, Bert began to circle toward the door. ‘Crawl in an’ out o’ me skull-bones whilst I sleep. I hear their squeakin’ an’ it sounds like words.’

‘This’ll shut ’em up. Guaranteed.’ *How many revenants constitute a hive mind? Is he controlled by the colony – good God! – that this Lemoine is growing in France, or by Hungry Tom out in the fog of the canal? Or – Jesus! – is his mind controlled by the rats, rather than the other way around, given that they outnumber him?*

He held out the bottle. ‘Drink it,’ he offered. ‘You’ll be the better for it.’

Bert’s lips pulled back from the bloodied mess of fangs and he lunged at Asher, clawed hands outstretched. Asher yelled ‘Door!’ and, thank God, Josetta had the wits to slam it without any wailed vacillation about *I can’t shut you in there with it …!* If he knew Josetta she had one sturdy shoulder braced against its panels, not that that would do any good—

He flung himself at the window, ripped down the wadded blankets, and hurled them over Bert’s head as Bert reached him. The stricken man was strong, but it was still human strength, the strength of a man of sixty who’s worked hard all his life, not the hideous abnatural strength of mutated cell tissue and altered muscle. Asher rolled him in the blankets, shouted ‘Josetta!’ and she was in the room, striding to help him—

‘Asher, there’s—’

Feet thundered in the stairwell. Men slammed into the room, half a dozen of them, as Asher grappled with the blanket-wrapped thing that had been Bert Mayo. Three of the men – laborers smelling of sweat and beer and very cheap tobacco – grabbed Bert and wrapped him still tighter in the blankets, and in the same instant one of the men seized Asher’s arms from behind, pulled him out of the fray, and held him while another whipped from his pocket a weighted rubber sap.

‘Get him outta here,’ commanded the sixth man, who held Josetta’s arms behind her – Asher automatically placed his accent within a few miles of Cork, like his round Celtic face and the thick shoulders in their meal-colored jumper. ‘These two—’

That was as far as he got. Josetta stomped hard on the man’s instep, dropped her weight, twisted in his shock-loosened grip and gouged for his eyes. In the same moment Asher kicked the man with the sap in front of him, performed the same classic stomp-drop-twist on his own captor before smashing him across the face with the laudanum bottle, grabbed Josetta’s wrist – it did not appear to be the time to ask questions – and used the pillow round his fist to smash open the window. There was a shed outside – there was always a shed, in tiny houses like this one – and he swung Josetta out the window and dropped out after her himself, into a yard the size of a dining-room table and choked with rubbish. He pulled Josetta into the outhouse and closed the door. Through its tiny judas he saw two of the men drop through the window, dash to the rear fence of the yard and scramble over it: the logical direction of pursuit.

They stood together, in black and stinking darkness, for nearly ten minutes, long after the house itself grew silent and still.

No light returned to the windows of its kitchen. No one opened its rear door.

Josetta made not a sound, though he could hear her breathing fast and hard and could feel her trembling where her body pressed his.

He himself was shaking, as if his legs would crumple if he tried to walk.

Hirelings of whoever it was – that flickering shadow that he’d thought he’d glimpsed in Charlotte Street? The bewhiskered and bespectacled ‘rat in an overcoat’ that Grippen had seen? Bert Mayo’s pals in the Irish Brotherhood, concerned that Katie had taken a stranger into the house? (*And God knows what was hidden up in the attic* …) The local Brotherhood of Light Fingers, if the enterprising Bert was in fact a fence as well as a gunrunner?

Dear God, what were they going to do if Bert tore into them with those bloodied teeth?

The matter is in hand, Langham had said, with a twinkle and a smile.

In time Asher slipped out of the outhouse, crept shakily across the yard – it was now pitch-black – and listened at the back door of the house.

Nothing.

The yard of the house behind the Mayos was tidier, when Asher clambered over its fence. By the feel of the dirt underfoot, and the way plants brushed his groping hands, he guessed the neighbors had a garden (and wouldn't thank his pursuers for trampling it). He went back and fetched Josetta, offered her help (which she turned down indignantly) over the fence, and over three more, moving laterally parallel to (he calculated) Ellesmere Street, the next street over from Brabazon, before finding a house that sounded vacant. With a mental apology to its tenants he broke the kitchen window, and let himself and Josetta through kitchen and hallway and out at last into Ellesmere Street indeed.

Since no cabs ever cruised anywhere near the grimy purlieus of Brabazon Street – and the busses had long since ceased running – they had a walk of nearly a mile to the cluster of pubs around the East India Docks where such a thing could finally, by chance, be obtained.

Lying awake in the darkness, Lydia thought about blood.

She'd dreamed about it, as she often did, especially since her expedition – nearly a week ago now – to Cuvé Sainte-Bride. In her dream she'd seen the vampire Francesca Gheric attempting to flee from the convent of Cuvé Sainte-Bride, getting caught on the barbed wire that half-filled the trenches which surrounded it like a toothed steel moat, trying to tear herself loose from the barbs. (These were longer and far more thickly wound on military wire, Captain Calvert had told her, than they were on the mere stuff that Americans used to pen their cattle.) '*We are flesh and bone, lady*,' Don Simon had said, and in Lydia's dream Francesca had struggled, tearing both flesh and bone in an attempt to get out of the trench before the heaving gray tide of rats reached her.

Blood had glistened on the steel barbs and, standing on the brink of the trench, Lydia had tried to figure out how she was going to obtain a sample of that blood.

She'd eventually decided that the best way was to have Don Simon transform himself into a bat and go fetch some for her, and they were in the midst of a rather convoluted argument about whether or not this was possible ('*Were it possible for a vampire to transform into a bat, Mistress, the Lady Francesca would not now be in the difficult situation that she is …*') when she woke.

Why did I want her blood? She frowned over the question.

I've already SEEN vampire blood under a microscope. Simon had donated some a few years ago, and had been as curious as she herself, to compare it with the blood of the living.

She had written up her findings, and had handled the sample with the greatest of care, well aware that if the vampire state were in fact connected with some unknown virus – and were related to the hideous pathology of the Others – no chances could be risked of contamination. When finished with her study (which had taken place by gaslight) she had set the sample outdoors, and had been queasily disturbed to see it spontaneously catch fire, and burn up at the first touch of morning sun.

So why did I want HER blood?

A thought, like the echo of her now-fading dream, came at once: *Because the blood is the answer*.

But she had no idea what that meant.

By the sound of the camp it was three or four in the morning. The guns were stilled; there wasn't even the grind of motors from the road, or the hollow rumble of lorries on the makeshift wooden bridge. No sound had yet begun from the camp kitchen, nor was there smell of smoke. In the pitch-dark tent Lydia heard the stealthy scrabble of rats, and bit her lips to keep from screaming: in four months of living daily with the vermin she had never lost her terror of them. She should, by all rights, be sunk in the sleep of exhaustion – keeping company with vampires, on top of her duties in the fluoroscope tent (*And if we have another quiet day tomorrow I'll take the apparatus apart and give it the cleaning it needs* …), meant she was constantly short of sleep. *Thank goodness Colonel St-Vire insists on the surgical crews getting all the sleep they need during the quiet times* …

When she closed her eyes she felt as far from sleep as she was from a hot bath or Mrs Grimes's batter-cakes. But she saw, as if it were printed on her eyelids, the dreamworld moonlight glistening on Francesca Gheric's blood, dripping from the twisted spikes.

Saw Don Simon's blood under her microscope, the altered, queerly elongated corpuscles motionless and cold.

Her favorite sport was to kill her lover in the act, said Antonio's beautiful, velvety whisper.

And her own hesitant voice, *Some vampires do retain a capacity for love* …

She was still awake when first daylight outlined the tent-seams, and above the wasteland of blood-soaked mud and tangled wire, the guns began to pound.

‘What happened to that man?’ Josetta’s whisper barely carried over the rattle of the cab’s iron tires on the brick streets of the Limehouse. ‘His face …’

‘Don’t speak of it.’ Now that Asher was sitting down and more or less warm and in no immediate danger of being killed or worse, waves of exhaustion threatened to drown him. ‘Not to anyone. For your life, Miss Beyerly; I’m not joking …’

‘For my life?’ At least she didn’t laugh. The moon had set, and the blackness of the blacked-out streets was absolute. God alone knew how the cab driver – the only one to be found in the Wise Child, and arguably not sober – saw to steer … *Maybe he has a sober horse* …

‘I don’t know who is behind this,’ he said wearily. ‘It may be that our government brought those things – that infection – to England as a plan to win the war … as a cheap alternative to conscription. To get men to fight who won’t ask questions, who won’t even know what they’re doing or why.’

He heard the harsh draw of her breath. At least, he reflected, having battled Parliament for years over votes for women, she wouldn’t automatically assume that the government a) was always right, or b) knew what it was doing.

‘Or it may be someone who wants to spread chaos and panic here, so that we can’t produce enough food or munitions to effectively keep an army in the field. And I suspect we’d do it to the Germans quick enough. It may be someone who wants to raise a private army, for their own purposes. Someone who knows they’ll be outnumbered and outgunned by the police …’

‘I know one of the men,’ said Josetta quietly. ‘One of those who took the thing away, I mean. I’ve seen him at the settlement house. His name’s Teague, he’s part of the Irish Volunteers. Someone told me he’s one of the men who’s buying guns from the Germans and smuggling them into Ireland.’

Asher heard the hesitant note in her voice, the admission of the secret she was breaking, and shut his mouth hard on his first, embittered exclamation. With Irish independence tabled ‘until the war is over’, – and, worse, used like a hostage to lever Ireland into accepting forced conscription – he could understand the anger of those who had waited for years for a political solution to Ireland’s self-rule. The fact that armed militias had formed among the Protestants, who didn’t want to be governed by the Catholic majority – and were *also* smuggling guns in from Germany to arm themselves – and the Catholics, who in the face of violence in the countryside, were responding in kind, did not help the situation any.

‘Thank you,’ he said quietly. ‘Whoever is behind this – and there’s no reason to think this Teague is working for one side or the other in particular – please remember that we have no idea who is passing along information to

whom. If you value your life, tell *no one* about what happened tonight. The last man who was a witness to the existence of these things vanished without a trace on the sixteenth of March. Promise me.’

She gripped his hand as if to emphasize what she was about to say, but he was unconscious before her words were spoken.

THIRTEEN

‘Is the offer still open,’ inquired Lydia, ‘for me to pay a call on the Master of Prague?’

Don Simon regarded her for a moment with raised brows. Had he been like any of the men she worked with – both here in Pont-Sainte-Félicité and in fact back in Oxford – he would probably have greeted this volte-face with *And this is the woman who thinks we’re monsters?* and similar chaffering, but this was evidently another of the things he’d outgrown (or gotten tired of) in three-plus centuries of being Undead. He merely inclined his head and replied, ‘Graf Szgedny will be honored and flattered, lady. Am I correct in my guess that this concerns the Lady Francesca and her bargain – whatever it may be – with Dr Lemoine? Then might I suggest that the visit itself be kept secret?

‘E’en in the best of times,’ he added, when Lydia almost protested that she’d never in any case mention to Captain Calvert that she was going to tea with a vampire, ‘the Undead are frightful gossips. With eternity before us and little enough of each night required for hunting, I do not see how it could be otherwise, given the human material of which the vampire is formed. Caution warns me against bringing your inquiries to the Lady Francesca’s attention.’

‘I think that’s wise.’ Lydia glanced back over her shoulder at the lights of the clearing station. The purposeful bustle among the tents would soon die down. Another day was done. A few dozen men had been brought in – even when there was no ‘push’ on, constant sniperfire took its toll. Shells were always falling, sometimes close enough to the front-line trenches to blow men into fragments on their way back from the latrines. Trench foot, pneumonia, hideous and fast-spreading sepsis from the smallest of cuts …

When things grew quiet, did poor Brodie’s *bean sí* still walk among the tents? (*And is there a German equivalent, over on the other side of no man’s land? I’m sure Jamie would know* …)

‘What about Antonio and Basilio?’ she asked worriedly. ‘They know I’m asking questions. And they’re friends – or at least neighbors – of Lady Francesca.’

‘I spoke to them when we parted Thursday evening. Antonio at least shares my alarm at the Lady’s meddling in human affairs: such involvements never end well. Then again, merely the suggestion that someone is experimenting with the Others – let alone producing them – is enough to incline them to my will. The Others shock and repel us as much as they do you, lady. Perhaps more so, for those of us who are aware of them at all recognize a kinship … and fear the further connections that may exist. Do not look to them for aid in this matter, but at least they will keep their silence.’

Shouting near the bridge, and the rumble of engines. ‘Bother,’ said Lydia. ‘I’d hoped it would be a quiet night …’ *Not noisy enough for a push. A local attack …*

‘I must go.’

He bowed over her hand. ‘Until tomorrow, then, Mistress. ’Twere best we pay our call early, while the rest are out. I shall send John in the afternoon with papers, and come for you when darkness falls. ’Tis a dozen miles.’

‘I’ll be ready. You haven’t heard—’ She paused, half-turning back from the lights of the camp. ‘You haven’t heard anything concerning Jamie, have you? Mrs Grimes wrote that he’d gone down to London. The last I heard from him was that one of these … these things … is in London itself.’

The startled widening of his eyes was the greatest display of shock she’d ever seen from him. But all he said was, ‘Is it so, indeed?’

‘That means that either someone was infected here – one of Lemoine’s assistants, perhaps, or one of those poor prisoners who escaped – and developed the condition when he got to London. Or else someone shipped or carried one of Lemoine’s subjects to Britain, and it escaped.’

‘Or that the vector of the infection is asymptomatic, and does not manifest the physical changes of the condition himself.’ Don Simon folded his arms, and leaned one slender shoulder against the corner of the smashed-in wooden hut that stood between the last of the disused German trenches and the first houses of the village. From its shadow Lydia knew they were nearly invisible to the hurrying figures in the camp. ‘Rather like that woman Mary Mallon, who spread typhoid a few years ago in America …’

Lydia shivered, and pulled her greatcoat more tightly around her body. ‘I’ve asked Jamie to send me whatever information he has. If I know Jamie …’

She looked aside, unable to go on.

‘I do indeed know James,’ returned the vampire. ‘Thus I feel sure that when you do receive a reply to your reports of these creatures – and recall that any letter of yours to him must be forwarded from Oxford – ’twill contain the words *Do NOT pursue this matter*. Lionel is in London still.’ He named the

Master vampire of London. ‘But to attempt to touch his dreams in quest of what he may know of this is like playing the lute before a rooting pig. If you will it, Mistress, I shall seek out James’s dreams in the depths of the night, and at least endeavor to learn if he is well.’

Then he was gone, as if he could – as the legends said – dislimn into mist, and melt away.

Feeling rather like the corpse at a funeral in morning dress better suited to London than to Wendens Ambo, James Asher stepped from the first-class railway carriage and handed his companions out, reflecting for the hundredth time on the usefulness of ‘connection’ with the aristocracy. The son of a Church of England rector, he’d always been aware that the folk up at the ‘big house’ at Wychford had the power to make life easy or difficult for his parents and sister – interference which Sir Boniface’s family seemed to regard as part of ‘keeping them in their place’. Four years at Oxford in close proximity to the scions of nobility hadn’t much improved his opinion of the breed. But he had discovered at Oxford that the purpose of Oxford was as much to meet people as to actually learn anything. One could learn as much or as little as one chose, depending on the ability of one’s parents to keep one there. (Or, in Asher’s case, one’s diligence at any number of tutoring jobs.) But being in Balliol or Merton or King’s would be, ever after, a passport to a degree of acquaintance, rather like sharing a seat in a lifeboat with total strangers.

After four years, men of one’s year or one’s staircase or one’s college were strangers no more. His Oxford connections had certainly been as much of a factor in his employment in the Foreign Office as had been his fluency in Czech and Persian.

And by marrying the granddaughter of a viscount, he had quadrupled the number of people to whom he could acquire an introduction on the grounds of casual proximity. Lord Halfdene’s four surviving sisters might look down their elegant noses at the mere New College lecturer their beautiful niece had married, but when push came to shove, one of them at least could be counted on to know the person whom Asher sought to meet.

So it had proved in his quest to locate – and speak to – the Comte de Beaucailles, whose property in the Département du Nord had included the old convent of Cuvé Sainte-Bride. Once Josetta’s suffragette friend in the government purchasing office had found mention of the money Britain had lent to the French to refurbish the place as a research laboratory – after the French Army had acquired it in November – it had been easy to identify the former owner. Lydia’s Aunt Lavinnia, though she habitually referred to Asher as ‘that person poor Lydia married’, wasn’t immune to being taken out for a

criminally expensive tea at the Northumberland (Lydia's income deriving from American bonds and real estate in four major cities, and not farmland). In the course of consuming two cups of China tea and a single cucumber sandwich, Aunt Lavinnia had divulged the fact that the Comte de Beaucailles had come to England (as Asher had suspected: who in their right mind would remain in Flanders, or even in a Paris shorn of sugar, coffee and entertainment?) and was residing, with his family, as the guest of Lord Whitsedge at Whitsedge Court.

Lydia's Aunt Harriet, while deploring her niece's education, current occupation and husband (her own was the younger son of a duke, and a well-regarded barrister), knew everyone in Debrett's and was sufficiently good-natured as to write to Lord Whitsedge (whose Aunt Claire had married a Halfdene cousin) on Asher's behalf (though she referred to him in the course of a single paragraph as Ashley, Ashford and Ashden). And Lydia's Aunt Faith, who even now shed tears over the way in which her dear sister's child had 'thrown herself away' after being 'the most beautiful debutante of her year' (Lydia still had nightmares about her single 'season'), was so ecstatic at the idea of a weekend away from acting as companion to Aunt Louise down at Halfdene Hall that she had even agreed to accompany Asher (and Aunt Louise's official companion, Mrs Flasket) down to Whitsedge Court and introduce her plebeian nephew-in-law to Lord Whitsedge and his guests.

The Comte de Beaucailles proved to be an elderly, fragile man who took Asher to his bosom on the grounds of the perfection of his French. It was a joy, he said, to listen to after the tomcat squawking of '*ces Anglais*', the gesture of his yellow-gloved hand dismissing the hosts without whose hospitality he would have been living on cabbage soup in Hoxton. He nursed a profound hatred of Germany and all Germans, as if the Battle of Sedan (in which he had fought) had been yesterday instead of forty-five years previously, and could still be reduced to shouting outrage over the Dreyfus Case. But he recalled with tender vividness the France of his childhood, the France of the days of empire, and every detail of the convent which had stood only miles from the family chateau.

'The good sisters were still at Sainte-Bride when I was a boy,' he reminisced, to Asher's question after dinner. 'It was much larger in the days before the Revolution – quite a substantial foundation – but my cousins and I were always welcome there. My great-grandfather provided the money for a new chapel in 1773, and many of our aunts and great-aunts had taken the veil there. Its cellars were famous—' He chuckled softly, and made an ironic little half-salute with Lord Whitsedge's indifferent sherry – 'and there had been a healing well there, oh, centuries ago. Standing as it does on a ridge of hills,

there is a veritable labyrinth of catacombs beneath it, far exceeding the present size of the convent.'

The remaining servants had pulled shut the draperies of slightly faded mustard velvet over the Regency drawing room's long windows. One of Lord Whitsedge's other guests was playing the piano, a Mozart dance whose effervescent serenity echoed bittersweet in the quiet room. Whitsedge Court was an old-fashioned country seat in which gas had never been installed, let alone electricity; Lady Whitsedge's booming voice could be heard from the card table, bemoaning the absence of the footmen, and the butler's replacement by his venerable and stone-deaf predecessor. In London Asher had been conscious of the number of women hurrying along the sidewalks at the close of factories and shops, and of the hoary heads of bus conductors and ticket clerks on the Underground. Here in the depth of Essex, with the cold spring wind blowing spits of rain from the Channel, the sense of loss, of men missing who would never return, was more poignant, despite Her Ladyship's evident belief that the entire war had been concocted by God to inconvenience her daughter's coming-out.

'*Honestly*, if the fighting goes on for another six months – and *what* those generals are thinking, I can't *imagine* – Alice will be nineteen. *Nineteen*! I could *flay* Mother for talking me into delaying her debut last spring …'

'When was the convent abandoned?' Asher inquired.

'Oh, heavens, when I was ten or eleven, I think.' The Comte seemed to bask in the belief that the most casual of acquaintances found his childhood in the long-vanished France of Empire as fascinating as he did himself. 'Yes, because that year I was enrolled in the Lycée Notre-Dame in Lille—'

'I remember there was a sort of ruin across the field from my father's rectory,' reminisced Asher mendaciously. (He'd been packed off to school in Scotland at the age of seven and his father hadn't been a believer in bringing young James home for those few summers before his own death in 1874.) 'I have no idea what the place was – monastery or a small castle or just an ancient inn – but my sister and I found a way into it from the crypt of a sort of little chapel in what had been its grounds …'

The old nobleman laughed. 'Nothing nearly so romantic, I'm afraid! The convent at Cuvé Sainte-Bride had in a manner of speaking died by inches, so there was a huge zone of deserted farms, chapels, bathhouses and storage-buildings all round the cloister, even in the days when the good sisters were still in occupation. My cousins and I played hide-and-seek – risking our lives, I'm sure, for some of those old crypts were none too stable, and the roofs were always falling in! – in the unused portions, so as not to disturb the nuns.

But after they were removed we ran about them underground like wild Indians.'

The old man's eyes sparkled at the recollection, and he leaned forward, decades melting from his lined face. 'After my cousin Etienne was caught in a cave-in and nearly drowned – because, of course, the deeper crypts flooded in the wintertimes – my grandfather had most of the outbuildings torn down and the ways into the crypt sealed. But still we'd get in. There was a well by one of the old barns, on the hillside behind the convent, and if one of your friends would lower you by bucket to just above the level of the water, there was a little door leading into what I think used to be a drain from the old baths … Ah, the smell of that tunnel, all green and damp! And our girl cousins used to stand at the top and cry because none of us boys would let them go down with us. And one of the young men of the district, Henri Clerc his name was, unblocked the entrance that led into what had been the nuns' old wine cellar, and would use the place to tryst with the village girls …'

A young footman, walking carefully on a wood-and-metal leg encased in the livery's old-fashioned silk stockings, brought them a tray of drinkables and a soda siphon. At the other end of the too-long, lamp-lit room Aunt Faith meekly nodded while Lady Whitsedge continued her monologue on the shortcomings of maids who would quit and go to work in factories, and Mrs Flasket listened in intelligent silence to Lord Whitsedge's account of his spaniel bitch's latest confinement.

Asher kept the old Comte talking, and, when he finally retired to his small chamber (which looked down on an inner courtyard of the rambling old Court: Aunt Faith, though regarded throughout her family as little better than a paid companion to Aunt Louise, still rated a room in the main part of the house), was able to put together a rough description of five different ways to enter the crypts of Cuvé Sainte-Bride undetected. He spent the remainder of the night encoding a letter to Lydia, which ended with a further admonition not to investigate anything herself. *If Don Simon is there, and willing, he is far more likely to enter and leave in safety than you are. I will put in train arrangements to come there myself to follow up on his reconnaissance.*

The thought of going to Colonel Stewart for the necessary papers – and of the concessions he'd have to make to get himself assigned to that area of Flanders – made him groan, not to speak of the hazards of crossing the submarine-haunted Channel and making his way from Calais to Pont-Sainte-Félicité and Haut-le-Bois. Then there was the issue of leaving his ill-assorted 'network' of information-gatherers on their own in London, seeking for word of this second revenant, and for the Irish gunrunner Teague. *I'll have to brief Grippen*, he thought, *without telling him who's collecting the information.*

Josetta and Millward could communicate with the master vampire via newspaper. It wouldn't be the first time he'd run a network in which no member was aware of the identities of the others.

And God knows what Grippen will do with the information when he gets it.

Damn. He leaned back in the leather armchair beside the tiny grate, and drew his dressing-gown – and a paisley cashmere shawl – tightly around his shoulders. Despite the fire, the room was freezing cold and there was no coal left in the scuttle: guest rooms at Whitsedge Court were not supplied with fuel to burn all night. The clock on the mantelpiece chimed a tiny silver reminder that it was quarter to three. Around him the house was silent, with the darkness of centuries.

For eight years I've tried to keep the governments of both sides from employing vampires. He closed his eyes. *And I might as well have saved myself the trouble, since once the fighting started, both sides are giving the vampires, gratis, the only thing they'd have accepted as payment.*

And after swearing to kill them I'm working on their side.

He thought about going back to Oxford. Or taking Lydia and Miranda and emigrating to America, which was quite sensibly keeping out of the war while selling ammunition and supplies to both sides. But he knew there was no question of doing so. If one side or the other – *Or both, God help us!* – found a way to control the revenants, to use them as soldiers, God alone knew where that would end.

Not well.

He made a move to rise to compose a note to be placed in the Personals column to Grippen for a meeting – and the next thing he knew it was broad daylight and a maid was coming quietly into the room to open the curtains.

FOURTEEN

‘We who hunt the night have long memories.’ Don Simon Ysidro’s gloved fingers, grasping Lydia’s, were cold as they steadied her over the broken ground; cold as the iron of the unlit bull’s-eye lantern she bore. The moon, four days past full, hid behind its bank of clouds, though the rain had stopped half an hour ago. The darkness smelled of wet trees and farmland. Somewhere an owl hooted. ‘Yet being human, we are no more comfortable looking back on the road we have travelled than are other men. Among us it is held to be a sign of weakness and advancing age. Most look neither forward nor back.’

They had left the car with Captain Palfrey, in blackness so thick Lydia could only form the vaguest ideas where she might be. Having been taken to vampire lairs before, she had half-expected to be blindfolded – or at least have her glasses taken away, which would have amounted to the same thing – and had formed her protest ready: *What if something happens to you and I’m left out all alone in the dark?*

But the cloud-smothered blackness of the night had made any sort of blindfold supererogatory. Don Simon had taken the wheel (‘He’s a marvel, isn’t he?’ had enthused Captain Palfrey, in the back seat beside her), and in addition to driving the staff-car, Lydia suspected her guardian of using his mental influence on both her and her living companion in the back seat. Even now, barely sixty feet from the car, she found she had only the dimmest recollection of the drive: of how long it had been, or of any feature of sound or smell, or of the number of turnings or the condition of the road surface, that might have identified where they were. She remembered chatting with Captain Palfrey, but couldn’t call to mind a single word. Had he been likewise beglamored? she wondered. And if so, was he even aware of it?

Damn Simon …

‘Graf Aloyïs Szgedny, like the Lady Francesca, became vampire in the days of the great Wars of Religion,’ the vampire’s whispering voice continued, as they walked on through what smelled, and felt, like woods. ‘The master who made him – Odo Magnus Matilorum – was a very old vampire, who recalled clearly when first the revenants were seen in the days when

plague made its terrible harvest through Christendom. The city of Prague was not hit so hard as other regions, yet it is a pious lie to say that ’twas spared through a vision of the Christ Child. Szgedny does not speak of this matter often. Indeed I am surprised that he has consented to do so to you. Remember when you speak to him that he is a very great nobleman, of ancient lineage, long used to deference.’

Wet leaves rustled in the stirring of breeze, and droplets pattered on Lydia’s cloak and hair. She had the dim impression of looming walls ahead, and her feet gritted on what felt like gravel. Then her thought slipped away, to the memory – tiny and perfect, like something in those miniature Austrian snow globes – of walking up to the garden door of her house in Holyrood Street in Oxford, with her shoes crunching on the gravel of the path and James and Miranda standing in the lighted doorway …

She found herself, with a sensation of waking up, in a damp-smelling corridor, candlelight ahead of her outlining a partly-opened door. *DAMN you, Simon …*

She was aware that her heart was pounding. She was in the house of the vampire, and, for the sake of good manners, had left her silver wrist and neck chains back at the clearing station. *If anything goes wrong …*

She caught his sleeve. ‘Goodness, I didn’t think … does the Graf speak English?’

‘German, Latin, French and Polish, as well as his native Czech … which in his time one only used to address one’s servants or one’s horses.’

I work and eat and sleep, daily, in a place within range of German guns. They’ve shelled the clearing station more than once. Why should I worry about paying a call on a deathless multiple murderer?

Her knees were still shaking.

He led her up a short flight of stone steps, and pushed open the lighted door.

‘I trust Madame was not chilled on her journey here?’

Like most vampires Lydia had seen, the Graf seemed to be in the prime of life, though his long hair and his abundant mustaches were silvery-gray. His face was heavily lined, and beneath grizzled brows his gray eyes were level and cold, catching the firelight like mirrors as he rose from his seat beside the hearth. When Lydia sank into a curtsey (thanking her governess and the instructors at Madame Chappedelaine’s School for the ability to do it properly and with grace) he took, and kissed, her hand.

‘Thank you, my lord, I was most comfortable. It’s kind of you to ask.’

He conducted her to a chair, and Don Simon took Lydia’s cloak (and the lantern), and fetched tea from the small spirit kettle on a marquetry table

nearby. Lydia could not help noticing that only one cup stood ready, and beside it, a small plate of chocolate biscuits (*and I'll bet he got THOSE from Storeman Pratt!*)

She was infinitely glad of Don Simon's presence.

'And I'm most grateful to you, sir, for consenting to see me. I appreciate it very much.'

Beyond the reach of the firelight Lydia made out the dim shapes of a long salon: card tables, a harp, the flicker of gold leaf on an elaborate clock. Deep-set windows opened uncurtained to the night. Closer, flame-glow outlined the carving of the hearthside chairs, the marble angels, lizards, lilies and foxes that twined the fireplace itself.

'Simon informs me you seek information about the Lady Francesca Brucioram.'

Lydia took a sip of tea, and nibbled on a biscuit. After a full day in the fluoroscope tent and the surgical theater she felt she could have devoured the entire plateful without denting either her exhaustion or her hunger. 'In a manner of speaking, my lord. About her, and also about the revenants, the Others, to which I understand you can attest at first hand. Don Simon will have told you what we believe is happening at the old convent of Cuvé Sainte-Bride?'

'He has told me.' The wrinkled lids lowered over eyes devoid of expression: intelligent, cynical, and cruel. His powerful fingers rearranged themselves on his lap.

'Francesca the White is a woman with a great store of anger inside her,' he said at last. 'From what cause I know not.'

The slight movement of his head caused the fire-glow to pick momentarily at the strings of the distant harp: Lydia wondered if it was in tune, and if any of the vampires played.

'In most lamia – as you doubtless know, Madame – the capacity for feeling dwindles quickly. Loyalty, and the affection for one's family, become as the recollection of sugarplums loved in childhood: an objective awareness that such a craving once existed, coupled with a mild distaste at the thought of gorging oneself now. Given the opportunity to slay one's enemies with near-impunity, one finds no real desire to put oneself to the trouble. They will die … and we will not.'

The gray brows pinched slightly over the broken aquiline of his nose. 'For La Dame Blanche, the hunt is about cruelty. Many enjoy chasing a victim, the game of cat-and-mouse in the darkness: seeing a man piss himself with terror, hearing him squeak and plead at the touch of claws on his throat. The taste of

his hope when he still thinks he can get away.' The tiniest smile tugged one corner of his mustache.

'For her the game is more elaborate. More personal. And the pleasure she takes in it has seemed always to me – for she left Prague, as most of us did, when the Prussians attacked under King Frederick – to come not from the kill itself, but from a sort of spite. As if every victim were the one who had done her ill. As if every kill were vengeance. I had many occasions to speak to her, when one of her "games", as she liked to call them, would involve three or four members of the same family or a circle of friends, pursued over a time long enough for word of their misfortunes to spread. In a city barely a tenth the size of London, of older beliefs and different organization, this can cause serious danger to others of the nest.'

'Did she ever try to command your fledglings, my lord?'

His lips compressed in an anger that she hoped wasn't directed at her. 'She did.'

'Forgive me, my lord—' Lydia ducked her head and looked as humble as she could – 'did it ever impress you that she would have taken command of the Prague nest, if she were able?'

His deep, soft voice remained level. 'There were times when I thought as much.'

'Yet she never actually made an attempt to supplant you? Or began a conspiracy to have you killed?'

''Twould have been fairly easy to arrange,' added Don Simon from the shadows. 'In those days, much of Bohemia believed in the *vampìr* more certainly than they believed that the earth circles the sun.'

'Not so easily as you might think,' retorted Szgedny. 'I had – as I still have – eyes and ears throughout the city, among the living as among the Undead. In any case, she did not.'

'Did you ever ask yourself why?' Lydia took another sip of tea.

He sat for a time like a cat watching birds. When he said, 'I did not,' there was, instead of irritation in his deep voice (in so far as it displayed anything), a kind of curiosity at himself for this omission.

'Because it sounds to me,' said Lydia diffidently, 'as if the Lady Francesca might be incapable of creating fledglings. And that's what she thinks Lemoine can give her.'

In his dressing-gown and his paisley shawl, before the faint warmth of the tiny hearth in the room at Whitsedge Court, Asher dreamed of the echoing vastness of the Liverpool Street Station. Streaming mobs of people, as he helped Aunt Faith and Mrs Flasket from the cab, paid the driver, mentally

identified the man's speech as originating from around Shepherd's Bush; his ear caught the sing-song cry of the girls selling violets around one of the cast-iron pillars near the platform steps. Two girls and a woman, in the black of mourning … Beyond them, a worried little man (from Devon, by his accent) fussed with his Scots servant about the cat he carried in a basket …

Faces in the crowd. The smell of smoke from a cockle vendor's barrow and a child's frightened wailing. Clouds of steam rolling from Platform One as the express from Norwich ground to a halt. A flicker of shadow, a characteristic movement near the bookseller's – a ragged dark mackintosh …

When he turned it was gone.

Dreaming, he returned to the scene. Aunt Faith clung again to his arm – she was the only one of Lydia's aunts who would treat him with more than chill civility – and prattled in her gentle voice of the letters she'd gotten from the family of one of the Halfdene footmen who'd come back, blind and crippled, from the Front, while his own attention moved like a gunsight, trying to identify that flicker of a half-familiar shape.

Like spotting Lydia, or Dr Hoggett, or any of his scholastic colleagues at a great distance off in a crowd …

Who was that?

He knew, but the knowledge slipped away.

And in his dream he remembered – not entirely illogically – Josetta Beyerly, when she'd let him off at his lodgings Tuesday night after their adventure in Brabazon Street. Exhausted and shivering a little with what he suspected was a low-running fever, he hadn't waked until the cab had reached the door and then he'd been simply too tired to insist that they go round the corner so that he could slip in through the old mews that had been one of his reasons for choosing Faraday's Private Hotel in the first place.

When she'd seen him to his door, and walked back down the shallow step to the cab, he'd thought, as her heels clicked on the flagway, *I hope she's keeping safe* …

He'd looked up and down the dark street before closing the door behind him, and had seen no one.

‘’Twould make sense,’ said Don Simon at length, ‘of her own master's decision to make another her favorite in Strasbourg, lesser in strength by all accounts than the Lady. One does not bequeath one's estates to a gelding.’

For a long time Szgedny said nothing, but Lydia had the impression, almost, of hearing an abacus click behind those colorless eyes. ‘And ’twould make sense,’ he said at last, ‘of her anger. ’Twas clear as day she considered herself a law unto herself, and entitled to be master of Prague in my stead.’

‘And if Lemoine is working with the physical pathology of the Undead,’ Lydia continued, ‘which it sounds like he is doing, from what I’ve read of his work – she might well trade her assistance in controlling the Others for a cure for her own condition.’

‘Children trading pebbles by the seashore.’ The Graf’s nostrils flared in irritation. ‘A thousand imaginary ducats to pay for an imaginary horse. Best of luck to them both.’

‘Are you sure?’

She saw Don Simon’s yellow eyes move sidelong, to touch the Graf’s snow-gray ones.

‘I at least am sure,’ returned the Master of Prague, ‘that the Lady Francesca is incapable of commanding the revenants. Three hundred years I have watched them, and my master before me. Years will go by – decades, sometimes – between sightings of them, beneath the bridges of the Vltava and on the river’s islands when the moon has set. But they are there, in the crypts beneath the old city, the forgotten cisterns and drains. The sub-cellars of the old town palaces and the ossuaries under churches ruined and built over and erased from the memory of the town. Never more than a few handfuls of them, living on rats in the darkness.

‘My master, Odo Magnus, tried to gain command over them, when first they began to appear. One of his fledglings made the attempt also, Odo believed in order to gain control of the city and to drive Odo out. Or else to kill him and those loyal to him – such schisms, lady—’ He inclined his head to Lydia – ‘are uncommon but by no means unheard of, among those who hunt the night. This fledgling ended by being torn to pieces and eaten by the Others, who will it seems devour anything.’

‘So we have observed,’ murmured Don Simon.

‘I have myself, like Odo before me, tried to control them as I control the minds of the living.’ Stirred to the point of forgetting his calm dignity, the Graf leaned forward, gestured with one powerful hand, and his French became harder to follow as it slid back into the language as he had first learned it, centuries before. ‘Looking into their eyes I saw naught: no mind, no memories, no dreams. Not even the most rudimentary sensations of hunger and fear by which one commands the actions of beasts. Meditating—’ He glanced at Don Simon, as if making sure that he understood whatever mental technique that was, that each had learned from his master to control the perceptions of men – ‘I could touch nothing of their thoughts, either singly or en masse. The effort only revealed my hiding place to them, and I was obliged to flee.’

‘And there’s no chance, my lord, that you were trying this too close to running water? You said they live in the channel of the river.’

A wolf’s smile lifted one corner of the long mustaches again. ‘Clever little lady. I was inland, well enough.’ The silvery eyes met hers, and Lydia glanced quickly aside. To meet a vampire’s eyes opened your own mind to the possibility of its tampering with your dreams. To the danger that one day it would summon you … and you would go.

‘And the fact that the Lady Francesca didn’t take the opportunity to enlist the Others herself, against you,’ she concluded, ‘seems to confirm that she probably couldn’t. If she dwelt in Prague for – how long?’

‘Seventy years, or thereabouts. And you are right, Madame.’ He sat back, like a bleached cobra recoiling upon its rock. ‘I doubt not that she made the attempt, more than once. She would have used them, if she could.’

‘But Dr Lemoine doesn’t know that.’

‘And if her goal be merely to get of him some cure for her incapacity,’ went on Don Simon, ‘I cannot see her taking any pains to make sure these things remain under control. Lemoine’s experiments are sufficiently irresponsible as they stand – God knows how they acquired the first of their revenants, upon which to found their efforts, though I can conceive several ways in which ’twere easily done. But Lemoine at least is a living man, with a living man’s loyalties to his own. So far as I can ascertain, the Lady Francesca has none.’

‘Tell me one more thing, my lord, if you would,’ said Lydia, as Don Simon fetched her cloak and they prepared to leave. It was, by the exquisite goldwork clock, nearly ten, and for several minutes she had seen her escort listening carefully, for the sound of returning feet. By the look of the card tables, there was every chance the Graf’s fledglings would foregather in this room, or wonder why they were excluded from doing so.

Whether their fear of her companion would keep the vampires at bay in a group she didn’t know, though she was aware that most vampires held Don Simon Ysidro in considerable awe. In any case, the thought of that many of the Undead knowing who she was, and what she looked like, and that she was tampering in their affairs, frightened her a good deal. They gossiped, Don Simon had said, like schoolgirls, and there was no guarantee that one or more of them weren’t bosom-bows with Francesca.

‘And what might that be, Madame?’ Graf Szgedny bent over her hand.

‘Has there ever been occasion on which a vampire has tried to make a fledgling of a revenant?’

‘The condition of these things is spread by the blood. I know of no vampire, no matter how inexperienced, who would take such risk.’

‘But so far as I understand it, at least, it is the *death* – the absorption of the mind at death – that is involved in the transformation to vampire, not the blood itself. Might a vampire take in whatever mind exists in the revenant, and return it to the creature’s body after it’s dead? And then control it, as a master vampire controls its fledgling?’

‘There must be an exchange of blood, lady. The blood is what transforms the living man into the vampire, once he has passed through death. The risk would be simply too great.’

Lydia heard nothing, but Don Simon turned his head a little, then bowed deeply to the Graf. ‘That sounds like Elysée de Montadour’s voice, and those execrable fledglings of hers—’

‘Flee.’ Szgedny made a slight gesture, as though flicking water from his fingertips. ‘Your visit shall be as if it never occurred.’ For a moment – as sometimes happened with Don Simon’s – his face turned briefly human when he smiled. Tired – and amused, perhaps, at being able to step for a moment out of the society of the Undead and provide information to the quests of the living. But the cynical cruelty in his eyes remained.

Asher returned to London on the Saturday afternoon train from Saffron Walden, though Aunt Faith chose to remain at the Court until Wednesday, with Mrs Flasket to bear her company. ‘I’m sorry you have to return,’ said the Dowager Lady Whitsedge, as she poured out tea for Asher in the bright sunlight at breakfast that morning. ‘Thursday night was the first time I’ve seen the poor old Comte so cheerful. I do quite worry about him, losing his home as he has, and his son and both of his grandsons. I think it quite took him back, to tell somebody about his home, and the way things were when he was a boy.’

Once, on the four-mile drive to the station, Asher caught sight of a bicyclist following the Court’s pony-trap at a distance: too far to easily make out details of the rider under the striped shadows of the new-leafed trees. The man was wearing a shabby Fair Isle sweater rather than a mackintosh, but something in his outline, even at that distance, rang alarm bells in Asher’s mind.

FIFTEEN

‘Is all well, M’am?’

Lydia looked up quickly from the corner of the makeshift table, which, in daytime (and through more nights than she cared to think about) served Eamon Dermott as a workbench. The tiny root cellar beneath the ruins behind the fluoroscope room was barely large enough for both it and the tin basin he used as a developing bath, its rafters so low that during the daytimes (and through more nights than Lydia cared to think about) she and her assistant had to duck and weave about, to avoid the films hanging as they dried.

It was the only place in the clearing station where she knew she could work undisturbed.

She turned Jamie’s letter face down beside her candle, and crossed to the door.

VAD Violet Brickwood stood on the stair. Listening, Lydia heard no clamor of voices and motors in the camp, no rattle of the fluoroscope being moved in the building above.

Only the guns.

She propped her glasses on her nose. ‘I’m well. I just—’

The young volunteer’s glance went past her shoulder, to the papers that strewed the table. ‘I couldn’t help seeing, M’am, that that nice Captain Palfrey brought you that letter today. I hope it’s nothing amiss with your husband, or your little girl?’ The earnest brown eyes returned to Lydia’s face in the lantern-light, seeking – Lydia realized – the marks of grief. ‘I’ll sometimes go read my letters in the stores tent,’ the girl added. ‘If they’re from my sister, about Mama, I mean. I just … Please don’t think I’m meaning to pry, but you’ve been down here a long while. I just hoped you were all right.’

Lydia smiled, and gave the younger girl an impulsive hug. ‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘All is well. There’s nothing amiss.’

Except for a MONSTROUS scheme to dissolve the souls from out of men’s brains, that their bodies may be enslaved because the governments find they’re running out of good Frenchmen or good Englishmen or good Russians to kill.

Lydia returned to Dermott's worktable as Violet's shoes patted gently up the stair again, and stared at the letter.

It was on the stationery of Whitsedge Court (*What on EARTH is Jamie doing there?*) and ran to many pages – *It must have taken him HOURS to write it all!* – so that the minuscule dots, blots and pinpricks wouldn't be obvious as a code. Even though the letter had been sent to Don Simon's accommodation address in Paris, Jamie didn't trust anyone. The letter before this one, which she'd received through regular (censored) Army channels, had contained the terse warning *??? home team screening*, after the alarming information that there was a second revenant at large in London.

??? home team screening.

Monsters. She closed her eyes, leaned her forehead on her knuckles. The King's own government – or at least the Department that worked for them – was hiding the existence of those things she had encountered in China. Protecting them.

How that was worse than simply killing those poor Germans she wasn't sure, but it turned her stomach.

And chilled the blood in her veins.

A quick scratch on the door behind her. A whispered voice. 'Mistress?'

She turned in her chair and managed a half-smile. 'Well, you were right,' she said, as Don Simon slipped into the tiny cellar, closed the door without a sound. 'Jamie does indeed say *Do NOT investigate this yourself*.' She held out the decryption to him, her hand shaking with exhaustion. 'He suggests you do it.'

'Does he?'

The vampire scanned it. Four possible entrances to the sub-crypts and drains beneath the convent of Cuvé Sainte-Bride. Heaven only knew where Jamie had acquired the rough map, which according to the plain text of the letter was her Aunt Faith's house in Little Bookham (Aunt Faith had no such thing and had been Aunt Louise's pensioner for decades). One entrance was in the ruins of a chapel near lilac trees; another, thirty feet down the side of a well in a farmyard a mile from the Amiens road. And Heaven only knew if any of the four would still be usable.

'He says he's coming here himself, as soon as he can get the military clearances he needs.' She tried to keep her voice calm and decisive. The labored shakiness of Jamie's handwriting had told its own story. *Don't do it. You'll kill yourself …*

'Does he?' The vampire's pale brows lifted.

'It would help things,' said Lydia hesitantly. 'Speed things, if we knew at least whether those entrances are still open or not, or how dangerous they are.

Obviously they're difficult of access, since none of the other Undead have spoken of revenants wandering about the back roads and battlefields—'

'Yet one at least got through.' Don Simon refolded the decryption, drew it thoughtfully through his long fingers. 'Whether that was one of ten, or one of fifty, we know not – nor yet why our Nurse Smith would have risked her life getting a sample of its blood or its flesh, when she has access to ample at Sainte-Bride. Curious.' His glance shifted sidelong to her. 'If I read this description aright – and the map also, though 'tis clearly not to scale – the crypts and catacombs beneath the convent at its height extend far beyond the walls as they currently stand, and presumably beneath the trenches that surround it. And given the habit which the living have, of judging situations to be "under control" when they very much desire them to be, 'twould little surprise me if one or more of these things is hiding in the far corners of these crypts, unbeknownst to this Lemoine.'

'Which would mean—' Lydia regarded him somberly by the candle's flickering light – 'that it's only a matter of time before they start to multiply beyond the convent walls. And once they start to spread …'

'E'en so.' He folded up the paper. 'Though if they exist in any substantial number, how they are to be destroyed, with the French Army and, it seems, the War Department of England shielding them, 'tis another matter.'

He picked up Lydia's cold hand and kissed it. 'As for James's coming, if I have learned one thing since last September, lady, 'tis the oriental leisure of official conduct with regards to these "military clearances" of which he speaks. I should refer them all to the forgers who work in Montparnasse and Pigalle: 'tis a wonderment to me that none has ever questioned "Colonel Simon", on how speedily he seems to acquire documents.'

And taking up her candle, he followed her up the crumbling stone steps to the ground above.

On the following day the British First Army made a determined probe at the German lines, principally (Captain Calvert opined, spattered bicep-high in blood and cursing like a very quiet and well-bred Australian sailor) to pull potential German attacks from the French around Arras. From first light Wednesday, when the casualties began coming in, until midnight Thursday night, Lydia took x-ray photographs, administered chloroform, held retractors and sponges, and irrigated wounds, in between taking tea out to the men queued up on stretchers outside the pre-op tent where Matron was grimly sorting them into those who would live and those who wouldn't. Lydia saw not so much as the glint of reflective eyes in the darkness on either night, but

knew they were watching. She didn't know whether she was more furious at them or General Haig.

Colonel St-Vire finally sent the last members of the surgical crews to bed at three o'clock Friday morning with orders not to stir until teatime.

'Captain Palfrey's been to see you twice,' reported Nurse Brickwood worriedly, coming into the nurses' tent Friday evening while Lydia was sponging down with a flannel. Lydia felt her stomach sink, at the thought of what Don Simon might have found. Nevertheless she finished washing, brushed her hair, dressed and went to the mess tent (*Does this headache have anything to do with not having dinner last night?*), and was picking at a rock-hard biscuit soaked in a bowl of lukewarm Maconochie when Palfrey's voice exclaimed 'Dr Asher!' from the twilight of the doorway.

He dodged between the tables to her, and Captain Burke – with whom she'd been eating and commiserating about the upcoming evening's work – heaved his bulk from the bench and shook a facetious finger at her. 'Any more meetin's wi' that captain, lass, and I'll be writin' Professor Asher of you.' Everyone in the clearing station knew by this time that Lydia was involved in 'something for the brass' – presumably concerning x-ray photography – and had come to recognize Captain Palfrey as the liaison.

She thankfully abandoned the tinned swill before her and rose to meet the young captain, who guided her swiftly from the tent.

But instead of handing her a note – and enough light lingered in the sky that she knew Don Simon hadn't come himself – Palfrey inquired worriedly, 'Have you heard anything of Colonel Simon, Dr Asher? I'm dreadfully sorry to interrupt you, as I know you've had a rough time of it these past two nights – everyone has, all the way up to Festubert … But Colonel Simon didn't meet me last night.'

'He is very much a law unto himself …'

'I know.' The young man grimaced at his own concern. 'And he'll joke me sometimes about being a mother hen. But … Wednesday we drove down as far as Haut-le-Bois, and he ordered me to wait for him, with the car, in a lane a few miles beyond the village. I had orders, if he didn't return by sunrise, to go back to Aubigny and wait. Aubigny is where we're staying. Where *I'm* staying,' he corrected himself. 'I honestly have no idea where Colonel Simon stays. He had me rent a sort of accommodation address for him there, but he doesn't seem to use it.'

The young man's brisk calm cracked then, and for a moment his mouth tightened, and distress pulled the flesh around his eyes. 'But he … He never came to my lodgings last night. I sat up nearly all night for him, and I – in my heart I feel something terrible has happened to him, M'am. Dr Asher. Every

time I fell asleep – and I did nod off three or four times – I thought I heard him calling for me. I must have gotten up and gone to the door a dozen times! And I wondered—'

And I was so tired when I finally lay down last night I wouldn't have waked if Miranda had stood next to my cot and screamed. Her heart turned chill inside her. *He went to investigate the crypts under Sainte-Bride.*

Because I asked him to.

And he didn't come out.

Asher told himself, as his train pulled out from Saffron Walden on Saturday afternoon, that the man on the bicycle couldn't possibly have anything to do with the glimpse of what might or might not have been a half-familiar shadow in Brabazon Street Tuesday evening. Nevertheless he changed his own jacket in his second-class compartment and stepped off the train on the last foot or so of platform as it was leaving Epping, and after a considerable hunt for a cab, found one and took it to Pembridge Place. There he paid his bill, changed his jacket and hat yet again, and sought new lodgings in Kensington, after two more cabs and an excursion to Holborn on the Underground, just to make sure that he wasn't being followed. Descending to the Underground troubled him, for its tunnels were the logical place for the Others – two of them, now – to hide.

How long before they added a third to their number?

Does Teague the gunrunner have the slightest idea of the danger of blood contact? Did the man or men employing him?

Tomorrow, he told himself, he'd need to consult both Millward and Josetta, Sabbath or no Sabbath.

After a slender tea at a café, which he was far too exhausted to eat, he composed a telegram to Josetta, another to Miranda (care of Ellen and Mrs Grimes) and a Personals message to 'Dr Graves', then retired to bed, where he lay, shivering with fever, for the next four days. Between bouts of coughing he hoped Mr Fair Isle had been struck on his bicycle by a lorry and squashed flat.

On Thursday he felt sufficiently recovered to venture forth to the British Museum.

Osric Millward was precisely where Asher had found him first, at the end of one of the long desks beneath the great rotunda of the Reading Room. The shabbily-dressed Donnie was still helping him, assisted by another – stooped, a little rat-like, wearing no tie at all, but a kerchief knotted around his throat under a battered frieze jacket – whose intense eyes remained on Millward's face with every word he spoke.

Millward's 'network'. Asher wondered if they had had brothers, sisters, sweethearts, friends who had become victims of a vampire. In their unprepossessing faces he read not only hunger for revenge, but a kind of eager gratitude to have someone who believed them.

The posters Asher had passed in the hallway leading to the great room – garish colors, looming figures – seemed aimed at those two young men, the only men under the age of forty-five in the room: *Come Along, Boys, Before It's Too Late! Will You Answer the Call? YOU are the MAN we want* …

How much courage did it take to say *No, I need to stay in London and hunt for vampires*?

Millward sprang to his feet as Asher approached, seized him by the hand. 'When I didn't hear from you I feared they'd gotten you.'

He meant the vampires of London, not their own government departments, but Asher shook his head. 'I had to go down to the country to see a man about a dog.'

The older man studied his face, his brows drawn together in concern. Asher reflected that he probably looked more like someone who'd been attacked by vampires than like one who had an appointment to meet the Master of London in Piccadilly at midnight for a chat. Millward steered him into a chair, murmured to his two acolytes, 'Would you excuse us …?' and sat down himself. When the young men had gone he whispered, 'I've found where they're hiding.'

SIXTEEN

‘Shouldn’t we wait until it gets dark?’ Captain Palfrey braked the staff-car to a halt. ‘Colonel Simon always does.’

Scanning the description and instructions she had recopied from Jamie’s original letter, Lydia wondered how complicated it would be to explain to this young man that ‘Colonel Simon’ only appeared at night, Palfrey’s convictions to the contrary. ‘It’ll be dark soon,’ she said instead. Indeed, sufficient twilight had gathered to make reading difficult, in the shadows of the leafless trees. ‘And if anything goes wrong and we get separated and have to run for it, I’d feel much safer trying to do so with at least a little daylight.’ She added, ‘I don’t have Colonel Simon’s night-eyes,’ and Palfrey, turning in the front seat, grinned understandingly.

‘Lord, isn’t that the truth! I don’t think any man living does.’

You’re quite right about that. She went back to studying the paper. Their visit to Cuvé Sainte-Bride two weeks previously had revealed nothing about picket guards, and Lydia wondered how great a staff the French Army was willing to pay for.

How many men could be trusted not to blab about what was going on inside, either from horror and outrage or simply in their cups in the *estaminets* of Haut-le-Bois? Lemoine had a couple of soldiers to help manage the prisoners when they were selected, and certainly at least one man on the gate, but how many more? And how many was too many?

Three people can keep a secret only if two of them are dead. Wasn’t that how the old proverb ran?

Lydia propped her glasses on her nose, and took a deep breath. ‘*Old farm near Amiens road*,’ she read aloud. ‘*Well*. Is there rope in the car?’

‘Yes, M’am. I had some Wednesday night, also. Colonel Simon took it with him.’

‘*Sub-crypt of chapel …*’ She lowered the paper, scanned the silent woods around them. They stood a little above the lacerated road, where a lane led to the bullet-riddled shell of what had been a farm. ‘*Near lilac trees—*’

‘There are lilacs two miles down the main road from here, and up the ridge a little. I noticed them because there are lilacs at Deepmere. They’re

Aemilia's favorite.' Palfrey looked shy at the mention of his sweetheart's name. 'They won't be in bloom for two months yet …'

Lydia smiled. *And you probably keep them pressed in your book of the King's Regulations …*

'We'll go through the woods.' She turned back to judge how well concealed the staff-car was behind them. 'If we keep the road on our left we shouldn't get too lost. You don't happen to have anything like a tarpaulin or a gun-cover in the boot?'

He shook his head. 'I have a billhook, though. It won't take but a few minutes to cut brush.'

Lydia strained her ears for the sound of another vehicle on the road as she helped her escort pile cut saplings and shrubs of hawthorn over the vehicle ('You might want to not cut them all from one area …' 'Oh, right! Excellent thought, M'am!'). They were still, by her calculation, several miles from the old convent, and though the vehicle couldn't be seen from the main road, anyone who *did* see the rough camouflage-job would be bound to guess that somebody was up to something.

Of course, simply the sight of a staff motorcar sitting out here would cause them to guess that.

It was quite clear that fighting had passed over these woods the previous autumn. As they trudged through the shredded rags of undergrowth, the shrapnel-blasted trees, Lydia caught occasional glimpses of weather-faded khaki or gray under the winter's dead beech leaves, and the brown of exposed bone.

Wednesday night. Lydia shifted her grip on the unlit lantern she carried, her heart beating hard. *Did he get in? Was he trapped below ground?* The earth would block most of a vampire's psychic connection with the living. Even had Simon tried to make mental contact with her Wednesday night, she'd been awake, concentrating on taking x-ray photographs and administering anesthetics. Last night she'd slept so deeply she doubted anything could have waked her. *Oh, Simon, I'm sorry …*

If he were underground she suspected she'd have to be standing at one of the entrances to the crypts to hear his voice whisper in her mind. Even then it mightn't reach her.

Or will I reach the chapel and find only a heap of ash and bone?

The chapel lay in the center of a zone of shell-craters and scratched-out, makeshift shelters, scrabbled with entrenching-tools by men who had no time to do more than scrape gouges in the earth to lie in and pray. All around the pulverized walls, branches, trunks, shrubs and earth bore the appearance of having passed beneath the teeth of some frightful harrow that had stripped

everything in its path. The lilacs of which Palfrey – and Jamie's informant – had spoken had survived only because they lay far enough from the chapel itself to be on the edge of the death zone.

This near the road, any building that could have given shelter would have been bombed out of existence by the other side. She didn't need to slip and scramble into the chapel itself to guess what she'd find there, though she had to check: a pit some twenty feet deep, where bombs had repeatedly fallen on the sub-crypt, caving it out of existence. The graveyard smell of incompletely buried bodies lingered over the ruined earth.

She whispered, 'Drat it,' though it was just as well. The fewer holes for stray revenants to get through the better. 'How far are we from the Amiens road?'

Hiking over the ridge took the remainder of the fading daylight, though there was very little (*Thank Heavens!*) barbed wire in the shell-torn underbrush of the woods. Palfrey led the way, with a map of the area and a compass; full darkness was closer than Lydia cared for, when they finally glimpsed the charred stones of the farmhouse. There had been fighting here as well, but it didn't look as though the shattered cottage had been shelled.

'Mills bombs, it looks like.' Palfrey lowered his map, and frowned through the gloom at the ruin. 'Look how much of the roof is undamaged.'

The well stood halfway between the house and what remained of the barn. The windlass was gone, as was most of the well-curb. Palfrey found an unburnt section of beam, lit the lantern and laying the beam across the hole, stretched himself out on it to lower the light on his rope. 'We're still fairly high above the local water table here,' he reported, and Lydia, kneeling to peer down, saw the yellow reflection of the light some fifty or sixty feet below.

'Is that a hole, or a door, in the side of the well shaft?' she asked. 'Or just a trick of the shadows?'

The young captain lowered the light as far down as he could, the shadow clearly outlining a roughly rectangular mouth of shadow in the wall.

'Look,' she added, pointing, 'those are iron staples in the wall leading down to it.'

'Good,' returned Palfrey grimly. 'Because there isn't anything to tie this line to closer than twenty feet from the well. It should just get us down to the first of the staples.' He pulled up the rope, untied the lantern and carried the coil to the remains of the barn door. Lydia undid her belt – she wore a holstered Webley service revolver at her waist – and kilted up her stout linen skirt above her knees.

I really should get a man's trousers, to do things like this. They can't be less modest than a pair of bicycle bloomers. She checked the safety and the cylinder of the Webley, actions she'd performed half a dozen times in the car already. *Though it would be impossible to sneak out of the camp unnoticed in them. I wonder if Storeman Pratt would sell me a pair?* Captain Palfrey, returning with the end of the rope in his hands, halted in startled alarm at the sight of her calves and ankles: 'Oh, come, it can't be worse than a bathing costume, surely?' she answered his blush.

'No, of course—' He looked away from her as he dropped the end of the rope down over the edge. 'That'll reach,' he said. 'I'll go first.' He threaded his belt through the lantern's handle, wrapped the rope firmly around his forearms (Lydia watched carefully and hoped she remembered from her schooldays how it was done), and climbed down, leaning out on the rope and bracing his feet on the wall.

I think I can do that …

She wondered breathlessly how deep the water was in the well, and if there would be rats in the tunnel.

If there were people at Cuvé Sainte-Bride, there would be rats.

And revenants, of course …

The rope ended a few feet below the first of the iron staples. She saw Palfrey shift over to the staples, and continue the descent, testing each before he put his full weight on it. She saw three of them jar and shift, and heard the patter of bits of stone as they fell into the water below. With the disturbance of the surface the smell of it came up to her, a sickening whiff of rotting meat. *What'll I do if a staple breaks and he falls in? I'll never be able to get him out.*

When he drew near the entry hole she saw that the last few staples had been broken off – *Did they rust quicker because they're closer to the water?* – and Palfrey had to wedge his boot-toe on the tiny stubs that remained. One of these broke, and he swung himself deftly into the narrow slot. Lantern-light outlined the doorway's edges, then dimmed as he moved a little into the passageway beyond. For an outraged moment Lydia thought he was going to go in alone ('This is no task for a fragile little woman …') but an instant later he put his head out again, and signed for her to descend.

I have Josetta's word for it that there's scientific proof that women are just as strong and enduring as men …

And Simon got himself into this because I asked him.

She took a deep breath, wrapped the rope around her forearms and began her descent.

Jamie … Miranda … if I get killed I'm so sorry …

Oh, dear, which staples were the weak ones …?

Rope to staples. Staples – there were nineteen of them – into the blackness, with barely a feather-brush of yellow light on the wet stone against which she pressed her face and body as she descended. The horrible suggestion of the charnel reek below her, like a kitchen garbage pail too long neglected.

Nineteen. Her groping toe extended down, found nothing. Shifting a little sideways, she found the nubbin of the broken staple, but Palfrey whispered, 'I'll get you, with your permission,' and his hand – with that male gripping power that always surprised her – closed firmly around her calf. 'Lower yourself down …'

His arm circled her hips and he swung her down into the doorway with him.

Inside in the tunnel, the fishy, ratty stink of the revenants mingled with the acrid whiff of carbolic soap. Lydia was aware that she was terrified and aware also that there was no time for it, and no turning back. And of course, no guarantee that Simon had ever passed this way …

Palfrey slid down the cover of the lantern till it was barely a glimmer, and unholstered his own gun. From his tunic pocket he produced a silencer, which he screwed onto the barrel. Lydia observed he'd also brought the billhook from the car, hanging in a leather sheathe from his waist. *As if any of that's going to do any good …*

The tunnel was barely five feet in diameter, and went on for what felt like miles, though Jamie's map had assured her it was not quite three-quarters of a mile from the well to the convent's crypts. It dipped and rose, the low places sheeted with water, sometimes knee-deep, that stank like a sewer. A few yards before the end, it dropped off into what looked like another well, and another ladder of iron staples on a sort of pillar led up to what appeared to be the pierced cover of a drain.

The smell from above was almost unbearable.

Revenants.

Lydia held her watch close to the lantern and saw that it was just before eight. The sun had set some forty-five minutes before. The Master of Prague had told her the revenants were awake and moving about well before full dark: some vampires were astir that early also, Don Simon among them, though they could not venture out into the deadly sunlight. Her heart pounding so that she felt nearly sick, she listened, but heard no sound.

Palfrey moved her gently aside, slipping up the lantern-slide the tiniest crack, mounted the ladder and shifted the cover aside. Nothing attacked him, and the next moment he climbed through, and lowered one hand down to her.

The room above had been a chapel; it was a storeroom now. Above the tops of crates (*Lait en poudre* and *Legumes sec*) the walls showed whitewash. To the right an archway had been barred across, and the lantern-gleam flashed on silver. Shapes stirred beyond. Chains clinked; Lydia saw the flash of reflective eyes. She heard Palfrey gasp and read the shock on his face, but gripped his wrist, bringing him back to himself. Touched her own lips. *Not one sound …*

One of them, she thought, *is poor Captain Rhinehardt's cousin, who was captured because he wouldn't leave his kinsman*. Brain gone, soul gone, as casually as students in a biology laboratory would pith a frog.

She wondered how she had ever considered Simon and his brothers and sisters in Undeath the worst monsters at large in Flanders.

And in making those judgments, will I become a monster, too?

She touched her companion's elbow, moved softly toward the chapel's shut door.

A door opened somewhere beyond, and footsteps retreated on a stone floor. Echoes implied a corridor …

'—tell her the equipment is ready,' said Lemoine's voice beyond the door. 'And make her understand that we could not set it up in any other place.'

'There's still a little light in the sky,' returned a woman's voice. The footfalls paused upon the words, then started again, and died away.

'You're a fool if you think this will help you,' said Don Simon Ysidro's voice.

Lydia shut the lantern-slide, opened the door a crack. There was indeed a short corridor beyond. Reflected light – the strong glare of electricity (*They must have a generator somewhere*) – flowed through a half-open door a few yards along, showing her the same ruinous medieval masonry, roughly plastered and whitewashed.

'Oh, I think that remains to be seen.' Dr Lemoine, standing in the doorway, turned and re-entered the room behind him as he spoke, a sort of keyed-up cheerfulness edging his voice. Lydia signed for Palfrey to follow, crept toward the lighted door.

'If the Undead could increase their power by killing the Undead, they would have been preying upon one another for thousands of years.' Don Simon's whispering tones held nothing but a kind of tired patience, like a mother pointing out to a child that no matter how much that child wanted to fly, those cardboard wings would not do the job. 'To drink the blood of another vampire only renders a vampire desperately and incurably sick—'

'Ah, but she's not going to drink your blood.' Something in the room ahead clinked softly, metal on metal. 'Only absorb your energies, at the instant of your death.'

‘The instant of my death,’ sighed Don Simon, ‘was in 1555.’

‘And how many deaths have you absorbed since then?’

Lydia felt Palfrey halt, threw a quick look back and saw his face, in the reflected glow, transformed with protesting shock. This transmuted to unbelieving horror as they looked around the jamb of the door, to the room beyond.

The laboratory was a small one. Lydia guessed that the straps that held Don Simon to a sort of steel gridiron at one end of the room must be plated inside with silver. Either that, or simple stress and exhaustion prevented him from using any illusion to conceal his true appearance: silk-white, skeletal. His own claws – his own fangs – were clearly visible from the doorway, as were the scars that ripped across his face and continued down onto his throat, to where the open neck of his shirt fell away from it, gouged by the Master of Constantinople six years ago, when Simon had saved her life.

Beneath the grid on which he lay were arranged cylinders of oxyacetylene gas, their valves linked together so that a single switch (so far as she could tell) would ignite them all.

Don Simon’s right arm was strapped close to his side; his left was extended to a small metal table – of the type Lydia was familiar with from the surgical tent – and likewise held by a strap at the wrist. The fingers of this hand Dr Lemoine grasped in his excitement, his voice almost trembling with eagerness. ‘Your death – their deaths – is what she needs. Not your blood.’ He nodded toward a couple of gleaming gallon jars on the floor, and a small array of scalpels on a nearby table. ‘We know that draining all the blood from your body wouldn’t kill you. But your death, your real death—’

‘Will gain you nothing. If alliance with the Lady Francesca is your goal, ’twill thwart you of it, for ’twill drive her mad—’

‘No,’ insisted Lemoine. ‘No, it will simply complete her transformation to the vampire state. Her power is incomplete, it has always been. Once we—’

At that point Palfrey produced his revolver and shot Dr Lemoine in the back.

Even equipped with a so-called silencer, the report was loud in the underground silence – Lydia wondered, as she strode into the little room, how many soldiers were in the crypts and if the weight of the earth and the tangle of the small rooms and chapels would stifle the sound. She’d already seen a small ring of keys on the table with the surgical equipment and snatched them up, Palfrey still standing in the doorway, as if hypnotized with shock, dismay, betrayal.

Good, at least he won’t turn on the oxyacetylene himself in a fit of heroism …

Would Jamie?

She didn't know.

'There is a guard in the hall above,' said Don Simon, as Lydia unlocked the straps. ''Twill take them a moment, but – *cagafuego*,' he added, as the revenants in the nearby chamber began to howl.

'Can they control rats?' She caught his arm as he rolled off the gridiron, turned toward the door, which was still blocked by Palfrey, staring at him as if he could not believe what he saw.

Don Simon's wrists and forehead, Lydia noted automatically, were welted and bleeding where the straps had touched – a glance confirmed that, yes, the leather was sewn inside with silver plates.

'You knew.' Palfrey's revolver pointed at both of them, perfectly steady though his whole body was trembling with shock. 'Mrs Asher, you … you *knew* …' The blue eyes turned pleadingly to Don Simon: pleading, anger, disbelief. 'What *are* you?'

Boots clattered on the stair, a man's voice yelled, 'Colonel Lemoine—?'

And against the wall where he had collapsed, Lemoine raised himself to one elbow, blood seeping across the left shoulder of his lab coat. 'Spies!' he gasped. 'Germans!'

Palfrey reacted automatically, ducking back to the door and firing into the passage; Don Simon grabbed Lydia's arm, as she would have taken the moment to dodge past him. A gunshot in the passageway, unmuffled by a silencer, it rang like the crack of doom, and Palfrey buckled and collapsed. There was another unsilenced shot and Lemoine groped his own sidearm from its holster; Don Simon dragged Lydia out the door, stooped to snatch up Palfrey's revolver and fire another shot at the guard – who lay, Lydia now saw, a dozen feet away in a spreading pool of blood.

'Dressing,' Don Simon ordered, ripping open Palfrey's tunic. Lydia whipped her clasp knife from her pocket and cut a four-inch strip from the hem of her skirt (*I couldn't have done THAT if I'd been wearing trousers!*). The vampire tore the tough linen into two pieces as if it had been paper, wadded up the larger piece over the bleeding hole in the young captain's chest and used the shorter to bind it into place, with shouting and the thunder of feet sounding somewhere in the darkness of the stair. 'Stay close.'

'*I have a constitutional dislike of losing those who serve me*,' he had said to her once, and with a single swift movement scooped the taller man up over his shoulder as he rose. Lydia picked up Palfrey's revolver, reached back into the laboratory behind her to switch off the electric light there – Lemoine was on his feet, stumbling towards the door. She heard him crash into something as she caught Don Simon's hand in her own free one. In pitch darkness she

followed the vampire at a run down the uneven corridor back to the chapel-cum-storeroom, while the guards shouted and bumbled in the stair.

She felt rather than saw when they passed through the door into the chapel, and heard the revenants howling and baying in their cell, and the clash of their chains. (*Do they chain them to keep them from eating one another?*) Now and then one of them yelled a German word. Iron scraped – the cover of the drain. She groped for the staples on the wall, dropped down into the darkness, and the ice-cold fingers closed around hers again.

'Thank you, Mistress. She'll be in the hunt—'

No need to ask who 'she' was.

'We've a motorcar on the other side of the ridge, up the lane about two miles from the chapel with the lilacs. Did you try that way in first?'

'I guessed 'twould have been a target for artillery.' They were striding along the uneven passageway, Lydia stumbling where the floor dipped, cold, smelly water freezing her feet where the way was flooded. 'Is there a rope?'

'Only near the top. There was nothing to tie it to.'

The vampire swore again. 'Mine I left in the farmhouse, rather than have any man find it hanging down the well. 'Twill be but minutes to fetch it—'

Lydia thought of trying to leap from the threshold of the little doorway in the well's side, up to the first broken stub of iron, and shuddered. Even hanging onto the vampire's neck or shoulders had only to be thought of, to be discarded – vampires didn't weigh much, but she knew the double weight would crumble the rusted remains of the metal. 'All right. How badly is Captain Palfrey hurt?'

'*'Tis not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church door,*' the vampire quoted grimly. 'Can I but bring him to help, 'twill be well.'

Lydia shivered, recalling the young man's horrified face. *You knew* …

She said no more, but kept hold of the vampire's hand, and in time smelled the contaminated water of the well ahead of them, and the wet pong of moss on its stones. She listened desperately to the silence behind them, trying to determine if she could hear footsteps or not. And wondered whether anyone there would be smart enough to deduce that they'd have to escape via the well, and be waiting for them at the top.

Or didn't they know about the well?

And did Simon shut the drain-cover in the chapel—?

He stopped, and she felt him put Palfrey down. Holding Lydia's hand, he signed her to kneel, then led her, feeling the floor, to the edge of the doorway, to show her where it lay. Then he kissed her hand and released it, and she felt the sleeve of his shirt brush her cheek as he stood. There was the faintest whisper of scratching as he jumped – she was glad there was no light, for she

didn’t even like to picture it – and, presumably, seized the broken nubbins of iron above and to the right of the doorway, for she didn’t hear a splash. A moment later the faint pitter of dislodged stone fragments falling into the water.

She crawled back to Palfrey, took his hand. It was cold with shock. She put the back of her wrist against his lips, and felt the warm thread of breath. His pulse, when she felt it a moment later, was fast and thready: *He HAS to be got to help …*

‘*You knew,*’ he had said.

And how will I explain to him that vampires can bend and ensorcel human perceptions? Particularly the very old, very skilled vampires like Simon? How will I explain – how will I make him believe – that all those times he thinks he met Simon by daylight, all those ‘impressions’ he had of reading mention of him in his father’s letters – were only thoughts implanted in his dreams?

EVERYTHING – resigning from the Guards, and coming here to France, and leaving poor Miss Bellingham – EVERYTHING was based upon a lie. Everything he undertook was only because Don Simon needed someone to work for him in the daylight hours.

Her hand tightened involuntarily on Palfrey’s, and – a little to her surprise – she felt the pressure feebly returned.

She listened into the darkness of the tunnel behind them, seeking again for the rattle of soldiers’ boots, the creak of belt leather. *How much do the guards know? How many of them are there? And do THEY know the kind of thing Lemoine is up to, with his enslavement of German prisoners who are stripped of their own minds?*

Do they know how deadly it is to come into any contact with these things that might result in blood transfer? Do they—?

Something brushed her face.

She realized her thoughts had been wandering an instant before she smelled blood and cold hands seized her around the waist and throat.

A woman screamed, cursed, in the blackness beside her – silver burning a vampire’s hands …

Lydia tried to wrench free and fell over Palfrey’s body, cried out in pain as those steel hands grabbed her again, around the waist and by the hair, this time, and a woman’s voice hissed in her ear, ‘*Rogneux puteresse*!’

She was dragged away into the tunnel’s reeking darkness.

SEVENTEEN

Asher knew the place when Millward described it, a vast zone of waste ground beyond London's East End, where drab dockside merged with marshes, gorse and woodland. Rough land blotched around its edges by turpentine works, phosphate plants, varnish factories and sewer outfalls, before one came to the market gardens of Stratford and West Ham. Brown with factory waste, the River Lea and assorted creeks and cuts wound their way toward the Thames, and the bodies of vagrants and outcasts turned up periodically in the dirty margins of those streams, unmourned and not much regarded by the Metropolitan Police.

'There's a pub about two hundred yards from where Carpenter's Road ends in the marsh,' said Millward. They had retreated to the Reading Room's vestibule, with its garish recruiting posters, and the intermittent comings and goings of scholars, journalists, students and cranks. 'A stone's throw from the waterworks reservoir …'

'The Blind King.' Asher saw the grimy red-brick box in his mind: nailed-up shutters, padlocked door. The ground was marshy but the steps up to the door, and the narrow window slits at ground level, told him there was a cellar of sorts beneath it. 'It's been shut up for years.'

'Well, the police found a body near the outfall embankment Tuesday morning. Donnie and I went out there—' Millward nodded back toward the Reading Room – 'when we heard about the state in which it was found. A man we met there spoke of some boys playing along the City Mill Creek and in the marshes finding rats … You said these things can control rats? Dozens of them, torn to pieces and partially eaten, they said, lying all of a … all of a heap, as if they'd been dumped from a basket. He said it wasn't dogs.'

The vampire-hunter's silver-shot brows tugged together, oblivious to a tweed-clothed woman who was trying to get past him with her arms full of notebooks. Millward always planted himself in the center of any room.

'He said he'd seen rats after a ratting, and it was nothing like. Nothing like anything he'd seen. And a man who lives in Turnpike Row said he'd seen a thing, twice, in the fog, late at night, a thing like what you described.'

Asher spread out his ordnance map against the wall and located the Blind King, and then Turnpike Row, City Mill Creek and the embankment of the outfall. His recollection of that end of Hackney Marsh included no other buildings nearby isolated enough to permit concealing any creature that size in a cellar.

'Good man.' He folded his map, gripped the former scholar's shoulder. 'It sounds as if one of them's being kept there and is feeding itself on rats. The other may be lurking near. Any sense that anyone else thinks it might be the Blind King?'

Millward considered the matter, and Asher guessed he had pursued enquiries no further. Guessed that with his instinctive upper-class reticence, it hadn't even occurred to Millward to go down to the nearest pub on Carpenter's Road – the Dolphin – and further his researches. But he only shook his head, and didn't – as many people did when faced with such a question – elaborate or surmise: 'I wouldn't know, no.'

'Good man,' Asher said again. 'I'll go have a look at the place this afternoon.'

'Will you need help?'

'Probably later, yes, thank you. At the moment I think one man will be less obvious than two.' And particularly, Asher mused as he listened and mentally sorted through the rest of Millward's researches and newspaper cuttings from the past five days, if one of those two was as striking in appearance as the handsome raven-and-silver vampire-hunter. Nor did Millward possess the professional spy's quality of what Asher mentally termed *unvisibility*: the trick of blending into a crowd, of making himself look like nobody of importance. All his colleagues in the Department had had it, whether they were dressed as dons or coal-heavers. Pritchard Crowell, he recalled, could 'doze off' so convincingly that village chiefs of police had been known to interview local informers in his presence, and never be able to give a description of 'that fellow in the corner' when the informers (or in one case the village chief of police) later turned up dead.

It was – Asher reflected, as the suffocatingly overcrowded bus clattered its way out to Hackney that afternoon – one of his few reservations about Doyle's Sherlock Holmes tales: the fact that Holmes, though repeatedly touted as a master of disguise, was also described in terms of being a man of distinctive appearance.

But then, there was a streak of actor in many of the best agents, himself, he suspected, included. He stepped from the bus at Old Ford Road, glad of the stick that – with the flour in his hair and mustache, the long, grizzled side-whiskers that formed part of his little disguise kit, and a pair of steel-rimmed

spectacles – contributed to the addition of twenty years to his age. And indeed he felt like a man in his sixties, as he hobbled his careful way across the Five Bells Bridge and then along the railroad right-of-way through that grubby world of empty fields and straggly market allotments. The hot rawness in his chest and the swiftness with which fatigue descended on him were whispered reminders of the previous week's fever. *Don't mess about with this, Jimmy!* Hoggett had insisted, the last time – just after Christmas, it had been – that Asher had been felled by low-grade fever, crippling fatigue and paroxysms of coughing. *Once you've had pneumonia it lingers in your body for years …*

Like the infection that had been devouring poor Bert Mayo in that tiny back room on Brabazon Street: once contracted, there was nothing that could be done. He was, he knew, lucky.

The most pneumonia would do was kill him.

He reached the Dolphin public house at about three. It was the dead hour in business, before all the local mills and factories let out. The Dolphin was of the old style of public houses, literally a house, with beer and ale served in the front parlor and more private quarters in the back. The place was empty when Asher reached it and he presented himself as a Liverpudlian on the tramp, looking for some kind of easy work, having had pneumonia in the first days of the fighting. The landlady, with a husband and one son dead and another son still at the Front, was sympathetic, and Asher's offer to 'help with the washing-up' to pay for a second glass of beer and a sandwich earned him a full account of the two mysterious heaps of dead rats (one Sunday and the next only yesterday), and the condition of the vagrant's body found in the Lea Tuesday morning.

'Myself, I think it was an accident at the railway workshops, or the mills up past Bully Fen,' Mrs Farnum insisted, dipping hot water from the copper on the stove (the interview had moved into the kitchen) and spreading towels on all but a corner of the kitchen table. 'They're short of men there to work and they push them to all hours of the night – no, Mr Pritchard, I won't have you lugging great buckets of water about, I know how that pneumonia sticks to a man's bones!' (*I should introduce you to Hoggett …*) 'You just stand here by the sink and do the washing and I'll bring the glasses up to you … My father worked in the Houldsworth Mill in Reddish and had his hand taken off and all the flesh skinned off his arm – clear down to the bone! – by the belt on a ring frame, and the company claimed he was drunk and it was his own fault, but when you've worked fifteen hours – let alone where you'd even get the liquor to get drunk on – you're that tired, as the men are, working now, those that're left—'

But by the sound of it, once Asher had sifted through the long circumlocutions of her tale, the man had not been ripped up by machinery, but by a beast.

‘Looked like poor Dandy did, when that brute mastiff of Ted Clavering’s tore him up last Michaelmas two years …’

A beast, he thought grimly, which had once been a man.

The sightings in the fog by Mr Sawyer of Turnpike Row were both confirmed as well, and both between the so-called Channel Sea River (actually a drainage creek) and the equally narrow Waterworks River – both within a few hundred yards of the Blind King, Asher estimated – and had been accompanied by a smell. ‘I think that was the worst of it, you know,’ said the Widow Farnum. ‘Evil, that smell: fishy, and greasy, and ratty – not like nothing I’ve smelled before …’

‘*You’ve* smelled?’

She nodded with a grimace. ‘Near the old boarded-up pub out past the end of Carpenter’s Road. He’s lurkin’ around there, whoever he is – You can’t get anybody here on the street, nowadays, to walk out on the marsh at night. Even them as works in the phosphate plant, they’ll walk in groups back home …’

In the late afternoon’s harsh chill Asher walked out along Carpenter’s Road itself, where it petered out into the Stratford Marsh, and hobbled as slowly as he dared along the railway embankment as if following the Great Eastern line northwest to the cluster of factories in Hackney Wick. *Always look as if you’ve got good reason to be where you are* had been the first thing he’d learned when working in the Department, and it was a caution he’d never forgotten. And the Blind King – sitting like a dropped brick in the midst of those brown wastes of clay and grass, now thinly filmed with the first of spring green – was the choice of a professional. You couldn’t get near it without being seen. But from the railway embankment, Asher identified the path leading to it which continued the roadbed of Carpenter’s Road, and noted that the straggly assortment of sheds around the original pub seemed to have been put into some kind of order. They all had doors, and the grass around the walls of the pub itself looked beaten-down, as if there’d been activity there in the two weeks since Bert Mayo had been dragged away from the upstairs room on Brabazon Street.

Wind swept over the marshes, smelling of the estuary. A gull cried, rocking on black-tipped wings. Asher kept moving stolidly, leaning on his stick and prickling with the sensation of being watched – the awareness that the red-brick house wasn’t empty. The feeling pursued him, all the long trudge back to Hackney, and on his bus ride home.

The negotiation with Colonel Stewart that evening was a long one, but Asher emerged from it at last with a temporary commission as Major, orders to report to General Finch in Flanders, an ambiguously-worded mandate to ‘undertake such independent investigations as will further the war effort, at his own sole discretion’, and a place on the Channel steamer *Eleanor* on the fifteenth. Stewart had wanted him to depart on Monday, but there remained the problem of the Blind King, and the thing that dwelt beneath it.

For that, Asher guessed, he was going to need Grippen’s help.

He took a circuitous route back to Warwick Place, dropping out of the last bus on Holland Walk amid a beery crowd of pub-goers and walking through the deserted, blacked-out, misty streets to the mews that served all the houses on that block. Since that afternoon on Stratford Marsh he had been plagued with the uneasy sense that Mr Mackintosh had picked up his trail again, though he had never been able to form a clear proof that this was or wasn’t so. It was probably this suspicion that saved him. As he counted doorways with his left hand he listened behind him and before him, mind sorting every drip and whisper of the night, and something made him turn even as a cosh cracked a terrific blow on his shoulder. The next second a man’s weight slammed him to the pavement and he barely got his hand up in time to catch a garrote slipped around his neck. It cut into his fingers as his attacker dragged it tight, cutting off Asher’s breath as he twisted to get some kind of purchase against his assailant.

The man was an expert, grinding him into the pavement with elbows and knees as the silk line tightened. His fingers under the noose distributed the strain but didn’t alleviate the pressure; his ears were ringing and he was losing consciousness when he felt the man’s grip slack suddenly, greater weight crushing him at the same moment he gasped, and heard a man’s hoarse voice behind him curse.

Only half-conscious, he felt rather than heard light footfalls fleeing, and his second gasp filled his nostrils with the stink of old blood and dirty clothing as he heard Grippen snarl, ‘Dogs spit your arse, whoreson!’ The Master of London continued in that vein for some minutes, using terms that even Asher – a trained etymologist – had never heard, while Asher lay face-down on the wet bricks, trying to breathe through a bruised throat and wishing he had a notebook and pencil.

At length he felt Grippen’s coat-skirt brush his hand and the vampire turned him roughly over. ‘Live you?’

Asher started to reply, but could only cough, and the vampire dragged him to his feet.

‘’Twas the suck-arse clot that followed you to the park,’ said Grippen. ‘Hogs chew his lights— argh! Damn!’

Asher lit a match (*To hell with the blackout*) and saw, to his startled alarm, the whole side of Grippen’s face was blistered, one eye welted almost shut and both blood and pus oozing from the skin. ‘What the—?’

‘The whoreson had silver – a chain of it wrapped round his fingers, or plated onto the back of a glove, devil burn him! Worms eat his—’

‘He had it ready?’ Asher offered him a clean handkerchief.

‘He was too goddam occupied wi’ skraggin’ you, wasn’t he, to go diggin’ about for it in his pockets!’

‘In other words,’ said Asher, ‘he knew he might be dealing with a vampire?’

Grippen was silent for a moment, daubing his injuries and thinking that over. Then he said, ‘’Od’s cock.’

Asher said, ‘Yes,’ quite softly, with the sense of things coming together in his mind: glimpses, like the fleeting sense of a familiar outline half-seen from the corner of his eye, that slowly coalesced into a half-recognized form.

‘Will you come with me?’ he added after a moment. ‘I’ve found the revenants – and something tells me they’ll be moved elsewhere by tomorrow, and all this looking will have to start again. I think it’s best we deal with them – and the man who’s seeking them – tonight.’

The protesting squawk of chickens rattled in the misty night. A man cursed: Asher placed his vowels within ten miles of Cork.

Teague.

After a moment the faintest creak from the dark ahead of him spoke of a shed door opening. He hoped to Heaven that Grippen was listening behind them, around them, in the salt-smelling blackness for the squishy tread of feet, sniffing for the fishy, rat-piss foulness of their quarry. But like the vampire, he knew that the Others could, upon occasion, conceal their stink and their sound and their presence, until they were on top of their prey.

In a voice that living ears wouldn’t have picked up, even had the listener stood – as Grippen stood now – shoulder-to-shoulder with him at the foot of the railway embankment, Asher breathed, ‘How many in the house?’

And that bass rumble softer than a gnat’s whine murmured back, ‘Four above stairs. If the thing’s in the cellar no man’ll be down with him. I wouldn’t be. I smell smoke an’ beer.’

Enough thready moonlight pierced the mists to show Asher the vampire’s turned head, and the distant, grimy mustard seed of lamplight leaked from the

house’s shutters caught a reflection in his half-shut eyes. Asher knew what he was doing.

Two years ago, in the spring of 1913, Grippen had stood thus in the alleyway behind Asher’s own house on Holyrood Street in Oxford, and had put the household to sleep, so that he could walk in and steal Asher’s child. Even retrieving Miranda, safe and unharmed, had not shaken Asher’s resolve, taken at that time, that he would kill them: Grippen, Don Simon, the London nest. Every soul of the cursed Undead who crossed his path.

And here he was at Grippen’s side, watching him do the thing that the old vampires, the skilled vampires, the vampires who had absorbed thousands of lives over hundreds of years, could do.

He heard the man Teague, in the shed, mutter, ‘Jaysus …’ in a voice thick with sleep. Then long silence, broken, in time, by the soft, slithering bump of his body sliding to the floor from whatever bench or box he’d sat down on when drowsiness overcame him. The chickens continued to squawk frantically, desperately, and on the still air Asher caught the faintest whiff of blood.

Grippen said, ‘He’s all yours, Jimmy.’ Taking Asher by the elbow, the vampire led him toward the shed, not to risk even the faintest flicker of lantern-light on the marsh until they were within the shed itself. As they approached it, Grippen rumbled, ‘You given further thought to my offer?’

To become vampire.

To acquire just precisely those qualities that would be most useful to a spy: the mental power over other men’s perceptions, the ability to turn their eyes aside, to cause them to think you looked like someone who belonged where they glimpsed you. In time, to bend their dreams so that they were sure they’d met you before and that you were trustworthy.

To become a thing of illusion and shadow, apart from the world and its pain.

Abilities and qualities he had worked for years to acquire. He had sought to perfect them in himself, having seen them in Pritchard Crowell. ‘I’ve given it thought, yes.’

He edged up the slide on the lantern as they entered the shed, showing two chickens, tied by their feet at the back. Blood made dark splotches on their white feathers. To Undead senses, the smell would permeate the fog for miles. The beam of his light traced wires from their bound legs up the corners of the rear wall and across the rafters of the small loft that covered half the shed’s width, to a mechanism that would drop a steel grille, like a portcullis, down over the door. He could see where coins had been welded onto the steel, enough silver to burn the hands of a vampire – or a revenant.

Beside an old milking stool at one side of the shed the man Teague lay: Asher recognized him from the confused struggle in Brabazon Street. A heavy pug chin and a broken nose, the tight, nearly lipless mouth sagging open like a child's in stuporous sleep.

Asher climbed to the loft and found rope there. Rope, and a dozen long crates labeled Ludwig-Loewe, one of the largest arms manufacturers in Berlin.

Grippen stood just outside the shed door, barely more than a shadow. Asher guessed that if the grille had fallen and trapped them both inside the rickety roof wouldn't have held out against the vampire's strength. But wariness was the core of the vampire's soul – they understood themselves to be both predator and prey.

He dragged Teague to one of the supports that held up the loft, tied his hands together and then sat him up against the beam and tied him to it, in such a way that he could cut him free, and drag him from the shed, without loosing his bonds. He roped his ankles together as well – the man didn't stir – then crossed to the terrible shadow by the door. 'Anything?'

'Narh. But you don't always hear 'em. Or smell 'em, much as they stink.'

Nerves prickling with watchfulness, Asher shut the lantern, slung the remainder of the rope over his shoulder, and followed Grippen to the shut-up pub itself. Unlike the Dolphin, the Blind King had been purpose-built as a pub, with a large taproom facing the road and kitchen, storeroom and private parlor behind. The four men dead asleep in the parlor, with drinks before them on the table and cigars smoldering in a cracked Queensware dish, were those who'd helped drag poor Bert Mayo from his daughter's house on Brabazon Street – it had for years been part of Asher's business to remember even faces glimpsed once and under trying circumstances.

Even through the dusty fetor of a building shut up for decades, and the heavy odor of cigar smoke, the smell of the revenant stained the air. Asher found the cellar door in the kitchen, re-enforced with makeshift metal, and triple-locked. His ear to its panels, he could hear a kind of groaning bleat down below.

Not just 'a revenant', he thought. *Not just 'one of those things'*. A man named Bert Mayo, whose daughter loved him enough to take care of him and shelter him though what was happening to him terrified her.

Every one of the revenants started out human.

As did, he reminded himself, every one of the vampires.

Grippen came in and listened, too, then looked around the kitchen by the light of Asher's lantern, and grunted. 'Whoreson cullions.' He nodded toward the crates stacked around the walls, more long boxes of rifles, and smaller

metal containers of ammunition, likewise bearing the mark of German manufacture. ‘The Papists, is it, taking the chance of this greater war to rise up ’gainst the King?’

‘It could actually be either side,’ returned Asher quietly. ‘Either those who seek to free Ireland from English domination, or those who don’t want to be ruled by a Catholic majority. Who want Ireland to continue as a part of a greater Empire. And are willing to stamp out anything they consider rebellion.’

‘I’ve no quarrel wi’ killin’ Papists.’ Grippen’s fangs glinted in the shadows, and he shrugged. ‘Either way ’tis naught to me. But they’re fools an’ worse than fools if they think making revenants’ll gain ’em anything. As well loose a cage full of wolves and tigers onto a battlefield. They’ll kill your enemy, sure, but devour as many of your own in doin’ it.’

‘They think they have someone who can control them,’ said Asher. ‘For the sake of humanity I hope they’re wrong. Does the name Francesca Gheric mean anything to you?’

‘The White Lady?’ The piggy dark eyes narrowed. ‘What of her? A troublemaker in every city she’s dwelt in, I hear tell, but when all’s said she’s proved no great threat to any.’

They passed through the taproom on their way out, the four men lying, bound hand and foot by Grippen, on the floor. ‘When I give the word,’ Asher added, ‘get these men out of here. Is the revenant in the cellar chained?’ He found he couldn’t use Bert Mayo’s name.

‘Aye.’

He couldn’t say, *Good*, either, knowing that a bullet wouldn’t kill the thing that that poor old Irish fence had become. That the only way out for him – and for any future victim of his insane hunger – was through fire. Fire, or the burning corrosion of the sun.

All he could say was, ‘Let’s do what we have to do, then.’

EIGHTEEN

Teague was awake when Asher and Grippen returned to the shed. The chickens still chattered and clucked, though softer, resigning themselves – as animals do – stoically to their pain. The Irishman, Asher noticed, hadn't cried out, and it interested him that the man had enough on his conscience to keep him quiet even in a pitch-black shed on the Hackney Marshes with a revenant somewhere out in the darkness …

And the smell of fresh blood close by.

Asher unhooded the lantern. 'So is this something you're being paid for, or were you the ones taking delivery on that first package from France when it got away in London?'

Teague spit at him. Asher sidestepped the wad.

'We know about that French doctor trying to cook these things up for their army, and it doesn't really make a lot of difference whether it was the French who sent that poor Fritzy over here and he went astray, or whether one of your people lifted him from them, either on-site in France or on the way. What I need to know is, who are you working for, and do they – or do the French – have some way of controlling these things?'

'Sod you.'

'I see you mistake me for someone in the Department.' Asher slipped one of his knives from his boot, set the lantern down and slashed the buttons from Teague's shirt, then ripped the garment back over his shoulders. With precise care he cut a large, shallow X in the Irishman's chest, only deep enough to bleed. Copiously.

Teague's eyes flared in horror. 'Damn it, you can't …'

'I told you I'm not in the Department.' Asher wiped the blade on Teague's shirt and replaced it in his boot. 'Even if I were, I suspect you underestimate them. I think the smell of that'll carry more than those poor chickens.'

He stepped back, and watched his prisoner thrash in a violent effort to twist free of the ropes. The man didn't curse, as he would have, Asher thought, had he been less utterly terrified.

At length Asher said, 'That's not going to help you, and it is wasting your time. I think you know none of your men is in any state to help you and I

think you know what's going to happen when that revenant gets here. Even if you do manage to break free and get away during its attack, I think you know what happens to those whose blood gets mixed with Fritzy's. So why don't you—'

He turned his head sharply as, from the door, Grippen said, 'It's out there.'

'You're lying—' Teague's voice was hoarse with shock. 'I been setting chickens out here three nights now—'

Asher retreated a step or two up the ladder to the loft, his eyes warily on the door.

'I don't know anythin'—'

'Too bad.'

'I swear it!'

Asher said nothing. He'd been perfectly prepared to have Grippen impersonate the revenant – the night was coal-sack dark and the vampire perfectly capable of imitating the random, bleating groans that had come from the cellar – but he knew this wasn't the case.

Damn it, he'd better not hold out …

He dropped from the ladder, walked to the door to listen, to breathe the damp air— '*Don't*!' Teague screamed, clearly thinking he was going to go through the door and keep on going.

Outside in the blackness Asher neither heard nor scented a thing. But the whole night seemed to whisper of it.

He turned back, his face a calm blank.

'They got one they say'll be able to command 'em—'

'Name?'

'I dunno. Some woman.'

'*Would* or *does* command them?'

'I dunno! She said *would be, will be* …'

'Who said?'

'Meagher. Oonah Meagher. Calls herself Tuathla. Let me out of here, for the Lord's sake—'

'I thought finding these things was the thing you most wanted in the world, Teague. Bringing them over to England, so they could walk about—'

'For the love of God, man, it's business! Meagher and her friends, they heard talk of a risin' against John Bull, while England's army's away in France an' half the Ulster volunteers with 'em! Meagher works over there for this Frenchie, says he's come up wi' a scheme to make soldiers out o' nuttin', men who'll walk straight into machine-gun fire an' won't care. I dunno the whole of it, they just hired me an' my boys to meet 'em on the Calais beach in a motor launch: two hard Armagh lads an' a Fritzy that just huddled under a

blanket an’ shivered. We put ’em up in a safe house in Brunswick Road an’ that’s where he broke out from …’

‘Names of the friends?’

‘For God’s sake—!’

He could still smell nothing, hear nothing, but backed from the doorway toward the ladder. Grippen was nowhere to be seen, and Asher knew better than to think that the master vampire would tackle a revenant. Keeping his voice expressionless, he replied, ‘No. For the sake of the men – and women – who won’t be either killed by these things or transformed into them; who won’t have to be killed like murrain cattle to keep this plague from spreading. For the sake of this country – of the world, if you will – if these things start roving at large. And for your own, of course.’

‘Jimmy Darcie, Nan Sloan, Joey Strahan …’ He almost babbled the names. ‘Uh— Jerry Dwyer … Ned Mulready …’

‘Any of them hurt when the thing broke out?’

‘No! ’Twas down the cellar, an’ broke a window. I’m to tell ’em when we catch it – then we heard it got Bert … Please, man, please, what d’you want me to say? If it’s comin’—’

Asher heard – or thought he heard – the soft crunch of a step on the wet gravel outside, and his heart turned sick with shock. ‘Any more of them come over, or just the one?’

‘Just the one – dear God—!’

‘Who else is in on this?’

‘Nobody— Just us! Meagher, an’ Joey—’

‘Safe house, bunch of hard lads,’ mused Asher. ‘That’s a lot of money invested, for just a couple of rebels.’

‘Nobody else knows!’ Teague screamed the words. ‘Not a livin’ soul, I swear it—’

Asher tested the ladder that led up into the loft, made sure that it wasn’t attached and could be pushed down easily. He pulled the knife from his boot again and mounted a step or two, to check whether the cord that would release the trap on the shed door could be easily cut. It could. He mounted another step and Teague shrieked, ‘Butler, a chap named Butler! He paid for it all! Sets up deliveries of the guns wi’ the Germans! We told ’em we had a way to get fighters is all! He gave Jimmy Darcie a hundred pounds and paid us besides! I swear that’s all! I swear it!’

Asher sprang down from the ladder, bent to cut the cord that held Teague to the beam, and in that instant was surrounded by the stink of the revenant: blood, rats, urine, filth. He swung around, aghast to see that it was inside the

shed with them, coming at them in the dim glow of the dark lantern, *How could I not have seen it? Not have heard it …?*

With a hideous crash the steel-and-silver grille dropped over the shed door, but the revenant didn't slow its rush by a second. Asher made to dive to cut the rope on Teague's feet, but like a nightmare darkness surrounded him, and he had a vague awareness of being dragged literally off his feet. The next second, it seemed, he fell with a crash on the plank flooring of the loft and by the lamplight reflected from below saw Grippen hurl the ladder down into the shed beneath them.

Teague screamed.

'You've more bollocks than brains,' snapped Grippen, and ripped open the lid of one of the crates. 'Could have got yoursel' killed, an' who knows how many of these godless things yet to deal with.' As Asher had guessed, the crate was full of rifles, brand new and still thick with factory grease. The vampire pulled one out and used it to smash a hole in the flimsy wood of the roof between the rafters. 'Don't bother,' he added, as Asher moved toward the edge of the loft. 'The man's dead.'

Teague was still screaming, but Asher knew what the vampire meant.

Grippen sprang lightly up to the hole and pulled himself through it, reached down – brutal, strong hands in their black gloves – to draw Asher up after him, then slid down the roof to the edge and dropped off, a bare eight feet to the ground. Asher followed, and walked with him to the boarded-up pub, where, more by touch than anything else – for no gas was laid on in the building and Asher guessed, now, that it would be deadly dangerous to light a lamp – they dragged Teague's compatriots out and into one of the other sheds.

'There's paraffin in the kitchen,' said Asher.

'Stay here, then,' growled the vampire. 'I'll make sure the place is good an' doused – an' you look like hell.' He shoved Asher down onto something – it felt like a barrel – in the smaller shed, and turned back, a dim shape of black in the blackness, toward the pub.

Realizing that he was, in fact, almost too tired to stand, Asher caught the dirty wool sleeve of his coat. 'Did you ever hear that thing coming?'

'Nary a peep.'

'Did you hear anyone else? See anyone?'

The vampire turned back, stood over him, a dark presence more sensed than seen. 'There's someone out there, aye,' he said. 'One of these Irish or one of your lot, I don't know. Followin' old Hungry Tom in there—' he jerked his head toward the larger shed – 'I'm guessin'.'

'The Department knew one of their subjects had been taken,' said Asher wearily. 'They had a man looking out for him, the moment he landed in

England. Trying to trace him – and trying to keep those who'd stolen him from recapturing him before they did.' He rubbed his throat, where the bruises of the garrote still smarted. 'By whatever means they could.'

The matter is in hand, Langham had smiled …

And somebody in Germany was doubtless saying the same thing to his superiors, and basking in anticipation of promotion.

He added, 'Thank you. That's twice tonight you've saved my life.'

'Huh.' The vampire set his hands on his hips. 'I ain't given up hope you'll come round to my way of thinkin', Asher. I need a man like you. And you're a natural for it. But I warn you now. I'll kill you mesel', ere I let that Papist whoreson Ysidro make you a fledgling of his.'

Grippen scattered paraffin over both the Blind King and the shed where the first revenant – Hungry Tom, Tom the Ogre, some poor nameless German soldier picked at random from among prisoners in a war he might never have wanted to have anything to do with – gouged and tore at Teague's body. Then Asher and the Master of London sat down to wait until it was almost sun-up, Asher to make sure that neither revenant would escape the flame into night's darkness, Grippen listening for 'our little pal' in the darkness, though Asher was, by this time, fairly certain of who it was out there. Certain, and a little disgusted with himself for not having guessed it sooner.

Shortly before the first whispers of daylight, Asher became aware that Grippen had gone, and tossed burning screws of paraffin-soaked newspaper through the broken windows of the pub, and the hole in the roof of the shed. Then he went back into the smaller shed, to inform Teague's henchmen that the police would be on their way. With the first stains of light, he discovered that the smaller shed also contained boxes of German rifles.

And that it now contained only two bound Irishmen, when he knew that there had been four, asleep around the table in the pub.

Grippen had brought them out to the shed in darkness.

Grippen, who'd had a severe burn from the silver wielded by Asher's attacker earlier in the night; a burn that vampires had only one way of healing.

He closed his eyes. Yes, the men had been smuggling guns from Germany to Ireland, a hanging offense in time of war. And yes, they'd been part of a plan for even greater horror: greater still, had the plan progressed to the point where Germans could get involved. And yes, they'd have killed him two weeks ago if he hadn't gone through that window and gotten away.

But they'd been prisoners. And bound.

And the house would burn over their bloodless bodies and no one – not the police, not Osric Millward and his hunters – would know how they died.

And Grippen wants me to become part of that world. Because I'd be a useful fledgling. A good vampire.

He walked away from the burning buildings, back toward the railway embankment. With the destruction of the two revenants he was fairly certain that he was now safe from further attack – Langham certainly wouldn't care about the fates of a couple of Irish rebels – but frizzling in any case with the sense of being watched as he went.

But if I'm right about who it is who's been watching me—

The thought snagged at his mind as he started the long trudge across the Marshes toward St Paul's Road, where the busses would begin running for the city.

—why doesn't Grippen try to recruit HIM?

NINETEEN

‘My dear Madame Asher!’ Lamplight bobbed on the stone of the walls. On the other side of the archway – filled in with bars which gleamed with tarnishing silver plate – the revenants muttered and jerked at their chains, their eyes catching the light. Lydia’s cell had been, she guessed, a burial chapel built off the long catacomb that had been adapted for the revenants. One archway – the one barred with silver – opened into it. Another, also barred, led back into the main round chapel that served as a storeroom.

When the Lady Francesca had dragged her back up out of the tunnel to the well and had thrown her in here, she’d left the cover off the tunnel. In the ten or fifteen minutes that Lydia had been in the cell, with only one of her pocket candles for light, she’d seen half a dozen rats emerge, either from the tunnel, or from the hall which led to Lemoine’s laboratory, and trot straight into the catacomb where the revenants were chained.

There they were torn to pieces, and devoured raw.

So thirteen revenants constitutes a community large enough to have a hive-mind capable of controlling rats.

Lydia was fascinated, despite her horror of the rats and her fear that the next person who entered the storeroom would throw her into the catacomb as well.

I am wearing silver but how long would I be able to stay awake even if three chains’ worth is enough to get them to back off?

Palfrey, bleeding to death back in the tunnel …

Unless Francesca went back and finished him?

Poor Palfrey—

Colonel Dr Jules Lemoine strode into the chapel, his left arm in a sling (Palfrey’s aim, Lydia now saw, left a great deal to be desired), pale in the light of the lantern he carried in his good hand. This he set down, and drew a key from his pocket.

‘What are you doing?’ Nurse Meagher appeared from the shadowy hallway at his heels. ‘You can’t mean to let her out, sir! She tried to kill you!’

‘Nonsense.’ Lemoine held up Lydia’s Webley. ‘This weapon hasn’t been fired. It was her companion – like her,’ he added gravely, ‘under the delusion

that the vampire we took was their friend.'

'She is the pale vampire's *mignonne*.' Lydia didn't see her enter, but Francesca Gheric now stood beside the chapel door.

Seen closer, and in the lantern-light that was marginally better than the shreddy moonlight of no man's land, she was indeed beautiful. But maybe that was only a vampire's illusion. Like Meagher, she was dressed as a nurse – *In case any of the guards sees her?*

Any Matron on the Front would tell her to put her hair up …

Facing the three of them, with the revenants stirring and growling on the far side of the silver bars, Lydia had to struggle to keep her breathing steady.

She clutched at the bars of the smaller archway that separated her from Lemoine, made her expression as earnest as if she were trying to convince her Nanna that she'd only been seeking a book of sermons in her father's library, and cried, 'He is indeed my friend, sir! He has long ago given up preying upon humankind, and has pledged his loyalty to the British crown!' *Which I'm sure was precisely what he told poor Palfrey …*

The colonel's gaze melted from sternness to pity. 'Madame, Madame, do you truly believe that?' and Lydia let her eyes fill with tears.

'Who told you about the passageway that you used?' Meagher walked up to the bars, planted herself at Lemoine's side.

'Colonel Simon.' Lydia took off her spectacles, wiped her eyes and tried to sound as if she were struggling against the inner suspicion that she had indeed been betrayed. 'He said the fate of Britain depends on his mission here—'

Meagher rolled her eyes impatiently. 'Of course that's what he told her! And probably his driver as well.'

Lydia reached timidly to clutch Lemoine's sleeve, and threw a glance of terror toward the darkness beyond the silver barrier. 'Colonel, what *are* those … those *things*? Captain Palfrey wouldn't tell me anything, only said things like, "Dark forces are at work …"'

'Why did he bring you?' demanded Meagher.

'He said he might need a second person to drive the motorcar, if he were injured.' She sobbed, and bit her lip in what she hoped was a touching display of wan and ignorant courage. 'I wanted to help—'

'It's all right.' Lemoine put a strong hand over hers. 'You've gotten mixed up in things that are no business of yours, Madame. Deeply secret things. And you *can* help.'

Meagher's blue eyes flared wide and she grabbed the edge of Lemoine's sling, dragged him from the bars to the far side of the little storeroom chapel. Francesca watched them for a moment with cynical cerulean eyes. *Probably*

telling him he can't trust me and that Don Simon's going to read my mind first thing, if they let me go …

Then the vampire turned her mocking gaze back to Lydia.

Lydia hastily looked away, and fumbled in her pocket for a handkerchief. But she felt the tug on her mind of cold power, power from outside herself. James had told her that picturing a door shutting, or a blank brick wall, worked, but she remembered also that both Antonio and the Master of Prague had described Francesca Gheric as overwhelmingly powerful – *Can she see through that brick wall?*

What will she see if she does?

And will thinking of it tip her off that I'm not as ignorant as I pretend?

Lydia called up images to her mind of what it would feel like to be swept into Simon's arms, passionately kissed (*What about those teeth? Never mind …*), overwhelmed by a torrent of ecstasy (*Was that Mr Stoker who'd said that? Or Mrs Radcliffe in* Romance of the Forest*? Or was that someone else …?*). Hoping for the best, she yielded meekly to that terrible cold grip on her will, and raised her eyes timidly to the vampire's. (*And I hope this works …*)

(*Oh, wait, if I were passionately in love with Don Simon why would I be wearing all this silver …?*)

Francesca's lip curled again at whatever she saw in Lydia's thoughts, and she put her hand through the bars to pat her cheek, patronizing as a duchess handing a farthing to an orphan while her friends are watching.

Lemoine jerked from his conversation with Meagher and reached the bars in a stride. 'You will not touch her!'

Francesca raised her brows – *YOU'RE saying this to ME?* – and the physician hurriedly collected himself.

'It's clear she's only this Colonel Simon's dupe,' he amended. 'She has nothing to do with either the Germans or the British government, or my own.' He turned back to Lydia. 'I'm very sorry, Madame,' he said, 'but you're going to have to stay here for a time. And I'm afraid you'll have to remain underground—'

Drat it, Simon won't be able to speak with me in my dreams—

'—since the men on guard in the compound know only as much as they need to know, to accomplish their duties.'

'I wouldn't say a word to anyone.' Lydia gazed up at him with brimming eyes. 'It's just that—' She glanced at the revenants in their long, niche-lined cell. 'Those things … And … And the rats—'

'The rats won't bother you.' Lemoine thought hard for a moment. 'I'll have you moved as soon as a place can be readied for you. You have nothing to fear, Madame. Our work here – our work with these … these men—' He

nodded toward the catacomb – ‘is nearing its conclusion. In a day or two I may ask you to help us—’

Meagher’s nostrils flared, like a horse about to kick.

‘We need trained personnel, and I can promise you, Madame Asher, that whatever this Colonel Simon told you, the work we’re doing here will indeed make the difference between victory over the Germans, and defeat.’

Behind her, Lydia heard one of the revenants speak, in a dazed mumble yet completely comprehensible: ‘*Wo bin ich? Welcher Ort ist das?*’

Where am I? What is this place?

Her heart clenched in rage and grief, *Dear God …*

‘*He could have escaped,*’ Rhinehardt had said of his cousin. ‘*Fled when the remainder of our unit did … but he would not let go of my hand …*’

Without waiting to hear what Lemoine had to say next, or plan her own strategy, she pulled away from him, stumbled to the farthest corner of the cell, curled up on the floor and wept as if her heart would break.

Lemoine put her in a storeroom off the laboratory, formerly the cell of some anchoress, Lydia assumed, since it had a judas window in the door. The bars of that little window had been wrapped in silver wire, and a hasp and padlock hastily screwed onto the door. Both, Lydia saw, were plated with silver.

‘I am truly sorry for the crude amenities, Madame,’ said Lemoine as he led her in, past boxes of laboratory glassware and light bulbs, spools of wire and packets of silver chain now stacked up in the hall. ‘Please understand that my hesitation to release you stems from the desperate importance of what we do here.’

There was a cot in the cell, an empty box for a table, a tin pitcher of water and a chamber pot behind a screen. When he’d locked her in and crossed the lab, Lydia heard Meagher say, ‘That’s all very well, Colonel, but the fact remains that thanks to that girl, we’ve lost the vampire. God only knows how long it’ll be before we trap another! That puts our work back two days, three days, maybe a week—’

What Lemoine replied Lydia didn’t hear, but after his footsteps had died away down the hall, Francesca’s voice said, very softly, ‘Don’t trouble yourself, my sugarplum. He’ll come back for her.’

It was a long time before Lydia could sleep. The electric bulb burned permanently in the laboratory: dragging the lightweight screen from the chamber pot to cover the judas in the door only dimmed the glare. For many hours (specifically, from 3:10 until 6:25 by her watch) she could think of little but poor Captain Palfrey, lying in the tunnel on the lip of the well in the

darkness: deluded, dying, dreaming perhaps of Don Simon's lies about aiding King and country. *I'll have to write to Aemilia Bellingham*, she thought at one point … *But say what? That he was chosen because he was stupid, and died because he tried to do his duty to a hoax?*

And what makes me think I'll live to see daylight again?

She wondered if Francesca had gone back through the tunnel to finish him, before Don Simon could return.

She wondered if the man who'd cried out in German – whether it was Gleb Rhinehardt or some other poor soldier – had done so because he actually had some dying flicker of his own mind left, or whether it had been merely a spasmodic firing of the nerves in the brain, the equivalent of the galvanic twitching of a frog's severed legs in the laboratory.

She wondered if Tuathla Meagher was planning to kill her the moment Lemoine's back was turned, and what would happen to her if Lemoine's gunshot wound – which seemed to be in his shoulder – turned septic.

Not as long as Francesca thinks she can lure Don Simon back here, using me as bait.

Cold comfort.

One thing Dr Lemoine was right about was that there were no rats. Presumably all were lured into the catacomb of the revenants – a frightful thought, considering how many rats swarmed every shell-crater and trench in no man's land.

'As you've seen, they're not mistreated in the least,' Lemoine told her, when he returned later in the day (10:15, by Lydia's watch) with a tin mess kit top holding a quarter-cup of bully beef, two rock-hard biscuits and a sloshy quantity of Maconochie, the ubiquitous tinned stew of the field kitchens. 'Nor are the other German subjects we're still keeping above ground. Those who have been—' he seemed to hesitate over a euphemism for *infected* '—*converted* are fed quite well, but half of them refuse real food and kill and eat rats instead.' (Lydia felt inclined to take issue at his definition of Maconochie as 'real food', but didn't.) He had locked the door of the laboratory behind him, and opened that of Lydia's cell, to allow her to eat at one of the laboratory tables. He had gained some of his color back, and the slight difference of his tone told her he'd injected a little morphia for the pain.

'They're only kept chained because I'm afraid they'll attack one another.'

'But what *are* they?' asked Lydia again, guessing that such a question – whose answer she already knew – would not only add to the impression of ignorant harmlessness she was trying to give, but tell her how many people above Lemoine in the French Army and government were in on the secret.

??? home side screening, Jamie had written.

So at least someone in the British government might know of this hideous scheme as well.

And probably – like Colonel Lemoine – thought it was going to be perfectly safe.

And that it was perfectly acceptable to mind-strip, enslave and kill German soldiers for the purpose. They had, after all, asked for it.

She widened her eyes and kept her mouth shut. Men, she had learned back in her days as a debutante, loved to explain things to women. And Lemoine especially wanted to make sure she understood how right he – and the French Army – was in undertaking this terrible project.

'Hundreds of thousands of men have died.' Lemoine leaned across the corner of the table, the tea he had made for them both on a Bunsen burner forgotten before him. He hadn't taken enough morphia to be dopey, but the impression Lydia had was of a man after two glasses of wine.

'Hundreds of thousands more are dying daily in a bloody stalemate that cannot be broken. Already France struggles to fill its ranks. You've seen the colonials, the native troops of Algeria and Senegal and Indochina, fighting white men whom they should be taught to respect. You've seen them in Paris, learning to treat white women as they treat the whores of their own countries. And they have not the courage, the *élan,* of the white race! The men of France – yes, and of Britain, too! – bleed away their lives in the mud, and what kind of world will we win, if this goes on? What sort of world can we bequeath to our children? There must be some other solution.'

Lydia nodded, with an expression of shaken horror. 'But where does the Lady Francesca come into this?' she asked timidly. 'And what were you going to do with … with Colonel Simon? He said you were going to kill him …'

Gravely, Lemoine asked, 'You know what Colonel Simon is, do you not, Madame?'

She turned her eyes away as if distressed, and rotated her tin cup of now-cold tea in her hands. 'He – I – It isn't how it is in all those silly books,' she stammered. 'He told me that … that people like him … They only need to drink a little bit of blood to survive. Just a sip … mostly those they … they *take from* aren't even aware of it …'

She had no idea whether this was something Francesca had told Lemoine, and if it was, whether Lemoine had believed it or wanted to believe. But he looked troubled, and nodded. 'But the fact remains that many of the Undead do in fact kill their victims,' he replied gently. 'I have made a study of them for some years, Madame. At first – like yourself, I daresay – I was unwilling even to believe in their existence. Later, as I studied them further, I came to realize that these revenants, these Half-Dead, are, as it were, cousins of the

true vampire, and that like the vampire they have a psychic – a mental – component of their state.'

Lydia nodded. 'I know that Colonel Simon can … can communicate with me in my dreams.'

'Even so, Madame.' Lemoine would have grasped her hands, she thought, in his eagerness that she should believe and agree, had she not been married. 'I believe – and I shall very shortly accomplish it, I hope – that vampires can learn to control the minds of these revenants.'

Lydia forcibly stopped herself from protesting *Not according to the Master of Prague, they can't*, and only exclaimed, 'Oh, my goodness, how?'

'By absorbing the mind – the life – the soul – of one of the revenants, before his mind entirely dissolves into the group-mind of their kind. Once she – the Lady Francesca – can control the mind of one of them, she can participate in, and guide, as it were, the whole of the group.'

'And she's agreed to do this?' Lydia hoped she sounded wondering rather than totally disbelieving, or completely aghast. 'Isn't it terribly dangerous?'

'Not if there is no blood exchanged. The disease – the state of the revenants – is in the blood,' the Frenchman assured her. 'The control is in the mind.'

'And she'll do this for you?' Lydia gave an exaggerated shiver. 'She seems so … so *sinister* …'

'She will do this,' agreed Lemoine. 'For a consideration.'

TWENTY

By Lydia's later estimate, it was two days before the next stage of the 'project', as Lemoine called it, could be undertaken. Both Meagher and Lemoine saw her daily, Meagher tense – *screwed,* as Lady Macbeth would have it, *to the sticking-place* with frustration and dread that something would go wrong – Lemoine dreading likewise but quiet and calm. Lydia saw no one else, and gathered by degrees that, as Lemoine had said, none of the fifteen guards aboveground knew what the project was nor why a dozen or so German prisoners were being kept in the upper area of the compound … nor what had happened to the further dozen who had disappeared into the catacomb.

In the face of Meagher's sharp-tongued impatience, Lemoine increasingly turned to Lydia, vastly to the Irish nurse's irritation. Lydia bit her tongue and pretended that she was her Aunt Faith – book-learned intelligent but absolutely uncritical and accepting – and by nodding and unconditionally agreeing with whatever the Colonel said, gathered that no one in the French High Command knew the exact nature of the means by which the hemato-bacteriologist (for such was Lemoine's area of study) proposed to 'convert' German prisoners of war to men who would fight for France. 'Most of them assume I'm using a combination of drugs and hypnosis,' he confided, one afternoon while Lydia was helping him sweep the laboratory. 'I cannot reveal the true nature of my work until I have something to show for it – until the Lady Francesca is actually able to demonstrate her control over the revenants. The British government paid for much of this.' He gestured around him with his good arm at the whitewashed crypt, with its line of electric bulbs hanging from the ceiling and the grinning, horrible apparatus of the burning-grille to which Don Simon had been lashed.

Lydia plied her broom and looked fascinated.

'I understand they've been putting pressure on Commander Joffre for information,' Lemoine went on. 'I am curious as to how much our High Command will disclose, even as we prepare to mobilize our new weapon. It is one reason for my concern about this Colonel Simon of yours, provided he

was telling you even a little of the truth: the British do not even yet appreciate how desperate things are here in France.'

'Is that why you're keeping me here?' Lydia paused in sweeping, and straightened up. Lemoine was always careful to keep the door of the laboratory locked, and even with his injured shoulder she wasn't at all certain she'd be able to overpower him and take the key. And if she did, if she'd be able to find her way out. But in the meantime her body craved exercise, and she swept and washed tables and – with the hot water Lemoine brought her – washed her own chemise and linen when he, rather shyly, presented her with a second set, almost certainly borrowed from the grudging Meagher. Anything to keep moving.

'It isn't that I mistrust your intentions,' the Colonel assured her. 'But Nurse Meagher is right. At this point we cannot afford even the smallest whisper of rumor regarding what we do here.'

In addition to food and hot water, in those two days Colonel Lemoine brought her reading material: issues of the *Lancet*, containing his own articles on disorders of the blood and their effect on the brain and other tissues, volumes of several Russian occult publications which contained his articles on the nature of vampires, the Ossian Poems (Meagher's – her name was in the front cover), Yeats's *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (from the same source) and four numbers of the *Irish Literary Review*. Between reading all of these works cover to cover, Lydia paced her cell, back and forth, aching with inaction, and when she slept, her dreams were broken and troubled.

Once, waking, she saw Francesca looking in through the judas at her, a speculative smile in her heaven-blue eyes. And once, jerked from sleep by some noise in the laboratory outside, she went to the judas and saw two revenants there, slimed and filthy and smelling of sewage and rats. The laboratory door stood open. By the stillness outside, it was clearly deep in the night.

Some of them have got away, and are hiding in the crypts.

Lydia withdrew to the farthest corner of her cell, almost ill with terror. They came to the door of her cell but drew back in pain from the silver lock. The incident expanded, horribly, the possibilities of what might have become of Captain Palfrey in the tunnel. *Dear God, poor Palfrey* …

If something went wrong – if Lemoine and all his men were arrested or killed or pulled out of their barbed-wire fortress of Cuvé Sainte-Bride – would the revenants in the catacomb break free in hunger and find some way of tearing through the door? The thought returned to her in nightmares.

Escape – if and when the opportunity presented itself – would be horribly dangerous, and the chances that Don Simon would come back for her – if he

had managed to get away at all – dwindled to almost nothing.

When she told Lemoine of the revenants' incursion the next day he looked shocked and troubled – though the outer door actually hadn't been locked properly – and asked her several times if it might not have been a dream. 'Because we've been very thoroughly over the crypts below the convent, right down to the foundation vaults, and haven't found any evidence whatsoever that any of them have gotten away …'

Lydia knew it hadn't been a dream.

She felt safer sleeping during the day, and that evening was just finishing cleaning the laboratory after supper and tea with Lemoine, when the lab door rattled on its hinges, and Meagher's face appeared in the judas window that led to the corridor. 'Colonel!' she shouted, her voice jubilant, 'Colonel, we've got him! Lock that bitch up, Colonel, and open the door—'

Lydia lunged for the door and Lemoine caught her arm. She whispered, 'Simon—' as Meagher called out again, triumphant,

'Francesca got him! Get the gridiron ready—'

Lydia tried to pull free of his grip but as she'd guessed, even one-handed, Lemoine was strong. 'I'm sorry, Madame – but you do understand that he was deceiving you? He was deceiving you all along—' he insisted, as he pulled her, as gently as he could, to the door of her storeroom, thrust her inside and slammed it.

If I call out his name I'll give myself away …

She threw herself against the door, face pressed to the silver bars of the judas, as Lemoine unlocked the door of the laboratory and both Meagher and Francesca entered, their prisoner borne slung over Francesca's shoulder.

Lemoine gasped, 'Good God! What did you do to him?'

'Broke every bone in his body,' returned the vampire calmly, and flung her prisoner down on the grille above the gas cylinders. 'This time there'll be no running away.'

The captive vampire sobbed in agony as Meagher and Francesca dragged his limbs straight, and screamed as they buckled the straps over his arms, his ankles, his forehead. When Francesca stepped aside, Lydia saw that the man's hair was black, not white.

It wasn't Don Simon.

It was the beautiful Basilio.

She rapidly calculated the number of people that the handsome vampire must have killed – between thirty and sixty thousand, not counting the dying whose lives he had devoured since the start of the war – but it didn't make what she watched less horrible. Francesca bent over him, held the left hand that was fastened away from his body, at a ninety-degree angle to his side,

gripped his chin in her other hand, forcing his eyes to meet hers. Basilio began to sob, '*Prego, prego, per favore—*' and Francesca smiled, and kissed his mouth, like a lover, murmuring in whatever Renaissance form of Latin or Italian that both had learned, centuries ago. On the other side of the grille, Lemoine stepped close, and cut Basilio's throat with a scalpel, catching the blood – which oozed slowly rather than spurted, Lydia observed (*of course it would, if his heart doesn't beat*) – in a glass laboratory jar.

He had no pity on any of his own victims …

Her eyes still locked on Basilio's, Francesca stepped back, gripping his hand, and with her free hand signed to Meagher. Lemoine turned a switch and the roar of jerry-built fans in the old air-passages filled the room.

Basilio screamed, 'Antonio!' as flame engulfed him.

Francesca's head snapped back, her face convulsed with ecstasy. Greasy black smoke rolled up under the low vaults of the crypt, but the fans could make little headway against the hideous stench.

Basilio screamed for ten minutes and thirty-five seconds (Lydia timed him). It was another eight minutes before Francesca released his hand – still jutting from the flame and still, as far as Lydia could see, attached to the bone of the arm – and stepped back. Her eyes were shut, her face transformed, like Bernini's statue of St Teresa in the Vatican. Across the flame that still swathed the blackening corpse (*If it IS a corpse – how long WOULD it take a vampire to die in flame?*), Meagher and Lemoine watched the White Lady with shocked and fascinated eyes.

Then – and this interested Lydia almost more than all the rest – she saw both colonel and nurse lose the focus of their gaze, and stand as if in trance as Francesca walked to the door and left. She knew this was what vampires did – put people in that half-dreaming state of inattention, so they couldn't see the vampire move – but it was the first time she'd seen it done, Francesca obviously having forgotten that Lydia was present on the other side of the storeroom door.

I'll have to write all this down for Jamie.

Under the grille the gas cylinders still spouted flame, the vampire's singularly tough tissues slowly dissolving into ash. Smoke choked the whole of the room, as if the underground chamber were in fact Hell. Lydia realized she was trembling.

If I get out of this alive …

The train from Calais to St-Omer was vile. Even the corridors were crowded with men coming off their leave or shipping in from their training, tense, harried, half-drunk or dog-tired, and all of them, it seemed to Asher – in a

first-class compartment with a dozen officers – smoking like chimneys. He'd acquired the uniform of a major in the Second Army as a matter of convenience – everyone would look askance at civilian mufti – and dozed most of the way, wrapped in his army greatcoat. But his dreams were troubled.

He had, after all, taken passage yesterday, as Stewart had originally wished. He'd turned in the names of the Irish Brotherhood clique who had been in on the revenant scheme, and that of Butler, the German agent who'd bankrolled them; had wired both Josetta and Millward to watch for further sign of new revenants. So far as he could tell, British participation in Lemoine's project was financial – at a guess the French Army hadn't told them where they were getting their 'special troops' and possibly didn't know themselves. But with a man like Langham sniffing for a way to take over the project 'for the good of the Empire' – and given the agent he was using – that situation could alter in less than a day to something far more deadly.

How many times, Asher wondered wearily, had he heard men say, 'It's perfectly safe,' or, 'It's actually much safer than it looks,' preparatory to destroying themselves and everyone around them? Including the idiots who'd gotten Britain mixed up in the war to begin with. *It's perfectly safe*, in Asher's mind, ranked right up there with *I don't really see what else we can do*, and *It will all be over by Christmas*.

His own experience of serving the Queen had been that most things were a great deal more dangerous than people wanted to think – or say – they were, and that anything could go wrong.

Even in twilight, the streets of the medieval town of St-Omer teemed with men in uniform. VAD nurses in blue and white brushed shoulders with British khaki, French blue, men in the darker 'hospital blues'. Horse-drawn ambulance wagons and drays of supplies rattled from the train station: tinned beef, crates of biscuits, box after box of ammunition, rumbling field guns. Asher had the horrible sensation of seeing goods going in at one end of some nightmare factory – men, food, weapons – and coming out at the other, discreetly bundled in bandages and dribbling blood. Did vampires haunt the railway station, he wondered, silent in the shadows behind the volunteers who brought hot tea to the men on stretchers being loaded for Calais?

Or are they all at the Front?

At Divisional HQ Asher presented his papers, pointed out the 'at his sole discretion' and 'please render all and any assistance requested' clauses to a harassed clerk and then to an equally exhausted colonel. The colonel ran a jaundiced eye over the letter and said drily, 'You're another one of them, then, are you?' and Asher raised his brows.

‘Has he come through, then?’ he asked. ‘I heard he would.’

The colonel’s mustache bristled irritably and he rubbed a tired hand over his eyes. ‘Don’t ask me. Didn’t see him – didn’t read his papers – don’t know a thing about him …’

‘Small chap?’ Asher put a note of sympathy into his voice. ‘Silver hair, though of course he may have dyed it … beaky nose. Face like a raisin and a voice you can’t hear across the room. Hands like a schoolgirl.’

The officer’s grimace answered his question and Asher thought, *He always did get across men in authority …*

And he wondered at himself that he wasn’t surprised to have his suspicion confirmed.

‘And I suppose,’ Asher went on, ‘he bagged the best of the motorcars in the pool, didn’t he? Always does.’

‘Not my business.’ The colonel sniffed. ‘Good as told me so. And where’ll you be off to, with your precious “at his own discretion”? I suppose you’ll want it first thing in the morning? And a driver?’

‘If you’d be so kind.’ Asher inclined his head, and took the requisition the colonel shoved at him across his desk. ‘I’ll be going to Pont-Sainte-Félicité.’

Because of the weight of the earth that surrounded the crypts of Cuvé Sainte-Bride, Lydia guessed that whatever psychic outcry had poured from Basilio’s mind at his death had gone no further than the stone walls of the laboratory.

The following night they took Antonio Pentangeli as well.

TWENTY-ONE

‘Be careful out there.’ Captain Niles Calvert touched Asher’s sleeve, staying him in the doorway of the wooden hut designated ‘officer’s mess’. ‘Jerry’s getting ready for something – you’ve been hearing that since you landed at Calais, haven’t you? But every wire-cutting party, every listening post, up and down the line as far as Langemarck, reports the same thing: fresh troops coming up, supplies laid in, artillery moving about behind their lines.’ He glanced out past the dim glow of lantern-light through tent-canvas, the glimmer of illumination leaked between cracks in the rough board shanties that had been built over Pont-Sainte-Félicité’s shattered foundations. A machine gun chattered – a German MG-04, by the sound – for the sixth time in an hour, and the rumble of the guns vibrated the ground under Asher’s boots. ‘Can’t tell when they’re going to hit.’

‘I’ll be careful.’

The surgeon’s eyes narrowed as he studied Asher’s face, as if he’d have preferred a reply more along the lines of, *Heavens, perhaps I’d better stay indoors* …

‘Mrs Asher goes out like that as well – as I’m sure you know. And she won’t be told either. It always worries me sick,’ he added, ‘even before …’ He hesitated, then lowered his voice. ‘I don’t ask you to tell tales out of school, but … I take it you’re from Headquarters?’

‘I passed through Headquarters, yes.’

Like the colonel in St-Omer, this foxlike little surgeon clearly had his own opinions about people who moved about the battle zone with things like ‘at his sole discretion’ and ‘please render all and any assistance requested’ written on their papers. His mouth twisted a little and he drew a last breath of smoke from his cigarette – the air in the mess behind them was blue with it.

‘You didn’t happen to hear anything about these … these whatever-they-are. Madmen—’ His red-gold brows dived down over the bridge of his nose. ‘Only they’re not …’

‘Not mad?’ Asher felt cold to the marrow of his bones.

Calvert’s voice was a whisper. ‘Not men. Not mankind, though they seem male enough. You haven’t heard tell of ’em?’

‘Tell me.’

For a moment Asher was afraid Calvert would balk. It was clear from his eyes that he read absolutely no surprise in Asher’s face, and was angry at it, and no wonder.

Then he said, ‘Night before last a lone Jerry attacked a listening post near Loos. Didn’t even seem to feel the barbed wire. They shot him, but he wouldn’t die, they said. Just hung there in the wire sort of bleating at them like a dying goat, and the smell of him – *it* – was something fearful, they said, something the like of which they’d never smelled, and after six months in this section, believe me, Major, that’s something. They doused their lantern and didn’t dare put their heads up for fear of his *kameraden*, but two of them – good men, I know them, and not easily funked – swear his face was more like an ape’s, or a dog’s, than a man’s. By daylight he was gone. There was blood all over the wires, and over the ground. Their bullets had hit him, all right.’

Calvert shook his head. ‘Then yesterday Trent, the head of the stretcher-bearers, came to me saying they’d been attacked out in no man’s land, just before dawn. They go out then, if there’s been a dust-up; less chance of Jerry potting at them. They had a hooded lantern with them. Trent said—’

He winced, and seemed to back himself up on his tracks: ‘Trent’s a good man. Conchy, and steady as a rock. Trent said they’d found a … they’d found a dead Tommy in a shell-hole, and with him what he first thought was a dead Jerry, crumpled up where a shell fragment had hit him. But when they got close, Trent says the Jerry sat up, and came at them – crawling because he’d been blown nearly in half, and his face, when he described it, was like this other thing that Guin from the listening post had seen: ape-like, dog-like, and smelling like Hell doesn’t have words to describe. Trent and his boys were about to go after this … he called it a Jerry … with clubs, when another of ’em came over the lip of the shell-hole. They shot it, but it just got back up again, and I can’t blame ’em for running for it.

‘*What is it*? What’s out there?’ Calvert’s face had such intensity that Asher almost felt the surgeon was about to grab him by the shoulders and try to shake the truth out of him. ‘Trent and his boys went back just after daybreak – and got shot at by snipers for their trouble – and found the wounded Jerry … not just dead. Half-burned-up, Trent said. He said his sister used to work in a match factory, and had got burned once by the phosphorous there. He said these burns looked like that. He said that by the look of him, the dead Tommy had been torn open and partly eaten.’

‘Did you report this?’ *Shit, bugger, damn* … Had Asher not been blessed with ears that didn’t turn red with anger, he knew he would have been scarlet to his hairline. *Bastards* … *BASTARDS* …

Calvert's mouth twisted. 'Oh, aye.'

'*The matter is in hand …*'

When Asher said nothing, Calvert pitched his cigarette stub to the mud and ground it with his heel. After a time, in a calmer voice, the surgeon asked, 'Did Mrs Asher see any of these things?' He held up his hand, as if to stay Asher's reply of *I don't know*, and said, 'I just wondered. The way she started getting these "special orders" to come and go, and drivers taking her off down to Arras and Amiens, and I never did quite believe it was all about teaching others to use a fluoroscope, although God knows we need that, too … And I know you can't say. But looking back, she'd take these walks late at night, like you're off to do. So I just wonder.'

Keeping himself outwardly calm, as he had long ago learned to do, Asher felt, inwardly, that he was shaking in his whole being like a plucked guitar string. *They're getting out …*

What the hell did those idiots THINK was going to happen, if they started farming these things, growing them like a Hell-crop of monsters …?

'I wonder also,' he said. 'And I don't actually *know* anything. But tell your stretcher parties – and tell your surgeons – that if they encounter one of these things again, *do not* make contact with its blood. The condition is transmitted by blood contact, and is irreversible. Those who are infected lose their memories and their minds, and yes, they will eat not only the dead but the living.'

Calvert stared at him: hardened at everything he had seen and done on the Front since the previous autumn, he was still knocked aghast.

'I hope to catch up with Mrs Asher in Amiens,' Asher went on. 'And to find out – I hope – a little more about what's going on. She may in fact be teaching fluoroscopy.' He pushed his hat back, and rubbed his face. The thought of fifty miles over the shell-holed roads tomorrow was already a nightmare. 'If she's already on her way back – if we miss each other – please let her know that I'm here and I'm searching for her. Don't let her go off on another of these "special assignments" before she talks to me. And in the meantime,' he added grimly, 'I think I need to have a look at whatever she saw out there in the dark.'

The man they got – the revenant they got – had just begun to turn. Looking through the judas into the lighted laboratory, Lydia thought he looked barely twenty, desperately trying to keep his fortitude in the face of his captors and clearly on the verge of vomiting with terror. She saw him reach up repeatedly to finger his face, his mouth, the sides of his skull where the sutures would be just beginning to deform. He looked wildly from Lemoine's face to

Francesca's, horrible in their absolute impersonality, as if he were indeed nothing more than the chicken they were going to have for dinner, once they'd wrung its neck.

Had Lydia had a gun she'd have cheerfully shot them both.

It was worse, she thought – as the young man balked at the last moment, at the sight of the gas cylinders beneath the grille – knowing that even if he did escape, even if both Lemoine and the White Lady were to drop dead (*and go straight to Hell!*), he was doomed, damned, infected already with the condition that would eat his brain into nothingness, that would turn him into a walking appetite that spread its horror into any that it wounded but did not kill. *Even if I shot them, and Nurse Meagher* – who was absent from the laboratory and whom Lydia had not seen all day – *I would have to kill him, too*.

She leaned her head against the edge of the judas, and discarded the idea of going to hide her head in the pillow of her cot. *Jamie's going to need to know exactly what happens and how long it takes. And I want to know, too*.

I'm so sorry, Hans or Gleb or Heinrich – even if you were the person who shot Uncle Richard's poor footman Ned, I am so sorry …

She timed it. Nearly seventy seconds elapsed from the moment that the White Lady took the young soldier's hand – gazing into his eyes, whispering to him in German – and the moment that she signed Lemoine to turn on the flame. Longer, Lydia thought, than it had taken for poor Basilio to surrender his mind into hers. But it was less than a minute before he ceased screaming, and only two and a half, before Francesca let go. Her shoulders relaxed just before she did, and her head dropped back a little, as Josetta's sometimes did when she'd sipped really, really good champagne.

Nothing of the paroxysm that had shaken the whole of her body, with Basilio's death.

'How do you feel, Madame?' asked Lemoine.

Francesca looked at him, and smiled. 'Not bad at all.' She moved her shoulders, as if readjusting to the decrease in tension. Ran a hand through her flaxen hair. 'Certainly I'm not hearing voices in my mind, if that's what you mean. To be honest,' she added, ''twas a concern of mine as well. Let me—' Her smile widened. 'Let me adjust … digest … contemplate …'

'Of course.' Colonel Lemoine's stiffness spoke worlds for his own impatience, his own barely-concealed apprehension that something might still go wrong with his mission, his project—

He turned his head, regarding the burning corpse on its bed of blue flame. 'And there will be no trouble – no danger – in destroying these things, once the fighting is over?'

‘Mmm … I shouldn’t think so.’ She made a little rippling movement of all her muscles, like a cat stretching, as if feeling for some change within herself. ‘If I am able to control them – as I feel, I think, I must be …’ Her velvety voice was barely audible over the roaring of the ventilator fans. ‘What can be simpler than ordering them all into a walled enclosure open to the sunlight, and waiting for dawn? If in fact,’ she added casually, ‘you *want* to get rid of them when the fighting is done. Someone in your government might want to keep them around a little—’

Lemoine’s eyes flared wide. ‘*Never*!’ By the horror in his voice the idea – obvious to Lydia – had never crossed his mind. ‘These creatures – these *monstrosities* – will be used for one thing only! When we have achieved that victory, we shall ask you to destroy them – all of them!’

‘Oh, peace!’ She lifted one clawed hand. ‘’Tis your endeavor; I’m only your … *condottiere*. Your helper. You have paid me … *amply*.’ Smug satisfaction oozed like cream from her words. ‘I am in your debt, I am indeed, Colonel. And I am – agog – to see if in fact your supposition about how these things can be controlled is in fact correct.’

‘Tomorrow night?’ The voice of a man who is trying hard not to nag.

‘Tomorrow night.’

‘I don’t suppose—’

And Lydia, incredulous, realized that the issue of whether or not someone in the government would want to keep a mob of tame revenants when the war was done had already dropped completely out of his thoughts. As if he truly imagined that saying *Never* and *You must destroy them* was going to be the end.

As if the truly important thing – the only thing – was victory over the Germans, and not other uses to which such a horror might be put.

He really is thinking no further than that.

‘No.’ The Lady smiled to take the sting out of the word, and reached with a forefinger – with its long, glass-like claw – to flick the surgeon’s cheek. Lydia saw – and she was positive the Lady saw as well – Lemoine stiffen, as if he would have twitched away from the contact, detesting the woman even as they bargained for the victory of France. ‘I will return tomorrow. Ah,’ she added, practically purring as she turned toward the laboratory door. ‘*There’s* our wandering girl!’

Meagher stood in the doorway.

She’d become a vampire.

Lemoine turned his head, saw her, startled … then Francesca glanced at him, that eternal, pleased smile still broadening her lips, and he relaxed.

‘Would you finish up here, Nurse Meagher?’ he asked, and Lydia realized, shocked, *He doesn’t see it. HE DOESN’T NOTICE.*

And he hasn’t noticed that she’s probably been missing since last night.

No wonder Graf Szgedny, and poor Antonio, and Don Simon said she was strong …

Lemoine left, probably, thought Lydia, to write up his notes. Francesca and Meagher stood looking at one another in the electric glare and stinking smoke of that charnel house crypt, the light of the dying flame playing across their faces.

‘Is it done?’ Meagher asked, as if she were no longer certain of her voice,

‘Well, *he’s* done, at any rate.’ The White Lady shrugged peerless shoulders. ‘As for whether I’ll be able to control the whole swarm of them … truly, it remains to be seen. I certainly feel no ill effects. But as for coming to Ireland with you …’

‘I wouldn’t ask you to.’ Meagher put up her hands, to push her black heavy hair from her face, then looked at them, turning them over in the light. Her nails had already grown out to claws. She opened her lips a little, ran her tongue over her fangs. ‘Thank you,’ she added. ‘I can … if you will but teach me how …’

Francesca Gheric regarded her, hugely amused. Like an adult, thought Lydia, listening to a four-year-old’s plans to slay dragons or find buried treasure.

Does Meagher really think she isn’t this woman’s slave now?

Or that, having been deprived of the ability to make a fledgling for the whole of her Undead existence, Francesca’s going to let her new-wrought fledgling go?

‘In time,’ purred Francesca. ‘In time.’

‘When you do,’ said Meagher, her speech still a little fumbling, ‘perhaps we can – we should … The revenants are getting out, you see. I’ve counted them, and … I knew there were a few, hiding in the foundation vaults below the wine cellars, and the drainage passages. But now … I think they’re finding ways outside. Will we be able to … to summon them back?’

The master vampire chuckled. ‘Old Stiff-Rump will have a seizure if we don’t, won’t he?’ She shrugged again. ‘They come back ere daybreak, you know. ’Tis where their hive is. In the meantime—’ She put out a hand, and stroked her fledgling’s cheek. ‘Let me look at you. My pretty, pretty child … You do know that our condition, our state, is one of perfection, don’t you? Physical perfection. The prime of life, if I may so term it. The prime of health.’ She reached up to finger the girl’s black, curling hair. ‘Your handsome

soldier – whatever his name is – won't be able to keep his hands off you when he gets here—'

Meagher shook her head uncertainly, and stepped back from the caress. 'It's not … It's not important what I look like.'

'Oh, but it is, my sugarplum.' Her voice turned warm and crooning. 'We look as we always knew in our hearts that we look – as we look in our sweetest dreams. And we gain strength – we maintain our strength – by the kill. How are you going to get anyone to walk up a dark alley with you if you aren't the prettiest thing he's ever seen in his life? We maintain our ability to make the living see what we wish them to see, only by the lives we drink.'

'I know that.' The girl spoke unwillingly, as if bracing herself for a horror – like Lemoine facing the burning of that young German alive – that must be got through, to attain the goal. 'And I will do whatever I need to do, pay whatever price needs be paid—' The words stammered, learned by rote in another lifetime, and Francesca laughed again, and again patted Meagher's cheek.

'And so you shall, my blue-eyed angel. So you shall. But right now, how do you feel?'

Meagher's eyes met hers at last, and she whispered, 'Hungry.'

'I, also.' Her smile turned dark, gleaming and terrible, and she put a caressing arm around her fledgling's shoulders. 'Let us go forth, then, sweet child. And I'll teach you how to hunt.'

TWENTY-TWO

Moving among the charred ruins of what had been a small French village, a willow pole in one hand like a blind man's cane and a lantern, sheathed down to its tiniest thread of yellow light, in the other, Asher was aware of the Undead. Since the night in 1907 when he'd come home to find the household in near-coma slumber and Don Simon Ysidro sitting at his study desk, he had dealt with enough vampires to spot them in the darkness. There were techniques of mental focus that improved one's chances, though this didn't always help, and he had the bite scars to prove it. Revenants were abroad, and some at least shared their vampiric cousins' ability to go unnoticed until they were almost on top of their victims.

By what Grippen had told him in London, he guessed himself almost safe from the vampires here.

But the reeking network of old trenches, gaping cellars and shell-craters – black as the abyssal pits of hell – could conceal any number of revenants.

Still he walked, whispers of moonlight glimmering on the ruined land.

If Lydia had received 'special orders' to go down to Amiens – and he guessed that Amiens wasn't her actual destination – she was almost certainly with Don Simon Ysidro, and curiously, the thought brought him comfort. He had for years watched the relationship between his wife and the vampire and was virtually certain that Ysidro would not let harm come to her. '*I will keep her safe*,' the pale vampire had said, on the night before Lydia's departure for France: the night Asher had waked to see a light burning in the upstairs hallway of their house on Holyrood Street, and had gone down in his dressing-gown to investigate, nearly certain what he would find.

He had been, at that time, barely three weeks recovered from his most recent relapse of pneumonia and had just begun to be up and about for a few hours a day, readying himself to begin teaching the Hilary term. The weather had turned cold at the start of November; the house was freezing. As Asher had expected, the vampire Ysidro had been sitting in Lydia's green velvet chair before the banked ashes of the study grate.

'*Will you be going to France?*' Asher had asked him, wanting to hate him and not able to do so; and the vampire had inclined his moonlight-colored

head.

‘*Look after her*.’ It was as if they continued a conversation already begun, and the vampire nodded again.

‘*I came here tonight on purpose, James, to reassure you that I would*.’

‘*Have you told her this?*’

Ysidro made the slight movement with his eyes that passed for a headshake, even as his nods were barely perceptible. ‘*Best not. Yet I thought you would wish to know—*’

Movement in one of the half-caved-in trenches; a fugitive glint of the feeble moonlight in animal eyes. The scrabble of rats among the bricks of a fallen chimney. Beyond the shattered stumps of what had been an orchard, past the makeshift bridge, the ruined country swelled, plowed by shell-fire into a sodden wasteland of darkness, barbed wire and wrecked wagons, stinking of the carcasses of horses and mules. Asher stopped, heart beating hard. Then, after a moment, moved on.

‘Promenading oneself’, Ysidro called this. Vampires did it, when newly arrived in the territory of a nest not their own, to ask permission of the master vampire to hunt on his or her grounds. Vampires always knew who walked their domains of darkness. If they wanted to speak to you, they would.

A white flicker in the bitter night.

The glint of eyes.

Asher kept walking, old instinct forbidding him to let any adversary know that he was capable of detecting them. He even made himself start when she laid a soft little clawed hand on his arm and said, ‘James!’ in a pleased voice.

‘Madame.’ He bowed. Lydia had told him she thought she had seen this woman, among the many who haunted the vicinity of the hospitals behind the lines. ‘A long way from Paris.’

Her French was modern, though it slipped now and then into the old-fashioned idiom of Napoleonic times. Moonlight made her green eyes nearly transparent. Scorning disguise, she wore a simple white dress, her black hair loosed about her shoulders in thick curls. Blood and mud spattered her hem and her sleeves, but this he only noticed later. It seemed to disappear from his consciousness as he spoke to her, even as he was only intermittently aware of her claws and fangs. She appeared to him to be the most beautiful, most desirable woman he had ever seen.

‘Dare I surmise you have come out in the hopes of a rendezvous?’

Elysée de Montadour was insatiably curious and vampires were the worst gossips in the world. She’d have accosted him if he’d had a whitethorn stake in one hand and a silver crucifix in the other.

‘The merest recollection of your name in one of my wife’s letters was enough to bring me forth.’

‘Brave soul.’ The next moment, the green eyes narrowed. ‘As for your wife, she’s gone off with Don Simon … and when you meet her again, tell her for me that spectacles *never* improve a woman’s appearance! *Outré*!’ She gave a theatrical shiver. ‘Like a great bug! Not that I mean to disparage—’

Of course you do, you witch. ‘No, no …’

‘Purely for her own good, as woman to woman—’

‘Of course.’ He kissed her hand. Warm. Even in the wasted moonlight there showed a flicker of color in her cheeks. ‘Do you know where they’ve gone? The surgeons tell me she had orders for Amiens.’

She made a sly little moue. ‘Maybe after they left Cuvé Sainte-Bride, they did. I hear that’s where Simon was seen, five nights ago, Johanna tells me … You know Johanna Falknerin, that horrid harpy from Berlin?’

‘We’ve met.’ Asher had no desire to encounter the hawk-nosed Rhineland vampire – or indeed any of the Berlin nest – again.

‘Dreadful woman! And tells tales …’ Elysée shook her head. ‘And speaks French like a goat! One can barely understand a word she says, not that one would wish to … Disgusting. But she says she saw Simon emerge from Cuvé Sainte-Bride with his minion – I presume your pretty little wife – and go off in a motorcar. So they may well have gone to Amiens for all I know.’

She shrugged, the gesture extravagant, as if playing to some far balcony packed with admirers. ‘So they’re not back yet? Only to be expected. Simon is the most *extraordinary* creature in his taste for the company of the living.’

‘What about the revenants?’

She startled, swung about and swept the shapeless landscape with those darkness-piercing eyes. ‘The Boche,’ she said softly. ‘Only cabbage-eaters, gone off their heads … They have to be, don’t they? Oh, I know about those awful things that are supposed to exist in Prague, but how could they get here? Even the Germans can’t be such fools as to—’

‘I doubt there’s anything,’ returned Asher, softly and from the bottom of his heart, ‘that either side in this wretched war would consider too foolish to contemplate. Have you seen them?’

‘Not close.’ She drew nearer to him, like a frightened woman seeking comfort in a male embrace; Asher retreated a step. Her glance flickered at him, half-reproachful, half-amused. ‘And not near here. South, five, perhaps six miles, towards Arras. I saw one the night before last, shambling among the shell-holes in the moonlight. Looking for wounded, I suppose. And I have seen the bodies of the wounded they have found and fed upon. Last night I came on – I don’t know, I suppose one had got himself caught in barbed wire,

and the flesh burned away off his bones when the sun came up. But it could have been a living man, you know, caught too close to a bomb-blast.'

'It could.'

'These things …' Elysée looked over her shoulder again, her beautiful face taut with dread. 'I have heard – from the Prague vampires, I have heard – that they devour the Undead in their coffins. That they live in the sewers, and the crypts below old churches … I have thought of fleeing back to Paris, but what if these things come to Paris? What if they make their nests there, like rats, like wood beetles that no one can ever quite root out? Who among us would be safe?'

'Are there any of you, left in Paris?'

She waved, as if to chase away a subject unpleasing to her. 'There isn't a city in Europe, where we who hunt the night linger. The cities are full of soldiers, and spies, and people looking for spies, and for what sort of pickings? And my boys – dear boys …' She smiled at the mention of her nest of fledglings, chosen – in Ysidro's opinion – for their looks rather than their brains. 'On their own, without me, they'd get themselves killed inside a week.'

'And is there another man,' Asher asked, 'a day ago, maybe two, who has promenaded himself as I did? A smallish man, and slender? Large nose, gray hair, dark eyes? Possibly – probably – in uniform?'

The delicate brows puckered, and again she shook her head. 'None save you and your wife, and that little fool of an Irish nurse … Whom I haven't seen, now that I consider it, in weeks … Did she ever meet with the Undead, do you know? Did the pretty Lydia encounter her?'

'I sincerely hope not.'

'And this man—' Elysée, who had once been an actress, made a mime of mocking a man with a large nose. 'He too is seeking us? La, so popular as we have become … Is he a friend of this Irish *poule*?'

'I don't think so,' replied Asher. 'But I suspect they have acquaintances in common.'

In the deep of her dreams, Lydia heard the lock click.

Simon, she thought. *Simon came back for me …*

She struggled to shake off sleep, to surface from a black well fathoms deep. *Why can't I wake up? I sleep so badly in this place …*

To the very walls, the blanket on her cot, clung the stink of charred flesh.

I shouldn't be asleep anyway. It's night. It's dangerous to sleep at night. But if Simon just unlocked the door of my cell, it HAS to be night.

It can't be Simon, the lock is silver …

Fear jolted her awake. A bar of the laboratory's electric glare fell across her face. The cell door stood open, about an inch.

Beyond it, the laboratory was tomb-silent. Even the constant, distant groaning and yowling of the revenants in the crypt was stilled.

Simon?

Lydia got cautiously to her feet. She was still dressed – *It IS still night, I DIDN'T go to bed*. Heart hammering, she tiptoed to the door and looked through the judas.

Nothing. The lab was empty. The burning-grille, steel-bright where Lemoine had scrubbed it that afternoon, gleamed under the harsh string of bulbs. The door to the corridor stood open, like this one, an inch or so.

This is a trap.

She knew it to the marrow of her bones.

But what kind of a trap? They've already GOT me.

A trap for Simon? She remembered Basilio screaming as the flames poured over him. Remembered Antonio crying in that thundering bass voice, '*Oh, God, oh God, have mercy on me, a sinner …*' The look of shuddering ecstasy on Francesca's face.

DON'T GO NEAR THAT DOOR.

Slowly, the gap in the outer door widened, and the reek of the revenants flowed into the lab.

Oh, dear God …

Even before the door opened sufficiently to reveal them Lydia knew they were there, and they were. She ducked back into her cell, looked desperately for some way to lock it from the inside – there was neither keyhole nor handle on that side of the door, and the door itself opened outward. Slowly the things shuffled into the lab, half-crouched and unbelievably hideous in the too-bright glare of the electric lights. Faces still bruised where the jaws had grown forward, mouths bloody from the unaccustomed length of new tusks. Eyes blank. The nostrils of their deformed noses flared, sniffing; heads thick with matted, uncut hair swinging back and forth; the remains of their uniforms stinking of bodily waste unregarded.

(*Why on earth don't they die of their own infections? They must after a time … CAN they die in this state?*)

At the same time the other half of her mind screamed in panic *NO! NO!* as they suddenly turned, sniffing, toward the cell door.

NO!

Get past them? The door was narrow and there were four of them in the lab.

The cell was barely six feet by ten. *I can use the cot as a shield …*

She unfastened the silver chains from her wrists, wrapped them around her hands. *How badly will that amount of silver burn revenants? Enough to let me get past them?*

The cot weighed something over twenty pounds and she was barely aware of it as she up-ended it, flattened against the wall beside the door, holding it in front of her body. *The legs are going to tangle in the door so I have to wait till they all get—*

The reek smote her like a hammer as the door was yanked open. Lydia shoved the cot at them, slithered past and out the door and almost into the arms of two more revenants that had entered the lab behind the first group. She flattened back to the wall, threw a fast glance at the door …

And saw Francesca standing, smiling, against the dark of the corridor.

Lydia twisted, dodged to another corner as the revenants came at her. One of them, still more man-like than bestial, sprang at her like a panther; she looked for something loose to throw and there was nothing. *If I strike at it and miss, it'll grab me—*

She dodged past and the other four emerged from the cell, surrounding her —

'Stop this!' Lemoine's voice shouted from the hall. 'What the hell are you doing?'

The revenants stopped in their tracks.

Stood swaying, scratching themselves, looking about them as if she, Lydia, had suddenly become invisible and odorless.

Francesca's smile widened. She stepped out of the doorway, angelic eyes glittering with delight. 'We're only having a little test.'

Lemoine pushed past her into the laboratory, in shirtsleeves, clutching his aching arm. *He must have been in bed and asleep.*

Lydia began to shake so that she could barely stand. She felt as if she would vomit, as much from sheer terror as because the six revenants stood only a few feet from her – even Lemoine hesitated to approach her, his eyes darting from the creatures to the White Lady, still standing beside him in the doorway. Lydia could almost see his struggle, knowing he should stride over to her and bring her out of the circle of the things and not daring.

Meagher slipped into the lab behind him, blue eyes sparkling with the mischief of Hell. 'And here we thought you'd be pleased,' she teased, and Lemoine swung around to face her. This time he saw what she was, and his eyes bulged with shock.

He whispered, 'What have you done?'

'Well, I was hardly going to risk touching those things—' Francesca gestured toward the revenants – 'before I'd made sure you were paying me in

genuine coin.’ She put an arm around Meagher’s shoulders, and the Irish vampire stepped into the embrace like a cat asking to be stroked. Like sisters. Like school friends. ‘And I’m pleased to say your procedure passed the test, dear man, with flying colors. You should be well pleased.’

She turned her attention – Lydia didn’t see how exactly she did it, more than just looking at the revenants – back to the creatures, and they shambled into one corner of the lab.

‘It is … an extraordinary sensation,’ the White Lady went on. ‘Feeling their minds. Look.’

She fixed them with her gaze. After a moment a huge gray rat emerged from behind the boxes in one corner of the lab, then another. They ran toward Lydia, who stepped back with a sickened cry. Lemoine said again, ‘Stop that!’ and the rats stopped.

‘Go ahead,’ said Francesca after a moment. ‘Hit one. It won’t run away.’

Lemoine stood still for a long moment, then looked around him for something to strike the rat with, but as Lydia had observed a few moments before, there was nothing loose in the lab to use for a weapon. With a laugh, Meagher stepped forward, picked up the rat – which made no move to resist – and grabbed it by head and body, and with a twist broke its neck. In the brightness of the laboratory lights, Lydia could see the rosy pinkness of the Irish girl’s face, the red of her lips: only by the reflective gleam of her eyes, by the fangs that showed when she smiled and the long claws that tipped her fingers, could anyone have said she was vampire. She’d clearly fed.

Meagher turned her mocking eyes on Lydia. ‘Why don’t you go back into your cell now, dear?’

‘They won’t hurt you,’ added Francesca, when Lydia tried to step past the revenants without touching any of them. It wasn’t possible to do, but Francesca was right: they didn’t even turn their heads when Lydia’s shoulders brushed against them as she slipped by.

‘You see,’ said the White Lady to Lemoine, as Lydia closed the cell door behind her. ‘Everything you wished to achieve. I stand ready to complete your plan.’ She curtsied elaborately.

Lemoine drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. Accepting – Lydia could see the shift in his shoulders. Accepting that sometimes evil must be done that good may come …

‘I am …’ he began, and then paused. ‘This is astounding. First we must test — How many of these creatures can you control, and at what distances? Not,’ he added warningly, ‘with a test such as this, which, if you will permit me to say so, was inexcusably cruel—’

‘And I am *inexcusably* sorry.’ Francesca curtsied, without an atom of contrition in her voice. ‘I assure you, it will not happen again.’

Even from the judas of her cell, Lydia could see the White Lady and Meagher exchange a wink.

A wink which Lemoine didn’t even see. *Isn’t he even aware that they can tinker with his perceptions? That they’re altering them – blinding him – even now? Making him see what he wants to see?*

Or doesn’t he even need a vampire’s delusion for that?

‘When we have tested – when we have documented what is possible – I will inform the Ministry,’ Lemoine went on, as the revenants filed from the laboratory. ‘No one – NO ONE – knows the extent of what I have sought here: the Germans have spies everywhere. And not the Germans only,’ he added darkly. ‘Even the British poke and pry, and try to find out what isn’t their business—’

He started to follow the revenants from the lab, when Meagher touched his arm and said, ‘Lock?’

‘Ah.’ Lemoine crossed to the door of Lydia’s cell. In one quick stride Lydia was huddled in the corner, knees drawn up to her forehead, arms wrapped around her shins, shaking and sobbing.

‘Madame,’ said the French surgeon urgently, and hurried to her side. ‘Madame, be calm. You must be calm. You can see – you *have* seen – that these creatures are now completely under control. Believe me, I swear to you that what we do here, shocking as it may seem to you, is necessary, for the defeat of Germany and the salvation of France … and of your own country, of course.’

He knelt on the floor before her, grasped her hand in his. ‘Sometimes one must use shocking methods, to bring about the good of all,’ he said. ‘Germany *must* be defeated. France – the French people – *must* prevail. Once this war is won, these things will be utterly destroyed, never to be used again—’

If I go on shuddering like this he’ll give me a sedative.

And does he actually believe that seeing what I have seen, the French government is going to let me go and tell people about all this?

Lydia looked up and straightened her glasses, and tried to give him an expression of dewy-eyed trust. ‘Do you … do you swear it?’ she managed to whisper – *Not bad*, she thought, considering how badly she wanted to scream *YOU IRRESPONSIBLE WRETCHED IDIOT!!!*

‘Upon my honor, Madame,’ said Lemoine. ‘And upon my honor, as soon as it is safe to do so, you will be released …’

Lydia gave a sniffle or two (*Do NOT scream* …) and, a little to her own surprise, succeeded in forcing herself to her feet, and crossing the cell to pick

up and right her cot. ‘I just want to go home,’ she whispered, like a beaten woman, and, spreading pillow and blanket back into place, lay down with her back to the door. ‘I just want to go home.’

She heard the click of the silver padlock, and the creak of the laboratory door.

Rising swiftly, she crossed to the judas in time to see Francesca leave the lab in Lemoine’s wake. Meagher turned, and with a casually savage stomp, broke the back of the surviving rat that still sat in the midst of the laboratory floor.

TWENTY-THREE

‘Mistress …’

Lydia jerked awake, as the voice whispered, like a thread of pale mist, at the edge of her dreams.

She immediately checked her watch. Four thirty. The first threads of light would not yet have begun to stain the sky outside. She hadn’t meant to fall asleep that early and, given the events of the night, hadn’t thought she would. But the fact that Simon’s mind could touch her dreams meant that he was somewhere close by, underground as she was and near enough that he could read her dreams.

Damn it, she thought. *Damn it, revenants or no revenants, I have to sleep …*

Her heart was hammering and she debated about getting changed for sleep – she had fallen asleep again fully dressed – and then decided against it. *If he’s down here it may be that he has a plan to escape now, before sunrise*, and she wasn’t about to undertake it in a pair of French Army pajamas.

She lay down again, closed her eyes, tried hard not to see the laboratory door opening, the circle of revenants closing around her. Tried not to see the tickled delight in Francesca’s eyes, like a child at the cinema waiting to watch Ben Turpin get a custard pie in his face. ‘*There was a kind of spite to her,*’ Szgedny had said …

Fall asleep! Simon will have to retreat, will fall asleep himself soon …

Miranda sleeping in her tiny cot back on Holyrood Street, silk-fine red hair spread over her pillow. Princess, the nursery cat, sleeping at Miranda’s feet. Jamie asleep … Jamie … the recollection of waking somewhere in the deeps of her wedding night and lying there looking at the shape of his shoulders in the moonlight, the way slumber smoothed the lines of his face and left it like a young boy’s …

‘Mistress …’

In her dream (*Do NOT wake up …!*) she sat up (*Aunt Lavinnia would FAINT if she knew I dreamed about Simon standing at the foot of my bed …*) and caught him against her as he perched on the cot’s edge, cold and skeletal

in uniform trousers and braces, the sleeves of his shirt wet with dirty water: ‘Simon, where *are* you?’

‘Hush – near. Near enough to see what happened tonight. Forgive me, lady – I would have come from hiding had things gone any further. But I heard Lemoine coming and gambled that he’d be able to stop her. Had I shown myself—’

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Lydia. ‘We would both have been killed, and you at least have to get out of here and warn somebody – Jamie, if you can do it—’

‘Hush,’ he said quickly, and the cold, clawed fingers pressed her lips. ‘I’ll sleep soon. Have you still your picklocks?’

She nodded. ‘I can’t use them on the padlock …’

‘Do you still aid this Lemoine in the cleaning of his workroom? Good. Leave them behind the storage boxes where the rats came from tonight. The Irishwoman has a key to the laboratory but regards it little now that she has ceased helping him with his work. I can take it from her room when all have gone out to this test of theirs tomorrow. Revenants—’

His head nodded suddenly, and the thin white brows buckled over his nose.

‘Revenants haunt the crypts.’

‘Simon—’ *Good Heavens, don’t fall asleep before you can get yourself hidden—!*

She was sitting up in bed, alone.

His voice whispered, like an ectoplasmic scratching at a dark windowpane: ‘Can’t get out …’

True waking came then, and the clammy stuffiness of the underground. The smell of the revenants, and of greasy smoke, absorbed into blankets and walls.

It was late afternoon when Asher reached Army Headquarters at Amiens. The road south of Pont-Sainte-Félicité had been shelled Monday night, and was blocked with supply-trains waiting for the digging parties to get duckboards on the surface. Beyond Haut-le-Bois it was impassable, necessitating Asher’s driver to backtrack half a dozen miles and take a muddy track over a shallow range of hills, to a more protected route.

Before they reached that point, Asher was able to get a glimpse of the old nunnery of Cuvé Sainte-Bride.

He didn’t dare stop, but the state of the road and the heavy traffic of mule-drawn wagons allowed him ample time to train his field glasses on the square gray buildings on the slope above the road, the dense snarls of barbed wire that rimmed the trenches around it, the lone sentry at its gate. According to the records unearthed by Josetta’s friend at the War Ministry (*Who could easily have been interred under the Official Secrets Act for her trouble,* he

reflected), there were five French soldiers and five British assigned to the place, as well as Lemoine and five members of ‘staff’, some of whom were almost certainly local cleaners and a cook. But the requisitions for rations were too high, and even without Lydia’s messages Asher would have deduced its use as a prison of some kind by this time. Presumably Lemoine had the French equivalent of ‘at his sole discretion’ and ‘please render all and any assistance’.

I wonder what he told them back in Paris?

The truth?

Or just, I have a plan to win the war.

He wondered how far Lydia and Ysidro had gotten into the place before they’d slipped out again, and what they had discovered. Was a coded letter even now lying on his desk in Holyrood Street?

Two miles down the wider road after crossing the hills, the car broke down.

‘I don’t blame you for wanting to get a shift on, sir,’ confided the young captain in charge of Field Artillery Battery Twelve, while Asher waited in the makeshift hut for horse-drawn transport to be arranged. Asher had given him a cigarette and expressed his genuine admiration for the battery – four BL-60s that dated back to the Boer War and a number of Woolwich Mk-IX naval guns mounted on railway carriages. Beneath a careful public-school English, the glottalized t’s and disappearing l’s of the West Country still lurked through. ‘There’s weird stories going about this countryside at night – things people see in the woods just lately, or things they’ve found. It’s not some form of shell shock, sir, or nerves. There’s not a man in the battery’ll venture past the perimeter when the light goes.’

‘An’ I don’t care what Colonel St-Vire says,’ added Asher’s driver, ‘beggin’ your pardon, sir, I’m sure, an’ no disrespec’ an’ all … But it’s Jerry. It’s got to be. Nick Frampton – my mate back at Félicité – ’e swears the thing ’e saw shamblin’ about the old trenches one night, wi’ a face on it like God’s nightmare, ’ad on a Jerry uniform, an’ eyes glowin’ like a cat’s. The men are spooked, sir.’ He drew on the Woodbine Asher had given him. ‘I’m glad that axle went out ’ere, an’ not further on down the road where we might be stuck when it was growin’ dark.’

‘Have you reported this?’ asked Asher. ‘How long has this been going on?’

‘A week?’ The driver glanced inquiringly at the captain. ‘Ten days?’

‘A week,’ said the captain. ‘And I think it’s growing worse. As for reporting, what can we say, really? Things somebody says he saw – the state bodies are found in, or that poor horse the lads found in the woods, torn to pieces by God knows what …’

‘Me dad’s a gamekeeper,’ put in the driver. ‘An’ I never seen an animal what could do that. But beyond that …’ He spread his hands.

‘You write a report, you send it to your colonel,’ went on the captain, ‘who’s got his own plate full of grief just keeping shells coming for the guns and food for the men, and he sees it an’ thinks, *Hrm, well, somebody going a bit shell-shocked, this’ll wait.* But if you were to know anyone, sir …’ His casual finger brushed the War Ministry papers, which, Asher was well aware, had ‘Spook’ written all over them.

‘I might have a friend or two who’d be interested in this.’

‘I’d appreciate it, sir.’ The captain touched his hat brim. ‘Because God’s honest truth, sir, it’s giving me the jim-jams.’

A corporal came in then, with word that transport had been found, and Asher did the last ten miles to Amiens in a wagon-load of wounded drawn by two of the beautiful copper-bay Shire horses that a year ago – like their owner, Asher reflected – had been peacefully plowing some Shropshire rye field. Conscripts who would lay their faithful bones in foreign earth. As they jogged toward the great cathedral city Asher turned the problem over in his mind, reflecting that the young captain of Battery Twelve was right. ‘*You write a report, you send it to your colonel …*’ and the revenants slipped from the crypt beneath Sainte-Bride, a danger not because of who they killed, but because of those that survived an encounter.

And say Lydia and Ysidro did find something, some proof utterly damning, in their visit to the half-ruined convent – proof that presumably had sent them hotfoot to Amiens … What then? What if he himself added to the report the contention that the Irish Brotherhood – and who could tell what other groups within the Empire, or what other groups they’d talked to – once means of controlling them was found – were seeking to breed up their own? Would that stand up against Langham’s bland assurances that ‘everything is in hand’?

Would everything lock up in some committee or other until it was too late? Until some wounded survivor of an attack was simply sent home to Britain with the infection in his veins?

No, thought Asher.

Simply, *No*.

No one at Headquarters in Amiens had seen or heard anything of Lydia, with or without a companion whom Asher was fairly certain was masquerading as a British officer. (*If the Undead can tamper with human perception he can probably make them believe he’s Sir John French and none of them would think to question the impression* …) As a major rail hub and supply depot immediately behind the front lines, the ancient cathedral town was swollen with troops and short on everything: coal, food, petrol, transport

and most especially housing. Nevertheless, Asher's papers got him a somewhat elderly Silver Ghost (plus driver) for the following day, and a garret room on the Rue des Tanneurs near the cathedral, to which he repaired after a sketchy dinner of bread, charcuterie and what he privately suspected was mule meat in the officer's mess.

Coming down the steps of the mess, he was just reaching for the handle of its outer door when the door was opened and Pritchard Crowell came in.

Asher was in the act of putting on his cap and didn't pause or turn his head, simply brushed past the man who was a legend in the Department – the man who had supposedly died in 1895 – the man who had instructed him in the finer points of running networks 'abroad' – stepped out into Rue des Trois Cailloux, and ducked into the blackness of a shop doorway where he waited for ten minutes. When he was fairly certain that Crowell wasn't going to emerge and follow him, he made his way – cautiously – to his lodgings, but wasn't terribly surprised, an hour later, to move his blackout curtain aside and, after long waiting, glimpse against the darkness on the far side of the canal a flicker of movement, a suspicion of moon-glint on uniform buttons.

Crowell had been in uniform at the mess.

Pritchard Crowell.

Why did it never occur to me years ago that the man had to be working with a vampire partner?

Probably because I'm not insane, he reflected after a moment's thought. *It's the sort of conclusion Millward would have leapt to immediately. When I knew the man – extricating himself from impossible situations, slipping past sentries and guards like a combination of Leatherstocking and Bulldog Drummond – I disbelieved in vampires, though I had studied their lore for years. And by the time I came to understand that the Undead were more than legends, Pritchard Crowell was – supposedly – dead.*

And I had rebuilt my life in Oxford.

Is Crowell a vampire himself?

A flicker of dark mackintosh in the corner of his eye, a shadow seen from the railway embankment on Stratford Marsh … A half-glimpsed figure on a bicycle on an Essex lane. *Grippen would know.*

Or is that why Grippen tried to recruit me?

He recalled the night Ysidro had recruited him, to search for the day-killer that was slaying the vampires of London in their coffins – after first drinking their blood – eight years ago: *We need a man who can move about in the daylight.* Twice since then, he'd encountered attempts by governments to recruit vampires, back in the days of that intricate chess game of information and preparation, before war had shattered all schemes.

Crowell was working with a vampire. He's been hiding, for twenty years, waiting … for what?

Yet it's HE who's watching ME. It's he who tried to kill me back in London. Not his vampire partner.

What does that mean?

Is he waiting, tonight, for a vampire partner to appear at his side, so that he can direct him or her up here to make sure of me?

Or is he waiting for me to come out, so he can follow me to Lydia?

Lydia, who's the one who knows … whatever it was she and Ysidro had found out about Cuvé Sainte-Bride.

Damn it …

And of course, rooms in Amiens being scarce as hen's teeth, he had been forced to take one in a building that had only one way out – a room that had only one window, so he couldn't even take the expedient of leaving over the roof. Not that that was anything he wanted to try at the moment. Exhaustion made him feel as if he were wearing the lead-imbued apron Lydia had rigged up to protect her from the supposed danger of invisible rays from her fluoroscope; his lungs felt on fire and all he truly wanted was to lie down and sleep.

Not possible, he told himself. He simply hadn't the strength. *Think of something else.*

A fingernail scratched at the door of his chamber. Like the gnawing of a mouse, barely to be heard.

He slipped up the shade on his lantern the tiniest fraction, and crossed to the door.

'Simon?'

'A friend of his.'

Asher unhooked the silver chain from around his wrist, wrapped it round the fingers of his right hand. Opened the door and stepped to the side, fast – though that, he knew, would make no difference against a vampire's attack.

The vampire standing in the dark of the attic corridor had the curious appearance of an old man. A seamed face framed with long gray hair; eyes that had probably once been dark gleamed on either side of a broken hook of a nose. Like most vampires at the Front (according to Lydia, anyway) he wore a uniform, this one French. But his face, like Ysidro's, was not a twentieth-century face. Pale gloves hid the clawed hands, one of which he extended to Asher.

'Permit me.' His French was eighteenth-century, but kept slipping back to an older form. 'I am the Graf Szgedny Aloyïs, of Prague.' He stepped into the garret, like a Slavic god, and handed Asher a card. The address lay near the

Charles Bridge in the Bohemian city, almost certainly an accommodation. ‘And you are the *Anglus* – the English – whom Simon has made his friend? From him I understand that you and I have another acquaintance in common, Solomon Karlebach, the Jew of Prague.’

‘Did Simon send you?’

‘I have not seen Simon since he escorted the most charming Madame Asher to visit me for the purpose of learning about the woman Francesca Gheric, who has now taken employment with this French madman, Lemoine. It is on that subject that I have sought you out, *Anglus* – that we must speak.’

At Asher’s gesture he took the room’s single chair, and Asher seated himself on the end of the narrow bed, and unapologetically refastened the silver chain on his wrist. Szgedny’s odd, dust-gray eyes followed his movements, and one corner of the long gray mustaches lifted in an ironic half-smile. ‘Elysée de Montadour tells me you seek to destroy the things that breed in Cuvé Sainte-Bride. Evil is being done there – I see you try not to smile, to hear me say such a thing … An evil I do not fully understand. But Hieronymus, Master of Venice, tells me that three nights ago his fledgling Basilio Occhipinti perished, in horror and in flame – this he felt, he knew, as masters sometimes do feel the deaths of their get. Yet afterwards he said he felt the young man’s mind, his awareness, still stirring, in a way that he had never encountered before. As if thought and brain had been pulped, Hieronymus said, and yet the soul were trying to speak out of the bleeding mush.’

Like Ysidro, the vampire showed little expression or change of tone in his deep voice, yet his eyes burned somberly. ‘Basilio and his lover, Antonio, slept in the crypt of a ruined church, ten miles from Cuvé Sainte-Bride.’

‘Mrs Asher wrote me of these two.’

‘But ere Hieronymus reached me with this tale, Antonio had come to me in great consternation saying Basilio had not returned to the crypt the night before. Yet, he said, he knew his friend was alive – if you will excuse my use of the term. After Hieronymus’s visit I sought for Antonio, for whom I cherish great respect, but could not find him. He had not taken the ambulance-wagon in which he usually hunts. Then, on this Wednesday past, Hieronymus came to me again saying he had experienced, the previous night, the same sensations concerning Antonio: first the horror of death by fire – only it was not death, exactly. Fragmented dribbles of his thought, his self, remained somewhere, weeping and screaming …’

He shook his head, deeply troubled. ‘It is Sainte-Bride,’ he said at last. ‘The evil there. It is breeding these things, these revenants … And in my bones I feel that it has taken both Basilio and Antonio. This Lemoine – or rather his

minion, the Irishwoman Tuathla – has sought for many weeks to find a vampire willing to work with him, willing to become his partner in some enterprise. It can be nothing but to give him a way to control the revenants whose numbers have grown so quickly of late.'

Asher said, 'I agree.'

The vampire considered him beneath the long gray brows, as if waiting for him to add, *But what has this to do with me?*

When he did not, Szgedny went on, ''Twas the White Lady who came forward at last and entered this man's service. When your beautiful lady spoke of her to me, she surmised that the White Lady was incapable of getting fledglings. The reward, she surmised, that La Dame Blanche asked of Lemoine was that he find some way to alter her condition. To permit her to pass along her own condition to others: to beget fledglings of her blood.'

'Slaves, you mean.'

'Children are – or should be – slaves to their begetters. E'en the Commandments so order it.' The gray vampire inclined his head. 'But this … This is an abomination. I am convinced she has drunk the lives of Basilio and Antonio – and indeed used those bleeding fragments of Basilio's thought to call Antonio to her. Whether this will give her what she seeks—'

Asher thought, *Ah*, with the sensation of seeing the pieces of a puzzle drop into place. No great cry of triumph, but an awareness of what had been before him, like a half-filled-in decryption of a cipher, all along.

'Can she control the revenants?'

'As I told your lady, I have never found it possible. But who knows what means this Lemoine has found?'

'According to Mrs Asher, who has read his work, he has studied the vampire state for many years,' said Asher thoughtfully. 'And he had the chance to observe them in China, where for a short time a hive of them flourished near Peking.'

'They must be stopped,' said the vampire. 'This Lemoine must be stopped. Say what you will, *Anglus*, of me and of my kindred – and yes, I know you have made a vow to destroy us, as your master Karlebach has vowed. But though the revenants hunt us in our crypts, through the brains of the rats that seek out our scent, in this you must aid us. For the sake of all the living, as well as the sake of the Undead, these things cannot be permitted to spread. Though they would kill us all, yet the harm that would come of making them your slaves – if you can do it – would be an ocean, a cataclysm, compared to what little harm we do when we hunt the night.'

Asher closed his lips on the observation that 'little harm' was a generous way of looking at the matter. But he remembered that small band of furious

Irishmen, who thought they had found an unstoppable weapon to make their land free. And Lemoine, who similarly believed that he had found a way to defeat the Germans before the war could shred away the willing manhood that had – in his eyes – made France great. And Langham who doubtless believed the same, when Crowell went to him with the information that such a useful creature had gotten itself loose and could be captured and put in British hands …

In exchange for what?

Protection? Another 'letter of instruction' like his own, to carry him here to France?

And meanwhile each night brought closer the moment when a wounded man would be sent home from the Front, with the infection in his veins.

He left the lantern on the corner of the dresser, and walked back to the window to peep out.

Cloud had shifted across the moon, but even had the light been a little better, he doubted that he could have seen anything in the blackness below. 'Is there anyone there?'

Behind his shoulder, close enough to the back of his neck to make his flesh creep, Szgedny's deep voice replied. 'I see none.'

Which doesn't mean he isn't somewhere near. And doesn't mean that he won't dog me tomorrow, if he thinks I'll lead him to Lydia …

'Aid us.' The vampire's hands rested on his shoulders. 'Simon speaks of you as a man capable of such a feat.'

'I hope I am,' said Asher slowly. 'But I will need your help.'

TWENTY-FOUR

The clink of a chain.

The flat, grunting '*Unnh* …' of a revenant – a creature, thought Lydia miserably, who had once been able to say things like *Take care of Mother* to a younger brother, or *Whatever happens, I will hold you always in my heart* to a weeping fiancée.

For two hours she had heard the thing moving around in the laboratory on the end of its short chain. 'Devil on you, you stupid gobshite,' said Meagher disgustedly. 'Ain't you got brain enough to hear through dirt?'

Lydia could have told her that any mental instruction that the White Lady might have given, in the ruined trenches just north of the old convent compound, would be unlikely to penetrate the depth of earth that surrounded the convent crypt, but didn't. And in fact she wasn't certain of this. Lying on her cot feigning sleep, she was profoundly curious as to whether Francesca's commands to the rest of the group of revenants *would* be perceptible to an isolate chained in the lab.

So far, to judge by Meagher's *sotto voce* cursing, as she sat on a lab stool with a pocket watch in one hand and a notebook (*time-synchronized commands?*) in the other, it didn't look promising.

'*Bitseach*,' added the Irishwoman, something Uncle Richard's head groom had occasionally called Aunt Isobel's high-strung mare.

'Eleven,' said Meagher. 'Time for dinner, and let's see if the *raicleach* upstairs can teach you some manners.'

Lydia's heart lurched within her, at the terror of last night's 'experiment', but the next moment she heard the soft clang of a wire cage, and a rat's frantic squeaking.

Simon is out there somewhere, she thought desperately. *Waiting for the moment to come in – please, God, don't let Meagher start poking about and find the picklocks! – and with all the revenants out of the crypt, this one remains*.

And Meagher.

A hoarse grunt from the revenant, and the rat's squeals turned to shrieks. Meagher said, 'Ah, you disgusting maggot!' and there was a metallic rattle, as

if she'd dropped the cage. The revenant howled, clashing its chain. If exposure to food had been scheduled for eleven, followed immediately by the command to desist from pursuing it, Lydia guessed that poor Gobshite had failed the test.

Or Francesca had.

And if that were so, and her control of the revenants wasn't complete (*Why not?*), would they simply scatter in the trenches, rove the battlefields, until one of them managed to wound a man but not kill him? Wound him badly enough to return to England or Paris with the contagion growing in his veins …

I have to get out.

What would Jamie do?

Poison them? Burn the place down? Blow the place up …?

'Tuathla!' The voice outside was a hoarse cry. Lydia heard the legs of the stool scrape, and risked the vampire's distracted attention to roll to her feet and cross the tiny cell in one long stride. A soldier stood in the lab doorway, staring into the room – yes, the revenant was standing over the torn-apart cage, greedily devouring the rat – and Meagher had sprung down from her chair …

I know him …

It was the freckled soldier Meagher had been bending over in the pre-op tent, on the night of the big push.

'Joey—!'

He won't be able to keep his hands off you, Francesca had predicted.

Joey's eyes were stretched wide, seeing her for what she was – changed, Undead, vampire – and trapped, aghast, fascinated, literally enchanted by what he saw. He whispered, 'Dear God in Heaven …'

Meagher crossed to him, slid her arms around his waist – he was over six feet tall and her head barely topped his breastbone – and as if against his will he bent to receive her kiss. Lydia heard him groan, in ecstasy and grief.

'You did it,' he breathed, separating his mouth from hers at last. 'Oh, *mo stór, mo chroí*, I never thought … I prayed and hoped another way could be found. For freedom … for Ireland …'

He shook his head, stunned, and Meagher put one small hand up to stroke his red-brown hair from his brow. 'Goose,' she murmured. 'Silly lamb.'

'And is it true?' He pulled himself together with an effort. 'This creature … She can control these things? You've found a way? A way you can learn now? I got word from Teague in London, they got the thing again, got it chained up good now, with silver as you said. Is there anythin' I can—?'

She said, ‘Poo,’ and waved her hand. ‘Teague’s a fool. And Francesca’s a bigger one.’

He put up his hand to her cheek, but she turned away with a shrug.

‘To do this,’ he whispered, tears in his voice. ‘To make yourself into such a creature, for the sake of our country … When can you—?’

‘Don’t be an imbecile,’ Meagher snapped. ‘I’m not going to do anything of the kind. To spend my time with those things?’ She nodded toward the revenant, tugging at its chain and reaching now and then toward Joey, whose face convulsed with pity at the sight of it. Dirty, bestial, blood-smeared and stinking, it still wore the remains of a German uniform, a dim reminder that it had once been a man. ‘Even if I could do it, without goin’ mad myself—’

‘Goin’ mad?’

The girl laughed shortly. ‘Isn’t that a joke on her, with all her petting ways, and speaking to me as if I was a child? And her just hugging herself, that she can bid these things come and go: it’s enough to make a cat laugh. She took one of those things into her mind, *mo chroí*, so she could get a grip on the minds of them all. And now it’s *their* minds that are getting a grip on *hers*. I can see it in her eyes.’

She looked back at him, twinkling with delight, and saw the look on his face as Lydia saw it in the glare of the laboratory lights: heartbroken, disappointed, shocked, crushed.

‘But what are we to do?’ he stammered. ‘There must be some way you can get control of these things, without … without riskin’ of yourself. Are you sure? Teague’s got the creature, and others can be made from it: *and* the thing’s hand you sent along! We can’t let this go now! We’re so close! We can’t let what you’ve done – my darling, my darling, how you’ve become – we can’t let it go all for nothing …’

‘Goose.’ She stretched out her arms to him, and Lydia saw the change in his face as desire swamped all his horror, all his desperation at the shattering of their long-held plan – a desire whose insane intensity confused him all the more. Her husky voice was a caress as she stepped close to him, wound her arms once more around his waist. ‘Silly goose.’

She put her palm to the side of his face, stroking ear and cheek and neck. Then with a flick she brought her hand down, and with her claw-like nails slit the veins of his throat.

Joey Strahan stepped back with a gasp but Meagher had him fast. Lydia saw him thrusting, struggling with all his strength to break her grip. She sprang up on him, literally climbed him so that her mouth could fasten on the squirting artery, and he sobbed and cried incoherent pleas and prayers as his strength gave out and he fell to his knees. Meagher dropped with him, his hair

locked in one hand and the other arm still round his waist, ignoring the blows he rained on her back – by the time he realized he had to strike with all his strength, Lydia guessed that his strength was half gone.

The revenant jerked its chain, groaned and howled, smelling the blood. Lydia flinched when the young soldier started to convulse, as the blood drained from his heart and organs. His hands flailed helplessly; Meagher's dark head bent low over him as he slipped to the floor. A final spasm arched his back like a landed fish and he made a thin, protesting noise, and went limp.

Meagher sat back on her heels, her head tilted back, mouth glistening with gore. Lydia reached her cot in a soundless rush and lay down, her back to the door, and took care to breathe deeply, mimicking the rhythms of sleep. Whether the vampire came to the judas or not, Lydia didn't know – and she breathed a thousand thanks for the silver plating on the lock and bars. But she heard Meagher laugh, the thick chuckle of sated lust.

Count down from sixty ten times …

Fifty-nine, fifty-eight, fifty-seven …

A clash of chain, and the revenant's howling moan, followed by thick noises that could only be tearing flesh.

Meagher had shoved Joey's body into its reach.

… fifty-six, fifty-five, fifty-four …

'Mistress …'

She rolled off the cot and was by the door as Simon, in shirtsleeves as he had been in her dream, his hands wrapped in three laboratory towels and clumsy as a drunken man's, bent gingerly to the silvered lock.

'Watch behind me—'

The door was open behind him, into the blackness of the corridor. There wasn't the slightest hope that she would hear the approach of either Meagher or Francesca before it was too late for Simon to flee, but she watched nevertheless.

Has he been hiding down here … for how long? If there were escaped revenants still wandering in the crypts – and how far do the crypts extend? – they must sleep in the daytime, as he did, but the risk was hideous … Not to speak of the rats …

Was that a sound in the corridor?

The lock clicked. Doubling and trebling the towels around his hand, Simon pulled the padlock loose and Lydia plunged out, and into his arms. The revenant howled again, poor Joey's blood covering its hands and chin. Simon steered her, not in the direction of the round chamber where the well was (*They must have blocked it after Simon's escape …*) but further up the

corridor, to a narrow door and a stair that led down, barely wider than Lydia's shoulders. The darkness stank of rats, excrement, decaying flesh and the fishy reek of the revenants; cold water slopped and squished under their feet. Simon held her right hand in his, his left arm around her waist, guiding her in absolute blackness.

'They're in the vaults of the foundations,' he murmured in her ear. 'Half a dozen. They move in a group, and seem to have disregarded the Lady's summons to their brethren to go out to military exercises this evening—'

'Meagher says – Meagher told Joey—'

'The young gentleman whose liver Corporal Schultz was devouring back in the laboratory?'

'Meagher told him Francesca is beginning to – to be absorbed into the mind of the revenants. That may be the reason …'

'Is she, indeed?' He stopped, placed her hands on what felt like a pillar some eighteen inches in diameter, then gripped her waist in a firm hold. 'Pardon me while I execute a gavotte of joy. Keep your hands on the pillar, just as they are, while I lift you. You should feel handholds and footholds. There's a loft about five feet above the first of the footholds. Watch your head as you go through the trapdoor. The loft contains bones, but there's room to sit and to lie. *Hop-la*!'

He boosted her up as if she'd been a bunch of daisies. Lydia felt the holes in the pillar, scrambled up, as he had said, and felt the rough wood of a square trap around her, then damp wooden flooring as she pulled herself through. Her hand encountered something hard that rolled when she touched it: a human skull. She slid herself out of the way of the trap and the next moment Don Simon's sleeve brushed her as he came up through.

'Bone loft.' Lydia heard the slight grit of a cover being slipped over the trap. 'I judge 'twas formerly used for the store of food. The roof of the natural cavern is but a few feet above our heads, were we to stand. The wine vault was below us.'

'Is the way out through the well blocked?'

'With a great tangle of barbed wire. From the wine vault beneath us, a passage leads—'

'What about poor Captain Palfrey?'

'I brought him up out of the well and stanched his wound as best I might. I then put him in the motorcar, which I left at the edge of the camp, where he would be found. And I told those that loitered about the Moribund Ward, to stay away from the car and tell the others so as well. 'Twas near dawn then. I returned here the following night to find the tunnel from the well already blocked.'

‘And you’ve been here since?’

‘Where else would I be, lady? Hush,’ he added softly, as she threw her arms around him again. ‘Hush, lady. James will call me out, should harm befall you – or should you go on clinging to me in this fashion.’ But his hands grasped hers, strong and cold. ‘Listen to me now. ’Tis deep night still, and the Others still wander the crypts, in such force that ’twere peril to try to get out through the old chapel above the Arras road. There are sufficient among them that they can summon and control rats, at least some of the time.’

One hand let go of hers, and a moment later two candles, and a brass tube that rattled with the dry sound of matches, were put into hers.

‘At daybreak I shall sleep. Wait a little time after that – for the Others move about longer than we – then climb down from here. From the pillar you can move in any direction and soon or late will find the wall of the wine vault. Follow this until you come to what was the great door of this place; the door itself is gone, and the stair beyond nearly filled in with rubble. You can climb past the rubble, squeezing against the wall to your right. ’Tis a short climb to another crypt, in whose floor you’ll find a trap with an iron grille over it, an old drainage conduit. ’Tis wet and nasty, but leads to the caved-in crypt of the chapel, at a distance of something over a mile. Do not wait for me. Make your way back to Pont-Sainte-Félicité as quickly as you might. If James wrote two weeks ago that he was seeking military clearances to come here he might well be at the clearing station now. Tell him all and see if he can come upon a way to destroy this place utterly. Knowing James—’ she heard the slight, chilly smile in his voice – ‘I place great faith in his ability to do so.’

‘Oh, yes,’ breathed Lydia. ‘Jamie’s very good at that sort of thing. But you —’

He put fingers like Death’s over her lips. ‘I’ve no intention of making a martyr of myself for the good of humankind. There are other ways yet, out of this place. Now tell me of what this *Irlandésita* had to say of our fair Francesca … and speak soft. The Undead cannot hear so clearly through the weight of earth as they can in the night overhead, yet their ears are sharp.’

In an undervoice she related all that had taken place in the laboratory that night, not only Meagher’s words to Joey, when she had casually turned her back on the scheme for which, it seemed, they had both come to the Front, but the fact that Francesca’s signals to the revenants under her control had evidently not worked on the creature chained in the lab. ‘It might just be the thickness of the earth, as you say,’ she whispered. ‘Or the distance – I don’t know where exactly they’ve taken the revenants for this test. But if what Meagher said is true, and Francesca is becoming *absorbed* into their minds,

from taking the mind of that single revenant into hers … *Would* one of her fledglings be able to sense this?'

'Without a doubt. No master vampire I've ever heard of has made the attempt, to take the mind of one of the Others – with or without the pollution of their blood. I am indeed curious as to whether this pollution of the mind – the influence of the hive of the revenants themselves – will spread from Francesca's to Meagher's, through that link alone.'

'How horrible!'

'Horrible indeed,' murmured the vampire, 'if the mind and strengths of the Undead come to be added to the hive. As Graf Szgedny told you, we who walk the night conscious and aware know surprisingly little of our unspeakable cousins. If either of us be so fortunate as to emerge from these crypts undevoured, we must add this information to that store of knowledge concerning the Undead – and the Unliving. As for Mistress Meagher, it surprises me not that after going to the pains of sending one of these things to her rebel compatriots in Ireland she would abandon the whole scheme, once she became vampire herself. 'Tis what most vampires do.'

'Forget the things they loved?'

'Lose their capacity to love.' There was long silence, and when he spoke again his voice seemed barely louder than the scratch of an insect's foot passing over bone.

'Love, as I understand it, is founded in hope, and in the faith that one's soul can at length be at peace in the embrace of another soul. For the damned, there is neither hope nor faith – nor any reason not simply to take one's pleasure in the kill, which is what gives pleasure to the highest degree.'

'Not all of them,' said Lydia, remembering Basilio, screaming his friend's name.

'No,' returned the vampire. 'Not all.'

Light drifted from below, lantern-glow almost painfully bright after hours of utter darkness. Lydia saw that indeed she and Don Simon were in a sort of loft built over what could have been storage space below. Francesca said, 'Brainless *putain*,' and Lemoine, 'It matters not whose doing this was. What we must do is find her, before she encounters revenants down here—'

'I thought there *were* no revenants down here,' jibed Meagher.

'In the event that there are,' amended Lemoine quickly. 'And it may be that there are some that have broken free.'

Lydia worked her way, flat to the floor and soundlessly pushing herself with her toes, to the edge of the loft, and looking down, saw that thin spots had developed in the White Lady's shimmering primrose hair. The color of

the hair itself had faded, streaked with the hue of dust. Through it the scalp showed rough and slightly warty. By the way Francesca's hands moved, restlessly fingering her jaw and her elbows, Lydia guessed that physical changes were beginning to overtake her as well.

We look as we always know in our hearts that we look – as we look in our own sweetest dreams.

And her dreams were being devoured, as she had devoured the souls of how many thousands over the centuries …

She can still use her skills of illusion to keep Lemoine from noticing – maybe even to keep Meagher from seeing changes. Maybe she's still telling HERSELF that what she feels is only her imagination. Or some effect of controlling the revenants that doesn't really matter.

Her hand closed around Simon's, as the lantern-light bobbed back the way they'd come, up the narrow stair to the corridor outside the lab. After a short time, Lydia heard the wet *splish* of shuffling footfalls, and smelled revenants, moving through the chamber below.

When Don Simon fell asleep, his hand still in hers, Lydia estimated that it must be close to six in the morning, but dared not strike even the light of a single match to check. Revenants had come into the chamber below, and for a time Lydia had heard the shriek and squeal of the rats they summoned to their hands, and the horrible noises of the revenants feeding. *I'll have to tell Jamie that there seem to be TWO hives down here, one under Francesca's control, and one independent*.

Bother! I don't suppose I'll EVER get access to Colonel Lemoine's notes, to see how that might have come about … Maybe one is the German prisoners and the other is guards they might have infected? Or soldiers from the front-line trenches? Have the lines moved while I've been down here? They were only a few miles away …

And what do the uninfected guards up top think about all this? What do they think is going on?

The noises below died away. Lydia began to count.

When she reached sixty for what she hoped was the sixtieth time – she got distracted, retracing Simon's instructions and what she remembered about the road back to Pont-Sainte-Félicité – she lit a candle, opened the heavy trapdoor, and peered down to make sure there wasn't a revenant sleeping directly at the bottom of the pillar. Then she turned back, and took a long look at Simon, lying on his back with his neck pillowed on a femur, a great heap of brown bones rising behind him: skulls, pelvises, long bones, with ribs and vertebrae scattered about him like dried flowers. His face was peaceful, a

young man's face, white eyelashes lying on the fine-grained white skin of his cheek like a child's.

He chose to be what he is.

If he hadn't, I would never have met him.

Or have met the thing he's become.

She propped her spectacles more firmly onto her nose, blew out the candle, and first climbed – then slid – down the pillar.

At the bottom she lit the candle again (*I do NOT want to trip over a revenant …!*) and made her careful way around the wall. She found, as Simon had said, an archway and the first two shallow steps of a wide stairway whose next step was buried in rubble. The narrow space to the right of the rubble was barely visible, even at close inspection, and thin as she was, scarcely admitted her body. Had she not had the vampire's assurance that it was indeed the way which led to the surface she would not have dared to squeeze herself in, for fear of getting stuck further in. But even when it narrowed to a crawl space, she could see the faint movement of her candle flame with the current of air, and this kept her going.

Jamie, PLEASE be at the clearing station when I get there …

She tried to calculate the days since Francesca had caught her in the tunnel by the well. Jamie's letter from Whitsedge Court had been dated the second of April. How long would it take him to convince the Army to give him transport to France? And if he was assigned to go to some specific place far from Flanders, how long would it take him to wangle his way out of it, acquire a motorcar (*I HOPE he isn't going to cadge a ride on a train!*) and reach Pont-Sainte-Félicité …

I should have left a message for him …

Oh, God, what if they start shelling the chapel again before I get out?

The blackness around her opened out. The dank air smelled of rats and death and revenants, but more faintly; she saw none in the low crypt into which she wriggled from the caved-in doorway. It took all her strength to wrestle the iron grille from the drain in the floor, and the stink of the old passageway beneath – it was ankle-deep in water, and too low even to stand in upright – made her queasy.

The thought of encountering a revenant down there was enough to make her understand, to the marrow of her bones, why Don Simon had put off the escape until daylight.

'*There are other ways yet, out of this place,*' he had said.

She wondered whether he'd been telling the truth.

Something over a mile, he had said. The thought was horrible, but there was no going back. She tucked her skirt more firmly up under her belt,

lowered herself down and dragged the grille back into place.

The last five yards were the worst. The tunnel had been caved in, choked with rubble and mud; had she been attempting the escape by night Lydia wasn't sure she wouldn't have simply put her head down and wept. But the candle flame still leaned toward the scraped, narrow crack in the mess, and, more glorious still, pallid daylight leaked through, so Lydia simply shoved her head and shoulders into the gap between two boulders, and began to wriggle and push her way. She was conscious that the stones around her were actually stones, not earth. They'd been cut. Once she even saw the broken remains of a carven saint's face.

The daylight was almost painful.

The smell of the fresh air, when she crawled forth from a hole in the steep bank of rubble that rimmed what seemed like an enormous shell-crater, made her want to fall to her knees and weep.

She had emerged at the bottom of what seemed to be a cellar, whose vaulted roof had been shattered. Fragments of stonework littered the brick floor, and a huge spill of rubble hid the whole of one end of the chamber. Clambering up this, with much slipping and backsliding, she reached a second crypt, above which, she saw, rose the remains of the church itself. It was the same chapel near the lilacs she and Palfrey had visited – *How many days ago was it?* – and had ruled out as impossible.

Exhausted, shaking and dizzy with thirst, she scrambled up a half-ruined stair to the pounded remains of the chapel itself, and from there into a caved-in labyrinth of trenches and sandbag walls. *Just get to the road,* she thought. *SOMEBODY should be along, and I'll come up with some tale to get a lift back to the clearing station.*

German spies? Black-marketeers? She glanced down at her clothing, gray with mud and torn from two long crawls through rubble*: I came to be buried in a caved-in dugout and have no recollection of how I got there …*

An ambulance-wagon came rattling from the direction of Arras and Lydia stepped out and waved. *Colonel Simon and I were on our way back from Amiens and were attacked last night by a German reconnaissance party …*

The ambulance-wagon pulled up and a slender man in a dark mackintosh sprang from the cab: civilian trousers and shoes. At the same moment two French soldiers leaped from the back, hurried toward her. They had almost reached her when Lydia realized that the vehicle was a long-chassis Sunbeam.

Oh, damn …!

The civilian produced a pistol and even if he hadn't, Lydia knew she simply hadn't the strength to run away. She staggered, put one hand to her

forehead, and collapsed in what she earnestly hoped was a convincing faint.

TWENTY-FIVE

‘She’s shamming,’ said the little man in the mackintosh as the ambulance-wagon lurched into gear. Even with her eyes shut Lydia could tell he bent over her, and she caught the whiff of smelling-salts as he uncorked the bottle of them. By the nearness of Lemoine’s voice, the colonel pulled the little civilian away from her cot.

‘Can’t you see she has been through hell, man?’ Then, closer and more gently, ‘You’ll be all right, Madame Asher.’

‘Asher?’

‘Madame James Asher.’ By the sound of Lemoine’s voice he – and his companion – had taken a seat on the opposite cot. Very sensibly, Lydia thought, since it was pretty clear that the Arras road had been shelled again, and the ambulance-wagon bucked like a Wild West bronco. ‘Her husband lectures on folklore and linguistics at New College.’

‘Her husband—’ Mr Mackintosh’s soft, slightly nasal voice sounded amused – ‘worked for seventeen years for the Foreign Office, if it’s the same James Asher I worked with in ’93 in Mesopotamia. And her husband, so far as I could tell when I was back in London, knows perfectly well what’s going on in your research station, Colonel – which I think answers all those questions you had about how she’d gotten mixed up with the vampires. These days he works for the London nest.’

Oh, damn …

‘I … She … *What*?’

‘This woman,’ sighed Mr Mackintosh patiently, ‘has been lying like Ananias. You didn’t even search her for picklocks, did you?’

‘Of course not! And in any case, there is no lock on the inside of that door.’

Mackintosh sniffed. ‘I’d say then that the woman Meagher let her out – having killed that young idiot Strahan, the kill might easily have gone to her head. Or she had some idea of shoving Mrs Asher into the arms of that abomination chained in the lab, to test her own control over it, since that’s obviously been the plan from the moment Nurse Meagher figured out what you were doing with these things.’

‘Nurse Meagher has been selflessly loyal! Even after she … she was transformed …’

‘Cock. One of your prisoners was smuggled to London by a group of Irish gunrunners, with the intention – I should think – of holding him somewhere safe until Nurse Meagher figured out how these things can be controlled. I understand she’s also been pinching tissue, which is less conspicuous to send. I have no idea what instructions she sent about safety precautions but obviously her boys botched it, because the thing got away – something a detached hand wasn’t about to do. My friends at the FO got wind of it and asked me to bring it in—’

?? home side screening … Evidently Jamie was right …

‘Probably put two and two together with what they may have already guessed about your show here. Whether Asher – his name was Grant, when I worked with him – is also working for the Department or for someone else, including the Irish Brotherhood, I don’t know, but he clearly knows all about you. He’s in Amiens now. I lost track of him last night, but I’d suggest you send one of your young ladies to make sure of him. He killed three gunrunners and the revenant in London, and his vampire partner near as dammit killed me.’

‘Does anyone else know?’ Lemoine sounded utterly aghast. As well he might, thought Lydia, considering how much of a secret he thought this was.

Jamie, she thought in the same moment. *Jamie here …*

‘God knows.’ Mr Mackintosh didn’t sound terribly concerned about it. ‘I’m only here to … *assist* … the Lady Gheric. But if I were you I’d finish that assessment of the Lady’s abilities to control your little pets quick smart, and put the whole thing on an official footing. Otherwise you’re going to find the entire circus taken away from you, and everyone shaking their fingers and telling you how naughty you were even to think of it. I’d also have a little chat with Nurse Meagher, as soon as she’s up. And not believe a single word she says.’

Asher spent Friday in the cellar of a house in St Acheul, close enough to the old church there that he suspected the building’s third-century crypt was one of Szgedny’s daytime hiding places. The cellar was so jammed with sacks of wheat and sugar, flitches of bacon, packets of coffee, cans of petrol and boxes of cigarettes that there was barely room for a cot for Asher to doze on. His hosts – three of the biggest, toughest women he’d ever seen – cheerfully fetched him bread, cheese, pâté, tea and clean linen: ‘From which army would be your preference, sir?’

Arriving in company with the Master of Prague shortly before dawn, he slept most of the day. If Lydia was in Amiens, he guessed that to hunt for her would only serve to give Crowell – if he was still in the town – time to find (and attempt to kill) him. Or, worse, would lead Crowell to Lydia. He studied again the Comte de Beaucailles's descriptions of the old convent's crypts, and with the aid of a prewar map of the Département du Nord, worked out the exact coordinates not only of the convent, but of the farthest extent of its crypts.

It would be, he guessed, a long night.

His hostesses fetched him upstairs after dark, where a handsome staff-car waited in the little courtyard ('From which army would be your preference, sir?'). 'The Boche, he's getting ready for a big push,' one of them said to him, and offered him a cigar. 'All up and down the line they're saying so. We've given you an extra pistol – there in that box on the seat – a flask of coffee, some chocolate biscuits and two Mills bombs.'

'It is as well to be prepared,' added her sister kindly.

Szgedny appeared shortly after that, paid off Mesdames and rode at Asher's side as he drove back through the dark countryside, the hooded light of the headlamps barely flickering on the desolation of mud, torn-up railway tracks, broken carts, dead horses and bombed-out villages. Again and again the car was held up by lines of wagons, struggling through the mud. Asher tried both staying on the road (deep mud and the necessity of levers and duckboards to pry the wheels clear) and veering carefully off the road through the fields (deep mud and flooded shell-holes).

It was nine o'clock before they reached Field Artillery Battery Number Twelve.

'You sure about that, sir?' The young captain in charge looked like he had neither slept nor shaved since Asher had conversed with him the day before – certainly not changed his clothing, possibly not eaten either. On the road outside the half-repaired cottage a shouting match had developed in the darkness between men driving wagon-loads of food and those offloading crates of ammunition; the guns sounded far off, a distant thunder broken by rifle-fire like lightning. 'I've heard there's some kind of Frenchie hospital station up there.'

'Our men will be cleared out by morning.' Asher touched his own orders – *sole discretion, all and any assistance* over some very formidable signatures – and the neat table of coordinates. 'The Germans have been running their own show in the crypts, using the boffins there as a blind. Believe me, it's devilish clever and I wouldn't have believed it myself if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes. This is our only way to eradicate them.'

It sounded gossamer-thin to him, but the captain frowned, looked from Asher to Szgedny. The vampire met his gaze, held his eyes quietly for a time. ‘I—’ the captain stammered. And then, as if remembering earlier orders, turned smartly back to Asher and saluted. ‘Of course, sir. Just at sunrise.’

‘Will you keep an eye on the place?’ said Asher, when he and the vampire stepped out into the night once more. ‘On the off-chance that the man who was waiting outside my lodgings in Amiens will appear and try to stop it? Which I wouldn’t put past him,’ he added, when Szgedny lifted his gray brows. ‘Crowell was always an uncannily good guesser. When he realizes I gave him the slip he may work out that my next move might be—’

‘*Crowell*?’ It was the closest Asher had seen to the Graf looking truly surprised.

‘You know the name?’

‘Dear me, yes. He went by others – Jourel was one, Grassheart another. Thirty years ago, forty years ago, he was very much La Dame Blanche’s minion, much as you are to Simon, and to others of the London nest. It amused her—’ And his own eyes glinted as Asher opened his mouth to protest that he worked neither for Ysidro nor Grippen.

When, after all, Asher did not speak he went on, ‘I think she loved the game as a form of hunting, though she hadn’t the slightest interest in your Empire nor mine. There was a time when I wondered if she meant to make him vampire, to serve her. He would have been a dangerous one. So that was he?’ A corner of the Graf’s long mustache lifted in his one-sided grin.

‘Forty years ago.’ *She must have been lurking somewhere in the background all the time we were in Mesopotamia*.

‘He’s old now,’ observed Szgedny. ‘I begin to think your lady wife correct in her surmise that the White Lady’s bite is sterile. She can kill, but cannot give the semblance of life in death. Like those rare queen bees whose eggs produce only drones. Well, well …’

‘Will you watch for him?’

‘I can remain until an hour before first light. This young man will sleep before then—’ He nodded back to the captain’s rough shelter. ‘That I shall see to. Spent as he is, it should be no trouble. I will speak to his dreams a little, to hold by your orders with good will. By sunrise, all the revenants should be in the crypts. And where do you go?’

For Asher had turned toward the staff-car again.

‘Cuvé Sainte-Bride. I suspect if I handed in a note at the front gate, when light is in the sky,’ he added, seeing the vampire’s silvery eyes widen, ‘that will give Lemoine and his staff just enough time to run for it, and to evacuate

any uninfected prisoners. But it will be impossible for any of the Undead – or the Unliving, as you call them – to follow.'

The vampire's brow clouded. 'They will be far more inclined to clap you in irons—'

'It's a risk I'll take. Don't fear that I'll go there a moment before there's enough light in the sky to destroy a vampire,' he added, seeing thought and suspicion flicker across the Graf's face. 'I must – we must – see those things destroyed. But I won't have the innocent destroyed with them.'

'I would hardly describe this Lemoine as innocent.'

'His guards are. Without Francesca Gheric, and the revenants themselves, Lemoine can do no harm.'

Szgedny's eyes narrowed. For a moment Asher wondered if the vampire had enough power of illusion to kill him in front of half the men of the battery and every mule-driver in the British Expeditionary Force. But the Master of Prague only gestured toward the black east, and the red flashes of fire over no man's land: 'He can do no harm until the next thing he thinks up; or someone else thinks up. There are no innocent in this war, Professor. Not Lemoine, not me, not you.'

That night Mr Jourel – which was what Dr Lemoine called Mr Mackintosh, though Lydia suspected that wasn't his real name either – came and took Lydia from her cell at gunpoint, and led her to a smaller room deeper in the crypts. Deeper underground, she thought, and more thickly insulated by the weight of the earth: *So Simon won't know I'm still down here? (Does he guess that Simon's still hiding somewhere in the crypts?) Or so Francesca won't know?*

As Jourel was leading her from the laboratory he paused in the doorway, and Lydia needed no threat from his gun, to stand quiet beside him. The first of the revenants bound for the surface passed them, stinking to heaven and walking without looking around them, or seeming to notice their surroundings. Those Lydia had seen elsewhere – in the crypts, in the Peking mines, or, horribly, in the laboratory two nights ago – had moved with a peculiarly shuffling gait, heads swinging from side to side, nostrils flaring as they sniffed for prey.

These weren't looking for prey – or for anything. They had almost the movement of marching men.

Francesca Gheric walked among them. Her awareness sharpened by years of discreet cosmetic use, Lydia noticed the White Lady's carefully powdered cheeks and chin, through which faint bruises still showed, where the shape of her face was beginning to alter. The Lady's head had begun to have that slight

characteristic side-to-side movement, and once or twice she could not keep herself from picking at her own collarbone and wrists.

And more than anything else, there was an indefinable change: in her posture, in her step, in her eyes.

Maybe if she hadn't been among the revenants, it would have been less obvious.

Lydia counted twelve revenants, each an ambulatory reservoir of further infection.

There had been thirteen in the long crypt.

Lemoine followed, notebook in hand. He was making notes as he walked, keeping a sharp eye on his charges, so that he – no more than had Francesca – didn't see his guest and Lydia, standing in the laboratory door. Jourel's childlike left hand, resting on Lydia's shoulder, tightened slightly and she wondered if Lemoine knew she'd been taken from her cell and what the old man beside her would do if she cried out.

But the thought of what the revenants might do if Francesca's concentration on them broke closed her throat. Without a sound she watched them pass along the corridor and ascend the stair into darkness.

The lower level of the crypts, entered through a winding stair at the far end of the reeking chamber in which the revenants had been kept chained, was flooded a few inches deep in water that reeked of soured decay. A small lantern hung at the bottom of the stair, its light just sufficient to show her rats: living ones crawling along the stonework, chewed carcasses littering the stair and bobbing in the dirty water. Thirty feet away, among the squat arches of the convent's deepest foundations, a chair stood ready, with a larger lantern on a goods box beside it and two pairs of handcuffs locked, one on either side, to the chair's frame. Lydia wondered in panic if she could kick Jourel and flee, but she knew from the stink, and the floating carrion, that revenants hid here.

He's going to ask me about Jamie …

She hadn't seen Meagher with Francesca and Lemoine, and wondered when she'd put in an appearance. Was Meagher still asleep? It was early. Did Francesca, like the revenants, now wake a little earlier than sunset?

They can't kill me. Lemoine will be furious.

But Lemoine isn't here NOW.

But when they reached the bottom of the steps, Jourel pushed her back against one of the niter-crusted archways, turned her roughly to face him and demanded, 'What's happened to Francesca?'

'She took the mind – the soul – of an infected man into her own.' Lydia was astonished at how calm her own voice sounded. 'That's how she's controlling the revenants. It's how she gained access to the … the group-

mind, I suppose you'd call it. Control of the revenants was the price Lemoine asked, you see, to help her make fledglings. But now *it's* starting to control *her*.'

'You're lying. She'd never have touched the blood of those things.'

'She didn't.' Lydia tried to sound matter-of-fact, as if there were no gun digging into her left seventh rib. 'She absorbed its soul without drinking its blood, at the moment of its death. I was there. They burned it up in acetylene flame, the same as they did the two vampires whose deaths – whose souls – she absorbed, in order to let her make fledglings in the first place.'

His bead-black eyes narrowed, though the lined features remained expressionless – as Jamie could go expressionless when he was thinking – in the dim glow of the smaller lantern near by them. 'You know a great deal about it, young lady.'

'Well, as you said yourself,' she pointed out reasonably, 'my husband and I have been dealing with the London vampires for the past eight years. Think about it,' she added. 'Vampires look how they think they looked in life. That's why most of them look young, you know. But it seems to work both ways now. She's starting to *think* she looks like a revenant. She is becoming one in her own mind. Becoming what they are: appetite, with the mind that controls it eaten away. And maybe the minds of the two vampires she devoured are still alive, after a fashion, within hers. Alive and welcoming the revenants in, as a way of destroying her. Maybe that's why vampires don't devour their own kind. She didn't drink their blood, either. Ask Meagher,' she began to add, but her captor's eyes had shifted past her, gazing into the blackness of the sub-crypt.

In a voice hoarse with rage he whispered, 'Bitch.'

His hand tightened painfully over Lydia's arm and the barrel of his pistol pressed into her side. But it was not of her, she realized, that he spoke.

'Stupid, lying bitch. All these years of waiting—'

The black eyes snapped back to her and he said, 'What does your husband know of this?'

Nothing, not a thing …

How much can he reasonably have learned?

'He knows about the revenants,' she said, hoping she still sounded as if she weren't making this up as she went along. 'I don't know whether he knows about this place or not.' *Has this man deciphered my letters to Jamie?* 'He knows Lemoine has been using German prisoners—'

'How did you know how to get inside here?'

'Don Simon – one of the vampires – showed me.'

'Who is your husband working for?'

‘I don’t know,’ said Lydia simply. ‘I haven’t been home since November.’

‘How did—?’ He turned his head sharply at a noise. Movement in the blackness of the crypt and the faint, almost soundless whisper of stirred water. Then eyes gleamed in the lantern-light. Lydia’s heart was in her throat at the thought of a revenant, but it was Tuathla Meagher, her nurse’s uniform damp and dirty now but her face deathlessly beautiful, framed in the blackness of her hair.

Jourel shook Lydia roughly, demanded, ‘Is what this bitch says true? About Francesca?’

‘You’ve noticed, have you?’ The jewel-blue eyes smiled briefly, amused, into Lydia’s, like a child speaking to a puppy. Then her glance returned to the old man. ‘And noticed a great deal more than that, I see. You must be Crowell. I’m Meagher. She’s spoken of you.’

‘Has she, now?’ Jourel – Crowell, and Lydia hoped that actually was his name – gave a single, snickering laugh. ‘The one who was going to raise an army of revenants and free Ireland?’

Meagher waved her hand, like a coquette dismissing the recollections of a schoolroom passion. ‘Guilty as charged, my lord.’ Lydia remembered poor freckled Joey, whispering of freedom for their homeland. ‘I calculate – at the rate she’s deteriorating – it’s going to be about two more days before she loses the ability to keep Lemoine from seeing anything’s wrong. Another beyond that for her mind to disappear. Nasty *cailleach* … I’d have left last night,’ she added, with the sidelong, alluring grin she’d given poor Joey, ‘but I heard you were coming.’

Their gazes locked, and held.

Understanding one another.

Meagher went on, ‘She planned to go to Paris. The master there’s weak, she said. A fool. Moreover, the Master of Paris is *here*, someplace on the Front.’

‘That’s what she said to me,’ returned Crowell. ‘That she and I would rule Paris, forever, between us. But as for laying my life into the hand of a woman I’ve just met two minutes ago …’

‘What choice do you have?’ Meagher stepped closer, sinking her voice though there was no one (except herself, Lydia noted nervously) to hear. ‘Whatever contamination she avoided in her blood, it’s in her brain now. If she made you vampire, it would pass to you. You’d be scratching in a corner eating rats and liking it inside a week. She said you were the best, Crowell: clever and strong and ruthless. With you, she said, she could rule half Europe.’

‘And she would rule me.’ Crowell’s voice was equally soft. ‘But I knew her. We knew each other, worked together, for long, long years. I knew what I’d be getting, as her … partner. And so I waited, while she sought for a way to overcome her barrenness, like a biblical matriarch rooting for mandrakes. But you …’

The vampire smiled again, and shook her head. ‘What choice have you, *mo grá*? All those years of waiting …’ Her voice teased, as if savoring his bitterness. ‘And now ’tis gone, because of her impatience for it … Or was it yours? How many more years would you have waited? *Could* you have waited? How many more years before your own brain started to go, along with your eyesight and your bowels and the heat in your loins?’ Her fingers brushed his body as she spoke of it. ‘How many years till you were too weak to hold onto the hand she stretched out to you, to carry you across Death? She put you at that risk, remember, for the off-chance of having you be *her* servant and no other’s.’

Crowell said nothing, and they stood like lovers, hesitating before a kiss from which each knows there will be no going back. But, Lydia noticed, his grip on her arm did not slacken one bit. Nor his grip on his revolver.

‘And when she comes back,’ whispered Meagher, ‘she’ll want you. She slapped me like a housemaid, only for looking hard at the bruises on her face, where her jaw’s growin’ out into a snout. She wants you for her own fledgling and if you don’t go to her of your own you know she’ll take you. Then the pair of you can sit and eat rats together.

‘This is your last chance.’ The vampire swayed closer to him, blue eyes glowing like sea jewels into his. ‘And you know it. Or do you know another vampire, whom you trust more than me?’

‘You’re something of a *cailleach* yourself,’ murmured Crowell, ‘*acushla*. Here?’

‘I’ve been through the whole of the vault. Even the strays and runaways are gone out; they won’t be back till near dawn. You’ll fall asleep for a few hours …’

Her glance went to Lydia, and her smile widened.

‘And wake hungry.’

TWENTY-SIX

From the hillslope above the Arras road, James Asher could look east across to the ruined land where the French Second Army had driven back the Germans in January.

He'd hiked these roads as a young man, tramping through Picardy during one of his vacations from Oxford, picking up strange old legends and half-forgotten words, tales of Celtic gods or of peasant girls who achieved good fortune from fairies by woodland wells. The well and grotto – the *cuvé* in question – at Sainte-Bride had long been sacred to the goddess who had later been adopted into the Catholic church as a saint, and Asher recalled the scene before him as it had been back in the early eighties: lush meadows dotted with black-and-white cattle, fields hip-deep in growing wheat. Lines of elms, an echo of the back lanes of Kent in his boyhood. Birdsong, and the whisper of wind.

A ghastly wasteland of mud and shell-holes and caved-in trenches under the sickly moon. And – not clearly visible from the road that ran along the feet of these low hills – a hideous suggestion of movement in the abyssal shadows of those trenches.

The Front lay three miles to the east, but the supply-routes to the firing line did not cross these lands. There had been no traffic on the road for hours. A glance at his watch showed Asher that it was a quarter to four. An hour until the first glimmerings of light.

He trained his binoculars on the two figures at the side of the road. A broad-shouldered man in the gray-blue uniform of a French officer, his left arm in a sling. A pale-haired woman in white, like a spirit in the moonlight. He saw her raise her arms, and the man looked out with his own field glasses, over the mud and the darkness.

All along the line of one trench, shadowy forms emerged from the earth. As they shambled toward the road in a ragged line Asher saw movement around their feet, as if the earth squirmed, and he shivered at what he was pretty sure that was. In a way, he thought, Lemoine scarcely needed the revenants, if through them Francesca the White could achieve control over the rats. While he watched, one of the revenants stumbled, staggered and fell, entangled in

the remains of the barbed wire that both sides had stretched across no man's land. Like an insect caught in a spider's web it thrashed, kicked, and the creatures nearest it swung around, converged, almost certainly at the smell of its blood. But at the roadside Francesca the White raised her hand, and the revenants turned away, and kept moving in the line of their march.

Asher estimated the distance. A good half-mile – *Can she operate out of line-of-sight?*

Can she see through their eyes? Their minds?

Vampires could walk in the dreams of the living. Could, under certain circumstances, control their bodies, ride them like rented horses, see through their eyes, speak through their mouths. Single individuals, but what about the collective mind, formed of individual consciousnesses whose self-awareness was gone?

A sound in the trees behind him. Momentary as a thought, the filthy smell that disappeared almost at once …

So not all of them were down across the road. Some, at least, escaped her control. An effect of distance? Or was her control not absolute? Asher listened behind him, heard nothing. Nevertheless, he began to move down slope, to where he'd left the motorcar, concealed by the broken ruin of what had once been a farmhouse.

He moved carefully, knowing he'd be visible to someone across the road in the flatlands, if they happened to look his way. The rise of land where he'd stood had commanded a view of the convent, on the next slope of ground. What little remained of the moon was sinking in the sky, and even shot to pieces and winter-barren, the woods would be pitch dark. He could only hope that Francesca the White and Dr Lemoine were too preoccupied with their observations – and their control – of the revenants to see him.

How much of her mind does she need, to control them? he wondered. *And how is Lemoine going to phrase this, in his report to the French High Command? 'I have turned German prisoners into mindless monsters which I'm paying a vampire to control for us. They're cheap to feed and don't mind being killed and oh, by the way, be very careful about contact with good Frenchmen …'*

And how long is it going to be before we run out of prisoners and start looking for 'volunteers' in our own ranks? He could think of a couple of his scholastic colleagues – not to speak of Marcellus Langham, hungry for his promotion – who'd be perfectly happy to see 'niggers' from India or Algiers pushed into the ranks of mindless cannon fodder. *Ah, well,* 'dulce et decorum est' *and all that, old boy …*

His mind briefly conjured the fifth year of the war, when the Germans had adopted the same method of fighting – *and surely there's a German vampire who wants something badly enough to strike the sort of bargain the White Lady struck* – and no man's land had spread across half the world, revenants mindlessly fighting revenants in the shell-cratered ruins of Paris, London, Berlin …

The revenants broke from their line, and began to move toward the road.

Damn it.

He'd been seen.

He left off the cautious smoothness of his walk and ran for the car, weakness clutching his chest and limbs like a leaden shroud and terror searing him. *Do NOT let yourself be caught, do NOT …*

He stumbled, scrambled up, dizzy and gasping – the foremost grabbed his arms and Asher shucked out of his greatcoat, turned, and fired his pistol point-blank between the creature's eyes. The thing stumbled and Asher didn't look back, knowing it would be on its feet and after him but blind. He reached the car with ten revenants from across the road lumbering toward him – two emerged from the woods behind the car: no thoroughfare in that direction, it would take too long to turn …

He snatched up one of the Mills bombs and flung it at those in front, far too close to the front of the car but he was past caring; crammed himself behind the dashboard and felt the car jolt in the blast, fragments of steel (and of revenants) spattering against the vehicle's sides. *Now if only there's enough left of the road to drive on …*

He came up from behind the dash, yanked the self-starter and got nothing. Half a dozen revenants were only yards away and even those that had been shattered by the blast were crawling in his direction. He turned with his pistol as those behind the car scrambled onto its back …

Then they sprang off, as if the metal were hot.

At the same moment those in the road before him stopped, and turned away. As if he'd suddenly become invisible, or someone had blown a magic whistle.

They started to stride off down the road, in the direction of Cuvé Sainte-Bride.

Asher looked back, automatically, toward where Francesca had stood beside the road, some fifty yards from the car, pale in the moonlight. She was still there, Lemoine grasping her arm – Asher heard him shout something at her but could not make out words. He saw the woman pull against the Frenchman's grip, with a curious, swaying movement that reminded him

eerily of the revenants themselves. Lemoine jerked his hand towards Asher – *Asking something? Ordering something?*

Francesca lunged at him, twisting her arm free and seizing the officer around the neck. Lemoine was taller than she, and built like an old-time warrior; still she twisted and shook, in a single, vicious gesture, and Asher saw the colonel's body spasm and his knees buckle, and knew she'd broken his neck.

Then she was running across the road in a swirl of white: ivory gown, pale hair flowing like a cloak. She moved with the curious light swiftness, faster than any human speed, which the vampires usually hid from living eyes, and the remaining half-dozen revenants stampeded around her.

The roar of a motorcycle made him swing around… .

Chest burning, knees shaking with exhaustion, Asher was too flattened with weariness even to feel surprise at the sight of Don Simon Ysidro on a dispatch rider's 550 Model-H Triumph. 'Get on,' said the vampire.

Asher obeyed, though Ysidro showed no sign of turning the bike around and evidently proposed to head straight past the last of the revenants. 'Where's Lydia?'

'She has to be at the convent. I felt no trace of her when I woke—' They were already careening up the road, weaving past the gore-littered crater left by the Mills bomb, gaining on the revenants – 'but she's not at the clearing station—'

Asher didn't ask what the hell Lydia had been doing at Cuvé Sainte-Bride in the first place, when Ysidro and his '*mignonne*', as Elysée had said, had been reported getting clear of the place …

Unless he has another living assistant that he was seen leaving with …

They swept past the revenants. Francesca had outdistanced them, and was now nowhere in sight.

'They're going to shell it out of existence at sunrise.'

'Good,' said Ysidro. 'Then we'll have to hurry.'

When Meagher came down the narrow stair again Lydia knew it must be shortly before first light.

The small lamp by the stair arch had gone out: Lydia knew they burned for about six hours on one filling, but had no way of knowing how long it had been kindled before the man Crowell had dragged her down to the vaults. Sick horror filled her at the thought that the larger lantern at her side would go out before Crowell woke, leaving her to listen in the darkness.

For revenants. For Crowell. For rats.

For death …

Oh, Miranda, I'm sorry! Jamie, I'm so sorry …

They'd left her handcuffed to the chair while they'd gone upstairs again, to fetch down a cot and a chain. Lydia thought, given time, she could have done something to break the chair – which was a common, wooden kitchen chair – before Crowell woke, but they'd fixed the handcuffs to the chain and the chain around one of the squat Romanesque pillars that held up the groined roof, and she knew there was no getting out of that.

Meagher had drunk Crowell's blood, and he, dying, hers, as she'd laid him down on the cot a few feet from Lydia. Then Meagher had smiled, and with the old man's blood on her lips had come over and given Lydia a playful kiss, enjoying her dread, before disappearing up the stair into the darkness. Lydia had wiped the blood off on her shoulder the moment the vampire was gone.

Then for several hours – as nearly as Lydia could estimate it – she had alternately pulled and twisted at the handcuffs, to utterly no avail, and had watched, with a deep interest that at times overcame her dread, the changes passing over Crowell's dead body.

His eyes didn't settle, as the eyes of corpses do after about thirty minutes. In between bouts of digging and scratching and scraping at the chain where the handcuffs were attached (and which she could not quite reach owing to the chain's tautness around the pillar), she tried to see whether Crowell was developing hypostasis on his shoulders, buttocks and the back of his head. *Probably not*, she thought. *And of course he won't develop rigor either, even in this cold*. She wished the light was better, and that she could examine him more closely. (*And while I'm wishing, I wish that I could run away …*) His face had gone the horrible, bleached, waxy yellow of a corpse's face, and his mouth had dropped slightly open.

His mind, Lydia was well aware – while wondering what that was actually like – was alive, tucked in some corner of Meagher's consciousness.

Some part of it would always stay there.

There's got to be SOME way out of here …

Does Simon know about this sub-crypt? She didn't know. *I don't see how he could. While he's awake the revenants have been down here, and when they're asleep, he's asleep.*

Because they are of the same order of being. Unliving and Undead. Terrifyingly similar …

Now and then she'd lash with her foot at exploring rats, but she noticed that the rats – which, she had observed in the clearing station, were very quick to ascertain when a human being was helpless – went nowhere near the vampire.

In time, even the waxed leather of her stout shoes grew wet, and her feet got numb from cold.

Miranda, she thought, and to her mind came again her last sight of her child, by the nursery fire. Smiling, thinking her mother was only going down to London for a day. *Oh, my poor baby, I hope Jamie gives you all the love I would have done …*

Then Meagher was there, standing on the edge of the lantern-light at the bottom of the stair.

She gave Lydia a smile and stroked her cheek as she passed; her hand, Lydia observed, was warm. She'd fed, either out in no man's land or in the trenches, scavenging the deaths so freely harvested by war. Looking back at Crowell as Meagher crossed to his cot, Lydia observed that the wrinkles had all but disappeared from his face, and that his hair had darkened, from white to a deep, sable brown. A young man's face. The nails on his childlike hands had become glassy and thick, lengthened to half an inch or so beyond the fingertips. In his half-open mouth Lydia glimpsed the fangs. Meagher stood for a moment looking down at him, smiling, and her smile wasn't one of tenderness.

It was a smile of triumph. Of pleasure, and the anticipation of pleasure to come.

He was the best, according to Francesca. The living man who would make a very, very good vampire. Lydia had the uncomfortable feeling she'd met others who fit that description – her stepmother leaped to mind. What had Meagher said? *Smart, strong and ruthless …*

Appetite that cares about nothing but itself.

Francesca had worked with Crowell, for years, evidently, in something of the same way Simon had worked with her and Jamie … *Is that what Simon would say of Jamie? Is that what he'd see in him?*

Exhausted, terrified, it was hard to tell, or to think clearly.

You'll wake hungry …

Meagher knelt in the shallow water at Crowell's side, and bent over him, her black hair framing his face as she pressed her lips to his. Lydia shivered, but couldn't look away. Couldn't mentally keep herself from taking notes. For some reason she thought of the vampire-hunter Osric Millward – *He'd want to know this kind of thing …*

And I'll need to tell Jamie …

But I won't be seeing Jamie again, ever. Or Simon. Or my child …

Crowell's hand twitched, and Meagher covered it with her own. His whole body shivered, and he pulled his hand free, grasped her arm, clung to her for an instant. Their lips still locked, as she released back into him the consciousness, the soul, that she'd carried in her own mind while his body died.

Released it back … but not all of it. She kept part of it within herself.

Then Crowell turned his head, as if denying that his first instinct had been to seek protection, and opened his eyes. They caught the lantern's reflection, like a cat's.

Lydia thought she should probably pray for her own soul but couldn't come up with any words.

'Pritchard?' said Meagher softly, and his hand returned to her arm, stroking this time. '*Mo chroí* …'

'Forty years,' he murmured. 'Forty years I've waited. I always wondered what it would be like. She made me wait … Just so that I would be hers, and not someone else's.'

'And now you're mine.' She nodded toward Lydia, without taking her eyes from Crowell's. 'Are you hungry? Will you play for a bit? Unchain her and blow out the lantern? They're still out with the Others, we have a little time. They won't be back till just before—'

'Whore—' The word came out of the darkness of the stairway like an animal's bleat, hoarse and bestial, as if formed with difficulty and pain. 'Swill-bellied stinking whore—'

Meagher and Crowell swung around like guilty lovers, staring into the darkness.

A white blur shimmered beyond the lantern-light. A huge clawed hand grasped the lintel of the narrow door as Francesca Gheric lurched into the glow.

'You dared. You *dared*—'

Crowell rolled off the cot and darted away into the darkness; Meagher sprang in the opposite direction, as Francesca lunged at her, snatching with her claws. *And now Crowell can get up the stair and away* …

It's what Jamie would have done …

If the woman he was leaving behind wasn't me.

A flicker near the stair – *Yes, that's him, all right* …

Crowell froze with his foot on the lowest step, light and thin and active, a young man again. In the dark of the stair above him, eyes gleamed. Stench rolled into the room like the black exhalation of Hell.

In the darkness Meagher shrieked, and Lydia had to shut her jaw hard to keep from screaming, too. She flattened back against the pillar, watched in terror as the revenants piled into the room. Six of them, mouths stretched open, howling and reaching—

—and running right past her as Francesca shouted, 'Kill them! Kill them!'

Water splashed, dashing about in the blackness as Meagher had moments ago suggested as a game. Meagher screamed again—

The next instant another pair of eyes flashed in the stairway and Simon and Jamie were beside her. Lydia choked back her husband's name as Simon made short work of the chain with a pair of bolt cutters. Behind them Crowell and Meagher screamed, but the two men ran her to the stair and scrambled up the slippery, crooked steps. *If I say anything Francesca will hear me—*

Will she care if we get away?

Probably not – she seemed MUCH more interested in making sure the revenants chomped up Meagher and Crowell – *but let's not take chances …*

She clung to the arms that held her in the darkness, Jamie's lanky with muscle, Simon's like a dancer's, leading the way through the abysses. She was aware of it when Jamie stumbled – *Good Heavens, he shouldn't be running around breaking into vampire lairs anyway …*

Through a doorway and into the storeroom with the drain in the floor, and the electric light of the laboratory pouring from the corridor. Jamie – as sheet-white as a vampire but looking far less healthy – rushed her along that hallway toward the stair and Lydia straightened her glasses and gasped, 'What about the guards?'

'Gone,' he panted. 'The prisoners, too. The Twelfth Field Artillery Battery is going to start shelling this place in eight minutes— Sunrise—'

Lydia looked back in panic, but Simon was gone. Stumbling, Jamie dragged her up the stair, through an old stone room and then through a modern wooden one, and out into a courtyard gray with misty dawnlight. *If they shell it as they did the chapel by the lilacs even the deepest vault will be laid bare. The light will consume Francesca, destroy the revenants …*

Burn Simon to ashes …

NO …

There was a motorcycle in the middle of the courtyard and Jamie flung himself onto it, Lydia straddling the carrier *à l'Amazone* and clinging around her husband's waist. The morning air was freezing and she barely felt it. Rooster tails of liquescent mud splattered up around them in all directions as they roared toward the open gate, between the lines of barbed wire and the defensive trench, past the empty guardhouse and along the rutted track toward the Arras road.

Simon, she thought. *Simon can get to the tunnel that leads to the well, hidden in the darkness …*

Will that be protection enough?

She knew she shouldn't hope that it would be. Pressed her cheek to Jamie's back, and hung on tight.

Distantly – five miles at least – heavy guns began to sound, and in moments she heard the shattering freight-train roar of shells overhead. The

road beneath them lurched, making the motorcycle jerk like a terrified horse, and even at this distance Lydia felt the shock wave of the first explosions, and the vicious spray of rocks and hot dirt pelting her back.

By the time they stopped to breathe, four or five miles down the road toward Pont-Sainte-Félicité, Lydia had stopped crying.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Lydia got two weeks' leave, to go back to England.

Jamie didn't.

'This is what I traded to Stewart,' he said, 'for that "at his sole discretion" and "any and all assistance" on my papers.'

Against the glowing lights of the clearing station's tents shadows moved, preparing men for surgery, ascertaining how much damage had been done, writing tickets for the next stage of care. Now and then, in one of the wooden buildings – or the additions built onto the charred ruins of Pont Sainte-Félicité – a door would open, and men's voices would be heard. Storeman Pratt walked by the bench where they sat, outside the officer's mess, with what looked like an entire crate of cigarettes casually tucked under his arm.

The wet, grievous stink of mud and smoke and decaying flesh mingled with the smell of the river, and the April green of a few ruined trees.

'The understanding was that I'd have a free hand – a *completely* free hand – in gathering information, even if it meant shelling a French Army research project on the grounds that it was actually being used by Germans. I had to commit myself to gathering information.'

He coughed, deeply and painfully. He'd spent forty-eight hours in the Isolation Ward with a low fever and Lydia thought he still looked haggard and shaky. It was good only to sit beside him, to hold his hand.

Near the makeshift bridge, ambulance-wagons rumbled in and bearers clustered around with their lanterns, and from the corner of her eye Lydia thought she saw two shadows – the dark woman with the big nose, and a gray-haired man like a Slavic god – flit in the direction of the Moribund Ward.

Far off, the guns boomed like thunder.

'Is that what you told them? That it was really the Germans behind that project?'

Jamie had spent most of the afternoon – when he should have been sleeping – writing up a report about why he'd instructed the men of Field Artillery Battery Twelve to shell Cuvé Sainte-Bride into a crater of sunbathed dust.

‘With Colonel Lemoine dead I could say anything I wanted. I said that the whole project was a German plan to spread plague among our troops. I wasn’t that far from the truth.’

‘He meant well.’ Lydia shook her head. ‘So did poor Meagher. I wish I could feel towards them something other than horror at the means they proposed to use. At their blindness to the devastation it would cause.’

‘They meant well,’ agreed Jamie quietly. ‘And too often, people who mean well find it hard to believe that the thing that will win them their victory is too dangerous to use, or might have consequences that they don’t foresee. And don’t want to hear arguments to the contrary.’

He lifted his hand to return Captain Palfrey’s salute as that young man walked past in hospital blues. It was Palfrey’s first day on his feet; the young man had asked Lydia, daily, when she’d gone in to visit him, if she had heard word of ‘Colonel Simon’. He clearly had not the smallest recollection of the scene in the laboratory. Or he recalled it quite differently.

Jamie had surmised – when he and Lydia had talked it over – that it was Don Simon bringing Palfrey out of the well that Johanna of Berlin had seen and told Elysée about. With the woman’s bad French it was not surprising that Elysée had mistaken the sex of the reported ‘minion’. He had also filled in for her his recollections of Pritchard Crowell: ‘Had I still been working with him, once I came to know the London nest, I think I would have spotted at once that he had a vampire partner. At least I like to think I would.’

‘And your Mr Langham covered for him, when he faked his own death … What was it, twenty years ago?’

Jamie had nodded. ‘I suspect if I’d continued much longer in the service I’d have been obliged to do the same,’ he said. ‘It isn’t uncommon in the Department. You go into hiding, you make a new life, where those you’ve wronged and those you’ve betrayed and those whose loved ones you’ve killed won’t find you. But the Department knows. And the Department can always come calling, if they need you.’

As Simon had, thought Lydia, eight years ago, when the London nest found itself in need of a day man.

‘Or members of the Department,’ he’d added, ‘who have some little scheme of their own going, in hopes of a promotion or a knighthood.’

Lydia hoped that in time Captain Palfrey would return to his grandfather’s estate and ‘wait for orders’ that would never come. That he’d marry his lovely Miss Bellingham and live happily ever after without ever returning to Europe again.

Now she asked softly, ‘Will you be all right?’

Jamie nodded, and coughed again. ‘Mostly what I’ll be doing is listening,’ he said. ‘Dressing up in German uniform and sitting with prisoners. Finding out about troop movements, and conditions in the Fatherland. Looking at pictures and newspaper articles, deducing the conditions of their economy from toffee wrappers. Letting the boffins back in England guess where we need to apply pressure, and what kind of inducements to hold out if they ever get round to negotiating for truce.’

‘Will they make you go to Germany?’

He was a long while silent. Then: ‘I don’t know.’

‘I’m committed to another year here,’ she said after a time. ‘Ellen writes me that Miranda is well and happy with Aunt Lavinnia, but asks after us. I think when my year is up I’ll ask for my papers, depending on where you are in your work. It must have been hard for you,’ she added, ‘signing up …’

Another silence. James, Lydia had learned, was a man who didn’t speak easily of could-be’s or might-have-been’s. Like herself, he dealt with the world as it came at him. At length he said, ‘They had to be stopped.’

He’d spoken to her of getting help from the vampire-hunter Osric Millward. In times past they’d made the man a figure of fun, but she knew that in his heart Jamie understood him. And understood that he was right.

‘It’s all very well to talk about doing evil that good may come, best beloved,’ he went on. ‘But the problem about evil is that the line is seldom clear, how evil is evil. And how much evil will bleed into the good you’re trying to do – like the virus of the revenants, spreading in one’s veins.’

‘Not to speak,’ added Don Simon Ysidro’s soft voice, ‘of the difficulty one can have in distinguishing when evil is masquerading as good.’

He stepped from the darkness, his uniform new and trim and looking as if he’d never gone crawling through old drains or cut his way through barbed wire, or done whatever he’d done to get himself to safety. He took Lydia’s hand in his own gloved one, and bent over it.

‘I am glad to see you well, Mistress. And yourself, James.’

With an ironic twist to his mouth, Jamie saluted him, which the vampire calmly returned.

‘You will be pleased to hear that the matter of the shelling of Cuvé Sainte-Bride is being hushed up under the Official Secrets Act,’ he reported. ‘And that those of us who hunt the night have passed across no man’s land for two days now, and have encountered no sign of revenants. I understand Colonel Lemoine’s body was recovered after the destruction of Cuvé Sainte-Bride, and returned to his family, with no stain on his record.’

‘Thank you,’ Jamie said quietly. ‘That means a great deal, to families.’

‘It did to mine.’

The vampire turned to Lydia, and again took her hand. ‘And you are returning to England, lady?’

‘For two weeks.’ She spoke around a sudden tightness in her throat. ‘I’m taking the evening train from St-Omer Thursday. I’ll return to finish out my year—’ She fought back the grief she felt, the concern about all those young men in the surgical tent, the hundreds – thousands – who had passed beneath her hands since November. ‘But I don’t want you watching over me when I return. Nor ever again.’

He said nothing, and there was neither grief, nor question, nor surprise in his yellow eyes.

Beside her, Jamie was silent also, though she felt his eyes touch her.

‘I don’t care how much trouble I get in,’ she made herself go on. ‘Or what’s happening around me, or whether I need help or not. I can’t …’

He inclined his head. ‘As you will, lady.’

‘And I release you,’ added Jamie quietly, ‘from whatever promise you made to me, Don Simon.’

‘I understand.’ His glance returned to Lydia, and she knew that he did.

She turned her hand in his, and holding it, drew off his silk-fine, gray kid glove, and felt his fingers, clawed like a dragon’s. They were warm. He’d fed.

Probably over in the Moribund Ward …

With the others of his kind.

Fed on young men dying, men she’d cared for that afternoon. She remembered their faces. Their wounds. The names they’d whispered in delirium, friends and sweethearts and children they’d never see again.

She couldn’t speak.

‘I chose to be as I am,’ said Simon quietly. ‘Not the best decision in my life, but one from which there is no going back. No more than these men—’ He nodded towards the soft glow of the tents – ‘can go back from the choice they made. I can be nothing but what I am, lady: a killer who devours the lives of others. I do not ask you to forgive me either my choice, or my current state.’

She couldn’t look at him, either. Only sat, looking down at the long, slim hand in hers.

A demon’s hand.

He saved my life at the risk of his own. And … She shut her mind on the further thought: *And I care for him …*

How can I go on accepting that he kills people, regularly, for his own benefit?

There could be no condoning what he was – what he did, and the side of his existence that he hid from her – no matter how convenient it was for her.

Gently he withdrew his hand, and she was desolate at the thought of never hearing his voice again.

Asher and Lydia got a ride on an ambulance-wagon to St-Omer the following afternoon. They had dinner in a small *auberge* near the cathedral, then walked to the station in the damp cold of the spring night: Lydia had some twenty minutes to wait for her train to Calais; Asher's, to Amiens, would leave in an hour. They were standing together, handfast, marveling in one another's presence, speaking softly of Oxford and Miranda and what codes they'd use to defeat the censors, when shouting started around the telegraph offices at the end of the platform: Asher heard someone yell, 'Ypres!'

Another Jerry push, he thought. The one everybody had been expecting.

People crowded in that direction. Military police and railway officials began to work their way along the platform, stopping people from getting on the trains.

''Strewth!' exclaimed a young man in a sapper's uniform close by, to a friend on a stretcher. 'They fookin' better not be confiscatin' these trains—'

Lydia's eyes widened in protesting dismay, and yes, the officials were getting on the trains, herding people off, soldiers mostly bound for leave, a few civilians complaining vociferously that they had their papers, by God …

The crowd mobbed tighter around the telegraph office, and Asher heard someone shout, 'Poison gas—'

He caught the arm of one of the military police as the man moved toward Lydia's train. 'What is it?'

'Jerry's hit Ypres. Chlorine gas – four miles of line – thousands of the French dead in minutes—' The man's voice shook a little. 'Most of 'em drowned in the fluid in their own lungs. Or had their eyes burned out. We're gonna need every train.'

The shouting was growing louder, as crowds of soldiers jostled on the platforms. Bearers were already coming to carry the wounded back to waiting rooms. People called questions, cursed, groaned. A delicate little VAD, bringing tea to the waiting men on the stretchers, swore like a sergeant of the Marines.

'—still fighting – Canadians holdin' the line, some of the Frenchies as well. Damn bloody bastards—'

Asher didn't mention that the French had also experimented with poison gas.

Behind her thick spectacles, Lydia's eyes filled with tears.

She said quietly, 'I have to go back.'

'I know.'

‘Please …’ She stayed the sergeant, as he would have gone on. ‘Transport back to the Front … I’m an expert at fluoroscope. I should get back to my unit …’

‘Bless you, M’am.’ The man saluted her. ‘Where’ll that be?’

‘The clearing station at Pont-Sainte-Félicité.’

‘There’ll be a convoy of ambulance-wagons outside the City Hall at ten. But they may take you on up to Ypres instead …’

‘That’s all right. Thank you …’

She turned back to Asher. ‘If they cancel your train—’

‘I’ll find another.’ He took her in his arms, kissed her gently. ‘And I’ll wire Ellen, and your aunt—’

Her arms tightened hard around him, pulling back only a moment to remove her spectacles before pressing her face to his shoulder. ‘I’m sorry—’

‘Go.’ He kissed her temple, then, when she raised her face to his, her lips. ‘I’ll write to you there, and let you know where I am.’

It was ten minutes to ten. He watched her walk away along the platform, tallish, skinny, her gray nurse’s cloak billowing slightly around the carpetbag she carried, her red hair screwed tightly up under her nurse’s cap and already working itself loose from its pins …

The most beautiful woman in the world.

And the flame that had warmed his heart back to life, from beneath the cold ash that the Department had left of it. With lucid certainty he knew that she was the reason he hadn’t turned into Pritchard Crowell.

‘*Why not?*’ Grippen had asked.

There was the reason.

As she disappeared into the darkness outside the station’s doors, he thought he saw a slim figure in a British colonel’s uniform – a flicker of pale hair like cobwebs – follow her into the night.