

Winter Wheat

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Published by Alexander Hope at www.obooko.com

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Chapter One

Germany spawned from the umbra embryo of Satan's seed, birthed heretics demanding religion's disembowelment. "Religion is a fantasy now and always!" scribbled Marx and Freud while the masses prayed. Nietzsche's festering brain attacked the religious impulse, "The greatest event of recent times is that God is dead! That belief, in the theory that a Christian God is no longer tenable, is beginning to cast its first shadows over Europe. Among the advanced races, the decline and ultimately the collapse of the religious impulse will leave a huge vacuum. The history of modern times will be in great part the history of how that vacuum is filled."

Was God dead? Or interminably fatigued. Why worry what the little idiots, who peopled His garden, did with their feeble lives? Why waste time with further evolution? Let the little jerks keep their little brains and littler hearts.

During the tumultuous start of the Twentieth Century, God must have turned His gaze elsewhere. How else could it have begun? That Century of Evil.

God, created in the image of Man, turned His gaze or allowed Evil to lurk in His blind spots. God was watching, but as with all creatures, His peripheral vision was obstructed or muted. Blind spots dotted the map during this Century of Evil: this tale began in one such blind spot.

In the lush, wheat country of what was to become the USSR, there grew a most evil being: his lust, so twisted, tore life's breath from all creatures that scurried across its path. This evil left hand of Beelzebub—the Great Mistress Beelzebub as Alexander Mackovick and his followers had the effrontery to call the Mistress of All Illusion, the Lady of Dung—began his murderous path in the shadows of a confused national revolution; a revolution that was intended to start a new age, change the face of the earth, and bring Utopia to the Workers of the world. Alexander Gregor Mackovick was a suffering child fertile for Beelzebub's moldering Seeds of Evil. His father, Gregory Mackovick, an unfortunate aberration of humanity, fomented a Worker's Revolution by spending his days slitting Nationalist's throats, his nights making stilted speeches calling for the Tzar and the Tzar's family's mutilation.

On a chilly evening at the Finland Station in Petrograd, Gregory Mackovick stood listening to an inspirational speech by Lenin. Lenin, the Marxist disciple was, atop an armored car, clutching roses. He spoke on the bloodletting that would follow if the Revolution was indeed to propel the Workers to power. He called for peasants to burn their food-stuffs rather than surrender them to the war effort. "I've called for all soldiers to mutiny. Force the mutiny! Don't give food to that fool Kerensky."

Gregory Mackovick listened intently. Someday he would have his own entourage and be given roses by the masses. Lenin's entourage consisted of his sister, Maris, his wife, Krupshya, and his protégé, Joseph Stalin. A mutiny would destroy the war effort and the "bread winner" conscription. Screw the government! Revolution was the only way to dodge conscription; the only way for him to stay alive long enough to slit his fat wife's ugly throat.

In the Winter palace, he would bed down with Sisters of the Revolution. He wouldn't puke at their looks or smell. No more fat, witch wife with three hundred pounds of flesh hanging from her arms and belly and sagging breasts. A knot of vomit formed at

the base of his throat; his nostrils burned; his face twisted; he swallowed back the bile. He would dump the fat bitch down some deep well—in Simbrisk—a well deep enough to accommodate a load of crap. He would tumble her lard-ass into the well then spit straight down on her ruddy face. She would choke and sputter and drown. He started with the fat pig because of her close ties to the Ulyanovs. She had placed him at the side of the elder Ulyanovs's son—Lenin. “He believes in humanitarianism,” Gregory told his wife. “He believes in crap,” she countered. “His parents are Christians. He hates his parents. So he hates Christians.” “Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, he hates that Christian crap and that Islam crap and that Jew crap and especially your Beelzebub crap. Because it's all crap. All of it believed by crap-brained women who impregnate their crap-brained children with the same crap. If the women had let it be, religion would have died out two thousand years ago.” He stepped toward her and whispered, “Women will never contribute anything to civilization.”

“Idiots like you and Lenin will?” she said.

The back of his hand slammed into her open mouth as she attempted to continue. Blood sprayed the dung-yellow walls of the tiny kitchen. She fell back into a heavy wooden chair; her enormous weight twisted the chair's back and split its arms; blood-laced spittle spewed from her mouth toward him as he stomped from the house.

Lenin's pounding voice drummed back into his thoughts. Shots rang out from the back of the armored car; a dozen Nationalists fired their weapons toward a cowering Lenin then shot point-blank at the audience. Mackovick felt the bullets whiz past him and hit two Comrades. He dropped to his knee and braced his modified rifle against his shoulder and fired at the nearest Nationalist—direct hit—then another. Before it was over, he had fired seven times; he scored six direct hits. No one in Russia was a better shot. He would have made the seventh shot, but the shot was too quick. Quick so no one would see: the shot ricocheted off the armored car's upper, right corner inches from Stalin's crawling body. Stalin fell from the top of the armored car then looked directly at Mackovick.

Mackovick charged forward and grabbed one of the downed Nationalists; he drug the dying youth toward Stalin. “Comrade Stalin, this Nationalist tried to assassinate you,” Mackovick said, then pushed the blade of his knife into the youth's groin and jerked it straight up to the boy's belly—slicing clothing, belt, and intestines. The youth's bloody guts spilled out onto Stalin's shiny, black shoes. Stalin turned his head to one side and threw up. Mackovick looked directly at Lenin and said, “Comrade Stalin has no stomach for death?”

Alexander Gregor Mackovick's mother contributed no less to the boy's evilness. She was politically aware, but preoccupied with indoctrinating the local female lonelies into the evil Coven of BabaYaga—First Daughter of Beelzebub. BabaYaga, who the black witches called Sacred Mother of All That is Evil, had been portrayed to decades of White Russians as the Skeleton Witch of the Birch Forest. She flew through the air on a stick wrapped with wheat-fodder. Her hut was fenced with human bones—a splintered reminder of her insatiable hunger. Worship of the ancient witch had never been diluted by the invading Mongols or Huns or Balto-Slavs or Vikings or any of the strident religions: Islamic or Christian or Judaic. BabaYaga held sway over tens of thousands of black witches. The Great War and the Great Revolution gobbled up able-bodied men and

spit out whole townships of frightened, lonely women; BabaYaga lapped them up and sucked them in; BabaYaga reigned supreme.

Alexander's mother worshiped the Skeleton Witch in slime-slick birch walls eight feet underground; just inches from BabaYaga's Mistress Beelzebub's grasp. It was a left handed grasp: the Mistress's right hand was crooked in a constant pleasuring movement as She got off on the evil of the world: evil that had erupted from the mastorrhagia that spewed molten-hot from her gangrenous left breast. Beelzebub wanted the Game of Evil to be played by all.

Chapter Two

He maketh peace in thy
borders and filleth thee
with the finest of wheat
--Psalm 147.14

Peace, bread, and land. Russian soldiers deserted the blood-soaked battleground. "They have voted for peace with their feet," Lenin shouted to the masses. But in truth there was no honor: Evil permeated every corridor of the world. The Century of Evil spewed forth. Germany was the cauldron, but Satan and his Mistress Beelzebub felt more at ease in Russia. As the world cowered to the strident moves of Germany, Satan dug His hooves into Mother Russia. "My beloved," the Fallen Angel said in a booming baritone voice, "can we not give more power to your BabaYaga? Her motherland is ripe. Let the juices run. If He sleeps through the next Century, we can make Russia . . . Earth's window to Hell."

Mistress Beelzebub halted her pleasuring movements. She looked curiously at her fingers. He had interrupted her again. Worms had devoured most of the synapses in her brain, but she could still analyze situations. He was jealous of her contentment. Why else would He interrupt the thing that most delighted her? He was not Himself. He was worried. He was never certain how long a period of Evil would last. He no longer had contact with the One Above so He was never certain if His foe was asleep or weary of the idiots peopling the Earth. But even Her worm-eaten brain knew the Big Man Above was asleep. Proof was the ease with which Germany had become Europe's most powerful nation. She knew that the Germans would someday prove just how evil one human could be toward another. A shiver darted down Beelzebub's spine and lodged between her open legs. Her fingers found the shiver's destination. "Yes, my love, more power will be BabaYaga's. But should she side with the Bolsheviks or the Nationalists?"

"My love, the Bolsheviks will create the Evil Empire. That's all well and good, but they have no God . . . so they have no Satan. We must empower BabaYaga to defeat the Bolsheviks no matter how long it takes. They must be replaced with Believers."

"Christians, Jews, Islamic . . . ?"

“No matter. If they believe in Him then they believe in Me. I humbly ask only one thing. That at the close of this century, no Atheist will be left standing.”

The Atheists turned Russia into Hell. They had an obsession for Force. “An oppressed class which does not strive to gain knowledge of weapons, to be drilled in the use of weapons, to possess weapons, an oppressed class of this kind deserves only to be oppressed, maltreated, and regarded as slaves,” Lenin said. But he felt his control of Evil shifting to a stronger being.

Alexander Mackovick witnessed the first aberration of Mistress Beelzebub’s promise to give BabaYaga more power: the vintage floor creaked in the alcove toward the rear of the tiny house. Alexander’s leg was numb. Fast asleep. He was vulnerable in the spot in the center of the alcove. What if his sister, Tanya, woke and went looking for a drink of water. Or what if his twin brother, Christian, came home early from his prayer meeting, or his idiot father made a surprise visit from his guerrilla warfare against the White Army. Numbness ran from his right leg up to his hip. His hip was pressed, uncomfortably, against the dusty floor. He had attempted to straighten out his leg, but tiny needles danced, from his hip to his ankle, stopping to do an excruciating Polka in his calf. Damn! He should get up, but the real action was just beginning in the tiny cellar beneath the uncomfortable floor. He had been at the floor’s peephole for almost an hour. He pressed his eye tightly against the rough outline of the peek-hole. He would retain the images and when his mother left the house—tomorrow—he would find his mother’s treasured picture of Beelzebub, that naked creature, pleasuring herself. Nothing in his life was more fun. Nothing gave him the total feeling of achievement. Bring up the images then pop off. Problem was: the images were always there.

At his cramped desk in his favorite class, Natural History, the images of the cellar activities and of the naked Beelzebub telegraphed burning, spine-tingling, red-hot charges to his crotch. The charges forced him to stay seated, after the bell, until the front of his heavy trousers no longer revealed his purulent thoughts.

Kineindrof, Alexander’s favorite teacher, thought the handsome boy was horny for the girls, especially the Tatteroff sisters. Something was wrong. The once brilliant student was flunking. “Alexander, you have a problem that is screwing up you grades. It’s your constant thoughts of sex . . . correct?” Alexander looked down. “Your day-dreams about girls are sapping your attention. Your attention to your teacher. Teacher has a solution.” Kineindrof reached down and took young Alexander’s hand. Alexander attempted to stay seated, but his teacher was very insistent. The hunched-over youth was pulled from the protective seat, and led into the cramped utility closet. His teacher knelt down and undid the strained buttons on the front of the youth’s trousers. When he released the youth’s problem, Kineindrof got down to work. No problem for Teacher. Teacher had solved more of these problems than Teacher cared to think about. Teacher was not to think about the problem-solving or the problems the problem-solving might create. Someday his superiors would find out. He would be ruined: banished from teaching: banished from the profession he joined just so he could do that special act. He repositioned his stiff knees against the hardwood floor. Genuflecting in front of so many young boys. Practicing his life-long commitment to his own form of religion. A rather humiliating religion, as all religions were. He was certain he was not truly a homosexual or a pedophile. He just liked the subservient position and the subservient act. He would do it for a woman. But women and girls always wanted to get him into trouble with the authorities. Men had

beaten him just for the suggestion. His only solution was to convert young boys. Young boys would let a snake or a large chicken do it to them. Anything, anybody, anytime. But he had to admit, the urine-stench, that permeated the utility closet, from un-rinsed mops and week-old underwear that most young boys wore, was a potent aphrodisiac. He loved it all. But most of all he loved Alexander Mackovick.

Kineindrof looked up at the youth, standing soldier straight, trying to catch his breath. Alexander was an anomaly. He was a unique specimen of God's less-than-perfect evolutionary system. The youth was beautiful. But Alexander's father was one of the ugliest human beings Teacher had ever met. "Why the Hell does Alexander know nothing of Marx, Engles, Sorel, or Lenin?" Gregory Mackovick had asked. Teacher was so frightened he thought he would pee his pants, but his mind was wondering how it would be to genuflect in front of the ugly monster. To service him. Then the monster would beat Teacher to death. Death was the only way the humiliation would end. Some Brute would beat him to death. The thought of Gregory Mackovick kicking in the utility-closet door stopped Kineindrof's movements. Alexander looked down, and then thrust his hips forward. Kineindrof continued. If there was a God, he would either cure Teacher or kill Teacher.

Alexander remembered that day in the utility closet. He and the feminine, little teacher continued to meet once a week. The last time was two days before Kineindrof was found drowning in a pool of his own blood. He had been castrated. The custodian found him, in the boy's gym, sans his privates. He died, without naming the Castrator. A week later, Alexander spotted said same privates hanging in a locker down the hall from his French class. The locker belonged to Dimitri Sonotov the youth leader of the Worker's Party for the Saratov District. Dimitri was big enough and strong enough to have ripped off the infamous privates with his bare hands. What a fantastic locker-trophy.

Kineindrof was gone. No one to relieve Alexander when the images seeped into his brain; image upon image seeping through the peek-hole, cloying, like the after taste of too much of a good thing. The nausea, now, was not from the images, but from his bladder's painful, insistent need to be emptied in the distant out-house. The damn dust didn't help. It was thick and packed his nostrils shut and quickly coated his open mouth and rasping throat. Screw it! He would lay his face in a foot of dust just to watch the fat, witch ladies move their giant, sweaty bodies around the gas-lamp lighted cellar; tons of naked flesh that rode the light waves through the peek-hole, through his eyes, and into his brain. The images blocked thoughts of anything else. Pink, naked witch flesh. He had placed his long, lanky body down in the same position so often that each Thursday night, when he approached his secret peek-hole, he was certain he could see a hazy imprint—a fossil-like etching—on the hardwood floor. The floor, like the rest of the house, was never dusted. His mother never lifted a finger. The finger usually pointed at, and then painstakingly caressed, a secret passage in a secret book retrieved from a secret place. She kept the lap sized book behind a storage cabinet in the cellar. In the morning, minutes after everyone has left the house for the day, she would sneak down to the musty cellar. Hours would pass, there-at, up would come his mother from the cellar. Cellar-stench clung to the big woman's naked sweat-slick body. The smell permeated the small house, seeping into the material of the sofa and chairs. The stench stayed in Alexander's nostrils: a life-long smell that ignited the nerves in his lower belly. If his mother thought no one was home, she stayed naked. His mother was the fattest, ugliest witch. They were all

ugly, but their actions made him forget about their size and their ugliness. The turn-on was great, but he was playing a dangerous game. If they caught him, he would die.

It happened to his pals! The night he brought his pals to the house, he had been egged-on, by the taunts, that there were no such things as witches. “You guys don’t know crap,” he told his three, school pals. “I’ll show you something you’ll remember the rest of your lives.” He had them wait at the edge of the wheat field. “Don’t make a sound or we all die,” he said.

His pals all went, “Wooo!” then giggled as he signaled them to be silent. And told them to stay in the protective shadows of the mature wheat. He moved quickly toward the quiet house. He looked around as he entered. The silence and lack of evil vibes told him he was early. The Coven meeting hadn’t started. Damn! The guys will think I’m full of shit. He moved quickly back out toward the wheat field. “Come on out. There will be no show . . . tonight,” he whispered into the darkness. He moved deeper into the wheat. He saw the path: wide, like three bodies had been dragged side-by-side. Alexander began to run. His heart was exploding as loud as the local artillery in the background. His pals would be food for BabaYaga. He followed the wide path around the side of the worker’s shed. In the center of the crushed-wheat circle, sat his pals. They were tied together as if riding a toboggan. Lucas, his best pal, was seated in front, and in his open mouth was the barrel end of Alexander’s mother’s shotgun. Alexander looked around at the dusk shrouded wheat field. She’s here . . . someplace. He could feel her evil presents. She’s waiting to kill me! But he had to try to save his pals. Pals are all a fellow has in this screwed world. He moved slowly toward his pals. Lucas’s eyes moved wildly around then looked straight down. It was too late! Alexander’s shoe-tip caught the center of the twine. The single blast from the booby-trapped shotgun blew Lucas’s head clean off then ripped into Detter’s head, but only took a small corner of Stavi’s head. Alexander screamed. The fat, ugly bitch had slaughtered his pals. His was not a mother you screwed with.

He untied the shotgun and wiped the blood slick barrel on what was left of Lucas’s jacket. As he charged toward the house, his mind ran through a catalog of places where his mother might keep the shotgun shells. The first drawer under the sideboard was where he found them. He turned. His mother was standing at the kitchen entrance. Small streaks of moonlight squeezed through tiny places on the sides of his mother as her huge body twisted through the door-frame. Alexander loaded the gun and fired. The shot tore out the plaster wall at the side of the frame. A second shot hit the frame and blew a small flash of pellets into his mother’s massive upper thigh. She screamed and slumped to the floor. Alexander dropped the smoking shotgun and ran to his mother. He dropped down and held her head against his chest “Mother! I’m sorry! I didn’t . . .”

She sat straight up and grabbed him by the back of his head and smashed his face down into the blood pooled on her upper thigh, then pulled him back up and screamed into his face, “Why?”

“Because,” Alexander spit blood, “you slaughtered Lucas and You slaughtered my pals.”

His mother stood up slowly, lifting him with her, “What are you babbling about?” Wiping his arm across his face, to remove the dripping blood, he said, “You know! Your booby-trap blew their heads off!”

She hobbled toward the sink and pulled an old rag from the counter. She primed the pump then doused the rag with ice-cold water and placed it on the bleeding wound. “Your mind has finally gone.”

“No, I saw them. They’re all dead.” He pointed toward the wheat field.

Alexander stood next to his giant mother in the center of the wheat field. There was no sign of a struggle, no sign of blood, and no sign of his slaughtered pals. While his mother repaired her torn flesh, Alexander repaired the torn wall and door frame. He stretched out the job into the late-night. She had said he would be punished when the repairs were finished. He wasn’t certain which repairs: hers or his. The story, to his sister and brother and finally his father would be that a Nationalist broke in and attempted to rape and murder his mother, but Alexander shot the intruder and the flash accidentally sent pellets into his mother’s exposed legs.

“Alexander, bring the large paddle to the field,” she said.

He lifted the large, wooden paddle off the sideboard, and then followed his limping mother out into the night-shrouded wheat field. Orange and yellow flashes painted the sky in the direction of the Saratov town center.

“Take off your trousers!” she said.

He removed his trousers. He stood naked and shivering in front of the giant woman.

“Where are your underpants?”

“I stopped wearing any,” he whispered. “Please mother, I’m sorry I hurt you.”

She pushed him backwards against the wheat. The dry wheat cut into his body as it crushed beneath him. “Spread you legs!” she said.

Damn! She’s going to beat my privates! It’s going to hurt like Hell!

She brought the paddle down on his upper thigh. The paddle smacked loudly in time with Alexander’s screams and the explosions coming from the center of town. Moonlight cast huge windmill shadows on the wheat as his mother’s fleshy arm lifted then slammed down. When she was finished, Alexander’s upper thigh was as bloody as hers. His mother helped him to the house and dressed his wound then helped him to bed.

Alexander returned to school weeks later. Word was that Lucas and the others had been conscripted by the Nationalist. He was ready to tell his mother when he went home for lunch, but he decided to leave good enough alone and just warm-up some soup. His mother never fixed lunch or supper; she munched on loafs of rye bread and washed the half chewed pieces down with more Vodka then even Rasputin was reputed to have consumed. The mammoth woman became restless if she strayed from the cellar too long. No matter what the wind-chill factor, she would break into a sweat. She would head back to the cellar and sit trying to memorize a tattered book: she would read, then close the book, and turn her head up toward the cellar ceiling, trying to mouth the words. If she had no success, she would slam her sharp upper teeth into her lower lip until blood ran down her chin, like a vampire who had just suckled the neck of a snow-white virgin. Or she would pound her fist into her fleshy mid-section. Sometimes the pain would stop her wondering mind.

From the time she was a child, in Simbrisk, she had trouble remembering what she had read. She would read and forget. She tried to force her stupid brain to memorize by passing her hand over an open flame until she could feel its blistering lick. To keep her mind focused during school hours, she placed glass in her shoes or underclothing—the girls thought she was having constant periods. But it was just a little blood from the glass

in her pants or the pins in her breasts. Pain kept her grade average high enough to graduate in the upper five percent of her class. But her enormous weight, and her need for constant self-mutilation and blood-letting, eliminated any social life except for the Coven. Her life was an open wound. Except for at the Coven. She had an idiot's life. She had been birthed by an idiot whose long-missing husband had been an idiot. And in the family tradition, she married an idiot.

Her husband was an idiot of the highest magnitude who spent his time trying to create a Utopia that any idiot knew would never come to pass. His Workers would never control the government; the Intelligentsia would control the government and control his Workers. Lenin and Mackovick had started their Revolution too early. Her dullard's brain had remembered one paragraph that her idiot husband had forgotten; it was from Engels. She remembered laughing when she first read it. It spelled doom for the Revolution and her idiot husband: "the worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the moment is not yet ripe for the domination of the class he represents . . . he is compelled to represent not his party or his class, but the class for whom conditions are ripe for domination."

She would stay with her idiot husband until the class that he was compelled to represent slits his ugly throat, or until she has gained enough courage or power to slit it herself or have it slit by others. He was surely planning a throat slitting himself. Lenin had certainly ordered Gregory Mackovick to eliminate her. Lenin feared and hated theologians, or anyone who worshiped anything other than the State. Lenin ordered her husband to eliminate the most devoted priests then move to the citizens who worshiped God or Satan or Beelzebub or the moon or stars. He wanted the citizens of the New Russia to believe only in the State lead by Lenin.

Plekhanov, the true creator of Russian Marxism, said of Lenin, "He is confusing the dictatorship of the proletariat with dictatorship over the proletariat."

She knew Lenin was a genius saddled with a bunch of idiots. And such a genius is no more than an idiot. The Revolution was far from won. Mother Russia was in the throws of Civil War. The idiot Bolsheviks were fighting off attacks by White armies in all directions. From the Gulf of Finland. From the tundraed plains of Siberia. From the mountainous Caucasus. She was certain the Bolsheviks had survived the onslaught only because of Leon Trotsky's and Gregory Mackovick's manipulations of the Red Army. To her, it was proof that even idiots could win a battle. But a war was another thing. Admiral Kolchak—third cousin on her mother's side—in Omsk, was building an army of volunteers for the new government of White Russia. Cousin Kolchak would be the downfall of her idiot husband. She prayed to BabaYaga that it would be a painful downfall. Very painful. Being in the Coven was painful. Being subservient to some putrid hag-witch was painful. But not being subservient and not being in the Coven was even more painful. She had always been in a Coven; protected by the Coven. You need all the protection you can get if you're two hundred pounds on the eve of your tenth birthday. All men, women, children, and dogs are cruel to the village elephant. She would learn the Chants. She would slit the fat throat of Una, the Coven leader. Then take over the Coven. It was all about the Chants. She would tear the skin inch-by-inch from her own body, but she would learn the Chants. It was all so painful.

Alexander remembered the time he peeked, in shocked horror, with the most excruciating fascination, as his frustrated mother jabbed, the tiny points of her sewing

scissors, into her thick upper thigh, so many times that, as a result, at the end of her reading, she was unable to stand. She crawled to the cellar door and called to him, “Alexander! Help me! I fell. I told your idiot father to fix the hand-rail. I slipped. I fell on the ax.” He went down into the dank cellar and pulled and tugged. “I warned your father about the ax,” she said. Alexander pulled and tugged at the three hundred pounds of naked flesh. She was fat and ugly. She slipped. Her heavy breasts slid down his extended leg. She reached up to stop her fall. She grabbed the front of his worn-thin overalls. She did that on purpose, he thought. The fat pig. I’ll puke. Witches all do it with their sons. If she makes me do it with her He turned his head to the side and puked against the birch wall.

They finally got her into the house. She hobbled to her room just as Christian and Tanya returned from their weekly visit to Simbrisk. Tanya had come home to tell her father and older brother, Alexander, she had joined Lenin’s Vanguard fighters. They were the revolutionary elite. Christian was there but he didn’t join. He told her it would be a slap in the face of her father that she had entered the Revolution not because of him but because of Mrs. Ulanov— Lenin’s mother—who was Tanya’s Grandmother’s dear friend. Tanya was happy to insult her brute father. The man she grew up watching brutalize her mother. But, screw it, her father wasn’t home anyway.

The family was so splintered. Tanya wanted to belong to something. Her father was an Atheist. It appears there was no God or there wouldn’t be all the bloodshed. But mother was a black witch. It appeared that witchcraft worked: both her mother and Grandma could make enemies apologize or disappear. And Christian was a Russian Orthodox. He said God was testing Russia. Only good people would go to Heaven. And then there was Alexander. He was insane. He was evil. More evil than mother and father put together. Alexander would go to Hell—soon—she hoped. In Hell there would be thousands of Tanya look-alikes. They would play little sister to Alexander and tease him but never touch him. She hated Alexander as much as she loved Christian.

Tanya had no idea of where she wanted to be or what she wanted to do in the future, but Alexander did. He knew he would never be a Bolshevik. He had read Marx and Freud. He knew most Germans were idiots. The whole silly Socialist thing came from Germany. Only idiots would think Workers could control the State. Only real damn idiots. And only idiots would follow his brother, Christian’s religion. The Bible was impressive but that don’t mean crap. Many impressive books were stacked with loads of crap as tall as his father. His father’s Twelve Greatest Books were nothing more than intellectual ravings of how dull-brained Workers were somehow more qualified to run the government than well-educated, well-trained politicians. None of the Greatest Books surpassed the Bible. But the information in the Bible showed that Jesus was a sell-out. He was one fantastic philosopher maybe as good as Plato, but he went for the Messiah roll because he was in the middle of a religious area at a religious time. He sold-out. Question for Alexander was: could the Bible be more impressive than the Book of Fire?

On one of the few evenings that his mother was away, Alexander tried to pull the heavy, wooden storage cabinet away from the cellar wall, but all he succeeded in doing was to scratch its fresh, green paint and rip the speckled nail from his index finger. He scared the holy crap out of himself. His heart jumped to his throat when he heard his name. “Alexander,” his brother said, “mother told us the cellar was out of bounds . . . it’s

her special place. God treasures children who honor their mother.” Alexander shoved his clinched fist toward the cellar ceiling. “See if your God treasures this.”

Christian spun on his heels and disappeared from the cellar’s entrance.

The little jerk was like some holy ghost always appearing when Alexander was sinning. Alexander tried the cabinet again but it wouldn’t budge. He placed the flat blade of the ax between the cabinet and the birch wall. The blade dug a deep crescent shaped notch in the slick birch. The cabinet did not budge. He sat on the dirt floor and placed his back against the cabinet and slowly straightened his long, powerful legs. The cabinet squeaked and groaned then plowed a semicircle, in the packed dirt floor, as it turned away from the wall. The cabinet’s hollowed-out back had a shelf littered with blood-streaked jewelry and blood-caked strands of hair. And leaning against the far side of the shelf was his mother’s sacred book. As Alexander clutched a corner of the large book, he felt a cold hand drop from above and grip his wrist. He screamed. He jumped back. His index finger caught on the cabinet’s rough edge and ripped his fingernail to the quick. Blood flowed from the torn finger. His hand shot to his new coveralls and wiped the blood across the bib. Not a good move. His mother would kill him if the thing in the cabinet didn’t rip his entrails out and twist them around his stupid neck. Damn! He was in deep crap!

He jumped up and then slammed through the cellar door. He fell against the exterior of the door attempting to hold back whatever was sure to be chasing him. The edges of his heart knifed into his ribs. He was in deep, deep crap. His mother would know he had been snooping. Instant death. The fat bitch would strip naked and lay her sweaty flesh across his gagging mouth. She would smother him to death. But if he went back into the cellar the thing protecting the Book of Fire would kill him or maybe eat him or maybe kill him and eat him. What the Hell difference did it make? He would be dead either way. But if he didn’t straighten up the cellar, he would be dead by smothering which seemed somehow more frightening than death by devouring. Then he knew what his fate would be: his fat mother or the creature protecting the Book of Fire, it didn’t matter, either one would feed him to BabaYaga. He would be her late-night snack.

He sucked the blood from his screaming finger then spat as he wiped his finger on his coveralls. If he left the cellar alive, he would go to the pump house and do some quick laundry. He opened the cellar door and entered. The cellar was somehow darker and smaller—more confining. The thing had stayed behind the cabinet. Or maybe it laid in wait under the stairs! He took a quick peek under the stairs. It was dark. Real dark! Something could be under the rickety stairs. It could stand straight up and bust through the rotted wood. It could pounce on him. Suck his entire being right through his butt. He sat down quickly and jammed his outstretched legs into the side of the cabinet. The cabinet moved toward the wall. It stopped. It stopped! His brain screamed. He cautiously leaned his head sideways: the cabinet had been stopped by a hand pinned between the cabinet and the wall. The hand was lifeless.

He reached up and gently touched the fingertips. Dead! It’s dead! It’s a feast for BabaYaga. Damn, you don’t screw with BabaYaga’s food. Not BabaYaga’s food! He was in the deepest crap of his young life. He had to straighten thing up or he would be the next feast for BabaYaga. He scooted on his butt to the side of the cabinet and pressed his legs against it so it turned away from the wall. There in all its naked splendor was the body of Tanya’s math teacher. She was the one Tanya said had called her the daughter of

the Seed of Satan. The witches had mutilated the teacher's once attractive face. Both of her eyes had been pierced with something hot and sharp.

He reached out and touched the teacher's naked breasts; they were cold and hung down toward her blood-streaked face. They were large but not too large. He would have loved her in a different time and a different place. He giggled. But they were not compatible. She was upside-down and he was right side-up. The two of them were a mismatch. His parents would never approve. People would laugh and speculate how they got it on. But he would have loved her. Some heavy, face-make-up would be a must. He touched her again. It was true love. An explosion, too close to the farm, startled him. He pushed the body back so its hanging hand wouldn't slip near the back edge of the cabinet. He repositioned the sacred book, and then with a grin stretching the corners of his mouth, he pinched the naked breasts one last time. Another explosion! Nearby! The hand gripped him. Damn! He dropped straight to the ground and shoved the cabinet straight to the wall in one swift move.

On the way to the pump house, Alexander spotted Christian, up the dirt road, sharing passages from his tattered Bible, with another fruit-cake. His brother turned and wagged a finger of shame toward him. "Screw you! You holly turd!" Alexander shouted. An explosion echoed from somewhere in the north. The blast hit in the center of the road. When the smoke cleared, Christian was still leafing through his Bible. The holier-than-thou turd would live forever. But Alexander won't live through the day if he didn't get the blood out of his coveralls.

He stepped out of his coveralls and shirt as he entered the pump house. Chilled breezes blew across his naked body.

"I'll tell Mama," Tanya said from the back of the pump house.

Alexander took a heart-stopping gasp of air. He turned toward the dark shadows at the back of the shed. "Damn!" he said. "What the Hell are you doing here?"

"You know I wash clothes today. You came to expose yourself. I'll tell Mama. I'll tell her you used bad words and you peed yourself." Tanya pointed at his naked front.

He looked down at urine dripping from his flaccid penis. "No . . . I just came to wash something from my clothes."

"Where are your underpants?"

"I stopped wearing them."

Tanya stood in the shadows and stared at him.

"You want to touch it?" he said.

"Yuck! Who would want to touch that nasty thing?"

"Just let me borrow your hand for a second." he whispered, "it won't bite you . . . I promise."

"Christian might come and see." She moved deeper into the shadows.

Alexander's heart began to tear through his chest as he moved toward his sister. He couldn't breathe. He could just make out her shape in the darkness. When he tried to grab her, to help her when she stumbled backward over a stack of roofing squares, she caught herself and pushed his hand away. This was it. She would learn to use her hands on him. Every day. Life was great! He moved deeper into the shadows. "Reach your hand out," he whispered. "I'll find it and guide it."

"Just stand still," she said. "I'll find it myself."

Alexander dropped his groping hands to his sides. He stood straight and tried to stop his heart from ripping his chest wide open. Her tiny hands would reach out from the dark and bring him his greatest pleasure. He jumped when he felt the light, gentle touch of her left hand on his upper thigh. It moved cautiously—fleeting as a soft breeze, hot as a scorching wind—toward the center of his stomach. And then, with an almost soothing caress, it stopped then slid down toward his other thigh. Hot air panted into his collapsing lungs. If she didn't touch it in another second, he would pass out. Her butterfly hand was on the move again. It was moving back up. Damn! He decided to just step into it. Or grab it. Her hand was moving in a triangle. From his thigh to his belly to his other thigh and back to his belly. She was sort of triangulating. Locating! Then he felt it! It was impossible to think what it might be, but part of his brain—the part not in total lust—remembered the roofing squares. The little bitch painted his manhood with tar! He tried to grab her to kill her. She escaped around him and dashed from the pump house and into the arms of her mother waddling up toward the front of the house.

Nothing was worth the painful hours Alexander spent as he tried still another tar-removing solvent. After weeks of cleaning, it still stuck to his fingers when he took a leak. His new pals thought it was some joke that his own sister tarred it. Alexander suspected that it was Tanya who gave his pals a blow by blow description. “Did she kiss it and make it well?” one of his pals asked. Alexander lied: said his sister always kissed it. But it didn't mean crap. All his pals said they did it with their mothers and sisters. But it was crap, except for the creepy kid in second period; he really did it to his sister. Alexander saw it. They all peeked. It was wild. All his pals talked about nothing but sex. It kept their minds off the reality of death; death that had blundered into everyone's house. They all knew that there was no future. No future that included them. Sex was today; this hour; this minuet. But it was still all crap. No one had had sex with their mother or sister—except Creepo—or their pal's mother or sister. No one had sex with their aunts or teachers or the Tarteroff twins. No one had had sex with anyone except Mr. Ten Fingers. That was the only game in town and the game was sold out.

But no one spoke about it. Alexander never told his pals about his twice a day sessions. He never told them about his sessions with Tanya's dead teacher. And he never told any of his new pals about the peek-hole in the alcove. Dead pals were difficult to speak to. He never told his new pals about his mother. About the thick layers of clothing she discarded when she went to the cellar. And in the freezing cellar how she stripped naked and poured pitchers of ice-cold water over her milk-white body. She never shivered, as she should have as any normal human would have; instead she caused the water to turn to steam. His pals and everyone in Saratov thought the Mackovicks were strange but no one chided them; after all his mother's side of the family came from Simbrisk and was rumored to be close to the Ulyanovs and thus Lenin.

Lenin's picture hung in the town square next to Stalin, Trotsky, and Mackovick. His father, Gregory Mackovick, had joined the Populist movement after his quiet return from the war against Japan. It was 1905 and his father was appalled by the lack of leadership in Mother Russia. He charged directly into the attempted overthrow of the diseased government of Tzar Nicholas II. Alexander had heard it all before. He became outraged at God or Satan or whoever when he learned of all the men and boys killed in ‘The Bloody Sunday Massacre’. Why didn't his father die? But no, his father was away from the Massacre. He was killing members of the secret police—the dreaded Okhrana. He

killed them in the dark shadows of what was to become Rasputin's scandalous rectory. Alexander's father became a national hero. The one chosen to raise a toast to the late Gregory Guerchouny, on March 13th of each year. Alexander remembered going with his father to the tiny meeting hall of the People's Freedom Party. On the wall was a vivid red poster by Melenkov. It depicted Guerchouny and followers being gallowised for the assassination of Tzar Alexander II on March 13th 1881. To be a hero in Russia you had to attempt to or succeed in killing a Tzar or someone connected with a Tzar. It mattered not if you lived through it all. In fact, if you were to be toasted, you had to die. His father was willing to die and go where? He was an Atheist. He would go where? When he died?

The Christian Martyrs knew they were going somewhere after death. Or actually they prayed they were going somewhere after death. But Alexander Gregor Mackovick was going nowhere after death, because he was going to live forever! But his brother, Christian, believed there was a Heaven, and that if he was "good" he would spend eternity in Heaven. Despite their parents, both Alexander and Christian had believed in Christ and Heaven when they were children. Only due to the constant preaching of their uncle Christian. Alexander and his twin brother, Christian, followed their beloved uncle through the wheat fields. "Christian," their uncle said, "always respect the winter wheat. Become Master of the Wheat as I am. Make your soil yield more per acre than any other soil. Stay close to God. He will guide your hand." Their uncle ran his hand through the thick shaft of the wheat then continued. "Don't listen to your father and his hate for the Church or your mother and her addiction to Evil. Stay with God and the winter wheat. You will help feed the starving children of the world.

"If the Revolution in Mother Russia succeeds, it will be exported to Germany and Italy and Spain. It will free the Workers. Free the wheat. Free the children. That is good. But I fear that because the Bolsheviks are Atheists they will have even less compassion than the Tzars or the Capitalists. You must try to keep Christianity alive. Only Christianity will work to feed the children." Uncle Christian gently stroked the crowns of wheat as he passed. "The precious winter wheat must not be in the hands of the Tzars or Capitalist or Atheists. The Revolution will give you a chance to distribute the winter wheat. Do it fairly."

Alexander's brother moved toward their uncle. "But, uncle, you'll be here to distribute the winter wheat."

"I won't be. I'll be joining Our Heavenly Father."

"We all will, but surely not in the near future," the brother said.

Uncle Christian stopped and slouched down onto a wooden bench at the far edge of the wheat field. "You know that your mother has been dealing in black witchcraft. Now she is trying to use her power with the Dung Witch, BabaYaga, to destroy your father . . . destroy the Revolution." He paused and coughed into his withered hand. "I will stop her. Bad things will be said about me and my beliefs, but remember, I love you, and God loves you." Uncle Christian turned and kissed his namesake on the lips, and as an afterthought pulled Alexander toward him.

The longer uncle Christian stayed at the Saratov house, the more Alexander believed in the God of Uncle Christian. He loved Uncle Christian and he loved God, but one day Alexander was deserted by them both.

Alexander was following his uncle through the rows of golden wheat. Suddenly, a rabid cow-dog charged toward Alexander. His uncle plunged forward to block the coal-

black dog's demented lunge; the animal's foaming teeth tore into the old man's arm and chest and leg and groin; the old man stumbled toward the field's center and sunk to the ground clutching his beloved winter wheat. The cow-dog turned and lunged toward Alexander. It ripped at his jacket with a fury that could only be halted by the sound of the blast of both barrels of a shotgun held professionally by Alexander's mother. She walked over and knelt by the cowering cow-dog; she patted its broad head. The dog disappeared. Bending her huge body over Uncle Christian, she lifted the fragile, old man, and packed him off to the worker's shack, then stuffed a dope soaked rag into his screaming mouth; nothing much was left of his throat and shoulders; he was alive; he was screaming.

Alexander's mother hummed as she strapped the torn, thrashing body to a cot. She continued to hum as she headed toward the center of town to fetch the doctor. His mother was evil. But she was happy. Uncle Christian was good. But he was screaming. It was obvious that God didn't reward righteousness. How could such an evil thing happen to his uncle? Righteousness was bullcrap. Evil had all the power. Alexander expected that the doctor would unstrap Uncle Christian, when he arrived, but instead, the doctor said, "He has inflammation of the brain. Hydrophobia . . . rabies . . . it will kill him slowly . . . but it will definitely be fatal." He put dope on a clean rag and stuffed it into the uncle's gagging mouth. "He will have violent mouth and throat spasms. You should have come for me immediately."

"I came for you immediately," Alexander's mother said. The doctor spread a greasy looking ointment on the open lacerations and began to sew the gaping flesh. "Impossible! The incubation period for hydrophobia is from ten days to two months. His wounds are from today. He must have been attacked another time." The doctor looked into the fat witch's evil eyes. The evil seeped into his brain and permeated his entire body then sat heavy in his burning bowels. He pulled his bag closed and moved rapidly from the shack.

Uncle Christian screamed without let-up for three days and two nights. Alexander prayed for his beloved Uncle Christian. "Please God, let him live. He loved you so. Please! You didn't need to send the Devil-dog. Uncle wouldn't have killed mother. He knew you would stop her—change her as you changed me." Alexander repeated the prayer each hour. But God deserted Uncle Christian. And God deserted Alexander. Alexander would never, ever forgive God.

When Gregory Mackovick finally came home, Uncle Christian was held through the night by the loving hands of his younger brother; the same man who he believed would save the world from cancerous Capitalism. That last morning, when Alexander went out to start his chores, he moved quietly, through the early morning mist, past the worker's shack; Uncle Christian's screaming body twisted and thrashed. Alexander watched as his crying father placed a large, flowered pillow lovingly over Uncle Christian's foaming mouth. The screaming was silenced. Forever.

Alexander's father became the driving force of the Revolution. He had no care for his own safety or the safety of his men. He became the Hero of the Revolution. It was he who had Petter The Great's Table of Ranks abolished; he set the action in motion that took all schools from the Church; he confiscated the fur coats and jewels of the aristocrats; he took over banks; he led the Red Army to search homes without documentation; he abolished all army rank; he slaughtered Nationalist: men, women, and children.

Alexander's parents were unique: In a backward country peopled with malcontent do-nothings, his parents participated-maniacally. Alexander never really knew his father. He had spoken to his father no more than a dozen times in his lifetime. On those few occasions, his father had beat him for something or another, and called him a bastard. And his mother was always in the cellar—always naked. How could he approach her? Her ugly body made him puke. His mother did nothing around the house. His sister, brother and he did all the chores. They would rise at 4:00 am, an hour after dawn, in the summer. Tanya would tend the cows and chickens. He would tend the hogs. Christian would tend the orchard.

They all would tend the winter wheat. But Alexander was the one who became Master of The Wheat. Master of The Wheat—three years in a row. Nothing gave him a more fantastic feeling of power. He could produce more bushels per acre than any boy of man in all of the Golden Triangle. While Christian wasted his time becoming Master of The Bible. Alexander Mackovick was Master of The Wheat.

“Uncle loved you best,” Alexander said to Christian.

“With good reason,” Christian said. “I was his namesake. I was never unruly. And I am and always will be a man of God.”

“You couldn't be a man of anything,” he slapped his brother playfully on the arm. “He was our uncle. He should have loved us equally. Just as father hates us equally,” Alexander said.

They both laughed.

In the summer season, there was only four hours of darkness—from 11: pm to 3:00 am. If Gregory Mackovick came home, those were the hours of his presents. He would stumble in—exhausted beyond limits—and crash, still fully clothed, on the master bed at the back of the house. He never noticed the filth of the house, and only spoke to his wife about the Revolution or the condition of the winter wheat. Only the Workers and the wheat concerned him. The wheat would feed his Workers until he could twist Russia from the Nationals and establish a Bolsheviki government across the land. When he succeeded—as the Young Turks had succeeded in overthrowing that insipid pig, Hamid, just south, in Turkey—and he became master of Socialist Russia, his fat pig, witch wife and her bastard sons would be the first to be purged. The bastards were only good for raising wheat. They could never be his followers or his sons. He would be the head of Russia. He was a born and bread follower of Marx, but much of his revolutionary zeal had been gleamed from an underground newspaper that had been smuggled from Austria across the Galician frontier.

When he first read “Pravda” it was written by an infamous Menshevik, Leon Trotsky. But now Trotsky was his mentor. Trotsky had some interesting ideas about the Revolution. But both Trotsky and Lenin were chickenshits. No guts; they had attempted to incite revolution while in the comfort of other countries. Neither had guts enough to lead the country when the Revolution was over. Neither deserved the crown. They were both mamby-pambies. Trotsky lead the 1905 revolution. But after its failure and his incarceration, and his escape from Siberia, he headed for Europe and the comfort of the Socialist Bourgeoisies only to reappear when the Mackovick troops had cleared the way.

Chapter Three

Mackovick was the only one crafty enough to stay out of prison and out of Siberia except for the disaster-days of service to Tzar Nicholas II against the slant-eyed bastards from Japan. The little Japs, Mackovick thought, won the war. Never again would anyone beat Mackovick. They would beat Lenin because Lenin was in the habit of loosing or at least being exiled. The little jerk had been exiled to Siberia but—with much inside help—escaped to Finland. Neither Trotsky or Lenin loved Russia as Mackovick loved Russia. Both wanted to be German Elite—German Intelligencia.

Mackovick and Stalin were the only professionals; Stalin, the Georgian, the Man of Steel didn't do much outside his own district. He was a jerk, but at least he returned to the Worker's Revolution of Georgia each time he escaped from Siberia. Stalin was his only competition. The Bolsheviki would not place Trotsky at the head of the Party because he was an avowed Menshevik who wanted world revolution—he didn't give a crap about Russia. The Party would exclude Lenin, because the little sniveling weasel was never around; a ghost who sent letters from the outside world. The Party would exclude the men of letters and elect a man of action. That left only Mackovick and Stalin: Jabon and Stalin. Jabon: he had started using his new name only months before. All the others had changed their names, why shouldn't he.

Jabon would kick Stalin's butt. Stalin was a little puke. Five foot five! The little puke was only five foot five inches tall! The next time Jabon met Little Joe, Jabon would beat the midget to a pulp; just like beating the little punk Alexander; probably bring the same pleasure. Terror in other people always brought him great pleasure. He would use terror against the Nationalist; against Stalin; against his fat, pig wife; against her bastard sons. "The attribute of popular government in revolution is at one and the same time virtue and terror. Virtue, without terror is fatal. Terror, without virtue is impotent."

Alexander was certain his father hated his mother and visa-versa. He was certain they had not had sex since the horrible death of Uncle Christian—probably way before. She called him idiot and he called her fat pig or ugly witch. The gruff man was never around. That was fine. Alexander didn't have to answer all those idiotic questions about the greatness of Marx and Engles, Lenin and Sorel. And most recently Trotsky. He had told his father that if they were all so great and proud why didn't they use their birth names. He slammed Alexander against the kitchen wall. But he continued to tell his father that his mother had told him that Lenin's name was Ulyanov. He never dated girls. He was a fancy like Kineindrof. His father slammed him against the wall again.

"Your idiot father and Vladimir Ulyanov will succeed with their Idiot's Revolution," his mother had told him. "But both will be dead before you come of age."

Fantastic! No practicing father was fantastic. No father, period, was more fantastic. His father's exploits were written of in the papers. But no clippings of his father hung in the Mackovick house. Only clippings, of Rasputin's rise and fall and slow death, hung in the little alcove. The clipping's corners yellowed and curled like claws of an animal long dead. Rasputin had piercing eyes and a jutting jaw like Alexander.

The home was no longer Gregory Mackovick's home. Home for him was the streets of violence. Violence that escalated as the peasants claimed their fair share of the Nobles' flesh.

"You stupid idiot!" Alexander's mother shouted at his father. "Get us some more land! All your followers are getting more land. We're getting zelch." Gregory Mackovick halted on his way to the door. He turned and threw his rifle; butt first, toward his wife. "Why would I want to give a ugly witch any land?" The rifle's heavy, wood stock hammered into the big woman's cheek-bone; it sent her sprawling against the pot-belly stove. "You bastard!" she pushed away from the stove. Burnt flesh tattooed her massive arm; its smell filled the small kitchen with the pungent odor of unbridled hate. She grabbed the rifle in both hands and fired toward her approaching husband. The shot blew fire back into the breach and singed the fine hairs in her nose but did not stop the macabre smile that painted her face as the bullet tore the middle finger off her husband's extended hand. "If you try to come back into this house," she whispered, "I'll blow your idiot head off."

Alexander was glad there was no father to stumble over him as he peeked through the hole in the alcove floor. He could hear the constant rat-a-tat-tat of running gunfights in the distance. The Bolsheviks and Nationals were down somewhere near the cannery, or what was left of the cannery. But who gave a damn? Below, flickering light haloed a muted gas lamp. His mother looked up—directly at him. Except she couldn't know. The hole was so very small. She could not see. The hole was too small. If he could twist his pocketknife one time, open the hole, and climb through; through a wooden womb and back into a flesh one. He could hide in the womb. Be protected from all the pain and slaughter. But then his mother would know. The giant woman would punish him beyond all pain her womb might save him from. She would beat him with the long, flat paddle kept in plain sight on the dust-caked kitchen-sideboard. Worse: she would tie the hideous looking doll to his privates.

Once, years ago, her huge hand had caught him by surprise; he was exposing himself to his sister, Tanya. The huge hand clasped him like a vice. His privates shriveled and quickly darted back inside him like a startled rabbit darts back into the safety of a Y in a log when the Great White Hunter is out and about. His mother's strong hand would not let it hide. She held tight and pulled the moaning youth, by his shrunken privates, over to the cabinet where the hideous doll waited. A heavy leather lace was strung through the exact center of the doll's grinning head; the lace snaked through the antique wood from ear to ear. In her rage, his mother tied the lace so tight that it cut into the tender flesh of his scrotum. He was made to walk around the house, naked, in front of Tanya and Christian and his mother. The hideous doll swung, like a horror-story pendulum, smashing, into his naked legs, hour after hour.

Tanya sat watching and giggling at the comparative lack of proportion of her brother's manhood and the phallus of the fertility doll. Christian begged, in the name of God, for his mother to show mercy.

Alexander knew if his mother saw him now—looking through the peep-hole—she would tie the hideous doll real tight this time. She looked directly at him. He was in deep crap. But he couldn't move from the peep-hole. He was frozen. And if he moved, the light would flash through the hole. But there was no light behind him. How could she see

him? It was dark in the alcove. But if she saw him, she would charge up the cellar stairs and drag him down to parade in front of the witches.

She looked away. Alexander was as stupid as his father. He was peeking again. She could hear him scramble toward the alcove whenever she came to the cellar. The dust in the alcove sprinkled through the separated floor-boards. He was watching her witches hack away at the store-keeper's body. The body spun at the end of a rope attached to a hook in the cross-beam. Soon he would become a warlock. An explosion, that sounded to be less than a mile away, brought her thoughts to her idiot husband. He was out there somewhere shouting and shooting. It was good he was still alive—at least at last word. There were advantages to being the wife of one of the leaders of the Revolution. Unless the Workers lost. She took advantage of being the spouse of an idiot; it gave her protection from the roving gangs who raped and murdered any woman who had no affiliation with the Workers. But she set her goal to be rid of the idiot, Jabon, before she brought young Alexander into her Coven. In no more than two years, her idiot husband would be dead either at the hands of the Nationalist or at the hands of the Coven.

It was good that Alexander watched. He would know exactly what to expect when he became warlock of the most powerful BabaYaga Coven in all of Mother Russia. Alexander was from the loins of a warlock. Gregory Yefimovick Novyka—Rasputin—the Debauchee. Her beloved Rasputin was reported to be a Khlysty by religion. But he was truly a warlock, and he was truly Alexander's, and by some strange quirk, Christian's biological father.

Rasputin and his followers came walking through Saratov years before he became the infamous seer to Tsarina Alexandria. They flogged themselves with short leather straps as they walked hunched over through the crowded streets. Rasputin separated from his flock. He inquired of the townspeople of the location of the nearest BabaYaga Coven. No one replied. But when he inquired of Una, she confessed knowledge of the location. Hypnotically, he explained that he and his followers were of the Khlysty, a Christian cult that believed man must sin before he can be saved. They were in Saratov to sin with the most evil of Covens.

Rasputin and his Khlysty followers ritualized each and every witch, but only Alexander's mother became pregnant. Rasputin picked her. She was young and fat and a virgin. Alexander had Rasputin's chin, hair, and skin tone. And his eyes. Alexander would be the world's most powerful warlock. His twin brother, Christian, would someday be a Coven sacrifice.

Alexander watched as his mother turned and slowly fixed her gaze on the swinging body of an old lady that his brain tried to identify. He thought it might be the lady from the meat shop who cheated his mother on the weight of a side. But he couldn't see her face; the angle was bad because the old lady's neck was tied close to the peep-hole. The witches had hung the old lady from the eye-bolt his father had screwed to the ceiling joist, of the cellar, to hold the boars for his comrades to butcher.

The witches should have been butchered. Fat, fat, fat, gut wrenching fat; all pink, all naked; all sweaty. But his mother was the fattest, the pinkest, and the sweatiest. Most of the members had been seduced, by his mother, away from the Orthodox Church. He pictured their tons of naked flesh in the front pew. His mind focused as a fat, naked witch trapped a scurvy mouse with the flat smack of her chubby foot on its too-long tail. The mouse was picked up by its tail, then carried to the store-keeper's hanging corpse and

stuffed into her open mouth; the mouse sat peeking out trying to figure a fast departure from the saliva pooled perch. Witches moved closer, to watch the mouse, opening Alexander's view of the far corner where three witches laid in the shadows using their mouths to pleasure each other; their bodies were so fat and so white that they blended into one, big mass of twisting, moaning flesh.

Alexander twisted his head so the eye against the floor could squint and focus better or become telescopic, but it only brought streams of tears to his overworked eye. He thought about turning over in order to place his left eye against the peek-hole, only, his long legs would not twist sideways under the heavy ice-box that fit so badly in the small, poorly designed alcove. He quickly wiped his eye on his rough shirt sleeve, and though his eye was stinging from his hasty treatment, it focused again on more, stimulating evil being performed below: close to the center of the dim cellar, a witch was sitting behind another; she was using the thick red-painted lips of her mouth to make suction hickies that ran across the bottom of the other witch's broad back; black and blue bruises were circled with dirty yellow rings that ran straight down the length of the spine thereupon circling the witch's flabby waist; the ugly bruises formed an upside-down cross. Most of the witches, including his mother, had the hickey art work on their massive backs. Alexander was startled when his mother clapped her hands.

All the witches stood and began parading around the swinging body of the storekeeper. They cast huge shadows on the birch walls, like formless cave women worshipping the God of Fire. All were pink skinned and black haired. He realized that he never saw his mother with her hair down except at Coven meetings. Her hair reflected the light of the gas lamp as it whirled around her massive body. The witches followed her. They began repeating his mother's chants.

No one had challenged her leadership. It was amazing, she thought. The old leader, Una, was dust. Dead. Slaughtered. Una was never able to make BabaYaga appear. But she would. She was certain. Tonight BabaYaga would appear. She would bring BabaYaga to Saratov just as her mother and her mother's mother had brought BabaYaga to Simbrisk. She chanted; at each chorus of the ode to BabaYaga, all the panting, sweating witches jabbed sharpened ends of broom handles into the sieved body hanging from the cellar rafter. Blood streamed down the broom handles and ran like thick molasses onto the witches' wrists and hands; it splashed and beaded the raising dust of the cellar floor, then caked red-brown between the dancing toes of the shoe-less witches. The mouse took advantage of one thrust and rode the broom handle up a witch's arm and over her back to her thick thigh and calf and onto the floor. But his escape was treacherous as the dancing tons of flesh smashed down toward his dodging body. He zipped under the stairs to safety.

At each turn, around the dirt floor, of the giggling, naked witch-flesh, one rotund witch would go into ecstasy and lick her blood-painted broom handle. On the third go-around, a god-ugly witch licked her broom handle then leaped forward and sunk her teeth into the flesh of the swinging body. Alexander's mother swung around—surprisingly fast for her enormous weight—and clutched the offending witch by the nap of her thick neck. “You stupid bitch! You violated the feast!” She pulled the ugly witch's broom handle from her flailing hand and drove its chiseled point through flab and gristle and into the witch's black heart. “Remove the violated feast!” Alexander's mother shouted. She pointed to the pin-cushioned body of the store-keeper. “Take it out and bury it.” The

bleeding body of the ugly witch was strung up, up side down, to the eye-bolt. Blood ran from the protruding broom handle and funneled down between the ugly witch's mammoth breasts then separated like blood-red tributaries as they ran down the edges of her double chins, soaked her face and trickled into her long, black hair that swept the floor as her body swung back and forth. The piercing began. Alexander's mother chanted "BabaYaga! Appear! Give us, your faithful disciples, the power to gain dominion over others. Make non-believers beg, grovel, and surrender to and service your disciples. Let the non-believers' open mouths bring us praise and pleasure; make them do all the things for your disciples that your disciples pledge to do for BabaYaga and her Mistress, the Great Beelzebub. BabaYaga! Appear! Drink and eat of the Violator. BabaYaga! Appear!"

Chapter Four

A piercing scream came from a round faced witch standing at the back of the milling Coven; Alexander recognized her as Vasilisa's mother—he shifted his position at the peep-hole—her naked body jerked and twisted; her heavy breasts sucked in instantly and formed the bony breast less rib cage of the metamorphose of BabaYaga. The cellar's dead silence was shattered with BabaYaga's shrieking-hag's laughter. Her gray-green hair hung like swamp slime from her fleshless skull; her privates flapped like dog's ears as she scampered across the cellar. The purring hag sniffed the hanging body then dropped down on her bony knees and placed her twisted lips on the gaping, blood-caked mouth of the hanging witch; BabaYaga sucked. First the witch's large head slid with relative ease into BabaYaga's mouth. The silent Coven watched with disbelief as the witch's huge body followed down, the evil BabaYaga's bony throat, and toward her distended belly.

Alexander's mother unhooked the butcher's blade from the wall, stepped forward, and slashed the rope, sticking from BabaYaga's ripping mouth. Like a severed umbilical cord to God, the sliced rope released the bloody, tortured body of the Violator; the body disappeared into BabaYaga's churning stomach. Alexander could barely hold back the gorge in his acid filled throat, yet his throbbing eye was glued to the dust-caked peep-hole. The hag witch stood, pregnant with the feast, the leather-skin on her belly stretched so thin that he could see the purple veins that laced and knotted as they held the feast-weight to her skeleton-body.

Alexander's mother knelt in front of BabaYaga. His mother looked like a large pile of bleached-white mashed potatoes or a pile of hog dung that had dried white by a hundred noon-day suns. Or maybe it was just the angle; high above her, like God would see her.

His mother kissed the bony hag-witch's festering feet. "BabaYaga, Sacred Mother of All That is Evil, you honor this humble Coven. You honor this humble leader. Let us satisfy your every desire. After, please reward us with power over all beings."

BabaYaga's emaciated leg kicked straight out, lifted the giant woman's naked body, held it up off the cellar floor, and then flung it against the damp, cellar wall. "Your Coven pretends allegiance to BabaYaga and her Mistress, the Great Beelzebub. But you sneak off to worship the Christian God," BabaYaga hissed. She started toward Alexander's mother. "I have come to devour this Coven. You are the main course."

As the hag-witch approached, the giant woman pressed her fleshy back against the slick, birch wall. She held her huge arms straight out in front of her dough-like body; her nipples dropped and fisted, into the heavy, thick rolls of fat that inner-tubed her waist, when her ponderous pillow breasts sunk deep into the flesh of her settling body.

She had come all that way. Studied until her eyes ran with blood; bled with self-inflicted wounds to keep her mind alert. And now the damn hag-witch, she had worshiped all her life, was going to chew her up and poop her out. It couldn't end like that. Not before she had destroyed her idiot husband and brought Alexander into the Coven. "Sacred Mother of Evil," she shouted. "We hate the Christian God. We enter the Church only to recruit." She slowly edged up to a standing position, and then faced the hag-witch. "Only in a Church can we find women who believe in God and thus believe in the Great Satan and Mistress Beelzebub. Women who serve my idiot husband and the Party don't believe in zelch. Only zealous Church women believe in Good and Evil—Angels and Witches. Forgive me BabaYaga. I was only following your commandment written in the Book of Fire. Recruit, you said. Recruit the righteous and make them evil. Forgive me."

BabaYaga stopped in her tracks; she looked like a stunned animal that had been presented with a dog that smelled like a cat. She twisted her evil head and looked at the shivering Coven. She looked back at Alexander's mother. She looked straight through the peep-hole at Alexander. She vanished. In her stead, Vasilisa's mother twisted and jerked in the center of the packed dirt floor, then threw up bowls of blood. Alexander's mother dropped to her beefy knees beside the witch; she put her arms around Vasilisa's mother then looked up at the Coven members. "The Sacred Mother will speak to Mistress Beelzebub. Our Mistress will understand. But we must not attend Church until she and BabaYaga approve."

The hyper-ventilating witches—all in awe of the three hundred pound witch's ability to conjure BabaYaga then calmly counter the hag-witch's threat of mass devouring—slowly paraded around the seated woman and kissed her extended hand.

The streets ruptured into twenty-four hour a day violence as thousands of bodies ticked off the Revolution's score. Christian knew it meant nothing to his mother; he understood that she was the most evil being on God's earth. Uncle Christian was correct. She would stop at nothing to destroy his father and the Revolution. But something had happened. His mother no longer attended Church. As evil as she had become, Christian still felt there would be redemption for her as long as she attended Mass. "Father, I was told to tell you that they all fell ill. Some exotic strain of the flu," Christian said to a young priest. "But I'm certain that it's something to do with my mother being a witch."

"Christian, my son," the priest said, "your mother and the others only pretend to be witches; I doubt that they could conjure more than a head cold." He laughed at his own

joke. “They’re just lonely.” The priest moved slowly toward Christian. He sat down next to the boy and gently put his small hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Your mother and the others are just confused. Most of your mother’s friends have lost their husbands to the evils of war or the evils of the Revolution. The husbands who God spared are out all night trying to use the words of the Antichrist, Lenin, to create more unrest. You mother’s friends are told by their husbands that there is no God; so these fat, ugly widows and soon-to-be widows search for something—anything. What they find are their mirror images and their fat, ugly mirror images believe in Satan.”

Christian turned to the priest. “My mother and her friends don’t worship Satan. They worship BabaYaga and Beelzebub.”

“My son, Beelzebub is just another name for Satan, the Devil, Lucifer, or the Morning Star. They are all one. They are all names for the Evil that stands against our Lord. Your mother is confused. The Church will help her. They want and need my guidance. I will start visiting each of their homes.”

He was not really intent on returning Mrs. Mackovick and her fat friends to the flock. He would visit more out of curiosity than out of religious concern. Mrs. Mackovick was one of the many White Russians who liked to dabble in the occult. Many used the mythical witch BabaYaga as their rallying point, but they were not evil people. Their meetings—Covens—were just get-togethers for lonely women; women whose husbands were out working for the Antichrist, or had been murdered by the Satanic people of Germany. The husbands were evil; the Germans were evil; the Bolsheviki were evil; some people who called themselves Christians were evil. The Khlysty cultist were very evil. They had followed the most evil. Rasputin. He had been the most evil. Satan’s hand maiden. He had carnal knowledge of both female and male. He had walked south-west from the Siberian Plane. He was nothing more than a vagrant. He was unwanted in his birthplace of Toboisk, but he became revered by tens of thousands. He was a pentitnet for their sins, a stranniki, who searched the Earth for the truth—his version of truth. He was a dung-smelling holy man. The hooligan had been introduced to the Romanovs by no less than the beloved Bishop of Saratov, Hermogen. Why had God allowed Hermogen to commit such a travesty? Bishop Hermogen could have introduced Satan himself to the Court of Nicholas II, and Satan would have been accepted with open arms. Accepted as a holy man.

In fact, Rasputin was the spitting image of Satan in the early Melenko drawings—as was Christian Mackovick. Only Christian was a much younger version. Christian was a good boy, but for some reason God had created him to look like Rasputin and thus like Satan. Alexander was the evil one. But God was all-wise so He must have planned to use Rasputin as a pawn in the Apocalypse. But the greasy peasant died before Our Lord could use him. The bastard’s healing powers were legendary, but they didn’t help him. Why did God give such power to an evil man and give none to a faithful priest? God had a plan. The plan was not always clear to a lowly priest. But still, a sane God would, should give such powers to a faithful priest not some peasant tripe. God was sane, of course. A humble priest could think nothing else. God had used Rasputin to destroy the Romanov Dynasty in order to bring the Antichrist to power to fulfill the prophecies in Revelations. The Antichrist, the little cretin from Simbrisk, would be brought to power. He might even bring the Jew, Trotsky, with him. God had a plan. It involved an Atheist and a Jew. God always had a plan. Mrs. Mackovick was somehow part of the plan. But only an insane

God would give the fat, obnoxious woman the power to conjure. Notwithstanding, he would still attend one of the Coven meetings, some evening when he was ahead of his reading. Of late he had been reading Lenin's letters to Gorky, published by Pravda; he recalled one outlandish statement by Lenin. "There can be nothing more abominable than religion." Lenin was the Antichrist. Lenin was the problem. Not some storybook witch with an Islamic name. No witches existed. Least not in his parish!

BabaYaga issued from Alexander's grandmother's body on a moonless night two weeks later. "The Great Beelzebub affirms you are a deserving disciple," BabaYaga said to Alexander's mother. "You are to be honored above all other disciples. As Rasputin ritualized you, so must his son ritualize you. The Birch Forest Ritual as described by the parchment." BabaYaga's long, bony fingers shot straight out and darted into Alexander's mother's gaping mouth. The fat woman fell back and sat down hard on the dirt floor while BabaYaga's hand snaked down her throat and probed the heaving base of the fat woman's stomach from which was extracted a slime shrouded parchment; BabaYaga dropped it onto the fat woman's naked lap; immediately the putrid hag-witch disappeared. In her stead was the twisted, silent body of Alexander's dead grandmother.

Alexander's mother looked over at the body of her own mother, but did not move toward her. Instead she reached down into her own lap and unrolled the parchment; slime ran down her wrists as she lifted the parchment toward the dim light. She paraphrased, "Alexander is to be the Coven's warlock. Alexander is to ritualize each and every one of us each and every meeting. Alexander is only to ritualize in the Birch Forest fashion.

Alexander is to be the sole and separate property of BabaYaga; Her Disciple."

The next Thursday, Alexander was moving around his room, nervously. If he heard correctly, he was to be part of the activities; in fact, he was to be the activities. All week it was all that grinded through his twisted brain. Thursday was a long time coming. God or somebody had stopped time. Alexander heard a sound behind him. He turned. His mother stood in the doorway. "Mother!" He tried to quiet his nerves.

"Alexander, sit on your bed; I want to tell you great news; if you haven't already heard." She walked over to the unmade bed and pushed the blanket over the musty sheets. She sat next to him. The edge of her big thigh touched his leg. She put her giant hand on the front of his trousers.

He jumped up from the bed. "Don't do that. It's not right," he said.

"In whose eyes?"

"Everybody whose sane."

"Look at you . . . you're thinking about the alcove," she said.

Alexander froze. She was going to take it out and tie it to that damn fertility doll.

She moved toward him. He pulled away and ran toward the other side of the room. She pursued him. "You must learn control. Think of other things; you need the mind control of your father . . . Rasputin."

What the Hell was she talking about? Rasputin? Mind control? He was going to puke if she touched him again.

"Alexander, relax. You will never have to peek from the alcove again. You are to become the Saratov Coven's Warlock. You will be taught to ritualize in the Birch Forest fashion. Every Thursday night, you will ritualize each and every witch. In your off time, I will teach you control."

"I can't! I won't! I'm not doing it with my own mother!"

“You must! I’ve planned a lifetime for this. It is your destiny. It will bring you power. It will bring me power.”

“I won’t do it to my own mother. No chance! I’ll puke if you touch me again. You smell like crap. You look like crap. I’ll tell the old man. I’ll . . .”

Her heavy hand flew toward the side of his face, but he sidestepped quickly so it slammed into the rough wood wall. Blood splattered from her fist. When her hand bounced back, painfully, from the wall, blood sprayed and formed a perfect upside-down cross.

After months of practice, Alexander became proficient at ritualizing like the wolves of the Birch Forest performed the act. He learned he could perform the act on the most repulsive of the Coven members and still satisfy her and himself. He never looked at their fat, ugly bodies; he never saw their fat, ugly faces. He imagined he was with one of the Tarteroff sisters or his own sister. He had made an agreement that he would ritualize all the witches if his mother would agree not to participate; she could be there and chant and lead the Coven, but she could not participate in the Birch Forest ritual. Thursdays were rough on Alexander, but there was no rest for the wicked. If he ran into one of the witches on the streets of Saratov, the witch would insist he go with her to her house or to the nearest bushes. He was in the bushes next to the cannery with Visialia’s mother when fighting broke out up the block; six Regulars were being chased by twenty Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks slaughtered the Regulars then spotted Alexander and his companion.

“Alexander, save yourself,” the old witch said. “I have lived a long and delicious life. Go, remember me as you ritualize the others.”

He buttoned his trousers. As he sprinted around the corner of the cannery, he heard her calling to the band of Bolsheviks to use her in any way before they murdered her. If he had the power his mother had promised, he would have cast some kind of spell on the Bolsheviks and saved Visialia’s mother.

“You will gain all of your strength back and become more and more powerful each ritualization,” His mother said. “Just hang in, don’t stop now. And reconsider our agreement.”

“Mother what are you saying?” Christian said as he stepped through the entrance door.

“This is not your business,” she said.

“You are trying to make Alexander a messenger of Satan. Trying to make him as evil as you”

The big woman swung and knocked Christian across the room. She charged toward him and dropped on one knee into the center of his belly. He blacked out as his lungs gushed air and blood. He kept thinking about the priest telling him that Lenin was the Antichrist. But what if the Antichrist was a woman? What if the Antichrist was his very own mother? No. Logically, Lenin was the Antichrist. The Ulanovs had many priests in their family. “They went out from us, but they were not of us,” Christian quoted in his mind. “He is the Antichrist that denieth the Father and the Son.” Lenin was the Antichrist and Saratov was Babylon. “Look to the East and you will see the seven hills.” Christian woke, his sister, Tanya, was gently stroking his forehead.

“They’re both gone,” she whispered. “They are in the wheat field. He is doing it to her.”

“No! It’s not true. You are like me; we are both jealous because she loves him most. But it is a mother’s love. Not a harlot’s. It is good love. Not evil.”

“You are a total Idiot, Christian, they do it every night . . . in the wheat field, in her room, in the cellar. I’m going to tell father.”

“No! You are wrong. She was attempting to seduce him when I walked in. If he was already hers in evil incest, she would not be pleading and coaxing.”

“I thought you said it was good love,” she said.

“I was trying to make you think that, but I know you. You will tell father. He has to know Alexander is not the evil one,” he said. “Think first. Father will beat you for telling him.”

Alexander was informed by his mother that Christian would have to be sacrificed to BabaYaga and Tanya would be brought into the Coven, if not, they would tell his father; there would be Hell to pay. Actually, he thought, there would be Hell to pay either way. He was already paying Hell; he had not an ounce of energy left in his adolescent body. “They both think we have had sex together. You want them to think that. You want him to find out. You want me to murder my own father or what ever he is. I’m about to quit this damned circus. Bring on that ugly BabaYaga before I die!” He shouted at his mother as he started to walk from the wheat field.

She knocked him to the cold ground. She stood over him and slammed her shoeless foot into his crotch. “Don’t ever blaspheme against BabaYaga, or I will feed you to her . . . piece by piece.” she said. “You must learn to love her in all her ugliness. If you do, you will have a wonderful surprise.”

Each time, he left the cellar with more power. Evil was power. And the Winter Wheat was power. With the Evil and the Winter Wheat, he would control the people of the world. He would be Warlock of Warlocks. He was already Master of the Wheat. The Coven rituals were making him powerful physically, mentally, and psychically. And he had changed his outward appearance. He was no longer his brother’s twin. He was taller and huskier than Christian; his forehead jutted out making his eye’s more recessed than his brother’s eyes; and they were no longer brown: they were almost black.. His hairline receded, and his hair was darker than Christian’s. He had finally lost his brother, that parasite that always bored up his butt to find all the bad crap then called it sin. BabaYaga would get rid of Christian with the snap of her fingers. Next Coven meeting, during an eclipse, he would ask. It was his turn to get some wish fulfilled. Most of the witches asked that BabaYaga eliminate their husbands if the Revolution had not or did not. It was a simple deal. BabaYaga would agree to be called by a chosen witch at a chosen time. When she was called, BabaYaga would enter the witch and come out at the proper time. Story was: Vasillisa’s mother, before her untimely death, used the BabaYaga method to rid herself of an overbearing husband who, in the normal course of the day, beat her bloody. “Where have you been?” the husband shouted.

“At a Coven meeting,” she said.

“Thought I told you to stay away from those ugly, dung-smelling witches. You never listen. Tonight is going to be a special night. I’ve decided to beat you as usual, but tonight I will beat you to death.” He clutched her arm and spun her into the living room wall.

The wind oofed from her lungs, but as her husband came at her, she caught her breath. “BabaYaga! Appear!” she whispered. Her clothing ripped and her stomach split; out danced BabaYaga.

“You stop that witchcraft crap, or I’ll really trounce you,” the husband said.

“What is your special method of trouncing?” BabaYaga hissed. She moved toward him. “BabaYaga loves to trounce.”

“What? A skeleton-witch is going to do me? Bullcrap!” He threw his best right-cross toward her bony chin. BabaYaga opened her mouth wide and let the fist slam in.

“Oh Christ!” the husband said. He withdrew the burning nub of what used to be his hand.

“Christ, ain’t the right one,” BabaYaga enunciated through the smoke coming from her mouth.

“Please, Baba Baba . . .”

“BabaYaga to my friends,” the hag-witch said.

“Please, Baba . . . Yaga. The death thing and the trounce thing and the skeleton witch thing were all just jokes.”

“Then you’ll die laughing!” BabaYaga pointed her finger at the big Russian and he ignited then exploded.

Tanya Mackovick had been watching at the side window. She had stopped by to see if Vasilisa was home. Tanya’s legs carried her home in record time. “Christian, I swear, it happened. He blew apart. Some of his guts stuck to the window,” Tanya said.

“Little sister, you’re getting as nutty as mother,” Christian said.

“I’ll show you. There’s a place in the alcove. We can watch. Watch the Coven meeting. BabaYaga will appear.

“I will not be a spy. Alexander is in God’s hands. God will save our brother from Evil,” Christian said; his constantly wagging finger pointed toward Tanya.

“Your God won’t do jack. I’m going to tell father. Alexander is doing it to his own mother. It’s against the laws of Russia and the laws of nature.”

“It’s against God’s laws. He will punish mother and save Alexander,” Christian said.

“I’m telling father!”

“No! Father will punish you. He will murder them. Let it be. Let it be in the hands of our loving God.”

“He is not our God. I believe in none of that. Father said that religion is the drug of the citizens.”

“The opiate of the masses. Marx said it. But God has been around a lot longer than Marx, and God will still be here when Marx is forgotten.”

“You’re a fool. Marx will never be forgotten. Lenin says that, ‘From the philosophy of Marxism cast as one piece of steel, it is impossible to expunge a single basic premise, a single essential part, without deviating from objective truth. Orthodox Marxism requires no revision of any kind either in the field of philosophy, in its theory of political economy, or its theory of historical development,’” Tanya quoted.

“Best if you had spent your time memorizing the Bible. They have brain-washed you.”

“The Church has brain-washed you!” she said. “There is no God!”

“There is! I saw Him. He has chosen me to bring the Truth to Mother Russia.”

“You lie! Truth is only in Marxism. Truth is in our father. You were going to let Uncle Christian stop her. Murder her. Now father will do it. He will slaughter them both.” She moved toward the peep-hole in the alcove. “You just watch, I’m telling father.”

Chapter Five

Jabon was fighting a fierce Revolution that erupted after the Bolsheviks ousted Kerensky from the Winter Palace on the evening of November 7th, 1917. He worked directly under Commissar of War, Leon Trotsky. They helped mold the Red Army and to keep the Revolution on track. When Tanya most needed her father; needed him to murder her mother and castrate her sodomizing brother, her father was in a major conflict. It was May of 1918. At Chelyabinsk, Gregory Mackovick, Jabon, had blockaded enraged Czech. Troops headed toward Viadivostok. "Shoot on sight any Czech or Allied troops," he said. "And any member of the Red Army who is unwilling to give his life for the cause." The cause took till the end of summer. The BabaYaga Birch Forest rituals continued.

It all came to an abrupt, blood-smear end in the winter of 1918. Jabon was leading a division of Bolsheviks that "hop and caper like troops of ferocious baboons amid the ruins of cities and corpses of their victims." Churchill was very descriptive, but he couldn't know what Jabon knew; when men receive very little pay, but you must retain their undying loyalty, bootee is the only recourse. Give them some of the spoils and let them abandon all conscience and you will have men who will follow you anywhere. What difference could it make if there was rape and disembowelment? Death was nodding its smiling head at the end, regardless. Jabon knew there was no afterlife. So what difference could it make if the troops were entertained in the process? So what if his men exercised their personal lusts and depravities? Death was nodding its smiling head at the end, regardless. Regardless. His men had disemboweled the secretary to Captain Crombie, the British Naval Attache, that's why Churchill was Teed. Churchill got Teed when things didn't go his way. Jabon got Teed when things didn't go his way. Churchill would have been Teed if his wife and bastard son were hopping and capering. Jabon would slash his way to Saratov, and then slash his way through the pig and the bastard.

Alexander was, in the center of the freshly etched Witches Foot, performing the ritual on the giant, naked, high-bucking body of a fat, ugly witch. The cellar door burst from its rusty hinges. It slammed wide. Alexander's raw-boned father leaped down the stairs into the middle of the naked, scrambling flesh of the BabaYaga Coven. Tanya and Christian stood in shock, at the cellar's violated entrance, as their maniacal father hacked his way, through screaming flesh, with the flat-bladed, long-handled wood ax. He stepped in front of Alexander and slammed his fist into the youth's chest knocking him, from the ugly witch's naked body, onto the heap of dying witches, then he smashed the ax down into the center of the ugly witch's broad body; the ax cleaved in with a thud like opening a damp log.

Jabon spoke hoarsely to Alexander's mother, "I beat your daughter for suggesting this could be." With blood-smear hands, he pulled the giant woman up from the Witches' throne and threw her against the wooden stairs. The weight of her naked body cracked bone and wood and sent her sprawling spread-legged in the corner.

"Papa! Stop!" Tanya screamed from the stairs. She ran toward her frothing father just as he kicked out with his hard, leather boot. The boot kick drove between his giant

wife's legs; she grunted, jerked forward, and vomited. The next kick caught the side of her broad face. The sound of her neck cracking echoed above the cacophony of the cellar.

Tanya grabbed her powerful father from the back but was too late and too feeble; her father drove his steel-hard thumb, into Tanya's shrieking eye socket, driving her against the slime-caked walls.

"Father! God will not condone this savagery," Christian said from the safety of the cellar entrance.

"You little, sniveling idiot," Jabon said. "Your God has no power in this Hell. Your God has no power, anywhere." Growling like a wounded bear, Gregory Mackovick grabbed his giant, naked wife by her long hair, dragged her into the center of the Witches Foot, laid her head on his upper thigh—face up—and pried her mouth wide open with both of his powerful hands until her jaw bone snapped. He looked straight down into the cavity in which tons of rye bread had been crammed; he crammed his fist down her throat until she gagged to death.

Christian leaped from the top of the cellar stairs and landed across his father's broad back. He dug his fingers into his father's eyes just before the big man slammed the youth to the ground and stomped his boot heel into Christian's ribs. Christian screamed.

The first shot was high because Alexander had never before fired his father's Bolo pistol. Nevertheless, when it fell from his father's coat, there was no hesitation. The safety kicked easily upward. The trigger squeezed hard in his trembling hand. Yet shot, two, three, four, five, and six tore into the side of his father's left ear, dug into his father's screaming throat, opened his father's charging chest, and emptied into his father's dying body. The cellar looked like a field trip to the slaughterhouse at Simbrisk: naked witches' bodies piled in heaps; some hacked wide open; some missing hands or forearms raised in feudal defense against the ax blows of a maniac—flimsy shields against insane rage. They were like slaughtered pigs: pink, ruptured flesh that lay motionless on the cellar's dirt floor.

Alexander carried his brother up the cellar stairs and placed him on the ground next to the house. Blood flowed from Christian's wheezing mouth. "I have to get you to the doctor," Alexander said. "Your ribs have pierced your lungs."

"Save Tanya . . . and mother," Christian blubbered through mouthfuls of blood "Save our father . . ."

"If he's not dead, I'll stomp him till he is," Alexander said.

"He's our father!" Christian said.

"You stupid idiot! We're bastards! Rasputin is our father." Alexander stumbled back toward the cellar. Some of the witches were still alive; they moaned and reached out for his help. He lifted the fragile body of his sister and carried her up the cellar stairs.

The bandages, he wrapped around his sister's head, would not save her once beautiful eye. The damage was too severe. The eyeball was slit open like a rotten soft-boiled egg. Nothing could save it. She stirred. She looked up at him. "You are the slime of the earth," she said. "I told father how many time you did to your mother."

"How little you know, if you had joined, you would have realized I never touched our mother. What I did to the other witches and BabaYaga was the Birch Forest Ritual. Performed as the wolves of the forest perform. Someday, I will show you what the witches gloried after. All the witches except mother. I never touched mother. She begged me to ritualize her, but I never did. But all you had to do was ask."

Tanya swung out. Alexander caught her fragile hand and kissed it. He moved his hand down the extended arm and cupped her blossoming breast. He twisted her arm so she had to bend slightly forward to be without pain and brought her palm down to cup his crouch. "I never touched our mother," he whispered. Tanya's free hand reached up and pulled a rusty iron pot from the shelf on the exterior of the kitchen window; it caught Alexander at the base of his skull and pounded his eager mouth into her breast. Tanya rolled his heavy body from her, and then struggled to stand. The pain in her eye was throbbing clear down in her feet. She would kill herself, if her beautiful face was scared. Or if she lost an eye. But first she needed to find Christian. She needed to think what to do. Her mother and father were dead. There would be a scandal that would follow her the rest of her life. Alexander and the witches who were still alive had to die. But how? Fire! Fire would be good. No one would be able to discover the bodies if the fire consumed them. Did bones burn? Would that much flesh burn? It would smell like so much crap.

Flames! Flames licked at his feet as a yellow-red fire attempted to eat, through the pump house door, and consume him. Alexander was tied with wire to a shelving post. Without hesitation, he ripped flesh and fine, brown hair from his arms as he twisted free from Tanya's handy work. Probably with Christian's help. She had wrapped him in chicken-wire, like a swaddled warrior. A warrior. A Warlock. No damn ax wheedling maniac or tiny-breasted bitch, or raging fire, or sleeping God would stop the Warrior-Warlock of BabaYaga. He clinched his teeth, and then rolled his nerve-edged body out of the skin-tearing wire trap, but he couldn't stop screaming as he tumbled through the flaming door. Flaming splinters of wood clung to his hair, but he brushed them off with little thought of the damage done to the palms of his slapping hands. He would find Tanya.

Up the road, his brother was limping, hunched over, in the direction of the town center. Tanya wasn't with him. She couldn't get far. Her blood loss would slow her down. His whole body stung from the cuts, and burns and blisters. Best he go to his room and put on some soft clothing—the neighbors who didn't have their own problems would be coming to help put out the fire. He would tell the fools that a mortar had hit. But what would he tell them about the cellar? More fire was needed quickly. Set the house on fire; then go and find Tanya and bash her beautiful head in and throw her in the cellar with the rest of the bleeding flesh. Light up the whole, damned mess. As he stumbled toward the house, he saw the kerosene can sitting off to the side of the open cellar door. He knew Tanya had planned her own roast. "I know you're still here," he said as he entered the cellar. "Under the butcher table?" He looked down into the slaughter house. No Tanya. Just half-dead witches. They moved toward him. They reached out to him. Crying and moaning echoed through the cellar. Movement came from the center of the Witches Foot. His father rolled over. He was trying to drag himself toward Alexander's voice. He couldn't see. One eye was missing and the other was covered by a flap of skin that had peeled back from his ruptured skull and fell down across his blood-soaked face. Alexander expected his father to flip his head back in an effort to whip the flap of skin from his eye, but the only movement was his father's steady pace along the dirt floor toward Alexander.

Alexander stood frozen. It was like the time he smashed a grasshopper. It kept coming so he smashed it again, but its legs kept twitching although the body was smashed gook. Small ants gathered on the grasshopper's puss-covered wings, but it still

didn't stop. It kept dragging its damaged body toward Alexander until the frightened youth took a rock and hammered the remainder of the grasshopper flat. He would have to hammer his father flat. His father had reached the base of the cellar stairs. Alexander slammed the cellar door closed to his father's faceless stare. He flipped the heavy wooden cross-piece. Only a ghost could get through before Alexander lit the place up. He poured kerosene on and in front of the cellar door; he made a small kerosene-river up to the front of the stoop of the house. Inside the house, he turned when he heard sounds coming from the outside. When he peeked out, he saw Tanya, standing at the cellar door, trying to hold the bandage over her damaged eye, while nudging the cellar door cross-bar free.

She saw Alexander. She screamed. She dropped the bandage—exposing an empty blood-rimmed eye-socket. She darted around the corner of the house. Her brother was gaining on her as she circled the house. She ran into the house and slammed into her room. A bag of possessions was sitting beside the closed entrance to her room. Marx's picture sat on the top of the bag. The door bolt slid shut.

Alexander hammered his bloody body against the solid door; small blotches of blood patterned its rough wood surface. "Tanya! Let me in! I won't hurt you. I promise!" he said. "There is just the two of us now. Christian ran off. We must stick together," he laughed to himself and thought about sticking to her fragile body like an ant to grasshopper gook. No sounds came from the other side of Tanya's door. "Tanya, I need to light up the place real soon. I'm going to fire up the house. I don't want to burn your beautiful body, even though you tried to burn mine. Come out! Now we can be together with no one interfering."

"I'd rather burn alive! Than have your slimy hands touch me!!" she said.

Alexander slid a heavy cabinet in front of her door then continued to pour kerosene around the rooms of the house. He poured an extra dose on the cabinet blocking Tanya's door. "Too late," he said. "I'm not going to let you out even if you beg." He stepped out of the house and headed toward the ashes of the pump house. One glowing ember would torch the entire house. His breath caught. He froze in his tracks. His father's mutilated body was pulling itself over the top of the cellar stairs. It was snailing toward Alexander. Alexander told his body to escape, but his feet could find no purchase on the kerosene soaked ground. An eternity passed. His father's groping hand clutched Alexander's ankle. The youth screamed. He bent down and tried to pry the hand away but it was vised. He moved sideways, toward the cellar entrance, dragging his father's twisting body. Alexander stumbled headlong down the cellar stairs. His father's body tumbled with him as its hand still clutched Alexander's ankle. Alexander pushed himself up from the mattress of bodies that had sardined the stair-base. Hands were reaching out and grabbing at him. He worked his way back up the stairs with the ax in his hand and his father's body in tow. Standing on the top cellar stair, he hefted the ax and slammed it straight down across his father's thick wrist. On the seventh brutal stroke, the wrist tore loose from the hand. Alexander's fear and insane rage hammered the ax into his father's other wrist then finally his bull neck. Alexander kicked the blood-spurting pieces down into the cellar. He rolled his father's headless body down into the moaning, screaming mass.

"Even God can not forgive you for this!" he heard his brother say, but he knew this time it was just in his mind. "Screw your God!" Alexander slammed the ax hard into the rotted wood of the cellar stoop. He locked the door and headed toward the smoldering

ashes of the pump house. Tanya appeared around the corner of the house. He had forgotten her bedroom window. She splashed kerosene across the front of his body then quickly dropped the lit kerosene lamp in his path. Fire whipped his legs, but he tumbled to the dirt and smothered the flames—leaving nothing more than slight burns on his hands and legs. He stumbled to his feet and charged after Tanya. Her short legs had carried her to the center of the wheat field. But he caught her. He grabbed the back of her bodice and caught his fingers in its filigree. It ripped. Tanya tore free and scrambled sideways into denser wheat. She had on only leggings and underpants. Alexander dove into the wheat and grabbed the back of her underpants; she tried to twist free, but he was too strong. He held her and pulled the ripped panties down over her leggings then threw her on the ground between the rows of wheat.

“You best kill me when you’re finished. Because I’ll find you, and burn it off!” she said. She spit in his dirt-streaked face.

“I intend to kill you while I’m doing you.” He moved forward to drop down on her frail body. Then he felt it. It couldn’t be. His father’s hand! It was clutched around his ankle! He screamed and twisted sideways. He fell next to Tanya. She scrambled to her feet and edged into the dense winter wheat. His ankle was clutched by a bony hand: the hand of the witch who had been buried months earlier in a shallow grave. He sucked in a deep breath and pulled the bony fingers from his ankle.

His search for Tanya began. By the time he found her path, she was galloping, naked, across the open land, heading toward the Sonotov’s—three miles distance. She would stumble and fall from exhaustion and loss of blood. A commercial combine would reap her body during the coming harvest: it would gobble her up and poop her out.

The house and cellar flared up like dry wheat shaft. It was late; nevertheless, darkness would not come for another hour. Flames from the house would not draw attention until the sky was black at midnight—the witching hour. It might not draw any attention; there were thirty or forty fires going at all times across the Saratov battleground. He would escape with no one knowing but Christian and Christian would be too ashamed to tell, and Tanya and she would die and be discovered at harvest time or her body burnt beyond recognition as the wheat burned.

Tears washed down his strong cheeks and soaked the rough, work shirt he had snatched from the worker’s shack. The golden wheat would char black. He kicked out with the hard-toed shoe; the violent kick shattered the glowing lantern he had sat at the edge of his beloved winter wheat. Flames seared the heavens. Alexander prayed the flames would scorch the sleeping God.

Chapter Six

His tears did not stop until the mid-winter season. They froze to his scowling face and packed his raw nostrils. The tears were not for his decapitated father or one-eyed sister and certainly not for his holier-than-thou-brother; the tears were for his mother; how could he live without her? Why had BabaYaga let her parish? Why were they not warned of the betrayal? BabaYaga didn't intervene because she was furious that the Coven had not followed through on her demand for total elimination of all the witches' husbands. If they had followed her demands, his maniacal father wouldn't have been around to slaughter the Coven and his smooth-skinned mother. He should have chopped up his father months before, just as BabaYaga demanded. Tears filled Alexander's eyes again as he slid around a corner at the sound of approaching feet.

Alexander was wanted throughout White Russia for patricide. Members of his father's Worker's Party, incited by obscene images provided by Tanya Mackovick, chased him across the Volga River then south-east toward the Caspian Sea. The peasants who had no land began to seize the aristocratic estates. To assuage their rage, they ripped the flesh from the living bodies of their ex-lords. Alexander moved slowly through the countryside sidestepping the Nationals, the Bolsheviks, and the soldiers retreating from an all but lost war with Germany.

His mother's younger sister was in Karaball, she would surly take him in. She always had an eye for him. At several family get-togethers she had touched him—accidentally—on his upper thigh. And once she leaned directly over the food, when he was attempting to spear a small, stuffed sausage, and she let a portion of her heavy cleavage come tumbling—accidentally—from the top of her open bodice. She would gladly take him in, and take him on. Peasants stood in line to have their allocation of wood weighed; each time Alexander passed a long line waiting for fire wood, he was amazed. Russia was burning. Bolshevik fires. Nationalist fires. Invader fires. Why wait in line? You could go next door and take your neighbor's burning timbers.

Alexander could see the flames around his aunt's house as he came up over the rise in the center of Karaball. Wood frame houses with brightly painted trim belied the poverty of the ancient town. The street was cordoned off as volunteers tried in vain to save the houses that pressed in on his aunt's.

"Was anyone in the houses?" Alexander asked an old man leaning against a barricade.

"Not a one at home in the houses. God be praised," the old man said.

"Yes, God be praised," Alexander said as he crossed his fingers behind his back. "My aunt lived in the center one."

The old man turned and stared at young Alexander. "You will not be pleased."

Alexander waited throughout the cold winter afternoon until the barricades were taken down and the people were allowed to re-enter their houses. The freezing youth moved toward the three piles of burnt timber in the center of the block. A crowd had formed in front of his aunt's house. Impaled on an iron spike, in the front corner of the tiny yard, was his buxom aunt: her bodice had opened—accidentally—exposing a good portion of her heavy cleavage.

“They’re impaling all the harlot-witches,” a young woman said to Alexander. She stroked the fragile bible held across her breasts. “I’m in ecstasy,” she purred.

“Do you enjoy seeing iron rods shoved up women?” Alexander whispered in the tiny woman’s ear. She turned and began to slap Alexander’s face but he caught her hand by its tiny wrist and led her away from the crowd. “That’s my aunt up there with her innards oozing down the poll.” he said.

“Your aunt was a notorious follower of BabaYaga and Beelzebub. Our Lord is using the Revolution and its leader, the Antichrist, Lenin to eliminate the horrible creatures. She had intercourse with anyone and everyone. Even our excommunicated priest.”

“So your Lord thinks it handy-dandy to shove a spike up her?”

“Our Lord has taught us it should be Hell on earth for the non-believers,” she said as she pulled away from him.

Alexander grabbed her and pulled her back into the shadows. “If I feel you now? What would I find?” He pushed her further back into the shadows. Pushed his hand through the opening in the front of her coat and crumpled up her skirt until he could feel her leggings. While he held her against the side of a dilapidated house with one hand against her mouth, he used the other hand to push up into her underpants.

She pulled loose. “You’re a very nasty boy. If I call for help, they will spike you next to your aunt . . . then I will really enjoy it.” She moved a few steps from him. “Have you ever done it with a woman?”

“You are not a woman.”

“I am nineteen. I have been a woman for a year.” She opened her heavy coat and revealed large, sweated breasts. “Have you ever had a woman?”

“No,” Alexander lied.

“If you’re a good boy and not talk so naughty about our Lord, I may let you have me. But you must do it exactly as I say.” She stepped toward him and pulled his hand toward her breast. “Our Lord wants us to be in ecstasy when we observe his work.” She held his hands in place and moved him slowly toward the edge of the weathered house. They stood in the shadows with Alexander facing the tiny woman and her staring around him at the aunt’s buxom body rapidly becoming a human icicle.

Alexander’s toes were freezing and his nose was running but he couldn’t convince her that he should stop his twisting, probing fingers. He stopped, abruptly, when a dozen Nationalists rushed into the crowd and began bayonetting everyone in sight. A husky Nationalist ran toward Alexander. Alexander pulled his hand from the young woman and twisted to the side. The sharp tip of the bayonet stabbed into the rotting wood of the house’s exterior. The woman kicked up hard and caught the Nationalist between the legs. Alexander took the husky youth’s head in both hands and slammed it straight down on the sharp edge of the bayonet. The youth’s skull split open and splashed blood on the woman and the wall. Alexander grabbed her hand. “Let’s get the Hell out of here.” he said.

“But I’m not finished,” she said.

“You’re about to be finished,” he said.

They ran hand-in-hand through the freezing rain, toward the woman’s house.

It was freezing, cold throughout Russia. Tanya and Christian sat by the warm, iron stove at their paternal grandmother’s house. Outside, the streets of Simbrisk were alive with Nationals and Workers smearing each others blood on Simbrisk’s once impeccable

streets. News had come that General Denikin and his White Russian Cossacks had been stopped at Tula; Moscow was still in the hands of the Bolsheviki, but it meant nothing to Tanya; she was only concerned with the news that Alexander had been spotted on the outskirts of Karabali the day before. "He'll go to her house and join her Coven," Tanya said to Christian. "He'll do it to her as he did our mother," Tanya whispered. She looked toward the kitchen and listened for the sounds of stirring in the stew cauldron. "I told Dimitri where Alexander would go. I saw our aunt touch Alexander . . . last year."

"It was wrong," Christian said.

"Of course it was . . . she is his aunt."

"No . . . I mean . . ."

"To do it to our mother?" Tanya interrupted. "Of course it was. It is the most evil thing a son can do. He was doing all those fat pigs. He didn't need to do her."

"If you stop interrupting me, I will finish. I mean it was wrong to tell Dimitri. He will find Alexander and murder him. Alexander is our brother. Our flesh and blood. We need to find him and bring him back. Back to the family and back to God. Stop saying he was doing her. She was on that evil throne. He was doing another."

"You stupid idiot! I saw him do mother, many times. I peeked. I saw him do everyone. I didn't tell anyone but he raped me in the wheat field. On that last day. If he comes back it won't be to your stupid God, it will be to me. To get me . . . again. He wants to do it to me and maybe you." She leaned forward. She reached up and adjusted the patch over her missing eye. "He is Evil! He is an animal. BabaYaga's animal. He is not our brother."

"The Lord would want us to find him and bring him back," Christian said as he stroked his sister's arm. He twisted in the chair in order to relieve the pain that was shooting through his ribs. "You must learn to forgive our brother. He is under the irresistible power of Evil. Beelzebub is pure Evil. Impossible for a young person, confronted by such power, to resist. We need to find our brother and bring him back under the power of Good, the power of God."

"The Church can't help Alexander because the Church's entire existence is built on a myth. There is no God to give power to the Church. There is no Evil power in the myth of Beelzebub or the stories of BabaYaga. The evil is in that Alexander wants to believe in Beelzebub and BabaYaga because he is evil and he needs justification for his evilness. He is deranged. He is insane with our mother's insanity. And your insanity. There is no outside power that has possessed and taken over your brain or his brain. You are possessed because you need a crutch. Alexander is possessed to rationalize his lust. When I see him, I'm going to cut it off"

"Tanya! God would rather not have a sister and brother speak of their private parts."

"You're afraid you might want to do it to me!" Tanya scooped her chair closer to Christian. "You pompous little Fancy. I would puke if you touched me. When I look at you, I see Alexander."

Alexander stayed in a small room with the tiny woman, Vena Novinsky, and her mother. He was the man of the house because Hero Novinsky had been slaughtered in the streets. Hero was some hero; he was on neither side, so the Nationals hacked off his arms and left him to die, and the Bolsheviks came by and stomped his twitching body into the pavement three blocks from his home. The Bolsheviks had seized power in Moscow, and had stopped the government's war effort. The streets of every city ran with blood as

every local power group tried to hack out a piece of the action. If Alexander had been a couple of years older, he would be Tzar of his own area. But none of the local groups wanted a psycho who had hacked his father to pieces and had sex with his mother. Tanya had told every one that it was done in front of her. But it wasn't. It wasn't nothing. It wasn't ritualization. It wasn't nothing. He had never touched his mother. Never laid a hand on her. Now, Tanya was telling everyone he had raped her. He never did. He had never raped anyone. He had ritualized them all with their permission.

The Nationalists' pamphlets had quoted Winston Churchill as saying, "You might as well legalize adultery as recognize the Bolsheviks." Alexander was not a Bolshevik but he was an adulterer. He rolled over and touched Vena. "Vena, let's leave this dog-crap place," he said.

"I can't leave mother," she said.

"She's a grown woman," he said. "She should have a man. Maybe one of the war hero quadriplegics would give her a tumble. There are hundreds out in the streets. She could pull them up onto her like an overstuffed pillow."

"Alexander, you're a no-class, lust-infested heathen. I will stay with mother as long as she is alive."

A short walk along the ice topped water of the swollen river solved the problem. "Mrs. Novinsky," Alexander said. "You wouldn't mind if I took Vena with me when I go?"

"You are a stupid boy. You are not smart enough to bring food home for us. How would you take care of Vena? She won't go with you. I won't let her."

"Oh, Mrs. Novinsky, I'm so sorry to hear that. I'm sorry I asked. I will leave. Let us kiss and say our goodbyes." He pulled her toward him and held her tightly against his powerful body. He pressed his mouth against hers. He pinched her nostrils closed with his thumb and index finger. He held that position until her flailing body slowly died in his arms. By the time Vena came to join them, her mother had "Somehow slipped and fell through the ice." Alexander froze his toes and fingers as Vena made him break through patches of ice until he found the body and pulled it up to the edge of the river.

While Vena held her mother's dead, frozen hand, she instructed Alexander to do her while she said goodbye to her mother. It would be their love ritual: to have sex whenever death touched their lives. They performed the ritual, daily. The escalating Revolution gave them much ecstasy; it saw them travel back across the corpse ringed Volga toward Odessa.

"We can catch one of the wheat ships going out of Odessa. Take us from harm's way," Alexander said.

But Vena was not certain. She felt the double whammy of sexual and religious ecstasy when she saw another body. She would stop to pray over it, and then have Alexander make some kind of sexual contact with her. In another country there might not be the daily ecstasy. Ukrainian Nationalists were fighting blood-thirsty Bolsheviks all across Ukrinskaya; the loving couple was forced to flee to Novoanninskiy then Rossosh and by the end of spring to Karkov.

By spring, Christian's ribs were healed. He spent little time with Tanya because she was embracing the philosophy of the Antichrist, Lenin. His own sister and brother were somehow part of God's plan to bring the Antichrist to power, or so the old priest had told him. But Christian was not so certain that the strife in Russia had anything to do with

John's prophecies. It appeared to him that every generation of priests was ego-maniacal enough to think that they were part of God's overall plan for the Second Coming of Christ. But Christian doubted it was to come in his time. It would come someday, but not now. It would be fantastic. It would be the most fantastic thing. He prayed every day that it was the end time. He wanted to be on earth when it happened. He needed to be on earth when it happened. The priests used the Antichrist argument in order to do nothing about Lenin and the Bolsheviks. They didn't want to interfere in God's Plan. "There is no logic to that," Christian argued with a young priest four years his senior. "God is powerful. All powerful. Only someone with a monstrous ego would think he could add or detract from God's Plan."

"You are too young and too uneducated to understand," the priest said.

But Christian knew that God was all powerful. Nothing could stop any plan He initiated. The war and the Revolution and the starving children were not of God's making. They were not even a test. The war and the Revolution and the starving children were the makings of evil, greedy men who wanted to take what they could not earn. Nothing more. A warm glow filled Christian. He had guessed the truth. God was there and always would be. But He had distanced Himself from evil Man. He did not participate in their silly games. Games of greed and lust. Games of Revolution and war. Games of starvation and death. That was why prayer was so important. God needed to be called. He was not participating—maybe not even interested—not even near. He had to be called so that he would feel obligated to intervene. Christian knew that God was with him. God wasn't just some bullcrap—as Tanya said. God was with him. God was inside him. God was a warm glow. God was a presents.

He had received no message from God, but he knew what he must do. He had to save the Church and save the children. Not because the ego-maniacal priests needed saving, but because the Church was flesh of his Lord and house of his Lord. His Lord would want a place to call home if He should ever turn His attention back to Russia. His Lord would want fresh minds to mold into a new world. Christian would pledge himself to saving the Church from destruction, and the children from starvation.

Hunger led Alexander and Vena to the center of Karkov. Placards shouted slogans against the Bolsheviks. But the whole, stupid thing had nothing to do with either of them. Their only cause was survival. They turned onto Sumskaya street. It was early morning on the all but abandoned side street of the industrial section. The old lady's scarf covered most of her face but her eyes reflected Alexander's rage when she refused his appeal for a few pieces of the fresh bread she carried. She pushed past him, knocking him against an industrial shed. Vena's foot shot out and tripped the old lady. A wooden club was in Alexander's hand when he stumbled back to his feet and charged toward the fallen woman. He began pounding her; dry wood splintered her babushkaed head; the club vibrated, in Alexander's clinched hands, as it drew a ripe melon thud from the old lady's skull. The thud echoed then dwindled with a twang when the wood cleaved through the cloth, flesh and bone as the club shot splinters into her exposed brain.

The old lady fell forward and smashed face-first into Vena's urine puddle on the cobbled street. Precious bread covered the blood-painted street. They refilled the basket. They ran back deep into the industrial section of Karkov.

"We make a great team," Alexander said.

“Yes, I am Good. You are Evil,” Vena said. She held the long loaf of bread tightly between her legs as she broke the end off then stuffed the torn pieces into her hungry mouth. “Alexander, we must go back,” she said.

After they gobbled down most of the bread, and guzzled from a broken water main, they sneaked back. On Sumskays street, the babushkaed woman was still twisting in her own blood. She was whimpering and its music spun through Vena’s chest and electrified her open legs. “Do it to her! Alexander! Do it to her!”

He took the old lady by her stocking covered ankles and drew a blood line with her twitching, whimpering body, to the edge of the first building.

The Ukrainian Nationalist had all but lost the city by the time Alexander and Vena had reached the city. Bolsheviks wanted flesh-rending justice for the torture murders of students of the Foreigner’s College two years before. The Bolsheviks caught the young couple on Cheronomorka Road. No matter that neither was a Nationalist. “If you’re not for us, you’re against us,” the Bolshevik leader said.

“Your leaders speak of freedom for the Workers,” Alexander said. “I am a Worker. I am a citizen of Russia. I have disavowed the Church. I have embraced Marx. I am a humanitarian, as Lenin is, as Marx was. I am a follower of Jabon, Gregory Mackovick, the Great Patriot. My love for him is second only to my love for Mother Russia.” Alexander knew he was in deep crap. They were all looking at Vena. They wanted her. She wanted them. They could have her—no big deal. She would love it. “We are both more than willing to serve you.” He looked toward Vena and she nodded.

“You mean service us,” the leader said.

“She will service you. I will serve you,” Alexander said.

“You could not serve me. You are no more than this beautiful lady’s procurer.” he signaled to one of his men.

The man was tall and skinny, but easily picked up Vena and carried her toward the hull of a beached freighter. When Vena turned her head toward Alexander, he could see the saliva running from the corner of her mouth.

“Vena, do what they say and they will not harm us,” Alexander said. But he was wrong: two of the men held him as the leader pounded his face with the butt end of a homemade rifle. The wired barrel twisted loose when it smashed into Alexander’s jaw. A deep slice gushed blood down and over the collar of his stolen coat. “BabaYaga! Please! Destroy them!” he screamed to the sky.

“Ah, so you are a follower of Satan. Shout for him or her or for Jesus or God . . . none will save you. The opiate of the masses. You should have studied Marx.”

“Screw Marx,” Alexander said.

The leader’s heavy work boot caught the youth between his legs: Alexander fell forward and smashed face-first into the splintered wood of the dock. When they finished beating him, he wanted to die. He had summoned BabaYaga, but the hag-witch didn’t appear.

All ten hooligans had raped Vena. She had convinced them to place her where she could watch Alexander being beaten. She had screamed for all to hear through the first four rapes, but before the final rape, she was whimpering much like the little, old bread-lady.

Alexander would have laid on Chernomorka Road and gladly died, but a huge, bald; monster stepped to the center of the road with a weather-beaten, red hash-marked

Federov Avtomat. The big Turk held the trigger back on the Avtomat. Steaming bullets tore into the Bolsheviks. Large, meaty Worker-chunks of flesh whirled, through the air and splattered the buildings and street, creating a poor imitation of a red mosaic, blood-dripping sickle and hammer. The Bolsheviks's screams etched scalpel-deep into the big Turk's mind. They grooved in along side the screams of so many he had slaughtered over the years. Turk would save the boy for sale to his Turkish comrades across the border. The boy was young and startlingly handsome, but might have to be discarded because he was now damaged goods. Damaged goods would bring very little. In the current market, you could get damaged goods all day long. But the boy was handsome. The girl was worth nothing. Maybe Turk would use her once before discarding her. The Avtomat was burning his hand right through his finger-less glove. But it did the job. The idiots didn't have a chance. Turk walked toward the youth. He toed him over with his size twelve boot. Clean him up and he would bring a sack full. But first he would have to cart him across the border.

Alexander felt the big man pick him up. BabaYaga has sent this monster and his weapon to save him. Who else but BabaYaga. Only BabaYaga could love such a being as Alexander Gregor Mackovick. Alexander Gregor Mackovick would love BabaYaga forever.

Turk slung the smooth wooden stock of the Avtomat over his broad shoulder; the strap caught and swung the heavy gun back and forth under the big man's arm as he carried Alexander to a horse-drawn cart.

"Bring her!" Alexander pointed toward Vena. "She belongs to me," Alexander said.

"If I bring her, she belong to Turk," the big man said.

Turk and Alexander were soul-mates drawn together by the hag-witch, BabaYaga, disciple of the Great Beelzebub, Mistress of Satan. They were dipped from the same putrid swill. Alexander had been told by his beloved mother that her Mistress, the Great Beelzebub, had told BabaYaga to write the Truth in the Book of Fire. The truth was: God was insane. And Alexander knew that only an insane God would delight in the spiritual pairing of Turk's amorphous musculature and Alexander's mad genius. What supreme entertainment! Another way for earth's unfortunate natives to earn their way to Heaven: All beings who crossed the blazing path of the deadly duo would suffer over and above the normal rigors of life's endless gauntlet. The psychopaths moved cautiously through a Russia that was restructuring history with the bones and blood of brothers and sisters. After the slaughter of the Royal family, there was no boundary to the torture and bloodletting. No one had any love for the Royal family but they espoused abhorrence of the barbaric way the family had been eliminated.

In Simbrisk, Christian argued with Tanya about the validity of the slaying reports. "They were told that the Czech army was approaching,"

"Who gives a damn?" Tanya said. "The Romanovs lied to us each and every day. Who gives a damn if they were deceived on their last day?"

"History will find us barbaric," he said. "They were in their night clothes . . . the Tzar was carrying the boy. The boy was sick. They shot the Tzar through the head," Christian hesitated to wipe a tear from his eye. "The Tsarina and Olga, Tatiana, and Marie were slaughtered. Even, Jimmy, the spaniel was tracked down and bayoneted. The boy was the last—still in his dead father's arms—two bullets were planted in his tiny head." Christian stood and paced close to the red-hot stove. He slammed his fist against

it. Blood ran from his knuckles then evaporated from the stoves steaming surface. The blood was replaced by a dark-greasy-looking stain. He looked with wonder at the phenomena then turned to gaze back at his sister. He spoke so softly that his sister leaned forward, and tilted her head toward him. “They took beautiful Anastasia and stripped her and let the Cheka slowly smash her naked body with the butts of their heavy rifles.” He began to weep.

“Sometimes I wish that Alexander was the one who was here with me. You are such a weakling. Men don’t cry,” Tanya stood and turned her brother toward her. “I wish I had been there. I would have helped bash the little snob’s brains out. I would have cheered as they hacked up the bodies with axes and dismembered the bodies with saws. I love to hear the details. They told us the details so no citizen of Russia would be afraid the bloodthirsty Romonovs would come back to haunt us,” she laughed. “They even destroyed the bloody pieces with acid and fire, then dumped the remains down an abandoned mine shaft. I wish I had been there.”

“You are less sane than Alexander,” he said. “Did neither of you learn compassion? Did neither of you learn to love your fellow man . . . to turn the other cheek?”

“How in the world can we be related? Love your fellow man? Are we living in the same country? Turn the other cheek? If we turn the other cheek, the Nationalist or Alexander will spike it.”

“Tanya, listen to me. You must not think like Alexander or the Nationalist or the Bolsheviks; it should not be human against human; it should be human against Evil. We must all fight Evil”

”No! You listen to me, you stupid turd. If I listen to you and spout this Good and Evil God-crap to the wrong people, our mentor, Leon Trotsky, will spike me up next to some fat witch or some decapitated priest. I am only safe as long as I shout that I am from the family of a hero of the Revolution. Not the family of God. The Church is history. So is your God. So will I be if I listen to you.” She grabbed his worn bible and spun it toward the open door of the iron stove.

The whirling Bible hit the door and slammed it closed then spun back into Christian’s lap. Tanya stared at the Bible. Christian smiled. “You saw that which Jesus performed by the finger of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.” Tanya bolted from the room. Why are people so evil? Christian rubbed his forehead. It was so much more natural to be loving and kind. It seemed illogical to hurt others. It could only bring retaliation. But Tanya was correct about one thing; Leon Trotsky and his Red Army were to be feared. They were winning; they had painted the Nationalists, into a corner of Hell, with the Nationalists’ own spurting blood. They were slaughtering every non-Red in sight. He and Tanya had been right in the middle of it when they were bundled up to stay with Trotsky and his wife Natalia Sedova.

Tanya saw Trotsky only a few times in the many months she was living in the Moscow apartment, but on each occasion she approached him with the BabaYaga issue—as he called it—he explained to her that he was a Jew by family tradition, but he did not believe in God and he certainly did not believe in Beelzebub or some witch from the Birch Forest. He had heard tales, about BabaYaga, from his mother, when he was a youth in Yanovka. “Only children and very foolish adults believe in any power outside themselves,” Trotsky said. “It is time a young person, such as you, should forsake the myths of the past. Marx understood that as long as people drug themselves with the

delusions of religion, they will never achieve any self-governing. Tanya, you are a beautiful, young woman; young men will join the Party just to be near you; you should take the time to read and digest Marx; you will need the philosophy to survive the next, grueling years.” He shifted his eyes back to the paste-up he was preparing for the newspaper, Pravda. “There is no BabaYaga . . . No Beelzebub. Now, I have much more important things on my mind than the ravings of a beautiful child. The Americans and the British are using any excuse to help the foreign forces, who have invaded, in an effort to back the White Army’s attempt to topple the Bolsheviki government.”

Trotsky stood and approached a map hanging from the den wall. “The damn Nationalists in the Ukraine and Georgia are attempting to secede. Problems problems. Problems you could never understand.” He was the only one who understood the problems. Lenin was too busy trying to hold the Party together and Stalin had no brains. Tanya’s father would have been a help, but he was murdered in some incestuous happening. The happening had so disturbed the beautiful child that she had made up fantasies of the tragedy.

Mackovick had married some fat bitch who thought she was a witch, and somehow she concluded that incest should be socially acceptable. A wise man knows who to marry. Both of his wives were revolutionists. His first wife was a good friend. Natalia was now his friend and love for life. “Go tell Natalia the stories . . . child. Stop bothering you Uncle Pero,” Trotsky said.

She told Natalia that she didn’t believe in BabaYaga, but the people who did believe, like her brother Alexander, spread evil across Russia. To please Tanya and her convert Natalia, Trotsky sent a directive out to all who were serving in the Red Army: All fat woman, with long, black hair, professing to be followers of BabaYaga were to be eliminated.

The purge began: the old tradition was to be followed: all witched were to be spiked in front of their Coven locations. But it was easier said than done. The Red Army volunteers were more than happy to break the monotony, of being shot at by the Polish, Czech, and National Armies plus looters and hooligans. They volunteered to spike. But it was damn near impossible to comply with the directive. Any two hundred and fifty pound mammal of any kind took at least three very strong men to drive the spike up and through, and then to tilt the screaming, wriggling mammal straight up and drive the spike into the ground. It took superhuman power. The volunteers were exhausted after a day of spiking. But it had some good points. It became the rage of the Revolution. Few complained; not even the slowly disintegrating Orthodox Church.

“Tanya!” Christian said to his beautiful, one-eyed sister, “if we let this happen to witches, it will be done to everyone who worships anything other than the State. Priests will be next, then parishioners.”

“They’re already executing priests. The Church is finished in Russia. Maybe in the world. It’s all part of Lenin’s and Trotsky’s plans,” Tanya said. She stopped talking when a young priest came through the door and sat next to them on the bench. She looked at the clock and the train schedule to see if the train might accidentally be on schedule. She looked at the young priest. “Father,” she said. “Should you be wearing your robes when you travel? They could be your death garment.”

“I am what I am,” he said with a sad smile.

“But they are slaughtering your brothers. Why not disguise yourself? Why not travel incognito? Why not conceal yourself and fight back?” she said.

“I am what I am. It is not in God’s plan to have his servants be devious or to commit murder.”

Tanya moved closer to the young priest. “I would never question God’s plan, but what if his plan is to see if the Church will fight back? How do any of us know that God is not testing the Russian Orthodox Church?”

“Young woman! This conversation is ended! The Church is flesh of the Host. God would not test His own flesh. Go before He strikes you down for blasphemy.”

“Go screw yourself!” Tanya said as she and Christian walked toward the train to Simbrisk.

“Why must you always be so nasty?” Christian said as he followed behind her.

She turned and gave him the finger. A young Sailor thought it was a gesture of lust toward him. He waved and grabbed his crotch. Tanya smiled and waved back. She boarded the train and turned to watch three Bolshevik Hooligans roust the young priest, from the bench, douse him with kerosene and light him on fire. The crowd in the station scurried for safety.

Christian stood in the crowded isle next to Tanya. He was sad that his sister was such a sinner—so influenced by her residence with the evil Trotskys. There is a God. Christian had not seen Him, yet. But he was certain that when and if God wanted He would appear to him. Jesus lived. He was Lord. All was planned and controlled by Him. God was not evil. And God was not insane. He would not let the evil Bolsheviks control Russia or the world. But why did God want Russia in turmoil? God probably had Mother Russia in turmoil because of the witches. The witches were held in a higher regard than the priests. God was punishing Russia because Russia’s people worshiped Beelzebub and her disciple BabaYaga. But God did not want the witches to be spiked and tortured. God wanted them to be converted back to the Church. God found no pleasure in a steel spike being driven up them and out their throats. Christian analyzed the image then stepped forward and puked in the train’s isle.

“Oh, damn!” Tanya said. “Travel sickness, again.”

In Simbrisk, Tanya and her gang of teenaged Bolsheviks rampaged through the streets and accused any fat woman who would not pay tribute. The fat women were dragged through the streets to the nearest Red Army officer and turned over for spiking. The gang found four Covens that they did not report. Instead, they waited for a meeting to begin and then barricaded the doors and fired up the houses. Tanya’s first sexual experience was after one of the burnings. One of her male hooligans took advantage of her flushed agitation after a violent burning where the gang had to beat on the witches to keep them in the burning house’s crumbling cellar.

Tanya circulated a picture of her despised brother Alexander through the youth gangs. Alexander had not been captured, but when he was, Tanya planned to be the judge, jury, torturer, castrator, and executioner.

Chapter Seven

Alexander had no plans of being captured by the Bolsheviks. Fact was, he wasn't running from them; he was running with them. For sport, Turk, Vena, and Alexander joined one of the small Worker's Party groups springing up in their path to the Ottoman Empire. The trio would attend one or two meetings and swear to help the Workers fight the Polish invaders and the Nationalists—on several early morning raids, Alexander and Turk slaughtered their share of Polish regulars—but would use the trusty Avtovat and some newly confiscated weapons to machine gun the Comrades against the walls of the meeting halls. It was spectacular fun. The three crazies would slaughter for a couple of nights then sit in some burnt-out building talking late into the night.

"Vena and I have told you everything," Alexander said. "You have told us nothing."

"Told us nothing," Turk repeated. "Turk wants talk like you."

"Speak as I do," Alexander corrected.

"Yea, like that. Turk will learn if you correct Turk when he incorrect," Turk said.

"Turk is incorrect when he says Turk instead of I. Tell us where you were raised."

"I, Turk, was slave for Ottoman Sultan. I, Turk killed him because he treated Turk as dog. I, Turk, was beaten and held under water. Privates were flogged. But when Turk kill the Sultan, he kill him slowly. Held him under water till he almost dead. Then pop! Pulled him up. Then pop! Down again. I, Turk did same for hour. Arms get tired. Down goes Sultan for last time."

"Why did your parents let you be taken as a slave?" Vena asked.

"No mother. No father. Born and dumped at Sultan's palace. Good deal if you dumped at good palace. Bad deal if you dumped at the palace of the most bad Sultan entire Ottoman Empire. I, Turk, was used as slave. No school for slave. No smart slaves in Empire. But smarty-pants Alexander will teach Turk." Turk looked for approval from Alexander.

Alexander nodded. "Did you ever travel with partners?"

"Killed by Turk," Turk said.

Vena and Alexander looked at each other. "Oh!" They said in unison.

"He attempt to collect a reward for Turk's head," Turk said.

"You mean, 'on your head'" Alexander said.

"Turk's partner going to chop Turk's head off and take to officials."

They settled for a short time in Batejk a village south of Rostov. Alexander and Vena joined a BabaYaga Coven while Turk hit the streets to pillage and rape. Alexander was disappointed in the Coven's lack of knowledge of the rituals and chants. He was amazed to find that men were allowed to attend and be involved in the so-called rituals; the idiot who fancied himself a Warlock had never conjured BabaYaga. "You idiot! This is not supposed to be a fraternity!" Alexander said.

"Young man, I have been Warlock of this Coven for fifteen years, if you ever speak to me with disrespect again, I will cast a spell that will turn you into an old man before your time."

Vena grabbed Alexander's arm. Alexander shook her off. Alexander's voice broke the silence. "You have never conjured BabaYaga. I have. You have never performed the Birch Forest Ritual. I have. You have never sacrificed to BabaYaga. I have."

The Warlock walked toward Alexander. "You will no longer attend my Coven. You are excommunicated." The Warlock signaled to the three men sitting in attendance. The man stood and moved toward Alexander. Alexander side-stepped and grabbed the Warlock's scrawny neck with his forearm then pushed a long bladed knife against the Warlock's shrouded shoulder blades. "If you twitch, I'll cut his heart out through his back." Alexander looked straight into the eyes of the first approaching man then looked up at the circle of females sitting on a small bleachers arrangement. "Are there any here who truly believe in BabaYaga?" he asked.

Everyone said, "Yes!"

"Strip off your clothes and step to the center of the Witches Foot," he gestured to Vena to do the same.

Seven of the twelve women stripped as they started down from the bleachers and toward the center of the Witches Foot. A burly man moved forward and tried to stop his wife from stripping off her Coven cloak and her burlap clothes. She pushed him aside; he stumbled toward Alexander; Alexander slashed out with the long bladed knife and slit the burly man's exposed throat. The wife stepped over her husband's thrashing body and moved toward the Witches' Foot. The remaining men, followed by the women who were still clothed, moved en masse toward the exit.

"Stay! or I kill your Warlock!" Alexander said. "You have been deceived by your idiot leader and your husbands into thinking that sex orgies would bring you close to BabaYaga. Would bring you close to power. But these idiots just conned you out of a little sex. BabaYaga will bring you power, but first you must worship the Sacred Mother of All That is Evil by chanting and by giving sacrifice and performing the Birch Forest Ritual . . . not with your legs toward the sky and your face smiling at God. You have all been lied to. I will teach you how to become true disciples of BabaYaga. Tie up the men!" he commanded.

The seven naked witches wrestled with the two remaining men; most of the clothed witches helped subdue the men. They brought the men to their knees. All of the witches, but one, stood naked waiting for Alexander's instructions.

"Tie the non-believer," Alexander said. When the last knot was tied in the ropes that held the young woman, Alexander slit the throat of the Warlock. He stripped the Warlock and hung his body from the center rafter by making a noose from the Warlock's belt. "Find something sharp! Do as I do!" he said. He pulled a small knife from his boot and handed it to Vena. He stripped from his clothes and began marching around the Warlock's body. He chanted to BabaYaga and jabbed the body with his long bladed knife.

The naked witches pulled anything sharp from their purses and from the men's pockets; they paraded after Alexander and Vena—chanting and piercing. "Don't stop! Continue until she appears. You come here!" He pointed toward the fattest witch. She waddled toward him and dropped to her knees when he pointed to the floor. He stepped around behind her then mounted her in true Birch Forest Ritual fashion. "Before the night becomes dawn, you shall all be ritualized by your new Warlock . . . Alexander Mackovick!" he shouted.

The witches shrieked with delight and continued with their Sisters of Evil to hack at their ex-Warlock's mutilated body. A loud, agonizing scream erupted from the throat of the bound woman; her cloak and burlap ripped open exposing the parting flesh of her abdomen. From the peddled shreds of bloodless flesh the hag-witch appeared. The room went silent. Alexander dismounted and walked, naked, toward BabaYaga.

"My beautiful Alexander Mackovick," BabaYaga said, "you have created a new Coven."

"It's been your Coven for fifteen years; they just needed some help reaching you," he said. Alexander kissed her extended hand and motioned for the silent witches to line up and get ready to do the same. BabaYaga waived them off and scampered to the center of the Witches' Foot and quickly devoured the blood-drenched Warlock. She looked over toward the two men struggling to get loose from their ropes and gags. She looked toward Alexander.

"Strip them!" Alexander shouted.

The witches obeyed. They quickly disrobed the dead man, but had difficulty disrobing the two, struggling men. BabaYaga scampered over and devoured the dead man, then pushed the witches aside and grabbed the ankle of one of the naked men trying to crawl away. She pulled his feet into her gaping mouth and sucked him down her enlarged throat. The second man went into shock. He was gobbled down with no resistance. One witch went faint and crashed to the floor. The hag-witch grabbed the downed witch by the back of the neck with one bony hand and picked her straight up in the air and nose-dived her head-first into the open belly from which BabaYaga had earlier emerged. The horrible hag knelt down, peeled back the ripped cloak and burlap, like skin on a baked potato, and rapidly devoured the belly-full.

Alexander signaled and the entire Coven cheered. BabaYaga smiled, rubbed her protruding belly then said, "You have brought a great feast to BabaYaga. She will grant your needs." BabaYaga agreed to appear on the next Sunday from the body of the oldest witch. She would destroy the entire parish of uppity worshipers who had persecuted the old witch and other members of the Coven.

When Sunday came, the old witch entered the church as the priest was starting the second paragraph of his sermon, ". . . and God said . . . Madam! What are you doing in this holy place!" he shouted at the old witch.

"I have come to" before the old witch could speak the priest came charging from the pulpit, banging his robed arm into the giant crucifix centered so the rays of the morning sun sent an illusion of a halo around Jesus' head. The priest stumbled down the stairs and charged toward the apparently defenseless, old witch. "BabaYaga! Appear!" the old witch pleaded.

The hag-witch spun from the witch's tattered fur coat and stood naked in the center isle of the church.

The priest dropped in his tracks and turned on his knees toward the giant crucifix. "Jesus, Son of the Almighty God"

Before the priest could finish, BabaYaga, pointed her bony finger at the crucifix. Suddenly, blood began to flow from the wounds of the marble Jesus' wrists and ankles and eyes and forehead. Blood waterfalled down the stairs and raised rapidly up and around the priest's kneeling body. He attempted to get to his feet but he was quickly covered by the river of blood. He drowned screaming. The parishioners tried to move

through the thickening blood but it rose rapidly above their heads and filled the church to its rafters and washed against the massive doors that BabaYaga had closed as she escaped with the body of the old witch.

Alexander was in the middle of a ritual with one of the new recruits when he had flashbacks of the cellar in Saratov as the doors burst open and a wild youth gang stormed into the room.

“It’s him,” the first youth said. “Look at the picture. It’s him. I told you.” He jumped to the center of the room and grabbed Alexander by his arm. “How can you stand to do these fat bitches? Have you no pride? Have you no taste?” He laughed then reached down and gripped Alexander—he pulled up—Alexander screamed. “No pride. No taste. No more action,” the first youth said.

All of the gang members had “T A N Y A” printed across their storm jackets. They lined up the naked witches against the wall and held sharp knives against each one’s throat. Alexander was strapped to an upright on the bleachers; he watched as the leader—a surly youth as broad as he was tall—brought twelve-foot steel spikes into the room. Four of the youths struggled with Vena; all attempts to impale her failed as she thrashed and kicked and bloodied the perpetrators. A decision was made to slit throats—first. The three witches closest to Alexander had their throats slit so rapidly that Alexander was not sure it had happened. Certainty came as blood washed down each body and pooled at the feet of the victims.

Vena and the remaining witches fought off the youths, but were faring poorly against the weapons and skills of the hardened gang members.

Alexander chanted to BabaYaga, but before he had finished his first ode, Turk came slamming through the entrance with his dancing Avtomats; one tucked under each arm. The bullets danced and skipped across the room. He was beautiful. Bullets riddle everything in the room with sizzling lead. When it was over, no one, but the naked, laughing youth strapped to the bleachers’ upright, was alive.

“Put on damned clothes. We leave this party,” he laughed and slashed the leather straps knotted across Alexander.

Alexander hopped around pulling his trousers on one leg then the other. He stopped by Vena’s bullet riddled body. He looked over at Turk. “You idiot! You killed Vena!”

“I, Turk, get Alexander another Vena.”

Christian moved through each night never knowing what God expected of him. All around him, Evil was triumphing. God seemed to have deserted Mother Russia—left her to the Jackals who fed on the bones of brothers and sisters. Nothing seemed to be of any worth. Nothing seemed to give credence to life. Nothing indicated the presents of God. Everything indicated the presents of Satan. News came to him that BabaYaga had filled a church with Christ’s blood. But Christian knew that couldn’t be. BabaYaga would be destroyed if she entered a holly church. The church must not have been a holly one.

He had shunned Tanya because of the street gangs she ran with, or lead. They spent their unholy nights impaling old ladies they claimed were witches. It was good for the Church. But at the very least, fat ladies must have a trial before they are convicted of being witches. He had whispered his thoughts to the priests, but for some reason God had decided to have the priests ignore him. The priests were more interested in protecting their own skins from the God-hating Bolsheviks. Christian watched Tanya, in an attempt

to determine where her gang would strike next. He would then appear ahead of them and warn the witches. He saved many witches, but still Tanya's gang slaughtered many.

He watched Trotsky, in an attempt to determine where the Red Army would strike next in their campaign to destroy the Church. The priests who listened were saved, but still the Red Army slaughtered many. Christian often led the witches and the priests to the same safe-house; they spent the long hours debating the powers of the Fallen Angel and the powers of Christ. But none knew how to use their powers against the Bolsheviks.

"Christian, tell this fool witch that only our Lord has the power to defeat the Bolsheviks," an old priest said. "Tell her that God is using Russia to start the clock ticking on the final days."

"Father, I'm sure that our guest is not truly a witch," Christian said to the priest and the fat woman sitting at his side. "She has been accused but not convicted."

"Young man," the witch said, "I'm a follower of BabaYaga who is the disciple of Mistress Beelzebub the most powerful Deity on earth" she swept her long, black hair away from her ugly face, with both hands. "If you took the time to read Nietzsche, you would know that your God is dead. Only Evil is alive. You should worship Beelzebub. It will bring you the power you seek."

"Madam, if it brings you so much power, why are you cowering in this wind-swept building. Why are you not out destroying the Bolsheviks with this awesome power?" Christian said.

"Because the Great Satan is using Russia to bring on the last days," the witch said.

Christian gently touched her shoulder. "If your Deity rules the earth, it will be the same as the Bolsheviks. The people will be ruled by Evil. Why not have God rule? Why not love your fellow man? Why not love yourself?"

"You are a stupid, young man," the witch said, "the human race will never live in love. All human beings want power. Power only comes from Evil. There is no power in loving. When you love, you give up power. The people you love have power over you."

Christian looked the witch straight in her evil eyes. Tears began to fill his. As he walked back through the bomb-pocked streets, Christian thought about the old witch. She had hit home. He had always known that Evil had power. He had seen it in his mother and brother. Alexander had always been evil. Always powerful. More powerful than he would ever be. But power was wasted without love. Alexander was lost to Evil. Maybe Tanya could still be saved.

"Tanya, you must not revert to evil. Evil can never triumph over Good. Tanya!" She was not listening. He had lost Alexander to Evil and now he was losing his beautiful sister to the same power. God would note his failure. He could feel himself becoming more of a wisp. More of a nothing. Then, suddenly, excruciating pain burst in his skull. His broken rib screaming, again. Christian knew at that moment that the pain would be his life-long punishment

Turk and Alexander headed north then circled back around and continued south-east toward Turkey. They had murdered and robbed over three hundred Workers by using the meeting-hall method and were about to do the same at a small hall on what was the Russian side of its common border with Turkey. "This will have to be the last," Alexander said. "We'll do the hall, and then massacre the village. Our last taste of revenge."

“Some Turkish live in village,” Turk protested. “Not all in the village are Comrades.”

“War is Hell,” Alexander said. He smiled.

It had taken almost eighteen months to get to the border but the two psychopaths had had one Hell of a time. When they entered the meeting hall the overhead lights were aimed directly at the entrance. Then the lights went out for both.

Turk and Alexander gained consciousness in the back of a transport truck. They were transferred from truck to truck and from cell to cell in the years it took to zig-zag through the fighting to their final destination.

Chapter Eight

Douglas Victor Rodney Sage was born exactly two years, four months, and one week before he became an orphan. At the orphanage in Atchinson, Kansas, he was listed as D.V.R. Sage so everyone called him Dover. Later in life, he wasn't certain that he liked the name, but, by the time he was old enough to protest, the name had stuck. Dover knew very little about his parents' lives but he had been told everything about their deaths. He figured that there were Gods and Devils and angels and witches. And that Kansas witches were evil. Why else would the witches take a boy's parents? It was difficult to separate the nightmares of the deaths of his parents from the reality of the deaths of his parents. The story went that on December 26th, 1920 after the power of Christ had diminished from his Topeka home, his father, Artemus Sage, was hacked to pieces in the family barn, and Dover's mother, Naomi Sage, was dragged from the home and taken to the Tuesday night meeting of the Topeka Coven.

The good Sisters of the Atchinson Orphanage wrote one name in his Bible, “Betina Machovick.” they said she was a black witch who worshiped Beelzebub. Beelzebub was just another name for the old bastard Satan. But for some reason the black witches thought Beelzebub was female. They called her Mistress Beelzebub. “But what do the crazy, evil witches know about reality?” The sisters said. “If they knew about reality, they would know Beelzebub is a male or sort of a male. Beelzebub is the animal Satan.” The sister told Dover that Betina Mackovick was the leader of a Coven that believed they could contact “Mistress” Beelzebub through a skeleton-witch named BabaYaga. A red-Commi witch imported from the Evil Empire, Russia. Dover was told of his parents' last hours in gory detail: his mother was stripped and hung upside-down in the Mackovick cellar, then prepared as a sacrifice to the hag-witch, BabaYaga. Dover's father was hacked to pieces in the Sages' barn.

The back barn was where all the horror started and ended for Artemus Sage. He had been Sheriff for ten years and on more than a dozen occasions had been called to the Mackovick farm because of suspicious fires and because Betina Mackovick had been

beaten by her husband. On two occasions, bodies of local church women had been found in the wheat fields. The last time he went to the Mackovick farm it was for nothing more than another “Betina Beating.” It was nothing unusual; it seemed to be accepted in the Russian community; a man could beat his wife if she was out of line, or if he felt she had been out of line, or if he thought she might become out of line.

Naomi would have blown his head off if his struck her. A Sheriff can’t do much about domestic problems. The Russians were good people as a whole—not the Commies or the Anarchists ones. But as a whole.

The morning papers had reported on the Nicholas Steelink trial out in California. The Red Bastard had been convicted of Criminal Syndicalism for bombing food supplies. It made the I.W.W. Communist Party illegal. Artemus thought it was good. But Kansas Russians weren’t Commies, they just beat their wives once and a while and they pretend to be witches once in a while. They weren’t Commies or witches. Just kind of homebody people. But that night in the barn, he was confronted with something that changed his value system, his beliefs, for the rest of his life.

“Sheriff,” the voice came from the shadows, “Please help me,”

Artemus moved toward the voice but stopped short when he saw blood running down the barn’s rough wooden support.

“Sheriff, I’m Nattie Coleman, you met me at church three Sundays ago, and I’ve been murdered.” He moved in and caught the collapsing woman. Her body fell heavily into his arms. She weighed close to three hundred pounds. Blood ran from hundreds of wounds in her naked body. Blood caked her long, black hair. “They murdered me. They strung me up because I questioned our belief in BabaYaga. They strung me up and murdered me.”

He helped Nattie Coleman down onto a blanket in the corner of the end stall. He started toward the house to get his wife’s help. His wife’s voice stopped him—it was coming from Nattie Coleman. “Artemus, make love to me,” the voice called out. Nattie Coleman’s flesh turned inside-out and wrapped its slime around the center rafter; it slithered up the support and out onto the rafter; it slithered slowly, hypnotically overhead and dropped straight down onto Artemus Sage. He screamed and passed out. When his wife found him an hour later, she found a Witches Foot painted in blood across his forehead.

“It was some kind of telepathic hypnosis, Russian kind of stuff,” he said.

“Telepathic hypnosis doesn’t paint an odd looking star on your forehead,” she said.

“They did that after they hypnotized me.”

“Who’s blood did they use?”

“Nattie Coleman’s”

“That’s impossible, Art, Nattie’s standing in for Gert Tucker. She’s been, in the kitchen, playing Bridge all evening.”

Artemus pushed his wife aside and ran toward the back door of their house. He stopped dead at the open kitchen door. The round kitchen-table was afloat with blood; playing cards slowly sank into the black-red gook. Two chairs at the table were empty, but two chairs still contained Bridge partners; their heads had been twisted, and then torn from their bodies; the partners still sat perfectly straight in their chairs, and their cards were still clutched in their blood-soaked hands, but they had no heads. Wriggling from

their open necks were spurting blood vessels. Artemus was certain that this was another illusion, but reality struck when his wife started screaming behind him.

He pulled her from the house and sat her on the back stoop. He knew at that moment that everything the town's people had been whispering about Betina Mackovick and murderous witches was true. He had been too blind to see; too deaf to hear. If he put out a warrant for Betina Mackovick's arrest, it would be of little consequence. She was certain to have at least eleven witnesses who would swear to her whereabouts.

The solution was to eliminate Betina Mackovick. The entire Coven. He would become the thing he most hated: A vigilante: A murderer. He buried the Bridge partners, and told his wife to keep mum. "Topeka has had more than its share of missing people . . . probably due in part to Betina Mackovick. No one will miss a few more."

"Art, I've seen that look before. Before, when you said no one would miss the Hole In The Wall Gang. You followed them to Arizona, and wallah, no more Gang! But you and I know you murdered them in cold blood. Now, you intend to murder Betina Mackovick and who knows how many others. You have sworn to uphold the law. But again you want to be Judge, Jury, and Executioner. If you do this horrible thing, I will leave you and take our son with me."

He promised his wife that he would just investigate, "If I find enough proof, I'll bring it to the Attorney General." When he started following Betina Mackovick, he assumed that Olav Mackovick was a co-conspirator, but he discovered, through conversations with Olav and his friends, that Olav could care less about how his young wife spent her waking hours. He had brought her from Russia as a child bride and found that she was barren. His religion forbid divorce so "he had made his bed and now he would lie in it." "If you find out the bitch is some kind of witch," Olav said, "drown the silly tart."

Artemus knew Betina Mackovick was anything but a silly tart. A dangerous tart—yes. A silly tart? He doubted it. He had watched the woman capture the allegiance of too many intelligent women. All, almost without exception, from the Church. The priest had given him very little help with reasons why good women would switch from worship of Christ to worship of BabaYaga. Artemus stumbled on the church stairs as he moved down them to the hot Topeka pavement.

"Watch you step, Sheriff," Betina Mackovick said. "We wouldn't want you to break your neck." She moved up to the steel banister leading to the giant, church doors. She folded her skirt back and slid the banister between her legs. The three women with her started to laugh. As she spoke to Artemus, she slid slowly back and forth on the rail. "Sheriff, would you like to do me here or at the church door?"

"I should run you in for a Lewd Act in Public. For Disturbing the Peace," he said.

"This can be your piece I'm disturbing. You can come and get it anytime. You must want it. Why else would you be following me? Is that a weapon in your pocket or are you just happy to see me?" Her laughter was echoed by the others. "I could open my lips to you right now and you still couldn't take me in."

"You are a tart. As Olav said. He wants me to drown you if I prove you to be a witch."

Betina was startled by the mention of Olav. But she regained her composure. "Sheriff, I can tell by the way you look at me . . . the fear in your eyes . . . that you don't

think I'm silly. You think I'm a dangerous. Why play games? Ask me what you want to know."

"Did you have Nattie Coleman slaughter those women at my house?"

"Yes! What are you going to do about it?"

"Are you responsible for the disappearance of five to seven of Topeka's citizens?"

"Ten! What are you going to do about it?"

"Do you worship a witch named BabaYaba?"

"BabaYaga with a g . . . you stupid red-neck," Betina said.

"Do you sacrifice human flesh to this BabaYaga?"

"Yes! Human flesh and bones and blood and guts like yours and your wife's. If you harass me or my followers any more, I'll drag your screaming wife through the most horrendous torture this side of the Mississippi." She walked over and kissed him full on the lips. "Don't screw with the Topeka Coven, or I'll screw with your wife. I'll take your kid and put him back into your wife without the benefit of caesarian." She patted his stomach and walked away with the other women in tow. She turned the corner on the far side of the building.

Artemus watched them leave. There were no such things as witches just fat, ugly psychopaths with hypnotic powers. He had seen the great Harry Houdini. Houdini used hypnosis to make his audience think they had seen impossible stunts. Betina Mackovick was nothing more than a good hypnotist. A very good hypnotist. She used sex to frighten men. No other woman talked straight out about such things. Who the deuce would want to touch that fat pig?

The last night of his life, Artemus Sage was doing much more than just touching the fat pig. He had been following her and three other witches through the center of town.

He could tell they were in search of someone. They were on a hunt. Nothing but pimps and prostitutes hung out in the central business district after dusk. Betina and her followers turned the corner of the Kansas State Bank Building, and before Artemus could make the turn, he heard a muffled screaming. He ran to the sounds. He caught Betina and the others carving notches in a beautiful, young prostitute. He drew his revolver. "Betina! This time you screwed up."

Betina turned and smiled. "Sheriff, it's you who has screwed up this time."

Suddenly they were transported to his barn and he was humping her like some crazed, wild animal. She was pulling him tighter and tighter between her massive legs. She spread her legs wide. He felt the first stroke of the ax against his left leg. He screamed and turned from Betina Mackovick and looked into the eyes of three, demented, ax-swinging witches. His own blood splashed into his eyes. But his brain felt the next strokes and screamed to an image that looked like Olav Mackovick staring from the shadows.

Years later, in the shadows of the orphanage pantry, Dover sat and rolled a ball to his friend Willie. Willie was an Indian or almost an Indian. Willie was Cherokee and French. Dover was told that Willie was a girl, but Dover was certain that the Sisters were mistaken. Willie was his best friend and backed him up when the older boys decided it was time, once again, to taunt the "little sucker whose parents were eaten by witches."

"Dover," Willie said, "it ain't no big deal. I don't care if your people were killed by witches. And you shouldn't care if I pee like a girl. I don't look or act like no girl."

Willie was bigger and stronger than Dover, but it was a fact that when they had peeing contests, Dover peed the highest on the john wall. But Willie could pee mighty high.

And Dover could never bring himself to look in the direction of Willie's equipment. "It don't seem right that you don't have no thing," Dover said. "I thought all boys had things"

"I'm some kind of freak," Willie said.

"BS! You're just a thingless boy. When we go to town, there ain't nobody who thinks you're nothing but a damn tough boy. I tell everybody you're my best friend. A boy can only have a best friend that's a boy."

Willie pounced on Dover and they wrestled into the pantry shadows.

Chapter Nine

In Russia, Alexander woke in the shadows, on the floor, of a Cheka cell. His cell-mates were not much older than he but what stared out through their eyes was ancient.

"What's your name, boy," a bedraggled young man, with one arm, asked from the lower bunk against the east wall.

"Alexander Mackovick," Alexander said without thinking.

"You related to the slime-ball Gregory Mackovick?"

"Hell no!" Alexander answered too quickly.

"Alexander, huh? Well, Alexander, meet your sister." He pointed toward an effeminate youth lounging on the upper bunk against the west wall. "Her name is Alexandra . . . after our beloved, late Tsarina. Best watch Alexandra's hands; she likes to play around; she gets special treatment for her late night service to the guards; she's a very important person. Used to be one of Rasputin's Joy-Boys," he laughed and looked back toward the effeminate inmate. Alexander walked over, to the vacant bunk beneath Alexandra, and flopped face-down. "Bad position. Good for Alexandra but bad for you. Unless you want to loose some booty," the one-armed youth said.

"I'll shove my fist down the bastard's throat," Alexander said without raising his head from the hard mattress.

"Oh, a tough guy? What you here for, offing Stalin or Trotsky? You ain't nothing. I blew up two miles of the Trans-Siberian Railway along with my right arm. The Cheka keep me here to see if I'll set the scorched-balls endurance record."

Alexander rolled over and looked at his cell-mate. "Who the Hell are the Cheka?"

"The Cheka don't officially exist. They're Lenin's elite murders. Pollacks. Lenin thinks Pollacks are more deadly than the most barbaric Bolshevik," the cell-mate rubbed the stump of his arm. "Lenin gave this building to the Cheka; it used to belong to an old-line insurance company; now, it's the most modern, torture chamber in the known world.

I suggest you let the Joy-Boy have fun with you tonight. After they hook the cables to your balls, and crank up the big damn battery, you won't be able to get it up again. Tomorrow . . . you'll be Alexander Blueballs." He stepped from his bunk and dropped his pants. "See! Never use that baby again!" He laughed then flopped on his bunk; he rolled over, quickly, face-down, when he heard the guard approaching.

Alexander saw the guard and looked away. He had lived through the last couple of years in fear of running into one of his father's followers. Each new cell. Each time he was transported. It had finally happened. The guard wasn't in uniform; he wore a Worker's jacket. The guard was Dimitri Sonotov. Damn! He was in deep crap! Deep crap!

"Alexander Mackovick, you turd, come over here," Dimitri said. Alexander slipped from the rock-hard mattress. He moved slowly toward the guard. "Speed your butt up, or I'll speed it up for you," Dimitri said. He reached through the bars and grabbed Alexander by the collar of his torn shirt. He pulled the tall youth against the steel bars then held him tightly against the bars as he spoke directly into Alexander's face, "Raped and killed your own mother! Tore up your sister's privates, brain, and eye." Dimitri pounded the enlarged knuckle of his index finger into Alexander's eye. Alexander tried to pull away, but Dimitri was too strong; he pulled Alexander back tightly against the bars. "You're a real piece of dung. I'd beat you to death, but I promised Tanya and her mentor, Comrade Trotsky, they could witness the Cheka frying you gonads." Dimitri twisted his knuckle into Alexander's swollen eye.

The one-armed man jumped up from his bunk and ran toward the bars. He grabbed the guard's arm and tried to pry Alexander free. "Let him go, jerk!"

Dimitri swung his free hand back and drew a 9mm Parabellum pistol from his waist band; he fired a single shot; it tore into the exposed upper biceps of the prisoner's good arm. The prisoner screamed and fell back on the polished floor of the cell.

Rage pounded through Dimitri's temples; he slammed the round, wood butt end of the heavy pistol into Alexander's cheek, then released the body of the unconscious youth. Alexander dropped heavily to the floor. Dimitri spit on the unconscious body, then turned and looked at the silent Joy-Boy cowering in the shadows of the top bunk. "Come with me. Time to earn you keep. Dzerzhinsky needs your services."

Late that night, the frail Joy-Boy tried to move Alexander from his slumped position on the floor. Alexander slowly, stiffly twisted and pushed himself from the sweat-drenched floor; he could smell dank odors of sex on the frail prisoner's breath; he pushed the Joy-Boy away. "I can help myself," Alexander said. "Don't come near me!"

The one-armed youth sat stiffly on his bunk—his back pressed flat against the cell wall. He had ripped a strip from his baggy trousers and tied it around his bleeding arm. Alexander wondered how the Hell he had done that. Then he looked toward the Joy-Boy.

The one-armed youth spoke. "You might as well let Alexandra do what she wants. You won't have any need for your equipment after tomorrow," his voice lowered an octave in imitation of Dimitri Sonotov, "you piece of dung." The one-armed youth moved from his bunk and stood over Alexander. "You're a sick piece of crap if you did your mother . . . but you should get a medal for offing your idiot father. Gregory Mackovick was the most murderous of the all the Bolsheviks." He walked over to the shiny, new bars, and watched for the guard to return as he spoke, "Your father's friends are going to fry you." He held one end of the makeshift bandage with the arched fingers

of his injured arm and pulled the other end of the bandage with his teeth; blood seeped through the material as it tightened around the wound.

Alexander stumbled to the lower bunk on the west wall. He vomited over the side, and then passed out. He felt a cool hand on his forehead and slowly turned; the Joy-Boy was sitting side-saddle on his bunk. Alexander pushed the feminine hand away. "If you touch me again, I'll bust you in the mouth," Alexander said.

"I was just seeing if you were okay. I am not as he says. I do not attack. I only volunteer. If you need comfort, I am here."

Alexander looked straight into his eyes. "Was it true about Rasputin?"

"Yes, I was one of the privileged."

"Did he worship BabaYaga?"

"Who?"

"Never mind. Did he worship?"

"Rasputin was a Christian. A Khlysty. He believed sinning was necessary before you could achieve salvation."

"Was he a mystic . . . as they say?"

"Rasputin was totally and irreversibly insane. But he convinced the Tsarina and others in the Court that he was a mystic with a special power to heal. He was insane but he treated me and the other boys well . . . he could go all night."

"Did he have children . . . any sons?"

"He never spent his seed—his essence. He said it was unhealthy to drain the precious fluids. With men or women or girls or boys, he never spent his seed. But it is said that your mother made him spend it. He denied it. But rumor is . . . you're his son. You have his eyes and chin and you're as tall as he was. Can you go all night?" He looked at Alexander. "He liked young boys the best . . . sometimes three and four a night." He ran his hand up Alexander's leg. "Have you ever been with a man?"

"No!" Alexander lied. He shoved the frail man off the bunk and onto the hard, wood floor. "Why would a guy want to be with another guy?"

"Some guys are just their mother's souls trapped in male bodies—a cruel, little joke from a vengeful God." He pulled himself up from the floor and climbed to the top bunk "Good night, Alexander Mackovick, son of Rasputin."

The nightmares came quickly: Kineindorf was servicing his in the utility closet, but the physical appearance of the teacher was beginning to change. He was becoming bigger and heavier and his hair was growing long and black. He looked up at Alexander. A mist haloed the teacher's head. But, Alexander began to recognize who the woman was who was trapped in Kineindorf's body. The tingling feeling of a cold, tiny hand snaking down the back of his open trousers woke Alexander. His heel kicked straight back and caught the Joy-Boy between his naked legs. Alexander spun off the bunk and palmed the fragile prisoner's aristocratic neck. Alexander bent the Joy-Boy's much used throat over the edge of the bunk. He pressed. The snap echoed through the cell and flashed memories of his mother's death through his still weeping brain.

"Now, you've done it," the one-armed youth said, "The guards will substitute you for their night-time pleasure . . ."

"Shut up! I need to think."

“Think? You think you’re going to get out of here?” The prisoner walked toward Alexander. “I got myself shot for an idiot who thinks he can get out of a Cheka prison. No one gets out of a Cheka prison except in a pine box.”

Alexander reached out and grabbed an end of the trouser-strip bandage. He pulled the bandage quickly free from the prisoner’s good arm, and then whipped the bloody rag around the shocked youth’s neck, garroting him. “You won’t even get out in a pine box . . . maybe a birch box,” Alexander said.

He stripped the grimy clothes from the one-armed prisoner. He dragged the unconscious prisoner to the center of the shiny new cell. He ran across to the upper bunk and worked a flat steel spring free from its frame. With the flat steel, he etched a Witches Foot into the dull, waxed, wood floor. The one-armed youth would be a feast for BabaYaga. But he had a major problem. BabaYaga needed to emerge from a female body; the closest he had to that was the dead Joy-Boy. “Damn!” He looked down at the unconscious youth in the Witches Foot. “What the Hell do I have to loose. I’m a dead man tomorrow.” He stripped his clothes off and began parading around the one-armed youth. He jabbed the steel spring into the emaciated flesh. But Alexander felt uncomfortable—BabaYaga’s feast was missing something. An arm! BabaYaga probably liked arms best. He stopped chanting. He went over to the body of the Joy-Boy. The first blow of the flat steel spring just bruised the cold flesh. But Alexander battered away insanely for the good part of the night. At the end of the blood-smear session, all Alexander had to do was reach down through the fleshy muck and snap the arm-bone like a small wing-bone of a well cooked pigeon. He carried the battered arm across the cell and placed it in its proper position as an extension of the arm-stump of the one-armed youth. He returned to his chanting.

A sickening, tearing-splitting sound came from the Joy-Boy’s body; his small, feminine skull began to expand and stretch; it ballooned up like the thick, raw forehead of a giant baboon. It burst!

BabaYaga stood next to the ruptured skull. “BabaYaga had to emerge through his brain. He is only psychologically a woman . . . but more woman than most,” the hag-witch said. She scampered over and downed the corpse lying in the center of the Witches Foot. She ate the detached arm last. “BabaYaga likes arms,” she mumbled to herself. She bellowed.

The guard Dimitri Sonotov came running. He stopped dead. “What the Hell?”

BabaYaga moved close to the bars; she spat a long stream of saliva into the guard’s smooth, young face; he screamed and drove his knuckles into his festering eyes; when his hands fell away, his empty eye sockets were smoldering. He fell face-down against the bars; his blood stained the bars. BabaYaga twisted her head side-ways and watched with curiosity as the saliva ate through steel and weld. She spit full-force on a parallel bar; the saliva ate the hard steel in-two. Five more good-sized hockers and three bars fell, one-at-a-time, to the floor, leaving an opening big enough for Alexander to step through.

“They have taken your monster friend, Turk, to the torture room down on the first floor. His privates are hooked to a Magneto. If you don’t get there soon, he’ll be a woman—a real ugly woman,” BabaYaga giggled. The hag-witch began to evaporate. With the upper part of her body still visible, she snarled back at Alexander, “Your bitch sister’s gang has impaled thousands of my disciples. She is with the Trotskys at their

apartment in the Kremlin. Impale her!” She vanished, but the air vibrated with her hyena’s laughter.

Alexander stepped through the opening in the bars. Saliva touched his skin. Ugly, red welts appeared across his arm. He wiped the saliva off with his hand but it singed his palm. He bent down and wiped it on the dead guard’s trousers; it smoldered but did little damage. Its shelf-life was short. As he slipped into Dimitri’s trousers, he was careful not to drop the 9mm holstered to the trouser’s belt. He slipped into the Worker’s jacket, and then pushed his feet into the one-size-too-big shoes.

The clomp, clomp of his shoes down the first floor, should have alerted an army of guards, but it didn’t. They must have all been attending Turk’s ball-fry. He jerked open the first floor door by its ornate handle and there was his old buddy, Turk, in an eight foot by eight foot cell in the center of a small auditorium. The fat slob working the magneto reached for his gun, but Alexander’s 9mm sliced his brain waves and his hand never completed its task. The guard holding the cables to Turk’s swollen gonads, turned; he looked at Alexander; Turk’s knees shot forward and crushed the guard’s struggling head between the muscular quadriceps. Alexander moved toward the cell door. “It’s locked!” he said. “You okay?”

“Sore balls,” Turk said.

“The door’s locked.”

Turk gestured with his head toward the dead guard by the magneto.

“Hell!” Alexander said.

Turk grinned. He tightened his huge body and stood up. The wooden chair that had been pulled from its anchors in the floor was still strapped to his chest and arms. He dropped to his knees and crawled with the heavy chair still strapped to his broad back. His canine teeth gripped the key ring on the guard’s belt. He pulled. The heavy steel ring sprang loose but drew bright-red blood from Turk’s upper lip. He struggled to his feet—faltering only once—then walked, with the key in his mouth, toward Alexander’s waiting hand extended through the bars.

“I should give you a doggie treat,” Alexander said.

Inside the cell, Alexander unstrapped Turk from the torture chair. The fat guard’s trousers and shirt were a tight fit, but close enough to bring a smile to Turk’s pain-drawn face. The Avtomats sitting close to each guard were quickly snatched by the duo, but before they exited, Turk insisted on going back and stomping the fat guard’s privates. He disconnected the magneto while Alexander paraded around the exterior of the cell telling him what a stupid jerk he was.

“Where the Hell are all the Cheka?” Alexander asked.

“They went to stand in line to greet your sister and Trotsky,” Turk said.

Seven Cheka came down the stairs and were racing across the lobby, but their guns were at their sides and before they could react, the duo’s Avtomats pierced holes, through their running bodies, like precision sewing machines, leaving red stitching across their matching, black suits. “Damn! I love this Avtomat,” Alexander said. He ran with Turk toward the front of the revamped insurance building; Turk was still lugging the heavy magneto under one arm. He cradled the Avtomat in the other. Alexander stopped at the entrance. He looked up at the pictures strung across the marble wall: Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, Jabon (Gregory Mackovick), and the picture Alexander wanted. “Get that

picture for me,” he said to Turk. He pointed toward a 86'X86' photograph of a distinguished looking officer with a neatly trimmed mustache.

Turk looked up with surprise. “You more nuts than Turk.” he started toward the entrance.

“That’s Vladimir Grigorevitch Federov, he designed the Avtomat.” Alexander held up his steaming automatic.

Turk laughed and danced back and gently set the heavy magneto on the gray marble floor. He smashed the butt of his automatic into the glass protecting the coveted photograph, then with his huge hands he ripped the photo from its shattered frame, rolled it, and with a grand gesture presented it to young, smiling Alexander Mackovick. With little effort, Turk bent down and hooked the magneto in his arm then raced after Alexander and almost stumbled over the youth when Alexander turned and emptied half a clip, from the Avtomat, into the sneering photograph of his father.

They charged through the twelve-foot tall doors and out into the chill of Moscow. Two uniformed guards came toward them with weapons drawn. Turk raised his arms, as if to surrender, flipping the heavy magneto, like a child’s soccer ball, at the approaching guards; the one hundred and fifty pound magneto bounced off the chest of the larger guard and fell on the foot of the other. The big guard fell straight backward while his Comrade grabbed the damaged foot and hopped around the square on one foot until Alexander put him and his partner out of their miseries with a few rounds from his trusty automatic. The shots drew the attention of a shabbily-dressed crowd listening to a balding, bearded speaker, preaching from a platform in the center of the square. The crowd charged toward Alexander and his bending companion. The leading edge of the unarmed crowd was mowed down like dry winter wheat, but a stray bullet from Turk’s Automatic weapon grazed the speaker. The speaker fell.

“Assassin!” rang through the crowd. Then it turned to attend the fallen speaker. Turk and Alexander escaped into the shadows of the square.

“We need catch a slow boat to China,” Turk said with a smile.

“Not yet. I promised our benefactor, BabaYaga, a side trip,” Alexander said.

At the same time, Christian was working his way around stacked rubbish at the back of the Moscow apartments. He had heard that Alexander had been transported to Moscow. His goal for the evening was to use his and God’s power to convince Tanya to call off the scheduled torture of their brother. If she spoke to Leon, she would be able to convince him to imprison Alexander, long-term, and bypass the torture. There was little hope of getting him a full pardon and release. Alexander had built some kind of reputation of being an assassin. God could perform the miracle that would release Alexander, but Christian was not certain that would be good for the Church or Alexander. Alexander was evil. And even though the German Jews had developed theories that a man’s mental illness could be cured, Christian doubted that Leon Trotsky or anyone could be convinced that Alexander could be cured and could somehow become a useful part of the Bolshevik society. God, please help convince Leon not to torture Alexander.

Alexander and Turk—they had left a trail of bodies in their five hours of freedom—ducked through the arch of the thick Kremlin walls. The shadows cloaked them from the eyes of the roving guards. At the apartment complex, Alexander pulled up the collar of his Worker’s jacket and entered the building. He approached the seated guard in front of

a door with a red star centered in its rotting wood. “Comrade, is Commissar Trotsky home?”

“No, he’s at the War Office,” the guard pointed through the front doors.

“Is Madam Trotsky home?”

“No, she’s at the Commissariat of Education.” Again the guard pointed through the front doors.

“I have a delivery man waiting with a magneto that was ordered by someone in this apartment,” Alexander said.

“Magneto?” the guard asked.

“Yes, for experimenting with electricity.”

The guard smiled. “It must be for young Christian,” he stood and moved his chair back from the door. “He’s always experimenting with something. Bring it here. The lad’s out roaming but his sister’s here. I’ll call her.”

Alexander went back down the hall and opened the door for Turk. “Where’s the other guard?” Alexander whispered.

Turk made a clicking sound with his mouth and ran his hand across his throat.

Alexander turned. Tanya stepped out into the hallway; she recognized Alexander. She shoved the guard in Alexander’s path, slammed back into the apartment, and locked the door behind her. The guard tried to draw his pistol, but Alexander’s knife drove into the old man’s exposed throat. Turk hit the apartment door with all his weight and the driving force of the magneto. The door tore from its twisted hinges. Three bullets ricocheted off the steel case of the magneto. Turk just kept going through the door, and landed on the fragile girl, knocking the small pistol from her hand. Tanya was unconscious. Alexander pushed Turk from atop the beautiful girl.

“Before you kill her, Turk wants some,” Turk said.

“No! This is my special treat. Just me . . . this time,” Alexander said as he lifted his sister’s body and carried her toward the bedroom.

Turk stumbled to his feet and followed. “I, Turk, next!” He grabbed Alexander by the back of the neck. “I, Turk, will be next!”

Alexander shrugged the big man’s hand from his neck. “I’m going to ritualize her then drown her. You can do whatever . . . after.”

Turk left the bedroom and slammed the door behind him, he walked out to the apartment complex hallway and dragged the guard back to the guard’s chair and propped him up nicely. After seeing how his handy work looked from the complex entrance, he walked back and placed the guard’s dead hand on the revolver that still rested in the thick leather waist band. Though he banged around getting the door to stand back in its frame, he could still hear Tanya’s screams. When the screaming stopped, it would be Turk’s turn.

The screaming stopped. Alexander dragged his naked sister from the bedroom to the tiny bathroom. Water was pouring into the ornate tub by the time Turk decided to confront Alexander.

“Turk want some.” He bent down and touched Tanya’s small breasts.

Alexander held his silent sister’s head down toward the running water. He hesitated then looked up at Turk. “Okay! But you got to do it like with that sniveling Comrade’s wife.”

Turk nodded his huge head. He dragged Tanya by her hair over to the commode and draped her shivering body over the seat. He undid his trousers and knelt down behind her. Alexander bent down close to his sister's tear streaked face and whispered in her ear, "Now, dear sister, you will learn what it means to be ritualized. You lied to everyone. Now it's done. Enjoy!"

She turned and spit in his face.

In the living room of the apartment, Alexander inspected the pictures hanging over the desk. Turk had wisely put the door back in place, but Alexander knew it would take only a light breeze to topple it. He turned and read the citation, to Trotsky, hanging on the wall; it was for saving Petrograd; Order of the Red Banner. What a piece of crap. Next to it, in a smaller frame, was a picture of Trotsky and Lenin both looking very bored. Above that, was a picture, of Stalin, hung upside-down. Alexander laughed; but his laughter only tip-toed across Tanya's piercing screams. Next to the Stalin photo was a cartoon of Trotsky in front of the War Commissariat with a cannon pointed at his wife, Natalia Sedova, in front of the Commissariat of Education, pointing an identical cannon toward her husband; the headline read, "Military Necessity Often Clashes With the Sanctity of Institutional Culture." Alexander read but his mind focused on the begging sounds coming from behind the closed bathroom door. On the cluttered desk was a photograph of Natalia Sedova. She was a handsome woman. It was too bad she was not at home. He would be doing her instead of listening to his sister's screams. Her screams were smothered by the loud thud of the unhinged door against the thinly carpeted floor. Natalia Sedova, a uniformed guard, and Christian stood in the doorway. Alexander reached for his knife, but the guard twisted his arm before he could make a thrust. Christian stepped forward and took the knife from Alexander's hand; Natalia and the guard both looked from Christian's face to Alexander's and back. Only the manner in which they combed their hair identified one from the other.

Pulling the gun from her waistband, Mrs. Trotsky moved quickly toward the screams tearing through the bathroom door; with one kick the door was open. Turk stood without withdrawing from Tanya; he lifted her naked body in front of him by clutching her slender throat in his huge hand. With his free arm, he wildly elbowed the medicine cabinet mirror. The pieces of mirror rained on his shoulders, but he reached back and pulled a shard from the cabinet's frame. He held the shard against Tanya's naked belly and pulled; the broken piece of mirror drew a blood line across the tender skin. Natalia backed through the bathroom door and slammed it behind her.

She pressed the knife against one of Alexander's nostrils as the guard gripped Alexander in a bear-hug. "Tell that animal, if he does anymore harm to Tanya, I will slowly, whittle on your face," Natalia whispered.

Christian stepped forward. "Natalia, please don't harm my brother. I will speak to the man in the bathroom."

"Christian, move aside or you'll be shot. This psychopath has allowed his own sister to be violated by that pig." She put the knife up into Alexander's nostril. "Tell the pig to let her go or I will cut your nose off!"

Alexander was silent but spit straight forward. Mrs. Trotsky pushed the long blade of the knife into the nostril and pulled sideways. Alexander's nostril split and blood washed the front of his leather jacket. "Oh! Damn! Oh! Damn! Turk!" he screamed. "Come and kill this bitch! She's cutting my nose off!"

Turk came through the door carrying Tanya's struggling body under one arm and holding the shard in the other. He looked at the blood splashing down Alexander's front. He went berserk. In one move, he jammed the shard into Tanya's naked belly, withdrew it and jammed it into the guards' throat, withdrew it and stabbed it into Natalia Sedova's defending hand, then Christian's lunging body; Turk dropped Tanya and charged, after Alexander, across the fallen door, and out of the apartment complex.

Finding safety was fairly easy—no one cared about two idiots running around looking for a new magneto. One had the center of his face wrapped with a torn shirt-sleeve. Blood seeped through the center where his nose was. The other had a torn shirt-sleeve wrapped around his hand. Blood seeped through where his palm was. They moved through crowds of people who didn't care. The crowds were looking for signs of Cheka and the Red Army or the invaders, or they were looking for food and coal and housing. Nobody cared. But the people should have cared. The insane duo was more dangerous than any Cheka or Red Army or invader. They killed for sport. Three different manufacturing companies were gutted of employees in the search of the Holy Magneto. It was finally located at Elector Machines & Equipment Ltd. on the outskirts of Moscow, but not before the entire first shift was eliminated as Turk frantically shot and searched—searched and shot—but finally found the exact magneto.

This time around, it took longer to get to the Turkish border. They had to travel by night; Wanted Posters with graphic likenesses of them lined the inner-section of most towns. They were also slowed by Turks need to attach the magneto's cables to some unlucky Bolshevik's balls. "Do you believe in the Cause?" Turk asked in imitation of his Cheka tormentors. "Yes!" His brave victims shouted. Alexander was instructed—in an imitation of the voice of the Cheka officer—to crank the magneto. "Still believe?" Turk asked. After numerous yes answers, Turk's victims recanted. "All Bolsheviks are pigs," they would mumble. "I have done it with chickens. I wish Lenin to be buggered by a big, brown bear."

The duo left a trail, cluttered with bodies of converted Bolsheviks, as they made their way to Turkey. As they traveled, Alexander thought of nothing but getting back to the winter wheat. Russia was experimenting with weather control. If they succeeded, they would be the most powerful country on earth. Someday he would control the winter wheat, and then the wheat of the world.

In Turkey, they joined some of Turk's old pals in the sport of slaughtering Ottoman; but Turk was constantly harassed by the commanding officer so Turk crushed his head with a trench shovel. The duo escaped the Ottoman Empire by the skin of their teeth; they were on the run again.

Chapter Ten

In Moscow, Christian sat in the overcrowded hospital—icons of religion had not yet been destroyed—praying for his sister. Christian had survived his chest wound, but his sister was dying. She had been fighting for her life for over six months. He realized for

the first time just how much he loved her. Not because she was his flesh, but because she was her own person. She had balls. He had no balls. He should have saved her. He had no balls. The Lord said turn the other cheek, but He couldn't have meant to turn the other cheek when your beautiful, innocent sister was being ripped apart. He never condoned her life-style—or, her death-style. She was as much a killer as his insane brother, but Tanya killed evil people; though that didn't make it right, still, if you were to err, why not err on the side of Evil. Why not kill evil people? If Tanya died, he would understand. God would not take her unless it was for the good of mankind. If Tanya lived, he would realize that God wanted him to follow the path of vengeance—not to turn the other cheek—to pick up the sword against Alexander and his kind; Lenin and his kind. He sat by his sisters side moving his hand across her forehead and marveling how the muted light that passed through the holes in the bombed out building created a halo around his beautiful sister's head. It was a sign from God. She would become an angle. No, she would surly go to Hell. She was a murder, a fornicator, and more importantly, she had never accepted Christ as her Savior. Tanya's pale forehead twitched but went unnoticed by Christian. One day soon, God would call him to be at His side, but now he was needed on earth, in Russia, for something to do with the Antichrist.

For months Christian watched for any signs of life from his sister's beautiful face. The nurses had taken off her leather eye-patch and replaced it with a sterile-looking white one. Somehow the black, leather patch was more attractive . . . more Tanya. "Heavenly Father, thank you for all that you have given me. I know you have chosen me to defend your doctrine against the barbarians. Give me the power to do it with non-violence if that is Your will. Or give me a sign. If Tanya lives, I will pick up the sword in Your name." He had never picked up a sword. Would God give him the strength? Could he destroy another human being? That was a moral dilemma—the killing part. The strength part was a physical dilemma: could his slowly-healing body hold a heavy steel sword and then have the power to crash it down on some sinner's head? He sat through the cold night; his feet and hands were almost frozen. All the available blankets were being used to keep the patients from freezing to death. When the morning light came through the cracks on the boarded, hospital windows, Christian heard his name being whispered.

"Christian . . ." Tanya said as she looked at her brother. "I dreamed the monsters had murdered you. Are you okay?"

"Tanya, I am in God's care, I am certain that I cannot be murdered. I am an agent of the Lord. You live because of my agency. You are back from the dead because God is sending me a message. Now, you must get well. You must get strong. You must help me crush the non-believers and the Antichrist. Our God has given me a sign." Christian said, then bent down and kissed his sister's pale forehead; it was ice cold.

"I see you're still a babbling idiot," Tanya said, then kissed his lowered forehead.

The Four Horsemen rode with Evil across Europe: Gascisti raised the Imperial German flag in Nurenborg; Poles slaughtered Lithuanians; Italians murdered Jugo-Slavians; and Alexander and Turk started on a path that would destroy more human flesh than all the other evil humans put together.

They decided to escape harm's way, by boat, to the shores of Portugal in the spring of 1923. But for a twisted joke of fate, they may have become quiet citizens of a tranquil village just east of Oporto. The blood lust disappeared from both as they worked and lived in the slow paced community. They both took jobs in the same small winery. They

lived on the waterfront with assorted refugees from the Great War. On weekends, Turk went to help locals mend their nets and to party with them. Alexander went to a Fado club and sat through the long nights listening to the somber music. The two had very few problems other than Turk's constant complaints of eating so much Salt Cod that he was unable to control his urge to swim out.

They had both thought of going back to Russia when they heard of Lenin's death. And they had thought of traveling to other countries, but news was that most of the rest of the world was in violent revolution and that an idiot orator, Benito Mussolini, and his blackshirts would be the next scourge of the world—his ships were blocking every country on the Mediterranean. Both Alexander and Turk decided to wait until the rest of the world stopped being so damned violent.

"Why can't people learn to live together with love and trust," Alexander said.

"With love and lust?" Turk said.

They both laughed.

After three years of the same therapeutic routine, Alexander settled into his winery job with enough acumen to be promoted to the prestigious job of wine taster trainee. The equivalent of fifty cents per month raise came with the new position. "Can you imagine? Fifty damn cents a month? And they call that a raise?" He said to Turk. "But you know what? I must be getting brain-washed . . . I'm happy as a castrated dog."

"I am the one who should get the raise," Turk said. "I do all the work. You do all the fun. Should pay Turk to drink all day. I have more history of drinking wine than Alexander."

"You idiot. I don't drink it . . . I taste it," Alexander said as he made a dainty gesture of raising a cordial to his lips. "Besides, you don't do crap. You drive a cart and tell the peons when to poop . . . You're the macho boss."

Turk put his arm over Alexander's shoulder and pulled him close. "Alexander said.

"Turk have a good life here, no? We live and die here?"

"Maybe, partner, maybe."

Both had steady girls from the village. Both cheated on their girls, but not with anyone who really counted for much.

"You doing her yet?" Alexander asked.

"I, Turk, do others. Save her."

"Save her for what?"

"You do your girl?" Turk asked.

"Saving her for . . . marriage."

Turk took Alexander's face in his big hands and stared straight into the young man's dark eyes. "You want to live and die in Oporto?"

"Maybe."

"Turk . . . also."

"Ever miss the old times? Karkov . . . Moscow?"

Turk looked around to make sure they were alone on the small balcony. "Sometimes when Ramos is on Turk's back about the peons, I, Turk, think of smashing Ramos's head in a grape press."

Alexander looked around then whispered. "You screw-up anybody here in Oporto?"

"Two. Both stupid guys who try to jump Turk when he is walking on the waterfront. Both dead."

Alexander moved closer to Turk. He leaned forward and braced his weight on his forearms against the balcony's wood railing. He looked at the hazy moonlight reflecting the sea. "I was up in the foothills, two or three weeks ago, looking for some land that maybe you and I could buy and use to grow a couple acres of our own grapes . . . make our own wine. I stumbled on Tito . . . you know the village big-wig . . . he was in the bushes with a less than willing youngster." Alexander made a motion with his thumb in and out of the closed fist of his other hand. "I tried to walk away, but he insisted on a confrontation. He may have thought he had to kill me or I would announce the situation to the village. He came at me with a knife. Dumb jerk. It was a big damn knife. Almost a sword. I took it away easily. Slit his fat throat." He drew his fingers across Turk's throat.

"What happened to the girl?" Turk's eyes sparkled in anticipation.

"I chased her to the outskirts of the Gypsy camp. Trapped her, and then dragged her back into the forest. She was very cooperative, said she'd do anything if I would let her go, after. When she finished doing everything, I slit her throat . . . a very small throat, not much thicker than a new born lamb's"

"Couldn't bring her back for your old buddy, Turk?"

"Of course not, jerk. I didn't want problems. But I've got problems. When I buttoned up, I heard a rustle in the bushes. An old lady scrambled from her squatting position, pulled down her heavy skirt without wiping the dump from her butt, and scrambled toward the camp. I waited outside the camp for the old lady to bring help. I was going to slaughter as many as I could. But she never showed." Alexander looked toward Turk and frowned. "It's been a couple of weeks and no one has approached me. They must think the villagers won't believe a bunch of Gypsies."

Turk looked very seriously at Alexander then out at the sea. He was silent for a moment, and then said, "Did you find any land for us?"

If the duo could have stayed in the quiet village, where their rage had been all but tamed or at least caged to some degree, the world would have suffered less. If the sleeping God had stirred just long enough, looked down on Oporto, and decreed no Gypsies should ply their trade that celebration night—a simple enough task for an all powerful God; no more than a few minutes away from his precious sleep—things would have been better for humanity. But the sleeping God left it to Fate. Fate screwed up.

Alexander and his steady girl were going to have a small gathering on the waterfront of Oporto to announce their formal engagement. They had never had sex. The chaperon was always within sight. But, for the first time, Alexander could wait. He relieved his sexual rage with a fifty year old Fado singer. He decided he would settle down in a beautiful country with beautiful friends and a beautiful wife and have beautiful children. If he caught his wife, Leidia, screwing with his son, he would cut her beautiful tongue out and stuff it up her beautiful butt. No, idiot. Leidia wouldn't even conceive of molesting children; only sick Mackovicks think of incest and the evil things of life. He wanted to raise good children and great grapes. Really he would rather raise wheat. But if he really wanted to raise wheat, he would have to go two hundred miles south. The Iberian Peninsula wasn't famous for wheat, but Alexander Mackovick, Master of the Wheat, could make it so.

He loved to be with Leidia. He went so far as to trudge to church. He didn't pray; but only God and BabaYaga knew. Leidia was sure he was extremely religious; of course he was; he had been in more religious rituals than any of the zealots who trudged next to the

loving couple on a journey that took two hours. The church, hidden deep in the northern mountains, had once been forbidden by the government.

“Thirteen years ago,” Leidia said, “Senior Braga stopped writing his wonderful books to try his clumsy hand at politics . . . to try to run our country . . . his new government decided to expel the Catholic Church. The government persecuted the families of everyone here.” Leidia looked around at her friends. The Braga government fell to our current ministry, but the villagers are frightened. It happened once . . . it could happen again. So we fulfill our need to worship in this isolated place.”

They prayed to a Deity who could only understand Latin; they sacrificed a bleating lamb on a rough hewed prior. The smoke smelled sweet and wasted to Alexander. He never told Leidia that her God had deserted his Uncle and him. Because he had learned that all Deities desert their followers. Leidia carried her Bible with her everywhere. She quoted from it frequently. But, way back in Alexander’s subconscious, he believed she would, someday, abandon the Bible for the Book of Fire. They met each night as he left the winery. They stayed with each other until the sleeping hour, and then left for separate houses. Their constant companion, other than the Bible, was a slow, half-blind, half-deaf aunt.

The soon-to-be betrothed searched the waterfront shops for inexpensive gifts to buy each other. They talked of the folk lore of Portugal. Leidia loved her country and had

been a teacher for the State for all the years that Alexander had known her. She was Alexander’s equal in all things except evil. They strolled, the beach, isolated by love from the Hell of the outside world. They found quiet coves where they anxiously continued the last night’s conversations.

He recited every line he could of Pushkin and Tolstoy. Leidia countered with fantastic tales of Portugal’s world supremacy in the years gone by. Leidia’s cousin a merchant seaman on the Lisbon Queen brought, from France, James Joyce’s Ulysses. Alexander was proud he had finished the course in “decadent French” against his tyrannical father’s wishes; he was able to help instruct his beautiful Leidia as they read. She learned French and Russian from him. He learned Portuguese and English from her.

“This is really stupid,” she said. “We are reading a book authored in English that could only be published in French. We are always trying to see what English word Joyce really meant.”

“Governments are really screwed,” Alexander said. “Excuse my French . . . they should let people read anything they want. Do anything they want. Screw anyone they want.” Flashes of heat stung his groin as images of his sister’s tiny, naked breasts flickered in his brain. He reached for Leidia’s breasts. She pushed his hand away. She glanced toward the sleeping chaperon. She wagged her finger at Alexander. She continued to read. She read the many profane words without hesitation. “They don’t embarrass me,” she said, “because they are necessary to the good telling of the tale. Besides, I would like to do most of the things written about, save only for the marriage vows. The words shoot through my brain and embed between my quivering thighs.”

Alexander’s hand shot up her dress. She pulled his hand away, and held it up to both their faces. “I should not have been so descriptive with my thoughts or their stimulation to my privates. But I am Catholic. There will be no sex before marriage!”

One night on the beach, when her ancient chaperon fell into a deep, snoring, sleep, Leidia took Alexander by the hand and led him back into the shadows of the boat shanty.

“My love,” she said, “that we have found each other, in a world cluttered with hate and death and evil, is God’s miracle. I want never to lose you. I can not give myself to you, now, because God would shun me, but I will let you see what will be yours . . . when we marry.” She removed her blouse and skirt and underclothing and stepped out of the shadows. Her breasts were perfect proportion for her exquisite body. The breasts were a problem. They were a little too full for Alexander’s liking. He thought they would be more like Tanya’s. They looked smaller under her garments. “Forgive me, my love,” she said, “for doing this. I realize it could be construed as teasing, but it is not meant to be. I needed you to see what would be yours. No less would be expected if you were to buy a cow,” she laughed.

“You are anything but a cow. You are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.” He didn’t attempt to touch her while she slipped back into her clothes, instead he began to disrobe.

“Alexander, I do not need to see you. I love you for your fantastic mind. If you should have the privates of an ant, it would make no mind to me. Though I do pray, to our most Benevolent Father . . . they are not the privates of an ape.”

They both fell to their knees, in the cool sand, laughing.

“Maybe a small ape,” she said as they rolled in the sand. Alexander had never kissed her lips until that night.

The second kiss came when he asked for her hand in marriage. He was sent to Leidia’s uncle to ask the question; a question that should have been asked of her father had he not been killed in Africa during the War-To-End-all-Wars. Alexander spoke to Turk before he asked Leidia. If his giant friend had shown the least bit of agitation, Alexander would have passed on the marriage. Passed on the beautiful woman-child. But Turk was delighted; he was happy for his young friend; he wanted to settle down also; maybe marry; if he could somehow narrow down the covey of young things he was currently screwing without the knowledge of his favorite girl or sort of favorite girl.

He loved Portugal. He loved the ocean. He loved the relative tranquility of his life. Relative tranquility, Turk repeated to himself. Words he could never pronounce until he traveled with Alexander Mackovick. Maybe he was not insane as advertised. Maybe Alexander was not insane. Maybe pigs could fly.

The date was set for Alexander’s wedding, and plans were kindled for an engagement announcement party. The problems began. First, Alexander would have to become Catholic; he would have to learn Cataclysm. Each time he began, a burning rage ignited in his brain then burned a trail to his groin. After each lesson, his sex drive would burst its tethers and charge ahead uncontrolled. He tried to grope innocent Leidia; the chaperon’s poor vision didn’t pick up on the move, but Leidia pushed his hand away and whispered, “If it doesn’t happen again, I will forgive you.”

But at one of the sessions Alexander surprised Leidia and succeeded in forcing his fingers up into her. The chaperon slept through the struggle as Leidia tried to pull Alexander’s hand free. But Alexander persisted and forced his fingers deeper into the sobbing, young lady. He lifted her up and tried to force all his fingers into her—to grind at her—to climb up inside her. The loud crack of Leidia’s hand as it struck Alexander’s face woke the chaperon in time to see the beautiful woman running up the boardwalk toward home. It took almost a month of constant begging for Alexander to get back in Leidia’s good graces. He had satisfied his rage with the rape-murder or actually the

murder-rape of Oporto's town harlot. She was pure slut. It wasn't his fault. Damn! He was just walking down the boardwalk and coping with the current problem with Leidia. He had promised himself that he would make it through the rest of his life without raping or murdering another soul. If he could only have Leidia. But God must have decided to screw-up his plans; the idiot harlot saw his lonely walk as an opportunity to make some easy money. She approached him with little intent of doing anything more than making a few coins for—her oral specialty—under the boardwalk.

Chapter Eleven

"I've seen you around," she said. "You got enough to pay for a party?" She ran her hands across the front of his trousers. "You been dating that church girl. You must really need your tubes cleared."

"Not interested," Alexander said.

"I know how to use my mouth like nobody you know," she said. She touched the front of his trousers again.

Alexander grabbed her hand and twisted her down to the rough planks of the boardwalk. "I'm not interested!" he repeated.

She pulled his hand toward her mouth and bit deeply into the hand's flesh. Alexander jerked his bleeding hand back and slammed his other hand down against the harlot's grinning face. She rolled sideways on her knees and toppled off the boardwalk. Alexander ran down the poorly maintained ramp; he ran through the fine mounds of sand thereupon stumbling and falling across the harlot's whimpering body. "I told you I wasn't interested, but you just kept pushing," Alexander was livid. "You stupid bitch! You have no idea who you're screwing with. I'm going to use your mouth until you chock to death!"

"You keep your fag-self away from me," she said. "You hurt me. Maybe broke my leg and wrist."

"Good, you won't be able to grope a guy and run off with his money." Alexander's rage calmed. "I'll help you up. I'll take you to the Pharmacist . . . he'll fix your wrist and leg."

"Listen, Sonny-Boy, I ain't on this wharf for my health. I want money. You dig deep and find some and maybe I won't tell your little, church lady. If I tell her, she won't like you very much," she said as she struggled to get to her feet.

Alexander's foot shot out and its sandaled toe slammed into the roof of the harlot's open mouth. He slammed his other foot, hard, up between her legs. He ripped open the laces on her bright red dress; her breasts were supported by a heavy webbed wrap-around that strained with the weight. A wide scar ran from the center of her rib cage down to the top of her garter belt. He drug the bleeding harlot back under the boardwalk, but when he

started to unbelt the front of his trousers, the harlot kicked out and caught him with the ball of her silk-stockinged foot. His gonads sprung from their sack and painfully buried themselves into his lower abdomen. The pain tore into his belly and emptied his stomach's contents onto the gray sand.

She limped rapidly down the beach toward the town before he was able to get to his feet and begin the pursuit. Damn! He just went to the beach to contemplate, but no. God wouldn't let him just be. He tackled her and brought her to the ground just yards from the safe-haven of an impossible maze of pier pilings. When he straddled her and tried to turn her over, she screamed through her sand-packed mouth. He held one hand over her mouth and frantically packed more dirt with his other over the harlot's dodging face. Right hand then left; right then left; until there was a foot high mound of wet sand over the silent face. He had spent himself down the front of his trousers, yet he raped her only because of the position her legs splayed into during her death-spasm.

The next day Leidia forgave him—not for the murder-rape; he presumed she knew nothing of that—for the parlor groping. But it all came to a head. Leidia's fatal gesture was as innocent as she: she invited a Gypsy palm reader to set-up at the engagement party. Acoustic instruments of all invention played background to the voluptuous Fado singer who groped Alexander, for old time's sake, when he passed too close to her whirling hands. The party was progressing nicely as the young people lined up to have their palms read. The ancient Gypsy from the mountain camp looked familiar to Alexander, but they all looked a like. She joked with him when they were first introduced by Leidia. As she read the young people's palms, she joked and smiled and told of the future filled with love and long life. But when she came to Turk, she hesitated, and then said she was unable to read his callused hands. Turk threw up his hands in disgust then led several young, tittering girls off into the bushes. Against his best judgment, but under pressure from Leidia, Alexander presented both of his hands, palms up.

The ancient Gypsy smiled a smile more evil than BabaYaga; in her mind were images of the young girl Alexander had raped and murdered and dumped, like so much dung, outside the mountain camp, but even she was surprised at what she read in the aristocratic palms. Alexander sensed a problem. He pulled back his hands, but too late. The old Gypsy jumped up. She knocked her chair backwards. She choked, and then screamed toward the audience, "He is the son of Beelzebub. He will live forever. Only the son of Beelzebub has life-lines that wrap around his wrists. Life-lines that rope his wrists. He is the same." She pointed her twisted finger at Alexander. The finger looked like one that belonged to the hag-witch; but she was not there to save him; he had abandoned the hag-witch since his arrival in Oporto. The Catholic crowd clamored for him. They grabbed him, checked his palms and wrists, and shouted the truth, "They rope his wrists! They rope his wrists!" And then, "He is the son of the beast, Beelzebub!"

Turk tried to stop the mob but they knocked him aside. Alexander grabbed Leidia and shoved her into the eye of the mob; her battered body did nothing to stop the scrambling mass—they trampled her fragile, dying body then charged toward Alexander as he ran from the waterfront.

Hours later, with his heart tearing at his heaving chest and his lungs searing with dry, explosive pain, he was safely in the twisted vines of a field north-east of Oporto. His freedom was snatched from him by five, of his fellow winery workers, in who he had

confided his favorite place. They tied their pleading friend by his ankles then dragged him, behind a cart, up into the foothills.

A hundred villagers watched as Alexander was stripped, of what remained of his blood-soaked, tattered clothes, and strapped to a post, with dry branches stacked at its base. There was nothing he could say that would stop his loving friends from burning Beelzebub from his soul. He was to be sacrificed on the same prier as the lamb; a symbol of the Lamb of God. He was to be the Lamb of Beelzebub. Hell! What goes around comes around. His Catholic friends and neighbors were going to murder him in much the same way his mother and he murdered so many to implement the required sacrifices to BabaYaga. The Catholics were less barbaric, of course, they cooked their sacrifices. But they were not going to feed him to God. They were going to waste him. Just burn his body. No feast for God. At least witches were not wasteful. It would have been an ideal time to pray to God or chant to BabaYaga, but he was certain he had offended them both.

The fire started very slowly in the smaller branches around the periphery of the stacks, but slowly, the main branches ignited—the branches that would flare up and cook Alexander's naked legs and fry his shrinking genitals. The villagers chanted their Latin praise to God. With their hands clasped in prayer, their eyes half-closed in ecstasy, they did not notice their number begin to dwindle until a piercing scream came from the thirtieth villager to be slashed down. The remaining villagers saw Turk slashing his way through the mob. Blood soaked his winery coveralls; it dripped from the razor-sharp vine-sickle he swung in wide, savage arcs in front of his powerful body. Turk hacked a path through the scrambling crowd and up to the flaming sacrificial prier.

The flames bubbled the flesh from Alexander's sagging legs. Turk slashed the remaining straps, that held his young friend against the smoldering pole, and let the youth's naked, sweat-slick body fall loosely over his huge shoulder. He jumped down and slashed out wildly at two villagers who foolishly attempted to stop him. The sickle ate deep gashes into the overstuffed bellies of both villagers, then, on its down swing, the vine-sickle splashed blood and guts on the two wives who had quickly approached in a hysterical attempt to keep their collapsing husband's intestines from tumbling onto the log foundation of their sacred-burnings platform. Surviving villagers backed off to let the giant mad man leave with his dying cargo.

Turk carried Alexander, for two days and two nights, high up into the northern mountains.

High in the mountains of eastern Russia, Tanya and Christian met with a quiet minority of Independents. The Independents and the Mackovicks had agreed to join forces; Tanya wanted to rid Russia of the BabaYaga Covens and Christian wanted to help the Church survive and the Independents wanted the old government of the Tzar reinstated. Tanya was sure that Lenin and Trotsky were better for Mother Russia than the Tzar had been, but Christian and she had agreed to join forces to save Russia from Evil no matter what its name. Because no Evil had been personified. Joseph Stalin had always been there, but Leon Trotsky had told her that the little man would never gain power. But she had seen a secret correspondence meant for Trotsky's eye only, "Having become General Secretary," wrote Lenin, "Comrade Stalin has acquired immense power in his hands, and I am not certain that he will always know how to use this power with sufficient caution. He may have to be replaced by someone who is more patient, more loyal, more polite and considerate to other Comrades, less capricious and so on."

Tanya and Christian knew that with Stalin in control, Russia would be the blood-soaked path to Hell. The Independents had the same philosophy; only they believed both the Covens and the Bolsheviks were Stalin's instruments to destroy the Church, and both Stalin and the Covens should be eliminated. Tanya didn't tell them how ludicrous it was to think Stalin was involved with the Covens. "We are here to preserve the Church," Tanya said from the rostrum set on top of a strong wooden table in the hewed log meeting hall. "We need only to make sure the Church survives through this madness," she cleared her throat and continued. "Experts say it will last no more than five years . . . then people will demand independence from any autocratic government. In the interim, we must protect the priests and keep the Church's property in tact. My brother and I will lead the fight," she said. Her brother, Christian, had convinced her to switch sides, for now.

She was a striking looking woman. Her eye-patch matched whatever outfit she was wearing. On this occasion she had on tight, overalls that were a size too small; they clung to her long, slim legs and emphasized her firm, round buttocks. When she removed her heavy, fur-lined parka, she revealed a ribbed turtleneck sweater that was also a size too small, her breasts strained at the material. The men—young and old—focused on her breasts as she spoke, "My brother, Christian, is more concerned with the priests than I. Though I admit we will need priests to man the churches when this thing is over. I do not believe in God, but my brother does. I believe in my brother. He says it will take five to six years. We will have to learn to survive along side the Bolsheviks. I live with the Trotskys, they are idiots. If it were up to them, the Revolution should last no more than a year. One year and Trotsky and his Comrades will run with their tails between their legs back to Austria and Finland to work on world revolution.

"Socialism will be good for Russia, not the extreme Socialism that Stalin wants," she ran her slim hands down her thighs as she looked over at three rugged, young men. "My brother and I differ in our priorities, but not in our goals. He wants no priests banished, tortured, or murdered. He wants to keep the Church intact. I don't think that's possible. I want the Church to be passive . . . give up the priests, if they must, the Church can get more priests. The Church must survive. But more deadly to the Church, I think, is my brother, Alexander, and people like him who worship BabaYaga. My brother, Christian, wants to attempt to save the Church by saving the priests. I will save the Church by destroying the Warlocks and the murdering witches who prey on parishioners. I will be eternally grateful to anyone who brings me . . . alive, or at least half alive, Alexander Mackovick! Raper of my beloved mother." Tanya left the rostrum, stepped from the table—causing the material of her trousers to pull even tighter across her perfect buttocks, then walked over to the three young men, and led them toward one of the cabins that lined the isolated spot.

The isolated spot, that Turk and Alexander finally called home, was selected because of the inability of most human animals to traverse the slick rocks that pathed the upper edge of the rushing water of a crystal clear waterfall. The dense foliage provided a vantage point where Turk could see all comers without being observed by them. He built a small, weather protected shanty; the ridgepole, rafters, and joists were hewed from logs with his daily-sharpened vine-sickle; the studs were burnt to length then set into the ground by Turk bear-hugging the slim logs and driving them into the soft ground with his

enormous strength and body weight. The roof was thatched and the yard was fenced with bones of game. Turk thought maybe BabaYaga might be watching.

On a dozen or more occasions, the survival supplies, of unlucky officials sent up to the high country to find the son of Beelzebub and his mad rescuer, were confiscated from the garroted and sickled bodies and brought back to the shanty to complement the usual diet of over-cooked meat. Turk relished the stimulating times when a few radical believers of Fascism attempted to use the isolated forest to hold clandestine meetings; the Fascist brought along home-packed lunches apparently provided by mothers and wives and girlfriends. The variety was a fantastic treat for Turk—some of the special treats were never mentioned to Alexander—most all were trucked back to the recuperating youth. The intruders who brought food also brought Turk a break in boredom. Like a mountain lion protecting its cub, Turk slaughtered the first group because they were dangerously close to his den. The second group was peopled with teen-agers who must not have heard of the slaughter of the first group; they appeared less than a week after the first massacre. They were twelve, scruffy youths with makeshift weapons; they became sport for the Turkish psychopath; the leader was standing at the head of the gathering; he was dressed in a fresh, new brown shirt with a black arm-band; his was the only new outfit, but the other had armbands that were no more than a few days old. The leader spoke, “Portugal is a sleepy country. A backward country. We have had six ministries in ten years because they are all formed on forgotten philosophies. We need nationalism. National Fascism. We need. . . .”

Turk fired his stolen rifle; it blew a large hole in the leader’s new shirt. Another shot hit a second youth through his shiny-new, black arm-band. The bullet entered the armband and ate a path through the youth’s skinny arm, through his rib-cage, and exited his other arm. The startled assemblage scattered into the dense forest. Two days later, Turk killed the last of the stragglers. But he was scolded by Alexander for leaving his side for such a long period.

Over the next two years, Turk nursed Alexander back to health and sat at his side to listen to how words were to be pronounced in different languages.

Both Alexander and Turk were sad as they left their isolated mountain home and started the long hike back toward the village. Alexander was able to walk as well as before the searing flames of the Catholics had burned the flesh from his legs, but his long, thin legs looked like twisted strands of over-cured beef jerky—red and raw and horrifying.

A week was spent in rounding up and murdering villagers. Though the actual elimination took only a few hours. After entering each home and tying the occupants then transporting them to the mountain church, Alexander and Turk took time out for a few sessions of torture before they returned to the village for more fodder. The villagers all locked their doors as they noticed the disappearance of their neighbors; they were certain that it was another purge by the new Ministry; the government was condemning the Catholics again. On the seventh day, the job was finished; one hundred villagers had been strapped to posts set in the ground in the design of a Witches Foot. The priest was strapped to a center post. Turk and Alexander stripped off their own sweat-soaked clothes and danced around, the naked, screaming villagers, like insane forest Furies, while they lit the dry branches they had piled beneath the squirming, praying villagers. Turk tied his

ex-girlfriend—whatever her name was—to a post next to the priest. He tied her husband of one month to a pole facing her.

The bad boys were going to chant to BabaYaga—give her a feast of a lifetime—but Alexander was certain the hag-witch would be offended by his damaged legs and then insist on a new Warlock. He needed more time to heal and more time to think before he conjured BabaYaga. When the two walked, up the hill, away from the flaming conflagration, Alexander turned and looked back. “Look Turk, it’s a damn birthday cake. A big damn Catholic candled birthday cake. Our birth day. The day we are both born again. No one can defeat us. No one!” He slapped his big friend on the back.

Alexander used a small share of the Oproto villagers’ money to purchase a local news page. He read the tragic story of the Communist’s barbaric slaughter of the villagers. He showed the article to Turk. Turk said, “Commie bastards!” He laughed and lit the corner of the news page and threw the burning paper into the wind. When the smoldering paper landed, its blackened edge curled toward Alexander. The word “Gold” caught his eye. He stepped forward and stomped out the page. The article was lead-lined “The Country Where Gold Is Born.” It told of one of the Portugal’s first families, the Perestrellos, and the quickie marriage to their, Felipa Perestrello e Moniz, to Spanish-Jew native of Italy, Christopher Columbus, and how the Spanish-Jew spent his tragic life looking for the place where gold was born. The article said he never found it, but the citizens of the United States of America had found it in a land that Christopher Columbus was said to have discovered. The streets of the US of A were paved with gold.

Alexander looked up from the smoking page and smiled. “Turk, we are going to the US of A and dig up the streets.”

Turk flexed his massive biceps and nodded; a puzzled look crossed his face. They both laughed. It would be the last time the Devil’s Duo would laugh for a long, long time. As they scouted the waterfront for a ship that would let them work their way to the United States, Alexander noticed four, leather-jacketed thugs circling in the shadows. He nudged Turk. “Those aren’t locals,” he whispered. “If they’re not Cheka, I’ll eat your socks.”

They ran up the steel stairs of a deserted freighter—two knives against four automatic weapons. The Cheka followed. Turk lifted a keg of nails and slammed it toward the first Cheka to reach the top of the stairs; the Cheka agent twisted sideways and let the keg hit his surprised Comrade; the Comrade toppled over the side of the ship’s stairs and smashed head-first to the deck. The first Cheka caught Turk around the neck, and used the barrel of his automatic rifle in an attempt to strangle the big man. Alexander drove a knife into the Cheka’s back and shoved his thrashing body toward a Cheka coming up the stairs. Turk retrieved the Cheka’s automatic and emptied the clip into the remaining Cheka. “How the Hell did they find us?” Turk said.

“Your dog crap smelling socks,” Alexander said.

“Your dog crap smelling sister.”

“She’s dead. They probably just got the time to start looking for us, what with the Revolution and invasions and upper-Party intrigues,” Alexander said. He looked down at the twisted bodies of the Cheka. “One thing for sure,” he continued, “we are in deep, deep crap. If they get real serious, we could end up as fertilizer in some Russian wheat field. Best escape this insane, damn continent, go where two, nice boys like us, can walk the streets without being accosted by hooligans.”

In Russia, things were not going well for Tanya. She had survived the stomach puncture though she had to watch what she ate, but her mentor, Leon Trotsky, had been fighting a losing battle since the death of Lenin; Trotsky had been deported in January of 1928 to a village on the Chinese frontier. Tanya had used Trotsky's and his friend's protection to help Christian's priests; Trotsky's deportation made things difficult. But it would not change Tanya's living arrangements. Trotsky had long ago thrown her out on the streets—thrown her, to his friends, like a pimp. He had stumbled in on a sexual threesome involving his sons and Tanya. Lyova Trotsky still wrote Tanya because he professed her to be the “love of his life.” but he would not leave the side of his ailing father.

Friends provided shelter, for Tanya, on the outskirts of Moscow Circle. She earned money with her body, but spent most of it to keep her gang in food and traveling money so they would help her destroy the Covens. She had gained the reputation of being kinky because of the clothes she wore and the rule that they stay on—due to the deep belly scar—while she performed the many acts of sex necessary for her to be considered a professional. Her gangs, across Russia, wore her name on their jackets. But they slowly lost interest; the blood drawn, from impaling BabaYaga witches, slowed to a trickle. Tanya had lost interest in anything but finding and torturing and killing Alexander and his animal companion. But the word was he had escaped from Portugal and was on some ship to some other country. Some powerful Bolshevik leader would help her find him. Trotsky had introduced her to many high mucky-muck Bolsheviks before he booted her out into the streets; in his absents, she began attending parties; most of the parties were held at the Bukharin's apartment; secret parties given for the Politburo. On the few occasions that he was present, Joseph Stalin was accompanied by his wife, Nadya, but he always maneuvered around the room so he could get a clear view of Tanya. Though he was always the center of conversation, Stalin would answer each question then laugh and frown as he looked toward Tanya. Tanya returned his smile or frown.

During the May Day celebration in Red Square, she was invited by Bukharin to accompany him to the offices of the General Secretary of the Communist Party. At the parties, Tanya knew Stalin was important, but she had no idea he was the most powerful man in Mother Russia and maybe in the world. Trotsky had always told her that Stalin was a dullard who “over my dead body” was trying to control the Party. But Stalin was the one sitting in the overstuffed chair behind the triple sized desk at the General Secretary's office. And Trotsky had been deported to some God-awful place near China. Or in China. Trotsky had been wrong about most things.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Stalin's soft voice, “Tanya Mackovick, you may be the most beautiful woman in Russia or maybe the world.” He startled her with a paraphrase of her thoughts. “Do you miss the Trotsky house?”

“I miss Natalia Sedova, she was good to me,” Tanya said.

“Do you miss Leon Trotsky?”

“He was an idiot. He put me out on the streets when I was not of age because he said I was having an affair with both of his sons.”

“And the rumor is that you were.”

“Both sons. Together. Each and every night that I could,” Tanya said.

Stalin laughed. “Do you still meet them?”

“No, Lyova still writes, but no meetings.”

“What of his other son?” Stalin asked as he poured two small glasses of vodka. He motioned to Bukharin to leave the office.

“Nothing, he still blames me for his problems with his father.” Tanya looked down at the smiling General Secretary. She kept pacing the room, slowly shifting her hips, consciously drawing Stalin’s eyes to her perfect buttocks.

“You were with both of them at the same time. Do you have that arrangement with men very often?”

Tanya adjusted the leather patch over her eye than ran her long fingers over her lips. “I do anything to satisfy.”

Stalin laughed. He examined Tanya’s body inch-by-inch. “I have three interests in you. Your information about the traitor Trotsky, your deep hatred for the harmless witches of the BabaYaga Covens, and your reportedly liberal views on sex”

“May I interrupt, General Secretary? The witches of BabaYaga are not harmless. They have evil power. They use that evil power against anyone who defies them. If they become more organized, they will mount a counter-revolution. A revolution more devastating than any that Leon Trotsky can conjure from his exile,” Tanya said.

“Do you really believe either the witches or Trotsky are insane enough to attempt such a thing against me . . . Joseph Stalin!”

“It is all the witches live for and all Trotsky speaks of.”

“Do you know the names of those he speaks to?”

“Before he went into exile,” she said.

“You will give me those names.”

“Yes but what is my reward?”

“What more could you want than the gratitude of your Comrades and your General Secretary?”

“Just one little kiss from you, sir.”

“If you call me Joseph, you can have more than one kiss.”

“Yes Joseph,” she purred.

He motioned for her to walk toward him. When she reached his side, he ran his rough hands up her thigh and cupped her buttocks. “Your gang has stopped impaling witches?” He made a motion with his fingers against her butt.

“They are afraid of the Cheka,” she said.

He probed her through the material of her tight trousers. “Let’s you and I work together. You give me information about Trotsky’s accomplices, and I will make certain that the Cheka will condone the impalings.” He brought his other hand up the front of her leg then gripped her tightly. “You will become my sexual partner.” He rose from behind the great desk and moved behind her; he was two inches shorter than Tanya in her spiked boots.

“Where will we meet. You will be recognized anywhere.”

“It has been arranged for you to live with the Bukharins. They are discreet. They will buy your food and clothes. You are never to wear boots or spiked heels in my presents. You are never to be with another man unless I am present and so request you to be with him. You are to do all that I request.” He moved slowly against her as he ran his hands up under her jacket and shirt. “Now what can I do to make you happy?”

“Enter me,” she pleaded.

They met two or three times a week and were given the use of the Bukharins' master suite instead of using Tanya's smaller suite. It became a long-running custom for the Bukharins to join them, in the master suite, once a week; during one of the weekly sessions, when she had just finished servicing both the Bukharins and Stalin with her talented mouth, they asked her what they could do to bring her the most pleasure. "Have your people find my brother, Alexander Mackovick, have them castrate him and bring the evidence to me," she said without hesitation.

The endless year, it took Alexander and Turk to arrive in the United States, was loaded with back-breaking labor on puke and sweat permeated Portuguese freighters, and was punctuated by murderous port-nights of venting rage that had been re-ignited in Oporto. A battered, dead native was left in blood-smear shadows of every port-of-call.

In Topeka Kansas, Dover and Willie moved through the darkness of the orphanage; they were finished with the place. The Sisters had told them about God and his Son and Lucifer and the Witches. They told them that witches had caused Dover's parents' deaths but no one had punished them. Dover and Willie had decided to punish them. Dover was big for his age--nine going on ten--but Willie was bigger. She looked like a teenage boy, and could wrestle with the best of them. They would find the witches. They would find them and stomp the Hell out of them.

They had run off before to hustle odd jobs so they could get ten cents a piece for a ticket to sit in the gallery of the matinee and watch William S. Hart and Douglas Fairbanks destroy the bad guys. They were both big enough to destroy the bad guys. The witches who hung out with Betina Mackovick were the bad guys, and so was she. They moved through the darkness toward the front door of the orphanage; the door was locked. "Damn!" Dover whispered.

"Idiot," Willie said, "you was so damn sure the damn door would be unlocked Now, how the Hell we get out?"

Dover adjusted his kerchief bag, of his positions, on his belt. The stairs to the third floor and then the roof took forever to tip-toe, but they both did an excellent job. Course Willie did the best because she was an Indian. On the roof, they crossed rapidly to the steel ladder and took two rungs at a time like the professionals they were. They ran out into the main street and disappeared into the laughing late-night crowd; the Lone Eagle had flown the Spirit of St. Louis in a thirty-three and half hour transatlantic flight; everyone was celebrating. Dover only wanted to find the witches who had murdered his parents.

"Dover, let's grab some of that food before we hit the road," Willie said.

"Naw, I want to get going," Dover said.

"You fart. I'm going to get some of those hot dogs. If you don't come with me, I'll knuckle-bust your damn head."

They both grabbed two hot dogs and the fixings and some soda and sat quietly watching adults making fools of themselves with some kind of dance that neither could understand; adults were like humping each other in public.

"They're doing it with clothes on," Willie said.

"What do you know about doing it?" Dover said.

"I know a lot. Before my pa ran off, I saw him doing it to the neighbor lady. He put that thing you got into the thing like I got. It looked real silly. I laughed so hard. They saw me and whipped the dog snot out of me."

“You’re fibbing,” Dover said. “There’s no way I could stuff my thing into your thing.”

“Yeah, when you get old, your thing gets like petrified wood.”

“It does that now when I have to pee in the morning,” he stood and started walking toward the road. “But I ain’t never going to put it in no one.”

They hitched a ride in a shiny new Ford to the outskirts of Topeka. “Mighty late for younguns to be out,” the dapper, old driver said. “Wouldn’t be running away from home, now, would ya?”

“No, sir, we’re going out to my aunt’s place. A farm out on Old Russian Road,” Dover said.

“You ain’t related to that Mackovick clan? Are you?” he whispered.

“No, sir, the farm’s down from t-them,” Dover said.

The driver was silent as he steered the tall, narrow automobile over the rutted road. But he turned and looked Dover straight in the eye. “If you should be lying, I put the curse of the Lord on you and that clan. It best you two get out here.” He pulled to the side of the dusty road and motioned at them to get out.

As the two adventurers walked down the road, Dover turned to his best friend. “Hell!” He said. “If everybody knows about Betina Mackovick, why don’t they just go out there and drown her or do what ever you’re supposed to do to witches?”

“Cause witches has powers. You can’t just walk up and drown them. You got to get some magic. Indians got magic against witches. We should go back and find some Indians,” Willie said.

“You’re an Indian. You can work the magic.”

“I’m only half Indian. You gotta be a full Indian.”

“If we go back, where we gonna find a Indian?” Willie looked Dover in the eye then looked down at her dusty shoes. “That’s what I thought,” Dover said. “You don’t know no Indians.”

“My uncle’s Chief Red Hawk. He’s a true Indian renegade.”

“Let’s go get him,” Dover said.

“He’s in Oklahoma.”

“Damn!”

It was about a mile hike up the road to the main house, but Dover and Willie didn’t mind. The Sisters never brought the orphans out to the country. But Dover and Willie both knew that the country was the place to be. They both wanted to spend their lives there in the country, if they had any lives to spend after they captured the Mackovick witches. They moved up next to the lighted window of the ranch house. It was the front room of the house, and as they approached, they could hear shouting and crying. Dover moved a crate up to the window, and with Willie’s help, stood on the crate. Inside, a fat woman with long, black hair was cowering in the center of the floor. An old man in bib overalls stood several feet from her. He was whirling a long snake-whip above his head then letting it snap against her face and naked arms. Each time it struck, it ate small gashes in her white flesh. Dover shifted on the crate. He lost his balance. Willie tried to set him right, but he tumbled in to her outstretched arms. They both crashed to the ground.

The front door of the ranch house slammed open. Heavy footsteps ran toward the two orphans and were yards from them before the two intruders scrambled to their feet.

The stinging tip of the whip caught Dover's thigh and ripped through his Sunday-trousers. He stumbled to the edge of the house but not quickly enough to out run the lash that ripped across his shirt. Blood ran down the outsides of his arms. He began to whimper. Willie picked up a rock and bounced it off the shoulder of the old man. She pulled Dover up and they ran toward the back of the house. And then toward the safety of the winter wheat.

"You're the Sage boy," Betina Mackovik's voice was very gentle, but her fat arm caught him around the neck and held him until her husband turned the corner. Blood dripped from the whip gashes on her face; mucus formed in her nostrils. She sniffed back then continued, "He will beat you to death, you saw this man of God with a whip."

"Shut up," Olav Mackovick said. "Put him in the cellar until we catch the other."

"It's the damn Sage kid, come to kill me. He always stares at me when I pass the orphanage. He knows what I did to his father. He knows what I did to his mother. Like you, he wants to punish me. Screw both of you!"

The whip snapped out and caught her in the corner of her eye. "Your mouth is tainted with the juices of Satan," Olav shouted. He snapped the whip again and caught the tip of her ear. Blood trickled down her neck and dripped onto Dover's face.

Dover pulled away and charged after Willie who was high-tailing it through the dense, dry wheat.

"You stupid bitch!" Olav shouted. "He'll escape to town."

"Good, I hope they come out here and beat you up," she shouted. The whip lash caught her around her thick neck and created three, thin rings of blood. She looped her large hand around the taught leather and yanked quickly. Olav tumbled toward her. She brought her knee up into his groin then sat down hard on the center of his chest.

Dover scrambled through the wheat and cautiously followed Willie into a storage shed; they would rest through the night then hit town and tell Sheriff Turner.

The next morning, Dover opened his eyes slowly to the sound of chanting. Four naked witches were dancing around him with Betina Mackovick in the lead. It was all true. They murdered his father with the same weapons they were carrying. He pretended he was still asleep—stalling for time to think. The fat cows were going to stab him with the knives and needles they were holding. He was going to die like his father died. Dover squinted his half closed eyes; in the corner of the shed was a pitchfork. But he wasn't big enough or fast enough to get all four witches. He chanced a look to the side; three feet from his head was a can of kerosene; a pile of wood-shavings sat next to a pot-belly stove. But there was no way to light the kerosene or the shavings.

Betina Mackovick moved her sweat-slick body toward him—then he saw it. She had been blocking his full view of the shed; at the far end, a five pointed star was drawn neatly in the shed's floor; a lit candle sat at each point. In the center of the star was Willie. Dover could see her open legs as she twisted and tried to free herself from the spikes hammered into the shed's wood floor. She was naked. She looked like a boy with no thing. If they take his clothes off, they would want to make him have no thing. Dover and Willie "the traveling show of thingless boys."

Betina Mackovick grabbed his leg and began pulling him toward the center of the five pointed star. He twisted free and scrambled on his knees back to the kerosene can. If there was a God, the can would be full and easy to open. He was still on his knees when he clutched the can and pulled it to his chest and twisted the tight cap loose. He rolled the

spurting can toward the closest candle; kerosene splashed into the flames and sizzled a trail back in Dover's direction. He darted toward the front of the shed with two of the fat witches in pursuit.

"Let him be," Betina shouted, "get this out before we attract the authorities. The little jerk will be after us all his life—until we catch him." She walked back toward Willie as the other witches scrambled to put out the fire. "Little boy-girl, your friend has deserted you, but you're going to love your Aunt Betina." She ran her toe up Willie's thigh.

Chapter Twelve

Evil sucked the blood from Wall Street and painted Chicago red with the St. Valentines' day Massacre. God no longer protected the streets of gold. Herbert Hoover, the Great Engineer, tried to keep the United States from sucking down into the abyss, but nothing could stop the slide. No one would believe that it was Evil working her black-magic as program after program failed. No Republican or Democrat could save the country; both were basically good; it was the wrong time in history to be good; it was the Century of Evil.

The rusty, Portuguese freighter that quietly abandoned them off the coast of Florida was one of the most barbaric they had toiled on. Turk and Alexander had to defend Alexander's body from at least one panting sailor each and every stormy night of the grueling trip. At first, the men just backed off when confronted by the murderous Turk, but toward the end of the trip, Turk had to strangle two and slit the throat of a third. The Captain put Alexander and Turk adrift.

"Alexander, boy, I see a piece of ground. It's an atoll or the Kansas place you're looking for," Turk said.

Alexander stirred, then stretched, and looked out toward a horseshoe shaped piece of land. "Idiot, atolls only appear in the Pacific, and Kansas is in the middle of the United States of America, not on its coast." Alexander stood and stretched making the boat rock. "Screw the atoll, what do we do about those!" Alexander pointed toward two man-sized sharks approaching off starboard.

"What the Hell?!" Turk said. He tied the anchor rope around his thick waist and handed the knotted end to Alexander. "Loop this around both arms and lay in the bottom of the boat. Hold my weight. Even if I become a bloody pulp, don't let go." The muscular Turkish madman stood upright in the center of the boat. Alexander did exactly what Turk said. The insane Turk had saved his royal butt more than a few times over the previous ten years. Turk was the master of survival. If something could be killed, Turk could kill it. The first shark slammed its blunt nose into the side of the six-man boat; the boat rocked violently, but with help from the guy line, Turk stood firm. He slammed the rough edged oar down into the slick body of the turning shark. Black fluid seeped to the ocean's

surface from the shark's chattering jaws. The shark labored slowly out into the churning sea. The second shark was not so lucky. It should have followed its pal. Its pal probably lived to tell many a grandchild shark the tale of the contest with the insane, giant in a small, easily-destroyed boat, off the coast of one of the land masses the wise old shark frequented as a youth.

Maybe sharks were stupid, or maybe they didn't learn by example. Or maybe the second shark had no master-of-survival as a companion. The shark came charging straight at the life boat. It telegraphed its intentions. With jaws wide opened, it power-dove straight at Turk. Turk rammed the broad, wood oar straight down the shark's throat. Before the shark could bite through the handle, Turk lifted the man-sized shark up over his head, using the protruding end of the oar as a handle, then slammed its flip-flopping body down against the edge of the boat and trapped its lower jaw—open. Alexander was in ecstasy, he held the guy rope like a strong, young Portuguese bull roper trying to rein in a primo bull. He watched his crazed companion stomp the upper jaw of the thrashing shark until there was nothing but a bloody mass in its stead.

Turk pulled the oar from the shark's lifeless jaws and let the battered shark slip back into the ocean. He lifted the flat end of the oar to his thick lips and licked the oar's length. "I am like BabaYaga," he said.

"She only eats people, you damn, insane, beautiful bastard," Alexander said as he untwisted the rope from his rope-burned forearms.

They lay in the boat and laughed like the madmen they were until the boat stopped drifting toward land. They began to row. The undercurrent tried to keep them from land, but Alexander said, "The undercurrent . . . like that stupid shark . . . doesn't know who it's screwing with." When they beached, Alexander didn't mention the fact that he didn't know whether they were in Florida or Texas in the United State of America or whether they were on some bright, balmy beach off the coast of Mexico. More amazing was that his sun-baked brain couldn't determine whether it was 1929 or 30.

On their land journey toward Kansas, Alexander looked for the streets of gold, but all he saw was poverty more startling than in the mountains of Turkey or the foothills of Portugal. The contrast, of the modern buildings with shabby pedestrians standing around panhandling made little sense to Alexander's brain so it conjured pictures of sheep waiting for an unknown shepherd to come forth and fleece them and lead them to slaughter. He would be that shepherd.

The newspaper headlines screamed about how the stock market crash, several months earlier, had put the country and the world back three decades; "Losses In Stock Reaches 10 Billion," the Daily News headlined in their Extra Edition.

"The world has collapsed since we went out sea," Alexander said. "Ten billion dollars. We could live a thousand lifetimes on that."

"They had to have it to lose it," Turk said. "It will be easier to find now that they have lost it."

Alexander slapped Turk's back, "You're one smart nut bag. Let's go to Kansas and find it."

Before they reached Kansas, five people fell random victims to the two sociopaths' need for money and sex and relatively comfortable transportation. The first was a traveling salesman on his way to Little Rock to attempt to sell the local gas station owners on the concept that a new additive should take the place of the one currently

taking up precious shelf-space. "If anyone in the whole damn country is still buying anything off the shelf," he said to the two hitch-hikers who had been sweating their butts off on the wind whipped highway. Just two young men looking for a ride out of the southern states and into some civilized area. Looking for work. The look of suckers was written all over their young faces. "You guys looking for work?" He asked as he revved the engine of his shiny new automobile.

"Going to Topeka, Kansas to visit an uncle," Alexander said.

"I'm only going as far as Little Rock. You'll have to hitch from there," the salesman said.

Turk settled down in the soft seat in the back. Alexander slouched into the passenger's seat next to the slick-dressed driver.

"Kansas is not the best place to be going . . . these days," the driver said. "Had the Hell knocked out of it for the past decade. Nothing's growing. You're both farm boys from some foreign place, right? You foreign chaps really know how to farm. Probably could have saved the Kansas wheat crop."

"Alexander is Master of The Wheat," Turk said in his broken English.

"What the hell is Master of the We?" The salesman said.

"Master of The Wheat," Alexander said. "It means I raised more wheat per acre than anyone in the Golden Triangle."

"They raise wheat in the Bahamas?" the salesman said.

"Not the Devil's Triangle . . . The Golden Triangle of Russia," Alexander said.

"You're a damned Commie farmer! The salesman said. He screeched his speeding Chevy to a stop. "You Red Commie bastards! Get out! He reached across Alexander, snapped the curved door-handle down, but a split second before he could push the door open, Turk reached from the comfort of the back seat and snapped the Salesman's bow-tied neck.

The next four victims were all from the same black family driving their rickety, old Ford pickup to Tulsa. Turk and Alexander had ditched the salesman's shiny, new Chevy at the back side of an abandoned, share-croppers shanty about a half mile from the highway. They had both tried to drive the vehicle but neither could get the hang of it.

The burly, black driver stopped and asked how far they were going. When Alexander answered "Tulsa", the driver told them to hop in the back bed of the pickup. The front seat of the old Ford was jammed tight with what looked like a wife, teen son—a chip off the old block—and a very endowed, very attractive daughter. Just before the driver started to pull the smoking truck back onto the highway, he hesitated, then stepped from the cab of the truck and walked around the side where Alexander sat with his back pressed against the rusty front of the bed. "You fellows had any grub, in a while?" The big, black man said.

"Been two days," Alexander said.

"We'll go off the road and have a bite to eat. Give Betsy here a chance to cool." The big man patted the old truck lovingly on its dent riddled fender.

As the truck rumbled down the road toward the shanty where Turk had stashed the Salesman's Chevy, Turk gestured, toward the grinning Alexander, with his open hands. Alexander shrugged and whispered, "That's life . . . stuff happens."

Alexander and Turk sat with the family at an old picnic table next to the shanty. They each ate three pieces of the hardtack dunked in salty ham brine. But Turk kept

watching the girl; her father caught the drift. "You boys see many Negroes back where you come from?" he said.

"Not many," Alexander said. "Such beautiful skin-tone." He looked toward the man's wife.

"Around these parts, white's the only beautiful skin-tone," said the woman.

"Around these parts," the man said, "Whites hate foreigners more'n they hate Negroes." The big man watched Turk eye-ball his daughter. He looked back at Alexander. "Whites think foreigners caused the Great Depression. But the Depression was no nevermind to the Negro. We been in a Great Depression all our lives. You boys going to have the same problem. Be no jobs for you." He stood and gave Turk a threatening look then said they should get back on the road soon as he took a leak. He moved slowly around the side of the shanty.

Turk looked toward Alexander. Turk furrowed his wide forehead. Alexander shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

The black man returned still buttoning the front of his overalls. "You boys don't happen to know nothing about that brand new Chevy sitting back there?" He gestured with his head toward the side of the shanty. He looked them both in the eyes then said, "Think it best you fellows hitch another ride." He stood with his large hands clamped to his hips and his thick legs slightly spread, like a cop blocking on-coming traffic. He motioned for his family to get back into the old truck; when the teen girl passed Turk, the madman's big hand shot out and grabbed her smooth, round buttocks. The father moved forward and decked Turk with a straight-arm punch. The son had Alexander around the neck before another move could be made.

"I apologize for the crudeness of my companion. We will part company, here," Alexander said trying to relax under the boy's strong choke-hold.

The boy let Alexander fall free. The family moved cautiously toward the cooling truck. Alexander went to Turk and rolled the Turkish madman's big body over on its back; he smiled when Turk winked. With loud complaints, the old, battered truck responded to the driver's attempt to move it from the cool shade; it coughed and sputtered; gray-black smoke billowed from its rust eaten tail pile.

From the gray-black smoke, Alexander appeared at the passenger's door and Turk appeared at the driver's side of the shuddering truck. Turk reached, through the smoke filled space, into the windowless frame; he quickly gripped the driver's thick neck and twisted his hands into a strangle hold. While the black man was trying to break the grip, he was using his other hand to snap open the truck's door. The door slammed open. The black man fell to the ground next to the truck. Turk re-gripped the man's throat in a death grip. The two mammoth men rolled on the ground, like two behemoths, grunting and groaning. The man broke free. But not soon enough to save his son; Alexander violently pounded an old two-by-four through the half-opened window and caught the teen boy across the center of his ducking forehead; the second and third blow emptied the boy's brains onto the lap of his screaming sister.

The black man body-blocked Alexander then pried the two-by-four from the grimacing youth's grip; the man held the ends of the blood-stained weapon then jammed its center against Alexander's wind-pipe. Before Alexander blacked out, he saw Turk lace the man's arms into a full-nelson. When Alexander gained consciousness, Turk and the man were still wrestling. Blood splashed the side of the truck when Alexander slammed

the sharp edge of the two-by-four against the man's exposed throat. Turk released his hold. The big, black man dropped, to the dusty ground, clutching at his throat. Turk took the two-by-four from Alexander and slammed it down on the man's bowed head; then he slammed it into the man's broad lower-back just above the kidneys. Each blow brought deep grunts from the dying man, and piercing screams from his women—frozen in shock—in the front seat of the old truck.

The man urinated the front of his overalls and heaved up bowls of salt brine and hardtack but he would not lie down. Turk dragged him over to the front of the truck, then placed his gorilla head under the front wheel; he stepped into the driver's seat, fending off the clawing hands of the two women, then drove over the man's head. He back-handed both women with one blow to stop the piercing screams. He stepped from the truck and walked around front. "Alexander, help me load this big turd in the truck," he laughed.

They both hefted the bloody carcass and rolled it over the side of the rusty, old truck bed.

"Your turd is still alive," Alexander said.

"No problem," Turk said. He stepped back into the driver's seat and jammed the sputtering truck into reverse then gunned the engine. The old truck shot backward and crashed into the top rocks of the long-gone-share-cropper's well. The bloody body slid from the bed of the truck and draped itself half way over the edge of the well; Alexander took the two-by-four and held it under the big man's legs, then with a slight lift, the body toppled, head-long into the well, crashing on top of the Russian-abhorring Salesman's body. Alexander sat and spoke calmly to the hysterical wife, before he raped her and dumped her down the dry well; he watched her as she floated down through the darkness; he nodded in recognition, when he heard her heavy body thud. Then she screamed in pain. She had been partially cushioned by the other two bodies.

Turk was making his third pass at the slender, young girl. Her eyes were wide, but she saw nothing; they would blink if Turk rammed unusually hard, but except for that one betrayal, she showed no life. She was in a quiet place where Turk and his ramming could not reach; a place where her mind crawled to when there was no food, no future, no freedom, and no end to the pain. She was used up by Turk then casually dumped, with the body of her dead brother, into the same well her mother prayed from.

Alexander laughed. The family that prays together stays together. God grants all prayers. The black females with the beautiful skin-tone should pray to die. The kind of riffraff, who skulked around run-down shanties on back roads, were just the kind of riffraff who would help the ladies out of the well, use them up, and throw them back in to wait for the next riffraff. Eventually the ladies would have been used so much, like extremely dirty towels; even the lowest of the scum would not be able to bring himself to use them again. They best keep praying for death. But first they needed to throw some pebbles at their sleeping God; prayers could not compete with snoring.

When Alexander and Turk reached the outskirts of Topeka, Alexander pulled Turk into the shadows of a dusty tavern. "My Uncle Olav should help us. But you stay here till I'm certain. Don't cause any trouble. Don't have me come back to find you incarcerated in the local poky for manslaughter or mayhem."

"Alexander Mackovick! You have come to the States, after all these years." Olav said as the youth entered the farm's front gate. "I knew you would think of this as a

refuge. I thought it would be sooner. Tanya thought it would be sooner. You murdered my brother! You are tainted with the blood of the incestuous she-bitch!” He took Alexander forcibly by the arm and led him toward the house. I will take advantage of the reward offered by your sister’s new friend Stalin.”

“Let him go!” Betina Mackovick said. She stood in the doorway of the ranch house. She motioned to Alexander to run for the gate. Alexander twisted away from Olav and walked toward her. “You are the fulfillment of a decade old promise to me by BabaYaga,” she whispered.

Olav strode forward. He struck her hard, across her wide mouth, sending her, back into the house, flailing against a large, ornate breakfront. “You cow-bitch, don’t use that unholy name in my house. Again you have blasphemed. Get up! Bring me the strap!”

Betina Mackovick did not budge. BabaYaga had promised that when Alexander Mackovick arrived, Olav Mackovick would die the death of deaths. Olav was going to die right there in front of her. She felt a warm glow between her splayed legs.

Olav moved quickly toward an inch thick leather strap hanging from an intricately carved wood peg, sticking askew from the shadowed entrance wall, of-center, below the large, framed painting of the Last Supper. The wicked looking strap was stained black with blood. Olav smiled back at Jesus when he slowly and deliberately removed the snake-like strap from its perch. He whirled around; he expertly snapped his powerful wrist. Like a trained King Snake, the tip of the five-foot length of leather, flicked out and bit into the corner of Betina’s trembling mouth. It tore out a small piece of her lip a hair’s width from a not-yet-healed gash on the swollen flesh of her upper lip. She was conscious that the warmth, between her legs, intensified. Alexander was watching. Her mind started tripping on the sensation, but it saw the hazy movements of Alexander reaching for Olav’s upraised hand. Not yet! Her mind screamed. Not yet!

Olav turned; he grabbed Alexander by his tattered shirt collar; Alexander palmed the old man’s fist—with the strength he had earned over the past ten years—and bent the callused hand back causing his Uncle to kneel before him. Alexander kicked out and caught the old man’s throat with the steel toe of his leather work boot. Olav grunted and should have fallen yet, with his free hand, he flicked the leather strap; its deadly tip cut into the underside of Alexander’s chin. The pain twisted him off balance, but he held his punishing grip on the old man’s hand. He kicked out again. This time, his boot toe dug into the pit of Olav’s stomach. Olav pitched slightly forward, but didn’t collapse, instead with much more power than the first time, he snapped the leather strap. It whirred through the air, hissing and spitting, it wrapped its length around Alexander’s face from cheek to cheek. Alexander’s head flew back. Blood ran into his open mouth and poured insanity into his brain. He held the old man’s hand and started kicking in an insane staccato, until he battered a hole in Olav’s throat. The old man gurgled and sank to the floor. A shotgun blast pounded the saliva back down into his heaving chest, tearing out his larynx and part of his spine. His mutilated body spasmed then rolled sideways on the floor; his dead eyes stared directly into the smoking end of the shotgun held in Betina’s hands.

She began stripping off her thin blouse and long dress. “Can you believe that?”

“It will be a hard act to follow. Please don’t make it mandatory. I’ve been through it. It puts a lot of pressure on a relationship,” he said.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said. “I’ve been waiting for you . . . all my life.”

The buxom woman and Alexander stripped off Alexander's clothes and the bloody cloths of Olav. They laid Olav's naked body in the center of the Witches Foot they had hastily carved in the wooden floor of Olav Mackovick's living room. The old man's body looked as if a predator had devoured his upper chest then decided Olav was not to the predator's specifications, so the predator spit the old man up, dragged him to the center of the room, and headed for some local restaurant.

Olav's sightless eyes stared at Alexander as the handsome, young man, with a gash circling his high cheek bones, mounted Betina in Birch Forest manner and then chanted to BabaYaga. He was thrown from Betina's bucking haunches and landed on the sharp edge of a small pyramid of logs stacked on a dirty leather log-tote. Betina rolled into the corner of the dark pantry. Alexander's bark-filled ears could just barely make out the tearing sounds coming from the pantry; they were the unmistakable calling card of BabaYaga. Betina screamed a soul-scream. BabaYaga's bony nakedness filled the pantry doorway.

"Alexander has forgotten BabaYaga," the hag-witch said. "He hasn't sacrificed to BabaYaga in many years." She sprang from the doorway and landed on her bony knees in the center of the Witches Foot. She devoured Olav's bleeding body in less than thirty seconds. She stood and walked hunched over toward Alexander.

"I was trying to get to this place so I could start a new Coven. I am your trusted disciple. No one loves you as I do," he said.

"But you do not obey me," the hag-witch said.

"I obey your every command."

"Years ago, you were commanded to eliminate Tanya Mackovick."

"At no time did I doubt her death until Olav spoke of her and Stalin and their reward for me."

"You should have been certain of her death. She has put out a reward for your gonads. BabaYaga may chop them off and collect the reward. You should have gone to the hospital and made sure she was dead. She has wiped out all but two of my Russian Covens." BabaYaga stepped close enough to Alexander so he could smell her fetid breath. "Her rein of terror is more notorious than her paramour, Stalin," the hag-witch said. "But her reign will end next Thursday. One of my disciples has lost weight and cut her hair to hide her dedication. She will gain employment in the Bukharin household where your sister lives. She will conjure me just before Tanya dresses to join her gang for another death hunt. BabaYaga will give her a slow death. Tanya will not get your precious gonads."

She dropped down in the center of the Witches Foot and presented her haunches. Their wild ride demolished most of the living room furniture. It ended when they crashed heavily into the breakfront; the broken glass guillotined, immediately slashing Alexander's leg; he laid bleeding, unable to stop the spurting red river that darkened to maroon the already red tone of his fire-damaged legs. BabaYaga crawled back to the youth and drank the blood which geysered into her open mouth. A glazed look came over her face as she crawled back toward Alexander's feet; she put both of his number tens into her mouth. She began to suck. Alexander's twisting body slowly slipped into her gaping mouth; his body began to disappear down the witch's throat.

The bitch-hag was going to devour him. Damn! He was supposed to rule the world. Now, all of a sudden, he was half gone. He tried to maneuver his body around toward the

broken glass. A couple of good whacks and bingo, off with her ugly head. But it was futile; he could not reach the smallest piece of glass. She was up to his calves. She was going to finish him slowly. He must not have been the ritual-rider he thought he was. She had found some one younger. His damaged legs had offended the hideous bitch. His body was disappearing down her throat. She stopped at the gash, looked at Alexander—the gashed leg spurted red blood into her green hair. Christmas colors? Give your local witch an early gift. Hell! He was witness to his own death by devour. His legs slipped deeper into her widening mouth. “BabaYaga! Please! I am your disciple. Your slave. Please!” BabaYaga winked and sucked his legs, into her mouth up to his slim hips. She stood and stepped back. Alexander’s legs slid easily from her open mouth. His legs slammed to the floor. The cut was healed. He looked the length of his legs—usually he looked away—but the fire-damage was gone. His skin was smooth and perfect. BabaYaga skin care; recommended by ten out of ten Covens. He crawled over and kissed her gnarled feet. “I will do anything for you. Anything!” Alexander said.

“Open Covens all across this country. Help Betina Mackovick. She will be your mother. Follow her commands.”

“I should command. She is only a woman,” he said.

“Mistress Beelzebub and BabaYaga are only women. Yours will be the ability to call on more Evil than all other humans. But only a woman is evil enough to command a Coven,” the hag-witch said. “You have conjured BabaYaga to do a deed. But can you wish for any deed more magnificent than this?” She pointed at his smooth-skinned legs.

Alexander nodded no.

The hag-witch disappeared and Betina reappeared from the pantry. Betina led Alexander outside into the sunlight and examined his legs. “That’s one powerful lady,” she said.

They squinted into the Kansas sun and felt its warmth against their naked bodies.

“We have one Hell of a future . . . you and I,” Betina said. “And one Hell of a time convincing the town’s people that Olav has disappeared without a trace.” Betina turned toward Alexander. “He wasn’t the type to leave and not brag about what world-shaking deed he was traveling to do.” She smiled a glowing smile. “But he was usually traveling to screw some poor farmer out of something.”

During their frolicking they decided they would announce that Olav had gone to Kansas City to raise some interest in relief for the local wheat farmers, but he was grabbed by Commies as a warning to the Russian community. The Commies took him to some retched place in Oklahoma—Alexander had learned that most places in Oklahoma were retched. Olav was tortured then ground up.

“Ground him up?” Alexander said.

“Yes, ground him up,” Betina said.

The story would go that the ground up pieces were turned into ashes and sent to the grief-stricken widow, Betina. A silver chalice would be shown to all who entered the Mackovick house.

“By the look of things, it’s been Hell for you,” Alexander said. He gently touched the cuts on her face.

“You mean Olav or the Depression or the Drought?”

“All three,” he turned and kissed her on the forehead. He pushed her long hair from the side of her round face and kissed her ear.

“BabaYaga will make it better,” she said.

“Why didn’t you conjure her?”

“I was frightened. The last time our Coven was able to bring BabaYaga a sacrifice, Olav had followed us. He saw us hack up the local Sheriff and his wife. It has been years of blackmail from Olav. But he was a good front and protector, and he knew just how to beat me in just the right spots. That Sheriff that we hacked up has a kid. The kid burnt down our shed. He wanders around town doing odd jobs telling anyone who will listen about the murderous Mackovick witches. He’s more trouble than Olav was.” She ran her fingers across the scars on her milk-white shoulders. “But it’s all been worth it. You’re here,” she said. She put her head on his shoulder and looked up at the muted sky. “I waited a lifetime.” She pulled his hand down her thick body. “Touch me while we talk.”

“Our plans must include opening Covens. BabaYaga commanded it.” he moved his fingers slowly across her stomach. “BabaYaga will help us gain control of the wheat farms.”

“We don’t need BabaYaga for that. They’re giving them away. Why do we want the dried up farms?” Betina said.

“I want to control the wheat of the world. The food of the world.”

“Why not the gold of the world, like Justin Armdecker,” she said.

“Didn’t the Crash hurt this Armdecker?”

“No, he’s like most politicians, beyond the normal ups and downs of the economy.”

“He’s a politician?” Alexander asked.

She puckered up, bent down, and blew a wet, squeaky kiss onto the flat surface of his stomach. “No, he owns politicians and the largest wheat farm in the mid-west.”

“Wheat? I thought Kansas had a drought for more than a decade?”

“On and off. But Justin Armdecker isn’t affected by nature. The government waters his land and the government buys his wheat. He helped elect Harding, Coolidge, and Hoover. Doesn’t matter what party they’re from; they all feed at his trough,” She looked up at him. “They all belong to the ‘Good Old Boys Club’.”

“I will join that club,” he said.

“Impossible . . .,” she hesitated then recanted. “I will buy you a tux . . . tomorrow.” He kissed the laugh that was trembling on her lips. He ran his fingers over the scars that striped her breasts “You’re wondering about Olav and me. The beatings were our sex-life for the last ten years.” She turned and pointed toward the wheat fields. “Recently I’ve had a lover.”

Stepping from the ancient tractor and walking toward the farm house, Willie slapped the wheat dust from her trousers.

“You mean that boy?” Alexander said.

“That’s no boy.”

“Oh, you mean he’s all man?” Alexander chided. “I can’t imagine a boy his age being worth a damn in the sack.”

Betina smiled as she watched Willie move toward them. “Willie is not a boy.”

“You mean to tell me he’s just a guy that looks young for his age?”

“God, you’re dense,” Betina said then turned and motioned to Willie. “Willie, love, come and meet Alexander Mackovick.”

Willie moved slowly toward the porch where the two naked adults stood. “Willie come closer,” Betina said.

Willie moved closer to the two adults.

“Open you pants and let Alexander see,” Betina said.

Alexander stopped stroking Betina, “I’m not into boys,” he said.

“Trust me,” Betina said and pulled Alexander’s hand toward Willie’s open trousers. “Trust me.”

Alexander slipped his hand through the top of the trousers then snaked it down into Willie’s underpants. He hesitated then pulled his hand back like he touched the open mouth of a rattlesnake. “Now, I’ve seen it all,” he said.

“You ain’t seen Jack, Whiteman,” Willie said. “And you ain’t never gonna see Jack.” Willie ran through the entrance of the house.

“Willie!” Betina shouted. “While you’re in there, clean the blood from the floor and tidy the place up a bit.”

“So you got a girl that looks like a boy doing you and you think that’s great.”

“Not great, but good enough,” Betina said. “It’s nice on cold nights. And I also have a secret romance.”

“Why you little tart.” He ran his hand lightly over her breasts. “So you were fooling around on Uncle Olav?”

“Not fooling around. Just meetings. Just tea and Vodka. No fooling around.”

“Why no fooling around?” He cupped her heavy breast, nonchalantly thumbing her hardening nipple.

“I wanted to ask BabaYaga’s permission,” Betina said.

“BabaYaga doesn’t give a damn who you screw,” he said.

“She might with this one. He’s a priest,” Betina said.

Alexander turned quickly toward her. He jumped up. He danced around like a mad man. “That’s perfect. BabaYaga will love it. Ball the bastard’s brains out . . . under the crucifix. BabaYaga will crack up.” He danced toward Betina, grabbed her and with great effort spun her around in his arms.

“But she might think he’s contaminated me . . . made me holy or something,” she said.

“The minute he does you, he’s broken his vows. Fact is, he may have broken his vows just thinking about it. He’s married to the body of Christ. Screw his brains out. You’ll steal one of God’s own. BabaYaga and Mistress Beelzebub will both sigh. BabaYaga will eat it up. Almost as much as impaling Tanya.”

Later, they went to pick up Turk. On the drive, they tossed around ideas of how to destroy their wheat-producing competition. “. . . not to raise prices . . . nobody can afford it now,” Alexander said, “but this is the time to get a big foothold in the land. Force the people to abandon their farms or to sell real cheap or to bring us into manage. We need to put ourselves in control of land.”

“BabaYaga could help us by creating more problems than the average farmer can handle,” Betina said, “they have already suffered the indignities of the Depression and the ravishes of four droughts. It wouldn’t take much to push them over the edge.”

“BabaYaga is only part of the answer. I’ve spent many years thinking about controlling the price of wheat. To do that, you must control the production of wheat. We can use BabaYaga, but we best show some effort first,” Alexander motioned to her to pull over in front of the rauchiest bar in the center of the city.

Three muscle-roped farmers' sons came tumbling through the door of the bar. Turk came walking after them. He came over to Betina's truck. "They told Turk," he said, "he is not welcome in the land of gold. Turk . . . I busted their butts."

"Get in the truck before we all get arrested." Alexander opened the door and pulled his cohort into the front seat.

"Betina, this is Turk. He is the answer to some of our problems."

"He looks like something BabaYaga sent you."

"He is."

Turk smiled and reached across Alexander and cupped Betina's breast. "She belong to us," he said.

"Yes, she belongs to us," Betina said and held his hand in place over her heavy breast. "He may be the answer to some of my problems, to."

"Looks like you got your hands full, my friend," Alexander said.

Turk nodded.

"Not you idiot," Alexander said to Turk, "Betina has a boy-girl at home to take care of; and she gonna do a priest and now she has you and me. She's got her hands full."

Turk met Willie. They were to team up and start gangs like Tanya's. These gangs would burn crops and intimidate the farmers. "They'll go into neighboring states, so they won't be tracked to us."

"Willie can get her uncle to help. He's an Indian chief in Oklahoma. Most Indians are starving. Maybe they'll become the nucleus of a gang. We'll need money. Olav left some, but we'll need more," Betina said.

"Get some from your priest," Alexander said.

Turk liked Willie. The odd couple headed to Northern Oklahoma. They met Willie's uncle, Chief Red Eagle. "He wears a eye-patch like Alexander's sister. Not as fancy as Alexander's sister, but about as fancy as you can get in Oklahoma," Turk said.

Chapter Thirteen

In Moscow, Thursday night had arrived. All week Tanya had been flattered by the attention of the new worker the Party had sent to the Bukharins' household. The worker was middle aged but beautiful. She had milk-white skin that looked as if the sun had never touched it. She wasn't slim like Tanya, but just a little plump, like the delicious top of a dumpling that had bubbled up ready to eat. The worker followed her around the apartment, asking if she could get her anything or do anything or rub her back. The worker had been in the household only a week, but Tanya looked forward to the attention as if it had been going on for years. Each time she returned to the second floor suite, the worker was there to satisfy her every need. From the first day, the worker had taken to

touching Tanya lightly on her shoulders and back, and, on one occasion, she touched her breasts.

Tanya wasn't surprised when the worker asked if she wanted her back stroked after her Thursday night bath. Tanya shortened her bath time, and rushed into her bedroom to find the worker pulling back the covers on the bed. Timing was everything. The Burkharins were out. It was Joseph's night; he would be so delighted to come in and find her naked on the bed with the delicious worker caressing her back. Or maybe the worker would be further along when the Man of Steel came to visit. The night would be full. The worker would ignite her fires. Stalin would quench them—somewhat. And her gang would ignite them again, later.

The worker gently stroked Tanya's slender back then rolled her over and stroked her breasts. Tanya reached up and lightly pulled the worker's head down to her breast. The worker's tongue flicked out immediately like some well trained snake. The tongue quickly darted down Tanya's flat stomach. Little Joe would be delighted! It was fantastic. The worker was humming while she did the deed. She must love her work. It sounded like humming? Or chanting! Then Tanya felt it; the worker's tongue felt like it had slithered through her body and into her burning brain. Tanya's body felt like it might ignite.

The door to the bedroom opened. Stalin stood in the back-lit doorway. The worker looked toward the door and shouted "BabaYaga! Appear!"

Tanya looked down between her trembling legs and saw the hideous face of the hag-witch; she occupied the upper portion of the worker's body. Stalin unholstered his revolver and emptied it into the worker's body. BabaYaga disappeared but the worker's body thrashed on the floor. Tanya jumped up from the bed. She grabbed the vanity chair and turned it upside-down, and then smashed the chair-back's round edge down against the worker's head. She battered away until the worker's skull was open. Tanya turned to Stalin. "You saw her. You saw BabaYaga," she said.

Stalin slowly removed his clothes. "I saw no BabaYaga. I saw a peasant girl trying to chew into your intestines." he slipped under the covers.

"She was a witch. She conjured BabaYaga to devour me. Her tongue was scooping out my insides to feed to BabaYaga." She walked over to Stalin and kissed him on the forehead. "You saved me," she said. She looked over at the worker's battered corpse. "What do we do with her body?"

"We will think of that after." He reached out and pulled Tanya under the sheets. Tanya had been by his side during that terrible summer of 1930. Collectivization of the Kulak's farms had been one of his most unpopular acts. But the Kulaks defied the new laws. They waged warfare against his men. And they cut down their own fruit trees and slaughtered their own horses and cattle, and they burned the winter wheat. The wheat was the most devastating; along with the complete slaughter of all the sheep in Russia. Tanya was by his side when he depopulated isolated areas to stop rebellion. She was there when he executed a tenth of some area populations. The world called him a mad man, but Tanya called him her Man of Steel.

Instead of executing the priests, he exiled them because of her. She was his shelter in the storm. His safe port. At home, Nadya and her mother hammered at him. They wanted changes that would enhance their wealth. They hammered and hammered. He laughed when he thought of the symbolic sickle and hammer. It was not the symbol of the

Workers. It was the symbol of woman: the sickle represented her sharp tongue and the hammer represented her unrelenting use of it. He laughed to himself again.

“Are you laughing at me?” Tanya said.

“No, beautiful, I was laughing at women in general.”

“Don’t be laughing at that crazy woman, BabaYaga. She’ll come and eat you.”

“So I will laugh at you and maybe you’ll come and eat me,” he said. He raised the sheet so she could slither down his thick body.

Tanya wondered if her brother Christian had seen BabaYaga. His shadow had moved down the hall when Stalin rolled over and entered her. Did he try to conjure God to help her? Maybe God sent Stalin. Christian truly believed in God. He could only explain all of life as long as there was a God. He said a powerful God like his must test His followers; if there were no tests, what proof would there be of faith. The God-less Bolsheviks had no faith in God. Only in Stalin. Christian thought no Nation could survive without God’s blessing. And that no Nation ruled by the Bolsheviks could garner that blessing. Tanya laughed to herself. Little Joe’s thrusts were getting more and more violent. She repositioned herself and continued to think of Christian. “Christian, how did a holy lad, such as yourself, come to have such evil siblings?” she asked her brother in her mind. The Man of Steel had just turned into the Man of Marshmallows. “Tanya and Alexander are not intrinsically evil,” Christian said in Tanya’s mind. “They both fell under the spell of their parents. Alexander worshiped his mother thus he worshiped BabaYaga. Tanya worshiped her father thus she worshiped Lenin. As they grow older, they will understand that the evil witch and the evil Bolshevik both mislead. My brother and sister and I are important pawns in God’s game. God’s final plan.” “How can you be important, Christian? You are on a path that can only lead to your own death,” she whispered and then giggled.

“What did you say!” Stalin shouted as he rolled off of her. “You laughed at me and told me I was on a path to my own death. You are on a path to your own death when you toy with Joseph Stalin!” He began to slip into his trousers.

“Sosselo, my love, I only said that if you did me like this every night, it would lead to my death.” She giggled again and reached out for him. Christian’s shadow passed down the hall.

The young priest sat sentry at a shaded window. The priest lifted the corner of the shade; across the road from the shanty, where fourteen other priests and he had been hiding for two weeks under the supposed auspices of Tanya Mackovick, three heavily-armed men stepped from the haggard Mercedes outside. The young priest shouted, “Brothers we are discovered! Step to the trap door!”

Christian ran to the window. The three armed men moved slowly past the first shanty and were only yards away. “It’s the Cheka!” Christian said.

“Don’t panic,” the young priest said. “Lift the door and file down the ladder.”

The first priest moved quickly through the freezing shanty and grabbed the trap rings. The door was stuck. The other priests pushed the first aside and attempted to force the door loose.

“We are men of God . . . not panicky sheep,” an old priest said. “Kneel and pray to our God. He shall decide our fate.”

The priests knelt.

“This is not the time to pray!” The young priest shouted. “God expects us to make every effort to flee. Every effort to stay alive so we can teach His word.”

The Cheka came, through the shanty door, with automatics blazing. The lead Cheka stepped past Christian and began the slaughter. “Their God can’t answer prayers on such short notice.”

Alexander was still in Topeka, Kansas acting as foreman and lover to the widow Mackovick. They spent the dust-choked summer rounding up the loneliest and most religious women in the Topeka area then converting them to worshipers of BabaYaga. The candidates were easy to spot—the ones who would give up their souls for the Coven—they were always overweight; they were disappointed with the things and attributes which God had bestowed on them, but were only at home in religious surroundings. Because they believed in God, they believed in the incarnation of Evil, Beelzebub, and her hag-witch, BabaYaga, or any other evil entities they were presented. The commitment to the Coven was life-long. You could only leave the Coven; feet first.

Turk and Willie had traipsed off to Oklahoma; they stayed in an old shack on Chief Red Hawk’s tribal grounds in Northern Oklahoma.

“Willie, I like you,” Turk said. “But I would like you better if you were a boy. But if you weren’t so ugly, I, Turk, would screw you.”

“If you, Turk, weren’t so ugly, I would let you,” she said.

They both laughed. Turk turned down the gas lamp and rolled over on his side of the lumpy bed. They both knew that tomorrow would be a long day; it would be their first raid.

“You scared about tomorrow?” Turk said.

“Yeah, sorta. You?”

“No. I love to screw people up.”

“Why you so nasty?” she said.

“Born with bad blood. Like Willie.”

“Yeah. You’re right. I get in the middle of all the crap.”

“You a freak like Turk. You will never have normal life. Never have family and all. You just be a freak.”

“I’m not a freak. I have family. Betina is my family.”

“You sleep with Betina. But Turk think you never sleep with man. If you sleep with Turk, you never want Betina again,” he moved from the bed and dropped down on his knees next to Willie’s blanket on the floor. Willie’s knee came up and caught him on the tip of his nose and brought a stream of blood running down his face. Turk wiped the blood away and grabbed her by the breast and pulled her heavy shirt open. Willie swung out and caught his nose again; this time with her closed fist. Blood spurted across her naked breasts. She pulled her shirt closed and rolled sideways so her upper thigh caught Turk in the nose again. As he rolled on the floor, in pain, Willie jumped up and kicked out. The ball of her bare foot caught Turk’s nose again.

“O-tay,” Turk stuttered through the blood that pooled in his cupped hands held to his throbbing nose. He decided to be her friend not her lover—for now.

In the morning, Turk mounted a stallion and rode next to Chief Red Hawk. Red Hawk looked back toward Willie who was riding with some of the young warriors. “White man get red nose from Willie? You try to screw? She broke my nose when she much younger.”

They both laughed then rode toward the small wheat farm of Alfred Hooks. They burned the feeble wheat crop and rounded up the horses. They returned the shots of Alfred Hooks and his son Litl. They wounded both. But both Hooks escaped into the house. Turk followed. "Mister Hooks," Turk said. "We are not going to kill you. We are going to break your legs and take your money. If no money, we take your wife."

"What's a ugly white man doing with renegades?" Hooks said.

Turk kicked the seated man's wounded shoulder. Hooks screamed and fell sideways to the floor. His skin-and-bone wife charged toward her downed husband. Turk caught her and pulled her toward him. He grabbed the front of her bodice and ripped it straight down. She had no more breasts than a small boy. "The closer to the bone," Turk said to Willie then grinned. "Mrs. Hooks, Turk don't have time to do you right. But Turk will be back for you at the end of the month. You must give Turk money then." He ripped the rest of the material from her body. She stood naked trying to cover her privates. "Yes, old Turk will be back."

The warriors came back into the front room after loading up all the food and valuables. Chief Red Hawk moved toward the naked woman; he pulled out his knife and slashed a quick "X" on her upper breast. Her son tried to lift his wounded body from the floor, but Willie kicked him back down. Red Hawk looked Mrs. Hooks in the eyes and whispered, "Each time we return there will be another 'X'."

The warriors and Willie drug the unconscious Alfred Hooks out, to the dry sod at the front of the weather-beaten house, and used the ponies to break his legs.

After hearing Turk and Willie describe the raids, Alexander wished that he had been with them. But his priority was to build the Topeka Coven. After a few false starts, Betina and Alexander had the Topeka Coven back up to eleven witches. Alexander waited to summon BabaYaga until the witches were addicted to the Thursday night meetings: the freedom of tramping around nude waiting ritualization by young, handsome Alexander Mackovick. He decided to beckon BabaYaga after the New Year.

The New Year looked like a death watch. The streets were lined with shabby beggars carrying signs that said they would work for food or jobs; any food; any jobs. They were all sheep waiting for a shepherd. Alexander would be their shepherd. Americans needed him. Americans were imprisoned. They were the motionless arms and legs of a crowd. They did as the crowd did. They became what ever the crowd became. The 1931 Americans were the only lower class people in the world who would go through poverty: poverty of person, poverty of solutions—without starting a revolution. All in all, the people just stood around waiting. Waiting for what? Waiting for the coming of Christ? The coming of Beelzebub? The coming of a Democrat? Just give them jobs and you own their impoverished butts. With BabaYaga's help, he was certain to be the most important man in America within a decade. It was time to conjure the hag-witch. He grabbed Turk. They went to the red-light district of Topeka to find a feast—a whore who would accompany the deadly duo back to the Mackovick farm, for a party.

The prostitutes stood in the same door-ways they had stood in when the streets were paved with gold years before, but they no longer wore, expensive clothes; they no longer made a John pay top dollar for their diverse talents. In "these troubled times" they often took payment in cigarettes or other precious, relatively easy to sell commodities. Three ultra-raunchy whores made their night-watch office at the Topeka News Exchange; a block long news stand whose printed wares grabbed the passing eye, with bright, flashy

covers that contrasted with the drab poverty that stared back. The Exchange lined the exterior wall of the Rexall. Turk frequented the News Exchange, but not for news.

Alexander and his proud guide walked past the stacks of news papers set below rows of books and magazines. Alexander stopped dead. The wind had mysteriously ruffled the pages of the New Years issue of the New Yorker to its facing-center page; it was filled from blurb and by-line to folio and photo credit with a standing full-shot. The uniformed Dictator of the USSR--the bastard traitor of Mother Russia, Joseph Stalin—was looking down at the camera positioned at a low angle so the little Cretan looked larger than life. But screw him! In the austere background of the photo—to the idiot’s left—stood a stunningly beautiful, young lady wearing a leather patch over one eye. It was Tanya, sure as Hell, it was Tanya. The little bitch, who disdained him for being evil, was with the most evil man on the face of the earth. The little bitch was all grown up. A delicious woman. She had latched onto the most powerful man on the planet. Life was a crap-shoot. Alexander signaled to Turk. The magazine disappeared under Turk’s heavy coat. The news stand operator tried to stop the huge man, to collect the few coins charged for the excellent magazine—a magazine which sold less and less copies as the poverty became worse and worse—that had been stuffed in the upper inside pocket of the big man’s coat; a fine coat; a coat no doubt stolen from a fine gentleman by the big man who needed not to steal from a poor news stand operator.

Turk slammed the little man into a sleet topped stack of evening papers. The three sleazy prostitutes watched Turk hammer on the little news-guy. They all stepped forward.

“Pick on someone your own size! You ugly jerk!” the older prostitute said.

Alexander moved graciously toward them. “Now girls, please excuse my crass friend. He will pay for the damage, and then the five of us will go to my place for a party.”

He went back to Turk and whispered, “We can’t leave the little guy as a witness. Take his cash. Break his neck. Make it look like a robbery. I’ll take the girls to the farm. I’ll send Willie back for you. Meet her in front of the First Baptist.”

When Turk finally arrived at the cellar, the party was in full swing. The youngest whore was tied to the rafter eye-bolt in the center of Betina’s cellar. Her sister-in-sin was drunkenly flogging her lightly with a leather strap. The third whore was tied to the butcher table next to the cellar stairs; Alexander was not-so-gently flogging her.

“Are we having fun . . . yet?” The drunken whore said.

Alexander nodded at Turk; Turk’s big hand stopped the snapping strap in mid-air; he flipped it, then spun it around the drunken whore’s wrinkled neck—in a split second—he garroted her. The other two whores began to scream. Alexander’s wild laughter echoed off the cellar walls. “We begin again, my old friend,” he said and slapped Turk on the butt. “Enjoy!”

Turk disrobed and moved toward the screaming whore strapped to the butcher table.

When the Coven members stumbled into the cellar, they all stared at the corpses swinging from the rafters. Alexander walked toward the center of the Witches Foot etched lightly in the knotted-wood of the cellar floor. He stripped off his coveralls and shirt, then shouted toward the cellar door, “Turk, are you there?”

From the other side of the door came Turk’s horse response, “Yes, Turk will allow no one to leave.”

“Good!” Alexander said as he turned toward the nervous witches. “Now . . . I will show you real power. Tonight, you will meet BabaYaga, the Sacred Mother of All That is Evil. First Daughter of our Mistress Beelzebub. BabaYaga is my lover and my Mistress. She is my liaison with the Great Beelzebub Herself. We will no longer come here for fun and games . . . dancing around naked; having sexual intercourse for no other reason than it is nasty and you are lonely. When we finish the covenant tonight, you will never be lonely or shunned again. You will know power.

“We will control the wheat of Kansas; the wealth of Kansas; the people of Kansas.” He stepped forward and ran his knife deep into the thigh of one of the swinging corpses. He turned quickly. He faced the Coven, with the blood-dripping knife clamped between his teeth, like a startled lion interrupted while chewing on the leg bone of a dying gazelle. One of younger witches fainted. Another witch moved toward her. “Let her be!” Alexander said. He threw the bloody knife at the feet of the witch who had moved. “Pick it up with your teeth!” She did. “Strip!” She obeyed again. The ritual began. They all stripped and began dancing around the swinging corpses; on each fourth turn of the dance, Alexander pulled a witch from the line. When Alexander had finished with the last witch—the one who had fainted—he drug her naked, exhausted body over to the center of the Witches Foot and planted one foot on her heaving belly while he spoke, “The fun and games are over. This will no longer be a party house. You were recruited into the Topeka Coven of BabaYaga to worship the Sacred Mother of All That is Evil. The ritual and the feast will entice BabaYaga to appear and grant our needs.” He lifted his foot from the frightened witch and pulled her toward one of the corpses; he grabbed her by the back of the neck and pushed her fat face toward the bleeding thigh of the first prostitute; he forced the blade of his knife, into the thigh, inches from the witch’s trembling lips; he drew the blood-coated knife from the corpse’s thigh and slid it into the witch’s open mouth; he pressed the knife down and embedded it into the witch’s tongue.

Betina stepped forward and shouted, “We must chant to BabaYaga. Let her know we have brought to our Coven a feast. Chant! Pierce the bodies and chant!”

The witches dug into the pile of purses and handbags; they came up with scissors and knitting needles and sharp edged combs—a revolver fell from one purse but was quickly replaced. They danced in circles around the corpses—stabbing—ripping—and piercing the corpses, with their makeshift cutlery. They echoed Betina’s chant to BabaYaga.

A short, heavy witch who’s breasts hung flat against her chest, like two wads of gum that had been thumbed to the side of a school desk, began to scream and throw-up. BabaYaga appeared from the witch’s retching stomach. The hag-witch scrambled to the center of the Witches Foot and devoured the bleeding corpses. Alexander was flattered by her appearance. She had put her stringy, green hair up in a bun held in place by a small femur bone. Bright-red lipstick painted her twisted lips, as if a child had attempted—with little success—to color within the lines of a poorly drawn cartoon. She hobbled toward Alexander.

“Alexander Mackovick, what do you want of BabaYaga?” she said.

Alexander reached out and took her grimy, bone-strutted hand and kissed it.

BabaYaga knew he must be repulsed. But he never flinched. He never looked aside. Always straight into her eyes. He looked much like the beautiful young warrior she had sold her eternal soul for. Her warrior had been fatally wounded by a Mongol during a battle that would determine control of the Steppes. She vowed to be a witch-hag for

eternity if the Great Beelzebub would let her beautiful warrior live for another fifty years and let her stay beautiful throughout her warrior's lifetime. The Great Beelzebub kept her promise. Twenty-two centuries past. No longer beautiful, she was a witch-hag. The witch-hag, BabaYaga. Sacred Mother of All That is Evil. A hard earned title. But still, the beautiful, young warrior, Alexander Mackovick was hers. Thank you Mistress Beelzebub.

"Your wish, Alexander," she purred.

"To be with you for eternity," he said.

"You are a mortal, you can only be a mortal," she said.

"Then let me be with you until the day of my death and dwell with you after death."

"If I can make it so, I will," she said. "But you have brought me here to make an earthly wish. That wish I can grant. Your wish, Alexander?"

"Sacred Mother, we need your help," he said. "We wish to control the wheat production of Kansas. That control would exist if you convinced the Great Beelzebub to make it rain only on Coven land."

BabaYaga fell, to the hard-wood floor, next to Alexander. She shrieked a hideous witch's laughter. "My Mistress, the Great Beelzebub, would have the demons eat me if I should even think such a thought. The sleeping God only worries about the weather. He cares about nothing else. If anyone screws with the weather, He will awake and bring pain to the Great Beelzebub. Pain brought to Mistress Beelzebub is pain brought to BabaYaga," the hag-witch said. She stood and brought Alexander up beside her; she walked with him out of ear shot of the others. "Your plan is too small," she whispered. "BabaYaga will show you the way. Make the Coven's goal to control the wheat of the world." She hobbled over to the witch who had fainted—the last one to be ritualized by Alexander—standing naked at the edge of the Witches Foot. She grabbed the witch's fat, blood-stained face in both of her claw-like hands and clamped her twisted mouth on the full-lipped mouth of the startled witch. BabaYaga blew full force into the witch's mouth. The pudgy witch's belly began to expand; just when it looked as if the struggling witch's milk-white belly would explode, BabaYaga drew her mouth away.

The chubby witch's bruised lips trembled as she looked down at her bulbous stomach. It had been one Hell of a day. Her first Coven meeting. Sis said her would be de-virginized by a real handsome fellow. He would do the deed. Do it real good. Do it every Thursday night. So he de-virginized her. Cut her tongue. Fed her blood from a whore. Now a putrid witch spit something into her stomach. Just the weirdest damn day.

BabaYaga pulled Alexander into the center of the Witches Foot. They performed the ritual. "The one who nurtures the seeds," she whispered, "is not from the Coven. But she is not an Unworthy. You have made her your own. She will follow you always. Take her and Betina into the Witches' Foot. You are in danger. Your entire Coven has betrayed you for a handful of coins delivered by a henchman for your deceitful sister. Hold the two in the Witches Foot. It will destroy the Unworthies. The powerful winter wheat seeds in your new friend's belly are one deed. Saving your life is the second. You will owe me." And as Alexander turned away, she whispered, "Alexander Mackovick, I love you."

Alexander turned and looked back at her. He stepped from the shadows. He rushed forward and grabbed the chubby witch, Freda, and Betina and charged toward the Witches Foot. Four of the largest witches rustled through the stack of clothing and drew automatic weapons. They fired in the direction of Alexander, but BabaYaga stepped in

the bullets' path. The bullets tore her flesh and spun pieces of it into the attacking witches. The pieces of BabaYaga's yellow flesh ate into their faces and breasts. The earth crumbled and fell beneath their feet. All the witches of the Coven fell screaming into the Bottomless Pit. Only the Witches Foot still stood, like a five-pointed tower standing in the center of the Bottomless Pit. Both Betina and Freda were screaming.

"Shut up!" Alexander shouted over the screams and the rumbling of the earth. "Shut up, and stand still!"

BabaYaga had disappeared. Alexander expected the Bottomless Pit to fill in and return the cellar to Betina Mackovick's Early Kansas decor. Nothing happened. He felt someone staring at him; he turned. Turk was at the cellar door looking over the edge of the cellar stairs into the pit.

"Turk thinks you Teed her off, this time," Turk said.

"Idiot, she did this to save my butt from ten paid assassins," Alexander said

"She could have killed those assassins with a little less show-biz," Betina said.

"Get us off here before this thing topples," Alexander said to Turk.

"Will that eye-bolt hold a block and tackle?" Turk asked while examining the ten-foot wide mote.

"No. But get the rope from the barn. I'll tie the block in place around the rafter," Alexander said as he looked up at the ceiling still in tack overhead.

While Turk was gone, Freda and Betina complained of dizziness. Vertigo was drawing them to the dwindling surface of the points of the five pointed Witches Foot. Alexander made them sit in the center of the tower and hug each other. BabaYaga would not have saved his life just to let him fall into the Bottomless Pit. Is this "The Bottomless Pit?" BabaYaga loved him? She won't let him perish. She had some simple plan for his escape. Maybe it was an illusion. Maybe he could just walk across to the stairs. Maybe he should send Freda as a test. No Freda was his meal-ticket. It was something simple. BabaYaga wouldn't put him in jeopardy. She loved him. She whispered it. Imagine being loved by such a creature. They were both creatures out of step. Both insane. Both evil. But she was immortal. He was not. If she truly loved him, she would find some way to make him immortal. He should be immortal. He must be immortal.

Turk came with the block and tackle. He threw a length of heavy rope to Alexander. Alexander missed the first toss, and nearly tumbled head-long into the pit. He steadied himself, looked back down at the chasm—he could see fire licking at the walls of the pit miles and miles below his precarious perch. Did BabaYaga open the bowels of the earth? Did she tumble his wood-be assassins into the fires of Hell? He quickly looked up just as Turk threw the looped up rope again. Alexander caught the end. Turk tied the heavy block and tackle to his end and told Alexander to pull slowly and keep the rope tight. They transferred the block and tackle to the Witches' Foot tower. Alexander used a modified Blackwall hitch to knot it around the rafter. He macraméd a sling from the transfer rope and then tied another rope, Turk tossed over, to the front of the sling.

Betina was slowly shuttled across the steam-filled mote. But Freda, with the added weight of the wheat seeds nurturing inside her belly, made the sling sag horribly; both Betina and Turk tugged on the sling rope. The sling moved slowly out onto the lead rope, but Freda's weight began to pull the rafter loose from its footings.

"Stop!" Alexander shouted. "I'll pull her back. The contraption is breaking!"

"Let her fall," Betina said.

“No! She’s our future,” Alexander said.

Alexander pulled the trembling witch back onto the Witches' Foot tower. She scrambled from the sling and hugged Alexander's legs. He looked up at the split rafter that had ripped away from the cellar ceiling. He whistled. “Jesus! We are the stupidest bunch of idiots. Betina! Turk! Go into the house and rip the floor boards away.” Damn! Alexander thought. How stupid could he get. With a little luck, BabaYaga was not watching. He was an idiot! Never looked up. Like most of the other idiots who people the earth, he never looked up. He concentrated on the problem of falling off the tower instead of the solution of getting off the tower.

Turk ripped the boards up and reached down and pulled Alexander to the safety of the Mackovick living room; they had to rip away more boards to get fat Freda up through the irregular opening. But when she finally rolled her rotund body out onto the carpeted living room, she took a deep breath and crawled over to Alexander; she kissed his feet, his naked legs, and right up through the center of his body until she reached his chest, then she buried her trembling face and professed her love and obedience for eternity.

Turk and Willie dug a new cellar about one hundred yards from the main house because the Bottomless Pit continued to occupy the old cellar. A new and improved Coven was assembled. On moonless nights, Freda birthed the wheat seeds and the new Coven members planted them. The Mackovick wheat and the wheat of the new witches' farms became the only wheat standing on the ravaged plains of Kansas—except of course the Armdecker wheat. But the Mackovick wheat had the most bountiful crown of any wheat ever grown on a Kansas farm or any farm on earth: the dpiklet bracts were clustered with golden kernels; the pedicel was long and sturdy; the sheath was thick as shoe leather.

Alexander became the head of the co-op and began traveling to the largest, most troubled wheat farms in the area, but travel left him open to three more attempts on his life. It was screwed up. While most the citizens of the old US of A were worrying if Roosevelt would fix the economy with his “New Deal” or screw it up with his Liberalism, or if the kidnapers would murder Charles Augustus Lindbergh, Jr., or let the tyke go, he was worrying if some insane Russian was going to try to get his golden gonads for a transatlantic flight to Tanya in Moscow.

Chapter Fourteen

In Moscow, Tanya pressed Stalin, at every turn, demanding that his men keep tracking Alexander and eliminate him. She also pressed Little Joe to send his wife and his children away. Nadezha had left with the children once before when Stalin first involved himself with Tanya; she had taken Vasily and Svetlana to the Urals, but Stalin's secret police brought her back. “She want's rid of you!” Tanya shouted. “She doesn't respect or love you as I do.”

On a freezing night in November of 1932, Tanya trudged through the snow with the Bukharins to a party at the house of Kliment Boroshilov, Commissar of Defense. Stalin's wife spent the evening silently glowering at Tanya, and then interrupted a debate on Party policy to castigate Stalin for bringing his whore, Tanya Mackovick, to the party. Her mouth would not stop. She added charges of brutality to her and the Russian people. She condemned Stalin's policies that had caused discontent and famine. She condemned as stupid the campaign against the Kulaks. She finished her tirade then spit in Stalin's face and charged toward Tanya. "Whore!" she said before Stalin rose and grabbed her by the back of the neck. Silence held the floor. Then Stalin ripped the front, of his wife's formal gown, baring her heavy, sagging breasts.

"You are the whore, Nadya. You and your mother have lived off my spoils. You have ridiculed me and my comrades and still accept our favors You are the whore. Worse . . . you are the whore of the Kulaks . . . a traitor to the USSR."

She stumbled across the room. Tears filled her eyes as she ran through the room, attempting to stuff her heavy breasts back into her torn bodice. At the door she turned. "You are a slave to your whore. God save Russia." She slammed through the door.

The next day, a small item appeared in Pravda. It made mention that one Nadezhda Stalin had perished after a long illness. There were rumors that she had committed suicide, but Tanya knew better. Tanya knew the truth. She and Stalin had left the party immediately. His rage was supreme. She told him he should never ever let anyone criticize him. He was the most powerful man in the world. "This woman, who you no longer love or even like, destroyed your character in front of your comrades." As they rushed across the square toward the Stalin's apartment, Tanya continued. "You must go and tear the bitch's heart out. Then you must eliminate every party member who was in that room. For, now, in their eyes, you are weak."

Stalin's wife was seated in the parlor of the Stalins' apartment; she had a pistol in her lap.

"You think that, I, Stalin, can let you escape punishment?" He grabbed her by the throat and started to strangle her. She brought the gun up and pointed it at his heart. Tanya leaped forward and wrestled the gun from the struggling woman's hand then pulled her hands around behind the chair and held her tight against the chair.

"Joseph, if you strangle her, you will not gain the pleasure of a slow death," Tanya said. "In my purse is a very small knife. Use it slowly. The longer it takes now, the longer it will take with me . . . later."

"You are the whore of all whores," Nadya said.

When the two lovers finished with Nadya Stalin, there was nothing recognizable about the corpse. Tanya suggested that, if Nadya had truly committed suicide, she would have blown part of her face off, so all they had to do was find someone who looked somewhat like Nadya then blow her face off. It took the entire night to accomplish the task.

But the lovers were like giddy children when they found and altered their perfect Nadya look-alike. Nadezhda Stalin had a State funeral. She was driven through Moscow in an ornate closed-coffin. An intricately carved, white, marble statue of her was etched above her grave.

The "Terror" that Stalin had started years before accelerated as he eliminated ninety-seven percent of his old comrades—every man and woman who had been in the room

except the Bukharins who already knew all his weaknesses and depravities from their weekly sessions with the Iron Man and Tanya. Tanya was now the most powerful woman in Euro-Asia; she swore to Christian that she would use her power to eliminate every witch in Russia. “Tanya,” Tanya said to her mirror, “you have become more blood-thirsty than your mentor. Christian would want you to re-join the priests in their effort to restore the Church He would say ‘Stalin is doomed. If you align yourself with the Antichrist, you are doomed also.’” She laughed. She paraded naked in front of the mirror. The scar looked hideous—bright purple against her pure white skin—she hated it. She hated her brother, Alexander, for causing it to happen. She reached around behind her and felt where Alexander had, ritualized her. “I will pleasure in your slow death,” she shouted.

“Tanya, please forgive me,” Christian said from the bedroom doorway. “I was not snooping, I’m embarrassed for interrupting your pleasuring yourself, but I desperately need your help. We must move some of the Church’s most important priests.”

Tanya’s whole body was flushed from the excitement of the moment. “Why were you not announced?” she said as she wrapped a bright dressing gown around her burning body. “Who said you could just walk straight in and watch my private dance?”

“If it was a dance,” Christian said. “It was a nasty dance. God will forgive you.”

“Screw you and your forgiveness. I need no forgiveness. I was dancing. In private!”

“Your apartment door was wide open and your bedroom door was open,” Christian said.

Tanya ran to the hallway of the apartment. Flashes of Alexander and his gorilla companion cutting her and sodomizing her ate at her brain. The guard was no where in sight. But in the hallway, just discernible against the flowered pattern of the tile were small drops of blood. Tanya pulled Christian back into the apartment and slammed the door. “Stay with me until the Bukharins return. I will reward you.”

“I need no reward. It is apparent that someone has made another attempt on your life. God has brought me just in the nick of time.”

Christian used his relationship with his sister to save the lives of both priests and witches, and he brought them together right under Tanya’s nose; they were housed in the basement of the apartment complex next to the Bukharins’. “The Church is not in danger from the State. The Church can survive under Communism. The Church is the truest form of Communism,” Christian said to a group of leaders of The Cause. “Most Communist have never read Marx so they have no hate for the Church. But the anti-Church feelings come from the Antichrist himself, Stalin. Not because he reveres Marx, but because he reveres himself. He has developed a cult of personality. He is engaged in glorification of his own person in every conceivable manner. He is attempting to replace God in our lives and Beelzebub in the witches’ lives. We must all join together so that no man replaces our Gods whether it be our Holy Father or your Evil Mother.” The witches and the priests all nodded their heads. “When this is over, we will strive with every ounce of our being to convert all witches to the True Path, but for now we must use all our supernatural powers to defeat Stalin. We must stop his cult from expanding. We must stop anymore worshipers from kneeling to him. I have circulated among you a poem by Avdeienko. It shows how some revere Stalin.” Christian took one of the loose sheets being circulated and began to read, “I write books. I am an author; I dream of creating a lasting work. I love a girl in a new way; I am perpetuated in my children . . . All this is thanks to thee, o great teacher Stalin. Our love, our devotion, our strength, our heroism, our life—all are

thine. Take them, great Stalin, all is thine, o leader of this great country When the woman I love gives me a child the first word I shall teach it shall be ‘Stalin’.” Christian looked up. “He has become God to the likes of Avdeienko . . . just think how the peasants must worship him.”

But Joseph Stalin was not thinking of being worshiped by the peasants or being pleased by Tanya, he was thinking of the inevitable repercussions of the worst winter wheat harvest in the history of his country.

In Kansas, the Freda-nurtured wheat gave Alexander record yields per acre.

“We should not plant so much,” Betina warned. “We should hold back. Raise wheat prices.”

“We are too big and well known for that. Everyone would point a finger and say we are gouging during the Depression,” Alexander said. “We should grow all the wheat we can. Force the price down. We will be Heros of the people and we will force our competition out of the market. If the price of wheat gets below the cost of production, the others will be forced to abandon their farms or sell dirt cheap.”

Betina put her arms around him. “That’s why I love you. You are truly a genius. You can see all sides. With Chief Red Hawk’s warriors extortion, and BabaYaga’s grow-anywhere seeds, and your genius, we will own the wheat of this nation.”

“Of the world!” Alexander said.

Alexander became a partner, in twelve of Kansas’ largest and most troubled wheat farms in less than three years. He opened plush offices in the most expensive area of Topeka. His offices, in downtown Topeka, reminded him of the Cheka prison. The carpet was of the same damn design. The hard-wood floors had the same dull polish. Marble window ledges recalled the floors in the main entrance of the Cheka’s converted insurance building. The chrome of the chairs’ and desks’ legs sparkled like the bars on the Cheka cells. And what rounded it off—he must have wanted to remember the Cheka experience; how he escaped certain torture and death because of his allegiance to BabaYaga—was a portrait of Vladimir Grigorevick Federov, the designer of the Avtomat that stood in a chrome edged case against the birch paneled wall. Alexander had pulled a lot of political strings to get the Avtomat and the portrait sent to the States. He liked to think the portrait was the same one he stole from the Cheka prison, and the Avtomat was the one that saved his life in Karkov, but he knew life was not that linear. But the Avtomat was the start of what would become an internationally famous, weapons collection famous for including a portrait of each weapon’s designer.

Freda became Alexander’s secretary and traveling companion. She was an inaccurate secretary and a boring traveling companion, but her belly carried the nurturing destiny of Alexander Mackovick. At each new farm, Freda would birth the seeds then coordinate the transportation of the Topeka Coven to the planting sights.

A few days before the 1934 planting season, two tough looking farm boys were escorted by Freda into Alexander’s office. “I’ve heard a lot about you boys,” Alexander said.

“Bullcrap, you heard a lot about our daddy But that’s okie-dokie,” Clement Armdecker said. “My brother and me have come here for help.”

“Armdeckers need help?” Alexander said. “With wheat, or with the millions of dollars your father’s said to have hoarded. Tell the bastard to put it in the banks now that

they have reopened. Help the United States of America,” he motioned to Freda to leave the room. She lowered her adoring eyes and exited.

“Your father’s the wealthiest man in Kansas”

“He’s also the biggest son-of-a-bitch in Kansas,” Clement said. “He came up the hard way; so we have to come up the hard way. He gave us a farm with the worst production record in the State. The worst land in the State.” he looked over at his twin brother. “Clay and me want to make some kind of deal with you. Partnership or management deal. We were told, you’re the one fellow who would be willing to go up against the old bastard.”

“What do you need?” Alexander said.

“Your expertise or magic or whatever it is,” Clement said. “People say you got magic or witchcraft. Black magic. We don’t give a damn how you make the wheat grow. We just want it to grow.”

“You got it,” Alexander said. “No charge.”

“You must want something,” Clement said.

“Admission into the ‘Good Ole-Boy’s Club,’” Alexander said.

Clement and Clay Armdecker looked at each other and smiled. “You got it,” they both echoed. “No charge.”

They started chumming around the next week-end when Alexander and Turk delivered a 1933 Packard Roadster to the boys. The Roadster was one of Alexander’s wisest moves. Town’s folks said that Clay could never love a woman like he loved that Packard Roadster. It was bright yellow with brown fenders and tire kit. The wide whitewall tires looked like outer rings of archery targets. The light tan top was rarely closed. The four men: Alexander, Turk, Clement, and Clay whored around Kansas. They were inseparable except on Thursday nights when either Turk—he had become a Warlock—or Alexander had to attend the Coven meetings. The boys were lead away from their farm during the Coven plantings but Alexander assured them it would be performed correctly under the supervision of Freda.

During the years of Alexander’s accent in the ‘Good Ole-Boy’s Club’, and his tight friendship with Clay and Clement Armdecker, Betina gained status with BabaYaga because of one of the most obscene meetings ever held at the Topeka Coven. Alexander was envious when it finally came to pass, but he was the one who urged Betina on, and if Alexander had at anytime told her to cease, she would have The priest was such a gentle man and it was so exciting and so nasty to meet in the rectory, that Betina thought of nothing else. She knew the priest wanted to do things to her that were completely against his God’s commandments. He would sit and talk about problems of poverty in the parish, but his eyes never left her body. Then three days before Christmas of 1935, he started an off-the-wall conversation. “Betina, I feel comfortable with you. We have spent many years in this room . . . a lonely room, when you’re not here. I am going to share with you some things that are disturbing me . . . about you . . . about us.” He moved closer to Betina, by slowly sliding his arm chair along the polished floor. He spoke in a soft, almost feminine, voice. “There are some rumors about you and your nephew, Alexander Mackovick, being witch and Warlock. Being lovers. Outrageous rumors, I know, but why do you suppose they persist?”

“The people, in the parish, who tell these lies,” Betina said, “have guessed my feelings for you. They will do anything to discredit me.”

“In a church, this size, there are always busy-bodies, but even the town’s people say you lead a Coven. I have argued it is nothing but a social club, but”

“That is true. It is just a social club,” she said. “You can visit anytime.”

He scooted his chair even closer and nervously itched his neck under his cleric’s collar. “The things I need to say about us have forced me to rethink my contract with my beloved Church. I can no longer be silent. The thoughts of Satan are in me.”

“Beelzebub,” she quietly corrected.

“What?” he said.

“If it is a sexual thing, it is usually initiated by Beelzebub. She is the Deity I worship,” Betina confessed. The priest jumped up knocking his chair sideways. “You are as they say. You are a witch, and worst . . . a fornicator.”

“Yes, but my love for you could change that.”

“You love me?”

“Yes.”

“I suspected you felt the same as I do. I love you. But that is not the problem. It is the lust I feel for you that is so disturbing.” He moved back to his chair. “Let me explain. I do not need to be with you as other men have been. You need to do nothing to me. I would only want to bring pleasure to you with the very same instrument I use to praise my Holy Father.” The rectory was silent. Dear God! He had offended her. But her reputation was such that she should not have been offended. He needed her. He needed her more than he needed the Church. “Mrs. Mackovick, I am so sorry, I”

“Father, please! If I think you’re saying what I think you’re saying, I am about to slide from this chair.” She slowly raised the skirt of her most conservative dress. Alexander said it would happen just as it did. Father Timothy Daniels wanted to do Betina Mackovick. Betina laughed to herself.

“Are you laughing at me,” Father Daniels said. “Are you laughing that a priest would want to do such a degrading thing? You don’t understand my need, to bring pleasure to everyone, to be subservient to everyone. God will forgive me. God will forgive me all things as long as I accept him. For many years I have serviced you in my dreams. It doesn’t alarm me. Satan is a dream merchant. Satan slips into our brains from sin-filled dreams. The Lord should not allow this entrance by Satan. But then there is that ‘Free Will’ thing. The Night Creature enters my brain and brings images of you. You are a Daughter of the Night Creature. You are a good woman, an understanding woman,” he sunk to his knees in front of her. “A demanding woman.” he could feel her hands pressing on the back of his head. She was the Whore of the Night Creature. But God must have wanted him to do it. It was not God. It was Satan. He could kill himself, but that was a worse sin because it took God out of control of destinies. So it was the worst sin. Worse than degrading himself with a fat whore. Betina Mackovick Whore of the Night Creature.

Through the year, Betina’s conservative outfits did not include underwear if the day’s schedule included a side trip to the good priest’s rectory. Betina hesitated when Alexander insisted the good priest be brought to slaughter, but it was a small hesitation. It was moonless, that Thursday night set aside for her priest-lover’s visit to the Coven. He was encouraged to wear his garb—less the crucifix. She led him down, into the quiet cellar, hours before the scheduled meeting. With little persuasion, he laid on the butcher

table with straps holding him to the sturdy legs of the table. His head hung down face-up over the end of the thick blocks of wood. Betina stripped then approached him.

“We’ll be finished, long before the others arrive,” she whispered.

But she lied; he was still strapped to the table, servicing Betina, when Alexander Mackovick came through the cellar door and demanded that the good priest, from his strapped-down position, service everyone in the Coven.

The good priests didn’t struggle much. His thoughts were of the many dreams he had had about the current situation. *Deja vu*; just like his dreams picturing him kneeling at a railing ready to receive the Lord’s blood and the Lord’s flesh. But, instead, he always received Betina’s excited flesh and her burning blood. Satan had a hand in it. Tonight, Satan and the Lord would do battle for his soul. It would be the opening round of the Apocalypse. In the scheme of things, he was doing the degrading act under the direction of the Holy Father. It was, after all, a Holy Act. Not degrading in the larger sense. An act that would be written of in the Book of Life. The opening act. It would introduce the main event. The Lord versus Satan. Christ versus Beelzebub. And in the role of Instigator: Father Timothy Daniels. . . . The World’s Most Anticipated Play: The Apocalypse. Direct from Topeka Kansas the little town with big sins.

God would forgive him. But! The thing! That came at him! It was a thing from Hell! It had putrid privates that flapped to its knees. They would cover his face! They would suffocate him! For the first time, the young priest tried to break free of his bonds, but Betina and Alexander held him to the butcher table while BabaYaga positioned her bony body. Her hag’s screeches filled the cellar and burst the ear drums of three of the older witches. When she was satisfied, she ripped off the priest’s sweat-drenched garb and placed his toes in her mouth.

Chapter Fifteen

Betina was favored by BabaYaga from that night on. The night became known as “Priest Feast.” It only disturbed Alexander slightly that Betina had become such a good leader and the apple of BabaYaga’s eye; he was certain that the pursuit of the world’s wheat would have to be in directions other than exclusively the occult. The pursuit would need to be in the use of Red Hawk’s warriors and destructive Rain Dances. And destructive climatology and rustology. And by use of ravenous, crop destroying insects. If the farmer’s money-crops were lost, the farmers of the world would sell out, cheap. But the occult was helpful. The Coven would eliminate Justin Armdecker.

The elimination of Justin Armdecker would give Calvin and Clement control over the massive Armdecker estate, and Calvin and Clement would turn the estate over to Alexander. The witch, from which BabaYaga was to appear, was the youngest in the Coven. It was thought that she would have the best chance to approach the old man. Her

car appeared to break down at the Wichita farm's front entrance. She waited. At noon, the foreman stopped to help her. They ended up in the work house at the back of the farm.

"I got some business I need to tend to," the witch said to the middle-aged foreman.

"I got some extra time." The bone-thin foreman looked at the fat witch. It would be like doing a heifer though he'd never did no heifer. But a screw was a screw. It would be sorta of an extra screw. Not many mid-day screws in those parts.

They went directly to his bunk. "You ever screw a girl as fat as me," she asked.

"Can't say as I have."

"You ever screw a witch, before?"

"Can't say as I have. Not sure there are such a thing," he said.

"I'm a witch. A very important witch."

He laughed on the down stroke.

She slapped him. "I am so. I am carrying BabaYaga, right now."

"You look like you're carrying a Baba Bull," he laughed and moved faster.

"You wait. Just you introduce me to Mister Justin Armdecker and you just wait."

The foreman stopped his movements. "You stopped here on purpose." He withdrew and stepped from the bunk and slipped back into his Levis. "What the Hell you up to?"

The witch pulled her dress back down her naked legs. "I am the vessel for BabaYaga. If I call her, she will come out and eat you."

"Call her, you stupid, fat bitch," the foreman said. "I need someone to eat me . . . about now."

"I should call her, because you have been so rude, but I am only supposed to call her when Mister Justin Armdecker is present."

The foreman grabbed her by her arm and pulled her up the path to the main house. "Mister Armdecker, you better listen to this," he said to the gray-haired man sitting behind the entry-room desk. "She claims to be a witch."

"A Mackovick witch?" Armdecker said. He stood and approached her. She nodded her head yes. He walked over, slowly, to his gun case. He took out a highly polished shotgun. He moved, slowly, back and stood directly in front of the witch. He placed both barrels of the shotgun against her milk-white throat.

The foreman smiled. "She says she just has to call to someone called Babasomething-or-another and I'll see something special. But she insisted you be present."

Armdecker pushed both barrels up under the witch's fat chins. "Call your Mother of All That is Evil. Call your BabaYaga!"

The young witch tried to swallow but Armdecker pushed the barrels harder. "Call the hag-witch. Call BabaYaga!" he said.

"BabaYaga! Appear" Both barrels of the shotgun took her head off. Sparks shot up to the ceiling. Fire made the headless body dance across the entrance-room and out the front door. The body danced as the fire consumed it. It fell to the plush, green lawn and slithered along like a slowly deflating balloon. Then it sizzled and became ashes.

"What the Hell was that!" the foreman shouted.

"Just an old Russian myth," Armdecker said.

When Alexander heard about the screw-up at the Armdecker place, he told Betina that it appeared that the occult didn't always work. "We better not put all our eggs in one

basket. In the future, I'll need more time away from the Coven. Turk loves the ritualizing . . . so he should continue . . . except with you and Freda and BabaYaga. I need some time to find alternative methods of crop destruction, and obviously Armdecker destruction." He realized that Freda would have to be cleaved to him. She was the most important human in his life. She contained the winter wheat and could be the only real gift BabaYaga had ever given him. BabaYaga, of course, had saved his life, but life wasn't that great. "I need time away to become Master of The Wheat . . . Master of The World," he said.

But Betina felt that Alexander was slowly separating himself from the Topeka Coven and her. He wanted to take full credit for the spectacular growth of the wheat under his supervision. He was taking too much credit. He did nothing more than she. Wheat grew well because of BabaYaga and the Topeka Coven and Betina Mackovick not because of Alexander Mackovick. She was the head of the Topeka Coven! Not Alexander Mackovick!

Alexander came home late after meeting with the Armdecker boys. Betina had just bathed after a private ritualization by Turk. "Alexander! You are parading around town spouting off about your abilities with the wheat," Betina said. She moved across the living room and poured herself a tall glass of whiskey. None was offered to Alexander. "You are living in a grand and glorious manner," she continued, "while your beloved aunt is stuck with the trappings of yesterday. I am many years your senior. It is much more fitting that I live in a grand and glorious manner. It is my Coven and my house and my money. I think it is time we converted the assets of the holding company into a Trust that I control. You can build from my farm and my Trust after I am dead. But, now, I will lead you as I lead the Coven. I will judge how we should use the new farms and how we should spend the profits from the farms." She moved slowly toward him while letting her robe slowly open. "Come, I will give you a nice reward for being so understanding," she led him toward the cellar.

"Aunt Betina, Love, you are entirely correct. I have taken advantage of your generous nature. You are the Coven leader. I am nothing but a member of the Coven. I shall obey," he said. He put his arm around her thick waist as they moved toward the locked cellar-door. "I should be able to wait until your death!" he stepped forward and unlocked the heavy door and swung it wide. "We shall be partners until death do us part."

They entered the low archway to the cellar. With a drawn look of hate on her trembling face, Betina began to turn; Alexander quickly placed the sole of his thick leather boot, at the base of his aunt's spine, he jammed his foot forward. The large woman's legs ran, faster than her body, trying to keep from tumbling down the treacherous stairs. But her bloated body beat her feet; her chin hammered into the brand-new planks of the cellar floor in the expanded cellar. Her neck snapped – audibly.

Alexander rolled the heavy woman over onto her back; her broken neck flopped her head to one side; her hand tumbled, from its clutched position on her stomach, and sent the palmed Derringer clattering across the newly-varnished cellar floor. "The bitch was going to shoot me!" Alexander shouted to the cellar ceiling. "The bitch was going to shoot me with my own gun! Is there no loyalty? Is there no love?" He went out of control. He beat her bloody with a rapidly splintering two-by-four. He kept pounding her and repeating, "Till death do us part . . . till death do us part." After an hour of rage, Alexander stopped hammering at his aunt's body. Not because it was nothing more than a

pulp-like mass of pulverized muscle and flesh, but because there was no piece of the two-by-four big enough to grip. “Yes, my beloved aunt, this raped dust bowl could have produced rich winter wheat without my intervention . . . just as you’ll be able to walk back up those stairs without your skull.”

Alexander knelt down in the center of the cellar as if in prayer to some forgiving God. He slowly unscrewed the bolts holding three of the new planks in the cellar floor. He should have searched around the cellar or in the shed for a crescent wrench, but he was unable to talk his body into moving from its position on the floor. He bloodied his fingers unscrewing the planks. When he lifted the last plank, he looked straight down into the Bottomless Pit. He could see flames miles down into the pit.

He rolled the mushy body to the edge of the opening and slid it over. There was excruciating silence as the body spun down through the steam. Then he heard it! She was screaming! He jumped up and started to replace the planks, but the flames licked at his ankles. He scrambled, toward the cellar door, looking down at the planks under his feet, he could see flames around all the sides of every plank. The planks were floating on the tips of the flames. They’re floating! He had really Teed someone off. BabaYaga or the Great Beelzebub Herself. Betina was down there telling them of his greed. They enjoyed greed and all the other numerous sins. But he had squandered the Coven’s money. BabaYaga’s money. Jesus! He reached the cellar’s stairs. Blood waterfalled down each stair making them slick as the greased plank he use to slide down as a child in Saratov. His feet slipped back toward the flaming floor, but his hands shot out and grabbed the sturdy wood handle on the door. He pulled himself across the bleeding stairs and rolled out the cellar door onto the side lawn. He ran to the farthest corner of the farm.

When he saw the neighbors—attracted by the flames—arrive, he returned, running. The locals felt sorry that Alexander had lost his beloved aunt and the house—his home—in such a fire. A fire to end all fires. He was invited to stay at the Armdecker boy’s home until a new house could be built by the community. His beloved Russian community.

The Russian community in Moscow watched as Tanya Mackovick controlled Stalin’s every move. Joseph spent little time at their new home; he had instigated the public trials of the traitor Trotsky—hiding safely in Norway—and others who Tanya said had been conspiring to overthrow Stalin and his Comrades. Tanya went each day to watch the trials. Stalin was there also, but in the shadows. Tanya sat and watched the three judges extract confessions from men she had slept with on cold evenings. They were eloquent then—after a little sex—but now they whimpered from the long bench that resembled the confessional bench in the church she had attended so long ago. The trials were her doing; she had convinced Joseph to eliminate even the least of his detractors.

There were too many very intelligent opponents; Joseph was like a dullard compared to most. He would not be able to outsmart most of them, but while he had the power, he could eliminate them. But he had failed to eliminate his greatest nemesis, Leon Trotsky.

She had promised Joseph she would personally assassinate Trotsky as soon as his men brought back the gonads of her brother, Alexander Mackovick. Her spies kept her informed of Alexander’s good life; he had become one of the most powerful men in the United States. He traveled with women who were certain to be witches. They were fat and ugly and had long, black hair. He was still in the favor of BabaYaga, that was certain.

Attempts to eliminate Alexander had been disastrous. But if they could eliminate his control of the Coven, he wouldn’t be able to conjure BabaYaga.

She would have Joseph's men eliminate every witch within fifty miles of her mother-raping brother. She looked down, at the white walls of the Hall of Nobles, and listened as her friend Zinoviev confessed to being involved in a Trotskyite-Fascist scheme to involve Germany and Japan in a counter revolution against her beloved Stalin. She stood and walked toward the band-box recess in the high gallery. When she pulled back the curtains, Joseph Stalin looked up. His eyes indicated that his brain was a million miles away. He was in ecstasy listening to his old comrades being condemned to death.

"Joseph, I need you to try one last time to assassinate Alexander. If your men do not succeed, using my plan, I will never bother you again about Alexander," she said. She stepped into the band-box and pulled the curtain closed behind her. She dropped to her knees and unhooked the front of his perfectly creased uniform.

Chapter Sixteen

In the dwindling hours of 1936, Evil led German troops into the Rhineland. Evil ripped Spain apart as the country-side flowed with brother's blood. And Kansas flowed with the riches wheat crops in its farming history.

The Armdecker farm in Topeka, where Alexander stayed, was not much larger than Betina's. But old man Armdecker's farm near Wichita was the largest in Kansas. The first time Alexander saw the Wichita spread, he knew he had to own it or die in the effort. Or kill in the effort. And each moment that he lived with Clement and Clay, he coveted their father's farm, their father's money, their father's power, and their father's daughter. Alexander arranged his busy schedule to include always being present when Mary Louise Armdecker was on a visit to the boy's farm. She was a plain, pleasant woman ten years Alexander's senior, nevertheless, he decided to treat her as if she were BabaYaga. Both ladies could bring him many wishes. They would both be his lovers. Mary Lou's lover. Husband. Master. And heir to the Armdecker fortune.

"Alexander, you scum bag, don't you be looking at Mary Lou," Clement Armdecker said with a smile. "I've seen some of the women you bed down . . . I've bedded down most of them. Don't get any ideas about my poor, innocent sister." He patted Alexander's shoulder and handed him a cocktail. "Clay and me told her you was a scum bag. She said nobody could be as bad as us. We said you was."

Clay came up and put his arm around Alexander's shoulder. "If you lay so much as one of your whoring fingers on our sister, Clement and me are going to tie one end of you to that new tractor, you bought us, and the other end to the Roadster, then feed what's left of you to the hogs."

"But, boys, yours-truly bought you the tractor, the Roadster, and even the hogs. You wouldn't use my own gifts against me?" Alexander said.

Clement put his arm around Alexander and both twins moved him up in front of a

full-length mirror. The image looked like a Left Tackle and a Fullback bookending a handsome dancer. Clement spoke directly at the side of Alexander's face, "Don't screw with her, old buddy. She's never been with a fellow. She's a virgin . . . a saint. When the old son-of-a-bitch of a father dies, she's headed for a nunnery. 'sides, the old man told her you're the most dangerous man in Kansas. You're a Warlock or something."

Alexander escorted Mary Louise around the state as she worked for the re-election of Roosevelt—against the vehement protestations of her father. Justin Armdecker hated both Roosevelt and Alexander. But after Roosevelt settled into the white house . . . again, Justin Armdecker decided to focus all his hate on the Russian gigolo. It took just over two years for Alexander to pull off the marriage. During those years, he had more than one occasion to hide at Mary Louise's. The damn Russian agents were on him like flies on dog dung. They had killed all of his new recruits. It had been two years since he'd given sacrifice to BabaYaga. No one wanted to replace Betina after her untimely death. Three of the new recruits had been machine gunned on the front stairs of his office building. It was unsafe to be seen with Alex Macko.

Alex Macko was the new name the PR pros in New York gave to him for his appearances as President of Macko Enriched Wheat Bread, Inc. He sent his own assassins to Moscow to track down Tanya, and eliminate her, but they were detained at the border and soon disappeared under international red tape. In the two years before the marriage, he lost fifty-seven witches to bullets, three to homicidal beatings from husbands, two to homicidal beatings from locals, four to natural causes, and one to Christ.

"Turk, don't leave Freda's side! I don't give a crap if you have to marry her. Don't leave her side," Alexander said.

"Your sister, Tanya, has disrupted things," Turk said with perfect enunciation.

"Disrupted! You idiot! She's screwed them up entirely. I can't get together enough witches to make it worthwhile to conjure BabaYaga. She'll think we're slackers. Slackers either in enrollment, or slackers in elimination. We must eliminate Tanya."

But he was certain that BabaYaga had foreseen things. She was wise enough to give the ability to nurture winter wheat seeds. To fulfill his destiny. Some day, he would drag his bitch sister before BabaYaga and let the hag-witch do a number on her. But first he had to marry the Virgin Armdecker.

After the wedding, the problems began.

"I don't give a rat's behind what the production records show," Justin Armdecker said to his daughter. "That upstart, Russian, gigolo witch-humper is not screwing with the Wichita wheat."

"Father, I love him. I intend to stay with him for the rest of my life."

"That may not be long judging from the number of people who drop like flies around him."

"Father!" You know the Communists want him dead. He is a Hero of the Russian community, here. You are jealous of his power!"

Justin Armdecker swung out with his large, rough hand and caught his daughter's fragile jaw. She stepped sideways then slumped, into a chair, sobbing. He looked down at her then stormed from the house.

Later, Alexander asked her what had happened to her face.

"I slipped in the barn and fell against a center post," she said.

“My love, let me take you to town. Doctor Harreld will make certain your jaw is not fractured,” Alexander said as he gently lifted her chin. “I’ll get your coat and we’ll go.”

When the examination was finished, Doctor Harreld took Alexander by the arm and lead him from ear-shot of Mary Louise. “I assume you didn’t do this,” the doctor said.

Alexander jerked his arm loose from the Doctor’s grip, “She fell,” he said.

“She was struck hard against the face with an open hand, but unless she married you because you’re like her father, I’ll assume you didn’t do it.” The doctor began to walk away.

“Wait a second!” Alexander said. He grabbed the doctor’s sleeve and pulled him back. “She’s been slapped . . . by her father. Before and now?”

“If I speak, he will destroy me,” Doctor Harreld said.

Alexander pulled him close and twisted the collar of his white coat tightly against his neck. “What do you think I will do if you don’t speak?”

The doctor took a deep breath; he pulled away from Alexander then began, “Every couple of years, Mary Louise comes here. Usually with a broken wrist or a bloody lip. A bruised kidney. All from her horse riding . . . she says. But I can tell. Especially a hand print. She comes with those every couple of months.”

“Maybe she has a lover who beats her,” Alexander said.

“Mary Louise? Come on!” Doctor Harreld shook his head. “No lover did this. Only one man could do this and expect her silence.”

Alexander swung and smashed his fist into the plaster wall. “You mean, Mary Lou has been letting her father screw her up?”

“Beat her up,” the doctor corrected.

Alexander rejected Turk’s suggestion to conjure BabaYaga to feast on Justin Armdecker. The Coven was in full swing since Alexander had been able to stop the murder of the witches, but the number of missing prostitutes—for feasts—was beginning to bring heat to the streets. Namely, the young idiot, Dover Sage.

“Sage told me,” Turk said, “that he has tons of evidence pointing to our association with at least five or six of the missing prostitutes.”

“If he had tons of evidence, we would be occupying a cell,” Alexander said. “Besides, the kid ain’t old enough to vote little lone play policeman.”

“He’s the youngest man ever to be hired by the Attorney General’s Office. He comes from five generations of law men,” Turk said.

“I come form twenty generations of witches so I don’t give a crap if he’s Doc Holiday himself. If he had ton’s of evidence, he’d be barking at our back door. But take it real slowly while he has the hots for us.”

“He will always have the hots for you and Coven. Betina and the Mackovick Coven slaughtered his parents.”

“It just means that old man Armdecker will have to be dealt with in a more conventional manner.”

The more conventional manner began with Turk listening through the open chauffeur’s window. “It’ll take my daughter to give me a grandson. My drunken sons will never give me anything . . . but grief. Never give me a grandson . . . at least not a legitimate one. The Armdecker line will end with two drunken idiots. I don’t want a grandson from that pompous idiot, Alexander Mackovick or Macko or whatever the jerk calls himself.” Armdecker rested his arm on the window’s opening. “I thank you for

taking Robert's place. He's never stayed away without calling. So you drive me to see my daughter. I've been wanting to speak to you. You appear to be a nice enough fellow. Bigger than Hell; but a nice enough fellow. Why in Hell's name do you hang around with the likes of Alex Macko. Why stay? You know his reputation. He married my Mary Louise for the money he thinks he is going to get if I croak. Tell him he's getting zilch. Better yet, don't tell him diddley. Work for me but sleaze around with Macko. Report to me. I'll report his whoring ways to Mary Louise. Macko will be history."

"How much?" Turk asked.

"What?"

Turk looked at the rear-view mirror and straight into the eyes, of the wind-burned face, of Justin Armdecker. "How much you pay Turk to report?" he said.

"What's the bastard pay you now?"

"Hundred a week."

"I'll double that."

"When he gone, Turk still have a job?"

"A life time job," Armdecker said.

"Whose lifetime?" Turk said. "What if Turk kill him for a lump sum American?"

Armdecker moved back from the chauffeur's window and sat quietly. Moments later, he moved back to the window. "I only deal in American money," he mumbled. He sat back in the plush leather seat. Half way to Lawrence, Justin Armdecker cleared his usually horse throat, and began to question Turk, "How would you do it?"

Turk turned his gorilla head sideways. "Do the reporting? Or the killing?" he said. "The killing," Armdecker whispered.

Turk pulled the limo to a stop on the shoulder of the highway. He turned so his pitch black eyes stared into Armdecker's. "Turk would drive him out of Topeka. Maybe on the way to Lawrence. He would say there trouble with limo. He would kill him then dump body in Kansas River right over there." Turk pointed through the window at the Kansas River.

Armdecker laughed. "Everyone would know you did it." Armdecker leaned closer to hear the big man's answer.

Turk rubbed his thick tongue across his snagged teeth. "Turk would stand next to the car. Fall backward. Hit his head on car. Knock Turk out. When people arrive, Turk say, 'Turtle Creek Gang jumped him and took Mister Macko. Badges would search for Mister Armdecker. Find him in river. Turtle Creek gang get blame,'" Turk said.

"You mean they would find Macko. You said Armdecker . . . but you meant Macko. Right?"

"Right," Turk said.

"How much?"

"Turk want thousand bucks American and boat ticket home."

"I'd want it done when Mary Louise and I go to the Disaster Relief meeting in Washington. The end of the month." Armdecker twisted sideways in his seat, and dug his rough hand into his side pocket; he wrestled a fat wad of bills from the pocket. The large, silver money-clip reflected the unsmiling face of Theodore Roosevelt. "Half now. Half later at the funeral."

Turk slid the chauffeur's window wide open. He shot Justin Armdecker—dead center—in the forehead. "What I regret most is you not hearing my perfect speech

patterns. You had to think I was an idiot. Turns out you're an idiot. A dead idiot," Turk said. "I'll take the balance at your funeral. Which is now." He pulled the clipped wad of money from Armdecker's hand before he picked up the body and carried it to the Kansas River. Back at the limo, the noonday sun reflected off the shiny fenders. Alexander's plan was good except for the falling part. He stood with his back to the Packard Limo. He fell back. His head struck the mirrored finish of the sleek, rounded fender.

Dover Sage arrived in a Lawrence police car; he would have liked to tell his superiors that he had guessed there was going to be some hanky-panky so he had followed Turk, but the truth was it was all a coincidence; he had been invited to the Academy graduation. In Lawrence, he got the call, about Armdecker, so he rode back to Topeka with a Lawrence Police officer. "They say you were waylaid by the Turtle Creek Gang," he said to Turk. Turk nodded slightly, trying not to interfere with the doctor swaddling his head. "Turtle Creek Gang . . . huh? How'd you know?" Dover said.

"Turk heard them say."

"Stop with the Turk this and Turk that crap. I know you study language at Kansas State. Besides, the Gang never kills. Twenty years of rampaging across North-eastern Kansas and not one murder. Not even a pursuing agent. They're World War I vets, you know? They make it a point never to carry guns. They kill Armdecker with a knife?"

"Turk not know. Him knocked out," Turk said.

"Him knocked out," Dover mimicked Turk then looked at the crime scene as the troopers searched for the body. He was Teed at himself for not guessing that Justin Armdecker would be Alex Macko's next victim. The damn Warlock had stepped closer to inheriting the largest wheat farm in Kansas. They should have let him be captured by the rampaging agents from Russia.

In Moscow, Tanya was celebrating the extermination, by spike, of the last five thousand witches; most of them had only heard of BabaYaga, but they were witches so they had to go.

"Tanya, what will you do now that all the witches are gone?" Stalin asked. They both laughed but Stalin paced, around her, looking at her, sizing her up

"Why do you ask, Sosselo?" she said.

"I need a favor."

"Anything, my love," Tanya said.

"In your last letter from Natalia Trotsky, did she mention Eitington or Sigeriros?" Stalin said.

"Who are these people?"

"They were assigned by the NKDV to eliminate Trotsky. They botched the job. Twenty men under them and they botched the job. They entered with no resistance. Fired hundreds of rounds . . . used incendiary bombs and dynamite—all defective. Botched it!" he said.

"What can I do that those twenty men couldn't?" she said.

"Use the element of trust. He now has walls and watchtowers and steel shutters because of Eitington and Siqueriros. He has a fortress. His assassin must be an invited guest."

"But I'll be trapped."

"Just walk back out the same door you came in," Stalin said.

"This is more important to you than my life."

“It is more important than my life. It is for the Revolution!”

Tanya wrote Natalia Trotsky asking if they might meet in Beracruz; she had a private message from Joseph Stalin. Natalia wrote back that it would be too dangerous to meet in public. Tanya could come to the Trotsky's home in Coyoacan, Mexico.

The Americans, who picked Tanya up at the airport, were silent on the long trip to Coyoacan. She had been informed of the American Trotskyists's loyalty to their leader. Only Americans were allowed access to Trotsky. But Tanya knew he would see her. When she was blossoming in his household, he often let his eyes caress her body.

The house was old. It was set back in an isolated section of Coyoacan. Its walls had been extended with very little concern for blending the new with the old. Watch towers made the spacious grounds look like a small, local prison. The steel shutters were closed except for one window at the front of the house.

Natalia Trotsky was there to greet her. “Tanya, you have grown to a beautiful woman,” Natalia said.

Tanya met with Trotsky, but he was very cold and not receptive to any of her compliments about his appearance. In her heart, she thought he appeared to be a man straddling an open grave. As she became part of the Trotsky household, again, she became certain she would leave Mexico without doing the deed. Joseph would listen to reason. Then the rage would build in his chest and explode with a torrent of expletives that would singe her hair. If she said just the right things, she would live. But if her timing was off, she would die. Very slowly. Timing was everything.

Tanya's timing was way off; Stalin knew his Tanya better than she knew herself; he had initiated plan B the moment Tanya left Russia for Mexico. The plan was being played out the tenth day of Tanya's stay. Tanya was with Natalia at the front of the house when they heard an agonized cry. They rushed to the study. They found Leon Trotsky standing in the room's center with his arms hanging limply to his sides. Blood, from a three inch gash in his skull, covered his face.

He survived at the local hospital for another twenty-four hours. On August 21, 1940 Leon Trotsky was dead. Tanya Mackovick was in a Mexican jail. She was accused of being an accomplice by being a diversion while Ramon Mercador drove a short handled ice-ax into Trotsky's skull. Tanya was certain she would be saved by the most powerful man in the world, her lover, Joseph Stalin. But her savior came from Topeka not Moscow.

Alexander's agent in Russia had standing orders to kidnap Tanya. He had bungled the job when she was in Oslo, Norway a year earlier, but he was certain he wouldn't miss in Coyoacan, Mexico. Alexander had been informed that Stalin's Belgian assassin, Ramon Mercador, was coming and going from Trotsky's house like an old friend; if he followed his *modus operandi*, no one in the Trotsky house would survive. Alexander's agent was instructed to stay until he was certain the deed was done; he would receive a fifty thousand dollar bonus if Tanya did not die at the Trotsky's but was transported to Topeka. When the local police arrived at the Trotsky house, Alexander's agent was napping on a low ridge, just off the highway, a half mile from the house; the dust, from the line of beat-up police-cars bumping up the road to the secluded house, started him coughing and woke him with binoculars in hand. He watched as the beat and bruised Ramon Mercador was shoved roughly into a police-car; followed by the beautiful Tanya

Mackovick, her eye patch had slipped from her face and revealed a hideous, twisted eye-socket.

Alexander, Turk, and Willie went to Mexico. Alexander hired a despicable character to recruit the desperados who were to storm the jail. The character's name was Sanchez as was half the recruits and the Mayor and the Police Chief. When the men moved into position to await the command to attack, Sanchez approached Alexander.

"Senior Macko, could I talk with you one momenta," Sanchez said. Alexander stood and followed the smelly bandito to the side of a boarded-up building that fronted the entrance to the jail. "Senior Macko, I can assure you of getting your sister without harm to her. A thousand American dollars handed to my uncle, the Chief of Police, would guarantee it," Sanchez said.

Alexander nodded then motioned to Turk to pay the little man. They watched Sanchez enter the jail.

"Say by-by to that grand," Turk said, "and our surprise attack."

Willie laughed and looked down toward Dover Sage leaning, against a shanty roof-support, like one of the heroic cowboys they used to worship at the movies. If it came to Turk and Alexander against Dover, she'd have to go with the boys. She would never forgive Dover for leaving her in the burning shed. God wouldn't make her choose.

Alexander was looking the same direction; his mind was on the gringo who had been leaning against a support and was walking, across the dusty road, a block and a half away. It looked to be that Dover Sage jerk. He had no jurisdiction in Mexico. With a little luck, he could get caught in the cross fire.

The little bandito interrupted Alexander's thoughts. "Senior Macko, my uncle has agreed," Sanchez whispered into Alexander's ear. "He will let us kill a few of his new recruits, but we must let him kill a few of ours. Your sister will be released during the gunfight. We are expected to attack now."

"I want to say attack," Turk said.

"Screw! This is my deal," Alexander said.

"Screw you! I'm going to say it," Turk said, then turned toward the banditos and shouted, "Attack!"

No one moved. The little bandito, Sanchez, motioned with his hand and all Hell broke loose. By the time the battle was over, only the banditos whose mothers' names were Sanchez were still standing. All of the police recruits had been killed.

The blindfold stopped Tanya from seeing her rescuers; handcuffs stopped her from removing the blindfold. As she was being trucked across the border, she heard a gruff voice, from the cab of the truck, end a sentence with a name. The name sent shivers up her cramped spine. Her brain raced; she was being transported to some unknown destination by her insane brother. She would die the most degrading death he could conjure. He would certainly have his pig partner penetrate her again. A hot flash burned into her. Alexander would use her up and dump her on the side of some deserted road. But if they had planned to rape her, they would have already done it. They had another plan. A bigger plan. She would be entertainment and the main course for the hag-witch BabaYaga!

Dover Sage followed the truck across the border at Brownsville, Texas. He knew they hadn't fed the girl and they hadn't let her out to pee. She was dead or soon would be. They sure didn't give a crap about her. She was supposed to be Macko's long lost sister?

Who cares? When the bastard got on Kansas soil with a dead body in the back of the truck, Dover would own him. Could the perverted creep, Macko, get out of it?

At the Mackovick farm in Topeka, Alexander and Turk trundled Tanya down into the cellar while Willie held the door; Dover Sage watched from behind the brand-new thrasher. Dover left the farm and headed for the nearest phone. He needed a search warrant. Macko could really screw up your career. He didn't notice his sentry at the Mackovick farm was taken over by four young men who moved in after they watched Dover depart. At a gas station, Dover ridiculed himself for not saving the girl's life. If she was still alive. But his brain was certain that Macko's conviction was more important than all other considerations. Sick damned profession. Sick damned world

"Leave him be, Dover," his superior at the AG Office said. "Leave him be. Since his father-in-law died, he's the most powerful man in the state. Leave him be. And no more late-night calls."

But he just couldn't leave him be. As he slowed at the first turn to the Mackovick farm's entrance, he spotted four young men lounging behind the thrasher; they were dressed in suits. They were holding guns. FBI or Treasury. He slipped from his car and moved cautiously toward the men. He drew his gun and badge and approached them. "Dover Sage, Special Agent of the Attorney General's Office." The young men turned in unison with guns positioned. "Don't be foolish! Dover said. "I'll get at least two of you. I start shooting if you don't identify yourselves."

An intellectual looking young man stepped forward. "My name is John Adams. I brought these men, here, from Mexico. We've come to take Tanya Mackovick back to justice."

"John Adams', you have no jurisdiction in the States," Dover said.

"We are disciples of Leon Trotsky, here for his assassin. If you take her, she will get diplomatic immunity because of that mad man, Stalin," the leader said as he lowered his gun.

The other young men lowered their guns and stepped closer to Dover. Dover moved them back behind the thrasher. "I'll level with you," Dover said. "My superiors won't back me on anything to do with Macko. He's got too much clout. I've got none. Just a new kid with the Agency." He looked over at the leader. "Okay, when we do go in, Macko and his henchman will have to be eliminated . . ."

"Damn!" one of the young men said as he pulled everyone into the shadows and nodded toward the entrance road. They silently watched a caravan of expensive automobiles slowly make the turn up the road toward the Mackovick ranch house.

"Macko's witches," Dover whispered. "They make human sacrifices to evil spirits. Tanya Mackovick must be tonight's sacrifice. If you want her dead, just let them do the job."

"We want her for a public trial. It will show the world that Stalin is behind the assassination," the leader said.

"Then we have to eliminate Macko and his henchmen and eleven fat, murderous women who think they're witches." Dover said. "Are you that committed?" They all nodded. "Okay, here's the plan," Dover said. "When the last witch enters the cellar, we move in. You two big guys use that fence post as a battering ram." Dover pointed toward a lone fence post leaning against the implement shed about ten yards from the house. "Once we isolate Tanya Mackovick, we will start shooting. Shoot anything that moves.

Everyone in that cellar is a bloodthirsty killer.” Dover looked over at the leader. “Any problems?” The leader shook his head. “Is this Trotsky fellow worth it,” Dover said.

They all smiled and nodded slowly.

The witches parked their cars and slowly waddled down the path toward the cellar. Alex Macko greeted them all and closed the cellar door behind the last one. But Turk stayed outside with Willie to guard the entrance. Dover moved quietly through the shadows cast by the farm house. He circled around the back and came on Turk from behind. Dover’s pistol butt smashed down like a sledge hammer on the big man’s skull. Turk turned, and grabbed Dover, splashing his own blood as he pinned the young AG Agent to the side of the house. The butt of an automatic rifle slammed into the base of Turk’s skull; the big man released Dover and turned toward the Trotskyite leader. Turk timbered to the ground with a thud that made Dover look in the direction of the cellar door to see if anyone heard. No one came. Dover looked at Willie, cowering in the corner. “Willie, get the hell out of here!” He pulled Willie by her arm. “Don’t come back or there’ll be hell to pay.”

Willie scampered toward the wheat fields.

“He a friend of yours?”

“Yes, she’s a friend of mine,” Dover said.

The leader looked at Dover oddly then signaled to two of his agents. The two big Trotskyites lifted the long fence post and positioned themselves in the path of the cellar door. They all waited for Dover’s signal. Three guns were all he could depend on. The two guys with the ram would drop it once they were inside. But they might not get to their guns fast enough. Three guns against twelve killers and whatever else might be residing in the Mackovick cellar. Dover signaled. The ram hit the door only once and the troupe was stumbling down the stairs into the cellar, but they hesitated. The scene was too bizarre for their minds to comprehend: Alex Macko was naked, ritulizing the ugliest being Dover or any of them had ever seen. It looked like Macko was pushing the naked, ugly hag, around the cellar, like a wheel barrow. Fat women were dancing, naked, in a circle around Tanya Mackovick who was hanging spread-eagled up-side-down from the center rafter. She was naked and bloody, but was following the action with her one, good eye. A glowing hot, eight-foot steel rod was smoking on a table beside her.

Dover moved quickly toward Tanya. He cut her down. Her limp body slammed over his shoulder. He headed for the door. The Trotskyites began firing at everyone and everything. The hag-witch twisted away from Alex Macko and leaped forward and ripped the heart out of the leader. She used his still throbbing heart to stuff down the throat of one of the big Trotskyites’s. The three remaining Trotskyites tried to retreat toward the cellar door, but the planks shifted from beneath their feet; flames wrapped around their bodies. Flames pulled them into the Bottomless Pit. Dover was half way to his car but he could still hear their endless screams.

He took Tanya to his trailer, and gently placed her in a bathtub of warm water. Her English was enough for her to understand he was a government official, and that he wanted her to testify against her brother, if Alexander was still alive after all the Hell that broke out. He wanted to charge Alexander Mackovick aka Alexa Macko with kidnapping, torture, and attempted murder. He gently sponged her bruised back and tended the puncture holes along her inner thighs and breasts.

“They wait for her to show . . . this witch BabaYaga, torture just a little. But plan was to push hot spike up me. Same as I do to them in Russia,” Tanya said.

“You use spikes on women because they pretend to be witches?” Dover said.

“Not pretend!” Tanya said. “They witches!”

“Come on, you don’t believe in that crap.”

“You are idiot. You saw.”

“I saw a bunch of God-ugly women.”

“Like the rest . . . you see but don’t believe,” she said in broken-english.

They debated the realities of witches, Gods, Capitalists, Communists, Stalin, and Trotsky.

“I not there to assassinate. He was my father . . . for many years. It was to establish rules for meeting with Joseph.” she said.

All Dover could hear was his heart pounding. She was beautiful. Fantastically beautiful. He made a patch for her twisted eye-socket, more for him than her. He gave no resistance when she asked to be held for a while so she could sleep. And no resistance when she woke and asked him to make love to her. She, the whore of the most powerful man in the world. A man who had exterminated millions of people. The through ran through his mind that he might be sought out and assassinated—tortured first—for just a simple act of making love to a stunningly beautiful woman at the wrong time in history. But she was naked and beautiful. And he was naked and weak. Another sleepless night for Dover Sage.

Chapter Seventeen

It was another sleepless night for Alex Macko also. Willie had nursed Turk and some of the surviving witches. Alexander had her destroy and bury witches who required anything more than rudimentary first-aid. But he was thinking about Dover Sage. It was him he saw in Mexico. It was him who cut Tanya down and carried her away from her destiny. It was him who let the boy-girl, Willie, go. Easy to find him; at his decrepit, little trailer on the other side of Topeka. But he would not be stupid enough to take Tanya there. He would be at the airport with her. He and Willie would be waiting. Sage could have Willie dead or alive. Alexander would want Tanya alive.

The next morning, Dover kissed Tanya goodbye—not at the airport but at his trailer. “Keep my gun in your lap. Listen for Toot’s bark; he barks at everyone. I’ll go down and file against your brother and the others. You and I will pull Alex Macko from his throne.”

“If I could love,” she whispered, “it would be Dover Sage,” she put her arms around him and kissed him long and hard.

He knew she was too beautiful, too old, and too worldly for him, but he also knew that in the future it would be Tanya Mackovick’s marred face that he would see when he thought of love.

No one in the City, State, or Federal agencies would touch the case. Alex Macko was admired by people in high places, and Joseph Stalin was feared by people in high places; it was a no win proposition. In any case, Tanya Mackovick was known around the world as a whore. No one would believe the testimony of a whore. But Dover returned home to tell Tanya as many lies in one hour as he had told in his entire lifetime. "They will make their decision in a few days," he said. But it was just lies to make her stay a few more precious days. She stayed those days, but never became closer to him than on that first night. When he returned home on Monday night a note laid in the center of the bed. "Friends came to take me home. Thank you for everything." It was signed Tanya. "P.S. If I were ten years younger and with far less miles, I would love you forever."

Love him forever? From Russia? All she had to do was stay. He would have loved her forever if she was twenty years his senior and whore to a thousand men. There were hundreds of better endings to his affair with Tanya Mackovick, but none included any reality. Reality was that Alex Macko had slipped through his fingers again. There would be more victims. Hundreds of victims. Maybe thousands. Maybe tens of thousands. Because Dover Sage let Alex Macko slip through his inexperienced fingers.

Alexander moved slowly around the side of the brand-new cinder blocks of his twenty thousand square foot lab. In the fenced area at the back of the building, he walked up behind one of three white cloaked technicians. "Olm, tell me what I spent three hundred thousand for," Alexander said.

The startled technician swung his head around and banged it into a flange on the mechanism. "Oh, damn!" he said. He rubbed his forehead. "It is as it looks, Mister Macko. This is an ice cannon connected to a highly advanced Singer computer; the only one on earth; someday, every machine will be connected to a computer; they think faster and more accurately and less emotionally than man. When I feed calculations into the Singer, it will aim the cannon into the proper cloud formations. Bam! Down will come rain or hail. Light or heavy. Benevolent or destructive. I will become like God."

"I will become like God," Alexander said. "When will it be ready for placement?"

"With your permission, I would like to ship the equipment to Ohio. I am certain we can destroy any crops that are ready for harvest. The people of Ohio will not surrender their land, I am certain, but it is an excellent place to experiment."

"Screw experimentation! Ship the equipment to Alberta Canada. I want crop destruction on a wholesale basis. I want their land. Give the impression you're up there to observe Hutterites. Show your interest in their high yield per acre through organic farming."

"Hutterites? Like Mennonites?" Olm said.

"Use them as cover. Hide the cannon away from them. Only destroy surrounding wheat land. Let the Hutterites think God has spared them the grief of the hail storms."

"Well, if their anything like the Mennonites or their second cousins the Amish, I won't be able to set foot on their land. The Kansas Amish are real jerks; they won't give you the time of day," Olm said.

"We have a little edge; Betina's sister married into the Ukrainian Hutterites. She's up there in Alberta. I sent her a note. She replied that you would be welcome at her place."

"Betina? The one who died mysteriously?"

Alexander grabbed the chunky man by the front of his white coat. "Your death won't be mysterious if you don't shut up and listen." Alexander moved close to the ice cannon.

He ran his hand over the smooth barrel. “A couple of historical facts. Hutterites don’t like the Amish. The Hutterites were the first Anabaptist. Jacob Hutter believed that infant baptism was blasphemous; only adult baptism could save your soul. He was tortured and burned for his beliefs”

“Jesus,” Olm said, “you know about that silly crap?”

“That silly crap will put you in their favor. So shut up and listen!” Alexander moved over toward the Singer computer. He touched several keys then turned to face Olm. “You may not be the one for the job.” Alexander looked a second time at the shiny barrel of the cannon, and then he headed toward the fence gate.

“Mister Macko, I apologize. It’s just that I know only jerks worship external powers. Nothing exists but us. You can pray, jump around, chant, wear funny hats, never drive an automobile, sacrifice your life and everyone around you and still nothing exists but us.”

Alexander smiled then whispered to Norman Olm, “Stick to science. Your head is up your butt about religion.”

“I apologize. We think differently on that point. But, I am the man for the job. You’re the boss so tell me what else I need to know about Jacob Hutter,” Olm said.

“Good, you were listening. Now listen to a couple more facts. They may save your silly butt. Some of Hutter’s followers left and followed Menno Simons, thus they became Mennonites. Another Jakob, only with a K, decided the Mennonites were too worldly so he, Jakob Ammann, started the Amish. Hutterites are two steps removed from the Amish; don’t screw up. It’s like calling a Catholic a Baptist.”

After less than two weeks in Alberta, Norman Olm thought he was ready to puke up his guts. The jerks spent their entire lives thinking about eternity. They sold their futures and their childrens' futures for a piece of bull-crap in the sky. He could picture his ice cannon blowing a hole in God’s butt; down would rain bull-crap all over the Hutterites; the only brown Hutterites on earth. They were full of crap mentally; they might as well be full of crap physically. Norman Olm disobeyed Alex Macko’s orders; he made sure the Hutterites’s crops were wiped out right along side the non-believers’ crops. By May 15th, he was certain, no acreage in the wheat belt of Alberta would be worth more than a sack of bull-crap. Science had again triumphed over religion. Norman Olm’s reality had triumphed over the Hutterites’ fantasy.

But only the non-believers sold their land to Alex Macko. The Hutterites accepted the disaster as a sign from God that they were still sinners.

But Alexander was riding high. He owned more wheat land than any individual in the world, but he still did not control the wheat of the world. His next move almost backfired, but BabaYaga came to his rescue.

In Moscow, Tanya had forgiven her Sosselo for putting her in harm’s way in a dusty village in Mexico then in a dusty cellar in Kansas. All was forgotten and forgiven. They decided to concentrate on the Americanization of Russia. Not the Capitalistic aspects, but the scientific, cultural, and industrial aspects. They had both tired of the purge and the trials and the impaling. Tanya had eliminated ninety-five percent of the witches of Russia. Joseph had eliminated fifty percent of the Party Congress, most of the Central Committee, a quarter of the Army officers, almost all of the Ambassadors and Ministers, all of the Moscow Ministry, and a few hundred thousand of the top Government Officials and Party Leaders. He finished off by eliminating masses of Army Commanders and Police Officials. The loving couple had eliminated over five million people. They had

turned Russia into Hell on Earth. There was nothing left to do but make love and Americanize.

While Evil paraded as patriotism and Ring Lardner, Jr. and his Comrades had their lives ripped apart by the Congressional “Commie” witch hunt; Dover Sage was on his own witch hunt. Dover’s brain was occupied with nothing but his witch hunt; he knew Freud was correct, when he stated that there were not enough tyrants in this sprawling world to have perpetrated all the evil without the help from the evil residing in the common man. Alexander Mackovick had Americanized his name to Alex Macko so he would be thought of as a common man; less suspect as a tyrant. But Dover knew that Alex Macko was a tyrant to end all tyrants. But as Freud said, he had to have a little help from his friends—the common man and woman: a big, fat woman with long, black hair and the unquenchable desire to be a witch. Macko and his witches were ruthless killers who had only escaped punishment because of their and the Armdecker family’s connections with the powers-that-be. Dover had tried to indict Macko and several of his followers on twelve different occasions, but he never even slowed them down.

There were scores of deaths surrounding the movements of the Coven; Dover was certain that Macko and his soul-mate, Turk—and as terrible as it seemed—Willie, were somehow involved in a series of missing persons complaints about older women with records of prostitution. The old prostitutes were last seen with Turk or Macko or with a “Bull-dike witch they called Willie.” Willie made no bones about her ability to rip apart any woman or man. She pulled her long, black hair into a tightly twisted pony-tail that emphasized her high cheek-bones. Her arms were muscular and as big as Dover’s. He’d seen her take on three of Topeka’s rowdies and trounce them while sustaining cuts and bruises that would have stopped most men. She wore men’s pants. No woman dared wear men’s pants.

Willie was spotted coming from an alley, with a prostitute slung over her shoulder, by one of Dover’s associates, but when he stopped her in an attempt to see if the prostitute was willing cargo, he was told by the prostitute to take a hike. Willie smiled her toothy grin and purportedly told the officer, “I’m going to screw her like no pansy-white-man ever screwed anybody. If you want to watch, it’ll cost you a dollar.” Willie reached down with her free hand and unzipped her trousers. “You want to see what I’m going to screw her with?”

The prostitute was never seen, again.

Willie moved her giant, muscular body slowly through the dark streets of Topeka. The prostitute was a tiny thing—felt like no more than a feather on her shoulder. It would be fun to use her waxed thingy on the tiny thing. It would be the best she’d ever had. Then Willie would have to strangle her for Alex Macko and BabaYaga. It would be fantastic to wax up the old thingy and screw her and just keep her, but Turk would find her and kill her because Macko wanted this tiny one. She looked like someone in Russia. So he wanted her badly. Willie found an abandoned garage at the end of a deserted lot just at the edge of town; she pulled the tiny prostitute from her shoulder and dropped her on the cracked cement of the garage floor.

“Ouch!” the prostitute said. “Willie, don’t be so rough. I want to do it with you. I’ve never been with a dike.”

Willie opened the front of the prostitute’s dress and pulled the two small breasts from the fancy bra. “You’ll never want a man again.” Willie unbuttoned the large ivory

buttons on her own course, man's shirt and unbound her huge breasts. "First you need to make Willie feel good." Willie put her arms around the screaming woman's slender back.

She picked her straight up in the air and popped her spine and quickly brought the woman's thrashing skull down on her own rock-hard forehead. The prostitute's skull splintered and split. Red-black blood flowed from her nostrils into Willie's evil, laughing mouth.

Willie was whistling as she strung up the prostitute's damaged body behind the cabinet in the Coven's cellar.

"Willie, where have you been?" Alexander said from the cellar stairs.

"Getting the one for Thursday," Willie said as she turned. She tried to hide the body from Macko's view.

"You were to bring me the little prostitute, Dorine. When you going to bring her?" Willie looked away from him. "Willie, what'd you do?" Macko moved toward the Indian dike.

Willie tried to block his view of the body hanging in the cabinet, but Macko pushed her aside. He spun the naked body around. He looked at the blood-streaked face, the split skull, and teeth-marks along the insides of the breasts and thighs. "Willie, is this Dorine?" Willie nodded her head no. "Come over here and clean the blood from her face." Willie hesitated then moved toward the open cellar door. She backed directly into the wide chest of Turk. "Turk! Break the dike-bitch's arms and legs. She screwed with Dorine. I specifically told her not to screw with her. I wanted her. She could be Tanya's twin."

"Tanya had a sister?" Turk said.

"No! You idiot! She looks like Tanya," Alexander said. "Are you smart enough to break Willie's neck?"

Turk put his forearm around Willie's neck. He began to squeeze but Willie bent forward and flipped the huge man over her shoulder. Turk slammed against the cellar wall and came away with a twisted ankle. He limped toward Willie but before he could grab her, she kicked out and caught the big man's crouch with her foot. Turk fell to the ground holding his testicles. Willie kicked out again and caught the side of Turk's bald head. But the big man reached up and grabbed the retreating foot. He pulled her forward and slammed his head into her broad buttocks and then drove her to the ground on her belly. She tried to push up from the ground but Turk drove his elbow deep into her lower back. He grabbed both of her flailing wrists and pushed them up and forward plowing her face into the cellar floor and wrenching her arms up against the back of her thick neck. Both arms snapped

Willie began begging for the first time in her life. "Mister Macko, please don't let him hurt me anymore! Please!"

Macko walked toward the whimpering Indian and kicked out. Her flat nose slipped to one side; blood sprayed across her cheek-bones and painted her warrior's face. She sprang up and knocked Turk to the floor. Her arms were useless but she drove a shoulder into Macko's mid-section and knocked him next to Turk on the cellar floor.

"I'm going to beat you both," Willie spit blood as she enunciated her words. Her foot came straight down on Macko's throat and sprained his neck. Her other foot kicked out and caught Turk in the throat as he attempted to scramble to Macko's aid. Willie dropped down with both knees and drove her weight onto Turk's bent leg. It snapped.

“Oh damn!” Turk screamed. “She broke my leg. The dike-bitch is knocking the Hell out of us. I don’t believe it.”

Macko reached into his dust-caked vest and pulled out his gold-plated Beretta. The bullet caught Willie in her ankle but before she crashed to the ground, a second bullet tore into her knee-cap. Mako struggled to his feet. Macko held his head to one side and stroked his strained neck as he walked toward the sobbing Indian. He stood directly over her and pointed the Beretta at her exposed temple.

“No! Don’t shoot her. I’m going to break her legs then do her,” Turk said.

“Okay, but if I was a betting man, I would bet that if you ever do her, it will be after you have shot her dead,” Alexander said.

Turk struggle to his feet and used the cellar wall to brace his big body as he hobbled toward the downed Willie. “I’m going to break both your legs then do you. Then I’m going to cut you up.”

“I’ll break it off if you bring it close to me.”

Turk leaned against the wall and unsnapped his belt-buckle then unlaced the thick leather strap from his pants. He hobbled over to the cabinet and pulled a length of rope from the top shelf. He looped the belt and tied it to the rope’s end. As he hobbled back toward her he said, “I was going to do you, before, to turn you straight. But now I’m going to do it just to screw with your head before you die.” He moved toward her. His broken leg was sending brittle pain to his brain. There was no way he could get down between her legs to do the dastardly deed, so he would have to bring her up to him. After three attempts, he looped the belt around her dodging head.

She tried to raise her arms to fend him off, but the pain was excruciation, and she couldn’t school from his path because her legs were numb from the wounds.

Turk looped the belt around her neck and slipped the rope through the eye-bolt embedded in the cellar’s rafter. He put all his power into the rope and slowly hoisted her limp weight up into a standing position. He pushed the butcher’s table up against her legs to hold some of the tremendous weight so she wouldn’t choke to death. Propping his injured leg straight out, he slowly bent down and tied the rope’s loose end to the leg of the butcher’s table. At the side of the cellar stair’s he was able to find a two-by-four—his weapon of choice—and drag it over to Willie. He braced himself and swung hard with the thick length of wood against the back of Willie’s thighs. Willie’s screams filled the cellar. Turk swung again and again until he was certain he had snapped both thigh bones. Then he undid her belt and dropped her bloody trousers to the floor.

When Dover found Willie whimpering under his trailer, he thought it impossible that she hadn’t been dropped there by Alex Macko as a warning. But Willie mumbled that she had escaped from Macko and Turk and dragged herself the full length of Topeka around the outskirts through the fields; she had a twisted neck, two broken arms, one broken leg, a shattered knee-cap, bullet hole in her ankle. Torn flesh on the backs of both of her legs, two black eyes, a broken nose, broken jaw, and the skin rubbed raw off most of her body, and she was dehydrated and starving to death. But Dover knew Willie could survive anything and so what she said happened, happened. It was a riot.

That freak Turk had decided to do Willie. Because he had screwed everybody else. And good old Willie broke his. hard penis. She twisted sideways and let her weight fall off the butcher’s table; in one move, her weight broke Turk’s equipment and snapped the rope that was to become her hangman’s noose. While Turk was rolling on the floor,

Willie shouldered the butcher's table over onto his head—probably killing the freak—then she dragged herself up the cellar stairs and out into the wheat field. When Macko went looking for her, she was only inches from detection on more than three occasions. Over the next days and nights she rolled and dragged her heavy body through the fields around Topeka.

“You are damned unbelievable,” Dover said. “I’ll take care of you. But you can never go back to the witches.”

“Mister Macko will want me dead. They will all be after me. I will go to Oklahoma,” Willie said.

Dover was certain that Dorine's disappearance had to do with the fight between Willie and Turk. Willie must have tried to save her. Willie must have put her own life on the line for a prostitute. He always knew Willie was more good than bad. But she would not let him put her on the witness stand. Anyway, his bosses would not buy her credibility because of her years of loyalty to the Coven and Macko. Macko and Turk always had alibis confirmed by the most respected church ladies in Topeka. Dover knew the ladies were all part of the unholy black-witch Coven he had had just a glimpse of during the Tanya Mackovick rescue—it had been seven years but he could still picture Tanya hanging naked from the center rafter and later laying naked on his bed.

He knew his theory was sound: Alex Macko was some kind of killer who used witchcraft to promote world domination of the food supply. Dover's bosses told him he was nuts and on the verge of being reassigned. He had been demoted three times, and had dozens of negative-citations for beyond-the-call-of-duty harassment; Macko had become one of the most generous six-figure cash contributors to Dover's many bipartisan superior's political campaigns.

Dover had escaped death—contracted for by Alex Macko—more than ten times. But Dover knew that some of the gains, made by Macko, were due to Special Agent Dover Sage's slow moves. If he had moved faster, by a few hours, after Clay Armdecker was killed in a plane crash and Clement Armdecker crawled twenty miles from the crash site and was put in the hospital semi-conscious then disappeared along with Topeka's favorite nurse, Dover would have had a witness. Clement would have been a good witness for the prosecution against his brother-in-law, Alex Macko. Alex Macko would have been shown up for the ruthless killer and madman that he was. First, Dover was certain Macko had Armdecker murdered by Turk. Then the madman had to get rid of the Armdecker twins in order to inherit the farms or at least have Mary Louise, his wife of nine years, inherit the farms. Dover felt responsible for the brothers' deaths because he had called to have them meet him in Lawrence to view some new evidence that would convince them the story of their late father being waylaid by the Turtle Creek Gang was Alex Macko bull. Clay told Dover he would fly his new two-seater up and meet him on the outskirts of Lawrence on the Neidimyer ranch's dirt landing strip—his brother would be along. Clay and his brother never arrived. Dover had no idea how they died, but he was sure Macko had a hand in it.

Dover was correct. Alexander met the brothers at the Topeka airport before the flight. “Clay, I know this crappy little plane holds only two, but the journey is short, and it's urgent that Anne-Rose get to Lawrence,” he said. “She's from the church. She needs to be in Lawrence to console her dying daughter.”

As the plane rose slowly in the bright orange sky, Alexander chanted, “BabaYaga, Sacred Mother of All That is Evil; hear your faithful disciple’s plea. Enter my witch-disciple, Anne-Rose’s body. Devour the flying Armdeckers. I pledge all to thee. Enter her now!” He watched the plane disappear into the dawn. The Flying Armdeckers? A damn circus act. A dead circus act. Rain clouds formed in the morning sky. Kansas was going to have its first rain in four months.

Inside the laboring plane, Clement started a conversation with the rather pleasant lady stuffed into the cramped, back compartment. He twisted his body into an uncomfortable position and spoke to her over the back of the passenger’s seat, “I’m sorry you have to crouch there, but my brother’s too fat.” he grinned toward Clay in the pilot’s seat. “Anyway, I can’t fly a plane. And I’m too big to fit back there. But, as Alexander said, it’s a relatively short trip. We’ll be down sooner than you think. We’ll make sure you have transportation to you daughter’s side. He shifted in his seat and stared directly at the church woman. “What’s you daughter’s name . . . ? Clay? Look! What the Hell!” Clement screamed.

Thick, black grease poured from the church lady’s grinning mouth; it seeped onto the seats and dripped down onto the floor boards.

“Do something!” Clay said. “Shoot her!”

“It’s all true. Alexander and his scum-bag witches. Damn!” Clement said.

Before either could move, BabaYaga sprang from the grease covered belly of the church lady and merged with the grease seeping through the seats and dripping on the floor. Her open mouth reflected through the grease on the floor under Clay’s feet. The reflection sucked hard on Clay’s wing-tipped boots. His screaming body sucked down into BabaYaga’s emerging body. She took his place at the controls. She jerked the small plane’s stick straight back and set the overburdened plane into a slow climb. Clement pulled a small revolver from the map pouch strapped to the plane’s door. He fired all four shots from the tiny gun; three shots hit the hag-witch with no effect, but the fourth hit the body of the church lady. She screamed and died. BabaYaga disappeared. Clement grabbed the plane’s stuttering stick. Too late! The plane stalled in a radical climb. It dropped, backwards, spinning toward the frying-pan flat plains on the outskirts of Topeka. Clement Armdecker—like Willie—should not have survived, yet he did. But he survived in one of God’s blind spots; his prayers for direction went unheard. He started to crawl. Pain shot through all the major parts of his damaged body. His left leg was dragging because the Quadriceps, and its calf muscle were both exposed like the raw, red drawing in an Atlas Of The Human Body; his damaged left eye could barely make out, through its blood-blurred peripheral view, the torn Deltoid of his left shoulder. His right hand had been burnt into a black ball of flesh and ash. He knew death was walking close by. He prayed to God for his arrival at Mary Louise’s—alive and conscious. He prayed that he would be coherent enough to describe to his innocent sister exactly how Clay was devoured. Tell her what scum-bag; son of Satan had placed that hideous witch aboard Clay’s plane. Alex Macko. Alexander Mackovick. In league with the Devil. He was the Devil. Clement’s brain was getting woozy from loss of blood. He could feel a slick, wet patch of cloth stuck slick to his upper thigh—it made it easier for him to slide along the flat, hard packed earth towards Topeka. God would guide him. God had guided him through a good life. An excellent life until the thing of the Devil, Alex Macko, came along. He had done lots of bad things; the worst was the night he got drunk as a skunk

and raped Turner's daughter. She was walking along the road, too late at night—no decent girl would be on the road at that hour—when Turk, Alex and he stopped. Turk pulled the young girl into the back seat of the limo. They all took turns. He was last. She begged him to stop. The next morning, when Alex said Turk had taken care of everything, he felt relieved. Then the Turner girl was missing; but he convinced himself she had run away rather than face, Truck Turner, her father. What could she say to him? That three grown men had raped her because she was out late in a flimsy dress, and incidentally, father, one of the attackers was your best friend, Clement Armdecker. Damn, he'd done some terrible things since Alexander showed up.

Clement dragged his dying body along the sun baked Kansas dirt. And that damn War Wheat Bonus! Alexander got them the bonus, but they lied to Clay about the amount; they split the difference—Alex and him. Alexander was the Devil. Mary Louise had to be warned. He was dying, but he was determined. He was determined to kill Alex Macko. To avenge his father's death. And the impossible death of Clay. He was determined. And he was bull-strong. But he was crawling the wrong direction.

Chapter Eighteen

Clement Armdecker was found, by a farmer, three days later. There had been no search party because at the crash site there had been two bodies burned beyond recognition. The family, lead by Alex Macko, thought only the two brothers had flown from their Topeka farm. Alexander thought BabaYaga had helped Anne-Rose escape.

As soon as Dover heard that Clement was in Topeka General, he called the reception desk. "Don't let anyone in until I get there," he said.

"Yes, Mister Sage. Mister Macko left about a half hour ago, but Mrs. Schnider from Clement Armdecker's church is still with him," the receptionist said.

"Go check!" he said.

The nurse-receptionist never came back. From that day forward she was another missing person along with Clement Armdecker. But no one but Dover gave a damn. Everyone said that the two had run off. They didn't care that Clement was half dead. They felt that the missing nurse needed to nurse someone so badly that she stole the dying man. Nobody wanted to believe anything bad was happening. Because everything was going so well. The farmers were happier than pigs in mud. Dover remembered when the Agricultural Adjustment Act came into being. The Kansas wheat farmer received aid from the Federal Government. Alexander Mackovick aka Alex Macko received the first check. The idiot Government paid the psychopath not to raise wheat; he was one of the over producers. The thankless jerk went to the Supreme Court to eliminate the processing tax that was used to fund the program. Macko never, ever lost. He won the case which made it illegal to tax his processing companies, and he still got the subsidy because the

politicians appropriated the funds elsewhere. The psychopath always won. Big winnings. During the Second World War, Macko became one of the wealthiest men in the world. He supplied bread and wheat to all sides. He had bakeries in Italy, Germany, Austria, England, France, and the United States. The only place he didn't make dough-cash money—was in Japan and Russia—he wasn't into rice and he was the only wheat exporter who wouldn't sell to Russia.

But that was good because it put a Russian target on his back. Dover hoped the Commies had a double A sharpshooter. The blood of the Korean War turned into gold as the troops on both sides gobbled up rice and wheat supplied by Alex Macko and his corporate compatriots. Macko and his kind may have even perpetrated the war. It was possible. The corporate pirates would go to any lengths to make the bottom line turn from red to black. The red was the blood, of the Commies and the black was the skin color of most of the dead front-line dog-faces. It was all about money. Anything for money because money was power and power was all Macko and his kind existed for. Somehow that made power evil. It always seemed that way. Power equaled Evil. War was a great thing for the power hungry. A fantastic thing for Evil. Both exercised their will over people as death became a common denominator. “The Communist bastards are trying to destroy your freedoms. The freedoms to work your butts off and make Macko and his comrades rich. The freedom to never have enough money to live a proper life while Macko and his buddies live in mansions and drive cars that cost more than six of your houses.

“Freedom to go bankrupt with any attempt to compete with the big boys.” The flip side was. “The Capitalistic pigs strive to steal the food from the Worker's mouths. Food that should be fought for so that the Communist Party bosses could have ten times the helpings that the Worker had. Food that should be fought for so the Communist Party bosses can horde it and sell it for things that made them and theirs comfortable. Food that will made them fat and lazy while they lounged around reading Marx, Lenin, Mackovick, Trotsky, and Stalin.

While Alex Macko and his peers were making fortunes on the wheat of the world, Dover moonlighted from the Kansas Attorney General's Office as a volunteer for the FAO: the Food and Agricultural Organization, headquartered in Rome, Italy. It was established in 1945 to swap ideas about international farming. Dover volunteered specifically to have another organization's backing as he pursued Alex Macko. Dover had grown to look like a mix of raw-boned sod farmer and raw-boned range rider. The twang in his voice belied the brain in his head. But he was a true red-neck: he volunteered for the war in Korea the day after the Chinese joined the North Koreans. Dover knew not all Chinese were bad—just ninety percent of them. The bastard Chinese and the bastard Russians would rule the blood-soaked earth someday. Between them there were over a billion people that would have to be blown away before sane people could live safely. But he was rejected as 4F because of a heart murmur. “You doctors are stupid; I'm strong as a horse. All red-necks have heart murmurs, cause of what we eat.”

Now, Dover waited three hours to get through to Rome; the international lines had been down all morning. Since the religious revival, everybody and his brother was calling Rome. “Mister Hienrich, Alex Macko already has a corner on the wheat of the world, but I'm more concerned with his dedication to the destruction of the rice crops of the Malaysia Archipelago . . . no, damn it . . . I'm serious. He's a sociopath, and

megalomaniac, and a mass murdered.” He hesitated and listened to Hienrich on the other end. Then continued. “No, I never saw him murder anyone, but I know he’s had others do the blood-letting. He’s destroyed millions of acres of food, around the world, resulting in starvation of hundreds of thousands. “Litenburg, Tick, and Olm are not in his employ for benevolent reasons; they are damn near as sick as Macko. Norman Olm is an infamous climatologist; he was working on destructive hail long before the Russians. I can place him in most of the areas where abrupt weather changes have occurred. Whenever he catches a flight to a wheat or rice producing area, you can bet there will be some very unusual weather. He’s working with ultra-expensive, ultra-sophisticated equipment. Macko foots the bill. The GS-8 and the GS-12 with a Singer back up cost damn near a half million.” He shifted the phone. He hoped Hienrich was not sleeping on the other end of the line. “A young psychopath named Lanzel Tick, has been in the area prior to most of the latest major Green Bug infestations. A few years ago he worked with me on loan from the Bureau of Etymology and Plant Quarantine; he’s more insect than man. He knows more about Green Bugs, Hessian Flies, Saw Bugs, and Locust than any ten etymologists. He’s a young genius, and he’s insane. Deadly insane. And he works for Macko. The most dangerous of the bunch is Litenburg, one of the truly walking wounded, his specialty is plant disease. Really any kind of disease, but I’m certain Macko only pays for plant destroying diseases. I’ll bring you proof before the May conference.”

Dover was certain Alex Macko was the most dangerous man in the world. Dover had seen the world’s bloated bellies, its listless, starving eyes, and its despair. He had been places in the world where children were swaddled and buried minutes after birth because their parents were ignorant in the methods of birth control but wise enough to understand that suffocation minutes after birth was one hundred percent better than starving until the average death-age of thirteen. Thirteen gut wrenching years of pain. Pain due to the greed of powerful men like Alex Macko. Powerful men who controlled enough food to give a balanced meal to every man, woman, and child on earth. But food was not grown to give away. It was sold at varying prices. When it was dear, it took an arm and a leg to purchase. When it was plentiful, it took only a leg. Alex Macko was the harbinger of corporate control of the food supply. The corporate cartels would eventually control every morsel. Cartels kept food dear by destroying a major portion of the yields when surplus years occurred. Why not give the surplus to the needy? Because it would destroy the customer base for the free market. But the needy have no money to spend in the free market. Well, a third party foots the bill for the needy and buys from the free market. Why should the Food Industry foot the bill? The Food Industry, why not call it the Life and Death Industry? Dover knew that without food, starving children died. They couldn’t wait for a third party—a charity or a Government Agency. Only a first party would do. The children had to grow the food for themselves. It was just as painful to starve to death from lack of Government controlled food—Soviet or American—as it was to starve to death from lack of Corporate controlled food. Death was the bottom line.

The first right of every child or caged beast, in the screwed up world was the right to sufficient food. Bless the beasts and the children. But both the beasts and the children were the first to be sacrificed. Neither could vote. Neither could bring sexual pleasure to a sane man. No vote. No sex. No power. No food. Alex Macko and his peers felt that only those equipped to spend a high percentage of their gross income on food should be allowed to survive. Survival of the fittest.

Dover had heard rumors that Macko had vowed, that in his lifetime, any and all food would cost more per ounce than gold. If it came to pass, the children would be the first to perish. The FAO, the most powerful agricultural organization in the world—the one useful organization in the stodgy United Nations—had starving children in its own city of Rome. And in the most prolific contributor to the international horn of plenty, the United States, children starved. Starving in America? Unbelievable! Children starved around the world because their parents no longer controlled the land. Corporation and Governments controlled the land; land that clothed and sheltered and fed the children; land that no longer felt the endearing warmth of the children’s dancing feet, but now felt only the alienating stomp of the Government’s eager, angry jack-boots, of the cold, hard strut of the Corporate land manager. Neither cared about the children. No vote at the polls and no vote at the board room. Governments and Corporations had to get out of the food business. Alex Macko would have to go first.

In the autumn of 1953, Dover saw Macko at the annual Harvest Festival in Wilson, Kansas. The Korean war was over; a fast, efficient war: only sacrificed a minimum of good men. The United States won. The North Koreans won. The only losers appeared to be the six Wilson, Kansas families who were at the Harvest Festival with black armbands. The Festival turned out to be a “We Won The War Celebration.” Alex Macko wore an Uncle Sam hat. He was one of five judges of the Natural Art Contest: flowers, grass, and assorted rocks tied or pasted to weathered boards.

“Macko! Mackovick! What ever you’re calling yourself, beautiful weather.” Dover said. “I see you didn’t give the command to Norman Olm to screw it up.”

“Mister Macko to you . . . Sage.” Alexander said. “Still slithering around for the FAQ and the Attorney General’s Office?”

“Macko, you still haven’t learned the American way of hospitality. I’m going to teach you the Kansas way. I’m going to pound your evil, psychopathic head into the dung-stained dirt,” Dover said, “then I’m going to your wife and show her proof you engineered her father’s and her brothers’s murderers”

Macko’s powerful swing would have knocked most men to their knees, but Dover just palmed the slamming fist and twisted Macko down to his knees. They were in front of a judging stand wrapped in red, white, and blue crepe paper and dotted with Macko’s fellow judges. Dover interlaced his raw-boned knuckles and brought them hammering down between Macko’s shoulder blades. From behind, Turk smashed his fist into Dover’s kidneys; the surprise blow knocked Dover’s large frame into the too-often-used wood of the judge’s stand and toppled the structure on a kilter sideways. The seated judges rolled off onto the dusty Kansas soil. Willie came from behind Turk and caught him between his legs with her heavy work-boot. Turk tumbled next to Dover. Dover came away from the debris with his gun drawn.

He walked up to Turk, who was being helped up by Macko, and placed the worn muzzle of his shiny 45 against the big man’s forehead. He pulled the trigger. The empty chamber clicked impotently but caused Turk to wet the front of his spanking-new, brass-buttoned overalls.

Turk stayed like a naughty child being reprimanded by his sadistic mother. He waited for the next chamber to go off. He was dead for sure. It would blow the top of his head off and plaster it across the lipstick face of the pompous judge who has been

frowning at him since the early morning set-up. Maybe the constant—lifelong—throbbing in his head would stop . . . dead.

Willie grabbed Dover's hand. "If anyone is going to kill him, it'll be me," she said.

Dover removed her hand from the weapon and placed the weapon back against Turk's sweating forehead. "Next time, I'm going to blow your pea brain all over your master," Dover said. He holstered his gun under his jacket, tipped his hat to the judges, and left the Festival with Willie in tow. It was the same Festival that, twenty years earlier, he had seen Betina Mackovick pleasuring some of the Golden Wheat judges. He had sauntered around the back of one of the utility tents, and there she was with three judges standing in a row with their trousers around their ankles. She was working her way down the line and talking between movements. "I know you boys want to vote for my wheat. And I'm certain that even without this little service I'm giving you . . . you would. But this is just so you remember me. This is sort of a prepayment for me winning the Golden Wheat title." She finished one then wiped her mouth and knelt in front of the next. "You boys also know that this is just a nice gesture. I don't have to do this to get your vote. But this is better for both of us. You all know that if I don't win, you're dead." Betina's wheat won the award for the fourth year in a row. Nobody seemed surprised.

Dover thought then that everyone had guessed what Betina had done behind the utility tent. But it was also assumed that the Russians and in particular the Mackovicks just knew how to raise the best wheat. The Armdeckers raised the most wheat, but the Mackovicks raised the best. The story was that the Mackovicks always spent the most money on research. They deserved the award because they made the most effort to raise the best. They were correct about one thing; the last of the Mackovicks, Alex Macko, spent a ton on research. But only Dover knew what kind of research.

While Litenburg, Olm, and Tick researched methods of destruction of the world's food supply, Alex Macko began traveling around the country opening Covens. He had decided he could spread the body count by creating BabaYaga covens throughout the Wheat Belt. He needed favors from BabaYaga about once every six or eight weeks. He needed more help in the last years because he wasn't using Red Hawk warriors. After the boy-girl, Willie, escaped, Red Hawk stopped being a partner and became a Dictator. Dictator Red Hawk, instead of Partner Red Hawk. Alexander had the old chief and his warriors led into an ambush at a raid of the Hooks's wheat farm in Montana. The F.B.I. mowed down the Indian renegades as they came up the farm's bumpy road in their slowly moving, expensive automobiles that Alex Macko had bought them. It was one of those beautiful ironies of life. An added bonus was Willie riding up front with her uncle. Red Hawk was dead and so was the silly boy-girl. He was glad they were gone, but they had served well. So he needed BabaYaga more than ever. Problem was, Dover Sage had used local pressure to close every damn Coven just as they started to be productive.

Alexander needed many Covens. If he conjured BabaYaga only in Topeka, it would create an inordinate number of missing persons. But if he conjured the hag-witch in different areas of the mid-west and Canada, he would spread the body count so it looked like an occasional disappearance. All he needed was Dover Sage off his back, and he could start operating in a big way again. The next Deed he would ask of BabaYaga would be the demise of Dover Sage; it would be his first request when BabaYaga was conjured to his first new Coven. Salt Lake City, Utah showed the most promise; religion was rampant. He bought a small commercial building on West Temple. He had a cellar dug

then the walls paneled with birch. Recruiting witches was a piece of cake. The fat women who believed in Moroni were already seduced by the words of Lucifer in 2 Nephi. They wanted to know why Lucifer and women had nothing more than a second standing in the world. The women had secretly identified with Lucifer; all Alexander had to do was exploit that identification. The Salt Lake City Coven was formed and manned more rapidly than any other. The first sacrifice was a husband of two of the new witches. He had married both of them under the guise of the marriage being ordained by God. He was not sacrificed because of polygamy—the two witches rather enjoyed each others company when the master was away—but because he had been out screwing around with a sixteen year old, and talking of her being his third wife; maybe bring her home to his two dirt-poor wives and their five starving children.

The husband sacrifice started a trend that expanded so rapidly that Alexander had to step in and coordinate. “One husband for every four civilians. Draw straws to decide whose husband.”

“Turk, old friend, you’re going to be a busy man. You will ride all the wild rides with the witches except for BabaYaga,” Alexander said.

“Thank God for that exception,” Turk said.

Alexander looked around, waiting for fire to erupt from the office floor. “I’m going to concentrate on the scientific end of the business and concentrate on opening enough Covens so BabaYaga will only appear at any given one once a year. A special event. Something the witches will wait for with baited breath.”

Macko had opened twenty Covens across the mid-west. In Omaha, he recruited on the promise that BabaYaga would keep the Negroes from crossing into the state. In Austin, he promised no Mexicans. In small industrial towns such as Gary, Indiana, he promised no Puerto Ricans. When all the Covens were open and each had conjured and sacrifice to BabaYaga, Alex Macko got serious. He had paid off local officials to make no moves if Dover Sage came calling.

BabaYaga had become the most powerful witch in the world.

Events in Russia had stopped Tanya from impaling any more witches; her Sosselo, Joseph Stalin, had died. She was under house arrest in an asylum in the mountains. The new Kremlin boss, Nikita Krushev, spent most of his time de-Stalinizing the USSR: Joseph Stalin had been a murderer, a tyrant, and a very evil man. No one noticed the surge in evil; the witch-perpetrated evil rivaled Stalin’s evil in the hay-days of his Terror. From the asylum, Tanya Mackovick wrote about the evil reign of BabaYaga, but officials attributed the stories to her Dementia; she was strapped to her bed and sedated and used by any passer-by. She had possibly been the most beautiful fifty year old woman in the world when she entered the asylum, but years later, on her release, she was nothing more than a used up hag. In her heart, Tanya Mackovick, knew BabaYaga was laughing. But Tanya accepted the transformation as a benefit. She was no longer recognized by the people lined up along the street waiting for food or toilet paper. She could go to the State store without being booed or stoned. She could walk up on an unsuspecting witch without recognition until the six inches of steel was deep inside the witch’s black heart.

Tanya walked toward a dark alley behind the State store. Early in the day, she noticed five fat, long haired women sneaking around the corner of the massive building. She moved quietly through the darkness toward a splintered wooden door.

It was Tuesday night. The BabaYaga Coven would be meeting, if she was correct in her assumption that theirs was a new Coven. Since Joseph had died, Covens were sprouting up like fungus. The witches were coming out of hiding. No more spikes up their fat butts. The problem can only be solved if she had some help. But no one wanted to listen to a skinny hag. She would have to get some seedy hooligans to help her. Only pay she could offer was her body or her mouth, but no strong, young hooligan would work for a skinny, old hag. There was not much chance she could regain her beauty. She was so beat down inside that she had no courage to try to gain back her looks. She liked looking like a hag. It mirrored her inner soul. She always had been a hag inside. It was perfect. It was evil. She needed to seduce some new followers with her knowledge of how to use evil to gain power. Joseph used evil to gain power. She could teach some young men to do the same. She would not need to do them. They would follow just for the rush that power brings.

It was months before she found three, young hooligans who believed that the skinny hag had been Tanya Mackovick, the power behind Stalin. She was ready to eliminate the last of the witches. She moved with the young men to the center of Saratov. It would be the Genesis of her movement. Before the decade was out, she was certain she could use evil to place her and her followers—which would surely number in the thousands by the end of her life—to put Stalinism back into the hearts of the Russian people. She could see by their attitudes that they were shifting away from the roll of slaves. That was a problem because she needed slaves. Faceless masses. Her followers were allowed to rob, rape, torture and murder their victims, but no penetration. Penetration was to be saved for the inevitable event when her brother, Alexander, was brought to her. Then penetration would be the order of the day.

“Tanya, a Coven is being formed at Simbrisk,” a swarthy youth said. He pointed at a map that had been roughly etched in the side of a cabinet. “Your cousin is the leader, so we didn’t know if you wanted them slaughtered or not.”

“Slaughter them no matter. Matters not if they’re my sisters, if they’re dirty, if they worship the slut-witch, if they follow the harlot of my brother, screw them up. Make them die a slow death. They chant for evil—answer their chants.”

In Simbrisk, Tanya approached a fat woman who appeared to be half Tanya’s age. “Aunt Tanya,” the woman said as she ran toward Tanya, with open arms. “We were told that you had been released. That you were now sane. That Stalin made you spike our Sisters. You are still beautiful.” Tanya’s niece reached out and brushed Tanya’s gray hair back from her face.

Tanya’s hand shot out and drove the knife deep into the fat woman’s belly. The woman fell forward and raked at Tanya’s front as life’s breath dwindled. The bleeding body slumped to the ground. Tanya and her followers entered where the niece had come from. Ten fat, black-haired women decorated the Coven walls with symbols of the Mistress Beelzebub. The slaughter began.

“Find the priest,” Tanya said to one of her companions. “Find the priest to do the Last Rites.”

The priest was nearby he had followed them to his cousins house. Tears froze on Father Christian Mackovick’s face. “Tanya, our Lord will not condone this slaughter. Even for the good of mankind. It is still a sin in our Lord’s eyes.”

“I will continue to eliminate any followers of BabaYaga. Not for the good of mankind. But because the hag-witch destroyed our family,” Tanya said.

“My child, you must come back into the Church. The Lord will only forgive so much evil. You have outdone yourself.”

“There may not be a Lord or God for all I know.”

“You are a strange creature, Tanya, you believe in the power of Evil, but not the power of Good. God is Good.”

“I believe in the power of Evil because I have seen it. I have seen little of the Good and none of God. Take your God and go to some dreamland. He does not exist in any country I have visited.”

“If you continue to slaughter innocent women, I will have to find the authority that will stop you.”

“Christian, you have sealed your death warrant. We can not let you leave. You are a stupid man working for a really stupid God.” Tanya turned to her followers and turned her thumbs down.

Christian was dragged to the back of the Coven cellar. The hooligans pulled him toward the table where they had slaughtered the last of the witches. The hooligans placed Christian on the table.

“Tanya! I am your brother. God will find more evil in this deed than in any other.”

Tanya turned and walked back toward the entrance. “Kill him!” she shouted over her shoulder.

The smallest hooligan released Christian’s arm as the big one pulled the struggling priest onto the table. The small one slashed out with the knife toward Christian’s throat. Part of the floor shifted under its own power and placed the big one’s throat in the path of the jagged blade. Blood sprayed, from the ruptured throat, creating a fan of red that ignited into a red-orange fire and enveloped the small hooligan. Christian looked toward Heaven then crossed himself and ran from the burning cellar.

In the Wheat Belt, Alex Macko used the local Covens to birth the seeds needed for the acreage he owned or managed. He took over farms that had been destroyed by climatology and rustology and Green Bugs. He offered emergency loans with easy terms secured by equipment. “Olm, go screw up the weather in Utah. There are seventeen farms I want to go into default,” Macko said. Alexander remembered BabaYaga’s warning some twenty years before, “Don’t screw with the weather, it’s God’s only joy.” But he did screw with the weather, and the sleeping God never screwed with him. BabaYaga knew zip. Stupid, old hag. She was only good for spewing the wheat seeds into a witch’s belly.

After Olm manipulated the weather, Litenburg had Rust spores ride the wave of bad weather. Litenburg wiped out most of Utah’s wheat within the first two years of the Coven’s residence. “Timing is of the most importance, Mister Macko,” Olm said. The chubby climatologist pointed to a wall map. “I could bring rain at the wrong time and aid the farmer instead of devastating him. Best time to bring rain is the days of planting . . . the seeds wash from the soil . . . or during harvest so the wheat can not be thrashed. Mildew forms.”

“Can you help Litenburg with his spores?” Alex said.

“If you can get us one of those new jet engines from Rolls Royce, we could blow the spores up high enough so the wind currents could carry them for miles,” Olm said then hesitated. “Problem is, we have no control. They could destroy wheat at a friendly farm.”

“There are no friendly farms in Utah,” Alex said. He walked toward the door. “I’ll be back to foreclose on equipment and farms when the defaults start.”

Macko flew to Tulsa to attend the BabaYaga Coven of Tulsa. The sacrifice was Tulsa’s first foreign born Sheriff—he was born in Lubbock, Texas. Tulsa witches didn’t mind Alex being a foreigner. Fact was, they were more comfortable with their Warlock being a foreigner; it was somehow more evil, and they perceived BabaYaga and her Mistress Beelzebub as being foreigners, but they could not condone anyone but a Tulsan holding public office. Macko ritualized every witch in the Coven then BabaYaga, but his mind was not on the happenings. He was giggling to himself about the devastating results of Lanzel Tick’s Green Bug infestation on eastern Oklahoma. It left the state with not one strand of harvestable wheat. Nothing! Standing. Nothing could stop him! Not even Mister Dover Sage. The red-neck was running into nothing but trouble every time he started some new legal move.

Dover started his constant interviewing of Alex Macko’s employees and suppliers.

“Lanzel Tick, how you been, boy?” he said.

Tick swivel turned from his project at a lab work station. “Mister Sage, long time no see.” he said.

“Lanzel, you still the insane punk you always were? Still screwing with Mother Nature and her Green Bugs?”

“I have been instructed to be nice to you, but not answer any questions without an attorney present. And if you harass me, I have been instructed to call for help and have you ejected from the work area.”

Dover grabbed the skinny youth by the collar of his dirty, lab coat. “Lanzel, boy, tell me about the Green Bug infestation of our neighbor to the West.”

“Neighbor?”

“Oklahoma, you stupid turd.”

“Oklahoma has a history of Green Bug infestations. You have no proof it was anything but Mother Nature. Mister Macko said if you even suggest I had anything to do with that or any other natural disaster, I was to call our solicitor and file suit.”

“You slimy bastard! Talk to me or I’ll get you and your solicitor subpoenaed to the Grand Jury hearing on crop destruction,” Dover said.

“I know nothing about crop destruction. I am here to preserve the Macko family’s crops. I have supervision over their crops . . . world wide. I am here to . . . kill any Green Bugs who feed on the Macko family’s wheat.”

“Lanzel, boy, you never killed an insect in your life. You are an insect. It would be like killing yourself.”

As Dover was speaking, a red and black insect walked slowly up Lanzel Tick’s bare arm, across his shirt sleeve and into his pocket. The laboratory was filled with square glass habitats crawling with larva and rainbow colored insects. Over the lab’s door stood a mutilated stalk of wheat—the endospore of the stalk was riddled with needle-like holes—it hung like a monument to all the buzzing, chirping insects caged below its gaze.

“Mister Sage, that is not true. When I worked with the Bureau of Entomology and Plant Quarantine, I had the best kill record in the entire agency. It was given a Presidential citation for my use of gamma rays.”

“Tick, you’re a psychopath just as your employer, Alex Macko, is a psychopath. I’m going to prove it to the FAQ and then the Attorney General and the Grand Jury and anyone else it takes to get your tight little butt thrown in with some real men. You’ll have some hard times. I’m talking real hard times.”

Lanzel Tick tapped his breast pocket. The small red-on-black insect walked from Tick’s pocket and up the youth’s pimpled neck and stopped at the corner of the youth’s prissy mouth. The insect stepped onto Tick’s extended tongue. Tick blew the bug directly onto Dover’s cheek. The pain was sharp and instant. Dover felt a rock hard bump swell to the size of his nose before he could swat the insect away. It buzzed away and landed on the forearm of Tick’s outstretched arm, like a well trained hunting Falcon. Dover staggered from the converted barn and into his shabby four-wheel drive. He drove a zigzagged path to Wichita General Hospital.

When he was released after three of the most painful days of his life, he went to each of Lanzel Tick’s suppliers. “You’ll lose you government contracts if you continue to sell supplies to Lanzel Tick.” Dover flashed his AG badge at the owner of the company.

“Mister Sage, in all due respect, I was nothing but a small, starving botanist when Mister Tick began buying from me. I have more fear of loosing the Macko contract than loosing the little I earn from the government. And Macko pays on time. The government jacks me around ninety to a hundred and twenty days.”

Dover tried to get legislation enacted to make it a criminal offense to buy or sell or raise insects without a government permit. As it was, any psychopathic kid could raise enough insects in his garage to wipe out the food supply of his entire neighborhood and possibly his city But Alex Macko’s powerful political allies fixed it so it was almost impossible to get even a five minute interview with the lowest of Assembly clerks; clerks who were usually fat women with long black hair. No legislation was passed. No legislation was even presented to any committee.

“Just have BabaYaga eat him,” Turk said to Alexander.

“Couple of years ago, I would have, but now Dover Sage don’t mean zip. I can keep him impotent without any help from BabaYaga.”

Dover was certain his only recourse was to destroy the bugs before Lanzel Tick loosed his special army of insects on the world. Fight fire with fire. Dover’s botanist friends supplied him with several species of neutralized insects. He drove to the deserted Macko lab. He carried the genocidal bugs over the new chain link fence and deposited the bugs inside their respective species’s habitats. With a vengeance, he searched for and found the species of insect that had stung his cheek. He poured ammonia through the air screens. The insects became frantic and jammed fluttering-winged bodies against the microscopic openings of the screen, but ammonia did the trick; insects floated down through the white gas to a twitching death at the base of the cage. Dover lifted the cover of the habitat, and reached in, then took the largest, dead bug.

Like so many other times in Dover’s life, he pushed things too far. He began wearing the black-on-red bug; he kept it pinned to the lapel of his jacket. When people asked what the Hell it was, Dover recited the same tale of being bitten by a trained bug. Trained by a psychopath in the employ of a psychopath—Alex Macko. The trained bug had been

developed for the destruction of the world's wheat crops. He told his tale whenever and wherever and to whomever he could.

In Wichita and Topeka, the local newspapers ran a version of the story with a cartoon depicting Alex Macko standing, out by a rich, full wheat field, attempting to sick a big, hideous looking bug on the angelic looking wheat. Off to the side, Dover Sage knelt looking through the tall wheat with a pair of oversized binoculars. Alex Macko sued for slander.

That was the least of Dover's problems. Lanzel Tick had spent an hour every day in a small weed patch behind the Macko lab. Every hour made the little psychopath more dangerous. Lanzel bent over the graves of the different species of insects. They had been murdered by Sage. It was the fifth time his friends had been murdered by that red-neck. The death of his beloved Red Beetles was definitely the work of Sage; he must have poured the ammonia into the habitats. It would never be forgiven. He would be the scourge of the world. He rubbed the back of his hand across his tear streaked face. He packed some more loose dirt over the grave of the Red Beetles. The beetles were not hurting anyone. The Saw-flies and Green Bugs were defenseless against what ever had been put in their habitats. The lower reproduction was devastating. The cost to Macko would be in the millions. Macko might kill him. Lanzel decided to rig a special burglar alarm just in case Sage and his cohorts returned; the prowlers would be swarmed by Red Beetles—if they didn't die from the stings, they would be easy to spot in a crowd . . . deep beetle-scars would etch the intruders' faces.

Eight weeks later, Lanzel packed his new Saw-flies in their traveling cases—the harvest in Montana had been delayed by rain—from God, not Norman Olm.

Dover caught the same plane, but arranged with airline officials to put him three rows behind Tick; they both flew to Plentywood, Montana. They stumbled into one another at the Foothill Drink'n Bar & Eat'n Cafe.

"Tick, if I find one insect, in this area, that is not indigenous to this area, I'll have you arrested on the spot."

Lanzel did not wait to comment; he made his way to the first telephone. "Mister Macko, Dover Sage has guessed what we're trying to do. He's threatened me with arrest," Tick said.

On the other end of the line, Macko was silent then asked, "How did he know you were in Montana? He follow you. Never mind you idiot. It's not his jurisdiction. But he could cause problems." The line was silent. Then, "Bury the bugs. Set the empty cases where a blind man could stumble over them. Keep him waiting around watching you." The phone clicked dead.

Tick sadly stuffed the thousands of dead insects in paper bags and buried them; he sat the traveling cases—with their empty containers—out next to the plane hanger. Dover found the containers. But he wondered why they had been so easy to find. He ran his fingers over the surface of one of the containers. He put his fingers to his lips. The taste was . . . Cyanide! Ten feet from the containers, toward the back of the corrugated-steel hangar, he found the bags of dead insects buried in a shallow grave. Why did Macko have Tick travel all the way to Montana just to destroy bugs? Tick must have called Macko. Was told bury the bugs; but why not just pack them up and take them back home. Macko must have gone to plan B when he heard "Sage is here". Macko must have wanted it to appear that the bugs were out doing their destructive crap; make old Dover Sage stick

around and make a fool of himself. Lanzel was a decoy! Dover grabbed the nearest phone and dialed a friend at the Topeka Police Department. “I need you to keep Norman Olm and D.P. Litenburg under surveillance. Need to know every move. If they crap, I want to know what color.”

“Slow down, Dover, old friend. We’ve had them staked out since you told us their game plan. So, they both crap green, and they both caught the red-eye out of Topeka. Final destination . . . Buenos Aires. They’re loaded for bear . . . no guns, but tons of equipment. Scientific stuff.”

Dover sucked in the fresh Montana air, then spoke slowly, “Argentina is due for one of the most productive wheat harvests in its history,” he hesitated, “Alex Macko sent those two psychos to spread some kind of plant diseases and screw with the weather. “I’m headed in their direction. Call Macko and tell him we’re on to him. It may stop him dead.” Dover was told that no one would make the call because no one wanted to be sued by Macko. The word was that Dover was going to lose everything for screwing with Macko. Dover made the call, “Tell your boss,” Dover said to the phone operator, “That I don’t give a damn if he takes my call. Tell him I’m on my way to Buenos Aires.”

Chapter Twenty

Inez was certain of her power to call to Ochika. And she was certain of Onas’s power to call to Ochika. Together they were sure to defeat BabaYaga. Ochika was The Rainbow. The Serpent of The Sky. If Alexander thought BabaYaga had an insatiable appetite, wait until he met Ochika. Ochika’s power had destroyed all the human ancestors of Kenos—the first man and Great Ancestor worshiped secretly by a majority of the Tierra del Fuego Indians. Onas and she would conjure Ochika and Ochika would free Alexander from BabaYaga. Then she would control Alexander and the wheat of the world.

Evil stumbled when Juan Peron stood down without a drop of blood being spilled. But Argentina would still contribute to Evil’s cauldron. The plan was simple: Inez would be presented to the Coven as a naked corpse. When BabaYaga approached, the hag-witch would realize that Inez was alive. The hag-witch would hesitate. When she hesitated, Onas would enter the cellar with Ochika Roots grown in the shape of the Great Satan’s cloven hoof. Onas would evoke the presents of Ochika—Destroyer of the Human Ancestors of Kenos, the Great Ancestor. Ochika and BabaYaga would do battle; the loser would be banished to the Lake of Fire revealed in Revelations 20:15. “You believe in the Bible!” Alexander said.

“Of course,” Inez said. “It is proof, Satan lives. I can quote all the passages referring to the Devil or Satan or Lucifer. I read the passages daily.” She drew an upside-down cross with her fingers across the front of her tiny body. “If you truly believe in Evil . . . as

I do . . . you are obligated to read and study the Bible. You need to understand the enemy. When this bloody business is finished, we will study the Bible . . . together.”

The conditions needed to conjure Ochika were much the same as those needed to conjure BabaYaga with the exception that Ochika would not appear unless the high priest, Onas, conjured him on a moonless night following a rainbow’s appearance. Ochika was the Rainbow. Also he would not appear unless there was a string of sacrifices laid out in the design of the Serpent: head to toe, head to toe, head to toe. Until thirteen bodies were set for consumption. And to top it off, worshipers had to eat grub worms as they chanted. It was a bit much. Alexander could see the body count escalating beyond reason.

“My Love,” Inez said. “Once we have Ochika firmly entrenched and BabaYaga banished, my people will travel your land and supply you with the necessary sacrifices; a few here, a few there. I will make sure there is no heat. We can use the BabaYaga witches for the first sacrifices to Ochika.

Alexander sat and listened. He felt like he was losing control. Losing control. He was going to end up being screwed. Screwed out of everything.

“Ochika,” Inez continued, “will devour the physical body of BabaYaga; only her soul will be condemned to ‘a place where their worms dieth not and fire is not quenched’ as quoted in Mark 9:48. You and I must survive. So we will need more sacrifices. I will send you back with the last sacrifice. You will introduce her to your Coven. She will become the Coven’s newest recruit.”

Alexander stood and moved toward the hotel window the streets were already filling with peasants headed toward the markets a mile up the cobbled street. He had worked hard since the cobbled streets of Karkov. And now he was giving control over his life to a midget-woman. What the Hell was happening to his brain?

“My sister, Angela, will join your Coven and become the last sacrifice to Ochika. She will accompany you to Topeka as your new housekeeper, then your newest witch. And for me one less person to inherit my father’s estate. If you, Senior Alex Macko, leave anything to inherit,” she said.

Alexander laughed. “You’re in control of my destiny. Will there be anything left to inherit?”

“I’m not certain. What we are doing is unprecedented,” she said. “Come, I will introduce you to Angela.”

They left the hotel and walked through the crowded streets toward the rows of markets. One neatly roped off area was stacked with children’s clothing.

“Angela, this is the Alex Macko you’ve heard so much about,” Inez said.

A beautiful, young lady looked up from untying a bundle of clothing. She put out, her tiny hand. “Senior Macko, I am pleased to meet you. My sister has said such nice things about you.”

The two sisters were almost identical. Alexander’s twisted brain conjured quick pictures of him and the two in his king sized bed. “Angela, your sister is thinking of having you travel to the United States to represent the Moreno Family in our on-going business,” he said.

“I am flattered, Senior Macko, but I can not leave my duties, here,” she said.

“These are not duties,” Inez said. “These are fantasies.”

Alexander took Inez by the arm and led her into the crowd. “Don’t cause a scene. There is no point.”

“She wastes her time with that children’s charity. She will waste the inheritance if it comes,” Inez said.

“No matter,” he said. “I can’t take your sister to Topeka. It would never work. The Coven members are all red-necks.”

“What does the color of a witch’s neck have to do with anything?” she said.

“Red-neck means they are prejudice’ they would never allow anyone but a white girl in the Coven. She could stay with me as a domestic. Then she could have a domestic accident in the house so there is one less heir, but she could never be introduced into the Coven.”

Inez walked ahead of him through the crowd then turned and pulled him into the shadows. “Our plan can still work,” she said. “There is a woman from your home country. From an area called Belorusskaya. She escaped during the Revolution and became a Sister in the Church.” Inez was smiling a devilish smile. “She is now a teacher with Tierra del Fuego Missionary School. But she is a worshiper of Ochika, she is called by the Church name of Sister Ada.”

Alexander choked back a sob. After all the years and all the blocking of emotions, he was still moved by her name. No one had ever called her by it, but he had read it on the cover page of her childhood Bible. “Ada Kozinski, may this book bring you closer to the Great Beelzebub.” Images of his mother were interrupted by Inez shaking his arm.

“She will be accepted,” he said.

Alexander chartered a plan to carry Onas, Inez, and him to a frozen landing strip in Tierra del Fuego. They were then transported from the landing strip in a hybrid truck that looked like a cross between a Ford and a Mercedes. The Mission School covered three city blocks and appeared to be policed by Sisters walking around in their penguin suits. Most of the Sisters looked away when the trio approached, but a very large Sister, standing with her black draped back toward them, turned and looked directly into their eyes. Alexander was looking into the eyes of the past. It was his mother – thirty-seven years past. Sister Ada was his mother in every feature. Mother reincarnated. The Great Beelzebub had answered his wishes. He had always contemplated the possibilities if his mother had lived. But the current situation was better: She was the age he remembered, she was fifty pounds lighter, and she was clean. He thanked BabaYaga. He thanked Beelzebub. He thanked them for rewarding their faithful servant.

“Sister Ada, this is Alex Macko. He is betrothed to me. But he is under the influence of your motherland’s most despicable witch, BabaYaga,” Inez whispered. She took Sister Ada by the sleeve of her robe and led her to a more private place. “Onas has devised a plan. You will join Alexander’s Coven; it’s a BabaYaga Coven, and then wait for the rainy season. When the season comes, Onas and I will fly to you. Senior Macko will instruct you in the ways of BabaYaga.”

The big woman lifted the bottom of her habit and threw its dusty end over her arm. She turned and looked directly into Alexander’s eyes. “I am versed in the ways of BabaYaga. My mother led a Coven before the Revolution. She has since been spiked during the purge by Tanya Mackovick.”

Alexander cleared his throat before he spoke, “Why did you not establish BabaYaga in Tierra del Fuego?”

Ochika is the agent of Evil . . . here,” she said.

“And He will be the agent of Evil . . . there, the United States.” Inez said.

Alexander’s mind was churning as they rushed back to the plane with Sister Ada given very little time to pack. He did not believe in coincidence. So all he could conclude was that BabaYaga was warning him. The hag-witch knew the plan. She also would know that he had changed his mind.

Inez wanted to get them safely out of the country before the Peron government fell; the replacement government might not be as benevolent to Inez. The replacement might be a Fascist, Socialist, or Communist; none were of any value, as far as Inez was concerned, but at least, Juan had had the good sense to marry Eva—saint of Argentina’s liberated women. Best get them on the plane and out of the country.

On the plane to the United States, Sister Ada read and then quoted from the Bible in a low whisper. Images of his mother, struggling over the Book of Fire, rumbled through his brain. He was certain it was his mother beside him. There were no coincidences in life. Sister Ada was mother Ada. All things had a purpose. He had traveled the world over in the last thirty-seven years. He had never heard the name Ada. But next him on the plane headed for the United States, was the twin of his mother. And her name was Ada. No way. The Great Beelzebub was rewarding him or warning him. Either way he had to tell the plan to BabaYaga.

Sensations from the Images of the ritualization in front of his mother swirled through his mind and dropped down to his crotch. He placed his jacket artistically over his screaming lap, then reached over and slipped Sister’s Ada’s hand under his jacket. His

mother would finally get her wish. She would touch him. Sister Ada did not hesitate or miss a beat in her Bible quotations. In the darkened cabin, her movements were slight but perfect. “. . . and I saw an Angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold of the Dragon, that old Serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound Him a thousand years,” she quoted.

Alexander pressed her hand harder between his legs.

“And whosoever was not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the Lake of Fire,” she recited.

Her callused hand palmed Alexander and stroked him to the rhythm of the lullaby spinning through his head. He clutched the smooth, hard arms of the airplane’s seat. But he could not control himself; he was spent over her hand.

“. . . and behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last,” she whispered in a husky voice.

Alexander fell into a deep, perfect sleep. No nightmares performed in the cellar of Saratov. Just sleep. When he awoke, they were circling the airport. “What’s happening?” he said.

She looked straight ahead as she spoke, “Storm. God does not want us to reach Topeka,” she said.

Her hand still held him under his jacket-covered lap. He had been cleaned, as a mother would; it felt comforting to have her hold him.

She reached down with her free hand and retrieved a note pad from her travel case. She placed the note pad on top of the jacket. Alexander looked down at the perfect script.

He read to himself, “For an unknown reason, you are sexually aroused by me. I will not question why, I question very little. I have never caused this arousal in any other. I joined the Coven and then the Church because of the way I look. I have never thought about what I would do if approached in this manner. I of course, am a virgin. I was never ritualized in the BabaYaga Coven, that I belonged to, because there was no Warlock. We were promised a Warlock. A Warlock that would come along and ritualize each and every one of us. But we were also promised BabaYaga would be conjured; it was a lie, also. I joined the Church because the Coven could not conjure the Sacred Mother of All That is Evil; but I became disenchanted with the Church when the priests could not conjure Jesus Christ. I joined and stayed with the Ochika Sect because they can conjure Ochika. They are the only ones who have proven to me there is an outside power.

“Life is only worth living if there is such a power—Good or Evil.” The letter went on, “The Ochika Sect has no sexual ritual. All the time is spent collecting thirteen sacrifices once every full moon, then waiting for a moonless night after the appearance of a rainbow. If they would have required sexual union, of any kind, I would have complied. I will not object to you doing what you will with me, but you must understand I did not come on this trip to be ritualized by you. Not did I join to complete Inez Moreno’s ridiculous project; it will not succeed. Onas will lose his power if he goes to the United States. Inez Moreno has great influence over Onas—she is his sexual-mistress, as she is with all twenty-one Ochika Mystics across Argentina—but she does not understand the ritual. Only I know it thoroughly. But I did not join you to perform the task. I joined you to beg a small portion of your winter wheat.

“I sold my soul so I could feed the hungry children. The Great Deceiver has kept his word; wherever I go, no child is ever hungry. But if you were to give me a small portion of your vast holdings, I would feed all the hungry children. Not just the ones in my presents. I would gladly give you my soul, but it has been the property of Satan since my twentieth birthday ten years ago when I made the judgment that only a demented God would allow little, innocent children to starve as a test for all the sinning adults. I do not mind the thought of spending eternity in a place where they curse God, ‘And blasphemed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, and repented not of their deeds’. As long as the children of the world have full bellies, I will suffer any pains and sores. Any indignity. We are in an important time. A historical decade. The Biblical decade is forty years. The Apocalypse is to happen two decades after Israel. The time has come. I want the children to be fed before the end so they can face their fates on full stomachs.” The letter was signed, “Sister Ada, your vessel.” In postscript, she quoted, “Gather the good vessels, but cast the bad away,” then scribbled across the bottom of the pad was, “The field is the world; the good seeds are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one. Alexander, we and all the starving children are the tares.”

Alexander felt like a child sitting next to the giant woman. She began to stroke him.

On a dark Tuesday night, eight months later, Inez Moreno hung naked from the cellar rafter. Alexander kept the witches of the Coven away from her, explaining that she was a special gift for BabaYaga; a virgin to be devoured on the last Tuesday before All Hollows Eve. The witches buzzed about the special position the virgin was tied in; the position must be a signal to BabaYaga that a virgin was her repast. Inez was tied by her legs. Her left leg was tied to the eye-bolt in the rafter. Her right leg was tied to a newly installed hook four feet away.

The witches obeyed, but even in the dim light of the ritual gas lamp they whispered of the virgin's movements. The Coven chanted for BabaYaga. She appeared. She lunged immediately toward the hanging body of Inez Moreno. Inez screamed at the sight of the putrid hag-witch. BabaYaga did not hesitate; she dropped on all fours and bit the twisting neck of the beautiful Inez. The hag tore out Inez's jugular then jumped forward. The cellar door sprang open and the Tierra del Fuego Indian, Onas, entered. He sprinkled his path with holy root and called for the presents of Kenos. Alexander knew at that moment that his decision to conjure BabaYaga at the last Coven meeting and then inform her of this plot was the wisest of his life—it saved his life. Because Inez had duped him. Inez was an agent of Good. Inez and Onas were holy followers of Kenos. They were enemies of Ochika—enemies of Evil. They were there to destroy Ochika and BabaYaga. Alexander moved toward Onas, but BabaYaga flew across the cellar and grabbed the little Indian by the back of his brown neck and lifted him toward the cellar rafters. With her bony hand, she scooped up the holy root from the floor and shoved a handful down the screaming Onas's throat. The holy root began to spark and ignite as soon as BabaYaga touched it, but she crammed it rapidly down the Indian's throat before it singed her fingers. The last handful of holy root ended the Indian's life.

“Sacred Mother of All That is Evil, there is another who is part of this treachery,” Alexander said and moved quickly toward the big woman with long, glowing black hair. When his hand touched her smooth skin, his brain flashed images of Sister Ada and the bed they had shared for eight months. He grabbed the shocked worshiper of Ochika by the thick flab-ring that formed her neck and pulled her toward him. He cupped the front of her neck with his forearm and started to snap her neck. “Soon you will feast on the traitor,” he said to BabaYaga. But he was unable to snap her neck. Grub worms spilled from her open mouth and made his arm slick with scum. Sister Ada slipped from his grip and fell on her knees next to the body of Onas. She dug the holly root from his mouth—her fingers sizzled and smelt of burning flesh. Sister Ada bent forward and emptied the grubs from her mouth to Onas's.

“Ochika, Serpent of the Rainbow, I Ada, up from the Lake of Fire, call you to feast on thirteen unclean souls. The holy grubs are present,” she whispered. She turned to Alexander. “Goodby Alexander Mackovick, I love you.” The Topeka cellar rumbled and shook, then split open. There was no roof, above the cellar, only open sky with a Rainbow glowing through the dark Kansas sky. The Rainbow moaned and twisted and spit a multicolored Serpent from its bowels. Time froze as the Serpent slithered across the Witches Foot and worked its body up into Sister Ada. She stood in the center of the ruptured cellar with her hands clamped to the broad hips of her fat body; her naked legs were spread with one foot on one point of the Witches' Foot and the other on a second point. Her pretty, smooth-skinned face had become reptilian. From her Serpent's head a long pink tongue rolled out and flicked in the direction of BabaYaga.

BabaYaga slapped the pink tip away. “Ochika, you have invaded my Coven. Only your banishment to the Bottomless Pit will satisfy BabaYaga,” the hag-witch said.

Sister Ada moved her two hundred and fifty pounds rapidly toward BabaYaga; her Serpent's head flipped its flaming tongue toward BabaYaga's breast-less chest; the tip of the tongue ate through the leather skin and exposed a black, pounding heart. The hag-witch screeched and spit a stream of stemming saliva toward Sister Ada/Ochika. The saliva ate into the Serpent's head and dripped down and burned patches in the milk-white

breasts of Sister Ada. She screamed a soul scream from somewhere deep inside the Serpent's twisting head. BabaYaga leaped toward Sister Ada's chubby ankles and set her mouth on both feet. She sucked and the giant woman's body slipped down the hag-witch's throat. It stopped at the Serpent's head as the Serpent flicked out its tongue and sunk it deep into BabaYaga's spinning eye-ball.

BabaYaga's scream rang in the Heavens and thundered through the Underworld. God continued to sleep, but the Great Mistress Beelzebub stretched Her twisted arms toward the Great Satan—the eternal insomniac—and signaled Him to check out the disturbance. He moved toward the edge of the Bottomless Pit. He nodded His head toward Her and both the heinous creatures shot straight up and tore through the center of the Topeka cellar. Everything was silent. Flames shot from the nostrils of Satan's ram's head. Slime oozed from Beelzebub's arms and encircled the combatants. Satan's cloven hooves dug into the tattered cellar-floor. His hair-rugged shoulders grazed the ruptured ceiling. His eyes were the eyes of each of the beholders. Smoke filtered his voice and emphasized the accent he brought from the bowels of Hell, "If you wish to disturb The Brightest Star and His bride, Mistress Beelzebub, do it in some more exotic place. Kansas is Hell on Earth. It's like a busman's holiday.

Chapter Twenty One

"BabaYaga, my love, why would you eat your own son, Ochika? Have you not enough things to do, places to go, that you have no need to cross each others paths. Are there not enough souls to capture, that we need capture each others?" Satan intoned.

Beelzebub turned her worm-infested head toward the cowering witches. The fire-red balls of her oriental eyes glowed white-hot; all of the Coven witches imploded. "This is just for family to see and hear." She turned back toward the hag-witch. "BabaYaga let Ochika and Sister Ada out!"

Sister Ada's fat body slipped from BabaYaga's mouth then flopped to the floor with the Serpent's head curved up to watch every move of the Great Satan.

"Ochika, my son, come out of Sister Ada!" Satan commanded.

The Serpent's head slipped back down through Sister Ada's body. The Serpent, Ochika, attempted to slither back into the bowels of the Rainbow hovering in the midnight Kansas sky, but Satan's thundering voice stopped him dead.

"Ochika! Explain, to the Light of Heaven, why you are so far North," Satan bellowed.

Alexander looked for a way out as the Serpent focused his glowing eyes on the center of Alexander's naked chest. Alexander trembled as he waited for the blast of fire—like the newly invented laser beam—to burn into his heart. Bamb! It would be over. Good time to pray. But who would he pray to? BabaYaga? Ochika? Maybe the sleeping

God? Or Kenos? Or Mistress Beelzebub? The most logical choice was the Great Satan Himself. Alexander looked over at Sister Ada. She and he were the only living specimens of the human race left in the cellar. Maybe in the whole damned world. The Serpent did not open His mouth, but Alexander heard his gravely voice. He told of Inez and how she had been trying to destroy him with the help of the little, idiot Indian, Onas, and his powerful God-ancestor, Kenos. Ochika told His father, Satan, that He assumed His mother, BabaYaga, had sent Alexander Mackovick to help with His destruction. “I ask my mother for forgiveness and I promise my father, the Great Satan, and my step mother, the Mistress Beelzebub, that I will hibernate in the Bottomless Pit, for the act of trespass . . . for one hundred decades.” The Serpent disappeared, but Alexander could hear the sound of a child weeping; the sound diminished as if falling in an endless tailspin.

Satan reached down and helped Sister Ada up. He said nothing, but Sister Ada got down on all fours and braced herself for the monster’s entrance. While they rode the wild ride, Alexander listened to instructions from Mistress Beelzebub. “Alexander, you have been a faithful disciple of BabaYaga and Mine. You did warn BabaYaga of this planned treachery. But this time your greed for power almost got you skinned alive—BabaYaga’s suggestion. You will never love another human. Ever. Sister Ada will be your companion.

She will be your mother and your Coven mistress. You will do nothing that does not meet with her approval.” Mistress Beelzebub placed her slimy arm around Alexander’s naked shoulders. “The son that is being pumped into Sister Ada’s womb will belong to the Great Satan. The boy will be the Son of The Morning Light . . . he will be the Antichrist!”

Dover Sage had missed the show; he had been detained in Argentina for the double murder of the Moreno brothers.

Chapter Twenty Two

BULLETIN:

DALLAS, NOV.22(AP)—PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, THIRTY-FIFTH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, WAS SHOT TO DEATH TODAY BY A HIDDEN ASSASSIN ARMED WITH A HIGH-POWERED RIFLE.

Like most other citizens of the United States, Alex Macko remembered exactly what he was doing on November 22, 1963; he was supervising the construction of a cellar in the municipal area of Canberra, Australia. The contractor, who had tried to promote him on the idea of his crew doing all the work, even the more sophisticated work like the wine racks, told Alexander, through a mouthful of sardine sandwich, that Kennedy had been assassinated. There was no hesitation in the work; Alexander insisted that the birch paneling of the cellar be completed before the last week in November. There was no time

for the American members of the crew to slow down and think about the assassination. Turk was hit the hardest; he had always wanted to approach President Kennedy and tell him that Turk would go to Cuba and massacre the Commi bastards. But Alexander never took Turk to Washington D.C. when he went to meet high mucky-mucks at the Department of Agriculture.

The Kennedys were like the Romanovs: they were Tzars. Tzars of America. Alexander was also a Tzar. The Tzar of Wheat. He controlled most of the wheat of the world. Macko & Coven Wheat from Macko & Coven, Inc.

Alexander was in Canberra for two good reasons: first, he needed to control Australian wheat—they had become an important net exporter in the last couple of years; second, he needed to be as far away from Kansas as possible. He had married Ada and she was pregnant with the Dark One's Son—she had been pregnant for seven years. He had no sex with her since the night of her ritualization by the Father of Sin. It was too hard an act to follow. Ada took over the wheat distribution for Macko & Coven, Inc. There was diddly-squat he could do about it. She was in total control. She asked him at what price wheat should sell, but she gave away twenty percent of the production to the hungry, crumb-crushing little bastards of the world. He could handle that, but the little bastards' parents were getting some of the wheat and that was really the craps. He needed to control the wheat. He needed to gain back his power.

The company had to raise the price of wheat to make up for the twenty percent loss. Alexander was afraid he might price the company right out of the market. Maybe ingenuity would find a substitute? The Covens in Canberra and Perth would help him witch-nurture rich winter wheat seeds. But he planed to destroy the Covens minutes after he was in control of the wheat of the over-sized island. He would also try a second time to destroy Ada and the Topeka Coven. The first time was aborted when Ada came and confessed knowledge of the plot. "I won't inform BabaYaga," she said, "if you abandon your plan and spend the rest of your life, on this God-forsaken earth, in some country other than the United States." BabaYaga would be told he was traveling the world to open more covens.

This problem would be solved, someday, when he slit Ada throat or had it slit. Through the Argentina Mafia and other nefarious connections, Alexander had contracted for Ada's demise, but all the hit men and wise guys ended up main courses for BabaYaga. After years of plotting with no success, he again concentrated on controlling a wheat producing area; he chose Australia. He used his Wheat Mafia: Olm, Litenburg, Tick and their assorted Lieutenants to control the growth and destruction of Australian wheat production. In his twisted mind, Alexander knew that Ada would stumble and he would be back in control, but he would keep himself busy in Australia. If Ada left the United States to visit some starving children, she was a dead woman. A big, damn, dead woman. Dead Ada. An incarcerated Dover Sage. One out of two ain't bad.

Turk looked up from his book on Australian history, "What's up boss?"

"Just thinking about the red-neck, Dover Sage. Remember how he used to dog our every move. I'm glad he's gone."

"It's been good without him," Turk said. "But no blue ribbon yet. Word is he's got friends trying to get him out."

"Hell, they've been trying since the first day. It's been eight years? The red-neck will be there another eight."

“Hope you’re right. He and Ada can screw up wet dreams,” Turk said.

Alexander laughed and pegged a wadded paper ball that bounced off his mad companion’s greased-down hair. Alexander pictured the jailed Kansas-red-neck being bugged by some greasy little Amazon Indians—twenty or thirty of them little buggers. He had paid a bundle to keep Sage in prison. And damn if it hadn’t been worth it.

But Alexander hadn’t tended to business in Argentina. His agents had argued with the people who kept Dover Sage imprisoned. They paid the culprits one last lump-sum payment—two years prior. They were no longer interested enough to block Dover Sage’s appeal which was making its way through the slow, grinding machinery of the Argentina Appellate system. His case was reversed—along with six others—by the high court: Mistrial. Dover Sage had not been allowed his day in court. He was set for retrial. But the evidence was too old. Three witnesses were dead. The young prosecutor spoke of a plea bargain. Dover settled for time served and a ticket to the United States. In the States, he was given his old job at the FAO. His first call was at Macko & Coven Wheat Company in down-town Topeka.

“Ada Macko, my name is Dover Sage; I believe you know who I am.”

The big woman rose and offered Dover a comfortable chair. She came from behind the oversized desk and took a chair next to him. She leaned toward him as she spoke, “I never believed you murdered the Moreno brothers, but Alexander said there were so many witnesses. Are you back with the Attorney General’s Office?”

“No, Mrs. Macko, I’m with the Food and Agriculture Organization. I wish to interview your husband.”

“My husband and I have signed a Separate Maintenance Agreement which calls for him to give up most of the decision making of Macko & Coven. The Agreement also requires him to give up his citizenship, and not set foot in the United States. It is a private Agreement. Not for public disclosure.”

“Then he won’t be coming back from Australia?”

“If you knew, why the charade?”

“To see if you’d give me the run-around.”

“Run-around? Your superiors know Macko & Coven distributes more free flour and bread than all the known charities,” the big woman said as she shifted her considerable weight in the thickly upholstered chair. “Since I have taken over the administration of the Company, twenty percent of all of our production had been donated. No other company in the world . . . no Christian owned company . . . can make that statement.”

“Sounds like a rehearsed speech . . . is this a Christian company?” Dover said.

“Yes, I was a Nun before I married Alexander. We met when I was a missionary Sister in Tierra del Fuego, just miles from your prison cell.”

“I’ve heard about you and Tierra del Fuego. About you divorcing Jesus Christ and marrying Alex Macko. Bull!” He rose and tipped his cow-boy hat to Ada Macko.

“Mister Sage, your reputation is that of a man who cares about the starving children of the world. My reputation is the same. We both had to sell our souls. You to a lesser degree. I bedded down with Satan Himself. I would do it all over again if it gained me just one more bushel of wheat to give to a starving child.”

“That’s all well and good, but your company isn’t digging into its profits to feed the children; you’ve just passed it on to the consumer.”

“What does it matter . . . as long as the children are fed?”

Dover hesitated. “It doesn’t. I was speaking, pardon the expression, through my butt. The truth is I don’t give a rat about you or Macko & Coven. I want Alex Macko. Your work is well known, but you are just another of Macko’s sluts. He pimps you all to Satan or Beelzebub or whoever he worships. You sold your soul to gain your goal because you’re too damn lazy to do it with hard work. Fat people are all the same. Lazy and fat. You’re Macko’s whore. Don’t parade yourself as anything more!” Dover started for the exit.

The voice that blasted at his back was not the genteel voice of Ada Macko, but the bellowing sounds of a he-goat, “Dover Sage, you have mumbled your last blaspheme against Me and Mine. I am the Prince of the Night. I have come. I will destroy you. Your God can not save you.”

Dover turned quickly toward the he-goat’s voice. Ada Macko stood with her hands braced on her massive hips. Her head had become the reeking, slime-matted skull of a he-goat.

“I don’t believe in God!” Dover shouted at the illusion.

The goat’s head disappeared, but Ada Macko plunged her body toward him. Her weight knocked him to the oriental carpet. Ada Macko straddled him and pounded her laced fists into his chest. Pain hammered through his lungs. He wondered if a rib had been shattered and was piercing what felt like his left lung. She rose to hammer at him again, but he cupped his right fist in his left hand and drove the tip of his bent right elbow deep into her bloated stomach. Ada Macko rolled back. A screeching wounded-animal sound erupted from her belly. Dover saw her wale-like belly expand and contract. He saw movement inside. It was like a damned jackal was trying to escape from her belly. The bitch was pregnant! But, with what!

Dover bolted from the room. He ran through the halls of Macko & Coven so wildly that he floored two fat women. Both had long, black hair.

It took Dover days to get his head together. He couldn’t tell his superiors about Ada Macko; they would just think he was up to his old “Macko is the Devil,” tricks. He was certain the goat’s head was an illusion. Some kind of hypnosis. But the thing in her belly was real. A living animal. How could it be? There was no God. No Satan. None of that crap was true: Astrology, Palmistry, Ghosts, Demons, Catholicism, Mormonism, Islamic ravings, Judaic rantings, Buddhism, Hinduism, or any of the other ics and isms the feeble world had invented. But what the Hell was in Ada Macko’s belly?

He entered Macko & Coven with two six-shooters strapped to his hips and a double barreled shot-gun clamped in his hands. The conservatively dressed fat woman who occupied the oversized desk in Ada Macko’s office calmly told him his injuries to her boss had caused her boss-lady such a trauma that she had to be transported to a special clinic in Bern, Switzerland. The fat lady played with the bun of twisted, black hair that crowned her chubby head. “Mister Sage, I am waiting instructions from Alex Macko. If he gives the word, you will be arrested for battery. It appears you have a record of violence.” She undid the bun in her hair; it cascaded down around her shoulders; three black-widow spiders stepped from her thick hair and moved across her shoulders. “If you show up in Bern, you’ll be arrested,” she said.

“Screw Bern, I’m going to Canberra,” he said.

He had flashbacks of the trained beetle that stung his cheek. He grabbed a magazine from the side table. He rolled it, and then smashed it down on the fat lady’s ducking

shoulders. One wack then two then three. The spiders attempted to duck with their mistress but Dover persisted until the last one was dead. He tossed the tattered magazine on the office floor and backed toward the door. The fat witch's screams shattered the glass partitions and brought other witches charging down the halls. The fat witch opened the top of her blouse and scooped into her huge bra with both hands. She threw handfuls of black-widow spiders toward Dover.

He flipped the shot-gun up and blasted the flying spider-clumps. The blast blew the clumps apart and tore into the sides of two of the approaching witches' faces. Dover scrambled through the office door but was tripped by a hideous witch dressed to the nines. He rolled on his back, pulled both six-shooters and fired two shots into her protruding belly; spiders sprayed out and clung to Dover. Dover began screaming and backing away from the remaining witches as the spiders made their way up his jacket toward his throat. He holstered his guns and tore off his jacket, then lit it with his lighter and threw it against a wicker chair; the chair burst into flames that darted up the wallpaper and charred the ceiling with black billowing smoke. Before Dover reached his beat-up truck, he could hear sirens in the distance. Time to leave town.

In Canberra, Dover found that most of the government workers knew who Alexander Macko was; Macko had spent over one hundred and thirty million dollars buying up the municipal buildings of the nation's capitol then leasing them back to the Australian government. He had also purchased most of the distressed wheat farms after a record breaking hail storm destroyed seventy-five percent of the harvest. Macko was currently helping the wheat farmers by substituting his Canadian wheat to fulfill the Australian farmer's contracts with the Chinese People's Republic.

Dover walked in on Alex Macko at Macko's plush office in the center of Canberra. The smile that cracked Macko's face was genuine; it said they were true adversaries and that he knew the best man would win.

"Sage, I paid a ton of money to keep your red-neck in that resort in Argentina. Proves money can't always buy happiness," Macko said.

Dover moved toward Macko, but kept his eyes on Turk. Everything stopped. "I just wounded you in Argentina?" Dover asked Turk.

"No idiot, Alexander had the gun store sell you blanks. You spent eight years in Hell for shooting blanks. The Moreno brothers were dead before you got there. You're a dumb jerk. You knew you didn't kill them, but you thought you killed me. You're a real idiot."

"This time it won't be blanks," Dover said as he drew an ornate pistol from his jacket pocket. He rubbed the pearl handled grip with his handkerchief; he slipped the soft leather glove over his right hand; he motioned Turk over next to Macko's desk.

The one of a kind gold-plated Model 318 Beretta was a problem, Alexander knew. He recognized his pride and joy immediately. It had been in a show case at Macko & Coven and was registered to Alexander G. Macko with the State of Kansas. All the show weapons were going to be shipped as soon as his Canberra offices were finished. "Sage, let's have a truce. This advisory thing is getting out of hand. You hurt me. I hurt you. We're even. I will compensate you for Argentina and for getting my wife out of the United States . . . so now I can return to our beautiful state of Kansas," Macko said.

Dover emptied the 6.35mm slugs into the body covered by a four hundred dollar suit. The lunging frame was frightening, but Dover stood fast until the Beretta was empty and the body was twitching on the expensive carpet. Dover stepped forward and slapped the

Beretta into a shocked Alexander Macko's open hand, then ran out the door. Dover's new found friends from the Canberra Police Department, entered immediately; they had been waiting for Dover's signal; he was to distract Alex Macko so Macko had no chance to use the Beretta he had used to kill a prostitute in skid row at the center of Canberra.

"Sorry fellows," Dover said later. "I went into shock when I saw Turk alive. My friends had informed me that Macko had a body guard that looked like Turk, but Turk has lost weight and gained hair. He's changed his name. Everybody thought he was legit. When I confronted him, he agreed to come back to Argentina and clear my name. Macko flipped out. He pulled his Beretta and emptied it in Turk . . . calling him a traitorous bastard with every shot he fired into the poor wretch's body."

After the longest trial in Australian history, Alexander Macko was convicted. Dover thought about the injustice: Alexander Mackovick aka Alex Macko had been guilty of the mass murder by starvation of thousands and he had been guilty of the torture murder of hundreds of prostitutes and others for BabaYaga feasts, and he had murdered indiscriminately the business and personal people who stood in his way. But the poor turd was not guilty of either of the murders for which he was now being detained. Dover Sage murdered Turk. Maybe that was self-defense; there was no leaving Macko's office alive. And Mister Dover Sage shot the prostitute. He didn't murder her. She was already dead when he arrived at the back of the Canberra Court House. He had followed someone who he thought was Turk's replacement. In the center of town, Dover lost him in the maze of municipal buildings; when Dover rounded the corner of the unlit court house, he saw the huge man bent over the dead prostitute; her head had been crushed on one of the massive blocks that formed the base of the court house building. Dover reached under his jacket and pulled a Browning service revolver; he fired three shots at the big man as he chased him, but lost him at a railroad siding.

He thought it was typical of Macko employees to be out murdering prostitutes. It never crossed his mind that Turk was still alive. He ran back, to the prostitute, with the Browning still clutched in his hand, but a second revolver kept hitting him in the side as he ran. It pounded out a message of revenge that halted Dover's steps. He reached in his pocket and looked at the Beretta. He switched hands with the Browning and walked toward the prostitute. Dover's fingers pulled back the Beretta's platted trigger and kept pulling until he had emptied the compact weapon's contents into the exposed chest of the prostitute.

It was a kick the way life worked. He had lifted the Beretta from a crate of guns being shipped to Macko. It was so beautiful. He saw it being packed on his last trip to Macko & Coven in Kansas. Then he saw the same box being loaded on a train. He used his badge to claim it as evidence in an on going trial. Now Alex Macko was doing time for two murders he didn't do. Dover laughed to himself. Life was a kick. An Evil kick.

A female follower of Charles Manson—long time disciple of BabaYaga—stabbed actress Sharon Tate to death. Only those headlines kept Alexander from having the top headlines in most of the newspapers of the world. It had taken six years to convict him of one count of First Degree Homicide and one count of Second Degree Homicide, and to confiscate all of his Australian property that had been levied under a Federal Lien. All the municipal buildings, his homes in Canberra and Perth. All of his Australian wheat properties. The ruling came down in one of the municipal buildings owned by Alexander. The municipal tenants were two years in the arrears on rents.

Life was beautiful for Dover Sage. It became more beautiful. Dover became acquainted with and, in the third year of the trial, married the Assistant Prosecutor in the Macko case. His new wife agreed that there was no valid reason to bring a child into a world where thirty percent of the children were not going to live beyond the age of fourteen. Dover knew in his mind that he had contributed to the death sentence against the children of the world. Dover's personal vendetta against Alex Macko had frightened off the only person who cared enough to supply wheat to the hungry children: Ada Macko had never returned.

One of Alex Macko's illegitimate daughters took the reins of Macko & Coven and immediately cut the donation program. Dover Sage knew he was one of those do-gooders who screwed things up.

Instead of a child, the Sages decided to sublimate their instincts by retrieving a Dingo puppy from the Canberra dog pound and name him Toot in honor of the original Toot. The original Toot had lived a comparatively comfortable life while Dover was in Hell. Old Toot stayed with Dover's widow-neighbor in Topeka; Toot had succumbed to old age and presumably tooted his way to doggy heaven while Dover was lying helpless in an Argentina prison.

The new Toot was packed up with Dover's new wife, Jean Monrow, and trundled across the wide, rolling ocean to a weed-covered acre of land, with a small mobile home, on the outskirts of Topeka. Jean Monrow had gone from big city prosecutor to small town housekeeper. She had never been to the outback of Australia—though she had been born near the edge of it—but she was in the outback of the United States. But she loved Dover Sage. And she was lonely as Hell when he went on his witch hunting trips. He was an excellent husband. He always informed her what he was doing and when and where. He informed her of his every thought. What more could she want other than: a "57" T-Bird . . . blue. A colonial house in the best section of Topeka. Her big nose bobbed by that guy in Hollywood. A clandestine date with Rock Hudson. And for Dover not to get caught by the witches. Dover pooh-poohs it. But it was so dangerous. So very dangerous. Their arguments were short and laced with laughter. None of it drove her anymore bonkers than she already was. What with the damn Americans always mistaking her for a Brit, and Dover pestering her every evening to see if their Dingo, Toot, had let gas. "He would burst if he didn't. What with you always feeding him franks and beans," she said.

Jean Sage was in love with her life. Her first husband had been a real Aborigine; he was pure English stock, but he was a real Aborigine; he knocked her around until one of her official type friends put the fear of God in him. Of course there was no God. Dover and she agreed: there was no God. But they both believed it was best to live and let live unless it had to do with the BabaYaga Coven. At first she disagreed, "They're just lonely women. Harmless. They can't make evil happen. They can do evil. But they can't make evil happen by stirring some chowder or baying at the moon," she said.

But one night, when Dover was out, the Coven members began to walk past her weed-glutted property. Ten or twelve of them circled the property. They drew a five-pointed star in the clay of the drive-way then laid dry wheat fodder at its edges and set the fodder aflame. As she watched, an old hag image appeared in the center of the flames. It was an illusion, she knew, but the frightening illusion got down on its bony knees and the illusion of Dover mounted her from the back. They galloped around the inner-flames and on the thirteenth go-around—somehow her brain was forced to count—the Dover illusion

was sucked up inside the hag. She never told Dover. But the second incident restarted her old bed-wetting habit that had left her in her preteens. So she told Dover all of it: she told him when she was on the phone with him; he was in Salt Lake City discrediting the BabaYaga Coven

Chapter Twenty Three

“I’ll be back tomorrow night . . . sweetheart,” he said.

Toot The Second was, parading around the small trailer, whining. She thought he had sensed one of the rabbits that liked to nest near the trailer. Or maybe it was one of the animals on a wild life program on the Telly. But his snout was at the small, square sliding screen on the trailer’s door. She slid back the rough window-curtain over the sink. Outside, tramping a path in the two foot high weeds, were eleven naked women. They began to dance and chant. Their maypole was a burning, upside-down cross. She remembered checking the load in Dover’s Over-and-Under rifle and shotgun combination. The moonless sky lit over the heads of the nearest women as the shotgun blast erupted the night. The lumbering women hustled their naked bodies from her property in less time that it took her to reload, but they left behind the blood-oozing body of Dover’s widow-neighbor.

Jean Sage wet the bed for the first time in two decades.

Dover and she spent the early morning standing in charred weeds. There was no body, it had disappeared even before the Sheriff had shown up the night before. No matter how insistent Dover became, the Sheriff could do nothing; there was no body—though the widow was missing—and Jean Sage could identify none of the women. “They all look alike.” Also Dover had a history, in the area, and with law enforcement, of blaming every happening on fat, naked woman who thought they were witches.

Dover decided his reputation for making outlandish charges against the Macko Clan would curtail his efficiency in Topeka so he would have to execute his next plan elsewhere. He started in Salt Lake City, and then went to Omaha, Tulsa, Pennyworth, and the Covens in between. When he finished, the news services described one of the biggest drug busts by the Federal Bureau of Narcotics since the passing of the Drug Abuse Control Amendment of 1965. It was reported that the Covens were nothing more than fronts for an international ring of drug traffickers. The witches were so sure of their powers that the drugs were laying open on tables in the Coven cellars.

Susan-Ada Macko, Attorney at Law, and bastard daughter of Alexander Macko, claimed, “Not one of the defendants is or has ever, sold, used, or condoned others using drugs. They live their lives for the good of the community . . . their high is a spiritual high.”

In Topeka and Wichita, the news papers showed pictures of Dover Sage and Alexander Macko and reported that Dover Sage, of Topeka, investigator for the Food and Agriculture Organization, an information sharing organization home-based in Rome, Italy, stated, “All busted Covens are controlled by the Topeka BabaYaga Coven which is controlled by Macko & Coven Wheat Company, Inc. of Topeka.” Sage did not disclose what the interest of the FAO was. A second story reported: “Miss Leidia-Ada Macko, Chairman of the Board of Macko & Coven, and purported illegitimate daughter of the founder, Alex Macko, stated, ‘Sage is a psychopath who has pursued my father for the last twenty years. He is an ex-convict with a record of psychopathic behavior.’ This reporter discovered that Dover Sage was in an Argentina prison for the double homicide of two of Alex Macko’s business partners. Sage’s case was overturned by the Appellate Court. Sage was ordered to stand a second trial. Sage plea bargained for time served and was released. This reporter also discovered that Alex Macko is presently imprisoned in Australia for a double homicide—not related to the wheat or drug business. One of the prosecuting attorneys in the Macko vs Australia case is now Mrs. Dover Sage. This reporter smells a skunk. Private wars are being fought with public funds.”

Screw public funds, Dover thought. The damned State Journal reporter had screwed up his plans. No more drug planting. The Narco boys said, “Dover, old boy, you’re on your own in Topeka” So he staked out the Macko Topeka farm and watched the comings and goings of Leidia-Ada Mackovick, President under her younger step-sister Leidia-Ada Macko, Chairman of the Board of all the Macko and Armdecker holdings. The names Leidia and Ada showed up in different combinations with Susan, Anna, Sophia, Baba, and Liz on the payroll journals.

“You stole these records from the mill,” Sheriff Truck Turner, Jr. said to Dover. “I should arrest you for breaking and entering and grand theft and peeing on the sidewalk.”

“How’d you know I peed on the sidewalk?”

“I was tracking you. Make sure you didn’t get eaten by one of those crazy witches.” He looked over at a picture on the wall of his missing sister and deceased father. “Dover, you know I want this scum out of Topeka. My hands are tied. We have word from the top, ‘leave the church ladies alone.’ That translates into leave the Macko witches alone.” Sheriff Turner packed another thumb-sized plug of snuff under his lower lip. “Screw ’em, Dover, you find anything, I’ll go to the D.A. . . . but don’t get your butt eaten try’n.”

From the Macko farm stake-out, Dover learned that Tuesday nights were reserved for Coven meetings. That Tuesday night when he cupped his ear to the few feet of exposed cellar wall, he heard shouting and chanting; it was all jumbled but the witches were getting mighty excited. Flashes of the Tanya Mackovick rescue flickered through his mind. But had he really seen anything? He picked his way through the Kwickset lock on the front door. Out of practice, he stripped the pin tumbler instead of moving the cam and dead bolt. The witches would know someone had jimmed the lock. His pen light showed a circle of light just big enough to get him into trouble; he tripped and his big body smashed a planter that had been delicately positioned in the hallway. Damn! He would never be able to cover his tracks! Whatever he was going to do, he had to do it before the meeting was over. And he had to get home. Jean would be Teed. But she would forgive him.

The witches had trundled in something wrapped in a carpet. A body for BabaYaga. At the right moment he would barge in and arrest them all. Then get home. Spaghetti

night. He picked up the phone in the front room of the Macko ranch. If there was an extension in the cellar, he was dead meat. He dialed home. No answer. Just like earlier. It was late for Jean to be out. She was with her new friend, May. May what? What was her new friend's name. She said it quickly. His mind was elsewhere. May what? May-Ada? Ada-May? One of those witch names. They were trying to get into his family! He went out to his old Ford station wagon. He took out the weapons he stole from the Macko mill. He checked the clip on the Avtomat and then the Browning. He didn't need the other weapons but he stole them to put in the new house he was going to surprise Jean with. He tip-toed back into the silent house. His penlight found a shadowed spot in a large alcove in the back of the house. He laid his weapons aside and flipped open his pocket knife. He peeled back the alcove carpet then slowly began to twist his knife's smallest blade into the wood floor. With a little luck there would be no sub-flooring. His peek-hole came out in the corner of the cellar. But he could see. He could see fat, long-haired women parading around. Their sweat-laced, naked backs reflected the dim cellar light. Smudges formed upside-down crosses on their flabby bodies. They were marching around a female. She was naked. She was hanging from the center rafter. He would arrest them all for Homicide and Conspiracy to Commit Homicide. He folded the carpet back. He would make a citizen's arrest. He had the murders. He had the victim. The pen light brought him quickly to the entrance door. He hesitated. On the top of an ornate desk off to the side of the entrance door was an open letter. He went to it. "Dearest Leidia-Ada, Australia is still a penal colony. They treat me with barbaric contempt. I will survive. Vengeance is mine. You must convince Miss Yaga that Sister Ada lied about me. I still love Miss Yaga and always will. Convince her to help me with my Australian problem. Sorry to hear about your problems with our old friend. He will never stop. You must be convincing. His new wife sounds like someone who would be fun to have hanging around the Topeka cellar. Keep me informed; your loving father, Alexander." the letter was signed with a red A.

Dover ran back to the alcove. He tore back the carpet. His head smashed into a stool as he dropped down and placed his tear-filled eye against the peek-hole. She didn't answer the phone either time. He squinted his eye and tried to make out the features of the hanging body. It had been mutilated and gutted beyond recognition. Blood covered the body and rolled down its arms and dripped from a large, ornate ring . . . an Aborigine ring. A ring purchased in Perth. Dover screamed. The scream tore a piece of flesh from the inside of his throat. He grabbed the Avtomat. Pointed its polished barrel at the floor and opened fire. Screaming pandemonium shook the cellar under his feet. He slammed through the house and landed on his belly dead in line with the cellar door. Bleeding, naked, fat-ladies came tumbling through the ruptured door. His trembling finger held the trigger back tight on the Avtomat. His tears blurred the Topeka farm slaughter.

He used a small amount of the plentiful blood to paint a sickle and hammer on the door of the cellar. Maybe the Russian community would think the Communist did it. Maybe not. Who gave a damn? He kicked his way through the bodies strewn at the cellar's entrance, then cut down the hanging corpse and carried her to the station wagon. She was heavier. Half of her was missing but she was heavier. How could she be heavier? Mind tricks. He should have moved her out of town. Too damn stupid.

Twenty miles out of town, he drove the Ford into the deepest part of the Kansas River. They dragged him from the river, half drowned, the next morning. While Dover was in Topeka General, he read hour after hour but everything reminded him of his wife

and her death. Evil was controlling the world but for the first time he didn't care. He was under twenty-four hour observation in one of the glass rooms reserved for the serious suicides, but they let him have newspapers because they were certain he couldn't off himself with a paper cut. He couldn't kill himself so he became catatonic.

Alexander laughed when he heard the news of his old friend Dover Sage. He knew someday Dover would learn the truth. He wanted to be there when it happened. He laughed. The guard looked over at him. A friendly guard. Everyone had become friendly over the years. It was an excellent place to run his empire. He had no worries. It was a working prison, but anyone over seventy was allowed to consider gardening as their employment. He was a born gardener. Born farmer. He could yield more produce from his four by four plot of land than any other convict, past, present, or future. His bastard daughters had been installed in every Coven but Odessa. Odessa was a problem; no correspondence; no BabaYaga conjure. But the rest of the Covens were in line. There was no Topeka Coven. He couldn't chance another slaughter by Dover Sage—should Sage ever come to life. Alexander was like a brain in a box. He missed very little of the outside world. He still had power. The whole world knew he was the power behind Macko & Coven, the largest wheat producer in the world.

The things he missed were not as important as his control of the world's wheat. He controlled it from a cell in a maximum prison on an island. But the Aussies were a stupid lot. His mail was censored, but he was able to write all he needed and he could call collect once or twice a week. It was business as usual. Nothing could stop him. He had won again. Sage had lost. One Macko bastard daughter for one Sage wife seemed fair. But the fact was he had lots of bastard daughters. Sage had only one wife. He won. Sage lost. And now his daughters had convinced BabaYaga to talk to Beelzebub about canonizing him.

He would become immortal if he could prove he had stolen a thousand souls from the Christian God and made them disciples of Mistress Beelzebub. He called home. "Get my daughters off their fat butts. Make sure they open sixty or more Covens in the next years. I want to become immortal before I'm released. I can do the next twenty-one years of confinement standing on my head. It's a drop in the bucket compared to immortality."

The bowels of the Earth opened and Mt. St. Helens spewed death and the daughters of Alex Macko took it as a sign from Mistress Beelzebub that it was the year of their father's immortality. One enterprising daughter knew that Ochika's Sects were up for grabs so she took them over. "In a thousand years, Ochika will repossess them, but that is then and this is now." Jana Leidia-Ada was ready to plead with BabaYaga for her father's immortality. She sent first class tickets to all the witches listed in the witch tally. One thousand and thirteen witches were under the command of Alex Macko's Covens. She wrote her father in Canberra, "Miss Yaga has said she would okay the bid I've made anytime after she's confirmed one thousand folks delivered to the cause. It has been done." The Canonizing Coven would be held at the Topeka Free Fair Grounds; an intricate code revealed to Alexander.

It was a moonless night. One thousand and ten witches had made the trip. The meeting was guarded by a murderous motorcycle gang called the Warlocks. All intruders were excluded from the grounds. The sacrifice swung from the rafters of a specially constructed platform that sat in the center of the giant auditorium. She was a well publicized starlet who had mysteriously disappeared on a camping trip to Utah. The

starlet's perfect body was ornamented with flowers from the Witches' Garden: her head was roped with red berries of Yew interlaced with Water Lilies; her thin, fragile neck was chained with cherry-sized, blue-black berries from the deadly Nightshade plant; juice oozed from the tiny, white Hemlock flowers that clung to her naked waist; Thorn Apple flowers groped their way up her long sensuous legs; and her feet were slippered in Henbane flowers, of death-gray, veined with purple. She was a masterpiece. Or really, a mistress-piece.

Jana stood next to the hanging starlet in the center of the portable floor that was inlaid with an oversized Witches' Foot. She kept her hand in her pocket while she motioned with her free hand to the noisy witches. Her pocket hand sought out and found the special slit in her gown. She was like Mistress Beelzebub. She could feel herself. It felt good. It felt reassuring. It made her know she was alive. She was there. Not the fat corpse her brain told her she was. Busy fingers told her she existed. She would stop as soon as the real fun began.

She had brought in fifty of the most powerful Warlocks to perform mass ritualization. "Witches of BabaYaga!" The auditorium was rumbling with conversation. "Hold it down, you fat bitches!" Jana shouted into the mike. The witches stopped milling around. The auditorium fell silent. "Witches of BabaYaga, we are here tonight to call upon BabaYaga to fulfill her promise. The promise of immortality for Alex Macko, BabaYaga's most faithful and powerful Warlock." She removed her hand from her gown. She moved her caped tonnage toward the hanging sacrifice. "We have prepared a special sacrifice . . . you have all read of her disappearance, and you will all recognize her from 'The Young and the Restless'" she said.

The huge hall rang with applause.

"Strip, chant, and march around the starlet. Pierce the flesh but do not disturb the body art. We want BabaYaga, The Sacred Mother of All That is Evil, to be pleased, not only with the feast, but with the dressing."

Some of the witches stood immediately and began disrobing, but Jana held up her hands. "Please, ladies! Relax one more minute . . . when you have pierced the body once, please line up in the open area to your right. You will each be ritualized before we call to BabaYaga."

One hundred and twenty tons of flesh disrobed and tumbled into each other in an attempt to be the first to pierce the starlet's delicate body. But no matter how careful the witches were about piercing, the number of holes was logistically incorrect for the small corpse: blood flowed from every area of her tiny body; it washed the decorative flowers flat and painted white blossoms red, and gray blossoms purple. As the dripping blood teared down onto cowl-shaped flowered-sprays of Monkshood, the bright purple turned black, and Jana Leidia-Ada got Teed. "All that damn work. Spoiled! You stupid, fat bitches have made my beautiful sacrifice look like some wino draped in blood-drenched garbage. Stupid! Fat! Bitches!" She motioned the witched to get away from the starlet. "Move to the right. Ritualize one round. It's getting late. BabaYaga will not come if we do not beat the dawn!" she shouted.

The fat witches were ridden around the indoor riding-rink, fifty at a time, by young, muscular Warlocks. The stench of sweat and sex filled the air. When the last witch was dismounted, Jana dismissed all the Warlocks except the muscle-bound one from California. "Right on!" he shouted to the crowd as he raised his fist to the sky. "Right

on!” Jana moved toward the center of the platform. “BabaYaga!” Jana shouted toward the rafters. “Sacred Mother of All That is Evil, appear!” Receive your humble servants’ special sacrifice wrapped in sacred selections from witch nurtured dung patches. BabaYaga appear!”

A piercing screech echoed through the hall. From the exact center of the top bleachers, a four hundred pound witch clutched her bulbous stomach then tumbled forward. Her body toppled onto the lower bleachers and gained momentum until she was tumbling toward the Witches Foot at break-neck speed. When she slammed into the high edge of the Witches Foot, she split into two halves and BabaYaga stepped from the bloodless center, like an unattended lady stepping from a limo. Cheers rang the rafters of the hall. BabaYaga scrambled to the starlet’s blood-slick corpse; she dropped to her bony knees and placed her twisted lips on the flower-slipped feet. But instead of slurping up the flower decked starlet in a matter of seconds, BabaYaga slowly nibbled her way up. The thousand plus witch-coven stood silent for the better part of an hour while their witch-hag leader finished the special feast. Then BabaYaga headed for the Warlock from California.”Right on!” He said. He followed the hag-witch to the riding arena. All of BabaYaga’s infamous moves could not dislodge the young Warlock. After a long, wild ride, she stood straight up in the center of the Witches Foot, looked over her slime-slick shoulder and begged the young man to leave.

The Coven was deadly silent while the beach-boy dismounted. BabaYaga turned and watched the naked rider walk toward the hall’s exit. Everyone waited for an acidic stream of saliva to shoot from the hag-witch’s mouth and eat into the handsome, young man’s tight buttocks. But, instead, BabaYaga raised her hands—it would be one of those infamous deaths by fire, most thought. She would point her finger and fire would disembowel the gifted Warlock. She placed her bony hands together and began to clap. She clapped loudly toward the strutting, young man. The Coven joined in. He turned and took a long, sweeping bow then threw a kiss to BabaYaga. He would have a return gig.

BabaYaga approached Jana and threw her slim-ringed arms around the witch’s naked body. “You have done your father proud. Your wish is BabaYaga’s command,” the hag-witch said.

“Sacred Mother, here you see converted souls,” she swept her graceful hand through the air toward the audience. “Over one thousand. Converted by my glorious father, Alex Macko. We have come to receive your promise of immortality for him.”

“When were these witches recruited?”

“Most, in the last few years.”

“Did they all go to your father’s cell?”

“He commanded his daughters to recruit,” Jana said.

“Did they all go to your father’s cell?”

“He commanded his daughters to recruit. He was the reason for the drive. The reward should be his.”

“If he wants immortality, he must recruit one thousand witches. He . . . must recruit one thousand witches!” BabaYaga shouted.

Jana turned to the audience. “BabaYaga will not honor her promise!”

BabaYaga stepped in close to the trembling witch. “When he recruits one thousand witches!”

“You putrid bitch!” Jana screamed into the hag-witch’s twisted face—the auditorium went silent. “None of these will follow you unless I give the command. There will be no command unless you honor your promise to my father.” she turned to the silent audience. “I will not

BabaYaga’s claw-like hands shot through the still air and garroted the young witch’s tongue. One quick twist and the still wagging tongue was ripped from its roots and hurled with blood-trailing jets into the mass of witches. “Does anyone not want to worship BabaYaga!” BabaYaga shouted to the cowering mass of flesh, while Jana squirmed and gurgled, gagging to death on her own mouth full of blood.

When Alexander heard of the happenings, he paced his cell. “The loss of a bastard daughter didn’t mean diddly,” he said to the cell walls. “But it Ts me off that that damn hag has such a stick-to-the-book attitude toward my immortality. Okay, we’ll do it by the book. She’ll give me credit for about a hundred or so. So here I go. The recruits will have to be flown to the prison. It’ll cost about two million. I’m allowed two visits per weekend. I’ll have to have over four hundred and fifty weekends booked solid. Damn, that will take nine years. I’m out in twelve. I’ll be immortal before I’m released. If I’m not dead first. I can do it. Just a drop in the bucket.” As his new program went into effect, he found that the time was flying. He was booked solid on weekends and during the week the new prison administration allowed him to call his broker every morning. “I don’t sell short,” Alexander shouted into the receiver. “You idiot! That’s un-American! I want contracts delivered. Push all my contracts to the last trading day. I have Approved Delivery facilities around the world.” It was fantastic. The idiots in the world were going to sell him all their wheat. And give him terms to buy it. He could control—through many “Also Known As” and “Street Names” more and more contracts every day. It was much simpler than sacrificing to BabaYaga or paying tons of money to the Wheat Mafia. All he had to do was call his broker and always come with the money on the margin call—which there won’t be because he could control the wheat price. The price would always be up. He could tighten the distribution at Macko & Coven and keep the price high. Or he could let the price fall. Screw the margin, and then buy out the impoverished farms.

He picked up his “Early Outlook Into 1981-82” brochure sent to him by his St. Louis brokerage house. “The wheat market currently faces the possibility of record production and a significant increase in stocks, depressing prices this crop year and reversing a two-year trend of short supplies and high prices. Should the projected conditions materialize, this wheat crop year would bear a striking resemblance to 1976-77 when bountiful harvests, increased stocks, and low prices succeeded three years of short supplies and high prices. Wheat Summary: Dominant Force—The outlook for increased U.S. carry-over in 1981-82 as a result of projected increases in seeded acreage and final production. Bearish Forces—Outlook for decreased USSR import demand to between 13-15 million tonnes. Projected increase in world stocks in 1982-82 of 5-10 million tonnes.

Bullish Forces—Market concerns over yield reductions possibilities due to low soil moisture levels in the hard red winter wheat belt. Market concerns generated by any development leading to world wheat production below 460 million tonnes in 1981-82.”

“Damn I love this business,” Alexander shouted to the wheat charts on the wall. He walked closer to the center chart so his myopic eyes could unscramble the information. “You idiots! I don’t sell short,” he shouted at the chart and ripped it from the cement

wall. Alexander's power over the wheat of the world was aided by an unexpected windfall: the countries experimenting with Marxism through collectivism, all screwed up their export status. Russia and all the other countries that went for collectivism became immediate net importers. US, Canada, Argentina, and Australia were the world's net exporters. Alex Macko had the largest wheat holdings in all four countries. Maybe he would use his Wheat Mafia, one more time.

Chapter Twenty Four

Lanzel Tick and Norman Olm arrived in Nouakchott, Mauritania by yacht on the eve of the Moorish festivals. The message from the boss, Alex Macko, told them to enjoy the festivals and to try to aid the government of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in the upcoming problem with locust. The message said, that if there was an early rain, locust would breed and possibly cause crop destruction much greater than that of 1954 when most of northern Africa was devastated. If the rainy season were to start too early, "due to unusual weather conditions" the locust would get a head start and might even make it across the Mediterranean to Europe and their rich wheat fields. The boss sent for the Wheat Mafia. They arrived by Alexander's yacht so they could transport Olm's equipment and Tick's cages of locust. After two boring, boozless nights of watching black Moors and Bedouin Moors try to out-do each other, Norman Olm packed his rented Renault. The ten year old car had had its back-end replaced with a truck bed which Olm stacked with equipment and supplies. He drove away from Nouakchott on a paved road that quickly deteriorated into a rutted dirt roller coaster ride. He destination was the Tagant Plateau, "Country of Stone," where he was to set up operation "Early Rain".

The early rain was to help Lanzel Tick's silly grasshoppers to swarm and become locust. Because they were going to swarm early, they would become millions strong and eat their way through the rice and anything else in their path. They might even reach Europe. damn, if that happened, it would be the start of the Apocalypse. He would be part of the Biblical prophecy. That would be fantastic. The world was just starting to respect each others borders, and bamb, Norman Olm and Lanzel "Jerk-genius" Tick would start the Apocalypse. The Berber tribesmen who passed the chugging Renault smiled down from their complacent camels. Another European heading to an oasis to sell some useless trinkets. But the Berbers were way off the mark. Norman Olm was not European and he was not selling trinkets. His products were famine and death.

He set up camp on the edge of a small oasis, "Hajra", where a family of Marabouts resided in three, goat-skin tents. They never bothered Olm. Not even to peek over a small dune to see what he was up to with the explosions of dry ice to the heavens. It had been over six years since they had heard the same exploding sounds coming from the direction of Morocco. Two of their sons had died in that fiasco. They did not give a pile of camel

ding if the European on the other side of the Hajra was blowing Allah out of Heaven—they would not get involved. After three sixteen-hour days of blasting ice at the shallow clouds, just when Olm thought he would run out of ammunition or die of an overdose of sweet dates, it started to rain. It began to pour. Then came the deluge. Now it was Jerk-genius' turn.

Lanzel Tick was in his lab aboard “The Triticum” Alex Macko’s ninety-two foot yacht. The lab was quiet except for an occasional chirp from the green-skinned grasshoppers. The nymphs were in the solitary phase, their oxygen-intake and metabolic rates were sluggish. Lanzel had created the little beauties; they were immune to gamma BHC, Dieldrin, and Chlordane. They had a low rate of mortality if faced with Tomaphene sprays. They were beauties. The do-gooder ecologists saved Lanzel from having to make his nymphs super-locust. DDTs had been banned; they were the only sure death for his nymphs in any of their stages. The nymphs in solitary stage were not crop eaters. Alex Macko paid Lanzel Tick for crop eaters. He would transfer the nymphs to the shed out by the airport. There they would become active and nervous because of the crowding of thousands of them into a confined space. They would evolve into the gregarious phase with black and orange bodies and broader shoulders and longer wings. They would become crop eaters. Lanzel prayed his little friends liked the taste of rice and maize, because they would not get a taste of wheat until they reached Europe.

He was nervous, as a cat, the night before he opened the shed door. He could not eat or sleep; he would be responsible for the worst disaster in the history of the world. All the Lanzel nymphs had to do was eat their way through Africa and Europe . . . not too much to ask a one ounce grasshopper. If the rains were timed correctly, his Lanzel nymphs would make it. He would have to depend on that butt-kissing, ostentatious turd, Norman Olm, but he would league with Satan Himself to give the world back to its proper heirs . . . the Anthropoids.

He unlocked the small screened opening in the shed door. The hum of the locust was maddening yet stimulating. They were all mad as Hell; battering and climbing on each others broad shoulders. Wings fanned the air than were torn and fluttered to the locust-covered floor of the shed. Lanzel closed the screened opening and unlocked the shed’s reinforced door. He hesitated before opening the door; he wiped spittle from the corners of his pristine mouth; he pulled the beekeeper’s hood over his sweat drenched head; he opened the door. The blast of wings knocked him to the ground, but the locust swarmed off to more important tasks.

Lanzel’s note to Alex Macko, in the Canberra cell, had only one line “shed opened.”

Within two weeks, an urgent message came out of Rome from the Food and Agriculture Organization, “A plague of locust that could become the biggest that modern man has known is sweeping voraciously across North and West Africa, foiling international counterattack officials. ‘We are troubled,’ said Lucas Brader, a Dutch entomologist who headed the FAO anti-locust campaign. ‘The speed of the locusts’ spread has caught us off balance. It could become the biggest locust plague ever if we are unable to stop it.’ Reliable records on locust outbreaks go back about one hundred years. Already, twenty-five thousand square miles—about the size of West Virginia—have been invaded by the Winged Desert Locusts, who consume their weight in vegetation each day at two hundred tons per square mile. A forty square-mile swarm of Migratory Grasshoppers is considered moderate sized, but swarms ten times that size have been

reported in previous infestations. By Brader's reckoning, a sun-blackening sixty square-mile swarm of locust weighs ten thousand tons, a biological mass equivalent to the weight of a good-sized ocean freighter. "The locust, creatures of the wind, fly by day—as much as one hundred miles. At night they eat anything that grows, leaving barren land behind them. Thus far, crop losses have been slight, because the areas of worst infestation are lightly cultivated. At potential risk from the outbreak, whose spread is surpassing a 1954 invasion that took more than a decade to eradicate, is all of Africa north of the Equator and the entire Middle East as far east as India and Pakistan. About one billion people—a fifth of the world's population—live in the endanger area. 'This is almost a superhuman task,' FAO Director General, Edouard Saouma, said. 'Swift action is needed to avoid a major regional food crisis later this year.'"

"The locust swarms in which there are about one hundred million insects per square mile, began their rampage this year in North Africa after unusually plentiful rainfall in remote inland desert areas in Mauritania and the Western Sahara. In recent days, they have swung west with a vengeance. Their future course depends on the winds. Historically, the swarms move west and then east and south as the year progresses. What is particularly alarming this year is that the westward advance had come earlier in the year than in the 1950s outbreak, suggesting greater swarms. The Mediterranean island of Malta, Italy and other southern European countries are on alert. The Italian government has created a precautionary interministerial task force to assess the threat. Aided by military radar, meteorologists think they will get a three- or four-day advanced warning if a swarm attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea. There is no precedent for the locust invasion of the European mainland. But the Italian island province of Sardinia has been hit. And, before, and over Easter a sixty-mile stretch of beaches south of Rome was littered with dead locust.

"Brader's locust bulletin reaching FOA members Friday reads: 'Major air and ground control campaigns continuing in Morocco and Algeria . . . Tunisia quiet pending hatching. Numerous reports of swarms in central and southern Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia and western Mali indicated that this southerly migration is of much larger scale than anticipated . . . mature swarms seen in northwest Saudi Arabia and southeast Egypt indicates escapes on considerable scale from the earlier breeding in Sudan-Egypt area. Situation in West Africa has deteriorated rapidly. This constitutes grave threat of further development of plague, and situation should be considered as an emergency.' An FAO call for help on behalf of the poor countries that are often barely self-sufficient in food production has won hearting response from nearly two dozen international donors, including the United States, Canada, West European countries, Japan, the Soviet Union, China, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, the Islamic Development Bank and the European Economic Community.

"Italian helicopters in Tunisia and Soviet planes in Algeria carry airborne pesticides to the locust swarms. Canada sent planes, Japan and China pesticides, and the United States sent both as part of a twelve million dollar donation. Environmental concerns rule out DDT family locust killers that were used effectively in previous infestations. The currently used pesticides of the organo-phosphate family and carbamates group are safer but have only three-to five-day killing power. Locust eggs take three weeks to hatch, through, so breeding areas have to be sprayed more than once."

Alexander tacked a copy of the FAO article by William D. Montalbano to his cell wall. He circled the lines, “Before and over Easter a sixty-mile stretch of beaches south of Rome was littered with dead locust.”

“The little buggers couldn’t make the flight,” he said. “I’ll just have to have Tick open a shed right in the FAO’s back yard.

When the shed was opened behind Ciampino Airport outside Rome, the locust seemed confused. They stayed in the shed until Lancel Tick rushed in and scattered the swarm through the wind-whipped door. He knelt and gently gloved the locust he had carelessly crushed on the shed’s floor. He dug into the rich Italian soil and laid the locust one-by-one in their communal grave. He looked in the direction of the Vatican as he pushed the dark soil over his crushed friends. Some day insects would again rule the earth. No careless human would walk on the earth or on them.

The news of the worst locust infestation in the history of the European Community blazed in headlines across the world. It was hard for Alex Macko to believe. Damn, it had been only eight weeks since Tick’s visit to Rome. Eight damn weeks and the locust had done enough damage to cause him to dance a jig. A jig of success. A jig of death. He would be free in five years. The wealthiest, most powerful man on earth. Five years and then he would seek immortality. Nothing could stop him. Alex Macko had his game plan correct, but he was wrong about nothing could stop him. He assumed correctly that all the Evil of the world would back his hand. A hand that raised the price of wheat each and every day. But he also assumed God was sleeping or just didn’t give a crap. But God or Fate or some other power had the good sense to have the Food and Agriculture Organization call Dover Sage out of retirement.

Chapter Twenty Five

Along the Senegal River that etched out the southern border of Mauritania, Dover Sage sat on the steel seat of a stripped Cat. It had a hopper dozer bolted to its front. The wheeled screens caused the locust nymphs to fall into troughs filled with water and kerosene. The piles of their dead bodies grew two feet thick in the troughs until they absorbed all the liquid mixture than their comrades just clambered across their poisoned carcasses to freedom. They never stopped coming. Dover was getting claustrophobic in the stripped cab of the giant Cat. But if he stepped outside, the damned locust would knock him to the ground and swarm him as they did his assistant, Richard Dulles. Dulles was one of the rich kids who had volunteered to help fight the Lancel Tick disaster.

It was Tick for sure. Norman Olm and Tick had been spotted in the port of Nauakchott just weeks before the rain started and the locust rampaged across the center of Mauritania. Tick and Olm had as surely killed Dulles as the ravenous, winged evil. When it was finished—if it ever would be finished—he would look up the two sociopaths

and feed them handfuls of deceased locusts. The same locust that swarmed Dulles and slipped through his protective clothing and ate his flesh from his scrawny ribs like they would a deserted cow. Dover couldn't have saved him. All he could do was end the rich kid's torture by torching his and the bodies of his winged tormentors. He would stuff the Desert Locust into Olm's and Tick's mouths. Let the locusts eat into their throats, bellies, and intestines. Then he would torch the whole mess . . . slowly. If you could torch anything slowly.

It took more than three years before Dover could get released from his job at the FAO. He had spent every waking hour fighting the locust or shoveling up their dead bodies or re-seeding the crops they had destroyed. He had always liked grasshoppers and told any body messing with them that they were considered lucky by Orientals—or was that crickets?—but screw the Orientals, if he ever saw a grasshopper walking by itself across a bright green lawn in the center of Topeka, even if the grasshopper smiled and tipped his Jimminey Cricket hat, he'd smash the chirping bastard until its guts blended with the plush, green grass.

Europe had been devastated. The European Economic community depended on four powerful men for their supply of wheat. Wheat prices topped the price of gold for the first and only time in history. The four men became billionaires. The world's disaster was their glory days. All except Alex Macko. Not one bushel of wheat would be exported by Macko & Coven until Alex Macko was released from prison. The European Community argued that he only had three more years, "Let him out!" He had served more than a quarter century. "That's long enough!" But Australia said, "It is nothing more than black mail. Alex Macko is a murderer and worse, he is an opportunist."

As months went by, and things became more desperate in Europe, the world's largest wheat producer stepped forward; Russia loaned the European Community what they thought was enough wheat to get through the winter. Winter rolled in quickly and when it was certain there would be a short-fall, Australia was again besieged by requests to release Alex Macko. When President Bush went to Canberra, he came back with a grateful Alex Macko muttering something about taking back all the nasty things he had said about both Bush and Quail. Quail was in Argentina with FAO hero, Dover Sage.

Evil's score was kept with severed heads and genitalia in the border war between Chile and Argentina. Evil's bloody tally. Dover and Quail were rushed through tight security to the Argentina Criminal Board. Vice President Quail sat at Dover's side as Sage told his tale, "I have spent my life trying to stop Alex Macko and his kind from controlling the wheat of the world. When I came to Argentina that year, I was intent on proving Macko's involvement in the death of Inez Moreno." Dover stood and moved around the ancient courthouse. "I caught Macko alone on the back forty of the massive Moreno Ranch. He was muttering to himself about the beauty of the ranch he owned. I stepped up behind him. He turned. 'Sage,' he said. 'You still alive? Damn, I must have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years to have you buried.' "I pulled the Luger I had purchased from the bellhop in Buenos Aires. The number had been eliminated so there was nothing to tie me to the gun. The bellhop told me where to get the ammunition. I stuck the Luger in Macko's back, but he dropped to the ground and rolled over the edge of the low hill. Turk came charging out of nowhere. He attempted to grab the Luger from my hand. But all he grabbed was three bullets. The bullet's blast burned

Turk's giant hands. I noticed there was no blood, but I attributed that to Turk's thick clothing. I watched him roll down the hill and die in a screaming fit. Or so I thought.

"The Moreno brother jumped me and took me to Alex Macko who held me in a locked room at the ranch until the local officials came. When the indictment came down, it was for a double homicide of the Moreno brothers. I kept still because I assumed there would be no evidence and it would be over and forgotten and no one would ask about Turk. But the judge was an uncle to the Morenos. Most of the officials of the court were relatives of the brothers and owed money to Macko. My court appointed attorney yawned through most of the proceedings.

"My request for a change of venue was laughed out of court. I was denied most of my rights under the constitutional government of Argentina. I was sentenced to death, but my Writ of Habeas Corpus brought the Appellate Court to my cause, and eventually they reversed the case. I plea bargained for time served at the retrial and was released.

"In Australia, I discovered that Turk was alive and that I had been set up. The bullets were blanks. I am here today to ask the review board to expunge my record."

"Vice President Quail," one of the board members said, "is this a personal appearance or do you represent the United States Government?"

"I am the Vice President of the United States and I am a person," he said.

"Vice President Quail, is this official?" the board member tried to clarify.

"Yes it was official, once, and will be again," Quail said.

"Not your election. What is your status at this hearing," the board member said.

"He is here as a private citizen," Dover interrupted.

The board member slowly cleared his throat, hesitated, and then continued questioning Quail. "President Bush is the one who pulled Alex Macko out of the Australian prison. Does he condone you're helping Senior Sage?"

"President Bush knows that friends are what we make them," Quail said.

The board members all looked at each other.

Despite Vice President Quail, Dover Sage had his criminal records sealed and expunged. He was subsequently elected as a Director of the FAO and headed toward the next logical spot of Alex Macko's attack.

Religion shouted that the last of the Communist had to go. Communism did not work, not because off the Marxist's economic theories, but because of the Marxist's hate of God. But Dover was certain that Communism didn't work because it was just another religion. All religions made their parishioners subservient. Subservience was only good for slaves. When he reached Saratov, he checked into Motel 6. Before he could unpack his travel bags, an eleven-by-fourteen, dirty-yellow envelope was slipped under his door.

"Damn!" he said as the envelope's contents fell to the Formica top of the motel room's utility desk. In bright red lipstick across the base of the black-and-white photograph were the words "Guess Who?" Dover gently picked up the photograph and took it over to the window. His eyes weren't what they used to be. He needed to go and have them tended to. They made him see things that were not possible. In the back-lit photo, stood a woman who looked to be in her mid-to-late fifties. She was wearing a witch's robe and she was holding a Russian Democracy newspaper. Dover could not make out what it said, but he could read the date: it translated into February 28, 1993. "Three weeks ago!" he said.

They wanted him to think that she was alive. They wanted him to not expose their plans. It was she he drove into the Kansas River. He took the photograph and gently ripped it into tiny pieces then threw them, at the motel's ceiling, emulating the light snow flakes dancing against the outside of the windows.

Dover was correct about one thing: Alexander Macko and his entourage had been in Saratov since the formation of the new Democracy. The day after the Declaration was signed, the government began parceling out land through lotteries; Alex Macko began offering to purchase any and all wheat acreage in the Golden Triangle. No one was selling. Everyone wanted to try their hand at owning a fertile piece of Mother Russia. Many of their grandparents had had a small taste of ownership before the Revolution and after the Tzar began giving land to loyal citizens. Screw them, Alexander thought. Screw their grandparents, he could make them sell. He was back home. Home in Russia. Or what he would always think of as Russia. The regions were all broken up. It was insane. But he would stay until he owned it all. If it took a lifetime. Which could be forever if he became immortal. BabaYaga had certified his lists months before. But she said wait for Saratov. The Coven meeting would be the biggest in the history of the world. Great Mistress Beelzebub are you listening? Why must he subordinate himself to BabaYaga? Why could he not deal directly with you? Eliminate the middle-man? He had accomplished more of your work than Stalin and Hitler and Botha put together.

He walked through the city and approached the house that stood on the spot where he had spent so many glorious hours with the Coven. He could feel his old body responding. The juices were flowing just at the thought of the old Coven. Over seventy years since he had been there. When he was immortal, he'd bring back his mother and make her immortal also. A fantastic idea. Maybe if he had asked they would have brought her back years ago. Maybe all he had to do was ask. But he never thought to ask until he felt her karma in the golden wheat fields of Saratov. By the end of the year, all of his business would be finished. He would be immortal and his mother would be immortal. He would control all the wheat of the world including Russian wheat. He would be conjured by more witches than BabaYaga because he was more of a maniac and would do crazier things. He would be conjured more than BabaYaga or Hitler or Tanya's midget lover, Stalin. When the year was out, Tanya would be his only unfinished business.

Nothing he could have done could have prepared him for the shock of seeing his sister. He had kept the pictures of her that had appeared over the years in the international newspapers. But the pictures stopped appearing in 1953. No more Stalin. No more Tanya. The last picture was the face etched in his brain. He knew she would be older. He was older. Everyone was older—but BabaYaga. But he thought his sister would be beautiful in an older way.

She tried to block the weather-stained wooden door to the hoveled, Moscow apartment, but Alexander easily footed his way through the door. "I don't want you here," she said. "Your friends were here trying to get me to testify against you. I described for them exactly how you killed your own mother and father. How you penetrated me. How your pig friend raped me."

"Did you forget to tell them I ritualized you just blocks from here? Did you tell them you dreamed of me while that dwarf, Stalin, was humping you," he said

She swung out with her jeweled handled cane—her prized possession—and caught Alexander directly on the purple vein throbbing in his liver-marked temple. He crumbled to the floor.

When he came to, his was tied spread-eagled to the door-frame between the tiny kitchen and the shabby living quarters. Heavy spikes had been hammered through the dry wood into the crumbling concrete. He was naked. The ropes cut into his wrists and ankles. Pain fired every muscle of his old body. His eyes blurred. He could see Tanya standing directly in front of him. Next to her was . . . Joseph Stalin. Hell! He was going insane. He blinked his myopic eyes, and looked again; Tanya Mackovick was dressed formally; she wore an elegant dress with a low-cut bodice and a flowing train of material demurely lifted from the dust-caked floor and wrapped around her extended forearm. Next to her stood a short man dressed in what must have been one of Stalin's old double-breasted trench coats. The red patches on the coat and hat-band were frayed; water spots overlapped and formed intricate designs on the gold brickerbrack on the hat's brim.

The short man was a Mongoloid—not from the steppes, but one with Downs Syndrome—with a walrus mustache. Alexander would have laughed, but he was in excruciating pain. Between his legs. She had castrated him, he thought. BabaYaga would search her down and devour her. He looked down; from his angle, all he could see was the top of the wooden head and directly below it the protruding head of the fertility doll's phalis.

“I always make Sosselo wear it when he's been naughty,” Tanya said.

“What, if he doesn't slaughter his quota of Party members for the day?” Alexander said.

Tanya ignored him; she turned to the uniformed cretin beside her, “Sosselo, please go and fetch the iron rod,” she said. She turned to Alexander. “Sosselo always impales any worshiper of BabaYaga . . . he never listens to me when it comes to witches and Gods . . . but because he wants no one worshiped but him,” she said. “You are a worshiper of BabaYaga, so Sosselo and I shall impale you. The thing that most amazes me, is that, though the body is composed of a mass of so many things that should block passage, the iron rod slides up and through the body with less than maximum effort. Watch, my evil brother, you will see.”

The Mongoloid came back into the room carrying an iron rod approximately eight feet long and two inches in diameter. Alexander tightened up tighter than when he was listening to Tanya's description of the way it would travel through his body. His body sent an SOS telegraph to his brain. The Mongoloid began to hand the rod to Tanya, but she declined.

No, Sosselo, it is your turn. Fair is fair. I've waited a lifetime, but fair is fair,” she said.

“Wait, my sister, people will be coming for me; they know I was coming to beg your forgiveness. If I don't return to my room, they will come looking. Sosselo and you will die the most painful of deaths. BabaYaga will demand it.”

“I have already died the most painful of deaths every day of my Hell-bound life as has my beautifully deformed Sosselo,” she said as she reached out and stroked the Mongoloid's twisted face. Tanya Mackovick nodded her head at the little man; he moved clumsily toward Alexander; he ducked between the ropes and directed the pointed end of

the iron rod toward Alexander's cloistered butt. "I was always going to castrate you," Tanya said. "But it appears you have little left to castrate."

The criticism of his manhood Teed Alexander off more than the little cretin's attempt to rod his butt. Alexander kicked backward, toward the little man, with his roped leg; the anchor pulled loose from the concrete and startled the Mongoloid. Alexander kicked out with his free leg and caught his antagonist in the throat. The Mongoloid grabbed at his slightly damaged neck and scampered back around Tanya and hid in her skirts. Alexander kicked sideways, hard, with his other leg and pulled the anchor from the crumbling concrete. Only his hands remained tied, but he was rapidly running out of energy. Guys over eighty are supposed to be sitting home in front of the T.V. watching Michael J. Fox or something not hanging around in some ugly, old bitch's doorway waiting for a cretin to ram a spike up their butt.

Tanya started toward him; she bent to pickup the iron rod; Alexander's slamming heel caught her at the base of her skull; she stumbled face down on the hard iron rod; blood rivered the dusty floor. The Mongoloid scampered across the living room and out the apartment door.

Hours later, blood washed Alexander's right arm, but he was finally able to free it from the rope's loop. He untied his left wrist and fell to the carpet. It was nightfall before he forced his aching body to stir from the floor. Dust caked his nostrils and reminded him of his peek hole in the alcove of the old house in Saratov. Stirring in his privates brought immediate pain. He slowly and gently untied the strap that garroted his scrotum. The heavy fertility doll's weight smashed a Tiffany lamp. A fairly good shot considering his position on the floor and his age and lack of practice. It had been seven decades since he heaved a fertility doll; and it hit a Tiffany lamp—Tiffany is the manifestation of God. Did it mean something? Was it an omen? Was he to be a God?

He found his clothes in a back room filled with expensive dresses and jewelry. She could have lived in luxury. Dumb. He dressed, then rolled Tanya's body in the tattered rug and dragged her body through the open apartment door, down the landing stairs, and to the waiting Yugo four-door. He was in luck when the body conformed just perfect to the cramped space of the Yugo's back floor board. Another omen? For a moment he thought he would have to extract the iron rod that had been shoved up his sister's ravished body. "It went in with less than maxim effort." He was certain he was not the impaler. It could only have been the little cretin. The Stalin-clone must have come back and did the deed when I was out cold on the floor. He probably wanted to do it to his bitch-mistress for a long time. Or he had been convinced by Tanya that it was some kind of religious ceremony. Sosselo was a nasty, little bugger.

Chapter Twenty Six

Dover had been told by his friendly travel agent, the weather was unusually bad for the time of the year, but he just nodded his head when they had to circle for three hours, that first night in Russia, before the plane could land. He knew then that Olm was in Russia. The longer Dover stayed in Saratov and watched the inclement weather destroy any hopes for a wheat crop of any size, the more he spoke of the connection between the weather and Alex Macko. He kept pointing to the sky and shouting Norman Olm's name. He began driving around in an old Fiat he had purchased from a used car lot in the center of Saratov. "Would you buy a used car from this emancipated Ukrainian?" The lot was just down the block from Alex Macko's newly purchased industrial bakery. Dover named his little car "Joan of Ark" because of her origin and because he thought she had been an ark in a previous life. She was able to traverse flooded areas that he was certain Norman Olm was creating. He drove through the cities and countrysides until he ran into a tall, slim farmer—an anomaly in Russia—who saw an unusual piece of equipment passing down the mud-slick road. "If it happened before the new Democracy was formed, I wouldn't have given it a second thought, but guns and tanks are no longer transported along this road," the farmer said.

Norman Olm set up his equipment and thought about all the money Alexander, or Alex as he liked to be called, promised him. It would be for retirement. All he had to do was cause enough destructive weather so the crops would be ruined, then Alex could get the new landowners to sell. Tick and Litenburg were further south using Rust and bugs to destroy the crops across the fertile sea-land, but Norman Olm, genius of the ice cannon, would be causing the real Hell. He was a genius; anyone could fire an ice cannon, but to be accurate and know what to shoot at, that took genius. He had caused the wheat lands to be hit by hail as big as fists. In November and December most of the farmers began to sell. He was going to nail them so hard with the next barrage; they would be begging Alex to take their destroyed crops and land.

Dover found the spot where the ice cannon had been anchored, but Norman Olm and the equipment were gone. Dover headed back to Saratov and a warm bath and dry clothing. On the treacherous drive back, he thought about the statute of limitations and the possibility that there was none on a capital crime. Alex Macko may have come home to a murder charge.

The following day, he went to the new agency that would be policing national crimes. Alex Macko's crime was a national crime because he fled to avoid prosecution. The head, of the new policing section, stationed in Saratov, was Kamiel Ivanovin. Kamiel was dressed in a hand-me-down three piece suit. He apologized for his dress, but he had nothing but uniforms at his apartment and a directive to wear suits had just come down and he had no time to go shopping. "I can only talk for a short time," he said. "My work load is staggering. We now have Organized Crime, whatever that is. You are correct that there is no statute of limitations on a capital crime, but we would need irrefutable witnesses in order to bring such a powerful man to trial."

"I spoke to his sister, she will testify," Dover said.

“She’s as insane as her old lover, Stalin, and her brother put together. She’s of no value. She was Stalin’s whore. People remember her from the infamous photographs by Iosif Vissarionovick Dzhugashvili. The most infamous shows her impaling a fat, naked woman. She is reputed to have ordered more slayings than Stalin himself,” Kamiel said.

“When I went to see her, she was very depressed about her lack of status in the new Democracy. Said that she hadn’t been invited to the party,” Dover said.

Kamiel smiled and tried to adjust the ill-fitting jacket. “We have been a Democracy for a short time; the citizens are celebrating. The unemployment rate has soured. Double digits. Shortages in everything. And we have no direction, still the people celebrate.”

“There will always be hardships for some people,” Dover said. “Even in the States there is still some poverty.” Dover smiled. “Tanya Mackovick lives in abject poverty. She is no longer beautiful. Many years ago, we were friends for a short time, but she looked at me and showed no recognition. I told her I had come from the States to block her brother’s efforts to control the wheat production of the new Democracy.” Dover moved over toward the barracks window. The weather was getting worse. Snow covered most of the earlier mud patches causing pedestrians to step into what looked like nothing more than nice, white snow, but turned out to be a mud bath for their new, Italian made boots. “She began to laugh with such violence that she began choking and spitting up. I approached her but she held out her arm to keep me at a distance. For three hours she gave me a vivid description of her brother’s patricide. She said no one can stop Alexander, because no one can stop BabaYaga. She said if Joseph Stalin couldn’t stop the hag-witch, no one can. She said Alexander could only be destroyed after BabaYaga was destroyed.”

Inspector Ivanovin listened to Dover’s story then walked around the desk and held the door open as he said goodbye. “Mister Sage, there is no reality to the BabaYaga legend. Covens are just places where old women meet. Like your infamous Bingo parlors. It is a religion to some, but nothing of substance, like your Mormons. If I have hard evidence, I will be the first to stop Alex Macko, he has recorded deeds on twenty-two thousand acres. He is buying up my people’s future.”

Dover finally tracked Norman Olm. It wasn’t very difficult this time. He hopped into the little Fiat and drove to the densest part of the forest-encircled land on the eastern border of the Ukraine. It was like following a sign from God, as he drove deeper and deeper into the most destructive hail storm ever recorded in Russian history. The baseball sized chunks of hail had been bombarding the area for almost two nights. Dover drove the tattered Fiat as close to the center of the plane as possible, but the mud became impassable. In the perfect center of the smallest plan, like an insane general, his head protected from the chunks of hail by what looked like a World War II German helmet. Norman Olm was loading an ice cannon with dry ice and firing it toward the heavens. He danced around dodging the large pieces of hail that were hammering at him, the cannon, and the planes. Dover was less than ten feet from the insane, little man before the big American with a trash lid held over his head was noticed.

“Sage, you have no jurisdiction here. You probably have no jurisdiction anywhere.” Olm began to giggle as he danced between the hail.

Dover charged forward and grabbed the soggy coat of the crazy man. “I need no jurisdiction to pound your silly face in.” Dover twisted the man’s face down toward the crust of thick mud and began to push his face into it. “You and me are going to load up

and take this evidence and your confession to the police. You and your sleazy boss, Macko will do the rest of your lives in Siberia.”

“Okay! Macko doesn’t mean crap to me,” Olm said. “I want a deal.”

Dover helped Norman to his feet, and then began straightening the man’s jacket as they spoke. Like a jack rabbit, the man took off across the slick planes. Dover started after him, but his big cow-boy boots reacted like skis and he slid right into the side of the ice cannon. Norman Olm was half way across the planes and heading for the safety of the dense forest. Dover decided there was only one slim chance of stopping him. He stripped the paper from a cylinder of dry ice and jammed the cylinder into the cannon’s chamber. He cranked down the cannon and sighted with the ultra-precise-supper-sophisticated LED read-out. The blast kicked back into the unsuspecting cow-boy and almost ruptured him below his giant, silver buckle. But the running man, Norman Olm, never knew what hit him. The flying cylinder of dry ice tore his head off and carried its steaming, bloody remains deep into the forest.

Dover started to let out a whoop, but it froze in his throat just about the same level as the spot in his back where the two barrels of a shotgun were jammed.

“Dover Sage, you are the epitome of a red-neck,” Alex Macko said. “You can’t just go on your way. You always come back and screw things up. Turk once said you could screw up a wet dream . . . he was right. If you were a Russian cop or anybody else, I would just blow you away, but BabaYaga wants you.” He turned Dover around and put the barrels of the shot-gun against Dover’s frost-bit lips. “Open and suck.” Macko held the gun with one hand while he looped a rope around Sage’s outstretched hands.

On the ride back to Saratov, Alexander turned to Dover. “Sage, why the Hell can’t you just stay out of my hair. I’ve got more important things to do then jack around with an idiot red-neck. I’m here in Russia to become immortal. Can your stupid Cow-boy brain conceive of immortality?” Alexander reached over and pulled at the handkerchief he had stuffed into Dover’s mouth. “You understand immortality? You idiot red-neck!”

“Red-necks thrive on immortality,” Dover said.

“Name one damn red-neck whose immortal.”

“Satan! You idiot!”

Alexander started laughing. “Yeah, Satan is a red-neck in the comic books you read. A cute little guy in a red outfit, but I’ve seen him, he ain’t cute.”

Dover twisted around in the 4-wheel-drive’s hard seat. The ropes across his shoulders and around his wrists cut in when he tried to get comfortable. “Macko, you’re a stupid, senile, old bastard, if you think there is such a thing as physical immortality for a punk like you. Not even a jerk like Satan would want a psychopath around for eternity.”

Alexander’s gloved hand swung out and caught Dover’s tender lips. Blood ringed his mouth immediately. He spit the blood in a spray against Alexander’s dodging face. Alexander swung again. Dover caught the hammering hand between his neck and shoulder then pivoted his roped ankles up and against the steering wheel. The 4-wheel-drive twisted sideways and skidded across the road and slammed into a mammoth tree. Alexander pulled a small Beretta from his jacket with his free hand. Dover’s feet kicked up and smashed into Alexander’s unprotected jaw. The Beretta went flying. Blood washed from Alexander’s lips and busted tooth.

“We’re too old for this crap!” Alexander shouted.

“You’re not going to be immortal, Hell, you’re on your last legs. I’m going to bury you,” Dover said. He kicked out again and caught Alexander in the chest

Alexander coughed and snapped open the driver’s side door. “Screw, you, Sage, BabaYaga and I will see you in Hell.” He hobbled off across the path of approaching traffic.

Dover’s first stop, after being untied and unthawed, was to see Kamiel. He was led into Kamiel’s office. “Sage! Alexander Macko has filed a formal complaint against you,” Kamiel said.

“He kidnaped me,” Dover said.

“It’s not for kid napping. It’s for murder.”

“The only thing I murdered was his car.”

“He says you murdered one of his employees.”

“Norman Olm? That was a freak accident.”

“Norman Olm? Who the hell is Norman Olm?” Kamiel said as he moved next to the barracks window. The weather had suddenly become bearable. The hail had stopped. The rain had stopped. The snow was easy.

“Olm’s the guy that got his head blown off by an ice cannon,” Dover said.

“Where did this freak accident happen?”

“Didn’t Macko say in his formal complaint?” Dover stood and looked out the window past Kamiel. He knew he had done a good job of getting the weather back in the hands of Mother Nature.

“The murder complaint is for Lanzel Tick,” Kamiel said. “Another freak accident?”

“You tell me.”

Dover remembered trudging through the slush and rain and hail toward the small building at the back of Alex Macko’s industrial bakery in the center of Saratov. It was early evening, yet few lights were on in the business offices. The Russians had learned under Socialism that at day’s end you went home and forgot. All that would change when they discovered how hard it was to earn the almighty Ruble. Dover moved cautiously toward the light that seeped through the wire mesh on the building’s window. He pulled himself up, cutting his fingers slightly on the rusty wire. Below, inside, at a large work table, Lanzel Tick was hunched over an elaborate, multiknobbed microscope. The century old lock was one-two-three for Dover to pick. He moved quietly into the room. “Lanzel, you old mass-murderer, still alive? Just goes to show you even desert locust won’t eat scum like you,” Dover said.

Lanzel whirled around knocking the telescope and himself off onto the floor. Dover moved toward the frail biologist. Lanzel scooted backwards on his bony rump. “Don’t come near me! Alex Macko said you murdered poor Norman. You’re a crazy man. I want you out of here or I’ll have you stung so many times, they will think you were attacked by a drunken dart throwers.”

“Cute, Lanzel, real cute. Those the bugs you intend to use? He pointed toward the swarming habitat to the right of Lanzel Tick. Like a proud parent, but one who had just taken a stupid pill, Lanzel nodded. Dover reached down and picked up the scrambling scientist, and flung his screaming body through the protective glass of the habitat. “They only kill their masters!” Dover said.

The insects swarmed and began stinging the flailing little man. He was screaming something to the insects, but the insects were not listening. Dover understood; he could

make out most of Lanzel's ravings. Lanzel was yelling, "Attack! Attack!" But as his lips grew thick and swollen from the multiple stings, Tick's commands evolved into "Otah! Otah" the pea-brained insects didn't know how to "Otah!"

When Dover left the lab, Tick was still alive. Old Tick takes a licking, and keeps on Ticking. Lanzel staggered toward Dover screaming "Otah! Otah! to the insects that swarmed around his swollen, puss-filled face. He reached out toward Dover with hands that looked like they were the helium filled hands of the Under Dog float in the Topeka Christmas Parade.

"He was alive when I left," Dover said to Kamiel.

"We found him with a vile of cyanide clasp in his hand. His throat and stomach lining had been scorched by the deadly liquid. I listed it as suicide. He killed himself because of the pain of all the stings of some kind of insects. But Alex Macko says you must have had something to do with it," Kamiel said.

"You arresting me?"

"Not on this one. Tell me about the other freak accident."

"I'll show you. I need to pick up Joan of Ark anyway."

As Kamiel drove, Dover showed him a collection of Alexander Macko clippings. There was no hail but a light pleasant snow peppered the windshield of the official car. Dover opened a folder marked: ALEX MACKO aka Alexander Mackovick. The folder contained clippings and notes. Dover pulled out the first news clipping: "World Exporters Seek Strategy To Avert Famine In 1980s ROME—in a summer long series of meetings beginning Monday, world food experts will be trying to piece together a new international strategy to ease the risks of famine in the decade of the 1980s. 'All of the elements that led to the 1974 situation are there now and could lead to another world food crisis,' said Maurice J. Cunningham, executive director of the World Food Council. The situation is dangerous for several reasons, experts agree: World wheat consumption has exceeded production for two consecutive years, according to the International Wheat Council in London. None of the emergency food aid and reserve targets had been met. An effective response to the problem depends primarily on what wheat producers such as Titus Fuller and Alex Macko decide to do."

Dover showed Kamiel proof that during the late, great Lanzel Tick's short residence in Montana in the year of 1952 most of the wheat of the state and bordering North Dakota was destroyed by an unusual infestation of the Stem Sawfly. Then he read out loud in his gravely voice an article authored by Alex Macko for the ultra-right magazine "American Farmer" "We have been the bulwark of the world against famine since 1945. Under Public Law 480, we have given large amounts of grain either outright or by selling it on special concessional terms; but some nations are by now so poor and so over-populated that it is useless to try to help them; we must let them starve, and only offer technical help when their populations, reduced by hunger and disease, are small and more manageable." Dover turned to Kamiel. "Did you catch that crap about being more manageable?"

The next article proved Alex Macko was a major force behind the International Maize Improvement Center (CIMMYT) in Mexico that had developed Opaque-2 that was touted to be a gene to be transferred to the world's corn and wheat crops and add some ten million tons of protean to the world supply.

“Our Boy Macko made millions off that little farce,” Dover said. He ruffled through the file folder and flipped a small, brown piece of paper toward Kamiel. It fluttered in the air of the over-heated sedan. Kamiel grabbed the illusive paper and began to read in spurts as he watched the icy road and glanced at the article. ““A heavy Rust epidemic on the nearly 4 million acres of wheat in South Dakota could produce about 2 sextillion Rust spores. If only 1 in 10,000 of the spores blew north into North Dakota, four spores would be provided for every wheat plant in the state. Spores carried northward reach young wheat plants that are in a succulent stage, in which they are easily infected by Rust,” Professor D.P. Litenburg told this reporter.” Kamiel finished reading and looked over at Dover. “This is the same Litenburg who works for Macko?” he asked.

Dover nodded. “The combination of Olm and Litenburg get the job done. This Russian thing is their last hooraw . . . well Litenburg’s the only one alive, but Macko was certain to eliminate them all after this go around.”

“Litenburg going to have a freak accident?” Kamiel said.

“Best damn thing that could happen to Russia and the world. The stuff he’s screwing with is more dangerous than any of the rest. You can’t stop it.” Dover flexed his stiff shoulders. “A third of Ireland’s population starved to death because Blight destroyed their potatoes. Macko and Litenburg can cause a Blight attack . . . anywhere.”

Kamiel Ivanovin started to believe the North American. Dover Sage was no crackpot. Macko had either cornered the wheat market or was attempting to corner it—in Russia and the rest of the world. Kamiel drove the sedan through the muck until he reached the Eastern Ukrainian planes; he used Dover’s directions to drive right up next to the ice cannon. An equipment truck with its engine still running was hitched to the front of the cannon, but there was no driver. Kamiel jumped from the sedan and ran toward the woods; three sets of footprints scattered the snow in what looked like an art deco pattern to the edge of the sparse trees. Kamiel was glad he had been a little late. They must have heard the old sedan. The Democracy needed to buy some new automobiles. Timing was everything; if Dover Sage had not been such an interesting passenger and if the sedan had gone faster, he would be wrestling with three men, two of whom had the biggest feet this side of the Abominable Snowman, Kamiel thought. Sage was big, but maybe too old to hold his own against three fugitive Ukrainians.

Dover ran up beside him. “Jesus, look at those damned foot prints!” Dover said. “We are lucky. Five minutes earlier and we might have had to face them. Jesus!”

“Sage, I thought you Cow-boys were Macho,” Kamiel said. “John Wayne types. You afraid of a few Ukrainians?”

“Giant Ukrainians? Yes!”

“There is no proof that this belongs to Alex Macko, or that they worked for him, but you’ve been right about everything else. Where is this man Olm? When did the freak accident happen?”

Dover pointed off toward the forest about two hundred yards left of where Macko’s Ukrainians had escaped. The two detectives trudged through the snow to the edge of the forest. Kamiel looked back at the equipment and judged that the frozen, headless carcass of Norman Olm, that he was standing over, was approximately three hundred yards from the cannon barrel. “About the distance of one of your Football fields. How do you suppose that the cannon was so accurate? Why do you suppose Olm was so careless to

leave a loaded cannon pointed at ground level?” He walked ahead of Dover, back toward the cannon. “I’ll call in and get some people out here.”

Dover nodded at his back. Kamiel was a good guy. But Dover doubted he would get any help with Litenburg. The Russians didn’t want to be arresting any Americans right at the start. Dover walked over to the sedan and tried to cull any information from Kamiel’s side of the conversation over the two-way. But he spoke very little Russian.

“You were right, my friend,” Kamiel said as he hitched the two-way phone back onto the dashboard. “Norman Olm had the cannon. Lanzel Tick had the beetles. And another Macko employee, your friend Professor Litenburg had the Rust cultures. They were confiscated from his body when he was found dead in the rest area of Eastern Airlines. It appears he had tried to flee the Democracy. The Rust cultures were crammed in his ears and nose and mouth. Toilet paper was wrapped layer after layer very meticulously around his head as if in preparation to swaddle his entire body for a place along side King Tut. You have been correct about everything.”

“I’m glad you think so, cause I’m about to ask for a big favor.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Dover would need Kamiel’s help to pull off his plan to wipe out BabaYaga and Alex Macko in one fell swoop. The police found the informant who, while serving her seven life terms in maximum security in Odessa, had found God. She had been convicted on circumstantial evidence. None of the bodies had been found, but when her seventh child disappeared, the authorities decided to take action. After she found God—while in jail waiting her trial—she confessed to sacrificing all her children to BabaYaga. One child every time she needed BabaYaga’s services. She bred children for just the purpose of sacrifice. She had worshiped BabaYaga since her fifteenth birthday. But she had found God. And if God helped her get released from maximum, she wouldn’t be like the other prisoners: they forsook Him soon after the gates cranked closed behind their fat butts hustling to freedom. She gave Kamiel and Dover enough information that they were fairly positive they could get in and out of the upcoming Witches Conference without being tortured, beaten, and/or eaten. Both agreed that getting back out alive and in one piece should be priority.

The night of the Conference, Kamiel’s assistant sat in a van with technicians watching seventeen monitors mounted around the ceiling of the van. They panned and moved and focused and showed close-ups all according to instructions. The monitors verified that more than a thousand witches were in attendance in the central conference hall of Macko & Coven Saratov Industrial Bakery.

The informant had told Kamiel and Dover that security would be lax because anyone not a disciple was taking their life in their own hands; BabaYaga would know

immediately if there was an Unworthy present. The Unworthy would be tortured and sacrificed. Dover and Kamiel supposed BabaYaga's supposed abilities were bull just as BabaYaga was bull. Kamiel's assistant was not so sure as he watched Dover and Kamiel enter, the hall, disguised as witches. The assistant spotted them in one of the monitors and asked one of the engineers to zoom in. "In a congregation of some of the ugliest witches on God's green earth . . . those are two real ugly witches," the assistant said. "But two real brave witches."

Alex Macko stood in front. He was in the center of an elaborately carved Witches' Foot—it looked to be inlaid with twenty-four karat gold. "Sisters," he intoned. "Today, I become immortal! A promise from BabaYaga! For this I have brought a most apropos sacrifice. The slayer of thousands of your sisters. All impaled for their love of BabaYaga. The feast, tonight, is my biological sister . . . Stalin's Whore . . . Tanya Mackovick." He pointed straight overhead. High up in the rafters was a naked body hanging from a noose knotted around its neck. A heavy iron rod had been driven through its length; it caused the body to list to one side. A putrid odor seeped down from the rafters. The audience of witches stood and clapped and cheered. They would finally see the end of Stalin's Whore.

The powerful lens of the T.V. camera zoomed in. "His sister! The bastard has strung up his own sister," the assistant said.

The head engineer turned and spoke, "We should raid the Conference before they destroy the evidence. We have Macko by the balls."

"Kamiel Ianovin wants to destroy the entire Coven system; it is more important to the Democracy than to prove homicide against Alex Macko."

The camera focused back on Alex Macko in the center of the Witches' Foot. ". . . and BabaYaga is Sacred Mother of All That is Evil. We must prepare to receive her!" he shouted. He stripped off his clothes and stood naked in the center of the hall. He was in his eighties, the assistant thought. But his was the body of a forty year old. Evil had been good to him. But who wanted to live forever?

All the witches stood and began to disrobe. The assistant told the engineers to focus on the two witches standing three rows from the front. "The two real ugly ones." Dover and Kamiel began to disrobe while looking around self-consciously at their naked sisters. The assistant looked closely at the monitor. The make-up job wouldn't hold up in front of some American Hollywood camera, but in the dim lights of the conference hall, the rubber breasts and rubber privates looked real. Ugly, but real, Dover Sage's breasts were a little too large and looked like he might carry the breasts that could nurture all of Mother Russia, but that was not much of a flaw when you consider there had to be more tons of breasts in the hall than were in most dairy farms. But Kamiel Ivanovin, just looked like any fat, ugly woman with hair under her arms, who decided to join a Coven to gain the camaraderie with other fat, ugly women with hair under their arms. They had both developed the rather feminine habit of brushing the long, black hair back from their eyes. Kamiel did the best. Because he scooped the long hair in his palms then threw it over his powdered shoulders.

In the center of the ring, Macko lowered the body of his sister. The audience went wild, but, with decorum, stayed in their places. Macko raked his long fingernails across the withered chest of his sister. Blood dripped from his fingers; the naked witches swarmed forward and began stabbing sharp objects into the corpse. Kamiel moved in line

and stabbed the corpse with a knitting needle. Then Dover approached the corpse, he reached up easily and jerked the patch from Tanya's eye. The eye socket was skinned over, but he drove a glass vile down into the socket and twisted until the glass popped. Dover put the eye patch on his own eye and turned toward Alex Macko.

Alexander smiled at the giant witch with the eye patch. He cheered and pointed toward her. She reminded him somewhat of his beloved mother and maybe someone else.

He smiled again as the big witch disappeared into the swarm of witches.

They pulled it off!" the assistant shouted in the control van. "They pulled it off!" When the last witch stabbed the corpse, the thousand-witch-strong coven began chanting for BabaYaga. The conference hall vibrated with her name and echoed as if there were a thousand additional voices. BabaYaga appeared.

Dover and Kamiel damn near jumped out of their skins—the rubber ones and their real ones. The T.V. cameras focused down on every inch of BabaYaga's putrid, hairless body and privates. One of the young engineers jumped from the camera van then ran and coughed up his supper at the back of the trailer.

Kamiel was certain that Macko had hired some circus freak. It had to be make-up. But much better make-up than Dover or his. "There is no such thing as BabaYaga," he whispered to Dover.

BabaYaga looked at Alexander then toward the bloody corpse of Tanya Mackovick then toward the audience. The witches grew silent. BabaYaga sniffed the air like some Birch Forest she-wolf. "Unworthy!" she shouted then danced around in a jittery circle. "Unworthy!"

The witches all turned and examined their neighbors.

"Step forward! Unworthy! Or I shall devour each and every one," the hag-witch hissed.

Dover began to step forward just when a witch, three bleachers over, stood.

"Sacred Mother of All That Is Evil," the witch said. "Please let your humble disciple speak." BabaYaga nodded and the witch continued, "I am not an Unworthy. But you may have sensed that I am here with a non-witch." A rustle went through the audience. The witch continued, "I have brought a gift for you." she reached down at the base of the bleachers. She pushed the decorative dry wheat-fodder aside and reached under the seat. With her help, a young, beautiful boy appeared from under the bleachers. The witch brushed wheat-fodder from the dark hair on the child's head and from the thick hair on the boy's ram's legs.

Dover saw, but couldn't believe. Not so much the legs, damn, that could be faked, but the boy was standing on cloven hooves.

Alexander Macko stepped forward and shouted, "Slay them both! Both are Unworthy!"

BabaYaga raised her fleshless arm for silence. "Disciple, give your name and Coven and tell us of your gift."

The witch stood the naked boy in front of her. "My name is Sister Ada Macko. I was initiated in the Topeka Coven but I am now from the most sacred Coven of Odessa. I was originally raised in the Odessa Coven, but was not ritualized until the Topeka Coven.

My last ritualization was by BabaYaga's mentor and lover, the Great Satan Himself. This is His child. We waited for your signal to bare him but we also were frightened to conjure you as long as you had love for the Unworthy Alexander Macko. The Great

Beelzebub showed me a sign and I gave birth. I have come forward against the wishes of my Coven. We have been waiting for Alexander Macko's death. But now, he is to become immortal. He is Unworthy. He will be the Sacred Mother's enemy. My gift, a son of Satan is worthy. He will be your lover for eternity. His name is Luca-Baba. He will be our leader. He will share, not horde. Alexander Macko shares nothing."

The witches cheered, but Alexander rushed forward to grab the child. Dover reached out and gripped Alexander by the arm, then twisted down hard.

"Bring him here," BabaYaga said to Dover. "Sister Ada, bring Luca-Baba forward."

Dover pushed Alexander forward toward the center of the Witches' Foot. Luca-Baba stood at the edge of the first point and waited politely. He teetered on his cloven hooves but regained composure. BabaYaga beckoned to the youngster. Then held out her slim-webbed hand. The twelve-year old stepped forward and kissed the hag-witch's hand without hesitation.

At that moment Alexander knew it was over. If he begged, it would do no good. A curse would do nothing more than provoke the hag-witch. It was over. The look the hag had in her yellow eyes for Luca-Baba was the same look she had for him almost seventy years before. The older broads are starting to go for the younger guys. Damn! His only recourse was to pray. "God, I've heard you're a merciful God. That you are forgiving right down to the last breath of life. I don't expect you to give me immortality, though, I'd be an excellent disciple. I'd sell the crap out of your product. I can sell crap to a hog farmer. God, if you can't see it clear to take me all the way out of this predicament, please, at least let me die instantly. Don't let the whore-witch torture me. Please! God! And, yes I do accept Jesus Christ as my Savior. And God . . . have a nice day."

As Alexander finished his whispered prayer, BabaYaga approached. She looked over at Dover Sage, looked directly into his eyes, and smiled a toothless grin. She reached over and flipped the rubber nipple of one of Dover's huge breasts, then laughed deep in her knotted throat. "String Alexander Mackovick up next to his sister," she hissed at Dover "And Mister Sage, don't be gentle."

Dover jerked Alexander over to the corpse of Tanya Mackovick. With his free hand, he grabbed the long end of the rope hanging over Tanya's slumped shoulders. He tied Alexander's wrists to the rope, and then hoisted him up next to his molding sister. Dover leaned forward and whispered into Alexander's ear, "See you in Hell, Alexander." he reached down and took a handful of wheat-fodder and shoved it down Alexander's throat.

BabaYaga squealed with delight. She reached down with her bony hand and took some wheat shaft from the floor and shoved it up Alexander's nostrils. "Now BabaYaga has a Mackovick feast. Me thinks I should sup first on little sister. Don't you?" She looked over at Alexander for confirmation. She dropped down on her knobby knees—her privates slapped against the wheat shafts strewn across the floor. She put her twisted mouth on the withered feet of Tanya Mackovick and began to suck.

Dover Sage and Kamiel Ivanovin held their breaths. They were both thinking the silly trick might work. They had gotten rid of the most destructive witch in Russian history.

BabaYaga hesitated when Tanya's feet were in her mouth up to their ankles. She turned a stony glance toward Dover; she let the feet slip from her mouth; she smiled a toothless grin, stood up, pointed her gnarled finger at the wheat shafts in Alexander's nostrils—they ignited—as Alexander's eyes screamed. His naked body kicked and

twisted and spasmed. Alex Macko was dying a slow, painful death. Dover stood silent. It was like he had a cancerous lesion removed from his stomach; he could now feel the emptiness. BabaYaga reached down and took a handful of dry wheat shafts and lifted them up to the blood-streaked body of Tanya Mackovick. The putrid witch pounded the shafts down Tanya's open eye-socket. She touched some suspicious looking water that seeped up out of the socket; it smoked and sizzled on the hag's bony fingers. She put the smoking fingers in her mouth, then turned to Dover and with her rancid mouth kissed him full on his painted lips.

"Damn!" he said.

"Mister Sage, you make such a beautiful witch, I hate to destroy you," BabaYaga said. She pressed her index finger to Dover's false nipple. The ignited nipple flared up as Dover tried to slap it out with his big hands. Kamiel stepped forward and ripped the flaming breast from Dover's chest and threw it toward the on-rushing crowd of naked witches. The flaming breast hit the wheat-shaft-laced back of a bleacher. The flames began to climb across the convention hall. BabaYaga charged toward Kamiel, but Dover reached in his ornate purse slung from his naked shoulder. He stabbed the weapon into BabaYaga's throbbing temple. The hag-witch's scream shattered all of the windows; the glass partitions in the conference center imploded. She reached up and grabbed the glass vile sticking from her tortured skull. She twisted and snapped the vile. Holy water splashed from the vile and ran down her face and bony shoulders. She bellowed and charged around the hall ripping and tearing flesh from the burning witches—trying to eat more flesh than the Holy water was eating from her body. After tearing her way through a third of the clamoring witches, the Holy water became impotent. Through the crackling screams of the holocaust, she thundered at Dover Sage, "BabaYaga will track you down! You will die a thousand deaths," she turned and ran directly into a solid gold, five foot cross held like a lance by Father Christian Mackovick. The cross burned into BabaYaga and vibrated with her screams. She enveloped the cross and most of Father Christian Mackovick, but when the vibrating flashes of light subsided, the golden cross stood. There was no BabaYaga and no Father Christian Mackovick, but the golden emblem of the Church had a second, smaller golden cross-bar just beneath the feet of Jesus.

The assistant and his agents waiting outside the bakery tried to enter the hall, but decorative wheat shafts and wheat-fodder fed the flames and created the illusion of a giant wick burning the center of a full-on, giant gas lamp.

Kamiel's and Dover's rubber make-up worked like insulated suits. They escaped with the rubber burning on their bodies, but no burns on the flesh underneath. Just a few second-degree burns in areas where the make-up people thought their own bodies were the feminine shapes they were attempting to create. Kamiel and Dover were able to save only two: Sister Ada and her son Luca-Baba.

Epilogue

That life is worth living is the most necessary of assumptions.

“Now what, Dover?” Kamiel said.

“Well, I’m going to travel the world and eliminate all witches,” Dover said. “I’m just kidding.”

“Well at least Mister There-Are-No-Such-Things-As-Witches is now a believer.” Kamiel chided.

Dover laughed, “I think you were Mister-There-Is-No-Such-Things-As-Witches. I may do a little witch hunting. Just as a hobby,” he said.

“Dover, my friend, you may not have noticed, but they have no leader. No Alexander Mackovick. No BabaYaga.”

“But we both know they came from an Evil somewhere,” Dover countered. “I’ll just travel around and see who springs up. Regardless I’ll keep you abreast of things,” he laughed and tossed one of the three rubber breasts from Kamiel’s desk to Kamiel’s protesting hands.

“Why do all North Americans think they’re comedians? How do millions of people all get up on those tiny, little stages?” Kamiel laughed hardly at his own joke.

Dover knew his gig—a lonely gig—would start at the Wichita Coven, then travel north to Salt Lake City and back to Omaha and over to Tulsa. One-night-stands but no one would be laughing.

Dover thought no one but Kamiel Ivanovin and his assistant had come to the airport to see him off. Damn, he had only saved the human race as we know it. Why expect a commendation or a thank you. But he was about to receive the most fantastic thank-you of all.

Others had come to see him off.

In the passenger area, staring straight at Dover was Sister Ada; in front of her, seated in a wheel-chair, was Luca-Baba, and behind him, shrouded in a black robe was Dover’s thank-you present: Sister Ada hugged Jean Monrow and smiled as Jean bent and kissed Luca-Baba. As Jean Monrow-Sage ran toward her husband, Dover knew that Luca-Baba had just bought control of Dover’s tattered soul.

But who gave a damn! And who gave a damn who controlled the Winter Wheat?

The end