

Chapter I

Winter ground its jagged teeth. Exhaling its icy breath across the dense black forests, spilling a thick residue of frosted foam across the trees and the rugged scarred landscape dominated by the iron-grey Dolomites. The snow cascaded over sharp, treacherous rocks and jutting plateaus stretching out into waiting oblivion. Bordered by Austria and Switzerland on the North, to the East and South by the region of Veneto and on the West by Lombardy. Divided into the provinces of South Tyrol and Trento, the lower ranges of the Dolomite Alps imposed its presence across the canvass of merciless nature.

The snow brought a bitter hardness to the rolling landscape. Beneath its deceptively escapist beauty it concealed a promise of painfully slow frozen death as the harsh hand of winter leisurely crushes the air from another brittle ribcage and icy teeth tear their way through shivering flesh. Wolves roamed through the trees in predatory packs, their sinuous sensuous bodies seemingly untouched by the grasping stabbing fingers of frost. Their hungry yellow eyes, sensual and hypnotising, baring their fangs and snarling defiantly at the harsh cruelty of their environment.

The wolves hunt unchallenged in the vast forests surrounding the Castle of the Wolf, towering above the spiked treetops like some ancient stone sentinel. Its broken turrets with empty black windows like deep hollow staring eyes in a nest of cracked skulls grimacing contemptuously at the inhospitable ashen sky. Its shadow like a slowly widening bloodstain crawled over the landscape like a cloying leprous hand, spreading its disease and corrupting everything which falls beneath its cursed presence.

Standing on a hill, outside the perimeter of the haunted woodland stood the only other structure lying this far out in the icy wastes. The crumbling ruins of the monastery of Saint Barnardo resembled a corroded hand clawing its way out of the suffocating earth. Its fingers flexing rigidly as it grasps with futility at the grey sky and the dark clouds, which roll ominously overhead. Built by the Holy Roman Emperor Constantine around AD 325, it had been constructed as a symbol to usher in a new age of faith and a nation's conversion to Christianity. During its

construction, strange lights had been seen in the depths of the forest and unnaturally large animal-like shapes and shadows moving through the trees. A small garrison of troops had been billeted nearby to protect the sight but in the dead of night men started to go missing. Not a trace of them was ever found except for an occasional sword or helmet encrusted with dried black blood, strips of gristle and clusters of lumpy brain matter.

The monks foolishly entered the haunted forest determined to exorcise the place of demons and cleanse the environment of evil. They entered with a military escort and ran in terror. Leaving the monastery only two thirds built. The soldiers left hurriedly with only a small contingent of brothers choosing to stay. As the decades passed their numbers gradually dwindled but others came to replace them. Pilgrims and wary travellers would arrive at the monastery seeking shelter, they remained closeted within the ruins, maintaining their everyday rituals and eternally questioning their wisdom in coming to this Godforsaken place. The original monks had long since departed, their decaying grey bones rotting to dust in the choking dry catacombs beneath the decaying monastery ruins. Yet this place had always seemed to act as a beacon for the unwary or the curious and across the decades others had come like lambs to the slaughter, ensuring that the monastery never remained completely empty for too long or that the wolves were never denied an unwitting meal.

Brother Caligari trudged through the crunching crystal surface of the snow. His joints creaked like rotten splintered wood and his bent over back ached as if from the strain of carrying the very Devil himself upon his narrow shoulders. He had wrapped ragged filthy cloths around his bare feet and tucked them into his sandals to protect his freezing toes from suffering frostbite. He halted before a filthy ditch outside the monastery walls and looked around for any sign of unwelcome intruders. He knew that nobody ever came up to the monastery, it was isolated and far too close to the forest for him to be observed by human eyes. It was predators that worried him the most, especially those unnatural things, which lurked behind the dense wall of trees. Even on this inhospitable frosty evening he could feel them watching him from the forest borders. Their yellow eyes penetrating his thin sagging

flesh, which hung loosely upon his old creaking bones. The sensation caused him to shudder and his skin to twitch and crawl unsettlingly.

Lifting his cassock from where it trailed in the snow and hitching it up around his twisted waist he began to urinate into the ditch. Steam rose from the frozen ground as the acidic jet of hot urine melted the dirty sludge causing the old monk to wrinkle his nose as an offensively pungent odour drifted up with the rising steam to offend his flared nostrils. Unexpectedly he felt a sense of creeping unease. A tingling sensation caused an involuntary shudder between his shoulder blades as if he could feel myriad spiders composed entirely of ice crawling down the length of his crooked spine. Looking up he directed his aged gaze out into the blinding white wilderness but the blanket of snow seemed to camouflage all movement across the painted landscape. Yet the feeling of being observed refused to diminish. Something was coming; he could sense it like an omen carried in the grey clouds or the skeletal trees, their branches contorted as if frozen in torment, like twisted limbs they reached out in supplication.

“Have you tried writing your name?” The gruff humorous voice startled the monk causing him to jump, splashing his cassock and feet with foul smelling liquid. Shaking his foot of the speckles of warm water, he continued relieving himself shamelessly, ignoring the intruder until he was finished. Shaking himself off, the old man lowered his damp robe and turned slowly to face the impromptu visitor, his countenance frozen into an unflinching scowl.

Caligari discovered no less than ten riders resting behind him, sitting arrogantly upon their war horses, their appearance rough and dishevelled. Their chain-mail armour looked brown and rusted until closer inspection revealed the dark brown stains to be splashes of dried blood. Their leader, the man who had addressed the monk so disrespectfully carried a battered helmet beneath his arm, revealing a face of craggy character. A bulbous nose, artificially enlarged by a twisted scar, which trailed across the middle of his face like a winding river on a map, overhung a full strangely deformed pouting mouth for such a masculine countenance. Small pig-like eyes full of dark twisted humour granted little of illusion that they could transform into granite wells of sadism and ruthlessness. A pudding-

basin haircut crowned his large skull. He stared down at the monk, his face split by an insincere grin.

“I apologise for interrupting your ablutions, Brother.” Said the knight sarcastically. Caligari ignored him, shook his robe free of the damp speckles before they dried and began to walk back toward the open monastery door. The scarred individual climbed down off his horse, made his way over to the ditch and began to undo his chain-mail leggings. Hitching up his trailing tunic, he released himself and started to urinate in the spot recently vacated by the monk.

“We’ve been travelling this Godforsaken road for some time.” He called back to the monk without looking up from his business. “You wouldn’t happen to know of a place, where we can rest for a couple of days would you?” The monk continued to pay the knight little heed, trekking back toward the open door of the monastery only to have his path blocked by one of the riders. He remained motionless until the monastery door swung open and a youth appeared similarly attired as the old man. The new arrival looked uncertainly from the warriors to the monk and back again. Caligari held up his hand indicating that he wasn’t in any danger and that the young man should go back inside. The boy remained where he was, framed in the doorway of the crumbling stone edifice, causing the old monk to frown irritably. He turned toward the knight who had addressed him just as the man finished relieving himself and began adjusting his clothing.

“You won’t find any place to stay around here.” Caligari answered as the knight turned to face him.

“Oh? And why is that? Are there no parishioners to frequent this...mausoleum?” He asked directing his attention to the decaying walls of the structure.

“The nearest settlement is too far away. No one is going to make the trek into the wilderness just to pray here.”

“Not with the wolves roaming the forest.” The youthful monk spoke up out of turn and fell silent as his older mentor shot him a disapproving glance.

“Wolves?” The Knight looked from the young novice to the monk. “Are there many wolves around here?” The old man seemed reluctant to confirm or deny the report.

“No more or less than you would find in any other remote place.” He answered.

“And is this the only hovel between here and the forest borders?” The knight enquired contemptuously as he regarded the old crumbling building.

“It is.” The monk answered simply. “But if this old hovel is not to your taste then I suggest you move on. We have no females of easy virtue to accommodate you here.”

“Oh no? What about him?” The knight pointed playfully at the young novice. “The lad seems pretty enough.”

The ill joke produced a guffaw of mirth from the riders but only a contemptuous scowl from the old man and he didn't appear too afraid to direct his obvious disdain toward the gathered warriors.

“But Brother, there is also the castle.” The youth added in the vain hope that the soldiers might be persuaded to look elsewhere for their lodgings.

“Castle?” It was immediately obvious that the stranger's interest had been peaked and now the old monk began to feel a greater sense of unease about this fellow. “There's a castle around here?” The stranger enquired.

“Aye, ‘The Castle of the Wolf,’ it lies at the heart of the forest.” The young monk replied helpfully.

The knight's curiosity appeared to have been piqued to levels, which made him seem almost feverish. It was a change that registered disturbingly with the old monk.

“To reach it you would have to travel through wolf country.” The old monk spoke up. “And those Godless creatures seem to transform from wandering packs into legion the closer you draw to the castle walls.”

“Is it inhabited?” The two monks looked furtively at each other, the young man uncertain of whether or not to answer truthfully. The older man uncertain of whether to answer at all. “I asked ‘if this castle of yours was inhabited?’” The men remained silent. “You’re trying my patience old man. Perhaps someone should give you a lesson in manners and respect of your betters.”

The stranger stepped threateningly forward grabbing the old monk roughly by his bony arm and spun him around to face him. As he raised his hand to strike the cantankerous and spiteful old hermit across the face the young novice stepped between them.

“We know not, Sire, we know not. Please release my master. Don’t hurt him. He is old. He would not survive even the slightest blow in this harsh winter.” The young man pleaded.

The knight’s eyes narrowed and his fury seemed to slowly abate as he lowered his fist and reluctantly released his steel-like grip on the monk, allowing the old man the luxury of backing away to rub his bruised bone.

“How far is this castle?” He enquired of the young novice with unusual calm as if the moment of raised temperature had never occurred.

“Half a day’s travel, maybe. The forest is vast and there will be a great deal of ground to cover.”

“What would be our chances of reaching it by nightfall?”

“In one piece? Slim.”

The knight looked up again at the crumbling structure of the monastery.

“Well, it isn’t exactly a whore house but it will have to do.” He looked across at the scowling old man and beamed his broadest and most unsettling grin. “You will

invite us to stay of course, Brother, just for the night. We wouldn't want to intrude but it would be the Christian thing to do, after all. You wouldn't leave us to freeze out here in this frozen hell hole would you, with the steam from that piss pit back there, providing us with the only warmth?" He indicated with a movement of his head the ditch where he and the monk had recently relieved themselves.

"Are you giving me a genuine choice or is it merely a rhetorical question?" The old monk enquired snidely.

The knight's grin expanded to an unnatural wideness as he placed his arm around the monk's brittle shoulders.

"You have wit Brother, I like that. I would not have expected it in one with so sour a countenance as yours. So tell me, are there any more of your order inside."

"No, there are just the two of us." The youth answered for the old man.

"Just the two of you? An old man and a boy stuck out here in the middle of nowhere, completely isolated from civilisation. Cosy." The knight observed. "Then the two of you shouldn't really object to having a little company for the evening. I'm sure you'll find us a distraction from the monotony."

With a sidelong flick of the wrist, the knight indicated that the other riders should dismount as he walked the old monk across the snow toward the decaying walls of the monastery. The young man remained standing in the snow, uncertain of whether he should follow the knight and his old mentor until he was jolted from his state of confusion by one of the soldiers calling out to him as he dismounted.

"Boy, take the horses." The second warrior ordered dropping down to the ground and handing the youth the reins to his mount. The remaining knights followed suit, dismounting one after the other, leading their animals over to the young monk and handing him the reins before following their leader across the snow covered ground into the monastery. The boy felt immediately nervous. He had never had very much to do with large animals and horses seemed so big and imposing. He tried tugging gently on the reins, hoping in vein that they would respond sympathetically to his feeble attempts at persuasion. He realised he was

being overly naïve when they refused to budge and just stared indifferently down at him. He attempted to assert himself but the animals remained unimpressed and maintained their stubborn stance. The young man's face had turned red with the exertion and embarrassment when a hand encased in a thick leather gauntlet reached past his shoulder and took the reins from his freezing hands. The young monk turned and backed away as one of the knights, the features remaining concealed behind a blank iron helmet led the horses toward the monastery, the creatures following the enigmatic authoritative figure with blind obedience. Running after the silent warrior the monk ran past him, ducked inside the small door and unlatched the larger more imposing heavy double doors, swinging them wide to allow the horses easier access to the courtyard. The knight strode through, the war-horses trailing behind, worn with fatigue and snorting irritably at the sting of the chill frosted air.

The courtyard formed a small cemetery. Gravestones jutted out of the ground on either side of a straight path, which led from the monastery doors to a small chapel. Snow rested heavily on the worn, grey headstones. They leaned awkwardly, creating the impression that they were being pushed up from beneath the soil. The rotting bones of the previous residents of the monastery rested beneath the frozen ground and the long walk past the dead toward the sanctity of the chapel always made the young monk feel a little uneasy. Stepping off the path he escorted the silent knight to a rickety wooden building behind the chapel, where the horses were deposited.

"I'm afraid we don't have any hay." The young monk stated apologetically. "What meagre rations we do have belong to the goats."

The knight ignored the apology, taking down a nosebag from each of the saddles and fitting them over the heads of every horse.

"Don't concern yourself, friar. We'll make do." The warrior's muffled voice stated simply.

When the knight was finished, the young man led the quiet guest back toward the chapel. They climbed a small flight of snow covered steps and the young man

pushed one side of the large arched double doors inward. When they entered, they found the warriors, pitching their baggage in any haphazard fashion, about the floor or on the rows of neat pews. They managed to make the hallowed solemnity of the chapel appear closer to a barracks than a house of worship and silent contemplation. The large wooden cross, which dominated the forefront of the chamber, seemed to lose much of its symbolic stature amidst the soldiers' sense of complete indifference toward its dominant presence. To the young monk it seemed to shrink in the face of armour and weaponry, the symbols of evil being brought into these hallowed halls of prayer and peace. It was as if the Devil had entered this place and the young man fancied he could almost hear mocking laughter echoing around the walls. He looked at the warriors going about their business and the old monk standing among them in resignation, apparently oblivious to Satan's taunting voice, mocking this holy place, spitting on the cross and corrupting the sanctity of consecrated ground.

The silent warrior pushed past the young man and strode over to the bench at the back of the chapel. Reaching up, the knight gripped the heavy helmet and began to lift it over his head. The young monk watched in silent curiosity as a cascade of chestnut curls were released from beneath the helmet, flowing like a waterfall over the warrior's shoulders and down the back. The monk approached with caution and craned his head around to try and see the knight's face in more detail. He gasped at what he beheld, causing the warrior to turn in his direction. The monk gulped loudly swallowing cold air, which made his teeth ache.

"You're a woman." He commented, stating the obvious. The warrior's eyes narrowed and she turned away ignoring him. He took an uncertain step toward her and halted, stammering partly out of nervousness and partly out of curiosity. "I've never seen a woman..." The female turned to face him, her brow furrowing with intolerance and mild surprise. "I mean, I've never seen a woman riding with warriors as if she was one of them before." He completed his statement. She turned away almost with disappointment, as the young man hadn't said anything that she hadn't already heard many times. For a brief moment, she thought he was going to say something interesting. The young monk remained standing silently behind her, uncertain of whether he should engage her in conversation or leave her alone.

"What's your name, friar?" She asked without facing him.

“Nate.” She turned to look at him quizzically, one eyebrow raised in an unasked question. “It’s short for Nathaniel. Brother Caligari always calls me, Nate.”

“My name’s Shahazah.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Is it? I wouldn’t know.” She replied in a dismissive manner.

Nate shuffled his feet awkwardly as if he had other questions to ask but wasn’t certain of whether or not he should ask them. He was rather taken with the exotic appearance of the woman before him. Her long flowing hair framed a strangely confused countenance, which appeared at once inescapably feminine but containing a distinct element of masculinity in the hardness of the eyes and the firm set of the jaw. The high-sculpted cheekbones accentuated the curve of a diagonal scar under the left eye, which continued upward slicing through the arch of the left eyebrow. He noticed a smaller scar grazing her top lip, also on the left hand side and continuing down to crease the corner of her full sensuous mouth. Her large brown eyes burned at him and he immediately felt compelled to self-consciously look away.

“Are these the only quarters you have available?” The voice of the arrogant overbearing leader of the group boomed disrespectfully from the far end of the chapel.

“No.” Caligari explained quietly. “There are a number of small cells and we have a dining area. This monastery was originally built to accommodate a far larger compliment of brothers than just the boy and myself.”

“And where are the other brothers? How come you’re out here all on your own?”

“You passed the other brothers on your way in here. They’re buried in the courtyard, with the Abbots and some of the others sealed in the catacombs below. As for why the boy and I are out here all on our own? Well I’ve seen the outside world and all it has to offer and I decided here is as good a place to be as any.”

“And the boy, does he believe here is as good a place as any to be?”

“For the moment I suppose he does. The boy is without direction. He has yet to choose his own path and until he decides, he may as well stay here and keep an old man company as be anywhere else.”

The knight snorted in derision and wiped his bulbous nose on the back of his gauntlet.

“Do you have any food in this place?” He enquired, sitting himself down upon a long hard bench.

“Very little, we do grow our own vegetables.” Caligari stated but the knight wrinkled his nose in disgust.

“The boy told me they kept goats.” Shahazah volunteered the information.

“Really? How many goats do you have?” The leader directed the question at Caligari.

“Three.” He answered apprehensively.

The leader of the Crusaders turned toward one of his fellow knights and gave him a command.

“Find out where they keep the goats and kill one of them. We’ll have fresh meat tonight.”

“That isn’t necessary.” Brother Caligari insisted. “We have chickens.”

The big man halted the warrior as he turned to walk back out of the chapel.

“Kill a couple of chickens.” He ordered. “And the goat.”

The warrior left on his mission as Brother Caligari fumed helplessly. The leader shrugged off the monks disapproving glare and Nate found himself feeling a little disappointed that Shahazah could share her leader’s sense of casual cruelty and indifference. She ignored the young man as if his opinion of her didn’t matter in

the slightest. They waited in the chapel in silence. Brother Caligari looked at the boy and Nate saw unease and fear in those old grey eyes for the first time. Then the loud screeching of the chickens suddenly shattered the heavily oppressive atmosphere and the tortured squealing of one of God's creature's meeting a violent and bloody end tore through Nate's soul like a serrated dagger. The young man hung his head low, even more convinced that the Devil's emissaries had somehow managed to barge their way into God's house and make themselves at home.

Later in the evening, the invaders sat down to their meal of chicken and fresh goat, devouring each morsel hungrily as if they hadn't eaten anything substantial for weeks. Generously they offered food to the monks but they declined as they found it difficult to accept offerings from these intruders in good grace and still manage to keep the food down, knowing it was their own limited livestock which they devoured. The warriors were disappointed that their hosts were not the kind of monks that squashed grapes with their feet. At first they disbelieved the old man when he informed them that there wasn't a drop of wine in the entire monastery but after ransacking the place, they returned to the remnants of their meal in disappointment.

"Trust us to find a monastery in the middle of nowhere with the only monks that don't make wine." One of the warriors complained.

"My apologies." Brother Caligari responded without much genuine feeling. "But grapes won't grow out here. In fact, very little grows out here."

"And why is that?" The leader of the knights enquired. Caligari shrugged.

"There's something wrong with the land." He explained without any elaboration as if the simple statement was all he needed to say.

Most of the warriors fell asleep in the dining area, lying sprawled out on the tables or benches, too tired to retire to their allotted cells and being too used to sleeping in uncomfortable surroundings. Nate, however observed the leader of the group stand up and take the woman Shahazah by the shoulders, leading her almost tenderly out of the dining hall, through the chilly passages and up a narrow stairwell toward the private chambers. He saw Caligari screw up his face in disgust as he

watched them leave. The old man began to clear away the mess left by his unwelcome guests before, changing his mind and throwing the cluster of discarded bowls and animal bones back onto the table.

“I’ll clear up this mess in the morning. I’m going to bed.” He started to storm off before turning back to his young apprentice. “Don’t stay up too late. There are still things to be done around here.”

Nate carried a jug of water up the aged wooden steps to the balcony where the cells were located. It had been an unnerving end to the day, having this ragtag group of mercenaries arriving out of nowhere and taking over the monastery as if they had some God-given right. The only highlight of the intrusion was perhaps the presence of the darkly mysterious woman, Shahazah. She was an enigma to be sure. Nate found his thoughts fixated upon her as he made his way along the landing toward his room. Her exotically sensual beauty and coldly dark mesmerising eyes, which drew you in and drowned you in their black depths both chilled his blood and warmed his loins, creating confusing conflicts within the young man’s innocent mind. The fact that this stunning young vision was riding with these battle-hardened soldiers of fortune, dressed as they did and carried her own impressive arsenal of weaponry only served to deepen the mystery surrounding her. And the deeper the mysterious circumstances of the woman went the more the young monk felt himself drawn to her fire.

Nate passed one of the cells on the landing, its door ajar and paid it little heed until he thought he could detect movement in the room beyond. He was about to ignore it and continue on his way. He was used to the old building making strange sounds. It creaked and groaned around him like the joints of an old man, stumbling unsteadily toward a yawning grave. The leader of the knights had been correct; this place was like a mausoleum. The phantoms of its former residents infested the walls like a corrosive plague, filling the monastery with a sense of corruption and slow decay.

Nate took another step toward his own room when the unfamiliar sound drew him back to the crack in the door. Tentatively he moved toward the cell and placed his face against the thin opening between the door and its frame. A large single

candle flickered in the corner casting a hazy dancing illumination over one half of the room. It was within that half of luminous haze that two figures were captured. Their shadows stretched and looming large upon the wall behind them like predators waiting in the darkness. The young monk's eyes became wide as he witnessed the burly and ugly leader of the mercenary band facing his mysterious lady. She stood with her back to the door, divested of most of her heavy militaristic garments, only a heavy black shirt remained hanging loosely around her shoulders, the hem swinging provocatively around the tops of her bare legs. The man was naked down to the waist; his barrel chest was matted with tousled black hair interlaced with a criss-cross pattern of pale white scars. His meaty hands reached toward her and with a level of unexpected gentleness, he peeled the limp black shirt away from her shoulders. Nate watched in hypnotic fascination as the garment slid down over her broad muscular back, shimmering gold in the subdued glow of the candlelight, slipping like sinuous satin over the exotically provocative mound of her perfect naked buttocks. The man let go of the shirt and it slipped down over her thighs and down the length of her smooth slender legs to pool like black tears around her bare feet.

Nate continued to watch transfixed by the woman's nakedness as she reached up, encircling her hands around the man's neck and drew him toward her. His rough mouth closed upon hers and they pressed their bodies together as they squirmed against each other with steadily increasing urgency. The young man experienced a sense of unease as he watched from outside the room. Dryness seized his throat and he was vaguely aware of a trembling in his hands and knees. He felt sick as he watched the man rub his rough hands over her smooth silken flesh but he felt unable to look away as sensations of voyeuristic fascination held on to him and refused to let him turn away.

Bending backward, arching her spine sinuously, the man's toad-like lips slithered down her neck and between the luxurious valley between her breasts, leaving a glistening trail of spittle down her throat and over her chest. Squeezing one prominent breast in his large fist, he enfolded the nipple with his misshapen mouth and sucked hard. A thick serpentine tongue flicked from between his lips, circling the puckered areola and she gasped thrusting her chest into his face and

holding his head close to her as his free hand explored the exotic curves of her bottom.

Straightening up she gently pushed him away from her, his mouth leaving the succulent globe of her breast reluctantly. Kneeling down before him, she reached up, hooking her fingers into the waistband of his chain-mail britches and began to tug them down over the bulk of his muscular buttocks and thick legs until they swam comically around his ankles. Nate almost convulsed and retched at the sight of the man's freed erection, long ugly and thick, with bulbous blue veins standing out along its length. Yet he found that he couldn't turn away. He continued to stare, crouching down by the crack in the door, his legs buckling beneath him. He watched, fascinated by the sight of the young woman taking the man's engorged phallus into her soft sensual mouth, sliding her lips along its length until it disappeared inside her face. Her head drew back and the grotesque appendage reappeared, slick with her saliva, thicker and harder and uglier than when she first swallowed it.

Unconsciously, Nate's hand slipped beneath his cassock and he began to stroke himself as he hunkered down by the door and watched the proceedings going on inside the chamber. The knight had coiled his large meaty right hand in the locks of Shahazah's hair, pulling her head toward him and pressing her face into his loins as he thrust himself at her. Nate could see the cords standing out rigidly across the man's stretched neck and the veins pulsing like a network of dry riverbeds along his temples as the woman pleased him. Taking his stiffened member out of her mouth she stood up and kissed him hard and ferociously. Reaching down he grabbed her buttocks and pulled her roughly toward him, pressing her body into his until she could feel his hardness rubbing against her abdomen. Pushing him away, she reached down, taking him by the hand and led him to the stiff uncomfortable cot, which passed for a bed in the monastery. Sitting him down she removed his britches from around his ankles and climbed on top of him, pushing him back against the flat mattress as she straddled him. Nate stared as she reached between her legs to grab the knight's long thick ugly member and guide it upward toward her. He could see the girl lower herself onto the misshapen stump and watched as the bulbous head pushed its way into the fleshy dark opening between her thighs.

Nate felt light-headed as he concentrated upon the rhythmic movement of her bottom as she lowered herself onto the erect member, rising and falling onto it. Nate began to screw up his eyes, fixating upon the hideous erection as it slipped in and out of her but this level of intense concentration only served to increase the throbbing of his temples. He blinked droplets of stinging perspiration out of his eyes and winced with a curious mixture of pain and unexpected pleasure as he realised he was gripping his own pulsing erection a little too tightly. He grimaced, his muscles becoming spasmodic and his face flushing and contorting as if he was gravely ill and feverish. He couldn't hold on until the couple in the room had climaxed. He came in his hand. He continued to watch the couples' contortions through the gap in the door. He remained fascinated by the writhing of their bodies but now they seemed ugly and grotesque as they squirmed together, slick with oily perspiration and he reluctantly lowered his eyes in shame.

"What are you doing?" Nate jumped at the unexpected sound of the stern whisper by his ear. He immediately stood erect, self-consciously removing his sticky hand from beneath his cassock and hiding it behind his back. Brother Caligari stood glaring disapprovingly down at the young man. Nate's face flushed redder with embarrassment and he wondered how long the old monk had been standing there? The old brother could hear the sounds of intense groaning coming from the room behind Nate and he craned his head to look past the young man into the chamber. Caligari wrinkled his nose in disgust as if he had been offended by a bad smell and cast a sideways, disappointed glance at his young apprentice.

"Animals." The brother spat the words at the door and walked away, ignoring Nate as if the young monk had been caught in the act of committing the most reprehensible of sins. The inexperienced young man hung his head in shame. He had disappointed his teacher and disgraced himself in the eyes of God and beneath his roof. Removing his hand from behind his back, he wiped the sticky substance on the hem of his cassock, squeezing the rough material between the fingers in order to remove all evidence of his Devil's occupation. The goo glistened damply upon his grey dusty robe and he rubbed the material together in an effort to soak the milky fluid into the cloth. He successfully managed to conceal the contents of the

excretion but the tell-tale stain still remained at the bottom of the ragged robe, like an accusing reminder of his fall from grace.

Behind him the grunts and groans coming from the room had transformed into screams of tormented pleasure and he closed his eyes in order to shut out the temptation to return to the crack in the door. Picking up his bucket of water, he slowly walked away down the landing toward his own cell. Stepping into his sparsely furnished room he kicked the door shut behind him dumped the bucket in the corner and went to sit on his hard wooden cot. Claspng his hands in his lap, he stared down at them as if uncertain if he should offer a prayer of redemption before he turned in for the evening. Yet after the initial shame of his actions had subsided and his embarrassment at being caught by his mentor had started to become a dull unpleasant memory, he started to recall to mind the image of Shahazah's perfect body. It filtered back into his consciousness like a sensual whisper. The memory of her smooth glowing skin, the shapeliness of her legs and curvaceous hips, the way her breasts like two gently sloping hills jutted proudly and rose and fell with each passionate breath which issued from between her full pouting lips.

He groaned inwardly at the memory and pitched sideways onto the hard uncomfortable bed. He lay there staring at an image in the darkened ceiling, an image only he could see, a vision of Shahazah, naked and wanting him next to her, needing him inside her. He groaned again, pulling his knees up tightly into his chest. The uncomfortable stirring between his loins was beginning again and he attempted to focus upon the most mundane things in order to resist the pulling urge to relieve his mounting tension.

Nate jerked up to a sitting position his private moment disturbed by a lonely and haunting cry in the night. Jumping to his feet he made his way over to the narrow slit in the wall, which passed for a window and pressed his face into the opening. The sound seemed to reverberate across the winter landscape, carried by the frozen breath seeping through the tall trees of the dense dark forest. The solitary cry of the wolf was answered by another baying voice, which soon became accompanied by a chorus of wailing howls, weaving through the trees like the passing of some spectral entity, invisible to the naked eye but possessing an almost tangible presence. Nate shuddered, the cold seeped into his room through the

narrow slit of a window and chilled his face as he pushed it against the indent in the rough stone wall but it wasn't the freezing temperature, which chilled him. With each high pitched wail of those haunting voices, like the crying of lost souls a new sliver of ice formed along the young man's spine and across his shoulders.

Throughout the monastery every man froze and listened to the howling of the beasts. The haunting sound appeared so close. It seemed to reverberate around the cold stone structure as if the very walls were suffused with the indistinguishable voices of ghosts. Shahazah and her lover halted their lovemaking and clung to each other as much for comfort as warmth and listened intently to the high-pitched wailing of the forest spirits. The woman appeared mesmerised by the sound as if her mind and body had become separated, drawn to the darkness at the heart of the trees. A disturbed frown furrowed the brow of the knight as he watched his lover, sitting astride him, seemingly hypnotised by the spectral wailing of the invisible creatures.

Nate left his cell and climbed up a rickety makeshift ladder into the crumbling remains of the bell tower. Its crooked and jagged walls surrounded him like a mouth of decayed and rotting teeth. Pulling himself up onto the landing he made his way unsteadily to the far wall and looked out at the rolling darkness of the forest below. Even at this distance, it seemed to be swallowing the land like a rancid infestation, a crawling plague devouring everything within its corrosive reach. And in the distance rising out of the cloying suffocation of the trees rose the grey imposing towers of 'The Castle of the Wolf' like some dark imposing guardian, protecting the forest and the dark creatures, which reside within.

Nate hugged himself, exhaling a cloud of frozen breath from between his trembling lips. He looked down at the cruel points of the grey rocks beneath the tower, spearing through the top of a frosted covering of snow like the claws of an ogre, buried beneath an avalanche and attempting to dig its way back to the surface. As he stared down at the plunging base of the monastery he caught sight of movement on the periphery of his vision and he turned to his left. There, on the wall below the bell tower stood the woman Shahazah, wrapped in a rough grey blanket, which billowed about her like broken wings. He watched as she remained motionless as a statue and he followed her line of sight toward the forest and the

castle, which skewered its way through the canopy of dense black trees like a skeletal hand pushing its way up from the grave.

Nate climbed down from the bell tower, emerging from the arched entrance and made his way across the catwalk along the crumbling wall to where the woman stood in disturbing silence. As he approached, he noticed that her feet and legs were bare and he surmised that she was still naked beneath the insubstantial blanket. He forced himself to fight down the stirring sensations in his loins as he stood beside her. She remained staring out at the forest as if she hadn't even noticed his approach. Despite her flimsy attire, she didn't even appear to be shivering. Nate cleared his throat, insistently as if begging her to notice him. He was forced to do it several times before she half turned toward him in disinterested acknowledgement.

"You shouldn't be out here only half dressed, you'll catch your death." The young man stated.

"Death has been chasing me for some little time and he hasn't caught me yet. I doubt a mild chill will succeed, where all his emissaries and assassins have failed." She stated, turning back to face the forest. The young man stared at her curiously. She appeared transfixed by the sound of the wolves, as if she was listening to voices speaking to her in an ancient language, which only she could understand. It was as if the eerie wailing of the beasts was for her ears alone.

"Their voices sound so lonely." She commented, her own voice appearing distant and dream-like adding to the young man's sense of unease. "They sound like children singing beneath the moon."

"Children?" Nate was incredulous at the analogy. "Hell's choir singing for the pleasure of The Devil perhaps."

Shahazah turned to him, a trace of mocking humour folding the corners of her hypnotic eyes.

"You have spent far too much time with that old man. He's burned all of the imagination out of you and replaced it with fear and spite." Nate suddenly felt

confused at having his values questioned and the woman turned to look back toward the castle, ignoring the seeds she had sowed in the young monk's mind.

"How can you tell?" He asked weakly.

She smirked to herself. "I've seen it happen to stronger minds than yours. It happened to me."

"To you?"

"Aye, my imagination is suppressed and my faith is no more. There are few who are as Godless as those who ride under God's banner."

"I'm not sure I understand, lady." The young man admitted.

"They call themselves Crusaders, defenders of the faith, but Crusader has just become another word for brigand. Each one of us has baptised ourselves in innocent blood, slaughtered in the name of merciful God. Is it any wonder that my faith in our merciful Lord's perfect creation has deserted me, burned out by the fires of righteousness."

"Your words are blasphemy itself." The young man whispered as if afraid that the mountains may hear him.

"That they are friar, that they are." She almost giggled and Nate was found to question her sanity.

As he watched her, Nate's blood froze in his veins and he wondered at the young woman and her presence here. The atmosphere at the monastery had changed noticeably since her arrival and now the air was tinged with a sense of foreboding laced with the promise of violent death. Nate remained silent, standing by Shahazah's side as the wolves called to her from the depths of the dark haunted forest.