

Chapter Forty-One

By the time Mick had awakened the next morning, Ralph had taken leave. Confused and groggy, he left the bed wearing the same clothing that he had worn the day before. Lifting an arm while shuffling to the bathroom, he sniffed at his shirt and said to himself, I stink. He tore off the fear induced, sweat stained t-shirt, splashed cold water onto his face and tried to regain mental focus. "Man," he whispered to himself, while staring into the mirror, "I really fucked up this time. Got the shit shocked outta me and learned nothing, but it sort of feels like I wasn't really there, like maybe Ralph had taken over? Damn, it's gettin' harder to know when he's around."

He left the t-shirt lying on the bathroom floor and reentered the bedroom, trying to decide what would happen if he

were to go shirtless. The dilemma was nullified, however, by the surprise appearance of a neatly folded white pullover lying on top of the unmade bed. Where'd this come from? he asked himself, as he reached for it and pulled it over his head. At that hour, his sartorial needs fulfilled, the only remaining objective was coffee and plenty of it. He put his ear to the door while resting a hand on the doorknob, hoping to hear the sound of an approaching escort. To his astonishment, the door was unlocked; he exited and sprinted towards the dining room.

A few stragglers were leaving the great hall when he arrived but they paid him no attention. Not a soul remained within; the only sounds heard were those made by the click of a serving spoon as he filled his plastic dishes from the near empty stainless steel trays. What, am I late or somethin', ain't nobody around, he said to himself, while guzzling down a cup of warm coffee and stuffing his mouth with scrambled eggs and soggy toast. Ain't a chance in hell of gettin' to the mainframe now, that Ivano prick knows what I was doin' at the computer and he'll be watchin'. But I still don't get it, what could I have seen that was so frickin' important that they had to brainwash me?

As he prepared to rise and refill his cup, a dark figure approached from the entrance. "Don't let me interrupt your breakfast," Ivano said, as he calmly stood opposite Mick's chair.

Without responding, Mick rose, walked to the coffee urn and refilled his cup. Completely ignoring Ivano, he surveyed the

remaining items, grabbed the last chocolate covered donut and returned to his seat, behaving as if still alone.

"What were you planning to do with this?" Ivano asked, while waving the computer disk in front of Mick's now chocolate covered face.

Mick swallowed and took a large gulp of coffee. "Are you talking to me?" he commented, "if so, go fuck yourself!"

"Yes, after yesterday, I can see why you might feel that way but you must understand that it was necessary."

"Ain't the way I saw it."

"No matter, be comforted by the knowledge that we no longer see you as a threat."

"Then how come I ain't out with the others?" Mick asked, while longing for another donut.

"Is that what you desire?"

"Nah, not really. Flowers ain't my thing, make me sneeze."

"So, my friend, what are we going to do with you? Have you any suggestions?"

"I could use another blow job," Mick remarked, with a lecherous smile.

Ivano stared at him with contempt. "I will ignore your attempt at levity ..."

"Too bad," he interrupted, "I was hopin' for another shot at ..."

"Do not test my patience!" Ivano chimed in.

"Humph," Mick responded, while sipping the remains of his coffee.

"So, I trust you have not forgotten this evening's festivities?"

"Yeah well, what's that all about?"

"You shall see, you shall see," Ivano replied, as he pushed his chair back and left the room.

Following a quick lunchtime sandwich in the still empty great hall, and with the mainframe out of reach, Mick passed the day in his room, thumbing through a Bible that had been placed at the head of his bed. This ain't the Bible that I remember, he remarked to himself, while frowning and flipping through the various verses. "Anton LaVey," he whispered to himself, while staring at the first page, "who the fuck is that?" "Wait a minute," he shouted, while dropping the book as if it had scorched his hands, "I ain't gonna read this devil shit!"

He had fallen asleep following his rout with the Satanic Bible and by the time he was awakened by a knock at his door, sunlight had long since gone. "Yeah, who is it?" he mumbled, barely awake.

An elderly woman entered and without a word, placed a plastic encased garment at the foot of the bed and departed. He sat staring at the package for several minutes, then reached for it and removed its contents. Whoa, he said to himself, while examining the black, hooded robe, this is gettin' creepy. The typewritten note pinned to the hood might have gone unnoticed had the stickpin not scraped his finger. What the hell is this? he said to himself, while unfolding the crimson sheet of paper.

The robe, the note said, is to be worn to this evening's ceremony. I will be at your door at nine P.M. sharp, be ready. I warn you, do not deviate. Ivano.

He ran his hand over the coarse material, wondering whether he was expected to wear his clothes underneath and how he was going to tell time without the watch that Ivano had taken from him the day before. Falling back on the pillow, he was suddenly struck by the soft red glow of a large digital clock that had been mounted just above the entrance door. How the hell did I miss that, he wondered, while scratching an armpit ... 'cause it wasn't frickin' there before, that's how. Hard to believe but it's already eight-thirty an' I ain't had nothin' to eat since lunch. Hope they're servin' food at the ceremony. He glanced one more time at the clock, then tossed the plastic bag into a corner of the room and put the robe on over his clothes. "Damn, this thing is itchy," he mumbled, "wonder how long I gotta wear it?" A Knock on the door caught him admiring himself in the

bathroom mirror. "Hold on, I'm comin'," he cried out, as he reached the door and turned the knob.

"You are ready, I see," Ivano remarked, "come, it is time."

"What's the deal with the ceremony and this friggin' robe?" Mick inquired, as Ivano led the way down a dimly lit, previously unseen staircase.

"You are about to witness a secret and sacred ceremony, a Black Mass."

"Wow," was his only response.

"You do not remember, of course, but this is not your first time," Ivano commented, his voice echoing in the candle lit, stone walled staircase.

"How far down does this go?" Mick asked, "looks like it goes forever."

"Not much further."

"So, do I gotta do anythin' at the Mass?"

"Just watch, listen and remain silent."

"You know, I ain't had nothin' to eat since lunch, they got food at this thing?" Mick asked, his intestinal grumbling amplified by the stairwell.

Ivano stopped his descent and turned to face Mick, his flared nostrils and lethal stare conveying a warning. "No more stupid questions," he commanded, "understand?"

Mick, two steps behind, followed in silence. As they approached the bottom of the staircase, an ancient appearing, heavily carved wooden door came into view. On either side, stood

two tall, masked guards holding mediaeval lances in a vertical position. Their striking black hooded robes, unlike the one worn by Mick, were made of a shiny satin fabric, highlighted with bright red edging. Emblazoned over the upper the left portion of each robe was a red, inverted Pentagram. Ivano stopped before the men, offered what appeared to Mick to be a secret hand sign and waited, as the guards synchronously slammed the base of their lances on the stone floor six times; the door opened from within.

Shit, Mick said to himself, awed by the enormous, cave-like auditorium, this is downright spooky. Ivano had stopped just inside the door and standing by his side, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness, Mick sensed an odd odor. Turning to his left, he was less than surprised to find a tethered goat held taught by a pair of burly, dark blue robed guards. Just then, Ivano tugged at his sleeve. "Follow me," he demanded. The theater-like walkway descended for several dozen yards before their path became obstructed by a series of wooden benches arranged in a circular fashion around a large, highly polished, black altar. "Sit here," Ivano ordered, as he pushed Mick down onto a bench, one space away from the aisle.

Mick, his vision now adapted to the bizarre, candle and torch lit auditorium, gazed about. The high ceiling, he noted, was draped in black fabric as was most everything else, including sections of the rectangular altar. The room, permeated by the intense essence of incense and the reverberating sound of unintelligible chanting, sent chills down his spine. One by one,

the similarly robed participants robotically entered the room, stood by their assigned seats, adding their voices to the considerable background din. Mick leaned towards Ivano. "What are they chanting?" he whispered.

"Azazel, Belial, Asmodeus ..."

"What the hell does it mean?"

"An interesting choice of words, my friend," Ivano chuckled. "But you must learn them, they are the various facets of what is known as the 'Banishing Rite of the Dark Lord'."

"Oh yeah, what the fuck are they banishing?"

"Must you use that language on all occasions?" Ivano disdainfully inquired.

"It's the way I talk, man," Mick replied with total disregard.

Ivano shook his head, took a deep breath and exhaled. "The chanting," he continued, "is employed to clear the mind of disturbing, obsessive thoughts. We use it to rid ourselves of negativity, thereby facilitating contact with the Divine Hadit, perhaps better known to you as, *Satan*."

Mick shuffled uncomfortably in his seat. Not only did he find Ivano's commentary quite disturbing but added to that, was the spectacle of a room full of drones air tracing a pentagram in the four corners of the auditorium. As he gazed about, not certain if his abdominal discomfort was the result of revulsion or hunger, he noticed something up on the altar. "Hey," he whispered, "I thought you said there wasn't any food?"

"What did I tell you about stupid questions?" Ivano roared.

"Wait a minute, what's all that shit sittin' on that black table," Mick inquired, pointing towards the altar.

Ivano, sighed deeply, as if totally disgusted with his charge. "The chalice," he said, "contains a blood red wine which will be consumed sometime after a gong is struck. The dagger lying beside it symbolizes the aggressive nature of the Black Mass. Underneath that silver plate," he said, now pointing towards the table, "is a turnip or chunk of black bread that the celebrant will uncover as an offering as he or she recites to the Dark Lord."

"Whoa, that's some heavy shit, man. OK, so then what?"

"Watch and you shall see."

Moments later, the rear door closed with a thunderous bang, followed by the appearance of a dense red mist surrounding the altar. Kerberos, whose very fiber seemed to take form from elements of the thinning mist, gradually emerged, wearing a shimmering black and red robe, a horned crown adorning his head. The chanting ceased and the room fell silent. Slowly, kerberos shifted his gaze about the room, as if acknowledging each individual's presence. Suddenly, he stopped, turned to the right and casually waved his hand. A gong, whose hollow timbre filled the room, was struck with a large leather mallet. "Who among you," Kerberos roared, "dares to join the hallowed numbers and take the invocation?"

A raspy male voice, seemingly from out of nowhere, replied, "A would-be priestess is destined to summon the Lord on this hallowed occasion."

"Prepare this unworthy being," Kerberos demanded.

"That's Mariel, right?" Mick asked, while leaning towards Ivano.

"Quiet," he said.

The two guards, who had been standing at the back of the room, slowly marched down the aisle and stopped when they had reached the chosen disciple. Hesitating briefly, the young woman rose, allowed them to seize her by the forearms and lead her towards the side of the room from where they disappeared from sight. The silence was deafening, until minutes later when the trio reappeared before the altar, but something had changed. The celebrant's hooded robe had been exchanged for a flowing, black, gauzelike gown beneath which her nakedness was visible to all. What followed was a lengthy and intricate ceremony, filled with dedications and verbal expressions of devotion to the Prince of Darkness. Most of the incantations, memorized by the celebrant in ancient Aramaic, were a complete mystery to Mick. As a result, with the hooded robe acting as camouflage, he dozed off from time to time, that is, until he recognized the Lord's prayer being cited in reverse. He was about to query his mentor, Ivano, when all of a sudden, bright flashes of white light filled the auditorium, followed by a series of earsplitting, thunderous

booms. And then, the delicate sound of a bell signaled the completion of the initiation.

Mick grimaced, his stomach rumbling uncontrollably, and turned to face Ivano. "Is that it?" he asked, "can we get outta here now and get some food?"

"It is not over, as you shall soon see," Ivano replied.

With the new devotee standing obediently by the altar, Kerberos adjusted his crown and moved closer. "On this special occasion," he chanted, "in testimony of your devotion, our custom demands an appropriate offering to the Lord Satan." As he spoke, two robed figures and a goat began their descent to the altar when, unexpectedly, Kerberos abruptly raised his arms high in the air. "Not the goat," he bellowed, "there will be another!"

"What?" Ivano exclaimed, now sitting at the edge of his seat, apparently poised to rise.

"What's goin' on?" Mick asked, concerned by Ivano's obvious agitation.

"Quiet," he hissed, while observing intently.

As Mick leaned back on the bench, one of the guards pulled the goat towards the rear of the room while the other, beckoned by Kerberos, marched towards the altar. Shaking his head affirmatively, the guard pivoted and strutted to a nearby bench where he stood, menacingly, behind an unsuspecting disciple. Responding to a hand signal from Kerberos, the burly man's hands swooped down and grasped the young subject by the armpits. Caught by surprise, the resultant screams of fear were quickly

muffled by a stifling hand as the subject, much to Mick's amazement and Ivano's outrage, was dragged to the altar.

"What the fuck's goin' on," Mick exclaimed, as his natural response to rise was thwarted by Ivano's arresting forearm.

"This cannot be," Ivano said, making it clear by his demeanor that the unfolding scenario was unprecedented.

As the thrashing subject was lifted and placed upon the altar, a syringe, visible to all, was plunged into the young woman's neck. Her violent resistance ceased, her body falling limp with arms splayed, as the syringe was withdrawn. "Take this dagger," Kerberos shouted to the bewildered inductee, "you shall make the first strike!"

Mick was dumfounded, as he sat at the edge of his seat, his heart pounding and his mouth agape. "This ain't real, right?" he cried out, "tell me this ain't real."

"Something's wrong," Ivano hissed, his clenched fists beating on the seat back before him, "this is not part of our ceremony."

"Aren't you gonna do somethin'?" Mick asked, excitedly.

"Quiet!" he responded tersely, "I do not know what he is planning."

"Are you fuckin' blind?" Mick exclaimed, practically jumping from his seat, "she's the sacrifice."

To the consternation of Kerberos, the petrified inductee froze in place, ignoring his commands. "Give that to me and get out of my sight," he demanded, while tearing the dagger from her

shaking hand. The inductee remained in place, as if nailed to the ground. Kerberos glanced at her with contempt as he began rattling off a litany of Latin phrases while leaning over the altar, holding the dagger high above his shoulders, the tip pointed downwards.

"No!" Ivano shouted, as he rose from the bench and ran towards the altar.

"It is the will of Satan," Kerberos shrieked, as the falling blade penetrated the subject's chest, sending forth a river of bright red blood.

The dagger's impact had caused the body to roll towards the audience, its owner's identity now obvious to all. Mick, hardly a stranger to death and recognizing the face as that of Mariel, was horrified. He tried to shout but instead, heaved the contents of his almost empty stomach into the aisle. "Fuck, fuck," he cried out, from shock, grief and the guilt from having wished bad things upon her. In that moment, realizing that nothing more could be done, he commanded his wobbly legs to stand. The curious and horrified audience moved towards the altar as the two original guards grabbed Ivano and dragged him off to the side of the room. Mick, seizing the opportunity, ran for the door and up the staircase. Escape now in sight, his feet barely touching the ground as he sprinted for the exit, an all too familiar voice appeared from within. "Run, bugger, run--get us the fuck outta 'ere," Ralph pleaded.