

PROLOGUE

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 11TH, 1877.
PLEVEN. BULGARIA.

“Whoever knew men could bleed so much?”

The Priest’s knees trembled as he took a step forward from the assembly of clerics into a landscape of nightmares. A hand caught and steadied the ailing figure, holding him firm until his nausea had passed.

Everywhere was covered in blood. In the cloying, churned earth, dashed across the rocks, gathered in curdled puddles from the heat of the day. Over the carpet of bodies piled on the cold ground.

“Is this really a vision of our dream?” the Priest asked, as a taller cleric, bearded and dressed in a black satin robe inlaid with carefully laced fabrics and glistening jewels, pushed past him to stand ahead of the gathered congregation. Slowly he surveyed the ruined, blasted battlements, where a mighty fortress had stood only a short time before.

“No,” he said, beside a shattered column of rubble, once a vast support for the Turkish southern defences. He turned his head to look at the Priests who had accompanied him to this hellish place. “This is no dream. It is a nightmare. One that will soon embrace the entire world.”

All in their party fell quiet, the only sounds those of the battlefield being cleared by those who had survived. The sounds of suffering and disorder polluted the silence, the moans of the wounded and the dying, the shrill whinny of horses trying helplessly to rise from the dirt onto shattered limbs, the panicked shouts of Russian officers attempting to regain control of their broken troops and urgently strengthen defences at the hard-fought site.

The clinging stench of smoke, the stink of gunpowder and butchery drifted across the battlefield, ravaging senses, choking throats. All life had been torn from the land with the weight of the conflict, leaving everything black and grey and crimson, everything smashed, turned to stones and wooden splinters. Every inch of the landscape had been burnt and charred, as if a great fire had been unleashed on the Turkish defences that had guarded the place and consumed almost all within it. Blackened craters littered the ground, filled with contorted bodies, twisted and torn, soldiers

blown apart and lying where they had come to rest, so that they looked as if they were emerging from the fetid earth, clawing their way into the light.

For those not blasted away into bloodied hunks of meat, their bodies had taken on a drawn pallid hue, slaughtered and left to ripen under the infernal sun. Blood still dripped from the open wounds, nostrils and mouths of those caught by shrapnel, rifle bullets or the bayonet's charge. In places, Russians and Turks lay side by side, some in an embrace as if holding onto each other in a final death pact.

One of the Priests cleared his throat. "General Skobelev has taken the southern fortresses. He will hold them –"

"– until the Turks return," answered the great bearded Priest, his skin as white as the dead about him, "and in greater numbers too. We must work quickly." He peered back across the dusky landscape to the valley on the far side from where they had first entered the battlefield, towards the bleached white tent pavilion nestled on the grey granite hillside.

"They are watching," spoke the cleric who had come to close to fainting. "Czar Alexander and the Grand Duke."

"Of course they are watching us," replied the High Priest, casting his black glittering robe wide. "We promised them a miracle. Let us not leave them disappointed."

He went forward, his eyes fixed on the corpse-ridden floor over which they walked, as if searching for a specific spot, a certain location upon which to draw down his spell.

"The enemy might come back at any time!" called one of the party, his eyes trained to the far horizon.

"They will return," replied the Priest, "but not yet. Not till our work is done. It was so decreed. Here!" He commanded with a finger thrust towards the shattered ground, close to where a lone tree still stood, so much of it blasted away that only its twisted trunk and a solitary branch remained. Blood dripped from its bark, as if it were bleeding. "Set down the items here."

At once the Priests scurried forward and laid out the elaborate relics with well-trained efficiency and speed. A large silken black cloth was unrolled and set out on the churned ground, over which they laid a length of white ribbon and black candles, as thick as a man's wrist, set as the points of a star.

The moon, still drenched in the blood-red of sunset, had risen so that it sat like a dull orb in the heavens, weakly illuminating the spot where the Priests worked. Barely a breeze now graced the place the High Priest had chosen, as if nature itself had fallen silent to acknowledge the dark powers gathering.

A shard of crimson moonlight shone through the remaining tangle of twigs of the single branch, catching the folds of the Priest's dark cloak and making the gemstones sparkle like watchful eyes. He stepped back to the black cloth and regarded the assembly of objects laid before him. It seemed to please him and he smiled, turning his head heavenward, studying something within the stars. Around him the Priests had formed a circle, every eye trained on him alone.

"Will it be enough?" someone whispered.

"We have followed the ritual. Mirrored the sins. We have done all that was required of us."

"Twenty thousand lives?" another said. "Surely that is ample?"

"For them is anything enough?"

The bejewelled Priest drew himself up to his full height, his eyes staring hard into the fiery sunset. He drew a staff from his cloak, the head of which had been whittled into the image of a horned ram. At once lightning began to flicker in the heavens, and he turned his head to admire it. Thunder rumbled from the deep valleys leading down towards the Black Sea far in the east. A storm was growing. All eyes turned to scour the heavens for signs as to their coming, evidence that a link had been made. Crows, drawn by the summoning magicks and activity, had gathered in great numbers around the jagged stones and blasted trees, croaking and yammering angrily.

"For too long they have lain chained deep within the Abyss," the bearded Priest began, his voice deep, like the rumbling thunder. "They are blind to all but darkness and fire eternal, unable to feel anything but their jailers' wicked instruments of torture upon their calloused hides. But they have heard our every word, and they hear our words now! We call out to them, beseech them to prepare, for the time of their returning is nigh."

Lightning flashes streaked across the black heavens, the dark sky slashed open by forked barbs of slivery blue.

"They who would sacrifice all and nothing for their master, they who would fight and die, and yet can never be destroyed, for his majesty and his safe returning and reign, for they are as old as the foundations of time itself and created in the very fires of when time too was made."

He threw his arms wide as if crucified on an invisible cross, his left hand still clutching firm to the staff.

"Deadened eyes. Torn bloodied skin. Branded tongues burnt from toothless mouths. These are signs pleasing to our Lord. He has seen the sacrifices we have made for him here on this plain, ensuring the nourishing life-blood of the fallen has seeped down into the bowels of his domain. For too long

this world has been full of light and life. A new age is coming, foretold by many, an age of apocalypse and ruin for those who choose not to believe, not to follow, not to give themselves entirely to his darkness and might.”

At once, the storm seemed to dissipate and everything fell deathly still. He let his arms drop to his side. “Bring the final offering!” he called in a clear ringing voice. The crowds parted and a haggard beaten man was dragged out. He was bound by his torn wrists, but still wrestled as best he could between the two heavily muscled Priests who bundled him forward into the circle.

“Does he carry the marks of those who went before?” the bearded figure asked, as the man was thrown to his knees on the sodden bloody earth. “Of those who walked the earth as giants long ago, whose veins beat with the blood of Satan? The Nephelim?”

“He does,” answered one of the Priests flanking the prisoner, reaching down and pulling up his bound hands so that the High Priest could see them clearly in the light of the pale moon. On both hands the man possessed six fingers.

The bearded Priest nodded approvingly. “We have soaked the lands with the pure blood of the innocents,” he announced, drawing his arms once again wide. “Into this let us spill Satan’s blood, the blood that courses within his descendant’s veins before me.”

A pair of ornate knives flashed from the Priest’s belt and he held them high above his robed head. The grips were lined with finger holes, six of them on each dagger. A bolt of white light clashed with the glowing red dusk in the west.

“Please!” pleaded the bound man on his knees, weeping and spluttering, pressed down into the earth by the weighty hand of one of the guarding Priests. “Please! Let me go! I don’t know what you mean! I’m a good man! A farmer! I know nothing of Satan!” Through tears he looked up desperately at the circle of Priests around him. “You’re Catholics, like me. I recognise some of you. From local Mass. Whatever is the matter with you?”

The High Priest sneered, as if the man’s words were blasphemy. “Gag him!” he commanded. “Let his tongue not tarnish this moment or erode the incantations of the spell.”

At once a rag was produced and pushed roughly into the man’s mouth.

“Abaddon, Prince of Darkness, Lord of the Abyss,” the Priest called to the heavens, the veins in his neck protruding at the force of his voice. “I summon thee and thy six princes forth from your chains of Hell! Cross over the Abyss! Ascend, and make manifest yourselves within our mortal

world and with our mortal semblance. For *he* is to return soon and *he* must be protected. We are willing servants but unable to provide him the succour and protection he requires as he prepares to ascend once more to his throne. Only thou, and thy lieutenants, can offer him the solace of the shield and the mace. Share with us thy thoughts and make known to me thy will, for thou art our guardians, and we are thy foot soldiers.”

Abruptly the candles flickered as one and were extinguished by a phantom breeze.

“The flames have gone out!” someone exclaimed.

“There are new lights!” a voice cried from the opposite side of the watching circle. “Coming from within the star upon the cloth!” Tiny pinpricks of light, red and yellow spheres of flame and sparkling emeralds of fire had begun to manifest within the space above the pentagram marked out on the black background, turning and swirling as if stirred by unseen hands.

“They are gathering!” another voice called. “They are come!”

“It is them! They are coming across! They are coming!”

The dark High Priest stood unwavering, his eyes dazzled by the fire show he had summoned.

“With these blades we commit this final sacrifice.” He spoke the words like an oath, before turning to stare at the gagged man. “Your fate has been decided by the blood which courses in your veins, that of the descendants from the city of Gath, those of the Nephelim, those of Lord Satan. Through your ancestry, your role is prophesied.” The man shook his head and hung it low, sobbing into the choking cloth in his mouth.

“Let the blood of this sacrifice, given willingly by one of your descendants, merge with that of the others fallen in this place,” the High Priest began, “be as a lifeblood to their returning. We have praised you in the three sins, we have given you this mass sacrifice to provide succour for your thirsty tongues. Now we ask you to come across the great divide and be amongst us, to act as his defenders, his lieutenants, and guide us all for when he returns.”

With this, the man’s hands were cut free and the daggers presented for him to take. He hesitated, and heavy hands took hold of him roughly round the neck, forcing him towards the ornate blades. The weeping man grasped the hilts weakly, his six fingers slipping into the six assigned holes, and looked to his left and right, considering his chances of fleeing. But, as if those who guarded him read his thoughts, heavy hands grabbed his shoulders and pulled up his wrists so that the knife blades were held tight to his throat.

“You have a choice,” the High Priest revealed, and the man immediately looked up through his tears, “whether to live a thousand lifetimes within the deepest prisons of hell, your soul condemned to the damnation of the head jailer’s whip, or” – his eyes narrowed on the prisoner – “to cut your own throat.”

The bearded Priest looked down at the gagged man, his eyes boring into him, commanding him to act. The man could feel the pristine edge of the knives against his neck, the sting as they marked his skin. Once again he looked to either side, where all around the Priests were gathering closer to witness this final act. He knew there could be no chance of fleeing now, no way out of his predicament. For the last few weeks he had been held by these Priests, snatched from Mass at his local church three weeks ago and kept locked in a horse-drawn carriage as they had crossed mountains and borders to reach this place, wherever this place was. At first they had spoken kindly to him, fed and watered him. Assured him through the bars of the carriage door that he had nothing to fear. But now he knew what their intentions were. Death could be his only escape. He was a God-fearing man, but he feared the Devil even more. The thought of a thousand lifetimes within the confines of hell tormented him. He wept and remembered how painless the deaths of his goats seemed when his own butchering blade was drawn firmly across their necks.

The knives flashed one more time and then dripped with dark crimson as he toppled forward onto the blades, his severed neck bubbling with the last of his escaping breath. A cry of rejoicing went up from the crowd.

“We have bathed the lands with the blood of our enemies and drenched the spot through which they will emerge with *his* blood. Come now! Return and delay no longer!”

The dark Priest’s words had barely reached the ears of the congregation when a sudden explosion of heat and flame erupted from the middle of the ring of figures, engulfing everyone in foul choking sulphurous smoke and knocking them all to the ground. About the blasted trees and crumbled foundations of the broken fortress, crows leapt from foot to foot before suddenly tumbling and falling like stones to the floor, struck instantly dead.

As the sulphur clouds lifted and the flames died, the High Priest staggered wearily to his feet, the left side of his face blistered and smoking from where he had been struck by the explosion of flame. He stared hard at the spot out of which he had expected the demons to appear, his body slumped in failed resignation.

“Damnation,” he growled, like a curse.

“Where are they?” someone asked, looking about the scorched earth. Fireflies of light fizzed and flared in the circle, spiralling above the dead body of the six-fingered sacrifice, climbing higher with every passing second. “Have they come through?”

“Have they come amongst us?” another voice asked.

“I see nothing! There is nothing!”

“No,” growled the High Priest, his dark eyes fixed on the lifeless body slumped across the now scorched ribbon. “The sacrifice was not enough. Twenty thousand fallen on this battlefield. It has proved to be not enough to raise them from the Abyss. But something has come through.”

“How do you know? How can you tell?”

A sudden chill wind gathered among the stunned audience, tugging at their robes and gowns, crackling and spinning the last of the lights like flying embers from a dying fire. But as quickly as the wind rose, it fell away and at once the deathly calm of the battlefield returned.

“Can you not feel it?” muttered the High Priest, his burnt face impassioned. “A change has come. Something has come through. Something beneath which the wheels of oblivion shall turn.”

From a ramshackle wooden house on the rocky ridge, the agonised screams of a woman shattered the quiet of the Tatra Mountain night.

“Push, Zofia!” implored the giant of a man between her feet. “Push! Our child, he is almost through!”

The mother-to-be bit hard into her bottom lip and pushed with all the strength her body could muster. At once she felt the child slip out of her and with it the pain.

“It’s a boy!” cried the huge man, cradling the bloodied child within his huge hands. “It’s a boy, Zofia! It’s a boy!”

“My darling,” Zofia wept, reaching out to take the child from him and bundling the tiny infant to her breast. “He is beautiful!”

“He is like his mother!”

“He is strong, like his father Eryk!” Zofia shot back, tears of joy and love in her eyes. “Whatever shall we call him?”

“He is a rare and beautiful thing, precious like a bloodstone,” said Eryk, placing a hand upon his son’s head. “Poldek! We will call him Poldek, after the gemstone he embodies. Poldek Tacit, born of compassion and generosity!”