

# **DEMON STALKER VOLUME ONE: THE BEGINNING**

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**And**

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Obey the three-fold law. Where it harm none, do what you want is the will of the law. What goes around, comes around....Karma.

## PROLOGUE

The cave was pitch black, which wasn't surprising. The cave was some four-thousand feet in the Earth. But what wasn't surprising was that it was warm and dry. From Rhavi Kumor's experience, caves were always cold and damp...so this puzzled her.

Rhavi Kumor was a world renowned treasure hunter. Since childhood she'd enjoyed spelunking. She lived in a small town in North Eastern Tennessee. Before graduating from Ridgemont High, Rhavi had explored most of the caves that were within driving distance from her home.

At the young age of seventeen, Rhavi left home to attend college in Boulder, Colorado, where she majored in Archaeology and Geology, but her passions were exploration and discovery.

While in Colorado, Rhavi spent most of her free time combing through Colorado's abandoned mine shafts and unexplored caves. This left Rhavi with very little time for personal relationships. Still, every now and then, she would eke out a little time for a boyfriend. And it was with one of her short lived relationships that she happened upon her first big find.

During her Senior year, Rhavi was dating one of her fellow classmates, Javier Martinez. One day they were out exploring abandoned mine shafts in the Durango area. In one of the mine shafts, they lucked upon a narrow passage that was hidden beneath a protruding rock face.

Rhavi slithered her way, some 200 feet plus feet, into a small rock cavern. Water, over years, had produced a small pocket in the rock, creating sort of a natural vault. The newly discovered crypt was just large enough to hold four normal sized adults.

Inside, water was flowing steadily from the rock ceiling, tirelessly working its way to enlarge the space. Using a glow stick, Rhavi perused the rock enclosure. Upon doing so, she discovered an unusual cavity.

Rhavi called out for Javier to join her. When he arrived, Rhavi showed Javier the out-of-place indentation in the rock. Upon closer examination they could see that there was something inside the cavity. Something about the size of a large shoebox.

Rhavi reached into the rock cavity to try and extract the object, but could not budge it. Javier being taller and stronger, reached in, and wrestled with the box for some time, before finally extracting it.

It turned out to be a rusted metal chest. Years of moisture and oxidation had sealed the box shut. Rhavi engineered a makeshift skid, using items from their backpack, and with it, was able to slide the chest out and back to the mine shaft, where they pried the chest open. Inside were bronze rectangular shaped bars.

Rhavi, using one of her survival knife, raked one of the bronze bars and was surprised to discover the bars true substance, Gold. The gold bars total value added three and a half million dollars, which Rhavi happily split with Javier.

Not long after her discovery, Rhavi moved on from Javier. She then dropped out of school and decided to travel the world. For the next fourteen years, Rhavi traipsed valuable gemstones and raw minerals, which she used to finance her grand explorations and numerous adventures. Rhavi's current adventure was different, though. In addition the caves conditions being extremely unusual, it was also illegal for her to be there. 'Here' was about three-quarters of a mile beneath the ancient Palestinian city, Lachish, which was about thirty miles southwest of Jerusalem and the

location of several archaeological sites that had been evacuated in the 1930's and 1940's. Those digs had identified the city as being one of the last cities of Judah to be destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar around the same time that Jerusalem had fallen. Because of the materials found in the sites, which verified many events, names of places, people in the Bible and was written in the same language of the Old Testament Scriptures, the site was considered off limits to anyone except by express permission by the Israeli government. Of course, with Rhavi's background, she had no chance of getting permission. Besides, she didn't really want it. This was not the first illegal excavation she'd been involved in, and it probably wouldn't be the last.

It was certainly one of the most important though. Rhavi had been in Jerusalem visiting an old friend from her college days. They had been having a morning drink at the coffee shop when Rhavi had overheard two men talking about an exciting new discovery at Lachish. They had accidentally broken through a wall and undiscovered an entire complex of tunnels. The men were speaking Turkish, which Rhavi understood, because of her father had been born and raised in Istanbul before immigrating to the United States of America during the turbulent times of the 1970's. She listened to the conversation, finding out the government had stalled the digging and would be sending experts from the University to help with verification and removal of anything of importance.

She also heard that the government people would not be getting there until Monday afternoon, which was three days away.

This provided a great opportunity for her.

After finishing the morning with her friend, Rhavi went back to her hotel and started preparing for her journey to the dig site. First, she had gone on



the internet and found exactly where the site was, then she'd looked up all the past finds there and printed out maps of the site in order to put together her strategy for exploring and bringing back anything from a site like this, so selling her finds would be no problem.

After her preparation were complete, she had driven to the site and had sneaked past the rudimentary security, then made her way down into the newly discovered tunnel systems, finding them there were six tunnels and twenty-five separate caves to explore. She had been in there for nearly three hours, sifting thru dozens of antiques and had collected three clay tablets and a beautiful whole clay pot, leaving the rest for the official group. She didn't want anyone to know she had been there. She was getting ready to leave when she noticed something strange in one of the caves. There were dozens of footprints in there, and they all led to the south side, then stopped.

Rhavi had looked at the footprints closely, using a miner's light attached to a headband around her forehead, and had noticed that some of the prints were cut in half or had only about two-thirds of a print, with the rest seeming to go under the cave wall. There was also some type of a symbol carved into the wall.

Although, she could see the symbol quite well, she could not figure out what it was. She took several pictures of it with her digital camera and examined the wall more closely.

She had been looking for several minutes and was about to give up when she discovered a hand-sized hole in the rock that had been plugged up with stone that was slightly lighter in colour than the cave wall.

Rhavi had used her knife to pry out the plug, then, had carefully reached into the hole, where she found a lever. When she pulled it, there had been a

thumping noise from the wall and it had moved forward a few inches. Rhavi was completely astonished. These types of things never happened in real life. In books and movies, yes..... but never in real life. At least, never in her life, and never in any of the people's lives she had spoken with over the years.

She had pushed open the wall, as if it were a door quite easily, which had to have been almost a miracle of engineering, given how large it was, about eight feet high by six feet wide and maybe four feet thick.

After she had opened the wall wide enough to walk through, Rhavi shined her light on the floor. The footprints were there. She slowly followed them, leaving the wall open for her return.

Once she was a few feet past the opening, Rhavi looked up from the footprints and directed her light in front of her. She was in another tunnel. The tunnel, however, was different than the others she had explored. The other tunnels had been level and man-made, while this one was natural and sloped downward, gently, at first, then to about a ten or fifteen degree slope. When she moved the light to shine in front of her, she couldn't see any side openings, and she had the strongest feeling that this tunnel was extremely deep. She shuddered. Maybe it went all the way to the depths of Hell.

Rhavi stopped for a few moments to collect her wits, and took a few sips from her canteen. She stood where she was for a minute or so, then shifted her backpack with the artefacts in it a little to loosen some of the tension in her shoulders. She shook her head to dispel the gloomy thoughts, then, continued her downward trek.

It took her about ten minutes to reach the 'bottom,' where the tunnel levelled off, then led to the large cave where it was warm and dry.

Rhavi walked a few feet into the cave, shining her light in all directions, looking for anything interesting. She noticed that the rock in the cave was slightly different than the caves she had just left; it had mineral deposits and veins of quartz running through it, which was highly unusual for this area.

Rhavi was getting a small pick from her pack to cut off some pieces when she heard a noise that froze her in her tracks.

It was human voices.

Rhavi quickly reached up and turned off her head lamp, causing the darkness to engulf her. For a few moments, the only thing she could hear was the sound of her heartbeat in her ears.

After she calmed down, Rhavi opened her mouth and turned her head until she heard the voices again. When she figured out the direction, she turned that way, then reached into the cargo pockets of her pants and pulled out a small night vision mono-scope she had purchased a few years before. She put the scope to her right eye, turned on the device, and scanned the cave. Rhavi estimated the cave was about thirty feet high, and close to fifty feet across. There wasn't anything remarkable about it. There were no antiquities anywhere on the floor or any signs the cave had ever been occupied. In fact, the only thing she could make out that caught her attention was an opening in the wall from the direction she heard the voices. She walked toward the opening, carefully avoiding rocks and stones on the floor. When she got to the entrance, she moved to the left side and peeked around the edge of the opening, to see another tunnel. The tunnel was about ten feet long, then it turned sharply to the left. The voices were louder now, and they didn't sound like they were talking. It sounded as if they were chanting.

She could also tell there were at least a dozen, maybe more, although the echoes from the chamber behind her and the tunnel in front of her made it hard to guess.

Rhavi started to turn around and leave, but her curiosity got the best of her. She edged her way into the tunnel and walked quietly to the turn. When she looked around the corner, she saw another section of the tunnel followed by a sharp turn, this time to the right. Again, she walked to the turn and looked around the edge, only to find another tunnel and a turn.

The twists and turns went on for about five more minutes, and Rhavi was wondering what purpose these tunnels could have been for. They were clearly man-made; she ran her hand down the side wall, feeling the chiselled marks and ridges there, then she stopped as she came to what was the final turn in the labyrinth. She looked around the corner and almost gasped at what she saw.

There was another cavern, about twenty feet high and forty feet wide and there were twelve, no, thirteen people, seven men and six women, standing around naked in a circle, holding hands and chanting. There were torches at head height all the way around the perimeter, giving light to the gathering.

Rhavi turned off her scope, placed it in her pocket and gasped at the scene. She noticed there was a hole in the centre of the circle about five feet in diameter and there was a large object in it.

At first, Rhavi thought the hole was a well or some place to store items or food, but that didn't make any sense. As she continued to watch the strange gathering, she saw that there were strange symbols and what was called a magic square that looked freshly carved into the ground and painted on the walls. She got her phone and started to record the activity

when she thought she saw a shimmering above the object in the hole.

Rhavi blinked and rubbed her eyes, but that didn't stop the effect.

She was just starting to think that maybe she'd better leave, when something really strange happened.

The object floated up out of the hole.

Rhavi gasped in astonishment.

The object was some type of ancient water container with a smooth sealed top but it was larger than any she had ever seen. It looked large enough to contain over two hundred gallons of water. What was astonishing was that it was made of bronze, and it was untarnished, as if it had been placed in the hole earlier that day. The fire light and the bodies of the people reflected from the smooth polished surface.

As she watched, another amazing thing happened. The shimmering surrounded the container for a few moments and the chanting grew in volume and the shimmering stopped and suddenly symbols appeared all over the container.

Rhavi gasped again. A strong sense of foreboding and fear struck her. Her mind told her it was time to leave, but her body was rooted to the spot, refusing to obey her thoughts.

The chanting continued for another minute or two. Rhavi couldn't tell how long; time was feeling strange to her. Then the chanting stopped and darkness suddenly surrounded the top of the container. It stayed there for a moment, travelled down the sides like a dark fog, slowly covering the sides, then finally engulfing the entire container.

When the container was completely surrounded by the fog, the chanting continued, and was accompanied by a low rumbling. The rumbling became louder and the fog shrouded shape changed from that of a water container

to a globe. The globe expanded until it filled all of the circle inside of the chanter's arms, then started pulsing rhythmically with the chanting. It stayed that way for a few moments, then, expanded again, this time touching all of the chanters.

The chanting stopped suddenly and was replaced by screams, which were quickly ended as the dark fog completely engulfed all the people in the circle.

Rhavi was breathing hard and soaked in sweat as she waited for the fog to touch her, but it stopped expanding at the edge of the circle, and stayed there. Rhavi turned to move again but was still stuck in place. She sighed with relief when she saw the fog begin to shrink and move back toward the centre of the cavern.

Her relief was short lived when she saw what was left behind after the fog dissipated. Her screams echoed throughout the tunnel system as she was eaten slowly.

## Chapter One

Captain Jake Steele dove behind a rocky berm as bullets flew around him, some so close he could feel the wind of their passing and hear the whistling whine that was by now an all too familiar sound.

Jake was serving his twelfth combat deployment in Afghanistan and before that, he had served four tours in Iraq. He had been in the U.S. Army since 1999. After graduating from business school and trying to work for his father...buying and selling stocks...he had realized he hated being in the office all day, so he had gone to the local recruiting office and signed up. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he had volunteered for Special Forces and easily made it through all of the requirements. He had made his way through the ranks, up to Master Sergeant, then attended Officer's candidate school and became a Lieutenant. He'd just received his Captain's bars the week before the operation and since he'd been the driving force behind it and had walked it through all of the phases, he'd been allowed to lead it, even though, it was generally not done.

His twenty-four man 'A' team, along with a fifty-man Afghan force, was attacking a major supply depot being used by Taliban and Al-Qaeda forces to distribute arms, ammo, food and other items throughout the country. It was a network of caves that were situated in the mountains of the Pakistan border, and Jake's intelligence sources had said they were capable of bringing supplies and men over the border completely underground.

One of Jake's recon teams had put the area under surveillance and had confirmed the movement of supplies and men, then had returned to begin

the planning. Another team had stayed to keep watch, rotating out and returning to join the team when the time to attack had come.

The cave entrances they were concentrating on were on the Afghan side. Another team were cover the Pakistani side. There were a series of three openings, all larger than man-size and well camouflaged. They all had over-hangs that covered them from the satellite coverage and had a lot of natural vegetations and meadows in front of them. Their elevation was about nine thousand feet, so everyone on the teams were breathing harder than normal, but most were acclimated from their previous experiences at high altitudes and their home base was at 5,500 feet.

The teams had helicopters fly them to a landing zone about three miles away and walked the rest of the way under the cover of darkness, using night vision devices. They had begun the assault around three in the morning and had met more resistance than they'd thought was there, but had reacted well. Now, they were one hundred yards or so from the mouth of the main cave, and Jake was about to lead his men into the cave.

Jake looked over at Raver, his teammate and the first soldier he'd met after coming after coming to the 5<sup>th</sup> Special Forces group ten years ago, who was about five yards away on the left, and behind the same berm Jake was using as cover, and signalled to him. Raver lifted his weapon, a multi-unit grenade launcher, which looked like a huge revolver with twelve cylinders that each held a 40-MM grenade, and fired three HE High Explosive Projectiles at the cave mouth, then fired three white phosphorous rounds behind them, all in about three or four seconds.

Although the enemy positions were about one hundred yards away, the impact from the HE grenades made the ground shutter beneath Jake. As he watched the W.P. rounds ignite and fill the air with white smoke, he and



several others threw smoke grenades into the clearing between his team and the enemy, then they jumped up and ran toward the caves while firing at any remaining resistance.

As Jake came to within twenty yards of the centre cave, he ran into a small dip in the landscape and was about to run up the small incline at the other side when he saw the straight lines of a man-made object and everything around him seemed to slow. It was a claymore mine, covered loosely with grass and rocks in a clumsy effort to camouflage the deadly explosive from sight.

Jake threw himself in the air toward the mine, hoping to jump over it before it detonated so that he would be behind it and less likely to be killed, although the back blast might hurt him.

As he dove over the device, he took a deep breath and yelled out to his men, "Claymore!" but it was too late.

Dozens of explosions rocked the area, throwing dirt and smoke in the air. Jake made it over the claymore he had seen and the back blast has thrown him about ten feet further, while the concussion engulfed him and caused him to black out for a few moments. When he came to, he couldn't hear anything and his mouth tasted like blood.

Jake shook his head to try to get rid of the nausea and dizziness, then saw something move to his left. He crawled that way and saw it was Raver. He moved closer until he was at his friend's side.

As Jake looked at Raver, assessing his injuries as he has been taught, he knew immediately that the man was going to die. His right arm was blown off at the elbow, both of his legs were shredded, and his intestines were hanging out of the abdominal cavity. Incredibly, with all of these injuries, the man was still alive.

Raver was reaching toward Jake, while trying to say something. Jake saw that the diaphragm was cut also, so that the words Raver was saying would not be too loud. Jake leaned in to see what his friend was trying to say. His ears were still ringing from the claymore's explosion, but he clearly heard Raver's voice. "Why did you kill us, Jake?" Then Raver grabbed Jake's throat with his good hand and squeezed.

Jake screamed, then, opened his eyes to see that he was in a room. For a few moments, he didn't recognize the room and he started to panic. He could still taste the blood and smell the dirt, smoke and Raver's intestinal contents before he realized that he had been having another nightmare and was in his motel room/apartment.

He looked around as his ragged breathing slowed. The walls of his bedroom/living room were fly-specked and had originally been pale yellow and had brightened the room, but had never been repainted since the building had been built fifteen years before and were now a muddy colour that had cigarette and mold stains all over it and defied description.

Jake had moved into the motel, in the cheapest neighbourhood he could find, two months before, after losing his tenth job since leaving the army the previous year. After the disastrous mission where his team had suffered a staggering ninety-percent casualty, he had been cleared of any responsibilities in their deaths, but he had been told to accept a discharge. Since leaving, he had been suffering from nightmares every night and had episodes of depression and severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

The psychologists and psychiatrists at the VA had not been very helpful, trying to fill him with medications and asking him to attend group therapy. He had never liked expressing his feelings, and had just stopped going, then moved so they couldn't find him. The VA people never followed

through and he'd fallen through the cracks. Now, he was dealing with it the only way he could—he drank most of the day and passed out at night. When the nightmares woke him, he started all over again. Jake looked over at his alarm clock and saw that it was 9:52AM. 'Damn,' he thought. 'There goes another job.' His boss had told him not to be late again, after his third time in the past month. He sighed, reached for his bottle of Black of Velvet, and swallowed about sixteen ounces of the dark whiskey, just to get his juices flowing. Jake screwed the cap back onto the bottle, set it back on his night table, and thought about what he should do now. For the past year, he'd been staying at cheap motels that catered to prostitutes and others on the fringe of society. He had depleted his savings months ago, and was living week to week from what he could earn at whatever job he could talk his way into. He'd fallen into a pattern of convincing the managers of the motels into letting him slide a little on rent in exchange for doing some maintenance work but all of them had eventually kicked him out when he got too drunk to do anything, or when he was experiencing a flashback episode. Jake shuddered as after-images of the last mission flickered in his mind's eye. He squeezed shut his eyes and shook his head to get rid of the pain and got up. The sweat-soaked sheets left a sour smell in his nostrils but he ignored them as he made his way to the small bedroom. He emptied his bladder, flushed and rinsed his hands, then looked in the mirror. He changed a lot in the past year. His dark hair had grown below his ears and was greasy and seemed to have a lot of grey in it for someone in their early forties. His face was red and sweaty, and his eyes were very bloodshot, with the skin surrounding them puffy and blotchy. He splashed some cold water on his face and dried off, not really caring about what he looked like, then walked back into his

bedroom and flicked on the TV. The sounds of CNN filled the room as he went over to the small refrigerator and pulled out three pieces of pizza he had put in there two days before, sat down on the old chair in front of the TV and watched the images without seeing them. He picked up the whiskey bottle and finished it off before dozing off in the middle of a news story about a missing airliner.

Jake jerked awake when he heard a pounding sound. His heart thudded in his chest as he woke from another dream of combat, thinking he was still in the firefight. His head swivelled from side to side, looking for cover, before he realized he was still in his crappy motel room. It took him a few moments to realize the noise was coming from the door. He hesitated a moment, thinking it might be the manager coming back to kick him out, but he paid the rent for the next two weeks a few days before with his last pay check. He got up and moved toward the door, staying to the side. He took a quick look through the peephole. Seeing who it was, he started to turn away when a voice spoke from the other side of the door.

“Jake, I know you’re in there, let me in.”

Jake sighed, then pulled the door open. He stood in the doorway to prevent the man from entering, but he pushed past Jake and entered the room. He stood there, looking around, shook his head and turned to Jake as the door was closing. He reached over and turned on the lights.

“Damn, Jake, what the hell are you doing to yourself?”

Jake stared at the man for a moment. He wasn't much to look at. He stood five-feet nine inches, about one-hundred and sixty-five pounds with short, wavy blonde hair and blue eyes that seemed to be staring holes into Jake. He had a square jaw and high cheek bones with a good complexion, and would have been considered handsome except for the scar that travelled

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from his left ear down to the side of his mouth. The scar that Jake had been too late to prevent when they were just teens. He was wearing pressed blue jeans and a short-sleeved green shirt.

"Hello, Ben." Jake replied wearily. "Nice to see you, too."

Ben shook his head again and a look of sorrow crossed his face for a moment before he spoke. "Jake, I see you're not at work, so I'm assuming you've lost another job, and by the mess in here," he gestured with his hand, "it looks like you haven't been taking care of yourself at all." He kicked some empty food containers and made his way to a chair where he moved a pile of old newspapers and junk mail out of the way and sat down. He took a moment to gather his thoughts and spoke again.

"Jake, if you keep going like this, you're going to end up dead or worse, and I can't bear to see you do that. We've been friends too long."

Jake crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at Ben. "I didn't ask for your help, Ben, and I don't need it." He reached out to the night stand and grabbed the bottle, untwisted the cap, and took two quick swallows. "So if you don't mind, I'd appreciate it if you would get the hell out of my house." Jake slammed the bottle on the table to add emphasis to his point and stared at his childhood friend.

Ben smiled and leaned back in the chair, undisturbed by Jake's theatrics. He'd seen it all before. He stared at Jake and waited until his friend sat down on the bed facing him. Jake still gripped the neck of the bottle tightly, his knuckles showing white from the strain.

"Listen, Jake," Ben said. "I know you've been through some rough shit but that doesn't excuse your letting yourself go like this." He waved his arm around the dilapidated room in disgust.

Jake took another drink from the bottle before replying. "Hey, I'm doing

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ok!!!! At least I'm not living under a bridge somewhere surviving on scraps and handouts."

"Listen, Jake," Ben said, "I'm not here to argue with you about your living conditions. I'm here to offer you some work, if you're willing to hear me out." He looked at his friend steadily, waiting for an answer.

Jake thought about it for a minute. "What kind of work is it?" He asked.

Ben took a breath. "It's an armoured car robbery, Jake." He raised his hands to stop a protest, then continued. "Before you say anything, all I need is help in planning it.. You wouldn't participate at all, and I'd give you full share for your work. I'm thinking there's probably going to end up being two to three million dollars total, and there will be five of us to split it up, so your share will be five-hundred to six-thousand dollars. What do you think of that?" He finished in a rush and waited for an answer.

Jake looked at his friend for a moment, his lips thin with displeasure and his jaw muscles tensing. He took a few deep breaths before replying.

"Ben, get the hell out of here," he said through gritted teeth, and pointed at the door.

Ben stayed seated and stared silently at Jake.

“Jake, I’m giving you a chance to make enough money to get out of your rut, to use your brain, and your military skills, instead of letting yourself rot while you struggle at menial low-end jobs. Would you at least consider it?” Ben gave ‘the look’—the same expression he had been giving Jake, and everyone else, since they were kids. It was a cross between, ‘I’m pitiful’ and ‘if you do this, I’ll love you forever.’ Jake was pretty much immune to it now, and was about to repeat his earlier request for Ben to leave, when Ben added something he knew would prevent Jake from turning his back on him. “Besides, you owe me!!!!” He smiled, and Jake

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saw the scar turn pale and stretch the side of his friend’s mouth. It took Jake back to the day of the accident.

Jake had been fourteen, and he had been friends with Ben for five years. They were walking from the mall, passing a football back and forth. They had both made the varsity squad and their junior high school and were keeping their reflexes in tune. Jake was the starting quarterback Ben was the tailback. Earlier that week, coach had shown them a pass play where the tailback would block the opposing player and then fade into the flat, where there was likely to be no or low coverage. Because of his size and speed, it was the perfect play for Ben. Jake liked it because he felt that his friend would score plenty that year and it would help both of them make the high school team when they moved up in grade the next year.

Jake stopped short in the middle of the road, about twenty-yards in front of a small intersection and assumed a ready position, leaning over an imaginary centre. Ben took his position, behind and slightly to the right. The subdivision they were in was quiet and cool. The trees on either side of the road swayed lightly in the breeze, causing light rattling noises as the leaves brushed against each other. Birds chirped and flew from tree to tree. The day was beautiful.

Jake looked around at an imaginary defense, then yelled a cadence and ‘hiked’ the ball. He took a three-step drop back as Ben blocked an imaginary player. Then, Jake took two steps to his left and looked that way while keeping track of Ben’s progress in his peripheral vision. Then, as soon as his friend turned, Jake swivelled his body and snapped a throw directly into Ben’s hands.

When Ben caught the ball, he turned and started to run through the intersection toward a touchdown when a pick truck barrelled into the cross-

way out of nowhere. Ben tried to turn to avoid the vehicle, and was almost successful, but the driver swerved and hit Ben with a glancing blow. The thwack sound it made haunted Jake’s nightmares for years afterwards, until it was replaced by more horrible dreams.



Ben was thrown into the air and flew across the entire intersection and smashed into the side door of a parked car. His face was torn by the impact against the car's side mirror. Jake had been horrified and stood there frozen at the sight of all the blood spilling from his friend, and had thought Ben was dead until he moaned and moved. Then Jake had run to his friend, tore his shirt off, and placed it on Ben's face to slow the bleeding. The driver of the truck, an older man who had been driving to the airport to pick up his wife, called 911. A short while later, an ambulance came to take care of Ben.

Later, in the hospital, Jake was told in addition to the gash on his face, Ben had a broken bone and severed a nerve in his leg, which put a stop to his football days. The gash in his face, which had required over three-hundred stitches and three visits to plastic surgeons over the years, always made Jake feel guilty. Even though Ben had told him it was not Jake's fault, it didn't stop Ben from exploiting that guilt, like he was doing today.

"Ben," Jake said after taking a few deeper breaths to curb his anger. "You know I would do anything for you, but I'm not going to break the law." He took a large swig of whiskey to add emphasis to his words, then sat down on the bed. He rubbed his eyes and felt a warmth hit his stomach, The whiskey was starting to do its work.

"Jake," Ben said. "I already told you that you won't be breaking the law." He shook his head from side to side for a moment to emphasize his point. "All I need you to do is help me plan everything out and run through some

ideas to make sure everything goes as smoothly as possible. What was it you used to call that P7? Proper—"

“Proper previous planning prevents piss poor performance,” Jake finished the sentence. He drank the last few sips of the whiskey, tipping the bottle to get the last drops, screwed the top on and tossed the empty bottle in the trash can by his bed. He looked at his friend for a minute, not saying anything, just thinking.

“Ben, planning a crime is against the law. It’s called Conspiracy. Also, why do you want to set this whole thing up? Aren’t you making good money at the engineering firm?”

Ben sighed and rubbed his face. “Yeah,” he said. “But, my bitch of a wife is divorcing me. She’s going to get the house, the kids, and hit me up for quite a bit of alimony. I need some untraceable cash right now to keep myself above water. Come on, Jake! I know with your planning skills, we’ll pull this off without a hitch, and it will solve both of our financial problems.” He paused for a moment as he saw Jake’s expression bordering between resignation and rejection. Then, he went in for the kill. “You know, Jake, you don’t have to help. I’m pretty sure we can pull it off ourselves. I just think that with your knowledge and skills, we’re more likely to come through it without hurting anyone or getting hurt ourselves.” He stopped talking and waited for Jake to answer, although he already knew what it would be.

Jake sighed. He knew from past experience that Ben wouldn’t let this go. He’d keep bugging Jake until he got the answer he wanted, as he told Ben he’d do it, as long as he had nothing to do with the actual robbery.

“Thanks, Jake,” Ben said. He scratched his scar, then leaned forward, a serious look on his face. “Jake, I have one condition to add here, and this is

absolutely non-negotiable.” He stared at Jake for a moment to make sure he was listening. “During the time that we’re planning this, you have to stop drinking.” Jake started to say something but Ben held his hand up to stop the protest.

“Jake, we’re going to be putting our lives at risk and I don’t want you to make a mistake because you’re drunk. Now, I know that you can stay sober for the time we set to plan this, say six or eight hours per day for a few weeks, maybe a month. You did the same whenever you worked, right?”

Jake nodded his head reluctantly.

“Ok, then.” Ben stood up and held his hand out. Jake clasped it and they looked at each other for a few seconds. “I’m going to call the guys this afternoon and we’ll meet this weekend, ok?”

Jake nodded again then said, “Make it somewhere remote where there are no prying eyes to pay attention to us.”

Ben grinned again. “See....you’re helping already. I knew it was a good idea to involve you.” He let go of Jake’s hand and walked to the door. “Oh,” he said over his shoulder as he opened the door. “If you need any help or anything before the meeting, call me ok?” He waited until Jake acknowledged his query, then, walked out, closing the door quietly behind him.

Jake stared at the door for a few minutes, wondering what he’d gotten himself into, then went to his refrigerator, pulled out a full bottle of Black Velvet and took a healthy swallow of it.

## CHAPTER TWO

Jake glumly stared through the side window of the stolen SUV, watching the back alley where the armoured car would be stopping to drop off its' first load of money before making the rest of its' rounds for the day.

The windshield wipers moved rhythmically back and forth as the cold rain and sleet fell steadily, making visibility lower than average, but Jake wasn't glum because of the weather. In fact, he'd made sure that the group delayed the operation until today because of the rain and the help it would provide.

No, he was upset because he'd let Ben talk him into actually participating in the robbery.

Everything had been going well, and Jake had used his natural abilities and the leadership lessons he'd learned in the army to mold the disparate group into a team. It had taken a little longer than he and Ben had first guesstimated, about six weeks, but the time was well spent, ironing out all the potential problems and preparing creative solutions on the fly for those problems that would come up unexpectedly. This was something that Jake had excelled in while in the Army. He'd even started to feel the pride of accomplishment and the feeling of belonging he'd experienced while in the Army.

Unfortunately, they did not plan for what to do if one of their members was hurt before the operation and unable to perform his duties. John, the team member, had broken his leg two days before and was currently at his home recuperating in bed with a cast covering up his leg from mid-thigh to ankle. Ben had come up with the solution pretty quickly—Jake would take

John's place.

Of course, Jake had protested vehemently for hours, but Ben wore him down again until he finally agreed. The team had practiced the operation again several more times, with Jake acting in John's place, and all had gone smoothly. So, now....he was sitting in the back alley of the first stop, waiting to rob the armoured car that would be there in a few minutes.

Jake thought about the past six weeks. He'd 'slipped' a few times but for the most part, he'd stopped drinking, and he felt better for it. The dreams had been coming less frequently, he'd been more energetic and focused than he'd been since the disastrous mission. He'd even begun thinking about getting some therapy and maybe re-joining the Army. He knew that it might take some time, maybe a year or two, but he felt that he still had something to contribute, and maybe he'd prevent needless deaths like what happened with his mission from happening again.

Jake's thoughts were interrupted by a question from the driver.

"What?" Jake said after realizing the question was directed at him.

"What are you going to do with your share of the money?" Little Red repeated. His real name was Danny, but everyone called him Little Red because he was short, and when he got angry, his face would turn bright red. He was a member of the group because he'd recently lost his job as a local race car driver who had an incident with another driver earlier and started a brawl between the two race crews. The other driver had suffered some serious injuries and was now in a coma at the local hospital. Normally, the race directors would not have fired a driver for a fight, but Little Red had a history of fights and had been warned that the next time would be his last. He had also used his helmet as a weapon, smashing the driver over the head several times before being pulled off. He'd been

arrested later and was facing prison time. His share would be used for legal fees. At least, that's what he kept telling everyone. Jake thought the man should use some of it to take some anger management therapy. But that wasn't his problem. He was only concerned about the man keeping his cool until after the operation was over, and not making some kind of mistake because of his temper. Jake believed that the training that they had all gone through would help.

He looked at Little Red for a moment before shrugging. "I haven't thought about it much," he answered. "I'll think about it more once the waiting period is over."

After Ben convinced him to become involved in the robbery, Jake had looked up the laws and found that there was a seven-year statute of limitations, meaning that if he kept the money hidden until then, he'd be able to spend it freely without any danger of being prosecuted. He really didn't care that much about the money. In fact, he had thought about donating most of it to charities that helped children, but he didn't tell that any of the others; they just wouldn't understand.

Little Red turned and looked at Jake for a moment, his eyes round with incredulity. "Man, how the hell can you wait so long?" His hands writhed on the steering wheel and the gear shift in the centre console. His jaw muscles rippled as he gritted his teeth. Jake had noticed (it was hard not to notice) that Little Red was constantly moving and tense unless he was driving. Then he was always cool and relaxed. Jake had teammates who were the same way before going into combat. That was why Jake was comfortable with him driving. In their practice runs, Little Red had always been in control and precise in everything concerning his duties. He'd never given Jake any reason to doubt that he could perform as everyone expected

him to.

Before Jake could answer, he saw motion at the alley's entrance and pointed. "Looks like our time is here."

Little turned forward and grinned. His hands and jaw twitched one last time, then he relaxed, back into the seat.

Jake picked up the small pair of binoculars and stared through them at the armoured vehicle as it turned into the alley, about five hundred yards away. He adjusted the focus a little to compensate for the rain and the angle. His SUV was idling slightly to the right of the alley, in a parking area of the back of an insurance company. During their surveillance, Jake found that none of the employees came out the back door until noon, for lunch. He was prepared in case any came out early though. That's why they had the stolen SUV, with heavily tinted windows, and ski masks to cover their faces.

Jake waited until the armoured truck moved fully into the alley then raised his radio to speak. "Blue one, Blue one, package is in the slot, over."

The other team, Ben and Carl, were waiting in a similar SUV near the entrance of the alley to block the money truck from exiting.

"Red one, Blue moving into position, over." Ben acknowledged.

Jake saw the other SUV move in behind the armoured truck and he acknowledged to Ben that he'd heard the transmission by clicking the transmit button twice, which caused Ben's radio to hiss with static twice.

As the armoured truck moved closer to the back entrance of the bank, Jake moved to the back of the SUV by crawling over the seats. As he was doing this, Little Red pushed a button that lowered the rear window. A cold wave of air moved in and caused Jake to shiver. Rain and sleet bounced off the back gate door, some entering through the open window.

Jake ignored the rain and cold. In his time in the military he had operated in all types of climates.

When he got to the back, Jake picked up a very long barrelled rifle, a Barrett .50 caliber, slid it out the window and stood up to position it on the roof. He placed the bipod down and sat on the gate, squirming for a second or two to get comfortable. He reached into his pocket and put earplugs in both ears.

He seated the carbon fibre stock into his shoulder and cycled a round into the chamber, making a loud clacking sound. He stared at the weapon for a second to make sure it was pointed correctly on the roof of the SUV. The end of the barrel almost reached over the windshield.

Jake opened the two scope covers and stared through the scope for a second until he picked up the armoured truck, which was coming to a stop near the bank.

He made a few small adjustments, then, Jake flicked a button on the scope to change it over to thermal image mode. The scope, a ten-thousand dollars piece of equipment, had been the hardest thing to acquire.

Ben had found it somewhere and would not tell Jake where.

Jake stared at the images in the scope. Since the air temperature was so cold, it was easy to differentiate the warmer temperature of the engine and the three guards who were in the truck. The surroundings were a blue colour and warmer objects were orange and red. Two guards were in the front and one were in the back with the money.

Jake waited until the truck stopped and the guard got out of the passenger seat. The guard moved to the back of the truck.

As soon as the guard entered the truck, Jake heard his radio hiss twice and he knew that Ben was completing his duties. He then heard a screech from



his radio and turned it off. The frequency jammer was working, which meant all radio and cell phone signals within a quarter mile were being jammed.

Jake breathed slowly and focused on his job. The engine of the armoured truck was bright red in the middle of his sights and he could see orange and red heat waves shimmering around the edges. His finger tightened on the trigger until the firing pin struck the primer igniting the six-hundred and eighty-three grains of powder, and round raced down the barrel, exploding from the muzzle. The built-in flash deflector/muzzle brake caused the hot gases to be deflected to the sides, but it still caused a red flare in Jake's thermal sights. He waited a second or two for the orange to clear, then focused on the image of the truck. As he did this, he heard a muffled exclamation from Little Red. Apparently, the concussion of the shot had cracked the windshield.

Jake ignored all of that and kept his focus on the truck. He saw that there was a twelve-inch diameter hole in front of the engine compartment where the round had hit. The round, a raufuss explosive tipped, had been in Jake's storage unit, along with forty-nine others, and a few boxes of other items he had accumulated over the years in case of various emergencies. He'd never imagined he'd be using anything for this though.

Jake focused again on the truck and fired another round, this time at the passenger side of the front window. The bullet struck the triple thick 'armoured' glass and blew a very large hole in it. As soon as he recovered from the blast, Jake moved his sights. He saw that there were two bodies lying motionless on the ground to the side of the truck and a moving body was near the front. That's Ben he thought. He watched as Ben threw an object through the hole in the window. There was a small explosion,

followed by smoke that billowed out of the hole. The guard struggled to open the door for a few moments, then slumped over the wheel. The knockout gas had worked quickly.

As soon as he made sure the guard was unconscious, Ben moved to the back of the truck, where Carl had backed up the Blue team's SUV to a foot or two from the now open door. Ben went around the two guard's bodies (that he'd hit with a taser instead of killing, at Jake's insistence) and started loading the money into the SUV, with Carl's help.

Jake sighed, then, focused on the rest of his job. He removed a pair of thermal binoculars from his coat pocket and scanned the area, looking for any movement or anything unusual in reaction to the two loud shots he'd fired. He scanned three hundred and sixty degrees but didn't see any movement, except for a few passing cars at the entrance, to the alley behind Blue team's SUV. He kept scanning, and stopped for a moment as he thought he saw a flash of red to the right of the truck, near the corner of a real estate office directly behind the bank. He focused in on the area, but didn't see anything. He continued scanning for a moment, then glanced at his watch. Two and a half minutes had elapsed since his first shot had taken out the armoured truck's engine. They were about thirty seconds over the time they'd all estimated it would take to unload the money and exit the alley before a response from the police happened. He was about to tell Little Red to hit the horn to signal Blue team that it was time to go when he saw Ben step to the side of the truck and wave twice, the signal that he was done and ready to go.

Jake watched as the SUV moved toward the mouth of the alley. He lowered his binoculars and was reaching for the Barrett to slide back into the SUV when he felt two hammer blows to his chest.

The strength of the blows threw him off the gate of the SUV and he landed on his back on the ground in an almost frozen puddle of slush.

Jake laid there stunned for a moment, feeling the icy water seeping through his shirt and back of his mask. The cold slush brought him to realize what had happened fairly quickly.

He'd been shot.

His mind immediately jumped into high gear.

Jake took a breath. Pain shot through his chest. He reached up with his right hand and felt his chest. It was wet, but not from blood. He ran his fingers up his left pocket. There were two holes there, an inch or two apart, with lumps beneath them where the rounds had hit his Kevlar vest and flattened. He was lucky he had pulled the vest out of storage at the last moment. He'd debated whether or not to wear it because it had some bad memories attached to it. He had been wearing it on the mission where his team had been killed and he'd vowed not to use it again. In the end, practicality had worn out and he'd put it on.

Jake shrugged off the pain and rolled to his knees. Icy water immediately soaked through his pants. He moved to the back of the SUV and tried to access the situation. He hadn't heard any shots, either before or after the rounds had been impacted his vest, but that could be because of the ear plugs and the noise of the falling sleet.

He hoped the shooter wasn't using a silencer. That would mean it was a professional.

Jake moved to the driver's side and quickly looked in through the window to see if Little Red was ok. What he saw made his heart beat quicker and sink at the same time. There were two holes in the windshield and Little Red's head was slumped backwards over the seat with blood and gore

leaking from the back.

Jake glanced back to the exit of the alley. It was still empty. He had to get away from the crime scene before the police arrived and get to the rendezvous point to meet up with Ben and Carl before they left. He stared through the windows of the SUV watching for movement, scanning left to right and back for about ten seconds. He lifted the binoculars to his eyes and scanned for another ten seconds. Nothing out of the ordinary.

He reached up to the roof and grabbed the Barrett, then opened the driver's door. Little Red's body started to slide out. Jake stopped it with his left hand, unbuckled the seat belt and shoved it over the gear shift while leaning in. He then angled the Barrett through the door, slid it into the back, and slid into the driver's seat, pushing Little Red's legs into the passenger foot well while keeping low in order to present less of a target. He shoved the gear shift into reverse and pushed the gas pedal down. He looked through the seats and out the open back gate as he sped backwards towards the entrance of the alley.

When he was about a hundred feet from the entrance, Jake heard the ping and crack of bullets hitting the frame and front window of the SUV. Small pieces from the windshield pelted his back and neck as part of it shattered. He ducked lower and kept the gas pedal pushed down.

When he came to the mouth of the alley, Jake simultaneously spun the wheel, lifted his foot from the gas and shifted the automatic transmission to neutral, then when the heavy vehicle had spun around about ninety degrees, Jake hit the brake, put the gear into low and hit the gas again. The maneuver was something Little Red had shown him and made all of them practice just in case.

The tires, which the crew had placed snow chains on that morning, slid a

Little then caught some traction and accelerated the SUV away from the scene of the crime.

Jake watched the sparse traffic in his mirrors and ahead of him, watching for any pursuit. He didn't see anything unusual.

He kept to the speed limit and made his way to the rendezvous point, using a circuitous route instead of the route the team had planned. He was taking nothing for granted. Somehow, the team had been compromised.

Jake heard a hissing sound his radio on his hip. He picked it up, pushed the transmit button and spoke. "Blue one, blue one, do you read, over?" He was hoping to warn Ben of what happened and get him to move to the emergency rendezvous point.

He tried for two more minutes but didn't receive an answer. He tensed his jaw and took the last corner that was near the initial rendezvous, a small bar that would be open until later in the afternoon.

Jake drove by slowly, listening to the scrape of the wipers as they passed over the cracked, bullet-ridden wind screen, and looking back and forth through the side window as he went by. The bar was in suburban area, right next to a car lot and down the street from a gas station, but it was basically isolated.

That's why Jake had picked it in the first place as a place to change vehicles. He drove by twice, then around the block. Both cars were still parked where the team had left them.

Jake stopped at an abandoned lot a few hundred yards behind the bar and drove the SUV into the wooded area. He looked around for a few moments before driving the SUV into a large group of trees and brush, where it would be seen from the street, then turned off the ignition. He sighed with relief when he saw Ben's SUV a dozen yards ahead, covered with brush to

conceal its shape. Jake turned off the ignition and sat there for a few minutes calming himself from the adrenaline rush and its' after effects while letting his eyes adjust to the darkness under the trees and thinking about his next moves. Someone in the group had betrayed them. It was either Carl, John or Ben, and it could be for many different reasons. Jake shook his head.

He didn't care about the reasons. His main focus right now was to stay alive, and the first step to doing that was to find out who the enemy was. The next step would be to track him down. He rubbed his fingers lightly over the lumps on his vest. He absently pried the flattened rounds off the Kevlar and glanced over at Little Red's body. The next step after he found the man, well, that was not going to be pleasant for either him or Jake.

Jake dropped the spent rounds into his shirt pocket, reached down between the seats, then pulled out an MP5K submachine gun and five extra magazines. He pulled the bolt back slightly to make sure a round was seated, pushed the thirty-round magazine tight, then took a few deep breaths to calm himself and to make sure his hands were no longer shaking from the adrenaline withdrawal.

Jake opened the SUV's door, stepped out, then softly closed it. He looked around the area, watching for movement or anything unusual. He looked for places of concealment and cover in case he got into a firefight.

He moved cautiously to the other SUV. When he got there, Jake parted some pieces of brush to peer into the interior of the vehicle. He didn't like what he saw. Bullet holes starred both driver's side windows.

Carl's body slumped over the centre console, his sagging at an odd angle against the navigation screen. Blood and brain matter saturated the console. There was so much blood, it was running down onto the side of the plastic

And into the leg well. Jake could see some blood on the passenger seat, too, but he could not determine how much was there. He had to get a look inside.

Jake checked the door carefully before opening it, trying to look through the front window which was smeared with blood from the inside and beneath the side to make sure there was no booby traps or trip wires.

Once he saw that there were no traps in sight, he slowly opened the door while steering himself for what he had to do next.

As he opened the door fully and saw the extent of the damage to Carl, Jake's pulse raced. He immediately felt nauseous and visions of his dead comrades flickered in his mind. The sights, sounds, and smells of their fatal battle started to strike him. For a few moments, he felt like he was there again, but he shook his head and grit his teeth, coming back to the present before the memories overwhelmed him. He stared down at Carl's body for a few moments, imprinting the scene into his kind, then leaned into the SUV to look at the passenger seat.

There was blood on the fabric, but it looked like it was separate from Carl's which was mostly on the front window and the console, which meant, he'd been shot from behind.

Jake estimated that there was about a pint of blood on the passenger seat. That meant that Ben had been hit, but not a head shot, so that meant that he was probably in the wooded area somewhere, either trying to hide from the assailants or lying dead from the loss of blood. Jake looked in the back of the SUV. The money wasn't there. Hopefully, the money had distracted the assailants enough for Ben to get away. That meant Jake's next step was to try to track Ben, and if he was alive, give him medical assistance.

If he could not be saved, well, Jake would cross that bridge when he came

to it. After that, he would be going on the hunt for the people who killed his team, and Lord help them when he caught them. He ground his teeth together and moved around the SUV, then followed the blood trail that would lead to his friend.

After five minutes of careful tracking, Jake stopped when he saw Ben.

He was leaning against a small tree, a few feet from the clearing that was right behind the bar, and he had his back towards Jake.

Jake knelt down on one knee and scanned the area, looking for tripwires and traps, his military training making his movements automatic.

After assessing the area, Jake stood up and cautiously moved toward Ben, keeping his footsteps low, 'feeling' the ground with his boot toe before transferring his entire weight, and then using his other boot. His eyes scanned the area constantly, never stopping. It took him minutes to traverse the seventy-five feet to the tree Ben was propped against. Jake came to him from behind and to Ben's left, not making any noise at all.

Jake looked over Ben's shoulder, looking for any damage and then at his hands to see if he was holding any weapons.

Ben's left hand was on the ground beside his thigh. His forty-five calibre Glock twenty-six was beside on the ground. His right hand was covered with blood and was resting on his stomach. Blood also covered the man's left shoulder and sleeve.

When Jake saw his left hand, he noticed that Ben was breathing, Jake paused a moment, thinking about the possibility that his friend might be booby trapped, then threw caution to the wind and stepped around the tree. He knelt down in front of his friend and took a quick look at the extent of the injuries.

He then reached out with his right hand after slinging the MP5K over his



shoulder, and lightly shook Ben's shoulder.

"Ben," he said quietly, "Ben," a little louder when there was no response.

Ben ground and opened his eyes. "What, Jake," he said groggily, as if he'd just woken up from a deep sleep. Jake noticed that his eyes looked disoriented and his breathing was shallow. There was also blood on his lips.

Jake looked at him a moment, then said, "You've been shot buddy. I'm gonna fix you up. Can you tell me where it hurts?"

"Y-yeah. My st-stomach." Ben moved his right hand, and Jake's heart dropped as he saw the hole in his shirt, surrounded by blood-soaked cloth. There was at least two to three pints. The artery had been hit. Ben wasn't going to make it. He took a few calming breaths then reached into Ben's left cargo pants pocket and pulled out a first aide kit. Jake had made sure that all of the team had put their kits in their pockets. He'd done the same thing in the Army and it had come in handy many times. Except the last time.

Jake closed his eyes for a moment then tore open the kit. He set the instruments on top of the sterile cloth, picked up some scissors then started to reach for Ben's shirt to open it and start working on the stomach wound.

"W-wait," Ben said, so quietly Jake almost didn't hear him.

Jake paused and looked at his friend. "What's wrong," he asked.

"C-come here," he gestured Jake toward him with his right hand.

Jake leaned in to hear what Ben had to say. He turned his head slightly to the left to present his right ear. He had a little bit of hearing from the explosion during his last mission.

As he leaned in, he heard Ben struggle to move then Ben said, "Goodbye, Jake."

Jake saw a movement in the corner of his eye, then heard a loud noise and felt searing heat on the right side of his face, and then everything went black.

## CHAPTER THREE

Jake's eyes opened.

It was dark.

He was slumped in a seat with his head resting on his arms, and he heard low voices of people talking around him and a soft rock tune in the background. Then he heard the clink of glasses and the pouring of liquid and knew where he was.

Jake lifted his head from his arms and looked around the dimly lit area. His guess was right. He was in a bar.

It wasn't a big bar. Jake figured it was about fifty by fifty feet with overhead lighting. There were maybe fifteen to twenty people sitting at the bar, which was L-shaped and about thirty-five feet long, with large mirrors, racks of glasses with shelves of liquor bottles behind it. There were two moderately dressed bartenders behind the bar serving the customers. They didn't seem to be hurrying to fill the glasses or moving fast. Jake looked around at the rest of the bar—there were about twenty more tables similar to his, each about three feet in diameter, with a small light enclosed in a thick coloured glass, bolted to the table and two to three chairs around each. There were another fifteen to twenty people seated at the tables, some in groups, some alone like Jake. There was nothing remarkable about the place, in fact, it looked like most of the neighbourhood bars he'd spent a lot of time in after his discharge. He glanced at his hand, where his Special Forces ring was on his ring finger. He adjusted it with his thumb, as he'd done thousands of times. The ruby stone glinted in the low light

and the burnished gold glowed a soft yellow as the ring moved. He was also wearing his watch, which he noticed was not working.

As Jake looked around, he saw a cocktail waitress coming toward him holding a serving tray with two shot glasses full of dark liquid on it. She stopped at his table and placed both glasses in front of Jake.

“Two Jack Daniels, straight up, no ice,” she said, then started to turn away.

“Wait,” Jake said. “How much do I owe you?” He patted his pockets looking for his wallet. He found it in his back, right pocket and started to pull it out.

“No, no, honey,” the waitress replied. “It’s already paid for.”

“What? Who? How?” Jake was confused. He didn’t remember paying for the drinks. Hell, he didn’t even remember coming to the bar. The last thing he remembered was...Damn! The last thing he remembered was waking up here. He thought maybe he’d gotten drunk and blacked out, which had happened quite a few times, but he didn’t feel like he’d been drinking at all, nor did he have any signs of a hangover. In fact, he’d felt good.

“Sir, sir!” He shook his head as he looked at the waitress. He’d missed what she said.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t hear what you said,” Jake said.

The waitress, who was blonde, short, curvy, and was wearing black pants and a white silk blouse with a name tag that said, ‘Betty’ on it, smiled, showing a mouthful of even, white teeth. The smile lines crinkled around her blue eyes and made them sparkle in the low light. He couldn’t tell how old she was—probably in her mid to late thirties. The lighting probably took off a few years.

“Looks like you were wool-gathering a little.” She patted his hand. He

noticed that she had some rings on but not a wedding ring. “That’s alright. Everyone does it when they first come here.” She leaned down a little and Jake could see her cleavage.

“Your first night, all of your drinks are free, after tonight, you gotta pay the normal fees.” She smiled again and stood back to her full height, which Jake estimated at a little over five feet. Then she moved off before Jake could question her about the unusual comment, or where he was or how he’d gotten there. He started to get up to follow her and get the answers but he stopped when he saw the drinks on the table. He shrugged.

Plenty of time to find out later, he thought. He grabbed one of the shot glasses, then paused for a moment. He felt something ....strange.

It was if he really didn’t want to drink. As if something in his body was trying to stop him from drinking the shot glass. He felt a moment of disorientation and experienced a flash of memory.

He saw a disembodied shape that coalesced into the body of a man. He couldn’t see the face but the person was familiar to Jake in some way. When he saw the blood on the man’s hand and the hand being raised toward him, he remembered his friend Ben, then, as suddenly as the memory had come to him, it was gone and he was left grasping for it.

Jake glanced over to the bar, then to the cocktail waitress, who was serving drinks at another table, then back to his shot glass. He shrugged again then brought the shot glass to his mouth and downed it in one gulp.

As he was swallowing the dark liquid, Jake noticed that the whiskey tasted a little peculiar. Not as if it had been tampered with in any way. He’d drank enough liquor over the years to know if any foreign substance had been placed in his drinks or not.

No, it tasted off, as if it were lacking something. As if the distillers in the

Plant in Lynchburg, Tennessee had somehow made a mistake and forgot to add an ingredient, or something had gone wrong during the distilling process.

Whatever it was though, did not seem to change the whiskey's effects on the body. He felt the bite in his throat and the warmth of the alcohol as it hit his stomach. A few moments after that, Jake felt the warmth spread throughout his body, as if his cells were little sponges and they were pulling all the alcohol into themselves.

Jake set the empty glass down and drank the second glass. It still tasted a little bit off, but he ignored it and waited for the start of the buzz that he would make last through the night and into the next day.

Jake looked around until he saw Betty, then, after catching her attention, motioned for two more shots of the dark whiskey. She nodded her head and made her way to the bar, stopping once to drop off her last order of drinks from her tray to two women sitting at a table near the corner of the bar. It only took her a minute or two to get his drinks and some others for some of her other customers.

When she made it to his table and handed him his drinks, he took the opportunity to ask her where he was.

The woman's eyes widened and she took a step back in surprise.

"Why I-I thought you knew. Oh, honey, I'm sorry, You're—" she stopped as a man stepped up beside her and placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Betty," the man said quietly but firmly, "It's alright. I'll tell him. Why don't you go get us a bottle of whatever Mr. Steele here is drinking?"

"Oh, ok, Mr. Moroni." She glanced at Jake for a moment, gave him a sad smile then turned and walked back over to the bar.

Jake watched her as she walked away, then turned his attention to the man.

He had one of those faces that was all angles that made it hard for Jake to determine his age. Jake guessed it was somewhere between thirty-five and forty. He was wearing a dark suit that was well-tailored and looked expensive. He was between five feet ten and six feet one or two. He stood with a confidence and bearing of an older man who was used to command. Jake upped his estimate of the man's age a little. Jake also saw a shrewdness and calculation in the man's eyes that said he was street smart and maybe a little bit dangerous.

The man smiled a small smile and stood there for a moment, waiting for Jake to finish his assessment, then motioned for the chair on the opposite side of the table.

“Do you mind if I join you, Mr. Steele,” he asked politely. Jake motioned to the chair and nodded his head. Moroni pulled the chair away from the table, unbuttoned his jacket and sat down. He placed his left hand on the table and reached his right hand toward Jake. As Jake clasped the hand, he saw that there was no jewellery on it, which struck him as unusual. His grip was firm and his hand was cool and dry.

“As Betty said, I'm Vincent Moroni. I manage this place.” He released Jake's hand and waved his arm vaguely to indicate the bar. “And,” he continued, “I can answer any questions you may have.” He paused for a moment, but before he could say anything, Betty appeared beside him and placed a bottle of Gentleman's Jack Daniel's on the table and left quickly without getting anything. Jake caught an undercurrent between her and Moroni, but he chose to ignore it until he got the answers to his questions.

“So, the obvious question,” Jake said. “Where am I and how did I get

here?”

Moroni stared at Jake for a moment then leaned forward and put both of his forearms on the table. The light from below cast strange shadows on his face. For a moment, Jake thought he saw a skull with strange markings on it. He blinked his eyes and the image was gone as suddenly as it appeared. Moroni gave him that small smile again, as if he knew what Jake had seen., then answered the question.

“First,” he said, “let me ask you this, are you familiar with any religions?”

Jake was startled by the question, but recovered quickly.

“Yes,” He answered. “I studied some religions in college, and experienced many different beliefs in my travels with the military. What does that have to do with where I am?”

Moroni paused a moment, picked up one of the drinks from the table and upended it into his mouth. He swallowed the liquor, put the shot glass down on the table and spoke.

“Well, Mr. Steele, it has everything to do with them. You see, you’re in Purgatory.” He leaned back and waited to see Jake’s reaction.

Jake stared at the man’s eyes for a moment, trying to gauge whether he was serious or not. He couldn’t tell right away, but he felt in his bones that what he’d said was true. He decided whether it was true or not, he would let it go and see where the conversation went.

“Purgatory? You mean the place where the Catholics believe exists between Heaven and Hell, and where the dead souls go to await judgment?” He glanced at his watch, forgetting that it was not working, then back at Moroni. “So, you’re saying I’m dead and waiting to be judged, then, I’m going to go to Heaven or Hell? Ok,” he said, then, downed his drinks. Moroni opened the bottle of premium whiskey and



And refilled both of the glasses, refastened the top, then listened as Jake continued.

“If this is Purgatory and I’m dead, how did I die and why don’t I remember it? And, why are we in this crappy bar? No offense but the bar is pretty much like every other neighbourhood dump I’ve ever been in over the years. I would think Purgatory would be different, don’t you?” Jake leaned back and smirked at the man. He thumbed his ring absently as he waited for an answer.

Moroni smiled as if he’d heard it all before, and Jake saw a red glint in his eyes. Startled, he blinked and looked closer, but it was gone. Must’ve been the light reflecting in them, he thought.

“Well, Mr. Steele, what was the last thing you remember before you got here? You did wake up here, didn’t you?”

“Mm-hmm,” Jake nodded his head while trying to remember. He got some flash of memory he’d had earlier, only a little more vivid in detail and with a little more information.

The last thing he saw was his friend Ben, sitting bleeding while Jake was trying to give him medical help, then he’d seen a movement to his right in his peripheral vision. Before he had the chance to turn his head to see what it was, he’d felt heat and saw a flash behind his eyes, as if someone had hit him in the of the head, then everything had gone dark. He felt a moment of urgency about Ben, then it was gone.

He related this to Moroni.

“Are you wearing the same clothes?” Moroni asked.

Jake looked down at his clothes, which he hadn’t noticed until just then. He was wearing loose fitting blue jeans and a turquoise coloured long sleeve flannel shirt, one of his favourites. But that didn’t necessarily mean

anything. He'd had plenty of blackouts over the years and had woken up in many strange places since his discharge. No, Moroni had to provide Jake with actual proof if he were going to convince Jake he was dead and in Purgatory.

"No, they're not, but that doesn't mean anything. What else do you have?" He made a 'come on' motion with his hand.

Moroni smiled wickedly and raised both hands, palms facing up, then pointed to the door.

"Why don't you go look out the door, Mr. Steele," he said, then downed his drink.

Jake watched the man for a moment, looking into his eyes again, then feeling the first pangs of uneasiness in the pit of his stomach. Shrugging his shoulders, he put his drink down, stood up, then walked over to the door, which was about fifty feet away.

He paused when he got there. Something inside him started trembling as he looked at the door. He didn't understand why; the door was the same door he'd seen in dozens of bars a normal wooden door with no ornamentation, no markings at all on it. It had a flat metal piece attached just below chest level, no handle, so that it would be easier for people to leave in an inebriated condition. He didn't need to look at the outside to know there would be a handle to pull the door open. The difference he noticed was that above the metal piece, where there would normally be a lock, there was a strange symbol carved into the wood.

Jake squinted and moved his head, trying to get a closer look at the symbol, but couldn't make it out. It seemed like the more he tried to identify it, the more blurry it got.

Jake shrugged again, then stood straight and pushed open the door. As it

opened, all of the noises in the bar behind him stopped. He moved into the doorway and looked outward. As he came even with the doorframe, a sudden rush of adrenaline filled him, and he felt a chill down his spine. There was nothing out there. It wasn't the kind of nothing you saw in an empty parking lot. There was just a blackness that had an indescribable depth to it. There was also a malignancy to it, as if there was something waiting there, something intangible that Jake could feel deep in his bones.

Jake let out a shaky breath, just then realizing he'd been holding it since coming to the door. He stared into the nothingness, trying to see something, hear something, sense anything. Unconsciously, he started to move forward, but was stopped by a hand firmly grasping his shoulder.

"I wouldn't do that Mr. Steele," Moroni said, as Jake turned away from the doorway to reply to the man, he felt a cold breath of air brush the back of his neck that sent a shiver through his body. The door closed with a quiet thump, then, all of the voices and ambient noises in the bar came back.

Jake looked around, and suddenly felt a little dizzy and nauseous. His mouth started to fill with saliva, the first sign that he was about to vomit, but he swallowed and pushed the feeling away by force of will. He walked back to the table and sat down. Moroni seated himself and watched Jake, waiting patiently, the little smirk on his face showed his thoughts. As he reached for his drink, Jake saw his hand shaking and he felt as if he'd just been through combat and was now experiencing the adrenaline withdrawal phase which always occurred afterwards. He took his drink and poured it down his throat, waiting for the warmth to hit him and calm him down. He sat there, collecting his thoughts, then spoke.

"O-okay," he said. "Let's say I believe you and we're in Purgatory. That

means I'm dead, right?"

Moroni nodded, but didn't speak, waiting for Jake to put things together in his own time.

"So, so if I'm dead, how did I die, and," he continued, "why am I here and not Heaven or—" he hesitated.

"Hell," Moroni finished the sentence for him.

"Yeah, and why does Purgatory look like this crappy little bar?" He asked, repeating his earlier question. He leaned forward and made a sweeping motion with one hand to emphasize the point, then leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

Moroni picked the bottle of whiskey and refilled both glasses, then, set the bottle down and took a small sip from his glass. He leaned back in his own chair and smiled a smile that unnerved Jake a little bit.

"Well, Mr. Steele, to answer your first question, you died of a gunshot to the head while you were trying to help your friend. Your second answer is to your third question, that Purgatory is a place that takes on the aspects of your sub-conscious will." He saw the beginnings of a question forming on Jake's lips but forestalled it with a raised hand. "Basically," he continued, "Purgatory is what you will it to be for yourself. You said yourself that you have spent a lot of time in 'crappy bars' so that is why it looks like this. Now, your question about why you're not in Heaven or Hell. Now that is the main reason why I'm here." He paused to take a sip his whiskey. Jake didn't say anything. He was interested to hear what the man said next.

"Your balance, Mr. Steele, is why you're here. I'm not going to into a detailed explanation of how things were calculated or how many good or bad things you did during your life, ok, but suffice it to say that your

balance tips you in the direction of Hell."

Jake felt a cold hallowness in the pit of his stomach. Before he could think of a reply or protest to Moroni's statement however, the man held up his hand again.

"Before you try to protest and list all of the reasons you shouldn't be going to Hell, save it. I've heard it all before. But," he continued. "I have good news for you, Mr. Steele. You see, I've got the power to offer you the opportunity to change your balance in order to change your direction of travel, so to speak." He chuckled at his own joke, finished the whiskey in his glass, and refilled it.

Jake leaned forward and breathed a few deep breaths, stunned at the revelations that he'd learned in the past few moments. He tried to make sense of everything that had happened since he'd woken up. His head started to hurt so he lifted his shot glass to his lips and finished the rest of his whiskey, then put the glass down on the table. Moroni started to refill the glass, but Jake shook his head. He could feel a slight buzz going. He didn't want to get totally gone and do something he'd regret. This was the most important moment of his life. He wanted to be sober for it. As soon as he thought this, his thoughts cleared, and his buzz and headache went away, as if they'd never been there. He shook his head and looked at Moroni for moment before realizing that he had complete control over the environment and the effect it had on him. Moroni nodded, as if to confirm the thought. Jake put that aside for a while, then thought about more practical things.

"Okay," he said. "What's your offer? How can I change my balance so that I go to Heave and, how do I know for sure you can do what you say?" He leaned forward on the table to look closely at Moroni's face, to

scrutinize his expressions. Then he remembered something about the day he died.

“Oh, and one more thing. Can you tell me who killed and why?”

Moroni held his hand out toward Jake.

“Take my hand, Mr. Steele, and I’ll answer all your questions,” he said.

Jake reached and grasped Moroni’s hand while staring at his strange eyes. As soon as he closed his hands over Moroni’s, he suddenly felt cold, then everything spun and his surroundings changed. He found himself surrounded by trees and he smelled the woody dampness and felt the wet coldness he’d experienced the day he’d been looking for Ben. The day he’d died.

Jake looked around and realized he was floating about ten feet above the ground. Before he could marvel at this, he noticed that there were two men below him and a few feet to his left. As he focused on them, he took in a sharp breath as he recognized Ben, and then himself, beneath the tree where Jake had last seen him. (This must be a replay of how I died), Jake thought. He watched closely, turning his head slightly from side to side, trying to see the person who’d crept up and taken the killing shot. Jake was so focused the other person, he almost missed it.

As the ‘Jake’ below reached to help Ben, he turned his head and body slightly to reach into Ben’s medical pocket to get the emergency kit then leaned in to hear what Ben was saying. Jake, floating above the action, saw Ben grasp the pistol that had been lying near his left hand, raise it swiftly to Jake’s head, and pull the trigger. Jake’s body fell to the side, then Ben stood up easily, aimed the gun at Jake’s head and fired another round. Ben then shook his head, wiped his bloody hand on his shirt, said something Jake couldn’t hear, and walked away. Everything faded away, and Jake

found himself back in the bar, sitting across from Moroni, who was still grasping Jake's hand. Jake saw the weird shadowy skull again.

Jake jerked his hand away and was breathing hard, trying to grasp the events and the implications of what he'd just seen. It took him a few moments to get his voice back.

"Wh-what—did that really—D-did Ben just kill me?" His body trembled and his voice with the shock with the shock of seeing his friend kill him.

"Yes, he did, Jake," Moroni replied calmly and with a look on his face as if he'd seen this type of scenario play out many times before.

Jake didn't say anything for a long while. He was thinking of all of the events that had led to the moment he'd been killed, all of the memories that now came back to him. About how the only way the team could have been ambushed so efficiently and professionally was by one of the team members to betray them, and how he'd thought maybe it had been Ben right before he'd found him 'injured' in the wooded lot behind the first rendezvous point.

Jake shook his head to get the image of Ben shooting him out of his mind, then sighed and leaned back in his chair. He ran the fingers of his left hand through his hair.

"I guess I'm gonna have to accept that he killed me." He looked at Moroni for a moment, then, asked a question.

"Do you have any idea why he did it?"

Moroni shook his head. "No, Mr. Steele, I don't, but from what I've seen of your life—and I've seen all of it since we shook hands the first time—I'd say that Ben had some serious resentment and anger at you for the accident when you were teens." He paused as Jake absorbed the information, then spoke again. "But that is just my guess, although, most of

my guesses are right.” He grinned that eerie grin again, then, held up his hand as Jake started to argue with him about Ben.

“Whoa, whoa, Mr. Steele,” he interrupted. “Let’s put Ben aside for a moment and talk about you.” He leaned forward and put his elbows on the table. “More specifically, let’s talk about your situation.” He looked Jake in the eyes to make sure he was focused. “Ok, you’re currently in Purgatory, and your balance is going to send you to Hell for eternity, but.—“ He paused for a moment, building up the tension a little. “But—I have a deal for you. One that could change your balance, keep you from Hell and send you to Heaven. Would you be interested in that?”

Jake took a moment to reply. His thoughts were still a little bit jumbled.

“I think the answer’s obvious, Mr. Moroni. Of course, I’m interested, but I’d like to hear what you’re offering before I agree to anything.” He sat back in his chair and crossed his arm in front of his chest.

“Alright,” Moroni said. “It’s a simple deal for a man with your talents and training, although the execution will be tough—we don’t want to make things too easy, you know. You’re really going to have to work hard to change your balance.” He paused to see if Jake would say anything. When Jake didn’t reply, Moroni continued.

“Ok.” He looked at Jake, and Jake saw the seriousness on the man’s face. “We don’t have much time left, so I’ll make it short. A short while before you died, 72 Demons escaped from Hell and are hiding in the material plane, or Earth, as you call it. The Deal I’m offering you is for you to find these Demons, then either exorcise them or kill them, which will send them back to Hell. Do you think you could do that?” He stared at Jake’s face and Jake could feel the intensity radiating from the man in waves.

“I don’t even know where to start,” Jake began, “first, how did the



Demons escape, then second—“

Moroni held up a hand, stopping Jake’s questions.

“Mr. Steele, I’m sorry to cut you off, but we don’t have time for any questions except for this; can you do it or not?”

Jake’s mind was reeling with all of the questions he wanted to ask. His inner voice, the one that had kept him from being harmed during his time in the military, and that he had not heard since he’d started drinking heavily, came back to him, warning him not to take the deal. For the first time, though, Jake ignored the warning and nodded his head. He shook away his misgivings.

“Yes,” he said. “I can do it.”

“Good,” Moroni replied, then reached out his hand to clasp Jake’s.

As Jake accepted the handshake, he saw Moroni grin as he did before, he felt a surge-like electricity shoot through his arms. The last thing he noticed before everything faded to black was the red glimmer in Moroni’s eyes and the shadowy skull he’d seen earlier.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jake opened his eyes.

He was lying under covers on his side on a soft bed, and his head was on top of a soft pillow. He was facing a window where the curtains were drawn and a soft light filtered through the material to lightly illuminate the room around him. He could see that it was evening outside the window. He felt no other presences in the room, so he sat up and looked around.

To his left, there was a nightstand with a digital clock radio on it. The red numerals glowed brightly, showing 11:31P.M. There was a watch beside the clock that he'd never seen before. He reflexively looked at his left arm and saw that it was bare. That's when his memories came back to him. Sitting in the bar in Purgatory, seeing Ben kill him, making the deal with Moroni. He shook his head. It must have been a nightmare, he thought.

Glancing around the room, he noticed that it was average size, about fifteen feet by twenty feet, and had two dressers, a closet with louvered doors, and a doorway about eight feet from the bed that was open. It looked like there was a dark room or hallway on the other side of it.

Shifting his weight in the bed, Jake lifted the covers and swung his leg out, placing his feet on the floor. He stood and walked slowly and quietly to the door, the thick carpeting cushioning his steps. He noticed he was wearing a T-shirt and boxers.

When Jake reached the door, he stopped.

He felt strange.

Not the kind of strange he experienced while drunk or hung over—he'd had enough of those times to know exactly what they felt like.

Nor did it feel like any of the pre or post-combat feelings he'd had over the years in his military service.

No, this was a physical feeling. Something was wrong with his balance. His sense of self in space felt weird.

Jake put that aside for a moment and listened to his surroundings. There were no sounds except for the swishes of air coming from the vent on the ceiling near the doorway. That told him that he was probably not in the city—no traffic noises.

He took a few deep breaths and silenced his mind, letting go of all his thoughts and memories, all of his worries.

After three or four breaths, he knew instinctively that the house was empty. He'd had this ability since childhood. He didn't know how his 'gift' as his mother had called it, worked or why most others didn't have it or didn't have it as prominently as he did, he was just glad he had it. It had saved his life many times in the past.

Jake moved into the darkened hallway and carefully made his way through the house, checking things out anyway. It was better to be safe than sorry, as his first combat instructor had taught him all those many years ago.

As he moved through the house, he saw that it was small, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, a living room, and a kitchen. From the furnishings and décor, Jake could tell that a man lived here alone and that he was probably single or divorced and the wife had taken all of the 'good' stuff; the things that would have made the home more comfortable and warm. The other bedroom had been turned into a study or office. There were a few hundred books in there, on wooden shelves covering three of the walls. Jake looked through some of them and surmised that most of the books were unread,

just sitting on the shelves to give the appearance that the owner was well read.

When he was finished searching the house, he walked into the main bathroom. His bladder was full. As he was moving toward the toilet, he passed the mirror that covered a three foot by five foot section of the wall behind the sink. He glanced over at it for a moment to check the reflection and stopped in his tracks.

The man standing there was not Jake.

His heart lurched and he automatically moved into a defensive position before his brain kicked in and told him it was a reflection he was staring at.

Jake tore his gaze away from the mirror for a moment, until he located the light switch. He flipped the switch to the on position, waited for a moment as his eyes adjusted to the light, then stared at the reflection.

The man in the mirror was younger than Jake, maybe in his early-to-mid thirties, with short blonde hair that receding. His face was square with a dimpled chin and probably a day's worth of light coloured stubble on it. The eyes were light brown and there were light circles underneath. Lifting his t-shirt, Jake saw that there was some belly fat. He guessed that he was twenty to twenty-five pounds overweight. Jake reached up and ran his fingers through his hair and saw the reflection copy his move. He moved around for a minute or two until he got used to the idea that he was actually in a different body, and that his earlier conversation with Moroni in Purgatory had not been a dream.

After a few minutes of staring, Jake remembered why he had come into the bathroom in the first place. He went to the toilet and urinated, flushed, then rinsed his hands. He then splashed some water on his face and dried it, using a towel that was hanging from the rack beside the sink.

After he was finished, he stood there, wondering what he was going to do next.

As soon as the thought entered his mind, he felt a sudden strong desire to walk toward the front of the house. He was out of the bathroom and halfway down the hallway before he even realized he was moving.

He stopped and turned around, headed back to the bathroom, where he searched the closet and dresser. He found some comfortable clothes; a pair of jeans, a dark sweater, and an old pair of Nike high top basketball shoes. He searched the rest of the house, looking for weapons. The only thing he could find were a wooden baseball bat and a few good sized kitchen knives. He put one of the knives in his waistband. He found a small bottle of bleach and a bottle of window cleaner that had ammonia in it under the sink with some other cleaning supplies. He grabbed an athletic bag from the bedroom closet and placed everything in it, grabbed a glass of water and ate a few bananas that were sitting on the counter in the kitchen, then he went to the front door, shouldering the bag as he moved.

He picked up a set of keys that were lying on a glass dish on a small table by the door then walked out, closing and locking the door behind him.

As he closed the door, Jake looked around.

He was in a residential neighbourhood that was softly lit by the moon and starlight. There were trees lining the street, including one in the small yard in front of him. All of the houses he could see were modest, middle-class type homes, similar in size or slightly larger than the one he'd just come out of. There were a few cars parked in the street facing the direction of travel. The other vehicles he saw were parked in driveways situated on sides of the houses.

Jake looked at the left side of 'his' house and saw a dark coloured BMW

sitting there. He pointed the key fob at the car and pushed the alarm deactivation button. The car beeped twice and the lights flashed. Jake walked over to it, opened the driver's side door, slid the bag of weapons into it, then sat in the driver's seat, closing the door. He put the key in the ignition and started the car, and took a few deep breaths and relaxed his mind, waiting for the feeling of which way to go came back to him.

Almost immediately, he felt the compulsion return, pulling him towards the right. He put the car in reverse, backed up onto the street and drove slowly in the direction from which he was being pulled.

After about five minutes of driving, he'd left the neighbourhood and had entered a small town. He drove around for another few minutes before spotting a small Catholic church. There was a large marquee that showed the name of the church was St. Matthews, and listed the times for Mass. He pulled into the parking lot and stopped the car near the front door to the building. He shut off the car, got out and walked to the door, hoping it was unlocked like most of the other churches in small towns he'd visited before.

It was.

Jake opened the door and walked inside. As he entered, he saw that he was in a small reception area. On his left, there was a table with religious pamphlets and booklets on it. Behind the table was a black bulletin board inside a glass case, that listed the Mass times, announcements and the attending priest's name.

To his right, Jake saw a hallway that he assumed led to the administrative offices and maybe some classrooms.

In front of him was a set of closed wooden doors. Both were covered with ornate symbols and pictures. The door on the left showed Christ as a baby

in Mary's arms and on the right, His crucifixion.

Jake pulled the door on the right open and walked into the cathedral area. The inside looked a lot larger than the outside. Looking up, he saw that the roof was arched, and at least fifty feet high. The cathedral was shaped like a cross. There were paintings depicting the various saints and the life of Christ on the far walls and a pair of stained glass windows on the left and right sides of the cross. The North Transept and South Transept, he remembered he remembered from his many years of Catholic school as a child. He was standing at the west front and facing the worship area, or Nave and Transepts, and the pulpit. There was enough room to seat nearly five-hundred worshippers here.

Jake looked to his right and saw a small brass bowl attached to the wall. He reached out and dipped his first two fingers into the Holy water, then made the sign of the cross over himself, the lessons of his youth making the actions automatic.

After crossing himself, Jake walked down the long central aisle. He saw the three confessional booths on his left as he passed them, he paused for a moment, then moved on toward the pulpit.

When he got to the end of the Nave, he moved to the right, ignoring the pulpit and choir areas. He walked about thirty feet to a small recess that held a table full of candles, each encased in small red glass jars with a cross on the front. The smell of melted wax and incense filled the area and brought memories rushing to Jake's mind.

He shook them off and lit a candle, then kneeled down on a padded bench and prayed.

After a few minutes, Jake heard a quiet noise to his left, back near the pulpit. He looked that way and saw a man he assumed was a priest. The

man was wearing a pair of black slacks, a black collarless long-sleeved shirt, and black shoes. The button at his neck was open and the white plastic piece that Catholic priests wore was hanging from a button on one side. Looking closer, Jake saw that he was average height, thin, about one hundred and sixty pounds, and had short, dark hair parted on the left side and combed to the right. He looked to be about thirty to thirty-five years old.

Jake crossed himself, stood and walked toward the man, who was adjusting a stack of notes on the pulpit. As Jake moved toward him, the priest turned and smiled, highlighting the many laugh lines on his face.

“Hello, Stephen,” the priest said as he reached out to shake hands. “It’s good to see you, my son.” He had what sounded to Jake like a light Irish accent.

Jake grasped the priest’s hand and returned the handshake. He paused for a moment before replying, thinking he’s better be cautious since the priest seemed to know this man whose body Jake was inhabiting. As he released the priest’s hand, Jake noticed he was wearing peculiar ring.

“Hello, Father McLanahan,” Jake said, remembering the name on the bulletin board. “It’s so good to see you, too. How are you this evening.”

“Oh, I’m fine. Thank you, although I’m having a hectic time putting the sermon together for Sunday’s Mass.” He gestured towards the notes.

“I’m also having trouble setting up a projector for a power point presentation I’m giving tomorrow evening. You work with computers don’t you?”

Jake nodded. He’d run a few power point presentations while working as a financial consultant, and several dozen times when he’d briefed his superiors in the military prior to and after many missions.



“Good, maybe you could help me,” McLanahan said. He walked down the Nave to the entrance, pausing for a moment at the confessionals and looked at Jake.

“Before we go, is there anything you need to confess, Stephen?”

Jake paused for a moment, thinking about what the priest would think if Jake explained what was going on. He shook his head. “No, Father, I’m fine for now. Let’s go see if we can fix your machine.” He opened the door and motioned for Father McLanahan to lead the way.

The two men made their way down the hall to a small conference room, where the priest showed Jake the equipment. The two men made small talk while Jake worked. Jake was cautious in his replies, not wanting the priest to figure out he was not who he appeared to be. After a few minutes, Jake figured out what the problem was and fixed it. He stood up and gave the remote to McLanahan, showing him what the problem had been and how to fix it if it occurred again. After the priest was done manipulating the images and text on the screen, he turned everything off and turned to Jake.

“Now that you have fixed one of my problems, Stephen, is there anything I can do to fix yours?” He gave a small grin that once again highlighted the laugh lines on his face, but Jake saw an intensity and compassion in the man’s eyes that told him that the priest was really concerned for him. He was obviously good at his job and astute, although it probably did not take much to tell that Jake had a problem; he was in the church after midnight, lighting a candle and praying. Jake felt that the priest might have noticed something different about his actions or mannerisms. He was about to brush the question off and leave when a thought occurred to him.

“Father,” he asked. “What can you tell me about Purgatory.”

McLanahan had a momentary look of surprise on his face, then recovered.

He clasped his hands together in front of his chest and leaned back against the wall. Jake noticed the strange ring again. It was on the priest's right middle finger. It had a small green stone, maybe an emerald, set in gold with strange symbols surrounding it and some kind of symbol underneath it. Jake couldn't make out what was behind the stone, but the symbols surrounding it were slightly familiar. He had the brief thought that maybe they were some type of symbolic language, like Hebrew or maybe Aramaic. Jake had travelled all over the world and had spoken half a dozen languages, and it seemed likely to him that these symbols were of a language. He glanced back up at McLanahan's face as the priest started to reply to Jake's question.

"Purgatory," he said. "That's a deep subject, Stephen. Were you looking for something in particular or just general information?"

Jake took a moment to think and ran his fingers of his left hand through his hair, a habit he'd had since childhood.

"My first question is, what would cause a person to go to Purgatory and how long do they have to stay there?"

"Okay, you're starting me off on the easy ones, right?" McLanahan smiled easily, deepening the many laugh lines around his eyes and mouth. Jake felt an instinctive liking for this priest. He was probably well thought of by his congregation, he thought as the man continued.

"The church teaches that all who die in God's grace and friendship, but are still imperfectly purified are assured of their eternal Salvation. However, after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of Heaven. The church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of those of the damned. It is in Purgatory that the last

vestiges of love of self are transferred into love of God.”

“Purgatory is a testimony to God’s Mercy and Justice,” McLanahan continued. “Because he is infinitely merciful, as well as infinitely just, Purgatory is a necessity. If God was more merciful than just, He would be imperfect. He is perfectly merciful, but that mercy can be perfect only if it is balanced by His justice. If we who are so imperfect must demand such simple justice, as God had ingrained it into us, how can we expect that He should do less? Purgatory is the perfect reflection of both His justice and His mercy. Without Purgatory to show His mercy, the slightest sin would by necessity condemn us to Hell.” He paused for a moment to see if the information was getting through to Jake. Jake nodded his head and asked another question.

“Ok, Father, you’re saying it’s basically a holding area for those who are saved to wait while being purified, right?”

“That’s right, Stephen.”

“Ok, what about those who are saved, but their balance is such that it would send them to Hell. Is there some way for them to gain back, or tip the scales to the point where they’ll not be spending eternity in Hell?”

McLanahan looked at Jake strangely for a moment before replying.

“Stephen, there’s no going to Hell from Purgatory; there’s only Heaven as the next step. Where did you get that idea?”

Jake thought fast. “Well, Father, I was reading a book about the different beliefs of cultures around the world about the afterlife. One of the beliefs is that once a person reaches Purgatory, they’re judged, and depending on what their balance is, this decides where the person spends eternity.”

“No, Stephen, that’s not right. Paul said in Corinthians that at the Day of Judgement, each man’s work will be tried. This trial happens after death.

What happens if the man's work fails the test? He will be the loser, and yet he himself will be saved, though only as men are saved by passing through fire. Now, this loss, this penalty, cannot refer to consignment of Hell, since no one is saved there; and Heaven cannot be meant, since there is no suffering (fire) there. So basically, once you're saved, you're always saved, which means you'll go to Heaven, but once you're saved, you must also seek to love God and not yourself. I think it's always wise to be wary of anything you read these days. Stephen, because Satan is always trying to influence us into believing his lies. The only place to find the truth is the Holy Bible." He stopped talking for a moment and smiled again.

"Well," he continued, "I turned my explanation into a sermon. But that doesn't mean that you can skip out of Mass on Sunday, Stephen!!!!" He chuckled for a moment, then, asked Jake what other questions he had.

Jake paused for a few moments, stunned by the information the priest had given him and the implications of it all. Somehow, he'd been lied to and he didn't know how to take it, or what to do about it. If the man, Moroni, in Purgatory, or whatever else it might be, had lied, then why Jake here in this body getting ready to go search for and kill a demon? What possible reason could there have been to deceive him like that? He was thinking about what his next move might be when his thoughts were interrupted by Father McLanahan's hand on Jake's shoulder.

"Stephen, I can tell you're anguished. What's going on?" The priest's face was full of concern.

Jake almost told the priest everything, but stopped at the last moment.

"Oh, nothing major, Father, I was just thinking about a friend who died recently and I don't think he was saved. I was thinking he might have gone to Purgatory and was given a chance to go to Heaven." Jake sighed and ran

his hand through his hair. He looked down at the floor for a moment, remembering all of his friends and colleagues who'd passed away; the men he'd lost during the last raid in Afghanistan stood out to him. He shook his head and forcibly pushed the memory away.

"I can see you're deeply affected by your friend's loss," McLanahan said sympathetically. "But you should remember that you," he emphasized this with a finger touching Jake's chest, "are still alive. Your friend is gone. If he was not saved, then he gave up the opportunity to go to Heaven. Did you ever talk to him about God and how the belief in Jesus could save him?"

Jake was startled for a moment, then nodded his head.

"Well, you tried to offer him eternal life and he rejected it. There's nothing else you could have done. The only thing you should mourn is his choice not to accept eternal life when it was offered. Does that help any?"

Jake shrugged a little, "I guess, Father, but it's still hard." He took a breath, and another thought came to him.

"Father, could you tell me something else?"

"Sure, Stephen, if I can," McLanahan looked helpful.

"Well, Father, uh...do you know anything about how to kill demons?"

The priest was startled again. His eyes widened and he drew in a sharp breath. Then his eyes tightened. "Stephen, why would you ask me something like that?"

Jake was startled by the priest's sharp tone and the sudden look of intensity in his eyes.

"I-I'm writing a book, Father," Jake stuttered in reply as he thought quickly. "The hero is chasing demons that have been released from Hell, and I need a quick, efficient way for him to send them back." Jake stopped,

the lie. He sent a quick prayer to God, asking for forgiveness, then looked at the priest and saw belief written in his face, but there was still a glint of scepticism in the man's eyes.

"Stephen," McLanahan said. "I'm assuming that you're not talking about exorcisms, right?"

Jake nodded.

"Okay," McLanahan said. He crossed his arms over his chest and reached up to rub his chin while he thought. Jake noticed the strange ring again.

"Okay," he said again. "I don't know a lot about killing physical demons, only what I've read over the years. Most of what I know is anecdotal information." He looked at Jake. "The book is fiction, right?"

Jake nodded again, "Yes."

McLanahan nodded, too. "Well, you can add this if you want, as far as I know, the best way to kill physical demons is to use a consecrated weapon; a weapon that is made specifically for that purpose. The crafter is someone who practices for years, then purifies himself by fasting, praying and so forth, then performs a ritual then fills himself with the Holy Spirit, and to summon two angels to watch over him while he works, lest Lucifer attempts to slip in and destroy the Sanctification. When the weapon is completed, the crafter dies. Part of his spirit is entwined with the weapon and the rest of his spirit is immediately taken to Heaven so that he cannot be corrupted, which would befoul the weapon." He paused to take a breath and Jake asked a question.

"That seems kind of extreme, doesn't it?"

"Well, yes, Stephen," McLanahan replied. "But, you should consider that it was written in the 12<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> Century, and also, consider that was to fight an actual physical creature from Hell, a creature that would have

extreme strength and maybe some other abilities that could overwhelm almost anyone who is unprepared.”

“Okay,” Jake said. “Is there any other way to kill one? I mean, what about dipping a weapon in Holy Water, or having a priest bless a weapon?”

“I don’t know that that would work, Stephen, but, it is a fiction you are writing, I guess you could put something like that, or make up something exotic.” He looked at Jake and Jake saw the scepticism in his eyes again.

“Yeah...I guess I could, Father. It’s good to have some bit of factual information to base it on though. Is there anything else you can remember?”

The priest shook his head. “No, no, Stephen, that’s all I can remember.”

“Alright, Father, I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me.” Jake glanced at the clock on the wall. “It’s getting pretty late. I’d better go.” He reached out his hand. McLanahan reached out and clasped Jake’s hand. Jake felt the cool strip of the unusual ring touch his palm. “I’m glad to have helped, Stephen. Don’t forget to come to Mass on Sunday.” He held Jake’s hand for a few seconds, then let go. Jake nodded and told the priest he would be there, then turned and walked out of the conference room, and down the hall, when he reached the lobby area, he turned and entered the West front. He reached into his waistband and pulled out the large kitchen knife. He dipped it into the large Holy water bowl, making sure the whole blade was submerged, then said a quick prayer and lifted it out. He put it back in his waistband, then filled a plastic water bottle with the Holy water, turned and exited the church. When he got back into the car, he sat there for a moment and breathed deeply, while letting his thoughts go quiet until he felt a pulling in his mind. He opened his eyes and turned the key, put the car in gear and exited the parking lot in the

direction of the pull. He didn't notice the car that followed him a few moments later.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Jake stood in the shadows of the concrete wall, glancing across an alleyway at a window in the bottom unit of a two-story duplex apartment. The only light in the area came from a street lamp at the end of the alley, about one-hundred yards away, it had taken him thirty minutes to find the place—he'd had a hard time driving and relaxing his mind and then trying not to think about what he was going to face or if he could believe what Moroni told him, or even if the priest had been right. Every time he'd begun to think about any of these thoughts, he'd lost track of the 'pointer' in his head, he'd had to breathe and let his mind sink back into its meditative state.

Once he'd gotten close to the building, he had the distinct feeling that what he was seeking was in the duplex. He'd parked the car in a parking lot a block away, made sure the knife and Holy water were secure; the knife in his waistband, the bottle in his back pocket. He'd walked around the block a few times, checking out the area, planning escape routes, seeing if there were any people around, if there was anything odd or out of place, He didn't see or notice anything unusual, it appeared to be a normal residential neighbourhood in a small town that could be anywhere in the United States.

Jake glanced around one last time, then, walked across the alley to the window. It had a metal frame which slid up and down. He looked outside through a gap in a light-coloured pair of curtains at a small living room. There was a dark coloured couch with a low table in front of it that had a stack of magazines and a Playstation controller on it. Beside the couch was

a La-z-boy reclining chair. There was a large flat screen TV on the far wall and a stereo system on the shelves set into the wall beside the TV. He saw nothing unusual, and no movement. Jake looked at the lock on the window, searching for any alarm devices. To his surprise, the latch was unlocked. He shook his head. That could mean one of two things, either the lock was left that way out of habit or unknowingly, or the demon was completely unafraid of anyone that could come through the window. Jake clenched his teeth, making his jaw muscles bulge. Well, he's definitely going to have something to be afraid of tonight, he thought. He reached out slowly and pulled upward until the window was completely open. He carefully leaned in and listened for a few moments. He couldn't hear or sense anything. So, he leaned back out, stuck his left leg in, stooped, and gracefully entered the room. He tripped on a small object on the floor. He stumbled a few steps then, caught his balance. He stood still for a few moments, willing his heart to slow down, then, turned to look at the object.

It was a bone.

He knelt down on a knee and picked it up to examine it. His stomach lurched as he noticed bite marks on it. He tasted bile in the back of his throat but swallowed several times to rid himself of the sourness. He almost lost it again when he realized the bone was a human thigh bone, and there were little bits of grisly meat attached to it. He stared at it in horror for a moment, then started to put it down when he felt a presence in his head and felt a presence enter the room. He turned his head toward the doorway and saw a shadow standing there. Jake stood up, turned toward the shadow, and pulled his knife out of his waistband in one fluid motion. He squinted his eyes, trying to make any features in the shadow, when it took a step forward and came into view.

It was a man.

Jake was dumbfounded for a few seconds and he took a step back in surprise. He didn't know what he would be expecting, but it certainly had not been this. He was starting to contemplate his next step when suddenly the man's form changed.

The transformation started at the top and worked downward. Jake saw a shimmering, as if a great amount of heat was surrounding the man, then the face changed, from that of an average looking man to what Jake would only think of as a nightmare come to life. He knew immediately that this was the demon he was sent to take care of. He put all of his doubts aside as he watched the end of the transformation. His adrenaline started pumping and his heart beat skyrocketed as he looked at what stood there.

The first thing that was immediately apparent was that it was BIG! The man's form he'd first seen had been about six feet tall. This demon was well over nine feet tall, maybe even over ten feet, and it was at least twice as wide as Jake.

It's body was remarkably human, just on a larger scale, and it's skin was red and black with scarring all over, as if it had been severely burned. The face was burned also, but only slightly, and Jake could see that underneath the burns, the bone structure could have been called handsome. What turned the creature into a nightmare were the eyes.

It had over two dozen of them—several on its' face and at least a dozen spread across the upper body. They were all red and about twice the size of a normal human eye. Jake shuddered when all of the eyes turned toward him and blinked.

He took a deep breath in preparation of attacking, and coughed at the smell of burning coals, the copper scent of blood, and burned meat. He

suppressed the urge to keep coughing and started to step forward to plunge the knife into the demon's body, hopefully in its' heart, when he was stopped by a voice. A human voice!!!!

"What—what are you doing in my house," it asked.

Jake hesitated for a moment, questioning his eyes. He looked at the beast, squinting to make sure. The shimmering continued, this time changing the image of the beast back into the original shape of the man. But this time, there was still a shadow of the demon superimposed like a shadowy figure around the man's body.

Jake shook his head slightly, tightened his fist over the knife's handle and pointed it at the beast.

"I'm here to send you back to Hell, demon," Jake said, then he lunged forward intending to plunge the knife into the demon's heart, but he was too slow.

For such a large creature, the demon moved incredibly fast. As Jake moved forward a step, he felt what he could only describe as a psychic wave come from the demon, first of surprise, then of anger.

The demon easily side-stepped Jake's lunge, stepping to Jake's right, then swiping Jake's stomach with one of its' clawed hands. Jake stumbled to the side and hit the wall, hard, then slid to the ground. He tried to get up but couldn't. He looked down and gasped in horror as he saw why. His stomach had four wide slashes in it, from left to right, starting at his chest and going down to his waist. His intestines were falling out of the open cavity, blood was all over him and the floor. There was so much blood, it looked as if someone had emptied a five-gallon bucket over him. Jake looked up and groaned as he saw the demon coming toward him.

It stopped in front of Jake and leaned down until its' face was a foot from

Jake's face.

"Who are you, human, and how did you know me?" Jake cringed at the smell of rotting meat coming from its' mouth, Its' voice was much deeper and Jake could hear it in his head also, He tried to reply, but his lungs didn't seem to be working and blood splashed over his chin. They must have been slashed too, he thought.

"Yes, human," the voice vibrated inside his head. "Your lungs were slashed. Unfortunately for you, I don't need to hear your voice to understand you." The beast moved closer, smiling at Jake, showing a mouthful of long, very sharp teeth. It started to say something to Jake in a gloating tone, but Jake didn't hear what the demon said, because he was occupied with two things. The first was that over the demon's shoulder Jake could see a figure standing outside the open window he'd used to enter the apartment. It took Jake a moment to realize it was Father McLanahan. Jake looked away from the window and tried to empty his mind, hoping the demon didn't pick up his thoughts of the priest, but his attempts to clear his mind was too late.

The demon's smile became wider, stretching the burned skin of the beast's face impossibly wider.

"Ah, you brought dessert with you!!!!" The demon said gleefully, then started to turn toward the window. That's when Jake used the last of his quickly waning energy to take care of the second thing that was occupying him.

The knife was still clenched in his fist.

As the demon's mind left Jake's mind and it became momentarily preoccupied with the priest at the window, Jake plunged the knife into one of the demon's eyes, the one located on the left side of its' chest. Jake

hoped that's where the heart was. The demon shouted in surprise and pain. Its' voice was so loud in Jake's head, he thought his brain was going to explode. He gritted his teeth and waited to see if the beast died.

The demon stood up to its' full height, stumbled back a few steps, then pulled the knife out of the wound. A little bit of the creature's blood, a black, vicious looking substance, ran out of the wound, then stopped. It grinned at Jake as the wound closed and healed itself, leaving no trace that it had ever been there. The demon laughed and Jake's hopes were crushed.

All of the demon's eyes, including the one Jake had stabbed, focused on Jake. "Did you think this puny weapon would hurt me," it said, holding the knife up. It sniffed in disgust then dropped the blade to the floor.

As Jake's vision started to fade and he started the final plunge into death, he heard Father McLanahan's voice ring loudly from behind the demon.

"No, you foul beast from Hell, but this will!!!!!" Jake struggled to focus his eyes on the priest. He last thing he saw was McLanahan standing in the room, with what looked like a bar of bright white light in his hands, Jake sighed and let go as everything faded away.

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Jake sat at a table in the bar in Purgatory, or wherever it was, waiting for Moroni. There was a drink sitting in front of him, but he ignored it. He'd tried drinking when he'd gotten here, but he did not feel any effects. Plus, his anger was about to explode and he didn't want to complicate matters by adding alcohol to it. Even if he could turn off its' effects by concentrating, Plus, it felt good to be back in his own body again.

He'd been sitting in the bar for what seemed like days; the time here was

strange, and there weren't any clocks, plus, he didn't feel any need to eat, drink, or go to the bathroom, so it was hard to tell how long he'd been waiting.

He'd woken up at the same table he'd been at before and had asked the same waitress, Betty, to contact Moroni for him. She'd picked up a telephone behind the bar and had left a message for the man, then told Jake that Moroni would get there soon. When Jake had listened to the message on the phone, it had said to be patient and Moroni would be around to see him as soon as he could. So, basically he was stuck waiting for who knew how long. While he was waiting, Jake thought about the last thing he'd seen before he'd died; why had the priest decided to follow him, and what was the bar of light he'd been carrying? He hoped that McLanahan was alright and that the demon had not killed him, too. To keep himself from worrying about what had happened to the man, Jake prepared for the coming confrontation with Moroni by composing all of the questions and arguments in his mind.

He was transposing what McLanahan had told him about Purgatory and idly using his finger to trace diagrams of the symbols that he'd seen on the priest's ring in a puddle of water on the bar when he felt a presence at his left side. He looked over. It was Moroni.

"Hello, again, Mr. Steele. It's good to see you again, although," he paused and looked Jake up and down, "I didn't think you'd be back so quickly. But, then again, I did figure you would fail at your first try." He grinned, and Jake saw the strange shadow of the man's skull for a brief moment before Moroni turned and motioned Jake toward the table they'd sat at the last time.

"Let's go have a seat and discuss things," He walked toward the table

without turning to see if Jake was following. Jake got up and walked over to the table, then sat down across from Moroni.

“So, Moroni,” Jake said. “We have a lot of things to talk about, the first being what took you so long to get here? I’ve been waiting for,” he started to say, days but changed it, “uh, a long time.”

Moroni stared at Jake for a moment, then waited as the waitress, Betty, brought a bottle of Gentleman Jack Daniels, placing it and two shot glasses on the table in front of Moroni. She gave Jake a sympathetic look, then walked back to the bar to pick up another order. Moroni poured a shot for himself and motioned for the other glass, asking without words if Jake wanted one. Jake responded by taking the shot glass and turning it upside down. He then sat back in the chair, crossed his arms over his chest and waited for Moroni to start talking.

Moroni played it out for a minute, drinking the whiskey shot, then carefully filled the glass again. When he set the bottle down, he grinned wickedly at Jake then finally responded to Jake’s question.

“Well, Mr. Steele, as you may have recognized, time here is irrelevant. It really was not that long. It just seemed like a long time.” He took a sip of the whiskey. “And,” he continued before Jake could say anything, “I have other things I need to do. So, there’s your first answer. What else do you have?” He smirked, and Jake had to control his temper. He had more to gain by talking than by hurting Moroni, or by trying to hurt him, Jake thought as he remembered the strange shadow on the man’s face.

Moroni grinned knowingly, as if he knew what Jake was thinking. Jake shook his head and asked the next question.

“Is this really Purgatory, or somewhere else? I talked to a Catholic priest while I was down there,” he motioned to the air. “And he explained that



Purgatory was pretty much a way point on the road to Heaven and that it was where the spirit was purified before moving forward. He didn't say anything about this being a holding place for people who had neutral or negative balance." Jake leaned his elbows on the table and looked intently at Moroni. "So, tell me, where are we, and who are you?"

Moroni stopped grinning and looked back at Jake with an intensity similar to Jake's.

"Mr. Steele, we ARE in Purgatory." He put his glass down and pointed at Jake to emphasize his pointed. "You see, Just like Heaven and Hell, there are different levels to this place. At this level," Moroni waved his arm around, indicating the bar, "your degree of love of self is still too strong and you must go through a purification process that will be shorter and less..." he paused. "Painful if you will. It will also benefit both of us by eliminating what could become a very big problem for the human souls still on Earth." He looked at Jake intently, then continued.

"As for who I am, the only thing I can tell you is that I am an agent for those that want the demons sent back where they belong." He raised a hand to stop Jake before he said anything.

"No, Mr. Steele, I'm not from Hell, nor am I from Heaven. I'm a completely neutral party that was contracted to perform a service." He stopped and looked at his watch.

"Now, even though time is of no consequence here, I need to be going soon, so, I'll give you two more questions." He looked at Jake and emptied his glass again. Jake shook his head slightly not understanding the affectation. He focused.

"Okay, I'll choose to believe on who you are and where we are. Now, my big question is how do I kill the demons and why didn't you tell me before

So that I'd be better prepared? I used a knife dipped in Holy water, but it didn't seem to work, and I was killed before I even had a chance to do anything else. Plus, I think that the priest that I talked to may be in danger, too."

"Oh? And how would he be in danger," Moroni asked.

"Well, right before I died, he came through the window behind the demon and challenged him." Jake told Moroni what the priest said to the demon and about the bar of bright light he'd been carrying.

Moroni's facial expression changed and the skin around his eyes tightened as he looked at Jake. He put his half-full shot glass down on the table so forcefully, some of the whiskey splashed onto the table.

"A bar of light," he said. "What else did he look like? Did he have any symbols on his clothes? Was he wearing any jewellery? Did you see him attack the demon?"

Jake was taken aback for a moment by Moroni's intensity, then he recovered and raised his hands.

"Wait, wait, wait, Moroni. Why are you so interested in the priest; and why don't you answer my question first? Jake closed his mouth and sat back in his chair with his arms crossed over his chest, making his point clear that he wouldn't be saying anything more until the man answered his questions.

Moroni looked at him a moment, swallowed another shot of the whiskey, set the empty glass down, then answered.

"Alright, Mr. Steele, I'll answer your questions." He paused for a moment to look at Jake's facial expression. "All of your questions, at least, the ones that I can at this time, but then I want you to answer mine, agreed?" Jake nodded. Moroni settled back into his chair and moved around for a

moment, as if he were trying to get comfortable, then started talking.

“Alright. There are several ways to kill the demons, or banish them back to Hell. The first two ways are fairly easy, and the others are more complicated and I don’t have time to explain. Ok?”

Jake nodded again and stayed quiet, his mind focused on what Moroni was saying.

“Okay, the first is to use a weapon that has been created to specifically destroy demons. It’s forged a specific way and the person who makes it goes through a lengthy, complicated procedure that ends in their death.” Moroni paused for a moment to sip from his glass and Jake almost told him that this was what the priest had told him too, but stopped himself. Moroni put the glass down and continued.

“As far as I know there are one hundred such weapons on the planet, so if you can find one, that would be your best bet.”

“How do I find one,” Jake interrupted.

“Well, that’s up to you, Mr. Steele. I guess you could look on your internet for any legends that have to do with demon killing, or check with any religious leaders, or if your priest is still alive, you can ask him. Did you get a chance to talk to him much before you were killed? Did you—“

Jake held up his hand to stop Moroni. He shook his head, grinning without humor.

“No, no, Moroni. Give me the rest of the answers I need, then we will talk about Father McLanahan.” He let the man have the priest’s name to keep him interested.

“Okay,” Moroni replied. “Where was I? Oh, right. The second way to kill or vanquish the demon is to have a priest or someone similar to purify you, after you go through a cleansing ritual, then you can use a spell or a ritual

to stop or slow the demon for a short time, a very short time, and then you use a bladed weapon to decapitate it. Once the head is separated from the body, you must place them in separate containers and destroy them by means of an Enochian spell.” He raised his hand to stop Jake from speaking. “I don’t know the spell. You can find out by asking your religious people. There are specific groups that are formed specifically to vanquish or kill demons. If you can find one, they can help you. Now,” He looked at Jake for a moment, and Jake saw the shadowy skull beneath the features. Jake realized that the man used the effect whenever he wanted to, and that explained some things. Jake figured he was going to ask something about the priest again. He was right.

“Tell me a little bit about this priest. McLanahan, you said his name was. Did he have any symbols on his clothes or wear any jewellery with symbols on it? How did you meet him and what did you talk about?”

“Yes,” Jake answered. He did have some jewellery; a ring with a green stone and symbols on it.” He then explained where he met the man and what they’d talked about.

“Alright,” Moroni said, when Jake finished. Can you show me what the symbols looked like?” He took his half empty shot glass and poured a little bit of the whiskey carefully on the table, then asked Jake to sketch the symbols he could remember in the liquid.

Jake nodded his head then closed his eyes to concentrate, remembering the few minutes he’d talked to McLanahan, and visualizing the ring. The image came to him clearly, he dipped his finger in the spilled whiskey and drew out the symbols to the side of the puddle. As he drew, something strange happened. As each of the symbols was completed, they started to glow, as if they were phosphorous. Jake hesitated for a moment, but didn’t

stop. The glow was soft at first and barely noticeable, but by the time he was through sketching all of the symbols, the light had become so bright it was shining like a miniature sun, and hurting his eyes. He tried to shade them with his arm, but the light was so bright, he could see the bones through his skin and the material of his sleeve. As the light fell on his face, Jake felt an intense wave of heat throughout his body, and with the heat, he felt a strength and confidence saturate him to his inner core as he'd never felt before.

There was a sudden sound from across the table, and the light was suddenly extinguished as Moroni swiped his hands across the symbols, wiping them from the surface.

Jake looked in Moroni's direction, but couldn't see him for a moment through the spots in his eyes. When his sight returned, he looked at the man.

"Wow. What the hell was that."

"Hell, is the wrong choice of words, Mr. Steele," Moroni chuckled at his own joke. "It was in fact the opposite. The symbols that you drew were from one of the groups I was telling you about, the groups I was telling you about, the groups that vanquish demons. My guess is that the bar of light that you saw in your priest's hands was one of the special weapons I mentioned. So that means when you go back, you can contact him for help in your endeavour." He paused a moment. "That is, if Crocell didn't kill him." He said beneath his breath.

"Crocell? Who's Crocell," Jake asked.

"Oh, uh the demon who killed you was named Crocell, and he's one of the seventy-two Demon Kings of Hell."

"Demon Kings?" Jake raised his voice, then looked around, but no one

had seemed to notice. “Now, I’m not only fighting demons, I’m fighting Demon Kings? Dammit, Moroni! What else haven’t you told me, and why didn’t you tell me this before so that I’d have been better prepared?” Jake pounded his fist on the table in anger. He stopped himself from hitting the man. He needed the information, and striking Moroni wouldn’t do him any good. Plus, he didn’t know what Moroni was and if hitting him would hurt him at all. He breathed and reluctantly let the tension flow from him.

Moroni smirked again, as if he knew what Jake was feeling, then answered Jake.

“Mr. Steele, the reason I didn’t tell you all this before is because I didn’t have time to explain things, and my employer told me that you would learn a stronger lesson through experience than if I’d just told you. That was part of the contract they gave me. Oh,” Moroni snapped his fingers as if he’d just remembered something. “I do need to tell you this, though. Whenever you inhabit a person’s body, you’ll have complete control. The person’s spirit will reside here for a certain amount of time, say seventy-two hours Earth time, or after you kill the demon or get killed, if it’s within the seventy-two hours. And one more thing. If you’re killed while in a body, that person’s spirit will die and move on to their eternal destination.”

Jake felt his heart drop.

“Does that mean—“

“Yes, Mr. Steele,” Moroni interrupted. “Stephen Jacob Taylor died and has gone to his eternal rest.” Moroni saw the look of pain on Jake’s face.

“If it helps,” he said sympathetically, “Mr. Taylor went to Heaven.”

Jake felt some small measure of relief, but was still anguished. If he had not inhabited the man’s body, Taylor would not have died, and there was no telling what the man would have gone on to accomplish. Jake prayed

for a few moments, asking God to forgive him, and reflecting on what he could've done differently. With the information he had, he didn't think he could've done much. He started to play the what if game, but stopped himself quickly. He knew from past experience no good would come from that. Images of his men being torn apart by explosions and bullets flashed through his mind and he clenched his jaw and fists. He reached and grabbed the bottle of Gentlemen's Jack and drank several gulps of it, disregarding his earlier promise to himself to stay away from alcohol. When he put the bottle down, he instantly regretted it, but shrugged it off, justifying the action with the thought that the liquor's effect could be turned off at any time by an act of will, so it was basically guilt free. He took another healthy swallow and looked at Moroni, daring him to say anything.

Moroni sat there silently, a small, smug smile on his face. Jake came close to hitting the man, but held himself in check again. Instead, he put the bottle down and asked another question.

"When I first saw the demon, it looked like a man, then it changed shape, then went back to a man and there was a shimmery effect," he paused. "Sort of like the skull effect you keep turning on and off for me." He smirked back at Moroni after he noticed the brief look of startlement on the man's face. Score a minor point for me, he thought.

"Alright, Mr. Steele, score a minor point for you," Moroni replied, eerily echoing Jake's thoughts again. The smirk was back on.

Jake was the one to be startled this time. Before he could say anything, Moroni answered his question.

"To answer your question, Mr. Steele, you've been given the gift of discernment." The man paused for a moment, then, explained after seeing

the blank look on Jake's face.

There is a diversity of gifts given by the Holy Spirit to those who believe and are chosen for special work. Discernment means you can see and understand a person's spirit. In your case, you'll be able to see, hear and understand the demons, even though they will be disguised, in most cases as humans."

Jake started to ask Moroni to elaborate a little bit more, but Moroni raised his hand and stood. Jake stood too.

"Enough, Mr. Steele. I have to go now. When you go back to Earth, try to find the priest you talked to. I will send you back to the same city you were in, as close to the time that your Mr. Taylor was killed. Maybe you'll get there in time to help the priest." He stuck out his hand. Jake considered not shaking, but figured Moroni would just leave him there longer to contemplate his own stubbornness, and he didn't want or need that. In fact, Jake was quiet eager to get back to the fight. He reached out and firmly grasped Moroni's hand. As he did, he saw the shadowy skull again, then everything faded away.



## CHAPTER SIX

Jake woke up, not gradually like he had before, but suddenly and with full awareness of his surroundings and all his memories from Purgatory intact and clear in his mind.

The first thing he did was open his eyes and sit up. The room he was in was shadowy and he was in bed, just as he had been before. As his eyes adjusted to the dim surroundings, Jake saw that although the dimensions were a little bigger, the room was very similar to the previous room he'd awaken in. There was a walk-in closet, two large light coloured wooden dressers, one with a mirror, and even a nightstand with a digital alarm clock on it that was an exact duplicate of the other. There was, however, one major difference in the room.

There was a woman lying on the bed beside him, and she was awake and staring at him. Before Jake could process that, she spoke.

“What’s wrong honey?” Her voice had a sleep induced softness to it. In the darkness, he could make out that she had short, light coloured hair and attractive facial features.

“Huh? Oh. Nothing. I just had a dream.” He moved his hand up and rubbed his head, easily pretending the feeling of upset that a bad dream gave. He’d had enough of those over the past year to know that feeling intimately. As he lowered his hand, the woman reached out and grasped it.

“Oh, Jake,” the woman said softly. “Was it about Iraq again?” She sat up, and Jake gasped involuntarily not only because she’s said his name and mentioned Iraq, but because the sheet had slid down and he saw that she was nude.

Jake stared at the woman's body for a moment. In addition to her nudity, he saw a wedding ring on her finger. He automatically checked his ring finger and saw the flash of gold there that told him he had one too. He started to say something, but the woman once again interrupted his thoughts.

"Do you want to make love, hon? It might help like the last time." She let go of his hand and put hers on his chest, then before Jake could stop her, leaned in to kiss him.

The kiss was warm and passionate. Her mouth was soft and her tongue moved slowly into Jake's mouth, alternately stroking his lips, teeth and tongue.

Jake's emotions were in turmoil. It had been over two years since he'd been in bed with a woman. He returned the kiss, tasting her tongue and lips with his own. He put his arms around her, rubbed the back of her neck for a moment then, he moved his hands slowly to her breasts and lightly began caressing the undersides. She moaned into his mouth and reached beneath the sheet to grasp his manhood. When she touched him, he felt the warmth of her fingers, then the brief coolness of the wedding ring on his skin. He broke the kiss and gently grasped her hand, stopping her from going any further.

"I-I can't," he said. His voice was harsh from the raw emotions he was experiencing. He was confused by her calling his name and mentioning Iraq.

The woman looked at him for a moment, panting from exertion and passion while radiating a raw sexuality. Compassion filled her eyes and she leaned in and hugged him. He hugged her back, still breathing raggedly.

I'm so sorry, babe. Is there anything I can do? Do you want to talk about

it? The doctor said it might help,” she said into his ear.

He moved back a little and looked her in the eyes.

“No,” he said shakily, and shook his head. He thought fast. “I’ll be ok. I think I’ll grab something to eat and take a drive.”

The woman stared back at him, this time the concern plain on her face.

“Alright, Jake,” she replied, “but don’t take too long, ok?” She leaned in and kissed him again, this time briefly, but still sexily.

Jake returned the kiss, then rolled out of bed. He stood and walked over to the dresser to his right, hoping it was the right one. He opened a drawer in the top row and saw men’s T-shirts in a variety of colours. He picked a dark-coloured V-neck, then searched through a few other drawers until he found some underwear, jeans, socks. He put them on then looked toward the bed, hoping there were some shoes there. None. The only thing he saw was the woman watching him. He smiled, told her he would be back soon, then opened the door that was beside the dresser.

Jake stepped out into a hallway that was a little dimmer than the bedroom, but not so dim he couldn’t see. He closed the door behind him and moved off to his right, the only way he could go; the other way led to a blank wall. He made his way down the hall, stepping quietly on the carpeted floor. When he got to the end, Jake saw an open door to his right that led to a bathroom. He stepped in for a moment and relieved his bladder, then rinsed his hands and looked at his image in the small mirror over the sink. What he saw there made him feel encouraged, and explained why the woman had mentioned Iraq.

The man’s body he was inhabiting was a service man, either former or current. He could tell that immediately from the haircut and the body’s fitness. Jake rolled the sleeves of the shirt up, then pulled it off while

looking in the mirror. He found what he was looking for on his upper left back, near the shoulder blade: a USMC tattoo.

The man had light hair, brown eyes, and looked young, maybe in his mid-twenties.

Ok, he thought. At least, I'm in good shape. I can deal with this. He walked out of the bathroom and moved through the medium sized house until he got to the kitchen, where he went to the refrigerator and grabbed a handful of apples and a package of sliced deli turkey. He put the apples in a bag, opened the meat and started eating it while he searched the area.

After a few minutes, he found two sets of car keys on hooks by the front door and a 12-gauge Mossberg pump shotgun in the closet. He pulled a light windbreaker off the hanger, put it on, then pocketed a box of buckshot shells. He looked around for a moment, then walked into a mudroom beside the closet, put on a pair of Timberland hiking boots and walked out the front door.

As soon as Jake stepped onto the doorstep, he felt the same compulsion in his mind that had led him to the demon before. He looked around to get his bearings, then lifted the keys and pressed the alarm button. He heard the chirp-chirp from the car around the corner of the house, so he walked that way. When he turned the corner, Jake stopped and let out a low whistle.

Sitting in the driveway was not one, but two 1967 Corvette Stingrays, one silver, one black. They weren't run of the mill 'rays either. Both had the 427/435 big blocks, with manual transmissions, and they looked as if they'd just driven off the showroom floor. This was the car he'd dreamed of having when he was a kid, the car he'd bought when he was a broker before joining the Army. The car he'd sold after Afghanistan to rid himself of painful memories. Jake walked around them for a moment, admiring the

classic American craftsmanship, then, shook his head, remembering why he was here. He hit the alarm button again and the black Corvette chirped. Jake smiled, opened the door, got in, and started the car. The deep rumble beneath the hood showed that the engine was as well tuned as the rest of the car. The interior smelled like aftershave and Armor all, bringing back memories of his own car.

Jake paused for a moment, letting the engine warm up and letting the memories of his own go. He reached up and flipped down the visor, found nothing, then unlocked the glove compartment. Ah, he thought, there's what I'm looking for. There was a small pistol, a Glock 26 forty-five calibre there, a sheathed K-bar knife, and a wallet.

Jake put the pistol under his left leg, attached the knife to his belt, and opened the wallet. There was some cash in it, but Jake didn't pay attention to the money. The driver's license was the only thing he was interested in. It said his name was Jake Marshal, he was twenty-one years old, and the address was in the same city, Carson, Pennsylvania, that he'd been in before. As Jake started to close the wallet, he also saw a military I.D. He looked at it, curious to know what the man's rank was. It said he was a Captain. Must have joined right out of college, maybe ROTC, Jake thought. He also saw that the I.D. was current. Jake sighed. Hopefully, he wouldn't get this one killed and leave the man's wife without a husband. Jake clenched his jaws as images of his men tried to intrude on his thoughts. He took a few calming breaths, engaged the clutch, put the car in reverse, then backed it out of the driveway. When he got to the street, he turned in the direction of the compulsion and hit the gas for a moment, getting the satisfaction of lighting up the tires for a few second, then straightening the car out and moving toward the demon.

After only five minutes of driving, Jake found himself in the neighbourhood he'd been in on his private trip. He took a few turns from memory, heading toward the duplex where he'd confronted the demon, but when he was a few blocks away, the compulsion started pulling him in a different direction. He started to ignore the pull, but his instincts told him to follow it. He swerved the car sharply to his left and drove in the direction of the pull, hoping that the priest was still alive and that he was not abandoning the man.

Jake drove on for another five minutes or so, until he felt the same strong feeling he'd had before, outside of the duplex, that had indicated that the demon was very near. He sighed when he saw where he was.

It was a military cemetery.

Of course, he thought. It reminded him of all the cemeteries he'd visited when he'd buried his men. He sighed and parked the car in a parking lot on the cemetery grounds, got out, put the pistol in his waistband behind his back, then hung the shotgun by the combat sling so that it was hanging in front of his chest. He held the shotgun's pistol grip loosely with his right hand and rested his left hand on the barrel, as he'd been trained to do while on patrol. He checked to make sure the keys were in the ignition, closed the door, then scanned the area for a minute or two before moving forward.

When Jake got to the front gate, he paused for a moment to say a brief prayer for those that were buried here, for his own men, and for himself. The last thing he did before entering the grounds was to ask God to give him strength to fight the demon and to watch over Father McLanahan. He hoped to talk to the priest again; they had a lot to discuss.

The first place Jake stopped was the administration building, which was of moderate size. About five thousand square feet Jake guessed and

constructed of red brick with a single roof. From what Jake could see, the building looked fairly new and was clean. The grounds were well tended, which didn't surprise him, being that it was a military cemetery.

Jake looked around the perimeter for a few moments until he found what he was looking for, a map of the grounds.

It was on the wall near the front doors, encased in plexiglass to withstand the elements, and bolted to the wall. Jake looked at it for a minute, getting his bearings, noting that it was a pretty large cemetery covering at least a hundred acres and containing what Jake estimated to be about five or six thousand graves.

Jake saw that there were a dozen different sections covering most of the major wars from the Revolutionary war to the war on terror.

Jake memorized the map the best he could, then walked away from the building and toward the direction in which he was being pulled. When he figured out which section he was heading for, he sighed again. It was toward the newest section, where those who were fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan were interred.

It was a long walk, maybe ten minutes, over small hills and through shallow valleys. The light the full moon glowed brightly, and there was sparse cloud cover, which allowed him to easily stay on the paved path. If he did not have to face a demon, Jake thought he'd probably enjoy the walk. The temperature was brisk, but not too cold, the grass in the area had just been cut and there were wild flowers and trees growing all over the place, leaving a variety of scents that were entirely pleasing to the nose, and there was even a brook running past the path and into what looked like a small wooded area. It reminded him of the events that had led up to his death. He shuddered at the memory and the betrayal from his friend. He

was very angry and he thought about revenge for a few moments, then put away those thoughts to focus on the mission.

As he came to another hill, he noticed a monument to the side. It was made from what looked like granite, was about fifteen feet high, and depicted a soldier in uniform, carrying an M4 and looking out into infinity. The plaque at the base read, “From a grateful nation to those who have given their lives in the war on terror to prevent those would destroy our way of life.” He saw the dedication was December 15<sup>th</sup>, 2001, shortly after he’d been deployed to Afghanistan.

Jake sighed and moved cautiously up the crest of the hill, then moved his head so that he could see into the valley below.

The first thing he noticed was that the valley was different than the others he’d seen tonight. Unlike the others, which were clear, there was a low-lying mist or fog near the bottom, which made it impossible to see not only the graves, but any people, or demons, that might be there. Great, thought Jake. He started to curse Moroni for getting him into this, then thought better of it.

Jake moved cautiously downhill, going at an angle and moving away from the obvious paths, all the while, staying keenly aware of where his internal sense was telling him the demon was. Right now, he sensed that it was in the centre point of the valley and was either standing still or was not moving too much.

When Jake made it to the bottom, he saw that the mist was pretty thick, but visibility was moderate—maybe fifteen or twenty feet. Good enough for him to pull the trigger if the demon tried to run at him. At least, he hoped so. The last time, the demon had moved pretty fast. Jake shrugged, then looked briefly at the shotgun to make sure the safety was off. He put



His finger lightly on the trigger, then moved slowly forward. His surroundings were eerily quiet. The mist seemed to be absorbing all of the ambient noises that he'd been hearing since he'd gotten here. He continued moving.

After only a few minutes, Jake heard a noise. He couldn't tell what it was or where it came from. He stopped and opened his mouth while tilting his head a little, then cupped the back of his left ear with his left hand while moving his head to try to get the direction. It was a trick he'd learned from one of his men during his first deployment before 9-11. A long time ago, he thought.

After a few moments, he found the direction the noise was coming from—the same direction as the demon. He creeps forward, stepping between grave stones, avoiding fallen leaves and twigs from nearby trees.

All of Jake's senses were alive, reminding him of the times he'd gone into combat, the feeling that at any instant he could come upon the enemy and would either live or die, according to God's will.

As he crept forward, the noises became clearer. It sounded like rocks being pounded together combined with the deep rumbling of a voice, followed by another voice. A voice that Jake recognized as Father McLanahan's. It sounded as though the priest might be in pain.

Jake moved forward about ten more steps, holding his pace steady and slow, not being distracted by the priest's painful exclamations, which were more clear now that he was closer. Jake stopped as soon as he saw movement. He suddenly lowered himself behind a large grave stone, then wiped the mist and sweat from his face before peeking over the side of the marker. What he saw almost made him sick.

The demon was about twenty feet away, facing away from Jake at a slight angle and was not disguised as the human Jake had seen before. He noticed that there was a small pair of wings on its back.

He was leaning forward a little and talking to the priest, who was hanging from a large stone cross that was marking a grave. There was blood on his face and body and his clothes were shredded. Jake looked closely and saw that his hands were nailed to the cross with some type of metal spikes and it looked as if both his legs were broken. They were both bent at extreme angles with the ankles nailed to the bottom of the cross about a foot above the ground. His hair was matted with blood, sweat and dirt, but there was a defiant look in his eyes that gave Jake a boost of confidence.

The priest answered to something the demon said, and Jake heard the strain in his voice. He realized that McLanahan might not last that much longer. Jake took a few breaths to calm himself, lightly gripped the pistol grip on the shotgun, then stood up and moved slowly toward the demon, carefully watching where he stepped while keeping the demon in his sight. When he was about ten feet away, he lifted the shotgun, aimed at the demon's centre mass and pulled the trigger.

The shell exploded in the chamber and expelled the pellets out of the barrel at a high rate of speed. Less than a half second later, they impacted in the centre of the demon's spine, right below the wings. Since they didn't have to travel very far, the pellets didn't spread out very much and most of the kinetic energy was concentrated in an area about the size of a small plate. It would have devastated a human being.

It didn't seem to hurt the demon very much.

The force of the pellets threw it forward into the priest and Jake could hear both the demon and McLanahan grunt from the impact. Jake looked at the

place where the pellets had hit the demon, expecting to see blood and gore, but there was none. Instead, there were several holes in the skin, and they were rapidly closing up. This thing can't be hurt by normal weapons, Jake thought. He had a brief idea, wondering if a large explosion would effect it, then put it aside for later, if there were a later. Jake focused on the present.

The demon turned around and faced Jake, moving with the same swiftness it had shown when Jake had confronted it before. Jake saw a large stone with gouge marks and blood on it in one of its hands. It had apparently been using it to nail the priest's hands and feet to the cross and to break his legs.

When it saw Jake standing there with a shotgun in his hands, it smiled, showing a mouthful of sharp, bloody teeth, then throwing it's head back, started to laugh.

Before it became too amused, Jake pumped the shell into the chamber and fired it, this time aiming for the demon's exposed neck, hoping to decapitate it. He hit the neck, but it didn't decapitate the monster. It did knock a significant hole in it, but the hole immediately started to heal. The demon was thrown back into the priest once again. Both of them grunted again.

Before the demon recovered, Jake fired the rest of the shells in the gun, rapidly sliding the pump back after each shot. When he ran out of shells, Jake squinted at the demon through the gun smoke and mist, hoping the combined kinetic energy of the seven shells full of the buckshot had severed its head from the body.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

After the smoke dissipated, Jake saw the demon lying on the ground beside the cross. His heart sped up and he felt a moment of joy until he saw the demon moving.

Jake started reloading the shotgun for another attempt, but as he was putting in the second shell, the demon jumped up and took long strides toward Jake. The look on its face told Jake it was no longer amused. It got to within a few feet of Jake and swung its' massively muscled arm at his head.

As the demon loomed closer, Jake's combat instincts and the reflexes of the young Marine's body kicked in. He dove to his left and rolled twice, to put as much distance as he could between him and the now enraged demon.

When Jake came out of the second somersault, he straightened his left leg and rapidly stood up. When he was standing all the way up, he pivoted, turning one-hundred eighty degrees until he was facing the demon again, which was rapidly turning his way.

Jake lifted up the shotgun and fired the shell he'd placed in it, then dropped it, letting the combat sling catch it and hang it across his chest.

As soon as Jake dropped the shotgun, he reached behind his back and pulled the Glock pistol from his waistband and started firing it at the approaching demon.

The first three shots hit right above the collarbone area, making a larger hole as they hit almost exactly where the buckshot had, but the demon leaped forward, knocked the pistol out of Jake's hand, and then shoved him

backward.

Jake staggered backward about four steps, trying to keep his balance, then, fell when his foot hit something. He landed hard on his back and hit his head on the unforgiving ground. All of the air rushed out of his lungs. He saw flashes of light in front of his eyes and struggled to breathe.

In between the flashes in his eyes, he saw the demon approaching, moving leisurely now, as a cat would after it had finished playing with the mouse. Its bloody teeth gleamed in the moonlight and its many eyes seemed to glow with an otherworldly light. The hole in its neck closed and sealed as it stopped a few feet away and loomed over Jake. It stared at Jake for a moment and Jake felt a pressure in his head. He moaned as intense pain exploded in his head. After a few moments that seemed like an eternity, the pain stopped. A look of surprise appeared on the demon's face and it spoke.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" The demon leaned over Jake and sniffed a few times, as if it was trying to identify Jake's scent. Jake finally drew in a ragged breath and started gagging as he inhaled. The smell of putrid, rotting flesh, burned skin and a charcoal smell that he assumed was brimstone overwhelmed him. His lungs spasmed and he started coughing. The demon ripped the shotgun off of his chest then struck Jake in the chest with its left hand, holding him down and knocking the wind out of Jake again.

"So, I have a Stalker in my hands, eh? Interesting." It looked over at the priest, who was only about five or six feet away.

"So, priest," it said. Its voice rumbled deeply and Jake could feel the vibrations from it in his bones.

"Is this the best your group can do? A small town priest and a has-been

soldier who doesn't even know how to fight my kind?" Crocell laughed, then looked at Jake again, this time using half of its' eyes. The other eyes were evenly split between watching McLanahan bleed to death and scanning the area for any more threats.

Jake turned his head to the side and drew in a shaky breath through his mouth, trying to ignore the stench coming from the demon.

After a few breaths, Jake's vision cleared and he saw something that made him quickly turn his back toward the demon.

"What makes you think I don't know how to fight your kind, Crocell," Jake asked through gritted teeth. He needed to keep the demon from invading his thoughts again.

The demon snorted and leaned into Jake's chest a little more. Jake groaned and the air left his lungs again. He felt his ribs creaking, on the verge of breaking.

Jake struggled to breathe, reaching up with both hands in an effort to move the demon's hand, but he may as well have been trying to move a tree trunk. It was immovable. His vision started to get dim and his hearing faded as the blood pounded in his ears. He felt one of the ribs on his left side crack a little. He felt not only physical anguish, but the mental anguish of failing to keep this man, this Marine officer whose body he was inhabiting, from dying, from ever seeing his wife, friends, and family again. Jake was full of grief, and he felt his spirit start to slip out of the Marine Captain's body. Before he was all the way gone, he had one last look at the priest. Jake saw the small blood stained silver and black cross still hanging on the man's chest, and he finally shouted out, "Oh, God; please help me!"

Everything went quiet and dark, then an explosion of brilliant white light,

brighter than the sun, engulfed him. The demon, Crocell, was thrown over a hundred yards away, tumbling out of control through the air until it crash landed into a large oak tree at the edge of the small forest. The impact knocked the tree down and sent broken branches and pieces of wood shrapnel flying away from the sudden crater created by Crocell's body.

Jake saw all of this and even felt the Earth tremble beneath him from the impact. He stood in front of the cross where Father McLanahan's torn and broken body was being crucified. The priest's body was limp and his head hung down his chest. Jake looked carefully and noticed that the man wasn't breathing. Anguish filled Jake once again and he felt hot tears washing down his cheeks. He started to move toward the priest to help him somehow when he heard a rumbling noise in the distance. He turned to look that way and saw Crocell rising from the crater. The demon brushed off some debris from its' shoulders and looked in Jake's direction. Jake could hear the rage in its' voice and feel the ground trembling again as each of the beast's feet struck the Earth.

Jake stood there for a moment, wondering what to do. He didn't feel any fear at all; as a matter of fact, he felt completely calm and he realized all of his injuries and the pain he'd felt was gone. He even felt strong. It was a strength he'd never felt before. Not just physical, but mental and spiritual too. He suddenly felt a presence surrounding him; a warm, comforting presence that filled Jake with a peacefulness and love. A love that was so deep and total that it defied description. He knew he was in the presence of God.

Jake felt other presences too. He turned to look over his shoulder and saw a shimmering light there, then for a brief moment, he saw four very large men with wings on their backs and holding bright shining swords. Angels,

he thought to himself.

When Jake turned back around, he saw the demon standing about ten yards away. He also noticed the sword he'd seen earlier on the ground was now standing point down and leaning against the stone cross about two feet away. He noticed that it looked like a plain old sword—nothing fancy or with any engraving on the blade. It was about four feet long from point to pommel and the hilt was wrapped in plain, worn leather. Jake reached out and grasped the hilt.

As soon as he touched the sword, the weapon which he'd rightly assumed was Father McLanahan's, burst into brilliant white light, as brilliant as the light that had surrounded him just moments before. Although the light was bright, it didn't hurt Jake's eyes at all. In fact, he felt his eyesight might even have improved.

Jake looked at Crocell and saw a red and black mist surrounding the demon. Inside the mist, he could see what looked like disembodied faces floating around. He counted at least three dozen, all of them with expressions ranging from pain to pure terror in their eyes. As soon as he saw them, Jake realized that these were the souls of the people that Crocell had devoured and that there were many more than three dozen in that mist, perhaps hundreds.

Jake's jaw clenched in anger as he gripped the sword tightly. He felt a sudden confidence fill him. A confidence similar to what he had always felt before when going into combat, due to his extensive training and the fact that he could rely on the world's most powerful military to back him up. Only this confidence was deeper and fuller. Jake knew in his heart that this confidence was from God, and he knew without doubt that he was going to defeat Crocell and send the demon back to Hell.



Jake lifted the sword and held it in front of him with both hands on the hilt. The weapon felt light and perfectly balanced, without the cumbersome heaviness he expected from a sword of this size. He looked at Crocell, who had been standing motionless since Jake had touched the sword, and spoke.

“Demon, you can either go back to Hell willingly or by force. Either way, you WILL be going back!” Jake’s voice rang out forcefully in the tombstone filled valley, and all of the background sounds Jake had been hearing suddenly ceased. Everything was perfectly quiet, until Crocell’s laughter broke the silence.

“Human,” the demon said after it stopped laughing. “I’ve been alive since before the universe was formed, and I’ve defeated armies by myself. I am a King of Hell! What makes you think that you, all by yourself, can beat me?” The demon pointed a long, clawed finger to its’ chest and laughed again, then pointed at Jake and continued.

“That weapon will not give you the power to defeat me either, so I will give you a choice.” Crocell stared at Jake with its’ many eyes and paused for a moment to let the words sink in.

“You can put the sword down and I will kill you quickly,” Crocell grinned and its’ sharp teeth gleamed in the moonlight.

Or you can attempt to fight me and I will tear you apart slowly, making sure that it takes many painful hours for you to die. What do you think of that?”

Jake paused for a moment before speaking, “You’re overlooking something very important, Demon.” His gaze went to Crocell’s face and he waited.

Crocell looked puzzled for a moment before a sneer came to its’ face. “And what is that, human?”

Jake grinned humourlessly and prepared himself for what was about to happen.

“I’m not alone.” And with that, he jumped forward, wielding the sword and beseeching God to give him the strength to defeat the demon.

As Jake came within reach of Crocell, the demon swung a massive clawed hand at Jake’s head, but instead of the incredible swiftness Crocell had shown at their previous encounter, the demon now moved very slowly; in fact, Jake noticed that everything around him was moving slowly, and conversely, he was moving pretty quickly.

Jake came to a halt about two feet in front of the demon, raised the sword over his right shoulder, took a step forward with his right foot and twisted his body while swinging the glowing weapon at the demon’s neck.

Crocell saw the approaching blade and somehow moved back far enough to avoid being decapitated, but not far enough to avoid being struck altogether. The point of the sanctified blade hit the demon’s jaw, slicing open the skin and easily cleaving through the bone in the lower jaw.

Blood, thick and dark, spewed from the wound and Crocell staggered back a few steps. It raised a clawed hand to the wound. When it saw the blood on its’ hand, the demon raised its’ head to the sky and bellowed in rage, then lowered its’ head toward Jake and leaped to attack.

Jake felt a force move him to the side and watched Crocell land where he had just been standing and rake its’ clawed hand still moving slowly, where Jake’s head had been.

As he saw this, Jake felt his body twist and his arms move without his conscious direction. The sword arced through the air, glowing brighter as it got closer to the demon, then exploding into incandescent brilliance as it connected with the back of Crocell’s neck and separated its’ head from the

shoulders.

The demon's head fell to the ground, where it landed with a thump. As it did, everything around Jake returned to normal speed. The head rolled a few feet away, leaking blood, and the massive body stood there for a few moments, the thick blood spewing from its' severed neck. All of the many eyes around the body widened and stared directly at Jake, as if surprised that this mere human killed it.

The mist surrounding the demon grew dark for a moment and Jake could see the disembodied souls still swirling around the body, but no longer wearing looks of pain and horror. Instead, they were all showing expressions of relief and gladness.

Jake watched them for a moment and noticed that one was looking directly at him and mouthing words. He stepped forward and peered closely at the spirit. He exclaimed in surprise when he realized that the words coming from its' mouth were 'release us.'

Jake stood there for a moment, trying to figure out what to do, when he felt a warmth coming from the sword, which he now held down by his right side. Moving by instinct, Jake raised the sword and pushed the point into the mist.

The sword burst into brilliance again and the light caused the mist to dissipate. The spirits all moved toward the sword and were swallowed by the brightness. When all of the spirits were gone, Jake lowered the sword and looked at Crocell's body, which had shrunk from almost ten feet tall to a little bit shorter than Jake's six feet. Jake grimaced as he saw the demon's eyes grow blood red, then close. The body then tipped over and fell to the ground, where it lay for a moment, then suddenly burst into flames. Jake looked at the head and saw that it was burning too. The flames were bright

white and it only took about a minute for the remains to disintegrate into ashes. A breeze blew the ashes into the air and they spread throughout the valley.

Jake stood there for a moment, then turned to his left and saw Father McLanahan's battered and bloody body hanging on the cross. He walked over to the priest, intending to pull the body from its' cruel repose. When he touched it, something miraculous happened.

The sword brightened again and Jake felt a surge of warmth and love surround him. He stared in amazement as Father McLanahan changed from the pale colour of death to the healthy pink of the living. The bloody gouges and tears in his skin healed almost instantly and his legs straightened with a small popping noise as the bones became realigned and set into place where they belonged. McLanahan gasped as he started breathing, then groaned in pain as the spikes keeping his hands attached to the cross moved and slid out of his palms.

Jake dropped the sword and caught the priest as he fell off the cross. Jake staggered as McLanahan's full weight landed on his arms. He stepped back from the grave and gently laid the man on the ground, then kneeled beside him. After only a few moments, McLanahan's eyes opened. He stared blankly at Jake, then focused.

"Who?" His voice was hoarse. He coughed violently, sat up, and spit bloody phlegm on the ground beside him. He looked at that for a moment, then, at his bloody and shredded clothes. He ran his hands over his chest, where the demon's claws had ripped his skin and muscles. Jake heard the priest gasp as he moved his legs, then looked over at the blood stained cross where he'd been crucified and tortured for hours. He silently stared at the cross, and Jake couldn't even begin to contemplate what was going on

in the man's mind, the horrors he was reliving.

After a minute or two, McLanahan turned to Jake.

"W-what happened?" His voice was still hoarse and a little shaky.

"What do you remember," Jake asked.

The priest looked at Jake for a moment, then Jake's eyes followed his as he turned his head to the cross. His body shuddered and his breath caught as he looked from the cross down to his hands. Jake noticed the scars there and was so surprised as McLanahan apparently was; these were the only scars visible, even though the demon had torn him up pretty well.

He stared at his hands for quite some time, then looked up at Jake, his eyes wide and a look of wonder on his face.

"I remember everything," he said, then his eyes grew worried. "Where is the demon?" He reached for the sword that was at the foot of the cross. His face tightened and he started to stand. The sword brightened in his hand.

Jake put his hands on the priest's shoulder.

"Don't sorry, Father," he said. "I killed Crocell." He paused for a moment, then added, "Well, actually, God killed him. I just picked up your sword and he guided me." Jake nodded at the sword and McLanahan lowered it back to the ground. The light dissipated. The priest's face registered shock. He glanced at the ring on his finger, then stared at Jake for a long time.

"Who are you," he asked.

"Well Father, my name is Jake Steele, and who I am is a lot more complicated. I don't think I have much time left, so I'll give you the short version." He took a deep breath, then told the priest a very condensed version of what had happened, starting with his death during the armoured car robbery, ending with the death of Crocell and McLanahan's

miraculous healing. When he finished, Jake sat back on his heels and waited for the priest to digest everything.

He didn't have to wait long.

"You're a Demon Stalker," he exclaimed.

"That's the same thing Crocell said. I'm assuming that there have been others over the years? I'm also assuming you know a lot more than what you told me when we spoke at the church earlier," Jake said. He looked at the priest inquiringly.

"Yes, Mr. Steele," McLanahan nodded his head. "I know very much more, and in the interests of time, I will give you a condensed version also." McLanahan took a deep breath and continued, talking quickly.

"I'm a member of the group called the Sons of Solomon. We have existed since the reign of King Solomon, almost three thousand years ago, and all of the members can trace their lineage directly back to Solomon himself. Our purpose is to hunt demons and send them back to Hell. Once we do that, we erase all signs that they were here. I won't go into our history or our other duties, but I will say that there have been other brothers around the world who have reported demon sightings or suspect that may have been more here than normal."

"Wait," Jake interrupted, holding up his hand. "You mean to tell me that demons running around are normal? Why haven't I heard more about this, why haven't there been any pictures or...." He trailed off as McLanahan started shaking his head.

"Mr. Steele," he said. "You said when you first saw the demon, it looked and spoke like a normal man, correct?"

Jake nodded.

"Well, that's the way they appear to almost everyone. The reason you saw

the true form is because God, through his Holy Spirit has granted you certain gifts. One of them is that of discernment. The other would appear to be that of healing.” He looked at the scars on his hands again, then back to Jake. “But, I’m not sure of that. That may have been a special case. Regardless, you have been chosen to hunt the foul beasts down and kill them, so I will offer the help of the Sons of Solomon to you. There are several instances in our records of Sons and Demon Stalkers joining forces to rid the world of Satan’s minions. If you agree to work with us, I’ll give you my contact information and you can get in touch with me whenever you need to and I will direct you to the other Sons who can help you. Is this acceptable to you?” The question sounded formal to Jake, as if it were part of a ritual.

“I accept your offer, Father, and before I go to my next destination, you should know that the man in Purgatory or being, or whatever he was, told me that the reason I was needed was to track down seventy-two Demon Kings. I hope that doesn’t make things too difficult.”

McLanahan gasped and looked sharply at Jake.

“Did this being say anything about the seals being broken,” he asked.

Jake shook his head. “No. The only thing he said was the name of the demon we just fought.

“Crocell,” the priest replied. “I recognize it now.” He rubbed his temples and sighed.

“Help me up.” He reached out his hand. Jake clasped it and pulled him up. The priest looked at his shredded and bloody clothes and shook his head. “We need to get out of here.” He looked around and picked up the sheath for his sword where it was lying next to the bloody cross. Jake walked over to the area where the demon had almost crushed him and

looked around for a moment until he found the pistol he'd dropped earlier. He put it in his waistband and returned to the priest's side. As he joined the priest, he suddenly felt a strange sensation, a disconnection. He told the priest about it.

"You're going to be leaving to your next body shortly. Can you remember a phone number and email account?"

"Yes, I don't think I'll have any problems with that," Jake replied.

McLanahan told him the contact information. Jake repeated it to himself several times to commit it to memory. He felt himself getting lighter, then thought of something.

"Father, before I leave I want to make sure you get this man back to his home." He reached into his back pocket, pulled out the man's wallet, and gave it to McLanahan.

The priest accepted it. "Of course," he said.

Jake started to say something more to the priest but he got dizzy and sat down, then everything faded away.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Wham!

Jake rolled out of bed and landed on the floor on his hands and knees. His eyes quickly scanned from side to side, assessing the area for threats, looking for cover. His heart pounded in his ears and his breathing was fast and ragged. He reached for his weapon, but it wasn't there. When he looked down to see if he dropped it, Jake saw that he was wearing a bright pair of pajama bottoms. Confusion clouded his mind for a few moments before he came to reality and realized he had transferred to another body.

Jake looked around again, this time not looking for threats but for clues as to where he was. There was a twin-sized bed with a bland looking wooden frame, a small night table by the head of the bed with a landline phone, a cell phone and watch on it, a medium-sized dresser, and a closet with no doors that had plastic hangers in it. Inside the closet, Jake saw a small travel suitcase and a black plastic suit bag hanging from the hook. A thick curtain barely covered a large window where light came through around the edges and gave enough illumination for Jake to see that he was in a hotel room. Now, the only questions was where?

He stood up from his crouch, walked to the curtain, pulled it open from the left side and looked out the window. He couldn't see for a few moments because of the glare and he let his eyes adjust. He must have been facing west, because the setting sun was directly in front of him. When his sight returned, he gasped as he saw the skyline, and then the buildings around the hotel.

From his vantage point, Jake could see that he was fairly high. He

guessed that maybe it was twenty to twenty-five stories with a lot of the buildings in the immediate surrounding areas standing ten to fifteen stories high. So, he could view a fairly large area. The city beyond the smaller buildings was fairly large and the buildings were close together, giving Jake the impression that they were crowded. On top of that, the air seemed a little bit hazy and he could make out thousands of people on the sidewalks and hundreds of vehicles and bikes on the streets.

But what really told him where he was, was the famous mountain in the distance and all of the signs; on the buildings, billboards, and the traffic signs. They were all in Japanese, with most but not all, having English translations beneath.

He was in Japan. Jake didn't know what city it was, but he was definitely in Japan. He'd been in the country about fourteen years before, when he'd been tasked to train the special tactics squadron of the interior defense force, which had its' headquarters in Tokyo and branches all over the rest of the country. For the three months he'd been there, his stay had been enjoyable, and Jake had come to appreciate the Japanese people. Their customs, morals and traditions had resonated with him. He'd been practicing Japanese martial arts since he'd been a teenager. That training had exposed him to some of the traditions and had given him a 'centre,' something to focus on after the accident with Ben.

Jake turned from the window, walked around the night table, then opened the drawer and pulled out a telephone book. He noticed there was a Bible in the drawer too. He closed his eyes and offered up a brief prayer of thanks to God for helping him to defeat the demon.

When he was done praying, Jake looked at the phone book. It said Tokyo. Jake looked out the window again and shook his head. It sure didn't look

Like the city he remembered. Of course, that visit had been fourteen years before, so there was certainly going to be progress since then. Once, Jake had asked one of the men he'd been training with, a man about Jake's age and who he'd had a good rapport with, why the Japanese people were so focused on building so many new things. He pointed around the block, they were standing in the middle of an industrial area, having used one of the factories to practice a bomb scare response, and there was new construction going on in almost every direction; some buildings that were being knocked down to be replaced looked less than ten years old. He'd never seen so much construction back in the states.

The man, whose name was surprisingly, John Kamakura, and who Jake called Johnny K, had paused in the middle of breaking down his weapon to pack it into a carry case for transporting, and smiled at Jake humourlessly. He motioned for Jake to sit down beside him.

"Jake-San," he said. When Jake had sat on the ground, he spoke perfect English and Jake heard a slight Boston accent. "The Japanese people are a highly complex society, although they sometimes appear to have dual personalities. You see, after the second World War, and even as recently as the 1970's, the image of Japan that the average American or European had was a country of geisha, cherry blossoms, and of Mount Fuji. Hell, just a few months ago, a tourist asked me if we lived in paper houses!" He shook his head in disgust.

"Anyway, this was the image that the Japanese people felt westerners had of our country and it tends to irk us, since we have been a highly industrialized society since the late 1950's and 60's and have been at the forefront of technology since the 1970's. Our attitude was. And still is to some extent, like that of the Englishman who takes a fierce pride in his

heritage, feeling vaguely irritated that foreigners should find his country quaint and perhaps even antiquated because of the old customs that are still preserved." He looked at Jake for a moment to make sure he was understanding. Jake nodded to show he was following him.

"Similarly," John continued. "We, not wishing our country to be thought backward or old fashioned, will go out of our way to offer proof of our modernity at every opportunity, forgetting perhaps that most foreigners who visit us wishes to see the more traditional aspects of our culture. Do you see?"

Jake nodded his head and they had finished packing their equipment and left. During Jake's stay, he and John had had many discussions about many different topics, from philosophy to engineering, and of course, the martial arts. They'd spent many nights out drinking and mornings sparring and practicing. He always thought fondly of John.

Jake shook his head, coming back to the present. He rubbed his temples and eyes, then picked up the phone and called the front desk to find out what hotel he was in and where he was in the city.

The attendant he talked to told him he was in the Hilton International and that they were in the Shinjuku business district. He thanked the woman, then had the call transferred to the kitchen to order something to eat. When he was finished ordering, Jake went into the bathroom to freshen up and to see what kind of body he would be working with this time.

When Jake looked into the mirror, he was shocked to see that the body he was inhabiting was oriental.

He should not have been shocked though. After all, he was in Japan, and of course the best way to blend in with the population was to look like a native, although he wished the body was in better shape. He pinched about

two or three inches of fat at his waist and sized himself up. He guessed he was about five feet, six or seven and weighed around one-hundred eighty or ninety pounds. He was pale and there was very little muscles beneath the fat. It didn't appear as if the guy worked out at all.

Maybe he works in an office and doesn't get time to keep himself in shape, Jake thought. He looked at his face and noticed a sparse bit of beard stubble along with some dark circles under his eyes. He gazed at his hair which was cut short in a business-like style and didn't see any grey there; he guessed his age was maybe in the late twenties or early thirties. Looking at his hands, Jake sighed when he saw they were manicured and had no calluses.

After using the bathroom, Jake went back into the sleeping area and performed some quick stretches, followed by a few yoga positions and martial arts moves to get a feel for his body. The extra weight and being five to six inches shorter made some of the positions and moves awkward, and Jake could feel a bit of strain in muscles that were not used to the repetitive work. He shook his head. He wondered what the guy would think and feel when he 'woke up' after Jake was done with the body. He was thinking about that when a knock came at the door and his meal was delivered. He had an awkward moment when he signed the bill, but he faked his way through it by scribbling an unreadable signature.

After he ate, Jake took a shower and looked around the room for some comfortable clothes but only found two suits which looked like they were of very high quality in the suit bag and some underclothes in an overnight bag pushed beneath the bed. Behind the bag, he saw an expensive briefcase. He guessed that the guy, whose name he found out by looking at papers in the briefcase, was Toshi Tanaka, was just here for a one day

conference or something of that sort. Jake hoped he didn't mess up the guy's life by missing it. He shrugged. It was best not to think that way; to lose focus. Besides, it was almost night time and the business had probably already been taken care of earlier. He sat down and called the front desk again, this time asking where the nearest casual clothing store was. After finding the hotel had a store in the lobby, Jake hung up, then called the number in America that Father McLanahan had given him. After three rings, the phone picked up.

"Hello?" Jake recognized the priest's voice immediately.

"Hello, Father, this is Jake." There was a pause. "Hello, Father, are you there," Jake asked, thinking that maybe he had a bad connection.

"Jake, Jake, I'm here," McLanahan replied. "I-I'm sorry. I didn't recognize your voice." He chuckled self-consciously. "Of course, I should have expected that, but I guess I'm not used to the idea yet."

"I understand, Father," Jake replied dryly. "It's taken me a while to get used to it also."

McLanahan chuckled again, "Yes, I guess it would." He paused for a moment and Jake sensed something. In his mind, Jake saw the priest hanging bloody from the cross again.

"Father, how are you? Are you in any pain from the experience?"

McLanahan sighed. "No, Jake. I'm alright physically. I'm feeling a little put out and tired because Stephen was buried this morning. I've been consoling his ex-wife and two daughters the past few days and it has been kind of tough. Although, they were separated, they were still close, and I think they would have gotten back together." The priest started to say something more, but Jake interrupted him.

"Father, what day is it?"

McLanahan gave him the date and Jake was shocked. It was five days after the experience at the cemetery. He told this to the priest and asked if he knew why so much time had passed.

“well, Jake, I’ve been studying the literature about demon stalkers and although some of it is conjecture and rumors from what I could piece together from the ‘true’ evidence, it indicates that they show up at unpredictable times and places, which, when you think about it, is a good thing; if there’s no discernible place or time of arrival that can be predicted, then it makes things that much harder for the enemy to figure out where you’ll be and when you’ll be there.” He took a breath then continued. “Then also, to my knowledge there has never been a threat like this since Solomon trapped those Demon Kings in the first place. I believe this may be a harbinger of great events, maybe even the end of days.

“You’re talking about the Apocalypse, right,” Jake said disbelievingly. “The one in Revelations?”

“That’s exactly what I mean, Jake,” McLanahan replied. From the limited information I’ve been reading through, there are a few references to a great evil that will be released on Earth to create chaos before the seals are broken and God’s plan is revealed. The information I’ve looked at so far though, is vague, so I’ll be going to the Vatican archives. There should be much more extensive information available there. The more information I can get, the more help I can provide for you,” he finished.

“Ok,” Jake replied. He ran the fingers of his left hand through his hair and was about to say something when a thought occurred to him.

“Father, how many people have you told about me?”

“I’ve only spoken to one brother about you, Jake,” the priest replied. “We have protocols in place for this kind of situation. Your mission is the most

important thing in the world, Jake,” he said earnestly. “And we will take every precaution to protect you.”

“Alright, Father,” Jake said. “I believe you. I just wanted to know for my own peace of mind.” He sighed, then changed directions, telling McLanahan he was in Tokyo and asking if he had any contacts in the area. The priest asked Jake if he had a few moments while he checked. He heard the rustling of papers as McLanahan checked some files. Jake felt better that the priest didn’t keep his information on a computer.

After a minute or two, McLanahan came back to the phone.

“Ok, Jake, I found a brother you can contact. His name is Kaji Murotomi. You can reach him at the Sensoji Temple.” He gave him a phone number. Jake wrote it down on the back of his room service bill and asked the priest a question.

“Is he a Christian?”

“Of course he is, Jake. All of the Sons of Solomon are Christians. The one true God and Jesus are the foundation of our organization. It has been that way for over twenty-nine hundred years, when Solomon’s son, Rehoboam established the organization.”

Jake was confused. He’d read the Bible, and had taken some religion courses in college, and did not remember reading or hearing any mention of Jesus in Solomon’s time. He asked McLanahan about this.

“I’m sorry, Jake. I should have been more clear. We were first organized to serve God, then later we added Jesus as our Saviour. Does that help any?”

“Ok,” Jake said. “That’s fine. Now this guy, Kaji Murotomi. You say he can be reached at the Sensoji Temple?”

“Yes,” McLanahan replied. “He lives there.”



Jake exhaled loudly in exasperation and ran his left hand through his hair again. “So he lives there, which means he’s a monk, right?” Jake remembered visiting some of the Temples before, and the only people who had lived in the buildings had been monks, and they had all been Buddhists.

“Yes, Jake,” McLanahan replied. “And before you ask, John is also Christian. The best, and shortest, explanation I can give you is that with Kaji, the two beliefs do not conflict with each other. If you want to know more, you’ll have to talk to him.”

“Okay, Okay,” Jake said. I’ll discuss that with him later, if I have a chance.” He sighed again and rubbed his temples. His ‘demon sense’ as he was calling it, that the demon he was going to be hunting was a fair distance away. He didn’t know how far. The signal was weaker than the previous two, so Jake assumed it was farther than the ten to fifteen miles those had been. He told this to the priest.

“That’s good, Jake. That means that the demon probably can’t sense you.” He started to say something else, but Jake interrupted him.

“Wait. You mean demons can sense me like I can sense them?”

Jake’s heart fluttered for a moment and he felt an adrenaline surge run through him.

“From the accounts I’ve read, which again, were very few,” McLanahan said. “The demons have a limited ability to sense a stalker. Certainly, the distance is not as far as a Stalker’s, but then, you also should consider that none of the demons whose accounts I’ve read about were Demon Kings. I’m assuming that they have more extensive abilities than the average demon.” He sighed. This worries me, Jake, and it also worries Prelate Jessup, my contact in the Vatican, who has access to much more

information about them than I do. When I told him about our encounter and your defeat of Crocell. He was amazed that you were not killed again, as you were when you first encountered the Demon King.

“Well, thank the Prelate for his vote of confidence.” Jake said sarcastically.

“Oh, don’t take that the wrong way, Jake. Consider this; These Demon Kings are some of the most powerful and evil beings in the universe. They have lived since before God created the universe, and have powers that we can’t even conceive. You have only been a demon stalker for about a week, and you really have no idea what you’re doing. I’ll grant you that your combat experience with the military will help you, but these creatures are more dangerous,” the priest said emphatically, “than any threat you’ve ever faced. What I’d like to do is get as much information about demons and the Demon Kings as possible. Once I get access to our archives, I will compile a packet for you and get it to you as soon as I can.” He paused for a moment. I don’t know if I can get it to you before you confront the current Demon King, but I will try. I know you have a very limited time before you have to leave so I will try my best to at least get you something. In the meantime, I want you to take some time with brother Kaji. He has fought two demons during his tenure in Japan and he could be very helpful to you.”

“Have you already contacted him about me,” Jake asked.

“No. As I mentioned before, I want to keep your existence as secret as possible, Jake. There’s a recognition signal and code I’ll give you to show Kaji that you’re not a member of the enemy’s groups. Once he knows you’re legitimate, you can speak with him and plan your next moves.”

“Alright, that sounds good,” Jake said. “So, what are these groups? Are

they something I need to worry about?” He absentmindedly grasped his bottom lip with his thumb and forefinger and squeezed it, thinking about what he was going to do if he had another threat to face.

There are several groups out there that worship Satan, and some of them are organized, but most of them are just general nuisances. Of all the groups out there, there may be five that may pose any real threat to you if they found out about your existence. Of these five, there is only one that I would truly worry about.”

“And who would that be, Father,” Jake asked.

“That would be the Hellfire Club, Jake,” McLanahan answered.

“The Hellfire Club. Hmm. That sounds familiar.” Jake sat back in his chair and thought for a minute, then it came to him.

Okay, weren't they some high society nuts in Britain or Ireland back in the seventeen-hundreds or eighteen-hundreds who got together to mock religion and have some kind of ceremonies that were the opposite of those that were in churches at the time? I think I remember reading about them in a religion class in college that they were just a joke at the time, basically just a small footnote of history.”

“Yes, Jake, that particular group was basically a joke, but the Hellfire Club I'm talking about is much larger, much more dangerous organization. They started their organization around the same time the other group did, and we believe they used the other group's infamy to make themselves look more inconspicuous. Kind of a 'hiding-in-plain-sight' move. We that maybe even the first group was set up to fail on purpose in order to hide the more serious group.”

“Alright,” Jake said dubiously. Although he understood the thinking behind those kind of machinations, he didn't see how that affected him

today. “So what makes them so dangerous now?”

“Jake, have you ever heard of Evanescent Energy Corp?”

“Yeah, they’re the second largest energy company in the world, right?”

“Yes, they are. They have offices all over the world, they own hundreds of other companies, and all of their board members are also Hellfire Club members. Their reach and influence are incalculable, and they’re all dedicated to instigating the end of days. In fact, it’s very likely that they were the ones that released the Demon Kings from King Solomon’s confinement container.”

“Let me get this straight,” Jake said. “Three thousand years ago, King Solomon sealed these demons in a container, and they were released by the people in this Hellfire Club in order to precipitate the final battle, the battle mentioned in Revelations. Do I have it right so far?”

“Yes,” said the priest.

“Ok. So, if Solomon sealed these Demon Kings away. I’m assuming that he went through some kind of ritual or that God gave him some kind knowledge and power to do so.”

“That’s right,” McLanahan said cautiously.

“So, if you’re an ancestor to Solomon and a member of the organization, would you be able to have access to that information, and if so, would you be able to seal them back up?”

“That’s a complicated question, Jake, but I’ll give you a simple answer: no, we can’t seal them back into the container. First, the knowledge that Solomon had about the Demon Kings is written on an Emerald tablet that was found in the ruins of one of his many dwellings. We have this tablet, but we cannot decipher any of the writing on it. We believe that the tablet came directly from God and could only be read by Solomon himself.

Maybe Jesus will read it when he comes here for the final battle, or destroy of confine all of Satan's demons in the pit. Second, none of us has the power that Solomon had. We all derive some of our power from being Solomon's ancestors, and the remaining power comes from the ring we wear and from the sanctified weapons we use."

"How do you get power from a ring," Jake asked.

"There was a second Emerald tablet found with the first, but it was shattered into hundreds of pieces. Many attempts were made to reassemble it, but too many of the pieces were missing or destroyed. Then, one of our brothers, I think it was Solomon's great-grandson, discovered that pieces of the tablet gave strength and resistance when fighting demons. He had the pieces cut and polished into stones, then placed in rings and other pieces of jewellery from Solomon's treasury, then bequeathed to Solomon's ancestors. All of our brothers are given a piece when they pass their initiation.

"Okay, I get that," Jake said. He sighed and ran his left hand through his hair. It seemed that the more he learned about all of this, the more complicated and troubling things were becoming. Now, he not only had to worry about all of the Demon Kings and whatever chaos and destruction they were up to, but he also had to fight against one of the largest companies in the world; a company that could afford to throw almost unlimited funds and people at whatever problems that came up, and Jake knew that if he had any success in his mission, it would not be long before he would become one of their problems. He told this to McLanahan and they discussed security measures to Jake from becoming a spot on the Hellfire Club's radar. They spoke for another fifteen minutes, coming up with strategies to keep communications secure and how to keep Jake's

identity anonymous. Jake's military training and McLanahan's experience with the organization made planning easy.

When they were finished, Jake got dressed in his dress pants, shirt and shoes, then went downstairs to the hotels' lobby to do some shopping for comfortable clothes and a few other items to help him in his mission.

## CHAPTER NINE

Jake sat quietly on a large flat rock in one of the meditation gardens at the Sensoji Temple, thinking about his earlier conversation with Father McLanahan and wondering what to expect from the man he was meeting.

McLanahan had not given much information about him, saying he'd only met him once, briefly during a conference of brothers, shortly after Murotomi had been initiated into the brotherhood. The feeling that McLanahan had gotten after talking to him for a few minutes was that Murotomi was a quiet man and appeared to be a good listener. That was all he could convey to Jake, in addition to a physical description so that Jake could easily identify the man.

Jake couldn't imagine how a Christian could also be a Buddhist. He shook his head and thought back to his days in the military, before the combat deployments after 9/11, of how he'd travelled all around the world and had encountered many people with strange beliefs. He'd always been able to accept those people at face value. He figured he could keep an open mind and accept Murotomi also.

Jake took a few breaths and changed the direction of his thoughts to his surroundings. He looked around.

A few hundred meters away, the fabled five storied pagodas stood out among the bamboo and other plants. Jake had read a brochure that a monk had given him when he'd first entered the temple grounds saying that the temple was one of the oldest in Japan, and the pagoda, the main hall and front gateway had been rebuilt after being burned down during World War II.

The grounds surrounding the Temple were filled with local vegetation, small streams, and a lot of pigeons. The birds seemed to be everywhere. Jake watched them as they flew around and cavorted. He smiled to himself and sighed, letting go of the tensions that had been building up in him since he'd woken. He enjoyed the peaceful sensation for a few minutes then looked at his watch. It was a little after 9:00PM. The sun had just gone a little while ago and the moonlight and lights of the surrounding area outside the Temple's grounds shed enough illumination for him to see clearly for hundreds of meters. He saw a figure coming towards him from the main hall. It was a man wearing the robes of a monk.

Jake waited for a few moments until he could distinguish the facial features of the man, then he stood up.

"Mr. Murotomi?"

The monk stopped a few feet in front of Jake and bowed. Jake returned the bow. When he straightened, the monk replied to Jake's question.

"Yes, I am. Are you the person that my brother mentioned?" His voice was quiet but Jake sensed an underlying strength to it. Jake looked at the man for a moment, assessing him.

The wasn't anything distinguished about him. His head was shaved, which made it hard to determine his age. He average height for an oriental man, about five feet six or seven. Jake couldn't guess the weight because of the loose, flowing robes, but the skin around the monk's face was tight and his neck muscles bulged slightly. When he'd walked up to Jake, Jake had seen the fluid strides of a dancer or martial artist. When he reached out to shake hands, his guess was confirmed. Shaking the monk's hand was like grasping a piece of granite. Jake looked at his eyes and saw a soreness there that he had not seen in many others before. Surrounding his eyes



many wrinkles and laugh lines that became more pronounced when the monk smiled.

“Yes,” Jake answered. “My name’s Jake Steele.” He said a code word that Father McLanahan had told him, and the monk replied with the correct corresponding word and gesture. He also reached beneath his robe and showed Jake a necklace with a green stone similar to McLanahan’s. The rest of the tension he’d been holding left him, although he still remained cautious.

“It is nice to meet you, Mr. Steele,” the monk said.

“Thank you, Mr. Murotomi. It’s nice to meet you too, although I wish the circumstances were better. Oh, and please call me Jake. I don’t think we should stand on formality.”

A momentary look of surprise flickered across the monk’s features then was gone. “Alright, Jake. And you can call me Kaji.”

“Good. Now that we’ve got that out of the way, shall we talk business?”

“If you wish,” Murotomi replied. He gestured to a bench about fifty yards away that sat beside a small gurgling stream.

“Let’s sit down.”

They walked to the bench and sat. Jake looked around. There was a clear view all around them for hundreds of feet. They were completely alone. He saw that Kaji observed his movements but didn’t look around. It was a good bet that he’d picked this spot specifically because of its isolation and clear fields of view. That was good; even though he did not know what this meeting was about or who Jake was, he still took elementary precautions. Jake looked at the monk, who sat there, waiting patiently for Jake to begin. Well, Jake thought, there’s nothing to do but jump in with both feet. He took a deep breath.

“Do you know what a Demon Stalker is,” he asked.

The monk gasped, then another flicker of surprise crossed his face for a moment. He leaned back on the bench and placed his hands in his lap.

“Yes, Jake, I’ve heard of Demon Stalkers.” He stopped and Jake waited for a moment to see if he would continue.

When he didn’t, Jake said, “Well, I’m a Demon Stalker. I appeared in a Tokyo hotel a few hours ago and called Father McLanahan to find some help and he put me in touch with you.” Jake gestured to the monk with his hand. “And here we are.”

Murotomi stared at Jake for a moment, his face expressionless, then he bowed deeply. “It is an honor to work with you, demen stoker.”

Jake was slightly embarrassed. He held up his hand. “Please, I’m just Jake, ok? I’m a man who has to do a job, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Alright, Jake,” the monk replied. “Can you tell me a little more about your experience? How you met Father McLanahan and what kind of demons you have fought, I’m assuming you’ve fought at least one?”

“Yes.” He gave the monk a brief description of his life before his death, and of the encounter with Moroni in Purgatory, then the first encounter with McLanahan and the fight with the demon that had ended in Jake’s surrogate dying. When he got to the point, Jake’s throat tightened and he paused a moment to wipe the tears from his eyes.

Kaji placed his hand on Jake’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry that you had to experience so much loss, Jake,” he said sympathetically. I hope you know that God will never lay on you more than you can bear, and that perhaps it was meant for you to fail the first time in order to make you stronger and better prepared for your next battle and all of the battles after that.” He paused for a moment to let Jake regain

his composure then asked a question.

“Jake, where did you learn to speak Japanese?”

Jake was startled. “What are you talking about?”

“You said you were born in America, yet your Japanese is perfect, and your accent is from the Tokyo area. Did you learn the language when you were in the military?”

“Uh, no.” Jake replied. “I-uh-I’ve never spoken more than rudimentary Japanese. I was stationed here for a little while, and I’ve practiced some Japanese Martial Arts for about twenty years, but I’ve never had the time to study the language in-depth, although I’ve wanted to. Have we been speaking Japanese the whole time? It sounded like English to me.”

“Yes,” Murotomi replied. His facial expression brightened. You must have been given the gift of tongues, understanding and speaking other languages.” He looked at Jake. Have you had any other gifts?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said. He was a little non-pulsed, trying to come to terms with this new revelation.

“Yeah,” he repeated. “McLanahan told me I had the gift of discernment after I killed Crocell, then I healed McLanahan too, but he said that might have been a temporary thing.”

“Can you tell me what happened the first time you died, Jake,” Murotomi asked.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, I kinda skipped ahead there.” He told the monk everything he experienced after the demon king had killed Jake’s surrogate; the wait in Purgatory, followed by the talk he had with Moroni about the demon kings, his return to earth in a new surrogate. He left out the intimate details of his encounter with the Marine Captain’s wife, then explained about the encounter at the cemetery. When he mentioned seeing

The angels after crying out to God and the defeat of the demon, the monk said, 'Praise God,' in a low voice. Jake continued, telling of his discussion with McLanahan. When he finished, he looked at the monk and said, "And that leaves me here."

"Wow," the monk said. He sat back on the bench; he'd been so engrossed with Jake's story, he'd unconsciously leaned forward and was so close to Jake, they'd almost bumped together. He took a few moments to gather his thoughts.

"Jake, you have been truly touched by God. I would be honored to help you to defeat whatever demon king has come here. Are there any questions you have before we prepare?"

Jake took another deep breath before replying.

"Yes, Kaji, there are. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? How can you be both Christian and Buddhist? Also, I can tell you've had some martial arts training. Have you ever fought any demons or had any specific training to fight them?"

"Well, Jake, all the Sons of Solomon are taught the basics of how to fight demons, in addition to our other training. Not every Son however, gets the advanced training that is made to those who prove to be adept during the assessment period. I was chosen for the advanced training, and since completing it, I have fought and killed two demons." He said this matter of fact, without any obvious pride, nor with false humility. Jake liked that. Most of the men he'd fought beside while in the special forces had similar traits.

"As for being both Christian and Buddhist," the monk continued. "My mother taught me about Buddhism when I was a child and I did not become a Christian till I was thirteen years old, when my mentor contacted

me and told me about my heritage. At first, I struggled with the two different philosophies, but I eventually found that they actually complement each other, which allows me to practice both. Of course, my interpretation may not be as understandable by someone else, but works for me.” He grinned widely and chuckled for a moment. Jake grinned with him. He could see how it would be easy to like this man. They talked for another fifteen minutes or so, getting to know each other, until Jake decided it was time to get ready to go find the demon. He asked the monk if he had any sanctified weapons they could use to kill the demon. Murotomi chuckled again and stood up.

“Come with me, Jake,” he said. Jake took a few strides until he was beside him, then they walked away from the Temple at an angle. They passed a small gurgling stream and a few other meditation gardens that were empty. Jake guessed the temple had closed up the gates and all of the tourists had left.

After about five minutes of walking, they passed under the branches of a huge willow tree and entered a small clearing with a small stone hut in the centre of it. Night sounds echoed around the clearing as the two men followed around the foot path toward the hut. Insects buzzed, bats swooped out of the sky to collect them, and frogs chirped from a nearby pond. It almost felt as if they were far out in the country. The only thing that dispelled that illusion was the distant sound of traffic from the always busy Tokyo streets.

As the two men reached the hut, the monk paused for a moment and bowed his head. Jake assumed he was praying. So he said a quick prayer of thanks himself, then lifted his head and waited until Murotomi was through. He followed the monk through a plain wooden doorway and left

The door open so that Murotomi could see.

The monk moved to the left, where Jake could just make out a wooden shelf over a small fireplace. The monk lit a match and without thinking, Jake automatically closed one eye while squinting the other to preserve his night vision.

Murotomi lit two oil lamps, one on each side of the room, then motioned for Jake to close the door and come in. Jake closed it, noticing while he did that there was no lock on it, then looked around the room.

It wasn't very remarkable. It was the size of a small bedroom, about fifteen feet by fifteen feet, with a stone floor and no windows. There was a little bit of furniture all made from rough-hewn wood; a bed fit for one, against one wall with a dozen or so books and some clothes on it. The bed with everything else in the hut, was tidy, the sheets and dark blanket folded neatly and the thin pillow placed precisely, so that it was positioned exactly between the edge of the blanket and the head of the bed. The whole place was perfectly neat and clean. It even smelled fresh. It reminded Jake of his military days, in a good way. He smiled to himself, briefly, then watched as Murotomi moved toward the bed. When he got there, the monk knelt down by the head of the bed and for a moment, Jake thought he was preparing to pray, but then he reached under the frame and Jake heard a scratching sound, followed by a click.

Murotomi stood up and pulled the bed away from the wall. Jake noticed that the wood didn't make any noise and didn't see any scrapes on the stone. He must have felt the material, or some other type of padding on the feet, he thought. The bed looked fairly heavy and sturdy too. When Murotomi walked around the bed to the outside wall, Jake leaned over and tried to move it. It didn't budge. His guess was correct. The monk was a lot

stronger than most people would think when looking at him.

Murotomi bent down, put his fingers in two holes about three feet apart, and pulled a slab of stone about the width of the bed out of the floor and placed it on the bed, then motioned for Jake to come around.

When Jake came around the end of the bed, he saw the hole, with stone stairs leading down into darkness. He grinned at Murotomi and said, "Lead on Mcduff."

Murotomi grinned back at him, reached up to the lamp and walked with it down the stairs, turning sideways to fit his shoulders through the narrow gap. As his head came level with the stone floor, he thought of something.

"Is there any chance of someone coming in and seeing the floor like this," he asked.

"No," the monk's voice came up from beneath him. "This is my hut, and the other brothers won't enter without permission. And," he continued as Jake took a few steps downward. "If the enemy somehow makes it in here, they will have much more problems than they could ever anticipate." He chuckled again.

"That's good to know," Jake said, then moved down the stairs. There were only twenty stairs, and Jake estimated they had only gone about fifteen feet below the foundation when he stepped down off the last stair. The light from the lamp illuminated the area pretty well. He looked around.

They were in a very small cave that was close to the same size as the dwelling up above, maybe a little larger. The ceiling was definitely higher, Jake thought. He could tell that it was man-made because it was squared. The rock was dark-coloured and the floor was just as clean as the hut above. Again, Jake found nothing remarkable about the place; at least not until the monk moved to the wall, put the lamp on the floor, then took what looked

to Jake like an old iron key from his pocket, placed it in the natural looking crack in the wall, then turned it counter clockwise nine times, and Jake heard a ratcheting sound, like what an old clock sounded like when it's gears were wound up.

When he was through turning the key, he moved about two feet to his left, took a small metal rod about the size of a new pencil from another pocket in his robe, showed it to Jake long enough for him to see the symbols raised on the surface. Symbols that were similar to those on Murotomi necklace and McLanahan's ring. He then placed it in another crack in the wall.

When the rod was in the crack all the way, with about two inches still showing, Jake heard another click, then saw the iron key turn in the opposite direction from which the monk had spun it. The winding sound came again, but this time it was accompanied by a short grinding sound.

Jake watched as a seam appeared a few inches from both cracks, and then a section about six feet tall and a foot thick moved inward. He looked at the floor and ceiling of the doorway and saw that there gleaming metal tracks on both to guide the slab. He whistled at the simplicity and the craftsmanship of the device. The slab had been so precisely cut that he had not seen the seam until it had been 'unlocked,' and then it had very smoothly slid back about five feet almost soundlessly. He stepped to the side to let Murotomi past, then followed the monk through the entrance, then down another set of stairs and into another cavern.

The cavern was a lot larger than the other one. Jake estimated its size at about twenty by forty feet, with a twelve to fifteen-foot ceiling. He smelled and felt a slight dampness in the air and heard the slight sound of moving water.



On wall, there were about two dozen wooden crates, each about one meter cubed, with Japanese lettering stencilled on the outside. When he got close enough to read them, he saw that they were different types of freeze-dried food. Most of them were the types that campers and outdoors enthusiasts used, and Jake also saw that there were three crates of U.S. Army M.R.E., or meals ready to eat, the freeze-dried combat rations the U.S. had been using for almost thirty years. Jake grunted quietly as he remembered all of those meals that he'd eaten while in the service. When he turned to his left, Jake saw five beds, identical to the bed upstairs, empty and neatly made, lying headboard first against the wall. He turned to ask Murotomi why he needed a shelter, then stopped when he saw the monk standing by a wall full of weapons that had not been there a few moments before. He sighed, then walked over to the display.

The weapons filled almost the entire wall, about thirty feet from side to side, and from the floor to about nine feet high.

The stone was chiselled out into box-shaped shelves and each shelf held one weapon. Some of the shelves were small, and held small weapons, like knives or dirks, and others were large and held weapons like bo staffs, naginatas and such. To his surprise, there were also several modern firearms in the cases.

Jake perused the collection for a few minutes, noticing while doing so that while a lot of the weapons were oriental, at least forty percent were from other countries. He picked up a bowie knife and after testing its weight and unsheathing it, he made a few passes with it, following a knife kata he'd been taught once by a combat instructor in the Philippines. Although he had not practiced the kata in several years and he was in a different body with a completely different centre of balance, Jake moved

Smoothly through the forms. When he finished, he moved to place the weapon back onto the shelf he'd gotten it from when Murotomi placed a hand on Jake's arm to stop him.

"Jake," he said quietly. "Why did you pick that weapon?"

Jake looked into the monk's eyes and saw an intensity that had not been there before. Uh-oh, he thought. What'd I do?

"Uh, I don't know, Kaji." He shrugged his shoulders. "It just looked good. And when I picked it up, it felt good, too." He hefted it a few times in his hand to illustrate the balance to the monk.

"Ok," Murotomi replied. "Can you feel anything special about it?"

Jake looked quizzically at the monk for a moment, then at the knife. He was about to say no when he saw something. A brief flickering of light surrounded the entire weapon then was gone. Jake squinted his eyes and looked closer. As he focused, the light returned. It was a rich golden colour that intensified for a few moments, then glowed steadily. It now looked like a fine golden mist that surrounded the entire weapon. He also felt a warmth and an energy coming from the knife. He stared at it, fascinated, then looked up at the monk and told him what he was seeing and feeling.

Murotomi stood there quietly as he listened to Jake's description. When Jake finished, the monk bowed deeply, then spoke.

"Jake-San," he said, using the honorific for an honoured or respected leader or elder. "You truly have the gift of discernment. The weapon had been sanctified. Can you pick out the other sanctified weapons here?" He waved his arm at the wall full of weapons. Jake took a moment to process the information, then nodded. He gave the knife to Kaji.

"I'll give it a try," he said then stepped back to the right side of the wall,

Where he started to look at each weapon. After only a few moments, he stepped in front of a long shelf that contained a dark-coloured, wooden Bo-Staff. It had symbols engraved into the wood from top to bottom and there was brass caps with more symbols and pictures at each end, and there was a two inch thick silver ring in the middle of the weapon. He could tell it was meticulously crafted. Jake saw the same golden mist surrounding the staff. He pointed to it and said, "This one," with complete confidence. The monk nodded his head.

"Any others, Jake-San?"

"Hold on," Jake replied. He walked slowly down the line until he was near the end, where he pointed to nunchaku set that looked to be made of some type of metal. He pointed to them. The monk nodded again.

"Very good, Jake-San. Do you have any experience with any of these weapons?"

"Yeah," Jake replied. I've had some training with all three of these types of weapons as part of my military training, although I've probably had the most training with knives. I had extensive combat training with or against knives, and I had a bowie knife I carried for about five years after my first combat deployment in Zool."

"That is good, Jake-San," Murotomi said. "Then you must carry the sanctified knife with you when we go to engage the demon in combat." He handed the knife back to Jake. Knowing that he would be going into combat with the weapon. Jake examined the knife a little closer.

The handle was dark and plain, with a small score pattern on it, which made it a little rough to the touch. That's good, Jake thought. If my hands gets slippery with sweat or blood, I can still keep a good grip on it.

The rest of the knife was unornamented. The silver colour that held the

handle to the tang had a small symbol on it and the butt plate at the end of the handle had the same symbol, but that was it. Murotomi told Jake that the symbol meant divine love. Jake nodded his head and placed the sheath, which was made of plain dark leather, over the blade, then attached it to his belt at his right side. The knife was so long, the point almost touched his knee. When he'd gotten it situated he went to the shelves and pulled down a .45 caliber pistol and two full clips. He put them in his pocket and asked the monk which weapon he'd be using.

"Both," Murotomi replied with a grin. He went to the shelf and picked up the metal nunchaku, then walked down the wall and took out the Bo staff. He came back to Jake. He took on a serious demeanour.

"Jake-San, are you ready to kill the demon now?"

Jake nodded, "Absolutely!"

"Good!" The monk went to the end of the wall and pushed a hidden button or lever, and a section of the wall raised from the floor and covered all of the shelves. Jake shook his head, then followed the monk out of the cavern, then back up to the hut, where they put the stone cap back on over the stairs and moved the bed back into place. The monk then changed clothes, putting on a pair of loose black jeans and a black long-sleeved pull over sweat shirt. He replaced his sandals with a pair of black high-topped athletic shoes. When he was done dressing, Jake asked if he had a car.

"Yes, Jake-San," he replied, then reached up onto the small mantle over the fireplace and brought two keys on a plain key ring down. He then placed the nunchaku on his shoulders, with the chain covering the back of his neck, and put the staff on his left shoulder, blew out both of the oil lamps and walked out the door. Jake took a deep breath, then followed closing the door behind him.

It only took them about five minutes to walk to the Hozo-Mon gate and leave the temple site. Murotomi's car, an old beat up Toyota, was parked in front of a small book store about a hundred meters down Nakamise-Dori street. When they reached the car, Murotomi opened the trunk and put the nunchaku in a large black nylon bag, then took the Bo staff off his shoulder, gripped it near the centre and twisted. To Jake's astonishment, the staff came apart in two four foot long sections. The monk placed them both into the bag, then asked Jake to put the pistol with them in case they were pulled over. Jake did so, remembering that unlike America, Japan was very intolerant of citizens carrying around firearms. He looked at him then grinned, as he remembered his friend's statement about the complexity of the Japanese people.

When they got into the car, Murotomi placed the key in the ignition, turned it to crank up the engine, then turned to Jake.

"Which way is the demon, Jake-San," he asked.

Jake closed his eyes and concentrated for a few moments. When he opened them, he pointed south-west.

"That way," he said.

The monk nodded, put the car in gear then drove out of the parking lot and into the dense Tokyo traffic. They drove through the city for about an hour before Jake felt his demon sense get stronger. Jake looked around. They were surrounded by skyscrapers. Neon lights flashed, cars passed by, honking horns and blinking multi-coloured lights. Hundreds of people walked or rode bicycles on the sidewalks and near the curbs. Jake hoped they didn't have to confront the demon in a place where a lot of innocent people could get hurt. He turned to Murotomi and told him they were getting close, then asked the monk where they were. The monk told him

They were in the Shinjuku ward. They had just left the entertainment area and were heading into the business district. Jake shook his head. He'd come full circle. His hotel was less than a mile away.

On their right, Jake saw the massive Tokyo Metro Government Building, which was immediately recognizable by the twin towers at the centre of the complex, and he could see a large wooded area in the distance that Murotomi told him was Tokyo's central park. He was beginning to hope that they would meet the demon there when he felt its presence to his left. He told Murotomi to turn. They turned and started down the street but were stopped by a road block. Behind the road block, there were about a dozen fire trucks; their lights were all flashing, and firemen and policemen moved back and forth in front of a skyscraper that had about twenty five or thirty stories.

Jake and Murotomi glanced at each other with grim expressions on their faces, then looked up toward the top of the building.

The top four or five stories were on fire.

Flames and smoke poured from the windows and filled the air, covering the moon.

Jake looked down the street and saw ambulances parked by the entrances of the building. As he watched, a crew was wheeling out the stretcher with a sheet-covered body on it. The sheet was very bloody. His heart sank. He turned and looked at Murotomi. The monk nodded.

They were going to have to go up there.

## CHAPTER TEN

Jake coughed and reached up to adjust his oxygen mask. Although he'd tightened it earlier, the straps kept pulling loose, causing smoke to leak around the seal.

Maybe that's why the mask was left on the back of the truck, he the mask resealed against his skin and he breathed in the oxygen from the tank strapped to his back.

He and Murotomi had parked the car and walked around the building until they'd seen a hose truck with no one near it. The two men had searched the hose truck's compartments and found two sets of uniforms, boots, oxy tanks and breather masks. They had put everything on and walked into the building without any problems. Jake's sense had led them to the twenty-second floor, right below the highest floor. They were walking down a smoke-filled corridor toward the back of the building. Jake was on the right side of the corridor and Murotomi was on the left. Jake paused at the door of an office. He opened the door and looked in. He patted his hand on the bowie knife at side, ready to pull it and use it a moment's notice.

Although the room was filled with smoke, he could still make out a good sized desk, a few chairs, some plants, and a body on the floor. He turned to the corridor and called to Kaji. When the monk got to the door, Jake pointed to the body, motioned for him to wait while he went in, then moved cautiously into the office. His sense told him the demon was near, but he didn't know how near.

When he got close enough to the body to see it clearly, his heart sped up in his chest. It was a fireman, and he was a bloody mess. He was laying on his stomach, his face toward the door. The oxygen tank was lying beside him, the straps torn. The back of the man's uniform was torn to shreds. Jake could see the bloody skin, and bones beneath the fabric. To Jake, it looked like some animal had eaten a big hole in the body.

Jake kneeled down next to the man, took off a glove, and reached down to check for a pulse, just to make sure. Nothing. Jake said a quick prayer, shook his head sadly and stood up. He looked around the office to see if there any other bodies, being careful to avoid stepping in the blood. When he moved around the side of the desk, he saw the fireman's axe. He picked it up and took it with him as he left the office. As he passed through the doorway, he nodded to Murotomi, then resumed his walk down the right side of the corridor. The monk moved to the left side and paced Jake as they continued their search. Murotomi gripped the Bo staff lightly in his right hand and the nunchaku hung within easy reach around his neck.

They check five more offices all smoke and flame filled. They found another body in one, a woman's, torn like the fireman's, before they came to the last office door in the corridor. An emergency fire exit was about ten feet away, closed. Jake went to it and propped it open, then returned. The office door was made from thick, dark wood, that was lacquered and polished which looked expensive. There was a silver plaque on it that read executive dining room. It stood open a few inches and smoke curled out around the edges to swirl into the corridor. Jake's sense told him the demon was in there. He looked over at Kaji to make sure he was ready. The monk nodded. Jake saw his eyes through the plastic lens of the mask and saw the determination there. He wondered briefly how his own face



looked, then mentally shrugged and focused on the coming confrontation. He hefted the fire axe in his hand then pushed the door open far enough to get through. He took his helmet off and quickly looked around the edge of the door, making sure the demon wasn't waiting in ambush.

When he saw that the immediate area was clear, he put the helmet on, tightened the straps to the mask, then, eased his way into the room. He waited for a moment as Murotomi followed him in, then looked around.

Although the room had a lot of smoke in it, it was not as thick as it had been in the corridor of the other offices. He could only see about fifteen to twenty meters around him. Jake saw six tables, small enough to fit two or three people, and a few larger tables for four or five, spread around the area. They had thickly cushioned chairs positioned around them. The room was only about twenty meters by twenty meters, with a six or seven meter high plaster ceiling that had track lighting fixtures to give light to the diners. There was thick, grey carpeting on the floor, and Jake could easily feel the difference between it and the carpeting in the corridor. Although he could see most of the room, the walls and corners were hazy, there were several objects and shoji screens that blocked his sight.

Jake walked into the room, his head moving slowly from side to side, keeping alert for any movement or anything out of place. His sense told him the demon was here in this room, so Jake was completely ready for a confrontation. He concentrated on the shoji screens in the two back corners of the room. They appeared to be the only things big enough to hide something human-sized. When he looked closer, he realized there were doors behind the screens, which he assumed led to the food preparation area. He looked over at Kaji, who was three meters away, and pointed to the two screens, indicating he should take the one on the left and Jake

would go to the right.

The monk gave him the ok sign and moved toward the left while Jake headed toward the other one. They both arrived at the doors at the same time. Jake noticed that the shoji screen was made of silk and had a very beautifully painted scene of fishermen pulling a net full of fish from the sea. He also noticed that the door behind the screen was open and that was where the smoke was coming from. His breathing was fast and he felt a little queasy. He took a few calming breaths to steady himself. Unfortunately, the body he was in was not very fit or healthy and it didn't help that all of the gear he was wearing weighed about forty pounds. He shrugged it off and moved into the doorway, then slid quietly around the corner.

The first thing he saw was that there was a grey non-slip floor. And there were small pools of red liquid spaced out in irregular spaces. Jake assumed the liquid was blood. He glanced to his left and made sure Kaji was there and had seen the blood. The monk nodded and moved towards a pair of ovens and stoves. Jake couldn't see anything more in that direction because of the smoke. He looked to his front and saw two stainless steel prep tables, with a variety of equipment to them, including blenders, mixers and two industrial type microwave ovens. Beside the microwaves were wooden spice racks and metal racks filled with knives, ladles and other utensils.

Pots and pans hung from racks from the ceiling and were also stored neatly beneath the tables. As he started to walk around them, Jake heard a noise.

It was a woman's voice.

"Please let us go!" It was followed by a fit of coughing, then a rumble of laughter.

Jake glanced over at Murotomi again. He saw through the pots and pans that the monk had heard the voice, and he knelt down, apparently in an effort to see under the rising smoke. He motioned for Jake to kneel down also. Jake did so and he could see ten feet further, but he didn't like what he saw.

There was a large walk-in freezer in the back wall. Its' door looked as if it had been torn off the hinges and was laying on the floor about ten feet to the right. Beside it, lay two bodies in a large puddle of blood.

There was a semi-circle of fire in front of the doorway that made it hard to see, but inside the freezer, Jake could see what he estimated were about a half dozen people, sitting on the floor. One woman, who was wearing a dark-coloured business suit, knelt inside the doorway, looking out. She held a wet cloth napkin over her mouth and nose in an effort to breathe better. Jake assumed that this was the woman who'd spoken a moment ago. His assumption was proved correct when the woman took the cloth from her face and repeated her earlier request. Jake was about to get up and try to help the people when he saw a movement to his left. He looked that way and his eyes widened.

A man walked out of the smoke and approached the doorway. At first glance, Jake thought the man was a fireman because he was dressed in a fire resistant uniform. The same uniform Jake and Murotomi were wearing. When Jake looked closer though, he noticed the man wasn't wearing a hat, mask or oxy tank. He also wasn't wearing any footwear. He walked through the chest-high flames as if they weren't there at all. When the man got to the doorway, he turned to the woman and stood there. The rumbling laughter Jake had heard a few moments ago returned, followed by a voice.

“Shut up, whore!” You're not getting out of here today.” To Jake's ears,

the voice started out normal, but then changed pitch to a deeper more guttural sound by the end. The man's form also changed by the end of the sentence.

Jake watched and his breath became faster as a haze surrounded the man and changed what he looked like from an average sized human being to a demon.

The demon stood about eleven feet tall. Its' skin was black with dark green splotches all over, and it had a very large pair of wings springing from its' back. Unlike Crocell's wings. Which had looked small and atrophied, these were full and looked as if they could be put to use and actually work. Jake realized that they would they would have to be his first target. As he thought this, Jake looked at the rest of the demon. Even though he'd seen Crocell and know this was a demon, its' appearance still shocked him.

Besides the wings, it had four arms; two in the normal place, and two sprouting out beneath the rib cage. The skin looked slick, kind of like a scale-less fish's, but not wet. It had what looked like small, very sharp fins running from mid-back to its' waist. The biggest shock though, was that there was not a head on its' shoulder. Jake grimaced in disgust as he saw a head, also black and green, and about normal human size with normal features except for the skin colour on a thick four or five-foot-long tail, that twitched from side to side like a cat's.

When he got over his immediate feeling of disgust, Jake became a little confused. The head, even though it was small for a demon's body, couldn't hold the demon's brain, or be used to see for that matter. For one, it was facing away from the front, and two, its' eyes had been closed the entire time Jake had been watching it. That didn't last long however.

Jake turned to Kaji to let him know the human fireman was the demon, using one of the pre-arranged signals they had practiced earlier. When he started to turn back to begin the attack on it, Jake's mask slipped again and he inhaled a lung full of smoke. He coughed. He tried to stop himself, but he couldn't. He lifted his hand quickly to the straps and tightened them, the move made awkward by the axe in his hand. When he was done, he looked toward the demon, hoping it had not heard the noise.

That hope was quickly squashed.

The tail had stopped its' twitching and was about a foot off the floor, facing in Jake's direction with its' eyes open. Jake stared at them a moment before springing into action. He didn't like what he saw. The momentary impression that he got was that they were all red, although there could have been other colours in there. He didn't care because he was running for the demon. He raised his axe and tried to strike as close to the right wing's root as he could, but as he closed in on it, the wing spread and the demon turned. It hit Jake solidly in the mid-section and threw him back about fifteen feet. He slammed into one of the prep tables, causing his oxygen tank to clang when it struck a lower shelf and the metal leg. He didn't know how he did it, but Jake shook off the effect of the blow and started to get up. He noticed he was still holding the axe. Then he saw Kaji running toward the demon who was focused on Jake and did not see him coming. The monk jumped through the ring of fire and struck the demon king, using the sanctified Bo staff. As he swung the staff in an arc, it glowed brightly, getting brighter as it got closer to the demon. When it actually struck the demon, the weapon flared brilliantly, causing Jake to raise his left hand to shade his eyes from the flare. He heard a solid thwack sound when it hit. The demon grunted from the impact and stumbled to the

side, falling through the curtain of flames on Jake's right. As soon as the demon king passed through, the flames decreased, not all of the way, but only a foot to two in height.

Kaji jumped through them and struck the Hell monster again, his Bo staff flashing as he attacked relentlessly. The demon king continued to stumble backwards as the blows landed. The monk was swinging the sanctified weapon so fast, Jake could only see a blur of motion, and it seemed that he was attacking from all directions at the same time. He was about to get up and try to attack the demon king from the side while it was distracted, but was stopped when he heard the woman who'd been in the freezer coughing. He looked over in that direction and saw the woman and five other people crawling out of the freezer.

Jake jumped up and ran to help to help them. He knelt down by the woman and asked if she knew where the fire exit was and asked if she could lead the others to it. She nodded her head. He looked in the woman's eyes and saw fierce determination there. Jake told her to hold the next person's hand, who Jake saw was a cook dressed in a cook's outfit. To stay below the smoke and get out fast. He then led them all through the ring of fire, which by now was only a pale flickering on the tiled floor. He led them to the door of the kitchen, then watched as they made their way through the dining area and out the door. He sighed with relief, then turned back to help Kaji. When he got to the back of the kitchen, he stopped short. Jake saw that it had let its' human form dissolve and its' true form now stood revealed to all. The demon had Kaji on the floor, holding him two of its' left arms and getting ready to plunge a large kitchen knife into the struggling monk's chest with one of its' right hands. The other arm was limp. Jake guessed that Kaji had somehow disabled it. Jake also noticed the

black mist that appeared around the demon similar to Crocell and the dozens of faces.

In the second or two Jake had before he reacted, he heard the demon saying something, but he didn't pay attention. He lifted the fire axe and in one fluid motion, stepped forward and threw it with all his force at the centre of the demon king's back.

The axe turned twice in the air and struck the demon six inches below the left wing root, making a meaty thumping sound when it hit. The force of the throw caused the axe head to penetrate the demon's skin and sink in three or four inches.

As soon as the axe hit the demon, its' three working arms spread wide, the muscles in its' back contracted, and it screamed. The sound was loud and hideous; similar to what Jake heard from Crocell. It only lasted a moment however.

The demon king spun toward Jake, knocking Kaji in the side while turning. The monk slide across the floor and struck the wall. The sanctified Bo staff rolled across the floor and under a table.

Jake stared at him a moment, relieved when he saw the monk sit up and shake his head. When he turned his eyes back to the demon, he gasped in shock and disgust.

The demon had another face in the middle of its' chest, and it was just as hideous as the rest of its' body.

It had a snout like a crocodile, in the centre, just above where the sternum would be in a normal person, and it stuck out about three feet. They were slit-pupil like a crocodile's too, but the slit was red and the eyes were sunk into the chest a few inches above the snout instead of being in the snout. Jake's mouth went dry when those eyes focused on him and the snout

opened, revealing hundreds of sharp, yellow teeth. Very large teeth. The demon reached behind its' back with its' lower left arm and pulled the axe out of its' back. Jake heard a wet, sucking sound as the fireman's tool came out of the demon's skin. The demon moved slowly toward Jake, the axe in its' lower left hand and the kitchen knife in its' upper right hand. As it moved, it spoke to Jake.

“So, you're a demon stalker, eh?” Its' eyes assessed Jake, looking him up and down.

“You don't look like much to me.” Its' lips peeled back from the teeth and Jake heard more than saw the sneer in its' voice.

Jake was momentarily surprised that the demon knew what he was but then understood when he felt an intrusion in his mind; something foreign, unclean. Jake immediately closed his mind to the demon. He didn't know how he did it; it was instinctive, natural.

The demon stopped seven feet away from Jake, far enough away from Jake to be out of Jake's immediate striking range, but close enough to strike Jake if it took a step forward and reached out with the axe. Jake clearly measured the distance and reached down to the knife at his side, placing his hand on the handle but not pulling it out of the sheath.

The demon noticed the movement but ignored it.

“So, Jake Steele,” it said. “I see you can block me from your mind. Let's see if you can also block pain.”

As soon as the demon said the word, pain, Jake felt excruciating agony throughout his entire body. Jake had experienced pain before, but nothing like this. It felt like all of the nerves in his body were on fire. His eyes, his nose, his ears, mouth, even his heart hurt. The pain was so intense he couldn't think straight. He fell to his knees and had a flashback.



He was back in Afghanistan, in the clearing just after the claymores had torn his men apart. He could smell the smoke in the air around him and the odor of burnt flesh stuck in the back of his throat. He looked around. Dead bodies surrounded him. Severed arms, legs, heads laying all over the clearing. Torsos were split open and entrails were spilled over the ground, their contents splattering the grass around them like a macabre painting.

Jake stood there a moment, stunned, then saw a movement in front of him. It was an Al-Qaeda terrorist. Jake reached for his rifle, but it was gone. He then reached for his pistol and pulled it out of the holster, only to find it was a knife. He shrugged his shoulders and grinned savagely, then ran toward the terrorist.

When he got close, Jake thrust the knife at the enemy, intending to disembowel him but the man moved quickly to the side to avoid the blade. Jake pivoted and sent a kick to the man's left leg, intending to break it and get him on the ground. He struck the leg, but the man moved at the last second and it was only a glancing blow. The man skipped back when Jake adjusted his grip on the knife and tried to slash him across the mid-section. That's when Jake saw the knife and axe. His instincts made him move quickly.

He fainted for another strike at the left side of the mid-section, then when the man moved to block, Jake changed his swing and slashed at the man's arm. The move worked. He cut a deep gash in the bicep and the man dropped the axe and screamed. Before Jake could press his advantage however, Jake was hit from the side; a massive blow that threw him several feet in the air. He landed on the floor, tumbled and rolled four or five times before coming to a stop against a wall. He lost his mask and oxygen tank during the tumble and started coughing when he inhaled smoke. That's

when he came back to his senses and realized he was in an office building in Japan and not in Afghanistan. Another thing he realized was that the pain the demon had been projecting at him was gone. That was the good news. The bad news was that the demon was coming toward him, and he looked angry.

As Jake struggled to get up, he noticed that the demon's upper left arm, the one that had been holding the axe, had a deep cut in the crook, just above the elbow joint where the bicep muscle joined the forearm. Blood, dark and vicious, flowed from the cut and down the forearm to the hand, where it dripped from the demon's clawed fingers onto the floor. As it walked, its clawed feet scraped on the non-slip tiles.

When the demon got to within a few feet, Jake tried to lunge forward in an effort to try to cut the demon's Achilles tendon. He figured if he could disable one of its' legs, the demon might be easier to fight. Unfortunately, the demon saw it coming, and it moved faster than Jake.

It kicked Jake's forearm. The blow was so hard that it knocked the knife from his hand. Jake heard the sanctified weapon clatter against the wall and strike the ground somewhere beside him. It put its' knees on Jake's thighs and grasped his throat with its' right hand. It pinned Jake's right arm to the ground with its' good left hand. The other two arms were limp and hung down from the demon's centre to lay on the floor beside Jake's waist. Jake struggled to get free, but even with the two arms the demon was too strong.

While Jake was struggling to get lose, the demon crouched over Jake, its' eyes watching Jake's face and its' snout only inches from Jake's chest. It spoke.

"Well, Jake Steele, Demon Stalker, it looks like you're not so good at your job now are you?" It chuckled evilly. Jake gagged as he smelled the

foul breath coming from the beast's mouth. He turned his head to the side to try to avoid it.

“So, what am I going to do with you, little man? Should I eat you?” It opened its' mouth wide and Jake's heart rate doubled. His breathing rattled raggedly in his chest as he looked inside the evil beast's throat. He shuddered in disgust when he saw pieces of shredded, bloody skin and clothes sticking between some of the teeth. He struggled with all of his might to get free, twisting, turning, even trying to gouge out the creature's eyes with his free left hand, but the demon just closed its' eye lids when he got too close. They were thick and too hard to penetrate. He tried hitting its' ribs and smashing its' snout, but only hurt his hand. He started to shove his hand in the demon's mouth in a desperate attempt to grab at its' tongue in an effort to hurt the demon, maybe enough to get it to flinch enough for Jake to work his way loose somehow, when an idea suddenly occurred to him.

“Before you—“ His voice cracked because his mouth was dry. He coughed and tried again. “Before you eat me demon, I have two questions for you.” He held his breath, hoping the demon's curiosity and ego would compel it to stop in order to listen to Jake's questions.

It did. The demon moved back about a foot and stared at Jake, its' eye lids covering half of the slit eyes.

“And what would those be,” It said suspiciously.

“The first question is, what is your name?”

A look of surprise came into the demon's eyes for a moment, then it chuckled again. “Why do you want to know my name, human? That won't prevent me from eating you!”

“Well, if it won't prevent you from eating me, what's the harm in telling

me,” Jake asked.

“Alright, I’ll play a long,” the demon said. “My name is Orias. Are you satisfied, Jake Steele?”

Jake nodded and started to say something, but the demon king stopped him before he could speak.

“Now, what was your second question?” It stared intensely at Jake and Jake swallowed, remembering to concentrate on keeping his mind closed to Orias thoughts.

“My second question, Orias,” he spoke slowly trying to keep the demon’s attention. “is, why would you want to kill me when you know I’ll be coming back in a new body; one that you won’t recognize, and probably with more weapons. What kind of sense does that make? You’re a demon king, you’ve got to be smarter than that.”

Orias stared at Jake for a few moments that seemed like an eternity to Jake, then answered the question.

“You know, Demon Stalker, you’re not as dumb as you look.” It moved back a foot while still holding Jake’s arm and throat. It stared at Jake for a moment, then smiled.

Jake had a bad feeling.

“I have a better idea,” it said. “A much better idea.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s that,” Jake asked.

“Instead of releasing your spirit to return in another body, I’m going to bind it to this body so that when I kill you, your spirit will stay with me for eternity, like the others that are here now.” It briefly released Jake’s right arm to gesture to the spirits surrounding it in the mist. Before Jake could react and think of what to do with his right hand Orias pinned it again, then simultaneously started humming and chanting strange, guttural sounds.

As soon as Jake heard the sounds, he felt a strange tightness inside him, a feeling that increased as the demon king continued to chant. The feeling of tightness was joined by a sudden overwhelming surge of claustrophobia, as if everything was closing in on him. His body started shaking intensely and became filled with pain. His back arced and he screamed uncontrollably for what seemed like hours when that chanting and the pain suddenly stopped. It took him a few moments to recover enough to realize that the weight on top of him was gone.

Jake looked up, to see Kaji had recovered, found the sanctified Bo staff, and engaged the demon king in combat.

Kaji moved with fluid grace and speed of a martial artist master, matching up with the superior strength and speed of Orias.

The monk slashed at the demon king's side in an attempt to slash the ribs in between the lower and upper arms. Orias stepped back, twisted and aimed and outstretched wing at Kaji's face. The monk ducked and dove to the demon's right, rolled once, jumped to his feet and pivoted while slashing at Orias' right leg. The demon king moved, causing the Bo staff to land only to land a glancing blow to the calf. The sanctified weapon flashed brilliantly, and although the hit was only slight, it staggered Orias, and the demon king fell to one knee.

Kaji moved in, trying to disable the demon's right wing with an overhand strike, but Orias leaped backwards, twisted and struck the monk in the chest with the back of its' right fist. Kaji saw the blow coming and managed to move with it to lessen the impact, although the demon king's strength was that it still knocked the monk back a few feet. He didn't seem too badly affected though, because he jumped back toward the creature and struck again, this time by thrusting the staff at the demon king's torso in an

effort to strike its' face, maybe trying to penetrate the creature's brain. Jake's heart momentarily sped up, hoping the monk would kill it and end the battle.

Orias quickly twisted to the side and snapped its' snout at the staff, catching it in its' mouth and holding it there for a moment. Jake thought for a moment it was going to try to break the sanctified weapon, but he didn't factor in the strength of the staff or the speed of Kaji Murotomi.

The monk stepped sideways and yanked the staff hard to his left. The staff flared bright as the sun and Jake heard the crunching sound of several teeth breaking from Orias' jaw. Kaji pulled the staff from the demon king's snout but was stopped when Orias surprisingly grabbed the end of the staff with its' left claw. The staff glowed brightly again and Jake saw smoke coming from the demon's jaw and from the hand that held the sanctified weapon. The demon yanked on the staff in an effort to get the monk off balance, but Kaji was much too experienced for such a move, and he had a surprise move of his own.

As Orias pulled, Kaji pushed and twisted. The staff came apart in the centre. Creating two separate four-foot long Jo-sticks, a Japanese weapon which was usually used in pairs, similar to Philippino fighting sticks. Orias was momentarily surprised and this caused the demon king to hesitate. Kaji quickly took advantage of the hesitation. In one fluid motion that he must have practiced thousands of times, the monk turned sideways, placed his palm on the bottom of the staff. And shoved it forward into the demon king's left eye. Jake saw the eye lid close reflectively to protect the eye, but it didn't help. When the staff touched the demon king's flesh, it blazed with divine light and penetrated the eye lid as if it were a piece of paper. The light was accompanied by heat that just as easily destroyed the

creature's eye. This brought an immediate action.

Before Kaji could press his advantage and push the staff farther in to penetrate the demon king's brain, Orias struck the monk in his chest with one hand and pulled the staff out of its' eye with the other. The staff continued to blaze with divine light until the demon dropped it to the floor, where it joined the other piece of the staff. Kaji flew backwards until he struck the wall and fell to the ground in a limp about five feet from Jake. The force of the blow was so strong, he didn't know if the monk had survived or not. Jake stared at him for a moment and was relieved to see the man's chest move as he breathed. As he stared at Kaji, the demon suddenly put its' claws on its' ruined eyes and screamed in pain.

Jake tore his gaze from the monk, jumped to his feet, and ran to attack the demon, keeping to the side of its' ruined eye to prevent being seen. When he was within striking distance, Jake lunged forward and thrust the sanctified knife in an underhanded grip towards the creature's upper stomach, intending to penetrate its' body just below the jaw and thrust up either into the brain or heart, whichever organ was there.

Unfortunately, the heart's reflexes were too fast.

The demon king somehow saw the motion and lashed out, striking Jake's forearm with its' left hand. The force of the blow was so strong, it broke his two wrist bones, separated Jake's shoulder, and drove him to his knees. The knife flew out of Jake's hand, sailed over the demon king's shoulder, and was lost in the smoky room. Jake heard it hit a metallic surface then clatter to the floor about the same pain from his broken forearm and separated shoulder hit him.

Struggling to breath in the smoky room and ignoring the intense pain, Jake reached down with his good right arm, grabbed the shortened staff

laying in front of him and slammed it into the demon's lower back, near where a human's kidney would be. The staff blazed with light again and a puff of smoke appeared where the staff struck the skin.

The demon king grunted and turned toward Jake while stepping back a few paces. It looked at Jake for a few moments, panting in obvious pain. Blood, black and vicious, leaked from its' ruined eye socket and the broken teeth in its' mouth.

"Demon Stalker," it said. The creature's mouth barely moved and the words were slurred. "I'm tired of playing with you."

The demon king jumped forward and before Jake could react, kicked Jake in the chest. The blow was so hard, Jake felt his ribs break and both of his lungs collapse. He flew back through the air and struck the wall with his back. He heard more of the bones crunch from the force of the impact and saw a flash of intense light before he collapsed to the ground. Jake watched helplessly as the demon king walked over to Kaji, picked him up, and walked toward the exit. Smoke swirled around the demon and engulfed its' body as it passed the ovens. The last thing Jake saw before falling unconscious was the demon's second head swaying on the tail as it moved away. Its' eyes stared malevolently back at him and it smiled evilly before it faded from view.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Jake woke up in the hospital. He knew it immediately from the antiseptic smell. All of the hospitals Jake had been in around the world had smelled the same way, so he wasn't surprised when he heard a voice on the intercom asking a doctor to report to radiology.

What did surprise him was that he was not lying in a bed with his arm in a cast and a sling.

He looked around. He was lying on a couch with thick cushions in what had to be a small waiting room. There was a half dozen thick-cushioned wooden chair spread out around the carpeted area, with another couch on the other side by a large curtained window. There was small wooden table with some books and magazines spread out on it with a medium-sized flat screen television that was showing some kind of game show without any sound. Everything was neat and orderly.

Jake looked over his shoulder and saw a nurse through the large plate glass window there. The lights were dim in the corridor and the waiting room. Everything seemed calm out there, so Jake assumed that he was not on a critical floor.

Before Jake turned away, he saw a ghostly image of himself in the window, superimposed over the desk. He stared at the image for a few moments, wondering why he'd travelled to another body directly and not gone to the bar as he had before. Then he remembered all of the smoke surrounding him, and he thought that the man might be dead occurred to Jake. He also wondered what happened to Kaji.

His heart plummeted and he sat there thinking of all the friends and

comrades he'd lost over the years. He leaned his face into his hands. His gazed grew unfocused and pictures of their faces flickered on the screen of his optic nerve, moving backward in time from his first host, Stephen, and then to those who'd died during the armoured car robbery, and finally, to his teammates who'd been killed on his failed mission to Afghanistan. The screams and the smell of blood and burnt skin filled his senses, then the images ceased suddenly when someone passed through his field of vision. It was two firemen, and they were wearing the fire suits; the same suit that Jake had been wearing earlier.

Jake shook his head to dispel the final vestiges of his disastrous mission from his mind, then walked out of the waiting room, turning toward the direction of the two men who had been walking and followed. It was a fairly short corridor, with patient rooms on both sides.

As Jake walked, he looked down. He was wearing a long-sleeved pinstriped oxford shirt with a loosen tie around his neck, a pair of suit pants, and dress-shoes that made a light tapping sound as each foot struck the floor. His balance felt good and his body felt very fit, more fit than his previous host at least. Jake guessed from the thick calluses on the edge of the man's hands that he practiced martial arts, was even a high ranking student or maybe an instructor. He patted his pants pockets then pulled out a wallet. He looked inside and found documents that named him as a Sheiji Tanaka, the same last name as Jake's previous host. He speculated on the implications of that as he returned the wallet to the pocket and walked into the room the firemen had turned into. He stopped short when he almost ran into the back of one of the men.

There were over a dozen firemen in the small room, surrounding a bed. A bed with someone in it. Jake moved his head a little and shifted his body to

try to catch a glimpse of the person. After a few moments, one of the men nearest the bed moved and Jake got a clear view. He gasped in surprise.

It was Toshi Tanaka, his former host, and he was alive.

As soon as Jake saw the man, he felt a surge of pain throughout his entire body, similar to the pain he'd felt when the demon king had been chanting over Jake while pinning him to the floor. It wasn't as intense, it made his knees buckle and he shot out a hand to lean heavily against the nearest wall.

One of the firemen saw him and reached out a hand to grasp Jake's shoulder. He was young, maybe in his early twenties, with chubby cheeks, that were smudged with soot and sweat.

"Are you alright, sir," the man asked. Jake looked at his eyes and read the concern etched there. He thought fast.

"Y-yes. I'm alright, thank you. That—that is my brother." He pointed to the bed.

The fireman's face changed from concern to sympathy and he stepped back and bowed.

"I am so sorry, sir." He turned in the direction of the bed and spoke to one of the other men. When the young man was through talking, the other man, who looked like he was in his forties or fifties and was wearing a dress uniform with rank insignia and other regalia that identified him as some type of commander, turned toward Jake, bowed politely and asked Jake if he could speak to him in the hall. Some of the other men glanced his way but turned back and ignored him out of politeness.

Jake nodded and walked out of the room. The officer followed him. They walked a few feet away, in between Tanaka's room and the next one. Jake turned toward the officer and waited. He was still in pain but only about

ten percent of what he'd experienced in the room itself. It must have something to do with my proximity to Tanaka's body, he thought. He grimaced as a wave of pain struck him then dissipated.

"Sir, are you alright," the officer asked. He stood there for a moment and Jake gave him a quick once over. When he looked closer, Jake saw that the man was older than his first guess. He had heavy 'crow's feet' on the outside of his eyes. A thick, wide nose that looked as if it had been broken several times and a small scar on his chin, peeking out from a day's growth of salt and pepper coloured stubble. Jake thought the man was in his early fifties. Looking at the uniform, he noticed that it was pressed and clean. Jake recognized the Japanese insignia for Captain on the shirt collar and read the name on the metal name plate over the man's right breast pocket.

"Yes, Captain Maruniho, I'm alright. Thank you for asking." He put his hand to his face and rubbed the unfamiliar features for a moment as he thought.

"It has been a very long day, and my brother—" he gestured to the room and shrugged helplessly, allowing the man to come to his own conclusions.

The Captain nodded sympathetically.

"I understand, Sir," he said. Do you mind if I ask you some questions about your brother?" He reached into a pocket in his pants and pulled out a small notepad, then pulled a pen from his shirt pocket. That's when Jake realized that this man was not a fireman, but a policeman. His thoughts swirled. He's going to want to know what Tanaka was doing at the building, why he had a knife and why he was dressed in fire gear. He had to be very careful what he said.

"Can you show me some identification, please," the Captain asked.

Jake pulled out his wallet and showed the identification inside to the police

Captain. The man looked at them for a few moments, wrote something in his notepad, then handed them back to Jake.

“When was the last time you spoke to your brother,” he asked.

Jake ran his left hand through his hair as he thought.

“I talked to him this afternoon when he had lunch,” he said. “He was in the city for a business conference and we got together. We rarely see each other when he was transferred to Sapporo for his job. We were supposed to meet tonight and go out.”

“Oh?” Where did he work,” Maruniho asked. He looked at Jake curiously and held the pen poised over the notepad.

Jake told him the name of the company remembering it from his exploration of Tanaka’s belongings while in the hotel room earlier that day. The Captain wrote it down. He looked up when he was through writing. Here it comes, Jake thought.

“If he worked for...” He glanced quickly at the notepad. “Sakura Foods. Why was he at the Seiko office building and dressed as a fireman?” He stared hard at Jake, waiting for an answer.

“He had an appointment with one of their purchasing directors,” Jake said smoothly, remembering from the papers he’d read, that Tanka was a sales representative from that company.

“As for the fireman’s clothes, I have no idea why he would be wearing them.” He shrugged and kept a neutral expression on his face.

Maruniho stood there for a moment, nodding his head with a sad expression on his face and scribbling in his notebook. Jake listened to the pen making scratching noises as it moved across the paper. When the pen stopped, the police Captain looked up.

“So, Mr. Tanaka, you look to be in good shape. Do you practice Martial

Arts?” At first, the question seemed innocuous, but Jake instantly understood where the man was going to lead him. He allowed his face to show startlement.

“Why, yes I do. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, I just noticed the calluses on your hands.” He nodded towards Jake’s hands. “How long have you been practicing,” he continued.

“Most of my life,” Jake said noncommittally.

“Ah,” Maruniho nodded his head.

“And what about your brother? Does he practice?” He looked Jake in the eyes and squinted a little when he asked, a sign that this was a serious question, belying the casual way he said it.

“No, not that I know,” Jake said while shaking his head. He remembered how soft the man’s hands had been and how he’d had that twenty to thirty pounds of fat around his middle. “He’s more of an inside person, someone who does not exercise much in any way.” Jake decided to elaborate a little. “He’s been that way since we were children.” He stopped there and looked at the police Captain, waiting for the obvious question.

Maruniho didn’t keep him waiting.

“Mr. Tanaka, can you think of any reason why your brother would have had a Bo staff and a military type combat knife?”

Jake stepped back and allowed his mouth to drop open, and his eyes to widen in astonishment for a moment.

“What are you talking about,” he asked.

“Well, what I’m saying is that these weapons were found near your brother when he was rescued from the fire. There was an office worker dead in the freezer and a fireman dead down the hall from him. Both with apparent slashes and stab wounds. Now, the knife we found had blood on it

that we thought was from the fireman.”

Jake started to say something, to protest, but Maruniho held up a hand to stop him.

“Wait sir, I’m not through,” he said. “As I was saying, we THOUGHT it belongs to the fireman. That was before we heard the stories of the fire workers that were being held in the building by some kind of psychopath who was dressed like a fireman too. They said that they set the fires and trapped them in the storage freezer, then killed one of the men who’d tried to escape. Shortly after that, they said your brother and another man attacked the psychopath and got those people safely out of the area. From what I gathered, it was quite an intense fight. They said some other things that were a little crazy, but that’s of no importance.” He waved his hand in front of his face, as if he were erasing those strange stories.

Jake shook his head, with astonishment. “I’m assuming that you’re going to ask me if I might know who this other man was and what reason he was helping my brother to stop this-this psychopath from killing those people, right?” He was taking the offensive here, in an effort to lead the questions, to keep the Captain off balance and preventing him from catching Jake with a surprise.

The Captain nodded his head and started to say something. Jake interrupted him as a thought occurred to him.

“Captain, the only reason I can think of for my brother to have those weapons would be to maybe present them as a gift.” He took a deliberately shaky breath and rubbed his face again.

“Since we rarely saw each other, he would bring me gifts whenever we would get together.” The Captain started to ask something but this time Jake held his hand up, “never anything large or elaborate. Just things that

had personal meaning to us.” Jake shook his head and lowered his eyes as if contemplating his ‘brother’s’ relationship. He didn’t like lying, especially to a police officer, but in this case he felt he had to. He was about to raise his head and ask the police Captain where the weapons were when a fireman ran from Tanaka’s room and yelled for a nurse. An alarm started ringing from the room.

Maruniho turned, and Jake followed him as he rushed into the room. When they got there, Jake gasped as the pain hit him fully again. He looked to the bed. Two firemen stood over Tanaka performing CPR, pumping his chest and breathing into the man’s lungs. Although his chest was covered in bandages, Jake could see wires that ran from his upper body to monitors beside the bed, and two IV’s to his arms. He must have been burned after I left, Jake thought.

His thoughts were interrupted as a doctor came swiftly through the door, followed by two nurses, one pushing a cart with a defibrillator and other items on it into the room. The doctor went directly to the bed and ordered the men who were not performing CPR to leave the room. After they had left, it only took a few moments for the nurses to set up the machine beside the bed. They put a breathing mask and pump over his mouth and nose and squeezed the bulb to inflate his lungs. When the defibrillator was charged and ready, the doctor took the paddles and had everyone move away, then placed them on an exposed area of Tanaka’s chest and released the charge. Tanaka’s body jumped as the charge ran through him. The doctor looked at the heart monitor to see if the heart was working. Jake heard a steady tone, signifying that the heart was not beating. Flatline, he thought to himself.

The doctor tried again, with still no response. He told one of the nurses to give him some adrenaline. He injected it directly into Tanaka’s heart and



let the fireman continue pumping his chest. The monitor still continued to ring in a steady tone.

While Jake watched the doctor continue with his efforts, he noticed something strange. From where he stood against the wall by the door, he saw a hazy shimmering spot, about the size of, or maybe a little larger than, a basketball. Jake rubbed his eyes, then glanced at the nurses and the police Captain beside him, but they didn't appear to see it. He watched the spot for several minutes while the doctor continued to work on Tanaka, once more putting the electrically charged defibrillator paddles on the dying man's chest in an effort to restart his heart. When he lifted them, the monitor continued to ring. He stopped the fireman and the nurse from continuing their efforts to resuscitate Tanaka. He looked at his watch.

"I'm calling the time of death at zero three eighteen." He walked over to Jake and bowed respectfully.

"I am sorry, sir," he said, a note of resigned anger in his voice. Jake guessed that the man didn't like to lose patients. He bowed, shook the man's hand and thanked him for trying. As the doctor left, taking the nurses with him, Jake walked over to the bed. He looked down at Tanaka's body, hardly recognizing the face he'd seen in the mirror five or six hours ago. He leaned against the bed, panting from the pain he was feeling and the mental anguish from losing another innocent. He lightly touched the unbandaged side of Tanaka's face, said a brief prayer, hoping that this man was saved and asking for forgiveness. Tears came to his eyes and he let them fall for a few minutes, totally unashamed.

When he felt some of the sadness decrease, Jake looked up and saw that he was alone in the room. He started to make his way to the door when he noticed the hazy spot again. It was about four feet over the bed. When Jake

looked at it, he rubbed his eyes, thinking it was maybe some kind of dust or something in his eyes, but it stayed there in the same place. Jake started to shrug it off and leave when the ball of haze moved. Jake watched curiously as it floated down until it was at eye level about three feet away from him. It floated there for a few moments, then distorted and transformed into a face. Jake's jaw dropped as he recognized the face. It was Toshi Tanaka!

Jake watched as Tanaka's features sharpened, then looked at Jake. Its' mouth moved. He was trying to say something. Jake stared at the floating head, trying to make out the words, it looked like he was saying, 'I'll be ok.' Jake looked at the doorway to make sure no one was there. "You're going to be ok," he asked quietly.

'Yes,' the figure mouthed and nodded. Jake breathed a sigh and was about to ask the figure a question, when it turned and floated toward the bed. It stayed a few feet above Tanaka's body for a moment, then disappeared. When it did, the pain Jake had been feeling disappeared also.

Jake shook his head, wondering why that had just happened. He shrugged it off and glanced at the body again. His anger came back. He turned toward the doorway to leave, the tears were dry now; the sadness left his face to be replaced by a look of anger and determination. He was going to find Kaji and send Orias back to Hell tonight.

When he walked into the hallway, he saw Maruniho down by the nurse's station, talking to the doctor who'd tried to save Tanaka and taking notes. Jake glanced to his right and saw a corridor that branched off from this one. He looked back at the police Captain and saw the man folding his notebook closed. Jake didn't have time to waste, answering the man's questions, but he still needed some kind of sanctified weapon to defeat

Orias. An idea came to him. He quickly crossed to the other corridor, walked until he saw an elevator, entered it and pushed the button for the lobby. When he got there, he made his way to the exit. He saw a cab in the parking lot and got in, asked the driver to take him to the nearest internet café. When they got there, Jake paid the man and walked into the café. He was surprised that there were about three dozen people using the computers or sitting there talking quietly.

He walked to the counter and was about to order an espresso, when he saw that the café sold alcohol. Behind the counter, there two or three dozen shelves stocked with different types of alcohol, and there were three different areas, each fronted by glass doors and containing different varieties of beers and fast foods. He started to ask for a bottle of black velvet, but stopped himself. He only wanted a little buzz, not to knock himself out.

Jake walked to one of the coolers and pulled out a six pack of Michelob beer, paid for it and paid for an hour of internet time, using some cash that was in his host's wallet.

Jake walked to an empty table at the back the back of the store near the wall and sat down, making sure to face the door. He moved the chair so that the twenty-four inch monitor was blocking his head from sight from the outside but he could still see anyone who approached the store. He set the six pack on the table and opened one of the bottles, then lifted it to his lips. It only took him twenty seconds to drink the whole beer.

He put the empty bottle back in the cardboard container and took the second bottle, opened it, and placed on the table beside the keyboard. He burped, loudly enough for a few young people that looked like college students at the table next to him to look up from their conversation and

stare at him. He stared at them angrily and they turned away and continued their conversation.

Jake turned to the monitor, moved the keyboard to a comfortable position, then typed in the store's WIFI password. He then entered the website Father McLanahan had told him to go to in order to contact him. The high speed connection put him through in a matter of seconds. He looked at the clock in the top right corner of the computer screen, then calculated the time difference between Japan and U.S. He hoped that the priest was not on the flight to the Vatican yet, or if he was, that he could still get in touch with him.

The website popped up and he clicked seven pages into it then put his mouse arrow on the blank area McLanahan had told him about and clicked the left button seven times. The screen went black. Jake quickly moved the arrow up to the top left of the screen and clicked the left button twice. A small blinking cursor appeared and the rest of the screen stayed blank. Jake typed in the password and waited. The cursor disappeared and the screen stayed blank for two minutes. Jake fought the urge to tap the mouse buttons to try to make things go faster. McLanahan had told him this was the process, and if any buttons were clicked after the password, it would disable the whole sign-in process for twenty-four hours and that password would be disabled permanently, plus, someone would be notified of what happened, so basically, he'd been told not to screw it up. He took a few sips of beer as he waited.

After the two minutes was up, the screen printed a question. WHO IS THIS? He typed in his name and hit enter. He waited thirty seconds. What can we do for you? It said. Jake typed, I've confronted Orias. It took Kaji. I was hurt, but somehow switched hosts. I need another sanctified weapon—

need a firearm—two of the three Kaji had are in police custody. He gave an abbreviated version of the encounter, then waited for a response. This time, it took almost five minutes. Jake sat back and finished two more beers while waiting for the answer.

When the answer finally came, he turned to the couple at the next table and asked if he could borrow a pen and piece of paper. When they gave him the items, he thanked them and wrote down the information, logged off of the website, gave the students back their pen and gave them two of his beers. He drank the last one, got up, walked out of the café, and hailed a cab. He gave the cab driver the address of the Sensoji Temple and sat back in the car, trying to relax. The driver didn't say much to Jake, somehow sensing that he wanted peace and quiet. The beer helped a little, but his thoughts raced as he worried about Kaji. What could the demon be doing with him? Was he still alive or dead? He hoped the demon wasn't torturing the monk. He remembered what Crocell had done to McLanahan and he felt sickened. He tried to keep his thoughts in check, but the same images of McLanahan hanging bloody on the cross flashed in his mind. He stared out the car window, his eyes unfocused, not seeing anything until they passed a large building with a small blue and red neon cross on the roof. The light brought him out of his trance. He stared at it as the cab passed it and recognized the building as a church. A feeling tagged at his heart.

Jake told the driver to pull into the church. The driver, a small Japanese man, with a sour expression on his face turned to him in surprise, but Jake motioned back toward the church, pointing with his thumb. The man shrugged his shoulders philosophically and made his way to a place where they could turn around. Once they got to the small parking lot in front of

the church, Jake handed him some bills and asked if he would wait for him. The man's face expressed surprise for a moment, then he nodded as he quickly folded the money into his pocket.

Jake got out of the car and stared up at the cross, then at the church. It was a fairly small building, maybe twenty feet wide by twenty feet high. He took a few steps to the door, which was made of rough, hewn wood that looked unfinished. He grasped the knob and turned it, knowing instinctively that it would be unlocked.

It was. He opened the door and looked in. As soon as he entered, Jake felt a calmness envelope him. His swirling thoughts slowed and then cleared. He breathed a sigh of relief, then looked around.

The place was small, but it looked comfortable. Jake guessed that the distance from the door to the back was fifty to sixty feet. There was a tightly woven carpet on the floor that looked worn, but clean. Fifty padded chairs, were arranged in five rows of five on each side of a narrow aisle, which showed more wear than the rest of the rest of the carpet.

In front of the row stood a nicely appointed pulpit made of a dark stained wood, with a cross on the front made in a nicely contrasting lighter shade that drew his eyes to it. To one side, there were a dozen chairs facing the door, and a keyboard, electronic drum set, a few guitars, some equalizers, and amplifiers. He looked closer and saw some wires running from the equipment to the amps, then to the holes in the concrete walls. He looked at four large speakers bracketed to the walls about seven or eight feet above the floor and imagined the music playing in here. A song of praise he'd sung as a child came to his mind and he hummed it quietly as he made his way to the front of the church.

When he got there, Jake knelt down on his knees in front of the pulpit and

stared at the cross. After a few moments, he closed his eyes and started to pray.

Jake didn't use any flowery or pretentious words. He talked to God as he would his father or to one of his commanding officers.

“God, thank you for caring about me and loving me. I don't know why I was picked to do this, but I prove worthy of your decision. Father, please protect Kaji. Orias has him and there's no telling what kind of pain he's experiencing, what kinds of torture the demon is inflicting on him. Please protect him from the pain and give me the strength to defeat Orias. Thank you Lord. In Jesus name, Amen.

Jake knelt there for another minute or two, taking in the feelings of comfort and peace that surrounded him, then stood up and walked down the aisle toward the entrance. When he got to the door, he turned and looked at the pulpit for a moment, and thought to himself that he'd like to come back here after he takes care of Orias and rescued Kaji. He nodded his head, then walked out, got into the cab and told the driver to go. Jake's thoughts turned to his plans as he watched the neon cross get smaller as they moved farther away. As it disappeared in the distance, he turned back to the front while mentally preparing himself for the coming battle. If anyone could have seen his face at that moment, the look of fierce determination, they would have gotten out of his way very quickly.

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Thirty minutes later.....

Jake walked past Shitimachi Museum on his left and toward the edge of

Shinobaz pond. He'd come here after going back to Kaji's quarters at the temple where he'd gone down to the cave, gotten some of the weapons there, including an MP-5 Heckler & Koch sub-machine gun with a silencer on it and two flash-bang grenades. He also carried a Samurai sword. Following instructions he'd gotten from the Sons of Solomon website, he'd gone to another area of the cave and had found the sword hidden in a recess in the floor beneath some crates of camping gear. After retrieving the weapons, Jake found another cab and followed his demon sense to Ueno park, which was only about a ten minute ride from the temple. The cab had let him out in front of the museum and he'd waited until it left, then took the weapons from the large sports bag he'd put them in to keep them hidden from site. He folded the bag up, stuck it into the waistband of his back, then adjusted his weapons. He stuffed the scabbard under his belt at his left side, stuffed the grenades in his front pockets, and held the silenced sub-machine gun in his right hand. He inserted the thirty-round magazine, pulled back the charging handle, releasing it to set a round in the chamber, then moved the safety switch from safe to semi. He took a few deep breaths and shrugged his shoulders to ease the tension there.

Jake walked past the museum, ignoring the architecture as he focused on finding the demon. When he made it to the edge of the pond, he looked over the surface of the pond. In the small island of its centre, he could see the lights from the Benzaiten Temple shimmering and reflecting off the pond's surface. In addition to the normal night sounds of frogs, insects and such, he heard calls from several of the animals that were housed at the Ueno Zoo, on the opposite side of the pond.

Jake stood there for a moment, his senses telling him that the demon was very close. He looked to each side and behind him, but everything was



clear. It has to be the Temple, he thought. He was about to start walking around the pond to get to one of the bridges that led to the island when he saw an object floating on the surface of the pond. It was a row boat, and it looked like someone was in it.

Jake squinted at the boat, trying to see who was inside. At that moment, the full moon came out from behind some clouds and gave him a good view of the boat. There were two figures sitting in it. He recognized both. Kaji was sitting in the front. Orias was sitting behind the monk, its' clawed hands resting on Kaji's shoulders and the bottom of its' snout resting on top of Kaji's head.

Jake stared at Kaji for a few moments, thoughts of sneaking up on the two of them running through his mind when Orias shattered his thoughts.

"Demon Stalker," the demon yelled. "What took you so long? We've been waiting for you for hours." All of the frogs and other night sounds stopped

"What do you want, demon," Jake replied yelled back.

"Why, I think that should be obvious, Jake Steele. I want you." The demon king paused for a moment, and Jake was about to say something when it continued. "I'll make you a deal, you come out here and fight me, and I'll let your friend go."

Jake thought about it for a moment. He knew Orias was setting him up somehow, but he had to take the chance. Before he thought, he had to find out something.

"Kaji," he yelled. "Are you alright?"

"Jake-san," Kaji yelled. "Yes, I am ok. No worse than I was a few hours ago. Don't do it, Jake-san. You can't trust a demon. It will most likely kill me before you get out here."

Jake heard the demon king chuckle.

“Now, now monk, if I wanted to kill you, we both know I could have done that earlier, right?” It shook the monk a few times, making the boat rock back and forth. The surroundings were so quiet, Jake could hear the water lapping on the sides of the boat. Jake took a few breaths, thinking. He remembered that although the demon looked like an alligator, its’ powers were connected to fire. The Sons of Solomon website had said that it tried to avoid water.

“Alright, Orias, I’ll come out there, but I want you to release Kaji. When I’m ten feet from the boat, let him swim to shore. When he gets out of the water and is safely on the ground, I’ll swim the rest of the way to the boat and we’ll have our fight. If you can’t agree to that, well, then I’m going to walk away.” He crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for the demon kings’ reply. It only took a few moments.

“You’re bluffing,” it said. “I’ll kill him slowly and painfully if you walk away.”

No I’m not,” Jake yelled back. If you don’t agree to my terms that tells me that you’ll kill him before I reach the boat and I’ll be stuck in the water and pretty helpless against you.” He didn’t let on that he knew about the demon’s aversion to water.

Orias paused for a few moments. Jake started to turn away.

“Wait,” the demon king yelled. Jake stopped and turned back. “Alright, human. I agree to your terms. I will allow the monk to swim back to shore once you are ten feet from the boat. “But—“ it said emphatically, “If you try to swim back once he’s safe, I will destroy you.”

“Alright, Orias, you have a deal. Kaji, can you make it to shore?”

“Yes, Jake-san,” Kaji replied. “But you should walk away. You can’t

trust this demon. It will not honor any agreements.”

“Don’t worry about it, Kaji. I can handle it. I’ve got God on my side. Oh,” he paused. “Your brother’s ok. I saw him before I left the hospital.” He hoped the monk understood Jake had been in contact with the Sons of Solomon and was prepared for Orias, for anything the demon king should throw at him.

“Good,” the monk replied. He didn’t say anything else.

Jake nodded his head, then took off his shoes and socks. He emptied his pockets, except for the grenades, then walked a few paces in the water.

“Are you ready, Orias,” he yelled.

“Yes human, I’m ready.”

Jake stretched a little, loosening his muscles, then walked into the water until it reached his stomach. He tightened the strap on the MP5 so that the sub-machine gun was tight on the front of his chest. He checked the sword on his waist, then pushed forward and started swimming. The pants and the long-sleeved shirt made it awkward, but he’d been trained to swim in fatigues and boots with a twenty-five-pound pack on his back when he’d been in the military, so he didn’t have much problems other than the sword bumping against his leg. It was annoying, but he found a rhythm. It only took him a few minutes to make it to a spot a few feet from the boat.

When he got to the spot, Jake stopped and treaded water.

“I’m here Orias,” he said. “Let Kaji go.” He waited to see if the demon would honor its’ word. It did. Kaji slipped carefully over the side of the boat and splashed his way over to Jake. The clothing he was wearing made it hard on him, but he had a lot of strength and determination. When he made it to Jake’s side, the monk stopped.

“Jake-san,” he said while struggling to stay afloat.

“Are-are you sure you know what you’re doing?” He spat out some water as it splashed into his mouth from all of the movements he was making.

“Yes,” Jake said quietly. He reached into his left-hand pocket and put the flash-bang grenade in Kaji’s pants by pulling his waistband. He leaned into Kaji and spoke to him in a whisper, “be ready.” He looked into the monk’s eyes. Kaji nodded.

“Go, Kaji,” Jake said loud enough for the demon to hear.

The monk swam off. Jake watched him and kept his eyes on the demon at the same time. Even though he was confident the demon would not come into the water, it could still fly, and Jake didn’t trust it at all.

Surprisingly, the demon didn’t do anything. Kaji made it to shore and waved to let Jake know he was ok. He turned toward the boat.

“Are you ready to fight now, Orias, and go back to Hell?”

“Oh I’m ready, human, but before we do that, have I introduced to my brother Orobas?” His chuckle became a laugh.

Jake was puzzled, but only for a moment. He felt a swirl of water by his feet, then something grabbed his leg and dragged him under. Jake fought, kicking and punching, but the grip was too strong, then his other leg was caught. He tried to reach for the sword but something caught both his arms. He struggled with all his might as whatever it was pulled him deeper. He couldn’t see anything in the deep water and his head was in pain as the pressure built in his ears. The last thing he heard was the demon king’s laughter as everything faded away.

## EPILOGUE

The man sat in his office reading a memo and jotting down notes for a briefing he'd be giving in a few moments. The gold nib of his Montblanc fountain pen made a small scratching sound as it moved across the paper. It was only sound in the room. The traffic sounds from the busy city were fifty-seven stories below and completely silenced by the tinted triple-thick glass. The man could feel the slight movement of air, from the air-conditioner, but had paid to have that muffled also. He'd even had all of the ringers turned off on all of his phones. He liked things to be quiet. This allowed him to operate in a heightened state of awareness, a state the Japanese people called *haragei*. The man had been studying different philosophies for most of his fifty-five years, and he'd found that the oriental philosophies fit his personality best.

He rejected some of those philosophies though, minimalism. He looked around his office. It was a very large office, taking up a full corner of the building and measuring a little over three-thousand square feet. It was divided into four separate areas, like a house with thick walls blocking off each section. He had his workout area with a stationary bike and the latest resistance training machines. There was room for massages, a sauna and steam bath, a jacuzzi, and a shower of course. The last room, which was closest to his working space, was the place he spent most of his time in.

The finished his writing, washed a small bit of ink from his fingers with a damp clean cloth, then moved around the Indian teak desk and toward the worship room. He stopped in front of a large book case with many different types of books, from law books to geology, physics, mythology, religion, languages (he spoke seven fluently) military history and of course

every type of philosophy, from Plato, Socrates, Sun Tzu, and including some of the newest thoughts about life.

The man reached up to a shelf that was just above eye level, pulled a book down; the Kama Sutra. He smiled at what a psychiatrist might think of that. He reached into an empty space and back to the back of the shelf, lifting the heels of his two thousand dollars Oxford dress shoes from the thick carpeting and standing on his toes in order to reach the recessed button there to unlock the door.

There was a click that sounded loud in the quiet room. The man lowered his heels to the ground, put the book on the lower shelf, grasped an edge of the case and pushed inward. The whole case moved in like a door. He walked into the room, the soft, dark carpeting absorbing his footsteps.

There were no windows in the room, and it made it very dark. Not absolutely lightless; some light was coming in from the windows in his outer office, enabling the man to see well enough to manoeuvre around some chairs and an altar to get to the light switch, but he could have walked there in complete darkness, with a blindfold on. He'd been in this room so many times since his move to upper management in the organization that he could literally recite perfectly the position of every piece of furniture and every item in there, no matter how small. When he turned on the light, the man walked over to small table and picked up an object from it. The light put out a warm glow that was a sharp contrast to most of the other lights in the building.

He held the object up about a foot or two in front of his face and admire its' beauty. It was a human hand. It was perfectly preserved, looked exactly the same as it had twenty-two years before, when the man had dismembered and killed the man as part of his initiation into the hierarchy

into the Hellfire Club. He looked at the hand for a few more moments, twisting it to see the runes he had tattooed on the fingers and top of the hand above the knuckles. He swivelled it around and looked at the pentagram he'd carved into the palm on the first day of the torture session he'd given the man. He stood there for a few moments until a knock at his outer office door interrupted his memories. He put the jar down and shook his head, smiling ruefully at his wool-gathering. As he turned off the lights and exited his devotional/torture chamber. He raised the sleeve of his dress shirt and glanced at his Patek Philippe. He shook his head again. The initiate was six minutes late. Not a good start. The man closed the book case, went back to his desk and sat down. He paused a moment, preparing himself for the coming encounter.

“Come in,” He said loudly.

A short man with dark hair came through the door. He approached the desk with his hand out to shake.

“Mr. Hathaway, It's good to meet you. My name is—“ He stopped speaking abruptly and dropped his hand as Hathaway held his hand up.

I know who you are, Mr. Martin,” he said sternly. “I also know that you're six minutes late. I'll let that go this once, because you're new to the upper levels of the brotherhood, but that will be the only time you get a free pass. From now on, any discrepancies will be dealt with will be dealt with immediately and harsh!” He stared at Martin for a moment, his face tight. He wanted to make sure the man understood the consequences of his actions. Martin nodded.

“Yes, sir. It won't happen again,” he said humbly. He lowered his eyes and Hathaway grunted. “See that it doesn't,” he said. The look on his face he would remember and hold the man to his word.

“The reason you’re here, Mr. Martin, other than to meet with me, is to give you advice about a threat to our organization.”

Martin looked back at Hathaway with a surprised expression on his face. “A threat, Sir? What kind of threat?”

I’ve just been informed that there is a demon stalker out there hunting down our demon kings. He’s already killed Crocell, and he has injured Orias. He’s working with the Sons of Solomon.” Hathaway paused. “You’re aware of the threat the demon stalker presents, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Martin replied. He nodded emphatically, his face serious.

“And you know about the Sons, of course.”

Martin nodded again.

“Well, we’re going to set up a task force to hunt down and capture this stalker, and to eliminate the Sons of Solomon.” He looked at Martin for a moment and saw the slight puzzlement in his expression. “You’re wondering why I’m telling you all this, right?”

“Yes, sir, I am.”

“Well, the first reason is that I looked over your records and I liked how you handled your initiation, and how you killed your friend when we asked you to. Not many people would show that kind of commitment.”

“Thank you, sir. It really wasn’t a hard decision.”

“Ok,” Hathaway said. “The second reason I’m telling you this, is because I want you to lead the task force.”

Now, Martin’s face really showed surprise. He recovered after a moment.

“Sir,” he said. “Although I appreciate the opportunity, I don’t know that I’m qualified. In fact, I know several people who’d be better, who have more knowledge of demon stalkers, and the Sons of Solomon. I—“

Hathaway held up his hand and interrupted.



“Mr. Martin, I know you’re not the most qualified to take charge of this task force, but you bring something to the job that those others you’re referring to do not.”

“What’s that, sir?”

“Well, it turns out that you have a connection to this demon stalker.”

How’s that, sir,” Martin asked.

“The demon stalker is your friend. The friend you killed.”

Martin stepped back and his mouth dropped open in astonishment.

“Wh-what? I-I don’t understand.”

Hathaway sighed. “Your friend, Jake Steel, right?”

Martin nodded dumbly.

“His spirit has been returned to Earth. He inhabits and controls a body for a set amount of time. During that time, he has powers and abilities to kill demons. Are you following me?”

“Yes, sir,” Martin nodded again.

“Ok. I want you to hunt your friend down, Capture him and bring him to me. I will then render him useless. I will give you whatever help in manpower and financial resources you need to do this, alright?”

“Yes, sir,” Ben Martin said. He smiled, and unconsciously reached up and caressed the scar on his face.

## **TO BE CONTINUED....**

About the Author, Michael E. Fulkerson...

Michael E. Fulkerson was born in Helena, Arkansas. He is profound deaf in both ears, born premature. He relies on telepathy to communicate. He is an expert on the Occult, having achieved multiple degrees in Occult studies and World Religions. Fulkerson is an avid sports enthusiast, who enjoys weight lifting and practicing Mixed Martial Arts. He is an Elite in Jeet Kune Do. A spirited writer, utilizing multiple medias; literature, music and poetry. He is fueled by his own personal pursuit for truth and justice. Drawing much of his creative writing influences from a very dark period of his life, (having spent fifteen years in four prisons; falsely accused and unjustly convicted of the crime of rape... He was twenty, she was sixteen, being traumatized over losing fifteen years of his life for a crime he did NOT commit. Fulkerson born almost completely deaf (who is psychic and relies on telepathy) currently lives in Gothenburg, Nebraska. He is currently forty-two years old. Arrested at twenty, released two months prior to his thirty-sixth birthday. Having served his time at the Evaluation Center, State Penitentiary, Lincoln Correctional Center and Tecumseh, shipped around for fighting.

He is currently working on a book and movie project, "War Within a Psychic Mind," with Tyreise Swain and writing, "High Speed Robbery," "High Speed Revenge," and, "Prison Warrior." He is also writing a movie script, "I-Demon King." He is working on a poetry book and a book of hilarious horror/paranormal style short stories.

## About the Author, Michael King.....

Michael King grew up in S.E. Pennsylvania and Central Florida. He loves the outdoors. He has worked at a multitude of jobs, from busboy to fruit and vegetable inspector for the Department of Agriculture. He has served in the United States Military in the 1980's and holds black belts in Bujutsu, Aikido, and Togakure Ninjitsu.

He is currently working on, "On the Razor's Edge," a fictional autobiography about U.S. Special Forces as he serves in the 1980's, and, "Caliber: Worlds Apart," the first book in a series of epic fantasy books that is based on Native American and Oriental Mythology and religion.

King has published short stories and continues to write short stories. He is working with Mr. Fulkerson to write the movie script for Demon Stalker.

Michael King is currently incarcerated in Tennessee. Michael King #211954.

Also by the Authors:

Career Thief (Green cover, silhouette holding a flash light)  
Reader's Favorite Five-Star Award. A one of a kind, unique  
crime fiction told in a first-person account. On Amazon.com in  
paperback and on Kindle. Also available in paperback on  
Barnes & Nobles.

Music album by Michael Fulkerson:

The Twisted Jester.....On Jango.com, Amazon, Google Play,  
iTunes, Spotify, Pandora, iheartradio, every download site in  
more than a hundred countries.

