

INNOCENT BLOOD

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*December 18, 9:58 A.M. PST
Palo Alto, California*

An edge of panic kept her tense.

As Dr. Erin Granger entered the lecture hall on the Stanford campus, she glanced across its breadth to make sure she was alone. She even crouched and searched under the empty seats, making certain no one was hiding there. She kept one hand on the Glock 19 in her ankle holster.

It was a beautiful winter morning, the sun hanging in a crisp, cloud-studded blue sky. With bright light streaming through the tall windows, she had little to fear from the dark creatures that haunted her nightmares.

Still, after all that had befallen her, she knew that her fellow man was just as capable of evil.

Straightening again, she reached the lectern in front of the classroom and let out a quiet sigh of relief. She knew her fears were illogical, but that didn't stop her from checking that the hall was safe before her students trooped in. As annoying as college kids could be, she would fight to the death to keep each one of them from harm.

She wouldn't fail a student again.

Erin's fingers tightened on the scuffed leather satchel in her hand. She had to force her fingers to open and place her bag next to the lectern. With her gaze still roaming the room, she unbuckled the satchel and pulled out her notes for the lecture. Usually she memorized her

presentations, but she had taken over this class for a professor on maternity leave. It was an interesting topic, and it kept her from dwelling on the events that had upended her life, starting with the loss of her two graduate students in Israel a couple of months before.

Heinrich and Amy.

The German student had died from injuries sustained following an earthquake. Amy's death had come later, murdered because Erin had unwittingly sent forbidden information to her student, knowledge that had gotten the young woman killed.

She rubbed her palms, as if trying to wipe away that blood, that responsibility. The room seemed suddenly colder. It couldn't have been more than fifty degrees outside and not much warmer in the classroom. Still, the shivers that swept through her as she prepared her papers had nothing to do with the room's poor heating system.

Returned again to Stanford, she should have felt good to be home, wrapped in the familiar, in the daily routines of a semester winding toward Christmas break.

But she didn't.

Because nothing was the same.

As she straightened and prepared this morning's lecture notes, her students arrived in ones and twos, a few climbing down the stairs to the seats in front, but most hanging back and folding down the seats in the uppermost rows.

"Professor Granger?"

Erin glanced to her left and discovered a young man with five silver hoops along one eyebrow approaching her. The student wore a determined expression on his face as he stepped in front of her. He carried a camera with a long lens over one shoulder.

"Yes?" She didn't bother to mask the irritation in her voice.

He placed a folded slip of paper atop the wooden lectern and slid it toward her.

Behind him, the other students in the room looked on, nonchalant, but they were unconvincing actors. She could tell they watched her, wondering what she would do. She didn't need to open that slip of paper to know that it contained the young man's phone number.

"I'm from the *Stanford Daily*." He played with a hoop in his eyebrow. "I was hoping for one quick interview for the school newspaper?"

She pushed the slip of paper back toward him. “No, thank you.”

She had refused all interview requests since returning from Rome. She wouldn’t break her silence now, especially as everything she was allowed to say was a lie.

To hide the truth of the tragic events that had left her two students dead, a story had been put out that she had been trapped three days in the Israeli desert, entombed amid the rubble following an earthquake at Masada. According to that false account, she was discovered alive, along with an army sergeant named Jordan Stone and her sole surviving graduate student, Nate Highsmith.

She understood the necessity of a cover story to explain the time she had spent working for the Vatican, a subterfuge that was further supported by an elite few in the government who also knew the truth. The public wasn’t ready for stories of monsters in the night, of the dark underpinnings that supported the world at large.

Still, necessity or not, she had no intention of elaborating on those lies.

The student with the line of eyebrow rings persisted. “I’d let you review the story before I post it. If you don’t like every single bit, we can work with it until you do.”

“I respect your persistence and diligence, but it does not change my answer.” She gestured to the half-full auditorium. “Please, take your seat.”

He hesitated and seemed about to speak again.

She pulled herself up to her full height and fixed him with her sternest glare. She stood only five foot eight, and with her blond hair tied back in a casual ponytail, she didn’t strike as the most intimidating figure.

Still, it was all about the attitude.

Whatever he saw in her eyes drove him back to the gathering students, where he sank quickly into his seat, keeping his face down.

With the matter settled, she tapped her sheaf of notes into a neat pile and drew the class to order. “Thank you all for coming to the final session of History 104: Stripping the Divine from Biblical History. Today we will discuss common misconceptions about a religious holiday that is almost upon us, namely *Christmas*.”

The bongs of laptops powering up replaced the once familiar sound of rustling paper as students prepared to take notes.

“What do we celebrate on December twenty-fifth?” She let her gaze play across the students—some pierced, a few tattooed, and several who looked hungover. “December twenty-fifth? Anyone? This one’s a gimme.”

A girl wearing a sweatshirt with an embroidered angel on the front raised her hand. “The birth of Christ?”

“That’s right. But when was Christ actually *born*?”

No one offered an answer.

She smiled, warming past her fears as she settled into her role as teacher. “That’s smart of you all to avoid that trap.” That earned a few chuckles. “The date of Christ’s birth is actually a matter of some dispute. Clement of Alexandria said . . .”

She continued her lecture. A year ago, she would have said that no one alive today knew the actual date of Christ’s birth. She couldn’t say that anymore, because as part of her adventures in Israel, Russia, and Rome, she had met someone who *did know*, someone who was alive when Christ was born. In that moment back then, she had realized how much of accepted history was *wrong*—either masked by ignorance or obscured by purposeful deceptions to hide darker truths.

As an archaeologist, one who sought the history hidden under sand and rock, such a revelation had left her unsettled, unmoored. After returning to the comfortable world of academia, she discovered that she could no longer give the simplest lecture without careful thought. Telling her students the truth, if not the whole truth, had become nearly impossible. Every lecture felt like a lie.

How can I continue walking that line, lying to those I’m supposed to teach the truth?

Still, what choice did she have? After having that door briefly opened, revealing the hidden nature of the world, it had been shut just as soundly.

Not shut. Slammed in my face.

Cut off from those truths hidden behind that door, she was left on the outside, left to wonder what was real and what was false.

Finally, the lecture came to an end. She hurriedly wiped clean the whiteboard, as if trying to erase the falsehoods and half-truths found there. At least, it was over. She congratulated herself on making it through the final lecture of the year. All that was left now was

to grade her last papers—then she would be free to face the challenge of Christmas break.

Across that stretch of open days, she pictured the blue eyes and hard planes of a rugged face, the full lips that smiled so easily, the smooth brow under a short fall of blond hair. It would be good to see Sergeant Jordan Stone again. It had been several weeks since she had last seen him in person—though they spoke often over the phone. She wasn't sure where this relationship was going long term, but she wanted to be there to find out.

Of course, that meant picking out the perfect Christmas gift to express that sentiment. She smiled at that thought.

As she began to erase the last line from the whiteboard, ready to dismiss the students behind her, a cloud smothered the sun, cloak-ing the classroom in shadow. The eraser froze on the board. She felt momentarily dizzy, then found herself falling away into—

Absolute darkness.

Stone walls pressed her shoulders. She struggled to sit. Her head smashed against stone, and she fell back with a splash. Frantic hands searched a black world.

Stone all around—above, behind, on all sides. Not rough stone as if she were buried under a mountain. But smooth. Polished like glass.

Along the top of the box was a design worked in silver. It scorched her fingertips.

She gulped, and wine filled her mouth. Enough to drown her.

Wine?

A door at the rear of the hall slammed shut, yanking her back into the classroom. She stared at the eraser on the whiteboard, her fingers clutched tightly to it, her knuckles white.

How long have I stood here like this? In front of everyone.

She guessed no more than a few seconds. She'd had bouts like this before over the past few weeks, but never in front of anyone else. She'd dismissed them as posttraumatic stress and had hoped they would go away by themselves, but this last was the most vivid of them all.

She took a deep breath and turned to face her class. They seemed unconcerned, so she couldn't have been out of it for too long. She must get this under control before something worse happened.

She looked toward the door that had slammed.

A welcome figure stood at the back of the hall. Noting her atten-

tion, Nate Highsmith lifted up a large envelope and waved it at her. He smiled apologetically, then headed down the classroom in cowboy boots, a hitch in his step a reminder of the torture he had endured last fall.

She tightened her lips. She should have protected him better. And Heinrich. And most especially Amy. If Erin hadn't exposed the young woman to danger, she might still be alive today. Amy's parents wouldn't be spending their first Christmas without their daughter. They had never wanted Amy to be an archaeologist. It was Erin who finally convinced them to let her come along on the dig in Israel. As the senior field researcher, Erin had assured them their daughter would be safe.

In the end, she had been terribly, horribly wrong.

She tilted her boot to feel the reassuring bulge of the gun against her ankle. She wouldn't get caught flat-footed again. No more innocents would die on her watch.

She cleared her throat and returned her attention to the class. "That wraps it up, folks. You're all dismissed. Enjoy your winter holidays."

While the room emptied, she forced herself to stare out the window at the bright sky, trying to chase away the darkness left from her vision a moment ago.

Nate finally reached her as the class cleared out. "Professor." He sounded worried. "I have a message for you."

"What message?"

"Two of them, actually. The first one is from the Israeli government. They've finally released our data from the dig site in Caesarea."

"That's terrific." She tried to fuel her words with enthusiasm, but failed. If nothing else, Amy and Heinrich would get some credit for their last work, an epitaph for their short lives. "What's the second message?"

"It's from Cardinal Bernard."

Surprised, she faced Nate more fully. For weeks, she had attempted to reach the cardinal, the head of the Order of Sanguines in Rome. She'd even considered flying to Italy and staking out his apartments in Vatican City.

"About time he returned my calls," she muttered.

"He wanted you to phone him at once," Nate said. "Sounded like an emergency."

Erin sighed in exasperation. Bernard had ignored her for two months, but now he needed something from her. She had a thousand questions for him—concerns and thoughts that had built up over the past weeks since returning from Rome. She glanced to the whiteboard, eyeing the half-erased line. She had questions about those visions, too.

Were these episodes secondary to posttraumatic stress? Was she reliving the times that she spent trapped under Masada?

But if so, why do I keep tasting wine?

She shook her head to clear it and pointed to his hand. “What’s in the envelope?”

“It’s addressed to you.” He handed it to her.

It weighed too much to contain just a letter. Erin scanned the return address.

Israel.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she slit open the top with her pen.

Nate noted how her hand quivered and looked concerned. She knew he was talking to a counselor about his own PTSD. They were two wounded survivors with secrets that could not be fully spoken aloud.

Shaking the envelope, she slid out a single sheet of typewritten paper and an object about the size and shape of a quail’s egg. Her heart sank as she recognized the object.

Even Nate let out a small gasp and took a step back.

She didn’t have that luxury. She read the enclosed page quickly. It was from the Israeli security forces. They had determined that the enclosed artifact was no longer relevant to the closed investigation of their case, and they hoped that she would give it to its rightful owner.

She cradled the polished chunk of amber in her palm, as if it were the most precious object in the world. Under the dull fluorescent light, it looked like little more than a shiny brown rock, but it felt warmer to the touch. Light reflected off its surface, and in the very center, a tiny dark feather hung motionless, preserved across thousands of years, a moment of time frozen forever in amber.

“Amy’s good luck charm,” Nate mumbled, swallowing hard. He had been there when Amy was murdered. He kept his eyes averted from the tiny egg of amber.

Erin placed a hand on Nate’s elbow in sympathy. In fact, the

talisman was more than Amy's good luck charm. One day out at the dig, Amy had explained to Erin that she had found the amber on a beach as a little girl, and she'd been fascinated by the feather imprisoned inside, wondering where it had come from, picturing the wing from which it might have fallen. The amber captured her imagination as fully as it had the feather. It was what sparked Amy's desire to study archaeology.

Erin gazed at the amber in her palm, knowing that this tiny object had led not only to Amy's field of study—but also to her death.

Her fingers closed tightly over the smooth stone, squeezing her determination, making herself a promise.

Never again . . .

2

December 18, 11:12 A.M. EST
Arlington, Virginia

Sergeant Jordan Stone felt like a fraud as he marched in his dress blues. Today he would bury the last member of his former team—a young man named Corporal Sanderson. Like his other teammates, Sanderson's body had never been found.

After a couple of months of searching through the tons of rubble that had once been the mountain of Masada, the military gave up. Sanderson's empty coffin pressed hard against Jordan's hip as he marched in step with the other pallbearers.

A December snowstorm had blanketed the grounds of Arlington National Cemetery, covering brown grass and gathering atop the branches of leafless trees. Snow mounded across the arched tops of marble grave markers, more markers than he could count. Each grave was numbered, most bore names, and all these soldiers had been laid to rest with honor and dignity.

One of them was his wife, Karen, killed in action more than a year before. There hadn't been enough of her to bury, just her dog tags. Her coffin was as empty as Sanderson's. Some days Jordan couldn't believe that she was gone, that he would never bring her flowers again and get a long slow kiss of thanks. Instead, the only flowers he would ever give her would go on her grave. He had placed red roses there before he headed to Sanderson's funeral.

He pictured Sanderson's freckled face. His young teammate

had been eager to please, taken his job seriously, and done his best. In return, he got a lonely death on a mountaintop in Israel. Jordan tightened his grip on the cold casket handle, wishing that the mission had ended differently.

A few more steps past the bare trees and he and his companions carried the casket into a frigid chapel. He felt more at home within these simple white walls than he had in the lavish churches of Europe. Sanderson would have been more comfortable here, too.

Sanderson's mother and sister waited for them inside. They wore nearly identical black dresses and thin formal shoes despite the snow and cold. Both had Sanderson's fair complexion, with faces freckled brown even in winter. Their noses and eyes were red.

They missed him.

He wished they didn't have to.

Beside them, his commanding officer, Captain Stanley, stood at attention. The captain had been at Jordan's left hand for all the funerals, his lips compressed in a thin line as coffins went into the ground. Good soldiers, every one.

He was a by-the-book commander and had handled Jordan's debriefing faultlessly. In turn, Jordan did his best to stick to the lie that the Vatican had prepared: the mountain had collapsed in an earthquake, and everyone died. He and Erin had been in a corner that hadn't collapsed and were rescued three days later by a Vatican search party.

Simple enough.

It was untrue. And unfortunately, he was a bad liar, and his CO suspected that he hadn't revealed everything that had happened in Masada or after his rescue.

Jordan had already been taken off active duty and assigned psychiatric counseling. Someone was watching him all the time, waiting to see if he would crack up. What he wanted most was to simply get back out in the field and do his job. As a member of the Joint Expeditionary Forensic Facility in Afghanistan, he'd worked and investigated military crime scenes. He was good at it, and he wanted to do it again.

Anything to keep busy, to keep moving.

Instead, he stood at attention beside yet another coffin, the cold from the marble floor seeping into his toes. Sanderson's sister shiv-

ered next to him. He wished he could give her his uniform jacket.

He listened to the military chaplain's somber tones more than his words. The priest had only twenty minutes to get through the ceremony. Arlington had many funerals every day, and they set a strict schedule.

He soon found himself outside of the chapel and at the gravesite. He had done this march so many times that his feet found their way to this grave without much thought. Sanderson's casket rested on snow-dusted brown earth beside a draped hole.

A cold wind blew across the snow, curling flakes on the surface into tendrils, like cirrus clouds, the kind of high clouds so common in the desert where Sanderson had died. Jordan waited through the rest of the ceremony, listened to the three-rifle volley, the bugler playing "Taps," and watched the chaplain give the folded flag to Sanderson's mother.

Jordan had endured the same scene for each of his lost teammates.

It hadn't gotten any easier.

At the end, Jordan shook Sanderson's mother's hand. It felt cold and frail, and he worried that he might break it. "I am deeply sorry for your loss. Corporal Sanderson was a fine soldier, and a good man."

"He liked you." His mother offered him a sad smile. "He said you were smart and brave."

Jordan worked his frozen face to match that smile. "That's good to hear, ma'am. He was smart and brave himself."

She blinked back tears and turned away. He moved to take a step after her, although he didn't know what he would say, but before he could, the chaplain laid a hand on his shoulder.

"I believe we have business to discuss, Sergeant."

Turning, Jordan examined the young chaplain. The man wore dress blues just like Jordan's uniform, except that he had crosses sewn onto the lapels of his jacket. Looking closer now, Jordan saw his skin was too white, even for winter, his brown hair a trifle too long, his posture not quite military. As the chaplain stared back at him, his green eyes didn't blink.

The short hairs rose on the back of Jordan's neck.

The chill of the chaplain's hand seeped through his glove. It

wasn't like a hand that had been out too long on a cold day. It was like a hand that hadn't been warm for years.

Jordan had met many of his ilk before. What stood before him was an undead predator, a vampiric creature called a *strigoi*. But for this one to be out in daylight, he must be a Sanguinist—a *strigoi* who had taken a vow to stop drinking human blood, to serve the Catholic Church and sustain himself only on Christ's blood—or more exactly, on *wine* consecrated by holy sacrament into His blood.

Such an oath made this creature less dangerous.

But not much.

"I'm not so sure that we have any business left," Jordan said.

He shifted away from the chaplain and squared off, ready to fight if need be. He had seen Sanguinists battle. No doubt this slight chaplain could take him out, but that didn't mean Jordan would go down easy.

Captain Stanley moved between them and cleared his throat. "It's been cleared all the way up to the top, Sergeant Stone."

"What has, sir?"

"He will explain everything," the captain answered, gesturing to the chaplain. "Go with him."

"And if I refuse?" Jordan held his breath, hoping for a good answer.

"It's an order, Sergeant." He gave Jordan a level glare. "It's being handled way above my pay grade."

Jordan suppressed a groan. "I'm sorry, sir."

Captain Stanley quirked one tiny corner of his mouth, equivalent to a belly laugh from a jollier man. "That I believe, Sergeant."

Jordan saluted, wondering if it was for the last time, and followed the chaplain to a black limousine parked at the curb. It seemed the Sanguinists had barreled into his life again, ready to kick apart the rubble of his career with their immortal feet.

The chaplain held open the door for him, and Jordan climbed in. The interior smelled like leather and brandy and expensive cigars. It wasn't what one expected from a priest's vehicle.

Jordan slid across the seat. The glass partition had been rolled up, and all he saw of the driver was the back of a thick neck, short blond hair, and a uniform cap.

The chaplain lifted his pant legs to preserve the crease before

sliding in. With one hand, he closed the door with a dignified thump, trapping Jordan inside with him.

"Please turn up the heat for our guest," the chaplain called to the driver. Then he unbuttoned the jacket of his dress blue uniform and leaned back.

"I believe my CO said that you would explain everything." Jordan folded his arms. "Go ahead."

"That's a tall order." The young chaplain poured a brandy. He brought the glass to his nose and inhaled. With a sigh, he lowered the glass and offered it toward Jordan. "It's quite a fine vintage."

"Then you drink it."

The chaplain swirled the brandy in the glass, his eyes following the brown liquid. "I think you know that I can't, as much as I'd like to."

"About that explanation?" he pressed.

The chaplain raised a hand, and the car slid into motion. "Sorry about all this cloak-and-dagger business. Or perhaps *robe-and-cross* might be the more apt term?"

He smiled wistfully as he sniffed again at the brandy.

Jordan frowned at the guy's mannerisms. He certainly seemed less stuffy and formal than the other Sanguinists he had met.

The chaplain took off his white glove and held out his hand. "Name's Christian."

Jordan ignored the invitation.

Realizing this, the chaplain lifted his hand and ran his fingers through his thick hair. "Yes, I appreciate the irony. A Sanguinist named *Christian*. It's like my mother planned it."

The man snorted.

Jordan wasn't quite sure what to make of this Sanguinist.

"I think we almost met back in Ettal Abbey," the chaplain said. "But Rhun picked Nadia and Emmanuel to fill out the rest of his trio back in Germany."

Jordan pictured Nadia's dark features and Emmanuel's darker attitude.

Christian shook his head. "Hardly a surprise, I suppose."

"Why's that?"

The other raised an eyebrow. "I believe I'm not sackcloth and ashes enough for Father Rhun Korza."

Jordan fought down a grin. "I can see how that would bug him."

Christian set the brandy in a tray near the door and leaned forward, his green eyes serious. "Actually Father Korza is the reason I'm here."

"He sent you?"

Somehow Jordan couldn't picture that. He doubted Rhun wanted anything more to do with Jordan. They hadn't parted on the best of terms.

"Not exactly." Christian rested skinny elbows on his knees. "Cardinal Bernard is trying to keep it quiet, but Rhun has disappeared without a word."

Figures . . . the guy was hardly the forthcoming sort.

"Has he contacted you since you left Rome in October?" Christian asked.

"Why would he contact me?"

He tilted his head to one side. "Why wouldn't he?"

"I hate him." Jordan saw no point in lying. "He knows it."

"Rhun is a difficult man to like," Christian admitted, "but what did he do to make you hate him?"

"Besides almost killing Erin?"

Christian's eyebrows drew down in concern. "I thought he saved her life . . . and yours."

Jordan's jaw tightened. He remembered Erin limp on the floor, her skin white, her hair soaked with blood.

"Rhun bit her," Jordan explained harshly. "He drained her and left her to die in the tunnels under Rome. If Brother Leopold and I hadn't come upon her when we did, she'd be dead."

"Father Korza fed upon Erin?" Christian rocked back, surprise painted on his face. He scrutinized Jordan for several seconds without speaking, plainly floored by the revelation of this sin. "Are you certain? Perhaps—"

"They both admitted it. Erin and Rhun." Jordan folded his arms. "I'm not the one lying here."

Christian raised his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to doubt you. It's just that this is . . . unusual."

"Not for Rhun it's not." He put his hands on his knees. "Your golden boy has slipped before."

"Only once. And Elizabeth Bathory was centuries ago." Chris-

tian picked up the glass of brandy and studied it. "So you're saying that Brother Leopold *knew* all about this?"

"He certainly did."

Apparently Leopold must have covered for Rhun. Jordan felt disappointment, but not surprise. The Sanguinists stuck together.

"He fed on her . . ." Christian stared at the glass as if he might find the answer there. "That means Rhun is full of her blood."

Jordan shuddered, disturbed by that thought.

"That changes everything. We must go to her. Now." Christian leaned over and rapped on the partition to gain the driver's attention. "Take us to the airport! At once!"

Instantly obeying, the driver accelerated the car, its bottom scraping when it crested a hill and headed out of the cemetery.

Christian glanced to Jordan. "We'll part ways at the airport. You can get home from there on your own, correct?"

"I could," he agreed. "But if Erin is involved in any of this, I'm going with you."

Christian drew in a long breath and let it out. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and punched in numbers. "I'm sure Cardinal Bernard gave you the whole speech last time about your life and soul being in danger if you involve yourself in our affairs?"

"He did."

"Then let's save time and pretend I gave it again." Christian lifted the phone to his ear. "Right now I must charter a plane to California."

"So you don't object to me going with you?"

"You love Erin, and you want to protect her. Who am I to stand in the way of that?"

For a dead guy, Christian was turning out to be okay.

Still, as the limousine sped across the snow-swept city, Jordan's anxiety grew sharper with every passing mile.

Erin was in danger.

Again.

And likely all because of the actions of Rhun Korza.

Maybe it would be better if that bastard stayed lost.

3

December 18, 6:06 P.M. CET
Vatican City

Cardinal Bernard rearranged the newspapers atop his polished desk, as if organizing them into neat lines might change the words they contained. Horrifying headlines screamed from the pages:

Serial Killer Loose in Rome
Gruesome Murderer Savages Young Women
Police Stunned by Brutality

Candlelight reflected off the bejeweled globe next to his desk. He turned the ancient sphere slowly, longing to be anywhere but here. He glanced at his antique books, his scrolls, his sword on the wall from the time of the Crusades—items he had collected during his centuries of service to the Church.

I have served long, but have I served well?

The smell of newspaper ink pulled his attention back to the pages. The details disturbed him further. Each woman had her throat sliced open, and her body drained of blood. They were all beautiful and young, with black hair and blue eyes. They came from every station in life, but they had all died in the oldest quarters of Rome, in the darkest hours between sunset and sunrise.

Twenty in all, according to the newspapers.

But Bernard had managed to conceal many more deaths. It

amounted to a victim claimed nearly every day since the end of October.

He could not escape the timing.

The end of October.

The deaths had started just after the battle waged in the crypts below St. Peter's Basilica, a fight for possession of the Blood Gospel. The Sanguinists had won that battle against the Belial, a joint force of humans and *strigoi*, led by an unknown leader who continued to plague his order.

Shortly after that battle, Father Rhun Korza had vanished.

Where was he? What had he done?

Bernard shied away from that thought.

He eyed the pile of newspapers. Had a rogue *strigoi* escaped that battle and hunted the streets of Rome, preying on these young girls? There had been so many beasts in the tunnels. One could have slipped through their net.

A part of him prayed that was true.

He dared not consider the alternative. That fear kept him waiting, indecisive, as more innocent girls died.

A hand tapped on the door. "Cardinal?"

He recognized the voice and the sluggish heartbeat that belonged to it.

"Come in, Father Ambrose."

The human priest opened the wooden door with one hand, his other clasped in a loose fist. "I am sorry to disturb you."

The assistant did not sound sorry. In fact, his voice rang with ill-disguised glee. While Ambrose clearly loved him and served the cardinal's office diligently, there remained a petty streak in the man that found perverse enjoyment in the misfortunes of others.

Bernard stifled a sigh. "Yes?"

Ambrose entered the office. His plump body leaned forward like a hound on a scent. He glanced around the candlelit room, probably making certain that Bernard was alone. How Ambrose loved his secrets. But then again, maybe that was why the man so loved Bernard. After so many centuries, his own veins ran as much with secrets as with black blood.

Finally satisfied, his assistant bowed his head in deference. "Our people found *this* at the site of the most recent murder."

Ambrose stepped to his desk and held out his arm. Slowly, he turned his hand over and uncurled his fingers.

In his palm rested a knife. Its curved blade resembled a tiger's claw. The sharp hook bore a hole in one end, where a warrior could thread a finger through, allowing its wielder to whip the blade into a thousand deadly cuts. It was an ancient weapon called a *karambit*, one that traced its roots back centuries. And from the patina that burnished its surface, this particular blade was ancient—but this was no museum piece. It was plainly battle scarred and well used.

Bernard took it from Ambrose's hand. The heat against his fingertips confirmed his worst fear. The blade was plated with silver, the weapon of a Sanguinist.

He pictured the faces of the murdered girls, of their throats sliced from ear to ear.

He closed his fingers over the burning silver.

Of all the holy order, only one Sanguinist carried such a weapon, the man who had vanished as the murders began.

Rhun Korza.