

Shades of Blood and Darkness

This Cleansing Fire Templar Chronicles Mission, prequel

by Joseph Nassise, 1968–

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As a Massachusetts State Police officer, Cade used to spend his time hunting criminals until the day an encounter with a fallen angel changed his world forever. Now he commands the Echo Team, a special ops squad of modern Templar knights, and the things they hunt are far darker and much more deadly...

The Lear jet banked suddenly, the abrupt action jolting Cade Williams from his uneasy sleep. Glancing out his window, he could see the lights of the city far off to the left and knew the pilot must be starting his preparations for landing. That meant Cade had another twenty minutes or so before he and his team would be on the ground and in the thick of things.

Like most of the Order's equipment, the interior of the aircraft was spartan. Gone were the leather seats and the recessed mini bars, the inflight entertainment centers and the four star meals. Only that which was functional and necessary had been left in place. Thankfully that included the privacy curtain that separated the rear compartment where Cade was sitting from the main cabin just ahead.

Looking past the curtain, he could see his executive officer, Sergeant Matthew Riley seated about halfway up center aisle in the main cabin. As Cade looked on his teammate stripped the Mossberg combat shotgun he held in his hands his weapon and began cleaning it with deft movements that came with long familiarity. The voice of O'Malley, Cade's first drill instructor at the academy, echoed in his head at the sight, "If you have no other assignment, see to your weapons." It was advice he had heeded during his fifteen-year career with the Special Tactics and Operations team of the Boston Police Department and had brought with him when he'd been recruited into the Order. He had enforced that unwritten rule on his squad from the very first day and now, five years later, it was as habitual to them as breathing. Cade knew without looking that their other team member, Sergeant Nick Olsen, would be in the seat opposite Riley, doing the same thing to his Heckler & Koch MP5 submachine gun.

Having a perfectly operational weapon might just make the difference between life and death for any of them, particularly on this run, Cade thought to himself with some resignation. They had been asked to take the assignment at the last minute, without any advanced preparation or intelligence, and that was not the way Cade liked to operate. The quick briefing they'd been given hadn't done anything to inspire confidence, either.

Two months ago, the local Catholic diocese had requested help in dealing with a particularly violent blood cult. The parish pastor had catalogued a number of problems ranging from intimidation of his parishioners to the sudden disappearance of many of the street people who frequented the soup kitchen. He was convinced that there was evil afoot and believed the local authorities had neither the desire nor the manpower to handle the situation properly. His request for assistance had gone all the way up the church hierarchy to the Vatican itself and had been passed to the Order for investigation.

That was what the Order did, after all.

Contrary to popular belief, the Holy Order of the Poor Knights of Christ of the Temple of Solomon, or the Knight Templars as they are more commonly known, were not destroyed by the King of France when he burned Grand Master Jacques De Molay at the stake in 1314 for heresy. Following Molay's death, the Order had gone underground, hiding its wealth, disguising its power and managing to remain a viable independent entity right up through the end of the First World War. A treaty with Pius XI was followed by a reversal of their excommunication, and the Templars were reborn as a secret military arm of the Vatican. Their mission: to

defend mankind against the evils that walked in the world, unnoticed in a society that was preoccupied with science and that scoffed at superstition and myth, regardless of the truths they might contain.

Those in command of the Order had agreed that the situation merited a closer look. They had sent a team in, led by a veteran Knight Captain, and instructed them to look into the situation and assist the parish in whatever manner they found necessary.

Three weeks after their arrival, the team had abruptly disappeared.

Using equipment the missing Templars left behind, the parish pastor had communicated directly with the Preceptor and had requested further assistance. Since Cade unit, Echo Team, had been closest to the site, and presently unoccupied with any other duties, they had drawn the short stick and had been asked to take the assignment.

That had been several days ago.

Oh how Cade wished he could have those days back.

As was standard procedure, Echo Team's active commander had sent the fourth member of his squad, Bishop, in ahead of the rest of the team, with instructions to set up a secure location unbeknownst to the locals and then, and only then, rendezvous with the parish pastor. Bishop had carried out both tasks without a hitch, relaying the address of the safe house during his regularly scheduled communication a few days ago. He had checked in the next night as well, leaving a brief message that he believed he had some information about the fate of the first squad and that he would see the rest of the team in a few days.

The night after that he'd missed his call.

Cade hadn't been too concerned at that point. His team was trained to use secondary and even tertiary communication schedules just in case any activities they were engaged in prevented them from making the primary one. When Bishop missed the second check-in, however, Cade grew more concerned.

By the time he missed the third, Cade had the rest of the team and the necessary gear loaded onto one of the Order's jets and had gotten underway the moment the Preceptor had given them the word.

Now, as the pilot made the announcement that they would be landing soon, Cade reached over and picked up the long, thin case resting on the seat next to him. Balancing it on his knees, he opened the case's three clasps and raised its lid.

Inside, on a smooth bed of white silk, lay the sword that had been given to him during his investiture ceremony on the night that he had pledged himself and his life to the Order.

The weapon itself was an unadorned English long sword. Like all Templar weapons, its hilt had been specifically molded to match the grip its owner's right hand. Along the length of the blade that was facing upright in the case, the word *Defensor* had been inscribed in silver.

Translated, the Latin word meant Defender.

Cade carefully withdrew the sword from the case and held it up in the aisle, turning it slightly to and fro so that the dim lighting of the cabin made the script sparkle and shine. According to the Code, a knight in the Order was allowed personal ownership of only a few, specific items. The sword given to them during

their investiture ceremony was one of them, a symbol of their fidelity to the Order and their unrelenting dedication to its ideals. The weapons were supposed to remain undecorated, chaste if you will, just as the knight who carries them pledges to do the same. Enhancing the weapon in any way after it is awarded was cause for a variety of punishments, for doing so was considered a sin of pride.

Cade wasn't concerned with his sin. Or his pride, for that matter.

He had ignored this rule, just as he had ignored more than a handful of others over the last several years when the success of his missions required it. On the day after the ceremony, he had secretly commissioned a silversmith to help him add a second word to the same exact location on the opposite side of the blade from the first.

Now, as he turned the weapon over, he smiled grimly at what he had written there.

Ulciscor.

Vengeance.

That word represented the driving reason behind Cade's daily existence and the true reason for his membership in the Templar Order.

He gently replaced the sword back into its case, this time with the opposite side facing upward. Tugging the thin, cotton glove off his right hand, he traced the Latin word with the tip of his index finger. He could barely feel the inscription through his skin, but his Talent sent the raw emotion locked in it back to him with the force of a thunderbolt. For several long moments, he reveled in the flow as all that rage, determination, and utter hatred for the Adversary washed over him like the torrent of a raging river. Just as he had on the day he had awakened in the hospital five years before, he vowed once more to find the Adversary and make it pay for the loss of his wife and for all that it had stolen from them.

His encounter with that supernatural entity had left him with a scarred face, hands, and soul. It had also left him with several unique abilities, something he was certain the Adversary had never intended. The first, what he liked to call his Talent, was more properly known as psychometry. When a person handles an inanimate object they leave traces of their passing on it, a psychic residue so to speak, as the emotions and thoughts passing through the individual's mind are left on the surface of the object. With just a simple touch, Cade could read those impressions and know something about those who had handled the object before him. The ability had a dark side too, however, for it denied him even the most casual physical contact with another person. Touching someone was far worse than touching an object, for an object held only a few, brief glimpses into the individual who last handled it while a person had all of their pain and emotion locked inside them. Even a casual brush against another person overwhelmed Cade with a sudden influx of foreign thoughts and emotions. He suspected continual contact could even result in a loss of his own identity, as his psyche was overwhelmed by another's, though he had never tested his theory. Because of the danger of such contact, Cade was forced to wear thin cotton gloves at all times when he was out of the safety of his own home, preventing his Talent from activating.

His other ability, less troublesome from a practical sense but more disturbing emotionally, he called his Sight. Where the Adversary had touched Cade's face,

nothing but scar tissue now remained. His eye was destroyed on contact; the skin around it melted and cauterized in seconds, leaving so much scar tissue that removing the damaged orb and being fitted with a prosthetic would have been impossible without extensive surgery, something he had decided long ago that he had no intention of enduring.

In spite of the damage, or perhaps because of it, Cade could now see into the realm of the dead. He could see all manner of ghosts and supernatural beings. Not just when they wanted to be seen, which contrary to popular belief isn't very often, but any time he wanted to see them. Cade had learned that there was another layer of reality superimposed upon our own, a place he had come to simply call the Beyond. It was within this realm that the dead normally resided, cut off from humanity by the smallest of margins. The Beyond is almost a mirror image of this world, but fashioned out of emotion instead of material substance. The stronger the emotions, the better. It is emotion that allows a shade to exist, to hang around some aspect of their former lives that were particularly important to them. To haunt those places, if you will. Just as an accident victim will wander that lonely stretch of highway where they lost control of their vehicle, so will a murder victim revisit the scene of the crime. The shade of an adult might even return to the home they knew as a child, if such a place held a strong emotional attachment for them. When a person sees a ghost firsthand, it is nothing more than a fleeting glimpse into this aspect of reality.

Cade had also learned that having the ability to see into the Beyond had its share of dangers, though. Ghosts and other supernatural beings hunger for the attention of the living the way a heroin junkie hungers for a fix. They quickly take notice when the living suddenly drop into their world. Cade had been hounded by all manner of phantoms when he'd spent too long on the other side of the barrier.

Being on the other side isn't easy, either. The real world constantly calls out to you, so your concentration is often split between this side and that. A momentary lack of caution can get you killed in our world. In the Beyond, the old saying that there are fates worse than death is more than just a saying, it's a reality to live, and die, by.

A mechanical sound vibrated through the aircraft's frame, announcing the lowering of the landing gear, and bringing Cade's attention back to the situation at hand. He replaced his sword in its case and sealed it up before replacing the case on the seat beside him. Unbuckling his seatbelt, he moved forward into the main cabin.

His men looked up expectantly when he entered.

"Ten minutes to go," Cade told them. "Get those weapons secured and sealed away. Once we're on the ground, Riley and I will unload the gear while Olsen goes for the rental car. I want us loaded and on our way in less than thirty minutes. If we get lucky, maybe we'll pick up Bishop's trail from there. Any questions?"

Both men shook their heads.

"Good. If everything goes smoothly, we'll be back at the commandery by this time tomorrow."

Leaving his men to their tasks, Cade went forward to talk with the pilot and see what arrangements had been made for their landing.

They touched down without problem and taxied to the corporate hanger they'd rented for the duration. While Olsen went to round up the rental car, Cade and Riley began unloading their gear from cargo area at the rear of the aircraft. There were four large cases in all. Each case was locked up tight and was sealed with the emblem of the Holy See, making them the sovereign territory of the Vatican itself, off limits to all but their intended recipients. It was the same type of diplomatic protection afforded to the staff members of a foreign nation's embassy and it allowed the Order to move cargo of all types, including firearms, explosives, and supernatural artifacts, about the country with little to no resistance from the authorities. If the authorities couldn't see what was in the box, they certainly couldn't prevent it from arriving at its destination.

Ten minutes after they had finished unloading, Olsen pulled up next to the aircraft behind the wheel of a black Ford Explorer. Cade and Riley quickly put the gear into the rear of the vehicle and then climbed inside. A few moments later the three of them were speeding out of the airport gate.

With Bishop missing, Cade had no choice but to assume that the safe house was compromised. Instead of going there as originally planned, Cade had Olsen drive around for a while until they found a run-down motel on the outskirts of town. Cade went inside and got them three adjacent rooms on the ground floor in the back of the motel, where their comings and goings would be mostly unobserved. Olsen parked the truck in front of the door to the center room and they made short work of unloading the equipment.

Ten minutes later they met in Cade's room.

"Any luck contacting Bishop now that we're on the ground?" Cade asked.

Olsen shook his head. "I tried several times on the standard and the back-up frequencies without any luck. I also tried calling his throw-away," referring to the prepaid cell phone Bishop had purchased to act as an emergency contact number, "but didn't get a reply. If he's there, he's not in any condition to respond."

Cade nodded; it was pretty much what he'd expected, but it paid to be thorough. He turned to Riley. "What do you think?"

The black sergeant rubbed the crown of his bald head for a moment, before answering. "Start with the safe house. Maybe he left us a message of some kind to let us know where he was going. If we come up empty at that point, I don't see any choice but to contact Father Martin and see if he knows anything."

Martin was their contact at the church, so it made sense to try there if they struck out at the safehouse. It was figuring out what to do next if they failed to find anything at either location that was worrying him.

Deal with that when the time comes, he told himself. One thing at a time.

To the others, he said, "Martin might be compromised or even in on this thing from the very beginning, so if we have to hit the church we treat it as hostile territory. Secure the premises first, then ask our questions. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

With that, there wasn't anything left to do but suit up.

Each team member pulled on a set of grey ceramic body armor that had been blessed by the Holy Father himself and displayed the red cross of the Templars prominently across the chest. In a shoulder holster, each man carried a standard issue HK Mark 23 .45 caliber handgun, complete with a 12 round magazine, a

flash suppressor, and laser-targeting device. A combat knife was either affixed to their belts or in a calf sheath on the outside of their boots. Two spare magazines were affixed with Velcro to their left wrists. Their swords, held in tear-resistant nylon sheaths, were slung across their backs, the hilt of the weapon extending just beyond the right shoulder for easy access in the heat of combat. Lightweight Kevlar tactical helmets with built-in communications gear went on their heads.

In addition to the pistol, each man carried his choice of personal weapons. For Riley, it was a Mossberg 590 12 gauge combat shotgun. He was also the team demolitions expert, so he carried an assortment of plastic explosives and detonators in the chest webbing he wore over his armor as well. Olsen's weapon of choice was an HK MP5 compact submachine gun, though on occasion he would swap that for a Barrett Light .50 caliber sniper rifle if the situation demanded it. Bishop had been an expert with all kinds of throwing knives. Only Cade restricted himself to the use of the pistol.

He liked to think his other, more esoteric abilities were all he needed.

When they were ready, the three men left the hotel behind and climbed once more into their vehicle.

The safe house was located in a quiet, residential neighbourhood on the south side of town. A thick stretch of woods occupied the right hand side of the street, while several older homes occupied the left. Cade had Olsen drive down the street slowly, occasionally using his high beams to illuminate the house numbers painted on the sides of the mailboxes before moving on again. To the casual observer, it would look as if the men in the car were looking for a particular address. In reality, Cade and Riley were using the time to study the target property, noting entry and egress routes and watching for motion behind the darkened windows that faced out onto the street.

After passing the house once and not finding anything obviously amiss, Olsen drove around the block and pull over to the side of the road in the shadows beneath a large oak, where Cade and Riley slipped out of the vehicle.

The night was dark, the sky above covered with a thick curtain of heavy storm clouds and the rise of the moon still a half hour away. That would help them in their effort to remain concealed. Keeping to the shadows, the two men made their way back down the block until they were hidden in the woods directly opposite the front door of the safe house. Cade clicked his mike twice, giving the signal that they were in position. A moment later Olsen came back down the street in the Explorer and parked along the curb in front of the house. He flipped on the interior light and pretended to study a map.

His companions watched the house carefully, looking for any reaction to Olsen's presence, but none came.

So far, so good.

Cade clicked his mike again.

Upon receiving the signal, Olsen turned off the interior light and exited the vehicle, the map held in his left hand, leaving his right hand, his weapon hand, free. He walked up the path leading to the front door and rang the doorbell. The plan called for him to ask for directions to the airport if someone answered the door, while Cade and Riley covered him from the street. If no one answered, Olsen

would signal to the others and they would advance on the house themselves, at which point they would enter the home with the key Bishop had previously sent to them.

Cade watched tensely as Olsen headed up the walk. This was the dangerous part of the plan; if Olsen was attacked and dragged inside the house before the others could get to him, he would be on his own with his companions locked outside, unable to help.

Olsen waited a moment after ringing the bell and then, after receiving no answer, rang it again. When it went unanswered the second time, he stepped off the front steps, checked the street one time to be certain no one unexpected was watching, and then walked around the side of the house, headed for the rear.

Cade and Riley crossed the street and found him waiting at the back door of the house, key in hand. The two men moved into position and Cade signaled for Olsen to go ahead and open it up.

Inside, the house was dark. The three of them fanned out and cleared the structure room by room, but found no sign of Bishop. They returned to the kitchen and with the help of their flashlights checked it over for a note or other communication from their missing teammate. The refrigerator and shelves were stocked with food and several city maps lay on the coffee table in the living room next to the briefcase containing Bishop's communications equipment, evidence that he had been here, but that was all.

There were no clues as to what had happened to him.

Or where he was now.

They were going to have to check out the church.

The St. Margaret Catholic Church occupied a small, half-forgotten lot sandwiched between two abandoned tenements. It was made of brick that had long lost its newness, coated as it was by the dust and grime of the city. A small, squat rectory was attached to it by a short covered walkway. A broken-down chain link fence surrounded the property. Here and there small piles of wind-blown trash could be seen trapped up against the fence in the light of the now risen moon.

Cade parked the Explorer along the curb in front of the grounds and the three of them got out. The streets were quiet, hushed even, as if the buildings around them were holding their breath, waiting to see what these intruders would do in their domain. Cade could feel the electrical tension that comes from being watched, but couldn't identify where the feeling was coming from.

They pushed open the gate and made their way over to the church entrance. Once they drew close, they were able to see that the heavy, oak doors of the sanctuary were left partially open. Considering the neighborhood, it was a clear sign that all was not right here.

They entered the church like it was hostile territory.

Riley shoved open the door and let his companions slip inside before taking up a position behind them. Stretching out before them was a large central aisle that extended to the altar fifty feet ahead and divided two sets of pews into equal parts, with aisles stretching down the outside of each section against the walls. On either side of the altar, two small wings formed the horizontal axis of the cross and

stretched out of sight. The building was shaped like a cross and the team had entered at its base. The interior was semi-dark, lit only by the soft breath of moonlight that was streaming in through the four windows that were evenly spaced along the left hand wall. The red beams of their laser sights danced about in the semi-darkness like the lights at a rock concert before swiftly coming to rest on the body that had been left lying across the altar at the front of the church.

Making certain that the building was clear was the first priority, however, and so the body would have to wait. Without a word, Riley moved to the left-hand aisle and Olsen moved to the right. Cade waited until they were in position and then gave the hand signal for them to advance simultaneously toward the altar. This would allow them to provide fire support to each other while at the same time make use of the wooden pews as cover should it prove necessary.

They made it to the foot of the altar without incident. Riley and Olsen circled the outer wings without finding anything out of the ordinary before rejoining Cade at the apex of the central aisle. Only at that point, once they were satisfied that they were alone, did the three of them advance on the body lying on the altar.

The man was dressed in the black casual clothing and white clerical collar of a Catholic priest. One leg was draped over the front of the altar, the other hung over the side, bent at the knee. The priest's hands were arranged on his chest with an antique wooden crucifix clasped upright between them.

If it hadn't been for the condition of his skin and face, you might have almost been able to believe he was sleeping, Cade thought idly. Of course there was no way you'd ever make that mistake once you'd gotten a close look at what had been done to him.

Had the man spent the last two hundred years baking in the Arizona deserts, he couldn't have looked any more drained of substance than he did now. The skin of his face was stretched tightly over his skull, as if the flesh beneath had been sucked away, leaving just the thinnest barrier between the air and bone. A quick glance down at the man's hands let Cade know the condition extended there as well and from that Cade guessed that it extended across his entire body. The man's eyes were gone, the empty sockets staring at the ceiling far above. From the position of the man's jaw, it looked like his mouth was frozen open in a silent scream, but the several strips of grey duct tape that were wrapped around his lower face made it difficult to tell for certain.

Olsen was the first to speak.

"Vamps!" he cried, using the common name for something that was in truth far more vicious than the blood-sucking monsters immortalized by Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. "I knew it! I just knew it! Every time you think you've rooted out the last of them, another batch shows up in their place."

"*Ch'iang shih*," Cade corrected softly, using the proper name for the Chinese creatures, but he agreed with the general sentiment. If the blood cult they had supposedly been called in to investigate actually turned out to be a pack of *Ch'iang Shih*, he and his team were in for a nasty fight in the not so distant future.

While his team had never had to face this particular supernatural menace, he had been thoroughly briefed in the past. He did his best now to recall what he had been told.

Also known as the Gui Ren, or Demon People, they were some of the fiercest supernatural creatures ever encountered by the Templars. They had their origins in China and were routinely seen throughout Central and Southeast Asia, but they had rarely been encountered here in the States. According to Asian tradition, they are formed when an individual has an outstanding karmic debt that must be paid, a debt so enormous that it prevents the soul from moving onward through the Great Cycle and forces the body to rise again from death. More often than not, the higher, rational aspect of the soul, the Hun, becomes dormant, leaving the P'o, or the lower, bestial aspect of the soul, in control of the resurrected creature. Neither truly living nor dead, the Ch'iang shih are creatures without Chi, the essence of life, and therefore must constantly steal it from the living in order to sustain their existence while they seek to redeem their debt and rejoin the Great Cycle.

The drained, lifeless husk that is left behind after such a theft had become the Ch'iang shih's signature the world over. No other creature left such evidence of its passing in their wake, making them easily identifiable for hunters like Cade's team.

Identifying them was the easy part.

Finding and defeating them was another matter entirely.

Leaving Olsen on guard, Riley and Cade did a more thorough search of the church, looking for anything that might indicate what had happened to the missing advance team, Bishop, or the church staff.

After an hour of searching, they came up empty-handed.

Which left the body itself and the need for more drastic measures.

Cade bent over and examined the corpse on the altar before him. The priest had clearly been middle-aged; his thinning gray hair and liver spotted skin gave evidence to that. A close look at the shrunken flesh of the right side of his face revealed a large bruise. The black cloth of his shirt and pants was ripped and tattered in certain places, mainly about the arms and lower legs.

Cade removed his gloves and placed them in his pocket. He checked to be certain his men had control of the situation, receiving a nod of confirmation from each of them, and then turned back to face the altar.

It was time to go to work.

There was no way Cade was going to use his Talent on the body itself. The priest had no doubt suffered greatly at the hands of the Ch'iang shih and Cade had no desire to relive any of that experience, not like that. Instead, he was going to take a reading from the surface of the altar itself, in the hopes that it would filter enough of the horror out of the encounter to allow him to understand just what had happened here.

Cade took a deep breath, mentally preparing himself for the task ahead. Using his Talent was never easy. It physically drained him of energy at an alarming rate, leaving him weak and disoriented for several long minutes afterward. The need to constantly guard against being overwhelmed by another's thoughts and emotions made it mentally demanding as well. Staying immersed too long in the flow made it difficult for him to regain his own identity, and though he had never tested the theory for obvious reasons, Cade believed that his physical form could be affected by what he was seeing through his Gift as well.

When he was ready, he reached out and laid his palms flat on the altar's surface.

Hands.

Hands carrying him, perversely caressing him, while others seize hold of his arms and legs and haul him bodily into the air.

Our Father, who art in heaven...

Movement, the whisper of bodies parting to get out of the way, a low murmuring of anticipation filling the air.

He's dropped onto a hard surface (the altar?) and his limbs are pulled out and away from his body, his captors' claws clicking against each other as they expose the skin of his wrists and legs.

Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with me...

The cloying scent of rancid meat hangs in the air.

More hands seize his face, forcing his jaws open, the taste of something metallic as an object is shoved into his mouth while gnarled fingers snatch at his tongue.

Pain, terrible pain, as his blood flows freely, filling his mouth...

With a sudden cry Cade snatched his hands away from the altar top, the coppery taste of phantom blood sharp in his mouth. He turned his head and spat on the carpet to clear it.

When he looked up, Riley and Olsen were staring at him expectantly.

"Vamps, all right," he told them, as he pulled his gloves back on. "A lot of them. And they left us a calling card." Cade reached out, held the corpse across the forehead with one hand and, with the other, yanked the pieces of duct tape off the corpse's mouth. The man's mouth remained locked open, so Cade peered inside and then reached in with two fingers to draw something out.

Cade held the object out for the other men to see.

It was a gold signet ring set with a ruby stone in the shape of a cross. It was identical to the ring that each team member wore on their right hands, the same rings they were given on the night of their initiation into the Order. On the reverse side, directly beneath the stone, were the initials JKB.

"Bishop's ring," Cade said.

Riley swore.

Cade handed the ring to him, removed the glove on his right hand and then extended that hand back toward his team-mate again.

"You sure you want to do that, boss?" Riley asked.

Cade nodded. "We don't have any other choice. They obviously want us to know they have Bishop. The ring might be able to tell us if he is still alive, and if he is, where they might be keeping him."

Shaking his head in resignation, Riley gently dropped the ring into his team-mate's open palm.

This time, Cade's Talent was a bit more generous.

Pain.

A deep, throbbing pain that pulsed in his left side, right where the vamps had slashed him with his own weapon. He knew he was still bleeding; the wet trickle that marched down his ribcage and under the waistband of his pants clearly told that story. His right wrist hurt as well, where two of the vamps had locked their vile mouths on his flesh before their leader had stopped them from draining him dry.

He was bone-weary, evidence that the two junior vamps had taken a fair amount of life force from him before the stronger one had intervened. Still, he was alive, and while he was he had no doubt that his team would make an effort to rescue him.

Which meant he had to stay that way until they could get to him.

He knew he was in the warehouse district; he'd seen as much when they'd grabbed him at the church. While he'd been unable to determine the exact location of the building to which they had brought him, he had been able to catch a glimpse of the sign out front. "Markhams Slaughterhouse" was all he'd been able to see before they'd dragged him inside.

A quick search of a phone book was all Cade and the others needed after that.

Markhams Slaughterhouse was located on South 52nd Avenue, near the intersection with Grand. Olsen went out to the car and returned with his computer equipment. Using coordinates from a GPS device and some mapping software, he quickly pinpointed the exact location of the warehouse in relation to their current position. It was less than fifteen minutes away.

Neither Jones nor Riley were surprised when Cade suggested they head directly for the warehouse. The fact that Cade had "read" anything at all off of Bishop's ring meant that he had been wearing it sometime in the last forty-eight hours, for this was how long any given object could retain the psychic impressions imprinted on it. While forty-eight hours was a long time to be trapped in the hands of the Ch'iang shih, the possibility remained that their team-mate was still alive.

They couldn't take the chance and leave him to the vamps' mercy.

They had to try to get him out, as he had known they would.

Cade had no intention of going into a nest of vamps without someone knowing what had happened to them, however. Using Bishop's computer equipment, he sent a coded email directly to the Preceptor, informing him of everything that had occurred so far and letting him know what they planned to do next. If they did not return, at least the Order would have the information amassed to date and could plan an appropriate response to the situation.

Cade had every intention of surviving, but it never hurt to be prepared.

The warehouse seemed to be deserted.

Cade and his fellow knights stood just inside the entrance, their weapons held ready for use. The cavernous interior of the warehouse stretched away before them, illuminated by a series of old arc lights strung across the ceiling. A few piles of discarded crates and equipment lay in the far corners of the room.

One of the lights shone down directly on the bruised and bloody face of a man whose slumped body was tied to a support pole halfway across the room.

Bishop.

Cade looked carefully around the interior of the warehouse, searching for any sign of movement either in the shadows that lined the walls or among the rafters and catwalks that stretched high overhead.

Nothing moved.

With Jones and Bishop ready to provide covering fire, the three men cautiously made their way across to their fallen companion. While the others stood guard, Cade knelt down beside the pole and gently touched Bishop's face. The man's skin was icy cold.

They had gotten here too late.

Keeping one arm around his team-mate's body, Cade leaned around the back of the pole and cut through the cords that bound the body to it with his knife. With its support suddenly released, Bishop's corpse slumped against him. Cade gently eased Bishop onto his back on the floor.

Just to be certain, Cade leaned in close and listened for a heartbeat.

All he heard was silence.

Cade raised his head and looked down at his team-mate's dead face, burning it into his memory, another victim he would now have to avenge.

Bishop's eyes suddenly popped open.

His gaze met Cade's confused one and a wicked grin scurried across his lips.

"Sorry, boss," he said, without a touch of remorse, and his hand whipped around toward his former leader, a razor sharp set of talons extending from his fingertips and seeking Cade's face.

At that exact moment, most likely the result of some undisclosed prearranged signal, the rafters suddenly vomited a scurrying, seething horde of ravenous creatures that descended the walls with spider-like grace and came rushing across the warehouse floor toward Olsen and Riley.

"It's a trap!" Cade yelled, throwing himself away from Bishop and out of reach of those deadly claws.

His warning was unnecessary, however, for Olsen had already caught sight of the swarming horde. Without hesitation the Templar opened fire with his MP 5, pouring 800 rounds per minute into his foes. Riley followed suit, his combat Mossberg booming in the echoing confines of the warehouse in sharp contrast to the buzz of Olsen's weapon.

Cade rolled away from his opponent and came up in a crouch, his pistol held securely in his right hand. He could see that Bishop had already risen to his feet and was snarling in rage at having missed his target.

As his enemy came charging toward him, Cade triggered his Sight.

In the Beyond, the warehouse was a darker, more ominous place, full of the shadows of pain and suffering caused by the slave-driving mentality of its owners. Here, the true nature of the team's attackers also revealed themselves, as their thirst for the team's life force was an almost physical presence pulsing out from them in waves of need and desire.

There was no mistaking the fact that the warehouse was full of very hungry Ch'iang shih.

Nor was there any doubt as to what had happened to Bishop.

Cade calmly noted his former team-mates' altered condition—his savage hunger, his unholy rage, and his dual existence in both the real world and in the Beyond—and then he was out of time. As his former team-mate rushed in to savage him, Cade fired point blank into the man's face.

Bishop went down, hard, with a bullet hole just beneath his right eye.

In the fifteen seconds it had taken Cade to dispense with Bishop, Olsen and Riley had littered the warehouse floor with vamp bodies. The staccato stutter of Olsen's weapon was interspersed with the booming tones of Riley's, but still more of the creatures swarmed off the rafters high above and charged toward them. Worse yet, many of those who had gone down were now starting to get back up.

While Bram Stokers' fictitious creations had access to regenerative powers, the Chaing 'shih did not. Yet such powers were not really necessary, for their bodies were really nothing more than animated corpses give new life by the hunger and desire of their souls. As such, bullets, even high powered ones from a weapon like Olsen' MP5, did little to actually stop them. Those Chaing 'shih who had gone down under the Templars' onslaught did so more from the sheer velocity of the striking ammunition than from any physical harm the bullet might have caused them. A bullet hole to the chest was of little concern for an undead creature and was nothing more than a few moments worth of inconvenience as they were knocked off their feet.

Cade quickly took in the situation. "Go for their legs, " he yelled to the others. When it appeared they did not hear him, he stepped up between them and directed his own fire at the legs of his opponents. It only took a moment before his companions caught on to what he was doing and followed suit.

The warehouse was filled with a cacophony of sound; the bark of Cade's handgun, the booming sound of Billing's shotgun, the shrieks and wails of the Chaing 'shih as they were cut down in mid-step by the precision shots of the knights. Conversation between Cade and his men was next to hopeless. It was only the steady training and discipline that Cade enforced on his team that allowed them to operate as a cohesive unit even in the face of such an overwhelming assault. As one man's weapon would run dry, the others would step up their volume of firepower, allowing him to reload and rejoin the fray.

Soon, however, their supply of ammunition began to dwindle and then disappeared altogether.

As one, the knights dropped their weapons and drew their swords. The vamps closed in, anticipating an easier time of things now, only to discover that the knights' still had plenty of bite left to them.

In the face of the savagery of the knights' defense, the vamps retreated to the darkness among the machinery in the far corner of the warehouse. Those wounded that could walk followed suit, while still others, unable to walk due to shattered legs and kneecaps, used their arms to drag themselves along the floor in pursuit.

The three knights took a moment to catch their breath.

"Bishop's gone," Jones said matter-of-factly as he kicked a still twitching forearm away from his boots.

Having already written off his former teammate, Cade glanced over to his right where he had left Bishop's body before joining the fray. That section of floor space was empty. Jones was right; Bishop was gone. But had he gotten up of his own accord or been dragged away by his comrades?

Before Cade could ponder the question further, the vamps attacked again.

This time they came drifting in and out of the Beyond, so that Jones and Riley were mostly unable to see them coming. Nothing more than an occasional whisper of movement was visible as the vamps streaked in toward them at inhuman speed, flickers of motion they caught out of the corner of their eyes and desperately tried to counter.

The vamps had not counted on the changes the Adversary had wrought in Cade, however.

Cade's Sight showed the vamps clearly, even when they stepped fully across the barrier into the Beyond where they believed they were safe. As the vamps closed in, Cade kept up a constant stream of information, calling out commands to his men, telling them where and when to strike. He danced in and out of the battle like a whirling dervish, his sword flashing in the light, striking his foes with savage grace.

But his fierceness was not enough. By the time the vamps retreated for a second time, all three of the knights were bleeding from multiple wounds and their energy was getting dangerously low. They would not be able to hold the vamps off for much longer.

Across the floor the knights could see the vamps gathering together again, preparing for another assault. They must have abandoned their previous tactic, for they were clearly visible to all three of the Templars.

Grimly, the knights waited for the onslaught.

Much to their surprise, it did not come.

At least, not yet.

The milling group of Ch'iang shih suddenly parted ranks and an Oriental woman of extreme beauty stepped to the front of the group. She was dressed in a traditional Chinese gown of flowing green silk that matched the emerald hue of her eyes. Her midnight black hair flowed loosely across her shoulders and down her back where it hung almost to the floor behind her. One hand held a Chinese war fan across her upper face and even from across the warehouse Cade could see the gold lacquer that covered nails several inches in length.

Behind her, like a faithful servant, came Bishop.

His face bore the evidence of Cade's marksmanship; a large swatch of flesh and bone had been torn away just below his right eye. It did nothing to dim the unholy light in his eyes, however, and only served to increase the hatred in his heart for the living knights standing before him.

The woman spoke up in a voice like a softly lilting breeze. "Why have you come here?" she asked.

Cade ignored the question and gave the standard Templar response when encountering a supernatural being. "Your kind is not welcome in this place. You are an insult to the Lord. Renounce your evil ways and let the Order send you to the rest you deserve."

In a voice pitched so low that only his fellow knights could hear him, Jones said, "You get better at that line all the time, boss."

Riley laughed at the remark. "He does, doesn't he? Sure has a way with women, too," the knight joked.

Cade ignored them, though their quiet humor in the face of almost certain death made him proud. He had trained them well. He did not expect the Ch'iang shih princess to accept his offer, but the demands of the Code required that he offer such succor to any supernatural creature he encountered. It was a throwback to the days before the Inquisition, when the Order would offer surrender to all their foes before resorting to force. Personally, he thought it to be complete foolishness, but he had taken a vow to follow the Code and where it did not conflict with his own personal mission of vengeance he strove to do so.

At this point it served to gain him a few more precious seconds to try and figure a way out of their current predicament.

Cade had no doubt that many a foolish young man had fallen for the woman's innocent facade but the sudden guttural bark of laughter that escaped from her near perfect lips revealed the animal hidden beneath that glamorous form. Her razor sharp teeth flashed into a smile.

"You are as arrogant as the commander of the last team that invaded my territory." Indicating Bishop with a disdainful wave of her hand, she said, "Like this one here, I will make you into my personal lap dog for your audacity."

Cade smiled and all the hatred he'd harbored for years against the agents of the darkness spilled forth from his gaze. Raising his weapon in front of him, he said, "I think you'll find me more difficult prey than my lieutenant. But feel free to give it your best shot. At the very least, it should make for an exciting end to a fun evening."

The Ch'iang shih leader snarled, spittle dropping from her lips. With a wave of her war fan she gave the signal for her troops to attack.

Cade and his men braced themselves for the onslaught, knowing that they had very little chance of surviving.

The Ch'iang shih dashed forward, their shrieks of rage filling the confines of the warehouse.

Before they had crossed even a quarter of the distance to their prey, however, the warehouse was suddenly filled with the booming thunder of several dozen firearms and the front ranks of the ravenous creatures were cut apart like confetti.

Cade glanced behind him, the direction from which the firepower was still continuing.

High above, on one of the catwalks that crisscrossed the building, stood the members of a second Templar assault squad. They lay down a blistering wave of covering fire over the heads of Cade's group as other members of their team began flinging hand grenades into the seething mass of oncoming vamps.

Pure chaos ensued.

Under such overwhelming firepower the Ch'iang shih stood very little chance of surviving. From his position on the opposite side of the warehouse, Cade watched the vamp leader scornfully turn her back on her followers and disappear back into the darkness.

With a last angry glance at his former leader, Bishop followed suit.

The knights and their unexpected allies made short work of the remaining vamps after that.

When it was over, the rescue squad commander, Davis of Charlie Team, walked over to where Cade knelt on the floor tending to an angry-looking but otherwise shallow wound on Jones' back.

"Why is it that Echo always gets the fun assignments?" he asked, jokingly.

"You call this fun?" Cade asked. "I think its time you got your head examined, Davis."

"Nah," the other man said, slapping Cade on the back in a wordless show of support for what he and his men had just been through. "I already know I'm nuts. I don't need some shrink to confirm it for me."

Cade dutifully laughed and shook Davis' hand. Charlie Team had pulled their ass out of the fire tonight and Cade was thankful for it. He just didn't understand how it had happened.

When asked, Davis just shrugged. "Maybe the big man upstairs was watching out for ya," he said and winked. With another slap on the back he wandered off to direct the clean up efforts, leaving Cade to tend to his wounded teammates.

"That bitch got away, boss," Riley said, referring to the Ch'iang shih leader, then winced as Cade pulled the bandages around his injured ribs too tight.

"Bishop, too," Jones added from where he was seated nearby.

Cade nodded. "I know. We'll deal with them both at another time. For now, let's just get you two out of here and back to the commandery. We'll debrief there."

Gathering their gear, the three men limped over to the warehouse entrance, now standing wide open to admit the Templar clean up crews that were already mobilizing to wipe any trace of the Ch'iang shih presence from the warehouse. The team slipped across the street to where they had left their vehicle in an adjacent lot.

After he'd gotten his men settled, Cade turned and gave the warehouse one last look.

He knew that it would not be the last time they would be hearing from the charismatic vamp leader or from the former Templar who now walked at her side. The Order had encountered another enemy today, one to add to the every-growing list of evils that would have to be dealt with before long.

But that could wait for another day.

For now, it was time to take his team home.

